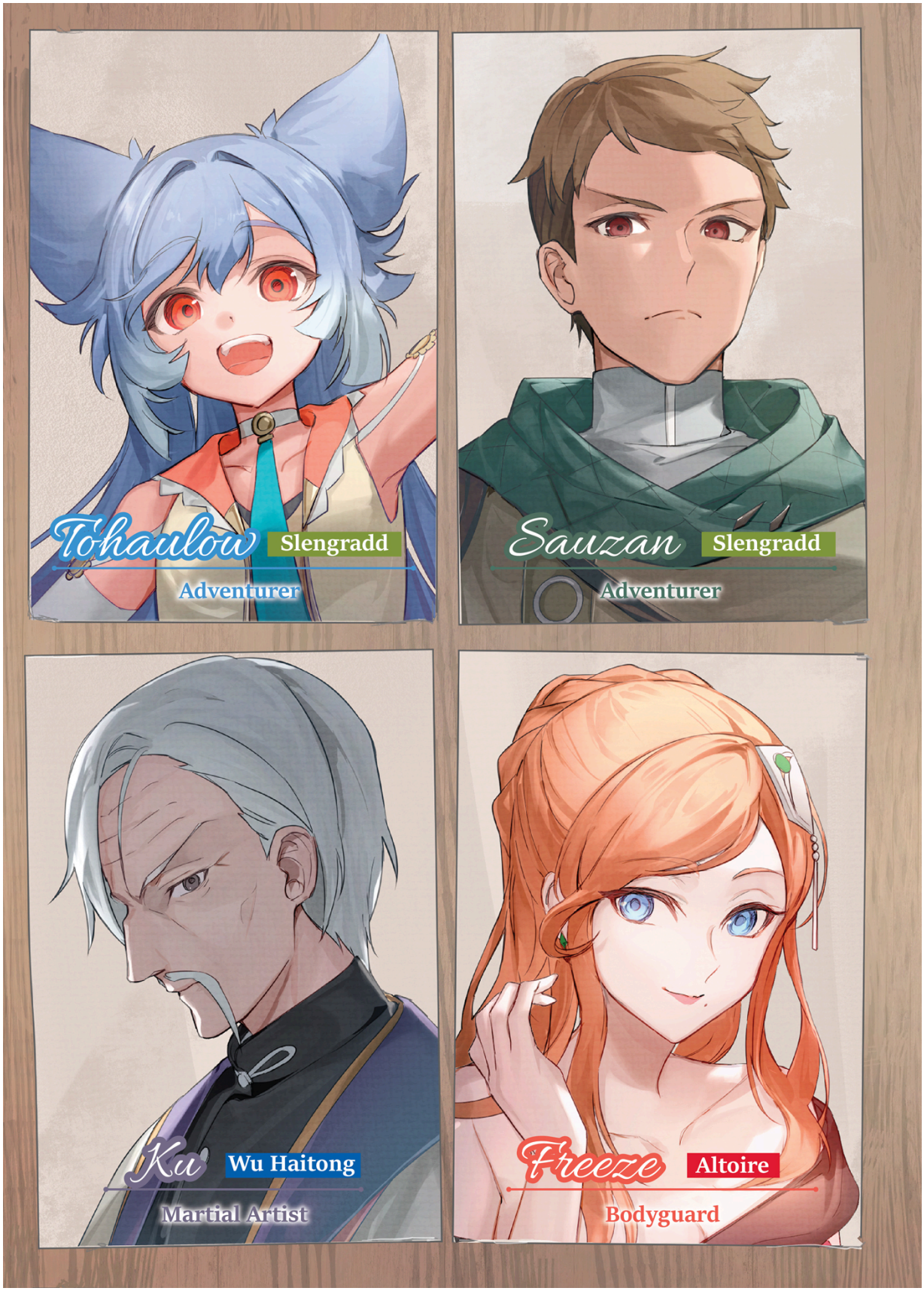

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The Merciless Maiden


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Nia Liston
The Merciless Maiden


"Miss Freeze, may we talk?"
I have work to do. Come.
"Oh, uhhh, sorry, y'see... I've got some pre-match nerves so I want to stay focused. I'd reeeaaaally like if we could—
Yes, of course, gladly. I'll talk about whatever you like, miss."
Interview with a Fressa in disguise!


Leeno
Slengradd
Adventurer
FEAST YOUR EYES
ON THESE
FEATURED FIGHTERS!
Gandolph
Altoire
Vice-Deputy Instructor of the
Heavenstriker School
Anzel
Altoire
Bartender


Tohaulow
Slengradd
Adventurer
Sauzan
Slengradd
Adventurer
Ku
Wu Haitong
Martial Artist
Freeze
Altoire
Bodyguard


Lynokis would give Avan a little punishment on behalf of the competitors who had already been injured by him. Her master had told her to just beat up anyone she didn't like. As her student, it was only right that Lynokis follow that teaching.
"I declare here that I will end this in one blow. I'm going to punch you head-on, so prepare yourself."

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Prologue

"This is much more complicated than we imagined, Your Majesty."

"It is simply a difference in specialty. I'm already used to it."

Meetings, paperwork, social functions, all of it was a regular part of a king's day-to-day. He was past thinking much about them.

In a small meeting room, six men sat at a round table with a woman standing at attention by the wall. The table wasn't all that big, but it was covered with piles of paper. Five of the men were struggling (paperwork was not a part of their daily duties), but the last was going at a much greater speed—it was the current king of Altoire, Hyurence Altoire.

"Hey, pass over that pile there."

"B-But, Your Majesty, I can't; those are supposed to be my responsibility."

"Just hand them over already. I have an appointment after this, I can't be wasting time." Hyurence glanced at the woman standing watch and she immediately moved the pile of paper from the young man to the king.

"Ugh, so many of these have such terrible handwriting..." Hyurence grumbled. The amount of paperwork wasn't an issue to him, but when he couldn't even read what was written, it slowed him down exponentially. Having to use extra brainpower on trying to decipher the letters ended up making his mind wander.

"Hey, what does this say?" he asked the woman.

Her blank face morphed into confusion as she squinted at the paper and spoke some strange words: "Ubboh... Abacchibela... Benz...?"

"That's what I thought it said too, but we must be wrong." The words made no sense. For a moment, he thought it was some strange name, but it was written in the "Achievements" section. The words had to have been trying to convey *some* sort of information.

Right? Surely.

Hyurence clicked his tongue and put it on the "Illegible, confirm with contestant later" pile.

"Want to help?" he asked the woman. "I can remunerate you out of pocket."

"Dealing with national secrets will cause me more trouble than it's worth, so I'm afraid I must refuse," she replied coldly.

"Oh, I suppose these *are* considered confidential," he realized. Nothing very important was written, but it was still people's personal information. It was crucial that they keep those private.

"Though I must say, I never imagined we would end up with so many participants. I appear to have underestimated how far news of this tournament would reach," said Wolkas, captain of the knights.

The documents piled in front of them were all entry applications for the upcoming martial arts tournament. They detailed the basic personal information of the participants—their name, birthplace, occupation, and achievements.

There were over ten thousand entrants in total; that many confident fighters were expressing interest in entering Altoire's tournament. Many of them had gathered with their eyes on the five hundred million kram prize money. Wolkas wasn't the only one whose estimations had fallen far short of the mark—the whole of Altoire had underestimated how many would travel to the capital to participate. Even Hyurence Altoire himself hadn't expected such a massive number.

This was *over ten thousand* people. Even taking into account the surrounding countries, who would ever think this many competitors would show up? Perhaps this was the result of the lack of any large-scale tournaments that allowed foreign participants in recent years.

At the moment, they were working through those entry applications.

"Oh, this is a big one."

"I've heard of this person before too."

And in order to do that, they were categorizing the applicants based on the provided information. Civil servants would be hopeless at identifying known fighters, so the king had called along Wolkas

and some of his knights; they would at least recognize the famous adventurers.

The next issue was that the regular knights weren't used to paperwork, so they were much slower. Meanwhile, Hyurence had only superficial knowledge, yet was dealing with the forms so quickly. He was only sparing time between appointments to help and yet he had still managed to work through more than them.

"Excuse me." Upon a knock at the door, the woman went to answer, and then returned with a whole new pile of entry forms.

"There's still more?" one of the knights whined, face barely hiding his genuine misery.

Another pile was added to the table. The number of participants was still increasing.

Hyurence stopped what he was doing. "This isn't good..." The amount of paperwork wasn't a big deal. The number of participants, however, was.

It was almost time for the preliminaries to begin. The dates had already been decided, so they had to make sure all the fights could fit within that time frame. But if the number of participants kept increasing, so would the amount of time they would require. There had been a few extra days just in case, but he'd rather they didn't have to use them. With so many foreign participants, the number of tourists would surely continue to increase as well. That wasn't even factoring in the world's rich and elite who would almost certainly be coming to watch.

Altoire was the host country—they couldn't afford to make a fool of themselves. They were already infamous for their naive peace; if even their political competency was called into question, it would hamper future diplomacy. They *had* to make sure everything went as planned.

But with this many participants...the possibility of that was looking slim. Although it was almost closing time for registration, it was likely that many would get their forms in at the last minute. Any more entries than this, though, and they would most definitely struggle for time. Large events like this were already guaranteed to have issues somewhere down the line. It was common for things to

be delayed, very rarely sped up.

"Everyone, put down whatever you're working on. Think of a way that we can decrease the entries," Hyurence ordered.

"*Decrease* them?" Wolkas asked incredulously.

Hyurence nodded without hesitation. "We're going to run out of time at this rate. We need to be more selective."

The king's decision-making was quick. Such a skill was something that situations like this demanded.

"Oh... Yes, I suppose we should."

It wouldn't be pleasant for those who were rejected, but it was a necessary move. Being able to see the bigger picture and make decisions without being influenced by one's emotions was what it meant to be the ruler of a country.

They started by identifying those who were very easy rejections.

"We should probably reject any students first, right?"

"Yes. We have many famous adventurers participating. I'd honestly feel bad pitting them against a student."

"What about those under twenty?"

"No, wait, wouldn't Leeno fall under that?"

"Oh, so she would."

"Hey, I've been wondering, but isn't this Oltar guy who wants to remain anonymous a former Vanderouge army man? At least, that's what his achievements make it sound like."

"Keeping him in sounds like it would cause more hassle. Maybe we should get rid of those with status in their countries."

Hyurence watched on in boredom as the knights discussed among themselves almost as if they were having fun.

The pen is mightier than the sword. That was the ideology by which the king lived, so he had absolutely no interest in the intricacies of such crude sports. He honestly couldn't care less who was strong or who was weak.

The might of the many over the might of the lone.

Knowledge over martial arts.

One could have the gathering of the strongest martial artists they knew, but even the mightiest among them would be in trouble with one bite from a venomous insect or snake. Hyurence couldn't help

but think them terribly frail and fleeting. There was always the risk of disease or injury. Their mental fortitude had to be up to snuff as well.

They were so unreliable, as easy to crumble as a pile of sugar cubes.

Knowledge and education were a much different story. No matter how run-down one's body may be, so long as your mind is still whole, there would always be something you could do. A person's body may weaken with time, but knowledge would only be further compounded. Even if a scholar died, their work would be carried on by someone else. So long as the records remained, it was always possible for someone to build on it.

A human being's life lasted only a moment. It may feel long to the person themselves, but in the large scheme of things, it was over in a flash. The question then became what legacy would you leave? How many of your achievements and records could you connect to the next generation?

That was why Hyurence had no interest in physical strength nor could he understand it. At the very least, he wouldn't say it was pointless.

"Say, do you have interest in any of this?" the king asked the woman as the knights continued their excited discussion.

"I do. I *am* your bodyguard, after all."

Hyurence was not ignorant. He knew that there were those who protected him from danger day and night, and they had all trained their physical bodies to their limit. That was exactly why he didn't deem it *pointless.* He wouldn't even say it was unnecessary. He was just unable to understand what was so interesting about it.

"Do you have any ideas?" he casually asked. His bodyguard was naturally knowledgeable in martial arts; she might have her own thoughts on the matter.

"From a quick glance, there are many entrants from Wu Haitong. A number of martial artists have entered, especially those of the Heavenstriker school."

The Great Martial Land of Wu Haitong was a neighboring country of Altoire and, as their name implied, they were famous for their

martial arts. From what Hyurence had heard, every citizen of that country was involved with martial arts in some manner. It was the birthplace of many of the styles now prevalent throughout the world such as the Heavenstriker or the Adler Raging Kick. There were so many variants that there were plenty of minor schools that most people hadn't heard of.

"However, the majority of fighters from there tend to favor bare-handed styles. Wouldn't that mean many of the entrants would not be using weapons?"

A bare-handed style... They would face an armed enemy with just their fists? Were they insane? Surely that would leave the fighter completely defenseless.

"In which case, why not separate them into two different divisions depending on whether they intend to use weapons or not? Weapon fights are thrilling to watch, but a match between two bare-handed martial artists is exciting in its own right."

That's perfect. Hyurence wasn't sure of the exact number of weaponless entrants, but just twenty percent of the participants would be enough. Ten, even.

A weapons division and a bare-handed division. If they increased the number of arenas for the preliminaries, they could run both at the same time and cut down how much time it would take.

The king turned to the men who had begun quietly listening to their discussion and gave his next order: "Split them up into those who use weapons and those who do not. We need to come up with new rules. State your ideas."

"Ah, Your Majesty," Wolkas spoke up. "Excuse the objection, but we have already announced the prize money. If we are splitting them into two divisions, will we be splitting up the prize? Or will the winners of the two divisions fight to decide who the true winner is?"

Of course, there was the issue of the prize money. *Should* they split it up? No, definitely not. They absolutely could not change the stated prize money—that was what had garnered all the buzz. The participants had traveled far and wide because they had their eye on the prize, and the people here to watch the matches wanted to see those fighters blinded by the dream of money. They couldn't

suddenly disrupt that cycle.

To make matters worse, suddenly changing the prize money would be tantamount to breaking the terms of a contract. It would affect Altoire's reputation were they to come out of this being known as a country that couldn't keep its word.

"Both divisions will have five hundred million as its prize. A billion will go out in total."

Thankfully, the contributions made to the tournament were plentiful, and even if they were short, Hyurence would've willingly paid out of pocket. Five hundred million was fine. He would have to use some of his personal savings and probably borrow some of it from other people, but that was no issue. If the tournament could go on as planned, then they would make far more than five hundred million back. He could think of it as a lucrative investment.

"Understood. We will consider it from that angle, then."

The preparations for the tournament continued, but there were still many matters yet to be decided.

"O-Oh no... There's p-p-people squirming everywhere..."

Squirming was a pretty terrible way to put it. But it wasn't inaccurate.

"It does seem to be way more crowded than usual."

The day before the end of summer vacation, the airship of the fifth-class Silver family arrived in the capital.

"It must be because of the martial arts tournament. It's incredible."

Two girls were watching the crowd of people jostling about the harbor from the top of the airship ramp. One was the youngest daughter of the Silvers, Reliared.

"So, uh...I, uh, might just, y'know, wait 'til evening before I get off..."

The other was the second daughter, Rikelvita. The youngest had arrived to attend school; the second daughter had arrived for work.

"Huh? But you have to go to the meeting, don't you?" When Reliared turned to look at Rikelvita, she noticed how deathly pale her sister was. The swathes of people stretching out below her were

giving her cold feet.

It was undeniable that there were more people around now than there had been before the announcement of the martial arts tournament. Rikelvita wouldn't leave the Silver territories without good reason, so it had been a good couple years since the last time she came to the capital. The sight of the capital alive with the excitement of the tournament was completely different from the place she had in her memories.

"M-My stomach's hurting really bad, s-so it might be impossible..." She did look terrible and she was sweating buckets. Rikelvita wasn't lying—one look at her and you could tell she wasn't doing well. Everyone who knew her was aware that she was a severe shut-in and incredibly shy when meeting strangers.

She had already been fairly well-known as an artist, and the paper plays showing on magivision had further increased her reputation. Though she was a shut-in, she was still working, so her family hadn't viewed it as a problem. They acknowledged she had her own little idiosyncrasies and did their best to respect her wishes.

But they had no choice this time.

"It's a summons from His Majesty, though." Reliared didn't know the specifics, but it appeared this job wasn't one that could be refused. It was a royal command, a request straight from the king himself. As a citizen of Altoire, there was no way she could refuse, even more so as the daughter of an aristocrat.

"A royal...command... Ooogh, my stomach..." The mere mention of it made her sweat even more.

"Y-You can do it! I'll be there with you!" Originally, they were supposed to separate here, but Reliared decided it would be better if she personally delivered—no, *accompanied* her sister to the destination. It wasn't likely Rikelvita would deliberately run from something like this, but it was very possible she would find herself unable to move.

That frantic summer came to an end, leading into an even more frantic autumn.

Three months remained until the beginning of the martial arts

tournament.

This was the real critical juncture.

Chapter 1: The Second Semester of the Third Year

Summer vacation was over.

I let out a heavy sigh. Just what was the meaning of "vacation" again?

My eyes were open, but I couldn't find the energy to get up. I'd slept for a whole day yesterday, yet I still felt the exhaustion deep inside.

Lynokis and I returned to the dorms two days ago. I didn't want to remember a single thing about my summer. I barely had any memories to begin with. Gods above... That really had been nothing but recording from start to finish.

It was horrific. That period of time was busy every year, but this year felt especially terrible. Yesterday had been the only day I could consider a break. Usually, that would be a day dedicated to preparing for the next semester, but I had been at a point that I realized there would be consequences if I continued without rest. I thought both my mind and body were going to break. Honestly, I was starting to think they already had cracks.

This should've been the time I decked that Bendelio in the face. I could've pretended it was an accident. I was sure they'd overlook a single punch. I was confident I would win in a court trial too. Everyone would definitely argue that it was only inevitable that I punched him! They'd all acknowledge that I had every right to!

Ugh, I should stop being silly and get up.

I could imagine things all I wanted, but my schedule for the day wouldn't suddenly free up, and Bendelio's face wouldn't suddenly get all bruised. *Seriously though, even just a single punch would've been so satisfying... I'll never forgive him. I'll never let him get away with this.*

"Hmm?"

Where was Lynokis? It was already morning. Light was streaming through the window, and I could already hear the sound of students outside my room. It really felt like I was home again. But Lynokis wasn't getting ready as she usually was by this point.

This is strange. She's in her chambers, but she's not moving. "Let's have a look, shall we?" I figured I might as well check in with her.

And immediately I discovered why she wasn't up and about.

"I'm so sorry, Young Mistress..." Lynokis had been fast asleep. She had tried to get up from the bed, but collapsed onto the floor and fell asleep where she lay.

I helped return her to the bed. She was running a fever. It didn't seem like it was due to illness, so it was likely from overwork.

"It's okay. I understand." Lynokis had faithfully remained by my side as I carried out my harsh duties of the summer. Of course she would be just as exhausted. Exhaustion was enough to make anyone feel unwell. She must have been tense all summer until we finally made it back to the dorm. And she would have been doing training for the tournament on top of that.

Our work had continued for over a month and yesterday had been the first rest day we'd had in that whole time. Even I was feeling complete and utter exhaustion. It had been such a rough schedule that I felt it even with mastery of chi.

There was no denying that I was working far too much. But we were at such a critical time.

"Rest. You don't need to worry about me."

We just needed to hang in there until the tournament was over. It was just a little bit longer. Honestly, it might have been the case that this summer in particular had been unnatural...

After leaving Lynokis to rest, I did my own morning preparations. I asked Reliared's personal attendant—who I happened to bump into in the hallway—and Carme to look after Lynokis for me and then left for school.

The second semester started today. I may have been tired, but there were things I had to get done. All for the day I'd get to give

Bendelio a good punch in the face!

"Good afternoon, Nia, Relia." As I was getting lunch with Reliared in the cafeteria, Hildetaura came over to greet us.

I'm glad she's looking good. Summer vacation had no doubt been just as hellish for the princess.

"Do you have time today?" Reliared asked.

"Yes. I have something I wish to discuss with the two of you. May I?"

Hildetaura sat herself down when we gestured at a seat at our table. The princess was always so busy even during schooltime, so we didn't get to have lunch together very often. We were lucky to get the chance maybe once a week.

"Summer break was rough."

"To put it lightly, I was beginning to consider what to write in my will."

"Our production crew tried to run away many times."

We spent a bit of time getting out our complaints—there was no end to them. Even Hildetaura didn't want to talk about work, even though that was likely why she wanted to see us. We were all exhausted, both physically and mentally.

Unfortunately, we couldn't keep avoiding the topic forever.

"Rikel is actually in the capital right now."

Halfway through the lunch break, we naturally drifted into the important discussion. It was time for the attempt to escape from our sad reality to come to an end.

"Miss Rikelvita?"

Of the four daughters of the Silver family, Rikelvita was the second. It had already been two years since I met her. I still sometimes bumped into her when I went to the Silver territories for work, but we weren't that well acquainted. Generally, she holed herself up in her room, so I was surprised to hear that she had come all the way here.

"Does she have some errand to do?" I asked. There was no way she came here of her own volition. Her shut-in tendencies were so severe that she hesitated to even enter her own garden. I would

give her credit for having pushed herself to come see my stage play in person a while ago, though. I was very grateful for that.

"Yup. The request came from someone she absolutely couldn't refuse." Reliared turned to Hildetaura. "Do you know anything about it, Miss Hilde? I wasn't told very much."

Work with this timing had to have been related to the tournament, so it would make sense if Hildetaura was at least aware of it.

"This is still an internal matter, but..."

So she *did* know.

Lowering her voice, she continued, "We're planning to have Rikelvita draw posters of the competitors."

Well... Since she was willing to bring it up in public, it had to have been something that wouldn't cause a big issue if it leaked. It wasn't something she could say out loud yet, but it wasn't that big of a secret either.

"Posters?" Reliared looked a little doubtful. She was likely wondering what would necessitate such an old-fashioned form of advertising when we had the superior magivision.

Hildetaura must have assumed similarly because she smiled. Proudly. Smugly. "Those posters will be merchandise."

For some reason, this face of Hildetaura's still managed to irritate me a little. It was still cute! But that didn't change the fact that it irritated me. I wonder why?

"Since it appears a lot of famous people will be participating, the government is thinking of trying to make money by selling commemorative goods based on them. Rikelvita's posters will be part of this. That is still a secret, by the way."

If it's a secret, then don't say it so openly. You didn't say up front it was a government deal*.*

"O-Oh..."

See, you're just causing trouble for the people you're telling.

"Are you really going to make anything more than a few coins?" I was perfectly fine, though. "A merch display isn't going to make enough profits to satisfy the country's coffers, surely. Or is the situation so dire that such a paltry sum is what they desire? Oh,

don’t tell me this is actually a money laundering scheme? Or, Hilde, are you trying to save money in secret? Build up some savings you won’t tell anyone about?”

“Wait, Nia. Are you not being a bit too blunt?” Reliared tried to interrupt.

“The goal is to raise the reputation and awareness of the fighters. After all, if the public do not know anything about them, however will they bet on them?”

“Wait, Miss Hilde. Uh, this...this is *legal* betting we’re talking about, right?”

“Ahhh, so this all connects to the idea of gambling. That does change things. Right, since we have so many foreign elites gathered in the country, a *lot* of money would be changing hands.”

“Nia, hang on!”

“Precisely. We are essentially ripping off foreign money in as flashy a way as possible. This is the real thrill of the event, a privilege granted only to the hosts.”

“Miss Hilde, *please*, your wording.”

“And the secret savings?”

“Nia!”

“No comment.”

“Why are you not denying it?”

I see, I see. That crafty little fox, he’s not hesitating to use this tournament for all that it’s worth. What a reliable man.

This was the exact type of event that there was no point holding back on. It was the same reason that stands at festivals always had their food priced higher than usual. One should always profit when the chance arose. It was natural that everything would be charged at event rates given it was such a special time.

We finished our lunch and stood up from the table.

“I’ve got something I need to look up, so I’m going to the library,” Reliared said as she went on her way.

Followed by Hildetaura turning to me. “Nia, may we talk for a moment? I have a message from my father.”

A message from the king—this had to be the real reason that Hildetaura came to talk to us today.

"Is it something to do with the tournament?"

"Yes. And it is rather urgent too."

An urgent matter? I had an after-school recording today, so I didn't exactly have the time, but... It was an order from the king and certainly took priority, especially right now.

"What does he want?"

"Let us talk as we walk."

Now *this* was something that shouldn't be heard by those around us. Time for the real secret matter to be discussed.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble, Young Mistress."

Lynokis sprang back into action two days after she collapsed. I had been doing my morning preparations when Lynokis exited her room in her attendant's attire.

"Are you all right now? You're welcome to get more rest if you'd like." There was nothing I was having trouble with and there had been no problems without her either.

"I'm fine. I apologize for the inconvenience."

"It wasn't inconvenient at all, though?" My previous self must not have lived a life where being looked after was a given, so I'd...kind of maybe started to think that I didn't need anyone looking after me, after all... I would never say that out loud, though. Lynokis would definitely blow up at me.

"But you were lonely, weren't you?"

"What? Um... Yeah, sure." Just nod and agree, Nia.

"Young Mistress!"

"Okay, yes, yes, I was very excitedly awaiting your return. Congrats on your full recovery."



When Lynokis clung to me, I quickly shook her off with a, "Anyway, I have something I need to talk to you about. It's pretty important, so could you listen to me properly?"

After calming the girl down, I sat at the table. I had school after this, so we couldn't chat for too long, but I wanted to let her know as soon as I could.

"The preliminaries for the tournament will be starting soon."

"The prelims? Oh, then..."

"Yes, Leeno will need to participate." In other words, Lynokis would have to leave me to go do just that. Not that this was anything new, we'd already decided to do this, so it wasn't something I needed to remind her of. "But here's the important part: It turns out the king wishes to consult with Leeno to help decide the matchups."

"As in, who will fight against who?"

"Yes. It sounds like a lot of famous people have entered. You don't want to end up having all of them fighting against each other in the *prelims,* do you?"

It had been reported on magivision since before summer that famous adventurers had been swarming to Altoire. Naturally, interviews and special features on specific competitors had been broadcast over the summer as well. But it seemed there were way more potential participants than I thought.

"The king wants the strong fighters to face each other in the main matches to build more hype around the tournament." That was what Hildetaura was asked to pass on to me.

"I understand." Lynokis nodded. "Basically, don't suddenly serve the main dish to someone who isn't even ready to eat yet."

Exactly. Suddenly broadcasting a battle between champions would leave nothing for later. It was important to build up to the climax. Strong fighters getting knocked out in the prelims wouldn't be fun at all for the audience.

You had to start with the appetizer—the preliminaries—so they could truly savor the main dish of the finals. The appetizer had to be good enough to make people think, "If the appetizer tastes this good, then the main dish must be exquisite. I'd love to give it a try."

To do that, you needed to gradually build up the expectations and excitement.

The fighters didn't have to overthink things, they just needed to fight as hard as they could. Everything else would be handled by the hosts of the tournament. They were the ones who needed to prepare the stage and let the contestants shine as brightly as possible. The moment they would shine brightest would be when they were fighting with all their power against someone about the same strength as them. The perfect stage would be prepared for them, so in return, they were to dazzle all of Altoire with their brilliance.

If you're going to give something a beating, you should always give it your best shot.

Especially because I didn't want our summers from hell to all be for nothing. This was all for the sake of Bendelio, the future sacrifice to my fist, as well!

"And he would like to consult with *me* for these matchups?"

"Well, Leeno, actually. In other words, me, actually." The one who'd used the identity of Leeno as a cover for everything I was doing, actually.

Hildetaura's message from the king had essentially been that he wanted Leeno to select the fighters who looked like potential champions under the assumption that she would have an eye for the strong and the weak. I approved that request.

"So really, it's okay if you can't join me. You were just ill, after all. Why not take it easy for now?" I had already contacted the Liston production crew and asked for them to adjust my schedule.

I would be leaving tomorrow, first meeting up with the royal production crew before then making my way with them to the floating island where the tournament would be taking place. Hildetaura would be joining us. She had interviews and other recordings to do, so once we arrived, we would be going our separate ways. I would solely be there to scout contestants. They would use any of the information I provided to consider the final matchups, so it was more like I was giving them recommendations. That was why it didn't matter if Lynokis was there or not—it wasn't

like she would be doing anything.

"But what do you *really* think? If I'm not there, then...?"

This woman... She could be so annoying. She was looking at me with such hopeful eyes.

"All right, all right. If you aren't there, I'll be so terribly, terribly lost. If you were there, you'd be such a big, big help."

"Young Mistress! Wait. Is that it?"

Once the discussion was over, I immediately left.

Both the preliminaries and the main matches would take place on a floating island near the capital. From the moment the decision was made to hold the event with an initial investment of one billion krams, additional investments poured in from all different directions.

I had to think His Majesty had predicted this. If he could arrange a large sum of money from the start, the people would gather. Once potential investors could be certain of how serious he was being and how large he intended to make it, they would all choose to support it. In other words, the billion krams we had earned would become the catalyst.

And that was exactly what happened. Both the investors and the competitors came in droves, far more than ever imagined.

Thanks to that, there became enough financial leeway to allocate funds to the advertising of the event, encouraging even more competitors to arrive. I'd heard there were those from countries even farther than just our neighbors ready to compete.

"The furthest we have are definitely our competitors from the Kingdom of the Great Blade, Slengradd," Hildetaura explained. We were having our teatime before work while on the airship to the competition island. Of course, we were making sure to have a work meeting in the process.

"Slengradd, hmm? I only know the name. Is it that far?"

"Yes. It takes over a month to get there even on a direct flight."

Oh, that certainly was far.

"Good on them for taking the time to come all this way."

In this world, people crossed borders through flight rather than on foot, so the modes of transport themselves were really quite fast.

There were sometimes issues with weather, but generally speaking, there were no obstructions to worry about. An airship could go as fast as it wanted straight to its destination. There were times it was necessary to stop at border checkpoints or to restock, but even then, over a month was still a long time.

"But you should know this, should you not?"

Me?

"Slengradd was founded by an ancient Hero. The Kingdom of the Great Blade is a title taken from them. The country has an institution specifically for raising Heroes known as the Heroic Star Assembly."

Really now? I'd certainly heard of the names of Heroes and of the Heroic Star Assembly.

"Was this Alphen Alphon?"

"He was a Holy Knight, so it is a little different. They are both considered Heroes in that sense, though."

Ah, right, he was the Holy Knight that slew the Demon King, if I recalled correctly.

Heroes, huh... I vaguely felt like they taught us something about that in history class, but I had barely any memory of it. I didn't *think* I'd met one before. Oh, and, on the topic, I don't think I'd ever met Alphen Alphon either.

"Are those competitors from this Hero country strong?"

"There are two and they are both definitely strong in my opinion. They wish to remain anonymous so we cannot publicly announce them, but their claims of being part of the Heroic Star Assembly appear to be genuine."

Wow!

"So they're like little Hero chicks?"

"Yes."

I hadn't seen anyone that impressive on magivision, but this was exciting to hear.

The floating island was indeed close to the capital, and we arrived before I knew it. This was where the tournament would be taking place.

Apparently, the island had originally been a wasteland where

plants struggled to grow and there were very few animals to be seen. It had been repurposed to use for events a long time ago—the tournament would make use of the lodgings and the stadium that were already there. The island had been used for events from time to time before now, but with a bit of extra modifications, practically the whole land could be used as the backdrop for the tournament.

They opened the lodgings to competitors around the middle of summer break. All the competitors would need to stay there eventually, but registration hadn't closed yet, so it was likely that there would still be more arriving.

With how little time there was left, though, they wanted to start finding the most promising candidates soon—it would take time to pair the fighters together after all.

"I will see you again soon, Nia."

Hildetaura and I said our farewells at the port. We would be working separately from here on out. The princess had her own recordings to worry about.

I didn't have much time to waste. I had been given special permission to return home a little later than usual, but the curfew was still in place. Hildetaura and her crew would be back even later than me, so Lynokis and I would be returning before her.

Now then.

"Shall we get going?"

"Yes, Young Mistress."

It was time to explore the island with Lynokis.

All right, let's go hunting for the strong fighters! Not that I'm expecting much from them.

The participants already lodging at the designated accommodations were spending their time in their own ways. From what I'd heard, most were dedicating their time to training, whether that meant swinging their weapons or going on runs. The raised funds, Altoire's political skill, and the massive prize pool had resulted in a tournament of a scale rarely seen in recent years. Getting the opportunity to participate in such a tournament would pump anyone up. Not only was the prize money a whole five hundred million

krams, but the attention on the tournament was immense.

There were ten buildings to accommodate the participants and all of them were big. They were built with a reasonable distance between them, likely for the purposes of segregation—it wouldn't be good to have them all squished together. Since they'd been built for the purposes of events, it must have been considered for the possibility of international attendance. Multiple buildings would allow multiple countries to have their own space.

The largest building here was the stadium—no, the *arena.* It was impossible to see inside from here, but that was where the matches would take place.

I could hear the sound of construction and the booming voices of the builders. Their work had to be reaching the end soon.

"There they are." Surrounding the arena were several tough-looking men and women all training. *What a glorious sight.* It was so refreshing seeing all these people motivated to train hard. See? It was natural for us humans to want to get stronger. It was natural for us to seek power. The look and obsession of those trying to grasp victory was truly wonderful.

"Do you want to go to them?"

"No, viewing them from afar is fine." There was no need for me to talk to them—I'd rather not interrupt. Besides, no one here really interested me at a glance. There was no one I wanted to get a closer look at.

There were swordsmen, spear users, and bare-handed fighters. Some were fully armored; others were wielding weapons I'd never seen in my life. *What even is that? A three-section staff? Wait, no... A* five*-section staff?! Five whole sections?! Gods does that look like a difficult weapon to wield. Can you even make use of something like that? Is it even possible to master? Is it even possible to swing it? If you're going to have that many sections, you'd be better off just getting a whip. Are they okay? They look like they're really struggling.*

Honestly...I was kind of curious, but they didn't seem that strong, so I decided to leave them.

The more I looked, the more my attention was drawn to

contestants who showed promise, and upon further observation, actually did seem relatively strong. But it still wasn't enough, not enough at all. At this rate, no one would stand up to my students. *All of you need to thirst for more power. Be greedy. Be so desperate for power you'd even sell your soul to the devil. Even if you sold it, you'd get strong enough you'd be able to beat the beast up afterward anyway.*

Was that Heroic Star Assembly duo Hildetaura mentioned anywhere here? If they were really as strong as she said, then I should be able to tell right away...

"Oh, Young Mistress. Look, over there."

Over where? When I turned to look where Lynokis was pointing... *Oh?*

"She looks familiar."

A girl with red hair accompanied by two women in attendant outfits was staring fixedly at the arena while hiding behind a tree. Even at just a glance, she looked suspicious.

"She should. Isn't that the second daughter of the Silver family?"

Probably.

"Oh, she noticed us."

The attendants noticed us and then whispered in the red-haired girl's ear—and then all three turned to look at us at once. There was no mistaking it now. That girl looking at us like she was about to cry was almost definitely Rikelvita.

For a moment, I wondered why she was here, but then I remembered that Reliared had already said that Rikelvita was in the capital. And then Hildetaura had said something about her being asked to draw posters. That was probably why she was here.

She looked about ready to run away the moment she got the chance, but I was sure she did want to complete her task. Whether she would actually manage was a different story.

"N-Nice to...see you again, N-Nia."

I decided to go and at least say hello.

Mmm, she really does look pale. Is it because she's not at home? She's sweating so much too. I knew she was terrified of strangers

and that she was a severe shut-in. It seemed predictable that this would be how she would turn out if she came here.

"It's been a while, Miss Rikelvita. I've heard a little of what you're doing here from Relia. You're drawing posters for the king, yes?"

"Ah, yeah... I haven't finished a single one yet, though..."

No surprise there. With how she'd been hiding behind the tree until we came up, she hadn't even tried to talk to any of her models yet. Her nature certainly made things difficult.

"Are you all right?" I could tell she wasn't, but I asked without thinking.

"Oooh... My stomach hurts... I want to go home... I've felt nauseous this whole time..."

Was she really going to manage this?

No. No, she definitely wasn't.

"Could you tell me the situation? I'll help as much as I can." I turned to look at her attendants—the attendants who were standing behind the clearly-not-okay Rikelvita, most definitely sent from the Silver Estate.

"I see."

They briefly told me the state of affairs—not that there was much to explain to begin with. The job parameters were as simple as "just draw as much as you can." They would leave the method to her, and even how many people she wanted to draw. Even her pace was up to her. They left her with the vague order of drawing lots of competitors' faces.

Rikelvita arrived at the island two days ago, but, well, it was easy to see the result. She was as much of a mess as the first time we met her.

We could work with that.

"Let's go together."

"Huh?"

"I came here today to prepare for a recording. I was considering talking to some of the strong competitors, so we could ask if they would be willing to act as a model for you at the same time. I'll put in a good word for you."

"A-Are you sure? I'm, y'know... I really don't think I'll be able to help..."

Don't say that about yourself. Even though you're probably right.

"Don't worry, it'll just be something I do while I'm there." Those posters of hers would be a big part of making this tournament a hit. I wouldn't give up the chance to help.

"I don't think you'll need to draw that many to begin with." It wasn't as if she were expected to draw every competitor she came across. There was no point in drawing portraits of those who were likely to drop out in the qualifiers. Narrowing it down to just the potential winners decreased the workload by a lot. At most, she'd be drawing twenty to thirty people. "I've actually gotten some recommendations from Leeno in advance."

"In advance?"

"Yes. She has notified me of the competitors that are most likely to win, so I think you'll be fine just drawing them. There aren't that many."

"O-Oh, really..."

Yes, because Leeno's evaluations were my evaluations. I had told a slight lie, but it was nestled in truth, so surely it would be fine.

"Shall we go?"

