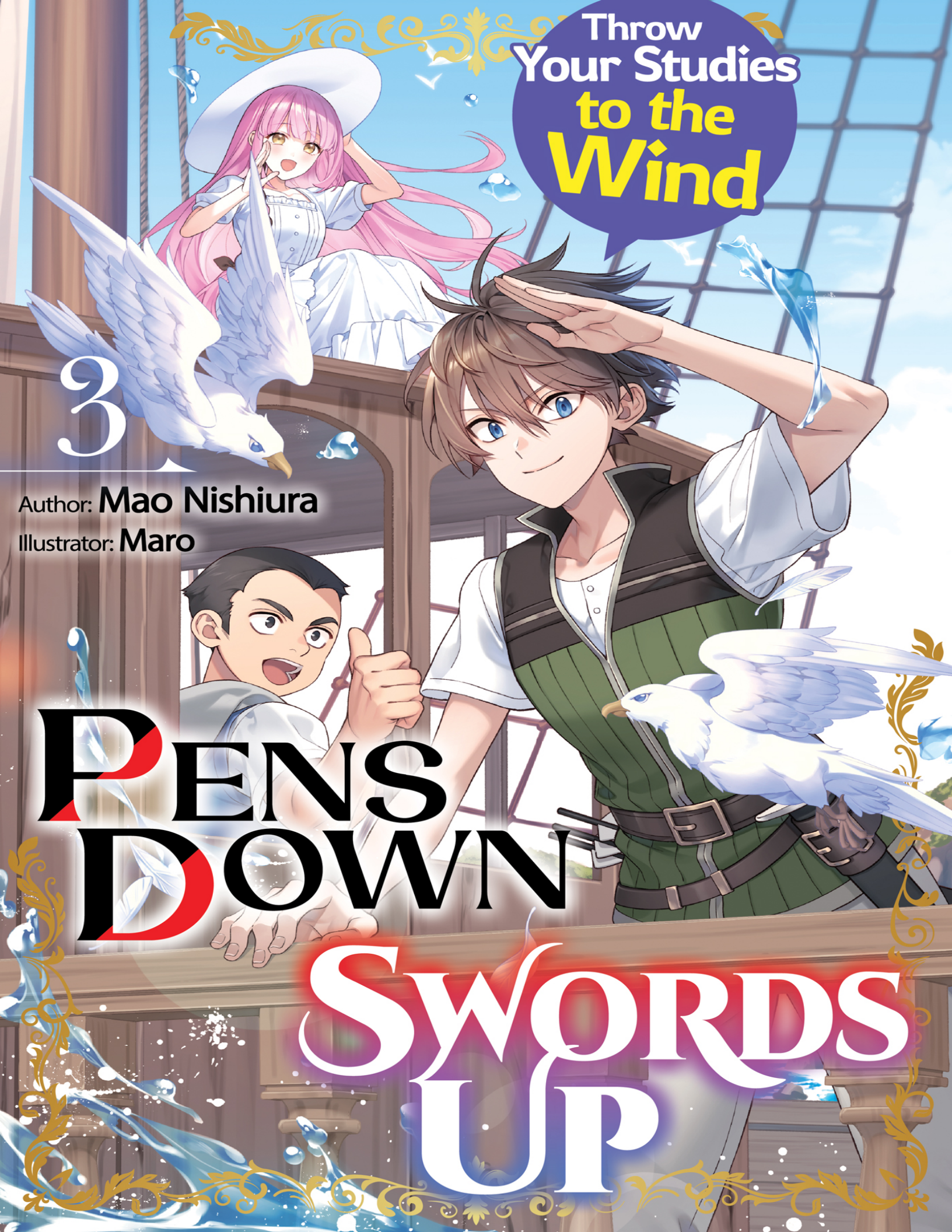
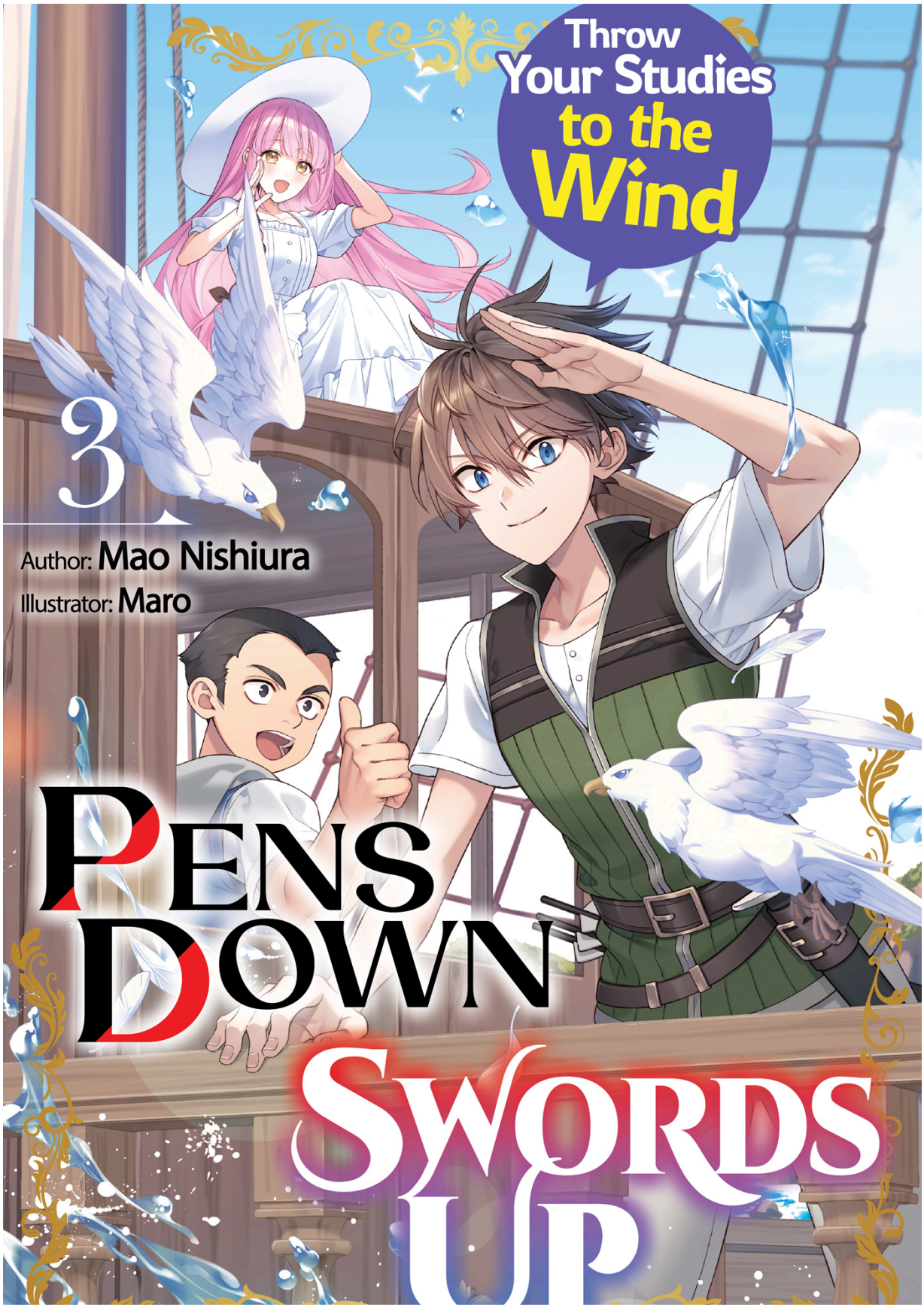

Throw Your Studies to the Wind
3
Author: Mao Nishiura
Illustrator: Maro
PENS DOWN
SWORDS UP


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3
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SWORDS UP




Reed
PENSDOWN SWORDSUP 3
Throw Your Studies to the Wind
"But seriously,
Allen, you were amazing.
I've never seen an archer who can fire
so quickly and still hit the same
tiny target over and over again."
Coco
Allen




Jewelry
Fey
Roseria
Fuli
"It's not like you've been so busy playing around with girls that you forgot to come and visit me, right?"


"They must have been lured in by the scent of all those seafalcons in the water!"
Dan



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Chapter One: Reunion with Rosa

The Terrifying Letter

"Wait a second, sonny! Here—a letter came in for you."

It was a weekend morning like any other, and I'd just finished forcing down the usual disgusting breakfast fare in the dorm's dining hall. I was just about to head back to my room when Thora, the dorm matron, called out to me—and handed over the accursed letter. Without even opening it, I knew three sheets of paper lay within that girlish, floral-patterned envelope, sealed away from the world by means of a single delicate sticker.

It was from my older sister.

I also didn't need to read a single word to know what the general gist of the letter would be. The first page would concern the latest information about myself, gathered by unknown means and for unclear purposes. She'd ask about the clubs I'd started up and whom I'd started them with. She'd ask for more details on Godolphen's challenge for me, and she'd press me on how I'd ended up enlisting in the Order as a provisional member with an apprenticeship under the captain. Heck, one of her previous letters had even revealed she'd somehow found out about my explorer work under the pseudonym "Lenn." But in short, the first page would touch on any and all of my recent activities, always signed off with a *"You're as amazing as always, Allen!"* or another similarly high-spirited remark.

And then there would be the second page, which always focused on the recent happenings in Rosa's own life. First, she'd update me on her thesis project: the development of a magical correspondence tool (which seemed similar to what I knew as a telephone) for the entirely self-serving purpose of being able to talk to me at any time,

regardless of our physical locations. She'd write about how she'd been bragging about me to a friend and classmate at the Special Magical Craftsmanship Research Institute. She'd list more places she wanted to show me around the capital and new restaurants we needed to go to together, and she would remind me how Venetta (the shopkeeper of the boutique I'd once visited with her) wanted to see me again soon. Yes, a status update on her own life and her future plans involving me—minus my consent, of course—would dominate the second page, as always. But by this point, a vague yet ominous hostility would have begun to thread itself into her words.

And then would come the accursed third page.

The words were always joined together—an unbroken string that read more like an evil chant or incantation than a letter. Rips and smudges accompanied each line she'd carved into the page, evidence of the many times her pencil tip must have shattered at the force of her rage. And the words themselves... How she understood how busy I must be but that she was still desperate to see me; how if I didn't return to our family estate in the city this month, she'd break into the Academy and track me down at my dorm; how she'd installed a monitoring device just outside the grounds so she'd at least get to see me during my morning practice; and how she'd been so angry when the Academy security had quickly found and destroyed the device, she'd nearly tried to burn down the entire school.

I knew why Rosa was so upset. Ever since I'd been admitted to the Academy, I had yet to return to our secondary estate—where she currently lived—even once. I hadn't actually intended to *never* visit her, but I'd been so busy between classes, exploring, and the Order that I'd kept putting it off. And the more I'd postponed it, the more dangerous the undertone of Rosa's letters had become—at some point, I'd found myself unable to even consider the prospect of a visit.

I knew full well that the more I avoided it, the riskier things would get; Rosa was a volcano, and the longer I delayed her eruption, the more magma would pile up within. Even so, I'd continued to delay the inevitable, and before I knew it, four months

had passed since my admission to the Academy—and since the last time I'd seen Rosa. Over the past month, I'd locked all the letters I'd received from her deep within my desk drawer, eternally unopened. Of course, today's letter was destined for the same life sentence.

Or so I thought, anyway. Al called out to me from a nearby table, pausing his battle against the rock-hard baked potato he'd been trying to force his teeth through. He proceeded to throw an uninvited wrench into the works with his usual joviality.

"Allen, you've been getting a lot of those cute letters recently, huh? You got a special girl back home or something?"

His nonchalant comment immediately hooked another of my classmates sitting nearby: Kate, a girl who gave off the aura of an upstanding student council president at first glance—while in reality possessing an overactive (and incredibly lewd) imagination.

"A long-distance romance between the third son of a penniless noble and his childhood friend?! The daughter of a local baker, her heart still belongs to him completely, though his admission to the Royal Academy has turned them into people from two different worlds! Yet that naive boy, that piece of human trash, doesn't realize how precious her feelings are, trampling them underneath as he loses himself in the capital's most beautiful women! But in the end, when he tires of his disgusting playboy ways, he'll choose the childhood friend who's always been by his side, the girl who gives him a unique sense of security... A dark horse! A dark horse has entered the race!"

Who the hell's a "dark horse," huh...? And I've never told any of them about Reina, so how the hell did she manage to come up with such an accurate image?! She even got the "baker's daughter" bit right... She might be wrong about our relationship, but her intuition is still scary. Kate's face shone with excitement; she was the spitting image of one of those nosy women who'd get together with the other housewives in front of their apartment building back in Japan to spend hours gossiping every day.

Two of my more troublesome classmates (aka Fey and Jewel) drew near, lured in by Kate's dramatic fantasy.

"Allen? I couldn't help overhearing some very disappointing news

just now... Do I need to teach this little miss dark horse of yours her place? And here I thought you were just an incredibly late bloomer... I never expected there'd be a girl like her..." Fey grinned dangerously.

"So Allen prefers simple girls..." muttered Jewel.

"'Human trash'? Seriously, Kate?" I sighed, annoyed. "The letter's from my sister... Just the usual exchange of recent news. I've been so busy since I got here, I haven't been able to drop by the estate and see her in person."

"Really?" replied Fey, suspicious. "You're telling me the 'Rose of Wrath' uses such adorable floral stationery? Plus, I'm not sure I believe a mere *sibling* would be sending you letters so often—" She stopped suddenly, glaring at me even more harshly than before. "And come to think of it, you're always managing to dodge it somehow, but when exactly are you going to introduce me to Rosa anyway? You promised on the train from Dragreid, remember? That you'd take me to meet her?"

Oh yeah... I guess that did happen. But introducing Fey to *Rosa*? There was no way. If she showed up with her usual carefree attitude, introducing herself as my "more-than-a-friend, not-quite-a-lover companion" again or something...there was no telling what would happen. It wouldn't be rumors flying around the capital this time; it'd be a specially printed newspaper, and I could see the headline already: "Bloodshed! A Fight Between Roseria Rovene and the Future Marquess Dragoon! Order Member Allen Rovene in Critical Condition at His Own Sister's Hands!"

Our familial standing was already shaky enough that a strong wind could blow us over. If an incident like the one I was predicting occurred, we'd be ruined—no ifs, ands, or buts about it. *Just need to come up with a plausible excuse to turn her down like always—*

"Oh yeah!" Before I could, though, Al interrupted, jumping in on Fey's request. "Your sister's an awesome magical craftswoman, right? I want to meet her too! You said there's no Order training today, so why don't we go now? I want to ask her what you were like as a little kid!"

Does he even know what he's saying? "I want to meet your

sister"—he's from the Endymion Region! There's no way he's forgotten about the Red Carpet Incident, right? And he wants to go today*? Right now?!*

"I'm coming too. It'll be beneficial to forge a relationship with one of the most prominent young craftspeople of our time—and I'm curious about the secrets of the Rovene family," Leo declared.

"Me too! It's only proper that I introduce myself to your family, considering how close we've become," added Jewel with a giggle.

Don't jump on the bandwagon! Why are you all acting like the plan's already decided?! And my family doesn't have any big secrets like whatever you're thinking of! The only "secret" that came to mind was the true extent of how dangerous Rosa could be when angered. Meeting my sister wouldn't benefit any of them in the slightest.

"Nope, no way. No joint outing, and no introductions. I've already got plans today—and Leo and Jewel, you're always going on about how busy you are with family stuff, right? Plus, Rosa's definitely too busy for us to just show up unannounced— Ah!" I shouted suddenly, clutching my lower abdomen. "My chronic overactive bladder..."

I need to end this conversation by any means necessary and get to my room. Just as I tried to move, though, Fey's hand shot out, grabbing my wrist with freakish gorilla strength to prevent my escape.

"Why are you trying to run away, Allen? She's sending you letters so often, and yet you won't even drop by for a visit every once in a while? If I were like you and I refused to show my face at home while there were crazy rumors about me flying around the capital, my family would dispatch our private army to kidnap me and bring me back to explain myself. Let's open the letter now, shall we? If it really *is* from your sister," Fey drawled, grinning as always in spite of her absurd suggestion.

"Why should I have to open it here?! Parents are one thing, but I don't have to go and report every little thing about my life to my older sister! I'm the third son of a viscount who's basically a commoner, not some snooty noble! Let go of me!" I tried to tug my wrist out of her grasp, but she squeezed even harder, nearly crushing my bones. "Gah!" The letter slipped from my hand and

drifted to the floor.

Fey calmly picked it up. "The evidence has been secured. What does the presiding judge have to say concerning the testimony we just heard from Allen?"

Kate nodded, her glasses glinting with the movement. "The words and actions of the accused party appear to be inconsistent. If the accused is truly busy today and therefore unable to arrange an introduction as stated, then the most reasonable response would have been for him to suggest an alternate date and organize a tentative plan. Therefore, the most likely conclusion is that said letter is *not* from his sister, but is, in fact, from the baker's daughter—his childhood friend! I demand the evidence be opened."

"Why is there a presiding judge all of a sudden?!" I exclaimed angrily. "And anyway, there's no postmark on the letter! So it had to have been handed in at the gatehouse, right? And the only person in the capital who'd send me a letter is Rosa! Now can you quit it with the stupid theories?!"

"Hmm... This is turning into an unusual case indeed," replied Kate, contemplative. "The accused demonstrates an abnormal possessiveness over his older sister—in other words, symptoms of a severe case of obsessive brotherly love, which only suggests one thing: the possibility of a forbidden romance. The letter will be opened. There is no need for the full contents to be read aloud, but a general overview should provide enough evidence to clear the accused of all charges. However"—she paused, her brow furrowing—"should the accused continue to strongly resist both the opening of the letter *and* the requested introductions, I will have no choice but to declare the suggested theory to be the truth."





"See, we're not asking you to read out the whole thing! If you've got nothing to hide, then open the letter and give us a quick overview—that's all we want!" Fey added with a giggle. "But if you don't get this under control soon, there's gonna be some *awful* new rumors added to the legend of Allen Rovene—and I'd *hate* for that to happen."

"Nearly every one of those stupid rumors about me has started thanks to you lot! Give me a break... Fine. I'll open it, all right? So don't spread any more weird crap about me!"

Seriously, what did I do to deserve this? I was trying to protect *these guys by refusing to introduce them to Rosa...* I sighed. I could probably safely read them the first page, and if it was normal enough, maybe the second as well. Then I could just pretend she'd written about how busy she was these days and hope the kangaroo court would be satisfied. I slipped my fingernail underneath the sticker sealing the envelope and tore the letter open.

At that point, I still hadn't realized the full extent of Rosa's anger—anger held at bay by a single heart-shaped sticker.

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"Man, I can't believe we get to meet your sister! I'm kinda nervous!" said Al, cheerful as ever—a shining beacon of light in my newfound darkness.

Compared to Rosa's normal missives, the letter I'd reluctantly opened earlier had been...*unusual*, to say the least. Instead of her customary tightly packed handwriting, each stroke no bigger than a grain of rice, today's letter had featured giant words, scrawled across the pages in an ominous, deep-red ink—a color so similar to blood, I swore I could smell the metallic tang of iron rising from the pages. This was what the letter had said.

Page one: "I'll be waiting at the estate today, okay?"

Page two: "If you ignore this letter,"

Page three was blank—not blank white, but blank *red*. The page was entirely coated in a deep, bloody red, and it felt sticky to the touch. I'd gulped when I'd seen it. *Red papers used to mean you*

were being conscripted in Japan... Sure feels like I'm being called to war now.

I was terrified. Absolutely, positively terrified. The moment I'd seen the letter, I'd lost all capacity to worry about my classmates' safety. I wasn't brave enough to face Rosa alone—and I wasn't brave enough to ignore her either. There was every chance my Class A compatriots would get caught up in the cross fire (if she didn't just straight up murder them to get the adrenaline flowing), but my first priority was making sure I'd live to see another day, so I'd enlisted them as unwitting human shields.

"Er... Oh! Rosa says she's free today—what an amazing coincidence! I'm going to go see her right now, so anyone who wants to come along can follow me! Chop chop!" My voice had been shaky—as had my hands—and everyone had regarded my invitation with obvious suspicion on their faces, but in the end, five of them had taken me up on my offer: Fey, Jewel, Kate, Al, and Leo. Fey had changed into a frilly, expensive-looking beige top—no doubt the work of some high-end designer—along with a neat pair of black pants. Jewel had also gone to swap her own clothes for a more luxurious outfit, returning in a chic navy dress that screamed "high-end boutique." Altogether, it seemed like they were treating the outing with the same solemnity as an official meeting with a suitor's parents or something. *Of course, they don't realize we're about to step right into a battlefield...*

Anyway, Fey and Jewel had just rejoined us in front of the dorm, bringing us back to the present and Al's upbeat remark. I smiled at him. "No need to be nervous, Al—just keep up your usual carefree attitude. But you three—Leo, Fey, and Jewel—are you sure it's okay that you changed your plans all of a sudden? Weren't you guys saying you've been swamped with family obligations these past few months?"

"No problem at all!" replied Jewel, buzzing happily—and entirely unaware of her impending fate as a human sacrifice. "Everything has started to settle down as of late. Besides, I'd even skip a dinner invitation from the king himself over missing an opportunity like this."

She's acting like we're going on a field trip or something... Jewel's overjoyed mood aside, it seemed unlikely she'd have to abandon the outing midway. *Reminding them of who they're about to encounter is probably the nice thing to do, though.*

"You're probably already aware of this, what with the Red Carpet Incident and all, but my sister gets real scary when she's mad. To put it bluntly, once she gets going, even all of us together wouldn't be able to hold her back. Please just act normally—and whatever you do, don't try to provoke her on purpose, all right?"

"Is that right?" Leo replied, his eyes sparkling with idiotic delight. "It'd be uncivilized to provoke her intentionally, of course, but I'd like to ask her for a friendly bout at the very least."

Lacking the words to respond to this stupid statement, I ignored Leo entirely and turned back to Jewel. "Can your holy magic resurrect the dead?"

She shook her head. "Magically bringing the dead back to life is impossible. I've only ever heard of such magic in particularly dubious myths and legends..." Jewel sighed. "I know the first rule of the Emissive Magic Club states mages must pursue the impossible, but it's not something I've been able to start researching yet. I'm sorry."

So probably not a possibility, then—but even so, she's still planning to give it a shot. Love the attitude, Jewel. This calls for a little positive reinforcement.

I nodded. "Well, resurrection magic is the highest form of holy magic, after all. Keep at it, but don't stress yourself too much. Although, since it's impossible for now... Leo, if you plan to ask my sister for a duel, I'll need you to sign an oath stating you won't hold our family accountable in case of serious injury or death. Probably better to write your will too while you're at it. She's never been the type to hesitate before laying into someone, so if you're unlucky, there's a definite chance you could die."

In response to my grave warning, Leo simply shrugged, turning his palms face up as if to say, *Surely you're exaggerating.*

I tried to warn you! Everyone here is a witness!

"I kinda want to go back to the dorm..." Al mumbled, uneasy. I threw my arm around his shoulder, holding him tightly. I could do

without the premonitions of worsening peril that Leo's behavior—and that of the girls—was stirring up within me, but Al's happy-go-lucky attitude would be essential to my survival here. I couldn't let him escape, no matter what.

"Shall I send for a car?" Jewel suggested, but I turned her down, and we set off by foot. It didn't take long for our little party to reach the Rovene city estate (a term that seemed altogether too grand for what was essentially a run-of-the-mill house with a tiny garden). My fingers trembled as I pushed the buzzer.

Rosa came flying out of the front door mere seconds later, a blur of color in her pretty green dress dotted with white flowers.

"Er... Hi, Rosa. I'm home." My face twitched as I forced out the words.

In spite of—or perhaps oblivious to—our obvious company, Rosa sank to the ground and burst into tears.

What Really Happened During the Red Carpet Incident

With great, painstaking effort, I somehow managed to calm Rosa down and suggested we relocate inside the house. She looked up, her face streaked with the fading rivulets of dried tears. She was still sniffling as she replied, "Um... I never expected you'd be bringing all your friends along all of a sudden, and, er...the house is a little untidy... Could I have a few minutes to clean up first?"

Oh, right... I should have known. Rosa had been left to her own devices in the capital for four months straight now; the house would be a pigsty. As I regretted my lack of foresight, Fey came to the rescue.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Roseria. My name is Feyreun von Dragoon—I am one of Allen's classmates at the Academy and an aspiring magical craftswoman. I've wanted to meet you ever since I laid eyes on your magnificent research from your time at our Noble College. Please, don't worry about the state of your fine residence, tidy or otherwise. A magical craftswoman's base

of research will always look disorganized to the untrained eye, and I'm sure there are many things you'd rather not move around. If it pleases you, shall we have a barbecue in the garden instead? I already asked my men to arrange for the equipment and provisions, just in case. It's the least we could do after showing up with such a large party unannounced."

It was odd to hear such a normal introduction and proposal coming from Fey of all people, but realistically, I supposed she *was* the head of an elite noble family and a future marquess. She'd have to be capable of appearing reasonable and respectable when the situation demanded it, even if *I* never got to see that side of her.

Of course, I knew the house wouldn't be covered in scattered research and half-built prototypes like she'd implied. It was just the slovenly lair of a slovenly woman.

"Great idea, Fey!" I said, my vocal cords straining with forced positivity. "Sorry for springing this on you, Rosa. Everyone's been wanting to meet you for a while since I'm always bragging about you at school, so when I said I was heading out to see you today, they all begged to come along! Let's take Fey up on her generous offer, shall we?"

"Bragging...? You really brag about me?!" Rosa replied, flustered. "Um, um... Are you sure it's okay to accept such generosity from someone I've only just met? Especially from the future Marquess Dragoon..." She alternated between looking at Fey and myself as she spoke, her mood seeming slightly improved (albeit panicked).

"Of course it is—please don't worry about it. Like I said before, we're the ones who showed up without warning. Consider it an apology for our rudeness," replied Fey with a generous smile.

"Ah!" Rosa jumped, looking every bit like she'd just remembered something. "Er—hmm. Um..." Finally, she found the words she'd been scrambling for. "Um, is it okay if I make a request? Actually, my friend from the Special Research Institute has been wanting to meet *you*, Allen. I promised I'd let her know when you dropped in... But no matter how many letters I sent, you never came... Um, would it be all right if she joined us too?"

Rosa's teary-eyed, innocent expression would make even the

toughest old man bow to her every whim—so Fey, naturally, wasn't immune. "Of course—the more the merrier! It's not every day I get the chance to rub shoulders with a prodigy from the Special Magical Craftsmanship Research Institute, and even when I do, it's always at some stiff, formal event. Yet today, I'll get to meet two! Please invite her, Roseria. You're all okay with it, right?" The last line was directed at the rest of our classmates, who nodded their ready assent.

"Yay!" Rosa smiled brightly. "I'll send a spellbird, then!"

I was a little suspicious. Spellbirds were this world's version of a carrier pigeon, avian monsters trained by highly specialized organizations and loaned out to paying customers. They were affordable enough for even ordinary people to use them if needed, but at the same time, they weren't *so* affordable that it made financial sense for anyone but the wealthiest nobles to use them for short-distance communication—like *within* Runerelia, for instance. I voiced my suspicion to Rosa, who shyly whispered in reply that she'd "borrowed" it from her school before running off to send her message.

"Well, I should also send a message to my men so they can start preparing the barbecue," said Fey, who promptly turned toward the garden gate and clapped her hands twice.

Spellbirds are one thing, but what kind of messaging system is she *using?!*

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A small army of Dragoon attendants who'd clearly been waiting outside came bustling through the gate in response to Fey's signal. They'd begun setting up a full set of barbecue equipment before I could even blink. Rosa returned a minute later, and the introductions continued. First was Al.

"Pleased to meet you, Rosa. I'm Aldor Engravier, from the Endymion Region, but please just call me Al. I'd like to apologize on behalf of my region for the trouble you went through during your Academy entrance exam."

Exactly as I'd predicted, Rosa seemed entirely unaware of what Al

was referring to. I tried to jog her memory. "Rosa, remember when you went to take the exams and ended up sending, like, sixty people from his region to the hospital? And then you withdrew from the exams? Surely you remember that much, at least."

"Ah," Rosa said after a pause, and she looked away, refusing to meet my eyes. "I, er—I've got no idea what you mean..." Her voice carried a playful, innocent lilt, although she was still adamantly avoiding my gaze.

I sighed. "Well, since it seems like nothing ever came of it, I don't really care either way. Does Mother know what happened, though?"

Rosa's shoulders sank, her expression turning gloomy in an instant. She was never any good at hiding her emotions. "I think she probably does know. When I went home and told her I hadn't made it past the magical aptitude threshold, she was like, 'Rosa? Are you sure there isn't something you need to tell me?' Allen, she was so scary! I managed to convince her the threshold was too high, and I spent the next few months fearing for my life, but she never said anything else, so...I'm safe!" Her mouth curved into a radiant, girlish smile, the spitting image of our mother's.

Well, I doubt Mother actually *doesn't know what happened. She probably just looked into the incident for herself and decided Rosa hadn't done anything wrong by her standards—otherwise, she definitely would have punished her.* I didn't necessarily agree with her evaluation, but our mother had always had a rather *unique* set of values.

Leo chuckled. "Your mother must be just as unusual as you, Allen, if she was happy to let such an incident slide without any further questioning... I'm Leo Seizinger. A pleasure, Roseria."

I didn't know why he looked so pleased. *What kind of weirdo gets excited when he finds out his friend's mother is "unusual"?*

"My name is Jewelry Reverence; I'm another of Allen's classmates. May I ask—has Allen truly not returned here since school started? I thought surely even children from a regional viscountal family would be required to report home every once in a while to update their family on recent events..."

Rosa glared at me, puffing out her cheeks. "Not even once! Allen

doesn’t care about my feelings at all! On the day the results were announced, I knew he would be accepted, so I spent hours running around shopping for a big celebration, right? But when I got home, no one was there. He’d left a note on an old bit of scrap paper that just said, ‘I got in. I’m moving into the dorm,’ and that’s the last I heard of him! I’ve written him heaps of letters since then, but he never responded to a single one. He never even came to pick up his allowance... I’ve been so worried about him...” She trailed off. I thought she was still angry, but then another tear ran down her cheek, and she started sobbing again in earnest. “I really thought...you never wanted to see me again...” She hiccuped.

Stinging glares pierced my skin like needles. Kate and the other girls whispered among themselves while nodding at me; I was sure I caught the words “human trash” more than once. I could understand that from an *objective* point of view, I was in the wrong here. Anyone who hadn’t experienced the real Rosa would have the same reaction after hearing such a limited version of the full story. Part of me wanted to argue my case, but I wasn’t stupid enough to try and alter the course of events now. I was painfully used to trivial arguments turning into full-blown sibling fights.

Rosa might have tricked everyone else with her emotional, docile behavior, but she couldn’t fool me. I’d met the wolf underneath her sheep’s clothing. The emotional instability she’d been displaying since our arrival was little more than a preview of the molten ocean of anger and gloom she’d cultivated over the past four months, and the smallest spark could cause her to erupt, triggering a torrent of magma that would smother everything in its path. I couldn’t care less what the others thought of me right now. All that mattered was that I avoided becoming another course for the barbecue. A quick glance at the Dragoon chef—and the wickedly sharp skewers he was currently loading up with meat—was enough to cement my decision.

I’d have to grovel.

“I’m so sorry, Rosa. Honestly, I was scared. I thought if I let myself see you—the sister I love and respect so deeply—I might allow myself to return to being your spoiled little brother like I used to be... I couldn’t stand the idea of dishonoring you like that. Painful

though it was, I forced myself to stay away until now. I wanted to support myself, which is why I didn't come to get my allowance either. But I've finally gotten used to life at the Academy, and I think I'll be able to drop in every once in a while now as long as I don't feel myself becoming too reliant on you again. I'm sorry for making you worry."

"So you weren't just being cruel..." murmured Al as he and the others nodded in response to my admirable behavior (fictitious though it was).

Rosa, on the other hand, just huffed and turned her face away. "And what about when I was still at the Noble College in Dragreid? I invited you to come and stay so many times, and you didn't agree once. I don't believe a word you say anymore, Allen." She stuck out her tongue, the gesture unbecoming of a woman her age, and everyone laughed in response. Everyone except me. *Guess I'm the only one who feels like I'm crossing a tightrope over a gorge filled with jagged rocks, and one misstep would mean certain death...?*

Kate was the only one left to introduce herself. "I'm Kate Sancalpar, another of Allen's classmates from 1-A. By the way, you seem to really dote on Allen, hm? I've got a little brother too, but we barely even talk. I'm jealous—the two of you seem so close...?" Kate prompted her, giggling politely—she was every bit a carbon copy of one of those gossiping middle-aged women when they were probing for information.

"Allen was soooo cute when he was little," Rosa replied, smiling. "I pampered him a ton, but somehow, he turned into such a cruel, unfeeling person... Maybe I spoiled him *too* much..."

I could see the exact moment when her posture changed. Rosa turned toward me slowly. Out of reflex, I took three steps backward, and she calmly took three steps forward to match, closing the distance between us again—but just then, my savior appeared.

"Gooood morning! Hey now, what a bunch of fresh young faces we have here! Which one of you is Rosa's li'l brother?"

"Fu!" exclaimed Rosa. "You got here so quickly! Perfect timing, though—Allen and I were just about to play a little game for the first time in *ages*!"

I ran as fast as my feet could carry me, delivering myself into the salvation of my new goddess, my deity, my benevolent saint Fu. I bowed deeply. “It’s nice to meet you! I’m Rosa’s unworthy little brother, Allen! Thank you for being a good friend to my sister!”

She laughed. “You’re pretty humble for a kid who’s the talk of the town! I’m Fuli. It’s nice to meet you too.”

Fuli was a beautiful woman. Her slightly wavy, light brown hair was swept back in a high ponytail, apart from two long, curly strands that framed her face. She was tall and slender, and she wore a loose-fitted shirt and pants. Her chiseled, strong-looking physique lent her a uniquely reassuring aura—like she could definitely protect you in a fight—and that probably made her as popular among the girls as it did the guys. Since she attended the same institute as Rosa, she was undoubtedly a genius in her own right—but I didn’t sense a hint of arrogance about her.

“When Roseria said she was going to invite her friend, I never would have guessed I’d come face-to-face with the famously antisocial Fuli Elevato... Today is just full of surprises,” breathed Fey. “And, Allen? Are you ever planning to stop ogling her so you can introduce us?”

“Fuli Elevato, the ‘Solitary Scholar’... The only commoner to graduate from the Academy as valedictorian in over twenty years... Daughter of Ashim Elevato, who pioneered the advancement of magically powered movement technology... A genius magical engineer in her own right, and she’s moonlighting as a popular model for fashion magazines too. It would seem yet another rival has appeared...” Jewel’s mutterings were quite informed, though a little unsettling.

“Well, look at you, li’l bro! Your plain looks haven’t stopped you from being popular with the girls, huh? Just what I’d expect from Rosa’s younger brother.” She smiled sheepishly. “Well, your friend sure knows a lot about me, but honestly? Compared to Rosa, I’m just an ordinary person.”

“Huh?!” Rosa stared at me, mouth ajar. “Allen, you’re not leading those two girls on, are you? Or are you dating one of them? No, if you were, you surely would have introduced one of them as your

girlfriend...which means they're just your friends...right? Am I right? It's not like you've been so busy playing around with girls that you forgot to come and visit me, right? Well? Well?!"

"How unusual!" It was the return of Kate, professional gossiper. "Perhaps Roseria does have *special* feelings for her little brother after all? No, what a ridiculous idea! Unless..." Another trilling giggle.

"It sure is getting pretty lively around here, Allen!" Al paused, then looked at me, concerned. "Allen? Are you okay? Uh, are you still breathing?"

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The others introduced themselves to Fuli while I played dead, an instinctual reaction to the storm I'd felt on the horizon. Fuli responded to each introduction with casual and good-humored amiability. Maybe it was because of her commoner background, but she didn't seem stuck-up or self-important in the slightest.

It wasn't unheard of for a commoner to graduate as valedictorian of the Academy every once in a while. The nobility could use their wealth and connections to their advantage while *studying* for the exams, but after a student got in, it was primarily their own abilities and determination that mattered. Plus, the commoner population was much larger than the nobility; statistically speaking, a few valedictorians here and there were to be expected.

When I eventually "came to," a full set of top-of-the-line barbecue equipment (plus a chef and several waiters) was already heating up in the cramped garden—and of course, the first voice I heard was Fey's. "Now, with a lineup like this gathering on unofficial business, I'm sure we've lit a fire under the private intelligence teams of every family in Runerelia. I was planning to set up an anti-Scouting device so we can talk candidly and just have fun—would everyone be okay with that?"

What an exaggeration... "As if there's going to be any eyes on a barbecue among school friends at our little old house. Don't be so melodramatic," I replied, exasperated.

Fey snorted. "Ha! Sure, Allen. I get it. I thought you were up to

something when you made us walk here instead of taking a car—choosing the method sure to attract the most attention to us and all—but now I get it. You're trying to give them the year's largest scoop, huh? There's already at least seven suspicious figures loitering around the area according to my men—but it's all according to your plan, right? If we don't take countermeasures now, that number will have increased tenfold by the time we take our leave. Shall we all line up shoulder to shoulder and take a commemorative photo? Something to remember the day we caused every private intelligence team and busybody in the capital to unite under a common goal?"

I hesitated for a second. "Well," I said after a pause, "I still think you're overreacting, but since you went to all the trouble, you might as well set it up. Right, Rosa?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, whatever. More importantly, what's your relationship with these gir—"

"We're nothing more than classmates, of course!" I laughed and hastily changed the subject. "But by the way, is Fuli actually pretty famous or something? I don't think I'd heard of her before today..."

"Fu?" Rosa tilted her head. "I mean, I think she's a pretty well-known researcher...? I don't really pay much attention to that side of things..."

While I tried to distract Rosa from her previous line of questioning, Fey clapped her hands again. At once, more of her attendants appeared through the gate, bringing forth a large, cube-shaped device and setting it down in the center of the garden. The instant the switch was pressed, a low buzzing sound swept through the area, and my Scouting Magic—which I kept habitually activated—stopped working entirely. *Huh... I'm gonna need to figure out a way to get around those at some point.*

"*Now* we can talk in peace," said Fey, grinning. "And there you go again, Allen—you always seem to be knowledgeable in only the weirdly specific areas. You know way too much about the histories and interests of all the major noble families, but you're always a little lacking when it comes to individual people."

Fey sighed exaggeratedly before continuing. "Valedictorian of the

1,123rd class of the Royal Academy, the Solitary Scholar, Fuli Elevato. She's basically the face of the current generation of magical craftspeople. On top of that, she's also a prominent magical engineer *and* a famous model. You wouldn't be able to count the number of people who'd give up their family fortunes just to get in contact with her. Unfortunately, she's also famously antisocial and has never accepted a single invitation to an official party or private event hosted by any of the noble families." Fey paused for a second and laughed. "Even being in Class A, her talent was leagues above that of the rest of her classmates. There's a pretty famous anecdote about the time she called them all 'mediocre at best.' Of course, we Dragoons have sent heaps of invitations for meetings and dinners as well, but she's turned down every one—which is why I never would have guessed she'd just pop up out of nowhere and greet us all like old friends... Well, how was that for an introduction?" She threw a glance toward Fuli. "Did I get it all right?"

Fuli laughed. "I think you're overestimating me a bit, but thanks. I was a little rough back in my Academy years, it's true. People can be stupid when they're young, and I said some pretty cruel things to my classmates... But I didn't think I was better than them or anything, and I'm not actually very antisocial either. I was just...angry." Her eyes flashed. "Someone who deserved to be in Class A with me wasn't—and it was all my fault. It ate away at me for three whole years."

Fuli looked straight at Rosa.

My sister frowned and puffed out her cheeks. "You're *still* not over it? I've told you *so* many times that it wasn't your fault! More importantly, you two girls—do you think of Allen as just a classmate too? Hmm?" Rosa, clearly not believing me, made to launch her investigation at full throttle.

This is not *going well. Kate is already a problem, and there's no telling what the other two are gonna come out with.* I'd already testified that Fey and Jewel were no more than classmates. If their statements were inconsistent with mine, the iron fist of justice surely awaited me. Frantic to find an escape, I latched on to Fuli's last words. "Wait! Are you saying you were involved in the Red Carpet

Incident as well?!”

“‘Red Carpet’?” replied Fuli, confused. “Oh yeah, I heard some people were calling it that. Rosa said she wasn’t going to tell her family about it, but I guess you already know, li’l bro?” She sighed. “I’ve never spoken about it to anyone, but...I guess it might be time for it to come out now?” She looked toward Rosa as though she was asking for permission.

“Yeah, whatever, looks like the cat’s out of the bag anyway, but more importantly, do you two girls think of Allen as just a class—”

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With Rosa’s permission, Fuli told us about what had *really* happened during the Red Carpet Incident.

“The day of the exams, I’d been waiting to find out whether I’d passed the magical aptitude threshold—you know, the so-called Sieve of Fate—when Rosa and I started talking by chance. We got really worked up discussing magical tools and stuff. It was great, until that Endymion idiot came along and all the trouble started...

“I was the one he targeted first. He claimed I’d bumped into him or something, but really, he just wanted to make up a reason, any reason at all, to flaunt his authority. Back then, I only had enough talent to make it into Class C at best, but I was desperate to get in. I needed the prestige of being a Royal Academy graduate to set myself up as a proper magical craftswoman. I’d never interacted with nobles before, being a commoner and all, and when I realized I was talking to a marquess’s kid, I froze up. Even when the stupid boy declared I was going to become his concubine, I couldn’t manage to argue back. And then...that was when Rosa stepped in. She was fearless.

“When I think about it now, I’m pretty sure that was his plan all along. He saw both of us as his prey. You could see it on his face when Rosa stepped in, like he’d just hooked a massive fish. The sleazebag told Rosa she should share the blame with me in solidarity, and he tried to walk up to her. Rosa seemed so calm. I thought she was on top of it, really. I thought she’d turn him down,

politely but firmly, and everything would be fine. I guess you all know what happened next.

"He grabbed her by the wrist, trying to force her to sign his sleazy contract—and a second later, blood was flying everywhere. She'd shattered his nose. All the other scumbags from his region had surrounded us already, so no one else could see what he had been trying to do. It was like she was dancing, the way she twirled between them, pulverizing their dumb grinning faces one after the other. Even now, it's still burned into my mind, you know—the beautiful way she moved. By the time it was over, it was like her hands and shoes had been dyed red...but somehow, there wasn't a single drop of blood on her perfect white blouse. Even though I'd been right there for it, I could barely believe what I'd witnessed. And then Rosa—she stuck out her tongue, like a kid who'd been caught misbehaving, and said this to me:

"'What a shame, Fu—we were only just getting to know each other and all. I couldn't stop myself since I've got a pretty short temper! Luckily, all these pieces of trash now have at least a couple of fractures each, so I don't think they'll be up for taking the exams. No chance you're going to run into them while you're at the Academy.'

"And then she left. She told them she was withdrawing from the exams and skipped back out the gate. She didn't look back once. As thickheaded as I was back then, even I knew why she'd done it. She'd wanted to make sure I wouldn't be hassled by any of those idiots if I did get in—so she'd thoroughly ensured *they* wouldn't stand a chance of passing. She was so sure I'd get admitted—me, an insignificant commoner she'd only just met—that she threw away her own shot at glory without a second thought. And she tried to wave it off with her 'short temper' so I wouldn't notice.

"I managed to get a hold of her address later, and I sent her a letter apologizing. From then on, we started writing regularly, mostly exchanging our ideas on research and magical tools. It didn't take long for me to realize—Rosa was a genius. I was no match for her when it came to magical craftsmanship. And then there was her crazy instincts for Strengthening Magic and her unbelievable

courage... I couldn't forgive myself. She'd given up everything for my sake. If she'd been at the Academy with me, she would have been valedictorian without a doubt. If I'd had the courage to stand up to that Endymion idiot back at the Sieve, if I'd been the one to throw the first punch—Rosa would still have had her brilliant future ahead of her. But I'd stolen it from her.

"So I spent three years studying like a madwoman and training day and night, all to make sure I could take the spot that should have been hers so she would know her sacrifice hadn't gone to waste. When I became a second-year, I was moved into Class A, and by the time I'd entered the third year, I had the highest grades in the whole school. That was when those rumors began. My classmates started to harass me, working themselves up over the idea of taking back the first-place ranking a 'mere commoner' like me had stolen from them—which was when I said something like, *'Mediocrity isn't gonna be enough to claim the valedictorian's seat.'* I was referring to myself when I said that too, but after it passed through the rumor mill a few times, everyone thought I was looking down on my classmates, and they started to call me aloof...or solitary. It was around then that people started using the weird 'scholar' title too.

"I wanted to scream it to the world: The only person who deserved to claim the valedictorian's spot was Roseria Rovene. But Rosa had asked me not to tell anyone, and the school had put a gag order on the whole incident as well. I only started to calm down last year when I heard Rosa was going to be admitted to the Special Research Institute. I felt like she'd managed to start rewalking the path I'd robbed her of. And as for the 'antisocial' label... Well, it's come in handy for turning down all the random invitations I get, so I never bothered to try and correct their perception of me, you know?"

She paused for a moment, then continued. "I've always wanted to tell someone about this. About what really happened. And today, not only did I get to come clean, I got to tell Rosa's beloved little brother about the best side of his sister as well... I don't think I'll ever be able to get over my regret for what happened that day,

but...at the same time, it feels like a big weight's been lifted from my shoulders."

And thus, Fuli's story came to an end.

Spring-Cleaning and a Barbecue

"Well, it's a good thing I got them to set up the anti-Scouting device, huh?" Fey said, grinning. "Most of us have only just caught a break from dining with other noble families every day of the week. If this got out, we'd be eating dinner three times a night for *months* with all the invitations we'd receive. I don't know about you, but that's a little too much for me— Er, Allen? Why are *you* grilling the meat?"

At some point during Fey's rambling, I'd walked over to the barbecue and politely—but firmly—shooed the chef away (even as he'd insisted that he be allowed to continue cooking). She'd caught me while I was turning some of the lovingly grilled skewers. "Because a barbecue cooked for you by someone else isn't a barbecue at all. In situations like these, there's more important things than just taste."

The spirit of barbecuing didn't come from how superbly the meat was cooked. It came from the raw, primal act of cooking the meat for yourself. There was an added bonus too: If I managed to convince everyone else to join in, they'd hopefully get distracted by the unfamiliar work—allowing me to manipulate the flow of conversation and ensure Rosa never got the chance to return to her previous line of questioning.

"Another of your mysterious philosophies?" Fey laughed, rolling her eyes. "So, as Roseria's beloved little brother, what do *you* think now that you've heard the truth behind the Red Carpet Incident?"

What do I think? I think you all seem to be taking it as some grand, moving tale of bravery and sacrifice instead of what actually *happened: She got pissed off and wanted to punch somebody. What do* I *think?* I *think the whole thing's ridiculous.*

I went ahead and said as much. "Well, since you asked—Fuli, I

know the whole thing's been weighing on your mind, but I don't think you should feel guilty about it. She got mad; she punched. She was never really fussed about getting into the Academy anyway, so she withdrew from the exam and left. Isn't that right, Rosa?"

Rosa giggled in response. "Full marks! You know me so well, Allen. I tried to explain it to Fu so many times, but she never believed me! It was really annoying, actually."

Fu froze for a second as she registered Rosa's words—and then suddenly, she threw her head back and roared with laughter. I caught a glimpse of teary eyes. "Ah," she finally said, choking out her next words between deep gasps for breath. "I'm glad I got the chance to meet you today, li'l bro. With what you just said... Well, I kinda feel like I might be able to forgive myself a little now." She grinned at me. "If you ever need help with magical engineering or something to do with magical movement technology, come and see me, okay? Your honorary older sister here will be happy to help with anything you need." She shot me a wink before turning to Rosa. "But seriously, if you wanted me to believe you, you shoulda tried to be a bit more convincing—you know, instead of going on about how the Noble College in Dragreid was more convenient for you anyway and how your little brother could come and see you more often since it was close to your house! You tried to convince me you'd gotten the better deal—but seriously, who would've believed that?!"

Rosa beamed with delight. "But now you finally believe me! Although Allen didn't end up coming to visit at all... Now, more importantly—you girls! Is Allen just a classmate to you?!"

"Oh my! For a mere sibling, Roseria appears particularly fixated on Allen's love life! Are they indeed a little *too* close? Oho ho ho!" Kate laughed airily.

The conversation flew back like a boomerang, landing exactly where it had started.

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"So brother and sister alike made a mockery of the entrance exams in their own ways, huh? You've really put me to shame." Fey

grinned, exaggeratedly bowing to Rosa. "Sorry to disappoint you, my future sister-in-law, but Allen and I are just classmates—for now, that is." She flashed her teeth at my sister in her unique feline way, eyes narrowing as though she were a lion on the hunt. A provocation.

"I, too, am participating in the earnest battle to become Allen's chosen. After all, I've already decided that I'll be his first *everything*," Jewel declared, her expression as determined as Fey's.

"Are you two stupid?!" I shouted. "Can't you read the situa—" I hurriedly tried to put a stop to the troublesome duo, but I was too late: Rosa's fist was already flying toward my face. As always, there hadn't been the slightest delay while she'd activated her Strengthening Magic, leaving me mere milliseconds of time to respond. I threw up a hasty Magic Guard, but it wasn't enough; blood splattered from my nose like crimson rain.

"Hm?" Rosa smiled at me dangerously. "Surely you should have been able to block that, Allen—unless playing around with those girls has made you weak? No, don't answer me. I won't believe a word you say anyway, and right now, me and your two pretty friends need to have a little girls' talk. You just wait here patiently, okay?" With a final foreboding smile, Rosa started to lead Fey and Jewel inside the house.

They stopped just past the entrance. "What an awful stench..." Fey said, pinching her nose. "What kind of experiment are you conducting in here? It smells like something's decomposing..."

I sighed. "There's no experiment. Rosa's just a slob—enough so to not even throw out her food scraps, apparently." I turned to Kate with a smirk. "Well, manager? Aren't times like these an opportunity to show your stuff?" I patted her on the shoulder encouragingly.

Kate blinked. "What *stuff*...?" she replied warily.

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Our barbecue plans temporarily adjourned, we all rolled up our sleeves to help Rosa with some long overdue spring-cleaning. She tried to insist on doing it herself, but she quickly conceded after I

pointed out she wouldn't be finished until sundown at the earliest. The thought of a whole day spent cleaning must have filled her with dread, and she was happily on board with the plan thereafter. We boys would clean the first floor, which included the kitchen, living room, bathroom, and toilet, while the girls' team took charge of Rosa's study and bedroom on the second floor.

Fey and Jewel had offered to lend us some of their men (who seemed to be on standby outside the gate) to take over the cleaning entirely, but I'd firmly turned them down. The idea of a viscount-cum-pauper family like ours appropriating servants from not one, but *two* marquesal families—and for something as silly as cleaning our house—was, to put it lightly, preposterous. If it somehow got out, the reaction among the upper nobility would be insane. Many would interpret it as the Rovene family overstepping its bounds—and many of them would be more than eager to remind us of our rightful place.

I'd said as much to Fey, who'd replied, *"I see where you're coming from, but are you sure it's okay for you to force* us *to clean instead...? Eh, I don't care either way."* Fey and the other girls were now knee-deep in their work on the second floor; I caught bursts of laughter intermittently alternating with fits of screaming. *Probably getting attacked by hordes of insects, no doubt.*

"Sorry, Leo. It's okay for me to force Al to dig through rotten trash, but a duke's son..."

"Why's it okay if it's me?!"

Leo ignored Al (who was quickly finding himself to be the usual butt of any jokes) and shrugged at me. "It's no bother to me. Eating all of Thora's meals has given me a remarkable resistance to smells like these. Besides, I've learned quite a few things since I moved into the standard dorm and started having to clean up after myself. Turns out I'm quite fond of chores, actually—and I like that I've still got a lot of room to improve my cleaning skills."

Leo paused for a moment, a faint smile playing on his lips, before continuing. "Whenever I go to a friend's house, their parents or attendants are always lurking nearby, either trying to gather information or otherwise use me to their advantage. This is the first

time I've come to a friend's house to actually hang out with *just* my friends. Plus, I think most families—even less affluent viscountal ones—would employ a housekeeper when they've got a child living away from home. Even more so if they were aware of how filthy the place was likely to become. But the fact your parents haven't... To me, it feels like they're acknowledging your sister as her own person instead of treating her as a child who can't—*shouldn't*—do anything for themselves. What I'm basically trying to say is, this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me—one I never thought I'd have. If anything, I consider myself lucky to be here." He grinned at me before returning diligently to his current task: scraping off chunks of the thick, gasoline-colored slime that clung to the sides of the sink.

