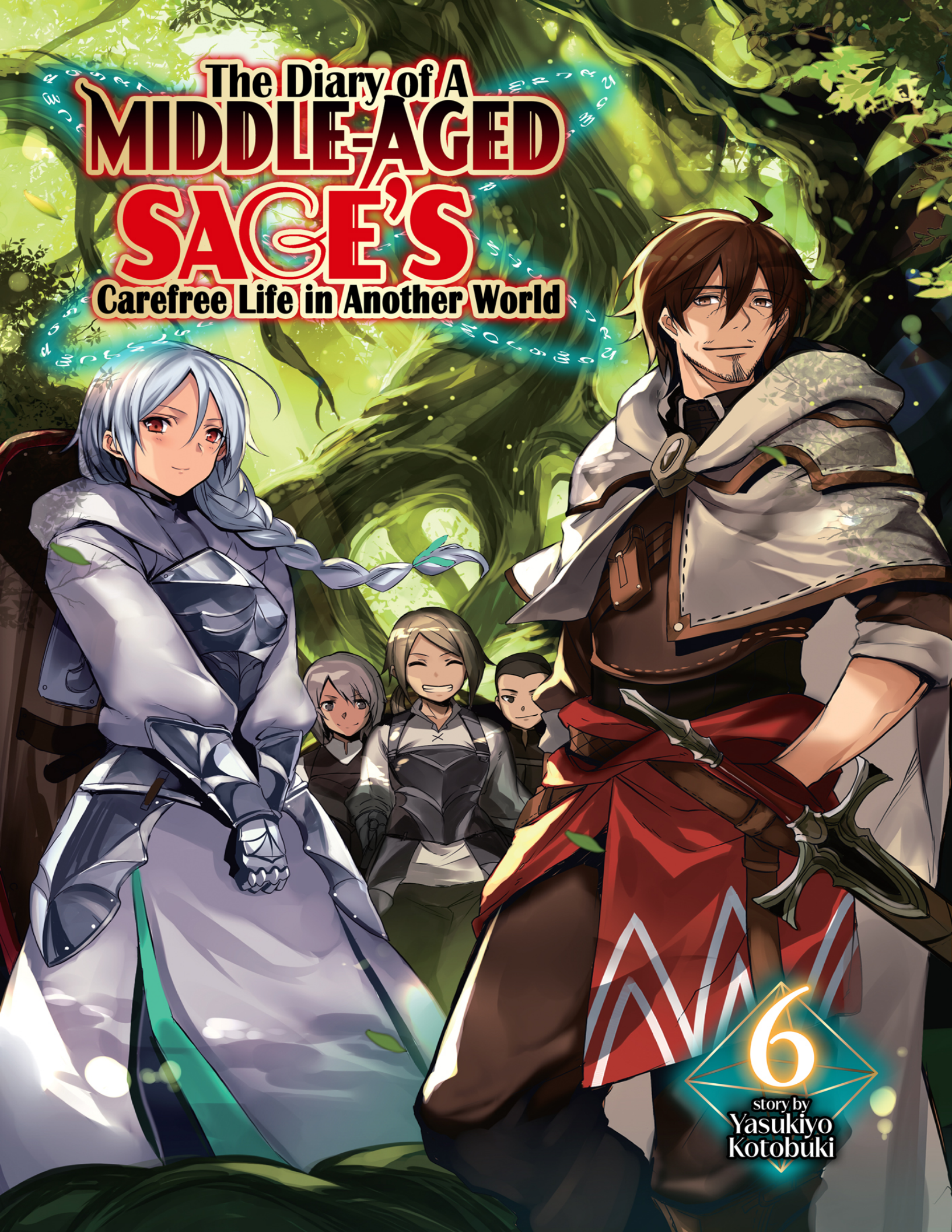
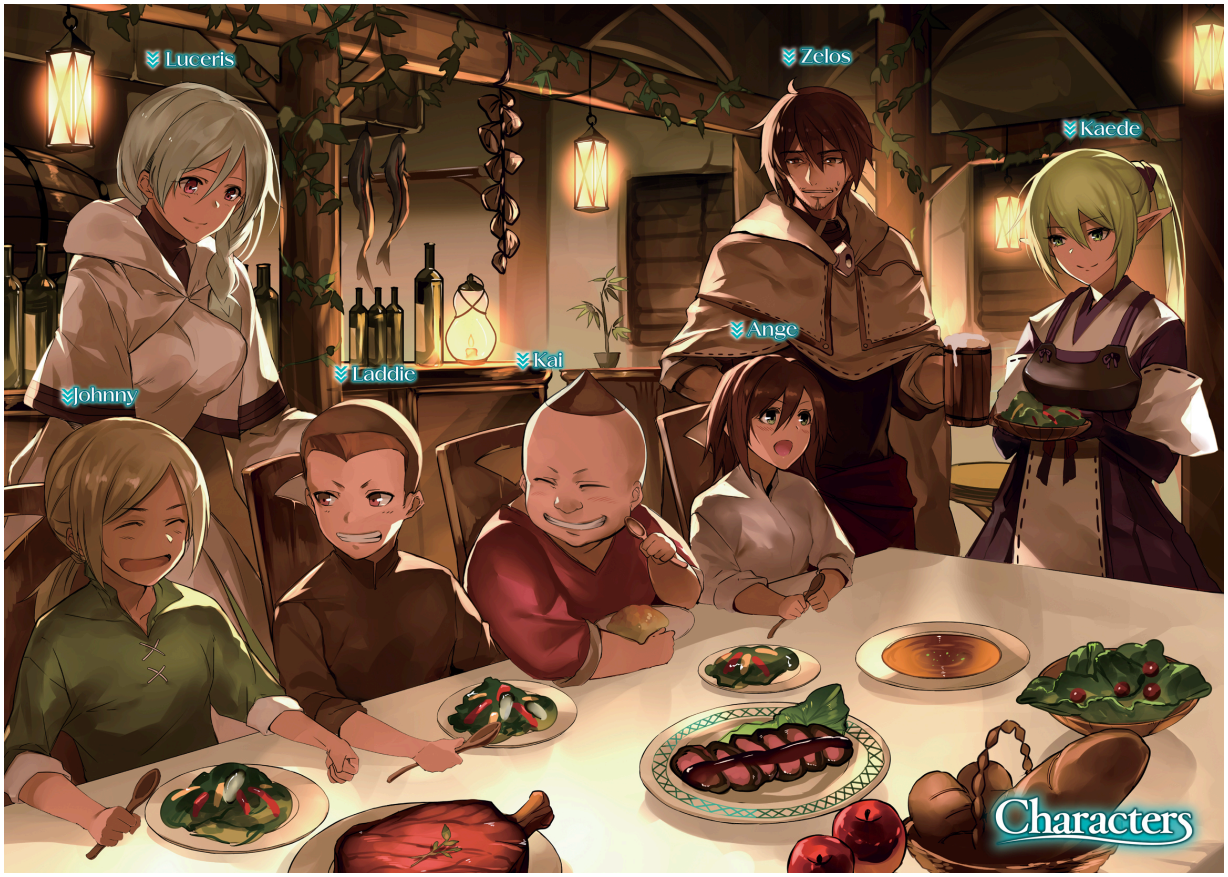

The Diary of A
MIDDLE-AGED
SAGE'S
Carefree Life in Another World
6
story by
Yasukiyo
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Luceris
Zelos
Kaede
Ange
Kai
Laddie
Johnny
Characters


Belladonna
Croesus
Zweit
Celestina
Kuhti
Lena
Jeanne
Iris

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Prologue: The Old Guy Gets Started on Creating a Homunculus

The legends of old tell us the Dark God shook the world to its foundations, laying waste to everything and everyone in its path. They say it appeared out of nowhere, and that it managed to destroy mountains with a single blow, boil entire seas down to nothing, and rend the very earth.

Even now, though, we still don't know what exactly the Dark God was. We know only that it was a mysterious being, from a mysterious place, that attacked a thriving civilization—and that it slaughtered every last army that came to the world's defense.

The history books tell us that back in the ancient times, before the Dark God attacked, there was a thriving scientific civilization. Or, perhaps, it would better be described as a *magic* civilization.

Regardless, it was right around that period's golden age that the Four Gods appeared in the world.

And just before that society was annihilated, the Four Gods bestowed upon the people a sigil to summon champions from another world.

It's said that the people pooled their understanding of this technology to create champion summoning sigils all around the land. However, only the original sigil was ever successful. Every last one of the others—together with the molds required to make the sigils—were destroyed by a single attack from the Dark God. To our knowledge, the only summoning sigil that remains today sits beneath the Grand Temple of the Holy Land of Metis.

But we have no idea how many summoning sigils the civilization of old created during the Dark God War.

All we *do* know is that a great many otherworlders were abruptly summoned to this world, only to be slaughtered before they even

knew what was happening. We aren't even sure who invented the whole system in the first place.

The records say nearly five hundred otherworlders were here at the time, yet only three survived to the end of the conflict. Considering that more might have been slaughtered before they were ever added to the records in the first place, there's no telling how many might have been summoned.

Ill-fated though they were, these champions, wielding sacred treasures with the power to seal away the Dark God, were called our "heroes."

When the Dark God was eventually sealed away, those treasures were destroyed. Later, however, adherents of the Faith of the Four Gods repaired them, and went on to use them as religious symbols.

After the war, the world saw conflict between surviving citizens and adherents of the old faith. Eventually, that conflict led civilization to split into two powers, each forming its own country—though of course, there were those who saw the whole conflict as pointless.

Microstates with their own armies began to form all around the land, each fighting, collapsing, and merging in a cycle of conflict. And in time, that cycle resulted in the world we know today.

To the east, an enormous empire; in the center, a theocracy. Then, dotted all around them, a smattering of smaller countries.

Including us, in the Magic Kingdom of Solistia.

Even now, Solistia is a young country. Its roots, however, stretch back to an oppressive regime—one that ruled until its people launched a coup d'état and put the country on a better track.

The biggest achievements in that coup were by mages. With time, those achievements led to mages receiving preferential treatment over others—and, eventually, brought about a kingdom where mages had too much power and pride for their own good.

Recently, however, domestic reform has seen our country move away from that magocracy and toward a proper meritocracy.

The friction between the Order of Knights—who protect the country—and the Order of Mages is fading too, helping bring more unity and order. And it's said that those who've set this all in motion are mere students! With such a promising young generation, this

country has a bright future ahead of it.

These youngsters—rational, wise, and open-minded—are determined to reform the foundations of our country.

And that brings this writer great joy.

—Taken from a column in The Santor Times titled "History Doesn't Repeat Itself. It's Always Becoming Something New."

* * *

Zelos folded the newspaper and put a finger to his brow.

"Uh... How'd they get from talking about the Dark God War to talking about 'the youngsters who are the future of our country'? What happened to the stuff about the summoned heroes? Honestly, I'm amazed the paper published this dreck..."

Zelos had been reading a newspaper column to pass the time while working, but it had left him...disappointed. Parts of it had been interesting, but it was mostly subpar.

In fact, even "subpar" was an understatement. It was third-rate at best.

"Anyway," he said with a sigh, "a 'scientific civilization,' eh? With people from another world, and champion—or, well, *hero*—summoning sigils, I suppose they're usually called... There's some interesting stuff in there, but the writing's all over the place. Hmm... I wonder if the author's a reincarnator like me?"

There was plenty he wanted to criticize about the column, but none of the other articles had even caught his interest in the first place.

Ultimately, it had helped him kill a bit of time, and that was enough.

"Well, whatever. I suppose it's ready now anyway."

The sound of boiling liquid, and of some mechanism vibrating as it rotated, echoed throughout the room.

Flasks, test tubes, beakers, and more crowded a nearby tabletop. There were also traces of recent work: pulverized remnants of ingredients mixed in a mortar and stains from spilled liquids.

The rest of the room was clean enough that it seemed newly

built...apart from the ceiling, which was stained with black soot. It was almost like something had exploded straight upward.

Zelos was waiting for just enough of a dark green liquid to pool in a flask.

When it did, the sound from the rotating mechanism stopped with a mechanical *BEEP!*, and Zelos turned to face the machine behind him.

It was a centrifuge, albeit a haphazard one.

"Hmm... Guess it's finished. Now, let's take a look..."

Zelos opened the centrifuge's lid and took out two test tubes.

A single, small bead of light floated in the liquid of the first tube. The other was *packed* with beads, of all different colors—and when he saw it, Zelos looked immediately bewildered.

"Whoa... You've gotta be kidding. How is it so— Jeez, I don't even know which one to use."

By all accounts, only a single bead of light should have been floating in the second test tube, just like in the first. This was far too many.

If there were just one bead, it would've been fine. But with the tube packed so full, Zelos wasn't sure which one to choose. Especially since choosing the wrong one might ruin the results he was hoping for...in fact, in the worst-case scenario, he could end up with a horrific monster on his hands.

"Leaving aside the spirit essence I extracted from Kaede's hair... The problem comes from these ones I got from the Dark God Stone. If I don't pick the right one, I could end up with a *chimera* here! Now, what to do with this...?"

Zelos was extracting these essences with the aim of creating a homunculus.



"Essence" here, by the way, didn't refer to a creature's DNA; it was more like something spiritual.

A being's essence carried information about its original life-form, and on rare occasions, it could even contain remnants of its ancestors' memories and experiences. It was something *like* DNA, but it was ultimately spiritual, and impossible to preserve. Even if you managed to extract it, it'd disperse and disappear within an hour or so.

Spirit essences were primitive spiritual bodies that could fuse with other essences. By embedding one individual's essence into another, you could create a fused essence containing data about the individual, and in turn reconstruct them. Theoretically, it might even be possible to resurrect the dead by using the spirit of a living creature—though as things stood, even attempting that was taboo.

Besides, even if someone *did* succeed in resurrecting the dead that way, the very act of incorporating a spirit essence into them would mean they were no longer human. They would be a different life-form altogether. And the reason for that lay in one of the catalysts required: the magimorph seed.

A magimorph seed was a type of seed dropped by a man-eater beastblossom. But you couldn't use one that had germinated, or your homunculus would become a chimera.

After all, man-eater beastblossoms preyed on all sorts of creatures, and kept all of their essences inside its body. Then, by implanting some of those essences into magimorph seeds, they could mass-produce soldiers to capture more prey.

So while this was just a little experiment, it was all too clear that Zelos could accidentally create a monster here if even a *bit* of some other essence was mixed in.

I guess I'm just gambling on whether or not there's another essence mixed into this magimorph seed, huh...? It's all up to fate. But what do I do if I end up making, like, some old guy with the torso of a human and the bottom half of a tiger...? Would the Dark God kill me for that? They are *apparently a goddess, by the sounds of it...*

Zelos had ended up with the disturbing mental image of some

rough-looking middle-aged guy—his torso covered in ancient Roman armor, and his bottom half a tiger—giving him a flirty wink and a "Hey, hun. ♡"

For now, though, he figured that if he screwed up too badly, he'd just have to dispose of his creation. There was no point dwelling on it any longer.

Homunculi were living creatures, but they were bound by a pact that used their creator's blood, so they couldn't act against their master. Specifically, the pact was a binding spell based on a magic formula drawn in blood. Except...there was no telling whether that spell would work if the homunculus was effectively the *Dark God*. Ultimately, the only way to find out would be to try and bring it into existence.

"Seriously, though... Which one should I pick? And why are there so many essences in there, anyway? Sheesh. It's...all a bit weird. I can't decide."

According to the legends, the Dark God had devoured a great many creatures, and it had taken their abilities as its own.

If those legends were true, it would have contained *countless* essences.

And one of the test tubes in front of Zelos was, in fact, absolutely chock-full of essences. So maybe the legends really *were* true.

"It'd be nice if I could tell which ones are the *good* essences to use, but when there are this many, it feels like it's more monster essences than anything else. What do I do if I get a female troll or something? Not to mention, the thing I got them from was cursed... That could have some kind of weird side effect. If I'd known I was going to end up in this situation, I would've asked Kemo for some tips."

The Dark God Stone emanated the sort of corruption that made it seem like even the tiniest fragment would curse you for life, though Zelos had somehow managed to purify it enough that it wouldn't affect its surroundings. If this had been anyone *other* than Zelos, with his ridiculously high magic resistance, they'd probably be dead.

Purifying the stone had taken him four entire days, so even just getting to the point of extracting the essence had been a major time

sink. He wasn't in a hurry, but he'd still have to wait for however long it took to form the homunculus's body, so he figured that the sooner, the better.

Plus, the essences had been exposed to the stone's corruption for a long time, and there was no telling what sort of effect that might've had. Even if Zelos succeeded in making a homunculus here, there was a real chance that something would be wrong with it.

"Kemo," by the way, had been one of Zelos's fellow Destroyers in *Swords & Sorceries*. His full name was Kemo Lavyune—so named for his love of characters with kemonomimi, or animal ears—and he'd devoted every hour of every day to creating homunculi, hoping to make a harem of cute animal girls.

At one point, a special event had granted Kemo the ability to create his own dungeons, which he'd used to create something that was less of a dungeon and more of a harem—a harem *by* a furry, *for* furries, full of nothing *but* furries.

He'd forced Zelos to help him out with it too, so Zelos had learned a bit from that. But still, cultivating a homunculus was a pretty tough task—and if you screwed up, you'd have one hell of a monster on your hands. Though that monster *could* at least give you a decent chunk of XP...

Any weirdly large essences are a no-go. They give me a bad feeling... Maybe because they remind me of some of Kemo's old failures. Should I go for something medium-sized, then? Or, no—if I want to play it safe, maybe one a little smaller *than medium...*

As Zelos thought things through, he swirled the essences in the test tube. He chose one a little on the smaller side, took it out with a dropper, then used a syringe to inject it into the spirit essence.

There would be no second chances here. With that in mind, maybe Zelos was being irresponsible—but at the same time, just worrying about it wasn't going to get him anywhere, so he figured his only option was to press on.

There was no telling *what* might happen. It was all up to luck, and his chances weren't great. But nothing ventured, nothing gained.

"Hmm... Nothing's happening. Strange..."

Adding another essence to a spirit essence was supposed to change the color of the spirit essence from blue to silver.

But there wasn't even the slightest hint of that happening.

Zelos leaned forward and peered into the test tube as it sat in the rack.

And just as he did, it let out an incredible burst of light, almost as if it had *shot* up out of the test tube right at his face.

"My... My *eyes*...!"

Zelos had been caught completely off guard. He was left pathetically writhing around on the floor, like a monster that had tried to attack a hunter only to get its eyes gouged out by a last-second counterattack.

He'd succeeded in combining the essences—at the cost of a fair bit of pain.

* * *

"Urgh... That was terrible. Guess it was a delayed reaction..."

Now that he had his eyesight back, Zelos unlocked the door to his underground storeroom.

His homunculus culture tank was underground, and the door that led to the room was locked with a mechanism similar to a Yosegi puzzle box; it wouldn't open unless you made the right sequence of moves. This was something he'd gotten into the habit of using back on Earth.

There was no need, of course, to say *why* he'd gotten into that habit.

When specific sections of what was essentially a sliding puzzle were moved in the correct sequence, a door embedded into the floor opened up. Solving it required a full seventy-three moves, and there was a steel plate fitted inside, so it wouldn't be easy for someone to brute force their way through.

As Zelos deftly manipulated the panels, the clasps in the mechanism opened. Then, once the puzzle was completely solved, the clasps converged and a handle emerged from behind them.

Zelos took hold of the handle and pulled it toward him to open

the door.

Test tube and flask in hand, he descended the stairs, heading for the very back of the storeroom.

Beyond another wooden door was a steel culture tank.

It was already filled with culture fluid; all Zelos had to do now was to dribble a bit of his blood over the magimorph seed containing the essence and toss it in.

Zelos took the magimorph seed, steeped in liquid, from his inventory. Then he made a small cut in it with a scalpel, and inserted both the combined essence from earlier and a fragment of a spirit crystal.

The spirit crystal fragment was only about as big as a grain of sand, but it would eventually transform into a magic stone of the same sort as those found in monsters. If his creation really *was* the Dark God, there was no telling what could happen next.

Zelos summoned a sigil akin to a world map. He placed the magimorph seed on top of it, then nicked his finger with a knife and smeared his blood across the seed.

As he did, the magimorph seed activated a sigil of its own, forming a spell known as Binding of Subservience.

"All right... Finally time for the culture tank. I just hope I don't end up making something with animal ears..."

Zelos'd had enough animal ears for a lifetime.

It wasn't like he had anything against beastfolk. It was just that he'd been forced to help out with creating animal-eared homunculi so many times before that the mere thought of it now gave him flashbacks to running about grinding for materials.

Please... Please don't end up with animal ears, I'm begging you...

Offering a silent prayer, he opened the cylindrical lid of the culture tank, put the magimorph seed inside, poured the liquid from the flask, and closed the lid.

The fluid inside the culture tank started to shine as the cultivation process began. A faint light was coming from out of the tank's observation window. Now, all that was left was to wait.

Mmm... Huh? Hang on a second. Maybe I should do this*...?*

After a little thought, Zelos had one last idea. He opened the

tank's lid and tossed in a little something extra from his inventory: the Dark God Soul.

The Dark God Soul dissolved with a glimmer of light. Then that light gathered around the magimorph seed that was set to become a homunculus—or more specifically, around the spirit crystal embedded in that seed—and was absorbed.

Zelos *had* planned to insert a soul *after* the body was complete, as was the norm when creating homunculi. But he'd suddenly thought that the optimal method might be different for a Dark God than it was for a regular homunculus. There was the chance, he'd figured, that if he tried to add the Dark God Soul after the fact, it could end up possessing the body rather than becoming one with it.

And if that was the case, there was the risk that the Dark God could disappear if it was hit by purification magic.

Inserting the soul earlier might let it adapt to the body sooner. Now I just have to hope it grows quickly.

Zelos had plenty of concerns, but seeing as he didn't know any right way of doing this, he had no choice but to press on.

"All right... Next thing on the list is this, then, eh? Wonder if it's done yet?"

Next to Zelos was a smaller tank with some cloth soaking in it. Most of the cloth made up the Dress of the Steel Butterfly—Iris's main equipment—and Zelos was working on strengthening it.

Gloves and other pieces from the same equipment set were soaking in there too, and they all had a new, fuller color to them that made them look more luxurious. The process had also boosted their defense by leaps and bounds, though they still weren't as durable as armor made out of metal.

Still, soaking cloth armor in a liquid like this was the only way to improve its defense. Zelos was using a compound of metal and monster fluid to strengthen the cloth.

If this had been metal armor he was working with, he could've melted it and mixed in some other metal, but that wasn't possible with fabric.

So instead, he was working as something like a dyer. This mixture *stank*, though...

Never would've thought armor dye would stink so bad in real life... Well, I guess it makes sense when I'm using body fluids from monsters. This stuff almost smells like kusaya...

He was meant to be strengthening equipment here, but he felt more like he was some craftsman making fermented fish.

It didn't smell *quite* the same as that, now that he thought about it, but...well, the point was that it stank. Incredibly bad. Enough that Zelos's nose was scrunching up. Enough to sting the insides of his nostrils.

He removed Iris's equipment from the foul-smelling liquid and transferred it to a tank filled with a different liquid. Commonly called "bonding solution," this other liquid was used to bind any substances that had found their way into a textile with the textile itself.

When Zelos dunked the equipment in this bonding solution, the foul smell immediately disappeared, replaced by a floral scent. But that floral scent was only temporary; with time, the equipment would end up odorless. It was a chemical reaction of sorts.

He massaged the cloth with his hands to confirm that the armor dye was bound with it now, and he kept at it for a long while.

Now that I think of it—what would a slashing attack do to this sort of equipment? Just logically, you'd still get a bone fracture or something, right? Cloth can only do so much to prevent blunt trauma, after all. Still, I'm curious...

Proper *armor* could withstand the impact from blows or slashes to some extent, but cloth equipment was weak against that kind of damage.

In a game, sometimes you wouldn't take all that much damage from a slash even if you were only wearing cloth, but it was hard to believe that reality would be so forgiving. And even *with* proper armor, factors like that armor's thickness and strength would affect how much defense it provided. You could use magic to enchant it with additional durability, but ultimately, the wearer would still take damage from straightforward physical attacks.

It might be enough to prevent the wearer from dying, but at least in theory, the physical impact would pass through their equipment and damage them. In other words, while wearing no equipment

apart from robes was the orthodox approach for a mage, it wasn't very reliable when it came to staying safe in a real fight.

I guess it lets you move easily, but defense is the problem. I mean, you'll just die if you take an arrow to the head...

Iris had been working hard at raising her close-quarter combat skills ever since her fight with the faerie rose.

Zelos figured it had to be because the fight had given her a whole new appreciation of what it was like to be in mortal danger. And she'd likely *need* that sort of awareness—an awareness that it was kill or be killed out there—if she wanted to make the cut as a mercenary.

That said, whether she can take a human life is a different matter altogether... That's the one thing I can't teach her, huh? I can't exactly drag in some guy with a bounty on his head and just tell her, "Okay, try to kill him"...

Without the resolve to kill people, it'd be difficult to survive in this world. The scariest things in this world weren't monsters, which had a set of behavioral patterns that could be predicted and dealt with. They were *people*. People were crafty.

Zelos didn't hesitate to kill anyone he saw as his enemy—even fellow humans. In fact, he'd crossed that line a long time ago. Killing no longer made him feel anything.

It seemed like Iris's fight with the faerie rose had made her realize the dangers of her own naivete. But even then, she still didn't seem to understand what killing a *person* really meant.

There were things out there that you could never really understand unless you experienced them for yourself. And that made those things hard to teach. Especially when Iris's ingrained sense of morality from back on Earth seemed to condemn the act of killing in self-defense.

Zelos couldn't simply tell her to get used to killing. But at the same time, if she found it *impossible*, she wouldn't be able to protect herself.

I guess the fact that she's aware of it now is a start, at least... It wouldn't sit right with me if someone I knew died. At the same time, it'll be a pain if she ends up relying on me too *much... And failure's*

an important part of learning. What to do...?

By the standards of this world's inhabitants, Iris was strong. And there was no doubt that strength of hers could weaken her judgment.

If she'd been born in this world, she would've learned firsthand as she grew up that danger was always lurking. She would've figured out from experience that she needed to protect herself from the environment.

But she was a reincarnator—and as a result, she tended to view this world almost through the lens of a game, making her insensitive to the concept of her own mortality. Perhaps some part of her even felt like she simply *couldn't* die here.

I wonder how many reincarnators are living in this world right now? Oh— Come to think of it, there are the heroes as well. Some of those would've died too, right?

Zelos didn't know where the heroes had been summoned from, but it was difficult to believe that they all would've survived until now in this world, teeming with danger as it was.

He'd determined there had likely been casualties already, though it was hard to get any information about what was going on in other countries. As he casually pondered whether there was anywhere he'd be able to get hold of that sort of information, he wrung the liquid out of Iris's equipment like he was squeezing a cleaning cloth. *I wonder if I should make a washing machine too...?*

Then he tossed the equipment into a basket and took it with him to dry it in the sun, leaving the underground storeroom behind.

* * *

Left in relative darkness, inside the culture tank—the only source of light in the room—the magimorph seed began turning into an embryo.

And the spirit crystal embedded within that embryo began emitting a faint golden glow.

Having already left the storeroom, Zelos was no longer around to see just how fast his homunculus was growing. It would be a while

longer until he noticed that the cultivation process was going quite a bit faster than usual.

Chapter 1: Seeking Revenge for a Grudge

"Hey, Zweit..." Diio said. "I hear a bunch of girls have been crowding around the Saint-Germain research lab lately. Do you know anything about it? Apparently there are even girls from *our* faction lining up outside."

Diio thought he'd ask about some gossip he'd heard recently as he pored over a map spread out across a desk.

"Oh—Croesus made something crazy again. And I hear he's only selling it to girls."

Zweit had heard a little bit about what was going on there, but the whole thing had sounded so *stupid* that he'd just ignored it. It was true, though—quite a few girls from the Wiesler faction had ended up joining the line at the Saint-Germain faction's research building.

The cause was the Female Hormone Booster the Saint-Germain faction had made. Apparently they were selling a weaker, diluted version of the potion on a trial basis.

They were also testing out a diluted version of the Extra-Strong Breast Enlargement Potion, with an effect that was only temporary.

Sure, it made your breasts bigger, but the duration of the effect depended on the rank of the sample you took. And ultimately, sooner or later, the user's breasts went back to their usual size. Zweit had heard about it recently from his younger brother Croesus, and it had left him baffled.

In short, the full-strength version was permanent, but diluting it even just a little gave it a time limit. It didn't make a whole lot of sense.

Nonetheless, there was a lot of demand for it, and sales were impressive.

As a sidenote, nobody had yet found out exactly why drinking the Sex Change Potion caused you to change sex. The field of medicine wasn't particularly advanced in this world, and it had a tendency to handwave things away as simply either "it's magic" or "it's a miracle from the gods."

All they'd found out for now, then, was that it could be made; research into how it actually worked was still ongoing. In fact, it'd be another hundred years or so until anyone found out its underlying mechanisms.

It was this very research into the Sex Change Potion, however, that would lead the Magic Kingdom of Solistia to establish a Department of Medicine—a development that would eventually spread to every *other* country too.

Starting with the creation of that department, the Magic Kingdom of Solistia would see major advancements not only in magic research but also in medicine. And this was where it all began.

"Women really have a thing for beauty, after all. I remember my own mom buying up cosmetics, trying them out, and then going back to the seller to give a terrible review if she didn't like them..."

"But I thought the Saint-Germain faction was meant to be about magic research? What, are they pivoting to cosmetics now?"

"Well... Depending on how you look at it, they could get a lot of money that way, if nothing else. There are a lot of nobles out there who'd pay a lot of money for that sorta stuff."

Rich women didn't cut corners when it came to beauty.

By making herself more beautiful, a noblewoman could improve her chances of marrying into a family of high standing. Or, even if she was *already* married, it could help her climb higher socially than ladies from other noble families.

Or...that was one way of looking at it, at least. In reality, it was more like an endless cycle of vanity.

Beauty was important for merchants too—it was always important to make a good impression during negotiations, and having a beautiful wife or daughter could be an effective way of promoting one's store. Plus, items like cosmetics and perfumes were relatively pricey, so selling them could earn you a big profit.

"Sounds like they made a potion that can change your sex, but...what would you even use that for?"

"In *our* case, we could use it for stuff like going undercover, I guess. Collecting information's always important."

"But...what would I do if I turned into a woman and I couldn't go back? Isn't that kinda dangerous?"

"From the sounds of it, they actually *did* make a potion that does that. But Teach took nearly all of it with him. I heard he left a few samples behind, though..."

"Jeez! That's terrifying! And besides... What does that teacher of yours plan to use them for? Don't tell me he's..."

"I think he just took them because it'd be too dangerous to leave them all there. There's no telling what Croesus'd do to tinker with them, after all..."

"That's a relief. So he's not going to be using them himself, then."

As the pair wound up their chat, Zweit rolled two dice and refocused his attention toward the other students in the room.

"That adds up to eight... The counterattack succeeds. Area D-15 secured."

"Team A's secured D-15!"

"Hey, Zweit, shouldn't we send some scouts out here? I know it's not great to split up our forces, but we want to find out where the enemy is."

"Yeah... You're right. We should use the mages' scouting group to figure out their position."

"Right, then... We'll dispatch an advance scout platoon to Area D-20. And we'll use the mage squad's familiars for scouting too."

Zweit and the others were in the middle of a board game.

There was a fine grid laid over a map, and each squad was rolling dice as they moved toward certain numbered squares on the grid. The dice rolls determined whether a given mission succeeded or failed, and there were two teams—A and B—in different rooms, each putting together strategies to try to emerge victorious. Both sides rolled to decide the outcomes of things like battles and plans. In short, this was a training exercise, intended to deepen everyone's understanding of strategic matters like assaulting enemy

encampments and retreating from bad situations.

"Losing all our forces in C-54 hurt us bad. Which idiot decided to attack there yesterday...?"

"I didn't know it'd be a trap, okay?! With terrain like that, I didn't think they'd have troops on either side to hit us with a pincer attack..."

"We had a mage squad there! They could've scouted it out! Why didn't you use them?"

The game was turn-based, and each player controlled pieces as the commanding officer of a squad. The students divided themselves into friends and foes, debated strategy, and placed pieces on the map to represent the moves they were carrying out.

Generally, if a piece was moved, the same move would be replicated in the other room, and dice were rolled to determine how any battles played out. The ones with the hardest job were probably the supervising students, who would write down each squad's movements and go back and forth between the two rooms to report them. It was a busy job, and nobody wanted to do it, so the students took turns; that was the rule.

"By the way, we haven't seen Samtrol lately, huh? I mean, I'm not complaining, but... There's no telling what he might be getting up to. I'm kinda worried."

"Oh, yeah—I heard he got kicked out of the Wiesler marquess house. Wonder if he got his hands on something crazy and ended up going on a happy little trip?"

"What—you mean drugs? No way... I know he's a moron, but it's hard to believe even he'd get caught up in something like *that*..."

"No, I think it's possible. He was cut off by his own family. It wouldn't surprise me if he turned to drugs for an escape."

"I mean, he's all talk, really. Can't do anything himself... So yeah, I could believe it."

"Right. He's got a lot of pride in his bloodline, but apart from that, he's got nothing. Even if he *did* end up as marquess some day, he'd still be an idiot."

The perception of Samtrol among the Wiesler faction students was back to normal.

Which made sense, of course. Bremait was no longer around to brainwash them with his magic.

"Nobles are meant to work for the people, aren't they? He may have royal blood in him, but still, that attitude of his is *not* cool."

"Yeah! Just goes to show how incompetent some royals can be. He's the type who'll never inherit anything important."

"Someone could use him as a pawn, right? Then just get rid of him if he becomes a nuisance."

"Whoa! You're scaring me!"

Back when they'd all been brainwashed, Samtrol had bragged about his lineage.

The students still remembered that now, and they were looking down on him as they took turns insulting the boy. He'd pulled their strings in an ego trip, and this was his comeuppance; they weren't mincing words.

"Let it go for now. Let's focus. I don't know what Team B's doing with their units here. They should be almost done with their turn."

"How do *you* think we're looking, Zweit? It feels like we've got a bit of an advantage at the moment."

"Report! Team B's sent their entire army into C-29! Hannes's company was wiped out! The same enemy is now engaging Ewan's platoon! Naber's company has taken major casualties! It won't be able to make it in time to rescue Zweit's battalion!"

"*WHAT?!*"

In this strategy game, information gained from scouting and espionage wasn't automatically shared with the other team.

The only students who knew what was happening on both sides were those acting as supervisors. Sure—with success and failure determined by dice rolls, most outcomes came down to luck. But one side having more intel on their opponent's forces could change things significantly.

It was only now that Zweit and his team realized what the enemy had been planning.

"Wait—did they leave most of their troops with their commander and send entire platoons out scouting?! But then how did a single scouting platoon wipe out an entire company? Don't tell me—

Hannes's company ran into their main force?!"

"They probably looked at the terrain to predict how we'd positioned our troops. Then their commander would've gone to the front line and taken control of troops from the other commanding officers... They got us good."

"Shit! We've lost half our forces!"

"B-But if we lose, we've gotta treat 'em all to a meal! Gimme a break!"

"And they've got *Bart* on their team! He's a *hog*. He'll eat until we're broke!"

"We've gotta protect our wallets! Do whatever it takes!"

The students often wagered on the outcome of these training exercises.

They didn't put money on the line—not directly, at least. Usually the stakes were things like buying a few sides at lunch or dinner.

The problem arose when one team had a big eater. In those cases, even a little wager of food could deal some major damage to the losers' wallets. After all, there were some students who could eat a whole ten people's worth with ease.

It was a tough spot for the losing side to be in.

"Damn it! All right—now that it's come to this, all we can do is split up and go for guerrilla tactics!"

"Bart's a real glutton, so *please*..."

"But what do we do?! At this rate, every one of our units is gonna get crushed!"

Zweit's Team A continued to panic for a while. Eventually, they managed to work out a decent strategy...but ultimately, they only managed to defeat half the enemy forces. By the end of the day, their wallets had gotten significantly lighter.

* * *

Lectures at the academy only went until three in the afternoon, and apart from that, the students were free to do as they wished.

As you'd expect, there were plenty of students who just slacked off. But there were also more dedicated students who used that time

to prepare for their next lessons, do some research, write reports, and hand those reports into their lecturers for extra credit.

Celestina, however, was beyond what even the lecturers could handle, so she was relatively free to do whatever she wanted. And as for what she was spending that time on right now...

"If you want to freely manipulate your mana, you have to control your magic with your own will. Try to use the Torch spell and change its shape at will—if you can do that, the rest is just practice. Give it your best shot."

"Yes, Mistress! ♡" came the reply from a chorus of younger girls who'd joined her magic training.

For some time now, there had been a group of younger students—though Miska called them *devotees*—who idolized Celestina and called her "Mistress." There had only been a few to begin with, but their numbers had continued to swell. Before she'd realized, it had grown to a group of some twenty or so students, and teaching them had become part of her daily routine.

What had drawn these students to Celestina was the way that, right in front of their eyes, she demonstrated the things she'd learned from her own teacher, Zelos. The younger students had started to see her as "the genius girl who can rewrite magic formulas," "the prodigy who can decipher magic formulas," and so on—and as a result, she'd begun to garner more and more respect.

Now, she was famous throughout the academy, among students of all years—to the extent that she was now starting to receive confusing letters saying things like, *Would you like an older girl to teach* you *some things too?*

"Aha ha ha ha! You sure are popular now, huh, Celestina? I heard you've even got guys confessing to you lately too, right?"

"W-Wait! Ulna?! What are you sayi—"

"*WHAT?!*"

Every student there whipped their heads around to stare, eyes full of curiosity.

For a moment, Celestina shrunk back.

"Who is it? Who's been sending you those letters, Mistress?!"

"Yes! I need to know! What's their name?! Who is this

gentleman?!”

“Is there even any man fit for Mistress? Was it perhaps Earl Bonshaw’s—”

“Impossible! A fat, ugly brute like him can *never* be allowed to speak to Mistress!”

“H-Huh? Uh...”

And so began the debate over what sort of man would be a good fit for Celestina.

In reality, though, there had been no son from any noble family making passes at Celestina. Or to put it more accurately, they hadn’t had the chance to.

Up until the summer holidays, they’d looked down on her, calling her *useless*, a *failure*, or *that girl who knows everything but can’t do anything*.

Besides, while she *was* the daughter of a duke, her mother had only been a paramour, so they didn’t fully recognize her as part of the family.

After all, magical talent that was passed down through one’s bloodline was an important factor in political marriages among magic nobles. And even within her own family, Celestina had been treated as a failure for her inability to use magic.

None of these nobles had the *right* to butt into another family’s private matters, but nobles were nothing if not power hungry, and they were always looking for an opportunity to slight each other. And Celestina had been the perfect target for that.

Their image of her, however, had quickly collapsed after the summer holidays. In a matter of months, her magical ability had soared past that of the nobles looking down on her.

And with *that* being the case, Celestina was now a *perfectly* valid target for political marriages. But having spent so long insulting her, there was no way the other noble students could try to court her now—and so the oh-so-esteemed sons of nobles had let the perfect marriage candidate slip away.

There were lowlifes who refused to give up nonetheless, and who planned to use their parents’ connections to get engaged with her. But a certain crazy old man—the Mage of Purgatory, who doted very

much on his granddaughter Celestina—stood in their way.

Moreover, he had records of everything that these noble boys seeking his granddaughter's hand in marriage had said and done to put her down in the past, and he used those records to chase them all away.

As a result, those students who'd been insulting her up until recently were now getting thorough scoldings from their parents. They had zero chance, essentially, and it was all their own faults.

There *were* noble students who hadn't taken part in that foolishness—but Duke Creston, driven by his love for his granddaughter, prevented even *their* efforts to get Celestina's hand in marriage. He was the worst possible person with whom to try to arrange a political marriage.

And so the Mage of Purgatory made sure to thoroughly crush any cockroaches who tried to swarm around his granddaughter, who remained clueless all the while. Her maid Miska was, of course, an accomplice.

"What sort of person do *you* like, Miss Celestina?" Ulna asked.

"Huh? U-Um... Someone tolerant, I suppose? But it'd be nice if he had a silly side to him as well. And if he were a gentleman, and intelligent, and levelheaded, and decisive, and self-sufficient..."

For some reason, Zelos's face popped into her head as she spoke.

Wh-Why did I suddenly think about Master right now?! I-I respect him, certainly, but it would be rude for me to see him as a man like that, wouldn't it? Besides, he's old enough to be my father...

If you asked Celestina whether she had romantic feelings for Zelos, she'd deny it. She respected him, but trying to think about whether she saw him as a *man* troubled her a little. If anything, the way she saw him was more akin to how these younger students she was training with right now saw *her*.

"Milady, age is but a number, is it not? If anything, wouldn't even *he* be happy to have a piece of nearly-ripe fruit come up to him asking to be *devoured*? Who knows; play your cards right, and he may be willing to have a taste."

"*Hwah?!*"

Celestina had no idea when she'd arrived, but all of a sudden

Miska—her perpetually calm, cool, and collected maid—was standing behind her.

The sight of the maid propping up her glasses as she showed a mighty smirk was irritating to no end.

"M-Miska... Why do you always have to scare people like that? I thought I was going to have a heart attack..."

"Hmph... A foolish question, milady. It is simply my way of life."

"Scaring people is your *way of life*?"

"Oh, no, milady, not *people*. Just you. You always have such delightful reactions, after all. Aha ha." Miska flashed another smile, equal parts beautiful and detestable.

The maid had disappeared recently, and when she'd finally returned out of the blue four days ago, she'd snuggled up with Celestina in her bed. Naked, at that.

Shocked, Celestina had tumbled out of bed and hit her head on the floor, only to look back up and see Miska gazing down at her with an evil grin. And Celestina was being reminded of that again now.

"Um... Mistress? Is this 'Miska' perhaps the 'Queen of Ice'? I've heard about her from my father."

"Huh? Is... Is that a nickname? It's not one I've heard before, at least... Miska?"

"I left that name behind a long time ago. Nowadays, I'm just a normal maid."

"A *normal* maid? What about you is— S-Sorry. Please don't glare at me like that... It's scary. Anyway...the 'Queen of Ice'?"

"It's the nickname of a graduate who specialized in ice magic," one of the girls explained. "She was in the same year as Duke Delthasis, and she was a transcendental mage, the same as he was. I never would've thought she was your attendant, Mistress..."

Celestina was shocked to hear about Miska's unexpected past.

If the woman had been in the same year as Duke Delthasis—Celestina's father—then she must have been his maid for quite a while by now.

And that meant that there was a high chance Miska would know what kind of person Celestina's mother had been. Celestina wanted

to ask her about it, but didn't have the courage.

"Transcendental mages," by the way, were those who'd attained a level of 500. Aside from the heroes from the Holy Land of Metis, there were few who had reached that level.

As such, they tended to occupy very high positions within the country.

"They say that even though she used ice magic, she was anything but coolheaded. That she was *merciless*. That if a man leered at her, she wouldn't hesitate to freeze him solid. There was also a rumor she was in a romantic relationship with Duke Delthasis..."

"What? *Whaaaaaat?!*"

"No, no. That's false," Miska immediately replied as Celestina whipped her head around. "If anything, we were always coming to blows."

"Y-You... You fought? With Father?"

"I heard that when any boys she rejected tried to harass her as revenge, she'd get them back in secret. And that if anyone tried to spread nasty rumors about her, she'd suddenly be standing right behind them. And that she'd recommend indecent novels to her friends..."

"It sounds like she hasn't changed, the— Sorry. Sorry. Please put your fist down..."

"You know, milady, a single unwise word can prove fatal. Please watch what you say."

Celestina could do nothing but silently nod.

That was just how intimidating Miska could be.

"I feel, milady, like you are becoming quite the thoughtless person as of late... Why, you make your dear maid so sad."

Celestina sighed. "Stop the fake crying, please. It's incredibly obvious... And it doesn't suit you."

"I suppose you are right. Stop it I shall, then. I suppose I will take a different approach to teasing yo— I mean, entertaining you."

"Did you just say *teasing* me? You just let your true intentions slip, didn't you?!"

"Oh, rest assured; it was no accident. No need to correct me."

"Hmm... What was it that I was supposed to say at times like

this? ‘My mace is itchin’ for some blood tonight’?”

“M-Milady?! Where did you learn that kind of— A-And what do you intend to do to me with that mace?”

“Um... Beat you to a pulp?”

Miska was shocked.

She’d intended to tease Celestina and enjoy her flustered reaction; she hadn’t at all expected the girl to up the stakes in her little comedy routine.



"You've learned well, milady... What do you say we aim to conquer the world together? On the comedy stage, that is..."

"Sure! I'll play the straight man, so Miska, you be the funny man. And when I make a comeback, I'll use my mace to—"

"Are you trying to *kill* me?! Hmph... Responding to my stupid line with one of your own? I barely recognize you anymore, milady..."

"I can barely recognize *myself* with you around."

"And now you're even criticizing me?! When did you even learn that sort of advanced... Oh. You're good."

Somehow, Miska felt a shiver go up her spine. But any sense of dread was outweighed by her frustration.

Thinking about it, though, she'd been thoroughly teasing the girl all this time. It only made sense that she'd build up a resistance to it sooner or later.

"Miska really is funny, huh? She looks all cool and calm, but she's actually so silly!"

"Ulna... I'd say it's less that she's *funny*, and more that she has a bad habit of taking her mean jokes too far. She's perfect at her job, though..."

"Milady, please do not speak of me like I am something to be ashamed of. I am more respectable than Sir Croesus, at least."

"I don't know how you came to that conclusion, but you're both bad in your own ways, okay? I think the only difference is whether it's intentional. And you're definitely worse when it comes to that. With you, it's all premeditated, and you do it for fun."

Miska puffed out her chest. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You're only proving my point, aren't you?"

A moment of silence passed as Celestina and Miska stared at each other.

It was like there were invisible sparks flying between the two of them.

"By the way, Celestina—I heard one of your brothers created a potion that can make your breasts bigger? *I* don't need it, but I'm curious—has anyone bought it?"

"It's... It's only temporary, and once it runs out, they go back to normal. So it's sort of meaningless."

"Milady, if it makes the user's breasts unnaturally large, then mightn't it cause them to sag when the effect runs out?"

"No, that's not a problem. They went back to how they used to be."

"Miss Celestina, don't tell me you—"

"M-Milady... You *used* it?"

"It was...a short-lived dream."

Celestina was a girl as well. It made sense that she too would dream about having the perfect proportions.

But the potion didn't last forever.

She'd been happy when she'd used it, but as time had passed, she'd come to accept cold, hard reality. She'd probably never forget the sense of hopelessness she'd felt when it ran out.

"Ultimately, a dream created through alchemy is nothing but an illusion. And all you're left with is a never-ending feeling of emptiness..."

Everyone was silent.

"Please laugh. Laugh at the pathetic girl who was drawn in by a fleeting dream..."

Th-There's no way we can laugh. Not at this. Not at all...

Some of the younger girls here were, themselves, very interested in the allure of the breast enlargement potion.

But now that they'd heard this testimonial from someone who'd actually used it, there was a strong sense of pathos in the air. Perhaps the more effective option would be the Female Hormone Booster—at least that one could give results over the long-term.

The girls here were unable to offer even a word of consolation to Celestina, who was giving a sad, forced laugh.

Next to her stood Miska, quietly dabbing at the girl's tears with a handkerchief.

* * *

Things were going down in a small bar tucked away in a grimy alleyway, not far from the hustle and bustle of central Stihla.

"E-Eeeeeep!"

"You *vermin*... You've made quite the fool of me, haven't you? And now I'm here to *thank* you."

"*Grrr...* We still have the numbers! Surround him! Close in!"

"It won't help you! Right now, I'm stronger than *anyone*! Hyah hah hah hah hah!"

This was a prime display of the bloodline supremacists. They weren't a proper faction; they'd always been nothing more than a group of thugs who manipulated and leeched off others.

They were an underhanded lot who bragged about being the "true descendants of mages" all while carrying out crime after crime—occasionally even extending to the likes of kidnapping and burglary.

They neglected to actually *train* as mages, though, relying instead on their pride in the innate but underwhelming magic that ran through their veins. At the end of the day, they were little different from terrorists.

You might ask why a group of mages blessed with bloodline magic had turned into such a bunch of thugs...but it was precisely *because* they had that magic. They had nothing *but* what they'd genetically inherited.

One problem was that their bloodline magic took up most of the space in their subconscious, making it tough for them to learn any other magic. But the *bigger* problem was that most bloodline magic wasn't even particularly effective in the first place.

It was flawed, hard to use, and certainly not fit for use in battle. Some mages had inherited support magic, but that tended to have issues too.

Ultimately, then, most users of bloodline magic were just mediocre. Such mediocrity ensured that those middling mages eventually came together to reassure themselves of their superiority.

Their goal was to usurp political power and proclaim themselves the true descendants of a righteous magic lineage. And they worked on all sorts of little schemes to those ends.

In the process, they had turned from mages into something more akin to fraudsters. They'd even brought a gang of ruffians under their leadership, forming an underground organization.

Officially, they only ran bars and clubs in the grimy outskirts of town. Unofficially, they went so far as to dabble in the likes of human trafficking—though with each country having strict laws against such activities, they were only able to do so much on that front.

Still, these kinds of people made for the perfect disposable pawns. They were convenient little tools that could be used to eliminate any nuisances. And nobles, in particular, had gotten into the habit of coming to these thugs with little "jobs."

Of course, just as the nobles used the bloodline supremacists, so too was the opposite true. The bloodline supremacists were strengthening their ties with the nobles, and reinforcing their own organization, with the goal of eventually manipulating the nobles in return.

And one key figure who they'd tried to manipulate to get a foothold in politics was Samtrol, the second son of Marquess Wiesler.

He had a strong lust for power, and he was simplistic and shortsighted to boot, so they'd figured they'd be able to take advantage of him. But both sides' scheming had led to Samtrol's downfall.

And as soon as Samtrol had lost his value as a pawn, the others had been quick to discard him. But ask yourself: How would a vain, manipulated boy react when he found out he'd been used?

The answer to that question was playing out right now.

"You spent all that time flattering me, buttering me up... And now you do *this*? Kinda cold, don'tcha think? Huh?"

"W-We're sorry! We know it was wrong! But we were up against the duke! If we'd messed up, we would've been done for..."

"And so you try to pin it all on me and run away? Is that it? Do you know who I am?!"

Samtrol's body had grown abnormally muscular, and he'd become stronger to match. He almost looked like an ogre now.

The men trying to surround him were fellow members of the bloodline supremacist faction. Members who'd tried to use him.

They'd positioned their children by Samtrol's side to sweet-talk him and get on his good side, all so they could manipulate him to do

as they pleased.

Honestly, their plan had gone pretty well. Up until the point they'd started manipulating their *real* target through Samtrol, at least. Indeed—the bloodline supremacist faction had actually been after *Zweit* the whole time.

"I'm going to kill you bastards. That can be your last good deed: helping me get even stronger. Don't worry—you'll be dead before you even realize it. Aha. Hah. Aha ha ha ha *haaaaaah*!"

"E-Eeeeeep!"

SPLORCH! CRUNCH!

Samtrol grabbed hold of one man's neck and pulverized his skull with a fist.

The rusty smell of blood wafted throughout the bar.

"Now, then... There are still more of you, right? C'mon. Get over here and help me level up..."

"R-Run for it!"

"Someone, *heeeeeeeeelp*!"

"You really think I'll let you get away? *Flaming arrow, pierce my foes. Fire Arrow!*"

"*AAAAAARGH!*"

One man's chest erupted into a ball of flames before shattering into pieces. A fountain of blood erupted, splattering across the bar.

"Oh... That felt *good*. Aha ha. This is just the best!"

Samtrol's eyes no longer contained even a trace of sanity.

He was clearly mad, drunk on both power and blood.

With a cackle of joy, he killed the mages who'd made a fool of him in a whirlwind of pure, elated violence.

"Next is Zweit... No, *all* of those idiots who betrayed me. I'll slaughter them all. Graaah ha ha ha ha ha *haaaaaah*!"

Covered in blood, Samtrol was savoring every moment of his revenge.

It might all have been his own fault to begin with, but that didn't stop him from feeling like he had every right to do this.

Having decided on his next target, Samtrol licked some blood from one of his fists as he left the bar.

He stopped only to beat to death a guard who'd heard reports

and come running over...

* * *

"So it's more effective than we thought it'd be, huh...? I guess it's not as bad as those amulets from last time, but still, that drug's bad news. It's like some messed-up narcotic..." Ado muttered. For once, he was wearing Western-style commoner's clothes.

He was disguising himself as a rookie mercenary, equipped with cheap leather armor and a sword.

"I don't think it's a good idea to use those stones to make drugs," Shakti said. "If we want to get rid of them, couldn't we have just buried them somewhere?"

"I agree with Shakti," Lisa chimed in. "This is getting out of hand..."

"Well, I guess, but... I wanna mess with those damn Four Gods, and the Kingdom of Isalas has had a food shortage forever. They need food—even if that means making use of some scumbags. We won't be in this country much longer anyway, so it's no problem, right?"

"When you say we won't be here for much longer... What, did we get another request from the king? Where will we be going this time?"

"To beastfolk territory. And we'll be going through the Holy Land of Metis, so we've been asked to cause some trouble on the way. That brings us to the little creation you see in action there. It'll help cause trouble, *and* it lets us get rid of those crazy stones..."

They'd be sacrificing other people to advance their own goals.

And while they'd resolved to do just that, it still hurt their consciences to see the victims of their decisions.

Still, they had their reasons for this.

"It's *their* fault our lives got all messed up. We've gotta teach them: If they mess with us, they pay the price. And it ain't cheap..."

"I get that. But still...isn't that stuff a little too effective?"

"Yeah. It's kinda...gross."

"The dude's completely tripping, yeah. But hey—if he's the sort of

guy who'll turn to drugs like that, I bet he was no good in the first place. You reap what you sow."

"You're horrible..."

Platitudes alone wouldn't be enough to achieve their goals.

They were up against a major power, so they were aware that they'd probably have to make some sacrifices and leave a few victims along the way.

But preparing themselves and actually seeing it happen were two different things.

"Anyway, we've confirmed it works. The others have gotten back similar reports too, so we don't have anything left to do here."

"But I thought the Kingdom of Isalas was planning to invade here?"

"They were, but I think they should at least try to form an alliance. Even if they *do* manage an invasion, it'll be pointless unless they can keep the land under their control—and besides, there's no way Isalas could start a conflict against Solistia and win."

"Well, the king of Isalas isn't an idiot. For the sake of his people, he'd probably rather accept a bit of foreign aid or something than go to war."

"And it's not like Isalas can use the surprise tactics they used to anymore, can they?"

"Yeah. Still...even if Isalas and Solistia did form an alliance, they'd have to pass through that other country to go back and forth, wouldn't they?"

The Kingdom of Isalas and the Magic Kingdom of Solistia were separated by a region of steep mountains.

And a nation that prospered among those mountains—the Artom Empire—was currently in the middle of war with a certain *other* country.

That other country had sent heroes to the battlefield, but even then, it had turned into a tough fight. Indeed—the Artom Empire's enemy was the Holy Land of Metis.

Ultimately, even if merchants wanted to engage in international trade between Isalas and Solistia, they'd have to travel back and forth along the Aurus River, and there were battlefields along the

route.

Soldiers would sometimes plunder merchants' goods in the name of 'impounding' them, and the soldiers from the Holy Land of Metis had a particularly bad reputation for this. If anything, it was the mountainous folk of the Artom Empire who left the better impression.

"Anyway... Heroes, huh? Wonder if they're doing the whole, 'WHOA! I'm so *strong* now!' routine?"

"I know they're just being manipulated, but still, I wonder why none of them ever run away. I've heard some of them die out there—and I mean, just think about it. People from Earth wouldn't usually *want* to be part of a war."

"There are also the *descendants* of heroes, right? People say they're strong—above Level 300..."

"I don't want to fight any heroes. They might be from the same world as ours, or maybe from a version of Earth in some other dimension. It'd be nice if we could all just team up... Sounds like it's the descendants that'd be the real pain, though. And from Zaza's investigations, there are a lot of them."

According to a certain spy, more than half of the thirty heroes who'd been summoned three years ago had already died, while the other half were holding up the front on the battlefield.

Almost all of the warriors from the Artom Empire were the same level as the heroes—and even among them, there were a fair few with *particularly* outstanding strength. With such military prowess on its side, the empire, despite its small size, was hitting the Holy Land of Metis hard. It was also making full use of its geographical advantages; ultimately, it hadn't even taken much damage.

The heroes had a real habit of acting alone, and that habit had been exploited to kill them.

"I've heard the people of the Artom Empire are descended from the apostles. And from what I've looked up, their abilities aren't too far from those of us reincarnators. Plus, it's a country of demihumans. Isalas will probably want to form an alliance with them too, or they'll have a tough time. From what I can remember, the two countries are on decent terms, but..."

"But there are the other beastfolk countries to consider too, so—Oh. Now I get it."

"Yeah. That's what we're off to do—to propose an alliance with the beastfolk. We're going to be messengers."

"How much longer are we going to stick around *here*, anyway? Let's talk about the rest back at the inn."

"Good idea. We're leaving tomorrow. May as well have an early night."

Their discussion finished for now, the trio began making their way back to the inn.

Ado and his merry band of companions now had a new goal in mind: to pass through the Holy Land of Metis and reach the Great Flatlands where the beastfolk lived.

* * *

"Don't do anything else stupid, okay? His Grace might've pardoned you this time, but you won't be getting any more chances."

"Thanks for taking care of me. I'll be more careful from now on."

Having been detained at the guardroom up until now, Eromura was finally free to leave.

He took a big breath of fresh air, relishing in his happiness at no longer being a slave. It hadn't even been that long, but to him, it had felt like more than enough.

He felt the need to spout a cliché line:

"HAH! *FREEDOM!* The sweet taste of freedom! Aha ha ha ha!"

"Hey! This is still a public space, you know! I understand you're happy to be free, but if you wanna make a big fuss about it, go do it somewhere else."

"Sorry..."

Happy as he was to finally be free again, Eromura had gotten carried away, and it had earned him a scolding from a guard.

Well... What now? Hmm. If I want to live as a mercenary, I'll need some money...

Eromura's official job was "Brave Knight."

He could use magic as well, but he was a frontline fighter through and through. And regardless of how strong he was, it'd be hard for him to properly enjoy this world on his own.

He'd lost his registration as a mercenary when he became a slave—and even if he wanted to register again and rise up the ranks, it'd take time. Plus, the reward a mercenary got depended on the request, so requests for beginners didn't pay much.

Sometimes, there weren't even any requests to take on, so mercenaries could be left with a lot of time to kill. When that happened, the only way they could cover their living expenses was by going out hunting.

