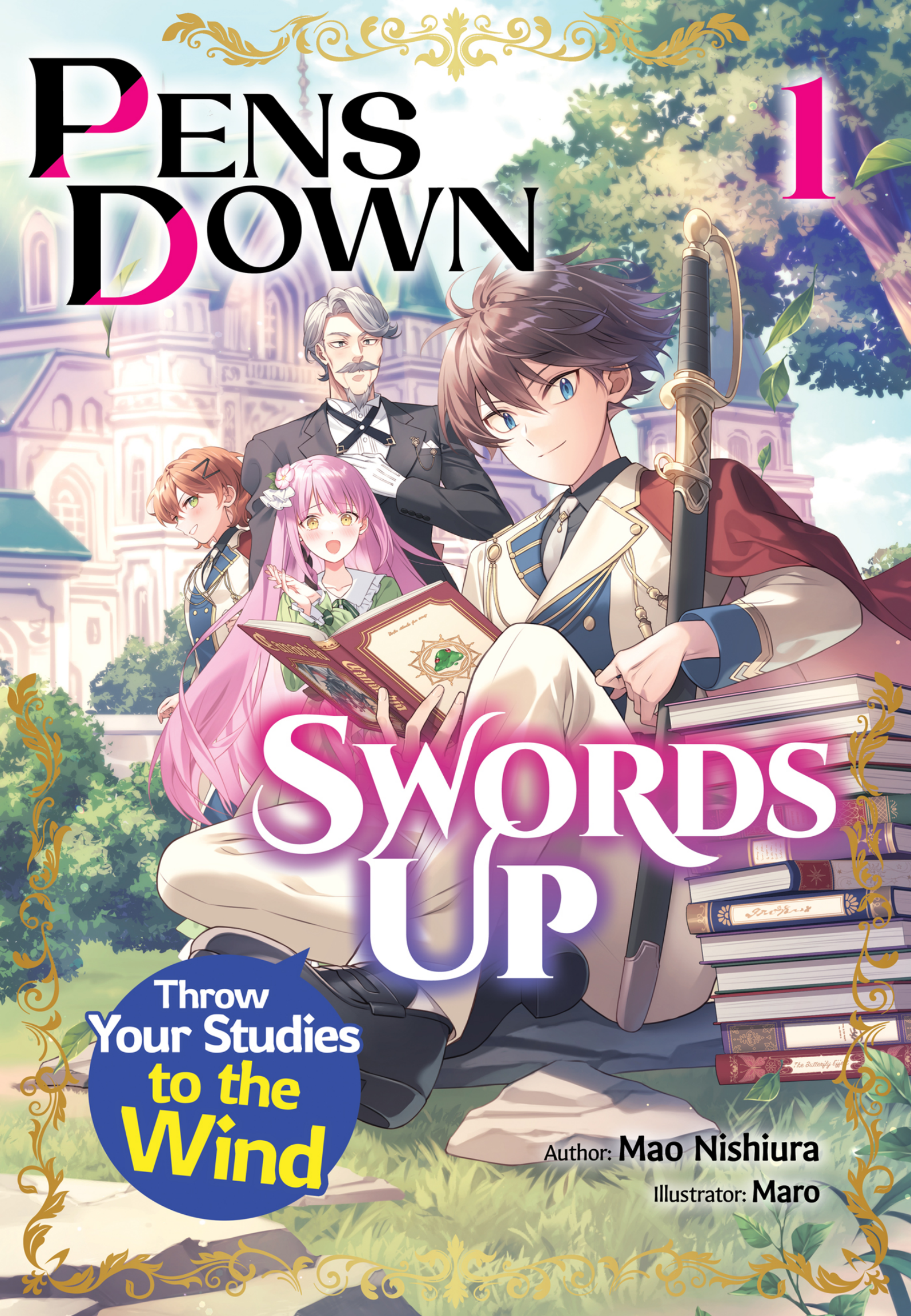
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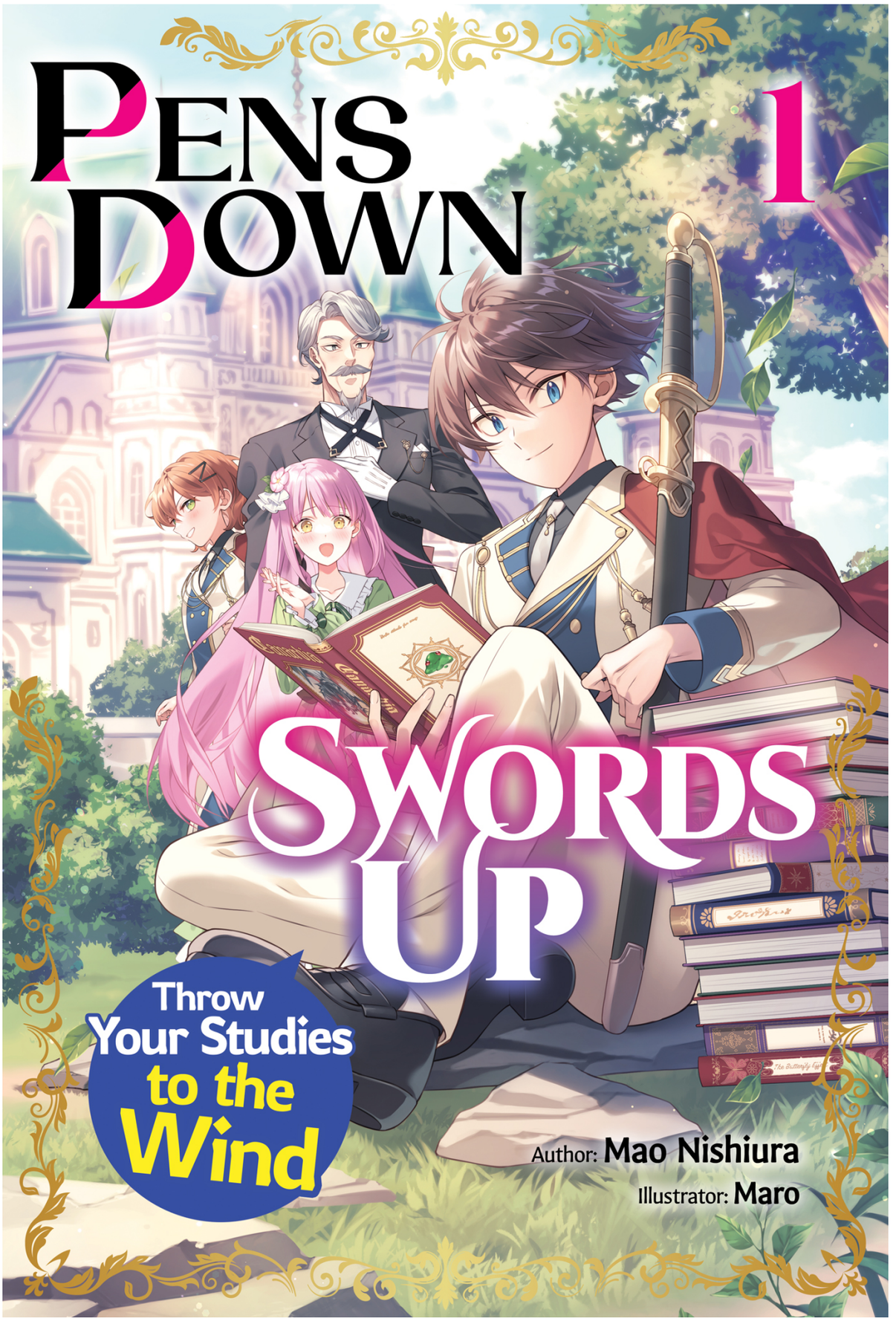
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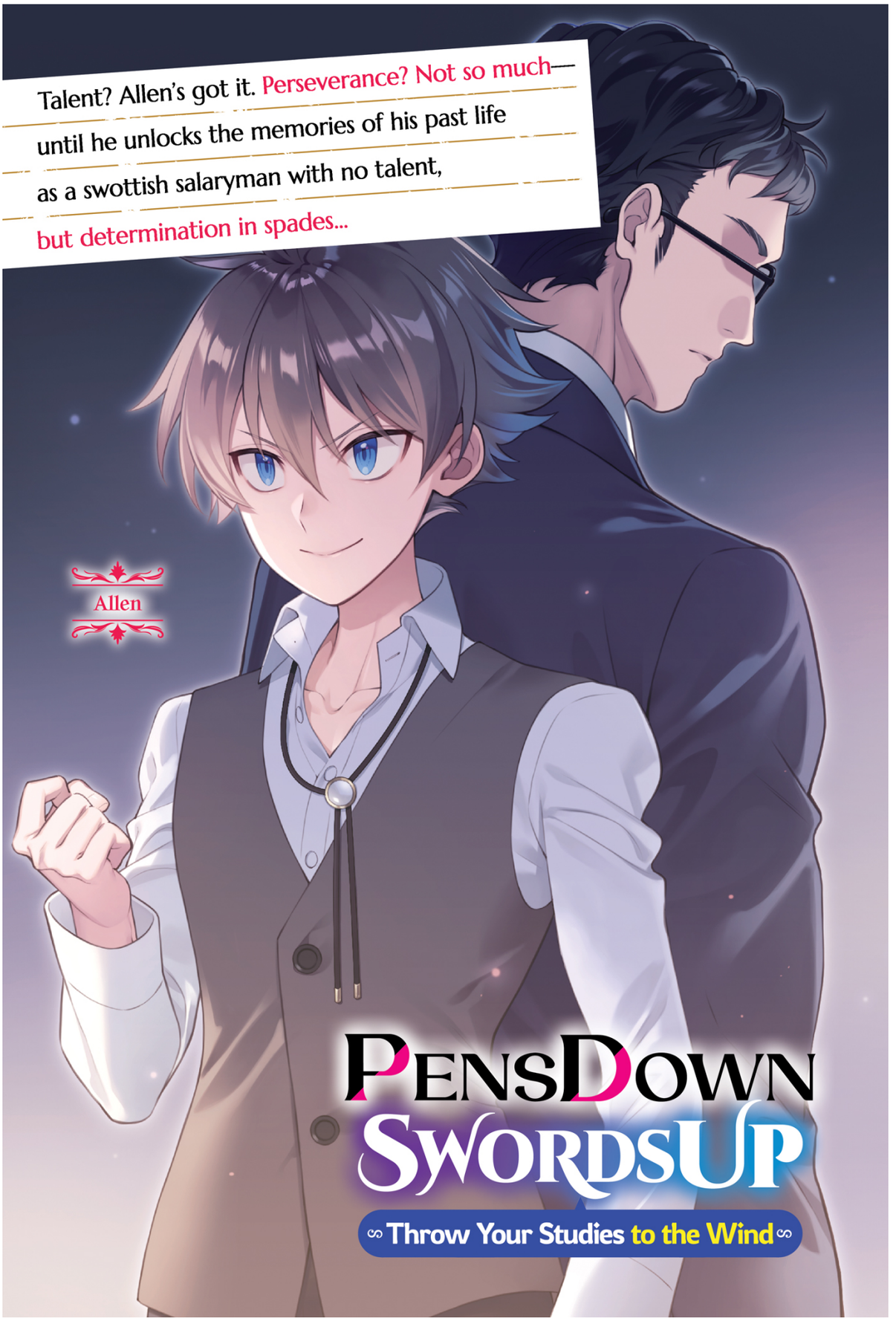
Throw Your Studies to the Wind



Author: Mao Nishiura

Illustrator: Maro


PENS DOWN
1
SWORDS UP
Throw Your Studies to the Wind
Author: Mao Nishiura
Illustrator: Maro


Talent? Allen's got it. Perseverance? Not so much—
until he unlocks the memories of his past life
as a swottish salaryman with no talent,
but determination in spades...
Allen
PENSDOWN
SWORDSUP
Throw Your Studies to the Wind


"I figured the best move would be to try and limit your options for striking back."
"You ill-mannered little brat... That big, flashy move at the start was just you trying to lure me in, huh?"
Dew
Aggravating the strongest examiner during the physical exam?!


No matter who his opponent is,
Allen won't give in to injustice!
"I'll crush anyone who gets between me and what I want— no matter who that is!"
"Is this the way you've chosen to prove your worthiness?"
Godolphen


Feyreun
Jewelry
He just wants to live as he pleases,
but before he knows it, his classmates
and his teachers are falling all over him?!

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Prologue

“Milord Allen, I found you!”

I jumped. I was sitting near a double-arched stone bridge—fondly referred to as “Spectacles Bridge” by the villagers—with a fishing rod in hand when a girl suddenly called out to me. It was Reina, my childhood friend, clad in the usual checkered shirt and brown apron she wore for work.

“Keep it down, Reina. And drop the ‘milord’—it doesn’t suit me. Are you on your way back from deliveries?”

Reina’s family ran a small bakery. Judging by the empty basket in her hands, she was probably on her way home from selling their bread to the various inns and eateries dotting the town.

“Yes, I only just finished. And I have to call you ‘milord,’ Allen. I’m already twelve years old, and this year we’ll start advanced schooling. As forgiving as the viscount might be, I can’t be addressing his son so casually forever, you know. It’s improper.”

The “viscount” she was referring to was my father, Bellwood von Rovene, which made me part of a noble family. But to be clear, in this kingdom, viscounts and the like were a dime a dozen. On top of that, I was only the third son, and in a backwater country town to boot. It was a sure thing I’d have to leave home someday to make my own way in the world. Basically, there wasn’t much separating me from any run-of-the-mill commoner.

“‘Improper’? You sound like Auntie Lou. Also, you don’t have the right to call things improper when it was only recently we were swimming around here in just our underwear,” I said, gesturing with my chin to the stream.

Reina’s face turned bright red as she huffed indignantly. “*Recently?* That was years ago! And forget about that—you’re here running away from your lessons again, aren’t you, milord? Soldo has been hunting for you everywhere—with a very scary look on his face, I might add.”

Soldo was the steward and private tutor who served my family. He’d been educating the children of House Rovene since my father’s generation.

“You bet I am. Every day is studying *this* or studying *that*—I’m

fed up with it. If I had known it was going to be like this, I'd have preferred not to be born into a noble family in the first place," I said with an exasperated sigh.

"You'll make Soldo sad if he hears you saying that again," Reina protested, her hands on her hips. "He's been trying so hard with you. I've heard people say you've got the most potential for Strengthening Magic out of any child ever born into your family! On top of that, you're actually pretty smart. If you *tried* to study, you really could get accepted into the Royal Academy, you know? You could move to the capital and learn from the best instructors in the kingdom!"

I sighed. Certainly, as far as I could tell, I had been blessed in terms of my skill with Strengthening Magic—granted, I only had the other magic users in this backwater region to compare myself to. And like Reina had said, I wasn't too shabby in terms of intelligence either. However...

"You might have a point, but...I've got no interest in going to the Royal Academy. Honestly, I'd like to take a look inside the mind of one of those guys who can just sit there and study quietly for hours on end. If you ask me, they're the ones who are actually talented—the people who can relentlessly work toward what they want like that. But I'm not one of them, and neither are most people, right? So when you think about it, I'm not actually that talented at all."

My eyes snapped back to the stream; I'd seen the fishing float submerge for a split second. A nibble.

I activated my Strengthening Magic just a little, adjusting and reinforcing my grip on the rod with a small, almost imperceptible movement. The next moment, the tip of the fishing rod jerked downward into the stream with a *thwack*—the fish had taken the bait. Immediately, it began frantically trying to swim away. I readjusted the flow of the Strengthening Magic I'd drawn upon earlier, sending it through the muscles in my arms and shoulders. With that, I was able to bring in the hooked fish with ease.

"See, Allen—I mean, milord? It's been a while since I've watched you fish, but the way you use Strengthening Magic is as godlike as I remember. Everyone says it, you know? That the only person who can land a fish in this river is you. It's no trouble for Al—no, *Milord* Allen, the king of slacking off! You *should* be working harder at studying!"

I glared at her. “Don’t give the gods the credit for my skill at fishing, Reina. This skill is the fruit of *my* hard work and perseverance,” I said, a serious look on my face. Reina looked at me blankly for a split second, then burst into laughter.

“Honestly, Allen, you’ve always been so passionate about the things you’re interested in. Why can’t you put that passion toward studying?”

Even I didn’t have the answer to that. The problem wasn’t that I didn’t understand why *I* couldn’t do it—it was that I couldn’t understand how *anyone* could be passionate about something like studying.

“Reina…would you honestly be happy if I got accepted into the Royal Academy?” I asked on an impulse. For a split second, a shadow crossed over her face, but the next moment, it was replaced with a somewhat awkward, frozen smile.

“O-Of course I’d be happy! You know what they call that place? The ‘Den of Demons,’ the ‘Monster’s Nest’… It’s the Royal Academy, the school only chosen geniuses get to attend! I’d boast about it to my children, and probably my grandchildren too! I’d be like, ‘The first person to attend the Royal Academy from this little country town was Allen Rovene—my childhood friend’! I might even tell them I was the one who taught you everything you know,” she said, finishing with a wink.

I averted my eyes from Reina and stood up, choosing not to respond to what had felt like a rehearsed speech. “I’m heading back. You can take the fish—your mother and sister like these, right? Besides, if I take it home with me, Soldo’ll be furious. Hide the rod in the usual spot for me, will you?” I brushed the dirt off my pants and made to head off.

“Sorry, Allen!” I’d barely taken a step when Reina called out from behind me. “To be honest…I would be a bit sad. If you did get accepted into the Royal Academy, I feel like you’d suddenly turn into someone from a whole different world. You’d definitely forget about someone as little as me.”

“But it is true I’m rooting for you,” she continued. “This town is too small for you, Allen. With your talent, I think you could spread your wings further—you’d become so famous, your name would be known not just throughout the Dragoon Region, but throughout the whole kingdom! So *please* just study as hard as you can so you don’t have any regrets.”

I turned back to her with a wry smile. “Well…I guess I’ll see

what I can do," I said, my voice lacking conviction. Even so, Reina responded with a carefree laugh.

Seeing her real smile, so different from the fake one she'd worn earlier, I felt just a little more motivated—not enough to loudly declare, *"Don't worry, Reina, I'll definitely pass those exams!"* or anything like that, though. But to be honest, I had already been starting to realize that it was probably time for me to try a little harder. This country town had been getting boring, especially ever since I'd learned to use magic. And with how quickly my skill in Strengthening Magic had developed, there wasn't anyone left worth sparring with anymore.

Please... Please, someone—anyone—teach me how to study!

And then, just four hours later...

Chapter One: The Swot’s Awakening

Rebirth (1)

“Young Master… Young Master Allen!”

I could faintly hear Soldo’s angry voice, dragging me back to reality.

When I came to, I found I had suddenly been reborn into a fantasy world of swords and magic.

Or, more accurately, as a result of being forced to study day and night for the entrance examinations for the Royal Knight and Mage Academy of Yugria (aka the Royal Academy), Allen Rovene had reached his limit, and the stress had broken through into the memories of his—*that is to say, my*—previous life. It wasn’t so much that I had been reborn a few minutes ago, so to speak; it was more that I’d unlocked the memories of my life before this one.

“The examinations will be held in just three months, Young Master! Do you think you have the luxury of sitting around and staring into space?!” Even as the memories of my previous life flooded my brain in a strange, disconcerting way, Soldo’s lecture continued without interruption.

In my previous life, as per my parents’ plans, my youth had been wholly dedicated to studying. The word wasn’t really used anymore, but back then, I had been known as a “swot”—basically, someone whose whole life revolved around cramming for exams.

In this world, your academic credentials are everything—as a child, I’d taken that biased, old-fashioned ideology of my parents’ to heart and studied like a machine, never considering my own needs or interests.

One might think, *Really? The first thing you think about after realizing you’ve been reincarnated into a different world is how much you studied?* But that just indicated how absurdly focused my previous life had been on studying. Frankly, who I’d been then was the complete opposite of who I was now. My natural aversion to studying in this life had probably been a subconscious reaction to the toils of my past one.

Despite the fact that I'd studied like a madman in my past life, I hadn't even been accepted into my first-choice school—the national university smack-dab in the middle of Tokyo, whose very name was synonymous with academic excellence. After failing the entrance exams, I'd had to wait an entire year before I could apply and get accepted into a different school. It'd been a fairly well-known private university, still within Tokyo; but while decent enough, it had definitely lacked the prestige of my top pick. Maybe I'd always been a little lacking in intelligence, even with all that studying.

The habits you forge in your childhood are a terrifying thing. By the time I'd become a university student, I'd developed a complex that made me feel vaguely anxious whenever I didn't study and guilty if I ever tried to go out and have some fun. My "hobby" as a university student had been studying for my degree. My holidays had been spent studying for random licenses and qualifications. I hadn't had a particular goal in mind—I'd just gone on obtaining a variety of qualifications that were realistically of little use to me.

Regardless of whether I'd loved studying or hated it, it had become ingrained in me as a routine, no different from brushing my teeth. Yet because of my average intelligence, I hadn't even achieved all that much. How could someone study to such an idiotic extent without any goals in mind? When I looked back on my memories of that life, I found it impossible to comprehend how someone could just…

Wait, not "someone"… Me? Did I just call myself an idiot? Well, my past self, anyway…

"Young Master, you're twelve years old this year. If we take into account the time needed for the journey to the capital, I have only two and a half months left for your instruction! Even if you do somehow manage to get accepted into the Royal Academy, your rank in the examinations and, subsequently, the class into which you are placed will have an unmistakable impact on your results thereafter—not to mention on your employment opportunities, potential promotions, and everything else in your future!" Soldo insisted. "It's no exaggeration to say that these examinations will shape the rest of your life! Yet I don't perceive any sense of urgency from you, Young Master. Are you even listening to me?!"

Just hearing Soldo drone on in his growling voice, I felt my

mind wandering further. This was…a very different reality from the otherworldly reincarnations I'd imagined in my previous life.

Sure, I'll take being born as the third son of a viscount. But aren't I meant to be blessed with some sort of one-of-a-kind hidden talent? Shouldn't heroes, saints, princes, and princesses constantly be visiting me, making a fuss over me and begging me to join their parties, all despite my insistence that I just want to live a laid-back life in the countryside? Isn't that more like it?

Well, even if I didn't go that far, I still felt a little cheated remembering what I had expected a life like this to be like. It was a bit unreasonable to suddenly awaken to life-changing exams knocking on my door instead of a princess. *Being reborn into Hard Mode would be one thing, but no one would even* dream *of a mode like this! There's no demand for this life, God!*

Flipping through the memories of my past life, I found I had died of an illness at the age of thirty-six. I remembered it happening like this: As a result of my swotting at university, I managed to secure a job at a well-known food and beverage production company; my diligent, though not particularly successful efforts had finally borne fruit.

But it was then that I realized the real world was a far cry from the one in which "your academic credentials are everything," as my parents had been so fond of saying. That world had long since passed. Of course, that wasn't to say academic credentials were meaningless, but what truly mattered in the working world now were communication skills, the ability to identify and solve problems, and general intellectual curiosity—even toward matters not related to the work itself.

Essentially, it was all over for me. It was like I was being told to become a different person on the spot. As soon as I entered the workforce, people started calling me "Mr. Waiting-for-Instructions" and "Mr. AI"—essentially saying I was only good for completing routine tasks that didn't require a smidgen of independent thought.

As I passed the age of thirty, I was being overtaken left, right, and center by my younger colleagues, and I knew something had to change. First, I needed to find a hobby other than studying, so I did the only thing I could think of—I searched "how to find a hobby" online. That's just how pathetic I was. At that time, I couldn't even comprehend what it felt like to be passionate about something.

To a man who had spent his whole life studying, active, outdoor hobbies seemed out of the question. I therefore set my sights on the tried-and-true hobby of indoorsy people like myself—reading. From pure literature to mysteries, I doggedly sampled a range of genres I'd never read before. Obviously, reading the printed word had never been much of a problem for me, but if you asked me back then whether or not I was enjoying reading as a hobby, I would have said I wasn't. Honestly, I just couldn't figure out where the enjoyment was meant to come from.

Alongside fiction, I also started reading business and how-to books with titles like *Practical Corporate Communication*, *Guide for the Emotionally Inexperienced*, and *Secret Strategies for the Popular Man*. These were books that, in retrospect, sounded incredibly questionable...but before I realized it, I was attentively taking notes as I read along—I was incapable of distinguishing between my hobbies and studying. I stopped after realizing my diligent notes on those books hadn't even remotely impacted my life regardless.

As though compelled to, I began watching all sorts of anime and playing all kinds of games—anything I could get my hands on, anything that was meant to be "fun." And they were interesting, to be sure; but that sense of "fun" was ultimately too palpable, and I couldn't shake off the resulting sense of guilt I felt, ingrained in me since my childhood.

It was then that I came across fantasy web novels. Maybe it was the fact that I was still reading blocks of text, but with them, I managed to shake off that nagging sense of guilt, even though the content was decidedly noneducational. Moreover, the otherworldly reincarnation genre, which was all the rage at that time, really scratched the deep, psychological itch I'd had to start my life over, a desire that had plagued me throughout those years. Thinking about that now, though, I could only laugh.

Wait, aren't I being awfully calm considering the situation?

For someone whose memories of his past life had just returned, I was *too* calm. Somehow, my mind was clear enough that I was conducting a kind of robust self-analysis. At this point, a normal person might assume they'd finally gone mad from exam stress, and they might figure this was all just some bizarre hallucination. But these distinct, newly accessible memories—of words and customs from my past life, of things that didn't exist in this world—allowed me to determine that this was definitely

no dream.

For some reason, I wasn't freaking out about it. My feelings were a bit closer to, *Well, it is what it is.* And although I couldn't quite put it into words, I had a feeling I understood why I hadn't been able to study in this lifetime. It had probably been some kind of subconscious reaction to the hell I'd gone through in my past one.

"I am *saying* that you need to have some sense of urgency, Young Master! This is no time to relax! You are barely attaining a passable grade as it is!"

Oh, shut up…

"For generations, it has been customary for the sons and daughters of this great house to undertake the challenge that is the Royal Academy entrance examinations. But not one person has been able to push the heavy doors to that institution open. Seven hundred years of painful longing! And you, Young Master—you would turn your back on that glorious future? You are not even trying! With your lack of effort, you besmirch the pride of this family: that its members push themselves to the utmost! If you were to fail, I would never be able to show my face to your father again. Nay, I would make amends by accepting my death!"

What is this? Is he trying to cast some sort of curse? Soldo had clearly started to go off the deep end a bit. Grimacing, I tried to placate the old man.

"Sorry, Gramps. I just got a bit lost in thought. I do have a sense of urgency, I assure you. Please, continue the lesson," I said, raising my hand to try to halt his sermon and giving him a quick nod. Having finally received a response to his rambling, Soldo regarded me with a suspicious look.

"Well, as long as you understand," he said after a pause. "Let us continue, then."

With a slightly puzzled look on his face, he resumed his teaching. Honestly, I could understand his confusion. My response had been very unlike the Allen he was used to. Born into a noble family—and the youngest child at that—I'd been doted on since birth. Consequently, I'd grown into the epitome of a spoiled, selfish brat. And that was how I'd acted—up until about three minutes ago. Now, if I were still the *old* Allen, my response to Soldo's sermon would have been something more along the lines of…

"Oh, shut up! I'm sick of studying from dawn to dusk! Even if I do

become a knight, you know what skills I'd actually need *to have? Discipline, strength, and the ability to go down to the tavern after work, make some noise, and find some friends I can trust to watch my back! Royal history? That's not gonna be useful even once! The magical power conversion theorem? Do you really think* I'm *going to become a magical engineer or craftsman? Hell, you could tear off my arms right now so I* couldn't *become a knight and I'd still never resort to that! Why should I waste my time memorizing stuff I'm never going to need just for some stupid exam? What's the point in cramming all this useless crap into my head just so I can sit there all quiet-like and do useless things like an idiot? Seriously…"*

Yeah, some childish response like that, stuffed full of those canned phrases study-weary kids love to parrot.

But enough of that. Right now, I had to think through my new situation.

First of all, just a few moments ago, I had regained my memories of my past life. For simplicity's sake, we would just say that twelve years after my reincarnation, I had "awakened." I still had the memories of the last twelve years of my life as "Allen," but unlocking those additional memories had made an unmistakable impact on my current personality and mental attitude.

At the same time, it wasn't like I'd been possessed by my past self; rather, it was more like the timid, swotty me of my past life and the carefree jock I had been until now had fused into some kind of hybrid. For some reason, the bright red sticker on the back of a bottle of household bleach flashed into my mind: *"DANGER: DO NOT MIX."*

What happens when you mix a jock with a swot, anyway?

Rebirth (2)

I shook my head to dispel the mental image of household bleach and resumed analyzing my newfound situation. I still had my memories from the twelve years I'd lived this life, but I now also had decades of memories from a past life flooding my brain. I needed to reconcile what I knew in this world with the norms and customs I now remembered from my past life, or else my family would think I had lost my mind.

In this life, I was the third son of Viscount Rovene, an aristocrat within the Kingdom of Yugria, which itself had stood

on this land for over twelve hundred years. My older siblings had all taken on the Royal Academy entrance examinations, only to unfortunately add their names to the long, tearstained list of failures that marked this family's history. My eldest brother had instead enrolled in the Dragoon Noble College's bureaucrat course, graduating with excellent marks, while my second-oldest brother had enrolled in the knight's course at the very same institution, passing with decent grades.

In this kingdom, titles were passed down through the generations according to nomination by the current head of the family—with the consent of the king, of course. Even so, it was still customary for succession of nobility to pass to the eldest child. In my case, there was no internal strife within my family, and it was pretty much a sure thing that my eldest brother, the kind and responsible person that he was, would inherit the title. My other brother, being the second oldest, would take a support role in the management of the Rovene Domain (while, of course, serving as an emergency backup heir). Essentially, there was only a minuscule chance I'd end up involved in any troublesome fights for succession.

One way or another, it was clear I would one day have to leave home and beat my own path in the world; a small noble family like ours had neither the need nor the means to keep a third son in the business of managing the domain. If, by some miracle, I managed to gain admission to the Royal Academy, it was very likely I'd go on to find myself a brilliant career as either a royal knight or a royal bureaucrat. These were roles exclusive to Academy graduates, and those who undertook them served directly under the king.

There were already countless examples of the illustrious careers available to those who managed to graduate from the Royal Academy. One example was the child of a bumpkin baron from farming land who'd gone on to join the Order of the Royal Knights—that graduate had become a war hero and ended up leading a division of over ten thousand men. There was also the royal bureaucrat who'd pioneered a project to develop regional roads, greatly boosting economic power in the kingdom's outlying areas. If I were to be admitted, I could use my subsequent influence both publicly and behind the scenes to raise my family to great prominence. The pressure on my shoulders would be enormous.

And then there was my older sister, who'd entered the mage course at the same Noble College, graduating from the magical craftsmanship major with the highest grades in her class. She'd been known to be a prodigy since birth, and my family had believed she would be the one to pass the Royal Academy's exams. Everyone had thought so. Crushingly, the minimum magical aptitude level had been uncommonly high that year, and she'd failed to be selected. For all her relentless effort, there were things even she had no control over. Apparently, the God of Entrance Examinations was cruel in every world.

After graduating from the Noble College, my sister had continued on to the highly selective Special Magical Craftsmanship Research Institute in Runerelia, the capital city, and she was now spending her days busily assembling her graduation thesis.

I hadn't seen her in quite a while—but then again, when she did come home to visit, she doted on me so obsessively it was almost painful, so maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. At first, she'd sent me dozens of long-winded letters, and when I couldn't be bothered to reply to them, it seemed she'd cried to our parents about it. Unfortunately for her, our parents had ruled that her ceaseless letter writing would interfere with both of our respective studies; contrary to her hopes, they had instead limited the exchange of letters to once a month, capped at three sheets of paper each. Any violation of these rules would result in the immediate incineration of the letter before I could even see it, much to my sister's indignation. After the establishment of that rule, the subsequent letters I'd received had been written in text so small, I'd needed a magnifying glass to read them. Honestly, it was terrifying.

At that moment, Soldo's eyes met my own.

"Young Master, your mind is elsewhere, is it not? I have watched your every step since birth; there is nothing I cannot tell just by looking into your eyes. Why must you do this to me...?"

Once again, I raised my hand in an attempt to curb the sermon he seemed about to resume. "Relax, Gramps. I've been listening—look, I've taken notes, see?" I waved three sheets of paper under his nose.

In my past life, I'd spent countless hours every day taking notes on the most boring topics imaginable. Even after I'd joined the workforce, the task of taking the minutes for meetings had

somehow always fallen exclusively to me. Even if I was thinking about something else, my hands would take on a life of their own to put together the key points—which was exactly what they'd been doing ever since I'd awakened a bit ago.

Soldo quickly perused the notes. His eyes, initially suspicious, suddenly began to fill with tears; before him were the contents of his lesson, summarized in a concise and easy-to-grasp manner.

"Well, Gramps? Was there anything I missed?" I asked, a smug look on my face. Soldo had flushed red with excitement.

"Finally, after all these years... To think I've finally gotten through to you!"

"Yes, yes, you've definitely gotten through. Painfully so. So would you *please* get on with the lesson?" I urged, dismissing the man's budding emotional outburst.

Soldo had been delivering a lecture on the modern history and geopolitics of the kingdom. Although I'd heard it all before, it left a completely different impression on me now that I'd awakened. Before now, I'd had no particular interest in history in either life, but as Soldo's lesson continued, I found myself leaning forward, eager to hear more.

I had no idea where this curiosity had come from, but maybe it was similar to the algebra I had studied so extensively in my past life. Just as the sum of "a" and "b" could equal "c," maybe my two different personalities—the swot and the jock—had combined to create an entirely unique Allen with new passions and interests.

Tearing my mind away from dubious hypothesizing, I focused instead on Soldo's lecture on the kingdom's aristocracy from a historical and geopolitical perspective.

The aristocratic hierarchy in Yugria was separated into five ranks—dukes, marquesses, counts, viscounts, and barons, with barons holding the least power. In society as a whole, dukes ranked second only to the royal family in terms of authority, and because they were closely descended from the original royal family, they somewhat served as insurance for the continuation of the official royal bloodline.

While they didn't hold any territory, dukes wielded considerable authority over areas of infrastructure, such as the roads and waterways, as well as other areas they had taken personal interest in, such as the Merchant's Guild or the

Explorer’s Guild. Apparently, the steadily increasing number of dukes throughout the history of the kingdom had gradually overpowered any authority held by the lower aristocratic ranks, ultimately culminating in a bloody political struggle centuries prior. As a result of that conflict, most of the ducal families had been demoted to lower ranks of nobility, with only three families retaining their status today.

I rested my chin in my hand—a bad habit in my previous life, and now in this one too, it seemed—and posed a question to Soldo. “I understand why having so many ducal families was problematic, but why did they decide on having just three?”



Soldo looked taken aback as he tilted his head quizzically. He clearly hadn't anticipated I would ask a serious question. "Why, you ask… I cannot say for certain, but perhaps there were only three influential families of prominent royal blood at the time the judgment was made?"

I couldn't readily accept Soldo's proposed explanation. For those three families to have come out on top of the fierce political struggles and then maintain their position for hundreds of years… No, there had to be some kind of deeper reason. Maybe now they held their positions simply because that was the status quo, but there must have been some initial reason they had been able to keep them in the first place.

It was like how in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, there had been a three-way deadlock between the warring factions that had prevented the concentration of power within a single family. Come to think of it, the Tokugawa family had had three branches too… Sure, I was getting off topic, but cramming the facts of history into your head was pointless if, in the real world, you couldn't explain *why* things had turned out the way they had. Thanks to my newfound interest in history, I was now coming to understand that the reason you studied the past was so you could use it as a guide for the future. Maybe my failure to realize that in my past life was one of the reasons I had never managed to achieve anything of note.

If I hadn't awakened, this would probably be around the point where I'd lose any interest in studying and attempt to distract Soldo with fruitless questions. But I wasn't that child anymore.

Ultimately, my desire to understand the *why* of history was unnecessary for a short-term goal like studying for entrance exams. So I left the question be, and Soldo continued his lecture, moving on to the rank of marquess as my hands semiautomatically took notes.

Nine distinguished marquesal families were spread across the sprawling lands of the Kingdom of Yugria (saying that, I still had no idea of the actual size of this kingdom). Each family had a vast estate of their own, and each also served as a minor ruler over the counts, viscounts, and barons within their region. In other words, this kingdom was composed of nine large regions, every one of them led by a marquess that often—overtly or otherwise—fought in his or her own interests. Each region featured a Noble College, a large branch of the Explorer's Guild, and various

other establishments and institutions. The children of noble families who hadn't managed to enter the Royal Academy generally enrolled in the Noble College of their own region, just as my older siblings had done.

The next rungs on the hierarchy belonged to the counts, viscounts, and barons. Being Japanese (at least, originally speaking), the sheer number of noble families in this land was overwhelming to me. The number of counts—eighty or so—was high, but that was at least understandable. On the other hand, the kingdom's viscounts numbered over one thousand, and the barons exceeded eight thousand.

To put it in the context of my past life, if the marquesses were like the rulers of the Kanto or Chubu regions of Japan, the counts were the prefectural governors, the viscounts were the city mayors, and the barons were like the town chiefs. I didn't really know how big this land actually was, and of course, the ruling system here was different from Japan's, but since Japan had undergone a lot of consolidation in its municipalities, I was pretty sure there were now no more than two thousand town-level governments left there. Meanwhile, the number was certainly much higher here. In a kingdom with a history as long as this one's, and with population growth constantly leading to newly established regions and newly conferred titles, the number of nobles had slowly ballooned over the years.

Naturally, given said growth and the staggering number of nobles out there, the percentage of commoners with noble blood was high. In fact, it would be nearly impossible to find a commoner who *didn't* have some noble blood in their veins. There were many noble families, but within each family, only one person could inherit the title; those who weren't chosen for succession would instead assimilate into the working class. It wasn't even unusual for a commoner to be able to trace their bloodline back to the *royal* family—though they wouldn't be conferred any special treatment for that.

In the founding days of the kingdom, there hadn't been as many noble families as there were today, and it had been those with strong magical abilities and the resulting genetics who'd been given special positions in the aristocracy. Now, however, there was no great divide in magical ability between nobles and the rest of society. In fact, it was fairly standard practice for a noble family to adopt a commoner child who showed signs of

great magical talent—though the exchange was transactional rather than charitable. In exchange for the family providing support to the child throughout their higher education—whether in the Royal Academy or elsewhere—the child would be expected to use their newly acquired influence to elevate their family's position within the aristocracy.

Speaking of schooling, there was a compulsory childhood education system in this kingdom, attended by noble and commoner children alike. After completing one's required education around the age of twelve, one could opt to advance to an institution of higher education, the most prominent of which were obviously the Royal Academy and the Noble Colleges. Owing to the kingdom's long history and stable social system, a fairly high percentage of the population had completed some form of higher education, even when you counted the common folk. Reina was only the daughter of a poor, local baker, but she was already set to attend a seamstress's college.

What I was coming to realize was that this world, in some ways, was not so different from Japan. The majority of the population went on to complete higher education, and your grades and the name of your alma mater would have a significant impact on your future prospects. Even accounting for the moderate advantages of belonging to a mildly well-off family, it seemed educational history was still paramount to one's future.

So I've been reborn into my dream world of swords and magic, and I've still somehow ended up in an academic meritocracy...? Well, crap. Okay, here goes nothing: Change Worlds!

I tried to force a do-over, but to no avail.

Soldo was staring at me again, his lecture on hold as he surveyed me with a threatening eye. I hurriedly offered him my notes, which I had still been taking through muscle memory even as my mind had been wandering. My messy scrawl in this world was a far cry from the neat handwriting of my past life, but I was still confident in my ability to summarize the main points concisely and highlight any areas I wasn't sure about.

Soldo's eyes widened as he reviewed the sheets of paper, although, as I'd expected, he refrained from offering me any praise. He was probably worried that praising me at this point, rather than encouraging me to keep going, would just convince me that I'd made enough of an effort to call it a day. Sure, Soldo

had watched over me ever since I'd been born, but for my part, I'd been on the receiving end of his sermons as far back as I could remember. There was nothing *I* couldn't tell by looking into his eyes either.

"We must maintain this rhythm, Young Master. For the next two and a half months, you will study at this pace or die trying! I will guide you on the path to certain admission to the Royal Academy!"

Hey, now. You shouldn't be saying things like "die trying" to the son of a nobleman, you know. Even if I'm going to be a commoner before long.

I got what he was saying, though. The Allen who'd existed up until this point wouldn't have been able to summarize the contents of even one of Soldo's tedious lectures like I'd done today. That Allen wouldn't even have been able to listen to him for an hour. There was still a lot I was unsure about when it came to my awakening, but the feeling of suffering I'd always had while studying had vanished in an instant. On the other hand, I hadn't lost the urge to play around either, nor did I feel any guilt at the mere thought.

This is going to require some investigation.

Study Schedule

Ever since that day, I'd been diligently testing out and analyzing the various consequences of my awakening, as well as all the new ways of thinking that had accompanied it. Because Soldo's lessons stretched across most of the day, I could only really move freely before breakfast and between dinner and bedtime.

The entrance examinations for the Royal Academy tested both practical skills and subject knowledge, and as such, it was common for aspiring test takers to devote half a day to one area and the other half to the other. In my case, however, my practical skills were apparently already considered strong enough that I'd safely score above the passing grade, and as such, Soldo had petitioned my father six months ago to permit him to implement what he referred to as the "Absolute Success Strategy." This method removed any practical training from the curriculum, instead allocating the full day for lectures in an attempt to remedy my woefully lacking subject knowledge. However,

despite the name of his strategy, Soldo’s schedule…

ABSOLUTE SUCCESS STRATEGY
- 8:00 to 9:00: *Breakfast*
- 9:00 to 10:30: Language and Literature
- 10:30 to 11:00: *Rest*
- 11:00 to 12:30: Physics and Magical Theory
- 12:30 to 1:30: *Lunch*
- 1:30 to 2:30: *Afternoon Nap*
- 2:30 to 4:00: History and Geopolitics
- 4:00 to 4:30: *Rest*
- 4:30 to 6:00: Military Strategy and Politics

…had been a little soft, to say the least. After I’d failed to get accepted into my first-choice university in my past life, I’d studied like mad eighteen hours a day for a year straight, ultimately managing to enter a fairly well-known private university on my willpower alone. Looking over Soldo’s schedule with my newly awakened eyes, I’d wondered whether or not he and my father really wanted me to pass the exams at all. Had I really only been studying six hours a day until now? What did they take me for, a middle schooler? Well, considering my age now, that was probably an appropriate amount of study, but still…

The morning after my awakening, I’d requested some revisions to Soldo’s lackluster study schedule. Class time would be extended to run from eight in the morning until seven in the evening, and the interlesson breaks and afternoon nap would be removed entirely. The lunch hour would be cut down to an adequate fifteen minutes. With the focus I’d just regained as a former swot, I could easily study from six in the morning until midnight, but there were too many other aspects of my new abilities I wanted to look into, so I’d begrudgingly made some concessions with the revised schedule. I could always add in some self-study if I had any free time after testing out my new abilities.

But Soldo had disagreed. “Young Master, while I appreciate your eagerness, simply extending the length of your study schedule will not yield the results you seek. Longer hours will not equate to higher grades; that is a common misunderstanding amongst those your age. In fact, it is more likely you will obtain

worse results by following such a strenuous schedule," the older man had said, attempting to gently reject my proposed revisions.

Generally speaking, Soldo wasn't wrong. If I were still the boy I'd been up until the day before, this kind of haphazard attempt to cram would have been counterproductive. But as I was now, there was no chance I'd accept anything easier than the schedule I'd proposed. I still had no idea how heavily my results on the upcoming exams could limit my options in my new life if I was careless.

Before awakening, I would have been fine if I'd failed the examinations. I would have headed off to the Noble College in the Dragoon Region and gotten a warm welcome, and I'd have possibly aimed to do better on the employment examinations taken postgraduation. But that approach was naive. I only had one shot at the Royal Academy.

Except for what I could glean from Allen's experiences, I understood nothing about this world or the way it truly worked. In that sense, I was no different from myself in my past life; back then, I'd believed unquestioningly that academic credentials were everything in life, and I had come to regret that conviction immensely. Now I'd been reincarnated and told the same was true in this world. With the regret from my previous life still burning in my mind, it was a hard pill to swallow. But that wasn't to say I was giving in; I had no plans to inadvertently limit my future options and leave myself no choice but to become a corporate slave again.

"You're too soft, Gramps. The next few months will shape the rest of my life! Seven hundred years' worth of Rovene family blood, sweat, and tears rests on my shoulders! You need to have a greater sense of urgency!"

Soldo froze for a moment, seemingly unable to understand the words that had come out of my mouth. But the next moment, he began to tremble, his face flushing with excitement.

"I was impressed by your perseverance yesterday...but to think the day would come when I would hear such conviction coming from you, Young Master... You *are* serious about this!"

"*Now* you're getting it, Gramps!"

"'Getting it,' I am! I shall amend our strategy for certain victory! Your schedule will be revised as you wish! We shall cut down the breaks between classes to a mere ten minutes each!

There's little we can do about the lunch hour, but the afternoon nap will be done away with. I'll write to your father in the capital immediately! Regret it though you may, there will be no backing out henceforth!"

My shoulders slumped dejectedly. Soldo was really taking this far too lightly.

"Gramps, why do we need an hour for lunch? Do you think I have the time to be leisurely strolling to the dining room? The liberty to sit back in my chair and savor some hot soup? If the cook prepares some sandwiches or a packed lunch in advance, we can get it over and done with in fifteen minutes without even leaving the classroom!"

"Sandwiches? A packed lunch? That kind of cold food is hardly suitable for the son of a noble family—"

"Remember what purpose all this studying is for, Gramps. If I can't get into the Royal Academy, eventually, I'll be living around here as a simple commoner—no title, no lands, and no true responsibilities. Living as an aristocrat just to keep up appearances is meaningless at this crucial moment."

I thought it was a sound argument. Soldo disagreed.

"True as that may be, Young Master, I worry if we do not allow for proper rest periods, your disposition—"

I cut the old man off again. "When you take an exam, you either pass or you fail. No matter how much effort I put in, if I don't pass, it'll all have been meaningless. The objective here isn't to do 'as much as Allen can handle.' It's to do 'as much as it takes to pass.' I'm not competing against myself—I'm competing against the other examinees. If I'm not willing to do as much as it takes, there's no point doing anything. It'd be nothing but a waste of time. If I follow a 'sensible' study plan...there's no way I'm gonna pass," I declared with calm confidence.

At least ten thousand hopefuls who'd passed the threshold requirements for mana and academic results would present themselves on the day of the entrance exams. Of those ten thousand, only one hundred would prevail. If one also included the potential applicants who had failed to meet those thresholds, the ratio of applicants to successful candidates was even more astronomical. Even an applicant blessed with great physical abilities wouldn't stand a chance against that mob of people—not with a half-hearted approach to their studies, that was.

I already knew the ruthlessness of the God of Entrance Examinations. It was ingrained in my very core.

"But, Young Master—"

God, he's obstinate!

Soldo clearly had no intention of accepting the revisions I'd requested of him. The Allen he knew had spent too many years running away from his studies; I was now just reaping what he had sown. At the same time, I was at my limit with all this circular talk. I had so many things I wanted to try in this promising new world; I wasn't planning to waste any of my precious time on leisurely dining.

"I'm fed up with this, Gramps. Let's say I end up joining the Royal Order. I'd be sent out on monster eradication missions, camping in the field. Do you think I'd have the luxury of sitting around eating warm, comforting food when I could be attacked at any second? Getting *into* the Royal Academy isn't the finish line here—it's just a checkpoint. If I don't think about it from the perspective of my life after graduation, I'll never even get admitted!"

This was my guiding truth. If my past life had proven anything, it was that studying without a vision in mind was worth less than nothing. And sure, it wasn't a bad thing to enjoy a nice meal every once in a while, but the kind of satisfaction I was after right now didn't come from food.

Soldo looked at me with a stunned expression on his face that said, *Who is this child?* I took advantage of the silence to further press my case.

"This is your last chance, Gramps. Enough with the half-assed adjustments. We've been cornered on the battlefield, alone and helpless. Our enemy is the entrance exams, and against them we are feeble. But if we do not defeat them, we have no hope of returning alive. And they're drawing ever closer." I paused. "In life, you need to leave yourself a bit of elbow room. Do you know why? Because when all hope is lost, and the enemy is at the gate, that's when you wring out your last reserves of hidden strength! At what point should we brace ourselves for the coming battle? When do we refuse to give in? That time is now! I've already made up my mind, Gramps. Forget the sandwiches—starting tomorrow, I'll be eating field rations for lunch, got it? I'll eat here while preparing for the afternoon lessons. And I don't want to hear another word about it!"

Soldo's eyes, previously still tinged with confusion, instantly filled with fighting spirit.

Mwa ha ha. I knew that would get him. I'd intentionally aimed to leverage Soldo's predisposition toward clichéd, impassioned speeches like that, taking inspiration from a particularly hot-blooded cram school teacher from my past life. Judging from his expression, it appeared I had been successful.

"From eight in the morning until seven in the evening…no breaks between lessons…and fifteen minutes for lunch… Are you quite sure, Young Master? Considering that up until yesterday, you were interrupting your lessons at every given opportunity to use the latrine…will your chronically overactive bladder not trouble you?" His lips had curved into a slight smile, but the old man's eyes were not smiling at all.

"How indecent! As the exclusive private tutor of the great House Rovene, you should know when to hold your tongue!"

The moment those words left my mouth, all humor vanished from Soldo's face. *Crap.* The words had slipped out reflexively in response to his pointing out my past childish behavior. Soldo held great pride in having guided numerous Rovene children, and ever since my potential in magic had been discovered, he had hoped more than anyone for my acceptance into the Royal Academy. And now I'd gone and made a fool of him.

Some lines were not meant to be crossed.

◆◆◆

And that was how I had succeeded in securing my proposed schedule. But it turned out that running my mouth had resulted in a few unintended side effects…

"Gramps, there's no reason for you to eat field rations too, you know? You could ask the cook to make you a sandwich or something, at least."

"There is no need. This is a battlefield, Young Master. Do you have the luxury to be showing such compassion?" His eyes were glazed with quiet anger.

"I'll continue to work on the questions on my own, so please, take a short rest—surely you must need a bathroom break at the very least?"

"Again, there is no need. I have come wearing a diaper, so rest assured that there will be no issues even if something were to

occur.”

This guy is terrifying.

Trial and Error

A month had passed. There were just two months left until the examinations—and when I factored in how long it would take to make the journey to the capital, the time I had left in this house was closer to a month and a half.

Over the course of the past few weeks, I’d more or less come to understand the effects my awakening had had on Allen’s original abilities—which was to say, it had only taken me a day to figure out that the addition of my past personality hadn’t resulted in any significant changes to Allen’s abilities whatsoever.

It would have been a different case if I’d been reincarnated into a strange, mystical world as a baby, but given I’d had twelve years of Allen’s memories as the basis for my research, all I’d had to do was verify if there had been any changes before and after I’d awakened. I’d quickly concluded that apart from the introduction of my original intelligence and personality, there weren’t any tangible differences. Of course, I hadn’t really expected anything else—but there *was* a part of me that had hoped my awakening would be the basis for discovering a “*Reincarnation Cheat Code: Waaay Too Strong?!*” or some other cliché like that…

Although I hadn’t been able to uncover an OP cheat code, one somewhat unexpected benefit of my awakening was the sense that my mental faculties had been considerably enhanced. It wasn’t just that my knowledge had increased either; it’s fairly normal to have an easier time memorizing and thinking through things that deeply interest you, and I had been reborn into my long-admired world of swords and magic. I pored over the facts and bits of information that Allen had filed away as nothing more than common knowledge. After all, even the reincarnation cliché of “I just reincarnated here, so let me get some late-night secret magic training in” was a no-go if you didn’t have some basic knowledge of that world’s magic. Magical theory, monster information, geography, and history—over the last month, I’d devoured those topics as though I were starving.

I had also hypothesized that there was a chance the superimposition of a second set of memories had *physically*

increased my brain capacity. For all his hatred of studying, it seemed like Allen possessed above-average intellect—significantly sharper than my past self's, easily. And it wasn't just his memory; the speed at which he processed things and his insight went far beyond what the average person possessed, and my awakening had only furthered that.

The brain's capacity only increased the more you used it, after all. It was like how the number of books you read was directly linked to your ability to verbalize your thoughts and the size of your vocabulary; you could always tell when someone had never opened a book in their life. It was also like how a person who'd learned mental arithmetic from early childhood could rattle off unbelievably speedy calculations without even thinking. The earlier you started using your brain, the smarter you got—and the potential was basically unlimited.

It was a fact that the brain had the most capacity to absorb new information during one's childhood. Thirty-six years' worth of experiences from my past life, plus twelve years in this one—all forcibly jammed into the fresh gray matter of a twelve-year-old's brain. No matter how efficiently one raised their child, that kind of result was normally impossible—there was no overcoming the constraints of time. My twelve-year-old brain now likely had the cerebral folds of a person four decades older. Of course, I would never be able to prove this hypothesis of mine, but in the absence of a scientific method to examine it more closely, I had decided to go ahead with that theory to explain my newfound mental prowess.

Next, I had tested out my physical abilities, but I hadn't been able to detect any significant changes. Honestly, given that I had been thin as a twig in my past life, with motor skills and athletic abilities well below the average, I'd been afraid my physical skills had actually gone *down* postawakening. Luckily, it seemed that wasn't the case.

Finally, there had been the part I'd been most looking forward to exploring: my newfound magical skills. But there hadn't been any changes there to speak of. Strengthening Magic, which utilized the magic reserves amassed in one's mana core to enhance one's physical abilities, was the only type of magic Allen could use. Actually, it was a type of magic anyone could learn to use, and it was such a practical tool that it was taught in the general curriculum. Whether for farmwork or making deliveries,

the effective use of Strengthening Magic made an immeasurable impact on productivity. However, the levels of mastery differed greatly from person to person.

Use of magic relied on two integral factors. The first was the capacity of one's internal organ known as the "mana core," in which magical reserves were stockpiled. These reserves were usually referred to as one's "magical aptitude," or mana. The natural capacity of one's mana core was thought to be fully grown by the age of twelve, but one's true capacity was determined by a skill known as magical compression. While natural capacity was limited, magical compression could be slowly developed over years of practice to exceed that limit. The more mana you had access to, the higher the power of your output, and the longer you could cast.

The other factor integral to magic use was one's ability to freely manipulate these magical reserves at will. The ability to manipulate magic was essentially an innate instinct. While it could be developed through training and practice, the fact of the matter was that one's intuitive instinct for magic was the biggest deciding factor in their potential abilities. It was like how certain people excelled at playing instruments because they had been born with a knack for perfect pitch. Anyone could learn an instrument with enough practice, but some were just innately better than others.

In my case, while my magical aptitude was considerably higher than the average person's, it was my magical instincts that were lauded as truly outstanding by those around me. It was difficult to get a general sense of how good my magical manipulation was compared to the rest of the world, but the swordmaster at the local training ground had once reckoned it wasn't a stretch to think I'd be placed into Class A at the Royal Academy, supposing I passed the written exam. I couldn't be sure if that was just the self-serving flattery of a rural swordsmanship instructor who felt personally responsible for all I'd achieved, but considering that soon after my eleventh birthday, he'd resigned from his position with a cool "There is nothing more I can teach you," maybe there was something to what he had said. After that, I had mostly practiced on my own, apart from occasional training from my mother, who also excelled at Strengthening Magic.

Well, this had been a long-winded explanation, but essentially,

there had been no change to my magical aptitude or instincts as a result of my awakening. Magical aptitude could be measured with specialized tools, so I'd been able to confirm the lack of change immediately. The average magical aptitude level across the general population was around 100; mine had been measured at 2,000. With my current magical compression abilities, I could amplify that by about twenty percent, so my true magical aptitude level was around 2,400.

From what I had learned, successful applicants to the Royal Academy had an average level of around 2,000, whereas the minimum threshold to even progress to the actual examinations was around 1,000—although that level varied each year based on the cumulative levels of the approximately ten thousand applicants. Unfortunately, in the year my sister had applied, the threshold had been unprecedentedly high at around 1,500.

The highest recorded magical aptitude level in the kingdom's thousand-year-plus history had been achieved around three hundred years ago: an unnervingly high 67,000. The applicant had been a twelve-year-old boy who had later gone on to be known as the Founding Father of Magical Medicine; he'd also failed to be admitted to the Academy. Apparently, he'd been utterly uninterested in studying, and his written examination score had been too low to gain him entry. That tale had gone on to become an oft-repeated anecdote demonstrating the Academy's stance on the importance of comprehensive excellence, and it was also solid evidence that pure physical ability wasn't enough to cross the rigid threshold line. It was a favorite story with which to lecture children who were slacking off on their studies, and accordingly, it had been drummed into the head of preawakened Allen so often that it had likely left an imprint.

On the other hand, an applicant's ability in magical manipulation was harder to quantifiably measure, because one's magical aptitude did influence their control over magical manipulation. Speaking in terms of my past life, if you tried to estimate an athlete's skill, it would be nearly impossible to distinguish the degree to which their genetic composition contributed to their overall ability. But to the trained eye, even magical manipulation instincts were somewhat gaugeable (albeit difficult to verbalize or quantify); this was done by studying the unity of the user's body movements and the speed of their

reactions while they used Strengthening Magic. And naturally, if someone had suddenly undergone a dramatic *change* in the level of their magical manipulation ability, they would be able to detect that intuitively.

Ultimately, aside from an increase in mental faculties, there had been no changes to my existing abilities. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Calling it an "ability" was a little off the mark, but there had been one more change that, at some point this past month, I'd realized I'd acquired.

I was brimming with vitality.

Well, it was difficult to put it into the right words. Rather than "vitality," maybe it was more my zest for living? Or a driving force that allowed me to overcome any difficulties that came before me? Whatever it was, what the past month had taught me was that I was overflowing with it. I guessed that maybe the feeling of having two souls in a single body felt a lot like having one soul with a really strong will to live. And so, brimming with this so-called vitality, I'd spent the past month diligently testing out...

"Here it goes... Fireball!"

