
NOVEL
3
Witch and MERCENARY
STORY BY CHOHOKITEKI KAERU
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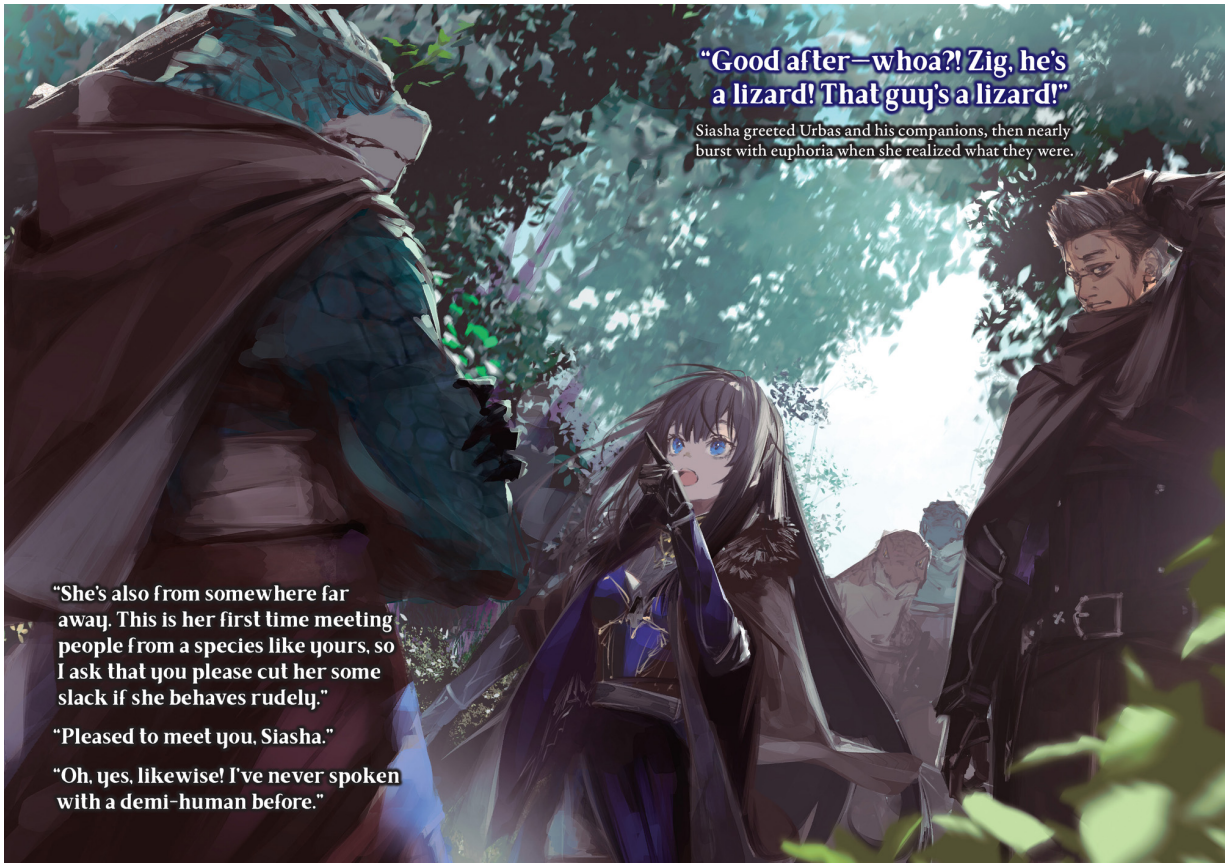
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"Good after—whoa?! Zig, he's a lizard! That guy's a lizard!"
Siasha greeted Urbas and his companions, then nearly burst with euphoria when she realized what they were.
"She's also from somewhere far away. This is her first time meeting people from a species like yours, so I ask that you please cut her some slack if she behaves rudely."
"Pleased to meet you, Siasha."
"Oh, yes, likewise! I've never spoken with a demi-human before."



ADVENTURER'S GUILD RECEPTIONIST

Sian Ebreiz

"It's so annoying that this keeps happening!"

FOURTH-CLASS ADVENTURER

Urbas

"I'm a scalefolk. Urbas of the Verdant Scaleclan."

ADVENTURER'S GUILD RECEPTIONIST

Aoi Kasukabe

"You're welcome to consult me if there's ever a problem."

FOURTH-CLASS ADVENTURER

Alan Clows

"So, *that's* what happened. Things are starting to make sense now."

WITCH AND MERCENARY

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THE CHOICE TO LIVE

BONUS STORY
BUSINESS STRATEGY AND TECHNIQUES

AFTERWORD

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©Kanase Bench (Illustration)
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Witch and Mercenary

NOVEL

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Seven Seas Entertainment

Chapter 1:
A Familiar Conflict and Unfamiliar Days

THE NONSTOP BARKING OF VENDORS ECHOED through the air, each enthusiastically trying to grab the attention of potential customers. Rows of fish with clear blue eyes, as lively as they were fresh, glinted silver in the morning sunlight.

Halian wasn't a port town, but its proximity to the coast was a boon to the freshly caught seafood they sold. Unlike the continent where Zig had come from, the existence of magic here made it possible to produce ice that people could use to preserve food at low temperatures, thus contributing to a rich food culture.

That being said, the town's coastal location was a pivotal part of the equation. Even if food preservation wasn't difficult, it still took more time and effort than producing products without it. The ice used to keep them cold also didn't come for free and was quite heavy. More than anything else, transporting the products across a land populated by monstrosities far deadlier than any wild beast was the most perilous aspect.

It was at this unusually spirited marketplace that two figures stood.

"I suppose it's not a bad idea to visit a morning market every once in a while," the mercenary—a perennial early riser—murmured as he gazed at the lively scene.

“Since I used to live in the forest, being able to eat fish every day is like a dream come true!” the witch said with a nod, narrowing her still rather sleepy eyes.

There were two reasons Zig and Siasha had come to check out this market instead of heading off on an adventuring job, like they would normally do at this hour.

The first was because of the bounty: A double-horned blue beetle, a monstrosity usually taken on by adventurers ranked sixth class and above, had been spotted recently. It appeared to be a veteran that had accumulated more combat experience and mana than usual due to living far longer than most members of its species. Its presence had spurred on an influx of high-ranking adventurers hoping to defeat it, drawing them to hunting grounds usually occupied by those who were around the seventh class.

There were currently several parties working to defeat the beetle, trying to gain both the reward and the guild’s trust, but none of them had been successful yet. It was likely taking some time to determine the monstrosity’s location from the sightings because insect-type monstrosities roamed larger territories. Double-horned blue beetles had tough exoskeletons, and the bountied specimen was exceptionally sturdy, so defeating it during a chance encounter would be next to impossible. Advance preparation was essential to taking it down.

Of course, an exceptionally skilled magic user or swordsman would be able to crush it, but adventurers of that level wouldn’t be

interested in taking on the job for how much reward money was being offered.

In the end, the guild determined that adventurers under seventh rank wouldn't stand a chance against it, so they were restricted from entering specific areas where the monstrosity had been spotted.

According to the veteran adventurer Bates, around half of registered adventurers were seventh class or lower. Considering how much of the population fell under the restrictions, the level-appropriate hunting grounds that remained open were now severely crowded.

Having to be considerate of other adventurers while working in a cramped space was something Siasha hated.

The other reason for their visit was that the witch wanted to see what a morning market was like. Even normal city activities felt exciting and new to someone who had lived in seclusion for so long. Sian, one of the guild's receptionists who seemed to always be watching out for her, mentioned it was worth seeing the morning market at least once.

It may have been the guild's intention to keep Siasha, a promising new adventurer, out of danger, regardless of whether she needed that consideration or not. Either way, those were the main reasons she and Zig had taken the day off.

After waking up early and taking his daily run, the mercenary had roused a drowsy witch out of bed and brought her here.

The scale of this morning market was even impressive to Zig, who had seen his fair share in towns and cities. He could understand

why Siasha would be so excited. In addition to the variety of fresh seafood, the area was packed with rows of stalls selling dried foods and other specialty products.

"Zig, take a look at this!"

Siasha repositioned herself to avoid being swallowed up by the crowds she was so unaccustomed to. The mercenary's intimidating appearance and physical stature functioned as an effective bulwark, causing people to move away from them like rocks parting water in a river.

"What is it?"

Zig glanced over in the direction that Siasha—who was oblivious to the role he was playing—was pointing at, to see a man filleting a fish with a knife. There was nothing surprising about that in and of itself. The issue lay with the fish he was serving to his customers: It was *raw*.

"Has he lost his mind?" The mercenary murmured under his breath in a rare display of astonishment.

"I've seen raw fish being eaten before, but witnessing it up close… I don't think I could partake myself." Siasha's perturbed expression was typical of someone watching others consume strange and exotic foods.

There was little risk of food poisoning in these lands where magic was used daily and preservation and long-distance transportation techniques prevented ingredients from spoiling. As a result, there were significant differences in this continent's food culture, the consumption of raw items being one of them.

On the continent where Zig and Siasha came from, it was customary to cook food before eating it, and the only things that were ever eaten raw were certain fruits and vegetables. Water was especially important to those whose professions required them to travel long distances such as mercenaries and merchants, so getting dehydrated after suffering with food poisoning during the journey could become life-threatening.

"I had heard of this kind of food existing in seaside towns, but…"

Zig resorted to eating raw foods such as bugs when it became necessary, but that was out of desperation and never something he would choose out of enjoyment. Watching people consuming them willingly was completely bizarre to him.

"I almost died after eating a river fish raw before." Siasha's face blanched as she recalled the unpleasant memory. The mercenary secretly felt a little relieved to learn that even a being as powerful as a witch was vulnerable to the foodborne illnesses that endangered many other living things.

They continued to watch the scene with horrified astonishment, on par with what they'd experienced after arriving on this continent and first witnessed people using magic. A few moments later, Zig stepped forward, a look of resolve on his face.

"Zig?" Siasha looked up at him in surprise, and she didn't have to say anything for him to know exactly what she was thinking: *You've got to be joking, right?*

"There are some things you can't overcome by being trapped in the past," he said.

Zig's tone seemed to hint that he had had his own harsh experiences. He didn't bother to wipe away the cold sweat that dotted his forehead but plastered on a brave smile as he started to walk, trying to convince himself that the shivering sensation he was experiencing was excitement.

"B-but you're being reckless! It's too dangerous!"

"That's exactly why I'm doing this. There may come a time when I'm served raw food and nothing else. It's not like I can ask for it to be cooked right then and there because I'm scared. If I get sick now, I'd only have to suffer for a few days."

He had to do it. Willingly taking a swig of the bitter medicine now would better prepare him for future crises.

"Would you mind stepping away from my stall if you're going to make a fuss?" the proprietor said, glaring at the large man looking so flustered that it was almost shameless. "It's bad for business."

At his word, Zig and Siasha decided to stop making a racket and return to strolling around the market, taking in the various regional products. However, before they left the stall, the mercenary forced himself to eat a dish of the raw fish with the determination of a man about to meet his maker.

All Siasha could do was watch from the sidelines in terror. Zig really wished she wouldn't make that horrified expression—one that looked like she was watching someone inch closer to death—every time he took a bite.

"How *is* it?" she eventually asked.

"Not as bad as I expected, but I'm definitely not used to it yet." Zig remained expressionless as he finished the slices of raw fish—apparently called *sashimi*—that had been served with a tangy sauce.

It really wasn't as horrible as he had imagined. Still, his lifelong desire to avoid raw foods wouldn't be erased that easily, and it was difficult for him to give the dish a fair assessment. Maybe he could slowly overcome his aversion to these types of dishes by pairing them with other foods like vegetables instead of just eating them on their own.

His mind continued to churn with these thoughts as he trailed behind Siasha through the stalls.

She was glancing at everything like some country bumpkin, stumbling over to take a closer look whenever something unusual caught her eye. She did this several times, practically advertising that she was a naive girl who wasn't used to life in the big city. Her actions caught the attention of several men who made the mistake of assuming she was an easy target and began to approach her, only to have Zig force their fingers back at an unnatural angle the moment they tried to touch her.

"Good grief," the mercenary sighed.

One of them had been very, very close. Like dark clouds potentially signaling a storm, the morning marketplace could have been enveloped in a tornado of screams. Fortunately, the sound of bone breaking followed by the would-be thief's shrieks were muffled by all the hustle and bustle. Zig just wished they hadn't been so quick to utter parting threats as they ran away—he had been awfully

considerate to just remove one finger instead of taking their whole shoulder off.

Siasha, who may or may not have been aware of what was happening, grabbed the mercenary's arm after making a certain discovery.

"I want to try that!"

She was indicating a group grilling seafood, mostly shrimp and shellfish, that they had likely bought at the market. A pleasant smell wafted from an enclosed box with a net above and charcoal below, roasting whatever was placed on the mesh.

These men were probably locals. They were using wooden boxes as chairs, carousing and laughing like they had been at it since first thing in the morning. The net they were using was large, and there seemed to be plenty of empty space left on it.

Siasha squinted. "It doesn't look like a normal stall, does it? I wonder how I place an order…"

"Probably not. Hold on while I go and chat them up."

Zig chuckled under his breath as he made his way to a vendor selling the same alcohol that he had seen the men drinking. He bought some for himself before heading toward the loud group. His large size seemed to startle the men, whose faces were ruddy with alcohol, but one of them managed to pipe up as he approached.

"Wh-what d'you want?"

The mercenary responded with a quick bow, holding up the bottle of booze as he tried to appear as unintimidating as possible.

The men drew back, regarding him warily.

"Would you mind lending us some space on your net? She's interested in trying it." Zig held the bottle out toward the group and pointed over his shoulder at Siasha's direction.

Although initially flustered, the men's expressions softened, smiling as they laid eyes on the offering and his female companion.

"I s'pose we can be accommodatin'! You there, bring some more boxes. Chop, chop!"

It seemed the power of booze and a beautiful woman was the same everywhere. Zig briefly thanked the men who'd cheerfully accepted his request and took a seat on the empty crate they brought over for him.

"Hey, Siasha, just buy whatever you want to eat." He turned to one of the men. "Do you have any recommendations?"

The mercenary figured he might as well get a local's opinion, and the man who had already opened the bottle he gave them pointed two stalls down.

"Over there, the shop with the granny who looks like a shriveled prune. She's got the freshest stuff at the market. A real connoisseur, that one is."

"A…prune? W-wait, that thing's alive?"

"You've got a sharp tongue on ya, missy! Don't worry, that granny's probably gonna outlive us all!"

The figure hadn't so much as moved from what Siasha could see, so she had assumed it was some tacky decoration. She couldn't

hide her surprise as she walked toward the wrinkled and skinny old woman.

The locals poured Zig a cup of the booze he had brought, and he chatted casually with them while waiting for Siasha to return.

"So, big guy, are you an adventurer or somethin'?" one of the men asked. "You've got that look 'bout you. Like you're used to fightin' and stuff."

"I'm not an adventurer, but I do specialize in fighting," Zig said.

"Figures. Though, I'd be dyin' to hear all the details if you told me you was in the service industry lookin' like that!"

"Wouldn't that be somethin'!" one of the other men chimed in.

"You lot sure don't pull any punches!" Zig laughed as he shared some drinks with the boisterous men, though not enough to become intoxicated.

After a while, Siasha returned with a mountain of seafood, and the men began to instruct her how to arrange them on the net.

"The ones with the turban shell might explode when they get hot, so be careful! You should cover 'em up with a basket."

"Really? Wh-whoa! They boil over way more than I thought!"

"As for bivalves like clams, they're easier to eat if ya twist off one of the shells once they've cooked to a certain point."

"Ah, that makes sense." Even Zig couldn't help but be impressed. "You guys really know your stuff."

They both went to town on the seafood as the men gave them tips on how to eat their meal. Zig hadn't done much beachside grilling

himself, so there was a lot for him to learn as well.

"Wow! This is so good!" Siasha's eyes widened with delight as she chewed some shellfish.

However, the mercenary started to cough after swallowing a shrimp headfirst. "It tastes great, but—nngh! The antennae got stuck in my throat."

There was nothing wrong with eating the prepared food from the stalls, but a simple meal like this that they made themselves was also a treat. Zig and Siasha had enjoyed their barbecue to the fullest and were finishing off their meal with a soup made from seafood stock when something drew their attention.

"Hm?"

Zig was the first to notice. The market was a noisy place, but he sensed something was different about the lively hustle and bustle. The yells that made his ears perk up sounded adverse and hostile. Despite having drank a fair bit, he turned his sharp gaze on their surroundings.

There were a lot of people around. Finding a single anomaly among the crowd would be difficult. With that in mind, Zig shifted his tactic, taking in the big picture instead of scrutinizing the details.

Noticing something that seemed out of place, he looked closer—there were two groups in the distance that appeared to be arguing with each other.

"Zig?" Siasha looked at him questioningly. She hadn't picked up on the scuffle, but she *had* noticed the change in his behavior.

"What's all that racket going on over there?" He jabbed his fork in the direction of the fight, causing both the witch and the men to glance over.

Their reactions were completely different. Siasha cocked her head in confusion and the men sighed deeply as if they just realized what it was about. They seemed more annoyed than upset, which meant this was likely a reoccurring problem.

It was well into the morning now, and customers who had - finished their shopping were hurrying home to avoid getting involved in whatever trouble was brewing. With their customers leaving, the stalls had no reason to stick around either. They were packing up shop and getting ready to make a quick getaway.

"For fuck's sake. I knew I smelled a dog around here… Enough with the damn dogs already! I hate that disgusting wet mutt scent of theirs. It makes everything taste like shit! What's wrong? Did you lose your master?"

It was obvious from a glance that the scowling man with his hands stuck in his pants was bad news. Judging from how his center of balance was off and his stance open, he was just an amateur who liked to talk big. A run-of-the-mill hoodlum. As soon as Zig figured that out, he shifted his interest to the object of the thug's tirade.

"We're going to pay. We have a right to use this shop as well!"

The two men were about the same height, but the other one's body was much broader and well-built. However, it didn't look like a form forged through training but more like a sturdiness that had been there since birth.

This “dog” the thug had been spewing vitriol about wasn’t a metaphorical insult at all. The man’s limbs were covered in brown fur and his nose was pointed like a snout. His mouth was curved back in response to the insults, revealing fanged teeth, his cheeks twitching in anger.

“This market is for humans!” the thug howled, his cronies chiming in and hurling insults of their own. “Not somewhere for freaks like you to show up, you filthy demi-humans!”

The beast-faced demi-humans tried to talk back, but they were severely outnumbered. Eventually, even some of the onlookers began to join in the verbal abuse, and the demi-humans skulked away with their heads down in humiliation.

“I was in such a good mood, but seeing all that right at the end was a serious downer,” one of the men they had been dining with said as he rose to his feet. The others nodded in agreement as they started to tidy up.

“What was that just now?” Zig asked as he helped them with the cleaning.

One of the men gulped down the last remaining sips of his drink. “Huh? If you didn’t get what just happened, you must be from way out in the countryside. Humans who hate demi-humans aren’t uncommon at all ’round here.”

Demi-human.

It wasn’t a word Zig was familiar with, but considering the circumstances, there was no doubt it was being used in reference to those dog people. He had occasionally seen others with similar looks

but never interacted with them. Judging from how it sounded, the term likely meant a creature that resembled a human but wasn't considered to be on the same level. Not unlike the insults that were used to degrade people from other countries in times of war.

"So, the demi-humans are generally disliked?"

"It depends on the person, but honestly speakin', we ain't got a great impression of them either," the man said. "Demi-humans are responsible for a lot of crime. Still, we don't hate them *that* bad. Human or demi-human, anyone who kills the mood when we're out drinkin' is a real piece of shit."

He and his friends finished cleaning up and began to leave. They were supposedly heading to work, but Zig wondered if they would be okay with all that booze they had downed.

"Anyway, see you around, big guy and pretty lady!"

"Yup! The food was delicious," Siasha replied demurely, waving as they walked away. Taking in lots of unusual sights and eating a bunch of tasty food had left her with a wide smile on her face.

"I'm so glad we came to the morning market," she said.

"Yeah."

She wasn't the least bit interested in the scuffle they had just witnessed. The boundaries she had drawn were easy to understand: her and not her. She didn't think of anyone beyond herself, so there wasn't a distinction between human and demi-human. Maybe it was a natural facet of being a witch, or perhaps it was a perspective she developed after spending so much time on her own.

This was Zig's first time seeing a conflict like that, but it didn't really come as a shock. If anything, he was surprised that things resolved the way they did considering just how different the two species were.

Differences in language, culture, skin color—Zig had seen for himself the many reasons why humans started wars. As a mercenary, he'd been paid to join a side and fight for them, but no matter which faction he was a part of, he'd never sympathized with either. In fact, there were several instances when he'd finished a job and had been hired the next day by the country he was just fighting against.

He didn't care why they were going to war; he just went with whoever paid better. For mercenaries like him, it wasn't important which side was right or wrong. That was the norm.

But the differences between humans and demi-humans… In this land where waging war wasn't possible, would he be able to maintain that neutral stance after hearing what both parties had to say?

"Are you still hungry, Zig?"

"No, let's get going."

He pushed away the slight doubt that had started to creep into his mind, returning his focus to the person he was supposed to prioritize. Behind him, he could still hear the thug boasting about his triumph.

All that was left was the familiar scene of the strong displacing the weak.

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Unsurprisingly, the bounty remained unclaimed the following day, and the hunting grounds were as congested as ever.

Zig waited for Siasha to finish up with the administrative procedures at the guild after they had no choice but to wrap up early for the day.

"If it isn't Zig!" Alan, an adventurer with fiery red hair, called out to him. "You're not usually around at this hour."

Sensing that the swordsman was subtly asking for permission to join him, Zig gave a small nod, prompting the man to take a seat across from him.

"We called it an early day. How about yourself?"

Zig couldn't see any of Alan's other party members around. He seemed to be at the guild by himself.

"I took the day off," Alan said, taking a quick glance around. "Some acquaintances asked me to meet them here to discuss work." It looked like the other party hadn't arrived yet. He gave a little shrug before ordering a drink. "Looks like they're running a little late. Would you be up for a chat?"

"Sure, at least until she's done."

"I appreciate it."

With that, the two jumped into small talk about adventuring. Alan seemed taken aback but also impressed by what Zig and Siasha

had gotten up to lately, while Zig pressed for more details after listening to Alan share some of his own experiences.

"By the way, did you hear about the bounty?" Alan asked.

Zig couldn't help but smile as he recalled Siasha's reaction the previous day. "Oh, yeah. That situation's got the little princess as mad as a hornet."

"Right, there're a lot of people in the same predicament. My condolences."

"She was fully determined to hunt it down in secret, but she got a stern talking-to from the staff."

"That's wise advice. There's no need to be rash."

A couple of figures soon approached them as they conversed a little more. Judging from how Alan raised a hand in greeting, these two were who he'd been waiting for. Zig started to get to his feet. Siasha still wasn't back, but he didn't want to intrude on their conversation.

However, a familiar voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Ala—oh?!"

"Sorry, bro. One of the senior members caught us just as we were leav—huh?!"

"You're late! Thanks for keeping me company, Zig. I'll be…uh, Zig?" Alan gave Zig a questioning look, noticing the other man had practically frozen in place.

The other man wasn't the only one who looked startled. The two women Alan had chided appeared equally stunned.

It really is a small world, isn't it? Zig sighed inwardly as he took in the acquaintances the swordsman had been waiting for: Milyna and Scecz.

"Do you know each other?" Alan asked.

"Um, well, kind of…" Milyna's response was vague. Considering everything they'd been through, *kind of* was very much an understatement.

Scezc's face darkened as she regarded him cautiously, but Zig paid her no mind and addressed Milyna instead.

"So, you're siblings. I thought there was something similar about your swordplay."

"How about you?" she replied. "How do you know my brother?"

"We met by chance, I guess."

Milyna had spoken to Zig before and knew he wasn't the type to keep bringing up the past, so she didn't share Scezc's wariness. Alan, feeling like the odd man out in the situation, finally collected himself and rejoined the conversation.

"Well, if you already know each other, that makes this simple. This is my little sister, Milyna. She's a member of the Wadatsumi Clan."

"Apparently so," Zig quipped.

"She asked me to meet her here so we could discuss some work from Wadatsumi, but since you're here as well, do you want to listen in?"

"But, Alan!" Milyna was visibly displeased that her older brother had extended an invitation to hear about his job offer to an outsider.

Zig was slightly taken aback himself. He didn't expect Alan to be so open about these kinds of things.

"Hold on, Alan," he said. "Do you really think it's a good idea for me to be privy to that information when I'm not an adventurer myself?"

"Hmm… Putting the work conversation aside, am I going to learn something that will influence how I feel about the Wadatsumi Clan?" Alan asked.

Zig was baffled at how he could be related to these negotiations in any way.

"What are you talking about, brother?" Milyna asked.

Alan returned her question with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Zig mentioned our swordplay was similar, which means he's had an opportunity to see you fight. But when? How about you let me know the exact reason for that?"

Milyna said nothing, her face twitching while Alan continued to stare at her with that mirthless smile. All Zig could do was facepalm at his unintended mistake.

"Speaking of, I heard about a scuffle that went down at the clan house recently. Do you happen to know anything about that, Scezc?" Alan asked.

"Th-that's…"

Alan's expression remained unchanged as Scezc tried to stammer out a response. She and Milyna visibly shrank from the intimidating aura surrounding the still-grinning Alan.

"Won't you tell me?" he said tightly.

At that question, both women felt compelled to cough up every last detail of what had happened when they met Zig.

"So, *that's* what happened." Alan nodded after hearing the explanation. "Things are starting to make sense now."

Even though all they did was just fill him in, the women had broken into a cold sweat by the time they finished.

Oh, he's furious.

Milyna was acutely aware that Alan was not happy. It was already surprising that her usually cool-tempered brother was so upset, but she was more confused at how Zig factored into his reaction.

Eventually, Alan heaved a drawn-out sigh and said, "Listen up. My friends and I owe Zig our lives. He's saved us not once but twice. And you behaved toward him with such audacity? We'll need to rethink our relationship with the Wadatsumi Clan."

"W-wait a minute!" Scezc cried, butting into the conversation.

It was critical to have connections with powerful adventurers like Alan and his friends, even more so considering they weren't even members of the clan. They would be held responsible if those connections were severed due to their blunder. That apprehension caused Scezc to try to jump into the conversation, but when Alan trained his gaze on her, she found herself at a loss for words.

Zig, who had been watching this entire exchange from the sidelines, sighed internally before throwing her a lifeline.

"Enough already. It feels like I've said it a hundred times now, but that's all in the past."

"I can't accept that," Alan said. "It doesn't make any sense."

"It makes sense to me. Do you need any more reason than that?"

Zig's worldview was unique to his home continent, so it was difficult for Alan and the others to understand where he was coming from. Still, sensing that Zig—a man who didn't seem to care what others said about him—was starting to get a little annoyed that the same story was being brought up time and time again, Alan adjusted his approach.

"My apologies. I shouldn't have pushed my opinions on you, Zig. Let's put this topic to rest."

With those words, Alan buried the hatchet. Scecz and Milyna had no objections of their own, so the conversation was free to move on to something else.

His way of thinking is so peculiar, and not something that can be explained away just by his profession as a mercenary. It's almost like he's from a completely different culture.

Alan gave Zig a sidelong glance before changing the subject. "All right, how about we get back to discussing work. If you don't mind, Zig…"

"Actually, this is perfect timing." Zig rose to his feet as he noticed Siasha coming down the stairs. "Looks like my companion's just finished up."

Watching Zig walk away, Alan shifted his gaze back to Milyna.

"I'm sorry…?" she said awkwardly, but Alan just squeezed her hand, a gesture that completely caught her off guard.

"A-Alan?"

"You're not hurt, are you?" he asked, patting her down as if to confirm for himself. "No lasting effects?"

Milyna shoved his hand away in embarrassment. "I'm fine. I only ended up with a few sore muscles."

"That's a relief." Alan's sigh was so earnest it seemed to come from deep inside his chest. Then, his face grew serious and he placed his hands on his sister's shoulders. "Milyna, I understand that you were acting on the behalf of your clan members, but you have to choose your opponents carefully."

"Are you telling me I should've abandoned them?" Milyna spoke with a hint of animosity in her tone, but Alan shook his head. That wasn't what he meant.

"Taking on an opponent you can't beat with no plan at all is just plain foolish. Searching for a vulnerability, negotiation, apology—you need to do whatever you can to ensure your survival."

Alan's explanation essentially meant that no matter how pathetic it might make you feel, getting out alive was key.

Stunned, Milyna stood in silence. It was hard to believe the words that were coming out of her skilled older brother's mouth.

"As I said, we owe Zig our lives, but he's not someone who will stay his hand out of kindness," Alan continued. "Honestly, you're still alive because you either got very lucky or he didn't intend to kill you in the first place."

"I, uh…"

"Even with the two of you, it wasn't enough, right? He was still able to get the upper hand even with your perfect pincer attack?"

Alan couldn't think of many swordsmen who could properly handle being caught between Milyna and Scezc. At the very least, he was certain *he* wouldn't be able to take them both on at once.

"We almost had him," Scezc piped up. "If we had one more partner, we could've taken him for sure…"

Alan sighed in exasperation. "How about you wait to say that until you've faced him with his weapon of choice?"

The color drained from Scezc's face. All she could muster in return was "Oh…"

When they'd faced Zig, he'd used a discarded sword that he picked up from the floor. The only reason they suspected Zig in the first place was because he wielded an uncommon type of weapon, the double-edged sword.

We couldn't handle him using the first weapon he could get his hands on…

If he fought them with his double-edged sword, the blows would be much heavier than what he could do using a one-handed blade.

What would've happened if we'd taken the brunt of one of those attacks?

Just imagining the answer sent shivers down Scezc's spine.

Seeing that the two women were finally coming to grips with the perilous tightrope they had walked, Alan continued to admonish them.

"That's what it means to know who you're up against. Thankfully, Zig won't harm someone unless they strike first, and he's not the type to hold a grudge. Still, you should be very careful when you interact with him from now on."

The two women obediently nodded at Alan's advice. They now had a renewed understanding of just how dangerous this man was.

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Another day of adventuring work had come and gone.

After eating and returning to the inn, Zig had finished cleaning his sword and was trying to convince himself to retire early for the night for once when Siasha suddenly threw open the door.

"I want to come up with some new magic!" she cried.

Her eyes were practically begging him to ask why, so he took the bait. "What brought that on?" he asked.

Not wanting her to stand out in the hallway in her negligée-like undergarments, Zig invited her into his room.

"So! Do you remember that catastrophe from the other day?" she asked.

Zig sat on his bed, shooting a glance at Siasha as she pranced inside. "What, the time you vented your anger by blowing all those monstrosities to smithereens?"

After Siasha had been warned that the bounty was off limits, she took out her frustration on some monstrosities, reducing them to nothing more than formless clumps of meat. They hadn't even been able to get any parts to sell or proof of kills to turn into the guild. It was a furious outburst that had resulted in completely pointless slaughter.

"Since my current offensive spells cause such heavy damage, I want to come up with something new," the witch said.

"Ah, you did mention something like that."

His memory of that day was somewhat faded because the scene was just that messy. He'd also been occupied with trying to salvage whatever parts he could from the carnage.

"You've got a point," Zig said. "It's not the most efficient method out there."

Although it *did* make perfect sense considering her background. Up until recently, she'd only fought humans and had no reason to let anyone who came after her escape with their life. It wasn't like she

had to put much thought into what kind of damage her magic did in those circumstances.

Siasha looked discouraged as she approached him. "It would be one thing if we were fighting normal beasts, but figuring out the scale of magic that's appropriate for monstrosities is another story…"

Zig watched her, unsure of what she was trying to do until—without saying a word—she handed him the comb she had been holding and took a seat between his legs.

Perhaps she had grown accustomed to how easy it was to let someone else do her hair. She glanced back at him, nudging her head in his direction. Resigned, he began to run the comb through her hair. She slitted her eyes in contentment like a pampered cat; it wouldn't have shocked him if she started purring.

Siasha hummed under her breath, then paused to say, "Anyway, since no one has turned the bounty in yet, I figured I could take a break to work on my magic."

It sounded like she had forgotten what she came to talk about the first place and was now bringing it up as an afterthought.

"Speaking of, I'm really sorry you have to take a break from working on my account," she added.

"That's fine," Zig said. "It's not like I'm going to die if I don't work every day. In fact, I welcome time off."

Admittedly, it would be a tough pill to swallow if his wallet was empty, but thanks to the jobs he had completed the other day, his

financial situation was good. Taking a break to wander around town might be nice.

"Are you sure?" Siasha glanced back at him skeptically as he continued to pull the comb through her glossy black hair. "You say that, but I've never seen you relaxing before."

"What do you mean? Resting when you can is a precept of being a mercenary."

He wasn't tiring himself out, so the work itself wasn't a problem. It's not like he was as much of a workaholic as she was implying. Probably.

As he kept combing her hair, Zig could see Siasha's pale shoulders through her flimsy undergarments. Her hair was draped across them, and he had to look away to keep the vivid contrast of black and white from searing into his eyes.

"You're going to catch a chill like that," he said, draping a blanket over her. It was too much of a temptation up close.

"Okaaay."

Judging from Siasha's noncommittal answer, she wasn't aware of what had gone through his mind. To someone who only had a vague awareness of a man's desire, this was probably proof of just how much she trusted him.

Because the mercenary's only physical experience with women was limited to brothels, he didn't understand the significance of entrusting your hair to another person.

Siasha eventually fell asleep while he was in the process of combing her hair. Zig carried her to her bed, gazing down at where she lay. Although she was a witch with unrivaled power, her peaceful face was so beautiful and innocent.

He didn't want to betray that trust.

***

Zig got up at the usual time to do his early morning run. Even if it was a day off, it didn't mean his routine changed. Running had been a part of his lifestyle for so long that it felt off if he skipped it.

After his run, he took a small break before doing some practice swings with his weapon. He did it not only as strength training exercise but also as a way to maintain his feel for the blade on days that he wasn't using it. Even if he was just doing practice swings, he wasn't swinging the blade around wildly. He did drills as if he was in a real battle against an enemy.

Since he had mostly been up against monstrosities these days, he needed to visualize how to fight them. They required a different approach than human opponents. Not only were they strong, but aiming for their heads wasn't necessarily enough. Considering the variety of shapes and sizes that the creatures came in, it was essential to use a more flexible fighting style.

However, they were much less cunning than human enemies. They sometimes relied on instinctual techniques that hunting animals

used, such as chasing and luring, but compared to how crafty humans were, monstrosities were child's play.

The perplexity of swordplay with feints and slashes, the thorough consideration of how to attack a group that would hurt them the most—human guile was hardly inferior to the robustness and raw strength of monstrosities.

In other words, he couldn't afford to slack off when it came to facing either.

After visualizing fighting a monstrosity, he switched to miming a battle with a human before circling back to the former. He practiced like this for a little while, only stopping once he was satisfied that he had a good feel for brandishing his blade.

"I guess that's enough for today."

With his training regime done, Zig washed off his sweat with cold water from the well and returned to his room to get ready for the day.

He took a quick peek into Siasha's room. She was sitting on the floor surrounded by piles of paper, mumbling something that resembled a chant while she scribbled down some notes.

"Interesting."

She looked like she was deep in concentration, so he decided it would be best to leave her to her own devices. Zig closed the door gently and tried to muffle his footsteps so he wouldn't disturb her.

That done, he found that he didn't really have anything to do. Not only was his client holing herself up in her room, but he'd taken

care of all the other tasks he was hired to do. Still, Zig wasn't about to lounge in his room all day. He decided to head out despite not having a specific purpose in mind.

He mainly craved a meal, but he would settle for buying a woman's time if food wasn't available.

Back on the other continent, it wasn't uncommon for them to have meager food supplies because all the fields were destroyed by war. During those times he often paid for physical company. Here, provisions were plentiful despite the interference of monstrosities. This meant that Zig was able to release most of his pent-up frustration through eating, so he only visited brothels on rare occasions.

He was walking along the main road, thinking about how fish might be a good choice since he had meat last night, when an alluring scent reached his nostrils.

"Hm?" He veered off his path as the smell beckoned to him, letting his nose guide him in the direction it seemed to come from. In the end, he found himself in front of a rather cramped restaurant specializing in meat dishes.