"Hmm... I guess I *will* need a decent income if I want to make a slave harem. And this world seems too dangerous for me to try to get rich quick."

He still hadn't given up on his dreams of owning a slave harem.

But to buy slaves, he'd need money—and at the moment, he was flat broke.

He didn't have any crafting skills either, so he didn't have the option of making things to sell. Earning money the slow and steady way seemed like a pain too.

"Oh! I know! I could be a guard for my comrade! I bet the son of a duke needs all the help he can get. And with that decided... Off we go! Aha ha ha ha ha!"

"Shut up!" the guard shouted. "I thought I told you already—if you're gonna make a racket, go do it somewhere else! You're being a nuisance! Do you *want* to end up as a slave again?!"

"Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry..."

Eromura's grand proclamation that he'd make a slave harem had gotten him yelled at by the guard again.

It seemed like he still hadn't learned his lesson.

Having arbitrarily decided to appoint himself Zweit's guard, Eromura set off in high spirits, sauntering through the city. He never once considered the possibility that Zweit might not actually *want* to hire him...

He was a very positive individual, to put it politely.

Chapter 2: Samtrol's Transformation

"I'm begging you, comrade!" Eromura cried. "Give me... Give me a job!"

He was met with an uneasy silence.

Zweit had run into Eromura on his way to the academy library. And now, Eromura was prostrated on the ground in front of him, begging.

Surprised by Eromura's behavior—completely devoid of any shame—and becoming increasingly aware of the inquisitive eyes of onlookers, Zweit was feeling pretty put off right about now.

"U-Uh... Hey there...comrade. What's this about, all of a sudden?"

"I need a job! If I'm unemployed, I won't be able to live my dream of making a slave harem. So please! Give me... Give me a job! I'm begging you here!"

"A *slave harem*? You... You still haven't given up on that? Seriously?"

"A true man never stops chasing his dreams! Sure, I made some mistakes. I'll admit it. But there are some feelings you can't give up on. You get me, right? Having a harem is every man's greatest dream!"

"You've...really got no filter, huh? I guess that's manly, in a way, but...this isn't the place to say that kind of thing out loud!"

"I know I'm being embarrassing! I get it! But you're the only one I can ask about something like this. Please! Give me some work!"

"Tell me: Why do you think you're being embarrassing? Is it the way you're groveling for work in that strange pose? Or is it the 'making a slave harem' thing?"

Slave harems were staple tropes in light novels and the like. They might look like the sign of someone who was *living the life*, but it

wasn’t exactly an easy thing to make work in reality.

For starters, slaves in the Magic Kingdom of Solistia had rights that were protected by law. Sure, there were cases of a master-and-slave relationship developing into a marital relationship, but those cases were pretty rare.

Slaves, ultimately, were there to provide work. They had to be given wages and looked after, and in line with their contracts, their slavery would come to an end once they’d repaid their debts.

Specifically, they were bound by magic for a certain period, and they were freed after that as long as their debts had been cleared, so unless a romantic relationship blossomed by then, it’d be all over after that. Maybe both parties could come to an agreement while in the midst of love syndrome, but generally speaking, it was rare to enter into a slavery contract with someone and then get into a relationship with them.

People generally became slaves in the first place because they couldn’t find work—so if they picked up skills as a laborer that’d allow them to earn a wage, they had no need to keep working for their former master after their contract ended. And if any master *did* try to keep a slave bound to them after a contract had ended, they would have to pay an exorbitant sum for breach of contract. That was laid out as part of the nation’s labor standards, making it virtually impossible to create anything like the slave harem Eromura dreamed of.

Even if any master-and-slave relationship *did* turn into a romantic one, the couple would be entered into a family register together once the slavery contract was over, at which point it made no sense for any party to be considered a slave anymore.

Not to mention, couples had to pay relevant taxes—and those taxes only increased for a polygamous relationship. If Eromura wanted a lot of wives, he’d need to fork over heaps of money.

“Well, leaving aside the whole thing about becoming my guard... Do you really think you’d be able to earn enough to pay slave taxes?”

“I’m confident in my sword skills and my magic. I hear monsters have exploded in number around here—and honestly, I reckon I

could wipe ’em all out.”

“Why not just work as a mercenary, then? What makes you want to be my guard?”

“I, uh... I thought being a personal knight for a ducal family would pay well...”

“The pay’s not *bad*, but...it’d be my old man who hires you, you know? It’s not really something I’m involved in myself. And I mean, money doesn’t grow on trees.”

“But you’re from the ducal family, right? Can’t you just be all, like, ‘*Wheeeeee*, taxes! I’m rich!’?”

“Like hell we can! As soon as one noble starts misappropriating tax money for themselves, every other one copies them! And do you seriously think we’d *want* to do something like that? Something that makes the common people hate the country?”

“Actually, I think I remember you mentioning something like that before. But how do you get spending money, then?”

“I earn some myself. Though, well, I get a bit from the old man too...”

Zweit received a little bit of pocket money from his parents, but it wasn’t so much that he could buy anything he wanted.

His upbringing as the son of a duke was strict, and he was only given a little bit more pocket money each month than a commoner child would receive. If he wanted any more than that, he had to earn it himself.

If he had to, he could earn it by making magic potions or by dabbling in his hobby of metal engraving. After learning to engrave magic formulas, he’d started engraving metal goods to sell as magic tools for extra money. And his tools had been met with a pretty good reception among mercenaries. Perhaps it was a surprising hobby for him to have, but he was unusually adept with his fingers—though that particular hobby was still a secret for now.

“I’ve been working my ass off too, okay? As I said—money doesn’t grow on trees.”

“Oh. I guess things are never that easy in reality...”

“You’ve gotta fix that habit of acting before you think. I’m still just a regular student, you know? I’d love to help you out, but there are

things I can do and things I can't."

"Sorry... I just want a steady income. Some money to help make my dream come true..."

"I wouldn't mind giving you a referral for the knights, but you'd have to do office work and stuff there too, okay? Things like calculating the army's food consumption, and estimating how long they can keep up a march, and learning about tactics. Think you could do that?"

"U-Urgh... No way. I'm, uh... I'm not good with that sorta thing."

It hadn't taken long, and Eromura was back in low spirits, his optimistic plans foiled.

Honestly, his issue probably stemmed from his complete dependence on someone else to make his life work out for him.

"Aren't there any other jobs you could do? Something crafting-related—potion-making, or smithing, for example?"

"I'm a fighter. I don't have any skills like that... About the closest I have is Fishing, I guess."

"That's not too impressive, yeah... Uh, did you wanna be a fisherman?"

Eromura was all about hitting things. Knighthood didn't suit him.

Being a knight was an elite job; it meant guarding nobles and protecting the people. Any stumbles a knight made would bring shame to nobles too, so it was important for knights to have quite a bit of knowledge, skill, and above all else a willingness to follow and enforce the rules. Becoming a knight was about as hard as getting into a top university back on Earth.

Becoming a *first-rate* knight required even stricter training and study, and if a knight managed to do well enough, they could even become a paladin.

Those who couldn't make the cut as knights could still end up as squires or guards—but even those jobs would require them to be capable of doing office work.

"I was always the type to slack off in senior high, so..."

"Senior high? What's that? Some sort of place of learning? Like the academy?"

"Huh? U-Uh, yeah, something like that. Y'know, I just can't relax

when I’m in a room with dozens of people studying together. It kinda, like, gets me on edge, I guess...”

“Well, I sort of understand you, but you go there to learn things that’ll help you in the future, right? Don’t you feel bad for your parents who paid to send you there?”

“Nah. My parents only sent me there in the first place to keep up appearances. I was always at the bottom of the class. Honestly, I wanted to go to trade school.”

“So you couldn’t motivate yourself because they didn’t let you go where you wanted to go? I guess that sort of thing happens. In fact, there are people like that at the academy too.”

“I messed up by passing the exam—just barely. I shouldn’t have. And thanks to that, my parents never shut up whenever my grades dropped. They never listened to what I wanted to do—they just hounded me like crazy whenever I let my grades slip! They ended up telling me they’d given up on me and put their hopes on my little brother instead.”

“Ah... I know the sort. Irresponsible parents. They push their own dreams on their kid without asking, and then they get mad when the kid doesn’t do exactly what they wanted... You hear things like that a lot.”

“Anyway, that’s how it is. So I’ve got no problems with manual labor, but office work might be a bit of a no-go... Urgh, just talking about it makes me annoyed again.”

Eromura, previously known as Itsuki Enomura, had wanted to go to trade school, graduate, and find work that aligned with his hobbies—cars and motorbikes. But his father, who had been the president of a small- to medium-sized company, had forced him to take the entrance exam for a private high school instead.

His mother had largely agreed with his father too, and she had been the type who obsessed over what other people thought and fussed over keeping up appearances. In fact, when Itsuki had been unlucky enough to pass the private school’s entrance exam, she’d told everyone she knew about it.

Ultimately, it had never felt like the right environment for Itsuki, and between that and him always putting his hobbies first, he’d

gotten into the habit of skipping class. He'd started frequenting a nearby repair shop for part-time work, and when his parents had found out, they'd gotten into a huge fight with him. It had ended with his parents calling him a *disgrace*, and he'd run away from home.

From there, he'd started crashing on his friend's couch, and the two of them had polished their engineering skills together.

Their goal had been to form their own team and compete in races—though reincarnating had put a quick stop to that dream.

Swords & Sorceries, by the way, was only ever something he'd dabbled in with friends on days off or when he'd had free time; he'd been just your average player. It wasn't as if he had been a shut-in or an otaku.

"Sounds like you've had it rough. More than I expected... Anyway, got it. I guess for now I'll try to get you hired as a guard, not a knight. I'll do what I can to convince my old man, at least. Until then, I can pay you out of my own pocket for a bit, but...it won't be much, okay?"

"I-Is that all right? I thought you said money doesn't grow on trees?"

"I've been making some tools on the side and selling them to earn a bit of money. It's not much, but I can pay you some wages for a little bit."

"Thanks, comrade... I'm in your debt. Even just enough money for food would be amazing."

"Don't worry about it. In exchange, I'll be getting you to come guard me when I go out to level up, okay?"

"No problem at all. Leave it to me. Hitting stuff's my specialty!"

Friendship between men ran deep.

"Now, where should I sleep tonight...?"

"Oh... Right. You've gotta think about that too, huh?"

"When they turned me into a slave, they took all my money. For breach of contract..."

"You've gotta at least follow the law, man... By the way, you're not staying in my room."

"Why not? When I was in custody, I heard the dorms at the

academy are pretty big, right?"

"Anzu's already using the spare space. You'd have to sleep on a sofa."

In response, Eromura shot Zweit an exaggerated look of utter shock, both eyes open wide.

Or...perhaps it wasn't *all* shock. Part of it was despair as well—despair at being betrayed by someone he'd trusted.

His entire body began to tremble with rage, and it only got worse with every passing moment.

Finally, his feelings boiled to the surface, and he vented them to Zweit.

"How *dare* you?! I thought you were a comrade, but you...you've been a *normie* the whole time, you traitor?!"

"Huh? Anzu just decided to hang around by herself. Then my old man sent her a guard contract the other day..."

"*What?* So you're living together with a little girl?! Of course I'd be jealous, damn it!"

"Uh... She's a kid. What are you even saying?"

"She's a *girl*! The sweet, forbidden taste of unripe fruit... You could teach her all sorts of things while you have the chance, and then eventually she'd be your perfect sex slave..."

"What the— That's a *crime*, okay?! You were seriously planning something like that?!"

"Yeah! Being forbidden only makes it more *tempting*, don't you get it? Oh—but I could totally go for a married MILF too if she was hot!"

"Don't play it off like it's just a casual little preference! You're talking about being a scumbag! A monster! And I don't want to end up dead, either socially or literally!"

As you'd guess from his name, Eromura was hopelessly obsessed with anything erotic.

In fact, it made it hard to believe that he ever *had* been fully devoted to his engineering dreams.

"Look—first of all, I still value my life. Anzu's strong, isn't she?"

"Is she? I don't really know..."

"Teach said she was part of something called...the 'Six Shadows,'

was it? Some sort of party?"

"W-Wait. The *Six Shadows*?! Anzu? Seriously? Actually, I think I remember that old guy saying something along those lines... Don't tell me—she was the Peach Ninja?!"

"That just slipped your mind up until now? Well, whatever... How much do you know about her?"

"I've heard rumors, at least. People said the Six Shadows were a party of ninjas who all wore flashy ninja outfits, and managed to kill all sorts of enemies in an instant... And one of them was the Peach Ninja. They were pretty famous high-levels—not to the extent of the Destroyers, but still."

"Then you understand, right? Do you really think you'd come out of it alive if you tried to put your hands on a girl like her? You'd be dead meat. Literally."

"For sure... Even *I* wouldn't have a chance."

Of course, trying to put his hands on a little girl would've been a crime regardless.

But there was *extra* reason for Eromura to hold back from perving on this particular girl. The Six Shadows were among the top players; they were one of the few parties to even come close to how crazy the Destroyers were.

They'd cleared the conditions not only for Limit Breaker but for Criticality Breaker as well, so if you tried anything funny around them, your life could be forfeit. All of them had levels in the 700s.

As a sidenote, you could clear one of the requirements for Zenith Breaker at Level 900, but the other requirements were determined at random. And nobody had figured out just how many requirements there were.

Zelos, for his part, had met the requirements before he was even aware of it, so he didn't know too much about what exactly they were.

"Seriously, though, why are you even thinking about putting your hands on a kid? Do you *want* to end up as a slave again?"

"Even if I have to use force at first, it'll be fine if she consents afterward. Don't you agree? There's a certain appeal to it, right?"

"*NO!* I don't think that at all! What part of *crime* has 'a certain

appeal' to you?! You're the worst!"

"Th-Then at least, I want to hear her say, 'I love you, onii-chan!' as she looks up at me..." Eromura started panting.

"Do you... Do you seriously think Anzu would ever say that?"

"No, but a guy can dream."

"Dream about committing *crimes*, apparently..."

Eromura was clearly an unmitigated perv.

Perhaps losing his dream of taking part in motor racing had forced him to seek refuge in more erotic dreams instead.

But these new dreams of his were clearly *out*, on an ethical level.

"Anyway, I'm fine with just sleeping on the sofa, so let me stay with you! Then I'll manage by earning money as a mercenary or something!"

"You're really desperate, huh... Well, fine, I guess. But absolutely no trying to do anything to Anzu. Even 'by accident.' Got it?"

"I'll...do my best."

"Wait. Why'd you pause just now? I'm being serious here. Do *not* do anything to her, okay? Or Teach'd kill me for—"

"Hmm? What's that, comra— Huh?"

Zweit's expression had suddenly gone grim, and Eromura noticed he was looking off in a different direction.

Eromura found it strange. But when he turned around to follow Zweit's gaze, he realized why.

There was another student standing there. But the student's clothes were stained dark red, and he was giving off a foul smell.

"Gyah hah hah hah hah! I found you, you fucking *worm*! No more waiting—I'm gonna slaughter you right now! Hyeh hah *hargh*!"

"Samtrol..."

Samtrol had made no attempt to hide the dark red bloodstains all over his clothes, and the way he was cackling made them doubt he was even sane.

It was clear he was on some sort of high—and that he was hostile.

Zweit immediately got into a battle stance.

"What's this guy's problem? You know him? Looks like he's kinda off his rocker..."

"I *know* him, yeah...in the sense that he's an enemy. But I don't remember him being *this* crazy."

"He probably took some sorta weird drug or something, right? Seems pretty dangerous right now..."

Eromura took a shield out of his inventory, equipped it, and drew his sword—all of it far better equipment than your average mercenary would have—and observed Samtrol.

"This is...definitely gonna turn into a fight, yeah? He seems pretty willing to go..."

"You're right. Jeez, I didn't think he'd be *this* much of a damn idiot..."

With Eromura and Zweit still on guard, Samtrol broke into a run and sent a bloodied fist flying toward Zweit.

That fist, however, was promptly blocked and flicked aside by Eromura's shield.

"What?!"

"Come on, man—no way I'm about to let you just kill my employer like that. You don't get to ignore me."

"Get out of my way! Or, if you *insist*... I guess I'll have to gobble you up! Heh heh heh HEH!"

"Sorry—I don't swing that way!"

"*GAKH!*"

Eromura landed a fierce kick to Samtrol's stomach, sending him flying back at least ten meters.

Failing to break his fall, Samtrol tumbled along the ground, only coming to a stop when he rammed into a streetlight.

"What is this?! Th-There's no way... I'm stronger! I should be *stronger* now! This can't be happening!"

"Strong? What about you is strong? You seem super weak to me."

"Uh... Hey. Eromura. Comrade. What level are you, exactly?"

"Me? Something around Level 600, I think? And by the way—stop calling me Eromura! My name is *Orpheus XIII*!"

"Wait... I thought it was 'Reinhardt'? Well, whatever. Doesn't matter."

"It *does* matter!"

As Eromura and Zweit continued their little comedy skit, Samtrol

trembled with humiliated rage.

Right now, Samtrol was Level 95. Considering the highest level among this world's average inhabitants was about 300, someone of average to intermediate level would have been able to kill even him with ease.

Eromura, however, was Level 621, to be precise. Even Zweit was Level 183.

Samtrol was far too weak to be facing off against the two of them.

Impossible... Impossible, IMPOSSIBLE! I should be STRONG now! My blood is noble, immaculate; there's no way I'm weaker than these pieces of trash!

Unfortunately for Samtrol, though, he wasn't reasonable enough to admit his enemies' strength.

When his opponents were weaker than him, he'd always looked down on them, and when they were stronger than him, he'd gotten terribly envious; either way, he'd never put in the effort to actually get stronger himself.

His bloodline was his only merit, and with that taken away from him, he had nothing left.

Now that the Wiesler house had cut him off, his only option was to actually get stronger. Usually, that was when anyone would've realized a thing or two. Samtrol, instead, had continued to deny reality, opting to turn to questionable drugs in secret.

He'd always made fun of people who took their training seriously, choosing instead to sit back and take it easy. And this was where it had gotten him.

Yet despite it all, he was arrogant enough to even believe he'd been right to do that. That was why he'd devoted himself to eliminating those who were actually competent—because in his eyes, it was justified. He'd been putting effort into the wrong places.

"What'd this guy even come here for? Pretty sure he's even weaker than you, comrade..."

Zweit grimaced. "I don't like how you phrased that. I'll admit I'm weaker than you are, but I don't intend to let things stay that way, you know?"

"Good. Seriously, though, can this guy not see the difference in strength between himself and his enemies? Is he a moron?"

"Sure is. He never put in the effort to get stronger; all he ever did was brag and try to lord his status over other people."

"Ah... Yeah, I know the type. And they always like dragging other people down, right?"

"He's a failure. The only thing he has going for him is his royal blood. Apparently he's even been disowned by his family."

"Uh...he's a royal? Is it really okay to beat this guy up?"

"Don't sweat it. I've got royal blood too. Plus, the guy might've been part of a marquess house, but he was kicked out of it. Us dealing with him shouldn't be any problem at all."

The bloodstains on Samtrol's uniform made it clear what sort of thing he'd been doing earlier.

It was reasonable to assume he'd been getting into fights and leveling up.

"D-Don't fuck with me! There's no way anyone else is stronger than me! This stuff made me strong!"

"You really got into some crazy drugs, huh? But if something like a drug could make you stronger, nobody would go through the effort of working hard in the first place. You get that, right?"

"Yeah... All drugs and potions can do is buff your strength a bit. In fact, I've never even heard of a drug that makes you strong as fast as this one..."

"It wasn't enough... This is all because I didn't take enough! This isn't how it was meant to go!"

Unable to accept reality, Samtrol took out a bottle, grabbed a fistful of pills, and tossed them into his mouth all at once. The others could hear him chewing on them.

"Hee *hee*! Yeah! *This* is it! *This* time, you two are gonna be—"

Countless veins rose to the surface of Samtrol's face, and his body began to swell grotesquely.

His clothes started to tear, unnaturally swollen muscles appearing from underneath as they did.

"*DROP DEAD, ZWEIT!*"

"Rather not."

POW!

As Samtrol came rushing forward, Zweit got him with an uppercut to the chin, then followed it up with a fist to Samtrol's defenseless gut. When Samtrol slumped forward, Zweit hit him with a left hook to the face.

Finally, Eromura sent Samtrol flying with a kick.

Unable to either defend himself or break his fall, Samtrol was sent tumbling along the ground again. And it seemed like he might've gotten a cut in the mouth—he was left spitting out blood as he face-planted the ground in unsightly fashion.

This was the difference between someone who'd only ever lorded his status over others and someone who'd actually trained to get strong.

"I guess those muscles of his were just for show. He might've been able to kill a beginner mercenary or something, but he's really not all that much..."

"Still—look at how big his muscles got just by taking that drug. That's gotta be bad for his body, right?"

"It has to be. That kind of thing always has side effects. I guess I'll ask Croesus to analyze it later..."

"This is all a lie... Lies, lies, lies, lies, LIES!"

"You've gotta face facts. If taking drugs were enough to make you superstrong, everyone would be doing it."

Zweit was at his wits' end. Samtrol was an infuriating guy to deal with, but when he was *this* much of a fool, Zweit's natural response went beyond anger and turned into something else entirely.

"Why...?! I have royal blood! How could I be reduced to such a pathetic—"

"It's because you only ever relied on your bloodline; you never actually put in the effort to improve yourself. Don't you see? Or did you seriously never realize that?"

"No! No, no, no, no, no! You're WRONG! It's all your fault! It's because you stole everything away from me! You should've just stayed nice and brainwashed! But because of *you*, all my underlings betrayed me, and Bremait disappeared! *You* did this to me, Zweit!"

"See?! There you go blaming your own failures on other people

again. That's why you're no good! You never think for yourself, you pin all your problems on other people, and then when you screw up, you take it out on someone else. What are you, a kid?"

"Silence! I am *superior*! I'm qualified to be king!"

"Yeah, no. You were always pretty far down the order of succession—and besides, you were taken out of it because of all the shit you've done lately, right? The royals look at the order of succession when they're deciding on an heir, and you're lower down it than I am. Not that I *want* to be king, mind you."

Zweit was twelfth in the order of succession, while Samtrol was—or at least, *had* been—twenty-third. Just thinking about it for a moment, it should have been clear someone so far down would have never been king.

Yet Samtrol—whether through misunderstanding or pure delusion—had openly proclaimed he'd be the next king.

Ignoring the order of succession amounted to treason, and when word had reached the royal family's ears, it had been the straw that broke the camel's back; the Wiesler house had been left with no choice but to cut Samtrol off.

If you declared you were going to be the king when there was already a valid successor to the throne, you couldn't complain if the country labeled you a traitor. But Samtrol hadn't even been smart enough to realize that.

"You brainwashed people against their will; you committed treason against the royal family; you tried to assassinate a member of a ducal house... You should just be happy you weren't given the death penalty. You brought this all on yourself, you know?"

"You're wrong! Wrong, wrong, wrong! It's all you... You set this all up to bring me to ruin, didn't you?!"

"Hey, comrade... Does this guy *always* refuse to accept when he's wrong? He kinda just sounds like some spoiled kid..."

"It's what it looks like. I don't even feel like arguing with him anymore."

"Yeah... You know, being so stupid is almost impressive. Only kinda king he's ever gonna be is the King of Morons."

"Y-You... How dare you insult me?! I'll fucking *slaughter* you!

Every last one of you!”

Zweit and Eromura had nothing left to say. The two of them stared him down like they were looking at a pathetic little child.

Samtrol reached for his bottle once again and shoved all of the remaining pills into his mouth. Well, not *quite* all—some of them fell to the ground—but Samtrol didn’t even care as he chewed and forced the pills down his throat.

As his body grew even stronger, his skin became darker, and his bulging muscles burst through his remaining clothes with enough force to send them flying. Scales formed on his arms, hardening his skin, and bumps began to grow out of his back.

“I’ll *ghill* youuu... I’ll *ghill you bastazzz*!”

“Jeez... He’s not even human anymore! Where’d Samtrol even get that drug?”

“Yeah—seriously, what’s *with* that stuff? Does it actually turn people into monsters? That’s messed up...”

“The question is, how much stronger is he now...?”

“*DIEEEEEE!*”

The mutated Samtrol mustered all of his enhanced strength as he leaped at Zweit.

“Like I’d let y— Whoa?!”

Just like earlier, Eromura moved to protect Zweit with his shield. But as he did, he heard a disconcerting noise, and noticed some sort of murky liquid spurting out of Samtrol’s body.

Samtrol’s arm was twisted at an unbelievable angle, his bones protruding.

The instant Eromura blocked with his shield, Samtrol’s arm hit its limit. Flesh tore; bones snapped.

“Wait... His body can’t keep up with the power?”

“Remind me—is monster blood black? And it smells kinda rotten too... Ugh, gross!”

“GROAAAAAAH!”

Samtrol continued his relentless attack on Zweit like he didn’t even register the pain. With each blow that Eromura intercepted with his shield, more of Samtrol’s flesh was sheared from his body and more of his bones *snapped*.

Yet even then, the assault continued.

"He's... He's destroying himself..."

"He's pushed his body too hard. It probably can't stand the shock."

"GHILL...OU...AYLGHILLOU!"

Samtrol's legs ruptured; his arms were torn to shreds; his entire body was screaming out for respite. And still he kept attacking.

If he kept this up, he'd eventually be unable to move. In the worst-case scenario, he'd die.

Other students nearby had already distanced themselves, and at this point they were only watching the situation from afar.

"How can he still move?!"

"Like I'd know... Wait. Comrade. Is it just me, or are his injuries healing themselves?"

"What?!"

As the two of them took a closer look, they saw that Samtrol's bleeding had stopped, and that his flesh was...writhing, uncannily, as it regenerated.

Still, Samtrol's body was continuing to destroy itself faster than it regenerated. The healing couldn't keep up.

It was like a grotesque suicide attack.

All that Zweit and Eromura had to do was dodge, but the surrounding area was being destroyed, and more and more murky black blood and chunks of flesh were being scattered about. Samtrol was destroying paving, benches, streetlights, and himself, yet still he continued to chase after Zweit. His grudge might've been a petty one, but his persistence in seeking revenge was terrifying.

"He's not even human anymore, is he?"

"Yeah... Our saving grace is that he's weak. If he'd been *strong*, we wouldn't have been able to handle it."

But as it was, the two of them were having such an easy time that they were casually chatting as they avoided Samtrol's rampage.

That came down to the level gap between them. Samtrol's level had been low to begin with; however powerful a drug he used to strengthen himself, it'd never make him *that* strong.

A low-level could try to strengthen themselves with potions or

drugs, but nothing they took could make them an actual threat to someone of much higher level. Still, Samtrol despised Zweit so much that he'd failed to even consider such an outcome.

His grudge was entirely unreasonable, but given Samtrol's selfishness—and the depths of his hatred—reason fell on deaf ears.

And it didn't seem like his hate-fueled rampage was going to get him anywhere.

"*Blugh! Guh— Gweeergh...*"

"Wh-What now?"

"Looks like he's suddenly in pain. Is this a side effect from the drug?"

Samtrol's muscles—which had become so swollen that they'd ruptured—suddenly deflated, and his body grew thinner and thinner.

In fact, at the rate this was going, it seemed like there would soon be nothing left of him but skin and bones.

"Wha—?! He's turning into a mummy..."

"This is bad. He's not gonna *die*, is he?!"

It seemed like Samtrol's muscles—having been forced far beyond their limits, and having gone through a repeated cycle of self-destruction and regeneration with his continued attacks—had used up most of the calories in his body.

And as a result, he was now rapidly mummifying. There was no saving him anymore.

"*HAAARGH... GAKH...*"

"This hurts to watch. He might've deserved it, but this is a terrible way to die..."

"And it's because of that drug, huh? That thing's dangerous. Who'd even make something like...?"

Zweit picked up one of the pills that had fallen to the ground and studied it with a stern expression. He didn't know where Samtrol had gotten these pills, but it was clear they had a horrifying effect. If these things got into the wrong hands, the entire country could fall to ruin.

"So there's a drug that turns people into monsters... You're telling me something like *this* is on the streets?"

"No... This was probably a prototype. But there's the chance it

could spread throughout the country eventually."

"This is no joke. If this thing gets out, there'll be all *sorts* of crimes."

"Maybe... Maybe that's what they want."

A substance that temporarily enhanced the user's body could be useful in certain fields. For example, when people were fighting on the battlefield, or out on monster subjugation. But when it seemed like it affected the user's personality too, it was far too risky to try and use. If someone *was* careless enough to use it, they could put their own allies at risk—and if it was used incorrectly, the person could end up self-destructing like Samtrol. This pill in Zweit's hand could *not* be allowed to make its way out into society.

"I feel bad for him. Still...what now? How do we clean all this up?"

"For now, we'll have to go in for questioning. Then the rest will all be up to the state. It's out of our depth."

"So... I've gotta go to the guardroom again? I only got out of the damn place earlier today, you know?"

"Too bad. Just consider it bad luck you got caught up in this. You were the victim this time, though, so you should be fine."

"I hope you're right..."

Presumably someone had called the guards, as several of them were running over just now in full armor.

After that, Zweit and Eromura had to answer some questions. And with everything that they said just sounding so absurd, they ultimately had to stay at the guardroom until the following morning, when enough information had been gathered to back up their claims.

* * *

The next morning, with Zweit and Eromura's questioning over, the two of them returned to the academy dorms.

Eromura had never been there before, and he let out a breath of wonder at the building's Baroque-style architecture.

It was sort of like seeing an old building on your first trip

overseas.

"This is incredible... How is this a *dorm*? Isn't this way too fancy for that?"

"It used to be a government building. It's been restored since then, but things like the murals on the ceilings are the same as they used to be."

"Why'd they change this place into an academy town, anyway? Wouldn't it have been fine as a regular town?"

"It *would've* been a good spot for that, except that the land here isn't suited to trade. The surrounding villages are tiny, and there are no local specialties made here either. So they gave some thought to what they could do to make the place prosperous, and the answer they ended up with was to turn it into one big academy."

"Sounds like a long story..."

With Zweit guiding Eromura, the two of them climbed the stairs to the second floor before stopping in front of a door about halfway down a hallway.

"This is my room. Apparently, it used to be some noble's study."

"Uh... Is it just me, or is this door really far away from the ones around it? Just how big is this room?"

"It's because a lot of the rooms around this part are used by nobles. The other wings are like this too."

Zweit inserted a key into the lock above the doorknob and opened it with a *KER-CHAK*.

He slowly opened the door, revealing a luxurious room—one that'd never usually come to mind on hearing the term "student dorm."

"So, am I... Am I gonna be sleeping on that sofa there?"

"That's right. I use the one next to that, and then Anzu's staying in the room at—"

But before he could finish saying "the room at the back," Anzu herself opened the door of said room and came out.

She had her hands on her stomach for some reason, and her expression was hidden by her hair.

"Hungry..."

Zweit sighed. "Did you not eat at the dining hall? You know it's

well past noon already?”

“I was asleep... I don’t like mornings. Need food...”

“Okay, so go to the dining hall, then. Wait—no. It’s already three. So they’ll be closed by now.”

“*Fooooood...*”

“Hey, comrade—surely you’ve gotta take her out to eat now, right? And what, does Anzu have low blood pressure or something?”

By the looks of it, she was so bad with mornings that she’d missed both breakfast and lunch.

And she seemed not to be her usual self.

“Usually you just disappear all of a sudden. Why is today the one day you’re in your room?”

“No money. Need food...”

“Didn’t you get your pay for guarding me? What’d you use it all on?”

“Making these,” Anzu said, raising her arm.

“Wh-Wha—?!” Zweit and Eromura both exclaimed.

She was clutching a pair of women’s underwear. Specifically, a bra.

She had the Imperial Tailor skill—a high-ranking skill for making clothes—and she was an artisanal crafter, exclusive to those in the know.

And this was where Zweit and Eromura, who were decidedly *not* in the know, messed up.

“Uh, Anzu... I get that girls need that sort of underwear, but that doesn’t exactly...fit your build, y’know?”

“He’s right. I mean, honestly, it’s supercute of you, but...still, yeah, those cups are *way* too big for you, right? There *is* demand for lolis with huge tits, but...”

A dangerous light flashed through Anzu’s eyes. In an instant, she disappeared from Zweit’s and Eromura’s gazes, leaving the two fools dumbfounded.

SCHING!

All of a sudden, she was behind them. She cast Shadow Clone and bit into both of their heads, hard.

“*AAAAAAHHHHHH!*”

The boys' agonized screams echoed throughout the dorm that afternoon.

Despite her petite build, Anzu did have *some* breasts, and she had a complex about them. And it seemed like Zweit's and Eromura's careless comments had hit a sore spot.

Their punishment: extreme violence.

The beating lasted for a fair while, and by the end of it, Zweit's and Eromura's faces were both swollen.

As a sidenote, Anzu was growing more and more famous around the Istol Academy of Magic.

As an elusive lingerie seller, that is...

Chapter 3: Sometimes, a Door Opens to Another World

The scene: a dedicated magic research lab at the Istol Academy of Magic.

As the foremost research institute in the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, this lab was a place for various magic research factions, including the Saint-Germain faction, to come together.

Most of those who frequented the lab were academy students with excellent grades, and they spent their time here researching magic, potions, and more.

The facility had ties with Solistia's dedicated military research facility in the nation's capital, and one of its key focuses was the analysis of medicinal herbs and other such ingredients.

For a long time, the development of magic had been at a standstill, with no progress on the deciphering of magic letters. More recently, however, a research publication from the Saint-Germain faction had started to set things on the right track. After that publication, researchers could finally decipher magic letters—though there was still a long way to go before they'd be able to fully understand entire magic formulas.

Among the authors of that publication was one particularly notable individual.

And his name was Croesus von Solistia.

In his entrance exam, he'd achieved the highest result of any individual to ever apply to the academy. He'd kept it up since too—gaining a reputation as a genius at the top of the academy, his intellect helping him to far outstrip every other student. He was quite the special mage, in short, having even earned himself the nickname "the Star of Magic" at one point.

Recently, however, those close to him had found him to be a real

troublemaker, which had earned him a *different* nickname: "the Calamity-Bringer." He was a true eccentric, and he never stopped causing problems for the academy's teachers.

He was currently testing a drug by administering it to a rodent-like creature called a guirat.

The guirat was going wild inside its glass tank. *So* wild, in fact, that it seemed like the tank could break at any moment. But it wouldn't have to hold out for long; the guirat's own body was starting to break down too. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"So? Have you figured anything out, Croesus?"

"This drug is... It's dangerous, Serina. We can't just let something like this exist."

For once, Croesus had a serious look on his face.

His eyes were filled with a mixture of shock and disgust.

"Is it really that bad? I mean, I can tell the guirat's having a bad time in there, at least... *Blegh!*"

"It gives the user a mental high, and it strengthens their body. But that's not all—there are other magic drugs that do those things. Part of what makes *this* one such a problem is that it forcibly extracts the nutrients stored in the user's body to heal their wounds at a frightening rate."

"That all sounds like *good* stuff, though... What's so dangerous about it?"

"It's highly addictive—take it once and you won't be able to stop. It also pushes your body to its physical limits, so if you attack someone while you're under its effects, your body starts to break down, only to repair itself with that hyper-regeneration... Then you get even more ferocious and turn into a monster. Anyone who becomes addicted to this doesn't have long left to live."

This was the drug that had killed Samtrol three days ago. On Zweit's request, Croesus had been researching it to analyze what it was made from and how it worked—and he'd found its effects to be more dangerous than he could've anticipated.

"Whoever made this drug is *demonic*. This sort of thing shouldn't exist. We can't *let* it exist. Who knows *what* it was made for..."

"Hey. Uh... Just hypothetically, what'd happen if this became

widespread?”

“Monsters would begin sprouting up in the middle of human society, one after another... So, yes, it’s a very dangerous substance. But also an intriguing one, mind you.”

“From what you’re saying, even *dangerous* doesn’t sound like a strong enough word... It could lead to disaster, couldn’t it? Really, who would even...”

“Who knows? Let me ask you, though: What do you think would happen if you gave this drug to a criminal on death row and sent them off to the front line in some war or another?”

“What?! Y-You mean...”

Using this drug to strengthen a death-row criminal and sending them to the front line of a conflict would allow a country to inflict major damage on enemy forces.

Those criminals would gain powerful regeneration too—plus, all you’d have to do was leave them there, and they’d fight, and fight, and fight, until they self-destructed. It was just about the last thing any enemy would want to face.

“So it must be made from some sort of ingredient that enhances the body while also inhibiting mental limits... I’m getting more and more curious as to what that ingredient is. Surely we can assume it’s something that has multiple effects—transforming the body and stimulating regeneration. Given how it works, I’d wager it was developed for military use. But if this ends up on the streets...”

“It’s terrifying to even think about. There’d be no telling when someone in town might suddenly get violent.”

“Slanthole was probably a test subject. And that’s how he met his end. Although...in this case, I suppose he was complicit in his own downfall anyway.”

“His name was *Samtrol*. And I hear he was royalty, for what it’s worth. You should at least try to remember the names of other royals.”

“But I’m not interested. I’m a second son, so it’s not like I’ll be ending up as the head of my family. Besides, he’s already dead, so I don’t see the point in remembering his name.”

Croesus never bothered to remember things that didn’t interest

him.

If he ever *did* remember names, they were the names of people who'd excelled in a particular field, or prominent historical figures.

He could just barely manage to remember his own friends' names, and even then, he still got them wrong at times. So of *course* he wouldn't remember the name of someone who had nothing to do with him. Especially if that someone was dead.

Long story short, you couldn't expect Croesus to behave the same as your average noble.

"As my brother was saying, this was a field test... But for what? Does whoever made this intend to overthrow a country?"

"Wouldn't it be *this* country, specifically? They already targeted Samtrol, didn't they? Part of Solistia's royalty? And they were targeting your brother at one point as well, right?"

"No... I don't think we're the target. Now that it's led to casualties, our country will be on the lookout for this...for lack of a proper name, let's call it the Demon Pill. Solistia's a small country, after all."

"You think so? And besides, with how powerful this thing is, couldn't it actually be helpful depending on how you use it?"

"If it didn't turn the user into a monster, perhaps. But it's so addictive that there's no limit to how dangerous it could be. There's no knowing when someone might turn into a monster and attack their own compatriots. This is going to be a big deal."

"Just imagining what could happen terrifies me..."

"For now, I'll put my findings together in a report. From there, it'll all be up to the higher-ups, so I'll just get back to doing what I usually—"

"*What you usually do?* You mean causing explosions, releasing poisonous gas, giving people short-term mental disorders... That *is* the usual for you, yes?"

"Erm... No, I was thinking of something closer to deciphering and improving magic formulas."

"Good. If you create any more trouble, you'd cause the gut of every teacher at the school to rupture from stress."

"Oh, so negative. There's no such thing as technological progress

without failure, you know? Are you *trying* to get in the way of progress?"

"*Your* failures always end up with too many victims, Croesus. I'm honestly amazed you haven't killed anyone yet."

"For what it's worth, I *do* take precautions and carry out inspections..."

Which was true. But the problem was that no matter how many precautions he took, no matter how many inspections he conducted, they didn't seem to help at all.

For whatever reason, whenever Croesus screwed up an experiment, it'd inevitably leave masses of victims in some unexpected place. He could put up magic barriers, he could make sure to ventilate the room ASAP, but ultimately, even those measures would have some sort of unexpected side effect.

"I mean, it's not like I do any of that *intentionally*..."

To Croesus, failure was just a different label for success; he was a researcher through and through, happy to get any data that showed significant results. He was a genius—and perhaps it was inevitable that any genius would be strange in one way or another.

"Could you take these results to the staff room for me, Serina? I'll go and tell my brother what I've found."

"Mmm... And then he'll pass it on to the duke, who'll tell the royal family, I suppose. Wouldn't that be faster than informing the teachers anyway? Is there a point in me going?"

"You're not wrong, but remember—everyone here is a researcher. If we don't tell them all what we've found, someone might try to recreate this Demon Pill themselves. And in the worst-case scenario, they'd do it in complete secrecy."

"Well, yes; everyone in this lab *does* have a screw or two loose. So we probably should be as careful as possible. I get it. I'll show them the results."

"I appreciate it. In that case, I'll go tell my brother once I'm finished with the cleaning here."

"All right."

Serina left the laboratory, a clipboard in hand.

"Now... Where are they going to use this drug next? Whatever

they do with it, it's going to leave more victims, I know that much... Still, I don't know *what's* going on here."

Croesus had an unusually grim look on his face.

Checking up on incidents involving magic potions, drugs, and the like was a daily habit for him. And the intuition he'd picked up from all the cases he'd heard about before told him that *this* one was incredibly suspicious.

As Croesus racked his brains, the girls nearby all looked over, faces blushing—leaving the *boys* with the fire of jealousy burning in their hearts.

* * *

Once Croesus had finished cleaning up, he started walking to what was an unusual destination for him: the strategy research hall. It was often full of students from the Wiesler faction, and he expected to find Zweit there. Unfortunately, though, Zweit was nowhere to be seen.

Next, Croesus headed to the library, figuring that that was another possibility. But there was no sign of Zweit there either.

"Just where have you gotten off to, Brother...?"

Croesus had leveled up a bit lately, but he still had no stamina. Or to be precise, he *had* gained some stamina, but only a tiny, tiny amount.

The academy was large, and the library and strategy research hall were on completely opposite ends; walking between the two of them had made Croesus's legs and back sore. He decided to use a potion to relieve the pain.

It made him look something like an office worker gulping down a nutritional drink on his way back to work. As someone who tended to spend his days holed up inside, he had less stamina than just about anyone. But it couldn't help but seem like a real waste of a potion.

Croesus spent a while longer looking for Zweit, but eventually—probably just because he was sick of walking—he gave up and returned to the dorm. And as soon as he got back, what he saw had

him lost for words.

"You're late. Where were you?"

"Yo. Long time no see."

Standing in front of the dorm were Zweit and Eromura. They'd been waiting for Croesus to return.

They'd gone right past each other. Croesus's effort had all been for naught.

It was his first time experiencing what it was like to try something new and fail at it.

"Brother, and... Erolover, was it? Why are you at the dorm?"

"That is *not* my name?! Could you at least go with *Enomura*?!"

"Well, I thought I'd hear you out in *your* room for once, but then I figured there was a chance it'd be locked. So I decided to just wait here."

"How... How long have you been here?"

"About...ten minutes, I guess? I was looking through some books."

In other words, Zweit had just been in the library. That meant that if Croesus had simply headed to the library first, he wouldn't have had to end up exhausted like this.

The two of them had chosen to break their usual habits, and they'd missed each other as a result.

"You were already at the dorm; you could've just gone into my room and waited there. Why stand out here?"

"I mean, you probably locked the door, right?"

"I never lock my door. The lock's broken—and besides, it'd be a waste of time, given how long it'd take me to lock and unlock it every time I wanted to carry documents in and out. There's no point fixing it, so I've just left it as is."

"Hey, comrade. Is your brother really that lazy?"

"Jeez... What would you do if a burglar tried to get in?"

"That's not a problem. There aren't many people willing to go into my room... Oh?"

Just as Croesus was about to open the door to his room, he faintly heard something that sounded like singing from inside.

La la laaaaa ♪ Cleany cleaaaaan~! I'll leave his room a lovely

scene~! Some acid here, some bleach on that... ♪

The three boys were all confused. "Uh... What sort of song is *that*?"

I wonder if Croesus will be happy~? ♪ A-And if he is, then maybe we can... Ehe he he...

Zweit and Eromura went silent. The air grew cold.

"So it's Yi Ling, is it? She must be cleaning my room again. I appreciate it—I do—but I can never find things after she does this. It can be a pain."

"She's cleaning your room out of the kindness of her heart, and you *complain* about it?!" Zweit and Eromura fumed. "Drop dead, you normie!"

"I *did* say I appreciate it, didn't I? It's just that...even leaving aside my potions and so on, I always end up not quite knowing where all the little things I've collected for my hobbies have disappeared to. And then when I look for them, the room just ends up becoming a mess again."

"Clean your *own* room, then! Don't just leave it for someone else to do!"

"And this is a *girl* we're talking about, right?! Do you even know how few girls there are out there who like looking after guys?! You're making me so jealous right now, you asshole!"

"Anyway, there's not much point in us just standing out here; let's go inside. If we stay out here, we'll be in the way of anyone coming through the hal— Hmm. What's this?"

Croesus tried to turn the doorknob as he spoke—but for some reason, the door didn't open.

He tilted his head to the side, confused, and tried to turn it again. Then again.

"Strange. It's not opening."

"Maybe she locked it from inside?"

"Hold on, comrade! Didn't he say something earlier about the lock being broken?"

"Maybe it can...still be locked from the inside? Is that how it works, Croesus?"

"No, it's the same from the inside. Completely broken. It

shouldn't be possible to lock it... Hmm. This is *quite* the intriguing little mystery."

All of a sudden, the three boys heard a beast's roar and a girl's scream coming from inside the room.

GROAAAAAAAAAR!

"*AAAAAAHHH!*"

"What?!"

Panicked, they tried to open the door again, but it was as heavy as a slab of steel. They couldn't get it to budge even a single millimeter.

THOMP! BLOOP... FWFF...

They heard the footsteps of a creature that was surely far too big to fit inside a dorm room, the sound of a large volume of liquid trickling down onto the floor, and the sound of something being dragged along the ground.

These clearly were *not* the sorts of sounds that should have been coming from inside Croesus's room.

"I wonder if this is what they call a paranormal phenomenon? This is my first time encountering one..."

"What's happening in there?! And more importantly—is that beastfolk girl with the big rack okay?!"

"A *beastfolk girl*?! With a *big rack*?! How much more jealous do you have to make me?! I hope your dick falls off!"

"S-Someone! *Heeeeeelp!*"

"I-It's an emergency?!"

Then, from who-knows-where, the three of them heard the noise of a motorbike engine, and...the *SCHING* sound effect of something shiny?

BRUM-BRUM-BRUM-BRUM-BRUM-BRUM...

SCHWING! SCHWING!

Two voices laughed with a "Wah hah hah hah hah!"

Another, with a "Yo ho ho ho ho!"

And it felt like there was one more presence there too, but they were staying quiet.

Next, the sound of some sort of chain wrapping around something, and of something bursting into flame: *CHA-CHA-CHANG!*

FWOOMPH!

The sound of a blunt impact, followed by a piercing stab: *BLAM! SKTH!*

Of something being severed by a sword, then frozen solid: *THWOOKSH! KSHING!*

Of something heavy being swung around and slammed into something else, which was then torn apart: *VWOOOOOO-BAM! SQUELCH!*

And of something being smashed to pieces: *SKSH!*

GROAR... OAAAAAAR... UUUR...

Then, finally, silence.

Croesus, Zweit, and Eromura stared at each other for a moment, none of them quite sure what to say.

"Thanks, Skeleton Four. You're always such a big help."

Now, the three young men went from confused silence to confused inquiry: "'*Skeleton Four*'?"

"'*Always*'?"

"Sh-She's *always* getting saved like this?!"

Something unbelievable was happening inside that room. It had made the three young men so confused that their heads had stopped working for a bit, and now they were just standing dumbfounded, unmoving, outside.

By the time they came back to their senses, the sun was setting, a red glow taking over the sky.

"Hwah?! I must've lost consciousness. And now it's... It's *sunset*?!"

"You're kidding. Have we seriously been standing here for *more than three hours*?!"

"Uh, before that... Didn't that all sound kinda bad? In a lot of ways? Those noises and voices made it sound like there was a real problem in there..."

In front of the three of them was, ostensibly, a completely ordinary door. But while the inside of Croesus's room was only a few inches of wood away, it somehow also felt so much farther than that. *Something* bizarre had happened in there, that much was clear. The three of them were obviously reluctant to go inside.

They were worried about Yi Ling, but maybe the other side of this door was a whole other world—and taking a single step into that world might mean forfeiting their lives. It didn't seem like the sort of place they should enter without caution.

But then, right in front of the trio, the door began to quietly open. And on the other side was a beastfolk girl with floppy dog ears—Yi Ling.

"Oh! Croesus! You really should make sure to keep your room clean yourself, you know~?"

"Yi Ling... If you don't mind me asking, what was happening in my room just earlier?"

"Hmm? I was cleaning it, if that's what you mean. It was *super* messy in there! Getting it all clean was such a pain!"

"Um, no, that's not what I meant. Who exactly are the 'Skeleton Four'?"

"Skeleton Four? Never heard of it. What is it? Some new kind of monster?"

The three guys stared at each other, bewildered.

It definitely didn't sound like Yi Ling was lying to them here. But from what they'd heard standing outside the door earlier, they were *sure* they'd heard her say 'Skeleton Four.'

"W-Wait. Is it something like she loses her memory when she leaves the room...?"

"No way... Do even the laws of nature work differently in there...?"

"You know, I feel like that place could get someone sued for copyri— I mean, like it could pose some different sort of danger."

As the three young men talked among themselves with serious expressions, Yi Ling just looked confused, tilting her head to the side.

"Yi Ling... I'm going to ask you again. Are you *sure* nothing happened while you were cleaning my room?"

"Hmm... Now that you mention it, I kinda feel like something super crazy happened, but...maybe it's just my imagination~?"

"So you really *don't* remember... What's *wrong* with your room, Croesus?"

"No idea. I'm certainly very interested in finding out what's happening in there, but there wouldn't be much point in figuring it out only to lose our memories of— Hmm. No. There was that thing with Carosty a while back, so perhaps that isn't always the case...?"

"Sounds like your room's a mystery all of its own."

"*Anyway*, I just went to all the hassle of cleaning it up, so don't make such a mess in there again, okay~? I had to go through a lot."

"It certainly sounds like it..."

The three young men decided to forget about the mystery for now and timidly made their way inside Croesus's room.

It was so neat and tidy that it was clear the room had just been cleaned. There wasn't even a speck of dust in sight.

While Croesus, Zweit, and Eromura examined the room with a sense of trepidation, Yi Ling left for the cafeteria: "I'm hungry now, so I'm going to get something to eat, okay?" Apparently she'd been doing all this cleaning without stopping to eat.

Zweit and Eromura—the anti-normie squad—sent envious glares in Croesus's direction. They really were petty.

"Doesn't *look* like there's anything too weird in here..."

"Yeah... Still, though, we can't let our guards down."

"Well, if nothing's happening, then I suppose that's the best we could've hoped for. Let's finally get to talking about that magic drug."

"You're... You're right. I guess that *is* why we came here in the first place..."

"We sure we're gonna be okay? I'm kinda worried..."

Croesus and Zweit proceeded to spend the next hour considering the report on the drug and—based on that—the ulterior motives behind its creation. The two of them tried to come up with every possible situation and write them all down.

It was all in the realm of conjecture, little more than something they were doing for peace of mind. But it was better than nothing.

If they could tell the academy what kinds of things that they expected to happen, the academy would likely take some sort of countermeasures.

At this point, however, the three of them had forgotten a certain something: the fact that Croesus's dorm room was apparently a

danger zone connected to a whole other world.

As it turned out, Eromura had been quite right to worry.

"Shit! What *is* this monster?! And what's with this massive world?"

"That's no living creature—it's a machine! Or...a biomachine?!"

"This...doesn't look good, does it? At this rate, my mana's going to... Not to mention, we could end up like them if— O-Oh, no!"

ZONDEEEEEERRR...

"*CROESUUUUUUUUS!!!*"

It seemed like they'd gotten themselves caught up in a strange world.

"*Ngh*— Croesus just got *eaten*!"

"What is that thing?! I feel like I've seen it somewhere bef— *WHARGH!*"

"Comrade?!"

GIIIIIIIIIIIRLSSS...

"You got turned into a monster and you're *still* going on about girls, Eromura?!"

OFCOOOUUURSE...

"You answered me?! W-Wait! Arg—"

The situation seemed to be going from bad to worse.

Other students were walking through the hall now, and they could hear noises coming from Croesus's room—noises of roaring explosions, and of enormous creatures engaged in combat. The students' faces paled, and they ran.

Sometimes, shouts could be heard from inside the room:

"Pierce through! Try to stop it... If you can!"

"This isn't all fun and games for me, you know!"

"Here's my finisher!"

It really was hard to tell just where they'd ended up.

"Jeez—*again*? Take a peek inside. I dare you."

"No way! Whatever's going on in there, I don't wanna get involved. If you're so interested, *you* take a look!"

"You couldn't make me. I could never bring myself to look into such a creepy room."

Nobody who went past could bring themselves to look inside;

they all just left in a hurry. There was almost a sort of unspoken understanding that Croesus's room was the sort of place one should never step into—and that understanding had spread throughout the entire academy.

The next day, Croesus, Zweit, and Eromura woke up, collapsed in a heap together in the middle of the room.

For whatever reason, the three of them felt strangely refreshed, like they'd been born anew. And it seemed like their levels had gone up a little bit too...

This room was clearly a danger zone—a dimensional portal to another world.

Ultimately, though, nobody was left any the wiser as to how a room like this had come to be.

Even the three young men involved had completely forgotten what had happened to them...

* * *

Back on Earth, in a cramped apartment room in a certain area of Japan...

Assorted game consoles stood in a row, and any light coming from outside was blocked by bookshelves and enormous piles of manga volumes.

There was a big mound of laundry too, not to mention empty snack bags and plastic bottles littering the floor. This was clearly the room of a shut-in.

Inside this mess of a room was a boy who looked about high school age, playing an online game on a handheld console.

The sound of clacking buttons filled the otherwise quiet room. And then:

"Oh. Is someone here?"

"Heeey~! Kemo! Long time no see!"

There was no sign that the door had been opened, but all of a sudden, a woman who looked to be in her twenties was in the boy's room.

"Ah, so it's *you*... What's up?"

“Don’t *what’s up* me! It’s about that one other world. The dimensional balance is collapsing, y’know? If we don’t do something about it soon, people here are going to get hurt as well.”

“The...dimensional balance? Did they summon more heroes or something?”

“Not quite. The summonings already made the distortions in dimensional space larger—but now, it’s the singularities. They’re appearing more and more frequently. And they’re connecting to a different world every time...”

“Do we know why? I mean, obviously that’d be bad enough by itself, but if there’s something more to it...”

“The singularities keep happening in the same place. But they connect to a different world at random every time. I think we have to hurry up and decide on an Observer. It may be okay for now, but there’s a high chance of a dimensional fusion in a hundred years or so.”

“You’re right. But we can’t interfere. Not right now. It’d be a different story if *she’s* revived, though...”

“You sent her back, right? Has she still not been revived yet? It’d be a pain if she starts annihilating everything, mind you...”

“Well, I’ve left it to *him*. And I think he’ll revive her soon enough! Remember, this is exactly why we sent players with personality issues.”

This was hardly how you’d expect a teenage boy to speak. Both his tone and what he was talking about seemed completely at odds with his looks.

An outsider would probably just assume he was a schoolkid with a bad case of chuunibyou.

Yet both wore serious expressions.

“So at the end of the day, we’re stuck waiting for her to be revived... I guess there’s only so much we can do. Still, couldn’t they give us an exemption or something...?”

“It’s that test world we’re talking about. That’s where things have happened. The problem is that the ripples from there have made their way here. The covenant’s been broken now, though, mind you.”

“Of course it has. If it had been upheld after everything that’s

happened, we would've been seriously mad."

"Well, I *did* warn them, for what it's worth. Told them not to underestimate humans too much."

"Somehow I doubt those idiots would ever listen to a warning from anyone... And they think they're equal to us."

"You're right. But even then, I bet they'll figure out things can't stay like this forever. If *she* is revived, that is."

"But still...did you really have to send *him*? You're friends, aren't you?"

"Aha ha ha ha! Well, if he's *really* mad at me, I'll let him punch me to make up for it. And if there's anything he wants, I'll grant it for him."

The woman sighed. "He's not much better himself... Leaving behind a mess like this."

"Oh, it's fine, isn't it? Lets us kill some time, at least! Anyway, if you could go and deal with that Observer stuff for a bit~..."

"Ugh, I guess I have to... Still—you sure you can't do something about the singularities?"

"Not at the moment. Remember—we can't interfere with each other, right? Let's just bide our time."

They'd been talking about some pretty heavy topics, but at some point the conversation had taken on a more lighthearted tone again. The earlier tension had vanished.

"So? Is that all you came for?"

"I'm here for some other stuff too, but...it's personal. I'm going to spend a few days here having some fun."

"Host clubs again?"

"Oh, leave me alone! Today's the day I make Atsushi fall for me, I swear it!"

"You never learn, do you...? Well, as long as you don't go too overboard, I guess."

But before the young man could finish his sentence, the woman disappeared in an instant.

It was as if she'd never been there in the first place.

"Now—it's all on you. Give it your best shot, Zelos..." he muttered into the empty space above before returning to his game.

The sound of clacking buttons filled the apartment room once more.

Chapter 4: The Heroes Receive an Imperial Edict

Maha Luthert: the holiest city in the Holy Land of Metis.

In the ancient times, the Church of Creation flourished here, its many believers building the city over the years.

Most settlements with that sort of ancient history had been annihilated in the Dark God War. Maha Luthert, however, hadn't taken too much damage; it was one of the few remaining settlements from the era.

Every building in the city was white, and its beautiful streetscapes radiated an aura of sanctity and purity.

But that was all a veneer. In reality, Maha Luthert was home to rampant social inequality, and priests were of far higher status than the average citizen.

Ever since the Faith of the Four Gods had been established, there had been a growing number of priests who took advantage of their authority. And nowadays, they comprised a government that squeezed its people for taxes in the name of compulsory tithes.

Of course, there were plenty of *good* priests too. But a certain subset of priests seemed to believe it was only natural that they would lead affluent lives—a belief that set them down paths the polar opposite of what they preached. It could be said that out of the seven deadly sins, politicians in Maha Luthert were masters of six: greed, sloth, lust, gluttony, envy, and pride.

The city's residents then finished the septet by keenly feeling the final sin: wrath. They were furious about the heavy taxes imposed on them, as well as the protection their country gave to faeries.

More than half their incomes were taken from them as tax, and the faeries' "pranks" frequently put a stop to their work and left casualty after casualty. Yet despite that, the people were forbidden

from even laying a hand on the faeries. They had to simply let them be. Meanwhile, the Order of Paladins and the heroes—those who were meant to protect the people—instead spent all their time invading foreign countries, leaving the burden to fall on the citizens.

As this all went on, the corrupt priests with control over politics indulged in every possible luxury. Even the *good* priests just pretended not to notice.

What was more, government in the Holy Land of Metis was determined by revelation. Not only was the country putting the cart before the horse, the cart and the horse were stuck in a bog.

In fact, it was so bad that even the summoned heroes were fed up. "Fix your damn government already," they'd often say. "Stop relying on the gods for everything!" Things here weren't going well, and it was clear even to outsiders.