...nothing. I'd spent a month verifying the various things I *couldn't* do. I mean, I'd been reborn into a world of magic, right? Why wouldn't I want to use it properly? I'd always been biased toward mage classes, even in my previous life. But magic like fireballs fell outside the scope of Strengthening Magic, and my attempts always ended with the same result: failure. It seemed that using *Emissive* Magic was basically impossible for me.

Life Plan

I'd been reborn into what was undoubtedly a heavily education-conscious society. On top of that, I'd awakened with life-changing examinations just weeks away, and studying was no longer an issue for me. Before I knew it, I was determined to pass—it was just muscle memory for me. But at the same time, I was already beginning to doubt that graduation from the Royal Academy would guarantee me success in life. My last life had already taught me that important lesson.

In this world, children between the ages of eight and twelve attended preparatory school, learning the basics like reading, writing, arithmetic, history, and geography. I'd attended a nearby preparatory school for the local children up until last year—in

most of the kingdom, the same preparatory schools were attended by commoners and nobility alike rather than being restricted by social rank like the Noble Colleges.

However, around my eleventh birthday, my magical aptitude had hit a sudden growth spurt, and Soldo had declared that with personalized teaching, admission to the Royal Academy could be a definite possibility. Thus started my hellish exam preparation. There was even a kind of mock examination held twice a year, sponsored by the kingdom so it could uncover potential talents from across the land. My results from the last mock exam, held just over a month prior, had indicated that my likelihood of passing, while not out of the question, was less than ten percent. Rather than just providing scores, the examiners had gone as far as to courteously estimate the possibility of success.

Those who excelled in preparatory school were often adopted by high-ranking aristocratic families; they were considered future assets and sent on to a Noble College. But even those with ordinary grades tended to move on to advanced schooling. It was only common sense: Further education led to better employment opportunities and a higher chance of success in life.

I had thought it a little strange that such crucial examinations—ones basically determining one's future prospects—were taken at the tender age of twelve. But as I'd discovered, the reason was that a child's mana core—and their subsequent capacity for magic—started developing around the age of nine, and it would be fully developed by twelve at the latest. By that age, you could generally gauge any child's full potential.

Advanced schooling included multidisciplinary schools like the Royal Academy and the Noble Colleges, but it also referred to specialized institutions like the knight or mage schools, as well as vocational training schools for fishery, forestry, tailoring, and so on. For those who couldn't afford tuition or living expenses, there were even a bunch of schools that offered free training (albeit with strings attached), such as the training school run by the Explorer's Guild.

Still, I had never thought that I, the one whose lack of intelligence had caused me such pain in my past life, would even in reincarnation be preparing once again to descend into examination hell. Two months of putting my nose to the grindstone, and once again, there would be a chance I'd be admitted to the synonym of academic excellence.

Well, I'd be lying if I said the concept wasn't attractive. But supposing I did manage to pass, would things just go like they had in my previous life? Would I throw away all my school days frantically studying toward the goal of future employment? And say, for example, that I did end up successfully joining the Royal Order—what then?

I had my doubts about the whole thing. It didn't end at securing employment—even after I joined the Royal Order, there was a chance I'd spend my days studying and training to enter the Battalion Leadership School, or otherwise exhausting myself competing for a promotion. I'd be spending my days sandwiched between superiors and subordinates, developing chronic stomach pains—and in the end, I'd maybe come out of it with, what, a baronship? Was that really how I wanted to live this life?

If I just let others decide my path for me, that was definitely how things would turn out. After all that time I'd spent checking for any changes to my personality postawakening, I could definitively say I still had no drive to become famous or even remarkable. Honestly, I didn't even care if I was poor. Even my past self hadn't had any real ambition to leave his mark on the world. Back then, I'd just half-heartedly sought some kind of stability, and I'd died without ever finding it. No matter how you sliced it, I'd been a pathetic guy who'd lived a worthless life.

Yep. I'll just do whatever the hell I want! Screw stability and success!

This was a world of swords and magic. There were explorers, there were monsters, and there was a whole wide world out there, still unknown to me. Things that had just been facts of life to the old Allen now made my heart throb with excitement.

Suddenly, an image from my final moments flashed before my eyes—a sea of white clouds drifting freely in the sky, framed by my hospital room's window. *That's right, it was that moment… That was when I realized it would have been better to live like those clouds, going where the wind took me, doing as I pleased, and only focusing on the things I wanted to focus on.*

The regret had felt like a knife to the chest. Sure, there probably wasn't just one right way to live, but at that moment, thinking about those clouds, I resolved to spend this lifetime going with the flow and doing my own thing. Maybe in my next life, I'd be able to look back on this one enviously.

Having considered all that throughout my 5 a.m. running

training, I decided it was high time to start my daily sword practice and headed into the courtyard. While the old Allen had enjoyed physical training, he'd been inclined toward the more practical mock battles and the like, and he'd neglected to practice the basics. Still, his abilities far surpassed those of anyone else in this little slice of the countryside, so he definitely had talent. But there were also things he hadn't understood before awakening.

The significance of the pursuit of "form." The joy of the accumulation of simple, repetitive practice. With the ample stoicism I'd cultivated throughout my lifetime as a swot, I spent my mornings in this life increasing my stamina and practicing my sword strokes, while my evenings were spent practicing my magical compression—another area in which Allen had been slacking off. It was one thing to be blessed with talent, but if I didn't develop my basic abilities, there was no chance I'd be able to live a bright, happy second life—especially considering I hadn't been able to find any evidence of cheat codes.

I headed out into the courtyard, wooden practice sword in hand. Crouched underneath a flowering tree was the house gardener, Oliver, tending to one of the many bushes. He'd been an explorer for most of his life, only becoming our gardener after retirement. *When it comes to the idea of living freely in a world like this one…of course, explorers and adventurers and jobs like that are what first come to mind.*

"You're up early again, as usual," I greeted him.

"Morning, Young Master. Training again?" Apparently, my recent independent practice hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Yeah, since all I've been doing recently is studying, my body's been getting stiff. This makes for a nice change of pace," I said with a wry smile.

Oliver chuckled in understanding. "That's right—Soldo said you've been so devoted to your studies as of late, it's like you're an entirely different person."

I smiled. "That tree with the flowers—what is it?" I asked. Oliver made a surprised face. Clearly, the old Allen hadn't been the type to inquire about the foliage.

"Ah, that's a flowering dogwood."

"A flowering dogwood… It's a nice pale crimson, isn't it?"

"Pale crimson? Hmm… Well, it's certainly different from pink or red, isn't it? I guess a pale crimson would be the best way to

describe it.” Oliver seemed impressed with my particularity, but I’d bet that most Japanese people would have said the same thing. We were fastidious about things like color.

“So I’ve been wondering,” I started. “If someone were to become an explorer, how long would it take them to really set themselves up in life? If you accomplished enough and became fairly well-known, it’d be possible to join a knighthood, right?”

I had tried to frame it as simple idle chitchat, but Oliver immediately fell silent. He knew as well as the rest of them that I hated studying and that I’d been slacking off in my exam studies up until very recently. He knew if he answered poorly here, it would come back to bite him—it was written all over his face.

“Don’t get me wrong,” I added hastily. “As much as I don’t like studying, I’m not saying I’m going to give up on taking the exams. But when you’re studying, you need to ask yourself questions like, ‘Why is this necessary?’ right? Having a reason to drive you directly affects the results you get out of something. That’d be the same whether you’re an explorer or a gardener, no?” I asked with a smile, trying to keep my tone as carefree as possible. Although he still seemed slightly apprehensive, Oliver, possibly satisfied by my explanation, finally began to answer.

“Certainly, I have heard stories of commoners, once unable to afford the necessities of life, who joined up as explorers and eventually were able to enter a knighthood.”

Aha! You mean instead of studying this boring, rigid curriculum, there’s a far more attractive route to the same destination? Seeing my captivated expression, Oliver hastened to continue. “But, Young Master, your aim is the Royal Order, correct? That’s not the kind of knighthood you can enter with just any old track record. At the very least, you’d have to hold a B-Rank explorer’s qualification and have some kind of special skill. If you wanted to be treated well, you’d need to be A-Rank.”

A-Rank and B-Rank have entered the playing field! As a former web novel enthusiast, it’s basically my duty to investigate this new development! To the preawakened Allen, explorers had basically equated to poor day laborers, so he’d never paid the career path any heed.

“Speaking of ranks…how many are there, exactly?”

“When you first register with the Explorer’s Guild, you start out at G-Rank, so there’s seven levels, up until A. There’s also an S-Rank above that, but it’s basically an honorary rank given to

those who've been awarded an Order of Merit or the like."

Hmm, I see. "How difficult is it to rise through the ranks?"

"Well…reaching E-Rank requires completing a set number of requests, so a decently skilled person could get there in about two years, give or take." Oliver's bearded, gentle face suddenly became stern. "However, on top of completing a set number of requests, advancing from E-Rank to D also requires you to fulfill a fair number of special requests assigned by the guild, each one taking several months to complete. And throughout it all, your character and your decisions are constantly evaluated by the higher-ups… If you're lucky, you could move up after about five years of work at the very earliest."

"A minimum of five years just to go from E to D… That's a long time to wait."

"And for good reason. By the guild's standards, a D-Rank explorer is someone with the capacity to take on any kind of request throughout the whole kingdom. Those at that rank often get recruited to become knights on retainer for the more prominent noble families. I kept at it for fifteen years before I got to D-Rank, and getting there was partly to thank for why the viscount took me on here as a gardener."

"Right… Does a D-Rank earn much money?"

"Well, from your point of view, Young Master, they probably don't earn much at all. A D-Rank with one or two children to support throughout advanced schooling would have to ask their wife to work as well, and they'd need to live fairly modestly in order to make ends meet."

I suddenly pictured myself in my past life as an assistant manager at a small corporation. It was a pretty dismal vision.

"Well, how about a gardener like you, or a retainer in a noble's personal army? How much do they make?"

"My wages here are a little bit lower than those of an average D-Rank explorer, to be sure. That's only to be expected; there's no danger in this kind of work. But I enjoy the work I do now, and since I never married, what I earn is enough to comfortably live off of. I'm sure a knight on retainer would probably start off at around the same pay, but even in a noble's private army, they could move up the ranks and earn a bit more as time went on."

"It's not an easy world out there, is it? What about A-Rank or B-Rank? How hard are they to get to?"

"Hmm… Honestly, to a countryman like me, that was an

entirely different world. I can't say with any certainty how hard it'd be. The explorers around these parts were C-Rank at the very highest, and to me, those C-Ranks were incredible people. They'd all been in the game for fifteen to twenty years at minimum. I think most of the A- and B-Ranks had unique abilities on top of their years of experience."

"I see. So basically, the only place I'd be able to come across an A- or B-Rank would be in Runerelia?"

"Well, yes, you'd certainly be able to find some in the capital. But even if you went to Dragreid in the Dragoon Region, you'd likely encounter one or two at those ranks. There's ruins around there that are known throughout the kingdom for the quality of their excavated materials—and for the sheer quantity of nearby monsters." Suddenly, Oliver burst out into laughter, lowering his pruning shears from the bush. "But do you know what all those top explorers aim for, all across the kingdom? Being granted entry into the Order of the Royal Knights! So as I see it, because you have a decent chance of getting in as well, you're just as impressive as all of those guys, Young Master."

"Huh? *That's* what A-Rank explorers dream of?" I couldn't believe it. Just a moment ago, I'd nearly been decided on the idea of skipping out on the examinations altogether and living a carefree life as an explorer. I'd thought I could withdraw from the rat race and live an enjoyable life on the fringes of society. I'd be lying if I said the idea wasn't still somewhat tempting, but...

"Sure, an A-Rank explorer would earn a tidy sum, and of course they'd have decent social standing. But the Royal Order is in a class of its own. Status, honor, wages...not to mention the well-kept secrets to enhancing one's strength beyond the norm—it's all only available to less than a thousand people across the kingdom. The Royal Order is the trump card of Yugria—the pinnacle for those who make a living by the sword." Oliver looked at me curiously; apparently, that should have just been common sense.

"On top of that," he continued, "there's not actually all that much work out there for A-Rank explorers. The Royal Order are the ones who take on requests to eradicate particularly powerful monsters to minimize collateral damage. Meanwhile, A-Rankers usually undertake the role of scouts during those subjugation missions, hoping that if they work hard and their contributions are recognized, the Royal Order will take them in. Of course,

there are many among the explorers who detest the idea of working in a group, and they'll remain explorers for life. But at any rate…" Oliver took up his shears once more. "Admission to the Royal Academy is like a magic ticket to getting into the Royal Order, and that ticket is already within your grasp, Young Master. Please, try your best on the examinations," he finished with a smile.

Status, honor, money—I wasn't interested in those in the slightest. And dropping out to become an explorer, spending years rising through the ranks only to get stuck on the path to the same damned order I'd been trying to avoid in the first place? Calling it a waste of time would be too charitable. Of course, there was always a chance Oliver had intentionally exaggerated his explanation, trying to push me to focus harder on the exams instead, but I doubted he would lie about things that could be so easily verified.

Living free of the constraints of time and society—in some ways, the life of an explorer had only become more tempting. But I still remembered something that had happened in my past life, when I'd spoken to someone who'd been running their own business.

"Must be nice to be free to take time off whenever you feel like it!" I'd said to him. But he'd glared at me sharply and replied, "Being 'free' means doing everything yourself and taking on all the responsibility alone, you know." Come to think of it, the guy had constantly talked about how much he wanted to take a vacation. It was all I remembered him ever saying…

Yeah.

Exam Strategy and Emissive Magic

For the time being, it seemed like dropping out of the exams this late in the game wasn't a choice worth making. Failing would be one thing, but letting down my family, Gramps, and my friends, all of whom had been wholeheartedly supporting me, by disappearing into the unknown without even trying? There was no way. I couldn't have brought myself to do it.

On top of that, what I really needed right now, more than anything else, was information. Heading to the capital to take the exams would also benefit me in that regard. So I decided to put off any further life planning for the time being and focus

solely on studying for the upcoming battle. After I got admitted, I would have access to a much wider range of information—and heck, there was nothing stopping me from dropping out of the Academy midway through if I came across a more tempting opportunity. Admission itself didn't pose much of a problem at this point—I was now well equipped to pass.

The single most important thing an examinee needed to pass any exam was a solid grasp of the height of the wall they needed to scale. My first step had therefore been simple—obtain past examination questions and thoroughly solve them, cover to cover.

Actually, that was the *only* thing one needed to succeed. To be honest, three months of prep time was too short. Without knowing how many similar questions were likely to show up on the actual exam, most people would be too scared to squander all their precious time on past exams. But to formulate a strategy to conquer the tests, I first needed to accurately measure the gulf between my current knowledge and what was needed to pass. By doing that, I could judge which gaps in my knowledge could be most efficiently filled in the short time I had, and I could proceed with a clear understanding of the level I needed to reach. That was the only way I was going to pass. Mindlessly completing the assignments set for me by my parents or Soldo wouldn't help me overcome those gaps to anywhere near the same extent.

I'd wasted a lot of time on unproductive study methods in my past life. Unfortunately, I hadn't realized that in my university years, nor when I'd finally become a company employee—no, it wasn't until I'd taken a series of miscellaneous qualification exams, years into my adult life, that I'd finally realized I was doing something wrong. Fighting a seemingly endless uphill battle, confronted by my own lack of ability and a grasp of even the basics, I had finally arrived at that simple conclusion: measure the height, then fill in the gaps. While I regretted that I hadn't come to that realization much earlier in life, that was just the way it was sometimes—not everything you needed was given to you the moment you needed it.

With all this in mind, I'd started by instructing Soldo to gather as many past exams as he possibly could, and I'd spent long hours poring over them, marking areas I considered gaps in my knowledge. I had then analyzed the scope of the content I had to

cover compared to the time I had left, and I'd determined that I could comfortably reach the level required of me with time to spare. As for the actual method of study...well, as a fairly accomplished efficiency geek in my past life, I would leave most of that up to my old friends: mind palaces and the Pomodoro Technique. That was basically my study strategy all wrapped up.

My immediate concern wasn't actually studying; it was magic.

The preawakening Allen had possessed a basic grasp of the concepts, which I'd quickly begun to build on through my research. Emissive Magic, essentially the kind of magic you'd expect to find in a fantasy novel or a video game—shooting out flames, conjuring up water, calling down lightning, and so on—was decidedly possible in this world. Sadly, this was apparently another area in which natural talent counted for everything.

After finishing my morning run, I'd climbed up and down the steps of the small hill to the rear of our manor several times, eventually settling in at the top with my legs folded in a meditative position as I gazed over the town where I'd grown up. There was still time until my morning lessons began.

I closed my eyes and began to stir up the magic inside me. It was a feeling that was difficult to put into words; there was a set of nerves, distinct from the so-called motor nerves, that ran throughout the body, and by focusing on them in the same way you'd put strength into a particular muscle, you could sense the magic and then draw it out. To control it precisely required practice and concentration.

"Good morning, Allen!"

A voice suddenly called out from behind me, and the magic I'd been stirring up dispersed in a flash.

"Don't sneak up behind me like that. And I'm the son of a viscount, remember? It's Milord Allen to you, *Milord* Allen," I joked. Reina grinned in response.

"No can do! Ever since you started studying seriously, it's begun to feel like you're really going to get accepted into the Royal Academy, you know? And when that happens, you're going to move away from this town. If we've only got a little bit of time left together, I'm not going to waste it pretending to be a proper lady around you!"

On account of her work at the bakery, Reina was also an early riser. Recently, I'd incorporated Emissive Magic training into my morning routine, sitting atop the breezy hill and stoking the

magic that ran through my nerves. The sharp-sighted Reina had spotted me one morning, and since then, she'd been a constant presence, quietly observing my secret training from beside me.

I pulled myself together and closed my eyes once again, drawing upon the reserves of magic within me.

By tensing the magical nerves throughout my body, I could feel myself brimming with power. If I had been using Strengthening Magic, this would be referred to as the "on" state. If I started running, for example, or swung a sword, the magic would act as an amplifier for the muscles in use and increase the power and speed of my movements.

Next, I drew the accumulated magical energy to my skin, cladding myself in a thin, all-encompassing layer of it. This was the so-called Magic Guard skill, primarily used to raise one's defensive power.

But all that was stuff I'd been able to do even before my reawakening. Going from this state to actually using Emissive Magic relied on two elements. The first was the ability to release the magic stored in my body and manipulate it *externally*—that, I could do. That technique was in the same vein as the one used to move magic around the body during the use of Strengthening Magic; essentially, it was a form of magic manipulation, and I'd long since realized this was my area of expertise.

It seemed like that kind of Emissive Magic manipulation could be used for things like scouting for enemies, so I figured in that sense you could say I was able to use Emissive Magic—just not the kind I actually wanted to use. Manipulating flames, conjuring up water, healing with holy powers—these all required that second, more crucial element of external casting: the ability to convert one's mana into another element. Elemental affinity. And I didn't have a smidgen of it.

It was said that only around one in ten people had any sort of elemental affinity in the first place. Out of all the elements magic could be converted into, there were some that were far more common than others. Fire affinity was the most common, wielded by about one in fifteen people. Then you had the rare affinities like lightning; you'd only come across one lightning wielder in ten thousand or so. On top of that, there were even dual and triple casters, who could manipulate more than one affinity... How I longed to be among them. Just like one's extent of basic magical capacity, one's potential ability to convert their

magic into another element would present itself by the age of twelve at latest—that being the age by which the mana core was said to be fully developed.

Elemental magic…a special power, held by only a chosen few… I mean, how cool is that?! Not that I'm one of those chosen few myself.

Apparently, casting external elemental magic required the caster to have a solid grasp on the fundamentals, as well as the ability to vividly picture the phenomenon in their mind as they manipulated the magic within. My past life had equipped me with a strong grasp of scientific principles and a vivid imagination honed by countless anime and manga. As such, I'd been half anticipating that my reawakening would act as the catalyst for my sudden, miraculous development of elemental affinity. Unfortunately, it seemed that had not come to pass, and I had begrudgingly accepted the theory that magical affinity was linked intrinsically to one's mana core. And that meant it was unlikely I would ever be able to cast attack-style magic.

"Pffft!" A snort sounded from beside me. As I'd been flaring up the magic inside me and willing it to somehow turn into flames, I'd found myself just scowling up at the sky instead. Reina burst out laughing.

"Honestly," she said between spurts of laughter, "when you suddenly started saying you wanted to use elemental magic even though you don't have any affinity, I thought you were going a little crazy. But seeing the renowned king of slacking off really apply himself to something again…it almost makes me believe you'll be able to do it."

"Who knows? Even now, slacking off is still my specialty," I said with a wry grin, scratching my head.

"No, I'm sure of it. Runerelia won't know what hit it when you get there, Allen. Just imagining all the sorry tales I'm going to hear after they set you loose on the world…I can't help but look forward to it!" Reina laughed joyfully.

"What you *should* be looking forward to is hearing about me becoming an amazing mage, not whatever it is you're thinking of!" I retorted.

Reina and I made our way down the hill, exchanging idle chat as we descended, and we parted ways at the bottom. I'd lost track of time at some point, and there were now just minutes until morning lessons started. *I guess today I'll have to eat rations for breakfast too.*

In reality, although I couldn't cast elemental magic, that didn't mean there was no way for me to use it. For the affinity-deprived like me, there were magical tools. There were wands and other similar devices which used affinity-specific magic stones (a solid organ taken from the body of a monster, equivalent to the magic core of a human) as an intermediary, allowing the user to forcibly convert their mana into the element aligned with that of the incorporated stone.

But that method had its own disadvantages. When someone without any affinity forcibly converted their mana, the stone would immediately begin to deteriorate rapidly. If the magical input was high enough, it could even shatter in a single cast. For those without affinities, magical tools were basically single-use—and at the eye-watering prices they fetched, no one in their right mind would happily use them for training.

In that case, maybe I should become a magical craftsman and improve the technology?

But I had no desire to become a craftsman. In any case, I wanted to be able to use magic freely, not rely on some mass-produced, strings-attached tool. Magic that any old person could use, power limited by the performance of your tool... Where was the fun in that?

And that was basically all I'd been able to uncover about Emissive Magic so far. As long as I remained here, my sources would be limited to Soldo's private library (he'd apparently once specialized in magical research). But if I went to the royal capital, I'd have access to the research material in the national library. And if I made it into the Royal Academy, there would surely be Emissive Magic specialists there I could beg to teach me. If it weren't for the compulsory practical magic examination, I'd actually be aiming for the mage course.

No matter how much effort I put in, there was a high chance my quest to use Emissive Magic would end in failure. But that wasn't going to stop me. Sure, it wasn't going to help in my future career; anyone would say this was just a waste of time. But I'd already decided I was going to spend this lifetime doing whatever I wanted.

Soldo's Report

Examinations are, at their core, a gamble with fate. This I

knew.

The questions one faced could be unduly weighted toward one's weaknesses; a well-prepared examinee could come down with an illness on the day of; and another could panic, thereafter unable to rebuild their fragmented concentration. There were countless variables at play. However, despite the many years I had labored as the private tutor of House Rovene, there was a truth I'd only recently come to understand.

Gamble though it was, it was not one that was won on the whim of some goddess of luck smiling upon the undeserving.

Working with the reformed Allen over the past few months, that revelation had been thrust upon me: that those who did pass were only those who deserved to.

The young master had made great leaps and bounds in his studies over the recent months. Even before entering the employ of House Rovene, I had been a private tutor for more than forty years. Occasionally, there had been students such as he who had rapidly improved on the cusp of the examinations—but Allen's progress was another matter altogether. I frequently wondered as to what had sparked his sudden enthusiasm. As his lifelong tutor, it was to my great shame that I could not strike upon an answer.

Naturally, I'd been surprised enough when the young master had appealed to me to extend his lesson times, but what had really shocked me was what had happened thereafter. As per the young master's orders, I had compiled and sorted all the past tests I could gather and handed them over to him. I could not hazard a guess at when he had found the time to do them, but I had received the thick stack of tests back before the week was out, thoroughly completed from cover to cover. Along with it had come a request for lecture content tailored to his specific needs. The young master had identified his weaknesses and the areas he would benefit from improvement in, taking into account the limited time he had left to prepare; then he had compiled an analysis examining the trends of recent exam papers in order to refine the content of our remaining lectures, such that they would cover only the most efficient material.

That lecture content would be determined by the student learning it—while it went against my very nature as a private tutor, I could not argue with his logic any more than I could avoid the force of his raw enthusiasm. While I'd voiced a few doubts

about his proposed strategy, Allen had refuted my arguments with sound logic, and before I could realize it, I'd accepted his proposal unreservedly.

The pacing of the lectures themselves had also undergone a significant change. Up until recently, our lessons had been entirely one-sided; I would explain a concept, and Allen would sit there silently. I couldn't recall even a single time he'd posed a serious question to me. Now, however, if the young master was even *slightly* unsure about some minor facet of a concept, he'd hound me with rapid-fire questions until he was satisfied in his understanding. Rather than simple question-and-answer sessions, those occasions were more akin to debates—ones intense enough that I'd nearly forget I was speaking with a boy merely twelve years old.

The young master had always been obstinately against studying anything that couldn't be deemed "essential," and in some ways it felt like that obstinacy had only intensified recently. On the other hand, he had begrudgingly accepted that some "nonessential" studying was necessary, at least for the purpose of passing the examinations. When I'd questioned him on this, he'd replied, "Well, I'm right that when you look at it in the long term, none of this is stuff I'll need to know. But for the short term, my goal is getting into the Royal Academy, so it's better to learn this stuff for now. In life, it's important to be able to differentiate between short-term goals and long-term plans, you know?"

Then just why *has that been such an issue for you up until now, Young Master?*

To speak frankly, the young master's improvement over the last two months had been so dramatic, it was as if he'd turned into a completely different person. The sheer density of our revised lectures exhausted me to the point of near collapse at the end of each day, and yet the young master never showed any signs of fatigue; in fact, it seemed as though he was even moving on to self-study after taking his evening meals. Although the exact cause would likely remain a mystery to me, it was undeniably evident that something had lit a fire under him. I could not evaluate his physical skills with any expertise, but as for his mental prowess…I had absolute faith a spot in Class A was well within his grasp.

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Thus went the report Viscount Bellwood von Rovene had received in the wee hours of the morning upon his return to the estate. The social season had been lengthy, as had the journey back from the capital, and the viscount was weary. Unfortunately, there had been one pressing situation he'd needed to be briefed on before he could let himself turn in for the night, so he had sent for Soldo to attend him at his private study. With hesitance and trepidation, the viscount had inquired as to Allen's progress during his time away, and, after hearing Soldo's report, he now found himself in a state of thorough confusion.

"You mean to tell me that for the last two and a half months, Allen has been studying a curriculum of his own design?! At this critical time?! There's just weeks until the examinations!" The viscount sank onto his desk, spent. It was as though the fatigue of his travels had magnified twofold in an instant. True, the letter he had received during his time in the capital had noted Allen's sudden enthusiasm and voluntary additional study, but the viscount, well aware of his son's fickle nature, had assumed the development would be short-lived, and he had quickly forgotten about the news entirely.

Grimm, the eldest son of the Rovene family, interjected. "Gramps, this is Allen we're talking about, right? You haven't confused him with Rosa in your tired state, have you? Sure, everyone here knows Allen has talent and can get things done if he feels like it...but this assessment of yours is a little too hard to swallow. Father said so as well, right? That this is all for formality's sake—if Rosa couldn't get in, there isn't a chance for Allen. You don't have to be taking it this seriously, you know?" the young man said, reassuring Soldo from his position beside his father's desk. As the heir to the viscounty, he had just accompanied the viscount to the social season for the first time, and both had just returned home.

Bellwood lifted his head from the desk at Grimm's words. "Right, right! You must have been talking about Rosa. That girl was a sight to behold, studying like that from such an early age! Once she'd decided to do something, there was no stopping her! Maybe even the great Soldo is finally starting to lose his edge, eh? Ha ha ha..."

Up until that point, Soldo had been impassively accepting the (understandably hesitant) reaction to his report on Allen's development, but his calm demeanor darkened the instant the jest had left the viscount's tongue. Bellwood gulped reflexively. He felt as though he had wandered onto an active battlefield. Slowly, Soldo fixed his deadly, unwavering stare upon his master.

"For the last two and a half months, the young master has been steadfast in his determination—that he will not be the one to sully the great name and long history of effort this house is known for. He has restricted his meals and his sleep to the utter limit in his endeavor. His vigor has been that of a soldier on the battlefield, and he has pulled me to the front lines with him. The young master's unrelenting effort is no illusion—and the examinations will prove it. That is what this old soldier believes…with all his heart."

Of course, Allen couldn't have cared less about his family's history or reputation—rather, he had simply been exploring the possibilities of his new world with so much fascination that he'd sometimes forget to even eat or sleep. It had gotten to the point that Soldo had been forced to plead with the young man, citing the potential impacts on his health, and Allen had reluctantly conceded.

"Regardless, it just doesn't sound like Allen at all… This is the boy who can't even treat the annual visit to the family graveyard with anything more than indifference. Yet what you're saying is…" The viscount timidly voiced his disbelief, intimidated by Soldo's stare. The old man was to be feared when his eyes glazed with anger in that particular way; Bellwood still remembered this well from his own days under Soldo's tutelage.

The old tutor ground his teeth in frustration. To be sure, it was a hard story to swallow after three months spent away from the boy. Were their positions swapped, Soldo wouldn't be quick to believe it either.

"The young master's disposition has also greatly improved," Soldo eventually continued. "If you cannot trust in my assessment, perhaps you might consider taking your evening meal with Allen tomorrow to verify it personally? He has taken to eating field rations for his morning and midday meals, so I am hesitant to say he would be able to join you before the evening." Recently, Allen had been bemoaning the time wasted on eating proper breakfasts in the dining hall, and in their stead, he had

begun eating field rations in the morning as well.

Soldo smiled warmly at the viscount, the wrinkles on his cheeks deepening even further. “Now then, this old soldier has but a few days left to spend with his young comrade, and tomorrow’s lessons will not prepare themselves—on that note, I beg my leave,” he said with some finality, departing the study before the viscount could reply.

“Rations?! Just when did that boy become a soldier?” Drained of his last vestige of energy, the viscount collapsed over his desk once more.

“Come now, Father. Even if the stress of the upcoming examinations has addled Gramps a bit, the news that Allen may have gotten a little more serious is a delight in itself. Let’s dine with him tomorrow. Listen to what he has to say, and praise him for his effort—just don’t take Soldo’s assessment at face value and place undue pressure on Allen, and all will be well.” Grimm, ever the positive thinker, offered gentle words of encouragement to the wearied viscount.

“You’re right, Grimm. Just the fact that my adorable son has finally begun to grow up is joyous news on its own. I’ll praise Allen, but I won’t try and pressure him any further. Make the arrangements for us all to dine together tomorrow evening,” said the viscount, a tinge of melancholy in his voice. There was a sad finality to seeing your youngest child grow into an adult, thought the viscount, his eyes beginning to drift shut.

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“Father, Brother, I apologize profusely for my lateness. My discussion with Soldo concerning the content of our afternoon magical history lesson got quite intense…” Allen bowed his head politely, having quickly walked the length of the house to arrive at the dining room.

I see… Certainly, he’s barely recognizable as the same boy of three months ago.

After his late return to the estate the previous night, the viscount had spent the following day swamped with work pertaining to the management of the domain that had accumulated during his time away. This was the first time he’d come face-to-face with Allen in over three months. Even the boy’s formerly crude speech, which the viscount had long since

declared a lost cause, had developed to the level used in polite society. Allen's usual rough and wild demeanor was nowhere to be seen; but he had not become meek either. It was as though his previously overflowing energy was not lost, but now safely stored within.

Or maybe that's just what I want to see... Ever the doting father. The viscount's eyes narrowed slightly. "Hardly, Allen. Soldo has already informed me of your recent dedication to your studies. With only a few days until your departure for the capital, your lessons should of course be your priority."

"Thank you, Father... I've truly put Soldo's old body through a lot these past few months, what with my finally deciding to start trying my best at this crucial moment, and yet he's kept up with me obstinately, through and through. There aren't enough words to express my appreciation to him." Allen's eyes grew distant and fond, as though he was reflecting on those recent days.

Bellwood was taken aback. *To think that mischievous kid would one day thank Soldo from the bottom of his heart... Surely, there are limits to how quickly a child can grow up.* He had begun to feel uneasy. "Allen, Grimm and I have quite had our fill of social niceties over the season in Runerelia. I know I'm always telling you to speak with more etiquette, but for today, please drop the formalities. After all, it's only family here," Bellwood suggested with somewhat excessive cheerfulness. He was stifling the faint urge to recoil in response to his son's uncanny new disposition.

"Mother's not here either," added Grimm with a wink.

Allen looked slightly embarrassed for a split second. He coughed, clearing his throat, and his face lit up with a wide grin. "Dad, Grimm—I missed you!"

He could act like a grown-up all he wanted, but the impertinent young boy who spent the rest of the night pestering the two of them for stories of their travels—yes, that was the adorable son Bellwood remembered.

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I'd been worried I wouldn't be able to act as "Allen" without arousing suspicion, but it seemed my fears had been unfounded. While I now had the memories of my previous life, I also still had the experiences of twelve years as Allen to rely on.

“Mother is still in Runerelia, right?” I asked between mouthfuls as our lengthy conversation about recent trends in the capital and various happenings in the wider world finally wound down. My cheeks were bulging with steak from a puppi, an oddly named monster formed when a deer had spent many years nurturing a magic stone inside its body.

“Yes, that’s right. Your mother was unimpressed with the way Rosa is taking care of herself, so she stayed back to oversee her for a while. Of course, you’ll be in the capital soon enough yourself, so she’ll be waiting for you as well.”

“Seems like Rosa hasn’t changed at all…” I laughed awkwardly. Even back when she had still lived at home, the moment she’d gotten hooked on some research or new training, it was as though she’d become blind to the world around her, often ending up forgetting to look after her basic needs. She’d stay up for two or three days straight as a matter of course, meals uneaten, face unwashed, hair unbrushed; eventually, it had gotten to the point where she would refuse to bathe entirely, and she and my mother had gotten into a terrible fight over it. In the end, my mother had been victorious, and Rosa had reluctantly acquiesced to at least bathing daily.

On account of her light-peach hair, reminiscent of a cosmos flower, and because outsiders were easily fooled by her usually gentle public demeanor and pretty face, people across our territory had taken to calling her “the Cosmos Princess.” Although it’s often said that names and nature go hand in hand, my sister was for sure an exception to that rule. She wasn’t particularly short-tempered, but once something had set her off, she’d come out with fists flying—even I, her excessively beloved younger brother, had felt the wrath of her endless punches on more than one occasion. My father, despite his somewhat stern appearance, was innately a passive man and a mild-mannered bureaucrat, so my mother was the only one in the family capable of reeling Rosa back in.

“Dad…if I do manage to get accepted into the Academy, I want your permission to move into one of the dorms. I don’t mind if it’s just the standard one either, so please!” I bowed my head so low that it brushed against the surface of the table.

The Royal Academy was equipped with two dormitories. According to what I’d gleaned from my inquiries, a room in the standard dorm was a cramped studio kind of setup, but the rent

was cheap, especially considering it was the capital, and it seemed breakfast was also included in the cost.

Like all viscount families, we possessed a secondary estate in the capital—although "estate" may have been too grandiose a term for it, considering it was basically a run-of-the-mill house with an attached garden—so it wasn't like I couldn't just commute to school from there. No, the issue was that Rosa also currently lived in the estate. My mother wouldn't stay in Runerelia forever, and the thought of us living together, just the two of us, gave me the shivers.

"Well, that's not a bad idea as I see it, since you're aiming to become a knight. Studying together with your school friends, living under the same roof, and eating out of the same pot…there is meaning in those kinds of things," my father said with a nod, although his wry smile implied he'd also guessed at my true reason for wanting to live in the dorms.

Father sipped on his wine, as though he was gathering up the nerve to continue speaking. "Although…I feel as though you're only worried about the arrangements for *after* you've been accepted… You don't have any concerns about the actual examinations?" he asked as nonchalantly as possible. Still, I could sense the undercurrent of nervousness that accompanied the question.

I snuck a glance at Grimm. He had frozen in place as though he'd turned to stone, a smile plastered on his face like a mask. Come to think of it, the topic of the exams hadn't come up once since we'd started dining, strangely enough.

I guess they were too scared to ask… Either that, or they were trying not to put any pressure on me. Of course, I was fairly confident I could pass. At the same time, I was also ready and willing to drop out of this competitive society entirely should a better opportunity present itself. In that regard, it would be better not to give my family any excessive hope.

"Well, I have been trying my hardest," I said. "Of course, it's not like I'll be able to get into Class A or anything, but I think there's a chance I might narrowly make the cut," I said carefully, trying not to set any high expectations for them—just as they were trying to do for me.

"Is that so? Soldo seemed to have far more confidence in your passing… Viscount Moonlit, from the territory across the mountain from here, was quite unbearable during this season in

the capital. His second son Tudeo will also be taking the entrance examinations this year, and all anyone could talk about during the Dragoon Region gathering was how well it seems that child will do. Moonlit was preening like a peacock!"

Minor noble territories like ours, along with those led by counts or barons, were grouped into larger regions under the patronage of one of the nine marquesses—in our case, that was Marquess Dragoon. As such, information concerning the grades and higher education status of the children of nobles within your region was one of many weapons to have up your sleeve in the battlefield of high society (although it was, of course, considered impolite to boast about your *own* children too openly). If there were any within your region who had the potential to become central figures of the kingdom in the future, they could also become valuable extensions of your own power and influence.

"That bastard has so much confidence in his son, he kept trying to provoke me, coming up to me and saying things like, 'Oh, I wish I had a son like *your* young Allen—they say he's *sure* to score well!' just to make his own son seem superior...and that's gotten everyone's attention focused on the upcoming results. I'm not looking forward to the regular summit at Dragreid next month..."

What, some asshole noble was trying to make my father look even more pitiable? Well, not that it affects me either way.

"Well, even if by some stroke of luck I do manage to get in, I've heard the lessons at the Royal Academy are incredibly difficult, and if things did go badly, I might even shame the family by getting expelled midway through... It would be best if you refrained from going around boasting like him, for both your sake and mine," I gently warned him.

"Carefree as usual... Well, I guess there's no point worrying about it now," he grumbled.

"That's right, Father. Just think, that wild child Allen has already come this far. All we can do now is leave the rest up to fate." Grimm, capable as always, made to swiftly wrap up the conversation.

"That's right. Even our brilliant Rosa couldn't defy the will of fate... Again and again, my mind returns to that time..." Yet my father's drunken ramblings, once begun, were nigh unstoppable.

If he weren't a drunkard, he'd be a pretty decent father...

Chapter Two: The Examinations

Journey to the Capital

My departure for the capital occurred just three days after my father and Grimm's return. Originally, the plan had been for my mother to accompany me on the journey, but that had been before Rosa's unbecoming lifestyle had required she remain in Runerelia. Father was also unable to make the journey, overwhelmed with the work that had accumulated during his absence; he had instead voiced his intention to send Soldo to accompany me in his place, but I had politely but firmly refused.

Father had objected at first, yet Soldo had surprisingly supported my choice, concluding that a journey unsupervised by family or tutors would be a valuable experience in itself. "Even if I were to accompany the young master, there is nothing more I could teach him at this point that would have any impact on his results," he'd said. "Rather than listening to my scolding, his journey will be better spent preparing his mind and body. I believe in you, Young Master." Father had agreed quite easily after that. Preparing for my requested lectures had surely been hard on Soldo, yet the smile on his face had been that of someone who'd given it their all. I'd driven the old man like a packhorse over the past two and a half months; words could not express the extent of my gratitude to him.

The journey to Runerelia would take two weeks. The first leg would take twelve days by private carriage, from our estate to the Dragoon Region capital of Dragreid. From there, I'd board a magically powered train and reach the capital within a day and a half.

I had tried to get a grasp on the size of this world, but when I'd spread a map across the table, I'd discovered that the scale used was more perfunctory than anything, so my understanding was still mostly vague. If I had to guess, the distance between our estate and Dragreid was probably similar to that between Tokyo and Fukuoka? Either way, there was no escaping the fact that I was definitely from a remote, backwater region. Incidentally, magically powered vehicles similar to cars, which

ran off the mana of magic stones, also existed in this world. Unfortunately, they had very poor mileage, so the use of one was far beyond the means of the poorer nobility.

When we'd first set off, we had crossed mountain after mountain, with monsters cropping up constantly—though my father had strictly forbidden me from participating in any fighting, citing the risk of injury. It had ultimately taken us three days to cover a distance of around a hundred kilometers. Thankfully, after that, we had been able to utilize the well-maintained highways, and thereafter we'd begun to progress relatively quickly.

At any rate, it seemed like this world was relatively safe, and with a C-Rank explorer whom my father had splurged on tasked with accompanying me as far as Dragreid, there had basically been no danger at all. A professional vanguard in his mid-forties, my bodyguard was an exceptionally unsociable man, and the atmosphere around him was frigid. However, I'd been able to convince him to let me spar with him throughout the journey, so his chilly demeanor didn't matter a bit to me.

His name was Dio, and he was a spearman. My mock battles up until now, whether with the instructor at the local training ground or my mother and the other members of my family, had all been against sword-wielding opponents. Dio's employment as my escort had proven to be a very useful opportunity to train against a spear user. In the name of safety, our sparring had been restricted to the use of wooden training weapons. Even so, I had still ended up battered and bruised all over by the end of the first few days.

Just the knowledge that swordsmanship against a spear-wielding opponent required a different skill set altogether was valuable in itself. By the time we had arrived at Dragreid, I'd somewhat managed to familiarize myself with the movements of a spear well enough for our practice sessions to actually resemble sparring—although I'd ultimately failed to land a single hit on Dio. *I got so confident in my ability to pass the written exam, but now I'm starting to wonder if I'll be good enough to pass the practical…*

Perhaps sensing my disheartened mood, Dio called out to me. "Y'know, at first I thought playing at swords with a little lordlin' like you was just a waste of time. But you've got guts, and good instincts. Once you get some experience, even a lordlin' like you

won’t have nothing to worry about.”

The taciturn bodyguard hadn’t praised me once throughout the journey, and he had initially tried to refuse my pleas to spar, citing that his job was only to protect me. As we parted ways, however, he, too, tried to cheer me on in his own way. I didn’t really know how seriously I should take the praise of a C-Rank explorer coasting through life on the proceeds of breezy requests like this one, but there was nothing else for it now. If I failed, then I failed. With a final nod, Dio and I parted ways.

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From Dragreid, I boarded the magically powered train for the day-and-a-half journey to Runerelia. The nighttime Dragreid was a very enchanting city, with its magical lanterns emitting a near-neon glow. I nearly succumbed to the allure of the place; after all, I’d already decided I was going to live however I wanted in this world, and Dragreid seemed as fine a place as any to drop out of the relentless academic arms race. But I regained my senses after an image of Soldo’s disappointed face popped into my mind. *Even if I do go rogue, I can do it just as easily* after *I take the exams.*

The train departed at ten in the evening. For a while, I stared out the window at the scenery, but as we left Dragreid, the view quickly turned pitch-black, and nothing could be seen at all. I started on my magical compression training instead, but before I knew it, I was fast asleep. The unfamiliar fatigue of travel had seemingly caught up with me.

The next morning, I overslept until 6 a.m., which was unusual for me, but by eating field rations for breakfast and lunch whilst continuing my studies, I was able to compensate for the lost time.

The rural scenery outside was largely the same as that of the carriage trip. When we had set off, I had been entranced by the landscape of the Rovene Domain, so different from that of Japan. But I had quickly gotten sick of it. Unlike Japan, there were only a handful of stations along the train lines here, and given this was a direct route to the capital, we wouldn’t be stopping along the way regardless.

My daily quota of studying completed, I exited my compartment with the aim of killing some time. The train was

practically overflowing with other children my age—almost definitely other aspiring applicants. It was to the extent that one would think this was a dedicated train service for the exams.

I needed to buy a packed lunch for my dinner, but I also thought this would be a decent opportunity to make a friend or two, so I set off, slowly wandering along the carriages. However, each and every one of the other examinees was accompanied by frazzled-looking parents or guardians with bloodshot eyes who peppered me with suspicious glares every time I got near, so I quickly gave up on the friendship endeavor.

After dinner, I again found myself with nothing to do, so I headed up to the observation carriage to bask in the breeze and go over some of the things I'd learned from Dio. Like the deck of a ship, the observation carriage was exposed to the heavens, enclosed by a railing that circled the perimeter.

In five years, I'll probably be able to surpass Dio…but am I really okay with that?

Five *years*, just to get to the same level as a career C-Rank explorer trapped in a backwater viscounty. It wasn't that I had any interest in climbing this world's equivalent of the corporate ladder; it was more that my desire to live however I wanted and do a bunch of interesting and incredible things meant I'd need a decent amount of power and ability.

I chuckled, amused by the surge of impatience I'd just felt—more age appropriate than most of my emotions recently—and I began to practice my sword strokes, activating my Strengthening Magic as I did. I started off each stroke with no magical enhancement, but I suddenly unstoppered the flow of magical power each time I swung the sword, all before cutting it off at the end of the stroke and returning to my starting position. As I prepared myself for the following swing, I wouldn't be able to sense even a lingering suggestion of the magic I'd used for the previous stroke. This was the ideal way to use Strengthening Magic.

I swung my sword downward.

Back to a ready position.

I slashed out horizontally.

Back again.

An upward slice.

And back.

In a real fight, I'd never be able to swing as neatly as this, but

by mastering the ideal form, I'd be able to utilize this kind of magic manipulation even in a real battle. Giving myself over to intensity, I continued swinging, cleaving through the vision of Dio that had appeared in my mind. Until I could defeat the phantom I'd conjured, I couldn't risk confronting the examinations.

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I only realized how much time had passed when the sun began to rise. *Crap... If I don't get at least three hours of sleep, I'll be useless all day.* The train was scheduled to arrive in Runerelia around 10 a.m., so if I went straight to sleep, I'd be able to squeeze in a few hours. I tossed my wooden sword aside and began my cooldown stretches. Stretching properly after exercise had a massive impact on your condition the next day; I remembered hearing something like that from a famous athlete in my past life.

"You've shown me something verrrry interesting," a girl's voice called out from behind me. I pretended not to hear it. Since around midnight, I'd been aware of a presence watching me, sitting on the maintenance ladder that led to the roof of the next train car. For someone to sit there watching me practice sword strokes for close to six hours... There was no other way to put it: They had to be a complete weirdo. They say a wise man doesn't approach danger, and this girl reeked of it. I ended my stretching prematurely, sensing a need to distance myself from the situation unfolding, and made to head back to my compartment. But the girl followed after me. Just as I'd expected, she seemed like the type who couldn't take a hint.

"Wow, your concentration is incredible! I'm aiming for the mage course myself, so I've never had to do much in the way of weapon practice, but even I can easily see there's something special about your swings!"

A mage course applicant, eh? And it seems like she has a good sense for sword strokes, at least... Suddenly, an image of my sister's face flashed across my mind, and in an instant, the needle of my internal warning system jumped from "caution" to "danger." Consequently, my walking pace also sped up a notch. *Please don't introduce yourself! Wait, I wonder if we've met before... Am I meant to know this person?* As I tried to respond to all the

warning messages popping up inside my brain, the girl started to introduce herself, although I hadn't asked her to.

"Ah, I haven't even told you my name yet! I am Feyreun von Dragoon. And you, you're also a Royal Academy applicant, correct? The youngest son of House Rovene. You can call me Fey!"

Ha ha ha… Of all the people I might have run into on this train, I managed to run headfirst into the most dangerous… She's from the Dragoon family, and moreover, the "von" in her name means she's the marquess? At her age? And she knows who I am…

My practice sword did have the Rovene family crest carved into the hilt. But even then, what kind of child had the time or patience to commit countless family crests to memory? Even if my family was within her territory. Although I had no room to speak, given I'd memorized the background information of every noble family ranked viscount and above.

I grimaced. Now that she'd introduced herself as a member of House Dragoon, ignoring the girl was no longer a possibility. At the same time, I sensed this was not going to be an easy conversation to navigate; my instincts were screaming with dread. *But I've got nearly forty-eight years of experience behind me! Get it together, Allen! If I don't take the lead now, she'll end up playing with me like a toy, just like Rosa!*

"Well, I say! To think I would come across the renowned daughter of House Dragoon, the prodigious Lady Feyreun! I offer you my humblest apologies for my ignorance and my belated introduction. I am Allen, third son of Viscount Rovene." I prostrated myself before her, my head low enough to lick her boots. Honestly, I'd never heard of her before specifically, but regardless, she was a member of the high aristocracy, and on top of that, a fellow examinee. You never knew who was watching. "I was so worried about the exams that I couldn't sleep, so I came up here to let off a bit of energy, and before I knew it, it was morning! To run into you here is no less than an act of fate! I hope we may become fine friends, if it pleases Her Ladyship!"

Mwa ha ha. I can play the part of complete and utter lowliness pretty well, huh? Despite my commitment to ignoring the girl up until a moment before, I'd successfully changed tack entirely the moment I'd heard the name Dragoon. Her family and mine were on completely different levels; in fact, we were barely on the

same playing field. Plus, there was a sense of Rosa-like recklessness around her that I most definitely did not want to stir.

But if I seemed like just another lowly noble trying to get into her good graces, she'd surely lose interest in me immediately. Or so I thought. Unfortunately, her response was not as I had anticipated.

"Pffft. Ha ha ha! You sure are an interesting one! To be honest, when I heard the younger brother of Roseria Rovene was here, I just came to scope you out. After all, out of all the magical craftsmanship graduates from the Dragoon Noble College in recent history, there's no one more famous than your older sister. But when I came across you practicing your sword strokes…" Her eyes suddenly gleamed with the fiery gaze of a predator. "Now it's not only your sister I've got an interest in," she continued. "Yes, I think we *will* become fine friends." The red light on my internal warning system began flickering on and off—the signal for immediate evacuation.

Feyreun von Dragoon

"But you know, your practice strokes were really something else! Most people these days only focus on increasing their maximum output if they're doing Strengthening Magic training. Even the really talented ones only work on their maximum strength and speed," Fey said, grinning. "But when you practiced, you focused on ensuring there wasn't any lingering magic between each of your strokes. Of course, preserving as much of your magical power as you can is important, for sure. But it's not the kind of practice you waste all night on right before an important exam! The only people who do that are the ones who know they have the magic to spare."

Ah, I see…not. How on earth could she tell all that just by watching me swing my sword? If our places were swapped, I wouldn't have been able to tell what kind of magical training someone was doing in that kind of depth no matter how many hours I watched them for. And it definitely wasn't like she had decades of experience either.

On top of that, she'd said she was aiming for the mage course, not the knights', so it was strange she knew so much about swordsmanship anyway. *Is the whole Royal Academy going*

to be swarming with monsters like her?

"I am honored by your appraisal of my skill, Lady Fey. However, you greatly overestimate me. Embarrassed as I am to admit it, my magical aptitude is just barely sufficient to even make an attempt at the knight course. That's why I must conserve my magic while I train—otherwise I would soon run out," I replied, attempting to squash any interest she might have in me. I felt like I was walking through a field of unmarked land mines, but there was nothing else I could do but try and search for a safe escape route. It definitely felt more dangerous to stay put.

"Really? But your magical aptitude level is around 2,480, right? That's not low enough to require restricted training." Fey grinned at me again.

What the hell?! There's no way you could figure out someone's magical aptitude level just by watching them swing a sword around no matter how many hours you sat there! And it wasn't like I had exerted my mana to the point of depletion, so she wouldn't have been able to make an educated guess that way either.

Is she trying to trick me into saying my actual level by implying she already knows it? No, there's no way... Her estimate was way too close for that... The last time I had measured my magical aptitude, it had been 2,400, but with my daily training over the past few months, I had a feeling the number she'd given was probably more accurate.

"Ha! Oh, you look so surprised. Of course I didn't estimate your level just by watching you. Ta-da!" Fey whipped out a camcorder-looking device from inside her satchel, brandishing it with a flourish. "This is a Magical Aptitude Meter, developed by yours truly. It can estimate anyone's magical aptitude level from the remnants of magic they cast. Although at the moment, it takes around thirty minutes to finish the estimation, so it's still not ready to be used in battle or anything yet."

"Actually," Fey continued, "*usually* an estimate takes around thirty minutes...but you, you barely left any remnants the whole time you were casting, so it took me nearly two hours to get a read on you! Seems like I've still got quite a bit of work to do before it's complete—but that aside, your magical manipulation is incredible, the way you left no trace behind like that!"

She hadn't stopped grinning the whole time she'd been speaking. I hadn't even remotely foreseen this development.

Sure, she said she was shooting for the mage course, but there's no way I could have predicted she'd be carrying something like that around—a device of her own design to boot!

"Oh no, not in the slightest. I was taught basic magic manipulation as a child, and I've just kept practicing since then… My Combat Level is only 5… I'm nothing more than trash." Rather than avoiding the conversational land mines, I'd been stomping on them one by one. Even I didn't understand the meaning of what I'd just said in my flustered state. *Combat Level? What is this, a video game?*

"Ha ha ha! 'Combat Level'? What is that? It would be impossible to measure your overall fighting ability with a magical tool, that's for sure. After all, you wouldn't need to measure just capacity, but actual talent too." Fey paused. "Although, if it were possible to get even a general grasp of someone's 'Combat Ability,' it would surely be a most useful tool. Necessity is the mother of invention, as they say… You've given me a great idea, Allen." Fey grinned again. Perhaps it was her only expression.

A great idea? You're reading way too much into it! All I was trying to say was that I'm worth less than trash on the side of the road!

"Lady Fey, you mentioned Roseria… Are you acquainted with my older sister?" Cursing my carelessness, I tried to forcibly change the topic.

"Acquainted? No. But I know all about her. After all, she's the only graduate of our college to have advanced to the Special Magical Craftsmanship Research Institute in over twenty years. We've put a lot of resources into our magical craftsmanship major, but the Institute rarely accepts anyone but Royal Academy graduates—your sister is truly an exceptional case. I was already thinking of introducing myself to her after I arrived in the capital, as an aspiring magical craftswoman myself—and as luck would have it, I ran into you! To think I'd become friends with the younger brother of the 'Rose of Wrath' here of all places. Make sure to introduce me, yes?"

I'd stepped on the biggest land mine yet. *Introduce this dangerous girl? To* that *Rosa? And what's this about a "Rose of Wrath"?! Just what on earth did my older sister do to get a name like that?* On one hand, I was curious; on the other, I didn't want to know in the slightest. As for introducing the two of them…a vision of a future filled with bloodshed flashed across my mind. But that vague omen wasn't going to be a good enough reason

to refuse. *I'll accept her request, then avoid her after this.*

"It would be my honor to introduce you to Rosa. I imagine she, too, will be most pleased to become acquainted with as talented a person as you, Lady Feyreun— Ah!" I suddenly cried, grasping at my stomach. "My chronic overactive bladder..." I would have to make my escape through other means, impropriety aside.

"Pffft. You were out here swinging your sword for six hours at the least, sweating buckets, without stopping to rehydrate even once, no? Must be a very bad case of chronic urination indeed," Fey remarked. "You can drop the 'Lady' as well—we're friends, after all," she said, still grinning from ear to ear.

I'd ignored her attempts to seal our friendship up until this point, but it seemed there was no avoiding it anymore. I dropped my lowly brownnoser act.

"That's just the kind of disease it is. By the way, I don't know about magical craftspeople like you, Fey, but if I don't get at least three hours of sleep a night, I'm a wreck the next day. The train's going to arrive in Runerelia in about three and a half hours, so I'm heading back now before I wet myself," I said firmly, standing from where I'd still been kneeling before her.

"Sorry, sorry!" Fey laughed. "We magical craftspeople do have a tendency to underprioritize our rest, I guess. Well, sleep well, Allen." She winked at me, brushing a lock of her choppy, boyish hair away from her eye as she did. At first glance, she certainly struck a wild, feline figure, but I felt there was also some element of femininity to her as I caught a glimpse of the slender nape of her neck.

Not that it mattered to me at all. I needed to go to sleep quickly, shed at least some of my unanticipated exhaustion, and prepare for tomorrow—well, it was today now. As I stumbled back in the direction of my compartment, Fey called out from behind me.

"By the way, a noble like you shouldn't prostrate yourself like that for no reason, you know. That's the kind of thing criminals do at their trials!" She was still grinning, right up until the end.

I guess dogeza isn't part of the culture here after all... I had hundreds of memories of Bellwood apologizing to my mother on his hands and knees, though, so I'd just assumed it was a cultural custom here too...

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An exceptional prodigy, Lady Feyreun had been bestowed with the “von” that marked her as the head of the Dragoon family before even being accepted into the Royal Academy. However, it couldn’t be said that her life had been smooth sailing up until that point.

When she had still been very young, her parents had withdrawn from the succession struggle for the title after a crushing political defeat. As a result, Fey’s importance within the family had shrunk significantly, and her supporters had dwindled.

Her grandmother, the ruling marquess, had realized Fey’s potential and overseen her development, but Fey’s position within the family had remained weak. Even the formidable marquess, overseer of a territory of over one thousand noble families, had not had the power to unilaterally declare Fey as her successor—no matter how much raw talent the child possessed. The position of marquess was not merely decorative, and it was certainly not a position that could be wielded by one with no supporters to help them keep it. So despite her partiality for the girl, Fey’s grandmother had ultimately maintained a neutral position in regard to the upcoming succession, instead allowing the young girl to showcase her own considerable potential.

As with any upper noble family, those with their own children in the running for succession would conspire to have their children claim the title for themselves—by any means necessary. In Fey’s case, her adversaries had been her aunt and uncle. As Fey had continued to exhibit remarkable ability and potential, they had schemed and plotted ways by which to oust her from the family entirely.

But Fey, with her resourcefulness and wit, had readily overcome their plots at every turn. She’d managed to maintain the few supporters she’d had left after her parents’ fall from power, and she had slowly grown her faction as she’d proven her ability to those above them. Before her twelfth birthday, Fey had unraveled the mechanisms by which one of the three Lost Tools had functioned, essentially reinventing the ancient magical tool that could search for deposits of natural magic ore—albeit imperfectly. The Dragoon family had long valued magical craftsmanship above all else. The impact of Fey’s discovery on

her position within the family had been tremendous.

Incidentally, a crucial factor guiding Fey's unraveling of said mechanisms seemed to have been a research paper written by Allen's sister Rosa during her Noble College days.

