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6



# Nia Liston

## The Merciless Maiden


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"So you will be participating in the martial arts tournament held in Altoire a year from now, Leeno?"
"Yes. And once I win, I intend to retire from my adventuring life."
NEWS
LEENO, THE UP-AND-COMING ADVENTURER, JOINS THE BATTLE!
BREAKING NEWS


"Deputy instructor of the Heavenstriker Leitao.
I will defeat you and then defeat Gandolph.
You're strong enough that there's no reason for me to treat you like a child. I will treat you as another martial artist to consume in my path for power."
"Charge ahead—and use defeat as your fuel."


“So that’s Nia’s brother, huh?”

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# Prologue

“Nice work today.”

“And the same to you.”

Alone in the back-alley bar, the pair clinked their glasses. The Shifty Shadow Rat didn’t have the most refined clientele, but even they knew to leave when the night had gone on long enough.

They’d both made it through the work day. The noisy, vulgar customers had all left, returning a peaceful calm to the establishment. Admittedly, if the patrons hadn’t left by midnight, the pair would’ve simply thrown them out; it wouldn’t have been a surprise if just outside the entrance was a pile of utterly smashed, passed out patrons. Had it been winter, there would have been the risk of freezing to death, but at this time of year, they would be fine to sleep it off where they lay. At worst, they’d be eaten alive by the bugs or wake up buck naked with all their belongings stolen, and quite frankly, none of that was the bartender’s problem.

Only one lonely little light near the bar counter had been left on. Standing behind it was the owner of the bar, Anzel. Sitting opposite was the barmaid, Fressa. They each took up a glass of the expensive liquor they’d splurged on, kicked half of it back, and then sighed.

“Won’t lie, I’m a little relieved,” the bartender said.

“Same here. At least we’re out of the woods now, I think.”

Summer was coming to an end. At long last, a certain rumor had reached the Shadow Rat; it was one that they had both been waiting expectantly for.

*“Apparently, there are plans to hold a national martial arts tournament.”*

It might have been nothing more than a rumor for now, but that was more than enough for them. Being aware of what was going on behind the scenes, they knew it was a rumor purposefully spread by the organizers—a form of building up excitement before the official announcement.

That was exactly why the two of them were celebrating with expensive alcohol they’d usually never get the chance to drink.

“Crazy to think we actually managed it.”

Those rumors now being spread meant that their mission of raising one billion krams had come to an end. Lily—Nia Liston—had already said that the money had been raised, but neither of them had truly believed it at the time. They had wanted to, but their caution just wouldn’t abate.

It was always possible that things wouldn’t go to plan or, perhaps, that things would be canceled because of some outside interference or unexpected pushback. That in and of itself wouldn’t have been a problem—it happened to events all the time after all. The real problem was that they couldn’t predict how Nia would react. It was because of *her* that they knew no peace.

They knew Nia well enough that they could guess she wouldn’t take it out on them at least, and she wasn’t the kind to put the blame on other people. She would probably do something a little crazy, but at the very least, she wouldn’t make such a big deal that everything they’d done would go to waste.

Despite knowing this, they still couldn’t relax.

There were countless people out there who would reach an intense emotion and become entirely different people. There were those who would lose themselves in that emotion and others who would be destroyed by it. There truly were many in the world who would find themselves in such a position.

But there was no longer any need to worry about that. The rumors had spread. The deliberate nature of it all served as confirmation to the two that the tournament had been finalized. A national martial arts tournament would be held right here in the Kingdom of Altoire. All their efforts in raising those billion krams hadn’t been for naught. Nothing had interrupted the plans.

“We *did* put in a whole lot of effort,” Fressa noted. They were thinking the same thing: They’d contributed a lot more than they’d thought they were capable of. Putting their personal totals together, they’d contributed about fifty million krams. It didn’t sound like a whole lot when you considered the final amount, but no, that was most definitely a considerable sum. “But if you ask me, the second Lily said she wanted to join in on the hunts, it was basically a done deal.”

“Oh, for sure.”

Any time Nia joined them on an expedition, the amount of

money they raised was unbelievable, and they always made it at an insane speed as well. It was enough to make them think they weren't even needed. In fact...that was likely true, but what was done was done.

Regardless, the earning of the billion krams was done and dusted. It was a joyous enough occasion that it was worth a little celebratory drink.

Now, they had something else to consider.

"You thinkin' about what's gonna happen from here?"

The tournament was going ahead. They didn't know the exact rules nor did they know just how flashy the whole thing would be, but there were some things they could still predict.

"It'll probably depend on how big the tournament ends up being. If the prize money crosses the hundred million mark, there'll definitely be some nasty competitors coming around." Such a massive sum of money would no doubt gather self-confident practitioners from across the land blinded by the thought of wealth, including from outside Altoire. In all fairness, that would be the point of such a large prize pool to begin with—of course there would be strong combatants, but...

"Like the main house of the Qilong?"

"I'm not sure if they'd make a move for a couple hundred million krams, but if anything, they'd probably come along to attack the competitors, don't you think?" Whatever the reason, there was a very distinct possibility the Qilong would be present.

"Who else?"

"Mercenaries with nothing better to do, probably. You know, like the Wild Beast Mercenaries and the Black Iron Knight Company. But only if they're not busy with some other job."

Anzel had heard of them, at least.

"Adventurers will definitely want to join in too," Fressa continued. "I'm not that informed on that neck of the woods though, so I can't tell you much more than that."

"Fair. Not like I know much more myself." In Anzel's opinion, adventurers were a shady lot in and of themselves, but they were still civilians. Ask him about anything to do with the underworld and he'd likely at least heard mutterings, but he couldn't tell you much about the goings-on of the surface. If the adventurer wasn't famous, there wasn't much chance for him to hear about them.

"It goes without saying, but news of this will definitely be all

the rage in Wu Haitong. Every other person you talk to there is a strong fighter."

The Great Martial Land of Wu Haitong wasn't a country that Anzel knew all that much about—the extent of his knowledge was that it was where the head house of the Qilong was based and that fighters at the same level as the Qilong were around every corner. Putting it like that, the whole country sounded insane.

*Now that I think about it, didn't I hear that the Heavenstriker style originated there?* Its title of the Great Martial Land was no joke.

"I think that's about it for those near Altoire," Fressa concluded. "Next question is the scale of the tournament and how far the news of it will reach. I only know about the countries that are close to us."

The barmaid knew of other big names, but a lot of them would struggle to participate because of their positions within their country, so it was pointless to consider them. Considering strength alone, there were the mechs of Marvelia and the Rampaging King of the White Orcas, but their strength wasn't based in sheer martial arts prowess, so they likely wouldn't be eligible.

There was one more group Anzel was wondering about.

"What about the Heroic Star Assembly? Think they'll join in?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure. They're based quite far from Altoire, so I'm not sure if they'd even be aware the tournament is going on. Again, that'll depend on the scale of the tournament and the prize money, I think. The more money there is to get out of it, the farther the rumors will spread, after all."

"Man, I pray they don't spread that far. Pains in the ass, every one of 'em."

"Well, whether they come or not, things are definitely going to start getting hectic. Time to say goodbye to our free time."

Their new task after completing their billion-kram mission was dealing with conflicts in the underworld. In fact, it was *because* they'd succeeded in raising the billion krams that everything was going to get that much busier for them.

Honestly, they almost welcomed the coming conflict—it gave them an excuse to irresponsibly run from their duties.

"At least we won't have to worry about being bored, eh? Sounds like we'll be able to make a pretty penny while we're at it."

“True enough.”

Their lips pulled wide as they once more clinked their glasses.

It was a bright, moonlit night. The full moon shone brilliantly in the dark sky, its pale light making the clouds pop.

It was a beautiful night to spend getting tipsy. Sitting down on the deck of an old house, an elderly man leisurely tipped his sake cup back. *What a luxurious way to spend the rest of one’s days*, he thought to himself.

Ku Yunxie was already crossing seventy. To the average person, he looked like nothing more than a small old man.

Another man suddenly appeared behind him. “Master, the young ones are getting restless,” he reported matter-of-factly.

Ku Yunxie might have looked like nothing more than a small old man, but that small old man was the head of the Qilong, a house of assassins that had existed since antiquity. He was a small old man who remained at the top of such a house despite his age.

Ku had been thinking for a while now that he really, seriously, *truly* wanted to hand over the seat of leader already, he wanted to safely pass the house on to someone else, and for a generational swap to happen before his back pain worsened, but life was not so kind. He’d been wishing to step down for about a decade now, but still that wish had not been granted.

A leadership change would happen when he was overtaken by the younger generation. Such tradition was why Ku remained in his position. Age had not worn down this old tiger’s fangs; keenly honed martial arts knew nothing of dulling.

Though to be blunt, the younger generation were spineless cowards. A luxurious way to spend the rest of one’s days? What nonsense—he was still active. Spending the rest of one’s days drinking sake under the moonlight would indeed be luxurious, but it was nothing more than a futile dream for him.

*How much longer do you intend to force an old man to work? Let me live the rest of my life in peace already.* He truly did think such thoughts often.

“Is this referring to the tournament in Altoire?”

“Yes, sir. It appears the young blood do not comprehend the reason we exist.”

*A generation gap, more than likely*, Ku mused to himself.

It was a sign that their country was no longer in an era where

it was necessary to constantly eradicate invasive insects burrowing into their lands. Even if there had been a time that they never shied away from being called a ruthless, merciless house of assassins; that they showed no mercy toward even women or children if they were targets; that they would absolutely carry out their missions no matter the difficulty; that they sacrificed their own men without hesitation, they had fully believed that was their role. They had never doubted their ways for even a second.

But that era had come to an end. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that that era *had to* come to an end—before his back came to an end.

"Fine. Let them go."

"Master? Did I hear you correctly?"

"They must be getting antsy with the lack of real battle as of late. I fully expected the impatient ones to make a fuss. At the end of the day, we aren't good for anything other than battle. We know no other way of life. Why not let them go? It will show them a path of valor that does not involve killing."

The Emperor's Fist was the name given to the old skill of chi, passed down for generations and sworn only to be used for the sake of the country. Rules and regulations alone could not save a country—this had led to the creation of the Qilong by one of royal blood who had chosen to dirty their own hands to keep their home safe.

"If we tie them down, they will only lash out further. Besides, it's good to see the world while you're still young."

Over the many years of its existence, the Qilong had fractured and been reborn in different forms all across the world. Who knew how far it stretched nowadays? Ku was fairly sure that there was a branch house of Qilong stationed in Altoire. At first, they would have been sent there as spies, but at some point, they had been naturalized in the country. The previous head—or was it the one before that?—of the main house had been consulted on the matter, and the two groups had settled into a tacit agreement.

The Qilong of Wu Haitong and the Qilong of Altoire would now meet. The main house would meet with the branch house. It would be the perfect way to give the young ones a taste of excitement. Admittedly, Ku was somewhat curious about the tournament himself. He'd spent the vast majority of his life

dedicated to martial arts; he couldn't help but become interested in a gathering of strong fighters even in his old age.

"To confirm, they're cleared to go, yes?"

"Indeed. However, ensure they are aware that they will be representing the Qilong there. A loss will not be treated lightly. If they are going to go all that way, then they must win. Should they lose and still choose to return, I will make sure to give them a very thorough lesson."

No matter how much time passed, the younger generation had yet to defeat an old man with a failing back. The tournament would serve as a good learning experience for those spineless weaklings.

Across many nights and many countries, the rumors traveled all the way from Altoire to the Kingdom of Slengradd. It was a country so far from Altoire that they had not even a single correspondence between them. They had barely even heard the name of Altoire mentioned there, let alone any rumors.

And yet those rumors had made it all the way to Slengradd regardless.

"Huh? They're holdin' a tournament in Altoire?"

A man had brought back the far-traveled foreign rumors and flyers to the barracks in which he stayed—the special barracks reserved for the Heroic Star Assembly nestled within the Slengradd castle grounds. The new exciting information made its way through the dirty area filled with tough warriors lounging around.

"Apparently. And get this: The prize money is a whole five hundred million."

"*Five hundred million*?!" The men loitering around immediately came to attention upon hearing those words. They'd heard of plenty of tournaments before, from swordplay to martial arts to card games, but one with a prize pool of a whopping five hundred million? That was a first for all of them.

"And this is takin' place in the Kingdom of what now?!"

"Altoire?! Where's that?!"

"What?! It's so far away we can't get there by dragon?! It'd take over three months?!"

In the midst of all the commotion, a young man sitting away from the rest and only vaguely listening to the conversation spoke up. "Toha, you're goin' on leave after this, aren't you?" His

name was Sauzan, a proud member of the Heroic Star Assembly.

"Hmm?" Next to him was a woman who had similarly only been vaguely listening to the conversation. Her name was Tohaulow. She was another proud young member of the Heroic Star Assembly, with a pair of fox ears sprouting from her head. "Oh, yeah, for about two or three years. I'll still come back if the situation is desperate enough though, so it's not a complete break."

"I'm gonna be going on one myself in about two weeks."

"You too, huh? If it interests you, I'm plannin' to go back home to train. Wanna join? You like me, don'tcha? Wanna get married?"

"I ain't getting married to you. I do like you though."

Tohaulow wasn't actually considering marrying Sauzan herself. They were colleagues that got along well, but they didn't think of each other as anything more than friends. Well, that wasn't entirely true on Tohaulow's part—her people were accepting of polygamy, after all.

"Our country's pretty fun, y'know. Maybe it's because we're a country of beastkin, but there's these *really* strong monsters. Oh, and there's this group of seven beast kings called the Abubatar—"

"No, listen, that's not what I wanted to talk about." Sauzan knew if he let her continue to speak, she'd never stop, so he immediately cut her off. "Wanna go?"

"Where? To get food? Didn't we just eat a second ago?"

"No, I mean to Altoire."

"What? You don't want food?"

"Well, I do, but..."

"You're gonna go for food *again*? How many meals do you need to fill that stomach of yours? You're such a glutton, seriously."

Being in his mid-twenties, Sauzan felt a little old to be lectured on his eating habits. He wouldn't deny he was a glutton though.

"You heard 'em talking about that tournament with the five hundred million prize, didn't you? The money's whatever, but aren't you curious how strong they are all the way over there?"

Tohaulow smiled. She smiled menacingly, like a predator that had caught sight of its prey.

"I *am* curious. Wanna go?"

The Heroic Star Assembly was an organization established to raise Heroes. The founder of the Kingdom of Slengradd had

been one themselves. Carrying on their will, the Heroic Star Assembly had left behind historic achievement after achievement and was perhaps even the oldest and most famous organization in the world. Whether citizen, foreigner, beastkin, half-demon, or demigod, so long as you upheld great skill and great virtues, the road to being a Hero would always be open.

Sauzan, Tohaulow, and all the others gathered at these special barracks had their eyes set on becoming Heroes.

“If we win that prize money, we should buy a ton of souvenirs and then go back to my hometown. You like me, don’t you? You need to come say hello to my family.”

“I don’t *dis*like you, but…” If he were asked if he liked her in a way any more than friends, he wouldn’t be able to give a quick answer.

Regardless, this was what led to the two wannabe Heroes making their way to the faraway country of Altoire.

# Chapter 1: A Second Year, a Second Semester

“Hey, did you hear the news? There’s gonna be a martial arts tournament!”

Voices excitedly discussing the rumors surrounded me.

Today was the first day of the second semester, the classroom filled with classmates I hadn’t seen in a while. Some of them had gotten tans or changed their hairstyles, but for the most part, everyone was the same as they had been before the summer. Summer vacation only lasted about a month; children were quick to grow, but even they wouldn’t drastically change after such a small length of time.

One topic in particular dominated conversation: the national martial arts tournament. The mission for the billion krams was finally bearing fruit. Apparently, rumors of it had begun spreading while I had been away from the capital. I couldn’t say where they’d heard it from, but many of the students were already aware of it, and they passed the information around without hesitation. The tournament was well-known in all corners of the school well before the end of the day.

I had let slip to Cedony Trading what I intended to use the billion krams for before I left to return home—but that likely had little influence on the spread of the rumors now. A big-name merchant wouldn’t so easily let slip such profitable information until they’d made all the necessary preparations to get ahead of the curve.

In which case, His Majesty must have made his own move. The information must have leaked from the castle… Or more likely, he had ordered for the rumors to be spread.

This was a national tournament that had been officially recognized by the royal family and would also be held by them. A tournament to determine the strongest fighter of Altoire that I had voiced my dreams of the previous summer—we’d finally reached a point where that dream was coming to life.

“Welcome back, Nia.”

When I returned to the dorm after school, Hildetaura was there waiting for me. Lynokis was still in the middle of preparing the tea, so she hadn't been waiting long at least.

"It's certainly been a while, Hilde."

Hildetaura Altoire, third princess of Altoire, was a born and bred member of the royal family, but she was also a fellow magivision star alongside me and Reliared. Worded differently, she was my comrade but also my rival.

I hadn't seen her even once over the summer. Last year, we'd done recordings together and then had a getaway on one of her family's privately owned islands. The image of the king going wild taking control of the barbecue was seared into my mind. No one had had more fun than he had that day.

"Very true. It is honestly a shame. The vacation we went on with Relia last year was so fun."

It turned out we were thinking the same thing. Hildetaura was aware of the reason I was busy though, so there was no need for me to try and make excuses.

"Congratulations on the success of your big special," I congratulated her.

"Thank you. Wait, no, that is not why I am here."

I placed down my bag and sat across from her. "Did my brother do a good job? He didn't make any big mistakes, did he?"

"But of course not. Neal Liston arrived proclaiming he had come in place of you and carried out his job wonderf— Wait, no, like I said, that is not why I am here."

"Relia ended up joining in too, didn't she? I wish I could've been there. It looked like a lot of fun, and the food looked delicious. You should make that seafood pot for me one day."

"I would not mind, but there is the issue of preparing the ingredients and location, and free time is quite scarce at the mome— I just said that is not why I am here! I will chat with you about it afterward; just let me speak first!"

Oh, well, that was a shame. The most frequent topic of discussion at school right now after the tournament was *Cooking Princess Fishing Festival Feast: Brother Liston Here to Save the Day!* The special program that Hildetaura had carried out over the summer had been a massive success. As proof of that, it had already been rebroadcast numerous times.

*I really want to ask about it, but I suppose I should be patient.* If she came all the way here, she must have had something

important to discuss.

“What did you want to talk to me about, then?”

The moment I turned the conversation back to her, Hildetaura immediately jumped into her questions. “Did you manage to raise the billion krams? The castle has been abuzz with talk about the tournament.”

“Really? Even more than your fishing festival special?”

“Well, I will not deny that that is also a topic of much discussion…”

That wasn’t a surprise whatsoever. It looked incredible even on the other side of the screen. Reliared fell into the ocean, Hildetaura was mobbed by the local residents, and Neal was always surrounded by girls both young and old. It made me realize just how crazy things would get when such an approachable member of the royal family went all the way to a fishing village out in the countryside.



The recording had been filled with incidents and they'd almost run out of time, yet they'd still managed to put together a complete program—the efforts of the three were commendable. Most of the program was filled with chaos, disorder, and mayhem, yet incredibly, they managed to end with a meal that looked delicious. Had the food not been successful, I imagined they would've shelved the whole thing, but given how many people had been allowed to participate, that would've been a big blow. They had to have used a fair bit of money to produce the special as well.

There was so much I wanted to ask. It had been broadcast around the end of summer vacation so I'd been able to watch it back at the dorm, and I'd caught rebroadcasts as well. It was hard to deny it was an incredible program. I wanted to watch it two or three more times. I wanted to engrave in my memories the girls' valiant figures, their endearing efforts, and the hard work and dedication to the project that only those in the industry could understand.

Naturally, my brother was cute too. Actually, he might have been even cuter than the girls. I had little doubt he had seen a sharp increase in fans from all of this.

"The martial arts tournament is what you discussed with my father last year, correct?"

"Yes. Remember I received a message from you just before the summer that four million krams would be enough for it to go ahead?"

"And did you really raise a whole billion krams for it? That is a lot of money, you know."

"We did, yes. Because she put so much work in." I turned my gaze to where Lynokis was stationed by the wall—where Leeno the adventurer stood.

I had already revealed Leeno's true identity to Hildetaura, and the fact that Lynokis hadn't had her cover blown by those around us had to mean that Hildetaura hadn't let it slip. She might have been a child, but she was still a member of royalty; she knew full well the importance of keeping secrets.

"What incredible skill... I did not realize adventurers earned so much money..."

Well, there were definitely many adventurers who wanted to pull that one big lottery ticket commission even at the risk of their own lives, but in Leeno's case, she'd been pulling in those

moneymakers consistently for a whole year. It was only natural that rumors of her would spread when she'd left such a record. Though more accurately, we'd raised around eight hundred million krams, not the whole billion.

"I suppose this means that the tournament is confirmed, then."

"Why did you not ask your father?" That would've been quicker and much more certain than asking me.

"I struggle to catch him these days. He must be busy with all the preparations."

He *would* have all of his duties in addition to setting up the tournament as well. Being a king sounded tough.

"I assume it'll be announced officially and as dramatically as possible on magivision. Since the kingdom itself will be holding it, you'll probably be the one to do it, Hilde." Right now, the tournament was still at the rumor stage, with no official announcement. Its announcement on magivision would be the moment it was deemed official, and it only made sense for the royal family to be the ones taking that role in order to emphasize the scale of the tournament.

"Would you be fine with that? Your attendant raised all the money, right? Then should the Liston Channel not be the one to announce it?"

"Oh, it's fine. This is really a very selfish desire of mine; my family has nothing to do with it. I just want to know who is the strongest in Altoire while also further promoting magivision. I'm not in this for the money, so whoever gets the prize is fine by me." Well, it actually seemed like it was going to become an *inter*national tournament at this rate, so it was more like I was seeing who was the strongest in Altoire and its surrounding countries.

"You would be willing to so easily hand over one billion krams for something like that? How bold..." Though the words sounded like a compliment, Hildetaura's face was one of pure disbelief.

"Enough of that though. I want to hear about the fishing festival."

"Personally, that is nowhere near as important as the billion krams, but...if you insist." Hildetaura sighed, her expression far too serious for a child. Despite her reluctance, she told me all about what had gone on behind the scenes during the recording of *Cooking Princess Fishing Festival Feast: Brother Liston Here to*

*Save the Day!*

"Hey, Esuella told me that Miss Hilde was here— She is! It's so nice to see you again, Miss Hilde!"

Reliared suddenly arrived in the middle of our discussion, which led to our first tea party together in a while.

The official announcement of the martial arts tournament came at the start of fall. The rumors had managed to spread all across the school by then, with the stronger students of the academy like Sanowil, Gazell, and Ririmi all training with the tournament as their goal. They had started the work before it was even confirmed, but now that it was, they could be sure that their training hadn't been wasted.

The king himself appeared on magivision to make the announcement. With it now known that the royal family was leading the event, it quickly became the talk of the whole country.

I had supplied eight hundred million krams, and then Cedony Trading had supplied two hundred million more as an investment in the tournament. As the plan had been developed on the budget of that billion krams, the aristocrats and merchants continued vying for supremacy over the spot of leading sponsor, eventually resulting in a whopping four billion krams of funding.

Thanks to the entirely unexpected mass of money, the tournament was able to reach an even bigger scale than anticipated. Instead of having to go the cheap route of holding the tournament in the capital's stadium, they'd managed to buy out a whole floating island purely to hold the event. Development of the facilities, accommodations, and battle grounds had already begun; many ships from neighboring countries had arrived with workers from abroad willing to assist.

The logistics of everything were constantly changing; food was required in large quantities. All territories, aristocrats, and countries were driven by the power of money—including the vital participants. Just as the king had planned, the moment those confident of their strength heard of the rumors, they all traveled to Altoire.

The prize money was a whole five hundred million krams; that sort of money would allow anyone to rest easy for the rest of their life, and rather luxuriously too. Both skilled combatants and

civilians began fervently training with their eyes on the prize.

With the tournament now officially announced, however, there was one more thing left for us to do.

The bounty hunter that had suddenly started taking down massive monsters was still the talk of the town. Debuting in Altoire, she had raised around five hundred million krams in only a year. She was a beast who devoured all the high-paying bounties on the outskirts of Altoire, an already legendary adventurer who had racked up spectacular achievement after spectacular achievement for a year before then suddenly disappearing completely. She had such a notable record and overflowing charisma that she was practically revered as a god by the local adventurers.

Her name was Leeno, and the time had finally come for her to be in the public eye once more. Leeno the adventurer was a character we had carefully crafted over that year. The whole reason we had built her reputation, her image, and her skill was all for this day.

It was time to announce her to the wider world. Leeno the adventurer would be participating in the martial arts tournament. The day such an announcement was made on magivision, it caused a great stir—so great, it was as if the Kingdom of Altoire itself had let out a roar.

Leeno had grown. She had grown far beyond my expectations.

Before all of that though, there was the matter of what happened shortly before, a month after the martial arts tournament was announced.

“The question now is when would be best to announce your participation,” I said.

The beginning of winter could already be felt. I had finished my homework, and Reliared had already returned to her room for the night. It was around the time I started to get sleepy. But I—who had just turned eight a few days earlier, by the way—had a dilemma.

When should Leeno’s participation be announced, and how should we do it?

“I don’t really know myself, but wouldn’t it be better to announce it later?” Lynokis suggested, as she prepared me milk tea instead of black tea—my preference before bed.

“It’s a difficult one. There will definitely be those who enter because of you, but I imagine there would be those who would also refrain for the same reason. Depending on when we announce it, we could end up causing a great decrease in participants.”

Leeno was an identity I had helped build specifically so that we could attract more participants to the tournament. We had done much so that she would become popular, so that she would be spoken about, so that she would become famous. But it seemed like I had gone a little too far in cultivating her. When I asked students what they thought about Leeno, they had nothing to say but shining praise and admiration, all of them certain that she would be participating. I’d been a little taken aback when they started saying she was legendary or that she was the next coming of a great hero; it was all a bit of an exaggeration.

Actually, no, perhaps this was inevitable. It might have been that I had been thinking too small myself.

“The sooner we announce it, the better it will be for Anzel and Fressa, I imagine,” I continued.

Anzel ran a bar that we had been using as our base of operations to allow Lynokis to slip away after her adventures. Up until now, they’d managed to handle the influx in nosy patrons, but with the announcement of the tournament, the mob of customers had become so massive it was starting to have a noticeable effect on their business.

Leeno’s name had become too well-known—she had become too popular. The number of people visiting the Shifty Shadow Rat had dramatically increased because they knew that Leeno had some sort of association with the bar. If we made the announcement that Leeno would be participating sooner rather than later, the crowd would likely shrink since they could all guarantee that they could meet her at the tournament.

Many people went to the bar because they’d heard the rumors about Leeno, but most ended their day with a few drinks but not even a glimpse of the adventurer. What that meant was that the bar was at least making a profit from it.

A lucky few would sometimes bump into Leeno at the bar after a day’s work, but no matter who it was that wanted to meet her, she would always ignore them and flee. Anzel and Fressa would then handle anyone who tried to follow after her.

We were both very grateful for all they had done for us.

"Did you not hear out a single one of them?"

"There was no need to. People are usually looking for me for one of three reasons: They want me to join their party, they want to have a match with me, or they serve someone who wants to meet me."

She was probably right.

"More importantly, the regulars over there are still very easy to handle. All I had to do was treat them to a drink and they all kept quiet about me. That's the only reason my cover hasn't been blown."

As simple as that, eh?

"You're very crafty with your money, aren't you?" I was a little impressed. That was exactly how you manipulated someone's impression of you for the better. The value of managing one's identity ultimately far surpassed the money spent. It was common for the rich to be hated, but using one's finances well helped reverse that negative perception.

"As much as I hate to say it...I got the idea from Anzel."

Now *that* made a lot of sense. Though perhaps a little different, using one's money in such a fashion *was* a form of bribery. Given his underworld roots, it was a very Anzel-like method.

However, I'd heard that since the tournament was officially announced, things had changed greatly. It wasn't as simple as a case of increased business; adventurers and martial artists coming to the bar wanting to meet Leeno was not new, but there were many more new faces popping up. Anzel surmised they were fighters from foreign lands.

Anzel had sent me a message saying "Any idiots who didn't heed our warnings got their asses beat." I imagined it was partly to reassure us that these newcomers weren't that strong. But even though he wasn't admitting it, they were likely going through great pains to keep them off our backs. I hoped I'd be able to pay them back one day.

"The prize pool *is* very big. While I do think many of them are foreign customers, I wouldn't be surprised if those that had been lurking in the shadows of Altoire have finally started showing themselves."

"I agree." There were many martial artists who didn't care about money, but at the same time, there was much they

couldn't do without the finances. Usually, a martial artist only had this realization after reaching a certain level of strength. If you worked a job, your time to train decreased. If you prioritized your training, you had no time to make money. When you got as strong as me, you could make so much money that you ended up begging others to use it, but I'd never met someone as strong as me to begin with. And I had let go of the expectation that I ever would.

"They mentioned foreign people in power have been showing up as well, yes?" I continued.

"Yes, though they admitted they were largely judging based on their instinct."

Apparently, Anzel and Fressa had been catching sight of aristocratic emissaries recently too. Just looking at them, they appeared to be shabbily dressed, but then they had elaborate accessories that made their disguises all too apparent. There were even those who blatantly said whom they were the emissary of and immediately tried to use that as an excuse to forcefully enter the back of the bar.

Anyone who clearly looked like someone of authority was politely chased out. "What use is status in this day and age?" they would say. They were right though. Times were changing. A well-respected princess had cooked for a small countryside fishing village not long ago, after all.

At the very least, it seemed this was within expectations for the staff of the Shadow Rat. When martial artists hear there is a strong foe nearby, their instinct is to go test their skills against them. It was also an obvious fact that powerful figures would come searching for a money tree of an adventurer the moment they heard how quickly she'd earned a massive amount of money. Cases like this happened all the time.

But there was one more unexpected factor: the passionate fans who idolized Leeno. According to Anzel, they were the toughest customers to deal with.

"Being popular is tough, huh?" Even my brother was already having a tough time at his age. He would probably have a tough time for the rest of his life.

"I only want to be popular with you though, Young Mistress."

"It's not my style to let someone I hate remain by my side."

"Oh? Is this a declaration of love?"

"You're too close. Step back even just a little, please. Don't hug

me either." After peeling Lynokis off of me, I stopped to consider the circumstances again.

If Leeno's fans heard anyone say a bad word about her, they would immediately get into a fight with them. If they heard someone was looking for Leeno, they would immediately interrogate them. If anyone was talking about an adventurer, they would immediately try to change the topic to Leeno. As a result, there had been a lot more conflicts within the bar recently, and many of them would escalate into full-on fistfights. It didn't help that the clientele of the Shifty Shadow Rat was often filled with the rough types to begin with.

What was worse, while it was okay to resolve incidents with violence when it came to the back-alley dwellers, it was a whole different matter when it came to those who were clearly civilians. The staff of the Shadow Rat were members of the underworld, but surprisingly that crew made sure they didn't lay a hand on regular civilians. The only time they would was if they had a very good reason.

That was exactly why I had felt no hesitation at the thought of training them; I was confident that even if I gave them access to more power, they would never use it against regular people. Back when I first met Anzel, his instinct had been to simply intimidate me. If I'd apologized, he likely wouldn't have fought me. He'd fully believed that I was a regular child.

This was the case with Fressa too. She was a professional assassin, and a professional wouldn't kill unless it was part of a job. At worst, she would leave them half dead.

"Personally, I don't care how much Anzel and Fressa suffer though."

I raised an eyebrow at Lynokis. "You say that, but don't you actually get along with them quite well?"

*I haven't forgotten how you all went off without me to go drinking!*

"Ha ha ha, don't be silly, Young Mistress. To be honest, I've always felt disdain for them. To be honest, it makes me angry that I am your first official student, and yet they go off acting like they're your students too. To be honest, it makes me very, *very* angry. I'll beat them black and blue in the tournament, just watch. To be honest, I want to go even further than that."

Really now? Well, rivals who didn't get along were fun to watch too. I'd just leave it at that.

“Okay, I’ve decided. Let’s announce it early.”

It was still a little too soon—the tournament was next winter, so we still had a whole year to go. Thinking of it that way, it seemed like it would be fine to wait it out for a little longer and observe how things were developing to see the numbers before making a move. There was no way to predict what the outcome would actually be, but it was already widely assumed that Leeno would be participating. In which case, it was worth lightening Anzel and Fressa’s load.

Besides, there was one very easy solution: tell them that Leeno would be training abroad for the next year to prepare for the tournament. If we used magivision to announce it to a wider audience, then it would give a reason for her to be absent from the country, and that would then decrease the number of people looking for her.

I couldn’t predict what her passionate fans would do, but they should at least stop camping out at the bar in the hopes of seeing her.

Now that I’d come to a decision, I intended to go to sleep. But then I thought of something else.

“Do you want to do it yourself?”

“What?”

“Do you want to appear on magivision as Leeno the adventurer? It’ll get everyone way more excited if they hear it from your own mouth.” Plus, Lynokis was a magivision fan anyway. She likely wouldn’t get another chance to appear in a recording if she didn’t take the opportunity now. “Oh, and you should appear on Relia’s program too. You’re aware that they want you to appear on *One-Day Camp*, right?”

Lynokis blinked. “*I’d* be the one to appear on magivision…?”

She looked troubled by the idea. To be fair, it was a very abrupt suggestion that had come out of nowhere.

It felt like it had happened so long ago now, but the only time Lynokis had appeared on magivision was back when Nia Liston reported that she had fully recovered from her illness. All of the Liston family and the staff of the estate had been recorded for it.

Back then, Lynokis had simply been one among many, but for this, she would be the main focus as Leeno. Having your first proper appearance be focused on you as the star would be nerve-racking for sure.

“Give it a little think. I won’t need an answer until winter

vacation anyway. Your participation will be announced regardless; it's just a matter of if you want to be the one to do it. Same goes for if you want to appear on Relia's program or not."

"What about the Liston Channel?"

"We don't have any programs that would make sense to have an adventurer appear on, so there's no need for that, is there? Actually, wait... You might be onto something." Instead of racing with a dog, what if I raced Leeno? What if I had Leeno be the one to finally beat me? We could set it up like this: The legendary adventurer who made several hundred million krams in just a year challenges the unbeaten Nia Liston to a race! It sounded perfect, no? It would certainly get people talking.

It would increase Leeno's reputation, and besides, I was getting sick of racing dogs all the time. I was pretty sure the audience was getting sick of it too. Plus, as of late, the Liston Channel was getting completely drowned out by *Cooking Princess* and the Silver Channel's paper plays, so it would be good for us to have something to generate excitement as well. We could even label it as a winter special.