At the center of the country was a temple devoted to the Four Gods. It was both the center of government as well as the site of rites worshipping the gods.

Standing inside that temple, in a hallway lined with marble pillars, were about a dozen armed warriors.

All of them were boys and girls in their mid-teens, and each was clad in a uniform of white armor.

Yes: These were *heroes*.

"Yo, Himejima. Haven't seen you for a while."

Himejima stayed silent.

"Still ignoring me, huh? C'mon, dude's been dead for ages at this point. Forget about him already—I'll let ya be *my* girl now."

But there was still no reply.

"He was a shithead, but hey, at least he was finally useful. It's thanks to him we're alive. He might have been a dead weight until then, but he really went out with a bang at the end there—and that's one less loser we've gotta deal with now. Win-win," the boy, gruff and pierced, said as he leaned in, flashing a vulgar smile.

"Shut up. Don't talk to me like we're friends, you piece of *trash*!" she spat, her words filled with utter hatred.

Her eyes were empty but for two emotions: loathing and contempt. And both of the two were directed toward the boy.

"Jeez... You never learn, do you, Iwata? Himejima hates your guts, and you're *still* trying to get in her pants. Besides, do you really think *anyone'd* go for a guy who's violent against girls?"

"The hell you say?! Don't *you* give me that shit, Sasaki! You've got a girl or two yourself, don'tcha?!"

"You make it sound so bad. I'm a *gentleman*. Both in my words and in my actions."

"*Pah!* Women are made to be won over by *force*. What they want doesn't matter!"

"See? This is why you get rejected. Himejima's a straitlaced person—and because of what happened, the guy she liked is gone, and her love's turned into hate. Tell me: Are you even aware of what you did to him? You do realize it was your reckless assault that got him killed, don't you?"

"You sayin' it's *my* fault?! That piece of trash was *always* gonna kick the bucket!"

"It *is* your fault, yes. Your terrible decision got half of us killed. Isn't it only natural that Himejima would hold a grudge against you, when you're the one that made that happen? Remember—you'll have to watch your back now with her around, and it's because of what you did."

These heroes had been summoned three years ago.

At the time, they'd just been regular middle schoolers. But one day, their entire class had been summoned here, and they'd been forced to train for battle, whether they'd wanted to or not. They'd then been forced to take part in a war against "demons," all to protect the people of Metis against "heretics" who held ill will toward them—with terrible results.

What Metis called "demons" were actually the inhabitants of a small nation with different religious beliefs; when you took a proper look at all this, it was just an ethnic conflict. Still, the warriors of that small nation were so powerful that it wasn't even possible to see their levels with Appraisal, and they'd driven the heroes into a corner with their might.

Metis had intended to win through numbers, and while the conflict had gone well for a while, its enemy had eventually used

monsters to devastate the country's Order of Knights. Those monsters had been so strong that they'd overwhelmed even the heroes, and ultimately, half of the summoned heroes had been killed.

It was this boy here—Sadamitsu Iwata—who'd been put in charge of that attack. And his idea of a strategy had been to simply charge the enemy front without a single thought, sacrifice his allies' lives, and ultimately—when it was clear he'd failed—use his fellow heroes as shields to flee.

At the time, few of the heroes had reached Level 500, yet they hadn't even considered the fact that they were up against warriors and monsters stronger than themselves. Put simply, they'd been fighting as if this were all just part of a game.

Reaching a gruesome battlefield, however, had lowered their morale—and on top of that, they'd been routed by the overwhelming strength of their foes. Their side had had the advantage in numbers, but it hadn't stopped them from dropping like flies to the enemy's tactics.

And in the process, the girl here—Yoshino Himejima—had lost both a close friend and a childhood friend who was her first love. To be precise, they were only *missing in action*...but judging by the state of the battlefield, there was virtually no hope they were still alive. Of course she'd loathe the man who made that happen. Of course she'd feel contempt toward him. Not to mention her urge to *kill* him...

"Himejima's really changed, hasn't she...? She used to be all quiet and polite, but now she's like some raging demon..."

"Yeah. It's all *his* fault, though. If he hadn't been so reckless back then, we would've all been able to get away. Don't you think?"

"Yeah. However much we outnumbered them, they were still stronger than us..."

"We're all just warriors too—we barely had any magic in the back lines to support us. But the demons were firing off spell after spell at us. They only *looked* like warriors, but somehow... Yeah. No way we can beat that."

"Having healing magic's a big advantage, but with all those

injured fighters coming in one after another, our healers couldn't keep up. I feel like the demons were specifically *trying* not to kill us."

"Then, to top it all off, there was that swarm of monsters. I didn't even know there *were* monsters as terrifying as those..."

"To sum it up," a chorus of voices said, "it's all *your* fault, Iwata!"

As soon as the heroes had realized the situation was bad, their front had broken completely, and they'd been engulfed by the monster swarm.

Amid the chaos, Iwata had been the very first to flee, leaving the defense entirely to his classmates. Heroes in other units had heard the story from their remaining comrades; that was how they'd learned about the stupid, reckless assault.

"This is *war*, you idiots! Of course the weak guys are gonna die! How much longer are you all gonna keep bitching about—"

"We don't want to hear that from the one who put them in the situation where they died. I hear Kazama was fighting right to the end so that everyone else could escape—did you know that? Even though he was our only mage. *You*, on the other hand..."

"A mage who couldn't even defend himself was out there putting his life on the line. And what were *you* doing? Didn't you just run away as soon as you could? From memory, Himejima was there with you too, right? How can you even talk to her now like nothing happened?"

The other heroes were all against Iwata.

Iwata had a tendency to be selfish and egotistical, and as a result, he'd ended up alienating the other heroes.

Even with that aside, there was no way anyone could trust a commander who made sure he was the first to flee the moment he realized his strategy had failed. Who'd ever want to form a party with a man who had no qualms using his own allies as shields?

The incompetent young man had lost that role by this point, of course. Now, it was Yoshino Himejima who took command at the front line.

The heroes walked as they bickered some more, eventually arriving at an enormous door with engravings that depicted a religious tale.

The door opened, and the heroes proceeded—silently, now—into the room of the Cloistered Emperor, deep inside the temple.

In front of an altar stood four women, and an older man wearing vestments.

Nearby, archbishops dressed in similar vestments stood in line, all of them regarding the heroes with grim expressions.

The heroes could tell they weren't here for some casual chitchat.

The man by the altar—Mikhailov Welsapio Macriel, the seventh Cloistered Emperor—began to speak in a quiet voice.

"Thank you, heroes, for coming today. We have called you here to inform you of an important matter. A few days ago, the gods gave a revelation...of a divine command for the heroes."

"A...revelation?"

"Indeed. It would appear the Dark God has revived. And the gods have decreed that you are to find and subjugate it."

A sense of unrest ran through the heroes.

The Dark God had been subjugated long ago, and so far, the heroes had been ordered to focus on fighting against the demons.

But if the Dark God had revived, the heroes would now need to devote everything they had to defeating it.

Defeating the Dark God seemed plainly impossible for them, however. It wouldn't be possible as they were now, at least.

After all, they were already struggling to defeat even a single demon soldier—soldiers who were said to be merely the Dark God's "kin." It just didn't seem like there was any way they could win.

"I understand your apprehension. But the Dark God is said to have disappeared somewhere after scouring a certain country. And we can assume from this that its revival may not yet be complete."

"You are to search for the incomplete Dark God and destroy it. This is the will of the Four Gods."

"This is a divine command! As of this moment, the heroes are temporarily released from their duty of fighting the demons. You are to begin your search for the Dark God immediately."

The archbishops near the Cloistered Emperor all followed him, making a horribly one-sided demand of the heroes.

But the heroes had no choice. After all, this was why they had

been called here in the first place.

Unable to say anything in reply, the heroes simply listened to what the Cloistered Emperor and the archbishops had to say, receiving their orders to deal with the Dark God. In their minds, all they could think was: *Well... Guess we're screwed. No way we'll be able to do this.*

Just thinking about it logically, they had absolutely nothing that would allow them to win against the sort of monstrosity capable of leveling the capital of an entire large nation with a single attack. Nevertheless, they were being asked to seek it out and defeat it. It was insanely unreasonable.

"Now, we will perform a ceremony to pray for your success in this task. Step forward, heroes."

After that, the heroes were forced to wait through an interminable holy ceremony, praying for the blessing of gods who, for all they knew, might not have even been listening. It wasn't until more than three hours later that they were finally released from the stifling ceremonial atmosphere.

They'd gotten used to this sort of thing, but they were still modern Japanese teenagers. None of them were good at dealing with any of that.

Starting that day, all of the heroes—excepting those who had other special duties—began preparing to depart for their journey. Three days later, they set out to split up across the land in search of the Dark God.

* * *

"What are you going to do, Himejima? We'll be traveling around the smaller countries collecting information."

"I'll head to the front line. I don't give a damn about the Dark God."

"Himejima..."

"This world can go to hell for all I care. The assholes summoned us without even asking us; they forced us to fight people to the death..."

“But they said we can’t go home unless we defeat the Dark God, right? They said that was part of the summoning covenant...”

“Do you seriously believe something like that even exists? Don’t you think they just summoned us as convenient little pawns to do whatever they want?”

Having lost the people precious to her, Himejima had doubts about everything now—the words of the saints and the priests, the revelations from the gods themselves, all just sounded like suspicious rubbish at this point.

There were those here who were fighting out of a desire to get back to Japan, but when there was no guarantee whatsoever that they’d actually be able to, it started to all just feel like a convenient lie they’d been told. That possibility had occurred to all of them, mind you; it was just that most of them hesitated to say it out loud.

Burned into Himejima’s mind was the scene she’d witnessed as she’d run away, tears in her eyes, looking back again and again: her childhood friend—a mage, left behind as a decoy—fighting relentlessly to save her and the others, even though *they* were the warriors. It was the last time she’d ever seen him.

“Uh, Himejima... You probably shouldn’t say that in front of the others. Some of them seriously believe in it.”

“Kazama—I mean, *Takumi* said it when we were first summoned here. He said this whole country felt suspicious...”

“Takumi did? Why, though? These guys *did* summon us to defeat the Dark God, right?”

“Then why were we summoned before the Dark God had even resurrected?”

“Th-That’d be because... Uh... Because heroes *also* have a duty to defeat heretics, and—”

“And who benefits from that? We’re being *told* they’re heretics, but at the end of the day, isn’t this just another religious conflict like those back on Earth? Why should we have to be part of that? Besides, that’s exactly the kind of thing that leads to racial persecution. The idea that just because others have different religious beliefs, they aren’t even people. It’s the same kind of discrimination as back on Earth. Surely we’ve all realized that, right?”

"But that'd mean we were summoned to—"

"To be sacrificed as pawns in a plan to give more authority to the Faith of the Four Gods. If the Four Gods want the Dark God gone so badly, they should fight it themselves. But they aren't—and that's probably because they can't win. So what do you think the Dark God even is, then?"

This line of questioning was equivalent to repudiating the Faith of the Four Gods.

The Faith taught that the world had been created by four goddesses. But if that was really the case, then how were those goddesses not powerful enough to defeat the Dark God?

"Isn't it one of those things where, like, only the heroes can beat the big bad? I know they were saying something about the balance of the world collapsing."

"That's probably just an excuse they came up with. Just them rewriting their doctrine once the Dark God was sealed away, never believing it'd actually revive... Just think about it, though. If the Four Gods are powerful enough to create an entire world, then there's no way they'd be able to make something even *they* wouldn't be able to handle. And I know there was that thing about the Dark God being a god from another world. But it's all just too convenient, isn't it? And now, the Four Gods are panicking. They're panicking because an enemy they know they can't beat has woken up..."

"Kazama was looking into that too, right? I always thought he was just some creepy otaku, but he *was* always spending all his time reading and rereading the religious texts here to try to figure out what's going on..."

"Yeah—and the bishops hated him for it. He was the most pragmatic one out of all of us, though."

"We were all treating this like it was a game back then... We never thought any of us would actually die. Or rather, we figured that if any of us *did* die, we'd just respawn... We were idiots, huh? Of course there was no way that'd happen..."

It was only when they'd come face-to-face with cruel reality that they'd realized just how wrong they were.

Losing their allies had left the remaining heroes shivering with the

fear of death—and the knowledge that those who'd already died wouldn't be coming back.

Yoshino had been forced to leave behind her childhood friend—to whom she'd never gotten the chance to confess her feelings—as he'd protected them with his life. And now, she had no choice but to go on living without him.

This was reality. It was a cruel, ruthless world, and they'd been made violently aware of that.

Ultimately, half of the summoned heroes had been lost in that battle, and the plans for a large-scale invasion had ground to a standstill.

"Are you really going to go *there*, Himejima?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Ichijo... That's the only place I'll be able to find him."

"Even if you do manage to get revenge...I don't think that's what Kazama would've wanted."

"I know. But it's the only thing I can think of. I wonder if Takumi will be angry at me if I die...?"

"He would. At least, *I'd* be mad about it—okay? You'd be making his sacrifice in vain..."

"I... I know. Thanks, Ichijo..."

Yoshino said goodbye to one of her remaining friends—there were fewer now than when she'd first arrived here—and the next morning, she set out for the front line.

Burned indelibly into her mind was the image of a female warrior with black wings.

A warrior who'd cut down those precious to her.

She could still remember the smell of blood, the hellish sight.

She remembered pain, and fresh blood gushing out from a wound. Remembered Takumi Kazama, who right to the end had kept shouting one word: *Run*. She couldn't stop torturing herself for how powerless she'd been.

All the while, the boy who was her childhood friend had bought her time using magic strong enough to keep their enemies at bay—and just like that, he'd disappeared into the flames.

The girl called Yoshino Himejima was left with nothing but

loathing, as fierce as a raging inferno, frustration, and finally, regret for her own cowardice, having never told the boy she loved how she felt.

Chapter 5: The Old Guy Opens His Big Mouth

A dozen or so men sat on chairs around a table, all waiting for a certain someone to arrive.

The men gathered here either looked like they were nobles or were wearing some sort of native dress.

They were all small nations' ambassadors to the Magic Kingdom of Solistia. On being summoned here without explanation, they'd come together with a sense of confusion, wondering what this meeting could possibly be about.

At present, these small nations were troubled by a certain major power invading other countries and making "requests" that were near impossible to refuse. Even some of the nations that *hadn't* been invaded had been pushed to the economic brink by its unreasonable demands. It had become a real quandary.

So far, these smaller nations had respected each other's interests and held discussions with each other. They'd sometimes helped each other, sometimes formed little trade agreements, and on the whole devoted themselves to the upkeep of their countries.

War would only get in the way of their best interests. It wouldn't be to the benefit of any of them. But there was nothing these small countries could do about the major power that continued to harass them—and the demihuman countries in particular tended to be targets of that harassment.

So far, two countries had fallen to ruin and their people been sold into slavery.

The people enslaved from such conflict had been taken in by the other small countries, which ensured the victims were given reasonable lifestyles. All of these countries were fed up with the behavior of their oppressor.

The Kingdom of Isalas was in a particularly pitiful state, forced to sell its mineral resources—its only form of income—at bargain-bin prices.

Historical factors had left the people of Isalas with no choice but to live among the mountains. With no farmland suited to anything but grazing, they were forced to eke out a meager existence in poverty, and they hadn't been able to develop domestic industry. They lacked the kind of land required to cultivate fields, and it was hard to grow medicinal herbs and the like there either—an issue made worse by the fact that the nation was so overcrowded that any illness that started to spread would tear through the country like wildfire.

In fact, Isalas was in such abject poverty that it was virtually a miracle it was being held together at all. And the ongoing war in a neighboring country didn't help. If Isalas tried to ship goods, its neighbor's enemy would seize those goods and send them back to its own home soil.

That neighbor, by the way, was the Artom Empire—and the Artom Empire's opponent in its ongoing conflict was the Holy Land of Metis. Further complicating the matter was the fact that Isalas was receiving food relief from Artom.

In other words, Isalas was indebted to Artom; it certainly didn't want to make an enemy of its neighbor. And yet...

One man sighed.

"What's the matter, Sir Weiss?"

"Ah, Sir Luo Ilgarn... Recently, Metis has grown more and more insistent that we form an alliance with them. Personally, I'm loath to make an enemy out of such a good neighbor as your country. And yet..."

"They're pressuring you both militarily and economically, I take it...? What an infuriating lot. Invaders claiming to act in the name of the gods..."

"Yes. But considering our food situation... Well. And I'd imagine their aim is to surround you."

"I'd imagine so. They probably intend to extort you for 'donations' without providing any support from their side. They'd just leave you

in limbo, neither helping you nor finishing you off."

"As a puppet state, yes... But at the same time, we can't just refuse them."

Weiss let out another deep sigh.

Luo, a black-winged demihuman, felt sorry for the man.

The two of them had been friends for many years. Neither wanted their citizens to be isolated to their own lands and forced to kill the people of the other. But depending on what each country decided, it was entirely possible that would end up happening. Both men had heavy hearts.

"I'm aware—they have their holy magic, after all. And when we *don't* have any, that puts us in a difficult spot."

"Don't tell me—they made an offer that included sending you priests?"

"Yes... Though I imagine it's more a plan to surveil us under the guise of support. Technically we can make magic potions and drugs, but we can't get the ingredients for those without heading into the Far-Flung Green Depths. We need something that lets us really push back against their demands."

The Kingdom of Isalas lacked manpower.

For now, they were receiving food support from the Artom Empire. But the Holy Land of Metis was located right on the other side of the forts that Isalas had built among the mountains, so if Isalas was invaded, it'd fall immediately.

And that was *not* something the Artom Empire wanted to see happen.

"That aside... I wonder why Solistia has brought us all together today? All of us here are from countries surrounding Metis..."

"Duke Delthasis scares me. I can never tell what he's going to do next."

These ambassadors saw the duke as a dangerous individual.

He was such a capable man that they wondered whether he might even be able to destroy a major power, if one got on his bad side. Over the years, he'd churned out impressive sums of money by facilitating trade between countries beset by problems, and he'd brought his trade partners big profits to boot.

Conversely, if you made an enemy of him, you'd be crushed in an instant. He was a cunning negotiator, willing to deal major economic blows without hesitation.

"At one point, our military intelligence was investigating Solistia as a potential target for invasion...only to find that the route to invade Santor had already been blocked off. In fact, it seemed like our military was seriously *intending* to stage such an invasion—and they developed a grudge when the wind was taken out of their sails. The fools in charge of our military, I swear..."

"No, no, Sir Weiss. I understand why your country might have felt like it had no other option, given the position you're in."

"Still, it's hard to deny that that's put us at a disadvantage in negotiations. If we don't make amends, it could spell the end of trade with our country."

"Considering who we're talking about, I'd be surprised if he didn't already have an idea of everything that's happened. But I'm never sure exactly *how* much he knows or how far he might go. That's what scares me about the man..."

"I'm not bothered by our military's failure. I'm bothered by the fact that I have more work to do now. Just *thinking* about what's to come... Urgh. My head hurts."

The army of Isalas had hypothesized Solistia was a potential enemy and sent spies there to scope it out. And it seemed like they would've been willing to proceed with war if the situation had called for it.

Later, when Weiss had received a report that people from Isalas—his own country—had tested out a dangerous magic drug within Solistia, he'd slammed his face against his desk over and over again. If the truth behind what had happened got out, then there was no telling just how bad the retaliation could be.

He'd responded by promptly sending the Isalas army minister a letter expressing his frustration, albeit without putting anything specific in writing—*Did you* really *have to do that?! Could you at least* think *of what you're doing to me?!*

Later, he'd gotten a letter back along the lines of, *Just do what you can to cover it up for me, 'kay? Our country's screwed if it gets*

out, so, uh, butter 'em up if you have to; just make sure you stay in their good books. Could you do that for me? Pwetty please? ♡

It had left Weiss in a real pain of a position. He wasn't sure what'd happen to him first—would the stress leave him bald, make his stomach rupture, or just turn him crazy?

"I can't take it. I want to just seek asylum here in Solistia and be done with it all..."

"You've got it tough, don't you...?"

The ambassadors from the various countries continued chatting, exchanging their opinions, until the one responsible for gathering them all here—Duke Delthasis—finally appeared, accompanied by other men dressed in black.

He looked like he was tired for some reason, but his eyes still had a sharp enough glint to them to leave everyone at a loss for words.

The man gave off such a dangerous aura that it was hard to believe he was royalty. If someone encountering him for the first time had to guess what he did for a living, they'd undoubtedly say either "mafia boss" or "elite soldier."

His real skill, though, was his infallible ability to examine the demands other parties made of him, find some sort of common ground, and turn it around with a proposal that would let both sides benefit. He'd never let someone else be the only one to profit.

If another country got on his bad side, he wouldn't hesitate to cut diplomatic ties—and depending on the specifics, he'd have no qualms even forming an alliance with an enemy of theirs instead. And he'd do it all while dealing a major blow to whoever had slighted him. He was nasty like that.

There were plenty of people out in the world Weiss wouldn't want to make an enemy of, but Duke Delthasis was the only man he'd ever met he felt it was *absolutely essential* not to make an enemy of.

With the room's eyes all on him, the duke quietly took a seat and raked the ambassadors with a domineering look.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting. There was a small incident that took longer than expected to deal with."

"No, that's... That's perfectly all right. If you could tell us, however... Why have you called the ambassadors of all these

countries here today? I imagine it's *something* quite important, at least..."

"Yes. First, I'd like you all to look at this."

At Delthasis's cue, the men dressed in black affixed a map to a blackboard, and a group of maids handed out papers to each ambassador.

The map detailed the Holy Land of Metis's current invasion routes, related trade routes, and the flow of goods. The papers for the ambassadors listed an assortment of unreasonable trade conditions their countries faced, laid out in minute detail.

"The Holy Land of Metis has bishops stationed in major cities throughout our nations, including my own. In addition, I expect you all know that part of the taxes levied on healing revenue flows back to Metis. And you would understand *why* this is the case, yes?"

"It's because of the holy magic that the priests use, correct? We need healing magic to mend injuries, but priests are the only ones capable of using it. With how important it is, we have no choice but to accept them into our countries."

"We take in a lot of priests who heal our people—and the money they earn from that ends up flowing back to the Holy Land as 'donations.' It also fortifies the validity of the Faith of the Four Gods, which the Holy Land uses to push for favorable trade conditions."

"The problem is, if we refuse their demands, they threaten to stop sending priests, and to recall the ones who are already here."

"Without priests, we wouldn't be able to heal all our injured people. And when they leave, the prices of potions and drugs tend to go up too. The Holy Land's demands are ridiculous, but we're forced to accept them."

Priests were essential for healing disease and injury alike. Magic potions and other forms of medicine existed, but they were expensive enough that the common people couldn't easily get hold of them; it was cheaper to pay a priest for healing. So, however unfair the Holy Land's conditions were, every country wanted to bring in as many priests as it could.

To make that happen, they offered the Holy Land of Metis the most favorable trade conditions possible; they couldn't afford to get

in the country's bad graces. Users of healing magic were just that important to a country.

"I see. Well, then... What would happen if the core assumption underlying our predicament went away?"

The other men took a moment to respond, shocked. "Wh-What...?"

"You all seem confused. Allow me to rephrase... If *mages* could use healing magic, what do you think would happen to the favorable conditions we're all providing to Metis at the moment?"

"D-Don't tell me... No. No, it's impossible..."

"Surely not! Holy magic is unique to priests. Are you really trying to imply that mages could use it?"

"You're slightly off the mark: There's no such thing as holy magic in the first place. But yes, that means it's possible for mages to use healing magic too—albeit to slightly lesser effect than priests."

"I-I see... So it's because of job skills. B-But... If we make something like that public, there's no telling what Metis may say in response."

"The Kingdom of Isalas and the Artom Empire are in a particularly precarious position. Their only trade route runs along the Aurus River, and one of them's in the middle of a war, is it not?"

Trade was essential to the national interest of small countries—but as things stood, the agreements they'd been forced into meant there wasn't enough money flowing into their coffers.

Further, every priest had their own personality, and quite a few of them demanded excessive payments for healing, earning the ire of the common people. The absence of any standard on what could be charged for healing was another issue.

But despite all that, it was dangerous to make an enemy of a major power.

"In short, we just need people who *aren't* priests to use healing magic. The day before yesterday, we had a doctor with the Alchemist skill learn healing magic, and their main job skill changed to Medical Mage. In other words, we have proof that it's not just priests who can use healing magic effectively. We don't need to keep letting Metis throw its weight around anymore."

"Y-You're right... But doesn't the Holy Land have a monopoly on holy—I mean, *healing* magic? Even if we know now that other people can use it too, that only means so much if we don't have the spell scrolls to—"

"We intend to provide those scrolls to each of your countries. Then all that remains is for you to reproduce them and spread out your official announcements of our little 'discovery' over time. By which I mean you are to announce that our countries worked together on developing this healing magic. Ideally, each nation will prepare several Medical Mages in advance to make that narrative seem more credible."

"Wha—?!"

A chill ran down the spines of the ambassadors as they realized how serious Duke Delthasis was about ending the tyranny of the priests.

If he provided healing magic for free and spread it throughout these small nations, the Holy Land of Metis would completely lose its edge. That was his plan. And a formidable plan it was.

The spell scrolls could be copied too, bringing enormous benefit to the small countries; they would no longer need to bend to the wills of the bishops and priests. That would, in turn, eliminate the need for these countries to set aside money for such expenses in their national budgets, while also restoring equality to the international trade conditions their merchants faced.

Taking things a step further, going through with this plan would also mean that these small nations had formed an alliance. And if all of them put their military might together, it likely wouldn't be all that hard for them to outstrip the Holy Land of Metis on that front.

However, that was all only if things went to plan. In reality, it didn't seem things would be that easy. And only two of the ambassadors here noticed that: those from the Kingdom of Isalas and the Artom Empire.

"Wait a minute, please. Certainly, Your Grace, this plan of yours would be magnificent if we could make it happen. But Artom is in the middle of a war right now, and the economy in neighboring Isalas is floundering. Even if we *do* all form an alliance, the two of us

are liable to fall if the fighting continues at this rate. And if that happens, forget about surrounding the Holy Land; our plan would be over then and there!"

"You're talking about the trade route along the Aurus River being blocked, yes? Don't worry. Tell me: Are you men aware of the underground city in our country? The one built by ancient dwarves?"

"Those old underground ruins? I've heard it's one of the few surviving magic cities that still functions, but...what about it?"

"Yes, that's the one. And my idea is this: All we need to do is create a *separate* trade route through that underground city rather than the Aurus River. Fortunately, that city's major highway connects both of your nations while also continuing through to ours. We've been sending groups of explorers there since the era of the former duke, Creston, in hopes of making good use of it. Repair work is being carried out down there as we speak."

"T-Truly?!"

"There are *dwarves* living down there, remember. And thanks to some construction magic developed not long ago, our repair work is moving along at quite the pace now. Faster than you'd expect, I daresay."

In other words, it would soon be possible to conduct trade via land as well, preventing the Holy Land of Metis from blockading trade. And if work on this had been proceeding since the time of the former duke, it likely wouldn't be all that much longer until it was ready for use.

"But wait! Why have you been repairing tunnels that run underneath our countries? D-Don't tell us you were considering an *invasion* of—"

"You're overthinking it. Solistia lacks mineral resources, and we only have so many mines to obtain them from. Meanwhile, the Kingdom of Isalas has abundant mines—but the Holy Land makes it difficult to trade Isalas for their minerals. I'm sure you understand. They're trying to annex Isalas...and I intend to destroy that plan of theirs from the roots. All while supporting the multinational alliance between us."

"I see... So you simply refuse to overlook the tyranny of the Holy

Land any longer, is that it? And you feel you need to pursue a radical plan to deal a blow to them...”

“Yes. Metis holds a grudge against Solistia. If we’re given the opportunity to put them back in their place, we have to take it.”

The ambassadors were realizing that the Magic Kingdom of Solistia must have been planning to surround the Holy Land of Metis for a long time now.

However, Solistia had never had the sort of trump card that would let it put that plan into action—on top of which it had needed to worry about keeping priests for their healing magic.

Now, though, those problems were solved. Now, there were no more barriers in the way.

“Metis still has the edge militarily. And won’t this arouse suspicion? After all, mages using healing magic would be an enormous deal to the priests. It’d shake the very foundations of their beliefs.”

“It would call their beliefs into question, yes. Should holy magic lose its dominance, the shock waves would spread all at once... This is a fearsome plan you’ve concocted.”

“What’s important is this: Metis has gone beyond the pale in recent times. If we don’t deal a blow to them soon enough, they’ll keep squeezing us for everything we’ve got.”

“Indeed... Their requests for ‘donations’ have only continued to rise as of late. And should they rise any further, our economy will be at risk.”

“We’ll follow your plan. Still... They have the heroes on their side, do they not?”

“Hmm... A single one of our Artom Empire warriors should be enough to defend against a single hero. And with half of their heroes dead now, they can’t be too reckless in sending more to the battlefield.”

It’d be dangerous to underestimate the heroes too much, but right now—while the enemy was weakened—these nations might be able to manage something. If all of them came together, they would be able to fight their powerful foe on equal ground. And the Holy Land’s Cloistered Emperor and bishops hadn’t even considered such

a possibility.

This was an important day: It marked the moment these small nations agreed to team up and defy the self-righteous, overbearing stance of a religious superpower.

Efforts to prepare and fine-tune their cunning scheme progressed smoothly—and in a few months time, the results would start to show.

* * *

CLANG! CLANG! KSSHK...

The sound of metal being struck—and of some sort of small object being fastened to it—echoed through the air.

Zelos, dressed in his usual gray robes, fiddled with a machine in the garden outside his house as the sun shone down from above.

He was making a washing machine, but it was only a prototype—for now, he was still just testing whether it'd even work.

He'd start it up, tinker, and repeat that cycle over and over, humming as he worked. For the time being, he was creating failure after failure. One time, the barrel rotated too fast and water spurted out everywhere, and another, the machine formed a waterspout akin to an attack spell known as Aqua Tornado.

The design itself was fine, but the machine was taking in too much mana, making it far more powerful than he'd intended. He'd already taken it apart three times by now, and he was in the middle of putting it together for the fourth time.

"I wonder what the issue is... Is it the size of the magic stone, after all? Should I swap it out for a magic *gem* here? But, no...I really should be able to keep it in check with the right formula. I'm stumped."

"Hey, Pops! You fail again?"

"Whoa—there's a *huge* hole in that thing, Pops..."

"It exploded earlier too, right?"

"Who cares about that? Gimme some meat! Nice, juicy *meat*..."

"I find it unlikely that persevering here will do you much good. More importantly, Sir Zelos: Would you do me the honor of facing

me in a battle to the death?”

The orphans were acting the same as always, though one of them seemed decidedly more dangerous than the rest.

Kaede was staring at Zelos with an awfully sharp look in her eyes. She was giving off such an aura of bloodlust that it wouldn’t be surprising for her to draw her sword at any moment.

It seemed like she wanted to seriously face off against a strong opponent.

“Ah... Kaede? Didn’t you already spar with Zankei just earlier? Are you sure you haven’t had enough for now?”

“A warrior must face off against a range of opponents to maintain a true understanding of their own strength. I wish to gain a better idea of how wide the world can be.”

“Doesn’t mean you have to fight someone *to the death*, though... Isn’t that going a little too far?”

“Swords are meant for killing people, are they not? The more weight I carry on my shoulders—the more lives I take—the stronger I will become.”

“Are you, uh... Just casually saying you’re going to kill me?”

She sighed philosophically. “The number of true swordsmen in the world never grows. For one strong fighter to emerge anew, another must lose their life...”

“Don’t stare wistfully into the distance and say things like that. What sort of warrior are you even meant to be, anyway? You’re way too bloodthirsty. It’s creeping me out.”

Kaede was devoted to a path of blood and carnage. Devoted enough to diligently keep honing her skills with the coccos.

It was difficult to believe that this was coming from a high elf.

“We all wish to experience real combat before long. Ange and the others are eager to go out hunting too.”

“You’d need someone to keep an eye on you all, though. How about you try asking Jeanne’s party?”

“We did, buuut...she said no. Told us it was too soon. But we’re not gonna be kids forever!”

“Yeah. I mean, *everyone’s* a beginner when they start out, right? And Laddie and Kai have been getting better too. We wanna try out

a real fight. Sooner rather than later."

"Hey, Pops. We're beggin' ya here. We'll have to start gettin' ready to live our own lives next year."

"I wanna eat meat... Some chicken'd be good today."

Zelos *had* actually been thinking it was about time to start teaching the orphans how to hunt.

Seeing as they wanted to head into dungeons and get rich quick, the orphans were, of course, aiming to be mercenaries. And that meant they'd need some money to prepare things like armor. Unfortunately, their current allowance wouldn't cover that.

At the same time, it was a bad idea to just send a bunch of novices into a forest. Without someone to watch over them, they could even die if things took a turn for the worse. And if anything like that happened, Luceris would be beside herself with grief.

"Mmm... It'd be fine if you had a strong enough guard with you, but..."

"Don't worry about that. We've got our friends."

"Friends? Who? Since when?"

As Zelos peered behind the orphans, he spotted five of his coccos, clearly ready and raring to go.

These were probably the "friends" the orphans were talking about.

"Ah, I see... Just about the best guards you could ask for. But if you're going to be hunting, you've got to do it somewhere nearby, okay? You should probably polish your skills in the forest near town. Maybe even get yourself some job skills."

"Anyway, Pops, there ya have it. So...give us some spell scrolls! ♪"

"I want some attack magic!"

"Support magic'd be good too. Stuff to make our bodies stronger, ideally."

"Wouldn't Tempered Breathing be enough for that?"

"We're gonna go hunt some *meat*. Nothing'd make me happier than being able to eat meat every single day..."

"I wonder whether *I* should endeavor to learn some magic as well? As an elf, I imagine I should have a high aptitude for it, but..."

The kids were as strong-willed as always.

Nobody had taught them any of this, but it seemed like they were proactively strategizing.

"I can't do any of this unless you get permission from Luceris first. It's not just something I can decide myself."

"I suppose you are right... It only makes sense to go through the proper channel and discuss this with Sister."

"Is she even gonna hear us out, though?"

"Yeah. She can be overprotective..."

"She worries too much, y'know~? Wish she'd trust us a little bit more."

"Meat. *Meatmeatmeatmeat*..."

"It's only natural Luceris would worry about you all. But if you're serious about making your dreams come true, then yes, you should probably have a proper talk with her about this. In the mercenary world, everyone's responsible for themselves. Nobody else is going to be responsible for you if you mess up."

For now, the orphans were just living their lives as they pleased, doing whatever they wanted.

But that was only allowed because they were under Luceris's protection. If they seriously wanted to do something with their lives, they'd need to talk it out with her. There was no getting around it.

"Aww... C'mon! *You* go convince her, Pops!"

"If she says no to us, we won't be able to do anything!"

"She'll *definitely* say she's coming with us..."

"Yeah. She's such a worrywart..."

"We are indebted to her. And as a warrior, it is only proper courtesy to be honest with someone who has done so much for us. We have no choice."

"You shouldn't rely on other people for everything, okay, kids? This is a big deal. Your futures are on the line here. I say you go and talk it out with her yourselves."

Zelos could understand the kids being so eager.

But it was about now that he had a certain question pop up into his mind.

"What are you going to do for gear, by the way? Swords, bows—that sort of thing. Armor too."

“Heh heh heh... Don’t underestimate us!”

“We scraped together the little bits of money we could get, saved it all up, and finally...”

“We bought some secondhand equipment! Except...”

“It didn’t fit. *Meat...*”

“I found no equipment that fit me. Is there truly nobody making armor that emphasizes ease of movement...?”

“So it was no good, huh? Guess you ran into a hurdle you weren’t expecting.”

These orphans had lacked proper nutrition until lately, creating some real problems for their growth. It made sense they wouldn’t be able to wear equipment from your average store.

For Kaede, meanwhile, the problem was a cultural one. The quality and form of gear here just wasn’t right for her; she had an inherent aversion to it. Her only option was getting something custom-made.

“You seem to all be getting taller lately too, so you’ll have to change your equipment as you grow. Still, you’ll need *some* sort of equipment to get started.”

Kids around this age could grow even faster than you expected. Some could grow enough in a single year that you’d think they’d become a whole different person.

That meant the orphans would have to consider their rate of growth when they were getting armor made, or they’d need to replace it in no time at all. And they’d *never* earn enough money to afford that, especially seeing as they were still children.

“Well, let’s see... How about I make you all some gear if you manage to convince Luceris? Just something simple, mind you.”

“You sure, Pops?”

“You’re not kidding, are you?!”

“Seriously?! *Sweet!* Let’s go find Sister!”

“My belly’s too big—is that gonna be okay?”

“Kai... Don’t you think you should lose a bit of weight? Being too heavy can slow you down in a fight, you know?”

Hunting skills were essential for mercenaries, and the Hunter job skill had a lot of different uses—scouting and ambushing, to name a

couple. You needed to experience real hunting to acquire it, though.

"All right, then! We're gonna go have a little *chat* with Sister!"

"Let's set things straight with her!"

"Show her what we're made of!"

"If I can hunt, I'll have all-you-can-eat meat... I'm gonna be king of the meat!"

"Let us convince her. Our futures are at stake."

"Um, guys... You do know you're just going to *persuade* her, right? In a *discussion*? You're just asking permission for something. Right?!"

The kids had made up their minds, and they were springing straight into action. There was no stopping them now.

A fire had been lit, and there was no putting it out. They were running off, full of passion, toward their dreams.

And behind their childish excitement, Zelos sensed a kind of steely resolve.

"Is... Is Luceris going to be okay? I just hope those kids don't do anything too crazy..."

Zelos had been the one to light the fuse here, but now he was a little worried.

As he watched the kids run off into the distance—kicking up a cloud of dust—he couldn't help but feel a cold sweat run down his neck.

* * *

"Hey, Misteeeeeer... My stuff ready yet?"

"Well, *someone* sounds tired. Tough job, was it?"

It was evening and Iris had just turned up at Zelos's place to see whether he'd finished strengthening her equipment. She looked both mentally and physically exhausted, having just returned from a job with Jeanne and Lena. It was hard to miss the bags under her eyes.

She was equipped with a sword and shield too, looking less like a mage and more like a novice swordswoman.

"Did you pull an all-nighter or something? You look like you're some artist who's just barely gotten their doujinshi finished in time

and gone out to get it printed three days before Comiket."

"I'm too tired to think of a witty reply right now..."

Jeanne and Lena were there too, and they figured they'd give Zelos some more context.

"We tried having her fight some goblins up close," Jeanne said, "but it seemed like she had something against killing stuff with a weapon. We kept trying for a while, but in the end, she just threw up..."

"She's too weak-willed!" Lena said, an exasperated look on her face. "Seriously, it's the same as killing things with magic!"

She had a point, but it'd obviously still be a big shock to Iris, who'd grown up in peaceful Japan.

"I can't forget how it felt stabbing something to death with a sword... Caving its head in with a mace..."

"Well, I get why you might feel a little sick after your first melee fight to the death, but...your face is *seriously* pale," Zelos said. "Was it really that bad?"

This had been Iris's first time ever killing another living creature with her own physical force.

If you wanted to be pedantic, she'd stepped on ants and things before, of course. But that was leagues different from killing another creature about the same size as you. If anything, there was something wrong with people who *could* happily do just that without issue.

As they thought about it, then, the others *did* feel bad for her, so they had her sit down in a chair.

"This was her first time killing something with her own hands, y'know?" Jeanne said. "I get it. I mean, I was in the same boat..."

"You cried back when we did our training, didn't you~?" Lena teased. "You used to be so cute..."

"So I'm not cute anymore, huh? Well, *sorry*."

"Oh, don't you worry about that—you're still *very* cute, Jeanne!" Zelos interjected. "In fact, I'm tempted to just push you down right now."

"H-How the hell can you say that crap with a straight face?! I-I know you're teasing me. Is it really that fun?!"

“See?” Lena said. “Your overreactions are exactly what make you so cute. Look on the bright side—someone loves you!”

“*L-Loves?!* Wh-Wh-What are you even...”

The way she overreacted and got flustered like this really *was* cute.

But even with all this ruckus going on, Iris was unresponsive. She was slumped over the table.

It seemed like the act of killing with physical force had upended her entire sense of morality.

“Anyway, you’ll just have to get used to it. Whether you kill them with magic or with weapons, it’s all the same at the end of the day. No point feeling guilty over which method you use.”

“You’re so cold, Mister. I can’t get the smell of blood off myself, y’know? A-And *dismembering* it was even worse...”

“You... You dismembered it? Seriously? You didn’t have to jump into the deep end like that. I think you should just get used to killing with weapons first...”

“I *did* try to stop her,” Jeanne said, “but she insisted. And then...well. She ended up like this.”

“Yeah, but, y’know... I know I’ve gotta get used to all this soon if I wanna survive here, so...”

“I tried asking Iris earlier myself, but was the faerie rose really that bad?” Lena asked. “It was just a faerie, right?”

Faeries could only live in certain places. They didn’t really appear in the middle of town around here.

And as a result, people here had come to see them as something like creatures out of folktales.

“I’ve got a picture here that shows what happens to their victims. Would you like to take a look? I have to say, though, I wouldn’t recommend it,” Zelos said.

“I mean, we’re mercenaries, so we should...” Lena replied, hesitating, “probably take a look, right?”

“Yeah.” Jeanne nodded. “Something about this has me worried, but I *am* curious. We might get a request to go out and subjugate ’em at some point, after all.”

“I’ll, uh... I’ll pass,” Iris said. “Just a guess, but I feel like I’ll puke

if I see that right now. I already don't wanna see any meat for a while."

"That bad, huh...?"

Zelos took out the picture.

But the moment Lena and Jeanne grabbed hold of it and took a look, they ran outside at full pelt.

"Sure packs a punch, eh~? They *really* shot out of here."

"I'm guessing those two won't be able to have meat for a while now either. I'm betting what you showed them was, like, a hundred times worse than what I saw today..."

"Want to see for yourself?"

"Uh... No."

Iris's retorts still lacked their usual edge.

"Well, at least that should motivate them to kill any faeries they see. I won't say you have to get *completely* used to this sort of thing, but at the end of the day, this world's all about survival of the fittest. Even just understanding now that being weak could get you killed is a big step, I think."

"Being weak could get me killed... Yeah. I get that. I know we're not in a game..."

"Right—it's harsh reality. If you can't bring yourself to kill someone, you won't last long if you're ever put in danger. That's the kind of world this is."

"I just...can't make myself accept that, though. However hard I try."

"I understand how you feel, but you need to stop being so naive. Or you'll die. Oh! They're back."

Jeanne and Lena came wobbling back inside, their faces pale.

They'd clearly taken a lot of mental damage.

"What the hell was *that*...?" Jeanne managed to get out. "How can something even *be* so disgu— *Blergh!*"

"Faeries are... I don't know." Lena said. "The word 'cruel' isn't strong enough. They're *demons*. They have to be."

"Oh—now that you mention it, there *was* an actual demon being born there! Don't worry, though. I annihilated it before it cou— Ah."

"Hey, Mister... Didn't you tell those villagers a mana well

overreacted, and *that's* what caused the explosion? I knew you must've done *something* stupid back there, but you never did tell me what happened, did you...?"

"There are, uh...certain things in this world you're better off not knowing. Truths that'd only bring misfortune."

Zelos was desperate.

There *were* truths that people were better off not knowing. But in this particular case, the only one who'd suffer any "misfortune" if it got out was Zelos.

Maybe Iris needed to remember that she wasn't in a game anymore when it came to the value of life—but Zelos had the same problem when it came to the power of his attacks.

He generally had a firm grasp on reality, but when he got into a battle, his mind shifted to a simpler track: *I have to annihilate my enemy.* Unless there was something else on the line he had to prioritize, like other people's lives, he couldn't think straight; he'd just fire off spells without restraint, no questions asked. In a sense, then, he was worse than Iris—not that he was aware of that.

Likely because his reincarnation had dumped him straight into a forest absolutely teeming with ferocious monsters, he'd ended up with the instinct that he had to destroy his enemies as soon as possible, and it led him to subconsciously jump to whatever method was absolutely guaranteed to win a fight.

"Anyway, setting that aside, what are you here to— *Ohhh.* That's right. You're here to collect that equipment you asked me to reinforce, aren't you?"

"So you forgot..."

"No, no. I set it out to dry in the sun a few days ago! Then I brought it in, and now it's finishing drying inside. Feel free to just go grab it."

"I can't tell whether you're organized or a mess..." Jeanne said.

"It'll be kind of scary to see what he's done with it, won't it?" Lena added.

Iris headed on unsteady feet to a room in the back to retrieve her equipment.

Zelos, meanwhile, started peeling potatoes in the kitchen to

prepare for dinner.

"Hey, Zelos," Lena started. "What's that powder you have there?"

"It's curry powder. A mix of different spices. What's it called again—a masala?"

"Curry? Can't say I've heard that word before..." Jeanne said. "Does it taste any good?"

Suddenly, the three of them heard a voice like a Bruce Lee character's coming from the other side the door:

"*FWOOOAAAH!*"

As they turned around, they saw Iris leap back through the doorway carrying her enhanced equipment, looking incredibly excited.

Design-wise, it was mostly the same as before. The only differences were minor—for example, the color was a little paler now, and the parts decorated with lace had a silver shine to them.

It had always been a bit of a basic-looking robe, but between the color loss, chemical reactions, and so on that had happened as Zelos worked on it, it had actually come out looking beautiful and elegant.

"M-Mister! C-C-Can I... Can I seriously have this?! Like, for real?!"

"*Have* it? It was yours to begin with, wasn't it? Besides, what use would *I* have for it?"

"I mean... If you're genuinely asking, couldn't you wear it if you transformed into a girl again?"

"*Hell* no! Why'd you have to suggest something so terrifying?!"

Zelos felt the need to retort as Iris dragged up what was a nasty memory for him.

Meanwhile, Iris's attitude seemed to have done a one-eighty. She was over the moon.

"Hey, Iris... Why has this got you so turned on?"

"Did it really get that much stronger?"

"Lena, the way you put that made it sound kind of naughty... I mean, that's not the point. This is more than just *stronger*, Jeanne! He didn't just improve its effects; there are more of them now! Increased Mana Recovery! Increased Magic Potency! Physical Resistance Up! Improved Magic Resistance!"

"Anyway, as for the cost... Seeing as this was sort of an

experiment for me, I'll give you a discount. With that in mind, it'd be...about this much?"



After pushing around some beads on an abacus, Zelos showed it to her—and it was *quite* the reasonable price.

It was cheap enough, in fact, that Iris's first thought was *SWEET! Done!*, and she was able to pay him on the spot.

"I get you now when you say you'd put other crafters out of business, Mister. These are some insane cheat skills you've got!"

"I'm super jealous now. Maybe I'll get him to enhance *my* gear again too..."

"Remember, Jeanne—we need metal if we want him to work on our gear. So we'd have to get that from somewhere."

"The two of you are free to do that if you want. Now, I suppose I'll get back to preparing dinner."

"Wait! I-Is that *curry powder* you've got there?! I want it! I'll help you cook, so gimme some curry too! Please!"

"So I take it you like curry? Just a heads-up—I'll be making it spicy, since that's how I like it, so..."

"I *love* curry! But...spicy, huh? Mmm... Well, I guess beggars can't be choosers. Lemme have some!"

Iris preferred mild curry.

But as a reincarnator, she longed for the taste of home, however she could get it.

And so—as poorly as she tolerated spice—she decided to compromise so that she could taste curry for the first time in a while.

"I suppose that's okay, then... In that case, can you cut the vegetables for me? As for the meat... Hmm. I guess wyvern should do."

"*Wyvern?!*" the other three responded.

Still, they put their surprise aside and helped cook.

After a full two hours, the wyvern curry was done—and it was even tastier than the four of them could have imagined.

Zelos shared about half the curry with the orphans too. And the next day, early in the morning, they raided his house. Before long, they found a small saucepan containing the leftover curry in his fridge and proceeded to lick it completely clean, leaving not even a single scorch mark on the bottom of the pan.

They were fully aware that this wasn’t their house. But it seemed like the orphans weren’t just hungry for adventure—they were hungry for curry too.

Chapter 6: The Old Guy Racks His Brains Over the Kids' Equipment

The washing machine was an indispensable item for the modern household.

It didn't *just* wash your clothes. It was extra convenient for farmers, who could use it to clean their vegetables as well.

Actually making one, however, was no easy task.

Zelos was trying to do just that, and he had to consider how many times the barrel had to spin, as well as how much mana was required. There were all sorts of other things that were a pain to design too, like how long a cycle would last—and even when he solved one of those issues, another new one would pop up somewhere else.

It wasn't as simple as *just making the thing spin*. He had to maintain a spin that ensured any dirt would come off, with a functional timer that kept the machine running for a certain duration, and he had to calculate how much mana all of that would consume.

If he wanted it to dry things as well, a cycle would probably take three hours at least. And *then* came the problem of where to even store enough mana to keep the machine running for that long.

Supply the machine with too much mana, and it would explode, with the force from the spinning and vibration causing the exterior to break apart. It was a simple design, but that very simplicity made it easy for stress to be placed on a particular component. Plus, if it was too heavy, it'd be impossible to carry, so Zelos had worked to make it lightweight...which had then lowered its durability again.

"Mmm... This is tough. Mana keeps flowing back the wrong way; where's *that* coming from? I'm sure I changed the magic stone to a magic gem, so that shouldn't be happening..."

Several days had passed since the curry dinner, and Zelos was

out in his garden still fighting with his washing machine.

He'd tweaked it time and time again, and the design really should've been fine at this point. But for some reason, the mana kept exceeding a certain threshold, flowing back the wrong way, and causing the mana-powered motor to increase the spin rate too high.

He'd even added a control component to the formula, but it *still* kept going out of control.

The truth was, this was a mana runaway phenomenon caused by Zelos's own excessive level of mana—unbeknownst to him, it had transformed the magic gem, causing it to absorb more than the intended amount of mana. He'd charged the gem without much thought, but since it had ended up holding far more mana than he'd expected, it caused a huge, instantaneous oversupply whenever he tried to run the washing machine.

In other words, Zelos had to either intentionally keep his mana supply to the very minimum, or get *someone else* to supply the gem with mana. But while it was a simple issue, he'd failed to notice it, leaving him racking his brains over and over.

He really should've realized by now just how unusually large his own mana pool was...but he hadn't. Sometimes, the simpler a solution was, the harder it could be to find.

It didn't help that he was from a world where magic didn't exist, so he didn't have much of an instinct for that kind of thing.

As Zelos continued to ponder his washing machine woes, he just happened to notice Luceris and the orphans in the distance, walking in his direction.

"*Heeey!* Pops! You alive~?"

"We did it, Pops!"

"We used our last resort, and we finally got permission!"

"We tied Sister up yesterday, and... Yeah. It was erotic."

"What'd you do to Luceris, you damn brats?!"

It sounded like the orphans had gone to drastic lengths for the sake of their hunting expedition.

Apparently they wouldn't hesitate to use any means necessary to pursue their dreams.

"We merely tied her up and tickled her with cocco feathers. It is

preposterous for you to suggest we tortured her."

"I, uh... I didn't say anything about torture. And that *does* actually sound like torture, you know. So, uh... Luceris? Are you okay? You haven't, erm...picked up a new fetish or something, have you?"

"I have not!"

Luceris was denying it, her face beet red.

Zelos was getting a strange, fuzzy feeling in his heart.

"Never would've thought the kids would go that far. Where'd they even learn to tie someone up in... In... In such an embarrassing, shameful—"

"Sh-Shameful...?"

As the two of them stumbled over their words, Luceris eventually cast her gaze downward.

Zelos couldn't stop the pervy thoughts from appearing in his mind, as much as he knew it was wrong.

He was a man, after all.

"We asked a lady who lives nearby to teach us!"

"Yeah! She really tied that guy up good, huh?"

"And she kept hitting him with a whip too, didn't she? He looked so...happy. But why? Wouldn't that hurt?"

"He almost looked like...like a pork roast. I want some meat now..."

"That *can't* be good for your education!"

Maybe Zelos's naughty imagination hadn't been too far off the mark after all.

He wouldn't have expected there to be a couple who were into that kind of thing around here.

And Luceris, apparently, had been the poor victim tied up using techniques the orphans had learned from this local lady.

"Why... Why didn't I go to the church yesterday?! Dammit, me! *Dammit!*" Zelos said.

"Don't sound so disappointed! You're even speaking differently all of a sudden! B-Besides, if anyone ever saw me like that, I'd never be able to get married..." Luceris said.

"Don't worry!" Zelos replied. "Even if a little thing like that

stopped anyone else from taking you, *I'd* happily take you as my wife..."

"*Hwah?!* I-I, um... I don't know how to respond to that, out of nowhere... You need to take things like that step by step..." Then, in a quieter voice: "And preferably Jeanne would be part of it too..."

"Uh... Is it just me, or did you add something kind of crazy at the end there? And you're making it sound like if I *do* take things 'step by step,' then someday..."

"*Ah?!* I-I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know what I could have *possibly* been saying..."

"Just marry him already, Sister..." said three of the orphans.

But it seemed like the *other* two orphans still had their own priorities:

"If you marry him, we'd get more meat..."

"Marriage marks the end of a life. Those walking the path of the sword need no husband."

One was devoted to his appetite, the other to the bloody path of the sword. They didn't care about getting Luceris and Zelos together; they were all about their own desires.

"Anyway—Pops! Make me some armor!"

"And some swords and spears, while you're at it. We can kinda use 'em now, so we wanna try 'em out."

"Some bows and arrows'd be good too, then! And if we get enough for everyone, we'll be able to change up our party composition whenever we want, so it'd help us practice different formations. Right?"

"We're gonna be warriors. For the sake of...*meat*!"

"No!" the other three retorted. "For the sake of our *dreams*! Why does meat always come first for you?!"

"*I* will not complain as long as I have a sword. Preferably a durable one, with a sharp edge..."

The orphans were making some fairly big demands.

"You kids really don't hold anything back anymore, do you? Remember, I'm going to be preparing all this by myself..."

Zelos pretty much had all the weapons already, at least, so he wouldn't need to prepare all of those from scratch.

It was the various types of armor that would be the problem. He'd need to prepare them all to fit the statures of the orphans, who had been really growing recently.

"Can you make us a legendary sword? Like Excalibur or something?"

"Or something like Gáe Bolg?"

"What—a sword that chooses the king and a cursed spear?! Do you kids want to start a war in this country?!"

They were talking about the sword King Arthur drew from the stone and the cursed spear of Cú Chulainn from Irish legend.

Not only were the kids 'not holding back' now, they were flat-out requesting legendary artifacts.

As luck would have it, it had actually been possible to craft both of those weapons in *Swords & Sorceries*, and Zelos happened to have both of them in his possession. But they were overkill in this world.

They were hardly the sort of thing he could hand over that easily. And he certainly couldn't just come out and say he was capable of making them.

Zelos immediately decided on the best course of action: lying.

"As if I could make legendary weapons! Besides, you need a lot more experience before you'd be able to handle anything like that. Just be good kids and accept some regular steel weapons."

He didn't mention it, but every legendary weapon was suited to someone of a certain job. If someone tried to equip one without meeting the right conditions, they'd be cursed for sure, so there was no point in them even having it.

The specific curse depended on the weapon, but some could emit a *terrible* amount of mana or miasma. It could be powerful enough to decay your body—and without a high enough Magic Resistance skill, the user could die on the spot, then and there. *That* was how dangerous they were.

"It'd be fine as long as we were compatible, though, right?"

"Yeah! And we would be! We're lucky!"

"I feel like I have also heard about items you can equip by singing...?"

"Anyway—I know we'd make it work!"

"And if you still think we can't, we'll just take some meat instead!"

"No, really, you'd just die... You don't even have any evidence for what you're saying. Where'd you even learn about the 'compatibility' thing, anyway? I can never tell where you kids get your information from..."

There were many who yearned for powerful weapons. Mercenaries and knights all dreamed of obtaining and wielding the ultimate weapons. But the stronger a weapon was, the more difficult it would be to wield. That was a given.

The orphans were free to dream, but trying to brute force those dreams into reality would be unwise.

"I'm sorry, Zelos. The children are saying some very unreasonable things..."

"Less 'unreasonable,' more 'impossible.' If things like that were possible, I imagine this world would be far more advanced right now."

"Oh—and equipping a whole set of armor piece by piece sounds like a pain, right? It's not *practical*!"

"Something that'd just equip *itself* to us'd be good, wouldn't it? Like living armor or something?"

"If you equipped living armor, wouldn't it start moving by itself while you had it on?"

"That'd be *good*, though, right? It'd make fighting easy! Oh, oh—and I want my armor to have a frying pan built in for cooking meat!"

"Speaking of which, I think I *have* heard stories of suits of armor moving around with living people inside. Might it not be possible to make something of that sort if you put your mind to it...?"

The conversation was moving in an increasingly dangerous direction. What sort of crazy equipment was Kaede envisioning now?

But Zelos wouldn't be able to meet the kids' demands.

He was fully capable of making some dangerous stuff, but there was no way he'd be able to give such ridiculous items to a bunch of orphans.

And if he tried, the guards were guaranteed to arrest him. It'd be enough to get him the death penalty.

"Okay, okay; let's stop with the unreasonable requests, okay? Even Pops here can't do everything."

"*Fiiiiiine.*"

"What a shame. The idea of wearing cursed equipment as I traverse a path of destruction sounded appealing."

"Maybe if you're a samurai, but think about it—you'd probably be more like an undead, controlled by the armor. Do you really think you'd be able to 'master the path of the sword' like that?"

"O-Oh! Y-You make a good point... To think I had failed to realize such a simple issue..."

"Mm-hmm—there won't be any mastering of the blade if you're being controlled by a living armor. *You* wouldn't be the one doing the fighting, after all."

Having now realized the fundamental problem with her idea, Kaede looked disappointed.

Walking a path of violence and carnage was one thing; a path of *mindless destruction* was another entirely.

"Well, then... I suppose I should start by getting all your sizes. But remember—I'll just be making you regular gear, okay? I will *not* be adding any sort of weird enchantments on top. Got it?"

"Um... Would you like me to help? I already know their sizes, to an extent."

"Yes, please. Especially for the girls."

"Of course!"

And so began the preparations for the orphans' first hunt.

It was decided that Zelos would prepare armor suited to their physiques, as well as melee weapons, bows, and arrows.

He wasn't quite sure how many of each to prepare, but he figured he could just wing it and it'd work out fine.

"Should I prepare them some spears as well? I have some unused ones just sitting around anyway."

"Um... Zelos?" Luceris asked. "About the children's hunt... Would it be all right if I came along as well?"

"Huh? I wouldn't mind, but... What would you do for equipment?"

"I already have some of my own, so don't worry about me."

"What about your charity work? Won't people here need your

healing magic? I feel like things could get difficult if you don't give them a heads-up."

