
The Diary of A
MIDDLE-AGED
SAGE'S
Carefree Life in
Another World
7
story by
Yasukiyo
Kotobuki

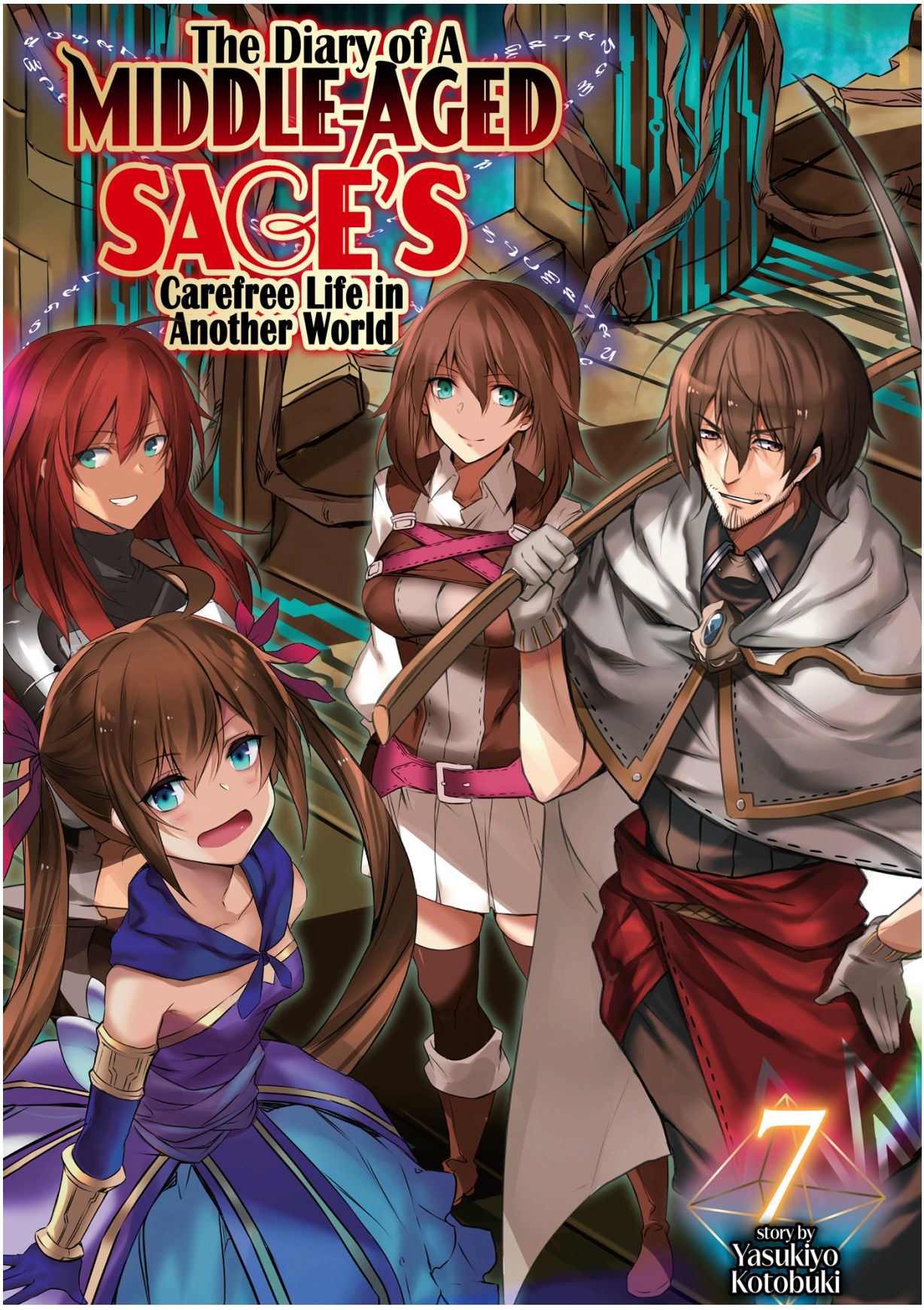

The Diary of A
MIDDLE-AGED
SAGE'S
Carefree Life in
Another World
7
story by
Yasukiyo
Kotobuki



Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue: The Old Guy Grills Some Meat
Chapter 1: Ado Goes to Meet the Beastfolk
Chapter 2: Record of Ado's War
Chapter 3: The Old Guy Gets Kidnapped
Chapter 4: The Old Guy Infers the Existence of Ancient Ruins
Chapter 5: The Old Guy Heads into the Ruins
Chapter 6: The Old Guy Nabs an Air Rider
Chapter 7: The Old Guy Wallops a Demon
Chapter 8: The Old Guy Screws Up Again
Chapter 9: No Rest for the Old Guy
Chapter 10: The Old Guy Meets a Former Hero
Chapter 11: The Old Guy Takes on Another Escort Mission
Chapter 12: Yoshino Himejima Remembers
Chapter 13: The Old Guy Preempts an Attack
Chapter 14: The Old Guy Kills the Vibe
Extra Chapter: Delthasis's Oath

Color Illustrations
Bonus High Resolution Color Illustrations
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Prologue: The Old Guy Grills Some Meat

"Now *this* is the life..." Zelos said to himself, relaxing as he kept an eye on his meat smoker.

The smoke carried a tantalizing meaty smell over to him, whetting his appetite. But at his age, it was easy for him to put on weight—and he knew it, so he resisted the urge to sneak a taste. He'd always been the sort to get flabby with ease, even when he *wasn't* snacking.

Zelos was in the middle of trying to make some wyvern jerky. He just wanted to see if he could, for the most part, but he was also hoping to get some preserved food out of it. He'd be screwed if the kids from the church found him, though. They'd eat every last bite.

The kids had grown even bolder lately. They'd even started barging into his house and rummaging through his fridge without permission.

Thinking about it reminded Zelos of how Luceris had apologized so profusely afterward. He'd...found it *very* endearing.

Why did seeing a beautiful lady panic excite me so much, though? Beats me...

Apparently Zelos had some pretty weird fetishes. But he set that aside, for now, to turn his focus back to the meat. He strengthened the fire by adding some treant wood chips.

He probably could've just made ham or sausages or something instead, and it would've been easier. But for whatever reason, he'd been reminiscing lately about the taste of beef jerky back on Earth, and it had spurred him to start trying to make some himself without knowing exactly how.

By this point, he'd racked up seven failed attempts.

Can't make the aroma too strong, by the looks of it. Or the

spices... I just don't have a good reference to go off of, that's the problem. Oh, and there was that one batch when I pounded the meat too hard and ended up with ground beef...

At least the ground beef hadn't gone to waste, though. It had made for some pretty nice Hamburg steaks.



Zelos had killed seven wyverns back in the Far-Flung Green Depths. And while he'd sold about half of the loot, he'd gotten so *much* of it that he *couldn't* have sold the rest. Not without risking a market crash, at least.

Maybe the consumers would've appreciated that, but the businesses buying the loot from him obviously wanted to sell it for the highest price they could. No distributor wanted to deal with a price collapse—that much was true in any world.

And so, out of consideration for the merchants, Zelos had kept about three wyverns' worth of loot to himself.

He'd shared any meat he couldn't eat himself with his neighbors, so he only had about one wyvern's worth of meat left. But even that was far too much for one person to get through alone.

That was why he was smoking it to try to preserve it. Jerky wasn't exactly the easiest option to have started with, though...

He had to get both the aroma and the flavor right; if either were too strong, the jerky wouldn't pair well with alcohol.

I'd love to have some of Mr. Nakanoya's beef jerky right about now, he mused, staring vacantly into the distance as he thought back to how his favorite jerky had tasted back on Earth.

"Hmm... That reminds me, I wonder what those two heroes are doing at the moment. Not that it's *my* problem, mind you..."

Perhaps trying to distract himself from his growling stomach, Zelos cast his mind back to the two heroes he'd met just the other day, on his way back to Santor.

In an attempt to get some information out of them and the priests who'd been accompanying them, he'd told them all sorts of things, mixing fact and fiction, to arouse their suspicions about the Faith of the Four Gods. And it had worked.

By the time he was done, the heroes' party hesitated to return to the Holy Land of Metis. As far as Zelos was concerned, though, that was nothing but a plus. He was, after all, putting together a plan to get revenge on the Four Gods someday.

He'd journeyed alongside the heroes' party back to Santor, but he wasn't exactly confident they'd be able to survive on their own. And it was a similar story for the priests who were with them. Now that

they'd learned some inconvenient truths, their lives could be at risk when they eventually got back to their homeland.

"I wonder if they'll manage by themselves...? Especially that Tanabe boy."

Zelos cast his mind back to the events of a week ago...

*

It had happened on the way back from the hunting trip.

Zelos and the others turned from the Far-Flung Highway onto the Santor Highway, and they were just about to enter Santor proper.

Katsuhiko Tanabe, a summoned hero, plodded along, feet heavy and back hunched. "Ugh, I'm beat..." he groaned. "C'mon, let me in the carriage!"

"Whiny young man, aren't you? Come on, tough it out!"

"It's not fair! We would've hired a carriage too if we weren't broke, okay?!"

Zelos's group was heading to Santor with the heroes' party—it had kind of just ended up that way after they'd met along the road—and it hadn't taken Zelos long to realize that this boy had no stamina. Or...well, he had the *physical* stamina, but not the willpower.

Besides, he wasn't the *only* one walking. Luceris, the children, Ichijo, and the female priests rode in the carriage, but their male counterparts traveled by foot.

They'd been taking breaks along the way, of course, but apparently that wasn't enough for poor little Tanabe to recover.

"Why do we have to walk, anyway? Shouldn't heroes get special treatment?"

"*Now* you're going to trot out the 'hero' title? Oh, you *are* a funny one. If only you'd been thinking this whole time about what it meant to be a hero, you might've been able to prepare for a revolution by now..."

"Must be nice being one of the girls. They always get treated better..."

Zelos sighed. "Don't you think that spoiled attitude of yours may

be why you get taken advantage of? In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if Metis specifically *tries* to summon people who think like that. They're the perfect targets to manipulate. Hmm—maybe people are easier to brainwash before they become adults..."

The self-proclaimed hero boy must have had a high level, but the environment he'd been in had left him a truly pathetic figure. In fact, it seemed like the priests were handling the trip better than he was.

"Looks like the *rest* of you are decently fit, though, eh?"

"We're often sent from place to place to spread our beliefs, so we're used to long journeys like this, really. Unfortunately, our hero here has indulged himself on this particular trip, leaving our budget rather..."

"Ah. You reap what you sow... It sounds like *you're* the one at fault here, hmm?" Zelos turned back to Katsuhiko. "If you'd budgeted properly, you would've at least had the money to hire a carriage."

"Ugh... Dammit! Why am I such an idiot?!"

But their money was gone now, and they wouldn't be getting it back. No use crying over spilled milk.

Ultimately, the hero party was walking because Katsuhiko hadn't thought things through. Zelos couldn't even bring himself to pity the boy.

"Couldn't you just say you're 'going off to find the Dark God' and use that as an excuse to escape Metis for good? If you go back, I'm fairly sure they'll just keep using you. And then, ultimately, they'll get rid of you. It seems like that's how it'd go."

"I *want* to, but I don't have the money. Plus, the Inquisition would be mad—and they've got no problem forcing their way into other countries. They're crazy."

"Why not just...*work*? Start up as a mercenary or something, earn some honest money; it'd at least get you enough to live off. Or do you seriously not intend on actually working?"

"Uh...no. No way."

Having grown accustomed to a life of luxury, Katsuhiko probably wouldn't have been able to tolerate the rough lifestyle of a mercenary. Zelos hadn't actually expected that response when he'd

asked his question, but hearing it only made him all the more certain: This boy couldn't make ends meet if his life depended on it.

He'd spent so long looking away from cruel reality that he'd become useless.

"Is there... Is there no other way? Why'd it all have to end up like this, anyway? *Why?!*"

"Pfft... You pampered little boy."

"Can you *not* right now?! Just stop! I'm feeling crap enough already!"

"It sounds like you heroes are getting screwed over by your own youthful indiscretion. I can see why you wouldn't want to admit that, but...that's what they call being an *idiot*."

"Is it really that much fun to watch me suffer? Why do you even hate the heroes so much?"

Honestly, Zelos was just teasing the boy to pass the time.

With Katsuhiko's pathetic figure still lingering in the corner of his vision, Zelos looked up to the sky, and his mind started to drift. *I'd love to be fishing right now...* He really was a free spirit.

"Sir Zelos..." one of the priests started. "What sort of religion is the Church of Creation? We've never known anything but the doctrine of the Faith of the Four Gods. I'd like to at least know a little bit about it."

"For the most part, it's not far from animism. It says the God of Creation made the world—but now, God watches over the world, never interfering in its affairs. It tells people to appreciate the joy of life; to show thanks for your food and for being born. Oh, and it encourages diversity. All different kinds of people coming together, regardless of race. That sort of thing. Sounds like a pretty peaceful set of beliefs, really. Nothing terrible in there."

"When do they say the Dark God and the Four Gods were born, then? Honestly, we don't know much about that ourselves."

"You know, I read something interesting about that. From memory, it was like... 'The time approaches for the God of Beginnings to ascend and leave this world behind. First, it created a new god to maintain this world in its absence. This creation was pure but hideous, and so the God of Beginnings sealed it within the

earth. In its place, the God of Beginnings made four spirits into proxies, and granted them the power of gods. But those four are nothing but simpleminded hedonists. They wreak havoc on the land, and threaten to plunge the world into chaos.' Something along those lines, I think? Apparently, it was carved into a stone at some ancient site. People have found similar things in other places too. And I hear there are a lot of cultures that have passed stories like that down the generations."

"B-But that would mean—"

"Are you saying that the Four Gods shirk their obligations? That they do nothing but cause havoc?!"

It was a truth the priests didn't want to hear.

But it was the sort of thing that happened all the time. History was written by the victors; the losers, and their truth, were completely erased from the records over time.

Even if those victors had only won through foul play, the story passed down to later generations would often say that they had won fair and square in a frontal assault. As soon as powerful figures and religions got involved, the truth was buried in darkness.

"The Church of Creation probably had its own saints who could communicate with their god. And the descendants of those women would have worked with mages to ensure the truth was passed down to future generations. The books and documents holding that truth might have been burned, but the story carved into *stone* has endured until today, for people to find in ruins. And, well, maybe that's part of why the Faith of the Four Gods hates mages so much. There's no telling when some mage might decipher those old engravings and reveal the truth to the world. It'd be a huge scandal, that's for sure."

"Wh-Where *are* these ruins with secret messages? If there are things like that lying around, we'll—"

"Beats me! Apparently, they were part of some enormous magical device, but I couldn't tell you exactly where they are. I just happened to notice the message included as part of the device's magic formula; someone had copied it down in a book on the history of magic, which I found in an academy's library. By the sounds of it,

the stones are somewhere important, so people couldn't just destroy them."

Someone long ago had probably hidden the truth—expertly camouflaging it within the magic formula Zelos had discovered—to keep it away from the prying eyes of the Four Gods and ensure its survival.

"Hmm. Okay..."

"There are ruins like that all over the place. But unfortunately for you guys, the engravings are in magic letters—which you can't read, can you? And, honestly, I only came across it by chance myself. By the time of the Dark God War," Zelos continued, "the Faith of the Four Gods was already powerful. Because the Dark God was sealed away, there was nobody to challenge the Faith's authority. And I suspect it labeled the Church of Creation as heretical, causing it to just fade away over time. Oh—but the Artom Empire seems to still follow the Church of Creation, even if nowhere else does. Seems like the Four Gods really want to wipe them off the face of the planet for it too. Heh heh heh..."

"Why does it seem like you're having so much fun talking about this, Mr. Zelos? You've got a really nasty-looking smile on your face..."

"Oh, Ichijo. I thought you were taking the carriage?"

"I just swapped with Tanabe. He's a guy, but he's such a wimp."

"Harsh. But, well, I suppose you're not wrong. The *priests* have more grit than he does."

The other hero of the group—Nagisa Ichijo—had joined in on the conversation, though Zelos didn't know how long she'd been walking alongside him.

As he looked at the carriage, he saw the *mighty hero* Katsuhiko slumped on top, completely exhausted. The kid really was weak-willed.

Maybe he'd just gotten sick of walking endlessly, slowly, amid the unchanging scenery.

This world didn't have anything as convenient as bicycles. Even carriages were uncomfortable enough that riding them would give you a sore back.

"Honestly, I don't want to go back to Metis. It feels like they'll just kill us if we do."

"How are you going to pay for somewhere to stay? I heard you don't have any money right now."

"Wh-When you put it like that..."

Honestly, Nagisa didn't know *what* to do.

Becoming mercenaries was an option, but the two of them were already sick of dealing with the rough and violent sorts of the world.

Most people who caused problems in this world were failed mercenaries, and Nagisa had apprehended those sorts a number of times herself.

Frankly, she didn't want to spend her days in such a bloody line of work.

"*We* should be able to support ourselves with healing fees," one of the priests said, "but as for Sir Tanabe..."

"No way he could handle it," Zelos responded. "Kid doesn't seem like he has any interest in working. He must've really been spoiled... You know, I'm not sure he'll be able to survive here."

Nagisa sighed. "Fine. I guess I'll look for a job too! I'll stay here—I can just give Metis an excuse like 'I'm investigating' or 'I'm doing missionary work'—and then eventually, I'll claim asylum."

"That's probably the wisest plan, yes," Zelos responded. "Though it may not work if they find out you've come across any information here that'd hurt the Faith of the Four Gods..."

"Seeing as we're in another country, it'll be difficult for us to get paid the way we usually do," one of the priests said. "We'll just have to work as healers at the local churches. And Sir Tanabe is quite irresponsible with money..."

Katsuhiko was a moocher, no doubt about it. Or at least, that was how Zelos had come to see him.

From what he'd managed to piece together at the ducal house, Zelos understood that society's view of heroes was changing.

Nowadays, if a hero tried to flaunt their authority in another country, it'd cause a diplomatic issue for sure.

And if that were to happen, Katsuhiko would be deemed an illegal resident and punished accordingly. At that point, the Holy Land of

Metis wouldn't hesitate to throw him away.

Throwing useless heroes to the wolves and coddling the useful ones best ensured the interests of those in charge.

"I don't think he's realized," Zelos said. "If he causes a problem here, Metis won't have his back."

"If we heroes really are just pawns," Nagisa said, "then yeah, it makes sense that Metis wouldn't help him. We might've been free to do whatever we want, wherever we want, up until now, but that's only because of our privileges as heroes. And now, I feel like things are taking a turn for the worse. It frustrates me to find out that they've treated us like idiots this whole time too. I want to get back at them somehow."

"But the boy will only hold you back, won't he?" Zelos said. "Even after finding all this out, he's still trying to lean on his authority as a hero."

"It's dangerous for us too," one of the priests chipped in. "We don't want to get the Inquisition's eyes on us."

The priests accompanying these two heroes were nothing but rank-and-file members of the Faith of the Four Gods, priests who'd merely trained at small churches.

In other words, they too were disposable pawns. They could vanish overnight, and nobody would care. In a sense, they were in the same boat as the heroes—not that Katsuhiko had realized that yet.

He had the pieces he needed to understand but couldn't put them together himself. He was one of *those* sorts of youngsters—stubborn and incapable of thinking for themselves—that people liked to complain about.

"You all would've spent a long time training as missionaries, right? Then shouldn't you know a decent amount about what goes on in other countries? It feels like you should be able to leverage what you know about the things Metis doesn't *want* people to know to get in the good books of the rich and powerful in some other country. Right? Then at that point, you just say, 'I'm scared to go back now,' and...well, I expect you'd find a warmer welcome than you might think!"

"You're right... Once, the Order of Paladins went to 'provide aid' when a plague broke out in a country called Selasta. But rather than help, the paladins just let the people die, then burned everything to the ground. The reports said that 'the citizens were all dead by the time the paladins arrived, so all they could do was burn the city to prevent the plague from spreading any further.' But in reality, they'd just decided the people weren't *worth* saving—and so they abandoned them. Selasta had never trusted Metis to begin with, so the church probably only cared about showing they'd helped out *other* countries in some way."

"Can you prove it?"

"We were there. They made us take part. I'll never forget what we did—abandoning people who were suffering, burning their city to the ground... It still haunts my dreams."

The other priests nodded in agreement.

But, afraid of the Inquisition, they hadn't been able to make any complaints about what had happened.

It had been nothing like what their religion taught. But they were bound by their fear of the blind believers.

In fact, the higher-ups had assigned these priests, who'd witnessed what had actually happened, to accompany the heroes in the hope that as many of them as possible would die along the journey. In other words, they'd been silenced by fear of death, then sent out to places of mortal danger by an imperial edict.

"What a pain..." Zelos sighed. "And not a god in sight. Just plain, old human evil. Oh—I can see the city's outer wall now. We should be inside within an hour or so."

"Why an hour? Isn't it only about a twenty-minute walk?"

"This city *is* under direct control of a ducal family, you know? It only makes sense for them to keep a close eye on any outsiders. And lines tend to form at the inspection gate, so yes, that's about how long it'll take to get in. Information's important, Ichijo."

Despite the Solistia family's control of Santor, it was still a key location for trade. There would be criminals eager to get inside, as well as merchants trying to smuggle goods in, so it only made sense that inspections were needed to protect the people.

After an hour, Zelos and the others safely made their way inside.

"Well, then—this is where we go our separate ways. Remember, though—don't get ahead of yourselves just because you're in another world. This is *reality*. Act accordingly. You never know where danger may be lurking..."

"Stop scaring me!" Katsuhiko wailed.

"Really, thank you for everything," Nagisa said.

And so ended Zelos's brief journey with the hero party.

After a last casual goodbye, Zelos and his group left them behind.

Zelos planned to get back home, have a bath, and relax with a nice cold ale.

Ultimately, though, his plan for a quiet night never came to fruition—he ended up getting dragged into a hassle the moment he got home, forcing him to resolve what was quite an incident... But that was a story for another time.

*

Thinking back to the information and stories he'd heard from the hero party, Zelos realized he'd learned something crucial: The heroes knew nothing. They were merely being swept along by the tides, living for the moment.

They didn't appreciate what it truly meant to be in another world. They'd underestimated how harsh reality here could be.

And it seemed likely that even if they *had* realized what was going on, they wouldn't have managed to escape their situation.

"Ahh... The folly of youth. It's a scary thing..."

Even old fantasy clichés from light novels and the like hit completely differently when they happened in what was now your *reality*. The real world was always going to be harsh; that much was obvious.

And looking at Tanabe, in particular, made that all too clear to Zelos, whether he wanted it to be or not.

Maybe in an RPG you could just barge into someone's house and take all their belongings, or be pardoned for any crime just because you were a hero. But if you thought about it for even a moment,

that was never going to be the case in the real world.

And to top it all off, it seemed like the heroes—despite seeing so many of their comrades die right before their eyes—had actually *believed* all that drivel about being sent back to their previous world safe and sound when they died.

They'd accepted it all without even *trying* to find out what their real fate might be when they were no longer of use...

Planning now to protect their own lives, the two heroes Zelos had met intended to find jobs in Santor while passing it off as 'missionary work' to escape the eyes of the Holy Land of Metis. The same went for the priests accompanying those heroes—and they too, it seemed, were in mortal danger.

Metis is starting to fracture. Or...maybe the cracks have been forming since they first started summoning heroes. The question now is: How do I capitalize on those cracks to destroy it...?

By the sounds of it, the heroes did have *some* suspicions about the Holy Land of Metis, but they'd never even considered confronting the country outright. But...what if Metis were to lose its edge as a powerful theocracy?

"I've already helped spread healing magic," Zelos muttered, thinking aloud now, "but how it actually gets used will be up to the higher-ups in Solistia, so that's a big variable. Now, now, who *knows* where things'll go from here..."

Zelos had propagated healing magic scrolls in an effort to smoke out the Four Gods. To smoke out his *enemies*.

He didn't know yet what the outcome of those efforts would be, though he had an inkling that it might just go exactly the way he wanted it to.

If someone hurt him, he'd pay them back with interest—that was his creed as a Destroyer.

As he gazed at his wyvern jerky—now finally complete—a cold smile came to his face.

Chapter 1: Ado Goes to Meet the Beastfolk

Long ago, a magical civilization flourished on the steppes now called the Ruuda-Iruruh Flatlands. Enormous cities filled the land, their magical tools providing a level of technology on par with modern Earth's.

But a single attack from the Dark God brought the country to ruin in an instant. And now, it bore no resemblance to its former glory.

The beastfolk—who'd been something like slaves in that ancient civilization—had gone on to settle in the ruined land themselves, building their own settlements. And it was still their territory today.

While the enormous cities were now long gone, some kind of their magic lingered on; the mana in these lands was highly concentrated, and all sorts of strong monsters had made the place their home. And in turn, the beastfolk too were far stronger than your run-of-the-mill knights.

Plus, perhaps because of the Dark God's attack, there were all sorts of elevations in the land; at every turn, Ado and the others found their way blocked by looming buttes. Honestly, "Flatlands" was beginning to seem like a misnomer.

Add in the number of trees that had taken over the land throughout the years, and the terrain now resembled a forested mountain range more than a plain.

A great many magic beasts lived here—though not as many as in the Far-Flung Green Depths—taking part in a harsh, never-ending struggle for existence. It was impressive that the beastfolk themselves managed to survive amid it all.

But survive they did. The average beastfolk had excellent physical prowess, making them far stronger than a regular knight. And that strength had made it difficult for the Holy Land of Metis to invade.

The beastfolk, however, had never been united. They valued freedom, and generally, one tribe wouldn't help another, even if attacked, unless specifically asked.

That attitude had changed recently, though. Someone referred to as a champion had appeared among the beastfolk, and they'd managed to capture a fort controlled by the Holy Land of Metis. And apparently, in the wake of that, the tribes had done an impressive job of starting to come together. On top of that, the beastfolk had begun to build forts of their own, and castles, and more; they were gradually dispelling the image of them as a savage people.

Apparently, this champion with them was a human—though Ado figured that only a fellow reincarnator could possibly have managed to pull all of that off. Beastfolk tended to value strength. And besides, Ado had some ideas just who this person might have been—who could have managed to bring together the disparate beastfolk tribes.

Specifically, he had two people in mind. And either one would be incredibly reassuring to have as an ally—as long as you ignored their quirks.

So Ado wanted to get them on his side, whatever the cost.

"Well, it looks like we've finally made it..." Ado said.

"We'd *better* have made it after all that walking," Lisa groaned. "I didn't think the beastfolk would keep moving all over the place..."

"They *have* to do that, Lisa," Shakti said. "They follow the grazing herds... Remember that place we passed? The tribe we saw? We ran into them *again* on the road the very next day!"

"And then, Mr. Ado, you ended up sparring with the tribe's strongest warriors..." Zaza said.

"Yeah. And it just turned into a battle of brute force. *Damn*, that one guy was a hothead... Ugh, I'm so sick of dealing with that."

The beastfolk lived off the land, and they were constantly on the move, following the herds of animals.

The only viable places for different tribes to meet up were water sources—but whenever Ado went to a watering hole in the hopes of taking it easy, he inevitably got pulled into a bout against a powerful warrior. And from there, it turned into an endless brawl, fight after

fight. That had happened over and over again.

He'd done well, though. He'd managed to beat every beastfolk who challenged him—and the beastfolk valued strength.

"Now, we should be able to see it soon— Wait. What's *that*?!"

"It looks like..."

"A mountain castle. Sort of like a Japanese one...or a Chinese one, maybe. I don't really know which it's closer to."

"That's Bah-Bareen Castle," Zaza said. "Apparently, the champion's there. Though the last time I was here, it was still under construction... How'd they get it done so fast?"

"*Barbarian* Castle?!" the three reincarnators asked, incredulous.

Traditional Japanese-style white walls had been built atop walls made of stone.

The building inside the walls had wooden architecture that clearly resembled Kumamoto Castle, and the castle itself was decorated with all sorts of designs from different ethnic groups. Dragon sculptures adorned its walls too, giving it a bit of a Chinese look.

"The castle gate is...at the top of those stone stairs, I guess," Ado said. "Looks like they get narrower the farther you go. And all the extra walls make a frontal attack difficult. This has *got* to be a Japanese castle."

"You're right," Shakti agreed. "From farther away it looked like the walls were plaster, but from here, it looks like they used earth magic to make them. I suppose they just painted over them later."

"It's kinda like someone just went, 'I'm gonna make the coolest Japanese castle ever,' right?" Lisa said. "Even so...it's *huge*."

As they continued, they realized the building's grandeur didn't hold up to closer inspection. It was poorly built.

But the walls surrounding it were a different story. And judging by their thickness and height, there were probably corridors running inside them. Loopholes dotted the walls, allowing archers to shoot arrows through the gaps or defenders to drop rocks onto enemies below.

"It's got bays for attacking with bows or spears, a bailey, narrow corridors... Mm-hmm. This is definitely based on a Japanese castle," Shakti said. "I wonder what those things on top of the walls are..."

"Looks like they cut corners when they made the building, though. What's up with that?" Ado asked. "Did they not have enough materials?"

"It was probably a rush job," Lisa said. "If that thing catches fire, I can see it all just burning down..."

But while the builders in charge of the castle itself had obviously taken shortcuts, the white-painted defensive walls and stone walls were intricate. There were arrowslits *in* the walls too, giving defenders even more opportunities to assault any charging attackers with spears or bows. It was clearly designed for brutal violence. Just thinking about it sent a shiver down Ado's spine.

"This is less of a castle and more of an enormous death trap," he said. "In fact, the walls around the outside are probably the main defense. There's mana coming from them too; I can feel it. But...what's the point of the building on top?"

In response came an unfamiliar voice: "The building's just for decoration. Not that those snobs attacking us could figure that out!"

"Who's there?!"

The voice had come from a slim boy wearing armor made from monster skulls on his shoulders and head. On his back was a massive battle-axe. And his outfit was designed to get even stronger if he provided it with mana.

The kid was a reincarnator, no doubt about it. But Ado wasn't sure that this was either of the two beastfolk-lovers he'd been thinking of.

One of the two he'd had in mind was Kemo Luvyune, one of the five Destroyers.

The other was a player nicknamed the Barbarian, a brawny warrior in bone armor. Ado had seen him in raids a number of times. In fact...

"Wait. Are *you* the Barbarian?!" Ado asked.

"Oh? So you know my nickname? Does that mean... Are you from the same place as me?"

Honestly, Ado would've rather dealt with the former of the two. But it looked like not everything was going to go to plan.

"No, you *can't* be... The last time I saw him, he was a huge burly

warrior dude... Oh! Right! That would've just been how your *character* looked! I always forget that. You've still got the bone armor, at least..."

The two of them had never actually talked before, but Ado had seen him a handful of times in *Swords & Sorceries*. The guy in front of him was nothing like his character. He was more of a cute little boy than a big, brawny barbarian.

It only made sense that Ado was struggling to hide his surprise.

"Did you build this castle?" Zaza asked in place of Ado, who was still trying to collect himself. "Why, though?"

"I built it to *PROTECT THE FLUFFIES*!"

Zaza hadn't expected the boy's answer to come in the form of a mighty *roar*, one filled with masculine spirit and real determination.

This guy looked like a middle school student—and on the *younger* end of middle school, at that. He certainly didn't seem like someone capable of climbing to the top of the beastfolk hierarchy.

Nevertheless, a crowd of beastfolk women accompanied him, each with their own weapons at the ready.

Each seemed to be from a different tribe, but there was something they had in common: They were all beautiful.

And before Ado had even realized it, they had his party completely surrounded.

"Hey. Uh... Surely, not, but... Those women with you—they're not your..." Ado was getting a bad feeling. He struggled to find the right words to voice his suspicion.

"Yup. They're my wives."

"Oh, come *on*!" the group shouted in response.

This boy had managed to make himself a harem of animal girls in another world.

Each tribe had offered this powerful individual—the Barbarian—a woman to take as a wife. And he hadn't hesitated to accept. From what Ado had looked into, beastfolk women didn't just *value* strength; they were often inflicted with love syndrome that drove them to go after the strong.

When they went into heat, they wouldn't hesitate to go after a suitable mate. That was the norm among beastfolk.

In other words, this flock of women around the boy had fallen for him at first sight.

For reference, he had *seventeen* of these wives, all of them beauties. He really was living the dream.

"Damn it all!" Zaza cried. "I still don't even have a girlfriend... How does a kid like that have *seventeen wives*?! The gods are playing favorites!"

"I get how you feel, Zaza," Ado said. "I'm a guy too."

"Ado, don't you have a wife?" Shakti and Lisa reminded him. "Do you *want* her to kill you or something?"

Zaza spun to face Ado. "So *you're* my enemy too, huh?! All you normies should just go die in a hole! *Waaaaaah!*"

As a spy, Zaza couldn't just get into a relationship without thinking.

Even if he *did* manage to get a girlfriend, she would be thoroughly investigated—her family, her friends, everything. Not an inch of her private life would be left unexplored.

Zaza himself had gleefully taken part in those sorts of investigations before...when they involved *other* people's love lives. But nothing sounded worse than the thought of the tables being turned and having the same thing happen to him.

"Huh... They just called you 'Ado,' right? Are you *that* Ado? From Extra-Large Tonkotsu Chashu?"

"Yeah, I am. I don't know *your* player name, though..."

"Oh, me? I'm Kemo Brose. And you already know my nickname, right?"

"Kemo? I know a Kemo Luvyune..."

"He's my mentor! So you know him? He's done a lot for me. He helped me get Zenith Breaker."

"Okay, I... I can believe that. So you were his disciple, huh..."

Kemo Luvyune was in the same party as Zelos Merlin—a player Ado looked up to—and he loved fluffy things and animal girls. He was an irredeemable furry.

He'd even gone so far as using Create Dungeon to make himself a harem he called the Kemo Labyrinth. He was also known as the Evangelist of All Things Fluffy.

In fact, he was such an oddball that even his companions were weirded out.

"It's not like you were...*trying* to make a harem, right?"

"No, no. We just... We just got attacked by these guys from the Faith of the Four Gods, so I beat 'em up without really thinking about it, and things ended up like this. Still not sure *why*..."

"And so you got a harem just like that, huh? Dammit, I wish *I* was that strong..."

Zaza was weeping now. He felt powerless.

He wasn't fussy, really—it could be a beastfolk, or an elf, or whatever. He just wanted a girlfriend.

All he wanted was for someone to really love him. He was at that kind of age.

And working in the shadows of society only made that desire all the stronger.

"We're actually in the middle of a battle now, you know. So we thought you might be enemies too. Enemies of the *fluffies*. ☆"

"It's the opposite. We came here to form an alliance with you. Those guys you're fighting? They're *our* enemies too."

Ado had finally managed to broach the topic he was here for. But Kemo Brose didn't look entirely convinced.

Just because Ado came from the same place as him didn't mean he was necessarily an ally. And that raised the question of what to do.

"An alliance, huh? But can we really trust you? I mean, you could be working with *them*, for all we know."

"So, what? Are you gonna fight us, then?"

"Hmm... I'll consider teaming up with you if you help us beat the guys we're fighting. How about that? You came at the perfect time, actually—there's a so-called hero on their way now."

"A *hero*?!" Ado's party shouted.

Heroes were the vanguard of the forces of the Holy Land of Metis, summoned from another world. But as far as Ado was aware, if you looked past their strength in battle and their impressive growth potential, they weren't really any different from the residents of this world.

From what he'd heard, the heroes were about Level 500. So from the perspective of reincarnators with special awakened skills that let them go *above* Level 500, these heroes were small fry.

Unlike in *Swords & Sorceries*, it was just about impossible to simultaneously master both combat skills and crafting skills in this world, so combining skills wasn't a thing that happened. In other words, nobody met the requirements to unlock the first awakened skill, Limit Breaker. As a result, even on the rare occasion someone reached Level 500, they couldn't get past the cap.

It was also possible to hone your crafting skills through combat, but you could only do that by defeating opponents stronger than yourself. It wasn't easy to level up your skills by defeating enemies of the same level as yours or lower.

It was sort of like getting bonus XP in a game.

"A hero, huh...? So there's some Level 500-ish scrub who thinks they're a hotshot? Okay. Let me at 'em. I'll take 'em out in no time."

"Huh? Are you really going to accept so easily? I would've thought you'd hesitate a bit more. You'll be fighting against another human, you know? If things go badly, you may even have to kill them..."

"Bit late to worry about that. I've already killed bandits and stuff—you've gotta be strong if you want to survive in this world. Besides, I was already expecting I'd have to fight the heroes at some point."

"A-Ado?!" Shakti and Lisa cried.

"You two don't have to take him up on it too. This is *war*; I won't force you. Besides, I should have no problem taking them myself."

Whenever Ado had to fight humans, he tried his best not to involve Lisa and Shakti. They'd already killed people, albeit bandits; this world was no safe place, and you had to be ready to go that far in order to protect yourself. But Ado didn't want to shoulder them with the burden of killing any more than he had to.

He didn't want to drag them into this bloodbath.

"Just what I would've expected from you, Ado! Zelos told me you're a skilled battle mage. Speaking of which, your gear looks similar to his too. I wish I could've formed a party and gone questing

with him someday...”

“His party is probably the group that took down the Dark God. I know they said they were going to give it another shot, but I bet they didn’t think they’d end up fighting the *real* one, hah.”

“I was thinking that too. Anyway, it’s all the Four Gods’ fault, yeah? Since they just threw away their trash in our old world.”

What... What are these two talking about? “Took down the Dark God”? “Our old world”? And...the Four Gods “threw away” the Dark God? What does it all mean? Who are *they, even?*

Zaza couldn’t keep up with the pair’s discussion.

“I always looked up to the Destroyers. And I’d finally almost managed to catch up to them, but...I never got the chance to tell them about it.”

“Did you unlock Zenith Breaker? Their levels were really high, after all. They must have gotten about as high as possible—they were going up against the Dark God all by themselves, without even forming a raid group.”

“I could see them pulling it off, though. That’s what makes them so cool.”

“Yeah. Anyway, come help us take on the hero. Even for *me*, it’s a pain to fight against an army as big as the one attacking us right now.”

“Sure. I was planning to start a counteroffensive against them sooner or later anyway... Let’s kick it off in style, shall we?”

A ferocious grin came to Ado’s face. And the same was true for Kemo Brose.

This marked the beginning of an alliance between a furry and a man out for revenge. An alliance that would go on to cause troubles that the Holy Land of Metis had no way of predicting.

The transcendentals—those who surpassed even the heroes—were finally baring their fangs.

*

Sadamitsu Iwata was the most hated hero of them all.

It wasn’t like he’d turned bad after becoming a hero; he’d always

been cocky, even back in Japan.

And it probably went back to how he'd been raised.

His father had been a member of parliament, and every time Sadamitsu had caused a problem, his father had pulled some strings to cover it up before it became a public scandal.

The man hadn't done it out of any love for his son, mind you. He'd just wanted to avoid any damage to his reputation. Sadamitsu's parents had already given up on him, choosing instead to dote on his brilliant younger brother.

Their attitude toward him had only made Sadamitsu's behavior worse—and so he'd gotten involved in all sorts of trouble, from fights and bullying to what was practically blackmail. It had caused his teachers no end of strife. Now, you might be wondering what'd happen if a boy like that got summoned to another world as a hero.

Well, the answer was: He'd get much worse.

He'd grown even more violent after arriving—it probably didn't help that he had the highest attack stats of all the summoned heroes—and he and his hangers-on had split the heroes into two camps.

The careful group tried to look at things with level heads and make rational decisions, while the arrogant group wallowed in power and greed.

After flaunting his authority and strength alike, Sadamitsu had climbed to the very top of the hero-led army. But then came the start of his downfall.

Sadamitsu had been put in charge of the army's vanguard in an operation to invade the Artom Empire, and he'd opted for a human wave attack, not caring in the slightest about the inevitable losses.

And that approach had taken them straight into a trap: the canyon known as the Scar of the Dark God.

Once they were trapped within, a horde of enormous monsters and less-enormous magic beasts had swept over them. Half the heroes died, and the Order of Paladins was annihilated. Sadamitsu, meanwhile, had been the very first one to flee—losing the trust of many in the process.

Though honestly, they'd never really trusted him in the first place.

Regardless, his failure there lost him even his hangers-on. And so, Sadamitsu had ended up alone.

He'd tried to push the blame onto his fellow hero Takumi Kazama, who'd perished in the fight. Before the group had headed into the Scar of the Dark God, Takumi had warned them that it might have been a trap, but Sadamitsu had ignored his advice. When they'd returned, Sadamitsu had taken it all out on someone else. He'd do anything but acknowledge his own stupidity.

Takumi had gotten hate for being a mage, but, once he was gone, his reputation had soared—all while Sadamitsu's own reputation had plummeted. And Sadamitsu couldn't stand that. It only made him that much more bitter toward Takumi.

Being jealous of the dead was a *bad* look...but Sadamitsu didn't care about anything or anyone but himself.

In an attempt to salvage his reputation, Sadamitsu had marched on beastfolk territory under the pretense of searching for the Dark God—though it wasn't going how he'd wanted it to go. He'd spent a while marching around to no avail, his enemy refusing to show themselves.

It was almost like when he'd marched on the Artom Empire. It made him *mad*.

But eventually, the beastfolk *had* shown themselves. They'd appeared out of nowhere, launching attacks on the slave merchants and mercenaries accompanying the Order of Paladins.

Beastfolk had no rights in many places—and so those places enslaved them and forced them to fight. But surprise attack after surprise attack had forced the slave merchants to flee, one after another. And then, even when they *did* flee, the beastfolk relentlessly kept up the chase. The slave merchants wouldn't be returning from these flatlands alive.

Already, these attacks had cost Metis about twenty percent of its forces.

"How have you *still* not found those damn animals?!" Sadamitsu screamed. "We're just rackin' up casualties for nothin'! We're even gonna lose a bunch of our reserves at this rate!"

"Well, the beastfolk have particularly good senses of smell,

hearing, even sight... We think they can tell when we're coming."

"I *know* that! And I'm telling you to fucking *do* something about it, you moron! Isn't that your job?!"

Sadamitsu was losing his nerve. His aide was tempted to snap back in kind—"*You're* the moron here! Why do we have to listen to some little brat like you, anyway?!"—but the man just barely managed to hold it in.

Despite it all, Sadamitsu was a hero. Defying him would be tantamount to defying the Four Gods.

And nothing terrified this man more than the Inquisition.

"A bunch of pathetic little animals think they can mess with me—and all you useless pricks are lettin' 'em get away with it!"

"We think it may be due to someone they're calling the beastfolk's 'champion.' They say he managed to capture a fort from the Order of Paladins, all by himself..."

"Huh? *I* could slaughter all you scrubs by myself if I wanted to. I bet all those guys in the fort were just losers too."

"However weak they may have been, that many of them should still have been able to *injure* the man. But the reports say he was completely unscathed... It makes sense to assume he's as strong as the warriors from the Artom Empire, at the very least."

"*Those* bastards, huh...? Urgh. Makes me mad. Fucking *birds* like that making a fool outta me..."

"Supposing this man *is* on par with them, we don't want to make the same mistake as last time. We need to be careful."

Even Sadamitsu fell quiet at that.

The Artom Empire was home to a race of people with wings. Their wings allowed them to make one-sided attacks from the sky, and their soldiers were just as good in battle as the heroes, if not better. They could attack with magic too.

Given that a demihuman race like them had such powerful warriors, it wouldn't have been surprising for the beastfolk to have some too. And to make matters worse, the paladins accompanying Sadamitsu were exhausted from all the surprise attacks.

Furthermore, the invaders had advanced too far into the Ruuda-Iruruh Flatlands. There was a chance they could be ambushed in the

middle of a retreat, leading to enormous losses.

The beastfolk had never been this strategic, and it left the paladin aide worried in a way he couldn't hide.

Not that Sadamitsu was likely to listen, however much his aide advocated for a retreat.

"R-Report!" a voice shouted. "We've spotted a fort...no, a *castle* to the northeast!"

"A *castle*?" the aide repeated. "I struggle to believe the beastfolk would have the technology to build something like that. Are you sure this isn't a misunderstanding?"

"I'm told our men spotted some sort of large building—perhaps a fort, more likely a castle—built on top of a mountain."

"Ridiculous... What's happening here? They've never done anything like this before."

The aide couldn't help but get a bad feeling from all of this.

It was just too out of character for the beastfolk.

"Good timing. I was gettin' bored here. Tell the whole army to march! We're gonna *crush* those animals! I'll make 'em regret ever messin' with me!"

"W-Wait! Please! Something... Something strange is going on here. We should at least investigate the layout of the castle, its defenses... We still have time!"

"*Pfft...* They might've put up a building, but they're still just animals. Bet it's their last resort. Or—what? Are *you* gonna defy me too? Sure that's a good idea? What would your *gods* think?"

"*Ngh...*"

The aide couldn't say anything back.

His faith prevented him from speaking his mind.

He would later regret that mistake.

*

That decision marked the beginning of the Battle of Ruuda-Iruruh.

It would go down in history as the day that exposed the depths of Sadamitsu Iwata's idiocy.

And so rose the curtain on an unusual battle: a hero versus a furry and a man out for revenge.

Chapter 2: Record of Ado's War

The Holy Land of Metis's Order of Paladins, led by the hero Sadamitsu Iwata, fell speechless upon seeing the mountain castle.

The castle made expert use of its elevated terrain, preventing the attackers from seeing inside it whatsoever.

Usually, you could at least *sort of* see from the outside into a castle built onto a mountain, but that didn't apply to the castle that stood before them now. Its design was clearly different from the norm.

Sadamitsu, meanwhile, was gobsmacked for a different reason: He *recognized* this design.

Is... Is this seriously a Japanese *castle?! Does that mean one of our enemies is Japanese?! No, wait... If that's true, then what— Would it be another hero? But the pastors told us all the previous heroes were sent home... What's goin' on here?*

Or at least it looked like a Japanese castle at first glance. Its walls were too high, so perhaps the builder had incorporated the design philosophy behind Chinese walled cities.

The keep itself was poorly constructed, yet the defensive walls were incredibly sturdy.

In other words, it looked like whoever built it had put all their effort into the defensive walls and done a rush job on the rest of the castle.

Whatever the case, it seemed like someone out there must have provided those technologies to the beastfolk.

And the only people who could do that were...probably the heroes. But that didn't seem possible. Sadamitsu had been told that all of the prior heroes had been sent back to where they'd come from.

His train of thought had derailed.

The paladins started murmuring to each other. "What *is* this

castle? I've never seen anything like it before..."

"I've never heard of the beastfolk having this kind of technology. I've got a bad feeling about this..."

"D-Don't tell me this is going to be another Artom..."

"Sh-Shut up! Don't say that!"

The fact that an entire mountain had been turned into a stronghold meant the attackers would have to steel themselves for a drawn-out battle.

Common wisdom said attackers needed to outnumber defenders at least three-to-one in order to take a castle.

It went to show just how much more difficult attacking was than defending in situations like this. But this particular case was even worse: The enemy castle was on a mountain, fully capitalizing on the terrain. Winning here would be no easy feat.

The more well-versed someone was with historical novels or tactics, the more they'd hesitate to attack this castle.

"The paladins are losing their nerve," the aide said. "Who could've expected *this*...? Besides, this raises the possibility that there are others out there just like it..."

The aide's words gave Sadamitsu a flashback to his defeat in the Artom Empire.

The man was right: There was no guarantee that this castle was the only one of its kind. And now that the attackers had seen *this*, they wondered what *other* strategies the enemy had up their sleeves.

Beastfolk tended to charge headlong into battle. They typically gave no thought to strategy, preferring to just destroy their foes with sheer might.

A castle, however, was the cornerstone of military defense, so its construction implied the beastfolk were using strategy now in general.

That, in turn, meant it would no longer be possible to defeat them by exploiting their instincts and luring them into traps.

In short: The beastfolk were learning. That much was obvious.

A cold sweat ran down the aide's back.

There was no doubt about it—attacking here would be death.

Worse, they were far away from Metis. They wouldn't be getting any reinforcements.

They'd lost almost all of their slave merchants and mercenaries during their brainless march through the plains, leaving only the Order of Paladins itself to assault the castle.

"So it really *was* a trap. If we retreat, they'll attack us from behind, and if we advance, we'll need to contend with that stronghold... This isn't how the beastfolk approach war. Or... Did they learn it from us?"

The Holy Land of Metis tended to view the beastfolk as stupid, mindless animals—a stereotype that was now coming back to bite them. The castle taunted them overhead, a symbol of their mistake.

"Hah. You sound like idiots. Take a *look* at that castle. They threw it together as fast as they could, it's obvious—so it's gotta be a pile o' junk. Should be *easy* to take it out, right?"

"Even if the keep's construction is slipshod, the surrounding walls are formidable. In fact, the keep itself could be a decoy, something to make us let our guards down..."

"Those *animals* aren't smart enough to pull that shit. It's just a sham."

This guy really is *a moron... Those walls are thicker than usual. There are probably corridors inside them to let the defenders move about unseen. And they've done a good job of making the walls tall enough that we can't see any defenses behind them from outside... If all we can think about is* how the keep looks*, we're going to get annihilated!*

The aide, at least, had a sharp mind.

From what he could see of the castle's construction through narrow gaps in the walls, he got a bad feeling.

His many years of experience told him that this place was *dangerous*. That they should abandon their attack plans.

"We should retreat—even knowing we'll incur some casualties in the process! This is simply too risky. Most likely, that's no real castle at all. All I can see is a *trap*, inviting us in."

"So what if it's not a real castle? The guy leading those animals is in there, right? Then we just need to get in there and *crush* him,

right now."

"It's too dangerous! If we rush up there without a plan, *we'll* be the ones dying, you know?!"

"I'm telling you to shut up and charge! Or do you wanna die by *my* hand instead, huh?"

"*Ngh...*"

The aide's instincts, honed over many years, were screaming: *Go no farther.*

But his commander was having none of it.

The aide felt like he understood now what had caused the defeat in the Artom Empire.

"A-All units... Forward march!"

He made the difficult decision to advance.

His devotion to the Faith of the Four Gods finally tipped the scales of his decision. Unfortunately, today would've been a smart time for him to abandon his faith.

He didn't, though—and so the battle began with the Order of Paladins, moving at the order of a hero, charging ahead.

*

All at once, the army surged toward the mountain castle.

So far, they had met with no resistance. Just an open gate, inviting them in.

The gate was wide, but the path up to it narrowed as they climbed.

There were a lot of branching paths too—this place was designed to induce confusion, almost like a maze. Some paths were even dead ends; it was getting harder and harder to imagine why the castle had been built in the first place.

The absolute *silence* hanging over the place was especially confusing. There was no telling what the enemy was thinking.

"Uh, hey..." one paladin said. "This is weird, right?"

"Yeah. They're not stopping us at all. We haven't even *seen* them."

"It's almost like they're saying, 'Please, come in. C'mon—closer.'

They *want* us here."

"C'mon, don't scare me like that. It *is* still a castle, y'know? Wouldn't even surprise me if the *king* of those animal guys is in here or somethin'."

These soldiers didn't know much about beastfolk culture. And while they'd been cautious at first, the more time that passed without an attack from the beastfolk, the more they began to relax.

"Maybe there was never anyone here in the first place?"

"Maybe. They mighta just pissed their pants and ran when they saw us comin'."

"Hah! Bet you're right. Shame, though. I was lookin' forward to hearin' how their women *scream*."

"Damn right! *Gah hah hah hah hah!*"

They were still in the middle of enemy territory, but they'd calmed down enough to start talking vulgarly and laughing out loud.

They continued walking until they reached the castle's keep. It was only then that they noticed something even *more* strange about the castle's design.

"Hey... Hang on a minute. How are you meant to get inside this thing?"

"Yeah. I haven't seen anything that looks like an entrance yet."

"Maybe the whole place really *is* empty after all? Just a distraction to slow us down...?"

"Nah, no way. Why even build the keep at all, then?"

There was a *building* here, sure, but they couldn't find any way to actually get inside it.

Charging their way up here had been all well and good, but they still hadn't found the enemy they'd come to defeat, and they couldn't for the life of them figure out how to actually get inside the castle keep. When they put that together with the total lack of resistance they'd encountered thus far, it could only mean one thing...

"*It's a trap!*" one of the soldiers shouted.

Then a surge of mana erupted from the castle, causing magic letters carved into the sides of the white walls to float into the air. An invisible barrier formed across the path the attackers had just come

up. Their retreat had been blocked.

"M-Magic?! The *beastfolk* used— *GWAAAAAARGH!*"

By the time the soldier realized what was going on, they were already on fire.

In fact, it wasn't just *that* soldier. The ones around them had burst into flames too, all at the same time.

Others watched the grisly spectacle from a safe distance, the invisible wall trapping them in the courtyard.

"Wh-What's going on?! What *is* this?!"

"Wait... Is this whole castle one giant magic tool?!"

"Don't be ridiculous... As if beastfolk would know how to do that!"

But it *was*, indeed, a magic tool. This was a massive slaughterhouse disguised as a castle.

An electromagnetic field had formed around the soldiers, boiling their blood. The caloric value of their bodies had caused them to spontaneously combust.

It was almost like a massive microwave oven—and it made for a *brutal* attack.

The carnage wasn't restricted to the keep either.

Flurries of spears and poisoned arrows emerged from the walls, assailing the soldiers gathered in the cramped areas below and overwhelming them before they had the opportunity to fight back.

They tried to defend with holy magic, but it seemed like there was some powerful kind of interference stopping the paladins' magic —and *only* the paladins' magic—from working.

Still being peppered by arrows and spears, they tried desperately to break the wall down, but the beastfolk's magic barriers and reinforcement spells kept it from budging whatsoever.

Meanwhile, in an entirely ordinary-looking passageway, one man was witnessing hell.

"No... *No...*"

To his left, he saw a comrade burning to death; to his right, another comrade, frozen completely solid before being shattered into pieces. It was a nightmare worse than any he'd witnessed before— terrifying enough to destroy his sanity.

Elsewhere, a group of paladins was encircled by an invisible wall

that had suddenly appeared, and they were slowly drowning as water flowed in from who-knew-where. This too had to be magic, but they had no idea where all that mana could have been coming from.

It certainly didn't seem like an amount of mana that could have been harnessed by a single person, let alone a beastfolk.

"*A-AAAAAAAAAH!*"

More paladins screamed as they ran.

But as they fled, panicked, through the maze that was the mountain castle's exterior, they were easy prey for illusions. Illusions that sent them running straight off cliffs, or herded them into spots that made them easy pickings for an ambush.

There was no escape awaiting them—only hell.

Even then, some managed to survive against all odds.

Determined to report the news of their comrades' horrific fate, they ran back to their base camp, as fast as their legs could carry them.

In the span of just a few hours, the Order had lost sixty percent of its paladins.

*

"Hey, Brose..."

"What is it, Ado?"

"Isn't this, uh...a bit too brutal? You're microwaving them, nullifying their magic, setting them on fire, drowning them, freezing them solid, impaling them... *Jeez*, war's scary."

