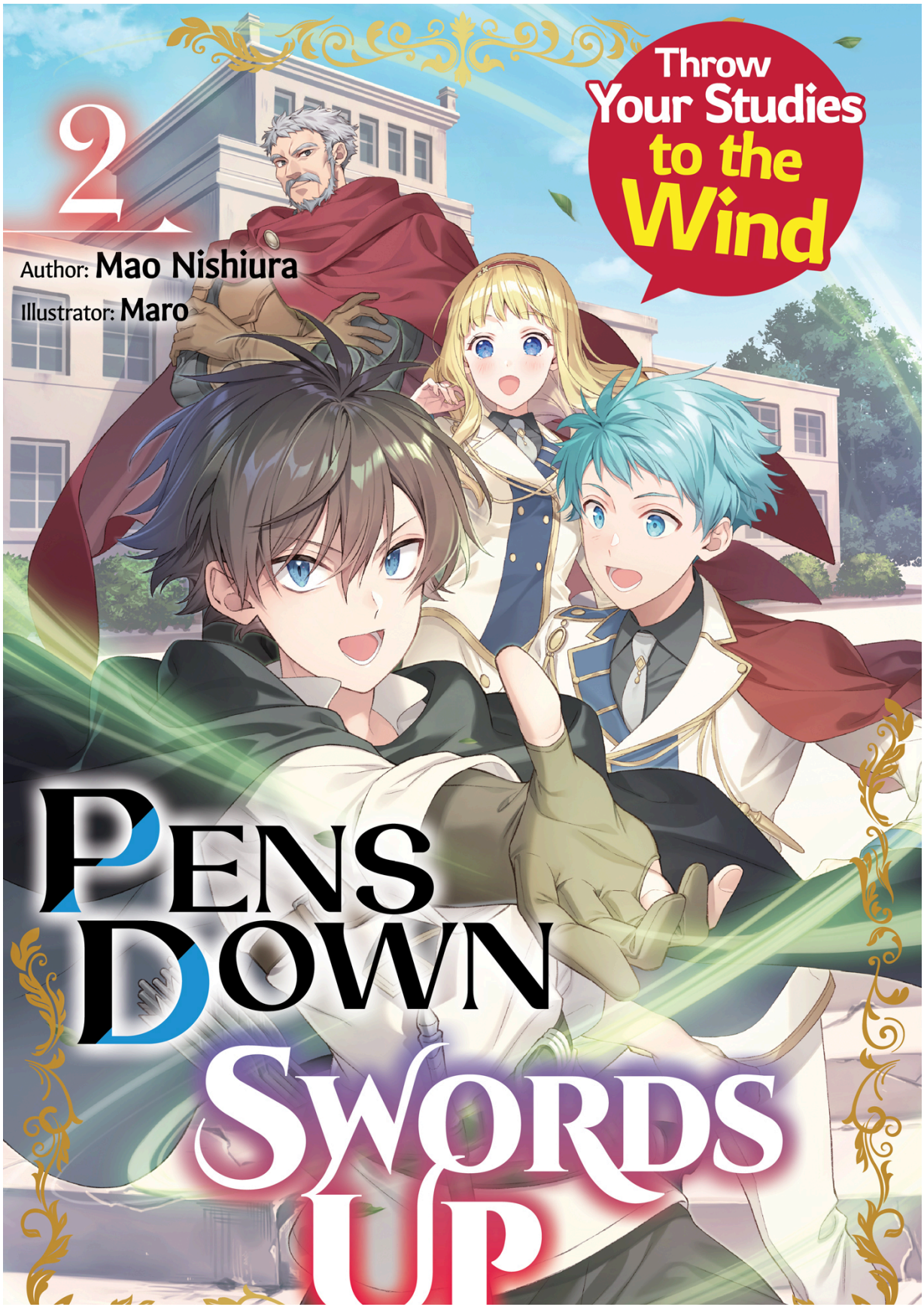

Throw Your Studies to the Wind
2
Author: Mao Nishiura
Illustrator: Maro
PENS DOWN
SWORDS UP


Throw Your Studies to the Wind
2
Author: Mao Nishiura
Illustrator: Maro
PENS DOWN
SWORDS UP




"You need to hear the ground's voice with your knees and reply with your feet— Oh, forget it! Just give up!"
Allen
As usual, I was dedicated to my job as the club's coach— which primarily meant harassing the other runners with illogical abuse whenever I passed them on the track. My harsh demands had only grown more unreasonable as the days had passed, but even then, no one had dropped out of the club yet, much to my dismay.
PENSDOWN SWORDSUP2
Throw Your Studies to the Wind




Al
Leo
Dolph
Jewelry
...
Everyone has magical abilities—
everyone...except Allen?


Cher was stupidly strong, and while Pops and I put up a good fight at first, we were black and blue by the time the dust had settled. I'd tried to pull a few bystanders into the fight to turn it in our favor, but in the end, all I'd done was turn our little scuffle into a tavern-wide free-for-all.
Rynde
Can't I be a rowdy explorer without getting into a tavern brawl?!



CONTENTS

Prologue

1 The Standard Dormitory, and My First Equipment

2 The Cooperative

3 Godolphen's Challenge

4 The Birth of a Mage

5 The Mad Hound

Side Story In Search of a Blacksmith

Afterword



Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Jnovels
4. Chapter One: The Standard Dormitory, and My First Equipment
5. Chapter Two: The Cooperative
6. Chapter Three: Godolphen's Challenge
7. Chapter Four: The Birth of a Mage
8. Chapter Five: The Mad Hound
9. Side Story: In Search of a Blacksmith
10. Afterword
11. Bonus High Resolution Illustrations
12. About J-Novel Club
13. Copyright



Stay up to date On Light Novels by Downloading our mobile App

Zerobooks Universal

Zerobooks USA ONLY

Zerobooks IOS

Download all your Favorite Light Novels

Jnovels.com

Join our Discord and meet Thousands of LN readers to chat with

Chapter One: The Standard Dormitory, and My First Equipment

Life in the Dorm (1)

Now that I'd successfully registered as a G-Rank at the Explorer's Guild, I could finally safely consider my first expedition complete. After I bid Reed farewell, I continued on my way back to the dorm. The yet-uneaten hind legs of the horned rabbit we'd hunted dangled from where I'd tied them to my wooden sword's crossbar.

It had been two weeks since I'd been admitted to the Royal Academy. Certain circumstances had led to me nearly being demoted to Class E—which would have suited me just fine, by the way—until my classmates' unwanted intervention had cemented my place in Class A. Per Academy rules, students in Class D or above could reside in the Noble Dorm for the same monthly board they would pay to live in the standard dorm—a paltry thousand riels. Considering the cost was identical, the sheer gulf in living conditions between the two dorms was staggering. From what I'd heard, the Noble Dorm was closer to a five-star hotel than a school dormitory, equipped with endless facilities and attendants to cater to one's every need.

Since my enrollment in Class A was now official, I *could* move into the Noble Dorm at any time without any increase in rent. However, I had no intention of moving out of the standard dorm. Better known as "the Doghouse" among students, it was home to very few residents. I had a couple of reasons for not wanting to move over to the Noble Dorm, but foremost among them was the Doghouse's dorm matron, Thora, and the breakfasts she served up daily.

You see, Thora also worked as a researcher; she studied the

effects of ingredients derived from monsters and how they could enhance one's magical abilities when consumed. The meals she created were far from delicious—to put it frankly, they were disgusting. However, I was holding on to the hope that one of those ingredients might turn out to be the missing link I needed to one day become able to use Emissive Magic. Since I'd been blessed with a second chance at life, and in a magical fantasy world to boot, there was nothing I wanted more than to be able to cast a fireball, or some other fantastical spell.

What's the point of being reborn into a magical world if you can't cast cool spells? Strengthening Magic is all right and all, but I want to cast Emissive *Magic...*

My research so far hadn't unearthed any other leads, so at this point, a somewhat mediocre living situation was a compromise I was willing to make to keep my dream alive. Besides, when I thought about it, the conditions at the standard dorm weren't all that different from my apartment back in Japan before I'd died, anyway.

I'd spent my previous life desperately searching for happiness or fulfillment, and I'd passed away from illness without ever finding them. I had no desire to waste even a minute of my second chance hanging around the Noble Dorm, listening to the peacocking of the resident rich kids (or so I imagined, anyway). I vastly preferred spending my time in the quiet, scarcely populated standard dorm, where I could actually focus on what *I* wanted to do.

And what was it I wanted to do in this new world, you ask?

My first priority was exploring any and all leads that might allow me to cast Emissive Magic. On top of that, I wanted to continue to enjoy my new part-time job as an explorer and learn more about the world I'd landed in. I wanted to encounter more types of monsters and discover more of the yet unknown (to me) magical ingredients and materials that hid in the forests and fields of Yugria.

And, most important of all, I wanted to enjoy the "now." I'd spent my previous life forcing myself to study, day in and day out, telling myself over and over again that it was all for my future. But I'd realized something as that life had drawn to a miserable end: There was no chance of a bright future for those who couldn't enjoy the

present. If I spent my new life bitterly working toward the promise of a good future again, without actually knowing what I wanted to do when that future came, I'd never be able to attain happiness.

◆◆◆

In my daze of contemplation, I found myself back at the dorm before I knew it. I snapped out of it as I realized that, for some reason, four of my classmates were waiting at the entrance—Fey, Jewel, Kate, and Stella.

"Ah, good morning," I said, as though I were a hiker passing another of their kind on the trail. I attempted to walk past the group and into the dorm. Unfortunately, Fey grabbed my wrist as I passed, a dangerous grin spreading across her face.

"Good morning, Allen! I just spoke to your dorm matron, and she said that *apparently* you didn't come home last night. Is that true? I was so worried about you when you didn't show up to club practice this morning, and now I'm finding out you skipped out on the club *you* set up, only to return from who-knows-where when the sun has already gone up?" Her tone grew more frenzied with each word. "Why, might I ask, did you try to run past me just now, hmm? Feeling guilty about something?" She was still grinning, but I could have sworn I could almost see the dark storm clouds gathering over our heads.

Why is she acting like a girlfriend who's been cheated on, anyway?!

"It's none of your business what I get up to. Let go of—ow! Why are you so strong?!" Fey's Strengthening Magic was so powerful, I could barely move my wrist, let alone shake her off.

Stella sighed. "Look, he's obviously on his way home from an overnight hunting expedition or something. Look at his sword—let me guess, a horned rabbit's hind legs?"

"Huh? How did you know?" I was surprised she could tell that a random chunk of meat was from a horned rabbit so easily; she must have some experience as a hunter. My interest in her rose slightly.

"*I* didn't doubt you, Allen, just so you know. *I* said there was no

way you were out playing around with girls. But Kate thought if you did somehow end up over in the pleasure district—well, with your status as a Royal Academy student and a top scorer to boot, she thought they'd be fawning all over you before you could even blink. She said there'd be nothing left of you by the time the sun rose... I just got a little worried, you know?" Fey's viselike grip loosened slightly as she spoke.

"That's right," laughed Jewel. "Kate said, 'Boys our age only have one thing on their minds. Once Allen's had a taste of an older woman's skills, we'll never be able to drag him out of that district... Plus, with his abnormal stamina, he'll be at it until the sun rises and the birds are singing outside the window.' Well, once I'd heard that, I must confess I was concerned about the undue theft of your first *experience*. That's why we've been waiting here—to hear an account of what happened last night from the boy himself." She giggled daintily through her fingers.

Wait, was Jewel always this kind of girl? I think I misread her... And will you please stop bringing up my virginity?! It hurts when you tear open a forty-eight-year-old wound, you know!

I shot a glare at Kate, the purple-haired girl with glasses who had always given me a "student council president" vibe. She coughed. "Ahem. Stella is from the Achilles family—I'm sure you've heard of them, Allen? She's got plenty of experience as a hunter." Kate avoided my eyes and the previous topic alike as she steered the conversation back to the rabbit hind legs.

The Achilles family, huh? Led by Viscount Achilles, Stella's family served as the custodians of the Darley mountain range in the kingdom's northwest. The Darley range was still a fairly dangerous area today, but back in the earlier days of the kingdom, when monsters had been far more dangerous and plentiful than they were now, the Achilles family had gained renown as "the Defenders of the Darleys." Because of their hunting prowess and bravery, the name Achilles was generally well-known among the people—which was particularly impressive for a kingdom with more viscounts than you could shake a stick at.

"Achilles... The Defenders of the Darleys, right? That explains it,"

I said, nodding at Stella.

She blinked, apparently taken aback. "I think you're probably the only person outside of my family who'd still know that old name. You been looking into me or something?"

I shrugged. "Isn't that normal when you're interested in someone?"

Stella's face turned red in an instant. "What do you mean, i-interested?" she spluttered.

"Oh, he's the aggressive type!" giggled Jewel. Kate let out a little squeal of excitement.

"Allen?" said Fey. Her previously slack grasp on my wrist clenched again suddenly—a steel hold so tight, I thought my bones would snap. "Do you really think I'm just going to let you hit on another girl right in front of me?"

That's not what I— Why is it turning out like this...?

"What's going on out here?" barked another voice—Thora, emerging from the dorm before us. "The only thing this dorm's got going for it is that it's quiet, and now we don't even have that! Oh, you're back, sonny?" Apparently, the gutter-minded girls had been making so much noise, she'd been able to hear us from the matron's quarters.

"Good morning, Thora. I apologize for skipping breakfast this morning without letting you know. I did bring you a gift, though," I added, holding out the hind legs to her. She examined them with a critical eye, then sighed.

"I don't know what you've been up to, but it's poor manners to leave five beautiful women waiting for you to return! Honestly..." Her eyes trailed over the gift again. "A water-type horned rabbit, eh? Killed between eighteen and twenty hours ago, if I'm not mistaken."

The fact that Thora had counted herself among the five beautiful women went unnoticed as Stella interjected from beside me.

"It's a water type? How can you tell just by looking at the meat?" Her voice was tinged with disbelief. "Who is this old lady, Allen?"

"Who are you calling an old lady? What a rude lass..." Thora grumbled. "You can tell by looking at the way the muscle fibers run through the leg, of course—and by the unique smell. You hunted

this, sonny?”

Before I could answer, Stella butted in again. “There’s no way Allen could have hunted a water-type horned rabbit on his own, obviously. These guys are impossible to catch once they start trying to flee.”

“Ow!”

At Stella’s words, Fey’s grip tightened even further, and my wrist made a crunching sound. If I hadn’t been using Magic Guard, it would have broken without a doubt.

“What’s the meaning of this, Allen? Didn’t you just say you went hunting alone? I was willing to forgive you for spending a night over in the pleasure district—you can’t get between a man and his needs, after all—but going on an overnight date in the forest? That *changes* things,” said Fey, grinning in a way that only intensified her threatening demeanor.

The other girls squealed again. “You did it *outside*?” one cried. “You’re wild, Allen!” said another.

Shut up, you idiots! You’re not helping!

“I never said I went alone! And anyway, I don’t need your permission or forgiveness in the first place! Let go of me, you—you gorilla girl!” I sputtered. In my flustered state, I couldn’t come up with a less juvenile insult.





“Maybe you’re not as mature as I gave you credit for, Allen,” snickered Fey. “You’ll never win a woman’s heart by calling her a gorilla.”

She wasn’t wrong, of course, but since the pressure she was currently exerting on my wrist must have exceeded two hundred kilograms, “gorilla” was the perfect—no, the *only* way to describe her.

“Settle down! Noisy brats,” grumbled Thora. “No doubt he went with the Reed boy—I can tell from the way he’s dissected the meat. Plus, these nicks on the bone look like they came from that kid’s custom Seimler-made knife.”

“You can really tell all that just from a glance?” asked Stella, astonished. From the look on her face, it must have been a fairly impressive ability.

“Well, *I* never doubted you, Allen. I knew there was no way you would have skipped out on morning practice to take some girl deep into the mountains, lead her into a cave under the pretext of avoiding the rain, and spend all night getting hot and sweaty...” said Fey, her voice calming once more. As soon as Reed’s name—and gender—had been introduced, her grip on my wrist had gone slack again.

Her imagination is too overactive. As soon as she’d loosened her hold, I tried to wrench my arm from her grasp—no luck.

“Who is this ‘Reed,’ anyway?” Jewel inquired with a polite smile in Thora’s direction.

“He’s a third-year in Class B—and the only oddball besides your friend here to live in this dorm by choice. Well, oddball and all, he’s a pretty talented little sprout.”

Jewel nodded along to Thora’s reply—and then she unleashed her next statement, one that was completely ridiculous.

“Please allow me to move into this *marvelous* dorm, Matron Thora. There’s only one building here, correct? So I imagine boys and girls reside in the same quarters, yes? Please assign me the room next to Allen’s.”

Thora gaped at Jewel, unable to form a response to the unexpected request.

"Whenever we ask Allen when he intends to join us at the Noble Dorm, he avoids the question. It was starting to seem like he didn't intend to move at all...and if he's made a good friend here, then I think I've lost my chance to lure him over," Jewel explained. "That being the case, I have no choice but to join him here instead. I can't spend another sleepless night worrying over the status of Allen's virginity the next time he disappears without warning."

Why are these girls so obsessed with my virginity?! Stop talking about it! If you keep this up, the staunch perma-virgins are going to start coming after you soon, you know?

Fey let out a dangerous laugh in response to Jewel's declaration, her eyes narrowing like a predator's. "No hesitation! You're really living up to your house's words, Jewelry Reverence—'Dauntless and Decisive,' was it? Thora! I'll take another of the rooms next to Allen's," she declared, as though she were simply ordering a refill at a restaurant.

"Of course," Jewel said with an airy giggle, "assuming Allen has a corner room and therefore only *one* neighbor, it will belong to the person who requested it first, yes?" She made no attempt to hide the tone of provocation in her words. Luckily, before things could heat up any further, Thora cut in.

"Listen here, lassies. I can tell you're all from big, important families, but unlike in the Noble Dorm, you won't find anyone here to do your chores, brush your hair, or anything else for you. Are you sure you can handle it?" She crossed her arms, surveying the two girls. "And besides, aren't you all from Class A? They've been calling this year's Class A a once-in-a-generation miracle, and you want to move in *here*? You do know what they call this place, right? The Doghouse!" She'd given me basically the same lecture when I'd moved in.

You can do it, Thora! Send 'em packing!

"I'm sure we'll have no trouble, Matron. One can do anything if they put their mind to it, after all. And besides"—Jewel trailed off, her eyes fiery—"Allen's already here, and after we move in—well, they won't be calling this place the Doghouse for long."

Thora was no match for Jewel's remarkable self-confidence. She

sighed. “Fine, fine. I’ll get the paperwork. Unfortunately for you lot, though, all the rooms near Allen’s are already occupied—both of the neighboring sides, across from, and above and below too.”

Really? I never noticed anyone else was so close—the dorm’s basically deserted, isn’t it?

Noticing my confused expression, Thora lifted her cane, pointing it with a jab behind me. “Look, they’re on their way now.”

Turning in the direction she’d indicated, I was met with the sight of an approaching magical truck-type vehicle, packed to the brim with cases and bundles—and running alongside it, a group of my classmates led by Al.

◆◆◆

“Hey, Allen! Guess what? From today on, we’re all moving in here too! I was going to tell you about it at practice this morning, but you didn’t show up... Guess you’re pretty surprised, huh?”

How did things turn out like this...? I really liked my nice, quiet dorm...

“Why would you want to move out of the Noble Dorm? None of you would benefit from joining me here,” I asked, suspicious.

“Well, yesterday, Leo managed to finally run the same number of hill sprints as you, so he said the next challenge was matching you at sword practice, and he came looking for you. We were all free yesterday, so we came along too, just out of curiosity,” Al replied. The “we” he was referring to seemed to be himself, Coco, Dan, and Dolph—plus Leo, of course.

“I’m still not fast enough, though,” muttered Leo. Apparently, he wasn’t yet satisfied with his hill sprints, even if he could manage the same number as me.

“But when we got here, we were told you’d gone out somewhere. We were just asking Thora if she knew anything about how you usually do your sword practice, and that’s when we found out—when you moved in here, you asked Thora to take good care of you for the next three years. Even though you told me you’d move over to the Noble Dorm soon...” Al trailed off. He kept his eyes fixed on

mine, though, and I could see a tinge of hurt coloring his expression. Jewel, on the other hand, was beaming at me with a self-satisfied grin.

Aw, man. I can't try and lie my way out of this now—not when Al's giving me those puppy-dog eyes.

"Sorry, Al. That was wrong of me," I apologized frankly.

"I'm not mad at you or anything, so don't worry. But Thora told us when you got here, you were so impressed by the single dorm rule—'with Sturdiness and Sincerity'—that you decided, on the spot, that you'd be staying here no matter what class you ended up in. When I heard that, I was a little ashamed of myself, to be honest." He chuckled awkwardly. "My family's not that well-off—for viscounts, anyway—so when I got a taste of the luxurious life over in the Noble Dorm, I couldn't imagine myself ever leaving. I'm a lot shallower than I thought I was."

As Al spoke, the other four boys hung their heads, similarly embarrassed.

Uh, I think you guys are reading into it a little too much... I just liked that there basically weren't any rules. And my interpretation of "Sturdiness and Sincerity" probably isn't quite as noble as you're thinking... Is it too late to explain that now?

"We discussed it among ourselves, and we realized if we want to catch up to you, the first hurdle to overcome isn't matching your Strengthening Magic—it's matching your attitude and motivation, Rovene—no, Allen," Leo added reluctantly.

He opened his mouth to say more, but it took him a while to form the words. "Recently...I think I've started to understand your point of view. About how you want to live, doing only what you want to do. It's about finding the one thing you truly want to achieve and throwing anything else away, right? You've got something I don't have, Rov—*Allen*." It sounded to me like he'd had to force the words out through gritted teeth. "So if I want to discover what *I* want to achieve, I need to be able to get a closer look at you. And then—I'm going to make sure I take it for myself." His face had grown solemn and serious, and I could barely stand to look him in the eye.

Yep, we're similar, all right—and completely different. God, he can

be annoying sometimes. I decided a little payback was in order.

I snorted. "Can you decide if you're calling me by my first or last name already? It's embarrassing waiting for you to correct yourself every time."

◆◆◆

"By the way, Al... Why is this the first I'm hearing of this plan to all move into the standard dorm? I thought we were friends, but maybe that was only me?" Fey growled, finally releasing my wrist as she approached Al. Her pupils had dilated in anger.

"What do you mean, Fey? We didn't have classes yesterday or today, and we didn't run into each other at practice this morning, so I just didn't have the chance to tell you yet! I was going to tell you first thing tomorrow in class, of course! Plus, it sounds like there's plenty of rooms free, so there's no need to worry!" Al replied cheerfully.

Man, he's good! I knew I made the right choice becoming friends with him! Fey fell silent as she tried to evaluate the truth of Al's reply.

"So, which of you have claimed a room next to Allen, then?" said Jewel. The simple question sent a shiver down my spine. I had a strange feeling about this...

"Ah, me and Coco have the rooms on either side. Dan's above him, and Dolph took the room below! Us boys have got to stick togeth—"

"I'll pay you one million riels," Jewel declared, cutting Al off mid-sentence. "Al, Coco, which of you will relinquish your room to me?" Her expression was as unconcerned as ever—in stark contrast to her outrageously concerning offer.

"A million riels? Jewel! Surely even a marquess's daughter can't go throwing that much money around!" gasped Kate, the girl with the student council president vibes (and, surprisingly, the one with the most overactive imagination about my virginity of them all).

"Don't worry. I'm confident my father will agree—in fact, he'd probably tell me to offer more."

What kind of parents do you have?! My premonition was right. This girl was operating on another level entirely, just like my sister Rosa... Jewel's definition of "normal behavior" was wildly different from anyone else's.

"Well, I'll pay three million! Coco? We're friends, right? You'll swap with me, right?" said Fey, drawing closer to the poor boy as she spoke. She was a cunning one, for sure—Coco would definitely fold under the slightest bit of pressure.

"Wha— Uh, um, if you want to swap that badly, then even without the money—"

"No room changes are permitted, no matter the reason!" I declared forcefully before all was lost. "Anyone who tries to get around it will be thrown out of the Hill Path Club—and I won't speak to you *ever* again." My peaceful dorm life may have come to an end, but I could at least avoid some of the more troublesome potential neighbors with this threat.

Incidentally, Leo had claimed a room on the first floor, right near the entrance. According to him, time spent climbing up and down all the stairs was time wasted.

◆◆◆

"Now then, kids..." started Thora, a wild gleam in her eye. "Residents of this dorm can enjoy my special breakfast menu, free of charge. I'm a researcher of magical ingredients, you see—but my research is only concerned with the effects of those ingredients, not the taste. My meals aren't particularly delicious, for sure, but your friend here eats them every morning as part of his training! What do you think? Care to join him?" She ended her explanation with a cackle. Through the cracks in her dorm matron mask, I could see the mad scientist lurking underneath.

Not "particularly" delicious? It went without saying, but I was the only one present who realized just how much of an understatement that was.

"So that's why you knew so much about the horned rabbit! I want to try your food—especially if it's part of the reason behind Allen's

weird strength. I'm going to move here too," Stella asserted.

"Well, if everyone's changing dorms, I guess I have no choice," sighed Kate.

They'd fallen right into her trap. Thora must have been pleased; so many new test subjects had appeared before her, all at once. *Serves them right! Those two especially—they're definitely behind all the weird rumors about me and my "insatiable sexual appetite."* It seemed there was no longer any chance I'd be able to dissuade them all from moving in, but I could still dole out a little bit of revenge...

"It's too soon for you guys to handle that part of my routine. Especially for Leo, Fey, and Jewel—your palates are far too refined to handle this. You'll regret it, so don't bother trying just yet." I glanced over at Thora, who was now glaring at me. Her eyes seemed to say, *Don't interfere with my experiments, sonny!*

"Don't worry, Thora," I wanted to say. *"I know* exactly *how they're gonna react. You just need to add a little fuel to the fire, and..."*

"Obviously I'll eat the same food as you, Allen. You think I can't handle it?"

"Your concern is appreciated but unnecessary, Allen. I was just thinking it would be nice if I could find a way to make my meals simpler so I'd have more time for my inventions."

"Any meal would be delicious if I got to eat it with you nearby, Allen..."

One after another, Leo, Fey, and Jewel all took the bait dangling before them.

Thora cackled again. "So everyone's on board, then? It's about to get a lot busier for me around here! Hee hee hee!"

I shrugged and shook my head. "Don't say I didn't warn you!" Of course, on the inside, I was laughing at the lot of them.

Mwa ha ha...!

Er... It actually feels a little too *good to laugh at people like a villain after tricking them... I need to make sure I don't make a habit of this.*

◆◆◆

In later years, participation in the Hill Path Club would become known as the first cornerstone of the Unicorn Generation.

On this day, however, began the quarrying of the second cornerstone: residence in the Royal Academy's standard dormitory.

Life in the Dorm (2)

It was a morning like any other, a day just a little over a month since Allen's admission to the Royal Academy.

The dining hall of the standard dorm—more commonly known as the Doghouse—was overflowing with students. The flimsy reasoning behind Allen's choice to remain in the standard dorm had been grossly misinterpreted by Leo and the rest of Allen's classmates, and within a few days, every member of Class 1-A had moved in—even those who'd previously been living at their families' estates near the school, surrounded by the best tutors in the kingdom.

Allen thought the whole thing was idiotic, but if it were just his *classmates* who'd moved in, maybe it wouldn't be *that* bad... If only.

Unfortunately, the news that the entirety of Class 1-A had simultaneously migrated to the standard dorm had caused a tremendous impact across the Academy. Furthermore, rumors had begun to fly that the reason Allen Rovene had chosen to stay at the standard dorm was on account of the exclusive, mysterious menu created by the dorm matron. In no time at all, the dorm had reached maximum capacity.

In any case, the standard dorm could only house forty students at most, and for good reason. Students in Class D or above could live in the Noble Dorm, where attendants took care of their every need, for the same monthly fee as a room in the standard dorm. In fact, even students in Class E could rent a room in the much better dorm, provided they could afford the nondiscount fee of five thousand riels. At any given time, there were sixty Class E students at the Academy across the three school years, but the standard

dorm only needed to accommodate those whose families were unable to scrounge up the higher monthly fee—and up to this point, the standard dorm's forty-student capacity had never been an issue. After all, the majority of the students at the Royal Academy came from excessively wealthy families. It was a sad but undeniable fact of life that academic prowess was influenced by one's financial standing.

Occasionally, prodigious students from penniless baronial families, or even from commoner backgrounds, managed to secure seats at the Academy. But even then, it was basically child's play for said students to secure cushy jobs as private tutors just by flashing their credentials as Royal Academy students. With that prestige behind them, earning five thousand riels a month for their board was hardly arduous work.

And then, when you accounted for the sheer range and excellence of the facilities and service offered by the Noble Dorm, five thousand riels was unbelievably cheap. The boarding fees were heavily subsidized by the government and alumni donations, all toward the goal of producing more pillars to support the kingdom. Considering the extraordinary salary any fresh Academy graduate was essentially guaranteed, it made sense for even the poorer students to ensure they could reside in the dorm that allowed them to focus on their studies while living in comfort—even if that meant borrowing money, if it came down to it.

All that being said, the residents of the standard dorm were generally limited to oddballs (like Allen and Reed), or otherwise, those unwilling to overcome their innate frugality (also like Allen), or *otherwise*, those attempting to avoid conflict with their supposedly hoity-toity classmates (again, also like Allen).

Out of the forty rooms available at the standard dorm, just five had been in use prior to the mass migration of Class 1-A, including the two occupied by Allen and Reed. After the remaining nineteen members of Class 1-A had finalized their paperwork, only sixteen rooms had remained—which were also quickly snatched up by quick-thinking students who'd heard the rumors.

As per basic economic theory, when supply cannot keep up with

demand, prices will rise. Students who'd missed out on a room on account of a more cautious attitude began offering absurd sums of money in exchange for another student's room, and within days, the black market for residential rights was in full swing. Before long, a room that should have been worth less than a dilapidated mountain shack had become more valuable than an apartment in Tokyo's most prestigious suburb, Ginza.

◆◆◆

"Damn it! I'm up to my ears in work here, and it's all your fault, sonny! Haven't you heard of doing things in moderation?" growled Thora, though her face was awash with delight. She was probably planning all the new experiments she could conduct now that her test subjects had multiplied like rabbits.

I didn't even remotely agree that I was to blame here, but either way, I'd begrudgingly accepted my new role assisting Thora with the breakfast service. Breakfast at the standard dorm ranged from awful to disgusting depending on the day, but today's menu...well, it looked implausibly ghastly even to me, and I was somewhat used to the food.

First was the everyday staple, a bread roll. That was fine, because the bread rolls never had any of Thora's special ingredients added to them. But the main dish was a giant fillet of fish—it must have weighed a kilo or more—which had been sautéed in butter since early that morning. Accompanying the meal was a glass of strange, brown milk. I was too scared to ask which animal the milk had come from. Finally, a small bowl containing a mysterious fruit—it looked like a dragon fruit, but I had no idea what type of plant it'd come from in this world—sat beside each plate, the flesh a poisonous purple.

Back when the dorm had been peaceful and quiet, I'd been the only person partaking of Thora's breakfast each morning, so she'd tailored the menu to my requests—primarily, that meant I'd usually received meals aimed at those in the mage course, with a focus on ingredients that could benefit one's Emissive Magic, and in particular,

any ingredients that might unlock elemental affinity. However, with the explosive surge of new residents at the dorm, it had immediately become impossible for Thora to handle cooking up separate menus each day for the students in each respective course.

Limited by both time and resources, she'd been forced to adjust her menu planning so the meals rotated through the different course focuses. *"Look, sonny! With this many new test subjects, my research will advance quicker, and we might even find the secret for learning elemental affinity—so I don't want to hear any grumbling from you about the menu! This is all your fault anyway, after all!"* Or so Thora had warned me. Again, I didn't agree that I was to blame in the slightest, but either way, I'd had no choice but to go along with the new rotating menu.

Today's main course, the giant fish fillet, was giving off an odor that could only be described as rotten. I watched my fellow dorm residents trickle into the dining room, exhausted from their morning training. The moment their weary feet carried them over the threshold, each and every one of them froze, a mask of abject despair rising to their respective faces. To call it a stench would be putting it lightly. The smell was so bad, many of them seemed to have been suppressing the urge to vomit from the second they'd entered the room. I wasn't confident they'd be able to continue suppressing said urge once they tried to eat the food itself.

Deciding I'd helped Thora enough for the morning, I made my way over to a small table. Al, Jewel, Fey, Leo, and Dolph already occupied five of the six seats. They were all frozen in place, knives and forks poised at the ready, like warriors positioned before a formidable enemy.

"You're not eating?" I asked innocently. As I sat down, I stopped breathing through my nose, which had already gone somewhat numb while I'd helped Thora dish up plates. *All right, Allen. This is just some extremely smelly brined fish, okay? You can do this.* Mentally cheering myself on, I threw the first piece of rancid-smelling fish into my open mouth.

"Do you usually eat stuff like this in the Rovene Domain?" asked an appalled Leo, who seemed to be going through intense culture

shock. Everyone else had also recoiled in disgust. I swallowed the lump of fish and waited for any aftertaste to disappear before replying. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that if I caught so much as a whiff of that rotten stench coming out of my own mouth, I'd vomit all over the lot of them.

"Of course not. But this isn't a matter of taste—it's all about willpower. My tutor Soldo used to say, 'If you clear your mind of all mundane thoughts, even a fire will feel like a cool breeze.' I told you guys you weren't ready for this yet. There's no shame in admitting defeat, you know? Tucking your tails between your legs and running away?" I'd attributed yet another famous saying from my past life to Soldo—as had become a frequent habit of mine—and riled up my classmates a little.

"All right! This is just another part of training, yeah? Clearing your mind of mundane thoughts... So basically, if you face any problem with resolve, you'll never be crippled by fear, right? What a great saying!" With seemingly intense concentration and an expression devoid of emotion, Al steeled himself and threw a piece of the fish into his mouth, just as I'd done. Then he chewed. "You're right, it's not so bad if—"

BLARGGGH. Al had made the mistake of trying to speak before he'd swallowed. He retched, returning all the fish back onto his plate, and he collapsed out of his chair, falling to his knees. Leo and the others had been on the verge of challenging their own meals, but as they watched Al gasp on the floor like he'd just finished an hour-long bout of karate, they all froze once again.

Observing them with quiet amusement, I tossed another bite into my mouth. After I'd waited for the aftertaste to vanish, I opened my mouth again to offer them some more "advice." "If you don't have a clear understanding of 'the reason you're eating,' you'll never find the willpower to carry it through. I heard from Thora that today's ingredients are supposed to increase the efficiency of one's elemental conversion. All of you except Fey are in the mage course, right? You should probably try a little harder." The instant I'd finished speaking, Fey's expression brightened considerably, although the other four looked even more forlorn than they had before.

“Honestly, Allen, you should have told us at the start! I’ll just enjoy the bread and fruit this morning. Good luck, everyone!” crowed Fey, flashing the others a somewhat condescending grin. In an instant, she’d peeled the thick skin from the purple fruit and taken an aggressive bite.

“Ah—” I tried to offer a word of warning, but it was too late.

The fruit shot back out of her mouth like a bullet. Her head began rocking from side to side, and she giggled like a madwoman before collapsing directly onto the fish-heaped plate in front of her. She’d fainted.

“Fey!” cried Jewel, rushing to her side.

“I couldn’t warn her in time... I was going to say the fruit’s really sour, so it’s best not to bite off more than you can chew...” It was too late for Fey, but at least the rest of them could proceed with a little more caution. Thora had served up that fruit once, sometime before all the others had moved in, and I could vividly remember its sour taste—it seemed to spread into every cell of your body.

“I didn’t think anything could be sour enough to make someone faint, though...” muttered Dolph, watching Fey out of the corner of his eye. Jewel had lowered her to the floor, where she now lay twitching.

“Her pulse is normal,” announced Jewel in a nasally voice—she’d had to pinch her nostrils closed to get close enough to the fish-covered Fey.

“Okay, Allen. Any more advice to help us get through this meal? Tell me everything,” said Leo with a serious expression. His straightforward, unaffected attitude was one of his best points, although I was reluctant to admit it.

“Honestly, there’s no secret strategy or anything. The most important thing is preparing yourself mentally for the battle. But if you can manage that, then yeah, there’s a few things that make it easier. If you’re tackling something with a strong smell, try not to breathe through your nose—and definitely don’t try to talk with food still in your mouth, unlike Al over there. If it’s something with a strong taste, on the other hand, you have to swallow it bit by bit, without chewing if possible. And whatever you do, don’t make the

mistake of thinking you can use Strengthening Magic to power through a meal like this. If you can't maintain your focus on the right muscles, you'll end up *increasing* your sense of taste and smell instead..."

I was a survivor of one such disaster. *What is it they say? Straight from the horse's mouth?*

Nodding, Leo steeled himself, spearing a piece of fish on his fork. With slow, deliberate movements, he tore off the chunk with his teeth, chewed it methodically, and swallowed. Success.

Props to you for effort and all, but is there any chance you could stop glaring at me while you chew? His teary eyes were growing more bloodshot with each mouthful, and frankly, it was rather off-putting.

A few minutes later into our shared struggle, a thought struck me. *Everyone here—well, except Fey, and she's still unconscious—is super talented in Emissive Magic.*

"By the way, I've been thinking about starting up an Emissive Magic research club—any takers?"

My First Equipment

It was a standard weekday, not long after all my classmates had forced their way into the standard dorm.

Reed's premonition that rumors of his association with me would quickly spread had apparently been right on the mark. As a result, he now had to rush over to his family's store as soon as classes ended each day to help them deal with the onslaught of brownnosers and busybodies. I'd wanted to ask him to give me a hand buying some of the tools I needed for my work as an explorer, but I hadn't been able to catch him at the dorms. Finally, I'd been able to corner him during club activities one morning, but he'd turned down my request instantly, albeit apologetically.

"It's not that I don't want to go with you... I just don't have the time. We've been able to chase off most of the rabble who come asking questions about you, but the more influential families have

started making appointments to meet with my father, and since he's got no time to handle the store, at the moment, it's up to my mother and me to run the place."

Man, I really sent him up the creek without a paddle. I'd then asked if I could visit his parents to apologize, but he'd refused me again for the time being. When everything did finally calm down a bit, I would need to make sure I went to apologize profusely for all the trouble.

Either way, I'd apologized to Reed, at the very least, for putting his family through so much trouble. *"Nah, they're glad I made a friend like you, so don't worry about it too much,"* he'd replied with a smile. His ever-considerate attitude had just made me feel worse about the whole thing, though.

With the Hill Path Club basically running itself now, I wanted to buckle down and tackle some more work as an explorer, but with Reed's assistance out of the question for now, it was starting to seem like I'd have to manage my shopping alone—until that morning. I spied the pink-haired Stella in the dining hall, and I decided to test my luck. Stella was from the Achilles family, after all—the Defenders of the Darleys. She'd probably have a good bit of knowledge when it came to hunting tools.

"Stella, do you have a minute?"

"What is it? It's pretty rare for you to start up a conversation."

"Really?" I cocked my head. "I wanted to ask you something... You see, I actually signed up for the Explorer's Guild recently, and I wanted to start taking on some foraging and hunting requests to earn a bit of money, so I need to buy a couple of basic tools... A knife for gathering herbs and dissecting animals, a storage bag, and the other bare essentials you'd need to survive in the wild, you know? And I thought you'd probably have some experience with this kind of thing, so I was wondering if you could give me any advice."

"Oh, so that's why... Well, I don't mind giving you some tips, but honestly, choosing the right gear is a delicate process. The perfect tool is going to differ based on the area you're working in and the type of work you're doing—and that's even before your budget comes into the picture. Instead of asking me, you'd be better off

asking back at the guild, or at a shop that specializes in exploring tools. They'll have more to say about what you'll need in the area around Runerelia."

That's not a bad idea, actually. "Now you mention it, that makes perfect sense. Thanks, Stella—I'll probably ask you for more help later, though."

She frowned at me. "Honestly, when it comes to equipment, I would have thought you'd be asking me about weapons and armor and that sort of stuff. I guess you've already got all that sorted, though. Do you use a sword like the wooden one you swing around for practice? The one with a single curved edge—you called it a 'katana' or something."

It was then that I realized my stupidity. I hadn't even *thought* about getting a proper weapon. I'd managed just fine with my wooden sword when we'd hunted the horned rabbit, but there were plenty of monsters out there that a wooden sword would be no match for.

"I kinda forgot about that..." I mumbled, wincing. Astonished, Stella shook her head at me.

"Most people would think about a weapon and armor before anything else... You're a weird one, all right. But even you shouldn't underestimate the monsters out there. The bigger they get, the harder it is to wound them, even with a normal weapon. If you're heading out into the forests, you need a weapon with *some* lethality to it, and a breastplate at the very least. What's your budget like?"

I had saved the spoils from my first hunt with Reed with the intention of funding my explorer's tool kit. It would be too risky to use it to cover my boarding fees and other living expenses before I could cement a way to make more money. Although that thought process ran a little contrary to the outlaw life I was dreaming of, I just wasn't the type to take crazy financial risks and potentially end up broke.

"I don't mind if it goes a little over, but ideally, I don't want to spend more than two-and-a-half thousand, give or take. I'm not planning to go all out on my first set of gear. If I can get my hands on the basic stuff now, I can upgrade them as I go."

Stella crossed her arms, considering my words. "I'm not too sure about prices and tools around here, but I'm pretty sure you're going to struggle with that budget, even if you're only buying the lowest-quality stuff. I reckon you'd be better off having a look around, figuring out the prices, and buying some of the higher-priority equipment first instead of rushing into things and throwing your money away."

It was an impressively levelheaded opinion. Stella could be a little rough around the edges sometimes, but she could look at things objectively, and she was fairly dependable at times like these.

"Are you free today? Any chance you'd want to come window-shopping with me?" It would only benefit me to have a second opinion, especially Stella's.

"Er, sure. Doesn't bother me. But you've got a lot of nerve, inviting a girl on a date without a second thought and all. Are you sure you're a virgin?"

I laughed. "Guess it's because you barely seem like a girl most of the time! You're easy to be around, for su—"

Thunk.

"Die, you shitty virgin loser!"

As I stood there, doubled over from the ferocious punch she'd driven into my stomach, I had a vague recollection of calling out, *"Meet you at the main gate at three?"* in the direction of Stella's departing back.

Look, I know I messed up there, but the girls in this world are a little too *quick to resort to violence...*

◆◆◆

"So...why are they here?"

Waiting for me at the main gate was not only Stella, but also Fey and Jewel. *The whole reason I asked Stella to meet me at the main gate instead of the classroom was to avoid these two catching wind of our plans...*

"You might think you're sneaky, but don't underestimate our friendship, Allen. You were planning to drag pure, innocent Stella to

one of those rough neighborhoods, weren't you? And then, once you'd saved her from the advances of some ruffian, she'd gape at you with lovestruck eyes, and from there, you were both going to head to an inn, hand in hand... Kate saw right through your scheme, though." Another wild delusion delivered by a grinning Fey.

"I don't mind if you're going to take other girls out on dates. In the end, I'm still the one who'll claim that most elusive prize," giggled Jewel. "But Stella got a little scared after Kate spelled out your intentions for her, so I'm here to support her. Kate wanted to come along too, but she said she's too busy interviewing the prospective managers for the club."

"Elusive prize"? Are you guys losing your minds?

"Scared? Who's scared?! I'll beat the bastard to a pulp before Allen can lift a finger! Just you wait..."

And why are we running away with the idea that this ruffian suitor is absolutely going to make an appearance?!

I sighed. "I know you girls can't help your chronic overactive imaginations, but you don't need to worry. I already invited Al and Coco along too, so none of your delusions are going to come true. You can go home now, yeah?" I waved my hand in a shooing motion.

"I knew you'd be faithful, Allen," said Fey with a grin—and with zero indication of leaving.

"Oh, I'm glad I asked them to send one of the larger cars! It's just like a triple date now!" gushed Jewel. She didn't seem to have any intention of leaving either. For some reason, she'd even arranged for a car.

"Hey, guys!" It was Al and Coco. "Sorry to keep you waiting—oh, hey! Fey and Jewel are coming too? Nice! If we're all here, then let's get going!"

◆◆◆

The magically powered car Jewel had arranged for had an open roof and an exclusive chauffeur, and it was painted a gaudy sky blue. Emblazoned on the side in a bright yellow nearly the same shade as

Jewel's hair was the Reverence family crest—a giant eagle, wings spread wide and a sword clutched in its talons. Clearly, it was a private vehicle. *I wonder how much it costs to buy one of these... My family couldn't even afford to rent one.*

We arranged ourselves sitting three abreast on the soft, luxurious monster-leather seats, with the boys on one side and the girls on the other.

"So, where are we off to, then?"

"Ask him to head to the eastern outlet of Singlord. It's on Second Street." Per Stella's recommendation, we began to make our way toward what was apparently one of the largest weapon-and-armor stores in the entire capital.

"By the way, Allen—why did you invite Al and Coco but not us girls? Is that your way of saying you want me to stalk you even more?"

"Don't spout scary crap like that with a grin on your face! Al and Coco both don't get much of an allowance, just like me, so they said they wanted to look into doing some exploring requests as well. We're gonna do a bit of fieldwork and earn some pocket money together—but that'd be a waste of time for a rich girl like you."

Fey snorted. "A waste of time? It's rich of you to talk about time and efficiency—I hear you forced the guild to register you as a G-Rank. You keep doing all these weird things, one after another. It's making it very hard for my attendant Sera to keep track of you, the poor thing. You really know how to keep a girl on her toes!"

It shouldn't have surprised me that Fey already knew the details of the private conversation I'd had with Satwa, but still... That attendant of hers was probably just as terrifying as her mistress.

"Indeed, Allen. Besides, considering how well-known you already are around the capital, you could easily be earning at least five thousand riels a day as a private tutor. If you're concerned about efficiency, exploring is probably the *least* efficient way to go about things."

Five thousand riels a day?! I briefly considered the tempting prospect—but ultimately, I discarded the idea. In reality, I had absolutely no desire to spend my precious time off school—in a

fantasy land, at that—working as a tutor. Besides, while the economy was allegedly booming at the moment, the looming threat of war meant the bubble would likely soon burst—and then no one would be paying those crazy rates for a tutor, meaning I'd find myself with no way to make money. *Also, if I were earning that much, I don't know if I'd be able to control my spending...*

As an aside, in my past life, I used to daydream about winning the lottery—but I'd always made dream-me immediately deposit all the money I'd won into a three-year, long-term deposit to avoid any possibility I'd squander it all and ruin myself in the process. It was probably the most boring daydream anyone could have come up with.

"Sorry, but I don't know anything about exploring—is being a 'G-Rank' a good thing?" Al asked, tilting his head in confusion.

It wasn't surprising that he didn't know the particulars. Explorers in this world were basically the equivalent of blue-collar workers in my past life. A talented kid like Al, born into an aristocratic family, wouldn't have needed to learn about such menial work. I was still deciding how best to explain the ranks when Jewel began to answer for me.

"When I heard from my steward about Allen's registration, I had a look into the guild system myself. From what I read, explorers move up the ranks based on performance and ability. G-Rank is the lowest, and A-Rank is the highest, with the exception of special and honorary ranks above that. Nearly everyone starts as a G-Rank, but it's become customary for Academy students to be registered as D-Rank explorers right from the get-go—which essentially means our friend Allen here must have thrown away that privilege in order to register as the lowest rank possible."

As Jewel finished her explanation, Al and Coco turned to me with expressions of utter bewilderment on their faces. Stella didn't react, however. She'd likely already heard the details from Fey.

I sighed. "When students from the Academy go to register, the guild sends a bigwig from the main branch out to interview them. I got into a bit of an argument with him, and because of that, they had me start from G-Rank." It was a mildly accurate version of the

events, at least.

"Ha! You don't need to lie, Allen. The way I heard it, the vice guildmaster wanted to put you through as a *B-Rank* explorer, but you badgered him into registering you as a G-Rank, didn't you?"

Where the hell did you hear that? And no matter how you interpret that interview, Satwa was clearly the one badgering me*!*

"I've got no idea where you heard that, but it's not true. Your attendant's being fed dodgy information from somewhere," I said, rejecting the "rumor" with unwarranted confidence.

"Are you sure? Because she confirmed the details with Satwa Fjorden himself. He said you were cackling like a maniac, saying something about how you'd get to enjoy everything exploring had to offer now?"

That asshole! He said he wouldn't breathe a word of it, and now he's gone and made the rumor even worse!

"I reckon if you're starting from the bottom, it's because you think that's the most beneficial way to do it, right? If that's the case, I'll sign up as a G-Rank too!" declared Al. Coco aggressively nodded in agreement.

"Don't bother, guys. It'd be nothing but a waste of time for you two," I protested half-heartedly—because once I'd seen the determined expressions on their faces, I'd already mostly given up on convincing them otherwise.

Oh well. It would be one thing if they were planning to make a career out of it, but if they're just going to approach this as a part-time job, then there's no real reason to get hung up on ranks.

It took us about thirty minutes to arrive at the Singlord outlet. The place reminded me a little of a hardware store. It was a single-story building with a high ceiling, and it was packed to the rafters with all kinds of weapons and armor.

"Now, I *was* thinking you'd probably be looking for a sword of the same type as your wooden one, but given you're the type to try and rush out on a hunting trip without even *buying* a sword, I'm guessing it's your first time at a store like this. You're probably going to want a backup weapon someday too, so if you don't even know what kinds of weapons are out there yet, I reckoned an all-

encompassing armory like Singlord would be the best place to start," Stella explained. Apparently, she'd taken a lot into consideration when she'd suggested this place. In reality, I wasn't particularly attached to wielding a sword, and from the moment we'd stepped inside, my heart had been racing with excitement.

"Thanks, Stella—you're really dependable, you know that?" I said, sincerely thankful. She turned red and hurriedly looked away.

A swarm of smarmy-looking employees suddenly rushed to the front of the store to greet us. It made sense—six new customers had arrived in a flashy car, dressed in instantly recognizable Academy uniforms to boot. They were nearly climbing over each other in their haste to reach us first.

"Welcome to Singlord," gushed the first man to arrive. "I am Lund, the assistant manager of this humble store. I must apologize that the manager herself could not be here to greet you—most unfortunately, she is currently out of the store on other business. Now, I can only assume that here, I have the honor of meeting Lady Jewelry Reverence and her esteemed school friends. What may we assist you with today, milords and ladies?" With his slicked-back hair and crisply ironed uniform, Lund reminded me of one of those fancy personal assistants you'd see at high-end department stores.

He must have figured out who Jewel was from the family crest and our uniforms... He's been trained well. Unfortunately, the man's sickeningly polite attitude was exactly what I'd been trying to avoid by not inviting Jewel and Fey along.

"Please, there's no need for such formalities. On the contrary, I must apologize for intruding on your store with such a large party and without prior notification, Mr. Lund. I'm just here to help our friends with their shopping today," Jewel replied airily, with all the usual grace of a young noblewoman. Around us, I could hear heated conversations. The sudden appearance of a group of Royal Academy students had caused quite a stir among the employees and patrons alike.

"Of course, of course! It would be our great honor to assist the future pillars of this kingdom in any way we can. My apologies, but may I inquire as to what equipment your esteemed friends might be

looking for, and their approximate budgets?"

"Oh, I'm Feyreun von Dragoon. I'm just here to help as well."

"Stella Achilles. Also here to help them."

"I'm Aldor Engravier. I'm in the mage course, but I have a wand already, so I'm just looking for some armor today. My budget is around twenty thousand riels, give or take?"

"And, uh, I'm Coconial Canardia. I have a main weapon already too, but I'd like to get a shortsword as a backup, and some gauntlets as well... I can spend up to thirty thousand riels, I think."

Hmm? Al's and Coco's familial statuses were pretty close to my own, but their budgets were a lot higher than mine. *Either my family is pretty damn poor, or Mother's decided to limit my allowance for some reason or other... Both seem pretty likely.* Either way, I had no intention of relying on my family to support myself throughout the next few years anyway.

With each respective introduction, Lund's eyes took on a growing hunger. His posture stiffened even further, and he began to grovel even more unashamedly than before.

"Astounding! To think that our humble store would play host to the most prodigious students of this year's Class A..." he murmured, trailing his eyes over a bundle of paper he'd produced from somewhere or other. "And the brown-haired gentleman there, could you possibly be Alle—"

"Pork Lietz, m'good sir, at your service. I have but two-and-a-half-thousand riels to offer, but if it pleases you, I'd be after a main weapon and a secondary arm, along with some armor and a few basic survival tools, if I might be so bold."

I'd panicked. Once he'd decided I was Allen, I'd been done for—it didn't matter if I confirmed it or not. With all the exaggerated rumors apparently making the rounds throughout Runerelia, it was pretty much guaranteed that I'd end up getting unwarranted, sickeningly subservient special treatment from the man—but in my panic to prevent it, I'd come up with a pretty haphazard fake identity.

Sure enough, Lund was now alternating between eyeing me suspiciously and flipping through the pages in his hands. Of course,

no matter how hard he looked, he wouldn't be able to find a "Pork Lietz" anywhere on the list. I couldn't fault his reaction, though—anyone would be suspicious of a single, weird pauper among a cast of nobility like my classmates.

"Two-and-a-half-thousand riels, you said? We might be able to provide all you mentioned within that limit, but you would only receive the lowest-quality goods, Master Lietz. However, we do offer a no-interest loan exclusively to students of the Royal Academy, if you are also a student..." He trailed off, equal parts curious and dubious.

Fey snorted, then lowered her voice so Lund couldn't hear. "I wondered why you changed out of your uniform, but you're just up to something weird like usual." Then she raised her voice again. "Lund, I'll cover the cost of Pork's weapons, so the sky's the limit."

Unlike the others, I wasn't dressed in my Academy uniform. In truth, though, I hadn't been planning to assume a false identity while we shopped. The reason I'd done this was because I planned to head to the eastern branch of the guild afterward; I wanted to find out anything I could about my new career from any explorer who'd deign to speak to me, and I'd predicted that would be a lot easier if I wasn't in my uniform.

"How splendid! In that case, I'll purchase Pork's armor, as a gift to commemorate his explorer's registration. Mr. Lund, please ensure he receives only the *highest*-quality equipment," added Jewel with a dainty giggle.

This is why I didn't want these two to come along... Registering at the local guild in the starting town is an irreplaceable element of the reincarnation fantasy! What kinda idiot would spoil that by showing up in the most expensive, highest-quality equipment money can buy?

"Lady Fey! Lady Jewel! Please do not even jest about equipping your humble porter with such undeserved wealth. Why, Mr. Lund is shaken, he is! This lowly servant couldn't *possibly* take up m'good sir's time any longer. Please, see to Milords Al and Coco if it pleases you, Mr. Lund—I'll just take a look around by meself, I will." With that, I turned and quickly fled from the group. Surely, Lund would

also understand that he'd be better off spending his time assisting the two of them over a pauper like me. Just like that, I vanished deeper into the store before their eyes could even focus.

◆◆◆

At first glance, it seemed like Singlord stocked every type of weapon in existence—which wasn't particularly surprising given its reputation as one of the largest equipment retailers in the kingdom. My heart raced as I headed deeper into the massive store, my eyes jumping from one display to the next with every step.

The sword department was closest to the entrance, equipped with rack after rack of blades in all shapes and sizes. *This is probably what draws most customers in, I guess.* As I made my way past a wall of carefully displayed longswords with gaudily decorated hilts, I found what I was looking for, tucked away in a small corner of the department—simple, unadorned swords, haphazardly arranged point-down in a few large barrels.

I grabbed a sword at random, and offhandedly, I flicked over the price tag dangling from the hilt to see the cost. Even a passing glance at the price labels underneath the swords on the wall had been enough to tell me they were way out of my budget, just going off the number of zeros. It was no big deal, though, since today's main goal was just to get a feel for the prices, anyway.

I quickly gathered that a two-handed sword, even of the lowest quality, would run me about two thousand riels. *So even a sword that looks like it was mass-produced in a mold fetches that kind of price, huh...? I guess the cost of materials is pretty high here in the capital too.* Either way, a two-handed sword seemed out of my budget, especially considering all the other equipment I needed too. Out of curiosity, I took another look at one of the swords displayed on the wall. It seemed to be cast from a deep-black metal of some kind.

```
Name: Black Purge
Country of Manufacture: The Baerent Islands
```

Swordsmith: Eveil Ningroze
Material: Black Tiger Steel
Price: 220,000 Riels
A single-edged longsword skillfully crafted with the manufacturer's closely guarded methods. The blade is black tiger steel, ten times harder than iron. This weapon is nearly impervious to magic and can cut through most spells and enchantments.

Damn, that's a cool sword... But two hundred thousand riels? It'll be years before I can drop that much on a single weapon—if ever. Thinking back on it, I'd almost never seen anyone carrying a sword around since I'd come to the capital—which made sense to me now that I knew they were apparently luxury goods to some extent.

I moved over to the neighboring one-handed-sword section. These blades were a good bit cheaper than the two-handed ones, with a basic mass-produced model going for about a thousand riels. Before I could get too excited, though, my eyes landed on a nearby display of small shields, and upon closer inspection, I found out that the one-handed swords were mostly only sold in sword-and-shield sets. If I purchased the cheapest iron sword along with a reinforced wooden shield, it would still add up to over two thousand riels at minimum—more than I could spend if I wanted armor and tools as well. *Worst-case scenario, I could try to convince them to sell me the sword on its own.*

The preawakened Allen had always trained with a sword, but while the familiar weapon was an obvious pick, I didn't *have* to limit myself to the single weapon I had experience with. Actually, I was more excited to see what other options were out there.