"The head pastor has been telling me for a while now to take some time off, so I was thinking of using the opportunity to take some paid leave."

"Huh. Didn't know you guys had that sort of system..."

She was starting to seem less like an apprentice priest at an orphanage and more like a childcare worker.

"I'll go around to everyone tomorrow and let them know I'll be taking some time off. I'm worried about what those children might do if I let them out of my sight..."

"Somehow, I... Yeah. I get where you're coming from. Still, I don't know yet when we'll be heading out."

"Oh, that's true. I think I could take a break for about...a week? So if I let the people around here know my specific schedule at a later date, and then— Oh. I'll have to let the head pastor know as well..."

"Sounds like you've got a lot of formalities to deal with. Even taking a break's tough for you, eh~?"

For Zelos, practically every day was Sunday, and he was actually a little envious of Luceris here.

He was an unemployed free spirit, and he could earn a decent bit of money just by living however he pleased.

Seeing someone hard at work, however, made him feel a little guilty about his lifestyle.

As he ruminated over that, Johnny ran up to him holding something like a piece of paper.

"Pops! Make our armor look like this, please!"

"Like *this*? Seriously? Mmm... No. Let's not. This doesn't look like a good idea..."

Drawn on the paper was an armor design that seemed like it'd come up in some sort of postapocalyptic setting.

You'd see it in a postapocalyptic movie, for example, or being worn by a secret resistance force in a global dictatorship. It left Zelos a little uncertain.

The design had a helmet with a mohawk on top, and shoulder

pads with spikes that looked like they'd stab you in the neck as soon as you put them on. It was hard to believe something like this could have any practical use. And frankly, it was just in bad taste.

Zelos couldn't understand the fashion tastes of any kids who'd want to wear *this*.

They were persistent about wanting him to reflect the design as much as possible, though, leaving Zelos racking his brains as he got started on planning out the orphans' armor.

* * *

The next day, around the same time Zelos started making the orphans' armor, Luceris was walking between orphanages to arrange for her time off.

Before she could go anywhere, she had to ask other people to temporarily handle the district she usually treated with her healing magic.

There were a total of four orphanages within Santor. One of these four was the old church Luceris managed, but the other three were around the cardinal edges of the new town area, and the largest of them had a head pastor who oversaw the local priests.

This awkward layout could be traced back to the mental episode that Zweit, the future duke, had gone through not too long ago.

Back when Zweit had still been brainwashed, he'd met Luceris and developed a case of love syndrome. From there, the brainwashing magic and the love syndrome had mixed together in just the right way to turn him into a right piece of shit determined to make the woman he wanted *his* by force. He'd lost his usual sense of justice due to the brainwashing, and unfortunately for him, it had ended in heartbreak. But an unreasonable request he'd made at the time had caused the existing orphanage in Santor to get broken up —and so it had remained, divided into the four cardinal directions around the city.

It wasn't as if no good had come from this, however.

The head pastor and the priests now each had a certain area within which they were expected to provide their healing services—

and as a result, they no longer had to waste energy wandering all around town.

The only one who'd been inconvenienced was Luceris. To the head pastor and the priests, it had actually been a very welcome change.

And about the only bother for *her* was that she had to go all the way to the church at the south end of town, managed by the head pastor, to arrange for a break.

This head pastor, for what it was worth, was also her benefactor, a woman who had raised both Luceris and Jeanne when they were children themselves.

Luceris paused outside for a moment before opening the door to the church and passing through. Inside were two priests lecturing a group of orphans about morality.

Complex topics like that were boring to children, though. A few of them were already dozing off.

Luceris took in the sight, slightly lowered her head in greeting to the other priests—so as not to disrupt their work—then proceeded farther into the church.

She walked along a sunlit hall, eventually arriving at the head pastor's room, where she knocked lightly on the door.

"Head Pastor Melratha? This is Luceris, an apprentice priest. I have come here today to request permission to take leave."

"Yeah, I'm in 'ere. Hurry up and c'mon in. I hate dealin' with formalities."

"E-Excuse me, then..."

Luceris opened the door and gave a slight bow as she entered the room. As she did, she saw the head pastor: a woman who seemed to be about in her fifties, sitting cross-legged on a table and drinking alcohol. Despite wearing the garb of a priest, she was raising a glass filled with alcohol, and she had a cigarette in her mouth, puffing out smoke.

She certainly didn't look like clergy, even if you really stretched the definition. Luceris sighed before muttering under her breath: "I see she's the same as ever..." The head priest's debauchery was nothing new at this church.

"Oh, Lu! Been a while, huh? What brings ya 'ere today?"

"I'm here to apply for some time off. The children are set to go out hunting, and I'll be joining them as a guide. So I'd like to request permission for a number of days off my duties."

"Hunting? Those brats ya look after? *That* seems pretty drastic."

"They're very eager about it, you see... I can't stop them anymore."

"Gah ha ha ha ha! They *have* always been problem kids, that lot. Still... I figured they'd probably go independent pretty quick, but this is even quicker than I'd expected! And *hunting*, eh? What— They wanna be mercenaries or somethin', do they?"

"Yes... Personally, I don't want them to do anything dangerous, but they're serious about this."

"That so? Well, sounds good to me! Go have a good time."

Head Pastor Melratha was a wild person. Plus, she was so fond of booze and gambling that you'd never think she was a priest—and she was terrifyingly strong. She loved to fight too.

Based on her daily behavior, then, she was less like a head pastor and more like a good-for-nothing bum. Nonetheless, the people around town really trusted her.

She seemed to get along *particularly* well with the sailors.

"Is it really okay to just give permission so easily? I'm a little worried, myself..."

"These are the first kids you've taken care of, Lu. So it's not like I don't get how ya feel. But they can't stay kids forever. Someday they're gonna head out into the world and be their own people. You were the same too, weren'tcha?"

"Y-Yes... But still, to go straight to *hunting*... I know they've been training, but that's nothing like being in a real fight..."

"A *fight*? They're just goin' hunting, aren't they? What's *fighting* got to do with it?"

"I know those children. They'll be reckless and go after some huge monster, without a doubt. First time or not. I'm confident in it..."

An image of children gleefully facing off against a monster flashed into Melratha's mind.

Knowing how the orphans *she* raised could be, she believed that Luceris was telling the truth here, not just being overanxious. People seemed to really believe in the kids at Luceris's orphanage—even if they didn't always believe in them to do the smartest things.

"Mm... That's strange. I can almost see 'em doin' that right in front of my eyes. They *will* do that, won't they? Absolutely."

"So you understand! But yes, that's why I'm worried. They'll end up obsessing over taking down a big target, I just *know* it!"

"Thing is, though... Never thought I'd live to see the day that li'l tomboy I raised was worrying about others. Guess I'm gettin' older too..."

"Head Pastor... Don't bring that up, please. Hearing about my younger days makes me feel a little..."

"To think li'l Lu—the girl who went around with planks of wood in 'er hands, beatin' up the neighborhood bullies—would turn out like this... You really have turned into so much more of a lady since then, haven'tcha? Speakin' of which—you get yourself a man or somethin'? I hear ya got the hots for some guy old enough to be yer dad. So? You two *done it* yet?"

"H-How could you ask something like that, Head Pastor?!"

Melratha was acting less like a pastor and more like a drunk old granny.

She was holding on to a bottle with her fingers, swinging it from side to side as she teased Luceris with a grin on her face.

Surprisingly, this debauched head pastor was loved by her old protégés, who often called her *Ma'am*.

"I hear he's a *mage*? And that Jeanne's got a thing for him too—so what is this, a love triangle? Good stuff! That's what ya call youth! Compare that to me—never got meself a man, and now that ship's sailed. Yer makin' me jealous, ya li'l rascal!"

"H-Head Pastor... Who did you even hear all of this from?! And...how much have you had to drink? Are you... Are you drunk?"

"Nah. Sober as anything. 'Sif I'd get drunk off a measly ten bottles! *Me!* Geh heh heh heh."

"People usually *would* get drunk from that... How are you still not?"

"Cause I'm just too damn good at holdin' me booze! Ah-hah hah hah hah hah!"

From every angle, this woman clearly seemed drunk. But Luceris knew: This was how she was *sober*.

When the head pastor *really* got drunk, it was something else entirely. The church would be swept up in such terror that everyone would lose their memories, and when they came to their senses again, they'd awake to a scene of complete carnage.

There'd be a ridiculous number of injured people lying around too—and what was more, they'd all end up being figures from the underworld or something.

Nobody would quite know what had happened, and yet every time it occurred, she'd be thanked by the guards for what she'd done.

"Speaking of Jeanne—how's she been lately? Boy, was I surprised when that girl said outta nowhere she was gonna be a mercenary. She'd always been such a quiet, shy li'l thing..."

"She's doing well, yes. She's good at her job. Sometimes she comes and stays at the orphanage to visit me."

"I'm worried, y'know? It's all well and good to copy someone else, but she's always been such a delicate girl. If she pushes herself too much, I can see the tiniest little thing causin' the *real* her to come out."

"I understand what you're saying... To her, 'a strong person' means 'the head pastor.' Still—she speaks differently now, but she's the same cute girl as ever on the inside."

"Is *that* how she saw me? Gotta say, that makes me feel a bit funny..."

Jeanne and Luceris were always very embarrassed whenever stories from their childhood days came up. Since then, Jeanne had been strongly influenced by the head pastor, while Luceris had learned etiquette at an abbey and straightened up to become the woman she was now.

From their appearances, both of them had changed considerably from their younger days—enough so that anyone who knew the two from their days at the orphanage would look at them now and say

their new selves just felt wrong.

"Anyway, Lu... Ya don't believe in the gods, do ya? However much ya wanna help the orphanage, ya didn't have to go and become a priest yerself."

"I do believe in them, though? About as much as the average person, at least... Besides, you said it yourself, didn't you? 'The gods won't do anything for you—you have to make your own path in life, with your own strength.' And what I wanted was to help children who are in the same situation I used to be in, even if it's only by a tiny little bit. This is the path I chose for myself."

"Didn't mean ya had to go off and train as a priest just so you could use holy magic, though, did it?"

"Back then, I thought that was the fastest way of getting to where I wanted to be. If I had to make the same choice again now, I wouldn't do it. Especially with all the rumors I've been hearing around town lately..."

"I've been hearin' 'em too. Somethin' 'bout mages from a bunch of different countries workin' together to make their own healing magic—that thing, yeah? Even sayin' they'll start sellin' scrolls for it before long. Dunno if it's real or just bullshit, though."

Rumors about the sale of healing magic scrolls had sprung up out of nowhere recently.

It wasn't clear yet whether there was any truth behind those rumors, and as a result, the priests and pastors dispatched by the Holy Land of Metis were bewildered. Melratha and Luceris, however, had been citizens of Solistia to begin with, so they weren't as confused as those who'd been sent here from the Holy Land.

Solistia was, after all, a *magic* kingdom. It had always seemed plausible that the country might manage to develop healing magic of its own someday, so the two of them weren't all that surprised. In fact, they believed that if such healing magic *did* exist, it would only be right to spread it as far as possible.

"The guys who got sent 'ere from Metis look like they're in a big panic. If this thing actually happens, they won't be able to keep bumpin' up their healing fees whenever they feel like it—and the value of holy magic'll plummet to the floor. If mages can use healing

magic too, priests won't be as important anymore."

"Healing magic is just the same as every other type of magic, I hear. Apparently the only difference between mages and priests is that their jobs grant bonuses to different things. So mages can use healing magic too; it's just a little less effective."

"Where'd ya hear *that* from? I've never heard anything like... Ahhh. That man of yours, eh~? Well, he's *Jeanne's* man too, I guess. What—he tell ya that while ya were in bed together?"

"*No!* He just told me in a normal conversation! He said that mages and priests are the same, and some other things..."

"Just make sure ya don't go around talkin' about that, okay, Lu? Yer part of the Faith of the Four Gods; doin' that'd get the Inquisition's eyes on ya. So don't ya go sayin' that to anyone else! Ya got me?"

"The Inquisition... Do they even operate here? This *is* a *magic* kingdom, you know?"

"Who knows? Still... Play it safe."

The Inquisition was the dark side of the Holy Land of Metis. It was a hidden organization that punished priests who went against doctrine—though in reality, it was just an order of assassins. A dangerous unit; one that'd erase any threats to the gods by order of the Cloistered Emperor or the bishops.

Melratha sighed. "Anyway, keep this to yerself. As for yer time off—no problem. You make sure ya look after those kids, all right? And if they do somethin' stupid, give 'em a good whack. That's what it means to raise kids."

"Isn't hitting children just abuse? I'd hesitate to go that far..."

"Teachin' spoiled brats how things work is an adult's job. And kindness alone ain't gonna get ya there."

"Still, I'm not sure about just *hitting* them without proper justification..." Now it was Luceris's turn to sigh. "Raising children is hard."

"Heh—as long as ya understand *that*, I reckon you'll be fine. Anyway, look after yerself out there."

"I will. And thank you for agreeing to look after things while I'm gone. I'll come another day to let you know when we're leaving."

"Sure. Now... How 'bout I pop open another three of these beauties? They were a present, so I don't have to hold back. Wonder if I can finish 'em all off by the end of today..."

Luceris had no words.

Melratha grabbed another bottle from under the table, skillfully popped the cork out with her fingers, and started to chug straight from the bottle.

It really was strange that someone like this was a pastor. How on Earth was *she* managing to escape the eyes of the Inquisition?

One way or another, though, Luceris had managed to get her leave request accepted.

Chapter 7: The Old Guy Sets Out on a Hunting Trip with the Kids

Today, the kids would finally depart for their first hunt.

Somehow, Zelos had managed to make some armor that fit each of them.

It had taken him about five days to finish it all—and what he'd ended up with was nothing like the kids' requests for postapocalyptic fashion.

Zelos *had* tried to accommodate Johnny's design at first, attempting to make it work through trial and error. But eventually, out of concern for the children's safety, he'd had to abandon the idea, despite his reluctance and all the effort he'd put in. (Or at least, that was one story. Another explanation was that it just got to be too much of a pain and he gave up.)

Regardless, the gear was all finished now, and he'd walked to the church and given it to the orphans—only for them to start changing into it right then and there! Maybe that wasn't such a problem for the three boys, but obviously it was a bit of an issue for Ange and Kaede, the two girls of the group.

Luceris had hurriedly ushered them away into a room at the back of the church to get changed there instead.

One way or another, though, the orphans finally all had their own armor. In exchange, they gave Zelos their ill-fitting secondhand armor they'd bought—though, honestly, he had no use for it.

The armor Zelos had made for Ange, Johnny, Laddie and Kai was standard: sets of leather armor incorporating steel plates, breastplates, and gauntlets. For weapons, they had shortswords, knives for field dressing, bows and arrows, and short spears. Then some bucklers, for extra defense.

Kaede, meanwhile, had already had her own light, Eastern-style

equipment. Zelos had used that as a basis, then, improving it by further reducing its weight and reinforcing it with steel. It had ended up as the sort of armor set that would set any otaku's heart alight; she was the perfect image of a warrior girl.

For weapons, he'd prepared her a katana and a wakizashi, a bow and arrows, and a cross spear.

And now that the orphans had all that equipped...

"It's not, like, *funky* enough... I wanted something with more *oomph*! Like spiky shoulder pads!"

"I'm disappointed, Pops. I was looking forward to the chestpiece just being a bunch of chains or something. Where's the *originality*?!"

"They all look the same. Were you just lazy? I don't *wanna* have matching outfits with everyone! It's embarrassing..."

"I don't care as long as I get meat. Meat..."

The reviews were poor.

Sure, postapocalyptic fashion would have had a lot more character to it. But it'd have been utterly useless on the practicality front, providing next to no defense.

Besides, having exposed skin would have been no good on a hunt. When you were hunting, you wore thick clothes. That was just what made sense.

It wouldn't do much against monsters with fangs or claws, but it'd be effective against those that had thorns or leaves with sharp cutting edges. Some of those could be venomous too, so you didn't want to let yourself get injured and end up poisoned.

When it came to armor, practicality was more important than looks.

"Look, kids... Did you really think you'd be able to go out hunting in postapocalyptic fashion? You'd just *die*, you know?"

"I... I guess Sister'd cry if we died, wouldn't she?"

"Ah, fine. We can always earn some money and use that to make it better."

"It's kinda heavy... Guess we've gotta level up, huh?"

"Meat... Hurry up... Come to me, meat..."

It seemed like even the orphans had decided they didn't want to cause Luceris any worry. It didn't take much to convince them.

However, their movements were clumsy due to the weight of the armor; it was hard to be confident that they'd be able to hunt like this. Still, this was their first time, so there probably wasn't too much they could do about it.

Kaede, at least, seemed like she was happy with her armor. She had a satisfied look on her face.

"Not bad... So *this* is my armor now... Ehe he he."

She had an awfully sharp look in her eyes, though. It wasn't the look you'd expect to ever see on a child.

And then there was Luceris, who was bowing her head to Zelos in apology over and over again.

"I'm sorry! I'm *so* sorry about all the rude things they're saying!"

It hadn't actually bothered him all that much. If anything, it was Luceris going this far to apologize that made him feel awkward.

Luceris, for what it was worth, was wearing a breastplate on top of her robes, as well as bracers and leg armor. She had a morning star for her weapon, and a kite shield for defense.

It made her look like a warrior monk—but apparently, this was standard equipment for priests.

"That's quite the big shield you've got there. The children are going to be our front line for this trip, so I don't think you really need to be a tank, do you? Besides, *I* can play that role if we need."

"There's no telling what may happen, so I decided on heavy equipment just in case. This way, I'll be able to protect everyone if I need to."

"I get why you'd be worried about the children, but isn't that going a little too far? Especially since... Well, Luceris, do you have any experience with hunting?"

"Just a little, back when I was training at the abbey. We had to raise our level up so that we could learn holy magic. Even though our doctrine forbids us from taking lives..."

"The servants of the gods, going out and killing for levels, eh? I can see it now—some old church guy saying something like, 'Monsters are impure beings, so killing *them* is only moral.'"

"You really do know what they're like, don't you? That's exactly what the bishop told us back then."

"Killing in order to survive is fair enough, but I'm not so sure about trying to justify it as *moral*. It sounds like they're just denying how the world works, all while saying it's perfectly valid to go out and kill as long as you can find some righteous-sounding cause. Which is, well..."

Killing other living things was considered a sin, but it was necessary for survival. The Faith of the Four Gods denied that simple truth, yet they coated it all with convenient words.

Even if they were to kill others in war, they'd come up with some grand reason and say it was all justified. It was a serious case of double standards.

"Anyway—so they're perfectly fine with killing as long as it's in the interests of the Holy Land, eh? I wonder what happened to 'compassion' and 'kindness'...?"

"You know, we always offered up a prayer when we ate. Something like, 'We give our thanks to the lives that nourish us today.' And, well, now that I think about it—this isn't something that bothers *me*, but we had no qualms eating those monsters that were supposedly 'impure.' I suppose it's ironic for *me* to say this, but I feel like that's a little bit strange."

"It really is hypocritical, isn't it?"

"In comparison, the children are much more natural about it all. They even help the butchers harvest the carcasses..."

"Mmm... What do those kids even spend all their time on, anyway? It seems weird to me that they're still not independent yet, with all the things they apparently do."

"I'm not sure. Even *I* don't know everything they get up to. Though I've heard rumors of people spotting them in the entertainment district from time to time..."

The orphans had a habit of popping up in strange places out of nowhere, and their stomping grounds were surprisingly large. Apparently it didn't just include the old town but extended to even the edges of the new town. And seeing as there were *brothels* among the entertainment district, it certainly wasn't the sort of place children should be frequenting.

Speaking of those mysterious children, they were currently

testing the feel of their new equipment—swinging swords, holding shields aloft.

There was no telling where they'd picked that sort of thing up.

"C'mon, Pops! Hurry up! Let's go!"

"I don't mind you flirting with Sister, but don't forget about us!"

"All set and ready to sweat!"

"Let's get going! The meat's waiting for us!"

"Mmm... This sword is only steel, but it feels quite acceptable. This should be good enough for me to..."

Their plan for the next week was to head to a nearby village and stay at an inn, then have the orphans do some combat training at a forest that low-level mercenaries went to for hunting. This forest didn't have any particular name, but it was known as somewhere that newly enlisted knights went to train, and it was also famous among mercenaries as a place to earn a bit of change.

The monsters that appeared there began with slimes on the weak end and went up to—apparently—giant boar monsters known as blast boars on the strong end. Plenty of other monsters could show up too, by the sounds of it, but those probably drifted there from the Far-Flung Green Depths.

They were all your standard monsters, but they were stronger than those in the Ramaf Woods, where the Istol Academy of Magic had held its recent training camp. It would provide the perfect level of challenge for the orphans, who'd gotten their skill levels unusually high by training against Zelos's coccos.

And that challenge would be important: When your skill levels were high, it was difficult to raise your overall level. Compared to the safer option of going hunting in the Ramaf Woods, *this* forest would be a far more efficient location for the children to raise their levels.

Though, of course, it'd also be that much more difficult...

"By the way, what's up with that carriage? I'm...assuming that's not the church's?" Zelos asked.

A single carriage was parked next to the church. Sitting at the front was a thin, middle-aged man with a dark look about him, waiting for passengers to board.

"The Head Pastor hired it for us. We'll have to hire another

carriage at the village on the way back, but even if we can't, we can always come back by foot."

"A rental carriage, eh? Didn't know those existed. First time I've heard of them."

It seemed rental carriages were mainly used by people traveling from farming villages to cities for trade.

If someone wanted to do trade in a city market starting first thing in the morning, they'd need a way to get there, and it wasn't as if every farmer owned their own horse-drawn carriage.

They were particularly important for small farming villages. It was common for a village to own a carriage or two that was shared between villagers, but inevitably, there wouldn't be enough space for everyone who wanted to get to the market for business. And so, when that happened, they'd use rental carriages.

Of course, those carriages had drivers too. It was effectively just part of the transportation sector.

"Wouldn't they, erm... Wouldn't they get attacked by bandits or something? Seems like they'd be the perfect targets."

"From what I've heard, bandits don't actually attack carriages like these. The pickings tend to be slim, and it's an easy way of ending up on a wanted list."

These rental carriages were managed by the mercenaries' guild, which had strict guidelines about how far they traveled, when they were supposed to arrive, and so on. So if there were any delays, the guild would immediately know that some sort of problem had occurred. In which case, the guild would send out mercenaries without hesitation—and if any bandits had been involved in the delay, they'd quickly find themselves encircled by mercenaries.

The horses were branded too, so even if someone were to steal them and ride them away, the horses could be identified. Plus, there were even some carriages that were monitored via magic tool once every few hours—and while that wasn't the case for many of them, it was still another factor that just made the risk of getting caught too high.

Though of course, none of that meant the carriages would be *completely* safe.

As a sidenote, it was typical for more prominent merchants to use their own carriages.

"That's all...very well-thought-out, isn't it?"

"Well, it's not perfect. If somebody isn't on the wanted list yet, they could hire a carriage themselves, so..."

"As a getaway vehicle, eh? But wouldn't they get found out anyway if the driver had memorized their faces? Besides, it sounds like the system's well organized enough that it'd be hard to do anything reckless..."

"Anyway—shall we hurry up and get going? The children are already in the carriage."

"Ah. Oops. Completely slipped my mind. You really can find out all sorts of things just by chatting..."

Despite having been registered as an S-rank mercenary half by force, Zelos had never had the opportunity to learn about this kind of thing before.

Luceris's own knowledge here had come from Jeanne, who was following the proper steps to increase her rank as mercenary. In comparison, Zelos—who had merely become a mercenary on a temporary basis, with the backing of a ducal house—was ill-informed about these matters.

By the way, his guild registration as an S-rank mercenary hadn't actually been canceled yet. *Zelos* might not have cared about being a member, but the mercenaries' guild was probably reluctant to just let go of such a valuable little resource.

In fact, they were planning to keep him registered *permanently* as a trump card—not that Zelos had any way of knowing that right now.

"Well, then—shall we get going?"

"*YEAH!* Our buddies are hyped too!"

By "buddies," they meant the coccos. Each of the orphans had one cocco assigned to guide them.

The coccos, in turn, probably saw themselves as senior disciples.

"I just hope nothing goes wrong on this trip."

"Sister... Is it not a bad omen to say that as soon as we depart?"

It didn't take long for Kaede's concern to be proven right.

"Right, then," the driver said. "Goin' now, are we? Heh heh heh... Time to get our blood pumpin'! Hyeh heh heh heh."

The passengers all had the same response: "I've got a bad feeling about this."

The driver had a crazy look in his eyes, like a junkie who'd finally gotten his fix; his eyes were bloodshot, and saliva was coming out of his mouth.

"*Hraaaaaah hah hah hah!* Better hold on tight, me fuckin' babies! I'm gonna take y'all to heaven—take ya to the absolute best, funnest place ya've ever been! *Grah hah hah hah HAH!*"

The carriage started moving—and as it did, an emergency siren like something from a fire truck started blaring.

It seemed like there was a device fitted into the carriage's wheels that used the energy from their rotation to produce sound.

"Hyeh heh heh heh! How d'ya like the beat?! 'Coz it sure helps a knucklehead like me get amped up! Now it's time for me honeys to show ya what they can do—they're the fuckin' BEST! Ain't no one that can stop me now! We're goin' *NONSTOP* the whole way there, baby! Y'all clenchin' yer buttholes? Get ready, 'coz I'm gonna *really* give yas a climax~! Hah-HAAAH!"

So began the party's journey by speeding carriage.

The driver's personality had completely changed as soon as he'd taken hold of the reins.

"Wha— Wait a minute! These 'horses' are *sleipnirs*! Why are there sacred beasts in a place like— *GWARGH!*"

"Hee hee hee! Bit yer tongue, did ya~? You lot should all just shut yer traps and count the stains on the carriage! This now's *my* fuckin' time to shine. I'm a *HIGHWAY STAAAAAAR*!"

"Someone, *help us*!!!"

"*Graaah hah hah HAH!* Real nice screams yer makin' there! Heh heh! Maybe *I'll* hit me climax! But ya know what? *We're only just gettin' started!* Keep me entertained 'til we're done, ya fuckers!"

The carriage forged a path straight ahead, showing no signs of stopping. The *driver* certainly didn't seem like he was about to stop it...

The mercenaries' guild might have owned the rental carriages,

but apparently that didn't guarantee that the people operating them would be sane.

Propelled forward by this speed freak of a driver, the carriage shot through Santor's gate in an instant, not only ignoring the inspections at the gates but also tearing right past the carriage in front. And the driver seemed to have absolutely no care for his passengers.

The sheer speed and jolting of the carriage quickly knocked out Zelos and the others.

As they gradually fell unconscious, the last thing they heard was the crude jeering of the driver: "What's this? Blew ya loads already, have ya~? I'm still ragin' to keep goin'—both me heart and me crotch! *Haaah hah hah hah!*"

But none of them were even able to voice a complaint. They'd all fallen to the bottom of a deep darkness...

* * *

When the group came to, they were in a quiet little town. Or...technically, it was more of a *village*, but it looked far fancier than the word "village" might have you expect.

It had originally been a stopover for bringing goods into a fort—and since medicinal herbs and monster loot were collected from the nearby forest, many mercenaries had come to this village, driving its development.

Huge volumes of materials were brought here by mercenaries who'd come to level up, and merchants then came to purchase them. That had been going on for about a decade now.

It was located about halfway between Fort Norgus, which looked out at the Far-Flung Green Depths, and the city of Santor. And if anything happened in this area, a net of mercenaries would be created to close in on the culprit. As a result, there were no bandits; it was a relatively safe place.

At the same time, most people who came to a village like this tended to be hotheaded mercenaries and the like. Obviously, that meant a lot of trouble occurred, so vigilantes and guards were

constantly stationed around the place.

The carriage had been parked at a guild-owned stop, and both the insane driver and the sleipnirs that had been pulling the carriage were nowhere to be seen.

As Zelos looked at his surroundings, now awake, he saw six horses in a nearby stable.

"I'm... I'm alive. I'm *ALIVE*!"

Realizing he'd made it through that terrifying experience in one piece gave him a sense of incredible relief and joy.

For at least this moment, he was convinced: The world was a beautiful place.

Still, I never would've expected a carriage pulled by three sleipnirs... Who was *that driver? Surely he wasn't another reincarnator, right?*

Zelos thought back to a raid he'd joined in *Swords & Sorceries*.

When the players' front line had gotten deadlocked against a swarm of demons, they'd sent a cavalry squad to crush the enemy back line. And, Zelos recalled, there had been a similarly high-energy man among that squad.

He'd been a summoner acting as a knight, astride a sleipnir and wielding a gigantic lance as he charged the enemy. He'd been a real oddball, preferring to plunge straight into his enemies head-on despite his job being all about magic—not that *Zelos* could fault him for that.

Ostensibly, summoners were a type of support mage, sending their contracted demons or sacred beasts to the front line to defend it while they themselves attacked with magic from the rear. Or at least, that was how they were *supposed* to fight.

That summoner, however, had been clad in the armor of a knight, and he'd charged right into the enemy forces with glee. And Zelos had started to see him in other raids after that too.

One time, the man had shocked everyone around by screaming nonsense like, "*Hyaaargh!* Drop dead! Meet yer makers! I'll put together a sick fuckin' beat from all yer screams—and me only performance fee's yer lives! Don't have ta hold back for me! All right, then—lemme hear those screams! Gimme some big, flashy ones~!"

That driver... Yeah. He definitely reminded me of that *guy. Don't tell me...?*

Once, that same summoner had run Zelos over right in the middle of a raid.

If Zelos hadn't had such a high level, he would've died and had to revive, and he probably wouldn't have made it back to the fight in time.

Honestly, he didn't want to remember it.

"Oh! Right! The kids!"

Zelos looked around the carriage, and saw that all of the children were still unconscious.

It was only natural after the violently wild ride they'd just been on. In fact, it was fortunate that they'd *only* fainted, that none of them had been thrown out of the carriage along the way. Still, there was the worry they could be traumatized by what had happened.

"We got here okay, I suppose, but what would that bastard have done if someone *had* been thrown out? Why even let someone as dangerous as that drive the carriage in the first—"

"*Hyau!*"

"Uh... 'Hyau'?"

As Zelos had been muttering to himself about the crazy driver, he'd casually moved his left hand to the side. But when he did, he heard a surprised voice—and felt his hand touch something soft.

He couldn't *see* where he'd put his hand, but he had a bad feeling about this.

Things were silent for a moment.

Zelos slowly turned his head, almost like a robot, and eventually saw that his hand had come to rest somewhere quite outrageous.

Worse, before he'd finished turning his head to look, his hand had instinctively squeezed two or three times to confirm the identity of this mysterious soft thing it had grabbed.

More silence. Both from Zelos, who had an awkward look on his face—and from Luceris, who'd turned beet red.

The two of them stared at each other. Even then, Zelos's hand was yet to move away.

Yes—it was still resting on Luceris's ample bosom...

"S-Sorry! I'm so sorry! I had no idea I was... What a lucky— No, I mean *unlucky*— Argh, that's not it! I'm just... Sorry!"

"*Hyawaaah?!* U-Um, as long as it wasn't intentional, then I suppose it's not your fault, but... *Get your hand off me already!* I-I can't stand up like this..."

"O-Oh! Right! My bad! It's just, when I realized what had happened, part of me couldn't bear to take my hand off— I-I mean, uh, I'll move it right away. As much as it saddens me... Er, no, that's not what I meant to say. It honestly wasn't on purpose, okay? Seriously!"

It was both a happy and embarrassing accident. And now the two involved were struggling to calm their nerves.

Having lived so long as a bachelor, Zelos had never expected he'd end up in a situation straight out of a rom-com like this.

Silently, Zelos strongly regretted not being able to keep his hand there squeezing a little longer. He wasn't used to women, but perhaps he had it in him to be quite the beast.

Zelos sighed. "Jeez, that surprised me... Never would've thought I'd get into a situation like that at my age."

"*Aaargh...* That was the first time a man has ever— I'm so embarrassed, I can't even look you in the eye... Maybe it'd be okay to do something like that to your *wife*, but—"

"Then, uh... Will you marry me? Heck, maybe even tonight if—"

"Don't joke about that! You're only making me more embarrassed!"

"Uh, no, I was actually kind of serious. I was thinking about popping into your room tonight and seeing if, well..."

"Well, *stop* thinking about it! I'm not ready yet..."

"Uh... Huh?"

The two of them fell silent again.

Zelos had said that largely to try to hide his embarrassment, but Luceris's little Freudian slip had just made things more and more awkward.

Saying she wasn't ready *yet* was akin to saying she would be willing to do all sorts of things with him some other time, when she *was* ready.

Both of them kept staring at the ground in awkward silence. They were worse at this than middle school students.

Then, they heard voices from nearby:

"C'mon... Just get married already, you two..."

The orphans—having apparently woken up at some point—were staring at the two of them and providing commentary.

"Y-You were awake?!"

"Knowing these kids, I'd wager they might've been awake for quite a while now, and they've just been quietly watching this whole time. Anyway, I'm amazed you guys managed to not get thrown out of the carriage. Thing was going *fast*."

"You know us too well, Pops. But yeah, that guy was *terrible*!"

"We nearly died. And we can't die before we achieve our dream!"

"I mean, our dream's just to retire and laze around doing whatever... But yeah. It's still our dream."

"The meat... It's so meaty... And all those *juices*..."

"What sort of dream were you just having, Kai...?"

It sounded like the tremendous speed of the carriage had been rough on the orphans as well.

Thinking about it for a minute, most people in this world walked nearly everywhere, and they used horse-drawn carriages when they had to travel long distances.

Vehicles that could travel at insane speeds didn't really exist here, and about the only things that could go move faster than horses were birds and the like. But sleipnirs were a different story.

They could move at more than 130 kilometers per hour—no slower than Zelos's motorbike.

Not to mention, they were *sacred beasts*. If there was any obstacle ahead, they could trample right over it, and even if that obstacle was a big fallen tree, they could call lightning to explode it into tiny little pieces. Their temperaments were wild, compelling them to annihilate any invaders in their territory; they were some crazy, ferocious horses.

"Putting that aside... Does the mercenaries' guild really breed sleipnirs? Surely they shouldn't be encouraging that sort of road rage."

"What even *are* sleipnirs? Are they some sort of monster?"

"So we have to start there... Sleipnirs are sacred beasts in the form of horses. They're not the same as monsters, but they still have wild temperaments. It's very rare for humans to tame them, and they're so vicious that if there's anyone or anything they don't like, they'll attack it without mercy. They're mostly famous as sacred beasts ridden by gods in mythology, I suppose..."

"So those horses were... They were sacred beasts? They seemed so wild, though. Enough to make your average wild horse look like a cute, tame little thing..."

"The only people they let ride on their backs are those they've deemed worthy. And being sacred beasts, they're *far* stronger than your average monster. If they start getting restless, there's nothing you can do about it. If you ever happen to come across one, I'd recommend keeping your distance."

Sacred beasts weren't the same as regular monsters. They were far stronger, and because they specialized in a single element, they were even more difficult to handle.

Even low-level sacred beasts were strong enough to stand up to high-level monsters.

"Anyway—we've reached the village. Next step's finding an inn, eh?"

"Will this village even have an inn? I'm completely clueless about anywhere outside of Santor..."

"Don't worry, Sister!"

"We'll be fine. Even if we've gotta sleep outside!"

"I'm good with anywhere, as long as it has meat."

"Remember—we're street kids! We're used to it!"

"I'm accustomed to sleeping outdoors from my long travels with my parents. It doesn't bother me."

It seemed like the orphans would be fine even with sleeping outdoors. They really were tough.

They'd used to live and sleep in alleyways, after all, and spend their time scrounging food scraps from restaurant waste.

They were like hungry, hardened stray dogs. Maybe they were already tougher than your average rookie adventurer.

"By the way, where are your cocco buddies? I'm sure they were in the carriage with us earlier, but I can't see them anywhere."

"Now that you mention it, yes... Where did those birds of yours get to, I wonder?"

The coccos had disappeared at some point after Zelos and the others fainted.

"Maybe they fell out of the carriage?"

"They'll be fine, though, right? I don't think they're the kinda coccos that'd just let 'emselves get tossed out so easy."

"Yeah. And I mean, they're our buddies. I bet they're just out looking for prey."

"Even if something *has* happened to them, we might still be able to use them for meat..."

"*Kai?!* I thought they were your buddies? Are you seriously thinking about *eating* them?!"

What even were "buddies" to Kai? Zelos struggled to see the bottom of the pit that was the boy's appetite.

From the sounds of it, if he got hungry, he'd even be willing to eat his partner. The coccos were less buddies to him, then, and more emergency rations.

That was when they heard a commotion in the distance:

"C'mon, lady. Stop bein' so tight. How 'bout'cha leave those brats 'ere and come 'ave some fun with us?"

"P-Please let go of me! Someone! Help!"

"The fuck are ya askin' for *help* for? Yer makin' it sound like we're doin' something *bad* to ya!"

"Yeah! What 'e said! It's not gonna be anything *bad*—in fact, it's gonna be real good. What a naughty girl you are, tryin' ta paint some innocent guys like us as villains..."

"Bo-*CAW*!" ("GUILTY!")

PECK! THWACK! STAB! SPLORCH! SHK! THWUMP!

Zelos and Luceris exchanged glances.

The coccos, it seemed, were perfectly fine—they were just busy doling out judgment to evildoers in the village.

"Well. Glad they're doing okay... Seems like they've sprung right into action. I wonder if that's just what comes naturally to them?"

"Um... Didn't it sound like what they did was a bit *extreme*? I'm sure I heard some very worrying noises..."

"Well, I'd say it's the fault of those guys for being bad enough to make the coccos attack them in the first place. People like that are such a pain with the way they refuse to take no for an answer. Surely they can't complain if the hammer of justice beats them up a bit, eh?"

"Are... Are you sure I shouldn't go and heal them? Just in case? You don't want to get sued for this later, do you?"

"Eh, it'll be fine. Take a listen."

Following Zelos's instructions, Luceris tried to focus on listening to the distant commotion again.

"*Tch!* Bastards are still alive!"

"Think we should finish 'em off while we can? They're all just cocky little shitbags anyway. No one'd give a damn if they went missin'. We could just dump 'em in the forest and wait for the monsters to clean up the mess."

"Those coccos really helped us out. If they were human, I'd buy them a drink."

"Those scumbags can all just go and die!"

"They went after my daughter too! And ever since, she's been so scared she hasn't wanted to go outside! This serves them right!"

By the sounds of it, the village *really* hated these guys. Zelos and Luceris wouldn't have to worry about cleaning up the mess themselves.

"See?"

"Is this really all right? Shouldn't we at least report it to the guards so that they can be put on trial under the law?"

"You see, Luceris... The law doesn't necessarily exist for the sake of the common people. Bad people who know the law well enough can take all sorts of back alleys to get around it, and good people can be treated like they're evil. You'll end up a fool if you assume the law's always going to protect the common people."

"Why do you say that with such conviction? I can't put my finger on it... Did you get caught up in some sort of trouble in the past?"

"I did, yes. Not that I want to remember it. It was something my

older sister caused..."

Zelos had experience with this. He knew full well that the law didn't necessarily protect the innocent.

Specifically, he was thinking about when he'd been brought in as a witness for his sister's divorce arbitration.

He didn't know what had gone on in his sister's marriage, but he'd been dumbfounded by the other witnesses treating her as if she were practically a saint. No matter how much testimony he gave about his sister's cunning nature, the process had ultimately ended with an out-of-court settlement due to the husband having cheated first, and nothing beyond that had ever come to light.

As a result, Zelos no longer had much faith in the law.

"Well, that's enough about that. For now, we should find ourselves an inn."

"That sounds good. This may just be a village, but when it's this developed, I suppose there should at least be an inn or something of the sort."

"By the way, where are the kids?"

It didn't take long to find them. Apparently they'd headed out onto the street before Zelos and Luceris, and as soon as the two of them left the carriage stop and walked a little down the road, they found the children immediately.

The problem, however, was the building they were in front of...

"Hey, Pops! I think this inn's got some rooms!"

"I wonder what that pink sign's for?"

"I don't care what kinda place it is! As long as it has meat."

"You'll get fat if you only ever eat meat, y'know?"

"Why does this sign have a picture of a naked man and woman on it, though? I find it hard to believe this is really an inn..."

Panicked, Zelos and Luceris responded together:

"*AAAAAAHHHHHH!*"

Indeed—the pink sign depicted black silhouettes of a naked couple, their bodies coiled around each other.

This inn obviously catered to *that* sort of activity; it'd be incredibly inappropriate to stay here with the children. He'd need to work up his courage to even go into this sort of establishment *alone*.

An inn like this would be an absolute last resort.

"So... This world's got love hotels too, huh? Well, I guess it makes sense. People get horny all year round. Seriously, though, what even *is* this village?"

"Wh-Why does this sign show so much exposed skin?! And if anyone ever saw me leaving an inn like this, I don't know *what* I'd..."

"Three thousand gol for a rest, eh...? Or six thousand to stay the night. But however cheap it is, I'd still rather not..."

"Who even started an inn like thi— Hmm? I-Is that...?"

Written on the sign in big letters was "Hotel New Moon Night Tsukishima: 300th Anniversary!" And for some reason, engraved in the corner of the sign was the name of the hotel's founder: Kenji Tsukishima.

"Going by the name here... Wait, the founder was *a hero*?! Why'd he decide to run a love hotel? I'm so curious to find out the story behind that! And this place has been around for three hundred years?! *Damn*, that's a long history!"

"You're joking... The first manager of this hotel was a hero?! I... I wonder what spurred him to do *that*?"

This place had operated for more than three centuries; it was quite the famous old love hotel. What was more, it apparently had other locations, and had branched out to become a major corporation.

A notice board put up neatly out the front of the inn gave a detailed record of the building's history, dating back to its establishment. It was almost like an explanatory plaque at some cultural heritage site.

As long as lust continued to exist in the world, this place would probably get an endless stream of customers.

"Hey, Pops!" said four of the orphans. "Let's stay here. It seems really cheap for some reason!"

"No! Anywhere but here!" replied Zelos and Luceris. "This hotel is clearly for something *else*!"

"Hmm... What's wrong with it?" Kaede asked.

But there was no way the two adults could explain this to the

children.

Or rather...the children *did* need some sex education, but this was hardly the time and place.

"We aren't staying here, and that's that. Let's go with a *normal* inn."

"Y-Yes. You're right. This place would be bad for the children's education. And besides, I'm not sure *I'd* be willing to stay at a..."

Luceris might have still only been an apprentice, but this wasn't a place for a *priest* to stay. And as they took a closer look around them, they saw the streets were full of private homes that also doubled as regular inns. It seemed like accommodation and agriculture were the two main industries in this village.

Given that there were so many options for places to stay, it was decided the group would be better off staying somewhere normal, cheap, and clean.

Eventually, after spending some time looking around, they found an inn that fit the bill.

* * *

The group eventually decided to stay at an inn that looked something like a log house.

As Zelos and the others passed through the door, a kindly-looking old lady greeted them from the counter.

"Welcome. Here for lodging?"

"Yes—three days, please. Though we might end up wanting to extend that at some point."

"We only have two rooms available, so... Well, the others are children. Should be fine~."

"I suppose we pay up front? Three days' worth, for starters? We'll pay more later if we decide to extend."

This inn was called The Forest Bower. It only had six guest rooms, but it was very well looked after, and it had the perfect vibe for a place to take it easy and relax. It was a night-and-day difference from the first inn they'd seen earlier.

The smell of wood, and scant furnishings, only served to further

the establishment's calming vibe.

"All right, then. Let me show you to your rooms."

Zelos and the others followed along behind the old lady.

First, she took them to a room for the children to stay in. It had two triple bunk beds, one on each side of the room.

The room was fairly spacious too, and it seemed like it had been designed on the assumption that mercenaries would stay there.

But this was when Zelos realized. If one of the two rooms was going to be for the kids, then the *other* room would be for...

"Uh... Seriously?"

"*Aaaaaah...*"

The old lady took Zelos and Luceris to a room with just one double bed, right in the center of the room.

She gave them a polite, knowing laugh. "You two will be in this room, okay? Don't you worry—I know how it is."

"E-Erm, actually, it's probably not the best idea to put a man and a woman in the same room together, is it...?"

"Y-Yes! He's right! Do you have any other—"

"We don't, sorry. All booked out. But, well, don't you worry about little old me—I'll make sure to give the two of you some private time in your little love nest~!"

"W-We aren't in that sort of relationship yet!" said Zelos and Luceris in unison.

But the old lady just gave them a massive grin and a thumbs-up.

"I know, I know. Worried about the age gap, are you? But it'll all be fine. You just leave everything to me!"

"L-Leave *what* to you...?"

"I'm pretty sure it's wrong for me to share a room with a bachelorette. There was still a spare bed in the kids' room, wasn't there? Luceris, you could—"

"No need to get embarrassed! Ah, the joys of youth... But don't worry, the two of you can get as passionate as you want in there. The room's soundproof!"

"What do you mean, *passionate*?! And...seriously, just listen to us! Why are you acting like some local neighborhood granny playing matchmaker?!"

"Oh, it's fine, it's fine. Sooner or later, a man and a woman have to get physical to see if they're compatible. That's just how the world works. No need to hold back on my behalf—have fun!" She giggled to herself.

The lady was being frustratingly considerate. Then—maintaining a smile that seemed to say, *Don't worry, I understand everything*—she left, nodding to herself with the satisfaction of a job well-done.

Completely oblivious to the fact that they really didn't need her "help."

And so Zelos and Luceris were left alone in the room together, an awkward silence forming between the two of them.

Chapter 8: The Old Guy Gets Surprised by the Kids

Zelos and Luceris were sitting down in a room with a double bed.

The two of them *had* been becoming more aware of each other lately, but that was precisely what made this situation such a problem.

Fortunately, there was a sofa in the room too—that might have been their saving grace. But Luceris was still glancing uneasily at Zelos, thinking about the sorts of things that could happen.

Zelos sighed. "I guess we don't have much of a choice. There are two pillows, at least, so I'll take one and sleep on the sofa. And I'll just have to leave the room for a bit when you want to get changed."

"U-Um... Won't you be changing your clothes as well, Zelos? And what should we do if there's a situation when *both* of us need to get changed at the same time?"

"I mean, guys don't really think anything of being seen while they're changing, unless they're completely naked. And rather than that, I feel like there's something we're forgetting... Ah. That's right; Johnny and the others are thirteen, aren't they? Isn't it a bit of a worry to leave the boys and girls together in the same room? That *is* about the age that kids start to take an interest in the opposite sex."

"A-Ah! W-Well, then, if Ange, Kaede, and I use this room, then..."

"The bed's large enough, I suppose, so that probably *would* be a solution. Shall we go ask them?"

"Y-Yes! Let's! Suddenly staying in the same room is too much for me to handle right now..."

Luceris opened the door and started making her way to the orphans' room, her gait awkward due to her nerves.

"Erm... Luceris? Why're you walking like a toy soldier?"

She almost looked like one of those old windup robot toys.

* * *

With Zelos in tow, Luceris had gone to the children's room to suggest the new room allocation—her last ray of hope.

Except...the orphans weren't having it. "Not happening! C'mon, Sister! You gotta use this to get together with Pops!"

"*WHY...?!*"

She'd been promptly shot down.

"B-But what about all of *you*? Surely having the boys and girls together in the same room is a bit of a—"

"We're already in the same room back at the orphanage, though."

"It's about time you went for your own happiness, Sister. You've got a thing for Pops, right?"

"At this rate, you and Jeanne are both gonna leave it too late to get married, y'know?"

"Good for you, huh, Pops? You'll have two wives! A *harem*!"

"Yes, Sister, I believe it may be good for you to settle down. I agree with the others."

Just like the old lady who owned the inn, the orphans were being a little too "understanding."

And for what it was worth, the five coccos had taken up position in the remaining bunk bed, so there weren't any beds left here anyway.

"This isn't going well. It doesn't look like the kids have any intention of changing rooms. I think we'll have to just give up."

"B-B-But... I-I-I can't suddenly stay in the same room as—"

"You really are flustered there, aren't you? But...look, I won't lay a hand on you in a situation like this. *As unfortunate as that is...*"

"Ooh, Pops is such a *gentleman*!" The kids laughed. "But this seems like the kinda time you actually *should* lay a hand on her..."

"You kids... You're too thoughtful for your own good. I do appreciate it, but don't you think you're being a bit insolent?"

The children weren't at all doing this to be nasty or as a prank. This was them doing what they thought was best for Luceris.

Still, they were being too pushy in trying to get her together with Zelos against her will.

"Mm. But Sister deserves to be happy too..."

"If there's a good match right there for her, she should just eat it up like an animal!"

"Yo, yo! Pops is a fine cut of meat, girl! You should eat him up! Get that *meat* in you!"

"So Sister's getting married! We just need to make it back from this trip alive, and then..."

"Johnny... Is that not what they call a 'death flag'? You make it sound like Sister's going to die!"

There was no way out. Luceris had no choice but to steel her resolve.

In a sense, it showed how much the children cared for her. And she was happy about that. But at the same time, this was going to be a real trial for her to get through.

"The gods must be my enemies... Must they put me through an ordeal like this? I'll never be able to make it through!"

"I'm with you on the gods being our enemies, but seeing you so terrified by the thought of sharing a room with me kinda stings, y'know... Anyway—it's time to go to the mercenaries' guild. Is everyone ready?"

"Of course!" the children said in unison. "We've been ready for ages!"

The children weren't registered as mercenaries. But anyone who wanted to go hunting in the forest had to first fill out a bunch of forms at the mercenaries' guild—plans relating to the sale of any materials, when they'd be going into the forest, and so on. The system existed to keep people safe.

This way, if anyone happened to get lost in the forest, a search team could be sent out to find them. If anyone went into the forest and got lost *without* filling out these forms, they'd just be left there to fend for themselves.

The mercenaries' guild didn't give a damn about anyone who broke the rules and died as a result. But when that happened, their family would make a request to the guild to search for them, find

their body, and bring back their belongings, and it'd end up just costing more money than necessary in the long run.

The rules existed to try to prevent that from happening.

"Information is key if you're going to be mercenaries, so it wouldn't hurt for you all to ask some mercenaries about things while we're at the guild. Consider it training for when you're mercenaries in the future."

"Does getting information cost us any money?"

"It *would* be good to have info on monsters, wouldn't it?"

"Indeed. We don't know yet what sort of monsters may be in this forest."

"Maybe someone in there'll pick a fight with us! Y'know! That thing!"

"Monsters with good meat... Monsters with *tasty* meat..."

The kids were brimming with motivation.

Hunting wasn't as simple as it sounded, though. You'd struggle to manage it unless you had a solid grasp of how monsters lived.

Luceris, meanwhile, was in a world of her own, flustered over what might happen.

"*Aaah...* Wh-What should I... B-But if by some chance we *do* end up in that sort of relationship, then... *Hwaaah...*"

Ange pulled her forward by the hand, and the group made their way toward the mercenaries' guild.

* * *

The mercenaries' guild was a nongovernmental, international middleman for mercenaries.

Huge numbers of mercenaries were registered to it, all helping to protect the peace by taking on requests befitting their ranks.

The guild would take a cut of any rewards offered by clients, so acting as a middleman for many requests over the years had seen it become a big organization. Its scope extended beyond national borders—and nowadays, it even operated in beastfolk territory.

Sometimes, the guild would send mercenaries to fight in wars and such, but most of its requests came from private citizens; a

mercenary's bread and butter was stuff like escorting merchants and culling monsters that appeared around cities and towns.

The guild also oversaw mercenaries who headed out to conquer dungeons, managed the difficulty level of requests that came in, and dealt with the aftermath when any mercenaries happened to die on a failed job. Then there was its work in researching how monsters lived and in training new mercenaries; it had even opened up technical schools and the like to help with that. Not to mention, it was involved in a wide range of charity work, and...

Long story short, it was essential to society.

"Welcome to the Mobville branch of the mercenaries' guild. What brings you here today?"

"So this village is called...Mobville, eh? First time I've heard of it."

The lady at the reception desk had a big smile on her face.

The reception desk at the mercenaries' guild recorded the names of anyone going into the forest. Apparently this meant that even those who weren't mercenaries could be easily accommodated if they came back with any pelts, meat, magic stones, fangs or so on that they wanted to sell.

The guild really did offer a thorough range of services.

Zelos and the others listened as the receptionist explained all that—which took a while.

"...and what that means is that the guild's not just for mercenaries—plenty of hunters make use of it as well. Now, you'll be taking these children with you on your trip to train them as hunters, correct? We'd be happy to buy any materials you may collect out there, if you're willing to sell them to us—depending on the quality, of course."

Zelos and the orphans listened carefully to the receptionist's explanation, figuring it'd be a useful reference for when they wanted to make use of the guild in future. Zelos was pretty clueless about the workings of the guild himself, after all.

"If we want to sell any materials, we go to the counter next to this one, right?" he asked. "Now, I've looked into things a bit myself, but just to ask: What sort of monsters are most common around here? Oh, and it'd be nice to hear about any rare monsters too, if

there are any."

"Goblins and orcs would be the most common ones around these parts. Then there are also things like wolves, stolebirds, bears and deer. Oh—and as for the strongest things you may fight, we've had sightings of giant cockroaches and the like."

"*Blergh!* There are cockroaches out there...?"

"Reckon we can beat 'em? I've heard they're fast."

"Could be tough. That speed of theirs makes 'em hard to hit."

"And we can't eat them. Since they're bugs. I want my meat..."

"Personally, I would prefer to cut down humanoid foes. Bugs are not quite as... Hmm."

It sounded like some of the monsters in the forest weren't just rare; they were repulsive, on a visceral level.

As a sidenote, insect shells were good for making armor. But giant cockroach shells were unpopular, despite how tough they were. If you could just get past how they looked, they were incredibly useful...but the creatures' resemblance to their smaller brethren seen scavenging through household food waste meant that their body parts were usually thrown away. You almost had to feel sorry for the poor things.

That aside, the information that the kids had about these giant cockroaches struck Zelos as odd. They were talking almost as if they'd encountered one before; it certainly didn't sound like they were just preparing for their first hunt now.

"If a swarm of those things comes at us," Zelos said, "we run. I do *not* want to deal with them."

"*You're* talking about running away, Zelos?!" Luceris exclaimed. "Are they really so terrifying? They're insects, aren't they?"

"Ah, it's...less that they're strong, and more that they just look really gross. They're about a meter long, and if I see a swarm of the things coming for me, and I have to fight them, I feel like I'd just...burn everything around me to a crisp. I'd probably forget there are innocent bystanders next to me..."

"Oh. That *does* sound bad, then, doesn't it? I don't think we'd be able to squish *those* with a slipper."

The cockroaches just couldn't catch a break.

In fact, as soon as Zelos came across any, he was liable to start screaming, "*Run awaaaaaay!*"

That was partially because of how they looked, but it was also because even if you defeated them, it wasn't as if you'd get any decent meat.

"Giant cockroaches? Are you speaking of those large, light brown insects? I thought their shells were supposed to be good for making armor."

"Do people not just hate them where you're from, Kaede?"

"Indeed. Their carapaces are both light and sturdy. You would be hard-pressed to find better materials. Why balk at using them?"

"Isn't it just 'cause they're gross?"

"Yeah. Just *think* about how fast their legs move... Ugh. Just seeing 'em makes me feel sick."

"And the way they look when they're swarming around rubbish. Especially if they're all covering a piece of *meat*... *NOOOOOO...*"

A correction, then—it seemed like a certain island nation in the east, at least, used giant cockroach materials for armor.

Perhaps that knowledge might have helped the giant cockroaches and great givleons of the world rest in peace.

"Do you not find it strange? You use all sorts of other monsters for materials; why is it only cockroaches that are the exception?"

The others all flinched.

"In any case, you are working with the corpses of monsters, are you not? I struggle to understand why you would have such a hatred for these ones in particular. Are they not mere insects?"

"Uh, no, it's... It's because if you're unlucky, they can reproduce and create an infestation, okay? They aren't *just* your average monsters..."

"But are they not preferable to goblins or orcs? There are many ways to use their materials."

"I mean, I get that, but they're just not the sorts of materials people *want* to use... They're just gross. On some biological level."

Cultural differences could lead to a big disparity in how people saw the world.

In nature, even monsters as hated as these were a good source

of protein, so even dragons had no qualms hunting them.

It was only the sapient animals who hesitated to make the most of nature.

"You should have no trouble subjugating slimes, even if you aren't mercenaries yet," the receptionist said. "But if you come across any bandits or perverts, please run away. We *would* appreciate it if you could apprehend them for us, but as long as you aren't registered mercenaries, I have to ask you to simply run as fast as you can. Even though we *would* really appreciate it if you could apprehend them..."

"Why'd you say that twice? Anyway—bandits are one thing, but *perverts*? Really? Is that a common thing around here?"

"Yes. Recently, we've had reports of people being chased by a naked bodybuilder with oiled-up skin shouting, 'Come with me, everyone—let's train our muscles together! We can build the perfect bodies by working up a good sweat! In *bed*, that is...'"

"It...sounds like someone probably *should* arrest him, right? Or just...deal with him, whatever that involves? Wouldn't that be best for society?"

"He may be a pervert, but he still has rights, so...we can't go too far. That said, I hear he's already gotten a number of his victims to convert to man-on-man love."

"*Victims?* He's gotten people already?!"

The receptionist remained unfazed as she spoke. And Zelos now had some new information that he would've rather never learned.

He was prepared for monsters, but not for perverts.

"Don't worry—it sounds like he doesn't target children, so that's not a concern. I hope you children all give it your best and grow up as strong as you can. Our branches are always looking for talented new members."

"You're giving me a lovely smile right now, but that doesn't just smooth everything over... It sounds like there's danger of a *different* sort lurking out there."

The plan had been to have the kids experience a regular hunt, but apparently there was another sort of menace lurking outside the village that could be bad for their upbringing.

And it was a menace Zelos hoped to never encounter, if it was up to him.

"Anyway, we get it! Let's hurry up! I wanna start hunting!"

"I'll show ya how good I've gotten!"

"*Meat meat meat meat meat meat...*"

"I can finally take the first step along the path of the sword. My blade is glowing, *screaming*, for the taste of blood."

"Uh...'glowing'? Doesn't look that way to me. Anyway, let's start with some *easy* prey, okay? That's what you usually do."

The kids were only getting more and more hyped up.

At this point, if Zelos tried to say, "We're only gathering information today," the kids would almost certainly stage a mutiny.

They'd probably just head out hunting all by themselves.

"Just try not to go too deep into the forest, okay?" the receptionist added. "New mercenaries and hunters often get lost. Once, someone got lost and wasn't found until three years later. They'd gone feral."

"I mean, that sounds like a pretty unique case..."