"I'll do whatever it takes to protect the fluffies. Even if that means becoming evil, or a tyrant—*whatever it takes*. Y'know?"

"Uh... You're not just a random tyrant, you've pretty much become Oda Nobunaga at this point. What's your plan? Do you want to start a revolution? Expose the truth behind the world?"

"No, no. As long as I'm happy, I don't care about what comes after that. I just can't let the fluffies get hurt anymore."

"Right..."

Even Ado was lost for words.

Brose was willing to go to terrifying lengths to protect "the fluffies." He truly was Kemo Luvyune's disciple. A dyed-in-the-wool furry.

He'd spit in the faces of the gods themselves if it meant protecting his beloved fluffies. It was honestly scary.

"Remind me never to get on your bad side. I have no idea what you may pull next, and it creeps me out."

"*Aha ha ha ha ha!* Aww, you're so *mean*~. I'm just a little furry! I couldn't hurt a fly!"

Ado, Lisa, Shakti, and Zaza all thought the same thing: *No, you're* crazy*. Why did you have to go so far?!*

Of course, there would only be one answer to their question: *For the fluffies!*

Brose loved the beastfolk more than anything else, and his character in *Swords & Sorceries* had been a beastfolk too. He'd been a pretty hardcore player, to boot, mastering magic—something that was usually an inaptitude for beastfolk.

"You're a middle school student, aren't you?" Shakti asked. "Why are your skill levels so high? It doesn't make sense."

"I was thinking the same thing," Lisa agreed. "I don't see how a middle school student could've gotten his level that high—you would've had school, after all. Did you use some big secret trick or something?"

"There's a simple answer for that..."

And Ado, at least, had realized it: "Kemo Luvyune probably made you fight against some crazy monsters. Right? That would've leveled you up, and the bonus XP would've given you a whole lot of skill levels too. That got you Criticality Breaker, and then all you would've had to do after that was play like normal as you went for Zenith Breaker... Yeah?"

"Yup! Spot on! A hundred points to Ado! ♪ But yeah, that sure was hell... He kept micromanaging my HP so that I *juuuuuust* didn't die. It made me wanna cry. So many times..."

"Oh," the others replied. "That's even worse than I expected..."

"No matter how many times I went to collapse," Brose continued, "he just wouldn't let me rest. He'd start shouting at me—'Is *that* all

your love for fluffy ears amounts to?! I'm amazed you thought you could master the path of the fluffies if that's the best you can do! Show me what you're really made of! Show me your love! Your *obsession*! More of it—yes, yes, like that! More! Come on! Come on! *COME ON!*' That sort of thing... The monsters were all crazy strong too... I might've just been better off letting them kill me."

"*Errrgh...*"

Brose and Ado were both reminded of the sight of the Destroyers, each wearing their ultimate armor of a different color.

And they were reminded of one of them in particular: a mage with a hooded crimson robe and a face that was all lovely smiles. He'd been relentless when push came to shove, though.

"Did Zelos not say anything to you?"

"I was too stupid to listen. I didn't think my mentor would be such a crazy guy... Zelos did warn me, though. In fact, he seemed really worried for me. He was all, 'This is a terrible idea—give up on it, for your own sake! Or do you *want* to fall to the dark side and end up a furry? You'll lose your mind by the time Kemo's done with you!' But I didn't even consider what he was saying..."

"Ah, yeah... He was probably the sanest one out of that whole crazy party, wasn't he?" Ado said. "Even if the way he named his spells was pretty cringe..."

"He was probably about the same age as me, right?" Brose pondered. "We got along pretty well, and I remember us getting up to some stupid stuff together."

"Mmm... I dunno. He *could* be pretty immature. But sometimes I wondered whether he was just some childish middle-aged dude..."

The Black Destroyer had been big on combat, even though he was a crafter.

At least, that was the image Ado had of Zelos Merlin.

"He was usually a good guy, though, right?" Brose said. "He gave me potions and stuff all the time."

"Yeah, right? Then when a battle started, you'd just see him leap into the fray... What about him was a *crafter*, seriously?"

"Who knows? It seemed to me, at least, like he saw his crafting and his fighting as two separate things. He just focused on

whichever one interested him at the time."

Ado and Brose were hitting it off surprisingly well. The distance between people could suddenly disappear when they had something in common to talk about.

Zaza felt a shiver run up his spine on hearing there might be a mage out there who posed even more of a threat than these two.

An acquaintance of these *two?! Who* is *he?! Zelos... Zelos... If he's such an impressive guy, I should've at least heard his name before, but I never have. It sounds like he's a mage, but...not just your average mage. Should I make a report about this?*

Ado was a powerful mage himself, and Brose had just shown impressive mastery over magic despite being more of a fighter.

The latter's mentor had apparently known this "Zelos"—and sounded like quite a hassle themselves, by the way.

Plus, there was no way any mage *these* two held in high esteem would be a respectable individual.

"*Honey?* It seems like things are nearly finished up here."

"Oh, you're right. Let's go hit their base camp, then."

"Guess I'll join you," Ado said. "I need to pay my respects to this 'hero.'"

"And you wanted to talk about an alliance, right? Well, let's see what you can do! Honestly, though, I'm fine with whatever as long as no one attacks us again."

"Lemme show you a move I learned from Zelos. Won't be as good as when *he* uses it, but..."

"Honey," she said... DAMMIT! Why don't I *have someone to call me "honey"?! Why does a kid like him get seventeen wives?!*

Zaza was burning up with envy.

Keep at it, Zaza. You can do it. You're not alone—you've got comrades out there. Don't let it get to you, Zaza.

The two normies walked off to battle, leaving Zaza behind.

Though it seemed like the battle wouldn't take much longer.

*

"You got wiped out?! You tellin' me you failed to take over one

measly castle, and then you ran back here with your tails between your legs?! Just how fucking *useless* are you guys?!"

That was the first thing Sadamitsu said to the paladins who'd made it back.

The paladins had committed seventy percent of their forces to that attack, yet they'd been utterly destroyed. This wasn't going to help Sadamitsu clear his name at all. In fact, it'd only make things worse.

Every returning soldier had a desperate look on their face. Sadamitsu's aide, struggling to keep himself composed, asked one of the soldiers for an explanation.

"What happened out there?! Tell us everything."

"Th-The castle's... The whole thing's a huge magical trap! Once we got there, we were just sitting ducks... It's *horrible*. There's no way a *person* thought that up! That castle must've been made by a demon!"

"A... A magical trap? *That* massive thing? It *can't* be. Or...are they using some kind of ancient weapon?"

"Hah! *Now* we're talkin'. Let's take the castle for ourselves, then. So? How do we get in?"

Even now, Sadamitsu was still convinced they could win.

He'd experienced crushing defeat before, but that'd given him no sense of perspective. He had utter faith in his own strength.

"There's, uh... There's no..."

"Huh? Spit it out. You did make it to the castle's entrance, right?"

"There *is* no entrance! The whole keep is just a decoy—they never even made an entrance in the first place!"

"That can't be right. Then how do they... What's even the point in making something like that?" The aide paused, realizing the terrifying answer all on his own. There was only *one* reason to build such a crazy design: to wear down enemy forces.

In other words, the "castle" had already done its job; they'd fallen for the beastfolk's plan, and it was too late to do anything about it. And as the discussion continued, it soon became clear what would come next:

Now that the paladins' forces were weakened, the beastfolk

would soon come to crush their base camp.

"Th-This is bad... Prepare to retreat! Leave all of our cargo here, if we have to. We need to get away from here as fast as we can!" the aide shouted.

"The hell are you on about? There's a huge weapon just sitting up there, and I *want* it. Why should we *run away*? All we have to do is kill a few pests."

"Are you an idiot?! This was all a trap! They lured most of our soldiers into that fake castle and slaughtered them, and now they're going to send everyone they have to crush whoever's left at our base camp. We're about to get hit by everything the beastfolk have!"

"What the fuck? Why didn't you tell me that earlier?! You're all useless, every last one of you! You're just holding me back!"

"*You're* the useless one! Get it through your thick skull already, you sack of shit! I *said* to retreat! *You're* the one who didn't listen!"

Finally, the aide had reached his breaking point.

A Level 500 hero could only win against so many enemies.

About fifty Level 300 beastfolk soldiers would probably be enough to take him down. They were *close enough* in strength to overwhelm him with sheer numbers, especially since they weren't exhausted in the slightest.

The paladins scrambled to flee, desperate to save their own lives.

But they were too late.

BOOOOOOOOOM!

Out of nowhere, a mighty attack spell hit the camp.

The aide was knocked straight to the ground by the impact—far stronger than any magic he'd ever witnessed before. And before long, another instance of the same attack spell flew in—and another, and another. The paladins' casualty count skyrocketed.

"M-Magic?! The beastfolk are using *magic*?!"

"It's so powerful, and it just keeps hitting... Wait. Are they not even using incantations?!"

No enemy would miss such a perfect chance to exterminate their foe.

The instant the aide had realized they'd walked into a trap, he should've abandoned the hero and evacuated his paladins, whatever

the cost.

But now, all he could do was curse his faith in the gods.

"*Drop dead, invaders!*"

"*GWAAAAAARGH!*"

The cries of paladins in their final moments echoed throughout the camp.

The beastfolk hated the Holy Land of Metis from the bottom of their hearts. They'd lost brethren and family members to death and slavery. Some among them had even been slaves themselves. Now, finally, they had the chance to direct every last ounce of their fury at the invaders.

The paladins, convinced they were on the side of justice, prayed for the gods to save them.

But no salvation came.

"Give me back my family!"

"H-Hel— *GAKH!*"

"Die! Rot in the ground and feed the maggots, you 'holy' bastards!"

A massacre had begun.

Had the beastfolk been against a respectable foe, they probably would've fought head-on.

But the Holy Land of Metis had committed so many acts of aggression in the name of the gods.

They had never fought fair and square against the beastfolk.

And so the beastfolk—a people who put so much value on their pride—no longer had it in them to fight fair against these invaders. Intent on recapturing their lost dignity, the beastfolk massacred the paladins one after another, just as Metis had done to them in the past. The hunters had become the hunted. It was karma, in a sense. Poetic justice.

"Th-There are so many of them... All these beastfolk, here just to kill us..."

"*Pfft...* I don't give a shit about you losers. *I* got dragged into this mess, okay? Hurry up and clear the way. I can still make it out if I'm alone. Don't need the rest of you assholes slowin' me down."

"Y-You *scumbag*!" the aide shouted.

"What? This was your war to begin with, right? Why should I have to clean up your mess?"

"You're asking too much, Mr. Self-Proclaimed Hero..." a voice reverberated around them. "Aren't *you* the one who decided to launch an attack here? That makes it *your* mess—and you should clean up after yourself, don't you think?"

"Wh-Who's that?!" Sadamitsu and his aide shouted together.

Someone else had spoken to them, but they couldn't see whoever it was.

It had to have been some sort of magic—but the two of them couldn't detect any mana.

This was clearly an incredibly advanced form of invisibility.

"Did you get a big head from everyone calling you a hero? Thing is, none of the summoned heroes have ever been sent back. Did you know that? You're all just disposable, in the end."

"Wha—?! What do you mean?!" Sadamitsu whipped his head around to look at his aide. "Are you guys—"

"As if *I'd* know! Ask the archbishops!"

He, too, was far removed from the *real* decision-makers.

"You've been duped," the voice continued. "'Heroes'? 'Divine messengers'? No way any of that's true. Idiots like you are just the easiest people to manipulate, that's all. Because you'll work your asses off as long as they let you have a bit of a good time."

"Wha— Hey!"

"Don't look at *me*," the aide said. "I'm just here obeying you since they told me you're a disciple of the Gods! They'd never tell me any of their secrets!"

"Oh, I bet. And if you *do* learn anything they don't want you knowing, you get *disappeared*... That's why they have the Inquisition. It's to kill guys like you in secret. So, how's it feel? You spent all that time letting people convince you that you were a big shot, but really you're just a disposable piece of shit. That's the truth."

"Y-You're lying! I was *chosen*! That's why I have all this power!"

"Power, huh? Want to test that theory? See how the power of a *hero* stands up to mine? What do you say?"

The air shimmered, and from it emerged a mage.

At least...he was technically a mage, but he had both a sword and armor. There was clearly something strange about him.

"*Gah ha ha...* Look at you, showing yourself. Gullible moron. As if a mage could beat *me*!"

"Come at me, then. I'll teach you just how wrong you are, you disposable little hero."

"*Shut your mouth!*"

Sadamitsu slashed at Ado with his long sword.

Ado flicked the attack aside with his scimitar, used his off-hand to draw a knife, and plunged it into the hero's shoulder.

"*GAAAAAARGH!*"

"Damn, you're weak, 'hero.' *Super* weak. How can you even call yourself a hero with moves like that? Guess I was expecting too much out of a pawn."

"Fuck you... You've done it now!"

Sadamitsu slashed at Ado again and again, but Ado deflected every strike with a tap of his scimitar, as if he knew where Sadamitsu was going to move before he did.

Th-This guy's good... And he's a mage*?! Who even is he?*

The aide couldn't believe how strong Ado was.

A Level 500 should've defeated anyone they came across in a single blow, but this mage was parrying every slash without even trying.

The gap between the two of them was enormous—both in level and in skill.

"Y-You asshole... You're Japanese, right? Aren't you a hero too?!"

"Oh, no, I wasn't summoned here... I'm just here because I was *killed*. By *them*."

"What's that supposed to mean?! Are you saying the Four Gods killed you?!" Sadamitsu asked, confused.

The aide, meanwhile, had heard something he simply couldn't overlook.

From what Sadamitsu had said, this mage was apparently an otherworlder as well. But there was no record of a mage like this ever having been summoned. And the aide couldn't get past the

man saying the Four Gods had *killed* him.

It was becoming clear: There were certain truths that he and the other believers of the Faith had never been told.

At this point, he didn't know *what* to believe.

He would've never expected things to end up like this.

"If you want an explanation, ask the Four Gods. This isn't some anime or manga. You can't just expect your enemy to spell everything out for you. But...fine. I'll tell you a freebie. Those 'Four Gods'? Yeah—not real gods at all. They're just stand-ins."

"B-But then that would mean the *true* god—"

"The true god is what you bastards call the Dark God. And that's why *they* want to kill it. Since it threatens to kick them out of their position as gods."

"Wh-What?!"

"Hang on! What were we heroes summoned for, then?!"

"Didn't I tell you that already? You're pawns. They use you, then they throw you away. What else could you possibly be?"

"A... A pawn? Disposable? *Me?* I was... I was summoned just for them to manipulate me?"

"Are you... Are you saying that the Four Gods are the real evil?"

"Who knows? I honestly don't give a shit about any of that. All I care about is that I'm going to take them down."

"But... What should we do now? Do we just choose for ourselves?"

"Look, I already told you: I don't care. Figure it out yourselves. It's got nothing to do with me."

The aide couldn't keep up with all of this new information.

Everything he'd ever believed was crumbling down around him—and at the same time, this mage was revealing a string of new truths.

More devout believers might have refused to accept it, but just looking at the hero beside him was enough to convince the aide.

That hero, however, refused to falter in his beliefs.

"Fuck off! I'm a *hero*! I'm one of the chosen ones!"

A foolish hero.

He swung his sword with wild abandon, slashing at the black-clad

mage.

This time, the mage grabbed his sword with a single hand.

"Pathetic. Is this really all you've got? I know people *way* stronger than me. They could instakill me as many times as they wanted. But look at *you*..."

"Y-You're kidding... You... You stopped my attack? With one hand? How could—"

"You stupid hero... It's time to show you how weak you really are. *Gluttonous Void.*"

Ado cast a spell he'd worked on in *Swords & Sorceries* together with a player he looked up to.

He'd thrown his scimitar to the ground, and the spell was coming out of his right hand.

"What... What *is* this magic?"

"I've... I've never seen it before. I've never even *heard* of it..."

A jet-black sphere formed in midair and began to swallow up everything around it, growing larger as it did.

Sensing the danger, the beastfolk ran without hesitation. The paladins just stared dumbfounded into the sky.

The sphere continued to grow and warp the space around, swallowing everything it touched. Then, when it finally reached its limit, it turned into a massive wave of destructive energy.

KABOOOOOOOOOM!!!

The explosion roared so loudly that it seemed even the heavens above might rupture. Its shock wave swept the area, gouging chunks of earth from the ground and flinging them into the sky. And the enemy—Sadamitsu—was hit with the attack's full force.

As the fiery explosion subsided and the wind swept the dust clouds away, those who'd survived were speechless at what they'd just witnessed.



The spell had ravaged the land, its force creating a crater and its heat turning sand to glass.

"Th-That was...wide-area annihilation magic..."

"N-No way... The... The heroes are meant to be the strongest people in the world..."

"The strongest? Who told you that? Even *I've* still got a long way to go, y'know? There are plenty of people stronger than me. Some Level 500 hero is *nothing*."

Sadamitsu collapsed.

Ultimately, his status was just something he'd been given. Sure, he was strong, but he hadn't been ready for *this*.

He was utterly powerless in the face of this overwhelming destruction.

"Damn, you're weak. If this is all you guys have got, taking down Metis should be a piece of cake. Guess the heroes were nothing after all..."

"Wh-Who *are* you? There's no way a simple mage could wield magic like that..."

"I'm a *Sage*. That means stopping the heroes from doing stupid shit is kind of my job, right? Really, though, it just means I get to crush whoever gets in my way. I don't feel any sort of duty to *heroes*."

"Y-You can't be... A *Sage*?! But you're working against the gods!"

"What even are these 'gods' to you? Just convenient things up in the sky that you use to justify yourselves, right? My enemy is only the Four Gods; I don't have any business with you. And I don't get anything from killing you. Anyway—I'm sick of you. Get out of my sight. If you stand in my way, you won't be in my way for long."

This man had a clear, iron resolve.

The paladins were suddenly left with doubt: If a Sage was so determined to defeat the Four Gods, then perhaps those gods really *were* an evil influence upon the world.

"Wh-Why do you try to kill the Four Gods? Without them, this world would be doo—"

"What are you even saying? It's the Four Gods' fault this whole world's in danger, y'know? Summoning all these heroes has warped

space-time, and now the world's on the verge of destruction. Plus, summoning so many heroes for no real reason is draining the world's mana."

At least, that was Ado's theory. The laws of nature in this world resembled the mechanics of *Swords & Sorceries*. In fact, they resembled those mechanics *too* well. And by looking through the memoirs and records left by a great many explorers who'd traveled the world—as well as examining pictures of ancient ruins—Ado felt like he'd gotten a decent grasp on what was going on in this world.

The balance of nature was in disarray. Badly.

Entire continents were turning into deserts; plants were growing at abnormal rates; monsters were evolving into incredibly powerful forms. None of it was natural, but it happened all the same, and had been progressing rapidly since the Dark God War.

And yet nobody had noticed.

After all, civilization had continued to regress, and those alive now were fully preoccupied with simply trying to survive.

But despite all that, the Four Gods did nothing to help.

If they really *were* tasked with protecting the world, they should *not* have been overlooking the current state of affairs.

"I-Impossible. It can't—"

"You guys have never sent back any heroes at all, have you? In fact, you've been getting rid of them in secret... In other words, they're just your convenient little pawns, right? And if that's not evil, then what is? Your religion is *founded on evil*."

Ado was mostly just riffing, but the paladins had no way of knowing that. Plus, it was all coming from the mouth of a Sage—one who'd just demonstrated his incredible might—which made it that much more convincing.

This was information warfare, so to speak.

Ado hoped to blend fact and fiction to shake up the invaders.

He'd been trained in psychological warfare by Zelos, one of the Destroyers, and it had proven a useful trick in PvP. Well, to be more accurate, he hadn't been "trained" as much as he had picked up on it over time from Zelos and the other Destroyers messing with him...

"Well, if you don't want to believe me, that's fine by me. Just

don’t come crying to me if the world falls to ruin. Anyway, whatever you do now is up to you guys. It’s your world, after all.”

And with that, Ado disappeared.

His crazy power—and everything he’d said, whether it was fact or fiction—had left Sadamitsu and the aide in a daze.

The aide was fully aware: His people had made a terrible mistake, and the ripples of that mistake had put a mighty threat on the road ahead.

Moreover, he’d learned that the Holy Land of Metis stood no chance in the face of that threat.

*

“‘Hmph... I have nothing to gain from killing you. Hurry up and get out of my sight.’ You were so *cool* there, Ado!”

“H-Hang on, Brose! I didn’t sound that haughty!”

“Mmm... You sure? I feel like that’s pretty much exactly what you said...”

“Why’d you have to say it like *that*, though?! I didn’t sound like such a *chuunibyou*, okay?!”

He *did*, of course—he just had no self-awareness. C’est la vie.

“Anyway, how does this castle work? Where does the mana come from?”

“There are ancient ruins underneath it, so it leaches a little bit of mana from the mana well there. The ruins are pretty extensive too—we’re in the middle of expanding underground as we speak.”

“You... You really just do whatever you want, huh? Even *I* don’t pull stuff that crazy.”

“I can use Create Dungeon, so I’ve been using that.”

“Kemo and Zelos were about the only ones who could do that, right? Why’re you out here using it to make some *impregnable death fortress*?”

“I mean, isn’t that something *everyone’s* wanted to do? As for the name, let’s see... I was thinking about ‘the Terminator’!”

“You’d...better not. Don’t use the name of a classic for some castle like this!”

The kid had some dangerous tastes.

This was the moment Ado realized Kemo Brose was, without a doubt, the disciple of Kemo Luvyune.

"Ado!" Lisa shouted. "You're alive!"

"You're not hurt, are you?" Shakti asked.

"Oh, I'm fine. I just hit 'em with some magic, that's all. It'd take a lot more than *that* guy to take me down. You worry too much."

Bastard really is *a normie... Why don't I get women caring about* me *like that?*

Inside his mind, Zaza was crying bitter tears.

He was just that jealous. It was a hard scene for a bachelor to take.

"So, what do we do about the alliance?" Brose asked. "Personally, I just want mutual noninterference."

"Yeah," Ado replied, "I guess that makes sense. No way you'd suddenly join forces with humans, given the situation."

"It'd be different if you were from the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, mind you. They accept beastfolk there..."

"Solistia, huh...? That was a nice place to stay. Makes me feel bad about, well..."

"Did you do something to them?"

"A... A bit. Given the position Isalas is in, y'know..."

They'd dabbled in human experimentation using a fragment of the Dark God, wiping a whole village out in the process.

That wasn't all either; they'd run into some other trouble too. Personally, it was a bitter memory for Ado.

"For now," he continued, "let's go with this: You leave me alone, I leave you alone. Pretty sure the king should accept that easily enough."

"It sounds like you have a...very understanding king, huh?"

"Oh, he's just a coward. The people around him are a lot more shrewd... Probably *too* shrewd. Enough to start planning wars behind his back."

"Isn't... Isn't that a problem? There's not gonna be a coup or anything, is there?"

"*Hopefully* not, but... Well, there are gonna be impulsive

hotheads in any country."

Ado wasn't sure what the future held, but for now, he was relieved to have solved *one* problem.

He'd gotten to know a fellow reincarnator and made a connection with him; that was important.

One way or another, Ado was a big step closer to achieving his goals.

*

Five days had passed since Sadamitsu's crushing defeat. He had somehow managed to survive, and after taking a series of carriages, he was back in Maha Luthert, the capital of the Holy Land of Metis.

He'd been summoned to see Mikhailov, the Cloistered Emperor, for a hearing on the Order of Paladins' vast losses.

Mikhailov stood in front of the grand altar in the middle of the room. Four saints were present too, as were a number of bishops.

"Iwata the Hero, I am glad to see you back safely. Did you succeed in confirming the presence of the Dark God, pray tell?"

"Before that... I wanna ask you something."

"Why, of course. I shall tell you anything you wish to know, should I have the answer."

"What's the deal? Were you lying when you said you sent the heroes back to where they came from? Is the whole world in danger because you keep summoning so many heroes?! Did you seriously just bring us here so you could force us to work for you? Is that it? You've gotta be fuckin' *kidding* me!"

Commotion spread among the bishops.

"What compels you to voice such falsehoods? I assure you, we *do* send the heroes back from whence they came."

"What, by *killing* us? Besides, that's only one of my questions. What about the world falling apart because of the hero summonings?! You go on about the Dark God, but *you* guys are the ones doing evil rituals, aren't you?!"

"I know not who put these tall tales in your head, but tall tales they are."

"*Hmph...* So you're gonna keep playing innocent, is that it? The guy who told me all that's a *Sage*, okay? And he was strong enough to blow up all your prized paladins with a single attack. Or what, are you sayin' one of the Sages who guide the heroes lied? He even told me the Four Gods are the enemies of the world."

The word "Sage" alone had more than enough impact to suddenly lend credence to what Sadamitsu was saying.

All of the bishops looked toward the Cloistered Emperor.

"Ridiculous. There *are* no Sages in the modern—"

"But there *is*. And we met him. A mage way stronger than any of us heroes..."

People stronger than the heroes were supposed to have long ago become legends. But now, apparently, one lived once more.

And he viewed the Holy Land of Metis as an enemy.

This was an alarming situation.

"That's not all. He's given the beastfolk this terrifying technology. There was, like, a whole *castle* that was pretty much one huge monster made outta magic tools. So it definitely *seems* like he sees the Four Gods as enemies, right?"

"A... A Sage, allied with the beastfolk?! Unthinkable. A Sage is meant to guide the *heroes*!"

"But what if the heroes and the Four Gods and all that are in the wrong? That'd make 'em the Sage's enemy right away, yeah? And apparently the Four Gods are just standins anyway!"

"Y-You—"

"No kidding, there's no *way* we could take on those fucking monsters! I'm gonna make sure you take responsibility for the shit you've pulled, okay?! You're gonna *pay* for messing with us."

Sadamitsu had failed to triumph over the beastfolk, but now that he'd gotten hold of some key information that could hurt the Faith of the Four Gods, he figured he could use it to secure his future.

"D-Did anyone else hear all of this?"

"Beats me. Maybe some of the other guys were listening, but they all left before I got back."

"I see..."

Mikhailov quietly raised his left hand.

And as soon as he did...

"*GAKH!*"

...Sadamitsu felt a sharp pain run through his back.

He didn't know when it had happened, but one of the bishops was standing behind him, and they'd thrust a sword into his back.

"O, poor hero, defiled by the words of a heretic; worry not. We shall purify you now, on our honor as disciples of the Four. Prepare yourself..."

"Y-You *bastards*..."

"*By the holy name of the Four, let this dirty soul bathe in the light of purification!*" Mikhailov chanted. His *thoughts*, however, were decidedly less holy.

If only you hadn't gone and learned things you didn't need to know, you could've left here alive... Greedy little brat.

The Cloistered Emperor was echoed by voices all around: "*Light of Purification!*"

Light enveloped Sadamitsu's body.

From the light came heat—and gradually, that heat began to *burn* the boy.

"*GWAAAAAAAAARGH!*"

"You were always impure. Now it would seem your screams are as well."

Sadamitsu finally realized what a fool he'd been.

He'd been offered a deal that sounded too good to be true—and deals like that always had a catch. He and the others had heedlessly carried on in their new world. Only now was he realizing: The Four Gods had been the heroes' enemies all along.

"*Aha ha ha ha ha...* So I'm... I'm gonna die, huh...? Bet all of *you* are gonna have way worse deaths than me... That magic...is...FAR...beyond...y—"

He crumbled to ashes before he could finish his final word.

Nobody could tell what he'd tried to say.

"*Hmph.* As if any magic could surpass the miracles of the Gods," the Cloistered Emperor said with a scoff.

But in the near future, he would be made fully aware: Sadamitsu had told them the truth. Their reckoning was coming.

Not by the hands of Ado, but by a different Sage— No. A *Great* Sage.

Chapter 3: The Old Guy Gets Kidnapped

Delthasis was sitting in a study piled high with documents, working on both his official duties and his trading business.

Unusually, Creston was there too, and a heavy atmosphere hung over the room.

"So the Holy Land of Metis tried invading the Ruuda-Iruruh Flatlands," Delthasis said, "only to have the tables turned on them. And they say the hero Iwata succumbed to his wounds after returning and making his final report. I find it more likely they executed him, though..."

"All sounds a tad hard to believe, doesn't it?" Creston mused. "The force they sent—a group of paladins led by a hero—was larger than Solistia's entire army, yet they say the whole force was annihilated? Something's not right here, if you ask me... And remember, they were up against the beastfolk!"

"I heard something interesting about that, actually. I received word there was a Sage on the beastfolk's side. Oh, and I've already ensured the safety of our source. We can't risk Metis killing them off."

"You really never change... Just how deep do your ties to the underworld run, my boy? I fear for you sometimes..."

"It's all to protect the country. She loved this country, Father; I can't let it fall. I may have no love for it myself, but she and she alone called it free, called it *kind*. And I'll devote my entire life to making sure it stays that way."

"Is that so... Still, do you not think it a problem for a duke to claim he has 'no love' for his country?"

Delthasis had a serious look on his face.

As a boy, he'd been an empty shell of a person.

He'd always had a fearsomely quick mind—as if he could see through anything—and it had robbed him of his youth. He was just that smart. Because of his intelligence, he'd always found relationships with other nobles completely and utterly worthless—an unpleasant waste of time.

But he'd started to change after entering the Istol Academy of Magic.

He'd been blessed with good friends, and slowly but surely, he'd started to mellow out. And Creston had decided to capitalize on his newfound maturity by setting up marriage talks with the daughters of influential nobles.

But that had been a mistake, and he regretted it now.

Delthasis had understood his father's actions. He was the son of a ducal house, and he'd known that would stop him from marrying the woman he truly loved and spending his life with her.

Nonetheless, Creston had decided to help the couple out by hiring the girl Delthasis loved—Milena—as a maid and assigning her to work by Delthasis's side. He'd felt it was the least he could do to make it up to his son.

Thinking back to those days made Creston's heart ache—in part because he'd been at fault himself.

As a side note, when he'd hired Milena as a maid, her friend Miska had joined too.

At the time, he'd had no idea that Miska would become such a menace that even he would stand no chance against her.

"I promise you, if anything tries to destroy the world she loved so dearly, I'll bring it to its knees—even if it's a superpower. I can't let her down. Not after she left her happiness in my hands."

"What scares me, Del, is that I can truly see you doing it... Again, I'm so sorry about what happened. It's all because I did something unnecessary..."

Delthasis's heart had belonged to Milena since before he'd married his two wives. And he'd been so deeply in love that he'd felt he needed nothing else in his world as long as she was there.

But nobles had duties to fulfill.

And those duties included political marriages.

The women had been introduced by the king himself, leaving Delthasis with no choice but to accept the engagements. Just before everything had been finalized, Creston had found out Delthasis already had his heart set on someone else.

If he'd known earlier, he probably would've tried to do *something* to call the marriages off.

Over time, Delthasis had had children with his current wives—though he would still sneak off to make love with Milena. That was his life for quite some time.

But one should never underestimate women's intuition. Eventually, Delthasis and Milena's rendezvouses came to light, and the latter was forced to keep her distance from the ducal mansion.

By then, however, Milena was already pregnant—and so, Celestina was born.

For the sake of Delthasis's political marriages, it would've been unacceptable for him to say he'd been in a loving relationship with another woman since before he'd even met his wives.

Just like that, then, Milena had been forced to shoulder the unfair reputation of being a *thief*.

But she'd long since known and accepted that this was her lot in life—and that her life itself would be cut short.

She possessed a bloodline magic known as Precognition. And those who peered into the future inevitably eroded the duration of their own lifespans; that was the price.

Since time immemorial, all sorts of people had targeted anyone capable of Precognition. The power to predict the future was just that alluring—and every time, it ended in tragedy.

Milena's family had spent generations working to forge a future in which their descendants would no longer inherit that accursed power. They'd hoped that—at the cost of sacrificing almost the entire family—their ruinous bloodline magic could be erased from the world.

Fortunately, their plan had worked. Celestina was born without inheriting the power of Precognition.

The dearest wish of Milena's entire family had finally been granted.

Delthasis had known about Precognition, but it hadn't been until Milena breathed her last breath that he'd discovered its effect on the inheritors' lifespans.

Milena had been fully prepared to die—and before she had, she'd entrusted Delthasis and Creston with the truth, as well as with Celestina's future. When she'd finally passed, her face looked completely at peace.

Personally, Delthasis cared little for the world.

But Milena had been his light—and he bitterly regretted failing to save her life. Still, she had entrusted him with her feelings. So ever since, he had continued to go to crazy lengths to honor those feelings as best he could.

Admittedly, he also very much *enjoyed* pulling off these crazy stunts...

Regardless, the truth was that Delthasis was committed to keeping Celestina happy.

And to that end, he was constantly pulling all sorts of strings to stop other greedy nobles from getting too close to her.

It might have *looked* like he had no love for his daughter, but in reality...

"It's all in the past. Besides, Isabella and Elustine love me too. But I want *her* to be free. I want her to live without being bound by the shackles of nobility."

"I know. And that's precisely why I'm always prepared to crush any pathetic worms who'd stop that from happening. If any maggots try, I'll make sure they *burn*."

"I feel you take it slightly too far, Father... Changing topic, however, I hear a massive crater was formed during the attack on the Ruuda-Iruruh Flatlands. Roughly the same size as the one in Earl Vethorsten's territory."

"Goodness gracious! Which side's attack caused *that*?!"

"The beastfolk's."

About a month ago, an enormous crater had appeared out of nowhere at the foot of a mountain in Earl Vethorsten's territory.

The water source for the village of Hasam—which lay downstream—had been destroyed in the process, causing Earl

Vethorsten to come in tears begging for financial aid. Work was now proceeding on digging a new well.

And the cause of that explosion was—well, exactly who you think. But the crater in Ruuda-Iruruh was someone *else's* handiwork.

"Does... Does this mean someone on par with Sir Zelos has joined the side of the beastfolk?!"

"I imagine it's the Sage who is said to be on the beastfolk's side. He could be a compatriot of Mr. Zelos—or perhaps a disciple."

Delthasis was perfectly aware that Zelos was responsible for the incident at Hasam.

However much Zelos had tried to explain away the explosion as the result of "a chain reaction in the mana well," Delthasis lived among the high society of silver-tongued schemers and liars. Seeing through the lies of a novice like Zelos was child's play for him.

He was in an entirely different league.

Though of course, even sending out an investigator to take a look at the site would have been enough to uncover the truth to some extent.

"How many casualties?" Creston asked.

"Out of about 10,000 troops, 453 survived. The beastfolk were keen for some revenge against Metis, no doubt."

"Still, though... This would mean a Sage views the country of the gods as an enemy. What's going on over there?"

"I have my guesses, but I can't say anything for now."

Delthasis had his own information network reaching practically everywhere that people lived. Every bit of frighteningly accurate information came back to him.

Creston sighed. "Well, I *would* very much like to see Metis's fall..."

"I concur—though I doubt it could be managed just yet. They have some troublesome help on their side."

"The Crimson Cabal... Those zealots, eh? If push comes to shove, could we somehow use them to crush the Inquisition?"

"They wouldn't be enough. Though it'd be a different story if there were an even greater power we could use..."

"Hmm... For now, I suppose we shall just keep a close watch."

Having decided to focus on intel for the time being, the two of

them set their sights on the next issue at hand.

Which was quite the thorny issue itself.

"Construction of the Irmanaz Deepway has come to a standstill," Delthasis said. "Something about there being extrahard bedrock in the way..."

"Hard enough that even Gaia Control would fall short? I was under the impression that spell was capable of getting through entire boulders."

"If it were rock and soil alone, it wouldn't be an issue. There's metal at the site, however, that prevents the magic from working properly. It even includes the likes of mithril and damascus, I hear."

"An ore vein, then? Surely they could just dig through it?"

"I'm told it's no mere ore vein. And they suspect the metal there is stopping magic from working... Though we don't yet know for sure."

"Hmm. Perhaps we will need to deploy our secret weapon."

Both men's minds went to a certain mage in gray robes.

A man who could pose problems all of his own.

"He *is* a useful man to have around, isn't he?" Delthasis said. "Yes. Let's have him work for us again."

"Truly, Del, you're as much a slave driver as ever, aren't you? Still, I suppose one must break some eggs to make an omelet..."

"Yes. I don't think we have another option. He can only blame himself for being so skilled in combat and construction alike. Ah, by the way—I hear two heroes have made their way into our country. What should we do about them?"

"I know not what they're here for, but leave them be for now. This is an important time for us; I believe our top priority is getting Sir Zelos to work. The Deepway shall be a crucial card up our sleeve."

"Then it's settled. I'll provide him with adequate pay—this *is* a state project." And then, with that decided, Delthasis called out toward the doorway: "Now, Nagri—you've heard the gist of it. Will you take the job? If you're concerned, I can write up a short letter for you..."

Standing at the door was a dwarf with folded arms.

"Sounds good to me. And you're right—can't have the man running off on us. If you can write us a letter about the job, I'd appreciate it. We'll take him to the site once we've got him. I'll go get ready now."

"I expect good news, Nagri."

The dwarf flashed back a rough grin through his beard.

This was Nagri of Hamber Construction. He was all about duty, loyalty, and common sense—and he was a tight-lipped man.

He was the hands-on sort, and he was always raring to dive into the next crazy job. The tougher the work, the more it got his blood pumping; he lived for his work.

And so, the plans were all made without Zelos even being there.

Worksites were no place for scheming. That was to be done in meeting rooms—or Delthasis's study, in this particular case.

"While you're here, Father, let me ask something. I met with some international ambassadors recently, and the ambassador from Artom didn't seem to know about the deepway. What's the story there?"

"Ah, yes. The only people in Artom who know what's been happening are a select few high-ranking individuals—royals and the like—and their aides. The same goes for command over their end of the project. High-ranking individuals, moving in secret. And with the chiefs of the dwarven villages helping keep things under wraps too, we shouldn't see any information leaks."

"Makes sense... Both the dwarves and the reufayl have an ironclad sense of duty. They'd stay true to an agreement even if it cost them their lives."

"Indeed. That's how we've been able to work in utmost secrecy this whole time... Until *this* big old problem turned up, at least."

"Well, well, we can just have Mr. Zelos fix that by working himself to the bone, now, can't we? *Aha hah...*"

The two of them were willing to use any tool at their disposal—even if that tool was an acquaintance of theirs. They were blue-blooded to the core.

*

Zelos had just returned home after a light meal at a local diner.

With his omnivorous coccos helping weed his field and eating any pests to keep the crops completely safe, Zelos's farming workload had decreased. He'd begun devoting his new free time to his efforts to make a washing machine.

It still wasn't going too well, though.

"Mmm... Why can't I get the water pressure right? Is it the magic stone? The spell formula? Or...maybe mana's leaking somewhere? If the machine's going into overdrive, there has to be *some* sort of reason, but I can't find it for the life of me..."

The washing machine's design was pretty simple.

You simply had to add detergent and charge the panel with mana, and it did the rest all by itself.

As a matter of fact, there was nothing wrong at all with the washing machine. Zelos hadn't realized, but the only problem was that he had a ridiculous amount of mana—enough that even when he held back, he'd supply the machine with too much, sending it into overdrive.

What's wrong with it? No matter how many times I redesign it, it seems like it should be fine... I just don't get it. It's simple enough that there shouldn't be many points of failure, and yet...

Zelos continued to rack his brains over it, unaware that the problem was mere user error.

He was used to working within the *Swords & Sorceries* mechanics he knew so well. But this was reality, where variability among individuals could cause errors like this.

"Hmm... Maybe I should get someone else to try it for me and see how that goes. Machines like this always need a lot of operation testing and durability testing before they're right; maybe there's something I've missed."

Seeing as he still couldn't identify the problem, Zelos figured he'd ask someone else to try it out for him. But he didn't want the machine to go berserk and ruin the clothes of whoever was trying to help him—at the very least, he couldn't ask Luceris for help.

After all, the church already had its hands full with the children's living expenses; it didn't have enough money lying around to buy

the kids new clothes over and over again. The risk of failure was just too high.

"So the question is... Who do I ask?"

As he absentmindedly pondered the question, he spotted a group of very rough-looking laborers walking up the alley between his home and the church.

And Zelos recognized some of the dwarves at the front of the group.

"Greetings, lad," Nagri called out with a huge grin. "You free?"

But he seemed...*too* happy. Suspiciously happy.

"Do I look free to you, Nagri? Ah—I see Boling's here too... What brings you? What's the occasion?"

Nagri firmly gripped Zelos's arm. "Let's go."

And in perfect sync, the other workers grabbed onto Zelos too. There was no escape.

"Uh... 'Go'? Go where?"

"Oh, just around the corner. C'mon, lad. Let's get moving."

"B-Boling? *Where* are we going?"

"Somewhere *amazing*. Excited to work up a good sweat together? The two of us, we're bridge-building buddies, ain't we?"

"D-Don't tell me we're..."

Zelos's hunch was right. If the workers of Hamber Construction were this eager to go somewhere, it could only mean a real pain of a job awaited them.

And a crazy worksite, soon to be filled with singing, dancing builders...

Construction work was a battle against nature. It was all about making the most of the terrain, of the environment, and of the builders' skills and knowledge to create the ultimate structure. The dwarves of Hamber Construction were experts. So there could only ever be one answer to where they were going.

"He's right. Place should be *amazing*. Satisfying as all hell, I bet. We got so much fun ahead of us... Let's *work*! ♪"

"*Yippee!* Nothing better than getting a tough job done! You get addicted to it, don'tcha?"

"*Noooooo!* Someone call OSHA!"

"Ah, don't worry about it. Just take a nap and we'll be there before you know it. *Boys!*"

"*RIGHT!*" shouted a chorus of dwarves.

The burly men lifted Zelos and started carrying him away.

It was right about then that Luceris appeared. "Z-Zelos? Are you, um... Are you going out?"

"Oh, it's the little priest lady! We're just borrowing the lad for a wee bit. Nothing to worry about, all right?"

"Why are you answering for me?! Luceris, help m—"

But before Zelos could finish asking for help, a dwarf covered his mouth.

Just like that, then, they hauled him along the alleyway. And at the other end, Zelos spotted a carriage. A carriage he recognized all too well by now...

"Hurry up an' get yer asses on board, ya shitheads! I've got a need for speed, and it's a need I can't impede! Get yer asses into gear already—lemme have some *fun*!"

"Th-That's High-Speed Jonathan! Why'd you hire *him*?!"

Nagri had prepared everything meticulously. In other words, they'd planned to take Zelos by force all along.

"Because he's the fastest. Less whining, more boarding... Whoops. Almost forgot to use this."

"*MMFF!*"

As Nagri held a piece of cloth against Zelos's mouth, Zelos gradually began to lose consciousness.

The cloth had probably been soaked in some sort of shady liquid earlier.

It'd become a full-blown kidnapping.

"All righty, Mister. We want the superexpress—get us there as fast as you can."

"Roger that, ya fuckers! *Hyeh heh heh heh...* I've been so busy lately! It's great! No time for me crotch to dry—just full hype, 'round the clock! Now...don't get thrown off, ya shriveled old farts! Ya want max speed—well, yer about to *get* it!"

"Sounds perfect. We'll leave it to you!"

"Yes. Thanks as always."

"Right! I'm on it. Let's get the beat started again! *GYAH HAH HAH HAH HAH!*"

The carriage set off, blasting straight to insane speed without a moment wasted.

Its passengers were on the superexpress to a job they were all *pumped* for.

All of them except one, that is—poor Zelos, being jostled around in the back...

Chapter 4: The Old Guy Infers the Existence of Ancient Ruins

TING! TING! TING!

There was an echoing sound of something hard being struck.

Still only half awake, Zelos tried to focus on the sound.

His mind felt like it was under a thick veil of darkness, and he was trying to focus on the sound to wake himself up and get out from under it. But it was heavy—almost as if he were tied down.

His faint consciousness felt the urge to give up and sink deeper into the darkness.

TING! BANG! CLANG! VROOOOOO!

"OO-RA-RAH, OO-RA-RAH, OO-RA-RA-RAH, MUS-CU-LAR!"

"*We are—blue-collar!*"

"MUS-CU-LAR, MUS-CU-LAR!"

"*No book smarts but major skills! Working dwarves with iron wills!*"

"MUS-CU-LAR, MUS-CU-LAR, MUS-CU-LAR, MUS-CU-LAR!"

"*Sweat that flies and shines so bright! Beauty in our working might. Without our arms we'd rot and die! 'Hopeless' jobs are just a lie. Pickaxes we lift and swing—give 'em mana, make 'em sing! Sturdy stones might block the way. Smash 'em into yesterday!*"

"SMASH 'EM UP! SHINY DUST!"

"*Someone falls and don't get up? Whack 'em as a pick-me-up!*"

"PICKS CAN TAKE US ANYWHERE! DWARVES NEED WORK LIKE MEN NEED AIR!"

Finally, the sheer urge to comment on what was going on roused Zelos.

"These lyrics are *crazy*! And what's with the melody?!"

He was pretty sure he recognized some of the musical phrases, but the overall melody and lyrics were still bizarre, and it had been

enough of a shock to wake him up. Not to mention, the dwarves were striking the earth with their picks in an eight-beat rhythm.

Zelos was left with nothing but a hazy sense of discomfort.

And it was then that he remembered: He'd been kidnapped by Hamber Construction.

The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was a ceiling dimly lit by some sort of bioluminescent moss.

"That means...we're underground right now?"

Aside from the moss, magic-powered lamps dotted the ground, helping to make the area as bright as daytime.

But that wasn't all. There were houses made of stone, which themselves seemed to emit a faint glow—and it definitely didn't seem like the same glow as the luminous moss.

"Do... Do the stones in those walls seriously *glow*? That has to be some kind of magic technology, right? But...*is* there even that sort of technology down here?"

A bunch of old-looking stone buildings lined the streets, though the place was far too small for Zelos to consider it a full underground *city*.

That, however, was because Zelos was comparing it to the cities of modern-day Earth. By the standards of this vaguely medieval world, it actually *could* be considered pretty big.

As he continued looking, he saw scaffolding set up along a huge, curved wall of rock. A swarm of workers stood on the scaffolding, swinging their pickaxes with abandon.

This had to be the "worksite" that Nagri and Boling had mentioned.

"Oh! So you're awake, lad."

"Boling? Could you... Could you tell me where we *are*?"

It was hard to tell dwarves apart by their looks. Zelos had determined this was Boling thanks to the man's voice—and because this particular dwarf was clean-shaven. If Boling had had a beard, Zelos probably wouldn't have been able to tell it was him.

They really were that difficult to tell apart.

"Oh—this place? These are the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz. It's where we'll be working."

"So we really *are* underground. And 'great ruins,' you say... Now that you mention it, yeah, all of the buildings here are made from stone. And it sure looks like they were built a long time ago..."

"Mm-hmm. These are from the Dark God War, so you're not wrong. Still inhabited, though—dwarves live here."

"Huh..."

For now, Zelos decided to gather information to get his bearings.

From what Boling had just said, the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz had been built during the Dark God War as a shelter for the dwarves. It wasn't known why the dwarves had gathered here specifically, but they had settled in this large underground space, making the odd product to sell to the outside world and gradually expanding the settlement as they lived.

There weren't *many* mineral resources here, but as the dwarves dug out the space over a long span of time, they'd been able to mine at least some. Their digging had eventually formed long, winding tunnels connecting them to three countries—what were now the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, the Artom Empire, and an area bordering the Holy Land of Metis—and the dwarves used those tunnels to conduct trade.

The dwarves had frequently gone back and forth along the tunnels when they first opened. But with time, kobolds and goblins had come to settle along the underground roads, gradually transforming them into dangerous places.

Up until recently, then, mercenaries had been working to subdue the monsters along the roads—and they'd succeeded in significantly reducing their numbers. But there was always the risk of a different swarm suddenly invading the tunnels out of who-knows-where, so the dwarves couldn't let their guards down.

"Hmm... Somehow I doubt you dragged me all the way here just to deal with some monsters, though. Is there some *other* problem too, perhaps?"

"I'll get to that. Just hear me out for a bit first."

About thirty years ago, Creston—the duke at the time—had passed a plan to expand these underground roads. In the intervening time, Solistia and Artom had worked together in utmost

secrecy to make steady progress on that plan.

At first, they'd simply developed the existing deepway connecting Solistia and Artom to enable smoother travel between the two nations. But the old underground civilization that had built those roads had made them complex and winding to deter invaders. It was hardly the sort of route suited to merchants traveling en masse.

And so the original plan had become a more ambitious one aimed at creating a new, more efficient underground tunnel, kicking off a survey of the underground ruins to determine the optimal route. One day, however, the survey group had been attacked by monsters that had appeared seemingly from nowhere.

In the wake of that attack, mercenaries had been sent to accompany the survey group, and the groups had been instructed to proceed with finding the optimal route and start looking for the source of the monsters.

By the time they'd mapped out a suitable route, they'd also found where the monsters were coming from: a long-collapsed section of the underground ruins on the Holy Land of Metis end, which had turned into a breeding ground for monsters.

Once that had been determined, they'd started excavating space for the new underground highway while also carrying out an operation to eliminate the monsters. The ones taking part in the latter had been unruly mercenaries—the sort who seemed likely to become criminals down the line—as well as criminal slaves who'd been convicted for some sort of terrible deeds.

In other words, they'd just thrown bodies at the problem. But it had worked: Recently, it seemed, the monster subjugation had been completed, or near enough.

"It took thirty years, and many lives," Boling said, "but with that done, they finally thought they'd be able to finish the deepway... Up until they found this cavern, that is."

The construction work had made good progress until they'd discovered a cave system along the route. And eventually, it turned out that the Artom Empire had found a parallel cave system on their side of the deepway too. After checking their maps, they'd realized they could draw a straight line between the two caverns. To save

resources, the miners had promptly begun work on connecting the cave systems. Of course they did—it saved both time and resources.

They'd been merrily digging away until they reached the wall of rock in front of Zelos now.

"Hmm... And then what?"

"This is where our problem comes in. If we'd been able to sort it out ourselves, we wouldn't have called you in, now, lad, would we?"

Hamber Construction had been working at the site for a month now, but the results had been less than ideal.

As hard as they swung their pickaxes, the rock here was just too tough. Even Gaia Control wasn't enough to get the job done. Worse, even when they *did* manage to crack a hole in the wall, the rock sealed right back up. Some spots nullified magic too. All these factors had converged to bring the project to a complete standstill.

"You're telling me it cancels out magic? And any holes you make close back up? That all sounds rather strange..."

"Oh, strange for sure. But take a look for yourself; think you'll get the idea. Seems like these wee bits of metal in the rock are canceling our magic."

"That still doesn't sound right. Even if there *is* metal in there, magic should still work on it. But if magic really is being nullified, maybe there's some powerful magical barrier in there..."

"No point telling me all this, lad. I'm no mage. Haven't got a clue what you're saying."

It was a common misconception, particularly among people who didn't understand magic themselves, that even small amounts of metal could nullify magic.

In reality, though, few naturally occurring things could nullify magic. The things that *could* were usually found in dungeons, or were otherwise man-made.

Wait... Man-made? Don't tell me this wall is... No. No, it's still too early to say for sure. Definitely worth checking out, though. Now, then...

After thinking the matter over for a moment, Zelos suddenly looked up at Boling.

"Boling? I'm going to take a closer look at that wall. I won't have

any idea what's going on unless I can get a look at it with my own two eyes."

"Sure. Appreciate it. We're counting on you here, lad. Project's behind schedule, and we got no one else to turn to."

"There are a lot of things about this that baffle me, so I'm going to have to be thorough. Would you be able to show me to a spot without many workers? I don't want to cause an accident on-site."

"On it."

Zelos followed Boling to a spot at the bottom of the rock wall.

Along the way, Zelos noticed armed mercenaries hanging around for some reason.

"Why are there so many mercenaries here?" he asked. "I thought you got rid of the gobs n' kobs?"

"Skeletons have started popping up around the place lately. Jeez... Work's already running late as it is, and now we've got those buggers to deal with too. There's been talk of going back to the original route, but who's to say we wouldn't run into the same problem there too..."

"Skeletons, eh? Oh, by the way—where does the mana come from to power these magic lights? It really doesn't seem like it'd be possible to do it all with magic stones..."

"Beats me. They've always been like this, so I never really thought much of it. Now that you mention it, though, aye. Where *does* the mana come from? Well, I guess that's why people call them living ruins..."

They don't even know where the mana comes from? It shouldn't be possible to operate this many magic tools without a mana well, though... There has to be a source of mana somewhere. Just...where?

If Zelos took Boling at face value, all of these glowing magic tools had been here for a long time, and nobody knew where their mana came from. And then there was the unusually hard, regenerative rock wall...

A certain hypothesis came to Zelos's mind, but he didn't have any proof. Not yet. He'd need to see it for himself.

This was starting to get interesting for him. If his hypothesis were

on the money, he was probably about to see something fascinating.

As they chatted, they eventually reached the bottom of the rock wall.

"Oh! Zelos! Awake now, are you?"

"I am, yes—after you *kidnapped* me. And you really pulled out all the stops, didn't you? You're lucky it was *me* you did this to. Anyone else'd sue you."

"Aye, aye, my bad. We were just short on time, is all. Figured a bit of force would speed things up."

The man who'd called out to Zelos was Nagri, an accomplice in the kidnapping. And he didn't seem to feel the slightest bit of remorse.

Dwarves were true artisans when it came to their craft, but outside of that, they tended to be incredibly crude.

"Please at least have a *bit* of consideration for other people's lives, I swear... So—is this the wall that's been causing you issues? It's...pretty tall when you look at it from up close, isn't it?"

"Aye. *This* is the problem. We gotta do something about it."

"There's something I'm curious about. I'd like to try something out; would that be okay?"

"She's all yours. As long as it helps get us back to work, we'll be thrilled."

"Well, then, if you don't mind... *Gaia Control.*"

As Zelos used the Gaia Control spell with all his might, a roughly twenty-meter indent formed in the rock, drawing an "Ooh..." from the bystanders.

But he wasn't just trying to impress them.

The indent was about twenty meters wide and three meters deep, flat across the bottom—almost like a frying pan. Zelos gave it a careful look.

A nice, flat indent like this would usually have been impossible. It should've been curved.

Bits of sand, interspersed with metal, sprinkled down the wall.

Based on the evidence, Zelos surmised some other force had acted against his spell from the other side of the wall. He figured it was probably a magical barrier...but that only raised a *different*

question.

"Hmm... What a pain."

"What is it? Did you figure something out?"

"Not yet. But give it a moment, and you may see something interesting, okay?"

"Wh-What do you mean? What's this 'something interesting' you're talking about?"

Then it happened, right in front of Zelos and a throng of workers.

All at once, the sediment lying on the cave floor floated into the air and returned to the indent, filling the hole Zelos had created.

There was no way this was natural. Everyone gawked, breathless.

"Whoa... How..." one dwarf stuttered.

"You've got to be kidding me," another added. "Did the hole really fill in that quick? What's going on here?!"

"Does anyone have a map?" Zelos asked.

"Er, first, we'd appreciate it if you could explain what just happened..."