Next, I headed to a section dedicated to longer weapons—spears, polearms, staffs, and any other weapons that gave you the advantage of distance. Unfortunately, from a budget perspective, these weapons were just as expensive as the two-handed swords. I assumed that with the extra length, the amount of material needed for longarms was similar to that for the bigger swords.

The next section over was filled with bows and divided into two broad categories. There were the longbows, which were around the same height as the people who'd wield them; they reminded me of the bows they'd used in the Kyudo Club back when I'd been in high school in Japan. The other type were the shortbows, used by hunters and the like—these looked a bit like sideways "M"s. From what I could gather, longbows were generally more powerful and could cover a greater distance, while shortbows were favored by those who valued a quicker reload.

A bow, huh? I mean, there's something pretty cool about the thought of becoming an archer too. With my fixation on swords, I'd never even considered picking up a bow as my main weapon. A quick survey of the price labels showed that the cheapest longbow was around a thousand riels, and the cheapest shortbow only half that. Arrows were sold separately, though. The simplest arrows were made entirely of wood, the ends tapering to sharpened points—these were priced at five riels apiece. The ones with iron arrowheads were ten riels each. I picked up the cheapest shortbow and looked it over. *I wonder how much it would cost me in the long run, though, if I had to keep replacing my arrows...*

"You a new explorer?" It seemed while I'd been fixated on the bow, someone had approached me. It was a young woman dressed in the same uniform Lund had been wearing. She was probably in her mid-to-late-twenties, with tall, slender legs and short, brown, wavy hair that ended at her shoulders. It didn't look like she was wearing any makeup, which only added to her youthful aura. *Instead of a bow, she'd probably look better dressed in overalls and holding an assault rifle...*

"You look like a newcomer. Just registered, I'm guessing? If you're interested in bows, there's a place around the side where you can test them out. Want to give it a go?"

"Really? Yes, please!"

The woman giggled at my rapid response. "Follow me, then," she said.

See, this is what I'm talking about! Just treat me like a normal person.

◆◆◆

The employee led me to the shooting range just outside the main building, which reminded me of a row of batting cages. "I'm Rouge, by the way," she said with a friendly smile. "Is this your first time handling a bow?"

"That's right!"

"Well, for a first-timer, I'd recommend this Rygo shortbow—per the name, it's made out of wood from a rygo tree, and the design and shape are as basic as you're likely to find. Rygo wood is sturdy but flexible, making it perfect for bows. The bowstring is made of tendons from a monster's leg. It's a lot cheaper than any of the composite bows made out of multiple materials, but while it might perform a little worse than them, it's much easier to maintain and care for." She grinned at me before continuing. "You pretty confident in your Strengthening Magic?"

I nodded at her, and she gestured for me to follow her to one of the shooting lanes. The one she'd selected had a distance of fifty meters between the nocking point and the target. I noticed a movement in the farthest lane along. An extremely brawny man was adjusting a scope on the biggest bow I'd ever seen, focusing it on a target that must have been at least three hundred meters away from the shooting area.

"Rygo shortbows come in five different strengths. We'll start with the lightest one here, the Rygo 1. This model has a maximum range of around a hundred and fifty meters, but it's most accurate up to around fifty meters." She quickly taught me how to hold and draw the bow, then how to nock an arrow. Once I had that down, I let loose my first-ever shot. The arrow traveled the full fifty meters and sank into the very bottom of the target with a *thunk*.

"Is this *really* your first time?" Rouge said with a laugh. "You've got some pretty good instincts if so—and you're a lot stronger than I would have thought!"

Mwa ha ha. Don't underestimate the guy who spent his childhood slacking off. Whenever I'd been trying to avoid studying, I'd done things like fish, which required precise and delicate control over my

magical manipulation. Of course, while Rouge was probably just trying to butter me up, the compliment still made me happy.

"You didn't seem to have any trouble with that one, so I think you might even be able to handle a much higher model. The Rygo 4 has an accurate range of ninety meters and a maximum range of two hundred and seventy or so." She took the bow I was holding and replaced it with another. Immediately, I could feel the difference—the wood around the grip was thicker, and the bow felt sturdier overall. Remembering the trajectory of the first arrow I'd loosed, I adjusted for the increased range, aiming just above the target itself.

Thunk. The arrow barely grazed the top of the target and sunk into the wood behind.

"Are you a Royal Academy student, by any chance?" Her question caught me by surprise, and I floundered over how to respond. She seemed like a nice person, and I wanted to ensure I could visit her again whenever I had questions, so I couldn't bring myself to lie to her—but on the other hand, I'd already told Lund I was someone else, and revealing my true identity was bound to cause problems. *What should I do...?*

Rouge chuckled. "It's an impressive accomplishment to get into the Academy. You should be proud, not embarrassed. Is something the matter?"

I grimaced awkwardly. "I just moved here from way out in the countryside, and I'm still not used to being treated all special just because I go to the Academy. I'd really appreciate it if you could just treat me like you would any other customer. But how did you know, anyway?"

Rouge gave me a strange smile. "And here I thought someone in your shoes would be flouncing around the city, relishing in that special treatment wherever they could get it..." She paused for a moment, then continued, perky once again. "As for how I knew, well—you've got astounding skill in magical manipulation for a boy your age. You're drawing that bow like it's nothing, but it's actually quite difficult to properly draw it while using Strengthening Magic. If you can't keep stable control over it, your grip will be shaky at best, and your aim nonexistent. Also, we're pretty close to the Royal Academy

here, so I was somewhat confident in my guess."

That made sense. It was particularly difficult to maintain precise control over magical manipulation when additional force—like that of drawing a bow, for instance—was at play. An average boy my age would have a lot of trouble holding a bow steady and aiming, if he could even draw it in the first place.

"My name is Allen...but please, call me Pork. That's how I introduced myself to the assistant manager just before," I said with another awkward grimace.

Rouge burst into laughter. "Lund's not that bad, really," she said once she'd calmed down again. "The actual store manager is a bit narrow-minded and hates to deal with kids from the Academy, so Lund is always forced to attend to them—oops! Don't tell anyone I said that, though!" She put a finger to her lips and shot me a cheeky wink. I grinned back. *Well, it doesn't seem like the name "Allen" meant anything to her anyway, luckily.*

"All right, then! You seemed to handle the Rygo 1 pretty easily, but what would you like to do? I thought you might be a little short on money when I saw you fussing over all the price tags, but since you're an Academy student, you could get an interest-free loan if you wanted to look at some more powerful models."

A loan, huh...? I had no doubt I'd be able to pay it off later, but at the same time, my Japanese upbringing had instilled in me a reluctance to rely on others—including a business—to pay my expenses. I decided to ask Rouge for advice.

"What do you think would be the best thing to do? Like you guessed before, I'm a brand-new explorer, and I don't really know enough to make an informed decision. Honestly, I don't like the idea of taking out a loan—I'd rather just buy what I can afford for now and upgrade my equipment as I earn more, but I don't know if that's the smartest plan or not..."

Rouge's face lit up as I spoke. "It's rare I get to meet a boy like you, you know. Most Academy students tend to take advantage of their financial resources—either the loans or their personal wealth—and gear up, but they always seem to assume that owning a powerful weapon means they're powerful themselves. Now, since

you've asked, I'd recommend you go with a Rygo 5; focus on improving your basic skills before trying to upgrade it. It's the most powerful Rygo model, but it's still a simple shortbow, no bells and whistles attached. Here, give it a go. The effective range is around one hundred meters."

I took the bow from her and readied myself. With a deep breath, I drew the bowstring, then let the arrow fly. *Thunk.* The arrow sank deep into the target, just above the bull's-eye.

"Amazing! I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it myself. You've got a good sense for this."

"Can I have one more go?" I asked, spurred on by her compliment.

She said I should focus on improving my basic skills—for archery, that means my accuracy and how quickly I can line up one shot after another. The power of an arrow all depends on how it's released from the bow.

I took the arrow she held out to me and nocked it as quickly as I could, then drew the bow. I aimed where I thought was just below my previous shot, and the next instant, I let the arrow loose. Just like when I practiced with my sword, the moment I'd finished the action, I stoppered the flow of the mana I'd been using. Then I watched the trajectory of the arrow as it sailed through the air.

Thunk.

This time, the arrow struck the middle of the bull's-eye, sinking well into the target.

Rouge's eyes widened, her expression one of utter astonishment. I couldn't tell if her response was exaggerated or not—was she just trying to make me feel pleased with myself?—but it honestly didn't matter, because I was happy regardless. When the arrow had hit the target, it'd been exhilarating. I was utterly taken with this bow.

◆◆◆

"I guess you're what they call a prodigy... Although I don't know if the word does you justice, really..." Rouge remarked with a serious expression after I'd declared I'd buy the Rygo 5. *I was only planning*

to have a look today, but oh well. Using the bow was really fun, and having fun is my goal in this lifetime.

"Please—I'm far from it," I replied, sheepish. "I hit a stationary target in an enclosed space, so there wasn't even any wind. I know I've got a long way to go." I paused for a moment and did some quick calculations and prioritization. "I'll have fifteen hundred riels to spend after I buy the bow, and at the very least, I'd like to get a leather breastplate, a knife sturdy enough to carve up a carcass, and a bag that can safely store monster parts and foraged materials—oh, and some arrows. How many arrows should I buy?" The Rygo 5 was pretty reasonably priced—one thousand riels.

"You're too levelheaded for a boy your age, seriously," Rouge said with a sigh. "Well, I'm pretty sure Academy students can access an unlimited supply of normal arrows—fully wooden ones and ones with iron arrowheads—from the Academy for free, so I think you'll be set for a while there. As for a storage bag, the really good ones are pretty expensive, but you can rent a secondhand one from the Explorer's Guild when you undertake a request, so I'd recommend putting that one off until later. Right now, we'll focus on the breastplate and knife. Sound like a plan?"

Free arrows! That's a bonus. If that was the case, I could practice to my heart's content without worrying about the ongoing cost of filling my quiver. I could deal with using a rental bag for the time being as well. All that was left was a knife and some armor, then.

"Do you have any Seimler-brand knives here? My good friend uses a custom-made knife of theirs, I think..."

Rouge's face fell a little. "Well, we do have some of their ready-made knives, but they're a little outside of your budget for now, I think. The cheapest one goes for around ten thousand riels, if I remember correctly—and a custom-made knife would cost at least ten times that."

I'd thought that maybe Reed's knife was somewhat replaceable, given he'd carved up the rabbit carcass quite energetically and even stuck the knife over the open fire to roast some meat, but apparently that wasn't the case. Well, I'd since found out he came from an extraordinarily rich family, and he himself was already a B-

Rank explorer. It didn't really surprise me that the tools he used were incredibly expensive.

"No worries. Can you recommend a knife for me, then?"

"I'll show you to the knife section—follow me." We set off walking, and Rouge kept up the conversation. "Since you're an Academy student, I gather you'll probably be sticking with requests around this area for the next while. There's not many truly dangerous monsters in the land surrounding Runerelia, so for armor, I'd say you'll be fine with a leather breastplate from our own Singlord brand. We've got stock of a simple one designed for new explorers. It's lightweight and easy enough to move in, and you can unlatch each part for easy washing. It's not as durable as any of the more expensive breastplates, but on the other hand, it only costs five hundred riels. I think you'd be fine with one of those for a good while."

"I'll go with that, then." I didn't see much point hemming and hawing over my armor. I wouldn't know what was good and what was bad either way, and Rouge didn't seem like the type to mislead me. Better to leave it up to the professionals—not that I had the budget to make much of a choice had I wanted to anyway.

"Well, all that's left is your knife, then. Wait here a moment—I'll bring out the models I was thinking of for you." She vanished into a back room. As soon as she'd gone, I heard a noise, and I turned to find my classmates rushing toward me. Until that point, I'd completely forgotten I'd come here with them, to be perfectly honest.

"We were looking everywhere for you, Allen! Where'd you run off to?" said Al.

"'Allen'?! So you *are* Allen Rovene!" cried Lund.

Al, realizing his mistake, made an expression that clearly read, *Oh, shit*, but it was already too late. The jig was up. *Oh well. I'm basically done with my shopping anyway, and Al didn't do it on purpose.*

"Sorry for the delay," said Rouge, emerging from the same door. She was delicately clutching two knives. "Oh, are these your friends?"

"Madam Rouge! Didn't you tell me to say you were out on other —" Lund froze, realizing what he was saying, and attempted to cover up his slip. "Oh, you must have just returned, right? Right?"

"Madam" Rouge? Is he saying—wait, is she *the manager?* I looked over at Rouge. She impishly stuck out her tongue in response. *Wait, when she was talking about the store manager who hated Academy kids, was she just talking about herself? Man, I don't know what's going on here anymore!*

"Allen, what in the world were you thinking? You invited us all to come shopping with you only to abandon us for a beautiful older woman? Walking around hand in hand with her and shopping with such a lewd expression on your face? What's the meaning of this?"

You invited yourself shopping, actually. Don't confuse the situation any more than it already is—I'm begging you.

"Ah, are you his girlfriend? What a pretty girl, Allen! I'm sorry for monopolizing him, truly. All we have left is to choose a knife, so I'll return him to you in a moment."

Fey immediately brightened upon hearing Rouge's response, but I swiftly jumped in. "Sorry, but you've misunderstood—she's just a classmate. We're not even particularly close."

"Just a classmate?! The other day, you demanded I make you a hundred of those magical recorders with my own money, and *now* I'm just a classmate?!" cried Fey.

Rouge looked at me coldly. "You need to be nicer to girls, Allen."

I wanted to protest, but for once, Fey's usually misleading claims were true. Long story short, the Hill Path Club (which I hadn't really intended to start in the first place) had somehow grown immensely popular, and the number of club members had grown too large for me to feasibly measure each individual's progress by myself. Begrudgingly, I'd had to ask Fey to help. She'd crafted over a hundred magical devices for me that could measure the abilities and progress of the club members so I could check over the data at any time. Of course, on a personal level, I couldn't have cared less whether or not my clubmates were getting better, but when it came time to report back to Godolphen that I'd overcome the challenge he'd set for me, it wouldn't do for me to have no idea about their

actual improvement.

I really need to submit my club budget to Ms. Musica and get some funding, or Fey's gonna hold this over me every chance she gets...

"To treat the heir to House Dragoon with such indifference... So this is the Allen Rovene of rumor," mumbled a shocked Lund, although I didn't think he'd intended to say that out loud—he'd dropped the servitude act and had even forgotten to refer to me with a title. With a start, he snapped back to himself. "Madam Rouge! Please, let me introduce you to our esteemed group of customers, the prodigies of Class 1-A at the Royal Academy. And I believe you might have already been assisting Master Rovene...?" He trailed off, still apparently unsure of his manager's actions. There was a tinge of worry in his tone.

Rouge laughed. "Yes, I saw him frantically rummaging through the swords, flipping over every price tag, and I couldn't help checking in on him. He said just to treat him the same as any other customer, but as you said, he's a Royal Academy student through and through. Tell me, should I be treating you more formally after all?" The last part was directed at me, albeit half jokingly.

"Please, there's no need," I replied.

"The same goes for us," said Stella. I noticed her eyes drop to the shortbow in my grasp. "Allen, you're not planning to switch to a bow now, are you? Even though you're already a match for Leo with a sword? They're pretty good for hunting, I'll give you that, but you won't see a knight using a shortbow anywhere. Shouldn't you at least go for a longbow? Those have got some potential in battle, at least."

Rouge looked astonished. "Allen, are you aiming to be a knight? In that case, you should listen to your friend there. It's good we caught this in time. Shall we swap that Rygo for a longbow?"

Her suggestion was made with good intentions, but I was already deeply attached to the Rygo 5 in my hands. Besides, I wasn't necessarily aiming to become a knight, nor a swordsman, nor the strongest fighter in the world—nothing like that. All I needed was the minimum level of strength that would allow me to live my fun

and fulfilling fantasy life.

"No, I'm happy with this bow. If I use it for a while and it doesn't suit me, then I'll consider any other options. Besides, I'm not actually set on becoming a knight."

"Is that right?" said Rouge, grinning broadly. "Well, with instincts like yours, I'm sure you'd be able to switch to a longbow without any problems, if you did feel the need."

"I let you out of my sight for less than half an hour, and you've already made a *very* close friend," Jewel was muttering. "I won't make that mistake again. Maybe I'd be better off aiming to become part of his harem instead of his one and only...? No, it would besmirch the Reverence name to wave the white flag before the battle has even started... I should focus on my goal—wait, what is my goal? Ha ha... Is this what they call 'love'?"

No, that is not *what they call love.* As Jewel continued her unsettling, bewildering monologue, Fey and Stella turned to me with icy glares.

"Okay, let's get you a knife, then," said Rouge. She ushered me to a nearby counter, upon which she laid the two knives she'd fetched earlier. The first was silver in color, about twenty centimeters long with a relatively thin blade. The second knife was longer—maybe around thirty centimeters—with a thick, squarish blade that reminded me of a machete or a Japanese nata.

"Both of these are made by Banree, a store that's only recently opened up here in Runerelia. While it's still only a new store, it was started by a former Seimler employee, so the craftsmanship is top-notch, though the materials are of a lower quality, of course. I think they're excellent tools for the price." *She really knows her stuff—guess you'd have to, to be the manager of a store like this at her age.*

My heart raced with excitement at the thought of owning a new knife—but when my eyes fell on the price tags, it skidded to a stop. The shorter knife was eighteen hundred riels, while the longer one was twenty-two hundred. I could afford it, but it would put me well over my budget. Noticing my hesitation, Rouge giggled.

"You don't have to look so sad. I'll make you a deal—the bow, the

breastplate, and the knife, twenty-five hundred riels altogether. And don't think of this as special treatment because you're an Academy student—this is just a special promotion for promising new explorers. Plus, I'll still make a profit at that price, so don't worry about that. Just make sure you come here first for all your needs in the future, okay?" She grinned at me cheekily.

With all that she'd said, I felt like it would be rude to refuse—so while I hadn't wanted any special treatment, I half begrudgingly decided to accept her generous offer.

"Thank you very much. Once I've earned a little more money, I'll come again for some more tools."

"That's all I needed to hear!" she said with a laugh. "Now, with these two knives, the shorter one is more commonly used for cutting through stems and stalks while foraging. If you're careful with it, you can also use it to process the remains of very small monsters, and to drain the blood and remove organs from some of the larger ones. The longer knife can get through thinner thickets and branches, and it can be used to dismantle some medium-sized monsters. I suggest you choose whichever knife more closely aligns with the requests you think you'll be undertaking in the near future."

Noticing that I was agonizing over the choice, Stella offered some advice. "Look, Allen. You'll be earning money real soon, so instead of worrying over which one to choose, just take the shorter knife, and you can come back to buy the other one in a week or two. You're better off practicing with the smaller one to get better at making delicate cuts anyway. Like, even if you don't end up joining the Royal Order, if you're good with a knife, you'll have another weapon you can rely on in a battle."

She thinks a bit too much like a boy sometimes, but she's not wrong. "You're right, Stella. You're good with stuff like this, huh? I'll go with the smaller one for now."

"You tryna pick a fight or something?" Stella said with a cold glare, almost like she'd read my mind.

Nope, only a girl could have that kind of intuition, I guess...

◆◆◆

After Allen and his friends had left the store, an apprehensive Lund approached his boss. “What happened, madam? You’re always telling us to ‘never give out any discounts’ and to ‘have pride in the prices we’ve set.’ And now you’ve given such an incredible discount to a Royal Academy student? You usually can’t stand those children! And don’t think I didn’t notice you changed the prices on those knives—that was the cost price, wasn’t it? With the deal you gave Master Rovene, we’re in the red for that sale! Perhaps the rumors surrounding Allen Rovene have even reached your ears?”





Lund's usually moody boss shrugged. "I haven't heard of him before. It was just like I said—I think he's got promise, and I want him to keep shopping here in the future. That's all it was." For once, she was in an excellent mood.

"You know, he beat the famous Leo Seizinger to take the top score in the physical entrance exam. At the very least, you should have told him just how much of a discount you were giving him. That way, he'd feel obliged to return the favor," suggested a passionate Lund.

Rouge didn't answer. She simply smiled at her assistant.

◆◆◆

"Sorry about before, Allen. I really messed it up," said Al as we left the store, looking like a kicked puppy.

"Don't worry about it. I was nearly done anyway, and besides, it looks like I'll be coming back here pretty often. It's probably better it all came out sooner rather than later."

"That's a relief to hear," he said with a sigh. "By the way, what's everyone up to after this? If we're done for today, Coco and I were planning to go and register at the main branch, but..."

"I've got some other errands to run today, so I'll see you all at school tomorrow." Now that I had the basic equipment, I was eager to head over to the southeastern branch and begin finding out everything I could about exploring.

"Are they something you can put off until tomorrow?" Fey asked. "There's a store near here that sells really delicious desserts... I thought we could all go together. I mean, we went out of our way to come shop for weapons with you, only for you to abandon us to hit on a pretty girl... It makes me wonder why we even bothered to come..." She trailed off, her eyes filled with resentment. Everyone else turned their own accusatory glares on me.

I mean, all I did was go into a store and buy a weapon. I don't think I deserve whatever judgment this is. I shrugged it off. *Well, it's already pretty late, and there's no pressing reason I* have *to start today...and she mentioned dessert?*

In truth, the mention of dessert wasn't enough to get my heart racing. It wasn't because I didn't have a sweet tooth—in my past life, I'd traveled far and wide to try out famous dessert shops fairly often, and before my awakening in this life, I'd had a particular fondness for all things sugary. But now, armed with my memories of life back in Tokyo—the point of confluence for world-class restaurants in any and all cuisines—my hopes weren't particularly high for even "really delicious" desserts in this more culinarily primitive world. Since my awakening, I'd realized that the meals I'd eaten back in Crauvia were certainly nothing special. The meat Reed had barbecued with just a bit of salt back during our camping trip had tasted amazing, for sure, but that'd only been because the meat itself had been delicious. And I'd tried one of Runerelia's high-class restaurants when my sister had shown me around the capital, but it hadn't wowed me in the slightest. *I guess Japan's just on another level when it comes to food—even when you compare it to another world entirely.*

On the other hand, I felt bad about the idea of parting ways here—if only with Stella, who'd specifically made the time to come with me. Not to mention, I'd gone off and bought my main weapon without even asking for her advice.

"Well, I guess I can put it off until tomorrow..."

The three girls let out a unanimous squeal.

Girls and their desserts, huh...

Intermission: Ice Cream

We all piled into the gaudy Reverence car once again and set off for our new destination. It took us about fifteen minutes to arrive at the dessert store Fey had suggested.

When she'd said this store's main attraction was their ice cream, I'd begun to imagine the clichéd youthful scenes of my past life—a takeout kind of joint, with unbelievably long lines of high school girls chattering happily as they waited for gelato or crepes, and then standing around taking photos before they ate. But as it turned out,

our destination today was just another of the city's many high-class restaurants. There was a somewhat Arabian feel to the decor, and it had a quiet, refined atmosphere.

Not quite *what I was hoping for, but there's no point complaining now.*

We were ushered inside with polite deference and shown to a private room. The menu was the frightening type—in that there were no prices written next to the dishes—so I went with the simplest, cheapest-sounding option, a regular old "Plain Ice Cream."

"I'm surprised you even agreed to come, Allen," Jewel said with a giggle. "I can't picture you as the type to eat sweet things."

"They actually call me Master Sweet Tooth back home, I'll have you know." *Well, back home in my past life. And it was a self-bestowed title, but still.*

Fey snorted. "You don't need to push yourself. We all know you've got a simple palate—no one's expecting you to make some refined or profound comment about the food, okay? Just relax and enjoy yourself," she said, smiling at me sweetly.

"A country bumpkin doesn't have to overextend themselves trying to sound like they know what they're talking about at a fancy restaurant like this, yeah?" The undertone of her message was clear.

I won't accept this. My palate was forged in the fires of Japan's world-class dining scene! How dare you assume my tastes are unrefined?! Although, given my recent diet...

When I thought about it, breakfast was always Thora's cooking, scarfed down on the daily without a crumb left behind. Lunch was ever the trusty field ration. And from the day I'd moved into the dorms, I'd visited the local noodle stand every night for dinner without fail. *Actually, my diet has been awful recently...* However, I still couldn't agree with Fey's comment on my palate. *Just so we're clear here, in my last life, I was on the product development team at a top-notch food and beverage company!*

I'd only come along with these guys as a way of thanking Stella for her time and advice today. As such, no matter how average or uninspiring the food turned out to be, I'd been planning to keep my carefully cultivated critique to myself; I would just focus on sharing a

pleasant time with my classmates. But now? Now I had no other choice.

"Excuse me, can I change my order? I'll get the rollberry flavor instead, with the sauce on the side, please," I said to the nearby waiter, who was dressed more like a first-class sommelier than a server in a dessert store.

"The...sauce?" he asked, bewildered.

"Allen, if you don't know what ice cream is, there's no shame in saying so, you know," Fey remarked, another patronizingly sweet smile on her face.

I'd thought for sure that a fancy store like this one would have prepared a handmade sauce to go atop the ice cream, but apparently not. Any flavor would already be mixed into the ice cream itself. *Oh well.* "We've got ice cream back in Crauvia as well, all right? But fine. I'll get the plain ice cream after all—and a cup of tea, please."

"Uh, you eat ice cream with *sauce* in Crauvia?" asked Coco, only somewhat hesitantly. It was rare for him to speak out among a large group like this. I enjoyed talking to him, and since I'd been pretty persistently starting up conversations with him on the regular, he'd grown more used to talking to me—but he still tended to clam up in a crowd. *He must be genuinely curious if he's overcome his anxiety like this...*

Incidentally, Coco had gone with the humble but reliable order of chocolate ice cream and a hot coffee. He'd slimmed down recently, but thinking back on the chubby boy I'd met on my first day, I could guess that he was quite fond of sweets.

"Oh, not always. It was just something our chef came up with as an experiment. People tend to get sick of monotonous flavors pretty quickly, right? No matter what type of food you're cooking, the most important thing to consider is that there's complexity in the flavors. So for ice cream, it's better to have a variety of flavors that can be applied to the basic dish, as opposed to mixing everything in from the start. Alternatively," I said, turning to address everyone else, "you could order a drink with a strong flavor like Coco did, then use that to vary up the taste a little."

It was the same with curry rice; it was a crime to serve it with the curry and rice already mixed together. Without variety and depth, anyone would quickly grow bored of their meal. Even when it came to other dishes that were served premixed, it was vital each bite had a range of flavors and intensity. Even plain udon came with spring onions—because the spring onions provided the necessary complexity. If you took away that simple ingredient, the dish would barely be worth eating.

Fey scoffed. "It's hard to put much faith in your opinions on food given you're the one who tells us you're eating *field rations* every time we invite you to lunch. Let me guess—since we've already heard all about the *legendary* tutor Soldo Vineforce, are you gonna tell us that this is all according to your renowned private chef, Salto Pinefork? Ha! Make sure to introduce us, okay?"

How dare she insult my faithful friend, the emergency field ration...? The line about the chef and their experiment might have been a little too much of a stretch though, evidently. Well, the "experiment" part had been a straight-up lie. In actuality, I'd made our cook Sugar cater to each and every one of my culinary whims under the pretext of it being vital to my success on the exams.

"Actually, our chef's name is Sugar," I said with a sneer. At the very least, I could emphasize that our cook was a real person. I wanted to add something else to show them I *did* know what I was talking about, but after omitting any of the sciencey stuff, I didn't actually have much ice cream knowledge to boast of. The company I'd worked for didn't produce any ice cream products, so my experience was limited to the one project I'd worked on when we'd collaborated with another company, who'd featured our popular brandy as a limited-time flavor for their ice cream. When that proposal had landed on my desk, I'd done what I did best—I'd gotten my hands on any information I could about ice cream production and studied like a dog. However, since the actual manufacturing had been carried out by the other company, I didn't have any firsthand experience. The only things I knew about ice cream were scientific, like that the mixture had to be churned to agitate the fat inside the milk, or that it was frozen in a special

machine that blew rapid jets of minus-forty-degree air. Obviously, there was no chance I could convince my classmates that our cook in Crauvia used a similar process.

Maybe I could tell them I learned it all from a wandering magical craftsman? No, if I do that, Fey won't stop pestering me until I can drag him over to meet her...

Fey and the others looked at me with lukewarm pity in their eyes as I struggled to find my next words, but before I could, the ice cream arrived.

One glance told me all I needed to know. A generous mountain of ice cream dominated the carefully chilled, luxurious porcelain bowl, churned to a uniform consistency. Even if I broke up the taste of the ice cream by sipping the tea I'd ordered, I had no doubt I'd be sick of the dish before I could get halfway through it. An image flashed into my mind of a foreigner I'd seen on television in my previous life, hungrily digging into a giant cup of ice cream—about eight times the size of a normal serve in Japan—with a massive spoon like the ones I'd usually eat curry rice with. The people in this world, once their mana cores had finished growing around age eleven or twelve, could eat a lot more than the people in my past life. It was *because* I could now eat so much in a single sitting that I had badgered Sugar into following my various schemes and recipes—because the alternative had been that I'd get fed up halfway through every meal.

"Does putting milk in your coffee follow the same logic?" asked Coco, his hand frozen where he'd been about to stir the milk in his cup.

He's sharp! I once more found myself appreciating Coco's quick mind and readiness to try to understand a new point of view.

"It does. You should give it a go," I urged him.

He took a careful sip of his unmixed coffee. "Wow... You're right, it is better this way."

Told ya.

"Wow, nice one, Coco! I can't believe you managed to get an *actual* meal-improvement tip out of him. You know, aside from 'don't breathe through your nose.'" Stella sounded genuinely impressed.

Rude.

I was a little annoyed that the common opinion of my palate was apparently so dismal, but hopefully Coco's ready agreement with my tip would start to change the tide. Taking my spoon, I tried a bite of the ice cream.

Man, this is frustrating. From just a single bite, it was obvious that the raw ingredients were of an extremely high quality, which made the dish even more disappointing. If I were here with a bunch of Japanese people, every one of them would no doubt say something like, *"It's deliciously rich in flavor, but why is it so watery and icy? What a waste!"* However, I had no way to explain *why* I had that opinion of the dish to the others, and even if I offered the staff some feedback on how to improve it, I wasn't sure they'd be able to make those changes with the tools available in this world. Holding my tongue, I instead focused on conquering the mountain of ice cream in front of me—but when I looked up a few moments later, everyone else jumped and turned away. They'd been staring at me with poorly masked curiosity.

"Oh, right. Uh, it's delicious?" I said, choosing a safe answer to the unasked question. The well-dressed waiter standing nearby breathed an audible sigh of relief. *Guess he was pretty worried, us being Academy students and all...*

"You still look like there's something you want to say, Allen. Is something wrong?" asked Jewel. The waiter stiffened again, nervous, and I rushed to appease his worry.

"No, it's honestly delicious. You can tell they've used a lot of fresh cream in the anglaise base to make it smooth and rich—it's a pretty standard technique, but the base must be at least fifteen percent cream here, right? You can tell it's got fairly high fat content from the texture and depth. I was surprised, really. What kind of milk do you use?"

The waiter, once again relaxing, answered me enthusiastically. "Thank you! We primarily use milk from Roubard cows, bred and raised on the colder plateaus."

Primarily? So maybe the problem is in whatever else they mix in, then... I figured it would be ill-mannered to pry further into the recipe, though.

Fey snorted again. “Pft! This is the first time I’ve heard someone talk about the ‘fat content’ in a dish when asked for their opinion. How did you calculate it, huh? And for that matter, why? Ha!”

Crap... Things like fat content probably aren’t even a notion in this world to begin with. Back in Japan, fat content was something you could find out about just by looking at the nutritional information, so I didn’t really have any idea how it was actually measured... Although, I was pretty sure with a magical scale or hydrometer, you probably *could* measure it in this world. *If I start talking about that, though, they’ll lump me in with Thora as another mad food researcher.*

“I think there might be more... Milk from a goat-type monster—a rummygoat, probably? I can smell it, just faintly. Their milk smells just a little like the scent of freshly cut grass,” said Coco, surprising everyone. “I don’t know about ‘fat content’ or anything, but rummygoats are really muscular because they jump all around the mountains, and their milk is thin in texture but deep in flavor, like onion soup...” He trailed off.

The waiter sighed, although he was smiling. “I should have expected as much from an esteemed student of the Royal Academy. Rummygoat milk is quite a rarity, but you are correct—we have used it as part of the recipe.” He directed his praise at Coco. *Hey, what about me? I said it too!* I *said it was rich!*

“Allen, what do you think? Have you got any ideas on how to improve it?” asked Coco, looking at me closely—I must have looked like I still had something to say. He was a sharp one, all right. I knew that now the question had been asked, Coco wouldn’t give up until he was satisfied with my answer. Quickly, I came up with an explanation in my head, drawing on the knowledge of my past life while omitting as much scientific information as possible.

“Well, like I said before, it’s better to keep the flavors separate from the ice cream itself and add them as toppings just before serving. Otherwise, you get too used to the taste and it gets boring to eat. It’s also a good idea to finely dice bits like the peel or the seeds of the fruit that’s flavoring it, then leave them in the topping instead of straining them out. That way, they add a bit of texture

and variation to the experience of eating it. And then... Well, I don't want you to think I'm complaining about the chef's work—not at all! But I think there's some adjustments that could be made to the production tools."

At the word "tools," Fey's eyes lit up. "What do you mean?"

"Well, ice cream is made by constantly stirring the anglaise base while you cool it. And, I mean, you've probably all learned this in physics class, but when you dissolve sugar or salt in a liquid, the freezing point goes down, right? So what you need to do is get the mixture to *just* above the freezing point, then churn it really hard before freezing it super quickly. I think if you tried that, the slightly icy texture it has now would become a little smoother and nicer on the tongue."

Coco blinked at me. "That's really interesting," he said. "I'm going to try it out for myself." He seemed to be satisfied with my explanation for now, although I had little doubt he'd be knocking on my door before long to discuss it more after his experiment.

Fey, on the other hand, had burst into a fit of laughter. "You're crazy, Allen! What *possible* reason could you have to know all those things? I'm starting to think that part of the reason you were suspected of cheating on the entrance exam was because you were doing crazy experiments with your sister and Soldo instead of studying like you should have been!" she said. As always, she was more concerned with my personal information than the matter at hand. *She's so annoying.*

"It's because I'm Master Sweet Tooth, of course," I replied dryly, neither confirming nor denying her hypothesis.

"Y'know, Allen, only you would end up talking about ingredient composition and freezing points and all that when all we asked for was your opinion," Al said with a chuckle. "It's okay if you don't know much about flavor! You don't need to put on a front."

"Yeah, the only thing I need to know about ice cream is whether it's delicious or not," added Stella. The two shared an odd camaraderie as they looked at me encouragingly.

Oy! Don't you try and lump me in with you and your unsophisticated tastes! Unfortunately, I couldn't risk sharing any

more of the knowledge I'd acquired in my previous life to try and convince them I *did* know what I was talking about. With their sharp minds, that would be a disaster waiting to happen. That cemented it, then: From here on out, everyone was going to think I was a troublesome kid with a simple palate who came up with weird theories about food. *At least Coco seems to understand me...*

◆◆◆

And as for the store Allen and friends had visited? Around half a year later, it became known as the number one ice cream store in all of Runerelia.

Chapter Two: The Cooperative

Explorer's Guild Southeastern Branch

The day after I'd purchased my equipment, I made my way to the southeastern branch of the Explorer's Guild. My plan was to ask around and find out anything I could today, then to start my official life as an explorer from tomorrow; it was the end of the school week, so I wouldn't have any classes for the next two days. Al and Coco were currently en route to the main branch to register as per my recommendation, while Fey and the other girls had said they intended to register after they'd gotten a little more used to life at the Academy. *No one's forcing you to sign up anyway! Just saying.*

Unlike the main branch, the southeastern branch was a simpler, single-story building constructed from a black wood that shone with a lustrous finish. Next to the main building was a smaller one that seemed to be a training area, as well as an area for processing materials and a few storehouses. It was late afternoon, and probably because of the time, a long line of carts and wagons filled with monster and animal carcasses was quickly growing outside the entrance to the processing area.

I strode through the open doors to the main building, my heart racing as the hustle and bustle enveloped me like a warm blanket.

◆◆◆

Again, I'd changed out of my uniform before I'd left the school. I wanted to be treated as a normal newbie, not some hoity-toity Academy kid.

"The hell are you doing standing in the entrance, dumbass?! You some kind of statue?! Get out of the way!" growled a voice from behind me, and a burly man barged past, ramming me with his

shoulder.

"I'm sorry! I'll be more careful!" I apologized, jumping to the side. The man snorted and disappeared into the clamor inside.

I grinned broadly. *See,* that's *what I expected from a place like this.*

I took a few steps forward, quickly scanning the crowd of explorers within. From my time at Singlord yesterday, I could make basic guesses at the value of the equipment they were all clad in. A good number of the weapons they wore on their hips or across their backs were clearly worth at least ten thousand riels each. That told me quite a few of them must have been decently ranked explorers. *That's the capital for you, I guess.*

Farther in, I could also hear drunken, boisterous laughter coming from what seemed to be a dining hall. I ran my eyes across the signs above a row of counters near the entrance, then joined the line for *"Numbers 13-15: General Inquiries."*

◆◆◆

"Good afternoon. How may I assist you today?" asked the woman on the other side of the counter as I took my seat, her voice raised in a (successful) attempt to cut through the tumult around us. Unlike the receptionists I'd encountered at the main branch, the employees manning the various counters here weren't dressed in fancy uniforms. Instead, they either wore simple jackets, embroidered with the words "Explorer's Guild Southeastern Branch," over what seemed to be their own clothing, or else they had plain armbands with identical embroidery on their arms. The woman across from me was clad in a neat linen blouse and trousers, one of the aforementioned armbands high on her left arm.

"Uh, to tell the truth, I just registered a few days ago, and I'm not really sure what kinds of requests are available or which ones I'm allowed to undertake. I thought it would be easiest to just come and ask directly, so..."

"Of course. Do you have your explorer's license on your person?" I produced my crisp G-Rank registration card—aka my explorer's

license—and slid it onto the counter with a triumphant grin.

"Congratulations on your registration, Allen," she said with a warm smile after a quick glance at the card. "We look forward to your continued patronage. I'm Anya, one of the guild employees stationed here at the southeastern branch. Now, since you're a new G-Rank explorer, you'll be dealing with G-Rank requests for a while. As per guild policy, you can also accept requests one rank higher or lower than your current rank as a rule of thumb, but don't ever feel like you have to push yourself too hard, okay?"

I guess that's a good way to prevent people from taking on requests they can't possibly complete while also stopping high-ranked explorers from snatching up all the easy work. "No problem! Don't worry, I don't plan on pushing myself too hard in the slightest," I said, grinning. "So then, what kinds of requests would you recommend I focus on specifically?"

Anya looked surprised. "Usually, when young kids like you register, they're the type who don't know their own limits and love putting themselves in danger... You're an odd one, Allen."

She paused for a moment, then blinked, snapping back to attention. "As for requests at your level around here, there's a good number of permanent requests—cleaning up the streets, doing deliveries, things like that. Undertaking a permanent request is easy enough. Just pick one from the noticeboard on the wall over there and go to the location written on it. Once you've completed the task the client wants you to carry out, they'll sign a commission slip for you, and you'll just bring that to one of the counters between one through twelve. If you pick up a foraging or gathering request, take the materials to the processing area next to this one, and they'll give you the commission slip there instead. Now, if you'd like, you can open an account with the guild's credit union, which makes it easy to store your money safely after a request—but just keep in mind that you'll have to apply in advance if you want to access your account from any of the branches outside the capital, yes? With that said, shall we open an account for you now?"

"Yes, please! Uh, if I wanted to learn more about exploring around this area, are there any books or anything you'd

recommend?"

Anya laughed. "You're the studious type, huh? There's a reading room in the back of the building with a good couple of books and manuals that'll give you a basic introduction to exploring. You'll also find some maps of the area around Runerelia, distribution maps for monsters and vegetation, and other materials like that. You can't take any of them out of the room, but you should definitely have a look when you've got the time. In addition to the reading room, this branch is also equipped with a small store, a training area, and the dining hall you might have seen on the way in. Anyone can access any of those facilities, provided they're a registered explorer."

"Thank you very much! I don't want to hold you up any longer, so I'll head to the reading room for today—but if I have any other questions, I might trouble you again in the future. Thanks again, Anya!" I said, offering her a perfect thirty-degree bow.

"I'm glad I could be of assistance, and good luck with your exploring!" she replied with another warm laugh. Then she looked at me curiously. "You really *are* a well-mannered one, aren't you? Hmm... Maybe the third or fourth son of a viscount or baron, unlikely to inherit the title, just arrived from the countryside?"

"Er, yeah—spot on, actually. How did you know?" I replied, confused.

She chuckled. "I've met enough new recruits your age to be able to tell a little bit about them by now. Just be careful. A brand-new young explorer like you is bound to get an invitation from one cooperative or another pretty quickly. They're unofficial groups that help each other out with requests and things like that, so it *can* benefit you to join one. But at the same time, you tend to find a lot of—well, shall we say *unruly* types? So if you do get an invitation to join, make sure you think carefully about your answer."

"Do you mean there's a risk I'll end up getting involved in something illegal?"

Anya shook her head frantically. "No, nothing like that! All the cooperatives here in the capital are decent organizations with long histories. I just worry a polite kid like you might struggle a bit if you end up joining a cooperative without knowing what you're in for. Just

keep it in mind, okay?"

Well, I don't particularly mind getting involved with the "wrong crowd" if they're just a little rough around the edges. As long as there's no crime involved. I thanked Anya again and left the counter.

◆◆◆

I spent the next few hours in the reading room with a book titled *A Beginner's Guide to Exploring: New Edition!* In addition to a detailed explanation of the rules and policies of my new part-time job, it was also filled with information on how to form a party, the perks that came with each new rank, and how to access a range of benefits, like free short courses and so on. A large section of the book was dedicated to maps of the areas around the capital, with known foraging sites and dangerous areas carefully highlighted on each page. Overall, it was an incredibly useful book.

After I'd absorbed as much information as I could, I made my way to the store inside the building and bought a disposable fire starter for ten riels. *If only I could use fire magic... Then I wouldn't need stuff like this.* Finally, I checked the noticeboard near the entrance, taking note of any requests that seemed doable after school or on the weekends. With everything I'd wanted to get done now complete, I headed outside.

It was around six in the evening, and the light was fading. *Okay, so from tomorrow, I'll have to change up my routine a little and start practicing with my bow... Or maybe from tonight would be better?*

"Hey, you!"

Lost in thought, I'd been about to take off on my run back to the Academy when a voice stopped me. "Come 'ere for a second."

"We're part of the Apple Family co-op here in Runerelia. If you're planning on working around these parts, you better make sure you know your place, you hear me?!"

I turned around to see two delinquent-looking boys, maybe three or four years older than me, glaring at me with their arms crossed and their chins set stiffly in warning.

"I understand. Yes, I'd love to join your cooperative," I replied.

"Wha— Oy, just shut your mouth and follow us, you hear?!"

The Cooperative

"You're inviting me to join your co-op, right? In that case, I'll be in your care."

If this was an invitation, that meant these two would be my seniors in the cooperative. To put it frankly, I knew very little about the world of exploring. Reed was too swamped with work to spend much time teaching me anything, so when I'd learned that groups like these existed from Anya, I'd immediately realized the benefit of joining one, and by doing so, acquiring some new sources of knowledge in the other members. If I tried, I knew I could probably find some other Academy students who also worked as explorers, but it would be wasteful to limit my social network to just those who attended the Academy. After all, I didn't want to miss a single experience in this new world full of magic and other possibilities. So I bowed my head politely to the belligerent duo, who were now staring at me less aggressively and more in bewilderment.

"Ah...right, then. You looked like another of them naive brats from some backwater noble family, but you've got a lot of nerve, don't ya, pip-squeak?"

Do I stink of the countryside or something? How do they all know?

"Yes! And you're right, by the way—third son of a penniless noble, just arrived a few weeks back. So, what do I need to do next?"

"I can't tell if you're a bigwig or just an idiot... There's something wrong with that head of yours," one of them muttered. "Anyway, you should meet the boss first. Come with us."

◆◆◆

En route to my meeting with this "boss" of theirs, I found myself in a pleasant conversation with the surprisingly friendly boys.

"So what's your name, anyway?"

"Oh, right—you can call me Lenn, if it pleases you." I'd carefully decided on a new fake name after the debacle at Singlord the other day, when I'd told everyone my name was "Pork."

"*We* can call you that, eh? Well, I'm sure you've got your reasons, and no one in the family is gonna ask too many questions, so don't worry."

"That's a relief, my esteemed superiors."

"Uh, 'esteemed superiors'? Were you talking like that before?" one of them said, scratching his head in confusion.

Oops. Guess I got a little carried away.

The boys—Amur and Roy, as I soon found out—led me through the worker's district on the eastern side of First Street and toward the slums on the other side. Eventually, we came to a halt at a small, dilapidated house on the westernmost edge of the slums. The border between the worker's district and the slums was immediately visible. The worker's district was still under the jurisdiction of the capital, so while many of the buildings were a little worse for wear, they were still habitable enough, and the area was enclosed with mud walls and moats to protect the district in case of monster attacks. The slums, on the other hand, were illegal settlements, and they were offered no such protections.

The building we'd stopped at had been haphazardly constructed from wood, and it had a thatched roof. I'd grown used to the usual quality of the buildings around the Academy, so I was briefly shocked to see that dwellings like this one even existed in Runerelia. Next to the door was a wooden sign with the words "Apple House" written on it in an elegant hand. It was an unusually cute sign despite the surroundings, but I still wasn't concerned that I might have made an errant step on my dream path toward an outlaw life—the rest of the template had been followed to the letter, from the scruffy youths who'd led me here to the run-down hideout. The small yard played host to a range of appropriate props, like a number of poles with nails sticking out of them and a small mountain of iron pipes piled up next to the building; the latter looked about ready to collapse at any minute. *Guess they might be*

for building a barricade when this place gets attacked... Or they're useful weapons for when these *guys do the attacking.*

"Amur, is the boss I'm about to meet a pretty scary guy?" Amur was the taller of the duo.

"Oh, he's terrifying. Terrifying, crazy strong, and a B-Rank explorer on top of it all. You need to be careful not to upset him—well, you'll understand once you meet him," replied Amur in a slightly nervous voice.

Hell yeah! There hadn't been any B-Rank explorers back in little old Crauvia. There was definitely a lot I could learn from him.

Roy pushed the door open—it was barely attached at the hinges, and it let out a loud creak. Immediately, a threatening shout sounded from somewhere inside.

"Where the hell have you idiots been?! Out for a stroll when you know we're short on manpower right now, huh?!"

Roy, the shorter of the two boys, shrank back at the sound. "S-Sorry, Pops! We saw this new recruit at the guild counter, so we were waiting to ask him if he wanted to join up, except then he went and hid in the reading room for hours. But we managed to get him, see?! Forgive us, please!"

The boss turned his unpleasant glare on me. He was a menacing figure, all right—he must have been close to two meters tall, with gray hair and a matching beard both cut choppily short. You would think he'd done it with a knife. *I mean, I was prepared for this, but I can see why a normal person would probably run away with their tail between their legs.*

"*Join up?* You think I'm gonna believe a little lordling like him decided to come along with you two degenerates of his own volition? You dragged him here, didn't you?! Idiots!" Suddenly, Pops swung his fists down, walloping both boys over their heads. Frantically, I tried to interject.

"No, Pops, I *did* choose to come of my own free will! I'm brand-new to exploring, and I don't know anything about the rules or the system, so when Roy and Amur invited me to join, I came along happily. Please, let me join the Apple Family—and, if at all possible, teach me anything you can about being an explorer!"

The older man listened to me with the same unpleasant glare in his eyes. Instead of responding to me, however, he turned back to Roy and Amur. "And what the hell is the 'Apple Family,' *huh*?!" he shouted, walloping the pair over their heads with his fists again. Then he turned his glare back to me. "For someone who looks like a little lordling, you're an odd li'l bastard. We're short of hands at the moment, so I don't give a rat's ass if you wanna join up—but let me explain how this all works to you first, since I know these two idiots wouldn't have explained shit to ya."

Pops sighed, running a hand through his hair before he continued. "Apple House—this cooperative—rounds up the broke kids from around here and teaches them the basics of exploring so they can stand on their own two feet. We take in any orphans and give them a place to sleep, and we help out the kids who don't earn enough to feed their families as well, which means that the older kids, like these two buffoons, are usually run off their feet helping the younger ones out. If you think you're still up for it, then yeah, I can teach you a bit about exploring..." He trailed off questioningly.

Without hesitation, I lowered my head in a thirty-degree bow. "I am your humble man. I beseech you, treat me kindly!" I cried, repeating some words I remembered a vassal saying in some period drama or other.

He glared at me for a long moment. "Quit it with the stupid talk and show me your license," he said finally.

Shit... I remembered to use my new fake name, but my license has my real name on it. Seeing my sullen expression, Amur interjected on my behalf. "Pops, Lenn here seems like he's got his reasons for keeping his real name a secret... Can't you just take him at his word?"

Pops frowned at Amur and shook his head. "I don't care if he wants to use a fake name as long as he's willing to work, but it's my job to protect this house." He turned his steely glare on me. "I'll call you whatever you like, but I need to know who you actually are if you want to join us."

I nodded and handed my license over. "Of course—I understand completely," I said, dropping the strange dialect once and for all.

Pops took an offhand glance at my license—and his eyes widened in shock.

"Hey, you're the crazy brat Cher was going on about, the son of a bitch! How the hell did these two idiots get their hands on you, huh?!" He turned to Roy and Amur. "Oy, you two! Piss off and go help with dinner. I'll take it from here." With a final blow to the head for each of them, Pops sent the two befuddled boys off on their way.

"Um, who's Cher?" *I've never heard of a Cher, but he's clearly heard about me...*

"Huh? He's an old drinking buddy of mine. Don't worry about it. More importantly, why are you here, huh? Putting it bluntly, there's a whole lotta co-ops out there that'll give you better support and nicer comrades than here. Kid like you would be pretty sought-after out there. I won't complain if you want to change your mind now and go find a better group to join," he said, looking a little troubled.

"Just like I said before, I want to learn how to be a good explorer—that's why I'm here. When those two told me about this place, it sounded like a perfect fit for me, and that's still the case now," I replied, resolute. I didn't need to be led around by the hand in one of those fancier cooperatives. Besides, I had no doubt those "nicer" groups wouldn't have any qualms about advertising my real name and Academy status to everyone, just to show off their shiny new recruit. I didn't want to be fawned over.

Pops sighed. "Weirdo... But all right. You're welcome to join—on two conditions." I waited for his next words nervously. "First of all, I don't care how important you become—I'll never accept you giving charity to the members of Apple House. At most, I'll overlook a little food here and there, but that's it. I say the same to every kid when they leave this nest to make their own way in the world. You understand why, right?"

I nodded. "So everyone can stand on their own two feet."

He snorted. "Guess you're not just a pretty face. That's right. So if you ever try to give handouts to the kids here, make sure you think about that first, got it?" I nodded. "The second thing is that I won't allow you to do anything here that interferes with your schoolwork. If you end up getting moved down a class or kicked out

of school, you just wait and see—I'll toss you out before the day's over."

That's gonna be a little more difficult to agree to considering there's a decent chance it'll happen anyway... I decided to try and negotiate a little. "Why the second condition? Honestly, I don't mind if I get kicked out of Class A, and I'm prepared to quit the Academy entirely if I find a better path for myself."

Pops stared at me for a moment, and I felt like I was being evaluated. Then, he shook his head. "I can see you're determined, but I still can't allow it. I have a duty to the kids in Apple House, and part of that duty is making sure they get a good education. I have too much pride in my family to allow rumors to get out about you getting expelled after joining us."

I couldn't find much fault in his explanation. He'd mentioned his pride, but I could also read between the lines. If negative rumors started up about this place, it would surely have an impact on their operation. It would make it harder to recruit new members, and it might even interfere with their ability to take on requests. *This "Pops" seems a little rough, but I can tell he really cares about his family.*

"I'm sorry, but I can't promise I'll be able to uphold that second condition if my path does lead me away from the Academy. If that time does come and you still feel like you need to dismiss me, I'll accept it without a word of complaint. I'll try to the best of my ability to make sure nothing I do affects the reputation of this cooperative. If there's any way you can accept that, then please, let me join Apple House." I punctuated my request with a very respectful forty-five-degree bow.

Pops frowned. "You're too much of a smooth talker for your own good, brat... I shoulda known." He sighed, then tossed a piece of paper at me. "Sign this. It instructs the guild to put twenty percent of your earnings into the co-op's account, and you'll get fifteen percent back once you move on from Apple House. If you ever get into trouble, let me know, and I'll get them to withdraw your money even before you leave—not that I think you'll need to, anyway."

"Understood! Thank you, Pops!"

And that was how I became the newest member of the Apple House cooperative.

Bow Practice and First Request

Because of my unexpected trip to Apple House, I ended up getting back to the Academy pretty late, but I still decided to get in some practice with my new weapon before the day was out.

In addition to a number of long, separated shooting lanes—much like the ones at Singlord—the Royal Academy archery training range also featured a semienclosed mock battlefield. The forested and mountainous terrain was dotted with various targets and obstacles; it was immediately obvious to me that the whole facility must have cost a fortune to establish and maintain. *Although I guess budget's not an issue when you're the best school in the country, but still...* The first time I'd seen the Academy, I'd been shocked the capital had allowed a single school to monopolize so much prime land, but the more of the campus's facilities I discovered, the more sense it made. Granted, on my first visit here yesterday, and now today as well, I hadn't spotted a single other student using this archery range. Just as Stella had said, the bow was apparently an unpopular weapon.

This *was* a world of magic, after all.

For the time being, I decided to set up at one of the basic shooting lanes and continue practicing the basics. A nearby shelf held hundreds of arrows, and there was no limit to how many I could use or take. Two types of arrows were available: simple wooden ones with the ends whittled to sharp points, or ones with iron arrowheads affixed to them for greater piercing power. I filled one of the provided quivers with twenty of the wooden arrows, and then I took my place at the shooting lane.

A deep breath. A single arrow. Nock, draw, release.

Each arrow was different—almost intangibly so, but nonetheless, they each had their own imperfections. I had to understand the difference in the response of each arrow as I drew back the string,

then make the slightest adjustments to my aim to adjust for it. It wasn't a matter of thinking about it, though; it was a matter of sensation—instinct, even. As with any skill, my first and foremost priority was perfecting my *form*. And as of right now, not a single one of the arrows I'd shot had followed the arc I'd envisioned in my mind.

Hmph.

Next, I tried to increase my draw speed, nocking and loosing my arrows as quickly as I could one after the other. Every arrow hit the target, at least—but again, not a single one of them had flown as I'd intended. I repeated this routine until I'd been practicing for an hour with the wooden arrows, and then I switched to the iron-headed arrows for the next hour.

The two hours of practice didn't have much of an impact on my mana reserves, although my arms were throbbing painfully by the end of it. The feeling of each arrow I'd shot had also changed as my arms had grown more fatigued. I hadn't yet practiced shooting while moving or shooting at targets on higher or lower elevations, but I already knew those arrows would feel different too.

*Archery is complex...*really *complex. And* really *fun.* The oddly pleasant fatigue I felt in my arms comforted me as I headed back to the dorm, already filled with anticipation for my weekend of exploring. I was asleep the second my head hit the pillow.

◆◆◆

The next day.

Allen had just arrived at a construction site in the worker's district. Initially, he'd planned to spend the weekend completing requests with Al and Coco, but unfortunately, when the pair had dropped by his room the previous evening, they'd broken the bad news: They'd had to register as D-Rank explorers. Although the two had gone to the main branch to register, their interview had been conducted not by Satwa, but by the other vice guildmaster—and *he* was apparently far more intimidating than Satwa had been during Allen's interview. They'd pleaded their case to be allowed to register

as G-Rank explorers, but instead, they had found themselves on the receiving end of a long and severe lecture, eventually coming out of it with D-Rank registration cards to boot.

"That Odilon guy was scary! He barely let me get a word in... How the hell did you convince them to let you in as a G-Rank?"

"Eh, my interviewer was a nice guy, so all I had to do was ask him politely... Guess I got lucky, though," Allen had said with a shrug. He'd tried to offer them an encouraging smile, but they'd only looked at him suspiciously. They were coming to understand it was fairly illogical that *anyone* would have let a Royal Academy student register as a G-Rank. Odilon's insistence on their more suitable D-Ranks had been a far more normal response.

Unfortunately, since there was no overlap in the requests available to G-Ranks and D-Ranks, Allen and his two classmates couldn't take on requests together. Until Allen's rank increased to at least F, they'd have to work separately for the time being—at least officially, anyway. There were ways around the restrictions if it came to it, like if Allen secretly assisted the other two with a request he couldn't accept himself.

For now, at least, the boys had decided to work separately, and after a quick stop at Apple House earlier that morning, Allen had received his first instructions from the boss. *"I know some folks demolishing a building over in the worker's district, and the bastards are crying out for any help they can get. Lenn, you go with Amur today and give 'em a hand."*

En route to the worksite with Amur, Allen had learned said demolition work was sorely unpopular in the current economic climate. Like Reed had said the other week, medicinal plants and herbs were in high demand with the rumors of war, and all the lower-ranked explorers were fighting over the well-paying foraging requests. Thanks to that, it was a struggle to recruit workers for any other requests at the moment, according to Amur. That went double for construction work like this, where the contracts had already been signed long before the rumors of war had begun to make the rounds, making it close to impossible to retroactively scrounge up some more money to offer potential workers. On top of it all,

construction requests demanded much harder physical work compared to cutting off a few stems in the forest, so it was only logical the lower-ranking explorers wouldn't willingly flock to this type of request. Apparently, that was where co-ops like Apple House came in—they often had long-standing relationships with the builders in the local area, so they would send out their registered explorers to help the builders out. In turn, the builders would help the co-ops out in whatever ways they could.

