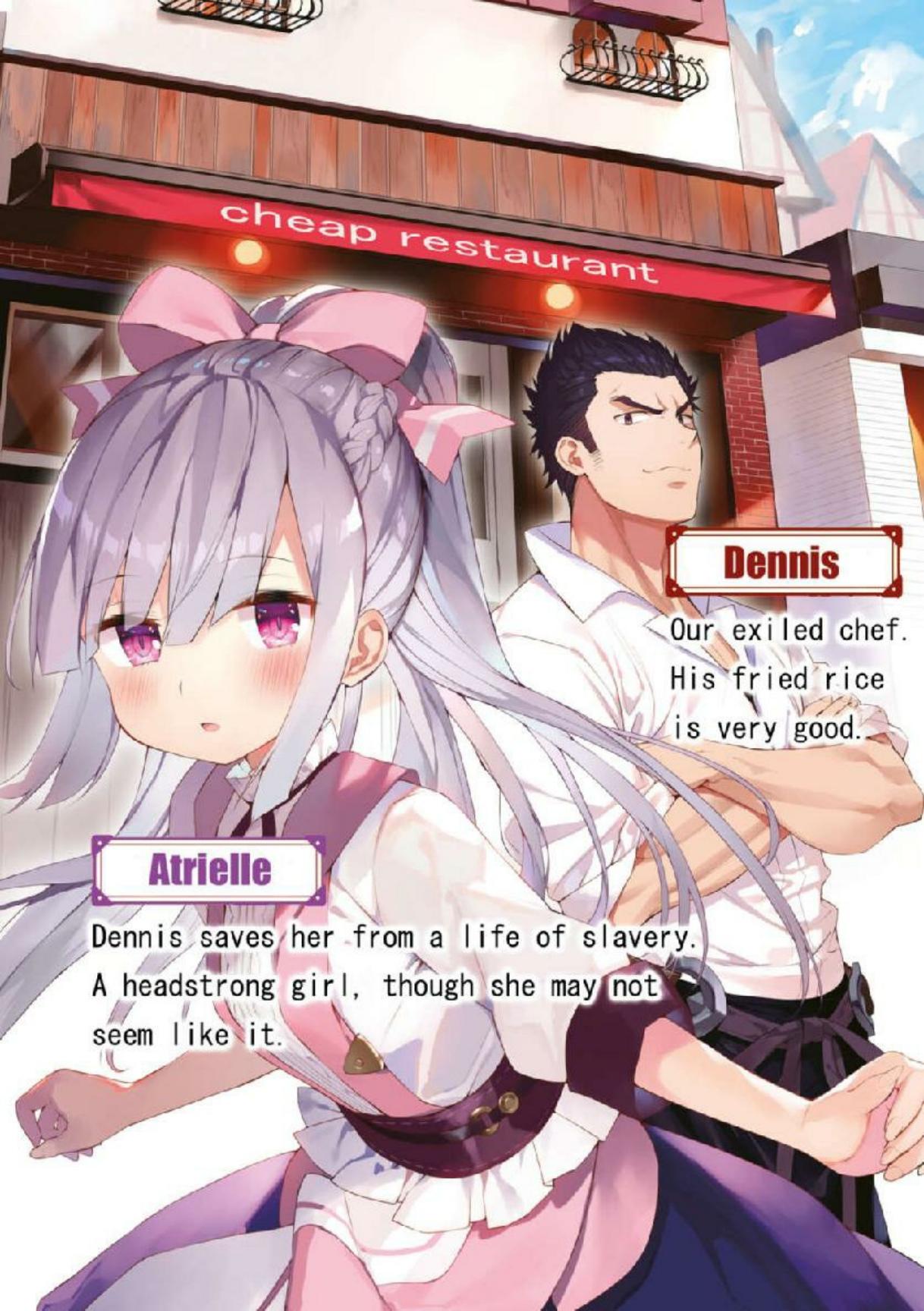


Welcome to the Diner of the Exiled!

A tale of the
mightiest chef
who was booted
from his guild!

1

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Dennis

Our exiled chef.
His fried rice
is very good.

Atrielle

Dennis saves her from a life of slavery.
A headstrong girl, though she may not
seem like it.

WOOOOOOOOOH!

**"VIGGO, YOU BASTARD,
CONSIDER YOURSELF
BANNED FROM MY
DINER!"**



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Chapter 1: The Exiled Chef

“Dennis... consider yourself exiled from this guild.”

The guild leader, Viggo, is speaking in front of everyone. Nearly every guild member has assembled here—the HQ—for an extremely important meeting.

Dennis hears his name and the word “exiled” in the same sentence and is immediately hit by a wave of dizziness. He pauses for a moment and looks at everyone sitting at the round table, as though unable to comprehend the situation. He then returns his focus to Viggo.

“You’re actually letting me go?” he asks.

“Basically,” Viggo quickly answers. His armor, a majestic gold and blue, gleams as if brand new.

Dennis takes a deep breath, then scans the table again: every single member of the guild is present... everyone except for Katey, the guild’s second in command.

The guild is known as the “Silver Wings Battalion,” and it’s probably the strongest guild in existence. It’s an organization composed of just 10 members, but it boasts a formidable reputation—it’s a first-class guild that’s recognized worldwide. The majority of its members, if not all of them, are experienced warriors and strategists. Several of them, primarily knights and soldiers, even surpass the level 80 threshold. For context, the average level cap for people is 60. Although there are certain exceptions, most never even hit that mark.

The one who has just been ousted is Dennis. He is—or was, rather—the guild’s chef. Despite being labeled “chef” on paper, he actually boasts several skills: alchemy, divination, healing, herbology, support, and a thorough knowledge of cutlery usage. So while he isn’t a proper chef in the typical sense, most of his skills revolve around some sort of culinary aspect, and he had fulfilled this role as the guild’s chef. He even managed to max out his skills. Although he had worked at the rear of the guild, rather than the front line, he’d been an excellent support to his guildmates.

He’s a unique exception among most adventurers, though: He’s referred to as “the guild’s chef” and uses a butcher’s knife as his main weapon.

“Can I ask why?”

“Remember the last quest we tried to complete? You know, the one we

failed? Yeah, it was your fault it all fell apart. That's why," his leader replies.

"Huh? What did you just say?"

"You used your 'Dismay Roar,' I guess because you were scared or something, and it made the Cave Dragon escape. Just a little more, and we would've been able to kill all the monsters and complete the mission."

"Whoa there. Just a minute."

Dennis raises one of his hands for a pause and slams his other on the table, leaning on it.

"Weren't you the one who told me to do that, leader? You're not wrong; I was the one who screamed, but that's only because you ordered me to do so," he says.

"I did not. Don't try to blame others for your mistakes."

Dennis doesn't reply; instead, he frowns at his leader. "Me, trying to put the blame onto others? Don't make me laugh," he thinks to himself.

Viggo's talking about a dungeon where they had been tasked to slay a rare monster known as the "Cave Dragon": a monster so rare, it only appears once a year. The guild had also planned to grab rare loot from the defeated mobs.

They'd had a strategy all planned out beforehand, but everything hadn't gone as planned. In the midst of battle, things had quickly gone south, and Viggo ordered Dennis to use "Dismay Roar" to control the mob. Although his skill was meant to give enemies the "dread" status, it actually ended up scaring the cowardly dragon away. If the battle had continued, though, other members could've died. In the end, they lost the dragon, but they had saved their guild members' lives.

Initially, Dennis had been surprised by his leader's order. He'd figured Viggo would've tried to fight the dragon 'til the very end, regardless of the lives it cost. For Viggo, the reputation of the guild was more important: he didn't want to fail the quest and upset the nobles that had tasked them with killing the monster. That was why Dennis was surprised. But since it was a logical order, he'd respected his leader's decision back then.

And now, that decision has come back to bite him.

"We're the Silver Wings Battalion, remember? The strongest guild in the entire world! We don't fail quests. Why would I deliberately give you an order that would set us up to lose? You're the only one who's to blame for what you did. Actually, for all we know, you could be a spy working for

another guild. Maybe you did all of this on purpose so you could taint our reputation!" Viggo cries.

"He sure likes to make mountains out of molehills," Dennis quips to himself. He scratches the back of his head and forces a smile as he ponders his guild's decision.

"This is likely a ploy by everyone to make me the scapegoat," he thinks to himself. "They need someone to blame for the guild's failure, and I'm the one on the chopping block. Plus, by being branded a spy, I'm lessening the impact of their failure. If they banish the traitor, they can gain the favor of the nobles and royalty who funded them. They'll end up regaining all the funding and respect they'd lost."

After ruminating on it, Dennis turns to everyone else in the room and asks, "Is everyone okay with this decision?"

No one responds.

"What about you, Florian?"

"I... I agree with what the leader says," Florian, the guild's priest, answers.

Viggo has always had Florian wrapped around his finger. He's nothing but his damn lackey. Dennis angrily recalls all the times that he'd saved Florian from danger.

"And you, Katerina?" he asks, "You agree with him?"

"Huh? Oh, well, I..."

"You've always loved my cooking. Why would you want this?"

"I, uh, I-I'll leave this decision to the leader as well."

"You too, huh? I see."

It looks like no one's siding with him, even the ones who'd normally have supported him. Realizing this, he falls silent.

"Okay, I get it; so everything's my fault. Since I was 'a coward,' and it cost us the quest, I have to be exiled. Looks like no one's against it," he finally says.

"That's right. Your qualifications and position here never really synced with ours, anyway. Everyone here is either a high-level knight or priest, after all."

"Is there something wrong with being a chef?" Dennis asks as he stands up.

Viggo also rises, and his hands reach for the sword on his back.

They share a heated glare across the round table, and everyone at the table holds their breath. You could cut the tension in the room with a knife.

“If you think your shitty level 99 cooking class is any match against me, a level 99 knight, you’re gravely mistaken. Watch yourself,” Viggo warns, grasping the handle of his blade.

“And how can you say that for sure? You’ll never really know unless you try...” Dennis replies with a threatening smile.

When people reach level 90, their true strength doesn’t necessarily correlate with their number. What really matters at that point is the class specialization and which skills they’ve gained from their training. Based on their specialty, each person gets very different skills along with different strengths and weaknesses.

Dennis and Viggo specialize in two very different areas. On one side, there’s Viggo. His skillset is mainly aimed at overpowering and defeating his enemies. On the other side, there’s Dennis. His skills are more supportive, and they focus on making the most delicious food possible.

Dennis looks around him once more. The tension reaches its climax.

“So they don’t need a chef here?” Dennis ponders, “Even though this guild reached its position with my help? Who cooked for everyone while they were in the middle of exploring dungeons? They would never have cleared them so easily if I hadn’t assisted them. Who was the one who created such a strong support group? Our guild’s reputation and our support team trumps the others.”

It’s useless. No one has his back.

“Very well. Do as you please. I’m out,” he spits out.



Dennis rushes to his room and begins gathering his personal belongings. As he’s doing so, the door suddenly bursts open.

It’s Katey: the knight who’s second in charge at the guild. She’s easily recognizable by her bright red hair and matching shiny red armor. She’s also wearing a black coat with two silver wings emblazoned on it—the guild’s signature coat. Each member has one, and it makes them stand out from everyone else. She’s panting pretty heavily from having sprinted to his room.

“W-Wait a second! What’s the meaning of this, Dennis?!?” she cries out.

“What do you think? I’ve been exiled,” he replies.

“Why would you even get exiled?! Isn’t that weird?!”

“It’s just as the leader says. Anyway, could you at least try to wear normal clothes around the HQ instead of prancing around half-naked in your armor?”

He squints at her, looking closely at what she’s wearing. Katey’s attire is normally scanty— rather than a traditional set of armor, hers resembles a bikini more than anything else. It covers everything that needs to be covered, but it doesn’t really leave much to the imagination. With a pair of dual swords resting at her hips, her “assets” are on full display.

There’s a good reason her armor is like this, of course: her fighting style tends to be quick and aggressive, unleashing a relentless flurry of attacks on her enemies. So, in addition to just being her style, her skimpy clothing allows for better mobility. It also works wonderfully well for the guild when it comes to asking the nobles for their patronage: their pockets seem to get significantly lighter when she’s around.

“I don’t accept this! And I still don’t get why this happened either!” she exclaims. She’s got a worried expression, and her cheeks are flushed.

It looks like Katey was told about his exile after the meeting. Although most of the party’s power is held by Viggo, Katey is a fair match against him in terms of strength. As second in command, if she had opposed his decision, Dennis might have still been allowed to stay. The others had planned the meeting out in advance to ensure she wasn’t there; they then quickly booted Dennis out and labeled him a traitor before Katey could find out and interfere.

“B-But if you’re gone, who’s going to make our medicines or potions?! And the cooking?! What about tonight’s dinner?!”

“Florian’s skilled enough to make medicine, and I bet there are others who can take over the potion master role. As for dinner… Um, sorry, but you’re on your own there.”

“Haven’t you been the one slaving away behind the scenes, though?! No one’s willing to admit it out loud, but they know as well as I do that no one’s as good as you are! Sure, they have some skills, but they’re nowhere near your level! They’re useless in comparison!”

“Yeah, I’ve got to agree with you there. What they have isn’t very useful, honestly,” Dennis replies as he continues packing his things.

Most of the private institutions that priests—like Florian—train at are lacking in one way or another. They have pretty cushy courses—for example, they never put their students through any battle simulations where they can safely level up. Without any sticky situations or hands-on battle experience, the institutions have created a place where anyone who applies can easily reach level 60 without any issues. Some of these schools cost a pretty penny, too: their tuition fees are so high, only nobles can afford to send their children to study there.

All those places really care about is the prestige of a high level, not how their students reach it. Since a person's level and achievements are available to those who are at a high enough level and know Divination, the method of obtaining said level and achievements aren't that important. Usually, these levels are obtained by repeatedly using their skills, as well as the number of skills they have total. However, the schools have people who are well-versed in the art of easy leveling.

Normal people can't even use the divination skill on these nobles because of the level gap, so that's why they're always looking for an easy way to get high levels. As long as the plebeians stay weak and obey, it's more than enough for them.

"Well, I've leveled up through more unconventional means than the rest of you. I focused on cooking instead of fighting, so I ended up doing things that you guys couldn't. Anyway, I'm sure you'll all pull through."

"No, we won't!" Katey shouts and slams her hands on the table for emphasis. She continues, "Oh shit, I can already see what's going to happen; things are gonna go downhill real fast. None of the guys on the front line have any idea of how much you've actually helped us. You're like the main pillar of the support group, and they're totally clueless! Have they even thought this through?!"



“Don’t forget the rest of the support members. They help out, too. Well, not like it matters; you guys are a warrior guild, not a support guild.”

“Dude! We’re gonna fall apart if you leave! For real! Like poof, gone! It’s going to be a frickin’ mess!” she shouts, her head in her hands.

Dennis isn’t wrong, though. The guild is mostly renowned for its warriors and aggressive tactics, not its support team. The most prominent members of the guild are Viggo, also called “The Blue Blade That Destroys All,” and Katey, also known as “The Crimson Blade Storm.” The two of them tend to go all-in on missions and destroy anything that moves.

Of course, this style has garnered the guild’s warriors quite the reputation. That’s one of the main reasons the guild is famous: the Silver Wings Battalion not only boasts a group of prodigy warriors and a very aggressive battling style, but it was also the first guild that reached the deep, unexplored zones of dungeons—areas which were previously considered impossible to reach.

That’s why the support members have never really stood out in comparison to the warriors. With the exception of Dennis, most of them are just puppets ready to be used and controlled by Viggo whenever he so pleases. They’re also primarily composed of women. That’s because Viggo prefers beautiful, fair women, as well as high-level members from wealthy families.

Obviously, Viggo’s choice in recruits is primarily due to the nobles’ tastes. With better reputation comes better funding from the guild’s patrons. Nobles are also the ones who provide the guild with tasks. Dennis knows this, and he’s also aware that Viggo isn’t an idiot. He tends to be careful in recruiting his members, but he has a tendency to favor his own personal taste, something Dennis is all too aware of. Viggo just prefers picking women over men, plain and simple.

“H-Hey Dennis, wait! You can still come back! I’ll convince them somehow! Please, I’m begging you!”

“It’s too late. I don’t want to stay in a party full of ass-kissers who just suck up to their asshole leader.”

“A-At least make some dinner before you go...”

“That’s your last request? Food? Well, it does make me happy that you want me to stay, even if it’s just for my food.”

“Also, if you could make some extra food for the next few months...”

“Seriously, that’s all you can think about? You’re like one of those kids that just thinks about eating constantly because they’re going through a growth spurt.”

Dennis finishes gathering his essentials, which he packs into a small bag and slings over his shoulder. He leaves his signature black coat on the bed and passes Katey on his way out of the room.