"Uh... You're kidding me, right?"

He snorted. "Well, I suppose you see it very differently, having grown up in an environment like this. But on another note, I've been meaning to ask—you could have avoided your sister's punch earlier, right? Why didn't you?"

Nothing gets past him, huh? "I've been ignoring her letters for months, so I knew she'd be furious," I said as I wiped the mysteriously greasy floor clean. It was slippery enough that I could have probably used it as something of a skating rink had I been so inclined. "I had to take at least one punch or she would have completely lost it. By the way, that punch was nothing more than an invitation—something to lure me in. If I'd dodged it, the next one would have been a whole lot deadlier."

"Oh?" A voice drifted down from the top of the stairs. "Did I hear that right? My sweet little Allen manipulated me? I'm so proud of you! You know, we haven't seen each other in *soooo* long, and we've barely had any fun! Shall we play a little more?"

Crap... The anti-Scouting device Fey had set up was extremely effective; I'd completely forgotten my Scouting Magic still wasn't working (even inside the house), so I hadn't noticed Rosa's footsteps at the top of the stairs. She'd heard everything.

I stiffened with fear as I scrambled for an answer, but before I found one, Leo stepped in front of the staircase. "I'll play with you, Roseria. Let me help you blow off some steam," he said, flashing her

his fearless smirk.

Rosa's eyes widened; naturally, even she was surprised by his boldness. "Huh?! Er—it was Leo, right? Um, sorry, but I can't! I'm no good at going easy on people, you see... I'd have to apologize to your parents for injuring you as *well* as for making you clean our house..."

"Think of it as my *reward* for helping you clean. Please, Roseria. It's not often I get the chance to experience the fighting prowess of someone even an Academy *valedictorian* considers herself ordinary in comparison to. Of course, I won't hold you accountable should anything happen. I swear it on the name Seizinger," Leo declared with far more gravity than the situation called for, placing his right hand over his heart. Rosa looked at me, bewildered.

Well, this is Leo we're talking about here. I doubt he's gonna get too *badly injured. Besides, I did bring him along to take a share of the punches for me... If my tank wants to be hit, what right do I have to say no? Yep, I think it's fine! I owe Rosa a lotta blood, so I'll go halfsies with Leo!*

"Give him a go, Rosa. I'm always losing to him in our sparring matches in class, so you probably don't need to worry about hurting him."

"Really?! Well, if you're sure..." replied Rosa, still a little uneasy. "I guess a little bout wouldn't hurt..."

And then she was flying. She threw herself down the stairs, her fist on a direct trajectory for Leo's face. It must have had at least twice as much force behind it as the punch she'd thrown at me in the garden.

"Gah!" Somehow, Leo managed to avoid the blow, twisting his body to the side and throwing himself off-balance in the process—a rookie mistake. Once you'd lost your footing in a fight with Rosa, she'd already won. She landed just behind Leo, flowing from one movement to the next in a seamless dance; she spun around with a low roundhouse kick, sweeping both of Leo's ankles and sending him sprawling. She was as magnificent as ever. It didn't matter how skilled Leo was—once she'd gotten him off-balance, the fight had been over and done with. He hadn't even hit the ground yet when

her fist came down on his right cheek like a hammer, as though she was trying to smash him straight through the floorboards.

Leo just lay there on the ground, dumbfounded. It had all happened so fast; he probably had yet to comprehend how he'd ended up on the floor or why blood was gushing from his nose. That was Rosa for you: She hadn't been lying when she'd said she didn't know how to pull her punches.

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"Whoops. Do you really lose to this guy, Allen?" Rosa asked, tilting her head in curiosity.

I nodded. "Leo's good, but even he's gonna struggle to match your speed, especially facing you for the first time. Also, apparently it's customary around here to say something like 'Okay, I'm ready' or 'Let's begin' before you start to attack—it's considered polite, you know? Most people would move to a more open space like the garden before beginning too."

"Oh! Really?! Sorry, Leo! I didn't know..." Slightly panicked, she apologized to Leo, who was still lying flat on the floor.

"No, it's perfectly fine," he replied, pushing himself to his feet. Blood still dripped down his handsome, princely face. "This is your house, and these are your rules. I came here to learn the Rovene way of doing things"—suddenly, he twisted on the spot, aiming a roundhouse kick squarely at Rosa's chest—"after all!"

Mwa ha ha. On the inside, I was patting myself on the back. Leo and I had spent a lot of time fighting one another in class. I knew better than anyone how much he hated to lose and how abnormally stubborn he could be. He'd play along with Rosa for as long as he could, and the more steam he got her to let off, the better the odds would be for me.

Rosa caught Leo's shin before it connected with her chest, pincering it between her elbow and thigh with a hideous *crunch*. Leo screamed.

"Ah! Sorry! You seemed a lot stronger this time, so I used that move without thinking... Sorry for breaking your leg! Rest up for a

bit, okay?" She turned back to me, smiling. "Alleeen, it's your turn to plaaay..."

Seriously, Leo?! Tapping out after ten seconds?! You're all bark and no bite, you bastard! You weren't even using Magic Guard? Leo's insane magical aptitude level meant he was used to always being the one attacking, and his lacking defense was the proof of it. It hadn't been an issue when I'd fought him, but my sister was on a whole different level.

I turned to Al. "Rosa said she wants to play with us."

"What?! Nuh-uh, no way. I'm a mage, remember?! She just took Leo down in a single hit—what the hell am I gonna be able to do?!"

"That's enough! I expect more from the captain of the Emissive Magic Club! Do you think mages never end up in close-quarters combat? Prepare for battle, Al! Coach's orders!"

"You're seriously telling me to cast magic inside your house?! Think for a second, Allen! I'll wreck the place!"

"Don't be stupid, Al! When Rosa wants to play, a few holes in the walls are to be expected! Besides, you won't need to worry about it anyway. Small space like this, you won't get a chance to cast one of your slow-ass spells before Rosa gets to you. You're just gonna distract her while I find a chance to attack—it's all we can do!"

"So I'm just gonna be the punching bag?! The 'tank' or whatever you always call it?! I'm a mage, Allen, a mage! Why do I have to be the one who gets hit?!"

"Because that bastard Leo's already tapped out!" I caught a flash of movement and turned to see Jewel coming back in through the front door clutching a meter-long staff; she must have slipped out while Al and I were arguing. Approaching Leo, she began chanting. It was a prayer in ancient Lavandulish, widely regarded as a complex, obscure language, but the words rolled off her tongue like a song. Her prayer drew to a melodic end as she held the staff over Leo's leg, and golden light materialized out of nowhere, enveloping his limb in a warm glow. The next moment, Leo stood up. It was like his leg had never been broken.

"Well, ain't that a surprise. You can heal a broken bone in seconds at your age? Scares me a little, to be honest!" said Fuli, who

was apparently very impressed by Jewel's mastery of holy magic.

Jewel smiled, embarrassed. "Well, it's only natural for those of us who belong to Allen's Emissive Magic Club, I guess."

Fuli chuckled. "Y'know, Rosa asked me to gather all the rumors I could about Allen, so I've heard a little bit about your club, but you're telling me y'all actually do more than just flip skirts there? It's hard to get information from inside the school, so I thought for sure you'd just started it on a whim after the Hill Path Club—as a joke, yeah? Somewhere to play around."

I did wonder how that slovenly sister of mine was getting so much information... Guess she enlisted Fuli to do it for her. But the idea that the Emissive Magic Club is just some whimsical joke is a gross *misunderstanding.*

"Actually, the Hill Path Club was the one I started on a whim. Everything we do there is just basic training—stuff I could have just kept doing alone. Nah, it's the Emissive Magic Club that's the real deal, all thanks to our captain Al and his hard work in putting it all together."

"Really? That's surprising. I couldn't find any information about Al except for him being one of your classmates, but I'm guessing he's not just an ordinary person either, then?"

I smirked. "Al *is* just an ordinary person. But with Rudolph Austin—the Demon Co-Captain—plus me, Leo, Jewel, and all the others, we've got a full roster of eccentric types over at the club, and Al's the only one capable of keeping us under control. *That's* the type of guy he is."

Fuli let out a low whistle. "You're sure having a blowout sale on information today, li'l bro." She chuckled, then turned her gaze toward Al, staring at him curiously. Rosa also seemed interested in him now on account of my deliberately provocative description. *Mwa ha ha... All according to plan. Al won't be able to escape now.*

"Hey! I'm only the captain because *you* impulsively decided it!"

"Er... Okay! Let's begin the punchiiing!" Rosa half said, half sang in an awkward approximation of how I'd indicated she should start a fight—and then she immediately took a swing at Al. I rushed toward her, timing my kick to hopefully intercept her right before her fist

connected with Al's face. Unfortunately, Rosa seemed to anticipate my move. She pulled out of her initial swing and spun around, aiming her fist at my incoming foot instead.

Having suspected the first punch would be a feint, I managed to dodge her and began giving orders. "Leo, you're the tank! If she manages to slip past you, the whole unit will collapse! Imagine there's a million helpless people behind you and defend carefully! Al and Fey will deal with Fuli! Kate—you support our healer Jewel and issue commands as a whole! I'll attack on all sides!"

"Wait a minute! Why do *we* have to fight—"

"It's not a fight! Just a perfectly normal icebreaker—a little game to get to know one another!" Kate still seemed horrified, but I ignored her and took a swing at Fuli. At this point, getting everyone involved would give me the best chance at victory—and if not, at least it'd be over quicker. The rough-and-tumble types of the exploring world (Uncle Cher in particular) had apparently had a bad influence on me, but at the same time, it *was* a viable strategy.

"You've sure got guts, li'l bro—just like I'd expect from someone related to Rosa!" Fuli said, catching my fist in midair and grasping it tight. "I was just starting to get a little jealous to be missing out on the fun, but siding with Rosa? Oh, now I'm excited!" Finally releasing my aching hand, the former valedictorian of the Royal Academy raised her own fist into the air. "Okay, let's begin the punchiiing!"

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Fuli, as it turned out, proved to be a more formidable opponent than I'd anticipated. She was strangely good at hand-to-hand combat for a magical engineer. In fact, she was probably just as good as Justin, who'd been valedictorian the year after her. I would be lying if I said she and Rosa were in any way synchronized in their attacks, but even so, the pair of them were utterly unstoppable.

When confronted by a superior opponent, most people tended to end up burning through their mana with Magic Guard. Leo's magical aptitude was insanely high, but even with him taking on a purely defensive role, he was definitely taking a hit to his mana reserves

protecting himself from Rosa's kaleidoscope of continuous attacks. My classmates looked like they couldn't believe their eyes, seeing Leo—*that* Leo—get beaten helplessly to a pulp, especially since we weren't even using weapons.

"I get being hypnotized by Rosa, but are you sure you can afford to take your eyes off me?"

In reality, Fuli was quite a handful herself. I didn't know what it was about these magical craftswomen, but her grip was as freakishly strong as Fey's. It probably had to do with all those hours spent concentrating powerful (yet delicate) magic in the tips of their fingers. Fuli had a decent command over various styles of attacking, but it was those long, slender fingers that posed the biggest risk. Once she'd gotten a hold of you, there was no escape—all you could do was throw up a Magic Guard until she tossed you away, thoroughly tenderized. We managed to hold our ground every time someone was thrown off the battlefield following one of Fuli's attacks, waiting for Jewel's holy magic to get them back on their feet. Unfortunately, it wasn't long until Jewel's mana began to run out.

"I'm sorry," she said, panting, "but I can't cast any more. The next time someone gets hurt, I won't be able to heal them." She sank to her knees, clutching her staff to stop herself from falling over completely. Her breathing was wild and labored; she'd probably stopped just before she'd run out of mana entirely.

Rosa lowered her fist, smiling. "Thanks a lot, Jewel! Because of you, I got to play with Allen for *ages*! The last spell was super cool too!" She wiped some blood off her forehead as she spoke, a souvenir from my right hook powered by Jewel's last buffing spell (although her counterattack kick had immediately sent me flying). "Ah, I feel so refreshed!" she exclaimed, buoyant.





In the end, that single punch had been the only hit any of us had managed to land on Rosa, but honestly, for a fistfight in a cramped environment like this, a single hit and no serious injuries was probably the best outcome anyone could have hoped for.

"Ah, that was fun," Fuli said, stretching. "I can see why everyone's calling this year's Class A special. Y'all are already as strong now as everyone in my class was by the time we graduated, and your stamina surpasses theirs easily. Plus, you're pretty decent at coordinated attacks, even though you shouldn't have to practice them till second year at the earliest... Guess all the stuff I hear y'all are getting up to in the Hill Path Club and at the standard dorm isn't false info after all." She grinned wryly before continuing. "Now, then... How are we gonna clean all this up?"

The house was in complete disarray, and the first floor in particular resembled a disaster zone, having been flooded by Al's water magic. I heard a faint groan, and I looked over to see Leo gritting his teeth in utter frustration. Eventually, he managed to force himself to speak. "Utterly defeated..." He sighed. "I'll compensate you for everything we broke today. I was the one who asked you to play, after all."

"Don't worry about it, Leo. Even if you hadn't asked her, it still would have ended exactly the same way." *Plus, he already took half the punches that would have otherwise come to me—there's no way I could take his money too.*

"Yes, please don't worry about it. If anything, we should apologize for dragging you into our little sibling argument. Besides, I have a lot of money that I have no use for anyway."

Wait, why does Rosa have so much money? Oh, right. When we went shopping, I think she said she gets a decent income from her magical craftwork or something...

Fuli chuckled. "It's fine. Rosa earns tens of thousands of riels a month from her patents, and it's only gonna increase in the future."

Tens of thousands of riels each *month from passive income alone?! I didn't realize magical craftsmanship was such a ludicrous career... I'd say it's terrible there's such disparity in this society, but in reality, Rosa's probably just a special case.*

Leo frowned. “No, this is a matter of taking responsibility, so I want to pay. Moreover, I have another request.” Suddenly, he sank to one knee, placing his right hand over his heart. He extended the other toward Rosa.

“Roseria Rovene. I implore you to enter a courtship with me, with the intent of marriage in mind.”

...Say what?

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Everyone froze up in shock at Leo’s sudden proposal. *There’s still* some *sense in this world, at least. Who gets beaten up by their friend’s sister and then decides it’s a good idea to ask her out?!* Even Kate, who usually seemed to all but subsist on romantic gossip alone, merely gaped at Leo in blank amazement.

“Jewel, it seems like he’s taken a bad blow to the head. Use your magic on him.”

“I can’t... I’m out of mana,” she replied, and I frowned. *We’ll have to call for a doctor, then.*

“Nothing’s wrong with me. I’m serious.” Leo looked directly at Rosa, his gaze unwavering.

Rosa started panicking, apparently not accustomed to sudden proposals from her younger brother’s friends. Bright red and breathing rapidly, she finally managed to choke out a few words. “Um, er—sorry! I’m not interested in weak people, so...”

That’s your issue?! “Wait a minute, Rosa. Leo is Duke Seizinger’s oldest son, you know? Potential heir to the most important of the kingdom’s three ducal families? Him being weak or strong isn’t the problem here—someone from a second-rate viscountal family like ours isn’t a suitable partner for him in the first place!”

Rosa looked visibly relieved at my admonishment, but Leo, unfortunately, didn’t show any signs of backing down. “In this day and age, social status doesn’t hold the same weight in such matters as it did in the past. My grandmother was even from the commoner class.” He still held his gaze, his expression resolute. “I’ll say it again: I’m one hundred percent serious. So if I become stronger

than you, Roseria, you'll accept my proposal—is that how I should interpret your reply?"

Rosa laughed awkwardly. "No, er... You don't seem to have much talent, Leo, so I don't think you can..." Such was her reply to the kingdom's cherished once-in-a-century prodigy—a boy who, in reality, possessed *extraordinary*, seldom-paralleled talent.

Leo smirked and rose to his feet. "So right now, as far as you're concerned, I'm not even on the starting line—much less in the race. But I won't give up. I'll definitely become stronger than you, and someday, you *will* agree to take my hand."

"I really don't want to have to call you my brother, though..." I mumbled, shuddering at the mere thought.

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"I'm really hungry now, so let's get on with the barbecue for the time being and think about how we're gonna clean up later." Fey's suggestion was met with unanimous agreement, and we all headed back out to the garden. As we emerged, she ordered the cook and waiters to stand down, sending them outside the gate. "With the way things have gone so far, who knows what other topics will come up today? Likely not anything we'd want casually overheard, whether by outsiders or my own men. No choice but to go along with your weird 'cook it ourselves' ritual or whatever," she said, shrugging.

"Hmph." Leo crossed his arms. "I don't care if anyone hears about what happened."

I groaned. "*I* care, you idiot. For someone so smart, you sure can be dumb sometimes. Use your common sense—or do you not have any?"

Leo laughed. "Maybe your lack of it has rubbed off on me."

He's a lost cause, seriously... A lack of common sense? Me? A man who spent nearly fifteen years forging my "common sense" on the ultimate battlefield of social awareness, Japanese corporate life?! Yeah, he definitely hit his head.

"Don't be ridiculous, Leo. I'm the sheer *embodiment* of common

sense," I protested. Upsettingly, my statement was met not with agreement, but by a sea of incredulous, disapproving expressions, directed at me by everyone but Rosa.

We quickly moved on to the barbecue, chatting idly among ourselves as we grilled up the skewers carefully prepared by the Dragoon chef. As expected, Fey, Rosa, and Fuli were in the middle of a passionate discussion about magical craftsmanship, the current focus being the "Roombo," an automatic cleaning device I'd recently asked Fey to make.

"Huh!" Fuli said, nodding her approval. "Pretty fascinating design, what you said there. Don't think Rosa or I woulda been able to make the same thing. Consider me impressed. Sure, you might have a bit more support and funding than some kids out there, but not many coulda developed as many tools as you have within four months of starting at the Academy."

"Yeah, Fey! You're definitely going to be famous! And can you sell me one of those? I'm not great at cleaning..."

I'd been somewhat aware of it, but Rosa's and Fuli's responses confirmed my suspicions: Fey *was* a considerably talented craftswoman. *Shame about her personality, though...*

"Of course! Please, take it as a gift—I'd love to hear your feedback on it from a fellow craftswoman's point of view." She sighed. "Honestly, Allen keeps coming up with one insane idea after the other, to the point that I've had to move our major research facility from Dragreid to Runerelia just to keep up."

"Yay! Fey, you're the best!"

They're on suspiciously good terms... What happened while they were all squealing upstairs? I was too scared to ask; instead, I silently prayed it hadn't involved any of the old picture albums commemorating my dark past as a mischievous bumpkin brat.

I'd been getting Fey to build me all kinds of tools and devices utilizing my knowledge of my past life. From everyday necessities (like the Roombo, as well as a similar device to help Thora with washing the dishes) to tools I'd decided I needed for the Hill Path Club, Emissive Magic Club, and Geography Club—every one of them was designed and developed by Fey, and I'd only had to cover the

cost of materials. Initially, I hadn't liked the idea of being indebted to her, but when I'd tried to voice my concerns... *"I can charge you market rates for bespoke tool development if you want, but then you won't be able to afford a single one,"* she'd said, and I'd begrudgingly suppressed the thought. It was then that I'd started up the Magical Craftsmanship Club, installing Fey as the captain. By reframing her tool development as a simple club activity, accepting her labor for free didn't fill me with anywhere near as much dread. In return for coming up with the ideas and covering the cost of materials, I received as many of the tools as I required; Fey, for her part, would own all of the patents for anything I asked her to make. Knowing her, she'd easily be able to recoup the money she'd invested by making a few of the tools available to the general public.

Incidentally, despite an apparent influx of applications to join the Magical Craftsmanship Club, there were still only three members. When I'd asked Fey about it, she'd replied, *"None of them are gonna be of any use to me with their current skills, and I don't have the time to train them. Besides, if I need people for basic labor, I'm better off just outsourcing the work."* Given that, she'd rejected nearly every application. I chose to leave it in her hands. Being part of a prominent noble family probably meant each new relationship she forged also came with a new set of obligations. So long as I could get my hands on the tools I needed, I didn't care about anything else.

"Well, even if they are insane, Allen's ideas are always interesting, so I'm a very happy craftswoman." Fey laughed. "Have you developed anything from one of his ideas too?"

Rosa shook her head, glancing in my direction. "I never really spoke with him about magical tools at all. I thought he wasn't interested in it, but after hearing about all his great ideas, I wish I'd tried to get him to open up a little more..."

I *hadn't* been interested back then, to be honest. All my "great ideas" were based on reacquired memories of my past life—the household appliances I'd relied on in real life, as well as some of the more realistic gadgets I'd come across in manga and light novels. Between my awakening and taking the exams, I'd only spent a few

days with Rosa, and the topic of magical craftsmanship hadn't come up in that time. Plus, when I looked back through Allen's memories from before my awakening, there were a lot of them surrounding my frequent use as a test subject for Rosa's newest inventions.

"I'm really interested in what you're working on for your thesis project, actually. I think it's one of the most essential tools we need, which is why I never brought up any of my ideas with you. I wanted you to focus on your own work without getting distracted by one of my little whims."

Rosa's thesis project centered on the development of a magical correspondence tool, something that didn't exist in this world as of yet. Well, *strictly* speaking, wired correspondence tools did exist if you had outrageous amounts of money to spend and were satisfied with short-distance, location-restricted communication (like within the Royal Academy, for instance). However, wireless, unrestricted correspondence tools—like mobile phones—didn't exist in any form, which was incredibly annoying to me as a former smartphone addict. Rosa seemed to have chosen her project purely for the selfish reason of wanting to be able to talk to me no matter how far away I was, but if she did manage to get it to work, it would definitely be considered one of the most revolutionary inventions in the history of this world.

"Roseria Rovene's latest project, huh?" Fey's eyes shone with excitement. "If it's no trouble, can I ask what it is you're working on? I got used to seeing your frequent research publications while you were still attending the Dragoon Noble College, but I haven't come across anything recently... I'm terribly curious, I must say."

"Um..." Rosa hesitated. "Actually, my supervisor told me not to speak about it to anyone...but since you're Allen's friend, I guess it's okay! And you might have some useful advice for me too. I'm working on a device that'll let you speak to someone who's really far away, like in an entirely different place, utilizing remnants of magic floating around in the air to transmit your voice from one receiver to the other. I'm slaving away trying to get it to work so I can talk to Allen while he's at the Academy, even while I'm still here in the house! But it keeps getting blocked by anti-Scouting devices, so it's

still not ready." She frowned.

Fey blinked a few times, lost for words. She'd definitely immediately realized the potential of what Rosa was building, even if my sister wasn't aware of it herself. After a long pause, she finally managed to reply. "Just to be sure...you're not saying that if *not* for the anti-Scouting devices, the device would be ready to go, right?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. It's still a little unstable, and it only works over short distances, but apart from that, it's working fine. I can deal with the anti-Scouting devices in the area *around* the Academy by setting up a few secret relays, but the problem is the Academy itself. Their security is too good! Have you got any ideas on how I could break in?"

"Rosa..." Fuli, taking over for a still-shell-shocked Fey, interjected with a question of her own. "This is the first I'm hearing of your new research too, but do you actually know what it is you're making?"

"Uh, yeah? Sorry. Like I said, my supervisor forbade me to tell anyone. And you know what else?! He came up to me with a letter from some bigwig and said something or other about me being the only person who could craft the mana circuits they needed, and that I needed to pause my research and make them a whole bunch of the circuit plates as they were now, without even perfecting them, and it was an *order* or something. So dealing with that really slowed me down for a while. Honestly! I know it's probably a *little* inappropriate to be building something that can get around anti-Scouting devices, but at the same time, he's terrible for telling me I needed to halt in my tracks to mass-produce my unfinished work! He's a failure of a magical engineer, that man!" Rosa huffed, indignant.

Fey slowly shook her head, then turned to Leo. "The Dragoons didn't know about this. You sure surprised me with your proposal earlier, but maybe your family has already heard about Roseria's research? Is that why you did it?"

"It's the first time I'm hearing of it too. My request to Roseria had nothing to do with family politics," Leo replied, his eyes flicking back and forth between Fey and Rosa.

"Wow!" chirped Al. "Sounds like it'll be pretty useful once you get

it working! Allen, your older sister sure is smart!"

Fey sighed. "I wish I could be as easygoing as you sometimes, Al. What Roseria's working on now isn't just gonna be something brushed off as merely 'useful,' y'know? Even if just the finished bits of it went into mass production right now, our kingdom's national power would double—triple, even—at the very least. If war broke out tomorrow, her correspondence device would have a massive impact on the outcome. And if the Seizingers haven't heard of it either, then..." She paused. "Rosa, the letter you got from 'some bigwig'—it didn't have a crest on it, right? A winged lion with a golden ball clutched in its teeth?"

"Huh?! How'd you know? My supervisor passed on a whole bunch of them, but they seemed like they'd be annoying to deal with, so I never read any—but they definitely had that crest! I think I dumped them all in the living room, so they're probably still around here somewhere."

I sighed. It was a *very* long sigh. It was hard enough to accept that someone existed in this world who was idiotic enough to not recognize the royal family's crest—and to throw away letters from said royal family in their living room trash can. It was even harder to accept that the idiot in question was my own sister. *She didn't catch on to how similar it was to the national flag?!* I had to suppress the urge to take a swing at her in anger; I'd just end up bleeding again anyway.

At the very least, I'd have to make sure *I* wouldn't share any of the blame should the royal family come knocking.

"Rosa!" I raised my voice, trying to sound reproachful. "Those letters were from a *very* important person! It would be little wonder if they were destroyed on account of the water magic cast by Aldor Engravier, Royal Academy, Class 1-A, but let us go and search for them at once! If they are unreadable, fear not—Leo Seizinger, of the same class, has already stated he will take responsibility for the unfortunate quarrel and compensate you for *all* destroyed items!"

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We conducted a thorough search of the living room and recovered several letters that resembled those Rosa had mentioned, but they'd been soaked through, and the contents were entirely illegible. Still trying to pass on the blame, I patted Al on the shoulder reassuringly, saying, "You really messed up, huh?" But unfortunately, everyone remembered I'd given him permission to cast magic in the house, and thus, my plan to pin the blame on Al failed.

I sighed. Ignoring Rosa, who was trying to cheer up a despondent Al by telling him she hadn't been planning to read the letters anyway and not to worry about it, I turned to face the others. Everyone wore identical, pale expressions. "Guess there's only one thing we can do now..."

"Well, you do always come up with the oddest plans, Allen," Fey replied. "So? How exactly are you going to turn *this* one around?" Around me, worried expressions changed into those of hopeful anticipation.

"Simple. We heard nothing and we saw nothing, and that's that! Got it? Now let's eat before everything burns and drink to our hearts' content!"

I mean, there's nothing else we can do, right?

Chapter Two: The Dragoon Region General Meeting

Parents and Their Secrets

Every six months, the noble families within Marquess Dragoon's territory would assemble in the region's capital, Dragreid, for the Dragoon Region General Meeting. Information would be exchanged, key bureaucratic positions across the region would be awarded and taken away, and petitions for new roads and similar projects would be heard by the marquess.

Unlike the spring social season held in Runerelia, where the exchange of information centered around the academic and professional success of one's children—as well as position changes within the central Runerelian government—the matters discussed at the Dragoon General Meeting focused on the interests (and wealth) of the region's noble families. As a result, the general meeting saw a far higher participation rate than the social season; most of the viscountal families and a good number of the baronial families ensured their attendance. Normally, the spring general meeting was held approximately one month after the new school year commenced. However, between war council meetings and other events requiring her presence, Marquess Dragoon had found herself unable to leave the capital for quite a while longer than originally anticipated, and the general meeting had been postponed for over a month.

Dragreid was situated in the upper half of the Dragoon Region, relatively close to the kingdom's capital of Runerelia. The city's skyline was a sea of reddish-brown tiled roofs—a signature of the southern regions of the kingdom—coloring the cityscape with an old-world nostalgia. This was the scenery that awaited Viscount

Bellwood von Rovene and his wife Cecilia as they arrived in Dragreid on the very morning of the general meeting.

Ordinarily, the couple would arrive in the city by noon the day prior to the meeting at latest. After refreshing themselves at their usual lodgings, the pair would venture out into the twilit maze of narrow alleyways and stone staircases that made up the backstreets of Dragreid, strolling underneath the distinctive canopy of glowing red lanterns that illuminated the city at night. They'd wander the dimly lit streets, looking forward to their traditional dinner at the usual hole-in-the-wall restaurant, a secret world away from the politics of the next day...

Bellwood sighed. "Although it appears Allen has been cleared of any wrongdoing, I cannot say I'm looking forward to this general meeting. If only he'd just gotten into Class E, I would be marching through those doors with pride..."

"Why shouldn't you march through those doors with pride regardless? Our region is home to over one thousand noble families, and yet no more than two or three of those are able to boast of a child accepted into Class A each year, if at all. Our Allen overcame those odds, Bell. What kind of parents would we be if we didn't take pride in our son's commendable effort?"

Cecilia's argument was indeed rather reasonable, but Bellwood was still struggling to accept the reality of Allen's Class A admission. He was at least aware that his son's ability in Strengthening Magic could be considered exceptional and that he could be quite intelligent (on those rare occasions that he put his mind to use in his studies), but as a mere rural viscount, Bellwood had no idea how Allen's talent measured up in comparison to the rest of the world. To overturn seven hundred years of Rovene regret... When even Rosa—who'd been considered a prodigy throughout the whole region, not just within the Rovene Domain—hadn't been able to overcome those high, high hurdles, the viscount found it hard to accept that Allen—rash, childish *Allen*—had been able to leap over them so easily, and to land in Class A at that.

Bellwood sighed again. "But if we're too open in our pride, we'll invite further interest in Soldo as well. Many eyes are still on him—

I've had to leave Grimm at home in case any others come inquiring."

"Visitors for Soldo have dwindled over the past few weeks, and the estate is in good hands with Grimm. He's become quite capable of late." Cecilia paused for a moment. "Besides, from what I have heard, Soldo truly pushed himself over those last few months with Allen. His responsibilities have come to an end for now with Allen's departure, so we must allow the man to do as his heart desires. *Your* responsibility is here. You must do what you think is best. 'Humble and True,' Bell. Uphold our family words. No matter what others might say, we shall reply that we believe in Allen and are leaving him to act as he wishes. After all, is that not the truth of it?"

Bellwood's shoulders sank. "As you say. I wasn't expecting any detailed reports from the boy, of course, but given he hasn't sent even a single letter since he left Crauvia, I know nothing but for the fact he *was* admitted." The viscount frowned. "Before Allen left for the capital, he warned me not to boast about his admission should he pass, saying there was a fair chance he'd be expelled anyway on account of the difficulty of the lessons or some such nonsense... It worried me, Cecilia. All I can do is pray the boy hasn't already gotten himself into trouble and been expelled without our knowledge..."

Indeed, Viscount Rovene and his wife had deliberately timed their arrival in Dragreid to be as late as possible, hoping—futile though it was—to somehow sidestep the trouble they both sensed looming on the horizon.

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The reception hall, the estate of Marquess Dragoon.

The reception hall that served as the venue for the regular Dragoon Region General Meeting was exceptionally large, even considering it needed to accommodate over one thousand nobles and their retinues at times. The Rovene carriage pulled up directly parallel to the magnificent building—a redbrick structure accented with masterful stone carvings that ran up the full height of the walls—and Bellwood von Rovene emerged, repeating the words "humble and true" over and over in his head while praying he would

somehow make it safely through the day.

Unfortunately, someone was waiting for Bellwood. The viscount stepped out of the carriage to find himself face-to-face with a tall man clad in what seemed to be incredibly heavy armor. A nasty scar ran across his right eye. Bellwood winced as the terrifying man began shouting.

"Bellwood von Rovene! You pitiful backwater viscount, you have the *nerve* to besmirch the name of the great countal house of Avinier?! I hope you got your affairs in order before you dared to set foot here today!"

Nicks von Avinier: head of the prestigious Avinier family, master of the Avinier style of spearmanship, one of only three generals in the Dragoon private army—and Bellwood's sudden visitor. A man who, as far as the viscount could see, was currently furious. His distinctive greenish-yellow hair was wildly disheveled, lending him an even more ferocious appearance.

"Er...besmirch? House Avinier? Me? Whatever are you talking about?" Bellwood replied, his voice strained in an attempt at calm. In truth, the viscount had sunk into a dismal mood; his foreboding premonition had seemingly come true the second he'd stepped out of the carriage. Still, he'd try to smooth the situation over somehow.

"You dare to ridicule me, you dog? I'll expose you for the self-serving scum you truly are... Let's see if you'll greet my spear with the same insipid look on your face!" As he spoke, the count clutched his polearm, the long weapon glinting dully where he held it ready at his waist—and the next moment, it shot forward and upward, directly toward Bellwood's face.

The viscount didn't move an inch. Nicks had stopped his thrust just a hair's breadth away from Bellwood's forehead, and the count was now regarding the other man with a suspicious glare. "Why didn't you dodge...?"

Bellwood burst into laughter, apparently finding the question ridiculous. "*Why*, you ask? *Why*, *how*—Your Lordship, I am but a provincial bureaucrat whose only hobby is gardening! I haven't an ounce of fighting ability! How could I have dodged it even if I'd had the thought to? Oh, what an excellent joke, Count Avinier." Bellwood

began to laugh again, and Nicks raised an eyebrow.

"How can a noble so proudly attest to his own lack of fighting prowess? Even had you not dodged it, I would have expected you to sink to your knees, wetting yourself in fear." The count frowned. "When I heard some bumpkin spawn by the name of Rovene was parading himself around the capital under the banner of 'Combat Readiness,' I vowed to expose your family's lies before it reflected on House Dragoon. However... You've got considerable nerve, Rovene."

"Had Your Lordship genuinely intended to harm me, I can assure you my breeches would be soaked at this very moment. But you see, we count an unusual number of somewhat, well, *violent* types within the Rovene family—though I'm not sure why—so it was no great difficulty to grasp that you did not truly mean to harm me." The viscount chuckled. "Just the other day, my wife caught me staring at a new serving girl down at the local bakery. Now that was bloodlust, Your Lordship, a truly bloodthirsty killer. I was chased around the town for over an hour, wetting myself all the while!" Bellwood chortled.

A giggle sounded from the carriage as Cecilia began to alight. "Whatever could be so funny, Bell?" The bloodthirsty killer in question descended the few short steps to the porch, a brilliant girlish smile adorning her face and a long, heavy sword resting on one shoulder. One look at the sheer mass of the weapon was enough to understand that a single blow could shatter most of an ordinary man's bones—without the bearer even drawing the sword from its scabbard. A muffled shriek pierced the air, involuntarily drawn out of the crowd of curious onlookers as they sensed the sheer bloodlust emerging from the carriage along with the woman.

Nicks cleared his throat awkwardly. "Yes, well—a failure on your part, Viscount. I have never cast my gaze upon a lady other than my wife. After all, if we cannot vow to serve and honor but one woman for the rest of our lives, how can we call ourselves men?" The count snuck a glance at the woman standing behind him as he spoke, obviously the wife in question.

"How honorable, Your Lordship. Bell, you should learn from the count's example."

"His example—you would throw me to the wolves, Your Lordship?! Why, I heard you were well-known for your *spearwork* among the ladies of the night in your youth—"

"Quiet yourself!" spluttered the count. "I have been devoted to my wife since our wedding! Do not try to share your shame with me, Viscount!" He huffed. "The marquess has instructed me to act as your escort. Come along at once!"

And thus, the curtains opened on Bellwood "Humble and True" Rovene's experience at the Dragoon Region General Meeting.

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"Please, Your Lordship. A worthless family such as ours cannot accept the company of so great a house as Avinier. We will do as we always do—mingle with the other lower nobles while perhaps snacking on a morsel or two—so you need not concern yourselves with us, Count. Please, return to the main table lest your absence reflect on your reputation." After making himself known to the attendants and depositing his purely decorative saber in the cloakroom, Bellwood found himself being escorted into the main hall by Count Avinier himself.

The general meeting was, for the most part, conducted as a stand-up meal. The gathering began with a reception in the main hall, where the nobles would eat, drink, and make small talk with those around them, followed by an address from the marquess and announcements regarding any matters of great importance. Afterward, the lower nobles were granted the opportunity to submit any petitions or appeals to the marquess; this also served as the time when they would make their rounds paying their obligatory respects to the higher-ranking nobility. Neither seats nor tables were provided for the rank-and-file viscountal and baronial families. Only a singular long table oversaw the hall, where Marquess Dragoon would take her meal alongside the region's eight counts and a handful of other important nobles.

Nicks snorted derisively. "Hmph. Do you think I'm doing this because I want to, you simpleton? The only reason I'm deigning to

speak with you is because the marquess ordered it so. Per her words, 'Even our own intelligence team was unable to unearth anything concerning House Rovene, except that the viscount seems unfit to call himself a noble, demonstrating no interest in improving the status of his house in the slightest. However, we cannot afford to be embarrassed by our lack of information any longer. It seems unlikely that the man will come to greet me based on the records of past meetings, and I cannot permit him to slip away once more. You'll escort him here.'" Nicks finished his recount of the marquess's orders and snorted again. "Personally, I thought the marquess's fears were unfounded, that surely the viscount couldn't be so insolent a man—and yet you thought you'd be able to stand around snacking and gossiping? You won't have time to eat today! You are testing my patience, Rovene. How long do you intend to keep up this carefree facade?"

Fortunately, it was a rhetorical question—if he'd been obliged to answer, the congenitally carefree Bellwood would have had no option but to respond, *"Until death, I suppose?"*

"What?! No time to eat?!" he instead exclaimed, visibly appalled. "Your Lordship...I am, as the marquess said, no more than an extremely ordinary man who isn't fit to call himself a noble. Concerning my son, we've decided to leave his affairs in his own capable hands, so I'm afraid I have no information that would be of interest to you or the marquess. Please inform her that I will come to pay my respects after the reception, and I will beg my leave for the present—" Bellwood turned to leave, but Nicks shot forward and seized the viscount by his collar.

"Drop the act, Rovene. This is your last warning. Without me at your side, you'll find yourself surrounded by busybodies before you can so much as blink. Stop playing the fool. Or do you intend to make the marquess wait her turn to greet *you*?"

"You exaggerate, Count... As I've been trying to tell you, I have no interesting tales to share with the marquess, nor *anyone* for that matter. Even if others should approach me, they'll leave in disappointment soon enough. More importantly, I've not had a scrap of food since last night, and I'm as hungry as hungry can be. The

thought of confronting a meeting like this—knowing how long they can be—without food or drink is most distressing, Your Lordship. At least allow me a single bread roll! Trying Dragreid's new baked goods is the singular thing I look forward to at these meetings..." Bellwood whined, stubbornly opposed to the idea of being dragged along to grovel at the feet of the marquess on an empty stomach.

"You never know when to give up, Bell," Cecilia scolded him gently but firmly, unable to bear witness to her husband's behavior any longer. "You're troubling the count with your childish obstinacy. If you are truly so hungry, eat this and quiet yourself," she said, passing him a plain field ration.

"But I want brea—"

"*Yes?*"

Shoulders sinking, Bellwood reluctantly took the field ration from his wife's hand.

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"It's been a while, hasn't it, Bellwood? I believe the last time we spoke was regarding your petition for an extension on your tax payment on account of the famine, and that was, oh, ten years ago? I am glad you've been able to manage your domain without further trouble since then. Now, take a seat here."

Bellwood, much to his dismay, had found himself dragged all the way to the very back of the hall, unable to shake Nicks's grasp on his collar, and he was now standing before a long, rectangular table, capable of seating around thirty. His unceremonious arrival was noticed by all, including the woman sitting at the head of the table, a perfect vantage point from which she could take in the entire hall with a single glance. The woman was, of course, Melia Dragoon: marquess of the Dragoon Region and acting head of the Dragoon family. She stood up to acknowledge Bellwood's arrival, ushering him into the seat beside her, one usually reserved for the current family head's spouse.

The other seated nobles, who'd lifted their heads in curiosity at Bellwood's sudden appearance, recoiled in shock in response to what

was, in reality, a most unexpected invitation. The marquess's husband had passed away many years prior, leaving the spousal seat usually empty during events such as this. Indeed, the *only* occasions on which the seat had been offered were during a visit from another marquess or otherwise when dining with the head of a family whose child was marrying into the Dragoons. Essentially, it was only offered to those Marquess Dragoon deigned to treat as her equal—which was exactly what she'd just implied by rising from her own seat to greet Viscount Rovene and gesturing that he take the seat of honor.

Being treated as an equal by the head of the Dragoon family (even if only the acting head, as Melia had already formally bequeathed her "von" to her granddaughter Fey) was, understandably, enough to make even the chronically carefree Bellwood break out in a cold sweat. It was implausible that the marquess would have remembered a seconds-long exchange from ten years ago, a single petition along a conveyor belt of hundreds of near-identical others—which could only mean that she had ordered someone to comb through the records of old meetings until they had found something she could use to facilitate their conversation.

"Ah—yes, my lady, a very long time indeed. I cannot begin to express the depths of my gratitude for your benevolent leniency at the time. Because of your generosity, the people of my region are living in peace and prosperity. I thank you for your most gracious offer, but I couldn't possibly allow myself to take such an honorable position, my lady. Even sitting at the same table is a privilege far beyond what I deserve! However, if that is your wish, I shall of course be delighted to join you—but please, my lady, permit me to take a more appropriate seat," Bellwood replied. If he was going to be forced to dine with the upper nobles, he at least wanted to secure himself a seat at the very foot of the table, as far away from the marquess as he could be. He might be able to blend into the background—and, if he was very lucky, even sneak a few bites of bread without anyone noticing.

"You need not be so formal, Bellwood. After all, we nobles are all equal in that we serve His Majesty the King, no? Forget all notions of hierarchy for the time being—today, I wish for us to speak frankly to

one another. Once the petitions begin, there will be no time for slow conversation—and I'm regrettably short on time as it is, so the pointless back-and-forth ends here. Lady Rovene, if you'll take the seat next to your husband. The Aviniers, those seats there."

Knowing it would be impolite to refuse the marquess yet again, Bellwood reluctantly lowered himself into the indicated seat, avoiding the curious, somewhat scandalized gazes of the other guests. All of them were high-ranking members of the Dragoon internal administration—heads of the region's countal families, or otherwise of branch families who held important positions in the region. Several of them wore expressions indicating their disapproval of the marquess's near-familial treatment of the viscount, but none were bold enough to verbally disagree with a decision made by "the empress" Melia Dragoon, the formidable woman who'd ruled their region for over thirty years.

Incidentally, seats at this table were usually strictly reserved for just the *heads* of each family. From time to time, the parent of a newly admitted Academy student would be honored with a seat at the very foot of the table, but only one—the family head would be allowed to dine with the marquess, but not their spouse. Thus, Cecilia's presence at the table—along with that of Nicks's wife, whose son Parley had also been admitted this year—was yet another unexpected shock to the gathered nobles.

"Now, then..." Melia started before suddenly snorting. "Do stop making such a dreadful face, Bellwood—you wound a lady's delicate feelings. Now, I'd like to hear an explanation as to why Nicks had to drag you here. It was quite a novel way to make an entrance, I'll admit. When I sent Nicks to fetch you, he was saying something or other about 'using his spear to skin a wolf in sheep's clothing' or some such nonsense. Apparently, he thinks you're quite the opportunist! Were his threats truly so fearsome that you lost the strength to walk here by yourself?" A glimmer of amusement lit the marquess's eyes as she glanced between them.

Nicks looked annoyed. "On the contrary, my lady. I only intended to scare him a *reasonable* amount when I went to fetch him, to ensure he'd come along without making a fuss. Rather than being

scared, he just stood there grinning like a fool, whining about his empty stomach—and instead of coming along as I instructed him to, he tried to escape into the hall, prattling on about snacking on bread and exchanging gossip!" the man spat. "It was clear he'd vanish the moment I took my eyes off him, so I decided to bring him by force."

The table erupted in whispers. "Threatened by an Avinier and he complains of hunger... Is the man an idiot?"

"Surely he must be—you saw that face he pulled as clearly as I! What could he be thinking, rejecting the marquess's offer?"

"And we're to believe the son of this simpleton was accepted into Class A? Perhaps those rumors about him cheating his way in *did* have some truth to them..."

Unlike the others at the table, Melia Dragoon didn't seem to have taken offense upon hearing Nicks's recount. She simply turned back toward Bellwood, her smile unwavering. "Ah, yes. Come to think of it, there was something I wanted to ask you about, Bellwood. The year after the famine, you submitted a request for research funds, correct? A ten-year study of the selective breeding of wheat, as I recall—which I believe must be nearly coming to an end, yes? How are the results?"

Bellwood's expression darkened at the question, for which there were two reasons. The first was that he'd submitted said research application at the city office (rather than during a general meeting) and therefore had never so much as mentioned the project in the marquess's presence, let alone discussed it with her. However, it was plausible Allen's admission into Class A had caused the marquess to take some interest in the Rovene family and that she'd come across the project while looking into them.

The second reason for Bellwood's dismay was that the results of said project hadn't been particularly good.

The viscount cleared his throat. "Well...the wheat has developed a significant resistance to the hexblister blight, which caused the initial famine, and we're seeing a steady three percent increase each year in the harvest size itself. Unfortunately, there is one major problem we've been unable to solve as of yet."

"Oh? What kind of problem?"

Bellwood's expression darkened even further. "When the wheat is made into bread, the aroma—what should be a most *delicious* aroma—is still too understated, too lacking. I cannot yet take pride in our results, vex me though it may."

"Ha!" Somewhere around halfway down the table, a hook-nosed man let out a scornful laugh. "Three percent a year?! How impressive—but of course, I should have expected nothing less from a *Rovene*. Your family is the talk of the capital, after all," he drawled, the words laden with derision. "Three percent each year for the past nine years would mean your harvests have grown by over thirty percent already! Our region, magnificent though it is, has few plains suitable for farming. Such results would put an end to our ongoing reliance on imported wheat—and you also claim to have developed a defense against the hexblister blight that's plagued us for centuries? Yet you attempt to convince us that the *aroma* of the bread is the most troubling part of your research." The man scoffed. "Enough of this nonsense. You've had a few abundant harvests with the good weather and mistaken them as the fruits of your own genius—or else, you're attempting to deceive the marquess with your false reports to wrangle yourself some more funding!"

Even the perpetually jovial Bellwood frowned at the outrageousness of the man's tirade. He opened his mouth, thinking to explain himself further—but when he took a quick glance beside him, the words caught in his throat.

Through anyone else's eyes, Cecilia's polite smile wouldn't have appeared to be anything out of the ordinary. Only Bellwood knew her well enough to notice the way her face and hands had stiffened, paled; only he knew what it meant.

Fury.

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Cecilia smiled, her face and hands a pallid white. No anger showed on her face—no movement at all, in fact, not even a breath. But that very stillness was the surest sign of her rage. She'd been on edge since the flippant remark earlier alleging Allen's admission had

been the result of cheating—and now, the hook-nosed man had accused Bellwood himself of dishonesty too. Unbeknownst to them, they'd struck right where it would anger her the most.

Bellwood had been at least reasonably aware Allen's acceptance into the Royal Academy—and into Class A to boot—would probably result in some contempt from the more elite nobles; they were a viscountal family, after all, and not even a particularly prominent one. However, the sheer disdain with which they were being regarded was beyond the man's wildest speculation. Bellwood himself was no stranger to being looked down on, but for them to do it in front of his wife—and to dismiss Allen's hard work too? Why, in the worst-case scenario...

Bellwood shuddered. He didn't want to imagine it. This was why he'd wanted to hide away in a corner until the meeting was over, but obviously, that hadn't gone to plan. Sighing on the inside, he began to speak again in the most cheerful voice he could muster.

"I beg your pardon, Your Lordship. Perhaps I got a little carried away. In the end, it is no more than the haphazard research of a simple country farmer." He tapped himself on the chest and laughed. "However, please rest assured that I wouldn't dare to pester the marquess for more funding, especially not when I'm unhappy with the results. Oh! I've just remembered—Count Avinier, you said something earlier about me besmirching your house's honor? I do hope our Allen hasn't done anything untoward..." It wasn't the most preferable change of topic, but it would have to do.

"How shameless you are, Viscount." It wasn't Nicks who answered, however, but his wife, her steely glare fixed on Bellwood. "When we last met during the spring social season, you boldly lied to us all that your son could barely hope to get into Class E, should he pass at all. Imagine my surprise to discover he'd been accepted into Class *A*, and with a higher rank than our Parley. Fourth in the overall knight course rankings!" Her eyes narrowed. "Yet nothing could have prepared me for the urgent report that he'd seen fit to *brutalize* our son on the very first day of classes, and in full view of his fellow students, no less. He used our Parley as a stepping stone to flaunt his own strength. Pray tell, what game do you Rovenes think you're

playing?”

“Settle yourself,” chided a flustered Nicks. “You know as well as I do that the report came from Parley himself, and only to inform us of his own inadequacies. I, too, have my suspicions concerning the previous information we’ve received from the viscount, but this is a different matter entirely. We have no reason to believe their boy used any underhanded tricks during his and Parley’s sparring match, so we should accept his defeat graciously. Such is the way of the noble warrior.”

His wife scoffed. “A fine jest coming from a man who’s been declaring his intention to flay the viscount for weeks on end. My inquiries revealed Allen Rovene demonstrated *clear* evidence of having trained to face a spear-wielding opponent. What possible excuse could he possess to have undergone such training? Defense against a spear has never been an area covered in the examinations. What’s more, Lady Feyreun seems to have taken a liking to the upstart too. A carefully laid scheme indeed, was it not?” She flung the words in Bellwood’s direction as though they were knives.

“Allen, training against a spear-wielding opponent?” Bellwood replied, stumbling over the words. “I cannot think of when he might have had the chance... Perhaps there’s been a mistake?”

Lady Avinier sniffed and turned her gaze away. “Clearly your shamelessness knows no bounds.”

“Dear, you enlisted Dio to accompany Allen to Dragreid, remember?” Cecilia’s calm voice belied her intensifying anger. “The man has some passable experience with the spear. He must have shown Allen the basics during the journey.”

Lady Avinier’s glare now shot to Cecilia, a mocking sneer pulling at the corners of her mouth. “Our Parley is one of the most promising spearmen in the history of the Avinier family, and your son made a fool of him. Surely you don’t mean to say that some haphazard instruction from a *passable* spearman was enough to best my child? Why, first we hear about the private tutor, and now this mystical bodyguard—it seems the heavens themselves have blessed your house with talented personnel. How envious I am!”

“Quiet yourself!” interjected Nicks. “A loss is a loss no matter

what may have led to it! And that's to say nothing of the fact that their sparring match was overseen by none other than Sage Godolphen, the hero himself. You think their boy would have dared to pull some dishonorable trick right underneath the sage's nose? Enough is enough. You disgrace Parley with your refusal to accept his defeat."

Unfortunately, Nicks's rebuke, though logical, was useless against a woman whose devotion to her son exceeded all reason. "Disgrace?! Where is *your* anger, husband?!" she shrieked. "Have you forgotten how we watched over Parley day after day? Forgotten how much effort he's put in, all to become a man capable of standing beside and supporting Lady Feyreun? The boy you doted on, the boy who's been copying your movements with the spear since he was old enough to pick it up—our son's efforts should be regarded with glory! The first Avinier in Class A at the Royal Academy, and his achievement has been tarnished by the likes of some backwater *charlatan*!" She glared at her husband through teary eyes.

An ominous silence fell over the table. All eyes had turned to the two Rovenes with accusatory glares that seemed to say, *You're to blame for all of this.* All eyes, that is, but for those of Melia Dragoon, who seemed to be entirely oblivious to the tense atmosphere. She signaled to a nearby attendant and whispered something in his ear, after which the man nodded and promptly departed. Melia then turned back to Bellwood with a sharp grin. "Now, Bellwood. As you might be aware, my granddaughter Fey is also in the same class as your son. According to her, Allen seemed altogether displeased with his admission into Class A, to the extent that he intentionally tried to force his own demotion to Class E. Did you tell him to do so?"

"Wha—" Bellwood gulped, trying to force down his surprise. "Allen *tried* to get demoted...? I'm sorry, but I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. We've left our son to make his own choices regarding his schooling—moreover, the thoughtless boy hasn't even sent us a single letter since he moved into the dormitory. I only know he passed the exams, nothing more. Oh, that boy will be the death of me, I must say..." he replied with a

chagrined smile, scratching his head awkwardly.