Finally, as Fey had turned twelve, armed with a ninety-nine percent probability of acceptance into the Royal Academy and an estimated placement in Class A from the recent mock examinations, her grandmother had bestowed upon her the "von" that marked her as the head of the Dragoon family, having decided Fey would benefit more if she could gather allies and garner influence during her time at the Academy rather than waiting until after her graduation. The title and responsibilities of the marquess were still held by her grandmother, but Fey's inheritance of the title was essentially confirmed. Of course, there were also disadvantages to inheriting the position of family head at such a young age, but the "von" in Fey's name would contribute greatly to her political strength and influence throughout her years at the Royal Academy as she mingled with those who carried the weight of the kingdom's future on their backs.

And en route to the Royal Academy entrance examinations, the formidable prodigy had had a fateful encounter.

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"Welcome back, Lady Fey. You were observing that boy's sword practice with much intensity, I must say. Were you struck by inspiration?"

So asked Seiren, Fey's attendant and closest confidant. Her mistress had departed their exclusive compartment for a "walk" some time ago—the previous night, in fact. Of course, Seiren had not simply sat idly by and waited for Fey's return; to do so would have been a disgrace to her role as attendant. When she had not returned within the hour, Seiren had organized a search party, and she had quickly been informed of Fey's location. After surveying her observation of the boy with her own eyes, she'd judged that her mistress was not at any risk and returned to their compartment. It was not unusual that the attendant might come across the young prodigy testing one or another of her magical devices on an unsuspecting subject.

"Sorry if I worried you, Sera. He was a pretty interesting kid,

though. I really wanted to be his friend, but he rejected me spectacularly," Fey answered with a laugh. Seiren—or Sera, as Fey liked to call her—smiled grimly.

"That boy will surely come to regret his callousness. If he had known who you were, I'm sure he would have tripped over his feet in his haste to get close to you."

"Pffft!" Fey snorted and burst out laughing. "I wouldn't have been anywhere near as interested in him if I'd sensed he had that kind of ulterior motive." She laughed again, remembering the disparity in Allen's attitude toward her before and after he'd prostrated himself before her. She had, of course, immediately seen through his attempts to intentionally repel her. "I wanted him to know who I was from the very beginning, so I introduced myself properly, right? But then he pulled *such* an annoyed face! When I tried to strike up a conversation again, he blatantly lied that he was about to wet himself and disappeared! Allen Rovene... What information do you have on him, Sera?"

"W-Wet himself?! To speak with such audacity before a lady..." Sera couldn't quite believe her ears. At the same time, the attendant was astonished by the unfamiliar expression that had spread across her mistress's face. The Fey she knew would mask any suffering or struggle she felt with a friendly grin—but the broad, genuine smile Sera was currently witnessing was a rare sight indeed. *Fey looks...well, like a child her age should look. I had a quick glance at the boy before, but I didn't notice anything* that *exciting about him...*

While still confused by Fey's clear excitement, Sera did as her mistress had requested, opening a list of the students registered to take the upcoming exams. "Allen Rovene... Yes, he's here on the list. I thought his name was familiar—he's Roseria Rovene's younger brother. Now I understand why you've taken such a shine to the boy. Although it seems he's aiming for the knight course rather than following in his sister's footsteps."

"Yes, he said as much himself," Fey laughed. "*Apparently* his magical aptitude level barely meets the knight course threshold."

Sera tilted her head quizzically. "Barely? His preliminary evaluation was 'Pass Possible,' the minimum to even register for the examinations. However, according to my data, his magical aptitude level is far higher than is sufficient to comfortably pass, and his physical abilities are unknown. On the other hand, it seems his subject knowledge scores are markedly poor—indeed,

the boy may find it quite difficult to pass."

"Subject knowledge? Hmm..." Once again, the memory of Allen's relentless practice and the steely glint in his eyes flashed across Fey's mind. Despite what he had said about being uncertain he'd pass, his eyes had told the truth. Those had been the eyes of someone who had already passed—someone with their gaze set on the postadmission future.

Taking her pick of the many seats furnishing the exclusive Dragoon family carriage, Fey opened a nearby window. A cool, refreshing breeze slipped in immediately, stirring up the stagnant air. "We'll definitely meet again soon... I'm sure of it," the young girl said under her breath, speaking in a quiet tone only she could hear. Her eyes brimmed with the very same glint of conviction.

Mother and Sister

Having narrowly managed my three hours of sleep, I quickly gulped down a packet of field rations and made my way to the carriage door.

I needed to be first off the train. Why, you ask? Well, it was because there was no doubt in my mind that my older sister had come to meet me at the station. And if, by some cruel twist of fate, my sister and Feyreun were to cross paths...there was no telling what would happen. But if there was one thing I *was* certain of, it was that such a convergence would prove disastrous.

At any rate...man, these field rations sure are something special. In my past life, I'd ended up working for a food and beverage company particularly well-known for their popular brand of beer, so I liked to believe I had a decent understanding of the special pleasure that came with enjoying a good meal. And these rations...

Well, whether you could call them "a good meal" was one thing, but I was deeply impressed with their quality at any rate. The taste was pleasant, and even a single bar was seriously filling. Sure, they looked dry and flavorless, but the texture was actually fairly moist, and you didn't need a drink at hand to swallow them down. There were both plain and dried-fruit varieties on the market, but I was a staunch supporter of Team Plain.

Speaking of something special…

The royal capital, Runerelia, was far larger and more magnificent than I'd imagined. Unlike the bullet trains in Japan, the magically powered trains of this world couldn't exceed speeds of around fifty kilometers an hour—an hour being about how long it had been since we'd left the countryside and found ourselves surrounded by the urban sprawl of the capital. The sheer size of the city was mind-boggling. My experience with and memories of the idyllic Rovene landscape hadn't prepared me for the sights currently racing past my eyes. Every now and then, I even caught glimpses of buildings over ten stories tall. Of course, with my memories of my past life, I wasn't too overwhelmed by the existence of tall buildings, but I could easily understand that to the average country boy encountering the big city for the first time—well, if he wasn't careful, the atmosphere could overwhelm him before he even took the exams.

The train slowed steadily and gracefully, eventually coming to a complete stop at the platform. I was off the train the second the doors opened.

Now then, where is she…? I set off, my eyes darting back and forth as I strode out the station building and into the plaza outside, deliberately putting distance between myself and the danger still waiting on the train.

"Alleeeen!" A familiar voice rang out.

Rosa. Her glossy, cosmos-pink hair had grown since I'd last seen her, now extending to around her waist. She'd worn a simple dress, the shade of summer grass after a passing rain, which contrasted gorgeously with her pink hair.

"Rosa… You're looking quite beautiful today."

"Thanks, Allen," she laughed. "You know, you've become pretty handsome yourself."

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Honestly, I was a little shocked. If anything, all I'd hoped was that she'd have the sense—and the dignity—not to show up in her usual tracksuit-like attire; never in a thousand years would I have dreamed that the slovenly Rosa would, or indeed could polish herself up like this.

Maybe she's found a man? Either way, this is a problem. Unlike

me, with my fairly ordinary features, Rosa's beauty easily attracted attention. While she was fairly lacking in the chest department, she was brimming with that peculiar femininity that exuded from those on the cusp of adulthood. It was almost as if she'd sent off pheromones through the air. Basically, all eyes were on us. Excessively so. One by one, each new arrival exited the station, their gazes drawn to us like magnets. And Rosa wasn't the only magnetic force at play here either...

"Well, Rosa, I hope you're pleased; I do believe when he complimented you, Allen was not merely humoring you. It makes the hours upon hours you spent choosing your outfit this morning nearly worthwhile, no? Dressing, undressing, dressing, undressing again—despite my telling you each and every outfit suited you well."

A second voice, accompanied by a piercing gaze, rang out from behind my sister. Its owner towered over Rosa—she had a full head over my sister's already respectable height. Her appearance, too, was abnormally flawless. A single glance was enough to know this was no ordinary person.

"Mother! Don't tell him that!" said Rosa, pressing her finger to her mouth in a shushing motion.

I agree, actually. I wish I hadn't heard that either.

Face red, Rosa glared at our mother reproachfully, but to no effect. "As soon as we return home," she said coolly, "you will deal with that mountain of clothing immediately." Rosa's rebuttal was over before it could start.

"Mother. It's been far too long."

"Yes, Allen. I nearly didn't recognize you." Her brown hair—exactly the same shade as my own—was pulled up into a bun. Like Rosa, she was remarkably beautiful.



The daughter of a fairly prominent family, it had always been a mystery why my mother had agreed to marry my hopeless father. Like my sister, she was also elegantly dressed; an ivory blouse, lace adorning the three-quarter-length sleeves, was paired with slender, dark-blue trousers that complemented her long legs and showed off a flash of her ankles. Just looking at her was entrancing; if not for the long, sturdy sword she clasped in her slender hands, we'd likely have been accosted by unsavory suitors already.

We're conspicuous. Waaaay too conspicuous.

"Come to think of it, Allen…" started my mother, resting her still-sheathed sword on her shoulder.

In an instant, the plaza was flooded with a stagnant air of tension. Nearby, a knight of the Royal Order, seemingly on patrol of the area, hastily averted his eyes. *Hey, aren't you guys supposed to be the pride of the kingdom? Get back over here and do your job!*

"Am I to understand that you were made to journey here all alone? Carrying such a large rucksack all by yourself? Just what was that man thinking…?"

I want to go home already…

Forget being overwhelmed by the city before the exams—I'd been utterly crushed by the family atmosphere in a mere five minutes.

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Although my mother had demanded an explanation right there and then, I'd somehow managed to convince her to wait until we'd boarded our waiting horse-drawn carriage, to my great relief. If we didn't put some distance between ourselves and the station plaza, there was no telling what would happen—even taking Fey out of the equation.

"So basically, I felt that as a prospective Royal Academy representative, it was important I prove to myself that I had the independence and responsibility needed to make the journey without a guardian. Of course, Father was strongly opposed at first, but I somehow managed to wear him down—he agreed, provided he could send a bodyguard to accompany me until Dragreid. And that's why I showed up here alone—I'm sorry for surprising you," I explained, sitting with my back uncomfortably straight.

It was a small, cramped carriage, pulled by a single horse. Mother sat directly across from me, so close that I could feel her breathing. Throughout my rambling explanation, she'd stared directly at me, not once averting her steely gaze. I didn't think she'd even blinked once. I'd spoken as honestly as I could; I'd never been able to lie to her.

"I understand," she finally said after an uncomfortably long pause. "Well, it's probably done you some good. When I said you had changed so much I barely recognized you, I meant it." The tense atmosphere softened palpably.

I did it! You're in the clear, Dad!

"Alleeeen! I missed you so much! I can't believe my adorable little brother is finally here!" Rosa was clinging tightly to my arm, seemingly unable to contain her weird excitement.

"However..." Just as I'd started to let my guard down, though, Mother swooped in for the attack. "Was your father truly 'strongly' opposed to your request, as you say? I'm not too sure I believe it..."

The atmosphere stiffened. Unprepared for the sudden attack, my mind went blank, and I unconsciously looked away as I stammered out, "O-Of course he was..."

It was an obvious lie.

Mother smiled dangerously. "It seems I'll need to have a conversation with your father, hmm?"

The air, still tense, would remain that way for the rest of the carriage ride. *Sorry, Dad... I really tried my best to save you...*

Last-Minute Concerns

A day had passed since I'd arrived at the capital. Although there were still a few days until the exams, I was currently en route to the Royal Academy, having chosen it as the site of my morning run. Although I wasn't particularly worried about it, I still thought it would be best to familiarize myself with the atmosphere of the Academy to avoid any risk of being overwhelmed by it on the day of the exams.

If I had to guess, I'd say it was about ten kilometers from our city estate to the Academy gate—the perfect distance to get nicely warmed up. And the Academy itself...

Well, it was easy to see why it was considered the most prestigious school in the kingdom. My first impression was that

it was enormous—excessively so. I snuck a peek through the main gate, which was large enough to comfortably accommodate four carriages side by side. Beyond the gate, a long stretch of a meticulously laid cobblestone path led to a European-style school building, so far away I could barely make it out. The chalky-white, stately building had to be at least three kilometers away from the gate. Ahead of the building, the cobblestone path forked; one track went off to the right, toward a thick grove of trees, while the other branched off to the left—though I couldn't see where it led.

I'm glad I came to check it out before the day of... I really underestimated this place. It would be difficult for anyone to try and maintain a level head after seeing a majestic place like this for the first time—let alone on the day of such critical exams. Those who didn't shrivel up just at the sight of the place would probably fail after overdoing it during the exams. No, if one wanted to succeed, they would have to be able to go at it with a calm mind and a positive outlook.

Every year, the Academy admitted just one hundred students, split among the knight, mage, and bureaucrat courses. Between the three years of advanced schooling, that meant there were only three hundred Royal Academy students in attendance at any given time. Ordinarily, one might think it would be impossible for a school with such a small student body to accommodate over ten thousand potential examinees...but if you witnessed the school with your own eyes, all would become clear. For an institution of this size and grandeur, ten thousand was a trivial number. At the same time, my quick peek into the grounds hadn't provided me with anything but a fraction of the full picture. I decided to set off clockwise alongside the wall of the Academy.

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As it turned out, a single lap of the school's exterior was a staggering forty-or-so kilometers. Frankly, it was ridiculous. Crauvia—the small, fortified city that served as the capital of the Rovene Domain—could fit inside the grounds entirely with room to spare. Even though the Academy was situated quite a ways away from the center of the capital, the amount of land that had been allocated to it was still obscene.

Of course, mages in training did require a good bit of space in case of accidents, and when you thought about it from that perspective, the more space between the training grounds and the rest of your campus, the better…

No, even then, I feel like this is going overboard.

Back at our country estate, my morning routine had been to run a lap of the fortified wall that enclosed Crauvia; it seemed like this would be the perfect replacement. By running the same distance each morning, I could easily measure my progress. During my lap of the Academy, I'd come across the perfect hill—five hundred meters long with a ten-degree inclination—so I'd added ten hill sprints to the middle of my training, sprinting up the hill at full power and jogging back down.

I was sure that to others, a daily running routine might have seemed unimportant in the grand scheme of things, but running was an excellent way to build muscle. While stamina and endurance were also important to those who served as knights, muscle was what had the biggest impact on overall strength. And the important muscles a knight needed to build? They could all be trained just by doing hill sprints.

If you looked at Olympic short-distance sprinters, every single one of them had arms as thick as logs. The faster you tried to run over a short distance, the more upper-body strength you needed. Hill sprints were truly the most effective method in the world to train the whole body. Exercises like sword swings might have also been great for the arm muscles, but that didn't train your legs in the slightest.

And it wasn't only my muscles I was training; when I utilized Strengthening Magic throughout my whole body, hill sprints doubled as an excellent way to further my skill in magic manipulation. If I had still been in my past life, a hundred meters or so would have been fine for an exercise like this, focusing purely on developing my muscles. But in this world, through Strengthening Magic, I could lessen or increase the load on my body while adjusting to the path's slope and terrain to practice magic manipulation while also building muscle.

I'd always been skinny in my past life, so I hadn't awakened in this world with any substantial knowledge around athleticism or muscle building. When I'd started training a few months prior, my initial attempts had been misguided and inefficient. But as I'd continued to run each morning, I had begun to detect the

individual factors that worked together to influence greater results. Over time, I had gradually increased the intensity of my training program to focus more specifically on the most efficient exercises, and I had come to understand the true joy of exercise: being able to physically feel your own body getting stronger on a daily basis.

I decided the Academy loop was going to be a fine replacement for my morning training course. Plus, having found a suitable replacement here, I could look forward to the thought of possibly getting accepted into the Academy a little bit more. *I'll come back here tomorrow.*

I hadn't been able to glean much more information about the layout of the Academy from my lap of the perimeter. The main gate, where I'd started my lap, faced the south. On the north face of the wall, there had been another gate, through which I'd been able to glimpse some dormitory-like structures. The rest of the time, though, the sheer height of the unbroken wall had prevented me from gaining any further insights.

I could probably have scrambled up the wall if I'd really wanted to, but I was also keenly aware this was a school that counted royalty and the high nobility among its students. I had no idea what kinds of security measures they'd have in place, so I'd ruled against the idea and headed back.

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After making my way back to the city estate, I'd finished off my morning exercises with my sword practice in the small garden, and then I'd finally headed back inside. I was about to enjoy my familiar breakfast—a field ration—when my mother entered the room.

"Allen, just *what* do you have there?"

"This? It's a portable field ration, Mother."

"Well, *obviously* I can see that it is a field ration. What I should have asked is, *why* are you preparing to eat something like that?" she asked coolly. The atmosphere had turned frigid.

Why...? It's not like she'll understand that my morning routine isn't over until I cap it off with my usual breakfast...but there's no way I'm letting go of my sacred routine until the entrance exams are over!

I summoned up all my courage.

"Ever since I started looking at the examinations like they're

an upcoming battle, I've tried to hold myself to the same standards as a warrior. I think maintaining those standards will be crucial to my success, and one of them is eating field rations—just like a soldier. Until the day after tomorrow, I don't intend to change what I eat."

Mother said nothing for a good five seconds, staring at me with an unblinking gaze, before finally replying.

"Nourishing one's body is also one of a warrior's responsibilities. A proper breakfast will provide you with the energy you need for the day, while a proper dinner provides your muscles with the fuel they need to grow stronger as you sleep. I'll hold my tongue regarding your meal choices at lunch, but I will insist you eat a proper breakfast."

I didn't feel like I had much chance of changing her mind, but still, I racked my brain for anything I might be able to say to persuade her. Before inspiration could strike, though, another interruption arrived.

"Good morning, Allen!"

Rosa was awake. It was rather unusual for her to be up this early on one of her days off. Less unusual, however, was her appearance. Gone was the polished, feminine Rosa of the day before. Her neat, lustrous hair was now a wild mop, still sticking up in places where she'd slept on it, and she'd yet to change out of her loose, raggedy pajamas. This was the Rosa I remembered: the one who'd always hated getting dressed up, claiming it felt like she was being restrained.

"Rosa, go tidy yourself up this instant. Allen got himself up, went out to exercise, and came all the way back home too, yet you can't even dress yourself. Speaking of which," my mother continued, turning her attention back on me, "I caught a glimpse of you practicing with your sword in the garden a little earlier, Allen. Your form has truly improved. Have you been practicing daily?"

Although she could be terrifying at times, my mother had always wholeheartedly praised us for the results of hard work. Especially now that I'd remembered my experiences from my previous life...I understood exactly how precious a thing that praise was.

"Yes, Mother. Although it's still only been a few months at this point."

"Awww... I want to see you practice with the sword too!

Especially if you're good enough that Mother's praising you!" said Rosa, her drowsy look now replaced with an expression of pure excitement. "Oh well, I guess once you get accepted into the Royal Academy, I'll get to watch you here every morning!" She laughed gleefully. Rosa was clearly in an excellent mood.

"Hey, Allen!" she continued. "What do you want to do today? I asked all my friends for recommendations, so now I know all the best restaurants in the capital and all the popular clothing stores for boys your age!"

So that's why she's up so early...

Before I could formulate a reply, Mother interjected, shaking her head in exasperation. "Rosa, your brother doesn't have the time to waste gallivanting around with you—not with two days until the examinations. For that matter, you'll be starting a new year at the Institute in two days yourself. Have you finished all your preparations?"

"But I spent so long looking into all the things we could do together..." Rosa said sulkily. "Oh well. Once you get in, we'll be together every day!"

It's now or never...

If I missed this chance, I'd end up stuck here with Rosa forever. Surreptitiously activating my Strengthening Magic, I broached the fatal topic.

"Actually...if I do manage to pass the exams, I'm planning to move into one of the Academy dormitories. You see, it's important for those who are aiming to become knights to learn, eat, and sleep alongside their future comrades..." I began, testing the same logic my father had extolled when I'd brought up the topic with him.

"*Huh?*" Rosa's mood soured in an instant. I could sense she was about to lose it. "You're joking, right? *Right*, Allen? Do you know how long I've been waiting for this day to come? I wrote to you about it every month! You should know how I feel better than anyone!"

Crap. I was now remembering my declaration to Soldo and the household staff that, in order to hone in on my studies, I wouldn't be replying to Rosa's letters for a few months... Of course, I hadn't even bothered to read them.

Sensing the potential danger, I decided to change the topic before Rosa could start questioning me about the specific content of those letters. I chanced a quick glance away from her,

ensuring my mother was still nearby—for safety reasons—before I started my reply. “Sorry, Rosa, but this is no joke. I intend to live on campus. I’ve already received Father’s permission as well.”

Wham. Without warning, a fist came flying toward my face—but I caught it before the blow could connect, and I held on. Rosa was fast, but I’d been prepared. I wasn’t the Allen she’d known before.

Rosa recovered from my unexpected defense with incredible speed, and her other fist came flying toward me—I caught that one too, rendering her unable to attack again.

“You stopped me…” she said, shocked. “Wow…you just keep getting cooler and cooler, Allen!” She was smiling at me, but I could hear the anger in her voice.

“What are you thinking, Rosa? A magical craftsperson’s hands are their life; you can’t just go around punching people. What if you injured yourself?” I replied—struggling all the while. She was pushing against my grip on her fists with an unthinkable amount of strength for her tiny arms.

The next instant, she ripped her arms backward with tremendous force. I’d been ready for it—retreat and attack was the basic pattern to a duel, after all—but even then, I couldn’t counteract that kind of speed. As I pitched forward from the force of her withdrawal, I made to enhance my legs with Strengthening Magic to regain my footing—only to find Rosa’s knee rushing toward my chin.

Somehow, I managed to refocus my magic into my chin just in the nick of time, but my head was still thrown backward by the strength of her blow. If I hadn’t been able to reinforce it in time, she would have likely broken my jaw. *Although I’d like to believe Rosa knew I’d be able to defend myself in time, this is still excessive violence—especially toward someone who’s about to take life-changing exams!*

Rosa took advantage of the fact that my head was still reeling, quickly delivering a backhand blow across my face. Blood spurted from my nose. “Don’t worry about me, Allen! Your face is nice and soft, so my hands aren’t hurt at all!” Rosa said, grinning dangerously at me. “Now, shall we have a nice little discussion about your decision?”



Thankfully, our mother stepped in then. “Stop playing around now, the pair of you. It’s high time for breakfast. Rosa, Allen’s decision is indeed logical. And even if he is to reside in the dormitories, the Academy is not so far away that you couldn’t visit him there. Regardless, if Bell has already given his approval as head of this family, then the matter is decided.”

Mwa ha ha… Although my face was covered with blood, I barely managed to restrain myself from chuckling in victory. Unless it concerned the safety of her children, my mother would always back Father’s decisions. I’d utilized that knowledge when I’d laid the groundwork for this plan during that dinner with Father all those weeks ago, and now everything had turned out just as I’d intended—although the fact that Rosa was now staring at me with teary eyes was making me feel as though I were in the wrong, somehow. Regardless, my final last-minute concern was now resolved, and all that remained was to face the exams head-on.

Cautiously, I reached out to pick up my field ration from where I’d dropped it earlier, thinking I might be able to get away with it given the previous commotion. Unfortunately, I was met with a cold, questioning “*Yes?*” as Mother noticed my movement. Reluctantly, I gave up on any thought of having my usual breakfast for the day.

The Entrance Examinations

It was finally the day of the examinations. As usual, I woke up just before 5 a.m., and I discovered that the sky was dark and rainy.

I would have to arrive at the Academy between eight and ten in the morning to register for the exams—a generous chunk of time, but when you considered the sheer number of people that would be turning up, it was probably necessary.

I changed out of my sleepwear into my exercise clothes, then slipped on a raincoat.

“You’re heading out to run on a day like this? Your mettle is admirable.” While I’d been getting ready, my mother had appeared at the entryway to the house.

“Yes, well… Running is pretty fun, and I just thought, well, it’s important to stick to your routines, especially on important days like this.”

Mother chuckled lightly. “I see. You certainly have grown up, Allen. Off you go, then. I’ll have breakfast ready for you when you return.”

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I had to take more care than usual when training on rainy days. The wetter it was, the more easily I could slip and fall—obvious, when you thought about it, but the danger was greatly compounded in this world with the existence of Strengthening Magic. When you ran with enhanced speed and power, any misjudgment of your pace or positioning could lead to a big injury. My boots—crafted from the leather of some monster or other—had better durability, weatherproofing, and slip resistance than even the highest-end sneakers of my previous world, yet even with those, it was still far too easy to take a tumble.

Of course, if I were truly scared of falling over, I could simply run without any magic activated and I’d be relatively safe. But to run with the speed and power I wanted…first, I had to understand the changing conditions of the ground before I landed on it, and then I had to touch down with exactly the highest amount of power I could use without immediately slipping, utilizing the minute information I gained from the slight sensation of my heel touching the ground to make tiny adjustments to my magical output.

It was a simple, yet deeply complicated process, one I had to repeat with each and every step. This was exactly the kind of skill—one mastered through the body, rather than the mind—that had been Allen’s specialty before I’d awakened. And even after my awakening, I still had a special fondness for training on rainy days.

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Once I’d returned home and finished up my sword practice, I made my way to the dining room for breakfast. Rosa was already at the table; her new year at the Research Institute also commenced today. Once again, she’d managed to make herself presentable; today’s outfit was a bright-green dress adorned with a ribbon. Her long hair was in a plait, a dark-brown silk scarf

braided into her twisting hair. I'd bought that scarf for her the previous day as a thank-you for showing me around the capital.

When I'd planned my study schedule, I'd made sure to keep the day before the exams free, in case of last-minute emergency cramming or otherwise to rest up. I'd honestly felt a little sorry for Rosa after our little fight the day before, so yesterday, I'd asked her to spend the day with me as my sightseeing guide, and along the way, I'd bought her the scarf as a present. When I'd offered to buy it, she'd burst into tears, and I'd quickly found myself surrounded by a mob of accusatory would-be defenders…

Well, I didn't want to think about that again—much like how I was ignoring the fact that she'd carefully chosen a scarf in the exact same shade of brown as my own hair. *I didn't even know it was possible to braid a scarf into your hair like that… Seriously, it's like she's trying to mess with my mind—and today of all days!*

"Breakfast is served," Mother said, laying some plates on the table before us. We weren't so well-off that we could employ a resident chef at the secondary estate, so Mother had done the cooking herself. The plate before me was heaped with the usual salad, bread, cheese, ham, and scrambled eggs—and unusually, a portion of plain-flavored solid field rations as well.

I must have been grinning like a grade-schooler who'd had a cheeseburger dished up for him at breakfast, judging by Mother's "You're still a child at heart, I see," and Rosa's "You're too cute, Allen!"

Ah, well. At least Rosa's in a good mood again. If I can have my field rations, I can even ignore the weird scarf thing for now.

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"Well, as you insist, I'll see you off from here. Try your hardest, Allen."

Normally, a child from the nobility would be accompanied to the Academy entrance by his parents, steward, or private tutor. Embarrassed by the very thought, though, I'd managed to convince my mother to let me go on my own during dinner the previous night.

"Looking at you now," she continued, "I can see why Bellwood decided to let you make the journey here alone."

Dad, I think you're in the clear! With yet another problem resolved, my heart felt lighter than ever.

“Well, I’m off!”

The rain had begun to subside.

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As I slowly meandered through the streets of the capital, I began to make my way back to the Royal Academy, taking the walk as an opportunity to restore the reserves of compressed mana I’d used up during that morning’s training.

I arrived at the entrance with ten minutes to spare before registration closed. As expected, most of the examinees had long since arrived, and the entrance wasn’t anywhere near as crowded as it had surely been earlier. There wasn’t any particularly deep reasoning behind my last-minute arrival; actually, the information letter we’d received had recommended it, given the earlier half of the registration period was always crowded. Well, on such an important day as this, it was understandable that most people would leave earlier than strictly necessary, just in case they ran into some trouble on the way. If our estate hadn’t been within walking distance, I’d have probably left earlier as well.

I weaved my way through the crowds of parents and tutors doling out last-minute advice and encouragement to their charges, making my way through the main gate and following the cobblestone path to one of the many recently erected registration tents. There, an attendant measured my magical aptitude with a specialized magical tool.

“2,488? That’s amazing! You can just go straight along that path there and follow the instructions to the practical examination ground,” said the attendant with a big smile. Next to the tents, a massive crowd of examinees waited anxiously. *Ah, so that’s the so-called Sieve of Fate…* After registration ended a few minutes from now, the magical aptitudes of all the remaining examinees would be ranked from top to bottom, and those who weren’t in the top three thousand would be sent home without even being allowed to take the exams. It seemed a little cruel at first, but on the other hand, it was also unfeasible to allow ten thousand or so applicants to take the exams.

If an examinee’s aptitude level clearly exceeded the average, they were allowed to bypass the Sieve and move straight to the first testing ground—just like I was doing now, with nine

thousand pairs of envious eyes glaring at me as I passed. It felt uncomfortable, to say the least, but I couldn't say I didn't understand it. Each time someone like me walked past that crowd, it meant one more student would be sent home, their Academy dreams forever unfulfilled.

Another attendant stood in front of the chalky-white school building. Mage course applicants were to proceed to the right, and other applicants were guided to the left. Although I was keenly curious what the mage testing would entail, I begrudgingly forced myself to continue along the left-hand path.

Suddenly, a fierce cry rose from the crowd behind me. Shouts of joy were mixed with the more numerous wails of the unlucky.

If I don't hurry up, I'm about to be swarmed by two thousand or so overexcited rivals…

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Just like the rest of the Academy, the site of the knight course physical exam was another ridiculously large space—this time a training ground coated in a peculiar black soil. Although it was still muddy from the earlier downpour, I quickly realized the mud would be far from the most annoying element of the test—the second I stepped onto the soil, I nearly recoiled in shock at the soft, fluffy texture it had. It was a sensation I'd never experienced before.

Step by step, I made my way toward the reception counter, making constant, minute adjustments to the Strengthening Magic I focused into my feet with each step. An impressive selection of wooden training swords in a variety of designs and lengths rested against the counter. After giving my name to the attendant, I was told to pick a weapon of my liking and proceed to any of the numerous examiners scattered around the training ground.

"I can pick whomever I like?" I questioned curiously.

"Yes, it doesn't really make a difference who you choose—you'll be sparring against your fellow examinees either way," said the attendant, a kind-looking young man, with a smile. *I wonder if he's an older student who's been enlisted to help out on exam day.*

Taking a suitable sword in hand, I once again cast my gaze across the training ground, this time more critically.

No matter how you looked at it, there was a clear pattern of

popularity when it came to which examiners students were choosing. It only made sense; even though we would be fighting our fellow students, at the end of the day, we were all going to be scored by another person, someone with their own personality and biases. It was illogical to believe every examiner would be as generous as the next.

Far across the ground, a distant but seemingly friendly-looking examiner was surrounded by a swarm of what must have been close to a hundred examinees. On the other hand, another examiner, who was standing right next to the central registration counter, had just a few students around him—and it was easy to see why. He had a stubbly, unshaven face and wore a deep frown. He was barely even looking at the students sparring in front of him. He gave off exactly the same aura my boss had in my past life whenever he'd come to work hungover—in fact, this fellow was almost certainly hungover, and he was definitely to be avoided.

"All right, all right, that's enough. No good. You two can go home," he declared, waving the two examinees away with a shooing motion. Their expressions twisted in despair. I felt a little bad for them, but that was just what happened when you went straight for the first examiner you saw without thinking. The God of Exams had no kindness for the unprepared.

The physical exam doubled as the second threshold for examinees to meet. Out of the three thousand who'd made it to this stage, the examiners would eliminate anyone who they felt didn't meet the minimum standards for their chosen course, cutting down the number of examinees who would go on to take the written exam to just one thousand.

Although the specifics of the physical exam changed on a year-to-year basis, what remained constant was that whether you passed or failed was largely up to the examiner's discretion. As an examinee, all I could do was use the information at my disposal to engineer a situation that offered me the highest likelihood of success. Thus, spurred on by seven hundred years' worth of Rovene regret, I skirted around the unshaven man with beautiful nonchalance.

"Oy, you!"

But just at that moment, someone called out to me.

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“Oy, you! You can do your test here.”

I pretended not to hear the man’s voice, continuing forward without stopping. *Come on, give me a break… The guy at reception clearly said I could go to anyone I liked, right? You’re infringing on my rights here! I could sue!* I continued to make a beeline for the friendly-looking examiner. *Friendly-Face, I choose you!*

Behind me, the grumpy-looking examiner called out again. “I know you can hear me, you little bastard! Don’t ignore me! Ugh… You’ve passed already, so get back here!”

Huh? Passed? As the word echoed beautifully in my ears, I stopped without even realizing it.



“You little… You’re him, right? The brat who’s been running a lap of the whole Academy the last three days straight? All the instructors have been talking about you.”

I was struggling to grasp the meaning of the words coming out of Stubble-Face’s mouth. It was weird enough that he knew about my daily running, but what was even weirder was that apparently, a random kid’s exercise routine had somehow become such a hot topic among Academy faculty.

Taking notice of my apparent bewilderment, the man sighed, exasperated. “You’re really underestimating the security around here. Did you think no one would notice as long as you didn’t get too close to the walls? There’s all kinds of idiots up to no good around here, especially at a time like this. If there’s a weird brat running around at an unnatural speed or loitering near the walls, of course that info’s gonna make its way back to me—I’m the head of security.”

I wasn’t really sure I could agree that I’d been running around at an “unnatural” speed, but the rest of what he’d said made sense. I’d made a bit of an oversight, thinking no one would notice a kid trying to get a sense of what was going on inside the Academy’s walls, especially right before the entrance exams. Although we didn’t have anything like it in our backwater viscounty, it wasn’t too far-fetched to assume they had something along the lines of a magical security camera system installed here, with individual cameras capturing my morning activities and transmitting them back to the school.

“Well, I have been doing my morning running around the school these past few days…” I acknowledged. There was no point denying it since they potentially had hard evidence stored somewhere. “I didn’t realize it would cause any problems…”

“Lucky for you, a large team of our experts analyzed the footage and concluded you were just a bumpkin kid running around without a thought in your head. So you’re not under suspicion anymore.”

So they do have recording devices, or something similar… Wait a minute, a large *team of experts?* At that moment, I was incredibly thankful I’d had the foresight *not* to scale the walls to have a peek inside a few days earlier.

“After I received the report about you, I took a look at the footage myself. Then I came down and took a look at you with my own eyes yesterday. It was obvious that your physical skills

are far above the threshold for the physical exam, so you've already passed."

Now I get it... He'd already assessed me before I even set foot into the Academy today. But he's saying he has a complete understanding of my physical abilities just from catching a glimpse of me running? Feeling a strange sense of déjà vu, I questioned him again.

"Sorry, but I'm finding it hard to believe you could assess my full abilities just by scoping out my morning run..." Even an expert magic user could only get a basic idea of another person's skill in magic manipulation just by looking at their form.

Hearing the doubt in my tone, Stubble-Face let out another exasperated sigh. "Normally, you'd be right. But you, kid...you had the nerve to come out for a run when it was pouring rain—and on the morning of the examinations themselves, at that. What would have happened if you'd expended so much mana that you couldn't pass the aptitude threshold? I guess that's why you didn't show up until the last minute, to make sure you had enough time to restore your mana reserves, yeah? But from that, I've got a decent idea of your ability for magical manipulation. You know, only Sage Godolphen wagered you'd actually come training again this morning. He won the whole pot!"

Okay, now I get it. For a moment, I thought maybe that Fey weirdo managed to perfect her little measuring device and lent it to the Academy... Wait a minute. They were betting *on me?*

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"As you and I both know, training in the rain is a tricky thing for magic users. It requires very precise control over your magic," said Stubble-Face, pressing his temples. It seemed the hangover was getting to him. "But the lap of the Academy that took you an hour and twenty-eight minutes yesterday? You did it in just an hour and forty minutes today, despite the fact that it was raining cats and dogs out there. There's very few kids your age who could pull off something like that."

I decided not to mention that, swept away by my excitement that it'd been raining, I'd done an extra two hill dashes that morning on top of my usual ten. It would probably just confuse him more.

"Because I could compare your lap time over the two days, I

got a decent feel for the level of your Strengthening Magic and your handle on magical manipulation. Although, you did slow down significantly in the second half of your lap. You've probably still got room to develop your stamina and magical compression."

Just as I suspected... There mustn't be any security devices installed around the beautiful hill in the back...

Suddenly, Stubble-Face grinned at me dangerously. "But even though you've already passed...I still have to give you a score. So come on and take a swing at me."

"I thought the sparring was meant to be done between examinees, though," I said questioningly.

"Unfortunately for you, even if you fought one of these other little bastards, it wouldn't be enough for me to get an accurate idea of your level. Of course, I'll defend myself, but I won't strike back, so hit me with your best sho—"

An instant before he could finish, I flooded my body with Strengthening Magic and closed the gap between us, swinging down at him with a full-strength overhead slash.

Unfortunately—although not entirely unexpectedly—he dodged the blow with a twist of his upper body and some surprisingly technical footwork. As I'd thought, Stubble-Face was a highly skilled warrior. My only chance at landing a hit on him had been a surprise all-out attack, but I'd failed.

Utilizing the force of his evasive twist, Stubble-Face followed through with a sideward swing of his own wooden sword—which I'd already anticipated. I moved to block the swing with my own weapon, and at the last second, I relaxed my grip, letting my sword fly away as we connected.

Unlike my sister, I didn't have the skill to create an opening from a deadlock. Losing my sword was a pain, but it was the only way I could create an advantage for myself. Stubble-Face had been prepared to meet force with force, but without the expected pushback from my sword, he was left unbalanced and stumbled just slightly to the left—just in time to meet the spinning kick I'd prepared when I'd manufactured this situation. My timing was perfect...

"Argh!"

...or so I thought. My foot, which I'd been certain would connect with his upper body, only barely managed to graze the hair on his head—he'd evaded the blow with a quick backward

jump. While he was mid-dodge, I snatched another sword from a nearby student and resumed a ready stance, the tip of my weapon pointed directly at his eyes.

“You ill-mannered little brat… That big, flashy move at the start was just you trying to lure me in, huh?”

“You claimed you wouldn’t counterattack, but your stance said otherwise. I figured the best move would be to try and limit your options for striking back.”

It was one thing that he was clearly hungover, but this grumpy examiner had also lost a bet because of me (not that that was really my fault, though). There’d been no chance he’d have just taken it all in stride.

“To top it off, you rushed me down before I could even finish speaking. Where’s your etiquette? Normally, it’s considered polite to say something like, ‘Yes, I understand,’ or ‘Okay, I’m ready,’ before you start sparring with a superior.”

Huh? Wait, of course that’s the polite way to do it, probably! I wish Rosa were the type to let me know before she started swinging…

Stubble-Face sighed. “Fine. The exam is over, anyway. Like I said at the start, you… What was your name again? Well, you passed. Go have something to eat before the written exam starts at midday. Once you’re all inside, you won’t be allowed to leave the building until the exam ends at three, you got that? Make sure you’re at the main building five minutes before noon at the latest.”

“Thank you very much! And my name is Allen Rovene!” With reflexes honed by countless hours of job-hunting prep in my past life, I introduced myself clearly and cheerfully. First impressions were everything, after all, and I’d done a perfect job, if I did say so myself.

Hell yeah! Even with this stubbly wrench thrown into the mix, I still made it through the physical exam!

I returned the wooden sword I’d borrowed to the student standing nearby, who’d been waiting patiently, and I thanked him politely. Then I started to make my way back toward the school’s main building.

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On my way back, I crossed paths with a group of enthusiastic fellow examinees. One of them asked me what sort of exam it

had been like, to which I replied that it was a simple mock fight between pairs of examinees. To one member of the group, a cute, kind-looking girl, I leaned in and whispered, “Stubble-Face—the examiner closest to the reception counter—is hungover and in a very bad mood, so you’d best avoid him!”

After all, it’d be nice if we could get to know each other if we both get in…

My lunch was a salami-flavored solid field ration—it was a brand-new flavor I’d stumbled across while exploring the capital the day before. The capital truly was a massive step above our backwater home region… Although, honestly, I still vastly preferred the plain flavor.

As instructed, after I’d had lunch, I entered the main building for the written exam. Physics, Magical Theory, History and Geopolitics, Military Strategy and Politics, Language and Literature—all five tests were distributed at the same time, so I worked through them according to my strengths, then reviewed my work on each sheet.

When I glanced at the clock, it was still well before time was up. I hadn’t run into any irregularities on the tests worth mentioning either. There had been some questions I’d thought were a little more difficult than those of the previous years, but that probably went for everyone else too.

At the end of the day, if you didn’t really understand some facet of a subject, no amount of turning the question over in your head would make it any easier. In that sense, you could say an academic exam was something that was over before you even opened the test booklet.

For caution’s sake, I spent the rest of the time checking my work again. Eventually, the clock struck three, and I made my way out of the building.

Thus concluded my three-month battle in the Entrance Examination War.

The Results Announcement, and Behind the Scenes Thereof

I was back at the city estate within the hour only to find my mother and sister waiting restlessly in the entryway. Although we hadn’t really discussed the exams much over the three days

since I'd arrived in the capital, it was now obvious to me that they'd been pretty anxious about how they'd go.

"Allen, you did it! I'm so proud of you!" A beaming Rosa rushed out to meet me. To be honest, I was a little proud of myself too. After all, I had well and truly pushed myself to my limits for the last three months straight—and seeing my sister's smiling face, I felt like a little bit of that effort had been rewarded.

"You've done well, Allen," Mother added. "I can tell just by looking at you that you must have given it your all. Surely you're tired, yes? Well, you'll be pleased to hear that Rosa really outdid herself getting everything ready for tonight's little celebration."

As always, although she was strict when she needed to be, Mother was a genuinely kind person. She, too, had broken out into a grin. Only her children ever got to see this special smile of hers, and only at times like this. Seeing her as she was now, smiling like a little girl, it was hard to believe she could have birthed and raised four children. I really was blessed to have been born into this family.

"Thank you, Mother—and you too, Rosa. It's good to be home." My gratitude echoed in my words.

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The following day, Mother and I returned to the Academy for the announcement of the results. I was confident; I had never really been worried about whether I would pass, even taking into account my unexpected (stubbly) encounter during the physical exam.

To be honest, I'd been hoping to come check the results by myself too, but when I'd said as much to my mother, she'd replied, "If your heart is set on going alone, I won't interfere. However, I hope you will allow me to be by your side as you receive your result, whatever result that may be." Again, she had broken out into that girlish smile. "Truthfully, I think I have even more confidence than you that you will pass. You might think it one of the annoying responsibilities of a good son, but will you allow me to accompany you and share in that happiness?"

When she'd put it like that, there hadn't really been any way I could have refused her. And so, like all the other examinees, I found myself accompanied by a parent as we headed over to see my results.

Incidentally, Rosa had also begged to be allowed to come with us. She'd started off by copying our mother, making declarations about how much she believed in me and wanted to share in my happiness. But by the end of her argument, she'd somehow ended up just crying about how much she wanted us to live together and babbling about other things entirely unrelated to the exams. Ultimately, Mother had swiftly denied her, reminding her with some curtness that her new year at the Institute started today. I could still distinctly feel the teary, reproachful glare she'd fixed on our backs as we'd left the estate.

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The previous evening…

After a hurried dinner, all concerned parties had reconvened to continue grading the day's examinations.

"Play it again, Emmie. This time from when he enters the training ground." Emmie, the magical engineer in question, had no reason to refuse—especially not when the request had come from the former vice commander of the Order of the Royal Knights, Godolphen von Vanquish.

Once again, the monitor-like magical device flickered on—this time, it projected a visual of Allen as he'd entered the training ground earlier that day.

"Now *you're* taking a look at his physical exam, Sage Godolphen? Shouldn't you be grading the mage course applicants?" said another man, approaching Godolphen. The newcomer was nearly two meters tall and extremely muscular; he sported short, gray hair and kindly eyes in the same shade, as well as a cleft in his chiseled chin.

"Dante," acknowledged Godolphen as the other man joined him at the monitor. "The mage course has few applicants this year. I've reviewed most of them already; the others can handle the rest while I take a look at this one."

Dante squinted at the monitor. "He *is* walking quite naturally. For him to make it from the entrance to reception, and then over to Dew with such ease… Well, he's certainly something, all right."

"That he is. That soil was created specifically for this year's exam, uniquely engineered to minimize friction and reciprocal force. It was only delivered to the Academy last night, and its composition is of my own design. All of which is to say, the boy

simply could not have encountered a surface like it before." As Godolphen spoke, yet another man joined them at the monitor.

"And while all the examinees were frantic to show off their best swordsmanship, the examiners were only ever watching their feet! In other words, all they were actually being scored on was their skill in magical manipulation and their ability to react and adjust on unfamiliar terrain. Honestly, Sage Godolphen, you've got a real mean streak to come up with a test like this," laughed the third man.

With his boyish face and matching personality, Justin Lock was the very same young man from the physical exam reception counter whom Allen had incorrectly assumed was a third-year student. A fresh Academy graduate from the year prior, Justin had quickly been snatched up by the Royal Order on account of his excellent grades and highly regarded intellect. His selection as an assistant for the Royal Academy entrance examinations had accompanied his enlistment.

All of those who were involved in the exams, however marginally, were subject to intense scrutiny and investigation beforehand; this was to prevent any possibility that related information would be leaked. After all, the Academy was the workshop in which the pillars that would one day support the entire kingdom were carved; it was vital that only those who were worthy of the role were admitted.

"Hmph. Cheap, flashy sword skills taught by some backwater swordmaster are of no use here in the Royal Academy," Godolphen grumbled with a sigh. "Yet, once again, we bear witness to a wave of idiots making garish, meaningless moves to try and trumpet their abundant mana reserves. Fools! Why do they think we bothered to measure their magical aptitude in the first place? No, the physical exam serves solely to measure one attribute—their potential. No complicated mechanism is required to uncover those talented pearls."

"Everyone..." Another individual had approached the growing group. "I know he's quite the interesting child, but the results still need to be announced tomorrow morning, yes? Make sure you focus on the work to be done," said the woman—Musica Yugria, the overall supervisor of the grading section for the knight course.

"Indeed, indeed," said Godolphen, stroking his long, white beard. "But this youngster...it just seems as though the soil was

nothing to him."

"Well, we all saw how easily he was running around in the pouring rain, after all," agreed Dante, grinning wryly. "It's clear he's got an excellent sense for magical manipulation."

At that moment, the door opened, and Dew Orwell entered the room, returning from a quick patrol of the Academy grounds to make sure there weren't any foolish examinees trying their luck at sneaking into the grading room.

Dew had been dispatched by the Royal Order as the head security officer for the duration of the exam period. His role as a knight course examiner had also doubled as a means by which the Academy could swiftly respond to any threats to the examinees during the physical exam itself, should any problems have arisen. It had been decided that such stringent security was needed after an incident around four years prior—one of the examinees at the time had gone berserk, injuring over sixty of the other applicants and faculty in the area.

"I thought you'd say something like that, Sage," Dew remarked brusquely, cracking his neck. "Which is why I went ahead and tested his skills for you."

"Dew!" said Musica, a look of astonishment on her face. "You're already finished chasing out the straggling examinees?"

Dew nodded. "Apart from the faculty and examiners, there isn't a single living soul left on the grounds now."

"You're as thorough as ever..." said Musica, shaking her head in disbelief. With Dew's return, every single member of the grading team had begun to gather around the small group, their attention drawn to the recording of Allen as though they were children crowding around a shiny new toy.

"He was on his way over to me when you snatched him away, Dew! I barely got to see him," grumbled Patch, the kindly-looking examiner Allen had originally targeted.

Musica sighed in resignation. "Fine, we'll have a quick look at the recording, but I'm begging you—let's wrap this up soon. I don't know how many times I have to say it, but the results *will* be posted tomorrow morning at ten sharp." Even as she spoke, however, Musica cunningly managed to sidle her way into the space between Godolphen and Dew, securing a prime position for the upcoming discussion. Despite her urging that everyone get on with their work, she, too, was quite interested in how Allen would score.

“Well, Dew—what was your impression of the boy, then?” asked Godolphen.

Dew snorted. “You can tell just by looking at the brat. He’s got a bit of a crooked personality, but his sense for magical manipulation is crazy. If you can beat that nasty streak out of him, he’ll make for a decent asset. I’m nominating him for an S.”

Of the grades ultimately handed down to all successful examinees, S was the highest. Each examiner from each respective section could only nominate one student to receive the S grade, after which the nominees were whittled down through group discussion until one prodigious examinee was left with the top score.

The next grade down was A. Each examiner could nominate four A’s; those nominees were again narrowed down through group discussion until only nineteen students had been identified as worthy of receiving the grade. It didn’t matter how many examinees a given examiner had observed; the number of students they could recommend was fixed, which somewhat evened out the system. Although a strict examiner like Dew might be quick to reject any number of hopefuls, a friendly examiner could still only recommend a few students. This actually made it harder in many ways for students who’d chosen a friendly-faced examiner like Patch.

“Honestly, the way he tried to get you at the start with that sudden attack made me laugh—though I reckon there’s quite a few people here who’d say a move like that isn’t very becoming of a future knight. On the flip side, I think there’s just as many who’d say it was a pretty smart tactic—right, Sage Godolphen?” said Patch, grinning.

“Naturally. Whether your opponent is stronger or far weaker than you, all that matters is that one fights to win! Those who don’t have that conviction will never be victorious. This generation has never experienced war, and it shows. The youth are too cowardly these days,” grumbled Godolphen.

“Eh, there’s a time and place for both the offensive and the defensive, I think,” Justin said with a shrug.

“Back to the kid…” said Dew. “Just as you saw, that initial overhead attack was him trying to lure me in. I’d been keeping half an eye on him from the second he set foot into the training ground, but I never once spotted any sign he was adjusting his magic to compensate for the soil. I should have realized his

initial attack wouldn't be as lackluster as it would have been from any of the other brats. Plus, he easily grasped from my stance that I wasn't planning to just defend..."

Dew trailed off, his eyes closed as he recalled the sparring. "No," he continued, "that brat knew from the start that I was going to go on the offensive, even though I'd told him otherwise. He didn't let his guard down once." A tinge of annoyance colored Dew's tone.

Godolphen chuckled genially. "He's an interesting boy indeed. In fact, I've taken quite a liking to him. We'll put him in my class."



“That’s not allowed, Sage Godolphen,” Musica immediately interjected. “It’s already been decided you’ll be in charge of Class A. The boy will be placed in the class that corresponds with his written exam score, which is being tallied up as we speak.”

“Hmph. It takes intelligence to excel in any field, no matter what field that may be. I don’t believe a boy with such astounding physical prowess could fail to pass the threshold for the written examination,” Godolphen said, confident.

“Even if he’s not an idiot, there’s a lot of people out there who just can’t study, you know?” teased Justin.

Godolphen’s eyes flashed. “Shall we wager on it, then?”

“Sounds good to me,” Justin replied with a smirk.

“I’m in too,” Dew declared, unable to resist the allure of another gamble. “I’ll make you pay back every coin you won off me yesterday.”

One by one, other members of the grading team gathered to place their own bets. Of course, actual members of the Academy faculty, like Musica and Emmie, refrained from taking part; it would be improper to bet on the results of their potential future students. However, most in the room, like Dew, had been dispatched from the Royal Order as examiners or security detail and were not bound by the same restrictions. Only Godolphen, vice commander of the Order until a few years prior and only a member of the faculty as of this year, seemed to be the exception to the rule.

Arguments and wagers started flying across the room as the participants debated which class Allen would be assigned to, while Emmie deftly noted down the bets each person had put forward. Class A was the favorite pick, although Class B and C also had a fair few backers among those who had their doubts about the academic skills of a son of the lower nobility, especially one from such a backwater region.

With one hundred successful examinees per year and twenty students per class, each year level at the Academy was composed of five classes ranging from A to E. However, with Allen’s magical aptitude level and physical exam results, even if he only barely managed to pass the written exam’s threshold, it was unlikely he could be placed any lower than Class C.

When all bets had been placed and recorded and the room had quieted down, Dew addressed the crowd again. “Well, anyone here can probably tell just by watching the recording,

but the kid's opening move was definitely his attempt to bait me. Since he could move so freely on that kind of soil, I reckoned he'd probably be able to avoid any serious injuries too, so I came at him from the side. Then he intentionally let me knock his weapon away, leaving me off-balance—and while I was recovering, he came at me with a roundhouse kick to the face." Dew frowned. "Despite Sage Godolphen's sneaky trick with the soil, the brat was moving around at his full power—or close to it, anyway. Even considering the energy he must have expended during his morning run, I reckon he managed to adjust his Strengthening Magic to account for the soil before he even made it to the reception counter."

"I've got two questions," interjected Dante, the burly but kindly-looking man with the cleft chin. "Certainly, it did seem like that child launched a very quick attack at you. But to come that close to landing a hit on the captain of the Third Royal Legion, the 'Untouchable' Dew Orwell… Was it really *that* fast?"

"Huh? Oh, I guess it must be hard to tell from that angle. Truth be told, he actually *did* manage to catch my hair with his foot, the little bastard," Dew explained with a grumpy sigh. "When I swung at him, he angled his sword so that when he lost it, it would fly toward the gormless examinees crowded nearby. I took my eyes off him for a second to make sure it hadn't smashed into one of them, which was exactly what he'd predicted I'd do. That's when he came at me with a kick from my blind spot."

"I see, I see. Well, that's answered my next question too. I was a little doubtful that he'd made a wise move willingly losing his own weapon, even if it might have created an opening for him…but it seems like he'd already calculated that the benefits would outweigh the loss with a trick like that. Besides that, he was able to secure another weapon from one of those examinees within moments."

"That's what's wrong with that brat. When I think back on it now, he didn't show the slightest concern for the folks around him while he fought. But when the situation called for it, he pulled them into his strategy and used them like pawns without hesitation. He's got a rotten personality, that's for sure."

Dante shrugged. "I can't comment on his personality, but I have to agree with Sage Godolphen—it does seem like he's got brains."

“All right, everyone, that’s enough. Can we please get on with __”

“By the way, Sage Godolphen, have you seen the footage of Dew after Allen’s exam?” laughed Justin, interrupting Musica’s attempt to resume the grading session.

“Hmm? I can’t say I have, no. Was there another interesting examinee?” Godolphen asked.

In an instant, most of the others in the room had looked away. It seemed that many of them, at least, had seen the footage in question.

“After that kid left, not a single examinee went to Dew! Not even one! I couldn’t see him very well from my position, but he must have been standing there with a terrifying look on his face considering some kid got a hit in on him!” said Patch, bursting out into laughter. He was unaware of the tension in the room.

A vein throbbed in Dew’s forehead. “Huh?! You think I’d get upset over some twelve-year-old pip-squeak?!”

“He’s right,” added Justin, jumping back into the conversation. “After Allen left, Dew actually looked pretty happy—he was just standing there, grinning like a vicious wolf waiting for the next bit of prey to wander past. But as time passed and no one else dared to come near, he started looking more and more lonely…”

While Justin riled Dew up further, Emmie hit a button on her console. An image of Dew, standing by himself in the training ground despite his proximity to the reception counter, flashed onto the screen.

Patch burst out laughing again. “Emmie, that angle is the best!” A few more people, unable to contain themselves, joined in with his laughter.

“Get that off the screen! Those stupid kids, they all choose their examiner based on appearance, you know that? The ones who came straight to me at the beginning were decent, but the rest of them were rubbish! Maybe it’s the Academy standards that are dropping!”

“That’s enough, everyone—stop laughing,” said Godolphen, chuckling in spite of himself. “Well, it’s only to be expected you’d be quite worked up after getting to play with a shiny new toy like that Allen there. It’s no surprise the other examinees were a little wary of you… Though it would be nice if those aiming for the Royal Academy had a bit more mettle!”

With Godolphen’s remark, the atmosphere calmed down once

more, and Musica pressed on with her instructions. “That’s enough!” she said. “Everyone, return to your grading immediately! We’re severely behind schedule now!”

However, as everyone made to return to their workstations, Emmie let out a near-inaudible murmur. “I think I might know why…no one else went to Dew.”

Dozens of staff stopped in their tracks. Emmie clacked on the console once again.

“*Stubble-Face—the examiner closest to the reception counter—is hungover and in a very bad mood, so you’d best avoid him!*”

Projected on the screen was a visual of Allen smiling at a girl as he whispered some advice.

“After that, the girl passed that advice on to two friends she’d made at the Sieve of Fate, and from there, it seems like it spread to the rest of the examinees like wildfire.”

“That…little…BASTARD! Who the hell does he think he is?! Huh?! Where the hell’d he get the idea that the head of security has time to get drunk the day before the exams? I had to stay up all night and I *still* came over to help test those damn kids! And he goes and calls me a drunkard?!” It seemed like, in spite of his earlier declaration, Dew was indeed getting quite worked up over the impudent boy.

Emmie hit a button. Once again, the screen was occupied by the visual of a lonely, forlorn Dew in the training ground. Patch restrained himself, just barely—until Godolphen himself burst out into a chortle. After that, the room was filled with roars of howling laughter.

“Aha ha ha!”

“St-Stubble…Face…”

“The Untouchable Dew, all alone!”

With skillful fingers, Emmie switched the screen over to another shot of Allen. “*Thank you very much! And my name is Allen Rovene!*”

“Don’t act all innocent and cheerful, you bastard!” cried Dew.

After the commotion had died down, Emmie was forced to alter the betting sheet, noting per Dew’s declaration that he was changing his wager from “Class A” to “the brat won’t pass the written exam.”

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Late that night…

The grading continued. Everyone on the floor was working together, attempting to make up for the time lost after the earlier commotion. In the midst of the hurried work, the supervisor of the written exam's grading entered the room.

"The written exam results are complete, everyone!" Instantly, all eyes were on him. The atmosphere was strange, tense.

"Hmm. And what was Allen Rovene's result?" asked Godolphen with a smile. Although he had been known—and feared—as a dauntless warrior during his time on active duty, the elderly man had mellowed out since his retirement, and nowadays, he was even known as "Godolphen the Buddha" on account of his appearance and personality. However, beneath his placid exterior, one could still sense his fierce spirit from those long-gone days.

As a result of Justin and Emmie's relentless instigation, the betting pool had swelled to a mind-boggling amount over the past few hours of grading—so much so that a loss could easily lead to the financial ruin of several participants.