However, explorers from co-ops other than Apple House weren't always as eager to assist.

"Tch. Why do we always get the shit end of the stick, huh? Those bastards from Round Piece found a tiny patch of yukeweed the other day and made a killing off of it! If we don't get out foraging soon, they'll harvest the lot, and we'll be beggin' for scraps!"

"We got no luck, I tell ya. Three weeks until it's our turn for a foraging request again, and by then this weird obsession with herbs and crap will be over. The boss shoulda taken this chance to cut ties with this stupid construction company once and for all."

Explorer work was casual in nature; you were paid at the end of each day, with no obligation to work more than a single day even with ongoing requests like this one. With that in mind, it only made sense that co-op explorers would be disgruntled about being sent out for lower-paying, higher-intensity requests like demolition instead of getting a golden-ticket foraging request—although it seemed the boys didn't realize the current demand for medicinal herbs was a result of the rumors of an approaching conflict. If they knew, they probably wouldn't be as worried about the market crashing before their turn came around again—although it would most likely only amplify their impatience. No, boys like these two based their work on a single principle: *"How much money can we make today?"*

The two irritated boys, members of the Gold Rat co-op, continued to moan about their luck as they plodded toward the worksite, clearly in no real rush. They arrived just seconds before the job was meant to start, immediately noticing the two explorers from Apple House already waiting.

"Oy, look!" said one of the boys, elbowing his partner. "If it isn't Apple Amur! Who's that brat you're babysitting, huh?"

The other boy snorted. "I heard the old man in charge of Apple House is starting to lose his mind—must be true if they're bringing little kids in to do their dirty work! Well, they *have* been saying all the older ones got fed up and left..."

"Bit of good luck for once, though!" replied the first with a devious grin. "They get to do all the heavy lifting, and we get some new punching bags!"

◆◆◆

"Hey, what're you two doing?! Pick up the pace! The next one's ready!"

Our work team for the day comprised myself and Amur from Apple House, along with two explorers from another co-op who looked to be around seventeen or eighteen years old.

"Damn it," swore Amur under his breath. "Those two think just because they're F-Rank explorers, they can slack off and order us around."

Our job today was basically to gather the demolition waste into large piles and box it up. A laborer from the construction company was using a magical device to smash wood and concrete into smaller pieces, which we'd carry and load into nearby wagons. The work wasn't too difficult, and I hadn't broken into a sweat—I had my Strengthening Magic to thank for that—but I still tried to ensure I kept pace with Amur, who seemed to be struggling with the manual labor.

But while the work itself was easy, the smirking faces of Idiots One and Two were beginning to get on my nerves. "Does this kind of thing happen often?" I asked Amur. Honestly, if he gave me the okay, I was half ready to beat the two of them into a pulp and show them who was *really* in charge around here. *If Rosa were here, their faces would already be unrecognizable.*

"Nah, usually, it's never this obvious. I mean, the client is watching, and normally if an explorer doesn't put in enough effort, it

impacts the reputation of their co-op... Apple House is in a bit of a sticky situation at the moment, though. Most of our members up and left recently, and a lot of the other co-ops think that means they can look down on us."

Amur's explanation took me by surprise. *How could anyone look down on such an exquisite manifestation of a textbook reincarnation trope?*

"My old lady taught me that when someone looks down on you, you need to stand up to them and show 'em who's boss. You reckon it'd be all right if I rearranged those two idiots' faces till you can't tell which is which?" I looked over at the two older explorers, who were lazily sprinkling water over the yet-to-be-crushed concrete blocks to minimize dust—that is, when they weren't busy laughing at us.

"You've got a pretty wild mom for a noble kid," said Amur, his eyes wide in shock. "Nah, don't—if you tried anything with those two, you'd lose for sure. Just grin and bear it until you get up to F-Rank and they won't hassle you anymore. I'll be an F-Rank soon enough myself. Besides, Pops already told me to make sure not to get into any fights with the other co-ops, what with everything else going on right now."

Now it made sense. I'd thought it was weird that Amur, who was fairly short-tempered himself, hadn't reacted to the Gold Rats' taunts, but if the boss had told him to keep his cool, I'd do the same—or so I thought, anyway.

At that moment, one of the two idiots strode over to us. "What the hell are you losers doing?! You're overloading the carts! See, this is why I hate working with little kids like you. You're gonna hurt our reputation, you know!"

In a flash, Idiot One snatched up a hammer from the ground nearby, and he swung it down on the concrete chunk Amur and I had been about to hoist between us. We both jumped backward, but Amur was a second too late. One of the slivers of concrete gouged into his cheek, and blood began to gush down his face.

You just crossed the line.

"What, you appleheads can't even follow basic safety rules? Look what you've done now! Go over and tell the foreman you're sorry for

getting injured—and for being such a nuisance to your oh-so-kind seniors, who spent so much time trying to teach you today! Go on!" Idiot Two urged with a smirk.

"Look here, you bastards, you can't just—" Amur, still trying to control himself, started to respond with his words—but words would be a waste of time.

I grabbed the hammer. Idiot One opened his mouth to say something, but before he could manage a single syllable, I swung the hammer down on a piece of concrete that had fallen near his feet.

A cloud of dust enveloped us. The piece was gone, completely obliterated by my magically reinforced swing. The two idiots probably didn't even understand what had happened. Their mouths hung open uselessly—as did Amur's, for some reason. He gaped at me, opening and closing his mouth like a goldfish. *Is he trying to tell me something? Oh, I get it! He's probably saying,* "I can't help you without risking my promotion, so you take the lead here." *Got it, brother!*

Now that I had Amur's permission, I turned back to the Gold Rats. "You looking down on the Apple Family? Huh?!" I said, leisurely striding toward the dumbstruck duo until they were within striking distance of the hammer resting on my shoulder.

"H-Huh? Do you know who you're talkin' to?" Idiot Two managed to choke out. "We're from Gold Rat, the second-biggest co-op at the southeastern branch! Do you know what'll happen if you—"

I swung the hammer down again, hitting a second piece of concrete. Another cloud of dust swirled around us. It was obvious to everyone that if I'd missed, the injury this loudmouth would've received wouldn't have been one he'd easily recover from. The dust eventually cleared, revealing Idiot Two had fallen flat on his ass, his face a pasty white. Idiot One glared at me with his teeth bared, and he began pulling something from his belt. A knife.

"You sure you wanna do that?" I asked, my mouth curving into a smile. With all the curative magic and herbs in this world, violence was a little more acceptable than it had been back in Japan—but that was limited to unarmed violence. Nearly everyone in this world

carried some kind of dangerous weapon with them, whether it was for hunting, foraging, or other work, but if it were acceptable for people to pull knives or swords out willy-nilly, society would crumble. Just unsheathing a knife on the streets without a good reason was enough to get yourself arrested by the royal knights or the police. Wound another person, and you'd usually find yourself sentenced to the mines for slave labor—even if the wound you'd caused was only superficial.

"The hell is going on here?! I'll report this to the guild!" Seeing the situation that was unfolding, the foreman from the construction company frantically rushed over—the same foreman that, up until now, had been pretending not to see the two idiots harassing us and slacking off.

I tossed the hammer aside to reassure our quickly reddening client. "Don't worry, foreman. Our seniors here were just teaching us how to use a hammer correctly. Though obviously, I can understand you'd be worried someone might get injured, right? So don't worry—I've dropped the hammer. But you see...as a fellow explorer, it's my job—no, my responsibility, even—to make sure my senior here understands how serious it is to pull out a weapon on a public jobsite like this one. You know, for us explorers, there's nothing worse than getting looked down on by someone else. But it seems like these two idiots won't understand just where they are in the pecking order until someone gives them a good, *proper* explanation."

"Lenn, stop! You only just register—" Amur began to mumble, but it was too late—I was already on the move, closing in on the knife-wielding Idiot One.

"Look, I know you Apple kids have been working hard despite the crap these two have been putting you through, okay? But you have to stop! If someone gets injured here, the work won't get finished, and I won't be able to sign off on your commission slips—you get that, right?!" cried the foreman. *Oh, so he* was *watching?* It was too late to stop, though. Amur had already been injured on account of these two buffoons. I couldn't stop now—not until I was satisfied they'd be crying themselves to sleep for days.

I was still calm enough, but I was also surprised at how angry I'd

gotten when they'd injured Amur. *Guess I like him even more than I realized.* He was a little clumsy and rough, but he really had tried to look out for me throughout the day, and he'd jumped in to help me out whenever he'd thought I was struggling. "Not a problem, foreman," I said. "I'll do enough work for three men once I'm through with these idiots. I won't kill 'em, for the record—even though he did pull a knife on us. I'm just gonna mash 'em up until you won't be able to tell which of them is which!" With a grin, I drew even closer to the two Gold Rat explorers. I moved slowly—not out of caution, but to give them a chance to make the first move. If Idiot One came at me with his knife, no one would blame me for acting in self-defense...

Unfortunately, in an anticlimactic turn of events, Idiots One and Two let out a unified scream and turned, fleeing from their unarmed, twelve-year-old opponent.

Just when it was getting good too...

◆◆◆

Just as I'd declared, I took on the work of the two departed explorers, leaving the job of watering the concrete to the injured Amur. At first, the foreman had been despondent, muttering with his head in his hands about how the work would be delayed again—but by the time the day was over, he was in an extraordinarily good mood. "I can hardly believe it! Forget the work of three people—I'm pretty sure you've done more than five men could!"

Another worker from the construction company, an older man with a towel tied around his head who'd been breaking down concrete a little farther away, also came over. "You said it. I've been doing this for forty years now, and this is the first time I've ever had a kid try to hurry me up so he's got more work to do. I'm beat!" He chuckled softly. "You said there's nothing worse for an explorer than when someone looks down on ya... It's the same for us laborers too. If you'd let those two blockheads walk all over ya, me and the foreman here would have looked down on you no matter how hard you was working—but you treated us to a show instead! Ha!"

Just as he'd said, I'd found myself with a bit of extra time to spare while I'd been waiting for the older laborer to break down the concrete, so I'd mostly spent the time talking to the foreman and Amur while compressing my magic—but my idleness had lit a fire under the older laborer, who'd started to smash through the chunks at the speed of a much younger man.

"I'll make sure the guild hears an accurate report of what happened today so those two can't stir up any trouble for you. And you'll both get an 'A' evaluation for today's commission slip, by the way," continued the foreman.

Amur's eyes widened in shock. "Are you sure?! You know that'll increase the payment, right? Sure, maybe Lenn deserves it, but all I did was pour some water here and there!"

The foreman grinned at us. "Well, those two Gold Rats won't be getting any payment, and we're actually *ahead* of schedule now thanks to your friend there. Besides, before you got injured, you were working plenty hard yourself, so just be grateful and accept it, okay? I'll chuck something extra in for Lenn too," he added, passing our signed commission slips to us. "In return, make sure you come back and help out again, all right?"

We accepted our respective slips and expressed our gratitude wholeheartedly. "Thank you very much!"

◆◆◆

As we were leaving the construction site, the foreman instructed me to take my pick of the scraps of metal, which at a glance looked to be nearly pure iron. I later found out from Amur that sometimes, if you got lucky and ended up with a generous foreman, they'd often pass you scraps like that as a "souvenir" for the day. *Must have been what was piled up around the entrance to Apple House too.* They wouldn't sell for much at the best of times, but Amur and I still hemmed and hawed over the various pieces on offer, and we selected one of the biggest and purest ones. *"You two must still have some energy left in you, picking a heavy bit like that!"* the foreman had laughed, but given it seemed like Apple House was in

trouble at the moment, I hoped the bigger scrap could help them out and repay some of the kindness they'd already shown me.

Back at the southeastern branch, we handed over our commission slips and received our payment—two hundred riels for Amur, four hundred for me. The initial request had stated that payment would be one hundred and fifty riels a day, so I'd somehow ended up with more than double that. The foreman must have allocated all the money Idiots One and Two would have otherwise received for us.

Something odd had happened before we'd received our pay, though: While we'd been waiting for it at the counter, the employee had returned from the back room and said, "Congratulations, you two! With this request, you've both become F-Rank explorers!"

It took a second to sink in. *Wait a minute.* It made sense that Amur's rank had gone up—he himself had said he was on the cusp of promotion—but there was no way *mine* had gone up too. *This was my first request, for god's sake!* I said as much to the employee behind the counter.

"Was this really your first request?" she replied, similarly shocked. "You're right, that is a little odd... Let me go double-check!" She dashed off into the back room, but she returned a few minutes later with a wide smile on her face. "Congratulations! I've checked with my boss, and there's been no mistake—you've fulfilled all the requirements to advance to the next rank! It's amazing to think someone could achieve such an exemplary rating on their first-ever request, but there you have it! I've never heard of anything like it in all my years here."

"Awesome, Lenn!" shouted Amur, clapping me on the back. "I don't think anyone's ever gone up a rank with a single request!"

Oh well. It is what it is, I guess. According to the rules, explorers could only take on requests rated as one rank higher or lower than their own, so I hadn't locked myself out of any lower-level requests with my unintended promotion. While I still felt a little undeserving of the sudden increase in rank, I decided to accept the foreman's good intentions—for it must have been his appraisal that had done it—with gratitude.

The Apple's Rynde

After we'd received our payment, Amur and I headed back to Apple House to drop off the scrap metal—and also to give our account of the day to Pops before he could hear about it from someone else. Amur was reluctant to report back, muttering that everything had turned out all right in the end anyway, but I decided it was important we let him know. As I explained to Amur, the ability to report difficult news to your employer was one of the fundamental skills of being an explorer. (Well, while I said "explorer," it was really something I'd learned as a company employee.)

"You're sure back early," said Pops in his gravelly voice. "Well, I can't say I didn't expect it. I reckoned you'd be all worked up and overdo it on your first request, but I bet you're tired now, eh? If you're planning on coming back tomorrow, then you should head home now and rest up."

Like Pops had said, I *was* tired. After I'd inadvertently riled up the old man working the concrete-breaking machine, we'd been locked in a bit of a contest of willpower, and I'd ended up working at a pretty insane pace... My mana reserves were fine, but my muscles, on the other hand, were aching. The muscles I'd used to lift and carry the chunks of concrete and metal were completely different from the ones I usually relied on when running or practicing my swordplay, and I already knew my thighs and back would be paying the price tomorrow. On top of that, I still had to practice with my bow after I returned to the dorms that night, and that meant I was going to use another set of muscles as well... I wasn't sure I'd be able to get out of bed the next morning. *Oh well. Can't have pleasure without a little pain, or whatever it is they say.*

"Thanks, Pops. I'll be on my way home soon enough—but before I leave, there's something you should probably know..." I started.

Pops's face twisted into a frown. "What the hell kind of trouble did you get into on your first day, huh?" Amur retreated, nearly toppling over as he looked down to avoid meeting the boss's eyes. Amused, I took up the task of recounting the day's events; I spoke as objectively and nonchalantly as I could manage.

"And that's how we showed those bastards not to look down on the Apple Family."

After hearing out my entire report without uttering a word, Pops suddenly jumped up and rushed us down. "What the *hell* is the 'Apple Family,' huh?!" he shouted, bringing his fists down on our respective heads with a *crack*. I rubbed my head, a little disappointed at his response. He sighed and continued. "Well, I can't say I don't get it, if they were treating ya that terribly. And if one of them pulled a knife, they're the ones in the wrong no matter how it turned out. As long as no one got badly injured, that's what's most important. What I appreciate is that you came here to let me know before I heard it from some other bastard. Keep that up—from now on, no matter what happens, you come here and tell me first. My job is to look after you kids, and I can only do that if I know what's going on—got it?" His frown faded, replaced by a cheerful grin. Amur relaxed with visible relief, but I wasn't entirely satisfied.

"If you're fine with it, then why did you hit us?"

"Because it sounded like you had fun, and I was jealous," he replied nonchalantly.

This guy...

◆◆◆

Even more tired than I had been before, I finally decided it was high time to head back to the dorm—except right then, an angry shout sounded from outside. "Oy! Amur, and that brat he was with at the site today—get your asses out here, now! We've got unfinished business with you!"

Pops and I sighed in unison. "See? This is why it's always important to come talk to me first. I'll deal with this. You two stay inside."

"I'll wipe my ass with my own hands, Pops," I replied, finally getting a chance to try out one of my favorite quotes from a web novel I'd read in my past life.

Pops burst out laughing. "Wipe your own ass, huh? Funny kid," he said. "But it's no good. If you go out there now, things'll just end up

messier than they already are. Leave this one to the adults, okay?" He was out the door before he'd finished speaking.

◆◆◆

Rynde Izrapole—otherwise known as Pops—left the building to find himself face-to-face with ten or so members of the Gold Rat cooperative. The oldest-looking man, likely around twenty-seven years old, stepped forward with a shout. "I wasn't asking for you, Rynde! Go back inside and send out the brats!"

"It's Savah, yeah? I heard you're gonna be promoted to C-Rank soon. Seems they've put you in charge of all the young Rats as well. You've sure grown bold to be telling *me* what to do, eh?" replied Rynde, and Savah shrunk back for a moment, afraid. Realizing all eyes were on him, however, he stiffened and took another step forward.

"Look, I came here to settle a fight between our kids, get it? Don't stick your wrinkled old nose in our business!"

Aren't you the one sticking your nose in? Rynde wondered, but he decided not to voice the thought. From what he could see, Savah still seemed to be an insecure leader, overcompensating with ostentatious displays of aggressive bluster to convince his followers of his dependability. Rynde could just beat Savah then and there and send him packing, but it would definitely come back to bite him later. On the other hand, it definitely wouldn't be easy to resolve this dispute with words alone. The Gold Rats' eyes were all fixed on Savah—they were waiting for their leader to prove himself. Rynde sighed.

"Listen, Savah. I don't know which kid you've come lookin' for, but I reckon your boss doesn't know you're here, eh? He's a greedy son of a bitch, but he's not an idiot."

"Shut up! We're a big co-op, I'll have you know! I don't have to ask the boss for permission to come settle a silly little fight between kids!"

"The kids might have started it, but you're the one who's made it a big deal. What were you thinking, bringing all these other brats

along to another co-op's private land? What are you gonna do if things go south? Are you gonna take responsibility? You're a leader now. Did you ever stop to consider that maybe your kids weren't telling the whole truth before you came barging in here?"

Savah's mouth twisted into a sneer. "Don't lecture me, old man. All the kids you raised have run off and left you, and your crappy co-op is on its last legs. Your old-fashioned ways don't work around here anymore."

A dark expression crossed Rynde's face. "You—"

Suddenly, the sound of approaching footsteps could be heard. Roy walked through the gate, shepherding two children so young, their mana cores hadn't even developed yet; they were on their way back from a cleaning request.

"Pops, what the hell's going on here?" Roy asked, dumbfounded.

One of the Gold Rats lurched forward, a plump youth who seemed to personify the saying "no brains, all brawn." "You're that Roy kid, ain'tcha? The one who's always glued to Amur! Go inside and drag him out here—and the brat he was working with today too. Talking to this geezer ain't getting us *nowhere*!" he cried, punctuating his sentence with a heavy blow to Roy's stomach.

"Bastard! Do you know who you're dealing with?" Rynde shouted, his anger flaring briefly. The sound of a door opening behind him swiftly tempered his outburst.

"Roy!" shouted Amur and Allen as they rushed out of the building, their voices unified in fury.

◆◆◆

"Why did everyone leave Apple House, anyway?" I asked Amur as we waited inside the building, trying to catch snippets of the back-and-forth outside. I expected him to hesitate or even refuse to answer the question, but to my surprise, his reply was quickly forthcoming.

"Well, Pops won't tell ya, so I might as well. Recently, there's been a lot of jobs popping up in the north, in the region bordering the Rosamour Empire, right? And there wasn't anywhere near

enough explorers up there to handle the work. Real different story than here, where there's too many explorers and not enough work to go around. Most of the kids here weren't earning enough to feed themselves, even with Pops taking next to nothing from their earnings for membership fees—any other co-op around here would be bleeding them dry, you know? We're always in the red here."

Amur paused, sighing. "Anyway, most of the older kids up and left for the border, trying to make a name for themselves and earn some proper money—and to establish a safe base to welcome any of the other kids once they can make their own way up there as well. Pops said being an explorer means being a free man, so he watched 'em all go happily. Told 'em not to worry about this place anymore. Some of them sent some of their earnings back here, but he returned it all, saying we don't accept charity here..."

Amur trailed off, his lips curving into a sad smile. "Pops could have been an A-Rank explorer years ago if he hadn't given his life to this place. All of us feel sorry for him, you know? He gave up his dreams, his money, and everything else he had to set this place up, and now he's barely got anything. So I get why the other kids left. I tried to go with 'em...but it was too soon for me, and no one would take me along." Amur's mouth was set in a rigid line. I looked away as he hurriedly blinked back a tear.

Amur wasn't the most eloquent guy I'd met, but I could understand his feelings, even if I didn't agree with him. "I get what you're saying, but I don't think you should feel sorry for him. How I see it, Pops isn't suffering—he's exactly where he wants to be, doing exactly what he wants to do. And if that's the case, then rank, money, honor—well, they don't mean much compared to that, do they?"

I was glad I'd trusted my gut and followed Roy and Amur to this place. The people here were chasing dreams they'd decided on for themselves. Apple House was going to be the perfect training ground to refine myself as an explorer.

"Roy!" Amur, who'd been peering outside through a crack in the doorframe, suddenly wrenched the door open and flew outside. The next moment, I realized why. A chubby Gold Rat youth stood over a

crumpled Roy, grinding his dirty boot into his cheek.

"Roy!" I'd followed Amur outside before I'd even consciously realized I was moving.

◆◆◆

"You idiots!" Pops shouted, furious. "I told you to stay inside!"

"Well, look who's *finally* here," drawled Savah, his lips curving into a wicked smile. "All right, boys! I'll handle the geezer here. Deal with the brats. Teach 'em what we do with rotten apples." With a shout, he flung himself at Rynde, tackling him around the waist.

"You think you can handle me, bastard?!" shouted Rynde. "Oy, Lenn! You handle the one with the brown hair—what are you doing?! You can't take them all on yourself! Grab some scrap wood or something, you idiot—don't go in bare-handed—no, don't just *throw* it at them! Roy, how long are you gonna lie there, you numbskull?! Amur, get Roy up and go stop Lenn right now!"

◆◆◆

This marked the day a mysterious new face appeared in the rough-and-tumble world of Runerelia's cooperatives, adding his name to an exclusive roster of underworld celebrities.

Among them, of course, was Cherbourg Monstell, the charismatic brawler who'd seized the position of guildmaster through pure strength and determination. Then you had Cher's longtime comrade and drinking buddy, the Apple's Rynde.

Now, there had appeared a boy so fierce, even Rynde couldn't hold him back.

The Mad Hound.

Rumors that a dangerous child named Lenn had joined the formerly flailing Apple House slowly spread across the capital. News of what had happened was quicker to reach the ear of the leader of the Gold Rats, however, who immediately showed up at Apple House with a gift and an apology, resolving the matter once and for all.

Runesheep

Two weeks had passed since the Gold Rats had fled from Apple House, nursing their wounds all the while. I'd spent those two weeks running all around Runerelia, heading out after school and on the weekends to complete delivery requests, clean gutters, or do odd jobs on construction sites. I could proudly say I was enjoying all the menial explorer work this world had to offer.

Of course, during those requests, I had occasionally run into a few idiots who'd tried to insult the Apple Family, but I'd kindly and carefully taught them the error of their ways—as was my responsibility as an explorer.

But today was different. Pops had brought me and eight of the oldest members of the cooperative to a meadow not far outside the walls of the capital. Today's objective was to hunt for the meat needed to feed the kids at Apple House. Apple House, unlike other co-ops, also doubled as an orphanage, and trying to sate the appetites of growing children living in the most expensive city in the kingdom necessitated a somewhat self-sufficient approach—an approach that had only grown more urgent recently, given that most of the high-earning members of the co-op had left to go north. The mass exodus of members meant the finances of Apple House were in dire straits.

This was why once a month, the eternally busy Pops made time to lead a group of kids out into the field, giving them some much-needed combat experience while also securing food for the family. For most of the kids at Apple House, this excursion was the highlight of the month.

◆◆◆

"Wow, Lenn, you've got a bow?! Awesome!"

"Teach me how to use it, pleeease?"

Since the incident with the Gold Rats, I'd become pretty popular with the other members of Apple House. *I knew it. Strength is everything in the world of exploring.* In particular, Po and Reena—

the two kids Roy had been chaperoning when he'd wandered into the middle of the fight—stuck to me like glue.

Incidentally, I'd come to learn that the chubby youth who'd started the whole thing when he'd punched Roy in the stomach was apparently fairly notorious in the exploring world. Piggy—as I'd started to refer to him in my head, because I didn't know his actual name—had popped up a few times over the past two weeks to try and get his revenge, but I'd politely set him back on the right track each time. It had been a little annoying, sure, and I had considered just running away at first, but I'd figured if he thought he could look down on me, it would mean the other kids from Apple House would probably receive the same treatment.

I'd made my peace with giving the kid his daily beating for the first week or so when an idea had struck me. Piggy had already been lying in the dirt when I'd noticed a yukeweed salve in the pouch at his waist. In a moment of inspiration, I'd applied the salve to his newly acquired wounds, and once he'd stood up, I'd soundly beaten him once again, finishing two days of work in one. The next day, Piggy hadn't shown up. I'd run into him at the guild a few days later—only for him to greet me with a rather crude, *"Lenn! What's up, bro?!"*

I wasn't sure if it was because of Piggy's change of heart or on account of the other explorers who'd received my generous educational beatings over the last two weeks—but either way, the members of Apple House were starting to see a little more respect from other co-ops, and that was all that mattered. The bonus was that I was already being treated as a part of the family.

"You've got great taste, Po—bows *are* awesome. But to tell you the truth, I'm nowhere near good enough to teach you guys yet. This is actually the first time I'm using it out in the field," I replied with a smile.

"Oh... You look cool anyway."

"Teach me when you get better then, okay? Promise!"

"Why'd ya pick a shortbow, though? And a Rygo at that, you cheapskate," Pops grumbled with a frown. "Don't go firing arrows all over the place today, get it? It'll be dangerous with the brats

wandering all around... Well, you're one of the brats yourself."

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I couldn't fault his warning. Hurting one of your own was a deadly serious matter, let alone accidentally shooting them. On top of that, unlike my usual practice sessions back at the Academy, here, I was limited to just the twenty arrows in my quiver. With all my practice, I could now shoot one arrow every two seconds when I was aiming carefully, and about two arrows in three seconds if I was just firing at random. If I wasn't careful with my arrows, I could empty my quiver in just a quarter of a minute. "I got it, Pops. So what are we hunting today anyway?"

Pops stretched, shifting the weight of the wickedly sharp spear slung across his back. It had an unusually long and thick blade, sharp on both sides for both stabbing and slicing. "We're mainly here for runesheep. They taste good, and right now is the best time of year to get high-quality wool from 'em as well—right before their winter coats grow back in. The normal ones are easy enough to hunt, even for little kids, but the elementally affined ones are D-Rank monsters, so keep an eye out—they've got a mean charge on 'em. Million-to-one odds that one does pop up today, but if it happens, I'll handle it. Well, you're probably fast enough to get away in any case," he finished with a snort.

There were two types of monsters in this world. Just like humans, every monster had a mana core—called a magic stone in monsters—and most didn't have any elemental affinity either. However, there was also a second type of monster, created when a normal animal swallowed a magic stone, turning itself into a monster in the process. Either way, both types were usually aggressive and often dangerous to encounter.

"No worries. An elementally affined one will have a shiny coat, and the magic stone will be its horn, right? If I see one, I'll yell out to you."

Pops stared at me, suspicious. "You seen one before or something?"

"Oh, no—but I've memorized most of the *Canardian Encyclopedia of Monsters*, so..."

"Those thick-ass books? Ain't there, like, five or six volumes?

What's wrong with your brain, kid?"

"Eh, it's interesting stuff, so I've read them a few times—anyone would memorize it after a few reads, right?"

"That's even worse! I can barely sit and read about any monsters that actually have a chance of popping up around here, let alone all the monsters in the world." Pops shook his head, frowning. "Okay. Enough with the nonsense talk. We're going off the path here, so this is where it might get dangerous."

With a gesture, Pops summoned all the kids into a semicircle around him. "We'll leave the wagon here. We've got Lenn with us today, so we're going to split up a little differently than usual. I'll be in the lead, and Roy and Amur will stay on the left and right. Lenn'll keep an eye out from the rear. Amur, what do we need to keep an eye out for today?"

"The most dangerous monster around here is the Gryetess snake, although we'd have to be pretty unlucky to encounter one," Amur replied without hesitation, directing his explanation toward the younger kids. He was also carrying a spear today, and so was Roy. "They usually stay up in the mountains, but they sometimes come down around here at this time of year to hunt. They'll chase anything that moves, so if we do come across one, stay perfectly still—seriously, don't even blink until Pops finishes dealing with it. If any elementally affined monsters appear, the worst thing to do is gather up in a bunch, because then they can get the lot of us in a single go. If something does appear, spread out at least twenty meters away from each other, then fall back until Pops has brought it down. And for normal monsters, if Pops reckons we're fine to take them on ourselves, we'll do the usual—surround one monster with three shield bearers and one of us spear-wielders, and finish 'em off quick."

Pops nodded. "Good job. As for you, Lenn—you can move as you like today, but as the rear guard of the group, make sure you're always keeping an eye on everyone, and make sure no one wanders too far. And *definitely* make sure you look before you shoot, got it?" He fixed me with a steely glare, and I nodded. "Good. Let's go. We're heading for the rocky hill over there."

◆◆◆

We could see the runesheep well before we'd arrived at the hill. Scores of them were scattered across the slope, grazing at the tufts of grass that poked out between the long sheets of rock. We quickly took out two of the beasts grazing near the bottom of the hill—well, Roy and Amur took out one apiece with the help of the other kids. I hadn't needed to contribute at all. I watched with intellectual fascination as they slung the two carcasses from a low-hanging tree branch and began to drain the blood.

"Lenn!" Pops beckoned me over to him. "Show me what you've got with that bow of yours. See the elementally affined one over there? Take a shot at it." I looked in the direction of his outstretched finger. Faintly, I could make out the runesheep he was talking about—it had a slightly glossier coat than the other ones nearby.

I thought it would be shinier... Maybe it's just because it's in the shade, but still... I thought, a little disappointed. I wouldn't have realized it was elementally affined if Pops hadn't pointed it out.

"It's pretty wary, huh?" I said in a low voice. The runesheep in question had already turned in our direction, and it was alternating between keeping an eye on us and snatching mouthfuls of grass.

"Can't blame it," Pops replied with a snort. "We've just killed two of its buddies right before its eyes. I know you're not gonna be able to hit it from this distance, not with a Rygo, but I just want to see what you're capable of."

I nodded at Pops, then set my eyes back on my target. It was around seventy meters away, but taking the elevation into account, it was probably just outside the effective range of my Rygo bow. I reached into my quiver, feeling for the end of a wooden arrow, and pinched it between the tips of my fingers. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Then I moved.

The arrow was sailing through the air before Pops could even blink. I was fast—but the runesheep was faster. It sank down, avoiding the arrow as it sailed over its head, and bounded up the rocky face of the hill, vanishing in an instant. I glanced at Pops. He

was frowning at me, his arms crossed.

"Sorry, Pops—it got away," I said with an awkward chuckle. "If they usually duck like that, I guess I'd be better off sending another shot right after the first, to hit it when it springs back up."

His brow furrowed. "You're kidding me, right? No way it's your first time hunting runesheep. Where were you aiming for, anyway?"

"Er... I was aiming for the forehead... I didn't want to smash the horn, obviously, and I thought a shot to the head would avoid damaging the fleece and the meat as well... Was that the wrong call?"

"I knew it... You actually did manage to aim at it in a split second. And now you reckon you can do the same thing with a second arrow too? Give me a break! I'm done talking to you."

I can't tell if he's mad at me or if he's impressed...

"I'll try my best to hit it next time," I replied, careful to avoid provoking him further—just in case he *was* angry.

The Snake Chases the Rats

We waited around half an hour for the blood to drain from the two runesheep carcasses. The younger kids then bound each carcass by their feet to two separate branches. With the two long branches hoisted over their little shoulders, we began to make our way back in the direction we'd come from.

Two rouvultures, a type of carrion bird monster, were circling overhead. *They must be looking for scraps.*

Unfortunately, unlike in some of the fantasy web novels I'd read, there weren't any magical 4D storage bags in this world that could hold an infinite number of goods without getting any heavier. The littler kids looked like they were struggling—after all, some of them hadn't even learned to use Strengthening Magic yet. I wanted to help them out, but Pops had ordered us weapon bearers—me, Amur, and Roy—to stay at the ready in case of monster attacks. *Well, I guess it's just another opportunity for them to get used to hard work...*

We'd made it about three hundred meters back toward the path when we heard a low rumble coming from somewhere in the east. It was the sound of shaking ground, like a tiny earthquake. The sound of something running.

And it was running toward us.

I strained my eyes until I could make out the source of the noise. And there it was—around five hundred meters away and quickly approaching was a swarm of meadowmara. About twenty of them by my quick estimation. The ratlike monsters weighed around twenty kilograms apiece, and they were stampeding right toward us.

What the hell? According to my beloved *Encyclopedia*, meadowmara were meant to be incredibly timid monsters. They were supposed to *flee* at the sight of humans...

"Shit!" Pops shouted. "That's a Gryetess snake after them! They're leading it straight to us!"

I looked again, and then I saw it. A ridiculously big brown snake was slithering through the grass behind the pack of meadowmara.

A Gryetess snake would chase anything that moved. Like Amur had explained, the plan had been to freeze in place if we'd encountered one, waiting until it either passed us or until Pops could deal with the beast. Unfortunately, that plan would no longer work. If we froze where we were, the meadowmara would crash right into us, bringing the snake along with them. The slithering beast in question was rapidly closing in on us, not slowing even a little as it flung an unluckier meadowmara into the air and swallowed it whole en route. All ten or so meters of its stupidly large body were on a collision course for our little group. This snake could definitely swallow a human just as easily, and at its insane speed, I knew I wouldn't be able to outrun it, let alone the younger kids.

Pops swore loudly. "At least it's not elementally affined—small consolation, though!" A Gryetess snake with elemental magic would have vividly colored scales speckled across the rest of its dark brown skin, although the color would depend on which affinity it possessed. *Can he really tell from this far away, though?*

Pops looked over at me for a moment, hesitation in his eyes, but I knew what he wanted to say. I offered him a tiny nod. In his

shoes, if I had to give the order, I'd find it just as hard—but we didn't have the luxury of hesitation now.

"There's no time to waste. I'll deal with the meadowmara, so you handle the big bastard in the back!" I said.

I knew Pops was worried if I took on the meadowmara, I might end up right in the middle of the snake's line of attack—but this was the only plan we could try right now. Without waiting for a response, I carefully darted away from the group and readied my bow, one hand inside my quiver. Pops was still watching me silently. Then, with a small sigh, he gave the order.

"Prioritize the elementally affined bugger leading the pack, and do what you can after that. If the snake makes it within fifty meters of here, everyone needs to freeze—and that goes for you too, Lenn! I don't care if one of those rats sends you flying. Don't make a sound, and pretend you're a rock for all I care—just don't move a muscle. Close your eyes if you're too scared to look. Remember, you won't die from a broken bone or two!" With that, Pops set off at a run, making a beeline for the Gryetess snake.

The sudden encounter with real, life-threatening danger had sent my heart racing. Realizing how tightly I was gripping my bow, I willed my hand to relax, but nothing happened. Every inch of me was tensed up, just like when Reed and I had come across the horned rabbit.

I've just gotta give it my best shot. That's all I can *do.* I had to place my faith in the countless arrows I'd shot over the past two weeks—in the hours I'd spent honing my skills until I couldn't lift my arm. Taking a deep breath, I refocused on the rapidly approaching meadowmara and counted. There were sixteen left thanks to the Gryetess snake. Pops took out two more on his way, including another elementally affined one toward the rear of the pack.

Fourteen meadowmara remained. Only one was elementally affined, a red-eyed specimen at the head of the pack.

My Rygo was only effective up to a range of about one hundred meters. Pops had told us to freeze when the snake was fifty meters away. At the speed they were moving, I only had around five seconds of viable shooting time.

I could let off eight arrows in five seconds at best. That meant I needed to prioritize my targets.

"Lenn..." My name left Po's lips like a prayer—like a plea. I grinned in an attempt to reassure him and brought my finger to my lips, gesturing to him to stay quiet.

And then, the meadowmara entered my bow's effective range—at the exact same moment Pops came within reach of the Gryetess snake.

◆◆◆

I didn't understand anything.

Dad had told us time and time again: *"Don't underestimate monsters. Nowhere is ever completely safe, not even close to the capital. Not even when you're with me."* I'd listened, but I hadn't understood a thing. I'd thought I was safe after just two or three hunting trips like this where nothing had happened... I'd thought nothing bad could ever happen to us. I'd thought that when Dad was around, nothing could ever hurt us. I'd been excited for the trip today, because to me, it'd meant a break from boring days spent cleaning the city... I'd even been wishing I could be one of the guys holding a spear too, instead of this lame shield. *Idiot.*

"Shit! That's a Gryetess snake after them! They're leading it straight to us!" I didn't realize it was Dad shouting at first. I couldn't believe he was capable of speaking like that—of sounding so worried, so flustered. I could just barely see the brown blur that was the snake in the distance, chasing after a pack of meadowmara. One by one, it snatched them away from the crowd, flinging them into the air and swallowing them whole. And that monster was coming for us.

It was terrifying, even from a distance. I could feel my knees going weak, and my hands had started shaking. I sank to the ground, and so did all the other kids, the runesheep we'd been carrying dropping to the ground between us with a *thud*. I wouldn't have been able to hold it up anyway. Any focus I might have had was gone, my tiny bit of Strengthening Magic along with it. Everyone

had become statues, still as stone, except for Dad. Even Amur and Roy were only managing to stand with the help of their spears, clutching them to keep upright.

That was when Lenn spoke, his voice so clear, it cut through the fossilized scene. "There's no time to waste. I'll deal with the meadowmara, so you handle the big bastard in the back!" Without waiting for Dad to reply, he dashed away, putting some space between himself and our sorry group. Then he waited, one hand on his bow, the other in his quiver.

Dad nodded to Lenn, then rattled off some instructions before he turned and ran too—toward the snake. Terrified, my eyes clung to his retreating figure—I desperately hoped he would somehow be okay.

The meadowmara were getting closer, each one of the rodents as big as a dog. The noise was still awful, and the earth was still rumbling even though a few monsters had already been lost to the snake's appetite. They were so close, but Lenn still wasn't moving. *What are you doing, Lenn?* I wondered. *Is he scared? He said he'd never used his bow in a fight before...* I summoned up my last bit of nerve to try and call out to him, to encourage him—but my mouth was dry, and the sound that came out was barely audible, even to me.

"Lenn..."

He heard it, though. Lenn looked over at me, a fearless grin spreading across his face. He withdrew his hand from his quiver, bringing a finger to his lips with a silent *"Shh!"* Then he turned back toward the meadowmara. Within a few seconds, they'd be close enough to trample us. A quick glance at Dad told me he was closing in on the snake as well.

The next moment, Lenn, breaking out of his still, silent stance, pulled an arrow from his quiver, the movement quick and fluid. Before I could blink, it had left the string. I desperately tried to follow the arrow's arc, but I only barely managed to catch a glimpse of it before it found its target. The arrow struck deep into the meadowmara at the head of the pack, the one that had been closest to us. Caught up in the moment, I nearly shouted with joy—but

before I could catch myself, I was rendered speechless anyway.

Two more of the rodents fell to the ground, skewered by Lenn's second and third arrows—he must have fired them while I'd still been following the first one. I turned my head back in Lenn's direction, and my teary eyes found a sight I'd probably remember for the rest of my life.

Beautiful—there was no other way to describe what I saw. It was like he was dancing, firing arrow after arrow without hesitation at a speed I would have thought was impossible, each one somehow faster than the last. You would think the arrows were being drawn to their prey like magnets.

In just ten seconds, every meadowmara was down, their bodies littering the field. Shocked, I turned back to Lenn, but he was already gone. Bow in hand, he was running toward the Gryetess snake's right side, tracing the perimeter of a circle with the deadly monster at its center.

◆◆◆

Pops began with a powerful sweep of his spear, carving upward from the left and across the scaly body, which kept him slightly farther out of the creature's reach. It wasn't an attack one would use if they were trying to kill the monster in a single blow, which made one thing immediately clear—Pops also thought the beast could finish him off in an instant.

The snake tried to twist out of the way of the spear, but Pops was too quick. With a terrible sound, the beast was sent soaring into the air; Pops had thrown it upward by the sheer strength of his arm.

"Think you can dodge me, huh?!" It had been a risky move for sure, but he'd pulled it off flawlessly. If the snake had avoided the swing, it would have been able to circle around behind him before he'd even finished the stroke, and we'd be in even more trouble than we already were.

Using the precious time Pops's attack had bought me, I frantically tried to evaluate the situation. It had taken me eight seconds to bring down the meadowmara, but shooting at a moving creature

was obviously different from shooting a stationary target, and I hadn't really been able to aim carefully in the first place. As I'd expected, a few of them were still twitching. *Not all dead, then.*





But I'd managed to kill the elementally affined one, at least. If Pops and I could deal with the snake, then Amur and Roy could probably manage to finish off the rest of the rats. I only had five arrows left in my quiver, and I didn't want to waste any more of them on the meadowmara.

"Roy! Amur! Take care of any that are still breathing!" I cried. I had to put my trust in them and their strength.

And then I ran.

While maintaining a healthy distance between myself and the snake, I darted to the right, tracing a counterclockwise path around the side of the beast. There were still about sixty meters between me and my target, but this was the best vantage point if I wanted to achieve my highest priority—making sure the snake couldn't get around behind Pops. I had to do what I could from here to help him get the upper hand. Keeping half an eye on the scattered meadowmara, I ran until I'd reached a spot that gave me a direct shot at the Gryetess snake without putting Pops in the firing line as well, and then I waited anxiously for a chance to help.

Pops himself had quickly noticed my movement. I caught a glimpse of the shock on his face before he returned to the fray, and the tiny adjustments in his movements told me he'd guessed at my plan of attack—those instincts weren't something any old explorer could boast of. *He has to let the snake attack him, even just once—and then I can take it down with a single shot.* That was the plan, anyway.

Then came the chance I'd been waiting for. I'd honed in on one of the beast's oft-repeated movements: when it would pull its head back like a spring, then pounce forward to try and sink its teeth into Pops. That was exactly what it was about to do now. Quicker than ever before, I released the heavy, iron-headed arrow I had at the ready, carving a beautiful tangent through the air—a tangent Pops could see, but not the snake, because it was too busy lunging toward the older man.

Thunk. Even with its iron arrowhead, though, the arrow bounced off the snake's thick skin—which wasn't supposed to happen. The snake snapped toward me, a new target—but that was when Pops

brought up his spear. A single strike, reinforced with Strengthening Magic that would prove fatal. With just a single blow, the head of the Gryetess snake was separated from its body.

Before the head could even hit the ground, I turned my eyes back toward the rest of the group; I loosed a single arrow into the air, sending it flying roughly twenty meters above Po's head. With a screech, a rouvulture dropped from the sky. I'd noticed it circling overhead ever since we'd drained the blood from the runesheep—hard not to notice it, really, given its formidable four-meter wingspan. Rouvultures didn't attack living things, instead snatching up kills made by other creatures in their wicked talons and carrying them far away, never to be seen again. They were smart too—the beast had waited until our battle had reached its climax, aiming to descend on our distracted group while all eyes were on Pops and the snake. But I'd foiled that plan; it hit the dirt with another screech, flailing for a moment before it finally stilled.

We nearly died for those runesheep. As if I'd let you snatch 'em up after everything we just went through.

The second rouvulture was still high above our heads, but it banked sharply to the left and fled upon seeing the skewer I'd made of its brethren.

◆◆◆

Pops ran up to me, an expression of unmistakable amazement written on his face. "You pulled that off like it was nothing, kid..."

"No way—that was just luck, honestly. I only managed to pull it off because you made me the rear guard and told me to keep an eye on the whole area... It's because I was already back here that I ended up being able to help. We'd be dead if it wasn't for you, Pops. See, my hands are shaking..."

I looked down, transfixed by my own trembling hands. The instant the battle had ended, a wave of relief beyond my control had rippled through my body, sending tremors through my arms and hands that I couldn't suppress. *That snake... I couldn't hurt it, even though I was in its blind spot. I didn't even* pierce *it.* If Pops hadn't

been there, it would have been upon me in seconds, and my only choice would have been a point-blank shot through its mouth and a prayer... *I'd probably be dead right now.*

Pops dropped his own gaze to my still-quivering hands and laughed. "Hey, at least you're still moving! It's hard enough to face off with one of them snakes when you're in a position to freeze until it passes you—there ain't a lot of people who could have rushed in to attack it like you did just now, kid. You did good." He sighed, visibly relieved. "We've sure got bad luck, though, I'll tell ya that. It's rare enough you come across one of those bastards up in the forests, let alone in an open area like here where it can see you coming for a mile."

I knew he was right. If it were even remotely common for high-level monsters like Gryetess snakes to pop up in areas like this one, so close to the capital, there wouldn't be all those foraging requests aimed at lower-ranked explorers. But there was still a chance it could happen. If it had been a normal low-rank explorer out here today instead of our group—if it'd just been *me* out here alone today, I'd be dead.

Being an explorer meant understanding that every request you took on could be your last. I realized now that my current strength and abilities weren't going to be enough to live a fun life in this world—not if they couldn't guarantee I'd stay alive at all. I'd been lucky in one respect, at least—lucky enough to have had said realization while Pops had been around to save me. Silently, I sent out a message of gratitude to my lucky stars, my guardian angel, whoever was out there; gratitude that I'd run into Roy and Amur on that fateful day, and gratitude that they'd made me a part of their family.

◆◆◆

After we'd regrouped and taken a moment to calm down, we sorted out our kills for the journey back to Runerelia. All told, we'd be bringing back the two runesheep, one rouvulture, two magic stones from the elementally affined meadowmara, and of course,

the Gryetess snake. The single wagon we'd brought could barely hold just the runesheep and the rouvulture, so Pops would carry the snake's giant carcass, leaving Roy, Amur, and me to protect the group on the journey back.

Amur and Roy had deftly finished off any of the meadowmara I'd only wounded, but the carcasses were heavy, and they had little value as either meat or materials. It was decided that we'd leave all the rodents where they were, only cutting out the magic stones of the two elementally affined specimens. With Pops watching from over my shoulder and explaining the technique to me, I'd used my new Banree knife to cut the two pea-sized, reddish stones out from the hearts of the monsters.

When I'd held the first of the tiny stones in the palm of my hand, a strange, indescribable feeling had washed over me like a powerful wave of energy. The stone itself was nearly worthless, but at the same time, it'd been a valuable reminder: *That's right. I live in a world of magic now.*

Pops and I parted ways with the rest of the group at the entrance to the capital. The others would head back to the house and start processing the runesheep while Pops and I would go to the guild and sell the rest of our spoils. We made quite a sight walking down the street—Pops with the snake's long body coiled over his shoulder like a hose and the detached head under his other arm, and me with the rouvulture slung over my own shoulders. Passing pedestrians stopped in their tracks to stare, and small groups outside shops and restaurants paused their conversations to point and whisper. *Guess we're pretty conspicuous.*

"Lenn! What's up, bro? Hey! Is that a rouvulture? Your kill, Lenn? That's my bro for ya, taking down a C-Rank monster! I just dropped off my own kill at the guild, so I'm free right now! Let me carry it for ya!"

It was Piggy, looking even more hot and sweaty than usual. He jogged up to us, his empty wagon bouncing along behind him.

"Well, look who's got some manners after all," said Pops, impressed.

"I wasn't talkin' to you, geezer!" Piggy spat in reply.

"Huh? You disrespecting my boss?" I said, raising an eyebrow. "You disrespect him, you disrespect the whole Apple Family—get it?"

"What the *hell* is the 'Apple Family,' huh?!"

Thunk.

After a little back-and-forth, and with a new lump on my head, we set off again. Thanks to Piggy—whose real name I still didn't know—we made for a slightly less conspicuous sight for the rest of the journey, since we'd loaded both the snake and the rouvulture into his wagon. He helped us unload once we arrived, and I offered him a few half-hearted words of thanks as he departed.

"No worries, bro!" he said in reply, flashing me a cheerful grin before setting off once again.

I'm starting to think "bro" is one of the only words in his vocabulary...

Saki from Payroll

It was late afternoon when we arrived at the guild, and the processing area was teeming with other explorers dropping off their spoils for the day. This was actually the first time I'd had to come to the processing area. The requests I'd completed over the last two weeks had all been labor-based, like cleaning the gutters on the sides of the main roads or helping out on construction sites, so I'd never had any materials to drop off. And now, all of a sudden, I found myself surrounded by fantastical creatures I'd only ever seen in the *Encyclopedia*, all brought forth by the battle-worn explorers. I could barely control my excitement. *This is amazing!*

The whispers started up again as we made our way into the crowd, once again thanks to the snake carcass coiled around Pops's shoulder.

"Hey, look. Ain't that the Apple's Rynde? Look at the size of that snake! He doesn't go out on requests much anymore, right? You reckon the beast was from around here, then?"

"That's Rynde for ya, though... Who's the kid with the rouvulture, then? Ain't seen his face around here before."

"Idiot. He's gotta be that 'Mad Hound' character who joined up with the Apples recently, yeah? Kid must have shot it down with his bow—well, there's no way a rouvulture woulda got close enough to Rynde for him to have killed it, eh?"

"You think he's the Mad Hound? Looks like a little noble kid to me... Sure, he's got a bow, but there's no way a little brat like him coulda shot down a rouvulture. You'd need crazy aim to hit one of those outta the sky."

"Yeah, but you saw that kid Benza from the Gold Rats, right? He was followin' this kid around like a puppy, carryin' shit for him. From what I heard about the Mad Hound, he only looks all sweet and innocent, but then—bam! You set him off, and he turns into a killing machine. Plus, he's under Rynde's care now, and we all know how much of a pain in the ass Rynde can be. Don't go picking any fights you can't win, yeah?"

How am I still being called the Mad Hound even here in the capital? I wanted to leave that stupid name behind in Crauvia... Also, all I've ever done is politely teach people who looked down on Apple House a lesson! I've never lost my cool or gone on a rampage. I've barely gotten angry at best!

And apparently, the fat kid's name was Benza—a name I was now unlikely to forget for the rest of my life, given that "benza" meant "toilet seat" in my native Japanese. *Not that I really wanted to remember it, anyway.*

Pops seemed to take no notice of the whispers around us, striding intently toward one of the processing counters marked with a "Large" sign above it. Unlike the other counters, this one had almost no line. Given we were in such a developed area, there weren't many requests around here that would require explorers to use this counter to hand over their prey. *Awesome.*

We only had to wait a few minutes until it was our turn to approach the counter. We were greeted by an old woman, the type who gave you the impression she'd been doing this kind of work for decades. She looked around the same age as Pops, maybe a few years younger at most.

"Well now, if it isn't Rynde. Rare for you to show your face

around here," she said before looking over at me. "Kid's with you? I'll handle the rouvulture here for you too. Just pop it up on the counter there."

"I might not show my face 'round here," Pops said with a grin, "but it's not like you didn't get to see it recently, eh, Saki? You, me, and Cher went drinking, what, three weeks ago?" He started unraveling the snake's body from around his arm. "Wasn't part of the plan to go hunting today, not properly, anyway. I was just taking the kids out to snag a couple of runesheep. Came across this bastard on the eastern Rune Plains—well, he came across us, more like. He was chasing a pack of meadowmara down through the forest, and the meadowmara tried to sic him on us instead."

"That's some bad luck," Saki replied with a frown. "Seems like you brought it down pretty easily though, eh? One neat slice through the neck—not like the usual butchered carcasses you drag in here for me. Guess you got the kid to help you with the meadowmara?" Her gaze slid back to me appraisingly. "Not many kids your age could pull a bowstring in those conditions—not without pissing themselves, at least! You're a brave one." She'd grasped the situation immediately, almost as though she'd been there herself.

"Damn right. Woulda been a sorry sight if not for this kid. Listen to this—he shot down twenty mara coming straight for him, and in less than ten seconds all up. Didn't even stop to breathe before he ran over to help me after. He might look like a cute little kid, but he's ruthless with that bow of his."

"It was only fourteen mara, Pops."

"Huh?" Pops squinted at me, looking somewhat annoyed. "Twenty or fourteen, who cares? Don't sweat the small stuff."

"It's not a small difference, though. I wouldn't have been able to take down twenty of them." I'd had many realizations during the last two weeks of archery practice, but I was painfully aware of two facts in particular. One, that increasing my shooting speed—even by just a tenth of a second—would make an incredible difference in situations like these; and two, that increasing said speed was a near-Herculean task.

Saki, chuckling at our exchange, reached over to take the coiled

snake from Pops. In a single, practiced movement, she flung it out to its full length, dropping it neatly on top of the counter between us. She was surprisingly strong for someone whose arms looked like twigs from a long-dead tree. She examined the long body closely.

"This bit here..." She trailed off, her finger tracing a tear in the snake's ironlike skin, precisely where I'd hit it with an arrow. Pinching the torn edge, she plucked out the scale, twirling it between two of her fingers. "What's your name, kid?"

I jumped. "Uh, call me Lenn, please." Even as I said it, I was pulling out my license—I'd have to show it to her either way when it came time for payment. Saki glanced at my license and nodded, seeming to comprehend why I was using an alias. But then she looked at the license again, her brow furrowing.

"You told Cher about this yet?" she said, directing the question at Pops.

"Not yet—no point anyway. He'll wanna see it with his own two eyes, and no doubt it'll happen sooner or later."

Saki chuckled in response. "All right, then. Hey, kid—no, it was Lenn, right? Next time you need to drop anything off, come find me at this counter. I'm here most of the time, but I'll let the others know to expect you if I'm not. It'll make life a little simpler for you, what with your special circumstances and all. Good?"

So Saki is Pops's drinking buddy, along with whoever that Cher guy is? I realized Pops had done me a favor by bringing me along with him. Now I could use the processing area without having to pull out my license—along with my real name—each time, which meant there was a much lower chance anyone would find out I was an Academy student. I still didn't like the idea of receiving any special treatment, but I'd gladly make an exception for this. I nodded at Saki, smiling gratefully.

"That's sorted, then. Let's get on with it." Now it was time for the real point of our visit—processing and appraising the materials. "I'll start with the Gryetess snake. It'll be ten thousand riels for the scales and another five thousand for the brains and meat. The fangs, organs, and all the other bits will come to two thousand all up. As for the rouvulture... It hasn't got an elemental affinity, so it's

not worth all that much. Two hundred and fifty for the feathers for arrows, and five hundred for the meat. And thirty riels for each of the two meadowmara stones." As she spoke, she wrote down each figure on a blank commission slip. "Sign here if you're happy."

I figured the negotiations, if any, were best left up to Pops. I personally had no idea if we were getting a good deal or not.

"I'm not so dumb that I'd complain about your work, Saki," he started, "but isn't that a bit too much for the snake? The scales are one thing, but the rest of it..."

Saki snorted, raising an eyebrow again. "You know as well as I do about the rumors making the rounds lately. Gryetess snake meat is popular anyway, and the market price for the brains has tripled these last few weeks. You can make a mean stamina-recovery elixir outta the brains, and people are fighting to get their hands on 'em. I'd usually only pay for an organ if he had a poison sac, but I've made a connection recently who'll pay for unusual monster organs, so you'll get some money for 'em now."

My hand shot into the air involuntarily. "Uh, those organs... Any chance they taste good?"

Saki laughed. "If they tasted any good, I'd already have a market for them. No, they're tough as all hell and smell like rotting meat even when they're fresh. Nothing a *normal* person would ever consider eating." She winked at me and laughed again, a somewhat wicked smile on her face this time.

Thora. It's definitely Thora. And I'd bet a thousand riels she's already told Saki about me based on that reaction. I sighed. *Guess I'll be finding out how they taste at breakfast in a few days... Lucky me.*

There was still one more thing I wanted to check. I aimed my next question at Pops. "It's your choice either way, Pops, but are you sure it's okay to sell the meat? We don't need it or anything?"

"Nah, we'll be fine. Two runesheep will last us long enough. If we took any more home with us, it'd go bad before we got around to using it. Always better to have money than rotten meat, right?" He grinned, turning back to Saki. "We'll split the money down the middle—half for the boy, half for me."

"Pops, you can't be serious!" I said hurriedly. The rouvulture was one thing, but I'd barely helped with the snake at all, apart from the single arrow I'd fired to distract it. "I don't deserve any payment for something I couldn't kill myself. If anything, I should be paying *you* for saving my life. I get that explorers split profit down the middle unless they decide otherwise beforehand, but I can't accept anything for the snake. If you're not going to take the whole share, then put it toward Apple House instead, at least."

But it was no good. Pops shook his head, glaring at me sternly. "We don't take charity, boy. You want me to kick you out of the co-op?" I froze, struggling to come up with another argument—or any words at all.

Pops laughed. "Calm down, all right? Look, you covered everyone's asses today. So what if you didn't land the killing blow? Doesn't make you any less of a hero. You deserve what you've earned today, so stick your chest out with pride and take it gratefully."