The marquess looked at him curiously. "How unusual. To have a child accepted into Class A—why, I had thought any parent would stop at nothing to ensure their continued success. Indeed, most of them relocate to the capital to support their child, some even going into debt to do so..." Her eyes flashed. "But your son appears to be altogether indifferent to his admission into the most prestigious school in the kingdom—and so are you, it would seem?" Melia still wore the same grin, but the tilt of her eyes had shifted, invoking the image of a carnivore locked onto its prey.

"No, not at all! Why, admission into the Royal Academy—be it Class A or E—has been our family's dearest wish for over seven hundred years! I was somewhat mystified upon hearing the news, it's true. Allen treats even the annual visit to the family grave site as a most laborious effort, so I had my doubts he'd muster the willpower to make it through the exams, but words cannot describe the joy I feel at his success." He sighed. "I had only just managed to stomach the news when those ridiculous rumors about our private tutor suddenly spread across the kingdom like wildfire. We've had callers inquiring day in and out for weeks—even now, they still appear nearly every day. It's been a trying few months... Er, 'altogether indifferent,' you said? I hope he's not done anything undignified..." Bellwood trailed off, nervous.

Melia laughed. "Nothing *undignified*, per se... The children's homeroom teacher is that old goat, Godolphen—an unfortunate acquaintance from my own time at the Academy. I have it on good authority that during the orientation, when Godolphen questioned your son about his potential misconduct, he replied—what was it? Oh, yes: 'What, did you think I was going to beg and plead to be allowed to stay at this school? I'll crush anyone who gets between me and what I want—no matter who that is!' He was quite impassioned, apparently."

The gathered nobles dissolved into chaos.

"Preposterous! The child sought to pick a fight with Godolphen von Vanquish?! He's the king's right-hand man!"

"Such insolence could bring any family to ruin!"

"Marquess, if we leave the boy to his own devices any longer, the Dragoons will soon share the blame! We should call the boy here at once and make sure he knows his place!"

The marquess raised a hand, stifling the clamor. "Do not fuss yourselves over such a trifling affair. It's unseemly. In any case, Bellwood's son seems to consider such actions as no more than an ordinary greeting—not the oddest of his customs by far, as I've heard." Melia smirked. "What else? Despite his official acceptance into Class A granting him the right to a room in the Noble Dormitory, he declared he'd stay in that run-down 'doghouse' of a dorm in order to rid himself of softness and naivete or some such nonsense—and the entirety of his class decided to move along with him. Then we have the report about the so-called Hill Path Club he started, which over one hundred students joined within the month—apparently, even second-and third-year students are happily training under his *zealous* leadership. Of course, I can't forget to mention the accounts of him bullying the vice guildmaster of the Yugrian Explorer's Guild into breaking tradition and letting him register as a G-Rank explorer—this vice guildmaster, by the way, was none other than Satwa 'Earthbane' Fjorden, the renowned prospector. You know, I myself was in Runerelia until just a few days ago, and not a single day passed where I didn't hear your son's name. Every private intelligence team across the kingdom is participating in the mad race to discover something—anything—about the boy... And my own scouts are no exception. Amusing, don't you think?" Melia's smile no longer reached her eyes.

"What in the world does he think he's doing...?" Bellwood slumped onto the table, spent.

Cecilia, on the other hand, had just the slightest glimmer in her eyes, the corners of her lips twitching upward in a nearly imperceptible smirk. A slight tinge of color had returned to her skin.

"Lady Rovene, you don't seem particularly surprised, hm? Did you perhaps *anticipate* your son's actions?" The marquess's voice rumbled with unsuppressed authority, and she peered at Cecilia with sharp curiosity as though she were trying to read her very thoughts.

"No, Marquess. Even I am a little surprised, I must admit.

However”—Cecilia’s pupils narrowed, returning Melia’s powerful gaze like a reflection in a mirror—“wouldn’t any parent take pride in hearing that their child is growing into such a fine young individual?”

A bright, girlish smile spread across her face.

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A barely repressed snort escaped the marquess, which quickly turned into a fit of unrestrained cackling. “Ha! You’re not wrong. When our children do well, we should share in their joy. A most crucial aspect of parenting—don’t you think so, Lady Avinier?”

Lady Avinier’s lips were tightly pursed into a single, thin line. Moments passed before she finally muttered, “I agree, Marquess.”

“Good! Now we can return to the matter at hand. From what I have heard, Lady Rovene, your son does not strike me as one driven by greed. His lack of regard for his class and the Academy as a whole, his disinterest in the Noble Dormitory, his mentoring of rival classmates, and the whole debacle at the guild... No matter how talented a person might be, those who lack greed will never attain greatness—or such is my opinion, anyway. What do you think, *Cecilia*?” said the marquess, referring to the woman by her name, rather than her title, for the first time.

Cecilia paused for a moment. “I’ve not seen my son’s face since the day the results were announced...and yet, even then, the expression I saw belonged to a proper young man facing his future with utmost sincerity. It reminded me of the first time I met Bell, in fact.” She smiled. “I’m sure my son is prioritizing the things that matter to him most.”

“Oh? How sentimental. Speaking of Bellwood—how long do you intend to sleep there, Viscount? Rouse yourself. Now, you said that admission to the Academy has been your family’s dearest wish for over seven hundred years, correct? For what purpose?”

Bellwood lifted his head from the table. “Well, to speak plainly...we’ve long sought to attain the official conservation of the Crauvian forests.”

Melia tilted her head. “That giant sea of trees? Not development,

but *conservation*?"

"Indeed—although I suppose development comes into it in part. Since our house was founded, we Rovenes have relied on those forests, and we have only survived on account of nature's generosity and abundance. The area is a treasure trove of precious vegetation and animal life, including hundreds of species of monsters and magical plants found nowhere else. No one understands the importance of those forests more keenly than our family. Because of how isolated our domain is, the kingdom hasn't taken any interest in helping us protect the area. Until now, we've scraped by, putting our own policies in place and relying on informal agreements with the local explorers—but as the population grows, the forests are at risk of being stripped of their resources, and the day will soon come when they disappear entirely."

The viscount's posture stiffened. Gone was the man's jovial mask, replaced by an expression of pure determination. "Before that time comes, we need to ensure there are official laws in place to protect the area, as well as effective ways to deter those who would try their luck anyway—and we'll also need to implement a way to generate enough capital to sustain those deterrents. As you can imagine, a mere viscount like myself lacks the authority needed to even start such an ambitious project, much less see it to completion." He sighed. "Over the past seven hundred years, my ancestors have striven to gain a spot at the Academy so we could support the forests as they have always supported us. Unfortunately, Allen has never quite shared my feelings for the issue—nor did his sister Rosa, come to think of it. Alas, things don't always go our way."

At that moment, the attendant Melia had dispatched earlier returned. Bowing to the marquess, he placed two items in front of her: the first, a summary of the last fifteen years of House Rovene's agricultural tax records; the second, a simple handwritten note. Melia slowly perused the records before letting her gaze fall to the note, her predator-like eyes widening in something similar to hunger.

And then, she laughed—a long, mirthful laugh that echoed through the room.

"Rejoice, Bellwood, Cecilia—a new report from the capital," Melia finally said. "It seems the old codger assigned your son some kind of dubious challenge concerning his classmates. When Godolphen told the boy he'd failed, a fistfight broke out between the two, ultimately resulting in the old fool *apologizing* and amending his decision." The marquess cackled again. "Under normal circumstances, I would disregard such nonsense, but this comes from a most trusted source. As reward for overcoming the challenge, your son forced Godolphen to make a direct appeal to the king, allowing him to enlist in the Royal Order as a provisional member—in the spring of his first year at the Academy! What's more, he badgered the 'Untouchable' Dew Orwell—the captain of the Third Legion—into taking him on as an apprentice! Ha ha ha!" Melia was beside herself. "Such shameless greed! Truly, it has been far too long since I've heard something so thoroughly amusing."

The nobles at the table (and those in the near vicinity who'd been eavesdropping) were stunned, altogether unable to believe their ears. Like the ripples of a stone cast into still water, the strange atmosphere surrounding the table pulsed through the rest of the hall, and within moments, the whole room was deathly silent.

Melia, singularly unaffected by the ominous atmosphere, was the one to break the hush. "Well, Nicks! You may have been correct about a Rovene opportunist after all—though it has turned out to be the son, not the father. He's used not just Parley, but Fey—a girl I saw fit to entrust with the succession of this house at the mere age of twelve, mind you. In truth, he's even used the Royal Academy itself to his advantage. He's used everything he could get his hands on as another foothold, and all to elevate himself onto the kingdom's grand stage." The marquess smirked. "Plots and plans, strategy and scheming—all the hallmarks of a true noble, as I see it! Underhanded or otherwise, is there anyone else here brave enough to say *their* child could shock Melia Dragoon as thoroughly as the Rovene boy has?!" Her voice now a thunderous shout, she cast her gaze around the hall as though daring someone to respond. All except for Cecilia looked down in fear; naturally, not a single person replied. Bellwood collapsed onto the table once again.

"Ah yes, Bellwood," Melia, who looked to be in an excellent mood, continued. "I spoke of Fey, my granddaughter and the successor to this house. As it turns out, it seems she is extremely fond of your son, throwing our money around quite recklessly to attempt to win his favor. She even saw fit to order the construction of a new magical craftsmanship facility in Runerelia to keep up with his whims. She's spent about, oh, one hundred million riels so far, I believe?"

The viscount sprang up from his seat, his face ghastly pale. It was, after all, a terrifying amount of money. If the marquess was intending to order him to pay it back... With the comparatively meager income of their domain, it would take over one hundred years to even make a dent on the repayments.

The marquess snorted. "Spare us your dreadful faces, Bellwood. I never imagined Fey would ever deem a boy deserving of such lavish spending either. But she is as human as the rest of us, it would seem..." She sighed. "When she started talking about love at first sight, I remembered that she is still a twelve-year-old girl, in the end. Perhaps I was a little hasty in bequeathing my 'von' to her..."

Melia trailed off, her eyes narrowing before she continued. "No. No, the time has come for me to trust in the keen sight of the young —not these clouded eyes of my own. Fret not, Bellwood. I won't be asking you to repay the money, of course, but...I am incredibly fond of my granddaughter, more than you will ever know. Naturally, I wish for nothing more than to see her happy." The marquess paused for a moment, fixing the viscount with her penetrating glare. "Supposing there *was* to be a marriage between our families, you would not object, of course?" She was smiling again now, but her voice had been firm.

Wordplay such as this was favored by the upper echelons of the nobility when dealing with those of a lower class of nobles. While no formal promise was made on their part, it indicated their willingness to *consider* a future commitment.

"Ob... Object?" replied Bellwood, flustered. "Marquess, it's simply too unthinkable a prospect for a family of our—"

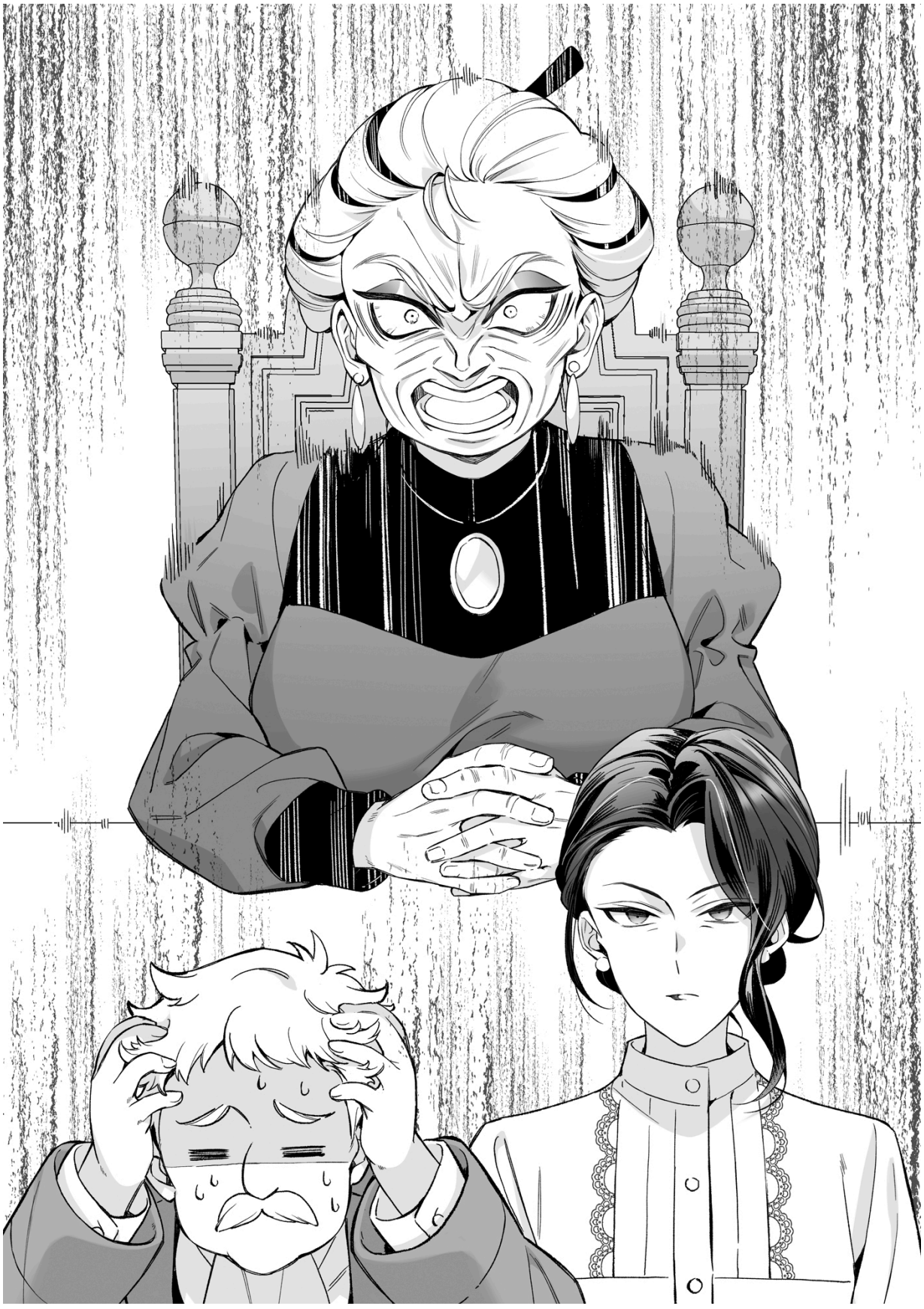
"Bell." Cecilia cut off the viscount's stammering attempt to reject

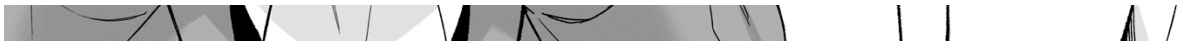
the offer with a single word. “The marquess has no desire to listen to your vague, rambling answers. Our son will choose his future spouse of his own free will. That has always been your belief, and it is what we have always taught our children. Have conviction in your choices, Bell, and answer plainly.” Her clear voice echoed through the still-silent hall.

The marquess’s smile fell. Gone was the good-tempered Melia Dragoon; the woman before them now was the empress. “So you mean to say you’d object, then?” she asked, her voice taking on a sharp, imperious edge. “Such arrogance for a family with all the power of a breath of wind. Do you truly understand what it is you’re doing?!” Unwitting exclamations of surprise could be heard from many of the onlookers as the empress’s voice turned to a shout.

Cecilia, however, remained calm as she corrected the woman. “You misunderstand, Marquess. I do not object to the thought, should such an event come to pass. But our children will select their own partners. That is what Bell decided; that is our family policy. That is all I wished to say.”

“What is that if not an objection?!” The empress’s raging voice reverberated through the silent hall.





But Cecilia merely returned Melia's furious glare with cool indifference. Moments passed while the two women stared at one another.

Melia was the first to finally break. "Fine. You win," she said, punctuating each syllable with angry taps of her fingers on the table. "Bellwood, I'll ask you again. Let me rephrase the question. Think about the future of your family, and consider your answer carefully before you open your mouth this time." Her pupils narrowed. "I, Marquess Dragoon, formally extend an offer of marriage to House Rovene. I seek an engagement between Allen Rovene and Feyreun von Dragoon. Now: Yes or no...which will it be?"

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The onlookers descended into pandemonium but for one exception. Lady Avinier had calmed herself, a solitary rock in a turbulent ocean. No sound escaped her mouth to add to the clamor, but tears ran down her cheeks—her own silent protest.

The marquess's offer was as good as an order. For their formidable empress to go so far—to deign to make a formal proposal in front of all present... Even a count wouldn't have been able to refuse, much less a mere viscount.

She cried for their son Parley, for the future he'd been wholeheartedly striving for since he could barely walk, a dream far too big for someone of his stature—to marry Lady Feyreun, and to stand by her side as she carried the Dragoon Region to even greater heights. She'd watched as her tender son had cast away all comforts, cladding himself in discipline so severe and so unyielding that it had terrified her.

And eventually, his relentless effort had borne fruit. Her son had been accepted into Class A at the Royal Academy, and a dream that should have been impossible had become a goal within his reach. She remembered the joy they'd shared on the day the results had been announced; she remembered the way they'd embraced, their whole family crying like she was now. With bitter thoughts, she realized even the memory of their joy would vanish soon, swept

away like smoke on a windy day.

It was all because of him. The appearance of a boy with such astounding talent, he'd surpassed even her own son—her diligent, dearest Parley—with ease. Lady Avinier shifted her gaze from the marquess, turning her teary eyes toward Viscount Rovene. Scornfully, she noted his ridiculous, carefree grin, and...

The man was shaking his head.

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Feeling as though he'd been driven into a corner, Viscount Bellwood von Rovene felt himself slipping away from reality, and he responded to the woman's fury with nothing more than an absent-minded grin. The marquess was quite scary, all things considered, but she was nowhere near as terrifying as his own wife.

Truthfully, Bellwood didn't possess as fervid a belief in their so-called family policy as his wife had implied. In reality, the Rovenes had always been fairly placid when it came to marriages—or rather, they were simply so low on the social ladder that "choosing" a marriage partner was more of a necessity than a luxury. No one would approach them with an offer of marriage given how little wealth and authority they possessed. Their children had no *choice* but to seek their own spouses.

Bellwood knew the easiest way to respond to Melia's offer would be a simple "gladly," but he also knew Allen (or any of the viscount's other children, for that matter) wouldn't have taken the matter in stride. After all, Bellwood and Cecilia had always told their children they'd need to seek out their own future spouses—they'd always told them they wouldn't meddle in their affairs. And of course, if he *did* dare to accept Melia's offer in spite of it going against what he and Cecilia had taught their children, he knew his beloved wife—currently sitting dangerously close to him—wouldn't approve either.

Suddenly, a vivid memory pierced through the hazy veil of Bellwood's drifting thoughts. Words his wife had said just that morning: *"You must do what you think is best. 'Humble and True,' Bell. Uphold our family words."*

Humble and true. In a situation like this, how do I act with humility...? Blast it. I can't even think *when I'm so dreadfully hungry.* The fragrant, alluring aroma of freshly baked bread penetrated his nostrils, and Bellwood made up his mind. He no longer cared about the potential consequences his next words might bring. He once again set his eyes on Melia, returning her gaze—and he carefully but firmly shook his head.

"As I have said, I am no more than an ordinary man. A disgrace to the whole nobility, with not a lick of interest in the social betterment of my house. No matter how much you insist I think carefully about the future of my family, I haven't the faintest idea which choice is the right one to make. No, I think we should leave decisions concerning the futures of our respective families in our children's very capable hands."

There was a long, uncomfortable pause. "A very respectable answer, Bellwood," Melia finally said. "I hope you won't come to regret it."

"I won't—or so I'd like to say. However, today has been nothing but regrets from start to end," he replied, his voice pitiful.

On that underwhelming note, the viscount rose from his seat. Of all those present, there was but one person whose authority was absolute, never to be challenged—and yet, he'd gone and defied her most magnificently. Bellwood lacked the nerve to ride out the rest of the general meeting, sitting up at the table like a prize catch on display. Cecilia stood up along with Bellwood in perfect synchrony, altogether as though the couple had arranged it earlier.

"Sit down. We're not finished talking," snarled Melia, glaring at the couple in turn.

"Finished or not, I'm too hungry to stay another moment," Bellwood retorted, looking altogether miserable.

Melia scoffed. "For goodness' sake, Viscount. A man who dares to oppose me has no right to look so pitiful on account of mere hunger. Moonlit! Your domain is next to Rovene's, correct? Has your wheat yield changed over the last ten years?"

Viscount Moonlit, who'd been watching the exchange with bated breath, jumped at the sudden mention of his name, nodding with

such force that he nearly smashed his forehead on the table in his haste to answer. His own son, Tudeo, had also been accepted into the Royal Academy this year—albeit into Class E—explaining his presence at the table. "Yes, er—well, not for the last ten years, per se. The weather has been fairly stable, and so have our harvests, but... The year before last, Rovene gave us some of his new seeds, and we experienced a definite increase in yield from our test plot. We've now resown all of our wheat plots with seeds from that first harvest, and by my current estimates, we too will indeed be looking forward to about a three percent increase in yield this year."

Melia nodded, picking up the information she'd received just earlier from her attendant, which—as expected—revealed a consistent three percent increase in annual yield. She flung it down before the hook-nosed man who'd mocked Bellwood's research earlier. "The aroma problem, or whatever nonsense you spouted—how many years will it take to discover a solution?"

"I estimate I'll be able to fix it within the next three years," answered Bellwood immediately, brimming with confidence.

"I'll double the original funding. In return, I want detailed reports from you every six months!"

"What?!" Bellwood shouted involuntarily. He was clearly utterly dumbfounded.

"And one last thing. It seems Marquess Reverence's daughter also has her own designs for your son, and with the latest news, it wouldn't surprise me if other prominent families—perhaps even the royal family themselves—begin to reach out with their own offers of marriage. If someone approaches you, you *will* report to me before giving an answer. Now, that's not too much to ask, is it?"

The hall was once again in an uproar. Bellwood turned to his wife with a familiar, carefree expression.

She smiled at him gently. "Only make promises you can keep, Bell."

Bellwood shook his head. "My apologies, Marquess, but even if I begged him, that rash boy of mine's not the type to come and inform me of his decisions before he makes them—no matter how important those decisions might be. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me

if he was already married right now."

Melia's face fell. "Good grief, what kind of noble are you? Aren't you the head of the family?! Have you no dignity?!"

"None at all," he replied, nodding with unreserved confidence.

Melia groaned. "My good man, can't you find it in yourself to throw a bone to a poor old lady who can't even help her granddaughter in love? Your selfishness may well be your ruin, Bellwood!"

Cecilia beamed at the marquess. "But I thought greedy people were precisely the sort you favored?" With those final words, she turned on her heel, Bellwood beside her.





The crowd parted like the Red Sea at Moses's hand, allowing the couple to pass—and, with all his usual nonchalance, Bellwood reached out, snagging a loaf of bread as he strode from the hall.

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"Gildo and Nicks should be waiting. Bring them to me at once!" shouted the marquess, sending her steward scurrying to do as she'd asked.

The Dragoon Region General Meeting had finally drawn to a close, and Melia had returned to the estate proper. Before long, the steward returned, leading two men in tow—Gildo, the head of the Dragoon intelligence team, and Nicks. Gildo, much to his misfortune, was the first target of the marquess's ire. Grinning dangerously at the man, she began to read from the report in her hands. "Cecilia Rovene: a reserved, dutiful wife, most likely of commoner background. Quite beautiful, with a youthful smile and a good disposition. Such was the report you prepared for me, correct?" The smile fell from Melia's face as she crushed the document between her bony fingers. "Wrong! All of it! The woman could overthrow the monarchy itself with one hand tied behind her back! If I'd known of her existence twenty years ago, I would have adopted her and installed her as my successor by any means necessary! I'm sure I warned you not to humiliate me any further. Are your ears just for show?!"

Gildo flung himself to the ground in prostration, unable to respond. Cecilia hadn't been seen in public once since all eyes had first turned to the Rovene family. The men they'd sent to negotiate with Soldo had all been received by either the viscount himself, or on some occasions, the oldest son Grimm. In the end, he'd had no choice but to rely on what little information they already had on file about the woman. The treatment he was receiving was perhaps too harsh, given the circumstances—a thought shared by Melia's personal steward.

"If you will oblige me, Marquess," started the steward, "I myself also perused the information we had available on Lady Cecilia. From

the interviews we conducted with those living in the Rovene Domain, it appears she was raised elsewhere, with no notable incidents or scandals after she married the viscount. She deferred to her husband during public events, scarcely making any comments of her own. The previous testimonies we've received and the events of today both attest to that description of her." The man sighed. "No, the issue is her life *before* marriage... We traced the last forty years of records from the Royal Academy and every Noble College and vocational school in the kingdom, but we could not discover a single entry matching her description. If she came from outside the kingdom, there would be a record of her marriage into the Yugrian nobility, as is procedure—yet we found no evidence in that regard either. Thus, the intelligence team decided that in all probability, she was born to a commoner family and did not advance to higher education—a logical proposition, all things considered."

The steward paused, shaking his head slightly. "Of course, given the woman we met today, a new hypothesis is probably in order. We might consider the notion of her being a former member of the nobility in her own right, who for some reason did not advance to higher education and was later wiped from her family records. Quite possibly a somewhat prominent family, based on the dignity with which she carried herself today. Although, I can't quite understand why a woman of such caliber seems content with being the wife of a poor country viscount..." The man coughed, raising an eyebrow. "Furthermore, it has been but two months since the Rovene family came to the attention of every family in the kingdom. No other intelligence team has gathered more information than ours, and if anything, we should consider ourselves blessed to have had the opportunity to meet her directly today, something no other marquesal family can claim. It was a wise decision to forbid any under your command from speaking of the events of today's meeting."

Melia simply sniffed, lowering herself into a chair. "You know full well how many people were gathered there today. The hush order has only bought us temporary peace of mind. The day's events will leak soon enough, if they haven't already." She paused for a

moment, then turned her gaze to the third man in the room. "Nicks—you sensed something in the two of them, didn't you? You went from shouting and screaming about skinning the man to being as docile as a lamb. What are your thoughts on them?"

"The viscount... When I went out to fetch them, I greeted the man as he stepped out of his carriage by shouting threats at him and brandishing my spear. He was entirely unconcerned—he didn't even *blink*." Nicks shook his head. "He said my threats were *nothing* compared to what he endures on the regular. That was when I first started to reconsider my image of the man as a mere opportunist. I watched his movements closely, and I do not think he was lying when he said he didn't have an ounce of fighting ability. However—whether owing to that so-called Combat Readiness or to his wife—the viscount has clearly survived far too many atrocious hardships for him to have been affected by my empty threats."

Melia smoothed out the crushed report and passed it to Nicks. "Do you see Bellwood's results from his Noble College years? The only point of interest is his grades in the sciences, particularly biology. Now, perhaps one report isn't quite enough evidence, but I'd wager Bellwood is one of those people who have immeasurable intellect in one specific field—one of those so-called gifted types. He only has the brain capacity to think about what interests him. People with his level of idiosyncrasies tend to find themselves in all kinds of social difficulties."

The marquess scoffed before she continued. "He could recognize his own hunger, yet he paid no attention to threats from the likes of you and me. Even his own son's admission into Class A didn't seem to faze him in the slightest. The most reasonable explanation for his sheer indifference is that his brain was made that way, innately unable to possess concern for areas outside of his interests. He couldn't see his son's admission as anything other than a chance to conserve his beloved forests—and yet, the boy is uninterested in the plan. Normally, a parent would try to steer their child in the direction they wanted them to take, but Bellwood is simply incapable of doing that, even if he wanted to. It's harder to tell now—he seems to have developed *some* social skills, at the very least—but if we were to

gather some testimonies from those who knew him in his youth, I think we'd find I'm correct. Well, enough about the fool. Men like him are only useful if another can wield their talents to their own advantage, so use him I shall. What did you think of Cecilia?"

Nicks thought back on Bellwood's behavior earlier that day. Certainly, "carefree" was too simple a term to describe the man who'd unabashedly ignored the *marquess* by pretending to fall asleep on the table. And then there was his wife...

"Her potential as a warrior is overwhelming. When she and Bellwood first arrived, they were having a silly little lover's quarrel—the man was ogling a shopgirl or something. But as for Cecilia... I could sense her sheer bloodlust. It was thick in the air, and quite frankly, it terrified me. And then, when my wife disrespected their family..." Nicks shuddered. "We warriors can usually sense one another's presence, but Lady Rovene's vanished the moment my wife started her insults. Her face was as white as a corpse, as though her heart had stopped beating entirely. I couldn't even sense a trace of the mana one would usually exhale while breathing." He paused, shaking his head. "I cannot measure her as a person, but as a warrior, I can say this without a doubt—she possessed a power surpassing that of every other person there by far. I spent the rest of your exchange worrying about whether I'd be able to ensure your safety if Lady Rovene decided to resort to violence."

"I thought you looked a little pale. The bloodlust you sensed from her—she showed it to you on purpose, you know. She's been hiding in her husband's shadow until now, but with their son's admission to the Academy, perhaps she decided it would be too difficult to continue lurking in the background. She *knew* today's meeting would result in a quarrel or two, if not blood, so she demonstrated her capability for you before the meeting had even started—to ensure you'd keep your emotions in check out of fear." Melia's eyes narrowed. "Power—be it fighting strength or otherwise—is what separates the wheat from the chaff. Cecilia is overflowing with tremendous power. Of that, I have no doubt. Gildo, I want you to look into every noble family in the kingdom again, particularly those with military backgrounds. Go over their records with a fine-tooth

comb. Cecilia is the key to the Rovenes' secrets."

"Yes, Marquess!"

"Now, what else was there? Oh, yes. Their second son—Beck or whatever his name is—belongs to our private army. Nicks, I'll be arranging for him to be moved under your command. Keep a close eye on him, and find out anything you can."

"As you command."

Melia huffed. "Each and every one of them is as odd and insolent as can be, and they have the nerve to come here yapping, 'Our house words are humble and true!' What nonsense. Do they take me for a fool?!"

No one dared to answer her.

The Original Five

It was a weekend morning like any other, and so, in accordance with my cherished routine, I'd just jogged to the main gate to begin my lap of the Academy's perimeter. To my surprise, a familiar face was waiting for my arrival.

"Good morning, Master Godolphen. Forgive me, I didn't expect to run into you here at this time of the morning. Is something the matter?"

"No, not at all. Rather, how should I put this...? While the time had certainly come for me to step back from the front line, even an old man like me finds himself weary of constant meetings and assemblies day after day. I thought I might mingle with you youngsters for once and see if I can't shake the dust off these old bones." The sage smiled genially. "Thus, I've been waiting for you here, enjoying watching all your fellow club members begin their own training. I don't suppose you'll mind having a companion for today?"

"Of course not, Master. You have seemed very busy lately. You've still got a lot of responsibilities outside of the Academy too, right?"

Side by side, we set off on a clockwise lap of the perimeter wall. From what I had gathered, Godolphen also worked for both the

Royal Order and the royal family itself, and he often rushed over from the school as soon as our morning lessons were over. As rumor had it, there were many days when the only sleep he got was a quick nap on his personal couch in the teacher's lounge. *Not a particularly luxurious lifestyle for someone who's meant to be one of the most respected people in the kingdom.*

"True, true. However, I wanted to join in on one of your practices as soon as I was able to after you gave me such a thorough scolding. As the club adviser, I owe the students that much, at least... But as the years pass, I find myself with less time and energy for these sorts of things, vex me though it may. Fortunately, our morning lessons grant me a decent understanding of Class 1-A's current abilities, and the reports I receive from your club managers allow me to check up on everyone else's progress too. Because of everyone's hard work, I can be at ease regarding your activities here."

"Please don't worry about it. Besides, a lot of us get to see you in class every day, and you've always been willing to lend an ear whenever I need advice. I'm more than thankful for what you do as it is."

We continued our idle conversation as we ran. By the time we'd reached the halfway point, we were overtaking the students who'd started before us. Since completing Godolphen's assignment, my "encouragement" (aka verbal abuse) of my fellow club members had basically ended, with a few exceptions. There were a handful of masochistic weirdos who'd all told me something along the lines of, *"I can't get into it without your heckling, Coach!"* So I still tossed those guys a few perfunctory taunts here and there.

Over the past four months, I'd whittled down my lap time, and a loop of the Academy's perimeter now took me just over an hour. None of the other club members could keep up with my pace. Well, to be completely accurate, Leo *could* keep up with me—if I were to force him to put his stupidly excessive mana to full use, that is. He was exercising self-restraint with his mana, though, since running with his Strengthening Magic activated from start to end would render the magical manipulation aspect of the training useless.

A thought struck me. “Master, do you think *you* could run while also compressing your magic? Everyone else seems to struggle with it...” As expected, Godolphen’s magical manipulation was incredible. He was keeping up with me with ease, expending the tiniest amount of mana possible. However, I was running with my Scouting Magic activated these days. By concentrating my magic around my eyes, I was able to detect the trace remnants of mana being expended as we ran, which told me he wasn’t compressing his magic between movements.

The old man didn’t answer my question, instead responding with an unexpected one of his own. “Do you know of the Original Five, Rovene?”

The Original Five: the first five houses. Five noble families who could trace their histories back further than any others—families who’d ruled over this continent long before the Kingdom of Yugria had been founded. It was said that all of the current noble families across the continent were descended from those five families, kind of like the four noble clans in Japan. Naturally, as time had passed and society had changed, not all of those five families could still boast of holding the same power now as they had back then, although the Rosamours, who still reigned over the empire of the same name to the north, were one exception. Yugria was still home to one of the five families too.

“Yes, I think so. There’s the Rosamour family in the north, and I’ve heard the Waning Marquesses belong to the Original Five too,” I replied.

“Quite correct. The Waning Marquesses—or House Dosuperior, if I may use their family name. A very proud family with *very* particular notions of education who’ve refused to allow any of their children to enter the Academy—or any other school—without exception. Furthermore, with their custom of marrying only close blood relatives... Well, many factors have led to their near-total loss of power in this kingdom, which explains the colloquial name for their house. However, even now, they still produce many masters of Strengthening Magic, and their closely guarded techniques are regarded with much jealousy both here and across the continent.”

Godolphen paused suddenly and frowned, as though struck by a somber memory. "I... I lost a good friend in the war. His name was Bardi von Dosuperior. One night, to pass the time as we waited at a campsite beside the very battlefield where he'd later lose his life, he taught me one of his family's secret techniques. The same magical compression technique you use now, in fact." Godolphen caught my eye, peering at my face curiously.

I didn't reply for a moment. "My mother... She cut ties with her birth family, for some reason. I never asked her why, because it seemed like she didn't want to remember it. I didn't parade it around as a secret technique or anything, but... Um, maybe showing it off during club activities wasn't the best idea?"

Besides, I didn't know it was meant to be some incredibly secret technique anyway, now did I?!

Godolphen chuckled when he saw the worried expression on my face. "Well, there's not much cause to worry. After all, your club adviser also knows the same secret. In truth, when Bardi taught me the technique, he said, 'Our mastery of intermittent magic compression is the backbone of House Dosuperior. It's not something just anyone can learn simply by watching.' And indeed, no matter how many years I spent attempting it, I was never able to imitate what he'd shown me. I imagine your schoolmates—prodigies though they might be—are struggling much the same. The attempt will be beneficial in itself, but I highly doubt more than a handful of them will ever master it, if any do at all. However...are you sure of your decision, Rovene? Having so readily revealed the secrets of your mother's family?"

I'd already realized that, for my classmates, constantly compressing and reusing mana was apparently more difficult than I'd thought. Four months had passed since I'd explained the technique to the others in Class A, but most of them were still struggling with the preliminary step of simply deactivating their Strengthening Magic between movements. Leo, with his stupidly abundant mana, was struggling twice as much as everyone else; the delicate level of control needed to readily start and stop the flow of magic was apparently more difficult for those with more mana than

they knew what to do with. Well, with his crazy mana, he probably didn't *need* to learn intermittent compression anyway. Only Dan and Stella had been able to start actually compressing their magic, but they were certainly nowhere close to anything resembling mastery.

"Well... She didn't go around telling everyone about it, but she also never *explicitly* told me to keep it a secret, so I think it's okay? Plus, I've never even met any of her family. But just in case, could you pretend I never said anything? My father always let something slip whenever he'd had a few drinks, but my mother never liked to talk about her past, so I am a *little* worried about what'll happen if she finds out I told you..."

Godolphen chuckled again. "Well, it seems the little country boy is finally learning something about discretion." He paused for a moment, looking thoughtful. "Tall trees catch much wind, Rovene. No secret stays hidden forever, but for now, I believe keeping it to yourself is the correct decision. I, too, will forget what I have heard today."

"With everything that's happened recently, I'd be stupid not to learn at least a little discretion..." I sighed. "Thank you, Master." *Things would have been a lot easier if the details of the assignment you set for me hadn't suspiciously leaked, though...*

Or so I wanted to say, but I swallowed the retort.

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Godolphen kept up with me for the rest of the lap—including matching me for hill sprints—before accompanying me back to my dorm, apparently wanting to see how everyone was handling life in the less extravagant living quarters.

He grunted as we slowed to a halt in front of the dorm. "Very impressive, Rovene. Your routine is quite intense despite how unaffected you seem by the end of it. I doubt I'll be able to keep up with you by the time you reach your third year." He stretched, casting his eyes over the exterior of the building. "This place hasn't changed in the slightest, and yet somehow, the gloomy aura that hung over us all during my time here seems like a false memory."

“Good morning, Master Godolphen!” As the sage and I approached the entrance, the crowd of students practicing with their weapons nearby paused in their movements and shouted a collective greeting to him. Without letting themselves get distracted, they immediately returned to their practice strokes, each focusing only on the sword, spear, or other weapon in their hand. It was a sight I saw every morning, but Godolphen seemed deeply impressed.

“Right, I heard you also lived here during your school years. Honestly, I preferred it before everyone else moved in, when the place was much quieter...” Excusing myself, I took my wooden sword from the rack near the entrance, then started my daily practice strokes—as always, precisely thirty minutes.

Godolphen must have had something on his mind, for he sat nearby and watched us practice the whole time, uttering not a single word. There was a depth in his gaze, as though he was lost in the recollections of days long gone.

Intermission: The First Time in Fifty Years

My morning practice finished, I returned my wooden sword, and Godolphen and I headed into the dining hall. A few students were busily helping dish up breakfast onto the waiting trays. When the population of the dorm had suddenly increased, Thora hadn't been able to manage the food service by herself anymore, so I'd reluctantly started helping out with dishing up plates and tidying up after. The other students had voluntarily started following my example. There wasn't a particular roster or anything; people just jumped in when they had time, doing what they saw needed doing—not just in the dining hall, but everywhere in the dorm. It was just the type of place this was.

Thora had been allocated some additional funds to employ a few more people, but after she'd hired one or two, my innate frugality had taken over, and I'd badgered her until she agreed to spend as little money as possible on things like cleaning, instead investing the new funding into ingredients and research. Everyone else had found out about my insistence on running a tight ship (though I didn't know how) but thankfully agreed with my prioritization of Thora's research, and we'd settled into the current system. Staffing was kept to a minimum, and whenever we lacked manpower, everyone chipped in to get things done.

"How excellent. During my time in the Order, there was no end of namby-pamby cowards who'd whine about having to cook their own food, demanding a chef at the campsite so they could focus on the battle and similar nonsense. It seems I won't have to worry about that from the residents of this dorm, at the very least. Were the campsite to have been attacked, the presence of even a single noncombatant could have endangered the success of the company

as a whole—but no matter how many times I tried to explain it to them, those spoiled brats never understood. However, the students I see here do not utter a single word of complaint, although many of them were raised in similar luxury." Godolphen smiled warmly as he gazed at those working.

"Well, if it isn't Godolphen," said Thora, emerging from the adjoining kitchen. "There's a face I haven't seen since you left these halls, what, fifty years ago? What brings you back here, then?"

So Thora's been here for at least fifty years... Wait, how old is *she?*

"Madam Thora," Godolphen said, nodding at her. "Quite frankly, I have nothing but humiliating, horrible memories of this place. In fact, I swore to never set foot here again. However, seeing the bright, smiling faces of these youths... Well, somehow, I found myself summoning up the courage to finally face the past—to face the naive, inexperienced version of myself I left behind. I thought I'd come inside and see if I couldn't pay my respects to you, Madam. Pray forgive me for my most discourteous failure to visit until now." He bowed his head apologetically.

For a split second, I thought I could see a trace of a tear in the corner of Thora's eye. The next moment, though, it was gone—and her expression changed back into the vaguely malicious one I knew too well as she burst into a fit of cackling. "Hee hee! *Madam?* Got yourself a silver tongue, have you? I still remember you crying in the bathtub with all the lights off after you got bullied by the older kids like it was yesterday... How the time flies."

Godolphen smiled politely, though I could see a vein throbbing in his forehead. "Dear me! I haven't the faintest idea what you could be talking about. Perhaps even the great Madam Thora is not immune to the dulling touch of time," he said, chuckling. "But it's true that my only memories of this place are bitter ones. For better or worse, my experiences in this dorm made me into the man I am today."

"Hee hee! Crybaby Goldie's finally got himself a backbone, eh? I remember it, don't you worry—the day you left this dorm, you told me much the same. 'This is our final farewell. I won't be back ever

again. Thanks for taking care of me, Thora.' I saw the look in your eyes back then. Made me realize how much you'd grown—and how much stronger you would become." Thora grinned. "You've been a source of hope for the kids in this dorm for a long time now, you know. When I find some hopeless, miserable squirt crying in the bathroom, I tell 'em even Godolphen the Indomitable once sat where they did—and that he got up and used this place as a stepping stone to become the man they know today. Well, I haven't needed to tell anyone about your crybaby past recently, though. This year's lot are too confident already. How about some breakfast then, eh? For old time's sake?"

Godolphen's face twisted—probably in response to the public revelation of his embarrassing past—but he readily assented to Thora's suggestion. Today's breakfast was thick cuts of Gryetess snake grilled in a gag-inducingly bitter liver sauce, accompanied by a glass of milk that smelled like it had been spilled, cleaned up with an old rag, and wrung back into the glass—and, as always, a normal bread roll.

"When I heard the current cohort were happily eating and even looking *forward* to your cooking each day, I thought my memories of entirely unpalatable meals must have become warped with age, but..." He frowned. "In reality, it appears to be even more disgusting than I remembered. The children are remarkably resilient, to readily eat something like this. I highly doubt I'll be able to finish the plate." Indeed, after just a single bite and a tiny sip of the milk, Godolphen put his knife and fork back on the table, apparently finished with the meal.

"Master Godolphen!" Al, sitting nearby, leaned in with a broad smile. "Do you see the paper stuck up over there? Allen taught it to us. It's one of the famous Soldo's sayings—but basically, it says a meal like this is a challenge to be conquered by willpower." He gestured toward a nearby wall. There, hung in a large, ornate frame, was a sign bearing the words, *"If you clear your mind of all mundane thoughts, even a fire will feel like a cool breeze."*

"Hee hee hee! Guess Combat Readiness might not be within your wheelhouse, eh? Fifty years on and you're still Crybaby Goldie on the

inside! Pathetic...” Thora cackled as she riled Godolphen up, her aura shifting from “dorm matron” to “mad scientist” in the blink of an eye.

An angry vein pulsed in the old man’s forehead once again—which was only natural, really, considering he was being mocked in front of every single one of his students. He took up his knife and fork for a second time. “When my unit was attacked and scattered during the war, I survived for a whole week on nothing but tree bark while finding my way home. A trifling meal like this doesn’t scare me.”

Thora snorted. “Well, if you’re going to eat it, go stand on that machine over there first so we can get your pre-and postmeal readings.”

Godolphen’s brows knitted in confusion. “What do you mean? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

The machine Thora had pointed to was something I’d asked Fey to make based on the design of bathroom scales in my previous life. The residents of the dorm used it before and after every meal to provide data for Thora’s research.

“Oh, it’s just something I developed at Allen’s request,” Fey chimed in. “It measures and records changes in muscle mass, magical aptitude, magical circulation, and control over elemental transformation for those with affinities. He wouldn’t shut up about how being able to see clear progression would motivate everyone and lead to even better results. It took a lot of hard work—with Thora’s kind supervision—to get it up and running. Plus about three million riels.”

Wait, how *much did it cost?*

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After he’d finally finished his meal—with the vigor of a soldier defeating a formidable enemy on the battlefield—Godolphen and I headed to the baths.

“This place remains the same,” he started, pausing to let out a small burp. “It’s as though time has stood still for fifty years. The only difference, perhaps”—he let out another belch—“are the looks

on the faces of those gathered here."

Vrrrm. Godolphen jumped as something zipped past his foot.

"What the heavens was that?"

"Huh? Oh, that's our automatic cleaning robot, Roombo 3. If you top it up with water and mana, it'll sweep and mop by itself for up to two hours on a single charge—very convenient, really. It's another of Fey's designs."

"Ro... Robot?" replied Godolphen, confused. "A device like this could steal many a job from those who need it more. You should exercise prudence before releasing such things to the world at large."

I shrugged. "Fey's got complete control over the rights to it, so it's in her hands. I'm sure she won't do anything too detrimental to society." I paused. "Master, you said nothing had changed around here, but we're trying pretty hard to improve the place, you know? We don't need any fancy decorations or furniture, but in terms of improving day-to-day efficiency, we're putting in a lot of work. Not that I'm satisfied yet, though. But for example, we installed a sauna in the baths to make it easier to recover our energy after a good workout. Well, the ongoing cost to maintain it is so high that nearly all of our new funding goes toward it, but still..."

My authority over the dorm's funding stemmed from my role as the assistant dorm leader. When I'd moved in, Reed was already the dorm leader—albeit in name only—and as soon as I'd started making changes, he'd appointed me as his second-in-command, claiming his frequent absences would make it difficult for me to get the approval I'd otherwise need. In reality, I suspected he just didn't want to do any work.

Godolphen's eyes widened at my words. "I *beg* your pardon? A sauna, inside a school dormitory?! What a splendid idea! I myself am a lifelong sauna enthusiast." His eyes sparkled. "I rarely get to partake these days, as there are no saunas around the area... Perhaps I will start dropping in more often."

With that, we entered the bathing area. The water temperature was maintained at a steamy fifty-five degrees Celsius, what we in Japan would have referred to as "extremely hot" on the sake

warming scale. It was hot enough that even the hardened locals of the Kusatsu onsen town would have struggled to jump right in. Incidentally, I refrained from using the sauna in the mornings. I only used it to recover when my body was most fatigued, which took more than a simple morning run.

"There's no classes today, so please, enjoy the sauna to your heart's content," I said before making my way to the large communal bath. I'd just seen Leo heading toward the sauna, so I wouldn't need to babysit the old man.

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After Allen had left, Godolphen made a beeline for the sauna, bouncing with an enthusiasm rather unbecoming of a man of his years. With how busy he'd been recently, he'd had to make do with the simple showers installed in the teacher's residence, not even able to relax with a long soak in the bath. *After all the long meetings of late, a sauna will be an excellent opportunity for me to relax these stiff muscles.* Somehow managing to suppress the urge to run, Godolphen strode calmly into the sauna—only to freeze with shock.

It's cold?! A memory flashed into his mind: long weeks spent subjugating ice dragons in the Euhrad Mountains...

"Sage?" Leo, who'd entered the sauna earlier, looked surprised at Godolphen's sudden appearance. "Why are you here?"

"Well, you see, I found myself curious as to how you all were getting on with life outside of classes," replied the old man, shivering slightly. "I accompanied young Rovene on his morning run, and then I decided to pop in and check up on the dorm. One thing led to another, as so often it does, but...I must say, I've never encountered a cold sauna before." For the time being, Godolphen decided to take a seat, lowering himself onto the step above and behind Leo.

The moment he did so, however, several people cried out.

What's happened?!

"Sage..." Leo started, looking concerned. "It's minus thirty degrees in here. According to Allen, icing our muscles is essential for recovery and growth. But... Well, if you sit down like that, without

even a towel between you and the seat, your skin will freeze to the surface, and you won't be able to stand back up."

Godolphen tried to push himself to his feet. As Leo had said, his buttocks were firmly stuck to the step's surface. He could probably extract himself with some force, but the tight way his skin clung to the icy seat conjured a foreboding image of torn skin and a great deal of blood.

One of the other students rushed out of the sauna, quickly returning with a bucket of water from the bath, which he poured around Godolphen's rear. With a sizzle, the old sage found himself freed from the seat.

"Don't worry, Sage. Everyone does the same thing the first time they come in here. If you wipe off the water and lay down a towel before you sit, you'll be fine. In case something happens again, if you push one of the red buttons all around the walls, it'll stop the sauna and alert someone."

"Thank you. It seems I was a little careless," Godolphen replied apologetically. However, despite the cold of the sauna, there was a fire in his eyes—the ignited ego of a world-class sauna enthusiast, an ego tempered in the bountiful hot springs and saunas of the Vanquish Domain.

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Of those men who entered the battlefield that was the sauna, there were but two types: those who fought against themselves, and those who fought against others. Godolphen belonged to the latter camp. However, when two people of the same camp—and of remarkably similar obstinacy—found themselves sharing a sauna, it would often lead to tragedy. That fact was as true here as it was in every other world.

Several other students, including Leo, had entered the sauna shortly before Godolphen. Of those students, all but Leo had already left, other students taking their places. As it stood, Godolphen was already so cold that he couldn't even close his mouth on account of his chattering teeth, but he couldn't leave—not while Leo, who'd

been here longer than he had, still sat in front of him.

It was clear that Leo—even with his eyes closed, apparently meditating—was keenly aware of Godolphen's presence too. Evidently, he was intending to stay in the sauna until he'd outlasted the sage. His legs were shaking, and his lips, ears, and other extremities had begun to take on a bluish-purple tinge.

This isn't good... He's minutes away from frostbite. Such obstinacy—the first to enter should be the first to leave! Does he think to make me admit defeat?! Furthermore, based on the feeling of the step under his feet, it was altogether possible that the step below—the one Leo was perched on—was even colder than Godolphen's own. *Blasted youth! How dare he entertain the thought that I, a sauna veteran—and one sitting on a milder step—will take my leave first?!*

Godolphen's angry thoughts began to slow as the need to sleep overtook him. *No... Sleep will mean my death. As an adult, I must end this now before one of the most promising youths of his generation sustains an irreversible injury...even if it means using some grown-up tricks.*

Decided, Godolphen stood up, stretching casually, and began to walk toward the door in a composed manner. At the old man's movement, Leo (who'd long passed his own limits) shot to his feet as well, desperate to finally leave—which was when Godolphen suddenly halted and began stretching his legs in the wide area next to the exit. After stretching both legs, he returned to his original seat, lowering himself onto the step once more. Leo froze where he'd been inches from the door, utterly bewildered.

Oho ho ho. You've got a long way to go in the art of the sauna, boy, to be fooled by such a basic feint. Godolphen chuckled inside—only to see Leo's bluish-purple lips twisting into a smirk. The boy began carrying out his own stretches before sitting back down as though nothing had happened. *Fool! Unpleasantly competitive fool!*

"Uh, wouldn't it be best if you *both* gave up on this silly competition and left now?" asked Coco, who'd recently entered the sauna himself—but to no avail. Ignoring him, both Godolphen and Leo closed their eyes.

Thirty minutes later, two towel-wrapped objects vaguely resembling large, frozen tuna were rolled in front of Jewel, who sighed as she reached for her staff.





Chapter Three: Unremarkable Exploring

Summer Break

"The time is upon us. From tomorrow, you children will enjoy two warm months of well-earned respite. Were this an ordinary class, this would be where I'd warn you against neglecting your training too much... However, over the past four months, you've all already become so strong, I can barely reconcile you with the youths I met on orientation day." Godolphen chuckled warmly. "I can't imagine you'll shirk your studies. When we return for the second semester, there will be many opportunities for you all to demonstrate the skills you've refined so far, such as during our upcoming school camp. I'm already eagerly anticipating the stories you'll bring back from your respective summer breaks. Exercise caution, and take care of your health. That is all."

The last day of the first semester was over. Earlier in the day, our rankings had been posted on the noticeboard in the hallway. Despite it being a collective list for all the first-year students, Class A had monopolized the top twenty spots.