"Just give me a map, please. A map of this whole area, including the underground city here. If you have one that includes any other underground cities too, that'd be perfect. I'll explain what's going on once I can see a map to confirm it."

"R-Right... Hey! Someone go get a map! Our futures are riding on this. Get a move on!"

The workers ran off in a flurry. There was probably no need for more than twenty of them to have all run off at the same time, though...

Still, this project was well behind schedule and they were at their wits' end. If they failed, they'd have to pay hefty fines; it only made sense they'd be in a panic.

This was a state project, after all. Failure was not an option...

*

The dwarves had come back with armfuls of maps.

"Where are we on this map?" Zelos asked.

"Oh... About here. Does that tell you anything?"

"Give me a moment, please." Zelos stared down the map as he considered all the possibilities. "If *this* is where we are right now, then... Hmm, that wall has a slight curve to it... And there's the cavern on Artom's side to consider... Ah, the dwarven cities are all clustered near the walls. In which case..."

Then he took a compass out from his inventory and suddenly traced a circle on the map, then used the degree of curvature of the wall ahead of them to derive the circle's center.

"This wall is probably some sort of magic barrier. Specifically, it's a composite of a magic barrier and a spell similar to Gaia Control. It mitigates most damage, then reforms anything that's broken off. Or, more simply: It's a self-repairing wall."

"Hang on. If this wall is magic, then...what's behind it?"

"Judging by the size, I'd assume it's a city. Think about it: It must take quite a lot of mana to keep all of the lamps around here lit. And considering where that mana could be coming from, my guess is there's a city behind here. An ancient one. That's the only way things add up..."

"A-A city from the ancient times?!" the dwarves shouted in unison.

The Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz had been built by the dwarves.

And those underground ruins were lined up in a curve around the recently discovered caverns, the depths of which seemed to be blocked off by a mysterious, self-repairing rock wall.

At least, it made sense to assume as much after cross-referencing with the map.

"It may *look* like a rock face, but to be precise, it's more like a circular crust that disperses the weight of the ceiling. It's probably *very* thick. And going by its ability to repair itself, we can infer that the ancient city inside still exists."

"You don't say... Guess we'll have to report this to the duke, huh?"

The dwarves had probably decided to build their cities in these caverns because it was possible to get mana from the ancient ruins. It made sense that they'd have built a complex network of

underground tunnels to protect themselves from invaders, but there was less reason to build cities right near the wall like this—that is, unless they'd wanted to use the mana as a light source.

In other words, Zelos's theory would mean this rock face had existed before the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz. It *was* possible that the cities' locations were just a coincidence, but considering all of the pieces of evidence, Zelos wrote off that possibility.

Anyway... A city of magic hidden deep underground, eh? There were a bunch of underground cities like that in Swords & Sorceries*, but...surely not...*

The underground cities in *Swords & Sorceries* had been tremendously advanced scientific cities.

Or rather, the civilization that had made them had blended technology and magic, so perhaps it'd be more accurate to call it "magic science."

If Zelos assumed that *Swords & Sorceries* had been based on the world he was in now, encountering such an underground city wasn't all that strange.

"So? How are you saying we break this wall? There's got to be some way to do it, right?"

"Not from the outside, there isn't. No matter how many times we break it down, it'll just repair itself straightaway. There should be an entrance somewhere, but...I wonder if it's buried."

The two enormous caverns, Zelos figured, had probably been dug out to create a service route connecting two underground cities, only for the construction process to have come to a halt due to the Dark God War.

The construction equipment from back then had probably turned into just more materials to make up the crust, leaving behind nothing but empty underground caverns.

"Shit... What do we do, then? Are you telling me that all our work's been for nothing?"

"That seems to be the case, yes. Even *I* couldn't make a barrier as massive as this one. There's probably some facility on the inside supplying it with mana, but..."

"Are you saying you'll go find it and break it?"

"No, no, never! If I broke it, *this* tunnel would collapse too. I say we try to find an entrance somehow and make our way inside that ancient city—or, well, it's confusing either way, but let's call it the ruins. And then, I think, we use it for ourselves, ruins and all."

That still left a vital question, though: Where *was* the entrance?

If they managed to find it, they'd not only be able to solve their issue—they'd get a whole, functioning, ancient city too.

And *that* would likely have quite an enormous economic impact all of its own.

"I guess the problem now is just...*finding* the entrance, hmm?"

"Aye, that's the hard part... Yumboh! You know anything?"

"As if *I'd* know! And...wait. What's with the axe in your hand?"

"Oh, don't worry about it. It's nothing. *Heh heh heh heh...*"

"That right? *Gah hah hah...*"

Nagri still hadn't forgiven Yumboh for pinching his food.

Now that they'd determined any further efforts to extend the tunnel were in vain, a group set out to gather information that might help them find an entrance to the underground ruined city.

They all split up and spent the next hour going around asking the other workers and mercenaries for any information they might have. Then, putting it together, they reached a conclusion.

"So... Based on what we learned, it seems like the mercenaries aren't just here for guard work; they're going out hunting too. But there are only so many monsters you can defeat in an underground place like this. Goblins and kobolds, maybe, but most of those are gone by now. The problem lies somewhere else. And that problem is *skeletons*!"

"Aren't those just weak little monsters? They really that important?"

"Think about it for a moment. When people die in these undercities, people put the remains of the deceased in coffins, cremate them on the surface, and then bury the ashes. In other words, there shouldn't be any corpses down here. So the question is: Where are the skeletons coming from? And the *answer* is..."

"Oh. From the other side of the wall, eh...? So you're saying there

are enough bodies lying about behind there that we're getting all these skeletons?"

"Well, I suppose they could also be from mercenaries who came down here to slay monsters and died in the process..."

"Nah, wouldn't be that. Once a mission's done, we bury any dead mercenaries under a cairn. And lately, we've even been using our magic to reinforce them. So even if they *did* turn into monsters, they wouldn't be able to claw their way out."

"So they *must* be coming from the other side of the wall, then."

"Looks that way, aye... But then why haven't the mercenaries told us where the skeletons are coming out from? That'd be a breach of contract."

"I can't say for sure, but...probably because not telling you keeps their profits coming in. At any rate, they should know more than we do about where the skeletons come from."

The dwarves and the other laborers had been seething this whole time over the unexpected delays to the project.

And now, all at once, Zelos's words brought their anger bursting forth.

"Huh... So those bastards were hiding things from us, were they?"

"I've been mad this whole damn time about the work going nowhere. Boys, what do you say we go have a bit of a talk with these mercenaries? Nice little chat between them and our fists... Time to vent some stress!"

"Yeah. Knowing those assholes, they probably figured they'd stop getting work if they reported the problem and it got fixed."

"Especially since we're in unexplored ruins here... Probably didn't want to miss their chance to get their hands on any treasures. So they chose to screw us over. If this gets out, it'd be a bad enough breach of contract to get them kicked out of the mercenaries' guild!"

"Let's go, lads! Time to set things straight with those shitheads!"

"*YEEEAAAHHHH!*"

This was a state project. Development of the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz, where monsters could attack at any moment, was a risky job. There was no guarantee of worker safety. With lives on

the line like that, hiding information amounted to a breach of contract between the state and the contracted mercenaries. They might get shackled into slavery, if they were lucky—if they were *unlucky*, their heads would roll. Even if that hadn't been the mercenaries' intention, they still had a duty to report where the skeletons were coming from, if they knew. And yet the laborers had heard nothing about it.

It went without saying that nobody would be punished for leveraging the power of the state to threaten the mercenaries here.

The *mercenaries* were the ones committing a crime, after all—a serious crime. Serious enough that they'd need to be truly blessed with luck if they were to get out of this with merely a demotion of their mercenary rank.

But Nagri and the other laborers didn't care about any of that.

All that mattered to *them* was that the mercenaries had information that could've ended the delay to the construction project—and they'd stayed silent about it.

A huge throng of workers headed off—making no effort to hide the fury on their faces—to find the mercenaries and settle the score.

"Surely they won't *kill* anyone... Right?"

Before long, Zelos could hear the sounds of enraged shouts and terrified screams in the distance.

*

Eventually, the bloodcurdling screams stopped echoing throughout the underground city.

Zelos was waiting at the construction site, a cold sweat running down his back, as he spotted the laborers making their way back, yanking on chains.

Not only had they thoroughly battered the mercenaries—they'd bound them hand and foot and dragged them on the ground behind them as they made their way back.

All with wild grins on their faces...

Half-assing things wasn't in their blood.

"I *knew* it..."

The laborers all looked refreshed, like they'd just gotten out of a bath. They seemed incredibly satisfied with themselves.

The mercenaries, on the other hand, were in a terrible state. Their beaten faces had swollen to twice their usual sizes, and their limbs were twisted in ways that didn't seem possible for human bones to twist. It was clear they'd gotten the beating of their lifetimes—and it had broken their spirits too.

Uh... Did these guys even need *to hire mercenaries to protect them? Seems like they could've wiped out all the goblins and kobolds themselves...*

Zelos couldn't help but wonder upon seeing the sort of strength these workers were capable of.

Boling and Nagri both called out to him, explaining what they'd found: "Oh, lad! They really *were* hiding info from us. Apparently there's a crack around the back of a rock ledge, and that's where the bonebags have been coming from."

"Aye. Past that, they said there's a warped steel gate—but no one who's gone through it has ever come back."

Apparently there really *were* ruins behind the wall.

"A... A gate, you say?"

"Aye. Or, well, it sounds like they built some kind of border checkpoint. There's a gate there, but the gate's doors are so decayed that skeletons are managing to come through one of the holes."

"This...sounds like something we should report to the higher-ups. And if everything goes well, those ruins might turn into an important base. Still... Skeletons, eh?"

If skeletons were appearing, it probably meant there were dead bodies lying around within the ruins.

Skeletons weren't actually monsters. They were a phenomenon caused by the inherent qualities of mana, which interacted with people's spirits. Mages, by trade, activated magic formulas to course through their spirits, then summoned forth those formulas to make phenomena occur.

When people died, a portion of their lingering emotions and memories was stored within mana, which could later move about as

if it had a will. That was called a wraith.

After a time, wraiths would eventually fade away; it was as if the world purified itself over time.

However, wraiths—masses of mana with wills of their own—feared their demise and colonized physical materials to preserve their mana and gain bodies. When a wraith inhabited a corpse, it became a skeleton.

Ultimately, though, wraiths themselves were only mana. Their ties to humanity would fade with time—and in an attempt to retain them, they would attack the living. That was the case for all undead.

"I don't know how many skeletons there could be in there," Zelos said, "but it may be wise to widen the entrance and take them on as a group."

"Aye. Even by our estimates, the ruins behind that gate are pretty large. Think we have to go with that."

"All right, boys—hope you're ready for the next hunt!"

"*YEEEAAAHHH!*"

The construction workers hadn't finished letting off steam yet. Not even close. Their stress was still at boiling point.

And they intended to blow off some more steam by getting revenge against the skeletons.

They began sorting themselves into a group, with Nagri at the center, to dig out the entrance to the ruins. It looked like they were willing to do whatever it took to get this job done. They were brimming with enthusiasm.

And *nobody* was going to stop that enthusiasm of theirs...

*

Ultimately, construction work was called off for the day.

It was obvious that working in a place where skeletons could randomly appear was too dangerous; they couldn't just jump back to work there. They needed to prepare first.

If it had only been the employees of Hamber Construction here, it wouldn't have been a problem, but most of the laborers were amateurs in combat. So if any skeletons *did* show up during work,

there would very likely be casualties.

As such, Nagri and the others were carrying out a preliminary inspection of the crack where they'd been told the skeletons had appeared. They were also going over the new plan.

If it was for their work, they were willing to enter dangerous ruins, engage in battle—anything.

Such were the blue-collar workers of Hamber Construction. "Surrender" was not a word in their dictionaries.

They were prepared to challenge even the gods to a fight if it would let them experience the ultimate satisfaction: a job well done.

Now, I wonder when they'll get back...

Zelos was side-eyeing the brutalized mercenaries as he casually sipped on some tea.

He was waiting inside some temporary housing that had been built for the many construction workers to stay in.

Because the undercities didn't have many inns—certainly not enough to house all these workers—they'd put up prefab huts that could sleep dozens of laborers at once.

"It's generally warm enough here since we're underground, but apparently the workers have to bring their own food rations... I'm amazed dwarves can live in a place like this. Speaking of which, where do they get their food from?"

"Well, they can mine some ore here—not much, but it gets them enough money to buy food from the outside."

"By the way, Boling, are you sure the others will be okay in there without you?"

"They'll be fine. Nagri's in charge. Anyway, back to the food—apparently they've had this carriage lately making lightning-fast deliveries. They say it's helped a lot."

"Uh...'lightning-fast'?"

Zelos suddenly got the image of a funky summoner racing along the roads with maniacal glee.

"I don't suppose you're talking about a carriage pulled by three sleipnirs, are you? Why would they choose such a dangerous lunatic to..."

"Dangerous? Don't know the man's name, but we use him all the

time for our work; he's damn handy. Helped us get you here for this job too."

"See! So he *is* dangerous! You're talking about a *kidnapper*! Besides, that's a *crime*!"

"He's quick—and he's a great help bringing food here. No idea what he's always carrying on about, mind you."

"Hmm... I guess people value him more than I'd thought. Have I just only ever seen his bad side?"

People always had their good side and their bad side—but Zelos had been convinced that High-Speed Jonathan was evil. Yet elsewhere, it seemed, the man was seen very differently.

I can see him starting up some long-distance transport service between continents before long. Are the guild's carriage drivers all just inhuman or something...?

Honestly, Zelos didn't have the slightest idea when High-Speed Jonathan even slept.

It seemed like he was constantly blasting along the highways somewhere. Somehow, he found the time to help bring back monsters from the hunting grounds too.

The man certainly left casualties in his wake, but now that Zelos thought about it, he struggled to think of anyone who contributed more to society.

Though, well, even just the fact that he used sacred beasts instead of horses was enough to call him crazy.

"I mean, the first time I got a ride from him, I chucked my guts up," Boling said, "but he's pretty handy once you get used to him. He's usually a nice guy!"

"But I don't *want* to travel like that. Even if he *is* a good person, he just goes way too fast..."

High-Speed Jonathan's carriage went as fast as Zelos's Harley-Sanders Model 13, if not faster.

And Zelos never wanted to ride such a dangerous vehicle again.

While he was chatting with Boling, Nagri returned.

"We've talked it out," Nagri said. "The real work starts tomorrow. Sorry to ask, Zelos, but we'll want your help dealing with the boneheads."

"That's fine by me, but...the checkpoint is about halfway up the cave wall, isn't it? Do you really intend to dig it out?"

"Already been there for a quick look. Made an estimate already. From what I reckon, we'll have the entrance dug out in half a day. We've got plenty of bodies to throw at it."

"Half a day? That can't be right. Sure, I don't know how long it'll take either, but isn't that gate supposed to be about the size of a *castle* gate? There's no way you can clear that out in half a day."

Logically speaking, it seemed near impossible to destroy a rock wall that was easily over twenty meters long in just half a day.

But Nagri and Boling responded with big grins.

"*Hah!* We'll have the thing done and dusted in three hours, just you watch."

"He's right! Just leave it to us, and we'll excavate this 'entrance to the ruins' or whatever in no time!"

"You're crazy! If you set such high expectations, the other workers here will be—"

"They're up for it too. Just take a look at those faces. They're *hungry* for it—you can see it in their eyes, can't you? They haven't been able to do any proper work lately. They're all pent up."

Zelos looked at the other workers, as he was told—and saw that every last one had a real gleam to their eyes. Each was flashing a faint smile toward the cliff.

All of them were craftsmen, willing to put their lives on the line for their work—or maybe you could say they just had a serious case of workaholism.

No words could stop them now.

They were simply *overjoyed* at finally being able to work for the first time in what felt like forever. They were eager enough that they'd start swinging their pickaxes this very moment, if they could.

It stemmed from a wholesome desire to get to work but, even so, the sight of a full 570 laborers grinning in unison was kind of creepy.

"It's like I said before: We're all just dirty little work goblins with nothin' but pickaxes on the brain."

"So you were serious about that... Just how obsessed with work *are* you guys?"

"Mmm, let's see... We love it enough that we'd never quit even if our families got fed up with us!"

"No! Don't say that! Are you seriously neglecting your families in favor of your work?!"

"Argh, they'll be fine. We can just leave them there; they'll be safe. Not like they'll die or anything, so they shouldn't have a problem if we put our work first, right?"

"B-Boling?! That's insane. You're talking like a terrible father right now!"

In normal families, people would often drift apart from family members too busy with their work. That sort of thing happened when family members' work time and family time didn't fit together neatly.

But these men here were willingly throwing their family lives away for the sake of work. They had a completely reversed perspective compared to regular people. Normally, you'd think about your family when you had a spare moment at work and do whatever you could to make some time to spend together with them; but these people deliberately neglected their families to prioritize work. Zelos wondered how many of them had gotten divorced by now.

But again: No words could stop them now.

Anything Zelos tried to say would go in one ear and out the other...

"Anyway, we'll start work tomorrow morning, so get some good rest today. Lad, we'll leave the stuff inside the ruins to you."

Zelos sighed. "All right. I'm mentally exhausted from today, so I'll try to save my mana for tomorrow."

"We're counting on you. You're our company's trump card, after all."

"Why are you treating me like an employee?! I thought I was only a temp worker!"

Today was the day Zelos learned he'd become an employee of Hamber Construction.

Suffering from a terrible headache, he asked two dwarves to show him to the second floor of the temporary accommodation to rest...but ultimately, he didn't manage to get to sleep until after the

dead of night. He'd have to face the next morning sorely sleep-deprived.

Zelos had forgotten: Dwarves were unmatched drinkers.

And they loved a good celebration.

Chapter 5: The Old Guy Heads into the Ruins

"So *tired*..." Zelos yawned.

Thanks to the dwarves making such a racket last night, Zelos hadn't gotten enough sleep and had woken up late in the morning.

By the time he was out of bed, work had already started for the day. He emerged to see a huge throng of workers, including the dwarves, digging away at the top of the rock ledge.

It was insane how fast they were getting the job done—not that Zelos felt inclined to comment on it. Somehow, he felt like even *thinking* about it was a waste of time.

The workers, for their part, were paying Zelos no heed as they unearthed the recently discovered massive gate.

Going by the fact that there's this gate here, I wonder if the Great Ruins of Irmanaz were made by expanding an old escape route. Maybe those mysterious glowing materials they used in their houses come from in there*?*

Even Zelos didn't know how the faintly glowing stones used to build the dwarven houses were made.

Based on the fact that the dwarves didn't know how to make them either, Zelos hypothesized that the stones had been recycled from a previous location in an emergency passageway to let inhabitants evacuate the underground ruins—the very passageway Zelos and the others were trying to excavate now.

"Look who's awake! Sure took your time getting up, eh? What—you have trouble getting to sleep last night?"

"And whose fault do you think that might be, Nagri? Of *course* I couldn't sleep with all that racket going on."

"Aye, sorry about that. We're just used to it, so we ended up drinking the night away like always. *Ga ha ha ha ha!*"

"How are *you* so full of energy? You were drinking until at least dawn, weren't you? Not that I'm at all certain what time it is down here, mind you..."

"Us dwarves can work for three days and three nights without food or water. We're different from humans like that."

It was a reminder of the dwarves' tenacity.

They were such heavy drinkers that they could down a whole barrel of ale in an hour—and hardy enough that even after spending the whole night drinking, they could get right back to work without falling over.

Above all, Zelos was jealous of the dwarves' livers, which were strong enough that the dwarves could drink as much as they liked without getting drunk.

Zelos liked his alcohol too, but he was no heavyweight.

"Anyway, job'll be done by noon. You ready?"

"I *am*, but...you sure are quick, aren't you? You're almost like one big machine."

In no time at all, the workers had erected scaffolding and begun using Gaia Control to neatly chip away at the rock, starting from the top. And with dozens of workers going at it all together, they were making amazing progress.

Plus, since they were using magic to get the job done, there hadn't been any casualties—unless you counted those collapsing from mana exhaustion.

And even *those* dwarves simply chugged a mana potion and got straight back to work.

"This is quite the well-oiled operation for what you said would just be 'throwing bodies at a problem.' You're already more than halfway done..."

"Well, we *are* pros. Besides, anyone who does a shit job gets walloped. Their lives are on the line."

"A real gulag you've got going on here, huh? Usually, that kind of thing would make most of your workforce quit."

"What can I say? They're trained for it. Anyway... Can't say I was expecting to see something like *that*."

With the top of the rock wall now excavated away, Zelos and

Nagri could see the top of a castle gate.

While it was just part of a defensive wall, the edges of the gate were decorated with beautiful, intricate sculptures and ornaments. They stood in stark contrast to the wall itself, which had no artistic flair at all.

Very quickly, more and more of the gate came into view—and as Zelos got a better look at it, he started to get a sense of déjà vu.

I swear I've seen this gate somewhere before...

The thought left him slightly irritated, like he had a little bone stuck in his throat.

"What's the issue, Zelos? That's a mighty frown you got there."

"Oh, no, it's just... I feel like I've seen this gate somewhere before, but I can't think of where. Where could it possibly have been...?"

"Oi, hold on. This ain't just your average gate, you know? It's part of some ancient ruins. Never seen anything like it in my life. All the ruins from back then were supposed to have been destroyed. Finding one in decent condition's unheard-of."

Nagri made a good point, but still, Zelos was sure he'd seen it before.

He just didn't know *where*, though. It was on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't remember; it was like there was a fog in his head.

Suddenly, Zelos heard a distinctly nondwarven voice nearby. And it was a voice he recognized: "*Whoaaa!* So there really *are* ruins here! I mean, kinda confusing to say they're 'ruins' when the place we're in is already called the 'Great Ruins,' but y'know... Wait, huh? I've seen this gate somewhere before."

"C'mon, Iris—these are ancient. There are no other ruins preserved this perfectly. Not *anywhere*. Sure you're not just imagining it?"

"Setting that aside: The other parties that went in still haven't come back out, have they? Don't tell me they were all slaughtered in there..."

Zelos spun around to face the familiar voices and saw Iris, Jeanne, and Lena.

Apparently, the three of them had accepted the job request to guard the workers during the expansion job in the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz.

A state project like this would probably pay well enough to line their pockets quite nicely.

"Oh! So your group's here for the guard job too, I see, Jeanne?"

"*Guh?!* Why're *you* here, geezer?!" Jeanne exclaimed.

"He probably just accepted the guard job like we did, right?" Lena said.

"But he's over there with some construction company," Iris pointed out. "Speaking of which...isn't there something kinda weird about those builders?"

Zelos was a little hurt by Jeanne's harsh treatment.

He very much agreed with Iris's opinion of the builders, though.

The builders were *dancing* up on top of the scaffolding as they dug through the rock. But they were making steady progress nonetheless—*more* than steady progress, in fact.

"You're not wrong," Zelos responded, "but they *are* just builders. By the way, you haven't gone inside yet, right? From memory, you're supposed to report any newly discovered ruins before you explore them."

"Nah, we haven't gone in," Jeanne said. "Didn't wanna break the law. If you wanna make it as a mercenary, you need people to trust you."

"Apparently a number of people *did* go in," Lena said, "but none of them have come back yet. It seems dangerous... Anyway, yes, we've stayed out here."

Iris just pouted. "*I* wanted to go in, though..."

It was dangerous in there, no doubt about it.

If they'd made a mistake, Iris might not have been here anymore.

So the mercenaries who went in haven't made it back, eh...? Either they're too busy fawning over whatever treasure they found inside or they were wiped out. It's probably one or the other. And if it's the latter, then I'm guessing there are some nasty monsters in there. Well, not long until we find out...

Personally, Zelos would be just fine regardless of the kind of

monsters inside, but certain monsters might be too much for the builders and mercenaries to handle.

He braced himself for the worst-case scenario. It didn't hurt to be careful, he figured.

"By the way, Mister... Is it just me, or do you feel like you've seen that gate somewhere before?"

"So you think so too, Iris? It's actually been bothering me for a while now. I'm sure I've seen it *somewhere*, but I can't recall where for the life of me..."

"It's gotta be from something in *Swords & Sorceries*, but..."

"Wait. *Swords & Sorceries*, you said?"

That was when it hit him. He knew now what this gate really was.

Swords & Sorceries had had a number of undercities.

The first of those undercities that new players could travel to was Isa Lante.

The gate to that very city was towering over them right now. It left Zelos half nostalgic, half shocked.

"N-No way... Is this really Isa Lante?! It can't be..."

"Isa Lante... Yeah! Mister, you're right! It looks exactly like the gate to Isa Lante!"

"So the game world really was— Hmm. That means where we're standing now should be the Isan Deepway, which connects to the other undercities. But..."

Isa Lante was a circular city, ten kilometers in diameter.

Using the mana that flowed through ley lines, the city reinforced its ceiling and outer walls. It had an enormous crystal called a glowcrystal embedded in the ceiling above, which could be controlled to simulate day and night. Moreover, the glowcrystal had the effect of holy light, giving it the power to purify undead.

Operating this glowcrystal was the first event that new players took part in. In the game, an unknown cause had blocked the flow of mana to the glowcrystal, and players were sent to investigate and fix it. They'd end up having to fight their way through swarms of undead and ghosts as they made their way to the control room.

The event started in the Isan Deepway. In *this* world, though, the crucial deepway didn't exist; there was nothing here but a huge,

abandoned underground cavern.

"Does this mean this city was ruined before they could build the Isan Deepway?" Zelos mused. "If that's the case, then... No. I should see what's going on inside before I say for sure."

"Wow, this brings me back," Iris said. "You couldn't clear this place with a single party, right? You know, I wasn't aware it was a raid quest, so the first time I tried it, the whole city was absolutely *swarming* with monsters...it was *insane*. It was all pitch-black too..."

"Remember, though, that's just what happened in *that* world. Things could be different here—seems like the sort of place a skull legion might appear, for example. Remember, it's been abandoned for more than two millennia, so maybe something's sucked up all the mana and turned into an even crazier monster..."

"Did you really *have* to say that, Mister? Not exactly helping me stay calm here..."

The excavation had opened the way to the doors of the gate.

The enormous doors were made of metal, but after the many long years they'd spent buried, they were horribly rusted.

Enough so, in fact, that it was strange there wasn't any damage to the gate itself.

Suddenly, the sound of creaking metal rang out.

VWMPH! CREAAAAAAK!

The laborers, still in the middle of work, paused to look in the direction the noise was coming from.

"Wh-What's happening?!"

"H-Hey... The doors! Something's trying to get through 'em!"

"What do you mean, 'something'?! What could it even be?!"

"As if *I'd* know! Anyway, I'm getting a bad feeling about this!"

"All workers, evacuate the site!"

All at once, the workers began to take refuge.

By this point, about two-thirds of the gate had been excavated...and something with an enormous amount of mana was trying to force open the doors that blocked the way through.

Huge, bony fingers emerged in the crack between the two enormous doors, attempting to pry them open by force.

"H-Hey, Mister, is that...?"

"Hmm... I think it's a skull titan? Also known as a *gashadokuro*. It's a stronger version of a skull legion."

Skeletons and wraiths had the ability to combine with their kin. The more of them that combined together, the better stats the resulting combination would have. This could potentially result in a fearsome monster.

"Jeez..." Nagri muttered. "If crap like *that's* in there, then are we in danger here too?"

"Get your workers somewhere safe, Nagri," Zelos said. "It's *my* time to shine now."

"Already on it. Don't think that bonebag'll be able to get through for a bit, but...you seriously think you can beat it?"

"Well, it should be doable. Besides, it's not like it's alive, so I don't have to hold back. I'll beat it into next week."

It was almost like Zelos didn't even register this skeleton as an enemy. The thing was letting off a lot of mana, but he still didn't get the vibe it was particularly strong.

"Jeanne, Lena, Iris—I'll leave you three to protect the workers. There might be more enemies like this one behind it. And you mercenaries *are* here for guard duty, right?"

"Yeah, but... You sure you can beat that thing?" Jeanne asked. "It's frickin' *huge*!"

"Honestly, I'm happy to see it here. Look at all those bones it's used up. Those are all skeletons that would've been a pain to track down in there otherwise. Anyway, yes, I'll be fine. All I have to do is turn that thing into dust."

"Zelos..." Lena said. "Aren't you scared?"

Strangely enough, he wasn't scared in the slightest.



Zelos would much rather fight this bag of bones than a great givleon.

This thing was about the same *size* as a great givleon, but the givleon—being a cockroach—was far more trouble. Despite its mass, it could skitter around at terrifying speed and fly.

Compared to the terror of fighting *that*, an enormous skeleton was a walk in the park.

"It's only a pile of bones—just a big one, that's all," he said. "What am I even supposed to be scared of?"

"It's an *undead*!" Jeanne cried. "Don't you need holy magic to defeat it?!"

"Even a sword could get the job done, as long as it's got some mana in it. This thing shouldn't be all that tough."

Of course, that was by *Zelos's* standards.

Ghosts and skeletons were artificial, mana-based life-forms created when a living being's emotions and memories were implanted in the surrounding mana.

Mana was all that kept their bodies together and functioning, and if you meddled with that by introducing different mana from some other source, they'd immediately disappear; they were feeble creatures, in that sense. But how *much* mana it took to make that happen depended on how much mana they possessed.

Imbuing just a little mana into your weapon was enough to take down a skeleton or the like, but things got more complicated with a skull titan. As a fusion between countless mana-based life-forms, it had an incredible amount of mana, and it used it to reinforce the many, many bones that made up its body.

Generally speaking, it was the kind of foe you could only defeat if you had a whole heap of mages.

All this was simply common sense...*in this world*.

"Workers are all evacuated!" Nagri shouted.

"Then I think it's time to take this thing down," Zelos said. "Hard to get excited about fighting undead, though. They don't drop much either, and since they're pretty much just human bones, you have to cremate them..."

"Uh... Mister? You probably shouldn't start a fire underground.

Wouldn’t it burn up all the oxygen?”

“Then I’ll pulverize them through vibration. After freezing them, that is... Would you like some bone kakigori? Could be a good source of calcium!”

“Uh, I’ll pass. I don’t wanna eat people’s bones... What do you think I am, a ghoul?”

While Zelos pondered the best way to defeat his enemy, he used delayed spell formulas to precast a bunch of spells.

The ring Zelos used as his magic conduit could hold up to ten precast spells. He could also do the same thing with his sword and knife, and considering the magic that he could stock *personally* as well, he could easily have over a hundred spells prepared in advance. And even with all that, he wouldn’t run out of mana.

Zelos was completely focused on preparing for *destruction*.

“H-Hey! Geezer!” Jeanne cried. “Stop takin’ your sweet time gettin’ ready! The huge bone thing’s coming!”

“Yeah, and I’m pretty sure it’s too much for *us* to handle,” Lena said. “Are you sure you’ll be able to beat it by yourself, Zelos? Should we wait for the army instead?”

“Oh, he’ll be fine,” Iris said. “Worrying about him’s probably a waste of time and breath.”

“I mean... I know he’s strong, but look at what he’s up against!” Jeanne said. “In fact, how are *you* so calm about this?!”

“He’s a Destroyer. We’ll only get in his way if we stay here; we should go and intercept any skeletons that follow it. Mister’s the only person here who can beat the big guy anyway.”

Iris was the only one who understood.

She had yet to reach the first awakened skill, Limit Breaker. And with that in mind, she decided to stay back and provide cover instead of carelessly diving into enemy lines.

Jeanne, meanwhile, had never expected things to end up like this. It was going to be her first time fighting against the undead.

She wasn’t sure what to expect, and her nerves made her tense up.

“It really *is* a big one, huh?” Zelos said. “*Is* it a skull titan? Or...hmm. Maybe a bone führer? Those things can be sturdy. Guess

it depends on their level, though...”

“It should be weak to light magic, right?” Iris asked. “Do you think Shining Rain would work?”

“It would, but at the end of the day, that thing’s just a pile of bones. It’s not going to get me anything regardless. Experience points, maybe, but those are meaningless to me...”

“Have you not leveled up since you got to this world?”

“Well, I was already way above Level 1,000, so my level won’t really go up anymore unless I start committing genocide against huge monsters. Not that that bothers me, mind you.”

Zelos’s defeat of the Dark God had given him a massive level-up.

It’d take something pretty incredible for his level to rise any further at this point; there was probably no way to keep increasing it unless he went on an extended trip to the deepest parts of the Far-Flung Green Depths. And when his level was already so inhuman, he didn’t exactly feel like going to all the effort.

Besides, it was rare for bone-based monsters like skeletons to drop loot. Honestly, fighting them got you nothing but exhaustion. At best, you could hope for a large magic stone or maybe a spirit crystal.

Cursed bones were another potential drop, which you could purify to turn into blessed bonemeal. But considering bones originally came from humans, Zelos could never quite bring himself to use it.

Blessed bonemeal was a useful ingredient for medicines, including those for infection and the like. It was highly effective at boosting the body’s immune functions. But at the end of the day, it came from what were originally human corpses, and it was only human nature to mourn the dead.

Zelos couldn’t help but think: *If it had to be an undead, I would’ve preferred if it was at least a big undead* beast *or something...*

“Ooh—I think it’s about to pop out!” Iris said.

“Sure looks that way, huh?” Zelos agreed. “It’s tearing down the rest of the rock wall to get here... It must really want to come play outside.”

“*Damn*, you guys are casual about this! Are you *actually* sure you

can win against that thing?!" Jeanne said.

"Well, I'll give it my best shot. It may sound strange, but I don't feel scared at all."

Zelos wasn't exactly excited about this, but it was part of his job.

"I mean, this is you we're talking about, Mister, so you'll probably be fine... But if it were a regular person—or even *our* group—we'd have no chance against that thing, okay? It's *absolutely* scary. We'd probably just die if we tried to fight it."

"Really?"

"By the way, Mister, there's something I've been wondering..."

"What is it?"

"Well... It's about my stats. And Jeanne's, and Lena's. I've been getting the feeling we're special or something."

"Hmm... That *does* pique my interest, but can we leave it until later? Then we can have a nice long chat about it. For now, I want to focus on taking *this* thing out."

Setting aside Iris's request, Zelos turned his gaze back toward the enormous skeleton.

```
*
Skeleton Kaiser (Level 520)
HP: 15,463 / 15,463
MP: 8,521 / 8,521
*
```

His Appraisal activated, revealing that this was different from any undead he'd seen in *Swords & Sorceries*.

Maybe there'd been other enemies in the game he hadn't encountered, but he had no way of checking that now.

"Huh," he said. "That thing's stronger than the heroes. And there could be whole swarms of it farther in."

"Are you sayin' it's over Level 500?!" Jeanne exclaimed. "No way we could take on somethin' like that!"

"Yes," Lena agreed. "Honestly, I'd never want to fight it head-on."

"It'll be easy peasy for me, mind you," Zelos said. "But seeing as I

don’t know how many of them are in there... Hmm. Maybe I should just go nuts with the purification...”

Its level was higher than Zelos had expected.

He’d still be able to smash it to pieces with a single hit, but it was far beyond what the construction workers or average mercenaries could handle. Iris could *possibly* beat it if she really tried, but she’d be putting her life on the line, and there was no need to make her do that when she didn’t have to.

“If it’s weak to light magic, then maybe we could make things work... But we’d need a whole bunch of mages,” Iris said. “With just the mercenaries we have here, I’m pretty sure we’d have no chance against a whole horde of those things, if there really are more inside. And by this point I’m guessing all the mercenaries who went in there are probably...”

“Oh, they’re dead for sure. It’d be nice if some survived, but that’s too optimistic. Especially since undead are drawn to the living... Eh, whatever. They’re the ones who got greedy, so they reaped what they sowed, I guess.”

Undead attacked the living largely to preserve themselves. Over time, the self-purifying nature of the world would cause them to gradually forget their living memories and emotions. As those parts of them disappeared, they would become scared of vanishing.

To prevent that, they had to fuse with other mana-based life-forms or feed off the life force of the freshly killed living. And so, they attacked the living out of a sense of self-preservation. But even that wasn’t always a success.

As they incorporated other mana-based life, the absorbed entity’s emotions and memories would add *their* fear of demise into the equation. And gradually, things would get more and more out of control.

The combined consciousness would become twisted, warped—and it would grow a seething hatred of any and all life.

“Well, then, I’m off.”

Zelos made his way to the skeleton kaiser as casually as if he were going on a stroll.

“See ya~!” Iris waved.

"I-Is he *really* gonna be okay? That's on a whole other level than a megaspider, y'know?"

"Yes... I'm worried for him. It's such a terrifying monster, and he's going to take it on alone..."

"Just watch him. You'll understand. There's no one stronger than the Destroyers!"

Iris had zero doubts about Zelos's victory.

Jeanne and Lena, for their part, knew that Zelos was strong, but they hadn't seen the true extent of his strength in person.

Even if Iris told them there was nobody stronger than the Destroyers, it was still hard to conceptualize.

As Zelos continued to walk forward, the skeleton kaiser recognized him as a target.

It raised a massive arm and swung it down at Zelos.

KA-THWOOOOOOM!

The enormous amount of weight behind its attack caused the cavern's floor to quake violently.

Zelos, however, effortlessly evaded the attack and leaped toward the skeleton kaiser's head.

"*Frozen Flower.*"

He didn't need an incantation.

In an instant, the skeleton kaiser froze and turned white, no longer able to even move.

Then came his next attack.

"*Shell Bullet of Relentless Ruin!!!*"

He'd always wanted to shout that line for real.

As he drove his fist into the skeleton kaiser's head, he unleashed his delayed spell formulas, causing all the spells he'd stocked up to activate.

Yup—he'd set this reference up in advance.

KABOOOOOOOOOM!

A wave carrying intense vibration—powered by a spectacular amount of mana—pulverized the skeleton kaiser.

However sturdy the creature might have been, it couldn't resist vibrations that destroyed its molecular bonds. Bonemeal rained down like snow, turning the underground ruins into a scene out of a

fairytale.

The mana wave carrying the vibration had extinguished the wraiths too.

Iris looked impressed. “Whoa. That’s Wave Punisher, right? The one that uses resonant frequency? It looked, like, *so* strong!”

“No way...” Jeanne said. “He’s on par with a hero. Maybe even stronger... Just how powerful *is* that geezer...?”

“It’s hard to tell which one’s the monster, isn’t it?” Lena remarked. “That thing didn’t even stand a chance. And his spells made everything look so beautiful...”

As Iris’s party stood around reacting, Nagri muttered: “Not my problem, but aren’t there going to be more monsters on the way? Sure you shouldn’t be getting ready to intercept them?”

The mercenaries had come here as guards, and at a time like this, they should’ve been putting everything into protecting the workers and the residents of the undercity. In reality, however, all they could really do was take on any skeletons that had the backbone to come forward.

*

As Zelos passed through the gate, he was met with a world of darkness.

Seeing nothing but a pitch-black void, he had no idea what was around him.

He couldn’t help but think to himself: *What is this, some kind of Buddhist training ritual?*

“*Light.*”

Zelos used a rudimentary spell to create a light in front of him—and it revealed a city of the dead, writhing with innumerable skeletons.

It was straight out of a B-grade horror movie. Among the ancient dead were some fresh corpses too. They were probably what remained of the mercenaries who’d snuck into the ruined city, dreaming of treasure, only to die inside.

“*Damn.* This is straight out of *Resident Evil*... Wait, no. More like

The Mummy, I guess?"

There were zombies mixed in with the skeletons.

All at once, the undead noticed the presence of the living and wasted no time swarming toward Zelos.

"*Shining Nova.*"

Shining Nova was the ultimate offensive light magic, eradicating and purifying all nearby undead by burning them to nothing. And right now, there was nobody around Zelos but enemies. Nobody would complain if he let loose and *destroyed*.

After all, this was a ghost town—literally. Zelos figured that if he annihilated everything here, including the wraiths that could later turn into skeletons and the like, the rest of the job would be that much easier.

A brilliant light filled the entire district of the city he was in, instantly purifying the undead.

Light and flame burned the zombies and skeletons, while a massive wave of mana eradicated the wraiths.

Hmm... For starters, I guess I'll exterminate all the undead in the city, then head to the glowcrystal control room. Things will be a pain if there's no light in here.

Given that the protective wall's self-repair functionality was working, the ruins *had* to still be active.

Plus, the glowcrystal ran off the ruins' mana—so the control room, Zelos figured, was probably somewhere around here. And if it was in the same spot as it had been in *Swords & Sorceries*, he decided, then there was no reason to hesitate.

The problem was that he could only illuminate his surroundings with a meager light, which made things inconvenient.

Zelos got straight to work on his plan to relight the city, utterly annihilating any undead he came across on the way...

Chapter 6: The Old Guy Nabs an Air Rider

Two hours had passed since Zelos had headed into the ruins, and Iris and the other mercenaries had been left with more free time than they knew what to do with.

The occasional, distant sound of something getting smashed to pieces let them know that Zelos was alive and well, but apart from that, they could do nothing but wait, clueless and impatient.

There would be all sorts of priceless magic tools and pieces of jewelry inside those ruins. It would have been the perfect chance to get rich quick.

However, this was the worksite for a state project—so given that the ruins had been found *here* of all places, they weren't allowed to head inside without first getting permission from the state.

After all, these ruins were ancient, and it seemed like they were still active. They'd be incredibly valuable, that much was clear.

Besides, the place was completely overrun with undead. Anyone who went in without the necessary strength was practically walking into their own grave.

News of the ruins had already reached Duke Delthasis, thanks to the efforts of High-Speed Jonathan. In fact, the duke had heard about it by the end of *yesterday*, and High-Speed Jonathan had gotten back to the worksite today—before the excavation of the gates had finished—carrying a royal command.

In other words, the duke's orders were already here, and they prevented the mercenaries from entering the ruins.

There were two main reasons behind his command: the presence of the undead and the presence of cursed magic tools.

Undead carried a plethora of negative emotions within their mana, and ruins teeming with such monsters tended to contain a lot

of cursed items.

Some cursed items would only give you a debuff or two, which wouldn't be that much of a problem. Others, however, could be life-threatening.

In the worst-case scenario, there could be a bunch of items lying about in there that took over the mind of whoever equipped them.

If that happened, the only solution would be to kill the wearer—and those in charge didn't *want* their projects to end in needless deaths. So when ancient ruins like this were discovered, the norm was to have the workers at the site temporarily cordon it off.

Both the Order of Knights and a squad of mages from the Solistia faction were currently preparing to make their way here, and Zelos had received an exemption allowing him to head inside as an investigator.

He'd planned on entering regardless; he figured that was better than having people die.

Still, he had approval, and the mercenaries didn't. There was good reason for that, but not all the mercenaries were bright enough to understand it.

In fact, plenty of them were being downright brainless about it.

"Why the fuck does that mage get to go inside?! He's gonna hog all the treasure!"

"Yeah! It's just some skeletons, right? We could take those! Let us in too!"

"Bet there aren't even that many of the big guys! It'll be fine! Just let us in, ya wankers!"

That was about the gist of it.

There's a saying—all bark and no bite—and these mercenaries were the perfect example. For the most part, they were pretty low-ranking and only worked the bare minimum every day to scrape by. Making matters worse, they saw any talented new mercenaries as their *enemies*. Long story short, they were common thugs.

There were decent mercenaries here too, but those just watched from afar.

And then there were the laborers—including those from Hamber Construction—who were glaring at the mercenaries trying to get into

the ruins.

These workers had been at a lot of tough job sites, so they were far stronger than the average mercenary. They'd faced off against monsters and bandits plenty of times too; really, they were more like construction *warriors*.

"This is a state project. The inside hasn't been surveyed, so no one's got a clue what's in there. And if there are undead, the place is probably chock-full of miasma."

"So what?"

"It means there'll be stuff lying around that'll curse you if you touch it. I don't give a shit if you lot get cursed, but I damn well don't want you bringing things like that back out here!"

"As if I care! I just want *money*. And when the government's lackeys get here, they'll take it all for themselves!"

They were so blinded by greed they couldn't see reason.

The same went for the rest of the mercenaries in this throng. The situation between them and the workers was reaching a boiling point.

"Pah! You wanna go, you wee mercenary runts?"

"Bring it on! I'll shave that beard clean off yer face, ya dwarven scumbag!"

The mercenary's fist and Nagri's fist flew past each other, each colliding into the other's face.

But only the mercenary got sent flying back. Nagri wasn't even left with a scratch on his face.

The mercenary didn't just *fall* either—he bounced and rolled along the ground for a while, until, eventually, he slammed against a wall of rock. He was out stone-cold, eyes rolled back.

"*Tch!* All talk. Amazed a weak lad like that can even get by as a mercenary."

"*Jodoh!* Oh, you've done it now, old man!"

"I don't remember agreeing to look after a bunch of shitty little brats like you! If you've got complaints, leave them until after *you* can take down a Level 500 monster! Because the mage who went in there earlier did that all by himself!"

"As if there's a chance there are *more* of those things! Get out of

our way!”

“You’re not getting past me! Lads, we’re stopping these dimwits!”

“*RAAAAAAAAAH!*”

“Yer gonna regret gettin’ in between us and our payday!”

A huge brawl began.

It was a chaotic mess of greedy fools and work-obsessed laborers, each a flurry of fists.

It was an unspoken rule not to bring weapons into a fight like this. This was a fight between men, and they would settle what words couldn’t with their fists. Rotten, stubborn, foolish—regardless of what you wanted to call them, they clung to these ironclad rules and were *not* about to break them.

Anyone who *did* try to bring a weapon into such a fight would completely tank their reputation, be they mercenary or laborer.

Lena sighed. “Men really are stupid, aren’t they? They’re still all just children...”

“Look, Lena—if that’s what you think, then how about you go and stop ’em?” Jeanne asked. “You’re just standin’ here resting your cheek on your palm and sighin’ with some deep look on your face. What good’s *that* gonna do?”

“I don’t want to. It’d be one thing if there were any boys in there who were my type, but it’s all just filthy old men.”

“Harsh,” Iris said. “Anyway, what are *we* gonna do?”

Their job was to guard the laborers and eliminate any monsters that had taken up residence underground. Exploring inside the ruins wasn’t part of their job description—and besides, they didn’t have permission to do so anyway.

In other words, their course of action was clear.

“We just have to stand guard,” Lena replied. “No point doing something stupid and getting locked up for who-knows-how-long as a result. And if I get locked up, I can’t spin any more love stories with cute little boys, now, can I?”

“Obsessed with that as always, aren’t you...?” Jeanne sighed. “Dependin’ on how you look at it, I guess knowin’ what you want might be a good thing for a mercenary. I just don’t get it, though...”

“Boys are good! Pure, unspoiled, adorable... Then when they turn

into adults, they get so *dirty*, and the stormy seas of life rob them of all their charm...”

“Lena... You *do* know that’s a crime, right?” Iris asked.

Lena was unwavering as always. An unabashed shotacon, through and through.

Even her decision not to head into the ruins came from her figuring that she’d much rather spend her time making pleasant memories with boys than wasting time away in prison.

She lived entirely for her warped sense of love.

Back near the gate, there was no lack of men in the brawl who had a shrewd side to them. They were small-time scoundrels, with no ideals and no sense of pride.

Those mercenaries managed to slip through the brawl and head to the gate, attempting to get a head start over their compatriots on exploring the ruined city.

“Hah! The morons can punch each other all they want. Meanwhile, *I’ll* be taking the treasure... *Heh heh heh!*” one of them said.

The guys brawling one-on-one outside had rotten personalities, but at least you could trust them to *some* extent.

You couldn’t even say *that* about these scoundrels sneaking through the gate, though. They had no reservations about getting one over on their own compatriots; they spent their whole lives loitering around those stronger than themselves, eagerly awaiting their next opportunity to steal the spoils. And the man here was one such individual.

As soon as he headed through the gate, he encountered four other mercenaries, walking toward him with unsteady gaits.

He recognized these mercenaries. They’d been his companions.

“M-Mokhos?! A-And Polcinoff... You’re alive!”

They’d been drinking together just yesterday, and while this man had spent the morning curled up in bed from a hangover, his companions had gotten a head start on him, sneaking into the ruins before he could.

Except they hadn’t returned.

“U-Uh... Hey. You guys okay?”

"*Uuu... Uuuggghhh...*"

His companions couldn't even speak. They must have witnessed something terrifying.

Upon seeing the state they were in, the man hesitated to continue forward.

Mokhos was a brave man, who knew no fear. If you wanted to put it in a negative light, you could say he was a rough, unthinking brute; but at the end of the day, there was nobody this mercenary trusted more by his side in a fight.

And yet here was that same Mokhos shambling along with an exhausted look on his face, having seemingly lost all of his vitality.

Wraiths stole mana from the living, so maybe Mokhos had been one of their victims, the man thought.

One way or another, the man's companions were clearly weakened, and he knew he'd lose the trust of so many fellow mercenaries if he just left them here like this.

It wasn't like this was a tight-knit mercenary party, one that trusted each other from the bottom of their hearts; no, this man was just worried about his reputation. He was cunning like that. And so, feeling like he had no other choice, he approached Mokhos.

"Hey! Mokhos! What happ—?!"

But the moment the man approached, Mokhos grabbed onto him and bit into his neck, tearing off chunks of flesh with abandon.

"*GAAAAAAKH!*"

The man screamed as blood spurted from his neck—and his scream brought a halt to the brawl just outside.

All at once, those who'd been fighting turned in the direction of the sound. And as they peered beyond the gate, they saw a group of mercenaries sinking their teeth into the fallen, bleeding man.

"H-Hey... Wh-What... What are they doing...?"

"Are they... Are they *eating* him?"

"N-No way... Those are..."

"Those are *ghouls*... Yer kiddin'! Those guys were alive just earlier..."

"Hang on! Look behind 'em!"

A swarm of skeletons was beginning to appear from the darkness

beyond the gate.

Among them were more figures that the mercenaries outside recognized.

"Shit... They turned into ghouls that quick? I can't believe it..."

"That's so many skeletons... The hell is that mage doin' in there?!"

"He may be strong, but he's still just one guy! If the ruins are big enough, no way he'd be able to take 'em *all* out by himself!"

The undead were slowly swelling in number.

At this rate, the whole area would be flooded under a surge of skeletons.

The workers of Hamber Construction were the first to react.

"*Tch!* Lads! Make a wall!"

"ON IT! *Gaia Control! Rock Forming!*"

Without missing a beat, they began erecting a wall. It was scary how accustomed they were to fighting.

"Focus fire on anything that gets past the wall!"

"*RAAAAAAAAAH!*"

Having been trapped behind the gate for so many years, these ghouls and skeletons had next to no mental faculties left.

They were almost like machines driven solely by the need to subsist, to attack the living and absorb their vitality. It made their movements dull. The only problem was their sheer numbers.

"We're goin' in too," Jeanne said. "Iris, use your magic to thin 'em out!"

"Got it!" Iris replied.

"I'll try to take out as many skeletons as I can," Lena said. "There are a lot of mercenaries here, though, so watch out for friendly fire, okay?"

The skeletons and ghouls were trying their best to get past the wall, but they were struggling.

And with how slow they were, defeating them one at a time was a piece of cake.

Amid the chaos, the dwarves of Hamber Construction were putting in particularly impressive work.

"*RAH!* Come at me! I'll crush every last one of you into

bonemeal!”

“All this time just waiting around, not being able to work... I’ve had a gutful! Time to blow off some *steam*. I’ll crush every last one of you!”

“Uh... Those guys are *builders*, right? Why are they so strong...?”

“No idea. Guess we didn’t know who we were pickin’ a fight with...”

A flurry of dwarven axes and hammers smashed up the skeletons with no trouble at all.

The skeletons’ levels were probably a fair bit higher than those of the mercenaries here, and yet these *laborers* were taking out skeletons with a single hit each. It only made sense for the mercenaries to be surprised.

A big part of the laborers’ strength came from the construction magic they were constantly using.

Dwarves had a lot of mana, but they were typically soldiers more so than mages. *These* dwarves, however, had bolstered their abilities to control mana and the size of their mana pools through their daily construction work, allowing them to control magic as they pleased.

Unlike imps and demons, which had real material forms, skeletons were spiritually very fragile. If the bones that housed their spirits were hit with mana-infused weapons, the mana would permeate the bones housing their spirits and deal direct damage to the spirits themselves.

That damage, in turn, would scatter the spirits’ mana, leaving them unable to maintain their existence—and so they would vanish.

Even to the mercenaries who didn’t understand the specifics, the sight of these dwarves standing so resolutely against the skeleton horde and systematically *obliterating* them was spectacular enough to leave them speechless.

Fighting was what these mercenaries *did*. What were they worth if they couldn’t stack up against some builders?

“Oi! You lot! Quit lollygagging! Stand there any longer and I’ll bury you in cement!”

“S-Sir, yes, sir!”

Just like that, Nagri flung commands at the mercenaries.

These mercenaries were meant to be the fighting experts here, but the laborers were far stronger.

And so it was only natural that Nagri, who headed up those laborers, would take command over the mercenaries as well.

It wasn't as if any of the mercenaries here were up to the task anyway.

"*Tch!* Another group on the way!"

"No fuss. Just smash them all to bits and we'll be fine!"

Some dwarves mowed down the skeletons with enormous hammers; others deftly threw their pickaxes like boomerangs; some cleaved undead in twain with shovels; some wielded the cranes' chains like weapons that combined offense and defense in one.

These dwarves were consummate professionals, able to switch between construction and combat modes as the situation required. Their proficiency made it hard to believe they were just laborers.

"Firing a magic attack~! *Air Burst!*"

Knowing it would be unwise to shoot off fire magic willy-nilly underground, Iris opted to blast the skeletons with air magic. She hit a whole throng of skeletons, sending a bone-shattering shock wave that struck and immobilized a group of nearby ghouls.

She wasn't about to hold back. Her enemies were corpses to begin with.

"*Hyaaah!*"

Meanwhile, Jeanne cleaved a ghoul in half with her longsword, used the momentum of her follow-through to destroy a skeleton, and then willed the magic in her sword to burn *another* skeleton behind that one to a crisp.

Zelos had made this sword for her; when she infused it with mana, the blade would cover itself in flames, which could be thrown as a projectile in the form of the Fireball spell. It was the quintessential magic sword.

"Careful with the fire, Jeanne!" Lena warned. "We'll be screwed if you start some big blaze down here!"

"I know! I'm bein' careful, okay?!"

Lena caught a skeleton's sword strike with her shield, pushed it aside, and counterattacked with her scimitar, smashing its head into

pieces.

She was constantly moving to make sure she wouldn't get surrounded, and whenever she got the chance, she imbued her weapon with mana and slashed at her foes.

She probably fought with the most finesse out of the three. If only she didn't have those crazy proclivities, she'd be the ideal mercenary...but alas.

"It's hard to tell when you've actually killed a skeleton, isn't it?" Lena mused. "It just feels like striking a bunch of bones."

"Yeah. Still, it helps that they're *old* bones—makes 'em brittle," Jeanne replied. "I'd be havin' a harder time here if they were *fresh* bones... That's what makes ghouls more of a hassle."