"Wh-Wh-Wha—"

Knowing that she was almost definitely glued to the spot, I grabbed her hand and forced her to walk. I had a curfew to obey; we had no time to be messing around.

We wandered around the different buildings, observing those who were training outside. Given how out of place we looked, we drew the attention of some of the contestants, but the majority were entirely focused on themselves. At most, they spared us a glance and then ignored us.

This was natural. The preliminaries were about to begin. They had no time for distractions.

Plus, there were staff allocated as security around the premises. With so many professionally violent people in one place, there was always the chance a fight could break out. Anyone who initiated a fight would immediately be disqualified. I'd heard they were being

quite strict about enforcing that rule. No one would want to be sent home for such a foolish reason after having journeyed all this way, especially not those seriously aiming for the title of champion.

"E-Eek, there's...there's n-naked bodies e-everywhere..." Buff men wiping off their sweat, slender men training half naked, women baring their midriffs as they ran... Rikelvita was terrified—or maybe not? She looked embarrassed, but also...happy? She was watching them with great interest. Well, so long as she wasn't scared, that was fine.

It was fine, right?

Anyway, I continued observing the contestants. A lot of them were just short of the mark. Others had clearly trained well, and were right on the threshold of utilizing chi.

The contestants surprisingly were not that bad. To be fair, the fact they were here at all had to mean they had some confidence in their abilities—and I could certainly see why. But it still wasn't enough. I could defeat any of them while filing my nails.

Just as I was thinking that to myself...

"Hey, you! I've seen you before!"

"Oh, it's her! The white kid!"

Two giant men came lumbering toward us with raised voices.

"Eek!" Rikelvita shrieked as she immediately crouched behind me. This girl was supposed to be over twenty years old and she was using a child as a shield... Well, whatever.

I've seen you two before, as well. They were the tiger beastkin Kikirira had interviewed on magivision back in the first semester. Their bodies were just as big as they had been back then, but they were still so, so weak. *Get in more and more training! Do some deep meditation! Surely this isn't all the innate talent the beastkin have to offer.*

Dammit, any time I saw incredible potential in someone, I immediately felt the desire to train them. They were so close to greatness.

"Hello. I've come to take a look at the island in preparation for a recording," I explained. "You're both very big, aren't you?" And yet despite their size, they were still so weak! They needed to stop

wasting their time talking to us and go train!

There were a lot of large-bodied participants, but these two were especially big. Being bigger than Gandolph was an impressive feat. Beastkin also had a natural litheness and flexibility to their muscles and tendons, and they had such sturdy bones to boot... Seeing them up close really drove home just what ideal bodies they'd been blessed with. It was so unbelievably tragic. *Polish that treasure you have, don't let it rot. I can see the dust clinging to you already.*

"You're preparing for a recording? Then get a good look at us! We'll absolutely win!"

"Indeed! We, the new conquerors of this land, are called—"

Yes, yes, how wonderful. Amazing. I said anything to pretend I was listening. I didn't need their names, I needed them to *train.* They'd be knocked out in the qualifiers at this rate.

There were a few more competitors who called out to us, but relatively speaking, not that many. There was a great tension in the air with how close the preliminaries were. Everyone was on edge to some degree. The capital itself may have been full of excitement, but that wasn't quite the case for the fighters.

Perfect. They needed to be taking something like this seriously—those who couldn't determine when it was time to lock in would have problems well before the preliminaries. *Drive forward. It's time for the last push. But don't push yourselves too hard. It would be terrible if you made yourself ill.*

The fighters who were managing to maintain their usual routines were definitely the ones that felt strong, but there were always differences in how that presented itself in people, so it was hard to say what one should do. Regardless, they needed to train. They needed to push themselves further.

"Ah." Lynokis let out a noise. She'd recognized someone: Sitting underneath a tree was a swordsman dressed in Eastern garb, a very familiar face from the Umbral Arena.

Asuma Hinoki, the Sword Demon, was it? He was someone Lynokis had a bone to pick with after he cut her arm clean off.

Hmm, I thought he was just lounging, but he's actually

meditating, isn't he? He must be fighting someone in his mind, or perhaps even fighting himself.

It looked like he'd gotten stronger. But he still fell a bit short. With the right impetus, I was sure even he could begin to grasp chi, but he wasn't quite there yet.

"What do you think, Young Mistress?" Lynokis whispered into my ear.

"He's the strongest of the middling competitors, at least." He'd probably make it past the prelims, but he was on the weaker end of the potential champions. Lynokis had been caught completely off guard last time they fought, but now, such a gap had been made in their strengths that it would be a surprise if she lost. My other students wouldn't lose to him either.

See, this is another case of a good teacher definitely being able to turn someone into a gem given the chance. He is so close to greatness...

"I-Is that man...a possible champion...?" We'd been staring at him for so long that Rikelvita had made the assumption.

"Yes." The chances were low, but he was a fighter that had at least a bit of a chance. Besides, that Eastern garb? That Eastern blade? His title of the Kenki? Being a famous adventurer? That would easily pull interest.

"Shall we go?"

"O-Ooogh..." The girl didn't nod, but she knew she couldn't refuse. Taking that troubled noise as a yes, we walked up to the Kenki.

"What do you want?" he asked, eyes remaining closed.

"You're Asuma, the Kenki, aren't you? We have something we'd like to ask you."

His black eyes opened and looked straight at us.

Oh...? Hang on now. Oh my. I see, I see. I'd been a little disappointed because I thought he had barely improved, but it seemed I was wrong—he had actually reached a new domain in his martial arts. In which case, he was much stronger than I had originally assumed.

I take back everything I said. He must have been blessed with a

good teacher after all. He was certainly at a level where he could take the title of champion so long as he was lucky with his matchups.

"What questions? I'm not particularly in the mood for such chatter. Ask someone else."

"We won't take much of your time."

At my insistence, the man frowned as he relented. "Then speak." He looked a little uncomfortable, but at least he was willing to listen. He wasn't the most amicable last time we met given the circumstances, but it seemed he was surprisingly friendly.

"We would like to draw a portrait of you to advertise the tournament."

"You wish to draw me? Well...what do you require me to do?"

"Um..." I turned to Rikelvita.

"U-Uh, sorry, if you could...could just s-stay where you are."

"O-Okay..." Even the Kenki seemed to waver when confronted by a woman who looked far from okay.

Right? She looks to be in a terrible state, doesn't she? You can't help but worry, can you?

With everyone around her watching, wondering if she was all right, Rikelvita crouched down in front of the Kenki and prepared her pen and sketchbook.

"Uh, um, s-s-so, uh, if you could just...just l-look a little to the left...and k-keep your gaze fixed there... Yes, yes... That's perfect, thank you very much..."

So fast.

I was completely clueless when it came to art, with most of my experience coming from art class at school, but Rikelvita's hand was moving at an insane speed, entirely different from her usual self. It was as if her arm were possessed by someone else entirely. The pen moved without stopping, and suddenly, the sketch was complete. The lines were rough, but you could still tell exactly who it was.

Having finished her work at unbelievable speed, Rikelvita just as swiftly closed her sketchbook and returned to her hiding place behind me. I didn't personally mind, but I had to hope she wouldn't use any other children as a shield—that would just be mean.

"Is that all?"

"Y-Yes. I just n-need to clean it up later. Th-Thank you, for, y'know...using your precious time on s-someone like me..."

With that done, we left the Kenki to his meditation.

For me, personally, my expectations had been kicked up a notch. *I'll make sure to closely watch what precipice you have reached in your martial arts.*

When I thought about it later, it occurred to me that Rikelvita was working on the paper play program. That show changed series and themes all the time, with five to ten new pictures being broadcast every day. If she was able to draw that many pictures with that level of polish consistently in such a short span of time, then she had to have insane skill. It only made sense that she could do a sketch with such speed.

What a wonderful ability.

Incidentally, while she had been doing the pictures for the paper plays by herself at first, she now had a team to help. She would do the storyboarding and sketches while other artists would clean it all up.

"At your pace, I imagine we could finish these all today." The potential champions did not number many. Even looking around where we were at the moment, none of them caught my eye. At this rate, there would be considerably fewer than I initially assumed. Though there *were* a lot of people to look through.

"R-Really? Phew..." Though I was only making assumptions, Rikelvita already looked relieved.

Personally, I was disappointed. Strong fighters from all the nearby countries were supposed to be gathered here, yet this just made it even more apparent to me that it wasn't just Altoire that was weak—the *whole world* was weak.

Whatever. There was nothing you couldn't find if you just looked hard enough. Take how I found the Kenki, for example.

If it turned out there wasn't anyone stronger than my students, then they would win, simple as that. I wasn't upset by that possibility, just a little disappointed. Though I'd been disappointed

for years, so I was used to it.

All right, let's pick ourselves back up and go looking for the next one!

We continued wandering around. All the contestants were milling about, so we went on a casual stroll as we observed. Occasionally, someone would challenge me to a race since they knew me from my dog racing program, but I ignored them.

No one here is standing out at all... Ah, never mind. She's standing out for a different reason.

A group of three people were standing around chatting—they were all wearing white coats and bands that identified them as staff. There was a woman among them who looked very familiar.

"Lynokis, the lady over there."

"Yes? She looks like staff. Is she a doctor? Do...you know her?"

What? Oh, of course. Lynokis was unconscious at the time.

That woman had been the magic physician in the Umbral Arena. She treated Lynokis after her arm had been cut off. We'd only met once, but she'd left a strong impression on me.

So she'd be participating as a member of the tournament staff, hmm? I didn't know anything about her personal life or why she would be at the Umbral Arena one minute and then here the next, but her skill was undeniable. Even potentially lethal injuries wouldn't result in death with her around. So long as they didn't die immediately, she'd be able to pull them back from the brink.

"Shall we go say hello?"

"No, let's not." That doctor had been sharp. It seemed likely she would immediately discern who Lynokis and I were. It would be inconvenient for all involved if anyone learned we'd met in an underground arena, and I had no reason to interact with the medical staff anyway. There was no need for us to meet—time to move on.

Oh, there she is. This time, I spotted two women, one of which I knew.

As in, she was my student.

"Ah, that's Fressa, isn't it?" Lynokis had noticed too.

Right now, she was in disguise. She'd dyed her hair, tied it up, and was wearing a chic dress that made her look ready to go to some sort of social function. She almost passed for an aristocrat like this—you could feel a real elegance to her.

I knew women could easily transform, but I didn't think they could change *that* much. I almost doubted I was looking at Fressa at all. Lynokis's transformation into Leeno with just a bit of makeup was already astounding to me, but this was a different level.

So this was an assassin's disguise. She was certainly a professional.

The woman next to Fressa looked like the wife of an aristocrat, graceful and regal. She appeared high-class and looked entirely out of place because of it. Was she a competitor too? Honestly, what were the two of them wearing? Those outfits felt like they were wrong for both the place and the time. At least as a disguise, it worked. I'd barely been able to identify her as Fressa just from appearance after all.

"Young Mistress, that is Scarlet." Noticing my confusion, Lynokis gave me the answer I was looking for.

"Huh? Who?" I assumed she was talking about the woman next to Fressa, but the name rang no bells for me.

"The Mystic Butterfly of the Night. The whip-user."

"That isn't helping."

"You know, the woman I fought against in the Umbral Arena. The one I knocked out with one hit."

"Oh!" Scarlet, the Mystic Butterfly of the Night! I...had completely forgotten about her, honestly, but I did have the vague recollection of wondering who the hell decided to pit her against Lynokis. Thinking back now, she'd had quite the outfit then too, so maybe this was just her regular attire. Well, you know, everyone has their own sense of style.

She and Fressa were friends, though? I imagined it had to be an underworld connection.

"Th-Those two, as well?"

"Yes. She is also a potential champion." Given she was in disguise, I could only assume that Fressa was participating

anonymously and with a fake name. I wasn't sure about the Mystic Butterfly, though. "Lynokis, could you go ask them? Ask for their entry names while you're there."

"Yes, Young Mistress."

The women had already noticed us.

After Lynokis went to talk to them, they came back with her.

"Young Mistress, this is Freeze and Scarlet."

So Scarlet was keeping her name—though really, that in and of itself was probably a fake name. She would've likely used a fake name for the Umbral Arena and then decided to keep it for the tournament. Fressa was now Freeze. *All right, got it memorized.*

"Nice to meet you, Freeze. Scarlet." When I greeted them, the two responded in kind.

Good, Fressa did always have a very good instinct. I shouldn't need to worry about how she'll interact with me. It would be bad for both of us if people knew we were acquainted.

After we made our introductions as if it were our first time meeting, we asked them about the portraits.

"Why, I don't mind at all! Please draw every last bit of my beauty!" Scarlet was certainly enthusiastic about it. Honestly, hers wasn't one we really needed... But it was fine. Her appearance made her stand out, and it would certainly attract fans of a certain kind as well.

Besides, getting a closer look at her, I started to realize that even if she wasn't strong, she was perfect for the screen. She had a good voice, she was attractive, and if she was willing to enter the Umbral Arena, then she had to be confident too. What an interesting talent. She might be quite suited for magivision. *I should let Bendelio know the next time I see him. If he thinks she'd be useful, we should grab her before someone else does.*

"Th-Th-Thank you...very much..."

Rikelvita swiftly sketched Scarlet first.

"Let me see."

"Ah, w-wait—" Rikelvita panicked as Scarlet snatched the sketchbook from her.

Scarlet paused. After staring at the rough drawing for a while,

she nodded deeply.

"Not bad at all. What do you think, Freeze?"

"She made you look three times cuter."

"Huh? Uh, no, you mean it's as cute as the real thing."

"Sure, whatever helps you sleep at night."

Scarlet seemed to like it at least and that was enough to give the artist relief.

Next up was Fressa. This was who I was really here for—she was undoubtedly one of the potential winners. Honestly, if these were deathmatches, I was sure she would win. But, of course, given it was intended to be a friendly tournament, killing was not allowed. How much that restriction held her back and chained her down would likely be the deciding factor for her matches.

"You should totally cut your hair. You look like you could be so cute, it's such a waste of your looks. We women have gotta be confident in ourselves."

"Ah, ha, eh heh... Eh heh heh, sorry... Hee hee hee..." Rikelvita giggled as she was sketching Fressa's portrait and Scarlet continued talking to her.

She really does whatever she wants with no hesitation. The longer I watch her the more suited she is to magivision.

We had more to do after this, so we parted ways the second the sketches were done.

I never exchanged a single word with Fressa that whole time. She truly was a professional, maintaining the guise of not knowing who Lynokis or I were right to the end.

After splitting with Fressa and Scarlet, we resumed our walk around the island. Now that we'd drawn Scarlet, I decided to lower my standards for which competitors could get posters. At this rate, Scarlet would stand out as the only competitor to immediately lose—there would be a random weakling mixed in among a crowd of strong fighters, and that would come across like a mean-spirited jab.

And so, my solution was to change my approach. I chose ten or so fighters who might struggle to win, but could probably put up a good fight and had Rikelvita draw them too. There were a lot of

people who were at least strong enough to have already made a name for themselves, like adventurers or martial arts instructors.

In hindsight, this was probably the best choice I could've made—the range of people this would attract had immediately increased.

Wait, I'd better remember my rankings for who I think is strongest, just in case. Even if they were all possible winners, their difference in ability was still noticeable. I split them into three categories: favorite, has a chance, dark horse. I'd heard such estimates would be useful for betting advice, so that would be good enough, I'd think. Later, I'd write down their names and my evaluation of them and send it away.

Though we'd done a circuit of the whole island, I hadn't seen hide nor hair of Anzel or Gandolph. They were in my favorites category, so I really wanted to get posters of them drawn.

I'd heard that Gandolph still hadn't checked in to his room yet, though. Since he worked at the academy, he'd be arriving at the last minute. Anzel, I had no idea about. I should've asked Fressa when we bumped into her.

I didn't find those Heroic Star Assembly people Hildetaura mentioned either. She'd said there were two of them, hadn't she? They were supposed to be Hero candidates, so surely I would know who they were the second I saw them. I was so curious, but maybe they hadn't checked in yet either...

The sun was starting to set. This was enough for today. We needed to report back to Hildetaura for now. Since Rikelvita's work just happened to overlap with mine, we could report back about that as well. I wanted to give the princess my rankings memo while I was there. If it seemed like I hadn't listed enough people, I could just come again on a different day. From what I could tell, there were quite a lot of participants. The ones I saw today had to only be one part of them.

"Miss Rikelvita, I must leave soon."

We'd circled the island and were now back at the docks. I had my curfew to consider, so this seemed like a good time to wrap things up.

"Th-Th-Thank you so much, Nia! I managed to get so much

done!”

Yes, yes, no need to cry. With how grateful she was, she must have been stuck for a while. I was glad I could help.

Hmm?

Suddenly feeling someone’s gaze on me, I turned to look. A group of six were coming out of the port. All of them were in well-tailored Wu Haitong garb and were *clearly* not regular people. Were they nobles or wealthy?

These people were definitely not normal... They were all decently strong, but especially the small elderly man at the front. And the large old man just behind him. My eyes met with the smaller man’s.

Those two old men were *fairly* strong. They definitely knew how to use chi. There was no mistake. No, wait, all six of them could use it. Their gait, their complete lack of openings... They were truly used to battle. *Too* used to battle. The kind of battle where killing others was guaranteed. They were *specialized* in killing people. All of them were.

What assassin’s organization were they part of? They didn’t look as if they were here out of greed.

Hmph, interesting. I was curious about their goal, so I decided I may as well have a talk with them. That man had locked eyes with me after all.

“Miss Rikelvita, let’s finish your sketches off with this group here.”

“What? Th-Those people over there? Huh?!” The moment Rikelvita caught sight of who I meant, the sweat started pouring off of her. She’d been sweating this whole time, yet she could still sweat more? She really needed to make sure she was staying hydrated. “N-Nia, we shouldn’t. W-We really, really, definitely shouldn’t.”

Rikelvita was trembling and frantically shaking her head at me. Her instincts must have told her just how dangerous that group was. I suppose it must have been her survival instinct. That or it was the instinct of the weak, of the prey.

“Then remain here if you must. Can you draw from a distance?”

“Listen to me, don’t!” She desperately tried to stop me despite her usually more reserved nature, but she was already too late...

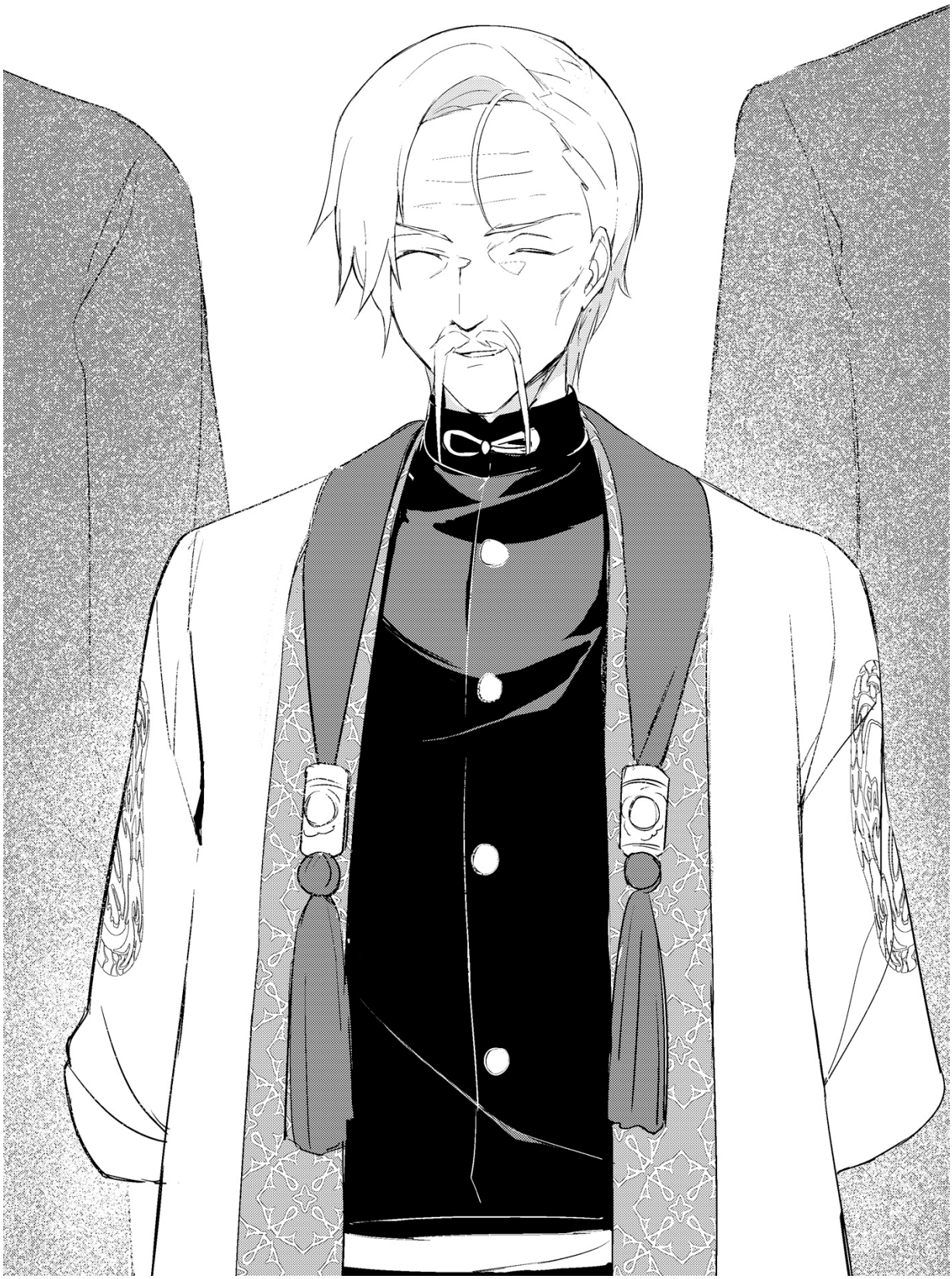
“You must be Nia Liston.”

...because they'd already made their approach.

"Yes, I am Nia Liston. Nice to meet you, mister."

When I turned around, they were already right beside me.

"Well now." The small old man gave a gentle smile as if hiding his true nature. That smile was so kind, as if he were a simple, harmless old man. "You're a strong one."



That's my line. He'd recognized my strength from my posture alone. Or perhaps he'd already come to that conclusion after seeing me on magivision.

"Whatever could you mean?"

Both our attitudes and our tones of voice were calm and peaceful. The tension in the air was palpable. It was even noticeable to the poor passersby who hurried away in fear.

Everyone apart from me and this old man were ready to jump at the slightest wrong move. Lynokis was ready to attack if necessary and so was the group of assassins. Rikelvita and her attendants, bless their hearts, were so overwhelmed by our presences that they could barely breathe.

They really didn't need to worry that much. This was nothing. If I wanted to, I could have very easily beheaded every single assassin in the blink of an eye. That was how little "fairly strong" meant to me.

"What's your name, mister?"

"Ku Yunxie."

"In that case, Mr. Ku, I have a request."

"And what would that be?"

"We want to make posters for the tournament and we'd love it if we could draw you and your group. Would that be all right?"

"Portraits of *us*?"

"Yes."

Ku's smile deepened. "You are asking this knowing full well who I am, aren't you? You're too strong for me to let you deny it."

I know. You're professional killers from Wu Haitong, aren't you? But that doesn't matter to me.

"The fact you're here means that you are entering the tournament, no? I'm asking for you to let us draw you because the chances of you winning are so high. Does that offend you in some way? Or is having your face so readily viewable by the public an inconvenience to you?"

Ku went silent.

"You aren't so weak that a little attention would cause you problems, are you? Or do you truly think so little of yourselves? Are

you afraid of one or two little scuffles while you're sleeping soundly in your bed?"

My provocations were enough to have the five men behind Ku radiate their hostility.

As for the man himself...

"Heh heh... Ha ha ha ha! Wonderful, wonderful." He laughed like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. "If it's just me, then go ahead. Make sure you make me look ten years younger, though. It'll be a nice souvenir. I'd love to have something like that in my coffin with me when I die."

When Rikelvita wobbled forward, she looked so pale that even that frightening old man was asking her if she was all right, but she still managed to finish the job.

Rikelvita was unmistakably a pro herself.

"It appears quite the troublesome group has joined the lineup," Lynokis said, face grim.

After we said goodbye to Rikelvita, we boarded the flight home and holed ourselves up in our room.

"To you, yes." The strength of those Wu Haitong assassins was unmistakable, especially Ku Yunxie. That old man had to have been the strongest candidate for champion among those I had seen today. His skill was on a completely different level. "I think he'll make a good opponent for you."

From my estimations, his strength was about equal to Lynokis. Either of them could win when pitted against each other. If it were a deathmatch, then Lynokis would almost certainly lose. I think even Fressa would struggle against a monster like that.

That old man was strong, but so were the men he had with him; they weren't to be underestimated either. Honestly, I'd have loved if all of them could've been made into posters, though I wouldn't deny that I could easily beat them even if I was so exhausted from my recordings that I came down with a fever.

"I suppose... Honestly, I had thought that there was no one there with the chance to beat me other than Gandolph and the others."

Oh, so even Lynokis had noticed. Yes, that group was strong. If

Lynokis wasn't careful, she would easily lose.

"Do you think you can win?"

"I'm...starting to doubt my chances now, I won't lie."

Hey, hey, why are you losing confidence now? *Don't look so hopeless. You're my first disciple; I need you to do your best. You're not going to drop out in the prelims, are you?*

...

Hey! I've literally told the king that Leeno is a shoo-in to win! I'm counting on you! I'm seriously counting on you, you know?!

Chapter 2: Let the Preliminaries Begin

"So? When are you leaving?"

"Man, I still haven't decided."

The Shifty Shadow Rat was as busy as always, and their clientele as rowdy as always, but at some point, the little back-alley bar had become one of the hottest spots in the area. Most of the customers weren't exactly rolling in cash, though, so despite how busy Anzel found himself, the profits weren't much to write home about.

The number of visitors had been gradually increasing as the martial arts tournament drew closer. Since rumors had spread that this was one of Leeno the adventurer's favorite joints, foreign patrons were not a rare sight.

Last winter, Leeno announced her participation in the tournament on magivision while also declaring that she would be leaving the country until then. True to her word, she hadn't been to the Shadow Rat since the announcement. That info should've spread too, yet apparently, it was still drawing people to his bar. Anzel couldn't help but lament how impossibly busy things had become.

"But the prelims are just a few days away now, no?" At the counter sat his old friend Nastine, who hadn't dropped by for quite a while. Due to the sharp influx in foreigners visiting Altoire for the tournament, the underworld had ended up quite busy themselves. From what Anzel had heard, there were fights basically every day at this point.

"People keep askin' me, but I'm not checkin' in 'til the last minute." His regulars had already been endlessly asking when he'd be checking into his tournament accommodation.

The tournament would be taking place on a floating island near the capital. All the competitors were to check themselves into the

accommodations and remain there until the preliminaries were finished.

"Fressa's already there, though, isn't she?"

"Yeah, but who says I have to go with her? Besides, even if we bump into each other, we'd have to be total strangers." Fressa was entering in disguise and under a fake name. If she was going that far, then Anzel would treat her as if she were someone else entirely. Fressa would likely try to avoid interacting with him as much as possible herself; she'd cut out anything that could risk blowing her cover.

"Strangers, huh? Well, I guess that'll make things easier for both of you." Nastine understood Fressa's caution without having to ask more. No member of the underworld could so boldly present themself in public without consequences. "You gonna disguise yourself too?"

"Still undecided." Anzel had been trying to come to a decision this whole time. His hesitation was the whole reason he hadn't gone to the island yet. Plus, he'd gotten injured in a fight with a famous adventurer—it was taking longer than expected for the wounds to heal, that was how bad he'd gotten beat up. "Nastine, you know that I'm on orders from the boss, right?"

"The fifty billion krams, yeah? Ha ha, I don't envy you." Nastine was able to laugh away because, at the end of the day, it had absolutely nothing to do with him.

For Anzel, though, this whole situation was no laughing matter. Though, he wouldn't deny he'd probably be the one laughing if their positions were switched. He could get angry, he could whine, he could complain, he could take it out on those around him, but at the end of the day, what Anzel had to do wouldn't change, so he wouldn't make a big deal about it.

"Yeah, the fifty billion."

Kaffes Jacks was ruler of the Altoire underworld, and the man who was practically Anzel's father figure. That same father figure had ordered him to win the martial arts tournament. He'd placed an unimaginably heavy bet of fifty billion krams on his victory.

"What're your thoughts?"

"You might want to get ready to skip town."

"You think I'm not?" If Anzel lost, he would escape Altoire. He was entering the tournament knowing full well he might never return to this country again. Absolute insanity, really. "That's not what I'm askin' about. I mean do you think I need to make up a fake identity?"

"Huh? I mean, *yeah?*"

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. You know better than anyone that there's no way you could ever live as a civilian. The number of crimes you've committed would easily stick you with a two-hundred-year jail sentence."

They absolutely would. And if Anzel ended up in prison, he'd never leave alive. He knew that, but...

"But I'm enterin' this thing to win."

"Come again?"

"If I win, my identity's gonna be found out whether I like it or not. I could have the best disguise in the world, but someone out there would probably end up leakin' who I am. Take this crew for example." Anzel's participation in the tournament was already well-known by his regulars. It wasn't as if he'd ever told them directly, they seemed to just suddenly be aware of it. That was why they kept asking him when he'd be going to the island.

He didn't even think there would be active malicious intent to leak his identity; it would simply spread through natural conversation. Those loose-lipped half-wits would gossip about anything they found interesting. At least one of these dolts would most definitely go around telling everyone they knew that the bartender of a place they frequented had entered the tournament. There was no mistake about that. Not a single thought would go into it. That was just the kind of people his bar had gathered.

Anzel couldn't trust a single one of them. They were the type of people who would pretend they never made a tab so they could get away without paying. Something as simple as collecting money was a hassle with them.

"But that's something for a winner to worry about, right? Are you

seriously aiming to win?"

"Well, yeah, it's the boss's orders." If it turned out to be impossible, then that was that. Anzel wouldn't blame himself for that. It was the boss's fault for assuming he could win—*he* had been the one to make the misjudgment.

But what reason was there to *not* try and win? Of course he was going to aim for victory. For Anzel, Kaffes's orders were absolute. Nothing would ever change that.

"Somethin' cheap, boss."

"Comin' right up." Since Fressa was away, the customers came up to the counter directly to order their drinks.

"Right, I heard you were enterin' the tournament too, yeah? Good luck out there."

"Thanks. I'll try as hard as I can without injurin' myself." After serving the drink to the customer, Anzel looked back at Nastine. "See? Now what's your opinion? Impossible, right?"

Anzel could dress himself up and use a fake name, but at the end of the day, his cover would still be blown. The preliminaries were one thing, but the moment he entered the main rounds, his identity would leak. If that was the inevitable outcome, there was no point in a disguise.

Fressa was actually really good at disguises. No one would know it was her just by looking, and even if they did realize who it was, that woman was quick on her feet. She could leave Altoire at any time. Anzel wouldn't be surprised if she'd made those preparations a long time ago. He was jealous, honestly.

Nastine silently downed the rest of his drink and stood up.

"I'll bet on you out of obligation. But the amount I'm putting in is because I believe in you." He'd caught on to Anzel's worries and his situation. "Take care, Anzel. Even if you have to leave the country."

"You too."

They were parting ways as if they'd never see each other again—and they both at least half believed that outcome may come to pass. Anzel didn't think his friend was heartless. He was sure he'd have said the same to Nastine had their places been swapped.

Whether Anzel won or lost, he would likely lose his place in

Altoire. If he didn't win, he'd need to escape the country. But if he won? His name and face would be known the world over, and that meant his past misdeeds would be dug up. If all of his crimes were revealed, all that awaited him was a life sentence. That meant even upon winning, the safest option for him was still to flee the country.

Even if he somehow managed to find a way to hide in Altoire, there would be no end to the people trying to jump him for the prize money. There was no reason to hesitate when a sinner owned such a hefty sum of cash. Hell, even Anzel would do the same.

Putting that aside, Anzel's life post-tournament was going to be crazy no matter the outcome. In fact, winning sounded like the worst option in terms of potential trouble alone. Planning how to escape overseas sounded much easier than thinking about how to continue clumsily living in Altoire.

This might be one of the last times he'd get to just be the bartender of the Shadow Rat. Anzel couldn't care less about his patrons, but he'd grown attached to the establishment. It had even become his home. He'd spent so long living an unstable life as part of the underworld that now, with the stability of the bar as a constant in his life, he found it was the single time he'd ever felt he belonged somewhere.

He'd bought it so casually, turned it into a bar so casually, and yet he'd come to love it far more than he'd ever anticipated. The cleanup was always a pain, but each time he did it, he felt his attachment to the place deepen. Every time he ordered in new alcohol, it was like he was building upon a collection of favorites. Everything here was colored by who Anzel was.

If Anzel did end up moving to a different country, he'd like to own a place like this again.

The future was uncertain, but until it was time for him to go to the island, this was still the place he belonged. He'd remain here until the very last second.

She could hear the sound of children from outside the room. It was a regular morning. Even if this was an aristocratic boys' dorm, children were still children.

The days were still swelteringly hot, but no one minded. The only ones who did were the servants who had to do the laundry.

"Young Master Neal, I will be taking my leave today," Lynette Bran stated as Neal Liston went to leave the room.

Neal would be going to school again today. By the time he returned, Lynette would have already left the capital. She was off to check into her accommodation in preparation for the tournament.

"You're going to the island?"

"Yes, Young Master."

Lynette had already received permission from the Liston Estate and informed Neal in advance, so there wasn't much that needed to be said. The biggest issue was that Lynette honestly didn't have that much motivation to enter the tournament. She was entering against her will, really. It was an order from someone she absolutely could not refuse, so before she even had the chance to make her own choice, she was participating.

The main factor was Neal, though. If only he had tried to protest her entry. If only he had said that he couldn't bear being away from Lynette for even a moment. Yes, if only he had said that he never wanted to be parted with Lynette, so they should get married. If he had just said anything like that, Lynette may have been able to avoid entering the tournament.

But Neal had approved. Without waiting for a full explanation, he'd excitedly said, "You're going to enter the tournament?! Go do your best!" He had said those words to her.

Deep down, Lynette had hoped that he would at least try to beg her to stay, that he would say he never wanted to be apart and so they should get married. Lynette had wondered to herself what she would do if he said that to her—she'd *have to* reconsider entering!

But then Neal had given her permission without any hesitation. So she would just...stop thinking about it. Now that Neal had approved, Lynette's participation in the tournament was finalized. No... Perhaps it was more accurate to say that she had simply given in.

In any case, as lacking as her motivation was, she had no choice. Lynette was a graduate of the Department of Adventuring, after all.

There was a time where she had wanted to become an adventurer herself. She felt no resistance at the thought of fighting others, and as the bodyguard of the young master, she had to perform well to protect his reputation.

There was still a little time left, but Lynette decided she should check into her accommodation now and spend the remaining days training. It was hard to do more than basic training in her current environment, and she needed to start taking the work more seriously in the lead-up to the tournament.

She'd never be able to face Neal again if she didn't do well. It would affect how the people around Neal viewed him if it became known that he had a weak bodyguard. She could end up causing him shame.

Plus, Lynette served as Neal's master in swordsmanship. A student would only feel betrayal if it turned out their teacher was weak all along. That was another of the reasons she absolutely could not lose.

"It is estimated that the preliminaries will take from two to four weeks. I will be unable to remain by your side over that time." Due to the number of participants and the need to factor in magivision recordings, the schedule was still not finalized. Rumors said that the number of entrants had been so great that the organizing body had been struggling to adjust—she was sure she would get the details on the island. "Young Master, if, for any reason, you absolutely do not wish for me to leave, if you wish me to remain with you, then I will —"

"Good luck! Do your best! I'll be cheering for you through the MagiPad!"

"Yes, of course, but if you really, deep down, do not wish for me to—"

"Don't worry if you lose. Just fight with all your strength!"

"I... Of course."

What pure eyes. The boy's face was innocent and trusting, not doubting Lynette for a minute. To think his excitement could be so blinding. Lynette had no choice but to meet his expectations.

"I'm gonna head off now."

Lynette had hoped that maybe, just maybe, Neal would stop her at the very end. But she would stop expecting anything more. She had given up.

After seeing off Neal, Lynette did some final checks of her luggage. She wouldn't be able to come back for a while, so it was important that she didn't forget anything. It wasn't as if she were going to some unexplored land, though, so if she really did forget something, she could probably replace it on the island.

Now that the young master was expecting so much from her, she had to do well in the tournament. *Right. Positive thinking.*

What would happen if she were to put on an incredible show? Well, Neal would compliment her of course. "That's my Lynette," he might say. "Let's get engaged." Imagine if she won it, even. Who knew what would happen then? What if he asked to be lovers first? There was no way to know for sure! Something incredible might happen! They might get married!

"All right!"

That got her far more pumped up than she was expecting.

After giving it a bit of time, Lynette left the room. It was quiet. It was almost time for classes to start, so the children should have all made it to the school building. The other servants in the dorm were beginning to start their own work. She had already explained her situation to the ones she was acquainted with, and they wished her luck if they happened to pass by. She left the dorm after saying farewell to the head resident.

"I suppose I may as well drop by first." Lynette could head straight to the docks from the school if she wanted, but there was still enough time to take a short detour.

Her destination was the aristocrat elementary girls' dorm.

"Are you heading off?"

When Lynette asked to see Lynokis Funk, the girl immediately came down in her attendant's uniform. They were both in the same position: They were on orders to compete in the tournament from someone they absolutely could not refuse.

No, actually, Lynokis's duty was much heavier than Lynette's.

"Yes, I want to get checked in today. You're going to wait right until the last day, right?"