"Overconfidence will get you killed in no time, so please be careful. Anyway, this concludes my warnings."

But scarier than the forest was the receptionist, who'd managed to practically say, *If you go in there, you'll die*, all with a smile on her face.

It was such a lovely smile that it seemed like her whole face was glowing, but her eyes weren't smiling in the slightest.

"Okay, then, kids—we're going to start by gathering some information at the guild. Knowing about monsters is crucial if you're going to be hunting them, after all. Oh, but different people may give you different information, so make sure to verify it with someone else. That's all."

"*Aww!*" the kids moaned. "Can't *you* just tell us that stuff, Pops?"

"Even the same monsters can behave differently depending on where they live. Hearing about it for yourself, seeing it for yourself, experiencing it for yourself—that's what makes you a pro. Besides, I won't always be around to tell you what you need to know. Do your best to find things out."

"*Kaaay.*"

"You are quite the strict teacher," Kaede said. "I suppose I must join the others in finding out what I can..."

Off went the kids, then, charging straight toward mercenaries inside the guild to ask about every little thing they could think of.

"Zelos..." Luceris started. "Are you sure you aren't being too hard on them?"

"I have to be. Sometimes, they may even have to *pay* for intel from an information broker or the like. There's no guaranteeing whatever people tell them will be trustworthy, of course, but that's all the more reason for them to try to confirm for themselves and make it a learning experience. There's no point in me just telling them everything."

"So you're thinking about when they're going to be independent and have to look after themselves...? You know, the pastor always told me that with freedom comes responsibility. I suppose she was right."

"Sounds like that pastor of yours was pretty mature. What sort of person were they?"

"Oh... The sailors all call her 'Ma'am,' for starters. It's hard to believe she even *is* a pastor. She's always drinking, and gambling, and fighting..."

"Whoa. What sort of blasphemous pastor is *that*? Or...no. She almost sounds more like part of the yakuza..."

As the two of them chatted, they watched the children wander around the guild's dining area. It seemed like the kids were trying to single out experienced-looking mercenaries, avoiding those who looked like novices.

"Hey! You! Yeah, the pretty lady!" Ange called to a member of a female mercenary group. "Could you tell me some stuff about monsters? I'm goin' out on my first hunt, so I was hopin' to get some information."

"D'aww... Me? Pretty? Ya gots ta be kiddin'! Yer makin' me blush..."

From the woman's accent, it seemed like she probably had come from some faraway land.

Johnny, meanwhile, was sitting at the bar. He bought some alcohol, then slid the glass along the bar to a mercenary who was drinking nearby.

"Huh? What're ya tryin' ta pull, brat?"

"This round's on me. See, I'm going out on my first hunt, so I was hoping to get a few pointers from someone who knows their stuff."

"Hah! Cheeky little thing, ain'tcha? But ya got me a drink, so fine. I can give ya a bit of a lesson. What do you wanna know?"

It was hardly a child's way of gathering intel.

As for Laddie...

"Hey—what's getting you down, lads? You don't look too good," Laddie said, calling out to some mercenaries.

"Ah, well... We screwed up a hunt."

"But moping about it isn't going to help, is it? Don't you think you'd be better off reflecting on *why* you failed, and what you should've done instead? Talk it out with each other! If you put your mind to it, you can turn your failures today into a lesson to help you succeed tomorrow. Oh—sorry, am I butting in where I'm not wanted?"

"Nah... You're right. Everyone fails every now and then. And based on our ranks, we *should've* been able to get it."

"You make a good point, kid. Yeah, you're right... I guess we went about it the wrong way. And we've gotta start by thinking about *what* we did wrong."

"Mm-hmm! *That's* what you want—you want to be positive. Oh—would you mind if I listened in as well? I'm about to go out on my first hunt, actually, so I'd appreciate it if I could hear some stories from people with experience."

Laddie was trying to use their mistakes as a reference for what he should and shouldn't do himself. He was being thorough about it too—he was even speaking differently from usual.

It was quite the astute approach. Maybe he had a talent for gathering intel.

"Hmm? I don't see Kai... Where's he gotten off to?"

"I saw him go through that door at the back just a while ago..."

"Excuse me," Zelos called out to the receptionist. "Could you tell us what's behind that door?"

"Oh—in there? That's where we take apart the bodies of any defeated monsters to sell to merchants," the receptionist kindly explained.

Curious, he and Luceris peeked inside the room, and saw chubby little Kai chatting with an employee who was taking apart a monster.

"Mmm... Tasty meat 'round 'ere, huh? Maybe the harebrained hummingbird. 'Round these parts, we pluck their feathers, take out their organs, add a bit of seasoning, then chuck the bird in some oil to deep-fry. Then you just bite into it whole."

"Ooh... Sounds yum. But I mean, they're tiny, right? Wouldn't they be hard to catch?"

"They're quick little things, but there's a trick to catchin' 'em. If you grind a slime core into powder and mix it with grated gumroot, you get a super sticky glue. Slather that glue onto some tree branches, and you'll be able to catch the birds when they land on 'em."

"Huh. Maybe I should try that..."

"Kids 'ere do it to earn some pocket money. You don't do that in the city?"

"There aren't many monsters around the city. We don't even see slimes that often."

Kai was going at his intel-gathering from an unusual angle.

Lastly, then, was Kaede, who was loitering in front of a bounty board.

"I see... So this yellow writing is for targets wanted either dead or alive? And the red writing is for those who are specifically to be eliminated? This woman, though... What did she do?"

"Apparently she's an assassin from some group who went after one of the duke's sons. I hear she's a real danger."

"Hmm... I would most like to test myself against her."

"Give it up, kid. You're not ready to take on someone like that yet. That's one test you'd be failing."

It looked like the high elf girl was as bloodthirsty as always.

Pinned up on the bounty board were big wanted posters that

Zelos had drawn up of his older sister a while ago. In fact, the board included every version he'd drawn.

"She's...more interested in *killing* than in hunting, by the looks of it. Can't say I'm too surprised, mind you..."

"The children seem very accustomed to gathering information, don't they? It's hard to believe they even *are* children."

"From the looks of it, I'd bet they've been doing this sort of stuff for a while now. In a sense, they've got better mercenary skills than Jeanne's group. And they seem to be really picking who they go for—they're used to this. Which I guess makes sense..."

Each of the kids from the orphanage had some sort of conversational skill.

They were all weirdly good at it too. It really made you wonder where they'd picked up those skills in the first place.

Or...perhaps it was *because* they were orphans. Perhaps they'd naturally picked up on all this in order to survive.

To get by on the streets, they'd needed to train a watchful eye, and, say, secretly pick up on the art of negotiation by watching merchants talk at a market. They'd probably even been capitalizing on their own youthful appearances to pick up on as much information as they could.

The kids' cunning—and their future potential—were even more frightening than Zelos had expected.

"Seriously, who *are* these kids? This isn't how children should be operating."

"They've grown up to be so strong while I wasn't looking. It almost makes me feel a little lonely..."

Having gathered their information now, the children regrouped, told each other what they'd figured out, and put together a number of plans.

As mercenaries, their teamwork was flawless. If they just got some experience, they'd probably manage to shoot up to the upper mercenary ranks in no time. The only real worry was doing so could give them all big heads.

"Okay, Pops: We're gonna go for some slimes and some rabbits today. Try things out against some easier targets first."

"Well, well... Is there even anything left for me to teach you all? You're virtually pros already."

"I wish to quickly reach the point at which I can fight to the death. Battles against powerful foes are how one masters the way of the sword."

"Beginners who haven't hunted before usually have to start by learning for a year at a training school, but we don't have that much time."

"Ah, 'meat'... How beautiful the word sounds to my ears! Fish! Poultry! Pork! Beef! Goat! All *sorts* of different meats are waiting for us. *Slurp...*"

They really are *strong—if that's what you'd call it*, thought the two adults.

They wondered whether these kids might just be able to get by perfectly fine even without the two of them there.

* * *

Near Mobville was a vast forest that eventually turned into the Far-Flung Green Depths.

But it was rare for monsters from the Green Depths to make it all the way here.

And that was because doing so would require an enormous amount of effort.

After all, there was a three-thousand-meter mountain range in the way that was virtually impossible to traverse, so getting to this side would require instead winding your way between a great many shorter mountains. Of course, *Zelos* had crossed those mountains at one point...

There was an alternate route that let you reach the Far-Flung Green Depths by taking a major detour, but that route took about three days, one way. That was the way Zelos had taken Celestina and Zweit when they'd gone there training one time.

One route was northeast from Santor, while the other was southeast; that was really the main difference. This alternative route was about the same distance by carriage, but the group had reached

Mobville yesterday in a mere half a day—and that was because the "horses" that had pulled their carriage yesterday had been *sleipnirs*. These sacred beasts weren't just fast; they were *ridiculously* fast.

In other words, Zelos and the others had arrived at the village earlier than planned, so they had easily enough spare time to start with hunting smaller monsters.

"Now, you've only got three hours at most for this hunt. And in that time, you have to hunt some small monsters *and* butcher them."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Your quota is four monsters each. You can work together, or you can each work individually; that's up to you. Think for yourselves, and act for yourselves!"

"Yes, sir!"

"To be fair, this is still only your first day, so I guess you could also save your stamina for tomorrow and focus on gathering or something today, if you prefer. The choice is yours."

"Understood, commander!"

"Good response! Now, get hunting!"

"Gotcha, champ!"

"Now, let's start looking for some easy monsters..."

"Um... Why did you call him 'champ' at the end there? Weren't you using military speak up until then?"

But the children ignored Luceris's retort as they surged into the forest.

The coccos followed along behind them.

"I suppose we should get going too. I'm pretty sure we'll catch up with them before long."

"Huh? Weren't they *running* just now?"

"Small animals are very wary. They hide as soon as they hear the slightest noise, so the kids will probably slow down to look for their tracks."

"Oh..."

Zelos walked along humming a tune, with Luceris beside him.

And just as Zelos had expected, it didn't take long for the two of them to find the children searching for animal tracks.

"Hmm... No tracks. But there's something here. I can sense it."

"There's poop here! It's little green balls, so it's probably from a forest rabbit."

"And there's some light brown fur here... Wonder what that's from?"

"No mushrooms. Guess it makes sense, this close to the edge of the forest..."

"One must hunt meat to eat meat. And to hunt, one must first *find*."

Their careful investigation had allowed the orphans to find traces of prey, but they didn't know exactly where that prey was.

The children were able to focus mana on their five senses to sharpen them, but it consumed a lot of mana, so they couldn't keep it up for long. With that in mind, they'd decided to take turns doing it.

Right now, the one searching was Kaede—and as an elf, she was particularly adept when it came to finding things in forests. The kids had only just started, and they were already deploying their trump card.

"Somewhere nearby. Most likely a rabbit, from the sound. I can also sense something else... A snake, perhaps?"

"Right! Let's surround it, just like we planned."

"Which one are we going for? The rabbit or the snake?"

"Both. Let's target them from the trees using our bows."

"But we don't know where the snake is, do we?"

They'd worked out a strategy for hunting monsters, and they were immediately putting it into action.

They ran carefully, taking the utmost care not to make a sound. They were more silent than burglars; it was such a splendid display that it was hard to believe this was their first ever hunt.

"Have the kids been training their stealth? They move awfully well for their first time doing this. Are you sure they haven't been testing their skills on people walking around town?"

"You're wondering if they've been...tailing people? Even if they were doing it as training so that they wouldn't be detected on a hunt, I'm not sure I can commend them for it..."

"So they were stalking people, essentially... I mean, maybe

they've been in situations before when they didn't want to be seen."

But just as Zelos and Luceris were having that discussion, things sprang into action.

"Oh! Found the bunny rabbit!"

Having climbed a tree to survey the area for prey, Ange had managed to find the rabbit. She sent a hand sign to tell the others where it was.

Seeing her signal, Johnny relayed it to the nearby Kaede, who in turn relayed it to the other two in the same fashion.

Each of them carefully wrapped around the location while making sure the rabbit didn't move, readying their bows as they went.

"They're very good at this. Is this really their first hunt?"

"I *am* surprised by their teamwork..."

The more the two of them saw, the more insane the kids' specs seemed to be. They'd already known the kids were skilled, but they certainly hadn't expected them to be so adept at acting as a squad.

And finally, right when it was time for the kids to let loose their arrows...

HISSSSSS!

A snake—specifically, a viper—suddenly shot out of the grass, striking at the rabbit.

"Now!"

All five children fired their arrows, piercing through both the viper's head and the rabbit.

"They got both animals at once?! You're kidding... Was that seriously *intentional*?!"

"Whoa. They're *incredible*..."

It was often said that "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," but somehow these children had pulled off what was seemingly impossible.

"That was easier than I thought!"

"Didn't level up from that... Oh, well. Whatever."

"Now we butcher it! Meat, meat~ ♪"

"Too easy. I suppose we simply search for our next target now."

"Think we can get a bit of pocket money for this?"

The kids began dressing the rabbit and the viper with glee.

And they were adept at that too—these were no amateurs.

Watching over them from afar, Zelos couldn't help but mutter, "This has got to be a miracle..."

The kids continued their hunt. By the time it was evening, with the sky growing dark, they'd managed to catch a total of six rabbits, seven snakes, and thirty-one slimes.

Chapter 9: The Old Guy Meets with Misfortune

The warm morning sun was shining through the window, and little birds were singing outside.

Luceris, though, was lying in bed, rubbing her bleary eyes. She'd struggled to sleep last night.

She'd never been good with mornings to begin with. In fact, it had gotten bad enough that getting out of bed had become a real chore for her.

She somehow comprehended that she was staying at an inn, but everything else had completely left her head. With wobbly footsteps, she made her way to the shower room, intending to carry out her daily purifying ritual.

This purifying ritual, mind you, wasn't like those carried out at shrines and temples; it was just a sort of daily routine, a habit, within the Faith of the Four Gods. There was no ceremonial meaning to it. It was essentially a kind of mental training for apprentice priests, a way to get them in the habit of following rules and conventions.

When people pick up a habit, however, it tends to stick. And so—almost unconsciously—Luceris went to the changing room and started taking off her clothes.

But just as luck would have it, Zelos—who had been staying in the same room as that very same girl of marriageable age—had gone to have a shower to help him wake up. And right as he was emerging from the shower, feeling refreshed, he ran into Luceris in the changing room.

"Phew. That was a good sho— *WUH?!*"

Now, Luceris—completely naked and spacing out—and Zelos, who'd just finished taking his shower, stood together in the changing

room.

Time stood still for a moment.

Silence.

The sight before Zelos's eyes caused him to stiffen up. And as a man, he couldn't bring himself to look away.

Luceris, still not fully awake yet, regarded Zelos with a blank expression.

But eventually, after a few moments, she came to. And when she did—

"*BWOAAAAAAH!*"

"*EEEEEEEEEK!*"

Time started moving again, and the two of them screamed in joint surprise.

Fortunately, this room was soundproof.

As a sidenote, Zelos vowed to himself that as long as he lived, he would never forget the wondrous sight he saw in this moment...or something to that effect.



* * *

It was breakfast time, and the vibe between Zelos and Luceris was clearly awkward.

Near them sat the children, who were happily munching away on their food. It was almost like a battlefield, with the way they were skillfully grabbing all sorts of dishes and shoving them all into their gobs.

They'd gulp down whatever food was in their mouths, then immediately get to washing it down with some milk. And for some reason, they were all doing it at the exact same time. It was weird just how synchronized they were.

"Uh... Why are they all in sync? I know they get along, but still..."

"Mm..."

Luceris was blushing so red there was practically steam coming out of her head.

It seemed like she'd need a little longer to reboot. It was a small blessing that she was even managing to nibble at some breakfast.

"Mmm~ That was some good grub. All right, then—what're we gonna hunt today?"

"Uh... How 'bout a forest grizzly?"

"We didn't level up yesterday, right? So that means we should be going for something big! I think a wild wolf'd be good!"

"I request orcs. I had not a single opportunity to swing my katana yesterday."

"I'm fine with anything, as long as we can eat its meat."

Just as Luceris had predicted a while ago, the kids were setting their sights on bigger prey.

Their common skills were just too high, which made it hard to increase their overall levels. So really, they had no choice but to go after larger game.

"If you're going for something big, you may want to buy some flares so you can signal help to carry back your kills. It looks like they even sell them at the inn, so how about you ask the old lady at the front desk?"

"Ooh!" responded four of the orphans. "I didn't know we could get tools at the inn!"

"I suppose you are talking about the cylinders sitting at a corner of the front desk?" Kaede asked. "It sounds like this place has rather good...customer service, do you call it?"

"Huh! Guess you were really keeping an eye out for stuff, Kaede! Well, let's go buy some, then~!"

"Yeah!"

Just because you were able to take down something big in the forest didn't mean you'd be able to carry it back with you. So a path had been cleared through the forest and paved, allowing carriages to travel to and from the hunting ground. Carriages owned by the mercenaries' guild constantly traveled along a predetermined route, and flares were sold to let hunters in the forest call for a carriage.

It was only common sense to call this carriage if you took down a big target, and it was also common sense to help the driver load your spoils on board.

"Hey, Miss! Do you sell any flares?"

"Ooh—Going after something big, eh? Well, aren't we brave? I'd be happy to sell you some."

"Yeah! We're going out to hunt some tasty meat~ ♪ So yeah—can we get five flares?"

"We're doing it for the prey, not for the meat... But, yeah, I guess we *will* get meat if we can take something down."

"Personally, my only goal is to kill with my blade. Hunting is merely secondary."

"Righty-o. One flare each, was it?"

As the old lady put the flares into a paper bag, she spotted Luceris and Zelos—and flashed them a satisfied grin. This was clearly the smile of a neighborhood granny who loved nothing more than meddling where she wasn't needed.

"Well, well... Looks like the two of you had some fun last night, eh? Ah, it's good to be young..."

"We didn't, okay?!" the two of them exclaimed at once. "You've got the wrong idea!"

"Oh, I know how it is. You don't want to go into detail, right?

Looks like girlie here's a priest, and she's in an age-gap relationship with a mage, who I know you priests aren't meant to get along with... But don't worry. Granny here's got your back. Looks to me like the two of you have some good chemistry—I'm betting last night was really something, eh? You're making me jealous... ♪"

"Wh-What are you *talking* about?! W-W-We're not like that! Seriously!"

"Aww, look at you. Getting all embarrassed. *Aha.* So young and innocent... You know, I used to be like that too. The day after my first time, I got so conscious of my husband. Just looking back on it now makes me feel embarrassed. But those were good times... Nowadays, I've got grandkids. Oh, it's so nostalgic... ~"

"Ah... So she's one of *those* people. The ones who just carry on a discussion all by themselves, never actually listening to anyone else..."

People like this didn't tend to listen to others. In fact, the more Luceris denied things, the more she got swallowed up in the old lady's pace. There was no stopping this woman.

Urgh... What happened wasn't my fault, but I really was staring at her earlier, wasn't I? Feels kinda awkward...

Mmmrgh... I was trying to forget about what happened! Why did she have to say something that reminded me of it again! I'm so embarrassed, I want to just crawl into a hole...

"It was your first time, right? Was he gentle with you?"

"*PLEASE*," the two of them asked, "can you stop talking about that already?!"

The lady outright refused to believe them.

"Holding back" wasn't a term in her dictionary; she just kept trampling all over their feelings and privacy. And somehow, the fact that she had no ill will only made it worse.

Whatever world you were in, old grannies with no filter were a pain. Getting caught up with one would only bring misfortune.

She was persistent, if nothing else—and annoying to deal with.

* * *

Somehow, Zelos and Luceris managed to finally shake free from the old lady and head back into the forest with the children.

The goal for today was to have the children level up, so they were going to do some *proper* hunting.

But the problem was that there was nothing Zelos could teach them. After all, they'd worked out for themselves how to hunt and how to butcher the prey they caught. Moreover, their training with the coccos had raised their skills higher than those of the average rookie hunter.

Some say that children grow up even without parents, but in the case of these children, it wasn't just that they'd managed to get by *despite* not having parents; their proactiveness and competency clearly put them leagues *ahead* of the average children.

Right now, these insanely promising kids were lined up together.

"All right: Considering what you're all capable of, we'll be heading deeper into the forest today to do some more serious hunting. I want each of you to work together with your cocco buddy to hunt—either by yourselves, or in a pair with another kid. That's up to you. But if you're going for something big, I want you all to work together for safety. And make sure you're always staying in touch with each other."

"H-Hold on! Zelos?! That sounds a little bit dangerous, doesn't it?!"

"So you say, but... Going by what they're capable of, they're perfectly ready to be pros. All they're missing is experience and levels; they've each done a very good job of mastering their skills."

"But they're still just *children*! You can't expect them to suddenly go out hunting by themselves!"

"They'll each have a cocco to protect them, so I feel like they'll be able to get it done as long as they don't get too reckless. Besides, I've prepared them each a little something that can tell me where they are if it comes to that, so I'll go and save them if need be. I'm not about to let such promising kids die in a place like this."

As Zelos spoke, he handed each of the children the same sort of items he'd given Zweit and the others on his guard mission for the academy's training camp.

Back then, he'd worn a mask with a built-in sensor to track those items, but this time he had a more compact design: glasses. He was already a shady-looking guy, and putting these glasses on only made it that much worse.

Seeing the kids go hunting yesterday had made him understand just how motivated they were.

Their motives might have been a little suspect, but having a goal and working independently toward it was undeniably a talent of some sort.

And that was exactly why Zelos had decided to have them split up and hone their skills by themselves.

"Don't worry, Sister. We ain't that soft!"

"We've been training hard for today. We'll do what we're here to do."

"Besides, you don't have to worry. We've got our buddies here, after all—we'll be fine!"

"And in the future, we'll be living lives of luxury, with *nonstop meat*... We're not gonna stop until we've reached our dreams!"

"We hope to gain experience here so that we can take another step toward achieving what we are capable of. Do you not think yourself, Sister, that it would be heartless of you to stop us here?"

The kids were each rolling the rings Zelos had given them around in the palms of their hands as they answered Luceris with confidence.

They really were promising.

"Are you going to try to level up too, Luceris? Having more mana should let you cast a wider range of healing magic, after all."

"I... I suppose. You're right. Having more mana can never hurt when it comes to healing, and selling some furs and things would get me some money to put toward the orphanage."

"So *practical*... We're on holiday. Don't you think you should be allowed to earn a bit of money to spend on yourself? Doesn't selling the mandrakes get you enough for the orphanage now?"

"The mandrakes do earn us enough money to get by, but if something bad happens and we don't have enough savings... I feel like I have to save up now, while I can, to prepare for whatever

emergencies might happen in the future."

Luceris's orphanage was only looking after five children.

Vegetables and other groceries were cheap, so at this point, they shouldn't have really been in poverty. But the costs of medical supplies were always fluctuating, and potions in particular could have completely different prices depending on which store you bought them from.

Only the largest of merchants were able to sell them at a steady price.

* * *

Between this and that, the party had now been walking through the forest for about three hours, and they'd finally arrived at a more dangerous area.

From here on out, they'd need to be careful.

"I don't see any big game around here, huh?"

"Think we should go a bit farther in? There might be something if we do."

"I wonder if there'll be any of those huge pig things? What were they called again—giant boars?"

"There are ones called barrel boars too, right? The ones that just charge at you nonstop."

"I am fine with anything. I just want to begin killing."

"Anyway," the other four said together, "CHARGE!"

"Hey— Kids?! You're going too fast! You need to be careful when you're hunting, or—"

VWOOF!

Suddenly, Zelos felt himself thrown into the air.

He didn't know what had happened, but he was able to make out a carriage passing underneath him at ridiculous speed.

And pulling the carriage were three sleipnirs.

"Hyah-*HAH*! Don't get in me way, ya bastard! If yer blockin' the road, ya better be ready to get fuckin' run over! Anyone who's on the road in front of me can end up as *mincemeat* behind me! *Grah hah hah hah hah!*"

Zelos had been knocked into the air by a certain crazy carriage.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the carriage disappeared into the distance, kicking up a cloud of dust. Zelos was left to fall violently against the ground.

"*Noooooo!* Zelos!"

"He really ran you over good... Or, uh, I guess 'sent you flying' more than 'ran you over.'"

"Pops! You okay?"

"'You have to mind your surroundings,' right?"

"At that speed, I doubt that 'minding' anything would have helped. I have heard things described as 'like a whirlwind,' but that seemed to be a particularly fierce whirlwind... That carriage had some incredible force."

"You alive, Pops?"

"D-*Damn* you... So that really *was* High-Speed Jonathan... *Cough!* To think the guild would hire someone like *that*. I guess the labor shortage really is...hitting...everywhere..."

As his consciousness gradually faded, Zelos became convinced:

The driver of that crazy carriage was indeed the summoner who'd run him over back in *Swords & Sorceries*.

As doubts swirled in Zelos's mind about this individual—his natural enemy, or perhaps his *sworn* enemy, who'd not only ended up in this world but had also been hired by the mercenaries' guild to boot—his vision gradually faded to black.

"Oh. He's dead..."

"What do we do? Do we bury him?"

"We should pray for him first. Burying him can come later."

"Yeah. Bet we wouldn't be able to eat him anyway, and we don't want him turning into a zombie. May this poor sinner's soul find rest..."

"*AAAAAA-MENNNNNN!*"

The kids were terrible.

For some reason, they were each holding their sword and dagger in their hands, and overlapping them to form a cross. It seemed like one of them could finish him off at any moment now.

Zelos might have had cheat skills, but he was no vampire.

"*Ch-Children?!* Don't just kill him off! He's still alive! And what's with that weird way you were praying?!"

"Oh. So he didn't die from that? Sir Zelos must be sturdier than he looks."

Only one person here was actually worried for poor Zelos.

Luceris proceeded to get mad and chase the children, who ran away at full speed.

Getting spanked, if nothing else, was something that scared them. They'd prefer to avoid it, if they had any choice in the matter.

* * *

"*Ugh...* Where am I...?"

When Zelos came to, he was lying down next to a tree so enormous it'd be hard to estimate its age.

Luceris was there too, sleeping with her back to the tree.

And Zelos, embarrassingly enough, had his head resting on her lap. Well...it was a mix of embarrassment and happiness.

"So I fell unconscious at the hunting ground... I guess I'm lucky there weren't any nasty sorts around. Would've been bad if goblins or orcs or something had shown up. Still, though, I never would've expected *him* to be in this world..."

The name "High-Speed Jonathan" was famous among *Swords & Sorceries* players. But this name was only something that those who'd seen him had started calling him; nobody knew what his name *really* was.

He was an elusive individual; he showed up unexpectedly, always with his face hidden, and he used the Camouflage skill to intentionally alter his status screen. Aside from the fact that he was a summoner with bizarre behavior, he was a complete mystery.

At one point, people had wondered whether he was a moderator or something sent by the people who ran the game. That was just one of many different theories.

Plenty of people had ended up as victims of his crazed behavior—and Zelos, as a reminder, had been one of those victims himself.

"Anyway... A girl her age really shouldn't be sleeping out in a

place like this. What if some scoundrel passing by assaulted her?"

Neither of the two had really managed to sleep last night, so perhaps she'd just fallen asleep now because of how tired she was.

This was a hunting ground, though. And there was no shortage of unsavory mercenaries who'd steal or assault without hesitation, so it was pretty dangerous to sleep out here unprotected.

Zelos got up and checked his gear, just in case anything *had* been stolen. But he was relieved to see it was all still there.

"Mmm... Ngh... Huh? Where am I...?"

"Ah—you're awake. It's a little careless of you to sleep at the hunting ground, you know?"

"Sleep? Uh... H-Hwah?! Z-Zelos?! Um... Are you..."

"I'm fine, fortunately. Never would've expected *him* to be a member of the mercenaries' guild, though..."

"Was that carriage driver someone you knew?"

"Well... He ran over me like that once before, a long time ago. It was him, I'm *sure* of it..."

Even Zelos didn't want to relive that memory. In fact, if he had it his way, he'd never encounter the man again.

"Um... If he *is* an acquaintance of yours, then do you think giving him a warning might stop him from being so reckless in the future?"

"He's not the sort of guy we'd be able to stop with a warning. In fact, take a look..."

Zelos was pointing to a little farther ahead in the forest, where—

"*AAAAAAH!*"

"*GE-BLAAAAAARGH!*"

"*CHUBLAPLAAAAAAGH!*"

"Yer in the way! Make room, ya shitbags! No one, and I mean *no one*, is allowed to stand in front of me! Ya get knocked over by me honeys and start cryin'? Serves ya right, ya *fuckin' monkeys*! *Grah hah hah hah hah hah hah!*"

The carriage was moving terrifyingly fast, sending both hunting mercenaries and monsters flying as it rattled along.

This particular carriage, after all, was pulled by sleipnirs, a type of sacred beast that boasted the highest land speed of any creature around. They were the wildest of wild horses, and once they started

galloping, there was no stopping them.

There was violence in the hunting ground, and it wasn't from any hunting. Violence caused not by monsters, but by human hands...

"For what it's worth, I think his job at the moment is meant to be helping transport monsters that people have defeated... But does that really look to you like someone that'll do what other people ask him to do?"

"No, I... I can't imagine it. And when he's going that fast, people don't even get the chance to try to dodge the carriage. It's horrible..."

"There are a lot of people who've fallen victim to him in massive raids. He went just as fast as he was going now, knocking people fighting on the front line all over the place as he charged straight at a horde of demon and orc troops... And what makes it all the more strange is that he's a summoner."

Zelos probably shouldn't have been the one to criticize someone else for that, but that wasn't stopping him.

This summoner had left countless victims in his wake in *Swords & Sorceries*, and now it seemed like he was doing just the same in this world. It was impossible to say what his aims were—though however you looked at it, he and Zelos were two birds of a feather.

"Well, leaving him aside for a moment... I wonder where the children have gotten off to?"

"They all split up and went hunting after you got sent flying."

Zelos sighed. "I should be able to tell where they are, so let's take a lap around the hunting ground."

"Y-Yes... Let's do that, then."

And so the two of them decided to set off together, maps in hand, in pursuit of the children who'd gone off ahead. In the process, they simply left behind the mercenaries who'd just gotten hit by the berserk carriage... Zelos and Luceris could be pretty heartless themselves.

The mercenaries were left groaning in pain on the ground, calling for help.

* * *

Group 1: Ange, Kaede, and two coccos.

Ange and Kaede—the two girls among the orphan group—had paired up. Each was accompanied by a cocco too: one black-belt cocco and one kendo cocco, two subspecies of the wild cocco. Together, the party was walking through the forest.

Maybe this group was a little lacking in its scouting ability, but, as a high elf, Kaede could make up for that, so they'd been able to make it a decent way into the forest without running into any monsters they didn't want to meet.

Elves' capabilities improved dramatically in forests. You could think of it as a sort of terrain-based advantage.

The two of them were looking for a certain kind of bipedal monster with piglike faces: orcs.

Orcs vaguely resembled humans, and they were smart enough to use weapons. Despite their appearance, they were formidable—and they had tough, coarse hair covering their entire bodies, giving them a solid defense as well. Behaviorally, they were incredibly aggressive. And they were famous for their perversion, since they'd assault members of other species, use them to reproduce, and start the cycle anew.

After a short while, Ange and Kaede found the monsters they were looking for and quickly hid themselves between the trees.

But then they noticed some mercenaries already fighting one of the orcs. It looked like the children had been beaten to the punch.

"What do we do, Kaede? They're already fighting."

"Mm... But it seems to be quite the burden for those mercenaries already, and there appear to be three other orcs as well. I imagine they will eventually conclude they cannot win, and then they will retreat."

While Kaede continued to hide, she had her hand on her katana, and she was also ready to fire her bow at a moment's notice.

And just as Kaede had expected, the mercenaries suddenly began running away. They'd decided they couldn't win against the orcs; they were only beginners, after all. If nothing else, they'd at least had the presence of mind to make some space with a feint before running away.

"There they go... Mm?"

"The orcs are comin' this way now! What do you wanna do?"

"We will handle two of them ourselves. The coccos can take the other two."

"Bo-caw!" ("Understood!")

The coccos rushed forward like a hurricane, intercepting the orcs who were trying to join up with each other.

"Bok-aaaaaa!" ("Great Wind Thrust!")

"Co-keh, co-keh!" ("Rising Chicken Flash!")

One of the orcs was hit by a powerful blow that slammed it against a tree, while another had its belly ripped open in an instant.

The coccos were merciless. The embodiment of "one hit, one kill." Though maybe these opponents here were just too weak for them...

Kaede charged at one of the orcs coming toward her and Ange, fluidly drew her sword, and swung in one smooth motion, landing a blow without delay.

"*GIVE ME YOUR HEAD!*"

This elf girl was dangerous stuff.

Her attack cut the orc's head clean off, including the cervical vertebrae. A fountain of blood spurted from the wound.

In a single flash of light, the orc had departed the realm of the living.

"*Hyah!* Darkwind Arrow!"

Ange's arrow struck the orc between the eyes. Then, right as the orc was screaming in pain, Kaede immediately closed in on it.

As she did, she drew her wakizashi and tore the orc's carotid artery in a single motion.

Orcs might have had impressive regeneration, but that didn't mean it was easy for them to heal a rupture in a major artery.

The orc collapsed from blood loss, and Kaede delivered the finishing blow with a stab to its forehead.

"Guess that's it?"

"Mm... I feel as if I have leveled up, but it does not seem like I have become all that much stronger."

"Apparently it doesn't go up by much unless the monster's a higher level than you, y'know?"

“I see... So this is what people mean when they talk about inequality.”

Perhaps she was missing the broader picture here, but in a sense, she was right. Levels determined a lot in this world.

“I wanna hunt something that fights back a bit more. You too, right?”

“Indeed. I would call these foes underwhelming, but even that would be too high praise.”

Considering how abnormally high Ange’s and Kaede’s skill levels were, they only had two real options if they wanted to properly raise their overall levels: They would need to defeat stronger monsters, or defeat a whole lot of monsters one after another.

Big monsters *did* occasionally appear around here, but any that did were usually taken down by the local mercenaries before long. It was up to luck whether these two would encounter any.

“Huh? Did... Did that rock just move?”

“A rock? Mm... Do you mean that one?”

There were stones and rocks lying all around the forest, but Ange had just spotted one of them moving.

Coming out of the rock were legs covered by a hard shell—revealing what the “rock” really was. And on closer look, there was more than just one.

They looked like hermit crabs, but they had a distinct mottled pattern of red and green on their shells. They were creatures called rockshells.

Rockshells were hard-shelled monsters that camouflaged themselves as stones or rocks and scavenged animal corpses. They were also known as “the cleaners of the hunting ground.” Their flesh made for good food, but it was covered by a sturdy shell that made them difficult to take down—and fighting them would really wear down your weapons, so hunters tended to hate them.

“Swords and arrows probably won’t do much against these things, right?”

“Crushing weapons would likely be a better match, but unfortunately, we have none of those with us.”

Slashing weapons wouldn’t do much to break through the

monster's tough shell; you wouldn't achieve much apart from chipping your blade.

As Ange and Kaede continued worrying about how to beat the rockshells with the weapons they had on hand...

"Co-*caaaw*!" ("Flowing Chi Palm!")

"Ooh!"

The black-belt cocco hit one of the monsters with an attack made to destroy the target from its inside out. Now, the two of them understood how they would have to deal with these things. The cocco had opened their eyes.

If slashing wouldn't work, they would just have to attack with blunt force to damage their targets from the inside out. They *had* been training in close-quarters combat, so it was nothing too new to them.

"Now I understand. Doing that should allow us to win."

"There are a whole lot of them here... Time to earn some money! ♪"

Due to their tasty meat, rockshells were in high demand. Moreover, their shells could be used to make weapons and armor, and their blue blood was treasured as an alchemy ingredient. They were pretty popular for their materials.

They were a real pain to work with, though, which had left many a crafter in tears. Ultimately, whatever rockshell products people made—food, gear, or potions—all fetched a fair price.

Rockshell gear was seen as a gateway to success, a way for rookie mercenaries to prove that they'd made it in the world.

And right now, those very rockshells were rushing toward the two girls.

The girls were bare-handed too, so the coccos were keeping a wary eye on their surroundings. But...

THUD! BOFF! THWOCK! CRACK!

However thick the shells covering the monsters' bodies were, they didn't have any way to defend against attacks that directly damaged their insides. The children had no problem destroying them all with powerful kicks or punches.

The rockshells' defense was meaningless in the face of attacks

that sent mana rushing into their bodies at the moment of impact.

Training with Zelos's high-level coccos had really improved the children's talents by leaps and bounds.

These girls had a frightening future ahead of them.

"Okay. I guess that does it. So...do we just use a flare now?"

"Yes. Then once we have cleaned up here, let us head farther into the forest."

Ange picked up a flare, read the attached instructions, held the flare above her head, and pulled the string.

An explosion shot up with a *POOF!*, scattering blue smoke about as it soared into the sky.

Before long, the two of them started to hear a crazed laugh, and a carriage thundered toward them at insane speed.

The guild's cargo carriages sure were fast. Or maybe it was just this one in particular...

By the end of the day, dead rockshells had been delivered to Mobville en masse.

This marked the debut of those who would later come to be known as the S-rank mercenaries Ange the Red and the Slaughter Princess.

It was said that the mercenaries' guild gave them a standing ovation upon their return.

Both for the delivery of so many rockshells, and for the pair's promising futures...

* * *

Zelos and Luceris were walking around the forest looking for the children.

Each child wore a ring that gave off something like a GPS signal, so by referencing that against a map, Zelos and Luceris had at least a vague idea of what area they were all in.

"*Hyaaah!*"

Luceris gave a cute battle cry as she swung her morning star down to crush an insect monster.

With her kite shield on her back, she was smashing up a swarm

of thick-shelled monsters called horn beetles.

These monsters were third-rate in terms of the materials they gave you, and their meat tasted indescribably bitter, so they weren't fit for consumption either. They were unpopular enough that nobody really hunted them, then—and because of that, they'd multiplied to great numbers. Swarms of them would get in people's way on hunts; they were seriously a pain.

Still, at least they gave some solid XP.

"All you can get from these monsters is magic stones... And they're not even good ones. Makes sense people hate the damn things."

"There are a lot of them, though. And they're a good way of building up experience, aren't they?"

"Sure, but that's *all* they're good for. Selling their magic stones just gets you chump change; it's not even worth the effort it takes to kill them. It's a different story if you're an alchemist who can fuse their magic stones together."

With an alchemist's abilities to fuse, compress, and transmute, even low-quality magic stones could be turned into high-quality ones. However, doing so required a lot of the inferior magic stones, so rather than toiling away to collect that many, it was quicker to just take out a higher-level monster instead and get a high-quality magic stone that way.

And alchemists in this world thought the same way, so it wasn't often that they created superior magic stones through transmutation.

"Well, putting that aside, let's at least gather up the stones..."

Zelos gathered up the magic stones from the defeated horn beetles and put them into a bag.

Luceris wasn't good at taking apart bodies.

Perhaps that made sense for someone who was a sister in a religious order. Though it was a little strange, considering how she was able to fillet fish.

"Oh— Zelos! Behind you!"

"Huh? Is there somethi— *GEBLORGH!*"

"*Grah hah hah hah hah!* This ain't the place for a secret

rendezvous, ya sacks of shit! Get run over, fucker! Anyone who gets in my way, gets *DESTROOOOOOYED*!"

Thuthump, thuthump, thuthump...

The same carriage had again sent Zelos flying as it shot through the forest.

And it really *was* High-Speed Jonathan driving it.

On seeing Ange's flare, he'd rushed there at mach speed. Zelos had become a casualty along the way.

"*Noooooooooooo!* Zelos?!"

Luceris's devastated scream echoed through the forest.

If you included Zelos's days in *Swords & Sorceries*, this marked his third time getting hit by the same guy's carriage.

Just before Zelos slipped into unconsciousness, he traced a dying message in the dirt with his hand: *JONATHAN*.

Chapter 10: The Old Guy Learns the Harsh Reality of Average Mercenaries

"Gu-grah!"

"Ngh..."

Luceris faltered a little behind her kite shield as she blocked the goblin's ferocious club swing. She wasted no time, though, in putting all her strength into her legs to push back. She leaned into her shield, stopping the goblin's momentum dead in its tracks and then breaking the creature's balance.

The goblin fell to the ground, and Luceris made full use of the opportunity to attack.

"*Hyah!*"

THWA-CRACK!

An underhand swing of her morning star hit the goblin clean on its chin, smashing the creature's jawbone to pieces with a shudder-worthy sound. Then she spun around, pummeling a different goblin that had snuck up on her from behind.

The new indent in the goblin's ugly face only made it look all the uglier.

But just as she was busy dealing the finishing blow, *another* goblin rushed at her.

"*Gyoh!*"

"Behind me?!"

The goblin leaped up to assail her from behind. It might have been a short little thing, but it sure could jump.

Yet Luceris wasn't about to be outdone. The instant she turned around, she leaped into the air herself and let out a somewhat unexpected cry as she hit the goblin with a splendid knee strike:

“Heave-ho!”

She’d been joining the children and the coccos in their training from time to time, and it showed—she’d definitely gotten better at hand-to-hand combat.

“Huh? A vacuum-jump knee kick?!” Zelos said, retorting with a meme so ancient it was practically fossilized. Still, the fact that Luceris’s kick had brought it to mind at all showed just how well she’d executed it.

She’d moved almost like a Muay Thai user from a fighting game; it was hardly the sort of attack you’d expect from a saintly-looking young woman like her. The gap was just insane.

But that wasn’t all. Once the goblin was left writhing on the ground in pain, she didn’t hesitate to finish it off with a blow with her blunt weapon.

If Luceris ever *did* get married, Zelos realized, whoever her husband was would have to watch out for an ass whooping.

“Phew...” Luceris sighed. “The goblins around here are rather strong, aren’t they? I actually broke a sweat.”

“Uh, actually, it looked like you were having a pretty easy time of things just now... And you sure didn’t waste any time finishing them off.”

If she was a saint, she was quite the violent one.

“Still... Goblins, eh?” Zelos continued. “Don’t get much for beating those, unfortunately.”

“They might have only been monsters, but this was still a fight to the death, Zelos. I feel like you should think less about what you *gain* from the act and more about the moral issue of killing them.”

“I get it, but... *Goblins* are...you know...”

Zelos and Luceris had come across these goblins while they were walking, and Luceris had fought them in earnest.

She’d figured she might as well take the opportunity to level up.

But you couldn’t get any materials from goblins apart from their magic stones. Plus, there was a rule: If you killed any goblins, you had to either burn their bodies with magic or bury them in a hole.

Considering all that, mercenaries weren’t fond of goblins. It would’ve been nice if they at least had metal weapons for people to

loot, but no...

"Really, though, I wonder where those kids have gotten off to? We've been looking for quite a while now—I'm amazed we *still* haven't found any of them..."

The two of them had been pursuing the orphans, who'd eagerly split up throughout the hunting ground. But they had yet to find even a single one.

"I'm sure they're safe, at least—just about anything that tries to attack them is going to meet its demise. In fact, I feel sorry for any monsters that run into them. If we don't find the kids soon, I can see them doing some crazy stuff. Heck, they might have done it already."

"Y-You're right... I wouldn't even be surprised if they've taken on a blood bear. The longer we take to find them, the more they'll keep escalating, going after larger and larger prey..."

Zelos and Luceris weren't concerned for the reasons you might have expected.

They had no real worry about whether or not the children were safe. But what *did* worry them was that the children might be going scorched earth against the denizens of the forest.

It just went to show how good the kids had gotten at fighting—as well as how cunning they could be.

Their training with the coccos had allowed them to far surpass what was considered normal in this world.

"Before anything else, I suppose I should deal with these goblin corpses. Some sort of disease might start spreading if we just leave them here."

"Thanks. I can't use magic, so having somebody around who can is convenient at times like this."

"You *can* use it, though. Heck, do you want to try and learn it now? Your job might end up changing to Holy Mage, mind you."

Holy Mages had mastered both healing and magic. Their attack magic wasn't quite as strong as a regular mage's, though, and their healing magic fell a little short of a priest's. As a jack-of-all-trades, master of none, they hadn't exactly been a popular choice in *Swords & Sorceries*.

Not to mention, even if a Holy Mage learned a melee job skill on the side, their defensive abilities and their melee combat abilities would be atrocious. Combine that with a baseline defense stat no better than that of a regular mage, and getting hit by attacks could prove fatal for them. Regular mages were more user-friendly; at least they could get better in melee combat by learning a melee job skill.

If you were going to be a Holy Mage, you'd be better off just practicing a crafting job on the side.

"Um... I feel like doing that could get the Inquisition on my tail..."

"If it does, just let me know and I'll go beat them up myself. I bet they're just a bunch of blind believers who spend all their time on scripture anyway. A bunch of nutjobs who refuse to listen to what other people have to say. Every one of them."

"How can you be so confident about that? Do you have some sort of prejudice against religion?"

"I just don't trust the Four Gods. That's all it is, really."

Zelos saw the Four Gods as enemies. And that meant any blind believers of the Four Gods would be his enemies too.

Besides, history showed that no group going around calling itself "the Inquisition" would ever listen to what a mage had to say; priests and mages had always been on bad terms. Zelos figured any encounter with them was practically guaranteed to turn into a fight.

In fact, he was convinced they'd immediately accuse him of some trumped-up charge and raise their swords at him. Maybe he could justify it, but he *was* prejudiced against them, that much was true.

"Well, then, I suppose I'll get rid of this garbage. *Fire.*"

"'Garbage'? I'd prefer if you at least called them 'corpses'... I mean, I understand what you're referring to, but—how should I put it—your wording just bothered me a little..."

As Zelos burned the bodies, an unpleasant smell began to waft throughout the forest.

Goblin flesh smelled bad. And when you burned it, it got so disgusting that anyone nearby would want to vomit.

Ultimately, goblins didn't give any useful materials *and* they were a pain in the ass even after they'd died.

But now, at least, the two of them could move on. They got back to walking around the hunting ground in search of the orphans.

* * *

Group 2: Johnny and a cocco.

Johnny—a boy with longish hair tied in a messy ponytail—crouched in his armor among the bushes, surveying his surroundings, and held his breath.

He could see five mercenaries and ten armored orcs. The mercenaries were surrounded, clearly at a disadvantage.

What should I do? Is this the sort of thing where I should go in and save them? That's a lotta *orcs, though...*

Johnny was calmly analyzing the situation.

Even if he leaped in to help the mercenary group, the orcs would still have the numbers. At the same time, he could hardly bring himself to just abandon the mercenaries.

But as much as he wanted to provide backup, he knew he was still only a child. He wasn't omnipotent.

With him was his "buddy," a black cocco. It held its breath just like Johnny, waiting for an opportunity to spring from the bushes.

This hunt was intended as a way for Johnny and the others to practice gathering information and testing their fighting styles; he didn't want to just barge ahead with some stupid plan. Back at the guild, he'd heard plenty of horror stories about how badly that could end up.

Instead, Johnny had a better idea. He sent a hand sign to tell his buddy the plan: They would vanish into the vegetation as they circled around, then launch a surprise attack from behind. He just had to hope the mercenaries would hold out until then.

"Shit! Are we... Are we just screwed?"

"What're you saying? Look at those big swings they're making! They're leaving themselves wide open! All we need to do is stay calm, and we'll manage to open up a path somehow!"

"You say that, but there are so many of them... And I'm almost outta arrows~!"

"M-My mana's almost..."

"If we can just take down two more..."

The mercenary party consisted of two swordsmen, one tank, one archer, and one mage. It was a pretty standard composition.

It seemed like they might not have the skills to hold their own, though; their movements were all over the place. It felt like something major was missing from their party.

That was what Johnny thought, at least, as he watched them fight. But he couldn't figure out exactly *what* the missing piece was.

Given his lack of experience, it was impressive that he'd even picked up on the general issue.

Okay. I'm behind them now. All that's left is to...

Having slipped through the ring of orcs along with his buddy, Johnny sent another hand sign. This one was the signal to split up—one going left, the other right—and begin their assault. And as soon as he sent the sign, he almost felt like he could see the cocco...*smile*?

It was only a chicken, of course; it didn't really have facial expressions. But he just had a feeling.

Johnny and the cocco split up, and began their plan to safely take out the orcs, one by one.

He wouldn't be using a sword, but rather a hefty survival knife.

Just gotta start with one...

Johnny held his breath and snuck up behind the orc's back, knife in hand.

He waited for the perfect timing, leaped up at the monster from behind, and used his momentum to plunge his knife into its head.

"*Gwooorgh...*"

Even a big, tough monster would die from a single hit if you struck its weak point. Johnny had executed the perfect surprise attack.

Right. Now for that *one...*

These were the same stealth techniques Johnny had practiced on strangers walking around town—and he was making full use of them. He set his sights on his next target.

He was less of a mercenary and more of an assassin. This was a

dirty way to fight.

But in a critical situation like this, with lives on the line, bravery and cowardice meant squat. Nature was a harsh mistress, with only one rule: kill or be killed. And the one who'd taught him that was good 'ol "Pops," the man who lived in a house just behind the church.

Johnny was a cunning child, but he still had a child's pure heart.

He attacked the next orc from behind too. Following what he'd been taught, he made sure to cut deep into its neck from behind. It was an impressive takedown.

As soon as he'd carried out the attack, he dashed away and hid among the vegetation again, hoping to avoid the spurt of orc blood. Meanwhile, his cocco buddy had taken out two orcs itself, so at this point, there were only six orcs left. Maybe now the mercenaries would notice they had a chance after all, and use this opportunity to mount a comeback?

"Whoa..."

"What's... What's happening?"

"The orcs are—*tripping*?"

Or not. The mercenaries weren't rallying; they were just *confused*. The orcs were similarly on guard—they stopped trying to fight, and started looking around the area.

Ultimately, Johnny had just put *both* sides of the fight on high alert. He'd miscalculated big time.

C'mon... I gave you a chance! Use it! Kill the orcs! What are you just standing there for?!

You couldn't really blame the mercenaries for being on alert after such an unexpected turn of events. After all, they hadn't even realized there was someone else here helping them out. Still, if they were the sort of people to just stop in their tracks when something like this happened, their future chances of survival might not be great.

What they *should* have been doing was making a swift decision and acting on it—either taking the opportunity to escape or using it to defeat the orcs while they were in disarray.

One inattentive moment could mean death for a mercenary—that

was another thing Zelos had taught Johnny.

Mmm... Well, whatever. Guess I don't have much of a choice.

Johnny scanned his surroundings again, and set his sights on an orc that was separated from the rest of the group.

He left the vegetation, quickly closed the gap, and sent a mana-imbued palm strike flying toward the monster's big, round belly.

"Exploding Chi Palm!"

The orc—a monster more than two meters tall—was launched into the air. The thunderous shock wave of mana from Johnny's attack had ruptured the monster's internal organs and blasted it upward, taking both its consciousness and its life. It probably hadn't even had the time to register its own death.

That made this an instant-kill technique, which defeated a target without making it suffer. Quite the merciful attack, really.

"That's a... A *child*?!"

"Y-You're kidding... Did he take out the other orcs too?!"

"So strong... When *we* were that age, we were just... *Fuck!* Fuck it all..."

Learning the identity of their savior came as a real shock to the mercenaries.

And their words implied a sense of anguish too.

Johnny was almost old enough to be considered an adult in this world, but his years of poverty and malnutrition had stunted his growth, making him look quite a bit younger than he really was. It seemed like the mercenaries here were struggling to accept that such a petite young boy could take out all those orcs.

"Bok." ("Enjoy your stay in hell...")

Then to pour salt onto the wound, a black shadow closed in behind an orc at turbo speed before stabbing at the monster's ear canal with the tip of a black wing. The black cocco only needed one attack before the orc was dead.

This cocco was an angel of death. A hunter in the night. A cold professional. It was mostly just here to watch out for Johnny, but it was damn impressive in its own right. And its attack had been both fast and precise. It was at this moment that the mercenaries' notions of common sense went completely out the door.

"I-Is that a...a *cocco*?! But it's pitch-black..."

"What did it... What did it do? It looked like it just flew past the orc, but now the orc's lying there dead..."

The mage and the archer—both of them women—looked like they couldn't believe what had just happened before their eyes.

"Hey—can you all stop gawking and take down some orcs?" Johnny said. "There are still four left, you know."

That drew a joint response from the five mercenaries: "Oh..."

This was a hunting ground, after all, where the smallest slipup could cost you your life. Sure, the five of them were flabbergasted, but there were still monsters to worry about.

Plus, unlike goblins, orcs were tough. Their attacks were so strong that a single blow could easily take your arm. And even if you took a bunch of them out, they didn't lose heart and flee.

"R-Right! Just a little longer! Let's finish this now!"

"Y-*Yeaaaaaahhhhhh*!"

Now that they knew there was a way to survive, the mercenaries rallied and got straight to advancing on the orcs. But...there was a sense that they were really pushing themselves here.

Once Johnny saw them start fighting again, he figured there was no need for him to keep providing backup. He got straight to retrieving the magic stones from the orcs he'd defeated.

It didn't take long for the mercenaries to wrap up the fight and shoot a flare into the evening sky.

And shortly after that, crazed laughter could be heard coming from the distance as a carriage hurtled toward their location.

* * *

Zelos was relying on his tracking indicator to find the children, but he still hadn't managed to come across any of them.

The kids simply refused to cooperate and stay in one place; they were moving constantly. They were probably just too absorbed in their hunting. At this rate, Zelos could go forever without actually finding them.

As Zelos and Luceris continued to follow in their tracks, a carriage

thundered past them once again. High-Speed Jonathan sure was busy today.

And just as usual, it seemed like he was leaving victims in his wake.

"*NOOOOOO!* Cain! Open your eyes!"

"Get a grip! Don't you go dying on us here, you bastard! We're gonna make our dreams come true, right?!"

"Don't let it all end in a place like this! You've still got a score to settle with me, don't you?!"

"Stay with me! What would I say to Yulia if I came back without you?!"

"Don't die! I'm begging you! Don't leave me all alone!"

Wails of grief could be heard from all around the hunting ground.

It sounded like High-Speed Jonathan was active on that front too.

Zelos stared silently into the distance, not sure what to say.

"Um... Zelos? Didn't you say that carriage driver was an acquaintance of yours?"

"Just getting *hit* by him doesn't make him my acquaintance, you know? I've never even spoken with him before."

The two of them weren't exactly friends. And the last thing Zelos wanted was to take responsibility for the guy's crazy antics.

Besides, what would have even been the point in Zelos asking him to change his ways? He hardly seemed like the kind of man who would listen to what anyone had to say.

"Now, at least one of them should be... Ah. *There* we are."

As Zelos scanned his surroundings, he spotted a group of five mercenaries, plus Johnny and a black cocco.

The mercenary group was giving Johnny their profuse gratitude, with the young man who seemed to be the group's leader exchanging a firm handshake with the boy.

Luceris went running up to Johnny.

"Johnny! So *this* is where you were. We finally found you."

"Oh, Sister. Took you a while, huh? The orcs are all dead already."

"Orcs?! You were fighting against *orcs*?! You're not... You're not *hurt*, are you?"

"Aww, you're such a worrywart~. I caught 'em off guard, and

honestly, they weren't all they're cracked up to be! No idea what would've happened if I'd tried to fight 'em head-on, though."

Johnny was proud of what he'd managed to do, but he wasn't being conceited.

He was just reporting the facts—but it still left the others worried.

Orcs were *strong*, after all, and they had high defense to boot. They could even form hordes sometimes, so in the right situation, they could be incredibly dangerous.

"By the way... Do you know where the other children have gotten to? I don't see them anywhere around here."

"You really *are* a worrywart, huh, Sister? My guess is they'd just be...hunting somewhere else, right? By the way, Pops—I made sure to be careful and take 'em all out one by one. It was actually pretty easy, y'know?"

"Given your skills, I suppose you *would* have had a fairly easy time with something like orcs. Especially seeing as you had a cocco there to guard you too."

Zelos didn't distinguish between his evolved coccos; he just used "cocco" as a blanket term for all of them.

The black cocco was a new variety, specializing in stealth, that had taken a certain evolution from an archer cocco; the other evolution available was called a shadow cocco. Both specialized in highly mobile stealth attacks.

The black cocco also excelled at ranged attacks with a bow; clearly, this thing was an assassination specialist. It looked like it wasn't just Ukei, Senkei, and Zankei anymore; Zelos had ended up with *more* special evolutions among his coccos.

Those three, by the way, had evolved by now into forms called an "ultimate force-master cocco," an "ultimate darkness-master cocco," and an "ultimate blade-master cocco."

Perhaps their training with Zelos had allowed the birds to go through these unusual evolutions. Could creatures in this world evolve quicker by facing off against strong opponents?

As a sidenote, the coccos didn't actually look any different after they evolved, so Zelos would have no idea it had even happened until he used Appraisal on them. It wasn't like video games where

creatures would shine when they evolved.

"Um... Excuse me," a hesitant young man called out.

"Mm? What is it?" Zelos responded.

The man seemed to have a fair bit of experience as a mercenary, but he looked exhausted.

In fact, it wasn't just him, and it wasn't just exhaustion. Zelos sensed that *something* was heavily weighing on him and his comrades.

"This boy here... He just saved all of our lives. Are you his guardian?"

"Not quite, but... Well, something along those lines. Still—he *saved* you, you said? Surrounded by orcs, were you?"

"Yes. My comrades were this close to losing their lives. Thank you so much. I don't know what we would have done..."

"It's not like *I* was the one who saved you, you know... If you're going to thank anyone, thank Johnny here."

All of the mercenaries in this group were young, maybe only about three years older than Johnny.

It was normal for mercenaries to take their time before they started squaring off against orcs. This whole situation went to show just how fast the orphans were growing compared to your average mercenaries.

Mmm... I suppose this is about what you can expect from your average mercenaries. Is everyone around me just an exception to the rule or something?

Zelos was trying to correct his understanding of the world.

Normal mercenaries wouldn't put themselves into risky situations; they'd always try to operate with the utmost safety. Of course, that didn't mean they'd always *succeed*, but they *did* make sure to be careful, and that was doubly true when hunting monsters.

They were nothing like Zelos, who'd bind vicious monsters with magic and then just start beating them up. And they *certainly* wouldn't let someone else deal the finishing blow to a monster to help them level up; they'd make sure to take the experience for themselves so they could get stronger. If anything, this young mercenary man had a smarter approach than Zelos.

What's going to happen if the kids level up from all this? They're already *pretty impressive. How much stronger are they going to get?*

Between sparring with Zelos's advanced coccos, tailing strangers on the street, and more, the children had leveraged their ingenuity to improve what they were capable of. In the process, they'd already acquired a number of job skills, and those skills were at fairly high levels as well.

Sometimes, having several job skills at once could unlock a new job skill. And the bonuses from that new job skill could then boost the user's physical capabilities, providing synergy that helped make them even more powerful.

In other words, these kids had the potential to turn into something insane.

Something insane—yes, just like Zelos...

