
NOVEL
4
Witch and MERCENARY
STORY BY CHOHOKITEKI KAERU
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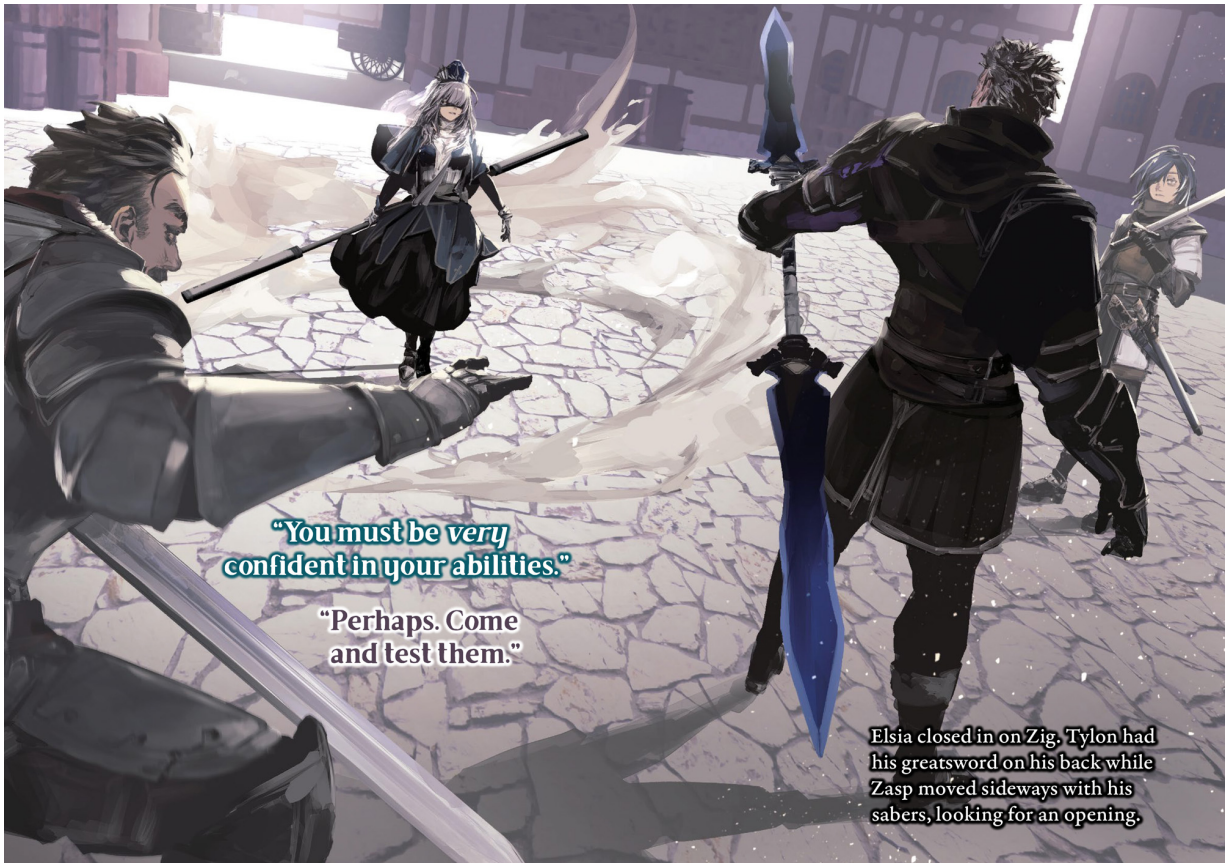
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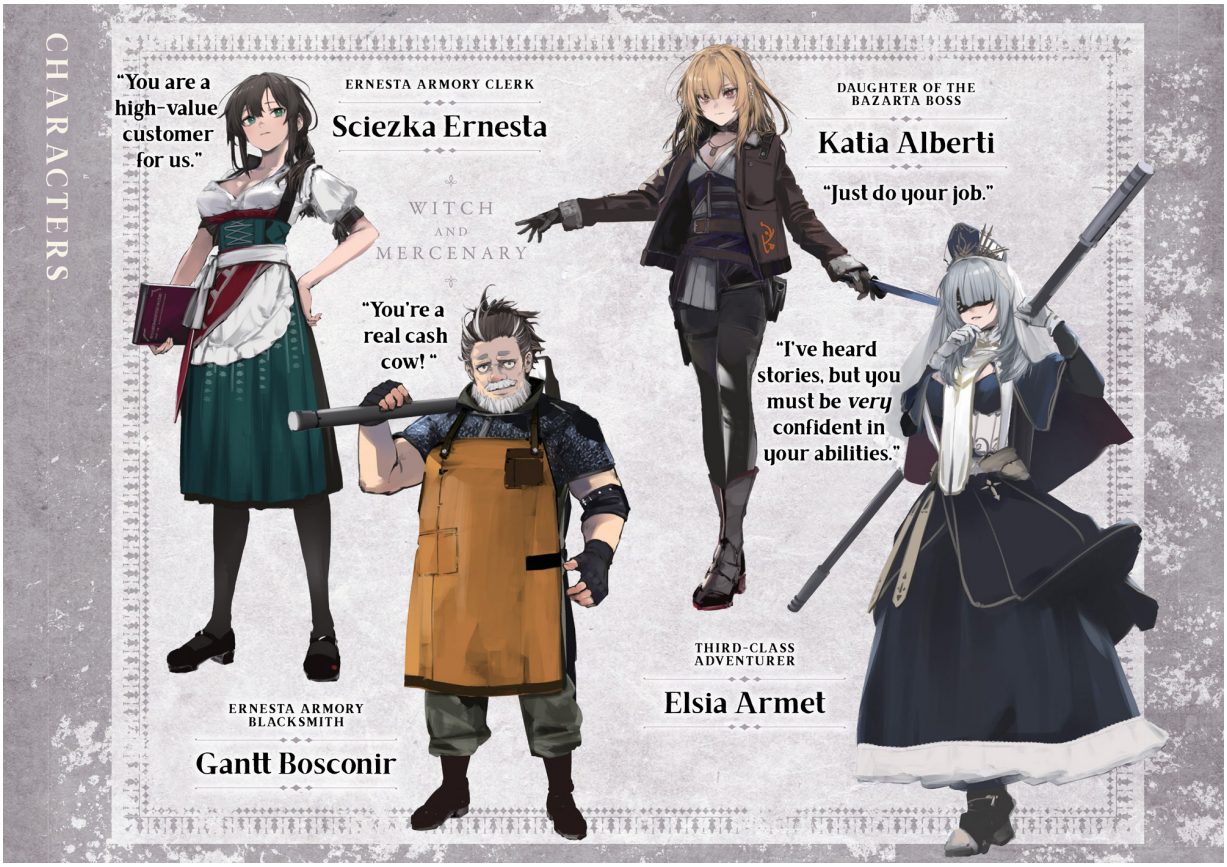
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"You must be very confident in your abilities."
"Perhaps. Come and test them."
Elsia closed in on Zig. Tylon had his greatsword on his back while Zasp moved sideways with his sabers, looking for an opening.


"You are a high-value customer for us."
ERNESTA ARMORY CLERK
Sciezka Ernesta
WITCH AND MERCENARY
"You're a real cash cow! "
ERNESTA ARMORY BLACKSMITH
Gantt Bosconir
DAUGHTER OF THE BAZARTA BOSS
Katia Alberti
"Just do your job."
"I've heard stories, but you must be *very* confident in your abilities."
THIRD-CLASS ADVENTURER
Elsia Armet

WITCH AND MERCENARY

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BIRDS OF A FEATHER

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Witch and Mercenary

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Seven Seas Entertainment

Chapter 1:
Return to Normalcy and a Looming Threat

CRACKED PAVEMENT WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE LINING the menacing back alleys: Such was the state of Halian's northern district. While not too far from the town's center, it was a far cry from the well-maintained downtown area.

Early in the morning, a large man was already walking through its familiar streets. He was an impressive two meters tall and gave off a menacing aura even when standing still. Despite his height, he was actually eclipsed by his bulk, and his muscles visibly bulged beneath his clothes. His face was blank, but his eyes were sharp and alert.

"Hmm."

After a moment, Zig Crane nodded to himself in satisfaction.

The mercenary from a faraway land was currently away from his client Siasha. Instead of guarding her, he was wandering around in back-alley stores—a peculiar hobby of his. Meanwhile, his ward was currently back at the inn, fast asleep after a night of reading the grimoires she'd checked out from the library.

"Didn't think I'd dig up a gem like this."

Zig's good mood was evident as he held up a slightly dirty bottle of wine. He'd found it in a general store—stolen and fenced for cheap, he assumed. To be honest, *most* of the items in the store were probably pilfered goods.

Upon spotting the bottle, his eyes had widened, and he'd bought it without saying another word. While he was still learning the ways of alcohol, he knew that wine had a universal production process, so he strained to inspect the bottling, vintage, and the state of the drink itself. Based on his experience and intuition, he knew he'd found *good* wine.

"I'll have to get some snacks to go with this. Where was the cheese store again…?"

Zig liked alcohol, but he loved looking for food to pair with it even more. In fact, he usually liked looking for drinks to accompany snacks instead of the other way around—but a wine as good as this shouldn't be limited to mere *snacks*.

"Cheese is standard, but meat might go better with a wine this age…"

"The *hell* did you say to me, bitch?!"

As he cheerfully contemplated wine pairings, a man's scream broke through Zig's concentration. A fight, maybe a mugging. These things happened all the time here. He would just go on his way. There was no need to interrupt the ordinary ebb and flow of life in the backstreets.

"Hands off, scrub. You don't know who you're messing with."

The voice was quiet but imposing.

Realizing that a young woman was speaking, Zig stopped and turned to look at the scene. Three men were surrounding a woman who was backed up against a wall. The woman had shoulder-length

chestnut hair and appeared to be in her late teens, though he couldn't be sure. Her eyes carried too much experience for someone so young.

Her gaze was sharp and dignified as she crossed her arms, unimpressed by the three men's attempt at intimidating her. Her clothes were plain but of high quality, suggesting that she came from a well-to-do family.

She looked bored by the men threatening her with knives, as if they were nothing but a bunch of yapping dogs. The menacing criminals clearly lacked the walk or the talk—or both.

As the woman remained unfazed by their threats, the men lost their tempers.

"Guess we're doing this the *hard* way!" one shouted, sending a fist flying toward her face. It lacked precision, being fueled with nothing but raw power, but there was enough force in it to harm her.

Both Zig and the woman observed the punch with the same cynical expression.

She dodged it as it came inches away from her face. All the force of the fist crashed into the wall behind her.

"Shit!"

The woman grabbed the wincing man's wrist and pulled him toward her, yanking his face into the wall. There was a thud, followed by the crack of the man's nose. He staggered as blood gushed out of his nostrils. The woman then took his legs out from under him with a sharp low kick. Unable to maintain his footing because of the pain in his nose and his chipped teeth, the man toppled to the ground.

"Huh?!"

Though she'd taken one of her attackers down, the woman kept moving. She drove her boots into the rough pavement before kicking the stunned man to her left. The hard tip of her boot connected with his crotch, knocking him senseless before he could make another sound. The only thing that could be heard was the sickening crunch of his groin being crushed.



She jumped over the man as he doubled over in pain to avoid the last one trying to grab her. She then kicked his rear, knocking him into his friend.

"Hey, get off me!"

"Wake up, slowpokes!"

There was a flash of ferocity in the woman's eyes. Planting a foot on the ground, she launched a roundhouse kick with the other by spinning her upper body. Her heel, drawing power from her breath and centrifugal force, connected with her opponent's chin. It rattled the man's brain, causing him to crumple like a puppet whose strings were cut.

"Try again in ten years," she said before dusting off her hands. As sharp as her words were, they were backed up by a finesse that had reduced the thugs' advantage in numbers and size to nothing. "Hey. You want a piece too?"

Her stern gaze landed on Zig, who had been watching everything from the sidelines. She tensed, sensing that his extraordinary size wasn't the only thing that made him different from the men who had been harassing her.

Zig shrugged and pointed in her direction. Her eyebrows knitted in confusion about what the gesture meant, but he casually said, "I'd compliment you on a job well done…but you forgot to stay on guard."

"Huh?!"

Her senses jolted when she realized he was pointing behind her, the back of her neck prickling like gooseflesh. Turning, she

instinctively put her hand up to guard.

Something hit her so hard it felt like her arm was about to break. Through her blurred vision, she saw the first man she had knocked out. She thought she had incapacitated him, but he'd gotten up to attack her again.

Though she was able to defend against his ambush, his strength was nothing like before.

"Urgh!"

Her small frame flew sideways, crashing into the wall across from one of the men she had beaten down. Her vision shook, the air rushed out of her lungs, and she couldn't hear anything for a few moments from the power of the impact. She'd managed to protect the back of her head, but she could hardly breathe in the aftermath.

Somehow, she pulled herself back on her feet, though the vertigo remained. It would take a while before she could start moving again.

Unfortunately, her enemy wasn't going to let the opportunity slip by.

"This is bad," she muttered.

"Heh! Heh heh heh." The man approached, his eyes wide and bloodshot. "This is what you *get*, you stupid little girl!"

Blood still dripped from his mouth and nose, and a number of his teeth and his nasal bridge were visibly broken. Despite that, he showed no signs of pain. The woman could tell from his rapid breathing that he was not in a normal state. She could also guess his

blood flow was elevated from the state of his groin. Knowing what would become of her if she didn't, she desperately tried to move.

"I've never seen anyone put a combat drug to such waste."

Zig stepped in between them with a shake of his head. The sinister man—his eyes wide, foam pouring from his mouth—came to a halt. From the pulsating veins, lack of pain response, and brutal strength that the man had displayed, Zig deduced that the drug was on the potent side.

The man became even more furious when he realized that Zig was keeping him from his target.

"Th-the fuck do *you* want, huh?! Get out of my way before I kill you!"

The man's enhancements were much stronger than his own body could handle. Without regard for himself, he launched himself toward the mercenary like a rabid animal.

But if the man was an animal, Zig was a monster.

"Go sleep in the dumpster, trash," Zig said.

He evaded the man's attack and countered with a kick to his side. Before the man could utter a word, he flew headfirst into a mound of garbage. The trash cushioned his landing, preventing his death, but he was definitely out cold this time.

Zig relaxed, even if he never dropped his guard. "Man. Combat drug regulations are a pain in the ass, but seeing what idiots like that can do with them, I'd say it's deserved. It's not something you use to settle petty arguments."

Combat drugs enabled their users to go beyond their bodies' physical limitations, but this would inevitably cause unnecessary injury to the body if the ones using them were untrained. They were widely distributed back on Zig's continent to fighters, but the thugs back home kept their hands off them. They knew of the dangers. Forcing yourself to go past your limits, which were there to protect you, came at the cost of your own body. You needed to build up your musculature to withstand the drug's demands, and those who weren't willing to put in the time and effort would find themselves with permanent injuries.

Zig had knocked the man out before he could suffer irreversible damage. Lucky for him, he would only be spending all of the next day in bed.

"Who are you?"

Zig turned to see the woman watching him carefully. Impressive, considering she hadn't completely recovered from her wounds. She was leaning against the wall, trying to size him up as well as looking for an opportunity to escape.

"I'm just a mercenary passing through. I didn't want to get involved, but then he went and used those drugs."

"A merc… You're not with the Cantarellas?"

Zig then realized that the woman was linked to the mafia. It made sense considering her steady gaze and nerves of steel. Her luxurious clothes also tracked, if she was a daughter of a mob executive.

She still looked wary of him after hearing he was a mercenary. Zig didn't blame her. Even if he didn't belong to an enemy organization, mercenaries had a nasty reputation in this town.

"I'll work for anyone if the price is right. But I have no plans in making long-term commitments."

"It's all about the money, huh?" The woman scoffed, then reached into her pocket and pulled out her wallet. "All right, how much do I owe you?"

Even if she hadn't asked for help, the fact remained that he had pulled her out of this bind. But her expression grew puzzled when Zig turned away, refusing her outright.

"We're not under contract. Besides, I deal with chumps like that for free."

"One of those chumps almost got the better of me. Are you joking?"

"Take it however you will."

"Hey! Get back here!"

Seeing that this would only lead to more trouble, Zig ignored her calls and walked away. His mind went back to the wine and the food that would go well with it. He hurried along, anxious to make the best of his day off.

***

"Who *was* that guy?"

The woman frowned as she watched her savior go, then realized that she had forgotten to thank him. While she couldn't help but be

cautious given the situation, letting him leave him with nothing, not even a word of thanks, didn't sit well with her.

She was thinking that when some men in trench coats ran toward her, slightly out of breath. *Her* men.

"Miss! There you are!"

"Vanno."

The woman finally let down her guard once the familiar faces were in sight. What to others looked like a bunch of shady middle-aged men were trusted acquaintance of hers.

The older one caught his breath before speaking. "You can't just get ahead of us like that! Who are these guys?"

Vanno squatted over the men lying unconscious next to her. The one with the busted crotch (who was still foaming at the mouth) didn't look familiar to him.

"Just thugs. They were looking for trouble," the woman said.

Vanno couldn't help but sigh when he heard that. Talk about not knowing any better. Ignorance was a crime deeper than the ocean when it came to their part of the world.

"They're real idiots if they came looking for a fight with you, Miss."

"They might not be your run-of-the-mill idiots, though. One of them used a drug."

Vanno's expression shifted at her words. The harmless half-wit was gone now, replaced by a seasoned officer of the underworld. "What?"

The woman tilted her chin, and his eyes followed toward the man buried in scattered garbage. Vanno quickly ordered his men to pull him out and search his belongings. They found a used syringe.

"What were the symptoms?"

"Excitement and superhuman strength. It looked like he wasn't feeling any pain either."

"Then it's an honest-to-goodness combat drug. Shit, I didn't think it'd go around so fast. Did you do this yourself?"

The woman bitterly shook her head. Although she had been the one who had insisted that she didn't need protection and would be fine going out on her own, the situation had turned too serious for her to put up a front.

"A passing mercenary saved me."

"A mercenary? So, a thug got beat up by another thug?"

"You know, the word 'thug' really didn't come to mind when I saw that mountain of a man."

But Vanno's reaction was commonplace. In these parts, "mercenary" was just another name for a criminal. They were people who couldn't make it as adventurer, soldier, or mobster and made money through illegal violence. However, their brutality would eventually attract the attention of actual professionals if they took it too far, so only the weak or disadvantaged became mercenaries.

That man had been a different beast altogether. His quiet composure and lack of interest in money was different from how the mercenaries she knew acted.

What a strange guy.

Their meeting was clearly coincidental. He was probably uninvolved with the whole thing, but his disinterest only piqued the woman's interest.

On the other hand, she had more pressing matters to attend to.

"Vanno, find out where he's from. That should give us a clue to this newly circulating drug."

"Gotcha. Hey, take these idiots to the office. I want names. Friends, family, favorite restaurants, everything."

Vanno's men moved as soon as he made the order. City mafia members were exceedingly quick at extracting information. They had everything at their disposal: force, money, veiled *and* unveiled threats. They could get you to tell your whole life's story over the course of two days.

"What do you think about all this?" the woman asked.

Vanno gave it some thought as he lit up his cigar.

"I don't think the Cantarellas are involved," he said. "Haven't heard anything about them, anyway. They're a lot more conservative than we are. None of *our* boys are stupid enough to do this kind of thing."

She frowned. Vanno's comment reminded her of the foolishness that took place the other day. Even mafias had lines that must never be crossed, one of which was the kidnapping of children for the purpose of human trafficking.

It wasn't a matter of ethics. Orphaned street urchins aside, kidnapping the children of taxpayers just carried too high of a risk. In this case, it had been the children of immigrants, for whom the military police were reluctant to mobilize. Even then, it was too dicey. The incident could have sparked large-scale retaliation, so the ringleaders of the fiasco had been disciplined and would never show their faces again.

"Human trafficking—those absolute morons," the woman hissed. "At least they've been dealt with. That leaves Aggretia. Dangerous bunch."

"I'll look into them while I'm at it. I'll be off now. Be careful out there, Miss."

Vanno turned to start his investigation, but the woman stopped him as his trench coat trailed behind him.

"There's one more thing I want you to check out."

"Say the word."

She realized that she didn't know the name of the man who had saved her. Struggling to think of another way to describe him, she suddenly remembered that he'd curried a particularly strange weapon.

"I want you to look for a mercenary. He had this thing with a sword at each end of it… What're those called?"

"Can't say. I'm not much of a weapons expert myself. Still, doesn't sound like your everyday weapon. Should be easy to find. Want me to look for him in a hurry?"

"No, just while you're at it. He's also a big guy. He'll stand out."

"Roger that."

Not thanking him for saving her, even if she hadn't asked for help, was against her principles. Things would've taken a turn for the worse if that man hadn't been there.

"Before I forget," Vanno said, "you really shouldn't go out walking on your own, Miss. I know you're strong and all, but things can still go south!"

"I know, I know. I'll be careful."

Vanno sighed as she brushed him off.

"You've got the arm and the heart for it, but you're so lax it borders on recklessness. I guess that's just youth for you."

As Vanno finally left, the mention of the man with a strange weapon lingered in his mind. It sounded an awful lot like the masked man who had helped the Jinsu-Yah. He had wielded a naginata—could probably handle similar weapons—and was powerful enough to make quick work of a small mob.

"A mercenary with a strange weapon… Nah. Couldn't be that convenient, could it?"

***

The Fuelle Mountains were not only home to monstrosities but also useful resources. Because of that, they held a stable population of miners, who were now returning to their profession after the spike in monstrosities had been dealt with.

Inside the mountains, many men swung their pickaxes at ore veins. At the same time, a monstrosity was running amok.

The bipedal lizard monstrosity was four meters in length from head to tail and had the menacing head of a pit viper. Its tail was the creature's most unique aspect. Highly developed and resembling a giant hammer, it could easily break the stones it encountered with a single swing. Despite the tail looking like it weighed a ton, the lizard was actually quite agile and able to jump thanks to its well-developed legs.

"Zig, look! It's a hammer lizard!" Siasha shouted with excitement upon seeing the creature.

Zig did not share her enthusiasm. The monstrosity spun its tail in the air and brought it crashing down into the spot where Zig had been standing, the impact causing a loud rumble.

"Powerful."

He readied his twinblade as deep fissures spread like lines of ants across the hard ground. The hit was powerful enough to instantly kill a man. Even if someone was wearing armor and it survived the strike, the human inside wouldn't.

Which meant all one needed to do was not get hit.

"Zig, try to leave the tailbone in one piece. It sells for a high price."

Siasha's tone was casual, but she wasn't standing idly and fooling around. Currently, she was preoccupied with exterminating the smaller monstrosities going after the miners.

"Easier said than done," he said with a wry smile.

He dodged the tailbone's horizontal swing. Despite the attack causing a powerful wind to whip into his face, Zig never took his eyes off his enemy.

He jumped, closing the distance between himself and the monstrosity before it could take advantage of its tail's momentum. At close range, the fearsome force of the massive tailbone was nothing more than burdensome weight. The more dangerous the opponent, the more creative he had to be in dealing with them.

Gripping the upper half of his twinblade and using the strength of his well-trained body, he launched a diagonal swing powerful enough to cut the hammer lizard. The hammer lizard sensed the fearsome power of Zig's attack and put up its front feet to block. The impact cracked its thick claws, but the mercenary wasn't stopping there.

Zig forced his twinblade into the lizard's claws, knocking them out of the way. He swung the lower half of his blade upward, slicing through its forelimbs. The hammer lizard shrieked, blue blood gushing out of its wounds, and pulled its amputated legs back.

"Die."

An arc of blue flashed through the air as Zig went into a low stance and swung his twinblade again. As the creature hunched over in pain, the blade pierced its chest, entering the rocklike shell with the precision of a master spearman. The shell (about as tough as heavy plate armor) shattered, and a fountain of blue blood sprayed over Zig.

"I missed. Was it the shell?"

The lizard's sturdy chest and shell had deflected Zig's twinblade from damaging a vital organ by mere inches, saving it from instant death.

Zig pulled his twinblade out of the flailing monstrosity and stepped back. The blow was fatal—all that was left to do was to wait for it to die without getting caught in its death throes.

"Aaaah! Stay away!"

One of the miners screamed in terror as the dying monstrosity lurched toward them.

"Of course it wouldn't be that easy," Zig grumbled.

Since their safety was a point of evaluation for the request, Zig couldn't ignore the miners. The monstrosity was closing in on them. He could catch up to it and kill it, but the lizard falling over *could* send it crashing right into the miners.

"Not the most elegant way of doing things, but no getting around it now."

Zig lifted his twinblade over his head with his right hand and stretched his left arm out in front of him, taking the stance of a javelin thrower.

Throwing your weapon wasn't high on the list of things one should do on the battlefield. Even if you succeeded in nailing your target, you would be left unarmed against the rest of your enemies… who usually still had their own weapons in hand. This was a rare exception.

Just as Zig squeezed his twinblade in his right hand, the ground in front of the monstrosity shifted. It rose with unnatural speed, turning into a stake as thick as Zig's torso. Its sharp, conical point was directly parallel to the creature's body.

The dying monstrosity had no time to react at the stake's sudden appearance and ran right into it. A thunderous crash rang through the air—even Zig could feel the echo in the pit of his stomach. It was as if someone had cast a fire spell.

The earthen lance, positioned like a knight would hold it, had used the full momentum of the monstrosity against itself. It drove into the wound Zig had inflicted earlier and impaled right through the lizard's body, killing it.

"You saved us! Man, you guys are tough!"

"Oh, not at all! In fact, we must thank you for transporting the monstrosity for us."

Having regrouped at the transportation stone, Siasha bowed to the miners. They had assisted her in carrying the monstrosity's materials as her loading trolley had not been big enough. The men returned the gesture, looking flustered at her gratitude.

"Well, it's the least we owe you for saving our hides! We thought it'd be a simple protection job. Didn't imagine a hammer lizard would show up. That was our bad. Really sorry about that."

Siasha and Zig had taken the request after dealing with the little problem that had been interrupting Siasha's adventuring jobs. It was

in the Fuelle Mountains, where they had once joined an extermination squad to deal with a rockworm outbreak.

However, the miners found that other monstrosities had taken up residence when they returned to their workplace. These creatures were smaller and were few in number, leading to the guild issuing a request to seventh-class adventurers. Zig and Siasha were tasked with escorting the men and were in the middle of exterminating the lesser monstrosities when the hammer lizard appeared.

While some requests downplayed the danger in exchange for a cheaper payout, this probably wasn't intentional. The job had actually come from the Merchants' Guild, and while they were known to be stingy, they weren't stupid enough to cause unnecessary friction with the Adventurers' Guild.

"We'll file a report to the guild to adjust your reward to the proper threat level."

"Thank you."

Siasha smiled and bowed again, seeing the miners off as they activated the transportation stone to report back to the guild.

While the normal behavior would be to complain that you were blindsided by sudden danger, Siasha was beaming. The materials she got from the hammer lizard had been worth the trouble.

"Good work, Zig."

"Thanks for the assist at the end. I don't think I would've been able to keep those miners unharmed by myself."

Even if throwing his twinblade killed the hammer lizard, it wouldn't have stopped it in its tracks. The monstrosity's large body would've led to major injuries, even if they avoided fatalities.

"Is that giant lump really worth that much?"

It had to be. Siasha had been keeping notes on valuable materials since she started reading the Encyclopedia of Monstrosities, after all. Still, it was difficult to believe that there was any value in the strangely shaped tailbone. It looked like an ordinary rock to the untrained eye.

"Despite its ordinary appearance on the outside, it's actually incredibly gorgeous on the inside! There's a pattern of stripes like wood in there, which makes for some amazing handicrafts, and the older the lizard, the more complex the pattern becomes."

"Oh? That's a nice way of putting the monstrosity to use, considering how violent it is."

"It makes for great helmets and shields too, since it's tough but relatively light and strong against impact. Though I hear you don't see them that often because the crafts sell for a lot more money. In a sense, equipment made of hammer lizard tailbone is even rarer than those using dragon materials. At the end of the day, money makes the world go round!"

"You know what, maybe it's not so nice after all."

The two carried on their conversation as they headed for the transportation stone.

The ever-familiar guild was just as packed as any other day. Both Zig (who had never stayed in one place for very long) and Siasha (who had stayed in the same place for a very long time) recognized this fact.

"Thank you for your hard work. We've received the report. That must've been awful, but we're glad you're all right, Siasha!"

Sian the receptionist greeted Siasha with her usual cheer. The witch thought she was going to get reprimanded for fighting another high threat monstrosity, but Sian went easy on Siasha after seeing how dejected she was about getting in trouble. In fact, Sian didn't even bring the topic up this time.

Siasha was slowly but surely expanding her circle of relationships. It was a big step forward for her.

Zig was silent as a thought entered his mind: He probably no longer needed to assist Siasha. Though, the concern he felt for her surprised even himself.

"Heh," he chuckled quietly.

"You look like an old man when you cross your arms like that."

Zig's gaze flicked to the source of the rude comment to find Isana, who was staring at him. However, he wasn't so sensitive as to let her jibe bother him.

He scoffed, his tone mild. "This is why you have no friends."

The pointed words were spoken quietly, low enough that the crowd would drown them out, but Isana's long ears picked up on

them just fine. Her green eyes went wide, her mouth flew open, and she glared at Zig with her eyebrows furrowed.

"E-excuse me?! I *have* friends!" As her voice rang throughout the guild, everyone's eyes turned toward them. She paid them no mind and kept ranting at Zig—even if her reaction was enough to prove he was right. "I guess you don't know me very well! People ask me to teach them swordplay all the time! And they respect me for my skills as a warrior!"

"I really feel bad for you now. You can't even tell the difference between respect and friendship."

Zig's eyes were filled with pity as Isana reached up to grab his collar. In fact, the expressions of the others around them reflected the same concern. Isana's heightened senses picked up their sympathetic stares, and her brown skin colored with red.

"You… I… Well, what about you, mercenary man?! All you ever talk about is work, work, work. I bet you don't have friends either!"

Backed into a corner, she threw Zig's accusation back at him. They were both friendless, and if she was going down, she would take him with her! Her intention to drag him down was so clear that she showed not an ounce of her warrior's honor.

"Hello, Zig. I heard you ran into some trouble during your job. Is everything all right?"