"Most likely." Lynokis grimaced. "They want to record me, so I'm adjusting when I go to suit their schedule. Apparently, they want to see when I arrive on the island and when I enter the accommodation."

It was because Leeno had become far too famous. She had gathered the attention and expectations of many, and those expectations had only increased after her announcement. Rumors had continued to spread even while Leeno wasn't active in her adventuring. Now, she was deemed the one most likely to win the tournament.

That alone would've been fine. At worst, people thought more highly of her than she anticipated. They just thought she had the best chance of being champion, there was no harm there.

The problem was what happened as a result of that. She wasn't sure how it had happened, but at some point, unofficial Leeno merchandise started being sold. There was even food being sold under her name like Leeno cookies or Leeno bread. She'd heard of there being something like "fried Leeno" too. Fried what? What were they frying? It was a total mystery.

The identity of Leeno the adventurer had grown such a life of its own, wandering off wherever it wanted that, having been completely left behind, Lynokis could do nothing other than grimace. In truth, she wanted nothing more to do with it. The public could do whatever they wanted. Once the tournament was over, Leeno would disappear without a trace anyway.

So she didn't care. She wanted nothing to do with it. Lynokis wouldn't get herself involved any more than she had to. She didn't even know if it was safe to acknowledge it at all, so it was easier to just leave it alone.

"Being popular must be tough."

Though Lynette had intended it as a light tease, Lynokis could only respond with a heavy sigh. It seemed the woman was finding herself a bit bothered by it all.

Perhaps I shouldn't touch on this topic too much...

"Anyway, I'm on my way now. I don't think anything will happen to the young master, but if it does, please look after him." There were attendants hired directly by the dorm, and Lynette had already asked some other attendants and the head resident to look out for Neal, so it was likely he wouldn't have any issues with his daily living.

But that didn't mean the unexpected wouldn't happen. Lynette hoped Lynokis would be willing to lend a hand in an emergency.

"Of course. Though, do remember I'll be leaving soon myself." The registration deadline was fast approaching. In just a few days, Lynokis would be joining Lynette on the island.

That day, there was an announcement that shook the whole school.

"That does make sense."

A new rule was added to the tournament: Students of the academy were not allowed to participate. Anyone under sixteen was also forbidden from entering. The second prince of Altoire and acting chairman for the royal broadcasting station, Hiero Altoire, had announced those new rules early this morning on magivision.

"Yes, I do think this was inevitable," Lynokis said as we watched the announcement together in my room.

As the broadcast continued, Hiero concisely explained the reasoning. Logically, this all made sense too. The academy didn't wish to permit students taking time off to participate and it was dangerous for such young children to participate in a tournament with seasoned fighters.

The preliminaries were taking place right in the middle of our second semester, so the timing was terrible, and beyond that, the tournament would be filled with fighters who had no qualms about killing not just monsters, but humans as well. The rules might forbid killing, but it was always possible to get badly injured—worst-case scenario, that could then lead to death. Keeping in mind such a massive risk, it was difficult to justify permitting children to take part in such an event.

Hiero explained that they'd ended up announcing it like this

because far more people wanted to enter than anticipated, and that if anyone tried to escape the eyes of the school and enter, they would be immediately disqualified, suspended from school, and possibly even expelled.

"Organizing this must be tough."

I'd heard that Sanowil Badr and his rival...Gazell, was it? They and other well-known martial artists in the school had been planning to participate, but it seemed that wish wouldn't come true for them.

"Yes, I imagine the organizers are busy with all the final preparations. I should also start getting ready to go to the island."

Oh, of course.

"Lynette went yesterday, didn't she?"

Now that the announcement was done, the broadcast had changed to show the tournament island. *Wow, it looks like there's far more competitors there now than when I last went.*

"She did, yes. She came all the way here to ask for me to look out for the young master. On the topic...has Gandolph left yet?"

Gandolph, hmm? I hadn't actually seen him since all the commotion before summer break.

"I haven't heard from him directly, but from what Relia has been saying, he seems to still be here at school." She'd mentioned that he was still teaching the kids martial arts a few days ago.

Gandolph, my student and a vice-deputy instructor of the Heavenstriker school, was also a member of staff. It wasn't so easy for him to just leave his work to go do what he wanted. Naturally, he'd made sure to ask for permission from the school to participate. Since he hadn't hid that fact, he had become quite the talk of the school. There was lots of boasting from children about how their instructor would be participating.

Gandolph probably wouldn't go to the island until the last minute himself. *It might be a good idea to go and give him a... No, never mind.* That would have been unfair to Anzel, Fressa, and Lynette. I hadn't been able to check in on them either, after all. It was never fair to begin with, but I'd been doing my best to give advice to them as equally as possible—especially now.

"Are you worried?"

That was why I hadn't been focus training Lynokis much these past few months either. I'd left it all to Lynokis herself, not giving a single piece of advice. That was probably the reason she ended up getting a fever the other day—she'd trained herself too hard. She was at least putting in the effort from what I could see, so I wasn't too worried.

"No? I'm obviously stronger than him."

Confident, aren't we? However, Gandolph was diligent and enjoyed his training greatly; who was to say how much he had grown. Lynokis had better hope she hadn't been surpassed over the past few months.

"And there are other strong fighters that caught my attention more. Like that Ku Yunxie. He seemed rather scary."

Ah, that old man. Personally, he was someone I worried about less than my dinner, but he would definitely be a struggle for Lynokis. Against Gandolph, though? Hmm... I couldn't say, honestly. Sometimes there were opponents you matched up with better than others.

That was largely why I was looking forward to the tournament. Martial artists shined brightest in a fight to the death, and that was where they would find the most growth as well. Even the weak and inexperienced could dazzle others with that shine. A marvelous death was its own appeal, but...I wouldn't ask for that from a tournament like this. Altoire was the Peace-Loving Kingdom, after all, and as such, a peaceful tournament fit it best.

I hoped everyone would try their best, not just my students.

The rule update caused as much of an uproar as I thought it would. There wasn't much in my dorm given it was for elementary school girls, but I heard talk about it plenty on the walk to school.

Prince Hiero had mentioned it on his magivision broadcast, but it appeared there had been far more participants than anticipated. There may have been way more student entries than I thought given how much I was hearing people bringing up some older students.

"Oh, Nia."

Reliared had already arrived at school and was talking with our classmates, but then... *Hmm?*

"What's wrong?"

She split off from the group and came right over to me, grabbing my arm and dragging me out of the classroom. "C'mere a sec," she said. Was it something that needed to be kept secret? I didn't mind either way.

The minute we were outside the classroom, she went right into telling me what she wanted. "My sister's asking for you."

"Miss Rikelvita?"

"Yeah. It's about the posters. You helped her, didn't you?"

Ah, yes, I had. It had been related to Rikelvita's work, so I didn't tell Reliared about it. I didn't tell *anyone* about it, actually. You never knew just what effect carelessly telling people about that kind of thing could have. Not that I thought that job required much secrecy, but just in case.

"I got a letter from her this morning. She wants you to go to the island one more time before the tournament."

I see. I wasn't surprised per se, but it seemed possible that her work hadn't been going so smoothly.

"You said it came in *this morning*?"

"Yeah... I don't want to put pressure on you, but I think it might be urgent."

It must be if it arrived at this time. Someone from the Silver Estate had to have come here to deliver it directly.

It probably wouldn't be possible to ask my students to help her... Especially not since Rikelvita was terrible with strangers.

"All right." There would be more competitors on the island than the last time I went. It wouldn't be a bad idea to go on the hunt for more possible champions. I wanted to find those Hero candidates I'd been curious about, and hopefully, I could get posters of all my students too. I wasn't sure if I would find any more potential winners, but my students would definitely fall under that umbrella, so I definitely wanted Rikelvita to get them down. It was important for the gambling sphere of Altoire, after all.

"Really? You'll really go?"

"Of course. I'll need to get my work itinerary adjusted, though, so it'll likely be a couple days. Could you tell your sister for me?"

"Yes, thank you, Nia!"

Yes, yes, good you got this sorted out.

"By the way, you've been keeping up-to-date with all the famous entrants, haven't you?"

"I have, yeah! You mean the ones that might get posters, right?!"

Well, someone's been doing their research.

"I want to focus on finding those, so could you let me know who they are?" While I was there, it might be worth having Rikelvita sketch any fighters who weren't necessarily strong but were famous or had good looks. Whether they were good enough to get merch made of them was for the organizers to decide. For now, we could just draw any that seemed like they might be worthwhile.

This would likely be the last time I'd get to go to the island, so I'd wanted to help out as much as I could.

"As we can see, all the competitors are gathering at the tournament island."

"It won't be long now until the tournament begins. Please be quick if you still haven't registered!"

And so, I once more arrived at the tournament island. I'd accompanied Hildetaura and her crew as I had last time, and also joined in with some of their recordings while I was there. We started by introducing the program, and then explained that academy students could no longer participate and that an age limit had been added to the rules. We then worked on building hype now that the preliminaries would be starting soon. That was all; we explained the additional rules, built up expectations, and then went our separate ways.

"Apparently, there have been some fights breaking out... I do not think you will be in any danger, but be careful, Nia."

Participants were protesting against the sudden addition of the new rules—and it wasn't like I couldn't understand their anger. It was natural that there would be those who couldn't accept suddenly being told they weren't allowed to participate. There were those who

had traveled from afar, and it wasn't as if they could do anything about their age. The hot-blooded young adventurers wouldn't simply sit down and take that. Even if they didn't have the strength to win to begin with, the eligibility to participate was a different matter entirely.

"You too, Hilde." I said it in turn, but Hildetaura would also likely be fine. That girl was an Altoire princess by blood. Surely there was no one so foolish as to pick a fight with royalty.

Then again...maybe I shouldn't speak so soon. There were a lot of idiots among us martial artists, and quite frankly, I had no right to speak myself. Rather, a lot of us probably became martial artists because we were stupid fools to begin with.

It was fine, I'd worry about it if something actually happened. Hildetaura was with her production crew anyway, so she'd always have security, and there were tons of strong fighters here. If anything happened, someone would be around to help.

Personally, I really quite welcomed the thought of a fight.

After parting ways with Hildetaura, I went with Lynokis to the meeting place. It was the same place we met last time—underneath the large tree. Rikelvita was already there waiting with her two attendants. The moment she saw me, she came dashing over.

"N-N-N-Niaaaaa! Thank you! Thank you!"

Yes, I know. No need to cry. Honestly, she'd been moving so slowly that maybe saying she "ran" over was being generous. She also immediately clung to me. Rikelvita was already crying, and her two attendants looked aghast.

I wouldn't lie, I was a little curious about the clear lack of affection between Rikelvita and her attendants. I felt like I could hear them lamenting how useless Rikelvita was. I was thinking the same, after all.

Anyway, it was clear that she was feeling the pressure. It was a royal order after all. Even though the class system was slowly losing its significance in Altoire, and even though Altoire itself was quite the laid-back country, it was hard to not be scared about what would happen if she didn't finish the job.

"And? How far did you get?" Once Rikelvita had calmed down, I asked about her progress. There was no time for tears.

"U-Um... I've drawn about sixteen of them..."

Sixteen, huh? That wasn't very many...

Wait. *Sixteen*? Was this not the same as before? Had she not drawn even one more since last time?

I wanted to question her, but the words didn't come out. Behind the tearful Rikelvita, I caught sight of her two attendants clearly looking guilty. I could practically hear them apologizing on her behalf. I understood well how they felt.

"I see. Let's go, then." This girl really was hopeless. I was starting to worry for her future.

My job here hadn't changed much from last time: Simply keep an eye out for potential champions while seeking out the list of participants Reliared had told me about—ones that were famous or looked attractive. The only difference was that this time, I had clear participants in mind to find. Rather than observing everyone we came across, I was looking for the individuals. Reliared had been quite detailed with her descriptions, so I had more than enough information to find them. That girl really did have herself together. I was worried about her sister, but she herself was more than fine.

"Huh? A poster?"

"You want to draw me?"

"Y-Y-You're so cute, little lady. Heh heh heh... So very, very cute..."

We asked powerful men and women, and then some people who were clearly suspicious if we could draw them.

Hey, Relia... A lot of these people you recommended seem like they'll cause problems. Are you sure people's attention is on them? They don't even seem that strong; are you sure? Who's going to want to watch these people? Ah, do you mean people won't be able to take their eyes off them because *they seem like they'll start something? They're watching them out of caution, right? "Suspicious" is too light a descriptor for these people. They're definitely doing things they shouldn't, there's no doubt about it.*

They're absolutely causing trouble. They probably already have. They definitely have.

Ugh, it was fine.

Actually, was it? Whatever the case, it wasn't time to question it.

In any case, we were running out of time, so we went around swiftly and efficiently getting everyone's portraits. Thankfully, Rikelvita's pen was abnormally fast, so we were able to get around quick enough. Some of them were a bit shady, but I left them alone for now. Worse came to worst, a little chop on the neck would do the trick. That or a punch in the stomach. Maybe a little snap of a bone. Maybe I should mess up their legs before they could do anything bad.

We managed to find Lynette, so I pretended we'd never met and asked to draw her. I asked her if Anzel had arrived yet, but she said she didn't know.

Leeno's poster would get drawn later, probably when she formally registered. She was the competitor with the most attention on her right now, so it would be terrible to miss her.

We had Fressa and Lynette drawn, so all that was left of my students was Anzel and Gandolph. I didn't know what the best course of action here was. At this rate, they probably wouldn't be coming to the island until the very last minute.

Oh wait, I can just ask Lynokis. Anything I don't manage to do today I'll get her to do.

Eventually, we managed to get about twenty-five people drawn. Was that too few? There were over six thousand competitors right now, and I'd only chosen about forty to be drawn in total. Relatively speaking, that was pretty small.

"Rikelvita, how many more do you think we need?"

"Umm..." Rikelvita flipped through her sketchbook. "They did say it was up to me how many I drew. I don't think we have too few... Since I have to draw these as proper posters later, from a t-t-time perspective...this is the perfect amount, but...I'd quite like it if maybe there were a few more girls..."

Ah, was this about the gender ratio? There were certainly more

men than women right now.

"And there aren't many beastkin, I guess..."

And then there was the issue of the ratio of race. Beastkin were very rare in Altoire, and there were other races that didn't drop by very often, so it would be good to get them down.

"But we've drawn most of the people that Relia mentioned..." We'd followed the list and found each and every person. We'd asked many competitors, from the weak to the strong, from the suspicious to the not suspicious, if they would be willing to have their portrait drawn. Unfortunately, there were still those yet to arrive, but we couldn't do anything about that. I wouldn't be able to help, so I'd have to leave it to Lynokis.

"Hey! Sauzan, look, a *khameyra!*"

"..."

"Wait! Don't just ignore me! You like me, don't you?!"

Someone was being noisy. When I turned to look, a boy and a girl were running away. They looked like they were in the middle of training. They were headed right to where Hildetaura was— *Hmm?!*

It's them! I know them!

They were the pair I'd spotted at the docks just before I'd returned to the Liston territories for the summer. They were definitely encased in divine chi. *Hmm, yes, they really aren't that bad. Their movements are good.* I'd like to get a closer look at them, but they were really fast... They'd already gotten so far away. I could have raised my voice, but it was unlikely they'd hear.

And that meant there was only one thing for it.

"Lynokis, grab those two," I said, pointing at their backs. I could easily catch up to them, but it wouldn't be a good idea while we were here; there were too many people around.

"Yes, Young Mistress. I will be back in a moment."

And with a kick off the ground, away she went. *Good, you'll catch up at that speed.*

"S-So fast..." Rikelvita muttered in amazement. "Huh? But... Huh?"

Hmm...?

"Is something the matter?"

"Ah, yeah, um... I was just thinking she looks kinda like..."

"Like who?"

"That lady who broke your win streak."

She must have meant when Leeno beat me in that dog racing program. She recognized Leeno from her running form alone? Or was it the movement of her muscles? The observation skills of a talented artist were likely much different to that of a regular person. I was starting to think I needed to reevaluate this shut-in. If there was the risk that she might realize who Leeno was, maybe it was worth telling her in advance. It wouldn't be good if she made a big fuss.

But I'd think about that later. Lynokis was already returning with my order—in fact, she was practically racing that pair back toward us.

"No, seriously, the city is scary. It's super scary, Sauzan."

"Right? I didn't think there was anyone out there who could match you in a race."

Lynokis had managed to catch up with the pair, and when she asked if they would come over, it somehow devolved into a race back. Lynokis won, by the way, but by a very narrow margin.

Still... No, now wasn't the time.

"Sauzan and Tohaulow, yes?"

The man was Sauzan Flameen. He had light brown hair and a large body. About the only thing of note at a glance was that he was well-built.

The beastkin woman—a blue fox beastkin, apparently—was called Tohaulow. She was tall and thin, with fox ears that were an indigo blue.

Sauzan looked to be in his mid-twenties, while Tohaulow appeared to be younger, perhaps in her late teens. Both were in the middle of their growing phase.

These two are quite strong, aren't they? From physical ability alone, they were definitely stronger than my disciples. In a chi-less match, they would win, no doubt about that. There simply was a sheer difference in physical capability between them.

They seemed as if they would make for a good fight. I didn't think they knew the specifics of chi, but they were still strong in their own right. They were definitely potential winners of this tournament—if my students underestimated these two, they'd absolutely lose.

What I was most curious about, though, was their divine chi. They were fully encasing themselves in it, but...why? Why would they not hide it? What was there to gain by letting it so obviously leak from their bodies? Was there some deeper meaning behind it or were they just not aware?

This pair certainly left a strange impression.

"I've seen you before. You're that girl that's on magivision every day," Tohaulow said, staring at me.

Yes, that's me.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Nia Liston. I actually have a slight request..." And so, I brought up the matter of the posters.

"Sure, why not? You're good with it too, yeah, Sauzan?"

"Yeah, I'm fine with it."



With the permission easily granted, Rikelvita quickly opened her sketchbook.

"Where are you from?" I asked. Since Rikelvita was drawing Sauzan first, I struck up a conversation with Tohaulow to pass the time. My curiosity in them both was genuine. "You aren't from Altoire, are you?"

"Nah, we're from Slengradd. People sometimes call it the Kingdom of the Great Blade. It's far away, old as hell, and totally rural. Altoire's much more of a city in comparison. There're so many weird and wonderful things here that it's almost making me dizzy."

Slengradd, hmm? They had made quite the journey, then.

Wait... They weren't the *Hero candidates*, were they? They... They were a bit weak to have the title of Hero, weren't they? Then again, that would explain why they were only *candidates.* Besides, I didn't know exactly how many people had arrived here from Slengradd, so I could be mistaken in assuming it was these two. It seemed right to think there weren't many entrants from there, though, given how far away the country was.

"The Heroic Star Assembly is in Slengradd, isn't it?" I decided to try and dig a bit further.

"Yup. We've got nothing to do with them, though."

Hmm... I couldn't tell if she was lying or not. That reaction wasn't enough for me to discern it. I suppose it didn't matter too much. They were undeniably potential winners either way.

Once Sauzan's sketch was done, I spoke with him instead while his fox-eared friend was getting drawn. "You get to go all over the place for your recordings, right? What do you think is the tastiest meat in Altoire? Or, uh, I guess it doesn't have to just be meat."

"Do you mean you want recommendations for good tourist spots and local food?"

"Yeah. Tourist spots are whatever, but I want to eat some good food. We came so far, so y'know."

"It *is* quite the trip from Slengradd. If you wish to eat some delicious food while you are here, especially meat, may I recommend the pork from the Silver territories?" They had rare beef as well, but that wasn't a local specialty—it was fine dining for the

elites. Their pork was much more affordable.

"Pork, huh? Sounds good."

"There is a famous restaurant in the royal capital called the Chocolate Lily's Aroma. If you go for a course meal, you can try each cut of the Silver pork. If you mention I recommended you, they might give you some special service. Evening meals can be a little expensive there, so if you're looking to save some money, I would go during the afternoon instead."

"Got it. I'm curious to give it a try."

Sauzan was a man of much fewer words than Tohaulow, but their contrast was likely exactly why they got along.

Our relaxed conversation came to a close when Tohaulow's sketch was done.

"Th-Th-Thank you so much! This is probably more than enough!"

The Slengradd duo were our last competitors of the day. After Rikelvita's heartfelt thanks, Lynokis and I boarded the airship back to the capital. Rikelvita would remain on the tournament island to turn her sketches into full posters. She also needed to wait for Leeno's arrival—since Leeno's registration would all be recorded, the date and time for that was set.

Rikelvita was likely assuming that the moment she drew Leeno, she would be done, but she would still need to draw the people on the list we hadn't found today. She'd gotten this far, so I hoped she would keep it going until the end. *It's a royal order, so you've got to do your best!*

"I'm counting on you for the rest," I said as I handed Lynokis the list. I would leave everyone who hadn't been drawn yet to her—the remaining names on the list, Anzel and Gandolph, and of course, Leeno the adventurer.

"Yes, Young Mistress. I will do everything I can to finish this."

"Thank you. If Rikelvita appears frightened, don't hesitate to reveal your identity to her."

"What?"

"I have a feeling she might realize it the moment she sees you properly, anyway."

An artist's perceptiveness was not a logic I understood. It didn't seem out of the question that Rikelvita would see through the disguise, but I also wouldn't be surprised if she *didn't* see through it. There was her personality to take into account as well. I couldn't tell if she was sharp or dull half the time. Her athletic ability was certainly dull, but her sensitivity to others seemed particularly high. Also, she seemed to like naked people and staring at muscles. What a strange girl.

"By the way, Young Mistress, about those two we just met..."

"Did you notice?"

"I felt something a little like chi, and yet different..."

In other words, she'd been able to faintly detect the divine chi.

"Do you think you'd win?"

"I'm...not sure. I don't think I'd have any chance if they fought me together."

Quite sharp.

"We might have some unexpected winners in our midst. Looks like things are going to get interesting."

"Are you looking forward to me losing?"

"Not looking forward to it per se, but I *would* like to be surprised." Personally, it would be okay for Leeno to lose if it meant it would excite the audience. The outcome being predictable was always boring.

Besides, it seemed like that pair had something else up their sleeves. It could be that they would be a fine match for Lynokis if they used their full strength. At least, that was the feeling I had. Those who had at least some degree of confidence in their abilities wouldn't just sit down and take a loss, even for something as simple as a footrace.

They had also been very laid-back given the circumstances. It felt like they themselves knew that they could win easily if they used their full power.

How interesting. Sauzan and Tohaulow, hmm? I'd definitely keep my eye on them.

We had just entered autumn, a time where the remains of the

hot days of summer could still be felt. That morning, the highly anticipated announcement was finally broadcast.

"I am Hyurence, fourteenth king of Altoire. To my citizens, I must express my thanks for all of your support. To those from foreign lands, I must express my thanks for your participation in this tournament. As a result of everyone's efforts, I can now declare that preparations for the martial arts tournament are now complete."

The long registration period that had excited the masses had come to an end. The king took that moment to appear on magivision and talk more about the tournament. It turned out the number of entries had crossed ten thousand, with just a little under that ultimately being accepted.

Ten thousand people? That is one big number.

The king I had met two years ago when I went on vacation at one of his private islands had been permanently in a bathrobe, and left me with the impression that he was a talented man, but messed up as well. Now I could see for certain that he was definitely talented. He'd managed to pull off an event of this scale, after all.

The gathering of participants, negotiations with the surrounding countries, and the adjustments needing to be made concerning the logistics of trade and mass entry of foreigners was likely much tougher than I could imagine.

It all felt like it had taken forever, and also like it had taken no time at all. As I watched the king, dressed in formal attire with his hair curled and exuding an aura of relaxed majesty, I couldn't help but feel proud. This was just as much the result of my own efforts these past few years as it was everyone else's. Neither of us could have put on an event like this by ourselves. The power of a king was truly immense.

This was why political leaders were so frightening. He was able to grip the hearts of his people in a way that my fists couldn't, he could lead them, and if necessary, he could take down even mountains for them. Martial artists were reliant on the power of the individual, which was nothing in comparison to the might of a country.

Then again, *I* could destroy a mountain or two by myself. Maybe I needed a better example.

The king continued his speech. It turned out they didn't have enough accommodations for all of the entrants, so they'd prepared several emergency luxury airships—airships filled with the amenities needed to remain comfortable for several nights—and parked them near the competition island to use as additional lodgings. The sight of so many large airships clustered around the island was quite surreal. It was even visible from the capital.

With the official start to the tournament so near, the excitement in Altoire had been picking up day by day. Tickets to watch the prelims sold out in seconds, and the tickets to see the main matches never even managed to go any further than preorder. Apparently, even aristocrats were struggling to get their hands on tickets.

I was sure the organizers themselves wanted to make sure that the hype for preliminaries only kept climbing higher into the main matches—accounting for that must be difficult.

"The preliminaries are when the most participants are gathered. It is with this in mind that we have greatly restricted the number of spectators. If we invite too many people to watch from the arena while it is already so crowded, it risks affecting the fighters' concentration. I realize many of you may be disappointed, but I hope you can understand our reasoning. In the interest of fairness, tickets for the main matches will be decided by lottery. Ensure you apply if you wish to watch it in person. Reselling or forging of tickets is strictly prohibited. Do not engage in such activities unless you wish to face severe *punishment."*

They even had to worry about scalping and counterfeits now. They really were having a hard time.

"We will also be distributing MagiPads to establishments all around Altoire. You are welcome to watch the matches there if you are unable to see them in person. The preliminaries will be recorded and will be rebroadcast every day. The rebroadcasts will no doubt continue long after the tournament ends. There will always be a time where you will be able to catch the show, so while I encourage your enthusiasm, do ensure you are not sacrificing your work or everyday life for it. Your efforts are what keep Altoire and this tournament running. I do not discourage your excitement nor do I

lack the understanding as to why you might wish to let loose a little more than usual. However, do not neglect your duties. It is everyone's efforts, work, and daily living that make this tournament what it is. Our power individually may be limited, but as one whole, we can achieve much in our lives. Never forget that."

He was speaking such an honorable sentiment; was this truly His Majesty the King of Altoire? Was this truly the man who said right to my face that he wanted a talented woman to give birth to talented children for him? Was this some body double?

No, this is the side of him that is a leader, a king. The Hyurence Altoire I saw when I first met him was his private side. He had even gone all out enjoying the barbecue.

"Do excuse me. I rambled a little there." The king's calm visage never once fell, even as he let out a small huff. *"Now then, I hereby declare the opening of the preliminaries for the Kingdom of Altoire's martial arts tournament. Enjoy to your heart's content."*

Magivision was an incredibly reliable form of spreading information. With it announced that the tournament everyone was anticipating would finally begin, the excitement taking over Altoire would only grow.

The king disappeared from the frame, and Wolkas, the captain of the Altoire knights, took his place. *"Allow me to now explain the rules of the tournament. There will be slight differences between the preliminaries and the main matches, but otherwise, they will be largely the same."*

Altoire might have been known as the Peace-Loving Kingdom, but even *they* had a genuine knight order—they'd made sure their country had defenses. Plus, that captain was strong. At least, within the realm of the reasonable.

Still, the rules didn't sound like they would matter to anyone other than the participants. It wasn't something I needed to have a precise understanding of. So long as I roughly remembered—

"With the unprecedented number of entrants for the tournament, and given the trends that we have seen among our competitors, we will be splitting the tournament into two divisions: weapon and bare-handed."

"*What?!*"

They're splitting them into two divisions?! Hey, hey, hey, hey! What's with making this sound ten times more exciting, huh?!

I had been looking forward to seeing holy sword wielders or those decked out in full suits of armor being beat to a pulp by the simplicity of a bare-handed martial artist as proof that our fists truly are superior, that all we need is our bodies, but I was also fully aware of the difficulty of such a victory. Someone wielding a weapon would mercilessly beat down an unarmed fighter. In fact, I'd actually prepared myself to witness many such cruel matches.

Splitting them into two different divisions, though? That sounded perfect. In fact, I was sure that would only make things even more exciting. Now I was far more interested in the rules. *What are they gonna be? What rules did you make for the two divisions? Do you have any fun ones? What about killing? Is killing still forbidden? Sure, in the prelims, but what about the main matches? Will you permit killing in the main matches? Any fights brought right to the edge could end up in death, you know? Will you still not permit killing? Will you? Will you not? No? Stop teasing and tell me already!*

"Young Mistress," Lynokis called. Suddenly, I realized I was leaning into the MagiPad.

"Wait, we're getting to the good part."

"This announcement is important enough that there will surely be rebroadcasts."

Well...that was true. Besides, calming myself down, I realized that killing would absolutely be off the table. We weren't in a wartime period, and we were in Altoire of all places. No one was hoping they would go that far. But a fight with one's life on the line was where a martial artist truly shone.

"Are you leaving?" I asked when I turned around and saw Lynokis in her casual clothes.

"Yes. Leeno will now check into her accommodation."

It was finally time for Leeno the adventurer to make her appearance at the tournament island. I hadn't heard the details, but it seemed she would be recorded. I imagined those were orders from the king. Since the royal broadcasting station was the one

leading it, I hadn't been told anything, but right now, Leeno was the one believed to be most likely to win the tournament. She was the most famous of all the competitors.

"You're going to have such a fun time."

"You are the only one who would find this fun, Young Mistress. I am filled with nothing but dread..." Leeno was the most anticipated piece of this tournament. Much of the audience *and* the competition would be keeping an eye on her. Naturally, that would mean people would try to start fights or talk behind her back or make themselves a nuisance.

Almost ten thousand people skilled at violence would be gathered in one place—there had to be plenty of them that couldn't hold a facade of politeness forever. I could already imagine entrants trying to obstruct her or provoke her. Being the center of attention meant that people would hate you and your enemies would number many.

That sounded like a fun time to me indeed.

"Lynokis, make sure you don't let them underestimate you. You are Leeno the adventurer, the most likely champion of this tournament. Carry out your role to the very end."

It was all right for her to lose, she just needed to make sure she didn't put on a pitiful show as she did it. With Leeno's name now being known far and wide, far beyond what I'd ever imagined, she had practically become Altoire's representative. With so many foreign visitors watching, she couldn't afford to make a fool of herself. Leeno's failures would surely be deemed Altoire's failures.

"I will do my best, but... Young Mistress, you'll be alone for a while."

"I will, yes." Since Lynette would be gone too, I wouldn't have anyone by my side—in other words, no one would be around to supervise me.

I know. I know, okay?

"I will be busy with recording practically every day, likely even at the tournament island itself. I won't have much time to move freely to begin with. But, I will still promise you that I will not go against your wishes. I won't go anywhere dangerous by myself, and I won't watch any of the off-limits programs. I will be good."

Lynokis stared silently at me.

Why do you look at me with such doubt in your eyes? I keep my promises, you know. I'm literally about to leave to go to a recording myself. There was no school today, so my work schedule had been packed from morning to night. There wasn't a single moment of free time.

"Is there not something vitally important that you're forgetting?"

"Huh?"

"You're going to do your homework, yes?"

Damn, she caught on...

"Okay, yes, I'll do my homework too."

And here I was thinking I could get away with an excuse like, "I was so busy every day that I accidentally forgot, aha ha ha ha!"

I'll do it, okay? I'll do the stupid homework.

"You promise? And you won't let any other attendant or servant into your heart, or smile at them, or drag them into your room."

"Yes, I promise." The second half of that sounded like she was asking something else entirely, but I chose to ignore it.

I was being serious when I said that I likely wouldn't have time to do much of anything while Lynokis was away. The moment prelims started, things would get far busier. My recording schedule would frequently take me to the tournament island.

Besides, right now, the most dangerous place in Altoire was anywhere surrounding the tournament, and that meant it would definitely be the most fun place to be. Though they would be considered one of the programs that I was forbidden to watch, the matches would absolutely be the most fun as well. Given my position, it was important that I check them out—I had no time to watch anything else.

"Don't pick up any more students either. You always invite anyone who looks like they have even a little potential. You won't be able to keep up at this rate. Even now, you tend to leave us all to our own devices. Such irresponsible nurturing is just cruel to your students. Think of how hurt they'll be if you try to hold so many that your old students fall out of your hands. How could anyone possibly trust you as their teacher after that?"

“Okay, I get it. Get going already.” She was making it sound like I was picking stray students off the streets. There was no way there would be a teacher out there who would so carelessly choose any old person to teach. Enough of this, though. A fateful meeting between a master and their disciple was all to do with *feeling*; being restrictive just made life harder. That was why it was pointless to even continue this.

“Then, finally, I must ask for an embra— Gwuh.”

“Hurry up and go.”

Shoving my hand into Lynokis’s face as she approached, I chased her out of the room. I could hear her wailing pitifully from behind the door. I told her once again to leave.

“Bye then...” she finally relented, disappointment clear in her voice. Finally, I heard her shoes go down the hallway.

Fight on, my students.

Chapter 3: Registration Complete

"It's Leeno! Leeno's finally here!"

A student of the junior broadcasting station was excitedly yelling below. If Lynokis remembered correctly, her name was Kikirira Amon. She was the interviewer that was on magivision practically every day now.

Lynokis had finally arrived. Gazes pierced into her from all around the airship ramp. Those looks were so fierce and intense that Lynokis could hardly say they felt good. Just how strong was the famed Leeno? Many fighters had come to see the answer for themselves, and their scattered looks could hardly be called a warm welcome.

They had come to see the favorite take her first step onto the island.

"I really don't want to do this..." Lynokis muttered to herself. In order to hide her reluctance, she plastered on a refreshing smile for the cameras and slowly descended the airship ramp. Those stares that felt almost painful only became more intense. On the surface, everything looked so glamorous, but in reality, she was walking into a bed of thorns.



After the recording of her stepping onto the island, she would give a short interview. Following that would be the announcement of the posters and other merchandise, and another explanation of the rules. The royal production crew had filled the recording itinerary to the brim. It didn't even feel like Leeno had any need to be present for half of those, but she would go along with it. It seemed she'd get away a bit after lunch.

It was so clear that she was being treated differently than the other competitors. She was being treated exactly as a proposed champion would be—no wonder so many people disliked her. Most of them wouldn't know her true strength, having only heard things from rumors. Leeno's achievements weren't really Lynokis's, so it made it all the worse.

The participants numbered almost ten thousand. The scale had become quite large, and the name of Leeno the adventurer had become just as sizable. During her days in the Department of Adventuring, Lynokis never imagined this would be the future waiting for her.

It wasn't the future she had wished for. But, well, she did think it was an interesting future.

Adventure didn't mean just going to dangerous places, traveling to unexplored lands, or hunting dangerous monsters. Facing things you'd never done before, things you never thought you'd ever do, and taking them on was also an adventure in its own right. Perhaps adventure was something far from special, already overflowing in one's daily life.

Then again, being by Nia Liston's side already turned one's normal everyday into the abnormal.

Even though Lynokis wanted to shrink into herself underneath those piercing gazes, her feet never stopped walking forward. All of the training, deep meditation, and exercise that she had put her effort into until this day, all the sweat, strange fluids and waterfalls of tears she had shed had become confidence, shoving her forward.

As she set foot on the port, it suddenly occurred to her. The pressure she was under was great, but she felt almost free at the same time. It was likely because this was the last time she would

ever have to use the Leeno identity.

Leeno had grown well beyond what they had envisioned, but that heavy weight would soon be no longer. That thought alone made her feel much better. It was so clear that she was failing to live up to her name. It was a burden so unbelievably heavy that it had become impossible for her to bear. Nia could have likely shouldered the name no problem, but it was impossible for Lynokis—at least, for now.

"Thank you very much! Good luck in the tournament! I'll make sure to buy your merchandise too!"

After being interviewed by the young Kikirira, Lynokis was led indoors to have a discussion with Hildetaura. They sat across from each other in a luxuriously decorated room that had been prepared in a building at the docks where they would talk one-on-one. It wasn't as if Lynokis *weren't* nervous, but they'd met so many times before now that it made the girl easier to work with—she already had a pretty good idea of the kind of person Hildetaura was.

"You appear to be holding up a lot better than I expected," Hildetaura whispered to her right before the recording began. Her consideration warmed Lynokis's heart. As one of the people who knew Leeno's identity, the princess had surmised the weight that Lynokis was feeling bearing that name.

Nia was strong, and it was for that reason that she never noticed. Lynokis was no one special, and to someone like that, Leeno's achievements were impossibly heavy to bear. The more the rumors spread, and the more widely her name became known, the more she felt like she was going to be crushed under the weight of it all.

The adventurer who raised a billion krams in a year, the strongest in Altoire, a living legend... There was no way Lynokis could bear such titles, not while she didn't have the strength to live up to that.

"It's because this will be the last time," Lynokis whispered in reply. "When I think of it like that, I end up feeling much better about it."

But she'd become able to dispel those worries. At this point, she had no choice but to just do it. Now that she'd come this far, there was no other option. Worrying about it wasn't going to make the

situation any easier. Like Nia had said, she needed to see this through to the end as Leeno. Even if she failed, it was a name she could abandon the moment the tournament ended. There was no need for her to think about what came after.

"It must be tough, especially since you have to look after Nia as well."

Hildetaura—no, His Majesty was probably aware. He knew just what kind of person Nia was, what she was doing, and what she had done. But all of that was irrelevant to the attendant. Lynokis simply followed her master's instruction.

"Good work today, Leeno. Let us meet again."

With the talk with Hildetaura done, Lynokis's recordings for the day were finished. There was a chance she would get asked to do more interviews after the prelims started and she participated in more matches, since they were likely to ask for words from the winner and loser of each match.

Nia's hardships immediately came to mind. Having now done all these recordings as Leeno, Lynokis was exhausted. Looking on as an outsider, it always seemed so easy, but having now done it herself, it felt entirely different. She had been nervous and tense the whole time, and her mind was constantly working. It had taken so little time and yet she was already so tired.

Nia had been carrying out recordings from dawn until dusk every day. That was horrific. No wonder she hated Bendelio so much and was always talking about how she would punch him one of these days.