"Urgh, this is a pain... I'm gonna purify them all at once!" Iris shouted. "*Purification Force!*"

Her anti-undead purification spell filled the surrounding area, annihilating skeletons and ghouls alike.

But there were still plenty more continuing to stream out through the gate. Their slow movement was a saving grace, at least.

"*Force Blast*, times seven!"

Bullets of pure, condensed mana shot out at the swarming skeletons, devastating the first rank and then passing through to strike the second rank.

The spell left nothing but broken skeleton remains in its wake.

"*Whoa...* Maybe I should try to learn some magic too," one mercenary said.

"Ya plan on buyin' it from Solistia Trading? Just a heads-up—it costs more than ya might think," another responded.

"Hard to pass up on that sort of power, though... It'd make us way more flexible in combat, right?"

If a mercenary wanted to purchase spell scrolls, they had to first undergo an examination by the mercenaries' guild and receive a license.

This had been implemented in response to the sheer number of unsavory mercenaries out there; some had stooped to banditry, using their magic for crime. Students at the Istol Academy of Magic were registered while they were at the academy, so they were

relatively free to buy spells as they wished. However, the Academy restricted access to certain categories of magic based on factors like grades and the rank of their robes.

Lately, the restrictions on purchasing spell scrolls had been tightened for mercenaries, and a lot of them weren't happy.

The rules had probably been changed based on the assumption that newer, more controllable spell scrolls would create a spike in crime rates. The mercenaries didn't care about the political specifics, however. It was the same lack of care that had led them to forgo making important reports, and instead try to sneak into the unexplored ruins, for the sake of some meager earnings.

The same indifference that had seen some suffer the cruel fate of becoming ghouls.

"Ghouls are such a pain. They don't just move faster than skeletons—they're strong too..."

"Yeah. And look at how those guys ended up... Sure is one stupid way to die."

As a general rule, ghouls were dead bodies possessed by wraiths, just like skeletons were.

There could be one wraith possessing a body or several, but the number of wraiths determined how much of a threat the undead posed and the extent to which it could reinforce its body.

Seeing as these bodies were already dead, there was no need to care for the physical limits of the flesh. In addition, each wraith used memories they'd made in life—so if they had the memories of a soldier, they'd be able to fight fairly well. And the fresher the body was, the stronger it would be physically.

Put it all together, and a ghoul with a fresh body and several wraiths inhabiting it could be monstrously powerful.

One such ghoul was making a ferocious charge right now—straight at Iris.

"Iris!"

"L-Look out!"

By the time Iris noticed the rampaging ghoul, it was already right in front of her.

The ghoul raised its sword, hoping to eliminate this mage who'd

been such a thorn in its side.

Without hesitation, Iris set her gaze on the ghoul and swung her Runewood Staff at it from below, shattering its jaw.

"*Cheerioooooo!*"

With a bizarre cry, Iris delivered a series of thrusts with her staff, then sent the ghoul flying with a palm strike.

No sooner was that one gone than a different ghoul came charging up from behind her, it too wielding a sword.

Iris contorted her body just a little, and the ghoul's sword missed her, slamming against the ground. She leaned against her staff and sent a roundhouse kick at the ghoul's head.

GOH... GROAHHH...

"I see them! I can see how the ghouls are moving! It's all thanks to you, Instructor Meikei!"

For just a moment, Iris looked into blank space, as if seeing the image of a pure-white cocco smiling kindly in midair: "Bok. Bok-a ba-caw." ("An enemy's movements aren't something you *see*. They're something you *feel*, with your entire body.")

Real or not, the image of the cocco reminded her to never let down her guard on the battlefield.

Iris got straight to blasting the fallen ghoul with attack magic.

"*Shining Geyser!*"

Iris formed a tiny fist and struck the ground—*PAFF!*—and as she did, a stream of white light erupted from the ground like a geyser, swallowed up the ghoul, and flung it high into the air.

The wraith possessing the ghoul was purified, turning the ghoul's body into nothing more than a regular corpse.

Iris had longed to become a grand mage, but at this point, she'd turned into more of a battlemage.

It went to show just how effective her training with the coccos had been—though her mage instincts still told her it was wrong somehow.

It made the bystanders quite curious about what the future might hold for her.

"Real little ball of energy, ain't she?" Jeanne quipped.

"The coccos would be proud," Lena said.

"Still, though, she... She ain't exactly fightin' like a mage, huh?"

"Mmm... No, she's not. What do you say *you* go and get some training from the coccos too, Jeanne?"

"Uh... Nah."

Iris—unaware that her allies were watching—had covered her arms with fire magic and used them to burn yet more skeletons to a crisp.

Then she felt the need to turn to the blackened skeletons upon her victory and quip: "Heh, heh—feel the burn?"

In any case, the combined efforts of the laborers and the mercenaries eventually managed to stop the undead's onslaught.

It was only four days later that the Order of Knights arrived.

*

"Lightning Rain!"

Zelos obliterated the endless swarm of undead as he strolled through the dark.

As he proceeded along the path, lit only by his dim illumination magic, he systematically exterminated whatever leaped at him from the shadows, be they skeletons, ghosts, and other small fry, or big monsters like skeleton kaisers.

It was vital to completely destroy the skeleton kaisers in a single hit—if he didn't, they could revert back into an army of smaller skeletons. Sure, he'd still be able to purify those smaller ones all at once with Shining Nova, but that cost too much mana for him to start using it every time he saw a skeleton. Which meant his only real option, if the skeleton kaisers kept dispersing, would be to use himself as bait, gathering all the enemies into a single location where he could then destroy them at once.

Fortunately, undead made no attempts to conceal their mana, so they were easy to locate with the Detect Mana skill.

Zelos was even being thorough about destroying all the wraiths that lurked inside buildings. The problem was, there were a *lot* of them.

The city was just that big.

Wraiths and ghosts are pretty much just mana, so they're easy to detect, but no matter what I do, there are always some that get away... Oh, well. They're not too strong, so I can leave those ones to whoever's outside. I suppose it's about time I head to the consulate, then, hmm?

Figuring he'd thinned the undead's numbers enough by this point, Zelos moved to the next step of his plan.

If this Isa Lante has the same layout as the version I know, then the control room for the glowcrystal should be right underneath the consulate. But why haven't I run into a demon yet? With all this miasma and all these evil spirits around, I'm surprised a demon hasn't been born yet...

Zelos felt like something was off.

As mentioned during Zelos's time at the faerie settlement, demons were born from mana wells polluted by miasma.

This entire town was one enormous mana well, and going by the fact that it had sat undisturbed for more than two thousand, four hundred years, it seemed strange that there *wasn't* a demon here. The mana here was so concentrated that Zelos wouldn't have been surprised to see the whole place overrun by lesser demons...but he had yet to see even a single one.

"Meh; I'll find out sooner or later. Anyway, all these corpses sure do stink..."

Even though the city had been abandoned for over two millennia, the unmistakable reek of death still lingered wherever Zelos went. The issue was probably the lack of airflow, as well as the sheer length of time these corpses had been sitting here.

Even Zelos couldn't help but scrunch his nose up at the stench. He was getting sick of it.

Hmm? Wait, what's... Don't tell me—!

Zelos had intended to carry out his plan nice and quickly, but he'd barely even started walking again before he discovered a certain something.

He'd spotted what was essentially a motorbike without wheels. It was an object very much unsuited to underground use, and yet here it was, just casually lying on its side in the ruins. Zelos made a mad

dash toward it.

"N-No way... Is this an *air rider*?! Why's there one of these down here?!"

As you might have assumed from the name, an air rider was a motorbike that could fly through the air.

It was fitted with gravity control magic that allowed it to float and propel itself by shooting out hot air like a jet engine.

Its speed could be adjusted by nozzles fitted to the front and back of the vehicle. It was a magnificent magic tool—the kind of thing Zelos dreamed of.

It was a symbol of the ancient civilization's technology—and Zelos had just run into one out of nowhere. He couldn't help but gasp.

After all, there had been very few functioning examples of these in *Swords & Sorceries*. Most had been found wrecked in ruins.

They were incredibly rare, in other words; about the most Zelos could remember of them was occasionally seeing an NPC riding one in a raid. They were incredibly convenient, everyone wanted one, and...here one was in front of him, out of the blue.

"C-Can I... Can I just take it?"

It was covered in dust and rust but overall in decent condition.

If Zelos let this opportunity pass him by, he'd probably never have another chance to get his hands on one.

That was especially true considering that the Order of Knights would surely seize every last magic tool they found in here. This was his big chance—and he, specifically, would be able to bring this thing out from the ruins without anyone even noticing.

His inventory—essentially a cheatlike storage system—was handy like that.

At the same time, stealing from a state project's worksite was a serious crime. And that was all the more true when that worksite was an unprecedented ancient ruin.

Urgh... What do I do here? I have no idea...

He looked to his right.

No one.

He looked to his left.

No one.

A sly grin came to his face...and he tucked the air rider into his inventory.

Today was the day Zelos decided to commit embezzlement.

Embezzling from ancient ruins was considered a serious crime in the Magic Kingdom of Solistia.

But that was outweighed by his sheer desire to *have* this thing.

With the deed done, Zelos left the scene without incident, merrily skipping his way down the path...

He couldn’t help but feel like his abilities as a reincarnator were kind of unfair.

Chapter 7: The Old Guy Wallops a Demon

After making easy work of any skeletons and wraiths that had dared to get in his way, Zelos reached the city center.

These streets had probably been beautiful in their heyday, but not a shred of their former glory remained. The trees by the roadside had withered completely, and the buildings had collapsed into rubble.

Zelos continued walking, looking over what he could see of the darkened city, until he eventually arrived at what appeared to be the consulate.

Architecturally, it looked different from any other nearby building; its design was mysterious and alien, like something out of a sci-fi movie. It clearly didn't match the vibe of the rest of this world.

It had probably been designed that way for practical reasons. And as Zelos went inside, he immediately found himself standing in a wide-open room.

"Kinda reminds me of a reception area, I guess. Nothing about it feels 'fantasy' in the slightest, though..."

The layout itself was nothing unusual to Zelos, but the complete absence of people made it feel strange.

This consulate must have been bustling with government officials at one point in time.

From the state of the place, Zelos guessed it had probably come under attack during a riot. It reminded him of a certain event from *Swords & Sorceries*.

In that event, Isa Lante's civic services had ground to a halt, leading to a riot. The player was tasked with restoring operation to the glowcrystal in the ceiling before the riot got worse. The situation would continue to worsen with time, and in the worst-case scenario,

the player would be forced to fight the rioters, resulting in a failed event.

In order to restart the glowcrystal, the player needed to get the underground power facility—located in the deepest part of Isa Lante—back online. To achieve *that*, they needed to take a specially produced magic crystal and insert it into a panel atop a pedestal inside the control room.

From what I've seen, this consulate doesn't look as developed or as big as the one in Swords & Sorceries*. Anyway, if their civilization was so developed, they must've used all sorts of advanced technologies daily... Nothing lasts forever, though, does it? It's a scary thought... Putting that aside, though, between the elevator in the middle and the urban design, this place* does *remind me of Isa Lante... Okay, maybe the urban design here is a* little *different, but still, it's got that same circular layout... Actually, hang on. Maybe this one's the original?*

Zelos was analyzing the structure of the ancient city, attempting to draw similarities between it and his hazy memories of Isa Lante in the game.

Mmm, yeah... Not sure I can deny it anymore, huh~? he mused to himself as he made his way toward the underground control room.

The structure of the overall building was different from what he remembered from *Swords & Sorceries*, but the path to the control room was exactly how he remembered it.

The floor, the walls, and the ceiling were all engraved with densely packed geometric patterns—reinforcement magic, which strengthened the building.

The city, by the looks of it, had twenty gigantic pillars in its center to support the weight of the bedrock above. The reinforcement magic helped to ensure those pillars would never collapse and lead to a cave-in.

"I never really went to Isa Lante much, now that I think about it. Didn't have much use for a beginner city, after all..."

As one of the game's top players, Zelos had been based elsewhere, and he'd had little need to frequent an underground city

made for beginners. Even when he had gone there, it had only been when he felt like it, and he didn't recall ever staying for long.

He'd never really spent much time in cities in general, in fact. He'd mostly spent his time making tools at his base, *occasionally* making a quick circuit around the cities to sell things, and then immersing himself in hellish hunt after hellish hunt. Honestly, he thought, it was a miracle he even remembered Isa Lante at all.

With his mind going over those thoughts, and his eyes keeping a close watch for any threats nearby, he arrived at the third floor down: the control room.

"Whoa... Even *this* place is full of bones. Just in case... *Purification.*"

Skeletal remains were lying around everywhere he looked. This really was a city of the dead.

He wasn't exactly surprised, but still, it looked like there was nowhere in the city that *wasn't* full of skeletal remains.

He sighed as he blasted the remains with purification magic—and as it turned out, they really *had* been possessed by wraiths. They let out a single, bone-chilling shriek and then vanished.

Now, where's that control panel... Aha! Here we go.

The control panel for the glowcrystal was a stone pillar in the corner of the room. It would activate upon being provided with a flow of mana.

Zelos tried to mimic the action as best he could remember it from the game—and as he did, several locks on the stone pillar released, and a rectangular panel appeared. The magic crystal inside it was gray.

So it's run out of mana... It's no good anymore. Funny, though. Didn't think I'd be doing the same newbie event again, in a whole other world...

Magic crystals were pretty, palm-sized hexagonal rods. Although they were usually rechargeable, this one had reached the end of its lifespan, given its complete lack of mana. Zelos had a number of magic crystals of his own, though.

Magic crystals had a standardized size and shape and were often used to power larger magic tools. Zelos used one as a power

component in his Harley-Sanders Model 13.

In the game, powerful figures often made orders for magic crystals during events, allowing players to really stock up while being confident they wouldn't go to waste. Events like that were the perfect opportunity to earn some money. Plus, if you handed in items of higher quality than the minimum required, you'd receive a juicy bonus reward. Thinking back to it made Zelos nostalgic.

He placed a new magic crystal in the center of the control panel, and the pedestal started to close up all by itself, as if reacting to the mana.

Wonder if that'll be enough to bring the light back to the city.

Mana flowed into the grooves etched into the pedestal and then into the intricate geometric patterns etched all around the building, causing them to shine one after another.

A monotone system voice called out, reporting on the state of progress:

"*Executive control system for Undercity No. 7, Isa Lante, activated. Verifying system condition... Unable to contact surface air force control room. Identified complete suspension of lifelines...*"

"Ah. So this really *is* Isa Lante."

Zelos had figured that would be the case, but now that the city name had been stated directly, the truth was unavoidable.

"*Launching illumination system... Verifying mana transmission line... Line verification complete. Mana transmission system operating normally. Opening bypass of central dragon vein control system. Operating rate currently at thirty-two percent. Established connection to main central system. Mana has reached Dragon Heart. Opening ley line bypass. Mana supply to illumination system will begin shortly. Approximately sixty minutes until full restoration of civic function to nondamaged areas.*"

As Zelos listened, he laughed awkwardly, and couldn't help but think: *This isn't very fantasy...* The level of technology here was very clearly out of place.

For comparison, if the world he'd been reincarnated in was like medieval Europe, then this ancient magic civilization was more like modern-day Earth. In fact, no—it was probably *more* advanced than

Earth.

"*Beginning mana supply to illumination system. Approximately one hour until full operation. EMERGENCY: High mana concentration detected in Dragon Heart. All citizens, find shelter at once. EMERGENCY... Beginning scan. Mana-based life-form threat: Rank A. Referencing library... Threat identified: Court-rank. Recommend immediate deployment of defense forces. EMERGENCY...*"

"Hwah?!"

It sounded like some kind of crazy threat was lurking nearby.

"*Court-rank threat identified as: Buer. Confirmed movement of mana-based life-form. Threat en route to present location.*"

"Wait a minute... So there really *was* a demon here. And it's 'court-rank'? How strong is *that* meant to be? I have no idea what sort of scale they're using... Something like a greater demon, maybe?"

Surviving religious documents indicated that the ancient magic civilization used court ranks to categorize the strength of mana-based life-forms. The highest rank was demon lord, followed by grand duke, duke, marquess, earl, viscount, and baron.

The problem was, there was no telling how powerful this "Buer" was. Zelos would've rather had this machine explain it to him in terms of power level instead.

Zelos's knowledge came from light novels and video games, after all, in which "demons" were invariably a certain race or the like. Beyond that, they could have categories like "greater demon" or "lesser demon," and from there, they were categorized by level.

This machine just blurting out the name "Buer" didn't help him in the slightest.

Well, this probably isn't the best place to fight. Let's take it outside.

The instant Zelos moved to exit from the control room, an announcement rang out: "*Defense system launching shortly. All floors deploying blast doors. All personnel evacuate at once.*"

That very same instant, the blast door to the room he was in began dropping at an incredible pace.

"*Give* me a second, you bastard!!!"

The same system that had just told him to "evacuate at once" was threatening to trap him inside.

Zelos wasn't sure why—maybe the system had bugged out, or maybe it was just such an emergency that not a moment could be spared—but it sent a cold sweat running down Zelos's back as he sprinted through the hall. If he screwed up, he could get crushed underneath the blast door.

In a sense, this door was more of a threat than the "court-rank mana-based life-form."

After sprinting down the hall as fast as he could, he just *barely* made it outside. This had been bad for his heart.

It was almost like a sequence straight out of an action game, and it had seriously stressed him out.

He wasn't *physically* tired, but he was panting nonetheless.

Somehow... He panted. *I-I made it...* Another pant. *Outside...*

And no later did he get outside than the control room was completely shut off. These blast doors probably wouldn't reopen until this highly concentrated mana-based life-form was defeated.

Outside the consulate, mana had started to return to the city, so the glowcrystal was lit up, allowing Zelos to see everything around the ceiling. It wasn't enough to illuminate the whole city, though, so his surroundings were still dim. The systems weren't fully restored yet; it was just a little brighter than when he'd first passed through the gate.

Line upon line of light stretched their way up the pillars that supported the ceiling, forming patterns that looked like modern circuitry.

Well, it looks like the city's coming back online like it's supposed to... Didn't think I'd have to sprint out by the skin of my teeth, though. They can't expect any workers to get out of there in time, right? Did they just accept in advance that they'd be sacrificing people in the event of an emergency...?

There were a lot of things here that didn't seem quite right to Zelos.

The control system had determined it to be a critical situation, though—and automated systems like this always followed a certain

order of priority.

Zelos wasn't exactly *mad* at it, but he couldn't help but wish the system had actually considered how long it'd take to escape and provided the appropriate amount of time. Perhaps the real bad luck, though, was ending up in an emergency situation like that in the first place.

"Now... Seems like it's here."

As he turned to look at the enormous presence he'd just sensed, he saw jet-black mana, flickering like fire.

Zelos's first impression: *This thing is* strong*, no doubt about it.* He opened his status screen and swapped his gear in a split second.

By the way, he'd only learned he could do this after getting out of the shower one certain morning back in Mobville.

After it had happened, he'd pondered, *Huh—wonder if I can quick-swap my gear like in the game?* After fiddling around with his status screen for a bit, he'd eventually figured out how to do it.

Now, he was wearing the jet-black armor he'd had on when his group had first gained the nickname of "the Destroyers."

Mana started to coalesce in his staff.

I can't make out its shape... Is it incorporeal? No, that can't be right. Given how concentrated the mana is, whatever this is has to have some kind of corporeal form, or it'd use up its mana too quickly.

As he raced through the possibilities, he refused to take his eyes off the demon for even a moment.

Gradually, the demon condensed its mana, transforming into the shape of a human.

It looked so unnaturally perfect—with golden eyes and blue hair—that it sent a shiver down Zelos's spine. It had wings on its back and wore a uniform of some sort. Almost like a military uniform, even.

The demon stared back at Zelos. And then it smiled at him, as if it had no malice at all.

"My, my. Greetings, lowly human. I must welcome you to my castle—even if you were never invited."

"Well, *someone* sounds pompous, don't they, Mr. Demon? Do you have a name, perhaps? If you do, I'd love to hear it."

"No, no; I have never even left this place. I have no name."

"That's a shame. Such beautiful looks, and no name to call you by—the ladies will be troubled, I'm sure."

"Would you like to give me a name yourself? That would be quite all right by me. It can serve as proof you once lived."

"Ah, sorry—I've already decided I'll be dying of old age. Would you mind quitting it with the stupid jokes?"

The demon was talking amicably, but it watched Zelos like a predator would watch its prey.

In *Swords & Sorceries*, demons were masses of mana and hatred—the result of the memories and personalities of countless wraiths fusing together into a single entity.

If the same was true in this world, then this demon here in front of Zelos had been born over two thousand years ago. It hadn't simply persisted this whole time—it had *evolved*.

Seeing the way this creature was looking at him, Zelos figured that demons were, indeed, the same in this world: They feasted on the souls and vitality of the living.

"That sounds most unfortunate," the demon said, "since you are about to disappear. I am going to eat you up."

"*Hah!* There you go again with the jokes. I'm a middle-aged man, you know? Could you save your pickup lines for the women?"

The demon gave a quiet chuckle. "We have quite the entertaining fellow here, it would seem. But I assure you, I am being completely honest. Besides, your gender is of no import. All living things are nothing but my sustenance."

"Ooh. So *scary*. Look, I've already had white apes going after my ass; can we leave it at that, please?"

"You truly are delightful. No...*odious*. So odious, you disgust me."

Suddenly, the demon vanished.

As it did, Zelos swung his staff—and it collided, with a shrill, metallic *KA-SHING!*

A blade at the end of his staff had clashed with long claws growing from the demon's hands, sending sparks flying.

"You really *are* a scary one, aren't you?" Zelos said. "A preemptive strike? Already?"

The demon chuckled back at him again. “Oh, but I could say the same about you. You blocked my attack; you must be quite the talented individual. *Nothing* like the ones who traipsed in here a few days ago.”

The demon continued to make ferocious attacks with its claws, and Zelos dodged or parried every one, counterattacking when he could.

“You flatter an old man like me. Really, at this age, all I want is a nice, quiet life.”

“Worry not, then. Once I devour you, you shall be at rest—for eternity.”

“I’ll get fat if I rest for *that* long. It may not look like it, but I *do* try to take care of my health. In fact, I’d rather be out harvesting my field right now.”

“Ah, such enduring wit... Why, I cannot *wait* to rip your guts from your body.”

“Sure you’ll be able to? I’m stronger than I look, you know.”

You wouldn’t have guessed it from their words, but a fierce battle was unfolding as they taunted each other.

Whenever Zelos stabbed with his spear, the demon would dodge and counterattack. Then Zelos would deflect the counterattack with his spear and launch a counterattack of his own.

They took turns playing offense and defense at an absolutely dizzying rate, a frenzied battle unfolding in the center of the abandoned city.

“Hmph... It seems you shall not let me kill you so easily,” the demon said. “Then how about this?”

“Oh? What little trick have you got for me next, I wonder?”

“I’ll leave that as a surprise.” Another chuckle.

The demon focused its mana, and from out of the mana appeared human skulls, enveloped in blue flame.

The skulls flew through the air as if they had wills of their own, swooping in to assail Zelos from every direction.

“You’re giving me a real show here, huh? Let me return the favor: *Dark Lightning Concerto!*”

Zelos formed jet-black bolts of lightning in the air and wasted no

time sending them to intercept the flying skulls.

The black lightning had no trouble obliterating the skulls—and then it headed toward the demon.

"*Kh!* Such cheap—"

"Would you mind staying where you are for a moment? I'd like to thank you for your little gift. Please, I *insist*."

"I must humbly decline your— *What?!*"

The demon desperately tried to evade the attack, but the black lightning followed doggedly wherever it went.

The lightning surged toward the demon at rapid speed like it was somehow attracted to the thing. As soon as the demon dodged one way, the lightning changed direction and raced back toward it from another angle.

Eventually, the demon gave up on running and decided to focus on intercepting the attack instead.

"Oh—I forgot to mention," Zelos said, "but you probably don't want those to hit you."

"Wha— *GAAAAAAH!!!*"

The demon had tried to swat the black lightning away with its claws, but the moment it came into contact, the lightning exploded, zapping the demon with an electrical discharge that stopped it in its tracks. And while it was stunned, more bolts of black lightning encircled it, flying in from all directions.

The demon took hit after hit, unable to dodge. Even with a corporeal form, a demon was still a mana-based life-form. Magic-based attacks were absolutely enough to damage it.

If this attack had come from a regular mage, the demon probably would've managed to negate it, but Zelos's magic used absurdly concentrated mana. Even just getting *touched* by his spell was enough to whittle away at the life of a creature like this.

I guess something of that caliber won't be enough to defeat it, though. The thing does *live in a mana pool, after all... Looks like I've run into a real nuisance of an enemy, eh?*

Zelos focused on the demon, a bored look on his face.

The demon still hadn't taken that much damage, from the looks of it.

"So after all that, I've only managed to chip away at your mana a bit, hmm? See, this is why you demons are such a pain. It's hard to tell how much damage you've taken just by looking at you."

"Well, I certainly felt that one. It would seem you are quite the formidable opponent, for a human... It just makes me want to kill you all the more."

"Rather you didn't, really. I've got a wife and kids waiting for me back home."

"Then I shall devour them as well. But first... I must deliver *you* to your demise."

The two of them continued to mess with each other, but they'd recognized each other as tough opponents.

One was a colossal mass of mana; the other, a completely unpredictable human mage. Each was aware their opponent would be a pain to defeat, and each brainstormed how to get the job done.

It was Zelos who made the first move.

"Delay formula, release! *Shining Nova!*"

"Wh-What are you—"

Both Zelos and the demon were swallowed up by light.

Shining Nova was both purification magic and destruction magic.

The destruction would drain the demon's mana by damaging its corporeal form while the purification would directly whittle down its mana in a major way.

Zelos would have taken the full force of his own attack too, but he escaped it using a proxy doll. This item allowed the user to avoid the effects of any attack, once and only once. Zelos used it to escape the blast from his Shining Nova, though he still took the full force of the purifying light.

Purifying light only worked on undead and mana-based life-forms in the first place, so it was no problem for Zelos. But it was a big problem for the demon.

"*Kh...* To think you would let yourself be caught up in your own spell..."

"I hit you from point-blank range just now, so what—you've probably only got about an arm's worth of mana left, right? Either way, I'm guessing it was more than enough to weaken you."

"You *swine*... How are you not weakened yourself, after taking that head-on?"

"What kind of magician reveals his tricks? Oh—and your mask's slipping, by the way."

Zelos might have weakened the demon, but it still wasn't an enemy he could afford to let his guard down around.

This demon, in particular, had a vast amount of mana under its control. Enough that it could take on a human form.

It showed that the demon had complete control over its entire body's mana, meaning it was capable of manipulating mana however it pleased.

"Don't get cocky with me, you *HUMAN*!"

"*Pfft.* Looks like you've got a shorter fuse than I thought. So, let me get this straight: You're turning into a second form now? What is this, a manga~?"

The demon was gradually growing larger, taking on an enormous, bulging form on par with a cyclops.

Its skin turned a lustrous reddish-brown; crooked horns burst out from the top of its head; enormous wings and a long tail sprouted from its back; scales and bristly hair formed on parts of its body.

"You puny *maggot*! You should've just let me kill you... Now you've *really* made me mad!"

"Is that the best line you've got? A generic threat some disposable villain would say? You sound like the bad guy who gets introduced as the big threat at the start of a story only to get killed by, like, episode three."

"*SILENCE!!!*"

The demon's long tail demolished a building as it swept from side to side, sending the rubble flying at Zelos.

Zelos dashed through the storm of rubble, using pieces of it as midair footholds in a wild approach—and then he activated more of his precast spells.

"*Frostflower's Banishment! Dark Lightning Concerto! Volcanic Geyser! Windserpent's Binding Squall! Gravity Burst!*"

"*GWAAAAAARGH!*"

Zelos's magic froze the demon; then pierced it with black

lightning that burned it from the inside; then burned it some more with a spout of magma; then dragged it into huge tornado, where vacuum blades sliced at its body; then, with the demon unable to move, crushed it with the force of gravity.

The demon could do nothing but get pummeled by the onslaught.

This had been Zelos's plan all along: Start by weakening the demon, and only *then* reveal what he was really capable of.

He'd never said he was going to fight fair and square.

He was making full use of his firepower now, suddenly sending a full-on flurry of attacks at the demon right when it had still been salivating over the thought of him as *prey*. Now all that was left to methodically finish it off.

"*Absolute Zero. Gaia Pressure. Destruction Typhoon. Prominence Nova*, times five. *Explode*, times seven. *Lightning Blaster*, times twenty."

"H-Hang o— W-Wai—"

"*Corona Napalm*, times twenty-five. *Cocytus*, times three. *Omni-Explosion. Magma Inferno. Iceberg Press*, times seven. *Abyssal Fall.*"

"W-Wait... Please... Hear me ou—"

Zelos continued to rain spell after spell down on the demon without mercy, as if he were saying, *What, you think this is all I've got?*

He'd systematically fired attacks at the demon while it had its guard down, gradually robbing it of cards to play—and before the demon had even realized, it was standing at the entrance to hell.

It was hard to tell who was the real demon here.

And that was only the beginning of Zelos's unstoppable, merciless tempest of destruction...

*

"I— I dunno what's happening inside the ruins, but it's *loud*..."

"Yeah. The hell's goin' on in there?"

The mercenaries were waiting at the front of the gate, each trying to peer inside as the ruins slowly grew brighter.

It was still pretty dark, so they couldn't see far enough to figure

out what was happening. Every now and then, however, they'd see a tremendous burst of light or hear a series of huge explosions that made them go pale.

After all, that probably meant there was an enemy in there you couldn't beat unless you had magic just as powerful—an enemy they probably would've run into themselves if they'd succeeded at forcing their way in.

And just thinking about what might have happened to them if they *had* run into it... There was no overstating how grateful they were to the construction workers who'd stopped them from going through the gate.

"The geezer's really goin' wild in there, isn't he...?" Jeanne said.

"It certainly sounds that way," Lena agreed. "Which goes to show how strong his opponent must be, right? These have to be some pretty dangerous ruins."

"He's showing what the Destroyers are made of, by the sounds of it. But what could he even be up against?" Iris mused.

Iris's party was peering into the darkness too, though they weren't quite as surprised by the sounds of destruction.

"These ruins have been locked up for more than two thousand years, right? *And* there's a mana pool..." Iris continued.

"Yeah, probably," Jeanne said. "What are you tryin' to say?"

"Well... Doesn't that mean a demon could've been spawned? And, like, if one *has* been, it'd be over two thousand years old... It'd be pretty strong."

"Demons are only myths, Iris," Lena said. "Nobody's actually seen one before."

"But all those corpses in there must've generated a whole heap of miasma, right? And if that miasma seeped into the mana pool, I think it probably gave birth to a demon."

"So, what? The geezer's fighting a demon in there? All by himself?!"

Iris's hypothesis was right on the money.

She was remembering that time she'd fought the faerie rose, and Zelos had told her that a demon had been about to form.

If these ruins really *were* Isa Lante, then they perfectly fit the

conditions needed to spawn a demon—the power source at the deepest part of the city, in particular.

"Probably," she replied. "It sounds like Mister's going all out, so it's gotta be *something* crazy strong, at least."

Iris's words left Lena and Jeanne silent.

Demons were only known from old myths passed down over the generations. Nobody knew exactly what specific conditions led to their birth either.

If Iris knew those conditions, they figured she had to be a pretty incredible mage herself, just like Zelos.

Fortunately, Iris's capabilities still fell within the realm of what Lena and Jeanne considered conventional. She wasn't as absurd as Zelos.

They didn't even *want* to imagine an enemy that could force a mage on Zelos's level to go all out.

Explosion after explosion continued to echo out from within the ruins.

*

Zelos was in the middle of fighting a demon.

Even dilapidated as they were, the ruins of Isa Lante remained beautiful. But now, in one area of the city, a violent tempest of magic had laid waste to the city's streets, reducing them to rubble.

And the culprit—having devastated city and demon alike—was a mage in a jet-black robe, standing among the rubble he'd created.

So the demon's still alive, eh? Tough one, isn't it? Bloody thing's convinced it's some kind of big shot...

This demon, apparently, was called "Buer," but Zelos still didn't know what that signified.

His Appraisal skill seemed to be on the fritz; it refused to give him any info on the demon. The thing sure was temperamental, for a skill.

Zelos still didn't completely understand the norms of the society he'd reincarnated in; it only made sense that he'd be clueless about the norms of an *ancient* society. All the era's wisdom and knowledge

had long since been lost to history.

More importantly, though, the demon Zelos had been beating up this whole time was still alive.

He'd pummeled away with attack after attack to weaken it, but he could tell from the lingering mana that he hadn't managed to exterminate it just yet.

The problem was that he didn't know where it was lurking now. The huge barrage of magic attacks he'd fired at the demon had dispersed its mana, so he couldn't detect its presence through mana alone anymore.

Hmm... I wonder if it'd be quicker to just purify this whole area?

Given how devastated this part of the city was by now, he didn't see any point in holding back. It couldn't get any *worse*.

But just as the thought spurred Zelos to cast some purification magic, a terrible *pressure* assailed his body.

"*G-GAAAKH!*"

"*Hah hah...* You let your guard down, *worm*!"

"*Ngh*— You dematerialized?! I didn't even know demons could— No... Faeries can do it, so it makes sense that demons ca— *GWAAAAAARGH!*"

The demon had temporarily dematerialized, waiting for an opening—and then, as soon as that opening had presented itself, the demon had rematerialized and transformed into a horned snake, coiling itself around Zelos.

That was the source of the terrible pressure now crushing him.

"I shall squeeze you to death... And then I shall *devour* your soul!"

"*K-Kah... Kah hah...* What an *idiot*..."

"What?"

"You're finished... *Shining Nova!!!*"

The demon had forgotten: Zelos was willing to unleash magic attacks even if he'd get caught up in them himself.

Anyone able to shrug off such powerful magic was a real threat in battle. After all, their durability meant they'd be able to fire off a barrage of magic attacks within enemy lines. There was no more devastating tactic than that.

The demon really should've been more careful—Zelos had used the same tactic against it once already. But this was its first time fighting an opponent stronger than itself. Zelos, on the other hand, had fought countless strong foes back in *Swords & Sorceries*.

"*GWAAAAAARGH!*"

A flood of light engulfed both Zelos and the demon.

As the light faded, only one figure remained: a mage in a jet-black robe.

"Well, *that* was a tough one. Had to go with the good ol' suicide-bombing approach with a proxy doll and a substitution doll..."

Gankers in the game had often used that approach, performing what was effectively a suicide bombing while keeping themselves safe with items that nullified attacks. Zelos and the other Destroyers, in turn, had adopted the same method to counter it.

Of course, the gankers they'd used it on had defensive items themselves, so ultimately, they had turned into back-and-forth suicide-bombing contests. Whoever had more defensive items would end up winning—and win or lose, both parties would take a big hit to their wallets.

"Mmm... Guess I should take a look at the central mana spot now? Urgh, what a pain..."

Seeing as a demon really *had* been born here, Zelos figured there had to be a whole lot of dead bodies in the city's center too. He'd have to purify the place from top to bottom, otherwise undead would start spawning all over again.

Just as he went to stop grumbling and take his first step forward, he saw the demon's black horns on the ground.

Very rarely, part of a mana-based life-form could drop as an item. Usually, life-forms like that were supposed to completely disperse into nature's mana, but their mana could sometimes coalesce and remain nonetheless.

Items like this could be affixed to weapons or armor as crafting materials to provide a special effect.

And demons' horns and claws, in particular, were pretty famous for being excellent at strengthening weapons.

"Hmm... I guess it was something like a demon general, then?"

With the demon’s horns and magic stone in hand, Zelos headed back inside the consulate.

From there, he made his way to the central part of the city, where the mana pool would be, exterminating plenty more wraiths along the way.

Just like that, the streets of Isa Lante were completely purified. But Zelos was unaware: The reactivation of the ancient city’s functionality had already begun causing an uproar around the world.

The Great Sage was a free spirit—*too* free, perhaps.

Chapter 8: The Old Guy Screws Up Again

Four days after Zelos's duel with the demon, an army company dispatched at the order of Duke Delthasis arrived at the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz.

Historians who'd come with the army thoroughly examined the city—and judging by all the skeletal remains scattered across its downtown, the historians determined the inhabitants of these ruins must have been completely sealed off from the outside world and starved to death.

They'd probably been trapped by a cave-in and had run out of food while they were waiting for rescue. Then, from what the historians could tell, a riot had occurred, killing the local lord.

The people, famished, had been forced to eat the dead to survive. And eventually, they'd started killing each other.

In turn, every last one of them had died, leaving nothing but a city of the dead.

The miasma filling the city had then turned the dead into *un*dead. That was nothing but the academic theory, mind you...but it probably wasn't too far off the truth.

Zelos had reached the same conclusion himself.

Within about a week, the knights started collecting magic tools and jewelry from throughout the city, and the construction workers began building the deepway out from the north gate on the other side of Isa Lante. They were eager to make up for lost time on the deepway construction project.

Most of the jewels found in Isa Lante were cursed, and even those that *weren't* cursed were probably contaminated with miasma. It was a similar story for the magic tools the knights found. Mages wouldn't be able to study them in this state. They'd need to get

some priests to help purify them all first.

Even the most talented priest, however, probably wouldn't have been able to purify this absolute mountain of cursed jewelry and magic tools all at once. Not to mention, it would be a bad idea—politically speaking—to ask the priests for help with this right now.

It was turning into a real nuisance.

Creston, who'd come to take part in the inspection of the ruins himself, was discussing the issue with Zelos.

"So... There you have it. Is there nothing you could do for us, my good Sir Zelos?"

"It's not like there's *nothing*, but...that's quite a lot, don't you think? Anyway, I'm surprised to see you come all the way down here yourself, Mr. Creston."

"Well, this *is* an active ancient city we are talking about! I could not help but abandon my work and— *Ahem!* I have always been fascinated by research into antiquity, so I decided to take part in the investigation."

The old guy's surprisingly proactive when he wants to be, huh...?

Creston might have been retired by now, but he still had duties as a member of a ducal family.

So if he'd gone so far as to shirk those duties to come here, it meant either he thought it was just that important, or he'd simply let his curiosity get the better of him.

Regardless, if the cursed items weren't purified here and now, any expenses from dealing with them would fall on the ducal house's shoulders. And there were a *lot* of them, so even if the ducal house was to ignore the political concerns and hire priests to purify them, the priests would request a hefty sum of money.

In addition, bringing priests into this city would mean giving away all sorts of information—something that was probably best avoided. Not to mention the risk of the priests finding some sort of excuse to seize the items for themselves...

To sum it up, the Great Sage here was the ducal house's last ray of hope.

For that reason, masses of magic tools were being carried into the control room, which Zelos had just been examining out of simple

curiosity. Now, he was being asked to both purify and appraise them.

But as you might have expected, even Zelos wasn't keen on investigating every last one of these tools.

Unfortunately, none of them really piqued his interest.

"I have some purification crystals here," he offered. "Would you like to use those?"

"Why, I have never *heard* of such a crystal before... Is it some subcategory of magic crystal, perhaps?"

"Something like that, I suppose. They're disposable, mind you—one use only. They were originally made as self-defense items for when you're surrounded by hordes of undead; they've got powerful purification magic inside. Just activate one, and *boom*, there you go. Ah, don't worry—they don't cause any harm to humans."

"Hmm... Now you have me more interested in these crystals of yours than in anything else. I shall take you up on your offer!"

Zelos took a handful of crystals out from his inventory and handed them to Creston.

These crystals had originally been invented from a failed attempt to artificially make explosion crystals, a rare find in mines and the like. As the name implied, they caused a huge explosion upon impact. They were one of the causes of mining accidents in this world. But they also had their uses: If you carefully shaved away at them, you'd get a fine powder that could be used in place of gunpowder.

It'd be fair, then, to call them a naturally derived gunpowder. There weren't many explosion crystals in the world, though, so using them in guns and other weapons wasn't profitable. People were better off making regular gunpowder.

People had tried to create artificial explosion crystals through trial and error but had ended up making brittle crystals with no attributes at all. In addition, the reagents needed to make these crystals were expensive and rare. Since these experiments only ever ended up making disposable items that could store magic, it never made commercial sense.

One day, it just so happened that the undead in *Swords &*

Sorceries had launched a massive attack, and Kemo Luvyune had suggested infusing purification magic into the brittle crystals. "Toss them like hand grenades!" he'd said. That was the story behind the purification crystals.

Fortunately, these artificial crystals could store a lot of magic, allowing them to hold highly powerful spells. But that was about *all* they were good for. And the crafting success rate was incredibly low.

"Well, then, I suppose I shall give one a try. *Hah!*"

Creston released the magic stored inside the purification crystal and tossed it at a haphazard pile of magic tools. Despite the size of the pile, it was only a fraction of what had been carried back here.

WhOoOoOoOoOoOoOo!

Pained, resentful voices that sounded like something from the deepest levels of hell flooded the room.

It seemed like the purification had worked, at least.

"Just how much hatred was crammed into that pile of stuff?" Zelos mused.

"You ask as if I would have the faintest idea! Well, one way or another, the mages should now be able to investigate these tools to their hearts' content. Now...let me ask. Sir Zelos, what have *you* been doing with your time here?"

"I've been taking a look at the city's control functions. I figure it'd be best to at least get a general idea of how they work before some clueless mage starts fiddling with them."

The underground control facilities were split into several sections, one of which Zelos and Creston were currently standing in—the city's defense control system.

It seemed to be linked to the system for maintaining the underground city's environment, which Zelos had discovered controlled things like air temperature, ventilation, and even artificial weather.

This civilization really *had* been advanced, by the looks of it. Enough to make Zelos tremble at the thought of the Dark God, who had been able to destroy the city of such a civilization with but a single attack.

Honestly, I'm amazed the Dark God even managed to wipe out a

civilization like this. It must've been crazy *strong.*

It seemed like all the ancient relics ran on mana, but their programs, systems, and so on seemed at least on par with Earth's. The systems here were operated differently—they used a different language, for starters—but Zelos's Automatic Translation skill allowed for smooth operation.

As Zelos tapped away at the console, he gradually started to figure out the control functions.

"I'm amazed anyone was able to seal away the Dark God in the first place... I have no idea how they could've won given how strong it was. I mean, it wiped out an advanced civilization like it was nothing. Surely there would've been no way..."

"And yet, defeat it the heroes did—with their lives on the line. An admirable story, is it not?"

"I'm not so sure... I mean, Metis pretty much just blackmailed them and forced them to obey, right? And told them something like, 'If you want to get back to your own world, go and defeat the Dark God first'... It's not exactly nice stuff. The heroes would've had families back in their original world."

"Oh, so pessimistic... Though I suppose I *could* see Metis doing something of the sort. Especially given the frequency with which they've continued summoning heroes even after the war."

Summoning heroes required a vast amount of mana.

The Holy Land of Metis would collect mana for thirty years, then use it to open a rift in space-time and summon the heroes.

But opening up that hole in space-time consumed a huge amount of mana—and, Zelos thought, that mana probably didn't dissipate back throughout the world.

The summoning process connected one world to an entirely separate one, after all. Sure, it might be done to bring the summoning targets to *this* world, but there was no guarantee that every world *had* mana. That much was true for the world Zelos came from, at least; no mana there.

The mana was used to open a hole, maintain that hole, and create the pathway they could use to drag heroes from another world to this one. That alone would probably consume a huge

amount of mana. Not to mention the possibility of mana leaking through to the other world when the hole was opened...

It was nothing like regular magic, which merely transformed nature's mana into phenomena for a period of time.

Zelos was trying to puzzle out what might happen if a process like that was repeated every thirty years.

"Mind you," he said, "that's just a hypothesis. But I have my suspicions, so I'd like to prevent Metis from summoning any more heroes. I can't bear the thought of people being dragged over here by those shady-ass 'Four Gods' and forced to do their bidding."

"Is hero summoning truly so dangerous? Why, this is the first time I have even heard such a theory!"

"Oh, absolutely. In the worst-case scenario, this world could even destroy the other worlds around it. It's still only a possibility, of course, but I don't want to leave it until it's too late to do anything about it. Threats like that should be dealt with as soon as possible."

"I suppose you have a point... Now that I'm thinking about it, 'tis quite the mysterious technique. No one can even say how it works. Besides, this may be the perfect stake to drive into Metis. Eliminating uncertainty is a core tenet of leadership."

Zelos wasn't messing around today.

Even as he discussed matters with Creston, he wasn't taking his eyes off the ancient magic civilization's monitor.

Trying to figure out the broader picture, he tapped away at keys, carefully examined the system, and followed words as they danced across the screen. The more time he spent, the more he came to understand the system.

Along the way, he found out more and more about the ancient magic civilization.

WHOA... They even had man-made satellites?! What is up *with this civilization? The Dark God War must've really been apocalyptic, for all this to be gone. The technology here's just crazy...*

With every new piece of information Zelos deciphered, he got a clearer understanding of the fallen civilization, whether he wanted to or not.

This civilization had been equivalent to twenty-first-century Earth

on a technological level. It had continued to progress right up until its fall.

Despite its advanced technology, its government had been a blend of monarchy and democracy. In Earth terms, it wasn't too far from England.

The civilization seemed to have been antagonistic with the beastfolk due to religious reasons, and it had taken them as slaves under a paternalistic doctrine that saw them as a people in need of salvation.

The beastfolk, in kind, had been living lifestyles akin to those of the native people of Africa or the Amazon.

While the beastfolk hadn't been as good at magic as humans, they'd been powerful soldiers, making them formidable in battle. The ancient society had assured the beastfolk that they would be taken as slaves only as a means of assimilating them into their civilization, but the beastfolk had heavily resisted.

An endless series of skirmishes had erupted as a result.

"Looks like they'd been working toward...well, I'm not sure whether to call it a unified nation, a multiethnic one, or something else, but one way or another, it was some kind of futuristic civilization with lots of different races. It seems their religious opposition and conflict were only with the beastfolk; they got along pretty well with all the other races, by the looks of it."

"Fascinating. To think you would even manage to decipher the ancient world's society... It sounds like a more advanced civilization than our own, eh? Why, I wish a certain theocracy would learn a thing or two from them..."

"In terms of their culture, it was probably about as advanced as the world the heroes summoned three years ago came from. Or...maybe beyond that, I suppose, if you consider their technology. I thought they would've had some crazy politics, but for the most part, they seem to have had a pretty big thing for civil liberties... Huh. What's this?"

Zelos had spotted something interesting on the monitor: a "dragon vein surveillance system."

He activated the system without much thought, and the monitor

displayed the state of the mana flowing through the world, with lines representing vast channels of mana that circulated underground.

These dragon veins, as surveyed by man-made satellites, were a complex network of lines that almost resembled the skin of a melon.

Zelos was also rather curious about the holes dotted around, which looked as if a bug had eaten through the map...

"Hey, control system. Give me some information on the present-day flow of the dragon veins. Just for places that are inhabited."

"*Understood. Dragon veins are stable, but abnormal mana stagnation has been identified in one location. Likely a result of artificial intervention.*"

"Can you show me where? I want to figure out what's going on."

"*Understood. Sending an aerial view to the monitor.*"

"Wh-Why, this is Maha Luthert! So this technology can show an aerial view of Metis? What fearsome power..."

Creston was shocked by the image, but Zelos's eye was drawn to something else.

There was a building that looked like an enormous temple—and within it, a point where mana seemed to be concentrated.

This was probably where Metis summoned its heroes.

Zelos also couldn't help but wonder about the holes all over the map of the planet.

"What are these holes?" he asked the machine. "The ones that look like a bug got to them."

"*The world is currently losing mana at a rapid rate. These holes indicate dragon dens where mana density has significantly declined. Based on analysis, these locations are presumed to have been completely drained of mana for more than two thousand years. Projection: approximately one thousand five hundred years remain until mana runs out.*"

"Let's say a huge amount of mana gets consumed from those high-density mana spots once every thirty years. Can you identify any one location that might be causing that?"

"*Calculating... Given the current rate of mana consumption, and the premise that mana is consumed once every thirty years, there is an eighty-three percent chance that the cause is located at the*

following coordinates. Searching... Unnatural mana pool identified approximately ten meters below the displayed building. Forced mana supply to this pool is ongoing. Location likely contains an apparatus to gather mana from the natural world."

Zelos felt a shiver run down his spine as he realized his bad feeling had probably been on the mark.

"So right around the middle of the temple, eh?" He steeled himself for his next question. "Hypothetically, if the world *did* keep losing all that mana, what would happen?"

"*Complete mana exhaustion would cause the extinction of virtually all life-forms with mana in their bodies. Resulting climate change would deal catastrophic damage to natural ecosystems. Estimate: Rejuvenation would require four hundred and sixty thousand years.*"

"That settles it: Summoning heroes is destroying the world. The world's losing all its mana, and fast..."

"Wh-*What* did you just say?!"

The story Zelos had made up off the top of his head and blurted out to the heroes had actually been right—and the situation was critical.

Zelos felt a cold sweat run down his brow. Inside, he was in hysterics: *What's going on here? Am I being punished or something?! I was just making that whole thing up! What do you mean it's* true*?!* If there were any gods here now, he thought, he would've loved to complain right to their faces.

This was no laughing matter.

"I-Is there anything you can do?!" Creston panicked. "It... It truly said the world would run out of mana and fall to ruin?"

"Dunno if I'm the one you should be asking. Metis is the one that needs to act. Still, at this point, I don't think telling Metis 'stop summoning heroes, right now!' would amount to much. The priests would never believe a mage anyway..."

There was no way the priests would look kindly on a mage trying to untangle the mysteries of nature.

In fact, they were probably convinced the world's mana was infinite.

Mana played an important role in this world, impacting everything from the growth of plants to the climate balance.

So if that mana disappeared, the global environment would change dramatically, and not for the better.

The world could even become one enormous desert.

"Would it be possible to intentionally change the flow of mana in this region?" Zelos asked the system. "Specifically, to stop mana from flowing to that particular facility..."

"*Searching... Confirmation: Requested course of action is possible. Current flow is determined to be the result of human interference. Full activation of other cities' functionality would enable a link to other facilities and subsequent cooperation to restore the flow of the dragon veins to their original state. Restore original dragon vein flow?*"

"Do it. Let's deal a big blow to those messed-up bastards... Justice is at hand!"

"*Understood. Conducting command search... Activating code 'Judgment.' Removing safety locks. Launching defense system. Enemy target: site D143125. Locking coordinates. Activating orbital strike satellite Metatron.*"

"*WHAT?!*"

Zelos had given his command without really thinking about it, but it seemed to have activated some insane military protocol.

Both he and Creston were left dumbstruck, unable to do anything but watch as the program proceeded from one phase to another.

"*Commencing connection of all magic cities. ERROR: Unable to connect to central control system. Transferring main system to current location. Opening forced connection to magic power reactor. Activating Dragon Heart. Commencing synchronization... Commencing alignment and movement of dragon veins. Commencing mana alignment. Launching dragon vein interference sequence in: five, four, three, two, one...*"

Suddenly, large-scale tremors shook the earth.

RUMBLERUMBLERUMBLE...

The quake must have been at least a 6.0 on the Richter scale.

Then came the aftershocks, which continued for a full twenty

minutes.

"*Confirmed relocation and stability of dragon veins. Releasing alignment mechanism. Activating ultimate weapon: Seraphim Burst. Moving to launch sequence. Confirmed program activation. Launch sequence, standby.*"

"U-Uh... I feel like this is getting out of hand..."

"Y-Yes... This is concerning, to say the least..."

A sense of disquiet ran through the air.

Zelos had nothing but bad feelings about this.

"Control system: What the hell is a 'Seraphim Burst'?!"

"*Seraphim Burst: a decisive air-to-ground weapon. Focuses sunlight from satellite orbit to project a high-output laser. Estimated casualties around site of impact—*"

"Wait! Wait! Stop! This is crazy! Call it off!"

"*Unable to cancel sequence once activated. However, power can be adjusted. Adjust power?*"

"Set the power to minimum! I only want to shoot through that one building!"

"*Understood. Limiting power to ten percent. Commencing energy charge. Forming gravity distortion field. Confirmed sunlight convergence. Launch preparations complete. Target locked. Countdown: five, four, three, two, one... Launching.*"

Zelos and Creston peeped at the monitor and saw the Grand Temple enveloped by light.

They could do nothing but watch, pale-faced and dumbfounded.

"*Confirmed impact of Seraphim Burst. Returning to standby mode.*"

Between the sheer scale of the damage and the system voice sounding as monotone as always in spite of it all, the two of them didn't know what to say.

They were too preoccupied with a crushing sense of guilt.



They could do nothing but stare, wordless, at the apocalyptic scene displayed on the monitor.

One way or another, Metis wouldn't be summoning any more heroes with its central facility so badly damaged.

Zelos and Creston had achieved their goal, then. Though this wasn't *quite* what Zelos had had in mind...

Accidents were scary things—Zelos had messed around with an ancient magic civilization's technology, only to find out too late he'd bitten off more than he could chew.

"Th-This is straight out of *Independence Day*..."

That was all that managed to escape Zelos's lips.

The way the column of light had descended and blown up the building like it was nothing was, indeed, just like a scene out of a certain movie.

Whether today would *truly* bring independence remained to be seen.

*

Maha Luthert was the holy city of the Holy Land of Metis.

And at the very center of the city was the Grand Temple of Malthander.

It was not only the holy cradle of the Four Gods, but it also served as the center of the Metis government.

But that wasn't *all* the temple was here for.

Directly underneath the chapel at the center of the temple was a cavern.

Formulas of some strange script, not magic letters, were carved into the entirety of the cavern's ceiling and walls, and the room was gradually accumulating an enormous amount of mana. In a little under thirty years, it would serve its true purpose:

Summoning heroes.

"Is the mana stable?"

"Based on our records, the current figures are adequate. The summoning sigil is gathering mana at the usual rate."

"It's taking too long. Should we use sacrifices again? They don't

help much, but it's better than nothing."

"Not enough heretics lately. Haven't been able to get our hands on enough beastfolk either. And we can't force the accumulation of additional mana. There's no telling *what* could happen if we try."

The summoning sigil was a terribly unstable thing.

Its accumulation of mana was inconsistent, and sometimes it'd just stop collecting mana.

The formula was very delicate, so even the slightest counterflow of mana could cause it to stop working. It was flawed like that.

Nonetheless, numerous priests managed this place, diligently ensuring the sigil kept collecting mana.

The floor of the room was stained black—proof of the deaths of those sacrificed over the years to help summon the heroes. Most of them had been serious criminals, but over time, Metis had killed many beastfolk here as well.

Much of the cause came down to the country's exclusion of mages.

Originally, mages had managed this summoning sigil. But one day, those who hadn't looked kindly on mages being in such an important part of the theocracy had revolted—and once they'd gained power for themselves, they'd erased both a great many mages and their documentation.

It had all stemmed from a shortsighted outlook—"We just need to be able to summon the heroes, and we can do that without mages. We'll be fine!" The problem was that the priests had also disposed of all the research materials detailing how to maintain the summoning sigil.