Urbas the scalefolk slipped into the conversation, looking quite puzzled. At least, Zig thought the expression on Urbas's lizard-like face was puzzlement. Urbas glanced from Zig to Isana, who was still gripping Zig's collar.

"We're fine," Zig said. "As for the job, well, let's just say a bonus happened to show up today."

Urbas watched quietly and, deciding that the situation didn't need his intervention, nodded. "I see. That's good to hear."

"I do appreciate the concern."

"Huh?" Isana seemed stunned that their short conversation lacked any formalities. But what struck her even more was Zig's honest gratitude toward Urbas.

"Don't mention it," Urbas said. "After all, we're friends."

Those words were the killing blow. Isana grew silent as a stone and let go of Zig's collar. With her arms hanging limp, she went to a nearby chair and defeatedly took a seat.

"Is something wrong with her?" Urbas asked.

"Don't worry about it. It's just what happens when someone fails to gauge their opponent's strength."

"Oh?" Urbas still looked puzzled but nodded again anyway. As an adventurer, he was highly adaptable.

Zig felt several eyes trained on him again. Glancing around, he saw a few adventurers were giving them not-so-friendly looks. Some were resentful or downright hostile.

He'd heard that discrimination against demi-humans wasn't as common among adventurers because the profession was a meritocracy. Clearly, not everyone was on board with this sentiment. He paid no heed to the small fry, but some of the adventurers looking at them were strong, which was why it took him a while to notice. It

bothered him, but he wouldn't make a big deal out of it since Urbas wasn't.

Urbas shifted his gaze to Siasha, who was still talking to the receptionist. Next to her, a large stone was sitting on their trolley.

"Is that the tailbone of a hammer lizard?" Urbas asked.

"Good eye," Zig said. "That thing brought a hammer to a pickaxe area. I had to ask it to leave."

The seasoned scalefolk adventurer had identified the rock with a single glance; veterans could see what Zig could not. Likewise, the younger adventurers around them peered quizzically at the rock, while the seniors seemed fascinated.

"Yeah, most folks know that it fetches a great price. Yours is an excellent specimen. It must have lived for quite some time."

Zig and Urbas chatted for a while about adventuring, leaving Isana to wallow in her sorrows. They were only interrupted when another group, loud and cheerful, approached them. Zig knew they must be out to speak to him because he had deliberately gone to a corner so he and Urbas weren't in the way of the foot traffic.

"Zig, hey! Didn't know you were acquainted with Urbas."

"Thanks for the help the other day!"

It was Bates and Glow, members of the Wadatsumi clan. The two had just returned from a hard day's work and stood out from the others in the building due to the amount of soil on their equipment.

"You look gnarly," Urbas said, striking up a casual conversation between veteran adventurers. "What were you hunting?"

"Earth-based monstrosity. One that likes to go digging through the ground. There was so much mud…"

"That's because you went after it when it was fleeing, and it took you for a ride!"

Bates laughed while Glow shook his head in exasperation. Their relationship was the same both on and off the job. Urbas gave a wry smile at Bates's barbaric act.

"That was reckless of you. I take it you were up against earth diver dragons?"

"Special request from the guild. They're a pain in the ass and I really wanted to refuse, but what're you gonna do?"

"I've never heard of that monstrosity before," Zig cut in.

Bates was more than happy to expound on earth diver dragons upon hearing that Zig was unfamiliar with them. He really loved explaining things.

"Basically, it's a giant worm. It's about as wide as an adult male and can attack you from underground by using vibrations to locate where you are. Pretty dang dangerous."

"Uh-huh."

As Zig searched his memory for a monstrosity that fit that description, Bates noticed the sulking girl to their side.

"Hey, that puddle of an adventurer over there… Is that Isana?"

Puddle was an apt descriptor. Isana's pointed ears had drooped, and she was lying face down on the table while her legs dangled

loosely beneath it. Despite hearing Bates loud and clear, she didn't react.

"Leave her be." Zig was no warrior, but he still had compassion.

***

"Zig knows so many people," Siasha muttered from afar, impressed at the number of acquaintances surrounding him. In the time it took her to look around the guild for a single person she trusted, he had gathered a small crowd. Considering her looks and manners, she hadn't expected to be so unapproachable.

"How strange," she said to herself.

"Hey, Siasha!"

Pulled out of her thoughts, Siasha turned around. "Yes?"

A female adventurer was waving to her with a friendly smile on her face.

"Oh, hello. Lindia, wasn't it?"

"Yes! We were in that temporary party the other day! It's been a while."

Listy had introduced this girl with medium-length, moss-brown hair so Siasha could party up with her.

"A…while, yes." Startled by how differently they viewed time, Siasha didn't answer Lindia right away, but her response grew more natural as she adjusted. "How have you been?"

"Could be better, but I'm all right, I guess," Lindia said. "Mostly I've been thinking about getting new gear. But, anyway! I heard you took down a hammer lizard, Siasha! That's awesome!"

"Ahh, well, Zig did most of the work, really."

Siasha knew she could've taken it on herself, but she decided not to tell Lindia. She had a subconscious fear that the gap in their strength would create distance between them.

"You mean that scary-looking older guy? I guess he seems pretty strong." Lindia nodded toward Zig, oblivious to Siasha's inner conflict. Then, without warning, she grabbed Siasha's shoulders and drew her close.

"Umm…?" Siasha felt a tinge of fear—no one other than Zig had ever touched her before. However, she let Lindia stay where she was and speak.

"Anyway, would you like to team up with me again? I've got a real profitable job for you!"

"Profitable?"

"Uh-huh! We're gonna be rich! You'll get enough money to buy whatever gear you want!"



"Huh. I suppose I have some magical equipment I want to get," Siasha mused. "Oh, wait. Zig told me not to trust random, convenient jobs."

"Right, sorry! I must have sounded really suspicious. This is a job that's been posted through the guild. I'll go talk to the old guy too."

"In that case… Go on."

Maybe her circle of acquaintances wasn't as small as she thought. As Lindia continued to speak excitedly about the job, Siasha realized that she had changed in her own way.

***

The day after they fought the hammer lizard, Zig roamed the town as part of his usual training. Downtown was packed as always, and the masses of people going around made the area give off a considerable amount of heat. It was a bit too early for lunch, but Zig was already looking for a place to eat before the noontime rush.

He was feeling more famished lately, and his expenses reflected that. He was making good money, sure, but he didn't have much left in his pocket after accounting for equipment maintenance. Narrowing his eyes, he glanced around, biting into some rye bread he'd bought earlier as a snack to fend off the encroaching hunger.

"Hmm…"

There were a lot of people downtown, all moving quickly, but Zig still stood out in the crowd because of his height.

Once he decided on a restaurant, he began to stroll toward it. He finished up the rest of the bread, passing the eateries he usually frequented in favor of something a bit higher class.

The restaurant was located in a good part of town, with a facade to match. It was a spot that served prim and proper people. Zig, with his giant weapon, looked *extremely* out of place.

"Welcome."

However, the restaurant's well-trained staff welcomed him all the same. The waiter didn't bat an eye at Zig's anomalous presence and showed him inside. He was somewhat wary of Zig, but only because he didn't know if he might be a drunk or a criminal.

The waiter kept his eyes on Zig as he perused the menu, taking his time to decide on his order. The other customers stole glances at his large frame and the even larger weapon he set next to him, but Zig paid them no mind.

He eventually settled on just coffee and looked out the window without further comment.

When it arrived, he put the cup to his lips and sipped. Zig raised his eyebrows at how good the drink was—he hadn't been expecting that.

"Welcome."

Another customer entered soon after Zig began to enjoy his coffee. Just as the waiter was about to show her to her table, she said, "My party's here."

The customer's footsteps came closer as she approached Zig.

“Well, well,” she said, “I wasn’t expecting to see you in a place like this.”

He turned his gaze and was met with the sight of the sharp-eyed brunette who had been attacked by thugs in the alley. She wasn’t obviously carrying any weapons, but there was something around her hips. Her clothes probably concealed a knife underneath.

He took in her physique. She looked well trained and ready to spring into action at any given moment, but her hands and demeanor seemed too delicate to be those of someone who fought on the front lines. She was probably taught mostly to defend herself.

Seeing as he didn’t object, she took the seat in front of him and called the waiter to order a dessert combo.

“You were tailing me,” Zig said.

“I was,” she answered with a sideways glance. “Pretty good, right?”

Zig grunted without another word. Seeing he was unwilling to admit that he hadn’t noticed her, the woman smiled and stuck out her hand.

“I never got a chance to thank you for the other day. Katia Alberti.”

He shook her hand. “Zig. I’m a mercenary.”

His hand felt so much like a rock that she raised her eyebrows. “Anyway, thank you. You saved me.”

“I just happened to be in the neighborhood. What is it you wanted to talk about?”

She could've just thanked him while they were in town and moved on if gratitude was all she wanted to express. There was no need to wait for the right moment to have a long conversation.

Katia crossed her legs and casually looked around. The restaurant was quiet and there weren't that many people since it wasn't quite lunch time yet. She could make out what the other people were saying but there was a good distance between the tables. She and Zig could keep things private if they lowered their voices.

This establishment was suitable for secrets. It wasn't a noisy pub with invisible ears everywhere, and it wasn't a crowded place where detecting eavesdroppers was difficult. This kind of restaurant came highly recommended when discussing dangerous matters or large amounts of money.

Katia folded her hands in front of her face and began talking.

"I want to put you to work. First, I'll get this out of the way. I'm with the mafia. Feel free to make of that information what you will."

Witches, adventurers, Jinsu-Yah, and now the mafia.

He hadn't expected that his adage of "if the money's right" would leave him so unprincipled. Nevertheless, he smiled at the thought of working indiscriminately for such a colorful cast of characters, took another sip of coffee, and readied himself to talk about business.

***

He's smiling. I knew *he wasn't on the straight and narrow.*

There were two major reactions when she told people she was with the mafia: visible displeasure or a poker-faced smile to hide their true feelings. The former didn't want to get implicated in whatever she was offering, but there was the money and the fear of what would happen if they refused. The latter was more ambitious, seeking to look for leverage to use as blackmail.

This man belonged to neither camp.

She had never run into anyone who grinned the way he did. His sip of coffee didn't seem like an act to conceal his reaction either.

This isn't his first time breaking the law. I'll have to be careful.

***

Zig made a conscious effort to avoid looking at the twinblade next to him.

"I'll rule out some jobs before I hear your proposal," he said. "Anything that messes with the law in a big way and anything that harms noncombatants."

It wasn't a matter of ethics. No matter how big the paycheck, jobs like that might end up accumulating huge losses for him in the future. Zig had no intention of being a fall guy.

"No problem," Katia said. "I want you to be my protection."

"A mafia member needs protection?"

Zig was surprised Katia wasn't asking him to be complicit with some kind of crime. Though he didn't know her exact position in the organization, he could tell that she wasn't just a rank-and-file member.

Ordinary members had to figure things out on their own as far as their safety was concerned.

Katia saw how he was narrowing his eyes and shrugged at his response.

"There's more to it than you might think. I know what you want to say, but the circumstances are complicated."

"Uh-huh."

Something was happening in the mobsters' underworld. Things must be very complicated indeed if Katia had resorted to hiring a mercenary instead of using her usual security detail.

"Is it about the drugs?" he asked.

"Maybe."

Katia neither confirmed nor denied his suspicions. Zig found her difficult to read, though he expected nothing less of her. He stayed silent.

Fortunately—perhaps—he had some free time.

Lindia, the girl whom Siasha had formed a temporary party with before, had asked him if she could borrow her for a while. She said something about finding a profitable venture, but the party would need Siasha's power to complete the task.

He ran this venture through Aoi, and she confirmed that the request was perfectly legal. The degree of risk was also appropriate to their rank so there were no problems there either.

Above all that, he'd decided to give the okay because Siasha seemed motivated about the job. It would be beneficial for her to

interact with more and more people, although he was a bit irked by Lindia calling him "sir" like he was an old man.

So, he *did* have some free time on his hands. Katia's request smelled like trouble, so she would have to make the compensation worthwhile. He had things he wanted to buy and was willing to accept as long as the price was right.

"What's your offer?"

"A hundred thousand a day for five days. You'll get an extra fifty thousand if someone attacks us. We'll cover any damage done to your gear—within reason. Consumables will be available on request."

Not bad considering the hours he would be working. If there was anything the mafia had in spades, it was money.

However, one thing bothered him. He couldn't work out why Katia had decided to ask him.

"Why me?"

It couldn't be just because he happened to help her out the other day. Mafias as organizations were hardly that sentimental.

A wry smile crept to her lips. She seemed unsurprised by his question.

"I had someone look into you," she replied. "I was excited when I got your dossier. To think that someone could get into so much trouble despite only being in this city for a short time. You weren't even looking for trouble! Makes me think an evil spirit is following you."

"You don't need to bring that up."

Zig shifted awkwardly at this total stranger pointing out something he had only just noticed himself. Indeed, realizing she was right was quite distressing considering how slow he'd been on the uptake.

"All right, I won't say more," Katia conceded. "You also seem like you're in possession of extremely tight lips. Ones that won't open over a couple of threats."

Ah, the Wadatsumi incident. The one where Zig wouldn't give up his client even when unarmed and surrounded by several adventurers.

"Work is work," he said.

"Well, your dedication to keeping your mouth shut for your clients and your strength to enforce it are the reasons I chose you."

Tight lips weren't enough to keep a promise, and strength didn't make you trustworthy. Finding both in the underworld, a place where violence and backstabbing were the norm, was difficult.

Katia's reasons for choosing Zig were very mafia-like.

He mulled over her offer silently. Her reasoning checked out. There was nothing wrong with the job. The money was good. There was no reason to refuse. The offer was there.

"I'll take it if you pay for my lunch."

"Then, I'll get right to the brief. Before that, I want you to put your hands over your mouth like I do."

He thought it was strange, but he did as he was told anyway. He folded his hands, creating a cavity between them.

"Speak into the hole between your hands," Katia said, showing how the effect muffled her voice.

"Is there a point to this?" Zig asked in a similar muffled voice. He had a bit of trouble hearing her and had to adjust his volume so she could hear him.

"There are spells that allow people to eavesdrop from afar, though they're usually well concealed. There are also races with sharp hearing. This is just a way to mitigate that."

Zig accepted this. Isana's wasn't the only race who had sharp hearing, and the same went for magic. If there were spells to conceal your presence, he couldn't rule out spells to eavesdrop from afar.

"The eavesdropping spell is quite sensitive. The area it affects is restricted to cut out unnecessary noise, and if they can pinpoint coordinates, they can hear things from an even greater distance. Muffling our voices like this prevents them from catching the details of our conversation."

That was interesting. These insights probably weren't listed in any grimoire, nor were low-ranked adventurers informed about this stuff either.

"Wow, no wonder you're in the mob."

"Stop it, you're making me blush."

They both wore mischievous grins on their covered mouths.

Katia started by giving Zig the gist of the situation. "As you guessed, this all revolves around the drugs. A new one has recently

started circulating around these parts. Not a rare occurrence. We have our hands in drugs too."

She was blunt about the illegal substances, her tone so casual that it must be an open secret. "Don't get caught and there won't be any trouble," that sort of thing. As different as the culture was here from Zig's original continent, the underworld's source of income was much the same.

"The problem is the effects that this particular one has," she continued. "If it just made you high to escape from reality, there wouldn't be an issue. *This* one, we need to deal with the idiots who get their hands on it without our permission."

Katia hissed as if she had a terrible headache.

There were stimulants that increased the user's strength, but nothing to the level of the man who approached her in the alley. Whatever he'd taken had magnified his physical strength, dulled his pain, and sped up his recovery to the point that he could instantly heal from wounds.

It was abnormal, to say the least. None of the combat drugs Zig knew could do that either. But it reminded him of something he saw recently.

He went still as he recalled the incident: broken arms and legs healing so quickly they seemed like they went back in time; people suffering injuries that could cause death from shock, yet they kept moving like nothing was wrong. There was a group of people who'd exhibited these abnormal symptoms. Unfortunately, they were no longer around.

He hesitated to bring it up because it involved Siasha. Katia carried on talking, oblivious to the information Zig was concealing.

"No one's circulating that kind of stuff in our association. We looked into it, of course, and one name kept coming up: Aggretia."

Zig had never heard of it before. Maybe it was a new mafia family.

"They're a group based far west of this city," Katia explained. "They control most everything there, but they're completely indiscreet and unscrupulous when it comes to drugs. Their territory is brimming with junkies, plummeting the local productivity and economy."

Sounded like there were a few differences between Aggretia and the other two mafia families. One was that they were from outside of town. They also didn't know when to put on the brakes. They seemed to be ignorant of the fact that sustaining the underworld depended on the honest, hard work of other people.

"And if they're trying to establish a presence in town…"

Zig had a feeling that it couldn't be good.

"Yeah. Looks like they've made this city their next target," Katia said bitterly. "The guys I ran into were the vanguard."

"Terrible."

The drugs were an initial investment to increase the number of addicts. When everyone in town was good and high, they'd move in for the kill. The extent of the violence breaking out as a result would come down to the strength of each organization. Being outsiders, Aggretia didn't have numbers or the lay of the land on their side.

However, the fact that Katia was asking Zig for help suggested that the situation wasn't looking great.

"Who's got the upper hand?" he asked.

"Honestly, I don't know. They're juicing their boys up to the gills, everyone from the executives to the small-time thugs. They heavily injured our younger guys in a scrap. They don't know the meaning of restraint."

An increase in physical strength wasn't the only thing the drug did—it also elevated and changed the users' mental states, releasing them from the subconscious limits. The change in mindset wouldn't mean much in a war where everyone was set on killing each other, but for the mafia who only fought in turf wars, it was enough to turn the tide.

There was a huge difference between "we don't mind if our enemies die" and "we're going to kill them all," even if the number of casualties was the same.

"Sounds reckless," Zig said. "Using those drugs like that will wear their bodies down in a hurry."

"They're trying to grow a military in their backyard, I guess," Katia spat.

They were focused on expansion no matter the human cost. Zig could see how they could rot a city.

"Which is why we don't have enough people to put security on me," she continued. "It'd be nice if things could just settle down, but

we can’t sit here and twiddle our thumbs watching our territories go to pot.”

Katia squeezed her fingers together, though her voice remained low. Her loyalty to the organization and her emotions were apparent. Her talk of security confirmed to Zig that she must be in the upper echelons of her organization.

“What’s your plan?” he asked. “Are you going to look into the guys operating in the west?”

Katia didn’t seem the type to stay put even with an armed escort. Obviously, the enemy organization wouldn’t waste their opportunity if they saw high-ranking personnel just wandering the streets. It was going to be an interesting five days.

“No, our executives are already doing that. I’d only cause trouble if I stuck my neck into their business. Still, I learned from our last encounter that these aren’t guys I can take on with just a bit of skill.”

She made a face as she remembered the beatdown she’d received the other day. Zig was grateful that Katia didn’t seem the impulsive or violent type. If she knew her limits, that would make his job easier.

“I’ll actually be investigating our family—for the traitor,” she continued.

“I see. You have your suspicions?”

“As much as I don’t like thinking about it… Yes.”

Mafia members tended to keep their promises since they were so harsh on traitors. But not all were cut from the same cloth.

"It feels like they're always a few steps ahead of us. They're a little bit more prepared for our ambushes than they should be, and the dealers we catch lack substantial evidence. They're not setting traps for us or anything, but it's a bit *too* convenient to chalk it all up to bad luck. There's just something…"

"You think someone's subtly leaking information to not arouse suspicion?"

Katia frowned, her eyebrows furrowing. She unclasped her hands to spoon some of the remaining cake into her mouth. Apparently, she had shared all the information she deemed dangerous if heard by the public. Washing the sweetness down with some coffee and wiping off some cream left on her lips, she pointed at Zig.

"That's one possibility among many. Maybe I just don't like being beaten by brain-dead outsiders on my own turf."

"I see. Well, you're free to do as you please. You're paying for me either way."

Zig's part of the job didn't change no matter what Katia did. He would prefer it if nothing much happened, but she wouldn't bother looking for him if that were the likely outcome.

"I'm counting on you. Anyway, I'll buy your lunch today as a down payment. Order whatever you like."

"You don't want to set a limit on it?"

"I'm not that stingy. Just make sure to finish your food."

Zig smiled internally at her carelessness while Katia called the waiter over so he could make his order.

"I'll have lunch sets A, B, and C," the mercenary said. "I'll have today's special too."

"And what drinks would you like to go with your sets?"

"Coffee, black tea, milk, green tea—and I'll have a dessert combo to finish up."

"Coming right up." The waiter didn't bat an eye at his humongous order. These classy restaurants really did know how to train their staff.

Zig turned his gaze back to Katia and found her mouth agape.

"Y-you can finish all that?!"

"No problem. This is what I usually eat."

"That's still a lot, and this place is pricey! You make that much money being a mercenary?"

"Of course not. I don't usually have the budget for this kind of place. I just had a feeling someone was going to be generous enough to pick up my tab today."

The mercenary gave her a teasing smile, one that annoyed Katia because she knew exactly what it meant.

"That's… Aah! Bastard, did you know I was tailing you?!"

"Good question."

Zig deflected and calmly waited for his lunch. The coffee here was good as long as you didn't mind the price. He was sure that the

food would be good too. Meals that you didn't have to pay for *always* tasted better.

Zig waited with anticipation as Katia checked her wallet to see if she had enough money to deal with this sudden expenditure. As he hoped, the food was delicious—for those who could afford it.

After finishing his dessert, Zig said to Katia, "Oh, I almost forgot. What mafia are you part of?"

Katia was busy lamenting the bill and shot him a resentful look. "Whose side are you even on? You're only asking that now? Did you just take my job without knowing who I am?"

When he shrugged, she sighed.

"The details of the job don't change no matter who you're working with. It shouldn't be a problem," he said.

"Careful," she warned. "What you said is enough grounds for you to show up on an organization's hit list."

Katia narrowed her eyes and glared at him for his impartiality in taking up contracts, even from opposing organizations. Her gaze was piercing, but though a lesser man would have been shaking like a leaf, Zig showed no sign of fear.

"Okay, I'll be careful," Zig said. "So, which is it?"

Katia scoffed, unimpressed. "Bazarta."

"I see."

I think the mobster who negotiated with Isana was a Bazarta. What was his name again?

At his last job that the mafia had been involved in, he vaguely remembered the weary middle-aged man who showed up being affiliated with Bazarta. He seemed to hold a decent position in the mafia hierarchy, so Zig might bump into him if he hung out with Katia.

His face had been covered with cloth, but there was no concealing his height. He was using a naginata then, although that odd choice of weaponry might give him away.

I'll have to be careful. The last thing I want is the mob on my ass.

Zig could always kill any goons that came after him, but he couldn't do anything about the whole mafia if they were set on getting in the way of his work. Worse, if Siasha caught wind of it, there would be no stopping *her*.

"Let's go," Zig said. "I'd like to get my introductions done with."

"Sure you don't need to lie down or something? You ate a ton."

"Like I said, that was normal. I'm 80 percent full at best."

"You're kidding…"

Katia sounded both astounded and exasperated, but she followed Zig when he got up from his seat.

The waiter politely bowed to the man who ordered four people's worth of food. "Thank you for your patronage. Please come again."

I should *come again. When someone else is paying.*

This restaurant was just that good.

As Zig left the establishment with his client, he felt a sense of foreboding about taking up the job—but that just meant it was

business as usual.

Chapter 2:
Men, Tools, and Their Uses

THIS PLACE IS TIDY.

That was the first thought Zig had upon entering the hideout.

From the outside, the office looked like it belonged to a trade company. The receptionist had been a perfectly ordinary man instead of a mean-faced gangster. Zig had heard once about how criminal organizations went through great pains to look perfectly normal, but seeing it in person was something else.

Katia walked through like a regular employee, and Zig followed after her. As they went deeper into the office, they eventually met some men who actually looked the part of mobsters.

The men greeted them. Or rather, they greeted Katia, specifically.

"Good morning, Lady."

"Good morning!"

Katia waved the men away when they greeted her in unison. "It's noon, yeah, I'm back, and cut the 'Lady' crap."

Her response sounded a bit uncouth, but she knew them well enough to warrant it.

"Welcome back, Miss. Who's this?"

A man with an imposing face approached them from out of the group. He had a large scar on his face and suspicion in his eyes as he

stared Zig down. The rest of the men didn't say anything but followed his lead in sizing the mercenary up. Not an unexpected reaction if your friend came home with a hulking, shady-looking man tagging along.

"Albano, meet Zig," Katia said. "He's going to be my bodyguard for the next five days. Thought I'd bring him over to introduce him to everyone. He'll be accompanying me when I go out."

"I'm Zig. I'm a mercenary."

Albano let out a deep sigh as Zig introduced himself.

"Miss, you know the boss told you to stay put."

"Sorry, Alba," she said, using a familiar nickname. "Staying put isn't in my blood."

He put his hands on his hips and shrugged, another sigh escaping him when he looked at Katia. Then, he shot Zig a dubious glance.

"The situation is too dangerous. I know he looks tough, but people who work for money will also betray you for money."

"I had Vanno do a background check on him. *I* think this guy's trustworthy. Isn't that enough?"

Albano gave it some thought. The information *should* be reliable if Vanno ran the background check. He might have been able to trust Zig more easily if he was an adventurer, but Albano couldn't get over the fact that he was a mercenary.

As he deliberated with himself, another voice chimed in.

"Are you *really* sure about him, Miss? Let me test him!"

A young man stepped out of the crowd. He was a flamboyant sort with hair tinted orange and red. Drawing close to Zig, he glared at him.

"Back off, Erald," Albano warned.

"Come on, Albano!" Erald said, bristling. "You can't leave the Miss in this guy's hands without knowing how strong he is!"

Albano looked at Katia, his expression saying that Erald had a point. She sighed in exasperation as all eyes went to her.

Having known that this would happen, she turned to Zig with a shrug. "I guess that's what it comes down to, huh? Sorry, do you mind?"

"Not at all."

"Just don't injure them."

Despite Katia's concern, Zig didn't enjoy needless conflict, and he counted this proposed duel with the colorful young man to be one such conflict.

"Don't worry," he said. "I just have to convince these guys, right?"

Zig scanned the men in the room. Erald was giving him an intimidating look, but Zig wasn't bothered by him at all. He sized the lot of them up before abruptly pointing. His finger landed on a man seated at the table drinking straight from a bottle of wine and watching the events with interest.

He noticed Zig pointing at him and tilted his head. "Oh?"

"One."

Zig moved on to his next target, leaving the man bewildered. This time he pointed at Albano.

"Two."

"What are you doing?"

Ignoring Albano, he now pointed to a man reading a book. He looked like he wanted nothing to do with what was going on.

"Three."

"Ooh."

The man Zig had pointed to first smirked after realizing what the mercenary was doing. His finger paused for a while between Erald and Katia before finally settling on him and then her.

"Four, five," Zig said as he lowered his arm. "The rest are about the same level."

The intuitive among the men seemed impressed, while the rest only put their guard up. The first man laughed and walked over to Erald. He put his hand on his shoulder.

"Ha ha ha! Don't do it, Erald. You won't last a second against him."

"You can't be serious, Elio! You calling me weak?!"

"You're not too bad, but you're no match for him. What kind of order did you think he was pointing out?"

"Our heights?"

"A real idiot, that's what you are! If there's any weakness in you, it's in your brain!"

Ignoring the boisterous exchange, Albano turned to Zig again. "All right, you've proven how strong you are. I still don't trust mercenaries, but I'll trust Vanno's info on you."

"Meaning?"

He stepped closer and stared Zig right in the eyes, his body language showing that he was still trying to intimidate him. "You better watch yourself if the Miss comes home with even a scratch. A pay cut's the least of your worries."

"I'll be careful."

"Hmph." Albano scoffed and turned away, unamused by Zig's composure, but at least he seemed to have won the other man's approval.

"What do you think?" he asked, looking at his client.

She gave him a pleased nod. "Not bad. You really are a professional. However…" Katia looked at Erald with a conflicted - expression. "I'm lower than *that*?"

"I don't mean to belittle you, but there are certain things you can't learn if you're the one being protected. I take it you're not an enforcer."

"Look at you, figuring me out." Katia crossed her arms in dissatisfaction. "Whatever. Your room's on the second floor, second one from the corner. We'll go once you're ready."

Zig nodded and ascended the stairs. The place was full because of the many employees staying there, though the farthest room on

the second floor was left empty. He left his things in the room and made to leave, only to find someone waiting for him in the hallway.

"Hey, I heard you're heading out."

Standing before him was probably the strongest person in the building. He was tall but slim, his physique not leaving much of an impression.

"Elio, right? Did you need something?" Zig asked.

Zig didn't know the extent of Elio's combat experience, but he wouldn't be an easy opponent. He had a different kind of ominous aura compared to adventurers who specialized in killing monstrosities.

"I know what Albano said, but there are definitely folks here who won't take kindly to you."

"I figured." No one would take kindly to an outsider meddling in their organization's internal affairs.

"Careful of knives to the back."

"Thanks for the heads up."

With a lazy wave, Elio left. Zig quietly watched him go.

A traitor on the inside.

He didn't know what to make of Elio. Better yet, what was Katia's opinion of him?

"No use thinking about it now. Doesn't really change my job description anyway."

His job was not to sniff out a traitor. He didn't mind helping where he could, but protection was the extent of what he signed on

for. His mind made up, he returned to Katia's side.

***

The Adventurers' Guild was populated even in the afternoon, though much less compared to the mornings and evenings when adventurers would get their requests and report on them. Some finished their jobs early, while others gathered with their comrades to discuss their next course of action. Alan's party was doing the latter.

As they'd just been promoted to fourth class, the party's policies were in a delicate place. While building their strength, they must also gain recognition and equipment in order to take on requests right for their level. If they focused too much on one thing, they would neglect another. Trying to do everything at once would only lead them to exhaustion. They were desperately trying not to rush things and move forward one step at a time.

"We've prepared enough," Lyle, the party's helmsman, said. "I think it's about time we took on a huge job."

"I agree," Malt, who oversaw the finances and equipment, added. "We have the gear and enough consumables, plus some money saved up in case anything goes wrong."

Listy nodded. "I'm for it too! The guild's reputation is directly linked to the requests that it provides."

"All right. Let's do it."