The savory aroma was tantalizing, but he *did* have meat the night before…

"There's no rule saying I can't have it again today," he said to himself. He was a man, after all! He loved meat! His master had advised him to eat a balanced diet, but that was neither here nor there.

With a burst of high spirits, he swung open the door and took a step inside.

"Welcome. Sit wherever ya like."

There didn't seem to be any employees working. The only seats were at the counter in front of a bearded man whom Zig assumed to be the restaurant's proprietor. This wasn't a customer service-focused establishment by any means, but that was actually how the mercenary preferred it. As long as they fed him, he didn't care about any other bells and whistles.

There were only two other parties dining there besides Zig, so he picked a random available seat and sat down.

One of the other patrons noticed him and called out, "Ooh? Well, if it ain't Zig!"

"What a coincidence," said another man.

Zig turned at the sound of the familiar voices. It just so happened that he was already well acquainted with one of the other parties eating there.

"Hey there. It's been a while since I last saw Glow, and now you're here."

"Come and join us! Let's eat together."

Zig accepted the invitation and went to sit next to Bates and Glow. It had indeed been a long time since he last saw Glow—not since his first day visiting the guild to be exact.

"Whaddya want?" the proprietor asked.

“Anything you’d recommend?” Nothing had immediately popped into Zig’s mind, so he figured asking the owner wouldn’t hurt.

The man narrowed his eyes and gave a thoughtful little nod. He stroked his beard before wiping his thick knife. “I got some good beef tenderloin in today.”

“Then I’ll take, say, three or so dishes using that. Whatever you feel like making.”

His offhand order was met with a piercing stare. “That’s gonna be a lot of food.”

“That won’t be a problem. I can pack away even more than you’d imagine. Oh, can I get a salad as well?”

It was obvious that he was trying to add vegetables to have a semblance of a balanced meal, but the proprietor said nothing more and silently skulked away to start preparing the food.

“Heard you’ve been making a scene.” Glow was concise as always.

“Yeah… Sorry about the kerfuffle that went down the other day.”

“What’s done is done. And you helped out our Milyna too.”

“Don’t mention it.”

As expected, an experienced veteran didn’t need a drawn-out conversation. Seeing that everything was settled in that short exchange, Bates cut in.

“The speed at which Siasha’s been climbin’ through the ranks is damn impressive,” he said. “I’m aware she ain’t some greenhorn, but what in the world did that girl do before becomin’ an adventurer?”

Zig evaded Bate's jokingly phrased question. "Beats me."

While he meant to come off as lighthearted, Bates seemed genuinely interested in an answer. However, understanding the meaning behind Zig's response, Bates didn't press any further. Instead, he changed the subject.

"Sorry, that was a bit too personal, eh? You were a mercenary, weren't ya? I ain't never seen a mercenary like ya before though."

"The ones around here are…well, you know," Glow said.

"That's what I've heard," Zig said. "I guess it's understandable since this place doesn't have any wars."

Bates and Glow both gave him quizzical looks. They'd never heard of a place without monstrosities in their entire lives, so it was hard for them to believe that such a land could exist.

"So, places without monstrosities still have wars?" Glow asked.

"War, huh?" Bates said. "I can't imagine somewhere so far away that it ain't got any monstrosities roamin' around. Never mind that, I ain't ever seen a war either, so I don't really understand 'em. Would ya mind if I asked ya some questions?"

"That's fine…but it's not really dinner conversation."

Zig wasn't opposed to discussing the topic, but he wasn't the type to talk about it for amusement. At the very least, he didn't want to bring up anything that might disturb the other customers at the restaurant.

The fact that Zig had gone out of his way to put a halt to the conversation ruffled Bates a little. "Is it that disturbin'?"

Seeing that Bates wouldn't abandon his interest, Zig thought for a moment before choosing his words carefully.

"Yeah. If the fighting intensifies, you can only focus on what's in front of you. Obviously, cleanup falls to the wayside, so *the meat* spoils quickly. I only realized this once I started helping with adventuring, but the fresh stuff is way easier to handle, no matter how bad you think it smells."

Silence fell between the men. Zig had beaten around the bush—a lot—but it was enough information to make someone lose their appetite.

Bates had been around plenty of ghastly scenes in his life, and he wasn't squeamish enough that seeing such things would make him nauseated, but he got the impression that a full-blown battle between humans was a completely different experience from hunting monstrosities.

Still, he was curious enough to want to hear more. "Okay, would ya mind explainin' a little more if ya can keep the particulars as vague as ya have?"

"Sorry about him," Glow said. "Once Bates discovers trouble, he loves sticking his nose into it."

"Seems so. Well, I guess it's okay as long as I can leave out the worst parts."

Zig launched into an explanation that covered both war and mercenary work in general. He didn't go into detail about his former

clients, but he could talk about information that was common knowledge, such as certain tasks or requests that countries typically hired people like him to do. These ranged from just standing around to raiding criminal organizations. He even touched on how he had once literally dug through a gutter to confirm that the head of one such group was dead.

Going into more specifics, he threw in a bonus story about how the number of fingers they were collecting as proof of kills weren't adding up. Worried that someone might have faked their own death, they ended up catching all the fish in an area and gutting them until the missing digit was found.

"Sounds like ya gotta wear a lotta hats for that job," Bates said.

"I understand why trust would be so important," Glow added.

Both men nodded their heads in agreement as Zig finished his explanation. Having a good reputation with the guild was also important for adventurers, so it was a concept they could relate to.

Zig's order arrived right when there was a break in the conversation.

"Here you go."

"Sakes alive, that's a lotta food! Ya gonna be able to finish all that?"

The best way to describe just how much food Zig ordered was that the restaurant's proprietor—who was about as wide as he was tall—could only carry two dishes at a time. It took him two trips to bring

everything out, and the spread took up most of the space on the wide counter.

"Nice. I'm expecting good things from this meal."

All of the servings were huge and appetizing: beef tenderloin, stew, and roast beef. Zig immediately cut off a huge piece of steak and brought it to his lips. The tender, savory meat was chock-full of flavor that exploded in his mouth as he bit into it.

"You can never go wrong with meat," he declared.

Meat revitalized him whenever he ate it. In a profession where his body was his asset, he wouldn't have the strength to get his work done without protein.

"Tell me what's happening on your end." Zig prompted the two men to take over the conversation before resuming his feast. It would be a waste for him to let his food grow cold. He devoured one bite of the steak after another, occasionally having some of the vegetables as an accompaniment.

Tenderloin didn't have a lot of fat, but there wasn't anything better if you wanted to enjoy a lean and tender cut of red meat. Moving on, the piping hot stew gently scorched his mouth as he ate pieces of bread soaked with the simmered meat and vegetables. He then wolfed down a slice of roast beef without pause. It was cooked to a perfect medium-rare and immediately left him wanting more. Having pieces of the meat wrapped in the salad greens was so refreshing that he could probably stuff portion after portion in his mouth. Next, he decided to add bread to the meat and salad, making

an improvised roast beef sandwich. It was a perfect accompaniment to the stew.

Bates and Glow were slightly taken aback as they watched Zig fill his belly as he pleased. The portions at this restaurant were not small at all—one dish was enough to satisfy a grown man. Watching the mercenary consume three plates without any sign of slowing down was a sight to behold for the two seasoned adventurers.

"Can I get more bread and stew?" Zig asked. "Oh, and salad."

"S-sure."

He was even asking for seconds! The proprietor turned to stagger back into the kitchen of his shop. Realizing that the conversation would stall if they waited for Zig to finish, Bates finally spoke up.

"Ya know 'bout the bounty, right? The clan's sendin' a team to claim it. They should be headin' out today since they seem to have pinned down the location."

Zig, who was taking a short break to drink some water, responded with interest. "Yeah? So, even you guys think it's a worthy prize?"

He wasn't really concerned about what the clan might gain from defeating it, but he *was* hopeful that someone would finally take care of the problem. He was in a world of trouble if that thing wasn't dealt with before Siasha reached her breaking point.

"It's a decent opponent in terms of cash. Ain't too bad if you've got the spare time, but our Kasukabe calculated that it probably

wasn’t worth gettin’ the *whole* clan involved. It’s about at the level that no one’d stop our members if they wanted to join forces and go after it, as long as they told us first.”

The financial reward didn’t seem to be enough motivation to go after it. Zig mulled it over, but he couldn’t come up with any other merits. So, he shifted his thoughts to the demerits of the situation. He could think of one reason that allowing the double-horned blue beetle to live would become a problem.

“The Wadatsumi Clan prioritizes support for their up-and-coming members, right?” he asked.

“Bullseye,” Bates said, taking a sip of his drink.

Glow picked up where his friend left off. “Many of our young members are seventh class, and a lot of adventurers have shown up to seek the bounty.”

“Ah, so you’re also having an issue with the saturated hunting grounds.”

Since a large percentage of the adventuring population was seventh class, the matter wasn’t going to be solved just by changing locations.

It was challenging enough to try and improve your rank. Siasha was a special case, but if you didn’t have confidence in your skills, trying to move up a class was incredibly dangerous. Seventh-class work could be considered an obstacle in and of itself, so many people avoided pushing themselves further.

"Right. We've been getting so many petitions from our rookies about the competition for prey that it became necessary to take action," Bates answered.

"Does that mean the two of you are taking part?" Zig asked.

"Glow and I can't take part 'cause we've got another matter to attend to," Bates said. "This time, Milyna and Scezc are gonna take the lead so they can get some experience."

"I see. Those two should be able to handle it."

Not only were both women capable individually, they were brilliant when working in tandem. Zig didn't know exactly how strong the beetle was, but those two probably weren't weaker than any of the other adventurers that had gathered to defeat it.

Bates chuckled when Zig said as much.

"The only fly in the ointment is, for all that raw ability, those two tend to get ahead of themselves. Though, seems a run in with a certain someone took 'em down a peg or two, 'cause they've been a lot more humble of late. Feels like they're more aware of what's goin' on around 'em, so we figured they could get a taste of the difficulties of leadin' a team."

"Sounds like you're raising them well."

"It's our job." Glow looked proud as he drained his cup.

Bates didn't look entirely displeased himself. However, his expression darkened a moment later.

"Truth be told, I'd rather we tag along and watch over 'em, but there's somethin' we've got to do."

Bates seemed to shrink with anxiety, a sudden change from his usual cheerful but stoic demeanor. Zig assumed that Bates worried when he couldn't keep a close eye on the younger clan members.

"Why not ask another adventurer you know to accompany them?" Zig asked.

"We reached out to Alan and his party, but they couldn't do it since they're busy with something else."

That must be why he was asked to the guild the other day.

Alan had been waiting to meet with Scezc and Milyna. He'd mentioned it was about work, so that checked out. Not only were they a party of capable adventurers, but he was also a clan member's relative. It would've been a perfect fit. They must've been incredibly busy to turn the offer down.

It wasn't good manners, but Zig began to wipe his stew bowl with a piece of bread as he listened. He popped the sopping morsel in his mouth to finish the meal, fully satisfied with both the taste and the quality. Delighted that he had found a hidden gem, he had started sipping his post-meal tea when he felt the unmistakable weight of someone's gaze on his shoulders.

Both Bates and Glow were looking at him like they had accidentally discovered the missing piece of a puzzle.

"What is it?" Zig asked.

"Are ya free today?"

"I suppose I am."

"And mercenaries will do whatever as long as ya pay 'em, right?"

"That depends on if the amount is commensurate with what's being asked, and if it's something where there's no worry about being hunted down by public institutions afterward."

Zig sighed as he caught on to what they were getting at. He wasn't annoyed with them, more that he was appalled at himself for considering taking a job being offered on his day off. He was going to have no leg to stand on with Siasha when she criticized him.

Unaware of Zig's internal struggle, the two men leaned forward.

"Then, we'd like to hire ya."

"That's fine. I can even go above and beyond depending on what you're willing to pay. One thing, though. You know I can't use the transportation stone on my own, right?"

Zig wasn't an adventurer himself, only outside help. He was - allowed to use the transportation stone as a perk of registering as an adventurer's companion, but he didn't have access to it by himself.

Bates and Glow understood that, so they proposed an alternative plan.

"It won't be a problem. You'll be goin' as the main muscle, so we'll just send along another young clan member to accompany ya. We should be able to dispatch someone who's at least capable of watchin' their own back. As for your payment…"

Bates turned to look at his partner, and Glow began doing some mental arithmetic. He finally made an offer after taking into consideration the potential danger, Zig's strength, and the fact that it was a last-minute job.

"I'll give you 200,000 dren up front, then 200,000 more after successful completion. That's if nothing happens, that is."

"If anythin' unforeseen happens, we rehash the payment dependin' on the circumstances. What do ya say?"

"Hmm."

If he was just going to be standing around, 400,000 dren wasn't bad at all. And if there was trouble, it sounded like he would even get some extra on top.

Zig extended his hand. "If you also cover my bill here, I'll do it."

"Squeezin' every dren out of us ya can get, eh?" Bates said, grasping Zig's outstretched hand to seal the deal.

"When do I head out?"

"The group's already left. It'd be great if ya could convene with 'em as soon as possible, but it's up to your availability."

"Okay, then. I'll head over to the guild once I'm prepped. You'll take care of arranging my guide, right?"

Once he had taken on a job, Zig preferred to move quick. He rose from his seat so he could go back home and start getting his things ready. With Bates and Glow settling the payment, they also returned to their clan house to look for an appropriate adventurer to accompany him.

Zig went back to the inn and prepared his gear immediately. He stopped by Siasha's room to mention what was going on, but all he

got in response was a noncommittal reply. He figured he would fill her in on the details later.

Since he usually got ready for the work the day after finishing his adventuring, it didn't take him very long to get everything in order. Gathering his things and exiting the inn, he quickly made his way to the guild.

It was afternoon by then, so there weren't many adventurers present. Only a smattering of regular vendors were around. Bates and Glow, noticing Zig had arrived, approached with the man who was likely going to act as his guide in tow.

"Wow, that sure was quick! This here's Cain. He's gonna be takin' ya there."

As Bates made the introductions, Zig found that he was already familiar with the man. He was the adventurer that the mercenary had swung around by the legs instead of a weapon during the brawl at the Wadatsumi Clan House.

Cain obviously remembered that encounter too—or rather, there was no way he could forget it. He tried to hide his look of displeasure but ended up with a scowl on his face anyway.

"Hi," he said stiffly.

Zig noticed the man's sour look, but what happened back then was water under the bridge to him, so he paid it no mind. "Thanks for your help."

That wasn't the reaction Cain had been expecting, so it left him feeling awkward and confused. But he wasn't going to let it show on

his face, so he just continued to frown.

Picking on the man's internal struggle, Bates chuckled. "He's still a youngin', but he can take care of 'imself at least. We can leave the rest in your hands, eh?"

"Take care of them," Glow added.

Zig silently nodded to reassure the two men he knew what he was there for and started walking off. Cain hurriedly followed behind him. Watching the mercenary and adventurer successfully depart using the transportation stone, Bates and Glow then rushed to take care of their own work.

"Crap! Look at the time! Let's get movin', Glow! We're gonna get a right earful if we're late."

"They should…be okay, right?"

Glow's worrywart tendencies were apparent as his gaze lingered on the transportation stone, causing Bates to laugh.

"Ya worry too much! I told ya, didn't I? Not only can he fight, he can actually get the job done. Speaking of which, let's go do ours."

Cain led Zig deep into the forest, far away from the area that Siasha had previously obliterated.

There were signs of battle here and there, but most of the monstrosities they encountered along the way were already dead and didn't impede their progress. It was likely that the extermination squad from the Wadatsumi Clan had cleared the way.

"How many people are in the group?"

"Fourteen. Milyna and Scezc are captaining two units of six members each."

"Why'd they split up?"

"The bountied monstrosity has a mate. They wanted to make sure the roles could be split up if they ended up taking both of them on at once."

Zig confirmed the conditions and numbers with Cain as they moved through the forest. Along the way, something occurred to him.

"You're not part of the group, but you seem to know a lot about what they're doing…"

Cain's expression soured even more at the mercenary's casual remark. Zig was puzzled; was what he said really that upsetting?

"I was originally planning to join them, but I don't have a weapon anymore—you broke it."

"Oh, um, sorry about that…"

He had grabbed a sword off the ground when he was fighting the Wadatsumi Clan, though it was destroyed by a bow attack. Apparently, the weapon had belonged to Cain. The clan had been willing to loan him a new one, but he wasn't so reckless that he would try to fight a bountied monstrosity with a weapon he wasn't used to handling. Unfortunately, that had forced him to take his hat out of the ring, but he still had a lingering curiosity about the mission. So, he kept his ears open for any information regarding the tactics to be used or the location.

In a cruel twist of fate, that knowledge had ended up benefitting *Zig*, which was something Cain found infuriating. But it wasn't right to take that out on Zig, so Cain kept his turmoil to himself.

He changed the subject in order to shake off those thoughts. "So, what's your plan?"

"Basically, watching from the sidelines. I won't get involved if something minor is amiss."

Unforeseen circumstances came part and parcel with this kind of work, but you couldn't call someone who needed help at every slight hiccup a full-fledged adventurer—nor was it something they would want.

"If the tides of battle turn and defeat seems imminent, I'll assist with the retreat. And if anyone is severely injured, I'll help administer first aid. That's about the extent of it. Bates asked me to make sure that no one dies."

Cain didn't have any complaints about the criteria Zig outlined, but it didn't feel great that his only function was regulated to that of a guide. He figured he could at least ask if there was something else he could do.

"Is there anything you want from me?"

"Help with the injured. I might need you to carry someone for me if the situation calls for it."

If the situation got so bad that people were seriously hurt, the other members would probably have their hands full with their own affairs. Even if this venture was in the name of accumulating

experience, they would gain nothing if they died. That's where Zig drew the line.

"All right. I'll follow your orders."

Regardless of his own emotions, Cain understood what had to be prioritized. It gave Zig a good impression of him; he knew what he needed to do despite his personal reluctance.

There were plenty of people out there who were skilled but unreliable. For example, those who thought highly of themselves just because they were good at what they did and misjudged both priorities *and* timing. Cain's abilities still weren't up to par, but Zig could tell he was a man that he could trust to get the job done.

"I'll be counting on you."

"R-right." Cain nodded, bewildered as to why the mercenary seemed to be in a good mood.

They drew closer to the Wadatsumi Clan's current location as they spoke. The extermination squad had slowed down because they were clearing out the monstrosities along the road, so it was only a matter of time that anyone following them would catch up.

Suddenly, they could hear the sound of a scuffle and several voices shouting.

"Oh! They must be fighting it already!"

Cane looked on in excitement at hearing the battle already underway. Zig hid in the shade of the trees as he watched Milyna and the others engage the monstrosity.

"Heh. So, that's it…"

Zig had pictured something resembling more of a horned or stag beetle from the name, but this monstrosity was bipedal, just like the saber-clawed insectoid. Supported by two strong legs, its armor-like torso shone with a blue luster. Aside from its forearms, it had another set of limbs growing from around what would be a human's lumbar region, and a pair of magnificent horns sprouted from its head. Its body was dotted with various scars, highlighting its battle-hardened appearance.

This one certainly seemed worthy of the bounty that had been placed on it.

"Heh, I can see why it'd be in a different class than your run-of-the-mill monstrosity."

The double-horned blue beetle fought back against the attacks barraging it from all directions. While it flailed around with its deadly claws and horns, it didn't seem very fast. Milyna and the other adventurers were easily dodging them.

"I'm going to trap it, Milyna!" Scezc called out to give her partner a heads-up.

She had determined that bludgeoning and slash attacks weren't going to be effective and started to chant an incantation. In the meantime, Milyna and a few others rushed toward it to keep it distracted.

"Yaaah!"

Despite knowing that their attacks would be ineffective even with fortification magic, they kept assaulting it with blows. The sound

of fierce swordplay rang in their ears as blue-tinged fragments flew through the air.

Milyna was able to slightly damage its carapace with a strike, so the double-horned blue beetle targeted her, seeing that she was the biggest threat. She dodged and weaved out of the way of its swinging claws and horns. Her companions took advantage of that opening, aiming for its joints with their spears.

They weren't strong enough to penetrate its carapace, but they managed to keep it occupied enough for it to expend a large amount of energy. It attempted to break the spears, but by the time it counterattacked, the fighters had pulled away to safety.

It may be tough and powerful, but it sure is slow! I should be able to do this, Milyna thought. She could easily avoid the double-horned blue beetle's attacks with the help of her companions.

Then, Scezc signaled that her spell was ready to go, so the unit cleared the area to avoid getting caught in the crossfire. Once they were well out of the way, she and the other magic users let their spells fly. The cold air knit together to form several ice projectiles and rain down on the double-horned blue beetle's legs.

The first few only thinly covered the surface of the creature's appendages, but as the ice continued to strike the beetle, its feet started to freeze, little by little, until they were stuck to the ground. With its lower half fixed in place, the monstrosity lost its balance and tumbled forward.

"Milyna!"

It was as though Scezc's voice propelled Milyna to rush forward.

"Ha-yaaaah!" Letting out a piercing scream, she swung her longsword at the monstrosity's frozen legs.

For a single moment she used her mana to drastically increase her physical fortification, timing it with a blow that shattered one of the double-horned blue beetle's legs, ice and all. With one of the legs that supported its massive body gone, the double-horned blue beetle let out a high-pitched screech and completely lost its balance, falling to the ground.

"Incredible!"

Cain's palms were sweaty with excitement as he intently watched the battle. He was amazed that they weren't losing any ground, even against a monstrosity so powerful it was deemed worthy of a bounty.

Milyna and Scezc's teamwork in particular is a cut above the rest!

He couldn't help but feel disappointed that he hadn't been able to take part himself. In contrast to the Cain, Zig said nothing and just watched calmly.

"What is it?" Cain asked, suspicious of his silence.

Zig just responded with a shrug. "I'm a little surprised. I thought it was going to be stronger than that."

"Well, of course it looks that way to you…"

Cain sounded dismayed, but Zig shook his head. "That's not what I meant. For example, Cain, how do you think it would go if you fought that thing?"

The sudden question caught the adventurer off guard. It didn't seem like Zig was messing with him, so he seriously gave it some thought. After considering the strength difference between him and the creature and imagining what it would be like to fight it head-on, he gave his answer.

"I couldn't beat it. My attacks wouldn't cause enough damage."

"So, you'd end up being killed because you couldn't run away?"

It was an extreme statement, and Cain's face was cast with doubt when he realized what Zig was implying.

"No, it would be easy to escape. Even I could get away from something like that, no matter how powerful it is."

"Right?" Zig glanced over at the collapsed double-horned blue beetle.

I didn't expect it to be so sluggish, relying solely on defense and power.

Zig didn't think a monstrosity like that was dangerous enough to warrant being given a bounty, but then something else flashed in his memory.

"You said it had a mate, right? Where's the other one?"

"Now that you mention it…" Cain trailed off.

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Scezc and Milyna were just about to finish off the immobilized double-horned blue beetle when one of their companions who'd been keeping an eye on the perimeter shouted, "There it is! The second one!"

Everyone immediately retreated and kept their distance. Another double-horned blue beetle—a little smaller than the previous one—appeared, mowing through the foliage. Its form was more rotund, and it lacked the characteristic horns. Thick and stubby fangs protruded from its mouth instead. This was probably the female of the pair.

Agitated, she stomped the ground a few times before charging straight at them with surprising speed; she was far quicker than the male.

"Don't mind the immobilized one, focus your attacks on her!"

The Wadatsumi adventurers leaped into action to follow Scezc's instructions. Since one of the male's legs was shattered and the other was frozen in place, they didn't need to worry about him.

They would, however, need to fight the female while keeping their distance from her mate, just in case. Her physique made it apparent that she didn't have the same combat capabilities as the male. Since their group had been able to take him down, there shouldn't be any reason for them to lose to her.

At least, that was what they assumed.

"This one's damn strong!"

Milyna dodged another of the female's attacks as she tried to divert her attention. Unlike before, she struggled and had less room

for error. The female wasn't as strong or thickly armored as her mate, but she was quicker, and more importantly, highly adept with her appendages. She attacked using all four of her arms but didn't swing them recklessly. With how she moved, there seemed to be a murmur of intelligence.

"Engage using the same plan of attack as before. Give the signal when you're ready to cast!"

Realizing that Milyna couldn't hold this one back on her own, Scezc rushed to her aid. As a team, they suppressed the female monstrosity's onslaught, Scezc's saber blocking the claws that slashed toward them while Milyna's longsword cut away large chunks of the carapace.

Nevertheless, the female didn't show any signs of faltering and continued to assail them. Perhaps she couldn't feel pain. Whatever the reason, the aggressiveness with which she attacked—almost like she didn't care if she sustained injury—put the Wadatsumi adventurers under an extreme amount of stress.

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"I see, so it's a package deal," Zig murmured. "Still…"

"The female looks quite a bit stronger, doesn't she?"

It was just as Cain said. Even if she wasn't as physically skilled, the female was a much more dangerous opponent than the male based on *how* she fought. Although, in a duel between monstrosities,

it made sense that strength and toughness would come in handy more than finesse.

Something still feels off though, Zig thought. The feeling wouldn't leave him.

When'd he first laid eyes on the male, all of Zig's instincts had screamed that he was a dangerous foe. But when it came to actually fighting him, the results spoke for themselves. Zig didn't know if the same principle applied to monstrosities, but in the insect world, females were often stronger than the males of their species. There was a reason for that: They were usually bigger, which this one wasn't.

There must be a logical explanation, Zig thought as he watched the male struggle feebly after losing his leg. *Either he's reaching the end of his life span or he's sick?*

Zig studied the double-horned blue beetle as he curled up and ceased to move. Going out in such a fashion was surprisingly common, even for once formidable creatures.

"All right! Just one more push!"

Cain's words snapped Zig back to reality. The battle had almost finished before he even realized it.

One of the female's mid-section arms was frozen, while the other flew through the air as it was severed in half. Despite being outnumbered, the creature was putting up a good fight, but it was easy to see how this was going to end.

That didn’t make her rampage less terrifying. Several of the frontline fighters were injured as they failed to avoid her blows, though none of them were seriously wounded and they could still walk on their own—thanks to Milyna and Scezc distracting the monstrosity. The two women had succeeded in sabotaging the female’s strength by preventing her from using one set of arms, even if several of their comrades had to withdraw after their weapons were destroyed.

“I can handle this, Scezc!” Milyna said.

The beetle was weak enough that she could hold her off on her own. Scezc exchanged a glance with her partner before retreating to where the other magic users were waiting. She began casting a spell, employing the same technique they had used on the male.

The female launched a terrifying attack that looked to be her final stand, as vain a struggle as it was at this point.

A slow slash, dulled by the beetle’s reduced physical capabilities, came Milyna’s way. Without missing a beat, she sprang into action, moving closer to the beetle while dodging out of the path of her claws. Then, she slid forward so that her longsword was positioned at the inner portion of her arm.

Taking advantage of the attack’s momentum, Milyna aimed for the inner elbow joint, slicing it clean off before rushing past the monstrosity’s rear and putting some distance between herself and danger.

At that moment, Scezc and the other magic users released their spells. Countless ice spears pierced the monstrosity’s carapace—but

the female was able to endure the attack thanks to her defensive stance. She was tougher than she looked.

"Take this!" Scezc yelled.

Now that the female monstrosity had stopped moving, she was defenseless. Scezc cast an even larger ice spear that shot toward the immobilized creature. The female beetle had been able to ward off the other ice spears, but this one skewered her, piercing through her thoracic carapace.

Green liquid began to spew from the monstrous beetle's orifices as her struggle came to an end. The male also seemed to have kicked the bucket—he was lying still where they'd left him.

Milyna and Scezc waited for a few moments to make sure the beetles weren't playing dead and then began to cheer.

"Yes! We did it!"

The other adventurers started to celebrate as well. Not only was it a nice payday, but everyone felt a rush of satisfaction knowing that they'd been able to take down such an impressive quarry on their own. Milyna and Scezc were particularly elated. It was a huge deal that a group of young adventurers were able to achieve this feat without the help of any veterans.

"They won't be able to coddle us anymore after this!"

"Right," Scezc agreed. "We can do plenty on our own."

The Wadatsumi Clan prioritized the development of their young adventurers. However, that was just the clan's policy and not necessarily something that *all* members were on board with. For every

person who got preferential treatment, another was put at a disadvantage. This was especially the case from the Wadatsumi Clan old-timers toward the newest members.

It was understandable that those who wanted to make a profit for themselves might feel antipathy toward newcomers who practically had everything handed to them. Of course, making the effort to take advantage of that situation was left up to each member, and none of it was a walk in the park.

The sense of security for a new adventurer that came with knowing the support of the clan was behind them no matter what couldn't be understated. For example, even if things were going well for adventurers who were clanless, with equipment wear and tear and overhead expenses, the more they worked, the poorer they became if they didn't make proportional profits. No one was willing to lend money to a fledgling adventurer, and if they did, it came at an exorbitant interest rate. On the other hand, clans would lend equipment and introduce members if a group was lacking in personnel, so new adventurers could work without being forced to borrow money from sketchy sources.

Offering even newbies such privileges *had* fostered a certain amount of resentment among some veterans in the Wadatsumi Clan. Those who felt that way refused to treat the younger adventurers as full-fledged members no matter how much time passed. As a result, the young adventurers and these veterans often didn't get along.

The younger ones were originally recruited by Bates and Kasukabe because of their talent, so they had plenty of confidence in

their skills. Being belittled and treated as subhuman by their more seasoned peers was frustrating for them, and Milyna and Scecz were no exception to this feeling. They smiled and bumped fists as they congratulated each other on the job well done. Being able to accomplish a task this big without relying on the veterans' help was a huge step forward for them.

This mission would change how the others saw them, but for now, they just wanted to share in the joy of what they had accomplished.

All of a sudden, a noise started to reverberate around them.

"Huh?" Scezc said.

It was the sound of something pulsing. As soon as they heard it, the other adventurers quieted their cheers and started looking around for the source.

The ground began to shake. An even louder sound echoed out.

"O-over there!"

One of them found the source of the noise and called out a warning, making everyone turn to look.

It was coming from the corpse of the male double-horned blue beetle. Along with the throbbing hum, the body was trembling. Soon enough, the back of his corpse began to swell—before splitting open with a sickly pop.

Instead of spewing green liquid, something black poked through the opening. At first glance it resembled a stick insect. It had a long,

thin body and six spindly legs that rested on top of the corpse of the beetle like it was trying to support itself.

As if emerging from a cocoon, the black form slowly unfurled itself.

With its gnarled limbs and narrow body, it was even larger than the double-horned blue beetle. But what was most unusual was the color of its body: a muddy black hue that appeared to have a gaseous haze seeping from it.

The black creature's red eyes locked on Milyna and the others as they stood motionless in shock.

A chill ran down Scezc's spine, and she yelped in disgust before crying, "Ready your defensive spells!"

Her scream brought the other Wadatsumi adventurers back to their senses, and they quickly began to prepare their magic. Meanwhile, Scezc considered how to deal with this unknown enemy as she started to cast her own spell.

I've never seen a monstrosity like this before. It doesn't look like it uses physical attacks, so it probably fights with magic. If we can defend against its first wave of strikes, we should be able to counter and bring it down in one fell swoop. It doesn't look like it's that durable.

As Scezc came to her conclusion, the black creature pointed its thin, gnarled arm at her.

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It seemed like the Wadatsumi adventurers had secured a victory when another monstrosity appeared from the male beetle's corpse.

"What *is* that thing?" Zig felt ice run down his spine as he voiced the first question that popped into his mind. "It's too big to be a normal parasite."

The appearance between the two monstrosities was too different for the beetle to have molted into something else, but one thing was clear—this creature was hostile.

Cain was staring with the same astonishment when he gasped. "It could be…a spellweaver mantis!"

"You know what this thing is?"

The adventurer wasn't quite sure how to answer Zig's question. He knew about these monstrosities, but this one looked far bigger than anything he had ever heard about.

"It's a parasite. They feed on the mana of other monstrosities and can control their actions to a certain extent, but the ones I know of are *way* smaller than that."

"So, a large specimen would be uncommon?"

"That's not it. To be frank, spellweaver mantises are fairly weak. They don't have the strength to feed on more powerful monstrosities, and even full-grown ones are only about the equivalent of seventh class. At least, they *should* be…"

Both men turned to look at the monstrosity as Cain's voice faltered.

An unsettling aura seemed to emanate from the spellweaver mantis as it faced the Wadatsumi adventurers. Despite feeling overwhelmed by its glowing red eyes, the group readied for its attack.

"It sure doesn't look like a seventh-class monstrosity," Zig said.

"B-but it should be weaker than the bountied one…I think."

Cain didn't sound very confident, but he still had faith that his clan mates would prevail. They were fighting consecutive battles, but the group had only suffered minor injuries until that point. Even taking attrition into account, they should still be able to escape if they weren't able to defeat it.

The spellweaver mantis leisurely raised one of its arms toward the Wadatsumi adventurers. All of them were maintaining defensive stances while concealing themselves behind various barriers. It didn't seem like much of a frontline fighter, and Zig's offhand appraisal was that it would focus on magic attacks.

The heavily concentrated pungent smell that hit him a moment later made his eyes fly open.

"Don't let it hit you! You have to dodge!" he shouted.

His words came too late to reach anyone. The spellweaver mantis released a shock wave accompanied by an ear-splitting, high-pitched screeching sound. Even standing at a distance, it was so powerful that Zig and Cain could feel it reverberating in their bodies.

The shock wave struck the adventurers' magic, paused for a split-second, and then blasted straight through their defenses. People

went flying in every direction, but the roar of the explosion was so loud that it drowned out their screams.

"Let's go!"

Zig barked this order at Cain, not bothering to wait for a response before he dashed ahead. The other man, who had taken longer to recover from his shock, hurried after him.

Nearly half of the Wadatsumi adventurers were incapacitated by the blast. Due to the difference between their powers, it didn't completely rip through everyone's defenses. However, the attack had blown away and knocked out a significant portion of the group.

The members who managed to withstand the blast tried to compensate for the losses, but it would take some time before they could get back into formation.

The blast didn't seem to have been the monstrosity's full strength, and it was starting to accumulate more mana for its next attack. Judging from the eye-watering smell, it was going to be even more powerful than the last one. This time, anyone who took that blow head-on would be decimated.

Damn it! I'm not going to make it in time!

Zig was running as fast as his legs would carry him, but it was obvious that the monstrosity was going to launch its second attack before he could reach it.

"I guess it's all or nothing…"

He drew his twinblade as he was still running and positioned it on his shoulder like a javelin. The muscles of his arms swelled with

strength as he waited for the right moment to release the weapon.

Keeping his momentum, he took a long step and brought his left foot down with so much force that the braking motion shattered the ground beneath him. He twisted his upper body, the power he gathered surging up to his legs, through his hips and back, and finally to his shoulders. Channeling all the kinetic energy he'd built up into the twinblade, he threw it with all his might.

The blade sang as it sliced through the air.

He had hurled the twinblade with so much force that it seemed like it would tear through the sky and pierce the heavens. Noticing something blue heading straight for it, the monstrosity held up a slender hand and its arm changed direction.

It unleashed a shock wave at point-blank range as the twinblade was about to reach it.

The two forces met in a violent explosion, but the result was far from a stalemate. The blue twinblade cleaved through the shock wave and punctured clean through the spellweaver mantis's head.

The impact didn't stop there; the blade continued after obliterating the head, cutting clean through a tree, until it buried itself deep into the one behind it.

Even though it had dissipated, the aftermath of the shock wave brought Zig to a halt. Looking at the now headless monstrosity, he was about to stop and catch his breath, when—

"It's not over yet!" Cain called as he caught up to Zig.

"Huh?!"

Despite not understanding what was going on, Cain's words of warning prompted Zig to start moving again. As the two men ran side by side, Zig probed Cain for an explanation.

"What do you mean? Losing its head isn't going to kill it?"

"That's no ordinary monstrosity! Regular weapons do nothing against it since it's composed purely of mana. Attacking with normal weapons is like trying to cut water. You have to hit it with magic or magic items!"

Zig looked at the monstrosity, his face twisted into dismay after hearing about this characteristic. Indeed, the creature was still moving despite losing its head, and a mist gathered around that part, as if to regenerate it.