Through a long process of trial and error, they'd devised their own solution: *sacrifices*.

Sigils didn't really have anything to do with sacrifices in the first place, but all those who'd made it into power had zero understanding of magic. It only made sense, then, that they would conflate summoning with evil rituals.

And as a result, countless beastfolk, criminals, and even wrongly accused innocents had been killed here in the name of "sacrifice."

The truth, however, was that heroes would be automatically

summoned once every thirty years, sacrifices or not.

But the problem ran deeper than that. With no mages to maintain it, the summoning system was effectively left with no one to tend to its upkeep. Then, throughout the years, it was used to continue summonings that threatened to destroy the entire world. It was a complete man-made calamity, brought about by ignorance and greed.

With no mages left to maintain the system, the priests had tried frantically to research it themselves, but the scant remaining documentation wasn't enough for them to reach a proper understanding of the hero summoning sigil.

And so, the priests had carried out countless cycles of trial and error, sacrifices and all.

They were fortunate that they'd even found *some* of the control mechanisms from the few writings that hadn't been disposed of.

And when the mana in the summoning sigil reached criticality, the priests all came together to perform a holy ritual.

But the fact that the heroes were summoned by that ritual had led them to a huge misunderstanding.

With the heroes being summoned before their eyes, the priests were fooled into believing that their ritual was correct, giving them complete faith in the belief that the summoning process entailed nothing more than collecting sufficient mana and performing the ritual.

They also came to the mistaken belief that their sacrifice rituals helped gather mana—leading them to kill swathes of heretics and demihumans for nothing. There was no telling how many lives had been lost as a result of their misunderstanding.

That was the real truth, though the priests would probably have been too stubborn to acknowledge it, even if they learned it for themselves.

"Head Priest Avornal. Give me a status update."

"A-Archbishop Eltorca?! It's as we expected—the problem seems to be that the sigil isn't collecting enough mana. We've tried sacrifices, but they've had a negligible effect at best."

"Now, now. Speak not of such ghastly things. All of them were

devoted to the faith, yes? Devout followers, to the last, who have gone to be with the Gods. It is nothing to be spoken of in such brutish terms."

"M-My apologies. Whatever the case, I doubt we can carry out another summoning just yet."

"That is most alarming. Only half the heroes remain. And it would seem there are unsavory figures out there, secretly filling the heroes' heads with things they need not know."

The archbishop was talking about the Sage—or Sages, as it were. They were on the move now, trying to cause the fall of the Holy Land of Metis.

They were mages, at the end of the day, so they would ultimately face the wrath of the gods—or so the priests believed. But their power far outstripped that of the heroes, and the priests were aware that they wouldn't be getting off easily if they made enemies of such individuals.

At the same time, they could hardly negotiate with anyone who showed contempt for the gods—even if they were a Sage.

"Additional mana can be gathered by force if we must, correct? Considering the worst-case scenario, we may have to at least consider such an option."

"B-But..."

The archbishop was talking about a last resort that the priests had just barely been able to glean from the remaining literature.

The summoning sigil could forcibly collect extra mana when absolutely necessary.

Doing so had a significant impact, though: Even a single use of that ability would rob the surrounding area of all its mana.

It was so risky that the area was liable to become a barren wasteland, no longer able to support any kind of life.

"Yes, I am aware it is a last resort. But it is one we may need to consider all the same."

"But usurping the mana like that would... It would kill the residents of the city, no?"

"What will be will be. Any blame will lie at the feet of the heroes for being so incompetent."

It was a terrible way to talk about teenagers summoned to this world against their will. These people, however, could justify *anything* to themselves by claiming it was their gods' will.

They seriously believed they were never wrong, even when they treated the heroes as disposable.

At least...that *had* been the case. Up until right now.

Up until the earthquake hit.

RUMBLERUMBLERUMBLE...

Earthquakes were unprecedented here. The priests, unfamiliar with them, fell to the floor, unable to withstand the sudden tremors. They could only interpret it as the gods' rage.

"Wh-What *is* this shaking...?"

"Might this be the will of the Gods? Telling us we must not use our last resort..."

"What a foolish suggestion. We are the disciples of the Gods! Who would dare to—"

"Wait! The summoning sigil has stopped working. The mana seems to be flowing somewhere else. There's nothing like this in the records!"

"What ridiculous... Find the cause at once! If we cannot summon heroes, our future is—"

The priests were in a panic.

But try as they might to determine the issue, they had no chance. They didn't even understand how the summoning sigil worked.

It was from ancient times, after all, and they'd operated it all this time without any real knowledge of it. Of *course* they found it impossible to determine the cause. At this rate, they were at risk of all being purged as offenders.

Then, right in front of the panicked priests, a ray of light pierced through the ceiling and struck the summoning sigil.

"O Gods... A-Are you telling us we have been mistaken this whole time? That we— *AAAAAAHHH...*"

In an instant, they were engulfed by the light.

The proceeding shock wave laid waste to the Malthander Grand Temple.

Just like that, the summoning sigil had disappeared from this

world, and a great many priests with it...

*

Mikhailov Welsapio Macriel, the seventh Cloistered Emperor of the Holy Land of Metis, was away from the Grand Temple of Malthander on official business.

He was inside an impressively decorated, stately carriage, where he was busy getting *very* intimate with two girls. Here was a man who'd reached his position through swindling and the power of money, and he didn't care about the teachings of the gods in the slightest.

The Four Gods accepted him all the same. In fact, they'd specifically sanctioned him to use his authority however he saw fit.

Personally, Mikhailov had no qualms serving *any* deity if it was in his best interest. Four Gods, Dark God—it didn't matter to him.

In public, he played the part of an upright clergyman—but behind closed doors, his hands were stained with blood and sin.

"Look at the two of you, writhing in pleasure—and yet you call yourselves saints! My, my; what is the world coming to?"

"*Mmm... Ah!* ♡ Your Holiness! N-Not there..."

"No fair! Pay some more attention t— *Aah! Mmf...*"

Mikhailov had more sex drive than you'd have expected from a man his age.

Even as he'd grown old, he'd clung to power, and his lust had remained as strong as always.

Everyone aged and died eventually. Such was nature; there was no getting around it. Mikhailov, aware of that, wanted to leave his mark on history. He wanted to be revered forevermore as the greatest man to ever live. Recently, however, a slight issue had jeopardized his ambitions—an issue in the form of a Sage.

"Why would a Sage appear now, of all times...? No. I shall allow no interference with my plans. *Whoever* it may come from!"

"*Mmm-aaaaaah!* You're being so *rough*, Your Holiness! ♡"

"No! ♡ I-I'm about to—"

As Mikhailov indulged in the girls' bodies, he *plotted*.

Sages were figures who'd guided the heroes in the famous epics of old. People considered them to have far more authority than even the Cloistered Emperor. And now, it seemed, one such Sage had appeared, seen through everything, and begun standing up to the Faith of the Four Gods.

If that were allowed to continue, it would be on the public to decide who was truly in the right—the Sage, or the Cloistered Emperor. The process would expose the latter's deeds to scrutiny, which would make it difficult for him to keep working with underworld figures as he'd done up until now.

Among those figures, the most prominent were the Crimson Cabal. They were fanatics, always willing to shed blood in the name of the gods, and they were emboldened by Mikhailov's promises of divine pardon.

Their zealous actions had drawn complaints from countless priests, but to Mikhailov, they were the perfect pawns. They weren't even afraid of death.

Now that a Sage had appeared, however, Mikhailov would have to limit his contact with the Cabal. The Sage had deemed the Faith of the Four Gods an enemy of the world—and he'd appeared in battle against them, apparently indifferent to the differences between races.

With how things were going, Mikhailov would need to summon more heroes.

Accumulating enough mana to summon heroes took thirty years, though. That was too long. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before the veil was torn off and the masses started seeing Metis not as the Holy Land, but as a land devoted to a religion of *evil*.

"What do they mean, 'Sage'?! He's just some filthy *mage*! And I shall *not* allow him to interfere! My name *will* go down in history!"

Gone was the dignity of the Cloistered Emperor. This greedy man was a slave to his delusions and ambitions, and he no longer cared to hide it.

He channeled his hunger on the girls in his caravan, girls who had only just gone from childhood to adulthood, ravishing them like a beast.

It was a repulsive sight, entirely unbefitting of a man at the pinnacle of the clergy.

But he was too obsessed with leaving his mark on history to care.

He might well have been the perfect example of just how wretched mankind could be.

And now would come the moment that sealed his fate.

Just as the gate to the Grand Temple of Malthander came into sight—

RUMBLERUMBLERUMBLE...

Without warning, the ground started violently shaking from side to side.

"Wh-What in the—"

"*Aaaaaaaaah!*"

"A-An earthquake?!"

Mikhailov's carriage careened out of control and toppled onto its side, bringing it to an abrupt stop.

Having been right in the middle of a tryst, it took some time for Mikhailov to tidy up his disheveled robes. But when he eventually crawled out of the toppled carriage, he saw that the beautiful temple grounds had been completely reduced to rubble.

The Temple's plaza was enclosed by brick walls and wooden colonnades supporting a series of multilevel structures; it had never been made to withstand an earthquake. As a result, most of the buildings in the district had collapsed, burying many citizens under the rubble.

This was an unprecedented disaster.

"Wh-What is this madness? What could possibly have caused this?"

Earthquakes and other natural disasters had never happened in Metis before. Consequently, its citizens didn't know what they entailed. They knew earthquakes existed in nature, but they were clueless about the sort of damage that a major earthquake could cause.

Mikhailov had made a miscalculation.

The people of Maha Luthert trusted the Cloistered Emperor. So when they saw him emerge from the carriage, they all rushed to his

side, begging for aid.

"Your Holiness! My wife! She's— She's under that rubble!"

"Please, help! My child! My child is—"

"I'm beggin' ya! My arm's all—"

"P-Please, slow down. I do not have the capacity to help each and every—"

"You can heal people, right?! My dad's on the verge of death! Hurry up and save him! I'll do anything!"

There was no way he could calm the disorderly crowd.

They were all around him now too; he couldn't even move.

Then came the nail in the coffin.

"Wh-What... What's *that*?!"

A man in the crowd pointed to the sky.

Far above, a dazzling ray of light began to shine, brighter than the midday sun.

And before long, it shot down toward the earth like an arrow of light, piercing the clouds and then the Grand Temple of Malthander.

SHA-BOOOOOOOOOOOM!!!

The subsequent shock wave destroyed the temple. It was focused enough that the surrounding buildings escaped the brunt of the damage, though they still didn't get off unscathed.

Gradually, the shock wave spread, ravaging the city of Maha Luthert.

It would likely be impossible to use the place as a temple ever again.

That was just how thoroughly the Grand Temple—the symbol of the Faith of the Four Gods—had been reduced to ruin.

"Th-The Arrow of Judgment?! This cannot be! O, Four Gods, why..."

The Four Gods were supposed to have given Mikhailov free rein.

But based on what had just happened, either the Four Gods had betrayed him or he had done something to incur their wrath. Those were the only two possibilities he could think of.

Whatever the case, it had mired him in a difficult situation he had no way of escaping.

The people of Maha Luthert, meanwhile, were all devout believers

of the Faith of the Four Gods. But the tragedy that had just unfolded before their very eyes seemed far too cruel to be interpreted as a *test*.

"*No...* The Four Gods are angry..."

"Why have you done this, O Four? All this time, we've followed your teachings..."

"Why would you turn your wrath toward those as pious as ourselves? Even if this is all a trial, it seems far too..."

At this rate, they'd inevitably lose their faith.

Grrr... I cannot allow this to continue. If it does, the Faith itself may be in peril...

When Mikhailov had become Cloistered Emperor, his predecessor had told him of a certain truth.

His whole life, he had never been allowed to utter it to another soul. It was such a momentous secret that, if he handled it poorly, it could spell the end of the Faith.

Specifically, he'd been told the Four Gods weren't true gods at all, but rather mere proxies. That meant the deity who was *supposed* to be managing this world was somewhere else.

And now, it seemed, the original god had passed judgment, destroying the center of the Faith of the Four Gods. If the attack *was* the judgment of some new, *true* god, then mere proxies stood no chance against it.

There was also the fact that a Sage had recently helped the beastfolk deliver a crushing defeat to the Order of Paladins. Perhaps drawing a connection to what had just happened was too hasty, but it was another point of concern.

If Metis assembled enough of a fighting force, it would probably still be able to oppose the beastfolk. But it couldn't simply ignore the appearance of some unknown new god. Mikhailov was growing panicked, and fast.

I must defeat them... I must defeat this new god and this Sage! We must summon more heroes at once!

Driven by a sense of impatience—a need to deal with this threat that had destroyed the symbolic Grand Temple and cast a shadow over his ambitions—Mikhailov healed the people as quickly as he

could, then rushed to the spot underneath the temple.

But when he arrived, he saw immediately that the summoning sigil—his one and only tool to summon the heroes who would be his weapons in killing this new god—had been utterly razed.

That day, the Faith of the Four Gods lost its ability to summon heroes.

*

Zelos and Creston stared at the temple's destruction from satellite orbit through a screen, speechless.

Their minds had yet to process the terrible firepower they'd just witnessed.

H-How on Earth did the Dark God wipe these guys out?! With this level of firepower, surely they should've been able to do something*, right...?*

Zelos's mind raced through irrelevant questions in an attempt to escape reality.

That was just how terrifying the cold, hard truth in front of his eyes was.

"W-Well, for now, I...guess we've made sure the world won't fall to ruin?" Zelos tentatively said. "I mean, they shouldn't be able to summon any more heroes..." He laughed nervously.

"Qu-Quite right. Though we must never speak of this to others... The casualties are simply far too great."

The laser had fired at just ten percent of its maximum output, yet it had blown up the center of a megacity.

Zelos was convinced: A weapon this oppressive should not exist in this world. And he still couldn't get his mind off the same nagging question: *How did the ancient people lose to the Dark God?*

He did his best to set that thought aside and focus on the more pressing problem: If this incident were discovered and investigated, he wouldn't be able to explain himself with a shrug and an, "Oopsie-whoopsie! I was just trying to stop Metis from summoning heroes, but I accidentally flattened the center of their capital! My bad! ♡"

That kind of admission would definitely spark a war with the Holy

Land of Metis. In the worst case, other countries could get involved too, leading to a horrific conflict centered around this weapon of destruction.

It was no laughing matter.

"This is, uh... It's a bit of a mess, isn't it?"

"Indeed... And if an investigator down here activates the system by accident, next time could be even worse."

But just as Creston was worrying about that, an announcement came from the system:

"*WARNING: System error identified in orbital strike satellite Metatron. Detail: Excessive strain on drive unit, assumed to be caused by deterioration. Moving to dispose of Metatron. Exploding satellite in remote location.*"

"Whew..." Zelos wiped the sweat from his brow. "Well, it seems like we don't have to worry about anyone going to war over this thing anymore!"

"I would be overjoyed if that were the case, but...could there not be others just like it somewhere else?"

"*Transferring Metatron's defense duties to Sandalphon. Sandalphon will be on standby. Note: Sandalphon is not fitted with Seraphim Burst.*"

"Sounds like the new one's just a regular military satellite. Glad *this* one doesn't have some superweapon fitted to it..."

"Indeed. What is misfortune for Metis may be fortune for us, but I was loath to leave that ancient weapon lying around. With it gone, we should now be able to use Isa Lante with peace of mind. Truth be told, my man, I was concerned for a moment."

Zelos and Creston felt a wave of relief wash over them.

The reveal that there would no longer be a potential doomsday device sitting around meant there was one fewer thing to worry about.

"*Transferring air-to-ground strike and monitoring role to new weapon: Gungnir. Please note: Launch code will be 'Time for the beginning of Ragnarok!*"

"*WHAT?!*"

They'd spoken too soon. There *was* another weapon, by the

sounds of it—and it didn't hold back on the corny naming scheme.

It seemed like the two mages would have to shoulder this burden after all.

I don't get it. Why's the satellite named after an angel when its weapon's named after Norse mythology? Besides, who came up with this launch code?! And what are they expecting some random guy like me to do with a weapon of mass destruction?!

For some reason, the name of the highest authority in the system had been registered as "Zelos."

Plus, he was fully authenticated through facial recognition. Apparently, the system had decided to do that all by itself.

There would be no more escaping reality.

The situation had become too crazy to even laugh about anymore.

"Mr. Creston! You jinxed it! Now I'll have to worry about *this* terrifying thing!"

"Why, it hardly seems like *my* fault! 'Tis merely a coincidence... Or perhaps it is your usual antics finally catching up to you?"

The system had foisted responsibility for a crazy weapon onto Zelos, and he had no idea what to do with it. He would've loved to forget about it all, but if word of this got out, it was almost guaranteed there'd be all sorts of shady groups setting their eyes on him.

Ultimately, after some discussion, Zelos and Creston decided to completely seal off this control room with a blast door so that nobody could enter it again. And the same went for the entire city center of Isa Lante, of course.

But even after deciding to bury this apocalyptic weapon down in the dark, Zelos couldn't help but worry.

It seemed entirely plausible that someone would eventually manage to find their way inside regardless, after all. Still, there was only so much Zelos could do about that...

Even just thinking about what could happen gave him a migraine.

There would be no respite for Zelos's heart just yet...

Chapter 9: No Rest for the Old Guy

In the skies above the ruined remains of the Grand Temple of Malthander, a woman surveyed the carnage with a bitter expression.

She had blue hair, good looks, and almond-shaped eyes that gave her an intellectual aura.

Her skin was covered with fabric so thin as to be sheer, unabashedly revealing her impressive body.

In short, she was beautiful. But somehow, she seemed inhuman.

Because she *was*.

None of the people running around below had noticed her presence; perhaps they physically *couldn't*. Besides, they were too busy dealing with the aftermath of the unprecedented disaster.

The living huddled near long rows of dead bodies. Some wept, others desperately searched for missing family, and others still rejoiced, having found and reunited with their loved ones.

But the woman in the sky wasn't interested in any of that.

They destroyed the summoning sigil. I suppose that's the end of our summoning heroes...

The attack that had destroyed the Grand Temple hadn't been magical in nature, so she hadn't sensed it.

In other words, it had been a *physical* attack that had dealt this fierce blow to her and her companions.

The heroes were essential to the four of them and their plans to change this world.

Now, their schemes had been foiled by some unknown player.

I've never seen an attack like this before. I felt no mana from it—nor divine power. Was it a weapon from ancient times, perhaps? Those should all have been long-lost by now, though...

"Aquilataaa~! How's it looking~?"

"Oh. Flaress..." the blue-haired woman said, unsurprised by the sudden appearance. "For starters, it doesn't seem to have been a

god. It was man-made, whatever it was."

"*Humans* did this?" said the other, a lively redhead who looked about fourteen. She hovered just behind Aquilata. "Huh. That'll be a pain to deal with~!"

"Oh, it's worse than just 'a pain.' This attack came from beyond the atmosphere—from *space*. We cannot reach the source, while they can target this place whenever they desire."

"*Whoa.* That sounds, like, the absolute *worst*! Who *did* that?"

"I doubt any of this world's humans are capable of it. They're all fools, compared to the humans of the past... The only possibilities that come to mind are a surviving hero, or a reincarnator."

The fall of an ancient, advanced civilization had brought the world's level of technology crashing down. It was hard to imagine the world's current civilizations being capable of operating those ancient technologies. That meant it had to have been a hero or a reincarnator.

"*THEM?!* But, like... I'd get it if it were a hero, but why would a reincarnator go after this place? We totally saved their lives, right?!"

"Who knows? I suppose it *is* possible that they see us as enemies. And...surely not, but there may even be some god from their world giving them orders."

"How *dare* they mess with our world! I say we kill all the reincarnators! Every one of 'em!"

"I doubt it'd be that easy. They're stronger than we are. I had the gods from the other side show me some information on the reincarnators—and as it turns out, a number of them have basic stats on par with lesser gods. Remember, we were faeries once. We wouldn't stand a chance against them..."

"But *why* are they so strong?! It doesn't make any sense!"

"We shouldn't have foisted their reincarnation onto the gods from their end. It seems they've used that as an opportunity to undermine us... Those other gods are better at controlling the world than we are, so it wouldn't surprise me if they've managed to pull off some sort of plan."

As was probably clear by this point, these women—Aquilata and Flaress—were two of the Four Gods. They'd been left in charge of

managing this world, and they'd been incredibly careless and half-hearted about it. A major reason for their attitude was probably that they'd initially been faeries—faeries who'd been granted the authority and abilities of gods by the God of Creation, and who'd taken on a higher form as a result.

Consider, for a moment: What would happen if you granted the power of the gods to faeries, who were pleasure-seeking by nature?

The answer was that they would simply fiddle with the world however they pleased—and they would do nothing but feign ignorance if their actions drove the world to ruin.

They had no true ill intent. However, their rampant selfishness threatened to destroy the entire world, and they didn't care in the slightest if that caused problems for the gods of other worlds. The notion of their actions being wrong never even occurred to them.

But at the end of the day, they were no true gods. While they could meddle with the world to a limited extent, they couldn't interfere with things like other gods could. To top it off, they couldn't go into outer space.

Subsequently, they had no way of knowing what was going on in the broader world. There was a system to keep gods up-to-date with that sort of thing, but they'd never used it once. Though, in their defense, they didn't even have the authority to access that system.

Given their situation, they'd been incapable of reincarnating the Dark God's victims themselves; all *they'd* really done was complete the formalities that allowed those victims to live in this world. It was the other worlds' gods that had done all the heavy lifting. Of course, that hadn't stopped the Four Gods from proclaiming themselves the victims' *saviors*...

In reality, it had gone something like this: First, the gods of Earth had come to the Four Gods saying, "You'd better reincarnate the victims who died! And look after them on your end! Remember, it's your fault any of this happened in the first place!"

The Four Gods had responded: "I mean, sure, but, like, we're not actually powerful enough to do that, y'know? Sorry, but could *you* guys reincarnate 'em for us? C'mon. We'll do the paperwork!" In short, they'd left the hard part to the real gods.

If there was one thing they were good at, it was being cunning. That much had been true even when they were faeries.

And as soon as the victims were reincarnated, the Four Gods had immediately made another stupid decision: "Hey, how about we drop 'em in the middle of somewhere dangerous! It'll be *hilarious*!"

But they could only have been reckless for so long before it came back to bite them.

And now, the Four Gods were beginning to panic about the appearance of a threat to their absolute authority.

It was the first instance of such a threat since the revival of the Dark God.

"I'm not sure how we're supposed to handle this. We can't summon heroes anymore, and even if we could, they wouldn't stand a chance against the reincarnators. There's one that seems like they could *maybe* win, but we have no clue how strong all of the reincarnators are."

"Seriously, why do the other gods keep sending us all these useless people~?! Are they stupid or something?! What're they gonna do if our world gets destroyed, huh?!"

Of course, the Four Gods were the only ones responsible for destroying the world...but they were too self-centered to realize that.

Thanks to all the hero summonings, the world was running out of mana. In the worst-case scenario, even the Four Gods could disappear from it—not that they were aware of that risk. Nor did they try to find out. Their personalities had always been rotten like this, and they hadn't thought that far.

Ultimately, as a result of their behavior, the world they managed was slowly shuffling toward its demise.

But they didn't even care about *that*. All that mattered to them was that these reincarnators were going to ruin their fun.

"We should try to find out some more about the reincarnators. Hmm... The gods from the other side taught you how to communicate with them, yes?"

"Yeah, but I've only ever done it once, y'know~? And they might not even wanna hear us out. Besides, we don't even know how

many people got sent over here, right~?”

“Yes. Urgh... I never expected that pushing everything onto the other gods or dumping the Dark God over on their side would backfire so horribly...”

“Those reincarnators should be *thanking* us for what we did! I’ll make sure to tell ’em off!”

“If you say that to their faces, you’ll die. That’s a fact.” Aquilata sighed. “If I’d known it would come to this, I would’ve asked the other gods for a list...”

At this point, the Four Gods weren’t thinking in the slightest about the heroes they’d summoned.

They didn’t consider that the surviving heroes had built up a lot of anger and might have been aiming for revenge. Being worshipped all this time had made the Four Gods grow arrogant; they completely believed they were the ultimate beings.

“Well, whether they’re heroes, reincarnators, or what have you, we can simply use other humans to crush them.”

“Yeah! Just make our servants deal with those pests! They wanna be ungrateful to us? Fine! Let’s see how ungrateful they can be once they’re *dead*!”

“Let’s give them a revelation, then—a divine mandate to dispose of the fools who stand against the gods. We cannot let those cretins get away with it! Just you watch, *rats*... We’ll chase you out into the light.”

The Four Gods believed they were always in the right, and it made their thinking simplistic.

But things weren’t so simple in the human world.

Countries around the world were beginning to turn their backs on the Faith of the Four Gods, and Metis had just lost a major advantage: its ability to summon heroes.

Not to mention, healing magic had yet to begin circulating in earnest. When it did, it would grow increasingly difficult for Metis to maintain its authority.

Then there was the issue of the terrible damage done to Maha Luthert. Metis would need to put some real effort into restoring its center of political power, delaying its efforts to provide aid to victims

all over the land.

It seemed like only a matter of time until the masses lost their belief in the Faith.

"But, like... How are we supposed to even *find* the reincarnators~? We can't even tell humans apart!"

"We can just make the humans deal with all the hassle of that. They do whatever we tell them to."

"Oh! Right! Another divine mandate. I'm glad *that* part's easy, at least!"

"This is what I mean. Fight humans with humans. Why should *we* have to lift a finger? It'd be a terrible bother."

"I know, right~? Let's go give those revelations now, then. Even *that'll* be a drag. I wanna get it out of the way ASAP."

"Yes. I swear, these humans—making us go to all this effort..."

With that, the irresponsible gods disappeared—unaware that their new plan would only tighten the noose around their necks.

Aquilata *looked* intelligent, but in reality, she was the type to live by the seat of her pants. Her schemes never had any real thought behind them.

Ultimately, the four of them were still like faeries: loyal only to the whims of their instincts.

The world was in a critical situation—in more ways than one.

*

Within a week of the Great Temple of Malthander's destruction, most of the priests—Cloistered Emperor Mikhailov included—had relocated to another ancient temple.

Fear of "the light of judgment" had shaken the priests' faith in a major way. The kinder priests started reexamining their actions, while the greedier ones spent their days trembling in fear of their coming judgment.

But fearful or not, they had to work to restore Maha Luthert. The priests were kept busy all day round, healing the wounded and providing aid. It was a similar case for the Order of Paladins, most of whom were tasked with manual labor for reconstruction.

In its current state, the Holy Land of Metis would struggle to even collect taxes. Even if they asked for support from other countries, the rumor going around was that "the Holy Land had incurred the wrath of the gods," leaving those countries unwilling to provide that support.

Amid all that, the saints received a revelation.

"What? By 'reincarnators,' you mean..."

"Yes. The Four told me that there are individuals in our world sent by the gods of another world—and that the light the other day might have been caused by those reincarnators using an ancient relic."

"Mmm... Could this mean the Sage is one of them too?!"

"I'm told that seems likely. As does the possibility that the reincarnators are receiving orders from the gods of other worlds... We have been asked to find them at once and mete out divine punishment."

"How many of these reincarnators are there, Saint Marianne? And do we not know their names?"

"Unfortunately, I wasn't told that much..."

"Ah..."

Mikhailov wanted to bury his face in his hands.

They had no way of telling *who* came from another world. "Meting out divine punishment" sounded all well and good, but without knowing where these people *were*, there was nothing they could do. They didn't know where to even start.

All they really knew was that these people were hostile to the Faith of the Four Gods, and that they'd delivered it a major blow.

"I suppose all we can do is make use of the heroes... Archbishop Jameel, issue a command to the heroes at once. They are to track down these reincarnators who oppose the Gods and enforce divine punishment."

"What should the Order of Paladins do?"

"The restoration of Metis takes priority. We are shorthanded as is—and we still do not know the extent of our casualties..."

"A-A moment, Your Holiness," Marianne hesitantly called out.

"What is it? Another revelation?"

"Yes. I am told the reincarnators have power that far outstrips

even the heroes'. We don't know how many have received orders from the gods of other worlds, but it seems as if carelessly making a move on the reincarnators may only lead to more casualties."

A commotion ran through the temple.

They were all well aware of the heroes' power. Heroes were weak when they were first summoned, sure, but as they gained experience, they grew strong enough to overwhelm anyone in their path. They were considered the strongest people in the world.

So if these reincarnators were stronger than the heroes—and *far* stronger, at that—then overwhelming them with numbers wouldn't be an option.

Honestly, they sounded like complete monstrosities.

"Did they say nothing else? Nothing pertaining to the reincarnators?!"

"No... Nothing but 'punish those who dare defy the Gods.'"

"I see... Thank you."

The existence of these reincarnators was disturbing.

Why would the gods of other worlds meddle in this one? What reason could they have to be hostile to the Four Gods? And would it even be possible to deal with individuals stronger than the heroes?

Recently, other countries had started putting political pressure on the Holy Land of Metis and claiming that even mages could use healing magic. There were rumors that those countries had independently developed healing magic of their own.

Until now, the Holy Land had held a monopoly over healing magic, allowing it to support itself by demanding significant 'donations' for healing.

If healing magic became widespread, priests would lose their standing in the world.

The Holy Land could typically pressure smaller countries through military might, but Metis could no longer summon the heroes, its greatest weapons.

Plus, it had to find the reincarnators now—but if it simply called for help from other countries, those countries were liable to instead designate the reincarnators as vassals. They were said to be stronger than the heroes, after all.

There didn’t seem to be any good options. Metis was at a loss.

“Why... Why must these problems arise now, of all times? With all that is happening, I know not where to even begin...”

“Be strong, Your Holiness... We should start by restoring our nation’s strength. Leave the search for the reincarnators to the heroes. Our duty is to leave no weakness for other countries to exploit.”

“I suppose you are right... Perhaps we should not have purified that one hero. We could at least have gotten some use out of him, had we let him live...”

“We had no other choice. He knew too much. And...”

“And he might not be the last of them—that is what you intend to say, yes? What a nuisance... If worse comes to worst, we may end up with even the heroes against us.”

There was the risk that the reincarnators and the heroes could team up to bring down the country of the gods. Considering everything that had happened so far, that possibility didn’t seem all that far-fetched.

“So the gods of the other worlds are to blame, eh? I know not how capable these ‘reincarnators’ are, but they are sticking their noses where they do not belong.”

Mikhailov had forgotten all about appearances by this point; he had a repulsive look on his face.

If the Faith of the Four Gods collapsed under his watch, Mikhailov’s reputation would be ruined. And he refused to let that happen.

No longer able to summon heroes, the Holy Land of Metis had lost its trump card, and storm clouds were gathering.

In fact, it was worse than that—there weren’t just clouds. The storm had already begun. Though only a scant few had realized that so far...

*

Work had resumed on the deepway through the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz.

Clings and clangs echoed throughout the caves, and the laborers sang manly songs as they worked. Some of them were hitting some impressive shouts—and it likely went without saying who was responsible for those.

Mighty swings of the workers' pickaxes made short work of the masses of rock blocking the way.

Among them was a gray-robed mage. He swung his pickaxe with vigor over and over again, demolishing more and more hard bedrock with every swing.

Workers from outside of Hamber Construction had been brought to the site too, so there were a whole lot of people chipping away at the rock right now. By this point, Zelos was familiar with a lot of them.

One of the workers called out to him: "Hey, lad. Working hard, I see. It's almost noon—what're your plans?"

"Already that time, eh? In that case, I suppose I'll take a break; I'm at a decent enough stopping point right now. Not long until we link the tunnels, but if I push myself too hard, I might screw something up, and then all my hard work would be for nothing."

"Let's go for an early lunch, then. We can just start back early too. You know, it's almost like all those delays were just a bad dream. Should have the job done by the deadline at this rate. Had me worried for a bit there, though, I'll admit!"

"*Aha ha ha...* Meals are about the only entertainment in a place like this, aren't they? I'm looking forward to being aboveground again. What I wouldn't give for a nice, cold ale..."

"You ain't wrong there! A drink always tastes best after work."

Zelos took a break with the workers and headed to the temporary office, where he took a preprepared boxed lunch, sat on a pile of materials, and opened up the meal.

The cooks had handmade the lunches with nutritional balance in mind. As Zelos removed the lid, his eyes were met with a tasty-looking assortment of colorful food. The boiled white barley looked delicious.

Zelos's empty stomach growled with joy. He wasted no time shoveling the barley down his throat. It was pretty salty, but with

how exhausted he was, that was perfect.

In the past, it had been normal for worksites like this to just chuck ingredients into a pot at random, creating mystery hot pots. But they'd often ended up tasting strange, so the workers hadn't liked them.

In response, boxed lunches had grown popular, and worksites had started using them more often.

"Ah—would you mind passing me the tea?" Zelos asked.

"Of course. Scarfing down your food again, I see! Hungry, eh?"

Zelos took the kettle and poured some tea down his throat, right from the spout.

"The Artom side's still got some digging to do, right?" he asked.

"Yeah. Should be meeting up with us before long. Still a bit to go—we fell behind schedule, after all—but it won't be much longer now."

"It's good we'll be able to get it done without extending the road the long way around. Plus, now we've got a whole ancient city in our hands."

"Yeah, you're not wrong—it'll be tough to get it all up and running again, though. Looks like it gets water from some underground lake, but we're stumped about how to deal with waste and the sort. Being honest with you, we can't even *guess* how the place is built."

"I suppose that makes sense. It *would* be hard to figure out what the people back then had in mind for urban development, and how that all relates to the city's construction."

Even as they ate, they continued to chat about what might be next for the construction project.

Then Zelos came to a realization.

It wasn't a particularly *important* one, but it had popped into his mind nonetheless: *W-Wait a minute! Since when did I get so into the swing of construction work?!*

Dwarves from Hamber Construction danced in the distance, while a throng of blue-collar workers ate their lunches all around him.

With a boxed lunch in one hand and a kettle he was drinking straight from in the other, he'd completely become one of them.

To top it all off, he'd gotten into the habit of saying stuff like "Hah! Now *that's* some good grub!" when he ate now.

He'd pretty much been kidnapped and dragged here; fought a demon and hordes of undead; brought ancient relics back to life; and laid waste to a whole city. But at some point during all that, it seemed, he'd grown accustomed to manual labor.

He hardly came across as a mage anymore. He was the spitting image of a blue-collar construction worker.

"It would seem you're well and truly used to construction now, eh?" Creston commented. "Why, it's getting hard to believe you're still a mage."

"Oh, come on... Mr. Creston, aren't you the one who used Nagri and his crew to kidnap me and drag me out here in the first place?! Why are you acting like you've got nothing to do with it?!"

"Leaving the specifics aside... I certainly didn't expect you to adapt to this extent! Why, you might've found your true calling!"

Zelos sighed. "Well, one way or another, it sounds like we've almost managed to join the tunnels up. Should be able to take a proper rest before long."

Creston had been staying in Isa Lante, heading up a squad tasked with retrieving relics from the ancient city. But today, it seemed, he was surveying the progress of the deepway's construction instead.

This was another one of his official duties...though he was partly there now simply because he thought it'd be interesting.

Meanwhile, with the construction of the tunnel nearly complete, Zelos was looking forward to being released from this hassle of a job.

He was seriously keen for some rest and relaxation once they were done. However...

"Well," Creston said, "about that... Would you mind going to take a look at how things are going in the Artom Empire? Usually I would go, but I must report to Del about Isa Lante. Especially with that *thing* in there... It is far too heavy a burden to keep to myself. Not to mention all that fuss about the potential mass disappearance of mana..."

"*Seriously?!* So, uh, what, are you...planning to have me meet with their royalty or something?"

"No, no; I'd like you to guard a diplomat. With all the chaos going on, Artom has to get trade with the Kingdom of Isalas moving properly again. Worry not; we'll only need you for a little while! Once you've seen the diplomat there safely, you're free to do as you please."

"Argh... You've got to be kidding me! You send me off for manual labor, and the moment that's done, you're trying to exploit me again... Come on, Mr. Creston, both you and your son—could you even bleed red if you tried?"

"As nobles, we're blue-blooded by nature. What of it? Besides, what are you saying after all this time? If we have someone useful, of *course* we'll work them to the bone. That much should be obvious."

In a sense, it was the proper answer.

One should have expected no less from nobles who'd managed to maintain their authority in a den of vice. He made a convincing point.

"Can you go back to acting like a human already?"

"Pah, worry not—when Tina comes back, I'll return to being a decent human in a jiffy. I've been so lonely of late... And I hear some wretched *fly* has been buzzing around her. *Heh heh heh heh...*"

"Run for it, Diio! Run for your life!"

Creston was far from *decent*. And it seemed like the ducal house's intelligence network was as impressive as always.

He'd already received word about the honest young man in love with Celestina.

Diio was already firmly within the man's sights—all that was left was to fire a deadly spell. It sounded like Diio's life was seriously in danger here.

"Well, setting that aside for now," Zelos said, "what do you intend to do once the path here's been cleared? Are you planning on setting up a town as a sort of base of operations for the trade route?"

"Mmm... I'm told that out in the mountains, just as you exit the

tunnel, there's a town called Lysagr. But it's quite remote, they say. It'd likely fare better if it had some sort of local specialty to bring traffic..."

"You're probably right; it's hard to force that kind of thing to happen, though. Anyway, I don't know how big this town is, but it's out in the mountains, right? I imagine they'd want to at least have some inns, or things will be difficult for any merchants hoping to use the deepway."

"I doubt it's worth getting our hopes up. After all, from what I hear, it's the sad remains of what was once a mining expedition site. Financial aid keeps it running, but it will likely take quite some time for the town to establish a respectable economy."

"But they'll get help with that, right? If you got Hamber Construction on the job, they'd have an inn in three days flat. I can see it now: the workers grinning with glee, dancing like madmen, and working themselves to the bone, day and night, until it's done..."

"You know, it scares me that it almost sounds like you're not joking..."

He *wasn't* joking.

If Hamber Construction put everything they had into it, they could, in fact, get two or three inns built in that amount of time.

All while dancing, of course.

Even as Zelos and Creston chatted, everyone from Hamber Construction was still absorbed in working. They hadn't even taken a meal break. Their stamina was incredible.

In fact... No. On closer inspection, they *were* eating—while they worked.

Apparently that was another new skill they'd picked up.

"That...can't be normal, right?" Zelos asked.

"If *that* were the standard for 'normal,'" Creston replied, "then what would become of the other construction workers?"

"Actually, the guys from Hamber have been a bad influence on the other laborers already. They're all dancing up a storm together. And the show's not over yet. In fact, they're only just getting started."

"How do they work at such a rapid pace while doing *that*? Not to

mention, I'm baffled that none of them get hurt from it all... Truly, it is the mystery to end all mysteries."

It was one of the wonders of this world.

Logically, it seemed like dancing as you worked would just deplete your stamina for no gain, and make it impossible to do any work requiring precision. If anything, it seemed overwhelmingly likely to end in failure.

But somehow, Hamber Construction got the job done all the same. They were confident enough in their abilities that they could treat construction work as recreation without batting an eyelid.

"Hey! Lad! Almost time to get back to work?"

"Huh? It hasn't even been fifteen minutes yet..."

"What are you talking about? A real worker gets his break over and done with in five minutes! 'Rest' ain't in our vocabularies! Life's a seven-day workweek—we get the jobsite *pumping*, even if it kills us! Now, let's go!"

And so, the gruff middle-aged dwarf dragged Zelos away with the energy and swagger of a hard rock frontman.

They had a motto: "Never let go of your pickaxe, even when you're dead."

This world had no labor unions and no OSHA. Even the trade guild just turned a blind eye.

They were scared of getting beaten up, after all...

"H-Hey! I haven't even finished eating my lunch! Mr. Creston, help m— *AAAAAAHHH...*"

"Poor thing..." Creston muttered to himself. "Oh, Del, it looks like we tossed Sir Zelos into hell itself. It's on you if the man comes to hold a grudge against us."

He simply watched as Zelos was dragged away before his eyes, half-eaten lunch left behind...

For reference, Zelos ended up clocking twenty hours of work that day.

But there was still no rest for him yet. Not until the deepway was opened up...

Press F to pay respects.

Chapter 10: The Old Guy Meets a Former Hero

The Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz formed an underground city built by the dwarves and mages of times long past.

It had once been a trade route connecting the borders of the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, the Artom Empire, and the Holy Land of Metis. But with time, the bedrock had caved in, and the tunnels had become a breeding ground for monsters. As a result, fewer and fewer people had used it, and eventually, it had vanished from history, becoming a no-man's-land.

Now, though, new history was being made in these ruins.

The new deepway went from the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, through the ancient city of Isa Lante, and connected to the road the Artom Empire had built for trade with the Kingdom of Isalas. The combined use of aboveground and underground routes would make it possible to restore safe trade between the nations.

The many laborers involved in the job were eagerly awaiting the moment the tunnels from both sides joined up. And that moment was tantalizingly close.

The workers, in their neat rows, had come all the way here for that very moment.

"Nearly there..."

"Aye. I can almost taste it."

Everyone's eyes were fixed on the wall ahead of them, and they held their breath as they waited for the moment that was about to come.

The dwarven and human site overseers were making an appearance in front of the laborers, and they too were animated now that the time had just about come.

They were about to hold a formal ceremony to commemorate the

opening of the tunnel.

"Right, lads—the time's finally here! The moment we've all been waiting for!"

"We might've fallen behind schedule at one point, but we've made it here in the end. Remember this moment, everyone! We're about to make history!"

One of the overseers here was Nagri; the other was a human laborer whom Zelos had recently gotten to know.

He'd been dispatched here as a temporary employee from a different site, and he'd helped Zelos out plenty of times during work.

Each of the two men held a pickaxe in one hand and faced the rock wall.

They took a big windup, then simultaneously swung at the rock with all their might.

CHINK! TING!

They swung their pickaxes again, and then again, breaking off more rock each time.

Eventually, a tiny glimmer of light shone through from the other side.

They'd finally opened a hole in the rock wall.

"It's... It's open..."

"The tunnels are joined... We've done it!!!"

The laborers let out a simultaneous cry: "*YEEEAAAHHH!*"

Some cried, others hugged each other, and others were so happy they *trembled*.

"*HEY!* We ain't done yet!" Nagri shouted. "Get to work on the final touches!"

His reprimand got the workers readying their tools all at once: "On it, Boss!" Then they charged at the wall, eager to get the job done.

"What's this feeling?" Zelos mused. "This...sense of achievement... I could get used to this."

He felt like he understood, now, the passion these workers had for their jobs. He casually took out a cigarette and lit it.

Tobacco smoke filled his lungs, and he felt a wave of satisfaction wash over him.

"*NO SMOKING ON THE JOB!*"

Nagri gave Zelos a good thwack.

"*GER-BLAGH!*"

Nagri was light on his feet; he'd immediately closed the distance and delivered a splendid uppercut. It was hard to believe a short-legged dwarf had managed it.

Smoking on the job was prohibited.

Zelos might have come to another world, but he still couldn't escape smoking bans.

"C-Curse you... Heroes..." Zelos cried as he flew through the air.

He'd been struck high into the air—and eventually, he crashed back down to the ground, headfirst. It was like something out of a boxing manga.

The laborers were too engrossed in their work to pay Zelos any heed. None of them even tried to help him. Someone getting walloped like this was just part of the daily routine for them, after all.

By the way, there were several different varieties of tobacco in this world, and some of them had medicinal properties.

These were benefits you didn't get from tobacco on Earth, and those varieties were highly valued as a result. But heroes had brought their old notions of common sense with them, spread the word that "smoking's bad for you," and, eventually, the stigma had spread far and wide.



It was a cold, hard day for a heavy smoker.

"I-It used to be fine to smoke at work... Am I really going to be kept apart from my beloved ciggies? *Nooo...*"

As Zelos fell into despair, the workers made good progress on finishing the job.

Zelos might've been an almighty Great Sage with cheat skills, but he was nothing compared to these construction workers.

*

"'The mage came out of the long tunnel into the snow country...'" Zelos murmured.

Thanks to the passionate workers, the tunnels were connected without further incident. When Zelos passed through, he eventually emerged on the outskirts of the mountainous region of the Artom Empire.

When winter came, it blanketed the entire Artom Empire in snow. It was colder here than in the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, and the location where Zelos stood now—walled off by tall mountains—was no exception, with a thin layer of snow on the ground.

Within the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz, the span between the Magic Kingdom of Solistia and the ancient city of Isa Lante was now designated as the Isa Lante Deepway, while the span between Isa Lante and the Artom Empire was designated as the Irmanaz Deepway.

As soon as Zelos emerged from said Irmanaz Deepway, he saw Lysagr, a little town among the mountains.

The Aurus River flowed along its west side, and the town was surrounded by lush forest.

Lysagr had the vibe of a rural mountain town.

"Sure is chilly here... Once it gets into the snowy season, it almost seems like the deepway could end up unusable. I can't imagine a frozen road would be great for merchants..."

Also near the town was a road so pristine it stuck out like a sore thumb. It had probably been built by the workers from the Artom Empire's side, and they'd clearly put some real effort and passion

into the job too. Sculptures and the like decorated its roadsides, but it was so spectacular it looked out of place next to this serene little town.

Even just building a road out here can't have been easy... I'm amazed they put in the effort to do all this extra stuff too, Zelos thought to himself as he gazed at a statue resembling the Nio statues found at Buddhist temples.

The Artom Empire probably had its own dwarves who'd come through the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz and settled here in the distant past, just like those in Solistia. Zelos figured they were likely similar to Nagri and his crew.

In fact, he could see right now a bunch of dwarven workers from the Artom side, dancing in almost a yosakoi style just outside Lysagr to celebrate the completion of the deepway. They and the dwarves of Hamber Construction were peas in a pod, that much was clear.

Zelos didn't know whether this was customary among all dwarves, or whether it was particular to those in Solistia and Artom, but what he *did* know was that it was...a lot to process.

Yosakoi makes me think of something like Hanayamata*; I'm not quite sure it works when it's a bunch of burly dwarves. And I don't just mean it's missing the same appeal—I feel like it could be downright* dangerous *to be in the middle of those guys swinging their arms around... Seriously, though, there's nothing around here except the town, huh? Just that, the road, and nature.*

Zelos continued surveying the landscape of the first other country he'd come to since arriving in this world. As he did, he noticed a human construction worker approaching him. It was a muscly man, a little older than Zelos.

He was a rough-looking guy with a crew cut and slightly slanted eyes. If not for his work clothes, he'd look like someone involved in organized crime. His name was Gato; he was the human site overseer who'd held the opening ceremony alongside Nagri.

He hardly *looked* like a respectable sort; you could imagine him going around wearing sunglasses and punching people.

"Yo, lad. So *this* is where you were. What're you doin' out here? The party's about to start."

"Ah—celebration for a job well done, eh? I can already see Nagri and the others guzzling alcohol like there's no tomorrow..."

"*Gah ha ha ha ha!* That's just how we workers are. When the job's done, we let loose to get our energy back—then in the morning, it's off to the next job site. 'Rest' ain't even a thing for us!"

"And your workers are okay with all that? Surely some of them must want to go home and see their families..."

"Well, not like there's a Labor Standards Act to worry about. We just go by everyone's gut feelings. Might be tough for newbies, but once you're used to it, it's a good life."

"And no workers' comp either, right? Hey... Wait a minute."

Zelos felt something was off with what the man had just said.

Specifically, he'd just mentioned the "Labor Standards Act."

But that wasn't *from* this world. It was a Japanese law. Only so many people would know about it.

It didn't take long for Zelos to figure out the reason.

Or rather...two possible reasons. The only problem was, he didn't know which was right.

"By the way," Zelos said, "I'm not sure I caught your full name. I know it's a bit late to ask—we've already eaten together a bunch of times, after all—but would you mind telling me? I know people call you Gato, but that's not your given name, right?"

"Oh? Yeah, I haven't told you, now that you mention it... I'm Taka Gato."

"And I'm Zelos. So... Which type are you?"

"Huh? Which type of *what*?"

"Are you a reincarnator or a hero, Mr. *Kato*?"

All of a sudden, it was like the air froze solid.

Zelos felt an aura of cold *malice* from the man who'd called himself Taka Gato. Immediately, he shifted to high alert.

Regular construction workers didn't give off vibes like this.

The two men glared at each other, sizing each other up.

"Who... Who *are* you?" the man asked. "How do you—"

"Answer my question first. Reincarnator or hero; which one? Don't worry, I'm not planning on killing you or anything. Though I *will* fight if you make me."

"How'd you know I'm from another world?"

"You mentioned the 'Labor Standards Act.' That doesn't exist here. Only people from another world would know that term. People from *my* world..."

"So I put my foot in my mouth, huh? I've worked so hard to hide it all this time. Never thought I'd let the cat out of the bag with some dumb comment like that. Actually, wait. *You* mentioned 'workers' comp'..."

"Mm-hmm. I'm a reincarnator. And going by how you just said 'all this time'... I'm guessing you're a hero? One of the ones summoned thirty-three years ago?"

Both men were from another world, but that didn't mean they'd lowered their guard.

"Yeah... Those bastards summoned me here thirty-three years ago. My real name's Takahito Kato. I'm not the only one who survived, but I got no idea where the others are now. Guessin' you'd have a decent idea why, right?"

"You're hiding because the Four Gods are after your lives—is that right? Anyway... I guess that proves it. They really *were* summoning heroes as disposable tools."

"Yeah. Those bastards in the Faith—or, at least, the top brass—sent us into battle like pawns just to grab more power for themselves. They want to rule the world. They may say they'll send the heroes back, but it's a fuckin' *lie*! By the time we finally realized that, most of us had already died. I'm bettin' a bunch of the heroes summoned in this last batch are dead too, right?"

"Yup. Half of them. Actually, I met two of the current batch of heroes not long ago. And, er—I got a bunch of intel out of them, then I put the idea of 'you can't trust the Faith, okay?' into their heads."

As soon as Zelos said that, Taka's eyes opened wide. Then he burst into laughter.

"*Pfft... GAH HA HA HA HA HA!* Sounds like you're no enemy of mine! Heads up, though—the Inquisition won't look kindly on you tellin' the heroes that sort of thing. They may even start goin' after your life."

Zelos got the sense this guy had been through a lot.

"Oh, that shouldn't be a problem. I'm stronger than the heroes, after all. I've practically got cheats."

"Whoa, whoa, hold up... How strong *are* you 'reincarnators'? We heroes started off at Level 1, and we had to grind our way up from there! How's that fair?"

"It *is* unfair, but you can blame the Four Gods for that. You see, it sounds like they really pissed off the other gods."

"All right, tell me—what'd the Faith pull this time?"

"It's the Four Gods who screwed up, not the Faith. As proof, the gods from the other side sent the Dark God back, and the Faith can't summon heroes anymore. Metis has enemies all around, including every neighboring country. They're boxed in on all sides."

That was Zelos's conjecture based on all the information he'd gathered so far—the existence of the Dark God Soul, his conversations with heroes, the intel he'd garnered from the control system in Isa Lante, his own screwups, and what he'd been able to glean from things like newspapers.

He was still missing pieces of the puzzle, but Taka's testimony had turned some of his suspicions into convictions.

It sounded like the man really had a grudge against the Faith of the Four Gods too. He was practically busting his gut with laughter.

"*Gah ha ha ha ha!* Serves 'em right! That's what they get for screwin' us over. Those pieces of shit deserve to suffer! This is the best! Three decades here, and this is the hardest I've laughed the whole time... H-Hey." He abruptly stopped laughing. "Wait. The *Dark God*, you said?! The hell did they do?!"

"The Four Gods tossed the Dark God into *our* world—not sure if that's technically right, but you get the idea—like they were dumping garbage on someone else's property. That's what killed us reincarnators. And then, it seems, the gods from our side sent the Dark God back here when they reincarnated us here. It's probably their attempt at getting back at the Four Gods."

To be precise, the other gods had sent over the Dark God's soul in crystallized form. But the general idea—that they'd sent it over along with the reincarnators—was right.

And Zelos was currently in the middle of cultivating a new body for that Dark God.

"The Dark God, huh... Is that gonna be okay? Well... Sounds like the Faith's lost its last ray of hope. Bet they're in complete chaos right now."

"Well, an earthquake just destroyed their capital city, so the rebuilding process will probably leave them in disarray for a few years or so. A country like that has to reconstruct ASAP or people will grow dissatisfied."

"Mmm... Right. In that case, leaving their official guys aside, it sounds like they might get their *unofficial* guys to act."

"'Unofficial guys'? Do you mean the Inquisition?"

"I'm talkin' about the Crimson Cabal. A bunch of devout nutjobs. I mean, you're not completely wrong—apparently a bunch of 'em work for Inquisition. But... You know how religions in our old world had different sects, right? Priests going off to make offshoots, the 'church of whatever'—that kind of thing. Especially the military orders."

"Ah... Yes, there *were* groups like that, weren't there? Honestly, I was never able to tell religious factions apart anyway, but... Well, they're some superextreme group, I gather that much."

"I can't tell the difference between 'em either. But my point is—the Crimson Cabal's bad news. They're the sort of guys who'll smile when they meet ya and smile while they're killin' ya. It's all 'death to the heretics' and that sort of thing. They've attacked us plenty of times too. I'm tellin' you, they won't hesitate to massacre people. They're *insane*. Even we watch out for 'em. That's why I'm usin' an alias."

The Crimson Cabal revered the Four Gods, viewing them as the absolute authority of all existence.

They wouldn't bat an eyelid at a massacre if it helped them maintain their authority—and, in turn, that of the Four Gods. They lurked among the other priests, but there had to have been some of them around the heroes too. Zelos doubted there had been any with Nagisa Ichijo and Katsuhiko Tanabe, though.

Zelos had criticized the Four Gods to no end right in front of the heroes, after all.

If there *had* been any members of the Crimson Cabal among the priests there, they would've stopped at nothing to kill him.

"Hmm..." he said, thinking back to the incident, "perhaps there aren't too many of them? If there had been any with the heroes I met, I'd probably have known. Or...maybe they were just trying to stay undercover?"

"You can usually pick 'em out in situations like that. They'll pull a knife on you the moment you say the tiniest little thing that makes fun of the gods."

"Well, they weren't in Metis at the time, so theoretically they might've tried to keep a lid on their emotions. I know they're zealots, but that'd be all the more reason for them to keep a calm head for the sake of their 'duty' or whatever. Religious sorts like that have their own value systems, after all. Though...who knows. Maybe they wouldn't have been able to keep a lid on their emotions if they had *really* wanted to see me dead."

A person's mana and spirit were intertwined, so strong emotions could cause waves of mana.

Others could then sense that mana, which was how the Detect Mana skill worked. With a high enough level in that skill, you could detect someone who was that furious, even if they tried their best to hide it.

Zelos's Detect Mana skill was already maxed out. He'd have no issue whatsoever detecting malice from the most capable people this world could offer.

He had plenty of combat job skills up to Divine rank too, and those provided synergistic effects that allowed him to even sense presences more broadly. Anyone intending to harm him would stick out to him like a sore thumb.