“Are you for real?! You don’t wanna come back?!” Katey cries, looking increasingly desperate.

The main reason Dennis joined in the first place was because Katey had convinced him to. Before that, he used to work at a restaurant in the city. The restaurant was owned and run by Dennis’s adoptive mother, but he found himself kicked out after they had gotten into a fight. That’s when he met Katey.

Katey knew from the moment they met that Dennis wasn’t merely a simple chef. It turned out that she was right: Dennis was a mercenary. A sort of rogue, freelance figure who wandered from one place to another and never really settled down in one guild, despite coming into contact with several renowned ones. He specialized in and excelled at several support-related skills, something that was generally only seen in high-class adventurers. She spied him at a bar and checked his stats out with her divination skill. Once she was certain she was right, she went over to expose his true nature.

“Why would a chef have such high alchemical skill levels?” she asked.

“Had to maintain my metallic pans somehow. You know how it works: gotta get rid of the rust and all... But then again, I’m assuming you’ve never cooked?”

“You also have an absurdly high herbology level. There’s no way you’re just a chef.”

“I bet you’re the kind of person who confuses salt for sugar.”

“And your knife skills are at a legendary level too?! Are you an assassin or something?!”

“Well, I think that’s pretty obvious. I’ve been cutting food up with my knives for years.”

“Then why would a simple chef like you have skills that are normally used to clear dungeons, huh?!”

“Because I busted my ass for years cooking!”

“Yeah, right! No amount of effort and time cooking gets you to this point! Hey, wait a sec— All of your achievements are just from cooking. You weren’t lying after all?! Damn, you’ve maxed your experience points in fried rice and noodle dishes. That’s amazing! I’ve never seen anything like this before! You’re an actual cooking junkie. I seriously can’t believe your best achievement is ‘Legendary Fried Rice’! Hahaha!”

“Are you trying to make fun of me, you bikini pervert?”

“My armor isn’t a bikini! It actually has a lot of advantages, you know!”

So, in the end, Dennis was basically roped into joining the guild by Katey. She wouldn’t take no for an answer. The leader wasn’t very enthusiastic about accepting him, but Katey had found someone with formidable skill in his field. Viggo couldn’t really refuse.

It’s not a stretch to assume that Katey and Dennis are good friends. They get along so well that many party members have already speculated if they’re more than “just friends.” During their downtime after clearing dungeons, they’d snoop on the two of them and say things like,

“Hey guys, look—Katey and Dennis are talking again.”

“Those two are totally going out. I just know it! Kyah!”

Despite their conjectures, however, this is what the typical conversation between these two sounds like:

“Dude, Dennis—a hamburger would be perfect for dinner tonight. Yep, it’s definitely gotta be a hamburger.”

“Hell no. We had meat yesterday, so today we’re having a vegetarian meal. We need to strive for a balanced diet.”

“But my tummy’s screaming! ‘Feed me a hamburger,’ it’s crying out! If I feed it anything else, it’ll puke it back out.”

“Sorry, but we’re having some fried veggies and salad today. My body’s speaking to me, too—the one that wants me to preserve my health. It’s just itching to make some veggies today.”

“Then perish, ‘Legendary Fried Rice.’”

“Can you not, please?”

Another thought occurs to Dennis: Viggo also probably didn’t like the fact that he’s so close to Katey. Viggo definitely has feelings for her, and it’s no wonder—she’s a beautiful, stylish girl. It’s just a shame that she has to open her mouth and ruin the whole thing. He’s constantly making up excuses and

situations so the two of them can be alone. For example, he often summons her and creates extra meetings with the excuse of “discussing the guild with the second in command.” Dennis has always been able to see it for what it really is, but Katey remains oblivious.

Dennis and Katey’s relationship primarily revolves around food. It’s really the only thing she can talk to him about; she’s a hopeless glutton. Maybe their great leader would re-evaluate their relationship if he knew.

“What are you gonna do now?” Katey asks desperately.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m gonna cook.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“I have some money in the bank, so I’m going to open my own place in the countryside.”

“...”

This isn’t the first time Dennis has considered leaving, actually. He’s always held back because he didn’t want to leave Katey; the thought made him ache. This time, however, he doesn’t really have the option.

“I... I was the one who found you and brought you in. You’re mine, Dennis!”

“I don’t ever remember becoming your property. Anyway, try to cheer up. It’s not that bad,” Dennis says. He pats Katey’s shoulder and hoists his bag up.

“D-Dennis?!”

He can hear her desperate cries, but he doesn’t turn around to face her.

“Come back, Dennis! This is an order from your commanding officer!”

“You may be my commanding officer, but you can’t undo your commanding officer’s decision. I’m thankful for everything you’ve done for me up ‘til now. I’m sorry, Katey. In the end, I’m not made to be an adventurer; my place is in the kitchen. Have a good one.”

He waves his hand goodbye.



A refreshingly clear blue sky greets Dennis the moment he emerges from the guild’s headquarters. He raises a hand to block the sunlight as he watches the bustling street in front of him. There are couples wandering around and

chatting, rich folks strutting primly with their flashy scepters, and children frolicking about.

“Whoops.”

Something bumps against Dennis’s leg as he’s distracted watching the scene. He looks down and sees a small girl, her hair arranged in a cute bun. She probably wasn’t watching where she was going. She looks back at him to see who she collided with, but she seems astounded by his height. As soon as she notices Dennis looking down at her, she lowers her gaze.

“I’m sorry... Ah!”

As if suddenly noticing something, she looks up to the sky. Dennis follows her gaze—there’s a red balloon rapidly heading for the clouds. It’s probably from a vendor with street performer skills. They create these balloons by blowing magical air inside them and then sell them on city streets. Those things can basically float forever until they’re popped.

“Oh, so that’s your balloon?”

“Y-Yeah. What should I do? My mom just bought it for me...”

The balloon’s past the rooftops now. The two of them follow its ascent, and the young girl looks more dejected the higher it goes.

“Come on. You shouldn’t let go of the things you cherish so easily.”

He takes a deep breath and jumps up toward a nearby building. He reaches the window and propels himself off of it, soaring up toward the city’s rooftops. He deftly grabs the balloon’s string in the air and lands back on the ground safely.

The little girl excitedly rushes toward him.

“Whoa! That was amazing, mister!” she exclaims.

“Here. Don’t let go of it this time.”

He hands the little girl her wayward toy, and she takes it with a large smile on her face. There’s a woman nearby calling out for her; it’s probably her mother.

“Thanks, mister! Thanks so much!” she repeats, then quickly toddles back to her mom.

“Don’t let go of things you cherish, huh?” Dennis thought to himself.

Easy enough to say, but could he actually practice what he preached? Would he be able to stand his ground and repeat what he’d just said with pride?

Not like it would change anything now. He’d already made up his mind.

The beautiful sky and lovely weather dissipate his bad mood, and he feels slightly better about what happened earlier.

“What an excellent day to be exiled,” he thinks.

Regardless of how things could’ve been handled, it’s not like anything would change anyway. “There isn’t any point in worrying about it now,” he assures himself. He gave his all as a support role, helping out the guild behind the scenes... all to be backstabbed by them and branded a spy.

“I guess things didn’t really end up well for me,” he jokes to himself, “but it’s not like worrying or brooding over it will solve my problems. I’m still level 99, not 100. My life as an adventurer may be over, but my life as a chef has just started. Let’s do this!”

As Dennis merges into the city’s crowd, one person watches him perched in front of their window. It’s Viggo, looking down at his ex-member with an evil smirk.

“Dennis... As I expected, you really are that kind of guy.”

He leaves his position at the window, places his sword on the table, then slouches on the chair next to it.

“With him gone, there’s no one else who’d get in my way. No one will oppose my absolute rule here. Time to start putting my plan in motion...”

Chapter 2: The Grand Opening with the Exiled Slave

Dennis, resolute and ready to open his diner, leaves the city and travels to a village a few hours away. The village isn't as busy as the place he came from, but it's bustling and thriving in its own right. Thanks to the numerous dungeons that are scattered nearby, it attracts all sorts of adventurers. He didn't really come up with much of a plan on his way there, but as he steps into the village, he realizes it's the perfect place for the small, cozy diner that he'd envisioned.

With a purse filled generously with coins and a burning ambition, he is ready to set his plan in motion. First, he has to find a building for sale—one preferably close to a dungeon. Second, he needs some furniture. Some cheap sets will suffice for the time being. As his business expands, and he makes more money, he can splurge on some nicer furniture. For now, though, there isn't much of a rush.

It is also important to save some cash for a rainy day. He'd learned this lesson from one of his favorite manuals, "Buck Naked Adventurer's Restaurant Business for Dummies, 4th Edition". He must've pored over this book a hundred times over back at the guild. He's read it so often, in fact, that he still remembers what page the advice about saving money is on: page 9, titled "First Lesson!" It warns, "In general, adventurers suck at managing their finances. Always be sure to keep a big pile of gold saved up just in case!"

Dennis reminisces on his days back at his guild, where money was of no concern to him. He could buy whatever he desired whenever he wanted it. His job had meant risking his life, but it had also paid handsomely. But the situation has changed—he's no longer the chef of the strongest guild in the world. He no longer serves the rich nobility. Now he's simply the manager of a humble diner; nothing more, nothing less.

That's why keeping some money for an emergency ought to be one of his main priorities.



"Whoa! This is amazing! How's this thing so cold without any ice?!"

Dennis is at a general store, peering in amazement inside a cold box. At Dennis's amazed shout, the store's owner—a rather corpulent, friendly-looking fellow—waddles over.

"Hahahaha! Well, well—that, my friend, is what people call an 'ice box.' It's a magical item! There's a blue crystal stored inside which constantly casts freezing magic. It helps keep any edibles you store inside fresh! It's a definite must if you're planning to open your own food place!" he exclaims while smiling and wiping some sweat from his forehead.

"Sounds really useful! Gimme one of these!" Dennis instantly cries, but then hesitates. "Uh, actually, wait a moment..."

He suddenly recalls the wise words on page 13 of "Buck Naked Adventurer's Restaurant Business for Dummies": "Second lesson! Ask yourself: do you really need to spend money on that item you've been eyeing?! Try to avoid splurging on your initial investments!"

"Uhhhh... I'll pass, actually. Never mind."

"Huh? You sure, lad? Everyone in your business has one of these."

"Y-Yeah. I just remembered that I can use ice magic. I've made those crystals before at an old job."

In the end, he buys only the bare essentials. He feels rather proud of himself for managing to keep himself in check. "I've read the Naked Adventurer's guide at least 17 times," he thinks, "I have no weaknesses. No blind spots."

Most restaurants that open end up tanking in the first year. Dennis isn't worried, though—he's trying to be as frugal as possible, and he has confidence in his cooking abilities. Now, what about advertising his business? To start off, he'll rely solely on word of mouth and see how it goes from there. He's not worried about troublesome customers since he has the skills to scare them off if they try anything. Anyone who tries to mess with him can answer to his superior knife skills and his maxed-out "Slash" ability. The only thing that remains uncertain is how he'll run the diner, but he puts that aside for now.

"Hahaha! Man, planning this all out is so much fun! I can't stop daydreaming about it!" Dennis thinks to himself as he jovially skips through town.



Dennis has met with the carpenter in charge of remodeling the place he bought and the man who's supplying his ingredients. Now he needs to think about hiring someone to help out. Although he could start on his own and be a one-man team, it would definitely be easier with someone else working alongside him. Plus, money isn't really an issue—he has enough to comfortably pay someone the minimum wage.

He thinks back to the lesson on page 15 of his beloved manual: "Don't think you can shoulder everything alone! Although cooking is the backbone of any restaurant, customer service is a very important aspect!"

Suddenly, Dennis notices a congregation; looks like a slave auction. They're a little more secretive in the city, but in a rural town like this, they're pretty much held out in the open. People just don't really give a damn here, as evidenced by the large crowd.

It wasn't his first time seeing one of these, and it likely wouldn't be his last. He looks over to see who they're currently auctioning. It's a young girl.

"Ladies and gentlemen, gather 'round and behold! I have a high-quality item for you today!" the thin auctioneer calls out. Dennis doesn't recognize him as a local. He's likely a traveling merchant going from town to town with his "merchandise."

"This young lady is actually former nobility, if you'll believe it! Apparently, her parents got into just a teensy little power battle with another rival family. Guess they weren't very lucky, though, because here she is! Check her out! Look at her noble, graceful demeanor!"

The girl's standing primly on the humble stand. In contrast to her surroundings, her beautiful, silky hair gleams silver. The merchant doesn't seem to be lying—she does indeed look highbred.

The other traders start whispering to each other.

"Wait, a former daughter of nobility? You're kidding, right?"

"Probably some bullshit excuse to jack up her price."

"She does look good, though. She'll probably be useless for labor, but I can think of some other... alternative uses for her. Hehe."

Hmmm...

"It's a shame for her, but I can't exactly help out," Dennis thinks. "I can really only accept her fate and move on. You can't save everyone, right? If I

were constantly worrying about all the injustices in this world, my nerves would be shot. Yeah, I can't do anything about this. I should just go... but her eyes..."

The moment he saw her eyes, he stared into a void. He could just sense it: the absolute hopelessness, the complete emptiness.

Dennis recognized that look. It was like his own, back when he was younger...

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Goldenagato |

Years ago, Dennis lived in the dark, dirty shadows of an otherwise glimmering city. He called a damp alley his home and lived with the sole purpose of surviving. He only moved or thought when absolutely necessary—after all, food was scarce, and using up any of his strength needlessly wasn't a good idea.

This is how Dennis had spent the majority of his life ever since he was a child. It was a miserable existence, but despite this, he never thought he was alone. He could've sworn there was the shadow of another child constantly tailing him wherever he went. Although he initially thought it a figment of his imagination, he couldn't shake the feeling of someone—or something—constantly sticking by his side.

But one rainy night, his life changed. Dennis was sitting in the alley, covered by a ragged coat that someone had tossed away earlier. He was utterly motionless, staring blankly ahead of him at the end of the alley. Suddenly, he saw the silhouette of a woman run by. Her long, black hair fluttered in the rain, and she ran past him without noticing. Unbeknownst to her, something had fallen out of her coat. With how dark and rainy it was, it would've been impossible for her to see it, anyway. Dennis had caught a glimpse of it, however; the dim light of a nearby street revealed that she had dropped her wallet, lined heavily with cash. It was more money than he had ever seen in his life.

He grabbed the wallet, pressed it against his chest, and rushed out of the alley. His first and only thought was reuniting it with its owner; he'd never thought about keeping it himself. He knew it must be important to her, at least as important as his own coat was for him. It had kept him warm and sheltered him against the dreary rain. Without it, he wouldn't have been able to survive such a cold, harsh night. He broke out into a sprint to try and find the lady.

As it turns out, his concern for returning the wallet would change his life.

When he'd caught up to her, she was looking around. She'd probably finally noticed she'd lost her wallet and was looking for it. He timidly approached her, afraid of what she might do, and presented the wallet. She accepted it—quizzically, at first, until she realized what it was.

"Oh, it's my wallet," she whispered as she looked at Dennis. "I'm confused, though. Why would you want to give this back to me so badly?"

Dennis didn't really understand her question. He knew he should answer, but he hadn't had much experience speaking with others before. When he opened his mouth to speak, his throat ended up getting caught, and he said nothing.

"You could've just kept it. Nothing would've happened to you, especially considering I'd dropped it for a while without realizing. I mean, I think keeping the money would've been the obvious choice. Why didn't you?"

Was he supposed to answer? And what was he supposed to say if he did? He was at a loss for words. He just thought it'd be bad if she lost it; that's why he'd decided to give it back.

Also, Dennis didn't really grasp the concept of money. He knew there was a lot of money, but he didn't quite understand its scope. His intentions were both righteous and naive.

"Well, whatever. Here, follow me."

Dennis turned out to be very lucky, indeed—that woman had turned out to be none other than the head chef of a very noble restaurant. She practically dragged him to her restaurant. Despite being dirty and utterly drenched, she made him sit in one of the fancy chairs normally reserved only for nobles and kings. Then she quickly whipped up some fried rice and soup and offered it to him.

The moment the spoonful of fried rice entered his mouth, tears started to flow from his eyes. For the very first time in his life, Dennis cried. He was in a daze—he didn't fully comprehend the situation he was in, nor did he understand the purpose or origin of his tears. He simply sat there, baffled and teary-eyed, and continued to eat the rice with the haphazardness of a baby first learning how to hold its utensils.

Dennis had finally discovered what it felt like to eat something truly delicious.



He wonders how she's doing now. They had gotten into a fight and exchanged some nasty words, and she'd ended up tossing him out. Hopefully, once the diner is on track, he can pop into her restaurant and apologize properly. His thoughts are quickly interrupted by the men around him

chatting about the slave.