They had done all the hard preparation and were now among the elite at fourth class. There were many individuals who reached this class, but most of them did it solo. Young adventurers who

reached a high level together, like Alan's party, were rare. It had taken a lot of time and effort, but they were able to keep themselves independent by not tying themselves to a clan. Instead, they made their own connections.

Now they could finally taste the fruit of their labors.

"I've got a good lead on something," Alan said. "It's pretty juicy from what I can tell too."

Lyle clapped Alan's shoulder. "Good job, Alan!"

"I can't just keep relying on you, can I?"

Normally, Lyle would handle the party's negotiations, but having him do everything didn't sit well with Alan.

Malt looked interested in the job Alan had for them. "So, what kind of request is it?"

"We're going to find out. Apparently, it's some kind of investigation."

"Sounds good. Not too dangerous, will get us recognized by the higher-ups. The exact kind of job we're looking for."

"I bet the pay's gonna be terrible, though!" Lyle complained.

Investigation requests didn't pay much because their danger levels were lower. However, these requests were only assigned to trustworthy parties since the guild couldn't afford getting a sloppy report. It was the type of work done to gain reputation.

Most adventurers doing investigations were looking to get class promotions which would allow them to take on bigger and better jobs. It was a scenario that benefited both the guild and the adventurer…if

you were being generous. Otherwise, you *could* say that the guild was being stingy by offering a payout in reputation instead of actual money.

"Cheap as the guild is, we need the job. Let's do it well."

"That's the spirit!" someone called out. "Looks like you're raring to go, Lyle."

Alan and the others turned to the stairs leading up to the guild's second floor, spotting a female adventurer who was watching them.

Vestments draped gracefully around her voluptuous figure, while her flowing silver hair was styled to enthrall anyone who gazed on it. In one hand, she wielded a metal staff just as shining as her hair, and with the other, she held on to the stair's railing. A girlish smile lit up her face as she regarded Alan's party.

"Elsia? Are you the request client?"

This woman, Elsia, was third class—among the guild's finest, adventurers said to be beyond human. It was the goal of Alan's party to reach her rank.

"It's me, yes." As always, her eyes were hidden under a blindfold and gave nothing away. "We'll talk upstairs. I don't want anyone else to hear this."

Alan and his friends stood and followed her to the second floor.

***

After Zig and Katia left the office, they found themselves in the alleyway where Isana had attacked him. They then left Bazarta territory and headed south to the borders of Cantarella.

Katia navigated the streets with such familiarity that it was evident how much she used these paths in her daily life. The denizens of the back alleys were loitering around, but the two of them ignored them, speaking as they walked.

"Is there a reason you brought us here?" Zig asked.

"Kind of," she replied. "Rumor has it Cantarella's cronies distribute their drugs around here."

"Didn't you say the Bazartas push drugs too?"

"Yeah, but ours just get you high for a little bit."

She stopped and looked over her shoulder. She could still hear chatter coming from the main street. It wouldn't be out of place if some ordinary drunks happened to stray in front of them—they weren't that far into the backstreets yet. Not the ideal place for shady dealings.

Katia's eyebrows furrowed, and she lowered her voice.

"Opening up shop in this 'shallow' a place is a breach of etiquette. And the Cantarellas are sticklers for etiquette, even more than we are." She groaned after expressing her concerns.

"Maybe the younger members wanted some extra pocket money," Zig suggested.

"I want to believe that the Cantarellas aren't so senile that they've lost the ability to discipline their children," she said, her tone - sinking as she considered the possibility. "But who knows?" Talking about the decay of a rival organization clearly left her conflicted.

Zig kept an eye on Katia and their surroundings as she scanned the area for suspicious buildings. A sense of déjà vu rose in the back of his mind as he took in the sights.

"Huh." He remembered seeing a mafia member selling drugs here. It had been a little while after reaching Halian.

I tailed the clerk because I wanted info on the city's underworld.

Although no deals were made that day, he *had* seen a mafia member waiting for someone to make a transaction. He had completely forgotten about that detail because of Isana's impactful impression. According to Katia, no one conducted drug deals unless they were deep into the backstreets. It was probably not a coincidence.

"What're you making weird noises for?" Katia said, looking back at him suspiciously.

Zig had been quiet, but his "huh" had reverberated through the empty backstreet. He scratched the back of his head, feeling awkward that he forgot to mention a relevant clue.

"I may have a hunch on where the mafia is selling drugs."

"What?! Why didn't you say so sooner?!"

"A lot of things happened back then. I just forgot."

Isana had ambushed him, and he'd been about to gain a reputation as a newly arrived junkie in Halian. No wonder he didn't notice how weird it all was! After that incident, Zig spent some very eventful days where the whole concern about drugs and mobsters

was pushed to the back of his mind. He never dreamed that the mafia he met back then could be related to this whole thing.

"Well, shit, where is it?" Katia was eager to follow Zig's lead.

"I think it's around here somewhere."

He followed his memories down a path of back alleys. There were enough landmarks that he should remember the location, but he'd blocked them out because of the painful memory associated with them. He regretted doing that now, since he could barely remember where he tailed the store clerk to. It took him racking his brains just to find where the store was.

"Is this the place?"

"Yeah. They didn't have combat drugs, but they had stuff to make you feel good."

The shop (a shack, really) was empty, both of people and of goods. Its shelves had been stripped bare, and the tenants had long since moved out. Still, the two went over the place with a fine-tooth comb, desperately looking for any trails or evidence. Unfortunately, they found none.

Katia kicked the wall in frustration. "Damn it! We're too late…"

So much for our lead. It was a long shot to begin with, but I thought we had a chance. At least we now have confirmation that the rumors were true. I guess Zig just happened to know—huh?

As she shoved her hand through her hair in frustration, Katia turned to Zig. His arms were crossed, eyes looking away from where

they had been searching. Assessing his expression, she really couldn't tell what he was thinking

She had ordered a background check on him, but it didn't say much. All she could find out was what he had been up to once he reached Halian. His past was a total mystery.

Where did he come from? What was he doing here? Even the mafia's wide network of information couldn't answer these questions. What kind of mercenary *was* he?

It's too late for second thoughts now.

Katia cleared her throat. "So, those thugs on drugs you beat up to get me out of trouble? I bet this place was their source. In fact, this shop was probably where this whole drug problem started. And here you are as my protection because of that. Don't you think it's a little *too* convenient to be a coincidence?"

Zig didn't answer and continued looking into the distance. His silence made her neck prickle with unease.

"You wanna answer my question?"

Katia's nerves shot higher the longer he remained quiet. Sweat began to run down her back as she had a premonition of the worst-case scenario.

Zig finally spoke. "Coincidences aside…"

She readied herself when Zig reached for the twinblade on his back, her hand gripping the dagger on her hip, even though she knew that she wouldn't stand a chance against him.

Her eyes scanned for an escape route. It was her only option.

"We might not be too late," he concluded.

"Huh?"

Zig swung his twinblade in a half circle while Katia was still bewildered by his words. A moment later, the stagnant air shook, the sound of metal ringing in the air. Something fell to the ground. Looking in the direction of the noise, she saw two short arrows rolling near his feet.

Katia gasped. Realizing what was going on, she quickly turned to hide in the darkness of the shack, using it as a shield.

Her shout echoed throughout the backstreets. "Who are you bastards working for?!"

Several men walked out of the darkness as if to answer her question. Their weapons were drawn, and they did not look friendly at all. Their clothes were foreign to the city, and the air around them crackled with hostility.

"What a surprise. I heard there were some people sniffing out one of our old storefronts. Wasn't expecting the young lady of the Bazartas," said a slender man who was clearly leading the pack. He had a slimy smile on his face as he caressed the tip of his curved sword.

"Aggretia," Katia said.

"Name's Makar. As you might have guessed, I'm chief officer of violence for the Aggretias. Nice to meet you, Lady."

"And what does the chief officer of violence want with me?"

Makar shouldered his sword at her aggressive tone, his big mouth curving into a wider smile. His eyes were wide and feral.

"Oh, nothing much," he said. "I just thought we'd introduce ourselves to the Bazartas, since we're outsiders and all. In fact, allow me to escort you to our hideout."

"Sorry. Already have an escort."

"So it would seem," Makar said in a pleasant tone, even as he dropped his curved sword from his shoulder. "Guess that big guy got to you first, but I can make room for one more. Sorry, would you mind coming along, Mister?"

"I would."

The answer was immediate. Makar snorted as if expecting it.

"I figured. Fine, we'll do this the hard way. Just the way I like it."

On their leader's mark, the other men slowly advanced on them. Makar himself tilted his head like he just thought of something as they closed in on their prey.

"Once thing I don't get—how'd you sniff us out? I'm not surprised that we were found, but by a Bazarta? I know it's not *too* deep in Cantarella territory, but this is still Cantarella territory."

"Who knows? Maybe we got lucky." Katia wore a self-deprecating smile as she deflected the question, remembering her earlier interaction with Zig.

Makar only shrugged; he hadn't expected much of an answer. "Uh-huh. Well, we'll just get it out of you once we're done. Kill the

man, but don’t hurt the woman. We need her in one piece if we’re going to use her.”

The men closed in. There were nine of them, including Makar. He watched the spectacle with a faint smile on his lips while the eight other men advanced.

Zig stepped forward to meet the attack, his twinblade ready at his hip.

Avoiding one of them, he deflected an attack from the second with the top blade. Next, he blocked the longswords of the third and fourth men as they came at him in a pincer formation. An ordinary man would have buckled under the pressure of their swords, but Zig’s training meant that he could take them on without exhausting himself.

Number five came at Zig after he turned away from three and four, but he kicked him away. As he did, numbers six and seven had their longswords ready, slashing at him from opposite sides.

The men put up their swords to defend themselves. Zig’s opponents were quite skilled—he couldn’t eliminate them all in one fell swoop. However, there was a huge difference between him and them in terms of strength and weapon quality.

“Gaaah!”

He sliced at them, forcefully pushing them away with his twinblade. Number eight stepped in before he could finish them off. Zig swung his twinblade upward, deflecting the sword with the bottom blade. The man tried to dodge, but the twinblade’s reach was long. The man stumbled, a deep gash on his thigh. He retreated a good distance away from Zig, showing no signs of rejoining the fray. The

mercenary didn't follow, knowing that he would open Katia up to danger if he did.

Zig had to play bodyguard *and* fight against overwhelming numbers. The men started smirking as if their victory was guaranteed.

"Wow, you're so tough. No wonder you're guarding a VIP."

Makar gave a slow clap, not anxious in the slightest about his men being driven back.

Not a single worry. Katia scanned their enemies. *Is he* that *confident in his strength?*

What she saw next shocked her. "Huh?!"

The men Zig had felled earlier were getting up somehow. Their wounds hadn't been shallow—in fact, they were still leaking blood. They gave the cuts annoyed looks and reached in their pockets to pull out small cases that looked a lot like the ones holding the syringes Katia's last attackers had used. Without hesitation, they jabbed the needles filled with red liquid into their necks.

"Ooh… Heh heh! Ah!"

A look of ecstasy warped their faces as the dreadful changes happened almost immediately. Their eyes became bloodshot, and their mouths widened so much that they looked like they would tear. They seemed to have completely forgotten about the slashes in their stomachs. With the amount of slobber dribbling from their lips, they were more like rabid dogs than humans.

The streams of blood had stopped flowing.

"Wh-what did they use?" Katia stammered.

"None of the combat drugs I'm familiar with."

The drugs Zig knew didn't have such dramatic effects. This one looked *very* bad. He could tell from their healed stomachs that the drug did more than kill the pain.

"Oh, it's just a special cocktail made of monstrosity parts," Makar said. "That's what makes our product so unique. Makes you feel so good too. Like you can do anything. Being in the mob sure has its perks, huh?"

Katia spat in disgust at the blissful Makar. "You're a piece of shit!"

He seemed disappointed that she didn't share the same views. "We make a living committing crimes, so what do you expect? Don't think you're high and mighty just because you do things differently. You're as much a sewer rat as we are."

"He has a point."

"Hey!" Katia protested at Zig's quiet utterance.

Makar looked at Zig with interest. "See, you get it. How about you come work for us? We could use more strong guys like you. You'd fit right in."

Zig caressed his twinblade, remaining silent. It wasn't an exaggeration that his well-maintained weapon was his trusted partner.

"Using tools to fight is man's privilege over the beasts," he said. "It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"That's right, brother," Makar said.

"But it's a third-rate man who loses his use of reason and ends up being used by his tools."

"Hell ye—what?" The veins in Makar's temples throbbed. An air of killing intent surrounded him as he squeezed his curved sword. "Sorry, I think I misheard you there. Can you repeat that? You *do* know the situation you're in, right?"

Katia's hairs stood on end at the sight of Makar's anger. His anger and bloodlust were so palpable that she physically recoiled. By contrast, Zig merely gave an easy nod.

"A tool should be something you use, not something you're used by. You're like a kid who's excited over playing with a dangerous toy."

Makar's smile disappeared. He lowered his curved sword from his shoulder and pointed it at Zig.

"H'ookay. I heard you loud and clear that time. You're going to die here. I'll make you regret being born."

Makar's eyebrows were twitching, but Zig met his gaze steadily.

"Try it. We'll see what an animal who's thrown away its reason can do."

"Allow me to fucking show you!" Makar roared, lunging at him together with his drugged-up cronies.

Their speed was unparalleled. Their bodies broke with the release of their inhibitions but were soon healed by their regeneration. No swordplay was on display here, just a show of sheer force.

"Haaaah!"

"Terrible."

Zig easily predicted the sword's trajectory, taking one of the men down with a speed that rivaled an elite adventurer before he took one step back to avoid the sword. He let the man stumble from the force of his own momentum. With how open he left his back, it was like he was begging to be struck down. So, Zig went ahead and stabbed him without reservations.

Instead of leaving it at that, Zig tensed and swung his twinblade to cleave the man's body in half. He then kicked the bloody torso toward the men behind it before it could fall to the ground.

Despite the significant weight of the torso, it did little to slow down the animalistic pack. However, Zig only needed a moment to obscure their vision. Once he was out of sight, he sent one man's head flying.

"Aaaah!"

"That the best you can do?!" Zig roared.

Ignoring the death of his friend, another man rushed in with a downward slash. The twinblade swung in a circular motion, deflecting the sword with its upper blade while Zig pushed back. The weapon sank into the ground as the lower blade twisted into the man's temple. There wasn't much force with so little movement, but it was enough to crack a human skull. Regeneration did nothing if you were dead.

"Next!"

"Don't get cocky!" Makar shouted, rushing past his men to attack Zig.

The mercenary blocked his attack as it came crashing down. Makar didn't lean into it. Instead, he used his curved sword as a pivot point and did a backflip.

Landing behind Zig, he and his men now had him trapped.

"You've had your fun, but we can play too."

Makar's curved sword jabbed toward Zig with blinding speed, the trajectory changing with each stab. Zig parried, dodged, and blocked against the barrage with his twinblade and gauntlet. The chief officer of violence had the skills to back up his position. Makar's swordplay was elusive, a mixture of feints and fatal strikes.

Letting out a battle cry, Zig dealt with his flowing attacks one after the other. Suddenly, Makar flipped the curved sword in his hand and stabbed it sideways into Zig. He barely managed to block it.

However, the curvature of Makar's sword was made to slip through enemies' defenses. The tip managed to sink into Zig's shoulder, tinting it red with fresh blood.

Makar clicked his tongue, unsatisfied with his attack. *It's too shallow!*

Zig had been occupied because he had to deal with Makar's men, but Makar couldn't make him hurt as much as he wanted to. Still, Zig couldn't be on the offensive as usual. He was surrounded, and his enemies weren't letting him return to Katia.

"You're working real hard!" Makar taunted him, doing his best to hide his panic. "Just how long will you last?"

He coordinated his attacks with his men, moving across the ground to strike at Zig's legs after feinting with a high hitting swipe. Makar's men pounced as their boss gave them an opening with his low stance.

Just as he was about to attack again, Makar sensed danger and backed away. A line of blue flashed before his eyes. Though he managed to dodge it, the whoosh of air he felt made his blood run cold. A sudden sweep should've been enough to take his opponent's legs from under him, but it was as if Zig's feet were rooted to the ground. His balance was phenomenal. Magic, projectiles, not even being surrounded could break his stance.

Shit, we can't get through him. Where did such a small-town mafia find this guy? We can't even slip past him to get to the woman!

He ordered his men to make another attempt at Katia, but Zig cut them down right as they moved. It was like he knew what they were thinking.

Now, Makar was down to three men, and they probably couldn't handle the effects of the drugs for much longer. Zig had managed to defend against their best coordinated attack.

Can't be helped. I'll have to use my trump card.

His decision made, Makar took a huge step back. His three men found themselves at a massive disadvantage against Zig, but he ignored them.

What's he planning now? Zig couldn't tell but took advantage of the opportunity to slip out of the pincer formation. The three men

slashed at him in an attempt to corner him.

He braced himself, then leapt at his enemies. Surprisingly, they were able to respond to his burst of speed. The drugs had drastically increased their reaction time.

The nearest thug swung his sword without adjusting his posture, ignoring the damage it did to his body. Instead of deflecting the sword's vertical swing, Zig met it with an upward slash.

"Hmph!"

The upward and downward strikes clashed. The latter obviously had the advantage due to gravity, but the results spoke differently. After a shrill clang, the man's arms were thrown into the air as his sword flew from his grasp.

Unable to stop his momentum, Zig stabbed the man's exposed torso with his opposite blade, twisting it into the wound for good measure. When he pulled it out, the man fell to his knees, blood and guts spilling out of his stomach. The fact that he wasn't completely unconscious yet was unnerving, but at least he was incapacitated.

The remaining two attackers peppered Zig with fireballs and lightning bolts as he approached them, but he had smelled magic in the air and moved out of the firing line before they could cast their spells. His spinning twinblade sliced through their necks, severing their heads from their bodies.

"Ha! You really are good…" Makar smirked with clouded eyes as he watched his men being killed. There was no anger or sadness in his gaze. "Well, you bunch weren't completely useless. At least you bought me some time."

Makar held a syringe with red liquid in his hand, gazed at it lovingly—then jabbed it into his neck.

"Ah, I can't get enough of this stuff… Heh heh heh!"

"Disgusting!"

Zig flicked his fingers to destroy the syringe, but it was too late. The drug was already running through Makar's body. He trembled as he held himself steady and sneered at Zig. As Makar looked at him with murder in his bloodshot eyes, Zig readied his twinblade.

"Here I come!"

Makar dashed at Zig, so fast that Katia's eyes couldn't track him.

"Haa!"

Makar's curved sword was already in front of Zig. Though Makar's superhuman speed had caught Zig off guard, he managed to block the attack with his twinblade in time.

Katia realized what had happened when she heard a cracking sound, followed by a heavy metallic clang. Zig's foot had skidded against the ground when he blocked the charge.

He's fast! His minions earlier were just cannon fodder.

Even the cronies had been a decent match against the seasoned mercenary. Now that threat was multiplied by Makar's skills.

"Nice block! You're not too bad!" Makar hissed.

"Get off!" Zig pushed the curved sword away.

Makar swayed for a moment before launching himself at Zig again, his blade clashing with Zig's, not giving him a moment to

breathe.

"I'll cut you to little pieces!"

The curved sword rained down a barrage of circular slashes. As Zig defended himself against the flurry of attacks, Makar also - assaulted him with leg sweeps and minor wind spells.

"What the hell is this?"

Katia was stunned at the battle unfolding before her. The fight was beyond her comprehension now, and she had no idea who would win. She thought about running, but she might get in Zig's way if she made any sudden movements. She didn't know what to do.

Even so, she couldn't take her eyes off the fight.

If Zig fell, she would have to go up against Makar.

And because of that—

"Come on… You better win this."

Sparks flew as the two blades clashed. Makar's curved sword was more precise, but Zig's heavy twinblade was more than a match for it. He was grateful that he no longer needed to worry about his weapon breaking.

Makar let out a scream and attacked again.

"Hngh!" Zig parried Makar's sword and repelled his legs with his twinblade, dodging any of the spells he threw out as well.

Makar's clothing was made out of some special material that protected his legs. Zig didn't know what kind of armor he was dealing with, but it would take a heavy swing to penetrate through the fabric. Meanwhile, taking one of Makar's kicks would leave him with more than broken bones.

A curved blade and a bladelike leg—Makar was specialized in close-range combat and absolutely relentless in his drug-boosted state.

Zig grunted as a blade of wind cut his cheek. Makar was beginning to adapt to his defense and changed up his attacks, making them more unpredictable.

Makar's smile carved deeper into his face when he saw the blood flow. Slowly but surely, more and more of his attacks were cutting through Zig's defenses. Zig's armor could do little to resist the cutting edge of the curved sword combined with Makar's boosted strength. Cracks snaked through his gauntlets and greaves while his chest piece became covered with scratches.

During this brutal assault, Makar barely suffered any damage. Zig had managed to get some hits in, of course, but they healed immediately and did little to hinder his movement.

He's almost as fast as Isana when she goes all out. But Makar had more stamina in comparison, and reckless as they were, his nonstop attacks proved dangerous. Still, something felt off.

Zig was looking for gaps in Makar's offense—openings produced when he needed to draw a breath. His rush attack should be impossible to maintain while breathing. There was a limit to how long

anyone could attack without pause, even with training. A normal human would have reached that threshold long ago, and drugs were not magical substances that allowed a person to do anything. Lungs could only hold so much oxygen. Once it ran out, the body would collapse, even if the drug user could withstand the pain. However, Makar was still moving, which meant he must be using some other trick.

Minor wounds don't even slow him down. I'll have to go for the heart or the head.

As Zig looked for an opportunity, his focus sharpened to a - razor's edge. Makar had gotten used to Zig's patterns, but Zig had also gotten used to his. Just like with Isana, his mind and eyes had adapted to the ridiculous speed of these monsters.

"Great job so far, but I think it's time to shut this down!"

"Agreed!"

Makar rushed forward, meeting Zig head-on. Perhaps it was his confidence in close quarters, but he didn't bother with a spell to divert Zig's attention. Maybe he should have, because Zig had seen Makar's motions, sword trajectory, and kick angle enough times to see right through him. His curved sword slashed sideways toward Zig's neck, but Zig took a step back at the last second and parried the end of Makar's sword.

"What?!" The sudden change in momentum threw Makar off-balance. He shifted his weight to his other foot and pivoted to deliver a roundhouse kick. "Get off!"

"You're easy to read."

"Huh?!"

Makar's desire for blood had made him all the more predictable. Zig ducked the kick aimed at his head and stomped the ground hard enough to leave a mark. The sound startled Makar, driving him back, and he wildly swung his sword to catch any counterattack that Zig would make.

Makar made a small sound of confusion before he realized what he'd done.

Oh, of course.

He had closed the distance with Zig because extreme close quarters were his forte. No one could control the pace face-to-face like he did—but Zig wasn't closing in on him. He'd just stomped his foot. Somehow, that one action had been enough to startle him.

I backed off like I was afraid of a stomp!

Zig dashed forward and brought his twinblade crashing down. Having broken his rhythm, Makar was unable to dodge in time.

"Shithead!"

He put up his curved sword to defend himself, but even in his drug-enhanced state, it was no match for the sheer weight and momentum of Zig's twinblade. The attack shattered Makar's curved sword and hacked his right arm off at the shoulder.

"Aaaaaargh! It hurts!" The drug was still dulling his pain, but the shock of losing a limb was too much to erase.

"Die." Zig swung his blade again to finish him off.

Makar had slowed down when he lost an arm, and now Zig's twinblade was falling toward him inevitably—when a flash of light whizzed by, headed straight for Katia.

"What?! Urgh!"

The light blinded Zig, but he threw his twinblade aside and ran. She was quite some distance away…

He barely made it in time.

"Huh? Hey!"

Katia had noticed the light after Zig turned his head. She tried to dodge, but it was far too fast. Just as she was about to be skewered, Zig stepped in front of her. He dug his left foot into the ground to brace himself and brought his left fist up. Hitting the battle glove's switch, Zig punched into the light aimed at Katia's chest.

"Zeah!"

An even brighter light burst from the clash of forces as Zig set the output to maximum. The two seemed to be at an impasse as they fought for dominance.

As Zig stared at it, he realized the light was actually an arrow imbued with magic. All of the mana it was charged with allowed it to keep going despite his attempt to block it.

He spent another shock wave blast, but it still took him all his strength to hold the arrow at bay.

No, it's pushing me back!

Zig had only been holding the arrow back for a short moment when Katia realized that he had saved her again. Angered at their

mysterious attacker and at her own helplessness, she made a move without thinking.

"Bastard!"

She drew the dagger at her waist and stepped forward, bringing it down on the arrow clashing with Zig's fist. A streak of blue flashed in the air.

The arrow lost its luster and fell with a dull clatter to the ground, where it rolled harmlessly. Zig regained his footing and stepped in front of Katia, keeping an eye on where the attack came from.

"Thanks, I owe you one," he said. "What's that thing made of?"

"Indigo adamantine, custom-made. Can go through most everyday defenses."

"I see."

The short sword was single-edged with an adamantine glint to it, just like Katia had said. Some short swords were more like repurposed steak knives, but this was definitely a dagger. Judging by its strength, durability, and form, it must have cost a pretty penny to have it made.

"No way… You actually stopped that? No wonder you took down Makar."

The exasperated voice came from the direction of the arrow, and a man carrying a longbow with the same faded blond hair as Makar stepped out of the shadows. He heaved a great sigh as he surveyed his surroundings. Makar's dead cronies were strewn about

the place, but he didn't seem bothered by the gruesome state of their dismembered corpses.

"Man, oh man. What a mess. Cooking these guys up isn't easy, you know. Anyway, you mind letting us go here? He's still my captain, after all."

The man with the longbow pointed sheepishly at Makar, who by now had stopped bleeding. Zig followed his finger while checking for the location of his twinblade. With Makar on all fours, he and his weapon formed a triangle.

Grabbing the twinblade and getting to Makar would be inefficient. The man with the longbow would immediately go after Katia since she was obviously his weak point.

Despite his lazy stance, the man wasn't revealing any openings —not someone Zig wanted to take on while unarmed. It was a shame that he couldn't finish Makar off now, but he couldn't expose Katia to further danger.

"Fine. Go."

Katia clicked her tongue, knowing that she would be letting go a whole warehouse full of information. Still, she could see no other way out of this situation. The last thing she wanted was to be captured herself.

Makar moved slowly, still cautious of Zig. He picked up his arm off the ground and ran to the man with the longbow.

When Zig and the others moved, Makar shouted, "Get him! He's worn out from fighting me!"

"Damn it!"

By the time Katia cursed, the man with the longbow had already nocked three arrows with a smooth and swift motion. He charged one of the projectiles with mana and fired. He only had enough time to imbue the arrows with the minimum amount of mana, but it was still enough to pierce most armor.

The three arrows flew in a V shape, the two outer ones flanking their target, setting Zig up to be struck by the central arrow—the one that had been charged.

Zig could've avoided the arrows if he were alone, but he had Katia to worry about. Unarmed and unable to survive a direct hit from the arrow, there was only one thing left that he could do.

He took a deep breath and focused his energy on his solar plexus, readying his hands in front of himself as he anticipated the arrow's trajectory.

It was approaching fast.

"Tsh!"

Zig moved.

He slapped the outer arrows away with gauntlets, the iron knocking the projectiles off course. He brought his hands together again, clapping them around the fatal arrow. Sparks flew as the sound of shrieking metal rang out.

The magically imbued arrow tried to carry on its course, but Zig fiercely braced himself to stop it. His arms bulged as he brought the rampaging arrow to a halt, barely inches from his chest.

Being far less enhanced than the arrow earlier, the projectile quickly lost its momentum.

"You're *kidding* me!" The blond man froze at the absurdity of Zig catching his arrow with his bare hands.

Zig forced his numbed hand to take Katia's, and he sprinted for his twinblade with her in tow. Before he could reach his weapon, Makar and the man with the longbow were already making their retreat.

"Boss, I can't believe you! I thought you said he was worn out!"

"H-he was!" Makar howled at the man's disbelief. "There's *no* way!"

The two left, arguing among themselves.

"He sure is chipper for a man who just lost a limb."

Makar should've died from either shock or blood loss, but perhaps the drug had preserved him. Zig flicked the blood from his blade and started wiping it down after making sure there was no more backup coming.

Unlike the mercenary who had quickly collected himself, Katia was still catching her breath.

"So, what now?" he asked. "I think we should get out of here soon."

"Um, yeah. But before we do…"

She forced herself to regain her composure and approached one of the dead bodies, then started rummaging through its belongings despite its disemboweled state.

“Guess they don’t have any fresh samples.”



She carefully collected the used-up syringes. There was barely anything left in them, but they could run an analysis to see what the drug was made of. Following her example, Zig also collected the needles from the other bodies. Since they were just low-level mobsters, they had nothing else on them tying them to their organization.

When Zig and Katia were done, they left the scene before anything worse could befall them.

***

After some time, reports of a disturbance were filed and people were sent to investigate.

"Now, this is a right mess."

Tylon, a big man with a greatsword, furrowed his eyebrows. He inspected the bodies, then reported his findings to his teammates.

"These wounds were all made with a sword. No traces of monstrosity activity. I'm guessing they're all mafia members."

"So, you think the one who did this is on the drug?" Zasp replied after scanning the corpses with a sharp gaze. He was a young man with two sabers at his hips.

Tylon remained silent, though he joined him in looking over the bodies.

"There's a good possibility. These are sword wounds, but they look like they were torn rather than sliced… Such amazing strength."

"Can you do the same?" Elsia of the silver hair and blindfold asked.

The three adventurers had formed a party with her as the leader to investigate the drug problem. News had already reached the guild, though they were delayed in catching wind of it compared to the mafia, who had their ears to the ground when it came to these matters. They couldn't just ask them for information either, which meant they had to look into things on their own.

Tylon touched the hilt of his greatsword and pondered Elsia's question.

"*Can* I…? Sure. Depends on the situation and the numbers I'm up against. But this is plain overkill. I guess the new drug really does rob you of your mind."

"Being controlled by a drug," Zasp said, not bothering to hide his contempt, "that's a third rate's way of killing."

He had clawed his way to his rank with his own strength and couldn't stand those that used drugs.

"Don't let your guard down," Tylon said. "Now we know that it can make a monster out of your garden-variety thug."

"Hmph, like I'm the kind of guy that would let some junkies catch me with my pants down," Zasp scoffed.