Saki added a chuckle of her own. "That's that, then! Now buzz off. I've got work to do now, thanks to you." And with that, the two of them had sealed the deal—I hadn't had another chance to protest. I still wasn't entirely happy with the situation, but I *was* kind of happy with Pops's praise. *I guess I'll just have to just accept it...*

But now, having accepted my half of the reward, I was a little in awe of the figure. *I know we put our lives on the line and all, but still... Nearly ten thousand riels for just a few hours of work! Maybe I'll splurge a little tonight, get them to add some pumpkin tempura to my noodles—or even some squid? Oh man, what do I pick? This is hard!*

◆◆◆

Pops and I went into the guild, clutching the commission slips Saki had given us. Normally, when you handed over materials that weren't part of a request, you could receive payment or account credit at the processing counter itself. However, the monsters we'd killed today all turned out to be covered under the permanent

requests sponsored by the guild, so we'd have to claim our reward inside instead. As Saki had explained it, Gryetess snakes were dangerous in general, but even more so for the low-ranked explorers who usually took on requests on the Rune Plains, which was where we'd killed it. And rouvultures were a nuisance to explorers given their tendency to steal carcasses from right under a weary hunter's nose. Even the elementally affined meadowmara were covered under a permanent request.

Unfortunately, my trip to the request payment counter was slightly soured by the news that my reward today would also entail a promotion to E-Rank. I tried to refuse the promotion more forcefully this time, claiming no matter how you tried to rationalize it, I was jumping up the ranks far too quickly. The employee at the counter called her superior out from the back room, but it was a lost cause. The boss, an older woman, refused to hear me out, stating I met the requirements to move up a rank—and that as such, the rules stated I had to be promoted.

Pops wasn't on my side either. "I get what you're saying, but the fact is, you're too good to be an F-Rank. Give up and move on to bigger jobs, and leave the little jobs for the people who can't do anything else."

I reluctantly gave in, although I was still annoyed. As an F-Rank, I'd been able to take on any of the smallest requests, but ranking up again meant I couldn't accept anything from the G-Rank request pool anymore. I'd given up this time, but I resolved to pay a visit to Satwa at the main branch—I had little doubt he had something to do with my unusually rapid advancement. If I didn't sort it out soon, I'd be a B-Rank before I knew it.

There was one more thing I realized too. Dio, the C-Rank explorer who'd accompanied me on my trip to the capital, was probably as good with his spear as Pops, who was basically an A-Rank. I couldn't say that for certain, of course—I didn't know much about spears, and I was pretty sure Dio had been going easy on me during our bouts. Pops was probably stronger overall, but I had a feeling Dio was actually better in terms of technique. *I know strength isn't the only thing that matters for going up the ranks, but it's starting to*

seem a little odd. Why was a powerful warrior like Dio just hanging around our backwater little town...?

Intermission: The Phantom Party

"Lenn! What's up, bro? You heading out on an overnight hunt? That's rare for you!"

I was waiting in a little alley not far from the southeastern branch of the Explorer's Guild when Benza, the fat kid from the Gold Rat co-op, showed up out of nowhere.

"What I'm doing isn't any of your business. Don't act like we're friends."

The plan today was to head out with Al and Coco. We were going to use our weekend off of classes to earn a bit of pocket money and take the opportunity to work together for the first time. I wanted to keep working as "Lenn" for as long as I could, avoiding the special treatment I would otherwise receive as an Academy student. I'd probably be found out soon enough, but I could deal with that when the time came.

We'd decided on the plan beforehand. Unlike me, Al and Coco hadn't seen the need to hide their Academy credentials, so if we all showed up at the guild together, I'd stand out like a sore thumb. To avoid running into any suspicion, I'd instructed the two of them to go pick out a request for us while I waited a few blocks away.

"Oh yeah, that's right—I heard you already got promoted to E-Rank! Is that for real?"

I sighed. "Yeah. Remember when I went out with Pops and we came across the Gryetess snake? You helped us carry the carcass back to the guild. Well, I barely helped at all, but they still promoted me anyway. I'm not all that happy about it, actually."

In spite of my obvious displeasure, Benza's face lit up. "Awesome, bro! Man, how strong do ya gotta be to go from G-Rank to E in just a few months?!"

"Don't ask me. I told you a hundred times already, I'm not *trying* to go up any ranks. Can you go away now? Your sweaty face is

pissing me off." I tried to shoo him away, not bothering to mask my annoyance.

Unfortunately, Benza didn't take any notice. "Man, I've been working at it since I was a little kid, and I only just got to E-Rank myself—"

It was too late; just then, Al and Coco came around the corner. Benza's eyes narrowed as he glared at the two newcomers. It was like a switch had been flipped, turning him back into the crude delinquent I'd encountered the first time we'd met.

"Sorry to make you wait, Al—er, Lenn. This a friend of yours?" asked Al, looking at Benza curiously.

"Not a chance. I've never met him before," I replied without a moment's hesitation. I'd hate for them to think Benza, with his sorely lacking manners and rough attitude, was the type of person I liked to hang out with. Benza, for his part, didn't pick up on my attempt to distance myself.

"You kids Apple House's new recruits or somethin'? I'm Benza from the Rats, and I'm Lenn's best bud." He glared at them threateningly. "Now you brats listen up, and listen up good. I know Lenn here's gone up to E-Rank just like that, and you might be thinking clinging to him's gonna help you do the same—but the guild's not the kinda place that hands out promotions to parasites, yeah? So I don't wanna hear anything about you kids getting in his way—get me?" His last words came out like a growl.

I yanked the taller boy down by his shoulder and slapped him on the back of his head. "First of all, we're not good friends—we're not even friends at all. And stop glaring at them, will you? If anyone's a parasite here, it's you and me. These guys are both D-Rank explorers, so *we're* the small fry. They've employed me to help them out on a C-Rank request today. So *now* can you stop bothering us?" I released his shoulder and shoved him away, but I still couldn't get rid of him—Al, kind as always, dropped the curious look he'd been shooting Benza and started to offer him a proper introduction.

"Nice to meet you, Benza! I'm Al. We're not part of the Apple House co-op, but Lenn and I do go back a little." He stuck his right hand out to Benza, grinning with near-palpable self-assurance.

In this world, handshakes were often a way of determining the respective strengths of each party, especially in industries like exploring. When two explorers shook hands, they did it while enhancing their muscles with Strengthening Magic, allowing them to test each other while they exchanged a greeting. Benza took in Al's proffered hand and determined grin, then stuck out his own hand with a satisfied grunt, grasping the other boy's palm firmly. Nothing happened for a second, but then...

"Gah!"

Al chuckled. "You're pretty strong, Benza!" he said, seemingly satisfied.

I guess they're pretty evenly matched in Strengthening Magic. No broken fingers, at least. I hated to admit it, but Benza had already proven himself; he had decent talent for Strengthening Magic. He was crude and a little stupid, to be sure, but he was also fairly determined—for one thing, there was the sheer number of times he'd tried to challenge me for payback after our first meeting. He'd never tried anything underhanded either, no matter how many times I'd beaten him black and blue.

I hadn't expected much out of him after our first encounter, when he'd ground his dirty boot into Roy's face, but apparently, the whole situation had been exacerbated by some heavily embellished lies Idiots One and Two had fed them. In the end, the whole incident had quickly been resolved when the leader of the Gold Rats had heard about it; he'd come over to apologize to Pops on behalf of his idiotic underlings.

Well, he might not be a bad guy, but I still don't want to be friends with him.

I smacked Benza on the head again. "Quit standing around and challenging mages to pissing contests you can't win. By the way, Al's not even the leader of our party today—that would be Coco over here. You don't stand a chance against him either, so don't get any ideas," I warned him, catching an ominous glint in his eye. "Now, for the last time, piss off and leave us alone, all right?"

Coco, hearing his name, lowered his head quickly to avoid meeting Benza's gaze. Coco wasn't the type to avoid mingling with

the lower classes just because of his status as an Academy student, though, as much as it might have seemed that way. To put it bluntly, he was basically a shy otaku, or whatever this world's equivalent was. In other words, he was the complete opposite of the thuggish Benza.

"Wait a minute—mages?" Benza, although briefly shocked, quickly recovered his somewhat unwarranted bluster. "Well, I'm only E-Rank, but I've never lost a fight to any of the D-Rank explorers around here! I've never seen you kids in these parts before, though—are you as good as my bro Lenn in a fight? There's not many people here who could take him on..."

Apparently, fighting prowess was the only way Benza could evaluate where other people stood in his weird version of a social hierarchy. *He's missing a few brain cells, all right...*

"Well, in a fight, Lenn's the strongest of us three. I don't think Al and I could win even if we ganged up on him," murmured Coco, speaking for the first time since he'd rounded the corner.

"Ain't that the truth!" laughed Al.

Benza grinned, his mood visibly improving in an instant. "Shoulda known better than to ask the obvious! Do ya know how many times I've challenged Lenn to throw down? Still never managed to get one hit in, though! Your name was Coco, right? I'll figure out how strong you are, so come and lay one here!" He grinned, slapping himself squarely on his rounded, protruding belly.

He's really enjoying himself, the weirdo. Coco looked panicked, unable to make sense of the unfolding situation. I'd have to help. "Here, like this," I said. Without hesitation, I drew back my left fist and sent it rocketing into Benza's blubber with all my strength. He keeled forward, clutching his stomach in pain, and I followed it up with a right hook across the face for good measure.

Benza was sent flying from the force of the blow; he twisted this way and that like a nightmarish ballerina before finally sliding across the ground. As he gasped for air, he somehow still managed to choke out a few words. "Urgh... Lenn's fist... I missed you..."

"Uh, Benza?! Are you okay?! That was a hard punch!" Al exclaimed, on the verge of rushing toward the collapsed boy.

"Leave him be, Al. He's abnormally solid—like, weirdly so—so he'll be fine. Don't waste your time. Besides, if we don't get going now, we're gonna miss the first carriage." Pulling him by the sleeve, I started to walk.

Al, still looking worried, glanced back over his shoulder, only to see that Benza had already managed to struggle to his feet. "Have a good trip, bro! Be careful out there!" he cried, cheerful as ever.

Al shrugged. Leaving Benza behind, we finally continued on our way.

◆◆◆

We managed to make it in time for the first carriage of the day, and we headed toward Mount Gryetess, to the east of the city. I'd traveled this route more than a few times since my first visit to the mountain with Reed. Mount Gryetess was close enough that you could get there and head back in the span of a day from the southeastern branch, provided you lined up to grab a request first thing in the morning. As well as being conveniently located, it was also abundant in resources, and the area near the base of the mountain was relatively safe for lower-ranked explorers. Well, there was always *some* danger, but it was safer than other areas, at least. Given it was a popular destination for explorers, there was added safety in numbers as well.

It was the weekend, which meant we'd have more company than usual—that would be the explorers who did it as a side job. The lines for the public carriages were so long on the weekends that they'd had to add additional services just to transport the explorers out of the city.

"So what kind of request did we end up with?" I asked Coco. I had completely forgotten to check earlier thanks to the fiasco with Benza.

I'd entrusted Coco with the task of selecting our request for a few reasons, but primarily, it was because of his family's background as the writers and publishers of the *Canardian Encyclopedia of Monsters*; Coco's knowledge of monsters went far beyond what we'd

learned in class. My instructions to him had been simple: *"Pick an interesting request for us—oh, and make it something that tastes good."*

Coco dug the request out of his pocket. "Uh...crabs. We're hunting crabs."

◆◆◆

As it turned out, the request Coco had accepted was a capture-and-retrieval request for blackshock crabs, monsters known for their abnormally strong right claws and pitch-black shells. They were also known to be incredibly tasty.

Twice the size of normal crabs, blackshock crabs were around the size of an adult's outstretched palm. When they snapped their giant claws shut, the loud bang and resulting shock wave would stun their prey, rendering it unable to move. *I think there was an animal that used the same tactic back in my last world... Was it a shrimp, maybe?* On that note, though, the shock waves blackshock crabs generated were only powerful enough to stun the small fish and crustaceans they fed on. A human would only be startled at best.

There was still some danger, however. An inattentive hunter who got his finger caught in one of those wicked claws would lose that finger for life. The crabs' other movements were much slower, fortunately, so prudent caution was all one needed to stay safe and in possession of all their digits.

The reason a relatively safe request like this one had been given such a high ranking had to do with the time of year. The period between late spring and early summer—in other words, now—was when the female blackshocks laid their eggs in the upstream basins and outlets of the Donari River, which ran down the mountain. As every explorer knew, the higher up the mountain you went, the more dangerous the monsters got—the odds an explorer would have a perilous encounter soared at this time of year. Monsters and wild animals alike gathered in the upstream region in anticipation of the egg-carrying blackshocks, which were apparently even more delicious than normal. The request was a C-Rank as a result of that

potential danger, and in exchange for the risk, it offered a substantial reward.

Blackshock capture and retrieval was actually usually a permanent D-Rank request, apparently. But there had been a poor harvest so far this season, and that had led to one of Runerelia's high-class restaurants placing a C-Rank request to ensure they could meet demand. They'd set the purchase price at sixty riels a head—nearly double the usual price—and they'd requested two hundred crabs.

I stared directly at Coco, my expression dead serious. "Do they taste good?"

He nodded vigorously, matching my energy. "I'll never forget the first time I tried one. Not for the rest of my life."

I laughed, pumping my fist. "All right! We're having a crab party tonight, boys!"

"A crab party?" Al replied, confused. "We don't really eat crab much where I'm from, so I don't know what you're talking about. But it does sound fun—let's do it!"

There was a sigh from elsewhere in the shared carriage. A small party of three women, each probably around their mid-twenties, was also geared up for a day of exploring. It seemed like the sigh had come from the short-haired woman in the center. Her light, flexible armor gave me the impression that she was probably the scout of her party.

"Do you kids seriously think you can survive up there with that equipment? You should rethink this before it's too late, for your own sake."

The more heavily armed woman on her right quickly jumped in to rebuke her companion. "Don't meddle, Misha. There's probably a reason they've taken on that request—you don't know why they need the money. Besides, it looks to me like they're pretty capable for their age," she added, her eyes flicking over us quickly. "Even if they are just stupid, at the end of the day, exploring's a job where you get to make your own choices. You're not gonna get anywhere sticking your nose in their decision-making—but you already know that, right?"

Misha fell silent for a moment, but then she quickly shook her head and pointed at me. "But look at him, Lynn. The other two might be all right, but what's *he* wearing? You think he's got any experience after seeing that cheap armor? It looks like it's never been worn! And then he goes on about having a crab party tonight... He's an idiot, no question about it."

An awkward silence fell over the carriage. "Uh..." I started, then paused. "Thanks for your concern, but we're pretty confident we can handle this request—otherwise, we wouldn't have accepted it. Also, is there something wrong with having a crab party?"

Misha sighed again, annoyed. "The crab party's not the problem. The *problem* is that you're planning to have one *tonight*! Have you guys even come up with a plan yet, or a route? Let's say, for argument's sake, that you're more than capable of dealing with the monsters upstream. Even then, if you're hunting for crabs, you'd want to spend today making your way up to the camp halfway up the mountain, then finish the climb the next morning. And *then* you'd hunt the crabs. But if you're planning to have your little crab party tonight, you'd have to climb basically the whole mountain today, capture all your crabs, and somehow set up your own camp before the sun sets—because you'd never get back down in time. So you'd be camping in the middle of the forest, half dead from exhaustion, and you'd still need to take turns keeping watch with all the monsters prowling around. Even an experienced explorer wouldn't come up with a plan that insane."

Al and I locked eyes. It went without saying, but we hadn't decided on a plan of action yet. We didn't have anything planned; we'd only taken this particular request because of the promise of a delicious meal.

"I've got it mostly planned out," mumbled Coco. Looking somewhat bashful, he opened his rucksack and pulled out a map, spreading it open across his knees. As I'd previously discovered, the maps of this world were a little looser with their scaling and accuracy compared to back in Japan, but the areas around the capital were relatively well-documented on account of the many explorers who worked in the area. "If we start off around the old farming village,

we can climb up along Unota Ridge until we get to Hikura Pass. That'll take us until noon, I think. Then we can climb down to the river from the pass and continue climbing along the riverside while we hunt for crabs. After that, we need to make it back down the river to the mid-mountain campsite before it gets dark... Well, that's the plan, anyway..." Coco scratched at the back of his neck awkwardly.





Misha pinched her forehead, looking stressed. "It's impossible. Do you think climbing a mountain is gonna be as easy as walking down the street?"

I wasn't paying much attention, instead studying the map intently. *I have a feeling Reed and I walked at least twice as far when we were foraging back then...* I tilted my head, trying to retrace the path we'd taken.

At that point, the third woman, who was adorned in standard mages' equipment, spoke up for the first time. "Let's leave it there, Misha. We've got ourselves to worry about today; it'll hinder you if you're worrying about these kids instead of our own battles. Everyone learns through hardship, right? We've been through our fair share of struggles too." She turned to us with a polite smile. "If you find yourself in trouble, pull back and change your plan, okay? Just some friendly advice."

They may not be saying it outright, but they're worried about us—even though we're complete strangers. "Thank you for the advice. Truly. If we get into a tough spot, we'll withdraw and rethink our plan," I said, genuinely grateful for both their advice and their concern.

◆◆◆

"There's two more over there, Al!"

"On it!"

I left him to it, seeing that my hands were already full dealing with two raccoon-type monsters that had just burst out of a thicket nearby. I took them down with my bow and dagger while Al captured the blackshock crabs.

It was a little past noon. We'd had a quick lunch of field rations while on the move, and we'd arrived at the spawning ground a little earlier, just as Coco had planned. It hadn't been a particularly strenuous climb thanks to our daily Hill Path Club training and Godolphen's physical strength classes. Coco, who was the slowest member of Class A, had handled the climb with ease—even more so than Al, funny enough. As it turned out, Coco had gained a lot more

experience with slopes and crags back in his hometown, and I realized he had probably been holding himself back a little so we could keep up. Al's magical aptitude was far greater than Coco's, but Coco was the one who excelled out here. *Guess experience counts for more than magical potential out in the field.*

The route he'd outlined for us to take was clearly one he'd put a lot of good thought into as well. We'd stuck to the easiest paths while still making good progress, and we'd circumnavigated most of the thickets that might have housed the deadlier monsters. Anytime we'd come across evidence of monster activity—scratch marks, footprints, tufts of fur, or piles of dung—he'd instantly known what kind of beast had been there, occasionally making adjustments to our route in response. I'd bombarded him with questions, and he'd answered each one carefully, taking time to explain the process and his supplemental knowledge instead of waving it all off as "instincts" or something like that. There was still a lot I could learn from Coco.

After we'd arrived at the spawning ground, we'd split up into different roles. Coco would keep watch and give out orders, and if needed, he would jump in too. I would deal with monsters and other wild animals, and Al was in charge of capturing the blackshocks.

"Lenn!" Coco called out. "It's really hard to tell if a catcoon has an elemental affinity or not, so stay on your guard for a magical attack."

"Got it!" I replied. "Al, there's another crab hiding behind that rock!"

Al swung his wand down, striking the crab on its shell. A cocoon of ice immediately enveloped the blackshock, freezing it in an instant. It was still alive, though—Al's ice magic meant we could put the crabs into a kind of cryosleep. He plucked the frozen crab from the rocky shore and added it to the many others we'd already tossed into one of the cooler bags we'd borrowed from the guild.

"Hey, look!" he shouted. "This fish keeps making some weird slimy bubbles!"

"It's a soapfish," Coco replied, unfazed. "The freshwater ones aren't poisonous, so we don't need to worry about it."

It took us around two hours to fill the two big cooler bags to their bursting points. Satisfied with our haul, we set off back down along

the river and headed for the preestablished camp about halfway down the mountainside.

◆◆◆

Early evening...

The sun had just started to disappear below the western horizon when the three rookies they'd shared a carriage with earlier in the day waltzed into the camp. The central campsite was maintained through the mutual assistance of the explorers who frequented it. It was surrounded by a rudimentary wooden fence to ward off monsters and animals—or, at the very least, to make it more difficult for them to gather there when the campsite was unattended. All in all, it was relatively safe, at least compared to the forest outside.

"Look, Misha—those kids managed to make it after all. Looks like they've been in a fight, though," said Lynn, jerking her chin toward the forest. Although she was still clad in her heavy armor, she didn't seem to be struggling as she set up the medium-sized tent they'd brought with them.

Misha turned where Lynn had indicated. To her surprise, the three boys were striding into the camp with effortless ease, their steps light and their energy seemingly unspent. One of the boys, however—the brown-haired one—had clearly run into some trouble. His once-brand-new leather breastplate was smeared thickly with dark-red blood.

Misha breathed a sigh of relief she hadn't known she was holding in upon seeing their cheerful faces. "Good work, kids. Glad you managed to make it up the mountain before it got dark. You all right? Any injuries?" They would have had to go through some rough country to make it to the campsite if they'd started off from Unota Ridge like they'd said in the carriage. Depending on when they'd abandoned the plan to make it to the top in one day, there was a good chance they'd walked nearly double the standard distance.

"Good evening—Misha, right? Oh, don't worry about the blood; it's not mine. No injuries here!" replied Allen with a smile.

Another unintended sigh of relief slipped between Misha's lips.

“Bet you’re tired, huh? We gathered too much firewood, so we’ll share it with you. Just try and set up your tent before it gets too dark.”

The boys looked at each other, confused. “Er, we’re not too tired, actually...” said Allen. “But thank you. We’ll take you up on your offer. We were planning to get here a little earlier, actually, but we ran into a bloodbear halfway here...” He scratched at his neck, looking annoyed.

Misha and Lynn looked at each other.

“A bloodbear?!”

“We’ve gotta run—now! Before it finds us!”

Their voices echoed around the campsite, drawing everyone’s attention to the three boys.

“Uh, it’s all fine, really... I just kept shooting at it—luckily, one of the arrows got it in the eye, and down it went. Coco tried to teach me how to carve it up, but we didn’t have enough time to let the blood out properly, so I got covered in it...” Allen looked down at his breastplate and grimaced.

“You took down a bloodbear with that tiny shortbow?” Misha shot back, suspicious. “Surely it was a cub, right?” She stopped suddenly, her eyes widening. “In that case, if what you’re saying is true, the mother is probably searching for its cub right now—and following your scent! Where did you kill it?!” She was shouting now, sending waves of tension rippling through the campsite.

“It was a male bear, probably about six or seven years old,” Coco replied calmly, trying to reassure the half-panicked woman. “So there’s no chance it was raising a cub. We ran into it around five kilometers northeast of here, I’d say—up the mountain, in a bamboo grove downstream from where Omojiri Hill meets Hikura Pass.”

For a moment, the camp fell silent as the explorers processed Coco’s explanation—then, they all erupted in laughter.

“Ha! There’s no way three brats like you could take out a fully grown bloodbear with those toy weapons. You must have run into a bambrew bear or something, ha ha. Well, it’s still pretty impressive you took down one o’ those at your age!” The speaker, an older man who, with his full brown beard, looked quite like a bear himself,

started laughing again.

Lynn chuckled too, unable to catch herself, and turned back to the young trio. "Well," she started, her tone tender, "if you ended up in the grove, I guess you really did manage to climb up Unota Ridge, huh? You must have a lot of stamina. Ah, I envy you young kids." She smiled at them warmly. "How about you show me the fur? Then I'll be able to tell you what it was you killed."

Allen shuffled his feet. "Well...our packs were already full, so we couldn't fit the fur in no matter how hard we tried. The only thing we brought back was the magic stone. Besides, the fur ended up with a lot of arrow holes in it, so it was a bit of a waste, really. I wrapped it up in a big leaf and buried it, so hopefully it'll still be there when I go back for it with some more room in my bag." As he spoke, he dug around in his pocket and produced a tennis-ball-sized transparent crystal—the aforementioned magic stone.

A few of the explorers shouted in surprise. "That's a bloodbear stone, all right!"

Misha was shocked. "So you really did kill the bear, and you left the fur behind? What have you got stuffed in there that could be more valuable than a bloodbear pelt?!"

"Uh, crabs? Blackshocks, to be specific. Oh, right! Do you want to join us for dinner? As thanks for the firewood? The request only asked for two hundred, but we got a bit greedy..." Allen trailed off sheepishly. "We've got more than three hundred, I think. Anyone else hungry?" He directed the last question to the campsite in general.

"Hell yeah!" cried the bearlike man from earlier. "I love me some crab! So, you really did bring down a bloodbear with that tiny bow of yours, huh?"

"'Hell yeah'?! Hell *no*, more like!" shouted Misha, frenzied. "These kids rode here on the same carriage as us this morning! And you're telling me they proceeded to climb up to the spawning ground at the head of the river, fill two bags with blackshocks, and make it all the way back here, killing a bloodbear *and* processing it on the way? You can't be serious! The math doesn't add up!"

A strange atmosphere settled over the campsite as everyone

considered Misha's argument. Many of them started nodding in agreement—it *was* impossible.

Moana, the mage of their party, timidly approached Allen, peering into the cooler bags he'd opened at his feet. "It really is full of blackshocks... Both of them. I can't believe it... And they're all frozen too? I didn't think such a powerful cooler bag existed..."

"Al—er, Lenn said to freeze them while they were still alive, so I did. I've got ice affinity, so..."

"But you're still so energetic... I can't begin to imagine how much mana you must have—you managed to freeze three hundred crabs after marching up a mountain, and you're still standing even now..." Moana peered at Al. Although she might have intended that as praise, she looked almost scared, like she had come face-to-face with a ghost.

In response to the steadily growing commotion, most of the other explorers at the camp had formed a loose circle around Allen and his friends. These onlookers were now jumping in with comments of their own.

"Man, you kids must be the strongest party we've had in a long time now!"

"What's your party called?"

"Forget all that! Where'd you leave the bloodbear fur? I'll lend you my pack, so don't leave it out there to go to waste! Look, we'll come with you as protection!"

"Uh..." stammered Allen, looking overwhelmed. "Er, my name's Lenn. Um, thanks for the offer? I'll take you up on it, I guess." With a nod to Al and Coco, Allen and two of the stronger-looking explorers began walking back to the edge of the forest.

"Well, what's your names, then? And what's your party called?" asked one of the other explorers, pressuring Coco and Al for answers.

"I'm...Niall?" replied Coco, looking uncomfortable.

Al was similarly flustered. "Er, uh, my name is Dore. Our party name is... Hey, Lenn! What's our party name?!"

Allen turned back around with a triumphant grin. "We're the Crab Party!"

A brief silence fell once again.

"You guys... You really love crabs too, huh...?" mumbled the bearlike older man.

◆◆◆

"Sorry about earlier," Misha said, looking sheepish. "I kinda underestimated you guys, and I was probably pretty rude."

I paused in my preparation of the stone firepit and turned to face her, smiling. "No, not at all! We're only D- and E-Rank explorers, after all, and we're new to the capital too—we've still got a lot to learn, so we appreciated the advice."

Lynn, joining Misha, snorted with wry amusement at my reply. "Already a high rank at your age, already able to kill a *bloodbear*, and you still reckon you've got 'a lot to learn'? Seriously, I can't even begin to imagine how you were raised—or what you're planning to become..."

Bzzt. Sorry, that information is not available to the public.

"Well, we do realize we're probably better than most kids our age in terms of strength and fighting ability, but that's not all there is to being an explorer, right? You've gotta be prepared and be able to think on your feet, and that only comes with experience. We sure realized that today. Honestly, I was surprised when you asked us about our plan in the carriage this morning... I probably would have just rushed right into things if not for you."

Between the three of us, we were probably strong enough to ensure we'd be relatively safe when working around the capital, at least. But using strength to overcome everything wasn't a particularly fun way of living. Plus, there was still always some risk. This wasn't a video game, where monsters kept to specific areas marked on a map. The inevitable truth was that I still wasn't powerful enough to truly experience everything the life of an explorer had to offer.

Moana giggled. "You're being modest, Lenn. I think soon enough, 'Crab Party' will be the name on everyone's lips."

Grinning, I thumped my chest proudly. "Well, of course!"

◆◆◆

That evening, a grand crab party was held at the mid-mountain campsite.

I demanded we steam the absurdly large right legs of the blackshocks, and everyone was happy to follow my lead. A few explorers lent me the iron pots they'd carried with them on the journey here, and I cooked the crab legs in just a little bit of water until thin tendrils of delicious-smelling steam rose into the air, dispersing over the campsite. We also cracked the crabs' shells in half and tossed them into the larger pots along with some wild mushrooms and vegetables, creating an extravagantly luxurious soup.

Everything was delicious. The plump right legs of the blackshocks dripped with the concentrated flavor of pure crab. The mild flavors added by the vegetables only enhanced the taste of the soup, and the roe we'd scooped out of the shells was bursting with salty flavor. Not to mention, the food was only made better by the company. Sitting around a fire, sharing stories with fellow explorers we'd run into by chance—it was a precious taste of the life I'd been hoping for.

One more thing came out of the request too.

"Lenn! What's up, bro? You're back early!"

"I told you not to talk to me like we're friends," I shot back, glaring. "We finished the request yesterday, so we took the first carriage back this morning."

"What?" Benza looked taken aback. "You finished a C-Rank request just like that? Bro, you're awesome! Do you guys have a party name yet?"

I grinned at him. The previous night, after realizing we were probably in danger of being known as the "Crab Party" forevermore, the three of us had decided on a proper party name. A name that would carry the memories of our first request together, and a name we'd be proud to gather under.

"Our party name is—"

◆◆◆

On that day, a new explorer party, one shrouded in mystery and rumor, was quietly born in the southeastern branch of the Explorer's Guild—a party of rookie explorers who were said to have accumulated high-demand ingredients with ease and shared them unreservedly with fellow explorers up at a certain mid-mountain camp.

Said party would thereafter appear and disappear, taking on requests here and there and vanishing at other times, almost as a ghost would. Rumors of the strange party would gradually spread throughout the capital until almost everyone had heard of them. The phantom party—"Party Knight."

The identities of the members of said party—and their true strength—would remain unclear for a good while after.

Chapter Three: Godolphen's Challenge

Status Update on the Hill Path Club

It'd been close to two months since school had begun. The Hill Path Club, which I'd started up on Godolphen's recommendation, was thriving.

"I told you to run with your upper body, right? Just go home, man!"

"Didn't I tell you to use your head?! You can't handle this. Give up and get out of here!"

"I told you to stop thinking! Piss off and quit!"

"Reed, you're doing great! Amazing!"

"Oy, you! You need to hear the ground's voice with your knees and reply with your feet— Oh, forget it! Just give up!"

As usual, I was dedicated to my job as the club's coach—which primarily meant harassing the other runners with illogical abuse whenever I passed them on the track. My harsh demands had only grown more unreasonable as the days had passed, but even then, no one had dropped out of the club yet, much to my dismay. My goal hadn't been to set up an actual club in the first place, and everyone here had other things they'd be better off focusing on (in my opinion, at least), so it wouldn't have bothered me if everyone had dropped out, forcing the club to shut down. I'd hoped most of them would have come to their senses by now on account of my nonsensical harassment. If they dropped out of their own accord, then they would no longer be within the scope of the challenge Godolphen had established for me. It would be mutually beneficial—they'd escape my bullying, and I'd be closer to my goal. Well, that had been the plan, anyway. Somehow, as my abuse increased, so

did the number of club members.

Three days after Reed had joined the club, he'd approached me after school with several other third-years in tow. "These guys are my friends from 3-A. They heard I'd managed to join the Hill Path Club and begged me for an introduction. I know you'd probably be a little nervous about having to coach your seniors, but they're good kids, and they'll take club practice seriously—you reckon they can join too?"

"We look forward to your instruction!" the three boys stammered in awkward unison, lowering their heads in an attempt at bowing Reed must have taught them. Clumsy, but earnest.

They were third-year students, and from Class A at that. Bowing their heads to a younger kid, especially a bumpkin like me, mustn't have been an easy task. They were probably stewing on the inside.

With that in mind, I quickly accepted their request. Not like I felt like I could have refused anyway, not when Reed had been the one to ask. Anyway, all I had to do was ask them about their goals and give them some advice on form. Then they could just run around without me needing to interact with them. No skin off my back.

Or so I thought, anyway. Two days later, I was approached again, this time by a group of ten second-year students requesting to join.

Can't these guys just go for a run? There's no need to join a club, I thought, annoyed. Conree, an athletic-looking boy, stepped forward to represent the group. "We're gonna graduate next year, and we'll do anything to move up to Class A before then. Please help us out!" The pathetic atmosphere he created with his pleading tone was only exacerbated when he got down on his knees and bowed, a position usually reserved for repenting sinners in this world.

Faced with his desperate passion, I found myself agreeing to their request, still thinking it wasn't going to take up much of my time or energy. I spent my precious afternoon with all of the new recruits, carefully explaining the general premise of the club along with the basic premise of halting one's Strengthening Magic between actions and using that time to compress mana instead. I gave each of them some specific advice too, based on their individual areas of concern. Then I sent them on their way, thinking my job was done.

To my dismay, the requests to join kept coming in the next day and every day thereafter. When I left the classroom the following afternoon, it was to find an ominous line of students waiting for me.

Godolphen's original challenge to me had been to make sure my classmates weren't showing up to morning classes half dead. I was the one who had put forward the condition that I would only be evaluated based on the success of the club's *members*—my intent being to ensure every single member dropped out before the two-month time limit was up.

I now found myself in a sticky situation; I wasn't sure if Godolphen would base my success on just the club members in Class 1-A or the club in its entirety. I'd thought my plan was perfect, but now I was beginning to worry I'd fail, losing my opportunity to be introduced to the Emissive Magic master Godolphen had promised I could meet. Day after day, people approached me with clumsy bows—I still didn't know where they'd learned about my fixation on bowing—begging to be allowed to join the club. Frankly, it was annoying, and I wanted to reject them all when I remembered Godolphen's challenge—but in the end, I accepted each and every one of them into the club. I knew it had taken a lot of self-restraint and determination for the sons and daughters of the most prominent noble families in the kingdom to swallow their respective prides and bow their heads to the third son of a penniless viscount.

That didn't mean I was going to squander my precious time babysitting complete strangers, though. I'd need to enlist some help. I decided to shift the responsibilities onto some of the more prominent members of the main gate team—namely, Leo and Dan, along with Stella, who'd quickly managed to move up from the slower group.

"Leading other people is hard. It's hard for me, and it's gonna be even harder for you guys since you're not even at my level yet. But you learn a lot by being a leader. Since I started coaching you guys, I've realized leading people is also a skill that requires practice to improve." I looked at each of them in turn. "I'm making you guys the vice captains of the Hill Path Club. Take this opportunity and use it.

Leo will be in charge of the third-years, and Dan, you'll take the second-years. Stella will look after the first-years. I'll leave your coaching methods up to you. Six months from now, we'll decide on a club captain out of the three of you, and we'll mix and match your different strategies to come up with the perfect coaching method."

I thought it was a pretty enticing opportunity, all in all—at least, the way I'd phrased it. With this, I could pass all of my work onto the three of them, including the task of dealing with the senior students. Leo and Stella, being quick to rise to a challenge, accepted the offer without hesitation. Only Dan was a little more skeptical. "It feels like you're just trying to avoid doing it yourself..."

Luckily, since Godolphen had already declared he wouldn't interfere in club activities, my word was law, and my plan was quickly implemented despite Dan's slight lack of enthusiasm. *This is a dictatorship in action, my friends.* By the time I'd roped them in, the club had already been approaching one hundred members.

The following day, I left class planning to head to the guild for a quick request. *No, I should probably drop by and see Pops first... Plus, I've been meaning to search for a skilled-but-overlooked legendary blacksmith...*

Mind buzzing with thoughts, I pushed open the classroom door—only to come face-to-face with a group of second-year students from Class A. One boy seemed to be the leader, while the others hung back a little, looking at him expectantly.

"You Allen Rovene?" he asked with a sneer, his expression dripping with unconcealed arrogance. "I'm Rudio von Dialemack, top student in Class 2-A—but I'm sure you knew that already. I've heard about your little 'Hill Path Club,' you know. Seems like a lot of people are signing up. You probably feel so proud of yourself." His haughty tone only intensified the longer he spoke. "To tell you the truth, I've also started up a Strengthening Magic club of my own recently—it's exclusively open to only the best students in the second and third years. With that said, I'd like to make you an offer."

Without waiting for an acknowledgment, Rudio began to explain his unsolicited plan. "We'll consolidate Road to Glory—*my* club—and your little group, forming a magnificent club the likes of which has

never been seen before at the Academy. Our reputation and strength will double, and soon, everyone in the kingdom will know about us. Well? What do you think?" he asked—though it was clearly a rhetorical question. "I have two conditions. First, we'll keep my club's name, Road to Glory. And of course, I'll be in charge of the club—an obvious choice, seeing as how I've been trained in leadership since I could talk. In return, I'll let you continue as the coach, and you can still be responsible for everyone's training and monitoring. It's a good deal, right? Surely, you can see how beneficial it will be for you."

His groupies snickered as he waited for an answer.

Wow. He's really going all out to fit the stupid-noble stereotype, huh? I can't find a single benefit in your offer, dumbass. He'd already wasted thirty seconds of my precious free time, so benefits-wise, I was actually already in the negative.

"I am honored you even deigned to speak with me, Rude. It is with great sadness that I must turn down your kind offer. I would not be skilled enough to teach the esteemed students in your club, let alone come up with training plans that would be to their benefit. No, I wouldn't dream of it!" *There. Turned him down politely—well, politely enough, if he doesn't pick up on what I did to his name.*

"Pft." Unfortunately, my expertly tailored refusal was ruined by a poorly concealed laugh from Fey. I hadn't noticed her sneaking up behind me. Rudio's face turned red, twisting in anger.

"How dare you—do you know what you've just done? You're talking to the heir of a marquess, you know! You think you'll be able to continue your happy little school life after making an enemy of one of the greatest noble families in the kingdom? You're nothing but a country bumpkin!" He was fuming, but compared to the quiet fury of my mother or Godolphen's subtle but dangerous rage, he seemed more like a toddler throwing a tantrum.

I decided any more time spent with Rude would be time wasted. I slipped past him and left without another word. Laughter broke out behind me as I continued down the hallway.

"Looks like negotiations have broken down, huh, Rudio?" giggled someone—probably Fey. I chose to ignore that. Turning back around

would definitely lead to trouble.

◆◆◆

Over the last two months, I'd come up with one more strategy to help me handle the unexpected surge of new members. I'd decided to bring in some managers.

Unlike in Japanese school clubs, the concept of a club manager—someone who would support the members and the coach—was unheard of in this world. As a staunch member of the "Go Straight Home Club" in my past life, at first, I'd actually forgotten about the concept myself—that was, until one morning in the dorm dining hall. Breakfast that morning had been a repeat of the rotten-smelling fish, and as I'd been watching everyone fight desperately to choke it down, a movement had caught my eye. Kate, the girl who'd always reminded me of a student council president, had been jogging around the dining hall, placing glasses of water in front of her grateful friends.

Kate's like, a textbook example of a club manager...

Later the same day, I used my supreme authority as the coach to appoint Kate as the club manager. "A club without a manager is like udon without spring onions on top!" I said. "Looks like it's up to me to teach you the importance of seasonings!"

"'Manager'? What would that entail, in simple terms?" she replied nonchalantly, completely ignoring what I thought had been a beautifully crafted analogy.

It'd been less than three weeks since the club had been formed, and membership had already swelled to nearly a hundred students. I no longer had any idea if any of them were improving or not. Running past someone once in the morning and shouting abuse wasn't enough to check on their progress, as it turned out.

Of course, I couldn't have cared less whether anyone *was* actually improving, but when the time came for me to report back to Godolphen, I was pretty sure *"I don't know, I dumped all the work on the others"* wasn't going to be enough to overcome his challenge. So after I'd promoted Kate, I asked Fey to build a hundred of those

bracelet-like magic tools—just like the one I'd smashed to pieces on the second day of training—to measure everyone's magical output and remaining mana reserves throughout their runs. Of course, I made her cover the cost of them all too.

"Oh, Allen, you really like to abuse me, huh? Don't worry. You'll owe me one for this," she said with a foreboding smile. *Oh well*, I thought. *Can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.*

She already had the prototype for the tool, but I was still impressed when she showed up with a box containing over a hundred of the requested tools just three days after we'd spoken. Despite my issues with Fey, she was the pride and hope of the Dragoon marquesal family, after all.

All that was left to do from there was order the manager to collect and compile the data, with the condensed report dropped off in front of my room on a daily basis. Not being a total slave driver, though, I'd already realized a single person would struggle to complete the work, so I promoted Kate to the position of head manager and instructed her to build up her own team of capable personnel. Kate appointed two managers from each of the three year groups for a total of six junior managers. Of course, all of the managers also participated in the training themselves.

Although I'd only asked Kate to compile and organize the data, she and her team went above and beyond—only to be expected, really, given the managers were students from the bureaucrat course at the prestigious Royal Academy. They'd taken it upon themselves to expand on my initial request, writing up reports that analyzed the current training schedules of the individual members and comparing them with their measurable progress. They were even looking after the physical conditions of each member.





Recently, I'd even stumbled across the management team during a self-organized meeting—they'd been having a heated debate over the best ways to improve the club even more, and they had looked like they were really enjoying themselves. I'd felt a little envious—here was a clichéd scene of youth on full display.

Finally, I was back to where I had wanted to be; I didn't need to worry about the operation of the club in the slightest. Apart from focusing on my own training, the only thing I had to do was shout abuse at the club members as I passed them on the track. Even my insults had started to dwindle, though. With every passing day, the club members seemed more focused on their own goals, each of them seriously considering their own reason for running. Rather than abusing them, I found myself wanting to cheer them on. A small part of me was even enjoying myself. Working together with your school friends toward a common goal of self-improvement—it was one of those integral youthful experiences I'd never had in my previous life.

Spurred on by that feeling, I briefly stopped harassing the others when I passed them each morning, but I quickly found myself cornered by an infuriated Kate. "Allen, I've got dozens of people coming up to me saying you've given up on them. Everyone's progression is stagnating. What do you think you're doing?" In the end, I reluctantly continued to play the part of the demon coach, inwardly cursing the unexpectedly high rate of masochists at the Royal Academy.

That brought us back to the present. Two months had passed since Godolphen had thrown down the gauntlet.

Once again, I burst through the door to the teacher's lounge.

Behind the Scenes: Godolphen's Challenge

"We've figured out why their pace seems to drop in the second half of the course. There's a rocky hill just outside the school walls, about a five-hundred-meter climb. Apparently, the students have implemented the hill into their training, running up it multiple times

in spite of the unsuitable terrain. They each seem to repeat the process a different number of times, but in Allen Rovene's case, he does it ten times each morning."

A few days after Godolphen had established his challenge, he and Musica received a report from Keynes, one of the school custodians. Musica had asked the man to check in on the Hill Path Club during his morning survey of the grounds.

"So essentially, Rovene is running forty-five kilometers every morning, and he still has energy to spare by the time he gets to class..." Musica trailed off, astounded.

"So that's what he's been up to!" Godolphen chuckled, his amusement a stark contrast to Musica's shock. "I did think it unlikely his pace would slow so significantly in the second half of the lap, given his general physical abilities. I assumed something was going on around the back of the school there, and here we have it." He laughed again, seemingly pleased.

"When he said he'd be calling it the Hill Path Club, I thought it was an odd choice. I suppose the main focus of the training is the hill portion of the track, rather than the running itself..." Musica paused. "Should I ask Emmie to install a surveillance device around the area?"

Godolphen thought for a moment before shaking his head. "No, we'll leave it as it is. The students must have some autonomy, after all—a tree will grow alone in the forest just as it will grow in a tended garden. I thought I might have to intervene if the boy was half-hearted in his approach, but it would appear he's put a good deal of thought into his routine." The older man seemed to be in an excellent mood.

"Your students were able to participate in classes this morning, though, were they not? It's obvious most of them are running a shorter distance than they were yesterday. You don't have any issues with such an approach, Sage?" asked Musica warily.

Godolphen's expression darkened. "Of course I do. If the boy believes he can meet the demands of my challenge with such an underhanded scheme, he won't be pleased with the outcome. If passing this test were as simple as lowering the standards, even a

monkey could succeed. But I will not interfere. We will wait and see what he has to say for himself when the time comes." His frown grew even more intense. "If I were in his position, I would push my peers to their breaking points and chase out any but those who could handle the pressure... I don't foresee the boy will have the same idea, however."

Noticing the serious expression on the sage's face, Musica reconsidered the true difficulty of the challenge he'd posed for the young boy. While Allen probably believed he had come up with an easy way out, the sage was not so lenient as to accept a victory claimed by lowering one's standards.

◆◆◆

Around one month later, a bewildered Musica updated the sage on the current status of the Hill Path Club. "The number of members now exceeds *one hundred* students! What in the world could Rovene be thinking?"

"Hmph. Well, I find it highly unlikely the boy has forgotten the condition by which his success will be measured—that is, against the results of *all* club members—given he was the one who insisted on the condition himself. Perhaps he believes he is capable of achieving victory even under the more complicated circumstances. Or otherwise..." Godolphen trailed off, his brow furrowed. "It's unlikely, after seeing just how desperate he was for an introduction to someone who could teach him Emissive Magic, but perhaps... After we received the report about the boy's tutor, Soldo Vineforce, I did find myself wondering if, from the very beginning, his true intention was not to receive an introduction, but instead just a means by which to help his classmates reach their full potential... After all, the very day after I established his challenge, he adjusted everyone's routine in a way that fostered more effective development. One could believe he was already more focused on cultivating their potential than on overcoming the challenge... But perhaps I am overthinking it."

Godolphen shook his head as if to dispel the notion. "Even if that

is the boy's true intention, the challenge remains as I have dictated it—the club members need to be able to run the *complete* course and still participate in morning classes. At the very least, his classmates must be able to meet those demands. I will not recognize his success otherwise."

Poor kid, thought Musica, but she was wise enough not to voice the thought aloud. She knew she had no chance of changing the sage's mind.

"Ms. Musica—a word, if you will." Jeffery, another of the Academy's teachers, approached the group.

"Of course, Jeffery. Is something the matter?"

"Yes, somewhat... In truth, I've received a request from the parents of one of my students in Class 2-D. Apparently, their child has just paid a large sum of money to another student for residential rights in the standard dormitory—without the parents' permission, of course—and they're asking whether the school can insist the transaction be reversed."

Musica and Godolphen exchanged astonished glances.

"What residential rights? You're talking about that run-down old place—wouldn't any student basically have a free pass to move in? And regardless, why would a student from Class D even wish to move *into* the standard dorm in the first place?" asked Musica in reply, confused.

Jeffery looked even more astonished than the other two. "Haven't you heard? Recently, nearly every student has been fighting for the chance to move into the standard dorm! Apparently, there's a fixation among them on throwing away the luxuries of the Noble Dorm and focusing on self-improvement without unnecessary distractions. As a result, it's no longer possible to acquire a room in the standard dorm the normal way."

As Jeffery spoke, Godolphen's mood visibly soared. "Well! What an excellent development, if I do say so myself. I was starting to believe the youth of recent years had little understanding of how blessed they truly are. I've seen many a graduate enroll in the Royal Order only to struggle desperately with the rough conditions during basic training... But to hear they are not only seeking out a simpler

life, but they're going so far as to pay for it?" He shook his head, smiling warmly. "Perhaps there is some hope for the future after all."

Musica sighed. "As an educator, I'm impressed by their determination, of course...but as a member of the board of directors, we cannot ignore the situation if parents are starting to show concern. How much did he pay for the room?"

"Er...two million riels, I believe. The parents did mention they would struggle to continue managing their region should the sale not be canceled."

Both Musica's and Godolphen's eyes widened to near-comical extents at the tremendous figure. "Two... Two *million* riels?!" Godolphen stammered. "Musica, what are the living conditions at the standard dorm like nowadays? Back when I enrolled in the Academy, it was before Class E students were allowed to live in the Noble Dorm, regardless of whether they could foot the bill or not. At the time, I couldn't afford to rent a nicer room out in the city, so I worked myself to the bone trying to move out of Class E and that cramped kennel of a room." He paused for a moment, his eyes unfocused, as though he were looking at something the other two couldn't see. "Back in those days, there was only a single bath—and the students would use it at the same time... Imagine it! Bathing together like animals in the greatest city in the kingdom... It's utterly implausible to think a student would throw away such a large sum to willingly live in such conditions."

Musica rushed over to a cabinet and began flicking through the documents until she found the necessary information. "Well...in the fifty years since you were a student...there's not a single record of any improvements being made to the standard dorm, nor any renovations... In fact, the only maintenance has been to fix a few leaks. After all, the dorm is left in its current condition as a way of encouraging students to improve their grades enough to move up a class level, or at the very least to drive them to earn enough to pay for board in the Noble Dorm. I imagine the place hasn't changed at all since you were there, Sage. Indeed, even the dorm matron remains the same—Thora Cendrillion, the renowned researcher, is still looking after the place."

"What?" replied a stunned Godolphen. "I'll acknowledge her research has merit, but the way she used to treat us—we were no more than test subjects for her experiments, and she certainly had a screw loose. I can't believe she's still around—she must be nearly ninety years old by now. She's really still in charge of the dorm?"

Jeffery slapped a fist into his palm, the mention of Thora sparking a memory. "That's right! Apparently, the matron's special breakfast menu is part of the reason everyone is fighting for a room there. I'm surprised you haven't heard about this, Sage Godolphen. After all, this whole situation started when your student, Rovene, moved into the dorm and brought the whole of Class 1-A over with him. Plus, all the students currently living in the standard dorm are also members of the Hill Path Club—aren't you the club adviser?"

For once, Godolphen the Indomitable found himself rendered speechless.

Pass or Fail

It had been exactly two months since Godolphen had set down his challenge.

"Pardon me for the intrusion!" a voice cried, and Allen Rovene strode into the teacher's lounge. He took a few steps, then dropped into a perfect thirty-degree bow. The strange custom of his, once a bewildering spectacle, had already become a familiar sight to the teachers. Everyone was now aware the boy even performed the strange ritual during his training each morning, bowing to the main gate before and after a run, and even repeating the motion before he started dashing up the rocky hill.

Incidentally, Allen himself wasn't all that serious about showing respect to one's training grounds—he'd actually started the habit on a whim, remembering the envy he'd felt back in his past life whenever he'd seen the baseball club bow before entering the field or the judo team bow before stepping onto the mats. Deciding the practice was another of those quintessential youthful experiences, he'd started doing the same.

He hadn’t explained the habit to any of the other club members, however. When asked, he would simply reply it was a quirk of his, looking annoyed—and yet, for a simple quirk, it was strange that he made an explicit effort to bow every single day. The other members had begun mirroring the movement, and before long, the habit had spread throughout the whole club.

After the incident between Allen and Rudio von Dialemack, the students’ collective perception of the importance of bowing had only intensified. After hearing reports of what had happened that day, in addition to what they’d experienced during club practice, many of the prodigious students of the Royal Academy had begun to conclude that Allen Rovene, despite his many wild actions, was a stickler for proper etiquette. Allen, of course, would deny such an accusation if they were to ask him about it, given the wild, outlaw-like picture he was trying to paint of himself, but at the end of the day, the etiquette-is-everything attitude that had been drilled into him while he’d worked at a Japanese company meant their conclusion wasn’t far off the mark.

Soon after, the prevalent opinion among the students had become that a keen understanding of the practice of bowing was a requirement to join the Hill Path Club, and an etiquette club had even been formed in response. As the days had passed, bowing had become a common sight around the Academy, even during classes and lunch.

Incidentally, Allen, much to his displeasure, had been appointed the honorary captain of said etiquette club. He’d thought the whole thing was ridiculous, but since the request had come from one of Reed’s friends, a 3-A student named Tyra, he’d found it too hard to refuse.

Back in the present, Allen rose from his bow and strode through the room, making a beeline toward Godolphen and Musica.

◆◆◆

“‘Pardon me for the intrusion’ indeed... I’ve heard many things about your penchant for proper etiquette recently, Rovene. I assume

this is more of Soldo Vineforce's teachings, hmm? *Pardon* me, you say... What am I to pardon you for? Is entering the teacher's lounge some kind of crime?" Godolphen's tone implied he was genuinely curious, but of course, I didn't know the answer to his question. It was just something we'd done in Japan.

I took a shot in the dark. "Well, it's a gesture of respect when entering a room occupied by your superiors. Of course, that *usually* isn't an action that needs to be pardoned, but by entering the room, there's every possibility I may have interrupted important conversations between my esteemed teachers—or perhaps my presence might have forced them to quickly hide documents not meant for a student's eyes. My crime, as you put it, is daring to enter the room while knowing my intrusion might cause trouble for my superiors. In that sense, the phrase 'pardon me for the intrusion' carries both an apology and a feeling of gratitude... At least, that's what Soldo taught me, anyway."

"And all of that is going through your head when you enter a room?" Ms. Musica asked in disbelief. "Surely such excessive concern makes your life difficult, no?"

"Oh, no. You don't have to think it through every time you enter a room, for instance. What's important is that you practice etiquette until you can use phrases like those automatically, without having to think about it—just like practicing basic combat stances in swordplay, right?" *Man, I'm good at this! Especially considering I had such a poor way with words in my last life.*

"I see. Well, I suppose if one were to acquire an etiquette 'stance,' as you put it, then conscious decisions of polite behavior could indeed become unnecessary..." Godolphen murmured, half lost in thought. "I would very much like to meet Soldo Vineforce at some point. Unfortunately, he firmly rejected our offer that he join us at the Academy as a fellow teacher. Could you persuade him to reconsider, Rovene?"

I shook my head. Of course, I didn't plan on asking him anyway, but even if I did, there was no way Soldo would want to come here.

"Unfortunately, I have no intention of interfering with Soldo's choices. Each man must live his life the way he chooses to. Besides,

if Soldo himself has turned down your offer, then I have no chance of convincing him otherwise. He's simply too stubborn. But that's not why I'm here today." I locked eyes with Godolphen. "It's been exactly two months since I petitioned you for an introduction. What's your decision? Pass or fail?"

"Hmph." Godolphen didn't break my gaze, his steely eyes boring into my own. "Tell me the truth, boy. Right from the start, you reduced the course length for nearly all of your classmates. Am I wrong? You must have known I wouldn't recognize any successes won through such an underhanded tactic. So why did you do it?"

I'd been prepared for this. I stood tall, my voice brimming with confidence. "Because it was, in my opinion, the most optimal way for everyone to get stronger."

Godolphen's eyes narrowed as he took in my reply, and then—he shook his head.

"You've failed, Allen Rovene."

Wait, seriously?

"If I had been in your shoes and as desperate as you were for an introduction, I would have stopped at nothing to get what I wanted. Even if that meant cutting off my friends if they couldn't keep up, just to ensure those who remained were only those who had what it took to secure my victory." His gaze was cold, his tone biting. "I have no time to squander on milksops who claim they 'tried their best.' No, the only thing that matters is *results*. Frankly, I'm disappointed in you, Allen Rovene."

A chilling silence fell over the room. Ms. Musica, who was sitting next to Godolphen, tensed up. I paid it no mind. I was too furious with the geezer in front of me to pay attention to anything else.

◆◆◆

"Oh, you tried *your* best*? That's loser talk, you hear me?! Cut the crap! What I need is* results*, get it? Results!"* It had been a favorite saying of my old boss in the sales department back at my company in Japan. He'd always set quotas that were impossible to meet, screaming at us whenever we failed to achieve them. It'd always

been about results. Get the results. Of course, he'd never offered us any *advice* on how to achieve those impossible numbers. He'd been a classic example of a toxic leader. He wouldn't have cared if we'd betrayed our customers' trust or broken any laws as long as he got his precious results. Obviously, his desired tactics would have caused trouble for the department in the long run, but he hadn't cared—he'd known by the time any consequences came, he would have long been promoted or transferred to another branch. And given my habit of doing things by the book, I'd been the favorite target for his scorn and ridicule. I had despised the man.

Right now, I felt like he was right here, his presence overlapping with Godolphen's. *There's no way this stubborn old fool is gonna change his mind, right? In that case...*

If I hadn't overcome his challenge, I was at least going to go down fighting. My frustrations from my last life, my irritation at his stupid challenge—the old geezer was going to bear the brunt of them *all*.

I burst into maniacal laughter. "Ha ha ha... Mwa ha ha ha!"

Godolphen's eyes narrowed in suspicion, and I caught his gaze. "Disappointed, you said?" My voice echoed through the silent room. "No. I'm disappointed in *you*, Godolphen."

I heard someone gasp, but it was quickly muffled. Silence fell once more; a heavy, ominous silence.

◆◆◆

"You're not fit to call yourself a teacher, Godolphen."

Caught off guard by the sheer contempt in my tone, the old man's face flushed with rage. "The youth of today are sorely lacking in respect," he snarled, rising from his seat. His hands shot out, and he grabbed me by the collar. "Repeat that, Rovene—if you so wish to test me."

Quiet fury reverberated in his words, but Godolphen's empty threats no longer scared me. His reaction told me everything I needed to know: If he'd gotten this angry when a mere child had pointed it out, it meant the remark had cut him deeply. He feared

what I was saying was true.

Ms. Musica shot to her feet, probably to attempt to intervene, but I ignored her completely.

"You've got it all wrong, Godolphen. You still think I'm the one who failed your assignment?" I snorted derisively. "Nah. *You're* the one who failed here."

Godolphen's face softened almost imperceptibly, his anger temporarily abated by confusion. "What do you mean, boy?"

"You don't remember what you said at orientation?" I sneered. "The king sent you here to draw out our potential, to make us into assets. And you're telling me I should have abandoned my friends, only training those who could keep up? What a joke. Do you think *you* could explain that to the king? That you pushed everyone to their breaking points, losing precious assets left, right, and center? You think you could stand tall and tell him you abandoned nearly everyone except those elite few? Answer me, Godolphen!" I was shouting now, grabbing the old man's collar the same way he had mine.