All his previous attack had done was scatter its mana. What Cain said about ordinary weapons having no effect appeared to hold true. The mercenary had heard about such monstrosities before, but he hadn't expected to run into one today.

"Damn it all! I can't use magic or magic items!" Zig cursed. "Whatever. I'll distract it, so I need you to help the other adventurers retreat."

It didn't sound like Zig would be able to defeat this monstrosity by himself, but there were still things he could do.

"All right. But don't push yourself to do the impossible," Cain said.

"Pushing myself is part of the job."

Cain shot Zig a dubious look—the man had just stated he couldn't use magic or magic items. Realizing that was hardly the most pressing thing to be thinking about now, Cain focused on the task at hand.

The two men split up: The mercenary headed for the monstrosity, while his young guide hurried over to the other adventurers.

"Scezc! Milyna!" Cain called out as he reached the group of Wadatsumi adventurers, trying to make sure everyone was okay.

"C-Cain?!" Milyna's voice was twinged with pain. She must have suffered a leg injury because she was using her sword as a makeshift cane.

"Milyna? It got you?!"

"I screwed up," she managed.

"Cain? What're you doing here?" Scezc asked, then she shook her head. "Forget it. Help us treat the wounded and evacuate to safety!"

An unconscious adventurer was slumped over Scezc's shoulder, so Cain rushed over to offer some support from the opposite side. About half of the group had some sort of injury, although the severity varied. None of the injuries were life-threatening, though some were unconscious while others could barely walk on their own. This was probably because the shock wave had been powerful but diffuse, meant to suppress their resistance rather than wipe them out. Those

who weren't handy with defensive magic like Milyna were unable to fully block the impact, but they were alive.

I can't believe an attack where the force was that dispersed could still have so much power. Cain's blood ran cold as he was reminded of just how dangerous this monstrosity was.

Since the adventurers who were unharmed were prioritizing patching up those with relatively minor wounds, he started picking up adventurers whose injuries would take a longer time to heal and carrying them off.

Scezc barked orders to those who could move. "Prioritize the unconscious when evacuating! Keep healing to the minimum necessary! You won't die from a few broken bones! Cain, I want you to lead the retreat."

"Got it. What about you, Scezc?"

"I'm going to engage it."

Once she had given her orders on how to treat and transport the injured adventurers, Scezc moved to prevent the spellweaver mantis from coming after them. It had already regenerated its head, and its red compound eyes were searching for the source of whatever had attacked it.

The weapon that hit that monstrosity had incredible force behind it. Could it really have been just a physical attack? It may not have been terribly effective, but it bought us time. Still, who could've done such a thing?

It wasn't long until Scezc's question was answered. The spellweaver mantis must've found what it was looking for because it started to raise its arms, prompting that someone to jump out from the trees.

"No way!" Scezc didn't want to remember the person who - appeared, her face darkening at the sight of him. Painful memories of their previous encounter yet lingered in her mind. "What's *he* doing here?"

But this was no time for questions. The spellweaver mantis fired another shock wave at Zig, but he dodged it with perfect timing, almost like he had expected it. It blasted at him several times, but none of the attacks made contact.

"How is he *doing* that?"

Given that they were unpredictable and covered a wide range, the invisible shock waves should've been incredibly difficult to dodge. Still, it couldn't be a fluke with how many she had seen him avoid with her own eyes.

"In any case, he's probably not here as an enemy, and I have to buy us more time." Scecz put her doubts aside and glanced behind her. Her grip tightened on the handle of her saber as she looked at her Wadatsumi Clan companions and her partner, Milyna.

"I'm not going to allow a single one of them to die!"

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The shock wave destroyed the tree Zig had been taking cover behind with a loud snapping sound. It almost felt like a bad joke seeing the sturdy wood snap like a thin bundle of straw.

"Sure! Do whatever you want!" The mercenary yelled to draw attention to himself as he avoided the spellweaver mantis's shock waves, continuing to dodge one after the next.

However, he wasn't feeling as in control of the situation as he looked. Even if he understood its method and timing, not only were the shock waves invisible, but he had to cover a wide area to completely avoid them. The previous shock wave had scattered a group of adventurers who'd been positioned in a wide area. It was challenging to continue ducking an attack that could hit that many places at once.

"Ngh!"

Zig suddenly stopped after evading so many shock waves he lost count. Nothing had happened to him, but he was getting dangerously close to the adventurers, who were still carrying their wounded away.

The moment of hesitation dulled his movements. He only paused for a split second, but it was more than enough time to upset his momentum.

Seeing that its target had stilled, the spellweaver mantis unleashed another shock wave. Zig, realizing that he wouldn't be able to completely avoid the attack, just tried to avoid taking a direct hit.

The monstrosity's spindly limbs began to emit black mist, a manifestation of the mana it had gathered.

“I don’t think so!” Scecz shouted.

An ice spear pierced the spellweaver mantis moments before it released its spell. The sudden blow from the side knocked it out of its stance, and the shock wave blasted off course. The misdirected magic ripped through the trees, filling the air with the sound of shattering wood.

In the meantime, Zig moved into a position opposite the adventurers to avoid dragging them into the fight. Following where the ice spear had come from, he recognized the adventurer brandishing her saber as she glared at the spellweaver mantis with a piercing stare.

“You saved me big time. Scezc, right?”

Scezc glanced over at Zig as cold air rose from her palm, suppressing the wariness that was bubbling up in her chest before speaking. “Don’t mention it. You saved us first. But why’re you here?”

“I’m working.”

She sighed as she realized the meaning behind Zig’s words. “We told them we could do this on our own.”

“You should be grateful you have veterans who are looking out for you.”

Their insurance policy had panned out in the end, so Scezc had no choice but to stop complaining.

“I can’t deliver an effective blow,” Zig said. “Can I leave that part up to you?”

"It'll be hard. I've used up a lot of my mana. I have enough for one more big shot, but that'll be it."

Scezc had depleted most of her mana fighting against the double-horned blue beetle and defending herself from the spellweaver mantis's initial shock wave. She still had a lot of strength, but she wasn't going to have much power left after physically fortifying herself. Since she didn't know how durable this enemy was, there was no guarantee she would be able to defeat it even if she blasted it with all the mana she had left.

In contrast to Scezc's grim expression, Zig gave a little nod. "All right. I'll distract it as much as I can, so hit it with something big."

He dashed off as soon as the words left his mouth.

"Huh?! Wait!" She tried to say something in response, but he was gone before she even had a chance to speak.

Although she was stunned that Zig ran off without listening to what she had to say, there was only one thing left for her to do now. Carefully, Scecz started to manipulate her remaining mana.

The spellweaver mantis regained its footing and directed all its hostility and magic at Zig. It had changed tactics, as if angry that something had prevented it from delivering its finishing blow. Instead of shock waves, the creature began casting black slashes that resembled blades.

The speedy slashes cut through any obstacle in their path. Despite their range being narrower than the shock waves, they were

faster and more dangerous.

Zig flicked a coin from his pocket as he twisted out of the way of an incoming vertical slash, taking care not to disrupt his tempo. The projectile bounced off the monstrosity right before it unleashed another blast. Its body shuddered as if it had been pounded by a wave, and the magic dissipated.

The spellweaver mantis trembled like something disgusting had touched it, scattering the magical energy it had almost formed.

"Oho. That works pretty well." The mercenary's lips curled into a smile. The indigo adamantine was even more effective than he expected.

Zig's actions seemed to enrage the monstrosity, and it launched a barrage of attacks at him while completely ignoring Scezc.

"Aww! Guess you didn't like that, huh?!"

The slashes were becoming fiercer, but they were losing accuracy. Zig leaped into the air to dodge a slash aimed at his feet. Grabbing a tree branch, he changed his trajectory and avoided the magic that hit where he would have landed. Although the force and speed of these slash attacks were more intense than its previous attacks, Zig found that the suppressive power of the shock waves had been far more of a problem.

He continued to provoke the monstrosity from afar to keep it from turning its rage on Scezc, buying time for her by dodging the slashes and interfering with its magic using the indigo adamantine coins.

Scezc watched on, half in shock and half in awe.

How does he keep avoiding those attacks?

She suspected she could dodge them as well, but she could probably only do it five, *maybe* six times in a row. At some point she would either lose her balance or her stamina wouldn't be able to keep up. It would take extraordinary core strength and endurance to both keep dodging and distracting it with those projectiles he was using.

Despite her surprise at Zig's physical capabilities, she was putting together her spell rather smoothly. She had swallowed an expensive potion that had a mana-restoring effect and was making up the rest through willpower and technique. Quickly but carefully, she focused, the dire situation allowing her to manipulate her magic with greater concentration than usual.

The air began to crackle and grow colder as her spell neared completion. Unfortunately, the spellweaver mantis reacted to the fluctuations of magical energy. Sensing that this was powerful enough to cause it harm, the monstrosity turned toward Scezc.

Her eyes met its red, eerie, compound ones, and her face twitched as her blood ran cold.

Bad! Bad! Bad!

She was still in the middle of giving the mana its form. This was the most important part of the spell casting process. If she was interrupted here, the magical energy she'd managed to wring out would just dissipate.

Should I try to escape or keep going? She wasn't sure which move was the right one.

"Don't stop!"

Scezc snapped out of her thoughts when Zig's screams reached her ears. He ran as fast as he could, pummeling the monstrosity with all the projectiles he had left.

Indigo adamantine was effective, but these were only small coins. They made for decent surprise attacks, but their usefulness diminished if the opponent knew they were coming. Even in large - quantities, the best they could do was slightly delay magic activation.

The spellweaver mantis launched a black slash directly at her. In that instant, both Scezc and Zig realized there was nothing they could do to stop it.

Barreling at full speed, Zig managed to reach her just in time. Scezc gasped as Zig grabbed her and dodged to the side, seconds before the attack sliced her in half.

"Now it's your turn!" Zig shouted.

Scezc hadn't canceled her spell. Still in Zig's arms, she stared down the monstrosity and unleashed the spell she had weaved. With a loud crackle, the cold air around the spellweaver mantis began to transform, taking the shape of countless sharp ice spears that encircled it like a dome.

The spellweaver mantis tried to react with defensive magic after launching its attack, but the barrage of ice spears was too swift. A shattering sound, like thousands of glass shards colliding, filled the air

as the ice spears pummeled into its mana-based body. Black mist began to seep out of the holes they left behind, and the monstrosity—which didn’t flinch when Zig blew its head off—appeared to be writhing in pain.



The barrage of ice spears Scezc created using every last drop of her mana continued until she could feel its last dregs draining.

"Hff… Hff…"

Scezc's breathing was ragged, her body consumed with the fatigue that came with reaching mana deficiency. Zig released her and she dropped back to her feet, holding her head as it throbbed with dull pain.

She peered at the monstrosity. It wriggled weakly as countless ice spears protruded from the holes that peppered its body. It only had two legs left, and black mist leaked from its every injury.

Finally, it reached its limit. The monstrosity stopped squirming and tumbled to the ground. Slowly, it dissipated like small grains of sand blowing away in the wind. The only thing that remained after it completely crumbled away was a single red sphere.

"Looks like…we won," Scezc said.

She was completely spent and couldn't handle any more fighting. Devoid of both mana and strength, she sank to her knees.

"Good on you for keeping that spell up. Although, normally, just run away when it looks that bad." Zig sounded impressed as he stood by her side.

His words prompted a wry smile out of Scezc. There was no guarantee that he would have reached her in time. Prioritizing escape in a situation like that was absolutely the correct answer. She really should've protected herself instead of heeding the words of a complete stranger.

The only reason I decided to continue the spell was…

"I thought you were scarier than the monstrosity. That's all."

Zig's eyes widened in surprise at Scezc's response, and he began to chuckle. "Is that so?"

"Yup."

They then heard voices in the distance. The Wadatsumi adventurers must have noticed the battle noises had stopped after making their retreat.

"Over here! Hey, is that blood?"

Standing up straight, Scezc was about to wave her friends over when she noticed her hand was wet with warm, fresh blood.

She blinked. "When did I…?"

She hadn't been injured without realizing it. Even including the battle with the double-horned blue beetle, she had only sustained small bruises and scrapes. And since Zig had moved her away from the previous attack, she should be completely unharm—

She turned around as soon as she realized what that meant. Behind her, Zig was on his knees, copious amounts of red liquid pouring from his back. A moment later, the thick smell of blood irritated her nose.

"Hey! Are you okay?!"

She dashed over to Zig and supported him with her shoulder, almost collapsing under the weight since she didn't have enough mana left to fortify her strength.

The mercenary's face was pale and sweaty. "I might be a little hurt," he groaned.

"A little, my foot! I'll heal you—wait, I'm out of mana! Someone help!" Scezc frantically called out to her companions.

To Zig, it sounded like her voice was coming from somewhere far away as he lost consciousness.

After performing emergency first aid on an unconscious Zig, Scezc and her companions hurried back to the guild. Since the Wadatsumi adventurers had mostly depleted their mana during the battle and in the aftermath, all they could perform on the mercenary were simple procedures.

Because of that, it was imperative for him to receive immediate medical attention.

"Please move aside! This is an emergency!"

"Are there any doctors here? Anyone who can use healing magic would suffice!"

Adventurers made a living doing dangerous work and the guild was used to handling them, so the relevant parties were quick to respond. Despite the unexpected situation, some adventurers quickly cleared the food and plates off the table where they were eating and covered it with their cloaks to create a makeshift bed.

"Put 'im over here," one said.

Scezc and the others gingerly lowered a blood-soaked Zig on the table so he was lying on his stomach. One of the guild's staff who had

some medical knowledge rushed over and sliced through the mercenary's clothes, his face clouding as he saw the wounds.

"This is nasty. What caused it?"

"Magic," Scezc told him.

"Poison doesn't seem to be a concern, but he's lost a lot of blood. We need to stop the bleeding. Get me some clean cloth and water."

Preparations for Zig's treatment proceeded without mishap under the direction of the bespectacled staff member. After cleaning the wound, he slipped his fingers inside it to make sure no foreign objects were present before starting the magical restoration.

It didn't take long before his eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"What's with this man?" he muttered under his breath. "Healing magic is unusually effective on him."

Healing magic wasn't a panacea; it couldn't cure colds, and it wasn't effective enough to heal someone who had been mortally wounded without having complications later. It could be used to quickly repair broken bones or patch up serious wounds, but doing that would greatly drain the patient's strength.

If it was used carelessly on a severely injured person, they could die from emaciation even if their wound was healed. For this reason, only life-threatening wounds were a priority when using magical healing, and the rest were treated through a combination of rest and taking the person's fortitude into consideration.

Zig was different from those from this continent. His physical abilities were all his own, and since his body didn't have a drop of mana, the way that it functioned couldn't be compared to theirs. Because he wasn't reliant on mana and had the inhuman capability to recover on his own, healing magic was much more effective on him than people from this continent. As a result, the staff member was completely baffled that the treatment was healing his wounds so quickly.

"What a skilled practitioner. I can't believe the guild has someone who's so proficient in healing magic…"

The Wadatsumi adventurers seemed to be getting the wrong idea as they watched, but there wasn't anyone around who could clear up that misunderstanding.

Once Zig's procedure was finished, the same group that had brought him to the doctor rushed over to put him on a stretcher. He was so heavy that they nearly buckled under the weight, but these adventurers had their pride to uphold—they pushed through the pain with force of will and physical enhancement as they carried him away as promptly as possible.

Scezc and Milyna watched as Zig was taken away. *They* had to remain at the guild. It was their duty to report on the circumstances of the bounty hunt and any abnormalities that occurred.

"Isn't that man the guardian…I mean, companion of that newcomer everyone's talking about?" The middle-aged man with glasses who performed the procedure on Zig inquired as he wiped his hands. "What was he doing with *you*?"

It appeared he held a rather high position in the guild, and seemed to be quite sharp-eyed despite his calm demeanor. However, Milyna and Scezc didn't know why he had been with them either, so they were at a loss for words.

"About that. I can explain." Cain inserted himself into the conversation as he put down Zig's double-edged sword that he had recovered from the hunting grounds.

The three people he had interrupted looked at him, silently urging him to continue.

"He came along as my companion this time, but that was just a pretense. Bates hired him to watch over the members of the Wadatsumi Clan who'd gone off to capture the bounty."

Scezc and Milyna had guessed as much, so they weren't that surprised. The staff member nodded at Cain's report and began to jot something down on the paperwork.

"All right, I understand the sequence of events. It's not a problem as long as he's officially registered as a companion; the guild has no involvement with whatever request he was hired to do. Normally, companions are responsible for any injuries they incur, but I'm not so cruel that I'd turn my back on a man on his deathbed. He will be charged for labor fees, though."

"Send the bill for any associated costs to the Wadatsumi Clan."

"Understood," the staff member said. He turned to the two women as Cain stepped back. "Now, if you could give me your report."

Milyna didn’t see a lot of what had happened in the second battle, so Scezc did most of the talking. The staff member quietly took in the information, his eyebrows raising when she got to the spellweaver mantis. Still, he didn’t interrupt and continued to listen until she finished making her report.

“First off, let me congratulate you on exterminating the bounty. We’ll have someone check on it later, but the prize money and any materials are yours.”

“Thank you.”

Despite the words of congratulations from the staff member, Scecz and Milyna’s reactions were muted. They weren’t so blithe that they could celebrate considering the circumstances.

The staff member just shrugged when he saw how they were acting and continued to speak. “Regarding the abnormally mature spellweaver mantis you encountered, we’ve received reports of similar things in the past. I believe a researcher even wrote a thesis about it.”

He asked one of the receptionists to bring him the paper in question and started reading it aloud.

“The spellweaver mantis is a parasitic monstrosity that feeds off the mana of its host. It chooses a host as a juvenile when its form resembles an earthworm. Since it is unable to change hosts once it matures, the one it selects at this time will influence how strong it becomes.

Spellweaver mantises are weak monstrosities. It they try to parasitize a stronger monstrosity, even if it is just a juvenile, they may be expelled due to the difference in magical energy.

However, rare exceptions exist.

Cases of an unusually well-nourished and large specimen parasitizing a relatively strong monstrosity, particularly those that are weak as juveniles—for example, emerging insects—have been recorded. In these cases, spellweaver mantises can grow to be about one size larger than normal with a level of strength that also appears to differ from conventional specimens.

Sadly, a spellweaver mantis is still a spellweaver mantis, and thus can only ever be moderately strong."

The staff member looked up from the paper once he finished reading.

"If it was lucky enough to parasitize a strong monstrosity, and doubly fortunate that its host lived such a long and battle-hardened life, then it's not beyond the realm of possibility that such a large spellweaver mantis could appear."

Essentially, he explained that that string of coincidences could lead to the events of that day.

Milyna wasn't buying it. She blurted out, "You really think that could happen?"

"It *did* happen, didn't it? You were just unlucky. Actually, no, considering how things turned out, I'd say you were lucky. You

claimed the bounty. No one died. I'm sure even that man I treated will be back on his feet in the not-so-distant future."

Everything he said was true—if they only looked at the outcome. Neither woman was satisfied, and a strange hollowness remained in their hearts.

There's nothing more troublesome than those who believe they should be able to do everything on their own. They should just be grateful they made it back safe and sound.

The staff member had been doing this job for a long time. He was well aware of why their mood was low, but he didn't offer any pointers or advice. For one thing, it wasn't his job, but above all, they wouldn't be able to accomplish anything in the future if they let such trivial details trip them up.

"Satisfaction" was such a luxury that some people even risked their lives to obtain it.

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The small hospital where the injured were taken was located on the edge of the market district. It was a privately run establishment with intimate ties to the Wadatsumi Clan. On this particular day, they were up to their necks in work.

At least the clan had informed the hospital director in advance that a party was going out to hunt the bounty and that the possibility

of injuries was high, so he was able to efficiently treat the wounded without getting flustered or panicking.

"There, you should be fine now," the portly director said with a gentle and reassuring smile.

"Thank you, doctor."

He had finally finished up with what appeared to be the last patient. Most of the injured only had superficial wounds, so he was able to make do with mana and the medicines he had on hand.

"There certainly were a lot of patients this time," the director said to himself as he stretched his arms above his head to try and relax his stiff shoulders.

Suddenly, he felt the prickle of someone's gaze. The female patient he had just been treating still hadn't left the examination room and was looking his way.

Perhaps she's still feeling unwell?

He made a conscious effort to smile as he asked, "Is everything all right?"

"Um, what happened to the man that was brought over here earlier?"

"Ah, him."

The director's expertly constructed smile twisted into a frown. Taking his reaction to mean what had happened was the worst-case scenario, the woman's expression turned grim as she hung her head.

"Oh, no, sorry! Please don't misunderstand. His prognosis is excellent. Almost *too* excellent."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"Of course, of course. Anyway, please take it easy for today. Even if your wounds are healed, your body is still fatigued."

The woman thanked him one again before departing the exam room. Once she was gone, the director's thoughts drifted back to when the large man was carried into his hospital.

He had come in as an emergency patient, though the wound on his back wasn't enormous. Nevertheless, he examined the patient to make sure there was no internal damage. Surprisingly, his wounds appeared to be closing *as* the doctor was carefully treating them.

Judging from everyone else's panicked reaction as well as the condition of his clothes and how much blood he had lost, there was no mistaking that the man had sustained a grave injury. Still, it was almost scary how quickly his wounds were stitching themselves back together.

It's almost like his body composition is completely different.

He was worried the man might be transforming into a monstrosity himself, but the blood test he ran was negative. He was still unconscious, but almost fully healed. Though his face was pale from losing so much blood, it probably wouldn't be long until he could leave the hospital.

I suppose I could just chalk it up to a physical peculiarity.

He had never heard of a human having regenerative power to *that* extent. Maybe he had used an expensive potion or some sort of

magic item—something this effective was likely to be a powerful drug that wasn't available through ordinary channels.

"The side effects might be pretty nasty. Should I start preparing for them now?"

It was probably better if he didn't concern himself with where or how this man had obtained such an item. The director wasn't the type of man who needed a logical explanation to treat the patients that showed up at the hospital, no matter the circumstances.

He was still considering what aftercare would be necessary when someone knocked on the door of the examination room.

"Come in," the director called out.

Cain stepped inside. "Pardon my intrusion, Dr. Dorea."

The young man was a frequent guest at this hospital and thus treated the doctor with reverence.

"Oh, if it isn't Cain. Where does it hurt today?"

"I'm not *that* injury-prone. Nothing's wrong with me this time. How is Zig…that is, the big guy?"

"He's fine. Speaking of, he's not a member of the clan, right? Do you mind if I ask what happened?"

Cain gave the doctor a rundown of the events that led to Zig's injury. The director of the hospital was a tight-lipped man, and the Wadatsumi Clan was so indebted to him that Cain decided it wouldn't be a problem to share a little of what had taken place.

When he told the story of how the clan had mistakenly attacked him before, the director's eyes widened in surprise.

"Seems he's got quite a pragmatic personality."

"I could say the same of you, doctor," Cain said bluntly.

"Well, it's part of the job. I suppose the same could also be said of him."

Perhaps Zig and the director—someone willing to help an injured person even if they were up to unsavory business—were cut from the same cloth.

They were still talking when someone flung open the door of the examination room without bothering to knock. Cain turned around with a frown, ready to give their unscrupulous guest a tongue-lashing.

"Hey! You can't just barge in here without—Z-Zig?!" The young man was so startled that he jumped out of his seat.

"Oh, it's you, Cain." Zig, still dressed in his hospital robes, leaned against the door. Despite his calm words, he was clearly in pain as he held his abdomen.

"What are you doing?! You shouldn't be up and walking around yet!" The director rushed toward Zig and tried to help support him, but he wasn't much help due to the differences in their build.

Cain lent him a hand on the other side, and the two men somehow managed to help Zig sit on the bed.

For a man like him to be in this condition, that wound must've been pretty bad, Cain thought. Seeing Zig *that* unsteady on his feet made him realize just how serious the situation was.

"Cain, I have a favor to ask of you…" the mercenary said in a faint voice, trailing off as he hunched over, his hand pressed into his

stomach.

"Wh-what is it?"

Cain leaned forward. This man had suffered an injury after accepting a job from his clan. He would do whatever he could to grant the request if it was within his power. However, he was confused. Wasn't Zig's injury on his back?

"I…I'm…hungry."

"What?"

"Ridiculous," Cain spluttered, his face frozen in genuine astonishment.

Despite being at a hospital, the scene he was witnessing looked like something straight out of a party. There was a table laden with food, just like the spread at a banquet, though the food in question was rapidly disappearing at an alarming rate thanks to Zig.

"Now, now, that's not necessary." The director tried to appease Cain, although he was feeling unsettled as well. "That man recovered at remarkable speed, so his body must have consumed an enormous amount of his strength. Not only did he lose a lot of blood, but it depletes more energy than you'd think to heal wounds."

Regardless, Cain couldn't get over the fact that he had gotten so serious over what turned out to be a silly empty stomach.

Hmph. If I wanted to see a performance, I would've gone to a play.

Still, watching the mercenary shovel the food into his mouth with an almost demonic expression probably meant what he felt went beyond average hunger pangs. He hadn't known Zig very long, but it was long enough to understand he wasn't the type who would mess around.

"Oh…but if it's not too much to ask, how about eating something a little gentler on your stomach? Rice porridge, perhaps?" As a medical practitioner, the director was reluctant to see his recovering patient consuming a mountain of salt, sugar, and oil. Cain had prioritized speed when getting Zig some food, so the meals were pretty much just items sold at the local stalls.

Zig wolfed down a sausage sandwich lathered in mustard in two bites, washing it down with a gulp of wine directly from the bottle. He responded to the director's question without so much as a glance in the man's direction.

"No." He could only spare enough time for a one-word answer. He wiped some wine from the corner of his mouth before continuing his meal.

The director balked at his blatant refusal and didn't say anything more.

Well, it's not like he had a cold or damaged his internal organs. It should be fine. Having this voracious of an appetite must be a side effect of whatever he took to help with his healing. Considering how much it enhanced his ability to recover, it's a mild side effect. He must've used something that cost a small fortune.

In truth, it wasn't a side effect at all. Zig was just meeting his body's demand to replenish the energy that it had used up—but the misunderstanding was no surprise considering his appetite showed no signs of abating.

Cain had to go out on two more shopping trips before Zig's hunger subsided. In the end, he ate so much that it would make anyone watching him feel sick. It was around that point that he finally felt stable enough to examine himself. He twisted around and did some arm exercises, checking to make sure nothing felt off.

"My back still feels a little weird, but not enough to have any lingering effects. You must have top-notch skills to have healed that nasty of a wound to the point where I've recovered this much. Thanks, doc."

"No, no, I really didn't do much. While we're on the topic, recovery magic works exceptionally well on you, Zig. Any idea why that might be?"

"There's no need to be so modest," Zig insisted. "Recovery magic works well on me? Hmm. I don't usually use spells to heal myself, so I can't think why that might be the case."

"I see…"

A medicine's effectiveness diminished if used repeatedly. The director had once heard a theory that if one always relied on magic to recover, the body could get used to it, causing its innate resilience to decline. However, further research hadn't made much progress because it wasn't possible to distinguish between individual

differences and the decline in physical strength that accompanied aging.

Even taking that into account, it doesn't explain the speed*. I just get the feeling that this man is built different…*

The director's curiosity wasn't sated, but he doubted this man would allow himself to be studied. He would just have to force himself to rest on the knowledge that there were people like him out in the world—and leave it at that.

Zig stood up once he was done testing his body's condition. "Thanks for all the help. How much do I owe you?"

"Don't worry about it. The Wadatsumi Clan will cover your treatment fees."

Hearing the director's response, Zig shifted his gaze to Cain as if to ask, *Is that really okay?*

"The decision came from the top," Cain told him. "You earned it. The food was my treat as well."

"If you say so. Thank you very much for the meal."

"Don't mention it. I'm grateful to *you* for helping my friends."

Zig stretched out his arm, and Cain responded in kind. He had to admire the strength he felt in the hand that clenched around his.

Once Zig had changed clothes and was about to leave, Cain called out to him, "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

Zig didn't respond but glanced back over his shoulder as if prompting Cain to continue. "Why are you so dead set on being a mercenary? You won't consider becoming an adventurer?"

There were many merits to registering with the guild, and someone as capable as Zig would benefit immensely. He was already doing the same things that adventurers did. Cain was curious as to why Zig never stepped away from his role as a companion.

That's *what he wanted to ask?* Zig chuckled at the other man's question.

"Because I've always been a mercenary. This is how I live, and I have no desire to change that. Pragmatically speaking, if you belong to a specific group, you won't be able to accept any work that might be opposed to it, right?"

"You're planning to challenge the guild?" There was a tension in Cain's response, and he seemed to grow wary.

Zig gave a little shrug. "I don't have anything against the guild, nor do I intend to oppose them. It's just…if they get in the way of my work, I'll have to deal with them like I would any other obstacle. That's all."

Sure, he could join an organization and reap the benefits, then do whatever he pleased when it became necessary, but that was against his moral code. It would feel too dishonest to belong to a group that he would turn on if the need arose.

With those final words, Zig left the hospital.

"I look like shit. I need to get back to the inn."

Zig's clothing—if it could even be called clothing since the back had been sliced to ribbons—was stiff with dried blood. He headed to

the inn to grab a change of clothes.

"Man, that hunger was almost debilitating. I never realized that getting healed had such a nasty side effect."

He noticed he was eating more than usual lately but had chalked it up to getting used to the new work he was doing. That doctor, however, did mention something about rapid regeneration through magical recovery depleting both physical strength and energy.

He remembered being hungry, although not to the same extent, after Siasha healed his shoulder that Isana had run through with her blade. Back then, he had assumed it was due to the intense battle. If being healed by magic was going to make him that famished, that was something he needed to give some serious thought about.

"If I get a fairly nasty injury fixed up, I could be depleted of energy to the point where I can't move…"

Mercenaries often found themselves in the position of not having enough food, and it was a matter of life and death. He would need to be careful when using healing magic. Considering how much food he required afterwards, the cost might not be too different from that of an expensive medical treatment.

Zig had a lot on his mind as he returned to the inn. The other residents gave him strange looks due to his tattered appearance but left him alone to return to his room and change clothes.

Siasha must have noticed he had come back, because she showed up at his room right around when he had finished slipping into fresh clothes.

"I'm coming in, Zig!"

"Okay."

She was dressed but sported dark circles under her eyes, like she'd been deep in concentration for a long time. She had been so busy working on developing her new spells that she hadn't eaten or really been listening when Zig left earlier.

Her nose twitched as soon as she entered his room, shooting him a reproachful look.

"You smell like blood again. Do you have a penchant for getting hurt or something? More importantly, aren't you working too much?"

Zig sighed, aware of what a bad look this was. Realizing the conversation wasn't going in a favorable direction, he tried to change the subject.

"It just sort of happened, okay. Did things go well with your magic?"

Siasha responded to his question with a look of pride. "I came up with something pretty good! It took a lot of effort to distribute the mana and adjust the intensity, but I think I created a spell that'll be much easier to use."

She really wanted to try it out the next day, but the exhaustion she was unable to hide had dulled her enthusiasm. "I tuckered myself out. Today calls for an early night."

"That's a good idea. Did you eat yet?"

"No. Did you?" Siasha could smell traces of some sort of sauce mixed in with the blood.

"Yeah, a lot happened today. Is something wrong?"

Zig noticed a shift in her expression, but she responded with a troubled smile.

"A-actually, would you mind coming with me? Um, you don't have to eat anything…"

"Huh?" The mercenary couldn't quite understand why she would ask that.

A look of embarrassment flashed on her face. "You know, never mind! Don't worry about it."

It wasn't like her to be so wishy-washy.

Hmm…

They had eaten separately before, and it didn't seem like she was just lonely. Well, her *intentions* might be a mystery, but he could still tell what she wanted.

Siasha made some excuse or another and tried to leave the room, but he followed after her.

She looked up at him as he stood at her side. "Zig?"

Without meeting her blue eyes, he stepped forward and opened the door.

"I feel like having a drink. Want to join me for a nightcap?"

"S-sure, I'd love to." Unable to hide her delight, Siasha smiled and followed Zig out of the room.

It was dark outside, and rows of mana-based lights illuminated the road ahead of them. There still weren't many people out yet, but

the night was young.

As they walked through the business district, Siasha stayed beside Zig and silently linked her arm through his. He let her do as she pleased, not saying a word.



Chapter 2:
Alien Elements, Strangers, and the Insolent

THEY ENDED UP TAKING THE NEXT DAY OFF.

Zig's wounds were basically healed by that point, but he decided it would be best to err on the side of caution. Siasha was also unable to completely shake off her fatigue; developing new magic had been a more difficult endeavor than she imagined.

Since Zig had nothing but time on his hands, he ended up making his way to the Wadatsumi Clan to report on the job he completed. The inn he was staying at had received a message stating he could come around to discuss his payment whenever he was feeling better, so the timing was perfect.

Making a brief stop at the armory to drop off his breastplate for repairs, he passed through the business district before arriving at the clan house. The moment he stepped through the door, a couple adventurers who noticed him clamored in surprise.

"Hmm? O-oh! It's *him*! He's here!"

"He's seriously up and about already? Someone call for Bates!"

Before Zig had a chance to say anything, the adventurers had guessed what he was there for. They jumped up from their seats, making a huge racket as they rushed into the back of the clan house.

"Well, I guess that makes things easier."

Having been left to his own devices, Zig walked around a little bit as he waited. That was when a familiar face noticed him and approached.

"Hello there, Mr. Zig," Kasukabe greeted. "What brings you here today?"

"Reporting on some work. Are Bates and Glow around?"

The wiry man gave him a good-natured grin as he pushed up his glasses. Even though Zig knew he was just putting on that smile, he couldn't help but be impressed at how genuine it appeared.

"Those two are currently reporting something to the clan master. I don't think it should take too much longer. Would you mind waiting for a little while?"

"That's fine."

"This way, please."

Kasukabe started to climb the stairs with Zig following behind. The mercenary smiled wryly as he recalled how similar this felt to the last time he was here, although the circumstances were completely different. The clan administrator seemed aware of the reason behind that expression because he seated Zig at the very same table as his last visit before going to prepare some tea.

"I heard about the bounty extermination squad, but I didn't realize the outside help they'd hired was you. As the clan's administrator, I express my gratitude."

"No need. I was just doing what I was hired to do."

Realizing those were Zig's true feelings on the matter, Kasukabe didn't pursue the subject any further.

Looking at Kasukabe, Zig remembered another incident at the guild. "I met your sister, you know."

"So I heard." It was the first time any cracks showed in Kasukabe's perfectly crafted expression. Despite his nonchalant demeanor, the topic of his older sister seemed to be a sore spot.

"She was furious when she heard what happened," he said. "My head is still smarting." He ran his hand over the afflicted area.

Zig chuckled as he sipped his tea. "Did she box your ears?"

"Something like that. There was a heel drop in there too."

"That's rough."

Apparently, his sister was the type who preferred *direct communication*. He was going to say that perhaps she was just worried about him, but stopped when he saw the disgruntled look on Kasukabe's face. He was old enough to understand that sentiment for himself. Besides, hearing it from a stranger would probably just make him feel pathetic.

They saw someone else climbing the stairs—two someones.

"If it ain't Zig! Thanks for everythin' ya did!"

"You really are up on your feet again. Even though you were hurt worse than me."

Bates and Milyna took seats across from him. They couldn't hide their shock at how healthy Zig looked despite his horrible injury the previous day.

"And here I am still recovering from the fatigue of the healing magic…" Milyna groaned.

"Well, health is wealth, as they say!" Bates said. "On that subject, let's get to discussin' your compensation." He pulled out a bag full of money. "Here's the 200,000 dren you were promised for completin' the job. Now, for the extra compensation I said we could discuss in case ya ran into trouble…"

Bates trailed off, his gaze shifting to Kasukabe. He immediately read the intention behind the other man's glance and started doing some mental calculations.

"We'll cover any treatment related fees, and how about an extra 500,000? That should include any equipment repair costs and other particulars," Kasukabe said.

It was a very generous offer, but Zig had the feeling the amount was *more* than just a reward.

"What do you mean by 'other particulars'?" he asked.

"Taking down the bounty was handled by the Wadatsumi Clan alone. Thus, any materials from the veteran double-horned blue beetle, as well as the prestige of the kill, belong solely to the clan. Is that acceptable?"