1. Leo Seizinger
2. Daniel Sardos (Dan)
3. Feyreun von Dragoon (Fey)
4. Vesta von Stocklode
5. Jewelry Reverence (Jewel)
6. Charme Harlonbay (Char)
7. Kate Sancalpar
8. Stella Achilles

9. Allen Rovene
10. Rudolph Austin (Dolph)
11. Marguerite Steyr (Maggie)
12. Aldor Engravier (Al)
13. Coconial Canardia (Coco)
14. Regina Sunheart (Reggie)
15. Pisces L'Avancour (Pisce)
16. Elena Iskandar
17. Parley Avinier
18. Sophia Blanche (Sophie)
19. Beld Univance
20. Larla von Liencoul (Lala)

I'd fallen two places in the overall ranking since orientation—from seventh to ninth place—but I'd maintained fourth place in the knight course rankings, at least. I paid attention in class, but with no particular motivation to study outside of lessons, my ranking would probably continue to fall over time. Although in Magical Theory—my favorite subject, and one I'd spent hours studying out of personal interest—I'd taken the top grade. *Bet they've never had a knight course student do* that *before... Well, who cares, anyway? What's more important is...*

Summer break. The words filled me with a strange excitement. Godolphen had made it sound like he expected us to naturally spend the time training and studying, but obviously, my only plan was to have fun. With school, I'd never been able to go anywhere that took longer than a one-or two-day journey to get there, but now my chance had finally come.

I was going to go on a solo vacation—and I already had a destination in mind.

Of course, with the mandatory training I'd need to attend for the Order, I couldn't spend the *whole* two months away from the capital, but I still intended to have myself a one hundred percent fulfilling summer break. *And to achieve that, I need...*

"Allen? I'm going to make you tell me today, you know. No matter

what I have to do. Every time I've asked you about your plans for the break, you've brushed me off with nonsense about 'going where the wind takes you,' but you've obviously got *something* planned, or you wouldn't be looking like a child with a new toy. Don't think you can lie your way out of this one."

...to find some way to get rid of these guys.

I wanted to go wherever my whims led me and see what the broader kingdom had to offer—even running into trouble, if things turned out that way. But if I traveled with this lot of filthy-rich egotists, I knew how it would turn out: all meals and expenses paid, people kissing the ground beneath our feet, and an army of attendants and bodyguards surrounding us. Trouble wouldn't touch us with a ten-foot pole. I'd briefly entertained the thought of suggesting a stereotypically aimless "high school summer trip" to Al and Coco, who possessed at least *some* trace of moderation. I'd decided against it, though. The more people I involved, the greater the chances of our plans being overheard—and if anyone else found out about them, we'd soon be joined by the full conspicuous cast.

"You look like you're plotting your escape, Allen..." said Jewel thoughtfully—and accurately. *Mind reading magic...?*

Fey took a single step toward me, and I immediately took one backward. *This isn't good.* Past experience had already proven that if Fey got a hold of me with her gorilla-like grip, escape would be impossible.

"Is Allen here?" Just as Fey was closing in, a voice sounded from the doorway—a voice I knew, belonging to a boy I respected very much.

"Reed!"

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"Sorry to interrupt while you're with your friends! Planning something for the break? Actually, I came to ask you for some help myself. You're probably already fully booked though, huh?"

"You want my help? Of course! I don't have any plans, not a single one!" I ignored the glares I could feel burning holes into the

back of my head.

Reed laughed. “Well, it’s actually an exploring request, so wait until you hear the details before you decide,” he said before proceeding to explain the situation.

The destination in question was around half a day’s journey from the capital, which would require us to first take a train before finishing the journey via magicar—magically powered vehicles similar to the cars I’d known back in Japan. From there, we’d push our way deep into the forest until we reached a certain waterfall. Behind that waterfall, we’d find a type of magical moss Reed had discovered growing en masse on the rock face. The moss, which dramatically increased the effectiveness of other magically based medicines, was an incredibly useful and valuable ingredient—but so far, this was the only place he’d found it growing, and once pruned, it took quite a while to grow back. Thus, he only visited the waterfall twice a year, checking on the moss’s growth and harvesting a small amount to sell back to his family.

However, his family’s apothecary business—the Panacea Company—had been struggling to get its hands on high-quality ingredients recently, and they were currently unable to meet the demands of their upper-class customers. The usually constant supply of imported ingredients from Justeria, the large nation to the west, had suddenly dried up, and there was no indication it would restart anytime soon.

Though Reed hadn’t wanted to begin distributing moss-powered medicines until he discovered more colonies of the plant, in order to supply their customers with the potentially lifesaving medicines they needed, he’d decided to pay an extra visit to the waterfall, harvesting as much of the moss as he could without harming the delicate ecosystem. Unfortunately, at this time of year, the forest that housed the waterfall was teeming with dangerous monsters, more so than during his usual visits. Depending on what emerged, he wasn’t entirely confident he’d be able to take it on alone—and even if he did, he wouldn’t be able to carry the useful monster parts back by himself. On the other hand, if he hired some random bodyguard or porter to accompany him, there was every chance the secret colony would become public knowledge—and the place would

be entirely stripped of its materials by the time Reed next visited.

"So I thought maybe I'd ask you to help, Allen. I can trust you to keep a secret, and you're more than strong enough to take on a couple of monsters. I could probably find one or two other dependable guys if I asked around, but since I've been too busy to join you every time you've invited me to come exploring, I just thought..." Reed paused, smiling at me. "I'll cover the travel costs and any other necessary expenses, and the payment's a fixed sixty thousand riels. What else...? Ah, for everything we gather excluding the moss—so other plants, monster parts, and the like—I was thinking of just leaving it as a fifty-fifty split. But anyway, how about it? If you're happy to come, I'll head to the guild and put it through as a nominated request."

"How about it?" Oh, Reed, you crack me up. The request sounded like genuine fun, plus the payment was great. What reason did I have to refuse? Plus, Reed had specifically asked me to come with him, and I knew he would've been able to find another dependable partner much more easily than he'd tried to make it sound. As always, he was a superbly considerate and capable guy.

"Of course I'll come!" I answered without hesitation. "Thanks for inviting me!"

"Now it's starting to feel like summer break!" interjected Fey, giggling. "Grandmother's been nagging me to bring you along to our holiday home for the summer, but I guess I can join you on your camping trip first. Oh, don't worry about bringing a tent, Allen. I'll prepare one for the two of us. Something cozy and private, with an anti-Scouting device so no one can see or hear what's happening inside..."

"Droves of powerful monsters, you say?" Leo chimed in, eyes glinting. "You've got my interest. I'll come along too—and I'll bring along ten of my most trustworthy porters from home as well. Let's have a little competition to see who can bring down the most valuable prey."

Your eyes might be open, but you two must be dreaming if you're spewing crap like that. "Reed and I are *professional* explorers, and this is a business discussion. Our work isn't so easygoing that

amateurs like you can stick your heads in for a bit of fun! Right, Reed?”

“Huh? Well, if they’re strong enough to protect themselves, I don’t really—”

“See, he completely agrees with me! Professional explorers only work with other licensed explorers, properly contracted through the guild. Us pros have pride, you hear?” I declared, my voice echoing around the classroom.

Jewel pushed past Fey and Leo, giggling as she stopped in front of me. “Too bad for you two, but I, a D-Ranked explorer, will happily prepare Allen’s tent. Although unfortunately, I don’t have a special soundproof tent like Fey... We’ll have to make do sharing my small, tight sleeping bag, okay?”

Fey’s eyes narrowed in that dangerous, feline way as Jewel spouted her absurd fantasy. “And just when did you register as an explorer, hm? Don’t you know it’s not polite to take a sneaky head start?”

“Oh my, you’ll wound my reputation. I simply registered on account of my *genuine* and *profound* interest in the field of exploring.” Jewel turned back to me, smirking. “I’m looking forward to our trip, Allen.”

“When are you leaving? I’ll be back with my license within three hours. Then there won’t be any problems, right?”

Aren’t these guys meant to be busy?! My shoulders sank. “There’s nothing *but* problems, you idiots. Even if you go and register, it doesn’t change the fact that you’re all amateurs without a single completed request to your names. It’s not like our lessons here, where our safety is guaranteed. It’s different out there; if luck’s not on your side, you could die. We’re going on a school camp next semester, yeah? Save your outdoorsy fantasies for then—I’m not letting easygoing jokers who haven’t even gotten their licenses come along with us. And if that annoys you, go and register properly, and get yourself some actual experience too.”

“You don’t think I’ve got experience?” retorted Leo. “Before I enrolled here, I often trained in a region where dangerous monsters __”

"I don't want to hear about how your instructors babysat you while you practiced, dangerous monsters or not. You didn't go there on your own, right? You didn't *choose* to jump into a situation where one wrong move could mean death?" I retorted, tilting my head. No one replied.

Nervously, Coco raised his hand. "Can I come along? I can protect myself—at least, I think I can—and I want to test out our new tool..."

"Yeah! I was gonna go back to visit my parents, but maybe I should come too. How many days do you reckon it'll take?" added Al.

"You guys? Well, we have done a few requests together already, and I know you're pretty experienced, so I don't really mind, but..." I glanced at Reed.

"If they've got your stamp of approval, then it's fine by me. I reckon it'll take about two days there and two days back. With an extra day or two just in case, I'm aiming for about a six-day trip, all up. But what about the payment? I mean, if I need to pay each of you the same amount, I'll definitely go over budget."

"Don't worry about it. Keep the conditions as they were, and we'll just split it among the three of us."

Reed frowned. "I don't know. Makes it pretty poor compensation for you guys. How about this? We'll keep the original payment the same, sixty thousand. Split it among yourselves however you like. Anything else we find along the way, we'll share evenly among all four of us. As far as I see it, the more help I have, the more we'll be able to carry back—and the safer we'll be too." Al and Coco nodded, and the deal was struck. "So, as for when and where we'll meet—"

"Wait!" I interjected hurriedly. "We *involved* parties should discuss the rest elsewhere, don't you think? Look at those greedy faces! If these bastards learn where to find your moss, they'll harvest the lot for themselves!"

"Uh, I seriously don't think kids in Class A are gonna—"

"Pro explorers prepare for the worst-case scenario, right?! Let's go, Reed—and don't any of you even think about following us!" Pushing Reed forward, I safely secured my escape from the

classroom.

Mwa ha ha. Even these guys aren't stupid enough to try and follow us after a warning like that.

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After Allen's group left the classroom...

"Ha. Allen said he was only exploring to earn some pocket money, but he seems pretty obsessed with it, don't you think?" said Fey, grinning. "Well, I'm off to register at the guild."

"Surely you're not serious, Lady Fey," spluttered Parley, rushing up to her. "Exploring work is only for hopeless people with no other means to earn money. You're the next Marquess Dragoon, someone who already holds the authority to command many. Being ordered about by other people as an explorer will reflect poorly on your reputation."

Fey giggled. "I understand what you're saying, Parley, but I have to put my faith in Allen's 'tendencies,' however odd they might sometimes be. He sees things other people don't. And for him to call us—Class A students at the Royal Academy—easygoing jokers? To not even *consider* us worth taking along?" She paused, giggling again. "Honestly, when I think about it sensibly, you're probably right—but I also don't think exploring is the end goal for him. I mean, no one's out there saying, 'I want to become an explorer when I graduate!' Although, who knows? Everyone's got their own dreams, in the end..."

Fey looked around the room, grinning in her usual, dangerous way, and not a single soul was brave enough to reply.

A Real B-Rank

The next morning, we met at Central Station, already having gone to the southeastern branch the previous afternoon to submit (Reed) and accept (me, Coco, and Al) our nominated request.

Reed looked me up and down. "You seem a lot more like a proper

explorer than the last time I saw you, Allen. I guess I should have expected as much from 'Mad Hound Lenn.' You hold the record for the fastest-promoted explorer in the whole of Yugria, don't you?" he teased. Coco and Al—and now Reed—all knew I worked under the alias "Lenn" while exploring.

"It's all thanks to you, Reed. You were the one who took me along on your gathering expedition that day and introduced me to the guild. But my 'record' is a sham, to be honest, since Uncle Cher just kept promoting me for his own amusement."

After consulting with Rouge at Singlord, my favorite weapon-and-armor store, I'd completely replaced my exploring gear. Firstly, I'd replaced the knife I'd lost to the honeyants with a simple dagger made by the same company, Banree, and I'd sheathed it at my belt. The blade was around forty centimeters long, making it feasible for use in a fight as well as for foraging plants and dissecting carcasses. The sharp edge required more maintenance than most other hunting knives would need, but the time I spent caring for the dagger only made me more fond of it.

I hadn't really intended to replace my old leather breastplate yet—it was still in good shape—but Rouge had worried that the beginner-targeted gear would restrict my nonbeginner movements, so I'd taken her advice and replaced it with a light yet sturdy leather vest with an attached belt for my knife. It was easier to move around in, and it offered a lot more protection than my old breastplate.

Lastly, reluctant though I had been to part with it, I'd upgraded my beloved Rygo bow to a Parthia composite bow. Rouge—skilled businesswoman that she was—had encouraged me to change it along with the rest of my equipment, saying I'd get a better price buying everything as a package. I'd known I would have to graduate from the Rygo sooner or later, and when I'd tested the Parthia out, it was obvious that the better model would allow greater progress with my archery skills, so I didn't regret saying farewell to the older bow. With an effective range of two hundred meters and a maximum range of six hundred, the Parthia was about twice as powerful as my Rygo 5. The added power made shooting it a little more difficult, but

Rouge had specifically chosen a bow that handled similarly to the Rygo for me, so the basic mechanics were virtually the same.

When she'd seen me decked out in my new equipment, Rouge had smiled and said, *"Well, it's still only the bare minimum equipment...but you're looking a* little *more like a B-Rank explorer now, Lenn."*

That was a name—and rank—she shouldn't have known; Cher had pulled some strings to ensure no one would realize that the Academy student Allen and the explorer Lenn were one and the same person. Seeing my suspicious expression, Rouge had continued, *"Oh, it's just because I'm a big fan of Explorer Lenn. I know how to keep my mouth shut, though. I won't tell anyone your little secret,"* she'd said, giggling.

I'd thought we'd done pretty well with my budget of thirty thousand riels, but judging by the bitter expression on the assistant manager Lund's face when I paid the bill, I'd probably received an incredible discount again after all.

But back to the present.

We boarded the first train out of the city, heading toward our destination of Robles, a town in the Dialemack Region.

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Our train arrived in the Dialemack Region's capital at half past eight in the morning. From there, we hired a magicar to take us to the regional town of Robles, which took another four hours. Apparently, a significant number of explorers—mostly mid-level—operated out of Robles, since the forests and grasslands surrounding it were abundant with natural resources and monsters.

"We should pop into the local guild branch before anything else," said Reed. "Check if there's any recent reports of unusual monster activity or not. Plus, we'll rent some storage bags from there, since we'll sell everything we gather back to this branch before we go home—apart from the moss, of course. Once we're done, we'll rent a room nearby and have an early night, and we'll set off before dawn tomorrow. Everyone happy with the plan?" We all nodded.

The storage bags available to rent from the guild were magically reinforced to keep things cool and prevent decay and odor. They were a necessity when exploring dense forests or rugged mountains where you wouldn't be able to bring a wagon. Al, Coco, and I often relied on them when working together as "Party Knight," the registered exploring party I'd forced Coco to take charge of.

Reed's so reliable. With a more experienced explorer around, everything just feels so straightforward... I want to become as capable as him one day. My thoughts were filled with gratitude toward Reed as we started to make our way to the guild.

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A simple wooden building, the Robles branch of the Explorer's Guild gave off a very different atmosphere compared to the more ornately constructed branches in the capital. I was buzzing with excitement as we entered, eagerly anticipating the cold glares that awaited our rabble of outsider brats. Unfortunately, my hopes were dashed as we proceeded to the front counter without even a whiff of trouble. *Well, this is a pretty big town after all, and it's fairly close to the capital. They probably get outsiders like us every day.* I sighed to myself. *Anyway, I'm here on a request with my idol Reed, so it's better to avoid trouble. Plus, I've gotten into enough fights with hot-blooded explorers recently to keep me going for a while...*

"Good afternoon! We just came from the capital to do some foraging in the forest to the south. Are there any requests around the area? Oh, and we'd like to rent two medium storage bags as well."

The receptionist, a plump older woman, smiled generously at Reed. "What a handsome young man! Seems nearly a waste that someone's letting you be just an explorer. To tell you the truth, the south forest's full of strong monsters this time of year—not something a lady-killer and three boys can handle on their own, sorry to say. You'd be better off in the grasslands to the west. The yukeweed and copelgrass you might find there fetch a fairly high price at the moment."

Reed laughed politely. "I know I look young, but I'm actually a B-Rank, so we should be okay. Here's my license," he said, passing it to the woman. "These guys are strong enough to hold their own too. Unless you've heard reports of monsters more dangerous than usual for this season?"

The woman's eyes widened as she took a look at the rank on Reed's license. "My apologies. I had no idea I'd be coming face-to-face with Reed Gourshe, the star of the southeastern Runerelian branch today! You're as handsome as the rumors say. You've got some fans among the staff here, you know. As for the monsters, they're no more dangerous than usual for this time of year, so if you say you'll be okay, I'm sure you will be. That said, you were after a request?"

"Well, we needed to rent some storage bags, so I thought I'd check if there were any requests around the area as well. We're actually here on another request already, though, so we're not planning on taking on anything too difficult on top of it. These guys will be the ones to accept the request, so do you have anything around D-or E-Rank?"

The receptionist beamed upon hearing Reed's explanation. "Oh, you'll be a big help! We always start running low on materials from Knapp Forest this time every year. I'll give you a list of our standing D-Rank requests. If you come across any of the materials on there, just bring 'em back with you, okay?" We happily agreed, taking the list she'd retrieved from a stack behind the counter. "This'll help a lot," she continued. "Strictly speaking, these requests aren't usually difficult enough to merit a D-Rank, but with how dangerous it is to gather them during the summer, that's the highest rank I could put down for the price those materials will fetch. Well then, can I take a look at your licenses? Reed won't be able to officially accept the requests as a B-Rank, but I'll pop your names down so you can get credit for completing any you do. Do you have a party name registered?"

"Our name is Party Knight," replied Al as he and Coco dutifully handed over their licenses.

"Party Knight? Well, that's a fun name," she said, laughing. "So

here we have Aldor and Coconial? D-Rank at your age—I'd wager the both of you are Reed's friends from the Royal Academy, no? Very impressive. And what about you?" She directed the last question at me.

"Uh, despite my wishes, I'm also a B-Rank, so I can't take on the requests either." With an unpleasant premonition, I reluctantly produced my own license. Her gaze narrowed to a glare as she looked it over. I'd been right on the mark.

"So you're the Mad Hound of rumor, eh?" She scoffed in apparent disapproval. "The little shitkicker who likes to start fights wherever he goes? Oh, I've heard all about *you*. If you try to start something here, I'll toss you out myself, mark my words! I don't know what they were thinking, promoting someone like you to B... Don't act all cocky just because you've got a few muscles, you hear me?!" Her angry tone caught the attention of the previously indifferent explorers elsewhere in the room, who now pointed at me, whispering to one another.

I never asked them to break all precedents and rapidly promote me, did I?! I'd have to smooth this over somehow. I'd probably never be fawned over by "Lenn fans" at the branches I visited, but I wanted them to treat me normally, at the very least.

"It was all a misunderstanding! I've never *started* a fight—"

"I don't want to hear your excuses! From what I heard, the first time you met Guildmaster Cher, you suddenly grabbed an iron pipe and smashed him in the stomach! And what about that business at the tavern, eh? After beating half the explorers to the brink of death, you roped the whole tavern into a drinking contest and spent the hundred thousand riels you'd earned in a single night! Oh, I heard all about it, don't you worry! Kid your age ain't got no business actin' like a thug! Our branchmaster heard it straight from Cher at the tavern, so there's no use pretending it didn't happen!" The hushed whispers had swelled to a ruckus by this point.

"That bald bastard! He's handing out *conveniently* abridged stories about me as drinking snacks again!" My seething anger toward Cher involuntarily affected the volume of my voice, raising it to a shout.

"Eeek!"

"Glad to hear you've been enjoying yourself, Lenn—but you're scaring the nice receptionist, so maybe tone down the glaring?"

"Oh—sorry," I said. I unfurrowed my brow, and the woman breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hmph. Showed your true colors pretty quickly, didn't you?" she scoffed. "But Reed—no, *Master* Reed—you're something special, all right! Not even the guildmaster could control the Mad Hound, but you reined him in with just a few words... I guess *real* B-Ranks are built differently," she said in a sickeningly honeyed voice. This plump old woman reminded me of a comedian playing a lovestruck maiden.

Though her distaste for me was somewhat upsetting, I was still pleased with the emergence of a new Reed fan. "No one can compare to Reed, after all!" I said, smiling.

The lovestruck maiden vanished, replaced by the plump receptionist once again. "*Tch!* You'd do well to watch him and learn what a *real* B-Rank is while you're out there! And don't cause Master Reed any trouble!"

Okay, I get that she hates me, but does the difference in how she treats us have to be this *harsh...?*

House Canardia

Somehow—likely thanks to Reed's endorsement of me—we finally managed to accept the requests and rent the storage bags without further trouble. We spent the night at a local lodging house that catered to explorers, then left before the sun rose the next morning. Al and I each carried one of the rented bags. Reed carried the same woven basket he'd had when we'd gone exploring together back during my second week at the Academy, while Coco wore a backpack containing the magical cartography tool we'd developed together in the Geography Club.

I was still somewhat upset that we hadn't been able to eat dinner at the lodging house's dining hall the night before. I'd been looking forward to trying some of the local specialities, but to my dismay,

Reed had stopped us from going, saying he had a bad feeling about it or something. We'd dined on field rations instead.

Admittedly, Reed had probably been right: When I'd Scouted the area, I'd discovered that a small pack of somewhat violent-seeming explorers had trailed us from the guild to the lodging house and had been waiting downstairs. *And all because the old woman was talking so loud...* I didn't know what they wanted with us—though I could probably hazard a guess—but a wise man keeps away from danger, as the old saying went.

"All right, let's head straight in. Like the receptionist said, there's more dangerous monsters around this time of year, so stay on your guard." Reed's expression—usually easygoing and kind—was stiff.

"For monsters to keep an eye out for in Knapp Forest around this season, we're probably looking at child-rearing danztigers and mid-mating season reknews, I think. Both tend to appear along mountain ridges," Coco replied immediately, drawing on his wealth of knowledge.

Reknews reminded me of the okapi I'd once seen at a zoo in Japan, with the vertical stripes on only the lower halves of their bodies. A reknew's diet was primarily plant-based. Ordinarily, they weren't known to attack humans—except during mating season, when their temperaments became much more violent. And with speeds reaching nearly sixty kilometers an hour—even in the dense forest—once they'd set their sights on you, escape was next to impossible.

On another note, Coco had really made strides in overcoming his crippling shyness recently. I couldn't truthfully say he *actively* approached people or struck up conversations, but between the communal living situation in our cramped dorm and running the Geography Club, he'd been forced to converse with others a lot more often—whether he liked it or not. The other thing that helped was, quite simply, his increased self-confidence. Everyone in Class 1-A possessed at least some margin of confidence, of course. However, in Coco's case, not only was he keeping up with the difficult lessons, he was also thriving in the Hill Path Club and the Geography Club, managing independent life in the standard dorm, and even working

as an explorer. Once you felt pride in your own accomplishments—no matter how simple or small they might be—you stopped worrying so much about what others thought of you.

On top of that, I'd also started praising Coco's extraordinary wealth of knowledge (concerning not just monsters, but so much more) at every opportunity, and some of our classmates had also clearly begun to see him in a new light—though it bugged me that they still didn't understand just how amazing he truly was.

"Wow," said Reed, sounding impressed. "You memorized all that in just a single afternoon? Luckily, we won't be heading anywhere near the ridgeline. Out of curiosity, did you also come across the fact that wyverns tend to fly over these ridges looking for food around this time of year in your research?"

Ridgelines were the trails that connected one mountain peak to the next. If you stood on the summit of one mountain, it looked like a thin line connecting each peak to a series of others. We wouldn't need to cross the exposed ridgeline unless our destination was on the other side of the mountain, in which case it would be inevitable.

"Coco didn't need to research anything, Reed. He's got the characteristics and habitats of every monster in the whole of Yugria in that gorgeous head of his. His family's responsible for the famous *Canardian Encyclopedia of Monsters*, you know?" Coco had only nodded awkwardly in response to Reed's question, so I answered in his stead, throwing out my chest with unwarranted pride.

"Canardia, hey? Well, now I feel even safer. I hired myself an expert, and it didn't even cost me anything extra!" Reed winked at Coco and grinned.

As I'd expected, the ever-capable Reed was well aware of the *Encyclopedia*'s sheer magnificence. The multivolume chronicle had been released several hundred years prior and was treated as more of a "classic" than a must-read these days, as plenty of thinner, more convenient guides had been released ever since. Even so, in terms of comprehensive knowledge, I firmly believed none of them came close to my beloved *Encyclopedia*. Above all else, what struck me the most was the unmistakable, fiery passion woven into the author's words.

"Well, um... Most of what I know is only theoretical so far. I think it's important for me to see monsters with my own eyes and turn my theoretical knowledge into something more real... Plus, some of the information is probably outdated. A lot of stuff has probably changed. So I'm really grateful for a chance to put what I know to the test. Thanks for letting me come along," Coco replied. His voice was somewhat quiet and stilted, but his words were his own.

Reed nodded at Coco, grinning broadly.

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We left the dirt road we'd taken from the village and entered the forest, following a rough trail through the trees. Before long, even the vague trail vanished, leaving us to plow our own path into the dense, dark thicket. The group of vaguely bloodthirsty explorers who'd been following us since yesterday quickly vanished outside the range of my Scouting Magic as we made our way farther into the thick maze of trees. The last bit of their conversation I'd caught went something like this:

"How are those brats walking so fast?!"

"Damn it! If we can't keep up, we won't be able to swoop in and steal all the crap they're gonna gather!"

"Forget it! I'm going back! It's too dangerous here for us this time of year!"

"Hey...over there... Did something just...move?"

"No—it can't be..."

"RUUUN!"

It had gotten harder to hear what they were saying toward the end, but the fact that they'd run for their lives was perfectly clear. I just hoped they got away safely.

Our own risk of running into dangerous monsters, like Reed had worried about, was actually quite low thanks to Coco. As we walked, he pointed out the hoof prints and dung left by reknews, as well as the claw marks danztigers left on trees to mark their territory, leading us away from any possible danger. While his discoveries might have sounded easy enough to make, in reality, they were

anything but.

"Here—this is reknew dung too. Probably a female looking for a mate—she's left all her waste under a single tree to draw the attention of a male. Based on the hardness and smell, it's been about three days since she was last here. I don't think we're in any danger," Coco said, nonchalantly sniffing and squeezing the dung. I'd read about monster excrement in books, but all I knew was that herbivorous monster dung was usually round and pebbly—beyond that, it all looked the same to me. Even Reed, who was a fairly decent tracker himself, was astonished by Coco's wealth of knowledge.

Coco had accompanied his parents on field excursions since he was old enough to walk, sometimes even traveling to distant regions to assist with their research. In addition, their private library apparently contained hundreds of journals and records compiled since the *Encyclopedia* had first been published, which—from how Coco had described them—added up to about fifty times the content of the *Encyclopedia* itself. In short, his knowledge was astounding.

For example, as we pushed our way farther into the forest, I'd asked on a whim, *"Why do reknews have those stripes on the lower halves of their bodies? Aren't they a bit conspicuous for herbivores?"*

Without even thinking about it, he'd replied, *"It looks conspicuous to us, but the majority of monsters and animals only see in black and white—and without color, the pattern on their lower bodies blends right into the vegetation. For reknews in forest habitats, the pattern is said to resemble the bushes, and the rest of their coloring mimics that of the surrounding trees."* Information that wasn't present in the *Encyclopedia*, spouted off like it was common knowledge.

From what I could infer, the Canardian journals also included records of barely legal experiments and research conducted throughout their family's history, which would explain why they'd never been released to the public, remaining locked in their private library. I was already trying to figure out how I'd convince Coco to let me visit and read them for myself.

Long ago, when the Canardians had first presented the

Encyclopedia—a thirty-year endeavor to compile in itself—to the king, they'd been rewarded with the bestowment of an honorary countship. The title granted them no land, but it still positioned their family among the higher nobility, and for a long time, Canardians had held positions in the royal government, putting their abundant knowledge to good use in formulating antimonster strategies. However, around a hundred years ago, they'd gotten involved in some political struggles, ultimately resulting in some of their more questionable experiments being publicly exposed by another family. Their familial status had been reduced to a baronship, and they now governed a small area under the direct supervision of the royal family instead. An absurd waste of talent and knowledge, in my opinion.

But back to the present. Making full use of Coco's brains and my Scouting Magic, we moved along at a brisk pace, fighting only the few monsters we couldn't avoid without taking a significant detour. Any monsters we killed now—and the materials we harvested from them—would just become extra baggage this early into our trip.

Al—whose presence I might have otherwise overlooked—also contributed along the journey, albeit only slightly: Whenever Coco had finished prodding at monster dung, he'd conjure up some water so he could wash his hands.

Eventually, sensing Al's uncharacteristically depressed mood, Reed stepped in to encourage him. "Having a mage with water affinity around is a blessing, as far as I see it. Having access to water can make the difference between life and death out here. Without you, we'd be a lot more restricted in what routes we could take. Plus, I hear you're decent with a sword as well, so you can still fight even when it's hard to cast magic, and you've got incredible stamina too. Heck, if you advertised yourself at the guild, I reckon you'd easily get invitations from at least a hundred parties begging you to join."

Al, who was at heart an astoundingly positive person, quickly cheered up at Reed's encouragement. I wasn't surprised by Reed's sensitivity toward team morale, though. A capable guy like him wouldn't skimp when it came to keeping the group's spirits up. Plus,

to be fair, we'd have been hard-pressed to find a mage with both an affinity for water and Al's physical abilities around here *or* in the capital. As quick as I was to make him the butt of my jokes, any other party would be drooling over a golden goose like him.

Finally, when the already meager light piercing through the canopy began to dim with the setting sun, we arrived at the waterfall.

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The dense trees suddenly gave way to a large clearing, and at its center was our destination, Ripup Knapp Falls. The waterfall was majestic to behold. Though it towered over us at nearly a hundred meters tall, the water flowed down gently from the peak, slowing as it passed through the several stony tiers that staggered the cliff's surface. A wide pool at the foot of the waterfall caught the flow's final descent, splitting off into several streams that snaked back out into the forest and quickly vanished from sight.

Reed whistled. "Seriously, I didn't think we'd make it all the way here in a single day, much less while there was still a bit of light. Coco was impressive enough, but your Scouting Magic sure helped a lot too, Allen. You weren't using it when we went last time, right?"

I shook my head. "When I saw how you could walk through the dark forest without even a torch because of your nightgaze, I realized I'd probably need to start learning it myself. Luckily, the guy I'm apprenticed to at the Order just so happened to be an expert in Scouting Magic, so I asked him to teach me."

"So you're telling me you became *that* good at Scouting in just a few months?" Reed rubbed his forehead, looking exasperated. "Seriously, the way you can handle magic is just crazy sometimes... Oh well. Let's set up camp. We'll be better off harvesting the moss in the morning, so we'll just rest for today. I'm starving after all that walking."

"I'm pretty hungry too. You said we could fish in the pool for dinner, right? None of us brought any fishing gear, though..."

Reed chuckled. "Well, when it was just going to be the two of us

here, I thought one of us could just splash around and drive them to the edge of the pool while the other snatched them out with a little help from Strengthening Magic. It's not the most efficient way of doing it, but it does work. It's gonna be a lot easier now, though, thanks to our good friend Al..." He trailed off, flashing us a devilish grin.

An Uninvited Guest

As it turned out, using Al's water magic to fish made the whole process very simple. First, we blocked off all but one of the streams with rocks, securing Reed's basket under the water in the remaining stream. Then Al stood in the middle of the pool, using his magic to circulate the water and aggravating the previously gentle current. The surprised fish fled toward the only available exit, packing themselves into Reed's basket (like sardines in a can) of their own accord. Just like that, our dinner was secured. Al hadn't had to stir up the water too violently either—apparently, fish could sense when magic was being used to disturb the water, and, mistaking it for a monster attack, they'd always attempt to flee out of an innate sense of self-preservation. Dew had once said that wind magic—or external mana circulation, as he'd called it—was useful for scaring smaller monsters away. It probably worked the same way.

Fishing this way was incredibly effective, and in the blink of an eye, we'd caught ourselves around twenty fish. The majority of them weren't monsters, but simply normal fish—which looked a lot like rainbow trout to me at a glance—but around five of them shone with an odd bluish glow.

"No way we managed to catch this many manafins in one go," said Reed, chuckling. "It's incredible. We're eating well tonight thanks to you, Al."

A manafin was what you got when a normal river fish turned into a monster after swallowing an errant magic stone. Usually, they were meant to be quite difficult to catch. Their allegedly delicious taste attracted a high price, but since you'd never find more than a

few in any given river or stream, they unfortunately weren't common enough to become a water mage's ticket to quick riches.

With our feast now secured, the rest of us joined Al in the pool and washed off the sweat of the day before huddling around the campfire.

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I skewered a fish on the branch I'd whittled to a point and began rubbing it with salt. "By the way, Al, I've been thinking—couldn't you just stand *outside* the pool and touch the water while chanting a spell to freeze it? You could shout something like 'Ice Age!'—and bam, the whole thing freezes over?" I asked.

Al groaned. "It's always like this with you, Allen... No. That much water—and *flowing* water, on top of it? There's no way I could freeze it all in an instant, not with my current mana. But you already knew that, right?"

Well...yeah. From what I'd seen during our Emissive Magic Club sessions and learned from additional research in the Royal Library, I'd figured it was probably impossible. After all, if giant bodies of water could be frozen so easily, ice-affined mages would be near invincible on any battlefield near a river or shore. I hoped Captain Al would be able to reach said level one day, though.

I stuck several of the skewered fish over the fire. The skin instantly began to shrivel, and a tempting aroma spread through our campsite. The scent of the roasting manafins was particularly stimulating, and my stomach rumbled.

"Um, by the way... Allen, should I be worried about the whirlwind swirling around you?" Reed asked, smiling awkwardly.

"Oh, nah. Just doing some wind magic practice and drying my hair at the same time. Honestly, I'd prefer if I could make it a bit warmer, but I'm not quite there yet... Well, as long as it's not winter, drying my hair with cold wind is fine. Did you want me to do yours too?" If I *could* conjure up warm air, I'd probably stand up and christen my new spell "Dry Wind!" or something, but a little breeze wasn't important enough to name. *It's gonna be a long time before I*

can cast a level-1 spell like Wind Cutter at this rate. Regardless, the fact that I could conjure up wind out of nowhere was cool enough in itself, at least for now.

Reed turned his gaze back to the campfire. Thanks to my excellent control over my mana circulation, it wasn't even flickering despite the nearby whirlwind. "Er...I'm good, thanks. I think it'd just feel like I was wasting something valuable..."

It's just mana circulation. I'm not even expending any mana either, so nothing's going to waste... I was about to tell Reed as much when Coco stood up, his expression serious as he peered in the direction of the forest.

"Something's coming. Get ready for a fight."

Oh. With how loud the wind was, I couldn't hear anything approaching at all...

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I quickly strung my bow, Scouting out into the forest as I did. "There's some kind of quadruped monster coming at us from our three o'clock. About two meters tall, four meters long—and fast. It'll be here within the next fifteen seconds. What do you think?"

"It's not a reknew, then. Whatever it is, we must have lured it in with the manafins," Coco replied quickly. "I'd prefer not to fight it so close to the campsite, but we're not going to have a choice. It might attract other monsters, though. Allen and Al, you try to scare it off with ranged attacks. Hopefully we can send it running. If not, we'll have to try and take it down in close combat."

"Got it," Al and I replied in unison. Al stood at the front, eyes on the forest, while I positioned myself behind him, ready to feed him precise directions and timings. Range-wise, the most potent spell Al could use was Ice Lance. The lances he could conjure still lacked sharpness and solidity, so even if he hit the monster, it probably wouldn't pierce through hide or fur. But in terms of discouraging a monster's attack, it was way more effective than a few of my arrows. And if it *didn't* flee at the threat of magic? I'd unleash a barrage of them.

Something glistened in Al's hand, and in the blink of an eye, he was clutching a crystalline, frozen spear.

"You have to say 'Ice Lance!'"

"Shut up! You're distracting me!"

We bickered for a few precious seconds. In this world, there was no need to chant an incantation or even say the *name* of the spell you were casting for it to work. In fact, spells didn't even *have* set names. Wordless incantations were a classic cheat code in reincarnation fantasy, to be sure, but a world where people didn't even say the *names* of their spells? It was just tasteless, as far as my Japanese sensibilities were concerned.

If I had it my way, Al would actually be saying something like, *"I invoke the spirits of ice. Pierce this wicked beast with your frozen thorns! Ice Lance!"* Unfortunately, the one time I'd used my authority as coach of the Emissive Magic Club to force him to chant that while casting, the entire club—myself included—had burst out laughing, and Al had turned bright red. Since then, he'd refused to chant even once. In truth, I hadn't been laughing at the (perhaps somewhat cringey) chant like the rest of them; Al's embarrassed, awkward stammering had just been too much to bear. With things as they were, my only choice now was to start casting my awesome wind magic alongside even more awesome chants. Sooner or later, everyone would come to cherish the sheer beauty of chanting.

At my signal, Al sent his lance hurtling through the forest. I heard the impact as it struck something solid, accompanied by a terrible roar.

"It's a hewgeboar!" shouted Reed and Coco in near unison. Judging by the looks on their faces, it wasn't a good thing.

The monster doubled its pace, racing into the clearing in front of us. The second he came into view, I fired an iron-tipped arrow, aiming for the joint connecting his right foreleg to his torso. It pierced through the skin, but the hewgeboar seemed to take no notice beyond a fractional drop in speed. He was nearly on top of us.

I dashed to the left, and Al jumped to the right, both of us just in the nick of time.

Momentum carried the hewgeboar forward, and he plunged into

the pool with a tremendous splash, showering us with water. Slowly, he turned around to face us, eyes narrowed at his unexpected attackers—in other words, me and Al.

"Dealing with a hewgeboar is going to be hard enough in itself, but this one's got earth affinity too. I wasn't prepared for us to run into one of these out here, but running into the forest would be the deadlier option, so we've got no choice but to take him out—though it's not gonna be a quick fight. The smell of blood will only lure more monsters, so after he's dead, we'll have to distance ourselves from here and revisit it in the morning," Reed rattled off quickly, his eyes never leaving the boar.

"Knapp Forest borders the western Rune Mountains, so a boar straying from there wouldn't be surprising at this distance," Coco added, his expression hard. "Keep your guard up, everyone."

Al and I signaled our understanding, and our strategy was decided. The hewgeboar had waded to the edge of the pool, his front two legs already on the solid ground. One thick foreleg pawed at the dirt, a blatant sign that he was about to charge. Unfortunately for him, I had no intention of standing still and making myself an easy target. I loosed another two arrows in quick succession, just barely piercing into the same joint I'd aimed for earlier. The beast roared in anger. His deadly tusks glowed with an amber light, and between them, a lump of conjured earth and stone began to form.

A crack sounded throughout the clearing. Before the beast could send his attack flying toward us, the lump had shattered, struck by the sharp wedge of ice Al had just shot at it.

"Ice Bullet! I told you to say Ice Bullet!"

"And I told *you* to shut up! Focus, Allen! He's getting mad!"

Even while reprimanding Al, though, I'd shot another three arrows at the same point on the boar's right leg before he could charge. This time, the arrows sank deep into flesh. Blood spurted from the wound, strips of hide dangling where my arrows had torn their way in. The hewgeboar roared in pain as it retreated farther into the pool—but not far enough. The upper half of his forelegs still protruded from the surface of the water.

Without hesitating, I plucked a macagate-tipped (and therefore

highly penetrative) arrow from my quiver and shot again. It tore through the exposed joint, disconnecting the foreleg entirely. The now three-legged hewgeboar toppled into the pool. He thrashed around, trying to stand, but three legs weren't enough to find purchase on the slippery rocks. After a minute or two, the devastating loss of blood and breath worked their grim magic, and all movement stilled.

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"Well, we don't have to worry about the smell of blood now! Let's let him drain in there for a bit and eat before the fish gets burnt!"

Reed paused for a moment before responding. "Well, I guess that's probably for the best," he said, shrugging. "The smell of the manafins must have lured it in. It probably scared any other monsters off for now, but they'll be back if we don't eat these soon..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "But seriously, Allen, you were amazing. I've never seen an archer who can fire so quickly and still hit the same tiny target over and over again. I really underestimated how good you'd be with a bow. I heard rumors you were going through a crazy number of arrows at the school training range, but now I'm thinking your practice sessions are even more intense than I imagined..."

I tore off a chunk of fish, tilting my head to the side in confusion. Practicing with my bow was just another part of my daily routine, so I didn't think it was particularly "intense" or anything. In much the same way as any other daily habit—like brushing my teeth, for instance—I actually felt a little sick on days when I couldn't do it for whatever reason.

"Man, this is good!" I said, swallowing another delicious mouthful. "Considering how strong the smell was, it's a pretty delicate flavor... Uh, what were you saying? Oh yeah—I don't think I'm very good, though. I get lessons from a great archer named Kiana when I'm at headquarters sometimes, but I've still got a lot to learn. When it comes to moving targets, especially those moving sideways, I'm like a baby compared to her." With weapons that shot projectiles, like

bows or guns, aiming for a target that moved forward and backward was easy, but it was much harder to aim properly at something that moved from side to side. "We'd have been in trouble if the hewgeboar had run across the pool instead of toward us, but luckily, he wasn't very smart." I tore off more of the manafin's perfectly grilled flesh, chewing happily.

"Okay, now I'm starting to get it," replied Reed. His smile carried a hint of exasperation. "Even if you're a 'baby' in comparison, you're still *at* a level to compare yourself to Godshot Kiana, the legendary explorer. I suppose it all comes with the territory when you're qualified to join the Royal Order at just twelve years old."

"It was smart to go for the legs," Coco interrupted. "Because charging is their main form of attack, hewgeboars have thicker skin around their heads than most other monsters. Were you planning to shoot his leg off right from the start?"

"Not really. I've never even thought about how I'd fight one before—but the *Encyclopedia* did talk about the tough hide around their heads, particularly the forehead. Since we thought we were in for a long fight, I decided to try and limit his mobility first to give us an advantage—and when I saw my arrows could pierce through the hide on his leg, I realized I'd have a chance of making it topple over if we could get it into the pool."

"It was pretty impressive how quickly you stopped it from using magic too, Al," Reed followed up. "You guys were really in sync. Do you practice coordinated attacks?"

"Nah, but I had a pretty good idea what he was thinking," Al replied. "I guess we do spend a lot of time together now that we're all living in the same dorm."

"Oh yeah, come to think of it, Allen, you moved behind Al straightaway at the start. Usually—"

As we ate, we swapped reflections on the fight, savoring both the meal and the memories while they were still fresh.

Unremarkable Exploring

Once we'd finished eating, we returned to the hewgeboar corpse. It was already nearly entirely drained of blood and lay motionless in the flowing water. Following Reed and Coco's instructions, we dissected the massive carcass. First, we removed the tusks—which also served as the magic stones in which the beast had stored its mana—and skinned the hide. Then, we dismantled the rest of the carcass into slabs of meat and piles of organs. Al used his ice magic to freeze the meat solid.

"I thought we were going to eat some of it tonight and tomorrow," said Reed, confused. "Did you mean to freeze all of it?"

I nodded enthusiastically and gestured to Coco, who was already retrieving the slicer from his backpack. The tool, which somewhat resembled a plane like you'd use in woodworking, was something I'd had Bem (the blacksmith I'd met in the slums) make for me. The three of us had already put the tool to good use on a few of our expeditions. With practiced movements, Al quickly ran the frozen meat over the slicer, and we soon had a pile of meat slices so thin, they were translucent.

Just like the horned rabbit Reed and I had hunted months before, freshly hunted monster meat, while delicious, was incredibly tough. With the help of a little Strengthening Magic, it was *possible* to chew through even the toughest meat—but as someone who'd experienced the buttery softness of Wagyu, diminishing myself to eating meat so tough it necessitated reinforcing my jaw muscles felt like a crime.

"Pretty interesting," Reed said, looking at the thinly shaved meat. "Guess it only works when you've got someone like Al around, though. Even then, I feel like you've gone a little overboard with this one, Allen." He grabbed a slice, peering through the translucent fibers at the fire flickering behind.

"Allen gets hung up on a lot of strange things," murmured Coco. "Every time we spend a night in the field, he won't let us eat dinner unless we call it 'a feast'... I can't make sense of most of the things he makes us do." He continued to work as he spoke, pushing another tool—the needlepoint meat tenderizer I'd also ordered from Bem—against thicker cuts of the hewgeboar meat. The delicate

needles were incredibly thin and sharp; Bem had nearly fainted when I'd shown up with my hand-drawn blueprints.

"I know, right?" Al agreed. "It's just one thing after another with him... But on the other hand, the difference is like night and day when it comes to the meat, at least. I'm never gonna be able to go back to the old way now." He nodded in unison with the pounding of the hammer-shaped meat tenderizer (another of my custom-order tools) he was using to flatten another piece of meat.

"I think I'm starting to get the idea behind your party name now..." Reed chuckled. "But now that I've seen you guys in action today, I'm pretty sure you can handle anything you might come up against. Well, I suppose I'd better contribute something too, huh?" He pulled out a few things from the pile he'd removed from his basket earlier—a pot containing a mix of various herbs and spices, and another containing some kind of dark red paste.

Capable as always, Reed. The last time we'd gone exploring together, he hadn't been planning to spend the night in the field, so he'd only brought a lump of rock salt along that we'd used to season the horned rabbit. This time we'd been planning to camp from the start, and the capable older boy had come fully prepared. According to his explanation, the seasonings—which were his own recipe—contained herbs that helped with recovering stamina and mana. Plus, they were second to none flavor-wise, of course.

We roasted chunks of the seasoned meat over the fire, slathered thickly with the red paste. The herbs quickly neutralized the slightly odd odor of the raw hewgeboar meat. Of the organs we'd harvested, we took just the small intestines, cutting them open and washing them thoroughly in the stream, which had gradually cleared up again. Reed placed strips of the intestines in a small pot with some of the paste, as well as a few leafy herbs he'd picked nearby. These, we left to simmer overnight—the plan was to enjoy them for breakfast. We packed as much of the meat as we could carry into our bags, but we'd have to leave the rest of it behind, returning it to the circle of life.

During my turn at keeping watch, two large monsters—danztigers, most likely—silently stole into the campsite, but they

quickly fled after I sent a ball of circulated mana in their direction. *Okay, Scouting Magic is pretty convenient when it comes to scaring off monsters...but it's still not the awesome Emissive Magic I* wanted *to use*, I begrudgingly admitted to myself. *I guess they'll be back for the rest of the hewgeboar after we leave tomorrow?*

We rose before dawn the next morning and harvested the moss, Reed making short work of the task. The sun had barely risen by the time we'd packed up our campsite.

"Well, we can't carry much more thanks to the hewgeboar meat, and if we head back the same way we came, we'll be back in Robles before nightfall—but what do you guys want to do? We've finished up a whole day earlier than I expected, so if there's anything else you want to check out, I'd be happy to join you," Reed offered.

Coco raised his hand. "Well, since we've got time, I'd like to test out our new plotter, but we'll need to go to the ridgeline—all the way to the top of the first peak, if possible. I think it'd only take us about an hour and a half to climb up... I'm not planning on fighting any wyverns, of course."

The plotter—the device we'd developed together in the Geography Club—was essentially what I'd known as a triangulation station in my previous life. Although back on Earth, we'd moved on to using satellites to plot land, triangulation stations had once been essential to cartographers everywhere—but nothing like them had existed in this world until now.

In order to make any kinds of specialized maps, we first needed an accurate basic map of any given area. Unfortunately, I'd long since discovered that the mapmakers of this world seemed to have taken a fairly generous approach when it came to scaling. The map I'd seen of the Dragoon Region, for instance, was only slightly more accurate than a dying pirate's hastily scribbled treasure map. Localized maps were much the same. The map I'd seen of Runerelia had been fairly detailed in regards to landmarks and streets, but the farther one went from the capital, the less accurate local maps became—if they even existed at all. Many areas—including Knapp Forest—had never been plotted.

Exploring was dangerous work, and without knowledge and

preparation, accidents were a very real possibility. While the current state of this world's maps might have been fine for those who lived their lives inside the safe walls of a city or town, I wasn't satisfied—because I'd experienced the convenience of carrying a responsive GPS system around in my pocket. Thus, the Geography Club had been born, and our first goal was the creation of a generic—yet accurate—map on which we could subsequently build. Constructing a satellite was a little out of our reach, so I'd instead focused on the development of its predecessor, the triangulation station. Placing these at high, unobstructed locations—like mountain peaks, for instance—gave us an accurate understanding of a plotter's location in relation to other plotters we'd then set up elsewhere.

In saying that, all I'd *actually* done was give Fey a rundown of the basics of triangulation and what I was hoping to achieve, and she'd done the rest. Apparently, the plotters relied on a property some types of magic stones possessed that somehow attracted them to one another under certain circumstances, but it seemed like the more difficult mechanisms she'd used were Dragoon family trade secrets, so I hadn't bothered to pry.

In short, if a plotter was set up on an unobstructed mountain peak, it would automatically connect with the network of others. The plan was to put out requests through the guild for other explorers to set them up on every reasonably accessible mountain peak across the kingdom. With every new triangulation station, the network would be expanded, and we'd be able to use the data to plot accurate distances and directions on our base map.

From here, the plotter would hopefully still be within range of the one we'd set up on top of Mount Gryetess, to the east of Runerelia. It would definitely connect to the one we'd set up on the outskirts of the capital, plus the two we'd installed on either side of Robles the morning prior. Spreading these plotters throughout the kingdom was the key to anything else we'd want to do in the Geography Club. From the few things Fey *had* told me, I didn't want to think about how much money it had cost to develop the tools. From what I could gather, though, she seemed to think the plotters would be pretty useful, so I was relatively certain she'd eventually make her money

back on them somehow or other.

"Right, the mapmaking thing. I can't say I think it's worth the effort of trekking up a mountain just to make a map of this remote forest—but I don't mind coming along, of course. Let's definitely try to avoid any wyverns though, okay? It wouldn't be an easy fight, even with Allen and Al on our side."

And so, with Reed's ready agreement, we climbed the mountain. Even moving carefully, we quickly reached the peak and set up the plotter with time to spare, so we continued along the ridgeline to the next two peaks and set up plotters on each of them as well before descending the mountain. We beat our way back toward Robles along something that could barely be called a trail. Along the way, Reed once again demonstrated his sharp eyes and knowledge, and we gathered a good number of the plants and mushrooms that had been on the list we'd received at the guild.

Furthermore, while Scouting during the journey back, I picked up the sound of cascading water, and when I followed it, I discovered yet another waterfall. This one was about forty meters tall, water pounding the earth from a sheer peak in a powerful torrent. When we first discovered it, I couldn't contain my excitement.

Ripup Knapp Falls, where we'd stayed the night before, had been an elegant, graceful scene to behold, with water trickling gently down several shelves of stone.

But this? This was a *proper* waterfall.

"Come on, Al! You can't call yourself a water mage unless you've done waterfall training!" I pulled my protesting classmate into the pool at the base of the waterfall, forcing him to sit beside me underneath the torrent. Reed and Coco regarded him with sympathetic eyes, but I didn't pay them any mind.





"It's freaking cold! How the hell is getting smacked with water gonna help with anything?!"

"You're training your *spirit*, Al, your spirit! There's no use trying to find logic or reason here! Being smacked has meaning in itself!"

"If it's spiritual training, then what does being a water mage matter?!"

It was all just an excuse, anyway. There was no reason to this beyond me wanting to live out a classic fantasy. However, life often throws curveballs, as they say. While we were sitting underneath the waterfall, I noticed a small opening to a cave that we hadn't been able to see from dry ground—and inside the cave was a vast colony of the moss we'd originally come to harvest per Reed's request. We quickly decided to spend another night camping nearby and return to Robles the next morning.