“I bet she’d fetch a pretty penny in a brothel.”

“Yeah. Better do it now before she gets old and busted.”

“Let’s just buy her. If she’s got some weird condition we don’t know about, we can always sell her off to some freak show circus.”

“...”

“All right, gentlemen! As you can see, this girl’s a rare gem! You won’t find a slave like this anywhere else! Any takers? Who’s first?!”

The auctioneer starts scanning the crowd for bidders. Potential buyers throw up unique hand signs to tell him they’re raising the price.

“I see someone offering thirty greens! Oh, someone over there’s offering fifty!” he shouts.

Various calls spring up from the crowd, each placing their own bid for the slave.

“Fifty-five!”

“Sixty!”

“Sixty-three!”

“Sixty-six!”

“...A hundred!”

Dennis, who’s standing a bit behind the crowd, is responsible for the final bid. Everyone turns and looks at him, astonished at the high price.

“Aw crap, I ended up doing it... But there’s no going back now,” he thinks to himself.

“Very well, gentlemen! The young man over there has offered a hundred! Does anyone want to counteroffer?!”

He looks around, but the crowd is silent.

“Looks like she’s all yours, son. I assume you have the cash on you right now, yes?”

Dennis withdraws a fistful of green bills from his bag and presents them to the auctioneer.

“Hahaha! Well, well! Looks like we have quite the wealthy young gentleman over here! You don’t see that every day. Very well, son! She’s yours—!”

“Wait a second! I offer one hundred and fifty greens!”

The hell?!

Dennis looks over to see who called out. It's a large man, his face glistening in the sun. Based on his size, he's clearly someone quite successful—definitely someone with a cushy position in life. It takes him a second, but Dennis eventually recognizes him: he's the man from the general store he was in before.

"Heheheh... I can't let such a sweet little cutie like her go out much. I'll take her home and take very good care of her, yes I will..." he mutters.

"He looks like a stereotypical pervert!" Dennis thinks to himself, but then quickly checks himself. He'd hastily jumped to a conclusion just now, hadn't he? He usually tries not to judge a book by its cover. Sure, what the man had said might've sounded disgusting and all sorts of dodgy, and he might look unsettling, but he's probably a good guy deep down. Maybe he means that he wants to employ her in his house and take good care of her in that way. Who knows, right? Ruminating on all those factors, Dennis decides to keep his mouth shut.

"Oh shit, there's Bolbo," one of the merchants says.

"So she's going to that creep? Oh well... I give her a few months tops."

"Fuck! So he is a pervert!" Dennis thinks to himself, then shouts, "T-Two hundred! I offer two hundred!"

Bolbo is in quick pursuit, though, and shouts out, "Th-Three hundred! Hehehe..."

"Three hundred and fifty!"

"Four hundred!"

"Four hundred and fifty! Shit, damn, SHIT!"



Dennis is sitting inside his future diner on a chair he'd bought earlier that day. Sitting silently across from him is the silver-haired girl he'd won at the auction. Although he's trying to relax, purchasing the girl had cost him dearly, and he's currently counting the scarce remnants inside his bag.

"Man, I thought I had more cash than this. Between the earlier expenses and this... I think I'm completely broke," he says with his head in his hands and sobs lightly.

The girl doesn't reply. In fact, she's just been staring silently at Dennis this

whole time.

“Oh well,” Dennis says, trying to change his tone to be a bit gentler.
“What’s your name?”

“I don’t have one.”

“There’s no way you don’t have one. You can tell me; it’s okay.”

“I had one, but I lost it,” she answers expressionlessly.

Dennis puts his elbows on the table and sighs.

“Well, whatever. What would you like me to call you, then?”

“I’m fine with Slave.”

“Don’t give me that. Anything else you’d be fine with?”

She finally breaks her stoic character and ponders for a moment, then says,
“If you really need to give me a name... Atrielle.”

“Okay, nice. Got it. So it’s Atrielle. I hope we get along,” he says and claps
his hands once. He’s desperate to change the mood in the room.

“Why did you buy me?” she asks.

“I didn’t really have a reason, to be honest. You just reminded me of my
past, I guess,” he says while scratching his head awkwardly. He continues,
“By the way, if you just wanna run away and live your own life, I’d be fine
with that.”

“What’s your name, Master?”

“Don’t call me that. I’m Dennis.”

“Lord Dennis.”

“Take out the useless honorific, and we’ll be fine.”

“My Lord.”

“...Uh, my real name isn’t the useless part in that.”

She looks around, confused, and asks Dennis, “So what should I do?”

“Nothing for the time being. Just go upstairs and take a nap or something. I
just wanna be alone for a bit. Half of my savings just went up in smoke
because of this,” he replies and waves his hand at her, signaling that she
should just go.

Suddenly, a rumbling noise erupts from Atrielle’s stomach. Dennis crosses
his arms and stares at her.



“Here, eat.”

Dennis had gone to some shops that were still open to get his cookware and some ingredients. He’d returned to the diner and made fried rice for Atrielle and himself. Although the kitchen is still quite sparse in terms of equipment, he has an array of useful skills—such as “Blaze,” “Disinfect Food,” and “Boil”—that allowed him to cook whatever he wanted as long as he had the ingredients. During his time at the guild, all he would need during dungeon crawls was some seasoning. He could create full courses out of the most insidious monsters inside.

It’s no wonder that Katey called him things like “The Walking Kitchen,” “Cooking Incarnate,” or even “Her little level 99 cooking criminal.”

Dennis divides the portions between two plates and places one of them in front of Atrielle. It was nothing out of the ordinary, as he’d improvised while doing it: some finely chopped cave onions, plain white rice, some beaten eggs, a small portion of vritra meat, and a bevy of spices that he always carried with him.

Dennis begins eating the food silently. Atrielle, watching him eat, timidly takes her spoon, scoops up some rice, and puts it into her mouth. Her eyes snap open, and she jerks forward, as if hit by an electric shock. She looks at the mountain of rice on her plate and quickly shovels in another mouthful of food.

Seeing her eating with such gusto makes Dennis relax a little bit. Initially, he was worried that there was nothing left in her, that she’d been reduced to a hollow husk. Fortunately, it seems he was wrong. He’s about to take another spoonful of his own food when he notices she’s crying. Tears are silently pouring down her face as she eats.

“Sniff...”

“Poor thing. She’s trying her hardest not to cry, but her eyes are all red,” Dennis thinks. He figures it’s best to remain silent.

He doesn’t know what happened to her, but decides not to pry since she seems hesitant to open up for now. She just needs some good food and lots of sleep. He’s certain that with a little care, most of her wounds will heal themselves. As for the ones that run deep, the ones that can’t be healed... everyone shares one thing in common: the need to eat.

“Even when you’re at a loss, when you’re hopeless, when you think there’s

nothing that can be done, you can always eat. A brand new day starts with breakfast. No one's ever gotten anything accomplished without eating first, after all," he thinks to himself. He turns to Atrielle and asks, "So how's the food? Tasty?"

"...Ngh?! Kghhh!"

"Huh?! What's wrong?!"

"Ngh! Cough! Cough!"

Shit, did you choke on your food?! That doesn't sound good! Hey, are you okay?! I know you're supposed to be the silent type, but at least tell me you're okay!"

Chapter 3: Creating Dreams with Exiled Magic

Some time later...

“Nice! We’re finally ready to open!” Dennis shouts as he finishes the final touches; he’s currently setting up the banner over the front which exclaims: “Grand Opening! The Adventurer’s Diner!”

Dennis regrets the name, but neither he nor Atrielle could come up with a better one. In the end, he decided to go with this. It’s simple and unoriginal, but it’ll be fine, or so he’s told himself.

It’s noon: the prime time for customers. There are adventurers with empty stomachs milling around the area. Dennis prepares to rush inside the diner to get things ready. He then spots Atrielle in her adorable pink and white apron and calls out to her, “Atrielle! You gotta be outside attracting some customers. I’ll leave it to you!”

“Understood, my Lord.”

“Seriously, again with that joke? Come on, it’s not funny anymore. Just call me by my name.”

Dennis gets behind the counter and crosses his arms, waiting impatiently for his first customer. He has everything set up: the menu, the beverages, the chairs, the tables, the ingredients, and the cookware.

Plus, he has the poster girl outside to attract customers, although he’s still not sure how to feel about that.

Yep, everything’s looking perfect.

“Well then! First customer, come at me! I’ll feed you so well, you won’t be able to eat anywhere else! That’s a promise! And, most importantly, you will pay! I’m flat broke at this point! Seriously, please come buy some food; I’m desperate!” he yells internally.

His legs quiver with excitement; he’s ready to give it his all. Then, suddenly, his first customer shows up: a knight clad entirely in armor, trying to enter as quietly as possible.

“Welcome!”

“Welcome.”

Upon hearing Dennis and Atrielle’s greeting, the knight freezes in place.

“I can’t see his face, but I’m betting he’s just overwhelmed by our

enthusiasm. Shit! I forgot the manual's 27th lesson!"

The lesson read: "There are some customers who aren't the chatty type! They prefer to be left alone. Be sure to give them some space, and stay as quiet as possible so they don't feel uncomfortable at your establishment."

"All right, Dennis," he pumps himself up inside his head, "You got this. Just shut up, and smile!"

It's worth noting that his smile isn't actually doing him any favors—he's so tensed up that his smile is strained and comes across as incredibly creepy, not to mention off-putting. The knight doesn't seem to mind, though; they take a seat next to the counter by Dennis and start scanning the menu.

"Ah! Atrielle! B-Bring some water for our customer!"

"Understood."

As Atrielle pours the water, Dennis stares fixedly at his first customer.

"So, my dear first customer, what will you order?" he thinks to himself. "I can't see his face, so I can't really guess what types of food he likes. Not like it matters, right? He can order literally anything—I'll make it, no problem! All of my plates are a legendary level, so I can handle anything! So what's it gonna be?! Vritra katsudon?! Soba?! Hit me with your best shot!"

The customer in question is feeling increasingly more uncomfortable under Dennis's heated stare. This is only made worse by Dennis's physique—he's taller than most people, and he's got an impressive set of muscles. Having him looming over his customer with arms crossed, muscles and veins bulging, makes for quite the intimidating presence.

The knight looks at Dennis and then back at the menu. They silently point at an item: a small bowl of rice.

"Okay, so you want a small bowl of rice! ...Wait, what?"

The knight points at another item: a dried plum. Dennis had added it without much thought, because he figured some of his customers would want it as a side dish—keyword being side dish. Dennis had never expected someone would order it as a meal to accompany a meager bowl of rice.

"So just a small bowl of rice and a dried plum? That's it? Nothing else?"

His customer shakes a hand to signal they're finished ordering.

"Are you sure that's enough for you?"

They nod silently, their helmet still obscuring their face. The two of them stare at each other silently for a few seconds.

“Here’s your water.”

Atrielle brings a glass of water on a small tray. The knight bows their head slightly as a sign of gratitude and takes the glass.

“Do you just not have much of an appetite?” Dennis asks, confused.

His customer tilts their head, puzzled by what he said.

“Wait, do you not have enough money?”

The knight assents by hanging their head in shame. It’s as if the armor is merely for show, making outsiders believe its wearer is wealthier than they really let on.

“...Do you happen to like vritra katsudon, by any chance?”

The knight nods again.

“All right! I’ll make one of those then! One bowl of vritra katsudon on the way!”

“Huh? W-Wait a second! I don’t have enough money for that!”

“Shut up! You’re my first customer, and I’m not having you order just a puny bowl of rice with a dried plum! You don’t need to pay me. Just worry about eating the damn food, you son of a bitch! I mean, uh, sir!”

Dennis stops in his tracks, as if thinking about something.

“...You’re a woman.”

The knight recoils, surprised by Dennis’s guess. He stares straight at his customer, and she slowly nods once again.



“Uh-huh. So you got exiled from your guild because you’re a woman?”

“Yeah. Isn’t that just the worst?”

Dennis talks with the knight while he prepares her dish. Her name is Henrietta, and she’s recently been expelled from her guild. The moment she’d removed her helmet, she started complaining about her situation.

“They told me I’m out because, according to them, women are weaker than men. Can you believe it? Isn’t it nuts? Fighting skills don’t depend on gender at all, don’t you agree?!”

“I guess so.”

“And, well, I know my level isn’t the highest, but I’m level 23. That’s not so bad, right? Plus, I’m already an adult, y’know? I’m not a child...”

“Well, one’s level is pretty important.”

Dennis can’t relate, considering he’s already level 99, but her level isn’t bad for someone her age. She is the average for fighters—most knights, soldiers, and other kinds of adventurers are between level 20 and 30. When adventurers reach level 20 or higher, they normally start to get jobs from other people. Although they can’t specialize in anything yet, they have a good understanding of their class’s basic skills at that point.

Henrietta changes the topic of conversation.

“Doesn’t the strongest guild in the world have a woman as their second in command?! She’s called ‘The Crimson Blade Storm!’ You know her, right?! She’s the legendary knight who’s maxed out all her weapon skills!” she says excitedly.

“Yeah, I know her. She’s a handful, all right.”

“A handful?”

“Oh, nothing. Forget it.”

Dennis removes the steaming hot cutlet from the frier, mixes it with chopped onion and a half-cooked egg, and places them over the bed of rice. He then finishes the accompanying soup.

“Sigh... so basically, I’m trying to find a party that’s open to accepting anyone, regardless of their sex. As you can probably tell, I haven’t had much luck yet. Hence why I’m broke.”

“Oh well, that’s a shame. Here, eat up.”

He puts the katsudon and the soup on a tray and sets it in front of her. It’s an inviting meal, and Henrietta gulps: there’s thick fillet strips over pillow-y white rice, a dazzling golden egg, tender sautéed onions, and a garnish of fresh green onions and parsley.

“Um, is it really okay if I eat this? I can’t pay you, after all,” she says.

“Just eat it before it gets cold. You can pay me whenever you have the money,” Dennis quickly answers and urges her to eat with his hands.

She bows a little bit to thank him and picks up a slice of the fried cutlet with her chopsticks.

“Ah?!”

She lifts the bowl and shovels some rice into her mouth to accompany the cutlet.

“Hmmm! Thiph iph pho good! I haven’t eaten anyphing like phiph bepho’!”

“Hahaha! Glad you like it. But don’t talk with your mouth full; it’s disgusting.”



Henrietta, completely overwhelmed by the deliciousness of her meal, thoroughly polishes off her bowl. She hasn’t left even a single grain of rice behind.

“I meant what I said, by the way—I’ve never tasted anything this good before.”

“Good to know. I hope to see you back here more often, then.”

“Oh, r-right... Hopefully, I’ll find a guild that accepts me soon. Then I can get some cash from completing quests and come back more often.”

“I can try asking around for you. It shouldn’t be too hard with customers coming in, after all.”

“Huh?! Y-You’d do that for me?!” she shouts, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

“Just write down your skills, any joining conditions you have, that sort of thing. I’ll try and find you something based on that. I can’t promise you I’ll find anything, but it’s something.”

“Ah! I’m so sorry for all the trouble! I-I’ll be sure to repay you for your generosity one day!”

“Sure, no problem. Anyway, it’d be a pain to go looking for you every time I find someone who’s interested, so how about you come back here and eat ‘til you find a guild? Oh yeah. I forgot to tell you, but you’ve got some rice on your armor.”



Slowly but surely, Dennis’s diner begins to attract more and more attention, as well as a steady stream of customers. The party of adventurers boisterously enjoying their meals is one such group.

“S-Shit, this is good! This fried rice is ace, I’m tellin’ you guys! I’m cryin’ over here!”

“Same thing with my gargoyle napolitan! You guys gotta try this! You’re

seriously missing out if you don't."

"What the hell's up with this diner, man?! The food's out of this world, not to mention the cute little waitress!"

"Hey, Chef! This is super frickin' good!"

"Hahaha! Good to hear. Hey, Atrielle! They called you cute! Lucky you, eh?" Dennis jokes.

Atrielle doesn't reply to Dennis's joke. Rather than saying anything, as he'd hoped, she just stares at him blankly. He still doesn't understand her very well or know what she thinks of him. In that sense, she was very much like a cat—taciturn, independent, and sneaky. Although she approaches him whenever she's in a good mood, that is somewhat rare; usually, she's off and doing her own thing. At first, she was somewhat reserved about her role of helping out at the diner. Now, though, it's how she spends most of her time. She does take breaks to eat; in fact, when she does, she consistently stuffs herself to the brim.

Dennis doesn't know how she feels about him, but he does know that she loves his food. Well, at least he's hoping that's the case.

"Oh right, you guys are an adventurer party, right?" he asks the party.

"We are," one of the guys in a blue cape answers.