Since the Wadatsumi Clan focused on the development of newcomers, they had less achievements to their name than other clans. Claiming bounties wasn't uncommon if a clan actively pursued those kinds of endeavors, but it was a whole other story if the entire operation was handled by up-and-coming adventurers. If it became known that the Wadatsumi Clan had the ability to nurture and develop

young adventurers, they would see an increase in applicants, contributing to their further growth.

Guilds composed of many veterans wouldn't be able to sit back if young and talented members were snatched away from their ranks. The value of such a success would decrease dramatically if there was a hiccup, so what Kasukabe wasn't saying out loud was that part of the bonus included hush money. While he appeared nonchalant, he was struggling to keep his facial expression from turning stony.

"Got it," Zig said. "I was there to help transport back any of the wounded and sustained my own injury from a different monstrosity that wasn't part of the bounty. Sound good?"

"Yes, that's perfect." Kasukabe felt a wave of relief rush over him at the mercenary's easy acceptance of the situation.

Since the Wadatsumi Clan wanted the job to have a clean result that had been accomplished solely by young adventurers, they would have to comply to whatever amount possible if Zig insisted on increasing the compensation.

Luckily for the clan, it went against Zig's principles to demand a larger reward just because his client had profited more than initially expected. He would consider it if they had *deliberately* toned down the threat level, but the clan had warned him of the possibility of unforeseen dangers in advance. Being stingy after agreeing to a price was strictly prohibited in mercenary circles. Word of those actions spread quickly and could interfere with obtaining future jobs.

Kasukabe had faith that Zig wasn't the type to renege on a contract once he agreed to it. He hadn't given away the details of a

previous job even when surrounded by a large group, after all, despite that situation leading to bloodshed. The clan administrator saw the other man's boldness firsthand when he faced him as an enemy.

"It was a deal that was ripe for the takin', so I figured you'd say that," Bates said. It wasn't entirely clear whose side he was on.

After a pause, he fished something out of his pocket and placed it on the table. It was some sort of deep red gemstone. The gem was an impressive size—almost as large as a fist—but something felt a little off about it.

"What's this?" Zig asked.

"It's from that monstrosity—a spellweaver mantis kernel. Unlike your usual monstrosities, them mana-based ones just disappear when they're defeated. They leave a kernel of their concentrated magical energy behind. If this little nugget is processed, it can produce some effects that ain't like other monstrosity materials."

Milyna chimed in after Bates finished his explanation. "Low-power monstrosities like spellweaver mantises usually just leave behind small pebbles that aren't much use. This one is significantly more valuable than others of the same size. You don't find spellweaver mantis kernels like this every day!"

"I appreciate the thought, but I'm fine with just taking the payment we decided up front…"

"Now hold your horses a moment and listen till the end," Bates interrupted Zig as he was in the middle of refusing.

Kasukabe continued with additional context. "Exterminating a spellweaver mantis was *not* part of the original plan. The only one from the clan who ended up fighting it was Scezc, so possession of this item fell to her. *She* decided to give it to you."

He glanced over to Milyna. Zig followed his gaze and was met with a pair of red eyes that matched her fiery hair.

"She said to tell you something like, 'A debt has been paid,'" Milyna said.

That statement alone conveyed Scezc's intentions.

"Understood." Knowing full well that these women weren't going to leave him alone until he accepted the item, Zig gave that succinct reply and took the kernel off the table. Then, he rose from his seat. "Sorry for the intrusion."

"Not at all! Hopefully ya can help us out if we run into more trouble again."

"Depends on my availability."

Saying a brief goodbye, the mercenary departed the Wadatsumi Clan house.

"Looks like I got some extra income, so I guess I can stop by the armory again. I'm curious about what this kernel can do… Should've asked while I had the chance."

Zig's pockets were flush with cash due to his unexpected payday. He had reached the point where he could realistically purchase something that had caught his interest the other day. His

mood light, he made his way back to the armory, where he was greeted by the usual clerk—albeit with some confusion.

"How can I… Wait, Zig? The repairs on your breastplate are still going to take some time."

"I'm here on a separate matter. I happened to get my hands on this, and I wasn't sure how to use it."

The clerk squinted at the item with a critical eye as he held it out to her. "That's a mana kernel, but I've never seen one like this before. I wouldn't be able to shed much light on it. How about asking one of our craftsmen?"

The clerk led Zig out of the shop and into the workshop where he had previously taken a few practice swings. She grabbed the attention of one of the men working in the blistering heat, and he reluctantly paused his task to go over to them.

"Please meet Gantt, one of our blacksmiths," she said.

"Your patronage is appreciated," Gantt said.

"Oh, uh, thanks."

Gantt was a middle-aged man with a full beard, though he didn't project any of the roughness usually associated with his profession. If anything, he seemed a little high-strung, but with the stereotypical grumpy blacksmith demeanor underneath.

"Gantt is the one who crafted that double-edged sword of yours."

"Is that so? I should be the one thanking you. That blade has been a lifesaver."

"Glad to hear it. Is that all you wanted me for? There's a whole lot I need to get done."

With his curt reply, Gantt was about to return to his work when the clerk interrupted him.

"Not so fast, Gantt. *This* is why we're here. Would you mind giving it an appraisal and telling us what it does?"

As soon as the blacksmith laid eyes on the kernel, he practically snatched it from the clerk and brought it to his face so he could get a better look.

"What in tarnation?! I've never seen a mana kernel like this one before. Something like this actually exists? How'd you get your hands on it?!"

"Gantt, that's enough!"

The clerk was flustered by the blacksmith's inappropriate behavior, but Zig didn't seem to mind as he responded to the man's barrage of questions.

"It's a mana kernel from a spellweaver mantis. I acquired it through a job, but I'm not sure where it came from beyond that."

"A spellweaver mantis?! You got one this big from those little things? Wow, what amazing luck."

I'm not sure if the Wadatsumi Clan would see it that way. Zig chuckled internally and got down to business with an obviously excited Gantt.

"Can this be used to make anything?"

"Huh? You don't know? Well, whatever. The quickest way to use it is as fuel for magic items. If you incorporate it into your equipment, it'll be consumed in place of your own mana—but once you use it up, it's gone."

"Really?!" Zig was elated to learn he could use the kernel to wield a magic item. He'd always felt a bit sore that he couldn't use magic but never knew this method existed.

However, in his next breath, Gantt advised against it. "Using a rare kernel in that manner would be like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. I'd throw you out of the shop myself if that was your request."

"R-right…" The mercenary's shoulders slumped at the news that what he finally wanted wasn't going to happen.

"If you're going to make something with this, it should utilize its innate properties. Speaking of which, do you know what kind of magic that monstrosity used? I can't really remember. I've only ever used spellweaver mantis kernels as materials in lamps and such."

"I believe it used widespread shock waves and slash attacks."

"Slash attacks? So, like, wind-based?"

"No, it didn't really feel like a gusting wind."

"Hm, maybe mana manipulation. I wonder if that's also where the ability to control its host comes from. If that's the case…" Gantt mumbled to himself as he started rummaging through a pile of

haphazardly stacked items. He seemed to be someone who marched to the beat of his own drum.

The clerk gave Zig an apologetic bow. “I’m so sorry. Gantt is a bit of an odd duck.”

“Eh, most craftsmen are like that,” Zig said. “Don’t worry about it. The only thing I expect from guys like him is to be good at their job.” From his perspective, it was the responsibility of the owner and staff to provide the other aspects of customer service.

“Yes! Here it is, here it is! Take this.” Gantt appeared to have found what he was searching for.

“A…gauntlet?”

At first glance, it looked like a sturdy gauntlet. Upon closer inspection, it became clear it was made from a unique material. There was a distinctive bulge around the finger area, as if it had some sort of padding.

“Try it on,” Gantt urged, as though it was the first step of his explanation.

Zig obediently put on the gauntlet, opening and closing his fist to get a feel for it. There was a light red gemstone—perhaps another mana kernel—attached to the wrist section.

“Hm? A battle gauntlet? And it’s padded with iron sand?”

The fit was surprisingly comfortable, and it was sturdy enough to protect the hand, but its design didn’t affect its functionality. If the wearer clenched their hand into a fist, it hardened the padding around the knuckles, enhancing the power a punch could pack.

“Try taking a jab while pushing on the switch located by the index finger. The recoil is strong, so be careful of your arm.”

Zig felt around with his thumb, finding a protrusion where Gantt said it would be. He stood in front of the same kind of full plate armor he had taken some practice swings against when he last tried out a new weapon and readied himself.

Since he was warned there would be a reaction of some sort, he decided not to go all out and just throw a light punch.

“Mmph!”

His movement was sharp but effortless. If someone wearing the battle gauntlet was emphasizing speed over power, they should’ve only been able to slightly dent the plate armor at best.

“Oh, shit!”

The speed of Zig’s fist was much faster than Gantt, the item’s creator, had anticipated. He blurted out those foreboding words, but there was nothing he could do to stop what had already been set in motion.



The mercenary's fist connected with the plate armor. The magic engraved into the battle gauntlet activated as soon as it made contact, using the mana as fuel. A shock wave channeled through the catalyst packed into the knuckle section, piercing cleanly through the full plate armor without so much as a reverberation.

"Whoa?!"

At the same time, the repulsive force caused Zig's arm to bounce back. The recoil was so strong that his arm might have been injured if he hadn't been expecting it in advance.

"Zig, are you all right?" the clerk asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

She had started to run toward him when he lost his footing, but he waved her off while looking over the gauntlet. It didn't appear to have sustained any damaged and only felt a little hot to the touch.

"Ah, I should've mentioned not to overdo it because the output is proportional to the strength of the punch…"

"Sorry, I *was* holding back."

Gantt paused. "If that's true, I might've underestimated you. But I guess that's neither here nor there."

He picked up the armor and looked it over. Zig's punch had left a round hole in the torso, penetrating straight through it.

"This is my pride and joy, the impact gauntlet. It's engraved with shock wave magic. The results speak for themselves, as you can see."

"Interesting… Being able to deliver a fatal blow to a heavily armored soldier is quite impressive."

"No, no, this is only for monstrosities. Why would your initial instinct be to use it on another person?"

Gantt kept rattling on, but Zig had zoned out as he performed a full mental analysis of the item.

The might's not bad at all. It'd depend on what the maximum output is…but the recoil could be rough. If there's no limit, you might break your arm if you're not careful. I guess it all hinges on endurance…

"How many shots does this thing have in it?" He needed to know about the gauntlet's fuel capacity.

"Probably about ten blasts at that might. And let me clarify, this item is designed for monstrosities with tough armor or ones where ordinary weapons are ineffective. It's *not* intended for use against other people, you hear?"

"Ten…" Zig said to himself. Ten was a tricky number. As a trump card, it was more than enough—but something that limited couldn't be included as part of his normal combat repertoire.

"You can keep using it as long as you replace the mana kernel. It will require processing, though."

"Oh, that's not too bad. How much?"

"The gauntlet is priced at 1.5 million dren, and one replacement mana kernel will run you 400,000 dren with processing fees included."

Once he heard the price, Zig silently removed the gauntlet and looked over at the clerk. "So, I'd like to sell this mana kernel."

"Hold your horses! That's just the retail price!" Gantt said hurriedly, trying to stop him. "You've already got your own mana kernel, so you don't need to pay for a replacement, right? Plus, you're a promising customer, so I'm sure we can give you a small discount!"

Zig looked back at the man and sighed. "Even if you lower the price, do you really think an item that's going to set me back 40,000 dren a blast is user-friendly? How many monstrosities will I have to kill to break even?"

"B-but you've got a highly compatible mana kernel. You'll be able to use it more effectively than anyone else!"

"The gauntlet itself is still too expensive."

"But the performance is worth the price…"

It wasn't that Zig couldn't afford it; he just wasn't sure he wanted to pay that much. Still, the blacksmith was determined to get him to purchase the weapon somehow. They debated back and forth about whether it was too expensive or a fair deal at length while the clerk quietly observed them. Eventually, realizing the conversation wasn't progressing, she stepped in.

"Gantt, if I may?"

"What is it? Can't you see I'm in the middle of something here?!"

Gantt was perturbed as the clerk flashed him a smile, but the color swiftly drained from his face at what she said next: "When exactly did you *create* that magic item?"

"Uh, it was…maybe…two years ago?"

"Try four."

"Oh, w-was that it?" Gantt muttered, his face looking pale and sickly compared to the clerk's beaming smile.

"I might have mentioned this before, but we can't keep unsold inventory indefinitely. It's better for the shop to make some money on leftover items, even if we have to sell them at a discount. Plus, our sales and profits have been a bit low lately."

Like flags in the wind, glimpses of her true intentions flickered in and out of clear view. Gantt seemed flustered but could say nothing in rebuttal. It gave Zig an opportunity to cut in.

"Why *hasn't* this sold? Is there something wrong with it?"

"Not at all. I'm sure you know this, since you're using the sword he crafted, but Gantt is an excellent smith. However, he tends to prioritize his own satisfaction over customer needs." Polite, but the clerk got her point across.

With a sulky tone, Gantt said, "Come on, who's going to go around punching monstrosities just because it works well? I never meant for it to be a main weapon anyway…"

"I think I get the gist of it now," Zig said.

He could understand where the adventurers were coming from. When you already had options for long-range attacks, the benefits of getting close to a monstrosity just to punch it hardly outweighed the disadvantages. Even if you used the gauntlet as a secondary weapon like Gantt was suggesting, the unreasonable cost and limited uses, as well as the expensive recharging fee, would deter most people from buying it—high-performance or not. Since its appearance was bare-bones, it was unlikely any collectors would seek it out for display

either. If there was someone with peculiar tastes that had a penchant for beating opponents with their own hands, it would be a different story, but Zig didn't have such unconventional preferences, nor did he lean toward using his fists in combat.

However, his only option for long-range attacks was throwing his weapon with all his might, and he wanted an ace up his sleeve in case he encountered another monstrosity that was resistant to physical attacks like the one from yesterday.

"Considering the circumstances… Allow me to be frank, Mr. Zig. How much are you able to pay?" the clerk asked, willing to bypass negotiations as long as they could break even on the sale.

The way she was speaking gave the mercenary the impression that the cost of the raw materials had been significant. He calculated how much money he had at his disposal by subtracting the necessary expenses for the next month or so from the amount he currently possessed.

"I can do 1.2 million dren, but that's the limit," he said as he looked at the mana kernel. "Processing fee included."

The clerk exchanged glances with Gantt. For a few moments, he hemmed and hawed. At last, his shoulders slumped forward and he raised both hands in defeat.

Seeing this, the clerk turned to Zig with a grin. "We accept your offer."

They measured Zig's hand, and Gantt retreated to the back of the shop to make some minor adjustments.

"Even with the processing it shouldn't take too long," the clerk said. "Do you want to stay here until it's done? We can also have it delivered to your inn."

"I want to use it first thing tomorrow, so I'll wait."

"Certainly."

"Sorry about driving the price down."

"Don't be. It's true that we're struggling to reduce our stock," the clerk replied. She stared intently at the money Zig handed over to her.

"Is there a problem?" He was worried that something was wrong with his payment, but the clerk just smiled and shook her head.

"No, no. It's just… You came to town not that long ago. I'm a little surprised that you've already made so much money."

"I've been lucky enough to have a steady flow of jobs coming in. There seems to be a lot of potential for work around this city, so I'm grateful for that."

Zig had worried about how he would put food on the table when he learned wars weren't a thing here, but he couldn't have been more off the mark. This town, or rather, this continent, had a distortion that prevented wars from happening, causing widespread unrest everywhere instead. Although large-scale carnage didn't occur, there were plenty of disturbances and squabbles going on all the time.

He had gotten the lion's share of his work through adventurer connections, thanks in part to his role as Siasha's bodyguard. A lot had changed since he met her. Zig never imagined he would travel to

the unknown continent he had only heard about through rumors. Not to mention that he would learn that magic still existed there, and that people went around killing bizarre creatures called monstrosities.

Just the thought of it made him laugh. How would his old friends react if he told them about everything he'd seen?

I bet they'd think I lost my mind. To be fair, he would feel the same way if the roles were reversed. *I wonder how much crap Ryell would give me?*

That was a futile thought—not like he would ever be able to ask Ryell anything again. Still, Zig was strangely curious about what the frivolous senior mercenary who had taken him under his wing would've had to say.

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The bountied monstrosity may have been taken care of, but that didn't mean the number of adventurers out and about decreased. After their activities were temporarily halted, they hurried back in droves as soon as they heard the nuisance had been dealt with. Those who were saddled with debt were especially anxious to seek some new quarry.

When Zig had been offered a loan, he'd run away with his tail between his legs. However, it was actually common for adventurers to borrow money. It was a different story if they belonged to a superior clan, but most people didn't fall into that category.

There were many reasons why an adventurer might be lacking funds: newbies who were just starting out, those with medical debt from treating their wounds, those who had splurged and were no longer able to afford the basic necessities… The list went on and on.

Those were the types who usually looked for monstrosities in the areas near the entry point. It was better for adventurers ranked seventh class and above to go deeper into the hunting grounds. For that reason, an increasing number of adventurers were venturing into the depths, so there were more people around than usual.

Zig and Siasha were in the depths as well. Currently, they were facing a granite gecko, which was a large, carnivorous, lizard-type monstrosity that fortified the crust of its skin with ores. It made this crust by scraping away at rocks and metals with its wire-thin tongue that was covered in brushlike hairs.

Siasha threw in another bit of trivia during her explanation—if they weren't raised in an environment where they had access to those materials, they ended up looking like a normal lizard, just bigger.

"It'll be the perfect test subject for my new magic," she said before beginning her incantation.

Born from her magic experimentation, the result of her new skill formed in front of her: a long and slender stone-based spear. It was only about the length of an average woman's arm, so considerably smaller than her usual ones. Its tip wasn't the same color as a normal rock, but beyond that, it didn't seem too unusual.

Siasha sent the spear flying at the monstrosity. It soared fast; she must have allocated a large chunk of mana into its launch power.

The granite gecko sacrificed agility for its superior defense. Unable to dodge the swiftly advancing spear, it braced itself and took the attack head-on.

The spear penetrated its hard outer shell.

No dice, huh? Zig thought. *It's far too large to sustain a critical wound from just that.* Considering how enormous the granite gecko was, she would need to hit it with a couple dozen of those spears to take it down.

However, his musings were interrupted as the monstrosity suddenly twisted in agony.

"What the…?"

Several more spears hit the granite gecko as Zig watched. The struggling monstrosity began to weaken until it stopped moving all together. When it was dead, there were six puncture wounds visible on its body, but they hardly seemed like they could deal enough damage to kill such a large creature.

Did she use a toxin of some sort?

Zig cautiously approached the corpse and began to examine it, but he couldn't smell or see any traces of poison.

Noticing his confusion, Siasha began to laugh triumphantly.

"Ha ha ha! What do you think, Zig? That body is in perfect condition!"

"I'm impressed. What's the trick?"

Like she'd been waiting for him to ask, Siasha quickly produced another spear and pointed to the tip. Zig originally thought it was only

the color of the rock was different, but now he could see that it was a different material entirely.

"This part. It's actually made from clay."

"Clay?"

"Yup! I fortified it by pumping more mana inside."

Naturally, stone was harder than clay, so it would've taken a lot more mana to fortify clay. Maybe that was why she had sacrificed some of the spear's length. He couldn't understand why she would make *more* work for herself, but Siasha had more to tell him.

"I only used extra hardening on the very tip of the clay. When it hits…"

She trailed off as she started an incantation. She produced one of her earthen shields and fired another spear at it. When the weapon penetrated the surface, the non-fortified portion of the clay tip smashed and ballooned out like the cap of a mushroom.

"This is the crucial part. The conical portion puts pressure on the internal organs and destroys them. This groundbreaking magic can cause much deeper wounds than mere physical piercing, and because it completely shreds the flesh and muscle, it's very difficult to heal with restorative magic!"

Siasha sounded incredibly proud of herself.

"Damn…" Zig couldn't help but be taken aback by the devastating magic she had created. It sure was a potent spell. He would be taken out of the fight if he was hit in the arm with just one of those thumb-sized tips. No, if he didn't receive immediate medical -

attention, it could be a fatal wound. Even with treatment, he would surely lose the arm or be permanently impaired.

"Siasha, I don't think you should really propagate the use of this magic."

"Well, obviously. Although, the structure is so complex that normal magic users wouldn't be able to use it well."

"That's a relief."

If a spell like that became widely known to *anyone* who could wield magic, mercenaries would be out of a job entirely. Zig was secretly comforted to hear that wouldn't be the case.

"Besides, there's a heavy punishment for teaching offensive magic to unqualified individuals."

"There is?"

"It's possible to kill someone even with simple attack spells. Those rules were put into place so that spats between neighbors and lovers' quarrels didn't turn into magic brawls."

That made perfect sense to Zig. Public security would take a nosedive if children or drunkards could go around killing people with magic willy-nilly.

"Since this magic only causes damage internally, the materials can be collected in pristine condition. No need to pointlessly get our hands dirty. It's quite economical, don't you think?"

"Is it?" Zig responded, trying not to think too hard about whether her definition of economical was accurate.

Siasha's techniques were practical and very advanced. He wasn't well-versed in magic, but he had gleamed that much from observing other spellcasters. It couldn't be a trivial matter that he had never witnessed someone else casting a spell with such a complex structure.

He was still lost in thought when he sensed the next wave of monstrosities approaching.

"Incoming!" he yelled.

"Ooh, they came to us! Time to feast!"

Zig unsheathed his sword, and Siasha prepared another spell. As soon as the horde of monstrosities appeared, he rushed forward while she sent a barrage of magic their way. The one leading the charge took a direct hit and toppled over, blood spraying through the air.

The monsters paused, their hesitation palpable as they surveyed their fallen comrade. This moment of indecision gave Zig enough time to close the distance as he rushed in, swinging his twinblade.

Twisting and whirling, the mercenary unleashed a series of slashes at the monstrosities. They disintegrated at the point of contact like vegetables being tossed into a blender. Knowing that they didn't stand a chance against these opponents head-on, the creatures tried to spread out and surround them, but Siasha shot each one down with precision.

It was only a matter of time until the horde of bewildered monstrosities was completely destroyed.

"Hey, is that a magic item, Zig?"

They were harvesting materials from their fallen foes when Siasha asked about the gauntlet he had purchased the previous day. Gantt had processed the mana kernel into a ringlike shape that hung around his wrist like a bracelet. Sensing that the item was magical, Siasha was observing it with great interest.

"Sure is. Looks like I can use the types fueled by an external source. The fuel runs out, though, so I'll have to keep replenishing it."

"Hee hee, the magic that's engraved into it looks interesting. Let me get a closer look later."

"You're not going to break it, right? This thing cost a pretty penny."

They continued to banter while stripping the corpses.

A question popped into Zig's head when he realized just how many of them there were. They were all unremarkable lizard monstrosities, but there seemed to be a surprisingly wide variety of species.

"Are these the type that travel in packs?"

Siasha narrowed her eyes at Zig's observation, her expression suddenly more serious and witchlike. After taking another good look at the monstrosities, she shook her head.

"A few of them, but most of these types act alone. A bunch of monstrosities attacked all at once when I provoked them the other day, but I can't think of a good reason they'd be doing it now."

Which meant there had to be another factor at play. They examined the bodies, but there didn't seem to be anything wrong

them. It didn't appear like they were being manipulated in any way.

Coincidences aside, the other remaining possibility was…

"What if they didn't come to us?" Zig mused. "They could've been running away from something?"

"I'd say the probability of that is very high. Look over there."

Siasha seemed to have reached the same conclusion as him. Zig followed where she was pointing to see multiple monstrosities emerging from a narrow path carved through the trampled vegetation that trailed back further into the grounds.

"What should we do?" she asked, hardly able to contain the excitement stirring within her.

He shrugged as if to say, *Oh, brother.* There wasn't much point in asking that question if her mind was already made up.

"Whatever the client wishes."

Siasha grinned at the satisfactory answer and started walking away, her black hair flowing after her. Zig followed behind, a wry smile playing on his lips.

Zig led the way as they headed in the direction where the monstrosities had come from. The trail was longer than expected, not to mention he didn't sense the presence of any others along the way.

Zig's danger senses start to tingle; something about the situation didn't seem right.

This might be a tough cookie.

He recalled the first time he and Siasha had gone out on an extermination job. The reason monstrosities had been fleeing then was because of an unexpected ghost shark. It was possible the same thing was happening again.

The stealth capabilities of that monstrosity were phenomenal. The thought that a similarly powerful creature might have magic just as potent was unnerving.

"Looks like we caught up," Siasha said.

They ventured a bit deeper but stopped when they heard what sounded like something big thrashing around. Zig managed to keep Siasha from getting ahead of herself and slowly got a little closer so he could see what was going on.

Two monstrosities were creating a ruckus, but they weren't fighting each other. Both were the same type, and they were launching a fierce attack at a group of adventurers.

Zig felt a hand on his shoulder as Siasha joined him, her eyes wide in surprise.

"Those are…crag drill dragons! But what're they doing here?"

Crag drill dragons were a fourth-class equivalent monstrosity. Despite the name, they didn't have wings and couldn't fly. They walked on two legs with a slouched posture and had a thick tail to help them balance. They consumed minerals and rocks, but similar to granite geckos, they were omnivorous monstrosities that could eat anything. Their name was derived from their large, pickaxe-shaped

heads that they used to smash rocks apart. Their tails also featured a hammer-like bulge which doubled as a weapon alongside their heads.

As one might expect, they weren't commonly found outside of rocky areas.

"Something's not adding up…"

"I'm also intrigued as to why they would leave their natural environment, but we can discuss that later. Seems like they're in hot water, don't you think?"

She was pointing at the adventurers who were locked in combat with the crag drill dragons. From the way they were dodging the dual onslaught of attacks, they were no doubt a talented bunch.

However, they appeared to just be on the defensive and didn't have enough leeway to mount a counterattack. A few of them also appeared to be injured, which prevented the group from making an escape. At the rate things were going, it was doubtful any of them would make it out alive.

Crag drill dragons didn't use any special magic, nor were they more intelligent than other types of lizards, but they certainly weren't weak. Despite not using any dangerous magic, the threat posed by their physiques alone was enough to grant them fourth-class status.

In addition to their heads, their whole bodies were tough and basically impervious to brash attacks. Magic worked relatively well against them, but with their defensive capabilities, it could hardly be considered a weakness.

The speed generated by their strong legs was shocking when compared to their huge bodies. Taking the full impact of one of their blows spelled instant death. Due to its simple but formidable strength, it was a monstrosity that required every member to be on the top of their game and was a test to the competency of the entire party.

Of the two crag drill dragons, one seemed to be covered with wounds and relatively exhausted. The party had probably been in the middle of battling it when its friend showed up.

"It's going to get ugly soon."

"Should we help them?"

"If you want."

"Hmm…"

Siasha was conflicted, so she tried to leave the decision up to Zig—without success.

The benefits of helping someone else were volatile at best and relied on the conscience and financial situation of the other party. You could end up walking away with nothing, or even worse, find yourself stabbed in the back. In that case, would going through all the trouble be worth it?

The most profitable course of action would be to look the other way. Have the party run the monstrosities ragged before they get killed, so they could swoop in, finish off the exhausted crag drill dragons, and strip the dead adventurers of their loot.

But even Siasha knew that was an ill-advised move. She thought for a few moments before stealing a glance at Zig. He wasn't a saint

by any means, in fact he could be downright ruthless…but he still had morals. She doubted he would look kindly on such an act of barbarity.

"Let's help them."

"Are you sure? Depending on who they are, it might end up being a huge pain in the neck."

"We'll cross that bridge if we come to it. I can just bury them alive if needed."

"Right," Zig said, standing back up. "We better hurry then. Looks like they're almost at their limit."

It was exhausting to be constantly on the defensive while trying to protect your allies. The vigor in the adventurers' movements were slowly starting to fade.

"I'm going to jump right in and distract one of them," Siasha said. "Can you handle the other in the meantime?"

"Got it."

With that brief exchange, the two of them sprang into action.

Siasha conjured a stone spear and hurled it toward one of the monstrosities. It struck the crag drill dragon's head directly just as it was about to slam it down. The creature staggered for a moment, then began frantically scanning its surroundings, trying to figure out where the attack had come from. However, it didn't seem like the blow caused much damage.

"Bring it! All you've got going for you is brawn, you dumb lizard! I'll show you the true meaning of being outclassed!"

Siasha's cries meant nothing to the monstrosity, but that attack meant she was an enemy. The wounded crag drill dragon let out an angry roar before charging straight for her. That took one of them out of the picture.

Once he confirmed it was gone, Zig charged in. The other monster, absorbed in its pursuit of the adventurers, didn't seem to notice his arrival.

He drew the twinblade from his back and swung it, harnessing the momentum from his advance. His first strike connected with the shin of the crag drill dragon's right leg just as it was about to lunge. A dull sound reverberated as he forcefully followed through, the blow sending the carapace that covered the surface flying off, though it wasn't enough to sever the limb. The impact was still considerable, and the crag drill dragon collapsed dramatically like its leg had been swept out from under it.

"I've got your back," Zig said.

"Huh?! Thank you!"

The adventurers didn't hesitate to take their opportunity to escape as the massive beast tumbled over and lost its balance. They quickly grabbed their injured and a few of them started to run away. Although, not everyone was leaving—the able-bodied members began to cast spells like it was their chance to finally get some payback.

Some of them hit the monstrosity with ice projectiles that caused areas of its body to freeze, while others followed up with force spells that blew the frozen parts off. Thanks to their coordinated

efforts, a large part of the abdomen's carapace was soon stripped away, providing access to the soft underbelly.

Zig hurried over to capitalize on the opportunity, but whether the crag drill dragon anticipated his move or simply reacted on instinct, it quickly righted itself and spun to the side, launching a tail attack.

The air split with a roar as it swung its hammer-like tail straight toward him.

"Wha—whoa!" Zig yelped.

"Gwaaaah!"

The attack knocked away an adventurer who had come forward with Zig to try and exploit the monstrosity's weakness. Lucky for him, he was quick enough to block the brunt of it with his shield, so his wounds didn't seem to be fatal.

Meanwhile, Zig slid between the crag drill dragon's legs to avoid its whipping tail, ending up right underneath its face. The thunderous roar of the tail passing right in front of his eyes was almost ear-splitting.

He slammed his elbow on the ground, using the impact to bring him back to his feet. Spinning around swiftly, he slammed his feet into the earth, pushing off against it as he propelled himself upward into a powerful uppercut, his finger ready and waiting around the gauntlet's trigger.

The magic engraved into the gauntlet activated on impact, releasing the shock wave directly into the crag drill dragon's jaw. The

monstrosity had momentarily lost sight of its prey as it thrashed its tail around wildly; the attack coming from the unexpected angle threw it into a state of confusion.

Due to its impressive defensive capabilities, the shock wave only managed to chip away at the carapace, but the powerful blast launched the crag drill dragon's head backward, exposing some of its now bare neck to Zig.

"Haaaah!"

The mercenary's left arm radically jerked back from the shockwave's recoil. Not letting the momentum go to waste, he channeled the energy into his twinblade as he swung it at the monstrosity's neck with all his might.

The tip of the blade cleaved into the monster, taking a huge chunk out of its neck. Unfortunately, the flesh was still incredibly hearty despite losing its protection. Blood started to gush from the gaping wound, but when a normal creature would have dropped, the crag drill dragon stubbornly held on to life.

"What?!"

As if following the droplets of blood raining to the ground, the crag drill dragon thrust its head downward. Determining he would be unable to dodge the attack at the end of his swing, Zig quickly blocked the hit with the hilt of his twinblade.

A dull clang echoed out as the impact of its pointed head met resistance, making him dig his feet into the ground.

"Nghhhh!!!"

It was still damn strong after taking what had to be a fatal wound. Zig desperately tried to push back as the dying crag drill dragon met his gaze.

It didn't matter that they were different species, it was perfectly clear what was on this thing's mind: *If I'm going down, I'm taking you with me.*

But I have no intention of joining you, Zig thought.

"Uraaaah!"

He weakened his grip on his left side and increased the force he was exerting into his right arm, momentarily casting it upward and deflecting the head to his left. If he was even a second too slow, his chest would be pierced clean through. It was an incredibly risky move. Zig was only able to pull it off thanks to his technical skills, strength, and most of all—his guts.

The crag drill dragon's head stabbed into the ground, missing its mark. Still maintaining the momentum of his movement, Zig struck its neck with the twinblade again from above.

That blow was enough to finally sever the head from its already injured neck.

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A stone spear catapulted off the crag drill dragon's hide.

"Hmm, I guess they're not very effective against a certain level of hardness."

It wasn't like Siasha had crafted her new spell to be more potent. Since they had been created to destroy targets internally, the spears wouldn't do any damage if the opponent was too tough to penetrate in the first place.

"Well, I guess I can just whale on it without holding back."

She threw up some earthen shields to block the approaching crag drill dragon's path. However, all they could do was buy her a little time since a blow to the head only seemed to stagger it momentarily.

It began ramming into the shields repeatedly in vexation. A massive blow from its pickaxe-shaped head caused the earthen barriers to crumble.

"Your strength and toughness are definitely impressive, but you sure are slow."

It didn't take the monstrosity *that* long to break through all three shields, but it was still enough time for her to prepare her spell.

Siasha waved her hand, sending spikes bursting up from the ground. The spiral of magic-imbued spikes whittled away the crag drill dragon's tough carapace until they penetrated its flesh.

It let out a cacophonous roar—partially from pain and partially because it was so surprised that its defenses had been stripped away.

"Oh, you're still hanging in there?"

Siasha hadn't expected to see the crag drill dragon putting up a fight despite being skewered like a pin cushion. She started gathering even more mana.

The monstrosity seemed to think, *I'm going to die if I don't stop moving.* Despite the pain, it desperately thrashed around to free itself from the spikes, but its realization had come too late.

"I take back what I said before. You can't be *all* brawn if you've survived this long."

A swordlike black mass began to form in her hand—but it towered over her, far closer to the crag drill dragon in size. She had pumped the rock with so much compressed mana that it turned as dark as night. At the bizarre sight, the crag drill dragon began to cower in fear.

Siasha giggled as she held the massive sword aloft like it didn't weigh a thing.

"Goodbye."

The giant black sword swung down, striking the crag drill dragon directly on the head. After a moment of slight resistance, the sword cut through its entire body, slicing it in half.

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"Thank you for your help!"

Zig was cautiously eyeing the headless crag drill dragon when one of the adventurers called out to him.

"Um, it's dead now," the same adventurer said, giving Zig a strange look since he still appeared ready to jump back into combat at a moment's notice.

At those words, the mercenary finally sheathed his blade.

"I was just doing my due diligence. I recently thought something was dead, but that turned out not to be the case."

Still, that wasn't something that happened very often. Feeling the last traces of his wariness melt away, Zig glanced over at the adventurer who had addressed him. What he saw made him freeze.

It was the man's appearance that had caught Zig off guard. His green eyes were an elongated almond-shape, not unlike those of the crag drill dragon Zig had just fought. His skin was also dark green and covered with shiny scales, and his features bore an uncanny resemblance to that of a lizard's. No, there was no other way to put it—he undeniably had a lizard's head, and his tongue sporadically darted in and out of his mouth.

I don't think…he's a monstrosity. I'm not sensing any aggression and he's speaking the common tongue. I don't smell any magic coming from him either. He must be legit?

This man wasn't unlike the other beast-headed humans he had caught glimpses of in the past. He had seen these types—the so-called demi-humans—around before. Somehow, the face of *this* lizard man in front of him was more of a shock to his system compared to others he had encountered.

To put it bluntly, the man bore a striking resemblance to a monstrosity. It was almost unsettling that he wasn't charging in to attack.

It didn't look like he was wearing a mask. Besides, there was no way something like that could make such precise expressions. That

was when Zig looked over and realized that *all* the other adventurers had faces or body parts that weren't human—not just lizards, but beasts and birds. Some even resembled insects.

"Is something wrong?" the lizard man asked suspiciously. It hadn't escaped his notice that Zig had suddenly stopped moving.

"Oh, uh, no. Nothing's wrong…?"

"Is that so?"

The lizard man took a step closer, flicking his tongue at the mercenary, who was fumbling with his words. He instinctively took a slight step backward as the unfamiliar entity approached.