*This sounds like it could work!*

# Chapter 2: The Announcement

*“So you* will *be participating in the martial arts tournament held in Altoire a year from now, Leeno?”*

*“Yes. And once I win, I intend to retire from my adventuring life.”*

The tournament had gone from simple rumors to an official announcement. From the moment talk of it started, the academy had been buzzing with excitement. Everyone was constantly talking about which adventurers were strong or the apparent power of foreign mercenary corps they’d heard about, and even debating whether a hero would come.

The second semester passed by in a flash, and finally, just before winter vacation, Leeno’s announcement of her participation in the tournament was broadcast on magivision. Not a single person objected to the idea of a lone adventurer’s announcement getting so much attention—none except for Lynokis herself, that is. “Is this not all a bit overboard?” she had said, but that was all.

We asked the academy’s junior broadcasting station to provide the recording—not the Listons, not the royal family, not the Silvers, but the children. The children who had the least authority, in the most neutral position, and without the professional experience.

The tournament was all anyone was talking about all across Altoire, and naturally, mentions of Leeno frequently came up alongside it. That was exactly what I had been aiming for when Lynokis and I were building her image. What was more, Leeno’s private life was still a complete mystery to the public, so there was no limit to the people searching for more information on her.

That mystery left room for imagination, turning her into some sort of enigmatic creature—there was no way to know where she would be, a solitary beast that would be quite valuable if she were caught. She had become such a special figure that if she were found out to be Lynokis in disguise, things would not end well. I wasn’t *too* worried, but there was always the chance that something could go wrong. It was best for us to be cautious.

Besides, Lynokis already stayed with me in the school dorms,

so rather than risk being discovered leaving the campus grounds, why not use the closest broadcasting station?

The junior broadcasting station's reputation was still lacking, so this would also get some more eyes on them. I had little doubt they would be working hard on the day of the martial arts tournament itself as well.

We introduced Leeno to the crew through Hildetaura and then made sure to record the announcement inside the building so that it was impossible to determine their location.

The recording consisted of a simple interview and then the vital announcement of Leeno's participation in the tournament. Wearing a wide-brimmed hat and high-collared jacket to hide as much of her face as possible, Leeno said only what was necessary.

Josecotte Coiz carried out the role of the interviewer wonderfully, showing not a single sign of nerves and asking prepared questions that brought out the perfect amount of information. She became known by every single student overnight.

The announcement caused a commotion both in and outside the school. Though everyone was certain that Leeno was a front-runner, she was still an adventurer shrouded in mystery who had only rarely been seen by anyone. To have gotten someone so secretive to appear on magivision and even accept a solo interview, it was no wonder that Josecotte—having been the one to noticeably interact with Leeno—received so much attention.

Talk of Leeno was likely spreading across all the other territories as well. And this one line brought everything into a sudden upswing:

*"Though I will be leaving the country until the tournament, before then, I would like to participate in Relia's* One-Day Camp *and Nia's* Game of Chase*. The former has asked that I appear many times, so I would like to fulfill those two requests before I go on my way."*

The martial arts tournament had originally been devised as a step of Project Magivision. Personally, I had just wanted to gather a whole bunch of strong fighters together to see if I could find anyone stronger than me, but I'd already given up on that. Both now and in the past, barely anyone could match me.

*I've already given up on this. Stop lingering on it.*

Regardless, I had completely underestimated Leeno's popularity. Not that I'd thought she would have a *negative* impact

or anything, but I hadn't expected the announcement of her participation in our programs alone to result in an increase in MagiPad sales. It likely helped that MagiPads had gone on a rather conveniently timed, twenty percent off sale at that exact moment. Surely it was all a coincidence.

Given the extortionate price of MagiPads, a twenty percent discount was big. A lot of people seemed to have decided to impulsively buy one while the chance had presented itself. This *had* to have been the work of the king, especially since he was pretty gung ho about promoting magivision himself.

Another unexpected response to the announcement had been many students suddenly asking to remain at school over the winter break. Be they commoner or aristocrat, they all wanted to watch Leeno appear on magivision by taking advantage of the MagiPads installed in every dorm.

If it had been only a handful of them, I might have thought they were just suckers for gossip, but it turned out it was almost thirty percent of the student body. Those weren't numbers that could be ignored—parents wanted to see their children. Hildetaura managed to salvage the situation by urgently putting out a notice that she would arrange to get it rebroadcast toward the end of winter vacation, reassuring the children that they would still have the opportunity to see it if they went home, but it was all really quite unusual.

Did everyone want to see Leeno that much? I couldn't relate since I saw her every day. Actually, I was starting to think I'd be very happy to be away from her for a few days. Oh, and Hildetaura also asked if I could ask Lynokis to appear on *Cooking Princess*.

*Now that I think about it,* Cooking Princess *was the one program she didn't mention in the interview, huh?*

And so, added to my schedule for the winter vacation was a recording with Lynokis.

"Young Mistress..."

"You're going to have to put up with it."

Once the closing ceremony was out of the way, we entered the winter break. Several children were gathered at the docks waiting for their rides home just as we were. Sometimes they would call out to me and I would give them a wave in return. *Be careful on your way back. Try not to catch a cold.*

Among the crowd, Lynokis and I were standing facing each

other. Just this once, Lynokis could not accompany me home to the Liston territories. She would be taking part in recording sessions I wasn't involved in as Leeno the adventurer. First, she would record in the capital and the Silver territories, and then she would come to record with us. She had already put in a request for leave at the Liston Estate to go visit her family.

And while Lynokis was absent…

"Hurry and come back, Lynokis. I beg you… Please…"

Lynette would be taking her place. Training her was my duty *and* an urgent matter, so it worked out perfectly for me. *Now, now, are you so happy that you can't stop the tears? What an* adorable *student. I'll make sure you get in all the training you want. All of it.*

Ever since the fishing festival, Neal had been receiving piles of fan letters every day and it was clearly affecting his mood. He probably wouldn't be energetic enough to spend the winter playing around and having fun. Perhaps *because* he was so out of it, he had very easily agreed to lend Lynette to me. Though he had given his attendant quite the shock…

"He approved without any hesitation…" she'd muttered to herself.

She had nothing to worry about though! I would take excellent care of her in place of my brother.

Still, I was starting to think Neal had no choice but to get used to both the letters and the fans… *Dear brother, it's all right for you to take your time, but you need to train your mind.* This issue would likely haunt him for life, after all—it was the duty of the Listons' oldest child.

"Nia, let's get going."

"Yes, brother."

We boarded the vintage airship, and when I turned around, Lynokis—who would usually be glued to my side—was looking up at me from beneath the ramp.

*It's not like we'll never see each other again. Stop crying. It's just four days.*



Now that I had parted ways with Lynokis at the capital docks, she would go on to take part in programs in the capital and Silver territories as Leeno, then come to the Liston territories in four days' time for further recording.

Honestly, I was quite worried about leaving her by herself. She hated Reliared, and she barely treated Hildetaura like a princess. I was worried she'd be rude to them in the middle of recording.

*No, surely it'll be fine.* Lynokis had never featured in any of my recordings, but she'd spent the past few years watching my sessions. She knew by now how everything worked, what topics were good to avoid or might cause some controversy, and what would happen were she to take certain actions. Surely she knew what she should and shouldn't do.

*On second thought…*

*No, never mind, I'm definitely worried.*

"Say, was Leeno always that popular?" I couldn't help but ask Lynette.

"I believe so. She's someone who experienced the adventurer's dream in almost no time at all. It's a little romantic in a way. I believe that is what caught everyone's attention."

The adventurer's dream, hmm? I supposed that made sense. When it came to those with the drive to become adventurers in the first place, it was practically a given they were willing to risk their lives for large rewards. There were also likely a surprising number of people who looked up to Lynokis *because* they couldn't live as adventurers.

It was the third night of my winter vacation. I was currently training Lynette in my room at the Liston Estate and had decided to ask her about Leeno while we were here. Leeno was even the talk of the mansion, and many of our staff had already asked if they could join me at my recording session for *Game of Chase*. So I thought I might as well find out the status of her reputation. I was too close—and also distrustful—of Lynokis, so I lacked objectivity on the matter.

"It helps that she's strong too. A strong adventurer who can take down monsters threatening the people. That can be very easily understood by even children."

So her *strength* was a key factor. I could relate to seeking strength. I looked up to those stronger than me. Not that

anyone fitting that descriptor existed.

"Whatever the reason, I do believe her story was the perfect spark to spread like wildfire. An adventurer appearing out of nowhere one day and making several hundred million krams in a year? That sounds like something out of a storybook. It's very easy to play up the story and make it even more exciting."

"I'm starting to get it now, I think. It's the kind of thing that kids love to talk about."

"Essentially, yes."

That aside…

"You know, you actually have quite the potential, Lynette. Have you considered aiming for champion?" To be honest, her improvement was even faster than Lynokis's. It was something I'd noticed a while ago, but Lynette had quite the martial talent. I had no idea how she had ended up serving the Listons, but she'd likely have been hugely successful by now had she gone the route of an adventurer instead.

"I have zero interest in either the prize money or the tournament. More than that…" Suddenly, the attendant's eyes took on a dangerous, suspicious glare. "I *must* become stronger than everyone in this world so I may protect the young master from whatever harm may come his way… If I don't, who will?"

Impressive. More than a simple feeling of wanting to protect, I sensed evil desire and greed, but regardless, those strong feelings were reflecting in her chi. It was the fanatically obsessive ones who, for better or worse, tended to show the most growth. Be they captivated by murderers, or those who would kneel in the name of a god, or those who decided to swear absolute fealty to a single person, even if their feelings alone could not win a battle, the *intensity* of those feelings always made a difference in literally everything they did.

"But brother is getting to that age where he'd probably start viewing girls in a different light."

"Please don't bring that up."

"Maybe he'll even find himself a lovely fiancée."

"*Blah blah*! I can't hear *youuuu*!!! I can't— Ah."

And the game was over.

"Your chi dissipated. Start again."

Currently, I was training her in keeping still and maintaining elevated levels of chi. It wouldn't be real training if I didn't try to distract her. That was why a little talking was recommended for

these kinds of drills—it doubled as a form of training in keeping one's cool.

Still, she really did falter whenever my brother came up. She'd make a good match for Lynokis.

Were there *any* sane attendants in our family?

"That wasn't fair! What a cheap trick! Of course that's going to make me lose focus!"

"Yes, yes, what a terrible cheater I am. This is the third time now. Isn't training such fun? I feel full of energy myself when I see my student trying so hard." Incidentally, my chi had been elevated the whole time. Barely did it waver. Oh, though it did a little there. I was getting a bit too excited.

*Ahhh, taking good care of my students is such fun! This really is the quintessential teaching experience!*

"Stop dillydallying. Onto your next round. I won't let you sleep until you manage this."

"Lynokis, please come back soon...!"

Well, she needn't wait long—Lynokis would be coming back tomorrow if things were going according to schedule.

I really was constantly reminded of Leeno's popularity though. While we were having dinner that night, even Neal had suddenly asked, "Your recording with Leeno is tomorrow, isn't it? Can I come along?" It had given me quite the surprise. It appeared my brother was quite the big Leeno fan.

The adventurer's dream... For a while, I'd thought Leeno had happened to become too popular, but the real issue was that we'd gone overboard, hadn't we? We'd done far too many flashy things in just one year.

Because I'd spent so long recovering from my illness and then having to behave like a good aristocratic girl, my fighter's spirit had been contained for far too long. The moment I had the chance, I became just a little too excited. The expeditions had been so fun... But I might have had a little *too* much fun.

Perhaps it was a good idea that we'd had Leeno announce that she would retire from the adventuring life—from the center stage—after all. Her fame was already unnatural; I didn't want to imagine what would happen if her popularity blew up even more. Lynokis didn't have a very strong attachment to her Leeno identity either, so this was definitely for the best.

But you know, for the amount of money we'd raised, I really didn't think the monsters we'd hunted were that big of a deal. No

matter how many of those crabs or other big monsters we'd hunted, not one of them had challenged my true strength. I said we'd done too much, but I was still thirsting for more. The problem was that society's perception of the scale of our deeds was much different.

I was really struggling to get a sense of what was deemed average strength and also what exactly was considered a normal amount of money...

"Y-Y-Young Mistress... I can't do this anymore..."

"This is only round thirteen, you know? Fine... You can go back to your room."

Maintaining levels of chi was easy at first, but the more you repeated the drill, the harsher it got. Though she managed to maintain it consistently for a certain amount of time, her focus was always interrupted eventually. For managing it thirteen times though, she'd tried her best.

I sent Lynette, covered in sweat, tears, and other strange fluids, back to her room.

While we had the time, I wanted to train her as thoroughly as possible, but Lynette's body had its own limits, so I couldn't push her too hard. It'd be terrible if I broke her.

*All right, let's go for a bath and then get to bed.*

Tomorrow would be the recording of *Game of Chase* with Leeno, the embodiment of the adventurer's dream.

Early the next morning, I departed from the Liston Estate with the production crew and we flew to the floating island where we would be doing the recording. Leeno was very easy to find once we arrived.

"Nia!"

And by that, I meant that she'd been waiting right at the docks for us. *Not sure that is appropriate, but...we'll roll with it.*

I'd made sure to be clear with Lynokis that she needed to act like Leeno until the end of the recording. The production crew had known me for a long time, and by extension, that meant they could possibly recognize the attendant who had always been by my side. The chances of Lynokis's cover being blown were high. So I'd told her we needed to act as distant as possible. I'd very clearly said it to her.

Her current attitude toward me felt far too friendly for that purpose, but maybe it was still within the realm of believability.

We could still play it off as her being a friendly older sister type.

Still, it was incredible how a simple makeover could make her look so wildly different. No wonder they said that a woman could easily transform into a new person; only people who knew Lynokis well enough would even realize it was her. Even the production crew hadn't noticed.

"Good morning, Miss Leeno. I look forward to working with you today."

"Same here. Have you had your breakfast? Let's eat together before recording starts."

*Wait, wait, hang on! Don't just grab my hand like that. Don't drag me either.*

"Before that, let me introduce my brother. He's a big fan of yours."

Lynokis turned back to me in horror. "What?"

*See? Isn't this a surprise?* I'd been surprised myself when Neal told me. I'd thought he would have no interest in trivial rumors about the adventurer's dream. He *was* still a child though, so perhaps it was only natural for him to have a regular boy's desire for adventure.

"Good morning, Leeno. Please look after my sister today."

"Ah, yes. I'll... I'll do my best." Leeno was clearly rattled as she returned Neal's polite introduction.

Lynokis was a servant of our house. While she was already used to me, it was much tougher on her having to interact with the successor to the family like this.

With introductions out of the way, however, the recording went on without any problems. This was a very small agricultural island with a just-as-small population. They were far enough out in the countryside, the landscape little more than large fields and wild animals, that barely anyone visited beyond cargo airships transporting their produce.

The crew had chosen a more remote location so that Leeno's popularity didn't cause any chaos. We only needed a small little space on the island for our race, so we'd gotten permission to use a corner away from everyone. We hadn't even notified the islanders about who was being recorded. Our plan was to go in, record what we needed, and then leave.

"Young Mistress." With the camera readied a distance away, Leeno—no, Lynokis spoke to me as we stood at the starting line. "I'm going to run as fast as I can without any thought. So I'll

leave it up to you whether I win or lose."

*Oh right, Lynokis was against me losing deliberately...* Lynokis cared much more about the pride of Nia Liston than she did for the Leeno brand. She didn't like the thought of my win record being broken or the thought of someone who so wholeheartedly supported me having to be the one to do it. She certainly had complex feelings on the matter.

"Win by your own strength and there'll be no problem, right?"

"Please don't ask for something so unreasonable."

The director raised a hand.

And then the moment he lowered it, we were off.

My winter vacation unsurprisingly saw me faced with a hellish work schedule and piles of detested homework—by this point, it was the norm. Winter break was much shorter than summer, so my frantic schedule really made it feel like it ended in a flash. Though I did come away with a *lovely* souvenir. Upon meeting with Bendelio, I had sarcastically remarked, "What is a vacation again?"

To which he had replied with distinctive smile and all, "It's a time of year where everyone gets to relax, but you have to work."

*I will* never *forget that smile.* That smile was the worst souvenir I could have ever asked for. I hated that smile so, so much that I'd very nearly whipped out a punch. It really was very close. I would never forgive him. *Never.* How *dare* he show that distinctive face to me?

*You know what? It's fine. Well, no, it's not. But let's get in a better headspace.*

Now that Leeno had finished her recordings, I met back up with Lynokis and we returned to the capital. There were still about three days until school started, and those three days were a very precious rest period for me. Though I still had some leftover homework and recordings to do...

The moment I returned to the dorm, I was immediately surrounded. The girls asked question after question about Leeno. Her episode of *Game of Chase* had been rebroadcast about three times by now probably.

Leeno—who was dominating all conversations in the capital right now and so much more famous than I had ever imagined—guest starred on my program, and following a short interview,

she broke my perfect win record. There were many things to enjoy about that episode. Given everyone's reactions, they must have all enjoyed it themselves.

But yes, my perfect win streak had come to an end. Because I lost to Leeno. I didn't obsess over the results of a match against someone I knew I could beat at any time. If a fixed race would generate more excitement and help wrap things up, I barely minded going for that option. I didn't even care about my record. First I'd been winning against dogs; now I'd lost against an opponent I knew I could easily beat. That was all there was to the record.

Besides, Lynokis was fast herself. No one would ever think I'd deliberately lost. With my skilled control, I'd managed to make it look like it was a close match. It was a perfectly crafted race that no one would ever know the truth of.

It also allowed me to see that Lynokis's chi had improved more than I'd thought. It felt like no exaggeration to say that she was undoubtedly one of the strongest in the country. In fact, she might have been *the* strongest—well, excluding me.

Gandolph, Anzel, and Fressa were all improving at a very fast rate too, though, so perhaps the outcome was not so certain. Would Lynette be participating? She was a possible champion herself.

Now then, just who would the champion of the Altoire martial arts tournament be? Would someone strong from outside Altoire enter?

*Hee hee, I doubt there'll be anyone as strong as me, but I'm starting to look forward to this.*

*"It might look like a regular pole, but you can use it to search for any floor traps like this. Pitfalls, for example, can very easily lead to death, so it's important to make good use of tools like this in dungeons—"*

"Young Mistress, could you please change the channel?"

"Why? I want to get a good look at Leeno's adventuring self."

"Haven't you seen enough? It's embarrassing watching myself like this."

Lynokis was making a disgruntled face at me while I watched magivision in my room.

"But I want to see how you progress through a dungeon."

"You've watched it three times already. Surely you've

memorized it by now?”

Personally, I still wasn’t bored of it even after those three times. Lynokis might find it embarrassing, but I quite liked this episode of *Reliared’s One-Day Camp*. Since she’d graduated from the Department of Adventuring, Lynokis’s explanations of the basics of adventuring were very clear and concise, and with the recording attached, it made it even easier to understand.

Besides, this was the only episode of *One-Day Camp* I was even allowed to watch. There were still a lot of programs I was forbidden from watching, especially on the Silver Channel which practically specialized in adventuring. Apparently, I shouldn’t watch it because they could sometimes feature extreme images. But I really did think it was about time they let me watch it…

Well, anyway, I understood how Lynokis felt so I changed the channel. Even I wouldn’t want to watch programs I had been on a whole three times. A single watch just to check how it ended up was enough for me.

*“As we can see, contestants burning with motivation have already come to our fair kingdom!”*

*Oh, it’s Kikirira.* When I changed the channel, I was greeted by a familiar face and a familiar background. Pictured were the docks of the royal capital with Kikirira Amon, one of the members of the junior broadcasting company, front and center. She still had as powerful a smile as ever.

Seeing her like this, I was starting to see how good she was on the frame. With her incredible energy, she proved to be an entirely different type of interviewer than us three original girls. She didn’t have a lick of intelligence behind it, but that innocent, childlike impression she gave off wasn’t bad either. In fact, that was her unique charm.

Her smile and the blue sky behind her complemented each other well. Even when faced with the burliest of adventurers, she never faltered.

*Not bad at all.*

“Oh, some tygres.”

Walking behind Kikirira were two large tiger beastkin—known as tygres—who were clearly warriors. Their bodies were naturally tougher than that of a regular human, so they definitely weren’t weak, and there were many who instinctively sought out strong fighters. In other words, there were many tygres who would naturally end up following the path of

domination.

And yet, those two tygres were clearly still lacking.

“They look strong,” Lynokis remarked. “They’re even bigger than Gandolph.”

Was she serious?

“*Those* two tygres? Strong? They look so weak you could make them cry by flicking them on the forehead.” To be blunt, they were lacking in proper guidance. They were simply beastkin blessed with strong bodies, nothing more, nothing less. They were immature weaklings who took physical strength as the only type of strength they needed.

*Train, train, and train some more! You haven’t trained anywhere near enough. You’re putting such potential to waste.*

Tygres had monstrous potential. With their natural strength and flexibility, their ability to survive easily surpassed that of humans. And yet, these were so weak…

“Young Mistress, you are the only one capable of doing that.”

“Really? I think you could do it now too though.”

“Of course I couldn’t…” she sighed to herself. I was being serious, though. Not only did Lynokis not understand her master’s strength, she didn’t even understand her own. Though she *really* didn’t understand my strength. *Respect me already. Show. Your. Master. Respect.*

*“Excuse me! Are you here to take part in the tournament? Can we have a little chat?”*

There was Kikirira charging right for the tygres. She barely even cared that they were huge, towering men with the faces of big cats. Was this girl scared of *anything*?

*“What do you want, little girl?”*

*“Hey, bro, look at that. Isn’t that one of those ‘kamera’ things people were talking about?”*

*“Oh? You’re right, it must be. You’re taking images with that box of yours, aren’t you? Make it show us.”*

*“Huh? W-Wait!”*

*“I don’t know how this works, but listen up!* We’re *gonna be the champions of this tournament!”*

*“If you’re seeing this, Leeno, you better run this second if you’re scared! Our names are—”*

I rolled my eyes. *Hey, hey, you’re way too close! All we can see is your little wet black noses, and you’re clouding the camera lens up with your breath.*

Shenanigans aside, the junior production crew had gotten something juicy. No wonder this had been accepted by the official broadcasting station. I ended up engrossed with what I was watching before I knew it. The junior crew were working with the stipulation that what they recorded had to be of the necessary quality to be accepted, and this definitely met that criteria.

"It's a surprisingly carefree scene, isn't it?"

"Indeed."

I think the two of them said their names, but I was only paying attention to how funny the current image was so I didn't take in what they said at all. No, really, what had they said? I guess it didn't matter. Not like they had any chance of taking the win.

Anyway, it seemed the participants were now all gathering for the tournament. But the tournament didn't start until the end of the year, so were they not a bit early?

Unfortunately, as much as I wished to completely ignore it, it was about time I did my cursed homework. It was almost time for Reliared to stop by, after all.

"Master, there is something I wish to discuss with you..."

*Hmm?*

One night toward the end of winter vacation, I visited the Heavenstriker dojo to check in on Gandolph, making sure to give him a quick thrashing while I was there.

"What is it?" I peered into his exhausted face. The expression looking up at me through his sweat could only be described as distraught.

I couldn't afford to spend too much time here since I always stopped by during my rare free time, so this really was intended to be a quick assessment. I'd have loved to train him more thoroughly, but the time granted to me just wasn't enough. Despite that though, Gandolph's current condition wasn't half bad. He was becoming an interesting talent among my students.

When we first met, he'd been nothing more than a musclehead, but since he'd learned how to manipulate chi, his fighting style had slowly but surely been...not changing, actually, not at its root. Rather, his steps had become sharper, his punches and kicks faster. He was overall as slow as one would assume with his lumbering body, but it was undeniable that each

individual body movement in isolation had become much faster.

It was likely a result of the strength of his forms. He must have been endlessly polishing those fundamental stances. Forms were of little value in a real battle, but it was because Gandolph was aware of that fact that he knew how to put them to good use for practicing his Techniques.

Whether due to diligence or a hunger for power, Gandolph was taking his training seriously. Not that the others weren't—Gandolph just dedicated far more time to it. The results of that were more than apparent in both the quality of his chi and also his body movements.

"I'm really sorry, but I don't have much time. If it's something that'll take a while to discuss, I'll need you to arrange a meeting."

"Oh, I see..." He let out a sigh. "Yes, it won't be a quick chat..."

In that case, I definitely couldn't discuss it with him right now. But if something was worrying my student, as his master, I had to hear him out.

*Hmm... Oh, I know.*

"Are you free tomorrow around noon?"

"I'll be free, yes, but are you not busy?"

"I am." I had recordings scheduled for tomorrow. I'd had recordings from the beginning to end of this vacation period. It really pissed me off. That wretched Bendelio... It was all because of that horrid man. "But I can make a bit of time in the afternoon, so I should be able to meet you in town if you'd like."

And when I said "a bit," I meant it. The next morning, I had a session in the capital, and then in the afternoon, I had two episodes to record off on some floating island. The only spare time I had was between the morning and afternoon sessions for lunch. I had originally been intending to use it to have a meeting with the production crew, but really, I was free to use it how I wanted.

"I could manage that. I have something to do in town tomorrow anyway. Though, um...the thing I wanted to get your advice on actually *is* the reason I'll be there..."

"What do you mean?"

"You see, some practitioners from the main Heavenstriker dojo are here in Altoire right now. I have plans to meet with them, but I wanted to have a discussion with you about it first..."

Very interesting.

"Oh right, you were a *vice*-deputy instructor, weren't you? So

you're the deputy of a deputy?" Why were their ranks so complicated? I was pretty sure I was correct with my understanding of the hierarchy being head instructor, deputy instructor, and then vice-deputy branch instructor.

"Yes. It's related to that…"

*Sounds fun. I'm interested in the main dojo anyway.* Not that I expected them to be strong, but with a history as long as theirs, they had to have all sorts of stories. Would they have any interesting ones? Like maybe there had been an incident between them and another martial arts circle, or they'd hunted some crazy monsters. I'd even be content with the juicy gossip of any men that were in intimate relationships—a pretty common tale in the martial arts world. Then again, I was a child, so they definitely wouldn't tell *me* stories like that.

"Let's meet tomorrow, then. I'll hear you out."

"Thank you so much."

After we made our plans, I left the dojo.

*What is this going to be about, I wonder?*

"I'll meet you at the port later, then."

I parted ways with the staff after the morning recording of *Occupation Observation*. I was utterly exhausted. Today's episode featured a maker of magic talismans who taught me how to make my own. It turned out there were all different types of talismans, from those to ward away evil, to those wishing for good health, to those wishing for a safe birth.

I…couldn't really say whether or not they had any effect. Gods definitely existed, but I'd never gotten the blessing of one before. They were so fickle I couldn't be bothered to waste my time with them. They barely thought about us humans. That was why they so frivolously saved people one minute and abandoned them the next.

They were perfect sparring partners though, I'd give them that. I probably couldn't win right now, but they were opponents I could use all my strength against. *I wonder if there are any nearby? Mmm… Yeah, probably not.*

"Are you ready to go, Young Mistress?"

"Yes."

Lynokis would be coming with me—I'd already recounted the discussion I'd had with Gandolph last night. We didn't have infinite time, so we needed to be quick.

“Look, it’s Nia!”

“It’s the real Nia!”

*Ah, yes, yes.* The fate of a popular magivision star was to be greeted at every moment while walking down the busy afternoon streets. This was also a reflection of how popular magivision had become. The number of people who recognized us was directly tied to how many people had bought MagiPads. I didn’t care about my popularity, but I hoped this pace would keep up.

Usually, I would leave the handling of the public to the staff, but obviously, I didn’t have that luxury right now. We swiftly strode through the crowds while I returned their enthusiasm with a general wave. Once we got them off our tail, we entered the place we’d arranged to meet with Gandolph.

It looked a little like a high-class family restaurant. My usual restaurant, the Chocolate Lily’s Aroma, was also fairly high-class, but in comparison, this place was quite comfortable to walk into. I was immediately led to a private room in the back without even having to say my name. That had to be thanks to my reputation once again. *What? You want my autograph? But of course. You’re going to display it in the restaurant?* Display *it? Really? In the most visible location? Then I may come visit again.*

“Master Nia!”

Waiting for us in the booth was Gandolph.

“Have you already ordered? No? Lynokis, go order something for us.”

“Yes, Young Mistress.”

I felt bad for rushing, but I had recordings in the afternoon. I didn’t have the time to take things slow.

“Thank you for taking the time out for this. Please allow me to pay!”

“What? Do you have the money for it?”

“I can afford this place! Their lunch is cheap!”

That made sense.

“Well, okay, I’ll leave it to you, then.” Gandolph was the one asking for advice in this situation, so he’d probably feel bad if I were to foot the bill. Once Lynokis returned, we all sat around the table.

“So?” I’d been looking forward to this so I immediately jumped into the conversation. *What is it? Having a spat with the main dojo? Have you finally decided to leave the Heavenstriker? I don’t want you*

*to, but I'll support you all the way, whatever your choice is.*

"Um… I intended to enter the tournament."

Okay…

Wait.

"*Intended* to? As in, you won't now?" Gandolph had been a vital card for me to play against Leeno. I was hoping to build him up as her rival. From what I could see from the interviews of the candidates so far, none of them looked like they would last in a match against Lynokis, not a single one.

But Gandolph was different. He was strong, and he never viewed training as something to dread. These types of fighters who kept building up their strength bit by bit and never stopped working hard always ultimately ended up the strongest. Even though it didn't seem quite so possible right now, I was sure Gandolph would have a chance of winning the tournament if he kept up his training.

Whatever the result, it would definitely be a close match. It would certainly be a sight to see.

Incidentally, Lynokis hated training. *You silly student of mine. If you keep slacking on your training, you'll be passed in no time.*

"About that…" Gandolph went on to explain what he needed advice on, frowning all the while.

*Hmm, I see.*

"I underst—"

"Young Mistress, your mouth is all dirty."

"Mmph."

Just as I went to speak, Lynokis wiped my mouth. I never asked her to be *this* attentive; I could do that much myself. When was she going to show her master respect? It wasn't the student's place to wipe the grease from around her master's mouth. *You know what, whatever. This isn't the first time she's been lacking in respect and it won't be the last.*

"I understand your situation. Essentially, you were told to throw a match?"

Gandolph didn't hide the pain on his face at my blunt question. "So that *is* how it sounds?"



*Yes, unfortunately.*

Apparently, ten or so skilled practitioners of the Heavenstriker style had recently come to Altoire from the main dojo. Their eyes were naturally on the martial arts tournament; it would be difficult for any martial artist to ignore such a grand stage.

The core of martial arts was about facing oneself, but oftentimes, facing another allowed you to learn more about yourself as well. That was especially the case when it came to such a gathering of strong fighters.

Of course, they would also simply be interested in who was strong, just how strong they were, and who was the strongest from XYZ country. Though the king had said that he had no interest in such things, he was a very notable exception.

Plus, if any of them managed to earn the title of champion, prospective Heavenstriker students would come flocking to them.

However...

"That sort of thing does happen sometimes."

Naturally, large schools ended up forming some kind of hierarchy. Gandolph was a vice-deputy branch instructor, but apparently everyone who'd come here from the main dojo was a head instructor or higher. Those higher-ups had called Gandolph to them as the current instructor of the royal capital's Heavenstriker dojo, asked for a progress report, and then said to him, "If you end up fighting against one of us in the tournament, surrender before you get hurt."

On the surface, it sounded like nothing more than a kind warning, but that wasn't the case at all. What they were really trying to say was "Lose to us immediately." That way they didn't end up wasting their energy or getting injured while fighting a fellow practitioner. To make sure that head instructors didn't lose to a simple vice-deputy, they'd come right to Gandolph's doorstep and were trying to intimidate him.

Fixed matches weren't all that rare though. Hell, I'd even deliberately lost to Leeno in our race.

"What do you intend to do, then?" I asked.

"I... I'm not sure."

And that's why he'd come to me seeking advice.

"Orders from above are absolute," he explained. "The Heavenstriker style is so famous it's known the world over, and it has many practitioners. Since we have a clearly established

hierarchy, our school is a much more coherent whole."

That made sense. When a group got too big, it was impossible to keep an eye on absolutely everyone. A strong hierarchy allowed them to properly oversee the group. There was a clear reason that hierarchies existed even outside of martial arts.

"But now you entrusted knowledge of chi to me. I can't do something so cowardly and ruin your reputation."

Lynokis was nodding sagely beside me. But I responded with "I don't see the problem?"

"What?"

"It's not like I forbid fixed matches. If doing that will resolve a situation without hassle, then you should do it. 'I have to win. No matter what, I have to get this victory. I want to win.' It's only when you start thinking like that that you start reaching for cowardly methods. That's why I never put much weight on my wins and losses."

Though I personally thought that using cowardly tactics to win wasn't wrong either if you desired it that much. I hated nothing more than people employing dirty tactics and then using "I have a reason I can't lose" as a justification. It was unbecoming and disgraceful. If they were going to use such tactics, then I'd much rather they stick their chests out and say, "You may view my tactics however you wish. I can't hear the whining of losers." If you were going to use such tactics, then commit. Be clear that you were simply obsessed with winning.

"Lose when it's safe to lose. But if there is an absolute reason you cannot lose, then win no matter what. That's all it means to be a martial artist." He was asked to throw a match? He didn't want to do such a thing? They have a hierarchy over there? He should just banish such difficult thoughts from his mind. Martial artists were stupid fools, and that was perfect. "You don't know what you should do? Then think about what you *want* to do. You already have your answer, don't you?"

"'What I should do,' huh…?"

After Nia finished her meal and left with Lynokis, Gandolph was left alone with his thoughts, still seated at the table. It was okay for him to lose in a fixed match. Lose when it's safe to lose, but when he absolutely could not lose, he should win. If he didn't know what he should do, then he should think about what he *wanted* to do. As profound as it sounded, it also felt quite simple

to him.

“Wait, that’s it.” The reason it felt simple was because he was meant to think simply.

Right.

That was it.

The world of martial arts was simple. That was why he should simply do whatever came to mind—all in order to not disgrace his own martial arts.

“All right!”

Gandolph stood up. He could now clearly see just what it was he should do.

That day, Gandolph was arrested.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!”

On the same night I met with Gandolph, a shocking rumor started circulating through the dorm: The vice-deputy instructor who taught at the academy’s Heavenstriker dojo had been arrested. What else could I do but laugh?

“This isn’t a laughing matter! This is definitely your fault, Young Mistress!” Despite her usual cold attitude toward her fellow students, Lynokis seemed flustered as she brought the news up to me. She was just that kind of person—she would always bad-mouth them to me but then go out drinking with them when I wasn’t watching.

No, but really, I couldn’t help but laugh. Gandolph had gotten himself arrested, had he? In other words, he’d done it.

“This is brilliant though. He truly is a martial artist.” Right, this was how he should be. “I can already tell you exactly what happened.”