"Well, I was wondering if you were looking for any recruits, or if you know anyone who is, really. See, I know a girl—a knight—who's pretty solid, and she's looking for a group to join. She's... interesting, I'll say that much."

"A female knight, huh?" they mutter while looking at each other.

After a moment of silence, the appointed leader steps forward and declares, "We wouldn't mind having her. She's in if she wants."

"Oh?"

Dennis is surprised. That was easier than he'd expected.

"If she's in a hurry, we can accept her as soon as tomorrow," the leader says.

"Hah, it's kinda weird there's a female knight out there in the first place. Not like we've got a problem with that, but... what if she won't do enough damage to keep up with us?" another member chimes in.

"You shouldn't worry about that, guys; I know her—she's a juggernaut. I'm sure she'll be able to keep up, no problem," Dennis replies.

"If you say so. We have a deal, then."

The party finishes up, pays their bill, thanks Dennis, and leaves. As for

Dennis, he's having a hard time understanding why those guys were so willing to readily accept her. She's a stranger to them.

Customers come and go, and after a while, Dennis decides to close the diner as he's waiting on the last diners to finish their food. He asks Atrielle to close the curtains and flip the sign outside to "closed."

Inside, the final customers—a pair of witches with their hair tied up cutely—are cleaning their plates and gossiping.

"What's up with this food?! It's sooo good!"

"Right?! I knew you'd like it!"

"By the way, you need to listen to this."

"What is it?"

"There's apparently a guild that picked up a girl who was going solo the other day. They brought her along during a dungeon raid and assaulted her there!"

"Whaaat?! And they haven't been arrested?"

"Apparently, there just wasn't enough proof. They covered their tracks really well... They took her to a really deep level they knew she couldn't escape from. Then, I guess, they did their dirty work and just left her there. And, even worse, I've heard this isn't even the first time—they've lured other girls and then fled the town they're in."

"That's absolutely horrible. We've got to watch out, then. Don't wanna get picked up by any criminals."



"Whaaat?! You've already found a guild for me?!" Henrietta shouts as she digs into the simple meal Dennis made for her.

"Uh, yeah. They told me that you could tag along starting tomorrow if you want."

"Whoa! Thank you so much! I'll be sure to pay you back as soon as I get my money!"

"Hm, but..." Dennis hems and haws with crossed arms.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just thinking... They accepted you just like that, no questions asked or anything. Maybe you should go with someone else? They're all guys, after all,

and you're the only girl, so..."

"You too, huh?" she says in an exasperated tone while giving Dennis a side glance. "I'll be fine! Don't forget that I'm a front liner, not a support member. I can fend for myself; that's why I became a knight, after all."

"Being alone has its limitations, though," he retorts. Dennis knows a knight who can fend for herself, but it's not Henrietta. It's a certain girl in striking red armor.

"Oh, come on! I mean, that might be true and all, but I can't let the 'what-ifs' in life hold me back. If I did, I'd end up doing nothing at all!"

"Hmm... I mean, it's really up to you. I don't know, though... I've heard about this group recently who recruit girls and assault them in dungeons."

"I told you, I'll be fine! Beggars can't be choosers, right? I'll be sure to earn some honest cash and pay you back, Chief!" she exclaims while finishing her plate.

"She's so stubborn at times," he thinks to himself. He agrees, however—the path of an adventurer is fraught with risks. Her line of thinking isn't at all unusual for her class. Although a bit of prudence is an important quality to possess, these people cannot be paralyzed by uncertainty. It'll get them nowhere in life.

"And come on, what are the chances these guys are the criminals I've heard about?" Dennis tries to reassure himself internally. "She can't possibly be that unlucky, right? ...Right?"



"Um, my name's Henrietta, and I'm an apprentice-level knight. I'll be tagging along with you guys starting today. Nice to meet you!" Henrietta says with a bow of her head.

She's currently in the waiting room of her new guild. A guy who appears to be the leader approaches her and shakes her hand with a smile.

"Nice to meet you, Henrietta. I'm the guild's leader, a knight that specializes in light armour and mobility. The name's Steele."

"It's a pleasure!"

"Well, I say I'm the leader, but that's not exactly the case—no one here is. Everyone here can call the shots, and we treat each other as equals. If you can do the same, then we're all good."

"O-Okay! So, um, are we doing any quests today?"

“Yep. Since it’s your first day, we’re just gonna do a simple gathering quest. It’s nothing hard: we just need to enter a small dungeon, pick up what we need, and get out of there.”

“Got it! What are we looking for then?”

“Nothing big. Let’s just go to the dungeon; we can hash out the details on the way. Like I said, it’s nothing big. Mostly, we just wanna check how you fare in raids, your skills, and all that.”

“Oh, uh, okay!”

She definitely wants to know the details of the mission beforehand, so she’s a little taken aback. But as it’s her first time with them, she wants to leave the best impression she can. Rather than making things awkward, she chooses to obey. Like he said, their quest would probably be an easy trial. She figures that once she proves her worth, they’d give her some more serious quests later.



The party enters the dungeon in question and is immediately exposed to monsters. Fortunately, the spawns are quite weak, and Henrietta is able to slice through them with ease.

“Yaaaaah!” she screams as she closes in on an imp and slashes him in half.

She sheathes her sword, and the other party members, who are behind her, begin applauding.

“Damn, a one-hit kill! Amazing! That’s a juggernaut for you!”

“W-Well, uh, it’s not really a big deal...”

“Nah, I’m serious. We actually don’t deal much damage with our specializations, so it’ll definitely be nice to have someone like you around.”

“R-Really? Hehe,” she stutters. Although she’s a bit worried, her mood’s definitely been lifted from the compliment. Up until now, she’s always been treated as a weakling for being a woman. People have tried to keep her away from battle out of concern. Being relied on by others is a new—albeit not unwelcome—experience.

“I know Chief was worried about me joining the group back at the diner, but they seem like pretty nice guys. I hope I end up staying with them. I’m so happy!”

Slowly, but surely, the party delves deeper and deeper into the dungeon. Henrietta leads the party, while Steele and a hunter named Handock keep the mid-flanks secure. Finally, the mage and support remain behind the rest of the group. Most of the monsters so far have been easy, and Henrietta has generally managed to slay them with one swing. If any are unfortunate enough to survive that, the other party members behind her quickly lend their support. But, as the sole front-liner, Henrietta quickly begins to wear down.

Although she's ecstatic she's been trusted enough to lead the front line attacks, it's starting to take a toll on her body. She can still kill monsters, but she notices that her swings are starting to lose strength. Soon, she'll need to retire to the back to rest for a bit.

"I-I'm sorry guys, but I need a break."

She stops in her tracks and turns around to tell the rest of her party.

"Oh, you're tired already?"

"I'm sorry... Um, by the way, how much further do we have to go? I thought we weren't going that far in," she says breathlessly while looking around at her surroundings. They've already ventured quite deep, and the monsters they're starting to encounter are noticeably stronger.

"Keep it up! Just a little more, and we'll reach it. We're pretty close—there's an open area up ahead with the minerals we need to deliver. That's where we'll rest up."

"O-Oh, okay. Got it."

As Steele had explained, they soon arrive at an opening in the dungeon. Despite being deep in a cavern, the area is brightly illuminated by the brilliant blue mineral lining the walls.

"These are called 'remembrance crystals,'" the support mage informs the group.

Henrietta's eyes widen upon entering the cavity; it's her first time ever seeing anything like these crystals before. "Remembrance crystals, huh? I've never seen these before. What do they do?" She asks.

"They're able to store people's memories—among other things—thanks to their magic properties. Pretty weird, right? It's said that the founder of the magical arts himself, King Kikai, was the first to find these. Ever since then, there've been people who specialize their skills in storing all kinds of information in these."

“Hahaha. There he goes again, rambling about smartass stuff,” one of the party members chimes in jokingly.

“Oh, shut up. Why do you even care? Anyway, these are what we came for.”

“I see, okay,” Henrietta replies.

While the others are chatting, Henrietta sits up against a wall and tries to catch her breath. She’d put in a lot of work slaying monsters so far.

“Hey, Mammock—give Henrietta one of your stamina spells,” Steele says.

“Sure thing, boss.”

Mammock, the support, approaches Henrietta and squats beside her. He prepares the spell, and Henrietta looks at him apologetically. “Sorry, but I appreciate it. You’re a lifesaver,” she says.

“No problem. With this, your strength will definitely be fully replenished.”

She’s still panting, trying to regain her strength. She tries to sit as still as possible and lets Mammock take care of her. The spell starts forming a visible aura around him that he pours over her. Something’s not quite right, though...

“Hm?!”

Instinctively, Henrietta quickly tries to reach for her blade, but Steele’s already ahead of her. He kicks her, stomping her right arm against the ground. “Aaaaaaaaaagh!” Henrietta screams in pain.

While Steele is busy distracting her, Mammock finishes the spell. Her body goes completely numb, and she can’t move any longer.

He hadn’t cast a spell to regain her stamina—he’d used “Stun.”

“Y-You bastards...”

“Hah, it’s a good thing you’re fucking stupid,” Steele says with an evil grin. He turns around to the other team members and jeers, “She even believed all those sweet nothings about her strength. How much of an absolute moron can you be?”

“Oh come on, boss—don’t be so mean to her. She may be fucking braindead, but she’s about to give us a good time.”

“Female knights are the best. Mages and sages are usually goddamn psychos and have such shitty bodies.”

Henrietta tries desperately to move her limbs, but to no avail. She doesn’t have an ounce of strength left in her body. “These pieces of...,” she thinks. Other than that, her mind is blank from fear and distress.

“Anyways, let’s have some fun with her. We’ve got like an hour, then we’ll piss off home and leave her here.”

“As long as we take her weapon and make sure to stun her again, she definitely won’t be able to leave.”

Henrietta starts tearing up as she’s flooded by dread.

“It’s just like Dennis warned me. I should’ve trusted my gut and noticed something was off. Is it too late to figure a way out?”

“Th-Thtop... bathtards...” she tries spitting out at them, but her tongue’s gone numb, and she can barely move her head.

“Hahaha! Lesson learned: maybe don’t be such an idiot the next time! Consider this a learning experience for next time!” Steele cackles as he approaches her.

Henrietta gathers the remaining strength she has left, lowers her head to the ground, and tries desperately to crawl away from him.

“I can’t, I can’t get away! I can’t...!” she rambles to herself. She’s so stricken by terror that it overrides her flight or fight response, and she ends up paralyzed on the spot. Against her desire to survive, she lays there motionless, her face partially buried in the muddy earth. She lets out a feeble, cracked scream, “P-Please, someone! Help! Someone, please help me! Please!”

“Hahahaha! Scream all you want; no one’s coming. We’re way too deep into this dungeon for anyone to hear you. Thanks for clearing it out for us, by the way.”

Steele and the other members laugh as they get to their heinous work of stripping Henrietta’s silver armor. Her immobility allows them easy access to the straps that keep it together. They’re quick and efficient about it, easily removing the parts that protect her hips and legs. It’s clear they have experience in this, since many people don’t quite understand how the straps in armor work. She isn’t their first victim.

They leave the rest of the armor intact, but Henrietta’s undergarments are fully exposed. Her normal gear belies her body: although muscular—not a surprise, given her class—she still has noticeably ample feminine curves. Seeing her in her underwear makes her assailants gulp.

“Damn, your armor totally doesn’t do you any justice. You look juicy as fuck, girl,” one of them sneers.

Henrietta doesn’t reply. Instead, she repeats “Fuck, fuck fuck!” over and over

in her head. She thinks about how scary and humiliating this is, and her sense of hope diminishes by the second. Tears pool in her eyes and soak into the ground.

“Please no, don’t...!” she manages to croak out.

“Scream all you want! Nothing’s gonna happen! Hahaha!” Steele cackles. He reaches for her underwear, ready to pull it down.

Screech! Screeech!

The grating sound of steel scraping against steel echoes from somewhere in the cave. Steele quickly shushes his party so they can hear it better. He takes his hands off of his victim and looks at the others.

“Is it another party?” one of the members whispers.

“Let’s hope not, because that’d complicate things. Handock, go and check,” Steele commands.

Unfortunately for them, the one responsible for the sound finally appears. As it enters the room, everyone is left speechless.

What emerges from the cave’s depths is the imposing, muscular figure of a man. His shirt is covered in grime, he wields a menacing butcher’s knife in each hand, and his face is concealed by a paper bag—save for two holes cut out for his eyes. As he approaches the group, he keeps grinding the knives against each other, producing the awful screeching sound they’d heard earlier. All in all, he creates a rather terrifying image; Steele and the others begin to shiver by the intimidating presence in spite of themselves. They start talking among themselves:

“The fuck’s that monster?”

“I’ve never seen anything like that before! Is it even a monster?! Maybe it’s one of those perverted psychos that go around slashing anything that moves with their knife!”



“Yeah right. As if someone like that would end up this deep in a dungeon in the first place! It’s gotta be a monster!”

“F-Find his weakness with your divination skill!”

The mage tries, but his face soon contorts, and he screams, “Shit! My skill doesn’t work on this thing!”

“No frickin’ way! How can it not work?!”

“He’s way stronger than us! That’s why I can’t use it!”

“You’re telling me this thing is too strong for us?! We’re not even that deep in!” Steele yells back. Suddenly, the man-monster teleports in front of him.

“What the—?!”

The figure swings his knives, and Steele quickly brings his blade up to block the incoming blow. This proves to be futile, however, as the large knife easily shatters Steele’s short blade to pieces. The strike doesn’t leave a gash, though; instead, it shoves him against one of the cave walls. Steele screams, foams at the mouth, and then quickly loses consciousness.

“Oh shit! The fuck’s wrong with this thing?! Aaaugh!”

“Someone, help! Why’s there such a high-leveled monster here?! Eeeek!”

“Aaaah! I don’t wanna die! I don’t wanna dieee!”

Frantic screams echo throughout the chamber as the other party members try to run away. But much like their leader, they’re quickly dispatched by the strange figure’s knives. He plows through them easily, rounding them up and smashing them against the walls of the cave; a one-hit KO.

Meanwhile, Henrietta’s slowly losing consciousness. She can’t do much but lay there and watch the scene unfold. Strangely, she doesn’t feel afraid at all, though that’s likely in part due to the spell impairing her thinking. As the world around her slowly dims, she watches the strange figure swing his knives around with the expertise of a highly-skilled chef.



“So yeah, that’s what ended up happening yesterday...” Henrietta finishes. She’s currently seated in front of the counter at the diner and recounting her “adventure” yesterday.

“I see... What happened after that?” Dennis replies.

“Apparently another party found me lying there unconscious, because when

I woke up, I was in a room in some adventurer's guild. I guess they brought me there to rest up. I know I heard a voice calling for me and approaching me, but nothing else. Um, everything's blurry in my head," Henrietta says with some uncertainty and curls up a bit in her seat.

"Well, looks like this experience has opened her eyes, at least. That's the vibe she gives off, anyway. Maybe next time, she'll be a bit more wary about trusting others," he thinks to himself. Then he replies, "I see. Well, it's good that they didn't hurt you too badly in the end."

"For sure! And I love the guy who saved me from those assholes. He even tied them up at the front of the cave while they were still passed out and called the guards on them. It turns out they were part of a group of wanted outlaws!"

"Wow, that's crazy."

"Seriously! Honestly, it all feels like a bad dream, especially considering how it all wrapped up," Henrietta says with a hand above her brow to show her exasperation.

She goes silent for a while, so Dennis continues the conversation as he cleans some dishes.

"Anyway, hopefully you learned a lesson: always be cautious of new people you meet, especially if you're planning on sticking with them."

"I-I will."

"Don't beat yourself up over it. It's happened to me before, too. Just be careful from now on, and you'll be fine. Well, it's also partly my fault—I should've checked up on those guys before I told you about them."

"Don't say that, Chief! You've been feeding me and looking out for me this whole time. Honestly, I should be thanking you instead!"

"Let's just put that aside for now. What are you eating today?" Dennis says, ready to change the subject.

"I... I still don't have a lot of cash."

"I know. Just order something," Dennis quickly replies as he keeps washing the dishes.

"Well, um, in that case..."

"Just order whatever you want. Don't worry about the price."

"Th-Then how about the steak menu?"

"I tell you the price doesn't matter, so you immediately go for the most

expensive dish?! Come on! Do you have any shame?! I know I said you could order whatever you want, but seriously...”

“Aaaah! I’m sorry! I went too far! I’ll order the cheapest thing instead!”

“Oh no you don’t! No take-backs, you little runt! Atrielle, you can rest for today. We’re having dinner with Henrietta!”

Atrielle nods and sits beside Henrietta. Dennis starts preparing the food for them, but two more customers enter. It’s the two witch girls that ate at the diner a couple of days ago.

“Hey there, Chef! We decided to come back today! Hey there, Atrielle! Good evening!”