"Uh, Allen Rovene, you said? Um… Oh, right, about him…"

The supervisor's next words left the whole room speechless.

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The next morning, half past ten.

As we weaved our way through the crowd of mostly despondent, occasionally jubilant examinees, I eventually found myself standing before the results board, Mother close behind.

I had confidence I'd done enough to pass the exams; I'd told myself that over and over again, but I still hadn't been able to shake the feeling of uncertainty. After all, I'd tried just as hard, if not more so, in my past life, and I still hadn't been able to get into the university of my dreams.

I closed my eyes as though I was praying, and then I opened them, slowly and reverently scanning the first column, Class E, for my name…

"Allen, you're on the board. There, see?" said my mother—with unwarranted simplicity considering my emotional turmoil. Hurriedly, I flicked my eyes in the direction she'd pointed.

Allen Rovene

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Magical Aptitude (C)
Knight Course Physical Examination (S)
Written Examination (A)
Class Assignment: Class A*
Knight Course Overall Rank: 4/50
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The C grade for my magical aptitude indicated I was ranked somewhere around the middle out of those who had passed, which wasn't particularly surprising to me. Similarly, the A I'd received in the written section indicated I was somewhere in the top twenty. Forget passing the written exam—I'd aced it. My chest swelled with a slightly arrogant, though not entirely unwarranted pride.

But what really had me scratching my head was the "S" next to the physical exam. Only one S grade was awarded in each of the exam sections—basically, it indicated I'd received the top score.

I don't know how I managed to get the S from my encounter with that hungover security guard... Has there been some kind of mistake?

However, there was something more concerning about my results than my miraculous S grade.

"Class Assignment: Class A"*

What's up with the asterisk? Was there a class like that? Instinctively, I looked over at my mother, and then I involuntarily gulped.

She was staring intensely at the noticeboard, her expression not joyous, but terrifyingly serious.

Chapter Three: Orientation

How to Make Friends (1)

“Um, Mother? That symbol next to my class assignment…do you have any idea what it means?”

Mother was still glaring at the noticeboard, but she jumped slightly at the sound of my voice. She turned to me, her stern expression morphing into a gentle smile.

“Congratulations, Allen. Class A… You’ve proven you have what it takes to enroll in this academy, and you did so through your own stalwart determination. I’m proud of you—immeasurably so.”

I was kind of touched, to be honest. I still hadn’t been convinced the Royal Academy was truly the right path for me in this new life. I’d been a little worried I was letting myself get swept along by circumstance. But to hear my mother, who never gave her children unearned praise, speak so highly of my accomplishment—I really felt like I’d made the right decision with the effort I’d put in over the past few months.

That’s right. At this point, going to the Academy is gonna give me the best opportunity to live however I want in this world. And it’s an opportunity I seized with my own two hands.

Things like academic history and future career success could go to hell for all I cared. If I found a better opportunity, I could cast this one aside without a second thought. But for now, I wanted to place my trust in wherever this road led me—the road I’d walked side by side with Soldo over the past three months. I would place my trust in the twelve years of effort the preawakened Allen had put in to become a strong fighter.

A tear ran down my cheek.

Once the tears had started, there was no stopping them. “Oh dear!” laughed my mother, smiling uncharacteristically broadly as she pulled me close. The hug was warm. Despite her sometimes terrifying disposition, my mother had a kind heart. And with more experience and understanding than any other twelve-year-old would have, I knew just how precious that kindness was.

After a short time, Mother stepped back and took my face in her hands. The corners of her lips twisted upward, and she said, in a very small voice, “Allen—I believe in you.”

The smile hadn’t reached her eyes in the slightest.

My tears stopped in an instant. I realized, with trepidation, that the hands pressed to my cheeks were pale white and as cold as ice. I knew what those signs meant.

She was angry.

The warm feeling inside me plummeted, as though it had been blown away by a freezing wind.

“M-Mother? The symbol, what does it mean?” My throat went dry, as did my tear ducts. It was as though I hadn’t even been crying just moments before.

“Well, then. I must set off to return to the Rovene Domain today, and without delay. Bellwood and Soldo must be beside themselves in anticipation of your results. It would be cruel to make them wait any longer.”

“Yes, that’s tr— But Mother, the asterisk! You know what it means, don’t you?”

“Those who would become knights must have the fortitude to stand up and crush their enemies even when it seems all hope is lost. Am I wrong?” She flashed me another of her rare girlish smiles.

“Yes, I suppose so, but that’s not what—”

I sighed and gave up. She wasn’t budging an inch. Her dainty smile was a cruel contrast to her impenetrable defense.

“Look at the time! The orientation for successful applicants begins at eleven, if I’m not mistaken. Off you go, or you’ll miss the introductions.” She gave my back a gentle push, then turned on her heel, heading back toward the main gate. Bewildered though I was, I still needed to say something to her.

“Mother, thank you for all the delicious food! I’m heading off!” I hurriedly cried in her direction. My mother had been brought up in an affluent family, and she had never been particularly good at things like housework and cooking. But for my sake, instead of settling for prepared meals, she’d braved the markets every morning, struggling over which ingredients to choose and despairing over nutritional value; she had slaved away to make me hot, nutritious meals every day.

Mother turned back toward me with a shy, somewhat embarrassed smile, and she gave me a small nod.

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Following the directions I'd been given, I entered the school's main building. Apart from the majestic stone facade, there wasn't really anything particularly worthy of mention about the architecture—at least, nothing I hadn't already come across in Japan in my past life. The only somewhat notable features were the polished marble floors underfoot and the lounge off to the left of the entrance hall, outfitted with luxurious tables and plush sofas.

Does a school with only three hundred students really need that big a lounge? I snuck a sideways glance through the open doors—only to meet the gaze of an older student who was looking at me curiously. A coffee-like smell drifted into the entrance hall as I hurriedly continued on my path. A few minutes later, I arrived at my destination; before me was the door to Class A.

Don't get nervous now...

In my past life, I'd devoted the entirety of my youth to studying. In both middle and high school, I'd started studying for exams from orientation day. My parents had frequently reminded me that *"your classmates are your rivals—defeat them, don't befriend them."* Obviously, given those circumstances, I didn't have a single fun memory of my student years, nor had I had a single person in those days that I could have called a friend. And although Allen had attended the local preparatory school until the age of eleven, his position as a viscount's son and his recognized skill in magic had built a wall between him—well, me—and the other, less distinguished children.

Secretly, I had been hoping I would be able to use this second chance at school life to see what it would be like to live as a normal student. I wanted to join a club, get a girlfriend, research the intricacies of magic with my friends, sign up for the Explorer's Guild to kill monsters for some pocket money, and sneak out of my dorm at night with a partner in crime to wander the city. I didn't care about grades. I just wanted to enjoy the moment.

If I want to make friends, first impressions are everything. But do I play it safe, or do I make my entrance in style? I paused and thought about it. *Nah, it's not the time to be taking risks just yet.*

Thanks to the fusion of my old self with Allen, I no longer had the hypershy personality that had crippled me in my past life. I

decided to enter the classroom normally—naturally—and try my hand at making friends the old-fashioned way. And if anything unexpected happened? Well, I'd leave it up to fate.

Steeling myself, I opened the classroom door.

"I've been waiting ages for you, Allen! I was dying to see you again."

The girl who'd greeted me grinned. I had found myself face-to-face with Feyreun von Dragoon.

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I reflexively closed the door again.

I was too careless… Of course I should have predicted she'd *get into Class A too…*

Distracted by my mother's strange behavior, I hadn't even remembered to check my new classmates' names at the noticeboard. Thanks to my oversight, I hadn't yet come up with a single strategy for my second encounter with Fey. Before I could even begin to formulate a plan, the door opened once again.

"I say, if it isn't Lady Feyreun!" I exclaimed.

"You can drop the act."

Tch. Choosing to temporarily ignore the girl in front of me, I began to survey the room. It was furnished with simple yet sturdy-looking long desks and chairs, all arranged to face the front of the room. Dotting the room were several groups of students, already deep in cheerful-sounding conversations.

Did I already miss my chance?

I shrugged it off. Even if I'd missed the starting pistol, it wouldn't be a significant setback.

It didn't seem as though there was assigned seating. Scanning the room, I located an open window seat and began to make my way toward it. I moved slowly and cautiously in an attempt to communicate my harmlessness—even approachability—to my new classmates.

"Ah, Allen. You're so cruel to me. But anyway—you really smashed that physical exam! Even I was a little surprised!" Fey followed behind me as though we were old friends. I continued to ignore her.

At that moment, a blue-haired boy with lean but clearly defined muscles approached me. If you ignored the blue hair, he'd look right at home in the baseball club were I still in Japan.

Two other boys, who seemed to be his friends, followed close behind.

"Did someone say Allen? Are you Allen Rovene?"

"That's right...and may I ask who you are?"

Before I figure out what he wants, I'll get his name... Heh heh. As part of my studies over the past few months, I'd memorized the names, businesses, and general interests of every noble family above the rank of baron. *For my opening move, I'll bring up some topic relevant to his family. That way, I'll win his friendship with ease!*

"Oh, my apologies. I'm Aldor Engravier. I'm in the mage course. Please, call me Al."

If he was an Engravier, that meant he was from a viscount family, the same as me. And on top of that, despite his baseball-player physique, he was aiming to become a mage, just like I yearned to. I quickly decided befriending him would be in my best interest.

"Engravier? As in, the family from the Endymion Region that cultivates the Anju trees used to produce wands? How cool! Pleased to meet you, Al."

Al made a shocked face, but it quickly changed into a grin, and he slapped me lightly on the shoulder a few times. "Likewise."

Well, I guess it's natural he'd be surprised. Anju isn't a material everyone would know, after all. But that aside, I think I'm actually doing pretty well here, if I do say so myself. Feeling as though I'd overcome the first hurdle to making friends, a weight was lifted from my shoulders.

"Hang on a minute! This isn't how you treated me when we first met!" Fey exclaimed from behind me. I continued to ignore her.

"Let me introduce my friends. Allen, this is Coconial Canardia." Al gestured to the short boy to one side of him.

"I-I'm C-C-C-Co-Co—"

Shy kid, huh? Of course, I wasn't going to make fun of him for it. It was as though I were looking at a past version of myself. The Canardians had at one point been a count family, but for some unknown reason, they'd been demoted to the rank of baron at some point. Coconial had a chubby face and a small nose and eyes. He definitely wouldn't be considered good-looking, but he gave off a friendly vibe.

"Nice to meet you, Coco! Can I call you Coco? Your ancestor

wrote the *Canardian Encyclopedia of Monsters*, right? I'm a big fan! I've read every volume. You can really tell the author was passionate about their work, you know? I'm just guessing here, but are you in the bureaucrat course?"

The *Canardian Encyclopedia of Monsters* detailed the habits, traits, and territories of the monsters that inhabited the Kingdom of Yugria. Whenever I'd managed to carve out some rare free time, I'd pored over its volumes.

Coco lifted his head, his eyes wide. It was clear there was something he wanted to say, but after struggling for a few moments, he only managed to squeak out a simple reply. "Y-Yes. C-Coco is f-fine. B-Bureaucrat c-course. Nice to m-meet you."

Yep, I reckon we'll get on just fine, Coco. Victory number two!

"Ha! I can't believe you're so knowledgeable about things like the *Encyclopedia*. I mean, that sure didn't come up on the exam. I think you just like surprising me, Allen!" laughed Fey.

"I wasn't talking to you," I retorted quickly without thinking. *Crap... She's just being so annoying that I responded involuntarily.* Al was watching my interaction with Fey with a suspicious look on his face, but as I turned back to him, he hurriedly carried on with his introductions.

"And this is Leo Seizinger. Of course, there's no way you don't know who he is." The newly introduced boy was tall, with lustrous bluish-black hair and delicately handsome features. If you looked up "prince" in an encyclopedia, there would probably be a picture of this guy there.

Crap. I haven't got the slightest idea who he is.

How to Make Friends (2)

Of course, the name Seizinger was one I'd heard before. Out of the already exclusive three ducal families, the Seizingers were the closest to the throne, the current Duke Seizinger being the younger brother of the late king. Forget Anju trees or old books—there was no one in the kingdom who didn't know the name Seizinger just by reputation alone. But the way Al had introduced Leo, it'd sounded like there was something special about Leo himself. *Is he famous or something?*

"I'm Leo. I hope we'll get along well." It was a simple but effective introduction. His voice and steely gaze relayed his confidence and composure. Still, I wished I had a little more

information on the guy...

"Remember, don't get down and prostrate yourself before him, Allen!" Fey whispered in my ear from behind. Then she broke out into a chortle. I kicked my leg backward, knocking her off-balance. Bemusedly, Al jumped back into the conversation to supplement my lacking knowledge—I was beginning to really like the guy.

"Well, I guess you might not have come across him before. Actually, those who scored highest in the mocks across the kingdom while also demonstrating a high magical aptitude level received a summons to Runerelia before the Academy exams, and a luncheon was hosted for us to mingle before the big event. Because of that, most of us in this room have met before or at the very least know one another's names."

Right, the mock exam that said I had a ten percent chance of passing the real one...

I had thought it a little odd that Al and Coco were on such good terms with the son of a ducal family—especially to the extent that Al called them "friends"—considering it was highly unlikely there was any common stomping ground among the three of them. But Al's explanation had unraveled that little mystery.

"And, y'know...I guess it's a little rude to put it like this, but when we all got here this morning and found out Leo's All-S score had been thwarted by some 'Allen' no one had ever heard of, you became the talk of the town."

So if Stubble-Face hadn't given me that S score—probably by mistake—this Leo would have received an S in all three sections? Everyone else seems to think it was a given as well...

"Al, I've already said the rankings or an All-S don't matter to me in the slightest," Leo warned him, albeit disinterestedly.

I could already see it. Leo was the type of guy who'd become the so-called leader of the class. Within three months, the girls would be calling him something like "the Ice Prince," or he'd become part of "the Top Three" or "the Stunning Six" or whatever nonsensical name they would assign to the most handsome boys. If I stuck around a guy like this, I'd quickly become a mere love letter delivery boy.

"Leo—is it all right if I call you that? I just want to be clear here. I'm the third son of a penniless viscount from the middle of nowhere, nothing more. I don't have a dignified or virtuous bone

in my body."

"It's all the same to me," Leo replied. "I came to this academy to sharpen my skills while surrounded by the most talented peers in the kingdom. I'm not here to be fawned over."

To be honest, Leo seemed like a pretty decent guy—but I still didn't think I wanted to spend the next three years as his bosom buddy. Sure, being on close terms with him would probably have its benefits, but it would also come with sacrifices I wasn't willing to make.

Leo seemed like the type to readily sacrifice his present-day comforts while working toward his future or the good of the kingdom. Me, on the other hand? I basically had one foot out the door already. As soon as I found a better opportunity that suited me and me alone, I'd be gone like the wind. It was clear as day to me that it would be hard for the two of us to find common ground—but it wouldn't do to pick a fight with him now and make him an enemy. That would definitely come back to bite me in the future.

I just need to make him lose interest in me... He should view me as a classmate he only occasionally speaks to...

Lost in thought, I didn't notice the danger until it was too late. Leo had fixed his steely gaze on me, and he bluntly asked me a question.

"You—Allen. Why did you enroll in the Royal Academy?"

There was a veiled challenge in his words. I'd wanted to avoid this, but now that he'd asked, I'd have to answer. I could tell he wouldn't be satisfied with replies like *"Because my parents wanted me to"* or *"Because it'll guarantee me a successful career."* He was asking what had driven me to sacrifice my time and health these last three months, all in order to be standing here today. And to Leo and me, the answer to that question couldn't be any more disparate.

The words Mother had said to me that morning flashed across my mind.

"Those who would become knights must have the fortitude to stand up and crush their enemies even when it seems all hope is lost. Am I wrong?"

No, there was something else she'd said that was more important.

"You've proven you have what it takes to enroll in this academy, and you did so through your own stalwart determination. I'm proud

of you—immeasurably so.”

I decided not to play it safe anymore.

“I came here...to do whatever I want. No matter what anyone else says.”

Leo stared at me blankly for a second. “You say ‘whatever you want,’ but what does that mean to you? To become strong, to protect this country and its people?”

I let out an involuntary snort. “Sorry, but my interests aren’t as noble as all that. I just want to do whatever I feel like. It’s as simple as that. If something seems interesting, I’ll do it. If something seems fun, I’ll try it. I want to act on the random thoughts that pop into my head. I want to live a fun life. I enrolled here because I decided it would be beneficial to me, and that’s the *only* reason I’m here.”

“So basically, you’re here for yourself and nothing more. You don’t have any love for the kingdom you were born and raised in?” Leo pressed. “You’re a noble too, aren’t you? Those who were born with power have a responsibility to use that power to protect those weaker than themselves—or is that notion unfamiliar to you?”

Just as I thought—our ways of thinking are just too different. I’d have to put it more bluntly.

“The only reason I enrolled in the Academy is because it benefits me. I don’t have a smidgen of love for this kingdom in me, or any of the other crap you mentioned. Like I said at the start—I’m a backwater, barely noble kid. I haven’t got a dignified or virtuous bone in my body. The only things I want to protect are the things that matter to me. My values are very different from yours.”

Leo looked astonished. The answer he’d heard was clearly one he hadn’t anticipated.

“I see,” he said finally. “Thank you for answering me frankly, Allen Rovene. I think I understand you now...and I don’t think there’s any common ground to be found between us. Not now, and not ever.”

Belatedly, I realized the entire classroom had fallen silent, watching our exchange with bated breath.

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“Oho! Seems like the self-introductions are more or less over,”

said a voice from the classroom door. I glanced over, tracing the source to a jovial elderly man.

Who's this old codger? I didn't even notice him walk in.

"They're not over yet! Allen hasn't even introduced his new friends to me, his *best* friend!"

I had to give it to Fey—she sure had guts. The situation was as turbulent as could be, yet she still wanted in—even though I was pretty sure she was already on familiar terms with most of the class at the very least. All eyes were on us.

"Hmph. Well, we still have a minute or so to spare. Keep it short," assented the elderly man.

"Hurry up, Allen. Introduce your more-than-a-friend, not-quite-a-lover companion to the class," Fey said with a grin.

Hey now, don't take advantage of the situation to forcibly advance our relationship! It's not going to end well for me if everyone thinks this weirdo is a friend of mine…

"Everyone, this is Feyreun. She's neither my friend nor my acquaintance. In fact, I don't even know her," I said with decisive bluntness.

"You're too cruel, Allen! How could you treat me like a total stranger when just five days ago, you made me your captive until the wee hours of the morning…?"

No, no, no! You can't just start spouting crap like that! I suddenly found myself the subject of a strange juxtaposition of gazes; the boys were scowling at me with fiery envy in their eyes, while the girls glared at me in icy unison. I felt as though I were being tried for a crime there was no evidence had occurred and I had no memory of committing. One boy in particular was glaring at me with quiet fury; I wondered if he had a crush on Fey himself. If I didn't resolve this misunderstanding quickly, I'd never be able to change the jury's impression—rather, my classmates' impression.

"Please don't twist a normal introduction into something suggestive! Also, it was you who decided to follow me around all night!"

Fey's face twisted into an expression of shock—then, a single tear ran down her cheek. It was an award-worthy performance.

Well, it is *a performance, right? Right?*

"I didn't think you could be so callous, Allen," Fey said after a pause. "What is it they say? 'There's no point feeding a fish after you've landed it'? Well, that reminds me of what you did to me

that night… At first, you treated me so kindly…but then, the moment it was over, you left me all alone, saying you were about to wet yourself.” Through her tears, Fey smiled up at me. “But treat me how you will, Allen—I’m happy so long as I’m by your side.”

Okay, this is quite clearly a perversion of the truth! But if I outright deny *it, she’ll probably just pull out some weird magical device and play back a recording of the night for everyone to hear…*

There was no telling how far Fey was willing to go with this charade. If I didn’t get myself out of this situation fast, it could prove fatal for me.

Quickly, quickly, think of a good excuse… This’d be a lot easier if everyone would stop glaring at me! The girls were still shooting daggers at me with their eyes, while most of the boys had recoiled entirely, save for a few sterner individuals.

“Oho!” Suddenly, the doddery old man let out a chuckle. “I see… And am I correct in assuming that you’re the boy who was just declaring… What was it, now? ‘I just want to do whatever I feel like’?” He smiled, raising an eyebrow. “Well, everyone, the time for introductions is over. Take your seats.”

You old geezer! How long were you listening in?!

The chance to make an excuse had passed me by, although my mouth continued to open and close of its own accord. I staggered over to my window seat and dropped my head onto the desk, unsure if I would ever be able to raise it again.

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And that was how, contrary to my own will, I’d made my entrance in style and managed to leave an impression on each and every one of my new classmates.

Just not the impression I’d wanted to make.

Under Suspicion

“Well, then. Without any further disruptions, let us begin the orientation,” said the elderly man, who seemed to be our homeroom teacher or whatever the equivalent was here. To be honest, I couldn’t have cared less. At that moment, I was focused entirely on the clouds currently drifting past outside the window. Right, if only I could be a cloud, floating aimlessly without a

thought in my head and letting the wind do all the work. *What a mess this has turned out to be…*

"Al-len, Al-len, it's time to wake up!" sang Fey. "Are you sure you want to be dozing off in class from day one? The teachers are going to hold it against you, you know?" She'd managed to secure the seat next to mine while my mind had been elsewhere.

And whose fault is it that I'm in this state anyway?! I couldn't even muster up the energy to respond to her.

"Let me introduce myself. My name is Godolphen von Vanquish, and I have the great pleasure of undertaking the role of homeroom teacher for this year's incoming Class A. In addition, as of yesterday, I have also been appointed to the Academy Board of Directors. I see a few familiar faces among you." As the man spoke, the classroom erupted in loud whispers.

"No way! *The* Godolphen the Buddha is our homeroom teacher?"

"He's Sage Godolphen, right? Former vice commander of the Royal Order?"

So he's not just an old geezer, but a famous one too… Again, not that I care.

"The war hero himself…"

"Why is such a decorated military leader here at our academy?"

"I heard they call him the king's right-hand man!"

"He's a dual caster *and* a master of swordsmanship, isn't he? The only royal *magic* knight in the kingdom!"

Just how many accolades can one geezer have?! Again, not that I care…

But then I paused. *No, wait—hang on a minute, what was that? A dual caster magic knight?* With a title like that, I couldn't help but feel a little jealous of the old man. I lifted my head just a fraction.

"He didn't have any talent for magic when he was young, and he only barely managed to get into Class E at the Academy—but through his own blood, sweat, and tears, he became not only a great knight, but also a first-class mage… I can't believe *the* Sage Godolphen the Indomitable is going to be in charge of us!"

Hmm… No talent for magic when he was younger, you say? I don't know who just said that, but thank you for the detailed explanation! Cautiously, I sat up in my chair.

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"Now, I'm sure you're all wondering why our esteemed Royal Academy has need of the teaching services of a senile old fool like myself," said Godolphen, laughing good-naturedly. "In truth, I am here at the request of His Majesty the King—"

"Before that, may I ask a question?" I interrupted, standing fully from my chair. *Sorry, geezer, but that sounded like the start of a long, superimportant speech, and I don't have the time to wait for you to wrap it up.*

For someone who'd just been interrupted, Godolphen didn't show any outward signs of irritation; instead, he gestured for me to continue. "State your question, Allen Rovene."

With a firm stance and a straight back, as though I was standing to attention, I looked the geezer straight in the eyes and activated my Strengthening Magic throughout my body—then, with a protractor-perfect forty-five-degree bend, I bowed.

"Master Godolphen, please take me on as your apprentice!"

Just like in Japan, this world followed the custom of bowing your head when making a request. Yet to someone like me, who'd gone through the hell that was induction training at a Japanese company and made it out the other side, the bows I'd witnessed in this world lacked the sincerity and respect the custom demanded.

Bowing was far more than simply nodding your head, like people did here. It was the control over how quickly you lowered your head, how long you held the position, and the grace with which you lifted your head afterward; it was about knowing how the depth of the angle reflected the intensity of your request; it was about knowing how to stand—as though an iron rod had been sewn into your back; it was about how to hold your arms, stretching your fingers out so straight and far that they began to throb with pain; and countless other points of consideration besides those.

My classmates were staring at me with cautious eyes—understandable considering just a few minutes prior, I'd proudly professed my lack of dignity, virtue, and general interest in the accepted values of society entirely. It probably felt like whiplash to them, the swiftness with which I'd changed my attitude.

But I wasn't going to let a chance like this pass me by, and every minute would count. Between his long, white beard and

his narrow, squinting eyes, it was hard to read the expression on Godolphen's face. Patiently, I waited for his response.

"Hmph. Well, I suppose we must jump ahead in the conversation, then. Let us cut to the chase." Godolphen released a deep, silent sigh before continuing.

Never in a thousand years could I have predicted what he said next.

"Allen Rovene, you are under suspicion of cheating on the entrance exams."

Uh…cheating? What the hell is this old man on about?

"Indeed, I expect many of you may have seen a symbol next to Allen Rovene's class assignment on the noticeboard earlier this morning." Godolphen paused. "That symbol indicates a student's *provisional* enrollment in the Academy. In other words, it means whether a student has passed or failed has yet to be decided."

I couldn't understand it. I had tried my hardest to avoid being examined by that hungover security guard. *He* was the one who had declared I'd passed the exam before it had even begun. *Are they now saying I should have declared right there and then, "That's cheating!" and told him to shove off? Was the physical exam actually a test of morals? No, that wouldn't make sense—I actually completed the exam after that anyway, when he made me fight him…*

"There are now but two roads you may take, Allen Rovene. You may prove yourself as one worthy of his admission here and remain at the Royal Academy. And if you cannot prove yourself worthy"—the old man's eyes flashed—"you will be expelled from the Academy and leave a cowardly cheater."

I shook with anger. Finally, I understood what my mother had said to me that morning: All hope was lost, and I needed to have the courage to stand up and defeat those who would harm me. I needed to crush anyone who stood in my way. That was what she had been trying to tell me.

Even if Stubble-Face had made a mistake while grading me, it was unforgivable of him to shift the responsibility for that error onto me, an examinee. *But how am I meant to prove my worth here, with no weapon or anything else? This is like going from Hard Mode to Death Mode!*

My eyes still fixed on Godolphen, I mentally surveyed the classroom, assessing it for anything I could use to my advantage. Finally, I took a single step forward. Instantly, Leo

rose from his own seat, standing between me and the old geezer.

Is this bastard in on it too?

"At ease, Leo," Godolphen said softly. For a moment, Leo remained where he stood, looking at me distastefully. Eventually, he took a single, reluctant step to the side, and Godolphen continued. "Allen Rovene, is this the way you've chosen to prove your worthiness?"

"I'll say it plainly. I didn't cheat, nor did I commit any kind of trickery. But I doubt anything I have to say will change your mind if you're already convinced that I did." My gaze unwavering, I approached the blackboard at the front of the classroom and took the eraser in my left hand.

"Hmph. Well, if you say I will not believe your words, can you prove your innocence in another way?"

"Huh? Why do I have to be the one to prove my innocence? Isn't the onus on you to prove my guilt? That hungover examiner just shifted the blame for his scoring error onto me, and you're standing here all high-and-mighty, lecturing me like I was the one who made the mistake! What, did you think I was going to beg and plead to be allowed to stay at this school, with instructors who already think I'm worth no more than trash? Give me a break. I'm not just going to let this slide, you know. I'll crush anyone who gets between me and what I want—no matter who that is!"

At my declaration, the classroom fell silent. You could have heard a pin drop.

"Hmm? You're under suspicion of cheating on the written examination—not the practical."

Huh?

"Your score on the physical exam was unanimously agreed upon by all the examiners—myself included—for the first time in twenty years. Not one person harbored any doubts about the abilities you displayed during that exam."

I realized I was still holding the eraser. I wasn't even sure what I'd been intending to do with it in the first place. *Chuck it at him?* Pretending I had been intending to clean it off, I used my hands to brush some imaginary chalk dust off the brand-new eraser, then returned it to its original place. Next, I silently made my way back to my seat, closing my eyes as I sat down. I didn't dare open them again. I could only imagine how everyone was looking at

me now. “Master Godolphen,” I started, my eyes still closed, “would you please explain the allegations against me?”

Instead of Godolphen, however, it was Fey who spoke next, in a fake-worried whisper that somehow seemed to echo around the entire classroom. “Allen, didn’t you have to crush him? Aren’t you going to crush him? Your face is bright red, you know? Hee hee!”

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“The crux of the suspicions against you is the disparity between your results on the kingdom-wide mock exams and your results on yesterday’s written exam. I am not at liberty to explain the details of the process to you, but your results were evaluated and found to show a near-impossible improvement in academic level between the two exams. I have that evaluation here.” Godolphen produced a folded sheet of paper and spread it out on my desk. I looked at it warily.

Out of the five separate sections of the written exam, they had determined it was highly likely I’d cheated on four. In particular, Magical Theory—the section I’d thought had been a bit more difficult than in recent years, and the subject I’d despised before my awakening—had been singled out; they had determined there was a 99.9 percent chance cheating had occurred there.

“Of course, once the query had been raised, our analysis team thoroughly investigated your every movement from the moment you passed through the school gates to the moment you left. Yet they found nothing out of the ordinary, nor did they find any sign magical devices had been used. Nonetheless, impossible is still impossible. Had it been just a single subject, we might have been able to accept this as a miracle—but such an unnatural level of improvement in *four* subjects…” Godolphen narrowed his eyes. “Let’s hear your explanation, Allen Rovene.”

The Legend

I prepared to explain the true reason behind the “unnatural” improvement in my results… *As if! I can’t just say,* “Yeah, a few months ago I remembered I’d actually reincarnated from another world, so I could suddenly study at a level far beyond

the reach of an ordinary kid." *That'd just get me into* more *trouble!*

"All I can say is that for the past three months, I've pushed myself to my absolute limit. There's nothing else to it," I said as honestly as I could without broaching the subject of my awakening.

"Hmph. Unfortunately, the suspicions against you are not so mild as to be cleared up with such a hackneyed explanation." Godolphen sighed deeply, his stern gaze ever unwavering. "I've always felt the true purpose of an examination is to force the student to question their past behavior; to grant them the opportunity to reflect on their results and, if they may be so blessed, to guide them on the path toward further enlightenment. But those who would sully that sacred ground of self-improvement..." Godolphen's eyes flashed dangerously once more, and the room stiffened perceptibly. "Such cretins are not even worth the air they breathe."

"Now, Allen Rovene," he continued. "I may, at my sole discretion, reject your admission to the Academy right here and now. Keep that in mind. I'll ask for an explanation once again—and don't think for a second that you can get away with lying to me!"

A few of my classmates shrieked as Godolphen raised his voice. *Uh, is this really the guy called "Godolphen the Buddha"?* With just a mild threat, the atmosphere he'd created had reached the same danger level my mother could only cause in her most furious form. I knew immediately that I wouldn't be able to sneak a single lie past the old man, just as he'd said. *But maybe a little misrepresentation of the facts...?* I chose my next words cautiously.

"At our estate, we have a remarkable private tutor by the name of Soldo Vineforce. It's because of him that I am here today."

I decided to shift all the blame onto Gramps.

"Soldo Vineforce, you say? Hmph. That's not a name I've heard before. Do you mean to say that through the help of a single private tutor, you were able to improve your grades to such an implausible extent in a matter of months?" As he spoke, Godolphen tapped the paper on my desk with a forceful hand. Of course—there was no reason the right-hand man of the king would have heard of Soldo before.

"I'm not saying he's a famous tutor or anything like that. But

he’s definitely the best private tutor in the entire kingdom, and I am the proof. I despised studying with all my heart, yet he was able to turn me into an avid student, to the point that I even began to skip meals and sleep just to study more. I’ll never forget what he said to me that fateful day. ‘Allen,’ he said, ‘there is a glorious future ahead, just out of your reach.’ He told me if I didn’t pass, he would atone for it with his death. On that day, my life changed. To be honest with you, for the last three months, I’ve barely slept more than three hours a day, and nearly all my meals have been nothing but field rations. I’ve used every single scrap of my time striving toward that sacred pursuit of self-improvement.”

It wasn’t a lie, so to speak. Just a selectively precise version of the truth.

Godolphen raised an eyebrow. For a moment, the room was silent. Finally, he spoke. “What are your thoughts on the new salami-flavored ration?”

“It’s no good,” I answered immediately.

“That was one of my own creations.”

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Well, at least he didn’t expel me on the spot for that remark…but I need to proceed with more caution.

“What Soldo taught me wasn’t cheap tricks or last-minute cramming techniques. It was something much more difficult to learn—spirit. ‘Combat Readiness’—he said those words more often than he breathed. In his mind, a student must always be prepared for battle. ‘Every day is another skirmish,’ he would tell me. Even at his age, he wouldn’t take more than a few minutes at a time to rest throughout my instruction, and he even wore a diaper so he didn’t have to waste time going off to relieve himself. It was he who encouraged me to throw away my weak spirit and who forged me into a battle-ready warrior!”

That was also still the truth—albeit barely.

But Godolphen was unfazed. “I cannot swallow your story so simply, I am afraid. I find it hard to believe a man of such fortitude would be content to wile away his days as a private tutor deep in the countryside.” The old man stroked his beard, his eyes tinged with skepticism.

“Even I don’t know how such a fine man ended up at our

estate. But to me, standing here right now, and to my older sister, who's currently enrolled in the Royal Special Magical Craftsmanship Research Institute here in Runerelia—if not for Soldo, our lives would have taken very different paths. My sister and I are the proof of Soldo's excellence."

That was still safe, right? Right? It's like the butterfly effect, or whatever it's called—no one can prove *how Rosa and I would have turned out without Soldo.*

"I had heard rumors that the Research Institute admitted a particularly talented girl from the Dragoon Region last year... I see. So that prodigy was also a product of this Soldo Vineforce?"

Fey let out a laugh of excitement. "Wow! I'd heard that the Rose of Wrath would forget eating, sleeping, and even bathing whenever she got really into her research, but to think there was such a secret behind it..." Her eyes had once again taken on the fiery glaze of a predator, just as they had when we'd spoken about Rosa on the train. She licked her lips hungrily.

That's just because she's a slob! Don't change the topic now, Fey. I was just about to win him over!

But Fey wasn't the only one to react to the mention of my older sister. The new participant, however, was less expected.

"The 'Rose of Wrath'?! Allen, your older sister is the victim of the Red Carpet Incident?!" said Al, his face a mask of shock.

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I glanced around the classroom. My other classmates looked as thunderstruck as Al, and many of them were hurriedly whispering to one another. My head was starting to spin. *What on earth did Rosa do?*

"What's all this about? 'Rose of Wrath'? 'Red Carpet Incident'?" said Godolphen, examining me carefully. *Don't ask me, geezer. I've got no idea. And I already know I don't want to hear about it either...*

"As such, I hereby pledge to you once again that I neither cheated nor committed any dishonesty on the exams. I swear it on the name of Soldo Vineforce!" I declared, trying desperately to steer the conversation away from Rosa.



“Aldor, please—an explanation, if you would,” Godolphen said, ignoring me entirely. He seemed just like a jovial, harmless grandfather once again.

“Well,” started Al, “it’s a rather shameful story in the Endymion Region, to be honest. During the entrance exams four years ago, the heir to Marquess Endymion tried to flaunt his influence over a girl as they waited at the Sieve of Fate… In the end, the Endymion heir, along with sixty other examinees from the region, had to be carried away to the hospital. Since then, examinees from our region have been strictly forbidden from talking to other examinees on the day of testing…”

I said I didn’t want to hear this…

“Ah, yes. I have heard tell of the story of the foolish heir and the unfortunate young woman. As I heard it, not only did the fool try to force the young woman to become his mistress, but after she politely refused him, he went so far as to grab her hand to try and force her to sign the contract. After that, he *and* every single one of his companions were washed away in a sea of blood—ah, the so-called Red Carpet, I assume.”

Hey! I said I don’t want to hear this!

“After the incident, the security team analyzed the footage and determined the young woman had indeed been the victim—but regrettably, two faculty members that had tried to intervene had also been caught up in her carnage,” Godolphen continued. Apparently, he knew quite a bit about the incident—he just hadn’t known its colloquial name. “Marquess Endymion disowned the foolish boy to try and maintain the family’s honor. And the young woman—after the incident, she simply declared she was withdrawing from the exams and refused to testify against the boy any further. Because of that, he was never brought to justice.”

And Rosa didn’t want to explain any of that to Mother, so she hid the truth. Ever since I awakened, I always thought it was strange that despite having the same number of examinees, the aptitude threshold was strangely high in Rosa’s year alone. After all, it goes against the law of large numbers.

“As a result of that incident, from the next year onward, the Royal Order’s finest were dispatched to serve as security for the length of the exam period. At the time, I was still vice commander, so I myself was heavily involved in the dispatch program. In fact, I was under the impression that those involved

were forbidden to speak about the incident, lest it further besmirch the good name of the hallowed Academy... But as always, the mouths of the masses are not so easily controlled."

Fey briefly burst out in hysterical laughter. "Ha! Ah, dear me—I hadn't heard *that* story before," she eventually choked out, wiping tears from her eyes.

"That" story? Are there more stories about Rosa? I don't think I can bear to hear another one...

"It's said in Endymion that the Rose of Wrath still holds a terrible grudge toward the boy, and by extension, our region as well. I would never have guessed you were her younger brother, Allen!" said Al.

I hate to break it to you, but Rosa's not the type to remember each and every person she's punched. She'll go on a little rampage, sure, but then she'll wash her hands of it. Heck, she probably forgot all about it on the way home from the exams.

"I see," said Godolphen thoughtfully. "I'm beginning to understand this Soldo Vineforce and his so-called Combat Readiness."

Uh, this isn't good. If I don't start reeling this in a bit, Soldo's gonna end up in a lot of trouble.

"Um, 'Combat Readiness' is really more of a metaphor, to be clear. It's about, you know, trying your best? It isn't about actual fighting..."

"No, no. In spite of being the victim, that young woman had the strength to throw away her only chance at the Academy right there and then. Such resolve! To think a girl of barely twelve could carry that weight on her shoulders, never telling her family the truth of what had happened that fateful day... And to have the spirit to claw her way back into this very city, this time as a member of the Research Institute! I could not think more highly of her. While it is a pitiful story, it is also one we could all learn something from."

"Wait a minute! No matter how you slice it, my sister can't have been the victim—not after she sent over sixty people to the hospital! That's the work of an assailant, not a victim! And Soldo didn't have anything to do with her admission to the Research Institute—"

"It is as you said, child—spirit is not something so easily taught. Throughout my time in the Royal Order, I watched over hundreds of young men and women. The hardest lesson to pass

on to them was the importance of an indomitable spirit. Yet, just as it was with that older sister of yours, spirit, once taught, becomes a valuable asset. I am greatly curious about this Soldo Vineforce—as a fellow teacher, of course." Godolphen's eyes narrowed sharply. "I want him at the Academy."

"Soldo's a Dragoon man—don't think you'll be able to lure him away from us so easily," said Fey, suddenly asserting her territorial rights—despite the fact that she'd only heard of Soldo's existence a few minutes prior. Godolphen fixed his cool glare upon her. It didn't seem to faze the young girl in the slightest.

Around us, the quick-witted cast of Class A had already realized what was very likely to occur in the near future, and they had furtively noted down the name "Soldo Vineforce" to pass on to their families.

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Thereafter began the fierce battle across the kingdom to recruit Soldo Vineforce, a tutor so renowned that even the king's right-hand man sought him out.

But that was another story entirely.

Conditional Admission

"Very well, Allen Rovene. I will present the case you've made to the faculty for consideration. If it is determined no wrongdoing has occurred, you will be fully admitted—to Class E," declared Godolphen.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Somehow, my scapegoating of Soldo had worked. Although I still wasn't set on staying at the Academy permanently, I couldn't bear the thought of having to tell my family I'd been expelled less than an hour after admission.

Thank you, Soldo. I'll never forget your sacrifice. I closed my eyes, offering up a prayer for my tutor's soul. Not that he was dead.

"Not a single word of protest? I can see the teachings of Soldo Vineforce haven't only taken root within your sister," continued the old man.

Well, Mother did say she was going to head back to Crauvia as soon as she left the Academy this morning, so I probably wouldn't

have had to face her right away—wait, did she leave so quickly because she predicted this was going to happen, down to the excuse I was going to make? Has she gone back to warn Soldo? No, no way…but it's scary just how plausible that thought is… Hey, wait a minute. Did he just say Class E?

"I am sure you must be rather upset at the thought of being demoted to Class E. But understand that the significance of a judgment such as this being overturned is immense. It implies, by extension, that the very grading analysis system of this esteemed academy is fallible. And in your case, it was not just one subject test our analysis team judged to be suspicious, but four… To put it bluntly, this is an unprecedented situation." Godolphen paused. "In past cases—although none as remarkable as yours—where the investigation was unable to find any clear evidence of wrongdoing, the students in question were all assigned to Class E as a matter of caution. If they were able to demonstrate that their academic ability was consistent with the result they had achieved in the exam, they were moved up to a higher class. Unfortunately, there have been very few such promotions."

Class E?!

On second thought, actually, I don't really care what class I'm placed in. Come to think of it, I'd probably have a lot more freedom and face less pressure in a lower-ranked class.

Although I hadn't "cheated," so to speak, on the exam, I couldn't really fault the grading analysis they'd come out with. Their system probably couldn't take reincarnation into account, after all. Besides, if I did decide that Class A would better suit my purposes, clawing my way back up from Class E would have a nicely clichéd "reincarnation novel" feel to it.

"I understand, Master." I nodded, adjusting my expression into one of appropriate resignation.

"Then for the time being, the matter is settled—and now, I must return to the true business at hand." Godolphen cast his sharp gaze across the gathered students. The atmosphere stiffened tangibly.

"Within a few years from now at the earliest, and certainly within the next decade"—Godolphen let the sentence hang for a moment—"it is extremely likely Yugria will go to war."

As he uttered those unexpected words, a chorus of horrified gasps filled the classroom.

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“This was the matter I was about to discuss before young Rovene’s interruption. It is because of the unfolding situation that I have taken up a posting at this academy by order of the king himself. I will speak plainly: This class is composed not only of those capable enough to pass the most grueling exams in the kingdom, but it also comprises the twenty greatest students among those already elite few. You are expected to become a great asset in the upcoming war, and my orders are to ensure your excellence materializes.”

Godolphen briefly went silent, flashing a brief glance in Allen’s direction. “It is not expected that all of you will participate in the fighting, of course. Each one of you is free to live however you choose—for no matter what role you take up upon your graduation from this academy, you will be performing an important duty in the support of this kingdom. The contributions of Royal Academy graduates have always been immense, and wars are won through collective strength, not military power alone.”

Leo raised his hand. “A question, Sage.”

“Yes, Leo?”

“If the possibility of war seems to be such a certainty, you must know who that potential opponent will be. Can you tell us?”

“At this stage, our intelligence agents are still gathering the necessary information. Our prediction is not yet solid enough that it is appropriate to speak of it to students—but if I do not, I foresee that rumors will fly regardless. I will tell you my suspicions, but what I say must not leave this room. From the information we have gathered thus far, I believe the northern Rosamour Empire will make the first move.”

“I knew it,” said Leo through gritted teeth.

The Rosamour Empire and the Kingdom of Yugria had been battling for exclusive control over their shared continent for centuries. A few decades prior, the Rosamour forces had invaded with such numbers and ferocity that they had managed to claim significant swaths of Yugrian territory for a time. However, after an elite squadron led by Godolphen himself had launched a surprise assault on the enemy and taken out their commander in chief, the Royal Order had been able to push the invaders back, and order had been restored in the region.

“Furthermore, should the Rosamour Empire move against us, I expect the nation of Justeria will join them.”

“What?!” A jolt ran through the class at the name.

“Justeria has been our ally since the Kingdom of Yugria was founded! Why would they form an alliance with Rosamour against us now?”

“It is not yet a certainty that they will join forces. However, there have been ominous signs for some time now. We have observed the two powers trading supplies and munitions with increasing frequency. As a nation, we are merely preparing for the worst-case scenario.” With a calm gesture, Godolphen quietened the increasingly agitated class, then looked in Allen’s direction once again.

“With that in mind, this kingdom cannot afford to let a talent like you, forged in the fires of Soldo Vineforce’s school of Combat Readiness, sink down to Class E to idly wile away your schooling. On the other hand, I cannot overturn the decision of this long-established academy by my own discretion. Therefore, I will set a challenge for you, Allen Rovene. You have one week to gain the endorsement of each and every one of your classmates—they must deem you a student worthy of a place in Class A. Being able to make allies is a valuable skill, and not one you can avoid learning during your time here. Should you secure their unanimous support, I will take that endorsement, along with the endorsement of the faculty, and petition His Majesty the King to issue a royal decree permitting you to remain in Class A. The matter is settled.”

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Settled? What’s settled about it, you old geezer?! I had no intention of participating in any war in the first place, let alone going around the class pleading for endorsements like a beggar. After all, staying in Class A wouldn’t actually benefit me in the slightest. *Unless… Is there something about being in Class A that* does *benefit me? Is that why everyone’s so worked up about it?*

“My apologies, but just to be clear, do students in Class A get any special privileges? Like access to an exclusive training area, or research materials reserved only for them, or anything like that?”

Godolphen looked at me sternly before he answered.

“No. The students at this academy are treated as equals regardless of class assignment. If there are any special privileges, so to speak…” He trailed off for a moment. “I find it unpleasant to say, but you will find that even among Academy graduates, those from Class A are treated exceptionally well upon their departure from the school. Whether you aim for the Order of the Royal Knights or any employment of your choosing, or else to advance to the Special Research Institute, you will find no roadblocks along your way. Whatever career you may fancy, your future is all but guaranteed. Especially for someone like you, Rovene. For a student to nonchalantly stroll into the entrance exams after running the entire circumference of the Academy in the pouring rain—it’s ‘Combat Readiness,’ as you say. The words are simple, but the meaning is far deeper…” Godolphen shook his head slightly, seemingly astonished.

Beside me, Fey erupted in laughter once again.

“Allen! You really ran, what, forty kilometers in that downpour before the exams and *still* managed to pass?! And you got into Class A, no less!” Around me, my classmates were looking at me like I was from another world. My face reddened.

Anyone have any more of my private information they want to share with the class?!

“However…” Godolphen looked at me with furrowed brows, a deadly cast to his eyes. Again, a few people shrieked involuntarily at his sudden mood shift. “I cannot imagine the disciple of the great Soldo Vineforce is suggesting a demotion to Class E is of no concern to him—or am I mistaken?”

Just how much confidence does this geezer have in Soldo now? It’s like you were brothers-in-arms or something!

“You insult me, Sage Godolphen! I could never think such a thing!”

Actually, Class E is fine by me! Not one of those so-called benefits interests me in the slightest!

“You would do well to keep in mind that the costs associated with the education of just a single Class A student exceed thirty million riels—a sum our kingdom has offered with your future in mind. But that is not all. You should also consider the support of your family and of Mr. Vineforce—and of myself, as I was the one who defended you against the accusations of the analysis team. All of which has resulted in you standing here before me today. If I were to hear even a whisper that you intentionally allowed

yourself to be demoted to Class E”—the temperature in the classroom seemed to drop by a few degrees—“once I was through with you, they would never be able to piece you back together.”

I gulped.

Thirty million riels? That’s pretty much the annual yield of our domain! After expenditures and taxes were taken out, our annual household income was actually only around three million riels. And from my estimations, one riel was worth around a dollar.

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I tried to analyze my new situation with a cool head. In the first place, it would be impossible to secure the endorsements of each and every one of my classmates in just a week. From their point of view, I was a shady student under suspicion of cheating on not just one, but four sections of the written exam—and the estimated likelihood of misconduct on my Magical Theory test had been determined to be 99.9 percent.

Then there was the situation with Leo earlier. This being such a critical time in the history of the nation, would anyone really support a classmate who’d declared his complete disinterest in the kingdom that had raised him? If I were in their shoes, I’d hate me too. At the very least, it’d definitely be impossible to convince Leo to back me. And then there were Fey’s bombshell statements afterward—opinions on me among my female classmates were pretty much guaranteed to be below rock bottom. I recalled their icy glares and shuddered.

Recommendations from all of them? Within a week? There’s no way.

Plus, there’d been my insolent demand to Godolphen that he take me on as an apprentice, followed by my illogical threat to crush him or anyone else who stood in my way. And now everyone knew I was related to the terrifyingly unpredictable “Rose of Wrath” too.

I snickered to myself, thankfully inaudibly. This was what they called “mission impossible,” right? I was in such a hopeless situation that even I had to wonder how I’d ended up in this mess—and I was the one who’d gotten into it to begin with. For the last few months, I’d really tried my hardest, but the hurdle before me now was impossible to overcome.

Why was it impossible? Honestly, it was because I no longer had a single ounce of motivation to put toward overcoming it. If, for some reason, I had decided that being in Class A would benefit me the most, there was nothing I wouldn't have done to make it happen. But there wasn't a single benefit to me staying here. Not in the slightest.

So I decided to pretend I was trying my best to stay in Class A—but secretly, I'd already set my sights on my future in Class E.

Moving into the Dorms

"Can I ask a question?" Fey's hand was in the air.

"Yes?" replied Godolphen.

"If we wanted to endorse Allen, what do we actually have to do?"

"It is no difficult matter. All it would entail is coming to me and stating that you recognize Allen Rovene as a worthy member of Class A. As it happens, I'm of the understanding that this year's Class A contains only those who have come from noble families, major or otherwise. Whether you judge Allen by your own values or by those of your family, or by any other means you deem necessary, I will neither question nor judge your decisions."

"I see. Got it." Fey stood up from her chair and laid her right hand over her heart. "On the name of my family, I, Feyreun von Dragoon, endorse Allen Rovene as a worthy member of Class A of the Royal Academy of Yugria."

"Your endorsement is recognized."

Fey's endorsement didn't come as a surprise to me, but it wasn't going to make a difference in the long run. Besides, if I moved to Class E, I'd be able to get away from Fey entirely—and that was reason enough for me.

I suppose it shouldn't surprise me that everyone in Class A is from a noble family either. Even back in my past life, people often said academic prowess was closely related to how well-off your family was. It was a harsh world, but that was reality.

At that moment, the boy who'd seemed jealous and glared at me throughout Fey's performance at the beginning of class stood up. "Lady Fey! What on earth are you thinking? Even if he is from the Dragoon Region, how could you wield your family's name in support of a mere viscount's son—especially one accused of such dishonesty?! Given his unbecoming treatment of

you earlier, I'm not sure he's even a noble to begin with—he's probably just an impostor! How could you risk the Dragoon name being tarnished because of this boy? I'll be reporting this to the marquess immediately!"

Ah, now I get it. This boy was probably from a branch family or a retainer family, or perhaps he was the child of a count from the Dragoon Region—whatever the case, he'd clearly fallen into the role of attendant-cum-chaperone for Fey. He must have put in unimaginable effort to gain a seat in the same class as her.

Mwa ha ha. He's definitely less than pleased by Fey's interest in a lowly country boy like me. I filed this information away for later use—it was something else I could possibly use to my advantage should the need arise.

"I've used the Dragoon name because I'm endorsing Allen not just as an individual, but as a representative of the Dragoon family. You see, in the game of politics, there are times when you need to make risky decisions. I see something in Allen that you cannot, Parley. I don't care what you report or whom to—so shut your mouth and sit down, will you?"

She's scary, all right.

It was clear from the look on Parley's face that he wanted to argue back, but there was no way he could—not after his lady had declared her position on the matter so publicly. Instead, he turned his attention to me, a murderous glint in his eyes. "I'll show Fey what kind of scum you really are, you bastard. You just wait."

"I'd be careful if I were you. Allen's Combat Level is 5, after all." Immediately, I heard my classmates scrawling notes across the classroom.

When I said my Combat Level was 5, I meant I was pathetic! It wasn't a serious statement...

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"And on that note, I must wrap up today's orientation. Those who intend to reside in the dormitories may move in today. Please ensure you proceed to your dormitory and complete the registration procedures by no later than 5 p.m. And I will see all of you here tomorrow morning; be in the classroom by nine o'clock."

Before Fey could offer to accompany me home—to get an

introduction to my sister, no doubt—I stood up and raced out of the room. As soon as I moved into my dormitory, I'd be free. And anyway, it wasn't like I would be in Class A for much longer either. There wasn't any point hanging around and forging friendships with the rest of them. I was exhausted. Far more exhausted than was warranted for what should have been a simple orientation and some icebreakers.

When I arrived home, Mother had already left for the main estate, and Rosa was still out at her own school. My impression of her course at the Special Magical Craftsmanship Research Institute was that it was something akin to a doctorate in my past life. Rather than attending specific classes, each student picked a theme for his or her own thesis, then used the facilities and materials at the Institute at their own discretion to conduct their research. Once they'd successfully compiled their findings, they would be awarded a degree. As a research institute, it had quite the reputation. The funding allocated to each student's research was extraordinary.

Taking advantage of Rosa's absence, I quickly collected and repacked my already minimal luggage, then headed back to the Academy. I was a little scared of what would happen when she came home to find me gone, but now that I knew about the Red Carpet Incident, I wasn't really in the mood to hang around and celebrate my admission with her either.

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The standard dormitory was a run-down brick building. The contrast between the dorm and the school's main building, with its extravagant marble floors and luxurious facade, was pretty noticeable—but I had never been particularly picky about my living situation. As long as I had a place to sleep, it was good enough for me. In fact, if I wanted to sneak out at night and roam the city, an older building like this would probably have more gaps in its security.

I entered the foyer and called out in the direction of the caretaker's room, which was right next to the front doors.

"Excuse me! Um, I've come to complete the registration procedures..."

"Just a minute!" After a few moments, an older woman appeared from inside the room. I couldn't begin to guess at her

actual age, although she definitely wasn't young. In one hand, she held a cane, but her back was straight and tall, and her movements gave off a youthful vigor. "A new student, eh? I'm the dorm matron here, Thora. Write your name and class on the sheet there for us."

Dutifully, I wrote "Allen Rovene, Class A*" on the sheet of paper she'd pointed out.

"So you're the kid who snatched the top grade in the physical exam while being accused of cheating on the written one. First time that's happened around here. Well, did you do it?"

"I did not," I replied, meeting her unflinching gaze with a steady one of my own.

Thora held the stare a few moments longer. "Well, I guess that's that, then," she said finally, and then she ushered me farther into the dormitory. "This dorm has only one rule. Look up there." She gestured to a framed sign hung on the wall before us.

"WITH STURDINESS AND SINCERITY"

I chuckled quietly to myself. It was an old saying in this world; it meant to live boldly, earnestly, and without showing off—and that was just how I wanted to live my life. If I did end up living like an outlaw from society, showing off and earning accolades now would only make it harder for me in the future. And things like "boldness" and "earnestness" could be interpreted in any number of ways. When it came to taking the steps necessary to achieve the carefree life I desired, no one was bolder or more earnest than I was.

"Room and board is a thousand riels per month, with breakfast included. Well, even if you have to work to support yourself, it's not so expensive that you'll run into trouble—especially as a Royal Academy student. If your family can't help you, you'll find work as a tutor or an explorer easily enough. Breakfast is served between six and half past eight in the morning—and make sure you let me know if you're not planning on eating. There's a latrine in each room, but the baths are shared—it's a communal bath back near the entry over there, open from six at night till ten in the morning." Thora paused, looking at me with mild disdain. "You're a noble kid, right? Do you know how to dress yourself?"

Sweet! My own private toilet! When I'd discovered the boarding fee was only a thousand riels—implausibly cheap for a place in

the capital—I'd been anticipating, a little worriedly, a derelict room. But the dormitory was actually sounding pretty good so far. Plus, it seemed like the communal bath she'd mentioned was basically like a public bathhouse back in Japan. The thought of getting to stretch my legs out in a massive bathtub again was the icing on the cake.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I might be a noble on paper, but I'm just the third son of a penniless viscount from the countryside. I'm used to doing all that stuff myself."

"Still, I wasn't expecting a noble kid to pull a happy face like that after hearing the particulars of a dormitory like this. Let me explain something to you, sonny, in case there's been any misunderstandings. Any student in Class D or above can choose to live in the Noble Dormitory for the same monthly board we charge here. Even kids in Class E can move in there, provided they can afford the full board of five thousand riels a month. In other words, this dormitory only houses the lowest, poorest students in the Academy. They call this place the Doghouse." She flashed me a steely glare. "If you don't like it here, make sure you stay out of Class E and move over there instead."

To be honest, the Noble Dorm sounded like a place where a bunch of assholes would be strolling about, trying to assert dominance over one another based on their grades. Sure, the facilities and food would probably be better there, but I was sure it wouldn't have the charm of this run-down building. Besides, if I wanted to eat fancy food, I could just head out into the city at night and seek it out myself.

"Actually, I like it here. 'With Sturdiness and Sincerity'—what an excellent rule for a dorm to have. I'll try not to cause you too much trouble over the next three years, Mrs. Thora. Thank you in advance for taking care of me."

For a moment, Thora was astonished. Then, she let out a cackle. "We'll see if you're singing the same tune if you end up staying in Class A," she snickered before pointing me in the direction of my new room. She was still laughing as she vanished back into the caretaker's room.

Behind the Scenes: Orientation

"Please state your final decisions."

"I believe he is innocent."

“I mean, he’s definitely innocent.”

“I also vote innocent.”

“Innocent.”

“He’s innocent however you look at it. My analysis is never wrong.”

One after another, the members of the grading team cast their ballots, leaving only Dew to speak. All eyes were focused on him as he let out a long sigh before finally casting his vote.

“He’s guilty.”

“Oh, don’t be a sore loser, Dew. This isn’t just about the bet, after all.”

“That’s rich coming from you, Justin! You’re the one who kept riling everyone up over it! If the little brat gets kicked out of school now, those three hundred million riels are mine!” Dew burst into hysterical laughter. The thought of the immense sum had kept him up all night, and he was at his limit both physically and mentally. The man was a perfect example of the type who should never gamble.

“Well, then. By unanimous decision, we have found no evidence of wrongdoing, and we therefore permit Allen Rovene’s admission to the Royal Academy as a member of Class E,” Musica declared.