“What?!”

“Gandolph met up with those instructors from the main dojo and beat them up.” I fully approved of his actions too. I would have done the same thing had I been in his shoes.

His answer to my question had been simple.

“‘I don’t care about your rank or where you’re from, but I refuse to give the win to someone weaker than me. If you’re stronger than me, then I’ll just need to make *sure* I defeat you, so fight me!’ Something like that, no?”

That would’ve led to a big brawl that had ended in his arrest, most likely. It wasn’t uncommon for martial artists to get

arrested either, so it wasn't something to get all worked up about.

"But you said it was okay for him to deliberately lose, didn't you?"

"I did. But that doesn't mean he'd do it without question."

Gandolph's fighter's spirit likely couldn't accept it. He'd spent years upon years polishing his technique, and yet he was to simply give away his win on the big stage without even putting up a fight? That wasn't an honorable defeat; they were forcing him to choose a dishonorable loss. Even if there was an absolute hierarchy, he wasn't willing to sit down and take their nonsense.

Besides, the fact he was questioning it at all despite that absolute hierarchy was all the answer he needed. He'd already been thinking that he wanted to fight back, that he wanted to struggle against their orders.

In which case, there was only one conclusion.

Martial artists didn't need to think about what came later—if they wanted to fight, they should just fight. We didn't fit an intelligent lifestyle.

Well...there were limits, of course. My old self was far too foolish, for instance.

"Nia! Sorry, I'm coming in! Something terrible has happened!"

Reliared suddenly burst into my room without even a knock. It made sense she was so frantic—she and her sister were students of Gandolph's school after all.

"Is this about the Heavenstriker instructor?"

"You already knew?! Master was arrested!"

*Yes, I heard he was arrested. It's quite comical, really.* Reliared would probably get really mad if I laughed at a time like this though, so I held it back.

"Nia, what should I do?! What should I *do*?!"

Why was she asking me? I wasn't part of the same school, and it wasn't public knowledge that I was teaching Gandolph, so she shouldn't have been aware of that. Really, she should have gone to either Ririmi or her attendant.

Not that I necessarily minded that I was the first person that came to mind when she found herself in need of help.

"Well, to start off, don't you think it would be a good idea for a member of the Silver family to do *nothing* at the moment? You might make things worse." Being aristocrats, the Silvers could probably use their influence to bail Gandolph out, but he hadn't

been arrested for a normal fight. If they moved in to support Gandolph so openly, the main dojo of the Heavenstriker would come after them next.

Assuming my predictions were correct, the root of this was internal fighting between Heavenstriker members—things could get messy if aristocrats got themselves involved. Any wrongdoing against them could be perceived as an international conflict.

"R-Really? But Master..."

Reliared looked so worried. *Would you look at that? You're well loved after all, Gandolph.* It wasn't such a surprise though. He was a very diligent man and he seemed good at looking after others. He even *respected* me. He respected me as his teacher!

"How about this, then? Let me talk to some people I know about it. Could you wait a little while?"

"People you know?"

"Yes. Though it's possible they're already doing something about it."

*And one more thing.*

"Why don't you try contacting the school for now? Go to them and say, 'There must be some mistake behind Master's arrest, so please wait before you punish him.' That'll help buy time, won't it? You can then take that time to confirm the facts and find out what happened. You might even manage to get him declared innocent. I think it would be fine to use the Silver name for something like that."

"O-Okay... In that case, I'll see you later!"

*I'll see you later.* Reliared burst out the room with as much vigor as she'd burst in with. What a busy girl.

"Young Mistress, just whom do you intend to consult with and for what?"

*What? Oh.*

"When in trouble, always turn to Cedony Trading."

"Ah, I see."

Cedony Trading was one of the biggest trade companies in Altoire. They had sway no matter where you went in the country. They'd do something if I asked them to, and honestly, I thought it entirely possible they'd already started making their move. Gandolph had formed a connection with them through the billion kram project, after all.

"Lynokis, I need you to go to Cedony tomorrow." I had work

so I doubted I'd have the time to slip out to ask about it myself, so I decided to give a letter to Lynokis and have her deliver it.

Shortly after that, Gandolph was released from prison. As I thought, he'd gotten into a fight with the other Heavenstriker practitioners, and he'd ended up getting arrested because the fight got so big. Cedony stepping in was naturally a big help, but it turned out the court agreed that he'd fought in self-defense given how outnumbered he'd been, and so he was let free.

Thanks to Reliared's plea, Gandolph wasn't punished by the school either. It was all filed away as him being innocent.

I wouldn't get a follow-up to that news until much later. For now, I would ask for Anzel and Fressa's help.

*Hopefully this is where it ends...*

Though the instructor of the Heavenstriker dojo within Altoire Academy grounds had been arrested toward the end of the winter holiday, the third semester started as if nothing had happened. Nowadays, all anyone was talking about were the programs Leeno guest-starred on and the martial arts tournament that was still a whole year away. Talk of a certain someone getting arrested faded fast. Though it probably helped that those rumors were overwritten with reports that the arrest had been falsely reported. Gandolph was right here, after all.

Both the school and the royal capital were so abuzz with excitement that I was almost afraid they wouldn't keep it up until the tournament itself—each day, I asked myself if this would finally be the day that talk of it died down.

Apparently, there were quite a few famous names among the foreign adventurers and martial artists coming to Altoire. The junior production crew showed no hesitation in getting themselves down to the docks and immediately interviewing anyone that looked like they might be a participant. Those repeated trips had given them plenty of recordings that would go on to get approved by the official station. Anything that was broadcast then became the talk of the town again, and so the people never ran out of things to gossip about.

Once, when I bumped into Josecotte in the hallways, she mentioned that she really wanted to do an interview with one of the contestants from the school, like Sanowil from the Satomi Swift Swordsmanship dojo or Reliared's sister Ririmi. But the

royal station had rejected it, saying that it was too niche a topic. It made sense, I supposed—the only people who would really care about interviews with students would be those with ties to the school.

Surely the chance to have interviews with them would roll around once everything calmed down a little. Right now, everyone was still too excited and it was chaotic trying to get anything done.

"Personally, it's fine for the Liston Channel to remain like this," Lynokis said as she watched magivision beside me while I did my homework.

Programs produced by the capital, Silvers, and junior production crew about adventurers and the martial arts tournament had increased greatly, and yet the Liston Channel alone remained the same as always. Our channel had always been more laid-back and relaxing than the others, and that made it popular with the older generation who had an attachment to the countryside.

Now that the other channels had gotten so lively, the Liston Channel felt even more carefree than before. We really didn't ever change that much. Even the Leeno episode of *Game of Chase* wasn't being broadcast as often since it had already been rebroadcast about twenty times. Now that the excitement from that was over, it was back to business as usual for us.

"I don't dislike it either, but we're definitely the least popular channel right now…" And that was an issue we'd have to act on by coming up with a new program or something. But honestly, even if we managed to come up with something new right now, it seemed like it would be hard to get people's attention.

*I don't have to worry about raising the billion krams anymore, so maybe I should try thinking of something myself.*

"Young Mistress, your homework."

"Hey, you were the one who started talking to me first." This time admittedly annoyed me. She didn't even show me any respect. What a terrible student.

The whole third semester, I found myself thinking about the Liston Channel. It really was getting to the time we needed to start thinking of new ideas.

The capital had *Cooking Princess* and the Silvers had *One-Day Camp* and the paper plays, but what did the Liston Channel

have? The only regular program we had was my *Occupation Observation*. *Tales of a Liston Stroll* episodes had become increasingly infrequent. Those episodes had a lot of rebroadcasts though, so they could still get the chance to see Bendelio's distinctive face. I personally was sick of it, though.

My next promotion exam passed without me coming to any useful conclusion, and suddenly, I was in my third year of elementary school. It was as the spring vacation began that I had an unprecedented meeting.

# Chapter 3: Behind the Excitement

Just as winter truly began to take hold, things finally started to move.

“Did you see the announcement?! Leeno’s participating in the tournament!”

“Finally, our soon-to-be champion is here!”

“May as well bet all my life savings on her!”

The Shifty Shadow Rat had always been a noisy little place, but its patrons were more excited than ever today.

“At least things should calm down a bit now,” Fressa muttered by the counter.

“But this is also where everythin’ starts,” Anzel responded.

The Altoire martial arts tournament had been officially announced that fall. People had already been abuzz about rumors alone, but the official confirmation was when the real fire of excitement took hold.

Thanks to that, business had been booming for their back-alley bar. With so many foreign participants entering the country, there was no end to the gossip. It was practically a given that people were discussing who was the strongest or who would be the dark horse of the competition, but there were also those talking about how cute the girl doing the interviews was, that they wanted her to be their daughter, and that a more normal girl like her was more preferable to watch than the kid of a self-important aristocrat. Anzel had no idea where they were watching magivision in the first place, but they seemed to be getting excited about it all anyway.

Days passed and it was winter when Leeno the adventurer announced her own participation in the tournament. Anyone who was a regular at the Shadow Rat had a bit of a soft spot for the girl; many of them had frequently met her at the establishment over the last year. And she’d treated many of them to a drink or two. Any time Leeno was about to head home, she’d always buy a round for everyone.

Thanks to that, the more simpleminded patrons had taken a liking to her. Gaining an allegiance simply by buying cheap drinks for everyone present was a seriously good deal.

Stories aside, Leeno's announcement had gathered attention for all manner of reasons—it was something that everyone had likely been waiting for. She was, after all, already deemed the strongest in Altoire since she'd earned a baffling amount of money in just a couple of years.

For those from Altoire, Leeno felt like a representative of their country. Knowing that foreign participants were allowed, they at least wanted one of their own citizens to win—they wanted to cheer for someone local. Anzel understood how they felt at least.

"Anzel."

"Huh? Oh, Geese."

The unusual voice from behind gave Anzel a fright, but when he turned around, it was just the older man he sometimes asked to stand in for him when he had to be away from the bar.

Geese Baitz was an employee that Anzel would turn to for help when he was busy. Geese had been part of the underworld for so long that Anzel trusted he could handle the rowdy crowd that frequented the Shadow Rat.

"Did I ask you to come today?" Anzel was sure he hadn't.

"No, and I didn't mistake the day or anything," Geese replied as he returned Fressa's wave and stood next to the bartender. "The boss is calling. Wants you to go right away."

Anzel nodded in immediate understanding. "In that case, I leave the place to you."

Geese had come to the bar to pass on a message. If it was a summons from the boss, then that became top priority.

It had been a while since Anzel had set foot here. He would drop by almost every day before he had his own bar, but nowadays, he rarely showed his face.

The warehouse district always looked abandoned at first glance, but it was simply that you couldn't see the residents. Anzel could feel the gazes locked on him from the shadows. Ever since he'd learned how to use his chi, he swore it felt like he could sense them even more keenly than before.

At least this place was as organized as ever. Though if you dared dig any deeper, you would instantly see how dangerous everything truly was.

Anzel thought there would have at least been some changes since the tournament announcement, but so far, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

“Yo, Anzel.”

On his way to his destination, Anzel bumped into his old friend Nastine.

“Where’s the boss?”

“Bumped into” might have been inaccurate—this was no coincidence. Nastine had been waiting for him to arrive. His presence served many functions: to show the way, to keep an eye on Anzel, and to serve as a lookout.

“This way.” Nastine beckoned, setting off for their destination. “Man, it’s freezing tonight.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty cold myself. How’s work been? Busy?” Anzel hadn’t seen Nastine for about a month now—the guy hadn’t shown up at the bar in a good long while. Someone as good with money as Nastine would spare no effort in maintaining his connections, making sure to visit all his usual joints and networking where he could. For someone like that to stop frequenting his bar...

“Super busy. Got a lot of strangers to the country that don’t know their manners. It’s been causing a fair few fights.”

Anzel had expected no less from the bustling underworld.

“A few skirmishes never hurt anyone.”

“Yeah, I agree. The real dangerous folks wouldn’t stoop so low as to get involved in these little spats. The only problem is if it stops being *little* spats. Not that that’s my wheelhouse anyway.”

The two chatted away as they entered a warehouse. It might have looked unguarded, but any lookouts simply weren’t visible. In reality, skilled assassins were constantly monitoring and defending the area.

This place was both the riskiest and the safest place one could be.

“I’ll catch you later, Anzel.”

“Sure. Drop by the Shadow Rat again when you find the time.”

“I’ll come for a visit soon. Don’t expect me to order anything expensive though.”

Nastine took his place beside the door to the back room—the door to where the boss waited.

The only ones allowed past this point were those who had been summoned.

When Anzel opened the door, he was greeted by three burly men standing guard and a fourth man leisurely reading a book

on a sofa in a large living area.

“You called, boss?”



The man on the sofa closed his book. He was middle-aged with a large scar on his left cheek. His name was Kaffes Jacks, ruler of the Altoire underworld…

"Been a while, Anzel."

"Sure has. Glad you're lookin' well, boss."

…and the one who had raised Anzel. Even if Kaffes had raised him entirely for his own gain, Anzel was still grateful. If Kaffes hadn't scooped him up when he did, Anzel would most definitely have been dead by now.

Kaffes wasn't an upright citizen, but he had taught Anzel how to live. This was perfectly fine by Anzel, as those who *were* upright had chosen not to save him.

"Not sayin' you have to become a regular or anythin', but it'd be nice if you dropped by my bar once 'n a while." Anzel had ordered in Kaffes's favorite expensive alcohol just for him. He'd have loved it if he'd come by even just once.

But Kaffes's response was a simple "If I came by, I'd disturb your business." His presence would likely give the local punks a scare. His cold gaze, his presence, his bodyguards, all of them screamed danger—even to a total rookie. "You want me to visit your establishment, then you've gotta make it one that can actually accommodate me. I have countless enemies; going down a back alley's a little too scary for me."

*Like hell.* Kaffes could stare death straight in the face and still march ahead without hesitation. This man was only standing here today after winning battle after battle with his life on the line. That was just the kind of person he was.

"You good for time?" Anzel asked, an indirect admonishment of the trivial chatter. Kaffes was a busy man. As the ruler of the underworld, he was naturally busy enough dealing with work on this side of Altoire, but he had a perfectly healthy business up on the surface as well. He only came to his base in the warehouse district once or twice a month.

Naturally, times of emergency were an exception.

"Good point. Let's get into why I called you here, shall we?" Kaffes put his book aside. "You've gotten stronger recently, haven't you, Anzel?"

"Hmm? Well…yeah, I guess." Not too long ago, he'd been out earning one billion krams. It had been a while since he'd seen Kaffes, so he hadn't had the opportunity to report to him about it. But there was no way Kaffes didn't know. He was the ruler of

the underworld, after all; there was nothing that went on down here that he *didn't* know.

"How much stronger?"

"How much...? How'm I supposed to explain that? Who are you wantin' me to compare myself to?"

Kaffes raised his right hand.

The moment he did, the men in the room lunged at Anzel. A collapsible bat, a pair of knuckle dusters, a knife—the three of them came at him with their hidden weapons without reserve.

"Some things never change," Anzel muttered. The Qilong really were something else. There were no openings in their attacks, no unnecessary movements, and their coordination was impeccable. They were highly proficient as both assassins and bodyguards.

But Anzel could read them.

He dodged each and every attack, his hands shoved into his pockets the whole time.

Kaffes soon halted their assault. "That's enough." The men pulled back and concealed their weapons. Even their retreat was refined. "Anzel, is that Leeno girl stronger than you?"

Suddenly, Anzel realized exactly why he had been called here. "Hang on now, did you call me here to tell me to enter the tournament? In what world could someone like me stand on the big stage?" Anzel had made all manner of mistakes as a member of the underworld. He had more than enough skeletons in his closet by now.

Thanks to Kaffes's support, he'd been able to own his own establishment, but that didn't make him a civilian. He'd never considered himself someone who lived on the surface, and he was sure it would be impossible for that to happen in the future. He'd long ago resigned himself to the fact that he would never be able to escape the underworld.

"I've heard the prize money's a whole five hundred million krams, you know? Sure you don't want that?"

"Course I do. Fressa *did* say she'd enter even if she had to wear a disguise, and it's not like I'm *not* interested, but..." But when he thought about it rationally, he didn't like the idea of being so scrutinized by the public. There wasn't a single good thing that would come from a dweller of the underworld gathering so much attention.

"Then enter. And win while you're there."

“If you’re orderin’ it, then… Just don’t hate me if I lose.”

“Oh, I will.” Kaffes laughed coldly. “I fully intend to bet a whole fifty billion krams on you.”

Anzel stared in shock for a few seconds. “You serious?”

“Deathly serious.”

The billion krams Anzel had raised with the others had already driven him crazy. What did Kaffes mean he was going to bet *over ten times* that much? And he was betting it all on Anzel to boot.

*I’m gonna lose my mind here, seriously.*

“It’s all my savings. If you lose, I lose everything. But there’s value in betting on you. I fully intend to extort the cash outta every bigwig coming in from abroad. We’ll take that cash from them no matter what, and if they try to weasel their way out of it, we’ll take everything they own. I’d especially like to get my hands on some foreign real estate. All you have to do is win and we’ll get far more than that fifty billion back. That’s why I’m betting everything on you.”

Kaffes had been planning one hell of a profitable scheme. Dangerous and underhanded, it really did reek of their overlord’s doing.

“You not confident? If you aren’t, you can refuse.”

Anzel sighed. “Why’re you actin’ like I have any choice in the matter? I’ll do it.”

Kaffes was the one person in the world that Anzel could never and would never betray—and Kaffes was fully aware of that. That was the reason he would rarely interfere with Anzel’s business. Even if he let the young man roam free, Kaffes knew Anzel would never betray him, and if he summoned Anzel, he would immediately return.

He was also fully aware that Anzel would never refuse an order from him.

Anzel was completely fine with their relationship. It might have been twisted—and from an outsider’s perspective, it was entirely one-sided—but this was simply the form their trust took.

“Old man wants me to win, huh?”

The moment he left the warehouse, Anzel immediately lit a cigarette.

*Can I really win…?* When he thought about it, his answer was “probably not.” He didn’t think he would lose to random thugs or to those who were slightly famous, but his cohort was a different

story.

Lynokis, Fressa, Gandolph, Lynette… He was more than aware of the strength of Nia Liston's other students. That was why he honestly wasn't sure if he could win.

In his opinion, there was no opponent he would guarantee victory against. No matter what, he would never say that he would definitely win, no matter who his opponent was.

Now that he had been ordered to achieve victory, Anzel would of course aim for it. But the impossible could not be made possible. He was well aware that there were those whose skill he could never reach no matter how hard he tried. There was always the chance that crazy fighters besides Nia's students could end up participating as well.

Could he win the tournament? What would happen if he couldn't? In that case, Kaffes would have no choice but to cough up every kram that he owned. If that happened, well…the only choice left to Anzel would be to run for his life.

*Maybe I should make sure I pack everything I own so I can run at any time.* With that conclusion reached, Anzel began his walk back to the bar.

"That you, Anzel?"

Anzel wasn't long into his way back when a man hidden in the shadows of a warehouse called out to him.

"Who are you?"

Rather than answering, the man walked out into the light.

"Oh, Dao, sir."

Dao Zanxi was a large man in his thirties, a resident of the underworld specializing in the rougher affairs both mentally and physically. He worked mainly as a bodyguard or as security, but his real job was more akin to Fressa's.

He was the head of the Qilong.

"Been a while, Anzel. Came to see the boss?"

"Yeah, I was just headin' back."

Dao was also working under Kaffes. In a way, he was like an old colleague, though Anzel hadn't spent all that much time with him. Anzel's main job had been as a bodyguard while Dao's crew did assassinations—as far as their jobs were concerned, there was little reason for them to interact. They'd have a friendly chat if they bumped into each other though.

Before learning how to use chi, Anzel had never thought he

could stand up to the head of the Qilong. They'd never sparred before, but he'd seen Dao in a fight. Everyone in the Qilong was powerful, but this man was in a whole different league.

*But what about now? Could I win?*

"Are you plannin' to enter the tournament?" Anzel asked.

"Hmm? Oh, the one here in Altoire? Heh… Do I look like the sort who'd enter such a public competition? Do you think I *can*?" The wry grin on Dao's face made it clear that the reason he wouldn't be entering was the exact same as Anzel's.

"I was just ordered to enter it."

"Huh? *You*?"

"Makes for a good laugh, doesn't it? Even though I have as much dirt on my record as you."

"You…bein' serious?" It appeared Dao had entertained the possibility that it was a joke. That was how unbelievable and out of the blue the idea of it was. Anzel wished it really was a joke.

"Boss wants to place a massive bet, apparently."

Dao knew exactly what Anzel meant with those words: Kaffes wanted to gamble with his life again.

"Guy never changes, huh? I really hope he mellows out sometime soon."

*Yeah, I agree.*

The two stood around and chatted for a while. Ever since Anzel had begun his bartending, he'd barely been by the warehouse district. That was probably why he ended up with a ton to talk about even with someone he wasn't all that close to like Dao.

"Ah, right. While we're here, I'll let you in on this."

It was a winter night, far from the perfect season to be standing around talking. Anzel had been considering heading off soon, and it appeared Dao had been thinking the same, because he left him with one last tidbit.

"It turns out some guys from the main house have entered Altoire."

"Them too?"

Not that there was any need to be surprised. It was a big tournament. It wasn't so strange.

The main house of the Qilong was an exceptional group of assassins hidden away in Wu Haitong. It was the root of the Altoire Qilong that Dao led. The nature of his work meant that Anzel had gotten involved in some slight altercations with them,

but…

"That's a little scary." The main house was strong, especially the executives.

And now, Anzel knew the exact reason—those guys knew about the existence of chi.

"They're only here for the tournament, not work, so I can't predict what they'll do. They might even turn up at your bar."

"Why…? Oh wait."

Leeno the adventurer, that was why. Anyone who followed her tracks would end up at the Shadow Rat eventually. That was why so many strong-looking fighters would show up day after day.

"Thanks for the heads-up. I'll keep an eye out."

The main dojo of the Heavenstriker style that Gandolph had clashed with, the main house of the Qilong, and countless other proficient fighters that Anzel didn't know were all arriving in Altoire, even though there was still a whole year until the tournament.

There were still many more to come. In fact, the real rush was yet to happen. The number of participants would only keep increasing, and there might very well be some insanely skilled fighters in there.

"I've gotta aim for victory, huh…?"

Kaffes's order lay heavy on Anzel's shoulders.

He really had no confidence he could do it.

*I seriously gotta make sure I'm ready to run at any time.*

"Yo, Nia Liston."

*Hmm…? Oh my.*

The annual calamity known as the promotion exam was now over, and there were only a few days left in my time as a second-year. But then one day after school, a familiar face was waiting near the entrance to the girls' dorm.

It was Char Gaul, the member of the school's production crew who had the air of a delinquent. The elementary and middle school buildings were separate so we didn't often get the chance to meet. There were times I'd seen him in passing, but the last time we'd spoken face-to-face like this would've been just before summer vacation the year before. I believed it was around the time we were trying to figure out how to get the junior team their first official broadcast.

A fairly attractive young man with a bit of a bad boy look was standing in front of a girls' dorm... *I know exactly why you're here.*

"Waiting for your girlfriend?" That was how it looked to me, at least. That or he was about to ask someone out on a date. Society was still a little touchy about high-class aristocrats going out with commoners, but there were already cases of lower-class aristocrats going out with commoners and even getting married. Hell, even a certain bartender was chasing aristocrats out of his establishment without consequence by questioning the use of status in this day and age. That was just the sort of age we were in.

And yet, Char's response was not what I expected.

"I was waiting for you."

*For... For me?*

"I apologize, but I just turned eight. I'm not thinking about courting anyone."

"What? Uh, sure, don't need to worry about that. I'm not interested in kids."

Thankfully, it seemed he was genuinely surprised by my reply. If he was surprised, that meant he hadn't been expecting it. *Only the most natural of responses. You shouldn't be thinking about doing anything at all with a girl of my age. Live healthily, my child. Though you already look like a delinquent.* There were strange people out there like Neal's and my personal attendants, but they were extreme examples. At least, I prayed heavily that they were. They... They were, right?

But that left only one other possibility for Char's presence.

"Then are you here to consult with me about magivision?" That was the only thing we had in common, so he had to be here to discuss that.

"Not quite. Though I do have something I want to consult you about."

*It's* not *about magivision?*

"Could I have a bit of your time? Seriously, I just need a little bit."

Standing in front of the dorm to talk wasn't the best idea, so I invited him up to my room, but Char was adamant that he would be quick and tried to jump right into his pitch right there. It seemed whatever he wanted to discuss wasn't a private affair, so he didn't care if anyone else heard. He would have to not care, because the fact a boy was standing at the entrance to a girls'

dorm was attracting a lot of attention—from both the students arriving at the dorm, and the students who had already arrived, and even Carme, the head resident of the dorm. She kept peeking out the entrance as casually as she could and then ducking out of sight.

They were all old enough to be greatly curious about any romantic gossip. Though given the age difference between Char and me, some of them might have been worried, as well. I personally didn't mind who saw us, but I absolutely did not want to be caught by Lynokis. If she happened to notice us, she would be incredibly annoying about it later, so it was simpler if we were up-front about it and met where she could clearly see us.

But it was fine. If he could say what he needed to say here, then we might as well get it over with.

"I asked Her Highness about it first, but she said she was busy so I should ask you. That's why I'm here now."

"Ah, so Hilde recommended you come to me." In that case, I couldn't disappoint. If she had passed it on to me, then it must have been related to magivision in some way. "She does seem especially busy right now."

"Right, with her cooking program and recordings for the tournament. She doesn't always have the time to come to the broadcasting station either."

Even Reliared seemed busy right now. The only one of us with time these days was the one at the laid-back Liston Channel. Though I didn't really feel like I was *that* free…

"Say, is it true you have personal connections to Cedony Trading?" he asked.

Now that was a surprising direction for the conversation.

"I do, yes." They'd been a great help while I'd been raising the billion krams. We hadn't really had any reason to remain in contact after that. Even when Gandolph had been arrested, we had made the request in Leeno's name, not mine.

Actually, that was a lie. Some of my students might have kept up doing jobs for them, but even if they hadn't, nothing said I couldn't go pop my head in at some point. It seemed likely we'd end up making a deal again in the future; there was no need to burn a bridge for no reason.

"Seriously? You do? How long have you worked together?"

How long? Uh…

"Into the hundreds of millions?"

“Into the…hundreds of millions…? Sorry, I don’t get what you mean. Basically, you’re trying to say you’ve had big dealings with them?”

“Essentially, yes.” There was no way I could say that I’d had them help me raise a billion krams. It would be annoying to try and explain. “More importantly, why do you want to know? I can’t decide if I’ll help you if you don’t tell me.”

“Oh, right. Long story short, I want to buy airship parts from Vanderouge.”

“Airship parts?”

“More specifically, airship parts for Wingroad.”

*Wingroad…?*

“I’m back. Prepare two cups of tea, would you? I’ll answer your questions later so be quiet for now.” When we made it up to my room, I immediately shut Lynokis up and invited Char in. “Char, please have a seat and tell me more.”

Char had assumed he could say what he wanted to say outside, but things were much different than I had initially assumed. I was very interested in what he had to say.

“U-Um… Yes, Young Mistress.” Lynokis was in a position where she had waited for my return and I had come back with a boy. It was likely a shock, but I needed her to swallow her protests for now.

Though she initially hesitated, she quickly began making the tea. Given she chose the expensive tea leaves, it appeared she had caught on that he was my guest. *Wait, you’re serving the cookies too? Will there be enough left over for my nighttime snack?*

“Your room’s so empty. I thought girls’ rooms were more…”

*Stop judging my living space. Just sit down and speak.* I held back the desire to snap out loud and waited patiently for Char to sit. When he noticed me watching him look around my room, he finally sat down.

“I guess I’ll start from the beginning. Wingroad is a competitive sport that started in Vanderouge…”

I was a barbaric monkey who knew little of competitive sports other than fighting. That was why I didn’t understand why people had taken so well to me racing dogs.

Humans loved competition. What I chose to compete in was blood-shedding savagery. Though, right now, I had not a single opponent that could match me, so it always ended up a very

one-sided slaughter. In this day and age, people competed peacefully without spilling a single drop of blood.

Competition done peacefully? Why, that sounded perfect for the conservative Liston Channel.

There were plenty of different competitive fields to discover. Many of the older generation watching our programs could've been sportsmen when they were younger, and so they'd like to see other people do as they'd once done.

Right now, the only real candidate for covering the competitive scene was Kikirira Amon, since she had literally been scouted for her athletic ability. It was likely a matter of time before she would be recorded competing in something herself. Though it was still a bit early for that.

In any case, it was a genre that was still largely untouched. Right now especially, the whole of Altoire was busy covering the martial arts tournament. It might have been a bad time to start something new, but on the other hand, it could be the perfect time to try and get a head start.

The Silvers might have stolen the paper plays from me, but I was not about to let this one slip through my fingers.

"So? How much does this 'Wingroad' of yours cost? Are you able to participate in competitions?"

"No, I just wanted to order the parts to build a Wingroad skiff."

"Okay, let's just do it already. Let's gather some racers for this, um...skiff competition of yours."

"Hey, that look in your eyes is kinda scary..."

But of course it was. This time, I would *not* let a project pass me by.

When I really thought about it, I began to realize that Wagnes's eye for talent wasn't bad after all. Wingroad wasn't all that popular in Altoire yet, but he'd predicted the day would come that its popularity would spread here and had invited Char to the production crew in preparation.

Apparently, Char himself had joined the production crew because he wanted to advertise Wingroad, believing that getting it on magivision was the fastest way to spread awareness—if he managed to get it to air in the first place.

Right now though, it was hard to say that the junior production crew had truly gotten the ball rolling with their

activities, and the whole country was talking about nothing but the martial arts tournament, so it was no surprise that it was difficult for them to do anything with Char's sport.

Wingroad was the collective name for various disciplines of competitive skiff sports. It had originated in Vanderouge and had recently been gaining more popularity. I asked Char more about it, and he said that it could broadly be split into three different types:

The most popular was racing. Several participants would race around a designated course to see who was the fastest. There were both long races and short races, but as a category, they weren't separated. This discipline was so popular that when someone said Wingroad, skiff racing was the first thing people usually thought of. It was apparently also big in the betting scene.

The second was called "freestyle." It was an acrobatic performance in which competitors would show off their honed skills on a skiff. Char said they performed moves like somersaults and cartwheels in the air, but words alone weren't enough to help me imagine a skiff doing such tricks.

Third was synchronized flying. This was about showing off a perfectly coordinated flight formation performed with a team. In other words, it was like acting as a flock of migrating birds.

These three disciplines together made Wingroad: the passage through which wings crossed.

"I see, so it's all about competing with skiffs," I mused to myself after Char's explanation. "No wonder it originated in Vanderouge."

Vanderouge didn't forbid riding skiffs through city streets, but it was against the law in Altoire. Well, it wasn't that Altoire *completely* forbade it. If you had special permission—if you had to transport those who were ill or had to rush to deal with an incident or a fire—it was fine. At the docks, you would see skiffs used to transport large luggage as well, though I heard that such transport required a license. In these cases, the skiffs used were built purely for their intended purpose. Instead of speed, their emphasis was on power and user-friendliness. They were skiffs built specifically for labor. Wingroad, on the other hand, used skiffs built specifically for the purposes of speed.

"It's great fun. You get to see these skiffs zooming at insane speeds right past your eyes."

It was a little difficult for me to imagine the idea of watching a skiff go by me at insane speeds given I'd never seen it happen before, but when I tried to imagine that high-speed liner with its turbo boost shrunk down to skiff size, I started to get a little curious.

"Your strategy's also important too. It's not just about going fast; you gotta try and predict how the other racers are gonna move and decide the perfect time to make your own." With how excitedly Char was talking, it was more than clear that Wingroad had the power to utterly captivate people. "Once I graduate from middle school, I'm gonna move to Vanderouge and become a Wingroad racer."

*Motivated, aren't you?*

"Then I'll make Wingroad popular in Altoire, and all the other countries too, so that one day, we can have an international competition. I'm gonna turn it into a sport that's popular all across the world."

*Wow, now that is a big goal indeed.*

An international sports competition... Imagining the only channel to broadcast a sport popular all across the world was the Liston Channel—*this isn't half bad! It isn't bad at all!*

"Hang on, why am I talking about this to a kid?"

"Because I asked." And because Char probably really wanted to talk about it. But mostly because I wanted to ask. He wasn't in charge of this conversation anymore. "Anyway, bringing it back to the start, what is it that you need?"

We could postpone the rest of the planning for now. As thanks for informing me of something potentially lucrative, I would support Char as much as I could without causing myself extra hassle. I would put in my full effort if it seemed the idea was about to bloom. It didn't seem like a bad idea to give some degree of financial support either.

Char left after I finished noting down the names of the Wingroad skiff parts that he needed.

"Young Mistress, who was that boy?"

"You were listening, no? Let's go to Cedony Trading right now." We needed to order the parts Char wanted as soon as possible. I also wanted to get a businessman's opinion on the viability of Wingroad in Altoire. I was fully motivated to take this challenge on, but I was curious what a professional thought. If it seemed like this seed could bloom into a magnificent flower, then Cedony

would surely appreciate the idea as well—it would increase the scope of their customer base, after all.

"Young Mistress, who was that boy and what is he to you?"

"He's an acquaintance. Now hurry up and get ready to go."

"You seemed awfully familiar for being acquaintances."

I had brought him to my room believing that meeting in secret would only make Lynokis annoying if she found out later, but apparently, meeting in front of her hadn't made a difference…

"I'll tell you as we walk. Now get ready," I said, leaving the room ahead of her.

"Deepest apologies, but the president is currently away."

This man wasn't the one who needed to apologize. "No, it's our fault for requesting a meeting so suddenly. Pay it no mind."

I left the campus in a hurry—as if I were running from Lynokis's questioning—and strode straight to the Cedony flagship store. Before I even had a chance to state my business, the staff member who greeted me immediately told me that Marju Cedony was absent. Said staff member was the familiar older man who felt much like a butler. He was the one who always listened to my requests and escorted me to the meeting room. I didn't know his name, but given his age, he must've been quite the loyal employee.

"My name is Dallon. Would it be satisfactory for me to hear you out and then pass it on to the president later?"

That was fine by me. I had my curfew to think about, so I couldn't wait for someone who would be returning at some arbitrary time. Besides, there was no guarantee this would be a lucrative plan. I just wanted to hear his opinion, so it wasn't necessary for me to waste his time for it.

When I accepted Dallon's offer, he escorted me to the usual meeting room.

"I apologize for asking for your opinion while you're so busy. I won't take long." The shop had been crowded when we entered, likely because of the martial arts tournament, and all the staff had been swiftly moving to and fro. The streets were quite lively and I'd already started to see foreign tourists.