From the clearing in front of the waterfall we'd just discovered, we could see two of the three plotters we'd set up previously, giving us a fairly precise understanding of the cave's location. Even without a physical map, we could still rely on the powers of triangulation. *Plus, with the plotters for landmarks, the way back to Robles should be easy enough to figure out too.*

Reed had started to come around to the idea as well. "Honestly, having a landmark to look for is more convenient than I'd thought it would be, especially in unfamiliar territory like this. I get why you started the club now. I'm already a third-year, and I'll be gone in six months, but is there any chance I could join anyway? I'd like to help out, even if it's only a little."

"Of course. We'd love to have you," Coco replied happily. He and Reed had seemed to hit it off over the past few days. While their specific areas of interest—plants and monsters—differed, birds of a feather did apparently flock together. I was glad they'd had the chance to get to know one another.

Before we set out the next day, we used Al's water magic again to fish, adding five manafins to our frozen plunder. I thought Reed would lead us northeast, directly toward Robles, but he instead struck out north, saying we'd exit the forest onto the highway by midmorning, making our journey even shorter. Unsurprisingly (to

me, at least), he was already making full use of the newly installed landmarks.

We arrived in Robles just after noon. At the gates, our path crossed with the group of explorers who'd followed us into the forest two days prior. They were covered in cuts and bruises and wore new, cheap equipment. They didn't even look at us as they headed for the grasslands to the west. *I'm glad they made it out okay.*

We sold the stuff we'd foraged, including all the extra hewgeboar meat, to the guild for a total of eighty thousand riels. The new-Reed-fan receptionist had apparently put in a good word for us (well, him) with the staff in charge of payments—but her attitude toward me was just as terrible as before, unfortunately. Reed covered all our expenses, just like he'd said he would, including the cost of a new macagate arrow to replace the one I'd shot.

Furthermore, he tripled our original payment to a staggering 180 thousand riels, saying it was only fair with how much additional moss we'd gathered from the new colony we'd discovered. I tried to refuse his offer at first, claiming it was a violation of our contract, only to be told that the original requester could indeed triple the payment by awarding an "A" evaluation on our commission slips. Reed then explained that under certain circumstances—like with a war looming on the horizon—payments for medically adjacent requests could actually be increased even more, so I hurriedly decided to accept his first offer before he could double it again.

Even after splitting the money up, Al, Coco, and I were still left with eighty thousand riels each. It had turned out to be a much more profitable job than expected, and though I still felt vaguely guilty about taking so much of Reed's money, I was grateful for the generous payment.

And so, the curtains closed on the opening act of my fun, fulfilling summer break.

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In contrast to the brilliant, illustrious careers that awaited those boys later in life, this account of their time in Robles might seem

somewhat unremarkable. However, if one looks back on it objectively, over those few days of what some might consider "unremarkable exploring," the relationships that were forged and events that were set in motion turned out to have great historical significance indeed.

Firstly, the *Comprehensive Atlas of Yugria*, the decades-long, world-changing project spearheaded by the second director of the Royal Geographical Institute—Coconial Canardia, also known as the Friend of the Kingdom—can trace its conception back to this one expedition.

Secondly, it marked the day that Coconial Canardia struck up his lifelong friendship and partnership with Reed Gourshe, the man who would later become known as "the Father of Magical Taxonomy."

Thirdly, we can see a clear connection between the events of this one expedition and the checkered destiny that would later await Aldor Engravier, the Colossal Cascade.

To what extent did Allen Rovene, heralded in later years as a "time traveler" on account of his extraordinary foresight, predict how widely this single expedition would impact future generations? His three comrades, despite their proximity to the boy himself, didn't seem to realize how drastically their fates were changing at the time, to say the very least.

Chapter Four: Solo Trip

Solo Trip

I breathed in deeply, filling my lungs with the nostalgically scented air. Although in truth, this was actually the first time I'd tasted this air—in this lifetime.

I'd boarded a train heading northeast from Runerelia, arriving a day and a half later in Kosrael, the capital of the Glaux Region. From there, I'd hopped aboard a stagecoach heading even farther east. It had taken a further four days to reach my final destination.

Solcoast, the second-largest town in Sardos County. It was the main trading post between Yugria and the Baerent Islands, the island nation famous for their weapons and armor forged of black tiger steel.

I took another deep breath, savoring the salty smell of the sea.

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I made a quick stop at the local guild branch before heading to the explorer lodging house they'd recommended, easily securing myself a room. After a quick change of clothes, I was off again, heading straight for the center of town.

I'd had two things in mind when I'd chosen this town for my first solo trip. Firstly, given Solcoast's proximity to the Baerent Islands, I hoped I might be able to find myself one of their high-quality swords for a decent price—especially compared to the offerings of the stores in Runerelia, where I was too scared to even finish counting the zeros on the price tags. However, this first objective was more of a bonus than a priority—I wasn't going to be too upset if I didn't manage to find the right blade. I'd been keeping up with my sword training, but right now, my predominant weapons were my bow and

dagger, and I wasn't particularly looking to change that.

The fundamental objective of this trip was fish—specifically, fresh, delicious fish. Basically, I wanted to eat some sushi or sashimi. In the capital, fish-based dishes were few and far between, and what was available was not up to my standards. I'd tried out several of the supposedly highly reputable fresh seafood restaurants scattered across the city over the past few months, but as someone accustomed to the first-class seafood culture in Japan, the dishes I'd been served were disappointing at best. And as for raw fish? I had managed to find something similar to one type of sashimi in Japan—raw sliced fish, lightly marinated in vinegar—but it hadn't even been worth commenting on.

Runerelia's lack of appreciation for seafood likely stemmed, at least originally, from the challenge of keeping it fresh. No matter which coast you set out from, the journey to the inland capital was pretty far. However, leaps and bounds had been made in magically powered freight in recent decades, as well as in cooling technology—but despite these advances in technology, what had yet to make the journey from the coast was the appreciation of a seafood-based dining culture. And without any demand for fresh seafood, the chefs in the capital never learned the art of preparing or cooking it.

When you can't have something, it only makes you want it more: a simple truth that came with being human. While rice did exist in this kingdom, bread occupied a much larger role in most dishes, so I wasn't anticipating I'd find something similar to sushi on this trip. At the very least, though, I wanted to eat some sashimi.

I'd been (internally) lamenting the lack of raw fish a few weeks ago when a sudden realization had struck me. The soba-like dish I ate nearly every day at the noodle stand just outside the Academy used a soy sauce base—and if my tongue didn't lie (which it never did), the soup base also contained seafood, and high-quality seafood at that. And those noodles—they were eaten with *chopsticks*.

I knew the trends of Runerelian cuisine pretty well by now, but it hadn't been until that day that I'd realized how unusual my daily noodles were in contrast. Back on Earth, chopsticks had been about as common as a knife and fork, so I hadn't considered their

appearance in this world to be particularly out of the ordinary. But when all those elements came together, it could only mean one thing: Somewhere in this kingdom—or in this world—there existed a place that shared at least some similarities with Japan.

Without delay, I'd casually asked the stand owner (who I'd always found to be strangely intimidating in a way I couldn't quite put my finger on, despite his being a very ordinary man in his sixties) where he'd come from. Despite my initial impression of him, the stand owner was actually rather good-humored and happily answered my questions. He actually seemed to like me, though I had my suspicions he merely found amusement in the concept of a Royal Academy student so stingy that they ate cheap noodles every day.

He'd been born in the Baerent Islands, and both the noodles and the soup were local specialties of his hometown. As I'd predicted, the whole culture of the Baerent Islands seemed to mirror Japan's in many ways. Food-wise, apart from the noodles, they also ate sashimi and even a kind of sushi that resembled what I knew as shimazushi—fish pickled in soy sauce and mirin, then pressed into small morsels with rice and mustard.

However, despite my immediate desire to set sail, getting to the Baerent Islands posed two problems. The journey would take far more time than I had available, and the screening process I'd have to undergo before entering the country would apparently take even longer. Because the island nation primarily relied on exports, as a rule, it maintained a neutral position when it came to all other countries, Yugria included. In such uncertain times, their show of neutrality had gotten even stronger, and they'd introduced very strict procedures for foreigners wishing to gain entrance. The stand owner reckoned my chances of being permitted to visit for mere tourism were very low indeed. He'd instead proposed I compromise on my plan and visit the next closest thing: the nearby Yugrian trading post, Solcoast. There, he said, I could find what I knew as sashimi—simple raw sliced fish, served with salt. I could buy soy sauce in Runerelia, so I'd brought my own bottle along with me, just in case. I'd also enlisted Reed's help, using his connection to the Panacea Company to acquire a spicy root similar to wasabi.

And now, in the present, I had everything I needed. All that was left to do was find some sashimi and deliver it to my waiting mouth. Suppressing the urge to run, I walked at a respectable pace along the seaside streets. Finally, I turned a corner, and I was immediately met with the lively buzzing of crowded tables and sidewalks: I'd arrived at the food district.

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It was early evening. Fishermen who'd left with the rising sun were now deep in their tankards, judging from the drunken conversations I could hear spilling out onto the street from open windows.

While I was fine with taking a whimsical, see-where-life-takes-me approach to my solo trip in general, I wanted to find the perfect restaurant to serve as the stage for my long-awaited reunion with sashimi. I activated my Scouting Magic, concentrating the circulating mana over my nose as I tried to discern between the melting pot of scents that permeated the street. It didn't take long for me to realize that I'd never be able to pick out the delicate aroma of fresh sashimi from the overpowering smells of different seafood being grilled in butter or garlic—not to mention the simple fishy odor hanging over the town itself.

Come on, how did I find good restaurants in my past life again? After giving it some thought, I remembered I'd always relied on user reviews on smartphone apps to choose my next meal. I'd become an expert at telling the difference between real reviews and dodgy ones—a skill that wouldn't help me now in the slightest, of course. In Japan, I'd also heard about people getting great recommendations from local taxi drivers, but I doubted the same method would work here. Even in the capital, most people relied on shared stagecoaches to get around; magicars were unaffordable for most, even if you were a temporary passenger. In a remote town like this—and in a world where Strengthening Magic made traveling short distances by foot no bother—there was no way I'd come across something like a taxi. I had no choice but to pick a restaurant based on signage,

atmosphere, and my own intuition.

This one does grilled clams, huh...? I'll have to try it later.

This one's got buttered squid... I'll have to try it later.

This place sells dried fish... I'll definitely come back later.

This place smells like Thora's rotten cooking... Not coming back here.

This... This isn't going well.

I'd relied too heavily on my smartphone in my past life—my "intuition" wasn't giving me anything *remotely* useful to work with. I was too scared to just pick a store based on its appearance. Once I started hesitating, it only got worse. Even the most delicious-smelling, crowded restaurants began to look suspicious. I wandered back and forth along the main stretch of storefronts, growing impatient, until I finally noticed a narrow alley between two large eateries. At the very end was a small restaurant that, for reasons I couldn't quite describe, vividly reminded me of the classic sushi shops I'd frequented back in Japan. It had a clean, tasteful exterior, but something about it spoke of generations gone by.

I hadn't seen anyone coming and going down the alley in all the times I'd wandered by, but for some reason, I was entranced. Trusting in my intuition—if I could even call it that—I stepped into the alley.

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When I entered the restaurant, I found myself in the company of a single man behind the counter. His height, slender build, and close-cropped shave lent him the presence of a no-nonsense naval captain. There wasn't a single other customer to be seen, nor any other employees for that matter. I couldn't hear any of the usual white noise that accompanied the use of an anti-Scouting device, but I also couldn't hear anyone else nearby.

Hmm. Guess it's not in the "cheap but delicious" category, then. But I'm reacquainting myself with sashimi today, even if I have to pay through the nose. I took another step inside, sliding the door closed behind me with a soft *thunk*. The man's eyes snapped to

mine, glaring.

"A stranger, and a kid at that... Listen, squirt. You won't be able to afford anything here with your pocket money, all right? Go find somewhere else for dinner."

Oh? So it's not in the "cheap and disgusting" category either, and it can't be an "expensive rip-off" either, or he would have ushered me to a seat. Now I'm really interested in finding out what kinds of dishes such an inept salesman might cook up. But first...

"I'm looking for a place that serves fresh, raw, sliced fish. You do that here?" I asked bluntly, not bothering to speak with any real respect. Judging from the man's rugged appearance and manner, I didn't think he'd appreciate fancy niceties—and I had a strange feeling I'd need to get him to see me as an equal before I'd be allowed to dine here.

The man scoffed at me. "Cheeky brat. Yeah, we've got raw fish, all right, but not any you can afford. Heck, even if you're some li'l lordling from who-knows-where, I don't do a kid's menu here, and I haven't sunk low enough to cook food for brats like you no matter how much you're paying. Now get lost!"

The cap'n is even more stubborn than I thought. If a restaurant in Japan treated customers like this, it would immediately become the target of an internet pitchfork mob. Granted, I was no longer in an internet-based society, but I wasn't just some weak little child either. I'd found sashimi (he hadn't called it that, of course, given we weren't speaking Japanese) along with a chef who looked like he knew how to prepare it. Under these circumstances, there was no way I was gonna say, *"No worries, my bad,"* and head for the door.

Ignoring the man's glare, I took a seat at the counter. "I've got money. Just name your price. Oh, don't get me wrong—I'm the youngest kid of a poor noble family, not some rich little prince. I pay my own way through life by working as an explorer. I'm B-Rank, by the way. Need to see my license?"

The man raised an eyebrow, but he shook his head all the same. "Don't just sit yourself down without permission, brat. B-Rank? If you're gonna lie, at least come up with something a little more convincing. I've had enough of this. If you want raw fish, go back

down the alley and turn left. About two hundred meters down, you'll find Yuki House. It won't be cheap, but you'll get some decent feed." He made a shooing gesture with his hand.

"Decent" feed? I came all the way here from the capital to eat sashimi, and you think I'm gonna settle for "decent" *feed? Oh, you've done it now.* My heart was set: I was going to eat sashimi here or die trying.

"Nope! I'm not leaving until I try your raw fish, Cap'n—no matter what you say or how much you try to get rid of me!" Resolve rang clear in my voice, and the man wavered, if only slightly.

"What the— You're a weird kid. Don't tell me you're working for *those* idiots... Nah, even they wouldn't send a brat like you to do their dirty work. Anyway, I'm done cooking today! I don't care anymore! Shop's closed for the day, so get out!"

"No! When I walked in here on a whim because I liked the look of the place, you were open for business! You might be done cooking, but that's not my problem! You don't care anymore? Says the guy running a shop without a speck of dust anywhere, polishing the counter until it shines! When I walked through that door, I saw a man who stood up straight, a man overflowing with pride in his restaurant. You won't turn your back on this place. And you think *I'm* the bad liar?" I laughed. "Now stop grumbling and start slicing!"

"Why won't you give up?! I'm saying this for your sake, kid!"

"Don't worry about me. Just know this—I'll crush anyone who gets between me and what I want, no matter who that is!"

We glared at each other again, but before either of us could utter another word, I heard a door slide open, and an older woman emerged from farther inside the building. I'd sensed her listening in on us since a few minutes earlier. Her skin was tanned and her hair a glossy black, and she wore a long smock quite similar to a kappogi. *Guess they wear those on the Baerent Islands.*

"Looks like we've got an unusual customer today..." The woman looked me over and giggled. "I got out of bed because I thought you were getting into a fight, but it really is just a kid. Although...he's got a good look in his eyes, doesn't he? Dear, hurry up and slice him some fish."

The man sighed. “Go back to sleep, Chloe. You’re going diving again tonight, aren’t you?”

“How could I go back to sleep? If I miss this chance, who knows when I’ll get to see you wielding a knife again? Just one thing first...” She looked straight at me, her gaze hard and unwavering. “The prices here at Ginicho are the same for everyone, no matter if you’re a regular customer or a first-timer. We don’t do discounts or reward loyalty. Our prices reflect our pride in our work. But if you can pay, then you’re a customer—that’s our rule.”

I nodded. “I can pay. Just tell me how much.”

“Well, let’s see. Ingredients-wise, all we can get right now are the fish he’s caught and the shellfish from my diving. But I won’t allow the man whose knife skills stole my heart to sell them for anything less than their true worth. The food will come to 130 riels—but you’re an explorer, right? If you want booze too, it’ll be two hundred riels all up. Well? Are you willing to pay that much for ingredients you could find at any old restaurant?”

Two hundred riels! That’s so cheap...

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When I’d first become an explorer, the basic payment for my first job as a G-Rank—helping at a demolition site—had been 150 riels for the whole day. According to the foreman, that sum hadn’t been particularly enticing for the local explorers, and he’d had trouble finding people to do the work—which meant if we were in the capital, the price of a meal here would be something even a G-Rank explorer could afford with a little effort.

Although...130 riels was just under twenty thousand yen, if my estimations were correct. I’d grown accustomed to the ridiculous cost of living in the capital, but maybe it actually *was* a little expensive, especially for a meal made with ordinary ingredients... The money I’d been earning since my promotion to B-Rank—plus the thousand riels an hour I got from the Order—might have made my attitude toward money go a bit haywire.

I wasn’t opposed to the idea of a little luxury. But the definition of

"luxury" was a very personal one, one that arose from just how extravagant something was in contrast to your everyday life. If you couldn't reel yourself in, the thing you'd previously thought of as a "luxury" would merely become the norm—and then you'd have to find something even more luxurious (and expensive) to scratch that itch. I'd vowed to live this life doing whatever I wanted, never fixating on things like status, glory, or wealth. If I ended up tricking myself into thinking my current life in the capital was "normal," I'd start focusing on earning more and more money to maintain it. Once I fell into that trap, I'd never be able to live my life freely. I'd thought the meal was cheap when I'd first heard the price, but I needed to take a good look inside myself. If my values of what I considered "normal spending" became inflated, that would end up driving a barrier between me and the life I dreamed of.

I mulled it over for a while before replying to the woman. "It's only natural for a craftsman's skills to demand a suitable cost, and you can charge whatever you like, of course. But it's the customers who decide whether or not the meal was worth the price. When prices and products are in harmony, shops will flourish. But if not... Well, it's just survival of the fittest." I looked around the store as I said it, purposefully obvious with my staring. "I'll let you decide on the menu, Cap'n. Just the food—I won't be drinking."

The surly old man glared at me and scoffed. "Now you've pissed me off. Guess I got no choice. Get ready to see the skills passed down through seven generations of Ginicho." Though he was still giving me the stink eye, I could swear I saw the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. But then he picked up his knife—and his expression went as sharp and flat as the blade.

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"You said you wanted raw fish, right?" the man said, pulling out whole fish after whole fish from a bucket of icy water behind the counter. Within minutes, he'd carved them all into neat blocks of flesh. Being able to sit at a counter that faced directly into the kitchen was a rare treat in this world—one I didn't take for granted

here, as it provided me with a perfect view of the man's splendid knife work. He'd placed a set of chopsticks on the counter in front of me. Like the noodle stand owner had said, apparently chopsticks were fairly common around here.

"Your knife isn't made of black tiger steel by any chance, is it?" I asked, gesturing toward the jet-black blade.

He huffed. "What, you're gonna say it's a waste or something? Sure, I don't need a knife this fine to cut low-quality fish like this, but I can't work with any other blade. It's a part of me. All right, here ya go. Fresh island mackerel." He set a small plate on the counter.

It was beautiful to behold. The slices were so thin, I could see through them to the ribbons of melon piled underneath. Each slice had been laid over the next so that the finished product resembled a rose on the verge of blooming. A small dish next to the plate contained finely pulverized salt.

"Not at all. The blade makes all the difference when it comes to preparing raw fish. The perfect cross sections are one thing, but the way you've left a single layer of silvery skin cut so smoothly, I can see my face reflected in it? There's no way you could have done that with any old knife. With fish, the layer of fat between the skin and the flesh is the most delicious part." I sprinkled some salt over the plate, then ate my first slice.

It's delicious...and so nostalgic.

The man grunted in approval. "So you've got some idea about fish, then... Hey, why the hell are you crying?"

"Sorry. It just reminded me of old times... I didn't think I'd ever get to eat something like this again. But please, don't let me distract you."

"I thought you were just an arrogant kid, but it seems like you've had your own share of hardships too, huh? Well, it's not like there's any other customers coming today. I'll feed ya till I ain't got nothing else to slice."

The next plate he served up was as beautiful as the first. It was some kind of roe—soaked in alcohol to diminish the smell—which had been spread over a small leaf that reminded me of perilla. The

whole thing had then been sandwiched between the two sides of a butterflied, slightly warmed sardine-like fish.

Unable to restrain myself, I immediately ordered some booze to go with it.

Thereafter, I lost myself in Cap'n's masterful work. Thick cuts of white flesh that tasted like sea bream. Thin, buttery slices of squid. Salt-cured fish. Freshly steamed mollusks. I couldn't even put my chopsticks down between each course of sashimi as he placed plates of fried, seasoned fish bones and other snacks on the counter before me. Every morsel was as delicious as something served at one of Japan's best restaurants.

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"It was amazing. I've been working as an explorer down in the capital since spring, but your cooking is far and beyond better than anything I tried there. Your prices are more than fair, I reckon. You know, for someone with such a rough face, you sure can do some delicate work!"

Cap'n grinned. "Rough's taking it a bit too far, don't ya think?"

He, Chloe, and I exchanged glances, and then we burst into laughter at the same time.

"I'm glad you liked it," said Chloe. "You did seem to be enjoying yourself. Will you be in town a little while? It'll be the same common ingredients as this time, but feel free to come and eat again."

"I'd love to," I replied, grinning. "Oh, I never introduced myself, right? I'm Lenn. So, by the way... If you're this good at what you do, how come you don't have any customers? You said you couldn't get your hands on any ingredients, right? Going off the standard scenario, I'm guessing the local Scrooge has it out for you for some stupid reason, and he's bribed the officials to make sure your business fails..."

Cap'n and Chloe both looked confused.

"'Scrooge'...? Well, I don't know what that's supposed to be, but you're pretty much right about the rest of it," Cap'n said with a sigh. "The Calmwinds Company—they're an old shipbuilding business in

this town. At least, that's all they used to be. Shipbuilding and repair is the lifeblood of a port town like this one, so they've held a lot of power here for generations, but now... Their current president's a pretty shrewd type, and they've branched out into all kinds of things—imports and exports, food... They want to turn our restaurant into one of their investments too. They've been pulling strings behind the scenes to make sure we can't get the ingredients we need, and they've been scaring our customers off until we can't stay open without their help."

So clichéd... Where's the imagination, the sophistication? I sighed. "I get it. And they're using their connections with the local officials to force them to turn a blind eye—or worse, they're actually in on the conspiracy too. That would explain why there's three of them waiting outside, planning to threaten me as soon as I leave until I swear to never set foot in here again."

The pair looked at me in shock. "I said I was an explorer, right?" I explained. "In a little shop like this without any anti-Scouting devices, I can't help but pay attention to what's going on outside, even if I'm drinking." I started counting on my fingers. "One woman the others refer to as 'Prez.' One muscly dude who's probably an employee at the shipyard. One explorer they've hired as a bodyguard. The explorer's got two shortswords."

"Even if your hearing is good, how the hell can you tell what they look like? I used to get a lot of explorers in here, but I never met one who could hear *that* well..." Cap'n frowned. "The woman would be Mimosa—the current president of the Calmwinds Company. The big guy is probably Katzo, the head shipwright. And the explorer is probably 'Twin Blade' Juren, one of the strongest around these parts. But if she's brought both of them along, we're in for some trouble. Kid, run out the back and get out of here. I'll handle her somehow."

"Oh, no need. You see..."

The door rattled.

"...they're already coming in."

Mimosa

The door rattled as it slid fully open, and two people stepped into the restaurant. The man entered first, his expression grim, though the woman who entered behind him seemed more composed. To my surprise, they'd left the bodyguard outside.

"What do you want, Mimosa? Pretty sure it was just the other day you were here saying, 'This is my final warning.' Or is my memory going?"

At first glance, the woman seemed to be in her mid-twenties, perhaps more toward the latter half. But when I took a closer look, while her tanned, glowing skin and glossy black hair lent her a youthful visage, something about the way she carried herself made me think she was probably easily in her thirties.

The beautiful woman—Mimosa—glanced idly at Cap'n before replying. "You're more stubborn than I thought, old man. Not knowing when to give up isn't something to be proud of, you know? Anyway, I'm not here for you today. I got a report from the Solcoast branch saying 'Mad Hound Lenn,' the B-Rank explorer, is in the area at the moment. As the face of this town, I thought it would only be proper to offer him a greeting and make sure he knows the lay of the land... But we've been waiting so long, I started to question whether he was even inside. Thought I should come in to check." Her eyes snapped to mine, full of confidence. Nothing in her gaze indicated she was mocking me, twelve-year-old boy that I was.

So she's even got the local guild branch on her side, hm? She's more dangerous than I thought. Well, I don't know what tricks she used, but if she's basically running a town this size, she wasn't just gonna be any old hotheaded upstart. Also, I can't believe my stupid nickname has spread all the way to this backwater port town! The gossip mill in this kingdom runs way *too quickly.*

"Wait, you actually were a B-Rank?!" asked Cap'n, looking somewhat flustered. Apparently, he hadn't believed me in the slightest.

"Well, you found me. I'm Lenn. Not sure about that 'Mad Hound' business, though. I don't recall anyone ever calling me that," I lied, knowing it was probably in vain. "I'm a complete gentleman, after all. How'd you know I was here?"

Mimosa shrugged. "It was easy enough to figure out. You asked the guild to recommend a lodging house. I went there, and they said someone matching your description headed out to eat and that you'd gone eastward. I figured you came to this district, so I followed you here and asked around. Didn't take long to find out you'd chosen this restaurant—of *all* places—but I reckoned following you inside might make the conversation a little trickier, so I've been waiting out front."

First the guild, and now the lodging house too... Does anyone *in this kingdom care about personal privacy?! Well, I guess in my past life, people only really started caring about keeping personal information private after we started to enter the digital age, so I'd be stupid to expect much respect for privacy in this world. I'll have to be more careful in the future.*

"I see. By the way, did you really not take one look at me and think, 'Is he actually the Mad Hound?' or 'He looks so weak!' or something? For the most part, the reason I got that stupid nickname is because I defended myself against idiots who picked a fight with me after they saw me..." I trailed off, frowning.

Mimosa burst into laughter. "Well, if you were an impostor, you wouldn't bother asking something like that, now would you? Honestly, keeping the peace in this town is my highest priority, whether you're really the Mad Hound or not. Supposing you *were* only pretending to be him, we'd be able to handle you if any trouble did occur, so maybe I'd have been better off if you were a fake? Nope, you seem like the real deal to me, and strong enough too—and unfortunately for you, I'm pretty confident in my ability to judge people." She laughed again, shrugging with her palms raised as if to say, *I've got you now.*

Hmm? For the self-proclaimed "face of the town," she seems to take her responsibility seriously, at least.

"Well, I wanted to borrow a little of your time for a chat, but I guess you're still eating? I can wait outside until you're done."

Hmmmm? Looks like she's got some idea of basic etiquette too.

"No, I just finished, actually. What can I do for you?"

"Oh, it's nothing important, really. I'm not here to cause trouble.

Like I said before, my priority is maintaining the peace. I brought along a bodyguard, but you're probably quite a bit stronger than him. To speak frankly, if you started to cause havoc here in town for some reason or another, we wouldn't be able to stop you easily." She paused. "Basically, if it's no trouble—could I ask why one of the most promising rookie explorers in the whole kingdom has bothered to come all the way to a little town like ours?"

Well, well. Blatantly revealing your own weakness first? She's got guts too, making her bodyguard wait outside. Well, I don't have anything to hide, anyway.

"I came to eat fresh, delicious fish. There's no good fish restaurants in the capital, you see. Well, I'd also like to buy a sword for cheaper than I could back home, but that's more of a bonus than a priority."

"Wait—a boy your age, and the *fish* is the priority? Not the sword? You sound like you've just come for a holiday or something..." She peered at me curiously, as though she was trying to ascertain if I was telling the truth. She wouldn't find anything out of the ordinary, though; her suspicions were unfounded. I *had* come for a holiday.

"Well, to sum it up in a single word, I guess you'd say I'm here for a vacation. It seems like there's something going on between you and Cap'n here, but I have no intention of getting involved. I'm not some knight in shining armor, and even if I did help, the problem would just come back again the minute I left town. But let's get one thing straight." I paused, slowly looking at Mimosa and Katzo in turn. Then, keeping my voice as devoid of emotion as I could, I continued. "I'm a fan of this guy's cooking. You could even say I respect him. I'm going to eat here again tomorrow—no matter what. Don't think you can get away with some sneaky midnight sabotage as long as you don't leave any evidence, you hear me? I don't get angry easily, but if anyone tries to get between me and what I want, I'll crush them. That's my way of life."

My disinterested tone belied the seriousness of my declaration. In situations like this—mergers and acquisitions, or whatever you wanted to call it—only the strongest would survive. It was a simple,

unavoidable fact of life. However, I couldn't bear the thought of not being able to eat Cap'n's cooking again. Mimosa seemed like a pretty smart person. Hopefully she'd heed my warning, and I wouldn't come back tomorrow only to find a *Closed* sign on the door because suspicious, hooded men had attacked the place in the night.

Katzo made to say something, but Mimosa silenced him with a wave of her hand. "Oh?" she said, lips curving into an unpleasant smile. "Looks like stubborn old Icho here's opened right up on the first date. So what you're saying is, provided it doesn't interfere with your meals, you couldn't care less whether or not Calmwinds takes over this restaurant?"

Cap'n Icho glared at me, jutting his chin as if to say, *Tell 'em, kid.* I nodded back in a way that said, *Got it, boss.*

"Actually, I'd love for that to happen. I mean, then he wouldn't have any more problems with supply, right? I'd love to see the cap'n wielding his knife to its full potential."

"You little bastard! Why the hell did you nod all significantly like that if you were just gonna turn around and stab me in the back?! Isn't this where you're meant to beat these guys to a pulp outta respect for me?!"

"Huh? I dunno, Cap'n—no matter how you slice it, you just don't seem like you're cut out for the management side of things, or the politics of it, I guess? I mean, I've only been talking to Mimosa for a few minutes, but the difference between you and her is already clear as day. If you're gonna lose eventually, wouldn't you be better off giving up now? It'd be best for everyone here. You want to use your skills to their full potential too, right? Aren't you just being stubborn here because your shop's got a bit of history to it? Or is there something else? Like...maybe you're being hassled for a ridiculous cut of the profit or something?" I looked between Cap'n and Mimosa. I figured it was unlikely, based on Mimosa's behavior up until now, but it was still best to make sure.

"*Pft.* Ha ha ha!" Mimosa threw back her head and laughed. "Y'know, the branchmaster said he'd heard a report about you from the guildmaster himself—that you leave a trail of destruction in your wake wherever you go. The way he warned me, I thought I'd be

dealing with a pretty loose cannon, but you're more reasonable than I expected! Oh, this is gonna work great. Let's have ourselves a candid chat, shall we?" She turned to her accomplice. "Katzo, run over to Yuki House and grab some more fish. It's been a long time since I've eaten at Ginicho, so we're gonna make a party of it!"

Wha— I leave a trail of destruction in my *wake?! Oh, I'm definitely gonna make Baldy pay one of these days...*

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Mimosa, as it turned out, was the clingy type of drunk.

"I didn't waaant to be the face of this town, you—*hic*—know? I just wanted to grow the company, earn more money, make bigger ships, and one day, just sail out to sea... That's—*hic*—all I wanted! But now everybody's putting me on a pedestal, and I have to spend all day catering to everyone so nobody complains! And all of 'em are always watching me, so I always have to do everything the right way! And to top it off, whenever a dangerous guy like you wanders into town, they call me up to deal with iiiit... I can't go on like this, Lenn!"





What do you want me to do about it? Besides, isn't trying to run this shop into the ground the very definition of "not doing things the right way"? What kinda criteria does your judgment system run off of?

"Prez, you should probably drink some water..." said Katzo from beside Mimosa, sliding a glass of water toward her.

"Shut it! *Hic.* Leeeenn, Katzo's belittling meeee. Hey, let's play your famous 'Drink or Die' game! If you win, you can do whatever you want to me, okay?" She threaded her arm around mine in an overly familiar way as she suggested we play the dubiously named drinking game.

Why the hell does it sound so dangerous— Hang on, my *game?! I've never even heard of this! This is all Uncle Cher's fault! His rumors are really taking on a life of their own...*

"Let go of my arm! I can't use chopsticks like this! And I only drink when it improves the quality of my meal, not to get drunk. Mmm, this is so good! How do you get shrimp innards to taste so refreshing?!"

"You usually won't give a man the time of day, and now... Look at yourself, woman. Aren't you meant to be 'Iron Panties' Mimosa?" grunted Icho before turning to me. "It's the juice of unripe jigo fruits. I pluck 'em when they're still green and mix it in with the innards to give them a fresher taste."

Oh, so like sudachi? The contrast between the thickly cut meat, the rich innards, and the acidic flavor of the juice was out of this world. *Yup, I'm sure of it. If I get this man some first-class ingredients, he'll turn them into something magical.*

"By the way, Iron Panties—what do you want with a man like stubborn old Cap'n here anyway?" I asked, curious.

"Don't call me that! Things might be different now, but I had my pick of the men in this town when I was younger!" Mimosa sniffed, indignant. "Once I took over the company and got it back on track, by the time I started looking around for a man, none of them had passion like me. Plus, my sister was already a single mother, and honestly, spending time with my adorable nephew was way more fun than chasing after some guy. Although..." She trailed off, grinning at

me. “Since you got me so drunk and all, you might be able to convince me to go back to your room with you tonight, hmm?” She winked. “And you’re the one who’s so in love with Icho’s cooking! Why do you *think* I want him?”

“Well, you said you wanted to earn more money to make bigger ships, right? So I thought you’d force him to join some bigger restaurant somewhere to reel in the riels, but it kinda seems like you’re planning to let him keep running Ginicho... The prices are a little premium here, but with a shop this small, even taking *all* of his profits won’t get you much closer to your goal, right?”

The alcohol might have slurred her words, but I didn’t think she’d been lying when she’d rambled about “the things she wanted to do in life” earlier. I had a keen ear for these sorts of things, after all. Cap’n froze, his knife hovering over the radish-like vegetable he’d been slicing finely. Chloe, too, stiffened suddenly, casting a wary glance in Mimosa’s direction.

Mimosa shrank back for a moment, as though cornered—but just as quickly, she shrugged it off, threading her arm around mine again. “A woman is throwing herself at you so boldly, and nothing? You’re a cold man, Lenn. Are you still a virgin, maybe?”

“Th-Th-That’s got nothing to do with anything! You’re the one getting drunk on purpose, not letting your mana core process out the alcohol! Show me a man stupid enough to let a woman like that lure him in, Iron Panties or not!” I glared at her. “Now hurry up and talk. What do you want with the cap’n, and what do you want with me? If it’s something vaguely interesting, I might actually help you out if you stop wasting my time.”

“Definitely a virgin,” I heard Chloe saying off to the side with a nod.

Mimosa’s gray eyes narrowed, and she smirked. “Oh, you realized? Impressive. No one’s ever picked up on it before. Sometimes a girl just wants to get drunk and let a man take care of her, you know? Some friendly advice—girls dislike virgins like you who try to get right *into* things straightaway, okay? You gotta learn how to play along for a bit first.” She paused. “Fine. There’s going to be a grand party held at Count Sardos’s estate soon to celebrate his

son's birthday. Unusually, Marquess Glaux, who rules over our whole region, will also be in attendance. I... I want to infiltrate the party."

"Why?"

She paused again, releasing a soft sigh. "So I can wish my nephew a happy birthday."

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We all sat and listened as Mimosa told us the details.

It had all started over a decade ago. Count Sardos had come to inspect Solcoast, and Mimosa's sister had served as his guide. He'd taken a liking to her, and when all was said and done, an illegitimate child had been born. Her sister had received financial support from the count for childcare expenses, but nothing more; the count, who already had both a legal wife and a formal concubine, had not sent for Mimosa's commoner sister to join him at his estate.

Her sister hadn't been unhappy, however. She loved their child, Daniel, with all of her heart. She lived a fairly comfortable life on account of their family company, Calmwinds, and the president at the time had been overjoyed with the birth of his grandson, having only had two children of his own—Mimosa and her sister. Daniel had been doted on by everyone who met him: his mother, his grandfather, and every single Calmwinds employee. He'd grown up with the shipyard as his playground, dreaming of becoming a sailor. Together, they'd raised a fine—if not a little mischievous—child. His aunt, Mimosa, had nagged him to study hard as well, saying in this day and age, boys who couldn't get good grades wouldn't be able to find jobs on the biggest, fanciest ships. It had worked, and as time passed, her naughty little nephew had grown into a boy capable of putting in hard work when needed.

But the wheels of fate weren't always in alignment. Daniel proved to be *too* brilliant. His grades in preparatory school were the best the region had ever seen, and his magical aptitude was just as outstanding. If left to grow unchecked, there was every possibility he'd even be able to get into *that* school—the Royal Academy. Once he heard the news, the count—who'd never visited his son once—

abruptly changed his stance. After all, the count would have adopted any local child with grades like Daniel's. The fact that the boy was of his own blood was just a bonus. The count's legitimate children were unfortunately, on the whole, rather unremarkable, despite the care and effort he'd put into raising them. None of them had a chance at a spot in the Royal Academy—a spot the Sardos family had failed to attain for many generations.

And so, the count wielded his authority, all but abducting the reluctant Daniel to his estate. His mother was summoned as well, becoming the count's formal third wife, thereby allowing Daniel to be recognized as a legitimate child. The count assembled a battalion of every notable private tutor he could get his hands on, and Daniel spent the next few years undergoing thorough education and training. Ultimately, the entrance exams posed no great difficulty at all to the young boy, and he claimed his place at the Royal Academy.

His birthday party, which would also serve as a celebration of his admission into the Academy, would be attended by all the most powerful families in the Glaux Region. Aunt or not, Mimosa, a commoner, would never be permitted to attend. Count Sardos seemed to be trying to cover up Daniel's past as a commoner, and thus, she'd been forbidden from even meeting with her nephew since he'd been taken.

But Mimosa needed to see him. She needed to tell him how proud she was of his unbelievable effort—she needed to congratulate him on the glory he'd seized. It was then that the thought had struck her. The count was holding a competition to select the chef who'd cater for the grand feast. If she somehow managed to win that competition, she could sneak inside the party as one of the chef's assistants. Sardos County was renowned for fresh seafood, and Mimosa knew the count would delight in showing off the local specialties to his many important guests. So she needed to find a chef who excelled in handling seafood. However, those entering the competition—and hopefully the banquet hall—would undergo strict investigation to ensure they were reputable chefs. The only way Icho would be allowed to enter was as an official employee of the wealthy Calmwinds Company.

In truth, Mimosa had wanted to bring Ginicho under the Calmwinds umbrella for some time. In an ideal world, she'd planned to make Icho recognize her own capability and get him to agree to come over to her side out of his own free will. Now, however, she didn't have the luxury of time. If she missed this chance to meet with Daniel, there was no telling when the next would come. More than anything, what she actually wanted was to give her father Gond the chance to see his beloved grandson's face one last time before he died. The man had fallen into a deep depression since the abduction of his grandson, and he had retired, leaving the company in Mimosa's hands. But first, she needed an opening. And so, she'd vowed to bring Icho under her control, no matter what it took—even if she had to get her hands a little dirty.

Such was the gist of Mimosa's tale.

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"I did notice that idiot Gond hasn't shown his face around here in a while... Can't believe he's moping around over something so pathetic." Cap'n shook his head, disgusted.

"Well, I get it. It probably does seem like a pretty stupid thing to get worked up over from your point of view. But when the person you want to see more than anything is so close, yet so far out of reach...you feel a special kind of loneliness. My father's not thinking of trying to steal Daniel back—if anything, he feels thankful to the count. He knows Daniel couldn't have achieved the same success growing up here, and he never dreamed he'd be able to get into the Academy either. He just wants to see him one more time. Tell him how proud he is. And the same goes for me." Mimosa bowed her head. "Any chance I can convince you to lend me your help?" Her voice was clear; she'd finally started allowing her mana core to process the alcohol, and the effects had quickly subsided.

Cap'n sighed, scratching his neck in apparent confusion. "Why didn't you just explain everything from top to bottom to begin with?"

"I couldn't. Daniel's true identity as an illegitimate child, and the fact that he's the same kid who was raised in this town until a few

years ago, are both top secret now. I didn't want to tell you the truth until after you'd agreed to join me. I thought you'd agree if I did reveal everything, but in the end, giving away my weaknesses and begging for help aren't habits I'm particularly fond of."

"Hmph. Well, I guess I can help ya out. Gond's done the same for me too many times to count, after all. But if I see ya being sloppy, I'm taking Ginicho back—back out of the competition, and outta Calmwinds as well. Got it?"

Phew. Looks like they've finally come to an agreement. Wait, does this mean I'll be able to get an even higher*-quality meal here tomorrow? Also...*

"I'm glad Cap'n's not going to struggle getting ingredients anymore, but there's gotta be some reason you've made sure I'm in on the secret too. What do you want from me, and what am I gonna get out of it? Just so you know, I've got no interest in going to fancy noble parties or anything."

Mimosa frowned slightly. "I've got a request for you as an explorer. I've heard you're good with a bow—even in the capital, everyone's calling you the next star explorer. But..." She hesitated for a moment. "I don't know what the going rates are for requests these days, but I'm guessing you don't come cheap, huh? I've always been good at handling my booze. I figured, if I won against you at your 'Drink or Die' game, I could get you to accept my request for a lower fee. Plus, you'd have the chance to eat fresh dualysse—the so-called Ocean Ruby—prepared by Icho himself. Daniel loves dualysse too, you see... We could only ever get our hands on some once a year, when the count's navy would hunt the monsters and auction off the meat." Mimosa smirked at me. "Although, once you've tried it, you'll never be satisfied with any other fish."

The "Ocean Ruby," you say? I didn't care about money—but I really, really wanted to taste dualysse. I'd already opened my mouth to agree when Cap'n interrupted.

"Wait, wait—don't tell me you're planning to take one of *your* little ships down the seafalcon-ridden Corrida Strait to fish for dualysse. It'd be a death sentence!"

"I know it would. That's why I need to hire Lenn, no matter how

much it costs me. I might never get another chance to see Daniel again after this. To me, the money is a farewell present from myself and Calmwinds to my adorable nephew, who's leaving the nest... I can't afford to be frugal, not now. All right, Lenn—name your price. Five hundred thousand riels? A million?"

Cap'n froze, lost for words.

A million riels...? If I accept this request, my understanding of what constitutes "normal spending" isn't just gonna inflate—we're looking at hyperinflation*.* I tilted my head to the side, trying to remember what I'd read in the *Canardian Encyclopedia of Monsters*. "So, I'm guessing you want me to defend the ship from seafalcons while it passes through the Strait, right? Not particularly hard for me, to be completely honest—but I'm on vacation right now. I'm not planning to take on any work, no matter how well paid it is."

Seafalcons made their homes along rocky coastal cliffs, and they were the bane of sailors everywhere—especially their sailing ships. It was unfortunately common for ships to go missing after their sails had been torn in seafalcon attacks.

Mimosa and Katzo both seemed to want to respond, but neither said anything—though their expressions reflected their disappointment.

"I'm not planning to take on any work, but I obviously can't possibly pass up the chance to eat dualysse, especially dualysse carved at Cap'n's masterful hands. Nope, I'm gonna eat me some Ocean Ruby. Just fill up the ship's hold with enough arrows for me. Normal iron ones will be fine."

Mimosa froze for just a moment, taken aback—and then she began to laugh, tears spilling down her face. "Ha! Are you really the Mad Hound, kid?! Seriously... Maybe you do know how to take care of a woman after all. Well, as promised, you can do whatever you want to me tonight, okay?" She gulped down the entire drink in front of her—clearly letting it affect her once again—and undid the top two buttons of her shirt.

"Wha— When the hell did we make a promise like that?!"

Ace up the Sleeve, and Tears That Won't Dry

The next morning, 9 a.m.

I'd just arrived in Raconteur—the capital of Sardos County—which was around eighty kilometers from Solcoast.

When I'd first woken up this morning, I'd made my way to the port in the gray light of early dawn, excited to set sail in pursuit of delicious dualysse meat. What had awaited me on the docks, however, was not a ship, but a problem. A swarm of monsters called ozrorcas had appeared near the shore, and ships were temporarily forbidden from leaving port.

"It's no good..." Mimosa had sighed. *"I must be cursed. Ozrorcas, of all things, and right now? The competition's a week from today. All we can do is hope the swarm disperses before then... We'll have to come up with a backup plan, just in case—using something other than dualysse."*

Not a chance, I'd thought. *Not when you spent all night telling me how delicious it is.* From the way she'd described it, dualysse was this world's version of bluefin tuna—usually the most premium fish you'd find on a sashimi menu. It wasn't rare for a single one of them to weigh more than five hundred kilograms, and each different cut of meat came with its own distinct, delicious taste. And then there were the buttery layers of fat and the entrancing, slightly acidic smell... I hadn't been able to sleep the night before because visions of gleaming, ruby-colored flesh had kept me awake. *And she wants to substitute it?! Nothing she could get her hands on could replace such a magnificent fish!*

"You're... You're messing with me, right?" I'd said in response. *"Isn't there anything else we can do?"*

"Not easily. If we had a monster-repelling device like the count does for his ships, we might be able to get through the swarm. But those things don't come cheap, and even if you had all the money in the world, those devices aren't something you can just go and buy at the market either."

Oh man... Guess I don't have a choice. I didn't want to have to play this card, but...

My mind set, I'd activated my Strengthening Magic and started running—all the way to Raconteur, right up to the front gates of Count Sardos's estate, where I now stood.

I took a deep breath, then shouted with all my might.

"DAAAAAN! COME OUT AND PLAAAAAY!"

Naturally, just a few seconds later, I found myself surrounded by the count's personal knights.

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Inside the estate, the Sardos family were gathered in the dining room, enjoying relaxing cups of tea after their breakfast.

"I must say, I knew you'd get in ever since I saw your preparatory school grades, but to think—Class A! And second only to the child prodigy Leo Seizinger in the composite rankings too! Daniel, you are truly a credit to the great Sardos family. You should thank your lucky stars that I took the care to raise you as I did, ensuring you knew everything we Sardoses have learned over the generations!"

Dan—that is to say, Daniel Sardos—had found himself on the receiving end of the count's excessively high spirits ever since his admission to the Academy had been confirmed.

"You're exactly right, darling," said the count's legal wife, her face flushing. "With grades like his, why, I can't even imagine how far he'll go! We're receiving so many invitations for tea parties, it makes me dizzy just to read them all! And they aren't just coming from families in our region either. Of course, as a commoner yourself, Ms. Vina, it would be unthinkable for *you* to attend a noble tea party. I, of course, will accompany Dan in your place and spread his name among the *proper* circles."

"Naturally," answered Vina, Dan's mother—and Mimosa's sister. Her stiff smile was pasted on her face like a mask. "I couldn't dream of attending such a high-society event. I'm so grateful for your assistance, Lady Brillauntey."

Pleased with Vina's response, Lady Brillauntey continued on. "If Daniel manages to obtain even a *marginally* important post, our

house will flourish in ways we never dreamed possible. For a mere bastar—" She abruptly paused, seeming to remember Daniel's recent legitimization. "Well, for someone like *you*, we've gone to great trouble, and you'd do well to remember it. We expect you to use your future authority to support everyone in this family—including, of course, our adorable heir Cody."

Dan's expression mirrored his mother's, a frozen, deferential mask. "Of course, Lady Brillauntey. I'll never forget the debt of gratitude I owe *everyone* who raised me."

"Oy, Daniel!" chirped the aforementioned Cody, grinning cockily. "Remember, unlike you with your knight course, I've actually got brains, okay? I'm not gonna be happy if all you can do is get me a job with the brawn. There's no way I'm gonna go off to battle. So make sure you find yourself a lot of friends in the bureaucrat course before you graduate. Use your connections to get me a job somewhere cushy!"

Jumping on the bandwagon, Cody's younger siblings started making demands of their own.

"Don't be greedy, Brother! Really, you might want to consider joining the knights and working off your pudgy stomach! I want an introduction to one of your handsome school friends, Dan. Someone in Class A like you, and from a countal family or higher, please!"

"A high position somewhere here in the Glaux Region is all I need—preferably something where I don't have to do any work. Even an army position is fine, so long as they let me keep up with my horse riding whenever I please. Oh, but I don't want to be on the front lines, obviously, so make sure you pull whatever strings you need to make sure I'm somewhere safe. Although, come to think of it, a beautiful, powerful wife would be nice too, huh? Some girl from a viscountal family would be good, so I won't have any trouble bossing her around."

"That's all you want? Lame! As for me—"

These were Dan's half-siblings. As it so often goes, they'd tormented him from the minute he'd arrived, both overtly and away from their parents' eyes. They seemed to take particular delight in calling him names, their favorites being "bastard," "lowborn," and

"commoner." Well, the unabashed insults *had* dwindled after the mock exams had determined he had near-certain odds of acceptance into the Academy, along with his invitation to the luncheon hosted for only the most promising applicants. But while they no longer insulted him to his face as often, their disdain toward him hadn't changed.

Dan had spent his childhood surrounded by proud craftsmen, straightforward and honest in their work and bearing. The crude, disgraceful behavior that had awaited him when he'd first arrived at the estate disgusted the young boy, and he didn't take any of their cruel words to heart. Still, the stark contrast between how he was treated here and the warm treatment he'd grown used to at the Academy was beginning to wear on him.

"Pardon me." A steward entered the room, somewhat hesitantly. "I... Well, you see... A friend of Young Master Daniel's has arrived suddenly. He says he's 'come to play with Dan'..."

The count's good mood vanished in an instant. "Fool!" he shouted at the trembling butler. "Was I not clear? Daniel will be spending the entire summer break cementing his place among the nobility! He has no time to play around, much less with some commoner brat! He is part of our world now, as you well know." His gaze shifted to Dan, eyes piercing into him like daggers. "And you, Daniel—after all my lectures, don't think to tell me you're still degrading yourself by maintaining correspondence with mere common folk."

Dan's mask of indifference cracked slightly, his mouth twisting downward, but he simply shook his head. "No, Father. As you commanded, I've neither met with anyone nor penned a single letter."

"As well you should," the count replied, turning back to the steward. "Send the brat away." With a huff, he returned to his tea.

But the steward didn't leave. Visibly flustered, he opened his mouth once again. "Indeed, Your Lordship. However... Well, you see... The boy claims to be one of the young master's classmates from the *Academy*. A certain 'Allen Rovene,' I believe..."

Count Sardos spat out his tea.

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"I met with the visitor, and it is indeed him, Father. I had no idea he was coming to visit, truly—I was as surprised as you. But like I reported to you the other day, Allen is a pretty unconventional sort..." Dan sighed. "According to him, he really did come just to ask me if I'd go on a trip with him for a few days. Apparently, he's planning on going hunting for a little while as a way to prepare for our upcoming school camp, and he wanted me to join him. Of course, with all my engagements over the next few days, it's impossible..."

The needle on the count's "good-mood meter" swung past the maximum. "Don't be ridiculous! When I said you didn't have time to play around, that obviously doesn't include time spent deepening bonds with your most *prodigious* Academy friends. Of course you shall go. I will handle your upcoming engagements—no one will dare to complain when I tell them I have to rearrange because *the* Allen Rovene turned up out of the blue to visit *my* son! Oh, they'll be gritting their teeth in envy, but no one will utter a word! Our house will soon be on the receiving end of jealous glares from every noble family across the kingdom! Ah, I feel faint just imagining it!" The count sighed dreamily. "Well, where is he? The parlor? I'll greet him at once!"

"Uh, actually, he's waiting outside the gates. He said he wouldn't dream of daring to enter a count's residence without a prior appointment—and definitely not of forcing you to rearrange your busy schedule just to greet him."

Count Sardos stared at Daniel vacantly for a second, but then his excellent mood returned, and he nodded enthusiastically. "Of course, of course. Clearly, the boy is well aware of how his actions will be viewed among high society. On the contrary, his meeting directly with you, rather than calling upon me, will only serve to show a deeper connection between our houses."

"Er, of course... Well then, I'll be away for two or three days,

Father. Oh, I nearly forgot—Allen said he wants to go fishing too, and he wondered if we might borrow a monster repeller just for caution's sake... Would that be all right?"

"By all means! After all, you'll be able to spend a more enjoyable time together if you're not constantly worrying over safety, yes? Make sure you treasure every *minute* spent with your close friend—and be sure to let him know he's more than welcome to stay here for a few days when you return!"

"Okay... Well, I'll be off, then." Dan turned and left the dining room, somehow suppressing the urge to grimace at the sickly-sweet greed dripping from his father's voice when he'd said "close friend."