"Next is...the posters," she muttered to herself, thinking through her plans as she exited the building. The number of people gathered was much smaller than when she arrived, but it didn't change there were still a lot of competitors around watching her.

She'd learned to stop minding it so much by now. There were plenty of staff wearing armbands nearby. It was highly unlikely any of her competition would confront her so openly. If they did end up trying to start anything with her, Lynokis would happily ignore any semblance of a peaceful conclusion. This name was soon to be

abandoned; it had nothing to do with her.

Anyway, she still wasn't done with her errands for the day. The only part that she had finished was the recordings.

Next, she had to get her poster drawn. There was the list Nia had given her too; there were just a few more fighters that she'd wanted Rikelvita to draw, including Anzel and Gandolph.

This was a duty given to her by Nia. As her servant, Lynokis would do all in her power to see the task through.

First thing to do was to go to the Silver airship where Rikelvita was staying.

Lynokis was guided into the airship by the servant who had been standing in front.

"S-S-Sorry f-for the wait!"

Rikelvita came out to meet her immediately. The interior was so extravagant it was hard to believe it was an airship. Lynokis was guided through to a meeting room that looked just like the ones found in an aristocratic mansion. No, it didn't just *look* like one, it really was one. It was a room made so that aristocrats could meet their guests with that status retained. A set of drawing materials had been laid out ready to be used.

"Thank you for working with me today."

"N-No, I sh-sh-should be the one s-s-s-saying that! So, um... Y-Yeah, th-thank you f-for today." The woman was so panicked that Lynokis couldn't help but feel sorry for her. Though she was still acting as suspicious as always.

"If you don't mind my asking, who are they?" Lynokis asked. Rikelvita had sat down and was waiting to draw her, but she was with a *production crew* from the Silver territories.

"Excuse me. Do allow me to explain." A refined-looking elderly butler stepped forward from the wall...

"I understand."

That's upper-class aristocrats for you, Lynokis couldn't help but think. Long story short, the Silver Channel wanted to record Leeno being drawn. But Lynokis also understood that they could've

conversely given the explanation that they wanted to record Rikelvita sketching a portrait. In other words, Lynokis had no choice in the matter.

They were truly cunning with their political judgments, or perhaps it was more accurate to call them negotiation techniques. Lynokis could feel their absolute desire to record Leeno. Not that Lynokis was going to refuse anyway. She'd already said she would continue as Leeno to the end—this was no different.

"I would have been grateful if you had informed me in advance." Lynokis had already relaxed, thinking that she was done with recordings for the day, so having this suddenly thrust upon her was the one sticking point she had.

The old butler guiltily bowed his head. "I truly apologize. The master wished to do so, but we were not aware of how to contact you..."

"Oh, of course. I forgot." Leeno's movements were entirely dictated by any orders given by Hildetaura and the organizing body of the tournament. To be more precise, any messages would go from Hildetaura to Nia to Lynokis. The Silvers may not have been aware that was the case. No point dwelling on it, though.

"Shall we begin, then?"

Let's get this over and done with.

Leeno the adventurer had arrived on the island. Thanks to how dramatically it had been announced, the rumors instantly spread among the competitors.

Brilliant achievements that were hard to believe, a famous adventurer known all over Altoire, the favored competitor to win the tournament, a completely unknown background with not a single person knowing who she was or where she'd come from—line up all of those rumors and no one could resist being curious. The more someone wanted to win, the less they could ignore it. Those were the sorts who gathered at the port waiting to see the supposed winner in question.

"What do you think, master?" A pair of older men, one small and one tall, were standing underneath a tree. The taller whispered to

the smaller, and the smaller laughed.

"No idea."

It was the leader of the main house of the Qilong, Ku Yunxie, and his first disciple, Ohya.

"You...don't know?" Ohya was a little surprised at such a rare lack of opinion.

"She looks like she could be strong, but she also looks weak. If the rumors are to be believed, though, she must be strong." Ku chuckled to himself. "If she does turn out to be strong, then she'll be a hassle to deal with."

Still waters can be deceptively deep. The ability to hide one's true strength was a sign of said strength. If she was able to hide it so beautifully, then the natural conclusion was that she must have been quite the fighter.

"Now then, I suppose I better get these old bones into gear," Ku said, as he turned and walked away.

"Is she that formidable an opponent?" Ohya asked.

"I told you I didn't know. You need to remember I came here while tolerating a bad back. I don't want to be eliminated in the qualifying matches." If Leeno turned out to be strong, he'd be in trouble, so he'd prepare as thoroughly as possible—it was as simple as that. "More importantly, have you seen Anzel anywhere?"

"No, he does not appear to have arrived yet."

"Still? How long is he going to keep an old man waiting? I'm going to shrivel up and die before he gets here at this rate."

"I'm sure."

Ku glanced back at his student. "Was that sarcasm?"

"I'm getting old myself, master."

"Oh? Well, that is true. We've both gotten old. I'd love it if I could retire already."

"Yes, so would I."

"C'moooon, they're saying Leeno's here! How long does it take for you to eat?!"

"Leaving any food behind goes against my creed."

"Then eat faster!"

"I hate eating fast. It's important to show respect to the food and the chef."

"Ugh, fine! I'll go look myself, then!"

A blue fox-eared beastkin burst out of an eatery near the docks. It was Tohaulow, a candidate from the Heroic Star Assembly of Slengradd. Sauzan, the other candidate who came with her, was too busy eating, so she left him behind.

No one was cheering, but there was a nice buildup of tension, and a quiet excitement rumbling through the crowd. Tohaulow ran through that atmosphere and locked her sights on a lone adventurer descending the ramp of the airship.

It was her. That was Leeno, the adventurer thought to be the most likely to win.

"Oh-hoh, I see..." Tohaulow narrowed her eyes as she closely observed the woman's movements.

She wasn't bad—it was clear that her body had been appropriately trained. That was the body of someone who was trained to fight, not someone who trained for exercise. It was important for fighters to not needlessly overtrain their bodies. You had to build up muscles that suited your natural physique, ability, talent, and personal style.

In a real fight, you needed to be competent in more than just physical strength. It wasn't enough to just build all of your muscles, but it also wasn't enough to focus solely on something like your leg strength either. You had to work out what you were and weren't good at and train with those in mind, and then come to fully understand those strengths and weaknesses. After that, it was all based on how good your situational judgment was.

Leeno had clearly trained, and had gained that understanding of her own strengths and weaknesses. Those were the fighters that were strong. But from what Tohaulow could see...

"How's she looking?"

"*Holy*— Don't scare me like that!" Tohaulow jumped at the sudden voice by her ear. When she turned around, Sauzan was there beside her. "What, so you decided to come, after all? What happened to your food?"

"I told them I'd be back. So that's Leeno, huh?" Sauzan moved his gaze from his fox-eared partner to the adventurer setting foot on the island. "What are you thinking, Toha?"

"She's not bad. But she doesn't look that strong either."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking. But..."

"From everything we've heard, there's no way she's weak."

"Exactly. We're hiding that we can use our Divine Techniques, so maybe she's hiding something like that too."

"No way that's true. At least...that's what I'd like to say, but the world's a big place. Maybe she is."

In any case, they'd managed to see the competitor they were most curious about. She wasn't quite as they'd expected, nor was she stronger than they'd expected, but at the very least, she didn't seem *weaker* than they'd expected. It was more like they couldn't get a clear picture of her strength just by looking at her.

"So? Anyone else catch your eye?" Tohaulow asked.

"A few, but those old guys from Wu Haitong are in a completely different league. They're real strong. What about you?"

"Leeno's...been a bit of a disappointment. I wouldn't mind so much if she was clearly stronger than us. No one else has really caught my eye. A couple martial artists seemed interesting back at the capital docks, but I don't see them anywhere. Maybe they weren't competitors."

"That's a shame. Should we head back, then?"

"To the restaurant? Do you do anything other than eat?"

"We get a special discount as competitors, after all. It's cheap *and* it's delicious. No food tastes better than what you're eating in the present."

"Man, you can go back yourself. I'm gonna keep looking around."

"Wait. You haven't even paid for your part of the meal."

"Sauzan... Can you pay for now? I'll pay you back."

"I hate doing this because I'll forget and you *know* I'll forget, that's why you keep asking me to pay. You're gonna make me lose faith in you at this rate. You're coming back with me."

Having failed to escape paying, the little fox was dragged away back to the restaurant.

"Lynokis has arrived, then."

"Yep. She sure has." A sigh. "I wish she wasn't here, though."

Lynette and Fressa were watching the docks from the rooftop of their accommodation. A lone adventurer confidently strode down from the airship that had just arrived. They were so far away that she was a little speck in the distance, but Leeno the adventurer had finally arrived on the tournament island.

"Why not?" Lynette asked.

"At the end of the day, she's definitely the one most likely to win this. I'm pretty seriously aiming for the prize money, y'know. What division do you think she went for? I'd hate to be in the same one as her."

Makes sense, Lynette thought. Fressa was going so far as to make a fake identity and disguise herself in clothes she wouldn't usually wear all so she could enter. She was serious about this. That desire to win the tournament was very real. The prize money was a whole five hundred million krams, after all. Lynette couldn't blame her. And honestly, maybe complete victory would be hard, but Fressa most definitely had the ability to make it into the top rankings. Aiming for the prize money was not a hopeless wish for her.

"You want the money for anything specific?"

"Yup. You know how Anzel bought that bar and then started using it as his home as well? I don't care about owning a business, but I'd love my own place. Like, one of those airships that you can live in. Fuel and maintenance costs can get expensive, so it'd probably be a small one, but the idea of having a home that can disappear along with you is my ideal, for sure."

She doesn't even have a stable home? Being part of the underworld must be tough.

"Have you considered living in the countryside?"

"See, this is how it's obvious you know nothing about how we work. The countryside is the one place I don't want to go. There are too few people, and the locals barely change, which means everyone knows everyone. Cities having thousands of people makes it much easier for a single person to blend in, but if there's a new person in a

village of one hundred people, what do you think happens? That's why we don't move to rural areas."

That was easy enough to understand. Someone *would* stand out if they suddenly joined a tight-knit community.

"Say, have any of the competitors interested you, Lynette?"

"Your friend with the whip, maybe?" Scarlet, was it? She looked as out of place as Fressa did in her disguise. It had caught Lynette by surprise.

"Oh, don't worry about her. She's not that strong. Honestly, she's more interested in getting on magivision than competing."

Perhaps she'd missed the point of Fressa's question. She was wanting to know who Lynette thought looked strong, like they'd put up a fight.

"The Kenki, Headsplitter Geeg, the Kedo Brothers, Sonicspeed Zeon, and Lestra, the veteran adventurer. Oh, and Avan, the bounty hunter. They're all famous adventurers, so they give a bit of a different vibe compared to everyone else." Lynette had once dreamed of becoming an adventurer herself after all. It was natural that famous adventurers would catch her attention.

"Oh, I get you. They do seem pretty strong."

"I think the ones I'm most interested in are those two older men from Wu Haitong, though."

"Don't even try them. If you get matched up with them, you should forfeit right away," Fressa immediately urged.

"Do you know them? Are they that dangerous?"

"I've warned you. Just do what you want. Then again, you're not the type to listen when someone tells you to stop."

But of course. The young master will be watching my every move.

Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that Lynette was doing this specifically to show off to Neal. In which case, aiming for victory was the only correct option. Nothing would beat that small boy walking up to her with a wide smile, congratulating her on her victory. That was worth even more than the five hundred million krams. Just thinking about it gave her the sustenance she needed to keep going. She would definitely get worked up. She'd get so

worked up she might die. Just what would she become...? She'd have to confirm with her own eyes.

Regardless, Lynette didn't intend to lose to anyone, not even Fressa.

The exciting announcements came one after another—the king declaring the start of preliminaries, Leeno arriving on the tournament island, the rules suddenly being changed, and then the creation of two divisions for the entrants. Over ten thousand people had signed up by the end of the registration period. It really was starting to feel like the tournament was almost here. The preliminaries would begin in just a few days.

"Anzel, it's almost time." Geese—the bartender that Anzel had hired—peeked his head out from the back while preparing snacks and called out to his boss.

"Damn, is it that time already?"

Today was the final day competitors had to get to the island. Anzel, still having not left his bar, put down the glass he was polishing.

He was reluctant to leave. Depending on the results of the tournament, he might not even get to come back. That was why he'd chosen to spend every last second he could here. Anzel made it a habit not to get too attached to things because he knew it hurt when you lost them, but it seemed the place he could call home was a bit special.

"Geese, you know what to do if the worst comes to pass." Anzel had already filled in the older man. He'd asked him to sell off his bar and land if he didn't return. Naturally, he'd also told Geese where he'd hidden the deeds.

Given the price of the place when he'd first bought it, Anzel didn't think it would make that much back. The location was bad and therefore the clientele were bad. There was constant trouble, and though they had a lot of customers, they barely made a profit. A genuine entrepreneur wouldn't want a place like this.

"I know. If you don't come back by the end of the year, I'll make sure to clean up for you."

"Thanks."

The tournament wouldn't be going on for the entire year. That was why it would be the biggest sign that if Anzel didn't come home after, he never would. He would likely be far away in a different country by then. Or in a jail cell. Or maybe not even alive.

Honestly, Anzel could've just gotten rid of it all by himself. That way would leave him with no regrets, and it would've served as a starter fund for his new life. But he was willing to bet on that slim chance that he would be able to come back.

The chances of it were low. So low that Anzel almost wanted to curse Kaffes and his fifty billion kram gamble. Anzel genuinely had no idea where his life would end up after all of this. It was highly likely that, win or lose, he wouldn't be able to remain in Altoire.

Anzel went to his room and grabbed his bag filled with the bare essentials, which was all he really owned. It was light, as insubstantial as his own life.

There was nothing to be gained by despairing over it. It wasn't uncommon for those of the underworld to disappear out of nowhere. It just so happened that this time, it was Anzel's turn.

"I'm headin' off, Geese."

"Of course."

As Geese responded, Anzel popped open one of his favorite spirits, one that was on the slightly more expensive side. "It's on me."

It was called Gadetszche, an old brand from Harvelheim. The color was a deep amber and had an exotic smell to it. It was a common drink among the middle-class over there, something that Anzel decided suited himself perfectly.

"See you."

They exchanged no more words than that. After downing a glass, Anzel left the bar. He didn't look back. He'd already hesitated over it enough.

The docks were as crowded as they always were. The closer the tournament became, the more visitors and goods from outside arrived in the country. Was this the peak? No, it would likely get

even busier as the main matches approached.

"Gandolph!"

As Gandolph was making his way through the crowd, someone suddenly called his name. When he turned, standing there was his old friend, Leitao. "You're back?"

All contact between them had stopped after he left Wu Haitong years ago, but then just last month, in a twist of fate, they happened to meet again at this very port. She'd sent a letter saying that she was returning to Wu Haitong, so she'd like to meet up before she left. They'd gone for a meal and had a chat about how life had been, and then he'd sent her on her way. Now, here they were, meeting again.

"I've been sent by the main dojo. We've got a lot of practitioners participating after all," she replied with a nod.

"Really? Uh... You aren't entering, are you?"

Leitao was strong. Back when they both lived in Wu Haitong, Gandolph may have beaten her in physique, but she had him beat in ability. She would very easily make a mark on the tournament.

"Right. I've got zero interest in the whole thing."

This wasn't a lie—but above that, Leitao was certain that she would lose completely in the prelims. She and her fellow instructors had all been beaten to a pulp by a single young student of Gandolph's. They'd lost one-on-one with a child, so they had no choice but to ultimately give up on what they had been trying to do.

Although everything in the main dojo seemed to be business as usual, behind the scenes, things were much more frantic thanks to that run-in. There were no participants from the main dojo as a result. There were plenty of Heavenstriker participants, but all were from branch dojos. It was incredibly unusual for a martial arts dojo, but there were so many participants that barely anyone seemed to have noticed.

There was no way for someone outside of the main dojo to be aware of those circumstances. They were also all on strict orders to say nothing about that incident to anyone, but Leitao really wanted to ask about that child. How had Gandolph raised such a gem? And how strong had Gandolph become if he was even stronger than her?

Rather than the tournament, Leitao had ended up much more interested in Gandolph and those around him.

Though they'd known each other for over ten years, the woman still was yet to realize the extent of the feelings she held for the man.

"That's a shame. It's been so long since we've had the chance to fight."

"I'm disappointed myself. But honestly, I feel like you're definitely stronger."

Gandolph wouldn't confirm nor deny. He was sure he would be—but only because he now knew how to use chi. From Leitao's perspective, though, it was because she had lost to his student.

A moment later, a man passed by and said only one thing before continuing on his way:

"Airship's leavin' soon."

"Hmm?"

"Who was that? Friend of yours?" Leitao asked.

"Oh, uh, yeah." It had been Anzel. Apparently, he still hadn't gone to the island. He just kept walking onto the airship. He must've not wanted to interrupt Gandolph's conversation. "Seems the airship's leaving soon. Will you be watching the matches?"

"Probably not the prelims." The tickets for prelims were cheap, but there weren't many available. They had limited the audience to keep the island from getting too crowded. The prices for the hotels on the island had also shot up, flights too. Leitao hadn't been provided so much money that she could afford to stay in those facilities, so she'd decided to find a place in the capital to watch them on magivision.

"I've had a VIP seat prepared for me for the main matches under the name of the main dojo, though. Arranged by His Majesty the King." But right now, the main dojo was in an uproar, so they'd chosen Leitao as the member of highest status among those who had been sent out to observe. If Gandolph made waves here, the dojo would likely make even more of a fuss... But that was something to worry about later. "Gandolph, you are aware, right?"

"Aware of what?"

"If not a single Heavenstriker competitor makes it to the finals, it'll be an embarrassment to the whole school." More specifically, it would be an embarrassment for Leitao sitting and observing in the arena seats. But honestly, she didn't care much about that herself. "I won't tell you that you need to win, but at least make sure you're not knocked out in prelims. You might only be a vice-deputy, but you're also the main instructor of a dojo. Don't forget that you represent the dojo that you teach. You have to put on a good show for your students as well. I'm not here to put pressure on you, but things'll get troublesome if you don't get results. For you and your students."

Gandolph understood what Leitao was saying. It was because he understood that he gave a firm nod in response. "I'll absolutely do my best. Honestly, I don't feel as if I'll lose."

Lynette, Fressa, Anzel, and then Leeno—technically Lynokis. While other competitors caught his eye, they were the ones who were definitely stronger than him. Difficult matches were inevitable, and yet Gandolph still didn't feel as if he would lose. He'd done all he could, putting in the hours for his training and working on his chi manipulation. All that was left was to fire off at full strength. If even that wasn't enough, he would still accept the result. That was how martial artists should be.

"I'll see you later, then. Cheer everyone on, yeah?"

And so, Gandolph, the vice-deputy instructor in charge of the Altoire academy branch of the Heavenstriker school, made his way to the competition island.



“You both took your time getting here.”

Anzel and Gandolph had ridden the airship to the island at the very last minute along with many other competitors.

“Wow, our winner-to-be comin’ out all this way to meet us?”

Lynokis had been waiting for them at the docks when they arrived. Everyone who had been on the same airship was caught off guard by Lynokis’s—or to them, Leeno’s presence, but the three of them paid the fuss no mind.

“I did indeed. I never thought you’d come on the last flight possible.”

This flight had quite literally been the last one of the day from the capital to the tournament island. If they’d missed that, they’d have forfeited their place in the tournament unless they could hire a private airship, but that would’ve been expensive.

“You came two or three days ago, yeah?” Anzel asked.

“Yup. I wanted to leave it to the last minute too, but the broadcasting station wanted to record me, so I had to come earlier. Also, Lily left me a bunch of tasks before we separated, so I’ve been running around dealing with those.”

If it was from Lily—in other words, Nia—then it had to be related to magivision.

“I was actually waiting here because I had a favor to ask of you both. For the record, this is also related to Lily.”

Neither of them could refuse a request from Lily without extenuating circumstances. And even if they were able to refuse, Lynokis would have been the next person to get angry. It was an annoying two-pronged attack.

“A favor? You don’t want us to fix our matches, do you?” Having been arrested due to a scuffle around the idea of a fixed match before, Gandolph couldn’t help but think the worst.

“No, nothing like that. She just wants you to model for some portraits. The organizers are currently making posters of famous participants or potential champions.”

“Potential champions? Like Gandolph?”

“You just mean Anzel, right? People barely know who I am.”

“I mean, not like I’m famous either. Well... Okay, maybe that’s not

quite so true now.” Thanks to Leeno being associated with the Shadow Rat, Anzel had ended up becoming well-known as a side effect of her popularity—very much against his will. He’d tried so hard to stress that he was just the regular bartender of a cheap little back-alley bar.

“Listen...” Lynokis leaned forward and lowered her voice. “This isn’t about how famous you are, it’s based on Lily’s picks of who could win. The real audience for the posters is the gamblers. You wouldn’t want to bet on someone you’ve never seen in your life, right? The posters and the preliminaries are a way to preview the fighters. It’s also to do with making sure the favorites don’t all end up knocking each other out before the main matches.”

Lynokis pulled back after her explanation. That was definitely not something she should have said any louder. It wasn’t as bad as a fixed match, but competitors being directly involved in choosing the matchups would ordinarily be completely off the table. People would very naturally become suspicious that the matchups were fixed in a way that would benefit the involved parties. The gambling wasn’t a big deal, though; it’d be more unusual if it *wasn’t* happening.

“Anyway, that’s why she wants you two to get your posters drawn.”

Either way, it was a favor for Nia. There was no reason to refuse, so the two of them agreed.

Lynokis led the two new arrivals to the Silver airship. Rikelvita shouldn’t have moved from where she’d drawn Leeno earlier. Not because of duty, but because now the island was overflowing with all the fighters and some of the particularly excited spectators who had arrived early. With so many people around, the girl had been crying over the thought of going outside. So rather than her being there waiting for the boys, it was more like she was stuck there, paralyzed with fear.

Then again, she did have to draw final versions of the posters, so there wasn’t much time for her to go outside to begin with.

“Popular lady, huh?” Anzel teased as the favorite winner, Leeno, drew gazes from all around.

"I don't know if 'popular' is the word I'd use. I feel as if I'm in a freak show, like I'm some rare monster." Having spent all her time by Nia's side, Lynokis knew that the *popular* figures were those like Nia, Hildetaura, Reliared, even Neal. She hated to admit it, but even Bendelio had his own popularity.

Compared to them, the heated gazes directed at Lynokis now had not a single ounce of affection or goodwill. They were staring because she had been so hard to find. They were staring because she was someone they wanted to take down. They were staring because they didn't like all the special treatment she was getting.

"I don't really care that much either way, though," she admitted. Leeno the adventurer would no longer be in the spotlight the second the tournament ended. It was the only reason the identity existed to begin with. Once she was done here, her role would end. Leeno's adventure would end here. Remembering there would be no "next time" made all the fear disappear. If she left anyone with a bit of a grudge or caused some trouble or built a bit of a bad reputation, it didn't matter—it would all be dumped along with Leeno. It was like a weight was lifted from her shoulders whenever she remembered that.

It meant that she didn't have to hold back anymore. Usually, she was the one stopping Nia, but this time, she was the one threatening violence. In fact, now being in Nia's position, Lynokis much better understood the girl's state of mind. If you didn't like something, just beat it up. Lynokis was beginning to think that way of living was captivating too. She was *really* beginning to think that way.

"What's with that devious look on your face, huh?" Anzel remarked as he watched Lynokis thinking things she absolutely shouldn't have been.

"I just realized that I have nothing to lose. That's all. There's nothing for me to fear."

What a terrifying thing to say. Anzel had no idea if Lynokis was even aware of how it came across.

"So many people here look strong," Gandolph said as he looked around them. He may soon be fighting them—of course he was

worried. “Right, Lynokis— Sorry, Leeno. Which are you entering?”

“You mean which division? Bare-handed. I haven’t said anything publicly and yet there’s already people saying that I picked it because I’d just steamroll everyone in the weapons division, and that would be boring. It’s scary how out of control rumors can get.”

It was such a nasty rumor. What likely happened was that someone had complained about something, and then someone embellished that complaint and turned it into a rumor that they released into the wide ocean of hearsay. They just kept popping up.

“Don’t even bother yourself with those,” Anzel said. “You’ll show ’em all that you’re actually strong when the matches start. You don’t gotta worry about that.”

Lynokis prayed that was the case.

“Oh, if you’re in the bare-handed division, then we might end up getting paired up.”

“I heard Lynette and Fressa are entering the weapons division. What are you entering, Anzel?”

“Weapons.”

“Then I guess we’ll get the chance to decide once and for all which of us is stronger, Gandolph.”

“I have to get payback against you, after all, and I’ll pay it back with interest.”

He must have been referring to that moment when they met three years ago. They’d had some simple spars since then, but no proper matches. Now, the stage was finally set.

At least, if they managed to get matched up. Depending on what the organizers decided, they might not even get that chance.

“Th-Th-Thank you s-so much for coming by!”

They were brought to an airship where a suspicious artist drew their portraits.

“Fifty portraits in total—that completes all the competitors that needed to be drawn.”

And that marked the completion of the job Nia had given Lynokis.

“Th-Th-Thank you, really! You were a big help! A massively big help!”

It also marked the completion of the royal order given to the artist. Lynokis wouldn't be mean about it and say the girl had done the bare minimum. After all, she sketched portraits of fifty people—really, she'd done the best that she could. She still had to clean them up, but for her, that job was ten times easier than actually meeting with people face-to-face. She'd likely have to spend an all-nighter to do it, but it was still much easier.

"Um, if you have a chance to see Nia...t-tell her thanks, please."

"Of course. I will tell her when I get the chance."

In any case, that marked the end of that. The men she'd brought didn't particularly do or say anything before it was all done. It didn't even seem like their understanding had managed to catch up by the time she'd finished her sketch, that was how quick she was.

"We'll take our leave, then. I'm looking forward to the posters."

With that being finished much faster than anticipated, they went their separate ways.

"Oh."

It was only after the group left and Rikelvita was sorting through her sketchbook that she remembered—she'd completely forgotten to ask something important. It was a complete mistake on her part. She'd been so desperate to finish her work that she'd rushed herself too much.

Honestly, she hesitated. She really did hesitate. But Rikelvita still stood up. She couldn't just *not* go. She hadn't done a single thing herself in this royal mission. Nia, a child, had had to bail her out *twice,* even though she was a grown adult. Sometimes, people would say she looked young for her age, but that didn't change that she was a grown woman. She was mature enough to find "grown woman" as a term slightly erotic. Even Leeno had followed through for her by the request of Nia.

And now she was here. From beginning to end, Rikelvita had relied on other people, even those who had nothing to do with the Silvers. She needed to do even just one thing by herself. Just one thing, without asking for help from even her attendants!

"Ngh..."

Her legs were shaking so much she could barely take a step forward... No! She was going to go! She just needed to ask a question. She just needed to ask a question that she forgot to ask while they were here. That was all she had to do. She didn't need to talk to them any more than that.

Be! Brave! Rikel! she thought, desperately trying to psych herself up.

Finally, Rikelvita managed to leave the room. She managed to go down the corridor at her level of fast, exited onto the deck and...

"U-U-Um! Excuse me!" she shouted at the two men who were still lingering at the bottom of the airship ramp, the ones she had just drawn. Leeno...didn't seem to be there. She must have already moved on to her next duty.

That was...fine. Rikelvita would've felt much more at ease if she had been there, but it was fine. The men were the ones she needed to talk to.

"Um! Excuse me! I-I have a question!"

"Wait!" The bigger one raised a hand as a sign for her to stop just as she stepped a single foot on the ramp. "If there's something you want to ask us, we'll go to you, so just wait right—"

Rikelvita didn't hear the rest of the man's sentence. She couldn't focus on that.

Because of her shaky legs, she completely missed the step. She couldn't focus on the words he was saying while she was tumbling through the air.

This is bad.

Rikelvita had always been slow—back in school, everyone else said that she was the girl without a single athletic bone in her body. Even now as an adult, she tumbled a lot. Someone had once said to her that her running was so slow she may as well have been walking.

She'd experienced it so many times that she knew: Falling down the stairs never ended well. There was a high probability that she'd injure herself. She had to at least protect her right arm. She had to protect the hand that she used to draw. She didn't mind breaking a leg or two if she had to.

But there was nothing else she could do. All she had left was to curl in and hold her right arm close.

Please, please let my legs be the ones to break! She squeezed her eyes tight and prayed with all her being.

"Gods, nearly gave me a heart attack."

There was no impact. Instead, she only heard a voice from incredibly close.

"You all right, Anzel?"

"Yeah, I'm good. Hey, missy. Open your eyes already."

Though her eyes were squeezed shut, Rikelvita could somewhat tell what happened. But that was exactly why she was scared to open her eyes. She knew she couldn't stay like this forever, though.

Steeling herself, she slowly opened them—and then immediately shut them again. It was exactly as she'd thought. No, it was *more* than she'd thought. It was scary. Terrifying, even. She'd fallen into various situations through her clumsiness over the years, but this was a first even for her. She despised how easily she always broke out in a sweat. What if she was making him feel uncomfortable because she was soaked through?

"Hey, you ain't actually injured, are you?"

He was worried about her. Because she couldn't open her eyes, she'd ended up making him worried. This clumsy, troublesome, gloomy, sweaty woman that barely gave off an image of cleanliness—who wasn't just looked after by Nia, a literal child, but had also felt safe and grinned away like a disgusting creep while she imagined Nia naked—shouldn't cause anyone any more issues.

"I-I'm o-okay." She couldn't open her eyes, but she'd managed to respond.

"Good. Can you open your eyes, then? I'll set you down."

"Y-Y-Yeah..."

When she slowly opened her eyes, she was met with the face of a young man. The face of Anzel, the man she had just drawn.

He... He was kind of frowning like she was being a hassle, so that helped her regain her cool. This wasn't the time to be thinking about how bad she was with strangers—she was seriously being a pain.

Apparently, Anzel had jumped up the ramp when she'd missed the step and caught her before she could hit the ground.

He'd caught her in a princess carry... It was just like the princess knight and the prince in the paper play she'd drawn not that long ago. Though in that case, it was reversed, and the prince had been caught by the princess knight. Either way, the pose was the same.



"Th-Thank you..."

Anzel climbed back up the ramp with Rikelvita still in his arms and gently set her down on the deck.

"Be careful, yeah? If anything happened to you... Well, it's fine." That was all Anzel said before he turned and went back down the ramp...

Wait.

"E-Excuse me! I, um, I actually...had something I forgot to ask!"

"Huh? Who, me?"

"Y-Yes!" That was why she had chased after him to begin with. It had all become a much bigger spectacle than she'd intended, but the cause of that almost-incident had simply been because she'd forgotten to ask a question.

"What is it?"

"Um, it's just... Y-You wrote that y-you were a bartender..."

"Yeah?"

"C-Could I ask for the name of your bar...?"

Anzel frowned. "You chased after me just for that?"

"Y-Yes."

He let out a long, tired sigh.

"The Shifty Shadow Rat. It's a cheap little back-alley place, not somewhere for you to go, missy. Besides, it's probably gonna go under soon... But, whatever, here." Anzel took out a business card from a small leather pouch and held it out to her. It was an exceedingly simple card with only the name and address of the bar. "I'll treat you to a drink if you drop by. See ya."

First she fell from the ramp, then she was caught in a princess carry. Rikelvita's servants were all flustered around her, but not a single word was entering her ears.

Anzel had left. In Rikelvita's hand was the business card for his bar. There was the faintest whiff of tobacco left on it.

A princess carry. She had been caught in a princess carry by a young man roughly her age. She had been up close to him.

Never mind her athletic ability, her senses must have been just as dull. Because it only took until now for her face to feel like it was on

fire.

All of her students were now on the island. Nia knew that much for sure when the posters began making their rounds. Named as the fifty featured fighters people should look out for, those carefully selected entrants from over ten thousand people had their name, fighting style or school, occupation, and tournament division noted on their poster. The information provided was as simple as that.

The art was beautiful, of course. Rikelvita had drawn them at least two or three times prettier than the real thing, had touched them up a little without making them unrecognizable. She had managed to get the perfect balance—she really was a good artist.

At first, the posters had been pinned up on the bulletin boards and shop interiors, but people kept running away with them. The original plan was to eventually make some cheap merchandise with the art from the posters, and those would then connect to merch for the tournament that would go on to be their biggest source of income.

They had originally been intended as a way to advertise the other merch they were going to make, and also to raise awareness of the competitors for the betting. That was why they'd plastered them up for free for anyone to see.

"They're all making good expressions."

Nia had lined up five posters on the table in her room: Lynokis, Lynette, Gandolph, Anzel, and Fressa. All of them were her proud students.

What kind of battles will these five show me? I truly am looking forward to this.

And so marked the start of the preliminaries.

Chapter 4: The First Days of Preliminaries

It was still early morning when the competitors began their days. With the ticket they received at the time they signed into their accommodation, they cross-checked their entrant number with the lists on the bulletin board and headed to their respective arenas. There were almost ten thousand participants to get through after all—if they didn't get through the numbers quickly, they'd never have enough time.

The posters had naturally already made their rounds on the tournament island. There were those who were furious that they hadn't been chosen, those who approved of the choices, and those who felt fear take root in their hearts knowing they may end up competing against those fighters. The reactions to the posters were many, but the passion among the competitors universally rose.

The preliminaries would now begin.

"I shouldn't even be surprised," Fressa—or Freeze as she was known for now—muttered as she peeked over the crowd to see the matchups on the board. Almost every person she had marked as strong or weak had been spread around equally. *Trust Nia to know her stuff.* It didn't take long for her to find the names she was looking for when everyone around here was loudly wondering where the strong competitors like Zeon or the Kedo Brothers were positioned.

Everyone who seemed strong was scattered through the lineups. Nia must have ranked the strengths of the competitors as she was going around having the posters drawn. It was blatantly obvious that the matchups had been designed with those rankings in mind; there was no way all of her students would have been separated

otherwise.

Then again, they were split into armed and bare-handed divisions, so maybe a coincidence like that *could* happen. Either way, the competitors that Fressa had found the most interesting had also been split apart, which had to have been intentional. Literally *all* of them were separated; there was no way it was a coincidence.

The truth behind-the-scenes aside, Fressa was pretty sure she'd be safe until the main matches. From the gossip she was hearing around her, there was one competitor in the prelims in particular that was pretty scary...but she'd already checked them out. She knew roughly how strong they were.

She was sure that if all she had to do was win, she would be fine. Things might get problematic afterward, but there was no point worrying about that right now.

"Freeze, where's your match?"

When Fressa stepped away from the board, an aristocratic lady dressed in attire completely unfitting of the current environment approached. She was the Mystic Butterfly of the Night, Scarlet, a whip user who had competed in the Umbral Arena. They'd been friends for a good while now. When you first met her, she would come across as a little annoying, but she was surprisingly down-to-earth and easy to get along with.

"I'm at court four, but it's not 'til tomorrow, so I'm free today."

Preliminaries would last four days, with the majority finished by day three, and the final qualifiers for the main matches on day four. There would then be a month break until the main matches to allow the competitors to recover completely from any injuries or fatigue suffered through the preliminaries. It was a pretty long gap, but they intended to hold other events during that time to keep interest high.

All sorts of preparations and recordings would take place in order to help build up hype for the finals, like short interviews intended to dive into the backstories of the main competitors, and losers matches to give those who didn't qualify one last chance to get a spot in the finals. The organizers had put careful thought into how to still make that month exciting.

At least, that was what it all was on the surface. But in reality,

that blank space was intended as a time to generate excitement surrounding the betting over the tournament results, and for the elite to fit the tournament into their schedules. His Majesty was making all the fine adjustments he could in order to accommodate as many of them as possible; he'd chosen to start the main matches on a day when most of the elites of the surrounding countries would have relatively free time. Far more money had been invested than anticipated, so it gave them the leeway to make much about the tournament grander than they'd initially planned.

"You'll come cheer me on then, yeah? I have my matches today."

"Huh? No, I'm gonna go watch some other fighters. The bare-handed division looks interesting."

"Huh? You're going to just leave me hanging like that? You're going to abandon me for someone else?"

"Huh? Is that a problem?"

"Huh? Why would it not be? I'm your friend, you've gotta at least cheer me on from the audience."

Realizing that if this continued, Scarlet would likely hold a grudge toward her later, Fressa waved her off with a flippant, "Okay, okay, I'll make sure to come back when it's your turn," and swiftly took her leave.

It occurred to her soon after that she'd forgotten to ask when exactly Scarlet's match was. Seemed she wouldn't be able to cheer her on, after all. What a terrible shame.

The arena had been split into eight basic courts. The matches were scheduled in a simple tournament style, with winners over the next three days participating in deciding matches for the semifinals on the fourth day.

Competitors were allowed to view matches as they pleased. Regular spectators had to make sure they watched from the audience seats. The matches would also be recorded, so there were about four production crews stationed around the hall. There were the Liston, Silver, and two royal production crews.

Eighty percent of the courts were dedicated to the weapons division, whereas bare-handed only had the courts at the very edge.

The bare-handed competitors numbered far fewer than the armed ones, and the courts allocated to them were also slightly smaller. It was almost adorable how reserved it felt. It really felt as if the organizers were using every last bit of space that they could. To be fair, it *was* just prelims, and there were ten thousand people to get through—it was likely an arrangement made so they could have multiple matches as quickly as possible.

"Is that them...?" After leaving Scarlet behind to enter the arena, Fressa approached a group of people with staff bands around their arms. They had cameras and other strange equipment, so they had to be a magivision crew. "Excuse me, can I ask which matches are the most anticipated right now?"

"Hmm?" The man looked a little surprised at suddenly being spoken to. When he turned around, Fressa was a little surprised herself—she recognized this man.