*Is everything really going to be okay? Will this excitement honestly last until the day of the tournament itself? They're not all going to burn out by then, are they? This is really fine?*

Dallon chuckled and sat himself down across from me after receiving the tea he had requested from one of the staff. “Cedony Trading can make all the time necessary for VIPs such as yourself.”

*He still refers to me that way, does he?* Now that the billion krams had been raised, I technically wasn’t even a client of the business, but I would be happy to form another official business relationship.

“Now, what brings you here today? You had something you wished to discuss?”

“My dorm has a curfew so I’ll be quick. I want to make Wingroad popular in Altoire, but what do you—”

“Young Mistress Nia.”

Before I could finish asking my question, Dallon calmly interrupted with a just-as-calm smile. “As much as it pains me to say, it appears the topic of discussion is a little much for myself and my lacking skill. I must ask that you discuss it with the president directly. We would be very happy to arrange a meeting as suits your needs.”

*Huh?*

“Are you…telling me to come back a different day?”

“Yes. This matter is also far too large for one such as myself. I would hesitate to give my opinion over the master’s.”

This matter was *also* far too large?

“That in and of itself is your opinion, yes?”

Dallon did not respond. And that silence was its own answer.

“I understand. Allow me to reschedule, then.”

“Thank you very much for your understanding. I apologize for turning you away after you took all the time to come here.”

This matter was far too large. If the matter of popularizing Wingroad was being equated to the matter of the billion krams, then at least in Dallon’s opinion, it was very possible to popularize Wingroad, but it was a big enough job that it would need to go to Marju directly.

*Suddenly, I’m much more motivated about this than before.* I would *make sure* that the Listons got full control of this project.

“Master Nia! I apologize for the trouble I’ve caused you!”

“I didn’t do anything though.”

I finally found myself with free time the day before spring vacation. The nightmarish promotion exam was over with, lifting

a heavy weight from my shoulders—though that freedom would be short-lived, given I would be back to a tightly packed work schedule starting tomorrow.

Gandolph had been waiting for me in the Heavenstriker dojo, kneeling. I had told Reliared to let him know that I would be coming here on this day at this time. There were no lessons today, so the dojo was devoid of children. Not just today even, but for quite a few days following this—spring vacation was just about to start, after all.

Despite my protests, Gandolph continued, “Not at all! I’ve heard that you put a good word in with Cedony!”

“Well, yes, you are right about that. But I didn’t do much more.”

Apparently, Gandolph had been immediately released thanks to Cedony Trading, but whether they gave their assistance would have fully depended on the gravity of his actions. Had he gone so far as to kill someone, the situation would have been much more complicated.

“Have you finished with all the legal processes you need to go through?” I asked, kneeling down in the same position in front of him.

About three months had passed since rumors of that incident spread through the school—though those had quickly died down. I hadn’t seen Gandolph since then. My third semester had been busy. Not only was the whole of Altoire excited for the tournament, but there were a lot of things independent of that that I had to do. The tournament’s true influence would start to show itself from here on out, most likely, especially since the event would be this winter.

Plus, Gandolph’s punishment had still been pending. Though he was cleared of all charges because it was ruled self-defense, there was no denying he’d gotten involved in a fistfight. I’d come to visit him because his ruling had finally been confirmed.

“Yes, everything is finished now. The school board has agreed that I may continue teaching.”

Since only related persons were allowed on the school campus, Gandolph was officially considered a member of staff—and he had been *arrested.* From the outside, it might not have seemed that big of a deal, but in fact, it was a very notable issue that had even led to the discussion of potentially dismissing him.

He had been under watch for some time before they came to

their final decision: The courts recorded that he was only detained, not arrested, and that was enough to convince the school. Therefore, he was allowed to return.

"I heard roughly what happened, but what exactly did you do?" This was what I had really come to ask about.

"Well, you see, after we parted ways at the restaurant…" Gandolph crossed his arms, a frown on his face. "I went to their lodgings where they had asked to meet me. They were all higher rank than me—head instructors, associate instructors, general instructors, belt holders, the usual, but…"

"You beat them up?"

"I beat them up."

*Yes! Good job! You should just beat up anyone you don't like! I'm constantly planning to give Bendelio a good slap! He truly is the worst! If he were a martial artist, I'd have beaten him black and blue by now! I'd do it four whole times in fact! I'd do it every season! Before and after every long vacation! I'd do my job, but I'd make sure he got a good punch too!*

"That incident really got me thinking," Gandolph continued.

"It's really annoying when you get arrested, isn't it? Next time, be quick about beating up your enemy and then retreat from the scene so that you don't get caught. So long as you don't kill them, you can always manage to wriggle your way out of it."

"That's not what I mean."

It wasn't?

"For a long time, I'd thought the instructors of the main dojo were out of my reach… But in truth, they weren't that strong. Their physical strength was lacking, their skills weren't as polished as they should've been, and it was hard to believe they'd trained all that seriously. There were more than ten of them, but even though they all jumped at me at once, somehow, I won without a single scratch. How did they become instructors at such a level? I would have been stronger than them even before I acquired chi."

"Have you become disillusioned with the institution?" I asked. I wasn't entirely sure of his true strength before he acquired chi, but I was very aware of how strong he was now. There was a wide gulf between those who could use chi and those who could not—Gandolph must have come face-to-face with that difference.

An enemy who he thought was incredibly strong had turned

out to be really weak. I'd be disillusioned if I were in Gandolph's shoes, and I'd be disappointed as well. I might honestly be quite angry.

"I'm not sure. But I can say one thing for certain: Their Heavenstriker style was not the Heavenstriker style I aspire to. No, perhaps there isn't even any reason for me to focus so much on Heavenstriker. I simply want to become stronger. That's all I've ever wanted."

"Are you going to quit, then?"

"There's not really a good reason to. Even if I don't think highly of the instructors anymore, it's not like I suddenly hate the school. It's fun watching the children improve, and I don't think there's any style stronger than Heavenstriker."

This man really did love the Heavenstriker style.

"The only one I think could be stronger than it is you, Master. But you're not even part of a specific school, right?"

"Correct, I'm not." I had no school. Rather, after spending years learning various martial arts and picking and choosing what I liked and didn't like, I had ended up with my own unique style filled with only the moves I wanted. It was the end result of taking all the good parts of everything I'd learned. Though of course, some of them were moves I'd developed myself.

At least, I believed that was the case, but I had no memory of it. It was just a vague feeling I had.

"My decision would've been made for me if I'd been expelled from the school, but the main dojo has still said nothing. Given I'm simply a vice-deputy, it could be that this incident is a big deal."

Perhaps. A deputy of a deputy had taken down many instructors much higher in rank than him, after all. Someone at the absolute bottom had taken down many at the absolute top. Given the main dojo essentially sold martial arts as its service, it was an incident that must be difficult for them to decide how to deal with.

"You definitely don't intend to quit yourself, right?"

"Definitely not. I became strong because I learned the Heavenstriker style. And I believe there is still room for me to get even stronger yet. I feel that way even more since learning how to use chi. Plus, recently, something's been bothering me... I want to discover what exactly is making me feel so uneasy."

*All right, I understand the situation.*

“There don’t seem to be any problems at least, so I’ll head home now,” I said, standing up.

“Oh, you’re leaving already?”

“Yes, I suddenly have something I need to do. No training today.”

“Ah, all right… Thank you for stopping by.” Gandolph looked a little lost as he watched me suddenly stand up and leave the dojo.

I would be returning to the Liston territories tomorrow.

*Yup, things are gonna get a little hectic.*

“I can’t say I approve of this, Young Mistress…”

“But you won’t be able to sleep well if we don’t do something about this, will you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I couldn’t care less about Gandolph.”

“Okay, whatever you say.”

“I’m being serious. Incredibly serious.”

*Uh-huh, sure.* Lynokis continued muttering away as she brushed my hair.

“There, it’s done,” she said with a sigh.

*Don’t sigh like that. Even if you hate the idea, if you’ve decided we’re going ahead with it, stop complaining.* Though there wasn’t much I could do to increase her motivation.

“Let’s go.”

This evening was the only time I had to take action. I’d be off on an airship tomorrow morning, so I had to end things here. I had my own personal reasons to want to do this anyway. I definitely wanted to go.

“Wait, Young Mistress!”

“What? Don’t stop me.”

“No, it’s just… Ahem.” Lynokis smiled. “It really suits you. You look so cute and adorable.”

*You stopped me for* that*? Well, whatever, we need to go.*

And so, we left Leeno’s apartment, Lynokis dressed as a simple townsperson and me dressed up as Lily. Actually, dressed like this, I was more like Gandolph’s daughter. I’d dyed my hair black and was wearing a dogi, after all. It was the same way I’d disguised myself back at the Umbral Arena.

Well, actually, this wasn’t a simple dogi—it was the Heavenstriker’s ceremonial regalia. It was probably so vibrant

because it was used for occasions like martial dance performances.

I'd received the outfit from Reliared. I had asked to borrow it from her saying I might need it for a recording and she had offhandedly agreed to give me a set. Apparently, she'd be getting a new one tailored for her in the new year, so she wouldn't be using this one again. Even if she had needed it back though, I was only using it tonight.

I had Lynokis wear plain clothes—she'd used her Leeno disguise on magivision so we couldn't use that anymore. If she had her cover blown, it would be over.

Ever since the announcement that Leeno would be participating, she had completely disappeared from the public eye. This apartment had already served its purpose the moment we'd finished raising the billion krams. Nowadays, we only used it for emergency purposes. It served as a good storage space anyway, so we had decided to keep renting it in case a situation arose that required us to act as adventurers. Plus, Cedony had been insistent that we keep it. "You don't have to live in it; just use it as a base," they'd said.

And, well, here we were having a reason to use it, so it only made it clearer it was worth keeping.

"Oh right, doesn't Sharro live right there?" I asked.

"Yes. But we're both busy so I've not seen her recently."

"I'd like to meet up with her again one day."

"Why, though? You have me, don't you?"

We walked onto the main street while we chatted. It was a bit later than dinner, yet the crowds were much bigger than I had expected, likely due to all the foreign tourists in the country now.

"You asked where it is, right?"

"Yes. Right over here, Young Mistress."

I followed Lynokis as she led the way. We turned down an alley and continued down an unfamiliar road. *I've been all over the capital for my work, and yet there's still so many streets I've never seen before. What a big place.*

We stopped in front of a large building quite a ways away from the main street. *I suppose this is our destination.* If the entranceway had been a bit more open, it would've looked like a little inn or shop.

"This is what we call a private lodge," Lynokis explained. "It's a bit like a big house, so there's no staff manning it. It's for large

groups who don't want to share with strangers. According to Anzel, there's about twenty people staying here."

From what I could sense, that appeared to be accurate. Immediately past the entrance was a large room. Ten or so people were lounging around there, with the rest scattered through the rest of the building. The living room being right by the entrance really was convenient.

"Ready to go in?" I asked.

"Yes. I will assist if necessary. Though…I don't imagine you'll need any help."

*Yeah, probably not.*

I stood in front of the door to the lodge and kicked it down. The door lost its function with an explosive rattle as it flew inside.

"Good afternoon," I greeted the gazes that all turned to me as I leisurely strolled inside.

*I see, I see. Wow, indeed. I understand now.* So these were the instructors that had come from the main dojo. They'd all been lounging around eating dinner and drinking alcohol just like any regular group of people. Well, one could probably assume they were an adventuring party just from how built a lot of them were.

*Seems I've interrupted your happy fun time together. My bad for catching you while you're all relaxed.*

However, I could see why Gandolph had been so disappointed. I could tell at a glance that they were all show and no substance, completely unworthy of their ranks. These were instructors of the world-renowned Heavenstriker school, and *this* was all they could bring to the table? This era's martial artists were endlessly disappointing. It was incredible humanity had survived and prospered like this. They must have had some very capable rulers over these past years.

"Wh… Huh? Who the hell're you?" While they all sat there stunned, a woman sitting near me called out to me. She was young. Given the way she was holding a beer mug, she must have been lounging around herself.

*Is she an instructor too?* Her potential wasn't bad, but she hadn't trained anywhere near enough. She needed to push herself harder.

"Pardon the intrusion." I put my palms together and bowed. "I believe that you are all masters of the main Heavenstriker school. My name is Lily, a fellow student." Upon me giving my

name and status, if you could call it that, they seemed to accept it as my identity—ignoring it was all a lie, anyway.

"A fellow student?"

"Hey, the door..."

What had once been a door was now left alone on the floor. I stood in its place with my hands together, and Lynokis was stationed by the entrance, blocking the way out.

"What's a student want with us?" And finally, one of the men deigned to ask why I was here. He looked like he was in his thirties and was of a medium build. I could tell he'd trained a decent amount, and that look in his eyes was sharp. He was on the stronger end of this crew.

And yet, he still wasn't good enough. *Do some more intense training!*

"I am here to request your guidance."

"You what?"

The room once more became silent. *Now hang on, don't clam up like that. Get a hold of yourselves. You're all martial artists, aren't you?*

"I'm asking for a fight." I stepped forward and kicked up the tankard the lady was holding. Then, before it landed, I jumped and did a roundhouse kick on it from above. "Can you not understand that much without me spelling it out for you?"

The beer mug flew past the face of the guy who'd spoken to me and slammed right into the wall.

"Master Gandolph told me that you'd treated him well, so I thought it only polite I come introduce myself." This was also a big fat lie. But did that matter right now? "I think I get what's going on. You brought an even bigger crowd here as payback for him beating you all. My master works at the academy, and that means he doesn't leave the campus much. That's why you were waiting until the long vacation period. You intended to call him out either tomorrow or the day after, didn't you?"

Gandolph had finally been acquitted, but this would put him in a difficult position yet again. As a vice-deputy instructor, he was required to obey any summons from the main dojo. There was no telling what would happen if he started another fight, so chances were he wouldn't even put up any resistance.

Gandolph had been very clear that he wouldn't abandon the Heavenstriker style, but if he got involved in a fight again, he'd probably be expelled from the school. To those in power, it would

be the instructors' word against his. Gandolph was outranked in both title and numbers; if he tried to play the victim, he'd get thrown right out.

That was why I was here now. If this crew had to resort to asking someone to lose for them, then they seemed like they'd be petty enough to try and get payback. That was why I had asked Anzel and Fressa to let me know if more people from the main dojo arrived in Altoire.

If Gandolph had been okay with leaving the Heavenstriker school, then I would've let him know reinforcements had arrived and washed my hands of it. But he'd said he wanted to continue, and so I was here. I was still his teacher, even if not officially, so I could do at least this much for my student.

The easy solution to all of this was for someone who wasn't Gandolph to beat them up. But it was even better if it was someone who was at a lower position than him. That was why I was posing as his student. If they even lost to Gandolph's *student*, then there was no way they'd try to get him in trouble again. And I highly doubted this many high-ranking instructors of the Heavenstriker style would want to admit something as embarrassing as losing to a child. They wouldn't report it, hiding that loss forever in their hearts.

Really, I was just challenging them to a fair fight. A martial artist was being challenged to a fight by another martial artist. If even this made them whine and complain, then they should quit martial arts while they were ahead. Hell, I'd *make* them quit.

"Did no one teach you manners, kid?" a young man said as he stood up. This one hadn't trained anywhere near enough either. His physique was solid but that was about it. "Anyone can do...such cheap parlor tricks!"

The man kicked up the beer mug on the table and then dove right at me.

*Too slow.* I stopped the mug, dodged the side kick that was aimed for my torso, and...

"Here, you can have it back."

*Thwack!*

"Gwah?!"



…threw the mug back at his face as a counter to his kick. *If you're so obviously taking a step forward, you need to be careful. Did you really think I wouldn't counter you?*

Still, this was perfect. It looked like I could go as hard as I wanted so long as I didn't use chi. These instructors appeared to have trained enough that they would be fine so long as I didn't hit a lethal point. It helped that they were getting pumped up themselves.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

"This isn't funny!"

Their fighting aura began to encase them as they yelled at me. With one of their friends now collapsed on the ground, even the observers couldn't stay silent.

"Who's next?" I asked, seeking another opponent. I'd never intended to play this off as a joke. In fact, I'd come here with the intention of beating everyone up from the start. Words were unnecessary here.

Actually, no, I had one thing to say first.

"Just a word of warning: If you can't beat me, then there's no way you're beating Master Gandolph." This was also a small lie. If I could say one nice thing about them though, it was that, as rotten as they were, they were certainly martial artists in their own right.

"I'll go!"

They respected my challenge and only came at me one at a time. I wouldn't have minded all of them coming at me at once—in fact, it would've potentially been fun… But whatever. I wasn't here to disrespect their pride.

"Now hit me!" the man with a shaved head roared. "I'll show you how rock-solid my rigidity is! I'll crush your limbs!" He planted his feet into the ground, pulled back his arms, and readied his stance.

Right, they had a skill that made their bodies tougher. Appropriate training and skill could make one's body stronger than even steel. It wasn't by the name I was familiar with, but I knew how it worked.

"Are you sure? A strike from me will hurt, you know?"

"I will return the strength of your fist right back to you!"

*Right, since it should feel like I'm punching metal.*

"I won't hold back, then."

I leaped toward him, grabbed his lapels, planted my feet on

the ground, and then adjusted the height and distance.

"I won't mock you if you cry."

What followed was a gigantic smack that could even be heard from outside. I slapped his face—which had also been fortified—as hard as I possibly could. *Wait, ow ow ow. Forgot how little this body can withstand without the support of chi. My hand hurts now.*

"Aggh…gah…agh…!"

I jumped away and a moment later, the bald guy crumpled to the ground. *Hurts, doesn't it? Slaps really hurt, don't they? Like I said, you can cry if you want.*

"Even if you fortify your muscles, your skin is left as vulnerable as always. Any sort of whiplike movement will always hurt." This solidifying defensive motion was good against direct incoming blows, but it wasn't very good against attacks that aimed to damage one's skin like a whip. Oh, and it couldn't protect against slashes either. It wasn't something you could use willy-nilly, but rather you needed to keep it in the back of your mind as one of many options. If you were knowledgeable, you had all manner of ways to deal with—

"Me next!"

*Oops, no time for thinking.*

Next was the lady whose mug I had kicked. Before I could even brace myself, she was throwing a kick at me. I dodged, only for her next kick to immediately follow. *Okay, so you're a kicker, are you? Nice.*

Except that wasn't quite right. This was a performance of simple forms. She wasn't attacking; she was using set movements, something that was just for show. It was pretty, but it wasn't anything more than that.

"Ah."

I stepped into her kick, stopped it, and then knocked her off of her pivot foot. I twisted the leg I had caught, throwing her to the floor, and slammed my foot down next to her face. She was looking up at me in shock.

"Don't just move with the momentum," I told her. "You crumble easily because your kicks are so unsteady. A feint, a bait, or a guaranteed hit. It would be hard to use for anything other than these. Also, forms are just forms. They're not of any use in a real battle."

I let go of her leg and walked away.

*There we go. They're all viewing me much differently now.*

“Who’s next?”

Nia’s body really was a little too weak. I suppose it would have been accurate to say that she had a naturally weak constitution. My passive state involved reinforcing her body with chi as a form of training, and that was what allowed me to feel fine day-to-day. Trying to fight without any chi at all forced me to feel how much it was supporting me.

I couldn’t take a brute force approach with a child’s muscles. I was basically competing with them through skill alone. I truly had thought I was capable of moving better, but apparently, that wasn’t the case. It was impossible for me to get a solid attack in that wasn’t a counter. Because my reach was so short, I had no choice but to take a step forward, but that step forward was also slow. I had no muscle strength, so a half-hearted strike would just tickle an opponent. Our difference in body size was already massive, after all.

If only I could use chi, I’d be able to brute force this whole thing… But I wouldn’t deny that this was fun in its own way. For me, these opponents were just a little big.

“Ngh?!” My current opponent was swift with his hands, but I easily dodged his palm strikes and slunk up to his chest. “Oh no — Gwuh!”

Before he could escape, I kicked his shin, then leaped up and shoved my knee into his face when he turned his head down. I stood over him after he’d fallen to the ground.

“Tch…”

I had all the time in the world to do a follow-up attack. The fact I didn’t do so told the man that he’d lost, and so he fell back while holding his bleeding nose.

*That makes seven.*

“Next?”

*Huh…? Why’s no one stepping forward?* There were still some of them I hadn’t fought yet. Oh, there they were quivering by the wall. Aw man, and here my body was just getting warmed up.

“You’re strong.” Just as my interest was starting to wane, a tall lady emerged from the back.

*Finally showing yourself, are you?* The woman hadn’t been in the living area at the start, but I’d sensed her watching us from about halfway through. I was pretty sure she was the strongest of this group. Face-to-face with her now, that opinion hadn’t

changed. That stern gaze and those angled features made her look more diligent and serious than even Gandolph.

"You said you were Gandolph's disciple, didn't you, little lady? He's from the same class as me."

*Oh my.*

"Rivals?"

"I view him that way, yes. I've always been one step ahead of him and never lost to him in a battle. But that's only because I trained extra hard specifically because I didn't want to lose to him. So yes, I view him as a rival. I do believe Gandolph views me the same way."

That was a nice relationship to have.

"Is he well?" the woman suddenly asked.

"What? Uh, yes, he is."

"I see. I thought he'd run away, but I guess that isn't the case."

"You thought he'd *run*?"

"From Heavenstriker. From me. From the world of martial arts. I thought that was the reason he started teaching children rather than focusing on his own training. I thought that he no longer had the ambition to reach the top of the Heavenstriker school, that he no longer wanted to compete with me, even though we'd made a bet when we were younger to see who would become a head instructor first."

I would never say that teaching children was a waste, but I understood what she meant, at least. Personally, if I had enough free time to teach, I'd rather use it to train. I could see why a rival might view Gandolph's actions as if he had fled.

"But seeing you now, I understand," the lady continued. "If he was able to raise a student as strong as you, then he has to have been putting in the work himself. You are the living proof that he hasn't been slacking."

*Wait, no, I'm so sorry. Me being his student is a complete lie; our positions are reversed.* There was no way I could say that though, so I'd just dodge the topic for now.

"And? Are you wanting to get back at my master as his rival?"

"Get back at him...? Oh. I did hear something about how this crew had a scuffle with him last time they were here." The woman looked around at everyone in the room with disdain. "I wasn't in Altoire yet when all of that happened. I have enough self-respect to not go along with such pointless revenge. I'm not interested in the tournament right now either. I was just curious

what Gandolph's doing. From what I heard from those that came back, he at least hadn't become a coward. That news was a relief, and so I came to Altoire to meet him. Meeting you now instead, I know for sure he hasn't run away from it all."

She looked back at me and then put her hands together. "Deputy instructor of the Heavenstriker, Leitao. I will defeat you and then defeat Gandolph. You're strong enough that there's no reason for me to treat you like a child. I will treat you as another martial artist to consume in my path for power."

*Very good.*

I widened my stance and lowered my right hand, pulled back my left foot, and raised my left hand. I believed this was the stance that Gandolph always used? A calm, immovable mountain. Or perhaps a tiger or dragon opening its maw wide. Whatever the case, this was a stance used for defense and countering. It wasn't a stance very suited to making your own attacks, so I tended not to favor it.

If I had Gandolph's physique and height, it would have looked better, but that wasn't something I could change. Right now, I was Gandolph's student Lily.

"Charge ahead—and use defeat as your fuel."

*Now this is something... This lady is quite strong.* I could sense her natural talent. She had a well-trained body, sensitivity, and battle sense that had not been drowned out by her innate talent. *Not bad at all.* This was a talent worth training.

After we both entered our battle stances, we stopped moving. Or more accurately, we *couldn't* move.

"I never imagined that she would be this..." Leitao muttered to herself. She must have unconsciously spoken her thoughts.

Because there were absolutely no openings in my stance.

Leitao was no doubt simulating all possible attacks against me in her head and coming to the conclusion that each and every one would be countered. She saw no possibility of winning while I was in a counter stance.

She was strong enough that she could come to that conclusion herself. As I thought, her battle senses were well honed, and she'd clearly had plenty of real experience. Even her training had been well-done. Every aspect of her went well above those of the other instructors gathered here.

*So this is Gandolph's rival.*

*Truly wonderful.*

If Leitao had been blessed with a better mentor, then she and Gandolph would have absolutely become a rival pair that only bettered each other through their competition. But seeing the other main dojo members here, it was clear to me that there was no one there that could teach the students about chi...

Given her potential, it was such a waste.

"If you aren't going to make your move, shall I attack first?" Since she looked a little lost, I decided to strike first. In other words, there had been no point to me getting into that defensive stance to begin with. It was the first time I'd done it so properly in such a long time too and yet it was all for nothing.

I jumped onto the nearby table and slowly walked forward. Our height difference made it hard for us to hit each other. Leitao seemed hard to get a hit in with said difference, so standing on the table would help level the playing field.

"Hiyah!"

And then Leitao made her move. She threw out a roundhouse kick with the intention of sweeping me off my feet—very sharp. The strength behind it would have broken any child's bones if it had landed. *Much appreciated. I'd have gotten bored if you'd dared hold back.*

I leaped up to dodge the kick and went to return it with— *Oh my.*

"You're wide open!"

*Not bad. The kick was a feint, hmm?*

Leitao halted the kick I thought she was going to follow through, then grabbed my leg that I had fired out in return. She could stop a kick moving at such a high speed? She had wonderful core strength. It only made me even more disappointed in her wasted talent.

Leitao roared as she swung my leg, putting all her strength into throwing me into the floor.

Before I collided with the floor, however, she let go.

"You have good reflexes," I complimented. Since she had thrown me so unnaturally, I had to use my hands to make a clean landing. I'd judged it impossible for me to land on my feet while restricting my chi usage. If she hadn't let go of my leg, I would have taken one of her eyes out.

I had used my abdominal muscles to fold my body, grabbed the arm that was holding my leg, bent my legs even further, and

shoved my fingers right for her eye.

*So close. I only grazed her temple.* I'd missed my mark because she'd changed the way she was throwing me. I wasn't *actually* going to gouge her eyes out; I just wanted to blind her momentarily.

"You're so young… How are you so accustomed to fighting?" Blood trickled from where I had lightly scratched her. Perhaps she hadn't noticed, because she did nothing more than keep her gaze fixed on me.

"I learned from my master."

Upon that answer, Leitao laughed in a way as if she had felt true power. "Gandolph! You've become that strong, have you?!"

*Wait, no, seriously, I'm sorry. I was lying when I said we were student and teacher.*

There was no way I could say that now… She was fully convinced that was the case. And here I thought *I* was simpleminded. I'd always said that martial artists were simple people, but looking at it like this, I was starting to realize that maybe that simplicity wasn't the best thing in the world.

*You know what, nah, it's fine. Martial artists* are *best remaining simpleminded. We hate homework too and that's totally fine.*

"What do you want to do? Want to continue?" I asked. Given Leitao's ability, she should've been able to tell clearly from that exchange that she couldn't win against me. But…

"Of course I'm gonna continue!"

*And of course.* In a matchup like this, a martial artist would only get more fired up knowing their opponent was that much stronger.

Around thirty exchanges of blows—that was the number of times we'd exchanged punches and kicks. Despite knowing she couldn't win, Leitao still kept up the offensive, and it turned into a little training session.

"Grah, hah!"

I dodged a sharp roundhouse kick by jumping onto the table, then dodged another one by nimbly leaping off her leg—actually, it just looked like I did, but I really dodged with another leap. I narrowly avoided the next kick and, this time, hit her in the face with a dropkick.

*This is the end. That was a pretty good kick, and her body should be reaching its limit.*

“Ngh…”

I turned to the other Heavenstriker practitioners after Leitao collapsed to the ground groaning.

“I won’t tell anyone what happened here tonight. So long as you keep your mouths shut, no one will ever know. I’m asking you to please stop bothering my master. I won’t stop you if you fight him fair and square, but don’t get him involved in your mess. You’ll all promise me, won’t you?”

Everyone averted their gaze. *Of course you all would. You got shown up by Gandolph’s student, so you won’t go after the man himself anymore, will you? The master should be stronger than the student, after all.*

Except that was all still a complete lie!

“Young Mistress, you didn’t use chi once that whole time we were in there, did you?” Lynokis asked the moment we walked out of the building.

I’d told her to serve as the lookout, but given how late it was, no nosy crowds had come around to see what was happening. It would’ve been very unfortunate had there been any witnesses, so I was glad.

“Correct. A few years ago, I would’ve struggled, but I can put up a decent fight without it now.” I’d been training my body, and I’d slowly but surely been remembering bits and pieces of my martial arts knowledge. Against opponents of that level, I didn’t need to use chi. Besides, I’d solely come here as Gandolph’s student—which was a lie, of course.

“As I’ve said before, all chi does is raise your basic parameters. Even Techniques can’t be done well without proper practice.” That was why it was only when one’s spirit, technique, and body were in harmony that one was truly a martial artist. An imbalance in any of those naturally led to an imbalance in one’s strength.

“So that’s how it is…”

That indeed was how it was.

“Have you learned to respect me now?”

“You were certainly very cute.”

This little rascal really did not respect me whatsoever. Even Leitao respected me more than she did, given that our fight had ultimately turned into a spar for her to see what she could learn from me.

This wasn’t new though. What was most important was that Gandolph’s problem should’ve been cleaned up now. I was thankful for the heads-up from the Shadow Rat. Though given I’d be returning home tomorrow, it would be a bit of time until I was able to thank them…

# Chapter 4: Food for a New Project

I was now officially in my third year of elementary school. Yet again, this vacation period could be simply summed up with “I was working.” That was all the memory I had of it, but it was practically the norm by now so I barely minded. That didn’t mean I would stop grumbling about Bendelio though.

We returned to the capital with two days left until the semester started. Before going to receive my newly tailored outfit, I had to pay Cedony Trading a visit…

“You’ve been working hard behind the scenes, huh?”

…along with my brother.

The Wingroad matter that I had brought up to Cedony had progressed much faster than I had expected it to. Honestly, I hadn’t even intended for it to happen this fast, but it had. It absolutely had. And there was one big reason for that: Marju Cedony himself had already been considering the importation and popularization of the sport.

And the reason for *that* was because he had suddenly ended up with around twenty airship engineers who needed something to do. Wingroad just happened to be one of the answers he’d come to. They weren’t exactly a crew that Cedony could make visible to the public, but it would have been a waste to leave their talents to rot, so he’d consulted with them about Wingroad to get their opinion.

They’d said that skiffs had plenty of room for tinkering, and they’d put in the work to study them if needed. Given the excitement from the engineers themselves, Marju had decided they might as well give it a try. It was around that time that I’d brought up the topic of Wingroad myself.

I had a feeling I knew where those engineers came from. Perhaps they were former sky pirates? Well, I had no reason to pry.

I didn’t want Marju to end up too reliant on me, but it seemed he thought that if he could get me on his side, then perhaps the Liston Channel would pick it up to put on magivision. To him, my visit must have seemed like perfect timing. Thanks to the martial

arts tournament—which was still more than half a year away—Altoire was seeing an unprecedented boom in tourism. The rumors that famous adventurers, martial artists, and strong fighters were gathering in the country had attracted all manner of foreign visitors.

Naturally, there were wealthy elites who intended to stay in Altoire until the tournament itself, and that meant there was a massive amount of money flowing into our economy every day. If all the world had their eyes on us, that meant that magivision was gaining just as much attention. Marju had begun thinking that if Wingroad was picked up on magivision at this juncture, there was a chance that it would immediately ignite its popularity.

There was no way for us to know until we did it, but Marju had already been making his move before I had even gone to discuss it with him. He was in talks right now to see about doing a synchronized flight performance on the day of the tournament itself to hype things up.

And then spring vacation rolled around. After returning home, I consulted with my parents about Wingroad, and they told me that if I wanted to do it, they had no complaints. It took basically no persuasion. I'd never complained about my work (though I did about Bendelio) for the Liston family, so they would do anything in their power to support me. Given I was a child who rarely asked for anything even though I worked myself into the ground every vacation period, they wanted to make sure they listened to all of my requests.

I felt their praise was a little too much for someone who was simply taking the place of the original Nia Liston, but given this might one day bring great profits to the Liston family, I chose to accept their kindness.

"I'd like to participate too, if I may."

What really caught me by surprise was my brother being just as enthusiastic about it.

When I arrived at Cedony with Neal and our attendants, we were immediately let through to the meeting room. We'd put this meeting on the schedule before the spring vacation, so it was all very straightforward.

"Welcome, Young Master Neal, Young Mistress Nia."

I'd made sure to inform them that my brother would also be

accompanying me, of course. That was why Marju's greeting was also straightforward as he rushed up to greet us before we'd even sat down. And by "rushed," I mean he literally ran up to us.

"I am Marju Cedony, president of Cedony Trading."

"Thank you for such a kind welcome. I am Neal Liston, oldest son of the Liston family."

After they finished their introductions, we immediately moved on to the topic at hand.

"I made some inquiries, and unfortunately, it appears that there are indeed no skiffs designed for children."

I see. At my last visit, I'd asked Marju if he could find out if there were Wingroad skiffs even I could ride, but as he'd said at the time, none existed.

"It's a bit expensive. They are already fairly pricey, so if you're looking at a custom skiff, it would bring you into the fifty millions easily."

Fifty million krams made sense. A regular skiff would have already cost about twenty million krams at minimum, and apparently, you were looking at much higher costs when you factored in customization. It wasn't an amount that a regular person could afford. That was why Char had been buying the parts for his skiff piece by piece, slowly building it up over several years.

"The money aside, there isn't enough time," I concluded. If we were going to advertise Wingroad, then having me participate would be the fastest way to do it, given I already had a bit of a reputation. Whether I continued with it or not, if I introduced the sport, it would be much easier for our audience to see the appeal. It would be like introducing a job on *Occupation Observation*.

But even taking into account my martial skill, I had no confidence I would be able to pick it up quickly. I'd never piloted a skiff before, after all. In fact, the last time I had been given the opportunity, I had been forced to taste the humiliation of not being able to reach the handlebars.

If it were a sport that required using my physical skill, I could probably manage it, but it would take time to get used to it.

"Wingroad skiffs are already smaller than your average model. It's said that those who are lighter are more suited to the sport as you add less weight to the skiff, allowing it to accelerate faster. It may be a little difficult for you, Young Mistress Nia, but

the young master may manage. We've gone ahead and customized a skiff for someone of a smaller stature."

*Oooh,* Neal *can ride it? He* is *growing quickly. Both in beauty and in height.*

"You managed to import one?"

"Yes, two, in fact. Just for a test. They have both been prepared for riding whenever you're ready."

From the way he was talking, it was more than clear what was next.

"Nia."

"Yes?"

"Why were you unbothered by the fifty-million-kram cost?"

Right, I'd treated time as if it were a bigger problem than money, hadn't I? That must have confused my brother. I couldn't admit to him that I did in fact think it was nothing. There was no way I could tell him that I could earn that much in a few days easily.