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A few minutes passed after Dan had left the room.

"Are you sure, Father?" Cody, the Sardos family's eldest son, had managed to hold his tongue throughout the exchange between Daniel and his father despite his shock toward the latter's sudden change of mood. "Academy student or not, it was still rude of him to show up at a count's estate without an appointment. And Daniel was second in the composite rankings, right? So whoever this kid is, he's *below* Daniel as far as ranks go," the young man said in an arrogant drawl—arrogance that was purely unwarranted, as Cody had recently graduated from the local Noble College with grades much, much closer to the bottom of the rankings than the top. Unfortunately, he also possessed that most convenient ability, the one that allowed him to believe counting a remarkable person among his friends or relatives meant he was remarkable too.

"You'd understand if you'd deigned to join us during the social season in the capital, but of course, you just had one excuse after another. Allen Rovene is the talk of the town right now. He scored higher than even Leo Seizinger on the knight course physical exam and received a unanimous *S* grade from the entire group of examiners. They say even the great hero Godolphen the Indomitable views him as an equal. Everything he does, everyone he interacts with—whom he goes foraging with, whom he invites to his home for

a barbecue—all eyes in the kingdom are on him and his actions. He is, without question, a most extraordinary boy. His Majesty the King even issued an official decree allowing him to join the Royal Order before his first semester had even ended! Do you know *why* Marquess Glaux has deigned to come to Dan's birthday feast? It is only because he wishes to hear about Allen Rovene directly from Daniel himself."

Count Sardos shook his head slowly. A thick silence hung over the room. Cody didn't dare to utter another word—nor did anyone else.

"Naturally, Allen Rovene's movements over the summer break have also been of particular interest to all concerned, but until now, his whereabouts have been utterly unknown. Not even his classmates were informed of his plans. Rumors suggested he might have been dispatched on a secret mission for the Order, but now... Allen Rovene—*the* Allen Rovene—came all the way to *our* county...specifically to visit Daniel..." The count slumped down in his chair, too overwhelmed to hold himself upright any longer.

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"Sorry to keep you waiting, Allen," Dan said, grinning. "Oh, you're a lifesaver, seriously. If you hadn't shown up, I'd have spent the *entire* summer break going around groveling before every noble family across the region. So, why did you actually come all the way out here?"

When Dan had emerged from the gates, he'd been accompanied by a steward who tried to insist on chauffeuring us to wherever we were headed, but I'd firmly refused his offer, insisting the run from the estate was just another part of our training. I wanted to go wherever the wind took me, not wherever some dude in a magicar drove us—and especially not in a magicar emblazoned with the Sardos family crest. We'd stick out like a sore thumb.

"What do you mean? I wanted to go fishing, of course. Well, to be precise, I wanted to *eat* fish. The owner of my favorite noodle stand back in Runerelia told me there was a town called Solcoast near here where they sell the best seafood I could ever taste. The

seafood restaurants in the capital are all a little lacking, so I decided to use my summer break to travel out here and see if the rumors were true. But when I got there, I heard about an even more delicious fish—dualysse or something? But no one can go fishing for it right now because of a swarm of ozrorcas near the port. I heard Count Sardos keeps a few monster-repelling devices at his estate, though, so I figured I might be able to borrow one off you. Sorry for showing up out of the blue, though."

"Huh?!" Dan gaped at me. "I love dualysse... But Allen, are you seriously spending your summer running around on a food tour? I know your usual eating habits, you know..." He sighed. "As always, I've got no idea what's going on in that head of yours. Is surprising people your hobby or something?"

Rude. At least I don't have a potato for a face. Once we got to Solcoast, I'd demonstrate my deep, cultured appreciation for seafood and force Dan to acknowledge how refined my palate actually was. "Of course not. You really think I have a nasty hobby like that? Oh yeah, just so you know, I'm traveling around under the name Lenn, not Allen. I didn't want to end up getting fussed over just because I'm an Academy student, or worse, getting summoned to pay visits to all the local bigwigs. So I'm just Lenn, a simple explorer. It's a bit of a hassle, but do you think you could register as an explorer too? Then we'll be able to walk around town as just ordinary people. You grew up nearby, right? Do you know much about the town?"

"Well, first of all—remember when you stood in front of the whole class and told us we were 'easygoing jokers' because we didn't have our explorer's licenses? After you left, everyone went to the guild and registered. So every single member of Class A has a license now." Dan grinned, but his expression quickly darkened. "But...ordinary people, huh? I am a little familiar with Solcoast, to tell the truth. Do you think I could ask you to join me on an errand of my own once we're finished with yours?"

Even the most obtuse person in the whole kingdom would have realized what Dan's "errand" would entail. He'd been forced to leave his hometown without even saying goodbye to Mimosa and the others at Calmwinds; there was no way he'd visit Solcoast without

trying to see them. *I know Mimosa wanted to surprise Dan, but surprising her instead is probably all right...right? And anyway, it's all for the sake of my delicious dualysse.*

We ran from Raconteur to Solcoast. Well, strictly speaking, we first ran in the opposite direction into the nearby forest, where we were able to lose the Scouts who'd tailed us from the Sardos estate. Between myself and Dan (one of the highest-ranking members of the Hill Path Club) running at full speed, we shook them off in no time at all.

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It was the perfect time for lunch when the two of us got back to Solcoast, and I led us toward Ginicho, where I'd hastily told Mimosa to wait for me before I'd rushed off that morning.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I said, sliding the door open. Mimosa and Katzo were sitting at the counter, talking with Cap'n.

"You're back sooner than I thought you'd be, actually. Well, did you manage to get your hands on whatever it was you had in mind —" She turned around and froze. Her eyes were the only thing that moved, flicking back and forth between my face and Dan's as they widened.

Seriously, surprising people isn't my hobby, I swear... "Oh, this is Dan, an explorer acquaintance of mine who just happened to be nearby." I waved my hand toward him, indifferent. "Funnily enough, he also randomly happened to be carrying a monster repeller around with him, so I asked him to come along and help us catch some dualysse."

Mimosa slackened slightly, managing to hold back the tears that threatened to spill from the corners of her eyes. That was, until Katzo shouted, "Dan! You sure got big, ya bastard!" as he jumped up and pulled the boy into a tight embrace, tears streaming down his face. The next second, Mimosa was crying too.

"You idiot! Now look what you've done!" she wailed, clapping Katzo on the back of his head. "You don't know who might be watching!"

I took a seat at the counter, peeking over it to see what Cap'n was working on. "Whoa, is that freshwater eel? Cap'n, I'll take grilled eel for my main course today! They say the quality of it goes up the longer you grill it, right? Take your time—cook it long and slow for me." I turned back to Dan. "Hey, I'm gonna wait here till it's done grilling, so could you go ahead with these guys from Calmwinds and get the ship ready to sail out? Take the monster repeller with you too. There's no anti-Scouting devices here, and I won't be able to enjoy my meal if I'm keeping half an eye on that expensive thing in the corner."

I glanced back at Cap'n. "I usually steam it for two hours, then grill it slowly for another hour or so," he said, flashing me a mischievous grin. "This is only saltwater eel, though, not fresh—don't get your hopes up too much."

"I..." Dan paused for a moment. "Got it, Lenn. I'll see you in a bit." He left along with Mimosa and Katzo.

This is saltwater eel? But it's so big...

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I spent the next three hours enjoying some of Cap'n's best work since he now had stock of all the ingredients he could ever dream of; I chatted with him and Chloe while he wielded his knife like an artist would a paintbrush. The sun had just started to descend when Dan reappeared, alongside Mimosa, Katzo, and Gond, the former president of Calmwinds. They'd also brought an anti-Scouting device with them from their company headquarters.





"Sorry to keep you waiting, Lenn. And...thanks," Dan said, smiling. He and the rest of them had red, puffy rings around their eyes.

"I don't know what you're thanking me for. Whatever I did, it was only so I could achieve my own goals—the things *I* want to do."

Dan snorted. "Not that again... Seriously, you're impossible. But Grandpa—no, Gond, the old president, wanted to come and thank you in person for some reason, so I brought him too. Just be nice and accept it, okay?" As much as he tried to keep it at bay, I could still see the faint smile tugging on his lips as he introduced his grandfather.

"So you're Lenn, eh? I'm Gond. What you've done...for myself, and for everyone at Calmwinds... I'm grateful. Really, really grateful. Thank you." The old man lowered his head. Although it was clear he'd only recently learned how to bow, it was an honest and true gesture. All I could do was squirm uncomfortably in my chair until he raised his head. *Seriously, though, all I did was assemble all the pieces I'd need to get my hands on some dualysse...*

"All right, I get it. You can raise your head now—please. I'm not good with this kinda soppy stuff. Look, Cap'n's got some eel just about ready. Let's chow down and toast to a big haul tomorrow, okay?" I turned away and pulled out the horseradish-like root and my own personal grater, both of which I'd brought from home.

"The heck are those?" Mimosa asked suspiciously.

Mwa ha ha. Interested, are you? I'd been so entranced by the food last night, I'd forgotten about them entirely: the soy sauce and "wasabi" I'd painstakingly prepared before I'd departed Runerelia. "This, my friends, is my most beloved condiment—wasabi—in its unprocessed form. We *connoisseurs* prefer to use it to flavor grilled seafood," I said, starting to push the root against the bumpy stone grater. It smelled much stronger than Japanese wasabi, so I'd have to be careful about how much I added. The shred I tried, however, was just as delicious as its familiar counterpart.

"I've never seen it before," said Cap'n, looking curious. "Well, the eel's ready now. Let me try a bit after I'm done serving it up, will ya?"

That's Cap'n for ya. First-rate chefs need to have an insatiable curiosity for discovering new flavors. "No worries, try as much as you like. It goes great with raw fish too, by the way. Plus, if you pair it with soy sauce like they use on the Baerent Islands, the taste gets even better."

I spread a tiny amount of the wasabi on the salt-grilled eel in front of me, then gingerly carried the first bite to my mouth. In an instant, the pungent, spicy burn of the condiment filled my nostrils—then, the juicy, buttery taste of eel danced over my taste buds. The steaming and grilling had worked wonders on the white, meaty flesh, and it was unbelievably soft on the inside, while the exterior was delightfully crisp.

It's so, so good! I shook my head in wonder, moved to tears by the nostalgic taste. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw everyone swallow hard, their mouths clearly watering in anticipation.

Chloe peered over the counter at my plate. "You've heard of soy sauce? I was born on the Baerent Islands, but I've never heard of this 'wasabi' you say goes so well with it. Can I try some too?"

"Wait a minute!" interjected Mimosa, sliding next to me. "Customers first, right? Thanks to Lenn, I was so surprised earlier that I forgot to eat all day. I'm *starving*." She moved even closer to me, opening her mouth and closing her eyes in a way that clearly indicated she wanted me to feed her. Shrugging, I scraped a little bit of wasabi off the grater and dropped it into her waiting mouth.

"Argh! I meant with some eel!" she cried, fanning her mouth. "It hurts! I've cried all day, and somehow tears are still coming out!" She glared at me through admittedly watery eyes.

Katzo chuckled. "I don't think your crying has to do with the pain, Prez. Maybe you're just as moved by the taste?"

I could see why he might think so. If he'd never tried something *actually* spicy before, he wouldn't get it. Wasabi's unique spice was something that could only be understood by those who'd experienced it.

"What, you don't believe me? Well, your tongue's always been a little off, I guess. You never react to spicy food... You shouldn't have any problems then, right? Be a man and have a nice big taste."

Mimosa grinned at him impishly, and Katzo smirked in response, smearing a chunk of eel with a massive blob of wasabi and tossing it into his mouth whole.

The next moment, he screamed. Just as I'd predicted, the stocky giant of a man fell to the floor, rolling around in anguish. "My nose feels like it's gonna explode!"

One by one, we began to roar with laughter. Tear ducts that should've long since run dry still summoned fresh drops, gleaming as they slid down every cheek. All except for Dan, who simply rolled his eyes and muttered, "Of course this is the kind of condiment *you'd* favor, Allen."

Bzzt. Wrong! I'm not Allen, but Lenn, the traveling explorer... And why does it still sound like you think I have an unrefined palate?!

Setting Sail

"Hoist the anchor! Rig the sails!" A new day had dawned, and as the sun rose, so did my voice.

"Oy, Lenn! Don't tell me you've sailed a ship before?!" Dan jogged up to me, his smile so wide and childish, I felt secondhand embarrassment just looking at it. *He must be overjoyed, getting to sail again for the first time in years.* Dan had always seemed a little more mature than the rest of our classmates, content to watch from the sidelines—but today, he beamed with a smile more suitable for a boy his age, his potato-like face glowing with excitement.

"Nah, I'm a complete amateur. I just wanted to try saying it," I replied confidently, chin high and shoulders squared.

Dan slumped like I'd taken the wind out of *his* sails. "Just don't say anything like that after we set sail, or you'll cause chaos..." he muttered.

But I really wanted to shout "Starboard turn!" or something after we started sailing...

The ship we'd be taking out today had been built in secret by Calmwinds. It was a masterpiece, demonstrating some of their finest work. They'd intended to present it to Dan's new family as a

traditional gift to coincide with his advancement to higher education (which, given his poor odds of being admitted to the Academy, many had still assumed would entail the local Noble College). However, after Dan had been accepted into the Royal Academy and left not only Sardos County but the Glaux Region itself, the ship had remained at Calmwind's docks.

It wasn't the kind of square-rigged brig you'd acquire around the midpoint of any run-of-the-mill RPG, the kind that relied on favorable tailwinds. No, it was a proper fore-and-aft sailing ship, meaning it could catch the wind from any angle and still move forward. From the vague memories of ships I'd seen in my last life, I'd say it was slightly bigger than a standard yacht.

Incidentally, naval ships in this world were almost exclusively galleys, which relied more on oars for propulsion than their auxiliary sails. Most naval battles took place near coasts or even along larger rivers, where wind conditions were unstable. Therefore, most propulsion came from rowers enhanced with Strengthening Magic. Apparently, those galleys were far superior to standard sail ships when it came to the minute tactical movements you'd need in a naval battle. But that kind of brute-strength, man-powered sailing didn't stimulate my passion for adventure in the slightest. A few magically powered ships had also started to emerge over the past few decades (exclusively owned by only the richest nobles, of course), but since they couldn't achieve anywhere near the same speeds as the galleys, the navy still relied exclusively on the oar-based ships.

The monster repeller was up and running since Dan had already installed it the previous day. As we enjoyed the cool, refreshing morning breeze, we untethered the ship and set sail.

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As soon as we left the harbor, we were met by a strong headwind. Fore-and-aft ships could sail in most wind conditions, but *directly* into a headwind wasn't one of them. When your destination and the direction the wind came from were one and the same, you

had to steer the ship in a zigzag pattern to make any progress. While every ship was different, forty-five degrees was apparently the standard angle to take—anything smaller, and the ship wouldn't be able to move forward at all.

Dan was standing at the wheel toward the back of the ship, manipulating all twenty or so meters of the vessel single-handedly. Next to him stood Katzo, who'd apparently nominated himself to assist Dan with steering the ship. But instead, the man was staring at Dan, dumbfounded. "We designed the ship so a single helmsman could control it in a worst-case scenario, but...I can't believe you're hoisting that heavy mainsail line with just one hand like it's nothing. First time you've handled this ship, and you've got all the sails out in winds this strong without breaking a sweat." Katzo sighed, shaking his head. "Your steering instincts are as crazy as ever, Dan."

The "mainsail" was the largest sail, obviously, and the "line" referred to the attached rope that allowed you to raise and lower it, as well as adjust the angle. By manipulating the line as well as the tiller behind him, Dan could control the speed and direction of the ship without taking a step. Apparently, my classmate had been sailing small ships since his mana core had started developing around the age of eight.

Apart from Katzo, a handful of other Calmwinds employees were also on board, serving as the crew of today's voyage. While Calmwinds was a shipbuilding company, many of their employees had started out as sailors or fishermen, and Mimosa hadn't wanted to bring in any further outside help, hopefully preventing word of Dan's participation finding its way back to Count Sardos.

"Oh, this is nothing, Katzo. There's heaps of people way stronger than me at the Academy," Dan replied, flashing me a cheeky grin.

I'd already told Mimosa and the others that I was actually Dan's classmate and friend. I hadn't really expected them to believe a casual explorer acquaintance would be able to extract Dan from the count's estate or be permitted to borrow a priceless monster repeller. Far better to tell them the truth and beg them to keep their mouths shut than be the cause of even more weird rumors—whether about the Mad Hound or about me. I was pretty sure Mimosa and Katzo

would keep their word too.

"I wanna have a go, Dan! Swap with me!" Honestly, Dan looked like he was having a great time, changing the ship's course at will, cutting through the wind with ease... It actually made him look *cool*, for once. *I want to try it too!*

"Oh, you're keen? Come over here, then, and I'll teach you the basics." True to his word, Dan gave me a rundown of the basic operation of the sails and things to watch out for, and I took over as helmsman.

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"Starboard tack!" Dan cried while making the accompanying hand gesture. He was clinging to a post sticking out of the ship's bow, giving me directions as he read the current and winds.

"Tacking, starboard side!" I slowly turned the tiller to portside, and the ship began moving in the opposite direction toward the starboard side. This process of veering into the wind was called tacking, or so Dan had taught me. Of course, our zigzag approach meant the wind would blow into a different side of the sail every time we turned. I tugged on the mainsail line as we reached the apex of the turn, holding it tightly to ensure I didn't lose control as we caught the breeze again.

"Close hauled!" he cried, and I adjusted the tiller again, keeping our angle as close to straight as possible without just sailing directly into the headwind.

"How the hell is he managing to stand upright with the ship bouncing all over the place?" I muttered to myself, astounded. *I guess he's been refining his sense of balance since birth, having grown up around ships and all... A lot of things are starting to make sense now.*

Dan's sense of balance was, to put it simply, abnormal. During our practical classes at the Academy, we'd been made to walk on a tightrope installed high in the trees or cross a pond filled with moving stepping stones, among other things. It was like being forced to participate in an insanely difficult obstacle course. Dan had

been in a league of his own during those classes, the undisputed king of balance and speed.

"He was already used to standing out there by the time he turned nine," said Katzo from beside me. "Best place to really see the wind and the waves. Even when I told him it was too dangerous, he'd refuse to come down. Well, I gave up after I accidentally steered the ship right into the headwind and he still didn't fall off. You're probably just as crazy at this as him, though, if you ask me. Steering a ship this size after just a few minutes of the basics... How'd they put your brain together, 'ey?" He asked, somewhat suspicious.

I didn't think it was too strange, though. "All I'm doing is following Dan's instructions. I mean, simple controls like these, I'd say any Academy student could do the same if they were in this situation. What Dan was doing—now *that* was crazy. He was reading the wind conditions and the waves all by himself...and his line work was so delicate too..."

From the moment I'd touched the line and tiller, I'd realized how delicate Dan's movements had actually been. Though the wind conditions hadn't shifted in the slightest, the ship was moving noticeably slower since I'd taken the wheel—only about eighty percent as fast as it had when Dan had been at the helm. That missing twenty percent was the result of years of experience behind the wheel and innate talent.

"The thought of handing over the wheel to some greenhorn was giving me an upset stomach, to tell you the truth, but...I can see why they call the Academy 'the Monster's Nest' now," Katzo muttered, shaking his head. "Dan... Ever since he could first walk, he was always good at everything he tried his hand at. Put him with the adults and he was right at home, but he never fit in with kids his own age. Sure, he was talented, but at the same time, he always seemed a little lonely to me. And then he was pulled into noble society, with all their stiffness and formalities—I couldn't help but pity him, you know?" The man sighed. "But now, seeing you and him chatting without a care in the world...I've changed my mind. I reckon Dan's finally found where he belongs—found friends who like him for who he really is. Thanks, Lenn. He doesn't look lonely

anymore."

I understood what Katzo was trying to say. The existence of magic had only widened the rift between people in this world, both in what they could do and how the world chose to value them—and that rift was wider than anything I'd experienced in my past life. It was cruel on both sides of the chasm: both to those who were poor in magic and to those who had abundant skill with it. I'd never fit in with the other kids during my own years in preparatory school either, an experience nearly every kid at the Academy shared, no doubt. Leo had once told me he'd come to the Academy to sharpen his skills surrounded by the most talented kids in the kingdom, but to be honest, he'd probably felt that loneliness more than anyone else. Every time he challenged me with that cocky sneer, the gleam of excitement in his eyes gave him away—it was like that of a puppy wagging its tail, thrilled at a chance to play. It was that look that always stopped me from really being mean to him, annoying though he was.

It was probably one of the reasons Rosa doted on me so excessively too. If *I* hadn't fit in with the other kids in our region, then Rosa, who was a hundred times more impressive than me, had definitely experienced the same loneliness. Her weird affection toward me could have been her trying to make up for the friendships I'd missed out on. I was glad she seemed to have found people like Fuli who understood her for who she truly was. I just prayed that with every new friend she made, I'd occupy a little less space in her thoughts.

Katzo and I continued to chat while I followed Dan's instructions, shifting the direction of the ship left, right, and left again on repeat until he eventually returned to join us at the helm. "Between the island and the mainland ahead—that's the Corrida Strait. It's time to fold the sails and slow us down." He tugged the lines, his hands flowing from one movement to the next as though he were playing an instrument, while I switched the monster repeller off so we didn't scare any dualysse. Just the small auxiliary sails and the spanker (a small sail on the stern used for balance and propulsion) remained unfolded. I could already hear the faint caw of seafalcons coming

from the strait, carried toward us by the wind.

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"She's on the hook, boys!" A cheer rose from the stern of the ship for the fourth time today.

Long wire ropes of intertwined threads made from a material called gryphite had been cast into the water from the back of the ship. A massive hook trailed at the end of every wire, each adorned with a small squid-like monster. Gryphite wires were apparently the tool of choice when fishing for the larger monsters dwelling in the seas. Although expensive, the wires were resistant to rusting and could handle extreme tension.

I really wanted to take a peek at what was going on at the stern, but I didn't currently have the luxury of taking my eyes off the situation at hand. Standing in the center of the ship, I loosed one arrow after another, sending seafalcons plummeting from the sky into the turbulent waters below. Dan was once again at the helm, leaving the Calmwinds men to handle the fish.

The next seafalcon drew near, folding in its wings halfway as it dove toward the ship in a straight line. At first, the ship's rocking had thrown off my aim, but I'd soon adapted to the rhythm of the waves and hardly noticed it anymore. I knew Dan's steering deserved most of the credit, though—my own short time at the helm had made it obvious. He was reading not only the winds and the waves, but also my own movements, adjusting the ship's direction as delicately as possible to make sure it didn't affect my aim. The ship was rocking so gently, it occasionally made me yawn. Even when Dan needed to make a bigger movement, like tacking or jibing (turning the ship's stern through the wind), he let me know first, so I never fell off-balance.

I chanced a quick look toward the stern, desperately curious to see how the fishing was coming along. To my great dismay, the only thing I could see was Dan's potato face. *Don't grin and give me a thumbs-up! I can't see anything past your big head!*

I must have downed at least three hundred of the seafalcons by

the time Katzo came to check on me, catching me while I refilled my quiver. "You're a hell of a shot, kid. You missed, what, two or three shots in the beginning, and it's been bull's-eyes ever since. When Prez said she'd pay ya a million riels, I nearly crapped myself, I gotta tell ya—but top-class explorers like you sure are in a league of your own." He shook his head. "They're just about to finish hauling up the fourth dualysse now. Dan's been weaving the ship from side to side and tiring them out—thanks to him, we've been able to finish up a lot sooner than I thought we would. We won't be able to sail with a fifth one on board, so once this one's hauled up, we'll start heading home."

Dan, you bastard... I hadn't been able to see the stern, so I hadn't realized—but not only had he been matching my movements, he'd also been helping the fishermen too? *Yup—my steering was like a child's compared to his, no question.*

I looked at Katzo and shrugged. "Seriously, I'm not a top-class explorer or—"

"It snapped?!" came a cry from the stern, quickly drowned beneath a rising clamor of voices.

"What? The gryphite wire snapped?" Katzo muttered, suspicious.

The next moment, the back of the ship was flung into the air. The odd floating sensation lasted just a second before we shot back down, smacking into the sea with a tremendous jolt.

One man screamed, his voice piercing through the chaos. "Ozrorcaaa!"

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The ship was on the verge of capsizing, but Dan managed to right us in an instant, unfolding the main sails as he turned us back toward Solcoast. Beside me, Katzo groaned, his face deadly pale. "Of course—they must have been lured in by the scent of all those seafalcons in the water! This isn't good. I underestimated the bastards' sense of smell!"

"Dan, you're in charge—just tell me what to do! It doesn't matter who lured them in now. Will turning the monster repeller back on

help at this point?" I directed the last question at Katzo, but before his lips could part, Dan had already started issuing orders.

"Lenn, until we're back through the strait, your priority is the seafalcons! If they get close enough to tear the sails, we're gonna be in even more trouble than we are now! We'll handle the ozrorca on our side somehow. Con, you come and take over the tiller! I'll handle the lines. The rest of you—drag the dualysse to the center of the ship and make sure you stay out of Lenn's line of fire! Once you're done, get down next to them—and don't throw off the ship's balance!"

Katzo rushed away to help drag the giant fish to the center of the ship. Once they'd all been moved, he crouched down beside them and answered my previous query in a shaky voice. "The monster repeller works by emitting a sound monsters hate to keep them away. If we turn it on now that they've already targeted us, all it'll do is make them more angry—it won't send them fleeing. That's what I've heard, anyway."

The *Canardian Encyclopedia of Monsters* didn't cover sea monsters to the same extent as those on land, but it did have an entry on these ozrorcas. The white-tailed beasts somewhat resembled killer whales, but they were much, much larger; they could reach body lengths of ten meters, and the biggest ones could weigh over twelve tons. They were an extremely warlike species, hunting in packs—and once they'd found a target, they'd chase it to the bitter end. All in all, they were very troublesome beasts, and not ones you wanted to encounter. If I remembered correctly, ozrorcas had an average speed of around fifteen kilometers an hour—but when they were on the hunt, they could swim eighty kilometers an hour or faster, albeit only for short bursts. *We're gonna struggle to outrun them.*

I reined in my Scouting Magic, trading the extra range for keener hearing around the area closest to the ship. Perhaps seeing the ozrorcas' attack as an opportunity to make their own, seafalcons were diving at us even more frequently than before. Every time I sent one plummeting into the sea, it instead found its final resting place inside an ozrorca's giant, terrifying maw, swallowed whole the

second it hit the water's surface.

While I dealt with the seafalcons, the ozrorcas continued their attack on the ship, ramming into us from all sides with staggering force. While the hull was sturdy enough to hold up for now, if we capsized—either from flooding or getting overturned—we'd be as good as dead. But even when we were lifted out of the water entirely, Dan readily ensured we stayed upright. Where he couldn't avoid being rammed, he adjusted our angle to minimize the risk that we'd capsize as much as possible.

Six. I couldn't be entirely sure, what with all the chaos around us, but as far as I could tell, there were six of the monsters—ranging from about six to ten meters long. "Dan, I think there's six of them altogether! Can you keep track of them all?" As he adjusted the lines, expression as serious as ever, Dan responded by shooting me a quick thumbs-up.

Not that it's a big deal, but can't you just reply with words like a normal person?

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I shot a few arrows at the ozrorcas that emerged from the water to feast on the downed seafalcons, but to no avail. Whether it was because of the close proximity or the slippery elasticity of their skin, my arrows didn't even leave a scratch on them. I still had plenty of the iron arrows Mimosa had provided for me, but I'd only brought five macagate-tipped arrows—and even in a tight spot like this, I wanted to keep them as a last resort.

I waited until there was a gap between the seafalcon attacks, then jumped up to the helm beside Dan. Even the slight difference in elevation would give my arrows a little edge when it came to piercing through the ozrorcas' thick flesh. I let the next seafalcon fly right up to the ship before I skewered it, readying my next arrow before the first had even struck and sending it rocketing toward the ozrorca waiting hungrily below. Even at point-blank range, my slightly elevated angle made all the difference. The iron arrow sank deep into the beast's head.

First one down. I raced back to the center of the ship. Dan might have been able to hold his balance up at the helm, but one sharp turn and I'd probably go overboard.

Dan immediately realized my plan. "I'll create the openings for you—just leave it to me!" he yelled, giving me yet another thumbs-up.

Shouldn't you be keeping both hands on the lines?! Quit it with the thumbs-ups!

For a minute, the remaining ozrorcas swam in circles around the one I'd killed, almost as though they were grieving over it. But then they turned, once again heading straight for our ship. Ideally, I wanted to kill at least one more of the monsters with the same method. Unfortunately, no matter how many seafalcons I shot down, the ozrorcas no longer stopped to feast. *They're smart, I'll give 'em that.* Just like dolphins and killer whales back on Earth, maybe the ozrorcas could communicate with one another in their own language too. *And if that's the case, this is gonna be even more dangerous than I thought.*

Soon after, we cleared the Corrida Strait, leaving the seafalcons behind. The ozrorcas were still pursuing us relentlessly, but they'd changed tactics after the death of their friend, now staying deep under the water until the very last second, when they'd shoot up to ram into us. When they came up for air, it was always a great distance away from the ship, and the few arrows I'd managed to hit them with did nothing. A macagate arrow could pierce them, but with how far away they were, the risk of missing a shot and wasting one of the very valuable arrows was too high. The ship had managed to withstand their attacks so far, but one poor turn was all that stood between us and a watery grave.

I jumped up to the helm once again. "I hate to suggest it, but maybe we should chuck the dualysse overboard. Between the four of them, they must weigh about a ton and a half."

Dan shook his head. "I thought the same, but even without them, we wouldn't be fast enough to outrun the swarm. We're better off keeping them on board—with the way we're being rammed, the extra weight is preventing us from flipping over."

Of course, I'd suspected Dan would have already considered the same idea—but he'd gone a step beyond that, deciding to prioritize using the dualysse's weight as a kind of ballast. "Got it. But at this rate, things aren't looking too good either way. I've got five arrows that'll be able to penetrate their skin, so for now, let's try and even up our odds. Let's send it starboard!"

I raced to the right end of the deck, near the stern. *Dan'll know what I meant.* I'd practiced shooting in all directions, but when push came to shove, my aim was a little better when the target was on my right. Readying an arrow, I focused on the water, looking for signs that anything was about to surface. Scouting Magic couldn't pick up noise from underwater, so all I could do was listen for the faint sounds of bubbles or splashing to clue me into their approach.

There—a flash of something, maybe, on the right side of the ship. "Starboarrrd...jibe!" In response to my signal, Con pushed the tiller to the left, and the ship began to swing to the right. The string slipped through my fingers, and the macagate arrow went flying into the water where the ship had been a moment before. A red haze bloomed under the water's surface. My timing had been perfect; once again, I'd skewered an ozrorca right through the center of its head.

Four to go.

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Once again, the remaining ozrorcas circled around their fallen comrade, but they showed no indication that they were giving up the hunt. If anything, it seemed to make them even more vicious than before. "Dan! Turn the monster repeller back on!" If they were already angry, then maybe the noise would make them lose their minds, even if only a little—and if they *could* talk with one another, the added noise might also ruin their means of communicating.

I was right on the mark. As soon as Dan flipped the switch, an ozrorca—probably still young, based on his six-or-someter length—started streaking toward the ship, specifically to where I stood at the stern. He was close enough to the surface that his dorsal fin was

clearly visible above the water, a sure sign that he'd lost all presence of mind. I let him draw close before sending three iron arrows at him in quick succession, stopping him in his tracks. *Three to go.*

The ramming stopped, but the remaining monsters still didn't give up. Instead, they followed us at a safe distance. From time to time, the largest one would send a jet of water magic ricocheting toward the ship, but apparently, he couldn't fire it in rapid succession, and the ship's design allowed the water to drain quickly enough to not cause us any trouble.

"What do you think they're up to?" I asked Dan. "Are they just trying to annoy us now?"

"I don't think they've given up," he replied after a pause. "Either they're waiting for the right moment to start attacking again, or otherwise, maybe they're waiting for something to give them an advantage—"

We learned the answer before Dan could even finish speaking. Three more ozrorcas emerged from the depths, the same size—and apparently, affinity—as the largest water-affined one from the original pack. They surrounded us, two on each side, sending fire hose-like jets of water hurtling toward the ship.

This is really, really not good. The ship's drainage wouldn't be able to keep up with this much water, and our speed would quickly drop. Plus, with water now coming at us from both sides, Dan was struggling to adjust the sails at all. If we couldn't catch the wind, we'd soon stop moving altogether. He managed to keep us upright as the sails were pounded by water, but even Dan couldn't keep us moving indefinitely in conditions like these.

The ozrorcas that weren't elementally affined pulled away to the side and began jumping out of the water in quick succession. I wasn't sure whether this was a show to somehow encourage their comrades or just a manifestation of joy given their now seemingly imminent victory. I briefly considered shooting one or two out of the air with macagate arrows, but I quickly changed my mind when I realized the new ozrorcas had brought along a swarm of their own. More than twenty of the monsters quickly joined the cheer squad. Using any of my precious macagate arrows to kill the small fry would

equate to no more than a drop in the ocean—a pointless waste.

I moved toward the main sail and shouted back to Dan. "It's sink or swim! I'm gonna try using wind magic—you just handle the lines!" Of course, I'd had the thought to try and use my wind magic to speed us up a lot earlier in the day. However, the actual wind speed was already roughly the same as what I could reach with my external mana circulation, about fifteen meters a second. I could generate faster winds, but I wouldn't be able to control the loop. Even if I used my mana as delicately as possible, generating winds at the speed we'd need to get us out of here—say, around thirty meters a second—I'd run out within three minutes. But if I didn't do something soon, it would be too late. Somehow or other, I needed to break out of this deadlock and find a way to run the ozrorcas aground—or any other method to get them off our tail.

I squared my shoulders and unleashed a gale.

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The next moment, the sails started moving—but not at all how I'd imagined they would. Seconds before, they had been swollen with the wind, but now they began to flap chaotically, and the ship's speed suddenly dropped. Dan yanked on a line, sending the ship cutting diagonally through the water before we stopped moving entirely. "Oy!" he yelled, frustrated.

"Give me a second, I'm thinking!" I shouted in reply, cutting off the gale. *Forget speeding up—we actually slowed down...? Wait, how do yachts actually work again? I know I've seen it somewhere, but I can't remember... Why did you have such a poor memory, past-life me?! If it had been in this lifetime, I would remember it for sure!*

Another surge of water hit us, and the ship jerked as we lost even more speed. Cold sweat ran down my back. Thankfully, I hadn't lost my nerve yet, probably thanks to the combat experience I'd had in the past, meager though it was. *Come to think of it, my hands aren't even shaking when I draw my bow—even though they shook like crazy when I faced the Gryetess snake.* I was a little surprised to find I had the capacity to even think about something

so unimportant with my mind racing like it was.

As I tried to get a sense for how the wind was actually moving, I cast wind magic again, doing my best to match the natural wind rushing past the sails while maintaining a circulation loop. The second my own wind intertwined with the air currents, it was like it had blown open a door somewhere in the very depths of my mind.

"That's it! Bernoulli's principle!"

"What the heck are you on about?!" asked Dan, but I didn't have time to reply. Now in full control of the winds rushing past the sails, I softened my circulation loop slowly, *weakening* the wind speed. The ship accelerated noticeably. I weakened the wind speed again, just a little—and the ship shot forward at a rapid pace.

"Wait, Lenn!" Dan shouted. "We're heeling way too far! We're gonna flip—Katzo! Get everyone to pull the dualysse to portside. We need to offset our balance!"

Heeling was when the ship lent over to one side because of wind pressure on the sail. Engine-powered ships could move in a straight line through the water, but fore-and-aft sail ships like the one we stood on now always lent to one side or the other, catching the wind to propel themselves forward. So when Dan said we were heeling too far, it meant we were tilting so close to the surface of the water that righting ourselves again would be close to impossible. Katzo and the guys from Calmwinds moved the dualysse and themselves to the left side of the ship—the side that was currently nearly vertical with the water—bringing us back to a happier, horizontal angle. Checking that everyone was safe and secure, I drew back on my circulation loop again, and we shot across the sea.

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Bernoulli's principle—it was the reason airplanes could soar through the air and sailing ships could still move forward even when pushing against the wind. In the case of airplanes, the wind passing over the top of the wing was faster than that below, and when it came to ships, the wind passing over the downwind side of the sail was faster than that on the upwind side. The difference in wind

speed on each side of the sail would result in a difference in air pressure, creating the force called "lift," which would then propel the ship forward. It was the reason those stupidly massive passenger planes didn't fall out of the sky. The faster air moved, the lower its pressure—and the side where the pressure was lower benefited from the pulling force of lift. The same was true of sails—like those on the ship I stood on now.

When I'd slowed down the wind passing along the inside of the sail, I'd probably increased the pressure difference between the two sides, which had in turn increased the force of lift. I hadn't had any idea if it would work until I'd tried it. My memory told me slowing down the wind speed would increase the pressure, sending us forward—but if I'd been wrong, it would have been like I'd slammed on the brakes instead. The laws of motion and the magical power conversion theorem seemed to support my hypothesis, but I still wasn't entirely confident in it. Right now, all I knew for certain was that by slowing down the wind on the inside of the sail, the wind on the outside had become faster in comparison—and I must have done the opposite at first when I'd tried to increase the wind speed on the *inside* of the sail and we'd instead slowed down. I'd have to put my new theory to the test in various situations before I could arrive at a definite explanation.

But in our current state, this new discovery gave us a massive advantage. We didn't need fast winds, but slower—and I could maintain a circulation loop of slower wind magic almost indefinitely, which in turn meant we could maintain a much faster sailing speed. The ship was currently moving at what must have been closer to thirty kilometers an hour. The ozrorcas, with their average speed of fifteen kilometers an hour, were probably focused on just trying to keep up, given their water magic attacks had stopped entirely. They could try their best, but this endurance contest wasn't one I intended to lose.

"Oy, Lenn!" Dan shouted from the helm in an anxious voice. "If we don't change course now, we're gonna crash into the coast! Cut the wind for a minute so we can turn—uh, you *can* stop it, right?!"

I turned to Dan with a smug, self-satisfied grin—and gave him a

thumbs-up.

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The ozrorcas tried to ram us a few more times before we finally gave them the slip, but thanks to Dan, we got away without even a single bump. The Calmwinds guys definitely had the hardest job during the return journey, moving the stupidly heavy dualysse from one side of the ship to the other to maintain our balance every time we turned. We arrived back at the port in Solcoast just after noon to find a welcoming party waiting for us. Mimosa and Gond were there at the docks, along with every single Calmwinds employee. Their eyes gleamed with clear anticipation.

"You're back a lot sooner than I thought you'd be. So...was it a good haul?" asked Mimosa, grinning at Dan and me.

"Yeah, we managed to catch three dualysse, somehow or other. Well, we caught four, but the ozrorcas snatched one."

A murmur of commotion rippled through the gathered crowd at my response. Gond stepped forward, pulling himself away from the noise. "Ozrorcas?! What about the monster repeller?! Just what happened out— Dan! Your hands!"

Indeed, Dan's palms were dripping with blood, the skin torn and tattered. Though I was pretty sure we'd escaped the ozrorcas soon after I'd started using wind magic, for caution's sake, Dan and I had kept sailing at our breakneck speed until the port had come into sight. There just hadn't been time to patch him up before now.

Dan chuckled tiredly. "Well, it has been a while since I've been on the water... Looks like I got a bit rusty. There were a few times when I didn't have time to wind up the winch, so I had to tug on the lines directly..." He yawned. "Sorry, Grandpa, but I'm beat. The others can tell you what happened—I'm gonna go take a nap. Come on, Lenn, you too. Just being on a sailing ship is tiring enough, but it's especially draining when you're not used to it. I bet even you're feeling pretty dead right about now, yeah?"

He's right... I'm completely wiped. Half a day at sea getting bounced around by the wind and the waves, expending my energy

on maintaining my usually automatic balance, had been tiring enough—not to mention having to balance on the line between life and death, where a single mistake could be fatal. My body felt heavy. I was desperate to lie down. "You're right... I'm exhausted too. Mimosa, we'll meet you at Ginicho tonight. Tell Cap'n I'll be expecting something amazing."

On that note, Dan and I bade the others farewell. I'd thought Dan would stay with Mimosa and Gond, but when we'd said goodbye last night, he'd said he wanted to try sleeping in a lodging house too and had rented a room at the same place as me. Maybe it was just a youthful show of independence, or maybe he was scared of what would happen if the count found out he'd stayed with his family—either way, I wasn't going to press him for an explanation.

"Wait!" Mimosa called out from behind us. We turned to find her holding out a basket. "Here, take this with you. There's a salve and a couple of sandwiches in there. Thought I should prepare something, just in case. I know you're tired, but you're probably hungry too, no?"

"Now that you mention it, I'm starving. Thanks, Mimo. I'll see you tonight." Dan smiled at his aunt and took the basket gratefully. Chowing down on our sandwiches, we made our way back to the lodging house.

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The pair were out of earshot before Mimosa spoke again. "Seriously... Twelve years old and already carrying themselves like seasoned warriors... The audacity," she murmured, not taking her eyes off the retreating boys. Emotions swirled in her chest, a complex clash of joy and sadness that she couldn't put into words. She stood and watched them until they'd vanished entirely, softly biting her lip.

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We snoozed for a good few hours and woke at around six in the

evening. We quickly changed and headed back out, striking a path toward Ginicho. My stomach grumbled despite the sandwiches I'd eaten before my nap.

"That was brutal, huh...?" Dan mumbled, the words thick and slow, like he was gnawing on them before letting each one go.

It's probably all only hitting him now after he's had a bit of rest. I nodded. "Yep. Honestly, we only survived because of your sailing and a whole lotta luck. I'm never, ever doing that again."

Dan smiled weakly. "You can say that again. What *did* you do back there to make us go faster, though? Things would've been a lot more brutal if not for you..."

Well... How do *I explain it?* The concept of atmospheric pressure hadn't really been discovered in this world yet. If I explained all the phenomena that had worked together to speed us up, Dan would definitely declare he wanted to learn more—and pester me until I told him where *I'd* learned it. But I wouldn't—couldn't—reveal my sources.

I didn't intend to tell anyone that I had been reincarnated from a different world. If by some chance word got out that I had knowledge of scores of different mathematical and scientific theories—theories that didn't exist in this world—I could bid farewell to the peaceful, selfish life of my dreams. I might be captured and forced to explain everything I knew to the king—and that would be the *preferable* option. In the worst-case scenario, I'd be abducted by some extreme radical organization who'd whip me until they'd wrung every last bit of information out of my crippled body before killing me to ensure I'd never tell another soul. *I mean, it's definitely* possible*.*

I decided to answer Dan's question as though I'd stumbled across the phenomenon, rather than it being prior knowledge. "Well, I used wind magic—you know, circulated my mana in a loop outside of my body, to analyze the flow of the actual wind, and I realized the wind blowing across the outside of the sail was moving at a quicker speed compared to the wind on the inside." I paused. "Everything after this is just based on my intuition, okay? The faster wind—on the outside of the sail—felt lighter, somehow. It's true that sailing ships move

forward because the wind pushes them from behind, but...I think maybe there's more to it. I felt like we were also being *pulled* forward at the same time, toward the side where the air felt lighter—and I felt like that 'pulling' motion actually added more speed than the pushing did. So I slowed down the wind on the inside of the sail, which made it even 'heavier' in comparison—and the wind on the outside sped up in response. And, well, you know the rest." I shrugged. "It was a lucky discovery, and I'll have to test it out a lot more before I really understand anything. I'm pretty sure I can reproduce it, though."

Dan didn't respond, which didn't really surprise me. Physics was one of his stronger subjects at the Academy, so I assumed he was running over my explanation in his head, considering the possibilities. Evidence supporting my assumption came in the form of Dan pinching the bridge of his nose from time to time—a habit of his that came out whenever he was focusing intently on something. I walked quietly beside him, trying not to disturb his train of thought. Ultimately, by the time we arrived at Ginicho, he'd yet to say a single word.

"We're here, Dan."

"Huh?" He jumped. "Oh, right... But Allen, I think you've made a really, really important discovery. We've always known ships with fore-and-aft sails move faster when the wind comes at a slight angle instead of from behind, yet no one's ever been able to explain why... But maybe it's all because of the 'weight' of the wind, like you said? Oh, I can't wait to test it out," he said. His expression was one of hunger, but I was pretty sure what he wanted to get his hands on wasn't fish, but a pen and some paper.

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"We're here!" I called into the restaurant as I slid open the door. Everyone who'd been here last night was back again, as well as a few of the Calmwinds men who'd been on the ship with us today.

"Managed to crawl out of bed, did ya? I was just saying how I wouldn't be surprised if you slept through to tomorrow morning, the

way you two were moving around earlier," said Con, the man who'd helped Dan steer on the return journey. From what I'd heard, he'd been a sailor on merchant ships for around forty years, joining Calmwinds after he'd retired from active work. His main role now was something to do with drawing up designs for the ships.

"The way we were moving? Oh, sailing is nothing compared to what I usually have to do. Every morning, I push myself to my limit trying to keep up with the insane training plan our club's demon coach came up with, and then our crazy homeroom teacher makes us work just as hard again during lessons... Nah, after today, I'm more mentally exhausted than anything else. I mean, one mistake and we could've died, you know? You seem pretty relaxed, though, Con," Dan replied, flashing me a cheeky grin.

"Demon coach"? Rude. And after I kindly taught you the most efficient way to train your whole body at once... Besides, you've been in the main gate team since the very beginning! "Pushing yourself to your limits" is laying it on a bit thick, don't you think?

Con swallowed in apparent shock, as did everyone else in the room. "You're... You're joking, right?" he finally managed to say in response. "I've been at this for forty-odd years, and the way you were rushing about the ship today made me wonder if I'd finally lost my mind—and you're telling me you push yourself harder than that on a daily basis? The Royal Academy, eh...? Guess those words mean more than I realized." He shook his head. "All I had to do today was follow your directions with the tiller. At my age, the only thing that's quick about me is how quickly I'll give up. To be honest, I nearly threw in the towel more than once this morning—thought we were done for, thought there was no point fighting anymore. But you, Dan—and your friend Lenn too—you boys were the only ones who never had that thought, I'd wager." Con's voice was sincere and calm.

"Yeah, you boys are something else!" interjected a much less reserved Katzo. "And us old farts couldn't do nothin' but shake in our boots! Nah, you didn't hesitate for a second, jumping from one movement to the next like it was nothing—it gave me chills, watching you two! Can't believe you've already become such a big

man, kid!”

The others from Calmwinds opened their mouths simultaneously as though to agree, but Mimosa got in first, fixing Katzo with a sharp glare. “‘Gave you chills’? Seriously?! Did you forget you were there to *help* these kids?” She sighed. “Think about it—all of you. The situation you guys were in this morning... Do you honestly think a couple of kids could’ve had it completely under control? I wouldn’t force any of you to do anything beyond what you’re each capable of, but you should have at *least* shown them what a reliable adult looks like—shown them you had guts! No matter how amazing these boys are, they’re still just that: boys. Twelve years old. It’s up to us adults to make sure we never forget that.”

She’s reminding me of Mother... Rosa and I had always been more capable than other kids our age, and as a result, our father often treated us as adults—forgetting that he was the parent, and we the children. Of all the things he did, that was what most often drew Mother’s ire.

“Well, I was only able to keep a clear head—barely—because this guy was there,” quipped Dan, elbowing me in the ribs. “I knew he’d have something up his sleeve.” He chuckled, trying to soften the stiff tension that now hung in the air.

“Get that smirk off your potato face, Daniel Sardos. You’re ranked second in our year at the Royal Academy, and you’re saying *I* was the reliable one?” I laughed. “Nah, I knew if I messed up, Dan here would cover for me somehow.”

Everyone froze at my words. Evidently, my classmate hadn’t told his Calmwinds family about his grades. *Guess he’s not the type to boast, after all.*

“‘Potato face’?! You’ve got a lot of nerve insulting how other people look when your own face is as bland as a slice of bread!”

“Who’re you calling bland-faced?! I have refined features!”

I could hear stifled laughter from the spectators watching our mudslinging contest, with its admittedly equally plain-faced contestants.

“I can’t believe it...” Mimosa said, her cheeks red from laughter. “To think the itty-bitty baby Dan I remember is now second in his

year at *the* Royal Academy... Dear me. Well, even if you're not the most handsome guys, I reckon you've both got enough going for you that it won't really matter, you know?" She snorted. "Besides, having a good wingman will land you a much better woman in the end, so don't worry about it too much. All right, let's eat! Icho, you ready?"

I heard that snort, you know.

Icho smirked. "Who do you think you're talking to? Get ready, you lot. Tonight, you'll get to experience the result of seven generations of Ginicho talent and eat to your heart's content!"

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Mimosa had selected the biggest dualysse—weighing around seven hundred kilograms, by her estimation—to serve as the focal point of tonight's dishes. It seemed like dualysse were similar to bluefin tuna in that the bigger they were, the tastier they'd be. Icho had also judged it to be the best specimen out of the three we'd hauled in. Incidentally, the concept of leaving meat to mature—thereby improving the flavor—did exist in this world, just like it had in my past life. However, as a rule of thumb, it seemed not all monster-based meat improved much by letting it rest.

"Since Dan's already here, there's no point being stingy with the dualysse now, you know?" Mimosa said, smiling broadly.

Icho's cooking, unsurprisingly, was delicious beyond words. The first course was a clear dashi soup made from the fish bones, into which he'd added thin slivers of the dualysse's skin and a garnish of herb leaves reminiscent of Japanese wild parsley. It was just what I needed to invigorate my still-tired body.

Next came the sashimi. Icho dished up cuts from eight different parts of the fish, from mildly iron-scented meat from the cheek to firm, chewy slices from the tail. I savored every bite of the glossy red flesh, which was only made better when accompanied by my beloved wasabi-and-soy-sauce mix.

The courses continued one after another. I chowed down on crisply grilled heart meat and tore off bites of vinegar-soaked,

sinewy intestines. A plate of salt-boiled fish collar came next, luscious rings of fat still attached. It was quickly followed by the spiced and fried spine of the dualysse, with generous chunks of meat still clinging to the bones. A massive chunk of the fish was served as a roast. Enjoying every new course as it arrived, we finally moved on to the final dish of the night: a dualysse rice bowl.

Rice, as it turned out, was a staple food on the Baerent Islands—and as the main trading post between the islands and Yugria, Solcoast had it readily available too. When I'd discovered that fact the previous day, I'd begged Cap'n to make me something with both sashimi and rice. The dualysse rice bowl was the result of my pleading.

Icho grunted as he placed the bowl in front of me. "Just like you said, I boiled the rice and mixed it with vinegar, sugar, and salt. I didn't have the time to perfect it, though. Frankly, it's not something I'd be proud enough of to serve to a customer, but for you, I'm making an exception. I won't charge for it—just tell me your opinion," he grumbled somewhat angrily.

Looks like he really does hate being made to serve something he's not happy with... Guess I was pretty forceful with my request yesterday. I added some soy sauce and wasabi to the bowl and dug in.

"It's... It's so good, Cap'n! A little less sugar in the rice next time, maybe—that's how I like it, anyway. You could also add some seaweed or sliced onions on top for a more varied flavor, but that's up to you and your instincts."

There was just slightly too much sugar, but aside from that, he'd made perfect sushi rice. More importantly, he'd tried his absolute best to fulfill my selfish demand; I was deeply moved by the display of customer service, coming from a man who'd claimed to have given up just a few days prior.

"I'm completely satisfied. This is the taste I've been looking for—the taste I thought I'd never find again—and now I've found it. Thanks, Cap'n. Really—thank you." Although I remained in my seat, I bowed my head deeply.

Icho, taken aback by my odd display of sincerity, didn't respond

with anything more than an embarrassed smile, rubbing his neck awkwardly.

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"So anyway, Lenn—can I convince you to take this, at least? We're all grateful for what you've done for us. If I let you leave empty-handed, I don't think I'd be able to forgive myself." Mimosa held something out—an intricately detailed black sword. "It's the work of Zanstet de Ningroze 14th and the finest sword ever acquired by our merchants." She looked at me anxiously, as did Gond beside her. I'd already refused to take any payment for my part in the fishing expedition, but clearly, they were hoping I'd accept the sword instead.

I'm glad they value my work so much, but... I shook my head.

"It's not enough for you—I knew it," Gond mumbled, hanging his head. Mimosa looked upset too.