Seeing that, the expression of the lizard man shifted ever so slightly. Zig picked up on the change since he had been observing the man's face carefully, but he didn't understand the reason for it.

"Do ya think he's involved in Claritism?" Another one of the adventurers piped up, regarding Zig suspiciously.

The whole atmosphere changed in an instant. Even though none of the adventurers said anything, the negative emotions oozing out of them were palpable: disgust, hatred, contempt. Zig stiffened, his battle mode triggering as his instincts kicked in at the perceived hostility from this group, who seemed so far-removed from humans.

Fortunately, someone put a stop to the situation before it ballooned out of control.

"Everyone, that's enough!"

It was none other than the lizard man who was standing in front of Zig. He gave his companions a reproachful look and waved them

back with his hands.

"This man helped us. He has no affiliation with Claritism."

"But…"

"Not thanking someone for their help is wrong. We're not brutes."

The other adventurers seemed quite displeased with what the lizard man was saying, but their negative reactions gradually receded. It appeared that he held a position of leadership within the group.

The lizard man turned back to Zig and lowered his head apologetically.

"I'm sorry for frightening you. Thank you for your help. Your kindness will be repaid."

His posture clearly indicated that he was making every effort not to provoke him. Zig could see a rationality in him that was no different from a human's. In fact, it almost felt like a faux pas to pull out a sword in the face of such sincerity.

This is no enemy.

Swayed by the sight of the lizard man bowing, Zig let go of the twinblade's handle that he had gripped in preparation for a fight.

"If you want to thank someone, thank my client. And, uh, I wasn't afraid."

The lizard man raised his head at those words, his head cocked slightly to the side as his tongue flicked in and out of his mouth. Zig couldn't get a read on him at all.

"I'd just never seen someone like you before," Zig continued. "A—uh, what would that be?"

"Demi-human. That's what people like you call us."

Zig furrowed his brow. It's true that humans here used that word, but there was no way this lizard man and the dog person he had seen in town before were the same species.

"That may be the generic human word for it, but it's not what you use, right? I want to know what you call yourselves."

The mercenary wasn't interested in a nickname or a derogatory term. He wanted to know their true name.

For some reason, the lizard man's eyes dilated at his words, his vertically slit pupils fixed firmly on him.

"I'm a scalefolk," he said. "Urbas of the Verdant Scaleclan."

"I'm Zig, a mercenary."

"Pleased to meet you, Zig."

Urbas thought for a moment before slowly extending his right arm. Zig thought he wanted to shake hands, but looking closer, the lizard man's fingers were closed tightly into a fist.

"This is a scalefolk greeting," Urbas said, shaking his fist up and down as Zig looked on curiously. "It's polite to respond with the opposite arm."

"Like this?"

Zig made a fist with his left hand and stuck out his arm. Urbas mirrored the gesture, bumping their knuckles together. It seemed to

be an unusual greeting, but Zig followed suit, moving his fist up and down in unison with the lizard man.

He realized that the other adventurers were watching them intently. Did this greeting hold some sort of significance?

Urbas continued to stare at his fist even after they pulled their arms away.

"Zig, do you not know of Claritism?" Urbas asked.

"I come from a very faraway place. Forget knowing about the local religions, I've barely even encountered other ethnic groups."

"I see. And you're not scared of us?"

"I was a little surprised. I might have mistaken you for monstrosities if I didn't know any better."

Urbas almost looked amused at the candid answer.

"How about now?" His tongue darted in and out as he prompted Zig to continue.

"Well, I can see you're not barbaric. I have no reason to be hostile toward you as long as you're not acting aggressively."

"Right." Urbas turned to look back at his companions. "Well?"

"We'll express our gratitude…to your client," one of the adventurers said as he and the other made their way over to the crag drill dragon so they could start harvesting its materials.

"Oh, right, I forgot there was one more!" Urbas said. "Will your friend be okay?"

The expressions of the other adventurers grew heavier at his question. They had assumed the battle was done, and none of them had enough energy to take on another dragon.

"Ah, you don't need to worry about her," Zig said.

He had barely spoken when the bellows of a monstrosity filled the air. It was less an angry roar and more a terrified scream—the fear in the noise so clear that none of them could mistake it for anything else.

It wasn't too long until Siasha walked back over to them. "Zig! My part's all done!"

"This is my client, Siasha," Zig said. "I helped you on her command."

"Good after—whoa?!" Siasha greeted Urbas and his companions, then nearly burst with euphoria when she realized what they were. "Zig, he's a lizard! That guy's a lizard!"

"She's also from somewhere far away," Zig explained. "This is her first time meeting people from a species like yours, so I ask that you please cut her some slack if she behaves rudely."

"Pleased to meet you, Siasha," Urbas said.

"Oh, yes, likewise! I've never spoken with a demi-human before."

"I see."

Urbas and Siasha shook hands. She seemed enthralled by the cool sensation of his scales but then remembered there was

something important she needed to get across.

"Please understand, we have no affiliation with Claritism."

"So it seems."

Urbas slowly flicked his tail as he looked over at Zig with a smile. Siasha had devoured a lot of books, so she was somewhat familiar with the local religions. Zig was curious about Claritism but decided to push his questions aside. Asking for details right in front of them would hardly be a good look.

Besides, I already have a general idea of what it's all about. Judging from their reactions, it didn't seem to be a very philanthropic set of beliefs.

Urbas bowed for Siasha. "Thank you for your help. Your kindness will be repaid."

"How about we leave it at you owing us one? I was just in the mood to lend a hand." Once she said it, that was that. She glanced over at the corpse of the crag drill dragon, then continued, "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Not at all."

The witch and lizard man discussed the series of events that led to his group fighting the monstrosities.

Urbas's group hadn't been seeking out crag drill dragons in the first place. That information made sense, considering this wasn't their usual habitat. An out-of-place dragon attacked them when they just so happened to come across it in the middle of trying to hunt for a different type of monstrosity. Figuring they had a good chance of

beating one on their own, Urbas and his companions fought back. They were gradually wearing it down—but then the second one showed up.

The group knew from the start that they didn't have the capability to take two on at once. They tried to make a quick retreat, but unfortunately for them, the entry of the new arrival meant they were caught between the two monstrosities.

The slower magic users hadn't been able to avoid its charge and had sustained injuries. In turn, the others were cornered while trying to cover for them and lost their opportunity to escape.

"So, you don't know what they were doing here either?" Siasha asked.

"No. Perhaps trouble in their usual habitat? We should inform the guild immediately."

"You're right. Even if we're quite far from the entrance, it's preposterous for dragons to be showing up in a hunting ground for seventh-class adventurers. First the bounty and now this… What in the world is going on?"

Siasha looked very annoyed at the prospect of the hunting grounds being restricted once more. Zig was sitting a short distance away, listening in on snippets of the conversation while he inspected his weapon.

"Did it get a little bent?"

His heart sank at the sight of the twinblade. Not only had he slammed into that tough carapace with all his might, but he had also

blocked a direct attack from the monstrosity's head. Coming away with a small dent or two was about as good as he could ask for in a blade. He *knew* he was lucky and that weapons were expendable, but discovering that the one he'd invested so much money in was damaged left him feeling low.

On the other hand, physically, he was fine. He had been on the receiving end of a mighty blow, but he had escaped without any injuries to his shoulders or other joints. Still, he had fought the creature relentlessly, with barely a second to breathe, so he was exhausted.

By the time he finished inspecting both his weapon and his condition, Siasha and Urbas's conversation had turned to the topic of how to divvy things up.

"Urbas, I'd like to discuss what to do when it comes to the guild evaluation and materials collected for these monstrosities."

Her tone had been nonchalant until that point, but now she looked like there was a rock in her shoe. The lizard man nodded, misunderstanding the reason behind her reluctance.

"Of course, the rights to both belong to you. You two killed them, after all. We'd be most grateful if you'd allow us to take a small portion of the materials. Just enough to cover the medical costs of our companions is fine."

"About that," Siasha said, trailing off guiltily before she continued, "I'd *actually* like your group to take credit for the kills. You can just report to the guild that we provided some assistance."

"I don't understand. How does that benefit you?" Urbas couldn't make heads or tails of why the pair would willingly decrease their own profits.

Siasha looked sheepish as Zig took over the explanation. "The staff at the guild have their eye on her. She's been a habitual offender when it comes to recklessly engaging opponents that are out of her league, and now she's done it again. If they found out she took on a dragon, forget going up a class, she'll probably be demoted."

"I'd love to take credit for these kills and get promoted as soon as possible," Siasha cut in, "but I've already been given my final warning, so I don't have another choice."

Zig's explanation made sense, but witnessing how downcast Siasha looked left Urbas with another question.

"What class are you?"

"I'm almost at seven." In other words, she was currently an eighth-class adventurer.

The lizard man's tongue darted back into his mouth. "You're kidding, right?"

Even without being able to read his expressions, Zig and Siasha could tell from his tone that he was shocked.

"It's just because she's new to adventuring," Zig explained. "Even so, the guild has been giving her requests so that she can increase her rank at a brisk pace. Acting overconfident on top of that brings unwanted attention."

Zig threw in that last part with a shrug.

Urbas cupped his chin in his palm and gazed up at the sky. He was trying to formulate a scenario that might sound convincing to the guild.

"We were fighting these monstrosities when something unexpected occurred. You two just so happened to be nearby, so we called out to you. Since it was an emergency situation, you lent us a hand. We were able to defeat the monstrosities thanks to your support, but our party landed the finishing blows. As a show of thanks, we offered you a portion of the materials and proposed a distribution of evaluation values. Hmm… How does that sound?"

Siasha's eyes were sparkling as Urbas finished relaying his scripted series of events. Zig, however, was somewhat skeptical.

"Doesn't that sound a little too convenient for them to believe?" he asked.

The people at the guild weren't idiots. It was an organization that had been around for a long time. They were probably sensitive to false reports or questionable information.

"Normally, yes. But the information we give them will supersede that." Urbas looked over at the crag drill dragon corpses. His companions had already deftly dissected them and were loading the parts onto floating trolleys. "They'll be too busy investigating why those monstrosities were here. They may be willing to overlook smaller details. At least, that's my opinion."

Dealing with an imminent threat would garner more urgency than a semi-dubious report. It meant relying on luck, but the plan seemed safe enough.

"It pains me to lie, but I will endure it for the person who saved our lives," Urbas muttered to himself as his tail uncomfortably swished back and forth. It was clear from his manner that those weren't just empty words.

"Umm, how about we say that makes us even?" Siasha offered.

"What? It's not nearly enough."

"I'm the one who gets to decide that. All debts are settled. Sound good?"

"If you insist."

Siasha must have also realized Urbas really didn't want to lie, so she'd told him the story he came up with was enough to make up for that. Even though neither of them could decipher Urbas's lizard-like expressions, his words felt genuine.

They had another brief discussion to get their stories straight. Once the adventurers were finished dismantling the bodies, they cautiously returned to the guild.

Encountering no more trouble on the journey home, they made a safe return. Zig suspected the other monstrosities had gone into hiding out of fear of the rampaging crag drill dragons.

Since the creatures were so bulky, only the most valuable parts were selected and harvested even when adventurers were dealing with just one. Given that they'd encountered *two*, they ended up with quite a substantial haul.

When they went over to work on the one Siasha had killed, the adventurers were puzzled by how it had ended up severed in half from its head to its groin. Having witnessed a fragment of the witch's power, it wasn't surprising that Urbas and his friends kept darting fearful looks at her as they walked back to the guild.

To think she was capable of that…

Zig had only been able to damage the crag drill dragon after he had used his trump card to break through its carapace and targeted its weak spot. Her ability to defeat the same monstrosity head-on was probably beyond his reach.

I think I only beat her back then due to combat compatibility and luck.

Siasha wasn't very good at close combat because of how powerful her magic was, but if his skills hadn't been up to par, the result might've been very different. If he had killed her back then, or the client who hired him had the slightest possibility of being alive, or if one of the regular soldiers managed to survive…

Life sure was strange. If even one of those things had been different, he wouldn't be on this continent now. Those were some of the thoughts running through Zig's mind as he watched Siasha and Urbas telling the guild staff what had happened in the field.

The staff member taking the report shot a glance at her and Zig as if to say, "*You two again?"*

Apparently, their reputation proceeded them.

"How'd you screw up this time?" a familiar voice asked.

"That's rude…although not entirely off the mark," Zig retorted automatically. "We saved some people's lives out of goodwill, if you must know."

He turned to see Isana staring at him in dismay, one hand hooked through the front opening of her kimono.

Her pointed ears twitched as she gave him a suspicious look. "Saved people out of goodwill… *You?*"

"Not exactly. It was by my client's order."

"Ah, that makes more sense. What happened?"

Isana's eyes were wide by the time he finished summarizing the incident. Apparently, this was a rare occurrence, even for a veteran adventurer like her.

"Crag drill dragons in a forest? That seems suspect. I bet they'll launch an investigation. That smells like a profitable opportunity, so thanks for the tasty intel." Isana glanced over at the reception counter. "By the way…is the person you rescued that demi-human over there?"

"Yeah. What of it?"

"You really weren't just all talk," she whispered under her breath, watching Siasha and Urbas continue to give their report.

"What do you mean?" He focused on Isana, not understanding what she was trying to say.

She gave him a sidewise glance as she smiled just a fraction. "Didn't you mention before that you'd work for *anyone*—even someone from a different species—if they paid the right price?"

"Yeah, I did say that." He didn't understand why she was bringing it up now.

"I was just wondering if that statement also applied to species like them that visibly differ from typical humans." Isana's smile broadened as she traced one of her long ears with her fingers.

It was only then that he caught on to what she was implying. Isana's people, the Jinsu-Yah, were another non-human species that was ostracized. In their case, the main things that separated them from "normal" people were their unique facial features, skin color, and longer ears. The differences of Urbas and his companions were dramatic in comparison. The aversion and dislike triggered by the disparity were deep-rooted problems for humans, who tended to reject alien features.

Isana had been curious to see how Zig would react to them, and she seemed pleased at how he had handled himself.

"I'm going to put this simply—I don't want you to assume that I'm anyone's comrade-in-arms. While I won't shun them, I also won't hesitate to hold back if the situation becomes hostile."

Zig didn't want anyone presuming he would be an automatic ally to other species. Still, Isana gave a faint smile at his words, even if some might take it as a rejection.

"That's good enough. Sometimes you can trust someone *because* they're not overly committed."

"I see." Her casual attitude disquieted him, but he had nothing else to say.

Isana gave him a little wave before turning around and disappearing back into the crowd.

Seems like things are going well on her end…

He gleaned that much from how relaxed she'd been during their brief conversation. While he didn't want Isana presuming that they were on the same team, Zig wasn't so indifferent to the people he'd met that he didn't care about what happened to them—to an extent. As he watched her walk away, he silently wished her good luck with her endeavors.

Siasha cut in to his thoughts a moment later. "Sorry to keep you waiting!"

"How'd it go?"

She was the picture of satisfaction as she gave him a thumbs-up. "I got promoted to seventh class. A whole world of new possibilities just opened up!"

"Congrats. So, you can take it easy for a bit?"

"Uh, the opposite! It feels like I've only just reached the starting line."

Now that she was seventh class, the many restrictions on the magic-related reference books and materials she was allowed to read would be lifted. By demonstrating a certain level of trust and capability, not only would the types of requests she could accept increase, but she would also gain access to certain special facilities. Becoming seventh class was proof of being recognized as a full-

fledged adventurer. As such, it was usually the first goal that newcomers aimed for.

"We should splurge a little today," Siasha said.

"Good idea. Never hurts to eat your fill now and then."

The two of them discussed their dining options as they walked. They—or rather, Siasha—caught the gaze of many in the process, but because they were linked with prominent adventurers like Alan and Isana *and* had the Wadatsumi Clan looking out for them, few mid-level and lower adventurers dared to mess with them. Likewise, when it came to high-ranking adventurers, they were wary of Zig's power and the strange atmosphere that Siasha seemed to exude. As a result, despite attracting a lot of attention, the two of them were usually left alone.

But every rule has its exceptions. People who don't think about the consequences of their actions exist everywhere, and loose expectations of restraint were ineffective against them.

"Oho, aren't you two just living the dream?" The man had called out in a tone that was clearly dripping with sarcasm.

Siasha and Zig recognized him as he approached with a malicious smirk. They'd had an unpleasant interaction with this same man during the rockworm extermination. However, at the time, Alan had stepped in and driven him and his buddies off.

"What do you want?" Siasha's voice was strained.

She hadn't forgotten what had taken place that day. However, since they were in a public place and Zig was keeping her in check,

she couldn't resort to violence.

Siasha didn't consider herself to be short-tempered, but she could hardly control the anger that started to bubble up inside of her as she glared at the man and his entourage.

I don't understand why they agitate me so much, but I need to get out of here before I snap.

If she did… Well, there would be trouble.

Unaware of Siasha's internal struggle, the men continued to leer at her.

"Sounds like Miss Rising Star here is raking in the dough. We just thought it'd be nice to keep you company. Right, boys?"

The man laughed crudely and looked to his friends for affirmation. It was obvious they hadn't been doing anything worth mentioning before they started annoying her with their disrespect.

"Absolutely not. Let's go, Zig."

Siasha started to walk away. Considering their lewd gazes and -attitude, it would be a fool's errand to give these men the time of day.

"Hey, don't be so hasty!"

The man reached out to stop her from leaving, but the mercenary grabbed his arm.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" the man asked, scowling.

"I'm her bodyguard. Sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave it at that."

The man glared at Zig for a moment before brushing off the mercenary's hand with a sneer.

He spoke as the faint traces of a smile played on his lips, his words dripping with condescension. "Oh, I've heard about *you* too. The big guy who hides behind a woman and barely fights for himself. You say you're protecting her? Don't make me laugh. I bet those muscles of yours are just for show! I never knew 'bodyguards' could be so pathetic."

As if on cue, his friends followed suit and laughed.

Zig was completely unresponsive to their teasing, neither holding back his rage nor ignoring them. These men were so unthreatening that he couldn't sense any danger to himself, let alone any serious hostility. There was no point in getting riled up over words that were empty of intent or power.

On the other hand, that feeling wasn't the same for everyone present.

"Bastards," Siasha whispered to herself.

An aura of murderous intent began to seep from her small frame. She slowly held out her hand, her face contorted like she was looking at something disgusting. Instantly, her palm filled with the magic that she had gathered.

The men didn't even realize they were standing on the brink of death. Seeing this, Zig rushed to prevent what was going to happen next.

"Stop—!" he called out. But before Zig could prevent Siasha from obliterating the men, someone else joined the fray.

"I can't ignore what I just heard," Urbas said as he stepped between Zig and the group of men. His tail moved restlessly from side to side as he stared at the men through his long, narrow pupils. "Zig is a brave warrior. I won't allow you to disparage him."

The menace emanating from Urbas was so palpable that even the dim-witted men noticed. They backed away, startled, but their pride wouldn't allow them to retreat at the threats of a demi-human.

"Hah! You're so lonely that you turned to a lizard freak for friendship?! Is your pride as a human so low that you'd allow a lesser species to stand up for you?"

Zig's response to the savage insult was decidedly nonchalant. "I've never felt pride in being a human. Isn't pride something you earn through your own achievements?"

As someone who had never known other species existed, being human didn't feel inherently good or bad. He was an orphan who didn't even know where he came from—patriotic statements about human superiority didn't make *any* sense to him.

Those were his thoughts when he responded, but the men took his words to mean, *The only thing you unaccomplished failures can cling to is being human.* Not only was their adventuring work not going according to plan, but it was even more humiliating that all they could do was harass promising newcomers.

"You've got some nerve!"

The angry men started to reach for their weapons but halted, their remaining shreds of reason reminding them of the vast power gap between them and Urbas—and the repercussions of spilling blood within the guild.

However, there was no telling how long that reason would remain intact.

Feeling the group's animosity, Urbas silently crouched down, raising himself onto his heels with his arms spread shoulder-width apart. Although he hadn't drawn his weapon, he was prepared to jump into battle instantly.

There was no way this flurry of activity was going to escape the watchful eye of the guild's staff.

"May I presume you're aware of the consequences if you fight in here?"

Aoi Kasukabe, one of the guild's receptionists, fixed the group with her gaze. Her usual impassive expression was flawless as she interrupted the quarreling adventurers.

The men looked conflicted at her warning.

"Ugh. Shameless demi-human sympathizers…"

Still, they weren't foolish enough to provoke the wrath of the guild by raising their hands against it. They spun on their heels and walked off, muttering curses under their breath and shooting hostile glares at Zig and the others.

After watching them angrily throw the guild's door open and storm out, Aoi turned back to the others.

“Please refrain from fighting on guild premises. Although, I did see the whole thing, so I won’t give you much of a reprimand beyond that.”

“Sorry,” said Zig.

“I was in the wrong,” Urbas added, lowering his head in a bow.

Even though that group of men had started it, Zig knew he and Siasha weren’t entirely faultless. They could’ve handled the situation better, so Zig felt he owed Urbas an apology.

“I’m sorry for getting you tangled up in our problem.”

“It was my decision to butt in. Besides, how could I stand by after someone insulted our savior?” Urbas’s tone was casual as his eyes closed in a warm expression.



His response was making Zig feel a little uncomfortable. The people in these lands seemed really hung up on "repaying debts" or "owing someone their lives."

"I *am* sorry," Zig reiterated.

A puzzled look crossed Aoi's face as she listened. "I thought that Zig and Siasha just so happened to provide you a little assistance? You seem to trust them quite a bit."

What Urbas had said *did* seem exaggerated for someone who was supposed to have only lent a helping hand. He wiggled his tail nervously.

"I just meant their aid was *that* appreciated."

It was obvious that Urbas was no practiced storyteller. His reptilian eyes darted back and forth nervously under Aoi's steely gaze.

"All right, that's fine."

She decided not to pursue the matter any further and turned back to Zig, though she caught the slightest glint of emotion flickering in his stoic expression.

"You seem to be steadily expanding your network. Forgive me for being presumptuous, but I believed you to be more of the *detached* type."

"My thought process seems to have changed since coming here. I'm a little perplexed myself."

As Aoi pointed out, he had made several connections, albeit unintentionally, since coming to this continent. If he were still working as a typical mercenary, none of that would be necessary. It wasn't like

he was independent to the point of dismissing all ties and obligations as burdens, but it wasn't a job that made it easy to get close to others.

My environment shifted too much… No, maybe I've changed, even if I wasn't aware of it.

"Is that so? Well, you're welcome to consult me if there's ever a problem." With that, Aoi returned to her work, her prompt footsteps growing fainter as she retreated.

"That was a surprise," Urbas said. "I've never seen her talk about anything beyond business. How do you know her?"

"It's sort of a long story. Hm?"

He turned when he felt something tugging on his sleeve. Siasha was there, looking incredibly sullen. She'd staved off her desire to kill the men, but her cheerful demeanor had been completely dampened.

"Sorry, maybe next time. My client seems to be at her wit's end."

Urbas glanced over at Siasha and chuckled. "All right, next time." He nodded before returning to his companions.

Zig poked one of Siasha's puffed-up cheeks. The air escaped through her mouth with a little pop, but her sour mood remained unchanged.

"I was ready to celebrate, but they took the wind right out of my sails! At least I could've felt better if you'd let me go through with my bloodbath."

"Enough with that talk. You can't afford to get bent out of shape over people like that. Just learn to suck it up."

"But they were bad-mouthing *you*, Zig!"

He sighed and scratched his head as she huffed and puffed.

He was still trying to placate her as they departed the guild, but she continued to pout. Her mood held for a little longer—until they arrived at the restaurant and a luxurious meal was placed in front of her. Then, she perked right up.

Zig wondered if he was spoiling her too much as he watched her happily gobble down the food. At the same time, he was amazed that such a thought had even occurred to him.

I really am different, I guess.

He didn't know if that was a good thing or not. If he was thinking only in work terms, he was now involved in a lot more troublesome situations that he couldn't solve by swinging a sword. He certainly would've felt that way before. Oddly enough, it didn't bother him that much now.

Those were the thoughts that occupied his mind as he watched Siasha voraciously devouring her steak.

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"I need a few moments of your time."

Zig was outside the inn, getting ready for his usual morning run. He had just finished warming up and was in the middle of deciding which route to take when he sensed a presence behind him. A white-

haired swordswoman appeared from the shadows of the building, walking toward him. Understanding her request, he clenched his jaw and offered no reply.

"Why do you always look so annoyed whenever I come around?" Isana sounded peeved as her pointed ears twitched up and down. She must've seen it on his face.

He remembered a similar exchange occurring before but chose not to protest, opting instead for a question of his own.

"How do you know where and what time I run?"

His expression neutralized as he continued to jog in place, while Isana seemed surprised at the topic he had just thrown out to try and change the subject.

"How? There's a bunch of rumors swirling around about you lately. A burly, tough-looking guy who jogs through the town every morning in full equipment. You didn't know about that?"

"There are…*rumors* about me?"

"Plus, you always choose the seediest roads, so there's even gossip that you're some sort of investigator. Since you slightly change your route up every time, it's gotten harder to make back-alley deals."

This was the first Zig had heard of people gossiping about his running routine. He occasionally saw others who were doing the exact same thing. What made him so different from them?

"Well, whatever. What did you break this time?"

Isana gave him a death stare as she silently moved her hand to the hilt of her blade.

Zig raised both hands in a show of surrender. Dealing with someone who was so quick to jump into battle mode from first thing in the morning was exhausting. He would rather avoid the trouble.

"Just come with me. The elder wishes to speak with you."

Apparently, this was a serious request. Although, so was the last one, and that ended up being a whole lot of trouble.

In the end, he began walking after Isana but decided not to waste his warm-up. He broke into a run, eventually overtaking her. He still remembered the way, so getting there wouldn't be an issue.

"I was in the middle of my jog, so I'll meet you there."

The area where the Jinsu-Yah resided wasn't that far away. He would be running a much shorter distance today, but he chose to ignore that fact.

"Hmm? You're really just *running*? How boring…but I suppose it wouldn't hurt for me to try it every once in a while."

Isana's ears twitched and she started bouncing on her heels, her green eyes lighting up.

"Let's race and see who gets there faster!"

"You just love competitions, don't you?"

Still, it wasn't a bad idea to mix up his regimen occasionally. The aspects of physical strength that he could train while jogging and all-out sprinting *were* different.

"It might be a bit short if we go there directly," Isana mused.

"How about taking a route that goes to the entrance of the West

District and then circles back?”

“Sounds good.”

That would be a decent enough distance for him to get his full training in. Isana tightened the obi of her kimono and started doing some practice stretches. It didn’t seem like her outfit was the most practical for running, but she appeared accustomed to moving around in it for work.

“How much of a handicap do you want, since you’re carrying all that stuff?” Isana asked, eyeing all the weapons and gear he had equipped, but Zig only snickered and smiled in response.

“Don’t make me laugh. I didn’t train like this just to lose to some slacker who blabbers about ‘running once in a while.’”

She gave him a scathing look, and he responded by picking up a small pebble and tossing it in the air.

“Don’t you think you’re underestimating me too much? The loser treats the winner, okay?”

Isana was aware of the intent behind his action. She readied herself, a fearless smile lighting up her face. The instant the pebble hit the ground, they were off at full speed.

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The distinct dwellings of the Jinsu-Yah lined the streets of the town’s East District, with the elder’s modest yet elegant residence nestled in its heart.

Isana was breathless and clutching her aching sides with her white hair a complete mess by the time she caught up with Zig. She had even stooped to using physical fortification in her all-out sprint, but Zig had still bested her.

"Ngh! H-how, hff, could this…be?!"

Zig, who had already started to catch his breath and cool down, chuckled before taking a deep breath. "Hahh… I win. You're lacking… in *endurance*."

At the beginning, Isana had taken the lead effortlessly, her agility and lighter load giving her the advantage. Green sparks trailed behind her as she dashed ahead at a speed Zig couldn't match, even without any gear weighing him down. However, as her pace slowed, he steadily closed the gap. Eventually, she fell so far behind that she lost sight of him when he rounded a corner.

"I-impossible… I…I can't believe…the difference is that…grea—" Isana started to choke and splutter before she could finish speaking. Her hair was plastered against her forehead with sweat, and her wind-chapped ears were red and quivering.

"Phew… Okay, I'm good. Tell me, Isana, when's the last time you ran so hard that you couldn't keep moving?"

"Ngh… Uh, I can't…recall."

Isana scoured her oxygen-starved brain, but nothing seemed to come to mind. Zig figured she had been forced to do similar training in the past but had neglected that aspect of her regimen once her

sword skills had advanced and shifted her focus to improving her techniques through actual sparring instead.

"Someone who's naturally talented like you can get out of sticky spots with their skill alone, but physical strength can't be forged through pure ability." Now that his breathing had normalized, Zig wiped away his sweat and took a swig from his canteen. "Mercenary work—well, the job of any soldier—can be summed up as: 'First, run. Second, run.' Swinging a sword falls somewhere around priority three. Here, have a drink. Slowly, okay?"

He handed the canteen to Isana who was still holding her sides as her ears drooped pathetically. "Huh? Oh… Thanks…"

Isana was still struggling to speak as she hesitantly took a sip of water. He hadn't meant she needed to drink it *that* slow.

"When it comes to raw talent or ability with a sword, you have the upper hand on me, but battles come down to everything you trained for. If you're just going to get better at what you're already good at and neglect your weaknesses, I'm happy to exploit them."

That being said, Isana's running ability was top-notch, and she had excellent endurance as well. Zig's physical strength was just *too* ridiculous. However, Isana didn't have any other swordsmen her age who met her standards and was desperate for someone to compete with, so, she took his words at face value.

"I'm going to start running every day from now on…" Having the difference in their physical strength rubbed in her face was completely mortifying. Isana clenched her fists, staunchly determined to do something about it.

No, not from now on, from this very moment! Surpassing your limits is where true growth is achieved.

She was about to force her tired body into a second wind when her ears perked up. The reason they had come there in the first place snapped back to her.

"What are you two up to?" asked the elder. Having noticed the two full-grown adults wheezing and panting in front of his house, he shot them a dubious look.

After that, he invited them inside and offered them some tea.

"This is delicious," Zig said. It was the first thing that came to mind when he took a sip.

Isana, who had removed the top of her robe and was wiping off her sweat, seemed pleased. Zig examined her in a new light. He had never really noticed because of her loose-fitting clothes, but the curves visible under her chest wrap were definitely appealing. The sweat glistening as it ran down her tanned skin was a feast for the eyes, painting a picture of her vitality.

"My people are quite particular when it comes to our tea," she said boastfully. "We have many types with a variety of effects. I can tell you more about them sometime."

"I'd like that. Do you sell the tea leaves?"

"Yes, we cultivate them in the fields and they're available for purchase, but…" She trailed off.

Realizing that he had probably stumbled upon some sort of circumstance around how her people sold their food, Zig shot her an

apologetic look.

Isana shook her head with a chagrined smile. “I know what you’re thinking, and I can’t say that’s not part of it, but the bigger issue is that not many people here appreciate good tea.”

“Really?”

That’s such a shame, he thought as he took another sip. The tea was made with milk, and it had a faint yet comforting sweetness that seemed to rejuvenate his body after the long run. It was different from the one he had been served last time he was here. He assumed the elder chose this tea after seeing how hard they’d been sweating.

“Would you like seconds?” the elder inquired.

“Please. This is a good brew.”



Hearing the reticent man's words of praise, the elder's wrinkled face creased into a faint smile. Isana's raised ears also gave away her happiness at hearing the compliment he gave her people's culture.

"You know, I'm surprised to find out that you care so much about the taste of tea."

"We were encouraged to bring along luxury items to help keep morale up when on the march," Zig said, though he added after a pause, "on our own dime, of course."

That being said, bulky luxury items defeated the purpose because they got in the way while traveling. Most people brought along tobacco products or spirits. Some even stuffed their pockets with chewing tobacco in case they couldn't find anything to light their cigarettes.

"I don't smoke," Zig said. "I do like to eat, but it's not like I could carry food around with me."

"Fair enough. Tea doesn't take up much room, so you could bring enough to drink for a while without it getting in the way."

The mercenary nodded in agreement and took another sip. Even amidst the chaos of war—no, *because* of it—he understood the importance of taking a moment to unwind.

"Anyway, what did you want to talk to me about?" The discussion had steered toward tea, but the reason he had been called there in the first place was because the elder had some sort of business with him.

"What I wish to discuss with you is something Isana told me about—that you recently helped a demi-human."

"Word travels fast. It wasn't of my own volition, you know. My client asked me to do it."

"It still means the same thing…at least to them."

The elder's words carried implications that didn't sound like good news. Zig didn't even need to confirm who he meant by *them*.

"Is the hostility toward demi-humans that pervasive?"

"Think of it this way—not everyone hates them with a passion. Some don't express their animosity outright, while others only dislike them to some extent, but at the very least, they *all* have a subconscious disdain for demi-humans."

So, he was saying humans had a slight aversion to them from the get-go, or something along those lines.

"It is true that the crime rate is higher among demi-humans," the elder continued. "Whether that's a product of their environment or an innate personality trait, no one knows."

"So, it's a 'which came first, the chicken or the egg?' type of situation."

Was it a self-fulfilling prophecy that came from constantly being seen as criminals, or were aspects of their nature just as bestial as their appearance? That question remained unanswered because no one saw the demi-humans as equals.

Meeting a man like Urbas might lead someone to assume the former, but demi-humans were sure to have a diverse range of

personalities, just like humans. Realistically, there could be numerous demi-humans who were just plain vicious—or the opposite.

Zig had seen a lot in his time, so much that it was hard to reach a definitive conclusion. From his perspective the differences between species weren't that huge.

"Some religions even preach doctrines that are anti-demi-human."

"Right, Urbas mentioned something like that. Claritism, was it?"

He was pretty sure that was the name he heard mentioned, even though he hadn't gotten the chance to ask Siasha for more details. The elder and Isana both frowned. Just as he figured, the religion didn't seem to be altruistic.

"Claritism… I suppose you could sum up their beliefs as 'human supremacy.' They label any non-human a demi-human and consider them to be depraved."

The elder explained that according to Claritism's scriptures, demi-humans were the product of humans who had committed mortal sins intermingling with non-human creatures. They were counterfeit humans with the blood of sinners running through their veins. Inherently evil, their existence was both dangerous and sinister.

"That's it in a nutshell. Not everyone takes those teachings seriously, but the hatred toward demi-humans itself is real."

In this continent overrun by magic and monstrosities, there were very few religions that were centered around the "divine work" of gods. Whether it be the parting of the oceans or the shattering of

mountains, these weren't considered holy acts. Rather, they were the doing of terrible monstrosities.

With that in mind, the nature of the religions themselves was different from those on Zig's original continent. In contrast to many others that centered around all-powerful creator deities, the ones here were mostly based on abstract concepts and principles such as law or reason. These types of faiths spread widely and were easily understood because humans were social creatures, naturally given to building societies.

"There are differing degrees of faith. From small fry who just try to impose their immorality on others, like those men who were giving you and your client a hard time, to zealots who truly wish to cleanse the world of all demi-humans."

"Adventurers tend to be meritocratic," Isana added. "They value the strong bodies and senses of demi-humans, so there aren't many problems…but there *are* some who think poorly of the ones who are active in the guild."

As a member of a different species, she had probably encountered her own issues when she was first starting out. Her expression sunk, like she was remembering something unpleasant from the past.

"Your tireless efforts are much appreciated, Isana. We're grateful for the hard work you've done for us," the elder said.

"Elder, this is the place that made me who I am," Isana said. She reverently she cupped her fist in her palm. "It's my duty to repay that."

Zig guessed the reason Isana was so low on money despite her status as a second-class adventurer was because she was giving most of her earnings back to her people. It was hard to imagine that due to how she usually acted, but it was possible that she was a good woman who was working hard for them.

"Is there something you have to say?" Maybe his thoughts had shown in his gaze because Isana was staring him down, her ears pressed back against her head like a cat's.

"Anyway," Zig said, changing the subject, "what you're trying to say, old man, is that they might be plotting something?"

"Probably. I believe it's likely they'll at least attempt some harm. I wouldn't be worried if it was just you, Zig, but…"

The elder trailed off, but Zig understood what he was trying to say. He was referring to Siasha, the client he was supposed to be protecting. The two had never met before, but anyone who did a little research into Zig would know that much.