Since we weren't allowed to ride skiffs on the streets, we rode a Cedony carriage down to the docks where the Wingroad skiff was being stored. Neal would be allowed to ride the skiff as he pleased down there since, as it turned out, the surrounding land was owned by Cedony Trading. As in, it was their private property. They really were wealthy, weren't they?

We'd split up into two carriages—Marju and some of his staff in one carriage, and us siblings and our attendants in the other—and ridden through the street busy with foreign tourists. That was when Neal began questioning me. Lynokis and Lynette sat opposite us. They were both very aware of how I could earn that amount of money easily.

"I don't fully understand the value of money, you see. I've never handled my own cash before."

"What? Do… Do you not go shopping?"

"If I want to buy something, I ask Lynokis to do it. I've never bought anything myself before."

"Don't you have hobbies? Have you never gone to buy anything from a general store?"

"I'm busy with recordings, so I have no time to take up hobbies. Even buying snacks takes time. I am taking the time to train my body so I don't get sick again though. You could call that my hobby."

My brother was rendered speechless. This must have been the moment he realized just how busy I was.

"Don't look at me like that, brother. I *am* doing this partly because I want to, so it's not so bad. Really. It's just a matter of getting used to it. Plus, I am indebted to many people. This is to pay them back."

*Which, on that note, I wonder how the Liston finances are now.* Were they as dire as before? Or had it all stabilized now? I had to make sure I didn't create an even bigger financial burden with my interest in Wingroad. Worse came to worst, there was always the option of monster hunting. In fact, I *wanted* to go hunting if the opportunity presented itself.

"Now I understand why mother and father accepted your request so easily…"

What?

"The whole time I was going out and having fun, and getting engrossed in my training, you were working. They knew that, and I knew too, but… No, I just told myself I understood. I should've known exactly how you were spending your long holidays every time you came back home, and yet I was never considerate of that. Please forgive me for being so thoughtless."

For a moment, I found myself lacking the appropriate words.

"I'm proud of you for feeling that way." But he was overthinking it. Children were supposed to play around every day, get too immersed in their hobbies, and study a bit on the side. My brother was far too mature for his age. "But as I said earlier, I'm doing this because I want to. You don't need to keep me in mind."

"I can't do that. How can I ignore it when my sister tells me that she's never gone shopping before?"

Was it that bad?

"Then will you go on magivision with me?" With his good looks, we could add a little spice to our boring Liston Channel and its falling ratings. He'd definitely be a boon to our Wingroad advertising. *Ahh, there's so many advantages to be had using Neal in magivision! And I'm sure there's even more!*

"Let me think on that one."

My mind had been conjuring up all those grand ideas, and all at once, they vanished. He'd been saying this for a while, and I'd waited all this time, but…this was my brother's way of refusing, wasn't it?

*That's fine. Children should play every day. You can just appear on magivision whenever I can't make it like you did for the fishing festival. Keep having fun, dear brother.*

And then that brother of mine got the chance to ride a Wingroad skiff. Neal's face as he dashed away on the skiff was no longer that of the mature eldest son of an aristocratic family but one of a normal child having fun. It truly was adorable. It only made me more certain that this was how children should be allowed to live.

Incidentally, I couldn't ride it. I'd never thought I would once more have to suffer the embarrassment of being too small to reach the handlebars and pedals.

"You serious?!"

"Shhh. This is still highly confidential." If I were the only person that would have been affected by such information leaking, I wouldn't have minded. But a leak had the potential to affect Cedony Trading as well. "Things should start moving around summer so keep it quiet until then. Nothing good will come of you getting put on Cedony's blacklist, especially if you want to get involved in Wingroad."

"O-Okay... Got it. I won't tell anyone."

Good.

I'd started my first semester as a third-year. Once more, I spent my first day of the new academic year wearing my brand-new *tailored* uniform so as to not sully the image of my family and returned to the dorm. Naturally, I had passed my promotion exam without a hitch and had not been forced to take supplementary lessons over the summer. I had successfully shown off my *massive* intelligence.

*Thank the gods...*

It was when I returned that I found Char waiting for me. I knew he'd be dropping by so there was nothing strange about it—he was here to pick up the skiff parts he'd ordered before spring break. "They might try to swindle me if I go, so I'd appreciate it if you could make the purchase," he'd said, so I'd done just that.

I returned to my room, grabbed his package, and went back to the entrance to give it to him.

The price was within Char's estimated budget, so I could only assume Cedony's offer was reasonable. When I told him the

total, he took a few coins out of his wallet and handed them over along with a leather bag. That was his payment. I shoved the bag into my jacket pocket without looking inside.

“Hey, you sure you don’t need to check how much there is?”

What?

“Not really. I imagine someone who is going so far as to build their own Wingroad skiff would have no need to pull such underhanded tactics.” He told me the price of a usual competition skiff, and those parts were not cheap. Even if he had been trying to cheat us, it was up to him if he wanted to ruin our trust to save a little money—all that would do was ensure that we’d never work with him again.

“Say, Char, what type is your skiff?”

“You know about the types?”

“Yes.” I’d only learned about it the other day, but I still had it memorized. “To tell you the truth, Cedony Trading is considering getting into the Wingroad business.”

“You serious?!” Char was as surprised as I imagined he’d be.

“Shhh. This is still highly confidential.” It didn’t help that we were in front of a dorm filled with girls all highly curious about romance—they were beginning to stare. They probably couldn’t hear us at regular talking volume, but any louder, and they’d definitely be able to.

When I told him to keep it secret until summer, Char solemnly nodded.

“But are you being for real? You mean…”

“Yes, that shop may end up selling Wingroad parts as a normal part of business.”

“Wow… It’d be a big help if they did.”

Knowledge of Wingroad was still niche in Altoire—only those with interest in it tended to know of it. It made it hard to acquire Wingroad-related goods within the country.

In terms of the skiffs themselves, it was one thing if you were buying a stock skiff, but buying the individual parts to build or customize one yourself was even more difficult. Altoire merchants didn’t have much knowledge on skiffs, and the cost of acquiring the parts went far above the profits, so no one particularly wanted to get into the business.

“So? What type is your skiff? Beast type? Snake?”

“Ah, well, uh…” Char suddenly stopped and smiled. “Why don’t you come see for yourself? It’s almost finished.”

*Oh, really? I do have free time today, so maybe I should take him up on his offer.*

"Lynokis, come. We're going to see his skiff." Lynokis had been glued to me ever since I'd brought down Char's order. She'd been hiding behind the entrance. *If you want to hide your presence, then at least contain your murderous intent, you amateur.*

"Your maid's coming along too?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not usually permitted to go out alone. Do you mind if she tags along?"

Char nodded. "You are famous, I guess. Do you get annoying people trying to cause you problems all the time when you're alone?"

"Well, sort of." Ever since the tournament had been announced, Sanowil Badr often tried to fight with me, so it wasn't entirely a lie.

I would be in no danger even if more people tried their luck though.

Unlike airships, skiffs had no predetermined shape. The most common type of skiff in Altoire was the single seater with a chair-like saddle, handlebars at the front, and a little section for luggage in the back. The ones used at the docks could be really big—they were honestly skiffs in name only. In the Liston territories, we used carriage-looking airships to seat multiple people, but those were apparently considered skiffs as well.

Those sky pirates we had bumped into in Vanderouge had used skiffs that looked like Wingroad ones, but it turned out the internal mechanisms were entirely different. Theirs were built to be able to fly outside of what was known as the windbreak airspace—the area in which floating islands and airships could shield from the open air. They weren't very fast, but they could generate enough momentum to power through strong winds.

The winds outside of a windbreak airspace were incredibly strong. Floating islands had the ability to adapt to their environment and so naturally developed one. Airships had a similar function built into them to allow for safe flight. Fly outside of that, and it became difficult to control the vessel.

There was already such a wide variety of skiffs in Altoire, so Vanderouge—being the leading expert in airships—likely had many, many more. Different types of skiffs were created for different purposes, and Wingroad skiffs—or competition skiffs,

as some called them—were entirely built in the pursuit of speed.

By squeezing out every bit of knowledge they had, the talented airship engineers in Vanderouge had developed four different base types of competition skiff: Beast, Snake, Bird, and Boar. Generally, they were made to be straddled like a horse, but they were differentiated by aspects like their design, shape, and basic parameters. Currently, they were the fastest skiffs on the market, and thanks to the races, the technology was being continuously developed.

Char took us to an empty room he was borrowing in the middle school building. The moment he opened the door, I could immediately smell oil. I followed Char in, and sitting there... *Ah, is this the skiff?*

Sitting on top of a tarp covered in oil was a raggedy little red skiff with its paint flaking off. The design was different, but it was the same type of skiff as the one that Cedony had shown me. I could tell from how round the front was that it was the standard Beast type.

"From asking around, she was a prototype Wingroad skiff that got dumped after she crashed. I happened to find her at the junk shop, so I borrowed money from my parents to buy it. It's taken years to get her to where she is today. Wasn't easy."

*Wow.*

"It was like fate, hmm?"

"I guess."

As run-down as it looked, it truly was only the paint job that looked bad. There seemed to be no obvious issues with the skiff itself. *I see why he said it was almost complete.*

"Been with her since elementary school. Long as hell time, I tell ya... I don't even know how much money I've used by this point."

I immediately came to a decision.

"Let's record it."

"Huh?"

"You're a student who's been repairing this Wingroad skiff since you were in elementary school. That doesn't sound half bad for a program, don't you think?"

The pieces were all coming together. First, Cedony showed interest in it as a business. Then, my brother thankfully also began showing interest in Wingroad. And now, right here, we had a young man wanting to get involved in skiff competitions.

On their own, these cards might have been weak, but using all three at once was a different story. I wouldn't go so far as to say it would multiply our strength, but it wouldn't put us at a disadvantage either.

"Let's record you working on your skiff until it's complete. We date-stamp it like a diary." The Silver Channel's paper plays sometimes had recap collections that edited a selection of their episodes together, so we could do the same for Char's skiff building. This type of program was very rare because of how long it would take to complete, so it might be received well.

Whatever we chose to do, we just had to make sure it became an advertisement for Wingroad. No one said we had to make its popularity jump up all at once.

"But why? Do you mean it might get broadcast on magivision? *I'm* gonna be the one on the screen?"

"Yes."

"But…diaries aren't something you're supposed to show to people…"

Why was this boy suddenly talking such nonsense?

"You joined the junior broadcasting station because you wanted to make Wingroad popular in Altoire, didn't you? Isn't this the perfect opportunity?"

"Well… Yeah, I guess…"

"Anyway, let's bring it up to Wagnes for now. If he thinks there's a chance it'll do well, he'll record it for you, I'm sure." The current director was still inexperienced, but his eye for potential wasn't bad. He'd definitely do something if he thought this sounded interesting.

*"When did you first learn of Wingroad?"*

*"When I was in my second year of elementary school. I saw it for the first time when I went to Vanderouge on a family vacation. Back then, I just viewed it as some really fast skiff competition. Didn't think much more of it."*

*"Then you didn't originally buy this skiff wanting to participate in Wingroad?"*

*"Right. I just happened to find her flipped over in the corner of a junk shop. I still have no idea why she was there, but a skiff like this normally shouldn't even have been in Altoire in the first place. Felt a little like fate. The thought of that got me excited so I ran off to see how I could buy her. Been hanging on to her ever since."*

*“Having spent all these years repairing the skiff, Char runs into one final hurdle.”*

*“Damn it! Why won’t she start?!”*

*“He had acquired all the parts he needed. His repairs should’ve been complete. And yet, the skiff refused to respond. Being completely self-taught, he couldn’t figure out what was wrong, where the issue was. And then, an unexpected savior came to his rescue… Tune in next time to see where his road leads!”*

“They left it on a cliff-hanger.”

“They did.”

The rest of the first semester passed without any notable occurrences, but then just before summer vacation started, the episode of Char’s skiff diary was broadcast. *Dreaming of Wingroad*, it was called. My idea of turning it into a diary-like compilation of him working on the skiff seemed to have been accepted.

With the dates and narration, it came across a little like a first draft, but it wasn’t bad. It was fun to watch. Rather than a program planned from start to finish, it felt a lot more natural, more human, especially with his project being relatively mundane. I couldn’t quite find the words to describe it.

“The junior team thought of a really interesting structure, huh?” Reliared—visiting my room as always—was impressed with the result. Right in front of me as I was doing my homework.

“They still can’t afford anything more than short-duration manastones.” As a result of their budget, they couldn’t afford the more expensive long-duration ones; even the short-duration stones weren’t cheap. And that limited the types of programs they could record.

“By taking multiple days of footage and editing it all together, they were able to take advantage of their disadvantage. It’s such a unique idea that I’m not sure whether to call it a story or an interview. I find it very interesting.”

I agreed with her. I’d come up with the idea, but the ones who had put it into practice so effectively were the junior broadcasting station. The royal station must have deemed it good as well, given they’d broadcast it.

Still, did I need to tune in to see what happened next? I’d already seen with my own eyes exactly how it ended up, so there

wasn't much for me to get invested in. I'd gone along to the recording of Char's first flight on his skiff, after all. I'd introduced him to Marju Cedony and gotten him permission to use their flight-test zone.

"I wonder how Char's skiff will end up," Reliared mused.

I might not have had much interest, but to those who didn't know how it ended, that cliff-hanger was enough to make them curious for what came next. I was sworn to secrecy until it aired, but after this, a very familiar ex-sky pirate captain would appear on the scene and use his skills as an airship engineer to help Char with the final touches and get it running.

The next episode would probably be broadcast before summer vacation started. That would also be around the same time Cedony would officially announce they were selling Wingroad skiff parts.

It was almost guaranteed that Wingroad would slowly infect the rest of Altoire. The real question was how far it would get before the tournament. If it failed to really get off the ground this year, when large amounts of money were being pumped into the economy every day because of the tournament, then it would likely end up entering a period of stagnation in the way magivision had. That was the exact same reason that magivision had struggled to increase its popularity for a few years. The starting moves were vitally important.

I'd have liked to assist with increasing the excitement surrounding it if I could—Neal was going on skiff rides from time to time, apparently, so it was about time I had him assist me as the eldest son of the Listons.

"Hey, what's your schedule like for summer?" Reliared asked.

"It turns out I have quite a bit of free time this year." Last year, I'd had to go out on an expedition for the billion krams. Trying to get the free time for that had been hectic. This year though, my work schedule was regular levels of busy with no special tasks that needed doing.

Personally, I would have much rather gone hunting, but…it would have been difficult to make those changes now. Making up my schedules took a long time, so it was hard to make changes on the fly.

"I think the only thing I'm interested in this year is the fishing festival."

"Oh, right. Miss Hilde said she was going to do it again this

year, didn't she?"

She had. It had been received so well last year they'd decided they'd do it again.

"But she told me to put in a good word to my brother." It was so obvious she wanted Neal to participate over me.

"Really?! Young Master Neal will be taking part instead of you?!"

*You look so happy about that fact, Reliared.* I had been curious about this festival for a while, but it was important that Neal occasionally appear on magivision for the sake of our family, so I'd given the opportunity to him.

*What a shame. What a shame indeed.*

When you really thought about it, who would want to participate in a recording guaranteed to be filled with incidents from start to end? *Oh, what a shame. I can't take part even if I want to. Guess I'll have to look on from afar this time.*

"It sounds like we'll be doing nothing but interviewing participants in the tournament," Reliared said.

*Ah, so the Silvers will be taking advantage of this trend as well, will they?*

"Sounds tough. I've heard the number of participants has already crossed two hundred."

The tournament fever was far from over. Both tourists and people confident in their skills had been consistently flowing into the country, bringing great economic benefits. I had thought that perhaps the excitement would eventually start to fade, but even by summer, it showed no signs of slowing down. Rather, it almost felt like things were only getting *more* exciting now that we'd crossed the half-year mark.

The hype from everyone had already been astounding, yet that blaze could burn even brighter? Everyone had such high expectations.

A lot of the fighters had gotten ahead of themselves, arriving in Altoire well before the date of the tournament and left with nothing to do until the day itself. Many of them accepted any invitations from the underworld to visit their arenas, secretly competing there in order to keep their skills sharp and to earn enough money to get by. The Umbral Arena was probably extra crowded these days.

Despite this, I still hadn't seen anyone who looked like they'd stand a chance against my students.

“My attendant said that no one looks stronger than Leeno yet.”

*Oh? Her attendant is that tall woman, isn’t she?* I’d thought she seemed skilled, but she had quite the eye for power. That was a sign of potential in its own right.

“I wonder what Leeno’s up to now,” Reliared continued. “Do you think she’d be willing to appear on one of our programs again?”

*Leeno is standing at attention right behind us, you know.*

Leeno had made a guest appearance on the Silver Channel once. Though she secretly harbored feelings of hatred toward Reliared, she’d managed to hide those feelings well and acted as a perfect example of an adventurer. Thanks to that, she’d ended up well-liked by both Reliared and their production crew.

The most important thing was that she hadn’t caused a fight.

“Oh, that reminds me. I’ve heard this rumor…” Reliared began, following it up with, “Have you heard of Redblade Becker?”

“I know of his name, at least.” He was a famous adventurer. I’d heard he was both strong and skilled. Though I imagined he wasn’t as strong as everyone made him sound.

“Apparently, the day after he registered for the tournament, he got badly injured and had to go to the hospital.”

*Oh my.*

“Did he mess up on a job?”

“No, actually. Apparently, he was beat up by some bartender.”

*By a bartender, hmm?*

“It’s not like it’s rare for people to fight in bars,” she continued. “But I feel like I’ve been hearing these kinds of rumors of skilled adventurers and martial artists losing to a bartender or his staff a lot lately. I think there’s been eight so far? There’s so many that it doesn’t seem like it’s made-up.”

*A whole eight cases?*

“If it’s true, I’d really like to go interview the bartender, but the rumors don’t mention the bar.”

*I see.*

“What an interesting little story.” It seemed likely that it was the bartender of a back-alley bar with a rodent in its name. But that wasn’t somewhere a child should go visit.

“The hell did you say to me, prick?!”

“What’d you call me?! And what backwater boonies did you

come from, huh?!”

“Quit it, Fressa’s looki— Ow! Hey, I’ll kill you! I’ll actually murder you!”

And so the customers were fighting *again*. Anzel sighed. Unfortunately, the Shifty Shadow Rat was as rowdy as always.

“Excuse me, kind sirs!”

After her lilting greeting, Fressa grabbed a beer bottle from one of the tables and whacked it over one of their heads. The customer immediately collapsed. That single strike knocked out the man so easily that it was clearly the work of a professional.

“Could you please continue outside? Or would you like to fight me instead? Oh, if you do decide to go outside, clean up after yourselves first, please!”

The customers who had been fighting moved with extraordinary speed, hurriedly picking up the collapsed man and cleaning up the shattered glass that covered the floor before leaving. Scenes like this had become such a frequent occurrence that the regulars didn’t even bat an eye. Some of them had started betting on how many bottles Fressa would break each day.

The bar’s usual clientele had never been the brightest bunch, but there were just so many of them recently. They’d always known the types to come to their bar tended to lack manners or were incapable of learning their lesson, but it didn’t help that there were far too many new faces on top of that.

Summer was approaching, and there were a little less than six months left before the commencement of the martial arts tournament. Even more foreign visitors were in Altoire than before, and it meant Anzel and Fressa were seeing new faces in the bar every day. They knew exactly why too, so at least it wasn’t without reason.

“That lady’s incredible. Her hits are precise, but she’s always making sure she doesn’t kill ’em.”

That was the third smashed bottle of the day. Given it wasn’t anywhere near as bad as the previous day’s ten, the regulars were able to relax as they observed.

“Listen, Becker. It does us no good havin’ you drop by like this all the time.”

“Don’t be so cold, Anzel, buddy.”

The middle-aged man drinking at the counter across from Anzel, polishing glasses as always, was Becker Guileman, a

famous adventurer. With a stunning record in both exploring the unknown and hunting monsters, he'd made quite the name for himself. He'd become known as Redblade Becker for the red demon blade he wielded. Anzel wasn't knowledgeable on adventurers, and yet even he knew the man's name, which said a lot for how famous the guy was.

He was forty-four years old. After failing big-time with a woman *twice*, he'd decided he'd never marry for the rest of his life. He was an energetic old man who frequently proclaimed that all the women in the entertainment district were his lovers.

Incidentally, he wasn't picky, whether the woman was eighteen or fifty, big or small. Also, he apparently couldn't forget the time an incredibly beautiful man had made a pass at him and he'd almost made the mistake of going home with him. Becker wondered to himself even now if he should've just accepted—life was long; surely it was okay to have an experience like that just once. But no, it felt like he'd be opening some forbidden door if he did that. Those worries still plagued him to this day.

"We talk to each other practically every day. Doesn't that make us friends?"

"Sorry, but your feelings ain't reciprocated. The only thing I view you as is a customer, and one hell of an annoyin' one."

Anzel had been stuck listening to stories he had no desire to hear. The past few nights had been filled with entertaining whatever Becker wanted to talk about. It had made him more knowledgeable on this man than he'd ever thought he'd be. He couldn't care less about the guy's escapades with girls. He didn't care that he'd considered going with a guy either. All Anzel could say to that was Becker could do what he wanted.

"You young ones are so cold nowadays. It makes an old man like me so sad."

*Leave, then.* Just as Anzel was thinking that to himself, Fressa came over.

"What's going on here, Becker? You hitting on Anzel again?"

"Of course I am. Though really, I'd much prefer spending the night with you, Fressa, darling. How about it?"

The man flirted as effortlessly as he breathed.

"I'm expensive, you know? Especially when I'm doing it for a job." Fressa smiled as she responded.

"Oh, how terrifyin'." Becker smiled back.

This man's reputation was not unfounded. He almost certainly

knew Fressa's real occupation. He'd seen through her act—she wasn't just used to fighting, she was used to *killing.*

"You're only half as scary as Rita though," Becker quipped. Rita was the name of the woman that Becker had fumbled. Anzel hadn't even wanted to know that much about him.

"You've been coming here all week, haven't you? You should give up already," Fressa said.

The only reason Becker was here was to get information on Leeno. Now that the tournament was fast approaching, the number of people out for info on her had only increased, and this old man was one of them. It had been spread around that Leeno was out of the country for now, yet for some reason, their bar was still lively every day. They'd become increasingly popular.

If what he said was true though, Becker's case was a little different.

"I wouldn't be trying to pick up the man if he'd just give me what I want already."

Becker usually operated in the neighboring Vanderouge.

"I want to meet Leeno no matter what. That girl hunted all of my enemies. It's 'cause of her that I've lost what gave me meaning in life. Wouldn't you want a word with her if you were in the same boat?"

He was referring to her expedition to Vanderouge. Apparently, he'd had a grudge against some of the monsters that Leeno had slain. Becker had been planning to retire after he hunted those monsters himself, but then his prey had been stolen from right under him.

"Ain't it the early bird catches the worm with hunting?"

"Sure. Doesn't mean I'm willing to just sit down and accept it though."

Well, Anzel was more than aware that everyone had their own baggage. He wasn't going to dig any deeper, and he wasn't that interested in Becker to begin with.

Fressa, on the other hand, seemed much more interested. "Your *prey*, huh? Got some reason this matters so much to you?"

*Or did she ask as a way to continue the conversation?*

"It's quite the cliché. I've had comrades killed by them. That type of thing."

"You're right, that is pretty cliché. It's the classic tale adventurers use when they want a girl to pity them."

"And that is what I excel at."

Becker was smirking, but Fressa was watching him closely as she smirked back. “In your case, it seems like it’s the truth though.”

“Oh? You can tell?”

“Yup. You’re being too casual about it. Like, you’re not even making it into a joke. Or rather, you’d prefer it *was* a joke… Ah, crap, sorry, that was a bit far.” On that awkward note, Fressa returned to her work. More than her simply realizing she’d said too much, it was more like she’d felt it. She’d felt the still-raw scars left on the heart of the shallow man named Becker.

The adventurer was silent for a moment before he spoke. “She’s a good woman. Why are good women always so good at appealing to a man’s heart?”

“Who knows.” Anzel couldn’t care less about how Becker viewed women; he just wanted him to hurry up and leave.

After Becker had enough alcohol to get appropriately drunk—wrapping Anzel up in his stories all the while—he stood himself up and disappeared into the night.

Midnight rolled around and the rowdy bar quieted down. But just as Anzel was closing up for the night…

“Huh? Why me?”

Anzel was called upon.

“Don’t ask me. Becker Guileman called you out specifically. Just come with me already.” An old friend and member of the guard had dropped by. Slightly corrupt, he would close his eyes to anything if you paid him enough cash. Though, given he’d never been promoted at his age, chances were high his superiors were more than aware of what he was doing. In other words, he was missing out on greater pay because of his greed for a little extra pocket change… Well, that was his problem, not Anzel’s.

“What’d he do?” Fressa asked as she continued cleaning up.

It turned out the old man had caused some trouble on the streets after he’d left and gotten arrested. Anzel was chosen as his guarantor.

“Just a fistfight. All I know is that it was between foreigners. We get a lot of these recently. If we arrested all of them, we’d run out of space, so we let go of the ones who were caught for fairly light crimes if they have a guarantor within the country.”

It was more than obvious that this guard had been bribed yet

again. It was always money that deemed a crime “light.” Anzel wasn’t about to criticize him though.

“Want me to go instead?” Fressa offered. “It’d be on my way back home. Though…on second thought, maybe not.”

“No, no, go ahead. I’m ready to collapse into bed.” It was late enough even for adults. Anzel wanted to end the day with a nightcap and then get himself to bed.

“Do you really think that womanizing old man would name you instead of me without a reason?”

*Won’t lie, was wonderin’ about that myself.*

“Ugh, what a pain… Fine, I’ll leave cleanin’ up to you, then.” He wasn’t exactly overjoyed at having to do this, but he decided to go. He wanted to at least ask why Becker had named him specifically. Depending on his answer, Anzel might have to ban the guy from the Shadow Rat.

With that decision made, Anzel left the bar with the corrupt guard.

“Sorry for the trouble, kiddo. This poor old man doesn’t have many friends here, y’see.”

“Thought all the women of the night were your lovers?”

“I can’t show someone so special to me such an embarrassing side of myself, now can I?”

The man was always ready with excuses for anything. After signing some documents at the holding station, Anzel picked up Becker Guileman. It was late enough that both the regular civilians and the women working in the entertainment district would have already been asleep. Anzel walked down the empty quiet streets with the man who he could no longer claim was simply an acquaintance—a midnight date with no joy to be felt.

“What did you even do?” he asked.

“Got into a fistfight. Stumbled across a guy putting his hands on a woman, so I stepped in to give a little warning. Before I knew it, everything became much messier than I expected.”

Seemed plausible. Unfortunately, it didn’t make for the most riveting of discussions.

“Say, why’d you name me as your guarantor?”

“Hmm? Didn’t I tell you already?”

“I’m bein’ serious. If you aren’t gonna explain, then don’t drop by my place anymore. Actually, I don’t care if you had a good reason, stop coming. Gonna be real, you’re just a pain in the ass.”

“How cruel!”

*Not as cruel as if I used physical force on you*, Anzel thought to himself. Becker had caught on to Fressa’s true occupation which meant he was likely aware of how strong *Anzel* was. Becker himself was no joke though, so Anzel wasn’t sure he could get out of a fight with him unscathed.

Win or lose, he knew he could at least get a single punch in; that would be enough to satisfy him.

“I want info on Leeno. It’s the main reason I keep hanging around you like this.”

“I’m not leakin’ info on my regulars. How many times’ve I gotta tell you this?”

“I’m not surprised. You’re the type to keep your lips permanently sealed. I still won’t stop trying though. I want to meet her, no matter what.”

“You are *such* a pain…”

Anzel stopped in his tracks.

Becker stopped with him.

“I ain’t helpin’ you,” Anzel grumbled. “Second this starts, I’m leavin’.”

“Were the youths always this cold?”

After a few moments at a standstill, a few men approached them, having realized that their attempt to ambush the two men had been noticed. It must have been the man Becker had picked a fight with and his friends.

“Huh?”

Or perhaps not. At first, they’d looked like regular poor citizens. But they were using their appearance to hide their strength—they were foreigners, and strong ones at that.

“You’re Anzel, aren’t you?” one of the three men said.

“The hell, you’re here for me?” Anzel sighed. He’d been so sure they were Becker’s problem. “Who are you guys?”

“That’s confidential. Answer our questions and we’ll let you go.”

“Yeah?” Anzel clamped a cigarette between his lips. “What are your questions, then?”

“Tell us where Leeno is.”

Anzel couldn’t help but sigh again. “You guys too? That girl’s mighty popular.” He lit the cigarette, watching the men as he took his first drag.

They were definitely strong. Abnormally so, even—they

weren't your average thugs. Their chi was also much more stable than an average person's—it was possible they knew of its existence.

As far as Anzel was aware, the people who knew how to use their chi were few and far between. If his guess was right, these were assassins from the main house of the Qilong. He nearly made the guess out loud, but Becker was still here—if Anzel said that name now, the old man could end up involved in his mess. Given Becker's ability, he'd probably be fine, but the last thing Anzel wanted was to owe him. If Becker helped him out, he'd be in trouble.

"You wanna know about Leeno, huh? If you made it all the way to me, that means you probably did your research, right? Then naturally, you know I ain't speakin' a word."

"Cut the attitude, or we'll end you here."

"Really? You don't have to worry about a thing, though."

"Huh…?"

"'Cause I won't end any of you." At that, Anzel melted into the shadows.

No. The fire of his lit cigarette followed Anzel's movements, drawing a burning line.

After feinting to the left, he swiftly stepped forward. Two of the men responded fast enough, but the one who failed to move in time found a metal pipe rammed right into his shoulder.

"Gah?!"

Anzel showed no mercy as he threw a punch at the same man. His body flew backward onto the ground.

The two assassins left were silent as they watched not their fallen comrade but Anzel. They weren't underestimating their opponent, the murderous intent within their gazes so sharp that if looks could kill, Anzel would've been dead on the ground.

"It's time for *everyone* to be headin' to bed. Be a coupl'a good boys and bring your and your friend's asses back home. Unless you want to make it to tomorrow passed out on the ground here too." Attuned weapon hanging over his shoulders, Anzel exhaled smoke. He was keeping himself wide open, yet neither of the assassins made a move.

When nothing happened no matter how long he waited, Anzel sighed. "Gimme a break already, guys. I'm more than ready to hit the hay. Make your decision before I pass out on you. Ain't you guys practically on vacation while you're here? You wanna go see

the sights, don’tcha? I, on the other hand, have work tomorrow. And you too, Becker. Every day, I’m stuck keepin’ you company. To be clear, we ain’t friends, all right? Don’t call on me like this again. My name bein’ mentioned anywhere outside my establishment just makes more trouble for me.”

Vanishing his metal pipe, Anzel walked away, caring little for a potential attack. He walked right by the wary assassins—all while exuding an aura that screamed if they tried to attack him again, they were goners.

With that incident out of the way, Anzel disappeared into the night of the Altoire streets.

“Phew…”

The next day, Anzel—having woken up as late as he always did—was standing in the basement of the Shadow Rat, shirt off, covered in sweat. Anzel always did his training here. Sometimes, Fressa would join him, but not today. He’d somehow ended up taking his training pretty damn seriously—no doubt as Nia had hoped he would.

Having someone to compete with really did wonders for a person’s motivation. There were Fressa, Gandolph, Lynokis, and Lynette. All of them were like Nia’s disciples, so they were all competing with one another to some degree. To Anzel though, that in and of itself felt like they were dancing on the girl’s palm.

He wasn’t going to fight it or anything. Whether that was the case or not, only the strong had the right to toy with the weak. If he didn’t like that, then he just had to get stronger than Nia.

Putting it that way, it was honestly quite fair. Anzel had no education, no money, no family, not even a birth certificate, but the one thing he did have was a reasonably strong body. Using that body, the only thing he could compete with was violence. It was pointless to try and compete with something you didn’t have.

The problem was that Nia was just too strong. So much so that it felt like an insult to even think he could ever defeat her.

Once, a long time ago, Anzel had challenged that monster time and time again, with absolutely no regard for his own life. Nowadays, he couldn’t help but look back and think of what a fool he’d been.

“I should take a bath…”

Any time he thought back to those days, he broke out into a

cold sweat. If he had somehow angered Nia at that time, there was a good chance Kaffes would've ended up wrapped up in everything as well. That would've been the absolute worst scenario imaginable.

Anzel dragged his exhausted body—now covered in two layers of disgusting sweat—out of the basement.

And so, his day began. Torso still bare, he grabbed his clothes and a wooden bucket and headed outside. The bathhouse was close by—or more specifically, he borrowed the baths of a nearby brothel.

"Yo, boss. Headin' for a bath?" one of the old regulars called to him from the ground.

"Yeah. Keep a lookout for me, would you?"

There were a number of regulars like this one whom Anzel trusted to let him know if there were any problems in the area. It wasn't exactly work and there was no compensation for it, but if they gave him a good tip, he'd give them a free drink. This guy seemed to live either on the streets or in one of the abandoned buildings nearby, so for him, it was a little like guarding his home.

It wasn't the safest of areas so it was valuable to have lookouts. Anzel wasn't going to treat them to anything special, but he wouldn't chase them away either. They cleaned up any leftover food, and for a little bit of change, they'd do any odd job you asked for.

"Of course, but I have a letter for you first."

"What? From who?"

"That scary lady that would come by sometimes. Y'know, the woman with the maid outfit who feels even more dangerous than Fressa."

It had to be Lynokis. That description fit no one else.

"You serious?" Anzel took the letter from the old man in slight disbelief. "Drop by the bar tonight. I'll treat you."

"S-Sure! Add some snacks too!"

Anzel opened the letter as he walked—and immediately crumpled it between his fingers.

"Things are finally lookin' up." He'd succeeded in getting a meeting with Lily—no, Nia Liston. Life had been hectic recently, but it seemed luck was finally smiling on him.

"Did you really think it was a good idea to come here after

yesterday?"

The Shadow Rat opened, and the regulars lurking outside filtered in, immediately filling the establishment with noise. Just as the sun was beginning to set, and the drunken idiots were starting to get carried away...

"No reason for me not to. You never said I was banned."

Becker came by.

"Tch... I shoulda." Given the atmosphere at the time, he could've just offhandedly said it and it wouldn't have seemed out of nowhere. Just a quick "Oh, and you're banned, by the way" as he walked away would've done the trick. He'd been so tired at the time that his brain hadn't been working so well.

"Gimme a drink for now, anyway."

"Yeah, yeah." Anzel reluctantly poured his customer a glass while internally begging him to hurry up and go home.

"Say, you curious what happened after you walked away last night?" Becker suddenly asked on his second or third drink.