"Wait, are you Bendelio? From *Tales of a Liston Stroll*?" And the man that Nia hated the most. Well, it felt like there was a bit of respect in that relationship as well. The best way to interpret it was probably that Nia had a lot of complicated feelings about him. If she felt nothing but hatred, she would likely have killed him already. It was Nia, after all.

Still, Fressa hadn't expected that out of all the production crews, she would accidentally end up interacting with the Liston one. Talking as if she recognized Bendelio felt like she'd just put her foot in her mouth. She'd wanted to remain completely unaffiliated with anything related to Nia while on the island...

No taking it back now, though. What was undeniable was that this crew were Nia's colleagues—Fressa couldn't show them any disrespect.

"Why yes, I am Bendelio. Thank you for watching my show." His face was a little distinctive, but his smile was strong. Despite his appearance, the man was very calm. Physically, he might not have been very strong, but he certainly was mentally. Fressa was certain he must have been incredibly skilled at negotiating. He came across as the type that could be very stubborn and forward.

Also, actually getting to see him in person, he was quite the

looker, much more handsome than seeing him through the MagiPad. His appearance might not have been appealing to the current generation, but Fressa liked it. If he had been ten years younger, she might have tried to chat him up.

"You must be Freeze, right? You were on one of the posters."

"Ah, yes. Nice to meet you..." Honestly, Fressa had wanted to refuse having a poster drawn since she didn't really want to be targeted by other contestants or the audience, but she couldn't refuse a request from Nia.

She really had ended up talking to someone that was a bit awkward in her current situation. It would be best if she quickly finished what she came here for and went on her way.

"You're going to record the prelims, yeah? So there have to be matches that you think you absolutely can't miss. If it's not a problem, could you tell me which those are?" With it being so crowded and so many matches going on at the same time, it was hard to know where to look. At times like that, there was nothing better than asking someone who had already done their research—in other words, the people doing the recording.

"I don't mind at all. You must be curious about your opponents, huh? We're planning to go to the matches in this order here..." Bendelio cheerfully told Fressa the route they were intending to take through the matches. Apparently, it wasn't something he felt they needed to hide, so Fressa could tag along if she wanted.

Following them around *would* be much easier than just going off of what she'd been told. Fressa wanted to hurry up and stop interacting with them, but now that she'd gone this far, perhaps it was pointless to bother.

Unfortunately, it seemed things wouldn't be so simple—it turned out the matches they wanted to record were completely different from the ones Fressa wanted to watch.

"Are there any fighters that you're interested in, Freeze?"

As reluctant as she was to continue interacting, and as much as she'd rather say no to avoid unnecessarily giving information freely to someone, these were associates of Nia's. She didn't mind giving them a little treat.

"The second match on court nine of the bare-handed division."

"That would be...Sonicspeed Zeon's match, yes?"

Zeon was a famous wolf beastkin adventurer. His achievements were incredible and he was quite popular on top of that. Thanks to the magivision interviewer, he'd gained the affectionate nickname of "Dog Ears" which had led some passionate dog lovers to become his fans. Even now, his reputation among the tournament goers was positive as a potential winner.

Naturally, Bendelio and his crew had their eye on him, but from what Fressa had just heard, they intended to record a different match going on at the same time. They may have been thinking that it would be a given Zeon would win his match, so they could wait to record him later.

"Zeon is going to lose," Fressa said.

"What?"

Court nine's second match was between Zeon and none other than Gandolph. If they were fighting with weapons, perhaps Zeon would have had a chance, but bare-handed, Gandolph would absolutely come out on top. There was no way in hell Zeon would be able to crush that man's defense.

After parting ways with the Liston crew, Fressa went on a wander taking a glance at each of the matches. For the most part she didn't remain for long, but she'd stop for a little longer if any of them caught her eye.

For now, it seemed her evaluations were not incorrect. The fighters that never caught her eye before didn't catch her eye now. A lot of the entrants were beginners who entered either for the prize or for the experience. It would be in their best interests for them to be careful and retire early so they didn't end up badly injured.

Even with that in mind, there was still a bit of tension surrounding the armed fights. The weapons being used were blunt ones that had been prepared by the tournament organizers, especially for those fighting with blades. Swords had their blades completely dulled so they were less deadly.

On the other hand, those with blunt weapons like maces or clubs

were allowed to use them as is, so long as they didn't have anything like spikes on them. The judges would decide whether or not private weapons were acceptable for use in the tournament. Magic-enhanced weapons were also a no-go.

But even with all those safety precautions, a dulled blade would still be going up against another blade. You could still kill someone with a wooden pole, or even just a single stone. Hit the wrong place and it would all be over in that single moment. It could be a complete accident, but a single strike could still kill a person. That tension made it fun to watch, but...it was almost time.

It was almost time for the match between Gandolph and Sonicspeed Zeon. This was the one match Fressa could not miss.

She wanted to see just how Gandolph's training had been going. She was already certain she would walk out of that match breathing a sigh of relief knowing they were in different divisions.

The audience numbers for the bare-handed division were generally low, but right now, a whole crowd of competitors had gathered, even those who were in the weapons division. Most had likely come to see Zeon's match.

A number of the entrants Fressa had marked were also watching —but they likely weren't here for Zeon.

A giant of a man was calmly sitting, awaiting his turn. His posture was stable and serene, as if he were a rock. He was Gandolph, vice-deputy instructor of the Heavenstriker school. Even disregarding his large frame, he exuded an aura of strength. The many eyes trained on him were sharp.

Many of the fighters had discerned Gandolph's true strength.

"I feel bad for him."

Fressa jumped at the sudden voice from beside her. She hadn't even heard any footsteps or felt their presence, hadn't even detected them approaching. If they had been approaching with the intent to kill, Fressa would've been dead. It had been a long time since she had been caught *this* off guard. It wasn't even as if she hadn't been paying attention.

However, the ability to hide one's nerves being shaken was

something assassins were proud of.

"Hmm?" When Fressa *calmly* turned to the side, a fox-eared beastkin was standing next to her.

"Oh, I was just thinking I feel bad for Zeon. No way he's winning this one. That guy over there's not someone you wanna get matched up against in the prelims." The girl was pointing toward the large rock of a man.

Fressa fully agreed. Zeon would've likely progressed to the finals if he hadn't been up against Gandolph.

"You were one of the people drawn on the posters, weren't you?" Fressa asked.

"Yup. You too. You're definitely strong." The fox girl gave a friendly smile. If Fressa remembered correctly, her name was Tohaulow. "From taking a look around, I could count on one hand the number of people that could beat that big guy. You'd be included, by the way."

This girl was good.

"Unfortunately, I'm entering the weapons division. I'm just here to watch."

"Oh, really?" Tohaulow leaned forward and looked into Fressa's eyes. "I thought you'd be in this division. You look like you'd be strong even without a weapon."

That's my line, Fressa thought bitterly. She had thought this fox-eared girl would be strong even before those posters had gone around, but seeing her up close like this completely changed her impression yet again. She was likely stronger than Fressa had originally surmised. The girl was skilled enough to approach Fressa without her even noticing. She was a prime example of the natural physical capabilities of the beastkin.

"I won't complain about having fewer rivals to worry about, though," Tohaulow said.

So she was entering the bare-handed division.

As they were chatting, the crowd started getting excited. A wolfman had arrived—Sonicspeed Zeon. His body was lean and well maintained, like a terrifyingly sharp needle. You only had to look at the way he walked to understand how strong he was. There was not

a single opening; the man never let his guard down for even a moment. The match hadn't even started, but he was already primed to attack.

The moment he looked at Gandolph sitting quietly at the side, his face darkened. Fressa could guess what ran through his mind. *"Oh, I might not be able to win against him."* Something like that.

Zeon was strong. No joke, he was an exceptional adventurer with enough talent and strength for everyone to accept that he was a potential winner. But it was because he was strong that he fully understood the strength of his opponent. As Tohaulow said, it was hard not to feel bad for him.

That wolf was about to fight with someone he had a very slim chance of defeating.

Not long after, the two were called up to the court. Their size difference was insane. Also, the result went exactly as expected.

"And...fight!"

BOOM!

A deafening collision echoed through the arena, rendering all other noise silent for just a moment.

The moment the referee signaled for the fight to start, Zeon had immediately fired a sonicspeed low kick right into Gandolph's thigh. Gandolph had remained still.

Or rather, there had been no need for him to move.

"Aw man, he's done it now. Stop it there, stop it there!"

Both competitors had stopped moving after the first blow. Tohaulow took that moment to barge in. It seemed she had noticed it too.

"Hey, what are you doing?!" the referee frantically shouted as he tried to stop the girl.

"Zeon's injured, man. His leg broke," Tohaulow told him casually, causing the man's head to turn to Zeon in shock. "Staff, over here! Bring a stretcher, please!"

Beside the fox girl who was doing as she pleased, Zeon remained silent, still unmoving from the position he'd kicked Gandolph's thigh in. It must've hurt like crazy—enough that he couldn't even move.

"You really got paired up with the worst opponent. Up we go." After Tohaulow helped lower Zeon onto the stretcher, she quickly picked him up and carried him away. Everyone was silent. The moment the man everyone thought was a potential winner disappeared out of sight, the uproar started.

"Sorry, but may I do a quick pat down?" the referee asked in a daze, turning to Gandolph after watching Zeon be carried away.

The kicker had been the one to break their leg, not the one who was kicked—the *kicker.* It appeared that was enough to make the referee suspect there was foul play, perhaps something hidden underneath Gandolph's pants.

"O-Oh, of course. Go ahead."

Gandolph was just as shocked. He'd never imagined his opponent's leg would break just by kicking him. Sure, he'd guarded with chi the moment the leg landed, but he'd done that all the time when sparring with Anzel. He'd done a very basic guard; he had been approaching the match with the mindset that if he let his guard down for even a moment, it would be over.

He'd been aiming to guard and then counter. He'd known he wouldn't be able to beat Zeon with speed. But the result of that...was him taking the kick, and physically feeling the man's bone break. He felt it snap, just like that. Never mind getting in a counter, the match was already over.

Zeon's kick being so powerful was a big reason for the outcome. The strength he'd put in had been bounced right back at his limb. If he'd done it as a feint or a way to get a quick little hit in, he'd have probably been fine. But that strike had been intended to end the match in one go. Had Zeon's opponent been someone else, that kick would've been powerful enough to shatter their thigh. If *Gandolph's* leg had broken, the result of that match would've been far different.

That match felt more like a bad incident. But Gandolph had won through pure strength, there was no mistake about that.

"Man, even preemptive attacks are scary against someone like him..." Fressa muttered as she left the court.

A full-on attack risked a far more intense rebound. Fressa really was eternally grateful that she wasn't in the same division as

Gandolph. She was pretty sure even a sharpened blade wouldn't cut through that man.

The immediate defeat of the adventurer Sonicspeed Zeon was the first dramatic upset of the tournament. The beastkin had both strength and notable achievements to his name. No one ever thought he would lose, and yet in the second round of the tournament, he was out.

Many of the Altoire citizens hadn't been paying the most attention since they thought the preliminaries wouldn't be that exciting, but with this, it was no longer something they could completely ignore. They couldn't help but look forward to the rest of the tournament after such a shocking incident.

And that incident let the true power of the Heavenstriker style be known to the world.

"You've gotta be kidding me?!" a deep, masculine voice boomed from one end of the guild to the other.

Kukriziev Eaf, the guildmaster of the royal capital's adventurer's guild, had been watching the preliminaries of the martial arts tournament from his office.

His dreams and ambitions and desires had all been snuffed out in the second round of matches. It had happened on the first day of prelims, when barely anyone was watching and no one cared about the outcomes.

The strongest adventurer that he knew, Sonicspeed Zeon, whom he had raised a massive pile of money to hire, had ended his match being carried away in a stretcher. Unfortunately, no station had been recording the match, only turning to see what had happened after the audience began making noise. The most important part of the match was nowhere to be seen.

Well, not exactly nowhere. By pure chance, the main recording had managed to catch the fight in the background, as small as they were, and that was being repeatedly shown right now. Kukriziev couldn't see what happened at first, but when a fox-eared beastkin interrupted the fight and the referee announced the result of the

match, his understanding finally caught up.

No, he'd been vaguely aware of what had happened; he just didn't want to acknowledge it himself at first.

For a moment, he tried to delude himself into thinking that something had happened he hadn't seen or something had happened outside of the match, and so this match was just being temporarily postponed while he was carried away... He'd had the slightest hope that something like that could be the case. But the reality was right in front of him.

"How?!"

But he didn't understand. The image was small, but the match could still be seen fairly clearly. The moment the match started, Zeon had dashed forward at incredible speed and got in a very good kick—and that kick landed. Despite the distance, the sound of the blow could be clearly heard throughout the hall, that was how intense the attack had been. It was such a good kick that it should've decided the match. Kukriziev had instinctively went to cheer. *He got one in! This is it!* he'd thought to himself.

And yet, the one who was injured was *Zeon.* Just what had happened? What was *happening*?

Sonicspeed Zeon was the adventurer Kukriziev had called in for the tournament. He had called the adventurer to represent their guild, a first-rate adventurer that he had expected to win. In fact, it would've been fine even if he didn't. Just getting a result that wouldn't put the guild to shame would have been enough.

If he were to be greedy, Kukriziev had hoped Zeon would even beat Leeno. Even though she was active in Altoire, Leeno still completely ignored the guild—he wanted to teach her a lesson. He wanted to show her that there were adventurers much stronger than her, to not get full of herself, that it wasn't too late for her to return to them.

But *this* was the result. Zeon lost to a vice-deputy instructor, a deputy of a deputy. He lost to someone who taught children, who was a lowly instructor of a small dojo within the academy grounds, who wasn't even a full instructor.

Just what was that man?

"Gnnnnggguuuuuhhhhh...!"

He was so horribly frustrated that all he could do was let out a strangled groan.

He'd gone too far.

Well, actually, it still hadn't registered that he'd *done* anything. But it was undeniably something he had done, and he had gone too far.

Gandolph let out a heavy sigh.

Sonicspeed Zeon was not someone he knew very well, but he had at least heard that the beastkin was a famous adventurer. A first-rate adventurer who was incredibly talented and all the richer for it. Having seen him face-to-face, Gandolph recognized that strength. Zeon exuded the aura of the strong.

And yet he'd made a man like that break his own body.

Oh, but, of course, he didn't mean that it would've been any better had it been some nameless nobody instead, definitely not. It was just...if he'd caught the leg, it would've ended at that. Gandolph could've ended the match without causing such an extreme injury. Catch someone like that with strength, and a light beastkin specializing in speed wouldn't be able to do anything to retaliate.

If this had been a real battle, a fight to the death, one where Zeon could've held a weapon, the outcome would've been more uncertain. But in hand-to-hand combat, Gandolph easily won.

And yet, Zeon had broken his leg. That low kick had been incredible. Strangely, it reminded Gandolph of the first time he'd been up against Lynokis. It had been so fast that it had been impossible for him to dodge.

But this time was different. It wasn't that he couldn't react, it was that he *didn't.* Because he knew he couldn't dodge, he chose to focus on defense instead.

And that resulted in the broken leg. Zeon must have been shocked, but so was Gandolph himself. Even though it wasn't an intentional injury, an adventurer's body was their lifeblood. If they suffered a bad injury, it would affect their work. He'd have to go through rehab, as well.

Gandolph had heard there was a magic physician on the premises. Hopefully, there would be no long-term damage...

"Yo. The folk around here sure aren't saying the nicest things about you, are they?"

Some of his colleagues came up as he stood there wallowing in...regret? No, it was something different, but it definitely left a bitter taste in his mouth. They were fellow dojo instructors within the academy.

"Are they?" Gandolph had noticed there were people glancing at him as they whispered among themselves, but he wasn't close enough to hear what they were saying.

"Yeah, they've been saying you cheated or something. What happened?"

"Well, I..." Gandolph went to explain, but then someone caught his eye. "Sorry, I'll explain later!"

He quickly ran to the neighboring tenth court, where a small elderly man had just walked out. He was someone Gandolph had been curious about for a while. The shock he felt from the moment he'd seen the man, and the complete lack of opening in every movement he made, made it clear to Gandolph that he knew how to use chi, and at a level far surpassing him.

This was a match he absolutely had to see.

Gandolph ran as close to the court as he could.

"Let the match...begin!"

And just at that moment, the referee gave the signal to start.

The elderly man's opponent was a martial artist of the Longarm style. The founder of the style was apparently someone with such long arms, they could use them as a whip, a club, and even as a blade. It was a fairly famous style in Wu Haitong.

Meanwhile, the elderly man silently stood there, not even getting into position. His hands were clasped behind his back as he stood straight. The lack of stance reminded Gandolph of Nia. If he recalled correctly, she had said once, "Stances like that are specifically used when fighting against people. In my case, I fight more than just people, so if I get into too fixed a stance, I have a tendency to be

slow in my response time to any unexpected attacks."

Perhaps that was irrelevant to the current fight.

"Fwoooah!" The Longarm fighter let out a loud rousing cry as he jumped at the elderly man. Upon greatly contorting his body, he swung his arms wide, and aimed a heavy, high-speed attack straight for the man's head. It looked like it would make a nice sound upon completion with how fast those arms were being swung. Gandolph could tell it was a heavy strike.

But to that strike, the old man stepped forward. Though it was a sharp step, it almost looked like his body was flowing gently, almost like a mirage... That illusory step forward allowed the old man to just barely dodge the strike aimed for him, and then throw a simple palm strike into his opponent's torso.

Gandolph heard a heavy thud.

"Grah!"

That thud hadn't been the sound of the palm strike landing, but of the stomp of the foot. The elderly man had used the strong step forward to increase the weight of his strike. It was the same logic behind Chi Fist: Roaring Thunder.

But...

"Match over!"

Having taken the hit directly, the Longarm fighter went twirling through the air off of the court. It looked like a comedy bit. According to the rules, stepping outside of the court was an immediate disqualification, so the winner was decided.

The man was so skilled. The way he utilized his chi was so good. He wasn't any stronger than he needed to be. Given his opponent was standing up without any problems, he likely wasn't even that injured. Just that alone was enough to tell Gandolph how trained that man was in chi manipulation. He didn't go overboard in the way Gandolph had. He was making sure to use only what was necessary.

Just like Nia.

Having witnessed that match, Gandolph now knew this man was even stronger than he imagined. If he showed his true strength, how would—

"Gh...!"

Their eyes met. They didn't just meet, the elderly man was walking over to him.

"Oh my." The man stopped in front of Gandolph and looked up. The size difference was like that between an adult and a child. The man scrutinized Gandolph closely, and then chuckled. "I really don't want to end up against you. I couldn't win without killing you."

Gandolph's instincts immediately told him that this was true. It wasn't just an empty threat. This old man would definitely come at him with the intent to kill if they were to fight.

"You better forfeit if we get paired up. You're still young. There's no need to rush to your death."

"Thank you for the warning."

"You thank me, but you don't intend to listen, do you?" The old man chuckled again. "You most certainly are a martial artist. Fine then, I'll do my best to hold back—but make sure you surrender when you're only half dead, all right?"

The elderly man kept laughing as he walked away.

He was strong. Far stronger than Gandolph was now.

Could he truly win against someone like that?

That didn't matter. What did was that he gave it his very best shot should the time arise.

Sonicspeed Zeon was eliminated from the tournament. The results of the first day of prelims had left the night in Altoire buzzing with excitement. Everyone was shocked by the incident that had resulted in the immediate elimination of one of the expected winners of the tournament, from those just finishing work to those busy with housework to the students—everyone who hadn't been in attendance or seen the latest broadcast.

The martial arts tournament had been hyped up for a whole year. There had been several interviews and short specials on magivision covering famous adventurers or renowned martial artists, rare martial arts schools from Wu Haitong, races rarely seen in the country, and martial artists coming from very far away. Those broadcasts detailed their basic achievements and history in order to raise the awareness of the competitors, and that had resulted in

many Altoire citizens greatly awaiting the day the tournament would begin.

And there really were *many.*

At first, they hadn't been very open to the idea, saying it was a waste of taxes or it was all purely for leisure. But then they were surprised by the reward money, and then there were famous overseas celebrities arriving in the country, and that ended up making expectations for the tournament much higher. Following that was the knowledge of Leeno.

Before long, conversations surrounding the tournament were coloring the whole land, rumors began spreading, and the expectations for the event became astronomical. People would have heated debates about who would win, or would choose a specific competitor to dedicate their whole life to as if they were a religion. Those debates about who would win would turn into fights, and before long, so-called tipsters—who were frankly very suspicious—began popping up all over the city. The underworld also began making their move on dominating the betting spheres before anyone else could take control. When one part of this strange cycle began to get traction, so did the next.

Everyone had become increasingly excited for the event, even when it was still just in the lead-up. *Has it still not started yet? When will it start?*

They had been teased for so long, but it had now finally begun. And from the very first day, there was already news shaking the public.

"Aw man, I decided not to bother 'cause it was the prelims."

"I worked out my shifts so I could watch the main matches."

"Why did they not record such an important match? Did not a single channel catch it?"

"I'd bet so much on Sonicspeed Zeon too..."

Through all the complaints and whining, they were all still glued to the MagiPad. On a related topic, official betting hadn't begun yet. Any betting that was going on was entirely unofficial.

That commotion didn't only occur on the first day. There were so many good bits to watch that people kept asking for more

rebroadcasts, and so the capital began setting up nighttime MagiPad stations around the city.

Thanks to that, Altoire became a city that never slept—but that story wouldn't come until a few days later.

"Oh, Freeze! There you are! I'm so glad I could find you!"

It was day two of the preliminaries. Fressa—whose match was today—and Scarlet—who had lost in her very first match the day before—were approached by a man with a distinctive face the moment they entered the arena. He had a staff armband, and the lanyard around his neck bounced as he jogged up.

"Wait, Bendelio?! That's Bendelio, isn't— Gwah?!" The moment Scarlet—*who had lost in her very first match*—began making a fuss, Fressa shut her up with a swift body blow.

"Good morning, Bendelio," Fressa greeted pleasantly. "Did you need me for something?"

"Yes, but, um...is your friend all right?" He hadn't seen Fressa's impossibly quick punch.

"She's fine, she gets stomachaches all the time. It's not unusual for her to get the runs."

"Oof, I do hear it's good to make sure you keep warm. Oh, and that alcohol isn't very easy for your stomach either. Make sure she doesn't drink too much."

What is he on about?

Not wanting to get too involved with Nia's associates, Fressa quickly moved the conversation on: "So what did you need me for?"

"Oh, right. Freeze, would you mind telling us which matches to look out for?"

"You're asking *me?*"

"Yes. We missed that vital opportunity yesterday, y'see..."

He must have been talking about Zeon's loss. Everyone thought that Zeon would win, that Gandolph was just some no-name martial artist from some random dojo, so none of the production crews had recorded their match. They'd luckily managed to catch it in the background of one of the broadcasts, but naturally, that wasn't good enough for the audience. They'd apparently already received a ton

of complaints about it, even though only a single day had passed.

"That *was* unfortunate."

Fressa didn't actually think the match would've made for very exciting viewing. There was barely any movement, and the way it ended felt much more like an accident. Regardless, everyone wanted to know how someone that was assumed to win had lost. That was something they wanted to be able to see for themselves. That was why magivision was being used to document the tournament to begin with.

Since Fressa had correctly predicted the outcome, Bendelio was now coming to her for her thoughts and advice. Honestly, she really didn't want to stand out, but...Bendelio was Nia's colleague. She couldn't let this chance go to waste. As much as she didn't want to be associated with him.

"I think you'll be fine if you just follow the competitors on the posters, especially the matches where both competitors are from that cohort."

"Like your first match today?"

"Oh, uh..." Fressa was pretty sure that her first match was against a tiger beastkin who was nowhere near as strong as he looked. She assumed the reason he had been drawn was purely for visuals. Tiger beastkin were both rare in Altoire and looked strong, so their appearance alone could leave quite an impact. In which case, maybe it would also make for a good recording. A large beastkin would be getting his ass beat by a human lady, after all.

But Fressa didn't want to stand out. She didn't want to be caught on camera and she didn't want to be broadcast to the world. She was using a completely fake identity and wearing a disguise, but it didn't change that Fressa was a member of the underworld; nothing good would come from having the eyes of the public on her. Becoming too well-known could be a problem, especially if that ended up blowing her cover.

At times like this, a scapegoat would be perfect... Ah, there's one.

Just as Fressa was worrying over how to respond, the perfect sacrifice came into view. "Try her," Fressa said, pointing elsewhere. At the other end of her gesture was Lynette, who also seemed to

have her matches today. Fressa didn't know who her opponent was, but that didn't matter. "She's another favorite to win. I think you should follow all of her matches."

There was no lie in Fressa's suggestion. While it was less certain that Lynette could win the whole tournament, she'd at least make it to finals for sure. Besides, looking at all the competitors, female fighters were significantly fewer. With so few women competing, Fressa would like if that precious female competitor slot was given to Lynette. Fressa would then hide in Lynette's shadow so she didn't stand out.

"Ooh, the lady over there? Is she that strong?"

Good, she'd managed to divert Bendelio's attention. Unfortunately, Scarlet was giving her the side-eye now that she'd recovered from the punch. You know, the woman who lost in her first round. Oh right, she had been drawn on the posters too. But she still lost in her first round.

"I've met her before, actually," Bendelio said. "Maybe I should go and see what she says."

"What? Oh..."

Right, Bendelio was part of the Listons' company. The fact he was interacting with Nia meant that it was highly likely he'd met Neal and his attendant before.

"Thank you for indulging me so early in the morning. Good luck in your matches."

Fressa let out a sigh as Bendelio walked away. She'd somehow made it through. At least for today, she'd avoided getting recorded. Hopefully.

"Isn't it pointless to try and escape?" Scarlet—the woman who was knocked out in her first match—said, eyebrow raised. They'd been friends for quite a while, and Scarlet had at least one foot in the underworld, so she could tell what Fressa was thinking. "I thought you were aiming to win this thing. People are gonna start paying attention to you the second you make it to the qualifiers for the main matches."

"I know. But even if I can't avoid standing out eventually, I'll avoid it as much as possible, that's all. The fewer people who know

who I am, the better."

"Like I said, isn't it pointless to try and escape?" She'd said it twice. This woman who lost in her first match said it twice.

She wasn't wrong, though.

At the same time Fressa was talking with Bendelio, Sauzan of the Heroic Star Assembly was staring at the posters hung down the corridor from the entrance of the arena. Apparently, they had started with fifty, but whenever a pictured competitor lost, their poster was torn down.

Sauzan had found the posters after coming to the arena to cheer on Tohaulow, who'd had her matches on the first day, and to scout out the other competitors. At first, he'd just given them a rough look, searching for himself since he knew he was supposed to be there. But then as he saw more of the posters, that casual look became a different feeling entirely.

Whoever picked these isn't normal. They've seen through everyone's power levels.

Most of the competitors who Sauzan and Tohaulow had agreed were strong or dangerous had been drawn for these posters. Only about a third of them were an exception to that, but given those were all famous adventurers or popular martial artists, they were likely reputable contestants picked solely to increase hype for the tournament. The only ones not drawn up were the henchmen of that old guy from Wu Haitong, but beyond that, this person had judged everyone perfectly.

The man who just passed behind Sauzan was one of those henchmen. In his case, though, his strength was blatant. It would have been obvious to anyone who looked at him that he was strong. What was more, that was the strength of an *assassin.*

He was a large, built old man that had often been hanging around the other elderly Wu Haitong man. Given he was carrying a big red wooden pole, his matches had to be today. He hadn't been drawn on the posters, but he was unmistakably powerful.

"Hey, big guy," Sauzan called out. The man stopped and turned a sharp gaze his way. "Mind telling me your name?" Having no poster

meant there was no easily obtainable information.

"Why?"

It was a good question. Sauzan suddenly striking up conversation in the way he had could have easily been mistaken for flirting if he'd asked it of a girl.

"'Cause you're strong. I'm in the weapons division too, so I'll probably end up fighting against you at some point," Sauzan said.

The man was silent as he looked away. "Then you don't need to know my name. I will be losing today."

What?

"Now it's my turn to ask why," Sauzan replied.

There was no way someone with such all-encompassing strength could lose in the prelims. He was strong enough to win the whole damn tournament.

"Don't ask questions with such obvious answers," the man said as he began walking away. "It's because I'll be fighting someone stronger than me."

Ohya, first disciple of the head of the main house of the Qilong, Ku Yunxie, was the second strongest assassin of the organization. The two men weren't that far apart in age, and in fact, there was a time that Ohya was more akin to a junior who referred to Ku as "boss."

Blessed with a naturally large body, he had as much strength as his size suggested, and he had spent much of his life as a martial arts dropout wreaking havoc in the countryside. At some point, he decided to move his antics to the city, and before long, he was beaten up by Ku, began respecting him, and then ended up dedicating his life to him despite how much Ku treated him like a nuisance.

It was not long after that when Ohya accidentally learned Ku's real identity as an assassin of the Qilong and was nearly killed for it...until a third option was presented to him.

"I can end your life right here, or you can join the Qilong."

And that was how Ohya went from a simple troublemaker to a member of the underworld. He had no regrets, though. If he'd

continued his previous way of living, nothing good would've come of his life. The Qilong were an organization that existed for the sake of the country—it wasn't made for the money. They were the ones who dirtied their hands when there were evils that couldn't be punished by the law. An outlaw had managed to reach the level of a government official, even if it was in the shadows. It was a pretty good promotion if you asked him.

Several years passed after that, and he'd begun entering the age where his finely trained body was beginning to deteriorate. His Emperor's Fist—the hidden technique of Wu Haitong—was now much weaker than when he was at his prime.

The one thing that hadn't deteriorated was his experience. Maybe his physical strength was weaker, maybe his reflexes were duller, maybe his movements had lost their brilliance, but his *eyes,* honed by all that he had experienced, could still make predictions and judgments in a way that made it feel like he'd barely aged a day. Ohya's eyes had become his most useful asset. Perhaps to others, it would be easier to understand this as his instinct.

Yet this woman he was facing now... He couldn't win against her. No matter how many times he ran it through his mind, there was no future in which he defeated her. Ohya's eyes, his gut, were telling him. He couldn't win against this woman. He shouldn't fight her. He shouldn't bring shame to the Qilong name.

His own juniors who would carry the next generation forward had come to this tournament with them. Ohya didn't want to lose in front of them. But maybe loss was the best and last thing this old martial artist could teach them. He didn't mind if his men laughed at him as an embarrassment, he didn't mind if they felt anger toward his opponent. He didn't even mind if they were able to view it as simply as the weaker of the two had lost.

Ohya still wanted to convey his wish for them to hurry up and succeed the Qilong, that they couldn't rely on the old guard forever. They weren't undefeatable opponents. The older they got, the weaker they would become, so the young needed to hurry up and surpass them.

They'd said this plenty to their students over the years, but this

was an opportunity for Ohya to show it to them. It was an opportunity for him to show them reality. That was the last thing this aged body could teach.

But...in truth, he wished that the one to beat him had been one of his students. He could lose happy if those he taught surpassed him—because it would lead to a happy retirement.

By the afternoon, Fressa had smoothly made it to her last match of the day. Standing in the court now were the two competitors fighting for a place in the qualifiers for the main matches: Fressa, and an executive of the main house of the Qilong who had also smoothly made his way to his last match. His name was Ohya, and he was a built old man wielding a wooden pole. His gaze was sharp, and it was clear to anyone just how strong he was. Given he'd made it this far without breaking a sweat, it was clear that his appearance and his skill were aligned.

Still, there really were a lot of people in the audience.

"Aw man..." Fressa already knew how she'd failed. Both competitors and regular people who had managed to nab tickets to the prelims had come in droves to watch their match. Even production crews were here to record it. Two of them, in fact. She was pretty sure she had spotted Bendelio among them.

It was all because of that tiger beastkin from the first match. Fressa had fully intended to deal with the battle swiftly and efficiently to get it over with before the crowds could gather—but then it completely backfired. The match had been between a beastkin and a human; their size difference was like that between an adult and a child. Anyone watching would've immediately assumed that the beastkin would win.

And yet, the human finished the match instantly. It had been so fast that the beastkin hadn't even been able to prepare his metal gauntlets to attack.

Now that she thought about it, she shouldn't have been surprised that that was much more likely to draw attention. Honestly, she would've drawn attention either way, whether she'd made it quick or not; that was just what happened when you kept winning. She'd just

sped up the process a bit, that was all... At least, she kept telling herself that.

"Both of us are in a pretty sticky situation here, huh?" Fressa said as she played with her weapon. She'd changed her weapon each match, this time using a blunt knife. She ran her fingers along the blade to check, and sure enough, it was even more incapable of cutting things than the knives at Anzel's bar. It would probably struggle to cut even a thin slice of ham.

Though there was quite the crowd gathered, there was still enough distance between them that with the referee still to arrive, the only one that could hear her was Ohya.

"You are of the same occupation, yes?" he asked.

Fressa shrugged. She wasn't surprised he could tell. In fact, it was *because* they shared an occupation that they could recognize it in each other.

"I've pretty much been out of business the past few years, to be honest. I've been picking up so few jobs I may as well be retired."

"That is for the best. You are still young. You have plenty of time to restart."

"Unfortunately, I'm too deep into it all to turn back."

"That isn't true. So long as you are alive, you can start fresh as many times as you wish until you die. We only live once. May as well do what you want before that time comes."

Fressa laughed. "Why's someone in the same field lecturing me, hmm?"

"It's simply a lesson I've learned in my long life. Humor me. Us old men like to chat."

"Oh? I suppose I do find it quite touching if I consider it life advice from a colleague."

The referee appeared shortly after their back-and-forth.

"Hey," Ohya called out to the referee just before they could give the signal. "Start the battle from outside the ring. I'll be using the whole space."

"Excuse me?"

"He's trying to say it's dangerous because he might accidentally hit you as well," Fressa added, seeing the referee's confusion. "Look

at how long his pole is."

Ohya's height made it look smaller than it was, but his vermilion pole really was quite long. If he swung that thing, he would hit the referee easily. The court wasn't narrow, but just in case, it would be good for him to stay back.

Now understanding the old man's intentions, the referee stood at the edge of the court. "I will step off the moment I signal for you to begin. Now, let the match..."

The referee raised his right hand. Ohya dropped into position. It was a simple orthodox stance, one with no openings. Fressa, on the other hand, remained as she was. The most she did was casually run her finger along her knife's blade.

"...begin!"

Almost as if he were hitting the air itself, Ohya immediately took his staff and did a magnificent horizontal swing.

One line, one flash. The attack took full advantage of the length of both the man's arms and the weapon itself as it used almost the full court as its attack range, and it was aimed right at Fressa's stomach.

It was a staff, a wooden pole. But that solid piece of wood would be practically sucked into the skin if they collided. It would be powerful enough to shatter a person's bones easily—both the weight and speed were more than enough. If Fressa, as slender and light as she was, were to take a direct hit from a weapon like that, she'd be out of the fight in one hit.

Letting out a quick breath, Fressa rotated her body, dodging the staff with a cartwheel as light as a feather.

"I knew it." Ohya was positive now. This girl had the same foresight that Ku Yunxie did. It was one step above being able to predict someone's next attack solely from their initial movements.

A prediction of a prediction. She could tell what her opponent was going to do before they even began their attack. That was why her reactions were so fast.

It was a precipice that Ohya had strived to reach and failed, yet this woman had already succeeded.

"Hmph!"

But that wasn't a good enough reason to give up.

Fressa had walked into this battle certain she wouldn't lose, and she was certain Ohya had come to the same conclusion.

But things really were different in a real battle—Ohya was stronger than Fressa had thought.

Ohya's attacks were generally thrusts and sweeps, very simple attacks because of their range. He would never take any large steps forward, remaining at the perfect distance to use his pole to its maximum potential. Whether because of that simplicity or because it was such a light weapon, all of his movements were speedy as well. The attacks were so simple they were easy to read, but the predictability didn't even matter.

And then...

"Crap...!"

One of those low thrusts managed to clip Fressa's toes, like a snake striking its prey.

This is bad. It was so fast I couldn't dodge it completely. It hurts too. He just grazed my foot, but that might have done way more damage than it appears.

That was why weapons were scary to fight against. Even simple attacks intended to control the enemy's position could get in some real damage.

From the very first swing, Fressa had been doing nothing but dodging. From afar, it looked like she was dodging with ease, but in reality, she was cutting it close. Ohya's attacks were relentless, and each and every attack was incredibly fast and *heavy.* You'd never think the pole was a light weapon.

If just a single one of those attacks hit Fressa directly, her whole stance would collapse. Lose that and the next hit would definitely land. Even if she did miraculously dodge that second hit, what about the next? What about the one after that? That endless barrage was his method of cornering her.

Fressa was starting to panic. She was failing to find a single opening to attack. The moment Ohya had managed to hold the distance between them, he continued with no intention of letting Fressa get a single attack in.

And surely it didn't stop there. Ohya was already this capable, surely he had some trump card up his sleeve. Fressa's prediction was that it was something that he would use the moment she entered close range. If even through those pole attacks, Fressa managed to slowly but surely approach, he would counterattack with that trump card. That was likely how Ohya achieved his victories.

Then what could his current attack patterns be considered? Zoning? Bait to get Fressa to approach? Wasn't he a bit too aggressive for something intended to keep her in her place? He should be more carefree. He was so merciless—like, unbelievably merciless. He should have been more considerate. He should have made the match more fun to watch.

Yeah, that wasn't gonna happen.

Fressa wasn't certain that her prediction was right, and that was exactly why she was so on guard. The price for taking this risk and messing up would be massive. If she leaped in too quickly, she might end up just like Sonicspeed Zeon.

The situation wasn't good. At this rate, she would lose. She was starting to notice the pain in her foot too. Pain was one of those things that killed your concentration the second you noticed it.

Her only choice was to go on the offensive. Fressa felt like Ohya was waiting for that too. She needed to put an end to this before her foot got so sore she couldn't move properly. If she didn't try now, she'd lose.