Atrielle nods silently in response.

“Welcome! I hope you don’t mind getting the water yourselves. Atrielle is having her dinner now.”

“No problem!” they both exclaim. They head to the counter and pour some water into their cups.

“Hey, Chef—we tried to come yesterday, but it was closed! How come?”

“Yeah! Isn’t it a little weird to close when you’ve only opened recently?”

“Huh?” Henrietta interjects, confused.

“Sorry, girls, I had some stuff to take care of yesterday,” Dennis replies as he keeps cooking.

“Your food’s amazing; how could we be mad at you? I want some fried rice, by the way!” one of the girls says.

“Can I have a small mackerel set?!” the other asks.

“Sure thing! Okay, Henrietta, here’s your steak set! Sorry for the wait.”

He delivers Henrietta’s food and writes down the girls’ orders. Just as he finishes that, the bell on the door tinkles again to signal new customers.

“Welcome to The Adventurer’s Diner!” he exclaims with a brilliant smile.

Chapter 4: A Rather Dreamy Exiled Mage

“Mmm! Thiph ramen’ph deliphiough! The soup and chewy noodles go together like magic! How can you even make something taste this good?!” Henrietta exclaims enthusiastically to Dennis. He’s standing behind the counter with an awkward smile.

“I really appreciate that you like my food, but still...”

“Mhm! Wait, what’s wrong, Boss?”

“When are you gonna find yourself another party to quest with?”

“Ugh! Cough!” Henrietta chokes on her noodles. Once she manages to get them down, she goes silent for a bit, her eyes staring blankly ahead of her. Finally, she says, “Uh, you know what they say... Sometimes, life’s a bitch.”

“You haven’t paid a single time for your food! At some point, you have to start feeling guilty, right?!”

“I-I’ve been looking, okay?! It’s not my fault that I need to eat to have enough energy to search!”

“Right, that’s why you’ve been mooching off me for weeks now. You could be considered a regular based on how often you come here, but you’re really just a freeloader.”

“Whaaat?! Well, maybe it’s your fault for letting me eat here in the first place, Chief! Maybe you shouldn’t be so soft on the ladies!” Henrietta shouts with an emphatic slam of her fist. Her metallic arms clang loudly against the counter. Up until somewhat recently, she’d been wearing a suit of armor designed for a man. Now, however, she wears a woman’s suit of armor, complete with a modified chestplate that provides room for her breasts.

She’s also been thinking about making some other changes ever since that incident. She’s even considered dropping the adventurer role and looking for other jobs instead. There were several factors involved: adventuring came with major risks, and she’d probably need to hide her gender to have a sliver of a chance of getting into a guild. Earlier, Dennis had advised her to “do whatever she felt like doing” and to “not worry about other people’s rules.”

“Why am I even trying to ask you about it? Of course you’d just give me some cryptic mumbo-jumbo like that,” she’d said.

“Maybe instead of trying to hide who you are, you should just wear whatever

the hell you want and get over it. I know someone who wears nothing but a bikini for armor, and she doesn't really give a damn about what anyone thinks of her."

In the end, Henrietta's decided to continue doing what she does best. She has made some changes, though—she's stopped hiding the fact that she's a woman, starting with her armor. It proved to be a good change: the new gear's easier to get into, and it's far less constraining. She feels like she can move her arms and legs more freely now.

Most of all, she's been thinking about her path in life. The majority of people tend to think that once you've failed at something once, you should either give up, or do things in a certain mandated way to achieve your goals. Ultimately, overthinking these things kills any ambition. Excessive self-criticism and uncertainty lead people astray.

What she desires the most is to be like her "Chief," Dennis—someone who lives as he pleases without anyone telling him what to do.

"Why don't you go look for a job, you bum? Maybe then you'll be able to pay me for all the meals I've been feeding you so far!" Dennis shouts.

"Wait a sec, you're making me pay for everything I've ever eaten?!"

"Didn't you tell me you would on the first day we met?!"

It's pretty late in the evening, and the diner's about to close. As Dennis and Henrietta bicker with each other, a new customer enters.

"Huh? Oh, welcome!"

Dennis looks over at the customer. Normally he gives them a cursory glance, but this time, he's a bit confused. The customer isn't wearing anything particularly flashy or anything, but he can't figure out if they're a boy or a girl. He—Dennis decides to stick with "he" for now—looks like a delicate porcelain doll. He has a fair complexion, glittering eyes, a shiny blue bob, and a youthful, androgynous face.

The new customer heads toward the counter, sits on one of the chairs, and starts skimming through the menu.

"He'll be the last customer of the day," Dennis decides to himself.

He tells Atrielle to start cleaning up so they can close. Suddenly, there's an audible, melancholy sigh from the boy as he peruses the menu. Henrietta eats her noodles in silence. The boy sighs at the menu again, this time in a louder and more dejected way.

“What’s up with him? Oh well, guess I’ll just wait for him to order,” Dennis thinks.

Several minutes pass.

“Okay, how long is he going to take?” Dennis thinks, irritated. “He hasn’t decided yet? Oh well, it is his first time here, so he’s probably feeling lost by all the choices. Maybe I should give him a helping hand. I’ll try not to be too pushy.” He turns to the boy and addresses him, “Um, so what’s it gonna be, sir?”

“Gimme a sec...,” the boy replies in a languid tone. Even his voice is androgynous, perplexing Dennis further. “There’s so much on here. Just trying to figure out what’s tasty.”

“Everything we make here’s quite tasty.”

“That’s what bothers me the most,” he answers with another despondent sigh.

Silence ensues.

“If you’re not sure about what you’d like, how about the katsudon? I’ve never heard any complaints about that,” Dennis suggests.

“Don’t feel like eating katsudon today.”

“They have some good pasta dishes, too!. Why don’t you try one of the fried pork and pasta combos? They’re great!” Henrietta interjects, trying to help.

“Pasta? Carbs? I can already feel the pounds piling on,” the boy replies.

“How about ramen, then?” Dennis asks.

“Ramen? Meh...”

“Then what the fuck do you even want, punk?!?” Dennis cries and lunges over the counter, trying to grab the finicky customer by his collar. Henrietta quickly jumps in and stops him, saying, “Calm down, Boss! He’s just a kid; you know how they are! Take it easy!”



Atrielle comes out from behind the counter, where she was cleaning, and walks over to the boy. She tugs on one of his sleeves and says, “When in doubt, fried rice is the way out.”

“...Okay. I guess I’ll have one of those, then,” he replies after his initial shock at Atrielle’s behavior wears off.



“So, kid, what’s up with you? Bad day or something?” Dennis asks while he cooks the fried rice. He’s hoping to engage the boy in some sort of chatter; he’s sick of the awkward silence.

“Sigh... No, it’s nothing, really,” he replies.

“Nothing, huh? Guess it’s fine, then,” Dennis says.

“Okay, I guess there’s something...”

“There we go,” Dennis thinks to himself.

“I’m just bummed out about... how everyone around me is so absolutely inferior in terms of level.”

“Damn, that’s gotta be rough.”

“Would you like to know why?”

Dennis doesn’t really care since he’s already level 99, but he can clearly tell that the boy is under level 50. Undeterred by his silence, the boy continues, “Everyone’s just a pawn in this twisted game. They just accept their trifling errands and earn their cash. There’s nothing else, no critical thinking beyond that point. I can’t think of even a single guild that does anything outside of petty grunt work.”

“Sounds like Henrietta’s your ideal companion, then. Earning a living is definitely not in her vocabulary.”

“You sure know when to pour salt on a wound, Chief.”

The boy interrupts by slamming his hands on the counter. “I abhor the very thought of it! It makes me feel bilious! I cannot forgive the clowns who call themselves ‘adventurers,’ yet possess not a splinter of ambition or aspiration outside of monetary gain! That’s right! Aren’t we adventurers, after all?! We’re supposed to bravely go where no man’s gone before, not loaf around with safe menial tasks! That’s what real adventuring feels like! Wouldn’t you agree?!”

“I, uh... I guess? I’d be lying if I said you seem like the adventurous type, though.”

“...Hehehe. Yeah, I basically said the same thing to my old teammates, and I was kicked out after that. Not even my grandiose posing helped.”

“Why’s this diner attracted so many outcasts? Is there some kind of sign that lures you guys in or something?”

“Beats me, Chief,” Henrietta replies with a shrug.

“Hah! Like I care about the plebs in that pathetic den they call a ‘guild’ anyways! Sooner or later, I’ll be way above them, and I’ll become the strongest mage in the world! I’ll be on par with the Silver WIngs Battalion! I’ll join their ranks and show them all!”

“I wonder how he’d react if I said I used to be a member,” Dennis thinks. “Would it rile him up even more? It’s a good thing I can give him some advice while he’s still young.” He turns to the boy and says, “Maybe you shouldn’t think of others that way. Adventurers need to help each other out. Camaraderie is what keeps a guild together, after all.”

“Hmph! I wouldn’t have any issues humbling myself if there were a party that could accept me, considering my level.”

“The more he speaks, the more I think he’s gotta be level 15 at most. I’ll bite my tongue for now, but man, is he cocky,” Dennis thinks.

The boy finishes his fried rice and leaves five coins on the table: three silver and two copper.

“Thanks for the food. Hopefully this is the exact amount.”

“Yep, that’s it.”

He stands up and prepares to head out. Right when he’s at the door, he turns around and says, “The name’s Bibia, by the way. Bibia Strange.”

“Oh, okay. I hope to see you again.”

“I’ll definitely order the shrimp fried rice next time, that’s for sure,” he replies before leaving.

Dennis is happy that his new customer seems to have liked his food.



As promised, Bibia returns a few days later. He sits at the same spot as when he first ate there, folds his hands together assertively, and orders

without even looking at the menu.

“One shrimp fried rice,” he commands.

“Sure thing. By the way, what happened with your guild stuff? Did you end up finding another one?” Dennis asks as he starts cooking the order.

“Hmph! Everyone wants a mage like me in their guild! I’m wanted everywhere!”

“Uh... Don’t you mean you’re in demand or something?”

“Hehehe. I even managed to join one of the strongest guilds in the area. It’s called the ‘Night Fog Battalion.’”

“Damn, that’s nice. I know I’m going to sound really rude here, but are you sure you match their average level? You’re pretty young, so your level can’t be that high, right?” Dennis says.

“Hah! Levels are just superficial numbers in the end. What matters are the spells I’ve learned and my skill in battle! Many of my spells are typically mastered only by mages of the highest levels.”

“So young, but so proactive. Good for you!”

“Clearly they chose me because they recognized my huge potential. I’ll climb up their ranks for sure. They’re vastly different from those low-level circuses I was in before, so I’ll stay with them for the long haul.”

“Oh, okay. As long as you keep at it, I’m sure you’ll be able to fulfill your dreams.”

Dennis plates the rice beautifully and pours a generous amount of broth over it. He places the plate in front of Bibia, who gives it a smile. He grabs a spoon, scoops up some of the rice and shrimp, and places it in his mouth. His smile widens.

“He’s a little bit self-conceited, but he’s a cute kid deep down,” Dennis thinks while he watches Bibia eat. “I’m probably being too hard on him. He’s got ambition, which is always good. I’m sure that if he’s serious enough about being in the party and works hard, he’ll end up becoming a pretty good adventurer.”

“So when do you start your first guild mission?” he asks Bibia.

“Amph... Oh, tomorrow.”

“Well, do your best. What do you have to do, exactly?”

“We’re supposed to pick some rare minerals on the fifth floor of a cave.”

“The fifth floor?” Dennis repeats. He thinks to himself, “Fifth floor, huh?

Okay, he's definitely level 15, tops. I'll use my divination skill on him... aaand he's level 17. Not bad considering his age, but the fifth floor of dungeons is usually reserved for adventurers that're around level 35. It's way too early for him to go down there. Hell, I wouldn't even recommend him tagging along just to watch. He told me he knows some high-level spells, but I bet he's just grabbed an advanced spell book and is still trying to figure them out. Either that, or he actually knows the spells, but can't perform them because his level's too low."

Levels are measured by quality and quantity: both by the amount of skills one knows, and how well they can perform them. In order to level up, adventurers must be able to learn new skills and perfect the ones they already know. It takes a lot of time and effort. Therefore, it doesn't really matter if Bibia knows high-leveled skills—he also needs to be able to cast them well. He also shouldn't shirk the important lower-level skills simply because they're not as impressive.

"You sure you'll be able to survive?" Dennis asks the young mage.

"Damn, Chief—how do you know he'll have a hard time? Maybe he'll be okay," Henrietta interjects.

"I just know."

"I'll be fine. I'll be supported by their most elite members. Not that I'd expect anything less," Bibia answers.

Dennis still isn't convinced, though, "They're gonna support you, huh? I don't know about that..."

"Come on, Chief—you're not even an adventurer! There're some things he's bound to know better than you, right?" Henrietta chimes in.

Her "Chief" reminisces about how Henrietta couldn't even reach the 18th floor without almost dying, but decides to keep quiet. Instead, he repeats, "Are you sure you'll be alright?"

"I'll be fine. I'm with a high-leveled party, okay? Relax," Bibia replies with a dreamy face. "Considering I'm with the Night Fog Battalion, that means I'm one step closer to joining the ranks of the Silver Wings Battalion."

"It's good to see that you're really ambitious, but still..."

"Come on, you have to know about Viggo, 'The Blue Blade That Destroys All.' What about Katey, 'The Crimson Blade Storm?' You know, the leader and vice-president of the Silver Wings? They say no one in the kingdom can

surpass those two!"

Dennis is irked by a kid trying to lecture him on the two people he's all too familiar with, but he decides to bite his tongue again.

"Man, I wonder if I'll also receive a cool title once I enter the guild. I can already see it in my mind: 'The Jet Black Sorcerer.' Haha, jeez, that'd be so embarrassing."

"Meanwhile, look at me," Dennis wryly thinks. "Mr. 'Legendary Fried Rice' himself."

Bibia clears his plate in between short bursts of babbling about his aspirations and dreams.

"...Oh, already done? It tasted pretty good. Thanks."

He places some coins on the table and stands up. "Well then, next time, I'll be sure to order the crab fried rice. It'd be nice if you could tell me more about your adventures, too."

Bibia leaves the diner, and Dennis silently watches his retreating figure, debating all the while about whether or not he should stop the mage from throwing himself into a reckless suicide mission.



The next day, Dennis starts his afternoon as usual: he preps the diner and opens it to customers. However, he can't shake the feeling that something's not quite right; he's filled with a certain restlessness, and he can't quite pinpoint the source. Is it because he knows Bibia could be venturing into the dungeon—and into certain demise—at this very moment? He considers whether he should've been firmer about stopping him when he had the chance to do so. Then again, as a former adventurer himself, he knows full well that jobs mean taking risks and even putting your life at stake. If anything happens to Bibia, it's his own responsibility; maybe Dennis ought to respect the young mage's wishes.

Even so...

As Dennis ponders the situation, he receives his first clients of the day. By the looks of it, they're a pair of novice adventurers in their mid-twenties.

"Welcome."

"Hey there," one of them replies. He turns to his companion and says, "Hey,

hear me out—I just discovered this place recently, and everything here's really good.”

“Really, man? And you expect me to just believe you? You've been telling me over and over again that this place is awesome, but will it really live up to the hype?”

“Hey, can you cut me some slack for once? I'm telling you, this place is amazing. Seriously, order something—anything—and it'll be good. I dare you.”

Both of them sit at the counter and continue their banter while they look through the menu. Dennis decides to eavesdrop on their conversation as he waits for them to order.

“Boss, not gonna lie, you really scared me this time with that whole stunt you pulled,” one of them says to the other.

“That's how I do things. It's a bit late for you to complain about it now.”

“Why'd you tell that kid that if he wanted to enroll with us, he'd have to prove himself by getting out of that dungeon alive?”

“If he manages to pull it off, I don't mind taking him in. It's like a rite of passage, you feel me?”

“You know he's probably gonna die, right?”

“Yeah. He didn't really seem like the lucky type to me, to be honest. Adventuring relies pretty heavily on luck, and I don't think he's got much of it.”

“Ahaha! If that cocky brat turns out to have even a shred of it, I'll be surprised! He's too ballsy for his own good. That's gonna be what'll kill him, not the lack of luck!”

“It's his fault for constantly pestering me for a chance to join the guild. Maybe instead of leaving him to his death, I should've just pimped him out instead. That way, he could've at least put his pretty face to use.”

“Pffft! Hahaha! You asshole! He'd probably be a huge hit with everyone considering how pretty he is! He should try selling his body for a living instead of trying to be an adventurer. I bet he'd be way more successful!”

Both laugh and keep talking. Finally, one of them looks up at Dennis and orders.

“Hey, Chef—I'll have the grilled meat dish, if you don't mind.”