"So yeah, we were surrounded by orcs, and— Um, are you listening?"

"Ah... Sorry. I just got lost in thought. The kids have some scary potential, so I was wondering about how that might end up."

"He really is strong, isn't he? How'd he even end up like that...? I can barely believe it. We've got a bunch of experience, but he's stronger than we are..."

"All I can say is that he trains every day. He learns how to fight with his fists and with weapons. He tails strangers just to practice his stealth. He uses his appearance to get information out of people. That sort of thing."

"Uh... Isn't that just crime? I mean, the 'learning how to fight' part is fine, but *stalking* is kinda..."

"It *is* a violation of privacy, I guess... Still, he doesn't actually use it for crime, fortunately."

That was the case for now, at least. But if the kids took just one step out of line, Zelos would have ended up raising some formidable criminals.

Street children often joined gangs; it was a problem all around the world. If Johnny and the others ever *did* turn to crime, they'd be a menace in more ways than one.

"Personally," Zelos said, "I'm worried he may be *too* strong. If he

has such an easy time taking out any monster he runs into, he'll just get used to winning—as long as he doesn't run into something *really* huge, that is. That may be fine for now, but if he keeps going like that, he may eventually get a big head and let his guard down."

"And then he might die—is that what you're getting at?" the young man asked. "You're right, that *does* sound dangerous..."

"If it was *only* about him dying, that'd be one thing. The real problem is if other people get caught up in it too. If his party members all die, and he's the only one left alive... Honestly, I think his heart might just break. He may be strong, but that doesn't mean he'd be able to endure seeing his friends die."

"I... I know what you mean."

The look on the young man's face gave Zelos a hunch that he'd seen an ally of his own die not long ago.

And that was backed up when he saw the rest of the party members making similar faces.

Zelos, too, could lose his head over his own power at times. With how strong he was, he wasn't always good at controlling his power.

He sorely lacked the experience to decide when to fight all out and when to pull his punches. And he was worried that if he kept fighting that way, he might someday make a terrible, irrevocable mistake.

In fact, he'd already noticed that he sometimes got careless about the lives of others in the middle of a fight. And the thought terrified him.

"Once someone dies, you'll never be able to meet them again. If it's an illness or an accident that kills them, and it happens in some place far away, you might be able to accept it. But when it happens right in front of you, in a battle..."

"You're right. When an ally dies, it's... It's tough on the ones left behind."

"This...may be a bit of a cliché thing to say, but I think you just have to give it some time. If one of your party members dies, and you're struggling to deal with it, it's probably best to just take on the simplest requests you can for a while. I know it can be hard to deal with such a big loss, but if you push yourself too hard, you could

end up losing someone else as well. That's just how mercenary work goes..."

"So you could tell, huh...? Yeah. We lost our party leader. Our childhood friend..."

"It was written on your faces. But... Yeah. It sounds like you're going through a tough time right now."

This was a heavy story, and Zelos would rather not have heard it—but he had, now. He placed a cigarette in his mouth and lit it, as if hoping the cigarette smoke could blow away this whole stifling atmosphere. But honestly, the smoke just tasted bitter to him right now.

He'd experienced the sudden loss of someone he was close to before, but it had never happened to him in a battle.

He was frustrated at himself; all he could do at the moment was try to console these young mercenaries with his offhand knowledge from movies, drama series, and light novels. He'd lived his whole life until just recently in Japan, so it only made sense he wouldn't have much experience with this kind of thing, but he still felt like he should've been able to think of something better to say after living for forty years.

"I... I want to get stronger," the mercenary said. "I don't want to see my friends die anymore."

"If you're struggling, talk it out with the rest of your party. You should at least be able to share the burden. Just don't try to shoulder it all by yourselves, whatever you do. Depending on how things go, that could lead to your party breaking up."

"Why... Why are we so weak? If we were stronger, we could've protected him..."

"I'm not going to ask you to go into specifics. After all, nothing I say is going to bring you any comfort. You just have to accept the truth—however hard that may be—and do everything you can. Just...remember that you won't be the only one struggling."

"I... I guess that's really all we can do, huh? Even though it's so hard..."

"You should all have a talk and figure out what you're going to do from now on. Losing a party member changes the way the whole

party works, especially if that person was your leader. For starters, you should determine what each of you is able to do. And make sure you don't try to just have just one person decide everything. Let me guess—you were the second-in-command, right?"

As a party formed and racked up experience, it'd inevitably end up settling on a leader and a second-in-command. Working together over time would see each person's natural role become apparent. And in the process, those who made poor, self-centered decisions tended to be demoted from the role of leader, while those capable of making calm, measured decisions would be welcomed into the role.

But fewer parties than you might think actually stuck together until they reached that point. Most either suffered internal discord due to some falling-out or another, or had one or more party members die, leaving the survivors keenly aware of their own inexperience.

And parties at that point were forced to choose one of two options: either they disbanded, or they fought on and aimed for the top.

"I don't know your exact situation, but if you want to keep being mercenaries, you have to trust your allies—there's no point trying to blame your failures on one person or another. You'll have your worries, I'm sure, but worry about them *together*. If you do, the answers will work themselves out."

"I... I hope you're right. Honestly, it feels like I'm just walking in the dark right now."

"But it's the same for your friends too, right? It'll be tough, but you should try to sit down and analyze what led to your leader dying—what mistakes you made, and why you made them. Maybe you *didn't* make any mistakes, but even then, there are all sorts of dangerous situations out there; think about them. I know it may sound cruel of me, telling you to use what happened as a learning experience, but if you don't, you'll be that much more likely to lose someone again, okay? Reality is unfair like that. Anyway, I should probably get going to look for the other kids..."

"Thanks. Sorry you had to stand here and listen to me whining. I sure am pathetic, huh...?"

"Don't worry about it. Every mercenary goes through it sooner or later. What matters is that you fight on—that's the only way you can move forward. Your weakness is nothing to be ashamed of."

Zelos knew he was sounding real high-and-mighty about now.

But at this point, he'd already learned about the party, and the heavy burden it was carrying; he knew there was no way he could just say, "Huh? You wanna know if you can get stronger? How do you expect some random old guy in the forest to answer that for you?! I'm not your counselor!"

In fact, he felt guilty for even having that thought. He wasn't quite sure how he'd gotten caught up in this bother of a situation, but he *had*, at least, tried to respond with his honest advice. Nothing he'd said was a lie.

"Now, I wonder what sort of area the other kids are in..."

Still racked by gloom and powerlessness, Zelos turned his back on the group, waved goodbye, called out to Luceris, and started heading to the next spot along with her, Johnny, and the cocco.

He had no way of knowing that just behind him, the young mercenaries were silently bowing their heads to him in gratitude.

Chapter 11: The Old Guy Has a Surprising Reunion

As the group made its way through the forest, Luceris noticed something wrong with Johnny.

He wasn't his usual wild self; he had a serious look to him, somehow, and his eyes were cast downward.

"Johnny? What's wrong?"

"H-Hey, Sister... Those guys... Their friend died, right?"

"W-Well..." Luceris hesitated, unsure how to answer.

Party members you were laughing with one day could be nothing but silent corpses the next. That was how the world of mercenaries worked.

Zelos let out a deep sigh, realizing the depressing talk wasn't over just yet.

"Yeah," Zelos said. "They lost one of their friends. And...the same thing could happen to you guys."

"But... But we're strong. We wouldn't just die like that..."

"Johnny, you need to stop thinking that way. It happens all the time: a party's being as careful as possible, and one of them still dies. You may not fully understand it right now, but I want you to remember what happened to that party."

"Z-Zelos?! You don't have to be so hard on him, do you? Surely he doesn't have to think about that sort of thing just ye—"

"He does. Especially if he and the others are going to be heading into dungeons. Dungeons are packed absolutely full of traps; they just make dying that much more likely."

It seemed like, at the very least, learning about the young mercenary party and their loss had put some fear into Johnny's heart.

But that fear would manifest as caution. As someone aiming to

become a mercenary and an independent adult, being careless in the face of mortal danger would get him killed in no time at all. So it was best that Johnny learned this lesson while he had the chance.

"Sometimes, a person can have everything prepared—techniques, physical training, information, equipment—and if it's their time to die, they'll die all the same. That's just how the world works. If he dreams about venturing into dungeons, then he *will* need to be prepared for that. He'll need to be *responsible*."

"You're... You're not wrong, but is that really something he needs to hear about right now? Sometimes, being paralyzed by fear can make people unable to do anything too. You're being too strict, Zelos."

"It's better than death, isn't it? Being a mercenary means being responsible for your own life, the lives of your allies, sometimes even the lives of strangers. I feel like it's a harsher job than you think it is."

"Have we... Have we all been naive?" Johnny asked. "We just thought that if we got strong enough, we'd be able to make our dreams come true, just like that..."

"You *have* been naive, yes. It's not the kind of job where you can expect everything to work out just because you're trying your hardest. And if one of you dies, it could completely change the dynamic you've had up until now. I want you to treat this as a learning experience, okay?"

Zelos spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, but he was half trying to convince *himself*.

Everything he was saying to Johnny applied to him as well, after all. He could really sympathize.

When it was your time to die, you died. Life came cheap in this world.

And Zelos's encounter with the young mercenaries had hammered that home anew for him.

* * *

Group 3: Laddie, Kai, and two coccos.

Laddie, the boy with a crew cut, and Kai, the chubby boy, were targeting a certain monster from the bushes.

Each of them had a cocco assigned to guard them too, but right now, those coccos were busy eliminating monsters that could interrupt the pair's hunt.

As a result, Laddie and Kai were free to focus on their quarry without concern—but the problem was the monster that lay ahead. It was a giant boar: a medium-sized monster with sharp tusks, impressive mobility, and a tough body.

But the *most* notable thing about this monster was its aggression: It would charge at anything and everything. As soon as it deemed something a potential enemy, it'd start charging right at them, and it was a lot faster than it looked. It was a hassle to deal with.

"Uh, Kai... Isn't this bigger than we thought it'd be? You sure we'll be able to take this thing down?"

"I know, but...its meat has gotta taste amazing. Besides, I...*think* we'll be okay? We've trained to deal with fast stuff, after all. No way this thing could be as fast as Ukei and the others."

"Hope you're right. I mean, this is our first hunt. I don't wanna screw it up."

The kids had had a tough time getting used to the coccos' ferocious speed when they'd sparred.

But compared to *that* speed, the giant boar was nothing to write home about. The bigger problem for the kids would be how strong and tough the monster was.

Its pelt could be sold for a hefty sum, so if possible, the kids didn't want to leave the thing riddled with holes. But as much as they would've preferred to use blunt force, they didn't have anything like a hammer on them.

"I guess we should give up on selling the pelt. Our swords and spears are gonna leave holes everywhere."

"Yeah. But if we *did* wanna target a weak spot and take it down... We'd need a one-shot kill to the head. That's the only way."

"I don't think we're up to that. Feels like it wouldn't end well..."

"Then we give up on getting a clean kill. I don't wanna get hurt."

They were being more careful than you'd expect from children.

They dreamed of living in opulence. And sure, they'd need a lot of money to make that happen—but if they got badly injured in the process of earning that money, it'd all be for nothing. The boar's magic stone alone would sell for far more than they usually got as pocket money, so they didn't need to push themselves *too* hard here.

"Okay, then. Let's get sta— Wait. Huh?"

The giant boar was suddenly looking at them and kicking at the ground.

It was about to charge.

"How'd the meat find out we're here?!"

"Hell if I know! Anyway, let's see what it does and go from there!"

It was the wind's fault. The two of them were upwind from the boar, so their smell had given them away.

Giant boars had good noses—not quite as good as wolves, perhaps, but still sensitive even to faint smells. This was a skill they'd developed to find food in nature, and it was one they shared with a lot of wild animals.

Wild animals needed good senses of hearing and smell if they wanted to defend themselves.

SQUEEEEEE!

"H-Here it comes!"

Having sniffed out its enemy with that keen sense of smell, the giant boar charged the pair at a mighty speed.

Even as it belted toward them, it continued to adjust its trajectory, trying its best to hit the children and land a devastating blow.

But that was all the more reason for Laddie and Kai to stay calm, watch its movements, dodge at the right time, and strike as it went past. *That* was how they could fight this thing.

Beginner mercenaries would almost never be able to pull off a trick like that. Most would just fall victim to the beast's mighty charge.

But of course, there were exceptions to every rule...

"N-Now!"

"*Dodge!*"

After training with the coccos on a daily basis, the children thought the boar's charge seemed almost *slow*.

They dodged with space to spare—and right as they did, they drew their shortswords from their belts and slashed at the boar, successfully landing the first hits.

They weren't *heavy* hits, though. The boar had gotten away with little more than scratches.

"G-Guess it's tougher than we thought, huh? Almost feels like my sword bounced off..."

"It's probably strengthening its body. It's not just its fur; its skin's super tough too."

"*Argh...* What do we do? If we take too long, the sun's gonna set..."

"Hmm... I guess we try to counterattack with a one-hit kill? We've got mana potions, right?"

"That's probably our only choice. We won't be able to get a proper hit in with our swords, so do we just hit it bare-handed?"

"Yeah! I was thinking the same thing. If we can KO that meat, we'll have a huge haul on our hands."

Their strategy talk didn't take long.

Wandering around the hunting ground had been all well and good, but for whatever reason, it had taken the pair a long time to actually find any prey. When they finally *had* found the giant boar, it had been fighting against some goblins. The kids had asked the coccos to chase off the goblins, but that had left just the two of them to fight the boar.

They wouldn't be able to rely on the coccos for help in this fight.

"*Raaaaaah...* Surge, my mana!"

"O Great God of Arms, I beseech your aid against my enemy! Angolmois never came..."

The boys were shouting out-of-context phrases they seemed to have picked up from somewhere or other. Apparently the otaku knowledge of heroes summoned long ago had been passed down the generations, all the way to these young children.

With how fast the giant boar had accelerated, it wasn't agile enough to turn in time. If it tried to turn any faster, it was liable to

topple over from the sheer momentum.

To make sure that didn't happen, it made a wide berth as it circled around, then charged at Laddie and Kai for a second time.

Its mobility was hard to believe given its thick, chunky body. But wild pigs and boars didn't tend to have excess flab; most of that big body was pure muscle. In human terms, this thing was *ripped*. What was more, it was strengthening its body to become even tougher than usual, boosting both its physical prowess and its defense. The boar had practically turned itself into a fleshy tank.

"Let's go, Kai!"

"Okay, Laddie!"

The two boys patiently waited for the perfect timing as the giant boar charged at them with abandon.

This would be over in a single hit. It was all riding on that.

And that included the kids. They wouldn't be coming out of this unscathed if they got hit by this charging boar.

Aware that their plan for a one-hit kill hinged on a split second, each of the two felt a bead of sweat run down their cheek.

"We're not gonna lose..."

"No one can stand up to our moves..."

SQUEEEEEE!

"Taste our ultimate attack!"

The giant boar reached the two boys.

It was the do-or-die moment. Nobody would have been able to peel their eyes away from this.

"Rising Power Fist!"

"Chain Destruction Kick!"

The boys' attacks, filled with every bit of mana they'd managed to gather up, caused the giant boar's flank to explode on impact.

With their bodies enhanced by their mana, they'd been able to land blows that surpassed their usual limits, launching the giant boar high up into the sky.

Finally, the poor pig came crashing back down to the ground.

"We're *unbeatable*! ☆"

Thrilled to have brought down such a formidable opponent, the crew-cut boy and the chubby fighter struck a pose to celebrate.

They'd made a spectacular combo...but they'd also exhausted too much mana. The pair immediately collapsed.

Drained and depressed, the boys each gulped down a mana potion as quickly as they could.

It tasted like bitter orange juice.

"Right, then... Let's start takin' it apart. Uh... Laddie? Where'd the meat go?"

"Mm? It fell into that bush over there, so..." He took a look. "*Crap!* That's not good..."

Right on the other side of the bush was a cliff. It wasn't a particularly *high* cliff, but a cliff it was—and the giant boar's body had fallen off it, into the hunting ground below.

The problem was, it could have fallen on someone down there and crushed them.

Their faces suddenly going pale, the boys could do nothing but take a nervous look down below.

* * *

Zelos, Luceris, and Johnny were moving from one part of the hunting ground to another.

The other kids were all flitting about the place as they pleased, making it difficult to get ahold of them.

One of their tracking indicators, though, was moving in the direction of Mobville.

"Based on the movement, I wonder if that's Ange and Kaede?" Zelos mused. "Whoever it is, they're taking a path back to the village. That means that up ahead of us here must be..."

"Laddie and Kai, yes?" Luceris said. "So we've finally found them."

"I think those two said they were gonna go after something big," Johnny said. "Wonder what they got?"

The search party of three people and one bird headed toward the part of the hunting ground that was returning a mana signal... But when they arrived, they were met with a smell so horrible they had to pinch their nostrils shut.

Zelos knew this smell.

"Goblins, huh...?" he said. "Does that mean Laddie and Kai took these down? But this doesn't look like *their* handiwork..."

"Oh—I see the two of them over there! It looks like they're in the middle of butchering something."

"We left an item bag with those two, so they were able to go after something big."

"You kids sure are a force to be reckoned with, huh? Wait. What's this?"

Right near the two children, Zelos spotted a woman he recognized.

It was Belladonna—the manager of the magic tool shop.

And it seemed like she'd spotted Zelos as well.

She casually waved and started walking in his direction.

"I sure wasn't expecting to see *you* here!" she said. "Er... 'Zelos,' was it? It's been a while. You haven't come by to sell any magic stones lately. Have you been busy? Doing a favor for a strange old man, perhaps?"

"Something along those lines. Specifically, it was a favor for the *current* duke, but going by the way you speak, it sounds like you're acquainted with Creston. Is that right? Are you part of the Solistia faction or something?"

"Mostly just in name, but I *do* get a lot of work from them. For example... They asked me recently to make some prototype magic gems for refrigerators. That sort of thing. And I heard your name come up as part of that too."

A refrigerator—in other words, the magic tool that Zelos had made a prototype of for his own personal use.

Creston had expressed interest in it when he'd seen it at Zelos's house, so Zelos had sent him the specifications—and before even a month had passed, Solistia Trading had started selling them. Now, they were even being used to set up cold storage at the harbor; the company seemed to have gone all in on it as a new business endeavor.

"So you've been helping make parts for those too, Belladonna? I'd imagine they want quite a lot of them..."

"Oh, you wouldn't believe it. I've been so busy, I haven't even

had time to sleep. And the only one around apart from me has been that useless employee of mine...”

“Speaking of which, I don’t see her anywhere. Did you finally fire her?”

Belladonna sighed. “Wouldn’t that be nice... But no. She’s just over there, unfortunately.”

Zelos looked in the direction Belladonna was pointing and saw a girl with a gigantic hammer, her maid uniform covered in blood, crawling out from underneath the giant boar that Laddie and Kai were taking apart.

Frankly, she looked like a zombie—a resident of evil, one could almost say.

Luceris paled at the sight, and the apprehension was clear in her voice as she asked Belladonna a question.

“Um... Is she all right? That’s a *lot* of blood...”

“Oh, she’s fine. None of that’s hers anyway. They don’t call her the ‘Bloodstained Bludgeoner’ for nothing.”

“What a horrible nickname. And you know what else is horrible? The *smell*...”

Belladonna’s bloodstained, maid-uniformed employee was walking over to them, looking like a ghost and positively reeking of blood.

“*Manageeeeeeeeer...* You’re so *meeeeeaaaaaan*! I’ll sue youuuuuu...”

And she was *sounding* like a resentful ghost too.

“Look, Kuhti, if you want to try to sue me, I won’t stop you. But I’d call on your former companions as witnesses, okay? And I’d reveal all the scandals you’ve caused at the store as well. All of them. Do you still think you could win? There are people who’ve gotten arrested by the guards because of all your false accusations, remember?”

“I... I’m sorry for getting cocky. It’s all my fault.”

Her poor ship sank instantly. She was no match for Belladonna.

There was an absolute hierarchy between the two of them; it would be impossible for Kuhti to ever win.

Though, to be fair, it was more like Kuhti just self-destructed.



Besides, even if Belladonna *did* win a legal case against her, the girl didn't have anything she could take.

At the end of the day, there'd be no point.

"I feel like we should just...pretend we never saw anything, huh?" Zelos said. "I don't want to get involved in this."

"Y-You're probably right," Luceris agreed. "I have a feeling that girl brings misfortune wherever she goes."

Luceris was unexpectedly harsh too, in her own way. But she wasn't wrong.

"Sweet—you got a giant boar!" Johnny said, calling out to the others. "We having barbecue tonight?"

"Ooh... *That* sounds good. We're almost done dressing it, but could you lend us a hand for a bit?"

"Sure. I've never done this before, though. Looks like you've finished taking the pelt off, so I guess that just leaves the meat?"

"Don't forget the innards! We can clean 'em on the way back and use 'em to make a hotpot. I feel like eating innards tonight."

The kids, for their part, were ignoring Belladonna and the others, and working energetically at butchering the boar.

Ultimately, it took until sunset for them to finish.

Chapter 12: The Old Guy Finds Out About Kuhti's Misdeeds

In hunting, a companion; in life, compassion.

Maybe that wasn't *quite* how the Murakami quote went, but it was what came to Zelos's mind as he sat with Luceris and Belladonna. Kuhti, meanwhile, was quietly munching on food at a counter seat. They hadn't realized it until now, but apparently they'd all been staying at the same inn.

To Zelos's frustration, the old lady behind the counter was staring at them like she was dying to know the full story.

Once the kids had finished butchering the giant boar, the group had returned to the Mobville mercenaries' guild and rejoined Ange and Kaede, who'd gotten back earlier. Apparently the two of them had brought back a massive haul of rockshells; the others had arrived just as the guild was heaping gratitude on the pair. It had been quite the scene.

After that, the party had made their way back to the inn for dinner—and they had *not* been expecting to see Belladonna and Kuhti again there. Coincidences like this must come in pairs.

"Really, though, I never would've expected to see you out hunting, Belladonna," Zelos said. "Are you sure it's okay to leave the store unattended?"

"Of course not. It's not like we've had any customers, though—thanks to this dolt I call my employee. At this point, I've been seriously considering just firing her. But then I thought, before I do, I may as well work her for everything she's got. I'd like to get back at least *some* of what she's cost me."

"You know, I've always thought it was strange that you hired such a terrible employee in the first place. But it sounds like you've finally decided to fire her, eh? Better late than never, I suppose..."

"I only hired her because those foolish parents of hers begged me to. They had tears in their eyes... To tell you the truth, she used to be a mercenary, and she had quite the gory nickname: the 'Bloodstained Bludgeoner.' Apparently she caused chaos everywhere she went, all without the slightest hint of remorse. She was just a good-for-nothing piece of rubbish, honestly."

"*Was?* Past tense? Isn't that *still* the case?"

"Well, you're not wrong... She's a relative, though, and I figured she'd at least be able to clean, so I gave in and hired her. But look at where it's gotten me... A rascal like her is always going to be a rascal. I can think of a hundred bad things to say about the girl, and not a single good one."

Zelos thought back to the first time he'd visited Belladonna's stop—Kuhti had immediately accused him of being a thief. It only made sense, Zelos thought, that any store whose employee leveled false accusations at its customers the moment they walked through the door would stop *getting* customers before long.

Said employee was sitting obliviously at a counter seat right now, entirely focused on wolfing down a large plate piled high with dinner. And even just from what Zelos had seen, this was already her third plate. The girl was a bigger eater than she looked.

"It, uh... It sounds like you've had it rough."

"Oh, you wouldn't *believe* it," Belladonna sighed. "Kuhti? I'm not paying for your meal, you know?"

Belladonna's surprise attack made the girl very suddenly cough out everything in her mouth, all at once:

"*BFFFFFFT!*"

And most of it landed squarely on the poor old lady, who'd just so happened to be walking behind the counter at the time.

"*Eep!* Are... Are you okay?" Luceris asked.

But who was Luceris worried about here—Kuhti, or the old lady? It was hard to tell.

"M-Manager?! What are you cutting my food budget for?! I did some work today, didn't I?!"

"Kuhti... Have you forgotten you owe me money? What makes a girl in debt order such a huge meal—and then a second, and then a

third? Not to mention the drinks—how many of those have you had now? I swear, just how shameless do you have to be...?"

"Ah. And yet you can't cut her off, because she's a relative, right...? I know how hard it can be, having to deal with thoughtless, selfish relatives..."

Zelos felt Belladonna's pain. After all, he had a real nuisance of a family member himself.

The only difference was that his relative was a scoundrel through and through, while Belladonna's wasn't really *evil*; she was just a twenty-four seven walking disaster.

Kuhti was a natural airhead, and that was the trouble. She was a hundred-percent-pure, hundred-percent-annoying *natural* at what she did.

"I know the type," Zelos continued. "You tell them to get a job, but they say there are no full-time jobs available. So they end up just doing a part-time job, but they even half-ass *that*. You warn them, but they don't even try to straighten up; then they start skipping shifts, over and over again, until eventually they just send a letter saying, *I quit*."

"Mm... But you're talking about someone who's *aware* of how self-centered they are, right? Someone who holds themselves to a different standard than everyone else. Kuhti's a little different, though. She doesn't actually *realize* how selfish she is. So she does the same things over and over again, and even when I warn her, she forgets all about it a few moments later; she never tries to work on herself. Or... Hmm. Maybe the way she forgets about it all so quickly makes her *incapable* of working on herself? She can have an absolute nightmare of a day, but by the next day, it's completely vanished from her mind. She's too optimistic..."

"So in other words, her mindset's just too positive...?" Luceris asked. "You know, I think you may be right. Take a look. She's *still* ordering more, even after what you said, and she's really wolfing it down..."

Luceris was watching as Kuhti shoveled more and more food from the huge plate into her mouth.

Kuhti couldn't pay for the meal. But by the looks of things, she'd

figured there was no point in wasting the food that was already here, so she'd decided to simply keep eating. And...then she'd ordered yet another serving, while she was at it.

Apparently her inability to pay for all this had completely slipped her mind already.

"Kuhti... You need to pay for your own food, okay? I'll cover your first plate, but the rest is on you. Don't expect me to let you run up a tab! Even if I *did*, you wouldn't pay me anyway..."

"H-Hang on! Manager?! But... But then who's going to pay for all this food?! I don't have any *moneeeeeey*~!"

"Says the one who ordered plate after plate... You got yourself into this hole, so it's up to you to get yourself out of it. But don't worry. All you have to do is go out there tomorrow and take down whole hordes of big monsters. Kill them all cleanly enough, and you should be able to sell their loot for a good price."

"Aww... Come on! How's that gonna help me pay for *this* meal, though~?!"

"Don't act like that's *my* problem! This is all on you for being so careless with money—you do know that, don't you? Why should *I* have to take responsibility for *your* carelessness?"

The pair continued to bicker.

"Are the two of them...*always* like this?" Luceris asked.

"From what I've seen before, I'd say yes," Zelos replied. "Judging by what Belladonna's saying now, I'd bet that if Kuhti ever *does* borrow money, she probably just forgets she ever borrowed it in the first place. It must make her a real pain to deal with... You know, thinking about it that way, I wonder if that moronic sister of mine was better? At least I knew she was doing it all intentionally, out of ill will..."

Luceris's question prompted Zelos to compare Kuhti with his own pain of a sister. The two of them were different, sure, but Zelos ultimately had to conclude that they were birds of a feather.

The topic was depressing him, though, so he decided to put it out of mind and down his ale. And as he did, he casually glanced over in the direction of the kids.

"Mm. So this is rockshell meat?" Kaede said. "It tastes rather

pleasant, doesn't it?"

"Yeah!" Ange replied. "You can use their shells for armor too, but they don't sell for much~. That's what someone told me, at least. Oh, but I heard the meat sells for a fair bit!"

"Someone said the monsters *I* killed are called mottled orcs," Johnny said. "No eating those, though, unfortunately..."

"Can there be good loot...*apart* from meat?" Kai asked. "Whoa. *That's* something to think about... Can you get magic stones from rockshells?"

"Yeah; apparently they're inside the shell. So they protect their weak point with their strong shells..." Laddie said. "Anyway, all *we* managed was one giant boar."

The kids were all energetically shoving food into their mouths as they went over the day's events with each other and shared their opinions. They seemed to understand the importance of exchanging information.

They'd been a whirlwind of activity today, but they still seemed to have plenty of energy left.

"I've been thinking, though... Maybe we should all be a bit more careful."

"What're you *talkin'* about, Johnny? Don't you always take the most risks out of all of us? Where's this comin' from?"

"I mean, it's just... I saved some other mercenaries today, and apparently one of their party members died recently. And...there's nothin' to say the same thing couldn't happen to us too, right?"

"Hmm... That *does* sound like it would make you think. I do believe the five of us are strong. But you are correct. If we grow too complacent in that strength, one of us may well die someday."

"*Reeeaaally?* I mean, it's *us*! *We'll* be fine, right? Just think about today—we all won easy, right?"

"There are a lot of other strong monsters out there too. So I get it. Now that I think about it—how strong *are* we, actually?"

"Mmm... Chicken. Yum."

It looked like Johnny had started thinking about the need to reevaluate his own strength. It was a good start, but there was no guarantee he was going to be able to get through to all of the

others.

For mercenaries, there was never any telling when death might strike. It probably *was* a good idea for the kids to take a good, hard look at how they measured up in the grand scheme of things. There was nothing more dangerous than baseless confidence.

"Good, good..." Zelos mused. "It seems like Johnny's experience earlier is doing wonders for him. Sure, a mercenary has to be strong, but that's not the *only* thing they need to survive; the world's not that kind. Surviving in this world is harder—more brutal—than people might expect. You know, I'm actually impressed by how well he's taking this."

"I... I really don't think I want them becoming mercenaries," Luceris said. "I've seen so many mercenaries carried into churches or other holy places. And far too often, we haven't been able to do anything to save them..."

"But it's *because* we have those people going out and risking their lives that so many *other* lives can be saved, you know?" Belladonna chipped in. "Besides, I understand why you don't want them to be mercenaries, but this is the path they've chosen for themselves. Don't you think you should be giving them your support?"

"I get where both of you are coming from," Zelos said, "and I don't think either of you are wrong. At the end of the day, this *is* the path they've chosen for themselves—but right now, while they're lacking experience, they need to be careful."

None of them could say for sure what was right and wrong here.

As long as people lived, they'd be forced to make choices, and inevitably they'd end up regretting some of those choices; that was just how reality worked. It was just that mercenaries had to make even harder choices than most—and if one of those choices led to their deaths, then— Well, that was just how things worked.

"Everyone has to become independent someday, after all," Zelos continued. "So don't you think our job as adults is to support the kids however we can, so they can make it in the world themselves? Though, yes, it'll be dangerous if they keep going at it like they are now. I won't just gloss over that."

"I suppose you're right... I know they can't stay at the orphanage

forever," Luceris said. "And I should be happy that they're ready to live their own lives. It's just..."

"You're thinking about how many young mercenaries lose their lives as soon as they *do* become independent, aren't you? Of course, there are also the ones who get a taste of the independent life, only to come crawling back before long..." Belladonna shot a glance at Kuhti, who was gulping down ale from a huge mug with such gusto that it was like she was taking a shower in the stuff.

Luceris and Zelos looked over in Kuhti's direction too. They got what Belladonna was trying to say: There were plenty of mercenaries who never really became independent, upstanding adults, even after they left the nest.

"Mmm... Yeah. You just *gotta* have a good drink after a meal~! ♪"

Apparently the word "payment" had already completely disappeared from her vocabulary.

How content her life must have been, completely oblivious to all the hassle she caused for everyone else. All sorts of misfortune could be awaiting her down the line, but here, in this moment, she was happy. Ignorance was truly bliss.

"Huh? Why are you all looking at me~? Do you... Do you want my drink? Because I'm not giving it to you, okay?!"

Ugh, Zelos and Belladonna thought together, their minds perfectly in sync. *She's such a little...*

Luceris, meanwhile, was just praying that the kids didn't grow up to be like Kuhti.

"Right," Zelos said, "I'm sure you've still all got a lot to talk about, but I think it's about time we get back to our rooms."

"Sounds good!"

"You make a fair point. Self-control is important. And improving ourselves will allow us to reach for ever higher heights."

And so the kids retired to their room in the inn.

That left Zelos and Luceris thinking. Thinking about their *own* room at the inn...

"We're...going back to our rooms?" Luceris replied with hesitation. "O-Oh..."

"Speaking of which, we were, uh..."

Yup—the two of them would be sleeping in the same room again. They were facing another night of their minds racing through what-if scenarios.

It went without saying that the two of them didn't get much sleep that night.

* * *

When Zelos woke up the next morning, bleary-eyed, it didn't take long for the old lady to start pestering him and Luceris again. She was no different from the day before.

Given that it was her second day doing this, they'd at least worked up a *bit* of an immunity to it, so they were more blunt in fending off her stubborn questions about what they'd gotten up to at night. Then, after a light breakfast, the group headed out for a stroll through the village.

The old lady had told them to do so this morning—"You only just came back from a hunt last night! Take some time off!"—and they'd listened. She meant well, as far as they could tell; she just liked to indulge in the old-lady specialty of poking her nose into things that weren't her concern.

Thinking back to the woman now, Luceris sighed. "Why does that lady at the inn have to keep asking us those strange questions? We've *told* her there's nothing like that going on..."

"People tend to stop caring about others' privacy when they get to that age. I don't think she means anything bad by it. She may just prioritize her own curiosity above everything else..."

Whatever their motives, there were a lot of individuals out there who'd ask nosy question after nosy question, trying to find out every detail of people's private lives.

When they had no ill will, you could perhaps just pass it off as pure curiosity, but that in itself could be quite the annoyance. And they tended to be stubborn about it too; you'd think they'd finally dropped a topic, only for them to suddenly bring it back up again moments later.

For better or worse, they were a force to be reckoned with, and

they didn't hold back. Even if it was *true* that nothing had happened, their innocent curiosity led them to suspect all sorts of things, making them a royal pain in the behind. In fact, the better they were as people, the worse it made the situation.

"Anyway," Zelos said, eager to change the topic. "This place is so built up it's hard to believe it's just a village. Don't you agree? I guess it just comes down to the number of merchants coming and going, but there are all sorts of different shops here, now that I take a look."

"You're right. Look—there's a bookstore! Paper's rather expensive, but it looks like they have a lot of interesting books. I wonder if I should buy something while I'm here?"

"Huh... Yeah, you're right. Printing technology's not too advanced here, so I'm surprised they're selling manga... Wait. *Manga?!*"

Mm-hmm. There sure was manga on those shelves.

Not to mention there was a book that looked like a rip-off of a shonen manga magazine on one shelf, and a weekly one on that other shelf, a shojo one over there... And on closer look, he even saw piles of what seemed like...a particular flavor of fan fiction in the back, displayed right out in the open for anyone to walk up and start reading. Zelos couldn't help but see some problems with that.

He found it scary to think of how that sort of book might influence any kids who unknowingly picked one up. And there were a *lot* of those books here.

Every book carried a sash with the Okamoto Taro quote, "Art is an explosion!" And while it wasn't wrong to call manga culture a form of art, when it appeared in *this* world, it looked so out of place as to be kind of inappropriate.

Zelos picked up a book and opened it to see what was inside. But what he saw just about gave him an aneurysm.

The way it trampled all over the original work was bad enough to make him burst into tears. Bad enough that he felt real *anger* begin to bubble up from inside him.

Why would they do something like this to Japan's manga? Was this... Was this the heroes' doing? Is this *their fault too?! Some hero's spreading around cheap knockoffs?!*

Zelos immediately checked the back of the book, and sure enough, it said "Holy Publisher of Metis." He figured the Faith of the Four Gods must be making these manga and selling them around the world to earn foreign currency.

He couldn't tell whether it was written by a hero or by a citizen of this world, but one way or another, it seemed like the summoned heroes were surprisingly active in noncombat cultural activities as a form of proselytizing. But with the way they were going about it—a way that gave zero consideration to any ethics or morals—he had to worry about what effect there might have been on people (or heck, young children) who came across manga for the first time.

It was enough to leave him with a headache.

As a sidenote, Luceris ended up catching a glimpse of the dirty book in question, which turned into a bit of an incident...but that was a story for another time.

* * *

Hoping to calm Luceris down after the mental damage she'd taken at the bookstore, Zelos ushered the group into another nearby shop without much thought.

It was an equipment shop, with neat displays of swords, armor, and more.

Luceris was still away with the faeries, but Zelos, at least, managed to calm down shortly after entering the shop.

Perhaps because he himself had always been a crafter, seeing all of this handcrafted equipment helped soothe his raging heart. He didn't want to think he was some madman who felt most at home around weapons, but picking up a sword and examining the workmanship brought him a real sense of calm.

"Ooh... This is a good one. I can see the work that's gone into it."

"Oh? You got a good eye, sir. That's a real sharp one. Dwarven friend of mine made it."

"Mmm... This has damascus in it, right? Is that to make the sword stronger?"

"Yeah. It's not *all* damascus, mind you—doing that for a sword of

this size'd make it as heavy as a buster sword, after all. It's tough to compound the metals, though. Mess it up, and your sword'll just be brittle."

"I know how it is. I've screwed up with metal compounding plenty of times myself, in fact. But if you want the perfect end result, you need to temper it over and over again. Knowing that...this is one impressive sword."

Zelos was hitting it off with the guy running the equipment store. And the guy in question—a muscly old geezer with a beard—seemed satisfied to hear the compliments for his good friend's handiwork.

"So you make weapons too, do you? You look like more of a mage to me, though."

"Well, I make swords imbued with magic. That kind of thing. Haven't been making them recently, mind you, but I'm actually a crafter; stuff like that is what I'm focused on. That's how I see myself, at least."

"Honestly, if I had to guess, I'd say you give off the vibe of a 'magic tools' guy more than a smith."

"I *do* make magic tools too, but...well, I got sick of it. There are so many people that only ever rely on magic tools..."

"Oh, you don't have to tell *me*. I've seen mercenaries. I know how they are. Always blamin' their weapons for their own incompetence. Their weapons've gotta be cryin'... I mean, come on! What's the point in even havin' a weapon if you don't wanna learn how to use the thing?!"

The lament of crafters everywhere: the sheer number of mercenaries who picked out gear of a quality that they couldn't hope to live up to.

If a mercenary lacked the right skills, it didn't matter *how* good their gear was. Their own weakness would be an unyielding barrier that would stop them from getting the most out of it.

Sure, it was better to have a quality weapon than a crap one, but unless you knew how to use the thing properly, it was never going to *shine*.

When Zelos made weapons, he designed them specifically for the user, so if anyone else used it, it wouldn't be quite right. That was

just how made-to-order weapons were.

"By the way, what's with the kids? They wanna be mercenaries or somethin'? That's some pretty fancy gear they've got on 'em."

"That gear was a present from me. They're trying to leave the orphanage and become independent; I figured it was best for them to have all the defense they could, so I made them all a little something."

"Mm. That stuff's too good for a buncha kids, if you ask me... Actually, wait. I heard just earlier that some kids brought a whole lotta dead monsters back to the guild. Don't tell me that was *them*?"

"It was them, yes. They *have* had some decent training, so they probably need gear about as good as that. If I'd given them anything shoddy, they would've been bottlenecked by their weapons breaking, not by their skill."

"That right? Guess I should look forward to hearin' about what they do in the future, then. Most kids these days don't have guts. They always just worry about how they look—and they've never got the skill, so they're always gettin' carried back hurt or dead."

It sounded like this old shopkeep had plenty to say about mercenaries.

"A lot of them end up dyin' around that age," he continued. "Feels like half the aspirin' mercenaries die out in the huntin' ground, and most of the rest get done in by bandits or someone who's tricked 'em. There ain't many who get to bein' full-fledged mercenaries."

"Ah. I *thought* that might be the case. Still... I know they're not very experienced, but experience is the one thing I can't just teach them. It's difficult, isn't it? Especially when what each of them sees and learns is up to their own natures."

"A fair while back now, there was this one beginner who had it in her to make it big, but she never learned anything. Just went around the place causin' trouble for everyone—never felt sorry about it either. All of her party members abandoned her because of it. Seems like she just kept on huntin,' alone, but she failed every time."

"You know, this sounds like something I've heard..."

The image of a certain magic item shop's employee flashed into Zelos's mind.

Surely, he thought, it had to be a coincidence. But, at the same time, too many points lined up.

"She had the skills, if nothin' else, so people expected big things from her. Problem is, she always took things too far. She'd go out on monster meat requests, only to pound the monsters into smithereens. And I don't just mean she was tenderizin' 'em—by the time she was done, there was no meat left to bring back."

"Er... You're not talking about a mercenary girl called the 'Bloodstained Bludgeoner,' are you? A girl who seems like she's never even heard of the words 'regret' or 'learning'?"

"So you know her, huh? I actually saw her yesterday, first time in ages—seemed like she was the same as ever. What *I* wanna know is...why's she still alive?"

"What— You want her to die?! Oh, Kuhti," Zelos groaned, "just how big of a hassle were you to everyone?"

"There was this one girl about the same age as her in her party. A girl who'd...well, she'd had a hard life. Anyway, the party broke up after a while, and the darn Bludgeoner used the opportunity to tell everyone all about the girl's past, just for fun. Left the girl depressed for more than half a year..."

"Jeez, she really *does* sound terrible!"

It seemed like Kuhti was even worse than Zelos had thought. She didn't have any ill will, though; she was just careless, and perhaps incapable of understanding how much hurt her actions caused other people.

In other words, she had very little malice in her heart. Perhaps none at all.

"At least that other girl's happy nowadays. Ended up gettin' married to the guy who was their party leader back then, and they've even got somethin' like three kids now. Got a li'l shop in Santor and everything. Finally found her happy ending."

"Well, *that's* good, at least. I just hope she doesn't run into Kuhti there. Somehow I doubt a reunion between the two of them would end well."

"If it *does* look like that's about to happen... Think you could get rid of that little menace for us? Make it look like an accident, if you

can?"

"Wait—this was all leading up to an *assassination request*?! We've only just met! We're strangers! The hell are you asking me this for?!"

"As long as she's alive, more and more people are going to end up miserable! I can tell from one look that you're hidin' some real scary skills. You're my only hope! I'm beggin' you! Please, get rid of her! Just make it look like an accident!"

The man was being serious here; he even had tears streaming down his face as he asked. Zelos, as you might expect, was bewildered.

He didn't know exactly how long Kuhti had been a mercenary, but he was pretty sure she wouldn't have seen this old guy for a while now. So if the guy was *still* feeling so cornered by her, after all this time, Zelos figured she must have done some pretty horrible stuff.

The man kept talking, and it sounded like Kuhti's victim had been his niece; the girl's father was the shopkeeper's younger brother. But apparently, the father had been about the worst scumbag imaginable, putting both the girl and her mother through some truly horrifying experiences. For starters, the girl had been forced into prostitution from a very young age, along with her mother.

A little after the girl's mother had died, her father had gotten himself killed by some street thugs—and so the girl, finally free, had set her sights on becoming a mercenary to live an independent life. Perhaps she'd been motivated by a desire to never feel weak again.

Apparently, the old shopkeeper had done what he could to help her out...but then the girl had met Kuhti, kicking off a whole new nightmare for her.

Having seen herself as something of a detective even back then, Kuhti had taken it on herself to investigate the girl's past. Before long, her questionable investigation skills had led her to conclude the girl was a villain, and so she'd begun endlessly insisting that the girl turn herself in. That self-righteous misunderstanding had led to the party's collapse...though Kuhti had maintained that even *that* was all the other girl's fault.

Which had then led Kuhti to...publicly reveal everything she knew about the girl's past. It was a mortifying story.

"Er... Well, leaving aside the whole 'me killing her' thing, I'll at least blast her with some magic if she tries to start something again. She doesn't exactly seem like she regrets anything she's done."

"I appreciate it. I just...don't want to see that niece of mine suffer anymore. Not after she's finally managed to end up happy. After all those years..."

Perhaps it wasn't intentional, but Kuhti was horrible. Her thoughtless behavior caused a great many people to suffer.

Ugh... What a pain.

Zelos just wished that, if at all possible, she wouldn't cause any more problems.

Right as he was feeling down from the hassle of a responsibility he'd just taken on, Ange called out to him in a chirpy voice.

"Hey, Pops, we wanna go to the hunting ground again now. That okay?"

"I thought we all agreed to take a break today? What happened to that?"

"Mmm... I mean, we didn't level up as much as we'd hoped yesterday, so, y'know, we wanna do some more, you get us? Or..."

"Well, I suppose it's fine. If you want to go after any big game, make sure Luceris goes with you too, okay? And no splitting up today. Are we understood?"

"Okay. The coccos have gone off somewhere today anyway, so I guess that's fair."

Excited, Ange rushed off to report to the other kids.

Zelos was left puzzled: *Now that she mentions it, I haven't seen the coccos today, have I...?*

And nobody seemed to know where they'd gotten off to.

Ultimately, Zelos went to accompany the kids too, and so began another day of hunting.

Chapter 13: The Old Guy Protects

It had now been three days since the group had started hunting.

And today, the kids were heading even farther into the forest.

If your average beginner mercenary managed to defeat an orc around here, they'd probably gain at least ten levels.

But now that the kids had strengthened themselves so much using the physical bonuses from common skills, that wasn't the case for them. Unless they took down a powerful foe—one that was a proper match for their talents—they'd be stuck leveling up at a leisurely pace.

The kids' skills just gave them too many bonuses for their own good. And it had really raised their level-up requirements.

If they'd leveled up normally, this wouldn't have happened. But instead, they'd rushed ahead to train themselves, without any restraint or any understanding of how leveling up really worked. Zelos hadn't known about that mechanism himself, and by the time he'd figured it out, it had been too late.

Nothing here. I should tell Ange behind me...

Johnny gave a hand sign to indicate there weren't any monsters here, then Ange responded with a sign of her own to tell him she'd gotten the message. This kind of silent communication was common among mercenaries to avoid making any noise that might alert monsters to their presence.

In unexplored areas especially, many mercenaries ended up in dangerous situations because they unwittingly drew monsters in by speaking.

Long story short, it was important to remember the fundamentals.

Roger. I'll tell the others.

Roger. Make sure to stay careful. There's no telling what could be hiding out here.

You stay safe too, okay, Johnny~?

Johnny and Ange were holding a proper conversation with their hand signs.

And the other kids were capable of the same.

Roger. I'll pass it on to Laddie...

Laddie here. Roger. I'll tell Kai.

Roger. Tell me if you find any meat...

The kids were all adept at using and understanding each other's signs. But as a general rule, each party came up with its own little system for communication, so different parties' systems weren't mutually intelligible. In other words, there were as many mercenary sign languages out there as there were parties.

That *also* meant it was common for the same sign to mean something completely different in different parties. There were surprisingly many parties that ended up in dilemmas because someone who'd been with a different party before accidentally sent the sign they were used to, giving the other party members the wrong message.

In fact, hand signs were actually the most common cause of trouble in parties with new members.

"They really are experts at that, aren't they?" Zelos remarked. "Ever since we came here a few days ago, they've done nothing but set my mind at ease."

"You're right. I couldn't even begin to imagine who taught them all of that, though..."

The kids had a lot of secrets Luceris was oblivious to.

Zelos's best guess was that the kids—who'd been street urchins, essentially—did a lot of things in secret so as to not bother Luceris. Or...maybe that wasn't the case. Maybe he just *hoped* that was their reasoning...

Perhaps it was more like the kids were just cunning, and kept secrets that they didn't want people finding out. But Zelos decided not to continue that line of reasoning any further.

It was a decision he made for the sake of his own mental health.

So Johnny's the stealthy type. Which means...they've got a scout as their party leader? I'm not sure that's the best idea for a party

comp, though...

Role distribution was important in putting together a party. For example, you wanted a tank to absorb the enemy's blows, some kind of highly mobile attacker, and so on.

But there weren't many parties out there that were led by scouts. After all, any party member out scouting was most likely to run into the enemy—and given the potential for things to go badly, that meant they were also the most likely to die.

It was obvious enough, from the young mercenary party Johnny had run into just yesterday, what happened to a party that lost its leader. The remaining party members would become that much more likely to end up in danger, and even if they managed to survive, they'd be left with deep scars on their hearts.

Who's in charge of offense, I wonder? And defense? Well, I suppose Kaede would only ever be on the "offense" side, for starters...

As Zelos and Luceris continued to watch over the kids from afar, Johnny found something.

He sent some more signals to the others, and all of the orphans moved to surround whatever it was he'd seen.

"Zelos, it looks like the children have found something."

"That it does... I just hope they can handle it, whatever it is. I want to say there's nothing *too* bad around these parts, but..."

As the two of them talked in hushed voices, Laddie readied his bow, nocked an arrow, and drew.

After a moment of careful aiming, he released the arrow without warning.

The arrow found its target, and lodged itself into the monster's side.

Or at least, it *should* have. But instead, it was repelled, bouncing off with a comical-sounding *BWOWOWONG*.

Then, a deep croak echoed through the woods.

GWAAAAAAK!

Laddie's target had been a particularly massive, particularly fat frog: a thumper toad.

Its oily secretions made its warty, dirt-brown skin glisten.

That very skin was what had repelled Laddie's arrow; the shot hadn't even managed to penetrate.

"*Raaah!* Let's get it!"

"*YEAH!*"

Now aware that enemies had spotted it, the thumper toad focused mana into its rear legs and kicked lightly at the ground.

And as it did, spears of earth came flying out of the ground and straight at the children.

This was an earth spell: Gaia Lance.

"You expect us to fold to something of *this* caliber?"

Dashing forward like a raging storm, Kaede drew her katana, and there was a sudden flash of light. She repelled every one of the earthen spears, and closed the gap between her and the thumper toad.

Then, with a cry—"Hai-*yah*!"—she slashed at the creature's skin. But...

"What?!"

Between the thickness of its skin and the slimy oil that coated it, she wasn't able to land a proper cut. Her sword just stuck fast in the beast's elastic skin.

Realizing the danger, Kaede immediately leaped back—and just as she did, some kind of fluid gushed out from the thumper toad's warts. It splashed onto the ground, hissed, and released a plume of smoke on contact that smelled foul enough to make the group grimace.

"Acid?! It can spurt *acid*?!"

"How are we meant to beat *that*?!"

"Those legs look awfully yummy, though..."

External attacks on the creature didn't seem to be effective, and if any of the children got hit by the creature's acid, they'd inevitably be badly wounded. This looked hopeless.

But the kids weren't the type to give up so quickly.

* * *

"Let's do this, then. *Flowing Chi Wave!*" Ange shouted.

THWUMP!

GAAAAAAAAAK!

Flowing Chi Wave used mana stored in the palm of the hand to fire a wave that passed through a target's flesh to destroy its internal organs.

Since the thumper toad's skin almost completely nullified blows, the similar Flowing Chi Palm technique would only be able to damage the toad through its mana and not the force of its impact; ultimately, it would only be half as powerful. That was why Ange had decided on Flowing Chi Wave instead.

It took a while for the wave to take effect, though, so if you used the attack on a monster that was resistant to pain—or one that had been paralyzed—there was no clear way to tell if it was working. And the thumper toad fell under the first of those categories.

More acid rained down on where Ange had attacked from, but she'd gotten out of the way before the counterattack came.

This was the right approach here: a hit-and-run strategy.

And having all realized that, the kids began peppering the monster with the same attack.

Luceris let out a sigh. "I'm relieved. It looks like they should manage to take it out."

"Oh, I'm not so sure. This thing's made of tougher stuff than that. It's a frog, you know? They're in for a tough time if they let their guards down."

Luceris had been worried to see the kids in a predicament, so she was apparently relieved to see the situation improve for them. But Zelos wasn't quite as optimistic. He knew how scary monsters could get, and this was only the start.

GWAAAAAAAAAK!

The thumper toad shot up into the sky with a powerful jump that belied its massive size.

At the same time, more Gaia Lances formed from the ground. The kids ran with all their might. But they hadn't realized: That was exactly what the monster wanted.

The formation of the spears bristled over the surface of the ground, creating obstacles that slowed the children's escape.

Even Kaede—who was slicing the spears in half as she ran—couldn't cover as much distance as she'd hoped, with more and more spears forming in front of her as she moved.

That was when the thumper toad dropped down out of the sky. The Gaia Lances couldn't pierce its rubbery skin.

They *did*, however, irritate the monster's warts—causing its acid to suddenly spurt out from all of them at once.

"*Gaaaaaah!*"

"*Hot-hot-hot-hot-hot-hot!*"

"So *that's* what it was tryin' to do?! For such a stupid-lookin' thing, it's pretty smart!"

"Quite the formidable foe, for a frog... I must cut it. I must *kill* it. Whatever it takes."

"Just imagining that delicious, gelatinous meat... *Slurp.*"

It looked like two of the kids weren't perturbed, despite the circumstances.

The area was filled with the smell of acid. Plus, the smoke was causing such bad irritation that it was hard for anyone to even open their eyes; the best any of them could do was to just squint really hard and see what they could through that.

"If we go all in, it'll get us with that weird acid...but if we try a hit-and-run, it's got those area attacks. This thing's more of a pain than I'd thought it'd be."

"Yeah. It's got a stupid face, but it's pretty tough. Our swords don't work on it either. Any ideas?"

The kids couldn't find a winning move.

While support magic would probably be effective against a monster like this—one that had a solid balance of offense and defense—Zelos hadn't provided the kids with any spell scrolls. That had been an intentional part of his teaching strategy—he'd wanted the kids to earn money with their own hands, then go out and use that to learn some spells—but that idea had ended up backfiring.

"Um, Zelos... Aren't you going to do something? At this rate, the children are going to..."

"They *do* have what it takes to beat it. Though given their lack of experience, it certainly won't be easy... Still, it doesn't look like

they've given up yet. I think we just watch for a little bit longer."

"Can we really afford to do that? What if something happens to them and then it's too late to act?!"

"Eh, I'm a mage. It shouldn't be too hard for me to do something in time. All I'd have to do is freeze it and then deal one blow to its weak point. Now, then, I'm looking forward to seeing what the kids do..."

The thumper toad *did* have a weak point.

Specifically, the top of its head, where the creature's skin was thinnest. If you hit it there, slashes and strikes would be...well, not *guaranteed* to work, but a lot more likely to. And if you played your cards right, you could land a lethal blow.

The question was whether the children would be able to find that weak point.

Understanding monsters' habits and weaknesses was incredibly important for hunters, helping them to quickly and reliably take down their targets. But that sort of knowledge came from experience; just *hearing* it from someone else wasn't enough to ingrain it in you.

There is *a way they can beat it. Let's see, kids; how long does it take you to figure it out?*

Zelos watched over the kids, his hand on his sword. He was ready to jump in at a moment's notice if something happened.

But he didn't want to interfere until the absolute last moment.

The kids tried time and time again to attack the thumper toad, but every time, their attacks bounced right off the monster's springy skin, or a fresh gush of acid forced them to retreat. They were probably dealing a *bit* of damage, but it was nowhere near enough to take the creature down.

Such tanky monsters were always a pain to deal with.

"Damn it! Doesn't even seem like we're bothering the thing..."

"And our mana's not gonna hold out for much longer. What do we do, Laddie?"

"It's gotta have a weak point. So I guess we have to just save our mana until we can find it. It's just... I dunno if we'll be able to hold out until then, Johnny."

"*Shai-yaaaaaa!*"

"Kai?!"

With an energetic yell, the chubby fighter leaped into the air. Soaring high through the sky, he did a double twist reverse gainer as he descended straight down onto the top of the thumper toad's head.

"Meatmeatmeatmeat*MEAT*! Boulder-Breaking Palm!"

KTHOOOOOOM!

Kai stuck the landing on top of the monster's head and landed a powerful hit.

He didn't care about how much mana the move was going to consume. All he was thinking about was eating the enormous lump of meat in front of him.

Thumper toad meat was delicious. It had a simple flavor, but its fat had more umami than chicken meat did—and if you slowly simmered the fat deposits from just under its skin, they'd end up with a sweetness that filled your whole mouth, and an addictive firm texture. People said it was good for beauty too, making it a popular ingredient among women.

"Gimme your meat! *Ora-ora-ora-ora-ora-ora-ora-ora...*"

"So this is how Kai fights when he has the full power of his appetite behind him. I would most like to try sparring with him in this state."

"This ain't the usual Kai... His appetite's really somethin', huh? I've never seen him like this before."

The chubby little fighter had transformed into a demon with a one-track mind for meat.

He was unleashing a flurry of attacks to the top of the thumper toad's head, and every one of those attacks was packed with mana.

He just kept unleashing hit after hit, any one of which would leave a grown adult writhing in agony.

"Whoa. You can really feel how much he wants it..."

"He's... He's *serious* about this."

Even Johnny and Laddie were lost for words at Kai's transformation.

It went to show just how different he was acting right now.

Meat... Meat's the reason I know everyone. It's why I know these friends the pastor gave me...

Memories bubbled up in Kai's mind. Memories of what his life had been like a few years ago. It was those memories—and the feelings that came with them—that powered his strikes as he continued to pummel the thumper toad.

Kai's heart was truly gripped by his obsession with meat.

* * *

Just a few years ago, Kai had been living on the streets.

Back then, he hadn't looked like his current chubby self. In fact, he'd been pitiably thin. Wasting away.

All he had to eat at the time was whatever he could find rummaging through restaurant scraps, and if he was ever found, the owner would wallop him. Even when he *did* manage to gather up those meager scraps of food, other orphans would steal them from him if they found out he had them, and he'd go hungry all the same. Every day was hell.

Today was no different; he'd finally gotten his hands on some food, only to have it stolen away from him. He was left cowering behind a warehouse near the Aurus River, doing all he could to endure his hunger.

That was when he met his goddess...

"Hmm? What's this? You're a real scrawny one, aren'tcha? Actually... Huh. You even alive?"

This 'goddess' was a foulmouthed old lady—or, well, she was on the border between middle-aged and old. She was wearing priest robes, but she held a bottle of alcohol and a paper bag of meat skewers as she looked down at empty-eyed Kai.

Kai didn't even have the energy to reply. Just looking up at her was all he could manage.

"Okay. So you *are* alive. But jeez... This ain't a place for kids to be. Still—you're not dead. That's a start. I guess ya got *some* luck. C'mon. Get these into your mouth."

The old lady carelessly tossed Kai her paper bag. The smell

wafting out from it made his mouth water.

"Ah... *Ah...*!"

"Don't worry, I ain't gonna take it back. So get eatin'. Just lookin' at the state of ya's makin' me depressed. I mean, really..."

There was no stopping Kai now.

He took the skewers from out of the paper bag and practically shoved them down his throat with force. He was almost like an animal—though at the same time, the taste of the juicy meat spreading throughout his mouth brought tears to his eyes.

He had no words. He was just so *happy*, and it was just so *delicious*. And even without that, just knowing he was filling his stomach was enough to get him bawling his eyes out.