Now, what should I do? Not only was the audience big, but the cameras were rolling. She didn't particularly want to do this, but...this was still prelims. If she lost here, she'd gain absolutely

nothing. She wouldn't get even a tiny bit of the prize money, and she'd have stood out for nothing.

Guess I'm making my move, then.

Thwack!

Fressa carried out her first block of the match, deflecting the red pole with her knife. Thankfully, with the blade being so blunt to begin with, it wasn't a big deal if it chipped. After deflecting the weapon, Fressa took the slight opening to make a step forward.

Thwack! Thwack!

Ohya recovered immediately each time and would attack again, but Fressa deflected those follow-up attacks with ease. She'd already memorized its speed and path. If she altered its trajectory a little, it was very easy to dodge.

She had decided against solely dodging to make her approach. It wasn't good to let that staff remain moving freely. It was already close enough while she had been focusing solely on dodging, but if she tried to dodge *and* make her approach, she'd be hit for sure.

After repeatedly hitting away the staff that was trying to wrap around her like a snake, after a time that felt much longer than it really was, after slowly increasing speeds of moving from defending to dodging...

There.

The moment Fressa was within touching distance of Ohya, the man unleashed a strike aimed for her legs—it was the move that she had been waiting for. Using the red snake as a foothold, thereby momentarily sealing the weapon, she lunged forward.

He really is fast!

But then the staff immediately came back to life, as if it were a real animal, and began moving again. Ohya had swiftly taken a massive step back to realign their distance and swung his staff sideways. He recovered way too fast. What an irritating old man.

Dodging that too, Fressa once again made her approach.

Though they were both moving so fast, the moment their eyes met after she'd closed the distance, it felt as if they'd come to a standstill.

He's gonna attack.

The moment that thought fully registered in Fressa's mind, their attack and defense had already been completed. Honestly, Fressa had no idea what Ohya had done.

And then she realized: It had been an upper roundhouse kick. That had to have been Ohya's trump card. It was simple, but an otherwise terrifyingly fast kick that was boosted by the strong centrifugal force generated by the movement of the pole. It was likely a move the man had polished most over his long career.

The kick had been aimed right for Fressa's head; had that landed, her neck would've snapped immediately. Actually, more than likely, her skull would've shattered. She didn't want to imagine just how much damage she would've taken if the attack had even just lightly scraped her.

The attack was so fast that Fressa couldn't even see it.

But Fressa's dodge had been entirely unconscious. The moment she sensed the movement, Fressa was moving to avoid that invisible roundhouse kick. And then finally, she'd once more managed to enter engagement distance.

The moment she was in, she made her attack. Twisting out of the kick, Ohya kept his pivot foot in place as he spun, and Fressa took that opportunity to aim the knife for his neck.

There was no time to think about holding back or where specifically to strike. It was kill or be killed. From the moment the round started, Fressa had understood this was the situation, and had switched into her work mode. All she had in her mind was how to kill her opponent.

This was the correct timing. She could kill him. Absolutely. If she just aimed here.

There was the tiniest opening after Ohya had finished his movement and completely stopped his assault.

This was an opening born from the man having messed up by misfiring his trump card that was fully intended to end the match—he hadn't thought of what came next, had not deemed it necessary to.

Fressa couldn't let this chance go by.

Her knife's blade was dull, but the point was still sharp. Thrust it

hard enough, and it would break skin easily.

She would not let this proximity, this timing, go.

At least...that was her intention.

"No way?!"

This time, Fressa was the one who had messed up. Her knife didn't reach Ohya's throat; it stabbed deep into his shoulder instead.

Did he dodge? Right after coming out of such a wide kick?

It had been the slightest movement, but it was enough for Ohya to avoid a lethal injury. What was more, he had *calculated* that. At the moment the knife stabbed him, he relaxed his muscles, and then the moment the blade was in, he tightened them again.

He'd deliberately made Fressa stab the knife in deep. She couldn't pull it out. She couldn't continue fighting at close range.

Their eyes met again. Ohya wasn't wavering even slightly. He was not frightened, nor was he hesitating. Even after being stabbed. Even after suffering a deep wound.

This man was in the same field as her. But the difference in experience between the two of them was great. He had shown clear as day that, as an assassin, he was greater than her.

Letting go of the knife, Fressa immediately jumped back. The next attack would be coming.

Don't panic. Don't mess this up. Calm down. Even if she was losing in the realm of mindset and skill of an assassin, the one currently with the upper hand in this match was Fressa.

The knife had met its target. Just like a snake's venom, it would now start to take effect.

"Stop! End it there!"

A while after they returned to their stalemate of Ohya swinging his pole and Fressa dodging, the referee finally cut in.

"Don't interfere! Why are you stopping us?!" Ohya yelled, hostility radiating off of him, but...everyone present, the spectators, the competitors, could answer that question easily.

"Because you'll die if you keep going," Fressa answered in place of the referee who was currently quivering in fear.

Half of Ohya's body was stained red.

The man had been moving aggressively even while the knife was still stuck in his body. The wound had slowly widened, releasing even more blood.

"You... This was your goal!"

That was why she had been buying time. That was why she'd never tried to attack again.

Well, he was halfway there.

"You're gonna pop a blood vessel being so hotheaded at your age. Do you really think I could attack while you were being that aggressive?"

"Cease with your lies! Someone of your caliber shouldn't have found that difficult at all!"

This was one thing Fressa really wasn't lying about. Ohya had been stronger than she initially judged him to be. That was why there were genuinely no openings she could have taken advantage of. It didn't help that she'd lost her weapon. She couldn't guarantee she'd be able to dodge that roundhouse kick a second time either.

Or maybe...it had been what Nia had mentioned once before. Martial artists would get stronger in the middle of real battle. Close fights were where the greatest growth was to be found.

The first time Nia said that to Fressa, she thought it was all rubbish, truth be told. "What stupid logic, there's no way that's true," she'd thought. But maybe there was truth in it after all. Through exchanging blows, testing each other's strength, they'd learned and slowly fixed their movements. You could say a martial artist's greatest growth was the adjustments one made naturally when their life was on the line.

Ohya had gradually been matching his swings to Fressa's dodges. That was why one of the strikes had clipped her at all. Sure, it wasn't a direct hit, but a hit was still a hit. It still hurt. She'd been forcing herself through the pain same as Ohya had, so it hurt real bad now. She didn't think he'd damaged her bone, but the inside of her shoe felt wet. Was it just sweat?

What made things worse was that she'd had nowhere near enough weapons. Usually, she'd fight with weapons hidden in various locations across her body. Knives alone she usually kept

several of. Ironically, it was specifically to have a backup in case she lost her weapon as she had in that fight. It also gave her something she could throw at range when her opponent fought at a distance like Ohya did. This was all she could manage with only one knife.

"Hey, take a look around you." Suddenly, a small elderly man stepped out of the audience.

It was Ku Yunxie.

"Everyone knows this is your loss. This isn't a deathmatch, stop it there. If you die here, you'll cause problems for both the tournament and all of Altoire."

"Master..."

"It was a good draw. Come on, let's go to the infirmary before you can't even stay upright by yourself." That was all Ku said before he walked off. Ohya's brow was furrowed deeply in frustration, face furious as he stood there, rooted to the spot... But eventually, he bowed, and stepped off the court.

Fressa let out a sigh. She was exhausted. She used up way more energy than she thought she would. Even though she won that match, it almost felt like she'd lost.

As an assassin, Ohya had been stronger. If they'd continued for just a little longer, Fressa would've been the loser. If that had been a fight to the death, Fressa would've lost easily. That man would willingly sacrifice his limbs if it meant seeing his job through to the end. The difference in people's mindsets always became most apparent when placed in the most extreme situations, and that included very close matches.

Was this the difference between working as an individual and working as a group? Freelance assassins' jobs weren't done the second they killed the target. It was only complete once they'd been given their reward. In Ohya's case, though, he had friends he could entrust the rest to.

Fressa couldn't deny it made her jealous.

"I guess I should go give the doctors a visit too..."

She was already this hurt, and it was only prelims. She had her work cut out for her in this tournament.

Given the large scale of the tournament, there were naturally many magic physicians on standby. They were reputed as being able to save any patient so long as they didn't die from their wounds immediately.

Ohya was led to the area for critically injured patients, where he lay down on a bed partitioned off from the rest of the room—and immediately passed out.

"Oh, off he goes. Let's see... That's another one losing too much blood."

As the doctor said, Ohya's bleeding was extensive. Despite being faced with a dangerous-looking man with a knife stuck in him and blood covering a whole side of his body, the woman examining his wound was exceedingly calm. In fact, she was so calm it was as if she weren't even thinking twice about what she was looking at.

"How does it look, miss? Is his life in danger?" Ku asked, having accompanied Ohya to the infirmary.

"Hmm, well, judging from his complexion alone, his blood loss is likely pretty bad, but he should be fine with enough good rest. Can I ask for permission to cut open his clothes?" Ohya was wearing a very well-tailored Wu Haitong outfit. It was easy to see how expensive it must have been from the material used. Since she wasn't cutting up some regular fighter's tattered robes, the doctor sought permission first.

"Of course, that's not a problem. Please help him."

Having been given the okay, the doctor took her scissors and cut open the area where the knife stuck out.

"Oh my."

The muscled body was surprising for someone of his age, and the countless old scars littered across his skin made it apparent how rough a life the man had led. But more than that...

"Starting treatment."

Everything made sense to her upon seeing those familiar tattoos. It was proof of one's status as a member of a certain assassin's organization. It had been a while ago, but the doctor had seen those tattoos at the Umbral Arena before. No wonder Ohya hadn't surrendered despite suffering a life-threatening wound. He'd

resolved himself long ago to not just kill, but to also potentially be killed.

"Have you seen these tattoos somewhere before?" Ku asked.

"Nope. The pattern is very fancy. What is it? An animal?"

The doctor knew she'd be putting her life at risk if she dared admit that she'd seen it before. Admittedly, it seemed as if Ku had already seen right through her...but you couldn't make it far as a doctor of the Umbral Arena if you didn't have some guts. The mental exhaustion would be unbearable if you were scared by every little thing.

"All right, then. Will he need to be hospitalized?"

The doctor's continued calm as she went about treating the wound must have been enough to let her get away with the lie.

"He's fine to go home once the wound is closed up. Make sure he eats plenty of red meat and green veggies so his body can make the blood it needs."

"No need to worry about that. He's a big eater, so he's always fed well. He might be getting old, but his appetite isn't getting any smaller."

The doctor laughed. "At least he can look forward to a long life."

The conversation was filled with false niceties, but it was the most appropriate way to be in a place like this. Keeping the atmosphere heavy helped no one. This was where those with heavy injuries were brought to be treated—while it wasn't the busiest unit right now, there were many patients here where just one mistake could've spelled their end. No one wanted to talk about depressing topics when they were lying there in pain.

"Shine, a patient is asking for you," a fellow doctor called out from behind the partition.

"Sure, I'll be there in a sec," she responded lightly as she stood up. "His wound is all cleaned up. Make sure he rests for a while."

External treatments were simple—all she had to do in this case was take out the knife, clean up the blood, and heal the rest with magic. Broken bones and internal damage were much more of a hassle.

"Of course. Thank you for your work."

After Ku said his thanks, the doctor went to the treatment area for light injuries.

"Ah, so it *is* you, Fressa."

"Yeah, but call me Freeze while we're here."

This area was also filled with beds blocked off with simple partitions. A familiar face had been sitting there waiting for her.

"We're working with fake names now, are we? Actually, was Fressa a fake name too?"

"Come on, not here."

Understanding the irritation, the doctor nodded in acquiescence. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"That's my line, no? Should an underground doctor really be here?"

"Did I never tell you? My underground work is just a side gig; my main job is as a proper doctor on the surface. I got officially requested to be here, y'know."

"Wow, that's news to me."

Just like with Scarlet, Fressa knew Shine through the Umbral Arena, but they weren't close enough to really consider each other friends. They'd gone out for drinks once or twice, but they didn't know that much about each other.

"So, what's the damage?"

"Hurt my foot."

"All righty, let's have a look, then." When Shine removed Fressa's right boot, blood was dripping from the tip of her sock.

"Whoa, it's actually hurt?" There was so much blood. Sure, it had hurt the whole time, and it had felt wet, but she'd thought that she'd just suffered a slight fracture given it was a blunt attack. At worst, maybe she'd broken a bone, but this...

"Why are *you* surprised?"

"I just didn't think it would be bleeding."

Fressa had spare socks, so that was fine, but the problem was her shoes—they had been on the more expensive side since she'd bought them for work. She'd decided to splurge a little so that she could buy a pair that would last her for life. She'd need to give them

a thorough clean later. Surely she could still use them; she wanted to keep them going for at least another twenty years.

"Your nail's probably been broken or ripped off. Mind if I cut your socks?"

"Go ahead."

As the doctor had surmised, she'd broken the nail of her big toe. Apparently, she'd also fractured the bone slightly too. No wonder it hurt so much.

The damage was that bad from a move that only grazed her? What the hell kind of condition would she be in if that had struck her directly? It would probably have mangled her whole toe, never mind breaking the bone. That man really had been much stronger than she'd assumed. She shouldn't have estimated his strength in the way she had. Why had she ever thought she could win easily? That had been a narrow victory.

"Are the matches heating up?" Shine asked.

"Eh, it's still only day two of prelims. They're not bad, I guess?"

"Not bad, huh? You know, I just saw to the old guy who fought with you. He would've died if he'd come any later."

"I see. You're...not gonna tell me I went overboard, are you?"

"No, but..." Shine cut up the sock until the injured area was exposed and then went to cleaning and disinfecting it, before beginning her magic treatment. "I'd just prefer it if you didn't draw out your battles. Don't hurt them too badly, if you could. The medical team's reputation will tank if anyone dies here."

Trust an underground doctor to not care about morals.

"Honestly, things are probably gonna get worse from here," Fressa said. As she'd just said, it was still only the second day of prelims. As they went from qualifiers for the main matches onto the finals, the fights would only get more intense, and that also meant an increase in fighters who would be much more reluctant to admit defeat. There would likely be many of them who would push through injuries just to keep a match going and then it would be too late to heal them by the time the match would be brought to a close.

"Well, I suppose there *is* five hundred million krams on the line,

after all," Shine said.

"Exactly."

Anyone would want five hundred million krams—that was an amount worth putting one's life on the line for. Why else would Fressa be here?

"Aren't you here for money too, Shine?"

"But of course. Why else? I couldn't care less about this barbarian festival otherwise. If people are that desperate to die, they can go do that, but I'd rather they do it in a way that won't inconvenience me."

Trust an underground doctor to have a clear vision of what they wanted.

"Master."

When Ku left the infirmary, his students were there waiting for him.

These four were the executives of the Qilong, but they had not yet surpassed Ku and Ohya.

"Ah, you're all here. Ohya is fine. The doctor said he just needs a rest and then he'll be fine to leave. I'll stay with him so you can all spend your time as you please."

Ku couldn't read his students' feelings. What were they thinking about the defeat of the second strongest assassin of their organization? Ku wasn't particularly concerned with what they felt about it, but he would be very thankful if it only increased their motivation. They couldn't rely on their elders forever, seriously. Both Ku and Ohya wanted to retire already. In all the years the Qilong had been active, barely anyone had remained in service for as long as they had.

"I'm happy to hear that. By the way, it seems Anzel didn't have his match today either."

"He didn't? It must be tomorrow, then."

Anzel's matches would be on the third day of prelims. There still seemed to be a lot of people left even after the second day. Ku began to think it might be worth waiting until the main match qualifiers. At least by then, the number of people on the island

should be much lower, and that would make it much easier for them to make their move.

Ku didn't want to remain for too long, but with Ohya's condition being as it was, a day's break wouldn't harm anyone.

"How were all your matches?"

"Everyone made it through except for Kou. Rimo and Taisan have their matches tomorrow."

"What's this? You lost, Kou?"

"Yes, sir. It was against a wooden sword user. The poster said her name was Lynette Bran... Apparently, she's the bodyguard for an aristocrat family."

"A bodyguard, you say?" Ku was smirking as he rubbed his chin. "We have so many interesting faces at this tournament. We have that man from the Heavenstriker school, that woman who fought against Ohya, and now we have this bodyguard. The world is a big place. To think there were those out there who could win against us in one-on-one battles."

But, well, that wasn't what was important here.

"Kou, you're getting severe drills once we return."

"Yes, sir..."

That was all they needed to discuss for now.

"Anzel's matches are tomorrow, yes? His life is ours two days from now. Enjoy the tournament until then."

It would turn out that single day would completely change the trajectory of both Ku's and Anzel's fates.

Day two of preliminaries were over. An interview with the mysterious beauty, Freeze, who had already shown the audience some unforgettable matches, was broadcast on magivision that night, much to the chagrin of the fighter herself. This resulted in a great upswing of her popularity.

Yet another stunning upset had taken Altoire by storm. With the fighters hired by the guilds and the trade associations losing one after another, the unpredictable events were never-ending.

"Unpredictable drama will only continue to unravel from here," were the words of Hildetaura, the Surprisingly Approachable Princess, who was also one of the interviewers for the tournament,

and those words had become something of a mantra all across the city. The citizens of Altoire were finding it harder and harder to take their eyes away from the MagiPads.

And then the third day arrived. It was time for Leeno the adventurer, the audience's most-awaited competitor, to face her matches.

Chapter 5: The Third Day

After giving his body a stretch, Anzel carried out his morning routine and got changed. He wouldn't need his jacket today—it would just get in the way while he fought.

"And done."

Anzel looked in the mirror as he finished checking his appearance, just as he always did, and then he left his room.

It was the morning of the third day of prelims. It hadn't been very long since he'd arrived on the island, but he'd spent that limited time holed up in his room training. He hadn't even gone to watch the previous matches; he didn't have the time to waste. It didn't matter who his opponent was; he was aiming for victory.

Kaffes Jacks's order had been for Anzel to win the whole tournament. Whether he could or not wasn't important, he just needed to put his all into trying. He'd be an absolute joke if he couldn't even make it through preliminaries.

After confirming what court his matches were at, Anzel went to the arena. The place was absolutely mobbed. Everyone in his area were competitors, and the ones in the audience seats were the regular spectators. They were spread out, but that didn't change there were a lot of them. Coming to see *prelims*—and this early in the morning to boot? Anzel could never.

"Yo," Fressa greeted as she walked up.

"Hey. Your matches were yesterday, yeah? Why're you here today, then?"

"Just here to observe my possible enemies. I'm gonna be in the qualifiers, by the way."

So Fressa had made it through her matches. Anzel couldn't say he was surprised.

"What about Gandolph and Lynette?"

"Obviously they made it too."

Okay, so they were through as well. Anzel couldn't say he was surprised about that either.

"Lynokis's matches are today, yeah?"

"Uh-huh. Pretty sure."

The favorite winner of the tournament had her matches on the same day as Anzel. Apparently, she was on the last day so the production crews could schedule their recordings of her or something... Not that it mattered to Anzel. They were in different divisions, so he could take it easy.

Anzel wouldn't deny that Lynokis was the scariest fighter here. She would've been his greatest obstacle had they been in the same division. He was thankful he could end this tournament without ever having to deal with her in battle.

"What were you doing the past few days? I didn't see you here."

"Nothin'. Was just takin' it easy."

"Okay then... Say, Anzel."

"What?"

"I may have accidentally leaked myself."

"You *what?* That's disgusting. Don't stand so close to me."

"What? I don't mean I wet myself, you ass. I mean my identity might've leaked on magivision. The production crews caught me and I ended up front and center."

Apparently, she'd appeared on magivision yesterday.

"Did you not see?"

"Nah. I've been tryin' to take in as little useless info as possible."

"Oh, really now? I'm so jealous of you people getting to hide away. Not like me and the long biographical special they put together for me."

Anzel didn't even have to ask any questions before Fressa was spilling the beans. From what she'd said, she'd instantly beaten a tiger beastkin in her first match, and that had caught everyone's attention due to their size difference. And then, in her last match, she'd ended up having a close call against a pretty terrifying opponent. That match had been unexpectedly intense for prelims and had naturally been broadcast as a result.

Violent matches were always the most visually appealing. It was no wonder the production crews had picked it up.

"Jeez, endin' up against a Qilong executive, huh? That must've been rough."

Fressa probably just wanted to complain. Every part of this girl was a part of the underworld. She knew full well what it meant to be so noticed by the public in her position, so it was no wonder she wanted to get out a complaint or two. She had likely entered expecting this would happen, but it didn't mean she wasn't allowed to grumble about it.

"It was *so* rough! I managed to win, but if that had been a real fight, it'd have been over for me. I never want to fight that guy again."

It had been a close match even with her ability to use chi. The Qilong really were a frightening bunch.

"At least you're not as swarmed as she is," Anzel said, eyes on the crowd gathering in front of them.

"Ah, now *that's* what you call having it rough."

It was Lynokis—or from the public's eye, Leeno—surrounded by cameras and production crews from each region. She was so surrounded that Anzel and Fressa couldn't even see her properly.

"Though that's what it was like for me."

"*You* had it that bad?"

"Like I said, I stood out way too much yesterday. It's such a pain in the neck. Like, they even made a whole special about me." Fressa's shoulders drooped before she continued, "And yet, the moment Lynokis walked by, they all just left me behind. That kinda pisses me off too. They clearly want to record Lynokis more than me."

"Weren't you just complainin' about havin' to be on magivision?"

"Yeah, but that's different. It feels bad being treated so noticeably differently."

Was this the heart of a woman? Well, it wasn't like Anzel didn't get it.

And then it was time for the matches to begin.

Lynokis let out a sigh. Finally, she had been freed. The royal, Silver, and Liston production crews had separated to go record whichever matches interested them.

She really hadn't expected that she would be surrounded the minute she entered the arena. Honestly, she wished they'd read the room and left her alone when she was about to have something as important as her own matches. This was the time that she wanted to use to raise her spirits, to get her mind into the right place. All that preparation she'd been doing to get herself in the right headspace for battle had been for nothing.

Since Lynokis wasn't used to being in front of the camera, every question she was asked made her nervous. It made her appreciate even more how calm Nia and the other girls looked whenever they were being recorded. Lynokis's mind and body would never survive if she was forced to go through that every day.

"Everyone wants to talk to you, huh? Miss Popular."

While she was sitting at the side of the court waiting for her first match, a tiger beastkin began speaking to her. He was one of those...Something Brothers.

Lynokis silently looked at him. She'd run out of energy to speak. It was still early in the morning and yet she already felt utterly exhausted. Recordings really were stressful. Her body was one thing, but her mind was spent. She fully understood why Nia hated Bendelio now. Even she was beginning to want to punch that distinctive face. Actually, she wanted to line everyone up and punch them one by one. She was sure it would make her feel so much better.

"I'm your first match today. I heard you chose this division because you thought it would be too easy with a weapon. Well, I'm gonna take that arrogance of yours and smash it to pieces."

"Sure... Looking forward to it." That was all Lynokis could think to say in her exhaustion. Honestly, those rumors of her apparent arrogance were another thing that was tiring her out. Even the interview had touched on it.

"The weapons division would've been too easy for you, right?" they'd asked. Even though Lynokis had never said anything like that.

Who had started such an irresponsible rumor? Who was responsible for it? She'd beat their ass, whoever it was.

And that was when it suddenly occurred to Lynokis that there actually *was* a way to deal with this fog in her mind. It was right in front of her too.

"Ohhh... Right. Of course. I get it now."

"Huh?"

"Let's have a good match!"

Lynokis suddenly understood Nia's feelings. Yes, she understood them far better now. She understood them almost too well. These heavy feelings lodged deep in her heart would clear up in a flash if she just got the chance to beat someone up with all her power.

And the perfect target for that was right in front of her: someone that she was allowed to beat up. He was so big and tough too. Such a bulky beastkin should be able to withstand a ton of hits. Naturally, she'd make sure not to go *too* far. She wouldn't hurt him any more than was necessary, so she really did want him to let her hit him.

That thought alone made the prospect of the match far more exciting.

Both Lynokis and Anzel were progressing through their matches without a hitch. The match that caught the attention of onlookers was the one in which Headsplitter Geeg—the large half-titan bounty hunter who stood out wherever he went—lost. His opponent had been a fighter from Wu Haitong wearing metal greaves. As his weapons implied, he was a strong kicker, and he had completely destroyed Gigzaras with his speed. The half-titan was known to hunt monsters by making use of his large body, which easily matched the strength of many of his hunts. But by that same token, it meant that a fast opponent was much more difficult for him to fight against.

No, it hadn't been quite that. Rather, the stipulation that he couldn't kill his opponents had limited all of his attacks. With such a gigantic body and monstrous strength, a single swing from his club would have been enough to kill almost anyone. Throwing it around aimlessly was dangerous.

To put it simply, Gigzaras was just too kind. He'd shown clear

reluctance to be violent toward other people. He likely hadn't had to fight non-monsters much over the course of his career.

The one who had managed to take that softie down was now standing on the court in front of Anzel.

It was the third match of the sixth court. Each winning competitor would have four matches in the prelims, which meant Anzel just had this match and then one more left before he'd move on to tomorrow's qualifiers.

"So you're Anzel."

"Yeah. And you're...Rimo, right?" The man's face was familiar. He was one of the guys who had been standing with that dangerous old man. Anzel had seen him from afar. That meant he was likely also an assassin.

"I won't hold back."

"Well, that sucks. Won't you consider showin' some kindness to little ol' me?"

The referee arrived at the court. Rimo raised one leg to ready his stance, and Anzel called out his metal pipe.

Rimo's greaves were his own weapons. They were fairly unique, so it wasn't something that the organizers had thought to prepare a dulled version of. They'd determined its lethality to be low, and so approved its usage in the tournament. Anzel's pipe was also acknowledged and accepted as a regular blunt weapon. They'd viewed it as barely different from a club or a mace.

"Let the match...begin!"

Rimo lunged forward the second the signal was given, doing all sorts of turns and cartwheels to generate enough power and then—

"Haaaah!"

With his greaves cutting through the ground, he let out a sweep at a terrifying speed—no, it was a feint. Moments before he was about to hit Anzel's leg, Rimo leaped into the air.

It was a spin kick. That heel equipped with a lump of metal was flying right toward Anzel's face.

A sharp clang rang out.

"Huh?!"

Rimo's leg was caught. Despite having taken one of his powerful

kicks, Anzel was standing there like nothing had happened.

"Shit, that stings," Anzel muttered, holding the leg in place so Rimo couldn't pull back, and then, he raised his metal pipe.



It had hurt, but Anzel was willing to consider that a success.

Anzel hadn't just taken that kick unprotected—he'd made sure to create a defensive barrier using external chi. That was what Rimo had actually hit. By the time the kick met Anzel's face, most of its momentum had been killed. If it hadn't, Anzel's skull would've been shattered right about now.

Right now, Anzel could only keep up external chi for a short moment. That alone had taken all his focus.

But if he couldn't do that much, he'd never be able to defeat his fellow disciples. His greatest obstacle was in a different division, as was Gandolph, which meant he'd only potentially need to fight Lynette and Fressa, but both of them used blades. They were blunted ones prepared by the tournament organizers, but they were still dangerous.

After Nia had taught him about external chi, Anzel decided the best way for him to use it was to protect against potentially lethal attacks. If the situation arose that an attack was incoming that he couldn't dodge, he would block it with chi. If he could master that, he could launch a desperate counter. It might result in him suffering a heavy wound, but since his opponent would be rendered practically defenseless, it would mean Anzel could get in a direct attack in return.

What was important was that he won the match. Close matches would likely be kept to a minimum. Anzel had also made sure to confirm that there were medics that could heal him after.

If toeing the line of death a few times was what he had to do to win, he could withstand it.

But he'd definitely prefer if he didn't have to...

"And we're done. Take care."

Anzel had gone to the infirmary and had his face checked out by Shine, a familiar underground doctor. They both pretended to not know the other through the interaction. They'd met someone unexpected in a place that they'd least expected to. According to Fressa, there were quite a lot of Umbral Arena regulars taking part in the tournament.

Not that it was Anzel's place to judge any of them.

"Hmm?"

Anzel still had one match left. As he was walking down the corridor back to the main stages, he ran into some faces he'd seen not long ago: it was Rimo and his friends. Anzel was decently sure they were all executives of the main house of the Qilong. They just didn't stand out anywhere near as much as those two old men with them.

The three of them had been discussing something when Anzel walked past. Rimo must have just received medical treatment himself.

"Yo. I'll see you around." There wasn't much Anzel felt he had to say. He held no personal grudge or hatred for Rimo—he was just an opponent in the tournament. Honestly, he couldn't think of anything to talk about with him even if he tried. Since their eyes had met, Anzel had greeted him.

"Hey."

But when Anzel tried to go on his way, he was stopped.

"What?" He turned around, and all three of them were silently glaring at him. Rimo probably felt the need to call out to him, but couldn't figure out what to say either. They were acquainted enough that it felt wrong to pass by without saying anything, and it wouldn't be right to just ignore them, but the relationship they had was a little strange. Maybe they felt the urge to stop him since Anzel had also deigned to give them a greeting.

"If you've got nothin' to say, I'm headin' off," Anzel said, turning to keep walking when the men continued staring at him without saying a word.

"Hey, what the hell are you?"

What are you? That was some way to say hello. That was all Rimo could think to say after stopping him like that? Actually, given who he was, Anzel felt like he understood what his opponent was getting at.

"Right now, I'm the bartender of my own place, but in the past, I mainly worked as a bodyguard. A weak bodyguard ain't gettin' nothing done, is he?"

That was the only way Anzel could think to respond, though he imagined it wouldn't be enough to satisfy them. How was a simple bodyguard, a *bartender,* able to fight against a professional assassin and win?

The Qilong were an exceptional assassin's organization known to assassinate even foreign dignitaries with no qualms. History was littered with the marks of their work. There were many incidents where there was no definitive proof, but it was obvious from what was—or wasn't—left behind that the Qilong were behind it.

No matter who the target was, they would see their job through to the end. They were a terrifying group. Even among the underworld, there were many who didn't even believe they were real, enough that they had become like a local legend. After all, an assassin's organization that managed to perfectly carry out every job given to them sounded completely unrealistic.

But as someone who had gotten involved with them through his work, Anzel knew them well. Or, perhaps it was more the case that he knew they were real, and not much more than that. He was completely clueless on their inner workings.

Altoire had their own Qilong, but that was more like a branch. The guys here were from the original main house. It was a lot like a main martial arts style, a head house of a clan, or even what one might consider as the real deal.

"Who is your master? Don't tell me it's one of us?"

"One of who? What're you talkin' about?"

Anzel couldn't utter the Qilong name. When someone learned their identity, that spelled either the death of the assassin or the death of the one who had discovered the truth. Really, Anzel wanted to berate them for so casually hinting at their identity like that. The only choice left to him now that he was put in that situation was to play dumb.

"You don't need to pretend. We already know who you are."

"Huh? Sorry, guys, but I've got no idea what you're talking about." Obviously, he did, but again, the only choice was to play dumb. Acknowledging it here would likely cause him hassle later. He was already about to get kicked out of Altoire; he didn't need the

Qilong after him too. He didn't need to take any unnecessary risks.

"Hmph. Fine. But regardless, you'll..."

"What was that?"

Rimo pursed his lips for a moment, and then continued, "No, never mind. Go."

Anzel was curious what the man had been about to say, but the longer they spoke, the more of a risk to his life it would become, so he chose to take that opportunity to dash away.

It would only take one more day before Anzel learned what Rimo had been about to say to him.

"How's it going?"

One match left. While Lynokis was lounging around in the spectator seats waiting for her next match, Lynette sat beside her.

"Not too bad, but everything about this is tiring me out."

Lynokis was really here to escape the crowds. She was attracting as much attention as usual, but at least the production crews wouldn't come all this way. At worst, some of the spectators would try to talk to her, but for the most part, they surprisingly left her alone. That was what made it pretty comfortable here. It was much better than being beside the court, at least.

"You looked like you were having fun with your matches," Lynette said.

"Not sure if I would call them matches more than I was just beating them up."

"True. You were having fun beating up your opponents then. It looked like a regular fistfight without even an ounce of martial arts, almost as if you were playing with them. Honestly, you reminded me of the young mistress a little."

The idea of that left Lynokis feeling conflicted. She definitely couldn't let Nia do whatever she wanted, but now, Lynokis knew exactly why the girl always wanted to go wild. Getting to beat someone up really helped blow off steam.

There was no logic there, and it wasn't something commendable either, but there was no denying that it was just that fun to do. She could forget all her worries while punching away at her opponent.

Sometimes, she'd even feel refreshed after the fight. It didn't fix the fundamental issues, but it stopped her being bogged down by her thoughts. Wasn't that incredible?

The moment Lynokis had those thoughts, she began wondering if she'd awoken to a very twisted desire...

"Your next match is your last, right? Who's your opponent?" Lynette asked.

"Avan. You know him, right?"

"The bounty hunter? The adventurer?"

"Yeah. The one who used to be part of the Alphon school."

Avan was an adventurer who specialized in hunting monsters. He'd appeared on the scene shortly after Lynokis had begun her middle school classes in the Department of Adventuring, and she'd ended up looking up to him as a result.

Back then, Lynokis had wanted to become an adventurer. Any time she and her classmates, including Lynette, heard of some new famous adventurer, they would all get excited talking about them, saying they'd one day become a famous adventurer just like them. Just what wrong path had Lynokis taken to end up here?

Well, that wasn't to say Lynokis wasn't content with where she was. It was just she'd come to realize that this felt more like an adventure than adventuring did.

"He was one of the people who got drawn on the posters, did you not see?" Lynokis asked.

"Oh, I didn't bother checking the bare-handed division posters since I don't need to worry about fighting them. But wasn't Avan a sword wielder? And yet he entered the bare-handed division. What are your thoughts? Does he seem strong?"

"I'm...not sure."

Avan was an adventurer Lynokis used to look up to a little. His achievements weren't anything to scoff at, and his bounty hunting records were pristine. People always said he was a little rude, but Lynokis had thought that adventurers who embraced that outlaw vibe were pretty cool.

An adventurer's work wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. Behind those brilliant achievements was a whole lot of blood and gore—

Lynokis knew that. That was why she thought a little bad behavior wasn't a big deal. She'd thought that it made sense for adventurers to turn out like that.

She really had thought that.

"Oh, I think it's almost time for my match," Lynokis said when she noticed the referee waving her down. It was time for her to take the stage again. "I'll be back soon."

"Good luck. I'll be watching."

If Lynette was watching, then that was all the more reason that Lynokis couldn't lose. Not that she had any reason to lose to begin with.

The match before hers ended, and the fighters stepped off the court. Once they passed her and exited, Lynokis stood alone on the court.

The surrounding gazes all stabbed into her. Eyes were all on Leeno the adventurer. The production crews had gathered, cameras at the ready to record the match. The title of most favored to win was heavy.

It all reminded Lynokis that having time to think wasn't good for her. Saying that she was good or bad with pressure felt like oversimplifying it—it was all on an entirely different level. The weight she had been given was just too much to bear. Given her strength didn't match up to the expectations being placed on her, it was only natural they would feel heavy.

But when she was fighting, when she was beating someone up, she could forget everything. She'd accepted that reality.

"Yo, you're already here. Sorry to keep ya waitin', Miss Winner." A middle-aged man with stubble stood in front of her.

This was Avan. He was nice, large and bulky. It wasn't rare to see muscled contestants at a tournament like this one, but the amount of work Avan had put into his body was especially apparent. First impressions would make one think he was quite the rude man. And so would any future impressions, because a rude man was exactly what he was.

"I'm sorry."

"Come again?"

"I despise you. I don't even want to talk to you, so can you stop?"

"Wh-Whoa, c'mon now, what kinda greeting is that? Did I offend you or somethin'?"

"I saw your matches. You took them all way too far."

The thought that for a time, for even a single moment, she had looked up to this man wasn't just embarrassing, it absolutely *infuriated* her. It had been incredibly clear that Avan simply loved hurting people. In both his first and second matches, he would be exceedingly aggressive toward his opponent before they had the chance to surrender. Even if the referee tried to end the match, he wouldn't stop his assault. Not even when his opponent fell unconscious.

Avan was definitely strong; Lynokis was certain of this. He was at least one or two leagues stronger than your average fighter.

"Huh? What're ya on about? Ain't this tournament literally made for us to be celebrated and earn prize money for beatin' folks up?"

It was. Lynokis couldn't refute that. The tournament was exactly as Avan had described. She could come up with all manner of explanations that *sounded* good, but at the end of the day, that was all this event was.

"Besides, ain't you goin' too far yourself? Ya keep draggin' out matches that you could easily finish in one blow. You just want to beat folks up too, don'tcha? Get off your high horse."

Avan wasn't wrong here either. Lynokis wouldn't even try to deny it. The reality was that she really did want to beat people up, and right now, that was probably all that she was feeling. She might have awoken to a deep, twisted desire to beat people up all the time.

But she'd never accept being equated to this man.

"I have my limits," she replied. "I know when to stop. And I actually have manners on top of that. Don't act like I'm the same as your violence."

If what she and Nia wielded was violence, just what did this man wield? It was hard to put it into words, but what she could say for

certain was that it was completely different. There was no way their violence was the same. Lynokis might not know exactly what it was, but it was undeniably different.

Equating it to Lynokis's violence was one thing, but she wouldn't let it be equated to Nia's. She hated the thought. It was truly unpleasant. She didn't particularly care to find a deeper answer either. Different things were different, and those she didn't want to be associated with were those she didn't want to be associated with. That was all.

In any case, the only language spoken on this stage was violence. Words and logic had no place here. All Lynokis had to do was use violence to shut him up, to show this man that their violence was different. Violence itself would be her proof.

Honestly, her thoughts were beginning to sound like gobbledygook, but that was fine. There was no point thinking too hard about people she disliked.