"Ain't the worry that they might try to hurt the people you're close to? There were some guys who sheltered us when we were escaping, and...the Cabal fuckers killed 'em all."

"You're right. That *does* sound like a potential risk. Though, well, I feel like the duke would spot them before they could do anything... Anyway, they're the sort to punish anyone they suspect of heresy, eh? With the way things are going, though, that'll probably only

drive more people away from the faith."

"You're backed by the *duke*? Huh. Maybe I should try goin' to him for protection too!"

"Now that I think of it... If the Solistia family is part of the royal lineage, why is it only a ducal house? I feel like it should be a *grand* ducal house..."

"Hey, don't ask *me* about that stuff. I don't have the first clue about it."

Creston and Delthasis, the past and present dukes, were part of the royal lineage.

In terms of court rank, then, they should have been grand dukes. And yet they weren't.

I wonder if there's a proper reason for that? Ah, whatever. Doesn't matter.

It was just a simple question that had crossed his mind. He didn't care that much about it, so he let the doubt fade away.

Every country had its own circumstances, and they had nothing to do with Zelos, who was only an ordinary citizen.

He figured there was no need to bother looking into it.

"Anyway—the party's about to start! And everyone who worked on the job is meant to go."

"Honestly, I'd rather pass... If I drink the night away with *those* guys, I'll wake up with a hangover for sure."

"Not an option. You have to. I mean, I won't force you, but in that case, you'd better be ready for all of 'em to come beat you up."

"I like my alcohol, but I can't hold it that well... A party with that lot would leave me so hungover I wouldn't even be able to move for a while! They're *monsters*! They drink straight from the barrel!"

"Don't worry 'bout it. The more you drink and spew it up, the better you'll get at holdin' it in. Everyone goes through it sooner or later."

"Do I seriously not have a choice here?!"

"Nope. I told you, right? You have to. C'mon—stop whining. Let's go. We all have to go through that gauntlet sooner or later!"

Taka had completely transformed from a hero into another one of the laborers. The society of tradespeople was a very hierarchical

one. Unfairly so—to the extent that it seemed even this former hero had been put through the wringer.

He was well and truly just another construction worker at this point; the perfect example of the notion that once the big bad was defeated, even a former hero was just another average Joe.

Changing jobs could completely transform a person's outlook. Just like a flashy university graduate changed as they acclimated to the actual workplace, Taka had changed into the archetypal site overseer.

He started dragging Zelos into the town, determined to make him take part in the drinking party.

Why was it only ever at times like this that Zelos's incredible physical capabilities didn't manifest?

The world really did work in mysterious ways.

*

The buildings in Lysagr were all made of wood, with steeply angled thatched roofs that closely resembled the gassho-zukuri designs of a certain tourist spot in Japan.

These ones weren't impressive enough to become a tourist attraction themselves, mind you. They just looked similar.

Lysagr had once been a mining village, but the nearby mine's yield had been poor. Eventually, the mine had closed, and no others were developed nearby, leaving the residents to eke out a meager existence. Recently, however, the village had transformed into a temporary site for construction workers from the Artom Empire to wait on standby.

That wasn't *all* the village had going for it. A local wine made with looseberries—a type of berry that grew in midwinter—was famous among connoisseurs. But the berries weren't abundant, and they weren't often traded, so it was more of a local specialty just for those in the know.

The fact that the villagers couldn't mass-produce the wine stopped them from turning it into a real moneymaker.

"The architecture here's mostly Western, so it took me a while to

realize, but it's almost like Shirakawa-go, isn't it?" Zelos mused. "Don't tell me..."

"Some hero who came before my lot probably gave 'em the idea," Taka replied. "The townsfolk here aren't Japanese, mind you. They even got wings on their backs..."

"The reufayl, eh? I've heard they're the strongest people in the world."

People in this world usually maxed out their levels at somewhere around Level 300, but the reufayl were the one and only race able to surpass that with ease. Citizens of the Artom Empire were about Level 400 *on average*, and it was said some were above Level 600.

There weren't many of them, but they were able to compete on an even—or perhaps advantageous—playing ground with the Holy Land of Metis. The only ones who'd stand a chance against Artom in combat were either the heroes or the rare others who'd managed to exceed Level 500: the so-called transcendentals.

And becoming a transcendental was no easy feat.

Clothing-wise, the people of Lysagr wore garments that looked kind of like Japanese kimonos.

Or rather, it was almost like they'd taken a kimono as a baseline, then incorporated Western tastes on top.

The result was a sort of extravagant native dress made of wool and silk, with peculiar designs on the sleeves, hems, and collars. They also wore jade necklaces like it was nothing.

The royals and such, by the way, wore something more like Chinese native dress, or so Zelos had seen in a book in the library at Creston's mansion.

Of course, the book hadn't described it as looking Chinese; that was just what Zelos had thought when he'd seen a picture in the book.

"Is Artom a big silk producer or something?" he asked. "Hmm... Makes sense why Metis may be targeting it, then. It could make them rich."

"Yeah, and the nobles here love their silk. The price skyrockets anytime foreign merchants get hold of some. Well, I only know the price of the silk thread, mind you, not whatever gets made with it."

"I'm assuming by the time they turn it into silk cloth, dye it, and turn it into a dress or whatever, the price would go up about tenfold."

This unassuming little town out in the mountains hid an incredible treasure.

Lysagr's revitalization seemed inevitable now that the merchants would soon begin using the deepway for trade.

"Anyway, yeah, the road between Isalas and Artom's finished too," Taka said. "Which'll help Isalas—their mineral resources should earn 'em a fair bit of money. They're pretty broke right now."

"Have you been to Isalas before?"

"Just to build out the road along the mountains; wasn't the hardest job. The path was pretty wide, and there weren't as many monsters as there are around Artom."

"You know, on the Solistia end, we ran into the ruins of an underground city. Maybe they could've just dug a detour around it, but the terrain probably would've forced the road to be pretty narrow in that case."

"I went to inspect the terrain myself, but there was a limestone cave in the way, and then an underground lake; in the end, we couldn't get any farther. I was surveying with some mercenaries, and about half of 'em died when we got attacked by goblins and kobolds and stuff."

A cave-in on the Metis side of the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz had blocked that end off and turned it into one enormous breeding ground for monsters. Since those monsters had spilled over into the rest of the ruins, it had become necessary to clear them out to form a contact network between the Solistia and Artom sides.

The monsters there had bred like rabbits and dug tunnels through the bedrock themselves, creating a complex, perilous tunnel network. Combine that with the darkness of the underground, and it had taken a lot of sacrifices to clear out all the monsters.

Making matters worse, these monsters saw well in the dark and had good senses of smell. It might've been easy to defeat them aboveground, but down in the caves, the monsters had the home field advantage.

The mercenaries had fallen victim to all sorts of raids, surprise attacks, and traps; it had taken a full thirty years of human wave tactics to finally clear them out. The mercenaries had also made the effort to fill in any unwanted monster tunnels with debris.

The most recent subjugation efforts had resulted in fifty-eight casualties. And while the casualties from before then weren't recorded—they'd been death-row criminals and criminal slaves—they probably added up to quite a figure. It had practically been as perilous as a dungeon down there; this construction project had clearly been more dangerous than Zelos had thought.

"Jeez," he said, "that sounds crazy. What're the higher-ups going to tell their families?"

"Probably just somethin' about a noble death for crown and country, right?"

Zelos and Taka, for what it was worth, weren't aware that those who'd been sent into the most dangerous areas had been mostly criminal slaves and thuggish mercenaries. As far as they knew, regular mercenaries had been sent down there for routine subjugation missions.

"Or maybe they just send a straight-to-the-point letter saying something like 'unfortunately, they got eaten by a monster,'" Zelos mused. "Being a mercenary's nasty work, after all. It's part of the job. By the way, I forgot to mention: I'm an S-rank."

"Whoa—we got a big shot here! Y'know, I picked a fight with a max-level, S-rank mercenary companion of mine one time, and I got *walloped*!"

"That was probably down to the difference in experience. Anyone who gets to S-rank is almost certainly used to fighting other people too, not just monsters. And experience means a lot—even between two people who are the same level, whoever's more experienced probably wins in a landslide. Oh, and the number and level of your skills have a big impact too."

Generally speaking, the academic understanding in this world was that a person's level represented how much mana they could channel, which determined how much they could strengthen their body.

A person's HP, meanwhile, represented the aggregate of their basic physical abilities as strengthened with mana. People who excelled at manipulating mana were able to efficiently circulate mana throughout their bodies, allowing them to use far more mana to bolster their basic strength.

Theoretically, then, it was possible for people to obtain superhuman strength. But getting to that point required a lot of training and combat experience, so few people reached that level.

On top of strengthening your body by circulating mana, you could also strengthen it further through magic or other techniques that forcibly boosted your physical capabilities.

Taking that approach too far could lead to muscle pain, so it wasn't always recommended. It was a necessary part of training to learn the Mana Control skill, though. Exerting yourself while using strengthening magic made you more efficient at controlling your own mana.

At the same time, a person's total mana pool and the amount of mana they could circulate to strengthen their body were different things. The latter could differ from person to person too—and when you combined that with everyone having a different number of skills, and having those skills at different levels, it became hard to tell exactly how much of a benefit someone would get from circulating mana to make themselves stronger.

Ultimately, the effects wouldn't appear until you got plenty of combat experience—that was why most mages were so physically weak. Leveling up increased their total mana pool, but they didn't do the physical training to be able to circulate that mana throughout their bodies. Perhaps they were still a little stronger than the average person, but it wasn't like they'd be capable of actual combat.

The flow of a person's mana was also affected by their emotions and environment, so the strengthening effect from mana diminished to almost nothing in front of someone the user didn't see as an enemy. In other words, they'd just be at their body's baseline physical capabilities.

When Zelos had gotten walloped by Nagri—well, it had come out

of the blue, for starters, but another big part of why it had worked was because Zelos didn't see Nagri as an enemy.

Even then, Zelos had come out the other end without even a single scratch. He really was tanky.

That was about the gist of how levels were seen in this world. Of course, it was complicated by enormous differences from person to person, making the whole thing incredibly difficult to actually study.

Zelos, for his part, was already a considerable outlier. Maybe, if he sat down and really thought about how strong he was in everyday life versus how strong he was in combat, he'd get a better idea of just how true that was. But thinking about how abnormal his cheats made him tended to send him down a spiral of self-hatred, so he didn't really want to do that.

His power was *unfair*, honestly.

"Pretty sure I'd have high-level combat skills and construction skills, though," Taka said. "We needed money when we were on the run from those Metis bastards, so I did some physical labor. If we worked as mercenaries, they would've found out where we were right away—but laborers are always movin' from place to place, so it's the perfect way to hide. Then, well, before I realized it, I *was* a laborer."

"So you just went with the flow and, before you realized it, ended up in Solistia, eh? And I guess you weren't able to get married, since you could be found any day. It's not exactly a safe world to raise kids in either."

"What? No, no, I'm married to one of the classmates I got summoned with. We've got five kids. Built ourselves a little house in Santor; she'll be there now, waitin' for me to come home."

"Fuck you! Go die in a fire!"

Taka and one of his fellow escapee heroes had fallen in love, and they'd gotten married twenty years ago. Nowadays, they lived a quiet life in the Magic Kingdom of Solistia.

Zelos, as a bachelor, was incredibly jealous.

"Anyway," Taka continued, "this snow seems like it'll be a problem. I can see the road freezing over something terrible when it gets to the coldest part of the year."

“Yeah, you’re not wrong. And I hear this area in particular gets some real heavy snow.”

“It’d be nice if there was some way of melting all the snow, but... Huh. That’s Nagri and the others all in a big group over there, right? I wonder what they’re doing?”

“Couldn’t say... Uh, is it just me, or does it kinda stink?”

The dwarves were gathered around a well in the middle of Lysagr, washing their clothes.

It was rare that they changed clothes in the middle of a job. Sometimes, they’d even spend more than a month in the same clothes. The resulting smell was so *rancid* that their clothing could have been used as a bioweapon.

Only royals and nobles could bathe in hot water; most commoners were stuck with cold water. Even that wasn’t an option at construction sites, though.

Underground, water was precious. Even water used for wiping your body was rationed, and getting laundry done was tough.

As a result, the workers eventually got used to the smell; at this point, they didn’t even notice it.

But of course, the people of Lysagr weren’t going to be thrilled about it.

“I, uh... I changed every day, okay?” Taka said. “I’d do my laundry first thing in the morning, and collect it in the evening...”

“Me too,” Zelos replied. “I used my magic to separate out the hydrogen and oxygen from wastewater. As for the leftover waste... Well, I used it to make some gunpowder.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on a minute! Gunpowder?! So...you mean potassium nitrate?”

“I’ve just the right tool for it, you see. I can put in some waste, let it ferment, and turn it into potassium nitrate. It’s completely odorless, by the way. Antibacterial too!”

“Y’know... You scare me, man. What are you even gonna *do* with that stuff?”

“I was thinking I might make a hunting rifle. I *could* make a rail gun, but that’d be overkill. It’d vaporize whatever I end up hunting with it.”

Taka had no response.

This mage was getting scarier by the minute, and Taka was worried the man might just get up to something absolutely insane. He was more frightening than the Crimson Cabal.

It was about then that Nagri ran up to them.

"Ah, there you are. Good timing."

"Mmm... Somehow, I feel like I know what you're about to say..."

"Good. Saves me some time, then. See, we're about to have a party, but apparently we all stink too bad. It's seeped into our clothes too; it's bad enough that all the townsfolk don't want to get near us."

"So... You're asking whether I have a tool that can clean it all for you? Because I do, technically... But it's a prototype, and it's not exactly practical."

"I'm fine with whatever you've got. Just please, let me borrow it! Pretty much the whole watering hole's full of workers. Wouldn't be able to get my clothes washed in time."

"What am I, some convenient little blue robot? That said, I guess it could be a good chance for me to test out my prototype."

Zelos took out a washing machine from his inventory—his very own four-dimensional pocket.

He'd made around twenty-one prototypes, but considering how long they held mana and a raft of other issues, they had little commercial value.

The one he'd just taken out of his inventory was prototype number sixteen—a relatively okay version.

"So how do you use this thing?"

"You put your dirty laundry inside, close the lid, and supply some mana to this panel on the side. Then it cleans your clothes all by itself. Oh—make sure you add some detergent too, okay? Something like a few soap shavings would work."

"Huh. Simpler than I expected," Nagri said.

"What about water?" Taka asked. "Won't work unless you put some water in there, right?"

Zelos exhaled from his nose. "Tell me, Taka: What's water made of? A mixture of hydrogen and oxygen, yes?"

"*Ohhh...* So it pulls hydrogen and oxygen out of the air?"

Yup—you didn't need to add any water to this washing machine.

It collected hydrogen and oxygen particles from the air and used them to make its own water. That *did* cause it to chew up mana like there was no tomorrow, but it meant that once it had collected enough water, the rest was simple. It automatically ejected any waste too, making it even easier to use.

After hearing how it worked, Nagri figured he *had* to have one for himself. It'd be incredibly valuable at construction sites; they were always filthy.

Nagri added his workwear to the washing machine, closed the lid, and provided some mana to the panel. Then the machine did exactly what it was supposed to do, beginning to wash his clothes.

"Huh," he said, "good stuff. Mind selling us some? I'll pay whatever you're asking."

"I'll be handing them over to Solistia Trading once I have them perfected, so buy them through there, please. It's still not ready to sell yet, though."

"What, this? You're saying you couldn't sell *this*?"

"It's...got some problems. Would you like to look at a different prototype, Nagri? It'd make it easier for me to explain."

Zelos took a different prototype out of his inventory.

"Okay... Take a look at *this*!"

He supplied mana to the panel on this second prototype, turning it on. As soon as he did, the machine began rapidly creating water and the tub inside began spinning.

Before long, however, it started to vibrate ferociously, and a torrent of water began to spill from the underside of the machine.

"See?" he said. "The waterproofing's kind of iffy, so it leaks something terrible. It eats up a lot of mana too. And even if it starts to work properly, the rotation of the tub's not stable enough. I'll have to keep up the prototyping before I get to the point where I can sell it."

"Shouldn't you stop it? It'll flood the whole village at this rate!"

"Ah... See, once I turn it on, it doesn't stop until the cycle's finished. With the way I've designed it, I can't fit any other big

components. It's completely automatic, after all; there's no way I could make any sort of precision part to let me control it."

The flow of water from the bottom of the washing machine was getting stronger and stronger. And eventually, the water current made the whole washing machine start rotating like a pinwheel.

It kept picking up more and more momentum, rotating faster and faster—and as it went, it started to bore a hole into the ground.

"Uh... Your washing machine's digging itself a hole."

"It's almost like it's drilling a well..."

"It takes mana from the atmosphere once it gets going, so it won't stop until the washing's done. Until then, it'll just keep going like this. See what I mean? It's got zero commercial value in this state. Each unit takes a different amount of time to finish too. So the thing is, there's no telling when it might stop..."

The washing machine dug itself further into the earth, and before long, it was completely underground.

A lone washing machine, on a journey to the center of the earth.

Even as it continued to dig, it didn't slow down. If anything, it just kept rotating faster and faster. And eventually, it disappeared somewhere far underground.

It dug and dug and dug some more. It sent dirt flying far into the sky, and pierced through bedrock as if aiming for the other side of the world.

Then came a rumbling sound from below.

"Wh-What now?!"

"Hmm... I wonder if it's hit an underground stream?"

"S-Something's wrong!"

A huge spout of water burst from the hole the washing machine had dug in the ground.

And it was *hot* water.

"How far did the damn thing dig?! How's it even goin' so fast?!"

"Looks like it's struck a hot spring. Good thing it wasn't an oil vein, eh?"

"Hey... Think we could use that thing for work? Seems like it'd really speed up digging jobs..."

This marked the day a washing machine dug up a hot spring.

Thanks to this machine, Lysagr would soon grow famous as a hot spring town—all due to an incredibly silly incident.

And just like that, the construction workers got straight to work on another project, without ever stopping to hold their party.

They couldn't just let the whole town get flooded with hot water, after all.

There was no rest for the construction workers—nor for Zelos.

The washing machine, for what it was worth, eventually shot back up out of the ground, riding on a geyser. Its wreckage was found in the forest the following day.

It might've failed as a washing machine, but it had done a brilliant job kick-starting the revitalization of Lysagr.

Those who found the machine's wreckage said that its metal exterior was like the armor of a battle-weary soldier who'd returned victorious—warped, battered, but shining heroically.

Chapter 11: The Old Guy Takes on Another Escort Mission

A month had passed since Zelos's kidnapping.

A public bathhouse and a warm-water laundry spot had been built in Lysagr. And of course, the builders had gotten carried away; they'd even built a hot spring inn to boot.

Plus, they'd done it all without compensation, as their apology for flooding the village.

Or at least, that was why they *said* they did it. They'd also just really *wanted* to build them...

One way or another, though, it was all built, and Lysagr had been fully reborn as a hot spring town.

The builders, having finished another big job, finally relaxed by soaking in the hot springs and drinking alcohol.

"*Whew...* Never thought a bath'd be so good!"

"Sure feels like luxury, aye! Nice and comfy in a way you just don't get from a sauna. I can't get enough of it!"

"A good bath after a job's really something else! I have to tell the missus about this. It's something special."

Baths were the new big thing among the workers.

And this one was an open-air bath.

The pleasantly hot water and the freedom of bathing outdoors had them in high spirits.

Zelos, however, couldn't bring himself to fully enjoy the hot spring.

"I *still* can't go back..." he murmured. "How'd things end up like this? I... I wonder if Luceris is worried about me?"

Everywhere he looked, it was beefy laborers as far as the eye could see. Honestly, he was getting sick of the sight—it was all lacking grace, flowers, colors.

The natural beauty of the snowy landscape was its one saving grace, but most of it was hidden behind macho men guzzling grog. It was just the worst. There was no way he could appreciate the delicate beauty of the scenery like *this*.

"Baths really are good!" Taka said. "Even if the whole thing bein' full of muscly guys ain't ideal..."

"How can you even relax like this, Taka? The best part about hot springs is having a big one all to yourself, and just *relaxing*..."

"What do you mean, 'all to yourself'? I'd want my wife in there with me too, obviously! And hey, there are some guys who'd rather be with other guys too."

"Just drop dead, you lucky bastard... You know, I could see someone turning this scene into a certain kind of doujinshi, and I don't like it. Oh—speaking of which, a certain theocracy's spreading the word about those sorts of *proclivities*, if you weren't aware."

"Ah... Yeah, could've guessed. An old acquaintance said they heard something once about that kind of work going on."

"Someone needs to stop them. That rotten culture's starting to infect every country on the planet now. Metis is printing and selling those books en masse, and putting them right where little kids can see them..."

"Shit... What am I gonna do if *my* kids end up holing themselves up inside and drawing porn books about big beefy gay dudes?! Think we should destroy Metis while we still have the chance?"

"I *strongly* agree with you on that... Well, if what you're worried about *does happen*, I hope you'll accept them like a proper father."

"*Noooooooooo!!!*"

A certain theocracy was approving materials that could cause a real nuisance for average families.

It was bound to become an international issue sooner or later.

Anyway... I wonder why they were summoning heroes so often in the first place? Historically, religions seeking out more power is nothing new, but I can't imagine those carefree goddesses would be interested in actual power. Wait—maybe the gods were summoning heroes to try to spread Earth's culture here? That seems entirely plausible... No, no. There's no way...

Zelos wondered whether the Four Gods and the humans behind the summonings had different objectives.

Metis used the heroes to expand its own authority by exerting military pressure on surrounding nations. Considering the hedonistic nature of the Four Gods, though, Zelos wondered whether there might have been a misalignment between the motives of the humans and their gods.

Humans always revered the powerful beings they called gods and did their best to weave coherent religions based on them as best they could. It had been no different here; humans had recognized the Four Gods as gods because humans, in comparison, were weak.

But flip things around for a moment—how did this world and its inhabitants look to the Four Gods?

They probably think it's a tedious, boring world with no entertainment... Maybe that's *why they kept summoning heroes? Buuuuuut if that's the case, it's hard to say they've really succeeded in advancing civilization here. No surprise there. There's no way a bunch of teenagers could suddenly advance an entire culture.*

Zelos shook his head.

At the same time, I can see why they wouldn't want to summon adults; modern adults might see the gods as dangerous beings. And the gods wouldn't want their summoned heroes to start plotting against them. There's also the question of technology—it's hard to imagine anyone being able to reproduce all of Earth's modern technology in a world like this. And even if the heroes could *do that, the Faith would be troubled if they got more public support than the religion itself...so ultimately, the heroes just get turned into blunt instruments of war, and that's that. The gods themselves probably see their believers as convenient tools in the same way... That'd be why they don't bother managing things themselves. Actually, maybe they never intended to manage anything in the first place...*

Putting together the bits and pieces of information he'd collected so far, Zelos surmised that putting pressure on surrounding nations through military and diplomatic might was probably the humans' plan, while constantly summoning heroes to create a more entertaining playground was probably the Four Gods' plan.

He didn’t know exactly how often the gods sent revelations, but going by what he knew of the Four Gods’ personalities, he couldn’t imagine any of them were decent.

The Holy Land was waging war on the Artom Empire and coercing the Kingdom of Isalas through diplomacy. Both were pretty standard national strategies, by historical standards, but they hardly seemed like the kind of thing those hedonistic Four Gods would come up with.

In fact, things started to make a lot more sense for Zelos when he compared those gods with his own older sister—Sharanla, previously Remi Osako.

The crux of the question was: How had they managed to dump the Dark God in another world?

And the answer, as far as Zelos could tell, was probably that the Four Gods at least interacted somewhat with gods from other worlds.

They’d disposed of the Dark God in another world, right when it was about to return. The other gods’ grievances about that were then what had seen Zelos and the other victims reincarnated here—and judging by all that, it seemed rational for Zelos to assume that the Four Gods were capable of playing around in worlds managed by other gods.

In other words, the Four Gods might well have experienced various cultures from other worlds.

There was a real chance they’d immersed themselves in the sophisticated culture of another world, then tried to thoughtlessly advance the level of civilization in *this* world to replicate it here. It wasn’t like they were busy properly managing the world anyway, so they had the free time to do whatever they wanted.

Compare that to Remi: One time, back in her high school days, she’d entered a friend’s house without permission, covered the floor with trash, and left pretending she knew nothing about it. Before that little incident, she’d had quite a few friends, and a wide network of relationships—but *after* the incident, nobody bothered with her.

Zelos *still* didn’t know why she’d done it in the first place...

If he had to guess, he figured it had probably had something to

do with a guy. Maybe his sister had spread trash around her friend's room to get rid of someone she saw as competition. Even then, Remi had been tricking random guys, getting them to treat her to meals and gift her jewelry; she hadn't given a damn. After going through those motions time and time again, the idea of ever working a proper job had started to seem ridiculous to her.

Back to the Four Gods, now: After playing around in a world far more advanced than their own, how would they feel upon seeing their own world again? Surely, they'd be incredibly jealous of the *other* world, full of all sorts of entertainment.

It wouldn't be strange, then, if they began resenting their own world's lack of cultural progress, and took a lazy, high-handed approach to solving the "issue" by forcing summoned heroes to spur on cultural progress for them.

So that's *why they're desperate for entertainment! Yeah, I should definitely assume they know about my world's culture—or at least, some world a lot like it. And I can't imagine that lot, who're obsessed with pleasure and always causing trouble, would be able to tolerate the level of civilization in this world. Especially if they're into* that *sort of thing...*

It was merely a hypothesis, but it was a hypothesis he was confident in.

That was just how much the Four Gods resembled Remi, personality-wise.

There was no end to their selfishness, their egos, their irresponsibility. And they were all equally messed up in the head.

Now that the Faith of the Four Gods can't summon heroes anymore, its military strength will probably plummet over the coming years. With healing magic becoming widespread, priests will be worth a lot less too, and the Four Gods will be starved for entertainment now that they can't summon heroes. I bet they're probably all sulking right about now... Then sooner or later, Metis's internal affairs will get worse, and the Faith will probably lose its followers, huh? So supposing that the Four Gods' aim is to advance civilization here, I'm very *interested to see how they'll stop their pawns from falling to ruin...*

No longer would the Holy Land of Metis be able to use summoned heroes for military might, nor would it be able to flaunt the status of healing magic it called holy magic. If the Holy Land continued putting political pressure on its neighbors, those neighbors would just band together all the more.

The country's military was still in pretty good shape, but the surrounding countries' combined might could stand up to it if they came together.

In other words, Metis was surrounded by enemies.

"They've lost their edge," Zelos said. "I know nothing lasts forever, but it's still something to see it happen."

"We've gotta *destroy* them," Taka replied. "Burn the whole country to a crisp... Mmm. Maybe I'll ask *them* to help too. And get the other heroes on board... Yes, yes... *Heh heh heh heh...*"

"U-Uh... Hello? Taka? You're kind of scaring me here..."

As Zelos mulled over this and that, the former hero next to him was obsessing over the downfall of the tyrannical theocracy.

Perhaps it went no further than a parent concerned for his children, refusing to overlook those who were spreading dirty books far and wide.

"Well, I think I've been soaking for long enough," Zelos said. "Now that work's finally done, I intend to take a proper rest."

"Yeah, sounds good. I think I'm startin' to get lightheaded in here anyway. Y'know, once this next job's done, I think I'll head back to the family for a bit. Gotta make sure there aren't any dirty books floatin' around."

"You know, the way you say that makes it sound like a death flag... Don't you think your kids will resent you if you force your way into their rooms and look through all the things they don't want you to see? Being hated by your own kids is some serious emotional damage."

"Don't even make me think about it... Anyway, I'm seriously worried, okay?! As much as I don't wanna see my daughter get married off to some guy, I couldn't stand to see her turning into some shut-in fujoshi either!"

Zelos left the bathhouse, praying that Taka wouldn't arrive home

only to find his fears had already come true.

Behind him, the dwarves continued drinking. Even if they drank the night away in the hot spring, they wouldn't get drunk, and it wouldn't strain their hearts or livers in the slightest.

Zelos couldn't help but feel a little jealous of their resilience.

With Zelos gone, the dwarves proceeded to drink the other laborers under the table.

He'd made a successful escape.

*

Zelos's next job began out of the blue the next morning.

"Is there a mage by the name of Mr. Zelos here? Duke Solistia has requested that he provide guard duties!"

"Oh—Zelos, eh? Aye, he's here. Hey! Zelos! A knight's here for you. Something about work?"

"Ah, right—Mr. Creston asked me to escort a diplomat to the capital of the Artom Empire, didn't he?"

As Zelos spoke, the knight shot him an indignant look.

That flicker of annoyance only created a little ripple of mana, but Zelos's Detect Mana picked up on it all the same.

Creston might've been from a ducal family, but he was also of royal blood. Perhaps it was only natural that Zelos referring to him simply as *Mr.* might have been seen as disrespectful.

"I'm Zelos, by the way. So they're sending the diplomat already, eh? They sure don't waste any time... I guess it goes to show how much of a nuisance the Holy Land's being, huh?"

"A lowly *mage* doesn't need to speculate about matters beyond his station! Just follow your orders and work as a guard like you were told!"

"You know, I've heard mages and knights were on bad terms, but...is it seriously *this* bad? Is Solistia really going to be okay?"

"I thought I told you to stop giving commentary. Just focus on your duties!"

This was one haughty knight.

It went to show just how large a gulf existed between the military

and the Order of Mages.

"So—Duke Delthasis didn't give you anything to pass on to me? If I'm taking this on as a proper job, then there should be a written request, no?"

"*Ngh...* Here."

Zelos took the document, glanced over it, and put it in his inventory.

"Okay, that's all in order. By the way, I'm aware you guys don't like mages, but don't lump me in with Solistia's state mages, please. We'll both be guards here; it'll be important to work together. Just treat me normally, like a mercenary. That should help us avoid any unnecessary tensions."

The moment Zelos said "work together," the guard's attitude suddenly changed; he clearly understood Zelos wasn't the average member of the Order of Mages.

"I— Sorry," he said. "I suppose I got you mixed up with the mages from the royal palace. I owe you an apology. Things have been getting better lately, but a lot of the country's top mages are still really arrogant."

Before the recent reforms, most of the Order of Mages had never even *considered* collaborating with the Order of Knights; they'd acted entirely of their own accord. They'd always looked down and even ridiculed the knights.

Of course, even *after* the reforms, some mages remained adversarial, and so the prejudice persisted.

But having realized his bias, the knight bowed his head in apology, owning up to his mistake.

"Oh, no, I'm not bothered. Anyway—let's get going, shall we? And with that... Nagri, I'm off to a different job now. You'll be fine getting the rest done without me, right?"

"Aye. We're past the worst of it. We'll manage the rest ourselves. Be careful out there. I hear there's some dangerous stuff where you're going."

"I will. I'll do my best to be a proper guard."

Zelos gave Nagri a casual wave, then accompanied the knight to a small public square in Lysagr.

Waiting there were an eight-horse carriage and knights taking care of the horses. And they *were* all knights—not a single mage in sight.

"No other mages, huh?"

"His Grace requested a diplomatic mission. The Order of Mages didn't like the sound of that, so they probably refused to send any mages out of spite."

"Uh... This is supposed to be an important mission for the country, right? Have things between the mages and the knights really gotten that bad here? I'd heard things were getting better, but..."

"His Majesty is concerned about it too. See, the mages in the old guard keep complaining; apparently they hold a grudge against the Solistia faction for not giving them first rights to the new, more efficient spells the faction started selling."

"Ah, yes... The Order of Mages must've lost out on income, no? The duke's very good at what he does, so I bet he wasted no time dealing a blow to the other factions. I'm guessing their losses are quite extensive, hmm?"

"Honestly, we knights appreciate it. Those old fogeys don't understand the battlefield. There's no *way* they could put together a proper military strategy. Anything that shuts them up is welcome by us."

"I get what you're saying. It sounds like magic's all they can do, like they're not capable of fighting up close and personal. How are they even supposed to protect themselves? I swear..."

Knights and mages had a close relationship within the Duchy of Solistia. They had a system of military cooperation between them, which seemed natural to Zelos.

But that wasn't the case in the country at large. Elsewhere in the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, the Order of Mages—intent on securing more military power for themselves—clung to their delusional belief that magic was the be-all and end-all and outright refused to listen to the Order of Knights.

It made Zelos realize the Duchy of Solistia must have been special.

"Well, well... It looks like you really *are* different from the other mages. And with how much you seem to know, it's surprising you're a commoner. Say, would you be interested in joining the special forces division of Solistia's Order of Knights? His Majesty is always looking for new talent."

"I, uh... Don't think I'd be great at dealing with royal court stuff. I'd rather just devote myself to my research, at my own pace."

"That's a shame. That said, I wish those court mages were as modest as you... Well, that's about enough talking for now. I look forward to working with you." The knight moved to the carriage door and spoke to a noble inside: "Earl Ilhans? I have brought Mr. Zelos."

But there was no response.

Zelos and the knight gave each other a look.

"Uh..."

After a moment, they received a curt reply: "Get in the carriage posthaste, if you could. I can't take my hands off this right now. Also, a request: I would like to reach the capital as quickly as possible."

"O-Of course..."

Zelos looked back at the knight. "So, uh... Do we just hop in, then?"

"If those are the earl's wishes, then yes. Let's hurry up and get in the carriage."

"All right, then. Excuse me..."

Zelos opened the door to the carriage and saw a high-strung-looking man in his twenties mired in paperwork.

He turned to a new page in his ledger and compared it to the previous page, scouring them for inconsistencies or opportunities for trade and profit. Then he sighed, turned to a new page, and repeated the process.

"Pleasure to meet you," Zelos said. "I'm—"

"Don't bother with introductions. I'm too busy for that right now... This mission could decide the fate of the nation. Get in. I don't want to waste another moment getting to Asuura."

"Of course..."

Earl Ilhans was completely unapproachable—all work and no play.

"Well, then, excuse me."

The moment Zelos hopped inside the carriage, the horses let out a neigh and began to run.

Even as the carriage started to roll along, Earl Ilhans remained immersed in his work, saying nothing.

It seemed like Zelos had gone straight from a busy job to one with a whole lot of downtime.

He quickly grew bored inside the carriage...

But on the carriage rolled, making its way to the capital of the Artom Empire: Asuura.

*

Let's go back a few hours to a fortress within the Holy Land of Metis, along the border of the Artom Empire.

The fortress existed to intercept monsters that appeared from the Far-Flung Green Depths, and as a potential base from which to launch an invasion of Artom.

The Far-Flung Green Depths stretched into the mountainous parts of the Artom Empire too, but monsters from there usually passed through a canyon called the Scar of the Dark God, which eventually funneled them into the plains on the other side.

The problem was the *strength* of those monsters. They were so powerful that they posed a threat even to the heroes.

If monsters did emerge for whatever reason, Metis's Order of Paladins had no choice but to devote everything it had toward fighting them off.

That was a key reason behind the existence of this defensive base: Shtomar Keep.

And currently, assorted figures from the Order of Paladins were holding a meeting with some teen boys and girls in a room of the keep.

One boy, voicing the question his companions all had on their minds, asked a paladin for clarification: "A... A highway? What do you mean?"

"Yes. They've built it just recently, weaving its way through the

mountains. Apparently it connects to the neighboring country."

"I don't get what's so important about that, though... Do we really need to do anything about it?"

The boy's status was higher than that of the knights.

Of *course* it was. He was one of the heroes summoned from another world.

Heroes were reportedly so strong that they were a match for a thousand soldiers; the average opponent wouldn't even stand a chance against them. Their importance granted them all sorts of favorable treatment.

"Are you asking us to destroy the road? But...why?"

"The *demons* will be able to use that road to trade with their neighbors. And of course, that includes the Kingdom of Isalas, which we're exerting political pressure on at the moment. It would be nigh impossible to destroy the nation of sinners with that road in place."

"Aren't they really strong? Are you sure we can even beat 'em, the way we are now? The last time we tried invading, Iwata's stupid plan got a bunch of us killed! And we're stretched thin already."

"Yeah! He's right! And if they call monsters on us again, we'll get wiped out this time for sure. Those monsters will be lurking nearby right now. And we don't have enough people to split up our forces."

"That may be true, but we *must* do something about this highway, or our entire nation will be surrounded by enemies. Our neighbors are refusing to acknowledge our righteousness."

The Order of Paladins's scouts had recently reported finding a brand-new highway winding its way through the mountains near the Aurus River before disappearing farther into the mountains.

This road took advantage of the surrounding terrain, making it difficult to attack.

"So it's surrounded by steep cliffs... How do you propose we even get there? And let's say we *do* destroy it—won't that only make more people hate Metis? Besides, where does the road even lead?"

"It may further antagonize our neighbors, yes—but we'll deal with the consequences of that when the time comes. Our more immediate concern is that if the demons ally with their neighbors, they'll be able to rival us militarily. As for your final question—the

road seems to continue into the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz. It turns into what's called a deepway—an underground road."

The top brass of the Holy Land of Metis were in a real panic.

Until now, they'd coerced their neighbors with threats. But now, with the Grand Temple of Malthander destroyed, all their plans had started to fall apart. The country was in disarray.

The "Arrow of Judgment" had left the country full of wounded people, and now, any priests, pastors, and paladins who could use healing magic were rushed off their feet healing all the wounded.

Reconstruction efforts were taking too long, and the damage was only getting worse with every passing day. The country's leaders were inevitably slower than usual in responding to their neighbors' suspicious movements.

They couldn't do anything, even against foreign countries that had begun clearly opposing Metis. And so they were forced to use their final trump card: the heroes.

The paladins gathered here, by the way, weren't aware that the Grand Temple of Malthander had been destroyed.

They were just following orders from their higher-ups.

"There are also rumors they've worked together to develop healing magic of their own."

"Healing magic, huh? I mean...isn't that fine? The more people who can use healing magic, the more people who'll get the help they need. I don't see the problem with that."

"What are you *talking* about?! The existence of any other healing magic would be a repudiation of our own holy magic! People would lose their belief in the Faith!"

"Their *belief*, huh... *Pfft.* You just mean that if mages make their own healing magic, holy magic won't be worth as much anymore, right? People might even start saying mages' holy magic and priests' healing magic are the same thing... *That's* why you're panicking, isn't it?"

"M-Miss Himejima! You mustn't say such things!"

Officially, the Holy Land maintained that healing magic—or *holy* magic—could only be used by believers of the Faith of the Four

Gods. If mages had developed healing magic of their own, it would be a completely different discussion. And if believers started to have doubts—*Wait, is holy magic actually the same as any other kind of magic?*—then that alone could shake their faith altogether.

When the Faith of the Four Gods had used its exclusive access to holy magic as proof of its legitimacy, even the smallest crack in that argument could lead to its downfall.

After all, holy magic was a real moneymaker. Countless priests were out there healing people, and the money they received went toward the Holy Land's national budget.

If some other place started to sell healing magic, the priests would be forced to significantly lower their healing fees, dealing a huge economic blow to Metis.

"You know, we honestly don't give a damn what happens to your country, okay?"

"H-Himejima! You're going too far!" one of the other heroes cried, before turning back to the paladins. "Sorry about her. She's been pretty on edge lately..."

"No, don't worry about it... I'm aware that big defeat changed her."

"Yeah! Besides, if Metis disappeared, we'd be out in the cold, y'know? It's the only country with a summoning sigil too. If something *did* happen to Metis, how would we get home?"

"Do you really think we *can* go home? What makes you so confident that all the heroes who died here are living normal lives back in our old world now? I don't believe a single thing they've told us."

"Himejima! You can't—"

Yoshino Himejima, said to be one of the five strongest heroes, had gone through a personality shift.

She'd been a diligent, quiet girl when she was first summoned to this world against her will. During the invasion of the Artom Empire, she'd fought against someone who seemed like an enemy general. She'd seen her friends—including a boy she'd been close with for so many years—disappear before her eyes.

Ever since that day, she'd been consumed by revenge, which had

transformed her personality to such an extent that her companions no longer knew how to handle her.

"If only Ichijo were here... She went off to find information on the Dark God, yeah? We can't handle Himejima ourselves."

"Not much we could've done about that. Some of us aren't as suited to fighting, including Ichijo. She's more of a support role."

"As long as I get the chance to kill that general, Metis can fall to ruin for all I care."

"H-Hey!"

"She's got it bad... Fine. We'll include Himejima in our plan. Maybe she'll be able to get her revenge that way."

"What do we do about *those*? Do we take them with us? Just in case?"

"Yeah, let's bring them. There's no telling what could happen out there, and they could be a good card up our sleeves."

The heroes quickly wrapped up the discussion and accepted the mission to sabotage Artom's new highway.

It was only thanks to the Holy Land's patronage that they were able to survive here. If the Holy Land fell, they wouldn't be able to survive out in the world by themselves.

They lived in an information bubble, told nothing more than what they needed to know, so they had little knowledge from which to make their own decisions. It left them afraid of going out into the big, wide world.

"We're the *heroes*, dammit! We're chosen by the gods..."

"I'm not so sure about that. Keep believing what they tell you, and you'll be nothing but their useful little pawn until the day you die."

"Hey, Himejima... Why do you never trust anyone anymore?"

"If the Dark God really does exist, I wish it'd just destroy this entire world. It should all just disappear. Every last thing here..."

Yoshino had already lost her will to live. She could only cling to her rage and burning desire for revenge, both strong enough to ruin her. She was so far gone that the voices of her companions could no longer reach her; in fact, she didn't even consider them companions any longer.

"W-Well, one way or another... We appreciate your accepting this mission. Please, go and thwart the wicked plans of the nonbelievers. Let them taste the will of the Gods!"

"Leave it to us! We'll show them what justice looks like!"

"Ooh... We would be most appreciative, Sir Kannagi. Gods bless you."

With that, the heroes left the meeting room to prepare for battle.

The heroes confidently believed that they and their actions were *just*.

Or...perhaps they merely *wanted* to believe it.

*

As they left the room, Satoru Kannagi called out to Yoshino.

"Himejima!"

"What?"

"What you did back there? Not a good idea. However much you may think it, you can't be so openly hostile and say stuff that'll force the priests into a corner. Who knows what they could do."

"Don't care. We all already knew they were suspicious, no? I don't see the point of sugarcoating it. Besides, everything they're talking about is just politics. The gods won't have anything to do with it."

"Even so, saying stuff like that is *dangerous*—you get that, right? If you're not careful, the believers could slaughter every last one of us..."

"That's fine by me. It's not like we can get back to our old world anyway. They all looked away when we talked about the summonings. They're hiding something, I just know it."

Yoshino wasn't unaware of the exaggerated kindness the priests had shown them lately. Ever since the earthquake, the priests had started giving the heroes more special treatment than ever before.

Going by how the priests were acting, Yoshino figured something had happened to Maha Luthert, the capital of the Holy Land. Something the heroes weren't supposed to know.

"I don't know what it is, but they're hiding *something*. Right up

until recently, they were trying to force us to support everything Metis does, but these last few weeks, they've stopped pressuring us about that. In fact, they've started taking really good care of us—way more than they need to. Something big must've happened."

"Even if that's true, maybe they're just trying to not worry us? Why do you have to antagonize them so much? What happened to Kazama's not their fault, right?"

"It *is*! If they had never summoned us in the first place, Kazama wouldn't be *dead* right now! And it's not just him! There's Yuri, and Hiromi... It's *these* bastards' fault that everyone's dead!"

"What? Isn't that *Iwata's* fault?! If he hadn't been the one in charge, then—"

"You've completely given up on trying to see past the wool over your eyes, haven't you? Or maybe you *know* they're deceiving you, but you're so happy with the status quo that you let it happen."

"*Ngh?!*"

Satoru couldn't look Yoshino in the eyes.

After all, out of all the heroes, he'd been the happiest to see Yoshino's childhood friend Takumi Kazama die.

That was because he kind of had feelings for Yoshino. But Takumi's death had had the *opposite* effect Satoru had wanted—it had turned Yoshino into a martyr with a death wish.

Instead of unifying them, Takumi's death had made them grow further and further apart, leaving Satoru feeling dejected and alone.

"He's *gone* now!" Satoru shouted. "And there's no point spending all your time thinking about someone who's dead!"

"Maybe that's how *you* see the world, but stop trying to push your own values onto me."

"Wha—?!"

Yoshino's cold words had stopped Satoru in his tracks.

In fact, it wasn't just her words—it was also her icy stare. Her eyes were full of contempt, like she was looking at human garbage.

"When Takumi first said this world seemed suspicious, you were the first to disagree, weren't you? Were you that desperate to be a hero? Were you that excited about killing people?"

"N-No! I— I just..."

"And you're the leader now, right? Good for you. You get to be a hero. But stop trying to force your ideals onto me. You're just being a nuisance."

"That's not it! Himejima, I *lov*—"

"I know. My heart's been taken this whole time. I'm sorry. I can't be in that sort of relationship with you. Not now. Not *ever*."

Satoru had already known what her answer would be, but it was still a harsh way to be rejected.

He really did have feelings for Yoshino—but he'd always been unfriendly toward Takumi, the otaku boy who had been Yoshino's childhood friend.

And his attitude had only earned him Yoshino's revulsion.

Sure, Takumi had always been something of an otaku, and weak in a fight. Even after being summoned as a hero, his comrades had kept him at a distance, figuring he'd have been useless in battle anyway.

But Takumi's knowledge from light novels had driven him to have doubts about the Holy Land of Metis, and he'd provided mental and emotional support for Yoshino, one of the five strongest heroes.

Back during the invasion of the Artom Empire, he'd been the first to detect the enemy's trap and warn his comrades. And when they'd fallen into it nonetheless, he'd put himself in harm's way to protect the others, saving half the heroes' lives. He was almost like the protagonist of some heroic tale.

At first, when Takumi had died, Satoru had secretly been happy. It was only later that Satoru realized just how large a hole Takumi had left—and when he did, he came to regret his joy. Takumi's death had turned Yoshino into a completely different person, consumed by revenge.

To Yoshino, Satoru's voice was nothing but annoying *noise*. Knowing that Satoru had despised Takumi out of envy, Yoshino had come to view him with just as much contempt as she viewed Iwata, another hero.

Still, she was Satoru's first love, and it hurt him to see her change like this.

"I wonder what Kazama would say if he saw you now, Himejima."

"What a cliché way of trying to convince me. Still, well—probably something like 'This isn't like you, Yoshino. I much prefer your usual self.' I know that much. But he's gone now."

"If you can accept he's gone, then why do you keep going on about revenge?! If you really care about him, then—"

"Don't talk like you were close to him. What would you even know? You aren't Takumi, and you can never replace him."

Satoru just flinched.

Nothing he said had any effect.

"I decide what I want to do, not you, Kannagi. Are you finished? Good. Then I'm going."

"Wai—!"

But he couldn't stop her.

It was true that he'd wished for Takumi's death—and his wish had already been granted.

Even if what followed wasn't what he'd had in mind.

"Fucking Kazama... Still getting in my way, even after he's dead..."

Whoever said death was the final goodbye?

In the right circumstances, the living could be slaves to the dead for life.

Yoshino's feelings for Takumi had been incredibly strong—so when he'd died, her reaction had been just as strong. That had led to the situation she was in now. Nobody could convince her at this point.

She cared for nothing now but dying on the battlefield of revenge.

*

After the heroes began preparing for their attack, a head priest met with the leader of the Order of Paladins in an office at Shtomar Keep.

Their stern expressions made it clear they were talking about something serious.

"The summoning room—the *entire Grand Temple*—was

destroyed?! Does that mean we can't summon any more heroes?!"

"Yes. We've been ordered to treat the heroes even better than before. Now that we can't summon any more of them, we can't afford to lose the ones we have now. They're our biggest military asset."

"What a disaster... And now there are people out there stronger than even the heroes, you say? 'Reincarnators,' was it?"

"That's what His Holiness believes. They have the technology and knowledge to create powerful weapons—and it's thought that same power might have been behind the defeat of the hero named Iwata."

"I... I can hardly believe it. What has brought this situation upon us..."

From what the head priest was saying, it sounded like these 'reincarnators' had been sent by the gods from some other world.

But that would also mean that the Four Gods had accepted those reincarnators into their own world, into *this* world. If so, the pair didn't know why they would then become hostile to the Faith.

"We don't know *what* the evil gods of other worlds are thinking. All we know for sure is that these reincarnators see us as an enemy—and that they're working to destroy us."

"Is it really okay to not tell the heroes about the reincarnators?"

"On the off chance any reincarnators run into any heroes, we wouldn't want the heroes getting lured over to their side. Remember, they're our biggest assets; losing them would be the worst-case scenario, no?"

"But we have a new weapon. The heroes called it a...'matchlock,' I believe?"

"It has its weaknesses, though. And we don't have enough of them to make up for those weaknesses."

Some heroes' technological know-how had helped them create a very effective new weapon: the matchlock. It could fire at a much longer range than bows, making it possible to attack enemies without retaliation by outranging them. It was probably revolutionary enough to turn the whole war around.

The cord used in the firing mechanism was hard to light when it was raining, and it took a while to reload. But even with those

drawbacks, there were high hopes for the new weapon, especially in defensive battles.

That was another reason they needed enough numbers.

"If we can mass-produce them, the Holy Land will have an edge over other countries again, at least while the technology is still obscure."

"I can't help but get a bad feeling about it, though. Especially since there's no knowing whether the reincarnators might be doing the same thing..."

That was met with silence.

If these reincarnators had come from the same world as the heroes, then there was certainly a chance some of *them* might know about these firearms as well.

And if one of those reincarnators had made high performance firearms for another country, Metis would lose its military edge once again.

They couldn't help but worry about what the newly appeared Sage might do.

"At the end of the day, they're heretics. If any of them appear, we need simply show them the will of the Gods..."

"But mightn't the Sage know about the firearms' weaknesses too? If that's the case, it might be fair to say we don't have an advantage at all."

"What an irritating problem... Speaking of which, I'd like you to *purify* that girl."

"Oh—Himejima? She *is* a threat, yes. Understood... I'll assign some members of the Crimson Cabal to join the heroes."

"Please do. We cannot allow faith to waver. Times are tough, but we must persevere..."

Sinister plans were brewing behind the heroes' backs.

Plans formulated by blind believers, so convinced of their own righteousness that they didn't even consider the opinions of others. They were so true to their faith that it had become something *wicked*.

All the while, they didn't realize just how evil their own actions were.

They didn’t even think they were in the wrong.

And in the crosshairs of their malice was a single girl, seized by despair.

Chapter 12: Yoshino Himejima Remembers

A year ago, during the early stages of Metis's invasion of the Artom Empire, things were going splendidly for Metis. They met little resistance, and gained significant ground using their overwhelming numbers.

The invasion was going faster than they'd expected; they'd already gained control over territory reaching almost the center of the Artom Empire. It seemed like just one more push was all they'd need to ensure their victory.

But one hero was opposed to making that final push.

His name was Takumi Kazama. He was the only mage out of all the heroes, and he was the weakest of the lot.

Perhaps because of that, his words held far less sway than those of the other heroes, and the priests were biased against him for being a mage. But with each passing day, his expression grew darker and darker—and one of the other heroes, Yoshino Himejima, was getting worried as she watched over him.

Takumi was currently visiting the troop headquarters to see Sadamitsu Iwata, a fellow hero who led the invasion plans.

After collecting and analyzing a bunch of data, Takumi had grown suspicious. The invasion was going *too* smoothly.

Consequently, he thought they might be heading straight into a trap—that was why he'd come here. To warn Sadamitsu. But...

"Huh? I don't need your 'it might be a trap' bullshit! Who even cares? If it's a trap, we run straight at it and fucking *smash their trap to pieces*. It's that simple. What are you, a moron?"

"Don't you find it strange, Iwata? Every town and village we've come across has been abandoned. The people took their food with them and left us nothing to take advantage of!"

"*Pfft!* Bet they just pissed their pants and ran when they heard we were comin'. Anyway, none of that shit matters. We've got the perfect opportunity."

"How are you so confident this 'opportunity' isn't just a trap? Always anticipate the worst-case scenario. That's just common sense in war!"

"You're gettin' too big for your britches, y'know. Who do you think you're talkin' to? There's no one stronger than the heroes, right? And *I'm* the strongest hero. These demons are gonna be *nothin'* against me."

Sadamitsu refused to listen to Takumi's warning.

Takumi didn't back down either, for what it was worth. But, eventually, Sadamitsu knocked him to the ground, and that was the end of that. It was decided: The heroes and the Order of Paladins would continue their invasion.

Yoshino, who'd been watching the scene unfold, knew Takumi wasn't acting like his usual self.

Later, as she treated his injuries, she felt the need to ask: "H-Hey, Taku— I mean, Kazama... Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Damn it—Iwata's an idiot, but he hits hard, I'll give him that..."

"Why did you go to see him in the first place? Usually, you try to steer clear of him..."

"The enemy's being suspicious. Surprise attacks from the sky, abandoned towns and villages... On the surface, it might look like we're winning, but there must be something we're missing. Something big."

"Something we're missing? What do you mean? And, I mean...once this war's over, we get to go home, right? Shouldn't we keep going while we have the advantage?"

Takumi's expression clouded. "I'm...not so sure about that," he said ominously. "I can't trust those priests. I... I think they're using us."

Yoshino paused. "Why is that? Do you have any proof?"

"The hero summonings, for one. Why do you think they don't summon any adults? I looked into it, and everyone they've

summoned has been our age or a little older. I mean, there were *some* adults, but...they died in 'accidents.'"

"Huh? So you're saying... But wait. Didn't they tell us younger people were better at adapting to being summoned?"

"Better at adapting? Hah. *Anyone* can adapt as they learn a few skills. I don't see why they'd have to be kids. And I can't get over the fact that *every* adult who's been summoned has died in an accident."

"What are you getting at?"

"The Holy Land probably just *got rid of* any adults who were summoned and made it *look* like accidents. I'm almost certain: There are *assassins* around us."

"B-But... Wait... Does that mean they're watching us right now?"

"We...probably shouldn't talk about that any further. And as for why they'd choose teenagers—it has to be because they're the perfect age for brainwashing. Spoil them enough, and they'll get used to it and stop thinking for themselves. Plus—this is a world of swords and magic, you know? Kids dream of being someone special. Someone like a hero. Give them a taste of glory and they'll get addicted. Which is perfect for whoever's summoning them."

Yoshino felt her spine stiffen at Takumi's words.

The priests certainly did spoil the heroes—especially those with powerful skills, like Sadamitsu. Their pampering ranged from simple financial support to more unsavory things, like providing the male heroes with women to keep them warm at night. The clergymen certainly didn't *act* very holy.

The treatment had made Sadamitsu increasingly arrogant. He had every possible luxury at his fingertips and felt no shame taking full advantage of them.

It could also be seen like this: The clergy were coaxing the heroes into a situation where the heroes wouldn't be able to live without the Holy Land's backing.

"Just look at Iwata and Sasaki," Takumi said. "They're completely obsessed with the lives they have now. They don't even *want* to go home anymore."

"Yeah... I get what you're saying. I've had so many merchants

coming to try to sell me jewels and dresses and stuff. They said the state would pay for everything, but it all kind of scares me, so I keep turning them down...”