Ms. Musica cried out, no doubt in disbelief at my treatment of a man hailed as one of the kingdom's finest, but I was utterly indifferent. If I couldn't even grab my teacher by his collar, could I ever really walk the outlaw path of my dreams?

Godolphen's face twisted; I'd hit the bull's-eye with my scornful accusations. Obstinately, he still tried to defend himself, his voice coming as a low growl. "You cannot twist this to suit your whims, boy. Yes, in my position, I don't have the option of separating the wheat from the chaff. But you are not in my position. This challenge was intended to measure *your* ability. You needed to show me how far you were willing to go. Not far enough, obviously."

Yep, here it comes: my awful boss's pet saying. "We're not talking about me here! We're talking about you!" I loathed people like him, people who put themselves on a pedestal and condemned the masses, thinking themselves untouchable. A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. "How far I was willing to go, huh? Don't make me laugh, Godolphen. Let me ask you something. What do you think the *real* purpose of the Hill Path Club is?"

The old man fell silent—only to be expected. *I'd be more surprised if he* could *answer, seeing as how I'm making shit up as I go.*

"I'm sure you at least grasp that part of our training involves running up a hill, right? But the club's not called the 'Hill Running Club' or the 'Hill Track Club.' You're the club adviser, Godolphen. Why do you think we're called the Hill *Path* Club?" I pressed him, adding a polite reminder that he was, in fact, the club's adviser.

Godolphen's fire had dampened now, his speech softening to a low murmur. "I... I made it clear from the beginning I wouldn't get involved in how the club was run, correct?"

What a stale excuse. "I don't care how you do it, just get me results"—you're no different from him. People who are meant to lead others can't just throw their responsibilities away willy-nilly.

I snorted. "I couldn't care less if you were involved in how the club is run, honestly. It's better this way; it lets the members develop a greater sense of autonomy, self-discipline. But there's a difference between not involving yourself and not understanding the

first thing about the club. Face it, Godolphen—you can dress up the facts with your fancy words, but the truth is, all you've done is shove all the work onto someone else. Let me guess—you're one of those people who think 'a tree will grow alone in the forest just as it will grow in a tended garden' or something, right? You know what I think of that phrase?" I let my disdain color my voice. "It's used by people who can't think for themselves."

Godolphen stepped back, dropping my collar. I did the same. He was still glaring at me, perhaps even more severely than before, but he remained silent, letting me double down on my attack. "This probably won't make any sense to you, seeing as how you don't know the first thing about the club, but I'll explain it anyway. Like I said back when we started up the club, the 'Path' in the name is the path we take through life. If the club's purpose were just to refine our magic or build our stamina, there wouldn't be any point giving it such a fancy name, right? No, what we're doing every morning is training not only our bodies and our technique, but our *spirit*—we're developing the *determination* to continue fighting, even in the most adverse circumstances. I'm not stupid, Godolphen. If all I'd wanted to do was pass your challenge, I know it would have been far easier to leave people behind when they couldn't keep up. Besides, I'm not a nice enough person to waste my time helping those who can't commit themselves to the process. When I started the club, I was prepared for people to quit. I tested them, thinking the less determined ones would give up. I abused them with ridiculous demands and illogical advice...but no one broke. No one gave in." I paused, my gaze unwavering. "They kept running, pushing themselves to get better every day, acknowledging their inadequacies and their mistakes. They were *desperate* to surpass themselves. And you think it's fair to say I wasn't willing to go far enough just because I wasn't willing to chase them out of the club? Ridiculous."

Godolphen remained silent, as did the rest of our observers. "Godolphen von Vanquish—an excellent knight, there's no question about that. Probably a decent person too. But you're not a good teacher. The responsibility of nurturing others, of developing them—

you're not taking it seriously. You don't even attempt to grasp what's happening in the club you're advising. You put all the onus onto those you're meant to be leading, challenging them as to whether or not they'll abandon their friends for a reward? It's just as I said, Godolphen—you're not fit to be a teacher."

Take that, old boss! Telling off Godolphen had been one thing, but I'd also managed to get out all those words I'd always wanted to throw into my boss's face in my past life. I'd killed two birds with one stone, and I felt fantastic for it.

The last smidgen of fury was gone from Godolphen's expression. Suddenly, he seemed more like the usual Godolphen, the harmless grandfather we encountered in class each day. He sighed. "I understand what you're saying, Rovene. Like I said, I personally would have cast off those I didn't need in order to succeed—but perhaps you are right in saying there *was* another way..."

Tch. Crotchety old bastard. Is he trying to lure me into a false sense of security, or is he just a sore loser? Just admit you've lost, man.

"You said earlier that my purpose in coming to the Academy was to raise the standards of my students, to help them fulfill their true potentials. Those were my orders from His Majesty the King; you were entirely correct. So, as I understand it"—Godolphen paused for a moment, looking at me thoughtfully—"instead of tackling my challenge to you haphazardly, you approached it in a way that aligned with *my* purpose at this Academy—am I correct?"

Obviously. In any workplace, it was almost a given that a leader who set impossible expectations for their team was usually someone who barely understood what results they were actually seeking. When you worked for people like that, being able to figure out what they really wanted—even when they didn't know it themselves—was an indispensable skill. If you couldn't do that, then work became an endless, dismal loop; whenever deadlines drew near, your boss would pop out of the woodwork and abuse you, screaming, *"This isn't what I asked for! Start again!"* It was something I'd learned for myself—not from a book, for once, but from countless painful experiences.

"Spare me the obvious, Godolphen. When a client asks you to do something, figuring out what they're actually asking for is the first rule of marketing," I responded, plagiarizing the line from a dodgy marketing consultant who'd delivered a lecture to us during company orientation.

"Marketing?" replied Godolphen, confused. But he was smiling now, cloaked again in his hapless grandfather disguise. "Well, if that's the case...could you tell me more, perhaps? Explain it to this senile failure of a teacher—just how did you approach this assignment? Your club has over a hundred members now, according to recent reports. Only the disciple of the great Soldo Vineforce could hope to coach such a great number of students, no? Or perhaps... You lecture me, Rovene, as though you have achieved greatness—but did you not simply let anyone and everyone into the club, thinking that assembling a small army would be enough to impress me? Not caring if anyone dropped out, nor if they improved?" He smiled at me good-naturedly, as though he were gently reproaching a toddler.

Oh, I can tell he's just boiling on the inside. How does it feel getting lectured by a child, geezer? He might have been smiling, but I could see the vein throbbing in his forehead. He was angry.

I slipped a hand into my satchel, retrieving the thick sheaf of paper—a report Kate and the other managers had compiled on my request. Then I dropped it onto the nearby table with a *thunk*.

◆◆◆

Ms. Musica quickly snatched up the report and thumbed through the pages with a practiced hand. Her eyes widened with each line they flicked over. It was only natural she'd be surprised, though. I myself had been astonished at the thoroughness of the reports I'd received recently.

Finally, she glanced over at Godolphen. "It's data on all the club members... All the details on their progress are right here. And not only that—it's got the focus areas for each and every person, along with strategies to improve those weak areas...estimations around

their future development... There's even detailed analyses of their health and daily routines. According to this, there are thirteen students in Class 1-A who've already achieved the standards you requested of Allen Rovene. I daresay the rest of your class will be able to achieve the same given another month or two. It's an astounding rate of progression, Sage."

Godolphen's eyebrow twitched, but he remained silent. Instead, Ms. Musica began to question me. "Allen, not only are you coaching the Hill Path Club, but you've also started up the Emissive Magic Research Club, not to mention the Geography Club and the Magical Craftsmanship Club. Furthermore, you're the honorary captain of the Etiquette Club. On your days off, you spend your time working as an explorer, and in just over a month, you've already progressed from G-Rank to E. How did you find the time to complete such a detailed analysis as well? Are you getting enough sleep?"

I'd started up the Emissive Magic Research Club as a way to fill any spare time I found myself with, and I'd installed Al as the captain—obviously, leaving him in charge of all the work. All I had to do was show up if I had the time. I'd done the same thing when I'd started up the Geography Club as a way of learning more about the continent of Rondene, where the Kingdom of Yugria was situated. I'd made Coco the captain of that one.

To me, geography was a subject that boasted endless possibilities—particularly in a fantasy world like this one. Maps could be used for more than just showing the relative locations of different towns and cities. They could reveal the distribution of different monsters, animals, and plants, and they could show differences in elevation and terrain. They could indicate various natural resources, like rivers and springs, and through that, provide information crucial to agriculture and industry. Geography could be utilized as a tool to figure out so much more—temperatures, rainfall distribution, even history—using maps as a starting point. But most of the maps I'd come across so far were but a crude mockery of what I knew they could be, barely telling me anything I wanted to know. One day, Coco and I had gotten overly enthusiastic while discussing the above points; spurred on by our passion, one thing had led to another, and

we'd ended up founding the Geography Club the very same day.

As for the Magical Craftsmanship Club...I was entirely to blame for that one. After the initial request I'd made of Fey for the data collection bracelets, I'd piled on my demands. Tools to make the Hill Path Club more effective. Various instruments to be used by the Geography Club. Things to make the dorm more livable based on appliances from my past life. I'd asked Fey to develop so many tools—obviously leaving her to both figure out how they would work and fund the whole endeavor—that eventually, I'd started to feel a little guilty, so I had suggested we formalize her work as a club activity. She'd have access to a small amount of funding—plus, it gave me an excuse as to why she was constantly making tools for my benefit. This way, it was just fostering cross-club cooperation. My role was limited to coming up with ideas, as I'd shoved any responsibility for managing the club onto Fey. In return, Fey maintained ownership rights for all the tools she was designing.

Also, my rapid progression at the Explorer's Guild was *contrary* to my wishes. Suspicious of how quickly I was going up the ranks, I'd demanded a breakdown of my promotions from the old lady managing the southeastern branch, but she'd flatly refused to explain the reasons behind it at all, just repeating "rules are rules" or other nonsense like that. I'd gone to the main branch too, since my unwanted progression was definitely Satwa's doing, but he'd pretended to be out. *Anyway, back to the topic at hand...*

"I didn't do everything by myself, of course. In fact, I've barely done anything. The club's managers, led by Kate, compiled all the data for me. All I did was establish the original role of 'manager.' Whatever's in the report is based on what the managers decided was necessary information for optimal improvement. I didn't specify anything—everything they decided to measure was based on their own intuition and ideas."

I had to be honest about the fact that I hadn't accomplished everything solely through my own efforts. I turned back to Godolphen, meeting his unwavering stare with one of my own. "How about taking a look for yourself? I know this report might be a little more lenient than what you're used to—data compiled by experts in

the field, I imagine—but personally, I'm amazed by how advanced their analysis has become in such a short time. Of course, maybe I should have expected as much from the kingdom's finest students. Either way, you can tell it's not a half-assed job; they didn't do it just because I asked them to. You can see their enthusiasm in each and every word."

I sighed, then continued. "Forget about your challenge. But I do want you to at least have a look at the report and see how much effort everyone has put in. If you can't set aside your fixation on results for a minute and just look at the progress, then you really *have* failed as a teacher." I let the remark sit for a moment before continuing. "By the way, I said earlier that I had no intention of influencing Soldo either way on coming to the Academy—but I've changed my mind. I'll tell him never to come here. It'd just be a waste of his time."

With that, I turned to leave. I meant what I'd said about Soldo. Sure, he probably wasn't as impressive as I'd made him out to be, but his passion as an educator was genuine. Even if it were just for a conversation, it would be a waste of his time to come here if said conversation partner was as unsuited to teaching as Godolphen was. Another thought struck me, and I turned back to Ms. Musica. "Also, I'm resigning as coach of the Hill Path Club as of today. Please let me know if there's any paperwork I need to fill out later."

"What?" she gasped. "You can't! You built up such an enormous group so quickly—if you leave them now, there'll be chaos!"

Now, she's *a proper teacher. Thinking about the impact it'll have on the students first and foremost.*

"I'm sorry, but that's not my problem anymore. I said it before—this was never really my challenge. It was his. I know I was spouting a lot of self-important stuff earlier, but to be honest, I'm not interested in leadership in the slightest. I don't think I'm good enough to teach anyone else. The only reason I agreed to go along with it was to get an introduction to someone who could teach me Emissive Magic. Everything I did was for the sake of that goal—implementing the managers, getting everyone fired up about finding their own purpose, all of it."

I shrugged my shoulders, sighing. "By the way, I'm not even the one coming up with the training plans anymore. Leo, Dan, and Stella are in charge of the three year groups, and they're already developing and tweaking the training plans based on their own observations. In a few months, they'll choose an overall captain from among themselves and condense their individual plans into a single cohesive one. So I'm pretty sure they'll be fine without me. The Hill Path Club isn't so fragile as to fall apart just because I'm gone."

Ms. Musica fell silent once again, and I turned to leave once more—but then, finally, Godolphen opened his mouth for the first time since I'd dropped the report in front of him. "Wait, Rovene. I wish to check the report for myself."

A few minutes passed as he carefully perused the report. Suddenly—and much to my surprise—a broad smile spread across his wrinkled face. "It's quite a haphazard report, as you said," he started, "but I can certainly sense their enthusiasm in the words. It's a fine report, Rovene." He paused, his fingers trailing over one of the paragraphs. "Indeed, there is a clear difference in the strategies used by each of the three year groups. Fascinating, really, to see how the peculiarities of your three classmates are reflected in the plans they've each developed. You can clearly tell how each of them has approached the challenge of teaching others—a challenge to which, of course, there is no one right answer." He smiled at me, and I grinned in response—well, perhaps it was a little closer to a sneer than a grin.

"Throughout my career, I firmly believed strictness and discipline were the cornerstones of effective leadership," Godolphen continued. "I thought those who couldn't keep up were destined for irrelevance. But perhaps you are correct, Rovene... Indeed, I have not been taking my responsibility to nurture others seriously."

I was a little shocked, to be honest. I hadn't actually thought a man in Godolphen's position would ever be able to admit fault—certainly not after being lectured by a *student* of all people. It was the first moment I had truly held respect for Godolphen.

"I think your kind of approach is also necessary sometimes, *Master* Godolphen," I replied, addressing him respectfully for the first

time since I'd entered the room. "If you hold their hands too much, there are some lessons they just can't be taught—I'd imagine you've experienced that for yourself, Master. But fixating on that singular approach is a little naive, especially for someone who wants to teach children. Always...you always, *always* have to be pushing yourself to figure out what's best for your students. That's what I learned from the best teacher in the world, Soldo Vineforce."

There was only truth in those words. I'd often bemoaned how serious Soldo was, but he had been an excellent teacher. He hadn't given up on me for all those years before my awakening when I'd been a terrible student, and he'd always given me a chance to share my opinion. What I respected most about him, though, was that he'd always done what he thought was best for my education, never appearing disheartened by my lack of interest or progress.

"Now, the situation in the standard dormitory—is that also one of your schemes?" Godolphen asked, stroking his beard.

"They all decided to move in on their own, and they did so before I'd even heard about it. It has nothing to do with me, really," I replied with an annoyed tone, unable to control my sour expression.

Godolphen's eyes fluttered shut for a brief moment as he sank into thought. Then, suddenly, they snapped open, meeting my own with firm resolve.

"I have reconsidered my decision, Allen Rovene, and I must offer you an apology. As a teacher, I still have much to learn. You have passed my challenge—but I must insist that you rescind your resignation as the coach of the Hill Path Club. Is this acceptable?"

This stubborn old man's really gonna go back on his decision so easily? And even apologize to a student? Crotchety geezer...

"I can live with that... And I'd like to apologize too, Master Godolphen. For my earlier rudeness."

I hadn't completely achieved my pseudorevenge on my old boss, but I reluctantly accepted this was probably the best I was going to get. I had to let go of it.

Ms. Musica sighed in relief. "Thank goodness..." she murmured. "I thought that might have turned out far worse..."

"What, a little disagreement like this one? Soldo and I would get

into worse arguments on a daily basis back home," I said with a grin, turning back to Godolphen. "Honestly, bad luck for you to end up in charge of a little brat like me. You're just gonna have to get used to it."

Godolphen chuckled in response, his mood seemingly improving by the second. "On the contrary, I believe my luck has been excellent. Through meeting you, I have been exposed to the great mind of Soldo Vineforce, however indirectly. To me, that is good fortune indeed. However"—he suddenly raised an eyebrow at me—"what was it you said? 'I'm not interested in leadership in the slightest'? You're a poor liar, Rovene!" He started chuckling again.

It was the truth, though...

◆◆◆

Allen had just left the teacher's lounge. Musica crumpled onto the sofa, spent.

"I'm exhausted... Tell me, Sage—how much of that was the truth, and how much was just you acting?"

Godolphen was beaming. "None of it was a farce, my dear Musica. Well, I might have tried to infuriate the boy just a little, just to try and force him to reveal his true thoughts. But I must have more to learn about being a teacher indeed, to find myself unable to counter the harsh lecturing of a mere child!" His genial laughter echoed around the room.

"But in the end, everything turned out exactly the way you'd planned it, no? In fact, you're the only real winner out of all this," Musica replied, sighing deeply. "Well, the important thing is everything worked out peacefully. But you remember what he said, about leaving them to do everything themselves? It's very similar to what we learned about Soldo Vineforce's methods, in the end... They're two peas in a pod."

◆◆◆

Godolphen the Indomitable had established a months-long, near-

impossible challenge for Allen Rovene, only to fail him; Allen, in turn, had lectured Godolphen so harshly that the older man had found himself apologizing and overturning his own decision. It was only natural that within three days, whispers of the nigh-unbelievable confrontation could be heard in every corner of the capital city.

In particular, there were three people who, upon hearing said rumors, responded not with astonishment, but with raucous laughter.

Explorer's Guild, Main Branch:

"Did you hear about it?! The old fool got thrashed so soundly by the brat, he ended up groveling in apology! Satwa! What's the kid's rank now?"

"Let's see... He's made it up to E already," replied Satwa. "As you demanded, his hidden evaluation was set as A-Rank the day he registered, so he's moving up a rank each time he completes a suitable request—one demonstrating his true ability. He'll be at C-Rank soon enough, and then you can start nominating him for specific requests. Actually, he tried to visit me once—I assume to complain about his rapid advancement—but I pretended to be out."

Cher grinned. "I mean, he took out that horned rabbit like it was nothing, so I don't think his abilities are gonna hold him back, yeah? Move him up a rank every time he plucks a single weed!"

The Royal Palace:

The man laughed wildly, unable to restrain himself. "Well, when I heard you'd been soundly defeated by a twelve-year-old boy, I couldn't help but want to find out more... So that's what happened, then. He sounds like an intriguing child," he said, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye.

"I'm ashamed, in truth," replied Godolphen, although he was smiling. "I was not aware just how closely I was clinging to my habits from back in the Order until the boy pointed it out. Well, there is no one way to be an educator, so if I had desired to do so, I'm sure I could have rebutted his arguments quite smoothly. However, while I was leading my students in my own way, he had already refined them all into a formidable group of capable assets. Soundly defeated indeed, as you put it."

"Hmm..." replied the first man thoughtfully. "It does sound like the boy has quite an unusual way of thinking, though. Whether in the Order or in a school, isn't it quite normal to push those under your leadership to their very limits, even if some break in the process? Perhaps this is the influence of the rumored tutor at work... Or otherwise, the child has a unique sensitivity the rest of us lack... Very well. I will write to the commander as you request. However, if I continue to hear as many rumors about this boy as I have recently, I will soon need to meet him for myself, this 'Allen Rovene'..."

From that moment onward, the name "Allen Rovene" was firmly cemented in the mind of the king.

Royal Order, the Runerelian Central Garrison:

"Well, if it isn't the sage. You know, I heard that ill-mannered brat scolded you until you were crying. I told you all he had a twisted personality! Ha!" Dew's crude laughter echoed through the room.

"Indeed," replied Godolphen. "But I daresay I deserved it. In any case, since the boy asked for an introduction to you should he pass the challenge, I thought it necessary to force him into a position where he would show me what he was truly capable of—out of consideration for your limited time, naturally. But as you've heard, he conquered the challenge, and he reprimanded me quite thoroughly in the process." Godolphen smiled, a peculiar twinkle in his eyes. "That being the case, I look forward to your cooperation."

Dew's laughter died suddenly, as though an invisible hand had clamped over his mouth. "You're messing with me, right? Do you know how much work I've got on my hands right now?! And you think I'm gonna babysit that little brat? You're joking, right? I refuse. No way."

Godolphen made a shocked expression. "Really? I thought you would have jumped at the chance... Oh well. I asked the king to write to the commander, informing them of the situation..."

Godolphen trailed off as a knight burst through the door and rushed toward Dew. "Captain! You've got orders, sir!"

"You... You're playing dirty, old man!"

Intermission: If It’s Not Love…

A few days had passed since Allen had cleared Godolphen’s challenge, and as usual, Jewelry Reverence was making her way toward the main gate. Classes had just finished, and she knew one of her family’s many cars would already be waiting. Unlike the large vehicle she’d requested for the group’s trip to Singlord, today’s car was a smaller—but still stylish—sedan type.

“Good afternoon, Sebas,” she said, sliding into the back seat. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

“Of course, my lady.”

Jewel was a busy girl. Incredibly so. Recently, her time had been primarily occupied with the intense studying necessary to keep up with the Royal Academy’s classes.

The Reverence family was one of only nine marquesal families in the whole of the kingdom, and Jewel was the first Reverence to have been admitted to Class A in over a century. The pressure on her shoulders was enormous. The last member of the Reverence family who’d been able to claim the glory of Class A was Jewel’s great-great-grandmother. Four generations had passed since then, and a dozen or so other children had confronted the examinations, including Jewel’s siblings—but only four had passed, and of those, only Jewel had been admitted to Class A. Considering over one hundred hopefuls presented themselves on the exam day for each available seat in the school, the Reverence success rate was one the marquesal family prided itself on. It was very rare for a child to have not only exceptional academic talent, but to also possess the physical abilities and magical aptitude the examination demanded.

Naturally, a family as notable as the Reverences had a large number of branch families under their command. It would be impossible for them to govern the many cities and towns within the region alone, let alone maintain their private army and Noble College. There were countless institutions in a marquess’s territory, each of which needed close leadership and management.

Including the branch and vassal families, there were over one thousand noble families within the Reverence region—each of them

with well-educated, talented children. Additionally, there were thousands of commoner children throughout the region, most of them well educated in their own rights thanks to the excellent preparatory schools funded by the Reverences.

Each and every single one of those families had celebrated Jewel's admission into Class A. The significance of having a Reverence in Class A was not lost on any within the region, given how much influence the family already wielded in the kingdom. Naturally, being demoted at any point throughout her time at the Academy would be inexcusable.

Jewel's academic progress and physical abilities were strictly supervised by a large team of the best private tutors. She was safe for the moment, but if for whatever reason her grades *did* fall—even just slightly—Jewel knew the freedoms she currently enjoyed would be snatched away, every moment of her schedule tightly monitored from then on. So no matter how busy she was, letting her grades drop was not an option.

"Your first engagement today is to attend the general meeting of the Reverence Youth Association, although you'll only have to show your face and exchange a few greetings. We'll depart before the meeting starts in order to make it to the opening ceremony for the Seventh Street Bridge, hosted by Duke Glaster. Now, you've received inquiries from many of the vassal families about your experiences at the Royal Academy, and in particular about the state of affairs in Class A. I've postponed many invitations on your behalf in light of your busy schedule, but we won't be able to delay them for much longer. With efficiency in mind, I've arranged for a series of dinners between yourself and several petitioners at the same time. Today's guests include three counts and one of the more influential viscounts." Sebas paused. "Your father has also expressed he will drop by the dinner when he becomes available, and he has requested you wait for his arrival before sharing any information about *him*. Anything else you wish to share prior to your father's arrival has been left to your discretion. All of tonight's attendees are current heads of their respective families, and you will have met them all before, but I have compiled a list for your convenience."

Jewel flicked through the thick stack of paper. A quick scan was enough to reveal that Sebas had organized around three dinners per week for the next three months. She'd be meeting with representatives from over one hundred vassal families. Though annoyed at the new development, Jewel swallowed her words of complaint—Sebas would have gone through a lot of trouble to organize the schedule. Prioritizing the more influential families first, ensuring representatives from different cliques weren't invited to the same dinner, arranging all the private rooms at various restaurants—Jewel could only begin to imagine how much effort had gone into the plans.

In another world, if Sebas ever had the chance to encounter a Japanese couple fretting over the seating chart for their wedding, he'd just laugh to himself.

"Thank you, Sebas. I suppose information is always the most valuable commodity at this time of year, right after the entrance examinations. Even more so this year, with everyone desperate to learn more about Allen."

Thoughts of her mysterious new classmate sprang up in her mind, and a soft giggle escaped Jewel's lips. The plain-faced boy had often intruded on her thoughts recently, and she herself was unsure why. The clothes he'd worn on their outing the other day had been so tacky and boorish, he might as well have worn a sign reading, *"Fresh from the countryside."* Of anything he could have chosen, he'd given himself the fake name *Pork*, and he had rendered the poor assistant manager speechless when he'd loudly declared his pitiful budget. A normal noble would have either flaunted his wealth—one of the standard weapons of the aristocracy—or otherwise kept his financial situation a secret, but Allen had done neither. He'd almost seemed *proud* of his poverty.

Jewel had met many handsome boys in her lifetime, all sons of wealthy noble families, but she'd never felt the slightest romantic interest in any of them. Her only concern had ever been whether or not they had any value as allies of the Reverence marquesal family, and if so, to what extent she should interact with them. Her feelings toward *him* were not of the romantic kind either, naturally.

For someone who bore the weight of the Reverence family's future, love was never an option.

If, hypothetically, she weren't shouldering said burden, Jewel thought she might have viewed Allen as more than just a brilliant classmate. Fey had once said it felt like Allen lived in a different dimension than the rest of them, that he saw everything in a way they couldn't fathom. Would that strange, detached outlook of his still have drawn her in?

"The family scouts investigated all your new classmates upon your admission, as is customary, but they couldn't unearth anything about him at all—much to their disgrace." Sebas frowned, clearly displeased with the result. He himself was from a branch family, and he had headed the family's private intelligence team before becoming Jewel's personal steward. His prior role had been one of the most respected—and most coveted—positions within the Reverence internal administration, but when Jewel's mana core had finished developing and it had been determined she had near-certain odds of admission into Class A, he'd been handpicked as her steward, tasked with supporting her both openly and behind the scenes.

Jewel laughed. "Well, I can't fault them for not finding much. The Rovenes fall under the jurisdiction of the Dragoon family, and even *they* didn't know anything about him, except that he had a minuscule chance of admission into Class *E*. I feel quite sorry for all the scouts from every family—the day the results came out, it must have come as a great shock. I can only imagine the mayhem Allen's appearance would have caused."

Sebas returned her grin with a wry smile of his own. "Indeed, he's turned into quite a headache for the intelligence team. However, I've received two pieces of information I think you'd like to hear. The first is regarding his activities as an explorer. As I told you previously, we discovered he joined Apple House, an insignificant cooperative associated with the southeastern branch. However, the cooperative's reputation has been steadily improving recently, allegedly owing to a new member known as 'Mad Hound Lenn.' According to our sources, he doesn't look very intimidating, but contrarily, he's incredibly

strong. He's built up a bit of a reputation by suppressing some of the wilder youths from other cooperatives based at the same branch. Of course, we can't be sure the 'Mad Hound Lenn' and Allen are one and the same, but based on the similarities between the names and the other information we've discovered, we're almost certain they are indeed the same person."

Jewel tilted her head, puzzled. "The 'Mad Hound,' you say... It doesn't sound like the Allen I know. Perhaps just another of his fanciful notions?"

Sebas nodded. "The scouts are still trying to determine the origin of the name. As for the other information...rumors, dubious though they are, have reached us concerning Allen and Sage Godolphen. Allegedly, the sage gave the boy a most difficult challenge over the course of several months, and when the time came to judge whether he'd succeeded, the sage determined Allen had failed. The rumors do not end there, however. Apparently, the boy grabbed the sage by the collar and scolded him so thoroughly, he overturned his decision and allowed the boy to pass. Do you have any idea what 'challenge' the rumors might be referring to, my lady?"

While Sebas spoke, a faint smile played on Jewel's lips. "No, I'm afraid I don't. In truth, I find the rumor a little *too* hard to believe. The situation itself is one thing, but it's also suspicious that news of a private challenge from the Academy could leak to the public so easily, especially with how closely monitored everything has become recently."

In fact, many rumors concerning Allen had been circulating around the capital as of late, the majority of them lacking an ounce of truth. No wonder everyone's private intelligence teams had been exhausted recently.

"I had the same suspicion at first, my lady. However, we traced the rumor back to several teachers from the Academy, so it is highly credible to say the least. Our best conjecture is that the sage prevented Allen and the teachers from talking about the challenge until it was concluded, then *purposefully* leaked the information between himself and the others. It is hard to imagine the leak was unintentional—not when the sage himself was involved. You really

haven’t the faintest idea what the challenge could have been?”

Jewel, much to her surprise, found herself rendered speechless. She could tell from Sebas’s expression that he considered the rumors factual.

She would never know this, but in reality, Godolphen had never imposed a gag order on the details of the challenge. Allen, not wanting to put any additional pressure on his classmates and the other club members on account of a personal challenge, had simply kept it to himself. The other teachers at the Royal Academy were sensible enough to know not to share a student’s private information with the world at large, but after witnessing the shocking scene in the teacher’s lounge, they’d inadvertently let snippets of the event slip to those outside the Academy walls.

Quickly but methodically, Jewel sorted through the information in her head. “The only thing that comes to mind is that it could have been related to the Hill Path Club. Everyone who joined the club did so voluntarily, so I’m not sure how he’d have been able to shape it into a pass-or-fail challenge... At the start, I thought of it as no more than an oddly named club with activities based on Allen’s whims, but it’s turned out to be a tremendous mechanism for developing everyone’s capabilities. The three vice captains all have different strategies, and the managers like to test unusual new methods with unnerving frequency, but the club is a very effective organization.” Another smile tugged at her lips, more evident than before. She’d started to find it amusing how often Allen’s actions exceeded the limits of her imagination. She’d been praised as a prodigy since she could walk; there weren’t many others her age who could surprise her, but here he was.

Sebas nodded. “Assuming the rumors hold weight, I can’t begin to imagine how the general perception of him will soar in the near future. Until now, the only information anyone has been able to verify is that he’s quite skilled in Strengthening Magic. But now everyone will know of his leadership skills, his ability to push others into realizing their full potentials, and that he’s courageous enough to face off with Sage Godolphen in a heated debate—and win. The Dialemack family will be forced to retract the somewhat adversarial

opinion they've had of him recently, and the other higher noble families will start making their own moves. It wouldn't be out of the question for the royal family to make a claim on the boy either."

Mixed, confusing emotions swirled around in Jewel's chest like a whirlpool. On one hand, she felt a strange pride that the boy she'd deemed promising was already exceeding her expectations at an unthinkable speed. On the other hand, the foreboding sense that Allen might slip out of her reach was uncomfortable, making her feel like she should lock him away in a deep mountain castle only she knew the location of...

The thought froze in Jewel's mind, and she smiled bitterly. *When did I become so possessive?* she wondered. *It's like I'm in love with him or something.*

Sebas smiled to himself as he noticed Jewel's expression in the mirror; her usual poker face was instead an open book. He cleared his throat, making her jump slightly. "After dinner, you'll be training in holy magic at the cathedral. Archbishop Dolittle has expressed he is looking forward to instructing you today once again."

Jewel's mood soured in an instant.

◆◆◆

The cathedral served as both the primary place of worship for Neosteritism, the foremost religion in Yugria, and as the location of Jewel's regular holy magic training.

Affinity for holy magic was incredibly rare. Only one person in five thousand could claim any affinity, although holy magic wielders did appear more frequently in the Reverence family than in any other. Just being born with the affinity granted one a warm reception from the Church, who would also provide said wielders with financial security and free training. Jewel's affinity had been discovered nearly immediately after her ninth birthday, when her mana core had just started to develop. She'd received basic magical training until her tenth birthday, at which point she'd moved to the Reverence's secondary estate in the capital to begin her education in holy magic.

Her primary teacher was Archbishop Dolittle—a lewd, unpleasant

man altogether unsuited for the clergy, in her opinion. The more her body had developed, the worse his salacious gazes had become, almost as if he were trying to undress her with his eyes.

Dolittle hailed from the Sterite Theocracy, a small religious nation elsewhere on the continent of Rondene. He'd been appointed as an archbishop at just thirty-six and dispatched to the cathedral in Runerelia. Popular opinion indicated that Dolittle was well on track to become the future pope, and when Jewel had first heard that he'd put himself forward as a candidate to be her future spouse, she'd sunk into despair—not in public, of course, but in her private chambers.

That despair, as well as any potential of an engagement, was no longer a concern. Jewel's capacity for magic had quickly exceeded anyone's expectations. As it currently stood, her magical aptitude level was set to surpass 10,000 in the near future—a figure nearly identical to that possessed by her distant relative Sally Reverence upon her own admission to Class A 120 years prior. Sally had also shared Jewel's affinity for holy magic, with a talent for Restorative Magic in particular that had led to her being widely hailed among the people as "a miracle from the heavens." There was little doubt Jewel would be capable of achieving similar acclaim—after all, there weren't many others who could pride themselves on possessing an affinity held by one in five thousand people *and* a magical aptitude level found in just one person out of a hundred thousand others. Sally had left behind a legacy of countless achievements and charitable acts, and despite having never joined the Church, she had been conferred with the title of saint after her death.

Saint Sally Reverence, responsible for propelling the Reverence family toward their current unparalleled fame and prosperity—and Jewel, often praised as her reincarnation. It had quickly been decided that an archbishop with only a *chance* at becoming pope was not a suitable marriage candidate for such an exceptional woman.

When Dolittle had first encountered Jewel, he'd been tempted primarily by the idea of having the influential Reverence family at his back when the time came to stake his claim for the papal title. At the

time, he'd thought securing an engagement with the girl would be child's play. Although he wasn't cruel, he'd made it clear he was seeking nothing but a political marriage, brazen about his intention to continue seeing other women after the two were wed.

But Jewel had grown.

Her magical aptitude had swelled, of course, but that wasn't all. As she'd prepared to enter the Royal Academy, she'd lost the childish naivete so common among girls from the nobility. Her strong resolve had become unreservedly evident, and her proficiency in holy magic had advanced faster than anyone had thought possible. Dolittle had quickly realized just how much he had underestimated the young girl's potential. If she truly had both the talent and the potential of the saint...then he, as her husband, would have the title of Pope within his grasp. Her body had matured at the same tremendous rate as her mana core, and the once-childish frame he had previously dismissed was now taking on the curves of the women he usually preferred. Dolittle, feeling like a prize catch was slipping between his fingers, had grown more obsessed, his lecherous gaze sticking to the girl like glue. Jewel's only solace was that the public nature of his position meant he could do little more than stare at her, although his insistence on the two of them meeting *alone*—always accompanied by some excuse or another—had amplified Jewel's disgust toward the man.

Once, Jewel had summoned up every last scrap of her courage and petitioned her parents for a change of instructor. After explaining her reasons, her father—Marquess Reverence—had thought for a moment, but ultimately, he had shaken his head. "It's impossible, Jewel. There are not many within the kingdom with the capability to teach you in the first place, and there's no doubt Dolittle possesses some of the finest talent for holy magic in the world. Remember, Jewel—what are our family's words? 'Dauntless and Decisive.' It's unbecoming of a Reverence to run and hide from their problems. And finally"—he paused here, returning Jewel's gaze with a steady stare of his own—"if you run away from a man like that, he'll never stop chasing you. By dismissing him as your instructor, you would lose the little control you do have over the

situation." Her mother had been glaring at the marquess throughout his speech, but her expression softened when she heard the last reason, and she nodded in agreement.

Suddenly, the marquess grinned. "Besides, once you're admitted to the Academy, I'm sure we can drum up some rumors concerning yourself and a suitable boy of your choosing—although I daresay any boy who manages to gain admission to the Royal Academy would be suitable. What about the Seizinger boy? He's quite a handsome fellow. You know, my great-grandmother apparently used to say a woman was worth nothing if she couldn't snare a man, no matter how talented she was otherwise—or something along those lines, anyway. We Yugrians might not give much weight to romantic gossip, but a clergyman from the Sterite Theocracy couldn't consider taking a wife if there was even a hint of a scandal about her—even if those rumors concerned events long past."

Her mother scoffed. "Really? I didn't realize the Yugrian elite considered themselves above romantic gossip, considering I hear a new rumor about you nearly every time I leave the house! In that case, maybe I should throw my hat in the ring. Jewel and I can *both* become disreputable women together."

"You've got it wrong, Dolly!" cried her father, suddenly panicking. "My meeting with Parfait was simply a discussion about—"

"Parfait?! I was talking about the supposedly *lively* dinner date with Gina I heard about just earlier today!"

"Er—"

Jewel rolled her eyes. *This is going to take a while.*

◆◆◆

"Sebas—if we *were* to circulate rumors about me and a boy, what would you think of picking Allen as my alleged partner?" Jewel asked, thinking of the naive boy who'd never so much as shown an interest in women—the complete opposite of the vulgar archbishop.

Sebas chuckled to himself upon hearing the question. It was far from the first time she'd asked it. He glanced in the mirror, noting the unusually hesitant look on Jewel's face. It was rare she'd let her

emotions show; she usually masked them behind an expression that invoked the family motto—"Dauntless and Decisive."

"Well, my lady," he started, choosing his words carefully, "because of your quick thinking in calling me to chauffeur, I was able to observe the boy more closely during your outing to Singlord. If I were to speak frankly, my first impression of him was that he was no more than a naive country boy, ignorant to the ways of the world and lacking in common courtesy. Even if there was no doubt about his magical ability, I didn't agree he was a suitable match for the jewel of the Reverence family. Whenever you asked for my opinion before, I told you it was not my place to make such a decision, but..." Sebas sighed. "After learning about the situation between Allen and the sage, I realized the limitations of my ability to judge the characters of others. Rather than it not being my decision to make, I am not *capable* of making it; I am unable to truly understand what the boy is capable of—though I believe you might be able to succeed where I have failed. Such is my current opinion."

Another glance in the mirror revealed Jewel's expression had brightened instantly. "Oh, dear... Just how are you planning to surprise me next, Allen?" She giggled. "The fact that he joined Apple House is certainly information exclusive to the Reverences for now, at least, thanks to our scouts. Please ask them to find out whatever they can regarding Lenn the part-time explorer. It might seem like he's simply doing charitable work for an orphanage or trying to tame some of the more mischievous youths, and while that *might* truly be the case—just him acting on his impulses, as per usual—I don't believe it's the full story. No, I'm sure he's working toward something that ordinary minds like yours and mine cannot begin to comprehend..."

Jewel trailed off momentarily, her mind racing. "It will be a while before I can participate in any work, but I'd like to register as an explorer too. I cannot afford to sit on my hands and wait around because I lack some critical qualification or another—not at such a critical stage of the game."

The usual spark had returned to his lady's eyes. Sebas breathed a quiet sigh of relief, but he was unable to soothe the nervous lump in

his throat. With her morning club activities and the unexpected move to the standard dormitory, Jewel's schedule was already nearing its limit. And if she intended to add exploring work to the mix...well, that would push it beyond the breaking point—as well as Sebas himself, who was charged with attempting to manage said schedule. But he couldn't voice that concern now, not when he'd just declared he'd support Jewel's decision. No, he'd have to hold his tongue.

"Understood, my lady. I will make the arrangements. I intend to support your first love in whatever small way I can."

"L... Love? My feelings toward Allen are not as fickle an emotion as *love*! Certainly, there is something more than *friendship* in what I feel about him...although I'm unable to put it into words... But I can assure you that *I*, Jewelry Reverence, am only working in the best interest of my family, as I have always done!"

Jewel's cheeks had reddened, her tone lacking its usual elegance as she scrambled to deny Sebas's accusation—looking, for all the world, like any other young girl caught in the throes of her magical, bewildering first crush.

Intermission: So It's Love, So What?

After school in the Royal Academy, just a few days after the examinations...

Feyreun von Dragoon left the class, heading not to the Noble Dorm she'd recently moved into, but to the Runerelian estate of Marquess Dragoon. Initially, she hadn't planned to return to the estate until the weekend. She and the marquess—her grandmother, Melia Dragoon—had decided Fey's time would be best spent in the Noble Dorm, forging connections with her peers and gaining an accurate impression of their abilities.

That morning, however, she'd received a letter from Melia instructing her to visit the residence the very same evening, as some time had opened up in her schedule. The marquess, expressing a desire to hear about the conditions at the Academy sooner rather

than later, had apparently organized a dinner to be attended by Fey, the marquess herself, and some of the other important Dragoons.

The Royal Academy entrance exams had just concluded, and the spring social season was in full swing, so Fey knew there was no way a vacancy could have appeared in the marquess's schedule—not unless she had organized one herself. And that meant there was something her grandmother was so eager to hear about, she'd willingly absent herself from another event to do so.

Needless to say, Fey knew what that *something* was already.

◆◆◆

"Fey, dearest, I'm glad you could make it. I would congratulate you on getting into Class A, but it's not really surprising now, is it? Not when I've deemed you worthy of inheriting my 'von' at your tender age. I'm still proud of you, though," said Melia with a broad smile, seemingly in an excellent mood as she waved Fey over to the seat across from her own. One glance at the pale-faced steward standing behind her grandmother, however, was enough for Fey to infer that said excellent mood would be short-lived. The upper echelons of the Dragoon family already occupied the remaining seats. They too congratulated Fey on her admission, although the nervous quivers in their voices dampened the praise a little. Fey returned her grandmother's grin as she dropped inelegantly into the seat opposite hers, situated at the frontmost edge of the table.

The seat between them—the seat at the head of the table, and Fey's rightful position—was left empty.

Fey had been bestowed with the 'von' marking her as the head of the family prior to her admission to the Academy, which allowed her to benefit from the prestige and security such a title indicated. However, her grandmother still held the title of marquess, and she would continue to do so until either her death, or until she submitted the necessary petition to the king for the title to be passed along to Fey. So while Fey technically was the head of the family, the formidable Dragoon Region was still ruled by the even more formidable Melia Dragoon, just as it had been for several decades.

Everyone in the kingdom knew of Melia Dragoon—or, as she was called in hushed whispers or behind closed doors, *the empress*. Fey might have been the head of the family, but the idea of her taking her rightful seat—and thereby declaring herself superior to her grandmother—was a thought that filled all with dread. Instead, they sat opposite one another, the seating arrangement painting a vivid picture of the delicate power balance between the two women.

"Thank you, Grandmother..." Fey giggled suddenly, unable to keep up the pretense. "You're in a really bad mood again, aren't you?"

Melia's smile vanished instantly, giving way to a piercingly sour glare. "Of course I am! All eyes across the kingdom are on the Royal Academy, and some kid no one's ever heard of shows up from *our* region and takes the top grade in the physical exam. And it doesn't end there; then he goes and forces the staff to overturn their ruling concerning his probable misconduct in not one, but *four* subjects! Everyone's asking about him—'Who is he? Why have you been keeping him a secret?' Do you know how much humiliation I've faced over the past few days?! But in fact, *you* knew about him." There was something lethal in the marquess's stare now. "Or so I've heard. You've met this Allen Rovene before. Let's see how you can explain your lapse of judgment, Fey. Why didn't you inform me of him before now?!" She punctuated the last word by striking the table with her fist.

Everyone in the room shrunk back, cowering from the sheer force of the marquess's words—everyone except Fey. Still smiling, she met her grandmother's terrifying gaze. "I apologize, Grandmother. In truth, I only happened across him on the train from Dragreid, but I wasn't sure he'd make it through the exams, let alone into Class A..." Fey proceeded to explain everything that had happened the day she'd first met Allen.

She'd wandered across him practicing with his sword in the middle of the night. Realizing he was the younger brother of her idol, Roseria Rovene, she'd decided to wait for the right moment to try and strike up a conversation with him—but that moment had never come. The boy's stamina and focus were astounding, and he'd shown no signs of slowing down, so she'd decided to try and

measure his magical aptitude with the tool she'd taken along on a whim. His magical manipulation had been astonishing, but his aptitude itself wasn't anything impressive—not for an Academy hopeful. Then there was the strange, elusive conversation they'd had toward the end—and the look in his eyes as he'd spoken, a gaze full of conviction and confidence.

She'd felt sure he would pass, but after asking Sera for a report on the boy, she'd been informed his academic results indicated otherwise; at best, he might have been able to claw his way into Class E. So Fey had decided to wait and see—if he did manage to get into the Academy, she could figure out his true potential and then report back to the marquess should it prove necessary.

Fey's report reached its end, and the tension flooding the room lifted slightly as Melia nodded. "So that was the extent of it... But I'm not entirely convinced, Fey. I've received detailed reports from Parley concerning your interactions with Rovene during orientation, *including* that you deemed it prudent to endorse the boy as a representative of the Dragoon family. Did you not think it a poor decision, putting our reputation at stake for a boy you barely know?"

Melia peered into Fey's eyes as though searching for a glimpse of the girl's true motive, hidden somewhere deep inside. Fey smiled in turn—not an insincere smile like the one she'd worn until now, but a true smile, one befitting a young girl. Then, she laughed.

"Well, Grandmother, I *am* a twelve-year-old girl, after all—isn't it only natural I'd fall in love with such a wonderful boy?"

"L... Love?" Melia repeated, surprise evident in her tone. This was *Fey* they were talking about—her granddaughter, the girl who'd used her talent alone to claw her way into the spotlight after her parents had lost all their influence on the ferocious battlefield of family politics. Fey, who had an extraordinary talent for magical craftsmanship—and who had matured far too quickly as a result of the attention she'd received for it, lamentable though it was. The idea that her Fey could be in love...and with a boy her own age at that...

Giggling at the sight of how dumbstruck her grandmother had become, Fey leaned back, idly brushing her hair to one side. "The

Rovene family falls under our jurisdiction, after all. I couldn't afford to lose what little advantage we did have. I might have gone a little overboard, sure, but what better way to stake our claim on Allen than by reminding everyone he's got the Dragoon family behind him? I think it was worth it. Well, Jewel did wedge herself in at the end too, which I should have expected. Always trying to seize the initiative, that girl." Fey flashed her grandmother another fearless grin.

Melia burst into laughter. "Love, you say..." she eventually managed to choke out, blinking a tear from her eye. "Thank you for clearing things up, Fey. I should apologize for making it your responsibility to accomplish what the intelligence team was incapable of. But why isn't Allen Rovene joining us today? I was expecting you'd have dragged him along today, knowing you."

Fey chuckled awkwardly. "It seems Allen doesn't consider building political connections much of a priority. It's not just me he dislikes, at least. He turned down invitations to dine with the Reverences and the Seizingers as well. It's hard to explain, but it's better if you don't think of him as just another twelve-year-old boy from a noble family. Instead of trying to make connections after school like the rest of us, he heads to the Royal Library every day instead." Fey chuckled again at the thought. "But what about you, Grandmother? You haven't dug up any information? You summoned the viscount, right?"

Just as Melia had regained her cheer, Fey's question made her frown again, brows knit in frustration. "I was informed Bellwood von Rovene had already departed from the capital several weeks ago, having withdrawn from the social season earlier than expected. Good grief! I've never heard of such a ridiculous situation in all my life—having a child accepted into the Royal Academy's Class A and the head of the family not being there to witness it! It's altogether possible the man hasn't even heard his son has been admitted!" Melia's disapproval toward the viscount was more than evident. "For the time being, I've dispatched someone to Crauvia to find out what they can and to acquire that rumored tutor of theirs for ourselves. I'll let you know once any further information arises."

Fey snorted in amusement. "His son's gone and stirred up havoc

in the capital, and the man's not even here for it?! Ha! Allen's father must be just as amusing as he is!" Her eyes glimmered with the characteristic sheen they took on when she was truly interested in something; it was the gaze that reminded Allen of a predator stalking its next meal.

Melia, noticing her granddaughter's expression, shook her head. "There's nothing amusing about this. I trust you'll keep us updated about any developments at the Academy. Do whatever you need to; if you need anything from us, just let us know and it shall be done. You are the head of the family, after all."

Fey nodded, a dangerous grin plastered across her face.

◆◆◆

Two months had passed since that day, and today, Fey once again found herself summoned to a meeting of the Dragoon elite. She walked into the dining room at a leisurely gait, trailed by Sera, her personal attendant and trusted confidant.

The gazes that met her as she walked through the door were unusually stern. Fey paid them no mind, continuing her slow stroll toward the far end of the room.

"You've kept us waiting, Fey. Sit down," said Melia, idly gesturing toward Fey's usual seat across from her own. Fey smiled at her grandmother, then sat down—not in the indicated seat, but at the head of the table.

"What do you think you're doing?!" someone cried. "You dare disrespect the marquess?!"

It was the man on Melia's left who'd hurled the contempt-laden words: Menson Dragoon, Fey's uncle and longtime political rival. He'd been vying for the position of Melia's successor since before Fey had been born.

In reality, Melia had long since decided her son didn't have what it would take to maintain control of the thousand-plus noble families under Dragoon jurisdiction; she had discounted him as a potential successor over a decade prior. Menson himself had only recently accepted that reality, but instead of throwing in the towel, he'd

changed tack. Fey's uncle was now singularly fixated on installing his own son as the head of the Dragoon family in his stead—despite the fact Fey had already claimed said position, along with the "von" that made it official.

"My invitation indicated this was a private meeting of the Dragoon *family*, not an official meeting concerning the Dragoon *Region*. Therefore, there shouldn't be any problems with me taking my rightful place—right, Grandmother?" Fey tilted her head as she asked the question, grinning at Melia, who met her eyes with a determined gaze of her own. Five seconds passed, or even longer, as the two held the stare; finally, Melia broke the connection and looked away, shaking her head slowly.

"Hmph. No, of course not. Why would there be any problems? That seat belongs to the family head, and therefore, it belongs to Fey now. I'm sure we *all* feel the need to apologize for summoning the head of the family here on such short notice, busy as you surely are. Menson seems to have an urgent question for you, and he wouldn't quiet down until we organized this meeting," Melia explained, waving airily in the man's general direction.

Menson frowned, looking even more serious than he had before. "I've received a report from Parley—Count Avinier's boy—with some outlandish claims about our *esteemed* family head. He reports she's started a 'Magical Craftsmanship Club,' or some such nonsense, and that she's spending her days making fanciful tools—funding it all with Dragoon family wealth."

Parley wasn't a supporter of Menson, though it may have seemed otherwise had any outsiders been listening in. He was Team Fey through and through. However, as a noble under Dragoon jurisdiction, he was expected to provide objective reports on any and all happenings within Academy walls, not just those concerning Fey—a fact the girl in question was well aware of. She'd briefly contemplated asking Parley to avoid some of the more pertinent topics in his reports, but knowing how serious and honest the boy was, she'd decided against it. If anything, it would have just led to further trouble.

"Yeah, that sounds about right. Is there a problem?" replied Fey,

her tone disinterested.

Menson smirked at her nastily. "I have no issue with the matter of the club itself, of course. Student organizations are but one way of forging political connections, and as such, your participation in said club should be beneficial to the Dragoon family and the region as a whole. You are well within your rights to invest our private funds into such promising endeavors. However..."

Fey's uncle stood up, unfolding a piece of paper and tossing it onto the table. His voice grew louder as he continued to speak. "The *problem* is the unashamedly excessive use of said funds. In less than two months, you've funneled over three *million* riels into the club, which raises the question—what kinds of tools could you possibly be developing, and what benefits are you anticipating in return? Undoubtedly, you understand someone in your position has a duty to report back to the family, especially when said report concerns the blatant use of Dragoon wealth." He sneered at her. "Unless—surely our lovestruck von Dragoon hasn't mistaken her personal interests for those of the family? *Surely* you're not creating tools whenever the boy demands them and paying for it all from our shared pockets?" Menson's tone made it clear that he did, in fact, believe she was doing just that.

Another round of stern glares swept the room, all with the same target. Fey, ever confident, returned each and every one of the stares coolly—then burst into laughter. "Perfect timing, Menson! I was just about to call a meeting to discuss the club with all of you too. Sera, if you wouldn't mind?" Fey nodded to her attendant, who slipped away from her position beside her mistress and toward the projector-type magical device near the center of the room. She appeared somewhat nervous as she slid a single piece of paper beneath the lens and flicked the largest switch. Words flashed up on the far wall.

```
Proposal for the Relocation of the Dragreid Magical
Craftsmanship Research Institute to Runerelia
```

"Allen keeps coming up with one brilliant idea after another, and it's getting to the point where all the facilities in Runerelia aren't enough to meet my needs. I suggest we move our main research divisions to the capital, situating them in a brand-new, state-of-the-art facility. As for a rough estimate of the budget..." Fey nodded at Sera again, who replaced the first sheet of paper with another summarizing the projected costs of the proposal.

"...we're looking at around one hundred million riels, give or take."

The room plunged into silence; all breathing seemingly stilled in response to the near-comical sum. Not even the prosperous Dragoon family could readily come up with such an exorbitant figure.

"What— How— What kind of foolish—" Menson sputtered angrily, struggling to form a coherent response.

"Quiet yourself, Menson." Melia's sharp glare stopped the man before he could find his words. "Now, Fey—do you know what you're asking, truly? I wouldn't have agreed to call this meeting if I'd known what Menson was planning. I couldn't care less about you spending a few hundred riels here or there; you've more than demonstrated your capability, and you have every right to do so. But one hundred million riels is a different matter entirely. Even if we reallocated funds from elsewhere in the region, we wouldn't be able to pull that much money together. We'd have to cover the rest from our personal wealth or sell off some of our other holdings. I'm sure you have a convincing argument up your sleeve?"

Fey giggled. "An argument? Why, that's unlike you, Grandmother—asking for an explanation when you should know a maiden's love is beyond such logical reasoning."

"Do you take us for fools—"

"I said *quiet*, Menson! This is a matter between Fey and myself!" Melia scolded her son once again, then sighed, turning back to Fey. "I understand you think quite highly of Allen Rovene, but we nobles have our own protocols for matters such as this—don't you think you should introduce him to me first, at the very least?" A vein throbbed in the marquess's forehead. "For goodness' sake, just when am I going to meet this boy?!"

Fey responded to Melia's obvious frustration with a strained smile. "I want you to meet him too, Grandmother...but as usual, Allen's avoiding the politics of the nobility by any means necessary. Besides, if he were to hear about my plan, he'd refuse to get involved, you know? He'd see it as indebting himself to us in exchange for the facilities he—and I—need. He'd certainly never ask me to make him anything again. So I have to sell it to him with no obligation on his part: magical craftswoman Feyreun von Dragoon and her coincidental new facility."

As Fey's words sank in, the tension in the room dissolved into bewilderment. Given the account of Allen's character they'd just heard described, it was indeed ridiculous to even *consider* making such a large investment for his benefit.

Melia drew close to Fey, as close as she could without leaving her seat, peering deeply into her eyes as though she was still looking for something that could explain Fey's motivation. "I don't quite understand, Fey," she murmured softly. "If there's any chance the boy might react as you say, then isn't that all the more reason to wait a little longer—to try and figure out his true intentions before making a decision? Two months isn't long enough to judge someone's character to the point of investing a hundred million riels in them. It's not like you to be so hasty."

"I won't deny it's a risky bet, but I—*we*—don't have the option to wait around and see which way the wind blows before making a decision. This is just my intuition speaking, but I think if we don't move now, he'll slip out of our reach. I won't allow that to happen—both as the head of this family, and as a maiden in love," Fey replied, returning Melia's overpowering stare with cool confidence.

Reclining back into her chair, the marquess straightened her posture, her expression returning to its former neutrality. "If that is your decision as the head of the family, then I will not question it. However"—Melia's tone suddenly dropped an octave, echoing around the room in threatening undulations—"you should prepare yourself for what will happen if your investment turns out to be a poor one."

◆◆◆

At long last, once Fey had sworn to take full responsibility for the unprecedented investment, the meeting was adjourned, and all left the room save for Fey, Melia, and Sera.

"There's something you haven't told me yet. Out with it."

Sera jumped, unsettled by the hallmark cold glare the empress was known for. Fey nodded slightly, and her attendant resettled herself, sliding another piece of paper under the projector lens. The yet-unseen slide specified the total investment Fey had already made into the Magical Craftsmanship Club, along with a detailed breakdown of how the funds had been spent and, most importantly, predicted returns on both the current and future investments.

Melia snorted. "I knew you were too smart to consider throwing away so much money just to impress a boy—not without a plausible plan to recover it." She sniffed at Fey dismissively.

Fey puffed up her cheeks, annoyed. "Actually, I made this investment plan just to impress him too. The fact that we'll make a return on our investment is just a bonus."

Melia sighed. "And why didn't you just show this to everyone else from the start? Menson would have held his tongue if he'd seen this."

Fey smirked, raising an eyebrow. "I'm just trying to live out the fantasy of a young maiden caught in the throes of her first love, but it's a bit hard when all I hear about is politics *this* and benefits *that*, you know? On the other hand, if we hit the jackpot here, everyone who agreed to let me take the risk—reluctantly or not—won't be able to complain about my relationship with Allen!"

"Living out the fantasy, you say..." muttered Melia, somewhat suspicious, to which Fey just laughed. "Do you think you can do it?" the older woman asked.

Fey fell unusually quiet, letting out a long sigh. "Well...he's pretty hard to break, that's for sure. I'm pretty cute, if I do say so myself—my personality might be a little less desirable, but I always make sure I give Allen whatever he asks for, you know? Still, I can't figure out what he's really thinking. I've lived my whole life surrounded by

people working in their own interests, so I thought I was pretty good at figuring out what people wanted, but...” Her voice lowered, as though she were now talking to herself. “I’m pretty good at figuring out what he *doesn’t* want, on the other hand...”