"Say, Leeno. Are those rumors about you true? Personally, you don't look nothin' like someone who could take down those snow tigers or those fire sea serpents, 'specially not alone. And that big ol' crab in Vanderouge? Definitely not. That ain't somethin' people take down solo. You ain't no big shot, are ya? What trick did you use? Tell me, and maybe I'll go easy on ya."

His personality might've been trash, but underneath it all, he was still an adventurer. Avan had already partially seen through to Lynokis's true strength. But that wasn't a big deal.

Realizing Lynokis wasn't going to respond, Avan clicked his tongue in annoyance.

After they waited around for a while, the referee approached.

The eyes on them were numerous, from competitors, to spectators, to the production crews, to the cameras. All those eyes were focused on this one match.

This was the third day of preliminaries. It was the match that would determine who would move on to the qualifiers. One could even call it the most important match of the day.

"Let the match..."

"Wait a moment."

Just as the referee went to signal the start of the match, Lynokis interrupted.

So many people had gathered. So many people were surrounding the court, watching them silently, eyes fixed on this one match. And that was why...

"I declare here," Lynokis began, pointing at Avan, "that I will end this in one blow. I'm going to punch you head-on, so prepare yourself."

It was a declaration of war and of victory. Lynokis would give Avan a little punishment on behalf of the competitors who had already been injured by him.

Her master had told her to just beat up anyone she didn't like. As her student, it was only right that Lynokis follow that teaching.

"Hah hah! What an interesting little lady you are. Keep in mind that if you don't manage this, you're gonna make a complete fool of yourself. This whole thing's gonna be broadcast on that magivision malarkey for everyone to see, ain't it? What'll you do if you lose on top of that? You'd never be able to show your face in Altoire again."

"Aren't we both in the same boat? If you lose, you might have to give up being an adventurer. After all, what do you think people will say about a big tough adventurer getting knocked on his ass with a single punch from a girl?"

"Ah, I see. I'm startin' to get your angle now. You're right, that ain't no joke." Avan's eyes narrowed. Lynokis could feel the hostility he was starting to emit.

"I-In that case..." the referee stuttered.

Lynokis nodded, and the referee raised his hand again.

"Let the match...begin!"

No one could follow what happened. It was an incredibly fast step forward. By the time the referee had finished lowering his arm, Lynokis was already right in front of Avan, arm pulled backward.

"Tch!"

This man really was no joke. Avan's reaction speed was fast. He'd already leaned his body forward slightly, decreasing the distance

between him and Lynokis's fist, and was guarding his face with his arms. Those arms were thick with muscles and sturdy bones. In comparison, Lynokis's arms were like sticks.

Avan was clearly guarding with the assumption he would have to take the hit—he was choosing a spot where it was safe to take a blow. It was likely an instinctive reaction upon realizing that Lynokis was too fast for him to dodge.

Being able to take up a defensive stance in that situation alone was already incredible. Lynokis was positive that Avan was strong.

But she charged at that head-on, and punched as hard as she possibly could.

Striking that stringy, tough flesh with something so much harder made the feel of it being crushed run right through her arm, but she followed through without lingering on it. Without even having the chance to make a noise, Avan was sent flying. He violently rolled along the ground of the court until he finally landed outside of it.

"Hmph..."

Honestly, Lynokis couldn't help but think that the man was lucky. A single bone being broken was the best he was going to get. If his guard had been too loose, she'd have broken right through and slammed her fist right into his face.

"*Wh-Whooaaaaaaa!*"

The audience exploded into uproar. Lynokis had taken the man out in one punch, just as she'd declared she would. What was more, her opponent had been Avan, one of the featured fighters on the posters. Up until this point, Lynokis's fights had been fairly reserved, almost as if she had been playing with her opponents. Even those clueless about fighting could tell that Lynokis had been careful with her punches and kicks, but it resulted in the only one really having fun being Lynokis and Lynokis alone. To those watching, the matches had been pretty boring.

This time was different. This match showed the version of Leeno they had been waiting for. Now, no one could question her—she had proven that she truly did have the overwhelming strength that her reputation suggested.

Situated in the royal capital of Altoire was an apartment building close to the main street, likely intended for the elites who worked in the area. The apartments were neither high-class nor run-down, perfect for someone with a nice income to live alone.

Kaffes Jacks, leader of the Altoire underworld, was sitting in one of those apartments. This was one of his many safe houses scattered across the city. He would never stay in one place for more than half a month, so he was always migrating between them. It just happened that this was the one he chose to go to next.

This kind of minimalist room containing little to call his own within it was much more preferable for Kaffes than a luxuriously furnished space, so it was much easier for him to relax. It was also quite open since it was made to have few blind spots.

"And done."

After finishing his work, Kaffes had taken a bath, wrapped himself in a loose-fitting bathrobe, eaten a light meal, and then brought some alcohol and nuts to the table. With those ready, he sat himself down in the one sofa he had an attachment to.

He wouldn't be moving anywhere else tonight. When it was time for bed, he would just fall asleep there on the sofa. Knowing that, he turned on the MagiPad.

This had become Kaffes's routine ever since the martial arts tournament had started a couple days ago. It turned out the tournament was much more exciting than he had expected it to be, and he'd been unable to take his eyes off of the events as they unfolded before him. He'd found himself wishing he'd been able to go see it in person—not that that was possible, for a variety of reasons.

Naturally, part of his fixed attention was for his work. He needed to assess the strength of as many fighters as possible before the main matches started, before all the rich foreign elites made their way to Altoire, before the real gambling began.

Even with his work in mind, however, there had been surprising upsets from the very first day, and those unexpected results made it fascinating to watch. It was impossible to predict the outcomes. Since he was yet to make his bets, it was much easier to celebrate

and bemoan the wins and losses. This might be the most fun Kaffes would get to have over the course of this tournament.

Today was the day that one of his men, Anzel, had his matches. Kaffes wasn't particularly worried—Anzel wasn't the kind to lose easily—but he wanted to at least confirm the results. He was sure Anzel's matches would be broadcast.

At least, that was what he had thought.

"Ah... Yeah, this was crazy."

The moment he turned the MagiPad on, Leeno the adventurer was being featured. They weren't only showing the same moments, but perhaps because it was a special coverage, she was permanently on-screen—to an annoying degree.

But Kaffes could understand exactly why, and in truth, he still found himself glued to the MagiPad. Altoire must have been going crazy for this right about now. That woman had shown incredible strength that lived up to the expectations of the one most expected to win. With just one punch, she had managed to send a fighter much bigger than her flying. It wasn't faked or set up; the images were there as proof. She'd even declared that she would end the match in one punch.

What made the situation more incredible was that her opponent had been Avan. For both good and bad reasons, the man was a famous adventurer. He was a problem child whose misdeeds and improper behavior had been overlooked due to his strength and skill. Kaffes had met him once before, and he'd left with the impression that Avan was quite strong.

Yet, Leeno had faced an opponent like that and ended the match with one punch. There was no way in hell that wasn't going to become the talk of the town. It was enough to instill fear in Kaffes.

From the outside, he'd looked as calm as always—even though he was alone in his room with no one around to take advantage of any moments of weakness, his poker face had at some point become his resting face. It was very rare for him to show his emotions outwardly these days.

Inside, though, all he could think to himself was *Holy shit.* The sight had shocked him enough he couldn't think of any other words.

And “holy shit” was right. The moment being looped showed it was even crazier than he’d ever thought it would be. Leeno was *this* strong?

There had been doubts surrounding the rumors—was Leeno really as strong as they said? Had she really earned all those hundreds of millions of krams by herself? Even Kaffes had had his doubts. It was unthinkable that her achievements could’ve been carried out solo.

But, no, this woman was strong. She really was strong. He instinctively realized that she was stronger than any of the strong fighters he had seen up to this point. He realized that if Anzel were to be pitted against Leeno, Anzel would be the one to lose.

“Well, at least we all know who’s definitely winning the bare-handed division...”

You couldn’t even call it a gamble anymore. Leeno was going to win, and by a wide margin. No one participating in this tournament could defeat her. It was starting to become apparent that if he wanted to make a profit, he would have no choice but to bet on Anzel.

“Oooh.”

But all of that aside, once he changed the channel, he ended up finding a new fun match to watch.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Nia.”

As I sat drinking tea with Carme in the lobby of the dorm, the person I had been waiting for finally arrived.

Reliared walked up to us with her tall attendant behind her.

“All good to go?” I asked.

“Yup, should be fine.”

“Then let’s be on our way,” I said, standing up. “Good day, Carme.”

We said goodbye to our head resident and took our leave. It was so early in the morning that the sky was still dark, and most children were still in the land of dreams. The air felt much more like fall than before; these days such early mornings were quite chilly.

Normally, this would have been a school day, given it was still the

middle of the week and all, but we would be carrying out recordings today as off campus activities. Rather than requesting special permission, it had been an order directly from the king himself. In other words, we were carrying out our duties as citizens of Altoire. I could call it a royal decree if I wanted to sound dramatic.

Today was the fourth day of preliminaries—in other words, the qualifiers for the main matches. The king wanted us to support the production crews as much as possible in order to show off the practicality of magivision technology to our foreign visitors.

"Nia, Relia," Hildetaura called as we arrived at the port. We joined her as she boarded the royal airship docked nearby, and held a meeting about the upcoming recordings as we ate breakfast.

The matches to be recorded and the locations of the cameras had already been decided. Apparently, the organizers themselves had requested specific matches be recorded to avoid further cases of important moments being missed. There were talks of the production crews sharing recordings between each other as well, but those details were for them to decide.

Us three girls would be conducting interviews of the fighters before their matches. And, if possible, after as well, with both winners and losers.

It was quite lacking in tact, but it was something you could only record at that precise moment. We wanted to record every facet of the tournament, to truly show the journey of the fighters, and that meant capturing their expressions at the moments they won and lost, to immortalize them while frustration still lingered on their faces.

The royal production crew had two cameras, while the Liston and Silver crews only had one each. It had been like that all through preliminaries. Personally, they should have had far more cameras in there, but there were apparently reasons that made that difficult.

Incidentally, the junior production crew were unsurprisingly refused permission to record. The reasons were perfectly valid: They were students and the prelims were happening over the course of the week. But above that, the organizers were likely being considerate of the fact that the air in the arena had been fraught

with tension ever since the tournament had started. Such an atmosphere could be too much for children.

Though that then left me with the question of what that meant for us. But apparently, *production* didn't question it. They didn't question it at all.

There were talks that we might be able to record for the main matches as well, but I couldn't predict the outcome of that. I wasn't exactly someone in the position to give such permission, so I couldn't say.

"Okay, but, how amazing was Leeno yesterday?" With much of the important discussions out of the way, giving us room to relax, Reliared immediately brought up the matches.

She'd said the same thing when we were watching them in my room last night. The excitement must have still been lingering.

"She was incredible, yes. Everyone in the castle was talking about her too, even early in the morning."

Hildetaura felt the same way, it seemed. It was apparently quite exciting for the children.

I could admit that the match wasn't half bad. Everyone was raving about how Lynokis took out her opponent in one punch, but what really caught *my* eye was the declaration of victory she'd made right when everyone's eyes were on her. That was immensely satisfying. Seeing her act like an arrogant martial artist gave me the chills.

That was exactly how one needed to be if they were going to act cocky. That was the type of arrogance I admired. I wished to do the same one day.

That was perfect. That was how a martial artist should be. Modesty was important, but when a strong fighter was too humble, it could cause its own sort of offense. As the one expected to win the whole tournament, that was the correct attitude to take. That alone likely gave a lot of hype to the tournament. I felt bad for her opponent, but if Lynokis went as far as to make a declaration that she would beat them, she probably didn't like them anyway.

And that was just as perfect. Martial artists should just beat up anyone they didn't like. Nothing felt better than being able to punch

someone without guilt!

Regular life was different, but when it came to a match in which martial arts was the method of competition, the one who was weak was at fault. If they felt wronged by that, then they should have just won. If they had a complaint about that, then they shouldn't compete to begin with. Simple as that.

"I've watched it so many times and I still can't see it! It's like one second she was standing there, the next she was punching him!"

Right? That there is my disciple.

"I could not see her either. I did not even know human beings could move so quickly."

Right? That's my disciple, that is.

"What's wrong with you, Nia? You've got this huge grin on your face. It's kinda creepy."

Well, that isn't a nice way to describe a smile. I won't try to defend your wording for you.



Chapter 6: The Qualifiers

It was finally the last day of prelims. The format was a round-robin tournament in groups of four with the winner decided from the results of those matches. The fighter had to win two matches minimum to get through to the main event. If there were multiple fighters in the group with the same score, it would be decided based on their performance in their matches. Something like that being left to the judges' own impressions would definitely lead to arguments, but making universal rules that worked for everyone was just as difficult. As things were, the fighters would probably be allowed to contest the decisions.

Combining both divisions, around thirteen hundred fighters remained in the tournament with the goal to trim them down to three hundred by the end of the day. Those remaining would then go on to the main matches, which would be held in a typical tournament format. In order to keep everyone happy, the rest of the participants would be made up of winners from the losers' rounds; there would be no automatic advancements.

Around three hundred fighters would be moving on to the main event. Honestly, that still sounded like quite a lot, but considering how many entered this tournament to begin with, they'd done a good job at whittling the number down. At the end of the day, there were a lot of competitors who had traveled quite the distance to make it here, so they'd expanded the bracket to take that into account.

The main matches would take place over several days. *All* of the matches would be recorded, so it was predicted that attention on these matches would be much higher. It would be worrying if they *weren't*, really. But it meant that if someone wanted to watch every single match of the tournament, they would be able to. Rebroadcasts would be happening for a while, after all, so the final

numbers were fine.

At least, that was how everything appeared on the surface. But Hildetaura quite openly spoke the truth to us: "Many foreign dignitaries will be here to watch the matches. Imagine there were no competitors from their country still fighting. Would that not be rather awkward? It appears my father made the bracket size bigger to accommodate this."

In other words, it was the question of whether people would find entertainment in watching a tournament where no one they knew was fighting, or if it would be fun to watch only foreign fighters. It was a form of political consideration, the type of thing that was important to those in government. It would be a complete humiliation if one of the visiting dignitaries had to sit through a foreign rival mocking them for their lack of representation in the tournament. Even if no one said it outright, it would come through in their attitude. On the other hand, those who had the self-awareness to realize they had no strong competitors in the ring might even try to poach from other countries—which would cause its own problems.

Put briefly, this was all a way to prevent any unnecessary feather ruffling. Being the organizers of this tournament must have been a tough job.

Having learned of all the necessary context on the flight over, we arrived at the tournament island. It was still early morning, but there were already many competitors up and moving. Some were out on runs, others were stretching their bodies, others were swinging their weapons in the air. All of them were eagerly preparing to fight. *Your enthusiasm is laudable. Good luck.*

There were still so many people here, though. According to the rules, even those who'd been eliminated were allowed to remain on the island until the end of the preliminaries. After that, the island would be inaccessible to anyone not associated with the tournament. Everyone would feel much more relaxed once tomorrow rolled around.

Apparently, the losers' matches would be held elsewhere, but I hadn't been filled in on the details of that, and that meant it had

nothing to do with me for now. I'd probably learn eventually.

"Niaaaa! Over heeeere!"

Upon hearing that wretched voice, I turned around, and standing there was the man I had expected but dreaded. *Tch, Bendelio. You look so full of life. Go catch a cold or something. I don't want to have to see your ugly, distinctive mug this early in the morning.*

"I shall see you later, then."

"Catch you both later."

Hildetaura and Reliared went off to their respective production crews as I was reluctantly caught by my own.

"You have no idea how much of a relief it is to have you here, Nia. It's tough doing so much when I'm the only one appearing on camera."

"Is that so?"

Then you can catch a cold or sprain your ankle if you want. Go take a tumble so that you can't walk for a while.

Such cursing was doing nothing for me, so I pushed it down and got in a better headspace. "I will be doing the interviews, then?" I asked.

"If you could. No one wants to see a musty old man on magivision. I'll work on supporting you from behind the scenes."

Yes, yes, I know.

I was briefly filled in as we walked to the arena. There were already a lot of fighters outside, but inside was just as busy. Many of them were beginning their warm-ups.

I could feel that special tension in the air—the quiet before war. *Not bad at all.*

For better or worse, the Liston crew would mainly be recording the weapons division. It wouldn't be necessary for us to go to the bare-handed matches pretty much at all. There was a chance that Lynokis would try to talk to me if I carelessly got too close, so I was thankful for the distance. I couldn't trust that girl to keep our cover.

This was a case of splitting up the roles, but not based on what a company's strengths or weaknesses were, but more, the expectations were high enough (despite this still being the

preliminaries) that we couldn't afford to let a single match slip through our fingers. The matches had all been cleanly divided up among the three crews.

And about the interviews... Well, we needed to go talk to fighters who were preparing to fight, so we would likely face some difficulties there. There were definitely a lot of irritable people here. I would do my best to not get too in their way.

I immediately got to work interviewing the fighters. Their state of mind before their matches, their enthusiasm, their determined gaze and posture, all of it was wonderful. Sometimes I would get people looking at me with annoyance, but that was a given. Many would have much preferred I left them alone. That was proof of how much they were putting on the line for this tournament, just as I liked it.

As I was making my rounds, someone I was personally interested in arrived.

"Sauzan."

It was one of the apparent Hero candidates from the Kingdom of Slengradd. I really was curious about him, his fox-eared partner too.

"Oh, uh... Nia, right? Morning."

It seemed he'd remembered me from when I asked if Rikelvita could sketch him. My hair color *did* make me memorable, and I'd been on magivision a lot the past few days, so maybe it was a given. I was fairly easy to recognize.

"Good morning. Are you participating in the qualifiers today?"

"Yeah. Somehow made it through my first matches."

This man really was impossible to read. Even now, he seemed to be calm. At least, that was the generous interpretation. Honestly, it seemed possible that he just wasn't thinking at all.

"May I interview you? I will avoid taking as much of your time as possible."

"Sure. I'm pretty bad at talking, though, so don't expect me to say anything deep. Usually, the girl I'm with talks for me."

He must have been referring to his fox-eared partner. She was definitely the more talkative of the two. I'd heard she was in the bare-handed division, so she wouldn't be over here at any point. I

was pretty sure she was in the qualifiers at least, especially since she'd been popping up on magivision here and there.

I signaled to Bendelio to roll the camera, adjusted our positions, and began talking to Sauzan again.

"Here we have Sauzan, who has come all the way from the distant Slengradd, Kingdom of the Great Blade."

After introducing him, I asked him various questions. "How have you found the preliminaries so far? Are there any fighters who have caught your attention or you'd like to fight? What about fighters you hope you can avoid?"

"Hmm, I was really curious about Freeze and the older gentleman from Wu Haitong that she fought against. And then there's..."

Sauzan was very cooperative, showing not even a hint of annoyance in our interview, answering most of the questions without issue. There was only one question in particular where he seemed to hesitate.

"I've heard there is an institute in Slengradd known as the Heroic Star Assembly created for the sole purpose of raising Heroes. Do you know of them?"

"Yeah, I do. But I can't talk much about it. Orders from the government."

"From the government? That makes it sound like you have connections to the Assembly."

"Uh... R-Really? N-No way that's true. Yeah. I don't know anything."

Don't be so clearly flustered. I understand, I'll stop asking about it.

After letting a rattled Sauzan free, I went on the hunt for my next prey.

Wow, so many of you are trying so hard to deter me with your hostility. But it won't, you know. I'm working here. Surely you can play along for just a couple minutes. You're not scary just because you're glaring at me. I could very easily go, "Look, there's a skyfish!" and knock you all unconscious with a swift chop to the neck while you're distracted. That's all it would take for me to solve any issues

you try to cause. I can do it at any time. I will *do it at any time. Keep that in mind when you talk to me.*

Things would go much faster if I could say any of this out loud.

I was perfectly fine, but the production crew would be scared out of their minds, so I passed on the ones who were glaring, only going for the fighters who looked friendly. That said, Bendelio would probably be happy no matter who I spoke to. That was just another side of him that I felt spiteful toward. I couldn't stand him.

In the middle of my interviews, I came across another familiar face.

"Good morning, Freeze."

It was Fressa. She was trying her best to hide behind some big man, but I'd noticed her the second she entered the building. I'd even been waiting for her to come over and greet me, yet she never did. It was fine, though. Why should I care?

"Huh? Oh." The large fighter turned around with a confused look on his face, and was shocked to see an unfamiliar woman standing right behind him. I'd interviewed this man already, but, uh...I forgot his name. He was probably going to lose.

"Freeze, may we talk?"

I have work to do. Come.

"Oh, uhhh, sorry, y'see... I've got some pre-match nerves, so I want to stay focused. I'd reeeaaaally like if we could— Yes, of course, gladly. I'll talk about whatever you like, miss."

Thank you for your understanding. If you behave, I won't treat you wrong. I may have glared a bit, but you don't have to worry. You aren't worrying, are you? What? You are? Really? Yes, see, you aren't worried about a thing.

"You've been performing so well! I'd love an interview!"

"Yes, of course. Ask anything you'd like."

See? That wasn't so hard. What a perfect response. This was the attitude I most hoped for from my students.

Naturally, I made sure my questions were not too intrusive, generally quite vague, before I let her go. I felt like she let out an awfully relieved sigh as she left, but I put it down to my imagination playing tricks on me.

I managed to catch Lynette in quite a similar way shortly after, and after that, my frantic interviewing continued.

Before long, it was time for the qualifiers to begin.

"I'm frustrated. Dunno what else to say. I greatly hope there'll be another tournament."

Even after the qualifiers started, what we had to do didn't change much. Well, I suppose it became a little harder. We were having to ask for interviews from those who had just lost, after all.

It didn't feel good having to go up and ask a martial artist how they felt after they just put their all into a tournament and yet still lost. *But please forgive me, it's for my work.* I hoped they would remember that those emotions they were feeling, that shattered brilliance, was something only a martial artist could feel. They should take pride in their defeat. That loss would only become the fuel to make them stronger.

With all the matches I was watching, I was starting to see the gems that had gathered here. While there had still been ten thousand people, naturally there were weaklings everywhere I looked, but now that the numbers had decreased this much, it was becoming easier to see the strong fighters. I supposed this should have been obvious given a tournament was all about filtering out the weak.

Even among those who were left, my students were still strong. They wouldn't lose against most of the fighters gathered here. They hadn't been matched up here either, so they wouldn't get to fight each other until the main matches.

From what I'd seen, Lynette was doing especially well. She was doing above average, so she might not have stood out compared to some other fighters, but she had very strong fundamentals, and as a result, it made her stronger overall. She was the type of fighter that could be scary to be matched up against—they had no notable strengths, but they had no weaknesses either. That was what made it possible for these types of fighters to use their full power against anyone they were up against. It wasn't very useful in a real fight, but in a friendly match, it was especially strong.

In real fights, the ones to fear were the fighters who had an ultimate finisher, a specialist who had overly focused on one specific move. Lose in a fight against them and your life would likely be forfeit. You rarely got the opportunity to fight people like that a second time. All they had to do was slip that finisher past a regular defense one time and they'd win.

Sauzan was the fighter with the most similarities to Lynette. There was nothing unique about his swordplay, but it was beautiful to watch. His strength was also better suited to friendly matches—at least, for now. There was no way that was enough for a Hero candidate. It seemed likely to me that he was hiding something up his sleeve.

The fighter I was personally cheering on was Asuma, the Kenki. He had gotten lucky with his matchups and had very easily advanced. I saw his matches and it was instantly noticeable that he had reached the precipice of his martial arts. These were the martial artists who could see unprecedented growth and unnatural revelations in the midst of battle. Depending on who he got matched up against in the main event, he could transform into a true monster. I loved these types of fighters, both as their opponent and just watching as a spectator. You could never predict what would happen next with them.

Honestly, anyone had the chance of winning here.

Hmm...

This tournament seemed quite fun. To be honest, I was a little jealous that they all had fellow fighters they could compete with. I wanted someone like that in my life too. I wasn't asking for much, just one or two rivals. I wanted someone I could have a real battle with.

Enough pouting, it was time to go find Anzel. He was such a crafty little man when it came to escaping me. He would hide somewhere until the matches started, and then arrive at the arena at the very last second and go straight to his court. He had immediately left the area after his first and second matches.

He was very clearly avoiding the production crew—no, it was *me* he was avoiding. If I didn't have Bendelio and the rest stuck to me

like glue, I'd catch him in a flash, no matter where he was hiding. *What an impudent little brat.*

I would leave him alone...for now.

But his third match was in the afternoon. I *would* catch him then, make no mistake.

Oftentimes, buildings would have unused spaces that came about due to the general design of the structure.

There was a quiet space in front of the door to a cleaning cupboard far away from the entrance to the arena at the bottom of a flight of steps where the only people who passed by were members of staff. At the top of the stairs were the VIP seats, though, so maybe it was always intended to be this way.

"Oh."

It was in that quiet, empty space that the two of them bumped into each other—Lynokis, who had already been there, and Anzel, who came after.

"Um... Why are you here?" Lynokis asked.

"Well... Probably the same reason as you."

There was only one reason the two of them would've met here: to avoid the eyes of the public. Anzel had just finished his first match. Most likely, Lynokis had just done the same.

The two simply stared at each other.

They weren't strangers and yet they couldn't think of a single thing to say. But it was also getting uncomfortable standing in silence, so Anzel searched for anything to start a conversation.

"You're pretty popular."

Lynokis responded with a deep sigh. "No matter where I go, there's always someone staring at me, and any time I have a match, everyone gathers to watch. Leeno is way too heavy a name for me to bear."

Yeah, I don't doubt it, Anzel thought to himself. Leeno the adventurer was an identity that had to shoulder the weight of Nia's achievement of earning several hundred million krams with just her fists. To be blunt, Lynokis was being treated as a scapegoat in this scheme. Even Anzel would never take on something like that. There

was no way he could ever handle the pressure of such a name. He could never bear the weight of the eyes expecting him to show the same strength as someone like Nia. There was no chance in hell.

"What about you?" Lynokis asked back.

"I'm just runnin' from the cameras. And yes, I know I can't escape 'em forever." He made sure not to mention that he was running away from Nia specifically. Lynokis would definitely take Nia's side; that was just who she was. Anzel could run from and refuse the other interviewers as much as he wanted, but Nia alone was inescapable, both in terms of their positions and in terms of their strength.

He knew he would inevitably be caught. The longest he could make it was probably around the end of qualifiers. If he managed to win that many more matches, there was no chance he'd be able to escape anymore. Never mind Nia, Altoire in general would want to get an interview with him just to help build hype for the tournament.

Anzel was already fully prepared to have his identity leaked. That was why he'd decided to not enter under a fake identity or wear a disguise. It was very likely he'd lose his place in Altoire by the time this tournament was over. He'd already entrusted the disposal of his establishment, his home, to someone else. He'd come here prepared for all of it.

But that didn't mean he wouldn't try to resist his fate, no matter how futile it was. Even if it was useless, he wanted to resist as much as he could. He wanted to hold on to the slim possibility that he might get out of this without losing the place he belonged.

Right now, though, complaining and getting depressed wasn't doing either of them any good, so they started talking about their matches.

"My matchups were pretty lucky, so I'll get to the main matches easy enough," Lynokis said. Not a single fighter in her group was anyone she found dangerous. She thought it likely she would win all three of her matches.

"Pretty similar to me, then." Really, yesterday's matches had been much tougher for Anzel, but that was because he'd had to fight a member of the Qilong. Sure, he'd ended it in one blow, but he

wouldn’t say it had been easy. If he’d messed up in how he used his external chi, he really would’ve lost. On the other hand, the fact he’d succeeded against a Qilong assassin of all people had given him some confidence. All he could think at the time was that if he couldn’t master his chi, his chances of winning would be in the pits. But at least it seemed he could make use of it in a fight.

“Gandolph seems to have qualified with little hassle.”

“Lynette and Fressa too.”

After a simple catch-up conversation, the two separated. Both of them assumed that they’d definitely meet the other back here again. And sure enough, after their second matches, they indeed met up back in that little space again.

“Phew...”

Anzel had somehow managed to make it through his second match, avoid Nia, and escape the competition space. He’d run so suddenly, but what else could he have done? He was desperate not to stand out in public. It was just in his nature as an underworld dweller by this point. He knew it was only a matter of time, but he couldn’t help but try and escape anyway.

He’d actually started to think that Fressa was in the better situation, having been caught and made famous on magivision already. At least she could relax now. Though the specials *were* a bit much. It might have turned into a whole different headache for Fressa, but that wasn’t a concern for Anzel if it happened to him. He wasn’t in disguise, after all.

“You’re back again?”

“You are too, ain’tcha?”

Anzel met Lynokis by the stairs to the VIP seats again. They passed time by chatting away, and then the two of them parted ways, Anzel entering the crowd of competitors as he left the arena. Their third matches would take place after lunch. Apparently, it had something to do with keeping the recordings balanced.

Anzel intended to grab a light lunch and retreat to his room. He didn’t want to be spotted, and he preferred to stay away from the eyes of the public as much as—

"Anzel, could I ask you for an interview, please?"

Crap. The moment he heard his name called in that child's voice, he became painfully aware that he'd messed up. He'd been so cautious of Nia that he'd completely forgotten about the other two girls interviewing the fighters. He'd let down his guard after leaving the arena and blending into the crowd.

"I'm real sorry, but I gotta prepare for my match in the afternoon." After refusing the red-haired girl who had come up to ask for permission, Anzel strode away before she had the chance to say anything more.

I'm in hot water now.

That kid was someone who'd sometimes appeared on magivision with Nia. If she heard that Anzel had refused the interview, who knew what she'd say to him? There was a silent agreement between them to assist with the tournament. It wasn't being forced on them, but it was very clear when you considered how Nia had been acting.

Now that he'd refused to help... *Ugh, I don't even want to think about it.*

"We've pinpointed his movements."

Shortly after Anzel left the arena, Ku Yunxie received information on his whereabouts.

"Report."

Except for Ohya, who was currently resting in their room while he recovered, the members of the main house of the Qilong had gathered in a corner of the building.

Their goal had never been to win the tournament—it had always been to take Anzel's life.

"He appears to go to a quiet stairwell after every match."

"What for?"

"He's meeting with Leeno."

"Oh? So that's their relationship, is it?"

A boy and a girl were meeting away from prying eyes. They were both adults—nothing unusual about them getting more involved with each other. Ku originally learned of Anzel because of Leeno in the first place. She had been frequenting the bar where Anzel was the

bartender. It was normal to assume they got along well. In fact, it perhaps made the most sense. Leeno had been going to such a cheap back-alley bar because she was meeting up with her boyfriend.

"I don't believe so, actually."

"No?"

"They seemed almost less than friends... Acquaintances, I suppose? I couldn't hear what they were talking about since I was afraid that they would notice me if I got too close, but both seemed far too stern to be meeting with a lover. They didn't look like they were having fun whatsoever. Um... Master?"

"I don't need all of this useless information. It has nothing to do with our work," Ku finally said in annoyance, brow furrowed. Ignore that Ku had perhaps been entertaining the idea himself, who cared whether they were going out or not? Their target was Anzel; that was all that mattered. Any extra information was just excessive.

Ku also wanted to criticize that exact point but decided against saying it out loud. The last thing he wanted to do right now was lecture his men in a place like this, but he so badly wanted to speak his mind. It was because they were considering such pointless possibilities that they were yet to catch up to a man as old as him. Some of them had even been eliminated in the prelims. How sloppy. What embarrassing students. Ohya had pushed his body so close to the edge, and yet nothing seemed to have gotten through these kids' thick heads. What even was the Qilong to them?

In most situations, losing meant death. Their usual fights were not some friendly entertainment like a tournament. If their identities were discovered, they needed to end people's lives for their own protection. Their comrades' lives were on the line, as well; they needed to have that desire to become stronger, to gain the strength to lose to no one.

He'd subject them to harsh training when they returned, the harshest that he knew.

"Our only target is Anzel. The moment he is dealt with, we leave the island. Get ready to depart at a moment's notice. Move Ohya to the airship, as well." They had their own vessel, so it would be

simple enough for them to escape Altoire. They'd redesigned the airship to look like it belonged to a different country, so only those in the know would be aware that it belonged to Wu Haitong. "After his third match, I will dispose of him. You all keep a lookout."

Ku needed them to keep monitoring the situation so that he could decide the perfect time and place to make his attack.

"What will we do if Leeno appears? Or if she's already there?"

"There is no need to worry about her."

Ku had been keeping an eye on Leeno this whole tournament, curious about how strong she really was. All of the recordings she was being asked to participate in meant her movement had been fairly limited while she was here, meaning it was likely that escaping from the cameras after her third match would be next to impossible. Once she finished her match, she would absolutely immediately be ambushed for interviews.

Even Ku had been asked to be interviewed. The guts and determination of not just the production crew, but the children especially, was commendable. They were boldly going up to dangerous-looking, armed adults and talking to them without issue. The recklessness of it all gave even him the shivers.

On the other hand, Anzel would always run without fail. It was likely the same instincts that those of the Qilong had that were fueling his actions. He was someone who feared locations visible to the light. Anzel must have instinctively run to hide in isolated areas. If he didn't come to this area, then they would attack his room in the lodgings during the night.

This was fine. All Ku needed was a little time for them to be alone together. This was different from a tournament match—the moment Ku dealt a finishing blow, that would be the end of that. It wouldn't take much time at all.

"That is all. Scatter."

Their assassination plan was finalized. The moment Ku gave the order, they all separated.

Ku stood in place for a moment, observing the fighters out in the arena. Ku had lived more than half of his life in the darkness, shying away from the sun. Someone like him could only find the sights in

front of him blinding.

He wasn't as frightened of the surface as Anzel, but even he understood this wasn't where any of them belonged. The trip had been fun, but this was little more than a stop on the journey. He had been given the opportunity to taste a little bit of a life that was different from his every day.

He had to hurry and leave.

What that old man didn't notice as he gazed with distant, tired eyes at those dazzling matches, was that a girl with white hair had been watching him the whole time.

The matches of the tournament were continuing at a steady pace. Each court was used one after another, and the production crews were recording without rest. The competitors were allowed a quick break after each match, but those of us tied to magivision were stuck in the arena.

Hildetaura and I were stationed inside. At this time, Reliared would be interviewing random fighters hanging around outside. The competitors weren't the only ones fighting their own fights here.

"I'm so tired..."

And this wasn't a fight I was personally good with. We'd been here all day since the early morning without a second to breathe. I was hungry too. We had small finger foods like sandwiches, the type of thing you eat when you have no time to think about your meal, but there had been so little of it. I'd been stuck in an endless cycle of moving all around the building to record different matches and carrying out interviews in between.

The interviews were especially tiring. It was taking extra energy focusing on being considerate of how raw the emotions of the fighters would still be, whether they won or lost.

"Are you okay, Nia? Would you like to swap places for a while?"

"I'm fine."

I refused Bendelio's worried request and continued searching for any fighters that caught my eye. Hildetaura and Reliared were still trucking on. I couldn't rest while the children were trying their best.

Besides, it seemed like it would be necessary for me to take a break soon anyway.

Lunchtime passed, and it was time for the third matches—the last matches of the qualifiers. I could hear cheers and loud roars likely coming from those who had managed to make it to the main matches. Those who had won all three of their matches could be sure that they were going through.

"Lynette, congratulations on qualifying for the next round," I said, congratulating my student on her victory as if we were barely acquainted.

"Thank you. It was through everyone's support that I was able to win."

Her matches had been very smooth. She hadn't even broken a sweat, literally.

Shortly after Lynette qualified, so did Fressa. Sauzan, Tohaulow, and the Kenki all made it through too.

Right, how did those assassins from Wu Haitong fare? That old man was strong, but so were the men he had brought with him, so it seemed likely they'd qualified too. The large man Fressa had fought the other day had been really good. He had been above Fressa in all but ability. That fight had really been worth watching. It was no wonder it had been given a special focus.

From what I'd overheard while walking around, Leeno and Gandolph had also qualified. All that was left now was Anzel. When was his match? Had it really still not happened? Wait... It already finished? Did he run off *again?* Darn it, he really was quick on his feet.

But this time, I wouldn't let him escape. I *would* get an interview out of him. I'd make him agree.

"Mr. Bendelio, sir, I must go powder my nose."

"Sure. Take your time. You can have a little break."

All right. I'm gonna get you, you insolent little brat, just you watch.

"Ugh, give me strength..."

The moment Anzel finished his third match, he immediately made his escape.

Having won all three of his matches, he safely advanced to the next round. What he had to fear now was his past catching up to him. It seemed entirely possible that someone could try to prosecute him, which would lead to his disqualification from the tournament. Never mind the tournament, he'd probably get *arrested.*

Kaffes would likely do his best to prevent that from happening. He was the one who ordered Anzel to win this thing, so surely he would put in the work to support him. The only one who would suffer if Anzel didn't make it to the finals was Kaffes. Though Anzel *would also* suffer from the outcome of literally being arrested.

Anyway, he'd made his peace. Whatever happened, happened.

He lit a cigarette and clamped it between his lips. *Nothin' tastes better than a smoke after a job well done.*

For now, he could be content knowing that he'd crossed the first hurdle safely. It had been entirely possible that he could have been eliminated in the prelims—all it took was one bad matchup. It was impossible for him to end up against Lynokis or Gandolph, but it was always possible that he ended up against Lynette or Fressa.

There was never a guarantee that he could win. Avoiding fights with his fellow students was the best course of action.

Anzel sighed as he blew out the smoke. It was so much easier to relax when smoking in the dark. Bright areas were just too—

"Ngh!"

His mind had wandered and dropped its guard, but thankfully, his body reacted for him. Throwing his cigarette on the ground, he threw himself to the side and rolled away.

"Nice reaction. I wish I didn't have to kill you."

Anzel immediately started sweating. His body was screaming at him that danger was approaching. This man hadn't fought in the qualifiers... Anzel hadn't expected he would appear outside of the matches.