“I'll have the udon with tempura, please.”

Dennis listens to their order, but he doesn't move. Instead, he tells Atrielle to flip the diner sign to "Closed."

"Sorry, guys, but I'm closing for today. You gotta go."

"Huh? What's wrong with you? We came all this way, and this is how you greet us? By slamming the door in our faces?"

They stand and approach Dennis. "Do you even know what guild we belong to, huh? We're from the Night Fog Battalion! If you don't wanna get hurt, I suggest you start cooking. You catch my drift?"

"You know what my level is?! 34! You should fear me!" the other shouts menacingly.

In response, Dennis cracks his knuckles and gives them an icy glare. "You sure talk a lot of shit for such a low level. How about reaching level 60 before you run your mouth?"

In the blink of an eye, both of the customers burst out tumbling out of the shop. Their bodies slam against the ground as Dennis wipes his hands at the entrance.

"Sorry, Atrielle, but close the place for today. There are some leftovers somewhere; you can have those if you want."

"Lord Dennis."

"Hm?"

Atrielle looks straight into Dennis's eyes. "Be careful," she says.

"Sure. I could go to the 20th floor of any dungeon alone if I wanted to, so don't worry."



"Huh? Wait, what?! Aaah!"

The scream erupts from Bibia, who's on the verge of tears and frantically running from one point in the dungeon to another. In his hand he's holding a torch meant to illuminate his path. He was carried here by who he thought were his new guild members. Suddenly, he was left to fend for himself. Their parting words were that it was a "test" to prove himself worthy of being in their ranks.

"D-Don't you dare come any closer! Stay away! Eeeeeek! Shit!" he screams out at a group of goblins that have been in hot pursuit. His thoughts are

frantic, consisting mostly of “I’mgonnadieI’mgonnadieI’mgonnadie!” He’s trying to head to the fourth floor, but he’s not sure if even that would be safe enough for him. The third floor would be a better bet.

As he’s considering all this and trying to escape, he trips over something and falls to the ground.

“Agh! Puagh!”

He swings his torch around from side to side, trying to figure out what tripped him up. It’s not a rock like he was expecting—there’s some sort of string coiled around his right leg.

“The hell?! What is this shit?! Agh!”

It looks to be a trap that’s been attached to one of the walls. While the string seems fairly fragile, it’s anything but—it’s powered by some sort of magic as far as he can tell. How could he have fallen for such an old trick?!

Bibia tries to recall a dispelling spell for the trap and waves his staff furiously with trembling hands.

“Umm... Lemme think. A dispel... err, ugh!”

Terror has completely overtaken him; any spells he might’ve known have completely evaporated from his mind. All those books he’d pored over are meaningless right now. Bibia can hear the goblins’ menacing steps getting closer by the second. His heart’s racing, and he feels on the verge of passing out. His mind starts racing with every awful scenario possible: “They’re going to take those rusty knives and tear me limb from limb while I’m still alive! They’ll chop me up into pieces and make me their next meal!”

“No! Please stop! Don’t come any closer! Shit! I don’t want to die! No!” Bibia screams while struggling pitifully against the trap, much like a helpless bug caught in a spider’s web.

“...Hey, you! Yeah, you!”

Suddenly, Bibia hears a voice calling out from the darkness. He tries to focus on the source of the voice and manages to make out a small tunnel in the rocky wall. He realizes, with some relief, that there’s someone else in the cave with him, as well as a place he can hide.

“Wh-Who is it?! Who are you?!” he asks.

“Just calm down, and listen to me! You take off the trap by...”

The voice seemingly belongs to a girl. She manages to tell Bibia how to dismantle the trap. It’s a rather outdated method, but Bibia understands it

well enough. With trembling hands, he manages to dismantle the trap and escape.

“Man, good thing she was here! She saved my ass!” Bibia thinks to himself as he slips inside his pitch-black path to salvation.

He’d left the torch on the ground where he’d been snared, but the light isn’t strong enough to betray his new hiding spot. The goblins pass by the torch and end up forging blindly ahead. Bibia sighs in relief at their retreating footsteps and starts talking to his mysterious savior.

“Th-Thank you! You saved me!”

“No problem,” she replies.

“Thank you for letting me hide here! If it weren’t for you, I’d have surely—”

“It’s still too early for you to be relieved about the situation. After all, we need to figure out how to escape.”

“Wait, so you’re just as lost as I am?”

“It’s embarrassing to admit, but I’m afraid so,” the girl says with a slight smile.

Her smile and the lower part of her face is about all that Bibia can make out in the darkness. That, and the fact that she’s wearing some sort of mage’s robe. Other than the lack of lighting, the little cave he’s found himself in is rather tight, too. The two of them are cramped inside the crevice without much room to move; the only thing they can really do is crawl back out.

“What’s your name?” he asks her.

“I’m Cynthia.”

“I’m Bibia. Anyways, what should we do now?”

“So I assume you didn’t come here to save me, then?”

Bibia shakes his head.

“I see. Guess you’re just a loner.”

“It’s not that, but... Oh well, whatever,” Bibia says with a forced smile. He’s overcome by a sudden burst of sadness. “I guess I got too ahead of myself. I’m always looking for trouble and, well, I’m a disaster; let’s just leave it at that.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Cynthia replies.

“How can you tell? You don’t know anything about me.”

“You don’t know anything about me either,” Cynthia retorts.

“Yeah, but I asked first.”

They don’t speak for a while after that exchange. Finally, Cynthia breaks the

silence. “It’ll be fine. I’m sure we’ll get out of this,” she says, trying to inject a little optimism into the dire situation. Bibia appreciates the encouraging gesture; being close to her reaffirms his desire to escape and eases the tension in the small space a tad. Although they’re in confined quarters, he’s trying his utmost to give her some space. He notices that she’s being deathly silent—she’s holding her breath and limiting her speaking, so he decides to follow suit.

They can’t stay like this forever, though. Eventually, it’s Bibia’s turn to speak up. “Hey, I have a plan,” he whispers to her.

“What is it?”

“I’ll distract the goblins so you can escape to the fourth floor.”

“No way I’m letting you do that. You have to get out of here alive, too. What’s the point of it all otherwise?”

“I would’ve died if you weren’t there for me, anyways.”

For once in his life, Bibia musters up the courage that he’d lacked before. Up until this moment, he’d looked down on others—“plebeians,” those with smaller ambitions than him. He was convinced that he was made for greater things, that he could become a legend. He now knows he’d had the wrong idea of who he was and the extent of his capabilities.

“Look at where my stupidity and cockiness brought me,” he thought bitterly to himself. “I’m still nothing but a noob. I thought I was someone special, someone who could achieve greatness, but...”

He feels encouraged by the girl’s words, a stranger who’d just saved him from death. Now, he wants to repay the favor by helping her out.

“Just listen to me,” he says. “I’ll come out first, and you follow right after. I’ll act as bait so you have a chance to run away. It’s simple as that.”

“I said no. Let’s just wait for someone to save us.”

“Come on! At the very least, I want you to make it out alive. It’s the first time I’ve felt like this for someone else!” Bibia exclaims. He starts crawling out of the hole and reaches for his torch.

“Wait, no! Don’t go! Don’t leave me alone!” the girl cries out.

“I am Bibia! Bibia Strange! You better remember me! Be sure to leave this place alive, you hear me?!” he calls back to the girl. He faces the expansive cavern and cries out, “Approach me if you dare, you goblins! Bibia Strange will face you in battle!”

The rumble of several footsteps starts to build from one end of the passage. He readies himself to fight, hand on his staff. Contrary to all his bragging earlier, he doesn't know many spells that are effective in battle. There is only one that he can reliably use, and it's not very strong—he can summon a protective barrier, but it's rather fragile. Despite this, he stands resolute.

"I don't care about my life either way! As long as Cynthia can live and escape this place, I'll be fine with dying! That's how an adventurer should be! That's how a man should be!" he assures himself mentally. "H-Here they come! I'll try to hold them off as long as I can! Even if it's just a second longer, I must continue fighting 'til the bitter end!"

"W-Woooh!" Bibia shouts out with a swing of his staff. At the same time, however, another voice calls out.

"Transmutation! Steel!"

The passage begins to shift and warp before Bibia's eyes. A bizarre-looking wall forms between him and the goblins. Upon closer inspection, he realizes it's not really a proper wall at all. Rather, it's a protective barrier made by a saucepan. Bibia whirls around and sees a familiar face.

"Wait, you're the guy from the diner?!"

"Yep! I'm here with your unforgettable special delivery, you idiot!" Dennis cries as he throws a punch at Bibia.

"H-Hey! That hurt!"

"I was fucking worried about you! Anyway, I blocked the path. Let's just get out of here."

It's as Dennis says—through alchemy, he was able to transmute a giant saucepan out of the walls of the cave and block the goblins' advance. The goblins are furiously clanking away on the other side of the pan, creating quite a racket as they try to break through the barrier. It's a fruitless effort; Dennis's spell uses strong steel that regular mobs aren't able to break.

Dennis grabs Bibia's hand and tries to drag him out, but Bibia starts shouting, "Please wait! Someone else is here with me!"

"There's someone else?" Dennis asks.

"Y-Yes! There's a girl here. She saved me, and... Maybe she's already escaped! We have to look for her!"

"What are you even talking about? I didn't see anyone else before I found you."

“Let’s look inside that small crevice in the wall, then! Hey, Cynthia! We’re here to save you!”

As instructed, Dennis leans over to look inside the crevice. He lights his fingers on fire to see what’s inside, but remains silent.

“A-Are you there, Cynthia?! We’re saved! Let’s go home together!”

“Um, Bibia, I think that you might’ve gotten a bit... confused.”

“What?!”

Bibia comes up beside Dennis and peers into the crevice. Inside, there’s “Cynthia”—a skeleton lying face up in an old mage’s robe.



“Let me see... Cynthia, Cynthia, Cynthia... Cynthia Dread. Yes, this is her. She was sixteen when she went missing on the fifth floor of a dungeon. Looks like she was separated from her guildmates while they were down there. We filed her case as ‘missing,’ but we all knew that she was probably dead. This was thirteen years ago, mind you. I assume you two are her relatives?” the receptionist at the adventurer’s guild asks.



After visiting the adventurer’s guild, Dennis and Bibia head straight to the town’s cemetery. Dennis digs up a hole with a nearby shovel and lays the bones inside. Bibia simply watches him work while sobbing.

“Sniff. Sh-She really did save me. She talked to me, a-and she encouraged me to be brave, and... Sob.”

Dennis finishes his grim task and turns to Bibia.

“I’ve heard that the souls of those who’ve departed in dungeons have occasionally rescued adventurers.”

“I... I swear that she was there. W-We even talked! Sniff.”

“It could’ve been some sort of magic. Maybe that’s what saved you and made you think it was her.”

“S-So you believe me?” Bibia asks shakily.

“I do,” Dennis replies. He packs down the topsoil with the shovel for good measure, then uses two branches to make a small wooden cross to fasten to

the grave.

“Th-Thank you. I’ll come here again. I swear I’ll visit this grave for the rest of my life... Sob,” Bibia mutters as he wipes his tears. “I-I will become the greatest mage the world has ever seen. I will become the strongest so I can save people just like you saved me. I promise you...”



Dennis and Bibia start making their way back to the diner together. It’s already pretty late; the amber and crimson glow of afternoon is beginning to fade into the darkness of dusk.

“Man, I’m hungry,” Dennis suddenly utters.

Bibia, who’s been walking silently next to him with his head hung low, doesn’t answer.

“I bet you’re hungry too. Come to the diner, and I’ll make you some fried rice.”

“...Sure.”

“Okay, nice. Want some fried rice with crab, then?”

“...Yes.”

“Don’t be so down, man! Come on! I bet Cynthia wouldn’t like to see you like this!”

“Ahhh! Okay, okay! I get it! Just let me be sad for a while!”

Dennis smiles and taps the younger boy’s back to get his attention. Bibia turns around to see Cynthia’s grave, freshly erected against the older, more-worn out tombstones. He thinks to himself, “The concept of magic itself was born from inexplicable miracles. Cynthia... While I can’t explain what happened back in that cave, I know that you had to have been a mage because of it. Of that, I am sure.”

Chapter 5: Exiled from the Dark Guild!

The tallest building in town is the clock tower. Looking at it, it's easy to imagine falling to a swift death—one wrong step, and the world around you quickly flips upside down. Currently, it's occupied by a certain little wise sage with brown hair. She's standing on top of the tower, looking morosely down at the town spanning below her.

"Why did things have to end up this way...?" she whispers to herself.



Her name is Bethel. She hails from a very small village where she had been praised as a prodigy.

"Damn, Bethel, you're smart, alright! You're gonna be a great mage, sho' 'nuf!" This was the sort of thing she'd heard constantly. Everyone in the village managed to pool enough money to get her into a magic school in the city. She was still very young when this happened, so she had left her village in tears.

"I'm sorry, y'all! I'll become a great mage and come back, y'hear?!"

From that day on until her graduation, she'd devoted herself wholly to her magical studies. She'd pored through books day and night. She even managed to acquire the sage role, skip a year, and graduate before anyone else, all thanks to her impressive grades. Even her teachers touted her as having a bright future ahead of her, that she was a genius in her field. She'd learned all kinds of spells like it was nothing and reached level 30 rather easily—an impressive feat for someone her age. She had so much talent that she even had the potential to surpass level 60, which is the cap for normal people. Only people with really special qualities could ascend beyond the level 60 threshold.

Once she'd graduated, the school offered her a teaching position. She declined, though, since her main objective was to join a guild and make money as quickly as possible. She wanted to give back to her village, who had been so kind as to fund her tuition. It was all she could think of—repaying her village. The villagers assured her that it wasn't necessary, but she still felt

obligated to do so. In the end, she'd left the city to join one of the strongest parties in the surrounding area: the Night Fog Battalion. From there, she started sending her village monthly letters with the money she'd earned through her guild work.

Year X, Month Y, Day Z

To everyone in the village,

Hey, guys! It's me, Bethel! It's been a while since I've entered the guild, but I'm feeling great as ever! Everyone's been super nice to me around here!

I'm going to be here for a while 'cuz I'm loaded with work. It'll be a while 'til I get to come home, but there's no need for you guys to worry one bit!

I've sent some money along with the letter, so use it as you please. Don't use it on alcohol, though! Lol.

Anyways! Take care, guys!

-Bethel



"How many times do I have to repeat myself before you understand?!"

"M-M'apologies... I-I mean, I'm sorry."

"An apology won't cut it. Is that all you can say, anyway? Just 'Sorry?'"

"I'm sorry... I mean, no..."

Bethel is at the Night Fog's HQ getting a hearing.

"Sigh... Whatever. Just be sure to have these requests filed by tomorrow. Got it?"

"Understood," she says while accepting a formidable stack of documents from the woman scolding her.

She checks her wristwatch: it's 5:00 p.m. After some pondering over how much time she'll have to allocate to the massive workload, she reminds herself that actually starting on said workload is much more important than worrying about the time it'll take.

"Huh? Why do you always look at your watch whenever we get angry at you?"

"Oh, well, I... I'm sorry. I apologize."

"Is what I'm telling you that boring? Am I just nagging on and on? I bet you wish I'd just shut up and piss off already, don't you?"

“No, that’s not it at all. I...”

The scolding then lasts another hour or so. Now, at 6:00 p.m., Bethel sits alone at her table with the huge stack of documents. She lights her candle and starts looking them over.

“Sigh... you’ve gotta be kidding me.”

The documents had been filled out incorrectly. Normally, her task is to report quest achievements to the guild. Parties fulfill missions, fill her in on the details, and she records what they did. The guild then knows how much to pay the party for their work based on how much or how little they’d achieved. This time, however, there had been a communication error—the team hadn’t reported their accomplishments properly, and she’d written a lower-than-average number as a result. In the end, the party had gotten paid less than usual. And this was just the tip of the iceberg; she had several other small jobs to finish, as well.

After finishing a little over half of the paperwork, Bethel checks the time again; it’s now 8:00 p.m. She has a quest tomorrow that requires her waking up bright and early at 3:00 a.m. The sooner she finishes her assignment, the more sleep she’ll get. She’s also incredibly hungry, though, as she’s skipped both lunch and dinner. As she fights off a wave of dizziness, she tries to think of a place that could be open this late.

“Yeah, that diner might be, actually.”



Bethel quickly makes her way through the darkened night streets. When she reaches the diner, she arrives just in time to see a young, silver-haired girl flipping the door’s sign to “Closed.”