The old lady, meanwhile, just stood at his side drinking from her bottle, like she was protecting him. She had a kind look in her eyes.

By the time Kai returned to his senses, the paper bag was empty. He'd eaten every last skewer. But it still wasn't enough.

"N-No..."

He wanted more.

But there were no more skewers left.

"Huh. Eaten 'em all already, have ya? Ah, well. Guess I don't have a choice. Come back with me. I might not look it, but I'm a big shot at an orphanage in town."

"An... An orphanage?"

"Yup. A place for lookin' after li'l brats like you and makin' sure ya grow up right. And I run it—that's my job. Well...I say 'job,' but it doesn't exactly pay the bills. *Gah hah hah hah hah!*"

It wasn't clear what was so funny, but the old lady was roaring with laughter.

Kai wasn't sure about this. If this place had other kids like him there, they might try to steal his food.

He was weak, so that happened to him a lot. He was well aware that the weak went hungry in this world.

"Don't worry. No one's gonna steal your food. 'Cause they know if they *try*, I'll give 'em a real good wallop to the head. So—what do you wanna do?"

"I'll... I'll go. I'll go to the orphanage..."

"Then that settles it. Heh. Guess it's gonna be gettin' more lively again... Hmm?"

The woman looked toward the harbor, and saw a group of thugs with swords in their hands, running toward her and Kai.

And for some reason, they seemed *mad*. These guys were clearly bad news.

"Found her! So *this* is where ya were, ya old hag!"

"Kill 'er! Teach 'er what happens when someone fucks with us!"

"Whoops! Guess they found me. Looks like they got some good noses on 'em, if nothin' else. But I ain't got any plans of lettin' 'em catch me! Hold on tight, boy... Huh. *Dang*, you're light. Gettin' away from these kids should be a breeze!"

Before she even finished talking, the old lady had grabbed Kai and started to run.

Honestly, Kai was so frazzled by everything that, later on, he didn't remember what happened after that.

"Catch me if ya can—if you limp-dicked bastards even have the guts to try, that is. *Gah hah hah hah hah!*"

"Stop running, ya old hag! *Fuck*—how's she so fast?!"

"Since when could old grannies run like that?!"

"She's taken out fifty strong men before! Watch out if ya don't want her to kill ya!"

"Surround 'er! Then we close in—and we do whatever it takes to make the fucker regret it. We'll... Yeah! We'll drown 'er in the Aurus River!"

When Kai finally came to, he was in a bed at an orphanage.

Shortly after that, he would meet three other kids who'd been in the same situation as his: Ange, Johnny, and Laddie.

The meat skewers the four of them ate together were truly delicious.

That was how Kai made his very first friends.

And it was skewers that brought them together.

To Kai, meat represented community. A reliable, tangible community that had given him friends, and safety, and a life at the orphanage.

As a result, his belief in meat was almost *religious*. Meat was

virtually a god to him.

As a sidenote, the old priest who'd handed him the meat skewers that fateful day—Pastor Melratha—had continued to wreak plenty more havoc thereafter. Eventually, it was said, she ended up in a position that let her order the local thugs around.

It was probably strange that someone like her was a pastor at all...but telling the story later, Kai would merely shrug and add, "I mean, that's just how she is. Anything goes."

* * *

We're all... We're all gonna eat meat together!

Kai's soul screamed out as he made his final attack.

But his opponent, too, was a living creature, and it refused to be defeated so easily. The thumper toad leaped high into the air, trying to escape the pain.

"*Gwah!*"

It took Kai by surprise, but he still managed to maintain his balance with ease and land on the ground. He was fat, but he was nimble.

He was something else too, though: low on mana. And right after he landed, it hit him, making him stagger.

"So its weak spot's on its head..." Johnny said. "Laddie! We should use our spears!"

"Right," he replied. "Ange! Kaede! Get your spears ready!"

"Yeah, yeah... Are they even gonna work on it, though?"

"I imagine they should, as long as we imbue them with mana. Its skin seems thinner on its head than on its body, so I expect even we should be strong enough to take it down."

Now that the kids had figured out the monster's weakness, they didn't need to just stand around and watch any more.

They had a second wind of motivation now. But at the same time, they were making a crucial mistake.

Focused on preparing their spears, they forgot about Kai. Imbuing your fists with mana to fight like he had was a proper skill used by melee fighters, but of course, using techniques like that

would deplete your mana.

And with the fierce rush of attacks Kai had unleashed, there was no way he'd have any mana left by now.

What that meant, then, was...

"Erm... Where is Kai?" Kaede asked. "Ange? Where did Kai go?"

"Mm? He was right there just a moment ag— Huh. He's gone. *Kaaaiii?* Where are yooouuu~?"

"Wait a minute," Johnny said. "He must've used up a lot of mana, right? He shouldn't be able to move right now."

"Uh... Johnny?" Laddie said, the realization dawning. "I... I feel you just said something scary. If he's lost too much mana to move, but he's not there anymore, then..."

"N-No way..."

Yes way. Running out of mana was the number one thing mercenaries had to watch out for, and Kai had fallen into that trap.

None of the kids had felt what it was like to *really* run out of mana before. And as a result, they weren't in the habit of making sure to back up any ally who had run out.

Johnny whipped his head around to look at the thumper toad, and...saw something sliding down its throat. It had a big mouth, but a shorter, narrower throat. Johnny could just barely see a foot poking out from the creature's mouth, making it all too clear what had happened.

He, Laddie, and Ange shouted together: "*The frog's eating Kai!!!*"

"Kai!" Kaede added. "Are you alive?!"

For the first time, the kids had made a terrible mistake. Fortunately—if you could call anything about this fortunate—thumper toads had no teeth, so they tended to just swallow their prey whole.



It looked like the creature hadn't fully swallowed Kai yet. And Kai seemed to be resisting with all the energy he had left.

"*Spit him OUT!*"

GO-BLAAAAAARGH!

The four other kids all landed mana-enhanced strikes on the thumper toad, forcing it to spit out Kai right before it could finish swallowing him. Sure enough, his entire body was coated in slimy toad spit.

"*Damn*, that was close! Kai was just about to get turned into frog food!"

"It felt like my heart stopped for a moment... Kai? Are you alive?"

"Yeah. *Ugh.* I feel gross... It was so sticky. And warm. And smelly. I'm all disgusting now..."

"Okay, sounds like you're fine. But, uh, we were the ones who took our eyes off you, so... Sorry! Seriously!"

"Yeah. Looks like we forgot what it means to be up against a monster. Guess we really screwed up as mercenaries, huh...?"

The tone of their conversation was going back and forth between childlike and mature, but one way or another, the kids had confirmed that Kai was alive and well.

The fight wasn't over yet, though. For now, their top priority was to defeat the monster in front of them.

"Thanks to Kai, we know its weak spot. This is where the fight *really* starts. Let's go avenge Kai!"

"*YEAH!*"

"Uh... I'm not dead, you know..."

The four other orphans readied their spears and rushed in all at once.

The thumper toad shot out its long tongue, but the kids—figuring it could only come at them in a straight line—fanned out, surrounded the creature from four directions, and immediately closed in on it.

"Chi Spear Death Strike!"

The kids all leaped at the toad from different directions, striking the top of its head with their spears.

The spears stuck deep into the top of the creature's head, where its flesh was thinner, and continued right through the skull. Then

they pierced its brain.

The thumper toad convulsed for a moment before finally, slowly, collapsing.

Then came the usual follow-up to taking out a big opponent:

"*BLEEEEEERGH!*"

Yup—they'd leveled up.

Up until now, the kids' levels had all been in the single digits. But killing the thumper toad had gained them each fifteen levels, all at once.

Unfortunately for the kids, Zelos hadn't known what their levels were. He had the ability to check, but ultimately he never had, and his reason for that had been a pretty cowardly one: *I'm kinda scared to look, so I can never bring myself to.*

Regardless, the kids were all now feeling exhausted from the sudden burst of levels. They couldn't move a single step.

"They... They did it!" Luceris exclaimed, the relief and pride clear in her voice. "They defeated it! I'm so glad. Just...so..."

"It got a little dicey there at one point, but yes—they managed it in the end, didn't they? Though I must admit, I got a bit of a cold sweat when that thing ate Kai."

When the thumper toad had started trying to eat Kai, Zelos had panicked, but he'd forced himself to just sit back and watch for a bit.

Thumper toads didn't have teeth, so he knew that even if Kai made it all the way to the monster's stomach, he'd still survive for a short while. Of course, he'd been prepared to intervene if it had become necessary.

But he'd figured that if he wanted to make the kids more cautious, it was best that they experience that sort of danger for themselves.

"Still, Zelos, you didn't have to make him go through something like that... Surely you could've done more than simply watch as the monster swallowed him?"

"If the kids are going to be independent soon, they'll need to have a keen sense for danger. *Very* keen. Or they'll just die. If I'd leaped in then and there to defeat the thing myself, they could just end up expecting others to save them the next time they're in

trouble. But there's no guarantee that someone'll be there for them the next time they're in bad danger. It'd be a dangerous mindset for them to have, one that could cut their lives short when they're out there by themselves. I need to give them the opportunities to triumph over things like this by themselves whenever they can, or they'll never make it as mercenaries."

"It's a harsh world, isn't it...? Well, then—how should we carry them back?"

"Hmm. Good question. For now, I suppose we shoot a flare and—Oh?"

As Zelos looked deeper into the forest, he just so happened to see a transport carriage from the mercenaries' guild coming their way. It wasn't carrying anything either, so it'd have plenty of room to fit both the thumper toad and the kids.

The driver who steered the carriage wasn't actually *on* it, for some reason; he was just walking alongside it, reins in hand. But whatever the explanation for that, this was certainly a convenient time for him to come along.

"Oh?" the driver called out. "Busy hunting, are you?"

"Ah, no—we've just finished. In fact, we were actually just about to call for a transport carriage."

"Well, would you listen to that! You're in luck! Or...maybe not, I suppose..."

Not quite sure what the driver was trying to imply, Zelos tilted his head in confusion.

The young man seemed to be a mage, by the looks of him. He also had long hair that covered his eyes, and a timid personality—or, if you were being blunt, you'd say he looked kind of gloomy. The man's anxiety made Zelos a little curious, though. Was this guy just shy around strangers, or was there something more to it?

"So... What did you defeat? If it's something big, I'd...appreciate your help loading it onto the carriage."

"It's a thumper toad. Though specifically, it's the kids here who took it down, not me. Anyway, it's bigger than I'd thought it'd be, so it may be difficult to carry."

"Let's take a... Oh. It really *is* big. Sorry, froggy..."

"Why are *you* apologizing to the thing?"

The young man did his best to load the defeated thumper toad onto the back of the carriage. As he did, though, tears began to well in his eyes.

As Zelos was helping the young man, he felt the need to continue teasing him.

"Er... What are you crying for? All you're doing is bringing back a monster body, yes?"

"I... I love animals. So when I see them killed for no reason, I get a little..." He sniffed.

"I understand how you feel," Luceris chimed in. "We should avoid taking lives where we don't have to. It's a sin, I agree."

"I get it," the man continued. "I know we have to do stuff like this to get by. But I just feel so sorry for this poor thing, losing its life in such a meaningless way..."

"Uh..." Zelos paused, trying to find the right words. "Why are you in this line of work, exactly? It should be pretty clear it doesn't suit you, right?"

While Zelos had a perfectly good point, the young man had a pragmatic answer: *because it pays well*, apparently.

People needed money to live. Still, it seemed like this particular man's personality would have posed some big problems for this particular job.

He sniffed again. "W-Well, then. I'll take this back to the guild. *Hic...*"

"Could I get you to give the kids a ride back too, while you're at it? They can't even move right now. They've just leveled up."

"I-I can do that. But...my friends are tired," he said, patting the horses, "so the going will be a little slow. If that's okay?"

"I'll leave that up to you," Zelos said. "It's not like she and I can carry the five of them by ourselves, after all."

Once the kids were loaded onto the carriage, the young man took the reins in his hand again, and the carriage began slowly making its way back toward Mobville.

"He was nice," Luceris said once the young man was gone.

"Mmm... Something seemed off about him, though. But what

could it be...?”

Zelos couldn’t put his finger on it, but somewhere in his heart, he had an uncomfortable feeling.

That “uncomfortable feeling” was because, when the young man had been loading the thumper toad onto the carriage, he’d used gravity magic.

It was a rare sight in this world; only high-level mages could use it. But that hadn’t clicked for Zelos. After all, gravity magic had been bog-standard in *Swords & Sorceries*, and Zelos was very familiar with it himself. So he was unable to figure out the source of his discomfort.

Regardless, Zelos and Luceris made their way back to Mobville, taking some detours along the way to gather ingredients.

* * *

The young man slowly walked his way back to the village, horses’ reins in hand.

For whatever reason, he still wasn’t riding on the carriage; he was just walking alongside his horses. But even though it was strange, the children didn’t find it suspicious.

At the same time, they couldn’t move, and they were bored. And that combination prompted them to say some things they probably shouldn’t have.

“Hey, Mister. Can you hurry up? We kinda wanna get back to the village soon...”

“I concur. We are quite exhausted. We would appreciate being able to sleep in a bed as quickly as we can.”

“Huh? Uh... That might be a little difficult...” the man said.

“Why? Just make the horses run and we’ll get there right away, yeah? When we’re going this slow, we’ll just get attacked by some other monster, won’t we?”

“You’re... You’re right, but...”

After their big fight, the kids wanted to return to the village ASAP. With the way the carriage was inching along, it seemed like it’d be dark by the time they got back, and the kids simply couldn’t bear to

wait that long.

"We're tired, okay? And we're sitting ducks if some monsters come across us right now."

"I wanna eat some meat as soon as I can. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat..."

"B-But... I'm, uh..."

"Whatever! Just make the horses run! The sooner we get back to the village, the sooner they can get some rest too!"

"What happens if we're killed out here? Do you think you could take responsibility for that, Mister? Huh? You couldn't, could you?"

The kids were getting really pushy at this point.

Their behavior changed around a person once they thought they had them figured out. And they'd determined that this young man was below them in the pecking order.

"Mmm... B-But... But the horses are..."

"Human lives are more important than some horses, okay? If anything happens to us out here, you'll be the one who gets blamed."

"*Urgh...* Fine. You're not really leaving me with a choice here. Just...remember. This is all on you, okay?"

The kids were confused. "Uh... Huh?"

Having grown up on the streets, they had a good nose for danger. And all of a sudden, their alarm bells were ringing hard—like they were being struck by a drummer from a hard rock band.

But it had taken them too long to notice. This young man was far more trouble than they'd thought...

The young man climbed onto the carriage, and finally used the reins in his hand to spur the horses forward.

His hair bristled, standing on end. And as it did, his horses started to transform too, morphing into jet-black warhorses with eight legs. Sleipnirs.

They'd been camouflaged using Transmutation—a common skill among sacred beasts and mythical beasts.

"*Hraaaaaah hah hah hah!* Ya just *had* to call for me, didn'tcha, ya fuckin' brats?! Well, yer gonna get what ya asked for—get ready for me to take y'all to heaven! Me honeys here are ready to give ya the

time of yer lives, and they are *PUMPED*! It's time for the encore, baby! I'll let ya hear Dixie! I ain't gonna hold back—you brats are the ones that asked for this, remember?! *Geh heh heh!*"

The timid young man had transformed into a funky, hyped-up, *dangerous* individual.

"Right—let's start the drive to hell~! ♪ Whaddaya think? Y'all lookin' forward to it~? 'Cause I'm tellin' ya, I'll have y'all pantin' by the time we're done~! ♡ And I ain't gonna listen to any complaints. Scream all ya want; it'll just gimme the sickest beat to drive to! And don't worry, I've got plenty of hot stuff to spurt all over yer dumbass souls! *Grah hah hah hah hah!*"

The kids were too paralyzed with fear to speak. The only noise they made was the chattering of teeth.

The nightmare was about to start again and they could do nothing about it as time lurched forward.

"It's go time! Me big, shiny, black magnum's rock-hard and ready to explode! It's feelin' the *heat*, and it's ready to shoot its shot any moment now! There ain't no stoppin' me anymore—this is a nonstop train to hell! Or...wait. Was it heaven? Ah, whatever. I'm the king of outsiders, baby! *Hyah hyah hyah hyah!*"

And so the carriage began its rampage, spurred on by the young madman.

By now, the kids were seriously regretting how cocky they'd been...but it was too late for that. The carriage, and its three sleipnirs, were already rocketing along at breakneck pace.

Going this fast, they should've reached the village in a flash. But the driver intentionally took detour after detour, zipping the carriage around the forest and leaving a cloud of dust in its wake.

As was probably clear by now, this driver was High-Speed Jonathan—or Loner Mon, as his official name had been back in *Swords & Sorceries*. When he got on a horse or a carriage, his personality did a one-eighty, but most of the time, he was just an average, timid young man who really loved animals.

Now, though, that young man was in the grips of a speed high as he rampaged through the hunting ground, a bunch of screaming kids in tow...

If there was one thing you could praise him for, it was that he was using the Hold Back skill. He had yet to actually kill anyone; he must have still had some sort of conscience in there, or so you'd hope.

Still, once he got going, there was no one out there who could stop him.

That day, the kids learned an important lesson firsthand: Never judge anyone by their appearance.

And they well and truly paid the price for their mistake...

Chapter 14: The Old Guy Meets Some Heroes

The day after defeating the thumper toad, the kids went straight back to the mercenaries' guild.

They'd picked up their reward from the guild's reception desk, and now they were sitting around a table, holding a meeting to decide how to split it up.

This would mark the end of their time in Mobville. Luceris had only gotten leave for one week, so the group would have to head back today.

It might be easy to forget that while they'd made it to Mobville in less than a day, that had been only thanks to a certain crazy coachman. Normally, the trip from Santor to Mobville, or vice versa, took two or three days. And they'd be taking a *normal* carriage this time, thank you very much, so they'd have to depart today to make sure they got back in time. They could practice their camping skills along the way back too, so as far as Zelos was concerned, this was actually the perfect itinerary.

In fact, Zelos's initial plan had been to have the kids practice camping along the way to Mobville, then hunt there for a couple of days before heading back. It was just that those plans had gotten derailed by a certain madman turning up.

Ultimately, they'd reached Mobville in just half a day, so they'd had time to take it slow and spend their first day hunting small fry. It went to show just how abnormally fast the sleipnirs were.

Zelos couldn't be entirely sure, since he'd fainted at one point, but looking back now, he was almost convinced that the carriage driver had been High-Speed Jonathan.

Either way, he figured, all's well that ends well. Their time here was pretty much over; all that remained was to load their luggage

onto a carriage and hop on board.

"Hmm... I wonder if we could use this to make our gear stronger?"

"Probably not, right? I thought you could only use thumper toad skin for, like, undergarments."

"Huh? Didn't someone say you can use them for mages' robes and stuff too? Apparently they've got good water repellency."

"I have heard it can be wrapped around a sword hilt to improve the grip."

"Their meat's amazing. That's all *I* care about..."

The kids were the same as ever.

They'd gotten some unexpected income and materials here, and they were having an in-depth discussion about what to use it on.

Among the materials they'd brought back, the "huge frog skin" that the thumper toad had dropped could be used for undergarments worn underneath armor and the like, so it was a favorite among mercenaries. It was both elastic and breathable, so it was snug yet comfortable, making it a popular material.

Elasticity aside, the material's breathability was thanks to the tiny glands that the thumper toad used to secrete oil. They were quite the useful quality in a natural material used for clothes.

"All right, all right, we need to get going. Let's leave the discussion for later, okay? Heading back to Santor comes first."

"Fiiiine," four of the kids responded together. "It's not gonna be *that* guy again, right?"

Loner Mon had traumatized the kids.

"Mm. I am dissatisfied. I did not have nearly enough opportunities to wield my blade," Kaede grumbled.

"Honestly, there aren't that many huge monsters you *can* take out with a sword," Zelos said. "And even against the ones you can, you need some impressive skills. Generally, people tend to use things like spears and hammers more than swords."

"That does not sit right with me..."

If you were just dealing with smaller monsters—something like wolves or orcs, for example—then swords were perfectly effective. But when medium-sized or larger monsters came into the question,

it wasn't that simple. *Those* often had hard shells or carapaces, not to mention thick skin and tough muscles, all of which stopped swords and made it hard to damage them. You'd need some kind of bigger weapon you could really put your weight behind.

Even if you imbued a weapon with mana to make its attacks more powerful, the strength of the weapon itself wouldn't change, so depending on how it hit, it could easily just break. It was standard, then, for mercenaries to have several weapons.

Like the monsters in a certain action role-playing hunting game, this world's monsters weren't such pushovers that you could take them down with a shortsword or two. If you were going after oversized game, you'd need oversized tools.

"The same goes for me—when I'm up against a big monster, I don't use my shortsword. Generally, I'll use my staff for that. I'll also use magic at the same time, plus I've got a bunch of combat skills that I use depending on the situation."

"*Ngh...* So there are foes one cannot defeat with a sword alone? The world is a vast place..."

"As a general rule, the larger something's body is, the thicker its muscles are going to be. So a lot of the time, if you try to cut into some massive enemy, you'll only manage to scratch it. Think of...well, something like a dragon is an obvious example."

"I see. Then I suppose I will also need to find a dragon-slaying sword... And I must expand my repertoire of weapon skills."

When you acquired a combat job skill, you became able to use weapon skills too, which were like special moves. Different job skills specializing in certain weapons—katanas, for example, or greatswords—each had their own affiliated weapon skills, and as you leveled up, or acquired a higher-rank version of your job skill, you'd gain more of them.

Of course, the weapon skills acquired at higher-rank job skills were more powerful, and they consumed a fearsome amount of mana to match.

Or at least, that was how it worked in *Swords & Sorceries*. Zelos realized, however, that in *this* world, if you wanted special moves, you had to actually obtain them yourself through training.

The world wasn't so kind as to just give you things like that for free upon leveling up.

Similar to how a child who started kendo would have to polish their abilities over the course of years, you acquired weapon skills through consistent training. And that was really troubling Zelos.

The kids had picked up job skills through their training with the coccos, but even after leveling up now, they hadn't acquired the all-important special moves. Zelos had realized, recently, that job skills were perhaps little more than bonuses that gave you a general framework for how to fight and just *made it a bit easier* to learn special moves.

If Zelos wanted to teach others how to use his special moves, his only option was to individually, manually explain how each one worked. And even then, there'd be no guarantee that he was explaining them *right*. The actual method for activating moves that included an attribute, like water or fire, was a mystery to him, so he was going to have to figure out how to get that across going forward.

It was always difficult to teach practical skills through theory. That said, when he'd told the kids once to "just try really hard! It's all about effort!"—just to see how it would go—they'd managed to learn basic elemental moves with ease.

Reality's...kinda harsh, huh? Actually, now that I think about it, I swear Zweit suddenly started using moves like that at one point. When'd that *happen...?*

He didn't even understand what was happening at this point. Every time he tried to think about it, he could only sigh.

From what he could tell, a lot came down to the user's nature and talents. But the actual principles behind it all were still a mystery to him. It seemed like his mettle as a teacher was going to keep being tested from here on out.

But when the kids looked at him with eyes full of hope, he couldn't bring himself to just say, "Sorry, I've got no idea how to teach you this stuff." He was too vain to admit defeat like that.

"I have the job skill of Elite Swordswoman," Kaede said, "but apart from that, I only have the base-level skills of, say, Archer and

Lancer... When it comes to high-rank elemental attacks, I am unaware of what to do. I must try to figure out the principles behind them... I suppose I have no choice but to give it my all."

There were some moves that combined multiple elements or properties, and the higher the move's rank was, the more complex it became. And so, especially when you got to things like gravity manipulation, you couldn't exactly make it all work just by *trying really hard* or *having the right vibes*.

"If you manage to master the advanced job skills, the physical bonuses get bigger too. And you get some pretty huge boosts to your stamina and your mana and so on."

"The path of the blade is a steep climb, but the challenge sets my heart alight!"

"How are you even an elf? Seriously. It doesn't make sense."

"How strong would you say I am at this point in time?"

"Hmm... Stronger than your average mercenary, I guess? And it looked like you leveled up yesterday too. But I imagine it'll be a while until that happens again. Unless you take on more strong monsters."

"It would seem the road ahead of me is long. But I must surpass my father. I need to punish that drunkard..."

"Anyway—shouldn't we be getting on the carriage about now? Don't want to make everyone wait."

"Oh..."

The other children aside, Luceris was already on the carriage too; at this point, it was only Zelos and Kaede who had yet to board. The two climbed inside in a rush, and the carriage set off.

And so the party left Mobville behind.

* * *

"Manageeeeeer! When do we get to go hooooooome?!"

"Maybe we'd be leaving sooner if you stopped pulverizing every monster we come across into a pile of mincemeat! Instead of just complaining, how about you reflect on your gluttony and that empty head of yours?! This is why people call you 'the Siren of the

Bottomless Bog'! And I do *not* want to wind up dying together with you!"

"Awww! Come *on*~! We can be fellow disasters! Pleeeaaase! Let's end up in hell together~!"

"*NO!* Go die by yourself, you waste of an employee!"

Zelos's group had left the village, but there were *some* people who hadn't been able to leave just yet.

Restraint was not in Kuhti's vocabulary. If there was a monster there in front of her, and she needed to defeat it, she'd use every ounce of her strength to turn it into mincemeat.

Of course, that approach never left them with any usable materials—so they'd get no revenue, all while their food bill continued to mount.

It wasn't just monsters that challenged Kuhti's restraint. It was everything.

And until they managed to pay off their ever-growing tab, the pair had no choice but to keep hunting here.

There was no telling how long it'd be until the two of them could return to Santor...

* * *

The carriage ambled along the highway.

The road from Mobville to Santor merged with the Far-Flung Highway at one point, and from there, all you needed to do was stay on the road until you reached a fork with a turnoff for Santor. If you instead took the other fork in the road, you'd end up at the Great Ruins of Irmanaz—a land home to many dwarves—or in another noble's territory.

The Far-Flung Highway was kind of just a long, straight line. It had actually been originally built for military use, as a way to quickly reach and subjugate monster hordes that emerged from the Far-Flung Green Depths. It had been intended to streamline the transport of relief, supplies and so on, so little thought had been given to the likes of merchants. As a result, the road was frequently beset by monster appearances, banditry and more, making it unsafe

to traverse in the smaller caravans merchants often used.

It was only in recent years that towns and villages had been built along the highway, perhaps spurred on by some sort of ulterior motive from the state. In addition, caravans from a country near the sea had started to travel the route recently, prompting rapid development.

"Peaceful, isn't it?" Zelos said.

"It is, yes," Luceris replied. "Honestly, *so* peaceful that I don't know what to do with the time..."

The two of them were taking it easy atop the carriage, looking up at the sky.

It was a completely clear, blue sky, not a single cloud in sight. Sometimes some birds would fly overhead, but that was it.

In fact, it was so tranquil that the kids and the coccos were already off in dreamland; if any bandits *did* attack now, the group would be caught off guard. There were few bandits willing to attack a carriage from the mercenaries' guild, though. That made sense given most people traveling in such carriages tended to be mercenaries.

"When it's *this* peaceful, it's hard not to get a little sleepy, isn't it? There's no...stimulation."

"You're not having any dangerous thoughts, are you? Please tell me you aren't secretly hoping for monsters or bandits to suddenly attack us..."

"Hah! That's the *last* thing I'd hope for. A quiet life's a good life—that's my motto. I'm more than happy to avoid conflict wherever I can."

"Are you... Are you sure about that? It certainly doesn't seem that way to me..."

"Aww, don't look so skeptical! I know I get caught up in big kerfuffles all the time, but it's not because I *want* to! Really! All that's just a bother to me."

"Can you look me in the eyes when you're saying that? Why are you looking away?"

Honestly, he was looking away because he was just too embarrassed to meet her gaze.

After his many years as a bachelor, Zelos hesitated to even look at women head-on. And Luceris, in particular, was a beauty. Her silver-colored hair, her gentle, maternal expression; it all made her so charming that Zelos was left flustered in a way unbefitting a man his age. Oh, and she had a big rack. For each night the two of them had slept in the same room together, Zelos had had a hard time holding back his lust.

Even now, if the right occasion presented itself, he would've loved to hug her and hold her close. And to top it all off, Luceris was just so defenseless. If he got in a situation like that, and she said something like "I trust you, okay? ♡", then yeah, he probably *would* struggle to even look her in the eye.

And so the poor middle-aged man, half because he was trying to mask his embarrassment and half because he was struggling to hold back his desires, blurted out...

"Luceris... Will you marry me?"

"Wh-*WHAT?*"

Whoops.

"I can't hold back my feelings any more. Please. Let's get married. Right here. Right now. Faster than the speed of light! Where would you like to go for our honeymoon?"

"Y-You're going too fast, Zelos! First, we need to find out how we feel about each other, and then think about what our family would look like in the future—a-and until the children are all independent, I couldn't—"

"All right! Leave it to me! I'll take the kids for some training in the Far-Flung Green Depths! Don't you worry. Give me one week, and I'll have them beheading wyverns like it's child's play!"

"What sort of crazy things are you trying to make the children do?! Taking down wyverns? With *one week* of training? How would that even happen?! I'm getting a bad feeling about all of this!"

"Don't worry. It'll all be fine. I'm the kind of man who's willing to spit on the gods for the sake of our happiness! Besides, you know the kids—I'm sure they'd be thrilled to go out for a little more training. Heh. Heh heh... Yes. They're having a hard time raising their levels anyway, so it'd be the perfect—"

"What are you, a demon?! You'd be a bad influence on them, I'm sure of it, so stop!"

"Oh, not at all. Once they get stronger, I'm *confident* they'll just say, 'We're off to hunt some wyverns as a wedding present for you, Sister. *Wheee!* ♪'"

"S-See! You're admitting you'd be a bad influence on— Oh. Wait. No, I can already see them saying that! They would... In fact, I *know* they would!"

Zelos had really just been joking to hide his embarrassment, but Luceris, as always, had taken things seriously.

And this far into the conversation, it'd be kind of awkward for Zelos to say, "Oops! Just kidding! *Ha ha!*"

He was in a tough spot. There was no laughing his way out of it at this point.

In fact, seeing as this was Luceris he was dealing with, perhaps there'd *never* been a good point for him to do that. After all, she had so much faith in other people that she'd happily buy snake oil off a street vendor.

At this rate, Zelos would have to actually put the kids through a boot camp from hell so he could marry her. Now that he'd come out and said it, he couldn't put the genie back into the bottle.

But, fortunately, there was someone here to stop them.

"Okay—if you're gonna flirt, could you do it somewhere else? Just listening to you two's pissing me off. Happy couples should all just go and fucking die. Don't you think?"

It was the carriage driver—a middle-aged man. And he was really glaring at Zelos and Luceris.

The man had such a jealous look to his face that it seemed like he might try to murder the two of them at any moment. He was *especially* glaring daggers at Zelos; it looked like he wanted to spit out, "How's some random middle-aged fucker like *you* got a young girl like *her*?!"

It was that obvious. But while it might not have looked it, Zelos *did* worry about the age difference between him and Luceris.

"W-Well," Zelos said, "All joking aside, when do you think we should hold the wedd— Uh, excuse me. Would you mind not glaring

at me like that?"

"*Huh?!* Go kill yourself, asshole! In fact, if you keep blabbing on, I'll kill you myself, seriously! I got rejected *yesterday*, I'll have you know! I am *not* in the mood to take shit from some moron right now!"

"Um..." Luceris chimed in hesitantly. "Does that mean you're just taking your anger out on us? Don't you think it's important to be able to wish other people a happy life?"

"Oh, shut up! What do happy people like you even know?! There's *nothing* I wanna wreck more than the happiness of people who've gotten big heads. In fact, how 'bout I kill the two of you myself?! Huh? Whaddaya got to say to *that*?!"

This driver was getting more and more heated. It seemed like other people being happy made him mad—mad enough to even lash out at Luceris.

Rationally thinking, though, there was no way women would ever love a guy who acted like *this*. It sort of seemed obvious that he'd get rejected.

"Don't you think that small-mindedness of yours might've been why you got rejected?" Zelos said. "You're practically admitting you don't care one bit about how anyone else feels, as long as *you're* happy."

"What's so bad about that?! *Everyone* puts themselves first! The fuck are you even talking about?! What does some guy who's got a woman think he knows?! Lemme tell you—I watched over that girl. To protect her. EVERY. DAY. From morning to night. And after everything I did for her—you know what she said? 'Guards! It's him! That's the pervert who's been stalking me all this time. Arrest him, please!' I loved her so much, and *that's* how she repaid me?!"

"Oh," Zelos and Luceris realized together. "Of *course* you got rejected. There's no saving you..."

"WHY?! Why wouldn't she accept my love?!"

Apparently this guy was just a flat-out stalker. It would've been weird if he *hadn't* gotten reported for his behavior.

The only mystery was why he was here driving a carriage, not locked up somewhere.

“Erm, just to clarify...” Zelos said, hesitating. “Have you ever actually *spoken* with that woman?”

“No! But, I mean...I loved her so much that she *had* to have noticed! Who even needs words?!”

“Yeah, no... If people could get across their feelings without saying anything, the whole world would be full of couples. What you’re saying is all just a fantasy.”

This guy seemed to just believe whatever he *wanted* to be true.

Or in other words, he interpreted everything in the most selfish way possible.

“No! You’re wrong! She... She *knew* how I felt, and she betrayed me! Whenever she went out, I’d go into her room and make sure there were no signs of other men. At night, I’d stand guard, because I was so worried some guy might assault her. And if she ever forgot to put away her laundry, I’d take it back with me for safekeeping, and... *Ahem.* Anyway, I’d make sure to sneak up and attack any bastards who tried to win her over, and—”

“You’re a real degenerate, aren’t you? How do you not understand why she called the guards on you? You were making her feel *something*, but it wasn’t love—it was sheer, hair-raising *terror*.”

“N-No. No way...”

People caught up in a one-sided obsession could justify everything they did. They’d convince themselves that they were in the right, push ahead with no regard for the other person’s feelings, and ultimately get mad when they were turned down.

A relationship like that wasn’t love, or anything of the sort; it was just one person forcing their feelings on another. Self-satisfied self-indulgence.

Of course, anyone who could actually understand this concept wasn’t the sort of person to get up to such idiocy in the first place.

“You’re wrong. My love for her was real! And she just...trampled all over it!”

See? Just like that.

Zelos sighed. “Look... Imagine this. You’re in your room. And then you suddenly see some woman you’ve never met just standing there.”

"*Ngh.* Th-That *would* be kinda scary..."

"Now imagine that woman follows you around every day. Breaks into your room. Rummages through your belongings. Steals your laundry. Spends every night 'standing guard' outside your door..."

"N-No. No, no, no, no, no. What I was doing was... It wasn't like that! I wasn't being *disgusting* like that!"

"Maybe that's what you think, but if *she* thought that's what you were doing, then you never stood a chance. What you were doing was *criminal*, no shadow of a doubt!"

"Stop treating me like I'm some kind of *pervert*!"

Some stalkers couldn't even admit that what they did was a crime. And they could have some real double standards—they'd *detest* the thought of anyone else doing the same things they did, but when it was *them*, apparently it was all fine and dandy. It was pointless trying to talk things out with someone like that.

Maybe they'd start to sound like they were understanding and giving in at one point, but as soon as they were cornered, it was straight back to violent denial.

Ultimately, they'd convince themselves that the *world* was to blame, and try to satisfy their desires by killing the target of their affection. They'd fall in love, get caught up in their own delusions, and escalate to crazier and crazier actions, all by themselves.

And of course, this guy was a prime example.

"*Ooo*-kay. *I* get it. You two are trying to get in my way too, aren't you? Heh heh heh... Fine. I'll kill you all. You two, that bitch who betrayed me...*every last fucking one of you! YOU'RE DEAD!*"

He was going crazy—and he was taking his anger out on people. It was disgraceful.

The man drew a knife from his waist.

"Anyone who gets in my way—you're all fucking *DEAD*!"

But he'd chosen the wrong guy to attack.

"Hup."

"*GER-BLAGH!*"

The man had come rushing at Zelos, trying to kill him with a knife, but a single, light punch from Zelos had knocked him out.

All that was left was an unconscious degenerate, splayed on the

ground.

Zelos wasn't sure what to say. Eventually, though: "Is the mercenaries' guild short on employees or something? It sure seems like they keep hiring lunatics..."

"What do we do now? Who's going to drive the carriage? *I've* never done it before, at least..."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I can do it. Sheesh, this takes me back..."

Zelos's mind went back to his time living in the Japanese countryside.

One of the people who'd lived near him had kept horses as a hobby, and she'd used them to transport crops in horse-drawn carts while she was at it. Sure, she'd had to feed the horses, but she'd saved on fuel, so it had been a useful way of moving things along narrow farm roads. And Zelos, of course, had tried it as well, mostly just for fun.

The roads to and from her fields were so narrow, you couldn't even take a kei truck... Honestly, I'm amazed they managed to build a house there. I wonder if Mrs. Nonaka ever found it inconvenient...?

As Zelos tied up the crazy driver with rope, his mind went back to a bit of an old memory.

The only way to get to Mrs. Nonaka's house was by turning off a local street onto a winding mountain road so narrow that even a kei car couldn't safely drive along it.

There were terraced farms on either side of the road, and if you went off the road, it wasn't like a tow truck could make it there to pull your car back up, so it'd just be left there. Zelos still remembered the sight of an old kei truck by the road—abandoned upside-down, weather-beaten, and rusted out.

"Anyway... I'm amazed the kids are still asleep. What with all the fuss we just had..."

"They must have been more tired than we thought. Especially after the way they all leveled up yesterday."

"Well, I *hope* that's the case." Then, under his breath, he muttered: "If they're just *like that*, then all I can say is that they need a better sense of danger..."

As mercenaries, you had to be wary even when you were asleep. If you couldn't react to the slightest presence, you'd just die. And *extra* care was needed in forests where monsters lurked.

Zelos placed his hand on a sword hilt and sent out a wave of malice.

Johnny and Kaede suddenly sprang up from their sleep.

"H-Huh? What?!"

"Wh-What was *that*...? I suddenly felt this enormous wave of malice..."

The five coccos also stirred awake, their wild instincts at work.

"Okay. Johnny, Kaede, you pass. The others will need some more training, I think."

"Was that you just now, Pops? What'd you do? That felt *crazy*!" Johnny asked, bewildered.

"That was malice. I see..." Kaede mused. "So you are telling us we mustn't let our guards down, even while asleep? Ange, Laddie, and Kai would have died from that. So I imagine we 'pass' because we reacted to his malice."

To be fair, they hadn't trained for this kind of thing before, so the fact that Johnny had reacted at all was pretty impressive, even if he was still confused.

"I feel bad for pulling that on you while you were sleeping, but you all need to be able to react to the slightest presence and get ready for battle, or you'll just die out there. So I thought I'd test it out. What do you think would've happened if that was in the hunting ground? Or deep in a forest?"

"Jeez... You're merciless, huh, Pops? But yeah. We would've died if we couldn't react to that, huh...?"

"I feel like I had let my guard down too. We may be on a major road, but it is not truly *safe*... Had we been attacked by bandits, we may well have been captured."

"Well—I wouldn't have let that happen, mind you. But in the future, when you're all out there by yourselves, you won't have me there to do that for you. It'll be up to you. And there are some monsters out there that can hide their presence, so you have to be alert to any malice, okay?"

The kids had something new to work on now. Kaede and Johnny started to talk it over between themselves, coming up with potential training regimens that could help them detect malice more readily.

As they did, the coccos gave them advice—and if you ignored the topic, it was a strangely heartwarming sight. You could almost forget they were talking about training regimens with their lives on the line.

"By the way—Pops? Might not be important, but..."

"Why is the driver tied up? And he is very much glaring at us..."

The middle-aged man who'd been driving the cart was completely tied up, and he was flopping about like a fish out of water.

He had some powerful malice in his eyes too...

Now released from the driver's control, the horses started slowly pulling the carriage toward Santor. It seemed like they remembered the way there; apparently the horses were better than their driver.

Zelos felt like he'd gotten a glimpse at just how professional horses could be.

* * *

Outdoor camping: an essential skill for mercenaries.

Preparing food in the wilderness was particularly important. If you didn't eat or drink, you wouldn't be able to fight properly when you needed to, and potentially, you could even die.

On escort missions, mercenaries would need to prepare their own meals from meager rations, and on hunts, they'd need to procure their own food. Planning and preparing things in advance was very useful, as was creativity.

It was around sunset now, and Zelos's group decided to set up camp by a riverbed.

The kids were each holding (Zelos-made) outdoors cookware in one hand and washing rice and barley, or cutting up meat and vegetables in front of a pot.

Perhaps because it was their first time camping like this, they seemed to be really enjoying themselves.

But times like this—when people were relaxed—were when they were most vulnerable to attacks from monsters or bandits.

At the moment, Zelos and Laddie were keeping guard, while the others were all preparing dinner.

"We're only gonna be sautéing some veggies. Isn't this too much heat for that?" Johnny wondered.

"Ehhh..." Ange replied. "I think it should be fine, right~? You just have to make stuff hot so it gets softer, yeah?"

"You don't get it, Ange. Burnt vegetables are bad for you, you know?"

"Kai... Where did you pick up knowledge like that?" Kaede said.

It was quite the lively scene—even if a man was lying trussed up on the ground a little ways off to the side.

It was like the campsite was divided into light and dark.

"Hey, Pops. I'm bored..." Laddie said.

"Keeping an eye on your surroundings is an important job, okay? Besides, everyone will be taking turns standing guard. And right now, it's your turn. So focus."

"Ugh... It's still a pain, though... I thought it'd be more fun than this."

"It's an essential skill to have if you're going to be delving into dungeons. When you're in a dungeon, there's no safe place to rest, so you'll just have to make do the best you can among yourselves. You have to be constantly vigilant to make sure you're safe and can rest as efficiently as you can."

Dungeons in *Swords & Sorceries* had no safe zones, so of course, you could suddenly get attacked by monsters while resting. And that meant you never had the option for a proper meal or sleep. It made conquering large dungeons a real hassle.

"So we're having curry, huh...? Hey! Pops! Teach me how to make curry powder!"

"I'm happy to, but...everyone's got their own preferences, just so you know. I've got a recipe, for what it's worth, but you should all experiment to figure out what suits *your* tastes the best. Personally, I like mine spicy."

"It looks like it should be simple... Is it not?"

"Changing the ratios between the different spices can transform the flavor. Even a tiny difference can be noticeable, so you have to

watch out for that."

"So is it, uh...a lot deeper than it looks?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe it..."

Even just adding a pinch of herbs to commercially available curry powder would change the aroma. There was so much to know; it was no territory for an amateur to tread lightly.

A tiny mistake could leave you with a foul-tasting mixture that was just spicy and nothing else.

I remember Minase's curry... That was atrocious*. A whole other level of bad.*

His mind went back to a friend he'd had in his faraway hometown. To an experience he'd had firsthand.

"You have to make use of the spiciness as part of the umami. You can't just toss it in there willy-nilly. You need to cook the ingredients to just the right point, and have a good grasp of the flavor they each bring, and then pair them with the right spices. It's not something an amateur can do."

"So, Pops... Are you a pro?"

"No, no. I'm just a smidge better than an amateur myself. If you ever get to eat the real deal, it's a whole other level of delicious..."

Zelos knew just how good the perfect curry could be, and thinking back to it allowed him to confidently say he was still essentially an amateur.

Getting the right mix of curry powder was really hard; there was a lot to it.

Suddenly, the two of them noticed something.

"Hm?"

"Pops... Someone's coming."

"Keep your hand on your weapon. Don't let your guard down. Pay attention to your surroundings."

"Roger!"

After informing Luceris and the others that there was something coming, Zelos rested his hand on a weapon too, and peered into the darkness ahead. He saw around ten figures rushing toward his group and making a real ruckus.

Their approach seemed...reckless. They were so devoid of

caution that that was the only way he could think to describe it.

"This smell... There's no doubt about it! It's curry! Someone's got curry!"

"W-Wait a minute. Let's say you're right. Spices are valuable in this world, you know? There's no guarantee they'll share some with us."

"Nah, we'll be fine! If we have to, we can just use the fact that we're heroes to make something work! I just wanna eat some curry, okay?!"

From listening to the voices, Zelos understood everything.

The horde rushing toward them was a hero party. Though from the fact that they were shouting that out loud as they headed toward him, it seemed like they really *did* lack any sense of caution.

Heroes, eh? What to do about this...?

Faced with heroes—the vanguard of the Four Gods—Zelos felt a crafty smile come to his face.

"Uh... Pops? You've got a real creepy look on your face right now..."

Zelos heard Laddie's retort, but he still couldn't wipe the smile off his face.

Chapter 15: The Old Guy Snaps at Priests of the Faith of the Four Gods

Before long, a boy and a girl—each looking around high school age and wearing a suit of armor—were standing in front of Zelos and the others.

"See! I *told* you they had curry!" the boy shouted, sounding proud to be right.

He looked like the stereotypical honor student, but his eyes carried a hint of arrogance.

"Sorry! I-I'm really sorry about him!" the girl said. She seemed far more humble than the boy; by the looks of it, she'd been trying to calm him down, but it hadn't worked. You had to feel sorry for her, working hard for nothing.

She had a diligent-looking face, framed by a ponytail and glasses. It was easy to imagine her leading a committee of some sort or another.

Or, to put it another way, she looked like the kind of person that everyone would foist all of their difficult tasks onto.

Somehow, just looking at her was enough to make you feel bad for her.

Not far behind the two of them was a throng of priests—the heroes' retainers, probably. Or perhaps their *observers*?

"Anyway, let's not waste any more time getting to that curry! I want to eat it, and I want to eat it now!"

"Hold on! Don't we need to introduce ourselves first? And what're you planning to do if they say no?!"

"Then we levy some 'taxes' from them. We're the heroes, so we can do that, right?"

"That's only in the Holy Land of Metis! We're abroad right now, so if we cause any problems, it'll be a diplomatic issue!"

"But that's only a problem for *countries* to worry about, right? Not *us*. *We're* the heroes! We protect the world from the Dark God!"

This boy really was arrogant. Honestly, Zelos couldn't help but feel increasingly disappointed by these so-called heroes.

These are the heroes? These *kids? I thought heroes were supposed to, you know, put their lives on the line, endure all sorts of ordeals, and stick it out through tough times... Like a certain king of braves. But this brat's just trying to use the fact that he's a "hero" to nab my curry.*

This guy seemed more like a video game "hero" who'd break into people's houses to steal their items.

He was one of those *bad* sorts of heroes, no doubt about it.

"Sorry," Zelos said, "but make your own food, please. We only have so much here with us."

"Huh? Do you know who you're talking to?"

"A couple of heroes, yes? What of it? Are you telling me that the heroes are all extortionists who show up unannounced to steal people's food? My, my... Quite the heroes you must be."

"Sorry! I'll make sure to tell him off..."

"Ah—*you've* done nothing wrong. Must be hard, eh? Having to look after a selfish, arrogant boy like him. Say, how would you like to join us for some curry?"

"Wait a minute! Why are you fine with Ichijo, but not me? What the hell?!"

"Why should I have to donate my food to someone as rude as you, is my question? What are you even saying? Use your head a little. I mean, sure, there's a time and place I *might* give you some, but this isn't that time or that place."

Zelos had no food to spare for kids as rude as him.

He was clear in drawing a line. And he was a ladies-first kind of man, to boot.

"Really? You're gonna give one of 'em food? But, Pops... We won't have enough if you do that!"

"Yeah! We'd need more veggies and meat, at least, and we don't have much curry powder left either..."

"Do we really need to feed any of these guys? Oh—but don't

worry about the curry powder, Ange. Pops has some more, so that's fine."

"I don't want to end up with less meat. If anyone tries to take my meat...they get *beat*."

"Surely we have no obligation to feed those with no manners. Can we not simply ignore them?"

The kids were ruthless.

But with how rude the hero boy had been, you couldn't exactly blame them.

"See, Tanabe? They hate your guts now because of how rude you were."

"Are you saying this is *my* fault?! These weaklings couldn't even protect themselves without us heroes around. They should *serve* us! We're out there fighting the Dark God so they don't have to!"

"The Dark God, eh? Tell me—who exactly are you *protecting* from something that's already gone? Don't make me laugh."

"*Gone?*" the girl asked, incredulous. "But we heard it only appeared just recently..."

"Hmm... Is that what the Four Gods are saying? I see... Well, that tells me the Four Gods aren't as omniscient and omnipotent as the Faith says they are. That's good to know. Thanks."

"Wha—?!"

Having gained some useful information, Zelos couldn't help but grin. And it was a real *nasty*-looking grin too.

The two heroes, finding his behavior strange, immediately recoiled.

"H-How are you so confident that the Dark God doesn't exist anymore?" the girl asked. "And why do you have such a creepy smile on your face? The Four Gods are the absolute authority in this world, you know?"

"Something's wrong with you, man... How can you even say something like that? In front of *us*? We're the *heroes*, damn it! The strongest people in this whole world!"

"Well, well... Why should I tell you all that? If you're so desperate to know, how about you ask the Four Gods? I can't be bothered to explain it all. It's a pain."

"Are you saying you won't explain yourself just because 'it's a pain'?!"

"Mm-hmm. You shouldn't depend on having people explain everything for you. Get too reliant on people's help, and you'll have no choice when they push their hassles onto you and work you to the bone. Just like the heroes of old..."

Zelos's words practically froze the air solid.

All of a sudden, the priests in the background looked furious.

"Ah—looks like the curry's starting to burn," Zelos said, ignoring the enraged onlookers. "We'd better take it off the heat, or we won't be able to eat it."

When curry burned onto the bottom of a pot, it was tough to get rid of, no matter how much you washed it.

"Oh, you're right," Luceris said. "Ange? Can you take that handle there?"

"Okay~!"

"Hold on!" the boy shouted. "You just said something that sounded really important, right?! The hell are you prioritizing your curry for?!"

"Because I don't really care about that 'important' thing. Besides, I bet you've had some good times here, right? So I figured, maybe you wouldn't really mind dying to pay for that. Even if they've been lying to you this whole time."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" the girl cried out. "We won't know unless you tell us!"

"No, no; I'm just some mage who doesn't believe in the gods! I'm sure nothing I could say to the heroes—to the agents of the gods—would mean all that much. So it doesn't really matter what I say, does it?"

"It matters to *us*!" the two of them shouted together.

"Well, it doesn't matter to me, that's for sure! Besides, it might be a little...*mean* of me to reveal it all if you're happy with the way things are now."

Zelos hadn't expected to actually meet any heroes, though he'd heard the occasional story about them in newspapers or rumors.

Apparently they'd been summoned by a "miracle of the gods,"

developed their skills at an astonishing pace, and boasted overwhelming strength in battle.

They served the Holy Land of Metis—and sometimes they even worked alongside the Inquisition to take down heretic priests, or so Zelos had read at a newspaper booth in the great library of the Istol Academy of Magic. That last part sounded a little dubious to him, though.

But however he looked at it, the only logical conclusion was that the heroes were being *used*. And now, he'd had the perfect opportunity to get some information out of them by taking the conversation in a certain direction. He'd only mentioned the curry just now as a trick to make sure they were thinking about what he *really* wanted them to focus on.

"W-We're not 'happy with the way things are'! Not at all! We... We want to see our families! We want to get out of this world as soon as we can!"

"*I* don't really care, actually. I can make all the good memories I want here, and we're the strongest people around. Not to mention, harems—they're just the *best*, don't you think?"

"Hmm... I guess I could explain myself to *you*," Zelos said, looking toward the girl. Then, turning to the boy: "As for *you*... Well, you can just go off and die, I guess. You'll be offed sooner or later anyway."

As soon as the priests heard Zelos's last words, they started casting magic.

That was enough for Zelos to understand: Either the priests were troubled by the implications of his words or they'd taken offense at how he was ridiculing the Four Gods. It was one or the other, he figured.

Both of those were just Zelos's conjecture, mind you, and he wouldn't know for sure unless he looked into it further. But now that the priests were suddenly *attacking* him, he didn't exactly have time to keep up the leisurely investigation.

"*May the light of the Gods coalesce in our hands and burn the sinners!*" the priests chanted. "*We pray for their salvation, and for mercy on their souls... Holy Ray!*"

"*Reflect.*"

Zelos casually reflected the priests' spell without so much as an incantation, giving them a taste of their own magic.

"*Aaaaaahhhhhh!*"

"H-How...?! How can he reflect the power of the Gods?!"

"*Ngaaaaaah!*"

"Damn you... You demon who would tempt the heroes astray..."

"You make me sound so bad... My magic isn't really any different from yours, you know? It kind of hurts to have you calling me a demon just because you're so ignorant about how things work. Look, let me show you... *Holy Ray.*"

Zelos started relentlessly blasting the priests with the same spell they'd tried to fire at him. He was being immature.

In his defense, he *was* at least taking care to not actually hit them with it...but he couldn't hide the sadistic smile on his face.

"*Gwaaaaaaaaah!*"

"A... A mage, using holy magic? It can't be! And he didn't even use an incantation?!"

"How could— Is our magic truly no different from what an average *mage* uses?!"

"Impossible! I *refuse* to believe it!"

Meanwhile, the two heroes were dumbfounded.

As far as they knew, holy magic was the power of the gods, and it wasn't a power that mages could wield. Now, this middle-aged guy had overturned that idea like it was nothing.

And that single moment broke all of their assumptions about this world.

"Hang on," the boy said, bewildered. "Does this mean holy magic is the same as the stuff mages use? Then would *healing* magic also be...?"

"Being a priest just gives you a job bonus that makes your healing more powerful; that's all. But mages can use it too, you know? And the inverse is true as well. Don't tell me—did you really think that mages couldn't use healing magic or something? Because if you did, you're wrong."

"So holy magic is just..." The girl was confused too.

"Derived from the same stuff as every other kind of magic, yes. It's just that the Four Gods started calling light magic 'holy magic.' So, what do you think? It's all a bit shady, isn't it?"

"But... What does that make priests?!" the boy replied. "They've built up a huge amount of influence, all based on the idea that their holy magic's special!"

"Priests used to worship the God of Creation. Which is probably how they gained a bonus to their healing. But nowadays, people aren't raised to worship the God of Creation—not apart from a few exceptions, at least. What I'm saying is, the Faith of the Four Gods got to the position it's in now by usurping it. Even hero summoning was only meant to be usable in times of emergency, but then the Faith of the Four Gods started summoning heroes all the time. And there's no telling *what* sort of disaster that might cause in the world. Worst-case scenario, the world could fall to ruin, and take every other world with it at the same time. That's the risk of opening up holes in space-time."

Zelos's explanation—half truth, half bluff—made the heroes go pale.

It had just made them realize that there was the danger of their *original* world getting caught up in all this as well.

What Zelos was saying here was speculation, though. He was referencing information he'd found at the Istol Academy of Magic, and then just blurting out a plausible-sounding hypothesis based on that. He was making stuff up on the spot, really, all unverified.

But the heroes had no way of confirming for themselves.

And so, it all oh-so-easily took on the mantle of *the truth*. When they kind of had a sense that at least *some* of it was true, they found it hard to assume any of it was wrong.

"Well, then—the curry's done, so I say we get to eating!"

"*Yaaay!*" four of the kids cheered. "Curry time! It smells *sooo* good!"

"This scent...it certainly does whet the appetite," Kaede added. "I can see myself becoming enthralled by it as well."

"Um... Zelos?" Luceris said. "Those priests over there don't look very good..."

"*They're* the ones that attacked me out of nowhere just because I said something that'd cause them problems, remember? Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if they had orders to eliminate the heroes if the situation called for it. That's pretty much what religion's like, I'm telling you."

Behind the heroes—who were ruminating over the seeds of doubt that had just been sown in their minds—the priests were rolling on the ground, moaning.

The magic they'd fired at Zelos had gone straight back at them, and they hadn't been able to resist it, so you couldn't blame them.

"Really, though..." he said. "You shouldn't fire attack magic at people unless you're prepared to die yourself. That's common sense. Do they not know that? Seriously, what does the Faith of the Four Gods even teach them? Did they really think I was going to just sit back and let them kill me?"

"Who... Who even *are* you?" the male hero asked. "You reflected ten people's worth of attack magic! That's crazy!"

"Oh, I'm just your average, run-of-the-mill mage. As long as you don't make an enemy out of me, I'm perfectly quiet.
Just...remember the 'don't make an enemy out of me' part, okay?"

"Still, didn't you...go a bit far there?"

"Are you saying I should have held back against people who were trying to kill me? It's a harsh world. The whole place is teeming with monsters stronger than any human. Especially if you go far enough into that forest..."

Zelos casually pointed in the direction of a vast mountain range covered in green.

The two heroes gulped. In the Holy Land of Metis, what Zelos was pointing at was said to be a cursed place, an evil land into which humans must not set foot.

And the heroes believed it. Not that it was too far wrong, mind you...

"Th-The Far-Flung Green Depths..." the girl murmured. "Are they really that bad?"

"Oh—people of *your* caliber would die on your first day in there. Though, well, it's easy to avoid that fate. You just need to not go too

far in... Hmm. Not enough turmeric, perhaps? And maybe a little too heavy on the cumin...”

“You’re already eating?!”

“Come on! If I don’t start eating now, those kids’ll finish the whole pot before I even get any! The *last* time I made curry, they ate the whole batch themselves...”

Zelos loved his curry.

He seemed a little dissatisfied with his curry powder, though. He knew how it was *meant* to taste...

“I suppose I should look into the ratios some more. Smell alone really isn’t enough to go by, and if I try to just wing it, I’ll end up with botched curry after botched curry. It’s tough. I’m still a long way away from the classic curry.”

“Really?” Luceris asked. “I think it’s delicious, though...”

“You see, Luceris... When you’re making curry, the flavor can change in a big way—as well as in a lot of delicate little ways—depending on how much you add of each spice. Since we’re using thumper toad meat this time, I’d like the flavor to be a bit lighter, and the spiciness to be a bit more punchy.”

“That *does* sound difficult... I suppose there’s a lot to cooking when you really dive into it.”

“Uh...” the two heroes butted in. “Can we stop talking about curry already?!”

As the heroes pressed in on Zelos, he gently extended plates of curry to each of them. And then...

“Would you like to try some? Personally, I don’t think it’s quite there yet, mind you. But I’d like to hear your feedback.”

“Yes! Please!”

That was all it took to win over the heroes. Curry was a mighty thing.

The heroes longed for the taste of Japan.

“It’s... It’s been so long since I had curry! I haven’t had any for three years now...”

“It’s so good... So *this* is how curry tasted...”

“*Pfft.* Silly kids... It ain’t good enough to *cry* over. Just shut your mouths and eat,” Zelos grumbled, every bit the old, gruff, worldly

chef.