Tylon knew that Zasp was on the alert despite his thorny response, so he didn't press the matter. He didn't want to treat Zasp like a child just because he lacked the proper respect for his elders. Pride came with being young and talented.

Elsia smiled at the interaction and began to outline their next course of action.

"Mafia-on-mafia violence aside, civilian victims are beginning to emerge. We need to handle this immediately. We'll start by looking for the survivors of this battle. That means interviewing the neighbors. Tylon and I will handle that. Zasp, tell Alan's party about our findings and work with them to find more information."

"Roger that." Zasp nodded and got going.

Elsia and Tylon split up and began conducting their interviews. This area was home to those who couldn't join the mafia but could no longer show their faces in public either. They wouldn't mind becoming informants for the right price. They would just as easily sell Elsia out for money, of course, but the team started gathering information regardless.

Bazarta, Cantarella, Aggretia, and the Adventurers' Guild: The city was becoming a tangled mess of clashing interests and information.

***

Having lost their attackers, Zig and Katia took multiple detours on the way back to base. They only returned to the office once they made sure that no one was tailing them.

"Welcome back, Miss. Wait, what happened out there?!"

Erald rushed to their side when he saw a distressed Katia and a bloody Zig walk through the door. Hearing his cry, Albano and the others immediately reached for their weapons and joined him.

Albano's mean expression became even more frightening as he shouted, "Miss, are you all right?!"

"I'm fine," Katia said. "Zig protected me. There's not even a scratch on me."

Albano inspected Katia for wounds before retreating and bowing to her. "I'm glad you're all right." He turned to Zig. "Nice work out there."

"All part of the job. Can I let you handle the rest? I need to change and clean my weapon."

Zig's clothes were stained with blood spatter and chunks of flesh. As so often happened, his gear was in tatters and could no longer serve its purpose.

"I think that's enough excursions for today," Katia said. "Get some rest. We'll bring you some hot water too. Just don't dirty up the room."

"Thanks."

Zig took Katia at her word and headed to his room. As she watched his retreating back, she noticed no signs of exhaustion from the life-and-death battle that had just happened.

Albano approached Katia as they both watched Zig go. "What on earth happened?"

"A lot. I'll walk you through it. Where's Vanno?"

"He's out at the moment. He's having trouble investigating the enemy's movements too."

"Then I have good news. They're apparently using Cantarella's cronies."

"Really?"

Albano couldn’t hide his surprise at this unexpected news. Sensing that this conversation would take a while, he brought Katia a chair and a pitcher of water along with a cup. Katia yanked the chair toward herself with her foot, sat down heavily, and took a sip of water before relaying the events in detail.

“That’s something,” Albano said when Katia was finished. “To think that the fringes of Cantarella are pulling the strings. The Cantarellas must have also realized it by now. But the fact that they haven’t done anything about it…”

“Is easy enough to figure out. They’re not gonna admit that their underlings are cooperating with an out-of-town organization.”

The Cantarellas would lose much more than face if word of that got out. Dropping their unified front would mean a tragic end for any mafia organization, so there must be a gag order enforced from the inside—and the Bazartas couldn’t be reckless since the Cantarellas had the inside scoop on their territories.

No wonder that Makar guy was surprised to see Bazarta members, and we couldn’t tail them or get a read on their movements.

“Things are getting out of hand, though,” Katia said. “The guild will get involved now that civilians are getting hurt.”

“They already have.”

Katia raised her eyebrows. “What? That’s awful fast of them…”

Unlike the mafia, the guild's stricter protocol meant they were usually slow to act. They would need to make risk assessments and file reports to their superiors. Adventurers also had their lives and incomes, which made assembling a task force difficult. Their swiftness in responding to the drug scandal was definitely unusual.

"There's nothing official yet, but I hear that there have been victims on the adventurer side too."

She didn't want to hear that. Katia rubbed her temples and stared at the ceiling. "Victim" here didn't mean that one of the adventurers had been attacked. An adventurer was responsible for his own safety, and the guild wouldn't interfere if one of them was hurt. Things would have been different if the adventurer was the guilty party, but even then, criminal investigations were the jurisdiction of the military police, not the guild. That meant there was only one more option.

"Some idiot adventurers must have started using…"

It must've been the ones who'd been reported to be on some shady drugs. The Bazartas didn't know the exact details, but the probability of those stories being true was increasing.

"Ugh. Thugs are one thing, but drugged-up adventurers are downright dangerous."

The mafia wouldn't be able to handle frenzied adventurers who fought monstrosities for a living. With their powerful gear, they would be even more frightening than those creatures.

"It's none of our business. Let the adventurers handle their own housekeeping." Katia decided that information would be all she would

contribute to the guild's investigation. Best let monsters take care of monsters.

"Yeah, that's for the best," Albano said. "We'll tell the guild if we get any adventurer-related leads."

"Be sure to let Vanno know."

"Affirmative. But there's something that's been bugging me, Miss."

Katia knew what Albano was going to bring up. She had already given it some thought. The situation was too suspicious; she'd be crazy not to suspect something.

Draining her cup, she traced her finger around its rim. "I know. You mean Zig."

Albano's eyes flashed, and he nodded at the man's name. "He's far too suspicious. I can't tell if he's actually involved in all of this, and I can't recommend working with a man who we don't know is friend or foe."

Zig's behavior, and the information he knew—Albano thought it was all too convenient to be coincidence.

"I understand your suspicions, but he's not with the mafia," Katia said. "I saw him cut off an arm of an executive with my own eyes. And if backup hadn't come… No, if I hadn't been holding him back, he would've slaughtered all those guys. Even the backup."

Katia explained to Albano how Zig had fended off the dangerous Aggretia official *and* his minions to the point that they were forced to

retreat. Albano widened his eyes and subconsciously reached for his weapon.

"He's *that* good? So, you're saying he wouldn't have had a problem killing or kidnapping you if he wanted to?"

Katia remained silent and answered him with a look. She got up from her chair, walked to the window, and stared out of it. The skies were darkening, and she could hear the rush of people making their way home from an honest day's work.

"I know keeping him in our pocket's dangerous, but I'm more afraid of what would happen if he started working for our enemies. He said he'd work for anyone as long as the price is right. A guy with all that firepower… Even with all the risk, I'd rather keep my eye on him than not."

"Should we pull him in?"

Katia shook her head at Albano's recruitment suggestion. She didn't have the authority to make that decision, but even if she did, she really couldn't imagine Zig agreeing to it.

"Let's just focus on the task at hand. If nothing else, we'll have one hell of a trump card to play. I'll make him earn his keep."

***

Zig was sharpening his weapon in the office's vacant room.

"So many chips and nicks…"

He inspected the blue blade as he went along. The damage done to his twinblade, despite the huge difference in weight, was a sign of the sharpness and craftsmanship of Makar's weapon.

Chopping off Makar's arm had been a brute force move. Running into another opponent with a weapon of similar quality would be dangerous. He couldn't rule out the possibility of his twinblade breaking if he went against another heavy weapon. As he thought that, getting a replacement seemed more and more compelling.

"But seven hundred thousand…"

Upgrading his weapon also meant a higher price point. An ordinary weapon could be traded, but something with so few users like the twinblade would fetch a very poor price on the market.

"I don't even know if they have any more twinblades in stock."

Even the big weapon shop in town only had two of them. It was hard for Zig to believe that he would find what he wanted. He could have one custom-made, but *that* would take even more time and money. Either way, he needed to make a decision or he'd end up defenseless when his weapon eventually broke.

"Do I even have enough?" He was making more money now, but he couldn't cover the expenses that resulted from his enemies' strength. His gauntlets and protective gear were broken too.

"Great. I guess money will always be a problem for me."

Back in his mercenary days, there were people who could work on his equipment for everyday wear and tear. He was making more money now, but he had lost a lot of benefits along with it.

A knock came on the door as he agonized about expenses.

"I'm coming in."

Katia entered before Zig could answer. She looked at the twinblade with deep interest before glancing over at the destroyed armor.

"They sure busted you up good."

"The enemy was that strong."

"Do you want to get some new gear tomorrow?" Katia offered, not minding the slight detour.

"I'd love to, but… Huh?"

It was then that Zig remembered the contract.

"A hundred thousand a day for five days. You'll get an extra fifty thousand if someone attacks us. We'll cover any damage done to your gear—within reason. Consumables will be available on request."

"Of course!"

Zig's shout startled Katia into assuming a ready stance. "Whoa! What…?"

It wasn't actually that loud, but his body language had amplified the effect.

"I haven't had such great terms in a while, so I forgot about them," he said. "You said you'd cover damaged gear, right?"

Katia still looked bewildered, but she vaguely remembered saying something along those lines when she hired him. "I guess I did. I also said, 'within reason.'"

"I won't go crazy, promise. What a relief. I was about to be broke no matter how much money I made if things kept going on like this."

Now I feel stupid for being so paranoid. Zig was in a better mood now that his financial problems were alleviated.

Katia felt a slight disappointment seeing his reaction, as her goal in checking on Zig was to see if he had any ulterior motives. Though she was thrown off by the issue resolving itself, she pulled herself together. There was something she needed to tell him.

"Uh, Zig? Sorry for doubting you back then."

Things had taken a sudden turn for the worse, but her suspicion must have hurt him, right? Although, Zig was in high spirits and had returned his attention to taking care of his weapon. He looked over his shoulder at Katia.

"Oh, that? That's all right. It's only natural that you'd be somewhat paranoid." Zig was used to being suspected. He almost told her that himself but stopped after realizing how sad it made him look.

Katia didn't back down. Her almond eyes locked with his. "I still want to apologize."

He was silent for a moment before answering, "All right. Apology accepted."

"We'll continue our investigation tomorrow. Do you mind if I watch you work on that thing?"

It was a strange and sudden request, but Zig paid it no mind and told her to do as she pleased. With her foot, Katia pulled the chair

over and slumped into it, folding her arms as she watched Zig polish his weapon.

Looks like I'm not completely clear of suspicion yet, he thought. *Can't say I blame her considering how fishy I've been.*

But all the mistrust in the world didn't change what he was supposed to do. No matter how much they wasted his efforts, he wouldn't get involved.

***

The documents Siasha was allowed to read after being promoted to seventh class were a little different. She had heard that, but it took reading them herself to drive the reality home.

"Humans have such powerful inquisitiveness and thirst for knowledge," Siasha muttered to herself as she finished another book and added it to her pile. She was sitting in a corner of the archives. "Is it because of their life span? I can't help but wonder where they get their energy from."

Witches were long-lived creatures born with powerful mana, and most of them happened to be adept at wielding it. However, a single witch was powerless before the collection of knowledge and enlightenment passed down through countless generations.

"Witches aren't known for cooperation." If two witches happened to meet, they would either ignore or kill each other. There was no opportunity for comparing notes.

Siasha looked around, thinking about what to read next. She had finished everything she was allowed to read in one sitting, but

there were some spell books that she couldn't check out.

"Which renders them very interesting. Ahhh, but the price. They're quite expensive."

In-depth spell books came with a higher price tag. With consumables and equipment in mind, she couldn't afford to splurge.

"Maybe I should try to look for more income streams. It would be nice if there were some requests I could do even while Zig is away."

She bowed to the familiar face of the librarian on her way out after returning the books. She went down to the first floor to look at requests that had been posted. As usual, it was quiet in the afternoon. People were still out doing their tasks. There were a few adventurers who had returned early and were having a meeting with their party, but that only meant all the lucrative requests had been taken.

"Hmm. Only the awful ones are left."

At this time of day, the only requests left were troublesome ones with dubious pay or extremely dangerous ones with decent pay. The former needed no further explanation while she couldn't take the latter at her current class. There weren't any requests which she could casually do on the side.

"Well, I guess I'll have to bank on Lindia's profitable proposal."

Siasha was meeting up with Lindia's party at the guild today, which was why she stayed up all night reading spell books at the archive.

"Oh hi, Siasha!" the receptionist called out to Siasha as she was browsing the request board. "Do you need some help?"

"Hello, Sian. I was just looking for some decent requests to do."

Siasha had gotten familiar with Sian, as she'd helped her since she became an adventurer.

"If you're not busy, would you like to have lunch?"

The small-framed receptionist pointed to the cafeteria attached to the guild. It was mostly occupied by staff at the moment since very few adventurers would go out of their way to return to the guild for lunch.

I've never actually tasted the food here… There are usually prying eyes everywhere. I guess now is a good opportunity.

Though Siasha wasn't bothered by staring eyes, she still didn't like to be seen. Sian was one of the few humans she didn't mind being around.

"Sure, if you'll have me," Siasha said.

"Excellent! One other person will be joining us. Is that okay?"

Siasha followed Sian's gaze, landing on a table with a woman already occupying it. The woman looked as beautiful as she did unfriendly. She was also a familiar face. Aoi, if Siasha remembered correctly.

She pondered for a moment before nodding, deciding that she could probably get along with the quiet receptionist.

"Not at all."

"Great. Let's go!"

The smaller woman looked very adorable as she walked, like a small woodland creature. Siasha's expression softened into a smile as she sat down.

"Hello, Siasha," Aoi said.

"Hello." Siasha greeted Aoi, then looked at the menu. "I'll be joining you for lunch today."

It was standard cafeteria fare. There were meat and fish options, but overall, nothing out of this world.

"I don't really know what to get…" Siasha said.

"I recommend the seafood al ajillo with shrimp and squid!" Sian said.

"That does sound appetizing, but the tenderloin stew looks tasty too."

"We can get a portion of each and share them!"

After she couldn't decide on meat or fish, Siasha decided to take Sian up on her generous offer. They chatted as they waited for their food to come.

"Is it hard working for the guild?" Siasha asked.

"Things can get tough at times, but it's worth it!" Sian replied. "I was intimidated by all the rough-looking people at first, but I got used to it. There are a lot more women than I expected. Aoi's always ready to help me if things get really bad."

Aoi had also been the one to resolve the problem between Zig

and the Wadatsumi adventurers.

"They wouldn't dare hurt a guild receptionist, so you should be more upfront about it," Aoi said. "Someone will put a stop to it if it ever comes to that point."

"I get it, but it's still scary!" Sian complained.

They must be good friends, judging by the ease and warmth between the two of them even as they argued. The topic of the conversation eventually shifted to Siasha.

"You really are amazing, Siasha." Sian leaned in, highly interested. "I think you're the fastest-promoted adventurer in history. Were you a renowned mage in your past life?"

"Sian, I cannot endorse prying into people's circumstances." Despite interrupting her, Aoi still looked interested in hearing Siasha's story.

"Oh, I was nothing of the sort. I was a backwoods girl who lived alone in the middle of nowhere. I'm decent at fighting, sure, but I learned all my magic by myself."

"You mentioned that when you signed up. You're of the manual school of magic, aren't you?" Aoi asked. "I think you're more than impressive if your self-studies have gotten you this far."

Compared to the automatic school which utilized magic seals, the casting speed of the manual school was slower and its construction more difficult. Despite the manual school's superior versatility, people still chose the automatic school because the manual

school was too difficult. The ones who insisted on using it were top-class mages.

"Thank you, but I have Zig to thank for all of this. I would've stayed in my little cottage and rotted away if I hadn't met him back then."

Every time she thought about that moment, Siasha appreciated how much of a strange encounter it had been. A gentle smile appeared on her face as she remembered it.

If Zig hadn't come for me with the extermination squad, if I had accidentally won that battle, and if Zig's client, the lord's son, hadn't died… If I hadn't called out to him… I wouldn't be here if even one of those events played out differently. I wouldn't know the world outside or be talking to all these people. I wouldn't have started learning magic on another continent. It's all thanks to him.

Which is why I have to—

"Zig sure looks strong, but how strong is he really?" Sian asked.

The subject had shifted from Siasha to Zig. The witch did most of the reporting whenever she turned in requests, so Sian never really got to know Zig personally. The most she had talked to him was when he signed up as an external collaborator.

Aoi, however, was the one who answered her question. "Oh, he's quite strong."

Sian's eyes widened at the sudden response. "Huh? Are you acquainted with him, Aoi?"

Aoi looked sheepishly at Siasha. She shook her head, telling her not to worry about it.

"My little brother caused him some trouble," Aoi admitted. "He knocked out a bunch of Wadatsumi adventurers all at once and had Milyna and Scecz in the palms of his hands."

"That makes him crazy strong! What was Akito thinking?"

"That's what I said. That boy let a little bit of recognition get to his head."

Aoi's eyebrows knitted though she otherwise remained expressionless. The other two smiled wryly at hearing Aoi's harsh assessment of her brother.

Fortunately, the food arrived right about then, and they all ate and forgot the conversation for a while.

Siasha brought a spoonful of the fragrant al ajillo to her mouth, filled with expectation. The plump shrimp on her spoon was steeped in a hot bath of olive oil and garlic.

"Mmm!" It was delicious. She then dipped her baguette into the oil and found it gave the bread a whole new flavor. The meaty stew she shared with Sian brought with it another dimension of flavor, making her just want more.

"The stew's great too!" she said.

"The beef used in it is sourced from a nearby butcher. It's their best product."

"Our guildmaster is very picky about food. Not that we're complaining."

Siasha's mind wandered as she ate.

It's good, but it might not be enough for Zig.

The three women carried on with their meal and conversation. When their plates were cleared, lunch break was over.

"Well, time for me to get back to work. Thank you for joining us, Siasha."

"Not at all. Thank you for inviting me." Siasha waved and watched Sian return to her post. Aoi remained, looking over at Siasha. "Is something wrong?"

Aoi leaned over to whisper into her ear. "Siasha, there have been rumors about adventurers using strange…consumables."

Siasha's eyes narrowed at the story. "Strange how?"

"I don't know. The higher-ups are still gathering information—information which they have not made me privy to as of yet. But, be careful. A lone female mage is a prime target for unsavory types. Do your best to stay close to him, or just to not be alone at all."

Aoi seemed genuinely worried for her. Siasha gave her a cryptic smile though she was happy for the concern. "Yes, of course."

A cold fear struck Aoi when she saw that unnerving smile, but by the time she recovered, Siasha was already walking away.

Lindia approached Siasha once she had returned to the main hall. She seemed to be without her party.

"Hello, Siasha. Sorry, did I make you wait?"

"Oh no, I was just having lunch."

As someone who fought on the front lines, Lindia was equipped with light armor and a sword and shield. Having partied with her, Siasha found that Lindia was a solid defensive fighter, and although her own attacks left much to be desired, she allowed her mages to bring their best spells to the field.

"So, what kind of job is it?" Siasha asked.

All she had heard was that the job would be one, profitable, and two, an investigation, but she didn't know what they were going to be examining.

"Well, actually, we're going to investigate the movements of some suspicious adventurers."

"Adventurers?" Siasha tilted her head. She was expecting the investigation to be monstrosity-related.

Lindia lowered her voice and drew nearer, though she actually blushed when she beheld Siasha's beauty up close.

"Adventuring draws in a lot of violent types, after all," she whispered. "Some of them do bad stuff. The guild usually leaves them to their own devices."

"So, they've gone over the line this time?"

"Looks like it. Don't worry, we won't be working on the investigation full time. We're just going to do our part and then report our findings. It'll be easy!"

Lindia proceeded to explain more. They would be observing an eighth-class adventuring party with five members. They had been

stuck at that rank for about a year now, not for lack of talent, but because of their propensity for seeking out trouble. They spent most of their money on drink, women, and gambling, leaving their gear neglected and outdated.

However, such behavior alone wasn't enough to warrant investigation; they hadn't caused real trouble for anyone when they were just acting up in public. It wasn't illegal to live like that—but it *was* unsustainable. Their idleness trapped them in a vicious cycle: The lazier they became, the weaker they grew, which limited the jobs they could take. In the end, they turned to breaking the law as an easy way to earn money. Even then, the guild wouldn't have intervened if their crimes were limited to petty theft, but things escalated when they started trafficking contraband.

"The guild will look bad if word gets out that its own adventurers are dealing illegal goods during inter-town requests."

Most guild requests involved monstrosity extermination, but some tasked adventurers to escort the cargo of trade associations. Immigration checks tended to be looser for these requests, so the guild would not stand idly by if adventurers started abusing this privilege.

"Got it. That's why the guild is offering handsome pay for something as bland as an investigation request."

"Ha, pretty much," Lindia said while pointing to emphasize the amount being offered. "How about it? I think it's pretty good."

Siasha also found it satisfactory. There were some magic items she wanted, and she could always use some extra money. Leaning

forward, she shook Lindia's hand, and the two smiled at each other.

"Let's get to it!"

***

An upscale restaurant in the wealthy district of town was well-known for being reserved by companies and executives for their private meetings. Today, the mafia was their clientele.

Two men faced each other in the restaurant's signature grand hall. One was Vanno Lotus, the notorious man next in line to take over the Bazartas. Across from him was Berthold Romani, the old head of the Cantarellas. The two stared at each other, both backed by a unit of their subordinates.

Berthold initiated the conversation. "So, Vanno, you mind telling me what we're doing here today?"

His jiggling belly gave him a somewhat jolly look, but his sharp gaze was all business. Meanwhile, dressed in a beat-up trench coat that didn't suit the location, Vanno played with his cigar.

"First, allow me to thank you for responding to my invitation, Don Berthold."

"This came in the mail with it." Berthold rolled an item across the table: an empty syringe. "Can't exactly ignore it, can I?"

Vanno had received the syringe from Albano, along with the report from Katia. *He* knew that the *Cantarellas* knew, so they couldn't just turn a blind eye.

Berthold lowered his voice. "Where'd you get this?"

"Come now, Don. You shouldn't ask questions you already know the answers to."

Berthold's sharp gaze was met with Vanno's greasy smile. Berthold narrowed his eyes, but Vanno maintained his relaxed demeanor. Eventually, Berthold sighed, knowing that he'd met his match.

"Your people sure made a mess in our lawn. You should tell your princess that corpse cleanup doesn't come for free."

"Our Miss is a tomboy. I couldn't stop her if I tried."

Naturally, the Cantarellas had gotten wind of Zig and Katia's ruckus. Berthold wanted to see how much the Bazartas knew. By the looks of it, Vanno had already figured him out.

"Enough circumspection," Berthold said. "Cut to the chase."

"Great, I was hoping we could get right down to business," Vanno replied. "We would like to take care of this matter by ourselves. You're free to sit back and enjoy the show. In exchange for us keeping quiet about it, give us your best territories."

The Cantarella executives bristled at Vanno's request. The Bazartas would gain more influence if they could take care of the outsider problem, which would definitely affect the Cantarellas' unions and affiliates going forward.

"Go to hell!" one of them snapped. "You can't just waltz into our territory and start making policies!"

Vanno slammed his fist against the table and shouted, "I'm not talking to you, runt! I have to handle this problem because you

morons can’t clean up your own messes! You should try doing your homework before you complain next time, you little shit!”

His fury was so unlike his usual shuffling demeanor that everyone fell silent. The pressure they suddenly felt was that of a true chief executive of a mafia.

The Cantarella executives reacted in one of two ways—fight or flight. Their fighters were already reaching for their weapons. The Bazartas responded in kind. A heavy tension spread throughout the room, beginning another staring contest that was more tense than the first.

“Stop.”

Berthold cut in, halting his men from declaring war. He took his pipe from his side and motioned one of them to light it. The Cantarella executives looked stunned and unsure whether they should put away their weapons or not.

“But, Boss…”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.” Berthold silenced his young subordinates without so much a glance.

They immediately backed down, their faces pale after hearing the hidden wrath in their don’s voice.

Meanwhile, Vanno enjoyed watching the farce, his own anger completely dissipated. The Bazartas looked to him, awaiting further orders. He answered them with an aloof wave of the hand. They silently returned to their positions as if nothing had happened.

Berthold heaved a sigh after seeing the difference in how they handled themselves. “Have to say I’m jealous of Gasparo’s successor.”

“That makes me feel a lot better about my prospects, Don,” Vanno said.

What a load of shit. Berthold rubbed his eyebrows, withholding the urge to call Vanno names. The Cantarellas hadn’t been defeated yet. “It’s not like we’ve just been sitting on our asses, you know. I hear *you* folks have been dipping your toes in human trafficking.”

Berthold launched his retaliation with his pipe still in his mouth. Vanno couldn’t help but wince.

Damn it. The old man has the devil’s ears…

He resisted the urge to click his tongue and instead put his cigar in his mouth. One of his subordinates lit it for him. Vanno blew a puff of purple smoke.

“I guess we both have things we’d rather keep secret,” Berthold said with a grin.

“Relax, Don. We talked it out with the people involved. Peacefully too. The only ones who got hurt in the end were the idiots who initiated the stupid venture.”

The painful blow managed to get another sigh out of Berthold. Still, Vanno couldn’t keep his composure forever. The Bazartas had managed to satisfy the victims and everyone related, sure, and the whole case was kept secret, unlike the business with the Cantarellas, but they were at a delicate point in their succession. Vanno didn’t

want to make sudden waves in the organization, especially with the whole Aggretia thing going on.

"Seven-three. Let's settle it at that, Don."

"Fine. You win this time." Berthold reluctantly nodded. He and Vanno were used to baiting each other with absurd demands before compromising.

"Why, thank you. You won't regret it. We don't want this stuff going around either."

Berthold gave another bitter nod before getting up. "Yeah? We'll see about that." He gave his pipe to his subordinate to clean. "By the way, I'm impressed you managed a peaceful settlement with the Jinsu-Yah. What kind of magic trick did you use there?"

His eyes locked on Vanno, watching for the slightest change in movement. Though he posed the question casually, Berthold seemed genuine enough in his admiration.

That's what I'd like to know. I don't know why they changed their minds.

Vanno had suffered at the hands of the combat-ready immigrants. They possessed a strong tribal bond, and negotiating with them was difficult because they couldn't be swayed by money. Yet the Princess of White Lightning was ready to negotiate. He kept his appearance of composure, but Vanno was so thrown off back then that he bit into his cigar. Nevertheless, the Jinsu-Yah had many specialists, so Isana doing the negotiating wasn't unheard of. Taking the offer was a gamble for Vanno, but things just happened to work out for him.

There must be a reason behind the change of heart of such a stubborn people. Vanno had looked into it with all his resources but had come up dry.

The whole debacle with the Jinsu-Yah had come about because of the unruly succession period. Afraid of making their relations worse by prying, he pretended to cooperate on the surface while continuing his investigation behind the scenes. In the end, he still had no idea what had caused the Jinsu-Yah's shift.

Berthold pressed him after he didn't answer for a few minutes. "Hello? I asked you a question."

"We handled it with a simple bit of sincerity," Vanno replied. "That's all there is to it."

He hid himself behind his cigar's smoke and an air of frivolity. The two stared at each other in silence. Berthold was the first to crack.

"I see. Send Gasparo my regards."

"Of course. Let's continue to be *good* friends, huh?"

The Don of the Cantarella gave one final glare to the man he couldn't intimidate before snorting and ordering his subordinates out.

Vanno watched them leave and sighed. He realized how dry his throat had become as he wiped the cold sweat off his forehead. He violently grabbed one of the cups on the table and drained it in one gulp. Now he could finally settle down.

Discussions with Berthold demanded increased caution. He couldn't appear weak, of course, but if he had gone too far in his

tough guy act, he wouldn't have made it out of the restaurant alive.

"Guess I'm still young. Not enough experience. Being rough and rowdy isn't my thing…"

The fat old bastard used to be an enforcer back in the day. His eyes scared the shit out of me.

At least Vanno's struggle was not without merit. He wasn't expecting the Cantarella to know about their human trafficking attempts, but all in all, the negotiation still went smoothly.

"We just need to wrap this up before the guild interferes. But first, lunch. I couldn't eat at all. Things were so tense…"

He was a practical man, and hunger clawed at him now that his fears had been put to rest. They had gone out of their way to pick a good restaurant! Although the food was cooked merely as a set piece, it would be a shame to see it go to waste.

Setting his cigar aside, he stuffed his mouth with braised veal. His subordinates were the only ones left in the restaurant so there was no more need for manners. Vanno could just enjoy his food.

"Is now a good time, sir?" One of his subordinates reported as he bit into the cold food. "We've got a message from Albano."

It must be quite important if he was interrupting lunch.

"Sure. I'm still gonna eat, though, sorry."

"Just don't dirty up your coat," his subordinate complained at the sight of the sauce smudges around Vanno's mouth. "It's worn down enough as it is."

It wasn't that Vanno didn't know proper table manners, but he always felt like politeness took the flavor out of food.

"Hah! Come on, I just like well-worn clothes more than expensive ones," Vanno joked. However, he took off his coat and continued to eat.

His subordinate took his coat with an expert hand, smoothing out the wrinkles and folding it neatly before delivering his report. Vanno listened as he ate. His expression barely changed as he washed his food down with wine and put his cigar back in his mouth.

"The guild's already on the move?" he asked. "So speedy. Some of their guys must've gotten involved. Which means there's a high possibility of them sending in their elites. We'll have to be careful and stay out of their way."

"First the Cantarella and now the guild," the subordinate said. "We'll do some internal cleaning too."

"Get on it. But what's eating Alba? He wants me to look into the merc again? He gave the go-ahead for my last report. It's not enough now?" Vanno twirled pasta with one hand while holding his cigar in another. His subordinate brought him an ashtray with a wry smile.

"Apparently, Albano thinks he's too good at his job."

Making sure it had a lot of meat sauce on it, Vanno put the forkful of pasta to his mouth. He reached for his soup as he chewed, the noise the bowl made as he dragged it across the table causing his subordinates to wince.

He slurped the soup without a care for etiquette. “That’s great! Can never have a guard that’s too competent.”

“Even if he took down a whole squad of Aggretia’s drugged-up goons by himself?”

Vanno let out a loud and dirty cough. His subordinate handed him a napkin and wiped the soup from his face as he continued hacking.

“He also knew that the Cantarella cronies were handling the stuff too.”

Vanno cut him off before he could say anything more outlandish. “That’s crazy! We can’t let the Miss go out with that kind of guy. You know what, I see Alba’s point.”

The guts on that girl. Feeling a headache coming on, Vanno massaged his forehead and slouched in his chair.

“Ugh… Fine, I’ll look into the merc again. Tell Alba to make time so I can see him in private.”

“Yes, sir.” The subordinate nodded and left.

Vanno watched, the gears in his head turning. “Now what would be the most profitable course of action?”