“Oh, they’ve already closed...” she thinks to herself as she fights the urge to cry. “Why do I have to be so unlucky? If I’d arrived five minutes earlier, I would’ve been able to make it, and I could’ve been eating something right now. Of course I came right as they’re closing, to really rub salt in the wound. It would’ve been better if they’d been closed for a while. It’s always like this. I wasn’t accepted into the first guild I chose because my level wasn’t high enough, and this guild always forces all their odd jobs onto me. My seniors are all assholes. They push all the blame on me whenever things go wrong,

but take all the credit whenever things go right. If my supervisor had actually looked at the documents before she gave them to me, she would've realized it wasn't my fault they were badly written."

She mentally prepares to head back to the guild, but she soon snaps back to reality when she notices the silver-haired girl from before standing right in front of her, staring directly into her eyes. Bethel flinches, and the girl speaks to her.

"Are you a customer?"



"Welcome...! Hey, wait a second, Atrielle! Didn't I tell you to close for today?"

"I want her to be our last customer of the day. Please."

Bethel enters the diner and notices several people still finishing up their meals. Led by Atrielle, she takes an empty seat by the counter. She looks over and is surprised to see a beautiful blonde girl sitting beside her.

"Wow, it's not every day you see Atrielle asking for favors," the blonde girl says in between large mouthfuls of fried rice.

"She looked very sad," Atrielle says to the man who apparently runs the place.

The blonde girl smiles and exclaims, "You're so nice, Atrielle!"

"Oh well. You're here now, so you might as well order something," the man says.

Bethel gives him a once over. The restaurant owner is young, but rather formidable looking. He's wearing an apron around his waist and a plain white shirt with his sleeves rolled up, showcasing his muscular arms. His bulky frame is nothing to scoff at—it's clearly the result of years of training. Maybe he had been a knight before working here? Or was he just another adventurer? He could've been a vanguard fighter; they tend to be quite muscular.

"Oh, uh, sorry about this. I'll have the daily special."

"Got it."

He starts preparing the food. As Bethel waits for her meal, she observes her surroundings. The diner seems to be a happy place, and she's pleased with

what she sees. She thinks to herself, “I like this place. I feel good here, and everyone else looks to be getting along well. At this rate, I might end up becoming a regular. I’m always too busy to do anything, though.”

She usually spends her rare days off sleeping. Because of this, she doesn’t have many friends or many places to frequent. This diner had caught her eye a while ago, though, and she’d been wanting to visit it for a while.

“I’m glad I came,” she thinks happily.



“So good! Super good!” Bethel exclaims without realizing it. She quickly notices and pipes down, but thinks to herself, “This food’s crazy! I’ve never had fried chicken like this before. The sauce on it is out-of-this-world good! I’ve never eaten anything this tasty in my life!”

“Everything here’s good, to be honest,” a young male mage replies to her initial shout.

“My personal recommendations are the vitra katsudon, the ramen, the mackerel dish, and...!” the beautiful girl rambles excitedly.

“Damn, Henrietta—you must come here a lot,” the mage replies.

“Hehe. I was this diner’s first client, after all, Bibia.”

“Yeah, and the first useless loaf that I got loitering around here,” the man—she heard him referred to as Dennis—cuts in.

Bethel laughs at his quip, but at the same time, she feels a lump forming in her throat.

“Sniff, sob...”

Suddenly, tears start pouring out from her eyes. She doesn’t understand why she’s crying—after all, hadn’t she just found a great place to eat with delicious food and good company? Shouldn’t she be happy? She worries that she’ll sour the mood with her crying, but, try as she might, she can’t stop. How could she? All she has to look forward to back at her guild is the constant stream of work and the wrath of her guildmates. The constant criticism, the long, seemingly-endless work hours... Why wouldn’t she approach each new morning with disappointment at having woken up? She knows what she has now isn’t really living, that there’s something wrong with it, but what else can she do? She’s been feeling increasingly terrible, both

physically and mentally, but she needs to send money back to her village. She's also worried about what would happen to her if she told the guild she wanted to leave.

"How could I face everyone back at the village, though?" she thinks desperately to herself. "How could I write and tell them that? All I can do is lie with a fake smile plastered on my face. I guess I just don't want them to worry over me or pity me. Is it because I want to fulfill their expectations of me?"

As if something inside of her has broken, her tears flow freely down her face and soak into her food.



"I wonder if she's okay," Bibia muses once Bethel's finished her food and left the diner.

Dennis crosses his arms and reflects, "Hmm... Doesn't seem like it judging by how she acted."

"Is there something we can do to help her out, Chief?"

"Who exactly do you take me for? Whatever she's going through, she'll have to figure out and fix by herself. I'm not sticking my nose into her business," Dennis scoffs as he starts washing dishes. "If she's having a rough time, all I can really do is make her some food to brighten her day. That's it."



The next day, Bethel wakes up before the crack of dawn; it's still dark out. She had ended up going to bed around 11:00 p.m. but ended up spending a lot of the night tossing and turning. As a result, she only managed to get around three hours of shut-eye. This is the time of the day she hates the most. Her mind is racing with thoughts of dread—"I don't want to wake up. I don't want to work. I don't want people to get mad at me today." In the end, though, she has to wake up. Today is the day she'll go on an adventure with the others, and she's a bundle of nerves.

She looks over at the clock placed on her desk. It's 4:00 a.m.

"Wait a sec, I'm late!"



“M’apologies! I’m sorry! Ah’m late! I’m so sorry!”

Bethel quickly readies herself and rushes to the HQ, where her seniors are waiting for her. They look at her with a mixture of surprise and irritation.

“Haah, man. Aren’t you even the slightest bit ashamed for making us wait an hour for you?” one of them asks.

“I’m sorry! I apologize!” she cries out.

“Stop apologizing, jeez. Let’s just go already.”

“Y-Yes...” Bethel meekly utters as she follows the others. The tension and lack of sleep are already taking a toll on her.



“Bethel! Get out one of those magic light beams!”

One of Bethel’s team members shouts out her first order. They’re in the middle of a fight with a monster.

“Understood!” she answers and begins rummaging through her giant pouch.

The magic light beam is a pretty common item in dungeon explorations. Bethel is responsible for that item, and many others, as the duty is always handed down to the youngest or lowest-leveled person in the party.

She’s having a hard time finding it, and her thoughts become increasingly frantic as she gropes around the bag for the missing item. “Wait a second... Huh? No way. You’re kidding me, right?” She turns her pouch upside down to make sure, but her group is quickly losing patience as the battle rages on.

“What the hell are you doing, dumbass?! Just give us the item already!” one of them yells.

“Um, w-well, err...” Bethel tries to mumble something, but the urge to burst into tears is overwhelming her. “I-I’m sorry, I don’t have it...”

“What?!”

“You’ve got to be joking, right? You don’t have it?” another team member yells.

Like a broken record, she’s left to repeat, “I-I forgot about it! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”



Before she knows it, Bethel finds herself atop the clock tower. Her thoughts are all a jumble as she tries to sort everything out.

“I didn’t realize it was so high up... I’m scared. How did I even end up here? I can’t remember. How could I make such a rookie mistake? I never would’ve messed up like that normally—it’s totally my fault. What is wrong with me? That quest should’ve been no problem. Why couldn’t I do it, then? I’m just a complete failure, a dead weight. What’s the point in living anymore? I’m so tired of it all—I’m tired of going to bed every night utterly miserable; I’m tired of waking up every morning and wishing I was dead. Well, now I can do it. All I have to do is throw myself off this tower, and it’ll all end. It’s just one step forward; it shouldn’t be too hard. It’s something that even a disappointment like me can do.”

Bethel takes a step forward, and her foot lurches into the nothingness below. Soon, she’s enveloped by the pleasant feeling of the wind as she starts to fall.

“Waaait!”

“S-Soft Palm!”

She can hear voices behind her screaming. “There was someone behind me?” she thinks. “Well, it doesn’t matter. It’s all over now.”



“Hmmm...”

It’s the interval between afternoon and evening; the time when Dennis isn’t open for business quite yet. He’s resting his head on his hand while deep in thought. He’s been ruminating like this for a while, in fact—his once-favorite book, the “Buck Naked Adventurer’s Restaurant Business for Dummies, 4th Edition,” has been tossed forgotten to the side.

Dennis is thinking about the brunette that came to eat at the diner just the other day. Normally, he firmly believes that people should solve their own issues, but this time, he felt like he should intervene based on the way she had been acting.

“I mean, maybe I should...?” he mumbles with an accompanying sigh. He’s the kind of guy that tends to keep to himself. In general, he doesn’t like opening up to others about his situation or his feelings.

“Maybe I should speak to her the next time she comes around?” Dennis wonders internally. Suddenly, he’s snapped out of his musings by the sound of feet pattering down the staircase.

“Hey, Atrielle, tell me somethi—” he goes to ask the owner of the footsteps, but he loses his train of thought. For some reason, Atrielle’s come downstairs dripping wet and stark naked.

“There’s no towel in the bathroom,” she explains.

“Shouldn’t there be one somewhere over there?”

“I didn’t see one. Where?”

“I’ll bring you one, okay?! Just do me a favor, and don’t go prancing around the place like that! How’d you end up like that in the first place?!”

“It’s pretty hot, so I took a cool shower. Now I feel nice,” she says and makes a peace sign with her fingers.

“Well, good for you, I guess!” Dennis says on his way to the kitchen. He starts to frantically pull out any drawer in his immediate vicinity on his quest to find anything even remotely resembling a towel.

Right then, the diner door bursts open. Bibia rushes in, followed closely by Henrietta, who’s carrying the girl Dennis had been worrying about not so long ago on her back. Henrietta’s armor is in a state of disarray, with parts of it either damaged or completely broken off.

“Haah... haah... H-Hey! Chief! You’re here, right?!”

“I’m here. What’s wrong?!”

“Dennis! This girl, she—wait a second, why is Atrielle naked?!” Bibia exclaims in shock while looking at her.

“Never mind that right now! What happened?!”

“How do you expect me to just ignore it?!”

Atrielle decides to add fuel to the fire by inserting herself into the conversation. “What happened?” she asks.

“How about you put some clothes on first?! You’re making things harder for everyone right now!” Dennis cries.

“I’ll get a towel first, then. That’s my main objective.”

“Thank you! Finally, you understand! I swear, I don’t get why you get so

expressive whenever weird shit like this happens. Can we not make this a common thing?!"





While Bethel sleeps on one of the beds on the diner's second floor, Dennis and the others discuss what happened.

"Henrietta and I were walking through town looking for some job offers from guilds, when we suddenly saw this girl looking like the world was going to end tomorrow or something," Bibia explains.

"We had a bad feeling about her, so we decided to tail her for a bit. You should've seen her face, Chief—she was pale white! We thought she might've been a zombie for a moment by the way she moved!" the knight added.

"Then we saw her climbing up the stairs of the clock tower, and we thought that was really fishy."

"And once she reached the top, she just threw herself off without any hesitation! We were shocked! I tried to stop her by shouting at her, but by then, she'd already jumped..."

"We didn't have much time. I cast my 'Soft Palm' spell on Henrietta, and she jumped off, as well."

"And that's why your armor is broken?" Dennis asks, piecing things together.

"Bibia's spell and my armor were enough for me to survive the fall, but they both broke as a result," Henrietta says.

"What's that girl's deal? Who is she?" Bibia asks.

"Her name's Bethel, and Atrielle's upstairs with her right now in case she gets any weird ideas again when she wakes up," Dennis answers. With that, he prepares some porridge in a small pot for Bethel. "Whatever it is, her illness isn't physical—it's mental. I've seen people like her before. They tend to be the serious type who take on more than they can chew. They end up being overburdened by their work and crushed under the weight. In a way, their soul gets crushed, too."

"Oh. In that case, I guess Henrietta suffers from the opposite illness," Bibia says flatly.

"I didn't know you decided to join the 'bully Henrietta' bandwagon, Bibia," Henrietta laughs.

Dennis is surprised by how quickly these two had started to get along.

“What should we do to help her?” Bibia asks.

“For now, it’s best just to let her rest. She needs a lot of it, judging by the way she looked earlier. I’ll let her stay here for the time being. Once things have calmed down a bit, we’ll see what we can do,” Dennis replies.

“Um, I actually think that Bethel was working for the Night Fog Battalion...”

“Oh yeah, I know that bunch. Let me talk to them. She’s not fit to go adventuring with them at the moment, so I’ll just tell them to let her get some rest and recuperate before she returns.”

That night, the guild leader and other members of the Night Fog Battalion arrive at the diner. Dennis shows them to a table after he’s closed the diner for the day. He prepares some tea for them and sits down at their table. Bibia and Henrietta are sitting by the counter, watching everything silently.

“Sorry you’ve had to take care of one of our members,” the leader starts. “I’m Hopper, the leader of the Night Fog Battalion. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Dennis, the owner of this diner,” Dennis says with a quick scan of the leader’s status. It’s quite difficult to cast a divination skill on someone without them noticing, so Dennis simplifies the skill so he can only see Hopper’s level.

“He’s level 51, and the others peak at 37. For being a normal adventurer, this Hopper guy is already higher than average. He’s probably stronger than most of its members, so I don’t doubt that he has a major role in his guild. I’d even wager that, at his level, he’s probably aware that I checked him despite my best efforts to hide it.”

“Heard this place serves some nice food,” Hopper says while checking out the diner.

Dennis remains silent for a second, analyzing the man’s demeanor, but soon answers. “I remember a couple of guys from your guild coming once, yeah. They weren’t very polite.”

“I apologize for whatever they did to you. Thanks for the tea,” Hopper replies, seemingly unfazed. “Anyways, back to Bethel’s issue.”

“You don’t need to worry about her. She’s resting upstairs right now,” Dennis explains.

“Whatever happened, I apologize.”

“She’s not fit to work with you, at least, not for a while. I’m hoping you let

her rest for a while here until she's completely recovered."

"Well, that'd be an issue. I'd prefer it if she recuperated with us. I wouldn't like to impose on you any further."

"Actually, about that... I think she should remain here. She actually prefers to stay here for the time being. And I don't mind taking care o—"

"We can't accept that. You see, she signed a contract with us," Hopper cuts in.

He signals one of his subordinates to retrieve the contract. He takes it from them and shows it to Dennis.

"She hasn't been working with us for very long, and she actually ended up getting sick pretty soon after she started. To tell you the truth, she's been doing more harm than good at our place."

Dennis takes the contract and checks it as he listens to Hopper. He scoffs, "She has to do all this alone? How could you push all of this work on her? It's obviously way too much for one person to handle."

"The contract states that she has to pay us back for the damage she's caused. That's how it is. She has no other choice."

"What kind of contract is this, even?" Dennis says incredulously while reading the document. He can't believe what he sees. "Did you really convince her to sign this insanity? This whole thing is off, actually—it doesn't look like a normal contract in the first place."

"That's how we do things in our guild."

"This has to be some kind of forgery. There's no way this is valid. For starters, it's not even signed. I don't see the sign of the adventurer's guild here, either," Dennis says.

"You don't get to decide on whether something's valid or not," Hopper replies.

"You son of a bitch. You sure put her through hell because of this fake piece of paper. I bet you'll only end up taking advantage of her and make her work until you get tired of her," Dennis growls and stands up. "And you call yourselves a guild of adventurers? My ass. You're just a group of thieves, at best."

"Well, this is unexpected," Hopper says rather nonchalantly while drinking his tea. He doesn't seem to care much about Dennis's heated words. "It looks like you don't know about our reputation around here. I don't blame you, I

don't blame you, since you're a newcomer to this area."

"Like I give a rat's ass about your reputation. You sure like to talk big, but if the Knight's Order in the city knew about th—"

"This isn't the city, though," Hopper cuts him off with a laugh. "This is our turf. Everyone here does as we say. You could call us the law around these parts. If you don't want bad things to happen to you, then give us the girl back. This is the last time I'll ask you nicely."



"W-Why wouldn't they let me die?" Bethel whispers, huddled under the sheets and trembling like a fawn. "I'm so tired... I should've died..."

Atrielle's been her silent companion. She hasn't done much besides watch and listen to the bedridden girl.

Moonlight creeps in through the window and illuminates the room.

"You're free to die if you want," Atrielle suddenly says. She goes to open the window, and Bethel watches her in silence. She continues, "I thought about it at some point, too. About wanting to die. They took everything from me—my family, my freedom. I was kicked out of my home and sold as a slave. Even now, I'm not sure about my future. I thought about wanting to die. You're free to die, but in the end, I don't think that's the solution. You just need something good to happen. I think you should eat something really tasty first before you decide. If you still want to go through with it after that, then that's that. Either way, I'll respect whatever you choose."

Dennis and the others would be shocked if they could hear Atrielle right now. In the three months since she's moved in with Dennis, she hadn't said a word of this. Now, she's pouring her heart out to Bethel.

"I think you should stay alive. That's just what I think in the end."



"Most guilds think they're hot shit when, in reality, no one's ever heard of them," Dennis spews with an air of scorn.