“Huh?! What’s unanimous about it? I voted guilty!” shouted Dew. “You all seriously believe that crap about ‘Soldo Vineforce’ and his ‘Combat Readiness’ training? As if a private tutor like that exists! The little brat has got you all hoodwinked!”

Dew raged, fueled by the anger that his win had just slipped through his fingers. His declaration hadn’t been far from the truth, but the fact remained that Soldo had indeed raised two outstanding students, and despite all the effort the investigation team had put in, they hadn’t been able to uncover any tangible evidence of cheating.

The team had focused particularly on the footage of the Magical Theory section, examining it frame by frame after the analysis team had evaluated there was a 99.9 percent chance he’d cheated on that test. They’d watched the footage so many times that many of them had committed it to memory. In their minds, they could still see Allen working through a set of magical power conversion problems not a single other examinee had been able to solve. Allen had simply read each question, thought for a moment, and, after scribbling a quick equation in the

margin of the page, solved each problem as though it were basic addition. And later, when he'd caught a small error while reviewing the section, he'd corrected it without a second thought. The investigation team had unanimously decided it was unlikely a cheater would show their work in the margins—nor could a cheater pick up on their mistakes in such a way. At other points throughout the exam, the footage showed Allen furrowing his brow at questions he didn't understand before he skipped them entirely—that, too, they ruled as unlikely if he had been cheating.

The only possibility left was that Allen had sent someone else in his place to take the exam. But that was ruled out after they compared his handwriting on the mock exam with that on the recent exam. Both tests had, without a doubt, been taken by the same person.

Through the footage, they had followed Allen's every footstep from the time he'd passed through the gates until the time he'd left, but it'd shown nothing more than a lonely boy trudging along the wide cobblestone pathways. The only time he'd interacted with any other examinees was when he'd exchanged a few words with a passing group after the physical exam. That interaction had also been exhaustively inspected by Emmie and a team of specialists. His voice, the way he walked, and the unique imprint left by his magic all pointed to the same verdict—the boy who'd sparred with Dew in the physical exam was the same boy who'd taken the written one.

Watching Allen sleepily review his answers after finishing all five sections with time to spare, the investigators had all come to the same conclusion: *That's not the face of a cheater.*

As a final precaution, they'd sent Sage Godolphen, the boy's homeroom teacher, to question him on the matter during orientation. That, however, had raised the curtain on some unexpected information…

"I've already dispatched some of my most trusted people to investigate Soldo Vineforce. If they find that even half of what Allen said about the man is true, I've instructed them to recruit him no matter what it takes—even if they need to invoke the surname 'Yugria,'" said Musica.

Godolphen nodded. "Before long, the name Soldo Vineforce will be known throughout the kingdom. We must act soon. I will not let such a capable educator slip through our fingers." Across

the room, everyone responded with determined nods. “At the very least, we must prevent any other nations from catching wind of him. The Dragoon family have already been informed of the situation, and they will keep an eye out for suspicious characters. The rest is in our hands.”

“By the way, Sage Godolphen—about the conditions you set for Allen to be able to stay in Class A…”

“You disagree with them? I believe the decision I made was in the best interests of the kingdom,” Godolphen replied, looking at Dew questioningly.

“Of course I disagree! You’re just throwing your influence around to change the outcome of the bet! If he ends up in Class A after this, you’ll still come out on top!”

Godolphen sniffed. “Well then, let’s hear everyone else’s opinions on the matter.”

“We’ve already discussed this,” replied Musica. “All except Dew agree with your decision, so it’s unanimous,” she said, once again unconcernedly ignoring Dew’s vote. The voting around such situations was determined by the majority, so even if one or two of the other examiners had objected to Godolphen’s conditions, there would have been little point in voting against him. But moreover, everyone had already recognized that given the unfolding situation, it would likely benefit the kingdom if Allen remained in Class A, just as Godolphen had said. The only person discontent with this was Dew.

“Honestly, I’d say the conditions you set for him are too difficult, in fact. I know it’s an unprecedented situation and all, but regardless of how you look at it, it’ll be hard for a kid fresh from the countryside to charm all those high-society types,” mused Dante, speaking over the still-grumbling Dew.

“Only because he caused such a scene during the orientation!” laughed Patch. “Oh, that was fantastic.”

“This is no laughing matter!” warned Musica. “If what that girl said is true, there will be trouble! Making her his captive until the wee hours of the morning, then treating her like a stranger in front of everyone and throwing her away like a worn-out rag! I can’t believe it,” she said, furious.

“This coming from the woman who watched the footage of that part over and over again with an ecstatic look on her face. With your masochistic tendencies, weren’t you just imagining it was you being spurned and ignored like that? Must be hard, not

having had a boyfriend for such a long time.” As usual, Emmie jumped in to provide some supplemental information.

“D-Don’t spout such nonsense, Emmie!”

“Huh? It’s the truth, though.” Emmie stretched a finger out toward the console, but Musica moved with unthinkable speed, pinning Emmie’s hand to the table.

“Okay, I admit it! I’m a spinster who hasn’t had a boyfriend in over three years! I admit it, so don’t put that up for everyone to see!”

“It’s okay, Musica. You have terrible taste in men, so you’ll find yourself the wrong guy again and get dumped before too long.”

Musica sank to the floor, crushed. “You really are a sadist, Emmie…”

“No, I don’t see any point in tormenting people if they’re just going to enjoy it. I only like tormenting people who don’t.”

Several people wondered if they should voice that Emmie’s “preference” seemed more like mere bullying, but they thought better of it and held their tongues.

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Godolphen coughed loudly, attempting to reel the conversation back in from the wild tangent it had gone on. “I admit the conditions are difficult. However, the boy seems more than capable of taking on a tough challenge, even at his tender age. As you saw, he even threatened me, knowing he had little chance of victory.”

Dante eyed the man. “‘I just want to do whatever I feel like…’ ‘I want to live a fun life,’” he said, quoting Allen. “At first, when he said that to the Seizinger boy, I thought he had quite the egotistical streak, to be honest. It’s not like we haven’t seen scores of children like that—blessed with natural talent and overflowing with arrogance because of it. But when he confronted you, I understood what he actually meant by what he’d said. He’s decided on his path, and he won’t let anyone lead him astray. He knows he’s got talent, but he won’t let that carry him through life. I think the boy’s got it right.”

“I agree. I sensed the same conviction from him. However, there is no escaping the politics of the matter. The boy received some of the highest grades in the entrance examinations. Whether he seeks to or not, he won’t be able to stay out of

future power struggles, within the Academy or elsewhere. If he is unable to gather some level of support from his peers, he'll quickly find himself swept away."

Justin smirked. "*Now* I get it. You intentionally set up a political struggle within the classroom to gauge the kid's ability to win over his peers. Insanely difficult, but a perfect way to measure what he's capable of. I've said it before, Sage, but you've sure got a mean streak," he said, grinning widely. "But what's really got me interested is the bit where Allen petitioned you to take him on as an apprentice. I mean, you're his homeroom teacher, right? If there was anything he wanted to learn, he could ask you at any time. Yet that wasn't enough for him? What in the world does he want to learn so badly that he'd take it one step further?"

"Ah, that's right," spat Dew. Up until that point, he had been listening to the conversation with a deep frown. "The way the brat lowered his head in front of you, Sage. What the hell was that? It wasn't just a quick nod—there was years of practice behind that movement."

"Why in the world would someone practice something like that?"

"As if I'd know! I don't have a clue what it means, but there's no mistaking it. There was a polish to his movements he could only have gotten from practicing over and over again. If you got him to do that a hundred times, I bet you each would look exactly the same."

Emmie quickly projected the scene in question on the monitor before them. As Dew had said, there was a clear refinement to the boy's movements.

"Certainly, his form is beautiful," said Dante, impressed. "You can't help but sense the sincerity in his action."

Dew seemed particularly unimpressed; instead, he was nonchalantly picking his nose. "Or, more likely," he rebutted, "that dodgy tutor of his forced him to practice it thousands of times, spewing some crap about mental fortitude or whatever. Are you really sure you want to go through with this? Throwing around the Yugrian name and recruiting that codger by any means necessary? Seems to me like he's incredibly fussy..."

Musica, who was still slumped over on the floor, lifted her head. "You're right! Why didn't you speak up sooner? That fastidiousness is exactly what we need! I can't risk waiting for my

men to get to the Dragoon Region. I'll send out a spellbird immediately!" Although there were some relatively high-tech magical devices in this world, a long-range communication tool had yet to be developed, so monsters were used to carry messages across long distances.

"Hmm. I had imagined the methods of the 'Combat Ready' Soldo Vineforce would be somewhat harsher, but this is far more profound than I anticipated. I wonder just how much we have yet to uncover..."

Chapter Four: Little Legends

Morning Routine and Thora’s Breakfast

The first proper day of classes had arrived.

As always, Allen awoke at half past five in the morning. The decently sized room he’d been assigned on the third floor was already furnished with several items seemingly left behind by the previous owner—a bed that creaked in protest at every minor movement, an old, beaten-up desk, and a matching chair. Between the main room and the door to the corridor were a latrine, a closet, and a simple kitchen. There was also a tiny balcony, although the orientation of the room meant it didn’t get much natural light. The average noble would probably consider the space barely habitable, but to a formerly Japanese person like Allen, it was more than satisfactory—even homey.

For laundry needs, there were magically powered washing machines in a room adjacent to the communal baths that anyone could use free of charge. A laundering service was also available to any students who couldn’t be bothered to manage their own washing, or else for items which needed particular care, such as equipment made out of monster leather or other unique materials. Bags of laundry were collected morning and evening from a counter next to the baths, and they were returned at the next collection time. For normal clothing, a flat fee of ten riels covered as much as you could stuff into a thirty-liter bag, though the fee for special items like leather changed depending on the material. Even then, the cost was extraordinarily low compared to elsewhere in the capital.

There were no other signs of life across the silent dormitory as Allen made his way outside. A mild chill lingered in the air, which felt pleasantly refreshing as he crossed to the front garden and began his stretches. Once he had sufficiently warmed up, he set off at a leisurely pace, cutting directly through the center of the school grounds to reach the main gate. It was around eight kilometers from the dormitory to the main gate, a distance he covered in around twenty-five minutes at his relaxed pace.

He could have exited the school grounds from the rear gate, which was nearly adjacent to the standard dormitory, and started his lap of the school's perimeter from there instead. However, Allen was determined to avoid altering the course he'd already established over the few days prior to the exams. He wanted to measure his progress as accurately as possible.

He left the school grounds from the main gate in the south, then began his clockwise lap of the perimeter. As he came across the hill toward the middle of the course, he completed exactly ten hill sprints as usual. Then, after he had reached the main gate once again, he cut the same path through the center of the school grounds back to the dormitory, once more at a leisurely pace.

Once he'd arrived at the dorm, he retrieved his wooden training sword from his room, this time heading to the courtyard in the center of the building. As he prepared to practice his sword strokes, Allen visualized his many encounters with the spear-wielding Dio throughout his journey to the capital. By the time he began practicing, he'd constructed a phantom of the man in his mind, keenly aware of the position of his own body as he avoided the imagined jabs of Dio's spear. Making sure to use the least amount of magic possible, Allen only activated his Strengthening Magic as he began each swing, moving with ferocious speed before suddenly cutting off the flow of magic at the end of each stroke.

Allen practiced like that for exactly thirty minutes. As soon as that time had passed, he once again began to stretch, this time with meticulous care. Stretches to loosen one's body before exercising were remarkably different from those done to maximize one's flexibility afterward. You needed to stretch out your limbs to their utmost limits, exhaling as you did so and holding the pose for as long as reasonably possible. Then, rinse and repeat.

The first proper day of his new school life.

He'd been able to start off his first day with his usual morning routine, and he hadn't encountered any trouble at all. Allen was ready.

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I quickly wiped the sweat from my body and changed into my

new school uniform. Despite never ordering nor even being measured for the clothing, this high-quality, perfectly sized uniform had been delivered to my room the previous evening. It was a blazer-type uniform, easy to move in and incredibly durable, and apparently, if I ever grew out of it, I could request another one free of charge. The uniform wasn't actually mandatory, however. Students could wear their own clothes to school if they preferred.

By the time I'd changed and made my way to the dining hall, it was just past eight o'clock. I could have just eaten field rations for breakfast, but I'd begrudgingly acknowledged the positive effects a proper breakfast had on my body after my mother had ordered me to partake. Besides, it seemed silly to pass up a free meal.

"You're late, sonny! Don't you know classes begin at nine? Are you planning to be tardy on the first day?!" The moment I entered the dining hall, Thora began grumpily admonishing me.

"I'm not late. I'm here exactly at the time I wanted to be. I can eat as slowly as I like; as long as I leave the dorm by half past eight, I'll get to class with time to spare. I'll just have to run a bit." To be honest, I wasn't planning on wasting twenty or thirty minutes eating breakfast anyway, but given it was the first day, I'd left myself some elbow room.

Thora set a tray before me. Tendrils of steam were still rising from the two large hamburgers she presented me, a glass of milk rounding out the meal. It was a pretty large breakfast, but it wasn't excessive to the point that I wouldn't be able to finish it, at least. *If I can manage to cut my breakfast time down to five minutes, I can start taking morning baths from tomorrow…*

As I idly adjusted my morning schedule in my mind, I took a bite of the first burger. I instantly recoiled.

It was absurdly greasy. It didn't taste like it had been deep-fried—it tasted like the oil from the deep fryer itself. This wasn't a meal suitable for breakfast. Heck, I didn't even think I could stomach it at dinner. I immediately understood why I was the only student present in the dining hall. *Guess it's gonna be a field ration breakfast for me from now on…*

However, the years I'd spent working for a food production company had instilled within me a policy to not waste food. My eyes watering, I somehow managed to continue swallowing down bites of the evil burger. Thora, who'd come back to check

up on my progress, let out a cackle.

"Well, you've sure got guts, sonny! I'm guessing you're a Strengthening Magic type, eh? I saw you practicing this morning."

I nodded at her, tears in my eyes and oil in my mouth. I felt like I would vomit if I risked opening my mouth to reply.

"Those hamburgers were made with Emissive Magic types in mind, to aid with circulation and control of magic *outside* the body. If you've got the guts to come back again tomorrow, I'll make you something that'll help with Strengthening Magic instead. Not that the effects are all that significant, th—"

Astonished, I reflexively choked on my mouthful of food, spraying Thora with half-chewed burger where she'd taken a seat opposite me. A drop of oil ran down her cheek.

"That kind of food exists? I've never heard of anything like it!"

"Isn't there something else you need to say first? The cheek of you..." Thora sighed. "Well, you wouldn't have heard of it before. The ingredients and methods I use aren't available to the general public. Although I might look like just an ordinary dorm matron, I'm also a researcher here at the Royal Academy, see? Specifically, I study the taste and effects of ingredients derived from monsters—and the students coming and going from this dormitory make excellent test subjects for my experiments. But nowadays, you young folk are too picky about your food! No one comes to eat here at the dining hall. I tell ya, it's really slowing down my research." Thora wiped her face with her apron, then scrutinized me carefully. As she'd said, her bloodshot eyes were those of an exhausted researcher.

There were a thousand things I wanted to ask her, but one question eclipsed them all. "Flavor research? I thought you forgot to season the food entirely. I mean, I couldn't even taste *salt* in there."

"Not flavor—*taste* research. I'm not a cook! My job is to study the natural taste and effects of those ingredients, so any other seasonings—yes, even salt—are hindrances to my work. There's salt in the bread, and that's plenty. You want fancy food, go out into the city, or even just to the lounge in the main building. You'll get your fancy breakfast there, and for a good price too."

This old lady's got it twisted. She's turned one of life's joys into nothing more than a science experiment. Her mad scientist aura somewhat reminded me of Rosa.

On the other hand, though, there wasn't any measure I wouldn't take if it'd bring me closer to becoming the mage of my dreams—even if I needed to approach it from the field of monster ingredients. The idea of having access to exclusive ingredients, prepared by a specialist researcher, and for free? And all I'd have to do was show up every morning and somehow stomach the food? I'd be lying if I said it wasn't enticing. I needed to know more.

"I'll be honest with you—I was born without a hint of elemental affinity in my body. Even so, I want to become able to use Emissive Magic, no matter what it takes. Have you ever heard of an ingredient derived from monsters that might let someone gain elemental affinity, even if they weren't born with it?"

Thora looked taken aback for a moment, but then she shook her head gently. "I'm sorry to say it's not something *I've* ever come across, at least. Research into acquiring elemental affinity has been going on for as long as this kingdom has been around, in all sorts of fields. After all, if we were able to achieve something like that, the world as we know it would change. But when you look back through all the research, all you can find is a record of setbacks and frustration." She smiled at me. "Look, sonny. I'm not an expert in all those fields, but I can tell you that I've never heard of any encouraging results in that area."

Thora paused, peering at me curiously. "But when it comes down to it, why are *you* so set on Emissive Magic anyway? You're the kid who took the top spot in the physical exam for the knight course, right? If the examiners saw fit to award you the S grade, it means you've got a sure talent for Strengthening Magic. If you want to become a knight, you'd be better off putting all your energy into mastering that instead. Heck, most of the time, kids born with talent in both Strengthening and Emissive Magic end up as half-assed magic knights without noteworthy ability for either."

I could read between the lines: *"I'm saying this for your own good—give up on this."*

"All the same, I don't plan to give up on Emissive Magic. I only do what I want to do. I've got no interest in making it big as a knight."

Thora crossed her arms with a sigh. "You do understand that even if you carry on with this pursuit, it's likely all your effort will

go to waste? You might even cause irreversible damage to your actual abilities in the long run."

"I'm prepared for that possibility."

For a moment, silence fell across the dining hall. But then, Thora began to cackle once more. "Now it's getting interesting! You got it, sonny. From tomorrow, you're in my hands! Hee hee hee!"

I feel like I've just signed a deal with the devil…and that laughter isn't helping. I was only trying to find out more about the ingredients, but somehow it's all been set in stone now. I shrugged to myself.

"Look, now you really are gonna be late for class, sonny. Take your breakfast with you and scram."

If I have to eat food like this every morning, I'll definitely need to set aside at least thirty minutes just to manage to swallow it down… I might need to adjust my schedule a little after all. Shame to have to revise it already, though…

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His mind occupied with thoughts of schedules and routines, Allen set off at a run in the direction of the main school building.

Even at a distance, his joy was unmistakable.



The Opening Move

After running over, enhancing my steps with Strengthening Magic, I arrived at my classroom just before nine. Bile burned the back of my throat. I'd thrown up more than once during the trip here.

As I pulled the door open, the noisy classroom fell completely silent.

Mwa ha ha. That's right! The problem child…has arrived.

This situation was of my own design, but the silence still felt unexpectedly painful. The seat I'd sat in yesterday by the window was still unclaimed. It looked like everyone else was sitting wherever they'd sat yesterday, which wasn't a problem to me. My seat was perfect for watching the clouds drifting outside. The only issue was…

"Morning, Allen! Gee, it's a lovely day. By the way, are you commuting to school from your estate in the city? I sent someone to wait for you at the entrance to the dorm yesterday so we could get rooms close to each other, but it seems like you didn't register for the Noble Dorm in the end…"

Right—the only issue was the fact that Fey had claimed the seat next to mine.

"Morning, stalker. It was a lovely day—up until a moment ago." I was pretty sure the word "stalker" didn't exist in this world, which would mean I'd just introduced it.

"'Stalker'? You always use the strangest words, Allen. What does that mean?"

"It's a type of pest that follows someone around everywhere without their consent or regard for their feelings."

"Ha ha! Yep, that's definitely me! The position of Allen's Number 1 Stalker is mine, and I'm not going to let anyone else take it!" declared Fey, glaring at the poor blonde-haired girl who'd had the misfortune of picking the seat next to hers.

Seriously, can't anyone *tell me how to break this girl's heart…?*

"Hey, Allen. Look at you, showing up right at the last minute on the first day of school. Gutsy move," Al teased with a grin. "Look…I wanted to apologize, but you ran off yesterday. The Endymion Region caused your sister a lot of trouble. I'm sorry." He bowed his head sincerely.

It wasn't like you were the one who caused it, though…

“You don’t have anything to apologize for, Al. Besides, my sister got over that mess a long time ago, so you should forget about it too. At the very least, I don’t care about it, so there’s no need to be so formal. We’re friends, right?”

Actually, I did care about it a little, but not for the reason Al probably had in mind. Sure, the idiot who’d tried to force my sister to be his mistress had gotten what’d been coming to him, but I felt like I was the one who needed to apologize to Al for the sixty-odd other Endymions she’d sent to the hospital.

Al hesitated for a moment, then grinned. “Got it.” He really was a nice kid.

Even when I do get kicked out of Class A, I still want to be friends with this guy.

Godolphen entered the classroom at precisely nine o’clock. While I still hadn’t given up on my desire to become his apprentice, I decided it would probably benefit me more to play the role of a good student for the next week. If I kept pushing for it now, he’d definitely make it contingent on my remaining in Class A.

“Well! It appears everyone is present, so let’s not waste any time. In the mornings, we’ll be doing practical training in Strengthening Magic. Follow me to the amphitheater!”

“Is practical training not different depending on which course we’re in?”

“A tempered body and firm control over one’s Strengthening Magic is beneficial to all, no matter what career path one might take. Graduates of this esteemed academy are expected to be more than mages who can only use Emissive Magic from a safe spot outside the battlefield; more than magical crafters who can barely cast a spell; more than bigheaded bureaucrats who cannot leave the safety of their desks.” Godolphen frowned. “You will be instructed in a wide range of subjects during your time here. The Royal Academy has always prided itself on a policy of generalized education. Before you graduate, you will find you have attained a high level of skill in both Strengthening Magic and weaponry. It will be from your second year onward that you will begin receiving instruction specific to your assigned course.”

So in other words, right now I’m taking the exact same classes I would in the mage course! I began to feel even more excited for my future lessons.

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The amphitheater was located midway along the cobblestone path that led east from the school building toward the forest. Actually, it wasn't a single amphitheater, but four large, Colosseum-style buildings—some roofed, others exposed to the heavens, and each around the size of a standard sports field.

Just how much funding does this school have? Honestly… The maintenance costs must be ridiculous. My immediate focus on the expenditure required, rather than the grandeur of the facilities, was probably just another way my Japanese upbringing had influenced me.

"Now, then! I already have a preliminary understanding of your physical skills based on each of your respective physical exam results, so the next step is for you to familiarize yourselves with the skills of your classmates. Find a suitable partner. Every pair will spar one pair at a time, and the rest shall watch from the sidelines."

And there it is. "Find a suitable partner," my ass. As if anyone will want to pair up with a troublemaker like me. Well, Fey would, but that's out of the question.

I could already see it playing out: I'd stand here alone until it was just myself and another pathetic soul left over. Rejected by the rest, we'd exchange bitter smiles and shrug as we formed a pair…

"Allen Rovene! I didn't think I'd get the chance to teach you a lesson so soon, but here we are. You said your Combat Level was 5, yes? I don't know what that is, but surely the kid who stole the S grade in the physical exam won't back down from a challenge here?" Parley smirked at me as he spoke.

Oh right, Parley was in this class… You might have it out for me, but I don't feel the same about you, you know?

"Let me make one thing clear. If I win this fight, I won't endorse you, no matter what. Even if Lady Fey orders me to."

"No takebacks, yeah?" Here I'd thought I would have to waste a whole week making sure I failed Godolphen's challenge; if I just lost to Parley here, everything would be sorted.

"Hmph. You won't be so sure of yourself for much longer. Sage Godolphen! I, Parley Avinier, hereby vow that whether or not I endorse Allen Rovene will be decided by the outcome of this fight!" Parley glanced at the sage.

“Your vow is recognized,” assented Godolphen.

“Allen, don’t worry! No matter how things go, Parley is going to endorse you no matter what—even if he doesn’t want to,” Fey said in a worried voice—although as she approached us, I noticed her predator-like eyes were dilated in anger. *If Parley does beat me here, he’s in for a world of pain from her... I can’t help but feel a little sorry for the guy.*

“Parley seems pretty confident, though. Is he actually that strong?” At the end of the day, I was still the one who’d scored the highest in the physical exam. But from the way Parley was acting, I could tell he had absolute confidence in his victory. And then there was Fey’s unusually worried tone of voice...

Fey hesitated before answering. “I think...if you fought a few times, eventually Parley wouldn’t be able to beat you...” Before she had even finished answering, I understood the unease behind her words.

After bypassing the racks of wooden training swords, Parley was now standing before a display of wooden spears, carefully selecting his weapon of choice.

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It was easy to assume that a twelve-year-old like me wouldn’t have had the opportunity to spar with a spear wielder before. Physical exams to enroll in advanced schooling—whether at the Royal Academy or elsewhere—all tested applicants exclusively on their swordplay, so nearly everyone trained exclusively with the sword, at least until admission. A twelve-year-old spear wielder, therefore, was a rare sight indeed.

Parley had given me his full name a few moments ago, and now, as I watched him carefully select a spear, I suddenly remembered. The Aviniers—they were a noble family that served Marquess Dragoon, and they were a famous military power in the region. The current Count Avinier was particularly renowned for his mastery of what had come to be known as the Avinier style of spearmanship.

I already knew dueling a spear user could be a brutal ordeal for the inexperienced. That was why Parley had seemed so confident in his victory.

Up until a moment ago, I’d been planning my own defeat, but now my goal had changed. The last time I’d faced off against

someone wielding a spear, I'd been beaten to a pulp, and Dio hadn't even gone on the offensive. Even if I went all out here, I'd probably struggle to beat Parley. But he would make an excellent touchstone to test out just how well I could handle a spear wielder who wasn't holding back.

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I picked a suitable sword and walked over to face Parley. "Here's to a good fight," I said, bowing my head at a perfect thirty-degree angle. Off to the side, I thought I saw Godolphen raise an eyebrow. *That's right. Even at your doddering old age, you still understand the beauty of a proper bow.*

Parley, his back straight and knees relaxed, had already assumed a fighting stance. The second he'd picked up the spear, it was like all idle thoughts had vanished from his mind, leaving only those of a warrior. *He's going on the offense from the get-go—no doubt about it.*

I assumed my own fighting stance while drawing upon the magic within me and sending it coursing throughout my body. Parley began his approach, sliding his feet over the ground as he slowly but steadily closed the gap between us. It was the kind of technique you could only use in a training school or an amphitheater like this one, where the ground was flat and unobstructed and there was sufficient distance between you and your sparring partner.

I had too much time to think. My training with Dio had never been this slow or methodical. However, I reasoned it would probably be too mean to ask Parley to hurry it up a little. After all, it only made sense his techniques would differ from those of someone like Dio, who spent his time battling monsters, not men.

Still, he's way too slow...

To me, this fight wasn't something I had to win, but rather a way for me to test my abilities. I dropped the stance I'd been holding, letting my sword swing downward as I rushed to close the gap between us. *Just one more step...*

Whoosh.

The thrust came with the speed and power of a bullet. Somehow, I managed to twist my body to avoid it in the nick of time. Even knowing he'd been about to thrust, I'd barely escaped

getting hit. Parley's speed and the reach of his spear were far more dangerous than I had anticipated. Rather than using both hands to thrust his spear, he'd used his left hand as a stabilizer, letting the spear fly through the channel his grip made as he thrust with the full power of his right hand, which itself held the butt of the spear.

So this is how spear wielders go on the offensive, huh?

I realized that at some point, a wide smile had spread across my face.

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"Damn it! Why can't I hit you?!"

Around ten minutes had passed since Parley's first attack, and he had yet to land a single hit on me. The reason for that was simple.

Parley's spearmanship was far too beautiful. His stance was picture-perfect, his thrusts as straight as a ruler; he retreated from each one to a practiced distance. The well-honed footwork that carried him to his next position only served to tell me what his next move would be. Occasionally, he changed up his attacks, mixing in sweeps and short jabs between the thrusts, but those posed even less of a challenge to me. I was used to dealing with Dio's ever-changing approaches. Parley's perfect form was hindering him from mastering the true advantages of the spear.

At first, I'd been wary it was all a trap—that he planned to come at me with monotonous attacks until I'd been lulled into a false sense of security, then suddenly begin the real onslaught.

But that onslaught never came. No matter how long I waited…nothing.

Parley's face was twisting with growing frustration, and as I looked at him, I began to feel frustrated myself. Godolphen was watching us closely, after all. *How on earth am I gonna believably lose to this guy?*

The Real Opening Move

Preparations made for future benefit are known as "strategic moves."

It was the previous evening. In a private room off of the Noble Dormitory's dining hall, which itself was as opulent as the finest

restaurants throughout the capital, a social gathering of the first-year Class A was being held. It had been organized by none other than Feyreun von Dragoon, the prodigy already entrusted with the future of one of only nine marquesal positions throughout the kingdom.

Those gathered already knew each other well enough that such a social gathering—usually held as a way to meet new faces—was unnecessary. Yet it was clear to all that Fey was the only one in their midst who had any solid knowledge about the boy who had suddenly arrived at the Academy that morning and sent shock waves through the classroom. No one among the elite ranks of Class A would be foolish enough to decline an invitation to learn more about him.

Present were eighteen members of Class 1-A. Of the class, only the boy in question and Parley were absent. Parley, as per Fey's orders, was currently standing lookout at the entrance to the Noble Dormitory. Fey had accurately predicted his presence would interfere with the evening's agenda, and she had skillfully delegated to the pitiable boy the task of alerting her if Allen did appear so she could force him to take a room near hers.

Not all those gathered had chosen to reside in the Noble Dormitory; several would instead commute from their families' estates throughout the capital. Nevertheless, the dining hall was open to all students from Class A to D, offering exceptional food at an unbeatable price.

Once the customary social pleasantries and mutual congratulations had been exchanged, the conversation turned to the looming topic of the evening: Allen Rovene.

"He's exactly like you said, Fey. What an interesting boy," said Kate, adjusting her slender glasses as she spoke. Her long purple hair had been twisted into a neat braid that dangled over her shoulder. If Allen were there, he'd likely think she was the perfect image of a student council president.

"Interesting is putting it lightly. I mean, he caused quite a ruckus, and classes haven't even started yet!" laughed Jewel. A bright-red headband fixed her long, blonde hair in place.

"That's right. When Fey used the word 'interesting' to describe him, I thought she just meant she'd found another toy to play with," added a third girl—Stella—with some frustration. Her pink hair was parted into two pigtails atop her head, and she seemed mildly dissatisfied with what she now considered to be a poor

description of the boy in question.

The three girls were the only ones who had heard about Allen from Fey prior to that morning. However, even Fey herself hadn't anticipated Allen would end up in Class A—let alone receive the top grade in the physical exam—so she hadn't retold their encounter in any great detail at the time.

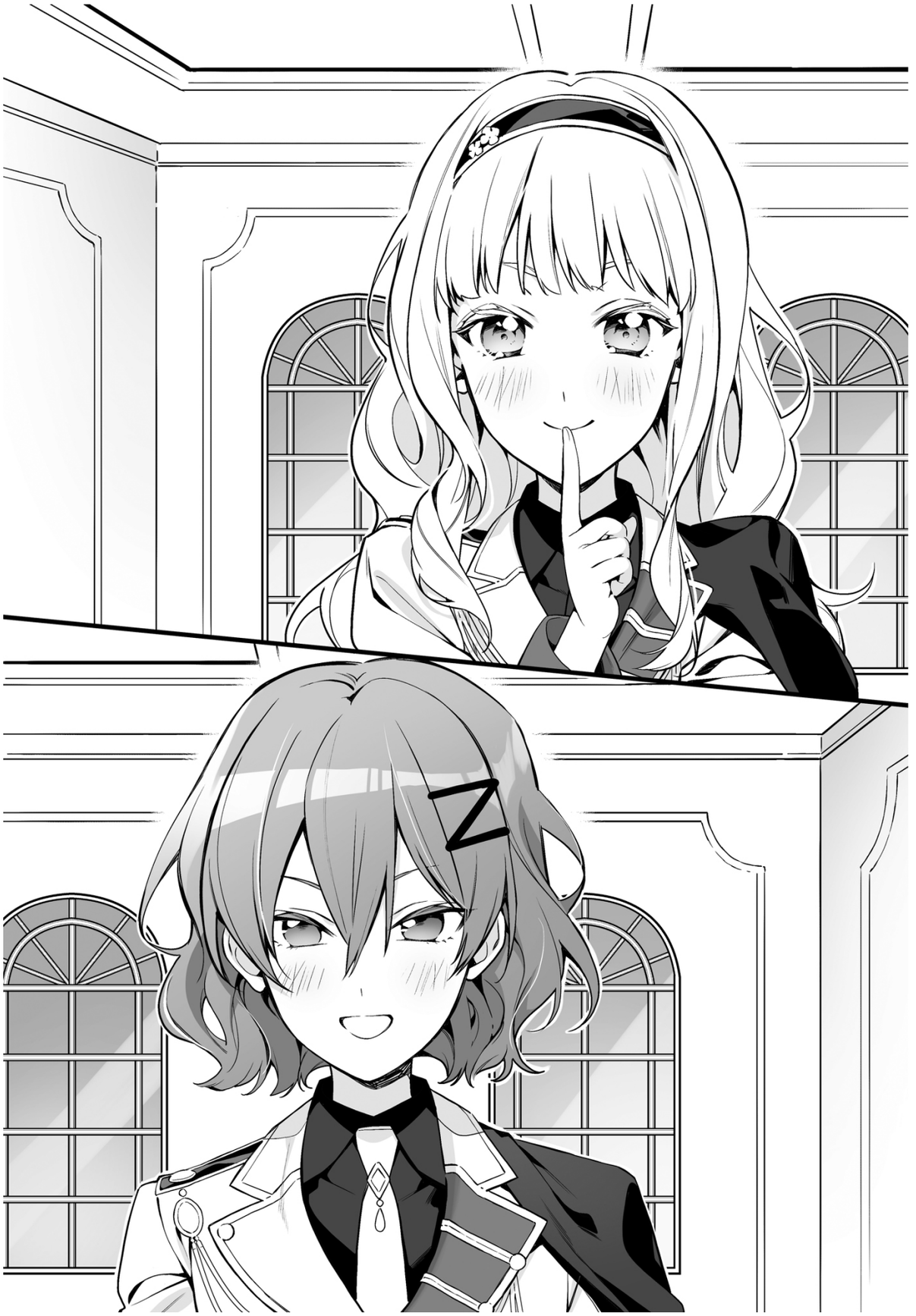
At that point, Al, a natural socialite and the unofficial representative of the male students, joined the conversation. "Fey, how much do you know about Allen's true abilit—"

But before he could finish, Stella cut him off. "Who cares about that?! More importantly, he made you his captive until the wee hours of the morning? Was he really that amazing?"

The girls all squealed in excitement as the conversation took a swift, vulgar turn. All the boys in the room, Al included, stared down at the table. The girls had firmly taken the conversational reins. It hadn't been an intentional move on Stella's part; it was simply that those gathered were all at that curious age, and no matter where you went in the world—or worlds—it was a fact that at that age, girls were far more likely to openly discuss such lewd matters.

"You said you met him on the train from Dragreid to Runerelia, right? Didn't you have an attendant in your room? Where in the world did he 'make you his captive,' then, you naughty girl?!" At Jewel's instigation, screams and vulgar comments rose from the girls again. For a while, the conversation was a sequence of wild fantasies and corresponding screams as the girls took turns presenting their individual imaginings. The boys remained as they were, eyes glued to the table.

After the squealing had finally died down, Fey confessed. "Sorry for getting you all excited, everyone, but the truth is I haven't done anything with Allen at all. You can tell just by watching him that he's not even remotely interested in me."



Kate smiled at her. “Well, it only makes sense, I suppose. After all, you can tell he’s completely inexperienced from the way he goes red when you tease him even a little.” Despite her student council president aura, Kate had been squealing the loudest until just a moment earlier, but now her voice was calm as she spoke. All the girls nodded seriously at Kate’s analysis—although, even in this world, it was to be expected that a kid their age *would* be inexperienced. They were just at that point in their lives where it was common to play at being grown-ups.

Not that they’d ever know it, but even across the forty-eight years of Allen’s two lives, he was still a complete virgin.

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“The reason I wanted us all to get together like this was to get an understanding of what everyone is thinking when it comes to endorsing Allen. Of course, you all know where I stand, and given that I’ve sworn my family name on it, I don’t intend to lose.” Fey smirked as she surveyed the others.

“What we’re thinking? I mean, after what happened this morning, I don’t know if anyone knows *what* to think!” said Jewel, hiding her smile behind her hand as she giggled; a perfect approximation of a noblewoman. Her other arm was folded under her chest, unusually ample for a girl her age.

“Besides, Godolphen the Buddha himself already said if everyone endorsed Allen, he’d petition the king himself for permission to keep him in Class A, for the good of the kingdom no less. On top of that, he’s now publicly backed by House Dragoon. There’s no good reason for us to force him out, and even if we tried to, it would just backfire on us anyway,” Stella calmly pointed out. Although at first glance she seemed like the hot-blooded athletic type, she was a particularly smart girl—although, given the high standards of the Royal Academy, and Class A at that, it was unlikely you’d encounter any idiots.

“You’re not wrong. Usually, I’d agree with you, but there are times Allen acts beyond expectations, so I’d like to eliminate any variability—as much as I can, at the least.” At this, Fey glanced over at the solemn Leo, who until that point had had yet to say a single word. He sighed.

“Don’t glare at me like that, Feyreun. I might not agree with his way of life, but I’m not stupid enough to confuse my personal

feelings with whether or not I'll endorse him. Forget Godolphen—*all* the examiners saw fit to award him the top score in the physical exam. I already said the reason I'm here is to sharpen my skills against the most talented peers in the kingdom, so his demotion would only be a detriment to me. But if I'm to back him with the name Seizinger, it'll only be after I've had a chance to test his abilities myself."

"Yeah... I mean, you could tell just from when he introduced himself to Al and Coco, but he's not dumb, that's for sure. The way he acted today, I'm pretty convinced he's not the type to sneak his way in here by cheating," said Dan, who'd later come to be known, along with Allen, as one of the "bland-faced brothers" of Class 1-A.

"Yeah, he seems like a nice enough guy. Just a little stubborn," agreed Dolph—who'd later come to be known as the third and final member of the bland-faced brothers, along with Allen and Dan.

Coco simply nodded.

"Well then, looks like everyone's on board! We'll tell the sage that we're all endorsing Allen first thing in the morning. It's up to you whether you want to endorse him as a representative of your family or just personally."

"First thing tomorrow? I mean, if we've all already agreed to do it, is there any reason to rush?" queried Al on behalf of the many bewildered students.

Fey frowned. "This is just a hunch," she said after a slight pause, "but I feel like Allen doesn't really care about staying in Class A all that much. In fact, he might even be thinking he'd be better off in Class E."

Eyes widened in disbelief around the room. No matter how privileged a family you were born into, the Royal Academy entrance exams weren't easy for anyone to pass. Admission was a golden ticket seized through immeasurable, relentless effort, and even then, only by a talented few. Furthermore, admission to Class A was so difficult that even renowned families like the Seizingers and Dragoons could only hope for one child to gain admission every few generations. For other families, it would likely be the first and last time one of their children could claim to have graduated from Class A—and that graduation promised a tremendous reward, if only to match the monstrous effort that had gone into obtaining it.

Al chuckled darkly. “And to think I was so excited when I saw the results this morning, I burst into tears and ran around hugging my family…” he muttered gloomily.

“I think Allen just sees things in a different way than all of us. I mean, even the first time I met him, the second I introduced myself as a Dragoon, he shot me such a disgusted look,” Fey laughed. “I don’t think he cheated—I’m certain he didn’t. But he also doesn’t seem like the type to obediently accept what anyone has to say either. Allen claims there’s things he wants to do with his life—I don’t know what those things are, but if being in Class A is getting in the way of him achieving them, I think he’d leave us without a second thought.”

“Excuse me, my lady.” At that moment, a waiter—the type you’d expect to find at a five-star restaurant—entered the room. He passed a sheet of folded paper to Fey, then left with a respectful bow.

Fey cast her eyes over the memo delivered to her, then let out an amused snort. “When Allen ran away after orientation, I sent a message to one of my people to keep an eye on him. It looks like he went straight to the standard dorm after collecting his belongings. Guess he’s already given up on Class A after all.”

Apart from faculty and students, no one was allowed to enter the Royal Academy grounds—not even the personal attendants of the upper nobles. Messages from outside the grounds were instead entrusted to the guards at the gate to be delivered to the recipient in question. Of course, the Noble Dormitory was equipped with staff to take care of any tasks that usually fell to attendants, so the children of noble families continued to live the trouble-free lives they were accustomed to.

“That jerk doesn’t care about us at all,” growled Stella. Many of the students’ faces had turned bitter. From the atmosphere, it was hard to believe this was the same day they’d celebrated getting admitted to the most prestigious school in the kingdom.

“Leave Parley to me; the rest of you, do whatever it takes to make sure Allen stays in Class A. I know it goes without saying, but keep our conversation today—and the endorsements—under wraps. Let’s let him keep believing everyone dislikes him, if that’s what it takes. We’ll catch him off guard, and he’ll be stuck with us before he even realizes what’s going on.” There was a hungry, bestial glint in Fey’s eyes as she brought the conversation to a close.

And so, with the exception of the pitiable Parley, the first-year Class A had decided on their collective endorsement before the first day was even out.

Allen, at the time, was in a great mood. He'd found an excellent noodle stand near the rear gate of the Academy, and he was blissfully unaware that as he slurped his noodles, his fate had already been decided.

"His first time is going to be mine," Jewel declared with a confident smirk.

The girls squealed.

"Oh, she's declared war!"

"Wait a minute!"

The night wore on.

The Final Battle of the Examination War

The next day, back at the amphitheater.

I found myself in an unforeseen situation. I'd been easily dodging Parley's attacks for a good while, and I'd finally decided the only way to believably lose to him would be to feign slipping and falling, letting him land a hit on me that way. But just as I was looking for a convincing opportunity, my opponent suddenly collapsed to one knee, his shoulders rising and falling dramatically as he gasped for breath.

Wait, what? Parley, that's some crappy acting…

Not even ten minutes had passed since the start of our fight. Squashing the secondhand embarrassment I felt over Parley's performance, I approached him, feigning carelessness—this had to be his attempt at a trap.

"That's enough—he's completely out of mana. Someone go and lend him a hand up," ordered Godolphen.

Out of mana?! No matter how recklessly you're casting, how do you run out of mana in ten minutes? Even if you assumed Parley's magical aptitude level had barely exceeded the threshold for admission, running out in a mere ten minutes was ridiculous. In a mock fight like this one, regardless of how ferocious your movements were, there was still time to breathe and recover your magic between attacks. A skilled attacker would aim to deprive their opponent of any time between attacks, forcing them to deplete their mana more rapidly—but I hadn't even swung at Parley once. And yet here he was, heaving like we'd just

finished a ten-minute sprint instead of a fight.

"Rovene." While I was still struggling to make sense of the situation, I heard my name. Leo had stepped forward. "Why don't we have a spar of our own?" he said, challenging me with a barely perceptible smirk. He'd already taken up a sword.

Leo... This will be a good opportunity to lower their collective opinion of me after that unfortunate win against Parley. Plus, I'd like to see what this guy is capable of at least once. I doubted I'd have the opportunity again after I dropped down to Class E. Besides, after the fight with Parley, I was beginning to doubt my prior understanding of my abilities in comparison to the average twelve-year-old's. Sparring with Leo might give me some clearer insight.

Silently, I lowered my head, indicating my acceptance of his proposal.

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After waiting patiently for me to get back into position, Leo began his attack with a simple but flawlessly executed sideways slash, as though he was trying to sound out my ability. The attack was fast, but not so fast that I wouldn't be able to counter it. Still formulating my strategy in my mind, I caught the attack with the flat of my own sword.

It connected with unexpected force. I was thrown nearly three meters away before I'd even realized it.

Hastily, I reinforced my body with Strengthening Magic as I fell to the ground, rolling backward to put some distance between us before I stood again.

So this is the kind of Strengthening Magic someone who nearly got the All-S score can use... And I bet he's not even using his full strength just yet.

The single blow I'd just received made it clear: Leo was unquestionably stronger than me. It would be impossible to overcome the sheer disparity in our abilities over the course of a single mock battle. *But...*

Right now, Leo wasn't showing any sign he would continue his approach. Instead, he was sneering at me.

Oh, I'm gonna make you cry, you bastard!

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I wouldn't be able to defeat Leo with just power; I would need to gain the upper hand through strategy. If we ended up locking swords, it would be over for me instantly.

Speed was critical.

When I swung at him, it was with the exact amount of power needed to knock back his sword, and if he dodged a swing, I just carried through into another attack. When he swung at me, I pulled away. If I could, I used his attacks as openings for my own.

Leo's attacks still caught me from time to time, throwing me across the field, but I used those moments as opportunities to catch my breath and restore my mana before going on the offensive again.

But I had yet to hit him.

We'd been at it for nearly thirty minutes, but Leo, unlike Parley, was yet to show any sign he was running low on mana. His smirk had vanished, but I hadn't yet been able to uncover a single crack in his perfect defense. I needed to take it up a notch.

Throughout our match, I hadn't used any thrusting techniques, instead focusing on swinging my sword. Suddenly, I made a surprise thrust directly at Leo's face, my full strength behind the attack. Leo twisted his head to avoid the blow.

Got you now!

Keeping my gaze locked with his, I took advantage of the close proximity my thrust had awarded me and kicked him squarely in the crotch with all my might. Thankfully, I hadn't shown off any martial arts during my match with Parley, so Leo hadn't anticipated the move—but somehow, he'd managed to close his legs in that split second, preventing my foot from completely connecting with its true target. Nevertheless, he groaned as he was flung backward a few steps.

I followed him, preparing another attack. I nearly had him cornered when…

Whoosh.

I froze in surprise. A brilliant red ball of fire, flung from Leo's outstretched hand, was currently hurtling rapidly toward my face.

Still off-balance from my attempt to rush him down, I realized there was no way I could dodge the fireball. Instead, I threw my sword aside, covering my arms with a shield of Strengthening Magic and raising them to repel the fireball. The instant I'd

swung my arms up to repel the fiery bullet, though, Leo's sword was at my neck.

I collapsed to the ground, limbs splayed. "I'm out. You've won."

After that first attack, I had no longer planned to lose to Leo intentionally. I'd wanted to test my strength, so I'd gone all out. And I'd lost. If Leo had been using Emissive Magic right from the get-go, I would have lost even sooner. He'd gone easy on me.

Irritating though it was to accept, this was the extent of my current ability. I had no choice but to accept it and move on. Frustrated tears began to well in my eyes. I'd never lost a fight to someone my own age. But despite those bitter tears, another part of me felt somewhat invigorated.

Leo Seizinger... One day, I'll definitely bring you *to tears!* I silently vowed that after I made my fresh start in Class E, I'd start practicing everything over again so I could one day defeat my newfound rival.

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"What kind of training do you usually do?" asked Leo, offering me a hand up. His calm expression contained no trace of triumph, nor did it hold any sense of superiority over a fallen opponent.

He's not such a bad dude, really. We've just got different opinions.

"I don't do anything special. In the mornings, I run and practice my sword strokes, and before bed, I do magic compression exercises. I've been so busy with studying lately, that's all I've had time for," I said, taking his proffered hand and standing back up.

"And it looks like you've still got energy to spare... You do realize your stamina defies ordinary limits, right?" Leo asked in a tone of genuine confusion.

Defies ordinary limits? Huh?

"Well, that's probably just from the running, I guess," I answered perfunctorily. I had no idea what he meant by that, but I'd already lost to him—having to admit I didn't know what he was talking about would just frustrate me further.

He smirked at me again. I thought he was about to gloat, but instead, he turned to Godolphen, putting his right hand over his chest. "On the name of my family, I, Leo Seizinger, endorse Allen

Rovene as a worthy member of Class A."

"Your endorsement is recognized."

"Huh?" *What the hell is going on?*

"From tomorrow onward, I'll join you when you run," said Leo, looking at me again.

"Huh? No, I'm good." The thought of spending every morning running next to a guy like him made me feel queasy.

But more importantly, he'd just endorsed me...

Yesterday you were saying we'd never see eye to eye, and now you want to buddy up with me? I didn't think you'd be such a fickle guy.

Leo was still smirking at me.

This is bad. Between Parley and Leo, I've lost two chances to make sure I get sent to Class E in one go. If I didn't act more carefully over the remaining days, I might end up having to stay in Class A.

But then, Godolphen delivered the final blow.

"And now, with Leo's endorsement, I have received endorsements for Allen Rovene from every member of Class A. Last night, with the additional support of the entire examining body, I received permission from His Majesty the King for Allen's admission. Therefore, with all endorsements received, I hereby officially admit Allen Rovene into Class A."

I was utterly lost. I briefly wondered if the geezer had gone senile.

Godolphen chuckled. "Very impressive, child. Securing all the endorsements before even a day has passed—and each of them endorsing you as a representative of their family at that! What kind of magic did you use?" he laughed.

If that kind of mind control magic did exist, I'd *be the one asking for lessons! Not that I could use it anyway.*

It seemed like this wasn't a horrible joke. But when I'd entered the classroom this morning, everyone had reacted so coldly...

"Pft." A barely suppressed snort.

This is her doing. I turned around slowly. There stood a broadly grinning Fey. She was accompanied by the rest of my classmates, the cold eyes they'd met me with that morning now gleeful.

"That was awesome, Allen! There's no way someone with a C grade in magical aptitude should have been able to go against Leo for that long! What kind of trick lets you hold your own against someone with a magical aptitude level of over 50,000?" said Al, throwing his arm over my shoulder.

“I mean, surely you didn’t think you could run away from me? I’ll chase you wherever you go, so you’d be better off giving up now,” my stalker crowed. Another elegant girl approached from Fey’s side, her yellow-blonde hair swept back by a bright-red headband. It was the same girl who’d sat beside Fey that morning, which I’d assumed had just been an act of bad luck for her.

“Good morning, Allen. I’m Jewelry Reverence from the mage course, but you can just call me Jewel. If Fey ever causes you any trouble, you can always talk to me.”

Reverence… That’s a marquesal family, just like Fey’s. Why is another elite noble suddenly acting so friendly to me? What’s more, why did she wink *at me just now? And why did my heart rate just jump?* I resented the part of me that couldn’t readily believe Jewel’s friendly approach, but after all, I’d grown up with Rosa—I knew that every cute, kind-looking girl had a hidden side to her.

“Uh…no offense, but I thought all you girls hated me,” I said, confused. A purple-haired girl standing beside Jewel answered instead. She gave off the aura of a student council president.

“Nice to meet you, Allen—I’m Kate from the bureaucrat course. And we have no reason to hate you—besides, everyone in class knows you’re a virgin now and that Fey was just teasing you yesterday.”

What the hell?! And how exactly did they draw that *conclusion, huh? I’ve never heard of a magical device that detects romantic experience!*

“If we’re all getting together for training in the mornings, count me in too. I’m Stella from the knight course. Nice to meetcha,” added yet another girl, this one with pink pigtails. The situation was developing so quickly, it was becoming impossible to keep up.

“Allen, can I come with you guys too? I’ll do my best not to become a burden—I promise.”

“Ah, I don’t mind *you* coming along, Coco…” I replied, still bewildered.

“So, what time are we meeting in the morning?” came one voice. “Let’s decide on a place too!” added another. It was a pair of very ordinary-looking boys. They looked like background characters.

“Oy! Don’t forget about me! I’ll be there too,” Parley declared fiercely, hurriedly standing up from where he’d collapsed.

I don't really get what's going on, but...is everyone actually happy to have me in this class?

Godolphen chuckled again. "It seems like you had no trouble winning everyone over just by showing them your true potential, young Rovene. It's certainly a valid method of gaining support, in politics or otherwise."

There he goes again, bringing politics and allies and whatever into it.

Again, I scanned over the crowd of faces—all smiles, but written on each of those faces was another message as well.

"Serves you right."

Well, I guess most reincarnation stories had a comeuppance like this at some point...

"Allen Rovene..." began Fey, her right hand over her chest. A signal.

"Welcome to Class A!" they all exclaimed, with the exception of Parley.



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Throughout the long and storied history of the Royal Knight and Mage Academy of Yugria, the legacy of the 1,127th graduating class held a particularly special position of respect. Later, that class would also come to be known as “the Unicorn Generation.” And the most notable among them…

The Invincible Leo Seizinger.

Feyreun the Limitless.

Aldor Engravier, the Colossal Cascade.

Coconial Canardia, Friend of the Kingdom.

And, of that roster of greats, there was one who was known as the ace of a generation. This day would mark the forging of the first of his many legends.

He who won the support of every one of his classmates in just a single day; he who overturned an unprecedented four-subject result investigation; he who became the first to remain in Class A after such an investigation.

Allen Rovene.

Chapter Five: The Beginnings of Youth

Stamina

Students of the Royal Knight and Mage Academy of Yugria were required to join an extracurricular club. It was another facet of the school's generalized educational policy: to raise generations of universally capable students.

However, that rule, established hundreds of years prior, was currently more a rule in name than one in practice, and in fact, there was only a scarce handful of clubs still in regular operation. After all, students who wanted to train in weaponry or martial arts, for instance, were better off availing themselves of one of the scores of exceptional training schools dotting the capital. A perfunctory school club was far from the best choice for these disciplines, and the same went for other areas of interest as well. It seemed as the kingdom had grown more stable and wealthy, club activities had dwindled as superior options had popped up.

One month had passed since my admission.

"Don't run aimlessly! Think of your *reason* for running! If you're not motivated, just piss off and go home! And stop slacking! If you're slow, you can piss off too! Surpass yourself from yesterday—if you can't, then go home!"

At some point, I'd transformed into the coach from hell. Somehow, my morning running practice had turned into a group activity. The fact that someone with a magical aptitude level like mine had been able to keep up with Leo for so long had shocked my classmates and incited their participation—after the sparring, we'd learned that Leo had exhausted nearly seventy percent of his astoundingly high mana reserves over the course of the bout. He'd been unable to find an opening in what I was now learning was an unorthodox style of magical manipulation, so he'd been forced to put more and more mana behind each of his attacks. However, such bold moves were easily read. I had been able to counter or dodge each of his attacks—and my immediate counterattacks had only further tested his magical reserves.

No one had predicted our fight would develop into the

stalemate it had become, especially when you considered we'd sparred immediately after my ten-minute bout with Parley, who himself possessed a magical aptitude level seen only once every few decades. If I'd managed to keep Leo in check for just a little longer, I would have won purely by forcing him to exhaust his remaining mana. So he'd chosen to go on the defensive, preserving his remaining strength, but to his surprise, my C-grade magical reserves wouldn't run out. As his mana had dwindled further and further, he'd apparently begun to panic.

"I was just lucky I could fling that fireball in your direction after you'd kicked me. If we fought again, I'm not certain I'd win," Leo had later said, a serious (albeit sour) look on his face. Rather than taking pride in his victory, you could see in his eyes that he had already begun to focus on the next challenge. It seemed his claim that he was at the Academy to sharpen his skills hadn't just been lip service.

The day following my complete endorsement and (unwilling) admission to Class A, an issue had arisen.

My classmates had apparently had trouble getting to class on time.

I'd adjusted my schedule to wake up earlier that morning—in order to safely fight my way through Thora's cooking before I'd need to leave for class—and so we'd set the meeting time for 5 a.m. at the main gate. To my surprise, all of my classmates had been there when I'd arrived.

As usual, I'd set off on my clockwise lap of the school perimeter—but not even a third of the way into the course, people had begun to disappear one by one. In the end, only Leo had been able to keep up with me to the end of the lap—and even he hadn't been able to muster the energy to join me for the hill sprints, instead glaring at me from his position on a nearby stump.

Oh well. There was no value in waiting for those who couldn't keep up. After all, this was *my* morning routine.

On that note, I'd returned to the standard dorm, not sparing a second thought for the classmates I was abandoning. I'd eaten Thora's vile cooking and made my way to the classroom, arriving ten minutes before nine. Apart from Leo and Background Character Number One (his name was Dan, as I learned soon after), no one else had arrived.

Dan, plain-faced and unassuming though he was, was

apparently second only to Leo in terms of magical aptitude. In fact, I later found out most people had thought he would be the one to top the overall evaluation—and he would have, if not for the superprodigy Leo.

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"Rovene. Are you attempting to wipe out the entirety of Class A on just the second day of lessons?" Godolphen asked as the final few members of the class trudged into the room just before ten.

Hey, don't blame this on me, old man…

"I didn't ask them to join me this morning. Everyone decided to come of their own accord, so they're late of their own accord too. I doubt there will be any problems from tomorrow onward anyway. Everyone's probably realized their limits already—I'm not expecting to see their faces in the morning," I said, smiling around at my classmates as I did. It was the same haughty smile they'd shown me yesterday—the one that said, *Serves you right.*

At that time, I was still underestimating the pride of those who had fought valiantly for their positions in Class A at the Royal Academy. Every one of them had been praised as prodigies, the likes of whom had never before been seen in the histories of their respective families and territories—and unlike the preawakened Allen, each and every one of them was already a diligent, hardworking individual.

Godolphen frowned. "Hmph. Have you no desire to lend a helping hand to your friends—friends who supported you not just as individuals, but as representatives of their families?"

You mean those "friends" who got together behind my back to force me to stay here? Yeah, I don't even remotely want to help them.

"You want me to encourage them? Sure! Hey, Lady Fey! Huh? No reply? Are you asleep? Aw, were you up late last night working on your latest magical device? Do you need me to arrange for someone to collect you and make sure you get to class on time?" I sneered, and then I looked back at Godolphen, ignoring Fey's reproachful, teary eyes. "There, help offered."

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When I arrived at the main gate the following morning, it was

deserted. I was a little surprised that even Leo had given up after the first day, but I wasn't particularly bothered by the lack of attendance. As usual, I set off on my lap of the Academy's perimeter, but as I rounded the corner that led to my perfectly sloped hill, I froze.

All nineteen of my classmates were waiting for me—they must have heard about the hill sprints from Leo.

Those nineteen prideful prodigies had each figured out what time they'd need to start their respective runs, and they'd woken up even earlier than me to make sure they'd be waiting as I reached the hill. I was surprised to realize I was genuinely happy about this—getting up that early and showing up here of their own accord meant they actually valued my abilities and the routine I'd followed to develop them.

"How long have you guys been out here running?" I asked Coco, who'd been the last to arrive at the classroom the day before.