Chapter 3:
Boulder-Breaking Silver Strike

EARLY IN THE MORNING, SIASHA AND LINDIA STAKED out a trade association based on a tip they received from the guild. Wearing plain-looking robes to blend in, the two women spent hours watching the doors of the association, keeping track of the people who passed through them.

"Rolyde Trade Association is suspected of foul play," Lindia said, keeping an eye out while eating her sandwich. "We know those shady adventurers were frequently taking requests from them."

She was unexpectedly good at remaining alert while she ate, her movements careful and natural. Perhaps it was due to her habits as a long-time adventurer.

"It doesn't sound like you have a strong case," Siasha said.

On the flip side, Siasha stuck out like a sore thumb. She was restless, regularly tossing noticeable glances at the trade association during her attempts at espionage. Lindia had given her a wry smile earlier and told her to relax, but it had the opposite effect.

"Ha ha, well, Rolyde doesn't really handle large cargo, and their profit margins aren't that impressive either. Yet their employees seem to be doing very well as of late."

According to information the guild gathered from a brothel, their Rolyde clients had started visiting them once a day instead of once a week. Some would even pick out multiple girls at once.

"Oh. That makes it quite obvious, then."

Lindia let out an exasperated sigh and pouted. "Men always spend their money on alcohol, gambling, or women. What about the old man you hang out with?"

"Who, Zig?" Siasha paused. She never thought about what Zig did in his spare time. "I think he works most of the time. He eats a lot, but he only drinks to enjoy it."

"Uh-huh. What else?"

"What else… He trains, I suppose."

"Wow, he's so stoic. And then?"

"Uhh?" Siasha tilted her head quizzically.

She didn't think she had ever seen Zig do anything other than work or train. Going shopping with her didn't count, and going to the armory to peruse equipment wasn't quite the same either. What did the man do in his spare time?

Siasha went silent.

"Umm, Siasha?"

Siasha was lost in thought.

Even the girl he's always with has only ever seen him work and train. What a dry way to live, Lindia thought. She concluded that the Rolyde employees who spent their money at the brothel were probably engaging in healthier behavior.

They continued chatting about random things until Siasha eventually tamed her nerves. By the time she could spy on them as

calmly as a housewife waiting for a pot to boil, something *finally* happened.

"Oh, they're here!"

"At last."

The first to enter the scene were the guild's suspect adventurers. As expected, not all of them were present. Only two of them showed up. They were talking with someone from the trade association, but eavesdropping was difficult from their spot.

There was nothing immediately suspicious about them, but one of them did look like he was standing guard.

"He's oddly cautious."

Lindia suspected something fishy was afoot, but Siasha tilted her head, not understanding what the fuss was about. "Is he? Zig usually stands like that. He's less obvious about it, though."

"Wow…"

Zig spent his days always on the alert. No wonder Siasha thought it was normal. Lindia didn't think it was an ordinary way to live, but she didn't press the matter and returned her gaze to their targets. The two adventurers conversed with the association employee before finally making their way inside.

"Let's get moving. But where are the other three…?"

As Lindia stood, a sliver of sunlight flashed in her eyes. She immediately crouched to avoid it, realizing her mistake. A slight lean would've been enough to avoid the throwing knife, but her hasty reaction threw her off-balance. Knowing it was too late to do anything

else, Lindia thrust out her left hand, gritted her teeth, and braced for the pain.

The knife stopped with a soft thud.

"Huh?"

She looked again and saw a bracer made of rock wrapping around her right arm to protect her.

"Are you all right?" Siasha asked, as if a knife hadn't just been hurtling toward Lindia's head. She was acting so casually that Lindia thought she was dreaming for a second.

"You made this rock, Siasha? Wha—"

A whip of wind cut Lindia off, reminding her that now was not the time for small talk. Lindia raised her shield just in time to block a flying arrow.

"What's *with* those people?" Siasha asked.

Lindia kicked down their table to act as a shield as their enemies readied another volley.

"They found us out, that's what!"

Siasha clapped her hands together at this revelation. "Oh, I see!"

Lindia took the opportunity to secure her shield to her right arm and draw the sword at her waist. There were eight attackers in total, each equipped with crossbows and short bows, all intent on holding their ground.

"Guild dogs!" one of the waiters holding a crossbow shouted. "We won't let you get in the way of the trade association!"

Lindia’s face paled when she realized what he meant. “Does Rolyde own this place too?!”

This was awful. They had unknowingly walked into enemy territory. Most of their opponents were regular civilians using hunting crossbows instead of specialized magic items, but they knew not to challenge adventurers up close. They weren’t about to give up their position.

“Lindia, over here.” Siasha beckoned to her after quickly raising a wall of earth.

The wall was sturdy, not appearing hastily cast at all, and blocked all the incoming projectiles. Lindia ducked behind the barricade before their table-turned-pincushion eventually fell apart.

“There’s a lot of them…”



Lindia's equipment was tough enough to withstand crossbow bolts, but her head was exposed. She had also skimped out on some armor pieces for financial reasons, meaning that she couldn't just shrug off direct hits. Good thing Siasha was around! An expert mage like her would have no trouble making a path through their enemies.

"Can you take care of them, Siasha?"

Siasha nodded calmly behind the earth shield and stepped forward.

"Am I to understand that everyone here is an enemy?"

"Yeah, but they're still civilians, so go easy on them. It'd look bad for the guild if we hurt them too much."

Even criminals couldn't be killed without a hearing. The military police had the authority to do so depending on the situation, but adventurers killing civilians was out of the question.

Siasha proudly puffed out her chest to reassure Lindia. "Leave it to me."

Lindia thought Siasha must have had a solid plan to be so confident, but she didn't know her very well.

"See, I've recently mastered the art of holding back!"

This might not end well, Lindia thought to herself as Siasha formed a giant rock arm around her regular one—but it was too late to stop her now.

***

Katia and Zig were walking down a main street during another busy downtown morning.

"What are we doing today?" Zig asked his client.

She turned to look at him. His equipment was in absolute tatters. Anyone could tell that it was heavily damaged, and if someone wanted to attack them, now would be the best time. That said, Zig himself was in good health.

"We'll start by fixing your gear. Judging by yesterday, we'll be in big trouble if you're not at your best."

The ambush the day before had highlighted the gravity of the current situation for Katia. Although she was strong enough to beat up a couple of mafia members, the battle she saw had been on another level. Her stomach squeezed as she remembered how much danger she was actually in when Zig first stepped in to save her.

I don't have enough lives to deal with monsters like that. Best to let the specialist handle it.

She hadn't even had time to prepare for death when that arrow had flown toward her. She was not about to go out that way.

Zig nodded, unaware of the thoughts racing through Katia's mind.

"Thanks," he said. "I have a regular shop I go to, if you don't mind. Maintenance should go faster there."

Katia recalled the massive lunch bill he slapped her with at their initial negotiation. "Sure, go for it. Just don't forget, 'within reason.'"

"Of course."

He brushed off the suspicious look she gave him with a vague smile and glanced around.

Observers. I should've known.

Zig didn't forget to keep watch even while they were talking. The one he noticed following them must be a Bazarta—a watcher to keep an eye on Katia. Zig had seen his face before.

Although he was uneasy from being watched, he walked toward the armory anyway.

"Looks like you took quite a beating there."

The store clerk couldn't help but comment when she saw the damage done by Makar's blade to Zig's chest piece and gauntlets.

"Sorry…" Zig apologized. He felt bad that the gear she had so carefully selected while considering his combat needs and financial situation was already ruined.

"It's all right! I'm just glad to see you alive, Mr. Zig. If I may be frank, we'd love it if you keep buying new equipment from us so long as you're not badly injured."

"That's reassuring."

Her professional smile was unwavering, concealing her true nature. If that's what she was going to say, Zig would take full advantage of it.

"I want something that's around the same price and performance as last time," he said. "You can talk about payment details with her. She'll be footing the bill today."

When he turned to Katia, he saw that she was giving the clerk a dubious look. She did seem like she was going to say something when

Zig had initially chosen the shop.

"You know each other?" he asked.

"You can say that," Katia said reluctantly.

In contrast, the clerk immediately said, "Zig, I do not mean to meddle in your affairs, but I must recommend that you choose your acquaintances wisely. She is not a decent person."

Zig froze, shocked at the sudden censure coming from the clerk.

Katia stepped forward, glaring daggers from her eyes. "That's rich coming from you, gold digger. I bet you only bought her stuff because you couldn't keep up with what she was saying, huh, Zig?"

"I only prioritize the shop's interests, as any employee would. I'd appreciate it if you don't lump me in with troublemaking bottom-feeders."

"Big talk for someone who just told her customer she doesn't mind seeing his equipment get busted. 'As long as you're not dead, Mr. Zig'? What kinda demon *are* you? You're right, I'm nowhere near your level."

"What did you say to me?!"

"You wanna go? Let's go."

The two glared at each other, though neither raised their voices. Katia's gaze could cause a full-grown man to shrivel, but the clerk wasn't stepping down either.

They knew each other, all right. Well enough to hate each other.

"Hrm," Zig grunted, backing away while doing his best to quiet his footsteps. He distanced himself from the two women, exiting their

discussion and fading into the background.

"Zig, hey, it's you! How's the magic item working? You look like someone who's rough with his equipment, so I'm worried you've busted it already!"

Zig failed to make his escape when Gantt came barreling in. Zig glared hatefully at him, but the blacksmith prattled on without a care in the world.

"Did you use it on monstrosities again? How many times and at what intensity? I need details! And—eep!"

Gantt yelped in the middle of his rambling when he noticed Katia. He quickly hid behind Zig. By the looks of it, he probably knew she was with the mafia.

"You know her too?" Zig asked.

"How can *you* not?! You look like just the kind of person who deals with people like her!"

"That's rude. My face has nothing to do with this."

The two women returned to their senses at hearing the two men bicker and tore their gazes away from each other.



"Excuse me."

"Hmph."

The clerk bowed while Katia scoffed, the dramatically different gestures making a strong contrast between the two women. Gantt did his best to avoid looking in Katia's direction and slowly walked behind the clerk to use her as a shield. The sight of a wretched man being so scared of a girl that he would hide himself behind another girl who was roughly the same age was…pathetic, to say the least.

"Katia and I have a history together," the clerk explained. "I know the organization she's in and the place she has in it, which is why I do not recommend getting involved with her."

"Don't make me laugh, Sciezka," Katia shot back. "You don't know this man half as well as you think you do. He's not as 'on the straight and narrow' as you imagine. In fact, *I* wouldn't be involved with him if it weren't for the mess that's going on right now."

She's mighty straightforward despite me being here.

He wasn't thrilled to be painted as a man even the mafia didn't want any involvement with, but he kept his mouth shut and continued to observe them. Katia was mostly right, after all.

"His line of work aside, Mr. Zig is a respectful patron of our store. Look, you're just the wallet today, aren't you? Just keep quiet and pay the amount I tell you."

"And I'm still paying for him, you—you know what, never mind. Take care of it. Zig, pick whatever you like. Call me when you're done."

Exasperated, Katia left to wander around the store by herself.

"That girl… Right this way, Mr. Zig."

"Sure."

Zig followed Sciezka. Although he wasn't without interest in the two's relationship, he decided not to poke that particular hornet's nest.

Despite Sciezka's guidance, Zig was having trouble finding equipment that met his criteria. He decided to get the same armor as before, but he wasn't so lucky when it came to gauntlets.

"There isn't much demand for gauntlets, you see," Sciezka told him.

"Really?"

"Ones made of decent materials can't take much of a beating against monstrosities. It's also much more efficient from a mana, weight, and cost perspective to use defensive spells rather than gauntlets made of tough material."

The heavier your equipment, the more mana you had to put into physical enhancement, which meant increased exhaustion outside of combat. It was easier to conserve mana if you only needed to imbue your equipment with magic when you needed it.

"Magic again…"

Zig hated to keep complaining over the matter, but his lack of mana came up every time he went out to buy equipment.

He had once asked Gantt about armor that used mana kernels like his battle gloves, only to be disappointed when the blacksmith explained that most people weren't stupid enough to use them in their armor. The reason was that the gear would be reduced to junk once the kernels were depleted. Offensive applications were different because they were more like consumables. Hearing that, Zig agreed it made sense. Aside from nullifying a single instance of damage, having to wear something that could suddenly break didn't feel safe.

In fact, since mana kernel-incorporated equipment couldn't be used with regular magic, people who got their hands on it would either sell it off or only use it as a last resort like Zig.

"The only gauntlets we have in stock are either incredibly light and brittle or tough and heavy. Polar opposites."

Sciezka brought out a pair of gauntlets which were slightly larger than Zig's current shield bug ones. Unlike the streamlined shape of his current gauntlets, these were more angular. The dark purple gauntlets gave off a feel that was as eerie as their gleam was strange. They definitely felt heavy in Zig's hands, about the weight of a shield.

"These gauntlets have been dubbed the azure dragon gauntlets by their maker."

The word "dragon" piqued Zig's interest.

"Dragon material, huh? It does have that majesty about it." He nodded, acknowledging the strange but dignified aura of the material.

Meanwhile, Sciezka shook her head, though she maintained her professional smile. "No, it's made of mantis shrimp."

Zig froze and stared at her. “Shrimp?”

“Rainbow Mantis Shrimp to be exact. Though it usually lives underwater, it comes up on land in search of prey. It uses magic to control water currents and has an incredibly tough shell. It can easily punch through rock monstrosities with its claws. Its punches have also been known to go right through adventurer armor, damaging their internal organs with the shock waves. Its danger level is ranked at sixth class.”

“I see. A shrimp.”

Zig cast a conflicted gaze at the “azure dragon gauntlets.” Their menacing aura was now gone, and he could swear he smelled a fishy scent around them in its place.

“Heh heh… Ow!”

Sciezka quietly kicked a snickering Gantt. She then tried to cheer Zig up by explaining the gauntlets’ features.

“They’re heavy but very tough. The shell has natural magic resistance so it will have no problem deflecting basic spells. You can also use it offensively, of course, and they’re designed in such a way that the recoil and shock wave of your punches will be redirected to your elbows.”

“Right… It’s all about performance in the end. The monstrosity it comes from has nothing to do with it.”

Zig put the gauntlets on. Their striking colors stood out, but they were comfortable enough to wear. Unlike his previous pair, these

gauntlets attached themselves to his arms instead of wrapping around them.

The range of motion wasn't bad, but he was afraid it might still interfere with his weapon. Unfortunately, that was something he could only find out on the field.

As for the weight… "It doesn't feel that much heavier."

Zig did feel that these gauntlets were heavier than the shield bug ones, but only marginally if he was being honest.

"Oh? How strange." Gantt brought out some scales to dispel the confusion. "Look, it's about 20 percent heavier. You're either dense or incredibly strong if you can't tell the difference."

Zig shook off the shock from being called dense and started shadowboxing. The speed of his punches didn't feel much different from his shield bug set.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Zig, but my eyes can't tell the difference." All Sciezka could see was the blur of Zig's arms as he moved.

"I see…" Zig's shoulders slumped when he didn't get the reassurance he wanted.

Gantt laughed at him. "You're fine! Twenty percent is nothing compared to mistaking the menacing mantis shrimp for a dragon!"

Zig went silent and thought about clocking the blacksmith over the head, but Sciezka went ahead and yanked Gantt's beard for him.

"We'll get it fitted for you right away."

"Thanks."

Sciezka dragged Gantt away, one hand over his mouth, all while maintaining her professional smile.

Zig called Katia over to settle the bill once the discussion was over.

"I knew going in, but adventurer gear sure is expensive."

The gauntlets Zig got weren't particularly pricey. Adventurer-grade equipment was just more expensive compared to its civilian counterpart.

Seeing the receipt, Katia forced a smile and took out her check book.

"Oh yeah, another thing." Zig stopped just as they were about to leave the shop. He turned to Sciezka who was seeing them off with her usual smile on her face. "I can't tell you the details because they're related to the job, but try not to go out alone, and stay away from quiet places."

Sciezka blinked at Zig's sudden warning, but she could tell that he wasn't joking. She thanked him, her professional smile fading for the first time that day, replaced with a real one.

"Understood. I'll tell the other employees about it. Thank you for your concern."

"I'd hate losing a discreet clerk."

Zig turned and walked away from the armory.

Katia was waiting a few yards away and started walking when Zig drew close. He kept a half step's distance from her and scanned their surroundings. The person tailing them was still following them.

"We talked to Cantarella the other day," Katia said. "We should be making our move soon. I'm to take some people with me for a surprise attack. You're our backup in case someone gets in our way or if we have our backs to the wall."

Zig was surprised upon hearing this turn of events. Large organizations tended to be slow—not only did they have to get majority votes, but they then had to coordinate with other teams.

"That's fast. But maybe that's natural for you people."

"Things are so bad this time that we *have* to move quickly. We just settled our infighting too. Bazarta can be highly responsive when it's just run by one person."

"Huh… I see."

Zig had heard about the Bazartas' infighting. It had been the cause of his last mafia-related contract, after all. Regardless, he kept his mouth shut about that. He was a professional and didn't want to give his client more reasons to be suspicious of him.

"Are you sure it'll be all right? A direct confrontation with them can't end well for you."

Makar had survived his arm amputation. There was the man with the longbow too. The Bazartas wouldn't be able to defeat men like that without suffering heavy casualties—though they might be the kind of organization that was ready to sanction such sacrifices.

"That's what *I* said but, apparently, we have a plan. They said we have enough firepower."

"Got it. They must have something prepared if they're so confident."

"I don't know the details, but Vanno isn't one to go in without a plan. You can trust him."

Vanno. Zig had heard the name before. Going by what Katia had told him, it had to be the mafia member from before. He had found the enemy's weakness and was directing the Bazartas. Though he had only met him once, it was enough to tell Zig that Vanno was a very competent individual. He would have to be careful if he didn't want to be found out.

They continued talking until they left downtown and entered the southern district, heading right into Cantarella territory.

They passed the busy streets into the residential area. The buildings grew taller, obscuring the sunlight. Small, privately owned stores that couldn't set up shop downtown were concentrated here.

"You just need to be my bodyguard, Zig. Anything else would be a breach of contract. We're getting more people as backup anyway."

"And are those people the characters tailing us now?"

Zig wasn't talking about the observers he'd spotted earlier. He referred to them as "characters" to drive the point home to Katia.

They had probably been following them even before they went to the armory. Their incompetent observers had caused Zig to notice

the others too late. These were excellent stalkers, if not for the fact that Zig caught a whiff of their unknown magic from time to time.

Katia stared back at Zig as if they were making casual conversation. She didn't pull any rookie mistakes like looking around to search for their stalkers.

"Where?"

"Four o'clock, sixteen feet. The young man with twin sabers on his waist."

A bead of sweat rolled down Katia's chin. That was *a lot* closer than she expected. She suppressed her panic and cast a glance in his direction. Fortunately, Zig stood in front of her to conceal her. Katia's expression shifted when she saw him. She recognized that face, and it wasn't good.

"This sucks."

"You know each other?"

"I do. Zasp Lognar, third-class adventurer. I knew the guild was on the move but to think they'd send out their top dogs…"

"Is he famous?" Zig asked, never having heard the name before. It earned him an exasperated sigh.

"How do you *not* know? You're at the guild all the time! He's a prodigy for being able to reach third class at such a young age. What the hell is he doing here?"

The guild was also out looking for information, but the Cantarella had placed a gag order on their men, preventing them from sharing anything. Having achieved nothing from stringing up mafia

cronies, it was only natural that the guild would go directly to the VIPs next.

Katia resisted the urge to click her tongue and began to think. Zig added to her burden by being the bearer of even more bad news.

"There are others with him, though I don't know where they are exactly."

"Rrgh! Those must be his party members. I hear they're a team of three."

Katia gave in to her frustration and started digging her fingers into her hair.

Do we cooperate and take them to the scene of the crime? No, of course not. A gangster's a gangster in their eyes, and I'd rather them not get in the way. What should I do?

As Katia clutched her head in her hands, Zig took his eyes off of his groaning client to look around him. His eyebrows twitched. He smelled that one of the people tailing them was using a different kind of magic.

"We don't have time to deliberate. The other two have made their move. They're probably surrounding us right now."

Zig's warning did the trick; Katia immediately pulled herself together.

"We'll go somewhere deserted. Try to negotiate."

"All right."

Following her lead, they went into a narrow alleyway devoid of people. Zig and Katia hastened their steps while the three pursuing

them abandoned all pretense and began chasing them. The footsteps of their hunters surrounding them became loud enough to hear.

Light, regular, and heavy footsteps. One of them is heavily armed by the sound of their armor. Not good. The one in light armor must be that Zasp guy.

Katia stopped once they were a good distance away from the residential area. The alleyway was wide and deserted, empty of all life except for some garbage scattered around. There was nowhere to hide here. It was the ideal location for secret conversations since you could easily sense when someone else was coming. The mafia was used to conducting deals in places like this.

"Hello. May I have a moment of your time?"

Katia turned around to meet the voice. "Is there a problem, adventurer?"

Her face was that of a mafia member. In an attempt to intimidate the adventurer, her tone and posture were imposing and her gaze was sharp. However, it was to no avail. Third-class adventurers were not ones to flinch at such things.

"Aww, how adorable."

A blindfolded woman with silver hair approached them, smiling despite Katia's attempt at baring her fangs.

Katia fell silent. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead despite her standing as a powerful member of the mafia. She'd expected to control the pace of the conversation, but she was powerless before

the difference in their strength—something akin to the distance between heaven and earth.

Katia subconsciously stepped back before Zig put his large hand on her shoulder.

"Keep it short. We're a bit busy at the moment."

The blindfolded woman looked intrigued at Katia's attempt to stand her ground, but her mouth twisted when she turned her attention to Zig.

"And what are *you* doing here? I thought you were suspicious before, but did you actually go and join a criminal organization?"

"It's just a job."

"For the mafia? Ridiculous."

"I don't pick my clients. What about you? Are you playing at being a military police officer now?"

Elsia had flung those barbed words at Zig in disbelief, but he remained calm and struck back. Elsia sighed, knowing that he wouldn't divulge anything beyond this point.

She returned her attention to Katia. "Does this look familiar to you?"

Elsia took out an all-too-familiar syringe. Katia didn't know *where* Elsia could've picked that up. Katia and Zig had swept the scene of their fight clean.

"What's that supposed to be?" Katia asked.

"Oh, just a drug that's been going around. It's claimed some victims on our side too. That's what we're looking into. And we

suspect that big man over there to be using it."

How'd you come to that *conclusion?*

Zig frowned at the unfounded accusation but said nothing. Whatever the truth was, they were going to use them as a stepping stone to get to it.

Katia's expression remained firm, and she crossed her arms. "I hired him as a personal bodyguard a few days ago. He has nothing to do with whatever that is."

"Then, what about you people? Who else would be distributing such dangerous substances? We have witnesses who saw that man rip other mafia members to shreds. It was quite gruesome the way they went out. How are you going to explain that?"

She has a point. Katia couldn't help but agree with her. She had seen Zig fight up close. Anyone who saw him in combat would think he was the odd one out. The man himself didn't look impressed.

"It was self-defense," Katia insisted. "They attacked us first. The drug practically makes them unkillable. The ones distributing it are out-of-town mafia."

The blindfolded woman scoffed at Katia's statement.

"You're telling me to believe that?"

"Those are the facts. They're causing a lot of trouble for us too."

The blindfolded woman gave it some thought but eventually shook her head. "I won't accuse you of lying outright, but you're leaving too much out. May we talk to your boss? I promise we won't be violent."

"I told you I'm busy. Give me two days. No—a single day."

The guild's interference now would get in the way of the plan. They still didn't know who was behind it all, and now the adventurers were suspicious of Zig because of yesterday's fight. Aggretia might take advantage of the situation. Katia wanted to buy them time.

"We're not kids on an errand," Elsia said. "Our superiors won't take 'wait' for an answer."

"Even if we tell you to stay out of the way because we're going to deal with the problem right now?"

She didn't mind giving them information if it would get them off their case. However, her offer was only met with aggressive silence.

Zig stepped in front of her and spoke in a low voice. "Go, Katia."

Negotiations had ended. Their opponents also sensed that combat was unavoidable and started getting ready. Greatsword and Twin Sabers came out of hiding and stood next to the blindfolded woman.

"Sorry," Katia said in a frustrated voice as she backed away. She knew there was nothing else she could do. "Can you buy us some time?"

"Yeah, I'll meet up with you when I'm done. Try to keep out of trouble until then." Zig remained calm despite the situation and even had time to crack a joke.

"That's my line, idiot."

Zig felt Katia slap him on the back, then her footsteps faded into the distance. Pulling out his weapon, he dropped into a fighting

stance. The blindfolded woman—Elsia—looked at him with her club in hand.

"Such composure for someone outnumbered three to one. I've heard stories, but you must be *very* confident in your abilities," Elsia said teasingly as she closed in on him.

"Perhaps. Come and test them."

Tylon had his greatsword on his back while Zasp moved sideways with his sabers, looking for an opening.

"You're pretty confident for a druggie. You think you can beat us with a little enhancement?" Elsia tried to provoke him, but it was only a bluff. She knew that she couldn't let her guard down against him.

"I don't know. I'm about to find out." Zig's tone was confident. His blue twinblade and dark purple gauntlets gleamed mysteriously.

They stopped trading words and stared each other down, waiting for the one who would make the first move. Zig took the opportunity to scan his opponents' equipment. The greatsword and sabers aside, the blindfolded woman's club was quite strange.

The pole looked like it should be swung by someone with a more robust figure. It was his first time seeing such a slender and long club. Its length was about the same as Zig's twinblade. She even handled it in a similar way.

Whatever it is, a third class is wielding it. There must be some kind of trick to it.

Zig shifted his position slightly but didn't initiate anything. His goal was to stall; there was something about his opponents that made

him hesitate. He couldn't attack carelessly.

"Come on!"

Zasp finally got impatient and made a beeline for Zig, his sabers in hand. He reached top speed in three steps, putting him on par with Makar. An expert in high-speed combat, he used his dual blades to bewilder opponents with consecutive attacks. Zasp brandished his sabers, having closed a distance of ten meters in no time flat. His charge was followed by a slash.

Though Zig avoided his skillful attacks, Zasp wasn't surprised. He knew going in that the big mercenary was going to be strong. Instead of faltering, he launched a follow-up attack faster than Zig could dodge.

Zig blocked one of Zasp's sabers with his twinblade and then knocked the other away.

Heavy! Zasp's eyes widened and ice ran down his spine as he felt the power behind Zig's deflection. He backed away by instinct, but the mercenary gave chase. Zasp was faster, but Zig had a longer stride.

Tylon rushed in, his greatsword swinging. Making fine adjustments was difficult for the large and heavily armored man, but he was more than fast enough moving in a straight line thanks to his physical enhancements.

"Yaaaah!"

"Haah!"

Tylon brought his greatsword down on Zig's twinblade, knocking it off its trajectory, then struck again. Sparks flew as their blades clashed with sharp, heavy clangs. The ground shook as the sound of their weapons reverberated throughout the empty alley, so loud that it left their ears ringing.

The two big men pushed their weapons together, using their full weight—twinblade clashing against greatsword.

"Hngh!"

However, the balance of power was shifting slowly but surely. Despite Tylon's initial advantage from the momentum of his overhead attack, he couldn't overpower Zig. Having lost much of his initial momentum, Tylon found Zig now pushing him back.

Beads of sweat formed on Tylon's forehead as the flat of his greatsword almost smacked his head. All of the physical enhancements he had cast on himself were for naught.

"T-too strong!"

Zasp stepped in as things started getting out of hand. "Get back, old man!"

Zig knew that he couldn't take on another combatant at the moment.

"Tsk." Putting all his power into the swing, he gave up defending and pushed into Tylon's greatsword, using its recoil to backstep.

Suddenly, something else entered Zig's field of vision as Zasp stepped ahead of a stumbling Tylon. With a surprised grunt, Zig

turned, finding Elsia's club shining with a silver light. Her robes swayed as she swung.

Before landing on his backstep, Zig twisted, swinging his twinblade with one hand to block the club aimed for his body. Even if he used his weapon with one hand, its weight and his strength should be enough to deflect it.

He sorely miscalculated.

The engraving on Elsia's club activated upon contact, knocking Zig's twinblade away with a loud crack.

"Wha—?!" Zig stumbled from the shock.

Elsia closed in when she saw the opening. "Hah!"

He dodged the rolling attacks of her club, regained his footing, and fought back. Now, it was twinblade versus club. Though there were many differences between the two weapons, their attacking style was quite similar: parries, sweeps, strikes.

Though her club's reach was the same as a twinblade, the weapon's lighter weight allowed for more attacks. Usually, the twinblade's weight and Zig's raw power would be able to overwhelm the rapid assault. Somehow, that wasn't the case here.

Is it that magic from earlier? What an intense shock wave. I'm done for if I get hit by that.

Zig had to be careful. He couldn't get a read on Elsia's maximum power output, and frequently hitting her weapon might just end with a broken twinblade. He knew that she needed to charge that earlier

attack, but he was otherwise in the dark and didn't have time for analysis.

The other two had recovered and were closing in on him from behind. Tylon raised his greatsword menacingly while waiting for an opening, while Zasp joined the scuffle to support Elsia.

Zig deflected Zasp's sabers with his gauntlet, his twinblade occupied with the club. Fending off attacks from his front and behind was difficult because Tylon was preventing him from changing positions.

Suddenly, Zig's nose caught a whiff of magic coming from Elsia. He remembered it was hers from the scent, but it wasn't the same smell that came from the club from earlier.

This had the exact same scent as when Zig had prevented her from using her magic on him in the past. He foiled her both times. He didn't know what the spell was, but their current situation suggested that it would be offensive.

Zig tensed.

"You're not slipping away!" Zasp yelled, his attacks becoming more intense, perhaps to bolster Elsia's magic. Zig did his best to defend himself against the flurry of his dancing blades that dipped and weaved without a set pattern.

Elsia took advantage of the break in Zig's motion to pour mana into her club. As soon as he saw it begin to glow, Zig moved.

He interrupted Zasp's sabers by redirecting his haphazard attacks with his twinblade. Zig then rotated halfway, bringing his

backhand crashing into the flat of Zasp's sabers.

"Urgh! You little…!"

The blow had enough momentum in it that Zasp thought he had been hit by a monstrosity. His sabers didn't break as he used them to defend himself; they were of good make. However, the impact still rattled his bones. It wasn't enough to make him stumble, but he stepped back to regain his footing.