"Not even slightly. I couldn't care less if you'd been beaten up or killed."

"C'mon now, I wouldn't even be here if I'd been killed."

"True." Even if he hadn't been killed, Anzel at least wished his leg had been broken and he'd had to go somewhere else to recover for a while. Though he could already imagine the man dragging his leg behind him just to get here...

"Those guys barely glanced at me. I asked them if they were okay, even offered to take 'em to the place with the girls with the nicest racks in town, but they ignored me and left."

No wonder they'd left if that was what he'd said to them. Anzel would've done the exact same if he'd been in their shoes, no matter who made the offer.

"Now then, Anzel, my boy. You know who they were, don't you?"

"I do not. All I know is that they were after me for the same reason you are."

"Fishing for info on Leeno, huh? It's no wonder—everyone's fallen for her."

"You're such a creep. Go home. This is so pointless. Ah... My bad. Forgot my filter."

Becker burst into laughter. "I'm *not* leaving. I'm staying here no matter what." Apparently, Anzel had pissed him off a little.

Just like all the previous days, Becker kept trying to talk to him

and placed bets on how many bottles Fressa would break until closing hours. Anzel chose to chase everything out of his mind, including Becker, and worked on closing up shop.

"Anzel, a commission's come in from Cedony."

"What?" Just as Anzel was in the middle of drying the dishes, Fressa sat down at the counter after mopping the floor. "When?"

"A messenger dropped by earlier today. They said if you're interested in some bodyguard work, you've gotta go to the warehouse out back tomorrow."

In other words, he was being asked to do his original job. "Did they say anythin' else?"

"Nope. They just said that and left. Besides, if it's a job for you, I'm basically an outsider."

"Yeah, I guess."

With so little information, Anzel couldn't give a reply. If it was an underworld job, then so long as the pay was good, he'd willingly protect the most villainous of men. If he'd be taking a commission from a company like Cedony though, that would be a surface job. If it was some job they wanted to keep secret, they'd never meet him right by the bar. They would want to completely erase any visible signs of their relationship.

The only problem was…

"Man, there's no way I can refuse this."

Anzel owed a lot to Cedony, both for the billion krams and for some other things as well. Despite having an inkling that he and Fressa weren't regular citizens, Cedony still held the two of them in high regard. They'd gained enough trust with Cedony that the company was willing to offer them jobs—at least, from a work standpoint.

"It must be a job where someone like us is useful," Anzel remarked.

"Probably. Since they came to me directly citing themselves as a member of Cedony Trading, I feel like it has to be clean work, but…we're both a little clueless about what that means, huh?"

The problem was that neither of them had much experience with surface work.

"Guess I gotta just go and see."

*I ain't brave enough to refuse this one.* The matter of whether he would accept aside, he needed to at least go and hear them out as a matter of respect.

First, he had the weight of fifty billion krams on his shoulders,

betting on his win in the tournament. Then he had everyone and their mother asking for information on Leeno. Then there was Redblade Becker, who wouldn't stop trying to cozy up to him. And *now* there was Cedony Trading trying to give him work.

Anzel couldn't help but let out a big sigh. There was so much to worry himself over. He poured some alcohol into a glass. If he didn't get a bit drunk, he'd go insane.

"One for me too, please. Do you have any fruit leftover? I really feel in the mood for a cocktail."

"Sure thing."

The next day, Anzel learned exactly why Cedony had come to him, and he was truly glad that he hadn't ghosted them.

Fate was such a fickle mistress.

# Chapter 5: Behind the Scenes

“What do you think?”

After being given a brief explanation of the gig, Anzel gave it a moment of thought before replying. “Sure, I’ll do it. You can let your boss know.” In truth, he’d known he was going to accept immediately upon hearing the details, but if he came across too eager, he knew he’d be taken advantage of—it was one of those secret pieces of life advice.

“Thank you very much. The details are enclosed in this envelope.”

“Thanks.” Once he took the letter, Anzel swiftly left the scene.

He stepped onto the main street from behind a massive warehouse that Cedony owned.

“Damn, that was close…” The words slipped from his mouth without thinking. He was incredibly glad he hadn’t ignored their call.

He had just met with a member of Cedony after his presence had been requested the previous night, a young man about the same age as Anzel. Anzel didn’t know his name, but they’d met multiple times over the course of the work for the billion krams, so they were at least acquainted. What he did know was that the man worked at their main store even though there were numerous branches all across Altoire, so he had to have been pretty good at his job.

As he’d been told in advance, they wanted him to serve as a bodyguard. The big sticking point was *whom* he was serving.

“Done with negotiations?”

“Yeah. They said I can tell you about it.”

“Really? Neat, I’ve been so curious ever since I got the message.”

After Anzel met back up with Fressa nearby, the two stopped at a nearby place for lunch.

“It feels a bit extravagant for us to be going into a restaurant on the main street at this time of day,” Fressa remarked.

Anzel wasn’t sure if he would call it “extravagant,” but it certainly didn’t suit them. At the end of the day, they were both residents of the underworld. It didn’t feel right for them to be

hanging around civilians while it was still light out.

“So? Spill the beans already.”

The moment they made their order, Fressa immediately hounded him for answers. Anzel shuffled closer to the table. Fressa caught on and leaned forward herself.

“I’ve to guard Lily’s brother.” He whispered only the most important part before pulling back.

“Huh? W-Wait, hang on. You mean—” The startled Fressa remained where she was. “The prince of the Liston family?” Apparently, that was what he had become known as after his appearances on magivision. But for someone like Fressa, experienced in the field, to so openly mention someone’s identity while in public… How flustered was she?



“You a fan or somethin’?”

“Not a fan *per se*, but I do like him. He’s cute. I’d love to whip him away myself.”

“Why, ’cause he’d sell for a lot?”

“No, you know I hate that kind of thing. I just want to have fun with him. All sorts of fun.”

Either reason was cruel if you asked Anzel.

“But okay, I see,” Fressa relented. “No wonder they came to you for this.”

“Yeah… I suppose.”

Cedony Trading had to have already caught on to much of the truth behind their operations, from the true identity of Leeno, to just what kind of person Nia was, to how Anzel and Fressa were tied to them.

No one who knew Nia would ever betray her. They were so aware of that truth that they’d given Anzel this work. In fact, they even allowed him to tell Fressa the details. They knew Anzel wouldn’t backstab them, and no matter what happened, he’d put his life on the line—all because the one who needed protection was a relative of Nia’s.

Still, what insane timing. Anzel could never have imagined he’d end up discussing Nia Liston’s relative right before meeting up with the girl herself. Was it coincidence or was it fate?

“There’s another reason they want me there too, but for me, that’s the most important part.”

“I see, I see… Say, couldn’t I technically do it instead? Wanna swap? I’ll give you twenty percent of the money. You’re the bartender of the Shadow Rat; you must be so busy. I’ll stand in for you, so let’s go renegotiate with them.” Fressa’s eyes were practically sparkling, as manic as a crazy fan’s. Anzel had served as the bodyguard for a famous stage actor once a long time ago, and the fans then had had the exact same look.

His work hadn’t even started and yet the kid was already in danger.

“No, it’s fine. Leave it to me.”

“But you have the bar to think about.”

“I *said* it’s fine. It’s not a one-off, but it’s short increments of time I’ll need to work. It’s perfect for me.” His client for this job was still in elementary school so he had a curfew to abide by. In other words, Anzel would only be needed from the end of the kid’s school time to the early evening. He’d be back in time to

open the Shadow Rat. Plus, the money wasn't half bad. When compared with how many hours he'd effectively be working, the rate was very good. Actually doing the job for the full amount rather than doing nothing for twenty percent was much more worth it.

"Come oooon, swap with me!"

"No."

"Fine, what if I said I'd give you thirty percent?"

"No way."

Following lunch, Anzel picked up some inventory on the way back to the bar, Fressa trailing him the whole way, and then he got ready to open for the night. The moment he was free, he looked through the documents he'd been provided, but it was all as he'd already been told. It didn't seem so difficult an order.

"Hmm…"

There was some stuff written about recording and surveillance, but that had nothing to do with Anzel. His job was simply to protect the client. Seemed simple enough.

Recently, there had been a lot of annoying things building up, his worries beginning to weigh him down, so getting to do work during the day might set his mind right. And of course, it helped that the pay wasn't bad.

His first day on the job would start in a few days, but there was something he had to do first.

"Fressa, mind watchin' the bar for a bit? I won't be long."

It was almost time.

"I'd take over for you however many times you needed if you gave me the gig!"

"Could you do this after I'm back? I've got plans to meet with someone. Can't keep 'em waitin'."

"Oooh, who are you meeting with?"

"A lady."

"Wow, did you finally get a girlfriend? What's she like? Or are you on your way to confess? If you are, I'll teach you how to definitely make a girl fall for you…if you let me take the gig."

"What'd I just say?"

After getting Fressa off his back, Anzel left out the back entrance. The regulars and some other thugs were loitering in the back alley waiting for the bar to open. *These guys sure are rolling in free time.*

"Hmm? Somethin' up, boss?"

“Just a little errand. Place’ll open up at its usual time, so just hold your horses. Oh, and Fressa’s still in there, so don’t get any funny ideas about breakin’ in.”

“I value my life too much for that. I lost count of how many folks she’s left half dead a while ago. The real mystery is how no one’s actually died in all this time.”

Hell, that was exactly why he’d chosen to hire Fressa in the first place. He could leave his bar in her hands even in such a rough area, and she seemed to enjoy interacting with the patrons. She seemed to enjoy that their patrons were of the type that it was okay to beat up if they started being a pain—more so than Anzel had thought she would. Plus, she was good at holding back, so she was perfect for the job.

After shrugging off their questions, Anzel exited onto the main street and strode quickly to his destination, the Chocolate Lily’s Aroma.

“Sorry to keep you waitin’,” he called out to a hatted child waiting in the alley at the side of the restaurant, trying to keep out of sight.

The child said nothing as she looked up and smiled—it was, of course, Nia Liston. Her characteristic white hair stuck out like a sore thumb, so she was avoiding the public as much as possible.

“Follow me,” he said. “Let’s chat somewhere else.”

Anzel guided Nia to a ruined building not too far from the Chocolate Lily.

“What is this place?” she asked as they went down the stairs.

“It’s the basement of a shop that went under.” It was also property of Kaffes. It looked like a regular abandoned building from the outside, but it was actually one of his safe houses. There was a bit of a trick to it, but… Well, that wasn’t important.

“Sorry for callin’ you out like this.”

“Well, you did make an arrangement through proper channels.”

Even when they went down the stairs, it was just more ruins. The air was dusty, and scattered about the room were broken boxes and rubble and other random pieces of junk. It had been a while since someone had been here last—perfect.

“You’re collecting on one of the two debts I owe you? Honestly…I’d kind of forgotten about that,” the girl mused.

“I mean, yeah, pretty common for the debtor to forget. Given

I'm the one who helped you out though, I kinda can't."

"True, that is how that works."

Anzel had entrusted a letter to Gandolph, which had safely made its way to Nia Liston, and she had now made time for him. Nia had asked two favors of him in the past, and he had fulfilled both of them. Anzel thought she might have tried to avoid the meeting so she could pretend she'd forgotten.

"What did you want to ask, then? Sorry to rush you but I have as little time as always."

That was her polite way of telling him to hurry up.

"Did you manage to shake Lynokis off?"

"No need, I told her directly to stay put, just as you requested."

"Wow, I'm impressed you managed to persuade her to let you go off on your own."

"I did my best to persuade her. A martial artist who can't keep their promises isn't worth one's time, don't you think? I don't want to become someone like that."

Nia had somehow managed to persuade *Lynokis*, of all people. Just what magic had she used to pull that one off? Anzel was curious for the details, but he wouldn't keep her any longer than he had to.

"I can't say exactly why, but I'm in a situation where I *must* win the martial arts tournament."

"Oh?"

Nia was smiling. It was a smile of excitement.

"I don't need the details, but I'd love to have at least a rough idea of what has inspired this attitude. So...why?"

Why? What answer would satisfy this girl?

Anzel hesitated for a moment before deciding to tell the truth. Someone like Nia wouldn't appreciate some half-assed made-up reason.

"The man I owe my life to is plannin' to bet a ridiculous amount of money on me. If I lose, it's all down the drain."

"And so you want to become stronger, to push your training even further, is that right?"

"Yeah."

"Wonderful. It's a great reason to want to fight."

Was it? "You sure 'bout that? Ain't it a little greedy?"

"A few fists are worth a penny apiece."

"Huh...?"

“It’s an old martial saying. Literally, it sounds like I’m saying our fists are worth little more than someone’s pocket change. But what it really means is that our fists fight for that which we value even more than money. To someone else, it may not mean much, but to you, it isn’t something so simple. In other words, we all have our own reasons for fighting.”

It always felt like those pale blue eyes could see right into someone’s heart.

“You said it was for someone you owe? Then that’s perfect. Though I wouldn’t be against fighting for the sake of a few coins. Not like you can’t fight without a reason either. A meaningless fist isn’t bad, especially if you can swing it without feeling a shred of guilt.”

Her response was so quintessentially Nia Liston.

In any case, their negotiations were complete.

“Please tell me how I can get stronger. I have to win.”

“Of course. You’ve been training well, and I’d honestly been very interested in you.” Nia picked up a piece of rubble. “When I offered to teach my students Techniques, you alone refused.”

Lynokis and Lynette had been taught Rumbling Thunder. Gandolph had been taught Roaring Thunder. Fressa had been taught Rupture.

“Well, yeah. Like I said at the time, I value the fundamentals over some fancy tricks.” While everyone else had been training their Techniques, Anzel had focused solely on basic chi training.

Ever since he had gotten used to handling his chi, he’d begun making use of it in his daily life, whether while cleaning glasses or while pouring drinks. He manipulated his chi constantly to get as used to it as he could.

Anzel had instinctively concluded that the power of a Technique largely lay in one’s ability to control chi rather than in the Technique itself. Thanks to that, in his opinion, he’d become a little more proficient than the others in that area.

“And I believed that was the best choice you could have made,” Nia said as she rolled the rock between her fingers. “For a long time, I’ve thought that it was far too early for the others to be taught Techniques. Rather than practicing an unstable Technique, they should really be working to stabilize their control of their chi. It leads to much faster growth. Techniques are just an extension of the basics. Get those down and it’ll naturally lead to more advanced moves. It’s one of those things you end up

picking up eventually even without being actively taught.”

Nia raised her right hand, holding the rock.

“Try hitting this back at me with your metal pipe.”

The second she made the request, she threw the rock at Anzel at tremendous speed.

Anzel reflexively moved. He summoned his metal pipe and stretched out his hand—but it didn’t reach. Instead, the stone shattered against the wall behind him.

“Your reflexes aren’t bad.”

Anzel clicked his tongue. “You deliberately threw that out of my range, didn’t you?” If it had just been that little bit closer, he would’ve been able to reach.

It was the sign that Nia completely understood the level of Anzel’s skill. She had analyzed Anzel’s reaction speed, his reach, and even his proficiency in chi. Through compiling all of that information, she had been able to deliberately throw that rock *just* out of reach for him.

It pissed him off. It was like being told that his strength was still little better than a child’s. It was moments like this that reminded him exactly why it always felt like he was dancing in the palm of her hand.

Nia unsurprisingly smirked at Anzel’s irritation.

“You need to extend it.”

“Huh? What, extend my chi?”

“Yes. Extend the chi past your limbs, past even your weapon. That is the fundamental idea behind external chi.”

Suddenly, Nia began walking.

In the air.

She came to a stop without dropping to the ground.



“External chi is the application of chi pushed outside of the body. First, you train by extending your chi beyond your body, and then you move on to learning how to fire it. With enough practice, you can even maintain a state of expelled chi like this. I can only do it for a few seconds right now.” Nia lost her foothold and dropped to the ground—her *invisible* foothold.

“The more talented a martial artist is, the more accurate their predictions. They can dodge attacks at the last minute and know their exact attack range. Without being able to do that much, you can’t attack or defend effectively. It’s a kind of sense that improves naturally with actual combat experience. Now think about it—external chi completely betrays such estimations.”

Anzel didn’t have to think about it. He’d already heard explanations of chi, so logically he knew that such crazy applications could exist.

“Attacks that ordinarily wouldn’t hit can suddenly reach you. What if it was a blade aiming for a vital point like your eyes or throat? That’s what would happen in a battle using advanced chi.”

Anzel…had thought he’d understood. But actually witnessing its usage with his own eyes, he was starting to realize that this power was even more insane than he’d ever imagined.

“You’ve spent these past couple of years polishing your fundamentals, and that is exactly why I think you’re capable of this. You’ll probably be able to pick it up through instinct, honestly.”

Would he, really?

No, he would. Because Nia Liston thought he could.

“Okay, looks like you’ll be fine.”

Something from Anzel’s expression must have told her that he had been convinced.

“Yeah, I’ve got a solid idea of where to take my training now,” he replied. She was truly precise. Since they could rarely meet, she’d taught him something that he could practice even without her being there. She’d explained it in a very easy-to-understand way. That action a moment ago had shown him exactly what he could and couldn’t do.

*I really am dancing in the palm of her hand, ain’t I?*

“I do apologize that we can’t meet often.”

“Doesn’t matter what age we are, we’ve all got our own responsibilities, especially now. Don’t worry about it.” The martial

arts tournament had filled Altoire with life, those from all sorts of backgrounds and with all manner of goals making their moves. Nia was busy with magivision, and Anzel was busy with his everyday life and his annoying number of worries.

“It’s time for me to get going.”

“Sure. Sorry for makin’ you come out all this way.”

Nia turned and began to walk away. But then…

“Hey.” Anzel called after her. “I’ve been wonderin’ this for a while, but…you’re not someone from my side of society, are you?” It was something he’d always wanted to ask. Her understanding of the underworld’s workings and etiquette was far too deep. Very few people on the surface had such extended knowledge on the way they worked.

In Nia’s case though, she’d always been this way.

“Anzel, are you a little dull?” Nia asked, looking over her shoulder.

That smile on her face was one of insanity.

“Everything I’m doing is about bending the laws of this world with sheer strength. I’m making everything surrender to me with violence. What about this seems like I’m on the straight and narrow? I know Altoire is known for its naive peace, but give me a break.”

It was true that the logic made sense.

“But you are, aren’t you? Clearly.” If she was that extreme, Anzel really would have run for his life by now—Fressa too, most likely. To borrow Nia’s words, someone like that wouldn’t be worth his time.

Nia Liston was not that kind of person.

“What I do is not that different. At the end of the day, all that’s different is that I haven’t mistaken how I should use my strength. So you’re aware, that’s why I didn’t hesitate to teach you all how to use your chi. Professionals won’t stray from the correct path. That is what I believe.”

After saying that, Nia left the building.

Having seen off the girl who was overwhelmingly stronger than him, Anzel let out a sigh and lit a cigarette.

“This is not the kind of pressure I needed right now.”

Professionals wouldn’t stray from the correct path. In other words, if he stopped being a professional… Well. What Anzel did ultimately depended on Kaffes’s orders, but whatever.

“External chi, huh?”

That was the next item on his training course.

“Oh, you’re finally heading out.”

“You’re *still* at it?”

When Anzel left the bar to make his way to his Cedony gig, Fressa was there waiting for him. She’d been begging him every single day to give the job to her instead.

“This is work, all right? I’m not gonna play around with you anymore.” Anzel was a professional. He couldn’t care less if it was his everyday life that Fressa was getting in the way of, but he wouldn’t let her get away with interrupting his work. Even when he glared at her though, she refused to budge.

“Let me join you. You don’t even have to pay me.”

She’d finally gone as far as willing to pass up the pay.

“You’re that desperate to meet Neal Liston?”

“Yeah. Lynette too. Haven’t seen her in a while.”

Anzel clicked his tongue. If she was making that big of a compromise, it would be impossible for him to chase her off or refuse her—Fressa would follow him no matter what. For someone like *her* to go so far as to give up the money, she had to be serious.

Even if Anzel injured her to try and keep her down, she’d still drag her body along the ground if it meant she could join him. And it wasn’t like there was any guarantee Anzel would get out of a fight like that unscathed himself.

At this point, accepting was the better option.

“Fine, but I’m bein’ serious, you’re gettin’ *none* of the money. Ignore my instructions while we’re on the job and you’re dead meat.”

“Yeah, of course! Just tagging along, just tagging along,” she assured him with a delighted grin.

And so, Anzel headed to his job with a big child accompanying him.

The meeting point was at the port’s warehouse district, the civilian warehouse district not teeming with those from the underworld. The port was much busier than usual because of the martial arts tournament; freight ships and foreign vessels were so frequent that the place was packed with people and stalls.

The increase in trade made it clear just how popular Altoire was right now. Those from outside the country were arriving one after another, and many tough fighters were clearly here to enter the tournament. Since crowded areas were prone to fights breaking out, Anzel could see a few plainclothes police milling about.

"We're not late, are we?" Fressa asked.

"Shouldn't be. Someone was supposed to meet us here to show us the way, but..."

Anzel and Fressa were waiting beside one of the port's restaurants, this one being pretty popular among sailors. There wasn't much they could do besides watch what was happening.

"Say, what even were the specifics of the commission?"

"I'm expected to guard Neal Liston. He's currently in his fifth year of elementary school and is one of the faces of the Liston Channel. He ain't appeared in many programs, but those few times he popped up were enough to gather a ton of passionate fans. Apparently, they just keep increasin'. You bein' one of them."

"Hey, I already said I wasn't a fan. I just want to tease him a little."

"Don't say that to Lynette, even if you're joking. You know as well as I do that she'd get mega pissed."

Honestly, the thought of a fight to the death between Lynette and Fressa was kind of... Well, thinking about it, he wasn't entirely *against* the idea. He wouldn't deny that he was a little curious to see who was stronger. If they *did* end up fighting, would there be any reason to stop them?

Actually, yes, there was a large possibility that Nia would end up intervening. If she questioned why he hadn't stopped them, he'd be in trouble.

"Then I'll leave it at a handshake."

"Good. Oh, and about the guy we've to keep an eye on—"

"Anzel!" Anzel was interrupted by a dreaded voice from behind him.

"Why the hell are *you* here?"

When he turned around, he was faced with a mug that he had been forced to see every day—Becker. Not only was Anzel forced to see the guy at the bar, now he had to see him here too. Anzel was sick of his face by this point.

"Work. Even us old fogies have work to do while it's still light

out. Oh? Why're *you* here, Fressa, darling?"

"Tagging along with Anzel. He's *terrible* with directions, gets lost all the time. I was worried enough I decided to come with him."

Anzel silently slapped away Fressa's hand as it reached up to pat him on the head. "You the messenger from the company?" he asked.

"Sure am. Here." Becker held out half a contract.

"I see. We sure bump into each other a lot...unfortunately." Anzel pulled the other half from his own pocket, held it out, and joined it together with Becker's.

Apparently, it wasn't a coincidence that they were meeting here. Their relationship had upgraded from a bartender and his customer to colleagues working for the same company.

"Hey, *I* just picked up some adventuring work. Aren't *you* the one stepping outside your lane?"

"Yeah, maybe." Doing work out in daylight was indeed rare for Anzel. He was more than aware that he wasn't someone who should be boldly walking under the sun.

"It's this way. You know your assignment, yeah?"

"Pretty much. Though I wouldn't mind gettin' another rundown to be safe."

"Sure thing. I'll explain on the way."

"No way! I seriously can't touch him?! I even said I'd be willing to settle for a handshake!"

Anzel had known from the start that she'd never be allowed to lay a hand on the boy; he'd just kept it to himself because he knew she'd be a pain about it.

They confirmed the details of the job as they walked, but as the reality of it sank in, Fressa suddenly snapped. "Hey! Becker, you bastard! Just what kinda work is this, huh?!"

*What was that about just accompanying me?*

"Wh-What's wrong, Fressa?!"

"Calm down, idiot."

"Bwah."

Anzel kicked the girl's butt when she tried to lunge at Becker, then repeated what he'd been told. "So you're actually the main bodyguard, Becker, while my job is to patrol the surrounding area. In other words, I'm basically security monitoring a specified client. I've gotta do what I can to not get spotted by the client."

What that meant was that he would have no interaction with Neal.

"You freakin' serious?! You joking?!" Fressa continued yelling.

"You're the one joking. Imagine sayin' somethin' like that while you've got your hand on your ass."

"*You're* the one who kicked it, asshole! I'm soothing it! That hurt way more than you'd think!"

"Oh, how terrible! How about this old man give it a little r— Sorry."

Before Becker could finish such a ridiculous line, Fressa shot him a glare that immediately shut him up. As a talented adventurer, he was good at recognizing danger.

"What's got her all worked up?" Becker asked. "She a fan of Neal?"

"She is indeed."

"I already told you that's *not. It.* I just want to give him a hug! A hug full of love!"

*Don't yell somethin' like that so loud.*

"You're supposed to just be taggin' along, so you've got nothin' to do with this gig. If it bothers you that much, then leave."

"I'm coming! If I don't manage to get even a handshake in, there was no point in me coming all this way! Plus my ass hurts! No, seriously, slow down, I'm not kidding…"

Anzel was pretty sure Fressa's enthusiasm was more than enough to make her a fan, but he didn't push it. It would just turn her into even more of a pain.

*Ah, I get it now.*

When they arrived at the location, there were already quite a lot of people gathered. Apparently, this area, including the warehouse, was Cedony Trading's privately owned land, and there was a whole crowd gathered just outside the property line. The crowd looked to be around fifty people strong. According to Becker, they were here to watch.

With this many people around, it made sense to want someone to keep an eye on things from a distance.

"They're gonna be doing a recording, I think."

"Ah…" In other words, the group in the distance was the production crew. They were all dashing around with strange devices in their hands…and wearing school uniforms. After a

closer look, Anzel noticed they were all kids.

Anzel had no idea what was going on, but at the end of the day, it was none of his business.

"Ah, there's Nea— Gwah!"

Anzel grabbed Fressa by the collar the second she tried to dash away.

"Don't enter the premises. That's not in my job description."

"Awwwww..."

"I'm bein' serious, you gotta stop doin' this. It's actually gonna impact my work," Anzel warned, letting her go. If she *still* refused to listen, he'd have no choice but to fight her over it.

"Fine... I'll just have Lynette call him over later."

*You* still *ain't givin' up?* Well, whatever.

"Where's the client?" He wanted to at least be aware of where the kid was in case of an emergency situation.

"Underneath that sun umbrella over there. See the boy reading a book?"

"Over there? Ah, I see him. Lynette's there too."

There was a blond kid standing in the back as the production crew dashed about. The woman standing beside him wearing an attendant's uniform was Lynette, one of the people they had worked with to earn the billion krams. She was strong herself.

And their eyes met.

"Hey, she ignored me. Anzel, she ignored me!"

"No shit. She's an attendant to an aristocrat; she can't just act like she knows shady types like us out in the open." They were just a pair of suspicious bodyguards—nothing good would come of them being friendly in public.

"Someone you know?" Becker asked.

"Don't worry about it. I've confirmed the location of the client, but who's the one I'm supposed to be monitoring?" Anzel had one more job on top of protecting Neal Liston, so he wanted to confirm the details of that too.

"The guy over there." Becker pointed at a man who was wearing a dirty uniform and currently talking to the schoolkids. From his appearance, he looked like an engineer, not a sailor or warehouse worker.

"Hmm? Have we seen him before?" Fressa suddenly asked.

"What?" Anzel narrowed his eyes at the man.

*You know, he does look kinda familiar...* But Anzel couldn't place him. Had he been to their bar, maybe? A onetime patron?

That didn’t seem right. It felt like they’d met somewhere else.

“Is that your type, Fressa?”

“Excuse me? Well… Okay, I’ll admit, he’s a bit handsome, but he’s not my type. I care more about Neal right now. He’s even cuter in person than on magivision. Give him ten, no, five more years, and he’ll be making girls cry like crazy.”

“Am *I* your type?”

“Do you have money, old man? How much? Can you give me ten million krams at a moment’s notice? I could overlook your age and appearance for money, but that depends on how much you’d be willing to give me.”

“Oh, how I yearn to return to my youth. I may be old now, but I was young once too, you know. But these days I’ve got that real silver charm, don’t you think?”

“Should you really be saying stuff like that? You’ll just make yourself sad later.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Slightly wounded by the young woman’s words, Becker said his farewells and headed off.

Becker’s job was to protect Neal Liston from up close. Anzel and Fressa’s job was to protect Neal Liston from a distance and also to monitor a specific person.

“Oh, now I remember.”

He’d been told explicitly to monitor that man in the engineer’s uniform. Why? Following that question reminded him of where he’d seen the man before.

“Fressa, that’s that pirate captain.”

“What?” Fressa narrowed her eyes. “Oh, you’re right. His haircut and general vibe is completely different now.”

If Anzel recalled correctly, the guy had been the captain of the Hammerhead Sky Pirates. It had been his crew that attacked their airship when their whole team (minus Lynette) had gone hunting together.

Somewhat tired and covered in oil, the man was a far cry from the cocky captain Anzel remembered. The guy just looked like a civilian now.

No… He didn’t just *look* like a civilian, he’d really become one.

“So they want us to keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn’t escape?” Fressa asked.

“That, and if he tries to hurt someone, step in and stop him. But… Nah, never mind.” He didn’t seem like he would start anything. That was how much of a civilian he appeared to be

now.

After waiting around for a while, one of the schoolkids and the former captain came over.

The former captain immediately recognized Anzel and Fressa. “Huh? Aren’t you two—?”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Anzel interrupted. “We’ll be in charge of guardin’ you all today. I’m not big on formalities, but I’ll do my job, so I’d appreciate it if you could overlook that.”

“Same here. Nice to meet you,” Fressa added.

Before the former captain could say any more, the two of them made their position clear.

“O-Oh, yeah, of course. Nice to meet you.” The guy immediately picked up that they were telling him to not say too much—a sign that he definitely used to be part of the bad side. It was unlikely that he wanted his former identity to be discovered either.

The young boy spoke up. “You’re both from Cedony Trading, correct? My name is Wagnes. I’m the one in charge of our production crew. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard roughly what’s goin’ on. You can just ignore us. Do whatever you need to. Don’t feel pressured to chat with us after this either.”

After introductions, Wagnes returned to his crew, leaving behind the ex-captain.

“You guys my babysitters?”

“Uh-huh. What are you even doin’ here?” Anzel asked.

The ex-captain chuckled with a smug grin. “I used to be an airship engineer. I’ve just returned to my old job is all.”

“Oh yeah, we heard something about that,” Fressa said.

When they’d had their final meeting about the billion krams with Nia, the Hammerheads had come up—something about how they’d been chased out of Marvelia. Anzel had never imagined they’d end up meeting again like this though. It could be that he was the reason Anzel had been requested for the job. They were only acquaintances, but he at least knew who this ex-captain was.

“You can’t touch me now. I’m an engineer of Cedony!” He had such a proud look on his face.

“Why would we? Ain’t you a regular civ now? Sounds good to me,” Anzel replied with a shrug.

“Right. It isn’t up to us how to deal with the crimes you committed.”

“Eh? What? Is it that simple?”

After spending their whole lives in the underworld, Anzel and Fressa both believed that if someone could clean their hands of it all and return to the surface, they should.

“Are you two not…upset about that?”

“Not particularly.”

“Nope.”

He could’ve purified himself of his sins and that still wouldn’t be something for them to care about. Only those involved had any need to be concerned about this man’s status.

“I *will* beat up anyone who gets too full of themselves, though, so watch yourself, okay?” Fressa warned.

“Agreed. Get too cocky with that smarmy face of yours and I’ll leak that you’re an ex-sky pirate in two seconds flat.”

“G-Got it. I’ll be careful.”

The ex-captain’s name was Rignar, and it turned out he was telling the truth when he’d said he was working as an airship engineer for Cedony Trading now. Apparently, his pay was pretty bad and he didn’t get much in the way of vacation time, but… Well, essentially he was an indentured servant. A lot of the pirates of his crew were working with him, but none of them really had any complaints about their current situation.

“You’re…really all right with this?” Anzel couldn’t help but ask.

“For now. Honestly, I’m just happy I can proudly work as an engineer. Just being able to work, fill my belly with some yummy food, and sleep without having to worry about a thing is enough for me. Oh, mind if I have a smoke?”

Rignar lifted his index and middle fingers up when he saw Anzel put a cigarette between his lips.

“Whew… Half of my crew were originally engineers from Marvelia. We only became sky pirates because we all lost our jobs. We had no work, no money, just our skills as engineers. Eventually, we decided to strike out as sky pirates. We weren’t taking it that seriously—all we had to do was point some cannons at unsuspecting trade ships and we’d get our hands on a bunch of goods. We managed to survive on that for a while, but…before we knew it, we’d gone too far over the line to turn back. We weren’t real villains at heart, just craftsmen, so we

couldn’t actually commit to anything evil. The only thing we could do was tinker with the airships. You could barely even call us crooks. We only managed to get by because we were able to get the airships into decent shape. All the weapons installed were made by us, y’see.”

Apparently, they had been proficient at airship combat. It wasn’t a matter of being strong or weak individually, but rather, they were strong in the types of battles unique to sky pirates.

“To be honest with you, I was saved that day. I just couldn’t get used to roughing people up no matter how much time passed, but since I was their captain, I had to pull everyone up along with me. Man, that was almost impossible. Have you seen how terrifying other sky pirates are? If we’d kept going as we were, sooner or later, everyone would’ve ended up dead. Our luck would’ve run out eventually.”

Cedony must have recruited them because they’d been able to see their true character. No company would want to hire someone who was actually dangerous, no matter their skills. Well, whatever the case, this wasn’t something for Anzel to concern himself with either. Anzel was here to protect Neal Liston and keep an eye on Rignar. Their circumstances were of no importance to him.

“And? Why’s an engineer like you here? Do you have something to do with the recording?” Fressa asked.

“Ahh, well, you see, there’s this thing called Wingroad…”

And that was how they ended up with a surprising new acquaintance.

The recording seemed to be about some competitive skiff sport called Wingroad. It looked like they were recording the skiffs going crazy fast.

“Ohhh, I get it. It’s like horse racing.”

Fressa’s analogy immediately helped Anzel understand. The more he heard, the more it really did sound like horse racing. Wingroad was just another way of gambling by betting on the speed of something that was gaining popularity in Vanderouge. Cedony Trading was planning to take the sport on as a new business.

“He really is as cute as I remember!”

The question of Neal Liston’s cuteness aside, it seemed he was just here to ride on the Wingroad skiffs and wasn’t part of

the recording. Rather, the star of the show here was a schoolkid named Char who looked a bit more on the rougher side.

When they weren't recording, the two kids would have fun racing on the skiffs, so at the very least, Neal's presence wasn't being treated as a nuisance—there had to have been a reason he was here too.