"Your concern is appreciated. I'll be careful."

There's nothing to worry about, though, he thought, but he didn't say that part out loud. Anyone who tried to directly harm Siasha would find out firsthand the consequences of those actions.

Their conversation finished, Zig then saw himself out, though not before thanking the elder once more with a small bow.

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The elder of the Jinsu-Yah watched Zig walk away with confident steps.

That man is a strong warrior. I didn't sense a drop of hesitation in him.

A warrior who didn't hesitate was strong in his own right. Whether he fought for his family or a principle, it didn't matter what the reason was. Even in the Jinsu-Yah, where the members felt a powerful sense of belonging and camaraderie because they had nowhere else to go, there were still very few that were *that* free from hesitation.

It wasn't like all he had was brute force either. He had also demonstrated the ability to think and act during the previous mafia kidnappings.

It would be nice to have that. The ostracization of demi-humans could come their way, sooner or later. It would be extremely comforting to have that mercenary around in case of an emergency. The Jinsu-Yah had been evolving since that incident, slowly embracing the notion that they didn't always have to do things their own way and could accept outside help at times. It was a good sign.

The elder turned to the warrior woman who was the Jinsu-Yah's golden child. "Isana."

"Yes?"

"I'd like to get that man on our side… Do you think you can win him over?"

They were easy to overlook because of her incredible talent with the sword, but Isana had many attractive qualities: a slender and curvaceous body, pure white hair without a streak of dullness, and eyes like jade glass. Her refined charm wasn't flirtatious and exuded an energy and warmth that were far beyond those of any brothel worker. Even though she didn't like the nickname, she was often referred to as the Princess of White Lightning.

"I'm very sorry, but that man is still far out of my reach. Not only that, but he just pointed out how much I've been slacking off on the basics…"

All of her allure was for naught. The only thing that was ever on Isana's mind was her blade. The elder said to win him over, but she had taken that to mean *win over him* in her head. It wasn't as if there was any agreement in place that he had to submit to her will if she managed to defeat him.

"But one day…one day, I'll show you that I can beat him! I swear it on my pride as a warrior!"

The elder sighed to himself. This was hardly the time for her to be clenching her fists in determination, especially as a woman of her age. Not caring in the slightest that she was exposing her wrapped chest in front of a man—maybe it was because of her profession as a warrior and adventurer.

Isana had a lot more to offer beyond her skill with a sword, but it went unnoticed because she didn't often team up with others and most of her attention went to improving her fighting capabilities.

"Sounds like quite a challenge," he finally said.

“Yes, a challenge indeed.”

Chapter 3:
No Road Ahead

SWEAT DRIPPED FROM THE BROWS OF THE MEN AS they hammered away in the stifling heat of their workshop.

Most of the armories that Zig had known were quasi-factories, where a predetermined number of weapons were manufactured at a set rate. In war, numbers were needed more than anything else—one hundred rank-and-file soldiers were preferred over one superior warrior. For this reason, blacksmiths who obsessed over a single piece were treated more like artisans than swordsmiths, paid by wealthy individuals to make tasteless gold decorations that would be treasured not as weapons but as heirlooms for generations to come.

"How rich do you have to be to get a direct consultation?" Zig muttered under his breath as he watched some adventurers chatting with a blacksmith. He still wasn't used to the customs of these lands.

The man and his companions had serious looks on their faces, and they seemed to be deep in negotiations about getting a custom weapon made. They had brought some sort of monstrosity materials —red horns from the looks of it. Zig wondered what they were going to do with them.

"Weapons made from the bones or horns of living creatures, huh. If you didn't know any better, you'd think they were barbarians or members of some primitive tribe."

It almost sounded like a bad joke to him, that metal swords made of materials such as iron and bronze were inferior to the horns of wild animals. But even Zig was wielding one of these outrageous weapons these days.

The twinblade had blue blades whittled down from the horns of a massive bipedal horned beetle. They were so sturdy and reliable that Zig had no intention of ridiculing them for their insect origin. For someone with extraordinary strength like him, there was nothing more valuable than a weapon that wouldn't break.

A war might only last a few days if it was short, but Zig had never been in one where he was wielding the same weapon he started with by the end. It wasn't that he had been using inferior weapons; it's just that when iron swords were brandished with the fierceness required to pierce straight through armor, they didn't last very long. Of course they didn't, since the enemy's armor was made from the same material.

Rather than bringing a large number of spare weapons, it was far more economical to take one from a defeated enemy.

"A weapon that won't bend or break is like a soldier's dream come true—to think I'd encounter one in a place like this."

The only downside was the excessive cost, but at least the opponents he used it on provided materials that could be sold for a high price. On the other hand, breaking a weapon while you had no funds could completely screw you over. It was a high-risk, high-return endeavor.

Working as an adventurer could be likened to gambling. Siasha wouldn't approve, but he could understand why some of them settled for just hunting blade bees since it provided a steady income.

In any case, Zig had come to the armory to have his weapon checked. He had encountered a crag drill dragon the other day, and the tremendous impact of blocking a strike from its pickaxe-shaped head had bent the handle. On top of that, in exchange for giving him a discount on the magic gauntlet, Gantt had asked him to provide a detailed account of how it felt to use it.

"I fixed the bent handle, and the blades were fairly worn down too, so I sharpened them up for you."

"I appreciate it."

Zig retrieved the twinblade from the cart it had been transported in, dismissing it before taking a few easy swings. Gantt had done an amazing job. Zig couldn't make out any distortions along the blades and the center of gravity was spot on.

"It hasn't been too long since you bought that sword, but it seems like you're putting quite a bit of mileage on it. How many monstrosities have you slayed with it?"

"Hmm… To be honest, I can't remember."

"Just give me a rough estimate."

Zig could hardly dismiss such a question from his weapon's creator, so he crossed his arms and dug deep into his memory. "Let's see. I think the first time I used it was during the periodic rockworm extermination mission."

"Oh? I heard about that. Wasn't there a swarm of saber-clawed insectoids?"

"You heard? Yup, a bunch of them showed up in addition to the other herd we were fighting. I ended up taking down the insectoids rather than the rockworms. I probably killed, oh, two dozen give or take."

"We had a bunch of their claws come in recently. Their claws are razor sharp but not very sturdy, so they don't make good weapons. We ended up turning the lot of them into knives. They're pretty popular."

Gantt handed one to Zig so he could take a look. The sharpened white blade appeared to be very well honed.

"It pales in comparison to the sharpness of your gaze though, Zig!"

Zig took a light swipe at Gantt's beard. The blade shaved off a tuft despite Zig barely putting any force behind the swing.

"True. I was able to cut through them without much difficulty. What happens once they break?"

"Those claws grow back incredibly quick. Probably only two days until they're back to full length. You think the same applies to my facial hair?"

"Couldn't say," Zig replied in a chilly voice as Gantt wistfully rubbed his beard. "I've fought a few kinds of species since then, including the lizards. So, maybe thirty in total, and that one guy."

"That's a lot for such a short period of time—wait, something about that description seems off."

Using a polished piece of armor, Gantt held the knife in one hand and trimmed the sides of his beard. Maybe he had just misheard what Zig said? Brushing the thought aside, he continued to groom himself, adjusting the angle several times until he was satisfied with the results.

"*Anyway*, I was reasonably confident about the durability of your weapon. What on earth did you do to it?"

"Oh, it happened when I used it to take the blow of a crag drill dragon's head."

There was a tearing sound. When Zig glanced over, he saw that Gantt had ripped out a few strands of the beard he had just groomed. He gave Zig a dumbfounded stare, completely unfazed by the fact that his facial hair was once again in disarray.

"Are you stupid or something? Did I really need to spell out that you can't take a direct hit from a dragon when I was explaining how to wield this weapon?"

"It was an emergency situation. Not like I'm planning to do it again."

"Still, there's got to be a limit, right?" Gantt sighed in exasperation, though he seemed quite satisfied with the results. "Well, I'd expect nothing less from a weapon I crafted. So, Mr. Mercenary, now that your pockets are overflowing from that crag drill dragon kill, how much are you going to contribute to my sales?"

He gave Zig an expectant look and rummaged around a little before pulling out another odd-looking magic item. It appeared to be a greave that was forged from the same material as his gauntlet, but Zig wasn't about to start shooting out shock waves with his leg.

"I picked this piece up not too long ago, and now it's almost paid for itself," he said, showing Gantt the gauntlet around his arm.

It wasn't like he had the income to upgrade his equipment every time money came in. Not only did his armor break frequently, but his food expenses were far higher than those of ordinary people.

While it was true that he made a pretty penny from selling the crag drill dragon materials, the profits still weren't enough to cover the entire cost of his magic item. There was no way he could afford another one so soon.

"Stingy bastard," he said, clicking his tongue. Gantt was just trying his luck, so he wasn't going to be too aggressive about it.

"Don't be like that. Besides, that dragon served as the perfect opponent to test this on. You don't want to hear how it went?"

Gantt's pout instantly transformed into a dreamy look. "Why didn't you mention that earlier?! How'd it go?"

He seemed quite excited to hear about how the item he crafted had proven useful.

"It couldn't penetrate the crag drill dragon's carapace, but it did break it. Didn't do any damage past that though."

"Ah…I probably should've expected that. Anything else of note? Could be anything, something bad or something you really liked."

"Well, a significant impact results in substantial rebound. With that level of force, even someone with considerable training wouldn't be able to fully contain it. My belief is that mastering the redirection of that momentum is more crucial than forcibly suppressing the recoil."

One by one, Gantt wrote down Zig's thoughts and impressions.

"Also, I wouldn't advise using it in an area with unstable ground. Anyone with a lighter body weight would be blown back even if they were fortifying their strength."

Zig had been given a generous discount on the item, so he was willing to answer the blacksmith's questions in detail.

"Heh, that about wraps it up. Much appreciated." Gantt appeared to be brainstorming ways to improve the item as he looked over the paper filled with notes he had jotted down while questioning Zig. "Looks like might is the biggest issue…"

"I'm pretty sure the user's shoulder will dislocate if the output is increased any higher…"

Gantt seemed to have a bad habit of getting fixated on one aspect of performance. Take the twinblade, for example. Not to say that its functionality wasn't fantastic, but it was putting the cart before the horse if there wasn't a demand for his creations.

"What if I had beginners get used to a low-recoil gauntlet before moving them over to one with higher power?"

"Sure, that'd be nice if there were *beginners* chomping at the bit to try hand-to-hand combat with a monstrosity." Zig's attitude made it clear that wasn't the case, but Gantt looked at him thoughtfully.

"Would you help me promote this? I think more people would give my creation a try if they saw how spectacularly it was working out for you."

"Don't be ridiculous. You really think someone would change their preferred weapon just from seeing me use it?" Zig looked taken aback; this wasn't some fashion trend or a play they were talking about.

Gantt, though, wore a solemn expression. "You'd be surprised how seriously people take such things. A lot of adventurers lean into that whole aspect of 'looking the part.' I mean, just the other day, some young buck from the Wadatsumi Clan came around asking if he could take a swing or two with a double-edged sword."

Recounting the tale brought Gantt close to tears—of laughter, that is. He pounded his desk as he explained how he had given the young man a weapon with broken blades to try, but he had quickly left in agony after smacking himself in the shin.

"What a stellar performance that was! So, it's totally believable someone could pick up a specialized weapon out of the blue after only using a basic sword."

It was a cruel statement, but the man wasn't wrong. It was a painful lesson Zig had learned countless times. It had also been a big help that his foundation came from using a spear. The twinblade functioned in a manner that was similar to wielding long-handled weapons such as spears or halberds.

If you tried to wield the twinblade like a longsword, all you would end up doing was smacking your leg. Zig respected that Gantt

wasn’t sugarcoating the harsh truth about learning to use the weapon just to make a sale.

“I wonder if promoting an item would actually have any effect…”

“You really don’t get it, do you? I’ve had people come in and request that I make them a katana like their idol, the Princess of White Lightning! They usually throw in the towel when they hear the price and how difficult it is to handle, though.”

So, even Isana had her admirers.

True, as long as she kept her mouth shut, she appeared to be a poised and beautiful high-ranking adventurer who was a master of the sword. Depending on how you looked at it, her emotional immaturity could be interpreted as an aloofness that kept others at bay.

He just wished they could’ve seen her out of breath and spluttering like a rookie soldier when she was running at full speed that morning.

“Zig?”

Zig was continuing to discuss Gantt’s publicity and improvement plans for his gauntlet when someone called out to him from the side.

The man was a little shorter than Zig, though he had a large frame. His skin was covered with shiny dark green scales, and hints of a red tongue peeked out from his oversized mouth. He gazed at Zig with a puzzled expression.

It was the same scalefolk Zig had aided the other day, Urbas of the Verdant Scaleclan.

"Oh, Urbas. Are you here to get your weapon adjusted too?"

"Yes. The crag drill dragon was tough," he said, his shoulders slumping dejectedly as he patted the curved sword hanging at his waist. "My blade was damaged a lot…"

Urbas's equipment consisted of a curved sword and round shield. His weapon was thick and heavy, its blade white and crafted from some kind of bone. His round shield was fairly large, sufficient enough to conceal most of his body if he crouched behind it.

"Was yours, Zig?" His long, narrow pupils rested on the twinblade.

"Yeah. It seems trying to block that powerful attack with my blade wasn't such a great idea. The creator was quite appalled when I told him about it."

"That's a normal reaction. Even if the weapon is unharmed, the user won't be so lucky. Don't be so reckless."

"See! This is what I'm talking about. A normal reaction."

Zig was somewhat disappointed to learn that someone with a constitution as good as Urbas's wouldn't give him a seal of approval. The lizard man carefully approached him, studying Zig from head to toe.

"You're really okay? Nothing feels off?" Urbas's concern seemed genuine, and the fact that he'd walked over so slowly probably meant that he was worried about making Zig uncomfortable.

There's no need for him to act like that…

On second thought, maybe there was. That caution wasn't an overreaction on Urbas's part considering what Zig had witnessed at the morning market.

"I'm fine. I just had some numbness in my arms right when it happened."

"Yeah, that's nothing Zig here can't handle," Gantt chided. "But, be good to your weapon, okay?"

"Of course I will, but why does hearing that from you piss me off so much?"

Ah, so this must be what they mean by having "bad vibes."

Zig wasn't bothered when others insulted or mocked him, but somehow Gantt's words got under his skin.

"'Cause I touched a nerve! Can't believe you're cranky just because I hit the bullseye. Don't you think it's tacky for a big fella like you to have a small mind?"

Zig made no attempt to respond. He really wanted to rip out a handful of the guy's beard, but he held back because that would just further prove Gantt's point.

"So, wait," Gantt continued, "does that mean the crag drill dragon materials we got in yesterday were yours?"

"That's right," Urbas said. "They were under our name as a formality, but Zig and Siasha assisted us."

They had reported Urbas and his group as the ones who defeated the crag drill dragons for convenience's sake. Since this

made it hard for them to openly distribute the materials, they ended up selling them and then dividing the money they earned.

"Interesting. You're someone who doesn't mind demi-humans, Zig?"

"Anyone who draws their sword against me is an enemy, but if they pay up, they're a client. Having scales or fur isn't a problem."

Same goes for you, right? he asked Gantt with his gaze, but the man didn't answer. Instead, he took Urbas's equipment and began to inspect it.

"I guess," Gantt finally agreed. "I'm not picky as long as I get paid. Oh, but I'll happily kick out anyone who asks for an unsuitable weapon."

"We appreciate your help," Urbas said.

It didn't seem like Gantt was forcing himself to be civil. To him, smithing took center stage, and everything else was secondary. Besides, it was unlikely that this eccentric craftsman had the capability to pull off such a clever deception. Even without asking, Gantt's real feelings came through in the equipment he created.

Urbas's curved sword had a handle designed to accommodate a hand that differed from a human one. His protective equipment fit him snugly, indicating that it had been tailored with precise measurements to accommodate his non-human body type. One of its most notable features was the feet: His clawed toes protruded from the armor, yet they were covered on top and bottom with monstrosity hide to ensure they were thoroughly protected.

Gantt might have had an infuriating personality, but he was a craftsman who always got the job done right.

"That's a nice curved sword you've got," Zig remarked. "What kind of materials does it use?"

"This is the tusk of a plated boar, and my shield is carved from its armor. It's a fine piece." No matter his species, Urbas was still an adventurer. He was pleased to have his equipment praised.

"Plated boar? I've heard of that before."

Gantt offered a little more insight into the material's properties. "If they're one of the handful that lives long enough to become huge, they become a monstrosity on par with the crag drill dragons. The tusks aren't the sharpest, but their sturdiness can't be beat. Plus, they're surprisingly lightweight and can readily handle magic engravings."

"Without this I would've been done for…maybe," Urbas said. "It was expensive, but I'm glad I upgraded."

"It's hard to come across a specimen with such an excellent tusk. I sure was startled when someone brought it in to sell not that long ago."

Gantt's statement triggered a memory in Zig.

I suppose that's what they'd call a fateful encounter, he thought to himself.

Although the story sounded familiar, he remained silent. There was still a chance that he was barking up the wrong tree. Bringing it up felt a bit uncouth.

"Not to mention they didn't capitalize on the guild's request. It's such a missed opportunity, considering they were offering one million dren to take it down."

Nope, Zig wasn't saying a word. That last shocking revelation cast aside any positive feelings he might have had.

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It would be a lie to say Zig wasn't caught off guard. He had - assumed any interference his enemies might try would be as good as garbage where Siasha was concerned.

At first it just seemed like a string of bad luck.

The librarian was puzzled because the subsequent volumes in the series of magic books Siasha was reading were consistently checked out by individuals who typically didn't read those types of tomes.

"I know I shouldn't say this, but they're pretty rough with books." The book-loving librarian gave an awkward laugh as he scratched his head. "I'm actually hesitant to lend them out to those types."

His feelings were understandable. Even though most of the books were transcribed copies, they were in no way inexpensive. It was impossible to overstate the importance of preserving knowledge in a tangible form rather than just passing it on orally.

Taking in this news, Siasha growled to herself.

"That's too bad, huh?" Zig said.

"Whatever! I'll just have to pour my energy into work for the time being."

She was annoyed that she wouldn't be able to read all the books that were now available to her as a seventh-class adventurer, so she tried to shift her mindset to completing new jobs instead. Visibly dejected, she made her way over to the board by the reception counter to search for a suitable request.

The situation didn't really improve from there.

"H-huh?"

The requests she had been planning to accept were no longer available. Everything that paid decently or that she enjoyed doing was gone. Crestfallen, she browsed through the remaining postings, but all she could find were boring surveying or collection jobs.

Once again, she couldn't get too angry. Adventuring requests were first come, first served. Jobs with a good payout would obviously go fast. Being too slow was her own fault.

She tried to shift gears once more. Maybe she could focus on requests that would build her reputation with the guild instead of ones that paid well.

"Why?" she moaned.

All of *those* jobs were gone too. She was starting to get flustered and looked almost on the verge of tears.

Zig watched her in silence. Requests that built reputation with the guild were either those that didn't pay well or were high risk. In

other words, the appraisal value was set high to compensate requests that otherwise weren't worth it. They were rare, but not so rare that it made sense that there were none. It would be hard to dismiss the disappearance of every request aimed at seventh-class adventurers across the board as a mere coincidence.

The warning he had received from the elder the other day nagged the back of Zig's mind.

"Ziiiig…"

He was brought back to the present by Siasha's quavering voice. She had a single request miserably clutched in her hand. The only thing that had been left was a periodic extermination request, such as the ones that were put up for monstrosities like blade bees.

Zig gave a small shrug and patted Siasha on the head, silently trying to comfort her.

Left with no choice but to accept that request, they finished up the boring and monotonous work before heading home.

There were even more people waiting to exterminate blade bees than last time, so it took forever until their turn arrived, and when it did, it was an easier task than mowing grass. It didn't require much effort and could be completed by anyone with even a small amount of skill—hardly a job worthy of someone called an adventurer.

"I'll make sure and get a proper request tomorrow!"

Having resolved herself, Siasha clenched her fist with determination. Meanwhile, Zig combed her hair, trying to soothe her sour mood.

They arrived at the guild early the next day to check the request board, but the results remained the same. They spent most of their day waiting for their turn to exterminate blade bees, completed the task immediately, and then headed home.

This continued three days in a row.

"What in the world is going on?!"



Siasha was indignant as she smashed a blade bee like it had personally offended her. The simple and monotonous adventuring work was more than enough to make her blood boil.

"I don't think we can write this off as a coincidence."

"Why don't we ask them, then?!" Siasha ranted, not caring one bit about the feelings of the other adventurers who were also there for the blade bees. "I did *not* sign up to be an adventurer for this!"

"Hey, watch your mouth! Don't talk big just because you have a bit of talent! You'll face the consequences if you belittle us."

Just like before, disgruntled adventurers didn't hold back their grievances. The difference this time was that Siasha was in a horrible mood.

Zig jumped into action as soon as the pungent smell hit his nostrils. "Siasha, wai—"

He tried to stop her, but it was too late. His words fell on deaf ears as she waved her hand, causing the earthen arm she had conjured to slam the ground.

An ear-shattering crash echoed all around, the trees violently shaking from the impact. Sky squids that had been hiding among the branches toppled to the ground, and the blade bees, sensing the danger, fled back to their hive as if they were afraid a powerful monstrosity had appeared.

When the dust had cleared, the adventurer was so badly maimed that not even his parents could recognize him—or not.

Instead, the ground had caved in a couple inches in front of the unharmed adventurer, who slumped to the ground in a daze.

"Oops, you had a mosquito on you. That was close." Siasha beamed as she informed the adventurer that she had saved him from the mosquito bite.

He finally seemed to snap back to himself once she spoke to him. Still sitting on the ground, he frantically kicked his legs, scooting back as he screamed at her.

"What the hell, bitch?! D-don't you dare think you're getting away with thi—"

That probably wasn't the best idea.

"Oh no, there's another mosquito," Siasha interrupted the man, wincing like she had seen something painful. "It's on your cheek this time. Don't move, okay? I'll take care of it for you."

Her beautiful face was clouded with regret as she held up her hand toward the side of his face as if to slap it. The earthen arm floated alongside her.

"Gaaah! I-I'm gonna report you to the guild!"

"It's making such an annoying buzzing sound. I want to silence it right now. Don't you agree?"

The giant hand slowly approached as she took a step closer. If it struck a human head, it would be crushed beyond recognition.

"I'll face the consequences if I belittle other adventurers… That was your advice as my senior, right?" Siasha smiled sweetly at the adventurer as she gazed at him with her blue eyes.

Realizing the implication behind her words, he immediately threw away his pride and shook his head in denial. “Like hell I was—I mean, I wasn’t belittling you!”

“Is that so? My apologies for jumping to conclusions. I wasn’t belittling you either. I just realized it does take a certain talent to continue doing monotonous work. So…”

Still smiling, she reached out her arm. The earthen arm brushed against the man’s face, and he winced in shock at the rough sensation. She slowly made a fist with her hand, and the earthen arm followed suit by changing its form to surround his head.

“C-cut it out…” the adventurer whimpered.

“So, you’ll do something about that buzzing sound for me?”

“You went too far.”

“B-but…”

“No buts.”

Zig couldn’t help but feel a little bad for the adventurer as he watched the man scurry off. The adventurer’s creed was based on meritocracy. While it was true that the weaker party was wrong to lash out, the level of danger he faced for such a minor infraction deserved some sympathy.

Having thought that, Zig soon reconsidered his stance.

He remembered when they had first come to this town. Considering how Siasha had disposed of anyone who threatened her immediately, she deserved credit for managing to spare the man’s life,

especially considering she was in a foul mood and Zig hadn't been able to stop her in time.

I suppose not jumping straight to killing and just sticking with threats would be considered personal growth?

Rather than reprimanding her, perhaps Siasha deserved a few words of praise from time to time. Though, Zig wondered if such crooked thoughts were a product of his upbringing or just because he was crazy.

"You did a good job of holding yourself back. I'm proud of you."

Siasha giggled. "Right?!"

The pair were very much like a haughty dog with a neglectful owner who gave out rewards indiscriminately.

After reporting her job for the day at the reception counter, Siasha learned she wasn't the only one in a bind. Requests were being accepted but there would be no subsequent reports of success or failure, so the guild was unable to repost them because it would end up as a duplicate. Just when it appeared these requests were being accepted only to claim them, a penalty fee for non-completion or a successful report would be submitted right around the time the job was scheduled to close.

It was clear this was being done intentionally, but what wasn't clear was *why*.

"Sounds like harassment," Zig commented.

He recalled the adventurers he had trouble with at the guild a few days prior. He thought they might try and pull the same crap, but he didn't expect them to go about it in such an indirect way. While he had no trouble handling any direct harm that came his way, they were playing a more troublesome game.

Siasha consulted with Sian, one of the guild's receptionists, about what was going on.

She reacted by slamming her hand on the counter, her eyebrows arched in anger. "It's so annoying that this keeps happening!"

Well, that was understandable. The biggest victims in all this were the guild administrators who had to carry out the procedures and follow up on requests to check their progress.

Siasha wasn't saying anything, so Zig spoke up instead. "Can't the guild give them a warning?"

He usually waited off to the side while Siasha made her report, but this time he tagged along because he was worried about her and wanted to learn more about what was going on.

Sian finally stopped banging the counter in exasperation, her brow deeply furrowed as she shook her head. "Formally speaking, they haven't violated guild protocol. They've accepted the requests and either completed them within the deadline or paid the penalty fee if they haven't. So long as they don't care about their reputation plummeting, the guild can't take any drastic actions."

"Hmm… Guess it's not like the guild would've thought to put rules in place so that idiots couldn't abuse the system to harass

individual adventurers."

"Sure, but this is just absurd! Parties who usually accept jobs as a group of several members are taking requests individually! Not to mention a whole clan is doing it, making everything disappear!"

Sian slammed both hands down with a loud bang again. Her usual cheerful demeanor was gone, replaced by a scowl and angry words that seemed to churn out of her mouth like froth. Not only was the unnecessary processing increasing her workload, but this insane behavior was also a nuisance to the other adventurers. She was enraged beyond belief.

"Okay, sorry for bringing that up. Just calm down, okay? Don't let your cute face go to waste."

Zig wiped away some of the spittle that had stuck to the corner of her mouth as he attempted to placate her, mimicking the actions of some of his mercenary colleagues.

"Enough with the cheap flattery! You really think any woman is going to calm down if you just call her cute?! I'm not falling for your insincere compliments!"

Unfortunately, Zig's stoic expression didn't seem to produce the same results that he had seen his seniors receive. In fact, it just added fuel to the fire. He shouldn't have ventured into unfamiliar territory, because he wasn't sure how to handle Sian as she snapped at him. It was like a large wolf not knowing what to do after a tiny puppy tried to pick a fight with it. He looked to the other staff for help, but they pretended to be busy and avoided making eye contact with him.



He was wondering what to do—her complaints flowing in one ear and out the other—when help finally arrived.

"That's enough out of you!" From nowhere, an arm shot out from behind Sian, seizing her by the collar.

"Gah!"

The fabric of Sian's clothes tightened around her neck, cutting off her breath. Although she didn't lose consciousness, her face drained of color. She started to cough, effectively halting her boisterous rant.

"What do you think you're doing taking our frustrations out on him? You shouldn't let yourself get carried away by exploiting his patience! I'm terribly sorry about this, Mr. Zig."

Aoi had abruptly intervened, obstructing her junior colleague's airways without the slightest change of expression. She shoved a heaving and limp Sian behind her as she stepped in to take her place with a small bow.

Zig breathed a silent sigh of relief. Finally, someone who knew what she was talking about.

"Uh, it's fine. It's not like I'm an adventurer. Anyway, what's the guild's take on all this?"

It wasn't a breach of the rules. However, permitting this behavior to continue unchecked would mean the guild was being taken advantage of and could tarnish its reputation as an organization. Even if they were perceived as allowing anything as long

as the rules weren't broken, they would have no grounds for complaint.

Aoi nodded as a matter of course and fixed him with a cool stare. "We are currently reporting this matter to upper management. In the not-too-distant future, a stern warning and penalty will be imposed on anyone who deliberately abuses the rules."

"You guys are taking action faster than I expected."

The larger the organization, the longer it took for them to get things done. More people involved meant more thoughts and ideas, plus the clashing of various goals.

To be honest, Zig figured they'd wait to respond. He'd assumed there might be human supremacists who didn't appreciate him and Siasha assisting demi-humans who would interfere and keep the situation from being resolved.

The guild receptionist lowered her eyes at Zig's statement before saying, "I'm truly sorry, but I don't think a resolution would've been reached so quickly if the only one being affected was Miss Siasha."

"Yeah, makes sense."

The guild didn't have enough free time to worry about just one adventurer, even if she was a promising newcomer like Siasha.

"We have a large population of seventh-class adventurers, and we've received complaints from many of them, not just Miss Siasha."

That was to be expected. Their harassers' actions were too shortsighted. Whoever was doing this should've known that this would

happen if they had any brains at all. Zig couldn't help but have some doubts about their abrupt and insane behavior, although he decided to push those thoughts aside for now.

"What's more, that four-eyed schemer… I mean, those in charge of actual guild management detest these kinds of practices," Aoi muttered.

"Oh yeah?"

Aoi's expression faltered for just a moment. Zig was now more interested in what kind of person could get under her skin than her explanation.

"I apologize for the trouble, but I ask for your patience for a little longer."

Her expression stabilized and she lowered her head, as if she didn't want him to see any more of her inner thoughts.

"Hmm."

He couldn't really argue when she phrased it like that. Even though it was a hassle, it seemed like the guild would take care of it, so things should go back to normal if they took a little time off.

However, that decision lay in the hands of his client: Siasha.

Speaking of, she had been quiet this entire time. Realizing that, he looked over to her to see how she felt on the matter.

He immediately regretted that decision. Apparently, he had made a severe error in judgment.

He'd assumed that her anger stemmed not only from the monotonous work she had been forced to do, but also from -

understanding that the people from the other day were behind the interference. With how blatant their behavior was, how could she not be?

Siasha was used to having malice directed her way, but those were direct forms of ill will born from a desire to kill her that was based on a pure hatred of her kind. There was no mistaking the antagonism between humans and witches. Indirect hostilities like envy or jealousy were foreign to her.

In other words, her naivety meant she hadn't made the connection between harassment and feeling jealous of someone's success. Zig provided her with a lengthy explanation about it, but in the end—she was just plain *mad*.

"What you're saying is, that trash from the other day is messing with me? Doing all that *just* because they don't like that I helped a demi-human? Ha! Bwa ha ha ha!"

"M-Miss Siasha?"

Siasha just kept on laughing and laughing. At first, her laughter sounded amused, then uncomfortable, and finally, incensed.

She was amused because they had gotten in her way for such a petty reason despite their own weakness. She was uncomfortable because she hadn't noticed the malice directed at her. But, above all else, she was *pissed*.

"Umm…Siasha?"

She had never known how infuriating it could be to have her path barred, preventing her from accomplishing her goals. Looking

back, she had felt hatred and loathing before, but never this much fury.

"Oh, *Ziiiig*," she said in a singsong voice.

"U-uh, what is it?" Zig replied, unnerved by the terrifying smile that lit up her face.

Her pupils were dilated, and all she could do was laugh because she didn't know how else to handle her overflowing emotions. Even though Zig had grown accustomed to looking into her eyes, that smile still frightened him a little.

"I just remembered there's something I need to do. Won't you join me?"

"Everything in moderation…right?"

He wasn't foolish enough to ask what they were going to do. The question at this stage was how far they were willing to go.

He was not going to try to stop her. He might appear mild-mannered, but that was because he disliked unnecessary conflicts or expending effort. However, at his core, he was a mercenary who resolved problems with force. He didn't resort to violence for no reason, but that didn't mean he would hesitate to use it if that's what the circumstances demanded. In fact, he'd already thought that fighting would be necessary in this situation. Such shortsighted fools wouldn't give up their bad behavior just because they were punished by the guild.

"What do you think? How far should we go?" Siasha asked.

"Half dead, Siasha. Just half."

"Oh, I know! We could make a spectacle of it by hanging their corpses somewhere."

"What are they, crows? And they'd have to be fully dead in that case."

"Hm? I thought we were going to leave half of them alive?" Siasha sounded puzzled.

Zig couldn't help but be slightly impressed. The fact that she interpreted "half dead" to mean keeping only half of her victims alive spoke volumes about how witches quantified human lives.

Meanwhile, the color had completely drained from the two guild receptionist's faces as they listened to the conversation. Having finally recovered, Sian desperately tried to stop her.

"No, no, no! You can't kill anyone! Yes, they did something wrong, but you can't dispose of them! No question there!"

"Miss Siasha, we will deal with the situation as soon as possible," Aoi added, her face twitching once. "So, I ask that you *please* act rationally."

Neither of them was taking what Siasha had said as a joke. Zig, who usually acted as her buffer, seemed to have given up. More than that, they were convinced by the look on her face that she was absolutely going to try something.

Whether she heard their attempts to stop her or not, Siasha turned on her heel and headed to the guild's exit. She didn't even know where to find them, so Zig had no idea where she was going.

"A necessary sacrifice, huh," Zig said.

"Why the hell are you standing there and doing nothing, you brute of a mercenary?! Ugh! Please, I beg you! Go stop her!"

Sian practically climbed over the desk to grab Zig by the collar and shake some sense into him. Alas, due to the difference in their physiques, she only succeeded in bobbing herself up and down.

"I also ask the same, Mr. Zig. It would be an administrative nightmare if they were to meet their end while we're still waiting on several pending requests."

"A-Aoi?!"

Sian started to make a racket at her colleague's coldhearted comment, but Aoi kept her eyes fixed on Zig, her expression unchanged.

Well, it was what it was. Not like he had been planning to let her go through with it. Openly killing other adventurers would certainly put a damper on her career. A compromise would have to be made. It was Siasha's emotional well-being that needed saving this time, not her face.

"I'll make sure the matter is dealt with cleanly if you don't mind sharing their names and the clan they belong to."

He looked at them as if to say, *That should be acceptable, right?*

"Despite their actions, they're still adventurers," Aoi responded immediately. "If disclosing this information will save their lives, I suppose we have no other choice."

She handed him a list of names so promptly that it was as if she had been expecting him to ask all along.

"Damn. I guess professional receptionists really are cut from a different cloth." His tone was about 80 percent compliment and 20 percent consternation.

Either way, Aoi shook her head in denial. "I expected you to be the first to take action. I never imagined Miss Siasha would get this upset."

"The little princess has a big temper. Be careful, okay?" It almost sounded like Zig was giving advice to himself as he turned around to leave.

He scanned the vicinity as soon as he departed the guild. Not much time had passed since Siasha stormed off, but he couldn't make her out in the crowd.

Once Zig had an approximate idea of the direction she was going in, he started walking with large strides. It didn't take too long until he saw Siasha, her long black hair bouncing behind her.

The difference in their steps and the fact that she was walking slowly contributed to how quickly he was able to catch up. He picked up the pace to close the distance between them, and once he was alongside her, he slowed his speed to match hers. He had learned the rhythm of her walking pace.

When he'd first started off as her bodyguard, he'd found it difficult to stay beside her. He always traveled with other mercenaries, so he had only walked side by side with a woman a handful of times. Due to the large differences in their leg length and walking speed, he

had to keep turning around to make sure they weren't getting too far from each other.

Now, he could match her pace without having to look. He hadn't been with her for long, but the time they'd spent together had been meaningful.

"Where are you going when you don't even know the destination?"

"I always had you to show me the way."

She kept her eyes straight ahead and didn't bother to look at him. She sounded calmer, but she hadn't let go of all her anger yet. He could tell from the stomp of her footsteps.

"Hey, Zig."

"Yes?"

Her footsteps softened, as if she was suddenly anxious about the path she walked. "Is being different from humans really that unforgivable?"

Even from her profile, Zig could see that her expression lacked its usual innocence.

"Isn't it absurd? I was treated like a nuisance for so long, yet here I am, a *witch*, being accepted as normal. Meanwhile, demi-humans are oppressed just for looking a little different. What makes them so intolerable?"

Siasha's position in society had changed dramatically since coming to this continent. Instead of being a witch who was despised and feared, she was now seen as a human adventurer—and a rising

star at that. But what she'd witnessed today had reminded her of her past self.