Standing where Anzel had been just a moment ago was a small elderly man.

"Are introductions necessary?" the man asked, voice calm,

expression unruffled. None of it hid the insane intent to kill emanating from his body.

This man was dangerous.

Anzel had grown up in the underworld; he'd met all manner of people over the years. But this guy here easily took the cake. No villain, no monster, had ever made Anzel instinctively feel helplessly in danger.

"Might be nice. I'd appreciate if you'd tell me why you're targetin' me while you're at it." Anzel's voice was clearly strained as he spoke, but the old man still put his palm and fist together in salute.

"Ku Yunxie, head of the Qilong. Or perhaps it would be better for me to refer to it as the main house while I am here?"

Anzel hadn't been crazy. The times he'd seen the guy around the island, he'd thought to himself that was the case, but now he'd gotten confirmation.

"Why is an assassin here at a martial arts tournament?"

"Work. Anzel, we are here to kill you."

Well, he could gather that. He was just attacked, after all.

"And the reason?"

"Because you attacked us. You know what I'm referring to, I hope?"

He did. Back at the beginning of summer, Anzel had hit back against the Qilong after they tried to get Neal Liston into an accident. That was the only incident that would make sense.

In other words, Ku was here for revenge—revenge for revenge.

"I see..."

Maybe Anzel would be justified in saying it was their fault for attacking first, but he wasn't stupid enough to say that here. That type of reasoning didn't fly in the underworld.

"What happened after that? Did your men get sent back to you?" After they'd captured the Qilong members, they'd handed them over to the Altoire branch of the Qilong—to Dao Zanxi. He hadn't been given any updates after that. Even if he asked Dao about it, he doubted he'd get any answers.

"They did. The Altoire Qilong kindly came all the way to the main house to deliver them personally."

Anzel hesitantly asked his next question: "Did you kill 'em? Both your men who got caught and Altoire's Qilong members?"

"About that..." Ku gave a strained smile. "Wu Haitong has become much more peaceful compared to when the Qilong was at its prime. That means our pay has been greatly reduced, and we get smaller and smaller by the year. We've become weaker too, especially in terms of our numbers. I won't execute my men unless they've made a grave error, otherwise I risk having no one left under my command. The Altoire Qilong were polite and graceful about the whole situation, so I didn't deem it worth taking their lives. In fact, I gave them my thanks and treated them to a nice meal before they returned. It's tough, you know? I'm having to remain active even at this old age. I want to retire already."

Ku told Anzel more than he was expecting. Maybe he intended it as a parting gift before his death. He was someone that was going to be dead in a few minutes—what did it matter what he heard?

"Then retire, old man. You're just causin' me trouble," Anzel snapped.

Ku chuckled. "That is both my introduction, and my reason for killing you. Does that satisfy you?"

"Unfortunately, yeah."

"Perfect."

Ku's expression completely flattened.

"I've heard there were two women who also accompanied you on that raid. I'd like to say I'll make your death painless if you tell me who they are, but I can tell you'll never rat them out. Oh well, killing you will serve as a good example. That will have to do. That does, however, make it vital that you die."

Anzel was done for.

He was so, so, *so* done for.

He could tell from what little he'd seen of this old man that there was no way he could win. He just wasn't strong enough. It seemed highly unlikely he'd manage to run either.

Despite having acquired chi, Anzel still hadn't been able to detect Ku until the last second. Their power was on entirely different levels.

This wasn't the best place to be either—it wasn't frequented by many people. He could shout all he wanted and no one would arrive to help, and it wouldn't be surprising if it turned out that Ku had his men keeping people out of the area. That alone would already make it impossible for him to escape without being intercepted.

In which case...

"Guess I just gotta brace myself."

Anzel called out his weapon and got into position. Fighting was the only option he had. The possibility of him surviving this was impossibly low, but it gave him a higher chance of surviving than doing nothing.

"Sometimes..." Ku began, taking his time as he strolled toward Anzel, "I recruit young targets who seem as if they would be an asset to the Qilong. I did just say that our numbers have been suffering as of late. What do you say, Anzel? Would you like to join? I'll spare you if you do."

The asshole was asking even though he already knew the answer. He knew the goddamn answer, and he still asked the stupid question.

"No thanks. Killin' ain't in my blood, and I've already got my own boss."

"Unfortunate. In that case, *die*."

It happened in a flash. Anzel had been paying full attention to the man in front of him, yet all of a sudden, Ku was *there* in front of him. He was in reaching distance. The movement had been so quiet, so smooth. The most unnatural thing about him was the hostility radiating from him.

Before Anzel could react, Ku's palm was touching Anzel's solar plexus.

Boom!

"Oh my."

A shock wave ran through Anzel's body—but at the same moment, he awkwardly swung his pipe down in retaliation. Ku looked surprised as he dodged with a little leap.

"Graaaaaaaagh!"

But all Anzel could do was fall to his knees.

It hurt. His body felt heavy.

The pain in his stomach was so intense it felt like it had exploded, and his organs felt as heavy as lead. He couldn't even stay standing.

"You did something there, didn't you?" Ku asked.

Anzel couldn't even utter a word in his current state. But Ku was right—Anzel had blocked with external chi. He'd managed to divert Ku's palm strike just slightly, and as a result, had avoided a lethal blow. He'd tried to launch a counterattack before the pain set in, but it had been easily dodged.

"No matter. I hesitate to have to kill you, but I have no choice."

Ku's hand touched Anzel's motionless head.

And then stopped.

"Now this is rather odd. What are you doing here, young lady? Did you not come across my lookouts?" Ku asked, moving not a muscle. His eyes were still trained on the hand that rested on Anzel's head.

Anzel couldn't move. If he did, his head would be pierced. Not that he had the strength to move right now, anyway.

And then suddenly, a voice belonging to someone that shouldn't have been here interrupted.

"They looked away when I told them there was a skyfish flying by, and I ran in while they were distracted."

What was she talking about?

"I don't quite understand, but you must leave and pretend all of this never happened. Forget what you saw here. This man has to go on a journey to somewhere far away, so you needn't worry about him. He is our problem."

"Oh wow, you're going to just let me go?"

"Assassins who kill children aren't very well-liked. But"—Ku took a step back, and then turned—"if it is your wish, I could make an exception."

A girl with white hair stood in front of him. Though she looked like a regular girl, her posture relaxed, there were no openings in her stance. Not a single vulnerability.

"Hmm, that might be a bit of a problem." The white-haired girl

walked forward. Even that was devoid of openings. "Fights between competitors outside of the arena is a major breach of the rules that leads to immediate disqualification. Even the smallest tussles are clamped down on fast. But I wouldn't mind letting you go if you let *him* go."

Ku laughed. "Do you really think I would hold back here? I will be returning home after this."

The girl cocked her head. "You will? Surely you won all of your matches?"

"I conceded after my first match of the day. It isn't right for the old folks to block the way forward for the younger generation."

"Really? That's a shame. I wanted to see you fight in a real match."

But that didn't matter.

"I'm afraid Anzel is different. I need him to make it to the finals and hype up the tournament for us. Letting him die here would be horrible. I really don't want any fatalities to come out of this. If anyone is going to die here, they need to at least do it during a match."

"Then what are you going to do?" Ku asked.

"What other choice do I have but to stop you?"

"Do you think you can?"

"But of course. Don't worry, I'll *really* hold back, so you can come at me without a worry."

"Hah hah hah! You'll hold back for me, will you? Well, this old man feels relieved."

That smiling old man was immediately within range of the white-haired girl, movements smooth as water.

Bang!

A heavy shock wave echoed, and the girl's hair fluttered.

Ku had managed to get in the hit and pierce her with his chi.

"Nice. You aren't half bad."

But she was calmly standing there as if nothing had happened.

"But I... I struck you, didn't I?"

Even Ku could not hide his surprise.

"You did. You got in a pretty good one, actually."

I had only been looking for Anzel and instead, I'd ended up stumbling upon an interesting little scene. Ku Yunxie—who had looked like he was about to do something very *not good* when I saw him earlier—and Anzel had been fighting. I watched from the shadows for a while, but the old man was, in fact, about to do something very not good, so I moved in to stop them.

Honestly, I'd been a little worried he wouldn't detect my presence, but I had at least been close enough that it would've been possible for me to intervene at any time. Anzel had looked like he wanted to try and fight back, so I thought it wouldn't be very nice to interrupt his fun. But the situation had gone far enough that it was now a danger to his life, so I had no other choice than to get involved. I'd rather not do something as barbaric as interrupting a fight between two martial artists, but what else could I do?

Anyway, back to Ku Yunxie. He was pretty good. There was quite a lot of force behind that palm strike of his, and it was precise to boot—had I been a regular person, I would've been dead by now.

When he went in for the kill, it was always sudden. Truly marvelous. He could kill anyone he was determined to kill. He didn't even show any mercy against a child, which was exactly how he needed to be. A martial artist who could not become heartless would always be second-rate, no matter how strong they were.

His movements leading into his attacks were also good. He would cut off any killing intent or aura in advance, and then enter engagement distance with an exceedingly fast step. It was a skill that allowed one to scramble their opponent's cognition. Those who were strong would use senses or indicators other than sight—instinct, atmosphere, prickling of the skin—to predict what would happen and react faster than their eyes alone would allow them to.

It was that part of a fighter's instinct that his move disrupted. The only thing the one being attacked would be able to register was that their opponent was suddenly in front of them. *Beautiful.* The quality of his chi was nothing special, and yet he could carry out something of such a high skill level. It was really, truly beautiful. It was the result of the old man's long, diligent training.

Which made it all the more unfortunate that his chi was so weak. It didn't seem as if he'd learned how to apply it well, so everything about his usage was inefficient. If your use was inefficient, your chi would turn out weak. He needed to temper it further. He needed to create stronger chi within his body.

How did this happen? Had his teacher been bad? He would've been so much stronger if he'd just been taught properly. That was what made this so disappointing. If he had just been properly trained for all this time, he might have been stronger than I was right now. That was how much innate talent I could sense in him.

Oh well. I had spent this whole tournament thinking about how jealous I was that everyone was having so much fun with their matches. I'd been itching for a good match—and this old man looked perfect to play with.

"As I said, Anzel is vital to the tournament. I haven't even had the chance to interview him yet. So I'll be your opponent now. Once we're done, be good and go home, okay?"

"Cocky, aren't you? I won't hold back."

"Please don't."

I dodged Ku's high kick that could've easily gouged out a tree's trunk. This was pretty good too. From a purely raw power standpoint, the large man that fought Fressa the other day was stronger, but Ku was sharper. He could likely break skin with his attacks very easily.

"Shaee!" With a piercing shout, he released a barrage of attacks aimed at my shoulder, stomach, solar plexus, throat. He aimed at each weak point with precision. Wonderful.

I blocked them all with my hands. It would be bad if I dirtied or ripped my clothes—I had no spares with me.

I needed to be careful about any hits aimed for my face too. My brow, nose, eyes, temples, chin, upper lip were all targeted with further precision, but I dodged those. I was pretty sure I'd be all right if I took such hits directly, but if I ended up with any bruises on my face, it would affect recording.

The attacks stopped as Ku's hands were placed over my solar plexus and heart.

"Hmph!"

It was a double palm strike aimed at two critical points—a heavy step in followed by a heavy strike. It had a destructive force unimaginable from such a small-statured old man.

I dodged it, though. I took his first hit as the one who was stronger here, but any more than that, and my clothes would have been in trouble. I still had recordings after this, you know.

"Wh-What skill..." Ku was shocked. He was shocked by my ability to easily dodge all of his attacks.

"My face is off-limits, sorry." It was the greatest lethal zone. Taking a hit to the eyes, ears, or nose was all bad. I'd have liked to tank the hits if possible—taking the full-power hits of the weak was the duty of the strong. *But I'm sorry. This is the one time I can't indulge you.*

"Now it's my turn," I declared.

Ku prepared his stance.

All right, let's go.

"Guh?!"

Punch, kick, kick. Each of my attacks were clean and simple as I went on the offensive. Ku dodged, deflected, and pulled back.

"You can't see, can you?"

"Y-You... Who are you?!"

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! He's all rattled, look at him!

It seemed this old man could use divination chi. Divination chi was how one could foresee the future. The Technique involved using external chi to observe how one's opponent's chi moved before their body did and read their next attack. Fressa appeared to be using this skill as well, but she likely wasn't conscious of it. I didn't think she even realized she was using it.

Ku was using it, but it seemed entirely self-taught. Had he acquired it through experience and pure instinct? The result of numerous deathmatches and years of training. I was getting even more sad. Still, he'd reached this point through his own strength alone. I was genuinely impressed.

"Do you have time to worry about that?"

I played around with him for a while. I kicked the wall, kicked the

ceiling, and aimed for his head, chasing after him the moment he dodged.



Good, you look as if you can continue for a bit longer. Time for me to pick the speed up a notch. No stopping now, I'm going to keep going strong.

Ku was being toyed with.

He could accept that there were martial artists stronger than him out there. Age meant nothing when it came to strength. If someone was strong, they were strong. If not, people wouldn't accept that Ku, someone who was both old and not blessed with a larger stature, was as strong as he was.

But for him to be pushed into a corner with such an age difference between them...

No, I can accept even that, Ku thought to himself as he continued taking the white-haired girl's attacks.

But she was strong, far too strong. Circling, unbalancing, fortification, brushing counters, blocking, grabbing, none of it worked. Was it really possible to so consistently attack with such a balanced center of gravity?

It didn't even stop there. This girl was *leading* him. She was leading Ku as if she were some master teaching her disciple.

The angle of her dodges, the way in which she carried her feet, her ability to deliberately create openings for attack... She was playing the role of an adversary for her student, matching their strength level. She was trying to teach a manner of fighting that couldn't be taught through theory alone.

Ku was almost certain that every single one of his moves was being controlled by this girl—because he was moving only in the ways he was being allowed to. He was completely unable to break the equilibrium they had reached. He could only spot the best move and take it. If he tried to introduce any unnatural attacks, he would simply be countered.

He had long forgotten this sense of safety. This feeling of understanding a master's strength and feeling safe to entrust his training to them was something he had not felt since he was a young child.

It was both gentle and warm, even though they were here

fighting. With such a clear difference in their strength, he couldn't even feel humiliation. And then...

And then, the end abruptly arrived.

"Gwaaaaaaah?!"

Huh?

What?!

Ku let out a scream and then slumped to the ground. I had only been punching him lightly; I hadn't even kicked him. What happened? Was he acting? No, that scream was filled with such genuine emotion, it was hard to believe it was just a performance.

"A-Are you all right? What happened?" What was wrong? He was clearly not okay, but then what was it? The only thing I could do was ask him. I couldn't leave him like this.

"Oogh, ungh... My back..." he answered as he groaned in pain.

Your back? Ah...

"Chronic pain?"

"From about a decade ago, yes. I hurt it once and since then the pain has never ceased." Ku sighed. "I've been fooling myself for so long, but it appears my limit has come."

That made sense. He was of an age where it wasn't surprising for him to have problems with his back. To be honest, martial artists were prone to problems with their bodies in general, whether because of old injuries, or because of repeated damage to their joints. Training as we did meant being reckless to some degree. Being reckless was the only way we could bring the limits of our bodies beyond the impossible. Bring it too far, though, and it was only natural to injure yourself.

Our little bout really had been fun, though... Sure, I might have held back a little, but we were having a proper spar.

"Kill me."

"What?"

"I can't move anymore. I can't even walk. I can't even *stand.* But having made such a fool of myself, I cannot be allowed to live. Please kill me in one strike. You can handle that, surely?"

I could, but... I knew nothing of his personal history, only that he

was a dangerous assassin. I had only interrupted the fight to protect Anzel. It wasn't like I had some personal grudge against him. I just wanted to have a little spar, especially since it looked like he still had room to grow. It might be difficult at his age, but he could definitely get stronger. There wasn't even anyone I despised so much I wanted to kill in this life yet.

Though there sure is someone on his way to that status! Right, Bendelio?! Right?!

"Mmm..."

What should I do? In this situation, it seemed right to let those involved decide. I was practically an outsider to whatever this situation was. In fact, I had committed the transgression of interrupting a personal fight.

I turned my head and looked over at Anzel, who was still too injured to do anything more than just watch.

Internal damage, it looks like. He's sweating buckets, but... He's not unconscious, so he's probably fine. If he was unconscious or vomiting blood, I would be worried.

"What would you like to do?"

"Huh? You puttin' this on me?"

Besides, it seemed he'd been able to rest enough that the worst of the pain had passed. His organs were likely fine. Anzel was a lot tougher than he looked.

"Well, it's not like this has anything to do with *me*."

"You spar with him for that long and suddenly it's got nothin' to do with you?"

"Yes. I'm just trying to keep the peace of this tournament." Therefore, I was an outsider.

"You're not makin' my life easy here..." Anzel looked a little lost himself. Face scrunching in pain, he put his hand to the wall and pushed himself up. "Okay, let's do this, then. Let's keep this a secret between the three of us."

"A secret?" I repeated.

"Yeah. I'll keep quiet about everything pertainin' to the old man here. I swear to not speak a single word to anyone. You, old man, need to keep quiet about how strong the kid here is. You, kid, need

to keep quiet about everythin' that went on here. How's that sound? If any one of us breaks that, then the remainin' two will take 'em out."

I wasn't really that concerned with the outcome, honestly. So long as Anzel accepted an interview and fought in the finals, at least. The real problem here was the old man.

"Are you really expecting me to just take you at your word?"

See? He hates it. He's still hunched over on the ground, though.

"You lost," Anzel snapped back without hesitation.

"What?"

"You lost to this kid. That kid is deferrin' to *my* judgment. And *this* is my judgment. My judgment is the kid's judgment. The loser should obey the winner. What weight does the opinion of a loser have? You want to die? Go ahead, but do it anywhere else but here. You lost, old man. Don't think you can start orderin' us to kill you."

Perfect.

"That's that. It's decided."

Honestly, Anzel's words were really quite unreasonable, but given how Ku looked, it appeared it was enough for him to accept. It *was* a very underworld logic.

He was right, though: The loser should obey the winner. Those six words said it all. It was so easy to understand, I loved it.

"If you want to kill Anzel that badly, save it for after the tournament, will you? Besides, you're not saying that Mr. Ku here should never attack you again, right, Anzel?"

"Course not. Not like there's any way to guarantee we can keep a deal like this, so no, I won't ask for somethin' so pointless. It's not like I intend to believe you."

In other words, he was just trying to find a way out of his present situation.

"Hmph. You're naive, child," the old man said, looking at Anzel. "We will continue targeting you for as long as you live."

So you do have some sort of history here. Sorry for barging in.

"Wouldn't killin' you here just cause me more trouble anyway? I'm guaranteed to have your men comin' after me out of revenge. This timing would *immediately* incriminate me."

He was right. That was what happened when you dealt with assassins. Killing the old man here would only implant a stronger desire to take revenge against him here.

"Besides, can't say I take joy in bullyin' the injured elderly. Lettin' you go for now is fine. Whatever we do, let's start over."

I agreed. I had to get back soon. People were going to start thinking I took a long time powdering my nose.

"Anzel?"

"Huh?"

"I'd like to carry out a winner's interview with you. Would you mind coming with me?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever... Lemme get checked out at the infirmary first and I'll go along with you."

Nice, mission success.

"Okay, old man, you're free to go," I said, kneeling down beside Ku. I rubbed his back—and then hit it.

"Ow?! Ow, ow... Ow?" One minute Ku was groaning in pain, the next, he was standing up straight.

"I just performed some first aid. You'll be fine for half a day, I think. From what I felt, I don't think your back is completely done for yet. Rest and recover before you hurt it so bad you can't walk."

I'd controlled his chi to force the body's regenerative functions to kick in at an amplified level. It was like what I'd done to cure my own disease but with someone else. The only side effect was that it tired out the patient's body. If he didn't make sure to eat and rest well, the pain would be much worse later. Rest and relaxation were required.

"Hey, that's a fancy trick," Anzel said. "Do it to me too."

"What? You're ordering me after sending me on a wild-goose chase? After you made me come all the way out here to find you? After making me do something as horrific as interrupting a personal match? You had me do all this and you want me to do what? Hmm? What do you want me to do?"

"Sorry, ma'am. It's nothin', ma'am."

Good man. Move your legs and get to the infirmary.

"What *are* you...?" Ku asked once more.

"Just a child," I replied.

"Don't think that's what he's askin'."

I know.

"If you really want me to answer, then defeat me first. If you manage that, I'll tell you anything."

Ku fell silent.

That's right. All the loser can do is quietly leave.

While they both likely had many thoughts about what had just occurred, that at least put an end to this situation. The old man left first. Apparently, he would call back all of his scouts and return to Wu Haitong.

I couldn't predict what would happen from here.

At the end of the day, it was a fight between Anzel and the old man, so I had no need to get much more involved. I didn't know what had happened between them, and I didn't particularly *want* to know either. It was their problem, not mine.

Things might change if Anzel decided to ask me for help, but it didn't look as if he wanted to.

Once enough time had passed after the old man left, I went with Anzel to the infirmary.

Time for work!

Things are only just getting started!

Epilogue

"And with that, we have completed all the preliminary matches."

Things were largely going according to plan. Or perhaps he could even say they were doing well?

"Good work." Hyurence thanked the knights as Wolkas gave his report.

Six men sat at a round table in a small meeting room within Altoire Castle. Standing by the wall was a female bodyguard. This had become a common sight since even before the prelims began. They were the same faces that had gathered time and time again to prepare for the tournament, from doing paperwork to carrying out meetings. They had been fighting to reach this point in a much different way than the competitors.

"The finals await. This won't be easy, but I'm counting on you all."

"Yes, Your Majesty. We of the knights will do all we must to make this succeed."

The preliminaries of the martial arts tournament wrapped up yesterday. Now that all the competitors had left the island and any last cleanup had been finished, it was time for Hyurence to receive the final report for this stage of the event.

Unsurprisingly, there had been some slight troubles along the way, but nothing that would have a large effect on the continued running of the tournament. Hyurence agreed with that judgment. None of the issues would be considered major enough to interfere with their goals.

All of that said, the king still couldn't understand all the hype surrounding this thing. However, if his citizens were happy, far be it from him to ruin their fun. No one said the host had to be enjoying themselves.

"I wasn't expecting prelims to be so exciting."

"There were so many surprises that I couldn't take my eyes off the matches."

"I don't think anyone could've predicted that Zeon would lose in *prelims*."

"What was your favorite match, Captain?"

The young knights were all fervently talking among themselves. Hyurence hadn't enjoyed himself, but it seemed they had.

All the knights gathered here had been on security for the tournament after being in charge of sorting through all the entry forms.

"We're in the middle of a meeting, boys..." Wolkas muttered in embarrassment. It appeared he'd already given up on trying to control them with how blatantly they had dropped into personal conversation. Though the king *was* still here. He had spared a moment in his busy schedule to sit in on their meeting.

It was hard to blame them, though—now that they'd successfully made it through prelims, it was natural to relax a little. After all, they'd been busy this whole time. They'd handled almost ten thousand participants. Now that the toughest part of their job was over, wanting to let loose a bit was normal.

Hyurence, however, had other things to do. "Knight Captain Wolkas, if you could concisely detail the plan after this. We'll get this boring meeting out of the way quickly so you can chat about the tournament all you like."

The young knights nervously closed their mouths.

"Ahem, then, very briefly..." Wolkas cleared his throat and returned the formality to the room. "The number of participants qualified for finals numbers roughly three hundred. We will carry out interviews on magivision of all qualified competitors, bar those who forfeit, and create brief introductions for them all. The losers' matches will begin concurrently."

The main tournament would begin a month from now. That was the time they had to get the fighters' identities known across the land, and also to provide enough information for the betting scene to get in full swing.

The losers' matches would be a nice way for audiences to enjoy

more battle excitement until the main matches began. Everything would be broadcast on magivision, which would likely lead to a rise in MagiPad sales; those who wanted to watch would buy one. If individual businesses owned MagiPads, then they would gain more business from customers wanting to watch the matches.

Altoire's economy was on the rise. Just how much could they profit by the time the tournament was over?

This was where their battle really began. They had to put in as much effort as possible to raise those expectations for the finals higher and higher.

"We have the losers' matches scheduled to end a week before the finals. We will use that week to run interviews of the winners from the losers' matches who have qualified to return to the tournament. This will also be where we see the greatest influx of our guests. Preparations for their arrival are going smoothly."

That was also when it would truly be Hyurence's turn to play his role. Dealing with foreign dignitaries inevitably turned any interactions into political games.

"As for the opening ceremony, the plan is to start with the fighters making their entrance, having a designated competitor to represent them all making a speech, then a speech from Your Majesty, then a Wingroad flight formation performance, and then we move on to the first match."

This was all as Hyurence had already been told.

"All right. Onto the next task." Hyurence glanced at the attendant by the wall who brought over some papers she'd been carrying and then spread them out on the table. All of them were posters. They'd been posted around Altoire for a while, but they'd been almost immediately stolen every time, so they decided to consider turning them into merchandise. The fifty featured fighters had been whittled down to around twenty after the preliminaries.

"Make predictions for who will win. We will supply extra security to those most likely."

There were already many foreign visitors to the country and that would only increase from here. Their competitors—the favorites to win especially—were all precious horses in this race. If anyone tried

to sabotage them before the matches even started, Altoire's profits and reputation would suffer. Many of Altoire's citizens would be disappointed as well.

That was a scenario they must avoid at all costs, but Hyurence had absolutely no personal interest in the power levels of the participants. Never mind his interest, he was completely clueless when it came to understanding what made someone strong in the first place. In that case, he just had to trust the eyes of those who *did* care.

"We need to predict who'll win?! Whoa, I've got no idea!"

Those eyes Hyurence was willing to trust suddenly began sparkling.

"I'm cheering for Lady Freeze! Who do you think will win?!"

"Leeno, duh! Who else could possibly win this?"

"Now hang on! I have full faith in Gandolph!"

"Captain, what about you?! Who do you think will win?!"

"Yeah, Captain! What do you think?!"

"This is really important, Captain! Faith in the knight order may decrease dramatically depending on your choice here! We might even end up getting despised by the soldiers! People might start talking behind your back about how bad you are at judging people's strength!"

"Don't force such an important decision on me in the middle of the meeting," the captain grumbled.

The passion in this meeting was on a whole different level. Hyurence wasn't particularly jealous that he couldn't understand their enthusiasm, but realizing he didn't quite fit into the circle, he turned to his bodyguard instead.

"Who do you think will win?" he quietly asked.

"I hesitate to answer, Your Majesty. Faith in your bodyguards and soldiers may decrease dramatically depending on my choice, after all."

Was this *really* that critical of a decision?

Afterword

I have a lot of regrets this year.

Hello, Umikaze Minamino here. I'm writing this at the end of October 2024.

This volume is filled with completely original content, and I am very grateful that this is only part one. Next volume will also be entirely original. I have been working on the next volume as I write this afterword. And I'm bawling my eyes out while doing it. It doesn't matter how many words I put to paper—it never ends.

I have very little space for the afterword again, so I can't write too much. Instead, I'd like to mention the first regrets and sadnesses for this year that come to mind. I didn't get to eat any unagi. I didn't get to eat my beloved T-bone steak. Me and pancetta were not fated to be. This really nice ramen shop in the neighborhood shut down. A restaurant that specialized in spaghetti napolitan also shut down. I still haven't found the wallet that I've been searching for since last year.

A lot of things have happened this year, and yet the sad things always stand out the most. Life is quite the bitter thing.

Katana-sensei, thank you for all your beautiful illustrations. It's great seeing Nia try to push Lynokis away! You can feel her cruelty and the sadness!

Kodai-sensei, thank you for always making the manga edition so much fun. The fifth volume of the manga should be coming out about a week after this book. I'm so excited to read it. Will Bendelio get to appear? I hope he does.

S-san, my editor, thank you for all your work again. Both this and the next volume will be entirely original. My pen is moving a little slow right now, and as the creator, I am spending the days sweating bullets. I will make it on time. I will do my best. I'll buy *Metaphor:*

ReFantazio and *Romancing SaGa 2* only after I finish writing the manuscript. I mean it. I promise.

I must express my thanks to everyone else who has contributed to the publishing of this book.

Finally, to my readers. We're on volume 7. I hope you enjoyed it. Hopefully I'll have the space to make the afterword a little longer next time. Thank you for joining me on this journey!

Let us meet again in volume 8!

Bonus Short Stories

A Meeting on the Way to Hell

The preliminaries for the martial arts tournament were fast approaching. With the official start date announced, Lynokis had already made her way to the tournament island, and the excitement among the citizens of Altoire was on the rise. Foreign visitors were still entering the country, greatly changing the flow of goods along with them. Altoire was starting to feel alive with a festive air.

"I don't want to go..."

I had a meeting for my magivision work to attend. Immediately after school, I'd returned to the dorms so I could get changed to meet with the Liston production crew in the city. For once, I didn't have any recordings scheduled, but in exchange, there was a lot we needed to discuss. Despite my complaining, it was certainly easier than recording...by about a coin's width. The meeting would still be about future recordings, so there was no escape.

Honestly, work had been far too busy since the summer break. It was like... What was it like? I was working so much I couldn't even think of how to describe it. There was so much to do that I wanted to just be honest and say out loud that I was working too much, that I'd had enough. This schedule was so spartan that even an adult would find themselves falling ill. Hell, *Lynokis* had collapsed and had needed to rest for a whole two or three days.

At least the production crew had shifts—it was easy enough for them to rotate people in and out. For those of us in front of the camera, however, we had no choice but to be active almost all the time. Apparently, they still hadn't trained people who could take our places.

All of that said, it was an undeniable truth that I was the one who'd proposed this tournament to begin with, so I was more than

willing to assist with it, but even I had my limits.

I let out a sigh. *Guess there's no helping it.*

Nothing would change no matter how much I complained, so I got my mind back on track.

Let's get dressed and get going. The battle is only just beginning.

Everyone on the production crew was gathered around a table in a hotel meeting room.

"How was school today, Nia?"

"You had lessons today, didn't you? It must be tough."

I'd known all of the staff for a long time now. Given how much we'd been through together, it would have been a disservice to refer to them simply as colleagues. They were a lot more like *comrades,* fellow soldiers who were fighting through this exhilarating tournament with me. Every one of them had a glimpse of fatigue on their face, but that didn't change how reliable they were.

We no longer used the Chocolate Lily's Aroma—a high-class restaurant I frequented—for our meetings as much as we used to. Back when I'd first enrolled in the academy and recordings in the capital had started ramping up, we would have our meetings in all manner of restaurants and bistros that had private booths, but as magivision became more popular, and as I became a much more well-known face, we'd stopped visiting our usual spots; we'd had too many cases of troublesome fans raiding the locations we were using.

For me, something like that was only as troublesome as a monster suddenly charging at me, but it was much more disruptive for the restaurant.

"Hey, sorry to keep you all waiting. Let's get started, shall we?"

You're finally here, Bendelio. Look at you bringing that distinctive face of yours again, you horrid man.

Why was he always the only one who looked completely unfazed? Why did he never look tired? Never mind me, *he* was the real monster here.

Now that Bendelio had returned from his errands, we started our meeting.

Naturally, the meeting was entirely focused on the martial arts tournament—the preliminaries were about to start, after all. Who would even bother watching anything else right now?

There was much we had to consider: our recording schedule, the general questions to ask in the competitor interviews, things we had to prepare for the losers' matches...

The schedule was the most important point of discussion. All the production crews had agreed to work together to catch as much of the tournament as possible. Apparently, permission had been granted to broadcast all tournament recordings on any channel. It completely removed the need to consider the competition or how to stay ahead.

Instead, it meant that we had to absolutely ensure we recorded what we had been asked to, and that we didn't miss any vital moments. It all sounded quite stressful, but that was for Bendelio and the other executives to worry about. My opinion held little power here.

"I think that about wraps up everything we need to discuss for now."

I looked through all the sheets on which I'd scribbled my notes. I didn't think there was much more to discuss myself.

Looking at the irritatingly packed schedule was making me dizzy...

Hey, Lynokis, it seems like I really won't *have time to do anything but record. The rest of this year is going to be filled with nothing but work.*

In any case, our meeting was done for now. It had been quite long, but there was still light outside. The days were long, and the sun's rays were strong. We were in fall already, and yet it still felt like it was summer, as if the climate itself had been infected by the passion spreading all throughout Altoire.

"Yep, this seems good enough for this meeting. Are you still good to get back by curfew, Nia?" Bendelio asked.

"I should probably get back to the dorms." I still had a little bit of leeway, but I promised Lynokis that I wouldn't go anywhere not originally planned and that I would make sure to finish my homework. More importantly, I really needed to make sure I relaxed

with what little free time I had. It would be best to preserve my strength for the battle that was ahead, or I'd be collapsing too—that or I'd go insane.

"That's a shame. We're all going to a recording after this."

Right, the only one here with a curfew was the literal student, so all the adults could easily go on and work some more. Being a grown-up certainly was tough in its own way.

"If only you didn't have your curfew," Bendelio dramatically despaired.

Huh? You wanna say that again, you freak?

"What, so you can work me to the bone? It's so you can work me to the bone even more, isn't it?"

"What makes you say that? I just wish I could spend more time with you, that's all."

No, really, can I punch you? Just once?

"Not just me, but everyone else here wants to see more of you too."

Excuse me? What did you just say? Everyone? Don't act like you understand us, Bendelio. Me and this crew are comrades who have walked through hell together. We're connected by the tightest bonds. They'd never wish misfortune upon me.

"There's no way that's true. Who would ever... Wait."

Wait. You all... What? My...my comrades. What are those warm, kind smiles on your faces?

I hated these bonds. I hated this empathy we'd built over the past few years. I could tell exactly what they were thinking just by looking at their faces.

Don't look at me like that. Don't look at me with those tired smiles ready to drag me down to hell along with you.

Damn it all, they were all just pawns of the corporation. They were all gears in the system of the broadcasting station. Their friendship with me had been just a working relationship all along, hadn't it? It had all been for show.

You Liston dogs! Don't think you can do what you want with me! If you want to go to hell that badly, leave me out of it!

Wait... *I* was the one from the Liston family. When I really

thought about it, I'd actually done the same to them. I'd dragged runaway staff back kicking and screaming more than once before.

"I want to see my family again."

"I want to see my daughter."

"I want to see my partner."

Our bonds were built upon ignoring those complaints. I may have been the one who dragged them down to hell first.

You know what? It was fine. The past could remain in the past. What was done was done. No point in dwelling on it now.

"Either way, I have my curfew to worry about, so I shall be taking my leave. Good luck with your work, everyone!"

Please just let me leave early this time. I'll go down to hell with all of you, okay?

Let's get through this battle together, my dear comrades.

An Inescapable Interview

"Please let us interview you! You've been performing so well so far!"

"Why, of course. Please ask whatever you'd like."

Hey, what a good response. Keep this up, that's perfect.

Day four of preliminaries, I finally managed to grab Fressa—or Freeze, that is—for an interview. And I meant it when I said "finally." She and Anzel had been sneaking around avoiding me this whole time.

Fressa was absolutely one of the favorites to win this tournament—the organizers wanted us to make sure we got in an interview with her.

She really needed to stop running already. I knew she was avoiding it because, as a member of the underworld, the last thing she wanted to do was stand out. But she'd already been caught front and center. Fressa's flashy performance in her last match on the second day of prelims had already been broadcast all around the country. What reason was there for her to bother trying to run anymore? I would definitely be catching Anzel today too, no matter

what.

"Now, if you please." I nodded at the camera. Once it was rolling, I began the interview, "Joining us now is our lovely Freeze."

I was grinning wide and so was Fressa. Anyone watching would assume that Fressa was being very cooperative. They would also think that we were strangers. It was important that our actual relationship never got out, after all.

"Today is the last day of preliminaries. How are you feeling?"

"I feel pretty normal, honestly. I'll just keep trying as hard as I have been."

She's able to keep her mind calm? Good, good. That's important.

But honestly, that was such a simple answer that it was a little boring... I didn't mind it with the other fighters, but I'd hoped my students would at least say something a bit exciting.

"Freeze."

I stared up at Fressa. For just a moment, I saw a flicker of nervousness in those blue eyes. She must have understood what I wanted to say. But it was impossible to run from magivision in a tournament like this. The more matches a contestant won, the harder it was to avoid.

Say something interesting. Say something unique.

"Do you think you can win?"

Now, give it to me. Say something good.

There was nothing wrong with a model student, but there were always plenty of problem children in the martial arts sphere. She should take this opportunity to say something provocative like a good martial artist would—not that Fressa was a martial artist. She was an assassin. But still.

"Heh."

I wasn't sure if my thoughts managed to get through to her, but Fressa ruffled her hair and then gave a confident smile.

This wasn't Freeze. This was just the Fressa that I knew.

"There isn't a single person here who isn't aiming for victory. Of course I'll win."

Yes, that's it. I can feel your motivation.

All right, I managed to pull out a good answer. Even Bendelio was nodding in satisfaction beside the camera. What an irritating face.

"I see. Thank you very much."

I put an end to the interview there.

"Wait, that's it?" Fressa asked in surprise as we prepared for our next recording.

This was the reality of the interview she had so desperately tried to run away from. It wasn't as if we were ever planning to dig into her true identity.

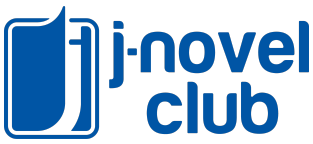
"Yes, that's all. We have a lot of interviews to get through."

There were currently over two thousand competitors in this building. If we wanted to get to as many of them as possible, we couldn't let interviews run on too long.

"Do allow us to carry out a more thorough interview if you make it to finals, though."

Fressa likely had a lot of fans by now. Carrying out a full interview would supply them with what they wanted.

As a possible winner, I need you to try your best. You're going to be someone people will be betting on, after all.



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