"For me, I started at around three thirty. We didn't decide on a meeting time today, so everyone started at different times," he answered.

Huh... So they didn't even discuss it first? Everyone just decided for themselves to make sure they made it here by the time I did...

Nineteen pairs of eyes watched me. Although I'd ridiculed them all the day before, those eyes weren't filled with resentment. Instead, they burned with determination.

I had always assumed basic training like running was meant to be a lonely task—so when I'd seen that no one had been waiting at the main gate earlier, it hadn't bothered me. But now...

It seemed like I'd made the right choice, enrolling at this academy. I resolved to stop trying to drive my classmates away.

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"But how many days in a row can you keep getting up at that time? You don't have to run the exact same distance as me if you can't handle it, you know. If you can't do it every day, it won't make a difference."

Coco frowned, then answered after a short pause. "I'm pretty sure my stamina and Strengthening Magic are the worst in the class. But I don't want to become a 'bigheaded bureaucrat who can't leave the safety of my desk' like Sage Godolphen said. I

have things I want to achieve—just like you, Allen. So…can you give me any advice?"

This Coco wasn't the same shy boy who'd stuttered his way through introducing himself the day we'd met. His voice was strong, his eyes sharp. This Coco was a boy with something to accomplish. The change in presence made me smile.

"Okay. But just keep in mind that the advice I'm about to give you is just my own opinion, okay?" Coco nodded, and at the same time, every single one of the other members of the class turned to listen.

"The most important thing you need to do is run the same distance every day, along the same course. If you do that, you can accurately measure your improvement. And that improvement will become the best way to motivate yourself. Of course, everyone has different levels of stamina and control over their magic, so the 'optimal' distance for you is going to be different too."

I paused. "But I don't think you should get too hung up over figuring out the optimal distance, really. It's not easy to figure out, and even then, it might change from day to day. It's far more important to run the *same* distance every single day and to just run it single-mindedly, without distracting yourself thinking about other things. You have to treat running like swordsmanship or martial arts—you have to work toward achieving perfect form, and you can't do that if you don't focus. Once you eliminate distractions, all that remains is improvement—or at least, that's what I think. Once you get used to it, you can manipulate your Strengthening Magic so it's only active during the split second your feet touch the ground and not while you're in the air—that's the form to work toward."

I'd been turning it over in my head since the day before, and this was the conclusion I'd come to—well, one of them anyway—that explained why my stamina seemed far superior to everyone else's. When I'd sparred with both Parley and Leo, although they'd intensified and softened their use of Strengthening Magic throughout the bouts, I'd realized they'd never actually *stopped* using it at any point. No wonder they'd gotten tired.

"Okay, that makes sense—although that does seem like something that requires an insanely high level of magical manipulation. But if it's just about running the same distance each day, couldn't we run in one of the indoor amphitheaters

instead of around the school?" asked Al curiously.

"You could run inside if you wanted. But the lap I run around the Academy wall has a nice amount of elevation and dips, and the ground changes as you keep going. If you only ever practice on a smooth, level surface...well, you'll become good at it, for sure, but you'll struggle the first time you run on bumpy ground. I think it's more important to develop abilities that can be used in any situation, so I recommend running outside instead. We're not going to be in training forever, after all."

"Ah, I get it," said Al, nodding.

"Everyone knows the closer you get to mastery, the more delicate your magical manipulation becomes. But I reckon most of us here haven't paid enough attention to that fact, given we've all been blessed with huge mana reserves. That's on us. Though I don't think that alone is enough to explain your crazy stamina, Allen," pointed out a suspicious Stella.

But my musings had led me to a second hypothesis too—one I was about to put to the test.

"While using Strengthening Magic, does anyone here also compress their magic at the same time?"

Everyone looked dumbfounded.

"There's no way, obviously..." said Stella finally. "I mean, to begin with, it's physically impossible to do magical compression at the same time you cast magic. It's like asking us to use a hose that's running to siphon up the same water that's still pouring out of it." Her expression said the rest: *What is this guy thinking?* And she wasn't the only one. When I cast my eyes around, many of my classmates' faces were dubious, even concerned.

"I can't do that either, of course," I said, chuckling awkwardly. "I meant between movements, while you're not actively using your Strengthening Magic."

"I've never even *thought* about doing that. Hell, it's shocking enough to hear someone the same age as me is already activating their Strengthening Magic intermittently while running... You can't be telling me that for the split second your feet are off the ground, not only are you switching off your magic, but you're also compressing it. There's no way," she said sharply.

"Of course I am. In fact, whenever I'm not actively casting Strengthening Magic, I'm compressing and restoring it. It's just a habit of mine. Even when I was fighting Leo yesterday, I was

compressing my magic during any gaps between movements. I mean, it would be impossible to do during an all-out fight, but if you're only casting at about half strength like our fight yesterday, you can cut off the flow between movements and compress your mana then. If we're talking about a repetitive exercise like running or practicing sword swings, I can cast at about seventy percent of my full strength and still restore the mana I used by compressing after each cast. When it comes to regular exercises like those, I'll never run out of mana—my actual body would give out first, I think," I said, shrugging.

Jewel laughed at me. "There you go again, tossing out preposterous ideas like they're just normal to you. Magical compression restores your mana much faster than letting it rebuild naturally, but it requires a lot of focus to that end. It's difficult enough to practice magical compression while walking—it's simply impossible to believe you could do it between movements in a fight," she said, giggling daintily.

What do you mean, "there I go again"? Although, when I do think about it…

My mother always practiced magical compression while casting Strengthening Magic, so Rosa and I had picked up on the same habit naturally when we'd been younger—but no matter how we tried to explain the method to our older brothers, they couldn't do the same.

"It's possible, but you have to do it differently than you usually would. It's a different method from regular magical compression, where you're trying to pack in as much mana as possible to raise your maximum magical aptitude level. It's definitely not easy, but I think everyone here is probably capable of it. If you keep practicing and working on achieving the perfect 'form,' you'll figure the rest out from there." I shrugged again. "But to be honest, even if you do manage it, it's a lot of hard work for not much reward. Most of the time you get into a fight, it won't go on long enough that you'll even need to be restoring your mana throughout."

Unless you were fighting an opponent with very similar strength to yours or you were on an active battlefield with enemies popping up one after another, it was very rare a fight would last longer than an hour, after all—and in that case, there was nothing wrong with the usual approach of just focusing on casting at one's maximum output. Realistically, it was probably

the *better* approach.

No one spoke for a while. Finally, Coco managed to force something out.

"What's so important about this hill, then?" he asked awkwardly.

"Great question, Coco! Everything I just said was about the warm-up exercises, in a manner of speaking—but this is where things get real! Al, there's no need to look so scared, you know," I chuckled, offering the wide-eyed boy a smile. "Just to be clear, there's nothing really special about this part of the routine. This is where I do hill sprints. When you run uphill at full power, you use all the muscles in your body. It's a great way to build muscle and develop your skill in maintaining Strengthening Magic under conditions where you need to go all out. Personally, I think running as fast as you can up an incline like this is the best sort of muscle training in the world. On top of that..." I trailed off, then suddenly gestured toward the slope.

"Just look at that hill! An upward inclination of ten degrees, five hundred meters long. It's the perfect slope—you couldn't ask for any better. Run up it at full power, then walk down slowly while recovering your mana. That alone will develop all the muscles you might need as a knight. Just by making it part of your routine, you'll be improving your muscle strength, stamina, maximum casting output, reaction speed, and continuous casting capability. Plus, if you adjust the load on your body through Strengthening Magic, you can continue to improve indefinitely."

"Uh," said Dan, "can anyone really run up that bumpy, rocky hill at 'full power,' though? What about you, Leo—reckon you could do it?"

"Not a chance," snorted Leo. "I'd need a few months of practice just to run up at half strength without injuring myself. If my mock fight with Allen had been on ground like that, I probably would have lost. You have incredible instincts for magic manipulation," he finished, directing the last part at me.

Really? I thought my instincts were pretty normal... But the way everyone else was nodding seriously made me question that line of thought.

Clack.

I looked down at the source of the noise, only to discover Fey was attaching some kind of weird magical device around my

wrist. “What the hell is that?” I asked.

Fey beamed proudly. “This is the tool I was up all night developing! Although really, I just adapted a prototype of another tool—the one that measures the remnants of magic left after casting. With this, all of your secrets will soon be reveal—”

Her smug declaration was cut short as I picked up a nearby stone and, without hesitation, smashed the device around my wrist into tiny pieces.

Ignoring the dumbfounded look on her face, I continued to address the rest of the class. “I know I said a lot of confusing stuff, but at the end of the day, the most important thing you’ll need to do is discover your own reason for running. After that, everything else will fall into place. If you just swallow what anyone around you says without question—even if it’s me—you’ll never achieve your true potential. Testing things out for yourself, trying different methods, and slowly perfecting a routine that benefits you is part of the process,” I finished. Then I turned away from my classmates.

With a quick bow in the direction of the hill, I set off on my first sprint. *If I don’t cut myself off from explaining now, my own routine will be in shambles…*

After all, the most challenging exercise of my morning routine still awaited: Thora’s cooking.

The Hill Path Club

“Master Godolphen, please take me on as your apprentice!” I said as I burst into the teachers’ lounge that evening. Now that all my classmates were starting their morning runs at different times, the tardiness problem had been resolved—and now that my position in Class A was official, I didn’t need to hold back anymore. The other teachers stared at me, disapproval in their eyes, but I didn’t pay it any mind. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, after all. I bowed to Godolphen at a deep angle and petitioned him once again.

“Hmph,” he snorted, raising an eyebrow. “At ease, child. I don’t care much for such formalities. As for your request…you keep voicing your desire to become my ‘apprentice,’ as it were, but I am already your homeroom teacher. My role is to guide you in any way I can. From that perspective, all members of Class 1-A are already my ‘apprentices,’ so to speak. So, on that note, is

there any guidance you are seeking?"

I steeled myself, preparing for the laughter that would likely follow my answer. "I don't have a lick of talent for Emissive Magic or elemental conversion. But I want to become able to cast it, no matter what it takes, because Emissive Magic is awesome. I know it's illogical—but I heard you also had no talent for Emissive Magic when you were young, Master Godolphen. Can't you teach me how to use it too? Or even just point me in the right direction?" Despite his request that I put myself at ease, I continued to maintain my deep bow, raising just my head as I spoke.

Godolphen didn't laugh. His eyes were serious as he began stroking his white beard. "I see, I see... You do understand that the knowledge you're asking of me will only lead you to hardship, yes?"

"I understand. I know the best thing I could do is focus on developing my Strengthening Magic. But even so..."

Godolphen sighed and crossed his arms, closing his eyes. I waited for his answer.

"I understand why you've come to me now, but I'm afraid I must be the bearer of bad news, Allen," he started softly. "Though I did indeed have no talent for Emissive Magic when I was your age, I *did* possess elemental affinity. I fear I know of no means to teach you what you seek. Even if I did take you on as an apprentice, it would be for naught. However," he said, opening his eyes sharply, "I might be able to point you in the 'right' direction—or at least somewhere to start."

"Seriously?!" I was hooked. Even while I'd been waiting for the opportunity to plead my case with Godolphen again, I'd continued my own research, but the meager information I'd been able to find had only further indicated the insanity of the task before me. Of course I'd cling to his every word if he had a lead.

It wouldn't be until a long while after that I'd realize I'd been playing right into his hands.

"However—there is one condition." Godolphen looked at me keenly. "You must do something about that disastrous scene this morning..."

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It was true that that morning, everyone had arrived at the classroom before the bell had chimed at nine—but given that nearly everyone had completely drained their magical reserves, there'd been no way anyone would be capable of getting on with practical training straightaway. Instead, most of my classmates had spent the morning period compressing and restoring their mana.

"That's not something I can control, though... Like I said before, I didn't ask them to come training with me, and I don't have the power to stop them from coming along of their own accord."

Godolphen chuckled at me. "Indeed, but I am not asking you to stop them—I am delighted to see students voluntarily practicing the oft-detested basics, and with such intensity that they deplete their mana reserves! If we have to squander a few lessons here or there in the name of self-betterment, it is a sacrifice I shall readily make—for a time, at least." He frowned. "But there are many other things to be taught all the same. We cannot be compressing magic during class time day in and day out. As such, my challenge to you is thus: You must guide your classmates and ensure that every one of them is capable of showing up not just on time, but ready to learn. I'll give you two months. And if you succeed, I will point you in the direction of the knowledge you seek."

Two months? Hmm... I quickly did some time-to-benefit calculations in my head.

"I'll accept your challenge on one condition. I'll only give advice to those who are willing to accept it. Everyone was there this morning, but sooner or later, people will begin to drop out—and there's nothing wrong with that either. Some of them will have more important skills they should be working on instead. I don't want to be held accountable for anyone who drops out of their own free will."

"Very well. However, if I find you are cutting corners with those who *are* prepared to follow your guidance, I will not reveal anything to you." Godolphen paused, then switched to a new tack. "But on that note...why don't we formalize your morning training as a club activity? There are very few active clubs at this academy these days, and most students belong to those clubs in name only regardless. Students can belong to more than one club, and if you were to take up the position of coach, then you

might find it will become easier to issue advice to your classmates."

"What?" I exclaimed. "What do you mean there's barely any active clubs anymore? What about the Magical Research Club? Surely they're still active, right?"

A blonde female teacher nearby raised an eyebrow in surprise at my shocked outburst and turned toward us. "The Magical Research Club hasn't existed in a long time. According to the records, it was disbanded nearly three centuries ago. These days, students with an interest in magical research usually choose to attend evening classes at the Symplex Intensive Educational Center in the city, or they might otherwise hire a high-caliber mage as a private tutor." She offered me a tight-lipped smile. "Allen Rovene, correct? We've not been formally introduced, have we? I'm Ms. Musica, another of the teachers here."

Evening classes? These guys just don't get how precious youth is!

I sighed. "Fine. As long as your challenge only applies to club members, and even then, only to those willing to accept my advice, I'll agree to it. What do I have to do to start up a club, then?"

Ms. Musica answered again. "If you can decide on a name for the club now, I can handle all the paperwork here. I have a general idea of the club activities already. Sage Godolphen, I imagine you'll become the club adviser?"

Godolphen nodded, chuckling. "Very well. I have no intention of getting involved with the club activities, however."

So you're becoming the adviser in name only, essentially... Probably for the best anyway. As long as I could ask him for advice if I needed it, it was better for me if no one else interfered.

"There's one more thing I wanted to confirm. When you say you'll point me in the right direction, can I take that to mean there's someone else who *might* be able to teach me Emissive Magic?"

It would have been one thing if Godolphen were able to teach me what I wanted to know, but I had no intention of wasting two months on the vague promise of a "right direction."

"As I said, I am personally unable to provide you with the information you seek. Instead, I will introduce you to a suitable acquaintance of mine who *might* be able to help."

"An acquaintance? What kind of person are they?" I asked

suspiciously.

"Hmm... Well, he is the current captain of the Third Legion of the Royal Knights of Yugria. Naturally, he is a very busy man. However, if I were to ask it of him, there is a chance he might take you under his wing—a chance, mind you. All I am offering is an introduction. Even if you do somehow manage to convince him to take you on as an apprentice, do not expect him to teach you everything you seek to know. If you're after anything more than occasional advice, you will find yourself disappointed."

Hell yeah! If he's actually got a real person already in mind, it means he thinks there's a chance that person could *teach me Emissive Magic, right? They're not just empty words. Awesome!*

Suddenly, I noticed Ms. Musica's expression had morphed into a look of astonishment that must have rivaled my own. *He must be seriously amazing...* I'd made my decision. I'd take on the role of coach and put my classmates through a training program so hellish, they'd quit the club of their own accord.

Recovering from her astonishment, Ms. Musica finally broke the silence. "Well, it seems like everything is settled, then. What shall I put down for the club name?"

I thought for a moment. "Put down 'the Hill Path Club.'"

"'Hill Path'...? Well, a name is just a name, in the end, but don't you think choosing a club name so disconnected from the nature of your activities might cause you some problems later on?"

Honestly, the name I'd offered didn't have much significance behind it—actually, it had kind of just slipped out, but now I felt embarrassed at the thought of having to explain myself. Instead, I doubled down.

"Disconnected? It's anything but! Running up a hill with all your might and taking care not to fall on the way back down... When you think about it, the hill path symbolizes the paths we take in life! The hill path is a metaphor for the adverse circumstances we might face; at times, we might fall, but at other times, we might push ourselves beyond our limits! And it's only after you've completed your descent that you can truly reflect on how the trial has changed you! That is the true goal of the Hill Path Club!"

"Huh? Well, it's fine either way..."

That day marked the founding of the renowned Royal Academy Hill Path Club, which would later come to be known as "the cornerstone of the Unicorn Generation" and "the secret

compulsory subject at the Royal Academy.” It’d all started from a hobby of mine and a half-baked thought.

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Allen had departed the teachers’ lounge a moment before.

“Sage Godolphen, don’t you think your condition was a little too harsh? In the faculty meeting yesterday, you said you’d happily give up on the morning practical training for six months if it meant continuing to let the students voluntarily exhaust themselves perfecting the basics. But now you’re giving him only two months?”

Godolphen laughed. “There’s little merit in offering the boy a challenge I know he could overcome with ease, don’t you think? I want to see how he tackles the task I’ve laid before him. I’m particularly curious to see how he approaches the challenge of leading his classmates.”

Musica sighed, shaking her head in distaste. “And if he does manage to overcome your challenge, you’re going to reward him by introducing him to Dew, who specializes in Strengthening Magic—not Emissive! What are you planning to do when Dew refuses?”

Godolphen smiled. “Now, now. We’re talking about the man who was handpicked to become the captain of the Third Royal Legion at just thirty-eight years old! Do you really think if an unpolished gem like Allen came before him, he *wouldn’t* snatch him up?” He chuckled again, then burst into genuine laughter, which carried on for a good while afterward.

The Royal Library

Located in the northern part of Runerelia, the Royal Library of Yugria housed what was undoubtedly the largest collection of books in the kingdom. In this world, papermaking and printing technologies were common to some extent, so books weren’t so valuable that it was unthinkable for the common man to be able to get his hands on one or two. At the same time, they were still far more valuable than they had been in my past life in Japan. Most of them were dauntingly thick, with heavy leather bindings. And the Royal Library was said to possess several hundreds of thousands of these tomes, including an impressive collection of

those written in bygone eras when books had still been rare.

The second that classes ended on the third day after my admission to the Academy, I made my way toward the Royal Library without a moment's delay. My goal, of course, was to begin my research into Emissive Magic—in particular, into finding out whether it would ever be possible for an elementally deprived person like me to conjure up a fireball. Based on what Thora had said, it seemed even finding the information I wanted would be an uphill battle, but if I could even just find a clue, it might be enough to get started.

As I'd made my escape from the classroom earlier, Fey had approached me with her usual dangerous grin. "Running off again today, Allen? You know, getting to know your fellow classmates and strengthening the bonds between your families is one of the obligations of the nobility—I'd even say it's one of the most important duties we have," she'd said with a smile.

But, as would become the norm, I'd bluntly turned down her invitation to whatever dinner party or social gathering she was planning, throwing around her power as the heir to the Dragoon family. I couldn't speak for the rest of my classmates, but *my* parents hadn't instructed me to try and forge social connections for the sake of our family. I wasn't against the idea of making school friends and living out my youthful fantasies, but right now, my desire to sate my thirst for knowledge took priority.

Honestly, were I still possessed by the same personality I'd had in my past life, I'd probably have accepted Fey's invitation, plagued by thoughts like *"I have to fit in with everyone else,"* or *"I can't cause any trouble for my family,"* or even *"I should probably get in the future marquess's good graces."* Bound by the collectivist mentality caused by my Japanese upbringing, I would have doubtlessly cursed myself to live through three very normal, uneventful school years, fitting into the mold of society.

But I wasn't of that disposition anymore. Now I was driven by the simplistic, positive, and above all, self-centered personality of the preawakened Allen. Of course, the thirty-six years I'd spent living as a swot in the rigid society of Japan hadn't simply been wiped away the moment I'd woken up as a bratty twelve-year-old, but Allen's innate character hadn't been so easily changed either. I couldn't really guess at the details, but if Allen's disposition was somehow linked to the structure of his brain, then my awakening hadn't changed its shape, even if it had

maybe deepened the cerebral folds.

And I had long decided that in this lifetime, I wasn't going to live according to rules set by other people. That being the case, I didn't have a speck of interest in participating in the so-called power games of noble society.

By the time I'd changed out of my uniform and crossed through the rear gate into the city, I'd forgotten about Fey's invitation entirely. Walking the streets of the springtime city on my first solo exploration, there was an excited bounce in my step as I began to cut a path toward the northern quadrant.

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The Royal Library was a magnificent building constructed from a concrete-like stone and glass, which lent it a somewhat modern appearance (from my perspective, at least). I'd heard the library was a popular attraction for sightseers to the capital, so I'd been anticipating a more solemn building, like a renovated cathedral or something of that design. I wasn't particularly interested in historical sightseeing either way, so the unexpectedly contemporary design didn't bother me.

However, the peculiar, otherworldly atmosphere that engulfed me the moment I stepped inside did surprise me a little. The clamor of the outside world had vanished in an instant. It wasn't *completely* silent, and there were a few groups of what looked like sightseers wandering around the inside too, but it was still a vastly different atmosphere from that of the plaza just a few steps outside. I guessed that the gray stone walls (which had initially seemed like a dull choice to my Japanese tastes) probably had some special property that dampened the sounds of the outdoors.

Y'know, since most of the buildings in the capital are made out of brick, this uniquely concrete-ish building is *probably quite the attraction…*

As I looked around the entrance hall, I noticed that unlike the libraries I'd frequented in Japan, some sort of registration card was required here to enter the main section where the books were housed. A few people entered the main section ahead of me, passing their bags and any other belongings to an attendant at the counter who swiftly carried them into a nearby cloakroom. There were plenty of valuable books here, so it made sense

they'd have a measure like that to minimize the risk of theft.

Finally, I located a sign that read "New Visitor Registration," and I headed straight toward the indicated counter.

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"Welcome to the Royal Library. How may I assist you today?" asked the young librarian at the counter—Cara, according to her name tag—with a smile.

"Good afternoon. I'd like to do some research here, so I'd like to register—but I didn't realize I'd need to register, to be honest, so I don't have any way of proving my identity or anything like that…" I replied embarrassedly, scratching my head.

Cara laughed kindly and nodded. "Not to worry. If you can pay a deposit of one hundred riels and fill out this form here, we can issue you a temporary registration card, which will allow you to enter the general section of the library," she said, placing a form on the counter. "However, please keep in mind that this library is funded by and operated through the generosity of the royal family. While using the facilities, you must ensure you do not cause any damage to the books or to the facility itself—or you run the risk of being charged with treason," she finished with a smile.

I dug out my well-worn wallet from my pocket and began counting the slightly grubby coins, lining them up on the counter. "One hundred riels, if only barely," I said with an awkward smile. "By the way, if a temporary registration allows me to enter the general section, does that mean there's other sections of the library? Restricted ones?"

Cara tilted her head curiously. "Indeed, there are—five restricted sections, to be exact, and the higher the level of restriction, the stricter the conditions of entry. If you wanted to enter Restricted Section Five, you'd need permission from no less than the royal family themselves—that's just how precious the volumes stored there are, or so I've heard, anyway." She peered at me. "Is the information you're looking for likely to be so highly specialized?"

I nodded vigorously. "I'm not completely sure what exactly I'm looking for yet, but first, I want to read every book about Emissive Magic I can get my hands on!" In the end, even if the books in this library didn't give me any leads, I was still eager to

start learning more about the subject—I couldn't help being excited at the thought of casting a fireball, despite the fact that actually doing so was still beyond me. Of course, the ultimate goal was still to become able to cast Emissive Magic—but for now, even *reading* about it was enough to get my blood racing.

"Well, you're quite the enthusiastic one!" Cara giggled. "But if it's Emissive Magic you're after, you'll certainly have your work cut out for you. The collection here holds thousands of books on Emissive Magic, from introductory guides to incredibly specific essays. Although, for many of the more specialized texts, you'll need not only a background in magic but also a fairly deep understanding of linguistics and arithmetic… For someone your age, I think the books you'll find in the general section will teach you everything you'd need to know. Otherwise, the conventional textbooks you can pick up from any bookstore around here could give you a bit more depth on the subject without you needing access to the other sections of the library."

"Well then, guess I'll start my search in the general section—thank you for your help, Ms. Cara!" I said, bowing my head politely.

She looked taken aback for a moment, but then she smiled. "Someone's taught you your manners well! Just in case, I'll explain the restricted sections to you. Restricted Section One is available to anyone, provided they pay the access fee of three thousand riels. But to access any of the sections above that requires not only payment, but also for the applicant to be of a certain social standing and trustworthiness…" She paused. "Forgive me if I'm wrong, but it seems to me you've probably just moved to the capital as a student, yes? Well, if you're attending an Alliance school, if you get excellent grades and a recommendation from your teachers, you can be granted access to the first and second restricted sections for the length of your schooling—and without any access fees as well. So study hard!" Cara said with a wink, glancing at the worn-out wallet I was still holding—a hand-me-down from Grimm. Apparently, that had been enough of a clue for her to figure out my admittedly poor financial standing.

"Oh… You're right. I just arrived in Runerelia a few days ago… Uh, what's an 'Alliance' school?" I asked, to Cara's shock.

"You've never heard of the Alliance of Esteemed Colleges? You *really* must have come from one of the outer regions! The

Alliance is the name given to the four elite vocational schools here in the capital. Well, I guess you're attending a different school, but even then—if you get a recommendation from the right person or an early offer of employment in the government, you still might be able to enter the restricted sections. Honestly, though, it might not be worth the effort—I can't imagine many of the books in there would be of interest to most people."

Hmm, so this Alliance is something like the Ivy League, or like MARCH in Japan, then? Well, if the Royal Academy is meant to be the best school in the kingdom, there's no way they wouldn't have the same privileges here. Once I'm done with the books in the general section, I'll get Godolphen or someone to write me a recommendation.

"I didn't know there was such an 'alliance,' to be honest… So theoretically, say a student from the Royal Academy came here with a recommendation—could they access the restricted sections too?"

Apparently, the question had been a little naive, judging from Cara's laughter. "Makes sense that even a boy from way out in the countryside has heard of the Royal Academy. That school is special, even more so than the Alliance schools. A Royal Academy student can access the first three restricted sections, no recommendation or payment needed. They even have permission to borrow books from the special collections, and they can use the private reading rooms and lounges located in the second section and above. Imagine! Sitting around and drinking coffee while reading such valuable books…"

I haven't just heard *of the Royal Academy. I'm actually a student there…* I didn't know if it was because Royal Academy students were so rare in the first place or if it was just my appearance—either way, it didn't seem like the possibility I was one of those students had even crossed Cara's mind. For now, I let it slide.

"I don't think I could relax with a cup of coffee if I was surrounded by such expensive books," I laughed awkwardly. "I wouldn't be able to take anything in—not the taste of the coffee or the words on the page!"

"I know, right? It's an entirely different world from the one you and I live in. I'm just a basic librarian, so I only have access up to the second restricted section even though I'm an employee. I've never even set foot in the third section—although from what I hear, it's more a gathering place for the social elite than it is a

library section, anyway."

It seemed Cara was now firmly under the impression that we were both clinging to the same rung on the social ladder—although really, I barely considered myself a noble anyway, so she wasn't far off. At the end of the day, my business here was with the books themselves, not hanging around in the lounge and mingling.

"Still, isn't it a little wrong that students get access to different books based on the school they attend? It feels a little like academic discrimination…" I mumbled—more to myself than anything—but Cara had obviously heard me.

"Isn't that normal?" she said suspiciously. "I don't think it's discrimination to be treated differently based on your academic history—after all, that's what the entrance examinations are for. Excelling in something after you put in a lot of effort means you get special privileges."

So this world runs off that kind of biased ideology too, huh…?

I could acknowledge it wasn't an irrational way of thinking, to be sure, but if everyone's worth was measured by their academic skills alone, then interesting, talented people who just couldn't study would be quickly overlooked—people like the preawakened Allen, for one. Plus, in societies where education was everything, you ran the risk of mass-producing people who could study like swots at the cost of being entirely useless in the real world—again, just like me, this time in my past life.

When I voiced those thoughts to Cara, she tilted her head dubiously. "Well, there's exceptions to every rule, but I still think people can logically be judged by their academic history. I mean, to pass the Royal Academy entrance examinations, you'd have to excel in not only academics, but also in magical aptitude and physical abilities, right? And it's unlikely anyone who could pass all those tests would end up being useless in the real world, as you say."

I was beginning to understand something. This world was different from my previous one in that here, magic existed. Magical aptitude was thought to indicate one's innate talent, and what's more, it could be measured to a horrifyingly accurate degree. Every line of work in this world involved magic in some capacity. Strengthening Magic was crucial not only to soldiers and explorers, but also to those who worked in the fields or the factories—and of course, magical engineers and craftsmen

relied on a firm talent for magical manipulation. In a world where magic influenced everything to some degree, it certainly might be logical to judge someone based on their academic history—and the magical talent that history implied.

In some ways, this world might be even crueler than my old one…

"Well, everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, after all. That's why vocational schools are the most common. Like how the Advanced Institute of Politics and Economics—that's one of the four Alliance schools, by the way—has developed their entrance examinations to place far more emphasis on academic skills over magical talent," said Cara. Then, switching topics, she said, "Here! Your temporary registration card. It only lasts for a day, so be sure you come back to the counter before you leave to return it, or you won't get your deposit back. It's a bit of a hassle, so if you're planning to be here often, make sure you bring your identification papers along next time you visit and we'll issue you an official registration card for ten riels." With practiced hands, she swept my deposit off the counter and neatly into a coin box, then handed me my temporary card with a smile. "Well then, good luck with your search and your new life in the big city! You'll find the Emissive Magic section on the second floor of Block B."

"Block B, got it. And thank you for taking the time to explain everything to me!"

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The library was massive. Overwhelmingly so.

In Japan, land—especially flat land—had been scarce, and in this world, I'd grown up in a small, fortified city. After all, the smaller your city, the easier it was to protect it against monster attacks. Having been raised in such constrictive environments, the sheer sizes of the plots of land given to the buildings in the capital were mind-boggling to me.

Apart from the size, the first thing that struck me about the library was its extensive furnishings. A corridor around ten meters wide ran along the walls of the building, and you could find passages through to the center section every few meters. Countless tables, chairs, and comfortable-looking couches were placed at regular intervals along the corridor. The walls along the exterior of the building were largely made of glass, through which you could see a carefully tended garden. The garden was

also dotted with benches and gazebos. *I might try reading out there on a day with nice weather...*

The books were housed in the aforementioned center section. This section itself was composed of five connected rooms, which Cara had referred to as blocks. The library's books were classified by subject and stored in their respective blocks, which were labeled from A to E. In each block, a small set of stairs led to a mezzanine level, and from there you could head up to the second floor. Including the mezzanine levels, the general section had fifteen sections in total. Cara had said the Emissive Magic section was on the second floor of Block B—or B2 for short, according to a signpost that had caught my eye.

Each block was also fairly spacious and furnished with many couches and chairs in every nook and cranny. Unlike the corridor, which was flooded with natural light from the outdoors, the blocks had magical lamps that provided the necessary light for reading, which generated a calmer, solemn feeling for each room.

And this was just the general section. A staircase at the back of the second floor led to the first restricted section, and apparently, a passageway in that section led to the other restricted areas, housed in a separate annex entirely.

With my temporary registration, I couldn't take a peek at the restricted sections, but the glimpse I'd caught of the separate annex while outside had looked more like the library I'd imagined before my arrival here earlier—a grand, majestic building looking exactly like it had been converted from an old cathedral or something. It'd seemed just like the sort of place the upper class would use as a gathering spot, like Cara had implied. I assumed what was now the restricted annex had originally been the proper library, and the modern building I was currently standing in had been constructed to accommodate the growing population of the capital.

In my past life as a swot, I'd frequented the public libraries around my neighborhood on a daily basis. They had typically been Japanese in construction—which is to say, they'd been cramped—and claiming one of the few uncomfortable desks there had been like playing musical chairs. I had never seen or heard of a library like the one I stood in now, and my heart was racing at the thought of exploring it.

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One week had passed since my first visit to the Royal Library, and every day ever since, I'd headed back immediately after school to continue my research into Emissive Magic.

On the day after my first visit, I'd returned with my school identification papers in hand and received my official registration card. Although I wasn't fond of being treated differently just because I was from the Royal Academy, I also wasn't going to limit the information I had access to just because of it. I needed to use all the resources available to me—after all, that was the reason I'd come to the capital in the first place.

I picked up the book I'd left half finished the day before and made my way to my favorite spot: a simple but well-made armchair with a small side table, hidden away behind the shelves at the back of B3 in the first restricted section. I'd found that the general section, whilst not particularly noisy, was often crowded with sightseers. I'd also wandered into the restricted annex one afternoon, but the furnishings and atmosphere there had been too refined for my tastes, and I'd found myself unable to relax. I'd tested out one of the private reading rooms as well, but it had been *too* quiet there to concentrate. In my opinion, libraries were meant to have that special type of ambience—where the sounds of other people just barely reached your ears and heightened your focus. This spot, where the hustle and bustle of the general section below trickled quietly upward, and where people only occasionally passed by, was perfect for me. In the early evenings, the western sunlight filtered through the stained glass windows, softly dwindling until only the magical lamps shimmered with warm light. And so, like a cat perched on its favorite stretch of wall, I curled up in the same armchair day after day.

"That's certainly some concentration—no less than I'd expect from a Royal Academy student, I guess." I'd been immersed in my reading, taking one book after another from the mountain I'd built on the table next to me, when someone spoke. I looked up to find Cara standing in front of me. I hadn't encountered her since she'd so kindly explained everything to me on my first visit.

"Good evening, Ms. Cara... Uh, how do you know I'm from the Academy?"

She giggled. "This week, I'm the supervisor for Restricted Section One, and whenever someone enters or leaves a

restricted section, the receptionist has to make a note of it. I was in for a surprise when I saw your name—but not as much as I was when I checked your registration records…"

I scratched my head awkwardly. "Sorry… I wasn't trying to lie to you, I promise. I just missed my chance to tell you…"

Cara waved off my apology. "Don't worry about it—if anything, I should be the one apologizing. I'm reluctant to admit it, but after I'd seen your clothes and your worn-out wallet, the thought that you might be a Royal Academy student never occurred to me. It was very rude of me, so I wanted to find you and apologize."

"Come to think of it, you guessed that I was fresh off the train from the countryside the moment you saw me. Do I really look that much like a bumpkin?" I asked, smiling awkwardly. Truthfully, I didn't really know anything about fashion. I simply had no interest in it, and I hadn't in the last world either.

"Yep. Frankly speaking, you look downright frumpy," replied Cara, sticking out her tongue. She laughed as I looked down at my clothing forlornly. "You might be brand-new to the place, but even then, you really just don't give off the vibe of one of those Royal Academy kids. If I hadn't seen you reading just now, I still don't think I would have believed it. How can you read so quickly and still take anything in?"

Speed-reading was a skill that could be acquired with enough practice—and I'd practiced plenty in my past life. Plus, my brain was better in this world, so naturally, when I was reading something interesting, I sped up without really noticing.

"Well, I remember most of it, anyway," I said with a shrug. "But by the way, can you really tell when someone's from the Academy? Like you said, I've only just started there, but my classmates don't seem all that bad—at least, they don't seem like they'd go around showing off." Before I'd met them, I'd assumed I would be sharing desks with a bunch of proud and snooty noble kids, but I had yet to encounter anyone who'd met those expectations. *Well, I suppose it isn't particularly rational to boast about being a Royal Academy student while* inside *the Royal Academy, but still…*

"Hmm… It's not that they show off or anything, really. They're just…different. I don't get the chance to interact with Royal Academy students that often, but the ones I have met never went around flaunting it. Students from one of the Alliance

schools or another school of slightly less prestige tend to behave that way, though."

That made sense. In my previous life, the only people who'd gone around boasting about the university they'd attended were the ones who'd had nothing else to boast about. The truly talented people wouldn't have bothered to speak of it, even if they'd gone to the best university in the country. The students who'd managed to get accepted into the Royal Academy weren't the type to go around flaunting it.

"Even then, though, Academy students are definitely hard to approach—it's like you can tell they're a different type of people just by looking at them. There's a peculiar atmosphere around them—excluding you, of course." On that note, Cara picked up one of the books I'd finished reading and opened it to a page at random. "Question time! Spiel Janeiro, the Founding Father of Medical Magic, is thought to have based his fundamental theory of medical magic on the works of another mage of the same era—"

"The essays of Hall Meraness, right? His theories on efficiency in elemental conversion are still the basis of elemental magic today, and many think Janeiro based his explanation of medical magic on Meraness's work. The book you're holding supports that argument too. But my tutor always doubted the truth of those arguments, and I tend to agree with him. The processes Janeiro outlines in his theory are fundamentally different from those explained by Meraness."

It had already been the subject of many debates between me and Soldo during my time back in Crauvia. Before he'd become a private tutor, he'd apparently been a researcher specializing in Emissive Magic Theory. Although he'd never left much of a mark in the research world, he still had an impressive scope of knowledge on the subject. Since the start of his employment as a private tutor for House Rovene, not a single child had been born with the talent for Emissive Magic—so when I'd suddenly developed a keen interest in the subject after my awakening, I knew he'd been secretly pleased at the chance to discuss his favorite topic once again. He was less of a researcher and more of an Emissive Magic geek...

"Wow... I have no idea what you're saying, but I'm sure it wasn't the type of answer a normal twelve-year-old would have been capable of. Given that you got accepted into the Royal

Academy, I'm sure that tutor of yours was one of the best in the kingdom as well!" said Cara.

I couldn't help but smile as thoughts of Soldo's weary, bloodshot eyes and our endless debates sprang into my head. When my questions had led us away from the content of the exams—a frequent occurrence—Soldo had admonished me, saying, *"The Royal Academy does not require so deep an understanding! You'll have plenty of time to study whatever you desire after your admission, so turn your focus back to the main lesson!"* But I hadn't ever relented, and every time, Soldo had ended up answering my questions in minute detail, a smile on his weathered face.

"Yeah... I couldn't compare him to any of the other tutors in the kingdom, but he's passionate, for sure. He's over sixty years old, and yet we often ended up nearly getting into fistfights while we argued about magical theories." I laughed. A feeling of homesickness unbecoming of someone my age (although, saying that, I was also only twelve depending on how you looked at it) came over me. I wished I could see Soldo's smiling face.

Cara stared at me for a moment, as if she was turning my answer over in her head, before she replied. "You really do look up to that tutor of yours," she said, breaking into a gentle smile. "I think that's wonderful."

"I do. I look up to him, and I'm eternally grateful to him. To me, he's not just a tutor—he's kind of like my comrade-in-arms," I said.

Cara laughed and bowed her head. "I've kept you for long enough. Please, enjoy your reading," she said, and she departed for the reception area.

I pictured Soldo's face once again—and then, with a smile on my face, I reimmersed myself in the world of the book before me.

Coaching, and Meeting the Neighbors

Two weeks had passed since my admission to the Royal Academy, and already, I was finding myself with nothing but free time. Up until now, I'd had the exams to focus on, so I'd filled every spare second with extra studying. But now that I'd been accepted, I had no plans to keep up the habit. If I just kept studying all the time like I'd done in my past life, the next three

years of what should be a fun-filled school life would pass me by in a flash.

For the last two weeks, I'd spent my time after school devoting myself to researching Emissive Magic at the Royal Library. Day after day, I'd trodden the same path through the city to head to the library, where I would scan the shelves for anything that might give me a lead on being able to cast a fireball myself one day. Although I'd told myself over and over again that I was there for my own purposes, not for studying, my routine had ultimately begun to mirror the life I'd lived back in Japan—from school straight to the library, stay until closing time, borrow the books I hadn't finished that day, drop by for a quick meal somewhere on the way home, then keep reading until I fell asleep, all while telling myself I was doing the right thing, despite my growing frustration.

After those two weeks at the Royal Library, once I'd read every book even tangentially related to the subject and failed to come up with any leads, I'd really started to lose my cool. At this rate, I'd end up doing nothing but studying and swinging a wooden sword around for the rest of my school years.

When I'd enrolled at the school, I'd ignorantly thought I would be able to join a school club and spend my days doing fun activities with my clubmates—only to discover that none of the few remaining clubs actually did anything resembling club activities in the slightest. The Hill Path Club, which I'd started on Godolphen's suggestion, only got together in the mornings, so that did nothing to alleviate my boredom after class or on my days off.

On that note, I'd already created a detailed training plan for each and every one of my classmates after interviewing them about their individual goals and analyzing their current abilities. I'd divided the club members into two groups—those who started from the main gate, like me, and those who would start from the rear gate. I'd given them each a personalized starting time, number of hill sprints, and focus areas, and then I'd left them to their training. They'd come this far just getting into the Royal Academy; they didn't need me to baby them through their training. I knew they'd be able to work out any other problems by themselves.

I had only one rule.

Anyone who couldn't run the full forty-kilometer course plus a

minimum of three hill sprints in under an hour and forty-five minutes was placed in the rear gate team to run a half course instead—although, by the time they got back to their dormitory, even the half course was closer to thirty kilometers anyway.

My classmates, considered the best of the best throughout the kingdom, had mostly found themselves in the rear gate team. Smugly, I'd told them, *"You guys are the dregs of this club. If you don't like it, work your way up to the main gate team quickly or just quit."* Their faces had twisted in collective frustration at my declaration. A few of them had even had tears in their eyes.

I'd felt a little bad about treating them like that, but I hadn't had any other choice. The system I'd devised for the club was the only way I'd be able to meet the condition Godolphen had set for me. If they wanted to complain, they could go complain to him for all I cared. Supposing they were able to work their way up to the main gate team, then as long as they started running early enough, they'd be able to restore their mana before classes started each day. If they couldn't manage it, then running half the distance, they'd have two months to develop their magical manipulation and compression enough that they could still restore their mana before classes. And if they got frustrated and quit the club, they were no longer my problem.

Mwa ha ha. That's right. With this scheme, there's no way I can lose.

Godolphen couldn't argue that I was cutting corners with those who were eager to follow my guidance by making them run a half course. I had simply set up a training program for them that corresponded with their abilities. Besides, if they followed the instructions I'd given them, there was no way their abilities wouldn't actually improve—and if they were improving, the old man had no reason to complain.

Just to demonstrate that I was really giving it my all, I'd planned out everyone's starting times to ensure I could overtake every one of them during *my* morning lap and offer them words of "encouragement."

"Stop thinking and start feeling! I told you the same thing yesterday. Just go home!"

"You're relying too much on your Strengthening Magic! You go home too!"

"Don't look with your eyes! Look with the eyes of your heart, and listen to your feet! To hell with it—you should just give up."

Half the time, I had no idea what I was saying. Regardless, the goal was to get them to quit—and yet, so far, not a single person had actually resigned from the club. They were sure to start dropping like flies soon, though. From my past life, I knew better than anyone how quickly someone who was trying their best could give up when faced with illogical, unreasonable harassment from their boss.

I'd also belatedly realized that if someone did manage to work their way up to the main gate team, it would mean they'd have to change their routine, despite how strongly I'd lectured them on the importance of running the same course every day to measure their improvement. But I'd simply ignored the realization. The only crucial point here was that without changing my own routine, I was going to be able to overcome Godolphen's challenge.

So, essentially, the Hill Path Club was already running itself, and as the sun rose on my second weekend after starting at the Academy, I found myself with nothing to do. I couldn't help my desire to study or practice my sword strokes, but if that was all I did, soon enough it would become my "hobby," and then where would I be? Hunched over a desk and missing any promising chances to abscond and start my life as an outlaw from society, that was for sure. I'd just be repeating my past life, where I'd wound up studying for useless qualifications.

And so, after finishing my breakfast and with nothing better to do, I ended up in the front garden of the dorm, fruitlessly attempting to conjure up a fireball. But then I had a rare encounter: Another resident of the standard dorm, a boy, came out through the front doors, a woven basket strapped to his back. The basket, along with the rugged outfit he was wearing, made it look like he was about to go gather firewood. Out of curiosity, I decided to call out to him.

"Good morning! I'm Allen—Allen Rovene. It's a pleasure to meet you," I said politely. I didn't know which year he was in, but he looked too old to be a first-year like me, so politeness was called for.

The boy looked surprised when he heard my name. "You're Allen? That first-year in Class A? Huh... I'm Reed Gourshe, third-year, Class B. Y'know, there's a lot of rumors flying around about how you're a real weirdo, incredibly dangerous, and a sexual deviant—but you look pretty normal to me," he laughed.

I laughed too, although mine was a little more strained. “Ha ha… Funny rumors, but entirely untrue, I’m afraid.”

Not that I don’t know why those rumors probably started… But Gourshe, huh? That’s not a name I came across when I was preparing for the Academy. He was either from a no-name baron family or otherwise maybe a commoner.

“What are you doing hanging around the standard dorm, though?” asked Reed curiously.

“Hanging around? I actually live here… I just finished Thora’s breakfast, and now I’m killing time with some training.”

Now Reed was looking at me like I *was* the rumored “real weirdo.” “You ate breakfast at this dorm?! Wow.” He frowned. “Your acceptance into Class A got formalized, right? Aren’t you going to move into the Noble Dorm?”

“I don’t see the need, really. I could ask you the same—if you’re in Class B, why are you living in the standard dorm?”

“Ah, that’s because of my family’s business—they run an apothecary. Whenever I can find the time away from studying, I go out to gather herbs and mushrooms and the like, and I sell them back to my family—at a discount, of course. This dorm is much closer to the rear gate, which makes it easier for me to head out whenever I can. I’m part of the common folk, so I have to do what I can to support myself to some extent,” he finished, laughing wryly.

Instantly, I found myself warming to Reed. A graduate from Class B at the Royal Academy was basically guaranteed the well-paid career of their choice, but this upperclassman of mine didn’t seem conceited in the slightest. In fact, he seemed utterly down-to-earth. The fact that he’d passed up moving into the Noble Dormitory in order to focus on the things he needed to do made me like him even more.

“Is that where you’re off to now? If it’s okay with you, would you take me along?” I’d thought it was a pretty normal request, but Reed’s eyes widened in shock.

“I don’t mind taking you along,” he said after a moment. “But I can tell you now, it’s very boring work, you know? And probably not the kind of thing that’ll be of any use to you in the future. I’ve never heard of a royal knight who had to forage for his own medicinal herbs.”

“I’m not necessarily planning on joining the Royal Order, though. There’s a good chance I’ll actually end up becoming an

explorer. And gathering herbs and things is basically what every new explorer gets assigned to do, right? It could be a very useful skill to learn, so please, take me with you—if it's not too much trouble?"

It was more or less set in stone that an explorer's debut assignment would be to gather medicinal herbs. *And when I return with an unbelievable number of herbs and dump them on the counter, right in front of the guild receptionist who'd haughtily brushed me aside thinking I was no more than a naive, cocky newcomer... Now* that's *the reincarnation cliché I've been dreaming of.* I didn't have cheat codes, but if I practiced for my exploring debut starting here and now, I'd still be able to live out one of my fantasies.

And anyway, I had nothing better to do at the moment.

But my dream was ruthlessly crushed by Reed's next words. "Ha! You definitely are a complete weirdo. I don't think you'll need to do any foraging assignments, you know. If you register with the Explorer's Guild as a current Academy student, you're automatically granted D-Rank, and graduates are promoted to C-Rank unconditionally. There's no herb-gathering missions around these parts dangerous or profitable enough for them to assign to a D-Rank explorer," he laughed.

But I don't want that kind of special treatment... Bitterly, I realized I had basically already reached the same rank our gardener Oliver had spent fifteen years struggling to attain—and I hadn't even registered yet.

Well, fine. Even if that's the case, I'm still interested in learning about the materials of this world. I already had a grasp on the basics from books, but that was nothing compared to the chance to learn from an expert, and out in the field too. "Still, please take me with you!" I said, intensifying my request with a forty-five-degree bow.

Reed cheerfully assented.

My First Hunting and Gathering

"So what are you foraging for today?" I asked Reed. I'd grabbed my wooden sword and writing materials from my room, and now we were sitting in a shared stagecoach, en route to an unknown destination. Other than the two of us, there were another two well-equipped occupants in the stagecoach who I

assumed were explorers.

"Hmm... Well, it's not like it's set in stone, but I'd like to gather herbs used for making salves, as well as herbs used to recover energy and mana. And while we're searching, I need to keep an eye out for distribution and growth levels—for future trips." He paused for a moment. "You might have already heard, but there's been some unsettling rumors lately—and because of that, herbs like those are in short supply, even though they're usually plentiful."

The rumors he'd mentioned must have been what Godolphen had been talking about: that a war might break out in the near future. I'd wondered whether it had been a good idea to entrust new students with such important information, but it seemed like the rumor was already spreading among the public anyway.

"The forest we're heading to is relatively safe and not all that far from the capital, but there's always the chance a monster might pop up. Have you ever fought a monster?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. Before my awakening, I'd begged Beck, my second-oldest brother, to let me accompany him on a routine culling of the local monster population, but all I'd ultimately done was observe the soldiers from a safe distance. If he was asking about actual fighting experience, I had zero—neither against monsters nor against other people, except sparring. Unconsciously, I tightened my grip on my wooden sword—but Reed noticed and chuckled.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much. Even if we do encounter a monster today, it won't be dangerous enough to be a problem for a kid who scored the highest grade in the physical exam. And if it comes to it, I assume you know how to run away, right?" he laughed. I loosened my grip and smiled, my face a little red.

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Our destination turned out to be a forest at the foot of Mount Gryetess, which loomed over Runerelia from the east. The river that started high up the mountainside and ran through the forest was the main source of water for the capital. We disembarked from the stagecoach at the entrance to a small village but immediately headed into the forest instead.

"Since you came all the way out here with me, I better try and teach you as much as I can," said Reed with a grin. Leaving the

small path that led into the forest, he pushed his way through some bushes to pluck a single blade of a grasslike herb. “This is yukeweed. The stalk can be used to heal injuries. It grows in forests like this all over the kingdom, so most people consider it the most common medicinal herb. When you use it, you should boil the stalk in a small amount of water to concentrate the healing properties, then pour the water over the affected area. In a pinch, you can grind the stem with some water and slather it over the wound, but it won’t be as effective.”

“That black mushroom with the white, diamond-shaped spots is a dramant mushroom,” Reed continued. “It’s great for restoring stamina. Most of the time, people dry it, grind it down to a powder, and mix it into a cup of water. It tastes pretty good, so you can eat it normally as well, but the ones with an open cap, like that one there”—he pointed to one of the mushrooms—“can induce sleep. So you have to be careful if you’re going to eat them out in the forest.”

“These flowers with the orange petals are called hinhush flowers,” he went on. “They would have only just started blooming, and they’ll stay until around the end of spring. You can only really find them between here and the northern areas of the kingdom, so this is probably the first time you’ve seen them—you came from Dragoon, right? Anyway, the petals are usually boiled and compressed into pills, then taken to speed up mana restoration.” He looked at me kindly, if a little sharply. “I probably don’t have to tell you this, but relying on supplements like this or dramant ultimately limits your natural potential. They’re not the kind of thing you use just because.”

Reed’s explanations continued; he introduced me to all kinds of magical herbs and plants, including descriptions of other materials we wouldn’t come across in this forest. He showed no sign of frustration as I peppered him with questions about preparation methods, optimal gathering locations, and preservation techniques, as well as anything else that popped into my mind. Although most of it was probably common knowledge, I still appreciated that he shared his preferred methods and techniques with me without hesitation or reluctance. There was a massive difference between reading about something in a book and seeing it done right before your eyes.

Didn’t Confucius say something like that? “There’s no greater

pleasure than practicing what you have learned"…or something to that effect, anyway.

But the thing I was enjoying the most about our outing was the fact that Reed was clearly enjoying himself. Whether he was gathering herbs or pointing them out to me, he was smiling—and that smile hadn't left his face since we'd started. It was obvious to me that Reed, like the flowers that surrounded us, thrived out in the forest, and I couldn't stop myself from getting swept up in his enthusiasm.

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"Is this really so interesting to you?" asked Reed, looking at me curiously as I made yet another note in the book I'd brought along. It was now well past noon, and we'd been out here for hours, not even stopping for lunch.

"Of course! I get excited just hearing the words 'magical herbs'—who wouldn't?"

Reed laughed. "I think you're the only student at the Royal Academy who'd say that, to be honest. You're an odd kid, Allen. You sure you're not thinking about becoming a botanist or something like that?"

"I haven't decided what I'm planning to do yet, but I'm not ruling anything out—botany could be fun too," I said. I'd become more and more fond of Reed as the hours had passed.

"Well, since you seem to be enjoying yourself so much, and because there's no school tomorrow as well… There's a small campsite set up a little way back into the forest. Do you want to stay the night, and we'll keep foraging for a bit in the morning?" he asked. "I say 'campsite,' but I should mention it's just a run-down old shack, so maybe it's not suitable lodgings for a noble kid like yourself," he chuckled.

"Really?! Let's do it! Please!" I answered without hesitation.

Reed smiled at me. "Well, in that case, we'll need to find some food."

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"There's a small stream just ahead. We can get water there, and maybe we can even snare a fish or two," Reed said before descending into a thick patch of bushes and leading the way

forward. After a few minutes, he stopped suddenly, signaling to me to do the same. His next words came as a whisper.

"There's a monster."

Moving carefully, I looked beyond the bushes, trying my hardest not to make a sound. Sure enough, in the clearing ahead of us was a rabbit drinking from the small stream we'd been making for. A light-blue horn, about twenty centimeters long, sprouted from its forehead.

"A water-type horned rabbit. They're usually pretty timid monsters, but when they've got an elemental affinity, they can be pretty aggressive..." murmured Reed in a hushed tone. "It looks like it's alone. We'd probably be able to take it on, but what do you want to do?"

"It's up to you," I whispered back. I did want to test myself against a monster, but I also had no experience dealing with them. It seemed wiser to leave the decision to Reed.

"Well, since we've come this far...let's make a party out of it. Horned rabbit's on the menu tonight," he said, grinning. "I'll chase it toward you, but do you think you'll be able to handle finishing it off? You won't have to worry about its water magic, but you will need to be careful if it rushes you with the horn—I've heard stories of it being fatal if it gets you in the wrong spot."

I nodded. "Okay. I'll sneak around the back, up on top of that ledge," I said, indicating a small precipice behind the rabbit.

"So you've seen someone hunting horned rabbits before, then?"

"No—but I've read the *Canardian Encyclopedia of Monsters* too many times to count. Horned rabbits have particularly strong back legs, so when chased, they tend to flee upward, where most predators can't follow them."

"Didn't realize I had an expert with me!" He grinned. "Guess I don't need to worry about you. Signal me once you're ready."

Cautiously, I made my way around the back of the clearing and climbed to the top of the five-meter-high ledge. Then I waved to Reed.

At my signal, he jumped out of the bushes with a hunting knife in hand, thundering toward the horned rabbit. The monster immediately swung its head in the direction of the noise. From the horn, it shot out a jet of water, as powerful as a firefighter's hose. Then it turned and ran—right toward the ledge.

I flooded my body with Strengthening Magic and leaped. The rabbit jumped as I rushed down toward it, and as we passed each other in midair, I swung my wooden sword, severing the blue horn right down the middle.

The rabbit crashed to the dirt below. With the damage I'd done to the horn, which doubled as its mana core, it'd been nearly dead before it had even hit the ground. I landed on my feet and swung around, still gripping my sword tightly. I stared warily at the rabbit until, with a final, pathetic kick, the monster stilled, never to move again.

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"Beautiful work," said Reed, coming up to confirm the monster's death for himself. He was dry; somehow, he'd managed to avoid the horned rabbit's water attack entirely. "Are you sure this is your first time hunting monsters? That was flawless."

"Thanks—but I messed up. I was trying to be careful, but I ended up flailing like a kid holding a sword for the first time. Sorry for breaking the horn. What a waste…" I said, looking sadly at the horn split down the middle. If I'd been able to cut it off neatly at the base, it could have been used as a magic stone and sold for a decent price. As it was, it was useless, the magic properties destroyed by the vertical cut.

Reed laughed. "Don't be too upset! After all, we were hunting for meat, and you brought it down like a seasoned hunter. When I heard it was your first time, I thought you'd probably make a real mess of it if you managed to hit it at all. Most newbies would have hacked at it, cutting open all the organs and leaving us with a pretty stinky meal," he said, gagging a little at the thought, or maybe a memory. "But man, when you just flew right past it and took it down with one swing—I was impressed, I gotta tell you. I wouldn't have been able to do it." He smiled and clapped me on the shoulder. "We're in for a feast tonight thanks to you!" With that, he knelt down and dragged the rabbit over to the stream to begin processing the kill, draining the blood into the flowing water.

"We're not planning on catching any fish?" I asked. With the amount of blood he was letting into the water, I doubted we'd be able to lure any fish toward us for a while.

“Nah. This will be more than enough food for the two of us, and we’re not really gonna be able to carry much back with us tomorrow, so I don’t want to have any leftovers if we can avoid it. Besides, if we don’t process it right away, it’ll start to smell, and if we don’t wash away the blood and guts, the scent will attract more monsters.” Reed carefully cut open the rabbit with his hunting knife and gingerly pulled out the organs, throwing them into the running water where they were quickly carried away. He then began to wash out the cavity with more water from the stream.

Frankly, the sight was turning my stomach, but I forced myself to keep watching Reed, committing the process to memory. Finally, once he had finished his work, he handed the surprisingly heavy carcass back over to me, and together we began our journey back through the forest toward our campsite.

Camp

It took us around twenty minutes to arrive at the campsite. A weather-beaten hut, built long ago from the look of it, sat in the middle of the small clearing. Like Reed had said, it didn’t look particularly comfortable, but it seemed sturdy enough to at least provide shelter from any rain or wind. It was probably around 4 or 5 p.m. by the time we arrived, judging by the position of the sun.