Was it right to turn a blind eye to the situation, dismissing it as someone else's problem because it no longer applied to her? Was it better to sympathize with them and try to lend a hand because she understood their pain? She was torn between these two options.

"That's stupid."

"What?"

Zig's voice mercilessly cut through her inner turmoil and cast it aside. "It's a stupid question, Siasha. We can't choose the time, country, or species we were born into. That applies to both you and me. Nothing changes when you hold a grudge or grumble about something you can't do anything about."

Zig couldn't afford to get lost in such thoughts, but he had no regrets.

"What's going to change if you get an answer to that question? If you learn the essence of humanity? Nothing, that's what. So, there's no point in asking in the first place."

This was the path he had chosen.

"No matter how much you dislike what's going on in the world, it's not going to change to match your preferences. You can't do anything but change yourself. The other option is to turn away from everything and live alone…just like you used to do."

He had willingly forged his own way, without complaining about the circumstances that rendered it impossible for him to depend on

anyone else.

"But you already made your choice, didn't you? The choice to change. So, what is there to be conflicted about?"

He thought back to when they first met—he had shown no sympathy or pity for her lamentations. If she had only been waiting for help, he would have just walked away from the start. *She* had been the one to reach out and stop him from leaving after he lost the will to finish their fight.

"I may have been the one who brought you here, but you made the choice to come, Siasha. It was your decision."

Any advantages or obligations she encountered from now on were hers and hers alone.

"Live as you please. If you make enemies as a result, then so what? That's life. You don't need to worry. I'll be here to make sure you don't overdo it."

Zig didn't advocate creating enemies without reason. However, being afraid to act for fear of making them was pointless. It was important to identify adversaries when necessary and confront them. He would stop her from being reckless and admonish her when she acted on emotion, but he *always* respected her choices.

Siasha said nothing in return. As she stood there in silence, Zig fluttered a single sheet of paper in front of her.

"So, Miss Client. The names of those who wish to obstruct your path are listed here. What do you want to *do*?"

The mercenary asked her as he always did because it was his job to protect her.

"Hee hee… Hee hee hee! Ah ha ha ha!"

Siasha started to laugh. Unlike earlier, this was coming from somewhere deep within her.

"Let's go, mercenary of mine. They can see for themselves what happens if they get in my way."

"As you wish."

Her unsteady footsteps from earlier were long gone. Now, they were strong and triumphant.

The two of them headed off to investigate the stronghold of their poor victims—to remove the barriers that stood in her path.

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Zig had admonished Siasha after she fell into dejection due to conflating her past with the oppression the demi-humans were facing. She'd now regained her composure. Actually, it would be more accurate to say she'd completely bounced back.

"I might have made a slight miscalculation…"

I cheered her up a little too much. A slight lingering melancholy would've been perfect, Zig thought as he watched the tavern descend into chaos. At the center of the storm was Siasha, on a rampage.

Oh well. Too little, too late.

They had gone to a tavern on the outskirts of town to investigate the men's whereabouts. The list Aoi had given them didn't have any details about the location of their clan house. That would've been going too far. All she'd provided them with was information about the members of a clan known as "Vardia."

"First, we need to gather more intel on them," Zig told Siasha.

He headed into the tavern alone and made his way to the counter. The preferred watering hole of the Vardia members was not a nice place by any means, even if it was frequented by adventurers. It was poor in both quality and standard—the cheap liquor looked pale, like it had been mixed with water. However, Zig was comfortable with places like this.

"I'll take two ales," he said to the barkeeper, scanning the place for an adventurer who seemed likely to talk. The quality of patrons was usually as bad as the establishment, so having loose lips was par for the course. Just treating them to one drink was all it would take for them to easily spill the details on people they didn't care about.

However, something unexpected happened right as he grabbed the lukewarm liquor and headed in the direction of the man he'd set his sights on.

"Did we get found out?"

Zig's eyes flashed as an eye-watering odor reached his nostrils. He quickly glanced around the tavern, but he couldn't see anyone behaving in a suspicious manner or acting like they were using magic.

His doubts were interrupted by a loud crashing sound.

A man with a shock of red hair styled to resemble a rooster's comb tumbled into the tavern, smashing the door in the process. He rolled until he crashed into the counter.

"A-are you okay?!"

"What the hell happened?!"

Other adventurers, presumably the man's friends, hurriedly jumped up to help him, but he was slumped over and completely knocked out. His face stained with blood as red as his rooster's comb hairstyle.

"Found you."

The adventurers' hearts lurched into their throats. The voice was as beautiful as it was spine-chillingly terrifying.

Zig had asked Siasha to wait outside, knowing that her just setting foot in a place like this would lead to her getting caught up in some sort of trouble. Considering her appearance, he doubted any man would be up for answering questions if she was nearby. That had been his reasoning, but it ended up being a mistake on his part.

All the patrons in the tavern shifted their eyes from the man sprawled on the floor to the doorway—where Siasha was standing.

She slowly and deliberately strolled into the tavern, her right arm covered by an earthen arm that was massive enough to touch the ground.

The guy on the floor must've run into her. Siasha had combed through the information on the list and immediately recognized the

distinctive appearance of one of the men who had crossed her path. Unluckily for him.

"Well, that makes things easier, I guess," Zig sighed as he downed the booze that he wouldn't be needing anymore. It was weak as piss.

"Y-you stupid *bitch*! You've got some nerve killing our buddy!"

Siasha begged to differ. The man wasn't dead. His face was just flatter now.

"Get her, boys!"

So, his friends are here too. Well, that's convenient. Having multiple sources of information can't hurt.



That was what Zig was thinking, until he looked around and realized close to twenty men had answered the call to arms.

"Okay, that's too many…"

The number was so far beyond what he'd expected that Zig had to laugh at himself. It appeared that *most* of the people in this tavern had connections to the Vardia Clan. It wasn't just a watering hole; it was their stomping grounds.

"Oh, me, oh, my! Today's my lucky day."

Siasha's smile was brilliant. Not only had she stumbled upon the object of her anger, but she had also been given an opportunity to vent her frustrations on many objects at once.

"Aim for anywhere but 'er face! She's a real looker, I'll enjoy savorin' 'er once we're—"

The man didn't get a chance to finish his sentence before he collapsed to the ground, having taken an empty mug directly to the head. Though he went down easily, Zig had to admit he was impressed by the brazen nerve of a man who was capable of feeling sexual excitement in the face of such a terrifying visage.

"Damn it! She's got a friend with 'er! But we've got the numbers, boys! Take 'em both down!"

That was how they'd wound up with Siasha running wild.

"Ungggh!"

She looked like a complete amateur as she dramatically drew her arm back and wound up to throw a punch, but the size of the

earthen arm that followed her fist was not to be underestimated. Those who carelessly approached her assuming they could take on a magic user were blown back in an almost comedic manner.

"Don't get too *cocky*, bitch!"

Still, melee combat wasn't really Siasha's thing. One of the men slipped past the opening left by the giant arm and was just about to strike her, when—

"Sorry, sir. You can look, but you can't touch."

"Nghhh! Damn you!"

Zig gripped the man's fist, preventing him from making contact. The man tried to shake him off, but his hand was stuck fast like it was caught in a vise. Siasha, though, might've been fine protecting herself without him stepping in.

Zig let go at the exact moment the man tried to jerk away, causing him to lose his balance and tumble backward to the ground. Zig kicked the man's unguarded stomach hard. At the impact, his back arched and his abdominal muscles loosened, leaving him to spit up a mouthful of gastric acid before collapsing in a heap.

"You bastard!"

One of the man's friends threw a punch at Zig with a howl of anger. These men were all unarmed—they had been taking a day off. For that reason, it had become a bar fight rather than a death match. It wasn't like Zig had intended to kill them in the first place.

"Take that!" one yelled.

"Gaaaah!" screamed another.

Zig glanced at Siasha. It was a little worrying to see the gruesome angles at which the men's arms and legs were bent when she sent them flying back with her attack.

"So yer not even payin' attention now?!"

"Observing my partner's also part of the job," Zig said.

His opponent, who appeared to have hand-to-hand martial arts experience, closed the distance and attempted a one-two punch.

Zig blocked the jab with his left arm, then deflected the man's right straight with the back of the same arm. He followed up with a left high kick, and the man pulled back his right arm to protect his head. However, the upward kick was a feint; the mercenary changed his trajectory and struck the man's leg instead.

"Gah!"

Zig's random low kick came at a diagonal, mowing down the legs of his opponent who had been focused on protecting his upper body. Zig kept moving, shifting his center of gravity to the left leg he had kicked with. He lurched forward, grabbed the head of the collapsed man, and slammed it onto the counter. Then, he dragged him across the top, scattering liquor and food everywhere, before tossing him at another man.

"Why…you… *Aaaah!*"

"You know you guys are going to have to pick up the tab for all this, right?" Zig said, tossing a random table. It made direct contact with a man's face, knocking him out cold.

Enraged for their fallen friend, two other men pulled out knives from their waists. One of them drew his arm back to throw his at Zig, but before he could toss the knife, a glint of silver hit the arm holding it.

"Ow! What the hell?!"

Zig had moved as soon as he saw the man reaching for his waist, flicking a coin he pulled out beforehand and shooting it at his hand. The impact tore the man's nail clean off. In the aftermath, the knife fell from his hand as he quivered in pain.

In that short span, Zig closed the distance and kneed the man in the jaw, taking him out of the fight. He deflected the other man's knife by grabbing a liquor bottle. There was a high-pitched screeching sound as glass and metal collided.

"Drink till you drop."

Before the man could even recover, Zig swung the bottle down on his head. It shattered on impact, releasing a shower of burgundy liquor and a rich, mellow smell.

"That's all you've got?" he mocked.

He turned around to see how Siasha was doing before he moved on to the next opponent, but his gaze met with a horrible scene.

"L-let go of me! St-st-stop! H-heeelp…!"

Two men were being held by Siasha's right and left earthen arms and being slammed to the floor, one after the other. They desperately called out for Zig to save them. Behind them, a row of five unmoving men had their heads smashed through the wall. There

were even men whose lower halves had somehow managed to get stuck in the ceiling. They were now limply swaying back and forth as they dangled upside down—not to mention all the other bodies scattered across the ground.

"Gathering intel sure is fun, isn't it, Zig?"

The smile that lit up Siasha's blood-drenched face was truly macabre.

Even if they'd both been holding back, Siasha had defeated fifteen men in the time it had taken Zig to take down five. He wouldn't have expected any less from a witch.

"Yeah."

The scene was so gruesome he didn't have the will to tell her this was all business for him. In response, she cackled and continued her rampage, only reluctantly stopping when the men she'd been pummeling started to grow quiet.

That evening, Zig and Siasha arrived at the Vardia Clan house. Their base was located far away from the residential areas and main streets, perhaps due to a lack of funds.



"They were very talkative, weren't they?"

"You could say that."

Siasha was right; the men at the tavern had been very willing to divulge information about the Vardia Clan. They were just inferior adventurers that bordered on thugs, so it wasn't surprising they would sell out their friends to save their own skins…but the fact remained that the conversation probably went as smoothly as it did because Siasha had done such a good job of "loosening them up."

"I guess meat *and* humans really do become tender if you pound them!"

"Where did you hear that?"

"It was in one of my books."

"Right."

Zig had essentially let Siasha do whatever she wanted, but perhaps he should have been more selective about the books he gave her. Too late to dwell on that now.

They had learned that the Vardia Clan was a subpar group, mainly consisting of members who fell between the eighth and sixth classes. There were a little more than thirty members in their ranks, which was considered a large number.

They were not known for their good behavior and were often found monopolizing hunting grounds or stealing kills. It was said that many stores had banned them from entering the premises due to their arrogant attitudes and violent behavior. They had a bad

reputation among their peers and were basically persona non gratae wherever they went.

They also hated demi-humans. Since demi-humans had high physical abilities in addition to their enhanced five senses, many of them were capable adventurers. Consequently, low-quality human adventurers tended to resent them. But that wasn't unique to just the Vardia Clan. Several others had similar stances.

The *real* concern was that, lately, some of the older members were associating with seedy characters and behaving in a way that would've been unthinkable in the past. Word was that they'd involved themselves with some shady drugs—but when they'd tried to take a piece of the pie for themselves, their hands had been slapped. The people who'd been at the tavern hadn't been involved in those dealings, but they'd heard the rumors.

From there, they'd apparently been coerced into participating in the sabotage of Zig and Siasha out of self-preservation. Small fry like them usually put their own survival first, so they weren't audacious enough to risk attracting the wrath of the guild by resisting orders. Nevertheless, it was an undeniable fact that they were participating in Siasha's harassment, so there was no point in feeling sorry for them.

There was quite a commotion going on inside the clan house, enough for Zig and Siasha to hear from their position outside.

"Well, let's get this party started!"

In the split second that Zig was wondering how to break into the enemy stronghold, Siasha called forth her giant earthen arm before

thrusting it into the wall like she was prying open a set of double doors.

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"Hey, Boss. Ain't we pushin' the boundaries a bit far this time?"

The Vardia Clan members were sitting around a table on the first floor of their clan house causing quite a racket.

The layout may have resembled that of the Wadatsumi Clan house, but the room was filled with booze, powder, and smoke. It looked much shabbier in comparison. Empty bottles spun on the floor, while piles of garbage bags in the corner of the room looked like they had been left there for who knew how long, as they were swarming with bugs.

These men were the embodiment of filthy and brutish adventurers. It wasn't that their clan was particularly dirty—this was just how many such adventurers lived.

They were addressing their questions to a middle-aged man who was a little larger than the rest of them.

"Don't they got ties with the Wadatsumi Clan?"

"Huh? Don't sweat it. We ain't doin' nothin' wrong. Just showin' some newbies they shouldn't get too big for their britches."

"So, what now?"

"Well, we gotta haul 'em over here and give 'em the smackdown. One of 'em's a woman, right? We can have a real good

time with her."

The boss's smirk was followed by echoed laughter. If they had been thinking clearly, they would've realized the guild wasn't such a kind and gentle organization, but somewhere along the line, they seemed to have lost their sense of reason and stopped questioning their beliefs.

"Who gives a shit if Wadatsumi pokes its nose in? Those two ain't even part of their clan. They're as good as outsiders."

"You do…make a good point…"

The dilated pupils of their eyes twitched back and forth above the sunken cheeks of their sweaty faces. In the end, they were typical drug addicts, so caught up in dreams that they refused to face the inconvenience of reality, believing that everything would go their way.

"If they dare try anythin', we'll just turn the tables on 'em! Always hated that clan for snatchin' up the best rookies, anyway." The man's sallow complexion was accentuated by the dark circles under his eyes. He removed a syringe that contained a strangely viscous red liquid and stroked it lovingly. "With this guy in our corner, it'll be a walk in the park, right?"

There was a noticeable shift in the other men at the sight of the syringe. They started to get worked up, and curses against the Wadatsumi Clan poured from their lips as if they were thirsty for blood.

"That's right! We never liked 'em!"

"Let's wipe 'em all out! It'll be a bloodbath!"

"A bloodbath? What a wonderful idea!"

They were silenced by this sudden voice, which rang out with unnatural clarity amidst the commotion inside. But the quiet didn't last for long, as an even stranger noise sent them flying into a panic. It was as if the clan house had been torn open with a resounding screech, followed by the night wind rushing in.

The dirty and unkempt building was roughly the same size and layout as the Wadatsumi Clan house, but after Siasha's actions, the front had been significantly remodeled. It now spread open like a picture in a pop-up story book, leaving the people inside completely flabbergasted.

"Aaaah?!"

"What the hell?! Is it a monstrosity?! An earthquake?!"

Some men plummeted from the second story to the first as the floor ripped open like a fracture in the earth. Screams rang out as others were crushed by falling furniture and people. As they witnessed the devastation of their clan house, it seemed like the world itself was ending.

The scene was the epitome of pandemonium, yet the party responsible for the chaos simply smiled, wide and beautiful.

"Oh, wow… This looks identical to the beehive I saw in a book the other day!" She sounded just like a scholar encountering the mysteries of life.

For a moment, the members of the Vardia Clan really were buzzing around like bees whose hive had been poked. Scanning the

surroundings to piece together what had happened, they noticed the magically constructed earthen arm, and its user, Siasha.

"It's that fuckin' bitch over there! You're the one behind this little stunt, ain't ya?!"

The Vardia Clan members were spitting mad as they screamed at Siasha.

She stood proud, defying them and their flushed, angry faces. "Precisely!"

Her reply was clear and confident, lacking even the slightest hint of guilt or embarrassment. Indeed, she was so composed that they were momentarily taken aback by her animated confession.

Then, a familiar looking man in the group pointed at Zig and Siasha and screamed at the larger man by his side.

"It's her, Boss! The adventurer that I told you about, the one who was helping the demi-human scum!"

"Bring it, *you*! You've sure got balls comin' straight to us! We're gonna have a lot of fun savorin' that body of yours before we rip it apart piece by piece! Look forward to it!"

Zig gave a little shrug at the man's descriptive rhetoric. "Aren't you just the picture of class?"

The threat, hardly reminiscent of something an adventurer would say, reflected the type of shady characters they had been associating with lately.

"And *you*! You're one to talk! All muscle, no brains! Just rot in hell, you demi-human sympathizin' traitor!"

It seemed their anger wasn't just directed at Siasha but also at Zig.

"*Traitor*, huh?" Zig said. "I don't seem to remember ever being allied with you lot."

"Don't talk back to *me*! How the hell can you, a human, say that after savin' a subhuman?! You get off bein' thanked by mangy, collar-less beasts?!"

"Oh brother. Honestly, I've lost track of who the real beasts are around here."

To Zig, they appeared utterly devoid of any semblance of human intelligence, screaming and ranting with bloodshot eyes and foaming at the mouth. Did they not realize the venom they were spewing was coming straight back at them?

"Whether it be the Jinsu-Yah or demi-humans…they're always comin' out of the woodwork and takin' our jobs and livin' spaces! We ain't gonna stand for this shit! This town belongs to the humans! For the sake of human pride, we'll drive every last one of 'em out and take back our town!!"

The rest of the Vardia Clan members took their boss's diatribe as a sign to draw their weapons. They made strange movements, injecting something into their arms. Maybe it was a drug to enhance combat performance. Zig had heard they were illegal here, but it seemed that some people could get their hands on them.

"Interesting. Your actions were so insane that I wondered if there was a catch. Turns out you're actually just insane."

Given his ashen, sunken cheeks and dilated pupils, it appeared he wasn't just a one- or two-time user, regardless of whether it was regular drugs or not. It was the same for the others. The drugs had certainly taken a big toll on their bodies. Since adventurers had strong builds, their bodies could endure more punishment than the average person, but judging from the condition they were in, these men had pushed past their limits. They weren't that much longer for this world.

It was probably the kind of drug that gave the user a sense of euphoria and omnipotence. Their mouths contorted into snarls that would shame ferocious beasts, and their eyes—devoid of reason—focused on Siasha.

"Kill her!"

The adventurers of the Vardia Clan pounced at the command.

Their speed far surpassed their natural ability. Their bodies protested and flesh tore from their legs—the price for exceeding their normal physical limits. But their lacerations instantly knitted together as their muscles swelled and bulged, and pain seemed to no longer reach them.

The drugs took their physical prowess beyond the bounds of what the body was capable of, imbuing them with incredible power. They rushed at the witch with speed that rivaled that of a monstrosity's, although they'd made sacrifices to gain that ability.

But…that was about it.

That was the extent of the power they received from their sacrifice. There was no depth to those who spent their days in idleness without bothering to train or study. Strength couldn't be

gained from shortcuts like cheating, nor did it spring up from out of nowhere. It was only something that could be achieved from steady, daily effort.

They had forgotten—no, they had deliberately turned a blind eye to those things.

That's why they didn't realize the significance of going toe to toe with a foe who was born with more strength than a human could ever dream of, nor what it meant that a man who had honed his skills to the point of defeating such a foe was merely standing by and watching without offering her any assistance.

"Such blatant foolishness," Siasha said.

The men charged her like beasts. She waved a hand to brush them aside, using the earthen arm she had conjured to sweep them away. The sound of whipping wind that the arm made drowned out their screams as they smacked into the sides of the clan house with a sickening thud.

"Diiiieee—nghhh!"

The clan's boss, who had managed to dodge just in the nick of time, lunged toward Siasha with his longsword in hand. However, he was struck in the stomach by a stone pillar she had summoned with a short incantation. The momentum behind his own attack combined with the painful blow to the abdomen stopped him in his tracks.

"Phew, that was close! I was almost about to use a pointed one out of habit."

If she'd used one of her normal spikes, the man would've had a hole in his stomach. She created even more stone pillars, launching him up into the air by his head before smashing him down with her earthen arm.

"Ungh! Aaaaah!"

His face skidded across the ground as he rolled like a ball, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

"Dramnit! I'm gronna keeeel you!"

The man swore angrily as he got back to his feet, spitting blood and broken teeth out of his mouth.

"Oh? Aren't you all lively? I didn't realize humans could be this tough."

Siasha was slightly puzzled by how unexpectedly resilient these adventurers were. Even the ones she had slammed into the wall were getting back to their feet, albeit moaning and groaning all the while.

Arms and legs that had been bent in opposite directions seemed to heal as if time was going in reverse. They were recovering at a speed that would be impossible, even with the use of regeneration spells.

Siasha frowned at the sight of a recovery magic that she'd never seen before.

"Well, no matter. All the better for venting my stress."

She didn't question the unusual sight. If they were going to keep moving after she beat them down, she would just have to keep going until they didn't get up again.

The now recovered Vardia Clan members hastily rushed to attack Siasha, but a wall of dirt enclosed them on both sides. Those in the front and rear were able to escape with the help of their enhanced leg strength, but several were trapped inside, blocked by their companions.

Their bodies groaned under the pressure, struggling to free themselves, but to no avail. They wailed like beasts as their flesh was destroyed as it healed, left high and dry by their friends who continued to rush at Siasha.

"*Your* town? What the hell is that?" Siasha scoffed.

She generated a plethora of stone projectiles—about the size of an adult fist—around her. They were trying to use the advantage of numbers in their charge attack, but she had created a far greater quantity of stone projectiles. The fighters on the front line managed to persevere with shields and defensive spells but trying to face a witch head-on was the epitome of foolishness. They were only able to hold out for a few moments before crumbling under the waves of projectiles created from Siasha's seemingly inexhaustible magic.

Realizing that they couldn't block the barrage, the frontline attackers scattered, leaving the now undefended rear guard to howl in pain as they were pummeled by stone projectiles.

Those that were still unharmed tried to fling fire spells at her, but she blocked them with her earthen shield and slammed it into nearby enemies while it was still burning hot. Anyone who tried to block the blow at close range had their arms snapped off by the

impact and smacked away as the unpleasant scent of burning flesh filled the air.

"I'll kill you, bitch!" Using his allies as a shield, the boss of the Vardia Clan had somehow managed to reach Siasha. He swung his sword at her, but she held her left arm out in its path.

"Human pride? Don't make me laugh!" she said.

His sword met a barrier of rock that she'd created to protect her extended left arm. The longsword he wielded was covered in ice and was some sort of magical item. It emitted cold air and flickered as he attempted to chip away at the rock. Yet, it failed to make any significant impact and only succeeded in freezing the surface. Behind her, the recovered frontline fighters tried to rush in once more and take advantage of the golden opportunity.

"You're not even fit to be a dog's dinner!" Siasha roared as she held the sword back with her left arm while swinging the earthen arm enclosing her right.

The massive blow from the gigantic arm struck not only the clan's boss in front of her but also the men charging in from behind.

They immediately tried to cast defensive spells to protect themselves, but they were still scattered away like paper in the wind. Then, as if a runaway carriage had crashed through them, anyone who took a direct hit was flung back, leaving a trail of blood and flesh in their wake. They fell into those who were pinned by Siasha's magic, slamming against the wall one after another before slipping and falling to the ground like crushed insects. The red stains they left behind made it hard to tell if they were even still alive.

"Being proud just because you're human? What utter nonsense! How about facing your own weaknesses before daring to speak of such trivial matters!"

Standing with her hands on her hips, she looked down both literally and figuratively at the fallen adventurers before her. They were groaning and writhing, their regeneration unable to keep up with the countless times their flesh and bones had been crushed.

Even if they were able to heal, several had completely lost the will to fight after witnessing Siasha's overwhelming display of power. Even if they felt no pain, even if they felt no fear, the fight was so lopsided that it was enough to remind them of those things.

It was such a horrible scene that it was miraculous there had been no fatalities. The adventurers of the Vardia Clan were terrified at the display they had witnessed from just one woman in such a short amount of time.

"Y-you're a monster…"

Drenched in blood, the boss of the clan sunk to the floor.

"I don't care who you persecute or who you oppress. Do whatever you please. However—" Siasha trailed off as she planted both of her hands on the ground, manipulating her mana to channel her anger into the earth that she had such masterful control of. "Be they human or demi-human, anyone who blocks my path is an enemy! I'll destroy whoever dares to get in my way!"

Seething in anger, she threw up her hands before flipping them over.

"Huh…?"

The ground began to quake, snapping the men back to their senses. What they were witnessing was so unbelievable that it dragged them out of their drugs' euphoria.

The building they called home was soaring in the air. The clan house was by no means small, but it was floating as if it had been launched by the earth itself.

As easily as a table being overturned, the house flipped over so that its roof faced down. It was like something out of a bad joke or an unintelligible dream. After a moment of silence, the clan house fell from the sky, hitting the ground below with a mighty crash. The resulting wreckage looked like it had been trampled by an enormous monstrosity.

They watched as even the parts that remained intact started to collapse, unable to bare any more weight in the impact of the fall. Finally, the remaining pillars snapped with a crack, leaving the entire house destroyed beyond all recognition.

A silence hung in the air.

The members of the Vardia Clan were stunned. Siasha and Zig wouldn't need to be concerned about them anymore. There was no chance they would attempt anything again after witnessing the vast gap in their power. If they had that much tenacity, they would've succeeded as adventurers in the first place.

"Hmm," Zig murmured from the sidelines, giving a nod after observing everything that had taken place.

He may have looked like he knew this was coming the whole time, but in reality, he was speechless because he had never imagined she would go to such lengths. His true feelings were betrayed only by the drops of sweat that were trickling down his forehead.

"Ahhh! I feel so much better now!!"

Having relieved her frustration, Siasha stretched out her arms with a satisfied smile. First, it was the bounties, and then these idiots had gotten in her way. It was obvious that her tolerance for having her ambitions blocked was perilously slim.

"Destroying anyone who gets in your way, huh?"

It was simple at best, shortsighted at worst. Depending on how Zig looked at it, it didn't seem like she had changed that much from before.

But to her, there was a huge difference. The contrast between the past, where she had no choice but to act a certain way, and the present, where she did so willingly—even if the methods were the same—was like night and day. Choosing of one's free will. As a concept it sounded straightforward, but it was something that was challenging to accomplish in the world they lived in.

"Did you say something, Zig?"

Zig gazed into her blue eyes.

"Nope, nothing at all. Anyway, let's go home."

"Okaaay!"

In the end, he would be the only one who was willing to help her.

“Because it’s my job,” he mumbled to no one in particular.

Chapter 4:
Traces of Weak Soldiers' Dreams

IN THE FOLLOWING DAYS, THE VARDIA CLAN RECEIVED a dissolution order.

It cited such things like disruptive behaviors toward other adventurers, including deliberately taking on excessive requests or defaulting on them, as well as multiple complaints the guild had recently received from the private sector.

Drug use itself wasn't actually illegal. The use of stimulants to overcome the fear frontline fighters possessed when facing ferocious monstrosities wasn't recommended, but it wasn't prohibited either. However, those that were highly addictive or that greatly affected the body were *not* allowed.

There were several reasons why they were served that order, but the most decisive one was the collapse of the clan house due to its *age*. The destruction of their stronghold ended up being the final nail in the coffin. After all, the clan was having financial difficulties due to a low completion rate of requests and the spending habits of the older members.

They would now have to work as unaffiliated adventurers either as individuals or in parties. Since quite a few of them had been demoted due to the recent incident, most would end up leaving town rather than feel the weight of scrutiny from the guild and their peers.

This, too, was a common path that adventurers followed.

"To that end, all the requests they took will be discarded. We plan to have the newly reissued ones posted tomorrow."

Zig and Siasha were in the guild's attached dining hall. Sian, who was taking her break, had called them over and was filling them in on the details of what had transpired.

"I'm so sorry for the inconvenience, Siasha."

Siasha threw her hands up in joy. "Yippee! Now I can finally get back to work!"

"That's good," Zig agreed.

From the way Siasha was devouring her sugar-stewed potatoes, he surmised that resolving those concerns had put her in an excellent mood.

Sugar was precious on this continent, but to a different degree than Zig was used to. Compared to his homeland, where it was hardly ever available on the market, sugar could be found here if you were willing to part with the cash. Gum syrup was widely available and often used in cooking. The fact that sugar was used for medicinal purposes where Zig came from explained why it was so priceless.

Zig gave a skeptical snort at hearing the report, in contrast to Siasha who just grinned over her sweet treat.

"So…the building collapsed from old age?" he asked.

"Right. It seems that they half-intimidated someone into selling them a cheap property and never took proper care of it. It was never going to last long."

"Interesting."

"The staff member who went to the premises reported, 'Destruction of this scale might have occurred if the house had fallen out of the sky upside down,' but that wouldn't make any sense at all now, would it?"

"Hmph."

"What? Do you have a problem with that?" Sian challenged.

From Zig's response, it seemed like there was something he wanted to say. Sian glared back at him, undeterred by his gaze. She raised her shoulders like she was trying to make herself appear as big as possible, but she still resembled a puppy that was trying to make itself look threatening.

In principle, disputes between adventurers were their own responsibility as long as no harm came to other people or the general public. Unless it was an incident like the serial killings that occurred not that long ago, the guild wouldn't bother intervening in minor conflicts among adventurers.

It was questionable whether the destruction of a clan house would be considered a *minor conflict*, but in this case, no one had died, and the guilty party was clear. Thus, the guild had no objection to turning a blind eye to what had happened.

Zig, not desiring further scrutiny, was content to let the matter rest there. "No, it's nothing. Were there any casualties?"

"The building was as cheap as the land underneath it. Thankfully, there weren't any residences or shops around, so no

damage or injuries were reported. Other than those suffered by the clan members, that is."

Sian explained that several of the clan's main members were carried out of the wreckage. Although they were soaked in blood, strangely enough, they didn't seem to have many wounds.

Zig didn't know exactly what the drug they had taken was, but it seemed quite potent. Siasha had gotten the bloodbath she wanted, but not a single person had died from the injuries they sustained.

"We tried to interrogate them further, but they fled in the night…"

Naturally, the guild would've wanted to know more about what happened, but the men weren't detained. They were free to run away if they wanted. Still, considering where they obtained that drug from, it was doubtful they would make it out of the town alive.

"Did they happen to say anything interesting?"

Sian smiled wryly and glanced to the side at his question. She was looking at Siasha who was still happily munching on her potatoes.

"Nope. They were even surprisingly okay with the clan being dissolved. Something *may* have happened." Not may, *did*. Sian didn't need to say another word, her eyes told the whole story.

"Who knows what it was," Zig said. "Maybe they saw something that scared them to death?"

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An entire clan was gone.

Although adventurers were known for their cavalier attitude toward life, it was almost unheard of for a clan to disappear. It wasn't *impossible*, but it didn't happen often. Despite how surprising it was, it would only be talked about a few times as an accompaniment to some adventurers' drinks before it was forgotten about entirely.

A couple of adventurers sat in the corner of a tavern, engrossed in such swirling, transient rumors.

"They were on the decline anyway, you know. All they did lately was drink and dabble in strange drugs."

"Yeah, I've heard that nonsense lead to a clan's breakdown before. But I *also* heard the whole place was destroyed by one giant guy, and a bunch of the members were pulled out of there covered in blood!"

"Oh, are you talkin' 'bout the big guy who destroyed that clan? I heard he's goin' around and takin' down all of the mid-sized ones in turn."

"Are you talking about what went down with the Wadatsumi Clan? Highly doubtful. Maybe it's not outta the question for a weaker clan, but it'd be real rough to take out Wadatsumi on your own unless you were at least a second-class adventurer."

The adventurers had a few drinks in them and were loudly exchanging gossip that may or may not be true. The facts weren't important, just that the story was interesting.

"I've seen that big guy before! He's sure got the face of someone who could pull it off! It's seriously creepy! Check it out next time!"

"The epitome of beauty and the beast, ain't it? More than 'is face, though, it's that huge bod and weapon that make me wanna stay the hell away. Sometimes the youths get caught up by that women and try and approach her, but I think they're outta their damn minds. Talk about a total lack of self-preservation…"

"It's scary how some people are so ignorant that they actually think 'overtraining proves your physical fortification skills are underdeveloped.' It's like they're young enough to believe in half-truths."

"Cut 'em some slack. We were just like 'em when we were that age. Can't be the pot callin' the kettle black. I don't blame 'em for bein' enchanted by that girly, though. I ain't ever seen a woman that beautiful before."

"You're not wrong, but isn't there something a little scary about her? Maybe it's just me…"

As the gossip diverged to another topic, the noise began to die down. Even the disappearance of a clan only elicited such transient conversation.

However, being the subject of even fleeting rumors was almost too much for the person in question to bear.

"Why do they think it was *me*?" Zig asked.

Siasha's response was brutal. "It could be karmic retribution for a past misdeed."

She was eating fish meunière. Smiling, she savored the skin, grilled to crisp perfection, as well as the meat, which was cooked without compromising its tenderness.

"Mmm, this is delicious! Anyway, Zig, you're the one usually causing a commotion. Even if I stir up a little trouble, no one looks my way."

"Urk…"

She did have a point—he wasn't unaware of that fact—but there was a valid reason for everything he did!

Besides, the rumors involving Zig that had become a hot topic at the guild were about conflicts instigated by others, *not* him. The fight with Isana, the incident at the Wadatsumi Clan—both times, *he* had been the one pulled into the mess.

Honestly, calling him a victim wouldn't be too off base.

"I'll need to ask them to clear up the false rumors next time I get a chance."

"I have a feeling it's a little too late for that." Siasha flashed him a wicked grin before popping a piece of citrus fruit that had been included as a garnish into her mouth.

Zig tried to stop her, but he wasn't fast enough. She'd already bitten into the fruit, which was far too intense to be eaten by itself.

"Guh, that's sour!"

Zig poured some water from the jug and offered it to her as she twitched in agony. Her eyes welled up with tears as she washed the sour taste out of her mouth.

She was still glaring at the offending fruit when Zig picked it up and squeezed it onto the meunière as an example of how to use it properly. Then, he took a bite himself.

"Ah, whatever. I suppose it's not so bad to attract attention if it means I can divert it from you."

After learning a painful lesson, Siasha dubiously squeezed the juice of the fruit garnish onto a bite of fish before bringing it to her mouth. Her eyes opened wide as she chewed. Apparently, it was to her liking. She gobbled up one piece after another, then wiped her mouth with satisfaction once she cleaned her plate.

"Speaking of attention, I did some digging out of curiosity, but I didn't find much information about *me* here." Siasha lowered her gaze as she put the dish down with a thoughtful expression. Zig knew immediately what she was talking about. He'd been thinking the same thing himself.

"Right. It might be used as a metaphorical expression to describe women who are skilled with magic, but it doesn't seem to be recognized as a species."

They had an understanding to communicate their thoughts without explicitly using the word "witch."

Zig had also done some research on witches not too long after arriving on this continent. In addition to looking up information in books, he'd also brought it up with others while keeping key details

vague. Ultimately, he'd been unable to confirm that witches were formally recognized in this region.

When he'd heard about a few individuals who were referred to by that term and gone to see for himself, it had either turned out to be a wrinkled old woman performing some sort of dubious ritual or a normal human woman who was skilled at using magic. Of course, neither description fit Siasha.

However, if asked what he would call either, Zig might have also answered "witch." Of course, that only applied to his past self—before he met the real thing.

"What do you suppose that means? If they existed on the other continent where there is no magic, I would've thought there'd be some *here*, since magic is a part of daily life."

"Same here. It wasn't in line with my expectations, to say the least."