"Hold up, you!"

Tylon came in from the other direction, slamming into the mercenary with his greatsword as Zig was about to chase after Zasp. The attack was weak, only meant to disrupt Zig, but it allowed Zasp to regain his footing and move in for a pincer attack.

Here. Again, Zig caught a whiff of a small chance of victory.

He pushed his right leg against the flat of the greatsword that was heading toward him, neutralizing his opponent's bash and using the momentum to jump away.

Zig now charged toward Zasp as the latter lunged at Zig from behind, moving near enough that they could touch each other.

"Hey!"

Zasp was startled by Zig suddenly closing the distance between them and swung his sabers…too late. Pushing the flimsy swing back with his gauntlet, Zig grabbed him by the collar and threw him into Tylon.

"Whoa!"

Tylon was still in the middle of an attack and wearing heavy equipment, so he couldn't avoid the living projectile. Both men were knocked onto the ground.

The tide was now heavily in Zig's favor. Elsia was in no position to help her fallen friends, and Zig wasn't about to let the opportunity slip by.

"That's it."

He gripped his twinblade with both hands, bent his knees, and lunged at the two. He lifted his weapon overhead and brought it down on them at full strength to finish them off.

Just as the gleaming streak of blue was about to take their lives —a spark of silver rammed into Zig's chest.

"Gaaah!"

The silver flash shattered Zig's chest piece, its momentum sending him flying across the street. His twinblade flew through the air as his gigantic frame crashed into a wall. A cloud of dust kicked up where he had been standing.

Elsia twirled her shining silver club, looking relaxed. "Don't let your guard down."

The other two watched the exchange in stunned silence before finally noticing that they had narrowly avoided death.

"You saved us… Thanks, Leader," Zasp said gratefully. He was drenched in cold sweat from the weapon that had been mere inches away from his neck.

“By a hair’s breadth, indeed. We would’ve been stains on the ground if not for you, Lady Elsia.”

The two got up as they showered her with more thanks.

Elsia flipped her silver hair and smiled. “I’m just glad you’re all right. Sorry about your armor.”

“Think nothing of it,” Tylon said. He laughed and slapped his side. “It’s a small price to pay for my life.”

There was a mark in the side of his armor where Elsia’s club had pushed between Tylon and Zasp. She had threaded her club carefully so that Zig had taken the brunt of the attack because he hadn’t seen it coming.

It had been incredibly difficult to pull off such a precise attack with her two teammates lying on the ground. If Elsia had miscalculated her output or accuracy even a tiny bit, she could have taken their lives. She flipped her hair again as if it was nothing after pulling off such an incredible feat.



Eventually, the dust cloud settled, revealing a crack on the wall with Zig slumped against it.

"Is he dead?"

"I don't think so. Though I can't be sure. I didn't have time to hold back."

Zasp voiced the question that was on all of their minds: "Who the hell is he?"

Their eyes fell on Elsia since she had interacted with him before.

"He says he's a mercenary," she said.

"Doesn't look like any mercenary I've run into," Zasp said bitterly.

Tylon nodded. "Same here."

Elsia didn't know the details; she had deliberately been avoiding him after he sniffed her out.

"I've heard stories about a mercenary who's working as a bodyguard for an adventurer quickly climbing the ranks. I didn't think he'd be so strong."

"He's crazy. I've never felt so much pressure in a three-on-one fight. And we're all third class too!"

Zasp frowned as he felt his sabers catch on something as he sheathed them. Upon inspection, he found that they had been bent from blocking Zig's backhanded strike. Tylon then ran his hand along his greatsword to check for deformations. They were running equipment checks like they had just fought against a large monstrosity.

Elsia's voice pulled them to get back on track. "That took more time than expected. We should hurry."

"What do we do with him?" Zasp asked.

Elsia wasn't sure. They should take him to the guild under the suspicion of using drugs, but they wanted to get the girl first.

"Leave him. He's not going anywhere anytime soon."

Lugging him around would be a massive undertaking. They would report this to the guild and have someone pick him up later. With Zig defeated, they could start tracking Katia. As they had claimed victory for themselves, their footsteps carried no hesitation.

Until Elsia stopped and gasped in disbelief.

She slowly turned around, the hairs on the back of her neck standing up as a cold sweat prickled down her spine.

The alley was empty of anyone but the defeated mercenary. The aftermath of the battle was still there, but there was no one else in hiding. Her friends wondered what was keeping her.

"What's wrong? We have to hurry if we want to catch her."

"Zasp, wait. This isn't right…" Elsia's tone carried a warning as she turned, brandishing her weapon and readying herself against Zig, who was still lying against the wall.

"What do you mean?"

"It's not over yet!" Elsia suddenly shouted, her relief gone.

Sensing *some* kind of disturbance, the other two readied themselves. Though they couldn't see anything amiss, they trusted

her enough to do as she said.

Silence descended on the empty alley, but they still maintained their vigilance.

"And here I thought I had you for a second."

A voice echoed through the space—a familiar one. They wouldn't forget how the man they had been fighting mere moments ago sounded.

Zig slowly got up.

"You've gotta be kidding me," Zasp said. He had seen Elsia defeat many monstrosities with that move she'd pulled off earlier. Even while armored, no human could take that kind of blow and still be standing. But the scene unfolding before him had dramatically flipped the script.

If it hadn't been for Elsia's warning, they would've had their backs against this monster. They knew he wouldn't have had any qualms striking them down. Would they have been able to survive the ambush? Absolutely not.

Zig had resisted Tylon's mighty blows, and even stood toe to toe against the speed of Zasp's sabers. Try as they might to fight back, one of them would probably end up dying.

Zig walked over to the twinblade stuck in the ground and picked it up.

He looked at the pitiful state of his chest piece and heaved a sorrowful sigh, his shoulders slumping now that it was damaged beyond repair. It would have to be thrown away due to the massive

damage it had sustained from Elsia's strike. Zig's face then twisted in pain, signaling that he wasn't free from injury. He cracked his neck to loosen up.

"I don't get it," he said. "You could've made your move sooner if you had me figured out. Why wait until you were further away?"

"Call it last-minute intuition," Elsia muttered.

She focused her mana by breathing and told herself to calm down. As shocked as she was that Zig was still standing, he wasn't unharmed. The slow way he was moving meant that he hadn't fully recovered. He shouldn't be able to take another blow of that magnitude with his damaged equipment.

"I'll use the same thing to hit him," she said to her teammates. "You know what I can do. Cover me."

They felt a too-real pressure watching Zig prepare himself to fight again. To distract him, Tylon started talking.

"Those drugs sure are potent. I didn't expect you to get back up after taking a hit like that."

Zig only sighed in exasperation. "This is nothing compared to the stuff they're using. Theirs is so potent that their bodies can't keep up with its effects, turning them into infinitely regenerating monsters. All I'm using is a mild stimulant compared to that."

"Hah!" Zasp shouted, partly to distract Zig and partly to denounce his actions. "So, you *are* using. That ain't real strength!"

The young man took pride in climbing through the ranks without relying on substances, thinking that any strength granted to you by

using them wasn't real. Though Tylon remained silent, he had the same views. Their gazes were filled with contempt.

For the first time, Zig's tone was laced with sarcasm. "*Real* strength. Funny."

He took off his cloak with one hand and threw the two of them a series of questions.

"Then, are you allowed to use a sword? What about killing your enemies at a distance with bows and magic? They're all just tools people use to be stronger. If one day there was an invention that let you kill people without lifting a finger, would you go on using your sword?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"That you're only in favor of the options that you prefer. Swords, drugs, magic—they're all tools developed by mankind for battle. We'll use them as long as we need them. Being proud of your tools of choice and refusing to use any other is a recipe for death."

Zig didn't take up arms for the sake of becoming a knight or a warrior. He needed them to fight, to survive. The blade just happened to be the right tool for the job, but trying to have an inspiring duel in a war zone was plain nonsense.

"Nothing wrong with sticking to your swords, but you'll get your feet knocked out from under you if you stubbornly reject every new thing that comes along."

Zig was partly lecturing himself, having just recently learned the terrors of magic. He was embarrassed at how ill-prepared he was

against mages. Now, he had an obligation to learn about magic even if he couldn't use it himself.

Look at me being preachy. Zig glanced over his injuries with a sardonic smile. The drug he'd used was beginning to kick in, numbing the pain in his body. His breathing became heavier, making him consciously focus on it. He breathed deeply to settle the battle fury growing in the pit of his stomach.

Cool head, burning body.

He couldn't afford to lose control even in the heat of battle. The precepts of drug-enhanced combat: His master had drilled that into his brain until Zig was sick of it. A miscalculation in one's own limits would destroy their body, rendering them useless. Mercenaries were expendable but only for their clients. The mercenary himself only had one life to use.

Mind and body. Make good use of them both.

Such was the lecture Zig had received when he wildly swung his sword for the first time. Back then, he didn't know what the hell that had to do with the job at hand.

A faint smile crept onto his face as he remembered those old times. Just a brief indulgence of sentimentality.

"Anyway, I've let you buy enough time. I'm ready, too."

He had been smelling the scent of powerful magic for a while now. They were going to use their trump card.

Elsia stepped forward between her teammates. "You've been quite frank with us so far."

Zig narrowed his eyes upon seeing her.

"So, *that's* your trump card?"

Elsia's silver hair swayed as she walked, and the aura she gave off was far greater than before. Her blindfold was gone, baring plain her face. It was as graceful and radiant as Zig expected.

But her eyes… Her eyes were something else. Where white should have been was colored a deep crimson, and her pupils were reptilian, vertical slits. Their color there was a black that went beyond darkness. Those eyes looked like they could penetrate through anything they saw, strong enough to knock a man out with even the most innocent gaze. They seemed to be the source of her enormous mana pool.

"Interesting eyes you've got," Zig said.

"Is that all? You don't have to be shy about your impressions, you know."

"I'm not sure what else to say. Are you a demi-human?"

"No. I'm a human, plain and simple. Except for the eyes."

"I see. No further questions."

"Goodness, how polite of you. Then, let us begin."

There was no room for further talk. The two combatants took their positions, sizing each other up. When they moved, it was at the same time.

Zig disappeared in a blur of dust as Elsia took a step back and swung her club upward and to the right. She saw through the move that had taken Zasp and Tylon down.

Zig’s twinblade crashed into her club. The silver weapon’s engraving made up for the difference in weight, but this time, it was not enough to knock the twinblade back. His speed, strength, and technique neutralized the silver club’s shock wave.



Zig and Elsia stared at each other across the line drawn by their dueling weapons, her black-and-red eyes widening in shock as she witnessed the ferocity of his attacks. There was no way she could win this test of strength once she ran out of momentum.

She quickly pulled her club back and swung it at his left knee. As she attempted to break that kneecap, she twisted into a sideswipe to knock his right foot out from under him. Next, she jumped back and heaved her club up to defend herself, only for the end of his twinblade to catch it. She felt him trying to yank her with his weapon but managed to resist.

Their movements resulted in them trading positions. Zasp released a blade of wind and ran in, while Tylon—as an impromptu defensive measure—covered his left side with rocks before he charged in with his greatsword. Zig dodged the invisible wind blade as if he could sense it, then his weapon collided with Zasp's incoming sabers.

He blocked the first saber slash and parried the second one with the handle of his twinblade before knocking Zasp to the ground with a leg sweep. He then guarded against Tylon's sideswiping greatsword with the flat of his blade and went after the back of his knees with a downward slash.

Tylon panicked and drew his greatsword back to defend himself, but Zig's attack was a feint. He changed course and planted his twinblade into the ground and used it as a pivot to launch a powerful roundhouse kick, breaking through Tylon's defenses.

"Guwah!"

Tylon's large body was thrown forward.

"Shit!"

The agile Zasp dodged the human projectile, intent on not repeating his previous mistake. Fortunately, Tylon was mostly unharmed thanks to the rocks and his armor.

As Tylon went flying, Elsia attacked with a thrust of fearsome accuracy toward Zig's neck, but he deflected the club in the nick of time with his gauntlet and swung his twinblade with one hand. Just like he had, Elsia deflected his attack, knocking it upward with minimal movement. Just before she was about to launch a counterattack to Zig's side, she pulled her club back.

Zig's uppercut hit nothing but air.

That was a blind spot. Did she read me? Her eyes were the prime suspect. Their magic was still active, but he didn't know what they were doing. *Don't tell me she can actually read my mind?*

She was dangerous either way. The longer the fight went on, the more he would be at a disadvantage. She fixed her strangely glowing eyes on Zig as he adjusted the grip on his twinblade.

Several flashes of blue sliced through the air.

Zig's enhanced physique was astounding. Not only could he hold his ground against the attacks of three assailants, but he also immediately counterattacked if they showed any kind of opening. If Elsia hadn't sensed and knocked his twinblade away, she would've lost her head multiple times by now.

Sweat ran down Tylon and Zasp's foreheads as they understood the immense power of their opponent. Each strike he made could be

lethal. The thundering sound of his blade slamming against their armor seemed enough to penetrate their defensive spells. Even focusing all their mana on protecting themselves would only allow them to survive a single blow.

That was all they *could* do. They would no longer be able to fight once depleted of mana.

Monster!

Their enemy showed no signs of slowing down despite his violent motions.

Soon enough, the two men were depleted of mana and stamina. They could only retreat and watch in fear, unable to wield their blades.

The situation was bad.

This was the fourth time Zig's attack had been blocked. Elsia had taken off her blindfold and proceeded to read all of his movements as though he were an open book.

She had dealt with all of his surprise feints and direct power attacks.

As they were fighting, he flicked a coin at Elsia's eyes from a blind spot.

"What?!" Elsia dodged it. "Hah!"

Zig internally seethed.

Again.

This time, his left hand was hidden behind his twinblade, but she easily deflected it. At least the indigo adamantine coin dispersed her focused mana.

She *hadn't* been reading his every move from the start. If that were the case, he would've been defeated a long time ago. From his experiments, he realized that she responded just as he was committing to a move. Judging by her hesitation, it didn't seem like she was reading his mind as he previously thought. It wasn't her eyes. It was her intuition.

"What are you *doing*?" he said to himself.

His body had been feeling off ever since he blocked the force of the greatsword user's sideswipe. As much as the stimulant he'd taken was masking the pain, the reality of his wounds remained. He wouldn't be able to make the moves he wanted if she kept reading him.

I guess I'll try being a little more aggressive.

***

The situation was well out of hand by the time Katia reached the scene with her subordinates. The information leaked from the organization had already reached her enemies.

Though, they had *deliberately* leaked it—down to the time and date.

It was Vanno who had suggested that there was a rat in their organization. Following his guidance, they carried out a plan to smoke them out, but they didn't expect to find the rat so soon.

"Good evening. But I suppose it's a bit too early to say that. You seem busy, Elio. Moving out? Actually, what are you doing here, anyway?"

Vanno, his men behind him, had a smile on his face. The air around him was heavy despite the small talk he was making.

"Vanno… When did you find out?"

The insider, Elio, glared at him, but Vanno only scratched his head with a sheepish look on his face.

"I didn't, really. But the way the Miss was attacked as soon as she left? Made me think they were closer than I expected. So, what're you all doing here?"

Sweat was rolling down the forehead of someone who looked to be an Aggretia executive. He cleared his throat and said, "Gentlemen! It's just been so dangerous lately, you know? Thought we'd find a safe place to stay."

"That won't do. You're supposed to be the ones keeping the peace in the underworld," Vanno said. "Tell you what, why don't you come with us for a little bit? There are some things we want to ask you."

The Aggretia member tensed up as Vanno approached. "You sure about that? Mess with us and you won't leave here in one piece. Our unit's pretty juiced up, and we're getting more backup from headquarters."

Although the Bazartas had them outnumbered, the Aggretias were still enhanced—maddened—by the drugs. The tables could turn

easily. Although Aggretia would suffer heavy losses, they were probably prepared for it. Their men were considered expendable. Junkies didn't need much of a training cycle when all they had to do was buy time for the higher-ups to escape.

"Headquarters, headquarters… Heh." Vanno laughed at the man's threat.

"Something funny?"

"We're not stupid, you know," Vanno said. "We called in a specialist since we knew we were going to be dealing with some pests. Your asses are getting exterminated."

The Aggretia members riled at his insult, but Vanno brushed them off and slapped a dirty grin on his face. Taking a dramatic pose, he called out, "I've always wanted to see it for myself. Master, if you please!"

With that, their fates were sealed.

A woman answered his call. "Hey, who are you calling 'Master'?"

The Bazartas' ranks parted to reveal her standing alone at the end of the street. Her traditional haori swayed in the wind. Though it was intricate, it didn't look difficult to move in. She seemed agile, though not necessarily fast. What the gang members noticed most, however, was her white hair and graceful features.

The woman wielded a thin sword, like a rapier, sheathed at her waist. A man with similar features emerged from behind her and stood before the Aggretias.

"And who are you people?" one of them asked. "Wait. Those ears… *Immigrants*."

When the man noticed the ears of the woman in strange clothes, his cautious expression turned to a smirk.

"Well, well, well! Isn't this something!" he shouted. "The mafia of this town needs help from immigrants, huh? You lot are pathetic." He turned to the woman. "Same goes for you. You don't need to be smart to know how the mob treats *you* people. And you're still gonna help them?"

His subordinates joined his laughter. But the people they were laughing at weren't fazed.

"You don't have to tell me twice," the woman said. "I gave it plenty of thought. In the end, we just can't make ends meet by ourselves. We'll use whatever and whoever we must to survive. Even the mafia."

"When circumstances change, so does one's standing," Vanno said. "The time has also come for the mafia to change. That's all it is. You'll get your feet swept from under you if you keep holding on to your outdated beliefs, Mr. Aggretia."

"Big talk for people regulating drugs because of their outdated beliefs."

"We're not about to throw everything out just because it's old. We'll respect our traditions as long as they're necessary. You really are a bunch of roaches if you can't understand that."

The smile on the man's face disappeared. He knew what to do now that he realized conflict was unavoidable. "Yeah? Then it's time for you to die."

On his mark, his subordinates injected their drugs. Before long, they howled in pleasure and drew their weapons, leaping at their enemies like wild animals.

The white-haired woman—Isana—silently loosed her sword from its sheath. Her blade glinted with an electric spark. Despite that, the lunatics approaching her showed no fear in their eyes.

***

Something was coming.

Elsia's eyes automatically activated in response to her intuition, something she couldn't exactly control. They had the ability to see the immediate future, but the constant activation put a strain on her living a normal life. It was one of the reasons she wore a special sealing blindfold. Though they were sealed, her reliable but dreadful eyes had no trouble *seeing* through the piece of cloth, allowing her to handle most ordinary fights.

What her unbound eyes showed her this time sent a jolt of fear through her.

"Zasp!" She shouted as she lunged at her opponent to stop him. Even if she knew there was something coming, she had no time to explain how it was going to happen.

Zig had his back toward her, and she tried to stop his movement by swinging her silver club at him.

He paid her no mind and went after Zasp. The thrust of her club connected with Zig's back, but because she had no time to charge her magic and Zig was moving away from her, the blow was insignificant.

Zig powered through the pain, dodged a rock spear coming from the side, and continued the distance between him and Zasp.

"Damn it!"

Zasp imbued his sabers with wind and swung, knowing that he couldn't let Zig get closer.

His saber made contact with his twinblade, but Zig was just too close—the attack only left a shallow cut across Zig's body. Blood splattered out of the wound because of the wind enchantment, but it did nothing to slow Zig down. Finally, he came face-to-face with Zasp.

Zig wasn't going to let this opportunity slip. Instead of his twinblade, he readied his fists.

He stomped on Zasp's foot as he tried back away and landed a powerful right hook to his jaw.

Zasp threw up his arms and a magical barrier in an attempt to defend himself, but it was as if a sledgehammer hit his body nevertheless.

"Gah!"

He gritted his teeth, doing his best not to pass out. He kept up his defense, trusting his friends to finish Zig off while he had him occupied. He prepared for the follow-up blow to his left side.

"No! Get out of the way!"

Elsia's warning came too late.

"Huh?"

Zig's battle glove activated with a click. The resulting shock wave punched through Zasp's barrier, sending him flying. He didn't just hear his arms break—he *felt* every crack as his body crumpled.

He's…so strong…

Despite everything, he felt some admiration and jealousy for his opponent. The last thing he saw before blacking out was his friends desperately lunging at the big man.

One down, Zig thought.

The enemy's defenses had been tougher than he thought, preventing Zig from killing him outright, though he would be incapacitated for a while. He expected some recoil and rubbed his hands in the aftermath.

"Bastard!"

Zig kicked his twinblade up to block the incoming greatsword. "Ugh!"

His feet left a crater on the ground as he resisted the powerful strike.

Another person joined the fray.

"Yah!"

The swooping attack left Zig silent. He barely managed to move his head out of the way as it went right for his jaw. Holding his twinblade in front of him, he heard the dangerous whoosh of air being cut.

After he blocked the greatsword, the club came straight for him again. Its magic activated, increasing the force of the shock wave. As tough as the azure beetle twinblade was, it had its limits. It could resist the opposing force for only a moment.

A shrill sound rang out as the twinblade fractured right in the middle of its handle.

"Urgh!" Zig's broken weapon caused him to stumble and lose his balance.

The greatsword was closing in on him. He immediately jumped back but he knew that he wouldn't be able get away in time. The tip of the greatsword sliced a long cut down his side.

"You're done for!"

"So confident!" Zig used his twinblade with one hand to fend Tylon off.

Aside from the bleeding wound in his side, the blunt force delivered to his chest had taken the wind out of him. Even Zig couldn't catch his breath in a situation like this. He had to finish the fight quick.

He swayed to avoid a fatal slash from Tylon and deflected the downward slash that followed, standing his ground.

As the greatsword arced toward his neck, Zig blocked it with his gauntlets and knocked it away. The end of the heavy weapon dropped toward the ground, leaving Tylon unable to lift it with only one hand.

Zig hopped over the greatsword as he avoided another incoming club strike, slashing at Tylon's arm twice with the broken blades of his

twinblade that he now held like daggers. The attack was effective as he aimed for Tylon's elbows, the unprotected parts of his armor.

Zig's poor positioning lessened the amount of power, though it was enough to cause Tylon to flinch. Avoiding the flashing silver club with another hop, Zig threw one of his blades at Elsia and landed behind Tylon.

"Tylon!" Elsia screamed, but Tylon couldn't react fast enough.

Their backs to each other, Zig took his remaining blade and plunged it into Tylon's side using the full weight of his body.

Using his mana to fully activate his defensive enhancements would've been enough to guard against it thanks to his heavy armor and Zig's lack of momentum, if only Tylon's armor hadn't been damaged.

Zig's broken twinblade found its way into the crack of his armor —a crack left there by Elsia herself. Crimson blood flowed down the azure blade as Zig slowly pulled it out.

"Ugh… Forgive me, Lady Elsia… You must run…"

"Tylon?!"

Elsia watched as Tylon fell to his knees, blood spurting out of his mouth, a deep wound in his side.

One to go.

Elsia quickly scanned her surroundings. The situation was awful but her experience as an elite adventurer helped her keep her cool.

Zasp's unconscious, but he's not fatally wounded. Tylon is bleeding out. He won't be able to fully heal himself with his own magic. We need to get him to a doctor fast.

However, she couldn't imagine the man in front of her being so generous. He had been attacking Tylon to get her to let her guard down.

The severity of Tylon's wound might have been deliberate. If he had wanted to, he could've twisted his sword to kill him. He had enough time to.

As deep as Tylon's wounds were, they were treatable, making him a burden for her, effectively reducing her combat capabilities. It was an effective tactic.

Was that his intention all along? How cunning.

Beads of sweat formed on Elsia's forehead. The more she analyzed the situation, the more she realized how limited her options were. Leaving her companions and escaping seemed to be the best option, but she wouldn't be in such a bind if she could do that.

After weighing several outcomes in her head, Elsia spoke.

"You're pretty good. I didn't think it would actually come to this. How did someone like you end up working for the mafia?"

"You're buying time. Bold for someone whose teammates are knocked out. Is backup on the way?"

Elsia's skin broke out in goosebumps at Zig's emotionless response. He had seen through her ploy so easily. The difference in

combat experience between them was apparent. It made her wonder if the man facing her had the same eyes she did.

Zig narrowed those eyes and said, "I'll let you buy your time if you answer my questions."

"You what?" Elsia couldn't stifle her surprise at the unexpected offer. He was looking at her with great interest instead of aiming to outright kill her.

His gaze held hers. "What's with the eyes?"

A direct question.

He looked ready to lunge if he sensed she was making excuses to stall for time. It wasn't a subject she wanted to talk about, but she needed all the time she could get.

There was no room for doubt. The slightest bit of hesitation and the man would attack her.

"They're called 'dragon eyes.' No one quite knows how they occur or are passed on. Owners of the eyes are very rare, and the only commonality we could work out is they all possess massive mana reserves."

"Uh-huh." Zig listened and motioned for her to go on.

Elsia explained every detail she could think of in order to buy herself more time. "They seem to only occur in humans. There have been no reports of demi-humans or halflings having them."

"Get to the point. What do they see?"

Zig saw right through Elsia's attempt to bog him down with pointless facts. She hesitated to meet his demands, but when his eyes

moved to her companions, she quickly carried on.

"They can see into the immediate future. I have no control over it, though. I'm forced to see it."

"You can't control it?"

"That's right. I wear a blindfold to suppress it. Even then, it still activates from time to time."

"I understand. So, that's the spell you wanted to use on me back then."

Zig seemed satisfied with the explanation. As much as she wanted to know how he noticed, Elsia was in no position to ask questions.

Where are they? They have to get here before this man changes his mind…

Tylon was healing himself, though his face remained pale. It was going to take some time before he could start moving again. There was no way Zig wouldn't have noticed that.

"That's how you noticed my ambush and read my moves," he mused. "What else do they see?"

"What else…?" Elsia asked.

"Don't play dumb. That blindfold is overkill if the immediate future was all you had to worry about. Don't tell me you're persecuted because of your odd-colored eyes?"

People might be afraid of those strangely colored eyes. There were scalefolk like Urbas on this continent, as well as other demi-

humans; Zig didn't think there was much of a difference between their reptilian and Elsia's dragon eyes.

Elsia went quiet, though her face scrunched with resentment. It seemed he had hit the mark.

It was clear this topic wasn't something that she would usually talk about. Her eyes were strange, but she also didn't like revealing her trump cards. However, all Zig had to do was to threaten her friends to get her to share her secrets.

"It is said…that they can read minds."

"And you're saying they can't?"

"It's difficult to explain, but… Well…"

Elsia lifted her face to meet Zig's gaze. He smelled the presence of magic but made no moves to defend himself. The light in her bewitching eyes seemed to pierce straight through him.

"You are interested in these eyes and worried about your client. Apparently, you're quite earnest. But the biggest thought of all…is a woman with black hair."

Zig's brows drew together at her words. Instinctively, he became more cautious, twirling one of his broken blades and switching it to his other hand, where he lowered it into a guarded position.

"That's about it," Elsia said. "It can see what the other person is thinking about at the moment. I can't read your mind."

"And you can't see any of their secrets?"

Because if she could—if Siasha's identity was to be revealed, and someone wanted to harm her—

Zig took some deep breaths, almost overwhelmed by the potential catastrophe.

It's all right. I can kill her at any time.

Holding Elsia at blade's length, he waited for her to go on.

"Let's say a shopkeeper committed fraud and kept a hidden ledger," she continued. "The root of these thoughts would be money. I would only be able to see money. That is why the only thing I can see in your head right now are my eyes, the mafia girl, and the woman with black hair."

Zig kept a watchful eye on his opponent. "Hmm."

He never had a particularly discerning gaze for liars, so he couldn't tell whether she was being honest. If she had figured out that Siasha was from another continent, she would probably have shown a reaction to that information, if nothing else.

Zig wouldn't have minded killing her if she was just another anonymous adventurer, but Elsia was third class. Lower than the second-class Isana, but still among the elite. He didn't want to kill her if he didn't have to.

What a mess.

He held back the urge to make an irritated noise and observed Elsia. There was nothing unnatural about her behavior; she was still looking for an opening to rescue her friends.

She isn't lying, he thought. *At least, probably not…*

As Zig weighed the risks of killing a third-class adventurer, the situation shifted.

"I guess time's up," Zig said.

Just as she was about to reply, Elsia's dragon eyes showed her the future.

"Huh? Wait!" She immediately moved, having no time to be surprised by her vision.

Zig threw his remaining blade at Tylon and started running. Elsia gave chase and knocked it away with her club.

Within that time, Zig delivered a roundhouse kick to her head. Elsia crouched, the neck-breaking kick only grazing her silver locks, but Zig wasn't about to slow down. Pivoting on his other foot, he delivered another roundhouse kick. Elsia held up her club and barely blocked the incoming attack from the side.

"Gah!"

She was sent flying, unable to withstand the sheer force with her unenhanced strength. The magic on her robes activated to neutralize the force, but the weight of his kick shocked her.

His combat capabilities are ridiculous, even when he's unarmed!

"But you're still weaponless!"

She thrust her club toward Zig's jaw. As well-versed as Zig might be in martial arts, his reach was pitiful without a weapon. Elsia was out of his range, and her club was headed straight for its target—if only Zig had been aiming for her.

"Think outside the box!"

"What?!"

Zig stopped in his tracks and spun away to avoid the club. As he twisted, he unleashed a reverse roundhouse kick. Catching the club with the back of his knee, he brought his other leg down to rip it out of Elsia's grasp.

She resisted, of course, but he was someone she could never hope to overpower, and her arms were no match for his legs.

Zig twirled the freshly requisitioned club in his hands.

"Always had a thing for polearms."

He squeezed his hand around it, testing how it felt.

Its weightlessness worried him somewhat, but it was the same weapon that clashed with his twinblade. It should be durable enough even without the use of magic.

"Ugh!"

Elsia lost her composure the moment Zig took her weapon. She knew that she would be beaten to a pulp and killed. Though she still wanted to save her friends somehow, she couldn't see a way out of this situation.

Zig smiled at the sight of Elsia's panic.

"Don't look so upset," he said. "Your distraction paid off."

Elsia heard several footsteps closing in on them. They were still a ways away, but the sound of scraping metal suggested that they were armed.

They made it!