The rare glimpse of self-doubt in her granddaughter was enough to draw a sad sigh from Melia. “For goodness’ sake. I don’t know why you came to me with that *ridiculous* proposal instead of first coming to me for advice on love. With my help, a mere twelve-year-old boy would become putty in your hands.” She thumped her own chest assuredly and grinned, wrinkles cutting deep ravines into her timeworn face.

“Pft!” Fey snorted, attempting to hold back her laughter to no avail. “Ha ha ha! What kinda advice could you give me about love, huh? Throw a bag of money at him and demand he kneel before me?”

“Ha!” The outburst came from Sera, who hurriedly clapped a hand over her mouth. “My apologies, Marquess!”

Melia glared at her and Fey in turn. “Is that what you think of me? I may look like this now, but in my prime, my beauty and modesty captivated men across the kingdom! Commoners and princes alike became prisoners to their love for me! They called me ‘the siren who could drown a kingdom,’ I’ll have you know!”

“M-Modesty...?” Sera choked out, stifling her laughter. Clearly she was struggling to connect the concept to the stern woman currently glaring at her furiously.

Fey, on the other hand, seemed to have swallowed the story whole. “So that’s how you were when you were young... Well, with all your experience, can you offer me any advice?”

Melia smirked and nodded. “Well, to begin with,” she said, pointing at Fey with a rigid finger, “you’re not very good at letting your emotions show, are you?”

“Huh?” Fey fell into momentary thought. “It’s not my strongest skill, but when it comes to Allen, I don’t think I have any trouble letting my fondness for him show...”

Melia groaned, pressing a hand to her forehead. “No, I know what’s going on. I can picture it already. You go up to him with that

perfectly controlled smile of yours and ramble on about how much you like him in your usual dispassionate voice... I'm sorry to tell you this, Fey—but he must surely think you're creepy!"

Fey recoiled as though she'd been shot, eyes widening in horror. "No way! But Allen seems like a pushover when it comes to love—I don't think he's ever touched a girl in his life!"

Melia shook her head slowly. "Which makes it even worse. Late bloomers are decidedly more wary when it comes to love. He won't open his heart to a poker face or a practiced smile; it'll just push him away more. You need to practice showing your true emotions—when you're happy, when you're sad, anything. If you can't do that, you'll never be able to stand at the starting line, much less win the race for his heart," she asserted decisively.

Fey swallowed. "O-Okay. I think I get it. It's not gonna be easy, but I'll try my best."

Melia nodded at her granddaughter. "Good. Now, the next thing that'll help you close the distance..."

◆◆◆

Thus began the first of what would turn out to be many frequent lessons in the art of love, presided over by none other than the empress, Melia Dragoon.





Chapter Four: The Birth of a Mage

The Emissive Magic Research Club

Founding day of the Emissive Magic Research Club, a few weeks before Allen overcomes Godolphen's challenge.

The idea had hit me one morning in the dining hall when I'd taken the last seat at a table coincidentally occupied by all four of Class A's Emissive Magic users. The founding members were Al, Leo, Jewel, and Dolph—along with myself, of course—and we'd meet at the Academy's Mage Training Facility. The building reminded me of a soccer stadium, exposed to the elements and with tall, sloping walls—although, unlike a soccer stadium, these walls were apparently imbued with heavy antimagic protection.

Out of all of Class A, only Al, Jewel, and Dolph were in the mage course. In this world, those with elemental affinity—in other words, those who could transform their magic into flames, water, or something else—numbered around one in every ten people. Those aiming for the mage course were tested separately during the practical portion of the Academy's entrance exams; this was done in an attempt to prevent any of those rare talents from slipping through the cracks. Their fighting skills were still tested, of course, but the exam would be heavily weighted toward the Emissive Magic they could demonstrate. While it was easier for those with elemental affinity to score higher in the physical exam, mage hopefuls were still held to the same standards on the written exam and magical aptitude threshold, so it still wasn't a walk in the park just because you could throw out a few fireballs. On the other hand, it seemed to be fairly standard that out of the hundred students admitted each year, around twenty-five of them would be those in the mage course, so maybe there was *some* leniency at play—in the admission stage, at least.

Out of the twenty-five or so mage students in our year, about half of them were in Class D, and the majority of the others were in the neighboring C and E. The reason mages tended to dominate the lower class levels was the same reason they wouldn't have stood a chance taking the same practical exam: They had little to no chance of keeping up with their knight course classmates through the grueling physical lessons of the higher class levels. Even the kids in the bureaucrat course could outperform most of the mages—after all, they'd had to demonstrate the same insane physical talent to make it into the school. As a rule of thumb, the higher the class, the fewer mages you'd find. It wasn't unheard of for some years to have *zero* mages in Class A—so really, our class having three mages *plus* Leo was something of an exception.

Incidentally, when I'd informed the others of my complete lack of elemental affinity upon opening the first-ever meeting of the club, they'd all been rendered speechless.

"What are you playing at, then?" Leo had finally said after an uncomfortably long pause. "I assumed you were just prioritizing your Strengthening Magic because your Emissive Magic was weak or something... Plus, you always know the answer when Sage Godolphen asks about elemental conversion or magical theory... But if you can't use Emissive Magic, then why start up this club? It's pointless. Seriously, I don't understand you in the slightest," he'd finished, frowning.

From my perspective, researching magic in a world full of magic was as normal an idea as I could think of. But I figured it would probably seem weird from his point of view.

"Honestly, I think sometimes you *need* a little 'pointlessness' in your life, no? Even if I can't use Emissive Magic, I think there's value in exploring the infinite possibilities it has to offer, especially when I can do it together with my classmates in a convenient facility like this. You can study at a cram school or with a private tutor all you'd like, and sure, you'll get results out of it, but you'll never discover anything unexpected or new that way. There are some things in life—integral things—that can't be found by following a map," I said, brimming with confidence. I'd taken the speech from one I'd heard

given by a Nobel Prize winner in my previous life—adapted for the current context, of course.

Leo shrugged, sighing. "Fine, then. I'm all for increasing the odds I'll learn new things, and there's no detriment to anyone here apart from you." Mild scorn tinged his last few words. "But I won't be able to participate every day, at least for a while. There's a lot of things demanding my presence back at home—especially since I've just been admitted—and since I'm a vice captain for the Hill Path Club, my schedule is fully booked as it is. I'll join, and I'll come as often as I can, but it won't be a daily occurrence until I can free up some time."

Jewel raised a timid hand as Leo finished speaking. "I'm the same as Leo... I've been swamped with engagements and meetings ever since school started. It'll probably be a while until I can fully commit to the club—if ever."

I suppose these guys are proper nobles after all—unlike me with my one foot over the commoner line. I probably don't even know half of what they have to deal with every day.

"Not a problem. Besides, this club won't be focusing on practice or technique or anything along those lines; the point of this club is to *research* Emissive Magic. There's no overall project or joint goal either, so it's not like everyone can't just keep working on their own things whenever they have time—we'll just meet as a club when everyone is available. The captain can be in charge of figuring out when we're all free for a meeting, so..." I paused for a moment, narrowing my gaze on two of my classmates in particular. "Al or Dolph—which one of you is going to be the captain?"

Both of them jumped when they heard their names. "Wait a minute, Allen," Dolph replied, startled. "Aren't you going to be the captain? Why is it out of the two of us?"

I chuckled. "C'mon, there's no way the only one here with no talent for Emissive Magic could be the one leading the pack, right? Because I'm the one who submitted the application, I was automatically roped into being the coach again... But I'll be leaving all the club policies and scheduling in the capable hands of our new captain. Since Leo and Jewel are too busy, one of you two will have

to do it—so who's the captain, and who's the vice captain, hmm?" I pressed them for a decision, leaving no room for rebuttal. Sometimes, the easiest way to win was to just force your opponent into a corner and trick them into thinking there was only one way out.

I'd asked Ms. Musica to be the club adviser. The young woman, in addition to being a teacher, was also apparently the vice chairman of the board of directors, so I hadn't really expected her to accept my request. But to my surprise, she'd readily agreed. As it turned out, she was also a talented mage herself, and she was eager to see the club flourish.

Dolph made a sound halfway between a sigh and a groan. "I'll be the vice captain, then. I'm pretty good at watching from the sidelines and figuring out when people need help—comes with being a middle child, I reckon. Al can be the captain. He's a natural leader, and people seem to like him for some reason."

It was exactly what I'd expected from Dolph. He had a quick mind and could turn any situation to his advantage with ease—like what he was doing now, taking the initiative to nominate himself as vice captain before Al had even grasped what was going on.

"Oy!" spluttered Al. "That's unfair, Dolph! And if you're gonna base it on that shoddy argument, I have three older sisters—"

"Good thinking, Dolph!" I said, cutting Al off before the conversation could turn into a mudslinging contest. His rebuttal probably would have been reasonable, but I didn't want to waste any more time. I was *itching* to see their magic in action. "You've really got a knack for understanding people. Honestly, I would've been happy no matter which one of you ended up as the captain—you'd both bring something good to the role. But like you said, there's a certain charm to having someone like Al in charge—he's charismatic, a natural leader, seemingly honest to a fault even if he's secretly plotting somethi—"

"Wait a minute. I'm not plotting—"

"But don't think that means you're off the hook, Dolph," I continued, cutting Al off once again. "The number two's job is to tighten any screws the leader might have overlooked, right? If

history has taught us anything, it's that an organization built on a loose foundation will crumble! Dolph, don't overlook this opportunity. Build up the Emissive Magic Research Club and absorb the skills that'll allow you to form an undefeatable squadron. What matters isn't being strict on each and every person; what matters is ensuring the group as a whole is held to the same unwavering standards! From this day forth, you shall be known as Rudolph Austin, the Demon Co-Captain!"

I'd gotten a little carried away by the end of my speech, inspired by a certain group of peacekeepers whose name had been known in every household across Kyoto as the Edo period had drawn to a close. I couldn't really remember anything concrete about how they'd maintained discipline, but their approach had probably been something along these lines...

"Hold on a minute! Why did you change it from vice captain to co-captain?! Were you even listening to me?! I'm good at watching from the sidelines and figuring out when—"

"Because I felt like it! You can do it, Dolph! Break out of your shell! This is my first and final order as coach! So, by the way, what elements do you all have affinities for?" I quickly changed the topic, dodging the next wave of protests already undoubtedly forming on Al's and Dolph's lips. I knew Leo could use fire magic, as evidenced by our mock battle back on the second day of school, but I had no idea what affinities the rest of them possessed.

"I've got fire affinity, and that's it," replied Leo, a little sourly.

"Huh? You can only use the most *common* type of magic? Like, I don't have an affinity, so I don't have room to talk, but...I mean, that's unexpectedly ordinary for *you*." If you asked fifteen random people on the street, at least one of them would be able to cast fire magic. And this was Leo of all people. He could have said he was a seven-element wielding heptacaster and I wouldn't have blinked an eye, so like I'd said, him having only a single affinity—and the most common one at that—*was* a bit of a surprise.

Al turned to me with a frown. "Don't be like that, Allen. Sure, having more affinities—or rarer ones—can be important, but your magical aptitude level, your magical manipulation, and your

intelligence are what really count. That's why Leo is so famous around here. He's at a level normal people can't even dream of reaching..." He trailed off, his frown deepening. "That's what I would have said, anyway, until some kid with absolutely *monstrous* instincts for magic popped up in the physical exam..."

Who are you calling a monster? Rude.

"It'll be easier if we just show you, right?" Dolph interjected, shrugging. "I've got fire affinity too, so we'll start from there. Leo, you happy to join me?"

Leo smirked. "Well, if those are the Demon Co-Captain's orders..."

Poorly stifled giggles came from Al and Jewel's direction at Leo's comment, but Dolph just shook his head, dejected. I smirked as well. *Excellent. Looks like everyone's on board now.*

Shaking off his discontentment, Dolph held out one hand, palm up; Leo did the same by his side. There was a flicker, and the next instant, a fireball appeared in each of their palms, the microscopic suns swirling as they grew larger and larger. There wasn't much difference in the speeds at which they grew, but there was a significant difference in the sizes. Dolph's fireball was around thirty centimeters across by the time it finished swelling, but Leo's showed no signs of stopping. It was at least one meter in diameter—and still getting bigger—when the two of them moved in unison. A flick of their respective wrists and the two fireballs shot forward, leaving blistering trails as they cut through the air.

Boom. A deafening echo sounded across the facility as the fireballs crashed into the targets painted on the reinforced wall across from us.

"Holy crap! That was awesome!" I yelled, unable to contain my excitement.

This is it! This is magic! God, why wasn't I born with any affinity? If I could use magic, I'd be out here casting every day until my arms fell off!

"You're amazing, seriously! How much mana did you expend just now? Does anything affect how long it takes to cast the spell? Can you change how fast the fireball moves? Can you limit the size or temperature? What about the direction you shoot in—can you

change it midway? Does it have to be from your palm? Or can you conjure it from somewhere else on your body? What about *away* from your body? Can you keep casting them one after another? Or is there a limit? How come you can do something so cool in the first place?"

It was a lot of questions, sure, but this was the first real chance I'd had to get answers. If a picture was worth a thousand words, then a real-life demonstration of magic was worth more than thousands of books. I could pore over theories and formulas all day, but I would never be able to truly visualize what that magic would look like in real life. If I *could* cast Emissive Magic, I'd willingly exhaust myself in pursuit of that understanding. From what I had learned, there was still much to discover about magic in this world, and most researchers agreed they'd barely scratched the surface of what was truly possible.

I suddenly realized everyone was looking at me with confused expressions on their faces, likely as a result of my excited outburst. *Of course... I guess stuff like this is just normal for them.*

"Well," started Dolph, a little hesitant, "I'm not sure how well I can explain it—you probably know more about this than me, with how well you do in Magical Theory—but I'll give it a go. My mana probably dropped by about 200, and Leo's—probably about 800, right?"

Leo nodded in reply, and Dolph soldiered on. "To put it simply, the higher your magical aptitude is, the easier it is to increase the size and power of a spell. Basically the same as with Strengthening Magic. Changing your casting speed, compressing the fireball to be smaller or purer, stuff like that—those are all based on how well you can manipulate your magic. What else did you ask? Oh, how fast the fireball moves after you've released it depends on how well you can manipulate magic on the surface of your body. It's really difficult to control or alter magic once it's left the body, so changing the direction—or even the affinity—of a spell once you've released it isn't something most people are capable of. It's possible, but it's not really worth the effort it would take."

I see... The potential power of your spells was based on your

magical aptitude, which meant it relied on the natural capacity of your mana core. You could gradually increase your capacity over time through magical compression, but that growth was marginal in the grand scheme of things. For the most part, your general power was determined at birth. From what Dolph had said, it seemed like a lot of the principles of Emissive Magic were based around drawing magic out of your body to the surface—like with Magic Guard, which I could use—and then manipulating it externally. Actually, a lot of it sounded very similar to the techniques used in Scouting Magic, which I still hadn't bothered to start learning.

I told myself I'd need to start learning it after the excursion with Reed, but I really *need to get onto it now...* One's ability to circulate magic around the outside of their body relied on their talent for magical manipulation, which was undoubtedly my specialty, so I was pretty sure I'd be a natural at Scouting Magic. But between learning how to use my new bow, working as an explorer, and everything else I'd started doing recently, I hadn't been able to drum up the enthusiasm to start learning it.

If I had to be honest with myself, I already knew I was capable of practicing harder than anyone else, capable of mastering external mana circulation like no one had ever done before. But I hadn't even started.

Because once I had mastered it, there would be nowhere else to go.

I could become the most talented mana circulator this world had ever seen, but it still wouldn't allow me to cast Emissive Magic. I'd avoided the start because I wasn't sure I could bear the crushing inevitability of the end. Even the fact that Scouting Magic would still be useful—regardless of whether I could cast Emissive Magic or not—wasn't enough to comfort me. It wasn't the magic I wanted.

But I couldn't avoid it forever. *I'll get through Godolphen's challenge and meet whoever he reckons might have the clue to Emissive Magic. If nothing comes of that, then I'll start learning Scouting Magic*, I promised myself silently.

"Er, something wrong? What's with the scary face?"

"Oh, it's nothing!" I hurriedly replied, snapping out of my

brooding thoughts. “More importantly, what affinities do the rest of you have? I want to see!”

◆◆◆

After that, Jewel and Al showcased their own magical abilities, and I wasted no time burying them under an unrelenting barrage of questions.

Jewel’s affinity allowed her to wield holy magic. Holy affinity was incredibly rare, found in only one person out of every five thousand or so. She cast her spells through prayer, enveloping herself or her target in a shimmering golden light that could only be described as mystical—or, indeed, *holy*. It seemed like her spells were primarily used to support—or buff—her allies. Apparently, someone blessed by her golden veil might find it easier to manipulate magic or could find themselves expending less mana when they cast their own spells—any of which tended to result in an obvious increase in power, speed, and stamina. Casting holy magic required different techniques than any of the other affinities, and much was still unknown about the way it worked. From what I could glean, though, Jewel being able to cast a successful buffing spell at her age was apparently a very impressive feat.

Al could use ice magic. Ice affinity was fairly rare itself, popping up maybe once in every thousand people, and anyone who could wield ice magic was considered a dual caster. The ability to control ice inherently required being able to control water, so anyone with ice affinity could also cast water magic as a result. Al’s magical aptitude level was over 5,000, more than double my own and higher than most others in Class 1-A.

Ice magic was mostly used to freeze anything one touched, Al explained, demonstrating by clutching one of the wooden poles set up around the facility for target practice. Within a second, the entire pole was enveloped in a sheath of ice.

Apparently, unlike fire magic, neither ice nor water magic were really used for long-distance attacks.

Hmm... I suppose if I brought Al along on camping trips, I could

use his magic to take a shower or flash freeze anything I hunt... But honestly, his magic is a little boring. Ice magic should be a lot cooler.

"What about Ice Lance, Al?" I asked.

"What the hell is that?"

Patiently, I detailed what should have really been a basic ice magic technique—summoning a spear made of ice and sending it flying at your target—but Al rejected the idea outright.

Apparently, it would be too difficult to make the lance as sharp as it would need to be, *and* ice was too fragile to not just break on impact, *and* he didn't see why you'd bother to make a spear out of ice in the first place.

I countered him by explaining that ice became nearly as hard as steel if you could get the temperature to minus seventy degrees—something else I'd learned during my time on the ice cream collaboration project. I also argued the ability to make a spear whenever you wanted would be worth the trouble. My passion got the better of me at that point, and I rambled on for a good while about the amazing potential of ice magic, like how you could use it to cast a spell that froze the ground under your opponent's feet and rendered them unable to move, along with myriad other ideas inspired by video games and light novels from my previous life.

Finally, Al begged me to stop, exhausted. "Every single one of those ideas makes me tired just to think about, let alone try and cast."

He started to explain just how irrational my suggestions were, but I wasn't having it. "If you've got time to think of excuses, then you've got time to think of how you'll succeed! Get it done! Coach's orders!" I declared, blatantly ignoring the fact that I'd already declared the previous order to be my final one.

The most surprising discovery of the day wasn't Leo's massive fireball or Jewel's rare affinity, though—it was Dolph. Plain-faced, unassuming Dolph—a walking, talking example of a textbook background character—turned out to have affinities for fire, water, earth, *and* light magic, making him a quadcaster. On average, one in fifteen people would have fire affinity. Water was one in fifty; earth was one in a hundred. Light affinity popped up once in around four

thousand people, which made it an extremely rare type of magic.

Genetics did have a marginal influence on what affinity someone was likely to possess—if they did possess it at all—but having multiple affinities more or less came down to chance. Wielding four types of magic meant Dolph had basically won a lottery with three-hundred-million-to-one odds. It went without saying that a talent like his was very rarely seen, if ever.

More astounding than Dolph's ability, though, was what he had to say about it.

"Eh, I never really bothered to practice with anything except fire magic. It's the only one that's much use on the battlefield, you know? I only cast basic spells with the other affinities when it's convenient—summoning water to wash my hands, molding a seat out of earth, making a light if I'm reading at nighttime, that sort of thing. My magical aptitude level is around the same as yours, so I can't cast anything too powerful, and if I branch out too much—well, you know what they say: jack-of-all-trades, master of none, right?" he said, grinning.

His nonchalant attitude sent me reeling; I actually *stumbled*, too confused to even maintain my center of gravity. If I possessed even *one* of the four affinities he held, I'd work myself to the bone aiming to become the greatest mage in the world, no matter how hard an affinity it was to wield.

"Dolph...do you know what Spiel Janeiro, the Founding Father of Medical Magic, once said? He said a mage who's not in constant, unrelenting pursuit of the infinite possibilities magic holds isn't fit to call themselves a mage. And I agree with him. Take a good look at yourself, Rudolph Austin, Demon Co-Captain! How can you be satisfied wasting your potential? Those who don't respect the power they've been blessed with have no place here—that's the first rule of the Emissive Magic Club! When you're within these walls, you *have* to pursue the impossible! That's my final order as coach!"

Invoking my "first and final" order for the third time that day, I single-handedly proposed and ratified the first rule of the Emissive Magic Club.

"Seriously, Allen...how many more final orders are there going to

be?”

Apprentice

I’d triumphed over Godolphen’s challenge.

And now, the day had finally arrived. I was standing in front of the Runerelian Central Garrison, clutching the wooden training sword Godolphen had instructed me to take along.

From what he’d told me, the Central Garrison was primarily occupied by the Third Legion of the Royal Knights. The Third Legion maintained law and order across a wide territory that, in addition to the capital, also included the vast Rune Plains, which sprawled out from the edges of the city on every side.

The Legion itself numbered around 120 knights, which of course was far fewer than what was needed to keep the peace in a city as large as Runerelia—let alone across the rest of the Plains. To that end, the Central Garrison also served as the headquarters for a number of less prestigious—though not less important—groups, including the Runerelian police force and the vigilante corps, all of whom fell under the watchful eye of the captain of the Third Legion, a man named Dew Orwell. Godolphen had described the captain as a busy man, and after hearing his explanation of the garrison and all the groups under his command, I could easily understand why.

When it came down to it, after all, we were potentially on the brink of war. If I were still back in Japan with a war on the horizon, and the leader of the Japan Self-Defense Forces also had to assume control of the Japanese police force...well, describing him as “a busy man” would definitely be underselling the situation.

There were seven standard legions in the Royal Order, along with an eighth legion known as the Royal Guard, who were exclusively tasked with the protection of the royal family. All up, there were around nine hundred knights in the Order. Of those, only around two hundred of them were also mages, a figure that included the ones who primarily worked as magical craftspeople or engineers. I’d initially doubted such a small group could hold *anyone* off for long if

it did come to war—let alone the entire army of another country—but as I'd later found out, the Royal Order wasn't Yugria's only line of defense. There were also the private armies maintained by many of the upper noble families, plus a reserve army made up of every knight course graduate from every school in the kingdom—nobles and commoners alike—all of whom trained together at regular intervals to ensure they were ready to mobilize should the call to arms ever sound.

Altogether, those groups were sufficient to protect the city from most dangers it would face—monster attacks or stampedes, for instance, or smaller raids conducted by enemy forces. Moreover, should a full-scale invasion ever occur, explorers and other laypeople would also be called upon to volunteer to protect their kingdom. After all, this was a world where nearly everyone above the age of twelve could wield magic in some form or another. Even standard citizens could readily be molded into a formidable defense force.

And the Royal Order was responsible for training, maintaining, and leading all of those individual groups. Any leader in the Order—even a captain of a single legion—was undoubtedly a very important person indeed.

I'd arrived precisely five minutes before the indicated time. Feelings of nervousness and anticipation battled for dominance within me as I steeled myself and took a step toward the main gate.

◆◆◆

"Pardon me for the intrusion! Allen Rovene, Class 1-A, Royal Academy, reporting for an appointment with Third Legion Captain Dew Orwell!" I cried, aiming my voice toward the open entryway of what looked like a guard post just beside the gate. There didn't seem to be a door installed at all, so knocking hadn't really been possible.

"Ah, you must be Allen! I thought you'd be along soon. It's nice to meet you—I'm Dante," a man replied, emerging from the small building.

Well, he was more of a *giant* than a man. He must have been

close to two meters tall, and he was built like a wrestler, muscles straining beneath his skin as though they were threatening to burst through. His silver hair was cropped close and nearly seemed to sparkle as the sunlight hit it—which, combined with the kind glint in his eyes, lent the man a refreshing, welcoming aura. If not for the cleft in his chin, he could have been a popular model back home in Japan. He was wearing a cloak I'd seen others wearing here and there around the city; it identified him as a member of the Royal Order. Cut from a thick, black material, the cloaks I'd seen had all featured different embroidery, which I'd assumed to be the owners' respective family crests.

Dante held out his hand, and I shook it. The sensation nearly made me jump in surprise. He wasn't gripping my hand with any real force; instead, it felt like *I* was gripping a boulder. The particular hardness and rigidity of his skin was the inevitable result of years and years spent tempering one's body through Strengthening Magic.

He's strong, all right. I immediately knew if I took him on in a fair fight, I'd have no chance. Even Leo and I together would barely pose a challenge.

"I've been told the general gist of why you're here today. I'll take you to the captain in a minute, but first..." Dante paused and cleared his throat, pulling a sheet of paper out of his pocket as he did. "The following notice is for Allen Rovene, Royal Academy, Class 1-A! You have been admitted to the Order of the Royal Knights of Yugria as a provisional member! From this day forth, you are instructed to serve under the command of Captain Dew Orwell, Third Legion, and perform your duties as best you are able, providing they do not interfere with your studies! Signed, Orina Seizinger, commander of the Royal Order; delivered in absentia by Dante Segran, Third Legion."

My admission into the Order didn't come as a surprise; it was something Godolphen had warned me about in advance. Captain Orwell didn't have much time to spare, so the most practical way to secure any time with him was to do it alongside Order training or by taking part in an official expedition. As a mere student, the amount of paperwork and number of security measures I'd have to go

through each time I visited the garrison was too immense to even consider. Instead, Godolphen had arranged for me to be admitted as a provisional member by misappropriating an existing system designed to allow third-year Academy students to gain work experience with the Order.

"You might not have your sights set on the Royal Order in the future, boy, but it'll still do you some good to take a close look at them now. It should prove to be quite an...enlightening experience, shall we say?" he'd told me. He'd been chuckling as he'd said it too.

There was probably some truth in those words, even if only through my personal, slightly warped interpretation. I didn't have any intention of joining the Order after graduation, but there was always a chance this "internship" could change that. Maybe I'd discover the Order wasn't as boring and strict as it seemed to be—and if that was the case, then the idea of becoming a royal knight could add another potential route on my journey for a fun-filled life.

"Here," continued Dante, snapping me back to reality. "This'll serve as proof of your membership in the Order." He held out another of the black cloaks, identical to his own, although it lacked any embroidery. "Provisional members don't receive personalized ones, but while you're wearing this, you'll be treated the same as any other royal knight—and you'll be expected to behave as one too, so treat it with respect. You'll receive some wages as well, although it won't amount to much."

I gingerly took the cloak from his hands. I had to admit, they were pretty cool. The material was smooth, sturdy, and surprisingly light considering the thickness. *If I tried to get something like this tailored, I bet it would cost more money than I've ever even seen.*

And the pitiful wages Dante had mentioned? A thousand riels an hour, as it turned out. Maybe a proper noble would turn their nose up at that kind of pay, but my palate for money wasn't so refined. If they were happy to pay it, then I was happy to take it. The geography club I'd started up with Coco had reached a standstill due to our lack of funds, and there were way too many projects I was just itching to get started on.

It still felt a little wrong to receive payment just for showing up to

training, but Dante thought differently. "You're employed by the Order—even if only temporarily—and participating in regular training is part of the job," he said, smiling. "If you want to look at it another way, then think of it as compensation for the danger you put yourself in by participating—knights can come face-to-face with death at any time, even during training."

Accepting his wisdom, I quickly put on the cloak like he showed me and followed him into the garrison proper.

◆◆◆

I'd figured as much from my passing glimpse of the exterior, but as expected, the inside of the garrison was huge, especially in comparison to the tiny gatehouse. It had clearly been built on a hill; as soon as we passed through the gatehouse, a vast space unfolded upward, dominated by a fanning stone staircase that rose at least fifty steps. We trekked up the stairs and stepped into a cobblestone plaza. A grand red carpet stretched from the top of the stairs toward the large building at the center. *This'd be where they do the big ceremonial salutes and all that crap when the top brass come to visit, I guess.*

As I followed Dante toward the central building—careful to avoid stepping on the carpet as I did—we passed through the massive open doorway and a short hall that led immediately into a wide courtyard. Men and women were scattered all around, practicing with various weapons alone or facing off against each other in mock fights, but the second Dante and I entered the courtyard, all swords stilled, and inquisitive eyes locked onto a new target—me.

I couldn't really blame them. After all, if I were in their shoes and Godolphen had strong-armed his way into getting a first-year student admitted into their ranks, I'd be curious too.

"So you finally made it, Allen Rovene," called a voice. It belonged to a grinning young man, his own black cloak swirling behind him as he approached us. I'd seen his face before. "My name's Justin—Justin Lock. You probably don't remember me, yeah?"

"No, I do—you were manning the reception counter at the

physical exam, right? I didn't realize you were a royal knight..."

Justin laughed. "So you do remember! But I mean, they're pretty no-nonsense about who they let assist with the exams, after all—who *did* you think I was?"

"Uh...I thought you were a third-year they'd roped into helping or something... Sorry," I replied, feeling awkward.

He broke out into a fit of laughter. "Sorry, sorry," he finally choked out between gasping breaths. "It's just, they're *really* strict about the exams. Forget older students—not even teachers are allowed onto the grounds unless they're directly involved in the testing, and not many are. All to prevent any foul play, you know. Good on you, though—taking on the exams without even the basic background knowledge, and getting into Class A on top of it!"

My carefree father's to blame for that one, I think. He went on and on about how important it was to pick your examiner carefully, because your results basically depended on what mood your examiner was in... And yet, he didn't bother to tell me all the examiners came from the Order. Man, he can be useless sometimes.

I forced a smile, and Justin continued. "So if you didn't know who I was...then I'm guessing you didn't know *he* was a member of the Order either?" Grinning, he tilted his head, looking at something—someone—a few meters to the side of our little group. I followed his gaze. Two glowering eyes locked onto my own.

It was my examiner from the physical exam, looking just as hungover as he had all those weeks ago. He held a wooden sword like my own, resting it idly on his shoulder as he scowled in my direction. Apparently, he was in just as bad of a mood today as he had been the last time we'd crossed paths. *He* did *say he was in charge of security throughout the exams...but I wouldn't have pegged him as a royal knight either.*

Unlike the others in the courtyard, Stubble-Face wasn't wearing a black cloak, but going off what Justin had just said, he was definitely a member of the Order too. *Oh yeah, Godolphen did say the Order started helping with exam security after the Red Carpet Inci—*

I cut myself off mid-thought. *Nope, I'm trying to forget I ever heard about that stupid affair.* Besides, the exams were long over,

and I didn't have any reason to deal with that drunkard today. *Not like I wanted to deal with him back then either... I'll just avoid him as much as possible.*

And then Justin leaned in, a broad grin across his face that could only be described as *wicked*. "He's a little hungover today, so be careful, okay?" he said in a low voice.

I caught a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye. The next moment, Stubble-Face was there, swinging his wooden sword toward Justin with ferocious speed.

How did he hear that from ten meters away?! Is he a bat?!

His sword slashed through the air, much faster than it had in the exam. Justin lurched out of the way with a laugh, leaving me exposed to the incoming attack.

Stubbly bastard—was he just aiming for me right from the start? I realized the danger just in time, somehow managing to catch the blow with the flat of my own sword. I used the force of Stubble-Face's attack to my advantage and let myself fly backward, putting some ground between myself and him. I stuck out my left hand to steady myself and caught Justin's eye; he'd begun to slide to the right, circling around Stubble-Face's back. He flashed me another of his boyish grins and a nod, as though indicating I should do the same. Returning his grin with a smirk of my own, I followed his lead, beginning to circle to the left.





That was when Dante intervened. "All right, enough. You don't stand a chance against Dew with just the two of you, and I don't want to deal with any injuries today."

"Screw you, Justin," spat Stubble-Face, not showing any signs of backing down. "Hungover? You and me both went straight from being on duty yesterday to chasing down and arresting those turncoat bastards selling our secrets across the border! When the *hell* would I have had time to drink, huh?!"

Uh...I misheard that, right?

It almost *sounded like Dante just called the grumpy dude "Dew"...*

Justin sighed, resting his wooden longsword back over his shoulder. "And just when it was getting good... Oh well. Hey, Dew—should we get the introductions over with, then?"

Justin just said it too? Nah, no way. Heydew—that's what he must have called him! Heydew. That could be a name, right?

Before I could convince myself, though, Dante started the introduction I was beginning to dread. "I'm assuming you remember him from your physical exam, but for the sake of protocol—I'd like to officially introduce the captain of the Third Legion of the Order of the Royal Knights of Yugria: Captain Dew Orwell the Untouchable!"

You're kidding me.

There wasn't any way I could convince myself I'd misheard this time. This was, unfortunately, the reality of it.

Fine. I don't care if he's got a bad attitude, as long as he can teach me what I want to know. Summoning up my best customer-service smile, I sank into a respectful forty-five-degree bow. "Thank you for your kind treatment during the exam! Allen Rovene, Royal Academy, reporting for duty! It's an honor to meet you once again, Captain Dew!" I lifted my head, pasting on another award-winning smile.

A vein throbbed in Dew's forehead. "An honor? Right... Then what've you got in your hand, huh?"

Shit, he saw me?! What, does he have eyes in the back of his head or something?

"Uh...it's a very pretty stone I picked up on the way here... Look,

isn't it beautiful?"

I'd secretly picked it up when I'd caught myself after Dew's attack earlier, thinking I could maybe use it to blind him if the opportunity arose mid-fight. I could feel my perfect smile twitching as I gently placed the entirely nondescript pebble back on the ground. *Nothing to see here, everyone.*

◆◆◆

"Well, as you heard, I'm Dew Orwell," Stubble-Face said, still scowling. "I thought the sage might have straightened you out a little by now, but you're clearly still the same ill-mannered brat you were back then. At the very least, that sorry excuse for swordplay they taught you in whatever backwoods place you came from is looking slightly more competent now," he scoffed, pausing for a moment as his eyes flickered to my hands. "And those calluses...they weren't there last time I met you. You got a bow?"

He figured all that out from locking swords once?

I'd been paired up with Leo for every practical class since school had started, and I was pretty sure I'd absorbed at least some of the elegance and fluidity of his swordplay, which he himself had learned from (allegedly) one of the finest instructors in the kingdom. I lost about eighty percent of our bouts. Frustrated, I'd tried to swap partners several times, but I'd always been waved off with a, *"Nah, I've got no chance against Leo"* from whoever I'd cornered (I didn't see how that was *my* problem, though). Ultimately, I was stuck with Leo nearly all of the time.

Interestingly, both Dan, who was usually an even match for me, and Stella, whose skills slightly surpassed my own, couldn't hold their own against Leo for more than a minute at a time. My working theory was that I was more accustomed to sparring with opponents far more powerful than myself—namely, my mother and sister—which meant I had more tricks up my sleeve to deal with a monster like Leo.

"That's right," I replied. "I've been dabbling in archery recently while working as a part-time explorer."

"Dabbling in it?" Justin laughed. "Those hands tell me you're more than dabbling." He peered closely at my rough palms and battered fingers, and I smiled awkwardly.

"Well, I hope they'll look a little nicer by the time I can shoot the way I'd like to. These"—I wiggled my fingers—"just prove I've got a long way to go." I wasn't being humble. I knew I was nowhere near good enough to be satisfied yet.

"Boy." One woman had extricated herself from the ring of cloaked onlookers and strode over to our little group. She was probably around the same age as Dew, and she was nearly just as scary looking too. "Show me your hands."

I must have appeared quite bewildered at the sour-faced woman's request, because Dante jumped in with an explanation. "This is Kiana—although most people know her as Godshot Kiana, both here in Yugria and beyond the borders. She's one of the best archers in the kingdom. She used to be an A-Rank explorer too, so she's your senior in that regard as well as here in the Order."

And a person with all those accolades is just standing here in this garrison? Huh... As requested, I obediently held out my hands, and she inspected them curiously for what felt close to a minute before turning to the still-grumpy Stubble-Face (who I now knew to be Dew). "Captain, I'd like to see him shoot. May I?"

"I don't care. Rare for you to show interest in another archer, though, isn't it?"

Kiana ignored him and turned back to me, still looking stern. "What bow do you usually use, boy?"

"Uh, a Rygo 5... It's just a cheap, basic one," I mumbled awkwardly.

To my surprise, Kiana smiled in response. "Simple doesn't mean bad—it's a decent choice, actually. I'm pretty sure there's a spare Rygo over in the armory. Wait here for a minute."

See, I knew the manager at Singlord knew what she was talking about. I vowed to visit again soon, now that I was earning some real money, and repay Rouge for all her help.

◆◆◆

Kiana returned a few minutes later cradling a Rygo 5, a quiver of wooden arrows, and a strange bird-shaped object she quickly explained was a magical target. She demonstrated by circulating her magic over her hand and flinging the device into the air, where it began to flap around just like a real bird.

"Try and hit it, boy," she said, gesturing at the fake bird swooping freely around the courtyard.

"Er, isn't it a little dangerous?"

"If anyone here is dumb enough to get caught unawares by an arrow they can see you shooting, then it's on them. Forget about anything else; just focus on hitting the decoywing."

Shrugging, I strung one of the arrows and quickly let off a shot. It flew straight for the decoywing, but the bird shot upward at the last second, and my arrow instead bounced off one of the windows set into the courtyard walls. Thankfully, the glass must have been fairly strong, because it didn't shatter.

"Try again," Kiana commanded.

I narrowed my focus on the decoywing's movements more closely this time. After the runesheep had dodged my shot back on the excursion with Pops, I'd dedicated hours of practice toward honing my maximum power and speed. I relied on every last second of those hours of practice now as I readied the bow, sending three arrows soaring through the air one after another.

"Argh!"

The decoywing had dodged the first shot again, but my second, slightly higher arrow struck true, sending it crashing to the ground. The *third* arrow, which I'd aimed lower in case it fled downward, instead missed Dew's cheek by just a hair. It'd caught him off guard as he'd been idly picking his nose—thus the shout.

"You lousy rat! Why'd you fire a third arrow anyway?! You got a grudge against me or something?!"

I hurriedly shook my head. "It was an accident—sorry! I've never seen one of those birds before, so I wasn't sure if it would fly up or down! Of *course* I don't have a grudge against you, Captain." *The only grudge I'm still holding on to is against my former boss, and that was a lifetime ago.* "Seriously, I'm in awe! It only took you a

split second to realize the arrow wouldn't hit you, so you didn't even dodge..."

He... He did realize, right? Kiana sounded pretty sure I wouldn't hit anyone, so I fired a few extra arrows without worrying about it... If I did *hit him, I'm guessing it would be a problem, huh...?* I glanced around the courtyard. Excluding Justin, who'd collapsed in a fit of laughter, everyone else was looking decidedly nervous—just as nervous as I was starting to feel.

◆◆◆

Kiana coughed awkwardly, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "Well, you're clearly self-taught—not badly so, however. How old were you when you first took up the bow?"

"Um, about a month younger than I am now? It hasn't been long..."

Kiana froze for a moment, her eyes widening almost imperceptibly. "Very impressive, then..." she finally murmured. "With a bit more work on technique and awareness, you'd soon be able to count yourself among the finer archers in the kingdom. In particular, a few minor adjustments to your grip and drawing technique should result in significant improvements to your speed and accuracy..."

Kiana then began a spontaneous lecture on bowmanship. I hadn't expected to receive such a generous gift of knowledge today, but I gratefully accepted it. Unfortunately, while the Academy did maintain a very impressive archery range, there weren't any archery instructors among the many staff. After all, most people in this world prioritized magic above all else—whether Strengthening or Emissive—and bows weren't usually the weapon of choice in a school known for producing scores of outstanding knights. Teaching myself had been my only option, but even I knew I was approaching the limit of what I could master on my own.

Eventually, Kiana's lecture drew to an end, and I thanked her wholeheartedly, adding that I'd love to talk to her again if she had the time. The techniques she'd explained to me were easy enough to understand, but I knew it would take a lot of practice—and

probably some more advice—before I could master them, if ever. She happily agreed. I'd initially thought the sour-faced woman was pretty scary, but I was starting to reconsider. It seemed like she could be pretty friendly if you got used to her.

"Now that I come to think of it, though," Kiana started as we were about to part ways, "aren't you here to ask Captain Dew to take you on as an apprentice? You must have a pretty good reason to have come this far, though I can't imagine why."

Huh? I guess Godolphen didn't explain much to them... I'd let myself get completely sidetracked by archery talk, but I'd come here today for a far more important reason. I wanted to get one step closer to achieving my ultimate goal in this new life: learn Emissive Magic. From what Godolphen had implied, I wouldn't be able to find all the answers I wanted here, but all I needed was a hint. One clue, and I'd be satisfied.

I took a step toward Dew. The customer-service smile had vanished from my face; I didn't need any niceties now. All I needed was passion, and I had that in spades.

I dropped into a respectful bow. "Captain Dew Orwell!" I cried. "I am cursed with a lack of elemental affinity, but there is nothing I want more than to use Emissive Magic. Why? Because it's awesome! I know it's irrational, but I'll do anything—*anything*—to gain that power. Master Godolphen thinks you might hold the key, so please—take me on as your apprentice!"

I lifted my head, holding my breath in anxious anticipation. Dew was staring back at me, eyebrows furrowed, but he didn't say a word. The seconds of silence felt like eons, stretching on until finally—he opened his mouth.

"Hmm... Nope."

His response, while disappointing, was pretty much what I'd expected. Godolphen had said all he could do was arrange an introduction, after all; there'd been no guarantee Dew would accept my request.

But I wasn't going to give up after a single rejection either. I quickly analyzed the situation in my head, figuring out what I had in my hand and which cards were best to play. This was where we

entered negotiations.

"Captain Dew, I'm aware you are incredibly busy, far more so than a humble student like me could ever understand. I swear to you that, to the best of my ability, I will strive to ensure my presence never becomes a burden to you! Furthermore, I can promise taking me on as an apprentice will benefit you just as it will benefit me—whenever I'm here, I'll take care of all the little jobs you don't have time for. You might not think I'd be much help, but I'm trained in the Vineforce Method of Personal Assistance and Administration. You won't find a better person to deal with paperwork in the whole kingdom, I swear it. Please, take me on!"

Continuing what was becoming a regular habit of invoking Soldo's name whenever it benefited me, I lowered my head deeply once more. The first card I'd chosen to play—showing Dew he could use me to complete menial tasks—wasn't really much of an embellishment beyond me rebranding it as one of Soldo's lessons, though. In my past life, I'd spent countless hours completing any and all tasks my coworkers had pushed off onto me.

And I'm damn good at it—they didn't call me "Mr. AI" for nothing, I'll have you know! Pretty sure they didn't mean it as a compliment, though...

Give me a task that required a smidgen of creative thought and I would have floundered, but give me a menial job anyone could do but nobody wanted to? No one could surpass me.

With a start, I realized Dew was grinning at me. *Did I win him over already?*

"Well, that does change things!" he said, still grinning in a way that made me uncomfortable. "Up until now, I was wondering what the hell the old man was up to, but now—oh, do I have a lotta work for you, kid! In fact, why don't I get them to set up a room for you? You can move in and live here from today onward!"

Oh, right... I remembered that grin now. It was the same grin you'd see on your boss's face when he dropped a stack of his own work on your desk before heading home. It didn't faze me, though. If it got me the answer I needed, a little bit of paperwork and a few odd jobs weren't a high price to pay.

"There's just one *little* problem, though." Unfortunately, just when I'd started to think I'd won, Dew continued. "I don't have a lick of elemental affinity either, and I've never heard of any methods, research, or even a drunkard's ramblings about a way to get it! But, oh well. We'll figure something out!" His grin was decidedly evil now.

What?! I thought with a sigh. *Well, it's not like I didn't predict this could happen either.* One part of me wanted to start kicking things and cussing Godolphen out, but nothing would come of it now, especially since he wasn't even here. I'd have to play the card I'd prepared just in case of this particular outcome.

"Erm, can I be excused, please? My stomach hurts..."

◆◆◆

"So, the Emissive Magic you're so fixated on—I assume I'd be right in guessing you're seeking an elemental affinity geared toward offense?" Dante asked, and I nodded enthusiastically in response. He frowned slightly. "Hmm... I'm not really sure what the sage's planning, but considering who we're talking about, sending you here was probably just one part of a much bigger strategy. If I had to guess why he went through all the trouble of arranging an introduction with Dew... Hmm." Dante crossed his arms, deep in thought.

Huh? Is there actually something special about Stubble-Face, then? Anticipation coiled tightly in my chest as I waited for Dante's next words, but it was Justin who jumped in next.

"It's gotta be for Allen to learn mana circulation through Scouting Magic then, right? In any case, even if he does manage to pick up elemental affinity somewhere, he'd have to master mana circulation before he could cast anything Emissive. Plus, I'd bet the sage's main goal is to try and get Allen signed up with the Order before he's done with the Academy, yeah?" Justin's laughter rang out.

Just like that, my optimism was gone, leaving only a dull sense of disappointment in its wake. *That's all I came here for?* Disappointment aside, though, I had already realized the importance of learning Scouting Magic soon, and I *had* been planning to turn my

attention to it next if my introduction to Dew hadn't led me anywhere...

But on the other hand, I didn't know if it was going to be worth wasting my already scarce time doing odd jobs for the captain just to learn it from him, as opposed to going with literally any other instructor I could find. I'd long since decided I would live however I wanted this time around, and "however I wanted" certainly didn't involve another lifetime of menial desk work. When I thought about it that way, accepting this opportunity would just be putting the cart before the horse. I could probably learn Scouting Magic just as easily from Godolphen or one of the other teachers at the Academy, or otherwise just teach myself like I had with the bow.

I had to make sure that was the right choice, though. "Is the captain really good at Scouting Magic or something?" I asked Dante.

"When it comes to Scouting Magic, he's probably the best in the kingdom. If he wanted to, he could probably hear every ongoing conversation around the garrison—and see the tiniest movements of every person in this courtyard—without moving an inch," Dante replied without hesitation.

I couldn't help myself. "Peeping is a crime, though, isn't it?"

Another vein bulged in Dew's forehead. "Who are you calling a Peeping Tom, you little punk?! And there's anti-Scouting devices installed in all of the private rooms anyway, stupid! Unless you're in some bumpkin town, Scouting Magic only picks things up outside, you get it? *Outside!* Piss off outta here, you goddamn brat!"

"Come on now, Dew," said Justin, still chuckling. "You know you can't chase him out now that he's a provisional member—especially not with the official orders you received, right? Besides, the sage sent him here to learn from you, and we all know he expects great things from the kid. The kingdom's gonna be far better off if it has two scouts at your level when push comes to shove. I mean, a second Dew Orwell? The strategic value is insane. Plus, your work is gonna get a lot easier with him around. What's the problem?"

I can't really see it, but he must be pretty special if even the most talented knights in the kingdom treat him like he's on another level... Maybe it is worth begging him to teach me after all? On the other

hand, it actually seemed as though Dew couldn't really refuse me either way. Maybe it'd be better to wait and see how things turned out rather than risk embarrassing myself with unnecessary groveling.

I was still deliberating the best course of action when Dante jumped back into the conversation. "Why don't we start with a demonstration? Even if we say Dew's the best hand at Scouting Magic in the kingdom, the kid probably has no idea what that actually looks like."

Dew sighed, his arms remaining crossed in a way that was anything but welcoming. "Fine. Look here, brat. I'll show you some basic Scouting Magic. If it doesn't interest you, then buzz off and don't come back—no one's going to give you a hard time if you do." He raised an eyebrow. "Don't bother yourself with what Justin said either. You've got things you want to do, right? Brats like you only grow if they're left to their own goals. I'll handle stuff on this end if you decide to resign, so do whatever you want."

That caught me off guard. I hadn't expected he'd actually tell me to prioritize myself and my future, nor that he'd even been watching me closely enough to know what I was really focused on. I admonished myself for mistrusting the captain so easily, just like I had Godolphen, purely on account of some bad experiences I'd had with my superiors in my previous lifetime.

I bowed deeply once more, this time genuinely feeling the respect behind the gesture. "Thank you, Captain. I'd love to see a demonstration."

◆◆◆

"So, it seems like you've never tried to use Scouting Magic before, but why? With your instincts for Strengthening Magic, it's weird you *don't* already use it."

"I've just never been particularly interested in it, honestly. There's no specific reason or anything." *It's not like I can just come out and say "it's not cool enough for me to want to learn it" to the kingdom's best Scout, after all.*

I thought my answer hadn't been too dubious, but Dew saw right

through me regardless. “I get it. When you’re a kid, you want to cast flashy spells. I was the same. I got over it by the time I was your age, but still.”

His expression shifted in an instant, his lazy eyes narrowing into sharp concentration. He unfolded his arms, letting them drift naturally to his sides. The change in the atmosphere was like night and day; he was casting.

“Right now, I’m reinforcing my hearing,” he started, his voice lower and calmer than before. “It’s the most effective way to grasp what’s happening at a distance. You concentrate your mana inside your ears, then push it out of your body slowly and spread it farther away, making sure not to break the connection—that’s the best way I can explain it, in any case.” He paused for a moment, concentrating. “Two knights have just come back from their patrol; they’re passing through the gate now. Patch won’t shut up about how much he wants to meet you.”

“Dew talks about it like it’s easy,” added Dante, “but few people could do what he’s doing now. Listening in on a conversation outside the walls from here, with all those anti-Scouting devices in the middle, is an incredibly difficult task indeed. You have to direct your mana over the walls without separating it from your body in the process.”

I see... It’s even more boring than I thought it’d be. Come on, where’s the charm, the allure? I’d have to find *something* that’d make the concept of Scouting Magic attractive to me. One thought came to mind.

“Did you use the same technique earlier to figure out I’d picked up the stone? I was pretty sure I was in your blind spot...”

“Huh?” Dew replied, thinking. “Yeah, I did catch the sound of it scraping against the ground when you picked it up, but I would have known anyway—I used my eyes, kid, not my ears. If you start by focusing your magic in your eyes and circulate it around an area, you can catch most of what’s going on even when it’s not in your direct line of sight. They’re weaker images, like seeing a reflection in water, and you can’t see color either. Since it requires constant and active mana circulation too, it’s difficult to cover an area any larger

than this one, even for me."

So the ears are like passive sonar, and the eyes are like active sonar? Or something along those lines.

I caught a flash of movement; Justin, who'd snuck behind Dew at some point, brought down his wooden longsword without even a hint of a sound. Effortlessly, Dew caught the attack on his own sword—and at the same time, he kicked out behind himself, sending Justin flying backward. Dew hadn't turned at all. "See, if you keep your hearing enhanced as a habit, even just a little, you can hear idiots like him coming and *then* focus on your eyes, widening your search area bit by bit. You expend less mana that way."

Justin stood up from where he'd been sprawled across the cobblestones, wincing as he rubbed his stomach. "I could see it a million times and it'd *still* be hard to believe..." He shuffled back over to us. "Allen, no matter what he tries to tell you, know this: There's only a few perverts out there who can use Scouting Magic well enough to see behind themselves. The majority of people can only use it for seeing better at night and stuff—you know, *normal* reasons... It's not something anyone can learn to do with just a bit of practice, okay?"

"Who're you calling a pervert, huh?!"

Magic only a chosen few can use? The mystical power to see what the naked eye can't grasp? Now we're getting somewhere!

"Awesome! What else can you do with Scouting Magic?"

"Huh? Now you're interested all of a sudden?" Dew replied, seemingly confused. "What else... Well, it doesn't work very well against human opponents, but..."

Whoosh. A concentrated ball of mana rushed past me like the wind itself, ruffling the edges of my cloak. I felt a vague sense of dread, almost as though he'd packed sheer *bloodlust* into the mana before severing the connection.

"You can use that one against animals and monsters to scare them off. It's a handy trick to have up your sleeve if they've got you cornered."

I fell to my knees, assuming the position that had expressed utmost, earnest pleading in my past life (although, as I belatedly

remembered, in this world it was the position the guilty party assumed when standing trial). "Captain Dew! I underestimated the greatness of Scouting Magic. Please, I beg you—take me on as your apprentice!"

◆◆◆

When Dew's mana had rushed through me, it'd been as though I'd been zapped by an electric current. It had sparked something, a subconscious thought deep within me that had never quite managed to take solid form...until now.

There was no wind affinity in this magical world.

Wasn't it odd such a clichéd attribute, one that had appeared in every light novel I'd ever read, just didn't exist in this world? And wasn't it just as odd that, conveniently, what *did* exist here was a form of Emissive Magic without any elemental alignment? Unless...

Unless Scouting Magic *was* wind magic.

My cloak had been moved; that was undeniable. Which meant the magic Dew had wielded *did* possess physical power. And if it was possible to generate that wind just by circulating mana, *without* converting that mana into another element, then this was something I could do too.

I was onto something—I was sure of it. But I did have one doubt: If anyone could theoretically do this, then why had no one else ever realized the potential?

I was still racking my brain for answers, bent over with my forehead to the ground, when the two knights Dew had scouted earlier entered the courtyard.

"Oh, man!" cried one, sounding disappointed. "Did we miss all the fun? Why is he down on his knees, anyway?" I glanced at the newcomer, a lanky younger man. I remembered his face too—he was the kind-looking examiner who'd had a crowd around him back during the exam.

"Nah, you got here just in time, Patch," replied Justin. I could nearly hear the smirk he was surely wearing. "The kid had absolutely no interest in joining up until a moment ago. But now...I guess

there's been a change in the winds?"

I stopped thinking. There was no need. What was certain was that I could learn to create wind from my magic, without any elemental affinity. Now that I knew that, I wouldn't stop until I had explored every possibility this new discovery had to offer. I stood up slowly, casting my eyes around the courtyard. All gazes turned to me. They could sense something was coming.

A vow. My vow.

"I, Allen Rovene, will train in Scouting Magic under Master Dew; I will become a mage who uses the power of the wind to destroy my enemies! I will live freely like the wind itself, leaving my fate to the breeze! I will become the greatest wind mage this world has ever seen!"

◆◆◆

My forceful, frenzied declaration rendered everyone silent, although the looks on their faces said what their mouths couldn't: *What is this guy on about?*

A single laugh cut through the silence. "Ha ha ha. A wind mage? I like it! You're talking about normal wind, right? Like, *whoosh*, *whoosh*, leaves drifting in the breeze? Man, that's the best! You're crazy." Patch broke out into another fit of laughter, clapping excitedly.

Dew scratched his head. "I don't care what your goals are, really, but...how exactly do you plan to destroy any of your enemies with the *wind*?"

I rifled through the knowledge from my past life, searching for the basics of wind magic. "Well, obviously, you'd mostly use Wind Cutter. Make a blade out of wind and send it right through the enemy."

"A blade? Since when is the wind sharp enough to cut through anything?"

Hmm... He's not wrong. But according to light novels...

"The secret lies in creating a vacuum—a space where air doesn't exist. If you could create a vacuum blade, it'd definitely cut through

a person...I think."

"If the air doesn't exist, then how is it *wind* magic? More importantly, do you really think it's gonna be that easy to remove the air, create a—what did you call it? Right, a vacuum—just by circulating your magic? And let's say you *could* do it. Why would a *lack* of air be sharp?"

Again, he wasn't wrong... But I had once read about what would happen if a human got ejected into outer space. The lack of pressure would expand the oxygen in their lungs, and they'd basically explode. The human body had to constantly maintain equilibrium with the atmosphere, keeping an even pressure inside and outside the body, which was why people got sick at extreme altitudes. It was like what happened when you carried a bag of potato chips to the top of Mount Fuji; when something couldn't adjust to a different level of pressure, it would swell and burst.

"The pressure in the air is constantly bearing down on all living things. We don't ever notice it, but the force is actually pretty incredible. If the *external* pressure suddenly vanished, like in a vacuum, the internal pressure our bodies put out to counteract it would race out of control and cause a lot of damage to our organs, or lead to our blood boiling and rupturing our veins...I'm pretty sure."

I trailed off awkwardly. The way everyone was looking at me—half warmly, half annoyed—was the same way you'd look at an overexcited toddler. In a world that hadn't even discovered the concept of a vacuum, there was no chance anyone could understand my explanation. And it wasn't like I could bring up how sturdy spaceships had to be to withstand the pressure in outer space as an example. Hurriedly, I racked the recesses of my mind for a simpler wind-based spell, something like a level-3 spell from a video game—basically, something they might be able to comprehend.

"Okay, what about using the wind to create a Hurricane, then? Using magic to recreate the raging wind of a tempestuous storm! If you could cast a strong enough spell, you could easily send a person flying, flip a carriage, or even destroy a building!"

"Is wind capable of destroying a building, though?" Dew shot

back with a smirk. “It’s a little hard to imagine it, but sure, let’s say it’s possible. Even then, if you were somehow capable of manipulating mana at such an insane level, it’d be way more efficient to just smash the thing to rubble with Strengthening Magic and a hammer.”

Again, he’s not wrong... Stop rebutting my arguments! Incidentally, while hurricanes and typhoons did exist in this world, they didn’t occur around this kingdom, so it made sense that a bunch of Yugrian knights couldn’t understand just how powerful the wind could truly be. *But forget that. Besides, I’m not talking about efficiency here! I’m talking about how awesome magic can be, whether it’s practical or not!*

Chuckles began to echo throughout the courtyard.

“Hey, it’s nice for a kid to have dreams! If you learn how to fly, make sure to teach me too! Ha ha ha!”

“Hey, if he learns to fly, then we’ll all be calling him *Master*! You should learn how to flip girls’ skirts while you’re up there too! Now *there’s* a spell I’d pay to learn!”