“I think there’s another reason they’re spoiling us. I’m... I’m not *sure* about this, but I don’t think we *can* go home.”

“Y-You’re kidding...”

It was the last thing she wanted to hear.

“I found a file in a suspicious-looking room at the back of the library. It said pretty much all the adults who got summoned were written off as ‘accidental deaths’—there were even some nonhuman races in there too. Do you understand what that means?”

“It’d mean that...we’re not here because we were *chosen*, but because we just got picked by the summoning sigil at random?”

“Probably, yeah. Just think about it: If they’re trying to summon heroes from other worlds, how many do you think exist? Because if I had to guess, I’d say they’re almost infinite. It’d be impossible to choose specific people to summon from out of all that. At most, they could maybe specify, say, an age range and a target number of people, but then they wouldn’t be able to choose the world those people come from. Besides—summoning sigils are a mage’s realm of expertise. Priests wouldn’t even know how to use them properly.”

“Still, that’s not enough evidence to say we can’t get home, right? It’s just a theory, after all...”

“Here’s the problem: How much energy do you think they need to open up a hole in space-time? The last hero summoning before us was thirty years ago. And...there’s no record of them ever being sent back.”

Takumi was the only mage out of all the heroes, and he’d pretty much only been able to use scouting magic at that. His one and only offensive spell had been Shadow Dive.

But the Holy Land of Metis had a room where it hid spell scrolls, and Takumi had snuck in there to learn all sorts of different magic. Sure, he’d also been looking for information relating to the hero summonings at the time, but it was just a coincidence that he’d found conclusive evidence in *there*, of all places.

“B-But... But that’s...”

Takumi's words had come as a shock to Yoshino.

"It's true, though," he continued. "And I... I think they probably all died. Either that, or..."

"Or... Or what?"

"Or they were *killed*. By the people who summoned them. If they'd found out what was really going on, they might've tried to revolt. So maybe Metis just disposed of them before they could do that and summoned the next batch of heroes instead. And I'm pretty sure about one thing, at least: Metis can only summon heroes every thirty years."

"That's... That's *horrible*! How *could* they?!"

"Remember, this is all just a hypothesis. But it's possible. So there's something I want to ask of you, Yoshino..."

"What... What is it? What do you want me to do?"

Takumi had a look of incredible concern on his face. After a moment, he said, "If this invasion *does* end as badly as I think it could... I want you to take everyone and run."

"Huh? Wait. But—"

"That asshole Iwata said he'll be sending me to the front line. And I'm almost certain we're going to lose. Artom hasn't taken any military losses yet, and its soldiers are about as strong as the heroes. A whole bunch of them are Level 400 to Level 500. Makes you wonder who's *really* blessed by the gods, doesn't it..."

Takumi was referring to the winged people who lived among the mountains. The people the Holy Land of Metis called *demons*.

Given how strong they were, Takumi predicted they'd deal major damage to the heroes and the paladins. And yet, Artom still hadn't tried to mount a full-on attack. They'd just launched an endless string of aerial surprise attacks and night raids.

Takumi had to assume that it was all part of some larger plan.

"We're walking into a trap. It's like something out of a light novel—they're luring us in. They probably have some way of suddenly finishing us off out of nowhere. *That's* why they're letting their enemy get so close. It's almost like Okehazama..."

"What— You mean the Battle of Okehazama? So you're saying the Artom Empire hasn't fought back yet because—"

"Right. They're not idiots. I think they've put together a plan to make up for the difference in numbers, and that plan involves drawing us in close."

The heroes were powerful, but ultimately, they were still children. In comparison, it only made sense to assume the Artom Empire—which had fought with Metis many a time by now—had spent a long, long time figuring out the best ways to defend itself.

The problem was that Sadamitsu—the leader of Metis's invading forces—failed to understand that. He was too arrogant to listen.

The heroes might've leveled up a lot in dungeons, but they knew next to nothing about *war*.

Devising tactics, adapting to a situation as it developed—there were so many skills like that that were essential to waging war, and the heroes lacked all of them.

With that in mind, Takumi had considered the worst-case scenario and decided his best course of action was to ask Yoshino to save as many of their lives as she could, if that scenario came to pass. After all, if Takumi was sent to the front lines, there'd be nothing he could do about it himself...

"Yoshino... Please. Save as many of us as you can. Help me out with this."

"But...*me*? I'll only get in the way..."

"I can't imagine any of Iwata or Sasaki's cronies listening to a word we have to say. But work together with the supporting heroes, the ones who *aren't* being sent to the front line. Ichijo and the others. I'm getting sent off to fight tomorrow. You're the only one I can ask, Yoshino."

"O-Okay. I'll do it. But Takumi, what about..."

"I don't want to die in this world either. But if we want to survive, our only hope is to outmaneuver the priests and the paladins. Don't worry about saving *them*. I want you to run as fast as you can, even if it means abandoning them."

"But can I... Can I really do it?"

"You can. I know it. If worse comes to worst, and half of us survive, I'd call that a success. And if you do survive—escape. Get to another country."

That was the first time the two childhood friends had talked in a while—and it would also be the *last* time.

The next morning, the Order of Paladins would launch its attack, and Takumi's hypotheses would be proven right.

*

The invasion by the Order of Paladins of the Holy Land of Metis had finally reached the Artom Empire's final line of defense.

It was known as the Scar of the Dark God, an enormous canyon gouged into the mountains by some mighty power.

Attacking into terrain like *this* was certain to leave the invaders with casualties, and no gains to show for it.

After all, the cliffs served as natural defensive walls. And with the defenders using them to launch ranged attacks with bows and magic, the cliffs were almost a kind of *fort*. The forces of Metis, meanwhile, had no offensive magic of their own to strike back with.

Between the terrain advantages and the ability of the "demons" to launch one-sided aerial strikes, the Order of Paladins was suffering a considerable number of casualties. More and more of them were getting badly wounded with every passing day.

The humans might've technically been the attackers here, but they couldn't fly. They didn't have any weapons that would let them deal a decisive blow either. Put that all together, and their vanguard was struggling to make any progress.

The Order of Paladins still had the numbers, but their supply of healing and other resources was running short. Sure, their front line had made it a long way into Artom—but now, that long stretch of mountainous territory between them and Metis was wreaking havoc on their supply lines, making it difficult to replenish resources. Between that and the rapidly rising number of injured people, their forces were dwindling, and fast.

Artom, meanwhile, had no choice but to rely on magic to compensate for their lack of resources; they couldn't risk any big losses. Their only option was to harry the invaders with constant night raids and surprise attacks.

They'd managed to hold out in large part thanks to this impenetrable natural fort. If not for that, they would've almost certainly been overrun by Metis's numerical advantage already.

A stalemate stretched on for seven days.

Then, around noon on the seventh day, things finally changed.

One of the paladins noticed a huge swarm of something heading their way through the canyon, kicking up a cloud of dust as it approached.

"H-Hey... What's *that*?"

The swarm was made up entirely of monsters. Monsters that overwhelmingly outnumbered the Order of Paladins.

Even more terrifying, some of the monsters were *gigantic*—more than thirty meters long.

Before long, the monsters descended on the paladins, ending the stalemate instantly.

Hell had arrived.

"M-Monsters?! But...what the fuck *are* these things? They're stronger than us!"

"I thought nothing was supposed to be stronger than the heroes! How can monsters this strong even exist?!"

Each individual monster was insanely powerful. A troll could mow down an entire squad of paladins with a single attack; meanwhile, some of the orcs were orc lords, an extra powerful variant. The Appraisal skill showed they were about Level 700. These were heinous enemies, ones that even the heroes couldn't defeat, and they'd started to overrun the paladins.

Just like that, the invaders' front line collapsed. Many tried to flee—and as they did, they were chased, caught, and devoured by quick-moving monsters.

"H-Help m—"

"Yuri?! *NOOOOOOOOO!*"

For the first time, Yoshino witnessed the death of a friend.

Yuri—a charming, petite young girl—was trampled by a massive monster, reduced to nothing but a mangled lump of flesh.

This was no longer a battlefield. It was the monsters' hunting ground.

Meanwhile, the Artom Empire took advantage of the chaos to pepper the invaders with more attacks. This had been their plan all along: lure in their enemies, bring them to a standstill, and get a third force to intervene from behind and cause chaos, wearing down the enemy forces all while Artom stayed safe.

This final line of defense had just been a way of buying time until the monsters arrived from the Far-Flung Green Depths.

A massacre was going on everywhere you looked.

It was more than enough to shatter the illusion that the heroes were the strongest beings in the world.

The mayhem of the battlefield left Yoshino paralyzed by fear.

"Yoshino! We're running!"

"N-No... *No...*"

"Get a grip! If we stay here, we'll die too! We have to run as fast as we can! That's what Kazama said, right?!"

A cyclops was eating paladins; wolves were tearing heroes to pieces; an ogre driven by manic bloodlust was indiscriminately attacking whatever came near it.

Some monsters were even *toying* with their prey—keeping them alive while slowly tearing them limb from limb.

The heroes' spirits had been shattered.

Their underestimations of their enemies and failure to consider the reality of war had led them here.

Iwata, who'd been so cocky the whole time, was the first one to flee, while his lackeys were slain by soldiers from the Artom Empire. Next, Yoshino and the others began to flee too, running with everything they had. Everything after that was a blur.

They simply ran, frantic, not even knowing where they were running to.

Amid the chaos, one thing was clear: They had been utterly defeated by the Artom Empire.

They continued to run, terrified—and before they realized, night had fallen.

It wasn't just the heroes; the paladins had been decimated too. The huge invading force had been utterly routed. They'd all either died or fled.

"I... I can't run anymore..."

"What the hell did they mean, 'heroes are the ultimate fighters'?! We were *nothing* compared to those monsters!"

"That old Cloistered Emperor fucker... He *lied* to us."

Now that they were safely away from the danger, the heroes had started hurling abuse.

Maybe it was just the relief of escaping with their lives. But they'd forgotten: They were still in enemy territory.

"Wh—"

"Yoshimoto?!"

All of a sudden, an arrow had pierced through someone's head.

Next, a black shadow swooped down from the sky, mercilessly cutting apart a group of paladins. Fresh blood flew through the air.

The shadow flew back into the air and proceeded to fire attack magic at the survivors from a safe distance. It targeted those who were too tired to move, intent on finishing them off.

This was a ruthless attack.

"What's ha—"

"Did you think we'd let you get away? You invaded our land. Surely you knew you might die when you came here?"

It was a woman's voice.

She wore jet-black armor with a vaguely Chinese design and had black wings that flapped against the night sky.

The heroes couldn't see her face—it was covered by a mask—but they could tell this was the last person they wanted as an opponent.

And that was because...

"I... I can't even see her level..."

"No way! Wasn't the maximum level meant to be 500?!"

The heroes' Appraisal skill didn't work on her.

This phenomenon could happen between people with a significant level difference, meaning this female soldier in the sky above was *far* stronger than the heroes.

"*Hmph.* A bunch of fools who thought they were invincible because people told them they were heroes... But that doesn't matter. What matters is that if I finish you off here, our side will have the upper hand. Remember: *You* started this war. I'm sorry, but

I need you all to die.”

And so began another massacre.

The heroes were by no means weak, but this woman was just that much stronger.

With an eccentric style of swordsmanship, she cut down paladins and heroes alike—and she even had no trouble slaying the monsters that had been pursuing the heroes when they threatened to intervene. It seemed like she was on a whole other plane of existence.

In one instant, with one strike, she could end so many lives.

Blood flew through the air, filling the forest with the scent of rusty iron.

“N-No... I don’t... I don’t want to di—”

“Hiromi! Hang in there! I’m coming to save you!”

Yoshino rushed to save her friend, potion in hand. But by the time she got to Hiromi’s side, it was already too late.

Now she’d seen *another* friend die before her eyes.

“I’m not letting you live. You all underestimated the terrors of war. When you go to war, people die. That should have been obvious...but you followed your orders and came to the battlefield all the same. Now it’s time for you to realize your mistake.”

“W-We’re not here fighting because we *want* to be!”

“Then why *are* you here? ‘Because we were just following orders’ isn’t going to cut it. You tried to kill our countrymen; you participated in an invasion of conquest. Or are you telling me you’d never heard of war before? That it didn’t exist where you come from?”

“W-Well... We...”

But Yoshino couldn’t find the right words.

War had absolutely been a thing in their world. It had resulted in countless deaths over the course of history.

They knew how horrific war could be. But all the same, they’d followed orders, they’d gone to the battlefield, and their friends and allies had wound up dead.

Wars were all about killing each other. But they weren’t waged by the will of any individual soldier; they were the product of political

aims. They were fought for the benefit of those who managed the state and the government.

Whether people wanted to fight or not, once they were facing each other on the battlefield, they'd start killing each other all the same—and they also had to be prepared to die themselves. When you'd gone somewhere specifically to fight people to the death, saying *I don't want to die* was out of the question.

War was a matter of "kill or be killed."

Of hurting the enemy before they could hurt you.

Of winning by any means necessary.

History was written by the victors; your reasons, your morals, they all meant nothing if you lost.

The strong would triumph over the weak. That was all it was.

"Do you get it now? You went to war as if it were all a game—and look where it got you. You're just puppets of the Four Gods. You have no pride or convictions of your own. What a pathetic lot you are."

"How—"

"Now, I don't want any of you getting out of here alive and coming back for revenge. It's time to put you to rest..."

The woman raised her sword and swooped down at Yoshino. But...

"Not on my watch! *Flame Lance!*"

"*Ngh?!*"

Just as she was about to land the blow, she was blasted with fire magic, saving Yoshino's life.

Takumi had saved her.

He was in terrible shape, though. Blood trickled out of his open wounds. He was so badly injured that he could barely move.

"T-Takumi!"

"Run, Yoshino! I'll hold her off here. Get as far away as you can, *now*!"

"Oh? It looks like at least *one* of you has some mettle. So you're prepared to throw your own life away for the sake of your allies... Allow me to honor your noble spirit."

She held her sword horizontally, watching Takumi approach.

Gripping a knife in one hand, Takumi fired spell after spell as he drew closer. She dodged every spell and deflected every thrust of his knife with her sword.

"Hmm... So you understand your weaknesses and you've come up with all sorts of tricks to make up for them. This is a shame... If you weren't an enemy, we would've loved to have you as part of our nation."

"I'm honored. But I don't plan on dying! I don't give a damn what happens to Metis, but I'm not a big enough piece of shit to just sit by and watch you kill my childhood friend."

"It seems like you know who those heretics *really* are. Why fight for them, then?"

"I was waiting for an opportunity to take my comrades and escape. I thought about seeking asylum. Not that we ever got the chance!"

"I see..."

Takumi clenched his knife in his fist, resolved, and continued to fling spell after spell at point-blank range.

But the woman turned every attack aside with a casual swing of her sword.

Mages tended to lack physical strength, but they made up for it with their skills.

Takumi had been concealing his true potential, spending his time gathering information and training himself, all in order to survive.

But his body was at its limit. He was *forcing* himself to fight right now—and with every attack he made, he could feel his strength ebbing.

A broken rib had pierced his lung. He coughed, spitting blood. "Damn it. Being a mage feels like more of a curse in times like this..."

He'd realized he wouldn't be able to keep fighting much longer. But he couldn't find an opportunity to escape either.

"It looks like this is the end for you."

"Yeah. Looks like it... Damn it! Nothing ever goes to plan, huh... This is checkmate, I guess. Fuck..."

Between the harassment he'd received for being a mage from the priests, the paladins, and Iwata's group, he'd barely gotten access to the ingredients he could've used to make healing potions.

So far, he'd survived by making the most of what scant consumables he'd been able to get.

But now those were running out too.

He'd used up every last healing potion he had; he was left with no way of healing his wounds.

This really was the end of the line.

"Let me put you to rest."

"I really don't wanna die, honestly... But I guess this is where it ends for me. Yoshino—hurry up and *run* already! I won't last much longer!"

The whole time Takumi had been fighting, Yoshino hadn't moved a single step.

But now, finally, Nagisa Ichijo took her by the hand and forced her to start running.

"Run," Nagisa urged her. "As fast as you can. We'll only get in his way if we stay there!"

"No... *NOOOOOOOOO!*"

Pulled away, Yoshino watched as Takumi gradually disappeared from her sight.

This moment—the image of her childhood friend fighting, covered in blood—would become indelibly etched into her brain.

"Huh," Takumi said. "Not gonna chase after them?"

"Leaving you here would be an insult. And I'm not shameless enough to insult someone who fights with such pride. I'm letting them go out of respect for your bravery."

"Heh... I'm happy to hear it. Well, then... I guess we keep going a little longer, huh?"

"Very well."

Takumi continued to make ineffective attacks. As he did, he gathered the last of his mana in the palm of his hand.

Every swing, every stab of his knife was deflected, the knife never reaching its target.

But that was all part of his plan.

With the repeated attacks, Takumi's cheap knife reached its limit and shattered into pieces.

His opponent's sword swung in for a counterattack.

"It's over!"

"Yeah—for you too! *Explode!*"

"Wha—?!"

KA-BOOOOOOOOOM!

Both Takumi and the female warrior disappeared amid a huge explosion.

"No... No, no, no, no... *NOOOOOOOOO!*"

From the distance, Yoshino saw the detonation.

And then she saw black wings, flying out to escape the blaze...

"Kazama... He... He blew himself up to let us get away..."

"I never knew he was so strong. Why'd he always pretend to be so weak? Dammit..."

Takumi had managed to save those he cared about—at great cost.

From that day on, Yoshino no longer smiled. She was consumed by revenge.

*

When Yoshino came to, she was lying in a tent.

She was here on a mission to destroy a highway that had been built among the mountains of the Artom Empire.

The voices nearby probably belonged to the paladins and her fellow heroes.

She could only just make out their words, but it sounded like they'd figured out how to cross the Aurus River.

Having just woken from a nightmare, her clothes under her armor were drenched with sweat. They clung to her skin.

Out in these snowy mountains, even just catching a cold could be dangerous. A loss of body temperature could cause you to freeze to death.

"I was...dreaming? Dreaming about back then..."

She'd had that same nightmare time and time again. She knew it

well by now.

And every time she awoke, she felt happy that her lust for revenge hadn't faded.

A dark smile stretched across her face.

"Himejima! You awake?"

"Yeah. Do we know where this highway is?"

"Mm-hmm. The only problem will be getting across the river. Still...we're pathetic, aren't we? Kazama saved our lives, but we still haven't been able to escape Metis..."

"I don't think there's much we could've done. We can't be too rash when we're always being watched. Just one stupid move, and we could get poisoned to death."

A portion of the heroes no longer trusted the Holy Land of Metis. As much as they wanted to leave the country, though, they had to be careful about it.

And that was because of the chaperones stationed by their sides.

Officially, they were assistants for the heroes, but they were constantly at the heroes' sides. Even when the heroes were just going around town, they'd inevitably spot someone watching them.

"Those assholes... Still, don't you think this could be an opportunity?"

"You're right," Himejima said. "I think we should wait until the last second to make our move. Now, what's the plan for crossing the Aurus River?"

"According to the scouts, there *is* a bridge. But it's a super old one that looks like it might collapse at any moment..."

"Better than nothing. Still, don't be surprised if we lose a person or two... Ideally, we'd end up losing some of the people watching us."

"Don't get your hopes up. And don't forget—we could end up on the *other* side of those matchlocks."

"Damn Sasaki. Making those things for them. If it comes down to it..."

"What—we kill them? But what do we do about Kannagi? You think he'd go with us?"

Yoshino and a handful of the other heroes were putting together

a plan to desert the Holy Land of Metis.

Of course, Yoshino hadn't forgotten about her revenge. But this mission seemed like the perfect opportunity to both get her revenge *and* escape Metis for good.

They weren't sure they could trust Satoru Kannagi, though. They didn't know what to do with him.

"I can't see it happening... He still feels *humiliated* by the fact that Kazama saved him. If anything, I think he'll try to get in our way."

"Hence the matchlocks, huh? That fucker..."

"Anyway—break's over. The paladins will get suspicious if we don't start crossing the river."

"You're right. Well... Off we go, I guess."

Yoshino stood up, left the tent, and headed to join the rest of her companions.

From then on, they moved as a special forces unit, day and night, until they arrived at the ancient bridge.

It was so badly deteriorated that traversing it would clearly be treacherous. Yet cross it they did...with a few casualties in the process. Eventually, they arrived at the highway they were supposed to destroy.

Once they arrived, they realized a major problem.

"Wait... How are we meant to destroy *this*? We don't have any mages here!"

"We use explosives to blow it up. If it's full of holes, they won't be able to use it, right?"

"But they built this whole long stretch of road pretty quickly, right? Won't they just...fix it straightaway?"

That was met with silence.

Satoru's idea of blowing up the road with explosives was sound, but Artom had built the road in an incredibly short span of time. If they could create it that fast, it stood to reason they could repair it just as quickly.

It wasn't like the Metis forces could just camp here and sabotage the road every time it got repaired. That was the major flaw in Satoru's plan—and he only realized it now.

"If only Kazama was still alive, he probably could've done much more damage with his magic..."

"*Grr...* What's the point in talking about him? He's dead! Forget about him. Hurry up and get the explosives ready!"

"Wait! No! We need to hide, *now*!"

The would-be saboteurs rushed to hide themselves in the forest—just before a number of "demon" soldiers went flying overhead.

It looked like they were patrolling the new highway.

"So they're even guarding it... *Fuck!* Even if we manage to sabotage the road, we won't be able to escape a fight, huh?"

"That just goes to show how important this road is to them. All the more reason we have to succeed."

"What—and get ourselves surrounded and wailed on?"

The road was guarded more heavily than they'd expected.

Lookouts were flying overhead every thirty minutes. There was no way they'd be able to set up the explosives at this rate.

If they were spotted, they'd get surrounded for sure. And there weren't too many places to hide here. They were surrounded by rocky mountains.

"So, what... Is our plan already screwed?"

"Let's move farther along the road. There might be a better spot."

"It won't matter. Besides...they're *really* guarding this place heavily, aren't they? I wonder if there's something else going on too?"

The number of guards patrolling the skies made Yoshino suspicious.

The Artom Empire was a narrow, mountainous land. Their military was only so large; maintaining this state of high alert must have required a lot of effort from them.

Sure, they'd obviously want to defend the new highway, but the sheer frequency of patrols seemed disproportionate.

As Yoshino looked over the demons flying through the air, she spotted a figure she recognized.

It was the female soldier who'd fought against Takumi.

"It's her. She's there. I'm going to go after her."

"Wait! If you move now, they'll spot all of us. And Himejima...are

you *sure* it's her?"

"I'm sure. She's the one... The one who fought Takumi."

"We saw how well she fights. She has to be a commander or something. So if she's here, then...maybe there really is something important around here?"

The jet-black female soldier had struck fear into the hearts of the heroes.

Seeing as she'd been sent out alone the last time they'd encountered her, it only made sense to assume she was the best of the best of Artom's military.

There was no way someone like that would have been sent to guard a random road in an outlying region without very good reason.

"I'm going. They may be hiding some important secret just up ahead."

"Hey, Kannagi... Isn't this bad news? What do we do if we can't get back?"

"I can't imagine these are just *routine* patrols. Maybe they're clearing the road for some important emissary... That could explain this level of security. Maybe they're like the special police? Hey... What do you think would happen if we *killed* whoever they're protecting?"

"It could pit their countries against each other. But do you really think it'd go that smoothly? What if we just end up making them even more hostile to *us*? I mean, Artom probably wouldn't get anything out of killing whoever it is, so the other country might not even suspect them..."

"Whose side are you on, Himejima? Still... I think it's worth a shot. We've got *guns* now. If we just shoot them dead, getting away should be easy enough."

Satoru Kannagi was being very proactive about this off-the-cuff plan.

Even if they destroyed the highway, it wouldn't amount to much if Artom could repair it straightaway. Damaging Artom's diplomatic ties with another country, though, sounded like a promising idea. Fortunately, the special force was moving in small numbers, and

about ten of them had trained in using the guns.

"Let's do it. First, we scope out the situation—and from there, we play it by ear. If it doesn't look like we can make an attack work, we revert to our original plan. And if we hide ourselves well enough, they won't be able to find us, right?"

"You really think this'll go well?"

"Sakamoto... You're against it too, huh?"

"I'm not *against* it. I just want to make sure we can get back to our old world."

In the end, there was no dissenting opinion.

Given they were in enemy territory, they accepted that uncertainty was inevitable. Decision now made, they moved cautiously, hoping to discover what exactly lay ahead.

They walked through the forest, staying out of sight of the overhead patrols, until they came upon a glade. It had probably been intentionally cleared as a resting place for travelers.

A number of winged soldiers were gathered in the clearing, lined up in rows, and they seemed to be waiting for something.

"The scouts said there was an underground road up this way, right? Given where it is, I wonder if it leads to the Magic Kingdom of Solistia?"

"Probably. If so, I guess these guys really *are* guards for some important official... Let's get the musketeers ready. The enemy may be able to fly, but if we're shooting at them with guns, they shouldn't be able to fly around carelessly. They won't even know what these weapons *are*, after all."

"Oh! Looks like someone just got here."

The heroes spotted a single carriage, protected by knights, approaching.

It slowed down just before entering the clearing and stopped in front of soldiers from the Artom Empire. One of the Metis priests seemed to verify the coat of arms carved into the carriage's side.

"Crossing staves, an owl with its wings spread open...and a fulia blossom, a type of medicinal herb. That carriage is from the Magic Kingdom of Solistia."

"They've got a platoon of knights, and a single mage... Wait. That

mage's staff... No way. Is that a *gun*?! Look how big it is. It looks like an anti-tank rifle..."

They stared at the young nobleman who'd exited the carriage, as well as the shady-looking gray-robed mage by his side. The latter carried a huge weapon—about as tall as he was himself—that looked like a combination of a sword and a gun.

"It's got a huge blade on it too. Is that a *gunblade*?! I thought those only existed in games! Why does he have something like that? What's he even expecting to fight with that thing?"

"I'm sure Takumi would've been excited to see it... Anyway, I guess guns are a thing in Solistia too. Doesn't that mean Metis is done for?"

"Seriously?! We're screwed, then. That thing looks like it'd have rapid fire. If it uses magic to fire its bullets, it wouldn't even need gunpowder... What do we do?"

"I guess we shoot the important guy and scram, then, right?"

"Kannagi... Have you noticed? Solistia has guns. The Artom Empire doesn't even seem to know what they are. Even if we shoot the guy, Solistia won't suspect Artom. They'll suspect Metis. Plus, their forces are obviously stronger than ours. If we fight, we're not getting out of here alive."

"So they've got more advanced technology... Then I say we take out the mage and the noble first. Then all we need to do is use the forest as cover to get away."

"As long as I get to fight that woman, I'm satisfied. I don't care what comes after."

Having come so far into enemy territory, they couldn't just turn around and leave without doing anything.

But their plan was nothing more than a vague idea.

Yoshino, in particular, was fixated on getting her revenge, while Satoru—failing to keep his cool at the revelation they'd already lost their new advantage—was desperate to show results.

If the heroes had tried to use Appraisal, maybe they would've gotten at least a general idea of the situation. But the heroes were so shocked to see a gun among their enemies that they neglected even that basic step.

None of them knew just how dangerous this gray-robed mage in the clearing really was.

Chapter 13: The Old Guy Preempts an Attack

Zelos spent three days traveling in a carriage, bored out of his mind.

He had so much free time, and so little to do with it, that he ended up using transmutation to make himself a toy.

Earl Ilhans sat diagonally opposite Zelos at a table, still poring through documents. He hadn't said a single word since that first day Zelos had boarded the carriage. The silence only made the trip more boring.

There were windows to look out of, but the scenery hadn't changed from an endless view of rocky mountains and forest, as far as the eye could see.

The lack of anything else to do, then, had prompted Zelos to start with transmutation.

The "toy" he was making—the gunblade—was a project he'd left unfinished during his *Swords & Sorceries* days. He was just tinkering with whatever interested him at any given moment—making some parts, putting them together, and repeating the cycle time and time again.

Fortunately, the carriage was spacious enough that he could lay out various components, though the gunblade would probably be big enough to get in the way once he finished assembling it.

Firearms that use gunpowder just feel kind of special*. I don't have enough potassium nitrate for that, though. Come to think of it, I also haven't gone out to collect any sulfur yet, and I can't make bullets either... Guess I'll have to ignite it with a lighter.*

"Lighters" in this world were magic tools that caused a very weak explosion; they were mostly used to trigger traps. They were valued as disposable tools that could, for example, ignite a barrel full of

gunpowder. Between how simple they were to use and how widespread they'd become, they'd ended up being known simply as "lighters."

I've been chipping away at making the parts, but I'm not actually sure how powerful this thing'll be once I've put it all together. I can't imagine it'll be practical*, that much is for sure...*

The gunblade sounded good on paper; it was a sword and a magic tool combined into one. In practice, it was flawed. It was heavy, its center of gravity wasn't right for a sword, its durability wasn't great, and the bigger you made it, the harder it was to wield. Once it had become as large as an anti-tank rifle, for example, it would be prohibitively heavy regardless of what you did to keep the weight down. That made it tough to actually swing the blade. The center of gravity created by the firearm components made it poorly balanced as a melee weapon too, throwing off one's swordsmanship. Meanwhile, the complexity of the mechanical components inside made it liable to break on contact. Protecting those internal mechanisms required high-quality rare metals, which only made the weapon heavier again...

Long story short, the gunblade was defective both as a gun and a blade. But it was just so *cool*—which was why Zelos couldn't resist the temptation to make one. He wasn't *trying* to make something practical. He was trying to make something he wanted to make.

Hmm... Guns were restricted in Swords & Sorceries*, so they were always hard to make there. But this world doesn't have those restrictions. Any weapon I can dream, I can build. There's nothing to hold me back... I feel so* free*.*

As Zelos basked in his excitement, he suddenly felt someone watching him. He looked up to see Earl Ilhans studying the gunblade with curiosity.

"Erm... Can I help you with something?"

"What are you working on there?" the earl asked. "Presumably it's a weapon, but it seems like it's going to be *very* large once you've finished it..."

"You're right. Probably...about as long as I am tall, if I had to guess. Once the sword part's attached, it'll probably weigh about as

much as an ultraheavy greatsword; not many people would be able to use it. It absolutely has its problems, I'll admit that."

"Hmm... So? What's it *for*, then? Taking down enormous monsters, perhaps? But..."

"Yeah—it's for fighting dragons. The gun part is, at least. The blade part's just there because I like it."

Earl Ilhans picked up the gunblade components one by one, examining each with a serious expression.

The weapon used all sorts of advanced magic tools as components. Just seeing it all left the earl quietly astonished by the clear talent of the mage in front of him. Still, he remained composed as he analyzed the mysterious weapon.

"Ah... And that must be the schematic, I assume? It looks like a massive greatsword, but...it's more of a ranged weapon akin to a bow, yes? I'd imagine it fires metal, from the looks of it... This is splendid. I wasn't aware it was even possible to create magic tools like this."

"Unfortunately, though, it's too heavy to be any good. I daresay even your average knight wouldn't be able to wield it. It'll probably pack a hell of a punch, sure, but it'll have the recoil to match. Get the average person to fire this and it'd send them flying."

"What sort of level would you need to make proper use of it, then?"

"It's not your average weapon, so I'd assume Level 800 at the very least. Higher than that if you wanted to swing it as a sword. See, that's what I mean—it's got some real problems, as a weapon made for an individual. It's just too heavy."

"Level *800*?! I struggle to even conceive of the existence of someone so powerful... But what if one were to attach this weapon to a fortress or the like? It could be effective if it were mounted and used for defense..."

Zelos didn't like where this conversation was going. He'd just been messing around because he was bored, but now an important diplomat had his eyes on him.

He realized—entirely too late—that he'd been careless.

"It probably *would* be effective, yes," he said. "But...tools that

effective always end up being used for war. I have no intent to start selling these. I don't want to enable massacres."

"Mmm... You make a fair point. If weapons like this were available, certain fools *would* use them to wage war, of that I'm sure. And even if you were to leave them in the hands of the state, the state is managed by people too, at the end of the day. I can't promise that people of good heart and sound mind will always be in charge."

"Certain politicians wouldn't hesitate to prioritize profit over human life, right? I'm telling you now: If people try to use me and my creations, I'll flee the country. That's no exaggeration."

"Which would be a loss for Solistia, I'm sure. So...your response is something along the lines of 'if you want to use them, make them yourself'?"

"Put bluntly, yes, I suppose that's about it. As a crafter, it's hard to imagine anything worse than seeing my creations used to kill people."

Zelos wouldn't really consider it a problem if someone *else* were to make a weapon like this and use it for war. But when it was *his* weapon they were talking about, he felt very differently. He did *not* want to see his inventions become tools of war.

Even without that factor, though, this was just a little something he'd made for fun. He had no intention of selling it regardless.

"That aside," the earl said, "you have quite a lot of parts here. Won't that make maintenance difficult?"

"A lot of them will be fixed in place—mostly for durability's sake. You're still right about the maintenance, but, well...I should manage once I'm used to it."

"Speaking as a representative of the state, it's clear you've got talent. But...do you really intend to fight *dragons* with that? I can't help but think that sounds reckless..."

"Mm-hmm. Wyverns have thick scales and a lot of flesh, so you can't really take them down with a regular sword or whatever. And if you want to get through those massive bones of theirs, you need a weapon about this size."

"It really *does* sound like you've got some impressive technology

here... Say, are you sure you don't want to work for the state?"

"I'm not exactly patriotic—and as a general rule, I'm not keen on accepting work that leaves me with a lot of responsibility. Honestly, I usually find it exhausting. Especially once you factor in all the, er, dealing with people..."

A normal mage would've leaped at the earl's offer, but Zelos had turned it down in a split second.

But diplomats tasked with the future of their country were persistent.

That was doubly true when Solistia was in the middle of reforming its Order of Mages and Order of Knights. It made perfect sense that they'd want to bring talented individuals and advanced technologies into the fold.

And Earl Ilhans was no different.

"I won't deny I'm on good terms with the Solistia ducal house," Zelos said, "but I *will* move to another country if I get pushed too far. I have zero interest in becoming a court mage."

"Isn't it usually the other way around? I thought every mage had high aspirations."

"I don't want to be some influential hotshot. Without obligations, I can research whatever I want, whenever I want—and when I get bored, I can move on to something else. That wouldn't be the case if I were working for some national research institute, would it? I mean...well, I suppose you could say I *do* have high aspirations. I'm just not aspiring to what you may think."

"I imagine someone of your talents would be given leave to work on whatever he pleased. Would that still not be enough for you?"

"In exchange, I'd have to hand the fruits of my research over to the state, right? I'd hate to accidentally make something dangerous, then have the government start using it behind my back. Especially considering how the other mages in the country can be..."

"*Ngh...*"

"I know, I know; I'm sorry. But I just don't see any appeal in becoming a court mage."

"Do you never feel like using your talents to help people?"

"I do! I help the people I come across, and I do it of my own

volition."

"But don't you ever dream of doing something even bigger? Aiding even more people? The way things are now, it seems like a waste of your talents. The state would be willing to provide someone as capable as you with all the funding you desired, I'm sure of it. Besides, what will you do if you receive a royal decree *ordering* you to lend your talents?"

"Look, I think we just have a difference of opinion. Not to be rude, but while it may look to you like I'm wasting my talents, I'm doing what I do because I've decided to do it, and because I'm happy with it. I don't consider it a waste at all. Besides, I've already said: If anyone tries to *force* me to contribute to the country, I'll *abandon* the country, no hesitation."

Earl Ilhans had thought Zelos would take the bait if offered good enough conditions, the same as any other mage. Somehow, the more the earl offered, the more obstinate Zelos became, flatly stating he had zero desire to work for the state. The earl was shocked.

Zelos had even said that he would have no qualms abandoning the country if forced into state employment. It seemed dangerous to leave this mage alone...but forcing the matter could easily drive him to another country.

In other words, Zelos didn't value the Magic Kingdom of Solistia. Or...no. Perhaps, the earl thought, it was more accurate to say Zelos saw no meaning in nations and royal commands.

"I've already had this discussion with former Duke Creston, by the way, so you're a bit late to the party. Even so, I do take on an odd job from him every now and then."

"*Grr...* The Solistia faction, hmm? At least it's not one of *those* factions, but I'd still rather see you working for the state's research facilities. Still...are you sure you're satisfied with that? Work as a court mage, and you'd never have to worry about research funding again!"

"I'm not exactly worried about funding as it is, you know? If I'm lacking any materials, I just go out and gather them myself, and I earn as much money as I want by selling things like magic stones.

I'll tell you as many times as it takes: There is *nothing* appealing to me about being a court mage."

Earl Ilhans had no way in.

Zelos's values were just too fundamentally different from those of every other mage. The earl had no cards he could play.

If neither power nor prestige held any appeal, nothing he said would convince Zelos to serve the state. That much was clear by now.

"Then...why are you on good terms with His Grace, the former duke, if I may ask? You said you take on work from him..."

"I said I *sometimes* take on work from him. I'm pretty free to do what I want... I appreciate your offer, but please, let's leave this topic at that."

It was a polite way of telling the earl there wasn't a point in discussing it any further.

The earl's attempt at scouting him had never had a chance of working in the first place.

"By the way," Zelos continued, "while I *did* take on this escort job, I haven't actually been informed of the specifics. Just that I'm only needed as an escort until we reach the capital of the Artom Empire, and that I'm free to do whatever I want once we're there."

"I see... Well, according to our schedule, we should be meeting with Artom's Order of Warriors quite soon."

"Order of *Warriors*? It's not called the Order of Knights?"

"Most people in Artom are warriors. About half the Empire's population is stronger than the average knight, and they take part in combat in times of emergency. You could perhaps say they're less like a country in the traditional sense and more like a village the *size* of a country."

"And those people are...the reufayl, yes? The people with wings? The first people made by the God of Creation? The people called angels?"

The Church of Creation said that after the God of Creation made the world, they went on to create seven races.

And the first of those was the winged race, the reufayl.

After that, it was said, the God of Creation made the remaining

six races—but five of those eventually interbred before again splitting apart into several different races. The reufayl, however, had never mixed with the other races, so they still maintained their ancient forms.

All that information came from old ethnologists, though. There was no knowing for sure whether it was true.

There *was* evidence that different races had lived together in ancient times, so crossbreeding seemed entirely plausible. In fact, Zelos was confident it *must* have happened at some point.

"Makes sense the Four Gods would hate the reufayl, eh?" he mused. "If they really *are* the first race the God of Creation made, that is... I mean, if an ancient race created by the God of Creation exists to this day, it threatens to tear a hole in the Faith of the Four Gods' doctrine."

"You're well-informed, aren't you? And yes... The reufayl still maintain their ancient forms. That's what makes them more powerful than the heroes."

"So they're good with magic and physically stronger than humans. They're probably the only race that could put up a fight against a dragon. As long as they're in a group, mind you..."

"Exactly. That's largely why we've decided to ally with them. They have a strange form of government, but they don't kill each other. They're a peaceful people."

The Artom Empire, the land of the reufayl, *did* have a royal family, for what it was worth. But all matters relating to how the nation was run were carried out between kin.

Citizens were relatively free to live as they wished, spending their lives trading, farming, or whatever else they wanted.

It was often seen as a country lacking structure, but its form of government resembled Sengoku period Japan. And its royals were even more powerful than the other reufayl.

"At the same time," Earl Ilhans continued, "I've heard they've lost the ability to use healing magic. Nowadays, they're the same as us; they only know attack and support spells. So while their magic is powerful, they lose their edge when they come up against Metis and its legions of priests wielding holy magic."

"They...'lost' the ability to use it, eh? Is that because of the Dark God War, I wonder? Were they carving their magic formulas into stone tablets that got destroyed or something? Still, you'd think healing magic would be pretty important. People usually try to record it safely."

What they didn't know was that back in ancient times, the reufayl had lived in a futuristic city similar to Isa Lante, and their city had been annihilated by the Dark God. At the time, they hadn't written their magic formulas down on the special paper that became common later; instead, they'd *installed* those formulas on devices akin to computers.

Even if the materials used to make those devices had remained, the reufayl hadn't been able to repair them after the devastation, so they'd been left unable to retrieve their formulas for healing magic. Nowadays, they wouldn't know how to operate those devices anyway.

After the Dark God War, the survivors had wandered the land in a state of disorder, seeking a peaceful place to live. Eventually, they'd settled in the modern-day Artom Empire. The reufayl had been on the verge of extinction at the time—though, over many years, they'd managed to replenish their numbers.

"Speaking of the reufayl," Zelos said, "it looks like they're...patrolling?"

"We'll be meeting with Artom's Order of Warriors at the halfway point. From there, the plan is for them to join us as guards as well. They're in the middle of a war with Metis, after all. The enemy could try to sabotage them at any time. Their caution is only natural."

"Ah. I see. I take it they haven't signed a ceasefire or anything, then. Heck, there could be spies hiding somewhere around here even now."

As Zelos continued assembling his gunblade, he looked out the carriage window at the reufayl flying through the sky.

Right as Zelos finished assembling his crazy weapon, he and the Solistia diplomat arrived safely at the halfway meeting point. Armed aerial soldiers stood in neat rows, there to welcome the diplomat tasked with the fates of both their countries.

Zelos sensed something different in them, something he hadn't felt from any of the people he'd met before. A sort of unusual fighting spirit.

Huh. They weren't that warlike back in Swords & Sorceries*...*

Zelos wasn't used to seeing reufayl like this, and it left him a little confused.

The reufayl in *Swords & Sorceries* had been NPCs who were strict about law and order and proficient with magic and melee combat alike. But while their fighting prowess was so insane that the average player hadn't held a candle to them, they'd usually appeared as important side figures in major events and quests and the like. Merchants, crafters of valuable items—that sort of thing.

The reufayl in *this* world, though, were eking out a meager existence among the mountains and fighting to fend off a threat from a major foreign power.

Zelos understood. The advanced reufayl civilization that had fallen long ago was now merely a fleeting dream, never to return.

*

"General Lusei Imara! The delegation from the Magic Kingdom of Solistia has come into sight!"

"Thank you," the general, a black-winged military leader, said to her subordinate. "Now, please welcome them—as politely as you can. The talks between our countries will be crucial. They'll decide the fate of our nation."

The general had neat, black, shoulder-length hair, and she was one of the Artom Empire's five most talented soldiers. She was known as the Shadowsky General, and the people of Artom trusted her greatly.

More personally, however, she was of marriageable age. And secretly, it had her feeling impatient; she worried she was missing her chance to get married. She'd tried to find a fitting partner, but unfortunately, she had yet to meet anyone who'd be a good match.

And there was a simple reason for that: her strength.

Her prowess made people fear her or respect her, but it never

made anyone see her as a woman.

She'd once declared that she would refuse to exchange marriage vows with any man weaker than herself. And as a result, she'd ended up getting turned down even from marriage interviews.

She usually covered her face with a mask. Rumor was that she did so to symbolize that she'd "given up on being a woman to devote herself to protecting the country." But, really, she just had terrible social anxiety and got embarrassed at the flick of a switch. Without the mask, she couldn't even look someone in the face and hold a proper conversation. The mask was her last resort to hide that fact.

Only a small handful of people knew that truth.

I have to hurry up and find someone soon, or... Or I'll be alone my whole life... I'm already twenty-two! My friends—even the ones from childhood—are all married already; why don't I *have anyone? I should never have said what I did...*

But there was no use crying over spilled milk, especially when she'd been the one to spill it.

Deep at heart, she was a woman, and quite the maidenly one at that. She dreamed of having a strong man to protect her.

But no man was strong enough to protect *her*.

Not only that, but everyone had come to see her as a soldier and nothing more. The mask she'd used to hide her social anxiety had been taken as a symbol of her resolve to protect the country.

Things had gone completely contrary to what she'd wanted, and as a result, she continued to miss out on her chance to marry.

Making matters worse for her, she was royalty in Artom—albeit a royal of the lowest rank—and her partner would be expected to have a reasonably high social standing. Not that *she* cared about that...

I just want someone*. They don't need to be high-ranking. They don't even need to be strong...*

She was at that age when she dreamed of marriage—though she'd never thought about what would come *after* marriage.

Well...maybe she had. It was more that her careless proclamation had made it pointless to even think that far ahead.

"I'm... I'm such an *idiot*..."

But regretting it wouldn't change the past.

She was at her wits' end.

"General Lusei, it would seem the envoy is arriving. They should be here shortly."

"Understood. Get everyone in their positions to welcome them. I can't imagine the heretics from Metis will let this opportunity pass them by. Remain on high alert."

"Roger!"

These people were regular citizens, but at the same time, they were soldiers. They followed decorum and rules and showed no mercy to their foes.

The reufayl's population had once rivaled humanity's, but now they were a minority. Their numbers continued to decline, perhaps as a result of their closed environment and small gene pool.

Many said that unless they brought in new blood from the outside world, they would eventually perish.

And right as the nation was worrying about that forecast, they'd received word of the Magic Kingdom of Solistia's plans to rebuild the road connecting their nations.

That had been a little over thirty years ago. Artom's conflict with Metis had already been escalating at the time—and so, considering the possibility of a protracted conflict, Artom had agreed to the plan, hoping to set up supply lines with a potential ally.

Artom had proceeded to spend decades building a highway connecting them to the Kingdom of Isalas, as well as working in utmost secrecy to help clear out the masses of monsters lurking in the Great Underground Ruins of Irmanaz so that a deepway could be built to the Magic Kingdom of Solistia. Now, finally, that project had been completed, and they'd been able to reallocate the laborers to other construction jobs, rapidly accelerating the completion of the road network connecting the three nations.

Finally, the three small nations had made their long-standing desire a reality: They'd joined themselves together with proper roads. All sorts of merchants and commodities would be able to flow between them now; people would be able to immigrate; standards of living would improve.

I never would've expected that self-regenerating wall to be the outer shell of an ancient city. The project was at a standstill... I wonder what would've happened if it had gotten stuck there? It's so reassuring to have Solistia as an ally... It feels like they've saved us already.

There had been some trouble, but ultimately, the tunnels had been connected. All's well that ends well.

Of course, the Holy Land of Metis still posed a problem. It was the heart of the Faith of the Four Gods, and its adherents staunchly opposed the Artom Empire.

The land of hero summoning, world-threatening heretics had to be destroyed, or war would never end.

"Can't relax just yet. The real fight's yet to come..."

They'd finally reached the starting line. But the fight was far from over—and they couldn't afford to mess it up.

"There they are. Hmm... That's quite the majestic carriage. Their knights seem well trained too."

"Well trained, yes, but not enough to fight the heroes. But...wait. What's this? I'm feeling an incredible presence. Is this really coming from a human?"

The mana emanating from within the extravagant carriage sent a cold sweat down Lusei's back.

She could tell: Whoever was inside was stronger than her. She couldn't see them, but their mere presence made that all too clear.

"Wh-Who could this possibly—"

"Looks like we've got a real monster on our hands. But remember: Don't forget your manners. They're our allies."

"Of course."

The carriage came to a stop. Knights encircled it, the door opened, and a gray-robed mage appeared from inside.

Lusei felt a shock like lightning running through her veins.

Wh-Who is *this mage? He's... He's no average human, but he's not like us either...*

The mage emerged from the carriage, carrying a massive, sword-shaped staff.

Being as strong as she was, Lusei instinctively recognized the

aura emanating from his body.



She knew the truth at once: He was stronger than her...

Just behind the mage, a well-dressed noble stepped down from the carriage and introduced himself.

"Thank you for coming to escort us. My name is Ilhans, Special Envoy of the Magic Kingdom of Solistia."

"My name is Lusei Imara. I lead the special forces of Artom's Order of Warriors. Thank you for coming all this way. Now that we're together, our forces will help escort you the rest of the way to the capital. I look forward to traveling with you."

"Ah—so we're to be guarded by the Shadowsky General herself! That's very reassuring."

"I'm still but a young, inexperienced warrior. But on that note—who's the mage behind you?" She looked at Zelos. "From what I can tell, you're a very talented man. Could I ask you your name?"

"Huh? Me? I'm just some guy they hired as a mercenary. Don't mind me."

Lusei found it hard to believe he was some average Joe.

He carried a sword as long as he was tall—with one hand, at that. She'd never heard of a mage capable of such a thing.

"No. I've never met anyone as powerful as you. I believe I would lose if I were to fight you. Any true warrior would want to know the name of one so mighty."

"That so? Well, in that case... I'm Zelos Merlin. A freelance mage."

"Freelance? A man as talented as you isn't working for the state?"

"I'm not cut out for court service. Not a fan of higher-ups ordering me around."

"That's quite a— No. People are free to live as they want. And I suppose nobody would want to force you into subordination at the risk of making you their enemy instead. I won't deny your life choices."

"I don't mind taking on some simple jobs here and there, mind you. I just don't want anyone always relying on me to be there to help. A quiet, laid-back life: that's the life for me."

This gray-robed mage looked like a shady guy.

But on closer examination, all of his equipment was top-notch.

His robe was made from the hide of an enormous monster known as a behemoth.

And the huge sword-shaped staff in his hand resembled a legendary weapon known as a dragonslayer.

Dragonslayers were weapons mentioned in ancient records found in Artom. Many a warrior had wielded them on the battlefield over the years to protect the common people.

They no longer existed, though. Some had been found in the past, but they'd been so badly damaged as to be unusable. The records also mentioned other legendary weapons: the "bird of steel," for example, and the "steel elephant."

It was all too clear that the mage standing before Lusei, holding such a weapon, was on a completely different plane of existence than your average mage. Her battle-forged intuition was ringing an alarm bell, telling her this was *not* someone she should fight.

"I see... Your strength *would* invite all sorts of troublesome requests, I imagine. That aside—I believe we should start moving. There could be some of those heretical thugs lurking around."

"Good point. Well, then, I look forward to working with you on— Huh. You're right; they *are* here. A bunch of Peeping Toms looking at us right now..."

That immediately caused a stir: "Wh-What?"

Even before Zelos finished speaking, he swung his massive sword out in front of him, its tip pointed toward the forest. Then he pulled the trigger.

KA-BOOOOOOOOOM!

With a gut-wrenching explosion, some sort of projectile shot out of the swordlike implement and tore through the trees, felling one after another with a cracking sound.

And as Lusei saw shadows dart out from between the falling trees, she realized that the enemy had already infiltrated Artom.

"We're under attack!"

The Artom warriors and the Solistia knights readied their weapons and shields, preparing for immediate conflict.

The soldiers ran into the forest, ready to defeat the invaders. But...

CHK! RA-TA-TA-TA-TA-TA!

Soldiers fell one after another, dropped by ranged weapons that fired with high-pitched noises, quite different from the mage's.

"*GAKH!*"

"*GUAAAAAAH!*"

"Wh-What *are* those weapons?!"

"Those are...matchlocks? Yeah! They are!"

The enemies hiding in the forest were attacking from afar with what looked like sticks, their tips pointed toward the defenders.

They weren't as powerful as what the mage from Solistia had just used, but it was clear they were the same type of weapon.

Zelos sighed. "Do the heroes *want* to turn this world into a horrific battlefield? Bringing things like that over here is going to change the face of war forever."

"Do you know what these weapons are?!"

"I do, yes... They're weapons from the heroes' world. Rather outdated ones, though. They shouldn't be capable of rapid fire, but it seems like they're making up for that with numbers. They're nasty weapons, but a combination of shields and defensive magic should be enough to defend from them."

As Zelos spoke, he lifted his giant sword again and fired another shot toward the attackers.

The projectile surged toward the forest, and on impact, it sent enemies and earth alike flying. The mage's weapon was *far* more powerful than the heroes', it seemed.

"Brave defenders of Artom!" Lusei shouted. "Raise your shields and ready your defensive magic! Their weapons can't fire nonstop. Reach the enemy lines, and we'll have the upper hand!"

The soldiers responded with a vigorous roar.

Then, at Lusei's encouragement, they each bolstered their defense by reinforcing their shields with magic before charging at the enemy, eager to regain the advantage after being taken by surprise.

Those shields deflected the matchlocks' lead bullets. The heroes had failed to achieve the decisive victory they'd hoped for.

Before long, the forest was filled with screams.

Chapter 14: The Old Guy Kills the Vibe

The paladins and heroes from the Holy Land of Metis had changed their plans. Instead of sabotaging the Artom Empire's new highway, they now intended to assassinate an important official. They were in the forest near him, waiting with bated breath for the right moment.

Its matchlocks ready to go, the squad waited for the signal to fire.

"Hey, Kannagi... How strong do you think that mage's weapon is?"

"No clue. But it's just the one weapon, right? Let's say he *can* rapid-fire with that thing—even then, he can only have so many bullets."

"But this world has magic, yeah? Maybe he's got, like, infinite bullets, or it's way stronger than it looks, or...something like that, y'know? Then what?"

"Then we just take him out first. That's why we've got snipers waiting up in the trees."

"They've only got matchlocks, though. Will they even be able to hit him from up there? Those things aren't exactly made for sniping, y'know?"

These matchlocks didn't have stocks like rifles, so the firing grip was at the back of the guns, reducing their stability. When a matchlock shot a bullet, the recoil would push the barrel of the gun upward, throwing the user's aim off. It took a while to load the next bullet too, and the gun could explode if the barrel became clogged.

Matchlocks were full of flaws like that. Still, put enough of them together, and they could be effective.

The squad consisted of a three-person team per gun: one to fire

the gun, one to reload it, and one to cool the barrel. With about ten teams working to minimize the gap between shots, the heroes had determined they'd be able to get something *close* to rapid fire.

At the end of the day, though, there were still only ten snipers. The rest of the squad were just backup crew.

"If this were an anime, our plan would work perfectly..."

"But one of our enemies knows about guns too. Damn Sasaki... Couldn't he have at least made proper muskets instead of these things?"

But creating muskets and the ammo for them required dedicated machine tools and a lot of knowledge. While this world had blacksmiths, it didn't have anyone familiar with that kind of work.

The average Japanese person, meanwhile, knew perfectly well the danger guns could pose, but very few knew how to make them.

That was especially true for the heroes, who'd been summoned here as middle schoolers. There was no *way* they'd know that sort of thing. Honestly, the fact that one of them vaguely understood how to make a matchlock was already pretty impressive.

"So we take out the mage first, right?" Himejima said. "We don't want that weapon firing at us. I'm pretty sure it's on a whole other level than what we've got..."

"You really have no qualms killing people, do you, Himejima?"

"I do. But it's us or them at this point. Kill or be killed."

Yoshino got what Sakamoto was trying to say, but this world wasn't so forgiving. It wasn't like she cared about her survival either. All she wanted was to kill the woman she so detested.

"Signal the snipers to kill the mage."

"Roger."

One of the paladins raised their left hand, then another paladin behind him relayed the same signal, giving the snipers the order to fire.

The snipers in the trees had matchlocks with barrels twice the usual length, fitted to improve their range.

Each sniper supported their long gun barrel on a tree branch, improving the gun's stability.