"Oh, that's not why. Even an amateur like me can easily see that sword is probably ridiculously valuable."

"But then, you don't need to show restraint—"

"It's not about restraint. Chloe said something the first time I came to this restaurant: 'Our prices reflect our pride in our work.' Cap'n just said it too—he wouldn't take payment for a dish he wasn't satisfied with. I feel the same. I came here on vacation, and everything I've done since was just vacation activities. I can't accept such an expensive gift just for doing whatever I wanted to do, even if I coincidentally might have helped out along the way."

If I just thoughtlessly accepted such a valuable gift, my attitude toward money would definitely get warped—as would my attitude toward life. Sure, in a life-or-death situation, I'd take the sword without a second thought. But right now, there was no need to rush things. Just like my father often told me, I wanted to "live humbly and truthfully." I wanted to slowly accumulate experience and gradually outfit myself with equipment suitable for me—equipment I found with my own two eyes. It was just another part of my most important goal in this life: doing whatever *I* wanted. It wasn't

something on which I could compromise.

I said as much to Mimosa, who responded by narrowing her eyes as though she was trying to figure out if I was telling the truth.

"Jeez, you're always stubborn about the weirdest things. Mimo, don't worry about it. He's always like this at school too," Dan said, relaxing onto the counter as he sipped his tea.

I ignored him. "Although...I do have a business proposition for you, Mimosa. Would Calmwinds be interested in sponsoring the Royal Academy Sailing Club?"

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Dan's expression went from relaxed to stiff in an instant. "Hang on a minute, Allen. Do we even *have* a sailing club? I've never heard of it before."

I haven't heard of it either, idiot. I just came up with it. "I'm gonna form it when vacation's over, obviously. The River Rune will be the perfect training ground, and the captain, of course, will be Daniel Sardos, the prodigious pride of Sardos County."

Dan's shoulders fell. "I knew you'd come up with some crap like that! A warship would be one thing, but there's no way the kids at the Academy are gonna be interested in little sailing ships that are only useful for fishing and transport! Heck, even the transport ships are gonna be replaced by engine-powered ships before long."

I sighed. "Why is it that every single student at the Academy is somehow so thickheaded? It doesn't matter if people aren't interested. We're not doing it to be popular. Warships? Do you really want to join a club just to pull an oar like your life depends on it? No, there's only two things that matter—if it's something I wanna do, and if you think it sounds like fun. So? What *do* you think?"

"Look, I love sailing, but I don't have time to play around at school. Plus, I'm already one of the vice captains of the Hill Path Club too! Besides, do you really think they'd approve a sailing club in the first place? With the discovery you made, we'd be better off forming a physics club or something and researching—"

Mwa ha ha. So there is *something you wanna do, huh?* If Dan

had actually seemed disinterested in my idea, I would have left him alone—but not when he was just scrambling for excuses. I'd get him to teach me everything he knew about sailing, by *any* means necessary.

"Approve it? They won't have a choice. As for the Hill Path Club, we're going to be consolidating the years into one group next semester, and I'll just make Leo and Stella be captain and vice captain. I know you really put your heart into it as a vice captain too, but after seeing how you handled the ship today, I'm absolutely sure. Dan, this is what you should be dedicating your precious youth to—sailing! Don't make the mistake of focusing on the wrong thing. The most important thing in life is the feeling I know you felt when you said those words: 'I love sailing.' If you dress it up with a vague name like 'the Physics Club' and stray from your real desires, you'll never achieve anything. You want to sail a ship—and if that's the purpose of the club, then it's gotta be the Sailing Club. Also, what's so bad about playing around, huh? You only get to live out your precious student life once, you know. Those who enjoy the game of life are those who win it. So just do it, Dan!"

I finished what I personally thought was a fairly impressive speech. Dan responded by imitating a goldfish—mouth opening and closing, but no words coming out. Shrugging, I turned to Mimosa. "Well, now that that's taken care of—where were we on the sponsorship thing?"

"I don't think you could call that 'taken care of,' but... Oh well. You said it was a business proposition, right? From a business perspective, I can't give you an answer until I've heard all the details," she replied, her tone instantly serious.

She's a proper businesswoman, all right. Can't expect any naivete here. "Very reasonable, of course. The truth is, Dan and I discovered a new possibility in the world of sailing today. I'd like Calmwinds to provide us with a ship designed to make the most of said possibility. Apart from the labor needed to design it, I'm pretty sure the ship itself won't cost much more than a normal one would. In return, Calmwinds will get a lot of publicity. In the river right next to the biggest city in the kingdom, there'll be a cutting-edge ship with your

company name and logo emblazoned on the sail in massive letters. If our hobby—er, research goes well, just think of the impact it'll have on your company. Of course, there is a risk our research won't prove fruitful, and your investment might go to waste. Basically, you just have to decide whether you think Dan and I are worth investing in."

Mimosa glared at me, her hands on her hips. "You're asking me whether I think you and Dan are worth the cost of a brand-new, custom-design ship? Really... Do I actually need to justify that with an answer?"

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Dan and I spent all of the following two days working with Calmwinds to design a ship that would take optimal advantage of my wind magic propulsion theory, trialing different ideas in the bay beside Solcoast. Mainly, our plans centered on altering the traditional fore-and-aft design, which typically favored a narrow hull to minimize water resistance, and on somehow making the center of gravity variable so the ship wouldn't tilt as much. The initial design for the ship was based on the assumption that it would be operated by Royal Academy students (aka those with a certain aptitude in Strengthening Magic), which gave us a little more wiggle room. The Calmwinds shipwrights had altered one of their existing ships to match it as closely as possible, allowing us to trial the design, and we were able to finalize it by the end of the second day. Mimosa promised the finished product would be at the Academy by the end of summer break. Of course, since we'd probably need to make adjustments as our research progressed, we also agreed on regular meetings between the Sailing Club captain and a Calmwinds representative.

During those two days, Dan also became a member of the Emissive Magic Club. *"I'm never gonna be able to get a girlfriend now,"* he'd moaned, but he obviously knew learning wind magic would be crucial to his role as the captain of the Sailing Club. It would have been one thing if he'd been a mage, but unfortunately,

the girls at the Academy had a rather critical view of boys from the knight course joining the Emissive Magic Club.

As for the competition to cook for Dan's birthday feast, Icho had apparently tried his best but quickly been eliminated—or rather, he'd been disqualified. Dan—who would be judging the competition—had been surprisingly fond of my wasabi-and-soy-sauce mix, and under his supervision, Icho had created a dish containing his own special blend of the condiments. Unfortunately, it was immediately binned by the poison taster upon submission, and Icho's dish was eliminated before Dan could even see it.

"The poison taster said his nose had gone numb, and Icho replied, 'That's what it's meant to do!' They nearly had him arrested," Mimosa had told me when I'd met up with her in the capital a while later. *"It was fine though, really. We all got to celebrate Dan's birthday together that night at Ginicho, and I get to see him regularly now that we're sponsoring the club."*

And so, with our ship design finalized and my first postreincarnation vacation feeling well spent, I prepared to return to Runerelia.

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Thus marked the formation of the Royal Academy's Sailing Club.

At the same time, it also marked the beginning of Daniel Sardos's temporary dip in public opinion.

Some said he'd been removed from his post as vice captain of the Hill Path Club and was now just sulkily playing around as a result.

Others scorned his fixation on old-fashioned sailing ships, saying he was refusing to get with the times.

Even more people condemned him as a stubborn child who refused to listen to the wise advice of his parent and mentor, the great Count Sardos.

In reality, of course, those assessments of the young man were as far from the truth as they could have been—and it wasn't very long at all until the gossipmongers found themselves eating their words.

Intermission: Friend

Winter, when Dan was nine.

"Oy, Dan! We're gonna have a stern-sculling race from Braya Beach to Diamond Crag! Come on!"

Dan was at the Calmwinds shipbuilding docks, helping the adults with their work, when a few of his preparatory school classmates appeared.

"Sorry, guys. I gotta help out here today. Next time for sure!"

His classmates weren't pleased with this response.

"Seriously? You're always working, Dan!"

"You haven't played with us in *ages*. You're boring, man!"

"I'm over this. Let's just go. He always says he'll come next time, but he never does!" His classmates left, still making snide remarks they knew he could hear. Dan watched them go and sighed.

"You sure, Dan? I'm happy to let you help because you said you wanted to, but we're not forcing you to be here, you know? Why don't you go play with your friends today?" said his aunt Mimosa in a cheerful voice, giving his back a light shove.

Dan just shook his head sadly. "It's fine. If I go, it'll turn into a fight like always, or they'll just force me to be the judge. It's boring."

Mimosa frowned sadly at her lonely-looking nephew. Dan had always excelled in everything he tried his hand at. He had a keen sense of curiosity and a brilliant mind; he could remember and understand every single thing he'd ever been taught. He had superb instincts and outstanding physical skills too. He easily surpassed his classmates when it came to both academics and sports. Yet, despite being more capable than most people, he wasn't conceited in the slightest. Most boys with his skills would have reveled in being the center of attention, but Dan was a more reserved, kinder child—the type who hung back at the sidelines, making sure everyone else was having a good time. Even with his humble personality, Dan had

always been surrounded by friends, and Mimosa—along with everyone else at Calmwinds—was immeasurably proud of him.

Recently, though, Dan had clearly been avoiding his friends, and Mimosa had an inkling as to why. His latest report card contained more than just excellent marks—it also revealed a significant growth in Dan's magical aptitude level. So significant, in fact, that Mimosa had at first been convinced there'd been a mistake. Even before his mana core had started developing, Dan had always shown a tendency to hold back when it came to his own abilities. But now, with his abnormally high magical aptitude as well as his innate talent, playing games by the same rules as his classmates was probably impossible. Indeed, he probably wouldn't even be able to find a partner in anyone remotely *close* to his age.

"Being so talented is a problem in and of itself, I guess..." Mimosa sighed, looking once again at her beloved nephew. There was too much sadness in his eyes for a boy his age, too much of that particular loneliness felt by those locked in the struggle to find a place they belonged.

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The next morning at breakfast, Dan's grandfather Gond said something completely unexpected. "Dan, guess what? Next month, you, Vina, and I are going to the open day at the Roma Naval Base up north! Just think about it—the Royal Navy's newest warships, all lined up in a row! You wanna see it, right?"

Dan's eyes widened. "Seriously, Grandpa?! Aren't those tickets super hard to get? And wait... Isn't it on a weekday?"

Gond thumped himself on the chest. "Yep! A friend of mine was lucky enough to win some tickets, and he's happy to give them to me if I want them. Also, who cares if you miss a few days of school, huh? You've been giving it your all since you started, and you've been first in your year the whole time too. This is your reward. Plus, I reckon you can learn just as much outside of the classroom."

Roma Naval Base was a key strategic position for the Royal Navy. As one would expect, ordinary citizens weren't usually permitted to

set foot there. Once a year, an open day was held, primarily geared toward the local residents—but one's chances of winning a ticket were extraordinarily low, and the lucky winners could sell their tickets at a very premium price. Not surprisingly, said tickets weren't the kind of thing one would happily give away just because a friend had asked. No, Dan knew Gond had acquired the tickets for his sake—and that he'd probably paid through the nose to make it happen.

Vina, Dan's mother, giggled. "Dan's not worrying about school, Dad—he's worrying about your job. I mean, you hate skipping out on a workday, right? What is it you're always telling your employees? 'Take your work seriously. People need to trust the ships you're building with their lives. Everyone at Calmwinds shares that responsibility.'" As she repeated Gond's words with mock seriousness, she raised an eyebrow at him, and he avoided her gaze.

"Well... I mean, really, checking out cutting-edge ship designs is an important part of my work too, no?"

Mimosa smirked at the poor excuse. "Cutting-edge or otherwise, we don't build warships here, remember?"

"No one asked you! Galley or not, a ship's a ship, so seeing them's worth it either way! Dan, you want to see them too, right?"

All eyes turned to Dan. *I've been making everyone worry about me, what with how down I've been recently...* he immediately realized. Bright as he was, he also knew turning down the opportunity—for which the tickets had definitely already been acquired—would just worry them more. Moreover...he'd get to see the newest warships, and up close too. Fighting his keen curiosity was near impossible. "Yeah! Thanks, Grandpa! I'm super excited!"

Dan's eyes shone with an innocent excitement his family hadn't seen in so long, and all three of them felt relief at his reply.

Sadly, the feeling was fleeting. At that moment, Katzo, the head shipwright, knocked at the entrance to the room. "Good morning, President," he started, hesitant. "You have a visitor."

"At this ungodly hour? Who the heck is it?" Gond replied, pulling an unpleasant face.

"He says he's come with a message from the count."

Dan just tilted his head in confusion, but everyone else's

expressions fell.

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Once the messenger had taken his leave, Dan was called to the parlor, where Gond and Vina still sat, waiting for his arrival with grave faces.

"I knew I'd have to tell you someday, but even then, this day has come sooner than I expected." Vina sighed. "Dan, there's something we need to talk about. It's... It's about your father."

She gestured for Dan to sit, taking the opportunity to resolve herself while he did so. "I've always told you he was a traveling sailor and that I didn't know where he was now, but...that wasn't the truth. Your father's name is Thomas von Sardos—the same man who rules over Sardos County."

Dan was lost for words.

"We knew the count would be informed of your magical aptitude level sooner or later. Your school principal said much the same, not knowing of your blood relation—said it wouldn't be surprising for the count to consider adopting you with potential like yours. If they'd known you were actually his biological child—well, it'd be obvious to anyone that the count would immediately try to reclaim you. But, Dan..."

Vina paused for a moment, staring deeply into her son's eyes. "Know this. Although he's the count, and although he is your biological father, I'm not going to send you away if it's not what you want. If you go, you'll be entering noble society. You'll be living in luxury. It will be an amazing opportunity for you. But in exchange, your relationships with those you leave behind will change too, and you'll be exposed to the rigid rules and expectations of their world. I know asking you to make this choice is cruel... You're still just a child. But this is your life and no one else's. No matter how hard the choice might be, you have to decide your path for yourself. And if you make the wrong choice, no one else is to blame, no matter how things turn out. Do you understand?"

Dan returned his mother's unrelenting stare and nodded slowly.

She sighed again. "I told the messenger to ask the count to give us a little time. I'll help you consider your options, so let's carefully __"

Before Vina could finish her sentence, Dan was already shaking his head. "I'm not going to go. I want everything to stay the same as it's always been, with you and everyone else, Mom," he declared, not a hint of hesitation in his voice. Gond, who'd held his tongue until that point, narrowed his eyes.

"Give it some proper thought, Dan," he said, his tone hard. "If you become a noble, you'll get a much better education than you'll ever get around here. Do you know what his messenger said? He said the count thinks you could even get into the Royal Academy. I don't know much about what kind of world you'd end up in, but if you did make it into that school...there's nothing you wouldn't be able to do. There's no reason you have to decide here and now, is there?"

Gond loved his grandson more than anything, and naturally, he never wanted Dan to leave his side. It was *because* Dan meant so much to him that he knew this was one situation in which he needed to be impartial. He couldn't let his own selfish desire to keep his grandson beside him destroy the boy's future.

Dan simply shook his head again, not pausing to think for even a second. "It's fine, Grandpa. I'd never fit in with those nobles. I'm gonna become a sailor, just like I've always said. I'm gonna sail on a massive ship and travel all around the world. So I need to stay here and experience heaps of different ships, plus meet heaps of different sailors. Also...there's still so many things I want to learn from you, Grandpa," Dan said, grinning. Gond didn't reply, though tears swelled in the corners of his eyes.

Vina considered her son closely for a minute, as though she was trying to ascertain the truth of his reply. Finally, she spoke again, her voice tinged with the faintest ripple of unease. "Okay, Dan. I understand how you feel about this. So... So I'll support you. Protect you. No matter what happens, I'll—"

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"Welcome, esteemed residents, to Roma Naval Base! We thank you profusely for your ongoing understanding of and cooperation with our necessary activities here. As I'm sure you understand, I won't be able to show you everything here today, but I would be honored to showcase some of the regular work and training we conduct on these premises. I hope today will serve as an opportunity to remove some of the barriers between the navy and the local residents, thereby promoting greater mutual understanding between our two groups."

The base commander smiled genially at the gathered crowd, his distinctive cloak—which designated him as a member of the Royal Order's Second Legion—flapping behind him in the mild breeze. The annual public open-day tour, limited to just sixty lucky participants, had commenced.

Roma Naval Base occupied a key position in the kingdom's defense strategy against the Rosamour Empire to the north, and it was so large, it seemed like a whole town in itself. Passing through the landside entrance gate to the base, the group first walked through a residential area populated by the naval soldiers, staff, and their families. Apart from the obvious barracks, there were also shops, parks, preparatory schools, libraries, hospitals and day care centers, and countless other facilities. As necessitated by the numerous facilities, outside personnel were allowed to come and go from the residential area to some extent (provided they had a permit to enter, of course). The library the visitors were shown around also served as a specialized museum, and the old sea charts, ship logbooks, and models of antique warships greatly stimulated Dan's intellectual curiosity.

After the residential area, there was another gate, this one more heavily guarded than the first. Beyond it lay the port. Unlike the residential area, as a rule, only naval personnel were permitted to enter the port under any circumstances. During the open day, however, those lucky enough to have gotten their hands on a ticket could choose to go through the gate and see the warships docked in the bay, and they could even experience boarding one.

Dan, Gond, and Vina enjoyed a pleasant lunch at a restaurant in

the residential area. The main dish was a specialty of the base, a kind of brown stew heavily flavored with exotic spices. Their hunger sated, the three put their hands up for the warship experience.

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"Well, ain't this just magnificent?!" said Gond, taking in the endless warships docked one beside another in the wide harbor. He was no more able to hide the excitement in his voice than he could the childlike sparkle in his eyes.

"They're awesome, Grandpa!" Dan agreed, his own expression identical to that of his grandfather beside him.

The majority of the ships anchored in the harbor were galleys, as expected, with numerous oars jutting out on either side of the hulls. However, there were also a good number of other ships too, including a massive schooner equipped with the biggest sails Dan had ever seen. The extravagant detailing on the ship's exterior suggested it was probably a transport vessel, the kind used by important dignitaries on their overseas journeys.

"You'll be boarding the three ships on this side today," said the knight leading the tour, pointing to one of the behemoths. "We'll split you up into groups in a minute." The ships he'd indicated were what seemed to be the most common types at the base: decently sized galleys equipped with only auxiliary sails. Longer and narrower compared to the civilian transport ships Dan had seen, they sat quite high above the waterline, despite the thick metal plates adorning each hull. The hulls' design would reduce frictional resistance against the water, sacrificing stability for speed and maneuverability. Pointed rams protruded from the prows, useful for either piercing enemy ships to sink them or as a means to board them.

Following the knight's directions, the civilians divided up into three groups and boarded the galleys. Once on board, Dan's group soon heard the sound of a drum, and the rowers on each side of the ship began to move, pushing and pulling to the slow rhythm of the drummer's beat. With the sails still folded, the ship cut through the water, making for the open sea. A breeze carrying the faint touch of

spring ruffled Dan's hair as sunlight danced across the rippling waves. The instant they cleared the harbor, the drumbeat began to quicken, and little by little, the ship started to speed up. The rowers moved in perfect unison with the booming of the drum. They sped across the open sea, the sailors showing off well-practiced maneuvers as the ship turned and weaved. Dan couldn't begin to guess how many hours had gone into perfecting those moves. All he knew was that it must have been very difficult to get so many people with differing proficiencies in Strengthening Magic to output it at the exact same level.

"You wanna give it a go, kid?" asked one of the rowers—a short, robust man—with a chuckle. Dan jumped; he'd been lost in thought, staring intensely at the man while pinching the bridge of his nose and muttering to himself.

"Are... Are you sure? I've never rowed a galley before, and I don't know if I'll be good enough..." Dan replied honestly, though his face lit up with an excited grin.

The sailor gave him a wry smile. "No one's good enough the first time they row, so don't worry too much. I'm curious, though—why were you only staring at me?"

"Well, because you seem to be the best rower... It was just a guess, though, Mr. Morley." Dan scratched at the back of his neck, looking embarrassed.

The sailor—Morley, according to the patch on his breast pocket—burst into laughter. "Good eyes, kid! Come on, then. The ship's not gonna capsize no matter how bad you are. Challenging yourself with new things is what life's all about, eh?" Morley slid over in his seat, the front-most one on the starboard side, making room for Dan between himself and the hull. Still a little hesitant, Dan shuffled forward and took the proffered seat, clutching the oar.

"Ready?" Morley grinned. He kept hold of the very tip of the oar, perhaps in case Dan went flying. "And...heave-ho!"

They were off, Dan rowing in correspondence with the man's shouts. "Heave-ho! Don't row with your arms, boy! Row with your chest! Feel the rhythm with your body! Heave-ho! You're doing great, kid!" Dan's tiny body moved like a spring, forward and back,

forward and back. “That’s it! I don’t think this is your first time, kiddo. You’ve picked it up too quickly!”

“It’s my first time rowing on a galley—heave-ho! I’m from a coastal town—heave-ho! I’ve been rowing paddleboats ever since—heave-ho!—I was born!” Dan’s face flushed, both with embarrassment at the praise and with the effort of trying to think up ways to put even more power into his strokes.

“Hmph. I reckon you’d be able to row without my help already. You’re a diamond in the rough, kid!” Morley praised him again. Gond, who was watching from nearby, bristled with pride.

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“Heave-ho! Heave-ho!”

A somewhat strange atmosphere hung over the ship.

Rowing. While practice and effort would of course make you a much better rower, in itself, the action was extremely simple: Put the oar in the water, then row. Morley and the other rowers had found themselves impressed by Dan’s work. However, since he was a child used to rowing—and one whose mana core had started to develop—the way he handled the oar, while impressive, wasn’t entirely implausible.

But Dan had been rowing for close to thirty minutes now. Most ordinary adults would have found it impossible to do the same. Even some of the sailors more lacking in magical aptitude would be struggling by this point, regardless of their thorough training. Yet Dan continued to row. His tiny body—still years away from manhood—didn’t seem to feel the strain, and his expression was utterly nonchalant. The rowers sitting behind the boy watched him with clenched teeth. It would be ridiculous for any of them to request a break from rowing—not while the boy who’d come for a lighthearted tour plowed on.

Finally, the ship’s commander called out, his voice bellowing from where he stood at the rudder. “Easy oar!” As directed, the sailors lifted the oars from the water, and the ship glided along slowly.

The commander strode down the length of the ship, cloak

swirling in the breeze rushing across the deck. He was young, probably only just in his twenties—much younger than the battle-worn Morley. "I'm impressed, lad. A magical aptitude level like yours is rare. What's your name, and how old are you? Where do you hail from?"

Dan rushed to his feet. "Um, I'm Daniel—Daniel Calmwinds. I'm nine. I live in a town called Solcoast in Sardos County."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Daniel. My name is Rafter von Epic." The man held out his right hand with a smile. Dan shook it, his eyes widening at the sensation. Out of all the hands he'd held in his short life, this one was different, hardened through countless hours of intense Strengthening Magic training.

Rafter's eyes narrowed as he grinned at Dan's reaction. "Sardos County, you said? Count Sardos is one of the more important nobles in the Glaux Region, if I remember correctly." He raised an eyebrow. "And just nine years old? Your mana core's only just started developing, then. Is this your mother?"

Vina nodded, her expression stiff.

"I'm sure you're well aware already, but your son seems to be blessed with a most uncommon aptitude for magic. However, his talent is unrefined—an unpolished diamond, some would call him. It would be a waste if he were not allowed to cultivate his talents in the right environment. I'd be pleased to write a letter of recommendation to Count Sardos on his behalf." Rafter peered curiously at Dan's mother, waiting for her response. Before she could reply, the boy himself interjected, shaking his head.

"I'm gonna train to be a sailor under my grandpa, so I don't need a recommendation. Thank you anyway."

Rafter looked surprised. He crouched down toward Dan. "Don't you ever feel like the world around you is just a bit too small?" he started, his voice warm and knowing. "I was born a commoner too, and I spent my whole childhood feeling like the world was so narrow, it was suffocating me. It wasn't until Viscount Epic adopted me and I started attending the Royal Academy that I felt like I'd found where I belonged. My first day at the Academy, surrounded by people far, far more talented than me...it was the first time I felt like

I could truly breathe."

Dan didn't answer. He simply shook his head again, more forcefully than before. Rafter watched him thoughtfully for a moment, but eventually, he nodded. "Perhaps I am meddling too much." With another polite nod, he turned, making for the rudder once more. "We'll return to base! Prepare the oars!"

Morley relieved Dan from his oar, and the boy jumped back a step, his eyes again gleaming hungrily as he observed the older man's practiced movements.

No one but Vina noticed the rigidity of his jaw or the thin, unsmiling shape of his lips.

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Count Sardos was beginning to get impatient.

The reason, of course, was the boy sitting in front of him—and his obstinate refusal to agree to move to the count's estate. He'd sent one messenger after another, but none of them had returned with the favorable reply he'd been anticipating. Fed up, he'd used his authority as the local ruler to forcibly invite Vina and Dan to his estate in Raconteur.

Naturally, the count was aware his request was rather selfish. He hadn't so much as seen the boy since he'd been born, and yet now he wanted to recognize him as his legitimate child and take him into his estate.

At the time—now already a decade ago—the count had actually intended to welcome both Dan and Vina into his family. However, his first wife, Brillauntey, had vehemently objected to the idea of the commoner Vina becoming one of the count's formal concubines. Count Sardos had known that forcing her to accept Vina wouldn't result in happiness for anyone involved—and when he'd asked Vina for her thoughts, she'd replied, *"I could never be at home among nobles such as yourselves. It's probably for the best."* Then she'd bid him farewell, her expression one of utter nonchalance. She'd told him to forget about her and Dan, saying she'd raise him to believe himself the son of a traveling sailor, but the count had refused. He'd

declared he'd recognized the child as his son, legitimate or not, and continued to send Vina money for Dan's expenses, though she'd told him it was unnecessary. So while the count wasn't proud of how things had turned out, he thought, at least, that Vina didn't bear a grudge against him.

Indeed, as proof of that very thought, the Vina who sat before him now was just as she had been all those years ago: lively, cheerful, and laughing in a most unladylike manner as she made rather impertinent quips. "You're still pulling the same 'woe is me' faces you did back then, Your Lordship."

The count could sense Brillauntey's mood darkening by the second at Vina's insolent manner of speech as she glowered from her seat beside him. Hurriedly, he tried to prevent it from plummeting any further. "Daniel, why are you so against the thought of moving here? You say you wish to sail on a grand ship, and I do not oppose the idea. Our county borders the sea; import, export, shipbuilding, and supply for the Royal Navy—ships are the very heart of the industries on which we rely. If you wish to make your mark in the world of sailing, then join me here. Cultivate your skills as a member of our house, and set your sights on the Royal Academy. If you graduate from there, you could join the Royal Order's Second Legion, whose members command the Royal Navy. Or you could secure a seat in the king's government, something to do with commerce and trade. Either would be a better future for a boy with your talent, don't you think?"

Dan shook his head, and the count sighed wearily before continuing. "Vina, what about you? Surely you must find his decision somewhat disappointing. Daniel's marks—and his magical aptitude level—are beyond anything the Sardos family has produced over our long history. If he joins me here and refines his abilities, he would be all but guaranteed a spot at *the* Royal Academy—even a spot in Class A would possibly be within his reach. Surely you understand the reputation and riches that would fall right into his lap were he to pass?"

Vina shrugged casually. "*The* Royal Academy it might be, but I'm just a commoner, Your Lordship. I don't know squat about what a

spot there would mean. To be honest, I'm more concerned with the fact that you think there's a chance he *wouldn't* be able to get into Class A. Are there really any kids out there who are more capable than Dan?" she shot back.

Brillauntey shook her head in disgust. "Good grief! Commoners truly know nothing of the world. There are children the same age as Daniel who are already the talk of the whole kingdom—outside our borders as well. Duke Seizinger's son is said to be a prodigy in both academics and weaponry, and they also say his magical aptitude level already exceeds 10,000. Ten thousand! At just nine years old! That's four times higher than your son's—and his magical aptitude is his only redeeming feature. In fact, Daniel's generation seems to be *teeming* with prodigies, according to the information I gathered throughout the last social season. To speak plainly, I consider it unlikely that Daniel *would* be able to pass the exams, even with the full support of the Sardos family behind him."

Dan grimaced almost imperceptibly at Brillauntey's declaration. It wasn't because he was hearing of the existence of others his age whose talents surpassed his own—indeed, it was the opposite. For the first time, he truly understood it: The Royal Academy was the gathering place for people just like him—people *better* than him—from all over the kingdom.

Dan had never encountered anyone who could compete with him. It was only natural he'd feel the way he did now—that he'd feel the instinctual need to test himself against them and understand how skilled he truly was. That he'd feel the need to compete without holding anything back. To maybe get into a fight every now and then, but to also mutually recognize each other's true skills. To find friends he could treat as equals...

In that moment, Dan realized the friends he'd been waiting for would probably be waiting for him at the Royal Academy.

But it would mean leaving his mother behind. Leaving his grandfather and his aunt behind. It would mean causing them sadness. He wouldn't do it. He *couldn't* do it. Nor could he stomach the idea of bidding farewell to his friends at Calmwinds, who'd always treated him like family. It would be like tearing his own heart

out of his chest.

Vina looked at her son with sadness in her eyes. She was the only one who knew what the faint grimace on Dan's face truly meant. Brillauntey, on the other hand, took it as the sour face of a boy who'd just realized how untalented he actually was, and she continued her lecture. "Hmph. Indeed, boy. Now that you're aware of how average you truly are, perhaps you'll understand your place. And you, Thomas"—she turned to her husband, a sharp glint in her eyes—"should understand yours too. You are their lord. You, of all people, should not deign to worry yourself over the feelings of some lowly commoners. Use your authority as the count and have the boy transferred to our family records. He is, after all, your blood; there will be no problems from a legal standpoint. While we sit here entertaining this rudeness, his rivals are already well on their way into studying for the entrance examinations." She turned back to Dan with a sneer. "Unless you'd like to wait until *after* we've run that pathetic company into the ground first? For that is what will happen if you pick a fight with a prestigious noble family like ours."

Dan's face paled at the threat. *Calmwinds will be ruined. And all because I'm being selfish—*

His thoughts stopped short as his mother sighed deeply. She fixed Brillauntey with a gaze as hard as tempered steel and began to speak. "Two conditions. If you'll agree to them, we'll do whatever you say."

"Mom?!" Dan shouted, but Vina held up a hand to silence him, her tone softer as she spoke again.

"You've already realized them, right? Your true feelings. You can't suppress them anymore. Grandpa, Mimosa, and everyone from Calmwinds...they only want you to be happy. Ignoring your true feelings is the same as betraying them, Dan." She smiled gently. "It's like having a favorite shirt. No matter how much you might love it, one day, you'll outgrow it, and then—it needs to be replaced. You've outgrown Calmwinds already, Dan. A long time ago."

Dan swallowed but didn't speak, and Vina turned back to the count. "First, you must promise to support Dan with everything House Sardos has to offer. Promise to give him the best education

available, to give him every chance to get into the so-called Royal Academy."

"That goes without saying," replied the count with a nod.

"And secondly, until Dan gets into the Academy at least, let me live here with him, at your estate."

Undisguised hatred clouded Brillauntey's face. "You're just a commoner," she spat. "You dare believe I'll allow you to join our family? Insolence. Why, you're not in a position to make demands in the first place—"

"If you won't agree to my conditions, I'll take Dan away from here right now. I'll take him across the border, where you'll never find him again. I'm not asking you to allow me to become the count's formal concubine. Give me a job cleaning or make me a laundress—I don't mind. As long as I can talk to Dan whenever he needs it and make sure you're keeping your promise when it comes to my first condition." Vina paused for just a moment, and the silence hung heavy in the air. "I will protect Dan no matter what happens. I always have, and I always will."

"I accept." The count nodded again, the movement resolute. Brillauntey opened her mouth as if to say something, but she held her tongue—though her expression was as hard as stone.

"I mean, if the Daniel Calmwinds I raised gives it his best shot, those little lords and ladies won't know what hit 'em," Vina quipped before sinking to her knees in front of Dan. She took his face between two warm hands and looked deep into his eyes—but then, one of hers closed as she gave him an impish wink. "Well...show 'em what you've got, Dan!"

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The seafalcon's piercing shrieks cut through the air as the birds circled above, diving toward the ship in quick succession. Though Dan was seeing it with his own two eyes, he still found it hard to believe: the sight of Allen standing in the center of the ship, sending arrow after arrow into the creatures with incredible precision just as quickly as they dived. Dan pulled on another line, changing the

position of the sail with near-automatic movements as he continued to watch Allen. For some reason, the memory of his mother's face flashed across his mind, the memory of the day she'd encouraged him to seize his future.

Dan had stayed at the count's estate from that day onward, not permitted to even say goodbye to his family at Calmwinds. It wasn't a day he remembered fondly. He'd been forbidden to have any contact with anyone from Solcoast either—not those from Calmwinds nor his preparatory school friends, because the count had insisted it would interfere with his studies. It had quickly been decided that, should Dan be admitted to the Royal Academy, it would reflect poorly on both him and the Sardos family if his mother were employed as a maidservant. Vina had therefore been forced to become the count's second formal concubine, and Dan knew she'd since faced very poor treatment at the hands of Brillauntey and the count's first concubine—all, of course, under the pretense of "helping" her correct her language and rough behavior so that she might become a woman more worthy of her new position.

"They only want you to be happy. Ignoring your true feelings is the same as betraying them, Dan." The words were burned into his mind, and so the young man had devoted himself to his studies and given everything he had in the pursuit of the Academy. But even when he'd seized the most coveted spot—a place in Class A—Dan still hadn't been sure he'd made the right choice. He'd achieved what he'd wanted, but his heart had been as heavy as ever.

That vision of his mother sprang into his mind once more. He felt the warmth of her hands on his cheeks, heard her words reverberating inside his head.

"Show 'em what you've got, Dan!"

Allen's eyes met his. The two had been synchronized since the seafalcons had started their attack, knowing what the other was about to do with just a flicker of the eyes. No words had been necessary.

Allen, who'd simply wandered into his life out of nowhere. Allen, who had vanished the heaviness from Dan's heart as though it were nothing, leaving no trace behind. Dan couldn't suppress the

emotions that now bubbled in his chest, and, unable to stop himself, he gave Allen a thumbs-up, grinning broadly.

Hey, Mom. I made a friend. He's a lot of trouble, and I never know what he's thinking, but... "This guy's awesome!" or "I'm not gonna lose to him!" or "If he was in trouble, I'd be there to help him out"... I made a friend who makes me think stuff like that.

Allen looked back at his friend, with his triumphant grin and pointed thumb, and tilted his head as if to say, *I have no idea what you're doing there.*

Chapter Five: Escort Mission and Hot Springs

Head Clerk

The time had come for me to start the journey back to Runerelia. After I left Solcoast, however, I first headed to Raconteur and paid the Explorer's Guild a visit.

The plan was to hopefully take on an escort request heading in the same direction I was. I had my heart set on the classic side quest of "escort some dude somewhere while making lifelong bonds with some new explorer buddies and getting paid to boot"—nothing outrageous, really. After I arrived at the guild, I headed to the main counter and approached the clerk, a friendly-looking middle-aged man.

"Good morning! Do you have any escort requests heading toward Runerelia? Specifically, I'd prefer something that finishes in Kosrael so I can catch the express train from there, or at least somewhere around the general area."

As I'd predicted, the man gave me a friendly smile. "Good morning, young man! We do have some escort requests going at the moment, but they are rank restricted, I'm afraid. Escort requests are ranked D and above, so you'll have to be at least an E-Rank to take one on."

Unless special circumstances specified otherwise, explorers could only take on requests at their own rank or one rank higher or lower. Said system prevented weaker explorers from accepting requests that might prove fatal, and it also stopped higher-ranked explorers from depriving their less talented guildmates of work. As a rule of thumb, if a request had been advertised for a certain length of time without attracting any applicants, it would then be made available to

explorers from the higher ranks too. In most of those cases, however, the reward remained unchanged, and the client was left to pray they'd attract the attention of some unusual explorer with a fancy for taking on requests far less profitable than their usual fare. It was a prayer that, more often than not, went unanswered. After all, the higher you looked up the corporate ladder, the fewer the faces—and the fatter the paychecks they demanded. It was as true in this world as it had been in my last one.

I dug out my license and handed it to the clerk. His eyebrows shot up as he looked it over. "Welcome to the Sardos Central Branch, Explorer Lenn. Trutta, head clerk of our humble branch, at your service. My personnel at the Solcoast branch informed me you were currently in Sardos County. I was asked to show you to the branchmaster's office were you to grace us with a visit. If you'd allow me to guide you?"

Like many branches within the main city of any given region, this one bore the name of the encompassing area rather than the name of the city itself—Raconteur, in this case. I managed to somehow hold back a frustrated sigh at the suddenly formal treatment. "Okay... But can you please just talk to me like you were before?" I said, forcing a smile. I didn't need any special treatment, but I knew I'd have to play along for a while yet—at least until all the rumors died down. Not much time had passed since I'd been promoted to B-Rank with unprecedented speed, but if I didn't do anything out of the ordinary, people would surely lose interest in me sooner or later. *For now, I just have to rehabilitate my image—and I* definitely *have to avoid getting into any fights.*

Trutta introduced me to the branchmaster. I figured he must have been out of the field for years, judging by the size of his stomach. At some point during his harmless but excessive flattery of me (although he somehow managed to talk a great deal about himself as well, which included, for some reason, sharing a recount of his excellent marks at an apparently competitive local school), the man inquired if I'd be interested in taking on a security request for an upcoming party at the local count's estate. While some of the higher-ups in the Explorer's Guild were like Cher—people who'd

worked their way up from the bottom—they were apparently few and far between. No, instead—as usual—those in positions of power were usually those with the most impressive alma maters, a fact that continued to irritate me every time I heard it.

Obviously, the security request he'd offered me had to be for Dan's birthday party. The party wouldn't be held for another ten days at this point—not that I wanted to accept the request anyway—so I politely turned him down. Count Sardos was apparently desperate to meet me, according to what I'd heard from Dan, so I wanted to find a request that would take me far from here as soon as possible.

The branchmaster was disappointed. "Though I can't share any more details, the request would place you in the presence of some of the most important nobles in the area. You'd benefit in both payment and prestige, Explorer Lenn." He sighed. "But I see I will not be able to persuade you. The most sought-after rookie explorer in the kingdom has blessed our humble branch with his presence, and that must suffice for me. Trutta, are there any escort requests that better suit our guest's needs?" he asked, and Trutta nodded.

"There are two requests I believe may interest you, Explorer Lenn. The first is a C-Rank request concerning the escort of a merchant group on their journey back to Kosrael, the capital of the Glaux Region. The payment has been set at eight thousand riels. The group will take the standard route to Kosrael, though because their caravans will necessitate a slower pace than usual, I imagine you'll arrive at the destination within six days. Ideally, the client is looking for two explorers ranked C or higher. There are no recent reports of bandits in the area, and as the merchants belong to a fairly prominent company, I'd imagine they also employ a number of permanent guards who will likely join you too. They're just seeking some capable extra hands for peace of mind on the return journey."

Uh-huh, uh-huh. Great work, Head Clerk. That's precisely the sort of request I was hoping for. I was ready to give him the okay then and there, but out of curiosity, I decided to ask about the second request first.

"The other request is also C-Rank, and it relates to the escort of a

viscount and his daughter who are visiting Sardos County for sightseeing. I'm afraid I can only disclose their names should you choose to accept the request. They are seeking a single explorer in exchange for a five-thousand-riel reward. Their route would take you slightly off the shortest route to Kosrael, but the general direction is the same. If all goes well, I'd imagine you'd complete the request within four days and could still reach Kosrael over the next two. The viscount also maintains a personal retinue of guards, and there is little danger expected. Given that, the payment is rather low for a C-Rank request. However, it is somewhat customary for noble clients such as this one to provide additional rewards based on performance, Therefore, as you might expect, it's been a fairly popular request, and we've had a good number of applicants already."

Dang, now I don't know which one to choose! Both of them are perfectly clichéd side missions, and either one would probably be a lot of fun!

While I was hemming and hawing over the decision in my brain, Trutta interrupted with an additional thought. "The viscount's daughter often visits our county, so I've seen her once or twice for myself. She is a most beautiful and refined young woman, perhaps a year or two older than yourself, Explorer Lenn."

Sharing other people's personal information seemed to be a common hobby in this world, but for once, I didn't care. The supplemental information Trutta had shared reeked with the potential of a hackneyed romantic side plot. *Great work, Head Clerk!* The second request was looking a lot more enticing out of the two now, but against my better judgment, I had to check something. "You said there were two requests you *thought* might interest me... Are there any you thought wouldn't? I'm only asking, though! I'm plenty interested in the two you already explained."

Trutta smiled, not seeming offended by my inquiry. "Of course. The only other escort request heading in that direction is a D-Rank one, but because we haven't been able to find anyone to take it on, it's now been made available to higher ranks as well. The destination is not Kosrael, but Kilka, a town slightly closer to the capital. The

client seeks an explorer to defend them from monster attacks en route. The payment has been set at four thousand riels, as per the D-Rank standard."

He paused here. "While it is not uncommon for, say, merchants transporting goods that can't be carried on a train to go via Kilka instead of Kosrael"—Trutta trailed off, frowning slightly—"no route was provided with the request submission. Failing to indicate one's intended route is not in itself against our guidelines, particularly when it comes to requests that may contain many variables. However, I imagine you're unfamiliar with the local area. Following the western highway, the standard route from here to Kilka takes around seven days. My concern is that the client has *intentionally* forgone providing a route because they intend to instead cross *over* the Ament Volcano, rather than circumnavigating it, as per the conventional route. Furthermore, the request details that departure will be immediate following the hire of a suitable explorer. If the client were in a hurry, they could have hired an E-Rank explorer or two to accompany them down the western highway and have already been in Kilka by now. Since they've neither provided a route nor altered their request, I believe their true destination is not Kilka, but possibly the remote village of Ment, situated about halfway up the mountain."

Trutta rubbed his hands together, seemingly anxious. "Ment is rather inaccessible to most travelers, and it's said to be a common gathering place for the more...unscrupulous types in the area. If Ment is their true destination, then an escort request there would carry a C-Rank at minimum, with a reward somewhere in the range of fifteen thousand riels. Now, if you *were* to cross over the volcano, it would take around two days to reach the village and a day and a half from there to reach Kilka, provided you didn't encounter any trouble along the road. However, though you'd reach Kilka within four days, the express train to Runerelia does not run through their station, so your journey back to the capital would take somewhat longer. In truth, you'd likely arrive in Runerelia at nearly exactly the same time you would have had you taken either of the first two requests instead. Are you interested?"

Gold star for you, Head Clerk. He'd summarized all the risks in one tidy explanation. Of course, I couldn't know for certain, but taking on the final request sure seemed about as safe as running laps around a minefield. I laughed. "You must be joking, Trutta. There's no way I'd take on a request like that. Thanks for the detailed explanation, though—I can see why you're the head clerk. When's the departure set for the first two requests, then?"

Trutta beamed in response to my praise. "Both clients intend to depart Raconteur a week from now, leaving plenty of time for the interviews and preparation! Leave it to me, Explorer Lenn. I, Head Clerk Trutta, will reserve your room at Raconteur's most exclusive lodging house!"

Couldn't you have said that earlier, Head Clerk?! I don't have time to sit around here for a week! But I'm not stupid enough to take on the minefield request either. Guess I'll just book a spot on a stagecoach and head home the normal way.

"I must say, I'd heard rumors about your alleged...shall we say, rashness and recklessness, Explorer Lenn? And I must confess I was a little worried at first when you showed up, but I shouldn't have been, of course. The guildmaster is not generous with his evaluations, especially when promoting someone as young as yourself to Rank B. As always, rumors must be taken with a grain of salt." Trutta sighed. "It is a shame, though. For many years, before high-level monsters began appearing in the area, Ment boasted the finest hot springs in the kingdom. People traveled from all over to stay at one of the many retreats in the town. It is unfortunate that the area is so dangerous now. At any rate, which of the requests piqued your interest?"

The... The finest hot springs in the kingdom?! Like onsens?! Come on, Head Clerk...

Escort Mission

I still had my reservations, but eventually, I decided to take on the minefield request.

A few factors had influenced my decision. Firstly, it seemed like the monsters I might run into along the way would be about C-Rank difficulty at most. If I was really unlucky, I might encounter a B-Rank monster or two—basically, the same level as a Gryetess snake. With my current abilities, though, I'd almost certainly be able to handle anything that could come my way. For caution's sake, I'd asked Trutta about recent monster sightings in the area, but it didn't seem like I'd have any issues on that front.

Then we had the client. Even if I found myself in the employ of a gang of ruffians, they'd be ruffians who couldn't make the journey themselves—they needed someone to protect them. Realistically, they wouldn't pose much risk to me. Besides, explorers had the right to terminate a contract at will if the client tried to force them to participate in illegal activities or anything else outside the scope of the request—not to mention if the client deliberately tried to harm them. If the request had stated "going to Kilka via the western highway," an explorer could have terminated their contract the instant the client went off route. Of course, this client hadn't outlined a route on their request, so they were free to take whatever path they liked in that regard.

I also wanted to leave Raconteur as soon as possible. Count Sardos (Dan's father) was already trying to sniff me out for an official greeting. Plus, all of the most important nobles in the Glaux Region had already begun to arrive in Raconteur for Dan's birthday celebrations. While the party itself was still ten days away, Dan would spend the time leading up to the party making the rounds, going to tea parties and dinners with nobles who wanted to make the acquaintance of the newest Royal Academy student from the region. Right now, I was exploring under the name Lenn, but I didn't know who I might run into if I stayed here for much longer. I needed to minimize the risk I'd blow my cover.

And, of course, the final reason I'd accepted the request: I wanted to sample what Trutta had claimed were the finest hot springs in the kingdom, no matter what. Honestly, despite everything else I'd considered, this was the singular factor I'd based my decision on. As evidenced by my obsession with the baths and

sauna in the standard dorm, I was a die-hard onsen enthusiast. I'd decided to spend this life doing everything I wanted to do, and I definitely wanted to try out those hot springs. Skipping out on an opportunity like this would be ridiculous.

I'd briefly considered ignoring the request and just setting out for Ment on my own. However, I wasn't familiar with the area, and since the journey seemed to necessitate at least one overnight stay somewhere on the mountain, it was realistically the safer option to go along with the client instead. There wasn't a single respectable map of the area—a reality I'd become painfully used to—and I didn't have too much confidence in my sense of direction. *I mean, really, if you plucked any random person from my world and told them to cross a mountain without a map, it would be nothing short of a miracle if they managed to do it. We didn't need a sense of direction back there—each of us had a GPS in our pocket.*

I hadn't been able to buy any macagate arrows in the city, so following Trutta's advice, I'd stocked up on ten mithril arrows imbued with water magic instead. Mithril was an unusual metal; if expert craftspeople channeled the power of magic stones into the raw metal as they worked it, it could be imbued with different magical properties. The water magic would give me an advantage against the fire-affined monsters I was likely to encounter on my journey up the volcano. I'd paid five hundred riels per arrow—a little costly, but only about half as much as I would have paid in Runerelia. Plus, if fire-affined monsters *were* going to pop up, it was basically a necessary expense.

Once my preparations were complete, I made my way to the arranged meeting place.

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Two men were waiting for me on the western outskirts of Raconteur. No one would have mistaken them for ordinary civilians—just based on their looks, they were clearly up to no good. I slipped into my outlaw persona the instant I saw them. "You the client? Name's Lenn. I'll be escorting ya."

For a fleeting second, the pair glanced my way—then, as if on cue, their expressions soured in perfect unison. "You gotta be kidding me!" growled the one with a toothbrush mustache. "I'm not hiring some brat as a bodyguard!"

The other man—who had a long goatee—took a few steps toward me. "I've met your kind before. Weaklings who swoop in on easy-sounding requests for the money and aren't worth squat when the going gets tough. If I see you tryna make a run for it when the monsters come out, I'll feed you to 'em myse—"

The man reached out for me, and in the same instant, I pulled my dagger from the sheath at my belt, cutting off the last inch of his goatee and resheathing my blade before he could even touch me. The only sound I'd made was the quiet *click* as I'd slid the dagger back into its place.





If I entertained their little show of intimidation, the sun would start setting before we even got the introductions over with, which would delay the whole request. It took the pair a moment to realize what had happened. Goatee started to shake, frantically rubbing his chin and neck to make sure I hadn't sliced him open. "Rank B," I continued, nonchalant. "Lookin' forward to working with ya."

"You bastard!" Mustache shouted, his face pale. "Pulling a weapon in public?! What's wrong with you?!"

"Oh, this? Nah, this is just for shaving. Can't stand seeing a fine beard like his with split ends, y'know? I'll tidy your mustache up for ya too. Don't move, okay?" I went for my dagger again, and the man froze like a statue, sweat dripping down his forehead.

I grinned. "I'm joking. Don't have the time for that now—you guys are planning on heading up Ament, right? We better get moving." *There. A nice, polite greeting, and there shouldn't be any trouble along the way.* A few minutes later, our final party member appeared—an old man from Ment who'd come to buy provisions in Raconteur and who would serve as our guide and carriage driver on the way back. With that, we started off.

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The journey was going well. I used concentrated blasts of wind magic to scare off most of the herbivorous monsters that approached our carriage, then my dagger to quickly finish off the few I couldn't scare away. I was trying to reserve my supply of arrows for the time being, because I didn't know if I'd be able to restock them in Ment.

I'd spent most of the journey so far sitting beside the driver, admiring his careful handling of the reins while exchanging idle talk. His name was Tony, and he was a good-natured fellow. He'd made the trek down to Raconteur a few days prior to stock up on necessities for those in the village. Ment was a remote place with no major source of income outside of the now-deserted hot springs, so the villagers didn't have the money to hire guards every time they needed to go shopping. Whenever possible, Tony instead offered his

services as a guide and carriage driver to those heading to Ment, which also gave him greater security on the return journey. Ordinary civilians rarely sought to travel to the village these days, but fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on how you looked at it), shady types like Mustache and Goatee now apparently frequented the area. Desperate measure though it was, Tony's guide work was the only thing keeping the village from falling into ruin.

"To be honest, I feel like you'd be fine making the journey yourself, Tony. I mean, you're at least stronger than those two back there, right?" With everything I'd done since I'd started at the Royal Academy—the Hill Path Club, explorer work, and joining up with the Royal Order—I'd become quite good at estimating other people's proficiency in Strengthening Magic just by watching how they moved. Learning Scouting Magic had only made my intuition even more accurate—or at least, that was how I felt.

"Hmm? Well, I somehow manage to make it up all right when I can't find any takers, to be sure. The lower the risk, though, the better, eh? Means I don't have to fight as much, and this way, I get to sleep at night. Why do you think I'm strong, though?"

"Er...I can kinda tell by watching you move that you're clearly decent at Strengthening Magic. It's a little hard to explain, though."

Tony chuckled. "You know, I'm a C-Rank explorer myself, and I'd never be able to estimate how strong someone was just by watching them handle the reins. Guess that's why they've made you a B-Rank already at your age. What kind of training have you been doing, huh?"

I've spent a lot of time observing the Hill Path Club and getting quantifiable reports of their skill thanks to Fey's tools... Guess my experience is *a little different compared to a normal person's.*

"Oh, just a bit of this and a bit of that— Hey, I can hear you guys, you know!" I turned, shouting in Mustache and Goatee's general direction. They'd been speaking in hushed whispers for a while now, saying stuff like, *"I thought we'd never make it back to the boss's turf after blowing all our travel expenses in the red-light district. Lucky we found that weirdly strong dumbass to take on our request for cheap!"* and *"If something dangerous pops up, we'll use him as a*

decoy and run for it," among other similar things.

It's an escort request, so obviously I'm gonna fight the monsters, but... For some reason, I kinda feel like these two were just looking for an explorer to use as a decoy right from the start. Gotta make sure I report them to the guild once this is over. My train of thought was interrupted as something new entered the scope of my Scouting Magic.

"Slow down, Tony. We've got company. Humanoid monsters, pretty large—three of them. Flamgongs, I'm guessing."

Panic crossed Tony's face as he looked around restlessly. "What?! Where? How do you know?" He groaned. "I thought we were lucky, getting this far with only a few monsters here and there, but now those monkeys... They work as a pack, and they can shoot fire from a good distance away. I don't care if those two idiots catch fire, but I don't want my supplies to burn. We should stop the carriage here and lure them away before we fight them. I'll help."