Poorly concealed laughter rang out all around me.

These bastards... One day, you’ll see exactly *what the wind is capable of!* Angry and desperate, I pulled all of my magic to the surface of my skin and sent it rushing around my body, focusing on a single image in my head.

Level-4 Spell: Tornado.

“Grrrraaaah!”

Wind whipped around me, and the laughter stopped in an instant.

“I don’t—I can’t believe it... In just one or two seconds, he’s circulating enough mana to create a breeze?”

“No, he’s just released it—it’s not circulating! Oy, kid! Rein it in! You’re gonna kill yourself!”

Oh, right... I have to keep circulating the magic through my body... My mana was depleting at a worrying rate. I tried to direct the stream of magic flowing out of my right hand back into my left, hoping to create a loop, but I couldn’t get it to stick. It wasn’t like mana compression, where you let magic go and restored it in the next breath. If you weren’t looping your mana to start with, it was

nearly impossible to force your magic back into circulation once it was already released.

I was fading, but I didn't care. I'd shown these bastards: Wind magic was something to be feared. A moment later, the last few vestiges of my mana rushed out of me, and I blacked out.

◆◆◆

The turbulent wind whistled through the courtyard, ruffling jet-black cloaks and messing up Dew's hair. Then it dissipated like it had never been there to begin with.

Allen collapsed to the ground. No one rushed to his side. Everyone was still frozen, shocked by what they'd seen.

Dante swallowed nervously. "To figure out how to create wind just by watching you cast Scouting Magic—and to be able to sustain it long enough to exhaust himself... It's like you said, Dew. His instincts for magic manipulation are unlike anything I've ever seen before."

A wicked grin had spread across Dew's face, as though he were a wolf discovering helpless prey. "He's a wild little brat, that's for sure. He heard me at the end and managed to circulate his magic—not enough to help, but he did it. Plucked it right back from the air. And did you see *how* he did it? Releasing it from his right hand and absorbing it with his left." Dew let out a low chuckle. "I hate to admit it, but his magic manipulation is on a whole other level, even compared to mine. I can't even guess how much the gap will widen after we throw some Scouting Magic into the mix."

There wasn't much that could render the Third Legion speechless, but today, it seemed being dumbfounded had been a regular occurrence. Every knight present was keenly aware Dew Orwell's reputation as a Scout relied on his seldom-matched talent for magic manipulation.

"You were right—we *did* get here just in time to see the fun. The mage who destroys his enemies with the wind... This will probably be the last time anyone laughs at that introduction, you know," said Patch. His eyes glimmered with eager anticipation.





The Birth of a Mage

"Hey, Allen! Man, I didn't think I'd see you here anytime soon!"

It was Al. A few weeks had passed since that day at the Central Garrison, and for once, I'd decided to show my face at a meeting of the Emissive Magic Research Club—I hadn't been to a single one since I'd forced the others to start it. As it turned out, watching those chosen few wield their cool magic—magic *I* couldn't use—was really depressing. Although, in the time I'd been away, those "chosen few" club members had apparently swelled into more of a "chosen many"...

Show-offs.

"Oh, hey, Allen. You said you were going to focus on exploring for a bit to earn some money, right? Everything okay on that front now?" Dolph had jogged up to join us. A buzz of excited whispers filled the room, probably on account of my sudden visit.

"Yes, all sorted! I apologize for my absence, Co-Captain. I've made enough to cover my expenses for the near future, so I'll strive to attend every meeting from now onward! Thank you for overlooking my disrespectful truancies!" I bowed, and the room erupted in discussion, all centered around my humble attitude toward Dolph.

"I'm begging you...please just talk to me like you do in class..."

"Impossible, Co-Captain. Whenever we're within these walls, I'll be treating you with the respect an amazing mage deserves. Although, if I take a look around..." I trailed off, scanning the groups of students scattered in twos and threes around the room. "I'm not sure the *other* club members have truly realized just how much awe they ought to hold you in." My glance turned into a harsh glare as I tried to mimic the outlaw characters I'd idolized in all those novels. To my delight, there was an audible *gulp* of collective nervousness.

"Don't act like a hoodlum, Allen," Dolph admonished me. "And I can't do it. I can't be a strict leader like you can."

I yanked Dolph over into a corner where the others wouldn't

overhear us. “I told you, you don’t need to be strict with *people*—just on the group as a *whole*. Don’t stress yourself over it! Just hold them to the same standards you hold yourself to and everything will be fine.”

“The standards I hold myself to?” he replied, confused.

Dolph could do anything with ease. Some might chalk it up to natural talent, but that hardly did justice to the depth of the effort he put in. To Dolph, being *able* to do something was just the beginning; he was always testing his limits, pushing himself to grow even further. Even the briefest glance at his Hill Path Club progress report made that abundantly clear. In many ways, he surpassed most of the students in Class A—no easy feat considering how many “prodigies” and “once-in-a-generation talents” shared our classroom.

He still looked like a hastily drawn background character come to life, though.

“You need to have more pride in yourself, Dolph! Numbers aren’t the only way to measure ability. In some ways, you’re even more talented than Leo!”

I’d thrown him under the bus a little when I’d set up the club, but in the time we’d spent together since then, I’d really grown to like Dolph, and I had high hopes for him. If he gained a little more confidence, he’d evolve—of that, I was absolutely certain. It pained me to see him waste his potential when said potential was so *obvious*. I hoped, through the leadership role I’d forced him into here, he’d gain more confidence—and when he did, that he’d be able to show me the awesome magic I yearned to see, magic only he could cast.

Dolph groaned. “I’ve got no idea why you have so much faith in me when I don’t, but...” He sighed. “Guess there’s not much I can do but give it a shot.”

There it was—just the faintest flicker of determination in his gaze.

Dolph and I headed back to the rest of the club, and Al zipped forward to meet us. “You okay, Dolph? Remember, you don’t have to go along with everything Allen tells you to do, yeah? You’ll ruin yourself if you try.” He grinned and turned to me. “What about you, Allen? How’s it going with the Order?”

Al might not have held the same respect for my opinion on club management, but I knew better: A group with strict leaders but no standards wasn't one anyone would want to join. There was no *charm*, no allure.

And as for the Order...

That day at the garrison, when I'd eventually opened my eyes after collapsing from exhaustion, the first words out of my mouth had been (once again) a plea for Dew to take me on as his apprentice. He'd accepted.

To get said apprenticeship, I'd needed to be admitted to the Order as a provisional member, which was a sort of internship usually restricted to third-year Academy students on their summer break. Godolphen had pulled some strings and manipulated the existing system so I could be admitted anyway, but I was certain his intervention hadn't gone unnoticed—or unopposed—by the concerned elite. So far, there had yet to be any repercussions. *Guess that's how much power the "right hand of the king" wields around here...*

"Yeah, things have started to settle down over there," I said, responding to Al. "When I signed up, the condition was that I'm only allowed to join in on Order training if it doesn't interfere with school. I skipped training today 'cause, as far as I'm concerned, showing up to at least one club meeting with you guys every week is a really important part of my school life."

Al nodded, grinning happily. "Well, I'm glad to see you—and I'm not the only one. Pretty sure a bunch of them signed up just so they could hang out with you during club time. See the girl over there with the braid? She's a massive fan of yours, apparently."

I looked in the direction he'd mentioned and locked eyes with a pretty girl who immediately looked away, blushing furiously.

She's adorable... I couldn't risk talking to her, though—not if she considered herself a "fan" of me. I'd hate to crush her dreams so quickly.

"So, Allen. Let's get down to it: What kind of research are you doing, anyway?" Al asked. He seemed a little...worried?

Well, as far as he knew, I couldn't use Emissive Magic. In his

shoes, I'd probably be just as concerned about what I might be getting up to in pursuit of such elusive power. But what he didn't know was... *Mwa ha ha.*

"I've discovered a path toward becoming a mage," I started, my voice brimming with confidence. "I've got a hell of a way to go, but I'm going to study alongside all of you, working toward the same goal everyone else here has—to become the best mage I can be."

The hushed whispers gave way to a thick silence, disturbed only by a few nervous gulps here and there around the room. Everybody here was probably well aware of my lack of elemental affinity.

After Dew had taken me on as an apprentice, I'd spent my time helping him out with paperwork and odd jobs—when I hadn't been participating in Order training—and in return, he'd been teaching me Scouting Magic, as well as how to use the mana-circulation techniques it relied on. On one hand, I was grateful for the training. But on the other hand...

It was brutal.

The previous weekend, I'd been training under Dew. I'd stubbornly kept practicing my mana circulation to the point of collapse, repeatedly ignoring his shouts to focus on enhancing my hearing. Naturally, in the end, he'd blown up at me. Under the pretext of "field research," he'd thrown me into a pitch-black cave inhabited by a swarm of vampire bat-like monsters—without a single torch or fire starter, of course. I had spent nearly twelve hours wandering around the cave before I'd finally found a way out.

Didn't he realize I could have died*?!*

On the plus side, though, my close brush with death had really cemented just how important it was to learn to enhance my hearing. The magic itself was useful enough, of course, but the technique it relied on—circulating my magic farther and farther away from my body without breaking the connection—was also going to be vital in my quest to use "wind magic." I knew there was a lot I could learn from the Scouting Magic scholars of the past. They might not have realized the true potential of the power they'd held, but their discoveries and techniques would surely help me push its limits.

"Are you serious?!" Al broke the silence, jumping in excitement.

"That's amazing, Allen! What kind of magic is it?"

Finally! Thanks for asking, Al!

"A type of magic born of external mana circulation—wind magic! Yes, that's right! I will live as freely as the wind—that's how I intend to become a mage!"

Al slumped, sighing. "Crazy talk again... So basically, what—you're using mana circulation to produce a breeze? What can you possibly use that for?"

I chuckled. "Let me show you. This, my friends, is what relentless effort can do." I relaxed my posture, letting my arms drift to my sides, and I breathed in deeply. I heard the others do the same, but they held those breaths, watching me in trepidation.

"*Haaaah!*" I pushed my magic to the surface, letting it whip around me in a whirlwind. Over the past few weeks, I'd grown capable of extending my miniature tornado farther from my body, sustaining the magical loop without any significant loss of mana. The windstorm I'd created stretched out about five meters in all directions, with a wind speed of around eight meters a second (by my best estimate).

"*Ahhh!*" Several girls screamed as they tried to push down their skirts, lifted by the wind, but to no avail. The cute girl with the braid whom Al had described as my "fan" was wearing a flashy pair of purple...

I sensed a stinging gaze and looked up to meet the teary eyes of the girl in question. "Sorry, sorry!" I hurriedly apologized. "I swear it wasn't on pur—"

"You're disgusting!" she shrieked. Her cry continued to echo as she ran from the room.

◆◆◆

Allen had taken his first steps on the path to becoming a mage.

Incidentally, his ingenious utilization of the fundamentals of Scouting Magic to develop a new, nonelemental form of Emissive Magic—one *anyone* could use—didn't receive the praise it truly deserved upon its debut at the Emissive Magic Research Club.

Allen's "Skirt-Flipping Spell," on the other hand, received *far* more attention than it deserved. Pervy boys joined the club in droves to try and see the spell in action for themselves, and after realizing how difficult the technique truly was, they took to calling Allen the "Skirt-Flipping Master," among other unflattering titles. On top of that, the dirty-minded (yet sharp-witted) boys took it upon themselves to analyze the spell, figuring out the minimum wind velocity and consistency needed to ensure optimal skirt flippage. They summarized their findings in what was referred to as "Allen's equation." Ultimately, Allen's painstaking discovery had been quickly labeled as no more than a naughty party trick.

Fey and Jewel laughed when they heard the rumors, and they took to wearing excessively short skirts whenever they and Allen crossed paths—but they were the only two girls who took any joy in the situation. Allen's reputation among the female student body plummeted, and the recent movement to start up an Allen fan club was swiftly trashed.

The wind had lifted some skirts, and in doing so, it had blown away his reputation. All in all, it was a bit like that old saying about the winds of change: No one could predict which way they'd blow.

Intermission: A Day in Class

One hundred students were admitted to the Royal Academy each year. With its three years of schooling, there were a total of three hundred enrolled students at any given time. While the exact percentages fluctuated each year, generally speaking, around half the students were enrolled in the knight course. Another thirty percent belonged to the mage course, a figure that included any students specializing in magical craftsmanship; the remaining twenty percent of students were of the bureaucrat course.

Classes at the Academy weren't divided based on a student's chosen major, however. They were organized according to each student's grades, which resulted in there being groups of students from all courses—a class structure rooted in the generalized

education policy the Academy proudly extolled. Students received a wider education than they would in specialized classes, and the combined structure also helped in the forging of connections among those who would go on to become significant leaders across the kingdom.

The Royal Academy had stood for over a thousand years, and it had gone through various structural and policy changes over time. There had been a period, centuries prior, when classes had been divided based on course; this had gradually resulted in the formation of strict factions within the school. The Academy board had realized the division of the student body would only lead to the division of society as a whole, considering how much power those students would wield after graduation. To avoid the breakdown of society as they knew it, the board had enforced a policy of integrated classes from that day onward.

Though the classes had been combined, students also started attending course-specific lessons from the second year onward in addition to their general classes, which meant there was little reason to ever consider returning to a course-based system.

◆◆◆

"From your recent lessons, I can see everyone's mastery of Magic Guard has improved quite nicely. Today, we'll be using it in a more realistic scenario. Most of you will be trying to close the distance between yourself and a mage while defending against their spells; those on the mage team will try to prevent your approach."

Hell yeah! Finally, we get to deal with Emissive Magic in class!

"I'll start with a demonstration. Is there someone who'd like to—"

My hand shot into the air.

Godolphen chuckled. "Very well! I like to see such enthusiasm in my students. Up here, Rovene."

I made my way to the front of the group. We were standing inside one of the many magical training facilities dotting the Academy grounds. Each facility was bigger than a soccer stadium, some enclosed and some open to the heavens; every one of them

served a slightly different purpose.

"Now, I'm sure you're all more than aware of the basics, so I'll touch on them but briefly. Emissive Magic refers to the act of releasing the magical power stored inside one's mana core and manipulating it *outside* the body. In a broad sense, we could consider this to include Scouting and other forms of magic that do not require one's mana to be transformed into an elemental medium. But in most regards, when we use the term 'Emissive Magic,' we are only referring to *elemental* magic."

Godolphen raised his right hand, waving the training wand for all to see. The careless way he held it belied the absolutely eye-watering price I'd discovered the specialized tools fetched. Those training wands contained precharged magic stones that served to dramatically lower the amount of mana a mage would expend during casting, and they were custom-made for the deep-pocketed Academy.

"Let's begin, shall we? We'll go slow to start off. Walk toward me while keeping your Magic Guard activated to repel my spells."

I'd barely turned to face Godolphen properly when a condensed clump of stone and dirt the size of my fist shot from the end of his wand, heading straight for my face. I cloaked my right arm in magic and swung, sending the mass flying away. A shower of sparkles glimmered as it shattered in midair, tiny slivers of stone and clods of dirt ricocheting in every direction.

That was so cool... Man, why can't I use elemental magic too?!

Godolphen harrumphed, seemingly annoyed, although he continued to smile. "Again." Another fist-sized lump came rocketing out of his wand. An eerie sense of foreboding stirred in my thoughts—I flooded my right hand with magic, guarding myself just in time to repel the attack with the back of my fist.

Boom. The earth shook as the lump of stony dirt—somehow much harder than the one before it—crashed to the ground before disintegrating into scattered shards of light.

"Oh?" Godolphen's tone was somewhere between frustrated and amused. "I thought I could throw you off by secretly increasing the power of the conjuration while keeping the casting time the same...

Have you done this before, boy?"

I shook my head, smirking. "Nope. Just had a bad feeling after I saw the suspicious smile on your face."

One of Godolphen's eyebrows twitched. He held up his wand again, another earthy missile already forming at the tip. "Hmph. Not bad for a first attempt, then—and a worthy demonstration for the rest of the class," he added, projecting his voice so everyone could hear. "When faced with an attacker using Emissive Magic, most would try to cover themselves completely with Magic Guard—which, unfortunately, tends to result in the severe depletion of one's mana reserves and limits one's opportunities to counterattack. Efficient guarding requires the ability to immediately judge how powerful each of your opponent's attacks are and to use only the absolutely necessary amount of mana to deflect them. What you'll find, however...is that the ability to read your opponent's moves isn't something that can be mastered overnight!" Before the last few syllables had even left his lips, Godolphen fired five of the earthen lumps at me in quick succession—physically identical, but definitely differing in power.

He was clearly underestimating my instincts for magic, though. Even without really thinking about it, I had a fairly decent grasp on the magical energy he'd compacted into each of the masses. *First one's easy—that's his normal output. Next one...if the last one's the baseline, then this is 130 percent. 150 percent. 120 percent. And...around 160 percent?* As I sent the last rocky bullet ricocheting away, I felt the ground shake under my feet. I flung myself backward just in time; a second later, the soil I'd previously been standing on shot out of the ground to form a towering pillar.

Uh...are you kidding me?

Godolphen was glowering at me suspiciously. I knew he wanted to question how I'd been able to dodge the attack, but he remained silent. From what I'd learned, manipulating the *actual* earth—rather than creating it out of your own mana—was a pretty advanced technique. He clearly hadn't expected me to foresee it, much less dodge it. Unfortunately for him, I'd spent a lot of time researching Emissive Magic in the library—but even if I hadn't, conjuring up

pillars had been a pretty hackneyed earth magic technique in all the light novels and games in my past life. Of course I'd expected it.

I shrugged at Godolphen, turning up my palms in the universal gesture that said, *Oh well, what can you do?* before answering the question he was dying to ask.

"I just had a feeling you were gonna try something, really. You had this gaudy, oh-so-kind smile on your face when you started your attack—the type only the most *rotten* adults have."

Godolphen let out a short, seething laugh. "Do you mean to pick a fight with me, Allen Rovene?!" he roared.

"Don't get so worked up over nothing, you stupid geezer!"

◆◆◆

In the end, after being chased around and beaten up by Godolphen for much longer than seemed appropriate, I was left nursing my wounds.

It just doesn't seem fair that, in a class where we're *meant to be cornering the mages, I end up getting chased around by one... Haven't you heard of false advertising, you old fogy?*

Seeing me get Godolphen all fired up—and subsequently getting beaten down by him—was no longer an unusual sight for my classmates, and they hadn't paid us any mind. By the time we'd settled down, the rest of the class had already divided themselves into three teams and started to practice, with Leo, Al, and Dolph taking on the roles of the attacking mages. Whenever one of the other students managed to touch the mage or was otherwise blown away by an attack, they'd move to the end of the line, and another student would tag in.

I hung back for a minute, trying to decide which group to join. All three of the mages had wildly different approaches to the role.

No one would contest that Leo's magical aptitude was on a whole different level than the rest of ours. He seemed to be casting carefully while his opponents were still far away, likely trying to preserve his mana and avoid injuring anyone. Whenever someone managed to get close, though, his competitive side came out in full

swing, and he'd quickly shoot off increasingly massive fireballs until they got so large, only someone in full fire-repellent armor could have stood a chance.

He's supposed to be smart, so I'm sure he understood what the point of the lesson's meant *to be... He's just got no intention of letting anyone break through.*

If I joined Leo's group, I'd probably just close in on him by dodging rather than guarding, and we'd end up in a no-holds-barred sword fight, no doubt. *Pass.*

I turned my eye to Al next. His magical aptitude wasn't as insane as Leo's, but he had a decent talent for magical manipulation, firing a relentless stream of uniform water bullets without breaking a sweat. The barrage only grew more intense the closer his opponent got, and most of the time, he broke through their Magic Guard before they managed to reach him. *Going up against Al would definitely be a good workout, but...*

I joined the line for Dolph's group without hesitation.

"Hey, Allen! Why're you here? I thought you'd be trying to smash through Leo's defense."

"There's no point trying to practice Magic Guard against that monster mage. Besides, it looks like a lot more fun to go up against you. Give me your best shot!"

Though visibly surprised by my apparent excitement, Dolph nodded in agreement.

◆◆◆

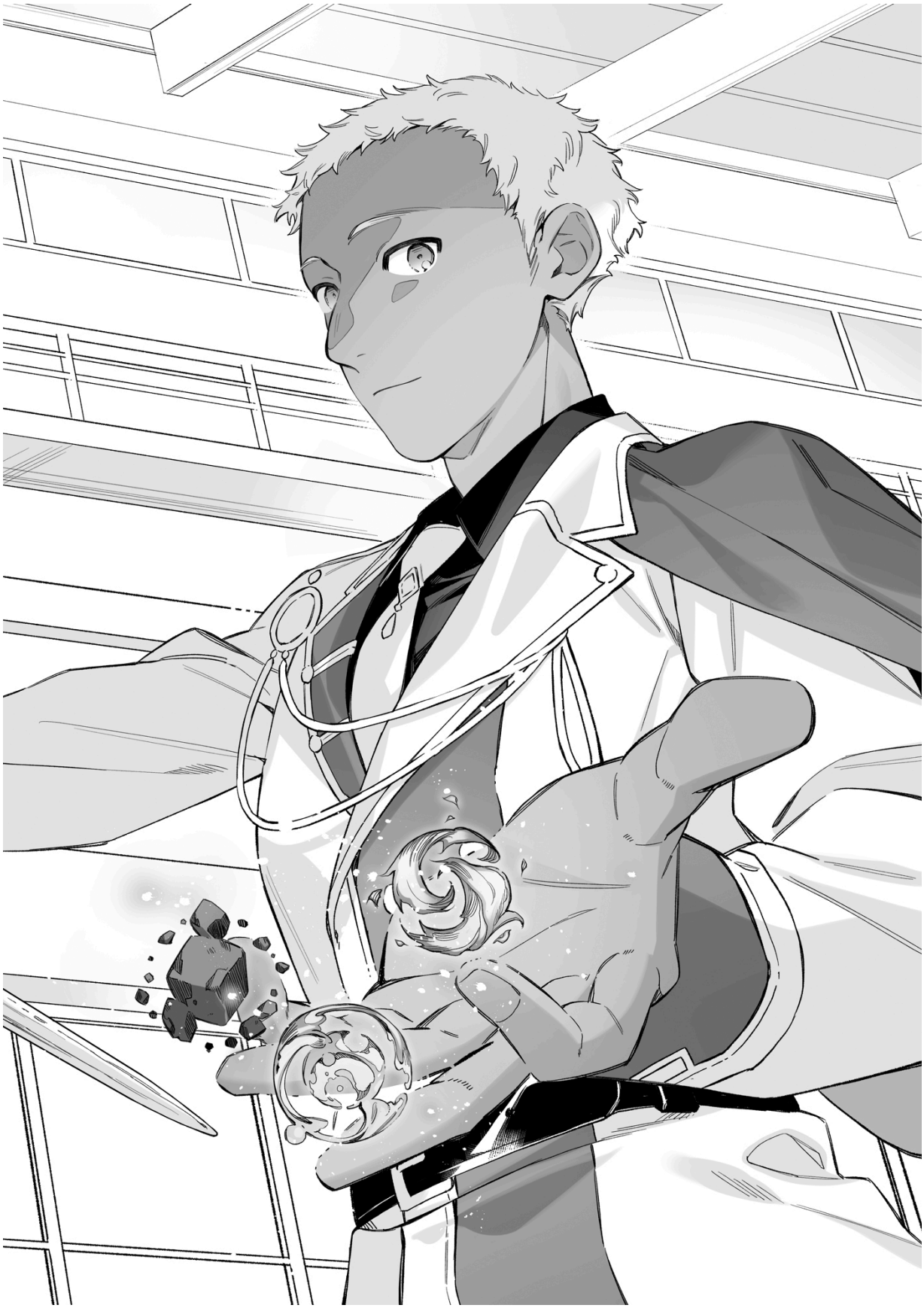
"Damn it!" I swore. "You're too good at this, Dolph! Let me have another go!"

No matter how many times I made my way to the front of the line, the end result was always the same. I'd yet to reach Dolph once.

Frankly, the control he had over his magic was unreasonable for someone our age. He could change the power of any of his spells with ease, doubling their strength for one attack and halving it for the next without any visible difference to the conjuration itself. One

error in judgment would send you flying across the facility. If this were a real battle, I could simply activate my Magic Guard at full power and rush him, but the point of this lesson was to block his spells with the *minimum* power necessary. Winning any other way would be a hollow victory.

I'd almost reached him once—at which point he'd started pelting me with bullets of water and stone in addition to the fireballs he'd been exclusively casting up until then. Back when we'd started up the Emissive Magic Club, he'd told me he'd only ever focused on his fire affinity despite possessing three others, not wanting to become a jack-of-all-trades and master of none. It seemed he'd changed his mind and had started working on his other affinities too.





At any rate, a barrage of spells from three of Dolph's four affinities would now fly at me every time my turn came around, all of them differing in power with each cast, and judging the necessary strength of my Magic Guard while trying to gain any ground was a near-impossible task.

I misjudged the power of yet another water bullet and went crashing to the ground, yelling in frustration. "It's too hard, Dolph! Even demons should show a little restraint!"

"My turn." I looked behind me to find Leo standing there. I hadn't noticed him wandering over. "Same conditions as Allen," he pressed, flashing his usual fearless grin.

"And then me!" added Al, running to jump in line behind Leo. "What? It looks fun."

Another shadow passed over me. "Very impressive, Rudolph Austin. I hope you won't mind letting me try my hand too?"

Get in line, old man.

By the time class ended, I'd witnessed everyone take a shot at Dolph under "Allen's conditions"—and all of them, Godolphen included, had been trounced spectacularly.

The way I'd been challenging Dolph meant victory could only be achieved if you reached him without using unnecessarily strong Guarding. You'd immediately know if you'd overestimated the strength of a spell because it would explode into a shower of sparkling light as it hit your Guard rather than simply being repelled, just like the first few spells I'd countered of Godolphen's. And since Dolph's movements gave no hint as to the true power of any of the spells he cast, more often than not, my classmates would reinforce their defenses more than necessary, sending them to the back of the line—if they hadn't already been sent flying back there after underestimating another spell. Leo hadn't stood a chance at all. The phrase "minimum power necessary" might as well have been in a foreign language as far as he was concerned.

We'd mostly just been playing for fun by the end of the lesson—after all, such delicate adjustments to one's Magic Guard wouldn't be possible on the battlefield—but Godolphen proceeded to make "Dolph Tag" a regular part of our physical classes thereafter. He

pretended to have some grand, mysterious reason for incorporating the new routine training, but in reality, I was pretty sure he was just a sore loser who didn’t know when to give up...

Chapter Five: The Mad Hound

Uncle

"Rynde, you here?!"

I'd only just returned to the Apple House headquarters when a visitor came looking for Pops...

To rewind a bit, I'd been out hunting, and I had brought back two rouvultures to top up the food provisions at the orphanage. To tell the truth, I'd been a little obsessed with hunting the birds of prey recently. Whenever I didn't have to join in on Order training, I'd be out on the eastern Rune Plains chasing those vultures.

I was still an E-Rank explorer too, much to my delight. Whenever our schedules matched up, I'd go out on requests with Roy and Amur or Al and Coco, but I'd managed to prevent any more unwanted promotions by simply forcing any one of them to register as the leader of the party when signing up for the requests. To meet the requirements for D-Rank, an explorer had to demonstrate they could complete a suitable request either alone or as a party leader—so as long as I didn't do that, I was safe.

I was a little worried about hunting alone on the Rune Plains. A Gryetess snake had popped up there once; it was feasible—albeit unlikely—that another high-rank monster could do the same. At the same time, I was pretty confident I could somehow get away from most of the more dangerous monsters.

For caution's sake, though, I'd splurged a little, adding two very expensive macagate arrows to my quiver. The iron-shafted arrows were fitted with arrowheads made from the namesake macagate ore, a very rare and costly mineral found only in the Marrat mountain range. I'd balked at the price—two thousand riels an arrow—but Rouge had assured me they'd be able to pierce through the thick skin of a Gryetess snake, even with the limited firepower of my

Rygo bow, so I'd picked up two in case of emergency. They were expensive enough that I barely wanted to touch them, let alone test them out, so I had yet to verify their alleged lethality for myself.

The Scouting Magic I'd been loath to start learning was also very useful out on the plains, particularly for enhancing my hearing. I knew Scouting Magic would be vital in developing my so-called wind magic, so I'd started practicing using it in earnest. Unfortunately, it was nearly impossible to practice around the school grounds or out in the city. There was just too much noise for someone at my level, and it was frankly annoying how often I accidentally eavesdropped on conversations I shouldn't—and didn't want to—hear. But the wide plains were a perfect training ground. I'd head off from the path at a random location and wander farther into the plains, Scouting for the animals and monsters that lurked in the undergrowth and bringing them down with my trusty bow. I'd leave my first prey where it fell and pursue another, and soon enough, a rouvulture would appear, lured in by an easy meal. My hearing enhancement wasn't good enough yet that I could hear them descend, but I could easily pick up on the hefty flaps of those huge wings as one made to get away, clutching my first kill in its vicious talons—and that was when I'd shoot.

I'd done the same today, repeating the usual process twice and bagging two of the massive birds in less than thirty minutes. I couldn't carry much more back on my own, so I usually ended my outings after the second kill.

"Hey, it's Lenn! Rouvultures again today? We've got an extra wagon, so we'll help you carry it all back!"

This had become a frequent occurrence of late—young explorers from other co-ops whom I'd never laid eyes on before would approach me and offer to carry my kills back to the city. A few times while I'd been out on a hunt, I'd come across young explorers being set upon by monsters or having their spoils stolen by greedy rouvultures. Sure, they were from other co-ops, but it was a little hard to ignore their cries for help—not when it was happening right before my eyes—so I'd ended up saving the day here and there, resulting in occasions like these. Sometimes, the explorers were

quite a bit older than myself, so I felt a little awkward about getting them to work for my benefit; at the same time, it *was* better than lugging the heavy birds back myself.

"Thanks a ton—that'll be a big help. If you want, you guys can have the meadowmara and jumpluger—they're just back over there." I wouldn't have been able to carry the other two monsters back anyway, and they weren't worth more than a few riels, so I'd been planning to leave them to the circle of life. No harm if these guys took them instead. Plus, if I did leave them be, they'd probably just end up in a rouvulture's stomach.

"Seriously?! Thank you! Oy, you guys! Load it all up!" said a boy who seemed to be in charge, sending the other two explorers to fetch my abandoned kills. "We're from Round Piece. I'm Seth, E-Rank, and those two are F-Rank."

I smiled politely. "Lenn, from Apple House. I'm still new to exploring, but it's nice to meet you."

The two other explorers had quickly returned, and their eyes flicked in my direction as I introduced myself. "Seth, is he really the Mad Hound?" one said in a poor attempt at a whisper. "He looks like I could crush him without breaking a sweat..."

"Idiot. You've heard about how he beat up Shue, right? And Benza from the Rats? You wouldn't stand a chance!" Seth smacked the boy on the back of the head. "Sorry, Lenn. I'll give these guys a good talking-to later."

Shue? Oh, right... I vaguely recalled a loser and his buddies who'd ganged up on me to try and steal one of my rouvultures, claiming he was the one who'd killed it. *And I think his name was something along those lines.*

Trying to avoid the hassle, I'd apologized and offered him the alleged kill—not like it'd be hard to just get another—but he'd demanded I hand over the second one too, and in the end, I'd been forced to teach him the error of his ways.

I chuckled politely. "Don't worry about it. People always think I look pretty weak, so there's no point in me getting worked up over it. Shue—he was the red-haired guy, right? Is he doing okay? I went in a little harder than I meant to and broke one of his ribs by

mistake.” A lot of injuries in this world could be healed with magical salves and potions, but broken bones weren’t one of them. If you didn’t set the bones properly, the quick-working salve would cause the fracture to heal in the wrong position, and it wasn’t easy to fix that.

“Yeah, Shue’s already back to work. And our boss was really impressed by you too, Lenn. He won’t shut up about how you went out of your way to help us, even though you were the one who’d been wronged. He thinks you’re very levelheaded for someone your age.”

Of the four explorers who’d surrounded me back then, I’d walloped the eldest-looking three until they could no longer stand—but the other one had been pathetically weak, and I couldn’t bring myself to rough him up more than a little. Once the fight had been over, I’d realized there was no way he would have been able to make it back to the city before dark, especially not now that he’d have to drag his friends behind him in the wagon. Feeling sorry for him, I’d ended up pulling the wagon all the way back to the Round Piece headquarters. As soon as we’d arrived, I’d found myself surrounded by suspicious senior explorers from the co-op, but after explaining the situation, an important-looking man had been summoned from the building, and he’d apologized profusely before sending me on my way. They’d seemed to be a pretty reasonable bunch, all things considered, so I didn’t bear any ill will toward them. I supposed my encounter with Round Piece had also contributed to my recent popularity.

Seth and the others carried the rouvultures all the way to Apple House for me, and then we parted ways. As usual, I got the younger kids from the co-op to process the rouvultures and exchange any sellable parts at the guild. I kept the proceeds from selling the feathers, and the kids received the meat in exchange for their work.

Pops had hassled me about this practice initially, saying the reward was too great for the minimal work, but I’d pushed back. If I went to the guild, I’d end up going up a rank just for handing over a few feathers, so to me, the kids were providing an absolutely essential service. The only times I went to the guild myself were on

the few occasions I managed to bring down a valuable monster that also wasn't listed on a permanent request.

◆◆◆

But back to the present.

"One day, I'm gonna become an archer just like you, Lenn!"

I smiled. I was sitting in the garden of Apple House, observing the kids as they carefully processed the carcasses to ensure they could sell any viable parts for as high a price as possible. Only vaguely focused on my surroundings, I didn't notice the bald, scarred man entering the garden until he opened his mouth.

"Rynde, you here?!"

Unfortunately for the stranger, he was not. "Sorry, Pops is over at the church today," I replied in his place. "I think they came across another orphan... Can I be of any assistance?"

"Who the hell are you? Didn't realize this co-op took in fancy noble kids too..." The man snorted. "Name's Cher. Grew up with Rynde in the orphanage that was here before Apple House—guess you could call us brothers."

Cher? So he's Pops's drinking buddy who was gossiping about me... Man, is he the perfect *outlawish explorer, though...* Since he'd called Pops his brother, that meant this man was my uncle, in a way.

"Right, I've heard a bit about you from Pops, Uncle Cher. My name's Lenn, and I joined Apple House a few months ago. Actually, Saki at the guild mentioned you too—she's been looking out for me since I started here. But anyway, do you want me to pass on a message to Pops from you or something?"

"'Uncle'?" replied Cher, frowning for a moment before shaking his head. "Eh, I don't care what you call me. Nah, it's nothing important. Seems like a few monsters have appeared near the city, and it'd be a little hard to wrangle them alone... There's no real rush, but it'd be better to deal with them sooner rather than later, so I thought I could get Rynde to help and turn it into a night at the tavern later... Wait, are those your kills, kid?" He'd finally noticed the half-processed rouvultures.

"You're always drinking, Grandpa Baldy! And Lenn is amazing with his bow! He's never missed a shot!" yelled Po, oddly conceited.

I admonished him, glaring. "Hey! You can't just go and call a guest 'Baldy'! Use your manners!"

"Sorry, Lenn..." Po pouted and returned to his work—but he wasn't out of the woods yet.

Cher took a step toward the boy, the fury radiating from him so intense, it seemed as though it were leaking from his very pores. A chill ran down my spine. The man was powerful—that much was obvious. Too powerful to be directing such rage toward a kid who'd barely started learning magic.

Po crumpled to the ground, overwhelmed by the sheer tension Cher was emitting.

Without hesitation, I jumped between the two of them, cutting off the older man's approach. "I know he was rude, but Po's just a kid, Uncle Cher. Please cut him some slack."

"What? I'm not gonna kill 'im. But brats like him won't learn without a bit of pain. Get outta the way, kid."

I sighed, dejected, and took a step to the side...or so I pretended. Instead, I darted down and scooped up an iron pipe, screws still protruding from its surface, and I swung it at the bald man's stomach with all my might.

Gonggg. Baldy caught it on the back of his Guarded arm, and the resulting echo made me feel as though I'd hit metal rather than flesh.

His skin is so hard! You a cyborg or something, Baldy?!

Cher grabbed the pipe and yanked me toward him. I let go the moment he did, but I was already falling forward, right toward the fist coming for me. I couldn't dodge it or circulate enough mana to use Magic Guard in time. The only thing I could do was take the blow.

I reinforced my face with Strengthening Magic and let myself go limp. His fist connected with my face with a spectacular *crunch*, and I flew backward, reinforcing my legs and back just in time as I smashed into a pile of scrap wood and metal.

"Lenn!" cried Po and the others.

I scrambled to my feet, trying to reassure them I was okay. "Don't worry," I said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. "Me and Grandpa Baldy just need to have a little chat. You all go inside." As I spoke, I snatched up a crowbar from the pile of scraps and rested it on my shoulder—of course, not forgetting to hide a few loose nails in my hand as I did.

Suddenly, Baldy laughed, his fury dissipating in a flash. "I can't believe you took that punch with only a nosebleed to show for it. Lenn, was it? Seems like you're pretty good in a fight, and you've got guts too. I doubt Saki's really needed to look out for you at all, you liar. You free right now?"

Wait a minute... Were you just trying to test me from the start, you bald bastard?!

"...I'm actually incredibly busy."

Honeyants

"Stop glaring at me! How else are explorers meant to get to know one another, huh?!"

"Get to know— Are you serious? If I hadn't activated my Strengthening Magic in time, I would have broken a bone, Uncle Cher!"

"You looked like you could take it. Besides, you did activate it in time, so what's the problem?!"

I sighed. "Fine... But no more, right? We know each other—*now*!"

Gonggg. I punched Cher in the stomach with all my might, trying to catch him by surprise. But it felt like punching a sheet of steel, and it made the sound to match. The man laughed as I nursed my hand, teary-eyed.

"Cocky little brat, aren't you? Well, as much as I hate cheeky kids, it's not a bad attitude to have as an explorer. Dunno what that bastard Rynde is thinking, picking up an interesting kid like you and not bothering to tell me." Cher snorted. "All right, Lenn, let's do it. We're gonna head to the forest north of the city. Seems like a bunch of honeyants have started building up a nest out there."

"No, like I said, I'm really busy—"

"I *saw* you sitting there staring off into space until I showed up! Shut your mouth and get moving. Either you come with me on your own two feet, or I knock you out and you wake up in the forest anyway. Which'll it be?"

"You're insane! And in the first place, honeyant nest eradication is a B-Rank request, right?! I'm only E! Even if I *wanted* to go, I'm not qualified to join a temporary party with you!"

Cher gave a quiet exclamation of surprise. "Huh. Pretty impressive, kid—knowing what rank honeyants are, considering how rarely they pop up around here? What, you a bit of a bookworm or something?" He grinned. I didn't like it. "Well, since you already know all about them, it's perfect! And since this *isn't* a request, you don't need to worry. If we leave 'em be, they'll tear through all the plants and herbs out there, so I thought I'd go and deal with them outta the goodness of my heart. Especially at a time like this, when we're gonna need those herbs more than ever."

"Nothing about this is 'perfect'! I told you, I'm not going!"

"It's only about sixty kilometers each way, so we'll just run there. Unless you'd prefer me to knock you out and carry you?"

He's completely ignoring me...

"It's getting dark, Uncle Cher. Have you already got everything you'll need for the hunt? I'm not coming with you, though, to be clear."

"I don't need shit for a little job like this one. It's gonna be a walk in the park. Come on! Let's get it over and done with so we can hit the town! It's your lucky day, Lenn. Not many explorers get to see Cherbourg Monstell on the hunt!" He cracked his knuckles, eyeing me.

Cherbourg Monstell?!

"Er, who?" I said after a pause.

◆◆◆

By the time we reached the outskirts of Runerelia, it was already considerably dark.

"How can you call yourself an explorer around here and not know who I am? What rock did you crawl out from under?" Cher had asked me while we'd been running, and I had explained that I'd only been in the capital for a few months, having come from the Dragoon Region originally.

I was interested in monsters and magic, not random bigwigs from the capital. But apparently Cher was one of just a few S-Rank explorers in the whole kingdom, which was enough to get me a little curious. The strange look he'd shot me when I'd said I didn't know who he was suggested that I probably should have, though.

Sixty kilometers wasn't very far in the grand scheme of things, but Cher's pace was hard to keep up with. The roads we were running along looked like they hadn't been maintained since they'd first been laid, and the lack of streetlights meant I had to keep my eyes magically enhanced while *also* running at full speed. We didn't stop to rest even once. Cher just pelted on, full steam ahead, while I tried my best to match him.

By the time we'd reached the forest, I was beat. "Too...too fast, Uncle Cher," I managed to get out between gasps for air. "I need to rest for a bit, or I won't be able to hunt at all."

"Ha ha ha! And here I thought I'd just run you ragged and carry you the rest of the way—you managed to make it the whole way yourself! You've got some stamina, kid!" Cher was in a suspiciously good mood. I wasn't sure what he could have possibly been enjoying about the situation so much.

Just as I'd suspected he would, Cher ignored my request for a break, and we pushed our way into the dense forest. "Okay, kid. I'm dying for a beer, so let's wrap this up and be done with it. Do you know how to deal with a honeyant nest?"

I sighed. "You block off all but two exits, then scare them from one side so they run out the other, right? If you don't leave them with an escape route, they'll just dig a new one and get away before you realize."

Cher made a throaty "hmm" of approval. "You really do know your stuff. Guess I should have expected it from a kid in Class A at the famous Royal Academy, though... Granted, on second thought, I

seem to remember that they don't teach much about monsters in the first year..." He trailed off, smirking at me.

I paused. "So you realized, huh?"

"Do you think I'm an idiot? Seriously. Runerelia might be a wide ol' place, but there still ain't many E-Rank twelve-year-old explorers who could run this far at night without breaking a sweat, you know."

"No, I'm definitely sweating... Please, just a short break—"

"Save the small talk for later! Let's tidy this up, and then it's time for honey-grilled meat and beer!"

Listen when people are talking to you, Baldy! But, well...it doesn't seem like he's gonna treat me differently just because I'm from the Academy. I was actually growing to like the guy—he was bold, brash, and a perfect example of what I thought an explorer should be. *When it comes down to it, I suppose a good explorer* should *be free to act however they want...*

◆◆◆

"So here's the nest. This one's, what, thirty meters high and about a hundred and fifty meters across? So they're still in the middle of building it," Cher explained. Without a moment's hesitation, he started making his way around the nest, caving in the irregularly spaced entrances with his bare fists. Soldier ants, each around fifty centimeters long, soon came spilling out of the still-unsealed burrows; he crushed them with his bare fists too.

The exoskeletons of insect-type monsters were, simply put, *really* damn sturdy. And yet, Cher could crush them easily. I figured he was probably stronger than even Dante, in that case—and Dante was meant to be one of the strongest people in the whole Order. *Somehow, I've gotten tangled up with yet another freakishly powerful acquaintance...*

"All right, we're all set to go. I'll drive the pack toward you from the other side and deal with any that come my way; you stand guard here. The big one with wings will be the queen. Don't worry about any of the small fry, but make sure she doesn't get away, yeah? She'll probably come out pretty quick."

"Got it."

Shortly thereafter, the sounds of fighting rose from the other side of the nest. I activated my Scouting Magic, enhancing my hearing as best I could. It was easier to hear things from farther away through caves and tunnels, like in this nest, but it did make it harder to discern which specific sounds were coming from where.

I could hear the scuttle of soldier ants. The *crack*s from Cher crushing them. The ground sizzling as the ants sprayed jets of their formic acid attack. And then—something different. Something rushing my way while the soldier ants bought time on Cher's battlefield.

This had to be the queen.

The second the queen and her guard rounded the final corner of the tunnel, I loosed a single iron arrow. It pierced straight through the eye of the soldier ant leading the pack, and it fell to the ground with a screeching cry. The three other soldier ants charged at me, and the queen darted back into the nest as fast as her legs could carry her.

I shot off three more arrows, hitting two additional ants square in their eyes, but my last shot was a little off, and the arrow just bounced off the monster's rigid shell. With a shriek, the surviving ant spat a jet of acid in my direction—but I managed to dodge the deadly stream just in time.

Rushing toward the beast, I kicked it soundly from beneath, flinging it into the air. It spun, revealing the softer shell of its abdomen, and I brought down my Banree knife, burying it to the hilt.

I'd bought myself some time. Keeping an eye on my tunnel, I activated my magic again, Scouting through the nest and beyond.

This isn't good. Cher must have kicked one of the soldier ants with incredible force, because there was a new tunnel in the cave now, one that definitely hadn't been there before—and the queen and a new squad of soldier ants were headed straight for it. If Cher didn't realize he'd accidentally made another exit and start coming back toward me, the queen would slip through our fingers before he'd even made it back.

I flooded my body with Strengthening Magic and ran, circling around the exterior of the nest toward the newly made tunnel. Even running at full power, I knew I only had a few seconds of leeway—if I was too slow, I'd let her get away. I hesitated for only a fraction of a second before sliding one of my macagate arrows out of my quiver, readying it as I ran.

The queen had already made it to the surface. I had no time to activate my nightgaze, but my hearing was still enhanced—enough so to hear the delicate flutter of wings. I shot the macagate arrow into the pitch-black sky, and it struck true. The queen ant fell to the ground with a *thunk*.

Guess they are *pretty powerful arrows—although I'd be mad if they weren't for two thousand riels a pop.* For caution's sake, I directed my Scouting Magic in the direction she'd fallen. Sure enough, she was dead.

"Sorry about that. Looks like you had to cover for me," Cher grumbled as he approached. "But more to the point—how the hell are you using Scouting Magic like *that* at your age? I heard you've been hanging around the Third Legion recently thanks to Grandpa Godolphen's meddling, but...don't tell me you've been picking up some tricks from little Dew?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Captain Dew took me on as an apprentice, and he's been teaching me a few things."

Cher groaned. "Kid, I gotta tell ya, I busted out laughing when I heard the rumors about you giving Grandpa Godolphen a good telling-off, but he's a sly old bastard, after all. You don't reckon this could all be part of some scheme of his?"

I shrugged. "Probably. He played me like a puppet on a string, so he's definitely got some master plan—but trying to figure out what he's up to is about as productive as banging my head against a brick wall."

Cher chortled. "Damn straight! All right, then. I'll send some men out tomorrow to clean up and gather the kills, so let's get us the queen—and the delicious ant honey she's carrying—and head to the tavern! It's beer time!"

Alcohol, huh...? In this world, one's mana played an important

role in digesting alcohol, so anyone could drink after their mana core had fully developed around the age of twelve—but at the same time, I felt a little uncomfortable about the idea of drinking while looking like I did now. *Although, as a staunch advocate of the outlaw life, it would be contrary to my nature to reject the idea outright...*

"What's with the sour face? If you're serious about being an explorer, you can't dodge the booze—helps you get in good with the others, and it toughens you up against poison."

"What? Alcohol gives you resistance to poison?"

"You know the most random crap, but you don't know that? You're a weird one, kid..." Cher sighed. "Your mana core processes foreign matter in the body, right? So the more foreign matter you put in, the more effective it gets. Those hoity-toity noble families force their kids to do it, and explorers are the same way. Drinking too much is bad for you, sure—but you gotta do it every now and then, at least. It's all part of the job. Hurry up!"

I've never heard about that at all... Guess I should be having a drink every once in a while.

"All right, all right," I relented. "Just let me get my knife before we go—I left it stuck in an ant on the other side of the nest."

But when I returned to the tunnel entrance, the ant—and my knife—were gone. *Oh, man... I spent* ages *maintaining it every day, and I'd only just started to get the hang of it and all...*

The Explorer's Tavern

Down a thin alley off one of the main streets of the capital, you'd find a rustic, brick building—the Lizard Fang Tavern, a favorite gathering spot for Runerelia's top explorers.

It was already well past ten o'clock in the evening, and I'd been able to hear the commotion of drunken customers all the way from the main street. Cher led the way into the tavern, and I followed close behind.

Around ten circular wooden tables dominated most of the floor space. Another eight stools were lined up in front of the bar counter.

Based on the plates scattered around, the tavern seemed to sell both food and alcohol. Two giant fangs, each over a meter long, were arranged in a cross that adorned the wall behind the counter, most likely as a tribute to the tavern's name.

Cher raised a hand, signaling to a middle-aged man preparing something behind the counter who seemed to be in charge of the place. The man jerked his chin, indicating we should go farther inside. His hands didn't stop their work for a second.

I quickly caught sight of what it was he'd been directing us toward: There, at the table farthest from the entrance, sat Pops and Saki, already deep in their tankards. The rest of the tables were completely full, and the walkways were teeming with those who hadn't managed to claim a seat. From the quality of their gear alone, it was obvious every explorer here held a fairly high rank.

Silence rippled through the room in a wave as each group clocked Cher's presence. *Guess he is pretty famous after all.* And then they noticed me. Frozen expressions turned inquisitive, then disdainful as they took note of my poor-quality, entry-level equipment. Straining my ears—which is to say, activating my Scouting Magic—I could hear snippets of newly sparked conversation.

"Oy, who's the shrimp with the bow behind Cher? You ever seen 'im before?"

"Rynde's in here too, so maybe he's the 'Mad Hound' all our brats won't shut up about these days... Pretty sure he's meant to be an archer, right?"

"Him? He looks like he's fresh off a farm! Look at 'im floundering around like a fish outta water! That *scrawny, tired-lookin' kid's supposed to be the Mad Hound? Nah. He's just some brat who got lost...and as his senior, I should teach 'im a little lesson about how the world works around here."*

"Don't bully him too much. Cher and Rynde are here, remember? I'm not saving your ass if they get involved."

"Over a little brawl between explorers? Come on, they're not gonna step in because of a few scrapes and grazes. If they do *jump in so the kid can hide behind Mommy and Daddy, they'll get laughed outta here."*

I sighed. Usually, I would welcome the kind of clichéd, violent reception that seemed to be emerging, but right now, I was completely and utterly exhausted. Cher had somehow *doubled* his pace on the route home; clearly, the only thing on his mind had been the beer awaiting him at the finish line. Even now, he was paying no attention to the obvious gossip around us. *Yep—he's definitely just thinking about beer.*

"Shoulda expected you'd be here, Rynde."

"Heard you'd gone to deal with a honeyant nest. Wasn't hard to guess you'd be along sooner or later to celebrate with some honey-grilled rocklizard and beer," replied Pops with an impish grin.

I was still desperately trying to think of a way to escape the unfolding situation, but nothing had come to mind, and Cher was already closing the last few steps to the table. At this point, there was little I could do but follow, which meant passing by the scout-looking explorer who was planning to "teach me a little lesson."

Said lesson started with a classic move: He stuck out his foot to try and trip me over. I didn't need to look down to figure out his plan—it was clear enough from the smirk on his face.

Ugh... That's the best you could think of? Disappointing, truly.

There were two obvious choices. I could kick his foot away, probably end up in a fight, and quickly show him the error of his ways; or I could "accidentally" avoid his foot and try to resolve this with words. *I feel like it's probably gonna get messy either way...*

Even thinking about it was tiring me out. So I gave up on my internal debate and took a third option. I chose to trip.

I threw myself over his foot with considerable force, face-planting into the floor without trying to catch myself. *Thunk.* Rubbing my nose—which had absorbed most of the impact—with teary eyes, I looked up at the smirking explorer and quickly apologized. "Sorry!" Ignoring his sneer and the body language that said he was clearly preparing for me to fight back, I pushed myself up and headed over to where Pops and the others were waiting.

"Ha! You still reckon he's the Mad Hound?"

"So you basically just bullied a helpless kid, then? Lame..."

I could hear the scornful whispers starting up again, but I didn't

pay them any mind.

"The hell was that, kid?" Pops asked, suspicious. He was a sharp one; I knew he would have noticed I'd walked into the trap on purpose.

"I'm too tired to deal with them right now. Uncle Cher's been running me around like a racehorse all afternoon."

Cher snorted. "Knew you wouldn't really start crying after a little tumble. I mean, I punched ya full on in the face with Strengthening Magic and you didn't shed a tear—not even a li'l one. Still think it woulda been easier to just give 'em the old one-two, though," he added, frowning.

Saki, on the other hand, cackled joyfully. "You're just as weird as ever, kiddo!"

◆◆◆

A broad-shouldered woman—probably the proprietress, given how out of place she seemed among the rest of the young, pretty waitresses—approached to take our order, but the moment she spotted me, her expression turned into a glare. "Don't stir up trouble, Cher. Even if he's with you, we're not in the business of serving kids still in their diapers here! Make it to D-Rank, boy, and you can come back then."

So this tavern's limited to D-Rank explorers and above, I guess?

"Long time no see, Pan. And I've got my reasons for bringing the kid along. Besides, there's no rule about what rank you gotta be to come here, right? Hell, plenty of people who aren't even explorers stop by too."

"Be that as it may, bringing a weak kid in here at this time of night? You know we're just going to end up with more quarrels like the one just now. In the end, it's the boy who'll pay the price."

Cher groaned, annoyed. "Ugh, what a pain in the ass! See, this is why I said it'd be easier to give 'em the old one-two! Lenn!" He clapped me on the back. "You know how to fight. Go show 'em who's boss! If anyone's paying the price here, there's no way it's gonna be you!"

I sighed. “Don’t be ridiculous. Besides, what happened to honey-grilled rocklizard and beer, huh?” I said, trying to pacify the quickly angering man. It worked. In an instant, he bounced right back into high spirits.

“Oh yeah! Pan! Look what I brought you...” he said, producing the queen—viscous ant honey still bulging in the sac at her abdomen. “Grill us up some rocklizard with this—and a half keg of beer each for me and the kid!”

Pan sighed reluctantly. “Fine. On your own head be it.” Without another word, she vanished behind the counter and through a door, taking the queen honeyant with her.

I hoped, for a brief moment, that everything was settled—and then I heard the disgruntled grumbles of the explorer who’d tried to trip me earlier, along with those of his three friends. I didn’t need Scouting Magic to hear them—they weren’t trying to be quiet.

“What the hell?! Honey-grilled rocklizard for a brat like ’im?”

“I knew Apple House had gone to the dogs, but now they’re hanging on to Cher like parasites? How low is Rynde gonna sink? Seriously!”

“Those losers can’t fall much lower than they already have!”

Pops and Uncle Cher turned to glare at me, veins twitching visibly in their respective foreheads. Pops jerked his chin. He didn’t need to speak for me to get the message: *Go deal with this. Now.*

Ugggh... But I’m tireeed!

I had no choice now. I stood up. “*What did you just say?*”

◆◆◆

As I stood up, the scout-looking man who’d tripped me did the same. “What’re you lookin’ at, shrimp?”

“Yeah, you got a problem or something, li’l parasite?!” The man on his left stood up as well—probably a vanguard, going off his equipment, and likely more on the defensive side of the role.

I walked toward their table with determined steps.

“Brats should know when to—”

The first explorer was halfway through his next inane taunt when

my fist slammed into his face. He slid across the table and crashed loudly to the floor on the other side. The man had been all bark and no bite, apparently; one punch, lights out.

"Now look here, you bastards... You think you can look down on the Apple Family? Huh?!" I snarled, drawing upon the "outlaw Allen" personality I'd been carefully cultivating through my recent exploring work.

I was tired. I was thirsty. And I'd reached my limit.

The vanguard's face went red. "You've done it now, you little shit! Corner 'im! We're gonna mess you up real good, brat."

His two remaining friends stood up to join him. The burly vanguard was on the left, a mage on the right, and a swordsman-looking explorer rounded out the trio from his spot across the table.

I started off by sinking my fist into the vanguard's stomach. The blow knocked just his stomach backward, making him look a little like a human boomerang until my knee connected with his chin. I'd been in quite a few fights recently—not ones I'd started myself, mind you—and I'd developed a pretty decent sense for how hard I could hit my opponents without breaking a bone.

Wow, he was weak... Maybe he was actually a mage? The vanguard's defense was so pitiful that I questioned my own judgment as he crumpled to the floor. *Dunno if he was strong or not, but either way, he's clearly not used to being hit.*

I caught a flash of movement, and the next moment, the swordsman-type explorer was flying over the table, aiming a kick squarely at my head. But he was too slow—excessively so. Even if I cut him some slack for being drunk, he was only about as good at Strengthening Magic as any other random person you'd pass on the street. Even the chubby hooligan from the Rats—Benza or whatever his name was—was leagues ahead of this guy.

I slid out of the way of the stupidly slow kick and grabbed the cuff of his trousers in midair, hoisting his leg upward. The swordsman, suddenly keenly feeling the power of gravity, started to fall backward. *Dunno if he was strong or not either, but he's got a lot of work to do on his reflexes before he's fit for this kinda work.*

I adjusted my grip on the swordsman's ankle and swung him at

the mage like a baseball bat. I let go on the follow-through, sending the man flying onto the adjacent table.

Crash. "The hell you think you're doing, you stupid brat?!" The six occupants of that table jumped to their feet in unison, glaring at me angrily. I hadn't wanted to get into a fight in the first place, but since we'd already started... The easiest way to resolve this would be to quickly identify who was still eager for a beating and dish up what they'd ordered. *Then I can finally go eat what* I *ordered.*

"You didn't think I'd leave you out, did ya? You think I didn't hear ya? Just 'cause I was tryna behave myself, you think you got the right to act all cocky? Well, I heard you. 'If that weakling's the Mad Hound, maybe we *should* just go back to bullying those stupid Apple brats,' was it?" I chuckled, my tone low and angry. "I'm tired, and you're pissing me off. If you don't know what happens when you look down on the Apple Family..." I flooded my body with Strengthening Magic; the next moment, I was right in front of them, grabbing the unlucky offender by the scruff of his neck and slamming him into the table.

"...then I'll be happy to teach you!"