Not sure how to even enter the conversation, the priests were left watching from a distance, quite literally gulping down their saliva as the fragrant scent whetted their appetites.

"*Hic...* I-It's just the spice making my eyes water, that's all..."

"It's sho good... I miss my mom's curry... *Sob...*"

And just like that, they were his. Zelos wasn't showing it, but on the inside, he had an evil smile on right now. "Mr. Sadistic" was showing what he was made of.

"These heroes really seem to miss the taste of curry, don't they?" Luceris said.

Luceris had curry piled high on her plate. To the others, she might've looked like Zelos's pregnant young wife.

But what she'd just said had raised a doubt in the minds of the heroes.

"Hey... Wait a minute! Now that I think about it, how do *you* know about curry?! Are you... Are you a hero?! Like us?!"

"Wha—?! N-Now that you mention it, we've been looking for curry powder here this whole time, and we've never been able to find any. So how...?"

"No, no; I don't have anything to do with the heroes. If you want your question answered, though, please ask the Four Gods or something. Mind you, it's not like I'm an ally of the Faith of the Four Gods either. More of an...*enemy*, if anything."

Zelos was feigning ignorance, trying to casually sidestep the question. The heroes' hands stopped moving—though their eyes didn't leave the curry.

"An enemy? What do you... What do you mean by that?"

"Like I said, ask the Four Gods that, please. All I'm saying is, that *might* be the case, depending on how things go. Of course, in other words, that could make me an enemy of the heroes as well."

"Stop beating around the bush. Just explain it to us, I'm begging you."

"Do you *really* want to know? Even if knowing gets the two of you killed? Killed for finding out things you aren't supposed to know, just like the heroes who came before you... Oh—did you know? Out of all

the heroes that have ever been summoned, not *one* has ever been sent back to Earth."

"What?!"

The heroes dropped their spoons.

Their eyes grew dark as they took in the mage's words. They lost their strength, and simply slumped forward, staring at the ground.

Seeing them react, Zelos knew he was onto something.

Mm-hmm—what he'd said was just a bluff, intended to confirm a hypothesis of his.

And the heroes' reaction, as if they were only just learning this now, told Zelos how unaware the heroes were of what was really going on.

In other words, these kids had no idea one way or the other whether heroes could go back to Earth.

They must have never actually seen another hero getting sent back.

"They... They weren't sent back to Earth? That's ridiculous. The archbishops told us they *all* got sent back..."

"Look... Do you even know how much energy it takes to open up a hole in space-time? And they're summoning heroes about once every thirty years, you know? There's no way they could have the energy to spare to send all of you back. It takes them thirty years just to gather up enough mana to *get* you all here, after all. Use your heads for a moment. The Faith of the Four Gods may summon heroes, but it has no intention of sending any heroes back home. What do you think is quicker—going through all the effort to send you back, or just killing you? To them, you're just otherworlders. Disposable."

"Th-Then that means our friends who died here didn't go back to Earth...?"

"They didn't, no. Death is the end. This isn't a game. The dead don't come back to life. That much should be obvious, right? Please tell me you didn't just think you could die here and get sent back to live out a regular life on Earth; you didn't, did you? Because *that's* what would be 'ridiculous.'"

Zelos continued to down his curry as he spoke, but his eyes

weren't smiling at all. They were as dark as dark could be, an endless void stretching out within each eyeball; *that* was the look he was giving the two heroes.

Just like before, everything he was saying here was mere hypothesis, made by piecing together stuff he'd found out at the academy's library with some other bits and pieces. But there were just too many things that didn't make sense unless his hypothesis was true—and as the heroes noticed that, they started to consider that they might *actually* have been seen as disposable.

And just as the heroes were falling deeper and deeper into despair...

"Anyway, the conclusion I reached from all that is that the Four Gods aren't even real gods. They're nothing more than agents doing a job. Whether you believe all this is entirely up to you...but, well, I can tell you that if you keep going down this path, you'll die as pawns. Or...maybe it's already too late for you to change that, whatever you do? *Aha hah hah hah...* ♪"



"Y-You're kidding..." the boy said. "They said we were the *chosen ones*..."

"I did think it was all suspicious, but we couldn't do anything except latch onto it and hope it was true," the girl said. "And the only ones who know how to get us home are..."

"Do you really think the hero summoning sigil even *has* a mechanism for sending heroes back? How many other worlds do you think there are apart from this one? Because if you ask me, we can assume that there are *countless* worlds out there. Each with its own events, timelines, histories... Do you seriously believe they'd be able to select a specific one of those worlds? It makes more sense to assume that they just summon heroes from some randomly selected world that meets a set of criteria."

The two heroes continued to pale. Zelos really had a nasty streak to him, with the way he was feeding this information to the two of them.

It seemed like as far as the heroes had been aware, they wouldn't die here, and even if they *did*, they'd just wake up back in their old world anyway.

But actually trying to confirm that was incredibly hard.

After all, the only way to find out was to actually die.

If you calmed down and thought about it for a moment, it was clearly suspicious. The details were all just too convenient for the Faith of the Four Gods.

"Huh... So *that's* why Kazama was trying to figure out the truth..."

"So the *otaku* realized what was going on, huh...? All while *we* just..."

"Ooh. So there was at least one hero with their head screwed on straight, eh? I'd imagine most of you got carried away thinking you're big-shots because of all the special treatment, right? And then you gave up on thinking, and that's how you get to where you all are now. How many heroes have died so far? And do you think they actually got to return to where they came from?"

The heroes certainly did receive special treatment.

They were given financial support and assigned personal concierges to find any services they needed, including those of the

sexual sort. They could commit various crimes with impunity as long as they didn't go too far; it was *incredibly* good special treatment by the standards of any country. The summoned heroes were afforded every possible luxury.

And now, half of them were dead.

"They've had you drowning in a honey trap. They close their eyes to any ridiculous, selfish things you might do, and so you get carried away. It's a common tactic. A hackneyed old cliché, if it happened in a light novel, don't you think?"

"Are you...*sure* you're not a hero?" the girl asked. "You seem to know a lot about all this. And you made curry. *Surely* you weren't born in this world..."

"Oh, I've just spent a lot of time looking into things. Mages always want to find out how things work, after all. Now, here's a question for you: What exactly is the 'Dark God' you've been trying to take down? Is it some invader from another world? Or did it mutate from something here? Either way, if it's able to travel between dimensions, then it has to be monstrously strong, no? Strong enough that it's strange the world hasn't already fallen into ruin."

"I guess we can't believe what the Four Gods have told us." the boy said. "So...since the world's still here, and it hasn't fallen to ruin, does that mean Dark God doesn't actually *want* to rule it or destroy it? Based on how desperate the Four Gods are to defeat the Dark God, we can assume the Dark God's existence is inconvenient for them somehow. That means that either the Dark God is threatening their godhood, or...wait. If this is something like you'd see in a light novel, maybe the Dark God *is* this world's real god?!"

"Ding-ding! Correct. Erm... Tanabe, was it? The Four Gods want to make sure the Dark God goes away, whatever it takes. Otherwise, they won't be able to reign over this world as gods anymore. At least, that's the logical conclusion. Which is to say, the Dark God's presence screws things up for them, so they're enlisting heroes to eliminate it since they can't do it themselves."

"But isn't it strange for them to expect the heroes to defeat the Dark God?" the girl asked. "Some of the legends say it can even

blow up whole mountains. There's no *way* we could beat something like that... It almost sounds like some kind of huge living weapon."

"Mmm... Yes. That's the hard part. I could make some guesses, but I wouldn't have any evidence or proof to back them up... Is the Dark God the legitimate god of this world, or is it some living weapon from the ancient times? Alternatively, if it really *did* come from another world, then there's no telling what its aim may be. And us humans with our physical bodies can't exactly just go and investigate that."

Zelos only had a bunch of circumstantial evidence. Nothing was concrete enough to *prove* his theories.

Despite that, he was putting on a very lofty, know-it-all face as he carried on about his theories, and it made them sound that much more credible, whether the others wanted to believe them or not. Ultimately, the two heroes ended up believing what Zelos had to say.

He'd never explicitly *said* this was all the truth, though. So this was all just the heroes' fault for misunderstanding, clearly.

He was a real piece of work.

The heroes had been acting based on revelations from the Four Gods, but now that they looked back on it all, they realized that a lot of the orders they'd been given didn't match their apparent purpose.

Orders, for example, to invade the lands of the beastfolk, whose religion centered around sacred beasts, or to wage war against other countries who worshipped religions that weren't the Faith of the Four Gods. All of it had just been a little too perfect for the Four Gods, and with their eyes now open, the heroes saw those wars had just been waged to *force* other nations to convert to the Faith.

And precisely because they remembered things like that happening, they completely believed what Zelos was saying. It explained everything they'd gone through so well.

Meanwhile, closer to the pot...

"*Nom, nom, nom...* So good! ♪" The kids were all wolfing down their curry.

"You don't have to eat so quickly," Luceris scolded them. "There's still more in the pot, okay? You'll burn your mouths if you're not careful."

"Mm... That was delectable. But wyvern meat was delicious too..."

"Yeah, right~? I'd never eaten any meat like that before."

"It was super good, wasn't it~? ♡"

"It melts in your mouth, and it's so juicy... It's got such a deep, sweet, savory flavor..."

"Hey, Pops! You got any wyvern meat?"

The kids were getting more and more particular about their food.

It made Zelos start to fret: At this rate, they might end up unable to tolerate the *usual* kind of fare mercenaries ate at camp.

For starters, strong-smelling foods like curry were usually forbidden at camp. The smell could attract monsters, after all. If you were careless, you could end up fighting a battle right outside your tent.

Guess this was a mistake... I should've waited a little longer before letting them eat curry.

"What... What the hell were we even summoned for?"

"Everyone's... They're all dead... They're dead, and..."

"The Four Gods have a hedonistic side to them, you see. Maybe they were just interested in the cultures of other worlds? I actually came across some manga being sold, and it was so bad it just about made me want to start a war myself..."

"*That* bad? Seriously?!"

If some heroes wanted to spread stories from anime and light novels for their own entertainment, that was fine. The problem came when those stories were adapted and awkwardly cobbled together, all without adding anything original in the slightest. Mashing all those different stories together destroyed what the original works were going for, and there was no consistent narrative; as a fan, it was unforgivable.

"The stuff I saw was like... You had Peter Pan riding the Flying Nimbus, striking an iconic pose as he transformed into Kamen Rider. Then he got into a fight to the death with a Force-sensitive Captain Hook. Not to mention, they were right above a skyscraper with a million-dollar night view, and there was a Bat-Signal on the moon. You know, just for a bit of an American comic book touch!"

"Th-That's *chaotic*..."

"You're right... That certainly doesn't feel like it'd have a cohesive narrative. And just how blatant do they want to be with their rip-offs...?"

"It was all like that. Just crap without the slightest hint of respect for the original stories. And what I really couldn't forgive was that they had a whole bunch of..." Zelos paused. "Fan fiction, we'll say, that wouldn't be good for children. Placed right where children could reach it. I felt like heading straight to the publisher and burning the books in front of them. Seriously... *Heh heh heh.*"

Zelos inadvertently looked over toward the priests, and all as one, they diverted their gazes.

You could see looks of incredible guilt distort their faces when Zelos mentioned those particular books. It was enough to tell Zelos all about who the perpetrators were.

"So it was *you* bastards, was it?! I get it... *You're* the ones rotting people's minds with those pieces of *crap*, just to raise some money and influence for the Faith of the Four Gods! Say you're sorry! Apologize to those works of art! To the people who worked their asses off to make them! You're going to make it up to all those writers and mangaka—by *dying*!"

Zelos was so enraged that it seemed like he might actually burst into flames at any moment now.

He was a staunch otaku, after all. So to him, the manga he'd seen in this world were nothing but absolutely unforgivable *insults*—scriptures of evil. He felt so, so, sorry for the residents of this world for having to read that dreck.

"So, have you said your prayers yet? Given your wills to your families? All ready to die?"

"Wait," the heroes realized. "He's *actually* going to kill them?!"

"N-No...!" a priest said. "Th-The people in charge of that are from a different department! We have nothing to do with it..."

"R-Right! Honestly, *we're* frustrated by those books too! So could you take that into account and... And have... You're *not* going to have mercy on us, are you? *Aha ha ha...*"

"I did think they were going too far with all that, but when I brought it up to them, they just got defiant and said, 'Oh, the

common rabble aren't gonna know the original versions anyway. If it gets 'em to hand over their money, that's all we need!' I tried so hard to stop them too, but a certain saint, she—"

"Yeah. She was putting even more effort into the books herself. The *dirty* ones, specifically. Is it... Is it really okay for us to be selling books with that sort of homosexual, um..."

"*That* saint's behind all of this?!" the heroes cried.

Aware they were in mortal danger, the priests were desperate.

And it seemed like at least one saint was involved in the creation of those manga too. The two heroes had learned a shocking truth.

"So? You think that's enough for me to let you off the hook? You put that crazy manga out there for sale without even censoring it, and now you turn around and tell me you aren't responsible for it in the slightest? At the very least, you knew it was being sold, and you overlooked it, yes? Because that alone would be an unforgivable sin. How do you intend to make up for the influence it could have on innocent children—especially when it's your own colleagues who caused it? Getting people hooked on yuri and bara is one thing, but what are you going to do if you end up unleashing a bunch of lolicon criminals on the world?! Shouldn't you guys be *protecting* kids?!"

A demon lord had arrived, and his name was Zelos.

Nobody knew when exactly the transformation had happened, but he'd even changed his gear at some point; now he was wearing a robe made from the membrane of a black dragon ruler, a breastplate made from the carapace of a triumphant black dragon, and a black hat made from the same material. In his hand, meanwhile, was a magic staff that resembled a cross spear. Apparently he was mad enough to go full Destroyer.

He looked something like a jet-black saint, or an archbishop dressed entirely in black; one way or another, it gave him a real *presence*. Enough to strike true fear into the hearts of the priests.

"You have to atone for your sins. Who knows *how* many minds have been corrupted by that twisted manga... If you're going to say this is an act of the gods, then I tell you now, the gods are my enemies. An *evil* I'll have to wipe out until not a trace of them remains! It's all just so *disgusting*. Worse than the foulest sewage.

You've committed atrocities—and I'm going to teach you a lesson."

Zelos was really turning the screws on these poor priests over what ultimately amounted to manga. This black-clad Great Sage was teaching the priests the true meaning of fear.

Still, mere manga though it might have been, the *contents* of that manga threatened to have a terrible influence on the upbringing of children here. Even if the contents *hadn't* been so twisted, it would've still had an enormous impact on their innocent hearts, and that was all the more true in this world with limited entertainment.

"Your sins cannot be forgiven. This is *war*. A war you started. *Your* actions must have raised the curtain on thousands, *tens* of thousands, of tragedies. Now comes the bell that tolls the end; remember it well! You set this in motion yourselves! And now, it's time to face the consequences. Time for a holy war; time for the beginning of Ragnarok!"

He was getting *really* high-and-mighty now.

And it had the two heroes baffled. "Just how much are you obsessed with anime and light novels?!"

"They're my personal bibles. I feel the need to protect them, even if that means killing the gods. What of it?"

"See! You're talking about 'killing the gods'! That alone makes you a hardcore otaku, doesn't it?!"

"And what's wrong with that? It's much more productive than devoting myself to some useless religion, at least."

In one sense, he made a fair point. In another sense, it was a dangerous line of thought to be going down...but here, that was a meaningless protest. This world had no regulations on that sort of thing, after all.

"With the way things are going, I'll have to go and destroy the Faith of the Four Gods with my own two hands. Oh; that's already set in stone now, sorry. There's no turning back."

"Set in stone, he says..." the boy muttered. "It could be dangerous to get on this guy's bad side. A whole country falling because of anime and light novels..."

"I can't see his level at all. How strong even *is* he?" the girl asked.

"I could take out a Level 500 in one hit, I'll say that much. And I'd have no problems winning even if I was up against thirty of them at once. 'Heroes'? What are those meant to be? Some new kind of snack for me to munch on?"

"Okay, we *definitely* don't want to get on his bad side!"

This was when the heroes realized they'd encountered an opponent worse than even the Dark God.

"Wh-Who even are you, sir?" the girl asked. "Between all that mana, all the things you know—including about what *we're* going through—and the way you're so insanely strong that you can casually *reflect* an act of the gods... There's no way you're just some guy."

"And that armor of yours... I don't know what it's made from, but whatever it is, it's rare," the boy said. "It looks like it all came from monsters we've never even heard of before..."

The two of them were right to be doubting the priests.

But before Zelos answered their questions, he took out a cigarette and lit it. He inhaled, puffed out some smoke, and stared listlessly into the sky.

"Ever since antiquity, there's always been a certain kind of mage around to guide the heroes, right? You know, the reclusive researcher type. Oh, and by the way—hero summoning magic? That's some dangerous stuff. This world might be just about done for because of that..."

"To guide the heroes, you say... Wait. You're a *Sage*?! N-No way! There were still Sages in the world?!"

"Now, now, I don't have to tell you *everything* about myself. Besides, the best researchers tend to be shut-ins, hermits—and as one of those myself, I have no intention of tying myself down to any one country. Plus, if a country *does* decide to cause problems for me, I can just make it disappear. The world losing a single country wouldn't make *my* life any worse—Don't breathe a word of this to anyone, by the way. Not unless you actually *want* your whole country wiped off the map, of course. *Heh heh heh...*"

That drew a big reaction from the crowd. "That's not something a Sage should say!"

It seemed like Zelos was still really pissed at the way the Faith of the Four Gods had trampled over his beloved otaku culture.

They'd well and truly destroyed his raison d'être, and he was hardly about to just overlook it.

Above all, if they were publishing stories in manga form, kids were *going* to see it. And it was *going* to have a bad impact on them. There weren't even age ratings here, so anyone could buy whatever they wanted without obstacles, even the stuff that'd usually have been adult-only.

"Anyway, mages here are like mad scientists in your world. They're shut-in nerds; people who'll read anything, carry out any reckless experiment, just to expand their knowledge. They aren't the moral paragons you hear about in stories. Just think about it. There's no way the world would be full of upstanding mages just sitting around waiting to help you out."

"H-He's not sugarcoating it, huh...?"

Zelos was suddenly trying to paint himself as a resident of *this* world to nonchalantly dodge the heroes' line of questioning. Maybe it was a bit of a stretch, but he thought he'd give it a shot.

He'd have problems, after all, if everyone here found out he was actually from another world, so he did his best to capitalize on the heroes' convenient misunderstanding.

"Mm... I guess it's obvious, now that I think about it," the girl said. "Someone who's reached the pinnacle of magic wouldn't just stay hidden away in obscurity. And even if there *was* someone out there who was satisfied with that, they'd probably just be a research nut."

"This otaku culture you heroes have brought with you is a good reference for my magic studies—that's part of why I like it. Things like your science, your technology; it gets me so excited to do my research. And then when someone puts out crap that ruins the original works... Well, I really *do* start wanting to wage war on the people who are responsible."

"So...the Sage is obsessed with otaku culture?!" the heroes cried. "And he's even one of those guys who rants about the originals being better than all the adaptations!"

"Oh? I never actually said anything about being a Sage, did I?"

While that might be true, the heroes and priests were already half convinced that he really *was* one.

Just from what they'd seen here tonight, he was an odd fellow, crazy for research, and devoted to otaku culture. There was clearly *something* strange about him. He'd threatened to destroy the entire Holy Land of Metis. But he was capable of holy magic, and he spoke of things they knew nothing about; *those* parts, at least, made him the spitting image of a Sage. And when even the *heroes'* Appraisal couldn't tell what his level was, it made sense to assume it was something insane.

While discovering a Sage should have been a wondrous moment in history, the heroes couldn't help but feel more scared than anything else.

That was perfect for Zelos, though. In fact, he decided to continue muddling fact and fiction to throw the heroes further off-balance.

"Don't tell me," one of the heroes said. "Was this curry something you—"

"Oh, that was just me passing time by trying to recreate a dish I saw in a cooking manga. One brought here by one of the heroes that came before you. Back then, I didn't know the summoned heroes were being tricked, so when they got all cocky and arrogant, I just thought that was how they were, and I didn't think to help them out. Especially when this whole world's all about survival of the fittest."

Zelos was just flat-out lying with a straight face at this point.

"So you're saying the Sages don't actually care about us heroes? That you could watch arrogant heroes die one after another, and it wouldn't bother you?"

"Again, I'm not a Sage... But let me turn the question back on you: Why should the Sages have to help you out? At the end of the day, you're just helping wage a religious war on other cultures, aren't you? I don't want to get involved in that, and I can see why *they* wouldn't want to either. It's stupid."

"But that's not *our* fault, is it?! So why should we be forced to

fight without any help?!”

“Make that complaint to the Four Gods, please. They and their servants are the ones summoning you—and besides, I bet you were happy when you got summoned, right? Come on, just *try* to tell me you didn’t feel a sense of freedom at being released from your boring old reality.”

“W-Well...”

The hero girl—Nagisa Ichijo—couldn’t bring herself to deny it.

It was true that she’d felt elated by the change of environment upon arriving in this world. And it was true that every time she’d delved into a dungeon and leveled up, she’d felt delighted at how she was growing stronger and stronger.

But reality was a harsh mistress. Once she’d started watching her friends die right in front of her in war, she’d started wishing to go back to her own world. At this point, it was fair to say, that was *all* she was fighting for.

“This other boy you were talking about—Kazama, was it? He had the right idea. He was probably comparing your situation with things he remembered from light novels and the like, and got suspicious enough that he couldn’t just swallow whatever the Faith of the Four Gods told you. He must have been cautious. And yet, by the sounds of it, the rest of you didn’t listen to him, and that’s how you ended up where you are now... What happened to him, by the way? Just from the way you’ve been acting, is he already dead, perhaps...?”

When Zelos inquired about Kazama’s safety with Nagisa, she flinched.

Arriving in this new world had felt so liberating at first. So *exhilarating*.

And she was probably feeling some real regret about those feelings right now.

The two heroes were practically open books, making it easy for Zelos to figure out the gist of what had happened.

“Y-Yes. He’s... You’re right...” Nagisa confirmed.

“We were having so much fun in this world,” the boy said. “We were leveling up, getting stronger... We didn’t know how terrible war really was.”

"It sounds like you were happy enough with your situation, so you gave up on actually *thinking* about it. You just gave in to the pleasure they offered you. Rather than face the fear of death, you *indulged*. Instead of trusting your comrade like you should've, you rejected him. Do you really have the right to rely on other people at this point? Reality is cruel. However strong someone is, they can still die in an instant... And honestly, I don't feel like I have any moral obligation to save people who closed their eyes to that fact, just because I happened to come across them."

"Y-You're..."

"War is terrible, you say? It's all about killing people. Of *course* it's terrible. Isn't it a little too selfish for someone to head into war with no preparation, no thought—just swinging a weapon around, brandishing their authority, compromising on all their morals—and then suddenly turn to someone else for help? Just how spoiled do you have to be? You reap what you sow—I think that's a saying in your world, isn't it?"

The heroes were silent. They had no response to that.

"I would've liked to meet that Kazama boy... Feels like we could've had some interesting discussions. Tell me—how exactly did you respond to him? Did you ignore him? Make fun of him? Either way, he's dead now, by the sounds of it, and the dead don't come back. There's no point apologizing either. It's too late for that... I'm not going to listen to any 'Oh, you're a Sage, so please save us!', okay? I'm just a regular old mage. And a very selfish one, at that. I don't get involved in things unless there's something in it for me. But enough about me; let me ask about *you*. Are heroes really all that great? Have any of you actually achieved any sort of great deeds?"

Heroes were said to be the strongest soldiers in the world...but the two heroes here could tell that this mage was far and away more powerful than them. Parts of what they'd been told had always seemed a little strange, but now they were *really* starting to doubt what they'd been told, including the idea that heroes were the strongest people out there.

Plus, they really *hadn't* achieved any great deeds. It was getting hard for them to tell why they were even here.

And the more they thought about it, the more they came to understand that not everything was as convenient as the Holy Land of Metis made it out to be.

"Well, as long as you're at this camp, the two of you can do as you wish. But if you decide to mess with us, I won't hold back against you, okay? And if I happen to wipe a whole country off the map in the process, well, that's no skin off my back. I'm sure there are plenty of people out there who'd be *happy* about it, in fact..."

"I get that you have no intention of saving us," the boy said. "But..."

"Yeah. There's just one thing I want to ask..." Nagisa continued.

"What is it?"

"What's with that guy tied up over there?" the two of them asked, pointing to the man who was still tied up on the ground, wriggling about pathetically. This entire time, he'd been staring at them all with hate-filled eyes.

"Ah. Just a creepy stalker."

Chapter 16: The Old Guy Spies on the Heroes

Young student Katsuhiko Tanabe had been summoned to another world as a hero.

It had happened right in the middle of homeroom, just before summer break, in his third year of middle school. All of a sudden—boom, summoned to another world, whisked away by the Four Gods.

At first, he'd been ecstatic. He knew all about heroes from light novels and games. The thought that *he* was going to be one of those heroes left him overjoyed, and it didn't take long for the special treatment he received to make him arrogant. Not just him, in fact. It was a similar story for the other students.

The only one who'd found the whole setup suspicious was Takumi Kazama, the sole summoned student who wasn't just a hero but also a mage. He'd warned the others, but only one of the other students had even listened. The rest had simply ignored him.

As heroes, everything the students did was endorsed by the Holy Land of Metis, effectively the headquarters of the Faith of the Four Gods. They could spend money as they pleased, they could sleep with as many people as they wanted, and they were even allowed to take heretics as slaves, to be treated however the heroes desired.

Katsuhiko was an adolescent boy, and just like the other boys who'd been summoned, he'd indulged his sexual desires, unable to resist the temptation. The girls had given him cold looks, but he hadn't cared.

Then, about a year ago, everything had changed.

A revelation had been handed down, ordering the heroes to destroy a country of "demons" living among the mountains.

That country—the Artom Empire—was home to a winged race of people. And driven by lust, Katsuhiko and the others had set out to

fight, just like they'd already done time and time again by then. But to the heroes' shock, they—supposedly the *strongest people in the world*—had found themselves powerless against the Artom Empire. They'd dropped like flies. They'd been no match for the winged "demons."

For the first time, the heroes had been struck with terror. And so, they had attempted to flee—an attempt that ended in failure.

Still, however strong the "demons" were, the Holy Land of Metis had the superior numbers. The war progressed in the Holy Land's favor, and eventually, the heroes had a certain fortress surrounded.

That proved to be a terrible mistake.

The land around the enormous fortress was marked by a twisted, winding canyon, commonly known as the Scar of the Dark God. And beyond that canyon was a forest brimming with all sorts of terrifying monsters.

Without warning, a swarm of monsters had emerged from the forest and assailed the Order of Paladins sent from the Holy Land of Metis, ripping into them like a pack of wild animals tearing into their prey. Several heroes had gotten eaten too, and just like that, the tides of war had turned.

They'd been lured straight into a trap—into their final resting place.

It had been a scene right out of the deepest levels of hell—and to make matters worse, a barrage of magic had been fired down at them from the fort while the monsters attacked. The heroic deeds of one Takumi Kazama had allowed half the heroes to survive, but he had disappeared among the chaos.

Just like that, the Holy Land of Metis had experienced its first ever crushing defeat, and its heroes—including Katsuhiko—had been left with the fear of death carved deep into their hearts.

Not long after, they'd fled from the front line under the pretense of "searching for traces of the Dark God," and made it to the Magic Kingdom of Solistia with priests in tow...only for a couple of them to end up getting interrogated by some middle-aged mage.

The heroes' chat with that mage had... Well, it had gotten off-topic at times, but it had given them some important pieces of

information. Things that really made them think about what was to come. Things that, perhaps, they'd refused to see this whole time.

Now, the hero party was at camp, a number of them standing watch for the night. Not far away, they could see a couple of children from the mage's party, both tending to the fire and helping stand watch.

They'd asked what the children were here for, and apparently, they were out training to be mercenaries. A common enough sight, in this world.

Back on Earth—where the heroes had lived not that long ago—they never would've seen something like this. But after their three years here, they were used to it. Now, it didn't seem strange to them at all.

"Hey, Ichijo..."

"What?"

"What do you think about the whole 'impact of summoning heroes' thing? You know, the stuff that guy was saying about this whole world potentially being screwed..."

"I could believe it. If they're summoning heroes from other dimensions, they're basically opening holes in space-time, right? Obviously, those holes have to open on both ends—not just here, but in other worlds too. It'll be leaving these distortions everywhere. And they don't go away, so more and more get added every time heroes are summoned. That raises the question... The *next* time heroes are summoned..."

"Yeah... What's gonna happen?"

"Well... For one, this world and our old one could get pulled into a collision, which'd just destroy everything. And who knows—maybe the impact could cause a domino effect, destroying *other* worlds too."

"Crap! That sounds, like...*super* bad, right?!"

As far as possibilities went, it seemed plausible. It wasn't like they had any proof, though.

Still, they couldn't prove it *wouldn't* happen, so it made sense to stop just carelessly summoning heroes. When potential side effects included *the apocalypse*, summoning people from other worlds

wasn’t worth the risk.

But given how many times the Holy Land of Metis had summoned heroes by now, maybe it was *already* too late. Maybe the doomsday clock was already ticking.

“Honestly, it should’ve been obvious that opening holes between worlds would require a huge amount of energy,” Nagisa said. “Why did we never even consider that before? Maybe Kazama realized what was going on, and... I wonder if that’d explain everything?”

“I mean, yeah, the priests *really* had it out for him. And it wasn’t just because he was a mage. If there’s a chance that summoning heroes could lead to the end of the world, and that gets out, then Metis could become enemies with every other country here. Believers of the Four Gods could suddenly convert and start following some heretical religion instead,” Katsuhiko said.

“Yeah. And, you know, it sounds like mages are always doing research and whatnot. So maybe *that’s* why the priests hated Kazama so much. Because he was trying to poke holes in their religion,” Nagisa said.

“Hey, you guys,” Katsuhiko called out to the priests nearby. “What do *you* think about that? I reckon what that mage was saying sounds pretty credible. I mean, you tried to silence him before he could say anything you didn’t want us to hear, right? It ended up backfiring on you, but...y’know.”

“We aren’t sure either,” one of the priests replied. “Our job is just to support the heroes, and to...deal with anyone who tries to fill your heads with blasphemy. So that sort of makes mages our enemies.”

“But a bunch of what he was saying makes sense to us, you know?” Katsuhiko said. “I don’t know exactly how much energy, or— Uh... Would you call it ‘mana,’ in this case? Anyway, I don’t know how much it takes to summon heroes, but it sounds like the more of them that get summoned, the more mana this world will lose. Maybe that’s already having an impact somewhere in the world. And if it is, then the world’s just inching toward destruction, right?”

“Impossible. We were told summoning uses the power of the Four Gods. And the power of the Gods must exist in some domain beyond human compre—”

"But isn't it just you guys who think that?" Nagisa asked. "Like, the Four Gods can't beat the Dark God by themselves, right? Maybe you want to say that the Four Gods made this world, but... Well, how was the Dark God created, then? Did it come from some other world? Did it mutate from something else? If it *did* come from another world, then that must mean it has an insane amount of mana—enough to open up a hole between dimensions all by itself. And if that's true, then this world's been doomed the whole time anyway. Doesn't it make more sense to assume it was just sealed away somewhere?"

"B-But that'd go against our teachings. Surely that wouldn't be the case..."

Turmoil was washing over the priests.

They didn't know exactly what effect hero summonings had, but there was no way opening up holes in reality had *no* effect at all. Until now, they'd probably never even thought about the implications of it all—let alone the impact of linking those holes with other worlds.

As the heroes and the priests discussed all this, by the way, Zelos stood hidden nearby. He'd concealed his presence and snuck up behind them, hoping to find out what was going on with them.

Heh heh... I hadn't expected to run into any heroes out here, but it sure seems like they're shaken up after our little chat. You know, I just blurted out whatever came to mind, but it seems like it all went pretty well. Honestly, I'm impressed with myself. Let's see where things go now that they've learned things the church didn't want them to know...

Still holding a real grudge against the Four Gods, Zelos had simply blurted out whatever came to mind earlier, mixing fiction and fact as one. His only reason had been to spark dissent and cause trouble for the gods...or, okay, maybe that wasn't his *only* reason.

While Zelos hadn't told the heroes the whole truth, he *technically* hadn't lied to them either. He was sly like that.

Ultimately, he only really knew what he'd seen in books, so he couldn't say for sure whether the previous generations of heroes had been sent back to their original worlds or just disposed of when they

were no longer needed. Regardless, it was the kind of question the Faith of the Four Gods didn't want people looking into.

Whether the heroes and the priests here knew the full truth wasn't actually that important to him as long as he could gather some intel.

As far as the priests were concerned, though, just seeing a mage use holy magic was *already* a big problem. That alone, they knew, would raise doubts about the Faith of the Four Gods's doctrine—let alone the potential loss of trust in the morality of summoning heroes.

The Faith of the Four Gods certainly didn't want to make enemies of the heroes, but in truth, no records remained that described the previous batch of heroes that had been summoned. In effect, no one really knew what might have happened to the heroes that had come before Nagisa and Katsuhiko. Which was odd, really. After all, the last batch of heroes had only been summoned thirty-three years ago. They should still have been very much alive...but they were simply gone, along with any and all information about them.

Maybe they'd been sent back to their previous world—or maybe they'd been killed. The heroes here *now* didn't know the answer, but the question alone was enough to make them suspicious of their own situations.

I wonder if any of these priests are part of the Inquisition? Anyway, this Ultimate Invisibility skill from my Ascended One job sure does work. I'm so close to them, but none of them have any idea I'm here. This'd probably be useful for committing cri— Wait! No! Surely it's useful for something apart *from just that. It's better than regular stealth skills, at least.*

Ultimate Invisibility was a technique available to an Ascended One or those with similar job skills. Zelos didn't really get how it worked, apart from the fact that it allowed the user to hide themselves from anything and everything. It seemed similar to magic, but it was strange; he didn't understand it, and he couldn't figure it out through a scientific approach.

"So," Nagisa asked, "how much do you guys actually know? If so much of what we've been told is a lie, then what *can* we believe?"

"We... We don't know much more than you. At the very least, we were told that the heroes got sent back and that only priests could use holy magic..."

"Hmm..." Nagisa continued. "But now you've learned that 'holy magic' is just another name for light magic. And if the archbishops find out about that, do you really think they'll leave you alone? Aren't you—aren't *we*—in a pretty bad situation here?"

"She's got a point," Katsuhiko said. "Maybe you guys'll end up getting disappeared, just like we will. I can see it happening—a huge organization, trying to protect itself..."

The priests felt real chills go down their spines. If holy magic really was the same as the magic that mages used, it would mean all their sermons on the importance of holy magic would have been lies.

Now that they knew things that were inconvenient for the church, their very lives could be at risk.

Well, would you look at that... I kind of just said that part on a whim; I didn't expect it to turn into this*. Seems like the priests are between a rock and a hard place, huh? Maybe the Inquisition'll come along one night, and they'll suddenly just disappear... I mean, they probably wouldn't have been able to keep up their stance on holy magic much longer anyway, once more mages learned to use healing magic. But this sure seems to have put another wrench in the works, eh?*

Ultimately, Zelos didn't really see it as his problem. Regardless of his intent, though, his cocktail of fact and fiction had really given this hero party a shock.

This was a huge issue for anyone devoted to the Faith of the Four Gods—part of their religious doctrine had been proven false. And it would only get worse for them as that information spread.

But there was no telling yet what these priests would *do* with the truth they'd just learned.

"This is bad. This could get the Inquisition on our backs. Our lives could be at risk here..."

"Do we just...try to smite that mage now, before it's too late? No... No. We don't stand a chance against him."

"Considering his knowledge and all his mana... He was being

evasive, but if he really *is* a Sage, then he's far beyond what any of us could handle."

Oh, come on. I'm not that *impressive...*

"I have a plan," Nagisa said. "We didn't see anything. We didn't hear anything. We didn't even meet anyone. Let's go with that, for now. Based on what that mage said, I think the truth behind the Dark God is taboo to the Faith of the Four Gods. Investigating it any further *will* get the Inquisition onto us. If they find out we know the truth..."

"I'm with you," Katsuhiko agreed. "Hearing all that stuff earlier, I don't trust Metis anymore either. But for now, we should be fine as long as we just play innocent."

In other words, they were kicking the can down the road. Then, when the right time came, they could drop the act and shove the truth in the church's face. They *had* to take that route or their lives would have been at risk. Closing their eyes to the issue—or at least pretending to—was the obvious choice for now.

"I guess we have to, huh...? We can't have them going after our families."

"I suppose we have to, yes. The Inquisition is merciless... I could see them killing our entire families."

"Their methods have grown far too brutal lately. We have to purge them sooner or later."

Jeez, just how hardcore are this religion's followers? This all sort of sounds like witch hunts from the Middle Ages. Are they just killing people without any evidence? I guess I could *see that happening here...*

Zelos had learned that there were some unhinged people in this world.

People that might just carry out something like a suicide bombing if given the right impetus. Those sorts of people *should* be purged, he thought, and as soon as possible.

But lunatics like that could also be convenient little pawns to do your dirty work if you gave them a good enough justification for it.

"Anyway... Didn't he say people here used to believe in the God of Creation? I've never heard that before."

"He probably looked into old books on it. Books that will have all been burned in our country. Are mages historians too?"

"If he's right, then his country could cause some massive issues for us if they wanted to..."

"They may be able to disprove our entire doctrine, yes. And this is a *country of mages* we're talking about. We only have so much authority here."

"I've heard rumors they're starting to sell healing magic here. People saying they worked on it alongside a bunch of other countries..."

"Hold on! Does that mean they're trying to break the Holy Land's hold on power? If the smaller nations come together, they'll have more military might than we do. And those small nations include the Artom Empire."

The Artom Empire alone had a fair few forces capable of going toe to toe with the heroes. If *they* were a part of this collaboration, it would spell trouble for Metis.

If word spread that holy magic, which had promoted its sacredness all these years, was really the same as every other kind of magic—on top of the fact that the Artom Empire's warriors could rival the heroes—the Holy Land of Metis stood to completely lose its geopolitical stranglehold.

Once mages learned to use healing magic, priests would lose their status. Plus, mages were already more skilled herbalists and alchemists. It would spell the end of priests being able to charge exorbitant fees for healing.

An ominous term came to Zelos's mind: "completely surrounded."

Oh, right... Mr. Delthasis mentioned something about all this, didn't he? Well, anything that screws over the Four Gods is fine by me. There are probably a bunch of other reincarnators out there all doing whatever they want to, so I suppose I should join in and keep casually harassing the Four Gods where I can, eh?

Zelos hadn't been able to drink any sake since his reincarnation, and he still held a grudge about it.

Specifically, there was some daiginjo sake that he'd so been looking forward to drinking back on Earth, and now it was quite

literally out of his reach. He was left with nothing but hatred for the Four Gods, who'd robbed him of the opportunity to drink it.

And for what was a rather petty grudge, he sure was being vicious when it came to getting his revenge.

"Aren't the people going to be upset with how you priests have treated people all this time?" Katsuhiko asked.

"Th-The same goes for the heroes too, surely!" one priest said. "I hear a lot of you have been barging into the smaller countries and throwing around your authority there, doing as you please!"

"That's not to mention the crazy requests they've made of *us*!" another added. "Like taking our daughters as slaves!"

"Ah..." Katsuhiko sighed. "That would've been Iwata's group, right? He's all alone now, though. Everyone else hates him, right?"

"And now Himejima might die because of him..." Nagisa said. "Why'd it all have to end up like this?"

It's ended up like this because none of you actually thought any of it through, right? You all just went 'Whee! It's an isekai! We're the heroes!' and got carried away, only for the rug to get pulled out from under you before long. Really, what's wrong with kids these days?

Zelos didn't know their specific circumstances, but based on how the conversation was going, he could guess.

The heroes had learned their lives might actually be in danger, so they'd gotten scared of fighting. And there was no use for heroes who couldn't fight.

That being the case, it seemed possible that the Faith might start sending unwelcome orders to reincarnators instead. After all, there were reincarnators out there whose power far outstripped that of the heroes, and surely there was no way the Four Gods would just overlook that.

In other words, there was a real possibility that the Four Gods could try to make the reincarnators their new pawns.

It seems likely they'll try to send us some kind of crazy message again... The question is, though, what should we do about it?

The reincarnators could access system messages as a form of communication, but they couldn't use them to communicate with *each other*.

He thought back to the one and only time he'd received a message from one of the Four Gods and figured that, by this world's standards, it'd be seen as something like a revelation. By the way, the reincarnators couldn't send a reply to those messages either; it was one-way only.

Maybe there was some other use for the system, but Zelos hadn't managed to find one yet.

By the sound of it, the only hero still too big for his boots is someone called Iwata. Hopefully, he gets what's coming sooner rather than later, eh? People who are slaves to their desires always tend to cling to the status quo when they can...

It looked like the priests and heroes who'd met Zelos had decided to stay silent to ensure their safety.

In an organization where you could be killed at any moment, there was no place for unconditional honesty. Whoever they told probably wouldn't believe them anyway, so lying seemed like the smartest choice if they wanted to live.

"Actually... Hang on," Katsuhiko said, thinking. "He said the Dark God had already been defeated, right? Then what about that Dark God attack that apparently happened here?"

"Oh..." Nagisa said. "Yeah. That's a good point. Whatever it was, it made a huge crater, so there must have been *some* sort of enormous, terrifying creature here. Now that you mention *that*, the stuff the *mage* told us is starting to sound suspicious..."

"He just *looks* suspicious, honestly," Katsuhiko said. "Hey—what if it was *him*? Maybe he fired off some crazy spell or something?"

A... A crater? Don't tell me they're talking about...

A while ago, Zelos had used Gluttonous Void to take out the faeries and their settlement.

And he remembered it leaving a massive crater in the ground.

So they assumed that was the Dark God's doing, eh? And so they sent some heroes to investigate. That aside, this Tanabe kid is pretty sharp, isn't he...?

"He said it himself—that mages are all kind of mad," Nagisa said. "So I could definitely believe it. And we did hear that two mages protected a village near there, so I could honestly see it being him. I

mean, he just seems like the kind of guy who'd screw up and go overboard like that, right?"

"So, what—you're saying he was testing his magic, and it was just an accident?" Katsuhiko asked. "In that case, there's no *way* we'd stand a chance against him. He'd wipe us out with a single attack."

"I've never heard of any mages capable of such destruction," one of the priests said. "Whoever did it would have to be as strong as the Four Gods, right...? That's not just a *mage*. There are people among the Faith of the Four Gods who collect information, but I've never heard of anything like that, even from them."

"But maybe people like that really *do* exist, and they've just been hiding all along," another added.

"Hmm, perhaps... Perhaps they've been holed up away from society, focusing on magic research. And now, finally, one of them's made a move," a third priest said.

The priests were realizing anew just how much of a threat mages could pose.

"But why, though? No... Maybe it was all just a warning. If he *is* a Sage, then he shouldn't *want* the world to be destroyed. All the more so if he's a researcher. And the same goes for the dangers of summoning heroes. In that case, perhaps it's no coincidence that we met him here."

"That sounds plausible. He knew the world was in danger, so he went under our noses and..."

"Maybe the hero summonings *weren't* actually done on the order of the Four Gods. Maybe they were all just decisions made by His Cloistered Majesty."

The priests were all making conjecture after conjecture now, trying to figure out what drove this mysterious mage to act.

But, as for the man himself, the culprit behind the crater...

Uh... Sorry. That was kind of just me blasting away with an empty head... There's no deep meaning behind it. And I really did just meet you guys by coincidence. It wasn't some grand plan of mine. In fact, stop believing it was! Please!

He was hating himself now.

When something happened that people couldn't understand, they

looked for meaning anywhere they could. That was just how people worked. With this particular incident, there was no deeper meaning at all—but, inevitably, these people were determined to find an intentional *warning* in the brutal scars left on the earth.

Even though they were the result of one man's regrettable screwup...

That said, while the hero party was just speculating, they were right in guessing Zelos was the culprit.

He could understand why they were saying what they were, but he wished they'd shut up. Listening to this was torture.

He was a sadist at heart, but he was a glass cannon. He wasn't used to being on the receiving end.

Unable to endure spying on them any longer, Zelos fled the scene, red with embarrassment.

His mind was about to break from a mixture of embarrassment and guilt if the hero party's opinion of him grew any more.

He snuck back into the carriage with the kids, pulled the sheets over his head, and sulked.

Meanwhile, the stalker who'd driven the carriage earlier was still tied up outside, exhausted from struggling the whole evening.

* * *

Winding back the clock by about a month...

Zaza, a knight of the Kingdom of Isalas's Ministry of Intelligence, had arrived at a certain country, with three mages in tow.

Or...*was* it a country? It wasn't entirely clear. One way or another, it was a vast territory home to beastfolk.

Various beastfolk tribes inhabited these lands, each with their own sizable territories, which they lived within while also mingling with other tribes; it was a unique social structure. They had no king, and instead each tribe was represented by its leader at a monthly intertribal council. Apart from that, the tribes lived in relative independence.

This vast area was known as the Ruuda-Iruruh Flatlands, and most of it was ripe for farming or grazing. As a result, the Kingdom

of Isalas wanted to seize the territory for itself, whatever it took.

"If we keep going, we'll get to the location where their tribe leaders meet. I just hope we're able to hold our own during negotiations..." Zaza said.

"Meh, we'll just have to see how it goes. It'll be nice if they hear us out, but humans are hated here, so..."

"Mr. Ado... How are you so calm? You are aware that they may *kill* us if this goes badly, yes?!"

"It's our job to make sure they don't, right? Besides, we're here on a direct request from the king. Not like we have much of a choice," Ado, a black-clad mage, listlessly replied as he continued walking through the thick grass of the steppe.

They must have been walking for a long while now, but he didn't seem even remotely tired. His stamina was extraordinary.

Following along behind Ado and Zaza were two female mages...and by the looks of it, they both seemed pretty bored.

In their defense, *anyone* would have been bored after walking through forests and plains for nearly a week. But just like the black-clad mage walking ahead, they too had extraordinary stamina.

Zaza, as the guide for the three mages, had no choice but to force his aching legs onward, one step after another. Honestly, he just wanted to get home as soon as possible.

"I have to say, Mr. Ado...your equipment certainly doesn't look like what mages usually wear. And it's... It's rather modest, but it seems to have been made by quite the skilled crafter. Where did you get it?"

"That's a secret. Anyway, do I seriously not look like a mage? Back where we used to be, this gear was pretty normal. Why do the mages around here only wear robes? Seems like that'd just get you killed out on the battlefield..."

"Don't mages usually just have robes and staves? I've never seen an *armed* mage before."

"Well, you're talking to one right now. Magic alone isn't going to carry you through a fight!"

Zaza saw this black-clad mage as an incredibly powerful individual.

Ado wore a breastplate, gauntlets, and greaves made from a scalelike material and rare metal. He had a scimitar at his waist, making it clear that while he was a mage, he was capable of melee combat too.

It was a similar story for the two women: One had a bow and was dressed like a soldier; the other had a glaive and wore robes common among mages. She too wore a breastplate, though it was one designed specifically for women.

Each member's equipment delineated their place in the vanguard and rear guard respectively, making it easy to tell which role each served in combat.

"So..." the first woman said. "We're meant to find that *champion* people have been talking about, right? The guy that... I think they said his gear was made from bones, yeah? I thought bone armor wasn't all that popular, so... Wonder if he's just got strange tastes?"

"*I* don't know anyone who uses it, at least. What about you, Ado?" the other woman asked.

"One person comes to mind. The 'Barbarian,' he was called. Surely it's not him, though..."

"The Barbarian? Who's *that*?"

Monitoring these three mages was part of Zaza's job.

For now, they weren't showing any hostility toward his homeland, but there was still the worry that they might try to start a rebellion.

And it was for that reason that he'd received a royal edict to both guide and monitor them.

"I never talked to him directly, but he was a pretty strong player. Good enough to unlock Criticality Breaker all by himself. Oh, and apparently he was a hardcore furry."

"What, so he likes fluffy-wuffy things? It sounds like we'd get along well!"

Oh, Miss Lisa... Seeing a look like that on your face makes my heart feel like it's about to burst. I wish she'd marry me... No, no. It's still too early for that. We need to get to know each other first.

Zaza was head over heels for the mage called Lisa.

This wasn't the phenomenon known as love syndrome either. It had been plain old love at first sight.

He didn’t know what “fluffy-wuffy” meant, but the contrast between her usual expressions—the look of an adult woman—and the innocent side she sometimes showed had Zaza smitten.

You could say he’d fallen for the gap moe.

As for Miss Shakti... I mean, it seems like she’d be in, er, the nightlife business. Feels like she’d trick me into something. She’s kind of scary.

Lisa’s other party member, Shakti, was quite the beauty. She had wavy, shoulder-length hair, and slightly droopy eyes that gave her a gentle look, but the way she spoke and acted could have a sharp edge to it at times. There was a sly side to her that’d surface from time to time; she wasn’t someone around whom you wanted to let your guard down.

And she fought like a raging demon on the front line, making it *doubly* scary to get on her bad side.

In a fight, she’d blast her enemies with potent magic at point-blank range. She didn’t need incantations either, which made her all the more dangerous. And to top it off, she was better with a spear than even the country’s best-trained experts.

Zaza wasn’t good at dealing with strong women.

“Hey, Zaza... Were you just thinking something rude about me just now?”

“P-Perish the thought. I’m just, erm, reassured to be with people as strong as the three of you. With you three around, it feels like I should be able to make it back safely, even from beastfolk territory.”

Jeez, she’s scary... How’d she even know? Her instincts are too good.

“Hmm... Well, I’ll leave it at that for now.”

Okay, she’s onto me! She’s totally *onto me! But how?! I swear it wasn’t showing on my face...*

As a spy, Zaza had been trained to prevent his face from betraying his emotions.

But in front of Shakti, that seemed to mean nothing whatsoever.

“Hey—didn’t you know? Even if people mask their expressions, you can still tell how they’re feeling by watching the way their eyes move.”

That drew an "*Eep!*" from the others.

"H-Hey! Lisa?! Ado?! Why are *you two* acting scared of me? That's kinda mean, don't you think?"

If Shakti could effectively read people's minds by simply *talking* with them, it only made sense that people might reconsider their relationship with her.

And for a spy, that was even *more* threatening to deal with. Not to mention Shakti was a female mage. If he wasn't careful, he'd find himself wrapped around her finger.

"Look, Zaza, just... Give up on Lisa. She may not look like it, but she's pretty devoted."

"Huh?!"

Shakti was giving Zaza advice for a problem he'd never mentioned. Which, in other words, meant that she'd read his mind. And *that* would mean that—

I, uh... Maybe I should ask for a transfer out of the Ministry of Intelligence...

She'd completely shattered his pride as a spy.

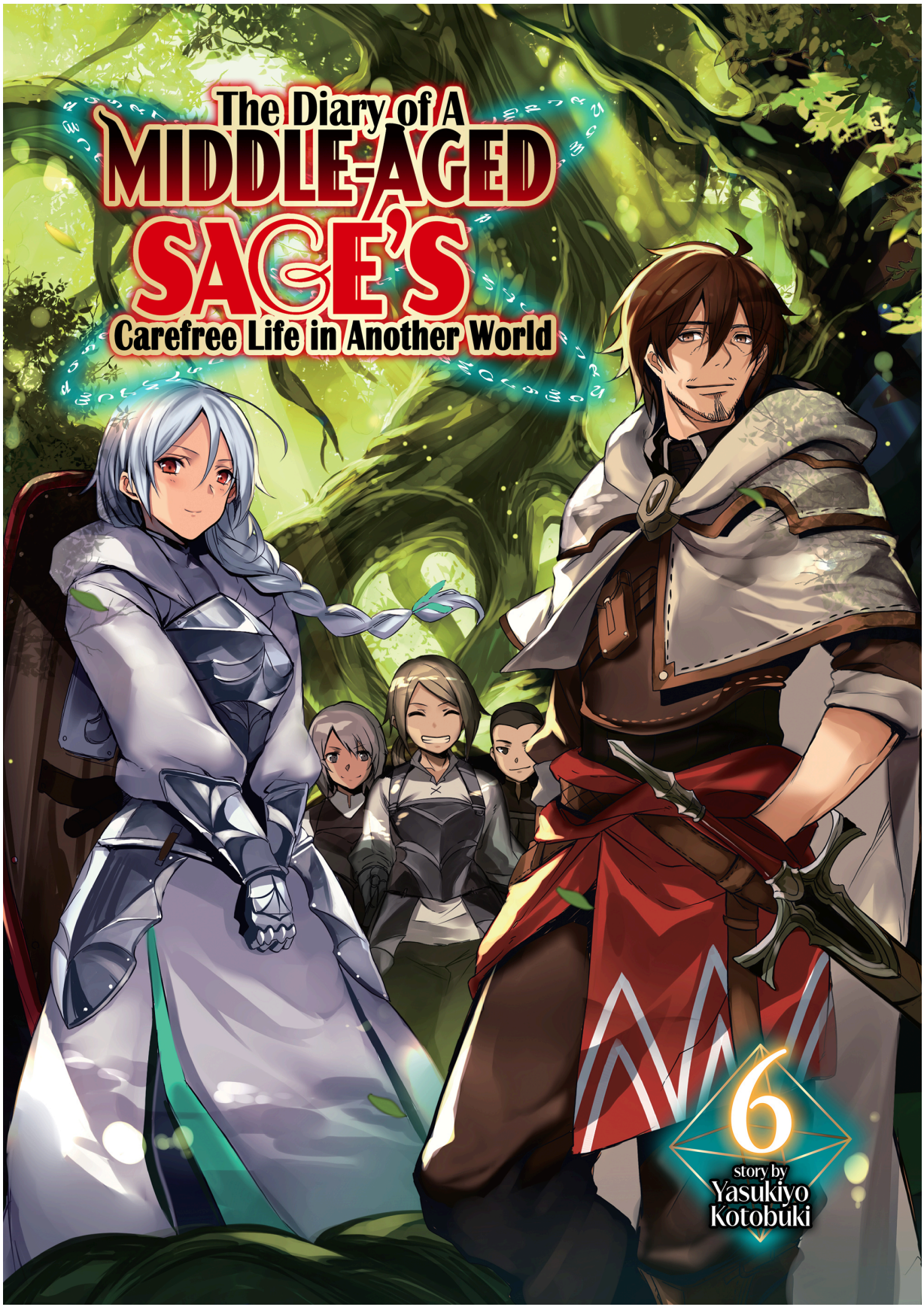
Next to Shakti, meanwhile, Lisa had a curious look on her face. It didn't seem like *she'd* figured out what was on Zaza's mind—though, going by what Shakti had said, it sounded like she was already interested in someone else.

So not only had Zaza failed to conceal his emotions—but he'd also gotten his heart broken at the same time.

His soul left with a wound that didn't seem likely to heal anytime soon, Zaza fell into a bout of depression.

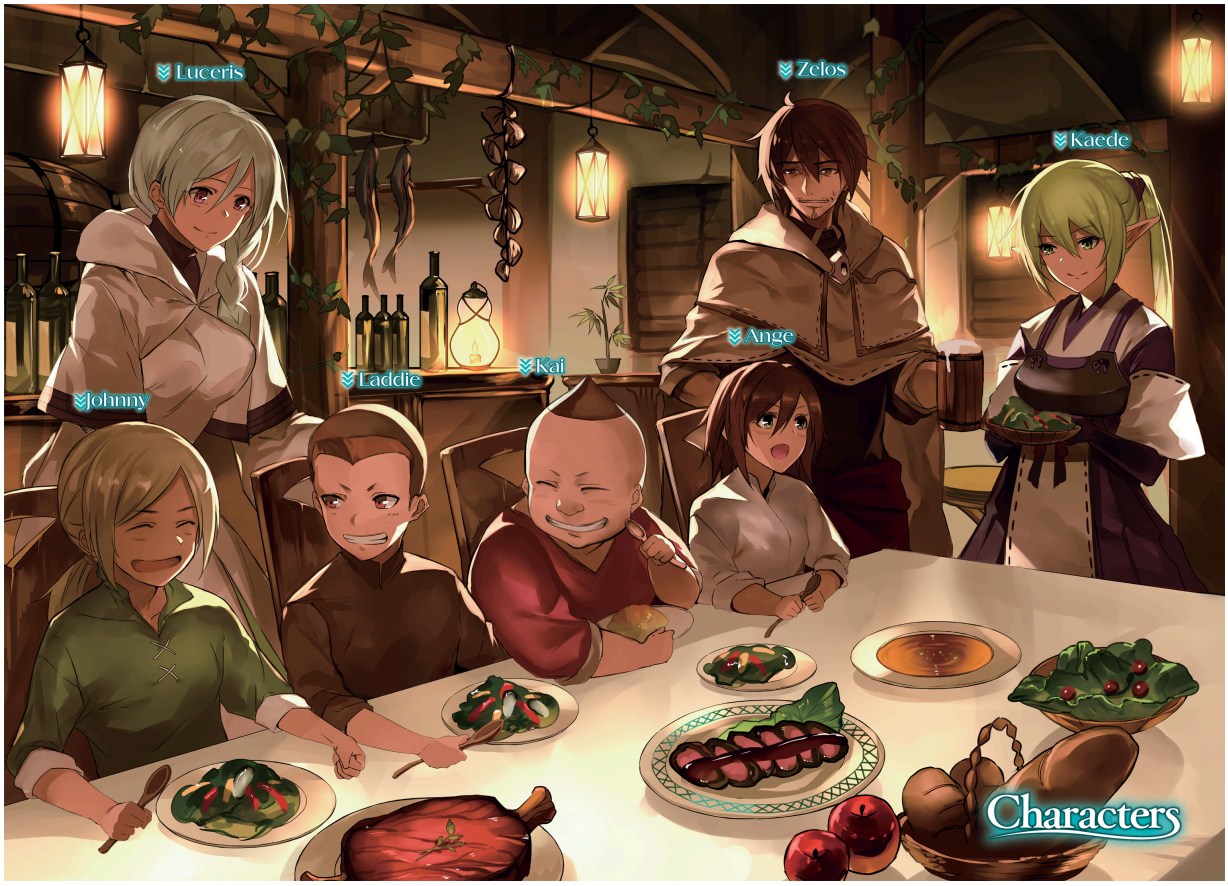
Shakti, meanwhile, kept strolling through the plains in a good mood, seemingly not fussed by how her cruel truth had snuffed out poor Zaza's love story before it had even had a chance to begin.

And as she strolled, she ignored Zaza's spiteful gaze boring into her back.

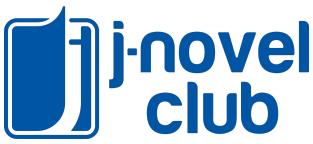

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by Kotobuki Yasukiyo

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