I shook my head. "There's no need. I can handle them from here." I stood up, readying one of my new mithril arrows. A few seconds later, the three flamgongs leaped into view—one behind the carriage and one on either side. The one behind the carriage landed at the same time my first arrow did. It didn't even have the time to steady itself—the arrow pierced it through, and it tumbled to the ground, dead.

The rightmost flamgong screeched, twin balls of fire beginning to swell in its palms. But I'd swung around to face it before my first arrow had even struck, and it too was dead before the fireballs could grow larger than a candle's flame. I spun to face the final flamgong, but it had already fled, having seen how easily its two companions had fallen.

"Do you mind giving me a few minutes to retrieve my arrows and the magic stones?" I asked. "It'd be a shame for them to go to waste."

We were still early on in the journey, and the carriage was already full, so I didn't bother to dissect the carcasses, instead just cutting out the fire-affined magic stones. Tony was still sitting in stunned silence by the time I returned to the carriage. *First time he's*

seen me use my bow, after all... I was somewhat used to reactions like his, having been on the receiving end of plenty during my hunting trips around the capital.

I didn't have to use my bow for the rest of the journey, thankfully. We spent the night at a simple campsite along the road, and we arrived at Ment just past noon the next day without any further trouble.

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The village of Ment was located about halfway up Ament's solitary peak. We'd joined the mountainous road from the north side of the volcano the previous day, and we'd followed the twisting path around it until we reached the village on the southeast face. Every inch of the more gently sloping area was in use. Houses with pure white walls and reddish-brown tiled roofs were sandwiched beside one another, and thin, twisting alleys ran every which way whenever they *had* left a gap. It reminded me vividly of the European "white towns" I'd seen advertised on travel shows in my past life.

We made our way around the village until we came to a gap in the white stone wall. Tony lifted a hand in greeting to a villager who seemed to be on watch, and we passed through. Judging by the size of the village, the population here was probably close to two thousand people or so, by my rough estimation.

The smell of sulfur—or, to be more accurate, the rotten-egg smell of hydrogen sulfide—permeated my nostrils and aroused my excitement.

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"We've gotta visit a few people here, so bugger off for the rest of the day. Meet us back here at nine tomorrow for the rest of the trip to Kilka—and don't be late," said Mustache, and he and Goatee promptly vanished into the web of alleys branching off from the area around the gate.

No worries, that's fine by me. The request only entailed

protecting the pair of them from monsters along the journey. I wasn't at all required to stay in the same lodgings as them tonight and risk getting mixed up in whatever shady business they were involved in. *Better not to use Scouting Magic while I'm here either—just to make sure I don't hear anything I don't want to.* The criminals' headquarters would likely have anti-Scouting devices installed anyway, but on the off chance I did catch wind of some illegal scheme, I was pretty sure my superiors in the Royal Order wouldn't be happy if I turned a blind eye.

"It's a beautiful village you've got here, Tony. I can tell why you're putting in the effort to keep it running, even though it must be a struggle," I said.

Tony smiled warmly at the straightforward praise. "Yeah, it's a fine place, all right. The white paint you see on all the walls is made from crushed cottonstone, which has a pretty potent monster-repelling effect. There's a lot of cottonstone around here, but there's too many dangerous monsters to make mining it for sale worthwhile. It's not perfect, but it's a tradition we've stuck to for a long time now, and it's part of this village's charm. What's your plans for lodgings tonight, then?"

"Do you have any recommendations? Somewhere with a hot spring attached, of course."

"You've come to the right person. I've got every inn and lodging house in the village stored in this old brain. Every place around these parts has a hot spring attached, so is there anything else you're after? A place with good food, or a scenic view?"

"I see... When it comes down to it, I'd like the place with the best-quality water, I guess. I prefer my hot springs closer to boiling, but I want to have a nice long soak tonight, so it's okay if it's a little on the cooler side. Oh, and it's gotta be a different place from wherever those two guys are staying. That's nonnegotiable." To put it bluntly, I didn't have much faith in the food of a half-abandoned village like this one, no matter how "good" Tony might claim it was. The views around here were all right, but not breathtaking enough that I needed to be able to see them from the hot springs or my room by any means.

"You know, for someone your age, your tastes are pretty similar to an old man's," Tony remarked with a laugh. "But I reckon I know just the place for you. There's an inn and bathhouse by the name of Fullmoon that's been running since Ment was first settled. It's a little old and small, and the elderly couple who run it won't trip over themselves to give you service, but it's got the only hot spring around here running with water straight from the source without being treated. You won't find hotter or purer water anywhere else. The temperature varies from day to day, but it's always near boiling. It's not one of those massive baths with a great view, though, so it's not been as popular recently, even before all the tourists stopped coming. You'd probably mostly have the place to yourself."

A hot spring with pure, unfiltered water... The thought sent my heart racing in this life just as much as it had in my last. It was decided: I'd stay the night at Fullmoon Inn.

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When I opened the door that led from the cramped changing room into the bathing area, there was just one other guest present. The man's hair—long for someone of his gender—was tucked behind his ears, just out of reach of the steaming water. Between the gray of his hair and the lines on his face, he looked to be around seventy years old. Though his eyes were open, he didn't seem to acknowledge my entrance; his gray eyes, the same shade as his hair, stared blankly into space.

The bathing area was small, with no separate area to wash yourself before you entered the hot spring. The spring itself poured into a tub cut from the mountain stone, around two meters long and four meters wide. In my previous life, it would have been considered impressively sized, but I guessed it was modest by the inflated standards in this world. Water the color of milky tea streamed quietly into the tub from a sliver in the rock face. Ridged stone steps surrounded the tub on all sides, catching the constant overflow of water. They must have been designed to work as some kind of a filter, because the color of the water got gradually clearer, changing

from milky brown near the tub to a nearly transparent crystalline blue by the time it reached the final step near the entrance.

I snuck another glance at the man, but he hadn't stirred, his eyes still vacant. *There's a good chance he's as staunch an onsen enthusiast as I am, if a hot spring like this is his bath of choice.* Invoking the well-honed bathhouse etiquette I'd drilled into myself back in Japan, I made my way to the side of the bath farthest from the flowing water. Crouching down, I carefully filled a small pail with the steaming water, taking care not to splash, and slowly poured it over myself, letting my body acclimatize to the temperature before gently climbing into the tub proper.

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I'd been soaking in the tub for about fifteen minutes, reveling in the tingling sensation on my skin, when the older man first spoke.

"You here on your own, boy? It isn't often I see someone your age who knows how they should behave in the bathhouse."

I nodded, surprised. From the vibes he'd been giving off, I hadn't expected him to talk to me at all. His manner of speaking wasn't anywhere near as rough as I'd expected either. "Yes, I'm in Ment for an overnight stop on the escort request I'm currently working on. My clients are spending the night elsewhere, but I asked our driver to recommend a good hot spring, and he suggested I stay here."

The man chuckled pleasantly. "Well, aren't you a mature one? Still, at your age, being skilled enough to take on an escort request to a place like this is a pretty big deal. I'm Gin. I'm visiting Ment to enjoy all the hot springs. What's your name, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Of course not. I'm Lenn, a humble explorer. I was visiting Solcoast on vacation from Runerelia, and I picked up an escort request to take me some of the way home. Luckily for me, it stopped off here, so I'm making the most of the opportunity."

Gin raised an eyebrow. "Oh? I'm from Runerelia too—though I haven't been back for the last half a year or so. I've been in poor health recently, so I've been recovering here, soaking up all the

healing properties of the springs. I only hear snippets of what's going on back home when my subordinates drop in from time to time to check up on me." He paused for a moment. "Boy—no, Lenn, I can tell you respect the hot springs just as I do. I've got a favor to ask, if you don't mind." He twisted slightly in my direction and lowered his head a fraction, this world's approximation of a bow. "To tell the truth, a wound of mine started paining me suddenly, and I can't stand up... It would be embarrassing to have to call for one of my men to come and help me. Can I trouble you to lend me a hand?"

Jeez, is that all? From the way he was talking, I thought it'd be something a lot more serious. "Of course, it's no trouble at all. Where is it you're hurting?" I paused, struck by a thought. "Don't tell me you've been stuck sitting there ever since I got here?"

Gin smiled wryly. "Hit the nail on the head. I'm constantly telling off my underlings for not following proper bathhouse etiquette—I'd never live it down if they came in here to find me screaming about my ailing legs in front of a child. So I've been trying to endure it, but I'm at my limit. You seemed like a respectful kid, so I'm swallowing my pride and asking for your help."

I grinned happily. *He* is *a proper onsen enthusiast, just as I suspected.* I stood up gingerly, taking care not to disturb the water, and waded over to Gin, lending him my shoulder to help him stand. As he rose to his feet, I caught sight of the raw scar running across both of his thighs. *A sword wound, or something similar. Whatever it is, it's pretty fresh.* "That's a bad spot for a wound."

"You got that right. It's been a real pain in my— Well, you get it." He winced. "A bit slower, sorry. My legs are twitching and my head's spinning—any quicker and I'll probably topple over."

I slowly guided Gin to the edge of the tub, managing to convince him (with some difficulty) to let me lift him out with my Strengthening Magic so he didn't have to put any pressure on his legs. Still carrying him in my arms, I took him into the changing room and gently sat him on a chair. "Should I call for some help?"

Gin shook his head, smiling. "Not to worry. It always eases off after I rest for a minute or two. My apologies for disturbing you in

the middle of your soak. Please, go back and enjoy yourself."

I nodded. I took a minute to pour Gin a cup of water from the waterskin on the table before I headed back to the bathing area. No one else entered the hot spring during the rest of my soak, so I enjoyed the luxury of the pseudoexclusive hot spring, steeping in the steamy water while gazing at the moon through the single bay window set into the wall. When I finally climbed out of the tub again about an hour later, Gin was nowhere to be seen.

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"You sure took your time, Boss. I was just about to come and check on you. Miss Shuri's just arrived for you." Osa, Gin's personal manservant, opened a door, revealing the woman with chestnut-colored hair waiting on the other side.

"It's been a while, Shuri. What's happened to make you come all the way here from Runerelia, then?"

Shuri frowned. "Another one of the groups under our jurisdiction has cut ties with us. They've left the Red Dragon Syndicate for the protection of the Lotz family... You're in a strangely good mood, Boss." She regarded Gin—and his wide smile—suspiciously.

"Is that how I look to you?" He chuckled before briefly falling silent. "Well, if they wish to cut ties, we can only let them. Many things in our world are changing at present, however gradual those changes might be. Anyone with some wits about them is taking the chance to make sure they're in the position that'll benefit them most. Have you learned anything more about these Lotz bastards?"

Shuri shook her head. "As you know, the Lotz Corporation's been well established across Runerelia's western districts for decades, running a profitable yet simple construction business. But we've still got no idea how—or why—they've amassed so much power over the past decade, nor why they've started poaching other organizations from 'our' world to join them. The companies and explorer co-ops under their protection are still running rampant around the capital, and the officials seem to be turning a blind eye to their unreasonable methods of making money. It's like anyone under the Lotz family is

free to do as they please. At the same time, they're not demanding excessive protection money from those organizations underneath them—and yet it doesn't seem like they're hurting for money at all."

Gin's eyes narrowed. "Something stinks, all right. Now that I think about it, western Runerelia used to be under the Saint Silver Syndicate, right? Until their boss died in an accident—ten years ago, funnily enough."

"Correct. I've tried looking into that incident too, but everything's either been destroyed or hidden somewhere. It has to be them, right? They've been behind all the attacks on Runerelia's underworld leaders—including the attack on you, boss." Shuri's eyes glowed with rage.

"Be careful what you say, Shuri. Rumors take on a life of their own easily enough, even when they don't come from someone in a position like yours. If they catch wind of it, they'll treat it as slander and use it as a reason to attack."

Shuri pursed her lips and lowered her head, clearly frustrated.

"Why isn't the Royal Order doing anything about it?" Osa, standing nearby, suddenly interjected.

Gin let out a short, sharp laugh. "Because we're nothing but outcasts to them. They'd never get involved in our business—and they especially aren't gonna put themselves in the middle of a fight between two of *our* groups. Besides, they've got plenty of other things to concern themselves with at a time like this. When those of us who make our living in the shadows start depending on the Royal Order to clean up our messes, it's all over. Never forget that, Osa."

Out of embarrassment at Gin's scolding and his own frustration, Osa, too, lowered his head.

"Well," Gin continued, "I can't hide up here like a hermit forever, and my wound is mostly healed too. I should return to the capital."

When she heard those words, Shuri's head shot up, her eyes shining with excitement. "Are you sure, boss? Everyone's gonna be so happy to see you! None of them have been acting like themselves since you left."

Gin's mouth twisted into a wry smile for a moment before his expression suddenly morphed, as though he'd been struck by a

thought. "Oh, right—last time you came, you said something about an energetic kid Rynde picked up from who-knows-where. The hoodlum everyone was calling the Mad Hound or whatever. His name—it was Lenn, right?"

Shuri looked confused. When she'd previously reported to Gin about the Mad Hound, he'd seemed utterly disinterested. Now, however, there was pure curiosity in his tone. "Yes, that's right. Apple House has gained considerable power in eastern Runerelia over the past few months... Are you thinking about bringing them into our fold? Back when we were having trouble with manpower, we tried everything to win Rynde over, but that stubborn fool said he'd die before joining us."

Gin chuckled. "No, I don't intend to forcibly try to bring Apple House under our control. Rynde has his own way of doing things—far be it from me to try and convince him otherwise."

With that, he flashed the two an uncharacteristically wide grin—so out of character for the man that Shuri and Osa exchanged puzzled glances, heads tilted in synchronized confusion.

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After a simple dinner mainly composed of locally foraged greens, I enjoyed another soak in the springs before bed, and I rose early in the morning for a final steep before checking out of the inn. I arrived back at the village gate just before nine. Tony, of course, wasn't joining us for the second half of the trip. A different carriage waited just outside the white walls, along with an unfamiliar man and woman, both heavily armed. Allegedly, the pair were the personal bodyguards of Mustache and Goatee's boss, and all three would be joining us on the Kilka leg of the journey. A few minutes later, my facially haired friends appeared, accompanied by the boss in question—a textbook shady character, right down to the cloying fake smile and beady little eyes.

"Apologies for the holdup," the man started, his voice oily and smooth. "I'm Red, a...brother, of sorts, to these two. They should have been here days ago, but apparently they *misplaced* their

traveling expenses back in Raconteur. I believe they might have caused you some trouble too, and for little reward. Thanks to you, we managed to finish our business without any unfortunate incidents. I apologize on behalf of these two *imbeciles*." He punctuated the sentence with a firm kick to Mustache's ass.

Guess they somehow managed to hide the fact that they actually spent it all in the red-light district, then... Oh well. Not my problem. "Nah, it was no big deal. I only took the request because I wanted to check out the hot springs here, anyway," I replied casually with a shrug.

Red—which, given his red hair, had to be an alias (and not a very imaginative one at that)—kept smiling at me, but his beady eyes opened a little wider in astonishment. "Oh? So these idiots weren't lying to me—you *did* agree to trek up Ament for a measly four thousand riels? From what I've heard, you're no half-baked D-Rank either..." His fake smile vanished in an instant, replaced by a threatening snarl. "Who are you working for, brat? Why are you here?"

I sighed. *Like I'm gonna be frightened by some petty underling... Right. What should I do?* Parting ways with the dodgy group would mean I'd have to find my own way to Kilka—I wouldn't have much other choice. It would also mean I'd fail the request. Failing to fulfill a request had a negative impact on an explorer's rank, so most people in my position would tough it out rather than have it affect their standing in the guild.

But I wasn't most people, and I sure as hell wasn't going to grovel before some half-assed criminal just so my rank didn't drop. In fact, I'd *welcome* it—if my rank were lower, maybe I wouldn't have to hear stuff like, *"Wow! A B-Rank? At your age?!"* and *"Who are you working for?"* every time I so much as breathed. If dropping down the ranks was an option, it was one I'd gladly take.

"I'm not working for anyone," I replied, my tone disinterested. "I'm Lenn, an explorer from the Apple Family co-op based in eastern Runerelia. As for why I'm here, I told you already. I was in Solcoast on vacation, and I wanted to visit the hot springs on my way back home. I just took on a request heading this way. I don't know why

your friends needed to come to Ment, and I don't care either. It's none of my business. But..." I stopped suddenly, and when I started speaking again, it was with confidence. "If you're tryna pick a fight, one of us is gonna be crying themselves to sleep tonight. Just know that it's not going to be me."

At my threat, the man's two bodyguards—the man and woman nearby—laid their hands on the swords at their respective waists. Red stopped them with a wave of his hand. Goatee made to say something, but Red sent him flying with another kick before fixing me once again with that slimy, insincere smile. "Ah, so you're the Apple's Mad Hound, then? I'm based in Runerelia myself, so I've heard a lot about you. Sorry for earlier, but I'm sure you understand. When I heard some mysterious kid—and an awfully strong one, at that—had accepted the request these morons put out for nothing but spare change, you can imagine my suspicions. I sent some of my men to keep watch at Fullmoon last night, but you didn't try to leave. I just wanted to make sure you weren't working for someone. If I'd known you were the Mad Hound, I would have gone to check for myself. It's so *frustrating* when your underlings can't even manage to give a proper report, you know?" He sighed exaggeratedly. "Well, it's no wonder you're strong, being the Mad Hound. Can we still count on your skills until we get to Kilka?" he asked with a grin.

Lucky for me that the Bumbling Beard Bros were *so unobservant—it would have been a real pain in the ass if Red had shown up when I was trying to enjoy the hot springs.* "Sure, but let me say one thing. The request I accepted was to escort *those* two to Kilka. I don't think it'll come to it, but if we get into serious trouble, I'll have to prioritize their safety, as per the request."

Red looked disappointed for a fraction of a second, but he quickly pasted on his disingenuous smile again. "Of course, of course. I mean, even if I offered you more money, we can't change the scope of the request without going through the guild, after all. Besides, if those two are safe, it should mean I'm safe too."

"One last thing. Once we're outside the village, I'll be using Scouting Magic to scan for incoming monsters, which means I'll be

able to hear everything going on around me. You should be careful what you say—or, if you've got an anti-Scouting device on you, feel free to use that too. Like I said before, I don't intend to get involved in your business in the slightest. But if I hear something that jeopardizes my safety, I'm not gonna be able to let it slide either."

Red smiled at my warning, but for the first time, his expression was genuine. "You're a pro, all right," he said, snickering. "Y'know, the rumors said you were young and short-tempered, so I had my doubts, but it seems like we'll be safe in your hands. I think I like you, Mad Hound." He clapped me on the shoulder like we were old friends, but I didn't like the greedy hunger I saw in his eyes.

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And so we set out for Kilka. Throughout the journey, Red repeatedly invited me to join him inside the carriage to chat, but I turned him down every time, telling him I needed to focus on keeping watch. Ultimately, none of the monsters we encountered posed any real challenge to me, and we safely arrived in Kilka the next morning.

When we parted, Red handed me a slip of paper. Written on it was the address of a bar in Runerelia's western slums. "Come find me here when you've got the time. Tell them Red from the Lotz family sent you, and they'll let you in."

Of course, I tore the paper to shreds and threw it away as soon as he vanished from sight. I didn't know what he wanted from me, but whatever it was, I didn't want to be involved.

I spent the rest of the day sightseeing around Kilka. The town was apparently famous for making masks, and I ended up buying a good number of them to take back with me—they ranged from simple designs to a few that were somewhat more unique. I thought they might come in handy if I ever needed to hide my face, and the ones without eyeholes could be useful for practicing sightless Scouting Magic.

I boarded the first train back to Runerelia the next day. *I guess I'll have to show my face at the Order tomorrow. No one* told *me I*

had to stay and work over the summer break, but I did just sneak out of the capital without letting anyone know.

Captain Dew's gonna be furious, isn't he...?

Side Story: Singlord, Runerelia East Outlet

Lund, assistant manager of Singlord's Runerelia East Outlet, knocked lightly on the door to the private reception room and strode in, nodding his head politely to the two women sitting inside. "My deepest apologies for disturbing you while you're with our esteemed customer, Madam Rouge. It's just, *he's* here."

"Who?" replied Rouge, tilting her head in confusion. "I thought I didn't have any other appointments today. And besides, we won't be finished here for a while yet." She turned away from Lund, taking a sip of coffee from the mug on the table. Lund froze for a moment, hesitant, before taking a few more steps toward Rouge and whispering something in her ear.

Rouge shot to her feet, a wide grin spreading across her face. "Sorry, but we'll have to finish this off another time," she said to the woman sitting on the opposite couch. "It seems a very important customer has just arrived, and I'm required elsewhere."

Her guest—Shuri, one of the higher-ups in the Red Dragon Syndicate, which ruled over the underbelly of eastern Runerelia—returned Rouge's excited expression with a suspicious one of her own.

Singlord itself didn't number among the many companies operated by one of Runerelia's shady underworld syndicates. In reality, it belonged to a conglomerate run by one of Yugria's three ducal families, meaning it didn't require the support of a mafiaesque organization like the Red Dragon Syndicate to stay on its feet. The relationship between the two women was primarily one based on the exchange of information—particularly that which concerned explorers, a group in which both had a vested interest. Therefore, it wasn't unusual for their talks to be cut short should a higher-priority

customer appear. But that wasn't what had caused Shuri's reaction.

No, Shuri's suspicion was the result of her genuine surprise—surprise that Rouge would all but race for the door upon learning that some random customer had shown up without an appointment, and in doing so dismiss Shuri herself, who *had* bothered to make an appointment.

Rouge was a formidable young woman. At just twenty-eight years old, she was managing the largest weapon-and-armor store in the whole of Runerelia. Naturally, a position of such importance hadn't come into her grasp merely because she was good at making money. Shuri had seen Rouge confront high-ranking explorers and settle business deals that had more closely resembled fights. The way she coolly refused service to unthinkably important nobles—as well as Royal Academy students who'd surely one day become central figures in the kingdom—the second they started demonstrating their arrogance had made Rouge legendary around the capital. Young though she was, her strong sense of justice and refusal to cater to those in power had given her a very trustworthy reputation, and Shuri could easily see why Gin, her boss, had so much regard for the woman.

"It's no problem. We didn't have anything too important to discuss today, anyway," Shuri replied, shrugging. "Really, though, who's this customer who's got you so eager to meet him? I mean, it's not like one of the Royal Order's top brass is gonna pop into a mass-market store like this one."

Rouge giggled, smiling fondly. "Have you heard about the Mad Hound? The rookie explorer who's been making waves at the eastern branch?" She giggled again. "I'm a big fan of his."

Shuri nodded, still a little confused. "He's the one Rynde picked up recently, right? I heard about his little stunt at Lizard Fang the other day. Roping the whole tavern into his fight..." She shook her head. "Last I heard, he was only an E-Rank. You must see something special in him if he's worthy of your personal service."

In reality, Allen had already been forcibly promoted to B-Rank by that point thanks to Cher, but it seemed the news had yet to reach Shuri's ears.

Rouge tapped a finger to her cheek, looking contemplative. "Maybe? To be honest, I'm not sure why I've taken such a liking to him. He's a really strange boy, that's for sure. I've seen hundreds of ambitious, talented kids come in here, but he's nothing like them. There's just something about him that makes me think he's going to do big things—things no one's even *imagined* before. I can't help wanting to see it happen."

Shuri bade Rouge a casual farewell as the latter all but skipped out of the room. She decided, in that moment, to gather more information on the reportedly short-tempered but oddly popular "Mad Hound."

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At long last, it was the weekend, which meant I could finally go to Singlord (the weapon-and-armor store I'd first visited with Stella and my other classmates) to replace the Banree knife I'd lost fighting honeyants with Uncle Cher. Rouge, the manager, had really looked after me the first time I'd visited Singlord, and I'd been fond of the shop ever since. Unfortunately, most of my money now went toward the geography club I'd started with Coco. However, despite the fact that I couldn't buy anything big on account of my perpetual poverty, Rouge still took the time to give me advice and find me suitable equipment every time I dropped by.

I took my time wandering through the store, admiring the endless varieties of weapons crammed into every spare inch of space. I'd visited a few smaller stores and manufacturer outlets since my first visit to Singlord, but none of them had made my heart race the way this place did. It wasn't just the massive range the emporium had to offer either. It was also the genuine appreciation and respect I could sense while reading the labels attached to each product. Besides listing the price, materials, and maker, the labels also frequently featured thoughts from the smith who'd made the weapon, or a personal recommendation written by one of the Singlord staff. It was this—the visible passion of both the artisans and the vendor—that really made me love the store. The prices here weren't necessarily

the cheapest, but being able to have that connection to those people behind the scenes made all the difference. Plus, unlike those cheaper stores, Singlord offered ongoing product care, like polishing, sharpening, and small repairs.

Eventually, I found my way to the dagger section, and I began perusing the shelves.

"Back again, I see. Thinking of swapping the knife for a dagger?" I turned to see Rouge standing there, but I was no longer surprised by her sudden appearances. Every time I visited, she'd pop up out of nowhere to greet me in the same casual way. *I know she's already the manager, but she could probably stand to learn a few of the basics of what normal customers would consider good service...*

"Good morning! To tell the truth, I actually lost the knife you kindly recommended to me during an expedition the other day..." I smiled awkwardly. "So I was gonna take the opportunity to try changing over to a sturdier dagger, maybe. Something I could use to carve up carcasses, as well as for foraging."

Rouge giggled at my expression. "You don't need to look so apologetic. I had a look at your Banree knife a few times when you dropped it off for maintenance, so I know you took good care of it. If you hadn't lost it, you'd have never come looking for an upgrade, right? You would've just kept using it until it broke—even though you're surely earning more than enough for a better one these days."

It was a little arrogant of me to say so myself, but I'd always been very good at taking care of my things—fastidious, even. I'd treated my Banree knife with tender care, polishing the blade (handwashing and line-drying the rags I used after every use) and sharpening it with my own whetstone after every trip. I found the process itself to be fulfilling, and given my susceptibility to perfectionism, I'd quickly started looking forward to the daily care routine. I'd also sent the knife back to Banree for maintenance a few times, a service facilitated by Singlord. After the second time, Rouge had offered to recommend a slightly better knife to me, saying that what I spent on the upgrade would pay for itself through fewer maintenance fees. However, I hadn't been able to shake the "waste

not, want not" mentality instilled in me by my Japanese upbringing, and I'd politely turned her down. Unfortunately, I had yet to find anyone who even remotely shared my delicate Japanese values in this altogether unimaginative fantasy world.

My heart felt a little lighter at Rouge's words, much to my surprise. The loss of my beloved Banree knife had apparently been weighing on my mind more than I'd realized. "I am a little better off recently, I guess... Eh, why not? I'll splurge today. Can you recommend a good dagger, something I can use for a long time to come? Let's say something around ten thousand riels, give or take."

Rouge grinned. "Let me show you what we've got."

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Rouge unlocked one of the display cases and began selecting a few of the daggers for my consideration. "While you're here," she started somewhat hesitantly, "are you sure it's just the knife you're looking to replace? Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to see you taking good care of the things I sold you and using them for as long as you can. But at the same time, I'm sure your new duties have started taking you to more dangerous places than before. I don't know if you're saving money for some particular purpose—or if you're just eccentric—but if you've got the riels to spare, how about upgrading your bow and armor as well? If you buy everything together, I can give you a special discount too."

The "new duties" in question probably referred to my new part-time job with the Royal Order. Rouge was one of the few people outside the Academy who knew me as Allen rather than Lenn the explorer, and it wasn't too surprising that she'd heard about my provisional admission into the Order.

I took in her worried expression and ultimately resigned myself to accepting the necessary—albeit painful—reality. It was time to replace my bow. I loved my Rygo, and I was reluctant to part with the weapon just a few short months after I'd bought it, especially while it was still in perfect condition. At the same time, my "waste not, want not" attitude wouldn't help me much if I was dead. Pops

had also lectured me about the risks of not noticing the need to upgrade my equipment until it was too late.

"Okay, you have a point." I paused, preparing myself to take the leap. "Fine, let's do it. I'll upgrade my armor and bow too. Can we keep it under thirty thousand riels though, please?"

Rouge looked relieved. "Thank goodness. To be honest, I was worried sick thinking about you going up against all sorts of danger in that beginner breastplate of yours. It's fine for new explorers, but not for someone of your skill."

She was really worried about me, huh...? I looked away awkwardly, unable to suppress the guilt I felt on seeing her unmistakably heartfelt relief.

"Well, let's decide on a dagger first. The first time you came here, you asked about Seimler's products, right? The same company that made your friend's knife. You can afford one of their daggers now, though to be honest, your options are still quite limited. But if you're happy to go with another Banree instead, you'll have a few more to pick from. If you're sticking with Banree, I'd personally recommend this one."

Rouge set two daggers on the nearby counter: one Seimler and one Banree. I picked each one up alternately, trying to see how they felt to hold. Maybe it was because I'd been using a Banree before, but the second dagger felt familiar in my hand, like it'd been made for me.

"Now, the Seimler has a thicker blade, and it's far more resistant to rusting, so you'll find that maintaining it will be easier than your old knife. The Banree, on the other hand, is a lot thinner, so you'll spend just as much time maintaining it—if not more. But on the other hand, you won't find a sharper edge anywhere. I can't say one is definitively better than the other, but given you're not afraid of a little elbow grease, you'd be able to reap all the benefits of the Banree."

"Can I test them out?"

Rouge dug out a few sheets of scrap paper, and I tested each blade, stripping ribbons off the paper with both the tip and edge of each dagger. I could feel the difference in the cuts from how

smoothly the blade passed through the sheets and from the sound each made as it did. *Keeping the Banree in good condition is definitely gonna take up more time, but honestly, that's just a bonus as far as I'm concerned.* I quickly decided on the Banree dagger.

"Good choice. I didn't want to tell you this beforehand in case it influenced your decision, but actually, the sales manager from Banree brought this dagger in specifically in the hope that you'd want it. Oh, don't misunderstand me," she added, seeing my look of suspicion. "I didn't tell him about your actual identity or anything. When their maintenance team saw the knife you'd sent in, they could tell how you were using it based on the wear and tear. Plus, they were apparently pretty curious about who was bothering to take such good care of a relatively cheap knife, or so I heard. When the sales manager asked me who the knife belonged to, I only gave him your age and approximate build though, okay? He left this dagger with us and said, 'He'll struggle trying to use his knife for dismantling carcasses, so if he's looking for a new blade, I hope you'll recommend this one.'"

That explains why the Banree felt so comfortable to hold. An expert's judgment sure is an incredible thing. But... There was something I needed to make sure of. "Um, doesn't that make this dagger a custom-made order? I'm pretty sure my budget won't cover the extra cost..."

I wasn't replacing my equipment because I wanted to go around showing off my new designer goods. My mindset was the same as it had always been—to gradually upgrade my equipment once my skills outgrew the old stuff. It was a philosophy that applied to nearly everything in life, from kitchen appliances to electronics: If you never experienced using an entry-level tool, you'd never be capable of appreciating the *true* value of the top-shelf equivalent.

Sensing my reluctance, Rouge flashed me a wry smile. "I knew you'd say something along those lines, but you don't need to worry. The metal they've used for this dagger gives it that incredibly sharp edge, but it's cheap as far as material costs go. Because it's such a bother to maintain, most explorers wouldn't buy something like this—and therefore, most smiths won't use it. But since the folks at

Banree knew they had a customer here who didn't mind spending a decent chunk of time and money taking care of their knives, they thought it was worth giving it a go."

I see... I should know better than to doubt Rouge, really. She knows I'd never buy some expensive dagger just to flaunt my wealth, and she wouldn't have recommended this one if she didn't think it would suit me. Well, either way, if it cost less than ten thousand riels, then it was within my current (self-defined) range of acceptable equipment.

"So, we've got a bow and some new armor left, then. As far as I see it, your armor's the more pressing issue at the moment, so I'd prefer to start there... What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me!"

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With Rouge's advice, I settled on a new bow and armor to go with the dagger. My new armor was an all-purpose model leather vest, with fairly decent blade and magic resistance. I'd also considered the premium model, which had metal plates layered between the leather, but I'd decided to prioritize ease of movement over the added protection.

As for the bow, I'd tested out a few of the longbows Rouge had selected, but in the end, I'd decided to go with a Parthia, a composite bow that handled similarly to my treasured Rygo. Unlike my old shortbow, which consisted of a single piece of wood, the Parthia had been made with a few different materials that had then been laminated together. The added complexity made the bow a little less durable than a shortbow, but in exchange, it was around twice as powerful as my Rygo 5.

Seeing me in my new gear, Rouge nodded with satisfaction. "Well, it's still only the bare minimum equipment...but you're looking a *little* more like a B-Rank explorer now, Lenn."

"Uh...how do you know I'm working under that name?" *Uncle Cher said he'd make sure only those who needed to would know that Allen and Lenn the explorer were one and the same person...*

Well, whether or not I can trust that Cher kept his word is a different matter entirely, but I'd still like to know how she found out.

"Oh, it's just because I'm a big fan of Explorer Lenn. I know how to keep my mouth shut, though. I won't tell anyone your little secret," Rouge said, putting her finger to her lips in an exaggerated gesture. I wasn't sure what kind of expression I made in response, but she reacted to it with a pleasant, feminine laugh that echoed through the shop.

I can't keep up with this woman... She's on a whole other level.

Side Story: Soup Kitchen

"Hey, Po. Where are you all off to? You don't usually work in a big pack."

It was just another weekend morning. I'd made my way to the plains east of the city before the sun had risen, combining my bow and wind magic practice with some perfunctory hunting. I'd just arrived at Apple House to drop off my kills—only to find every single kid under Pops's care swarming around the front garden.

"Lenn! We're gonna help hand out food at the church today," Po replied, grinning. "The people there heal us for cheap when we're sick or injured, and they teach us to read and write before we start school too, so we owe them a lot."

"Good morning, Lenn." Reena, who was standing nearby, jumped into the conversation too, offering some more details in the somewhat precocious manner I'd learned to expect from her. "A lot of the kids here were once orphans under the church's care too. Plus, when I get so hungry that I feel like I'm gonna starve to death, the church will give me bread for free—well, after I pray for so long that my butt hurts first, anyway. So us helping them is a give-and-take kinda situation, you know? Also, what's that?" She pointed to my hand—or rather, what I was holding.

I see... Pops did often show up at the house with a new orphan in tow, and I'd heard that the Neosterite Church was big on their charity work. *I guess even a big church can't do everything by themselves, though. Give-and-take relationships are probably a pretty big part of their system.*

"Makes sense. Also, this"—I held up my hand—"is a bit of lascaux meat. I was gonna get you guys to smoke it for me. The lascaux jerky you gave me the other day was really good, and when I saw this one on the plains this morning, I couldn't help myself." They'd given me a few pieces of the jerky the last time I'd dropped in, and I

hadn’t been able to get it off my mind ever since.

Lascaux were similar to deer. They’d apparently been domesticated once upon a time, but they had since reverted to their wild origins. The meat itself had a peculiar taste, but it was neutralized by the scent of the wood they used to smoke it (which vividly reminded me of cherry wood), and the resulting flavor was incredibly moreish.

“Yeah, you really stuffed your face! I don’t get it, though. I can’t get past the smell...” Po said, feigning gagging. “Anyway, lascaux jerky’s something we make in the winter. It’d rot if we hung it out to dry when it’s this hot outside.”

He’s really not a fan... “Aw, that’s a shame. What should I do with this, then? Can you add it to the supplies at the church?”

Reena nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah! There’s never enough to go around, and everyone will be really happy to get some meat, I think... Do you wanna come too, Lenn?”

So it’s basically a soup kitchen, huh? It’s not like I don’t *want to help, but...* “Hm. Where is it that you’re going, exactly? Is it at the big cathedral?” I asked, picturing the opulent building in the capital’s north.

Reena shook her head. “Nah, we barely ever go to the cathedral. All the fancy people go there, and they hate seeing people who look like us hanging around. Plus, I heard they won’t give you *any* bread there, even if you pray till your butt falls off. No, we always go to the run-down old church on the edge of the worker’s district.”

Okay, that’s not so bad, I guess. I wasn’t too keen on the idea of having to stand around inside a stark symbol of religious authority, handing out food to people who’d be forced to listen to some pompous bishop lecturing them on gratitude while they ate. If it was just a little church in the worker’s district, though, I was happy to give it a go. And so, I decided I’d accompany the kids.

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“This is preposterous. Why should a man of my standing have to deign to grace some shabby old slum church with my presence?

These people have no idea how precious our holy magic is. And no wonder—the commoners around here couldn't afford our healing services even if they pooled all their money together. The differences between us and them is why we *wield* authority. It's ridiculous to even consider offering your skills for free..."

To her credit, Jewel somehow managed to hide her contempt for the grumbling man who currently sat across from her—even in spite of the vitriol he was spewing and the way he was attempting to brush his hand against her thigh with every exaggerated gesture. She chose her words carefully, lest they be colored by her true feelings. "Your skills may be magnificent, Archbishop, but I am merely a beginner. Healing as many people as possible is the only way for me to develop my skills, and offering it as an act of charity allows me to reach more of those in need. As you know, the people who visit us at the cathedral have usually already undergone substantial healing. Most of the time, the services they pay us for are entirely unnecessary. If you truly do not wish to go, I will visit alone, as I originally intended..."

Jewel hid her true identity during her visits to the city's outlying churches. While she couldn't deny that the opportunity to practice her magic did benefit her, the last thing she wanted was for people to think there were political motives behind her actions. Unfortunately, Dolittle—the archbishop—was a rather perceptive man. After Jewel had started classes at the Academy, the number of lessons she took with him had dropped significantly on account of her overwhelmingly busy schedule. Apparently, the archbishop hadn't been pleased with his sudden lack of access to Jewel and had somehow been monitoring her activities. When he'd caught wind of her charity visits, he'd unilaterally declared that as her instructor, he would accompany her—much to Jewel's displeasure. Her circuitous attempts to turn him down hadn't worked, and she obviously hadn't been able to refuse his chaperoning directly: Her services were religion-based, and she had no grounds to ignore the wishes of one of the most important figures in the whole church. With no other options, Jewel had had little choice but to thank the archbishop for his offer.

Today was his first time accompanying her. In order to hide her identity, Jewel traveled to the churches in a run-of-the-mill carriage (still driven by Sebas, her personal steward, of course) rather than her usual private car. They'd gone to collect the archbishop from the clergyman's residence beside the cathedral, at which point the man had immediately started grumbling, not bothering to hide his foul mood.

"Honestly, child, if you want to heal commoners, you should at least organize a grand event at the cathedral so *all* can see how virtuous and competent we Neosterites are. But sneaking around like this? You should know that not all men are as tolerant as I—"

Perhaps offending him a little with a direct refusal wouldn't have been such a bad thing, thought a regretful Jewel as she rubbed her aching temples.

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"Well, if it isn't Lenn! You helping out today too?" A voice sounded from above as we arrived, and I looked up to see Amur standing on the roof of the church. The small building seemed to have been pure white at some point, but it was now a dull mosaic of brown and gray.

"Hey, Amur. Yeah, I had some time to spare today, so I thought I'd come check it out... What are you doing up there, by the way?"

Amur grinned, white teeth contrasting against his suntanned skin. "The roof leaks something bad whenever it rains, apparently. They asked me to fix it."

Now that I thought about it, the exploring requests Amur took on were often construction-based. My first-ever request had been demolition work on a construction site with him too. *I wonder if he's hoping to find work in the building industry.*

"Can I come up too? I want to see what you're doing up close!"

"Sure thing! There's a ladder over on the other side—just take your boots off first, or you'll damage the tiles!"

I all but flung the lascaux meat at the others in my haste to find

the ladder, and I quickly climbed up to join Amur on the roof.

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Amur had a knack for this sort of work. I watched with rapt attention as he methodically removed each tile, allowing him access to the now-rotten wooden boards underneath that he would then replace.

"It stinks! Good heavens, what *is* that smell?!" An arrogant, somewhat out-of-place voice shouted below, knocking me out of my trance. I glanced over the edge to see a greasy-looking man pinching his nose in an exaggerated manner. Probably in his forties, he was dressed in some kind of gaudy, stiff religious garb, accentuated with far too many ostentatious accessories. The smell, of course, was the distinctive odor of the lascaux meat now simmering in a nearby pot.

"What the hell is that thing?" I asked Amur, gesturing over my shoulder at the newcomer.

"Oh, some bigwig from the church. Must be doing an inspection of the food distribution." Amur scoffed. "Those guys are always going on about how they serve the people, but in reality, all they think about is how to squeeze money out of 'em. Just ignore him. Can you pass me a nail?"

While Amur had been speaking, the man had started spewing complaints at the flustered priest who'd rushed out to greet him, only to be softly admonished by the hooded girl who seemed to be accompanying him. I couldn't see her face from my vantage point atop the roof, but her voice, carried up to me on the breeze, sounded vaguely familiar. The more the girl tried to pacify him—in a voice identical to one of my classmates'—the more aggressive the man became, as if he thought a louder voice indicated more authority.

I really don't want to get involved... To avoid getting dragged into what would surely be a tiresome ordeal, I shuffled over slightly as I passed Amur the nail, ensuring I was out of sight of the situation unfolding below. I quickly forgot all about the pompous man as I

watched Amur work. He definitely wasn't anything close to a master, but observing him as he carefully hammered each nail with an expression of utmost seriousness was incredibly enjoyable.

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The residents of the worker's district and the nearby slums were quick to talk, and in no time at all, the news that a pretty young girl was offering healing magic for free at the local church—regardless of one's social standing—spread like wildfire across the entire district. Those who lived nearby—slum dwellers who couldn't afford expensive healing potions and usually had no choice but to wait for their injuries to heal naturally—advanced on the church in droves, and the streets nearby soon swelled with a crowd not unlike that at a protest.

However, the young girl seemed to possess incredible mana; she showed no signs of slowing down as she methodically treated each and every ailment. At first, the archbishop had stood behind the girl under the pretext of "instructing" her—not deigning to heal any of the injured himself, of course, while endlessly bemoaning the *heat*, and the *smell*, and anything else that came to mind. Thankfully, he'd finally been coaxed inside the church by the priest, and he was currently enjoying some liquor in a private room.

"Miss, your magical aptitude level must be crazy high! I can't believe it!"

"Thank you, Sister! I haven't been able to work in weeks, but thanks to you, I reckon I'll be back in the factory tomorrow!"

"You've helped so many people, Sister. You must be hungry, right? Please, have some soup." Reena, who'd been helping prepare the food, held out a bowl of the strong-smelling soup to Jewel.

Sebas hurriedly paused in his organization of the yet-untreated patients and rushed to intervene. "Thank you for your kind offer, but she couldn't possibly take a meal from someone who might need it more—"

Jewel shook her head, stopping Sebas mid-sentence. "She's gone to all the trouble of bringing it over, so I'll receive it with gratitude.

I’m quite hungry indeed, and this smell is incredibly enticing compared to my usual meals.” Jewel carefully took the crudely carved wooden bowl from Reena with a smile and spooned up a mouthful of the soup with elegant movements. “It’s delicious. Thank you.”





Po, who was standing nearby, looked on in astonishment. "You're amazing, Sis. Even I think lascaux is too stinky to eat, and you're definitely a lot fancier than me. Lenn gave it to us to add to the supplies, though, so even though it's smelly, at least there's more to go around."

Jewel tilted her head curiously. "*Lenn*, you said?"

"Yeah! See up there? He's the shorter one. He might look small, but he's super strong, and he's really nice!" Po declared proudly, pointing to the roof. Jewel and Sebas peered upward at the two figures atop the church, then turned to one another, both of them attempting (and mostly failing) to stifle their laughter. The boy on the roof—seemingly receiving instruction from the slightly older boy beside him as he swung a hammer with intense gravity—was, of course, none other than Allen.

Jewel stared up at him happily for a moment longer before she spoke again. "Well, I believe we've treated everyone now. Shall we return home, Sebas?"

"Are you sure?"

Jewel stood up and began walking toward the carriage. There was a new spring in her step. "Yes. He's not here because he wants other people to see how kind he is...I'm sure of it. If I call out to him, it'll only annoy him."

From inside the church, Jewel could hear the archbishop begin a drunken sermon; apparently, he was in a better mood thanks to the alcohol. She paid it no mind as she stepped into the carriage and signaled Sebas to depart.

Afterword

Thank you for reading volume 3 of *Pens Down, Swords Up*.

As I write this afterword, I'm sitting in an outdoor café in a small town in Argentina, South America. In writing this, it might seem like I, just like Allen, am enjoying a whimsical, free-spirited vacation. In reality, I'm here on a business trip, spending each day racing from location to location and returning to the hotel just to sleep, all the while suffering from a chronic stomachache.

In short, I am simply a careless and reckless person, as you will soon discover.

I have very little experience traveling overseas, but when this opportunity arose, I inexplicably decided I'd be able to manage somehow or other. And so, despite never having traveled to South America before—let alone on an extended business trip—I set off without doing even the slightest bit of research. As a result, I quickly found myself plagued by (to put it politely) "the runs." I've had a weak digestive system since birth, so I'm fairly accustomed to stomach problems, but these piercing pains were on an entirely different level. I should have at least packed some antidiarrheals, if nothing else...

Such being the case, when I woke up this morning (one of my rare days off), I made up my mind to head out and find a pharmacy. Somehow, I managed to purchase some stomach medicine from the very kind and cheerful woman at the counter. The medicine helped dramatically—so much so that I was nearly moved to tears—which is how I'm now able to sit here at this café.

Well, lengthy preamble aside—in this volume, we see the start of Allen's summer break as he sets out on a whimsical, free-spirited vacation. Along the way, a series of coincidences culminate in him discovering a new possibility for his wind magic, but we have yet to see just how much this accidental realization will influence the story

as it unfolds. Allen's discovery might seem like a rather convenient plotline, but in all honesty, I believe the real world is perhaps just as conveniently coincidental.

When you listen to interviews given by prominent scientists and the like, one point that often recurs is that many of the most important discoveries throughout history were the result of complete coincidence. Similarly, I often hear people talking about fateful encounters, or how their lives were changed by people they met by chance. Such situations, I believe, demonstrate the difference between "luck" and "good luck." Only those who have done the preliminary work to prepare themselves to seize the opportunities that come their way will be successful in turning a "chance" into a "fateful encounter," whatever that might entail.

As I ponder this while writing this afterword, I suddenly feel the urge to look up at the sky. Watching the clouds drift gently from the north to the south, I find myself deeply moved by the realization that this place is like a different world from my home in Japan. I hadn't really looked at the sky before now, back when my stomach was hurting. On the other hand, when I turn my gaze to the windows of the nearby mall—in this small town on the opposite side of the world—I can see countless action figures from all kinds of Japanese media, like *Dragon Ball*, on display. Incidentally, as a member of Generation Z (*Dragon Ball Z*, that is), I'm more of a fan of the latter series.

Something's weighing on my mind. On my way here, I happened across a thin, elderly man in a sunset-lit alley behind the church. The melancholy melody he played on his guitar tugged at my heartstrings, and when I inquired, he told me it was a traditional love song from this country. But when I sneakily hummed it into my phone around the corner a minute later, it turned out to be a slightly outdated Italian pop song. That's not even close to being the same thing...

I went off track again. Essentially, what I wanted to say here is that if something seems interesting, give it a go—without worrying about whether it'll be worth the time or money. That's the mindset Allen has decided to stick to in his new life. Just what kinds of

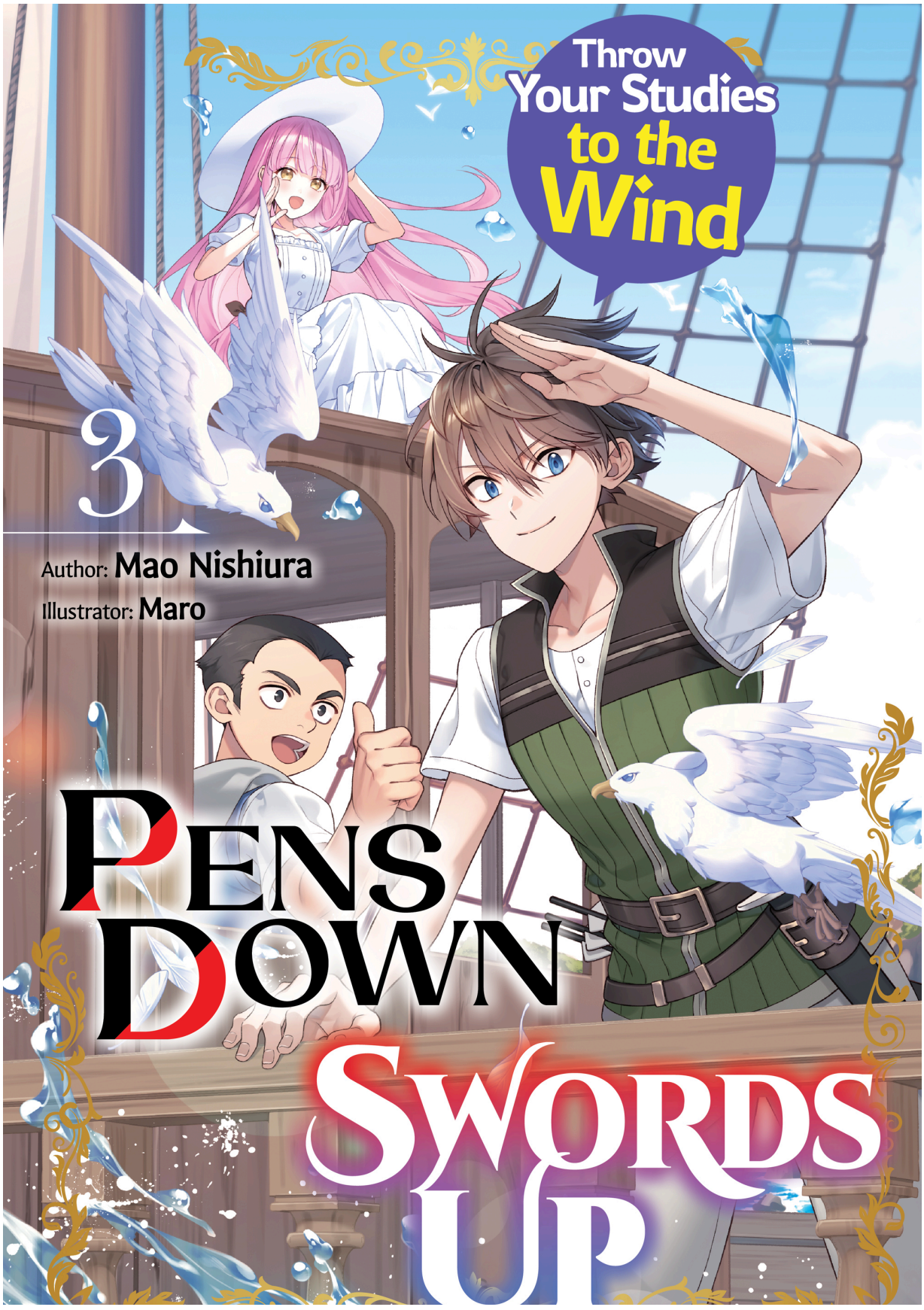
commotions is he going to create through his fanciful actions, and what will the consequences be? I'm looking forward to finding out just as much as you are.

Just as I thought, I would have been a fool to squander my day off hiding away in my hotel room.

Anyway, we've reached the end of the afterword now. I'm thankful for my good luck and the fateful encounters that brought me together with Maro (who has once again provided magnificent illustrations for this volume), as well as everyone else who's contributed to supporting this story. Thank you, everyone!

And despite all this adventure—I could really go for some ramen right about now.

Mao Nishiura


Throw Your Studies to the Wind
3
Author: Mao Nishiura
Illustrator: Maro
PENS DOWN
SWORDS UP



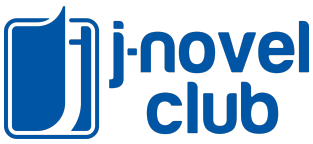

Reed
PENSDOWN SWORDSUP3
Throw Your Studies to the Wind
"But seriously,
Allen, you were amazing.
I've never seen an archer who can fire
so quickly and still hit the same
tiny target over and over again."
Coco
Allen




Jewelry
Fey
Roseria
Fuli
"It's not like you've been so busy playing around with girls that you forgot to come and visit me, right?"


"They must have been lured in by the scent of all those seafalcons in the water!"
Dan





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Pens Down, Swords Up: Throw Your Studies to the Wind Volume 3
by Mao Nishiura

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2025