She felt a wave of relief that backup had finally arrived. Then, she remembered her eyes were exposed and whipped her head

around, looking for her blindfold. However, the battle had been so intense that she couldn't find it.

Ugh! I shouldn't have thrown it away to look cool!

The all-too-familiar silver club flashed in front of her eyes. "Looking for this?"

At the end of it was her blindfold.

"Th-thanks…"

Startled, she took it, dusted it off, and slipped it back on. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Zig turning tail to run.

Elsia shouted after him, "*Hey*, get back here!"

"Sorry, but you have to pay for breaking my weapon somehow. Just be thankful I spared you."

Before Elsia could object, Zig ran off, silver club in hand.

Several rays of light shot toward his back: arrows powered up with magic. They homed in on their target in the blink of an eye.

Zig jumped right before the projectiles could hit him. He leapt off the ground and onto the walls, avoiding the arrows' trajectory by going upward.

The shooter was formidable. Sliding into a kneeling position, she fired at Zig, who was still hanging in the air. More arrows imbued with an eerie glow flew toward him. Unable to avoid them, he spun the club to knock them down. The silver club and the arrows met, lighting up the alley.

Within the flash of light, Zig's and the shooter's eyes locked on each other.

He noticed her surprise as he landed, but kept up his speed and left the area.

The shooter didn't give chase.

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Elsia watched as Zig disappeared into the distance, not noticing the people who chased him away were approaching her.

"Elsia! Are you all right?!"

Alan and his party. They surrounded Elsia while keeping an eye on their surroundings. Listy and Malt, the magic experts of the group, went to heal the others.

"Can you stand?"

"I'm fine. Just help Tylon and Zasp."

Though she looked completely exhausted, Elsia bore no noticeable injuries. She was wobbling in place, but Alan thought she must be all right if she could stand on her own.

"All right. Lyle, I'll let you handle things over there."

"Sure thing."

Having made sure there were no enemies around, Lyle went to inspect Tylon's injuries. The wound in his side was deep. It was going to take time before it closed and he could move again. They weren't out of the woods yet, since he didn't know for sure if the threat was gone for good.

Lyle and Malt helped Tylon to his feet.

"Listy, you go on ahead," Lyle said.

"Will do," she said.

Lyle's voice was a lot stiffer than usual, and the scene had him sweating. *This is insane. I've never heard of a third-class party getting blown up like this.*

They had accepted the investigation request since it was low risk for the reputation it offered. Now several third-class adventurers were lying on the ground, and Lyle wasn't sure if they had any business being here. He'd certainly never heard of the *mafia* being this powerful before. It would've made more sense if they'd been outnumbered, but the traces of battle showed that there were very few combatants.

"I guess they thought they were just gang members, even if they were juiced up…"

They would have to reevaluate the dangers of this job. At worst, they might have to resign from the request and risk a demotion. Resigning right after a promotion was a shame, but it wasn't worth losing their lives over.

"You've gotta be shitting me…"

Unable to suppress the urge to curse, Lyle looked at the others. Listy seemed to be lost in thought. She was still on alert, a behavior that didn't fit her usual demeanor.

"What's up, Listy?"

Listy shook her head and started walking. "Nothing. Tell you later."

Lyle thought that strange, but she was right. They needed to get out of here first.

Alan and the others left with more questions than when they arrived.

Chapter 4:
Birds of a Feather

AT THE AGGRETIA HIDEOUT, SPARKS WERE FLYING. It was just beginning to get dark, and members of Bazarta and Aggretia were attacking each other with feral cries as blood flowed freely on both sides. Isana stood at the forefront of the conflict.

"Haah!"

Her katana, charged with green lightning, struck down a flurry of magically enhanced arrows and met a curved sword that wove between them. She twitched her wrist to redirect the sword and swung at her opponent.

Makar panicked and dodged the pointed slash. "What the hell is going on here?!"

"Boss, you wanna *stop talking* and keep slashing?!"

"I would if you'd make yourself useful, Jaikov!"

"Don't take it out on *me*!"

Despite their quarreling, between Makar with his curved sword and Jaikov with his longbow, their coordination was solid. Together, they worked to keep Isana from going on the offense.

Interestingly, Makar's arm—the one Zig had chopped off—was back where it should be and working fine.

I could take them if it was one-on-one, Isana thought.

Redirecting Makar's violent strikes to the side with her katana, she drove the pommel into his stomach. At his flinch, she struck him with a reverse slash. Makar was too slow to react and received a cut from his stomach to his chest that sprayed a burst of blood. Just as Isana was about to follow up, Jaikov pelted her with arrows, stopping her advance. Meanwhile, Makar's injury was already closing.

That healing ability is too much. Is that what the drug is capable of? No wonder the guild and the mafia are worked up about it.

Makar was healing through her attempts to wear him down. Her opponent's speed and power were impressive, but it was clear that his technique was lacking in comparison to hers. The drug, however, more than made up for that weakness. Jaikov also covered up whatever openings she made, making eliminating him in one stroke difficult.

I don't like it, but I just have to keep them busy. An opportunity will come.

Fortunately, these two were the most powerful of the bunch. They had one more competent fighter, but Shuoh was taking care of that. The rest were just a bunch of drug-enhanced gangsters of varying degrees of ability. None of them could compete with the specialized skills of the Jinsu-Yah. The Bazarta mobsters were also holding the rest of the rabble at bay, creating space for the Jinsu-Yah to take the Aggretia members on one at a time. The Aggretias' inability to rely on their best fighters sealed their fates even against the unenhanced Bazartas.

"Damn, this isn't happening! We never had intel about these guys!"

As defeat loomed over then, some of the members attempted to escape. However, there was a woman standing in their way. One Aggretia panicked and lunged at the intruder, sword in hand.

"Where do you think you're going? The fun's just getting started!"

Knocking the sword away with her azure dagger, she followed up with a high kick. Even if she wasn't very strong, a hard boot to the head with her momentum would send anyone spinning.

As he fell to his knees, she kicked him away and finished off the rest of his cronies.

"You'll have to try harder than that to get me!"

Katia and her men blocked off the Aggretias' escape. They let out panicked shrieks as their numbers were whittled down.

"When the hell are those assholes from Rolyde getting here?!"

"I don't know! We told those adventurers to send them a message. Why aren't they here yet?!"

***

Meanwhile, chaos was descending on the Rolyde Trade Association.

They had done well to spot Siasha and Lindia spying on them, but their mistake was underestimating the lightly equipped women. The men outside were now unconscious, stuck in the ground with only their heads sticking out. Because the Rolyde members attacked first,

Siasha and Lindia took it as license to continue defending themselves and charged in.

"Why is this trade association hiding so many weapons?!" Lindia asked in shock.

A man with bloodshot eyes came at her with a sword, shouting, "Die!"

She parried his attack and bashed the side of his face with her shield. She held back so as not to kill him, but the blow should have been enough to take him down. However, he kept coming at her even through broken teeth.

"Whoa, why are these guys so tough?"

Next to her, a man was picked up by an earthen arm and flung toward the association's product shelves.

"I feel like I've seen people like them before." Siasha tilted her head as she observed his broken arm heal like time was being rewound. "Is this a common occurrence?"

"No! That kind of recovery… It's no ordinary magic potion. I knew this company was suspicious!"

Lindia blocked her opponent's weapon with her sword and knocked him away with a wind spell to the stomach.

"Then, let's paint them red," Siasha said.

"Hey, hold on, you can't do that!"

The chaos continued until the military police heard the ruckus and brought everyone in for questioning.

***

Aggretia's numbers were dwindling. It was only a matter of time before Bazarta had the upper hand. Isana's opponents knew that and were panicking accordingly. Victory was in reach. Isana only had to wait.

"Shit, shit, shit!"

Makar channeled his rage into his curved sword and swung wildly at his target. For all the energy he was spending, his attacks didn't seem to be doing anything.

First it was that guy from yesterday, now this bitch! What the hell is with this town?!

Despite his curses both internal and aloud, his opponent showed no reaction. Even his wind blades only managed to graze the hem of her garment. His strength, speed, and technique were all insufficient against her. Makar was at a loss. The drug high was wearing off, replaced by a rising frustration.

"This is bad," Jaikov muttered as the woman parried another triple attack.

Makar was strong. Even without drugs he could give the kingdom knights a run for their money or take on one of their captains. Somehow, this white-haired woman was toying with him and taking out their enhanced allies without breaking a sweat. Her movements were wholly unlike that of a gangster. They had never fought someone like her before.

We underestimated her for being a Jinsu-Yah. I'm shocked the established mob even asked for her help, but I guess Venomous

Vanno is even slicker than we thought.

In fact, Jaikov could see Vanno wearing a thin and slimy smile as the battle grew bloodier. Jaikov gritted his teeth and started thinking of an escape plan as he watched his men go down around him.

"Boss, we gotta get outta here!"

"Tch!"

"Like hell I'm gonna let myself be humiliated like this!" was what Makar wanted to say, but what was left of his reason suppressed his violent urges.

He scowled, his bloodshot eyes trained on Isana. Grabbing a nearby henchman, he threw him at her to cover his tracks. Meanwhile, Jaikov fired an arrow and backed away.

Isana drew a deep breath and sheathed her sword despite the incoming projectiles, organic and otherwise.

There it is. Victory.

She enhanced her body while calculating the distance between her and her retreating enemies. In the blink of an eye, the mana she had gathered exploded, causing her hair to rise and her green eyes to glow.

In an instant, lightning would strike.

With her body tensed to its limits, Isana fired herself like an arrow straight at Makar. She moved so fast that no one saw her coming.

“Boss!” Jaikov shouted, trying to warn Makar about the lightning bolt about to strike him.

With a slash that moved so quickly it was invisible, Isana struck the arrow Jaikov fired at her, then carried on without dropping her speed.

It was too late—not that it would have helped him if the situation was otherwise.

“What?!” Makar gasped out.

Isana’s sword didn’t make a sound as it cut through the air. Makar put up his curved sword to defend himself, but the katana charged with green lightning cut through it like butter.

Makar’s arms flew through the air without any resistance, the slash so fast that his blood only gushed after a short delay. Helpless fear flashed in his eyes—a terror that couldn’t be suppressed by even the most powerful drug.

Isana swung her katana over her head like a graceful crane opening its wings. She gave a short cry as she brought her sword down, slicing into Makar’s head and through his torso without a struggle.

The move used the speed of the blade together with an electromagnetic quickdraw. As the katana charged with green lightning made three arcs in the air, the sight was so beautiful that both sides paused fighting to watch with bated breath.

When Isana stopped and flicked the blood off her blade, Makar’s corpse split into two and crumpled, his blood spraying pointlessly as

his guts spilled all over the floor.

His manner of death was horrifying, but he himself would feel fear no longer.

Jaikov returned to his senses with a gasp when Makar's body hit the ground. Grabbing a magic item out of his pocket, he hurriedly threw it to the floor. The ball hit the floor with a dull sound, letting out a plume of black smoke that enveloped him.

"A smoke bomb! Hey, get some wind blowing through here!"

The smoke only covered a small area, however, and a quick gust of wind was all that was needed to clear it away. But Jaikov only needed a moment's distraction.

When the smoke cleared, his longbow was the only thing left of him.

"I *guess* it all worked out," Katia said as she cautiously scanned her surroundings.

The tide of battle had shifted heavily in their favor. Caught between a rock and a hard place, the Aggretia members were now helpless. Meanwhile, the Bazarta elite along with their helpers from the Jinsu-Yah held the line and were pushing back the enemy. The Aggretias' enhanced strength and regeneration were troublesome, but for all their logic-defying capabilities, they were still human. Their strength and durability couldn't hold a candle to a powerful monstrosity. Humans who had abandoned their reason were really no stronger than low-level monstrosities. Only Makar and Jaikov had

been able to hold onto their minds, and they were strong to begin with.

"A tool should be something you use, not something you're used by. You're like a kid who's excited over playing with a dangerous toy."

I think I get what he meant now, she thought. Zig wasn't trying to provoke Makar; he was just telling the truth.

With Makar's defeat and the escape of his lieutenant, the battle was as good as won. She wiped the sweat off her brow and allowed herself to relax.

"Wait, last time I let my guard down I almost got my ass beat. Won't do that again."

She straightened up, her last encounter with the enhanced gangsters and the humiliation she suffered at their hands on her mind. That alertness saved her life: She suddenly spotted an anomaly out of the corner of her eye.

"Huh?!"

Her body reacted as soon as she spotted it. She stepped back in time for a dagger to cut the air in front of her, only several centimeters away from her face. The black-coated blade missed its mark and plunged itself into her bodyguard instead.

"Gah!" He howled in pain and held his arm.

The arm… The dagger hadn't been going for her neck. It hadn't been meant to kill.

"Miss, get back!"

More of her men stepped forward to protect her as she watched the strange anomaly. It was probably magic, but the black haze looked somewhat humanoid. Whatever it was, it kept coming, unfazed by her bodyguards. It was approaching fast.

"You… Guh!"

"Gaah!"

The black haze avoided her men's attacks and countered them with its own. One by one, her guards dropped to the ground with bloody wounds, and the black haze stepped over their bodies. Steadily, it moved toward Katia.

"Rah!"

Deciding she had no time to run, Katia took her dagger and slashed at the haze, only to find it blocked her weapon and pushed back.

"Khh!"

As she resisted, the strange fog dissipated. The indigo adamantine in her dagger must have dispelled its magic once it made contact.

"Someone's desperate—but I'm desperate too!"

"You!"

Jaikov, who she thought had escaped, was right in front of her—his sadistic grin just inches away from her face.

Damn it. The boss died! What the hell am I supposed to tell the

higher-ups?!

Earlier, after Makar's death and before attacking Katia, Jaikov had hid himself in the crowd of combatants. Taking advantage of the chaos, he turned himself into a faint haze using deception magic. They would notice him if they were to run into him, but no one would be able to spot him in the middle of a fight. Still, he knew he wasn't out of the woods yet.

We failed our recon mission and couldn't establish a foothold, even with two high-ranking officers on the job. If I go back now, position's the last thing I need to worry about. I might be executed.

That was the last thing he wanted.

Something… There had to be *something* he could do. Something to make up for his complete failure.

Jaikov's eyes settled on Katia as he scanned the area.

Found it.

Aside from Vanno, she was leading the charge. A VIP, but one who was hardly protected at the moment. She was strong for a female gangster, but nothing compared to Jaikov.

Jaikov smiled at the golden opportunity. His luck hadn't run out yet.

Presenting her as a souvenir might not wipe his record clean, but at least it would buy him more chances to make up for his failure. If nothing else, she would make a valuable bargaining chip.

This is the only way they'll keep me in the organization.

He never had any thoughts of just running away, knowing what would happen if he did. Aggretia wasn't kind to its turncoats. They would find him no matter where he ran and have their pound of flesh.

Jaikov looked for an opening and threw his dagger while making a dash for Katia. The dagger coated with paralyzing poison had been aimed at her arm.

However, her instincts proved unexpectedly sharp, and she managed to avoid it.

Change of plans—he couldn't just grab her. Instead, he'd have to scatter everyone who got in his way and drag her out of here.

The Bazarta bodyguards noticed what he was doing but not fast enough. Dodging their weak attempts to attack him, he hacked at their legs. There was no time to finish them off. He just needed to keep them from moving.

Hopping over their bodies, he reached out toward Katia.

"Rah!"

His prey was fighting back. The slash was unexpectedly precise, but that's all it was. He blocked it and pushed her away.

Oh? For some reason, his deception magic deactivated. Looking quizzically at his opponent, he noticed the azure tint of her blade.

An indigo adamantine dagger. Fancy stuff. Giving it to a little girl, however, was a waste of a fine weapon.

Katia gritted her teeth as she resisted Jaikov bearing down on her.

"Someone's desperate—but I'm desperate, too!"

"You!"

Katia knew what Jaikov was after once she saw his face. His dagger hadn't missed, not really. The attack had been designed to slow her down.

"Not happening!" she snapped.

The disadvantage that would befall the organization if she were to be captured was unthinkable. It would be better if she was expendable, but the things her father would do for her at the expense of the Bazarta… She didn't want to be deadweight. Jaikov had taken out her allies, but more would come to her aid if she could just hang on.

Sadly, resolve alone was not enough to carry out her goals.

Jaikov deflected her dagger. "Quit squirming!"

Unable to maintain her balance after putting her entire weight into fending him off, the attack left her with both arms thrown into the air.

"Wah?! Urgh!"

Her torso fully exposed, Jaikov kicked her. She rolled backward, the pain so sharp it felt like she was about to empty her stomach.

"Urk…"

Regardless, she hauled herself to her feet and fought off the rising nausea. Her stomach was churning—a single kick had been enough to make her entire body scream in agony. But she couldn't

afford to be captured now. She held up her dagger with trembling hands.

"Ah…"

However, another dagger was already slicing down before her eyes.

"Sorry, but you're gonna have to lose an arm if you keep fighting back."

Katia didn't have to be in one piece to be a good bargaining chip. Jaikov's lips twisted into a foul smile as his dagger aimed for her left shoulder. Katia couldn't defend herself, but she refused to back down and glared at Jaikov and his blade.

That was when everything turned on its head.

"Funny. I was just thinking that myself," said a voice behind Jaikov.

Before the dagger could touch her, Zig grabbed Jaikov's arm. The tip of the black-coated dagger touched her shoulder but didn't go any deeper. Zig's large hand bore down on Jaikov, squeezing his flesh and stopping him dead in his tracks.

Then, Zig pushed his arm in the opposite direction.

"Huh? Gaaaaaaaah!"

The arm went past its stopping point, bending beyond its full range of motion. Obviously, an arm had no business being at that angle. The sound of bones popping and breaking—meat and sinew ripping—filled the air. One beat later, Jaikov's gruesome screams joined the mix.

His cries were so loud that it drew everyone's attention. All halted in shocked silence. Jaikov, who they thought had escaped, was here? No. Was it because their VIP was attacked? Again, no.

"My arm! My *aaaaaaaaarm*!"



Zig forcibly pulled on Jaikov's twisted arm. It tore out of his shoulder joint like a wrung rag, exposing the thin ligaments that it had been attached to. There wasn't much blood, perhaps because his blood vessels were all twisted. It was like a child pulling out the legs of an insect.

Still, the stump spurted blood on Zig's cheek. Everyone watched with bated breath the way they had Isana's special move, but for a very different reason this time.

Jaikov's screams were the only thing filling the silence.

"You're being too loud."

Zig winced because of how close he was to the racket and swung Jaikov's right arm like it was a new toy. The arm drew an arc of blood before hitting the writhing man on the head. Desperately attempting to apply pressure to his wound, Jaikov lost consciousness in a pool of his own blood.

Katia's body went weak at seeing the danger pass. She dropped to her knees and gasped for air, sweat rolling down her cheek.

"Sorry I'm late," Zig said, extending his hand.

Unable to stand, Katia stayed on the ground and waved him off.

"Don't worry about it. I was the one who decided to go on alone. You've done more than your share of work."

When she first hired him, she viewed him merely as a convenient bodyguard—nothing more. However, as time went on, his impact on the drug debacle had become significant, for better or for

worse. With the future set to become even more complex, she was confident in just one thing: She could count on Zig to guarantee her safety.

Katia had come to trust him that much. Realizing this put a stop to her trembling knees.

At least your body's honest, Zig thought to himself (like a dirty old man might) and helped her to her feet.

The arm that had threatened her life mere moments earlier now looked pathetic, although still plenty grotesque as Zig gripped it like it was just a mannequin arm.

"You gonna keep holding on to that thing?" Katia asked.

"Well, I just got it," Zig said.

"You're giving me the creeps." She sighed, feeling exhausted. "Give it back to its owner."

Zig glanced down at Jaikov, who was in agony but had regained consciousness. His left hand groped uselessly at his right shoulder.

The mercenary slowly allowed Jaikov to take back his right arm. Jaikov held his right hand the way you would hold a lost lover, squeezing it tight so as to not lose it again. Peace settled upon his pained face.

Zig nodded, satisfied at the scene before him, while the mafia member tending to Katia looked disturbed.

"Anyway," she said. "You got here faster than I expected. How'd you shake those three?"

"Losing them without revealing my destination would've been difficult," Zig said, holding up the silver club. "I had to beat them up to get them to retreat."

Now that she could look at him more properly, he was more injured than she first thought. The battle must have been fierce. First aid had been applied to the wound on his stomach, but the blood was still seeping right into his pants. The armor he had bought just earlier in the day was already battered.

"You're looking worse than I am. Hey, can someone look at this guy, please?" She tried flagging an idle mafia member.

"Huh? Hang on a minute." She had processed what Zig just said. Was he kidding? He hadn't just fended their attackers off but taken them down? "You *won*? Against those three?"

"I'm not sure I could call it a victory since I ran away with my tail between my legs from their reinforcements." Zig averted his eyes in embarrassment. "And this chest piece… I only got it today and it's already destroyed."

"Heh… Ha ha ha! No kidding!" Katia guffawed at hearing that Zig was more worried about finances and equipment than bragging about his victory.

After a good laugh, she grew serious and looked at her surroundings. The battle was coming to an end. The Aggretia gangsters had been either rounded up or killed.

Albano spotted Katia and walked over to her. "I'm glad you're safe, Miss."

"Nice work, Alba. What's the situation?"

"Four dead, ten heavily injured."

"I see…" Katia's eyes narrowed at the mention of casualties. They were common enough in the business, but losing a man meant that she hadn't been powerful enough to keep him alive. She silently offered a word of apology to the dead. Then, after a few moments, she lifted her head.

"Alba, secure the Aggretia executives. Treat them so they don't die and hand them over to Vanno."

"Affirmative. What about Elio?"

"Who? That traitor? No, he was with Aggretia from the beginning. That's all there is to it."

"Very well."

Albano signaled to his men, and they carried Jaikov away. Zig watched, thinking to himself about the fate that soon awaited him. That the man wasn't going to get an easy death. However, that was the life he chose. Zig could meet a similar end if he made the wrong choices.

It was all cleanup after that. The organization invading the city had been successfully repelled. No one knew whether Aggretia would make the attempt again, but they knew their MO now and how to handle them.

The guild hadn't been involved much this time because the mob left them out, but they would let them handle the brunt of it next time. They'd learned how dangerous the drug was and how strong the

Aggretia members could be. Despite that, they were nothing elite adventurers couldn't handle. The guild would do the fighting while the mafia kept an eye out for drug distribution. Infiltrating the town wouldn't be as easy again.

I see. So, this is the city's defense force, Zig thought.

The mob was a necessary evil. No one in the know really doubted that. They were criminals, a blight on common society, but without them, countless smaller offenders popped up. These small fry had no allegiances and their own goals, meaning it took a lot of time and effort to handle them all. Better to have the mafia around to clean them up. The city knew how to handle and communicate with the mafia. Indeed, they had been vital to the removal of the foreign force in this incident.

Zig stood behind Katia as she gave out orders, keeping his eyes open just in case. As he did, Vanno approached them.

"Looks like we did it somehow, Miss."

"Only because you convinced Cantarella's old raccoon. They're handling the cleanup, right?"

"They'd lose face if they didn't," Vanno said with a smile.

Bazarta had handled the glorious fighting, leaving the Cantarella to take care of the troublesome housecleaning in the name of their reputation. He was quite a fearsome negotiator.

"And you did excellent work today, specialist of the Jinsu-Yah," Vanno commented to Isana. "I was watching the whole time. Never seen anything so spectacular in my life."

"Thanks," Isana, the white-haired swordswoman, replied casually.

Katia noticed that her eyes were on Zig. She wondered what the Jinsu-Yah's relation was to the mercenary.

"Friend of yours?" Katia asked.

"She's famous among adventurers," Zig replied. "My client has dealt with her before."

"Oh, right. You said you're usually a bodyguard for an adventurer."

He didn't want her to pry, but feigning ignorance was going to be difficult considering Isana's attitude. He *could* say something noncommittal, but that might make her curiosity worse.

Isana sighed in exasperation as she watched them talking. "A mafia gig this time? You really don't have principles, huh?"

Unused to such delicate situations, Isana had said something careless.

C'mon, Zig thought. Katia wasn't a problem, but there was someone present whom he couldn't let his guard down around.

Speak of the devil—Vanno enthusiastically invaded Zig's personal space. "Oh! So, you take jobs from everywhere, do you? I saw you defend the Miss earlier, you know. You're quite strong."

Isana winced, realizing that she'd tripped up, but it was too late. Vanno had his signature slimy smile on his face and watched Zig like a hunter closing in on his prey.

"For Ms. Isana to call you unprincipled, it makes me wonder what jobs you usually take."

"And you are?" Zig tried to remain calm, but he wasn't an actor. He wasn't going to fool Vanno, who duped people for a living, but he would try his best.

"Why, excuse me." He bowed politely. "The name's Vanno. I'm the Bazarta in charge of telling people what to do in this drug case."

Despite his modesty, Zig knew that he was trying to wring every last bit of information out of him. A dangerous man.

Vanno lifted his head and carried on. "You seem to be quite the professional on top of being acquainted with Ms. Isana. You've had dealings with the Jinsu-Yah, I take it?"

Vanno's aura had changed. Despite his casual tone, his piercing gaze was searching for answers, trying to get Zig to crack. Even without his silver tongue, his stare would've been enough to get a normal man to talk.

But Zig was not a normal man.

"Good question. Even if I had, I'm not at liberty to talk about my clients. Not my style."

He wasn't good at acting, but there was no breaking through his stone-face no matter how much pressure was applied on him.

Vanno seemed prepared for that. "Ah, forgive me. You're right, we would be in trouble if the details of this incident were to be revealed. Always appreciate a tight-lipped contractor."

He gave him a knowing look as he waited for an answer.

"Yeah, you have to be in this line of work," Zig said.

Looks like I managed to dodge. Zig breathed an inner sigh of relief, but his relief didn't escape Vanno's attention.

"Gee, you sure are magnanimous. But I noticed you don't seem surprised that I'm making nice with the Jinsu-Yah."

Ugh. He got me.

Anyone living in this town would be familiar with the feud the Jinsu-Yah had with the local mob. A large-scale conflict had broken out between them once. It was strange to not be surprised by their cooperation.

Zig didn't let it show, but it did delay his response. That moment of hesitation was more than enough for a man like Vanno.

His slimy smile grew wider. "Sounds like you have more connections than you let on."

Zig clicked his tongue and saw Isana looking apologetic out of the corner of his eye. He hadn't actually revealed anything, but Vanno had confirmed his suspicions of him and connected the dots when he saw that Zig and Isana were acquainted.

Can't beat a pro, he thought with an inner sigh. Vanno was sharp. Served him right for underestimating a man whose business was to fool and be fooled. Even in the absence of evidence, the circumstances surrounding Zig could be inferred by reading him.

"By the sound of it, you take on a myriad of jobs."

Zig sighed and shrugged. "As long as it doesn't get me in trouble with the government or police, sure."

No point in being expressionless now that Vanno had seen right through him. Despite having ended many lives as a mercenary, Zig had never been charged with anything criminal. He didn't mind dirty business as long as it was kept under wraps, but his principles prevented him from shacking up with felons. It wasn't out of the goodness of his heart or any lofty ideal either. That was just how his old mercenary group rolled. The influence of their leader and his teacher, a former army man, had been instrumental in how they did things.

"Uh-huh, I see. So, you don't mind working for the mob depending on the circumstances—am I reading you right?"

A provocative, thin smile, the kind gangsters flashed to gauge your response, crossed Vanno's face. Whether Zig flinched or remained quiet would change Vanno's response. It was a mean-spirited question designed to test a man.

"That's right." Zig's answer was immediate, given without hesitation despite the gangsters surrounding them. Katia looked at him in shock, mouth agape, while Isana smacked a hand to her forehead.

Vanno gave a satisfied huff at the sight of their reactions. He'd expected Zig's affirmative. As rare as powerful freelance fighters were, he wasn't surprised. The real question was whom he was working for. Vanno's investigation had come up short of an answer.

"Wow, that's impressive. You must have a lot of powerful folks behind you if you've got the guts to say that to us."

He had some guesses as to who these powerful folks were as he reached into his shirt pocket for his cigar. *Cantarella, the guild, or some crazed cult. That'd be annoying to deal with.*

He carefully placed his trusty cigar cutter around the cap, being careful not to crush it.

"I don't," Zig said.

Vanno slipped, and the blade of his cutter sliced at an angle that made the wrapper start unraveling, ruining the head of a perfectly good cigar. It was worthless now—one not-inexpensive cigar gone to waste. But never mind the cigar, what the hell had Zig just said?

"Sorry, I didn't quite catch you there," he said. "Let me check to make sure. You said you don't have anyone backing you up?"

"That's what I said."

"I see. Well, that's a relief. I thought my ears were going on me."

Is this guy stupid? Vanno thought to himself, resisting the urge to say it out loud.

There was no merit in keeping quiet in this situation. Zig could at least hint at it if he didn't want to be precise. Vanno stole a glance at the Princess of White Lightning behind him, but she, too, was shaking her head.

The Jinsu-Yah wasn't backing him either.

Vanno scratched his head, throwing away the now worthless cigar. If Zig really was unaffiliated, saying that was like asking them to

kill him. And bones would be broken if you took on a real idiot like him.

Vanno groaned, feeling an increasing weight on his shoulders.

"Ha ha ha, you're something else, buddy." Vanno's smile did not reach his eyes. "No one unaffiliated would have the balls to say what you just said at a time like this."

The surrounding gangsters didn't encircle them, but they were listening in as they cleaned up.

"But hey, I get it, man," Vanno continued. "My guys are nowhere near your level. You'll wipe 'em out in a heartbeat. But the world's a big place, see? There's always someone better, you know. Hell, we got a specialist from the Jinsu-Yah right here. You catch my drift?"

Vanno pointed to Isana with his chin.

Isana, the Princess of White Lightning, the greatest among the Jinsu-Yah's warriors, innocently raised her hand that had been caressing the hilt of her sword and said, "Yeah, I'm not fighting this guy."

"Excuse me?"

So casual, so indecipherable. The words shook Vanno so much that it stopped him in his tracks. Still, he was a mafia executive. He regained his composure and turned to Isana, rubbing his temple. The corners of his mouth twitched, letting on that he hadn't completely recovered.



"Now, Ms. Isana, we're supposed to have an alliance here," he said. "We help you establish footing and you help us fight our battles… Like today."

"Uh-huh," Isana said slowly.