But right when the snipers were finally about to fire, the mage in

the distance swung his gunblade toward them and fired first.

KA-BOOOOOOOOOM!

The sound echoed throughout the forest while the projectile tore through trees, felling them—even those hiding the snipers—with a cacophony.

"H-He *anticipated* our attack?! You're kidding! How'd he even know we were here?!"

The answer was simple: He'd sensed their malice. People's mental states, including malice, influenced their mana, creating ripples that a mage could detect—and respond to with an attack of their own. The snipers had failed to clear their minds.

That wasn't the only factor, though. Another one was probably just that the invaders had let their guard down, thinking they were safe to attack from outside of their enemy's range without reprisal.

But now, they'd learned all too clearly that just being hidden and at range didn't mean they had the upper hand.

"Shit! Get ready to fire! When they get close, mow 'em all down!"

CHK! RA-TA-TA-TA-TA-TA!

The enemy had made the first move, but the matchlocks were still effective.

The first salvo succeeded in rattling the "demons" charging at them. But then came an order from a female soldier clad in black armor: "Raise your shields and ready your defensive magic! Their weapons can't fire nonstop. Reach the enemy lines, and we'll have the upper hand!"

The other enemy soldiers followed the order and approached.

"Damn it! These people shouldn't know about the matchlock's weaknesses... That mage with them *must* have told them! They have the numbers advantage too. Fire a second volley with whatever guns are loaded and retreat under cover!"

But the invaders didn't get to do that.

The enemy's solitary gun continued to fire shot after shot at them. Its power was orders of magnitude beyond what the matchlocks could offer. A single shot blew up both the paladins preparing the matchlocks and the ground where they stood.

There was no making up for this gap in firepower.

"That asshole... It's not fair! How's his weapon so strong?!"

"It was probably made for fighting some huge monster. We're out in the wilderness, remember. They probably brought it along just to be safe. Damn it—why couldn't we have been summoned in *his* country?"

"H-Hey! Sakamoto! Whose side are you on?!"

The enemy's weapon was in a different league altogether. Their matchlocks were peashooters in comparison—and peashooters with a weakness their enemy knew how to exploit. There was little the forces of Metis could do.

The battle quickly devolved into chaos.

"I'm going to fight *her*," Himejima said. "We won't be able to run anyway. Not like this. We should prepare ourselves for what's about to happen."

"*Fuck...* Why'd things have to end up like this?! That guy's cheating!"

"Swear all you want. It won't get us out of here. Well, I guess we might be seeing Kazama again soon..."

The invasion force consisted of five heroes and twenty-six paladins.

And the enemy's fire had blown away half its numbers, leaving the Metis side at a distinct disadvantage. It seemed practically impossible for them to turn things around at this point.

The fallen invaders were promptly captured, and the remainder were surrounded.

There was no escape.

The heroes drew their swords and charged, desperate to find a way out of this situation.

*

"Hmm... That'll do it for now, I suppose."

"What frightening power. Why, it's almost like the 'dragonslayers' of legend..."

"No, this is nothing like that. It's just a gunblade. I based it on the dragon buster from EKO, actually. I *did* mess with it a little,

though. I made it specifically for myself, so no one else can use it; I can tell you that much."

"Why make such an unwieldy weapon on purpose? If you made it smaller and created more of them, just think of all the battles your forces could win..."

"And I'd turn the battlefield into a hellscape in the process. War casualties would go off the charts. I do *not* want to mass-produce this thing. Besides, I really only made it for fun in the first place. I don't plan on passing them around."

Lusei was moved by Zelos's response.

This weapon and its tremendous firepower would transform any battle into a one-sided massacre. That would prompt other countries to develop their own weapons of slaughter, kick-starting an unprecedented cycle of death.

Warriors existed to take their enemies' lives, but someone who lived only to kill was no true warrior. A warrior had to also understand the value of life and be aware of the harm they were doing.

"You make a good point... A warrior's blade carries their will. Their conviction. But *this* weapon could kill with no thought at all."

"Mm-hmm—and remember, whatever weapons you've got, there are always going to be the nutcases who get addicted to the scent of blood. Ones who *enjoy* killing. Anyway, I guess I should go mop up the stragglers."

The reufayl were strong, sure, but on average, their levels were on par with the heroes'. They'd built up a grudge over the many years of conflict too. If Zelos didn't intervene, this would probably devolve into a no-holds-barred slaughter.

Metis was Artom's longtime enemy, after all, and it had put Artom through countless hardships. Those hardships had fostered rage within the people of Artom, and they'd passed that rage down through the generations. It was almost like each new generation was indoctrinated into the hatred.

"Please wait in the carriage, Earl Ilhans," Zelos said. "I'll go deal with them now."

"Yes... Will you be okay?"

"We have the numbers advantage. The question is whether they have any heroes here, I suppose."

Zelos lifted his gunblade and started strolling his way to the front line.

The battle had already devolved into a frantic melee. People screamed in agony and terror throughout the forest.

Hmm... I wonder if they came here to destroy the road? Maybe, at some point, they realized that wouldn't achieve anything, so they changed to a different plan. If they have matchlocks, I'm guessing they could have explosives too, so that'd make sense...

There were only so many strategies a platoon could pull off. Judging from the situation, Zelos assumed the platoon had just so happened to come across them, prompting them to adopt a new plan: assassinating a diplomat to stoke tensions.

That change of plans itself made good sense, he thought, but he'd detract marks for failing to consider the fact that they were weaker than the enemy. They hadn't thought about how they were going to retreat.

Most likely, he thought, their new weapons had made them overconfident, causing them to let their guard down. They'd probably never expected their enemy to have a gun too.

Sucks to be them, I guess. Oh—what's this?

"H-Heroes! We found heroes! Capture them at all costs!"

Two enemy soldiers were approaching head-on—and both were teenage boys with black hair. They clearly weren't from around here.

"Well, hello there, little heroes," Zelos said. "Nice to meet you. Don't you think it's about time you threw in the towel? You don't even have any real reason to fight for them, do you?"

"Wha— Hey... You're... You're Japanese, right? Why are you trying to stop us?!"

"Because these guys hired me. It's just business. Shouldn't that be obvious?"

"But you're a hero too, aren't you?! Why'd you go over to the enemy?!"

"Sorry to tell you, but I'm no hero. I wasn't even summoned here."

The two heroes had quickly realized that this mage was Japanese, the same as them.

But he was also the very same person who'd put them in this predicament—and he already had his gunblade pointed toward them. They were on edge, aware he'd be no pushover.

"Let me guess: They flattered you by calling you heroes, it put you on cloud nine, and you agreed to fight in their war. By this point, half your comrades have died as their pawns. And you're *still* fighting for them? Just how big of pushovers are you guys? Or what, are you just that desperate to escape reality?"

"Wait... You said this is *business* for you? You're some mercenary? You'd fight for the *demons* for a few coins?!"

"'Demons'? Ah... You must mean the reufayl. See, Metis only calls them 'demons' as a kind of racial slur because their religions don't get along. It's nothing specific to this world, right? Stupid stuff."

"Wha—"

"They're the first race the God of Creation made. That makes them a real thorn in the Faith's side, I bet. A race that can go toe to toe against a dragon isn't the kind of enemy Metis'd want to keep around, right? Hey—did you know? People used to call the reufayl *angels*. Anyone ever tell you that?"

"A-Angels?"

Of course, Zelos was drawing on his knowledge of *Swords & Sorceries* here. But the game's setting was generally the same as this world's history.

Not that the heroes had any way of knowing that, of course. A shiver ran down their spines.

And from the obvious fear they both showed, Zelos figured they hadn't known a thing.

No surprises there...

"So you really *are* clueless, eh? See, this is why they can use you and then discard you. Ah—by the way, I met some of your fellow heroes a while back. Ichijo and Tanabe, they were called."

"You met those two? Wait—did you try to put the same thing in their heads too?!"

"Rude. Can you not talk about me like I'm some con man?

Besides, you've probably realized at least a bit of what's going on already, right? Started to wonder to yourself, 'Hmm, this doesn't add up'? But then you pushed it all down, figuring you had to do what they said if you wanted to get back to your old world. Even if they were lying to you."

"So it really *was* a lie? Guess Kazama was right after all..."

"Shit..."

Zelos lit a cigarette and took a lazy puff.

"You guys *can't* go back, by the way."

"*Huh?!*"

"The hero summoning sigil? Yeah, it can't even do that. In fact, they won't be summoning any more heroes with it either. The Grand Temple kind of...collapsed. And the summoning sigil broke, so..."

"Nobody told us about *that*!"

"Yeah, I bet. They were probably worried you'd revolt if they told you the sigil was destroyed. They're afraid of you turning against them. Just a hunch, but I'd guess they've even got assassins lurking among you, y'know? With orders to get rid of you if you learn any inconvenient truths. It's scary stuff."

"You're kidding, right?! Then what have we even been fighting for?!"

"I told you, didn't I? You're just pawns. Tools. Disposable. Well, not like any of that matters to me. Anyway, that's that—so would you mind letting me capture you? This is all a bit of a hassle; I want to get it over and done with."

This mage in front of the heroes seemed kind of lazy.

But this was the same man who'd completely uprooted their strategy and left them in the situation they were in now.

They found it hard to believe what he was saying.

At the same time, however, they couldn't find any holes in what he'd told them.

"Hey, Kannagi... What do we do? If this guy's telling the truth, then Metis will just keep taking advantage of us. I don't wanna let that happen!"

"Are you sure we can believe him, though, Sakamoto? He could just be lying to us."

"One more thing," Zelos interjected. "Metis summoning heroes every thirty years was slowly destroying the entire world. Just thought I should tell you that. At the rate they were going, the world would've run out of mana in about another fifteen hundred years, and all life would've gone extinct."

"H-Hold on! I thought heroes were summoned using the power of the Four Gods!"

"Look... Summoning heroes requires *opening holes in space-time*. Do you think the energy to make that happen is just lying around somewhere? No. The Four Gods have been squeezing this world dry of mana. I found that out not too long ago—it was a bit of a coincidence, actually."

"Wh— *What* was that?!"

"Metis is probably done for. After all, they've been summoning heroes all this time for their own gain, bringing the world closer and closer to the edge of collapse. And the Four Gods won't bother to save their believers. They don't even care. They're not exactly the compassionate sort. In fact, they're a bunch of irresponsible idiots... Look, it hurts to say it, but your friends all died for nothing," Zelos said matter-of-factly, continuing to puff on his cigarette.

But it was a big deal for the heroes. Zelos had just dropped this huge reveal on them out of nowhere, forcing them to make a choice.

Not to mention, they were in the middle of a war. Their decision could decide their entire fates.

Yet Zelos just continued to smoke without a care. He sighed, his mind elsewhere. "Bet they're eating all the good meat right now..."

"Huh? What's meat got to do with anything?"

"Yeah, what are you talking about? Reminds me of how my family used to take the best bits of meat at yakiniku places before I could get to them, but... Why are you bringing that up?"

"The last time I toiled away preparing a whole bunch of meat—ham, sausages, smoked goods—I couldn't hide it from the neighborhood kids. They're a sharp-eyed lot. Anyway, they started devouring it all like locusts... I'd been meaning to have it with a nice drink, but when I got to the storehouse, every last bit of it was gone. Can you imagine my despair? My frustration? Do you know

what that's like? That gnawing sense of hopelessness?"

"As if we give a shit about your meat!" the two of them cried. "Why are you being so melodramatic?!"

"Anyway, can you hurry up and make a decision already? I really want to get this over and done with."

"You're the one who changed the topic!"

They were in the middle of a depressing battlefield filled with agonized wails, angry shouts, and the occasional gunshot—not to mention the scent of blood wafting through the air—and Zelos was moping about meat.

Zelos, for his part, didn't have any grudge against the heroes or the paladins. He wouldn't balk at killing to protect himself, but he also wasn't interested in killing when he didn't have to.

It was the reufayl, with their grudge against Metis, who were slaying the paladins without mercy.

"Anyway, enough joking around. Let's get down to business. If you still can't make a decision, then how about this: You 'faint,' and we take you as prisoners of war? If we do that, and we use you for some sort of political deal—well, they'll keep an eye on you, obviously, but you should be pretty free to move around as you wish. How does that sound?"

"How do we know you won't just kill us?!"

"Yeah! You expect us to believe we'll get any rights? In a war? In *this* world?"

These heroes had agreed to take part in this war, and here they were demanding a guarantee of safety. They were naive, that much was clear. With their enemies' rage, they were in no position to make demands.

"You're the invaders, so if anything *did* happen to you, you'd just be reaping what you sowed, right? Besides, if you use those weapons to fight back, Artom will declare you hostile. And then you'll *really* get slaughtered. Now—time to decide. Ticktock."

"We're all being *watched*, you know?! At this rate, our friends back in Metis will be in danger too! I don't want them to get in trouble because we—"

"Mmm... So you noticed they were watching you, eh? Then it

should be obvious they don't trust you. Metis doesn't give a damn *how* many otherworlders die in their name."

"So it's that light novel trope where the heroes get tricked, huh... You know, I kinda had my doubts, but... How could I ever look Kazama in the face?"

"You all like to bring up this Kazama, don't you? Every time you say his name, I imagine him looking like someone from a fighting game... And by the sounds of it, the opponent got a perfect on him. *Aha ha ha ha...*"

"Jeez, man..."

Zelos did feel kind of bad saying it, but he figured he had to make them despair if he wanted them to give up.

The heroes had probably been fighting this way the whole time. They weren't exactly fighting for a cause they believed in, and they'd only ever been given information the Faith wanted them to know, so they'd gradually become suspicious of everything around them.

Pair that suspicion with the fact that they *were* invading Artom, and it only made sense that they'd worry surrender could get them killed.

"Now—can you hurry up and decide? If you keep dawdling, I'll just attack you and knock you out. That way, at least the people watching you would think you just got beaten in a fight, yes?"

"It's a bit late for that!" the two of them cried. "We've been talking for ages now!"

"Anyway, just surrender. Or do you *want* Metis to go after you like they did the heroes before you? One way or another, Metis doesn't intend to let you live. I've already confirmed that much. So...c'mon! Just give up already!"

"Huh... Seriously? I mean, I get why you keep telling us to surrender, but it feels like you were really phoning it in at the end there... Are you even *trying* to convince us?"

"Ugh... Fine. We'll throw our weapons down and surrender. And you'll guarantee our safety, right?"

"That depends on how negotiations go. You've been enemies with Artom this whole time, so you *do* understand it'll be difficult, right? Even if you agree to give them intel, I'm assuming you don't know

anything too impressive, and while I'll make a request, well..."

"Y-You're *useless*..."

Zelos was right—the heroes hadn't had much intel to begin with, and being on the front line hadn't helped them come across any. But ultimately, the two Zelos was talking to agreed to put down their weapons and surrender. As they did, Zelos expected the rest to follow suit. But there was one who continued to fight.

It was Yoshino Himejima, who was engaged in a fierce battle with Lusei.

"Reckon you two could convince her for me?" Zelos asked.

"No way. Ever since Kazama got killed, Himejima's been consumed by revenge."

"Yeah, she's *still* hung up on that otaku... Seriously, why him? Why couldn't it have been me?"

"Ah... People tend to idealize the dead. If she was head over heels for that Kazama kid before he died, there's probably no stopping her now."

The rest of Metis's forces had been captured or killed by now, but the two women were still locked in combat.

Zelos sighed. "Oh, fine. I guess I'll mediate."

He took one last puff of his cigarette, put it out in his portable ashtray, and went to interrupt the duel, grumbling about the hassle and idly scratching his head.

*

Yoshino was searching for the female soldier whose voice had been seared into her memory.

Single-minded, she avoided every other soldier in the fight, running in a straight line toward that familiar voice.

When she arrived, she saw a tall, masked woman with her sword drawn, issuing commands to her subordinates.

Found her!

Yoshino sprinted toward the woman, sword held out, and as soon as she was in range, she took a swing.

"*HYAAAAAAH!*"

"*HUP!*"

The female soldier swung her sword up on a diagonal, parrying the blow and disarming Yoshino.

Without missing a beat, Yoshino drew a spare blade and pointed it at the enemy she detested so much.

"A hero, huh? One I've seen before too."

"I'm here to get revenge. Fight me."

"Very well. I'll take you on."

The pair began to exchange blows with their blades. They clashed, distanced themselves, then clashed again. They swapped between offense and defense at dizzying speed, but Yoshino was at a disadvantage in skill.

She was a lower level, for starters. She also had less combat experience, and her fury made her predictable.

"You need to stay calm in a fight," Lusei said, "if you value your life. *Ah.* You *want* to die, don't you?"

"I know I can't beat you. But...I'm not just here to die!"

"Hmm... So you're hoping to take me down with you, then. But do you really think that'll work now that I know what you're planning?"

Yoshino knew full well that she couldn't match up to her foe. After all, she'd already made so many swings and had yet to even scratch the woman. Every time Yoshino came close, Lusei dodged with the slightest of movements.

I knew this would happen, but I didn't think it'd be this *one-sided...*

"This is a farce," Lusei said.

"Huh?"

"You're the ones that waged war on us in the first place—all based on the words of those fools from the Faith of the Four Gods, no? You let yourself get fooled by their drivel, refusing to see the truth, and you invaded us. Do you really think *you* have the right to call this *revenge*?"

"That's true, but...you *killed* my precious friend! I'm not about to sit back and say, 'Oh well, that's fair'!"

The moment they'd agreed to take part in a war, they'd accepted

they’d be killing people. And the enemy, of course, would have people they cared about too. It was only natural that the reufayl would kill the invaders to protect their own loved ones.



Yoshino knew how unreasonable her quest for revenge was. And she knew venting her rage at the warrior in front of her wouldn't solve anything.

All the same, she felt like she needed this outlet for the overwhelming emotions coursing through her before she went crazy.

"Isn't that because you had no resolve? You weren't fighting for any conviction; you weren't fighting to protect anyone. Your half-hearted resolve—your *naivete*—was asking for death. You let yourselves get swept along by the tide; the fault lies with you."

"I *know* that... But even then, you *killed* him, and I *hate* you for it! I *detest* you!"

"Ah... Sorry to butt in," Zelos interrupted. "I know you're in the middle of something, but the rest of us are pretty much done, so do you think you could wrap this up?"

Neither Yoshino nor Lusei knew when it had happened, but there was suddenly a gray-robed mage standing right in the middle of them.

And he'd deftly avoided both of their blades.

"Revenge this, revenge that; it's all a bit much for me, really. Think you could put a stop to it already?"

"*Read the room!*" the two of them shouted.

Both instinctively swung their swords at Zelos out of frustration, but he easily blocked both swords unarmed, grabbing onto one with each hand. And once he'd grabbed them, they were stuck.

This gray-robed mage had well and truly killed the vibe.

"Wha—?!"

Th-There's no way... I was holding back, but how did he grab my blade with his bare hand?!

"The two heroes over there have surrendered, Lusei. Apparently, there are another three?"

"One is this girl here. And the other two..."

"General! We've captured two heroes!"

"...have been captured as well, by the sounds of it."

It hadn't taken long to subdue four of the heroes.

Only Yoshino remained. And just like Lusei, she couldn't make a move. Zelos was still gripping her sword.

She was just about to explode with rage. This middle-aged guy had swooped in out of nowhere to stop her from getting her revenge.

"Get out of my way! This has nothing to do with you!"

Oh. Here came the explosion.

"It *does*, though. You tried to snipe me dead just a few moments ago, didn't you? Why should I have to compromise with someone like that? This is a battlefield, and you tried to assassinate a diplomat. That alone's a pretty serious crime, you know..."

"I don't care about any of that! My only target is *her*! Let us finish our duel!"

"'Don't interrupt,' eh? But... *I refuse!* Artom doesn't want to keep this important diplomat waiting here forever—and personally, I have a job I'd like to be over and done with."

"Then take the diplomat and leave! It's got nothing to do with me!"

"Look, I *told* you already: Your plan has something to do with *me*. You lot are the culprits who tried to assassinate a diplomat I was hired to protect. Surely I'm in the right here, no? You don't negotiate with terrorists. That's just common sense in diplomacy, you know?"

The heroes might've been revered in Metis, but here, they were just foreign invaders who'd tried to assassinate a diplomat. It made perfect sense to consider them terrorists.

Even setting aside the assassination, any force that snuck into another country without permission and tried to blow up a highway would be targeted as terrorists. Only in the Holy Land of Metis could they use their status as heroes as an excuse.

"It sounds like you're here to avenge someone, but you were willing to drag other people into it too. In other words, you've taken part in terrorism. Do you really think someone like that has the right to ask me to leave them alone?"

"At least let me fight her! I don't care about anything else!"

"No. We're short on time, and as far as I'm concerned, I have no reason to let you do that. Think about it for a moment; why would I respect your wishes there when there's absolutely nothing in it for us? This is *war*—you do know that, right?"

"Zelos..." Lusei interjected. "Do you really intend to disrespect a warrior's pride?"

"Yup. You make it sound like some noble cause, but it's just a fight to the death, isn't it? And I don't see any 'pride' in letting people kill each other. You know, there's a saying: *Slay evil immediately.*"

Zelos was starting to sound like a certain samurai from pop culture.

He'd already seen enough bloodshed for one day.

"Say, how are you related to that hero called Kazama?" he asked the girl. "Mmm... Boyfriend and girlfriend, perhaps? No, probably not. Childhood friends, then? Jeez—the kid has a beautiful girl as his childhood friend, and then he wastes it by getting himself killed to look cool?"

"Don't insult him!" Yoshino cried. "You don't know anything about him!"

"Wait... Kazama? As in the hero Kazama? He's... He's alive, you know?" Lusei said.

"Wh— *What*?!" Zelos's and Yoshino's jaws dropped. They were stunned.

How could you blame them? They'd thought Kazama was dead.

"Erm... Lusei? I heard that boy was dead... He's alive? Seriously?"

"Yes. He cast an area spell at me, intending to kill both of us at the same time. My magic barrier saved me from the hit, but it left him on the verge of death. It felt like a waste to let such a talented mage rot away in Metis, so..."

"So what? You brought him back with you and healed him?"

"I did, yes. And, um, he fell in love with our princess, so..."

"*Huh?!*"

"Despite her age, the princess looks like a little ki— *Ahem!* I mean, she looks very *youthful*. And apparently that was exactly what Kazama was looking for in a woman."

All of a sudden, the atmosphere had grown very awkward.

The fact that he was alive was surprising enough. But to top it off, he'd fallen in love with an enemy princess?! It was ridiculous.

Yoshino, who'd been devoted to him this whole time, had rejoiced

to hear he was still alive—and then the shocking revelation that he had a lover had come. And when she'd learned that lover was a *princess*, Yoshino felt like she'd just taken a lethal blow.

"The first time he heard how old she was," Lusei continued, "he was over the moon. He was all, 'YES! A *legal loli*! I'm in love! Let me shout my love for you!' Honestly, I was...kind of shocked."

"So, what—it was love at first sight?" Zelos asked, deciding not to comment on what sounded like Kazama riffing on the lyrics to an anime opening. "Yeah, okay, I'm pretty sure our hero here's gonna see red. This won't be pretty..."

"N-Now I remember..." Yoshino said. "Once, when I was cleaning Takumi's room, I found an art book from an anime about a little magical girl... And he was always staring at these figures of chibi characters... And I found those hentai anime DVDs in his wardrobe. He said they were his older brother's, but... Wait..."

"Uh, yeah... You probably shouldn't have believed him. Pretty sure the kid's a full-blown lolicon, from the sounds of it. At least it doesn't seem like he's done anything illegal, but..."

"*Aha... Aha ha ha...* I'm such an idiot... He was such a nice guy, but now I'm learning he was a *pervert*... I've loved him all this time. Why'd I have to get my heart broken like *this*..."

All of a sudden, the flame in Yoshino had burned out.

It was a brutal end to her long first love. In fact, "brutal" didn't quite do it justice. It had gone up in flames.

It was such a sad fate that even Zelos felt like he was on the verge of tears.

"No... I can't do this anymore. I just want to die..."

"Yeah... That's not good, huh?" Zelos said to Lusei. "That's some crazy stuff. I feel so sorry for her..."

"Um... Did I say something wrong? She was so worked up just a moment ago, and now she looks completely deflated..."

"You just made her first love go up in flames. Now, let's hurry up and wrap— Hmm?"

All of a sudden, Zelos felt a hint of malice from somewhere nearby. He scanned his surroundings.

All he could see were soldiers from Artom and the corpses of

fallen paladins.

The knights from Solistia had already pulled back to consolidate around Earl Ilhans and shore up their protection of him.

Hmm... Where's this malice coming from, then? I know it's from someone lurking around here, but not exactly where... And what could they be after? We've captured all the heroes. So they might be hiding themselves for some other purpose... Mmm.

Several possibilities came to mind, but they lacked compelling evidence.

Zelos drew closer to Yoshino, pretending not to notice the aura.

"Look, you're not wrong. This is one crappy way to get your heart broken. But having feelings for someone isn't a bad thing. Your love may be over, but I don't think it was all for nothing. It may hurt right now, but time heals all wounds. I know it's a cliché, but it's true. However it ended, it was a good experience for you."

She stayed silent.

"At the same time, he sure had you worried, huh? I think you'd be well within your rights to beat him up for it."

"You're... You're right. I think that's what I want to do. To meet him, slap him in the face, and...put an end to these feelings."

"Then let's do it. All right—stand up. I *am* pretty much arresting you, for what it's worth, so...I guess next you'll be questioned? But just tell Artom about those scumbags from the Faith of the Four Gods, and they'll be over the moon, I bet. They'll want every little bit of intel they can get."

The moment Zelos said that, he felt the malice from earlier grow stronger. One of the paladins lying on the ground nearby suddenly pulled a knife, stood, and charged at Yoshino.

"Die, you traitor of a 'hero'!"

"Wha—?!"

"No. *You* die."

Right when the paladin's knife was about to reach Yoshino, Zelos casually swung his enormous gunblade and sent the paladin flying.

The man soared dozens of meters into the air. Then, eventually, he came crashing back down and hit the ground headfirst.

"Ah. *That* makes sense. Looks like he was tasked with

assassinating you. Have you been talking smack about the Faith, by any chance?"

"I... Yes. Ever since Takumi died—or, um, since I *thought* he died—I haven't been able to trust the Faith. Or anyone else, for that matter..."

"Then if I had to guess, I'd say the only reason they hadn't killed you yet was because you were still useful. And now, you've lost. That guy had probably been given advance orders to get rid of you if it looked like you might turn against the Faith. I mean...he failed, though."

"The people from Metis really are so..."

"They're rotten, aren't they~? And they probably got rid of the previous batches of heroes the same way. Though they're stupid if they expect the same trick to keep working forever. Anyway, now we know they see you as an enemy."

Zelos left Yoshino's side, walked over to the fallen paladin, and lightly stepped on his gut.

"*GUH!*"

"Hi there. Tell me, are you guys part of the Crimson Cabal? I've been hearing about you from someone from the last batch of heroes you summoned. Something about you being a real bunch of scumbags."

"H-How dare a filthy *mage*— *GAKH!*"

Zelos put more weight on his foot, face still emotionless.

"What was that about me being a mage? Do you get the situation you're in? I have your life in the palm of my hand right now. *I* get to ask the questions. *Your* job is to answer them. Truthfully."

"Wh-Who would tell a mage like you anything?! You impure—!"

"*Aha ha...* You're a funny one, aren't you? 'Impure'? Only people who've never taken another human life are allowed to call anyone 'impure.' Take just one life, and you're as sullied as anyone. Tell me, how many people have you killed? I can smell the blood coming off you..."

Zelos drew a knife from his waist and flung it at the man's thigh.

"*AAAAAAAAARGH!*"

"Now, let's get talking, shall we? There are *so* many things I'd like

to ask. About your little Crimson Cabal, especially. *Heh heh heh...*"

"I-I'd rather die than say a word to you! When I'm dead, I'll be with the Gods!"

"I can't imagine those sad excuses for gods would ever care about the death of a measly little human. You'd die for nothing."

"Y-You... How *dare* you... You know nothing of the mercy of the almighty Gods! Never speak their names!"

"Oh, I know them perfectly well. I know what a careless, rotten bunch they are, that is. I'd love for some *other* gods to replace them sometime soon..."

The more the man listened to Zelos, the more his face contorted into a mask of pure rage.

"Y-You... You're a *reincarnator*! An enemy of the Gods! A minion of the Dark God!"

"Well, well... Now I've got *more* things I want to ask you about. Don't you worry; I'll heal all your wounds for you. I may not look it, but I'm good with healing magic, you know? I could carve you up real good with a knife, then heal you up just before you die. And I could do it over and over again..."

"Wh— No. You're lying. There's no way a mage can use healing magic."

"Oh, but I can! You've got no idea. The only difference between mages and priests is whether they're *better at* attack spells or healing spells. But each of them can use both."

"A-Again with your lies! You're no disciple of the Four. You could never use holy ma—"

"*God's Blessing.*"

Right in front of the paladin's eyes, Zelos cast the most powerful priest support spell, all by himself.

"Th-That was God's Blessing... There's no way. That's supposed to be a lost spell. One used by the high priests of old... *How?!* How could a lowly mage like you... *How?!*"

"I already told you, didn't I? It's not like mages *can't* use holy magic. You said this 'God's Blessing' is something high priests could use, yes? But can your Cloistered Emperor use it? I'm guessing not, since you said it was 'lost.' Meanwhile, I can use *every* priest spell—

with a few exceptions, mind you. Would you like me to test them out on you? While we have *a little chat*, that is..."

"Th-There's no way... How is this even..."

"It's true. Accept it already. More importantly, though, let's get back to our topic from earlier. There are all *sorts* of things I'd like you to tell me about. See, if I throw a knife imbued with my magic, like that one just now, I can easily cut your whole arm off. And we *are* at war, after all. If it gets me some information, I'm sure nobody would balk at a little tortu— *Ahem.* I mean, nobody would complain if I got a little rough, eh?"

"*T-Torture*? You just said torture!"

"Just a slip of the tongue. Can't stress over every little mistake, you know? It'll make you go gray. Now—question time. I'd be oh so happy if you gave me honest answers. If you don't, I may have to resort to my fist— I mean, to a little bit of peaceful violence— I mean..."

Zelos drew a bunch of knives and pressed his foot harder into the man's gut.

The man was resisting as best he could, but he couldn't escape.

"Y-You devil! May the Gods smite you down!"

"'Devil'? That's a new one. Usually people call me 'Destroyer,' so 'devil' has a fresh feel to it. What are you going to call me next, I wonder? I can't *wait* to find out. *Heh heh heh...*"

Zelos flashed an evil smile at the man, pushing his mind closer and closer to the edge.

Exposed to a fear like nothing he'd ever experienced before, this paladin from the Crimson Cabal was on the verge of giving in.

"What kind of mage behaves like that?" Lusei mused. "Such cruelty..."

"H-He's so *cool*..." Yoshino murmured. "How fierce he is... Holding nothing back..."

"Do you have a screw loose? That man looks like he could have no moral boundaries at all. No proper mage would be like that."

"That's what makes it so good! 'Destroyer,' he said... A lone mage, raining destruction on his enemies... Justice without force is powerless, they say, and it's true."

The heartbroken girl had picked herself back up, and she was already moving forward...albeit in a bit of a strange way.

She'd always liked tokusatsu shows—and in particular, their antiheroes.

This day marked both the beginning of both a certain paladin's misfortune and a certain hero's fandom of the Black Destroyer.

"Help! Someone, help me! I'll tell you anything! Anything you want to know! Please!"

"Oh, come on; we're only just getting started! Hold out a little longer, will you? Don't make this boring for me. Don't worry—we've got *plenty* of time ahead of us. *Aha ha ha ha ha...*"

"What do you mean, 'boring'?! You're actually *looking forward* to torturing me, aren't you? Gods! O Gods!"

"I thought I told you already. Your gods won't be coming to save you. How long is it going to take to get that through your thick skull? Besides, you guys do this sort of thing all the time, don't you? Let's see. I think I'll start by pulling out every one of your fingernails and toenails. Then I'll break your finger bones one by one, flay you alive, cut your ears off..."

Finally, the unfortunate man yielded in the face of the Great Sage's Intimidating Wave skill. Coming from someone well over Level 1,000, it was nothing to sneeze at. The man felt like a tiny little critter who'd run into a dragon.

The mana-powered intimidation manifested into real fear, and the paladin surrendered with ease.

Shortly thereafter, Zelos handed one very pale paladin over to the Artom Empire. He must've really been terrified.

Zelos *did* end up reflecting on what he'd done—he knew he'd gone a little too far—but he didn't regret it.

Extra Chapter: Delthasis's Oath

"Hey, Del. What do you think happiness is?"

That question echoed through Delthasis's head as he stood in front of a small tombstone.

At the time, he hadn't been able to answer. He hadn't even *tried* to, really. It was a trifling question. But now, he had his answer.

"Being with someone you love," he muttered. "In whatever form that might take."

It was a simple answer, but it was his answer nonetheless.

"Are you really satisfied, Milena?" he asked the tombstone. "You never even got to hold Celestina in your arms..."

But Milena was gone now. Gone forevermore.

He'd been prepared for what had happened. But still, he'd wished, from the bottom of his heart, he could have had just a little bit longer with her.

His wish had fallen on deaf ears, though. The time for the two to part had come all too soon.

Delthasis's mind went back to their time together, when they were young.

As a boy, he'd never trusted anyone. But one day, at the Istol Academy of Magic, he'd met Milena.

Thinking back to it now, he wondered whether Milena had known all along how they were going to end up.

*

"You know, you always look so bored with the world. Do you really hate it that much?"

"Yes. I do. Every single person is wearing a smile that hides a nasty secret..."

"If the world's so boring, why not change it yourself? You could

do that, right?”

“Me? Change the world?”

“Yup! Just turn it into whatever you want! You can do that. And...you know something? It’s a much more beautiful place out there than you think.”

*

That was how he’d met Milena.

For whatever reason, she’d started to follow him around after that. Eventually, he’d met Miska too and gained a bunch of other friends.

“I still wonder... Was I ever able to do anything for Milena? No... Thinking about it won’t do me any good. I know I’ll never get an answer.”

Only the dead knew what their hearts had felt when they were still beating.

But Delthasis had never forgotten all the precious things Milena had given him while they were still alive.

Looking back on it now, it felt like there was so much she’d given him, and so little he’d given her.

He felt a deep love for her, still, and guilt for a debt he could never repay.

Regret filled his heart.

*

“Hey! Hey, Del!” Milena chirped. “This is my friend, Miska. Play nice, all right?”

“Er... She’s glaring a hole into me, though,” Delthasis said. “Do you really expect us to become friends?”

Miska sighed. “I don’t have a problem with *you*! I’m just annoyed that she’s dragged me out here. You’re her boyfriend, right? Why don’t you tell her off for always being so pushy? She never listens to what I tell her! It’s such a pain!”

“No, I’m not her boyfriend. Besides, she doesn’t listen to what *I*

say either. Think you can do something about that yourself?"

*

That, meanwhile, was how he'd met Miska.

He hadn't quite known what was happening at the time. Milena had simply come up to him, dragging Miska along by the arm. *Miska.* The very same Miska who his classmates had gotten weary of and started calling the "Queen of Ice."

Delthasis had never spoken with her before. In fact, he'd never thought of her as anything more than a part of the scenery. She'd always seemed like the sort who never wanted anything to do with other people, so, frankly, he'd been shocked to see Milena dragging her along.

From that moment on, it felt like he'd never stopped bickering with Miska.

"*Pff...* Thinking back, maybe that was why Milena introduced us. To give me someone to bicker with. She's always been a pain, for sure, but compared to all those other nobles, Miska and her naked hostility were a breath of fresh air."

Most of the time, Miska looked like an expressionless doll. But when the three of them got together, she'd spit barb after barb.

Restraint was not in her vocabulary. Nor did she give a damn about social status.

For Delthasis, talking with someone like Miska was infuriating, but it was also *refreshing*.

When was it, he wondered, that he'd stopped hating everyone around him?

At some point in his life, he'd just come to accept Miska as she was.

This from a man who'd once hated the world so much.

*

"Hey, Del. Do you hate Miska?"

"No. I don't particularly care for her, but I don't hate her either."

“Isn’t that when you’re meant to say you like her?” Milena pouted. “She’s a good girl, you know? It may not look like it, but we’re into the same things. By which I mean there’s a certain kind of illustrated book that’s been popular lately, and—”

“The ones you keep trying to force on me, you mean?!” Miska interrupted. “I came back to my room once to find you’d left them in there... How’d you even get in?! The door was locked!”

“Aww... You’re complaining, but you still read them all, right~?”

“I... I very much did...not...”

“So you two are *into* that kind of thing, are you? In that case, can you stay away from me for a while? I don’t want people to think I’m one of your kind...”

“Aww... You’re so *mean*, Del! You’re horrible!”

*

Thinking back, it felt like Milena had rubbed off on Miska.

Whether that influence had been for the better or the worse was up to Miska; that wasn’t for Delthasis to decide. At the very least, the “Queen of Ice” had come to show more and more emotion, even cracking the occasional joke.

Even if, a lot of the time, it was hard to tell whether they *were* jokes...

“So this is where you were, Del.”

“Oh. Miska.”

“Milena said it herself, didn’t she? ‘I’m prepared to die. And remember: Even when I’m gone, there’ll still be hope. So don’t be sad,’” Miska said, quoting something Milena had said with a smile on her face, the day she’d given birth to Celestina.

Delthasis sighed. “I know. But I... I never knew I was such a weak man.”

Delthasis had thought her smile would be the answer to all his questions.

But just three days after that, Milena had passed, leaving nothing but a letter.

The loss of his loved one had left Delthasis with a grief that

would never disappear.

And amid his grief, he'd remember all the fun times they'd spent together.

Their time at the academy felt so long ago, yet somehow recent. There had been all kinds of incidents; the days had been a mix of chaos and joy, one after another. As time had passed, Delthasis had eventually confirmed that Milena was part of the family with the bloodline magic Precognition.

Countless greedy scoundrels got in the way of Delthasis and his friends, seeking to use Milena's power for their own ends.

Each of those scoundrels sought out her family, unaware that the use of Precognition ate away at the user's own lifespan. Milena was the last survivor.

*

"Hey, Del... If I just vanished one day, would you look for me?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Answer the question! Would you... Would you look for me?"

"*Hmph...* It's a bit late to ask that, don't you think? Of course I would. And I'd find you, I promise. Whatever it took."

"That's a promise, okay? I... I'll wait for you."

*

Milena had been unusually serious that day.

At the time, Delthasis hadn't known where the question had come from.

But just a month after that, Milena was abducted. It was like she'd known it was going to happen.

And just like he'd promised, Delthasis had used every method available to him to track her down. Before long, he'd found her—and laid waste to the criminal organization known as Hydra.

But only once it had become too late had Delthasis realized Precognition's true danger.

Unless the user suppressed it, it would manifest as dreams that

showed them the future. And ultimately, it would rob them of their life. It was cursed magic.

Milena had been the final piece in a long, long plan to bring her cursed magic, her cursed family, to an end. And she'd accepted that.

Only after Milena had breathed her last did Delthasis learn the harsh truth.

Just before she'd passed away—all alone, with a calm smile on her face—she'd left a letter by her bedside. It ended simply with: "I was happy."

"How can I find you when you're dead, Milena?" Delthasis murmured.

He felt like he'd been spoiled by her deep affection, all while knowing nothing of the darkness she'd carried inside. He wanted to hit himself for it.

"I know it's frustrating," Miska said, "but self-loathing won't get you anywhere. I'm going through the same thing, you know—so try to be a little more considerate!"

"I'm aware. But I just can't get over it. I can't get over *her*."

Just like Delthasis, Miska was filled with grief that she could do nothing about.

Even then, Miska was considerate of him—just like she had been when they were at the academy. It reminded him of how strong she was.

Her presence alone made him grateful, lifting his mood just a little.

*

"So, Del... Do you want dinner? A bath? Or...*me*?"

"Wait. Why are you trying to take my clothes off? I thought you wanted to talk about something important?"

"Oh, don't worry. I'm just getting ready for you to—*eat me up*~?"

"Why did you say that like a question? And why are you putting your hand on my pants— Wait! We're still students! We shouldn't go any further than this! Stop this! This is no way for a lady to act!"

"If you won't make me yours, I'll just have to make you mine

instead... ♡”

*

It was a nostalgic memory.

Milena had refused to listen to others, the same as always. She’d put the moves on the stoic Delthasis as if it were nothing.

Delthasis sighed.

The days he’d spent with Milena had been so memorable, so full of joy.

She’d been a force unto herself...

Why was I so taken by her? Relationships are so hard to understand...

“Del... You should rest a little,” Miska suggested. “You don’t look well, and you’re sweating buckets. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m... I’m fine. I was just remembering some things. Things from the past...”

It was a past he didn’t want Miska to know about.

“She was utterly herself, even in her final moments, wasn’t she?” Miska said. “Passing away without telling us a thing...”

“You’re right. We were both in the palm of her hand until the very end.”

“It was always like that, wasn’t it? She’d drag us into something out of nowhere, and somehow, it’d always turn out for the best. And yes, the way she just passed on without saying a single word about it to us... I’m still mad about it now.”

“She never gave us the opportunity to complain about it either, did she? It’s almost like she quit while she was ahead.”

But Milena had never been the type to say what she really felt.

She’d always just put on an innocent laugh and dragged the two of them into some new crazy situation. Even when she was hurting, she’d never complained.

Only rarely had Delthasis glimpsed the darkness, the vulnerability, she’d hidden within. Whenever he had, he’d done his best to do something to help her; over the course of their time together, he’d become smitten by her.

But what they'd had between them had always felt so fleeting. It was like she'd suddenly drift away if he didn't cling to her with all his strength.

"But I have a promise to keep," he said. "Today's the only day I'll stand here and whine."

"You're right. I can just imagine Milena grilling you in the afterlife if you don't make Celestina happy."

"Mm. I'll have to protect her, as long as it takes—or I'll never be able to face Milena again. The girl was Milena's hopes and dreams, after all..."

"I'll help you as best I can, Del. *I* promised her too..."

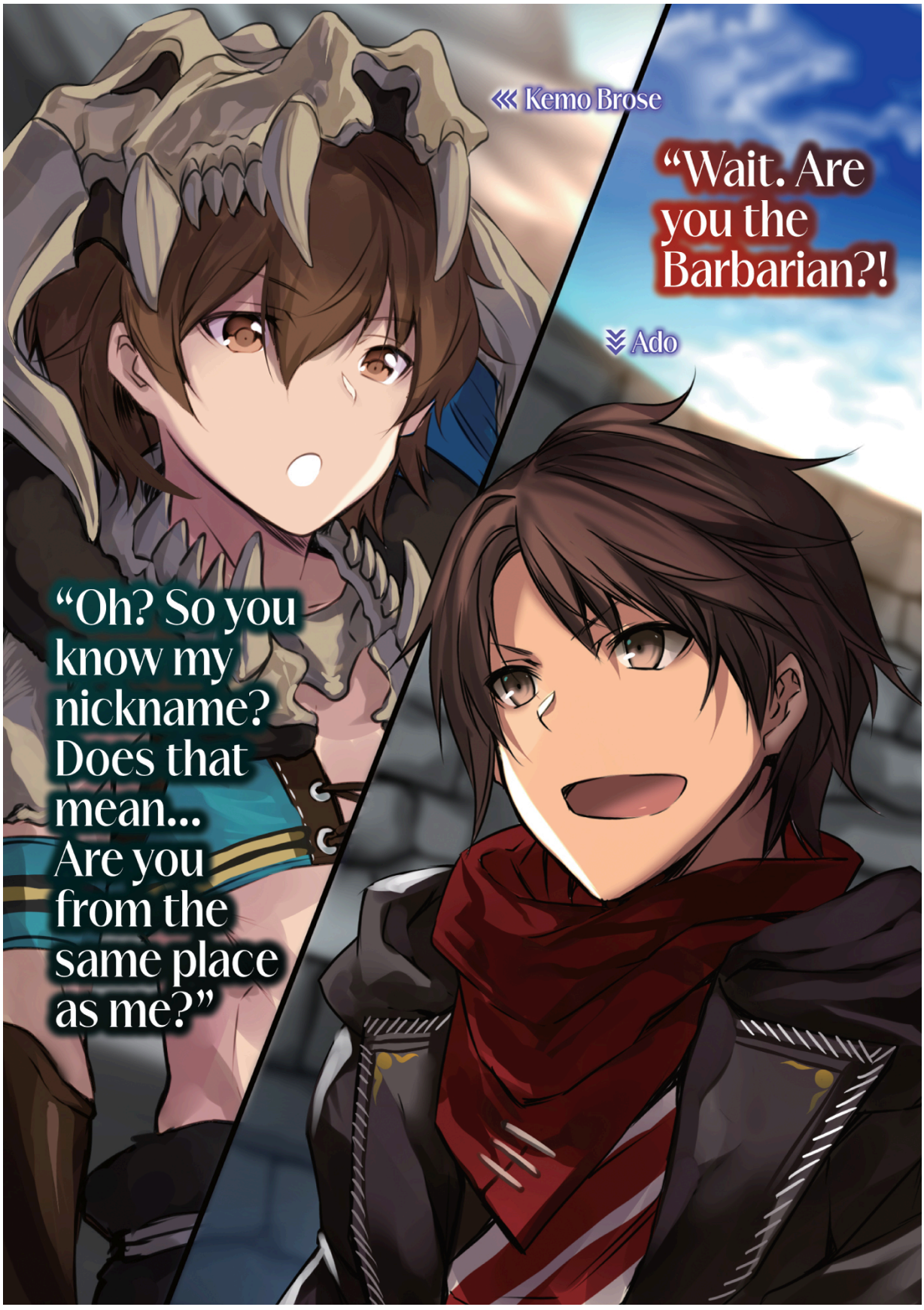
Delthasis gave a slight smile, turned his back on Milena's grave, and walked away.

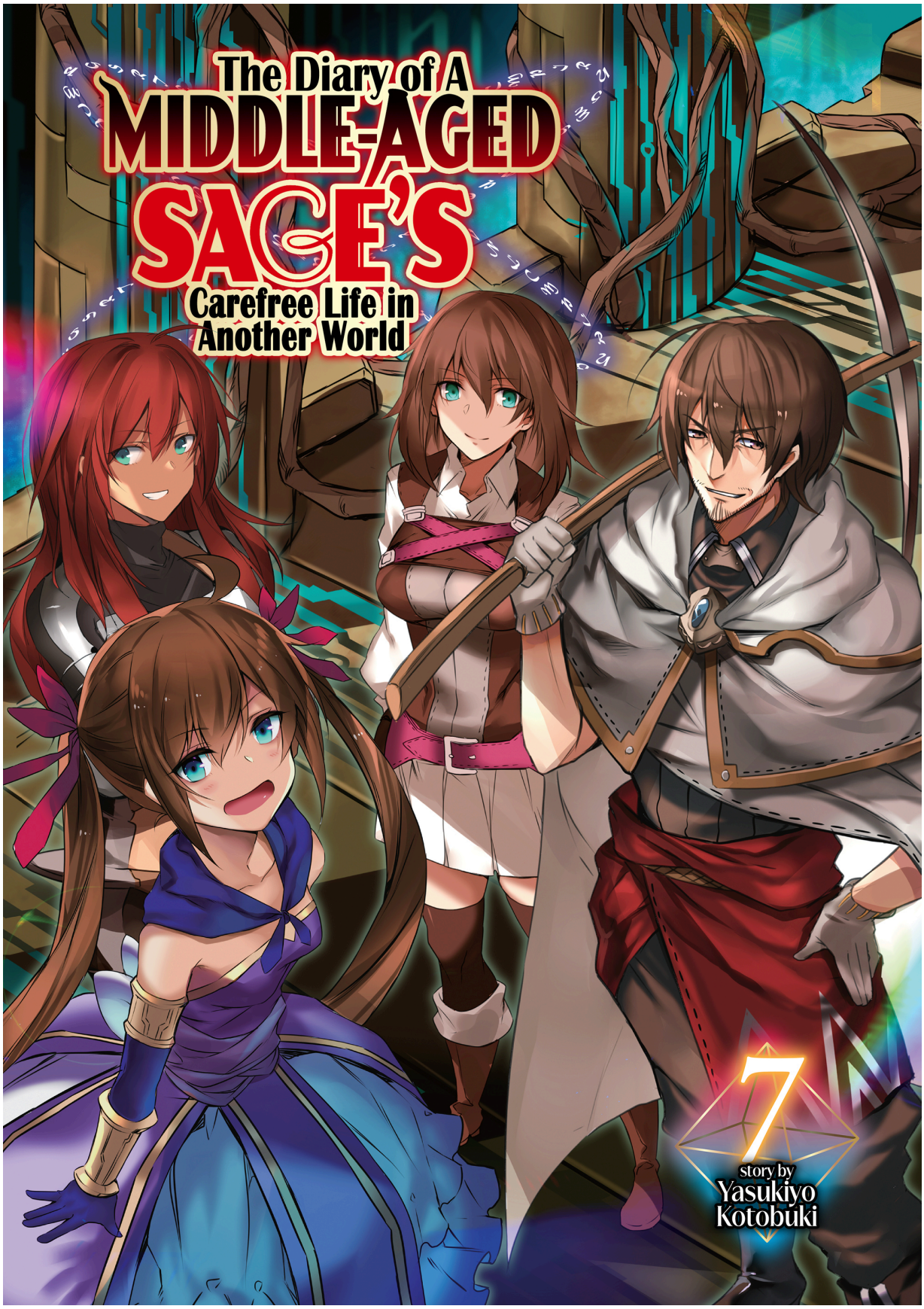
Milena had entrusted the two of them with Celestina, and they'd vowed to make her happy.

Up until the day she could choose her own path and fly high and free...


The Diary of A
MIDDLE-AGED
SAGE'S
Carefree Life in Another World
7
story by
Yasukiyo
Kotobuki


Creston
Zelos
Jeanne
Iris
Boling
Nagri
Lena

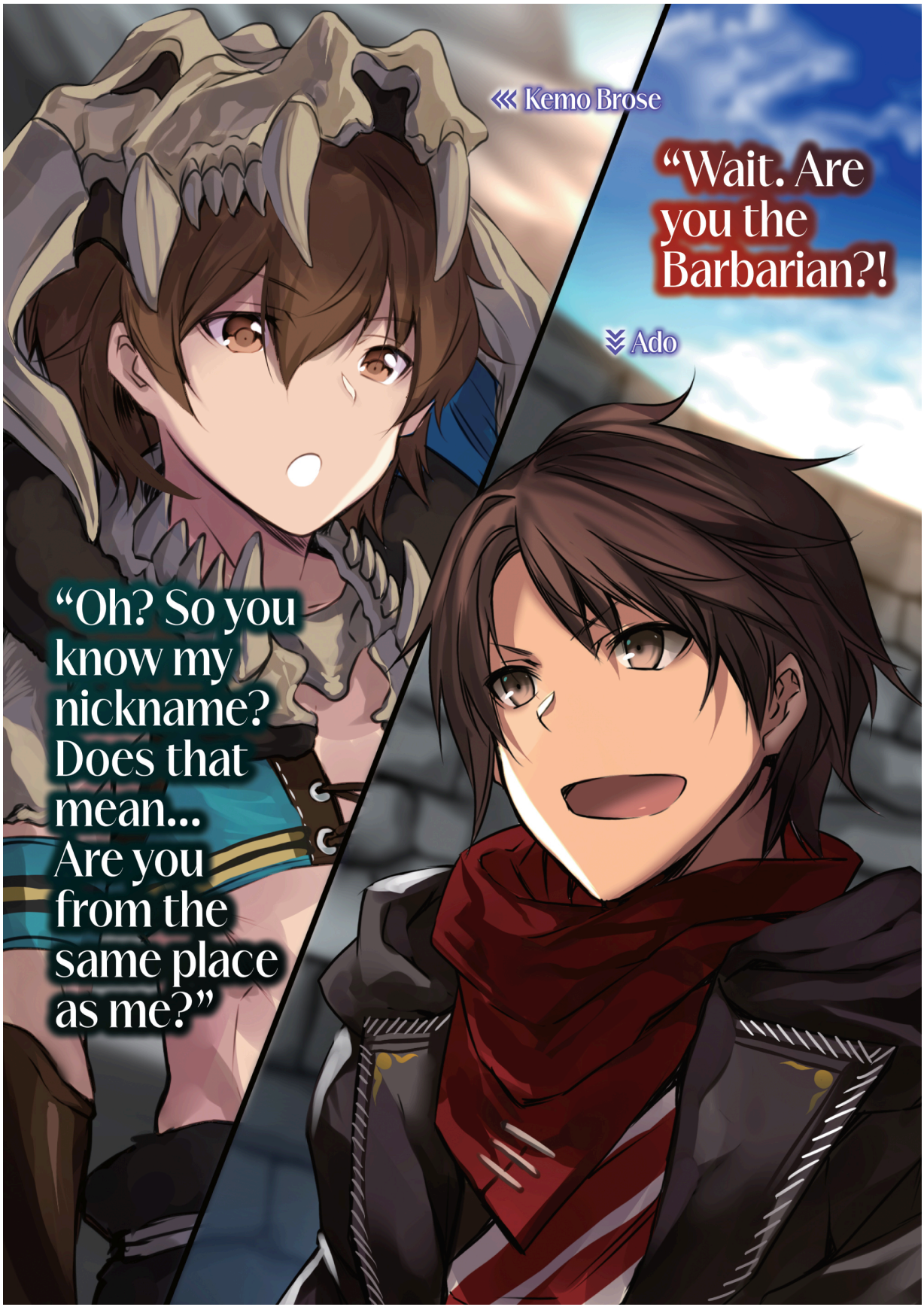

Kemo Brose
"Wait. Are you the Barbarian?!
Ado
"Oh? So you know my nickname? Does that mean... Are you from the same place as me?"

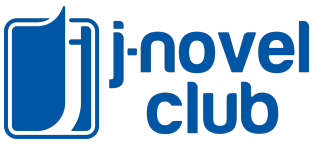

The Diary of A
MIDDLE-AGED
SAGE'S
Carefree Life in Another World
7
story by
Yasukiyo
Kotobuki




The Diary of A
MIDDLE-AGED
SAGE'S
Carefree Life in Another World
7
story by
Yasukiyo
Kotobuki


Creston
Zelos
Jeanne
Iris
Boling
Nagri
Lena


Kemo Brose
"Wait. Are you the Barbarian?!
Ado
"Oh? So you know my nickname? Does that mean... Are you from the same place as me?"



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 8 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

The Diary of a Middle-Aged Sage's Carefree Life in Another World: Volume 7
by Kotobuki Yasukiyo

Translated by James McBride Edited by LarsB

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright ©Kotobuki Yasukiyo 2018

Illustrations by JohnDee ARAFO KENJA NO ISEKAI SEIKATSU NIKKI Vol. 7
©Kotobuki Yasukiyo 2018
First published in Japan in 2018 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo All rights reserved.

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: August 2025
Premium E-Book for cbg