Anzel would learn later that Neal was going to be on various Wingroad-related programs; it was around this time that he started working to be the spark for Wingroad's popularity in Altoire.

Recordings for this particular program would take place over about two months, totaling around ten sessions. They would record Char riding his Wingroad skiff, spend a few days making adjustments, then record him riding it again. The recording was divided into several sessions to account for the length of time it would take to make adjustments to the skiff.

From Anzel's point of view, it already looked like the fastest skiff he'd ever seen. Yet apparently, it was actually on the slower side, and actual professional Wingroad was much faster.

Vanderouge being dubbed the Empire of Flight was no joke—he could sense the technical prowess that lived up to its name in those skiffs.

The fifth day of recording arrived.

"Damn, it's gettin' hot."

"It *is* almost summer."

Underneath the sun's steadily harsher rays, Anzel and Fressa watched the port from afar as usual. It seemed news of the recording had spread, because the onlookers had almost certainly increased in number. They were all here to see the young prince of the Liston family, Neal Liston; they wanted to get a glimpse of a celebrity's face.

"Say, it's fine for us to call over Lynette by now, surely?"

"Of course not," Anzel snapped. There was a woman right beside him who had the same goal as those onlookers, so he could tell. Though honestly, he had no idea why they wanted to see a kid's face so badly.

This was the fifth recording, and therefore, it was their fifth shift. In that time, no potential danger had made contact with Fressa's potential victim.

Secretly, Anzel was relieved about that. If anything happened

to Neal, Nia would not take it well. Fressa *should* have known that herself, but…a lot of times it felt like Fressa didn't truly understand, so he could never let his guard down. He viewed her as an ally, but she could very easily become an enemy.

"Yo, you two! Keepin' good?!" Rignar wandered over in his dirty uniform. This was the fifth time they had met, so they were decently close by now.

"Finished with the adjustments?"

Since Rignar was the one in charge of the skiff Neal was riding, the final checks were down to him.

Incidentally, Char's skiff was apparently self-made, including all the tuning and customizations—now with advice from Rignar as a specialist.

"Yup, they're gonna start recording soon. Never mind that though. I've got a fun little tidbit for you, Anzel."

"Huh?"

"Gimme a smoke if you agree. If it's boring, then… Well, it's just one. You don't mind, do you?"

"Buy your own."

"But I get paid so little."

Honestly, having this guy come begging him for a cigarette every time was starting to get annoying, but the ex-captain was always a chatterbox, and giving him a smoke got his mouth running, so in its own way, it was fun.

"All right, go for it."

For now, Anzel would give him one.

"Ahhh, that's the stuff." After taking a slow drag, Rignar began his story. "None of this is public yet, but we're building something incredible right now."

"In what way?"

"We're developing a toy. It uses magic to automatically assemble the parts of a skiff."

An auto-assembling skiff… That sure sounded familiar.

"Isn't that what we saw before?" Fressa whispered.

Anzel nodded. It probably was.

It was those parts they'd found (and stolen) when they'd taken on one of the routine checks of the underground waterways. They'd sold every single piece, doing their best to hide their tracks. Since the parts were stolen smuggled goods, they had sold them not to Cedony but to some shady source with a reputation for buying anything. It seemed they had somehow

ended up at Cedony anyway, if going by Rignar's words.

"Apparently, they want to reveal it at the tournament. So, what do you think? Interesting enough for another smoke?"

"Fine, here. I'll admit it was a little interesting."

"Heh heh, thanks."

Anzel handed Rignar—cackling away like some minion—a cigar case filled with rolled cigarettes.

"Wait, you sure you want to give me the whole case too?"

"It's fine. It's a cheap little thing anyway. If you don't want it, just toss it."

"Hee hee, I'm thankful, boss." He really did laugh like a little henchman.

"You probably shouldn't tell us stuff like that," Fressa warned. "Aren't there confidentiality clauses with this type of thing?"

"What? I can't tell you? They never said I couldn't…"

"You still shouldn't. Leaking information about your workplace to outsiders is a big no-no, you know? Plus, aren't you an engineer? You could get your pay cut or even get fired for something like this."

"Oh, crap. Don't tell anyone what I told you."

Why would they? If the authorities tried to track the trade route, they'd end up learning the truth about where the parts had come from.

"Rignar, can you come here a second?" Wagnes was waving at them.

"Sorry, gotta go."

As Rignar left, he was replaced by Becker.

"Yo, you two. Nice work today."

"You don't gotta keep comin' to see us like this. You'll be droppin' by the bar this evening, won't you?" The adventurer's constant visits to the Shadow Rat hadn't stopped.

"It's just a bit hard to work with the kid, y'see?" Becker smiled uncomfortably.

"He treatin' you bad?"

"Oh, need me to take over?" Fressa asked. "You can take my place guarding the outside."

"Nah, it's the opposite. Neal, he… He looks at me with such reverence. Naturally, he tries to start conversations with me all the time too. I'm a bit famous, so he can't help but be curious."

"I'm gonna kill you, old man."

“Huh? Why are you suddenly so mad, Fressa?”

One liked Neal but couldn’t get close. The other was close but felt overwhelmed by Neal’s interest in him.

How ironic.

“Don’t worry about it,” Anzel interjected. “Anyway, is there really anythin’ to you worth admirin’?”

“I’m as clueless as you are about that, but it doesn’t change that it’s hard to deal with. He looks at me with such innocent joy… Imagine if he saw me flirting with the ladies.” Turned out the old man didn’t want to break the little boy’s illusions. “Enough of that though… You’ve both noticed, haven’t you?”

They had.

They’d noticed, but they were deliberately doing nothing about it.

“What do you intend to do?” Becker deferred to them, as the outside security.

“For now, they’re just watching. If we attack them without justification, we’re gonna be the ones gettin’ arrested,” Anzel replied.

“So you’re just gonna stand here and do nothing?”

“If they try to get any closer, we’ll give ’em a scare. It’s still too early for that though. I want to get a feel for their movements and see what they’re after, so we’re gonna continue pretendin’ we haven’t noticed ’em. If they try any funny business, I’ll immediately take ’em out.”

“Got it. So long as you know what you’re doing, I won’t overstep. Be careful.”

Becker must have come over to give them a heads-up. A strange group had been watching the recording since about the second session. The way they hid their presence showed considerable skill—Anzel likely wouldn’t have detected them if he couldn’t use chi. The only ones capable of something of that level were the main house of the Qilong. It was probably the same crew he’d run into the other night, or at least their buddies.

The issue here was that Anzel had no idea what their goal was. Was it Anzel himself they had business with? Or were they trying to taunt him?

“Fressa, can you tell how many there are?”

“Four, I think? But I feel like there has to be more.”

“That’s what I was thinkin’. I can feel a ton of eyes on us—way more than just four pairs of ’em.”

Anzel had told Becker that he was letting them do as they wished for now, but that wasn't quite accurate.

Anzel was the type of person to beat up anyone suspicious that dared try and approach his client. He knew that if he chose to wait too long, he'd regret it later; he was the type to aggressively weed out any potential threats.

But right now, Anzel had no idea how many members of the Qilong were here. If he let even just one of them get away, things would get insanely troublesome later. That one leak could lead to even more reinforcements being called or a more indiscriminate attack.

The best-case scenario was taking them all out at once. Night was the best time for it. It was a pain trying to do damage control during the day, so for now, Anzel and Fressa would let them do as they pleased. They wouldn't even look at them, would give them no sign that they'd seen them. If the Qilong was looking down on them, then there was no way for them to be aware of Anzel's and Fressa's intentions.

The fact even Becker could manage to detect them meant these were probably lower-ranking members; that much was certain. Executives of such a prestigious organization wouldn't be so stupid. They wouldn't have just stood there as Anzel hit them like those guys the other night.

"What's the plan? Are we going to kill them?"

"Still too early for that. Once we're sure of how many there are, we'll make our move. Oh, and we won't be killin' them." If they went that far, the main house in Wu Haitong would almost certainly send people after them, including the dangerous executives. There was no way Anzel would be able to handle that.

"Ugh, they're so annoying. I want to just stare at Neal all day, not deal with them."

Well, at least Anzel had *something* to be thankful to them for.

Though the sun's rays were getting harsher and harsher by the day, the seventh and eighth recordings continued without incident. Anzel still hadn't been told what exactly they were recording, but from what he could tell, things seemed to be going smoothly.

There were a few annoyances like having to prevent some overly passionate girls from trying to run up to Neal, chasing off

a woman who tried bribing him with a large sum of money to let her through, and leaving the girls who tried to push past Anzel by force to Fressa. Beyond all that, though, the most dangerous woman here was behaving herself and for that, he was thankful.

"Okay, this gig is really starting to get on my nerves… Lynette won't come over to say hello, Becker won't bring over Neal, you keep being boring and telling me to wait, I'm getting no reward, and it's so *hot*. What am I even doing here? How long have I gotta wait around twiddling my thumbs right in front of my target?"

At least she *had* been behaving herself, but it sounded like she was hitting her limit. Would their work finish before Fressa exploded or should he negotiate to at least let her get a handshake with Neal?

"Yo, you two. Seems like we just have one or two more recordings before they wrap it up," Rignar reported as he sauntered over.

"Bring Neal over."

"What? Where'd that come from? The young master? You want *me* to bring him over? Are you crazy? That kid's the most important person here."

"I don't care. Bring him over here."

"I really can't…"

"Bring him over. Bring him over right now. I won't do anything, I swear. I'll limit it to a little kiss."

*Don't that count as "doin' something"?*

"Ugh, why am I even saying that's a limit? Is kissing me really a punishment?" Now she was fully having a conversation with herself. She really was at her wit's end.

"Ignore her," Anzel said, pushing aside the woman who was growing progressively more frustrated. "Are there any problems?"

"None, as far as I know. The obstacles for their race just arrived so I think they're doing an actual mock race today."

The kids had originally been riding the skiffs as fast as they could, but now that they had rules and a course decided, it was starting to look like a real competition—Wingroad was slowly taking shape.

"Oh, and about that thing I was talking about before, we've finally finished a prototype."

"That thing…? Oh, that." He meant the skiff that could

automatically assemble itself.

"All that's left is the presentation. You guys should watch too. It'll make you feel like a kid again."

Anzel had certainly already felt that sense of wonder—and certainly if this would have been his first time seeing an auto-assembling skiff, he'd have been looking forward to it.

Races were one of the main Wingroad disciplines. Just like horse racing, the competitors would start at the same time and try to beat the others to the goal. The races themselves came in broadly four different types, with the one today being an obstacle race. Floating rings were lined up in the air a short distance away from the island—the ocean was beneath them, but they were still within the windbreak airspace. The boys were to go through each one in order while aiming for the goal.

"It kinda feels like the risk of crashing is pretty high," Fressa said.

"Yeah, it does." The rings were big, but in a real match, there could be five to ten racers participating. If that many skiffs tried to fit through one of those rings, it'd be a tight fit. "But honestly, that's probably half the appeal of watchin'."

Anzel had never seen a Wingroad race before, but it made sense when he imagined it like a horse race. The positioning, timing of the dash, getting into the right angle to pass through the next ring with the shortest possible distance, and then the potential for rough plays like deliberately ramming into other racers or blocking the way forward... All of that brought forth a competitor's skill.

"I'm looking forward to this a little. Maybe I should pick up watching races—I can laugh at the trash who keep betting in the hopes they'll escape their debt."

"You have some messed-up hobbies." To each their own, he supposed.

The recording was going well when suddenly, something felt off.

"Anzel," Fressa hissed at him.

"I know."

Neal and Char had done plenty of practice flights on their skiffs, and it was now finally time to record them doing a real speed race. Anzel and Fressa, guarding the outside of the

premises, noticed the shift at the same time.

Something about their surroundings had changed.

The presences of the Qilong members that had been watching them had all disappeared at once, and Anzel and Fressa could no longer feel their gazes. Moments like this were always dangerous; it was like when suspects swiftly left the scene of the crime.

Where were they?

What had they done?

What had they set up?

Had they done anything at all?

Was something *about* to happen?

Anzel was the first to notice. “Track where they went!”

“Wait, I’ll go that— Ugh, dammit!”

That small difference was enough for Anzel to get a head start that Fressa couldn’t beat. Anzel dashed one way and Fressa dashed the other.

Neal’s skiff had gone strangely off-balance. Best-case scenario was that it wasn’t anything strange at all and Anzel had simply misunderstood—he’d just jumped the gun a little. But if this *was* some setup, it could be deadly.

And something *did* happen. Neal’s skiff was dashing at full speed for the goal, and then suddenly, the skiff slowed down and began sputtering out black smoke.

*Shit, it’s gonna explode.*

“Anzel! Look at me!” Becker frantically shouted from right behind him. Anzel turned to look and saw a stone flying toward him. When he caught it, he saw it had been engraved with a magic circle. “Fill that with mana and then throw it! I’m counting on you!”

Anzel had a rough idea of what the stone was; it was a keystone. Keystones were like switches that could activate magical devices. It was such a regular part of modern life that they were even used for skiffs and airships.

Anzel took the keystone and flung it as hard as he could beyond the island toward where Neal and Char were flying.

Before he knew it, skiff parts were flying past him right toward the keystone.

“Ngh...! Please help him!”

Lynette dashed in from somewhere else at around the same time as Anzel, but the moment she came into view, she began

falling behind—she was struggling to run in her attendant's uniform. Right now, Anzel was the clear faster of the two.

He had no time to respond to her.

"I'm comin' to help!" Anzel yelled to Neal, who was clearly panicking now that his skiff was billowing smoke and out of his control. So long as he knew help was on the way, he'd be fine. "Don't touch him!" Char had tried to approach upon noticing something was wrong, but he fell back at Anzel's shout. If the kid made one wrong move, they'd both be in trouble. A risk like that should be left to a bodyguard.

Anzel dashed up the barrier at the edge of the island and jumped for the skiff that had assembled in the air. This was one intended for races as well. In terms of driving it, well… He'd just need to hope that it would be like the skiffs he'd ridden before.

When he landed on the skiff, he grabbed the handles and immediately turned on the magic engine.

"Tch… The hell is this?"

It had already sounded loud from afar, but now that Anzel was on the skiff, the revving and vibrations were much louder than he'd expected. To make things worse, it was *way* too fast. Never mind trying to control the thing, it felt impossible to even adjust the speed. If he wasn't careful, he'd unintentionally end up at max speed. Thanks to that, he ended up zooming right past Neal.

At least it seemed to have the same controls as the skiffs he'd ridden before, but the speed was on a completely different level. In that respect, he was out of his depth.

Skiffs tailored for stupid levels of speed like this were impossible to make quick maneuvers with—at least, for Anzel's current skill level. The kids were making it look easy, but faced with it himself, he understood the difficulty. The best Anzel would be able to do would be to get close.

That would be enough though.

"All right." He'd gotten used to it—sort of. He just needed to stop thinking so hard.

Anzel had accidentally overshot the first time, but this time, he managed to approach the wobbling skiff. Char was still watching from a safe distance as Anzel had told him to.

"In ten seconds, jump! I'll catch you!" he yelled after making sure to enter Neal's line of sight. Their eyes had met, so Anzel was sure he'd heard.

He circled around and then once more began approaching Neal from behind.

After exactly ten seconds, Neal jumped. If the boy screamed, Anzel couldn't hear. Though he wasn't sure if that was because the wind was too loud or because Anzel was just too focused.

He held his hand out to the boy floating in the air.

"No way!"

Before he could grab the boy, he flew right past his hand. The winds were so strong that Neal's body had swerved just that tiniest bit, enough that he was just out of reach of Anzel's fingers.

*I can't reach.*

*I can't reach him like this.*

*I need to extend... No. Not my arm.*

*I need to* kick.

He didn't need to do it as well as when Nia walked in the air. So long as he could move to the side a little, that would be enough. Just one kick!

He'd never practiced it, but he could visualize it. Maybe that was the influence of having practiced the basics so thoroughly like Nia had mentioned.

Anzel felt like he could do it. He still wasn't able to reliably extend his chi, but in this moment...

In this moment, when his concentration was the greatest it had ever been...

He took as much chi as possible from his whole body, centered it all on his left leg, and then visualized it being expelled as he kicked!

He hit something. He felt something that wasn't supposed to be there hit the bottom of his foot. His skiff shifted to the side.

*I can reach!*



“Good! You did a great job!” he yelled at the boy as he pulled him in and tucked him under his arm as he gained height again.

If Neal had fallen, he would’ve been dead. Despite how scary it must have been to jump, he’d still listened to Anzel’s instructions. The kid had guts, that was for sure.

“Ah, the skiff…” Neal sadly muttered as he turned his head back to watch the skiff he had been riding slowly descend.

“Say…is that expensive?”

“Yes.”

“A skiff can’t be that expensive, surely. Give up on it and buy another.”

“W-Well, you see…that cost over twenty million krams…”

“Well then. I’ll do my best but don’t count on me succeedin’.”

Twenty million krams was not a value he could just abandon. He had to at least *attempt* to salvage it.

After entrusting Neal to Lynette and Becker, who were waiting at the edge of the island, Anzel flew back into the air again. He accelerated toward the falling skiff, catching up in no time at all.

“Please don’t blow up on me…” That risk was why Anzel had told Neal to jump off in the first place—now that he had to retrieve it, all he could do was pray it wouldn’t. He called out his attuned weapon and levered it between the handles and the fairing.

“This is so goddamn heavy!”

Forcing his own skiff to a stop, Anzel put as much strength into his arm as possible, trembling with the effort. The veins in his neck stood out under the strain. He was essentially trying to stop a skiff with one arm, something that would have been impossible without the help of chi.

“All right…” He somehow managed to stop the broken skiff from falling.

“Whoa.”

But it seemed he’d gotten a bit too close to the water’s surface, having to suddenly dodge the lance fish jumping out of the sea at him.

For now, the twenty million was safe. It was still spitting out smoke, but there had to be parts that were still usable.

“U-Um!” When Anzel returned to land, Neal came running up with a *blinding* smile.

“Stop. Don’t bother with me. I just did my job.”

That smile was far too bright for a man of the underworld like Anzel. Suddenly he understood exactly what Becker meant.

“I-I fixed it right, honest!” No one had said anything, but Rignar was already panicking. Anzel couldn’t blame him. If a skiff broke down, the first to blame would be the engineer who’d worked on it. Becker, the production crew, and Char were all giving him a look.

Especially Lynette—she looked about ready to kill him with that frightening gaze.

“I know.” Neal was the one to speak up. “It wasn’t your fault, Rignar. There was something weird with the tank.”

The tank… In other words, the part where the manastones that fueled the skiff were kept.

“So I think the problem was likely to do with the fuel. Maybe there was an issue with one of the manastones,” Neal explained.

A faulty manastone would mean the skiff had stopped functioning because there had been an issue with the fuel source. Honestly, it was a miracle it hadn’t blown up.

“The fuel? Then why didn’t we have any issues before the recording? You were flying with it perfectly fine.” Even though Neal’s theory served as a good defense for him, Rignar still debated it. He was right though—Char and Neal had been flying around just fine earlier. It was only when the recording started that it had started to break down.

“Ah-ha, I see now… The difference would have been in the acceleration then, right?” Becker suggested, his expression grave. This was a look of professionalism he’d never shown at the Shadow Rat.

“Nothing strange happened during practice, and then it did during the real thing. The main difference between those flights was your speed. You’d be going at full throttle for the recording. A manastone set to react when a certain amount of fuel was used or when the mana pressure reached a certain level might have been mixed in. But, well, hey, we have the skiff in question. May as well take a look and see the answer for ourselves.”

Becker looked at Anzel as if waiting for his opinion.

“I’m goin’ back to my post.” Anzel was just a bodyguard. It did no good to ask for his opinion. He’d given them the information they needed, so there was no need for him to stay.

“Thanks, Anzel. I should really have been the one to do all that.”

Anzel said nothing in response to Becker's gratitude as he returned to his spot.

The skiff was always tuned up right before the recording, so any foul play should have immediately been spotted. Rignar might have been a cocky blabbermouth, but Anzel was sure he was doing his job properly.

The fuel tank, however, likely wasn't on Rignar's list to work on or check. Someone must have sneaked in overnight and replaced one of the manastones in the tank with a faulty one. Once it overloaded, it had caused issues with the skiff.

A shadowy assassin's organization could carry out a scheme like that without issue. That would explain why they'd all withdrawn from the scene at that moment. Their frequent observations of the scene meant that they were aware of exactly when the skiff would reach its maximum speed—exactly when their trap would be sprung.

They'd vanished the second the recording of the skiff race started.

There was no decisive evidence.

But it sure was suspicious as hell.

"Anzel." Fressa returned shortly after Anzel had returned to their spot and calmed down the anxious onlookers. "Is Neal safe?"

"I mean, you can see him, can't you?" They'd resumed their recording, despite the incident. The kids were zooming around in the air, and the onlookers were watching the sport with interest.

Despite what had happened to Neal, he was barely shaken—he was a tough kid. Anzel could certainly believe he was Nia's older brother.

"Did you find 'em?"

"Yup. Looks like there's about ten of them."

"We'll attack tonight."

"Good." Fressa smiled. "If you weren't going to do anything, I'd be going it alone."

"No killing."

"Aw man, really? What about leaving them *half* dead?"

"Sure."

"Okay, I'll stop at that, then."

Now that that was decided, there was someone Anzel had to talk to—someone he knew he could trust to help clean up.

“We’re closin’ up for the night. Go ho— Oh, it’s you.”

It was late and their customers had already started to trickle out. In the midst of all the regulars passed out drunk at the tables, a new customer arrived.

“Good evening.”

It was Lynette, Neal’s personal attendant and one of Nia’s students. She was no longer wearing her attendant’s uniform, now dressed in the adventurer’s outfit she’d worn while out hunting for the billion krams.

Most notably, her eyes were determined.

“Oh, Lynette! You should’ve come say hello at the recording location.”

“Given my position, that wasn’t possible, you know that.” Lynette walked right up to the counter. “You know who the culprit is, don’t you?”

She was definitely referring to the incident that had happened at the recording.

“Seems like it was just an accident, no?” Anzel said.

“Do you really believe that?” Lynette had to have noticed the suspicious eyes fixed on the scene every session. “Can we skip this foolishness? I won’t back down. I’ll get it out of you by force if I have to.”

*By force.* Anzel could tell from the look in her eyes that this wasn’t an empty threat. Not that he had any real reason to hide it from her.

“I have no proof. It’s purely an educated guess.”

“That’s enough for me.”

Anzel put down the dish he was drying and placed a cigarette between his lips. “As I’m sure you were aware, that recording was bein’ watched by some shady guys that whole time, and I’m pretty sure that the issues today were ’cause of them. You’re better off not knowin’ who they are. Not just for your sake, but for Neal Liston’s, as well.”

Lynette looked on in silence. She wanted him to continue.

“I’m talkin’ under the assumption they actually *did* do somethin’ here. Their motive was likely to take a potshot at me.”

“So the young master was wrapped up into *your* mess?”

“Not quite. It’s ’cause I refused to give ’em info on Leeno. Personally, I think that makes it half Lily’s fault.” Nia had been clear that they were to keep Leeno’s identity hidden.

Lynette silently glared. At least she wasn't objecting.

"I refused to give 'em what they wanted, and so they caused an incident. It's a threat—if I don't want someone else to be hurt, I should hurry up and give them the info."

"So the reason they targeted the young master was to scare you, yes?"

They might not have even been targeting Neal specifically at all. From how they'd gone about it, all they'd had to do was mix in a faulty manastone in the tank. They most likely hadn't put in too many because someone would've noticed. And then it had just been a matter of waiting until either Neal or Char used it. Of course, there had always been the chance that neither used it or it misfired.

They'd maybe find out the truth if they looked into it, but to be frank, Anzel and Fressa didn't care. The suspicious would be punished; that was all that mattered. Lynette likely felt the same way—that was why she was here now.

"Probably. But it ain't my fault, all right?" Anzel might have been the target, but he wasn't the one responsible.

"I know. Whatever the situation is, I won't be so ridiculous as to act like the young master was targeted just because the two of you were there. The one who did this in the first place is the one truly at fault. The one who pulled the young master into their ploys is at fault. The one who tried to involve innocent bystanders is clearly at fault. And? I won't ask you who the culprit was, but you'll tell me where they are, won't you?"

"As I said, I have no proof it's them."

"And as I said, that's fine. I'll beat them up and get them to confess if I have to. First though, we have to make sure they'll never do something so insolent again, yes? At least, that's what I intend to do, regardless of my opponent. That's why I'm here. If they aren't the culprit, then it's their fault for being suspicious in the first place."

That was some insane logic—but Anzel didn't mind it.

"I like your style. How about we go a little crazy, just the two of us?" Fressa asked.

"So long as you don't get in the way again."

The ladies seemed motivated enough—they were exuding so much killing intent that Anzel was starting to feel sorry for them. Did the two of them love Neal that much? They were good examples of how obsessive love could drive people to do evil.

At this rate, Anzel wouldn’t even get his own turn.

No, really, he might not get his own turn. He’d started to worry that would be the case, but it really seemed like it was going to turn out that way.

After closing up shop, the three of them headed to the base of the Qilong. It turned out they were renting out a whole old apartment block. They must have chosen long-term lodgings over a hotel because of how much time was left until the tournament.

The raid was simple: Knock on each door and beat up whoever answered. If the person didn’t answer, then they’d either pick the lock or break the door down. The building being old-fashioned meant the locks would be old-fashioned; Fressa could pick them in seconds.

The girls slowly but steadily dealt with each of the apartments, like a pair of cats entering a mouse’s den. Anzel was observing Fressa and Lynette do their thing from afar.

He couldn’t help but think about how smoothly it was all going. Anzel was on standby in case any of them tried to sneak away, but it didn’t look as if his role would be necessary.

And then he heard the sound of harsh breaths.

Good. Looked like he would get a turn after all.

“Yo.”

A man had realized they were being raided and had run out of his flat.

“A-Anzel...?!”

Anzel stood in front of him. “And where do you think you’re goin’? You’re the ones who started this.”

“Th-The hell you talking about? We’ve done nothi—”

“Watch behind you.” The moment Anzel gave his warning, the man was being knocked over the head.

“I’m not letting a single one of you rats escape.” Lynette’s murderous eyes gleamed in the dark.

“That’s enough. Leave the rest to me,” Anzel said, stepping forward.

“What? Why?” Those sharp eyes were now looking right at Anzel. That gaze was exciting. If he said one wrong word here, they’d start fighting immediately, no doubt.

“If you take things too far, you’re gonna get yourself arrested. Who’s gonna protect the little man then?”

“You’re not leaving it at this, are you?”

“Of course not. This is where we shine, honestly.”

Lynette’s eyes did not drop.

“Just go home already. Don’t get involved with the underbelly of Altoire again.”

For just a moment, Anzel’s hostility mixed with Lynette’s. He at least seemed to have managed to make it clear to her that if they ended up fighting, he *would* stop her.

“In that case…” Lynette gave the man who had tried to escape one last powerful kick, even after he’d been hit so hard he’d collapsed to the ground. “I’ll leave him to you.” With that, Lynette went off into the night.

“Lucky you, eh? That crazy lady went home.”

Lynette must have gotten in a good one, because the guy writhed in pain before throwing up. Anzel was thankful himself—gods knew what he’d do if she hadn’t held back.

“Say.” Anzel waited until the man’s pain settled a little and then squatted down beside him. “I was eyein’ you guys up as the main house of the Qilong.”

The man turned his face up quizzically, harsh breaths still racking his body as he remained there on hands and knees.

“But you’re not, are you? You’re not the Qilong.”

“N-No, I…” The man hesitated over his answer. If he admitted he was a member of the Qilong, not only would his identity as an assassin be exposed, but it would also become known that the Qilong had lost a battle—which would severely break their code. This sort of thing was different from simply losing a match on the big stage, where killing was forbidden.

However, if he didn’t acknowledge his identity, he would be dealt with here in Altoire as a regular foreigner. In either case, his life was in danger. Should he admit that he was from the Qilong or should he keep that hidden?

“If you’re strugglin’ to come up with an answer here, then you must be somethin’ else, no? The real Qilong would immediately deny it.” Anzel’s voice was low, low enough that he could hear any approaching footsteps. “The Qilong that I know would never involve civilians, let alone a *kid*. They ain’t half-assed bad guys like us who get blinded by money or can get sweet-talked into doin’ anything. They’re *professionals*, through and through. So if you are Qilong, you’re not the Qilong that I know. You’re just common trash. If you tell me you *are* part of the main house,

then damn have they fallen in the last few years."

The man had been searching for a way to run the whole time, but suddenly, he gasped in shock. Before Anzel knew it, a group of men wearing black were surrounding them.

"We'll take him in."

It was Dao Zanxi, the leader of Altoire's Qilong. Now this was the real Qilong that Anzel knew.

"Thanks."

Anzel had been the one to call them. He honestly couldn't care less how they dealt with him so he left it to them. It was their fellow Qilong, after all.

"See you."

After meeting back up, Anzel and Fressa had walked home together, splitting up halfway.

Anzel wandered through the night capital. He still found calm in the dark of night rather than under the rays of the sun. Despite having just been involved in a raid, he was sauntering as if nothing had happened. Such things didn't faze him anymore, and he didn't linger on them more than necessary. He truly believed a person like him didn't belong in the light.

"Man..." Anzel stopped and sighed. "Thought an evening was gonna go by without me havin' to see your damn mug."

"Ha ha. On the other hand, this old man was feeling awful lonely not getting to see you tonight." Someone walked out from the shadows and stopped in front of Anzel. A man weighed down by the cruelty of time was illuminated by the faint light of the stars. It was Becker. He hadn't dropped by the Shadow Rat that night, but in the end, here they met.

Clearly, it wasn't just by chance.

"Finished your business?"

"Yeah. And? You the one I'm fightin' now?"

"Do you mind?"

In truth, Anzel had had a feeling he'd meet Becker tonight. It had only been a slight feeling, though.

"Tell me the reason first."

Becker had been waiting to challenge him to a fight. Anzel hadn't been thinking too hard about it...but then he saw Becker's face. That was the face of someone who had resolved themselves. It was the face of someone who had decided they were absolutely going to see something through—he had seen it

many times.

“What, I can’t just fight someone ’cause I want to?”

“I wanna know why I’m about to lose a regular. I never stop being the owner of that bar, you know?”

“That so?”

No matter the outcome of the match, this was as far as their relationship would go. Maybe fate would bring them together in the future, but Anzel had little doubt that for now, this would be the end.

“I just wanted a reason to retire.”

Anzel couldn’t hide his shock. “You’re seriously retirin’?” Becker had mentioned it but Anzel really had thought he was joking. At forty-four years old, his body wouldn’t be as it had been in his prime, but Anzel hadn’t felt the adventurer’s age from his personality. At the very least, he had enough energy to spend his nights having fun. He hadn’t come across as an old man tired of life.

“I told you, didn’t I? The only reason I kept up the adventurer’s life for so long was revenge.”

“Damn, you were serious about that too?”

The monsters that Leeno had hunted had been Becker’s prey, the prey that had killed his comrades. All of that had been true.

“Does that mean the only reason you wanted to meet Leeno was so you could retire?”

“Partly that, partly because I wanted to give her my thanks—thanks for killing the asshole that killed Rita. Even at my best, I knew I’d never have been able to take that crab down. Now, though? I’ve got nothing else to take my revenge out on. It’s painful living as an adventurer like this. My adventures have lost me far more than I’ve gained. I’ve got nothing but regrets. There must have been fun times, but all I can remember is what I wish I could forget. I’ve got no reason to keep clinging to that life.”

Anzel took out a cigarette.

“I got it. You don’t gotta explain any more. You’re fine if it’s not Leeno, yeah?” Becker had to have been asking for information on Leeno because he wanted her to be the one to do this. He’d meet her, have a chat, and then...

“Yeah. I had a job to do today, and you completely outshone me. That was the moment I realized I’d lost the right to challenge her.” In other words, Anzel had hurt his pride as an adventurer. “Anzel, are you stronger than Leeno?”

“Couldn’t say. Never fought her seriously before.” Kaffes had asked him the same question. Anzel lit his cigarette. “But I’m definitely stronger than you.”

“Consider this your first match in the prelims, then. If I win here, I’ll go on to fight Leeno in the tournament.”

Smoke rose into the air. It quickly disappeared with the wind, as fleeting as human life.



“Allow me to be the one to end it for you then, Redblade Becker.”

Becker unsheathed his sword. The vermilion blade shimmered ominously in the starlight. “Sorry if I hurt you bad.” So he said, but his face had become that of a professional adventurer.

He was taking this seriously. He was going into this fight with the intent to kill.

“What happened to you?”

The day after the raid on the apartment block, Fressa arrived at the bar at her usual time and was immediately shocked by the state of Anzel.

With bandages round his head and hands, and bruises on his face, he looked a mess.

“Fight,” Anzel stated curtly.

“What? With who?”

“My whole body hurts like hell. Stop talkin’ to me.” He turned his back on her.

Becker’s title wasn’t for nothing. Even with what he knew about using chi, Anzel had had a tough time. He was pretty sure that his strength was above Becker’s, but Becker won in a battle of experience. His way of fighting was crafty.

Anzel had really learned that night how troublesome a real adventurer could be.

Strength wasn’t something defined only by ability. Anzel had truly learned that painful lesson. His right arm had been slashed; his leg had been stabbed. Absolutely nothing had been off-limits: The guy had punched, kicked, thrown rocks, and thrown dirt. Anzel had been certain he was countering with double the effort, and yet not only had the guy not pulled back, he hadn’t even wavered.

Becker had come at him so resolved to retire that he didn’t even care if he died.

What a terrifying man. If Anzel had made one wrong move, he’d have been a goner.

It was just before summer. The days had gotten long, and the Shifty Shadow Rat opened at its normal time. The penniless regulars came as usual, laughing crudely as they exchanged unsubstantiated rumors.

There was one rumor in particular that caught Anzel’s

attention today.

“Did you hear? Redblade Becker got beat up by some bartender and ended up in the hospital.”

Becker was a regular of this bar.

And today, the bar’s owner, famous for his incredible strength, was injured.

Any time someone asked him about it, Anzel would give the same answer:

“No idea what you’re on about.”

The excitement surrounding Altoire’s martial arts tournament was heating up. As the number of people arriving in the country increased, so did the trouble.

However, the huge economic benefits and the spread of knowledge surrounding Altoire’s unique culture more than made up for that. Wingroad’s popularity also increased alongside them, becoming so ubiquitous that it was featured on every channel at least once a week—its popularity had become so massive it was impossible to ignore. It had safely gotten its kick start.

The days then flew by. Summer passed and autumn arrived. The air became cooler, but Altoire’s fame only heated up.

And then finally, it was time for the preliminaries of the martial arts tournament to begin.