He could understand why witches were treated as oddities on the other continent. In a place where magic only existed in children's stories, witches who could manipulate elements such as fire and thunder would be shunned as incomprehensible and terrifying.

Here, where magic existed as an indispensable part of life, it wouldn't be strange for them to be recognized as their own species, even if the scale of mana they possessed varied.

"Maybe they conceal their identities and blend in with the humans?"

"That's possible. People here don't seem to possess a sharp sense of danger. They would need to exercise some restraint, but if they were like you and didn't look out of place, they could assimilate."

"You mentioned that before. Is it really that easy for *you* to see what I am, Zig?"

He took a good look at her.

There was a spark in her blue eyes, and the color was so deep that it seemed to pull him in, like an abyss that went on forever. Recently, he'd noticed that her irises were unique. Although they appeared to be the same color, they were distinctly different.

"You're *similar*, but would someone who knew the difference look into the eyes of a tiger and a cat and think they're the same thing?"

Witches were on a completely different tier compared to humans. The distance between them was as great as apex predator and prey. Just like how a rabbit instinctively senses danger in the presence of a mighty carnivore, Siasha was a threat from a human's perspective. In Zig's opinion, it was concerning that the people here didn't recognize such a deadly presence.

"I don't know whether it's because of their mana or a difference in physical capabilities, but the people here don't react to you much. A perceptive individual might feel a little uncomfortable in your presence, though."

"Hmm. Then, it's realistic to assume they're concealing their identities?"

Zig didn’t respond right away.

There was a reason he stopped himself from immediately agreeing that was the case. If witches *did* exist in this region and their appearances were identical to that of humans, they would likely be accepted if the explanation was that they were special individuals with strong magical powers. The existence of demi-humans, whose appearances were easily distinguishable from humans, made this even more probable.

However, looking at Siasha, the question was really whether a witch could blend into human society. That doubt was further reinforced when he took her bloody rampage at the Vardia Clan the previous day into account. Just as humans could sense they weren’t on the same level as witches, it would be difficult for the latter to see the former as equals.

Was coexisting on equal terms even possible with creatures whose life span and power were clearly inferior? It was more realistic to think of witches as entities that governed over humans like pets.

“I guess there’s no use dwelling on it,” he finally said. “As long as we know they can live in human society without being found out, that’s good enough for now.”

“That’s true. Even if I met another one, I can only imagine a future where we’d fight.”

“That needs to be prevented at all costs,” Zig mumbled under his breath, looking uncharacteristically pale.

You’d need more lives than a cat to survive a battle between witches. It wasn’t difficult to imagine an entire town disappearing and

having more destruction to spare after that.

"By the way, are any of you male?"

Since they were already on the topic, he figured he might as well bring up some of the questions he'd been sitting on for a long time. Certain species had both females and males, so he wondered if there were witch women and witch men.

I highly doubt they'd call themselves witch men, though, he chuckled to himself.

"I don't know," Siasha said.

"Huh? This is your kind we're talking about."

But she just tilted her head to the side as she munched on some of the nuts that had been served post-meal.

She didn't seem to like the taste of them, so Zig slipped her a small bottle of honey that he'd received as a gift from the Jinsu-Yah's elder.

"Ooh! Thank you!"

Her eyes gleaming with delight, she immediately popped it open and started to pour the contents onto a small plate. Once she'd emptied about one-third of the bottle, she put the lid back on and licked off some of the honey that had stuck to her hand.



"And?" Zig probed, trying to distract himself from focusing on the sensual movements of her pink tongue.

Unaware of his gaze, Siasha blissfully nibbled on the nuts she'd drenched in honey, savoring every bite.

"Yum!" she said, before she focused on him again. "Um, I've just always been on my own. I feel like I might have lived with someone a long, long time ago and learned a lot from them…but I don't remember anymore."

"Oh yeah? Was it a parent you were with?"

"I don't remember that either. They may have been, or they could have been someone entirely unrelated. Either way, it's the same." Her tone was flat. It was the voice of someone who felt no attachment toward the subject they were discussing.

"Saying those two things are the same is—"

"It's the same. Either way, they abandoned me and left me on my own. It doesn't matter if they were my parent or someone else."

The sound of complete rejection in her voice took him back to the first time they met, but it was only for a moment. Her usual expression returned as she gazed at Zig.

"But now I have you, so that's fine."

"Hm. Right."

"Yup!" Her face blossomed into a beautiful smile. It was the look of someone truly enjoying the moment.

Yes, he'd caught the slightest glimpse of her inner turmoil and fragility, but he couldn't say anything more.

Urbas of the Verdant Scaleclan showed up after they finished eating and were wrapping up a conversation about going to bed early to prepare for the next day. The lizard-type demi-human—or the scalefolk, as his people were truly called—was the same as ever, his scales dark green and his tail slowly swaying.

Scalefolk had good physiques. He was burly enough to stand out, with his irregular form attracting attention, although he wasn't as large as Zig.

"Hello, Zig, Siasha."

He greeted them politely, gesturing to ask if he could join them before taking a seat at the same table. Zig wondered how he would manage with his tail since the backrest of the chair had no hole, but he expertly turned his seat to the side before sitting down.

"I'm sorry. You experienced quite a bit of trouble because of us."

He apologized as soon as he sat down, bowing his head low. It was a world of difference between his attitude and the ones they had encountered at the Vardia Clan. Even his tail seemed to curl up apologetically and his tongue hid away in his mouth.

"Sorry for getting you involved."

"I'm the one who decided to help you back then. If repercussions come from a choice you've made, then you just have to accept them."

Siasha's stance was resolute. Part of the reason started with discrimination against demi-humans, but she was the one who got

herself involved.

She was angry that the Vardia Clan had tried to put an obstacle in her path, and truthfully, she might have looked the other way if she had known what was going to happen from the beginning. Regardless, Siasha couldn't bring herself to deny the consequences of her choice.

"I did enjoy exacting my revenge on them, though. How about we say that makes us even?"

Yes, it had been fun. She felt different, almost joyful, compared to when she had been retaliating against the people who would come to kill her.

"Thank you for doing that for—"

Siasha interrupted Urbas, who was mistakenly thanking her for what she had done for them.

"I don't want there to be any misunderstanding. I did what I did for my own sake, to get rid of anyone who stands in my way." Her tone was dignified, her blue eyes determined—there was no hesitation in her anymore.

"Is that so? You're a quintessential adventurer, Siasha." Urbas's eyes creased slightly, and his tongue darted in and out. It was difficult to read his expressions, but that was probably a smile.

"Why, thank you!" A *quintessential adventurer.* Siasha seemed to enjoy those specific words of praise. "You may be more experienced than me, but don't get too complacent! It won't be long before I overtake you."

"I look forward to it. I'm waiting for the day when we can fight shoulder to shoulder again."

Zig had watched their exchange without a word. Feeling Urbas's gaze rest on him, he slowly shook his head.

"Sorry, but I can't align myself with either humans or your kind."

"Even though you're a human yourself?"

Urbas looked perplexed; he couldn't understand Zig's mindset.

Zig had been raised on a battlefield with only one species—-humans—so he felt little sense of belonging. He was an orphan of unknown origin, and the only mercenary brigade he ever belonged to instilled in him that allies and enemies could change at any time. Even after encountering demi-humans, a species that was distinctly different from humans, his beliefs hadn't changed. Some humans were bestial, some demi-humans were rational. *Both* were equals. Therefore, he would cut any of them down if they were his enemy.

"I'll continue to be a mercenary. Ideologies and species don't matter. If it's for a job, I'll fight everyone."

His words might be taken as cold and outrageous at face value —a statement from someone who only cared about money. That was fine with him. These were the absolute values that he had developed over his life.

He showed no remorse for the lives he had taken to prolong his own. But he wouldn't pretend he'd acted justly, nor embellish himself with flattering words.

"I see," Urbas said.

"I'm sorry." Allies were precious to an ostracized people. After offering his help, Zig had then brushed it off as work. He felt bad about getting their hopes up.

"No, that's fine. Would it be all right if I called you my friend, Zig?"

"What?"

Zig had to confirm what he'd just heard. Who would want to call someone a friend after they had just said they would mercilessly kill you if you were their enemy?

He glanced at Urbas as if to question his sanity, but the lizard man just gently swayed his tail before lowering it to the floor with a small thud.

"You see everyone as equals regardless of whether they are human or demi-human. I want to call someone like that a friend."

"But I would cut you down without hesitation if you ever became my enemy."

"Friends don't always get along with each other. Sometimes they butt heads." He looked at Zig with eyes that were a brighter green than his scales. His gaze was so piercing that it was almost dazzling, the kind that made people involuntarily look away.

"I suppose. Then, I won't say anything more. Call me what you wish."

"Thank you, Zig."

Urbas stretched out his fist, and Zig met it with his own.

They weren't comrades-in-arms, just comrades. Bewildered by this first-time experience, Zig's face bore traces of his younger self.

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The back alley was dingy, crawling with rats, and the ground was littered with the vagrants who lived among them. It was difficult to tell if they were alive or dead, but judging from how they occasionally made jerking movements, it was probably the former.

A woman with shoulder-length brown hair and a sharp gaze leaned up against a wall of the alley, coldly taking in the scene. Then, sensing a presence, she unsheathed the dagger at her waist that she'd brought for protection. Her custom indigo-adamantine dagger made a crisp sound as it sliced through the air.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Oh, it's you, Vanno…" Recognizing the voice, she slipped the dagger away.

A tired, middle-aged man wearing a trench coat emerged from the shadows. However, he only gave off the *impression* of weariness, as his gaze betrayed that he wasn't the type to tolerate any funny business.

Now that he was in the presence of the woman, Vanno extinguished his cigar and pulled out an empty syringe.

"What's that?"

Even though the contents were depleted, it didn't look like it had served a legitimate medical purpose. Taking it from him, she took a closer look. The container seemed worn, like it had seen frequent use.

"Seems like it's *that* drug," Vanno said. "According to the information I got out of that man, it doesn't seem like the transactions are occurring at a specific time or place."

"So, it's getting distributed randomly? Trying to increase the number of addicts before going in for the kill?"

"That's part of it. But their true purpose is probably—"

"A declaration of war, saying they can do whatever they want on our turf, including getting the local thugs on their side?"

Vanno gave a silent nod. The woman clicked her tongue as she tightened her grip around the syringe.

"Tell me you at least managed to get the name of the bastards behind this mockery."

"Aggretia."

Her gaze hardened at his response. It wasn't a local word, but there was something familiar about its unique sound.

"Those assholes who control Striggo in the west," she said. "I'd heard their regulations on illegal drugs are quite lax, but I didn't think they'd try their luck over here."

"They don't know the meaning of moderation. If left unchecked, the whole city will go to ruin."

Women and gambling weren't so different when it came to self-destruction, but the horror of drugs was on a whole different scale. It

destroyed people and their brains, bringing them a pleasure that reason could not resist, followed by an addiction that far surpassed it. Once you were in too deep, digging yourself back out of that hole was not an easy task.

That's why even the handling party needed to proceed with caution.

"We need to move quickly," the woman finally said.

Make no mistake, these were not good people.

However, even criminals like them had a line that they would not be cross. It was a line that didn't inconvenience them much, but due to their long-standing involvement in nefarious activities, they knew when to exercise restraint.

"I was getting suspicious of a group of rowdy adventurers and decided to have them investigated, but I acted too late," Vanno said with a sigh. "Their clan house was destroyed by some inexplicable duo that had a bone to pick with them. I don't doubt that they were *taken care of* when they tried to flee in the night."

"Adventurers…" There was a trace of uneasiness in the brown-haired woman's tone. "The situation may be even more dire than I thought."

The forces seeking to corrupt Halian were slowly creeping closer.

Side Story:
The Choice to Live

ROTTEN. IF THERE WAS ONE WORD TO DESCRIBE this place, that would be it.

Rotten flesh, rotten hearts, rotten earth. A gust of wind brought with it the smell of death, sticking in the nose and refusing to fade away.

Although it left the invaders exposed, this plain served as an essential path to entering the country. It was an attractive piece of land that compelled conquerors to make significant sacrifices to claim it.

"Well, it is what it is. It's true there's power in numbers, but it seems the other party couldn't discern between a motley crew and a unified group."

The mighty warrior with hair like a lion's mane sounded almost bored as he surveyed the battlefield where the conflict's outcome had been decided. With a weathered bow slung over his back and a rugged war hammer at his waist, his appearance lacked any flourish. However, he radiated an overwhelming aura of substance and excellence.

On his chest was the insignia of an eagle. The man he turned to wore the same emblem around his neck.

"What's wrong? I know you're always scowling, but your frown lines are especially deep today, Viktor."

"You're never going to fix that insensitive streak of yours, are you, Dael?"

The man who responded was a mercenary with a long spear who looked like he was reaching the end of his prime. He had a smaller build than the hulking warrior beside him, although he didn't give off a hint of weakness. Standing tall like a great tree, he evoked the image of a storybook knight. There was an air of elegance and refinement about him despite his status as a hireling.

"Seasoned" would be a more fitting term to describe the man than "old."

The name "Hundred Wing Brigade" was engraved on the insignia they were both wearing. But due to how ferociously the members of that mercenary group fought, everyone else referred to them as the "Hundred Demon Brigade."

Daebaltos Crane was the captain of the group, while Viktor Crane was the vice-captain.

They weren't related by blood. Daebaltos allowed members that were orphans that didn't know their own name or those with scarred pasts who wanted to keep theirs hidden, to adopt his surname. Daebaltos himself was an orphan, and the name "Crane" was a nonexistent name that he'd invented for himself.

"They let their guard down and got taken advantage of. That's all."

"True enough. This is usually what ends up happening when you forget something so basic as 'there are no absolutes in battle.'"

Their gazes were still sharp as they spoke, surveying the battle—which was as good as won—until the very end.

Eventually, the earthshaking victory cry of the soldiers shook the rotten plains, but at that point, the two of them had already turned their backs on it. They had no use for a battle that had already been won. All that was left was to collect their payment.

"It appears the rumor is true," Dael said abruptly. There was no context to his words, but Viktor knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Oh."

His response was just one word. Like a general who just received news of the death of one of his soldiers, there was no readable emotion in his voice.

"No matter how strong a man is—when they die, they die. That's a fact guys like us should be intimately acquainted with. Still, I thought you of all people would be able to escape death, eh, Zig?"

Dael ran his fingers through his messy mane of hair and glanced up at the sky as he finished speaking. Unconsciously tampering with his eagle insignia was something he habitually did when someone close to him had died. Aware of that, Viktor gripped the handle of his spear even harder as memories of one of their more memorable disciples among the many came back to him.

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They had picked the boy up when they were in a certain country on a job.

Sandwiched between major players to the east and west, the country wasn't large but was rich in resources such as iron ore and coal. It had maintained good relations with both of its neighbors by exporting resources. However, misfortune struck when they faced invasions from both sides in the wake of a war between the two powers.

As a result of trying to please everyone, they found themselves unprotected in a time of crisis, and their lands were ravaged. Attacked from the front and the back, the country was left with gaping wounds. To make matters worse, a chance meeting of the eastern and western armies sparked the beginning of a conflict.

Several years had passed since the war first started.

The Hundred Wings Brigade, who had been hired by the eastern power to fight in the battle, were appalled at the devastation they encountered in the town. The cityscape of this small country that had once thrived as a resource exporter was beyond recognition, with corpses of unlucky souls who'd gotten caught in the crossfire of the war between the two countries strewn about everywhere.

"Ugh, this is just horrible. You're not supposed to mess with civilians. Although, in these conditions, I suppose it was inevitable…"

Dael shrugged in disgust at the pile of bodies of noncombatants piled up alongside the road.

"The vanguard unit probably had criminal slaves," Viktor explained, his face unwavering. "They're deprived of proper

provisions, baited with the promise of amnesty, and used to demoralize the enemy since they'll engage in plunder and carnage under the guise of resupplying. Then, once the war settles down, they'll be purged in the name of their atrocities in order to maintain military order. It's a surprisingly effective means of dealing with dangerous individuals and weakening the enemy's military power."

Dael grimaced as he glanced back once more.

"What does it say when regular troops behave more shockingly than mercenaries?"

"Great nations can't be sustained without stooping to that level."

"Did you do that kind of thing too?" Dael asked, his tone testing as he held his war hammer in one hand.

Viktor, who didn't even flinch at the sight of the most gruesome corpses, changed the expression on his face for the first time. His brows knit together as his voice grew bitter and forced.

"If I had, I wouldn't be here now."

Dael's shoulders relaxed as he attempted to joke around. "I'm relieved to hear that, partner."

In response, Viktor clicked his tongue and tried to quicken his pace. Right at that second, a shadow loomed overhead, and they heard a sound like the scuffing of gravel.

"Viktor!"

Viktor flipped his spear around faster than his partner's voice could reach him. He thrust it into the ground, not caring that it would damage the tip, and utilized the recoil to back away from the attacker

coming from above. He firmly planted his foot on the cobblestones as he stepped back, aiming to thrust the spear he was holding in a lowered position—a movement ingrained in his body.

"Huh?! Wait!"

"Dael? What the fuck are you—"

His partner—Dael—knocked the tip of Viktor's spear clean off with his war hammer. For a moment he thought the man had completely lost his mind and started to curse at him, but Dael seemed unconcerned, dropping his own weapon as he ran out to intercept the assailant.

"You little brat!" Dael roared.

Instead of punching the attacker leaping toward them, he swung down his fist and knocked him to the ground.

"Ngh!"

The assailant fell with a croaking sound not unlike a frog being squished. The knife he'd been holding sharply clattered across the cobblestones.

"What in the—"

"Relax, Viktor. It's just a kid."

"A kid?"

Dael stepped to the side, revealing a boy, not even in his teens, lying on the ground with his eyes rolled back into his head thanks to that punch. He was wearing tattered clothes on his scrawny body. The "knife" that he'd been wielding wasn't a weapon at all—it was a dish.

"Must be one of the residents who survived," Viktor mused.

"More accurate to say he was left behind. Those who weren't killed were either taken away or got the hell out of here a long time ago."

"Thanks. I almost killed him."

Even if he'd been under attack, killing a civilian—and a child at that—was never a good feeling. Still, he couldn't often afford to think like that on a battlefield, where emotional leeway was scarce.

"Don't mention it. I don't care if it's me doing it, but seeing you kill a kid would ruin my appetite."

Dael was often saving him with those bold statements of his. Silently thanking his partner, Viktor approached the unconscious child.

The boy gasped, shaking his head and glancing around as he came to. The fact that he didn't pretend to remain unconscious and observe the situation first showed how naive he was.

"So, you're finally up, kid."

The boy turned around with a jolt and lowered into a defensive squat at Dael's voice. His gaze never wavered, not even for a second, as he groped around for a weapon. It was a remarkable display of resourcefulness for someone of his age.

By that time, Dael and Viktor had returned to their tent. Dael was sitting on a wooden box and eating while Viktor was doing some practice swings. With the tent fabric behind him, the boy had no choice but to get past one of them if he wished to escape.

Viktor watched him out of the corner of his eye as he continued to take his swings. His eyes, like those of a starving stray dog, spoke volumes about what he'd been through. He was wary of everything, as if whatever entered his line of sight was an enemy.

That made sense, though. It had been several years since the war started, and this kid somehow seemed to have survived all on his own. Even if it was a small country, there was no way a child could escape, especially when surrounded by the soldiers of powerful nations on both sides. There was nowhere to run. His protruding ribs showed that he hadn't been eating much, probably due to the looting. Judging from the dark circles under his eyes, he hadn't been sleeping much either.

It was impressive that he'd made it this long. The only reason he'd attacked them was probably because his hunger had reached its limit.

"What's your name, kid?"

The boy responded to Dael's question only with hoarse and ragged breathing. He was searching for a weapon, his gaze darting around the tent until he noticed some practice swords placed among their gear. Jumping to his feet, he fished through the weapons, settling on a dagger instead of the oversized longsword, and brandished it at Viktor.

"Well, well, Viktor. Looks like the kid's raring to go. Why don't you give him what he wants?"

"There you go, talking out of your ass again."

Taken aback by the task that had been placed upon him, Viktor stopped taking swings and wiped some of the sweat that was dripping from his brow. Seizing his opportunity, the boy rushed toward him. His leg strength was weak, but the initial speed of his light and nimble body was impressive. He beelined for Viktor, dagger firmly gripped in his hand, with his eyes set on the man's stomach.

Viktor's eyes widened in surprise.

The weight behind the boy's lunge made up for his lack of power. Despite being a kid, his intent was to kill him. Whether it was Dael's inept whistling in the background or something else that got under his skin, Viktor scowled and jumped into action.

Holding the spear in the middle, he thrust it into the boy's field of vision, bringing it down from the side. Although his movements were deliberately slow, it still frightened the child. Attacks to the eyes evoke an instinctual fear that takes substantial training to overcome. Resolve alone is not enough to triumph over natural instincts. By halting the boy's only advantage—his speed—his chances of winning, which were already minuscule to begin with, completely evaporated.

As Viktor slid in to close the distance, he swung the shaft of the spear up in a reverse grip, connecting squarely with the child's jaw.

"Guh!"

The uppercut-like impact sent the boy toppling over. Viktor had held back, so the blow shouldn't have caused any major injuries, but the child seemed to be at his physical limit. His limbs were sprawled out like a starfish as he lay on the ground unmoving.

"Ha ha ha! How lame! You can't let that freak you out, you little punk!"

Dael guffawed and slapped his knee as he chewed on some bread. Although he wasn't the target of the laughter, Viktor started to get annoyed. He was especially irritated at his captain's questionable behavior of putting weapons near the kid on purpose and then goading him.

The boy spluttered and coughed. "I-I'll…kill…you…"

Maybe the boy shared the sentiment, as his glare was aimed at Dael rather than Viktor, who had struck him. His voice was weak, likely due to fatigue and hunger, but his eyes remained as sharp as ever, jerking around in an attempt to find a way out.

"Oho! You've still got some fight left in you?"

That was when Dael's tone shifted. His expression transitioned from someone enjoying an amusing spectacle to one befitting the captain of a mercenary group. Viktor's face mirrored the sentiment.

Despite being shown that the men he was up against were overwhelmingly more powerful than him, the boy's eyes showed no acceptance of death. They only reflected the strong desire to survive. That sentiment might seem obvious, but those who lived and breathed on the battlefield knew just how hard it was to hold on to it. It was surprising how easy people would flee from life when they discovered they were outmatched or in a desperate situation. In the face of intolerable pain or a strong enemy, they sought escape in death.

It wasn’t that they thought this child could escape his fate. The streets were piled with the corpses of children his age and even younger. There was no distinction or discrimination among them, just the same lumps of meat lying on the ground.

“So, partner, what do you think?”

“Are you serious? He’s still just a kid.”

Dael waved around his bread, grinning from ear to ear. Having picked up on his intentions, Viktor’s first reaction was reluctance. He knew from experience that whenever the captain made that face, nothing good usually ever came of it—and he had a particularly bad feeling about this time.

“Why not? I think he’s got something that can’t just be achieved with training.”

“Suit yourself. You’re the captain.”

“It’s settled, then.”

Dael had a habit of going through with things even if he disagreed. Ignoring Viktor’s sigh, Dael walked over to the child, who was still lying on his back.

“Listen up, punk. You already know you can’t escape.”

The boy didn’t respond.

Dael flashed him an intimidating smile. The small child was frightened but glared straight back at him without averting his eyes. It was like they were having a staring contest, and whoever looked away first lost.

"I've got a deal for you, kid. I'm going to ask you questions, and every time you answer, I'll give you some food. Got it?"

He bit into the bread as if to show off, but the boy didn't react. Instead, he spoke in a strained and hoarse voice.

"Wa…"

"Wa?"

The child's voice was so faint that it was hard to hear. Dael strained his ears and repeated the syllable he had been able to pick up.

"Wa…wa…"

"You crying or something?"

"He's trying to say water, you idiot," Viktor said, giving Dael a smack on the head.

Unable to watch from the sidelines any longer, he finished his training and offered the child his canteen.

"Hey! We're in the middle of a deal here! I haven't asked him anything yet."

"Drink this. Consider it an apology for all the trouble this idiot caused."

The child reached out to take the water he desperately craved, but given how badly his hands were shaking, he probably wouldn't be able to hold the canteen properly. It seemed like he'd exhausted the last of his strength earlier.

Viktor got down on one knee and lay the child across it, pressing the opening of his canteen to the boy's parched lips. Slowly and

carefully, he let him drink, like he was pouring water into a cup that might overflow. The child coughed the water back up on several occasions, but each time Viktor gently tapped his back. He continued to let the boy drink until he had his fill.

"Hey, you finished yet?"

"Shut your trap, idiot. Hmph."

Dael, who been amusing himself by playing with the bread, cowered at the sharp gaze, but it was the child who stopped Viktor from glaring.

"N-name…"

"I told you already. That was an apology for this idiot's behavior."

He told the boy not to worry about it, but the child shook his head.

"You gave me…a drink. My debt…must be…repaid."

Both men were rendered speechless. This child had said he would repay a debt. Even though it was a phrase they were both familiar with, the two mercenaries couldn't help but gasp.

It was natural to seek comfort. It was natural to rely on others. This boy had abandoned all the feelings children instinctively possessed to ensure his survival. In the years this war had dragged on, what had led to this child being worn down to such an extent?

They should've known the answer. There were plenty of children just like him in this war-torn world. There was no difference between those children and the boy in front of them.

"What's your name?" Viktor asked.

"Zig."

Nevertheless, this boy had the right to choose.

"Zig. You have two paths going forward."

"Paths…?"

"Right, paths. You can either die a dog's death out here or come with us and kill others to live. Continuously ending the lives of others just so that you can survive. It's not an easy path by any means. There are many times that you'll wish you had died instead. That's the kind of path it is."

The boy who called himself Zig gazed intently at Dael, who was speaking firmly with a far more serious expression than he had been wearing before. This kid was young, so Dael didn't know just how much the boy understood. Still, it was something that had to be said. No one would accept his protests if he claimed later that he didn't know what he was signing up for.

"Think about it long and hard before you decide. Once you choose this path, there's no running away from it. Even those who think they've escaped will eventually find it catching up with them someday. That's why—"

"I'll go."

"Are you sure?"

It only took Zig a second to decide. He didn't seem to be conflicted at all. Choosing that path was so inevitable for him that he didn't spare it a thought.

"I will…live."

The boy—no, Zig—had made up his mind.

On that day, Zig Crane the mercenary was born.

***

"Heh. That takes me back. You still remember, right? That kid had the nerve to brush me off when I told him I'd teach him the sword and went to you instead."

Viktor realized he hadn't been the only one going down memory lane. Dael had a far-off look in his eyes as he recalled Zig bowing his head as he approached Viktor with a broken pole.

"Yup, the kid sure was perceptive."

"Hey now. That was uncalled for!"

Dael laughed heartily, not actually caring about the jab. Viktor himself was surprised that he still remembered something that had taken place that long ago so clearly. It had been that impactful.

That's precisely why it was so hard to come to grips with the fact that he was now dead.

"He wasn't cut out to be a captain, but as a soldier…" Viktor trailed off.

"Yeah. Hard to imagine he started out as such a scrawny kid."

After that, neither man said anything more.

The members of the Hundred Wing Brigade were getting ready to withdraw. Their deft preparations were nothing less than that of a first-rate army, a culmination of the forces the two men had built together.

"Hey, you know about that last job he took, right?"

"The witch hunt? He went after the Silent Witch, the most powerful witch of all, didn't he?"

"Heh, aren't you in the know? I heard there were a ton of casualties, but they managed to finish her off. Sounds like a crock to me. I saw the guys who made it back. They all looked like scrubs. And it's not like they're even exploring that forest much even though they *supposedly* got her."

Dael was grinning from ear to ear. Whatever idea was brewing in his mind, Viktor wasn't going to like what he heard. It was the same smile he'd had when the course of one boy's life had been decided.

"Wanna go and check out that witch for ourselves?"

"Let's do it."

Viktor's response was immediate—a move that was very much out of character for him. So much so that it caught his partner completely off guard.

"Huh? I didn't realize you'd be so raring to go. What's up?"

"It's not that serious." Viktor drew in a long breath as he gazed up at the sky. The air was as rotten as ever. The kind of air that was

filled with the karma born of taking and being taken, irrationality, and slaughter.

The same as it was back then.

"It's a master's job to clean up the mess his pupil couldn't."

Bonus Story:
Business Strategy and Techniques

THE SHARED WORKSHOP WAS HEAVY WITH STEAM AND the echoing sound of the blacksmiths' hammers. Gantt fiddled with his beard. He wasn't slacking off on the job—if anything, he was as fired up as he'd ever been.

"The concept itself isn't too bad. The question is just how to demonstrate its utility…"

Gantt was examining a single gauntlet. Engraved with shock wave magic, the item had been collecting dust in the storehouse for as long as he could remember.

No, no, it was one of his masterpieces. Sadly, no one had even bothered to try the gauntlet out, chiding him with comments like *"When the hell is someone going to challenge a monstrosity with their bare hands?"*

Yet, by a twist of fate, for the first time in years, it was getting a chance to see the light of day.

"I can't let this opportunity go to waste. I just wonder how long it will take," he murmured to himself, recalling how he'd used every trick in the book to get his customer, Zig, to purchase the same item.

If someone like him, a guy who seemed to be popping up in conversations everywhere, were to showcase the gauntlet's utility, more people might be willing to purchase one for themselves.

"I doubt he'll have a chance to use it right away, though."

Pummeling a monstrosity at close distance? Just saying the words sounded downright crazy. It wasn't a matter of whether it *could* be done, there just wasn't much reason to do it. When fighting from a distance, magic or projectiles were preferred, while swords were used in close combat. Using one's bare hands didn't even come into play.

Still, there had to be some use in incorporating power into a punch that could be deployed quicker than swinging a weapon and didn't require an incantation like casting a spell. The whole concept of this magic item was that it could be used in emergencies, but that was exactly why its usefulness was limited to specific situations.

"Hm. What to do?"

"Gantt, you have a customer."

Gantt was still pondering just how he was going to sell this item when Sciezka called out to him. He had a habit of ignoring her when he was engrossed in something, but she was adept at discerning the subtleties of a situation. She had probably noticed that his muddled thoughts were starting to wander.

"Yeah, what's up?"

He turned his gaze to the young man at her side. He was an adventurer with spiky auburn hair. By his attire, he appeared to be making a decent living for someone of his age, and his stance was polite. Gantt suspected he was one of the up-and-comers from the Wadatsumi Clan. Gantt didn't remember seeing him before, but he recognized the young man's equipment.

"This is Mr. Cain from the Wadatsumi Clan. There's something he wanted to ask you."

"I'd like you to show me a double-edged sword." Cain took a step forward as he made his abrupt request.

"Ha ha! I wouldn't do that if I were you, kid. You're just going to hurt yourself."

Gantt snorted with laughter when he heard what the young man wanted. His rude response prompted Sciezka to give him a scathing glare. Gantt immediately felt a desire to avert his eyes, but this was not a situation he could back away from.

"Sorry, I went too far. I didn't mean you specifically—most people would end up injured in some way or another. That weapon isn't one you just decide to pick up and use."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Surprisingly, Cain didn't sound irritated. It seemed like he just wanted Gantt to elaborate on what he said. Many people took offense to how Gantt spoke, which could be considered frank if you were feeling generous, or just plain rude if you weren't. This was especially true if they were young.

Due to that, Cain had improved Gantt's impression of him enough that he was willing to provide a thorough explanation.

"While it may be called a 'sword' in name, it's actually a polearm weapon, not unlike a spear or a halberd. It's not something a guy like you who's only wielded a normal sword before can use."

"How did you—"

"I can tell from your hands."

Gantt gave a little shrug, answering the question that Cain hadn't even finished asking. He been able to discern that Cain had only used a sword before just by looking at him. His attitude aside, Gantt truly was an excellent blacksmith.

"There are various reasons people end up with this weapon. Maybe a spear wasn't enough for them, maybe they randomly came across it and it was a good fit. In any case, it's not something you pick up just to wield on a whim."

As Gantt finished his explanation, Cain seemed to be brooding, his eyes trained downwards.

Well, I suppose words alone aren't convincing enough.

Gantt reached into a pile of random weapons and pulled one out. It was a double-edged sword forged from iron, but one of the blades had been cut in half. This was Zig's old weapon; he'd given it to them to dispose of when he'd purchased his new blade.

"Here, this is what you wanted, right? The blades are wrapped with cloth, so feel free to give it a whirl." Gantt figured Cain would see what he was talking about if he tried the weapon out for himself.

Stepping back to take the sword, Cain was surprised by how heavy it was. Nevertheless, he physically enhanced himself and adopted a confident stance. He raised the double-edged sword over his head before swinging it down.

Gantt didn't think he was too bad. Cain was skilled in physical fortification and well-built for his age. He was a talented adventurer,

the type that would continue to improve as he got more experience.

At least, that's what ran through Gantt's mind before he started shaking with laughter as Cain dropped to the ground, clutching his shin in agony. He had whacked it with a dull, dramatic thud.

"Ha ha ha! I told you so! The center of gravity and length are different from that of a sword, and since you can't hold it toward the bottom like a spear, you have to consider the position of the blades."

"Gantt! This is no laughing matter! Are you all right?"

He probably hadn't cracked the bone. Cain moaned as he cast restorative magic on himself while Sciezka hurriedly ran to grab a first aid kit.

Gantt continued to roar with laughter, but he'd seen for himself that Zig was having some sort of impact. If he played his cards right, he might even be able to get rid of some of the stock that was taking up space in the storehouse.

He was already counting his chickens before they hatched when the first aid kit Sciezka hurled his way smacked him directly in the face.

Afterword

THIS IS THE AUTHOR, CHOHOKITEKI KAERU. It's good to see you all again.

How did you like the third volume of *Witch and Mercenary*? I added quite a bit of new content to this installment, so I hope if felt fresh and exciting even for those who read the web novel version.

I also find myself getting hyped up over the amount of new content that is steadily coming with each volume. So much so that I'd love to go back in time and beat the crap out of past me for believing that publishing a web novel as a book would be "easy." It's surprisingly challenging to add in new things while maintaining consistency with the web version…

The additional content for this volume included the scene where Siasha went on a rampage. Being undermined by peers who aren't outright hostile can be a real hassle to deal with, and it's an issue that pops up in real-life relationships as well. For Siasha, this was a baptism by fire in experiencing how troublesome human relationships can be.

In the end, she resolved the problem by overcoming it with sheer force—a powerful solution—but I also received positive feedback that she was able to deal with her adversaries without resorting to wiping them out. Perhaps even more personal growth can be expected from her in the future?

At the end of the main story in this volume, we also got our first look at the mercenary brigade where everything started for Zig. Our muscle-bound mercenary is still quite a mysterious figure, but I've begun to write about his origins. This includes how, after losing his home to war, Zig finds his place with a group of mercenaries whose work revolves around conflicts, as well as the relationships he forges through the course of their battles. I'll be writing even more about how Zig spends his time and grows with the mercenaries in both the web novel and print version, so I hope you'll look forward to it!

Also, serialization of the *Witch and Mercenary* manga finally started on January 28th, 2024. I've been delighted to learn that it's been well received. It also achieved the honor of being awarded first place in Magapoke's (the web manga site where it's running) original rankings! Thank you so much!

Since becoming serialized as a manga, I've been fervently discussing the designs for the monstrosities with my managing editor, Mr. I, and we've been working hard on both their composition and movements. I really enjoy making the explanatory materials for the monstrosities. I tend to add details about their ecology, even though they aren't really necessary for drawing them in the manga. I really appreciate Kanase Bench-sensei and Ganmarei-sensei, who joined for this volume, for all their help with the monstrosity designs. I'd love to create an actual Monstrosity Encyclopedia someday!

Speaking of the manga serialization, Miyagi Makoto-sensei is incredibly responsive to detailed requests, so I feel very confident entrusting him with this task. Seeing the characters I've created come

to life through artwork has made me happier than I ever imagined. I've been continually amazed by how incredible manga adaptations can be.

I believe that I've only been able to make it this far because of my managing editor, Mr. I, who patiently guides me despite my ignorance; Kanase Bench-sensei, who creates incredible illustrations every time; and more than anything else, the readers who have always supported me. When I received fan letters, I was so happy that I started to tremble. I'm truly grateful.

I ask that you please continue to support this silly froggy from here on out.



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