“All right,” Reed said. “Let’s gather some firewood and eat sooner rather than later—I’m thinking if we go to sleep nice and early, we can wake up around 3 a.m. and go foraging for plants that can only be gathered before the sun starts rising.” Together, we quickly gathered some kindling and larger logs, and he began trying to light the small stone firepit that previous campers had built. It would have been quicker if he’d sent me out alone to gather the wood, but he’d guessed that I would want to watch him set up the firepit so I could learn how to do it too. *Competent guys like Reed are considerate about stuff like this too, I guess.*

The fire lit. He dusted off a small iron pot from where it had been hidden next to the stone pit, then positioned it over the opening at the top of the small pit. Next, he dug out the waterskin we’d filled at the stream earlier and poured it into the pot. Steam began to rise from it nearly immediately. With quick,

practiced movements, he skinned the horned rabbit and carved it into pieces, then carefully dropped the tail and forelegs into the pot with a few of the mushrooms we'd gathered earlier for good measure.

"I didn't think I'd be camping out here today, so I didn't bring any seasonings, except for a bit of rock salt that's always in my bag," Reed explained, smiling ruefully.

Mentally, I made a note of the things I'd need to carry on me anytime I set out on another excursion like today's. *A knife like Reed's that can cut through both herbs and animals. A waterskin. Rock salt. A magic fire-starter.* Even if I had no plans to camp, there was always a chance something would go wrong somewhere and I'd end up stuck in a forest like this one for a night, or even longer. I'd have to make sure I had at least the essential tools to survive.

"I'm surprised you're not exhausted, though," laughed Reed. "Do you go hiking often?"

"Never, really. But I'm fine! Don't worry about me."

"I've been coming out into this forest since I was a few years old, and I'm still exhausted from the distance we ran around today," he chuckled. "Looks like the rumors about your stamina are true, at least. Guess that hellish morning training everyone's talking about isn't just for show."

"Hellish? They're exaggerating. It's just a bit of running."

"I've heard even the famous Leo Seizinger can barely keep up with it, and here you are calling it 'just a bit of running'... Well, everyone is saying the club is run by a demon, after all," he said with another laugh, winking at me. "Are there any requirements to join?"

"Requirements? No... Wait, are you saying you're interested in joining?!"

"I think the whole school is interested in joining!" He laughed again. "Look, everyone knows the new students this year are special, even considering we're at the Royal Academy. Then add the fact that, on his second day of school, some kid no one's ever heard of sets up a club with all those prodigies, and with Godolphen the Buddha as the club adviser to boot! Everyone's desperate to find out what's going on."

I wasn't particularly thrilled about the attention the Hill Path Club seemed to be receiving, but I was also excited at the idea of Reed joining the club.

“Well, do you want to come down and try it out one morning next week? You’d be more than welcome to join if you like it.”

“I’ll probably take you up on that offer. I could do with a bit more stamina training, honestly.” He paused for a moment before continuing, his voice a little more serious. “But you might want to be a little more careful, Allen. Listen—you came out of nowhere and somehow got the top score on the physical exam. That was enough to get everyone’s attention. But then, on top of that, you managed to keep your spot in Class A despite the suspicions you cheated. No one’s ever done that before. It’s not hard to imagine that right now, you’re the favorite topic in all the high-society circles across the capital, not just at school. Everyone’s probably desperate for information on Allen Rovene.”

Reed sighed, then went on. “Look, I got the chance to spend a lot of time with you today, but I’m not planning on letting the rest of them find out about it, if I can help it. If people think I have information on you, my parents’ apothecary will be flooded with people digging for info, and eventually, even my parents will give up and start pestering me to tell them something, just to get the nosy bastards out of their hair.” Reed’s face was still serious.

“Thanks for the advice, Reed, but I think you’re exaggerating,” I said with a laugh. “Well, do you want to meet me at the rear gate around half past five the day after tomorrow? You can get a feel for the club, and we can swap thoughts on stamina training.”

I chuckled again. I did appreciate Reed’s advice, but after all, he did come from a commoner family—he didn’t understand there was no way a simple boy like me could become the hot topic among the nobility of the kingdom’s capital.

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“Right, it looks like the soup is ready. Let’s get the meat roasting.” Reed removed the pot from the flames, replacing it with two chunks of meat from the ribs of the animal, speared on his hunting knife. He’d rubbed the meat with a bit of the rock salt he’d dug out of his pouch. A tantalizing scent began to drift over the campsite.

“It’s done,” he said a short while later. He slid one of the chunks off the knife and handed it to me carefully. It was hot,

though I could just barely hold it, and I blew on it quickly to cool it down. I took a bite, and my eyes widened.

"It's delicious! But…"

Reed laughed, raising an eyebrow. "But it's tough, right? Usually, horned rabbit meat is aged for at least ten days before being cooked to make it softer. Right after it's killed is when it's at its toughest—but it's a taste only people who've hunted it themselves get to experience, so I'm a little partial to it," he said with a grin. "Here, try the soup."

Accepting the pot he'd offered, I cautiously drank a mouthful of the soup. My eyes widened again as I tasted the broth—it was rich and deeply flavored despite only being seasoned with salt. It reminded me of a broth made from chicken carcasses, but with an unusual, although not unpleasant, additional flavor. I snagged some meat from one of the bones, and it tore away with ease. It was much more tender than the roasted meat I'd eaten just before. I looked at Reed questioningly.

"It's the dramant mushrooms. They soften the fibers of the meat and make it easier to eat. Plus, they're great for restoring some of the energy we lost running all over the forest today—not that you need it, though," explained Reed, smiling wryly.

"It's delicious. Thank you." I was unexpectedly moved by the taste of the first meal I'd hunted with my own hands. *I'm glad I came along with Reed today.*

"And now for the main dish…" Reed cut off a piece of the liver, the only organ he'd saved while cleaning the rabbit earlier. He'd sprinkled it heavily with salt and seared it lightly over the flames. When I took a bite, I found that contrary to its sticky, unappetizing appearance, it had a meaty texture and a rich, savory taste.

Damn, it's good… This would be a perfect drinking snack… Wistfully, I wished for a highball to accompany the slices of liver, but I was pretty sure carbonated drinks had yet to be invented in this world.

Incidentally, there were no age restrictions for drinking alcohol in my new world. However, it was common practice for parents to forbid their children from drinking until after the age of twelve, when their mana cores had fully developed. It was well-known that drinking before the core had finished developing could damage the natural capacity—plus, once the core had fully developed, it became a lot harder to get drunk, for

some reason. After the age of twelve, it was quite common for noble children to begin drinking, especially considering all the socializing they'd have to do, but unfortunately for us, alcohol was not permitted on the Academy grounds.

"Reed, thank you for bringing me along with you today. If we get the chance, I'd love to do it again sometime," I said, bowing deeply, although I remained seated on the ground.

Reed laughed. "I'm looking forward to it. But I have to ask—what's up with the head thing? You did it this morning as well."

Competent guys like Reed pick up on everything, huh?

For a while, I passionately rambled on about the sacred and noble art of bowing—although I pretended it was something Soldo had taught me rather than a habit from my past life. Reed listened with intense curiosity. Finally, when I'd finished, he spoke.

"Well, then…" He straightened his back and looked me directly in the eyes. "Thank you for inviting me to join you for training." He bowed his head toward me. The movement was a little rough, but I could sense he'd sincerely taken what I'd told him on board.

We continued for a while, chatting about various things while alternating between sips of the delicious soup and bites of the roasted meat, which had become far easier to chew after I'd used Strengthening Magic to reinforce my jaw muscles. Eventually, our meal was over, and we cleaned up and headed into the hut for a short rest.

Reed dozed off quickly, but I still had energy to spare and couldn't get to sleep. I thought about getting up, but I wasn't sure if it would be safe to go out into the forest at night, although apparently it wasn't dangerous enough for us to need to take turns keeping watch overnight. I would have probably been safe if I stayed in the campsite and trained with my sword, but I couldn't bear the thought of waking Reed with my movements—not after the generosity he'd shown me. Instead, I sat in the hut and worked on my magical compression until very late, eventually drifting off for a few hours.

We got up just before three in the morning and started off in search of a particular mushroom that apparently glowed in the moonlight. It was still pitch-black outside, except for the dim light of the moon, which faded as we entered the thicket of trees. However, Reed led the way with ease. "I know the trails around here like the back of my hand," he said with a shrug.

“Plus, I’ve spent a good bit of time working on my nightgaze.”

It was possible to manipulate your Strengthening Magic to cover the outside of your body, like when using Magic Guard for external defense. However, it was also possible to focus that magic over your eyes or ears, for example, extending the power of your senses. Scouting Magic was the common term for any type of sense-enhancing Strengthening Magic, although it had other uses beyond detecting enemies. I hadn’t bothered much with the notion of it. I’d wanted to learn how to use *real* external magic—Emissive Magic—not what I’d spurned as the poor man’s version. I now realized that had been a blunder on my part.

Clutching the small lantern Reed had passed me, I decided to start incorporating Scouting Magic into my daily training routine as soon as I got back.

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Our targets for the morning’s foraging were popola mushrooms—the ones that glowed in the moonlight—as well as petals of anatweed, a type of flowered herb that only bloomed at dawn. The single popola we found was spotted by Reed, of course, growing alone out of the mossy rock of a small cliff. The mushroom was deep blue in color and slightly luminescent, apparently as a result of the intense magical energy packed within. Reed explained they were very uncommon and fetched a high price. He also explained they were usually used to make powerful magic stimulants.

Once the sun had risen and Reed’s basket was precariously full, we boarded the first stagecoach of the day from the village back toward Runerelia. We were the only two passengers.

“What are you planning to do with your share of the ingredients, Allen?” asked Reed.

“My share? I’m not planning on taking anything we gathered! I mean, all I did was follow you around and ask questions. You can have all of it.”

“That’s not happening.” Reed’s tone was firm, but not unkind. “In situations like this, when the distribution of spoils isn’t determined prior to the start of an expedition, it’s an unspoken rule that the profits are shared equally. That’s what happens if you form a temporary party too—which is basically what we did.”

This is a problem… No matter how you look at it, I barely helped

at all. If anything, I feel like I need to pay Reed for everything he taught me!

I prepared to refuse Reed's suggestion a little more strongly, but as I started to open my mouth, I noticed the look in his eye and swallowed the words. It was clear he wasn't going to back down.

I smiled. "Then I'll accept my share gratefully—but honestly, I wouldn't know what to do with any of it. How do you feel about buying it off me? I'll accept any price you set."

Reed's stern expression softened at my words. "That's not a bad idea, but I've got a better one. Sure, I could buy them off you for my folks this time, but you're probably going to go foraging again soon enough, right? And I'm not going to be around every time. So I reckon you should head over and register as an explorer, then sell them to the guild. That way, you'll have a buyer next time you head out too."

Hmm... Seems like the questline is advancing a bit earlier than I expected, but oh well. I'd been planning on registering with the Explorer's Guild *after* learning Emissive Magic and when I felt like I could pass whatever certification test I'd need to work as a bodyguard, like Dio. But I couldn't fault Reed's suggestion. Plus, however I went about it, I needed a way to start earning some money. I'd received five thousand riels from my parents to set myself up at the Academy, and they'd said they would send another two thousand riels each month as an allowance along with Rosa's. But that meant I'd have to go to the city estate each month to collect it, which meant encountering Rosa, which meant I had no intention of going.

"That sounds like a good idea. As soon as we get to the capital, I'll head for the guild like an arrow from a bow!"

"Arrow?" said Reed, confused. "Anyway, I'll show you the way. I'm already registered as an explorer."

Grateful though I was, I couldn't accept Reed's offer of guidance. *This is one of the big clichés of otherworldly reincarnation stories! Showing up to the guild to register as a new explorer, but somehow accidentally picking a fight with a senior explorer notorious for his bad attitude... Now, I won't destroy the place like Rosa would, but I won't let Mr. Bad Attitude walk all over me either—I'll show them what I can do, even if it means risking expulsion. Yeah, that's the reincarnation cliché I've been waiting for!*

Of course, I couldn't let Reed get tangled up in my fantasy,

not after how nice he'd been to me. "Don't worry about it! I can find my own way. Plus, if anything unfortunate happens, I'll take care of it—by any means necessary," I said, grinning. My voice had taken on a slightly villainous tone.

"Oh, that's right, I forgot I had some business to take care of at the guild anyway. I guess we'll go *together*," said Reed, this time more forcefully.

And that's how I ended up on my way to register as an explorer—not alone as I'd planned, but accompanied by Reed, who was watching me with a wary eye.

Explorer Registration

Runerelia, the capital city of Yugria, had grown so large over the centuries that it was now hard to define where the city actually ended. Some considered the outskirts to just be the part of the city that rested on the original Rune Plains, while others defined it as the area within the Nine Square.

The original city had been planned to some extent. Nine main roads, each around five kilometers apart, ran north to south through the capital. These were called the Streets, and they were named simply in numerical order; the road most central to the capital was called Fifth Street, and so on. Another nine roads ran east to west. Those were called the Avenues, and they followed the same naming system. Although the city had long since spread beyond the Nine Square, many considered the grid as the boundary of the actual capital.

The royal palace was located at the intersection of First Street and First Avenue, right in the southeast corner of the capital. It had been built on the western bank of the River Rune, and so the capital had expanded northwest in the early days, across the flat land of the Rune Plains. The main branch of the Explorer's Guild was more centrally located, on the intersection of Fourth Street and Fourth Avenue. Obviously, it would be impossible to handle all the explorers in Runerelia from just a single outpost, so four secondary branches had been established across the city, one in each of the four corners of the grid.

Initially, I'd been planning to go to the southeastern branch, which was located near the intersection of First Street and Fifth Avenue, not far from the Royal Academy. However, Reed had suggested otherwise.

“When a kid from the Royal Academy tries to register at the guild, they always send one of the big shots from the main branch to enroll them personally. Look, if you want to sit around drinking tea and listening to the branchmaster flatter you for a few hours while you wait for someone from the main branch to arrive, we can go to the southeastern branch. It’s up to you.”

After he’d put it like that, there was no way I wasn’t going to head directly to the main branch instead. From their perspective, it would be a waste of time to spend hours fawning over a no-name country brat like me. Besides, I had zero interest in wasting hours of my own time nodding along to a random branchmaster’s flattery.

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The main branch of the Explorer’s Guild was a brand-new, three-story building of the same concrete-like material as the Royal Library. We entered the building and were immediately met with a reception counter. Two female receptionists, dressed identically in neat, navy uniforms, greeted us as we entered. They looked like the kinds of receptionists I’d expect to see at the front counter of a multibillion-dollar corporation back in Japan—certainly not manning the counter of a fantasy guild. Other than the four of us, there was no one else in sight.

“It’s a little different than I expected,” I muttered, mostly to myself.

Reed heard, however, and looked at me with a little concern. “Really? What were you thinking it would be like?”

“You know, that it would be in an old, half-collapsed building… I’d push open the rotting wooden door, only to come face-to-face with a handful of half-drunk senior explorers, all of them glaring at me… Suddenly, one of them, a middle-ranked explorer known for his bad attitude—everyone calls him Johnny the Hazer, by the way—stands up and shouts, *‘This isn’t a place for brats like you to play around!’* and starts trying to pick a fight with me. So I ask him politely to step aside, but obviously, he doesn’t back down—not a chance. In the end, it comes to blows—it always does, you know? Maybe I can beat him and take the wind out of his sails a little. But even if I lose, he ends up begrudgingly recognizing that I’m a *‘gutsy little brat,’* and he steps aside so I can register. That’s what I thought it would be like, anyway.” It was the

template used by all those reincarnation fantasy web novels, at least.

"Is that what it's like at the Crauvia branch? Is everything okay in your region? Why doesn't the branchmaster stop things like that from happening?" asked Reed, an exceedingly worried look on his face.

"Oh, no, it wasn't something that actually happened," I said hastily. "But if it did, the branchmaster wouldn't intervene—they'd just shrug and say, *'Not again!'* and look the other way, you know? Or otherwise, maybe the branchmaster, who's a bald-headed, scar-faced, hot-blooded, big-muscled explorer in his own right, suddenly yells, *'Shut your mouths, you brats! If you're gonna fight, take it outside!'* But then he jumps into the fight himself anyway, and then everyone's brawling, but once it's all over, it somehow turns into a drinking party and we're all best friends… No?"

"I'm never setting foot in the Crauvia branch in my life. There's no way I could handle Johnny the Hazer," Reed said firmly, turning away to greet the guild receptionists. "Good afternoon!"

Crap… I think Reed thinks the Rovene Domain is some kind of bandit's den now…

"Explorer Reed! What brings you here on your way back from foraging? Did you find another new species of herb?" asked one of the receptionists in a calm, refined tone after she'd taken a quick glance at Reed's outfit. She had a keen eye. As I'd guessed, she wouldn't have been out of place at a top company back in Japan. Moreover, she'd known Reed's name without asking. *I wonder how many explorers' names and faces she's got memorized across this giant city…*

"The reception counter is different from what I expected too…" I mumbled, disheartened.

Reed ignored me this time. "No new species this time, I'm afraid. My new underclassman here wants to register as an explorer, so I said I'd come along and help."

"You're really here just to assist him with his registration?" she said in disbelief before turning to me. "May I ask your name?" I had a vague sense she was appraising me with her stare.

Wait a minute… Is Reed famous or something?

"Of course. I'm Allen Rovene, a new student at the Royal Academy. I'm still new to the capital, so Reed generously offered to guide me here today. I look forward to working with you," I

said, bowing my head politely.

Job interviews start when you greet the receptionist—that tip had been drilled into my head by the countless interview how-to books I'd read in my past life. But before I could raise my head, the second receptionist had gotten up and vanished quickly up the nearby staircase.

"Welcome to the Explorer's Guild. Please, follow me," said the first receptionist, briskly standing and leading us up the same staircase.

Uh, is it okay for you guys to leave the counter unmanned?

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After pushing open a heavy wooden door decorated with delicate brass studs, the receptionist ushered me and Reed into a large reception room on the third floor. It had to be at least double the size of my room back at the dorm. It was sparsely furnished in spite of its size; two couches, each a three-seater, sat facing each other in the center of the room, a low table between them. The Japanese part of my brain considered it the very definition of wasted space, but this was probably what they called living in luxury. You could have a room just for two couches and a table.

"Please wait here for a moment," said the receptionist as she left the room again.

Reed shrugged off his basket and sat down on one of the couches, then looked at me suspiciously. "Allen, why aren't you sitting down?"

"Well, we've been led to what I'm guessing is one of the more important reception rooms, which means whoever comes through that door is going to be a fairly important person. It would be improper for them to arrive to find that a no-name like me has already made himself at home." Reed, on the other hand, was apparently fairly well-known at the guild already, and since he'd accompanied me, my actions would reflect on him. I couldn't risk embarrassing my upperclassman.

"Right... Is this another one of your tutor's 'manner' things, like bowing?"

He's a sharp one, all right. I nodded and went back to standing at attention.

Ten or so minutes passed before I heard the sound of the

door reopening. “I apologize for the delay,” said the second receptionist, the one who’d vanished earlier, as she held open the door. A lone man entered the room. The door shut again with a click as the receptionist left.

At first glance, I would have assumed the man was a bureaucrat rather than an explorer. He had a friendly smile on his face and a rounded physique. But his movements betrayed him as he walked across the room toward us—sleek, strong, and delicately controlled, revealing the muscle undoubtedly hidden beneath the soft tissue.

Aha! So that’s the template they’re going with…

When Reed had worriedly declared he would accompany me, I’d begun to imagine the clichéd interrogation I’d surely encounter as part of my registration—a shrewd, older man, his gray hair neatly pulled back, would pressure me with endless questions, trying to break me and thereby declare that I didn’t have what it took to join the guild—but it seemed like my hypothesis had been wrong. However, that didn’t mean I could relax now.

I already knew it: This man’s apparent approachability was a trap to lure prospective explorers in. They’d get too comfortable and babble on, sharing all their secrets without even realizing it. The interviewer would respond enthusiastically, and you’d talk yourself up even more. These were the kinds of interviews where you went home feeling great about your performance, only to discover a rejection letter in your mailbox a few days later with a copy-pasted, “After careful consideration, we have decided not to move forward with your application at this time.”

Hmph. They can’t even begin to imagine how many times I’ve read those heartless, generic words. I had to handwrite all of those applications, you know!

I wasn’t particularly worried about being rejected by the Explorer’s Guild, but since Reed had decided to come along, I had to put on a perfect performance. Any mistakes on my part would reflect badly on him as my escort.

My job hunting in my past life had taken place in the midst of what people had referred to as a “once-in-a-hundred-years recession” after the overseas real estate bubble had burst. The number of rejection letters I’d collected had long passed the three-digit mark when I’d finally seized the position with the food and beverage company.

The tension I was feeling now rivaled what I'd felt when I'd opened that acceptance letter.

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"Welcome, welcome! What a pleasure to see you again, Explorer Reed!" the man said, smiling at Reed. "And of course, to meet you, Master Rovene! I am Satwa Fjorden, the vice guildmaster of the Yugrian Explorer's Guild. Please, take a seat!"

Oof. He's starting off strong. The sheer friendliness of the man's introduction hit me like a jab to the gut. *But he won't get me that easily—who does he think I am?! I was born and raised in Japan! No Japanese person would be foolish enough to take a seat while a superior is still standing—let alone the second-in-command of the entire Explorer's Guild!*

"Allen, he said you could sit down..." Reed trailed off, looking at me suspiciously. "You're not going to sit?"

"Don't worry, Reed," I reassured him in a low voice so only he could hear, although I kept my eyes locked with Satwa's the whole time. "I predicted I might have to tackle this kind of interview."

Reed sighed, then turned toward the man who'd just arrived. "Hello, Satwa. It's been a while. The standing," he said, nodding his head in my direction, "is like a ritual thing of his or something, so don't pay it any mind; you can just sit down. And I'm sure I say this every time, but please, just call me Reed."

Satwa smiled, and as Reed had suggested, he lowered himself onto the couch opposite his.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. My name is Allen Rovene, Royal Academy student and prospective explorer!" I declared, loudly and suddenly enough that Reed let out a yelp of surprise. Then I bowed—forty-five-degree angle, three-second duration. After I'd lifted my head, I confirmed that Satwa had indeed settled himself on the couch and finally took my own seat next to Reed.

Or so I pretended.

Reed had been sitting for a while already, and from my observation of him, I'd determined that the couch looked incredibly comfortable. If I let myself sink into the soft cushion, I wouldn't be able to maintain a respectful posture. I couldn't embarrass my upperclassman with such arrogant comfort.

Instead, I lowered myself until the backs of my thighs just barely brushed the material of the couch, and I reinforced my legs with Strengthening Magic so I *appeared* to be sitting without letting myself fall into what was surely a comfortable trap.

"I see! Is this another aspect of the 'Combat Readiness' training I've heard talk of lately? I didn't quite believe the rumors, but now that I see it with my own eyes... Yes, it's as impressive as they say." Satwa, as I'd expected, began laying on the praise. I braced myself for his onslaught.

"It's only proper that one as lowly as myself should pay respect to his superiors, of course."

"Is that so? How profound! I wonder, would you share some more of the teachings of the great Soldo Vineforce with me?" he asked with a genial laugh. The corners of his eyes wrinkled deeply as his warm smile widened.

Here it comes... If I took his bait and pompously explained the ethos behind Combat Readiness to him now, there was no question he'd be signing my generic rejection letter before I left the building. Plus, in the first place, Combat Readiness was just something I'd made up to hide the fact that I'd been reincarnated. There wasn't anything I *could* share with him.

"Unfortunately, I am no more than a beginner in the art myself, still far from capable of teaching others. My apologies."

"I believe you're being modest, Master Rovene. Why, the capital is buzzing with talk of you and your exemplary tutor."

"Well, rumors do take on a life of their own, as they say. I assure you that much of what you might have heard is mere exaggeration."

"Be that as it may, the fact that you were the highest-ranked candidate in the Royal Academy's physical examination is the plain and simple truth, no?"

"Truthfully, between you and me, my score was no more than the mistake of a hungover examiner, although I am eternally grateful for the generous evaluation."

Satwa burst into laughter. "An S score, the mistake of a hungover examiner! Ah, even your sense of humor is superb. Very impressive!"

For a while, we continued to play his little game—Satwa would attack me with praise for any little thing, and I would defend myself with modest deflection. It was a textbook example of the unproductive conversations Japan was famous for.

Suddenly, Satwa launched into a new style of attack.

"Well, I'm impressed. Few people with your talent and achievements would come across as modest as you, Master Rovene—let alone at your young age. I seldom come across anyone with such discipline and ambition, I must say. Now…" He trailed off, smiling at me. "Evidently, you've come to register as an explorer. May I ask why one as talented as you would go out of their way to sign up for such work?"

There it is: the classic "What are your reasons for applying for this role?" *Guess that means the small talk is over…*

I swallowed. I hadn't anticipated that my outing with Reed would end with an application to the Explorer's Guild, so I hadn't had time to refine a perfect answer to that ever-reliable interview question. If I answered frankly and said I wanted to register so I could sell materials and earn money, my rejection would be guaranteed—and I'd be dragging Reed's good name through the mud with a crude answer like that. I frantically tried to formulate the ideal response to convey my specific enthusiasm for the role, like I'd done so many times before. But before I could open my mouth, Reed, who'd somewhat faded into the background over the course of the interview, jumped in with a support attack.

"Oh, Allen came with me yesterday when I went to gather some herbs. He's interested in doing a bit of foraging work, so I suggested he register with the guild so he'd be able to sell them here in the future."

Nice one, Reed! It would have been uncouth for me to say I was in it for the money, but since Reed had said it for me, I could just follow up with the "passion" part of the response. *Leave it to a competent guy like Reed to have my back.*

"Exactly! Reed granted me the honor of accompanying him on his foraging expedition and generously shared his unparalleled knowledge with someone as clueless as me. I was so impressed by his sincerity toward the work that I decided to follow in his footsteps and become an explorer too, so that I might one day be half the man he is." For some reason, Reed's expression had stiffened at my words, but I shrugged it off. It was mostly true, after all.

Satwa nodded thoughtfully. "I see… Well, it's only natural. Explorer Reed is certainly inspiring to be around, after all." He smiled at Reed, who still looked uncomfortable, and turned back

to me. “Your friend is quite well-known around these parts, as you’d expect.”

I must have looked confused, so Satwa continued. “The Gourshe family runs the Panacea Company, the kingdom’s largest medicinal supplier. Many around here consider his foraging talent and medicinal knowledge the best in Runerelia. It’s amazing that such a young man could have already discovered several new plant species—not to mention his other accomplishments. And to be promoted to a B-Rank explorer while still in school! Well, I suppose compared to the prestige of being a Royal Academy student, being a B-Rank explorer isn’t quite as special…” Satwa smiled wryly. “It is quite unfortunate that his participation in several long foraging missions resulted in his demotion to Class B as he entered his third year. The Explorer’s Guild must take some responsibility for that regrettable development.”

When Reed said his parents ran an apothecary, I was picturing something more like a small-town drugstore, not a giant corporation…

Evidently, Reed was quite a renowned explorer. On top of that, he didn’t seem upset about his demotion to Class B in the slightest; instead, he was single-mindedly intent on continuing his work. I took a quick glance at Reed, who was scratching his cheek, looking away in embarrassment. He’d never even mentioned his family’s status to me, much less flaunted it. He really was a good person.

“His knowledge is truly amazing, but what I really respect is Reed’s passion for his work. We were out foraging for nearly a full day, yet he never got fed up of explaining things to me with a smile on his face, even though I’m sure it was boring for him to explain such basic information to a novice like me. But just by watching him, I could feel his deep respect for the forest and the enjoyment he got from the act of foraging itself. ‘Ah, that must be the passion of an explorer,’ I thought.”

Reed’s expression stiffened again.

Satwa chuckled. “It seems you’re quite fond of Explorer Reed, Master Allen.”

“I’m more than fond of him. It’s all thanks to him that I was able to take the first step toward becoming an explorer! I would trust him with my life.”



“What on earth are you saying, Allen?!” Reed exclaimed. “Satwa, don’t listen to a word he’s saying, please. He’s just got a few funny ways of thinking—this is just some lesson he’s been taught about respecting your seniors or something. He’s being polite, that’s all!” Reed laughed awkwardly.

“Huh? But it’s the tru—” Reed clamped a hand over my mouth before I could finish and forcefully changed the subject.

“Enough about that! Take a look at these, Satwa. The horn and skin of a water-affined horned rabbit, which this guy brought down with a single hit! No problem for someone who aced the Royal Academy’s physical exam, I guess. Even though he’d never fought a monster before, he wasn’t nervous at all! He cut down the beast in midair while it tried to flee—can you imagine? And then he even *apologized* to me for not being able to cut the horn off more neatly!” Reed spluttered, his face reddening. “His combat sense is crazy. There’s no way I could have done the same. I guess that’s what someone trained in Combat Readiness is capable of!”

Satwa carefully examined the skin and horn. “A fairly large specimen, to be sure. Horned rabbits are not particularly fearsome, but elementally affined creatures are certainly much faster than their brethren. Even a C-Rank explorer would be hard-pressed to take down a monster so neatly.”

“Right? Allen’s talking me up, but it’s only because I happened to take him with me yesterday after we ran into each other by chance—it was all coincidence, you know? But I’m nothing compared to him. I beg you, please don’t take anything he said about me seriously or let it leave this room!” he pleaded, desperate.

I could tell Reed was trying to move the conversation along, so I’d decided to keep my mouth shut—but something in the glint of Satwa’s eyes sparked something in me, and my mouth began moving of its own accord.

“That reminds me, Reed said something else that really resonated with me yesterday. When we hunted the rabbit, he said it was more than enough food for two people and that it would be wasteful to leave leftovers. I could really sense his deep respect for the animal in those words. I’ll never forget the deep impression—”

Reed dropped his head into his hands, spent.

Crap… Seriously, I was planning to stop, I swear!

Satwa laughed. “Birds of a feather flock together, or so they say. How is it that you two ended up meeting, incidentally?”

“Well, Reed and I both live in the standard dormitory, although he…”

Fifteen minutes passed as I recounted our excursion to Satwa.

“I say, what an excellent tale,” said Satwa, smiling broadly. “Well, I do understand your concerns, Explorer Reed. I assure you that I will not share any of the information shared here today with anyone but the guildmaster, and with him, only the relevant facts.”

Satwa’s words of reassurance were little comfort to Reed by this point, who’d long collapsed against the couch like an exhausted boxer against the side of the ring.

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Somehow, I made it through the interview, although I still felt as though I’d shared more than I’d intended to. Reed and I walked side by side down the footpath—though for some reason, my previously energetic comrade was now staggering along like he was on the very brink of collapse.

“I’m beat…” he mumbled. “I just want to go home and sleep… But I have to go let my family know about what happened today, or…”

“Sorry, Reed,” I said, smiling awkwardly. “I did *try* to stop talking, but then I saw a glint in Satwa’s eyes, and I couldn’t stop myself—I felt like I had to tell him just how amazing you are… Do you think he used mind control magic or something?”

I was slowly realizing I’d spent most of my time with Satwa praising Reed. When we’d left, I’d felt like the meeting had gone well, but now a strange sense of déjà vu was washing over me. In my mind’s eye, I saw the pile of rejection letters I’d slowly accumulated in my past life.

“I’ve never heard of any magic like that before… Are you messing with me?” Reed asked, glaring at me reproachfully.

Seems like there’s definitely no mind control magic, then…

Reed sighed deeply. “Well, what’s done is done. This will probably cause a little bit of a commotion, but I can’t do anything but ride it out now,” he said gloomily.

“But Satwa said he wouldn’t tell anyone apart from the guildmaster, right?” I said brightly. “I don’t think you have to

worry about any rumors spreading!" To be honest, I wasn't sure why Reed was so worried anyway. At the end of the day, all I'd said was that I'd run into him by coincidence, accompanied him on a casual expedition, and had been so impressed that I'd decided to register as an explorer myself.

"It'll be nice if it works out that way. But I said it yesterday, didn't I? You should be a little more aware of how much influence you have around here. Even if Satwa does only speak to the guildmaster, there's no guarantee the word won't get out—and if it does, it'll be all over the capital in a few days." He heaved a sigh again. "I have to visit my family's store, so this is goodbye for now." He'd stopped next to a sign that indicated this was a pickup point for the magically powered coaches that ran through the city.

The air was tense, but I couldn't let him leave without saying what I needed to. "Reed!" I said, bowing as deeply as I could. "Thank you for taking me under your wing these last two days! I had a really fun time!"

Reed sighed deeply again—then something came over him, and he burst into laughter. "That 'bowing' of yours is foul play, you know? I feel like I have to forgive you, no matter what you do. Ah..." He sighed again, but this time, he seemed to relax. "For the first time in a while, I had a lot of fun out there too—all thanks to you, Allen. I'll still see you tomorrow morning for training?"

"Of course!" I said, beaming.

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The materials I'd sold to the guild had netted us a tidy five thousand riels—more than five hundred thousand yen in Japan based on my rough estimates. The horned rabbit skin had been responsible for half the total figure, and the popola mushroom Reed had spotted had been worth another one-and-a-half thousand riels. The rest of the materials had rounded out the number. As per Reed's demand, we'd split the profit evenly, and I was now two-and-a-half thousand riels richer than the day before. I'd half-heartedly tried to get him to take the full profit again, but a sharp glare had stopped me in my tracks, and I'd begrudgingly accepted my share.

As expected, we'd been unable to sell the broken horn to the

guild. It couldn't be used in medicine or manufacturing in that state. However, Satwa had mentioned there was a chance he'd be able to find a buyer that dealt in curiosities like monster parts, so I'd entrusted the horn to him for the time being. We'd held on to the roasted hind legs of the rabbit, which we hadn't been able to finish the night before. With Reed's consent, I'd taken those to give to Thora as a present, along with an apology. My unplanned overnight excursion meant I'd missed out on breakfast without letting her know first. I hoped the unusual meat would buy me a little leeway.

And, to top it all off, I had successfully become an explorer—a G-Rank explorer.

Toward the end of our meeting, Satwa had told me I would be registered as a C-Ranked explorer from the outset, contrary to the customary practice of bestowing Royal Academy students with a D-Rank upon their registration. I had refused, however, asking him to register me as a D-Rank unless he could instead put me down as an entry-level G-Rank like anyone else. He'd refused stubbornly. Apparently, the interview I'd thought would determine whether or not I could register had actually been intended to determine my assigned rank.

There were already all kinds of rumors about me flying around the capital. I didn't need to add to them with another case of special treatment.

I'd continued to refuse Satwa's offer, but he'd clearly gotten confused over my obstinance; he had declared he'd negotiate with the guildmaster for permission to register me as a *B-Rank* explorer instead. I'd made to leave at that point, telling him to throw out my application altogether. Frantically, he'd urged me to reconsider: *"I understand! I'll put you through as a D-Rank!"*

In negotiations like that, the one who concedes first loses.

I'd told him I wouldn't register with the guild unless it was as a G-Ranked explorer, and I'd blatantly ignored all his attempts to get me to reconsider. Ultimately, I'd left the guild with my new registration card safely tucked into my pocket, emblazoned with my coveted "G." Hopefully, the guild's low estimation of me would help to quell some of the other rumors.

Unfortunately, the registration cards were all apparently made of paper, although the design changed depending on one's rank. Long ago, each rank had been issued medallions made of specific materials—A-Rank was mithril, B was platinum,

C was gold, and so on, with the G-Rank medallion being made of wood—and you could tell at a glance whether someone was highly ranked. However, the medallion system had apparently been phased out on account of rising costs and theft incidents.

"Isn't a sense of adventure and heroics more important than expenditures?" I'd asked Satwa, but he'd coldly shut me down with a, *"They're equally important."* It seemed to me like he was still upset about my rank.

Oh well. I probably won't meet any bigwigs like him again anytime soon as a G-Rank.

Also, I'd found out there weren't any certifications I'd need to get before I could work as a bodyguard like Dio either.

Behind the Scenes: Explorer Registration

Unlike the myriad rooms at the Royal Academy, the reception room in which Allen and Satwa had conversed was not outfitted with magical recording devices—an act of consideration toward the nobles and other bigwigs who might call into the guild given the delicate information that was often discussed. The solitary couch set in the center of the otherwise barren room—devoid of paintings or even a vase of flowers—communicated one message.

What's shared here stays here.

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"So? How was it, then?" asked Cherbourg Monstell, guildmaster of the Yugrian Explorer's Guild. His unwavering, steely gaze was fixed on Satwa.

Cher was frightening to look at. Hard muscles rippled across his body with every movement he made. His head was smoothly shaved, and a large, jagged scar ran across his right cheek and down to his chin. He'd made his name as a professional monster hunter and had worked his way up from a lowly G-Rank explorer until he'd seized the elusive A-Rank.

At around the age of forty, when his fame as an explorer had been at its highest, he'd been approached by the Royal Order with an offer to lead a squadron of knights. With his skill in combat, again, he'd shot up through the ranks. Before long, he'd become the captain of his own legion.

However, even though by *title* he had been a knight, attaining such a lofty position in the Royal Order had turned him into a bureaucrat for all intents and purposes. Disciplining his men and writing endless reports day in and day out had felt as uncomfortable as sitting on a bed of nails. So when the request had come from the Explorer's Guild asking for his return, this time as its guildmaster, he'd quit the Order without a second thought. As he'd left, the king had seen fit to bestow upon him a Minor Order of Merit, in recognition of his contributions as both a knight and an explorer.

With the Order of Merit, his rank as an explorer also increased. He became one of the few S-Ranks in the whole of the kingdom. Theoretically, it was also possible for SS-Rank and even SSS-Rank explorers to exist, depending on the magnitude of the Order of Merit received, but none of the explorers recorded in recent centuries had been so highly decorated. In fact, only a handful of the explorers who popped up in the ancient legends had ever received those ranks.

When he'd first been informed that Allen Rovene—the name on everyone's lips—had arrived to register as an explorer, Cher had insisted on interviewing the boy himself. However, he'd quickly been shot down by his two vice guildmasters, Satwa and Odilon. Odilon was a shrewd older man with gray hair neatly tied behind his head, and he was a renowned swordmaster. Incidentally, he was the spitting image of the man Allen had imagined would be interviewing him just hours earlier.

Both Satwa and Odilon had graduated from the Royal Academy—albeit with unremarkable grades—and were prominent A-Rank explorers in their own rights. They'd started off their careers as a bureaucrat and a knight respectively while spending all their free time working as explorers on the side. Eventually, both had been promoted to A-Rank, each possessing an impressive list of accomplishments to match.

But then again, Royal Academy students were automatically promoted to C-Rank upon their graduation from the school. Compared to Cher, who'd clawed his way up from the bottom by completing countless scores of deadly requests, they'd practically had it easy. Unlike Cher, who was still an active monster hunter, both Satwa and Odilon had essentially retired from active explorer work. Instead, they put their Academy-forged skills to good use cleaning up after him, since he had a

particular talent for disappearing after causing another one of his messes. The guildmaster had an impulsive temperament to match his rough appearance and illustriously bloody career.

Several years prior, a Royal Academy student had shown up at the southeastern branch of the guild to register. All the other "bigwigs" had been away on other business, so Cher himself had specifically made the not-insignificant journey to the southeastern branch to personally meet with the student. Unfortunately for Cher—and for the student—the prospective explorer had just been "window-shopping," as he'd put it himself, and he hadn't seriously been considering registering with the guild. The hot-blooded Cher had immediately flown off the handle and beaten the impudent student to a pulp.

Even more unfortunately, the guildmaster had then run into a few of his longtime hunting buddies. Leaving the student bleeding on the floor nearby, they'd quickly started up a drinking contest, and from there... Well, it had developed into quite the incident.

"He got what was coming to him. I'm not sorry for it." That had been Cher's only testimony in the resulting investigation. Satwa and Odilon, who thereafter spent weeks putting out fires, had banned Cher from interacting with prospective explorers from the Royal Academy ever again. Cher himself wasn't particularly interested in interviewing "spoiled kids" anyway, as he'd put it, so it hadn't been a problem—until now.

"Hey, this is the kid Grandpa Godolphen's got his eye on, right?! You two don't get how significant it is for that scary geezer to show interest in someone! I'll take this one!" Cher had said, already halfway out the door—only to be forced back into the room by Satwa. Odilon had quickly pinned both of Cher's arms behind his back, and the two receptionists, Mika and Maya, had each clung to one of his legs. Together, they'd somehow managed to restrain him.

The only remaining question had been who *would* carry out the interview.

"Well, we've already heard the kid wasn't fazed by Grandpa Godolphen—I mean, he even threatened to crush him. I don't think we'll get anything out of him with Odilon's style of interviewing. Satwa, you go," Cher had grumbled.

And thus had the tone of Allen's interview been decided.

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“So? How was it, then?” asked Cher in a sulky, rough voice; he was still upset he had not been allowed to meet the boy himself. Actually, they’d also briefly considered sending both Satwa and Odilon out to interview him, or even the two of them *and* Cher, but they’d quickly decided against it. It would raise a lot of questions if it got out that all three of the guild’s big brass had shown up to interview one schoolboy.

“He was a very likable boy—and at the same time, terrifying. Yes, that’s my impression of him,” said Satwa, beginning with a summary like any competent bureaucrat would. He then launched into the details.

“First, there’s the ‘Combat Readiness’ of rumor. The name being what it is, I was expecting to meet a somewhat violent child, but he was quite the opposite. Because of your outburst,” he said, eyeing Cher sternly, “he was left waiting in the reception room for a fair while. Yet, when I entered, I found he had been standing at attention the whole time, staring steadily at the entrance. As I moved toward him, I could feel him appraising me for a split second, but there was no sign of fear in his eyes or movements.”

Satwa smiled, shook his head slightly, and continued. “I introduced myself and offered him a seat—but for some reason, he obstinately refused to sit down. It was only after I’d taken my own seat that he moved. Suddenly, he introduced himself loudly and clearly, lowered his head toward me, then finally sat down. Apparently, ‘it’s only proper that one should respect their superiors,’ or so he claimed.”

Cher snorted. “I thought he’d be a little rougher around the edges,” he said, now seemingly disinterested.

Odilon spoke up. “Well, he did manage to score the highest grade in the physical exam, after all. It would be difficult to forge such astounding physical skills without the necessary self-discipline. When we heard about his insolence toward the sage, I was worried he’d prove to be another child with overwhelming talent and the ego to match, but it seems my fears were unfounded.” As he spoke, Odilon’s brow was furrowed. In contrast to Cher’s disinterest, he seemed even more curious than he had been before.

“Next, I tried to make him feel comfortable by praising a few

of his rumored abilities and accomplishments. Yet, he downplayed my every comment with humility, showing not even a glimpse of a smile. If he responded, it was only to bring up another of his shortcomings."

"Huh?! Well, I guess that's not a bad thing—but brats his age should be more cocky and full of themselves! Kids these days are so proper and boring," grumbled Cher.

Odilon looked more impressed. "It can't be an easy thing to show such humility after topping one of the Royal Academy's exams. His discipline seems extraordinary." Once again, Cher and Odilon seemed divided in their opinions on the new information.

"I don't think you have the right to think children should be more arrogant, Guildmaster—not after what you did to the last one," said Satwa, raising an eyebrow before he continued his rundown. "I then found out the boy had come here straight from his first hunting-and-gathering expedition. He made his first kill just yesterday; a horned rabbit Reed had suggested they might dispatch for food. Reed chased it toward him, and the Rovene boy brought it down with a single blow. Apparently, he cut it down in midair as the beast tried to flee up a cliff face—one swing, right down the center of the horn." As he described the kill, Satwa retrieved the broken horn from one of his pockets and placed it on the table between them.

"Poor effort, even if they *were* only after the meat. If it was me, I'd grab the beast by the neck and pull the horn out easily," huffed Cher.

"An elementally affined horned rabbit, eh?" said Odilon, surprised. "Even a C-Rank explorer might struggle to bring one down in a single blow. If it was indeed his first foray into hunting, he's definitely got potential."

Compared to Odilon, who was steadily growing more and more impressed with Allen, Cher had become bored, and he'd started to dig around in his ear disinterestedly.

Satwa, if he were asked to speak frankly, was very pleased with the boy he'd met earlier. Therefore, in order to prevent Cher becoming *too* interested himself—and undoubtedly making a downright mess of things—Satwa was being cautious about the information he gave them and the order in which he gave it. However, he now realized he was beginning to lose Cher's interest entirely, so he offered something to reel him back in.

“I do hope you’re not trying to compare yourself, an S-Ranked guildmaster, to a twelve-year-old boy… Ah, that reminds me. I forgot to mention that when the boy *did* finally sit down, for some reason, he didn’t *actually* sit down. He lowered himself until his thighs barely touched the couch, then held himself there hovering! It made me think of a predator lying in wait on a grassy plain, always ready to pounce at the first sight of prey. He held that position for close to an hour, smiling as though nothing was wrong. I don’t know what he meant by it, but his mysterious line about ‘respecting your superiors’ came after he assumed that position, so maybe it was something to do with that.”

Odilon’s mouth had dropped open in shock, but Cher was downright hooked by the new tidbit. “Now that’s some interesting stuff right there,” he said, grinning. “Next time, start off with that! He was definitely thinking something like *‘What kind of idiot would sit back on a couch when they’ve got a superior opponent right in front of them?’* or even *‘If this guy says anything I don’t like, I’m gonna give it to him!’* See, *that’s* more like what I’d expect from a kid Grandpa Godolphen’s got his eye on! Well, did he punch you?”

Satwa sighed in relief. Cher’s reaction was even more positive than he’d anticipated, and he’d returned the conversation to its original trajectory.

“Of course he didn’t punch me. Not everyone possesses your lack of control,” he said sharply, eyeing the guildmaster again. “I asked him why he wanted to register as an explorer, and apparently, it was due to Reed’s influence. He said he was so impressed by Reed’s knowledge and passion that he’d been inspired to pursue personal growth through the same path.”

“He should have tried to punch you. Wasted opportunity… And who cares about an insincere reason like that? If you asked a hundred kids, they’d all tell you the same thing.”

“It’s commendable he would go to all the trouble of trying to sharpen his skills as an explorer when he must know he’s guaranteed the career of his choice already. Even at his young age, he seems to understand the importance of getting your hands dirty,” said Odilon, still impressed. Cher had returned to digging out his earwax.

Satwa chose his next words carefully. He needed to keep Cher interested, but not *too* interested. Fortunately, this was the bureaucrat’s area of expertise. Before becoming vice

guildmaster, he'd been a high-profile mediator in the service of the palace.

"More than anything, he seemed to genuinely respect Reed and his passion. He said he was taken in by the way he got excited collecting even the most trivial materials. He also said Reed had shown him exploring was not only about profit—it was about enjoying the work too."

"Is that right? That's not half bad! It's not about how difficult the request is or how much money you'll earn from it. You should hunt because you enjoy the hunt itself! There's been too many idiots around here these days droning on about money and honor instead of focusing on the work!"

"I agree with Cher. The best explorers are the ones who are passionate about their work, no matter what kind of request they accept. Just like Explorer Reed," Odilon agreed with a nod. For the first time since the conversation had started, Cher and Odilon were on the same wavelength.

"The most impressive thing about the boy was his sense for appraising others. As he told it, he'd only encountered Reed for the first time yesterday and convinced him to take him along on his expedition. In spite of their short relationship, Allen told me tale after tale of Reed's actions and of all the aspects of his character that he was so taken with. The Rovene boy must surely have an open mind and a generous heart to be able to see such beauty in others in so short a period of time."

"If you really want to know someone's true nature, you've got to give 'em a few good punches and share a couple bottles with 'em," declared Cher. "But he's probably a keen worker, if he happily decided to go out on an expedition on a whim without a second thought or worry."

"Satwa is right. Besides, isn't it said that the ability to readily point out the merits of others is a reflection of one's absolute confidence in themselves? Those who are insecure are the first to point out flaws in others, after all."

Cher's opinion on the boy was steadily improving. Satwa continued his report, still monitoring the guildmaster's attitude. "When I praised Allen at the beginning, he refuted my words with such humility, I could scarcely believe he was only twelve years old. But when he started praising Reed, he immediately began to act more like a boy his age, endlessly babbling on and bringing up things I hadn't even asked about." Satwa smiled as

he remembered the moment. “Of course, that naive side of his may become a weakness in the future, considering the environment in which he’ll spend the next few years. However, I found it quite delightful to see through that little crack in his otherwise stalwart armor—that naive sliver, somewhat unbecoming of a Royal Academy student, was what truly led me to think quite highly of the boy.”

Cher snorted, shrugging his shoulders. “Well, I’d take that over the usually snobby-looking brats who come here with rote answers, anyway.”

Finally satisfied that Cher’s opinion of Allen was fairly settled, the bureaucrat cautiously moved on to the more precarious part of his report.

“Now, about the boy’s rank…”

“Yeah? What, did you let him sign up as a C-Rank? Well, it seems like he’s gonna be a pretty capable brat, so it’s fine,” said Cher dismissively. Odilon nodded.

Satwa made a difficult expression, finding it even harder to broach the news now.

“What’s with the sour face? You…you let him in as a B-Rank, didn’t you?! Shit, you went way too easy on him with that one, Satwa. Well, if you think he really is all that, I’ll let it slide—but he’s gonna have to come here and meet me first before I sign off on it. The other explorers will riot if I let some brat join as a B-Rank without even meeting him myself, even if he is some Academy big shot. If I like the kid, he can have his B-Rank, and the rest of them can come see me if they’ve got a problem with it,” Cher declared, cracking his knuckles in a way that implied any complaints would not be resolved through words alone.

“I’m against it,” said Odilon. “I believe the boy has potential, but it’s precisely *because* of that potential that we shouldn’t recklessly grant him such a high rank. We’ll set a precedent for giving out high ranks like candy on the basis of *future* potential, and next thing you know, we’ll have parents from all the influential families clamoring for the same honors for their children. The rank system will become meaningless.” It was a perfectly reasonable opinion.

Yet Satwa remained silent.

“Oy, don’t tell me you let him in with an A—” Cher’s shocked inquiry was interrupted by Satwa, who’d finally built up the resolve to tell them the truth.

“Well, the thing is…as per the boy’s wishes, he has registered as a G-Rank explorer.”

“Huh? Why the hell—” Cher said, breaking off in his bewilderment. “Humility is one thing, but that’s just being an idiot. G-Ranks are basically chore boys! If you thought he was so promising, why’d you say yes to that stupid request?”

Satwa frowned. “At first, I offered to register him as a C-Rank, but he turned me down, saying the customary D-Rank was more than enough, or even a G-Rank—he claimed he didn’t want any special treatment. He seemed entirely unconcerned about the ranks at all!” He sighed, looking somewhat uncomfortable, then continued. “I don’t know what came over me. I asked him, ‘Well, what about if we let you in as a B-Rank, then?’ just to try and test that determination of his. I think I must have started underestimating him after the way he’d opened up to me when talking about Reed. Well, his mood changed in an instant—his face turned cold, and he said he was canceling his registration, then started walking toward the door…”

“It’s not like you to screw up like that, Satwa. From everything you’ve told us, you should have known he wasn’t gonna jump at the chance for an unearned decoration!” said Cher, glaring at the bureaucrat.

Odilon was similarly critical. “He must have thought you were making a fool of him, and after he’d treated you with such sincerity.”

“It was a failure on my part. Thankfully, Reed managed to convince Allen to sit back down, but after that, the only thing he would say was that he would register as a G-Rank or not at all. The boy’s wish was to sharpen his skills through the work of an explorer and to allow his passion to grow into one like Reed’s, starting right from the bottom. Again, he was so open and sincere about his desire, I felt it impossible to deny his request, especially after my blunder earlier.”

Cher let out a deep, frustrated sigh. “See? I knew this kid wouldn’t be easy. That’s why I said I’d deal with him! But the damage is done now. Look, let’s give him a day or two to think about it, then call him back in here for another chat. The kid’s probably just being stubborn because you annoyed him, but it’ll be a waste to send someone with that kind of talent and motivation on lousy G-Rank requests.” Cher knew full well how miserable it was to have to claw one’s way up from the bottom.

However, Satwa's expression grew even darker. "About that... Well, he just seemed so eager about the prospect of starting from G that I caved and permitted his desired registration on the spot. When I did, he immediately became cheerful again, and he grinned, saying, 'Now I can experience being an explorer from start to finish!'"

Satwa shuddered as he recalled the memory. "When I saw that smile, I was frightened. I realized his every action, his every word throughout the interview had probably all been leading to that goal, or at least toward creating an opportunity for him to demand it... He was guiding me toward underestimating him and making a miscalculation, and without my realizing it. That smile was one of great satisfaction."

"He played you like a fiddle!" laughed Cher. "Oh, I'm looking forward to this." Suddenly, the guildmaster stood up from his seat, his fists clenched.

Oh dear, he's too interested in Allen again! Hurriedly, Satwa tried to lower Cher's fascination. "That's right—he said something else that struck me! He said when Reed had explained that they should try not to waste any of the meat from the horned rabbit, he was impressed by his deep gratitude toward living things!"

"Gratitude for living things? Explorers can't survive with that kind of naive mindset! That's weakling talk right there," said Cher, lowering himself back into his seat dejectedly.

Oh dear, now he's too *uninterested...*

"Oh, also, he shared quite the opinion about the registration cards. He bemoaned the switch to paper cards, saying the old system had a far greater sense of adventure and heroics to it—back when the material used for the medallions changed with every rank. He even asked me which was more important—expenditures or adventure?"

Cher shot back out of his chair. "Hey, he's not wrong! When did us explorers become so worried about costs and budgets anyway? It's about the adventure!"

It's too high again!

"Oh yes, come to think of it—"

Fifteen minutes later...

"Argh! Now I've got no clue what kind of kid he is! That's why I told you to let me handle him! You just wait—I'll change his hidden evaluation to A myself, and I'll force him up through the ranks so I can meet him face-to-face!" The rapid emotional

changes Cher had just been subjected to had left him very unstable. Even the talented Satwa couldn't handle the guildmaster in this state. Unfortunately, this meant Cher was ultimately even more interested in Allen than he would have been if Satwa had just delivered the report normally.

The "hidden evaluation" Cher was set on manipulating was the guild's way of measuring an explorer's behavior and character, which was something Oliver the gardener had explained to Allen all those months ago. Despite the name, the existence of the hidden evaluation was public knowledge, although one's score was not. The reason it usually took a significant amount of time to move up a single rank was because one's suitability for promotion was based on the hidden evaluation as *well* as one's contributions to the field. Apparently, raising the guild's opinion of you was no easy task.

With an ironclad will and nerves of steel, Allen Rovene successfully convinced Satwa Fjorden, vice guildmaster of the Yugrian Explorer's Guild, to allow him to cast aside his Academy privileges and register as a G-Rank explorer. Such was the rumor that quickly spread across the capital and even farther, on account of Guildmaster Cher—fond of both the story and of a stiff drink, he'd immediately begun recounting the tale in the many bars he frequented around Runerelia.

With it came another rumor—that Allen Rovene was apparently on good terms with Reed Gourshe, heir to the Panacea Company, and that Reed too had been present during the fateful interview...

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And so, just like a run-of-the-mill commoner, I started my career as an explorer right from the bottom rung. Somewhat regrettably, I'd had to deceive Satwa a little—I wasn't all that interested in passion or self-improvement or whatever else I'd come up with during our interview. Really, I just wanted to try my hand at collecting medicinal herbs, cleaning up the capital streets, or any of those other boilerplate, entry-level requests.

Simply put, what I was most interested in was this *world* itself—in what kinds of people would be walking the streets of the capital and what they would be thinking about; in the terrain of the nearby forests and plains and what kinds of plants and

monsters I'd find there; and, of course, in what it would feel like to be a real explorer.

I was starving. My spirit and my passion had withered and decayed over the course of my past life, but now they were screaming with hunger. Screaming to be fed new, meaningful experiences.

My long-parched heart was crying with desperate thirst.

I would drink up all this world had to offer me—and I would savor every drop.

Side Story: The Investigation of Soldo Vineforce

“Whatever is wrong, Cecilia? I did not expect you back so soon—even if Allen were to have failed to pass the first threshold… Has something happened?”

Though shocked by his wife’s sudden return, Viscount Bellwood von Rovene didn’t pause in his watering of the beloved eggplants he grew in the estate garden. Gardening was his most cherished hobby.

“Allen passed the exams and was admitted into Class A. However, he has been suspected of cheating, which means investigators from the capital are almost certainly already on their way. Of course, I do not believe Allen cheated,” said Cecilia—Allen’s mother—dryly. “But I knew if the investigators were to arrive here before I could inform you, you would panic and make quite a mess of things, no? As such, I took the shortcut back here through the mountains. Allen’s future will not be squandered on account of our unpreparedness. Send for Grimm and Soldo.”

“Wh-Wh-What did you say?! Our Allen—passed—Class A—and accused of cheating?! And when you say you took the shortcut through the mountains…you can’t mean you came by the old road right through the middle of Dosfarnas’s territory, can you?”

As predicted, the viscount was in a complete panic.

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“Sage.”

Godolphen lifted his head at the voice, coming face-to-face with Musica. One look at her expression was enough to confirm that whatever she was about to tell him would not be pleasant news.

They were in the teachers’ lounge. On his favorite leather couch—rigid and squeaky as per his preference—Godolphen sat, beside a gleaming, thin side table piled high with books.

“My apologies, Sage. The scouts I sent to secure Soldo Vineforce failed.”

“Hmph. Well, I did not expect we would be able to ensnare

him so easily. Was anyone able to tempt him at all?"

Musica's face turned darker. "No. He turned down each and every one of them—they were not even able to wring out a *clue* as to what would win him over to our employ." She placed a small sheet of paper on the table beside Godolphen.

Soldo Vineforce: Investigation Results and Scouting Status
Ability: S
Character: S
Scouting Difficulty: S

Then Musica flipped over the first page of a thick stack of papers she'd balanced on one arm. "I don't really know where I should start..."

Her tone was uneasy as she began to read out the report on Soldo Vineforce.

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The first investigator-cum-scout had reached the Rovene Domain thirteen days after Musica had issued the order—he was a man by the name of Scissour. The road from Dragreid to Crauvia was long and isolated, with only a smattering of inns and villages along the way—none of which were equipped with maintenance stations for magically powered vehicles, meaning the only realistic way to travel was by horse and carriage. As the road drew nearer to Crauvia, it twisted up into the mountains, passing around and over several of their peaks until the small fortified city could finally be seen in the distance.

As the investigator had approached the manor, the viscount himself had greeted him. Scissour had congratulated the noble on his son's admission to the Royal Academy, but the viscount had seemed entirely unsurprised by the news. When queried, Bellwood had simply replied, *"Well, he got quite serious about his studies recently, you see."* As such, the investigator had noted down that the Rovene family had likely believed there was potential Allen would pass the exams, and into Class A at that.