## Intermission: The Machinations of the Merchants

In stark contrast to the lively magivision program on the MagiPad, the atmosphere in the private room of an expensive restaurant was tense—likely thanks to the people gathered there.

*"We are now here in front of the arena for the preliminaries! With only a few days to go until the tournament, the competitors are flying in! As far as the eye can see, fierce warriors stand at the ready! They're so fiercely fuzzy!"*

While the girl's last comment made little sense, the viewers could see the many strong fighters descending from the airships. As both the qualifiers and the main rounds would take place on a separate floating island rather than in the capital city, accommodations had been prepared nearby for the participants.

*"Let's go see what our competitors have to s— Whoa, he's ginormous! He's huge! The half-titan Gigzaras, known by his title 'Headsplitter Geeg,' has arrived! A top-tier bounty hunter from Radical, the nation of adventure, he's a top contender for the title of champion! Whoa, he really is massive up close..."*

The girl on the MagiPad could only look up in shock as the gigantic adventurer quickly approached...no, walked normally past her. She looked incredibly silly, but her honest shock was so childlike it was quite endearing. Her genuine surprise was amusing to watch.

Though she was still looking up with shock, she boldly stepped forward to interview the man. His face was completely out of frame.

Gigzaras was surprisingly gentlemanly when responding to the child's questions. All that the viewers could see during the whole interview was his huge, muscular body—his face wasn't even slightly visible.

The girl was an interviewer commonly on magivision nowadays. Her three known traits of being lively, frank, and airheaded had made her hard to dislike. The way she held herself and spoke to her interviewees had granted her a positive

reputation and a kind of relatability with the audience. She had guts and had been gaining popularity.

Her name was Kikirira, and she was a student of the academy.

The contrast between the giant and the small child was striking. “My my, he certainly is big, isn’t he?”

Upon Marju Cedony’s remark, Rennie Brown, the president of Brown Trading, scoffed with a look that walked a fine line between smug and irritated. “The president of Cedony Trading is the last person I want to be hearing that from. Leeno is your horse in this race, is she not?”

Rennie was an elderly woman around the same age as Marju, and another born businesswoman who had climbed her way up from the bottom, growing her business through pure effort. Brown Trading used to be a trading association on an equal level with Cedony, but…

“Oh, come now. I’ve said many times already that Leeno is not my competitor.” He really had said it numerous times, and he meant it. But even knowing he was telling the truth, even Marju himself thought it sounded like a lie, and it was clear that everyone gathered was far from believing him themselves.

In the private room of a high-class restaurant, a group of people known only by a select few in Altoire were gathered.

Marju Cedony, president of Cedony Trading, had managed to double the size of his company with the assistance of a skilled adventurer known as Leeno—no one knew where he had found her. Not only that, but he’d had the foresight to predict the martial arts tournament faster than any of them, acquiring most of the shares of the investment. Because of the speed of his initial response, many of the merchants present had been completely left out to dry. To make matters even *worse*, Cedony had been among the first to invest in the Wingroad industry in Altoire.

The competitive Vanderouge skiff sport had been steadily increasing in popularity, but it was still hard to say if the trend would last. Many businesses had deemed it far too early to enter the market, but then the summer broadcast of *Dreaming of Wingroad* had led to a massive boost in the sport’s popularity in Altoire.

Many Wingroad enthusiasts had already personally imported their own skiffs and would fly them as a hobby. The moment

they heard that Cedony had entered the market, the number of investors had flown up.

When Neal Liston, the Liston “prince,” was shown to dabble in Wingroad himself, the sport had received yet another boost; its popularity was now rising at a frightening pace. And the only one of them who had successfully ridden that wave was Cedony. Many of them felt just as much frustration at this as at the tournament.

Though everyone present wanted nothing more than to complain about Cedony’s smooth sailing, they were all impressive themselves.

Rennie Brown of Brown Trading—Cedony was certainly in the lead now, but before then, they’d been on equal footing. Given how stable her business had always been, Cedony’s sudden ridiculously soaring results didn’t damage them too badly. Things were still stable for them, but it remained infuriating. Particularly frustrating was the way in which Cedony had managed to take over the Wingroad business first.

Rennie had estimated that Wingroad would become vastly more popular in Vanderouge in two or three years. Skiff technology would continue to develop, they would have a greater pick of popular competitors, and it would have become an easy and exciting source of gambling. She had believed that if she just put in the time, Wingroad would become popular in Altoire too. Rennie had already begun making her preparations to enter into the business of Wingroad—Cedony’s abrupt move ahead of her couldn’t have been any more shocking.

From frustration came fear. If she didn’t kill Cedony’s momentum soon, it wouldn’t be long before her business would be consumed by it, before she might even have to completely give up her company.

She had to defeat Leeno, Cedony’s black horse. The prize money was of no importance. With the international attention Altoire was receiving, there was the risk that Cedony would become all the more renowned overseas—if that happened, they’d gain even more of a lead than they had now.

That was why Rennie had used her fortune to call in Gigzaras, the famous bounty hunter. He was the fighter she’d chosen to pit against Leeno.

Headsplitter Geeg had the full backing of the Brown Company to win them this tournament.

*“And here we have another! Zeon is a wolf beastkin who roams from country to country! The solitary adventurer famously known as Sonicspeed Zeon! May I interview you?! Your doggy ears are so cute! Can I touch them?!”*

This girl knew no fear, a bravery that was enough to make the viewers scared for her.

Zeon was a young beastkin with sharp features and a constantly sullen look that exuded an unapproachable vibe. Children who’d excitedly come to see the famous Zeon all cried at the sight of him.

The interviewer’s boldness to see someone like him and run up to ask to touch his ears was incredible. The humiliation of acting like dogs and wolves were the same was one thing, but to ask so unreservedly to touch his ears was something else.

Zeon looked positively shocked for a moment, before he lived up to his name and immediately dashed out of sight.

*“Ah, waaaaaaait! My fluffy eeeeeeaaaaaars!”*

“So you picked Zeon, did you? You’re serious about this, Kuzie,” Haddware of the blacksmith’s guild snarled. Kukriziev, the guildmaster of the Altoire adventurer’s guild, smirked back.

“As far as I know, he’s the strongest adventurer of this generation. You don’t really think your Leeno can beat my Zeon, now do you, Marju?”

“I already said she’s not mine.” Maybe it was impossible for them to ever believe him, but his words were the truth; he had to try and deny them.

As guildmaster of the adventurer’s guild, Kukriziev Eaf had been the happiest man in the world at the sudden appearance of Leeno and her unmatchable achievements. He was an old man who wished from the bottom of his heart for her to become the primary source of income for their guild and then go on to become one of the strongest adventurers in the world.

He had always dreamed of raising an adventurer who would go on to become an unparalleled hero, one who would leave their mark on history more than any that had come before.

Thirty years had passed since Kukriziev had made it big, his talents as an adventurer used and manipulated by the masses before he switched sides, using other adventurers to his own gain instead. He had already forgotten the thrills, the

excitement, the passion from those times long gone—

No, he hadn't. For the first time in a long while, he had seen a dream in Leeno that made his blood sing. He had seen a dream in her skill, her strength, and her ambitious exploits. And yet, even though she had made use of the adventurer's guild at the start of her journey, that girl had instead decided to back up Cedony. She wouldn't even respond to any of their summons.

Adventurers were free to do as they pleased—the guild was just that, a guild, not an absolute power. It was built upon money, loans and debts, as well as basic empathy and honor. But then came that damned Leeno, completely ignoring the guild and rising up all on her own, as if she were trying to say there was no need for them to support one another!

From the guildmaster's point of view, Cedony had stolen a promising and talented adventurer right from under their noses. He wasn't sure what magnanimous treatment they'd given her to get her onto their side, but it was infuriating. Honestly, he still hadn't accepted it, and the very thought of it still angered him. Kukriziev couldn't help but hold the grudge against Marju.

He was just as angry at Leeno. Couldn't she have tried to do at least a little more for the guild? Since she was an adventurer, all inquiries aimed at her went to them. She wasn't the one that had to stand there like a fool saying over and over, "Leeno is registered with our guild, but she doesn't come here very often." She wasn't the one fielding all the complaints or being accused of being unable to handle a single adventurer, bearing the insult that he always acted so high and mighty yet he couldn't even do his job.

All that had led to him using his connections to call in Sonicspeed Zeon to pit against Leeno. It was a matter of saving face, and a hell of a lot of personal resentment.

*Win, Zeon! And you, Leeno, may crawl back to the guild when your resolve is broken in two!* Kukriziev's blood was boiling just as it had when he was young.

Nothing changed the personal nature of the grudge though.

Cedony Trading, Brown Trading, and the adventurer's guild. Cedony Trading was thought to be promoting Leeno as their competitor—even though they really weren't. But in all fairness, even Marju thought that it would seem like a barefaced lie if he were to deny any involvement with her entry, given the reality of

how much they'd assisted her in her endeavors.

Besides, whether true or not, the problem did not lie there. The problem was that he knew that everyone present was trying to kill Cedony's sudden momentum.

Rennie Brown had called in Gigzaras, a first-rate bounty hunter, to ensure Cedony could grow no further.

Kukriziev Eaf had called in Sonicspeed Zeon—the most powerful adventurer he knew—out of pride for the guild, to save face, and partly as a personal grudge. Usually, the sales of the high quality manastones and monster materials that Leeno gathered would've gone through the adventurer's guild, not a trade association; Kukriziev most definitely had complicated feelings toward Cedony Trading in that regard, though it wasn't illegal.

It wasn't illegal, but to Kukriziev, it was far from fair. Deep inside though, he knew that he had been rejected by Leeno and that was it.

Long story short, it was all down to a personal grudge.

And then...

*"Ah, and another has arrived!"* Kikirira had found another person of interest among the crowd of competitors. The merchants gracefully partaking in their meal and wine through their somewhat discordant discussion all turned back to the MagiPad.

*"He's known as the Kenki, the Sword Demon! Asuma Hinoki, the great swordsman who has recently been making waves in Altoire! Wow, I can't believe I'm seeing a real samurai! Excuse me, can we have a little chat?"*

He was a gaunt man wearing tattered Eastern garb, his long black hair roughly tied at the back. Sheathed at his waist was a katana.

*"Hmm? Oh, do you have need of me?"*

*"I'd like to ask some questions!"*

*"Very well. Ask whatever you wish, young child."*

Despite his blank look, the Kenki was much more amiable than he appeared, giving a concise response to each of the interviewer's simple questions.

"That little brat's gotten even stronger," Kukriziev remarked as he stared intensely at the MagiPad. He'd met Asuma many times over the course of his career. This time, however, his whole aura felt entirely different. It had been a whole year since the

announcement of the tournament and Asuma's own announcement that he was going to go train outside of Altoire.

"Yeah, he sure has gotten stronger." The one proudly stating that fact was Haddware Berganner, guildmaster of the blacksmith's guild. He might have been old, but he still carried out his work with great skill.

Asuma Hinoki was *his* horse in this race.

Blacksmiths who could handle Eastern blades in Altoire were few and far between. Haddware and Asuma had met through that common ground, and so Haddware had offered to take care of his blade until the tournament in exchange for him entering in the name of their guild, a condition that Asuma had agreed to.

Haddware's aim? To cause trouble for both Cedony and Leeno, of course. In truth, from a guild perspective, Haddware couldn't care less about Leeno. She might have been talented, but she was just another adventurer—there was little reason for them to become acquainted.

Cedony, on the other hand, was a different matter. They'd involved themselves in the Wingroad industry. They had *dared* get themselves involved. The blacksmith's guild had been preparing to do the exact same in a few years, and Cedony had completely overtaken them.

Predicting that Wingroad's popularity would increase in the coming years, Haddware had used the combined strength of the blacksmith's guild to train up engineers who could work specifically on competition skiffs—shipbuilders who could build both the parts and the main bodies. He also had ambitions to invent competition skiffs that could beat Vanderouge's. They would be cheaper and easier to acquire than importing from a different country.

But because of that unexpected magivision—whatever the hell *that* was—those ambitions were completely dashed. Never mind several years, Wingroad's popularity had shot up in a single season.

The blacksmith's guild had been entirely too late. What was worse, just as they'd been about to hurriedly start their preparations, Cedony Trading alone had immediately reacted to the sudden change in circumstances, much faster than any other trading association or the blacksmith's guild. As a result, most of the Wingroad-related products and rights were ending up in Cedony's hands.

It was the absolute worst.

In the field that was supposed to give the blacksmith's guild a massive boost in business, they had started too late and had been completely overtaken. They weren't even at the starting line, let alone second place.

Haddware wanted to find a way to retaliate. Cedony had already made so much money through Leeno, yet they were stealing even more of the guild's profits? Plus, they'd suddenly managed to acquire several airship engineers out of nowhere. They had been perfectly prepared for beginning their Wingroad business.

Could it be they were challenging the blacksmith's guild? Or were they trying to take them over? Were they trying to create an organization that could completely replace the blacksmith's guild?

Such doubts clouding his heart, Haddware had prepared Asuma Hinoki to crush Leeno and stop Cedony from going any further. It was his hope that Asuma would beat Leeno, beat the other fighters arranged by the other associations, and successfully spread the name of the blacksmith's guild around Altoire. If not the other fighters, at least he could beat Leeno.

Those dark thoughts would not stop swirling in his mind.

The dozen or so people gathered here were all successful in some manner—and they had each prepared their own competitor for the tournament: the Kedo brothers of the rare Tygre race, bounty hunters famous for their strength; Lestra, an adventurer who had established her own unique battle style by combining her mastery of archery and magic; Gandolph, a martial artist who had managed to become a vice-deputy instructor of the Heavenstriker school in his mid-twenties currently teaching at the Altoire Academy dojo; Avan, a bounty hunter who had been ostensibly kicked out of the Alphen Swordsmanship school for malicious behavior but was rumored to have actually been thrown out for his strength; and Orfei, a warrior monk of the Adler Raging Kick style who currently taught in Altoire.

Unfortunately, Redblade Becker had left the country after suffering terrible injuries. Rumor had it that he'd lost to a bartender. Apparently, the man had said he was going to retire from adventuring, but no one had been able to verify that yet.

Never before had so many famous elite fighters been gathered in one place. Even the merchants—who thought of the competitors as nothing more than their own racehorses—and the elders busy counting their chickens before they hatched couldn't help but feel excitement at such a sight. In the midst of all that, they were enjoying their meal and engaging in verbal spars with one another.

"Ah, that reminds me, who is your competitor, Kaffes?"

These were the first words that had been directed to the man. Hair neatly set and wearing a suit, Kaffes Jacks had an aura about him that was clearly dangerous—anyone could tell he wasn't a civilian. He was a slender man in his mid-forties with a large scar running down his left cheek.

Kaffes ran the underworld of Altoire, and no one knew just how vast his businesses or his total assets were. However, given everyone's occupation, it was inevitable that they would come in contact with the underworld. There were times they would get wrapped up in violent disputes whether they liked it or not. In short, their bond with Kaffes was a shallow one but one that was necessary to deal with any troublesome matters. They had to ensure they never got too close, but it wasn't a bridge they could afford to burn.

Under everyone's gaze, Kaffes slowly wiped his mouth and set down his knife and fork.

"I am betting on a nameless man, so I don't believe he will be interviewed here."

"Oh? Is this the presence of a favorite child I'm hearing?"

"No. There was someone else I wished to see enter, but I was unable to find them. Therefore, I have had him enter instead."

*Wait a minute.*

Everyone's attention was caught by what Kaffes had just said. This man, the ruler of the underworld, had someone that he couldn't find?

"I'm curious about this person you really wanted to enter," Kukriziev said, leaning forward over the table. "Who is it? An adventurer?" Given his position as the guildmaster, he couldn't help but ask.

Kaffes laughed to himself. "Why, just a child. I believe she should be around six or seven years old by now. Very small. I heard she took down the Kenki in a one-sided match."

"What...?"

Kaffes was deathly serious, yet the words he was uttering sounded like one big joke. His eyes were fixed on Marju Cedony, the one person here who'd had no reaction to what he had said.

"I've heard that it was a girl with black hair. Sound familiar, Mr. Cedony?"

Marju gave a slight chuckle before directing a smile his way—a smile that did not reach his eyes. "I may have an idea. But I'm afraid I could not violate my clients' confidentiality."

Kaffes smiled back. There were no emotions to be gleaned from his eyes. "Why, that isn't a problem at all. I do not require your information—I already have an idea of where to find her."

"I imagine so. Someone of your caliber should be able to find the answer easily. Let me warn you then: I advise against even considering laying a hand on her. If you make her your enemy, it'll be over for you."

"I am well aware. She is even more dangerous than a wrathful dragon. In that regard, you've done well. That is precisely what led to your success."

Marju's fearless smile betrayed a touch of nervousness. "That truly was a case of luck." He couldn't help but remember his foolishness at their first meeting. If he had failed back then, it would have guaranteed that someone else here would be in his successful shoes instead.

It could have very well been Kaffes.

# Epilogue

“That was a long trip.”

“Yeah. Might’ve lollygagged a bit too much.”

Sauzan and Tohaulow, the two Heroes from the Heroic Star Assembly, had finally arrived in the Kingdom of Altoire after a lengthy trip from the far-off land of Slengradd.

The journey had taken them a whole half a year. As Hero candidates, they were used to long expeditions, but a half-year trip was a first for them. It had been a pretty laid-back trip though—they’d even taken a whole monthlong detour. If they’d been quick about it, they could’ve made it in two months.

They’d carried out adventurer work along the way to fund their travels and stopped for some sightseeing and good food along the way. It was like they’d had a fun vacation before arriving in Altoire.

They had departed Slengradd at the end of the year and it was now summer. The martial arts tournament they’d traveled to Altoire for would commence in winter, but qualifiers started in autumn. With a month left, the pair had time to relax and shake off the exhaustion.

“There’s so many people here. The city really is totally different.”

The port was massively crowded—mainly because of the tournament, but this was their first time in Altoire, so they had no way to know that.

“I’ve heard they’re mocked for their naive peace… Now that they’re not in a wartime period, they’ve been building up their culture instead. There’s probably tons of places that would be cool to— Whoa.”

A man walking nearby with crutches staggered. Sauzan immediately held out a hand to help, but the man managed to right himself.

“‘Pologies, I’m fine.” The man smiled at them with a face covered in wounds. A closer look revealed he had uncountable small injuries, and he was using the crutches to support his bandaged right leg. It was painful to watch the man limping with his large backpack, clearly struggling.

But there were no shadows cast over that smile of his. He looked to be in terrible shape, but mentally, he seemed to be doing well.

"Mister, you okay?" Tohaulow asked. "You riding this ship? Want us to help you with your stuff?"

The man once more insisted he was fine. "I already dropped out of the qualifiers. If I have to humiliate myself on top of already losing, this old man'll cry!"

"A dropout? From the tournament? Huh? But they haven't started yet."

The man laughed. "I lost in a personal fight."

He seemed far too injured for a simple personal fight. But also...

"*You* lost, mister? What, were you fighting against a whole crowd?" This man was strong. Both Sauzan and Tohaulow would have found him a good match. It would have been difficult to win without being touched.

"Nah, it was a one-on-one. Are you two entering the tournament? Be careful, then. There's tons of people there as crazy as you." This man had evaluated their strength as well. He likely hadn't guessed they were from the Heroic Star Assembly, but at the very least, he could tell they were skilled. "Don't cry if you're eliminated at the qualifying stage."

Limping along with his crutches, the old man said his farewells and headed toward an airship bound for outside Altoire. Tohaulow stared after him for a while until she spoke. "He's that strong and he still lost. This city's crazy, Sauzan."

"Right. But if we don't make it past the qualifiers, there's no way we can go home." When they told their fellow Hero candidates that they'd be going to participate in the tournament, they'd all been saying how jealous they were while gifting them money for treats and souvenirs.

The Heroic Star Assembly was an institution formed to raise Heroes. Heroes were the trump cards in times of strife, the hope of humanity. Should one of those candidates lose in the prelims of a perfectly ordinary tournament, they'd be a complete embarrassment. The other candidates would be furious with them, and the upper echelons of the country would really chew them out.

"I don't really see many people around here who are stronger than that old man though," Sauzan said. He could see plenty of

adventurers and martial artists hanging around nearby but in his opinion, that man was stronger than all of them, even as injured as he was. “We should probably still train as much as we can with the time we have left anyway.”

Tohaulow hadn’t noticed, but Sauzan was looking right at a group of six fighters dressed in Wu Haitong garb. They all looked strong, but there were two older figures in the center that caught his attention.

They were *strong*. From how they moved and held themselves, they were pros in combat. A match with rules was one thing, but in a fight to the death…Sauzan wasn’t confident he could win.

“Good idea. I feel like we’re gonna have a ton of fun here.” The fox-eared girl was looking in a completely different direction from her partner. She was watching a large bulky man and a tall woman saying their farewells. They both looked formidable, especially the man.

He was *strong*. From what she could tell, he was a martial artist who specialized in using his fists. Toha wasn’t confident she could win if she had to fight him without weapons. She hadn’t imagined there would be people that strong here. His fists would easily match those of the Heroic Star Assembly.

The pair were thinking the exact same thing: They’d never slacked off from their daily training in all this time, but now, especially, would be a good time for them to try just a little bit harder. There wasn’t much time left until the qualifiers—they couldn’t take it easy.

“Toha, let me be clear, there’s no using our Divine Techniques here, got it?”

“I know. That’s not something to use against humans anyway.”

How far could they make it without using the power of Heroes, without using their trump card?

“Sauzan, let’s go find somewhere to stay the night… Ah! Hey, Sauzan! Look! Over there!” Tohaulow kept frantically slapping his back as she pointed at a corner. “Isn’t that one of those *khameyra* things?! That thing they use to make that magivision thing! We saw it at the place we stayed last night! It’s that, it’s that! That thing that can see far away!”

“Yeah, maybe… Hey, Toha, what’s that over—”

“Let’s go! I want to appear on magivision!”

“Enough of that, what do you think that yummy-looking food

is over there? It looks like meat to me."

"You like me, don't you? Then come on! I'll treat you to some of that after!"

"Really? How many? Two? Three? Can I ask for three?"

Sauzan and Tohaulow negotiated as they walked toward the recording location—to the junior production crew doing the competitor interviews.

I watched a boy and girl who looked like adventurers dashing away.

"Well then." It seemed we had some interesting competitors after all.

*Who exactly are they? I never thought I would see users of divine chi here. Could they be divine vanguards? Hmm… No, they're too weak for that. But maybe that is what they're aiming to become? No, that's unlikely.*



“Young Mistress, the ship is about to leave.”

“All right.” I turned away from the port and looked back at Lynokis. Both of us were on the deck of the airship.

“Oh my, did something nice happen?”

“You can tell?”

“But of course! I can tell anything and everything about you, Young Mistress.”

And yet she would still never show me any respect. Surely she wasn’t detecting my desire for her to show me respect and was deliberately doing the exact opposite. *Surely.*

“Gandolph is over there.”

“Hmm? Oh, you’re right. And there’s a woman with him.”

I remembered who that woman was but it appeared Lynokis had forgotten. Leitao, I believed her name was. Was she returning home?

*Well, Gandolph aside.* “I saw a pair that looked pretty strong. I would be able to take them down easily with my left wrist alone, but they’d be a good match for you.”

“What does it even mean to win with your wrist…? Anyway, let’s go inside.”

I did as Lynokis asked and entered the airship cabin.

“I’m glad that it appears the tournament is shaping up to be quite the spectacle.” I’d been afraid for a while that it would just end up a battle between my students, but things didn’t appear as if it would go so smoothly. In any case, those two adventurers were the ones to keep an eye on.

“Never mind the tournament. We need to think about the recordings,” Lynokis reminded me.

“I really wish you would let me forget about that for now…”

I would be returning to the Liston territories for my summer break once again. I couldn’t help but sigh.

*Time for the return of the recording schedule from hell.*

Oh well. There were only four months left until the tournament. I had something to look forward to at least.

# Afterword

When you mention summer, I think of unagi. When you mention unagi, I think of how expensive it is. I want to eat unagi this year.

Hello, I'm Umikaze Minamino. I'm writing this afterword at the end of June 2024. Yet again, I'm left with very little space for it. I wanted to discuss how half of this volume is original content, but when I started writing, I ended up using far too much space, so I decided against it. I'll simply leave what I was going to say to your imagination!

Katana-sensei, thank you for all of your beautiful illustrations. Nia wears a lot of different outfits, so it must be tough, but your illustrations were as good as always!

Kodai-sensei, thank you for always making the manga so much fun. At the time of me writing this, the fourth volume was just released. Never fear, dear readers—your favorite Bendelio will also appear there! Please buy it!

My editor, S-san, thank you again for all of your assistance. That makes two volumes in a row that were quite heavy with original content. But the real challenge is going to be the next volume. Our stressful days won't be ending just yet. It's quite frightening.

I'd also like to say thank you to everyone else who assisted with the publication.

Finally, to my readers. It's thanks to all of you that we have made it to volume 6. Volume 7 has also been confirmed for publication.

This volume has especially started to show the differences compared to the web novel—I do believe it's now a lot more fun than the original.

I hope that those who have read the web novel and those who haven't were both able to enjoy this book.

Let us meet again in volume 7!

# Bonus Short Stories

## Let the Rumors Fly

“Hey, did you watch it?! Did you watch it?!”

“I did! She was even younger and prettier than I thought she’d be!”

“So that was really her!”

I was already hearing the buzz of admiring voices before I even walked into the classroom.

The recording of Altoire’s young adventurer Leeno announcing her participation in the martial arts tournament had been broadcast on magivision just yesterday. The frigid cold of the winter air was chased away by the heat of everyone’s excitement.

*Just as I planned!*

I had worked so hard on Leeno’s image all for this moment. We’d marketed her, built as positive an image as we could, and carried out legendary feats. Our plan would have been a failure if her name had not caused a buzz.

Now, even my classroom was filled with people talking about her announcement. I wasn’t sure how long this would continue, and given it was almost time for winter break, the hype could very easily die down by the time we all returned, but still, I wanted the expectations for the tournament to be as high as possible.

“Nia! Did you see that broadcast yesterday?!” Reliared asked as she bounded over to me.

“The one with Leeno? We watched it together, didn’t we?” No, really, we had quite literally been together when it played on magivision. Had she forgotten already? She had turned it into a habit to come over to my room at night and get all comfy while I was stuck doing my homework, and she had forgotten? She’d been so noisy about it too. “Leeno wants to appear on *my* show?!” she’d yelled. The star herself had been surprised by the sudden reveal.

“This isn’t a dream, is it?! This is reality?!”

Her happiness was more than apparent with how worked up

she was. She'd made a racket as she returned to her room last night as well. I hadn't even had the chance to say anything.

And that was perfectly fine. She was acting like the child she was.

"You're right. This isn't a dream," I confirmed.

"I thought so! I knew this wasn't a dream!"

Reliared had apparently asked her attendant about her schedule when she returned to her room. When she asked if Leeno was really going to appear on her program, her attendant had said, "The details are yet undecided, but I have heard talk of such from the main house." So it had been left in the realm of possibility.

But of course, I knew of that as well. I was the one who had asked Cedony to bring it up to the Silvers in the first place. They'd sent the family a correspondence saying that Leeno was interested in appearing on their programs, so how would they feel about having her on as a guest? The response to that had been a resounding yes.

The part about Leeno having been asked multiple times was a lie. That statement was entirely scripted, and they'd received permission from the relevant parties before using it, of course. The Listons had been contacted in the same way—Leeno's identity was still a secret after all.

"I can't believe it! I'll really get to meet Leeno!"

*Even though you meet her every evening. Not that you know that.*

"Are you that happy about it?" Knowing Leeno's identity made it hard for me to think it was anything that special. All I felt was a little happiness that my plan had succeeded. I'd spent a lot of time building her up after all.

"Stop pretending you don't care!"

Hmm?

"This is *Leeno* we're talking about here! That super amazing adventurer who appeared out of nowhere a year ago and made a ton of money! She's incredible!"

Well, we had needed to raise the money to put the tournament on in the first place.

"I've spoken with so many amazing adventurers because of magivision, but even they need a whole team to take down those monsters worth several million krams!"

Yeah, I'd heard.

"I once asked about why the bounties are strangely low given

how dangerous the monsters are, but it's because they never leave the floating islands… If you don't try to poke them, they won't show up—and that means the bounty takes into account the danger *and* urgency! On the other hand, sea monsters are much higher value because we know nothing about the ocean! There's a huge chance of being attacked unprovoked!"

I'd heard that myself—just a little bit when we went to Vanderouge.

"Also, she raised a *billion krams*, you know! A whole billion! That means she's impossibly strong!"

*Well, yes, I am certainly strong.* The majority of Leeno's achievements were mine, after all.

"Relia, you're going to get to meet Leeno, aren't you?"

"What are you going to ask her about?"

Reliared's excitement had caught the attention of our classmates and they all gathered around her. Everyone was talking about Leeno with sparkles in their eyes—there was value behind us working so hard to get her name out there after all.

You know… It really would be nice if Lynokis respected me this much—even just half of this. But as per usual, she never understood.

## An After-School Summer

"What?! You're off today?!"

"Heh heh heh… I am indeed."

When I walked out of the school building with Reliared, I proudly declared, "We must say our farewells here!"

"Ugh… Fine! I'll go to work by myself then!"

"Hah hah hah! Be careful though. Don't cry if you trip."

"I won't trip and even if I did, I wouldn't cry!"

I continued my cackling as Reliared dashed away. She looked so jealous. *Hee hee hee ha ha ha! Yes, yes, suffer more! I was the one bearing that frustration before! I have your annoying smug look burned into my mind, girl!*

Admittedly, it wasn't the best look to be gloating at a child… Eh, it was fine. Our relationship was always like this anyway.

Still, she was once more having to go straight to work without even the opportunity to return to her room. Both of us really were working too much.

The magivision industry had become so frantic ever since the

tournament was announced. We were students—*elementary* students—and even we were not exempt from this. Even though I was off work today, all that meant was that I had no recordings to do; it wasn't a complete rest day, especially while I still had homework to do.

Yet for me, that was still the first day off after school in half a month (though I had my homework). Since we were both in similar situations, we felt that urge to wind each other up a bit—because we understood each other's struggles.

Anyway, today was my first day off in a while. I'd do some stricter training and get some energy back into my rusty body. I'd make sure to drag Lynokis along with me while I was at it.

*Now, time to return straight back to the dorm! I have such a skip in my step!*

"Oh, welcome home, Nia."

When I returned, Carme was there waiting in the lobby surrounded by about ten students. They were all young children that looked around the same age. *What's going on? Was there a fight?*

"Hello. Did something happen?" It didn't seem like anything too serious, so I decided to ask. Even if it did turn out to be an incident, it was unlikely to be something grave, just a fistfight at worst.

"We're going to— Wait. If you're here now, does that mean you don't have work today?" Even Carme had realized that it'd been a while since I'd returned straight to the dorm.

"Yes. Relia still has work though." Which Carme should have been aware of, given Reliared had definitely told everyone a few days ago. The girl just didn't stop boasting about it.

"Oh, I see. Are you busy right now?" From the awkward smile she showed, she must have remembered Reliared's bragging.

"Not especially," I said.

Only for the kids to immediately shout back, "Then you should join us, Nia!"

*Huh?* Now the students were surrounding me. Join them? Join them for what? A fight? A little spar? Wait, no, definitely not.

Before I could ask what they were referring to, Carme kindly gave an explanation. "We're going to make one of the desserts from Her Highness's program."

*Sounds fun.*

“I’m happy that you thought to invite me, but wouldn’t I be a bit of a nuisance?” We all lived in the same dorm, so we were all at least acquainted, but our relationship didn’t go much further than that. I would be intruding on an already-established friend group.

At least, that was the reason I would give. But in truth, I just wanted to train now that I actually had a day off. I really wanted to dig into some more intense practices.

“Of course you wouldn’t!” The students happily denied my excuse.

Carme approached and whispered words into my ear that I hadn’t expected: “I can’t look after all of these girls by myself. Could you give me a hand?”

Now I knew why she had invited me. She wanted me to join her to make sure the children didn’t hurt themselves. She wanted me to participate as something other than a fellow student—she wanted me to participate as a babysitter.

With that in mind, I admittedly was a little worried. The children all looked to be in their second or third year of elementary school. Children this young would be holding knives and using fire? *Crap, I* am *worried. Quite worried, at that.*

*But my training…*

“Then I can hang around for a while.”

I decided to watch over them so they wouldn’t get injured or cause any accidents. *But, my dear head resident, I am a child too. Why are you asking* me *to act as a guardian?* I was confused, but at the end of the day, I didn’t mind.

I first returned to my room so I could drop off my things.

“What?! You’ll be making dessert, Young Mistress?!”

When I told Lynokis my plans for the rest of the day, her face immediately lit up. *I am going to babysit, not participate.* But I wouldn’t deny the chance of participating was certainly there.

“We owe the head resident much, don’t we?” Due to my work and some…*other* reasons, there were times I had to bend the school rules a little. Carme would kindly turn a blind eye.

Well, there was no guarantee she wasn’t reporting each instance to her superiors, but at the very least, I was being allowed to move relatively freely without punishment.

“I have to at least help out with dorm events now and again.”

“I suppose. Shall I accompany you?”

“No, it’s fine.” Servants here were seen as just that, servants. They generally were not perceived as members of staff, so it was recommended to not have them involved with the student body more than necessary. As such, it would be much smarter for me to go by myself.

“I’ll get to taste the young mistress’s own handmade desserts! Oh, I’m so excited!”

Whether or not that would get through to Lynokis was a different story.

In any case, I made sure to save some of the cake I’d made for Lynokis.

“*Ahhhhhhhhhhh*! The young mistress’s cupcakes!”

She was clearly overreacting, but at least she was happy.

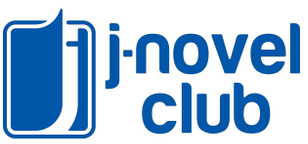
It had taken until the evening for us to finish and I immediately returned to my room. We’d made lots of little cakes, almost like mini cupcakes. Hildetaura had made many colorful ones on her show, but we’d stuck to very simple coloring.

“Being a head resident is certainly a tough job.” So many of those children had nearly hurt themselves. I suddenly understood exactly why Carme had asked me for assistance. We hadn’t even needed to use knives for the cakes, and yet somehow, I’d had to help out kids who almost injured themselves. One minute they were almost dropping the bowl, the next they were about to fall off their stools, the next they were almost crying because they couldn’t get the cream to whisk properly… You couldn’t take your eyes off of them for a second—there was no way one person alone would have been enough to handle them. Why wouldn’t she ask for someone to help her?

Gods above… My first day off in a while and yet I was still exhausted.

“It would be such a waste to eat them! I want to store them all forever!”

*Stop exalting them and eat already. You’re an adult; it should only take one bite.*



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by Umikaze Minamino

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