"But we can't have a proper alliance if you refuse to fight someone just because you happen to know him. That's not why you're refusing to fight him, is it?"

The mob had a reputation to uphold. It would look bad for Bazarta if their alliance was unilaterally broken, and he did nothing about it.

"I'll help if it's within my ability. And as long as it's not unreasonable."

"And fighting this man falls under that category?" He shot her a sharp look that was one step away from intimidation.

Isana calmly shook her head without changing her expression. "That's not it. This just isn't an alliance where I'd die for you if you tell me to. That's all."

Vanno's eyes widened. The specialist from the Jinsu-Yah—a people known for a strength so overwhelming that it kept them from falling to any conquerors—was saying that fighting Zig was ordering her to die.

"Is that some kind of joke?"

"You think I'd joke about this if I put pride in my blade?"

That's what I thought.

Vanno knew the Jinsu-Yah's stubbornness firsthand. It was unlikely that she was lying. As difficult it was to believe, the big man was not an opponent that even Isana would take head-on.

"Is that all?" Isana asked.

"Yes," Vanno said. "We'll contact you if we have more jobs that need doing."

"You know where to find me."

Vanno could do nothing against a man he couldn't intimidate. So, he pushed down the resentful feeling welling up inside him and said no more.

With the conversation finished, Katia bowed to Zig. The job was over. It was supposed to be five days, but the threat had been effectively neutralized.

"You did a lot for me. With all the mess settled, so is your contract. Don't worry, I'll pay you in full."

"Always a pleasure working for a client with deep pockets."

Dealing with the aftermath was going to be a doozy, but she would no longer need a bodyguard constantly at her side. That said, Zig ended up playing quite a large and visible role during his days as a gangster's bodyguard.

"I'll give you a bonus for that thing with the adventurers and throw in something extra for the broken gear too."

"Thank you… Really." He was glad to have included his equipment in the contract. It would've been a colossal waste of time if he ended up having to spend his paycheck on new equipment.

Seeing his relief, Katia couldn’t help but laugh. Zig clearly cared a lot about his equipment.

“See you around. I pray we don’t end up as enemies.”

Zig remained silent, answering her with a twitch of his lips—his version of a smile.

Showing no sign of how injured he was, he stepped confidently through the mob of gangsters and disappeared into the alleyways. The Bazarta members looked at Vanno, asking for his permission to pursue, but he shook his head.

“Don’t. We have more important business to attend to, and it starts when our Aggretia executives awake from their slumber. I want answers. You don’t have to be gentle either. Just get it out of them. Send whatever’s left of them to their bosses. No one fucks around in our territory and gets away with it.”

***

Sunset fell over a small infirmary on the outskirts of downtown.

Despite its small size, a famed physician practiced there. At the moment, he was tending to Elsia and her companions. It was past closing time, but Dr. Dorea had tended to them without any complaints.

Unable to remain in the waiting room, Elsia approached the doctor as soon as he left the surgery room.

“How are they doing, doctor?”

He had a friendly and amiable face. He smiled, giving her a reassuring nod. His gentle demeanor was one of the reasons for his

popularity.

"They'll be all right. Their lives are in no danger. The big one lost a lot of blood, but his wounds were so clear cut that they were easily treated. He'll make a full recovery with no ill effects."

"Thank goodness…" Elsia breathed a sigh of relief at his report, so great that she quickly fell into a seat.

"But these wounds…" Dorea shook his head as he examined the chart he held above his plump belly. "I can tell they weren't from a monstrosity. Should I inform the military police?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Things happened on the job."

"I see. Well, I won't pry."

Elsia quietly bowed in thanks for Dorea's thoughtfulness.

"Elsia, do you have a minute?" Alan, having waited for them to finish talking, called out to her from a corner of the waiting room.

"What is it?" she asked.

Alan had stayed close after carrying Tylon and Zasp to the clinic. He had received information from Listy as the doctor performed the surgery and was waiting for Elsia to confirm it.

"One of my party members happened to see the person you were fighting. Is it the same person we were looking for before?"

"That's right. Zig was his name, I think."

She remembered when Alan had asked her to find his party's mysterious savior. She didn't end up with much, though.

Though Alan had expected her answer, his brows furrowed. He found it hard to believe that his benefactor was working for the mob.

"I *knew* it, but why was he with the mafia?"

"No idea. Based on our investigation, it seemed highly likely that he was using drugs—"

Alan cut her off mid-sentence. "Zig isn't that kind of person."

She blinked in surprise behind her blindfold, not expecting it from someone who was usually so polite.

Okay, maybe he wasn't using the *drug, but he used* some *kind of drug…*

She could admit the substance he had used wasn't the one that was the talk of the day. There was no syringe, and the man's strength had been immense even without enhancements.

Elsia paused, choosing her words carefully. "He wasn't using *the* drug in question, no. Now that I think about it, he looked like he was protecting the mafia girl."

"I see. So, it was a bodyguard job. Zig does seem the type to take a bodyguard job from the mafia…"

Alan seemed satisfied with the explanation. Elsia, on the other hand, thought Zig had a few screws loose to be a bodyguard for the mafia just like that. He should learn to pick his clients.

Alan's face turned serious. "Are you going to report this to the guild?"

"Out with it," Elsia said. "Is that what you're most worried about? How I represent him to the guild?"

Alan gave a silent nod.

Depending on how she phrased it, the guild might end up making Zig a person of interest. Honestly, she should. Even if it was for a job, they couldn't let a man who openly interacted with adventurers on a daily basis go unmonitored.

Not to mention the injuries he gave to my friends.

Alan turned his eyes away from Elsia's hidden ones, lost in thought. Suddenly, she perceived one of his thoughts—the dragon eyes acting on their own. Not unheard of. She kept quiet until Alan spoke again, even though she knew what he would say.

"May I ask you a few questions?"

"Like what?" She was open to what he had to say.

"Did Zig attack you first?"

"No, we did."

So, that's how he's going to play it.

Alan was an honest man, but he wasn't naive to the workings of the world. He could be a skillful negotiator when he had to be and wasn't afraid to hit below the belt. It was why she thought highly of him.

"Did he provoke you into doing it?"

"No."

"Lastly—and I apologize for being rude—did you survive on your own strength?"

"No," she said with a sigh, a hurricane of emotions going through her. Even *she* didn't know what exactly she was feeling at the moment.

Alan was right. They'd forcefully initiated an interrogation in the name of the investigation, attacked Zig and the girl without listening to what they had to say, and…they'd lost.

While they hadn't been fighting to kill, they weren't holding back. Yet, they were alive, when that man had gotten within an inch of killing them. He indulged her talking about the dragon eyes even though he knew she was buying time. When he took her weapon away, he gave her the blindfold back instead of killing her. To top it all off, there was Dorea's medical report.

"His wounds were so clear cut that they were easily treated."

He had held back when he struck down Tylon. He'd only wanted to slow her down. How many more punches did he pull? His armor was cheap, without a single enchantment engraved on it. His weapon, while durable, had no special effects. The more she thought about it, the more it annoyed her.

That guy really looked down on us.

"He said that the drug scandal was coming to an end soon," she said without thinking. "Whether or not he's a threat to the guild can wait until after the investigation is over."

She was angry at him for hurting her friends. However, Zig was so mysterious that she couldn't base her assessment of him on those feelings alone. She was also curious as to why Alan was going so far

to defend him. It might not be a bad idea to trust him and see how things developed.

Alan bowed his head in gratitude. “Thank you.”

“Sorry for eavesdropping, but is Zig the one with the strange double weapon?” Dorea interrupted, having been unable to ignore the conversation. He was scratching his head when the two turned to look at him.

“Do you know him, Doctor?”

“As a patient, yes. He brought some heavily injured Wadatsumi adventurers along with him one time. He said it was work-related. I found him quite the passionate character.”

“He keeps getting involved in all this trouble…”

“Who is he?”

With Alan’s tired sigh, Elsia’s image of Zig grew even more mysterious in her mind.

***

At Zig’s regular armory, Ernesta Armory, clerks and craftsmen were busy with the evening rush. Adventurers returning from a hard day’s work were getting their equipment fixed and maintained.

Zig usually chose a less busy time of day, but now, he blended into the crowd and moved through it silently. His footsteps were soundless as he flowed like water through the store to not draw attention to himself. He was quick and quiet for how big he was. Wearing the crowd like a cloak, he gracefully navigated his way to an idle clerk.

Not Sciezka but a clerk he had never spoken to before. The choice had been deliberate.

"Is now a good time?" he asked.

Zig's frame startled the clerk, but she readily equipped her professional smile. "Welcome, sir. How may we be of service today?"

"I'd like to look at some armor."

"Of course. Excuse me, are you Zig, by any chance?"

"Have we met?" Zig dug through his memories for the girl's face but came up empty.

She put a hand to her mouth and giggled. "No, but Sciezka told me about you. So, you're the one…"

The "one"? What did that mean? Apparently, Zig had made a name for himself here, but he didn't ask more.

"Do you want me to get Sciezka for you?"

"No need. She seems busy. I'd rather not bother her."

"Did your equipment break again?"

The clerk's pointed words made Zig freeze. Finding she'd been right on the money, the assistant gave him a smile that said, "Oh, dear."

"You really are just like the stories. Do you mind if I ask you when you last bought it?"

"Yesterday. I bought it yesterday after breaking my previous gear, and I broke it before yesterday was over. It's a little awkward."

"Goodness me…"

Even the clerk was taken aback at how fast he broke his gear. She could see why Sciezka had said he was "a high value customer in his own right." She was looking forward to waiting on him by herself.

The clerk, Maia, inwardly apologized to Sciezka, who was busy in the back.

Unaware of her thoughts, Zig gathered himself and told her what he needed. "Never mind my armor. My weapon broke so I need a new one. Do you have any twinblades…double-edged swords in stock?"

"Let me just check that for you."

Double-edged sword… What an odd weapon.

She ran through the inventory list but could find none in stock. She recalled having two left just last month, but both had already sold. She then checked the production schedule. It included lists compiled from other stores, but she still found nothing.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we don't have any double-edged swords in our store, being produced, or being delivered at the moment."

"I see… That's not good."

"Would you like to talk to one of our craftsmen? Custom weapons are pricier, but you can put in a priority order. We also have plans that allow you to pay extra for a speedier production time."

She took out an employee list to find who could produce dual-edged swords.

"We should have someone who can craft the sword you need here. What was his name…?"

"Gantt?" Zig supplied.

"Gantt, Gantt… Yes, here he is," she said, pointing to his name on the list. "You're acquainted?"

Though a skilled craftsman, Gantt was famous (perhaps notorious) for crafting equipment no one wanted. He was also skilled enough to craft magic items and magic implements, but the fact remained that he was…difficult.

He received a lot of requests because of his skill. However, his own sense of aesthetics and troublesome personality made him a challenge to deal with. Though things had gotten so bad at one point that they were considering reexamining his contract, he had finally made some sales recently.

"He's a little eccentric but we can vouch for his skill. Would you like to talk to him?"

"Is there no one else?"

"Unfortunately."

Zig sighed as the clerk shook her head. Dual-edged sword users were rare.

"Zig, you broke your stuff again? You're a real cash cow! You've made this shop more money than I ever did!" Gantt said, laughing heartily.

Zig said nothing, his mouth set like he'd just bit into a grapefruit as he endured Gantt's predictable reaction. Gantt was the second-to-last person he wanted to meet, after Sciezka. Of course, he was now rolling on the floor and holding his sides as he cackled at Zig's expense.

He was a craftsman whose main job wasn't customer-facing, but his attitude was getting on even the clerk's nerves. Unaware of her rising anger, Gantt started to inspect the remains of Zig's armor.

"This thing's in a million pieces. I'm amazed you made it back in one piece! I think you're better off training that body of yours instead of getting new equipment."

Zig kept his mouth shut but felt his blood pressure rising.

Though Zig was unfazed when being mocked by adventurers and mobsters, Gantt's words really got to him. If Gantt weren't such a talented craftsman, Zig would've whacked him over the head by now.

"As for weapons, you might be better off carrying around a log or some bits of metal. Those are a lot more—"

Before Zig could lose his patience, the clerk acted in his stead.

A loud rumble cut Gantt off. Then, a piece of scrap due for smelting flew through the air and whizzed by his side.

The clerk gave Gantt a smile. She had been the one to kick the piece of scrap.

"You're on the clock, Gantt."

"Uh, yeah, right."

He held back any further laughter and walked over to Zig to - finally get negotiations underway. Giving the clerk a nod of gratitude, Zig asked Gantt about making him a new weapon.

"I need you to make me a dual-edged sword to replace the one that broke."

"Sure. It's gonna take a lot to make something better than the one you had, though. How's your budget?"

Gantt scratched his beard, concerned about Zig's wallet. Zig puffed out his chest to show him there was no need to fear.

"I can afford to spend this time. I have my paycheck, but I also have this."

Maia was shocked that pigheaded Gantt agreed to make a weapon so quickly, but what shocked her even more was the thing Zig brought out: a club that had been wrapped in cloth. The glow of the white silver gave it a unique charm, and one look at it was enough to make it clear that it was no ordinary weapon.

"Wait, where did you get that?!"

"Picked it up on the job."

"I know this thing's owner, you know."

The unique weapons of popular adventurers never went unnoticed, so it was natural that Gantt was familiar with the user of the Silver Explosion—the name people had given this club.

"Yes, well, the owner was the one who destroyed my equipment. I took it as compensation."

“Should I really be involved in this?” Gantt mused.

“Don’t worry, your weapon did a number on her and her team.” Zig nodded with satisfaction.

Gantt had been concerned but immediately became excited when he heard the field effectiveness of his weapon. “It did? Hell yeah!”

The clerk, the only person who had her head on straight, couldn’t keep up with the conversation.

“I want to sell this to pay for my crafting fee. Will it do?”

“It’s a great weapon but clubs aren’t that popular. Still, it should fetch a good price.”

“I took it to the pawn shop, but they refused to give me a quote for it without a proper certificate. Can you make one for me?”

“Hey, no problem. That’ll be seventy grand. It’ll take time for me to identify and issue a certificate, so I’ll contact you when I’m done.”

The price was up there but reasonable enough. Zig knew it was the cost of the craftsman’s knowledge and experience.

“If all goes well, it should solve most of your budgeting worries.”

“It’s worth that much?”

“Putting aside the question of demand, this thing’s worth ten million dren.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Works as a magic item, lightweight, tough. You won’t believe how hard it is to make something that’s as light as it is durable. Held

up against your sword swings, didn't it?"

Zig remained silent, seeing the sense in Gantt's explanation. Finding a club this thin and light that could withstand his twinblade strikes was astonishing in itself.

"But, hey," Gantt said, "less talking about someone else's weapon and more about your own, am I right?"

Thus, Zig and Gantt switched gears and spent a while discussing the materials and features that would go into making his new weapon.

Zig was a strange customer. Such was the assessment of the armory clerk Maia as she observed him. She had been curious about him ever since Sciezka told her about him. The other clerk talking about a particular customer was rare in and of itself.

Sciezka had described Zig as a man who would repeatedly break his armor. At first, Maia thought that he must be terrible at his job. After seeing him up close, she knew that she'd been mistaken.

In a society of magically enhanced bodies, his was honed through physical training. His footwork was immaculate and wasted no movements. She recognized right away that he was a seasoned veteran. His equipment, though, *was* on the shabby side.

He isn't an adventurer, she thought. *Not a knight either. Doesn't have the air of a mobster. He looks accustomed to rough work, but he doesn't radiate a violent aura.*

He also spoke normally and paid respect to ordinary clerks and craftsmen like herself and Gantt. Actually, she was surprised at how well he got along with the eccentric Gantt. She'd never seen the blacksmith accept a custom order so quickly. Though *Zig* might be the eccentric one, to be buying Gantt's merchandise. Well, his manners were good, and he wasn't fussy about money. Moreover, he bought the shop's stagnating merchandise and was the only one who could get Gantt to produce anything on demand.

All in all, Zig was a type of man Maia had never met before. They had to take good care of him.

Maia called out to them as she reached that conclusion.

***

Once he finished his equipment consultation, Zig went to the pub. He'd dropped by the inn before going, but Siasha had yet to return. She was probably out having dinner with Lindia after work, so he figured that he might as well grab a couple of drinks in town.

Elsia's silver club fetched a hefty price at the pawn shop, making it well worth the trouble he went through to get it. Tonight's ale was going to be exceptional.

Zig quietly drank, enough to enjoy himself without getting drunk. Choosing to stay in a corner of the pub, he turned his back to the noise. It was how he preferred to drink. He didn't mind being alone and wasn't one to be rowdy, though he wouldn't complain about others making noise.

Back in his mercenary group, the atmosphere would become significantly more relaxed after he showed off his parlor trick involving

throwing implements. That always had the other men treating him to some good food. Not much had changed since the days he was too young to drink.

"I wonder how the guys are doing now," Zig thought aloud. He almost laughed at himself for thinking of them now, after he had been away from them for so long.

Still, he couldn't deny that they were the ones who molded him, who allowed him to choose this path to begin with.

***

At the outskirts of a certain city, a number of tents were huddled together. A group of people with a less-than-respectable air about them inhabited the tents.

There was a reason they were dressed that way and the townspeople wanted nothing to do with them: They weren't honest people, and all of them carried the stench of blood.

In a corner of the group was a tent smaller than the rest. Inside that small tent was a young boy—the runt of the litter.

He was around twelve, maybe thirteen years of age, and his gray hair was shorn short. Though he was still growing, he was already larger than his peers.

What stood out the most about him were his eyes. They didn't have the shine of a boy his age; they were more like a dead thing's eyes. Neither bored nor motivated, he only did what needed to be done.

The boy was silently swinging his weapon, lifting the adult-sized longsword and bringing it down. Although the blade was large and awkward, it didn't slow him down.

He had been doing this for so long that his feet were sinking into the ground beneath him. Several of his calluses had torn open, causing his hands to bleed. The red liquid trickled down the hilt of his sword. A waterfall of sweat dripped down his body, soaking his pants.

He would've carried on training that way if someone hadn't called out to him.

"Yo, Zig! How long are you gonna keep swinging that thing for? It's time for grub."

A cocky blond in his twenties carrying a bucket approached him.

"Ryell." Zig cast him a sideways glance to acknowledge him and continued swinging his sword.

Ryell slumped his shoulders and walked closer. "You're as stubborn as ever, I see. Come on, they'll run out of food if you don't hurry. With how much you eat, Provisions will kill you if you don't help out with the dishes."

"That'd be *bad*." Zig emphasized his last word with a powerful strike of his sword.

He stopped his sword with precision despite having swung it countless times. The sounds the sword made and the force it gave off were so powerful that it was easy to forget that he was still a boy.

Ryell gave an impressed whistle, then spoke with admiration and envy in his voice. "Damn, you're growing fast." He gave the bucket to

Zig. “Wipe yourself down and let’s get going.”

Zig looked down at his hands and paused.

“I can’t move my hands,” he mumbled.

“You held on to that thing for too long. Show me. Whoa, you’re covered in blood! Didn’t it hurt at all?”

“It didn’t bother me when I was doing my strokes.”

“At least wipe the blood away…and your fingers are stuck. Great.”

Ryell wiped Zig’s blood with a wet rag and pried his fingers open one by one. From the way his joints popped, it must have hurt a lot.

Zig spread and clenched his fingers now that he could move them. His eyebrows furrowed.

“They hurt *now*.”

“Duh, dumbass. We’ll put some medicine on that later. For now, just wash your hands and wipe your sweat. No, don’t drink from the bucket! That’s not drinking water, this is!”

“Hm?”

Zig looked puzzled, having already drained the bucket. He took the canteen Ryell was holding out and poured it over his head. Ryell could only give a tired smile, having witnessed this happen again and again.

Their mercenary group had a tradition of looking after new recruits. Ryell had knocked on their door after his village was destroyed, and they’d trained him to the point where he could handle

himself in an operation. Now, the task of taking care of the boy with the dead eyes fell on him.

He'd been worried whether he could even get along with the little brat but soon discovered that his worries were unfounded. Zig wasn't friendly, there was nothing childlike about him, and he didn't address his elders properly. However, he did everything he was told without complaint, and his passion for training made him a hit with Ryell and the other members of the group.

His clumsy imperfections actually made him lovable. Unlike his peers, he didn't belittle his elders, despite his lack of proper address. Ryell wondered why that was so often that he once asked Zig, "Why do you respect your elders so much?"

"Because they've managed to survive so long in this awful world," Zig had replied. "Of course I respect them."

Ryell was surprised at the response, considering that Zig was just another war orphan, but the answer was enough to satisfy him. They made a good team: Ryell, frivolous but caring, and Zig, serious but flawed.

After washing up and putting on a new set of clothes, Zig and Ryell went to the encampment's temporary canteen. Several large stock pots were lined up to feed the company of men. A woman larger than the huge stock pots was overseeing the whole process.

"Get in line, you bastards! You're not getting fed with those manners!"

"Nice to see the lunch lady's in good spirits…"

Members trying to cut the line quickly made their way to the back. If the mercs had the battlefield, this lady had the lunch line. In the face of this great woman, even the old mercenaries were nothing but hungry children.

"Now listen up, Zig," Ryell said. "Do *not* piss off the people in charge of food prep. You'll end up eating bread so dry it might as well be a rock."

"Okay."

Zig obediently got in line, heeding the warning. Although they got there in time, no one else seemed to be lining up behind them.

Fortunately, the lunch lady's skill had the line moving smoothly. It didn't take long before it was Zig and Ryell's turn.

"Well, if it isn't Zig! Is it just me or did you get bigger again?"

"I don't know, but I've been eating more."

It was a clumsy response, but she smiled, knowing that he meant no offense. "That's great news! Anyone can get stronger if they eat a lot, work a lot, and sleep a lot! It's just that simple."

Zig gave an earnest nod. "I'll have a large serving."

"Extra-large it is, my boy!"

The stew was spooned into a bowl that might as well have been a bucket, and it made a heavy thud when she placed it on his tray. She also slid him one gigantic piece of rye bread along with a side of mashed potatoes the size of an adult fist. Ignoring his actual order, she had chosen *this* portion. He was not allowed to say no.

"Can you eat all that?"

Being a mercenary was physically demanding work. Naturally, they ate a lot more than an ordinary person—but the portion Zig had received was enough to make a mercenary hesitate.

"It's a lot, but I can finish it," Zig said. "I'm hungry, anyway."

The tray felt like it was as heavy as the longsword he had been using earlier. Zig turned around to look for a seat, but then he turned back.

"What is it?" the woman asked.

Carefully balancing the tray in his hands, he bowed. "Thanks for everything."

"Oh! Well, you better help me do the dishes when you're done!"

"Okay." Zig nodded and left.

He headed over to Ryell, seated at a makeshift table and chairs made out of storage boxes.

Ryell was biting into the tough rye bread and scooping some of the stew with a wooden spoon. It consisted mostly of potatoes and other root vegetables that didn't rot easily, but he was just thankful that there was a lot of it.

"Always grateful that we get actual food here."

"Really?" Zig asked. He had foregone the wooden spoon and was scooping the stew up with his bread.

"Most groups have their mercs figure out their own food if they're not on the job. Ours is a rare exception, although it does come out of our paycheck. It's still a good deal, though, so I'm not complaining."

As far as Ryell could tell, mercenary groups that covered their troop's food expenses were few and far between, if they existed at all.

"The rations they give out during operations are just horrible. Tough and salty jerky and bread so hard it makes this rye bread feel fluffy. That stuff's hard as rocks."

"Ungh. Sounds awful."

Zig tried washing his mouthful of mashed potatoes down with water but had trouble swallowing. Ryell sighed and gave him some of his water.

"Can't live on an empty stomach," Zig said calmly before he continued eating. Though the words seemed like a platitude, they carried more weight coming out of a war orphan who had once never known if he was going to see tomorrow. "Gotta be grateful for the nourishment we get today."

"Thanks for the food," Zig said as he finished.

"That was fast!"

Zig rubbed his stomach and relaxed with a satisfied look on his face. "You talk too much, Ryell. You should concentrate more on eating."

He put his cutlery onto the empty tray and got up.

"I'm going to help do the dishes. Help me with my sword training when I'm done."

"Again? Fine."

The runt—no—the *boy* was highly motivated, so Ryell couldn't slack off. At least Zig's training was much smoother compared to when he'd first started looking after him, and even Ryell found it to be beneficial.

It's a matter of time before he surpasses me.

Ryell didn't mind. He knew a long time ago that the boy was going to surpass him in swordplay. The best he could do now was teach him things other than swordsmanship to fill the gaps in his skills. Fortunately for him, the clumsy boy had a lot of cracks to fill up.

Case in point, Ryell bit into his bread and watched as Zig slipped and conked his head into the pot he was trying to wash.

***

Zig set his mug down, smiling to himself as he remembered the past. Despite cutting down his own friend, he couldn't forget about him.

They were on different paths—that was reason enough to kill Ryell.

He had no regrets about ending him. *Couldn't* have regrets. If he did, it would be like lamenting the countless men he had cut down in battle. He had decided a long time ago, ever since those men picked him up, that he would leave the corpses of the ones he killed in the past. Even for a friend, he wouldn't change his principles.

"Still… I wanted to have another drink with you, Ryell."

When he'd been alone after a mission, Ryell had always been the one to come and drink with him.

"Is this seat taken?"

As he reminisced, Zig almost mistook the figure who'd approached him for his old friend.

"There are other seats around," Zig said bluntly, wiping away his sentimental feelings.

He looked the stranger over. He had blond hair, pale skin, and appeared to be in his late thirties. Upon closer inspection, his face differed from Ryell's, but Zig could see now why the man had reminded him of Ryell. His robes made him look like some kind of priest. Such was Zig's slightly drunken assessment.

The man sat down without waiting for Zig to consent. "This is the only empty seat next to *you*."

"Oh." Zig gave a grunt as he stared at the man. Zig saw that the stranger was watching him closely. His sentimental thoughts had caused him to slack off. He scolded himself for not noticing the robed man's gaze on him sooner. How could such a dangerous man have walked up to him unnoticed?

"What do you want?"

The robed man spoke without introducing himself. "I come with a warning."

There was no hostility in his eyes, but rather what seemed like mercy directed toward a lost sheep. Those eyes reminded Zig of the zealots he'd seen on the battlefield—those that believed in their own righteousness and led people to war. A class of people that didn't mind bloodshed as long as it was for a noble cause.

Zig had no intention of judging them. They weren't much different from mercenaries who killed for money. Still, he'd had enough run-ins with fanatics in the past to know that they were always trouble. No good could come out of people who had no concept of friend or foe.

"What kind of warning?" Zig asked.

He couldn't imagine what it could be. He didn't know what kind of god the man served, much less what warning he could have for a single mercenary.

The man shook his head, as if he was disappointed at Zig for not understanding such a simple thing.

"You must not continue to associate yourself with the unclean. Otherwise, you will come to know them too well."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Who's unclean?"

"Demi-humans," the man said. "I really shouldn't have to say more."

He hated them so much he didn't even want to speak about them. Zig assumed this man was similar to the adventurers who had glared at him just for talking to Urbas the other day. Just another person who belonged to a religion that hated demi-humans.

"They are great sinners. Knowing this, they try to atone for themselves. All I ask is that you don't interfere."

Zig smirked at the man spouting doctrine. "Sorry, but I'm not pure enough to fuss about other people's sins."

“So it would seem. You, too, are carrying a great load on your shoulders.” The man shook his head, giving up on Zig, and got up without making a sound. “I pray that you never have to learn the things which are outside your purview.”

Zig didn’t bother to answer.

The man’s robes swayed as he stood and walked away. Watching him leave, Zig was now more cautious than ever. Even if he was a little drunk and the man had concealed his bloodlust, Zig hadn’t been able to detect the man until he was beside him. Zig was clearly not at his best.

“Guess I’ll head back.” With his pleasant buzz gone, he got up. He had no intention of sinking back into drunkenness.

He paid, left the pub, and scanned the area. The man was nowhere to be seen. The night air swept across Zig, cooling down his feverish body. He sensed someone not quite human and turned toward them.

“Oh, Zig!”

Siasha had also spotted Zig right away because of his large frame. Her long black hair swayed as she approached him, and he could tell something good had happened to her from her upbeat mood.

“Are you done with work?” Zig asked.

“Yeah, I’m all wrapped up,” Siasha said. “It ended up being tougher than I expected.”

The first thing that came to Zig's mind when she said that was the high-rank adventurer with the silver hair and dragon eyes. He immediately put a hand on his chest to suppress the pain, making Siasha giggle.

"Did you get yourself hurt again? You can't go out drinking when you're like that."

"Can't argue there. Could you patch me up?"

Siasha positioned herself next to him and took his arm in hers. Zig allowed her to do so without complaint. They walked back toward the inn together.

Eventually, she turned to him. "You get hurt the second I take my eyes off you, but I suppose it is what it is. This is my duty as your client."

She started humming, although Zig thought she misunderstood her responsibilities as *his* charge. Right now, she seemed to have no intention of hiding her pleasure that he relied on her. It was rather unusual that she was so upfront with her emotions. When she recounted the events of the day, she even had a broad smile on her face.

"I actually put the things I learned from you into practice today! We were staking out a suspicious trade association, but it turned out easier said than done…"

Zig suddenly remembered the man's words. He wasn't interested in whether demi-humans were actually great sinners. He knew that arguing with people who drew a hard line between good

and evil was a waste of time. But it still bothered him. If demi-humans were great sinners, what did that make a witch like Siasha?

While she looked human, everything else about her was wrapped in mystery. It wasn't a matter of having different worldviews, and there wasn't much of a difference in her physiological makeup. Yet, she was clearly different. If demi-humans were so bad, what were witches? He wondered how that man would answer if he posed such a question.

Siasha finished her story as Zig pondered his futile questions. "That's when my deductive reasoning got to shine! I knew those foul merchants would give us information if we nabbed them."

She squeezed his arm so hard that it felt like she was trying to pop a wine cork as she underscored how much her deductive reasoning came into play. Perhaps her investigative style was something like applying a corkscrew.

"Mm. That's great," Zig said.

"Yes! It was quite the productive day."

Seeing her bright smile made him decide that the little details meant nothing, really. No matter what she was, it didn't change what he had to do.

The moon shone on the pair, casting elongated shadows behind them. Twisted inside and out as they were, the large shadow and the smaller one continued to walk side by side.



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