When Scissour had explained the reason for his visit, Bellwood had appeared completely willing to cooperate with the investigation into Allen's unusually rapid improvement—and

specifically into the methods of Soldo Vineforce.

The Rovene boy's unbelievable progress could be attributed to Soldo Vineforce's "Absolute Success Strategy," noted the investigator. He'd attached a copy of the curriculum in question. It detailed a hellish schedule, with lessons from eight in the morning until seven in the evening without a single break in between. It seemed the boy's lunch had been limited to field rations eaten during his preparation for the afternoon lessons. It was an unthinkably harsh routine for a boy of merely twelve. When Scissour had questioned Soldo about how Allen could have possibly endured the demanding schedule, the tutor had simply smiled and said, *"The young master developed this schedule himself. I merely carried it out according to his wishes."*

The contents of those lessons had shocked the investigator even more. He'd attached a copy of Allen's results from both the mock exams and the actual Royal Academy exams. An analyst from the Academy had highlighted the specific areas in which Allen's grades had seen tremendous improvement. Scissour had then compared those areas to the curriculum he'd acquired from Soldo.

There was no question about it. The lessons Soldo Vineforce had taught Allen Rovene had been specifically tailored to his needs. There was an unquestionable correlation between the composition of each lesson and the areas in which Allen had most dramatically improved. It was the most efficient, most *ruthless* study strategy the investigator had seen in all his years.

According to Soldo, the curriculum had been designed by the boy himself after he'd analyzed past tests. Scissour, doubtful that a twelve-year-old boy—even a prodigy like the youngest Rovene—could have designed such a demanding study plan, had questioned Soldo on the matter. Yet the older man had simply replied, *"The young master found his motivation,"* and thereafter refused to discuss the subject further.

Scissour had noted that it appeared Soldo Vineforce's method of instruction placed high importance on the independence of the student. Rather than teaching everyone from the same prepared curriculum, it seemed he guided students to discover their individual problem areas and develop strategies to overcome them on their own.

However, even a thorough analysis of the curriculum he'd received hadn't brought the investigator any closer to

understanding how Allen had been able to solve *that* magical power conversion problem, a mystery that had become quite the topic among the examiners. In actuality, the secret to that had been found not in the curriculum, but in the style by which Soldo conducted his lessons.

Contrary to the accepted method of instruction around the kingdom, where a tutor would explain a concept and the student would take notes, Soldo conducted his lectures as a discussion between teacher and pupil. Together, they would examine some facet of a topic and work together to land on an answer to some considerably difficult questions. In response to Scissour's query on the magical power conversion problem, Soldo had laughed gently, then explained, *"The young master and I became so impassioned whilst trying to solve a similar problem during our lessons that we nearly came to blows. After that experience, a simple exercise such as the one on that test must have seemed like child's play."*

"Despite his gentle, mild-mannered appearance, Soldo Vineforce also appears to have a hot-blooded side," the investigator had written.

At that point in the discussion, Scissour had idly voiced his doubts about this method of instruction, which seemed to be, in the grand scheme of things, a rather inefficient use of the limited time Allen had had left to him before the exams. Of course, the discussion-based teaching format had clearly led to some positive results, but surely it would have been less risky to stick to the tried-and-true method of one-sided lecturing. When he'd said as much to Soldo, the tutor had nodded.

"It is as you say. However, it was the young master's belief that the plan he'd devised would provide greater benefits in the short term, even with the risk we wouldn't be able to cover as much content. I merely followed his instructions." Again, he'd refused to discuss the matter further.

It was once again clear to the investigator that Soldo's method of teaching was one that valued the opinion of the student just as equally as that of the instructor. The Rovene boy had been allowed—no, *encouraged*—to alter the lessons to target his own learning goals. When Scissour had inquired as to why the study strategy in question—the catalyst for Allen's rapid progress—had been implemented only three months prior to the exams, Soldo's response had been *"That's simply when the*

young master was ready to begin. The heart cannot be rushed."

"My interview with Soldo revealed the tutor seemed fully confident that once Allen was ready to begin studying for the exams, he would undoubtedly be able to exceed the threshold at the very least," the investigator had written. "It is my understanding that Vineforce's methods prioritize the development of the student's motivation and willpower over the development of their knowledge. Based on the information detailed above, it is my belief that Soldo Vineforce is one of the greatest tutors in the kingdom."

Scissour's report then moved on to his investigation into Soldo's character. First, Scissour had half jokingly questioned the older man about Allen's remark that the tutor wore a diaper during lessons just to eliminate the need to take any bathroom breaks. But Soldo's frank reply had shaken him: *"What kind of soldier concerns themselves with such trivial needs as going to the latrine in the midst of a life-or-death battle?"* he'd said, readily admitting to the truth of the rumor.

Up until that point, Scissour hadn't been able to reconcile the image of the "Combat Ready" Soldo Vineforce he'd heard so much about with the genial old man before him. Now, however, a hint of the warrior he'd imagined had begun to slip through the cracks. So the investigator had steeled himself—then, in a somewhat provocative tone, he'd asked the tutor if he thought there was any truth to the rumors that Allen Rovene may have cheated.

The next line of the report was an apology from Scissour for the above misstep.

In an instant, Soldo's gentle smile had vanished, and his face had hardened. *"The young master would never commit such a dishonorable act. If, for some preposterous reason, it is decided he* did *cheat, you shall all be the witnesses to my death. My own blade will demonstrate my dissent."*

"Such was the fire in his eyes," Scissour had noted in a trembling hand, "that I am certain he meant every word."

Finally, Scissour had brought up the topic that had been the talk of the faculty room since the exams—the strange, refined head-nodding movements Allen seemed prone to doing. Apparently, those movements were indeed another aspect of Soldo's teaching, which he had referred to as "the art of bowing."

Bowing, of course, was already a common practice in this

world, but it was a casual gesture of no more significance than a wave. *Soldo's* bowing was a much more sacred practice. Although Scissour had been unable to glean many details about the practice, it seemed there were two main forms: the standing bow or the seated bow. Furthermore, it seemed the degree to which you lowered your head also changed based on how much reverence you wished to convey to your target. A minor request would be accompanied by a fifteen-degree inclination of the head, whereas a larger request necessitated a thirty-degree inclination. A bow that accompanied a request of utmost seriousness could be anywhere from forty-five to *ninety* degrees, the investigator had written, and the length of time one held the bow also changed depending on various factors.

Scissour's opinion was that the profound philosophy behind the art of bowing was of far more significance than the movements themselves, and he had gone on to explain that the act of bowing was just one of the many tenets of "respect" Soldo Vineforce seemed to teach. As Soldo had put it, *"Each bow is but a single step on the path of an honorable life, but not all steps are bows."* The tutor had refused to go into any more detail, but Scissour had concluded that bowing was just one of a multitude of rites that formed said "path."

According to the investigator, it seemed Soldo and Allen had even started and ended each individual lesson with a mutual bow.

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"There you have it. Based on this report, Allen's success in the Royal Academy entrance examinations was the result of his own effort—not on account of Soldo Vineforce," said Musica.

Up until that point, Godolphen had listened in silence. Now, unable to restrain himself any longer, he spoke, his voice heavy with disbelief. "How can that be? No twelve-year-old child could have the forethought to come up with such a strategy, nor the discipline to carry it out. I cannot accept it."

"Exactly. I can only conclude that Soldo Vineforce provided us with this information *knowing* we wouldn't believe it. It's like he's telling us Allen has taken the stage, and that he himself is no more than a stagehand—working behind the curtains but never to be seen." She sighed. "He seems to be a man of great integrity

and talent. He was not swayed by the temptations of money, status, or title. I gave my scouts leave to offer him a tenured position at the Academy—I even received permission to offer him a baronship or an Order of Merit from the king himself! But he turned down every offer. 'A humble man such as myself is not deserving of such greatness,' he said."

Godolphen shook his head in wonder. "To think such noble people still exist in the world…"

"The world is a vast and strange place, to be sure," Musica agreed. "We will leave Soldo be for now and see what comes of it. Should the need arise, I will consider asking my father to act on the matter."

Godolphen nodded.

Side Story: Behind the Scenes; Journey to the Capital

For the first time in many years, Oliver—currently a gardener at the Rovene estate and formerly an explorer—paid a visit to the Crauvian branch of the Explorer's Guild.

Although it had been over ten years since he'd retired from the guild, the ramshackle building looked exactly as it had back then—it was as though time had stood still in just this small patch of land.

Oliver pushed open the creaky wooden door, which swung inward on precariously rusted hinges. A score of gazes turned in his direction, their owners clad in old, beaten armor that quantified their many years of service. They were evaluating him.

He smiled wryly. *This place hasn't changed at all.*

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"Well now, if it isn't Oliver the Coward! Here I thought the viscount was keeping you like a pet or something after you retired. Did he finally kick you out? Don't tell me you're here to make a comeback!" laughed Johnny, one of the weathered explorers.

Nearby, a considerably younger-looking man tilted his head, his interest piqued. "Oliver the Coward? What kind of name is that, Johnny?"

"Huh?" replied the older man, his brow furrowed. "Oh, that's right—you wouldn't have been around back then. Time flies, eh? Well, this guy right here"—he jabbed a thumb in Oliver's direction—"couldn't handle even the easiest fights for the life of him! Imagine it. An explorer who can't kill a baby monster, working out in the sticks like us!" He laughed again. "This weirdo spent fifteen years clawing his way up to D-Rank through collection and foraging requests alone. Never took on even a single eradication mission!"

At Johnny's words, the younger explorers' expressions morphed into blatant contempt. In their line of work, there was no room for cowards. That sentiment resonated even more

strongly in rural areas like Crauvia, where all kinds of dangerous monsters inhabited the mountains and forests. This was an environment in which strength was valued above all else.

Noticing the scornful faces around him, Johnny hurriedly waved a hand as if to clear the air. “Oy, don’t get me wrong, now. Sure, he doesn’t know which end of a sword to hold, and he won’t even hunt a small animal, let alone a monster—but Oliver here managed to get all the way to D-Rank *without* spilling a drop of blood. In other words, he’s probably the best foraging-focused explorer in the whole kingdom. Rookies like you don’t have the right to look down on him, you hear me?”

The rookies in question looked a little surprised at Johnny’s response. “Wow,” one of them replied. “Must be a pretty impressive person after all if *you’re* praising him like that. You never compliment other explorers.”

Johnny scratched his head awkwardly. “Well, it’s the truth. Heck, even now, ten years after Oliver retired, the branchmaster is still moaning and groaning about how no one can complete foraging requests like ol’ Oliver here. But still, if you ask me, he’s more of a superweirdo than a superexplorer.” Johnny grinned. Of course, to him, the word “weirdo” was just another form of compliment.

Finally, Oliver spoke up. “Please—I’m not anywhere near as impressive as Johnny’s making me out to be,” he said awkwardly, waving a hand in denial. Leaving the younger explorers to their hushed conversations, he scanned the cramped room, quickly finding his target. The man was sitting on a barstool, a drink in hand despite the early hour. Silently, Oliver slid onto the stool next to him.

“It’s been a while, Dio. I have a request for you from the viscount himself.”

The weathered explorer turned toward him, not even attempting to hide the disgusted scowl on his face.

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“The viscount’s youngest son, Allen, will be leaving shortly for Runerelia to take the Royal Academy entrance exams. Yesterday, the young master declared he would make the journey without a parent or chaperone—and for some reason, the viscount agreed. Of course, he’s organized for a coachman with some combat

experience to drive the carriage, but he's still concerned about Allen's safety, after all. He's requesting you escort Allen and the coachman as far as Dragreid, just in case."

I sighed. *Just as I thought—what an annoying request.* As rumor had it, the youngest son of the Rovene family had grown up doted on by everyone around him, and by all accounts, he was a spoiled brat.

"The viscount's put his foot in it again. Does Lady Cecilia know about this?"

Oliver shook his head. "Lady Cecilia is already in the capital and will remain there until after Allen's exams, so I don't think she's aware of the situation. Besides, the young master only made his declaration last night. The viscount is quite frantic at the moment, as you can imagine."

I knew it. I had no interest in the games and politics of the noble class, but even I knew acceptance into the Royal Academy could alter the trajectory of one's future dramatically, along with that of their family. *Heck, even a kid too young for preparatory school knows that*. There was no chance Lady Cecilia would approve her child's selfish request to play at traveling alone on the way to such momentous exams.

"Why me, though? I'm sure you know this already, but the escort fee for a C-Rank explorer to go to Dragreid, plus the nomination fee for a specific explorer... Well, it'll be more than eight thousand riels, at the very least. The branchmaster wouldn't let me take it on for less than that, or we'd be setting a precedent for others. And the Rovenes aren't exactly rolling in money, are they?"

Try your luck somewhere else. I hoped he got the message.

Oliver chucked awkwardly, but he didn't seem put off by my reluctance. We'd known each other a long time. He'd likely predicted my response.

"The viscount, carefree though he is, has at least *started* to anticipate that Lady Cecilia won't be happy when she learns what he's agreed to. I'm loath to put it so bluntly, but I think he's trying to curtail some of her anger by involving you in the trip, Dio."

So he wants to drag me into the middle of a lover's quarrel? No thanks, I thought, somehow managing to avoid speaking the words aloud. "Shouldn't he just put a stop to the kid's selfish adventure, then?"

Oliver smiled gently. "The young master has really turned

himself around in just a few short months. It would have been near impossible for the viscount, seeing the fine young man his son has become, to turn down his request—especially considering Allen asked because he believes a solo trip would help him mature even more, or so he said. I agree with the viscount's decision. For what it's worth, I hope you'll consider the request." Oliver smiled again.

I let out another sigh. *It's too hard to say no to Oliver, especially when he's this sincere… And if I do turn down the request and something happens to the kid along the way, I'd never be able to show my face to Lady Cecilia again.*

And so, this was how Dio found himself begrudgingly accepting the viscount's request—all the while cursing the fact that he hadn't taken on an earlier eradication mission that would have taken him away from Crauvia before Oliver could find him.

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If the request had been to escort that other Rovene child—the genius Roseria girl—I would have accepted it in a heartbeat.

Years ago, when I'd been called to the Rovene estate on business, I'd chanced across Lady Cecilia training her daughter in the ways of the sword. With her light-pink hair, the young girl looked as beautiful as a cosmos blooming in the garden—and her talent with the sword was extraordinarily similar to Cecilia's when she'd been the same age. No matter how many times Lady Cecilia had knocked her down, Roseria would jump back up again with a gleeful smile and go straight into her next attack. I'd found myself slightly awestruck by her sheer determination.

If only it had been Rosa…

Occasionally, my idle mind would wander, and I'd find myself imagining the bright future the young girl had in front of her. At those times, my heart would race with excitement in a way more fitting for a child than a man my age. When I'd heard the girl had failed the Royal Academy exams, it'd simply reminded me once again just how worthless "the kingdom's best school" really was.

On the other hand, this Allen—or whatever his name was—was better known as a brat. It was widely recognized that his swordsmanship, at the very least, was far better than that of his two older brothers. However, rumor had it he hated studying and spent most of his time spinning tall tales and running away

from his lessons over actually learning anything. The same went for basic endurance training and practicing sword strokes.

I'd seen it countless times—kids born with immeasurable talent who let it all go to waste because of their own foolishness. If you couldn't push yourself to *build* on that innate skill level, it would begin to rot away. Back at the guild, Oliver had said the lordling had begun to turn himself around recently or whatever, but I wasn't young enough to be hoodwinked by empty words.

I knew people didn't change so easily. My withered heart had long lost the capacity for optimism or hope.

Raised by Cecilia, with her blood flowing through his veins. The thought of having to look after such a brat, who wasted his talent like a fool... It pained me more than I'd anticipated it would. Secretly, I made up my mind. I'd do the job without getting involved with the kid any more than necessary, and then I'd put the whole thing behind me as quickly as I could.

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"It's a pleasure to meet you, Dio. I'll be in your care until Dragreid." Those were the first words the rumored wild child said to me, lowering his head politely. I was a little surprised by his manners, but some fancy words and a bow alone weren't going to warm me up to the kid. Sure, it was better than having to deal with a noble brat with an ego bigger than he was... But I had a vague feeling he was still just putting on an act. This wasn't his real self.

Stonily ignoring the young boy across from me in the carriage, I kept my mind focused on the work, scanning the passing countryside for any hint of danger. I made sure to avoid meeting his eyes, unable to bear the thought of inviting childish pestering for stories of my adventures.

Fortunately, the lordling seemed as uninterested in me as I was in him as he steadily worked his way through a thick book. Admittedly, I was slightly impressed by his concentration after I realized he'd been absorbed in the book for several hours straight, without so much as a slump in his posture. *Maybe he's not a complete waste...*

The first major incident happened in the afternoon of the second day since we'd left Crauvia. Set upon by a small swarm of red spiders, I'd ordered the coachman to stop the carriage, and

then I'd easily dispatched them all with a few jabs from my trusty spear.

"That was amazing, Dio! Hey, is there any chance you could let me spar with you along the way to Dragreid? Please!" pleaded Allen, his eyes sparkling. In an instant, he'd dropped the slightly uncanny nobleman's speak from the day before—now he sounded much more like how a boy his age *should* sound.

I swiftly turned him down. "I'm here as an escort, not a trainer." *If he somehow got injured, I'd have hell to pay. Plus, he's only going to run away from these lessons, just like all his other ones.* Either way, I didn't want to have to see Cecilia's child injured or slacking off.

The kid didn't drop it, though. "What about if it's just when we stop for a break, then? Please! I really want some experience against someone who uses a spear!"

Again and again, I tried to refuse him. I asked him what he thought would happen if he got himself injured right before the big exams. I told him getting too used to fighting a spear-wielding opponent might mess with his form before the physical exam. No matter how I tried to reject his request, though, he countered each of my arguments with sound logic. Eventually, I had no choice but to give in.

"I'll spar with you *once*—using a stick, not my spear. And I'm not going to use any thrusting techniques, so don't ask. Even with a wooden weapon, a thrust can be deadly if it catches you in the wrong place," I grumbled, still reluctant.

The lordling, on the other hand, was beside himself with excitement. "Thank you, Dio! I can't wait!"

As the sun fell near our campsite that evening, so did the boy. Mercilessly, I knocked him down, time and time again. I had no intention of continuing to play at sparring all the way to Dragreid. I assumed if I gave him a real taste of what it was like to fight a spear user, he'd hesitate to ask me again.

But the kid didn't know when to quit. Every time I knocked him down, he'd spring back up again with a grin on his face, then rush in for his next attack—and each time he did, there was a new twist to his approach. In the end, we only stopped sparring when I called it off, worried he'd hurt himself in his enthusiasm.

The next day, Allen begged me to spar with him again. And again the day after that. I begrudgingly gave in, telling myself he'd get sick of it soon enough. Surely, he would give up soon...

Contrary to my expectations, I found myself sparring with the young boy every night, all the way to Dragreid. No matter how bruised and battered he got, the kid always thanked me for my time before heading into the lodge or tent, where he'd study into the early hours of the morning. He woke up earlier than anyone to practice his sword strokes. Once a day, he'd alight from the carriage and run alongside it—for a considerable distance at that. And the rest of the time? He had his head stuck in a book; he'd devour its contents like a starving man at a banquet. I watched him plow through the thick *Canardian Encyclopedia of Monsters*, gazing at each and every word as though he were individually engraving them into his brain. Intrigued, I was tempted to ask if he'd really need to know the content of the book in such detail just for the royal exams. I'd long begun to question the validity of all those rumors that had painted the Rovene boy as a slacker and a troublemaker.

We exchanged our farewells in Dragreid. "Thank you, Dio. I had a really great time sparring with you—even if I didn't manage to land a single hit," said Allen. He flashed me a somewhat bitter grin, but there was no hint of frustration in his cheerful eyes.

It was true: He hadn't managed to land a blow on me even once. After seeing him bounce up time and time again that first day—well, I'd become a little more passionate about our sparring after that. I'd increased the difficulty of my attacks until he could only just withstand them, and even then, only some of the time—nevertheless, he'd spring back up each time, a new technique or strategy already in mind. With his instincts for magic manipulation and his obvious smarts, he'd been able to adjust to the differences in fighting a spear user with astounding speed.

He's going to become much, much stronger. There was no doubt about it.

"Y'know, at first I thought playing at swords with a little lordlin' like you was just a waste of time. But you've got guts, and good instincts. Once you get some experience, even a lordlin' like you won't have nothing to worry about." The praise was about as blunt as the rest of my treatment of the kid throughout the trip. It was clear Cecilia had never told him about me, so I couldn't cross any lines.

We'd part with him thinking of me as Dio, an explorer who'd

taken on an escort request on a whim, and nothing more.

"The train doesn't leave until tonight, but I want to look around Dragreid a bit, so...this is where we part ways, I guess. Thanks for everything, Dio. I'll repay your kindness one day!" said Allen, clapping me cheekily on the back before turning on his heel. Within seconds, he'd disappeared into the crowd.

"Good luck, kid!" I wanted to shout that after him, but my mouth couldn't form the words.

He might just be able to do it. He might be able to do what Cecilia couldn't...

There was a warm, unfamiliar feeling in my chest. Hope. With one last glance in the direction Allen had gone, I turned and left the plaza, heading for the Dragreid branch of the Explorer's Guild. I'd been eligible to take the B-Rank promotion test for a good few years, but I hadn't been able to muster the enthusiasm to make the long trip from Crauvia to take it. That would change today. *I can't let myself stagnate any further. I'm being put to shame by a twelve-year-old.*

As I strode toward the guild with purposeful steps, I began to wonder what Allen would get up to at the Royal Academy, then about what he'd become after he graduated. My legs and heart felt lighter with each step. I felt nearly the same as I had all those years ago, back when I'd spent hours pondering over Cecilia's future in the same way.

Side Story: Sightseeing

It was the day before the Royal Academy entrance exams. I'd left this day free—for emergency last-minute cramming if needed, but ideally as a day to rest. After I'd finished my morning training, I headed to the dining room for breakfast and found Rosa already sitting there. *Good.*

I'd already done everything I possibly could to prepare, whether in my studies or in refining my physical skills. Panicking now and trying to learn something new right before the exams wouldn't help in the slightest. On the other hand, taking a day to rest and breathe in the city air would likely help me approach tomorrow with a clear mind. Besides, it wouldn't hurt to get used to the city a little either.

Plus, it might also let me get back into Rosa's good books.

"Rosa, I don't have any plans for today, so I was wondering—hoping, in fact, that you might want to spend the day showing me around the city?"

Since I'd declared my intention to live in one of the Academy dorms, Rosa's mood had been at a record low. However, the moment she registered my request, her eyes lit up.

"Really? *Really* really? You mean it?"

Rosa's erraticism and impulsivity caused a lot of trouble, to be sure—but it was also part of her charm.

"Honestly, I can scarcely tell which of you is the older sibling sometimes," sighed our mother from across the table. Then she raised an eyebrow at me. "Are you sure, Allen? You shouldn't feel obligated to exhaust yourself running around after your sister—especially since tomorrow is such an important day."

Rosa looked back at me, her eyes brimming with worry.

"It's fine, Mother. Besides, it will do me good to take a break rather than trying to cram anything in at the last minute. Maybe having a look around the city and picturing myself living here after I pass might just be the last push I need to get me over the threshold. And since Rosa has lived here for a while, she'll be a real help—if I can convince her to accompany me, of course," I said, smiling politely at Mother and Rosa in turn.

As I'd predicted, Rosa's eyes lit up even more. "Leave it to me!

That's what older sisters are for! Let me think, let me think, where should we go…? Is there anywhere special you wanted to see, Allen? If we just start with the most popular spots, there's the royal palace, and you can't forget the royal gallery either. Then there's the cathedral, and of course, the watchtower at the old West Wall, if you want to look out over the whole city…"

"Hmm…" I thought it over for a moment. "All of those places sound interesting, but I think I'd like to explore the more normal parts of the city today, to be honest. Catch a little glimpse of the streets and the people, you know? Oh, but the watchtower sounds fun—I'd like to go there first, if that's okay. There's so much you don't realize about a place until you've seen it from a height."

Rosa giggled. "You've always loved being up high, haven't you? I still remember you climbing that gigantic tree before you could even use Strengthening Magic—and then you got stuck and started to cry!"

My face reddened in embarrassment, but she wasn't wrong. Even before my awakening, I'd loved climbing anything, going up as high as I could. The higher I was, the freer I felt, like I could nearly grow wings and fly away. Since I'd awakened, however, the Japanese idiom that had been drilled into my head in my past life —*"Only smoke and idiots like high places"*—had dampened that joy a little.

But I still loved being as close to the sky as I could, no matter what anyone else thought. I wasn't going to let some stock phrase from my old life decide what I loved in this one.

"Well, let's head over to the West Wall first, and then we'll just go wherever our feet take us! I'll go get ready—there's not a minute to waste!" Rosa stood from her seat and rushed up the stairs to the second floor.

"Rosa?" called Mother. Rosa stiffened, her foot hovering over the next step. "If you leave your clothes scattered all over the floor again like last time, you won't be leaving the house until you tidy them up. Understood?" Rosa swallowed hard and nodded, then flew up the last few steps.

Shaking her head, Mother turned back toward me, smiling. "Incidentally—just who are you?"

The smile didn't reach her eyes.

I froze. In an instant, the warm atmosphere had turned to ice. A shiver rippled up my spine.

I licked my lips nervously. *If I tell her I've regained my memories from my past life, there's no way she'll believe me—and even if she does, there's no way she'll keep treating me like the same Allen she knew before. But I can't lie to her either.*

My heart was thumping so loudly I could hear it. My mouth was drier than a desert.

"I'm…still Allen, Mother. Because of a certain…*encounter*, I've just changed a little. I can't tell you anything more." I barely managed to choke the words out through my parched lips.

Mother stared at me unblinkingly for a few seconds. It felt more like a few hours. Finally, she exhaled softly, relaxing her tense posture. "Of course… Of course you're Allen. The way you eat your food, the way you cast your magic—even your habit of licking your lips when you're nervous. They're all the same. Of course, you're Allen. I apologize for asking such a strange question. You've just changed so much that you seem like a different person entirely—even to your mother. It's as though you've just returned from a long, long journey…"

She paused for a moment, then broke into one of her special, girlish smiles. "And then, a certain encounter, you say?" She giggled. "That brings back the memory of when I first met Bell. I'd already cut ties with my family at that point, so I didn't get the chance to inform them I was to marry him. Is this how they would have felt, to realize their child had already begun to walk a separate path? Would they have felt as lonely as I do now, I wonder…"

She smiled again, but there was a sadness somewhere in the way her lips curved that made my heart ache.

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The watchtower at the old West Wall was very close to the center of the city, as it turned out. In the early days of Runerelia's foundation, the city had begun from the area surrounding the palace, which itself backed onto the River Rune, which bordered the city to the east. The current West Wall was much, much farther to the west than the old one. When you looked up at the domineering stone tower from below, it was still easy to imagine how majestic and foreboding it must have seemed in those bygone days.

Apart from the watchtower itself, the rest of the West Wall

had long been demolished. Besides it having been an obstruction to the expansion of the city, the building stone used in those days was apparently imbued with a significant resistance to both monsters and magical attacks—and it came with a significant value to match. It would have been a waste to leave the wall as a mere tourist attraction.

As for why I was so knowledgeable about the history of the West Wall?

That was on account of the swarm of tour guides buzzing around the watchtower entrance. One after another, they approached my sister—my presence seemed to barely register to them—with lewd gleams in their eyes, each trying their luck at enticing her to accompany them.

"Shall we look over the city together, young lady? I'll give you a very special price. Just a single riel! How about it? A ninety-five percent discount!"

"Don't be fooled by that youngling, my lady. I've been doing this a lot longer than anyone else here! Not only will I show you the city, I'll take you to the most delicious restaurant in Runerelia, and it won't cost you a single riel! You won't find a better price than mine!"

Come on—if you're not charging her, then you're just trying to pick her up, right?

"Thank you, but I'm not looking for a guide today! My little brother here has just arrived in the city, and he asked *me* to show him around since I'm such a reliable older sister—right, Allen?" She beamed at me.

The swarm of tour guides grumbled and sighed.

"It's nice to have such a kind older sister, kiddo!"

"I wish I was your little brother!"

A few of them slapped me on the shoulder as they disappeared in twos and threes back into the plaza. As you'd expect, those slaps were reinforced with Strengthening Magic—though luckily, I'd already shielded myself with Magic Guard.

Rosa and I joined the short line and began our ascent of the tower. By my rough estimation, it was probably around eighty meters tall. If I remembered correctly, the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy and the Five-Storied Pagoda in Nara both only just surpassed the fifty-meter mark; this watchtower was far taller, and with magic, they definitely could have built it even taller if they'd liked. However, the Rune Plains, which Runerelia had been

built on, were relatively flat, as the name suggested, and even eighty meters was high enough to see so far out that the horizon began to blur. They'd built it for practicality, not grandeur.

I wonder what kinds of lives people were living a thousand years ago when this tower was built... It was hard to imagine it now, looking over the city in all its size and splendor. But for them to have built a watchtower like this back then, it must have been a very different time—the threat of war and monsters would have been immense.

"Allen, are you listening to me?" Rosa's query interrupted my train of (very much unusual for a twelve-year-old) thought, as did the elbow she'd jabbed into my side. Scratching my head, I offered her an awkward smile, signaling that I had not, in fact, been listening.

Rosa puffed her cheeks out sulkily, sighing, then started her explanation again. "I *said*, that big forest over there"—she pointed to a green carpet of treetops in the east—"is where the Royal Academy is. They're really strict about their privacy there, so they've designed it so no one can see into the school, not even from here."

I strained my eyes in the direction she'd pointed her finger. As she'd said, a thick forest covered most of the area within the high stone walls. If I really looked for them, I could make out a few slivers of what might have been buildings through the trees, but that wasn't enough to get any kind of grasp on the actual layout of the Academy.

"Then, if you look just to the south of the Academy, you can see the palace. And over there—"

For a good while after that, Rosa rambled on, pointing out landmarks and useful facilities across the capital, barely pausing to take a breath. She usually had no interest in anything other than magical craftsmanship and tools, but judging by the breadth and depth of her knowledge of the capital as seen from the watchtower, she'd likely spent some of her precious research time preparing for my arrival.

"And lastly..." She paused for a split second, her eyes narrowing as she smiled a little shyly. "You see that white, hazy mountain range in the distance there? If you walked *all* the way past it, and then you covered the same distance again, that's where Dragreid is. And then, even farther away past Dragreid—that's where our home is." Rosa trailed off. "It feels strange, you

know. To be able to stand side by side with you, so far away from home."

I chuckled at the appearance of Rosa's seldom-seen sentimental side, and she puffed out her cheeks again.

"What's so funny, huh?!"

I didn't answer her for a moment as my eyes once again fixed on the Royal Academy in the distance. "Sorry for laughing, Rosa. But the strange feeling you get from me being in the capital—I'd say you'll have to get used to it soon." I grinned at her cheekily.

Rosa beamed at me, her cheeks growing red. "Oh, just when *did* you get so cool, Allen?!"

She linked her arm with mine, and together, we began the long climb down the tower.

The Royal Academy had seemed so far away before. Now it felt like I could reach out and touch it.

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After we'd finished at the watchtower, Rosa led me to a nearby restaurant she'd come across in her preparations. The redbrick facade and warm, cozy interior somewhat reminded me of an Italian restaurant back in Japan. It was definitely a place that catered to the upper classes of Runerelian society. The waitstaff didn't falter for a second at the appearance of two children; they ushered us to a table with the same manners and service shown to the much older customers around us. Frankly, it wasn't an environment in which I felt particularly comfortable, having grown up as a member of the working class in my past life and as a pseudonoble in this one.

I ordered something Rosa recommended. Sure enough, it was tastier than anything I'd eaten back in Crauvia, but it didn't quite hold a candle to some of the food I'd had the opportunity to eat back in Tokyo, if I was being honest.

But I didn't care much about the overall flavor. With each bite, I stumbled across another new ingredient or spice I'd never encountered in Crauvia, let alone Japan. Each unknown taste that danced across my tongue was a vivid reminder that I was indeed in an entirely different world. If I stayed in the capital, I'd be able to try countless new foods and flavors—although I'd definitely stick to the less upscale restaurants once I was on my own. *I'll ask Rosa if we can go to a more casual place for dinner...*

After lunch, we headed to a nearby street lined with fancy general stores and posh boutiques. At one point during our leisurely stroll down the street, Rosa pointed out a nearby boutique that she apparently frequented.

"Well, let's go and have a look, then! I need to buy you something to thank you for showing me around today," I suggested with a smile.

Rosa, overwhelmed with emotion at my casual suggestion, burst into tears right on the street, ignoring the startled glances of nearby shoppers. I hurriedly tried to soothe her.

"It's just—it's just—this is the first present I'll ever get from you, Allen," she said between sobs. "I'm just so happy…"

Give me a break…

"Oh, dear! Why is such a beautiful girl crying on the street?" came a voice from behind me. It belonged to a sharply dressed man in his mid-twenties, who approached us with a dazzling smile and an expression that practically screamed, *"I'm a hit with the ladies."* Offering Rosa a crisp, expensive-looking handkerchief, he continued, "My lady, let me be an ear for what troubles you. There's a tea shop nearby called Rosetin Box—I'm sure you've heard of it. Usually it takes months to get a reservation there, but I can pull some strings and organize a table for us. Shall we?" He finished with a slimy wink.

Rosa utterly ignored the man's presence. "Allen, this store is a little expensive, you know," she said worriedly. "I make do with a little magical craftwork here and there, but you've only got your pocket money. If you really want to buy me something, we can go back to the general store on the last block. There's some things there…"

Unsure whether or not I should acknowledge the man's presence on Rosa's behalf, I chose to ignore him for now and replied to Rosa. "Well…my wallet *is* a little light at the moment. If I do stay in Runerelia, I was planning to start doing some explorer work or something, but for now…if you could choose something that's around two hundred riels or so, I'd be thankful," I said, scratching my head in slight embarrassment. Incidentally, one riel was probably worth around a dollar by my estimation.

The man, whom Rosa had yet to even glance at, moved even closer to me, trying to force his way into Rosa's line of sight. He shot me a contemptuous look. "Two hundred riels? What a paltry gift that would buy. When I was your age, I received three

thousand riels each *month* to spend as I pleased," he said with a sneer before turning back to Rosa. "My lady, let me escort you. I'll find you an outfit that will suit you perfectly, as a memento of our first meeting. Oh." He faltered for a second, then fished something out of his pocket. "Where are my manners? I forgot to even introduce myself. Please, take this." With a sweeping gesture, he offered her a business card. A quick glance told me his name was Tony and that he was supposedly the president of what seemed like a jewelry company.

"Ah, talent like mine is both a blessing and a curse, I'm embarrassed to say," he remarked, not sounding remotely embarrassed. "My father was so impressed by my work, he entrusted me with my own store when I was just twenty-two." He slid his fingers through his long bangs in what he must have thought was a nonchalant motion.

This is bad. The new, mature version of me could just ignore pompous idiots like this one, but Rosa wasn't capable of overlooking someone who disregarded her beloved little brother.

All my effort to put Rosa in a good mood was about to be undone in just a few short seconds. I could see her temper worsening before my eyes. Her lips were still twisted in the ghost of a smile, but I could tell it was no more than an artifact of a good mood now departed.

Surely she won't beat him up over a few rude words... But who knows what this clueless idiot is going to come out with next? This could easily turn into a bloodbath.

In the outer regions of the kingdom, society was generally tolerant of the occasional fistfight or brawl. After all, there were a lot of rough explorer types out there, and the existence of magic and potions meant injuries could be quickly healed. I had no evidence said tolerance would extend to the capital city, though.

"Let's... Let's go in, shall we?! If we find something that suits you, I'll empty out my wallet to buy it for you! Although, you're so beautiful that everything looks gorgeous on you, Sister," I pressed her nervously.

The fire in her glare subsided slightly. "Oh, Allen... When did you learn how to compliment a woman like that?" she laughed, a blush forming across her cheeks.

Tony smirked, a look of comprehension crossing his face. "Ah, now I see. I wondered why such a beautiful lady would entertain

the likes of you—you're her younger *brother*! Now it makes sense. Did you come from the countryside for a little holiday?" he asked, his voice turned sickeningly sweet. "You might not get this, being a country boy and all, but your older sister has just walked right into a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The proper thing to do would be to make an excuse and scram—leaving your sister here in my care, of course."

Tony, it seemed, had now convinced himself that Rosa had been feigning disinterest because of my presence. *Just how full of yourself can you be?!* Furthermore, he'd now followed us into the boutique. We were swiftly greeted by the gentle shopkeeper.

"Why, if it isn't Lady Roseria! We've missed you recently. Who might your friends be?" Rosa apparently came here often enough that the employees recognized her face, at least.

"Hello, Venetta! This is my little brother, Allen. He used to be so cute, but while I've been here in the capital, he's grown into such a handsome man, as you can see! Right now, we're in the middle of our sightseeing date!"

As Rosa spoke, Venetta broke out into a generous smile. "Well, now! To think I finally get to see the little brother you've told me so much about. It's my honor to meet you, Master Allen. I'm Venetta, the owner of this humble store."

I didn't know why Rosa had apparently felt the need to tell a random shopkeeper all about me, but Venetta seemed like a nice enough person. *Although I'd like to clarify that we're* not *on a date, and she could have skipped the bit about it being an honor to meet me. But if Rosa's been up to her usual doting ways, then she's probably told Venetta all kinds of exaggerated stories about me.*

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Allen, Rosa's younger brother. Thank you for putting up—er, *taking care* of my sister."

Venetta smiled warmly at me, then turned her gaze toward Tony. "And this is…?"

"*Roseria!* A beautiful name for a beautiful woman," said Tony to Rosa before he acknowledged Venetta's question. "Here," he said, roughly passing her another of his business cards.

"Sunmarche Jewelry? An honor to have a member of the Sunmarche family in my little store! The Sunmarche Company is one of the pillars of this city—you must be a talented man indeed, running one of its divisions at such a young age. And your relationship to Lady Roseria is…?" Venetta asked with a perfect customer-service smile.

Tony ran his fingers through his hair again. “We are in the midst of a most fateful encounter.”

I pulled on Rosa’s arm and whispered into her ear. “Um, don’t you think you should turn Tony down if you’re not interested in him?”

“Well,” she whispered back, a troubled look on her face, “I thought if I just ignored him, he’d eventually give up, you know? If I try to talk to him, at this point, I won’t be able to stop myself from hitting him. And then we’ll have to waste time talking to the guards, and our date will be over…” With that, she stuck her tongue out cutely.

So she wasn’t just being oblivious. Maybe we can get rid of him peacefully after all. I’d just begun to hope for a trouble-free resolution when Venetta, misinterpreting the tension in the air, opened her mouth. She was probably just trying to help, but…

“I see! I did wonder if your relationship was of a business nature, being from a jewelry store and all, but I suppose it’s still too early for Lady Roseria to be offered craftsman work from one of the largest jewelers in the kingdom, even if she is enrolled in the Special Research Institute.”

At this new information, Tony’s expression changed—not to fear, as I’d hoped, but to something closer to ecstasy.

“The Special Magical Craftsmanship Research Institute? This is truly the work of the gods! You have my gratitude, shopkeep. As thanks, I will organize for this store, which my lady Roseria is so fond of, to be brought under the care of the Sunmarche Company. From today, you will no longer be the shopkeeper of a mere boutique frequented by the poor, but the manager of a true high-class establishment!”

Venetta immediately shook her head. “I am grateful for your kind offer, but I prefer my store the way it is now, unfortunately.”

Deference toward the nobility was not an essential practice in this world. After all, while there was still a clearly defined class system, most commoners also had noble blood, and most establishments and facilities—the Royal Academy among them—were open to those of any class status. In many regards, economic status was more important than one’s family history. That was especially true in the capital, where it was said you couldn’t throw a stone without hitting a nobleman. Lineage wasn’t enough to command respect here.

Of course, a noble from a marquesal family or the like would

be held in some regard, but then again, that was largely due to the large territories they controlled and the subsequent wealth that generated. It was also unlikely a member of such a noble family would be visiting a small boutique like this one—certainly not without a host of attendants, at the very least. Basically, it wasn't common for nobles to have an attitude like Tony did—he was simply a snob.

He snorted at Venetta. "You're quite full of yourself for the owner of an insignificant boutique." He turned back to Rosa. "Roseria. Today, you may choose as many outfits as you desire—and I, your future husband, will pay for them all. There's no need to show restraint." He went to curl an arm around her waist.

I shoved myself between them in the nick of time. At this point, Tony's fate was already sealed—but if I didn't at least *try* to prevent his swiftly approaching punishment, I'd be no better than an accomplice to murder. I grabbed his arm, which was still reaching for Rosa, and twisted it upward as I pulled him close.

"Listen. Today is my one and only chance to spend the day with my sister. Forgive my rudeness, but could you please leave us alone now?"

It was his final warning.

He paid it no heed.

"Ow! You little—just because your sister is so talented, don't start thinking *you* get to act all high-and-mighty too, little boy. Power is everything in this city. Don't be stupid, now—once your sister and I are wed, you'll get to benefit from my influence too. But before that, you need to learn a lesson about how you should treat your *betters*." With a cry, he started to draw on his own Strengthening Magic—at least, that's what I thought he was doing. His magic manipulation was so pathetic, his arm didn't even twitch in my grasp.

"What the—" His eyes bulged in shock. "That's impossible... I graduated from the Runerelian Advanced Composite School!" he said, continuing to struggle against me. "It admits only the best children from the wealthiest families"—a bead of sweat ran down his forehead—"with the highest grades in magical aptitude and manipulation! There's no way a kid like you could be stronger than me!"

Venetta let out a hum. "Lady Roseria always talked about how her little brother was coming to live with her after he got accepted into the Royal Academy; she said it as though it was a

sure thing. I was a little skeptical, to be sure, but now… I've been in business here in Runerelia for many, many years, and in all that time, I've never heard of an examinee so confident in themselves that they went sightseeing the day before the exams rather than studying. You're all Roseria claimed you were and more, Master Allen."

"Right?! Although, Allen said he wants to live with his classmates in the dorms instead…" Rosa said, trailing off with an awkward laugh.

Oy, stop putting your foot in it, will you?! I chanced a peek at Rosa. Her mood was clearly plummeting. With a mental sigh, I turned back to Tony. I'd have to use him to distract Rosa from her crushed fantasy.

"Listen here, you bastard," I said. "The rudeness you've shown my sister today is unforgivable. If I hear another word out of you, you might not live to regret it." He didn't make a sound, but I twisted his arm again for good measure, and he let out a shriek. Around us, the other patrons began to whistle and clap.

Stop it—I'm begging you. This is so embarrassing, I want to curl up and die.

"One sibling at the Special Research Institute and another at the Royal Academy? There's no way! Just who do you think you—I mean, who are you?!"

"The name is Allen Rovene! If you want to complain, you can come find me at the Royal Academy after tomorrow!" With that as my final note, I gently tossed Tony out the doorway, shutting it behind him. Through it, I could hear him cry, "Rovene? I've never heard of them!"

◆◆◆

"You dealt with him splendidly, Master Allen. Lady Roseria often spoke of your strong personality and fierce protectiveness—I've even heard the other boys in your domain took to calling you 'the Mad Hound'… But you dealt with him like a proper gentleman. I'm truly impressed," said Venetta, shaking her head in amazement.

Somehow or other, it seemed like twisting someone's arm and throwing them out of a building came across as "gentlemanly" behavior in this world. My ears turned red as I realized Rosa had told her about the preawakened Allen's behavior.

Like most of the border regions, the Rovene Domain had a culture that valued strength above all else—and our mother hadn't opposed it. She'd often told us, *"Children will fight, and even if they are the lord's children—no, especially when they are the lord's children, they must resolve such battles with their own two hands."* Already a short-tempered child, and with an education like that behind me, I'd subsequently spent much of my childhood getting into rowdy brawls with the local kids. However, by the time my magical aptitude had hit its growth spurt around my eleventh birthday, I could already easily beat anyone my own age—and by the time it had finished developing as I'd turned twelve, even people a good deal older than me had no longer posed a challenge, so the final year of my life back in Crauvia had gone by far more peacefully by comparison.

Back before I'd awakened, I'd even considered it painful how boring it was that I didn't have any worthy opponents… The memory made me shudder in embarrassment.

"Uh—the excess of youth! That's what they call it, right? That's all it was. I haven't gotten into any fights in over a year," I told Venetta, feeling my cheeks flushing pink.

Rosa giggled. "Our mother was tolerant of our fighting, but she didn't stand for any bullying. I remember when Allen was just five years old, he screamed at a few of my classmates—*'Don't pick on my sister!'* he yelled, and he charged right at them." She giggled again. "You always liked to pick fights with the older children, Allen. You must have been really upset once you became stronger than anyone else back there!"

That's one of the things I was trying not *to remember, Rosa…* Thinking back on it now, the group of boys had probably had a crush on her. They had probably just been trying to tease her into acknowledging them. Of course, she'd ignored them entirely.

Back then, I hadn't understood the intricacies of the mind of a nine-year-old boy, and I'd rushed in to protect my sister from their "bullying." Of course, back then, I hadn't stood a chance against three boys four years my senior, and they'd beaten me into a pulp right in front of Rosa. Rosa had then beaten the three of *them* into a pulp, and ultimately, I'd found myself lying there wondering why I'd rushed in in the first place. Well, Rosa had been delighted at my attempt to defend her, at least. She'd told me, *"Don't worry, Allen—you'll win next time for sure!"* And from the

next day onward, she'd started putting me through hellish training...

It was a bitter, painful memory. No one had won that day.

"By the way," I said, trying to change the subject yet again, "I'd like to buy Rosa a present to thank her for showing me around today. I don't have much more than two hundred riels, though. Do you have anything around that price which might suit my sister here?"

"Naturally, Master Allen. Roseria is a most valued customer of ours, of course, and you've also treated me to quite the show today. Please, choose anything you like, as a gift from me."

I refused Venetta's generous offer politely but firmly. If I didn't buy Rosa a gift with my own money, it would feel like I wasn't thanking her properly. It didn't seem like she was hurting for money either—she could probably buy anything she liked from here anyway. When I voiced as much to Rosa, she beamed at me and linked her arm with mine.

"Of course," Venetta said with a nod. "I apologize if I offended you, Master Allen. It's hard to believe you're only twelve years old—although, perhaps this is the difference between a student who will surely be admitted to the Royal Academy and the rest of society..." she mused, her voice tinged with admiration.

After that, she led us around the store, showing us a range of things still within my meager budget. Rosa hemmed and hawed over the various goods for entirely too long before she finally decided on a scarf.

Leaving Venetta and the boutique behind, we made our way to a far more casual restaurant nearby for dinner, then headed back to the estate.

It hadn't been a wrinkle-free outing, but from what I'd seen of the city and the people, I was beginning to like it here. We'd stuck to the heart of the capital today, but from what I'd read, there were more suburbs farther out, and then the slums. There was no way I'd have been able to get a decent grasp on the city in just one day—but my curiosity was piqued.

First things first, though. Tomorrow, I had to take the Royal Academy entrance exams.

Afterword

First of all, I'd like to thank you for reading my work, *Pens Down, Swords Up: Throw Your Studies to the Wind*.

Recently, I've been constantly reminded that our lives are just a series of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. Last spring, I couldn't even begin to imagine a story I'd written would one day go out into the world as a physical book. Honestly, even now that the manuscript for the first volume is finished (except for this afterword), it still feels to me as though this is all happening to someone else in a faraway world.

I've loved novels and manga since I was a child. I couldn't help but get excited whenever I imagined myself in those worlds—those worlds full of swords and magic, adventures and freedom, and endless landscapes just waiting to be explored. It was as though I were actually there, alongside those scores of fascinating characters. I could feel the wind blow past me on those endless plains.

One day, I want to write a story like this too... I knew, somewhere deep within me, that I was still holding on to that vague conviction, but I never confronted it, instead letting myself get carried away by the daily chaos of life.

But one day, I made up my mind, and I started writing a book. That book was *Pens Down, Swords Up*.

There wasn't a particular impetus behind my decision to start writing. There's no explanation for it beyond that one day, I made up my mind. For some reason, I knew it was now or never, and a strange energy welled up inside me.

Okay, let's write! I thought—and if I hadn't listened to that thought on that fateful day, I can't say I would have ever started writing thereafter. But on the other hand, I feel like if I had forced myself to start writing even one day earlier, I most likely would have given up along the way.

In the West, they have a saying that goes *"A watched pot never boils."* If you keep lifting the lid to see if the water is ready yet, it will never reach a boiling point. I think that, kind of like that saying, once I'd gathered all the ingredients and thrown them into the pot, I needed to spend my time doing other things while

waiting for it to boil.

This novel has taken shape thanks to the support of many people.

My editor, who guided a complete novice like me along the pathway to publishing a novel, along with the rest of the team at Kadokawa.

The illustrator, Maro, who brought the characters and world to life in a way that exceeded even my imagination.

My family, who supported me in countless ways and inspired me in countless more.

And of course, the readers who've followed this story since it first started serialization on the web and have supported me from the earliest days.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

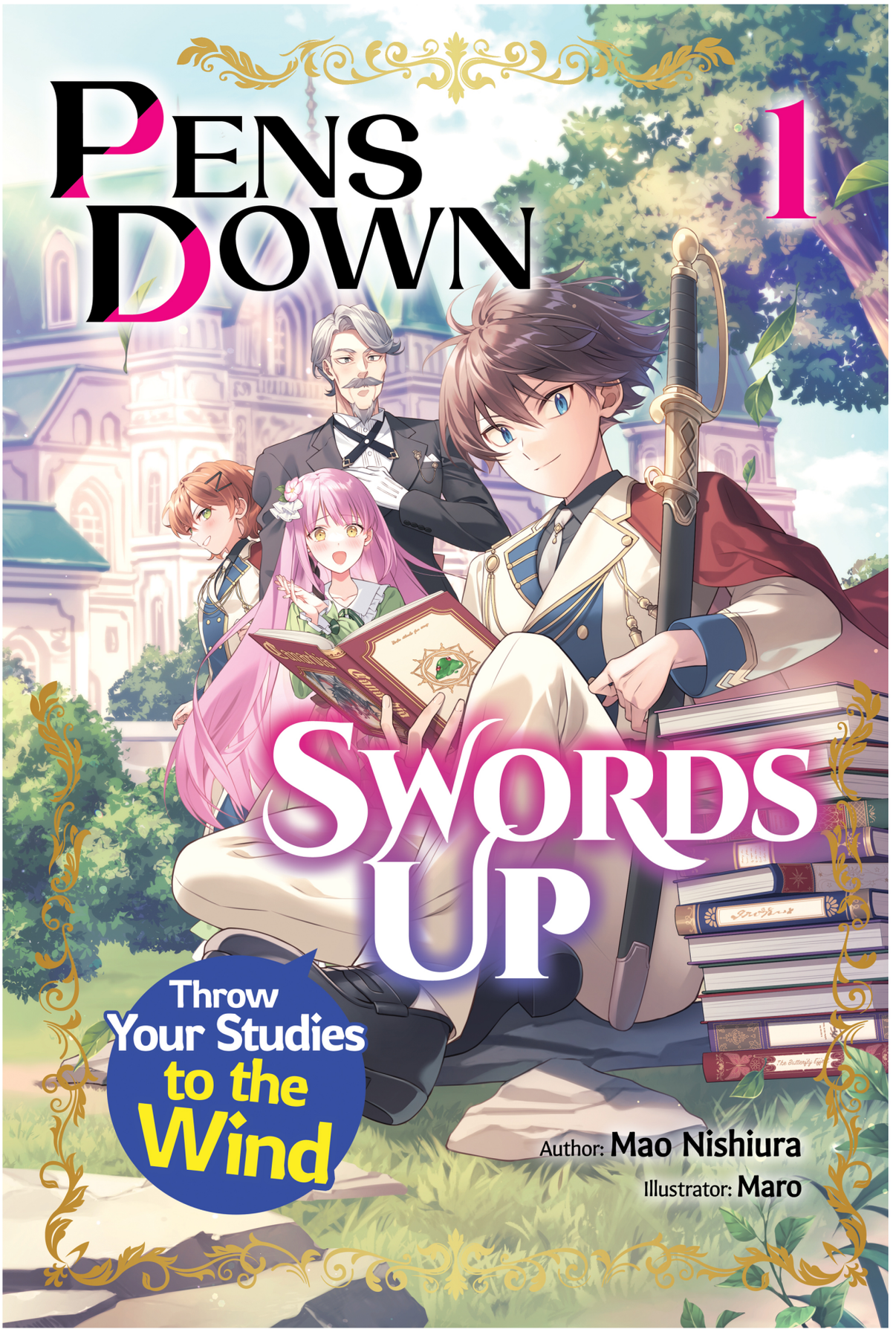
This story has only just begun. We've yet to see how Allen—who's just a little out of the ordinary in this world—will face the question *"What do I really want to do in this life?"* How will Allen decide to spend his second chance at happiness?

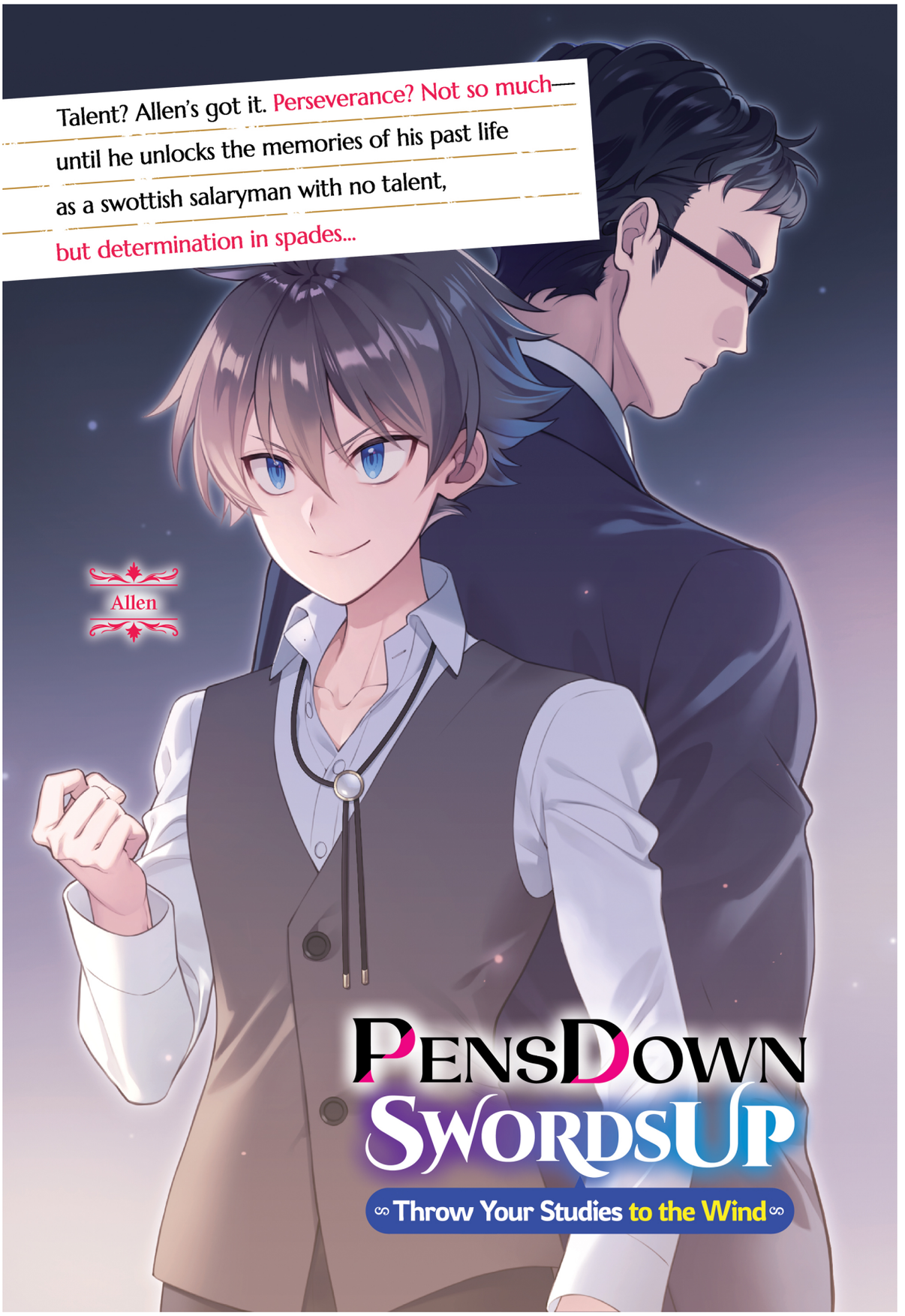
I'm looking forward to it as much as you.

According to the rumors on the wind, a manga adaptation of this story seems to be in production as well. Please look for more information on the web after we've confirmed the details.

And all that aside...remember that life is just a series of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities.

Mao Nishiura
July 2023

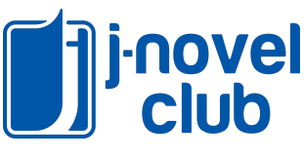

PENS DOWN
1
SWORDS UP
Throw Your Studies to the Wind
Author: Mao Nishiura
Illustrator: Maro


Talent? Allen's got it. Perseverance? Not so much—
until he unlocks the memories of his past life
as a swottish salaryman with no talent,
but determination in spades...
Allen
PENSDOWN
SWORDSUP
Throw Your Studies to the Wind


"I figured the best move would be to try and limit your options for striking back."
"You ill-mannered little brat... That big, flashy move at the start was just you trying to lure me in, huh?"
Dew
Aggravating the strongest examiner during the physical exam?!


No matter who his opponent is,
Allen won't give in to injustice!
"I'll crush anyone who gets between me and what I want— no matter who that is!"
"Is this the way you've chosen to prove your worthiness?"
Godolphen


Feyreun
Jewelry
He just wants to live as he pleases,
but before he knows it, his classmates
and his teachers are falling all over him?!



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Pens Down, Swords Up: Throw Your Studies to the Wind Volume 1
by Mao Nishiura

Translated by Emily Nelson
Edited by Imaan Ali

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