◆◆◆

"Anyone else got something to say about the Apples?" I'd shown all the previous volunteers the error of their ways in a neat and orderly fashion, and now I opened the question to the remaining occupants of the tavern, only to be met with silence. After verifying no more applicants were forthcoming, I headed back to Pops and the others.

Despite them being the ones who'd insisted on the whole thing, it seemed like they hadn't paid the slightest attention to the tavern-wide brawl. Instead, they were deep in lighthearted conversation—and their tankards. Cher had already finished off his first half keg—which, in reality, was less of a standard tankard and more of an actual small keg with the lid pried off, probably capable of holding at least two liters of beer. For that matter, he'd even downed the half keg he'd ordered for me; I made it back to the table just as he'd

finished ordering a third one.

"What about me, Uncle Cher?! I'm dying of thirst here! You coulda ordered a tankard for me, at least!"

Cher snorted. "Not my fault you took so long. I tried to tell ya to deal with it when we walked in."

"You sure surprised me, kid." It was Pan, carrying two more of the half kegs of beer. "But you're a customer now, same as anyone else here. Come back whenever you want."

And here I was thinking she woulda told me off about the fight... Instead, she's just approved me as a customer? Is there something wrong with everyone here?

"You seriously thought I'd bring a kid still in diapers along to a place like this?" huffed Cher. "I'm not stupid."

"Be that as it may, you know the boss's policy for deciding who gets to be a customer and who doesn't here—it's up to the other customers." She smiled. "By the way, who's going to pay for all the shattered dishes?"

Cher grinned and flashed her a thumbs-up. "Obviously, the one who broke them. Lenn's paying."

...

.....

"Are you kidding me, Baldy?! You're the one who pushed me to do it! This is the part where you're supposed to say something cool like, *'The adults will handle this,'* and then cover it for me!"

"Shut it, kid! I told you to smash *them*, not the plates! You break it, you buy it—that's what real explorers do! It's basic tavern manners!"

"I'm poor as dirt! You're an S-Rank; you should have money coming out of your ears!"

"I don't believe in holding on to money," Cher replied, puffing out his chest with pride.

A penniless S-Rank explorer? So...you're basically just a broke old man. You shouldn't be so proud of that, you know!

I snuck a glance at Pops. Our eyes met, but his were looking far, far away, as though he were in another universe entirely. He didn't seem to notice my pleading gaze, and he definitely didn't look as

though he was going to offer to pay for the plates.

"I can't believe this..." I muttered. "I mean, not only did I lose my knife, I had to waste one of my expensive arrows because *you* made a new hole in the nest! And now this?!" My shoulders sank.

Just then, Cher clapped his hands together like he'd just remembered something. "That's right, we went hunting today! Saki! Today's nest was about thirty meters high, a hundred and fifty around, and still in the middle of being built. It was nighttime, so most of the soldiers were at the nest, and we took out nearly all of them. I'm gonna send some men to clean it up tomorrow, but how much do ya reckon it'll net us?"

Saki began to answer without even a moment's hesitation. "Going off the size of the queen's honey sac, I'd say it was a medium-size nest. So we'd have the soldier ant carapaces and acid sacs... Plus, it'll depend on how many pupae they can retrieve... Minus the payment for collecting it, I'd say you're looking at a hundred thousand riels, give or take."

A hundred thousand riels for a few hours' work?! That'd be nearly ten million yen back in Japan! Although I guess it is *usually a B-Rank request, and not an easy one either... Kinda wishing I was getting part of the spoils now, though... At least enough to cover the plates...*

I must have been visibly shocked at the figure, because Cher grinned at me, offering another thumbs-up. "Like I said, I don't believe in holding on to money, so you can take all of today's profit. Tonight's your treat, though!"

"What?! It's a hundred thousand riels! Are you sure?"

"Yeah—I'd just lose it all gambling anyway. Besides, I gave away the honey sac from the queen you hunted without asking you, so this'll even us up."

Wow, he is *serious!*

"Thank you, Uncle Cher! I'll follow you for the rest of my life!"

Seeing my spirits had been restored, Cher nodded and raised his voice. "Oy, you lot! Lenn's covering the tab tonight, so you all better drink like your lives depend on it!"

Hold on—when you said tonight was my treat, I didn't think you

meant for the whole tavern! On the other hand, the tension in the room was still heavy after my earlier rampage. It didn't seem likely anyone would willingly accept a drink from me, even if it was free...

"Hell yeah! That's the Mad Hound for ya! Miss, give us five half kegs over here!"

"His approach to money's just as mad as he is! We'll take a bottle of Driell over here, with ice and glasses for everyone!"

...or so I thought, but everyone jumped on the opportunity to order without hesitation, including those I'd beaten up. *Buncha simpletons...* I dropped my head into my hands, terrified about how much this tab was going to add up to.

Pops, apparently sensing my worry, tried to ease my mind. "This place doesn't have any of the fancy stuff. You're probably looking at fifty thousand riels at most—just try to think of it as an investment into your future. And I'd say it was high time to replace the knife you lost too, considering your skills. It's important to stick with one thing until you've mastered it, but you're better off finding something a little sturdier for the long term. For a kid like you who improves so quickly, it's gonna be easy to miss when the right time to upgrade your gear is, so you're going to have to be careful."

Half of my money gone, just like that...

I sighed. Pops wasn't wrong, though—and with this, there'd probably be a lot fewer people looking down on both me and Apple House. I'd run into a lot less trouble out in the field, so work should become easier too. I'd really liked my Banree knife, but at the end of the day, it had been designed for foraging work, not processing carcasses, and I *had* already been thinking about upgrading it for something with a little more reach so I could use it as a weapon as well.

"You're right, Pops. I'll have to pay a visit to my favorite equipment store soon."

◆◆◆

"Come to think of it, if you need money, why're you dawdling on increasing your rank? You'd earn a lot more if you took on some

higher-ranking requests."

"Huh? How'd you know about that?" I asked, suspicious. "There's two reasons, really. First, I want to experience as many of the lower-ranked requests as I can before I go up a rank. The other reason is... Well, there's a lot of exaggerated rumors about me going around the city these days. Shooting up the ranks too rapidly is only gonna send the rumor mill into overdrive, you know?"

"I get it. I've had my eye on you ever since Satwa told me about your meeting, you know. I wanted to see you in action for myself, so I told all the branches to promote you a rank every damned time you picked a weed or something—because then I could nominate you for a restricted request once you ranked high enough and join you myself. But then your rank stopped increasing entirely. When I heard you'd joined the Order, I thought maybe we'd lost you to those guys...until I saw you getting the kids to process your rouvultures back at Apple House. It's not that you stopped being an explorer—you've just been avoiding taking on any requests."

Wait, what? From what he's saying, Uncle Cher must work for the Explorer's Guild...and he must be pretty high up too. He says he heard it from Satwa as well... Doesn't that guy know how to keep a secret?!

"Uncle Cher, I didn't know you worked for the guild. That Satwa guy is spreading some crazy rumors, and it's starting to cause me a lot of trouble. Even though he said he'd only tell the guildmaster..." I grumbled.

"Wait, you don't know?" said Pops, looking incredibly nonchalant in light of the bombshell he was about to drop. "This guy *is* the guildmaster. Of the entire Explorer's Guild."

"Huh?!" I jumped, shocked. "No offense, but how the hell are *you* the guildmaster? You can't even manage your own money—let alone an entire guild!"

Cher burst into laughter. "Yep! That's why I don't manage it! I leave all the hard work to the vice guildmasters and just handle the fun stuff! But yeah, I got the lowdown on you from Satwa, and I'm the one who's been making sure your rank goes up. As for the rumors...get this, right? After I heard about you, I was telling

everyone here at the tavern about the crazy kid who ran circles around Satwa. Pretty soon after, some high-ranking noble shows up at Satwa's place demanding information, and he couldn't turn them down! Ha ha ha—ouch!"

I slapped Cher right on the back of his bald head before I even realized I was moving. "So you're the one behind everything, not Satwa! Do you know how much—"

I stopped short as the tantalizing smell of meat filled my nostrils and set my stomach rumbling. Coming toward us was a gargantuan platter of meat, so large that it needed to be pushed on a cart rather than carried. The pile of meat was as big as a full-sized beer barrel; there was no way it weighed less than sixty kilograms. *Are they seriously planning to eat all of this?! Just among the four of us?!*

"Dinner is served—Lizard Fang's special rocklizard roast, honey-grilled style! The oval-shaped bit is your rib eye roast; the circular ones are tail steaks; and the bone-in cuts are your ribs. There's a tiny bit of cheek too—we didn't have much left, unfortunately." Pan grinned at us. "So, who'll be taking it?"

"Well, it's Lenn's treat, after all, and he was the one who took down the queen in the first place too. We've all had it a hundred times before, so it's all his today."

Tch. Now I'll *look like the bad guy if I keep telling him off.*

"Whatever you say! Kid, it's your first time having rocklizard, right? I'll load you up some of every cut, then."

"Thank you," I replied, and Pan began slicing off cuts of meat.

Across the table, Cher was staring intensely at me while we waited. "Well, I've had a good look at you now, so I'll tell 'em to stop with the forced promotions. And since I know you're with the Apples, I can just ask Rynde if I need to know anything else. But seriously, with your skills, you'd have no trouble in a B-Rank party as you are now. Hell, even A-Rank parties would be fighting each other to get you as a Scout. Strength's not everything around here, but if you don't get yourself up to C-Rank at the minimum, you'll keep getting into trouble like you did just earlier. Plus, from the guild's perspective, the higher up the ranks we look, the fewer capable explorers we find. We're short on manpower as it is without letting

you play around in the bottom ranks."

Basically, he was telling me to hurry up and increase my rank. It was a prospect I myself had been going back and forth on recently.

I'd done my fair share of low-level requests over the past two months, forcing one of my friends—Roy, Amur, Coco, or Al—to register as the party leader each time so I wouldn't get promoted against my will. Moving up from E-Rank to D would require me to complete a request of suitable difficulty as either a solo explorer or a party leader; I'd used said prerequisite to my advantage to ensure I *didn't* move up. When the old lady at the southeastern branch had promoted me to E-Rank after a single, itty-bitty request, spouting "rules are rules," I'd made sure to get a copy of said rule book for myself. If I didn't meet the conditions to rank up, then not even Satwa's meddling could override it, I'd figured.

But by this point, I'd experienced most of what entry-level exploring had to offer, and I'd really started to realize how many of the things I wanted to do were being compromised by my poor financial situation.

"Hmm... I don't think I'd mind going up to C-Rank or so, really, but if weird rumors start up again, it's gonna be more trouble than it's worth... Is there a way to get around that?"

"Yeah, that's pretty easily solved. Not many people know about it, but there is a way to register under an assumed name, provided you've got a good enough reason for it. I'm the one who approves those requests, so it's as good as done. We'll change your official registration to 'Lenn,' and then even if some rumors do start to fly, they won't connect back to your real name. And if there's rumors out there about Lenn, who cares? I'll send out an order to make sure everyone who does know the truth keeps their mouths shut as well. It's not a foolproof tactic, but it should work out all right."

Should help a lot, actually. Saki had already done me a favor by making it so I didn't have to show my license at the processing area at the southeastern branch, but keeping my identity a secret was still a massive hassle right now. "Sounds good, Uncle Cher. I'll work my way up to C-Rank, then. How do I change my license?"

Cher grinned. "I'll speak to reception and let 'em know what to

do; you just bring your license to the main branch tomorrow and they'll sort it out for you. We can treat today's hunt as a special request, and that'll clear the promotion condition for you too. But enough with the chitchat! Now's the time to chow down and drink up! Oy, you lot!" He raised his voice again, shouting so the entire tavern could hear him. "There's honey-grilled rocklizard to go around, all thanks to Lenn's bow! If you want some, come and get it!"

At those words, the other explorers, who'd all been eyeing our table hungrily, erupted in a great cheer.

◆◆◆

"Hurry up, eat it while it's hot!" Pan slid a plate in front of me, piled high with each of the four cuts of meat. The honey they'd lathered on while it had been grilling gave the rocklizard a teriyaki-like sheen. I started with the rib eye roast, slicing off a generous bite and dropping it into my mouth.

The sheer deliciousness hit me like a bullet. For the first time since I'd awakened, I was genuinely impressed by the food in this world. The honey-grilled meat wasn't too sweet, contrary to my expectations. It intermingled with the flavor of Pan's so-called secret sauce, a reddish-brown mix of chili and pepper spicier than anything I'd had back in Japan; some mysterious herbs, meanwhile, gave it a fragrant aroma. Overall, the sharp punch of the sauce mellowed out the rich sweetness of the honey, the contrasting flavors making for a comprehensive dish.

Apparently, rocklizard meat was usually quite stringy in texture but became very tender when rubbed with ant honey and grilled. The delicate texture of the rib eye roast, the rich, elegant taste of the honey, and the complexity of the sauce all came together to form a delicious morsel that melted in my mouth.

Pops's plate was piled high with thick steaks of the roast; he'd ignored the other cuts of meat entirely. The tail steaks, which had almost no fat and a solid, meaty texture—yet somehow still melted in the mouth just as easily as the rib eye—seemed to be Saki's cut of

choice. The short ribs were served karubi-style, just like back in Japan; these had the most fat on them, but they also had the meatiest taste of all the cuts. Cher piled at least five kilograms of the ribs on his plate alone. And as for the beer...I could really taste the alcohol in it, but it was still surprisingly refreshing, and I could easily down a number of the half kegs.

I'd saved the tiny chunk of honey-grilled cheek for last. According to Saki, a single plate of this premium cut of meat would run you at least three thousand riels at one of the city's best restaurants, and you wouldn't likely find it anywhere else. On one hand, I knew meat like this was most delicious when eaten hot; on the other hand, I'd always firmly been in the "save the best till last" camp in regard to food, and I wasn't about to shake that label now.

I'd yet to savor the cheek—I was still smacking my lips with relish at the bottomless meat-and-beer combo—when one of the explorers I'd beaten up earlier approached me.

"Yo. I'm Belt, C-Rank. You were pretty good up there before, you know—for a kid, at least," he added with a grin. "Uh, by the way...you're not gonna put a stop to that?"

By "that," Belt meant the brawl between Pops and Uncle Cher that had sparked a few minutes prior. Cher was apparently displeased that Pops hadn't told him about me joining Apple House, and they were currently at each other's throats—in quite the literal sense of the phrase.

"Because you said you wanted to see him for yourself! I didn't want to fill your stupid head with any preconceived ideas!"

"Then you shoulda dragged him along to meet me ages ago instead of wasting months of my time!"

"You think I don't have better things to do?! If meeting him was so important to you, you should've gone out and found 'im yourself!"

"You wanna try me, old man?"

"Bring it on!"

I shook my head. I was already exhausted; I couldn't even imagine sticking my neck into a fight between those two monsters. "There's no chance I can stop those two if they're raring to go. Look, Saki's got the right idea—just keep drinking and don't engage. I'm

just gonna do the same. Besides...” I let out a noise of satisfaction. “Ahhh... It’s so good! I’ll never get sick of this taste!”

Belt let out an amused snort. “Oh, you’re gonna be a big shot around here one day. I can tell.” With a clap on my shoulder, he headed back to his own table.

And that was when Pops came crashing down onto our table, tossed across the room by Cher. Before I knew it, my plate had gone flying—the precious cut of cheek with it. It fell to the floor with a simple, anticlimactic *thunk*.

“Aaahhh!”

Hearing my shout, Cher shot me a quick glance, seeming entirely unconcerned. “What? It barely touched the floor. Just blow off the dust a little and eat it!”

What?! I grew up in Japan! Top-class foodie destination and the hygiene superpower of the world! Yet you want me to eat something off a floor that has people’s muddy footprints tracked all over it?!

I lost it. “Is that shiny head of yours *empty*, Baldy?! Come on, Pops—let’s get him!”

The scene that followed was disastrous. Cher was stupidly strong, and while Pops and I put up a good fight at first, we were black and blue by the time the dust had settled. I’d tried to pull a few bystanders into the fight to turn it in our favor, but in the end, all I’d done was turn our little scuffle into a tavern-wide free-for-all.

At one point, the boss behind the counter had flown off the handle at us too, and then the whole thing had somehow turned into a drinking contest—which I’d *also* lost. I’d ended up footing the bill for all the plates, cups, and tables we’d broken during the fight. In just a few short hours, my entire hundred-thousand-riel paycheck had disappeared.

To top it all off, I ended up getting promoted to B-Rank.

Cher apparently *hadn’t* explained everything to the receptionists. When I showed up at the main branch with my license the next day, I was promoted all the way to B-Rank in one fell swoop. I tried to protest to the neatly dressed lady at the reception counter, but I was only met with the old faithful “rules are rules,” and my complaint was quickly rejected. I complained to Cher a few days later—*supposedly*,

he'd forgotten to explain anything to them on account of his hangover. But in the end, he just waved me off, telling me "not to sweat the small stuff."

When I first met Cher, I thought he might have been missing a few brain cells, but he's actually smarter than he seems... Although, surely he didn't "forget" to tell them on purpose... Right?

Side Story: In Search of a Blacksmith

One afternoon after classes...

An arrogant, slimy second-year student—Rudio von Dialemack, or whatever his name was—had sauntered up to our classroom, demanding I merge my Hill Path Club with another club he'd started. Of course, I'd have to do all the hard work of coaching while he would get to boast about being the captain.

Truth be told, I wasn't particularly hung up on being "in charge" of the Hill Path Club, but there was no way I'd allow Rude to disturb the system I'd worked so hard to build—not until I'd overcome Godolphen's challenge, at least. With that thought in mind, I'd up and left, not even bothering to answer him either way. Any further discussion would've been a waste of my time.

Besides, Fey and Jewel had been dealing with him when I'd left, and they were both from marquesal families—just like Rudio—so my rudeness probably wouldn't come back to bite me too much. They could deal with the annoying situation in my stead. *Yup, I'm a master at delegation!*

I'd forgotten about Rudio entirely by the time I returned to the dorm. I quickly changed out of my uniform and immediately headed back out. Today's destination was one I'd been eager to explore for a while now: the craftsman's district in the southern part of the capital. Of all the clichés in the otherworldly reincarnation genre, this was one of the most prominent: the quest to find a blacksmith. And I *really* wanted to give it a go.

The legendary blacksmith, shunned because of his constant bad mood and stubborn personality, left to rot in some run-down store but still capable of rivaling the kingdom's finest craftsmen... So, I wonder where he is. Can't be too *hard to find him, right?*

Or maybe...maybe they'll be the successor to a long line of smiths; after their father died suddenly, the young prodigy took up the reins, hiding the fact that they're a girl to avoid being ridiculed... Also a valid scenario. Although, thanks to Strengthening Magic, women in this world were easily as strong as men—so there wouldn't be much point hiding one's gender, but still...

I wandered leisurely around the craftsman's district, still running through countless tropes in my head. I wasn't entirely sure why so many businesses were concentrated in the southern part of Runerelia, but if I had to guess, it was probably due in large part to the River Rune, which curved around the south of the city and provided a valuable means of transportation for all the materials they'd require.

While magically powered trains and cars were gradually becoming more popular across the kingdom, they still didn't hold a candle to the efficiency of water-based transportation. Some ships powered by magical engines could be found here and there, but for those who weren't part of the nobility, sailboats were still the least expensive—and most popular—option. Industries that relied on heavy materials, such as ore refineries and lumberyards, would have set up near the river, and then codependent businesses would have followed—blacksmiths, metalworkers, and coin mints, as well as shipwrights, paper mills, and anything else one could think of.

As you moved closer to the city center, the businesses focused less on the raw materials and more on specific products; there, one would find the printers, the ceramics and lacquerware makers, shops specializing in musical instruments, and others in ornamental fans. While this was all just conjecture on my part, I was still pretty confident in my hypothesis as to why all the main manufacturers seemed to be situated in the south.

I turned onto Smith Street, so named for the many metalworkers and blacksmiths that bookended the street on either side. To my surprise, the buildings were relatively clean and modern. *Well, this world isn't really one of the "Middle Ages Europe" ones you see so often in reincarnation fantasy, so I guess it was to be expected, really...* I sighed, still a little disappointed. *But anyway, what now?* It

wasn't like I could barge into each and every building and ask if a stubborn, skilled-but-overlooked blacksmith was on their payroll.

"Hey, it's Lenn! What are you doing here?" I was pacing idly up and down the street, trying to figure out my next move, when someone called out to me. I turned to find Po, his face black with soot, along with Reena and another two kids from Apple House. Behind them trailed a wagon overflowing with chipped earthenware pots. *I know they can use a little Strengthening Magic now, but it's still a long way back to the co-op—especially if they have to lug that heavy thing along...*

"Hey, everyone. You guys been doing some cleaning? You must be working hard if you've come out this far." I grinned at the small group. "I'm searching for a certain blacksmith, but I can't seem to find the one I'm after... Do you guys come here often?"

"Yeah, we just finished up! This area is part of the southern branch's district, so we don't come here very much. But once a month, Dad sends us over to help clean the chimneys at his friend's factory! We have to wake up *real* early, but they pay us good, and we get to take home as much waste oil as we can carry too!" Reena explained. She grinned at me, white teeth starkly contrasting with her soot-stained face.

"Huh. And what's the oil good for? Do you sell it?" At my innocent query, the four of them looked at each other and laughed.

"We're not gonna sell it, Lenn!" replied Po, still giggling. "We need it for oil stoves for winter. If we don't stash enough now, we'll regret it in a few months! You haven't had a winter at Apple House yet, so you don't know how freezing it gets. The house is full of holes, so when the wind blows through, like, *whoosh*, *whoosh*, it's crazy cold!"

Po's explanation made sense. In most of the capital, nobles and commoners alike used stoves powered by magic stones to heat their homes, but Apple House wouldn't have been able to afford such a luxury.

"I guess fuel for a magic stove is a lot more expensive, yeah?"

"Yup. Using magic stones for heating is such a waste when we can sell them and buy something warm to fill our bellies instead. Waste oil is a little stinky, but it burns for *ages*, and it gets pretty

warm too, so we take as much as we can get."

I smiled. Moving around the back of the wagon, I placed both my hands on the wood and started to push. "I'll help out. I don't think the blacksmith I'm looking for is around here anyway, and I don't want to be cold when winter comes either. Even if it stinks a little, it's a hundred times better than freezing."

I *could* have asked the kids if they knew of a suitable blacksmith, but I doubted it'd lead to a useful answer. There was no way they'd have been allowed to enter any of the shops around here looking like they always did.

"Wow! Lenn, you're so strong!"

"Be careful! It's gonna spill!"

As much as people look down on the Doghouse, my dorm's actually pretty fancy...especially compared to the conditions these guys have to live in.

◆◆◆

"So what kinda blacksmith were you looking for anyway, Lenn?" Reena asked as we trudged our way back to Apple House.

"Hmm... I guess, someone who's pretty skilled but a bit narrow-minded... Someone who everyone else hates?" I replied.

Po snorted. "If that's who you're looking for, then why'd you come all the way out here? Coulda just gone to see old man Bem!"

"Er, who's 'old man Bem'?" I tilted my head in confusion at the unfamiliar name, and Po sighed, an expression of distaste crossing his face as he continued his explanation.

"You've never heard of him? He's a sour old smith who lives in the east slums. He's always boasting about how there's nothing he can't make and how he's the best blacksmith in the whole city... But actually, he's just a drunk with a short temper, and if he gets the chance, he'd even try to cheat a kid outta their money. Even in the slums, everyone hates him." Po's expression darkened even further. "He swindled me outta my change once, and when I went back to complain, he was all like, 'You can't get away with saying I gave you the wrong amount out here in the slums, boyo. If you got tricked by

an old man like me, then you've still got a lot to learn!'" said Po; this was apparently his impression of the blacksmith. "And his breath *stank* of booze. To top it off, Dad gave me a good scolding for losing the money too! Ugh, I still get mad whenever I remember it."

A drunk, short-tempered, corrupt smith... Sounds like a perfect triple threat, all in all! I was already feeling the tug of the strings of fate, but I had to make sure. "Wow, sounds like he's a pretty interesting person... Is he good at smithing, though?"

"Were you even listening to me, Lenn?! Which part was *interesting*?!" huffed Po, annoyed. "Seriously... He's not *bad* at it, as far as I know. Dad always says Bem's a cheapskate who uses the tiniest amount of materials he can get away with, but the stuff he makes doesn't break either, somehow."

So Pops thinks the guy is pretty good too? Then he might be just who I was looking for!

"Thanks, Po! I'll drop by and pay him a visit!" I grinned.

In contrast to my wide smile, Po's expression paled. "You *can't* go there, Lenn! A fancy noble kid like you—he'll take one look at you and milk you for all you've got!"

I grinned, ignoring his warning. "We're nearly there now... How about you guys jump on? I'll give you a lift." I swapped places with the kids at the front of the wagon, and all four of them scrambled aboard with shouts of joy, perching on the thin wooden sides. "Don't fall off, okay?"

"Wheeeeee!"

"Faster, Lenn, fasterrr!"

◆◆◆

The next day, I headed out on my quest again. The rumored smithy was only a stone's throw from Apple House. I couldn't believe such a magnificent blacksmith had existed less than a five-minute run from the co-op headquarters this whole time; I'd completely overlooked it.

Of course, my outfit for today was that of Lenn the explorer, not Allen the Academy student.

Taking a peek from outside the fence, I could see three ramshackle wooden buildings. Each subsequent building looked as though it'd been added as an afterthought to the first, and all of them were tilting to one side or another. If I were back in the earthquake-prone Japan, I'd be too scared to enter any of these structures, let alone live in them.

The building closest to the gate seemed to be the shop front. The smoke billowing out of the center building's chimney implied it was probably the actual smithy, which meant the third building was likely the smith's living quarters. The front garden—if you could call it that—was overflowing with haphazardly stacked racks of hoes, shovels, sickles, and any other farming tools one could think of. *Isn't it dangerous to leave all your wares unattended like this, smack-dab in the middle of the slums?* Shrugging, I passed through the gate and headed for the closest building, the one I thought was the storefront. I stepped over the threshold to be met with silence. No one was inside.

The goods lining the tables and shelves here seemed a little more expensive than those outside. Axes, machetes, and saws for cutting wood were jumbled together with all the chisels, planes, and augers a carpenter would ever need. What was nowhere to be seen, though, was a single sword or lonely spear; no weapons lined the shelves or walls.

I browsed a little, stopping at a kitchen knife of some dull, silvery metal. I clutched it in one hand and broke into an involuntary grin. Of course, I had no way of knowing whether or not the knife was any good without testing it out, but I couldn't help it if I let my imagination run a little wild with the idea of accidentally stumbling upon a smith's pièce de résistance.

"Ain't seen your face before. What's a brat dressed up all smart like you doin' in my shop?"

I spun around and came face-to-face with a short, hairy man who'd just emerged from the adjoining smithy. He wore both a fireproof apron and an expression that dripped with perfect, unadulterated stubbornness.

I couldn't believe my luck; here was everything I'd been

dreaming of. I smiled even more broadly, still grasping the knife. The man *reeked* of the talent I'd been searching for. "Good afternoon, sir—Bem, I take it? I'm Lenn, a new explorer. It's a pleasure to meet you." I started off strong, trying to assert myself as a proper explorer rather than a school kid.

Bem glowered at me, great drops of sweat trickling down his forehead; he must have been tending the forge. "So you're the Mad Hound I've heard so much abou— *Why* are you smiling like that? Put the knife back where you found it, now."

So this is the pattern we're going with, huh? "My apologies. I was so taken by your work, I couldn't help myself... It looks like it's got a wicked edge, truly." Obediently, I did as instructed and returned the knife to the stand I'd taken it from—keeping an eye on Bem while I did.

But Bem didn't approach me as I'd thought he would; instead, he seemed to shrink *back* a little. "Well? What're you after, then?" he asked.

Huh?

"Wait, what? I just touched your work without asking, you know? Aren't you gonna start screaming about how I damaged a priceless mithril knife with my clumsiness and demand I pay for the repairs?" That was the aura this old man was giving off, at least—there was no way he'd acknowledge me as a potential customer without a bit of a fight, a chance for me to prove myself. From what I'd heard from Po, I'd figured Bem was probably desperate for money and would come up with some reason or another to wrangle some coins out of me before trying to send me packing...

"No knife of mine is gonna get damaged so easily! And you're barking mad if you think I'm using mithril for knives out in a dump like this! Last time I'll ask, kid. What are you here for?!"

So he is *pretty confident in his work. There's a pretty good chance Bem's exactly the guy I'm looking for—someone I'll rely on for years to come.* To be honest, I hadn't *actually* expected to find a legendary blacksmith living in convenient obscurity so soon after beginning my search, if at all. My adventure to the craftsman's district yesterday had been driven more by whim than any real

expectation. *But now...*

For the time being, I decided to play the next card in my hand. "My apologies. It wasn't my intention to diminish the fine quality of your work. In truth, I'm looking for a skilled blacksmith, and I've heard you're among the best in Runerelia. Oh, right—I brought you a little something. It's all yours, so you can drink to your heart's content tonight."

With a *thunk*, I set down the bottle I'd purchased on the way here. The whole bottle—*some* type of distilled spirit—had cost twenty-five riels from a liquor store in the worker's district. If I was going to force Bem to play along with my fantasy, it was the least I could do to offer him a gift.

I'd asked the man at the liquor store to recommend the *strongest* alcohol possible to give as a gift, and this was what he'd come up with—not without his reservations either. He'd worriedly asked me, *"Are you sure* this *is what you're after?"* several times. Kindly, he'd offered me a taste of the spirit. A single drop on my tongue had set my throat alight. Frankly speaking, it wasn't something a sane person would assume to be a drink, so overwhelming was the taste of ethanol. According to the shopkeeper, the hangover was just as staggering as the taste.

"Wait a minute—that's Blackball, right?! What have I ever done to you for you to want to make me drink that swill? Drink it all *tonight*?! What the hell's gonna happen tonight for drinking *that* to be a better option?!"

Hmm... His reaction's not as good as I thought it'd be... When I thought of the "stubborn old blacksmith" cliché, being a complete and utter drunkard was basically an unspoken rule—the stronger the spirit was, the happier he should have been.

"Nothing's going to happen tonight. It's just, I heard from Po over at the co-op that you liked your booze—oh, he was the one who told me about you. Said the best-in-the-capital, nothing-he-can't-make Bem the blacksmith liked a good drink. And since I'm searching for a skilled blacksmith, I thought it was only appropriate to pay you a visit. I brought it as a gift."

"Not that brat again! Is he still going on about his change?! Sure,

I'll have a drink or two once the forge is cool, and *sure*, sometimes I'll make a *tiny* mistake with the change, but even if some kid comes back an hour later saying he's ten riels short, how am I gonna know if he's telling the truth or not?!"

Bem continued to grumble for a moment longer, then froze, looking at me suspiciously. "Let me tell you something, kid. There's nothing in this shop valuable enough to risk being sent to the mines if you're caught stealing, all right?! If you don't believe me, go have a look in the storeroom for yourself! But don't get any funny ideas, you hear me? Most of the tools in there are things I'm repairing for the people working around here, breaking their backs day and night. Don't underestimate the hatred of a poor man who's had his livelihood ripped out from underneath him! If you lay a single finger on one of their tools, you'll never be able to set foot in the slums again, you get me?" Still muttering angrily, Bem stomped into the adjoining smithy, threw open another door that must have led to the storeroom, and vanished deeper into the steam enveloping the forge.

Oh! My first visit, and I've already got an invitation to browse his secret wares at my leisure—this is turning out pretty well! As much as he complained about it, I'm guessing he did actually like the Blackball... I'll make sure to bring him another bottle next time I drop by. Quite pleased with my forethought, I entered the storeroom as suggested.

Well, calling it a "storeroom" was perhaps too charitable. What greeted me on the other side of the doorway was, to put it bluntly, a mountain of disorganized junk. *But if Bem's really as big a deal as I think he is...this is probably just another way he's testing me, to see if I'm worthy to wield his work. Maybe, somewhere in this trash, there lies a valuable treasure.*

I was pretty confident in the possibility. Deep within this rusty metal forest, I'd find Bem's magnum opus, a sword to rival the best in the kingdom. Even if I took his claim that he was the best blacksmith in the capital with a grain of salt, he definitely had a decent level of skill; even Pops had said so. Therefore, there had to be some reason he was hiding away here in the slums, cursing the

world instead of plying his trade with pride over in the craftsman's district. For instance, maybe he'd been swarmed day in and day out by rich customers lured in by the reputation of "Master Smith Bem"; they'd thrown money at him impetuously, entranced by the idea of acquiring one of his creations without even knowing the true value of such artistry. Fed up, Bem would have secluded himself away in the slums, vowing to never entertain said ignorance again... If that was the case, I could easily earn his approval by demonstrating that I was a connoisseur, treating his work with the respect it demanded. It was a pretty standard plan of attack if one's reincarnation fantasy took this route.

I took a quick peek through the smudged glass window looking out into the smithy. As I'd guessed, Bem was handling something over the fiery forge, having picked up where he'd left off when I'd entered the shop. I watched on as he plunged an axe-head or similarly shaped lump of metal into the forge, stepping on the attached set of bellows to maintain the heat. His expression was determined, serious—the face of someone who was losing themselves in their work, in a craft they loved.

Mwa ha ha. That's right, eh, Bem? "Finally...a customer who makes me want to swing my hammer with everything I've got!" *You can't hide what you're thinking from me!*

My eyes landed on something—a well-crafted woodsman's hatchet, relatively shiny and new compared to the rest of the worn-out, secondhand tools. Reaching out, I took the hatchet in hand, immediately appreciating the weight and careful balance. With a chuckle of satisfaction, I continued my little treasure hunt.

◆◆◆

"Argh!" Bem yelled, jumping in surprise as I reentered the smithy. "You were still here?! I told ya there was nothing worth seeing in there! What the hell were you up to?!"

I'd been there quite a while. So absorbed had I been in my perusal of the storeroom, I hadn't noticed the sky darkening outside.

While I'd been chuffed at how quickly I'd received permission to

browse Bem's storeroom, it had exposed a problem: I didn't have even a smidgen of knowledge regarding tools, and I definitely didn't know how to appraise the quality of their construction. I hadn't dreamed I would blaze through the quest markers so rapidly in just one day, so obviously, I hadn't come up with a plan to counteract my lack of knowledge.

Optimistically, I'd tried to call on the spirits, chanting "*Appraise!*" in a low voice while staring at a random tool. Unfortunately—albeit not unexpectedly—a screen showing a description and the stats of said item hadn't floated up out of thin air in response to my dubious spell.

I'd stumbled into an all-or-nothing gamble. I ended up going back to retrieve the hatchet I'd first spotted, the only tool I'd yet found that still gleamed with the promise of something yet to be used. But then I started to wonder why it had taken me so long to choose the hatchet when—no matter how you looked at it—it was the *obvious* choice. A tiny flash of doubt crossed my mind, and the perfectly suitable hatchet began to reek of a trap.

Attempting to dispel my worries, I went back through the storeroom, systematically going over every single piece of the piled junk—but without any knowledge of tools, every new item I handled only served to intensify my distress. A small sickle, once broken, repaired in the fires of a forge; a pair of strangely shaped scissors cast from a different metal than all the other tools; a pickaxe that looked entirely normal. To my untrained eyes, they *all* seemed suspicious. I'd been completely and utterly lost.

Back in the present, Bem was still staring at me, waiting for an answer. "I wasn't up to anything," I replied, somewhat exhausted. "But I am curious... What's this?"

I showed him the hatchet. In the end, I'd decided to go with my gut and had retrieved the newish tool I'd first laid eyes on. Bem tilted his head in curiosity. *Crap. Obviously, I just exposed my complete lack of knowledge by asking such a vague question...*

"Something wrong with it? Sure, it's a mass-produced model, and about three generations out of date at that... An acquaintance of mine runs an axe shop, and he couldn't sell it no matter how much

he discounted the price, so I bought it off 'im for the cost of materials..."

I shook my head slowly, dejected. "That's...not the answer I wanted to hear." Not only was the hatchet *not* one of Bem's pieces, it was a mass-produced, outdated model too? Out of anything I could have chosen to demonstrate my expertise to him, I'd gone and picked the absolute *worst* option of the lot. I couldn't have failed harder if I'd tried. *Really,* really *not the answer I was hoping to hear...*

"What? It's a pretty useful thing to have around. Once I melt it down and refine out the magiron, I can use it for soldering..." Bem trailed off, looking confused by the sudden downturn in my mood.

I sighed. In reality, nothing was as easy as it seemed. I decided it was high time to make my escape for today. I'd drape myself in an air of mysterious contemplation, as though some profound realization had crossed my mind...and flee. I could come back in a few days with another bottle of Blackball and start over with a clean slate.

"I'm sorry for intruding on you, especially until this late hour..." Shoulders slumped, I turned to leave. I was nearly out the door when Bem called out to me, his faint voice nearly lost amid the roar of the forge.

"No...I'm sorry." When I heard the sheer pain in his voice, I turned reflexively, and my eyes instantly caught the expression of abject bitterness and frustration now clouding the old blacksmith's face. "But...a savage blacksmith like me who didn't even graduate from vocational school...how could I even dream of forging a weapon?"

◆◆◆

Afterward, Bem told me of the bumpy path that had led him to the run-down forge we stood in now.

He'd been born in a remote village in the kingdom's north, part of the territory held by a destitute baron, as the fifth son of a poor farming family. Forced to work the land from a young age, Bem had

been enrolled in the local preparatory school in name only, hardly ever able to attend classes. Despite spending his entire childhood destroying his body to support his family, when Bem turned fifteen, he was cast out, sent to work in the forge of a local blacksmith the next mountain over. His eldest brother had married and welcomed his first few children; having secured enough workers for the next generation, the next step had been to trim the herd, reducing the number of unnecessary mouths to feed—Bem's among them.

From what he'd said, a childhood like his wasn't unusual among those raised in the desolate villages to the north. The area was besieged by formidable monsters, and growing crops on the barren mountainous land was an immensely difficult task. The villages culled their populations to only what could be safely maintained. It was a hard truth, but Bem had been well aware of that reality despite his tender years. Even being blessed with the affinity for water magic hadn't been enough to render him of any value to the village, and Bem, on the contrary, considered himself quite lucky to have been offered a place with the smith rather than being left to fend for himself.

The blacksmith he'd been sent to swore by a rigorous, old-fashioned apprenticeship system, which meant Bem had been treated with outrageous cruelty and forced to endure all manner of abuse. There had been some light in the darkness, however. The rural blacksmith had loved to boast of his youth spent as a weaponsmith in the kingdom's glorious capital; the tall tales he'd told—suspicious though Bem now regarded them—had kindled an intense curiosity in the young apprentice. For the first time in his life, Bem—fifth son of a farmer, born and raised in the desolate north—had a dream.

Years passed, and Bem turned twenty-five. Taking the money he'd diligently saved over the last decade, Bem set out for the capital, armed with only his coin purse and his ambition to become a first-class weaponsmith.

Unfortunately, as it so often goes, the reality that awaited him wasn't so sweet.

The plan had been to find work at one of the many weapon

manufacturers dotting the capital, but Bem's dismal education led to roadblocks every step of the way. He hadn't been allowed to complete even his compulsory education at preparatory school. His reasonable skill as a blacksmith didn't change the fact that Bem could barely read, write, or do basic math, and he was turned away at the door by each and every company he visited, never even granted the chance to take the employment exam. In order to survive, he somehow managed to secure a job with a small-scale manufacturer that dealt in all kinds of metalwork. While it wasn't the life he'd dreamed of, he was still able to do the work he loved, and his ability to cast water magic also started to flourish through his work.

And yet, his lack of academic credentials still stood in the way of his dream. He soon realized the unspoken rule within the company: Only those who'd graduated from at *least* a smithing vocational school were ever appointed to the weaponsmithing division. Years passed, and Bem spent day after day forging and repairing endless farming implements and forestry tools, never permitted to so much as *touch* a sword. And every day, he continued to be exposed to the cruel importance of academic credentials as he watched scores of his coworkers—each with less talent than himself, and each with a more impressive academic résumé—promoted up the corporate ladder, while he remained on the same bottommost rung.

Bem finally realized he could devote himself to the company all he liked, refining his skills until they rivaled the best in the kingdom, and it still wouldn't make a difference. Fed up with being treated as a handyman, Bem had just started to consider resigning when an offer made its way to him: to take over the run-down smithy in the slums and continue providing a much-needed service to the local residents. And now, here he was.

As for the hatchet I'd picked up by chance? Bem had purchased the expensive magiron tool in secret, practicing the skills he'd need to work the weapon-grade metal by melting and reforging the hatchet over and over again—hoping, one day, to use the same skills to craft a blade of his own design.

◆◆◆

"Even a kid like you could guess it, though—turns out weaponsmithing isn't something you can just teach yourself. Without a forge hot enough to handle the magiron, I've got no chance of crafting a sword that could hold its own against a monster. The hatchet you've got there might look all right, but it's dull as all hell—couldn't even cut a twig. Well, I'm sure you picked up on that right away, eh?"

So this society's stupid academic meritocracy runs rampant even in the world of smithing... As always, this world continues to demonstrate it doesn't have an ounce of the fantastical, adventurous spirit it should... However...

I snorted. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but I'm not the kinda guy who's interested in stories of the past. What I want to hear about is what you want to do *now*." My mood had soured a little; the look on Bem's face was painfully familiar. It was the expression that had stared back at me from the mirror every day in my past life. If Bem's current expression were superimposed over mine from back then, those dark, brooding eyes—full of resignation and self-resentment—would be indistinguishable.

"There's nothing I can do. I'm nearly fifty, kid. No weaponsmith out there's gonna hire someone my age, and if I shut the shop down, the folks around here will struggle—Apple House included."

"Aren't you gonna regret it?" Irrepressible anger flooded my tone. "Wasting your days here, turning your back on the *one* thing you wanted to do... Won't you regret it?"

Age, circumstance—at the heart of it, they were stupid reasons. If you wanted to think of a reason you *couldn't* achieve the things you wanted to, you could come up with a plethora of excuses without straining yourself in the slightest. But if you lived your life avoiding even *trying* to achieve the goals dwelling in the deepest recesses of your heart, how much would you regret it when your final moments came?

I knew full well how wretched that regret could be. It penetrated every fiber of my being.

And hey, Tadataka Ino, the renowned Japanese cartographer—he only started following his passion for mapmaking after retiring from the family business, right? Pretty sure he was only around the same age Bem is now.

I locked eyes with the blacksmith, unable to control the expression of anger and sadness I knew shrouded my face. He flinched, and I turned away. A pile of books stacked in the corner of the forge had caught my eye a few minutes before, and I made my way there now, plucking a worn volume from the top of the stack. *Weaponsmithing: An Introduction*.

"I didn't ask why you *can't* do it. If you've got time to waste thinking up shoddy excuses, then you've got time to figure out what you *can* do... If your dream seems impossible now, then think of what you need to do to get yourself just one step closer. Even that'd be a far better use of your time. You've got a dream so precious, you've never been able to completely give it up, even now—and yet you're wasting your days hiding from the world and avoiding the truth? Stop being an idiot, Bem."

I paused. "I like guys who aren't afraid to dream. I like people who act on their passion. The Bem I saw through that window earlier, working the forge in earnest—he had that passion. Am I wrong?" I started flipping through *Weaponsmithing: An Introduction*. Every dog-eared page was proof of Bem's battle; each crease left as evidence while he'd tried to figure one thing out: *"What do I need to do to achieve my dream?"*

Bem sat in silence for a while, staring at me. I didn't turn away. Eventually, he broke the silence with a deep sigh—and stood up. He headed back to the storefront, and when he returned, it was with a wide grin on his face and the bottle of Blackball in hand. "I don't know what you're expecting from a man well past his prime...but since you've run your tongue so much, I guess I can't do much but listen. Nearly fifty years old and working in the slums—the dream of a man like that..." He trailed off, smiling broadly at me. "You wanna come along for the ride?"

"Thought you'd never ask!"

◆◆◆

The two of us continued to talk about Bem's dream until the early hours of the morning. At one point in our conversation, I voiced a question that had been bugging me for a few hours. "Bem, what's your *actual* dream? I mean, I know you admire the flashy world of weaponsmithing and all, but is that really what you want to do? Make swords?"

Throughout our conversation, I'd had the vague realization that what Bem *actually* wanted was for his skill as a blacksmith to be acknowledged all over the world. It didn't seem like he was particularly fixated on making weapons; it was just the most obvious stage on which a smith's work might be recognized.

In actuality, it was when he talked about the tools he'd made—about how he'd basically educated himself on the ins and outs of toolcrafting; about all the designs and ideas he'd implemented; about redesigning the forge he worked in now; and about the deep, profound enjoyment that came from crafting a light yet sturdy tool—that I could *really* feel the passion in his words.

Certainly, crafting famous swords that fetched eye-watering prices was a valid path toward recognition. But listening to Bem as he proudly talked about all the hoes, hatchets, and pickaxes he'd made, as well as all the trial and error he'd gone through to perfect them—it just made me think said path would be a waste of his talent.

"If all you want to do is force the world to notice you, weapons aren't the only way to do it. 'Best smith in the world' isn't an accolade reserved for weaponsmiths, you know? One day, people could be coming to this little slum from all over the kingdom to buy the tools no one else can make. They'll come to find the smith who makes everyday tools that aren't too expensive, yet superbly crafted; tools even the most talented weaponsmith couldn't hope to imitate. Never went to vocational school and plays by his own rules: the 'Savage Smith'... A guy like that would be pretty cool, if you ask me."

My idle comment seemed to have stirred something within Bem. He looked down at his worn, leathered hands, eyes glazed over as

though he was reconsidering a deeply rooted thought.

When all was said and done, I'd definitely had my fill of the common reincarnation event, *Search for a Blacksmith: Part One*.

And naturally, when I awoke the next morning, my head hurt so badly that I thought it would burst.

Afterword

Thank you for reading volume 2 of *Pens Down, Swords Up: Throw Your Studies to the Wind*.

I first started posting this story as a web novel in April 2022. While I was preparing this volume for publication, I vividly remembered what it felt like when I first wrote this part of the story all that time ago. I remembered how the ideas flew out of me, and I remembered my frustration that I couldn't make those ideas take the shape I wanted them to. I remembered the loneliness I felt when nearly nobody was reading my work (ha ha), but I also remembered the joy of seeing my readership increase, even little by little, with each and every update. I remember it all as though it were only yesterday.

Thankfully, in the modern world, there's many opportunities for someone like me, an ordinary person with no connections or track record of success, to release the energy amassed within to the world at large. In an era of online videos, social media, and hundreds of other ways to forge connections across the globe, I consider myself very fortunate to have stumbled upon the web novel community. These websites provide a way for those of us who prefer the (oftentimes more cumbersome) genre of entertainment that is the novel to, through feedback or reviews, forge those very same connections.

Day by day, I received more support from my readers. I caught the attention of a publisher, and my story came to life through Maro's vivid illustrations—and now, I've been able to publish the second volume of my work. Furthermore, by the time this volume hits the shelves, the manga adaptation of *Pens Down, Swords Up* by Kyosuke Tanabe will be available through Dengeki Comic Regulus. To be honest, I'm indebted to so many people, I don't know where I should start paying it back first! (ha ha)

Thank you to everyone, from the bottom of my heart!

The second volume started just after Allen was admitted to the Royal Academy and took his first steps as an explorer. Unlike in the first volume, I wasn't as bound by the constraints of chronological order or specified locations when making revisions or penning the additional stories. In some ways, this made the work more difficult, but in many more ways, it made it a lot of fun. The additional stories were ones I originally wanted to include in the web version but reluctantly had to omit. We encountered Allen going wherever his curiosity led him and trying his hand at all sorts of things, and we learned a bit more about what's going on in the minds of his friends. I hope you enjoyed these new tales from Allen's world.

How do we come to terms with the environments we find ourselves in and at the same time live our lives in pursuit of what we "like" without compromising on what it is we want to do?

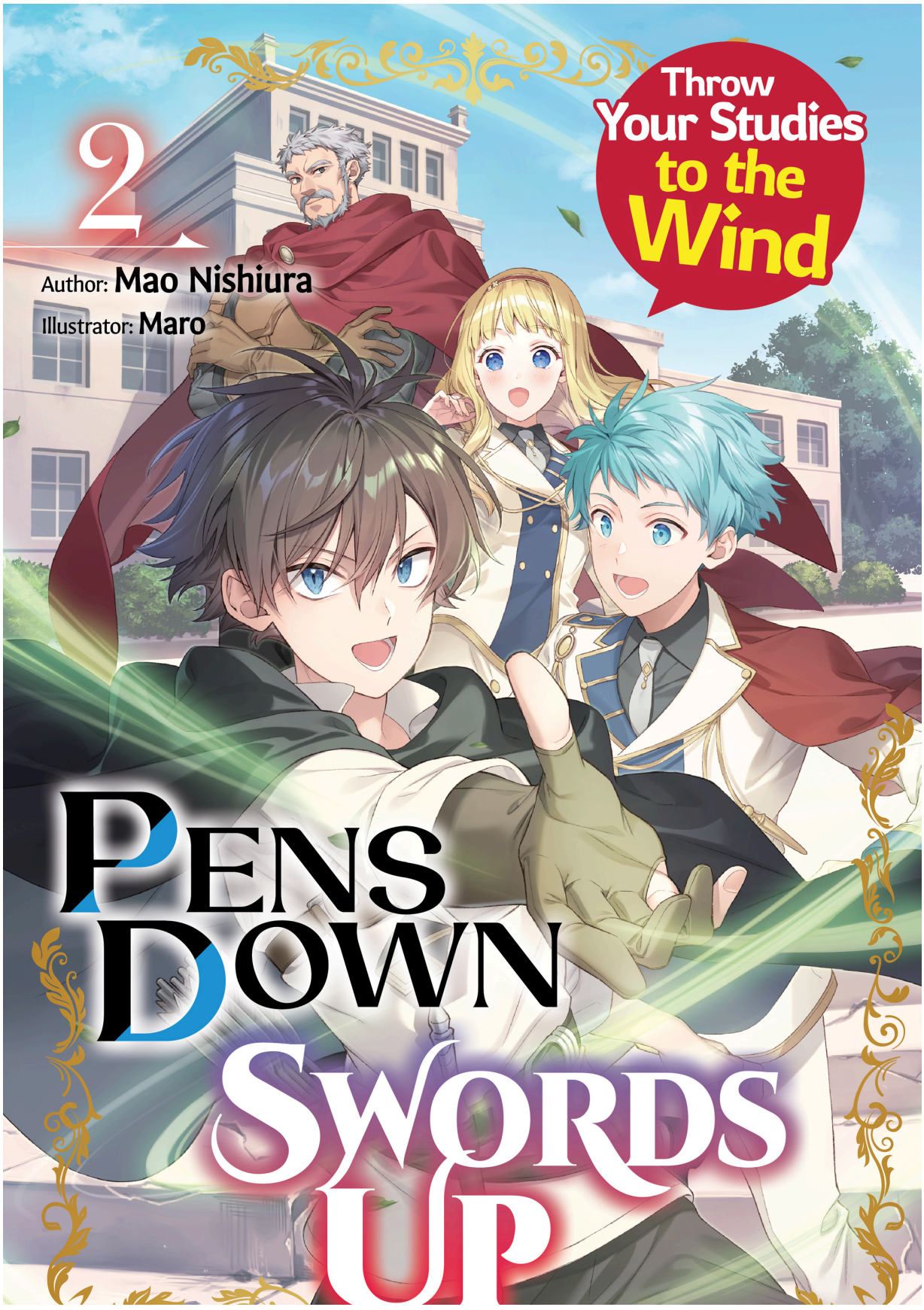
The above question isn't something as grandiose as a "theme" for my story or anything, but especially in this modern world of endless entertainment and pleasure, I hope to think about this question alongside Allen and the other characters—maybe we can come a little closer to an answer.

One more thing: As you've probably already realized, the subtitle "Throw Your Studies to the Wind" carries within it my quite literal intention to focus on the mysterious, profound phenomenon that is the wind throughout this story. Right now, Allen is still a baby mage who can't even cast a simple Wind Cutter, but if he approaches the challenge with the same characteristic enthusiasm he already displays, I'm not too worried about his potential growth. I hope you'll look forward to the next part of the story—and I hope you'll also give Allen a warm (or at least lukewarm) greeting when your paths do cross again.

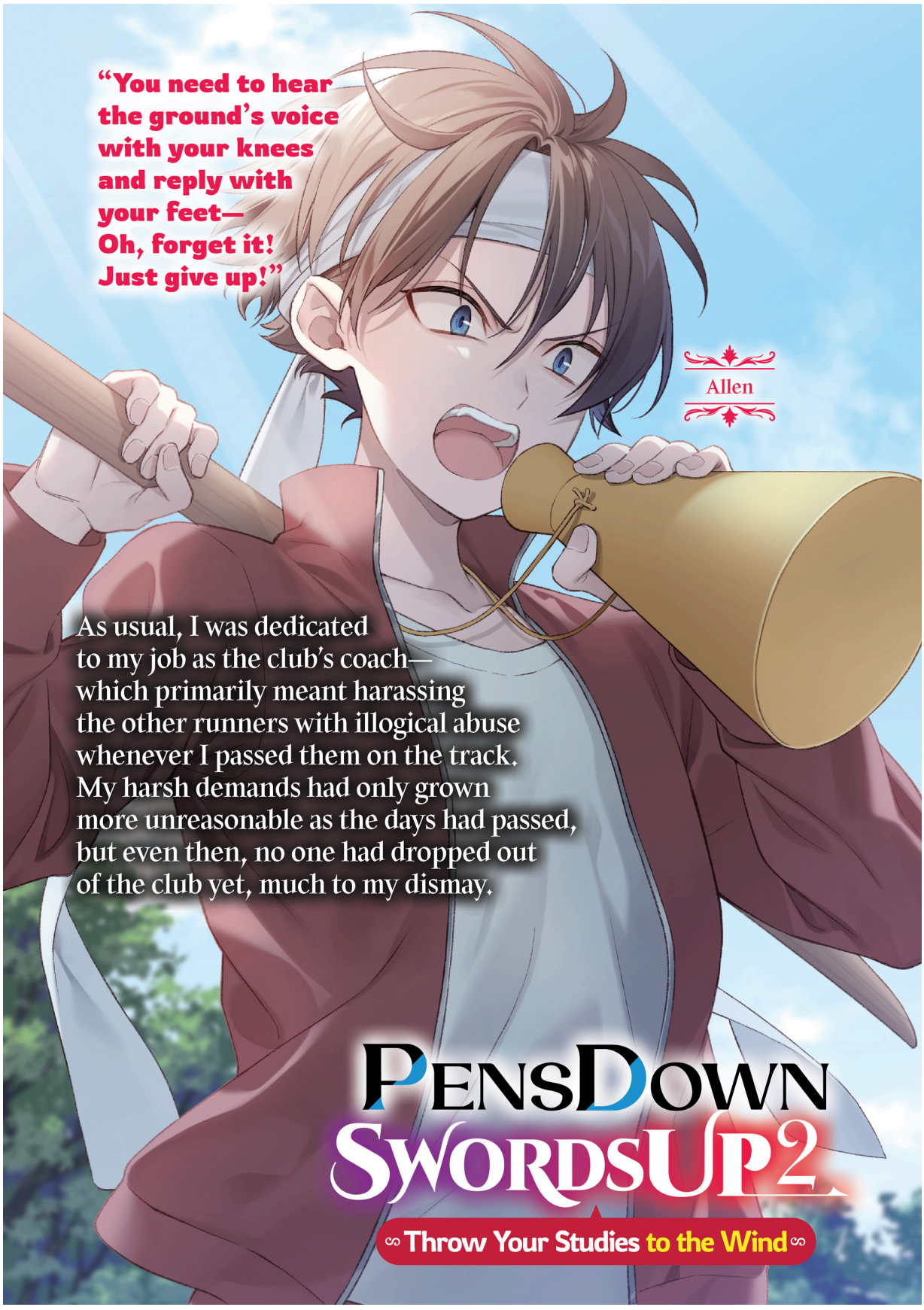
Like Allen the baby mage, I'm still a baby writer who's only just beginning my own journey. My story is far from the magnificent composition I'd like it to be, but just like Allen, all I have is my enthusiasm, so I hope you'll have the same warm greeting for me. Thank you for your continued support.

Mao Nishiura

December 2023


Throw Your Studies to the Wind
2
Author: Mao Nishiura
Illustrator: Maro
PENS DOWN SWORDS UP



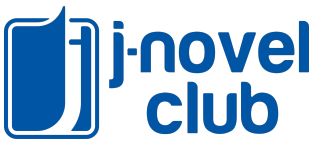

"You need to hear the ground's voice with your knees and reply with your feet—
Oh, forget it! Just give up!"
Allen
As usual, I was dedicated to my job as the club's coach—which primarily meant harassing the other runners with illogical abuse whenever I passed them on the track. My harsh demands had only grown more unreasonable as the days had passed, but even then, no one had dropped out of the club yet, much to my dismay.
PENSDOWN SWORDSUP2
Throw Your Studies to the Wind




Al
Leo
Dolph
Jewelry
...
Everyone has magical abilities—
everyone...except Allen?


Cher was stupidly strong, and while Pops and I put up a good fight at first, we were black and blue by the time the dust had settled. I'd tried to pull a few bystanders into the fight to turn it in our favor, but in the end, all I'd done was turn our little scuffle into a tavern-wide free-for-all.
Rynde
Can't I be a rowdy explorer without getting into a tavern brawl?!





Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 3 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Pens Down, Swords Up: Throw Your Studies to the Wind Volume 2
by Mao Nishiura

Translated by Emily Nelson
Edited by Imaan Ali

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright ©Mao Nishiura, Maro 2023
Illustrations by Maro

First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: June 2025