"Well, well, I didn't realize we were addressing the king of the land," the other man replies.

“I’m just stating the truth.”

Hopper and the others start puffing up and posing, preparing themselves for a fight. The leader speaks, “This is what happens in most small towns. The strongest guild is usually the one that runs the place. And you know what? Nobody minds. A guild with powerful warriors can easily overpower the knight’s guild and do a better job of controlling and policing the area than the actual ‘authorities’ could. Just look at the Silver Wings Battalion, for example. One of them could easily destroy a thousand knights if they wanted to. They’re the strongest party with a median of level 80. There’s no one in this world who would even dare try to topple them.”

“You guys are not a battalion, though,” Dennis replies.

“We’re basically the same thing,” Hopper answers with a shrug. “We’re the closest thing to the governors of this place. We don’t take jobs from royalty like the Silver Wings do, but we essentially rule this town.”

Hopper pauses for a moment to look around the diner, then continues, “What a vulgar, cheap-looking place you have here. Seems very flammable.”

“Is that a threat?” Dennis says in a low tone.

“Oh no, not at all. I’m just saying that if, by some strange chance, this place burned to the ground, I doubt anyone would care. Especially if we, level 30 and 40 adventurers, were the ones to do it. Even in numbers, small fry are still small fry.”

“That’s funny, boss. You should try creating a new dish with that: small fries!” one of the other members chimes in.

The mounting tension is interrupted by the bell chiming, signaling a new customer.

“Hey. I’m sorry, but we’re closed for toda—” Dennis says, but he quickly trails off when he looks over and realizes who the new customer is.

“Katey?”

Sure enough, it’s her. She’s wearing her usual flashy attire: her crimson bikini armor, her dual blades, her signature fiery red hair, and her coat with the Silver Wings Battalion symbol. Katey, the legendary Crimson Blade Storm, is here.

Everyone in the diner starts to lose their minds. As if oblivious to the hubbub, Katey examines the place. Finally, she notices Dennis. “Dennis! Nice, there you are! I was going to lose all hope if I didn’t find you here!” she

says excitedly. She skips over to him and grabs his hands. She continues chattering happily, "This is a nice place you got! Mhm! It looks very, how should I say it... Common, you know? Like it's for the masses. You've always liked this style! So how's the place going? Everything okay? What about you, by the way? You doing well? C'mon, Dennis—tell me something!"

"I'm sorry, but can we put this on hold? I'm having an important conversation with these gentlemen right now," he replies.

"Huuuh?! So I bother coming all the way out here, and this is how you greet me? That's really mean of you! C'mon, guys, don't you think so too?! Can you at least make me a hamburger meal, Dennis? Pretty pleaaaase?!"

"Fine, fine. I'll make you one once I'm done with this. I'm talking with them right now. You're distracting everyone with your perverted armor."

"Oh, c'mon! Don't say that!"

Dennis turns to Hopper, who's shed his unflappable facade. He's looking straight at Katey, clearly nervous. "Th-The Crimson Blade Storm?! F-From the Silver Wings...? What the hell is she doing here?" he stutters.

"And who are you? That's 'Miss Legendary Crimson Blade Storm' to you, by the way," Katey says and turns to Dennis. "So who's this old man, Dennis? Tell me."

"Well apparently, this is the guy who runs the town."

"Oh really? Well, I'm Katey. Nice to meet you and all that. Anyways, how long are you gonna keep talking? Can you hurry up and finish?"

"Oh, shut up," Dennis says. "It's on this guy. Just sit by the counter and wait until we're done. Atrielle! Oh wait, she's not here; that's right."

"Oh! I-I'll bring her some tea!" Bibia cuts in and rushes off.

"I'm sorry, Bibia, but thanks! I'll treat you to something next time."

Dennis turns around to face Hopper again. "Anyway, 'governor.' To be completely honest, I don't really like you much. I'll admit I got too heated before, so sorry about that. I wasn't looking for a fight or anything like that. I hope that you can reconsider letting the girl stay. Hell, you can expel her from your guild, and we can resolve this issue right now."

"O-Oh, right... I guess, um, yeah..." Hopper mutters. He isn't very talkative anymore thanks to Katey's incredibly intimidating presence. Dennis wryly notes that the guild leader is sweating buckets.

In the meantime, Bibia returns with some tea for Katey.

“Thanks! Oh, wow! You’re adorable! Are you a girl?” Katey exclaims.

“Oh, uh, no. I’m actually a guy...”

“Whoa, that’s amazing! I want a cute guy just like you in our ranks!”

“Um, are you actually the Crimson Blade Storm Katey?” he asks.

“Yeah. What about it?”

“Um, how do you know Dennis?”

“Huh? You don’t know? He was in our guild at some point,” Katey says bluntly. Cries of confusion echo around the diner.

“What?!”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m telling you guys... I know it’s a hard pill to swallow, but this guy’s actually a cooking maniac. He’s never told you before?” Katey says, looking around surprised. She takes a sip of her tea and turns around to look at Dennis. Doing so clearly showcases her impressive set of abs. “He used to be a part of the Silver Wings Battalion. He was like my buddy back then. We were always together! Man, I still can’t stand the fact that he’s a higher level than me!”

The diner goes silent for a moment.

“Wait... what?! Wait, w-wait... whaaaat?!?!” Bibia shouts out.

“Pfaaaaagh?! Whaaaaahgh?!” Henrietta follows suit.

“Will the two of you shut up?! Especially you, Henrietta! How the hell did you manage to sound like a banshee just now?!” Dennis snaps. He then turns to Hooper, who’s visibly deflating by the second. “Anyway, don’t mind them. This is an issue between you and me. Well, more like you and Bethel, but it’s fine if I represent her here, right?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Um, right. Yeah...”

“Keep it together, man. Look at me in the eyes when we’re talking, at least.”

“Yeah, sure... I mean, yes...” Hopper mumbles while wiping the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

“Listen to me—just accept that Bethel’s not going to go back there and that’s it. She’s not in any condition to work anymore. I don’t give a damn if you burn my whole place down, but don’t expect me to sit happily on my hands while you do it. If that happens, rest assured that I’ll come claiming damages.”

“Oh, I mean... Uh, I didn’t really mean what I said back then, and...”

Hopper meekly trails off.

"Then make it obvious from the get-go that you're joking, you jackass. If you wanna talk shit, say it to my face!"

"O-Okay! I accept Bethel staying here! She's expelled from our guild, okay?! We're over this now, right?!" Hopper cries. He frantically gathers the documents strewn on the table together and stands up. "I-I'll be taking my leave. I was just joking about what I said before. Don't take me seriously, hahaha..." he says with a fearful glance at Dennis.

"Was the contract part of the joke, too?" Dennis asks

"Oh... Oh! Yes! Indeed, it was! This is all a joke, yes! H-Haha!" Hopper shouts. He signals to one of his subordinates to take the documents and burn them.

The subordinate chants a blaze spell to burn the papers, and they quickly crumble to ash. Hopper wipes the endless waterfall of sweat off his face and looks at Dennis again. "There, they're gone. There's nothing left. The girl has nothing to do with us anymore, I promise, but please, let me go! I was just joking; I promise!"

"You sure have a weird sense of humor."

"We won't come near you or your place anymore! We won't do anything weird, okay?! Let's just end this here, all right?! We're fine now, right?! Please forgive us!" Hopper begs.

"I mean, as long as it's all settled, I guess I'm fine?" Dennis says flippantly.

"Th-Thank you! Anyway, we'll be going now. Please send Bethel our regards. We hope she feels better soon. See you!" With that, Hopper and his crew rush out of the diner as quickly as their legs allow them.

Katey looks just as confused as she had been when she entered.

"Are you sure you guys were having a civil conversation before I got here?"

"It doesn't really matter. All's well that ends well," Dennis says as he walks behind the counter.

"Looks like you've got something dark lurking within your depths, Dennis. Since you're mine and all, I guess I'm gonna have to be the one to stamp it out of you. Oooh, or we could rule this town... no—the world—together!"

"I'm not yours, and you're getting too worked up. At this rate, you're going to turn into a gangster."

"I love it when you play hard to get," she says with a smile. Seeing her grin

lifts Dennis's spirits, and he briefly smiles back.

"So you want a hamburger meal, yeah?" he asks.

"But of course!"

The others are sitting silently and watching the two former guild members banter back-and-forth. They feel weirded out more than anything.

"You're kidding me, right? Dennis used to be a member of the Silver Wings Battalion?"

"And he's friends with the Crimson Blade Storm? I can't believe it..."



Bibia and Henrietta sit at the counter beside Katey. They've started to barrage her with questions.

"H-How did you manage to get to such a high level? I'm a knight just like you, but..." Henrietta exclaims.

"Oh! Well, I'm just... let's just say special. I'm probably not the best example for you."

"And how do you join the Silver Wings? Can I be a member?" Bibia jumps in.

"If you want to join as support, and you're over level 70, you're more than welcome! We have a lack of talented people right now. In fact, we'd be happy to have you!"

"Huh, level 70..."

"Well, over level 60 is fine, too."

"Level 60...?"

"And why do you wear that red bikini armor?"

"Because it catches people's attention! Anyways, please don't call it that. It's my work attire, okay?" Katey exclaims.

"You wear it partly because you like being flashy; don't lie," Dennis butts in.

"I just love doing my work, Dennis. Let's leave it at that."

Dennis places the plates on a tray and puts it down in front of Katey.

"Here you go—your hamburger set."

"Whoaaaa! This is the stuff! I'm digging in right now!"

She grabs her knife, cuts a piece of the hamburger meat, and eagerly shoves it in her mouth.

“Mmm! Pho goood! I’ve missed this so much! Since you’ve left, all the food at the guild tastes like crap. I’ve been seriously struggling over there! I’m so used to your food now that it’s all I can eat, Mr. Legendary Fried Rice!”

Bibia, clearly puzzled, asks, “Legendary Fried Rice?”

“Just ignore her,” Dennis says while he watches Katey devour her meal. “Anyway, why’d you come all the way out here?”

“What? Do I need a reason to? I missed your food, you know?” Katey says in between mouthfuls of food.

“You sure came a long way from the city just to eat here,” he retorts.

“Am I bothering you or something?”

“Oh no, not at all.”

“Oh really?” she says while stuffing some potatoes into her mouth. She swallows, then continues, “Okay, I’ll be serious for a moment—can you come back to the guild?”

“I’m not your personal chef. Can’t you just find yourself a place close by that has some nice food instead? It’s time to move on.”

“I’m not kidding. Ever since you were banished, the guild has been on the brink of collapse,” she says coolly, giving Dennis a hard stare.

“Why?”

“Not everyone in the guild agrees with Viggo’s leadership. The vanguard squad, in particular, is unhappy with the situation. They say that Viggo’s decision to kick you out was rash and uncalled for. The guild’s about to split in half—there’s one side who remains loyal to Viggo, and a second side loyal to another commander.”

“And I’m assuming that other commander is you?” Dennis asks.

“It’s not that simple, Dennis. The situation is pretty bleak. You must’ve put something in your cooking back when you were at the guild, right? That’s the only explanation I can think of.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, what else could it be?” she says in a huff and a heated glare at Dennis.

“Beats me,” he answers. He averts his eyes, which makes Katey smile in response.

“Anyways, your departure has made it abundantly clear how mediocre the other support members we have are. We’re seriously lacking in good ones.

Everyone is saying that you should come back.”

“Easy for you to call them mediocre. Why don’t you guys help them to get better, then? They have the level; they just need the experience.”

“I’m saying this for your sake too, Dennis. Viggo’s feeling cornered right now because of everyone questioning his responsibility in the matter and how he handled it. If he feels too threatened, and he’s pushed over the edge, he might go after the people who ruined his reputation.”

“Like I care. Let him do whatever he wants.”

“I’m worried about you, Dennis...”

“Katey,” Dennis says abruptly. “I don’t feel like going back. I’ve gotten used to living here. Sure, I’d be lying if I said that it’s been all sunshine and rainbows—some of the regulars aren’t too bright, and they cause all kinds of trouble, but they’re nice people. They keep the place lively. Everyone enjoys the food I make, and I like this diner. It makes me happy. I have no intention of returning to the guild; even less so now that everything seems so tense.”

“Even if I ask as a personal favor? Please, Dennis—I’m begging you to come back.”

“I’ll apologize to you and you alone. I do appreciate what you’ve done for me. You let me into the guild. Thanks to that, I managed to make enough to open this place. But in the end, it turns out I’m not an adventurer, just a chef.”

“You didn’t end up reaching level 100,” Katey notes angrily.

“Yeah, that’s true,” he replies, looking straight at her.

“And you don’t want to reach it?”

“I’ll get it someday.”

“You know better than anyone else that getting to level 100 requires non-conventional means.”

“Yeah, I know,” Dennis replies rather disinterestedly. He’s weirdly calm about the situation. Katey doesn’t respond, partially out of concern for his unusual behavior, and partially out of resignation. She knows that look—whenever he gets like that, he doesn’t plan on changing his mind. He’s stubborn as hell.

“Okay. I got it,” she says with a sigh. She finishes her meal, stands up, and adjusts her top. “I’ll be leaving now, Dennis. I’ll be back.”

“Thank you for coming all the way out here, Katey. Um... I’m happy to see

you. I've never really wanted to tell you this directly, but, you saved me back then. I'm really grateful for that."

"Of course I would. Your cooking is to die for," she says while turning around, ready to leave.

"See you again soon."

Katey storms out of the diner without another word. Once she's gone, Henrietta and Bibia start talking again.

"When you said that some of your regulars aren't very bright, I bet you meant Bibia. Hahaha!" Henrietta cackles.

"No, he definitely was talking about you," Bibia answers.

"I was talking about both of you," Dennis says with a smile.



A week has passed since that incident.

"I'll have the daily special, please!"

"Chef! I'll have the yakisoba with ankake sauce while you're at it!"

"Three bowls of ramen over here!"

"Dennis! Can you get us some fried chicken? Oh, and how about a mackerel dish?!"

"Sure thing! Atrielle! You got all the orders, right?!"

Atrielle, who's standing next to Dennis, makes a peace sign in response.

"Okay! Just wait a bit, you scamps! I'll have your orders ready in a flash!"

Meanwhile, Bibia's sitting at his usual spot by the counter and taking in the diner's bustling atmosphere.

"This place sure has become busy," he remarks.

"Well mabbe becoph iph tho good? I can't get enoph oph thiph!" Henrietta says with a mouthful of food.

"Mmm, yep!"

"I'd consider you two regulars, but you're really more like a sad pair of ghosts that haunt the place," Dennis says while skillfully managing to flip a pan and serve Bibia a glass of water at the same time.

"Oh, thanks. Hey, it's Bethel!" Bibia exclaims as Bethel makes her way in. The girl's cheeks flush in embarrassment.

"Ah, hello... and thanks. Ehehe," she says.

“You look better than the last time I saw you. That’s good to see!”

“It’s all thanks to you guys. I’ve decided to come around the diner and help out from now on.”

“As long as you don’t force yourself. Remember, you’re still not completely healed. It hasn’t been too long since you had to stay here,” Dennis chimes in.

“I’d like to help, even if just a little. The sooner, the better—after all, I have a younger coworker here who’s my senior. She’s working at the diner and giving it her all, and I want to help her out.”

Bethel turns to look at Atrielle, who’s making a peace gesture with a sign in her hand to attract new customers. The customers really seem to like her doing that, for some reason; the peace sign has become her signature move.

The two girls will never find out what happened on the first floor of the diner that night. Likewise, Dennis and the others will never fully understand why Bethel cried on her first night at the diner, nor the special exchange the two girls had in the bedroom.

Chapter 6: A day in the Life of our Exiles

“Mmm! This shrimp with chili is just awesome! It seriously brings a smile to my face!” Henrietta enthuses while stuffing her face full of food. Suddenly, she’s struck by a cold chill that runs down her spine. She quickly turns around and finds Dennis staring at her with a sour expression.

“How much longer are you planning on mooching off me?” he asks.

“Oh, uh... Well, you know, I’m still looking for a job. Haha...” Henrietta deflects, startled by Dennis’s intense gaze.

“Um, I may have screwed up a teensy bit. Maybe I should try to be playful? Or would that only make him angrier?” she deliberates. She tries to placate him by saying, “C-Come on, Chief! Don’t look at me with such a scary face! I promise you that the moment I get a job, I’ll pay you back in full! Okay?!”

“I don’t even want you here anymore,” Dennis shuts her down bluntly.

“Wh-What?!”

“Don’t bother paying me back at this point. Just don’t ever come back.”

“Huh? What? Um, Chief?” Henrietta asks, trembling. “U-Um... I-I ended up taking advantage of your generosity, Chief. I’m sorry.”

“Sigh. Would you just leave already? If I keep being nice to you, you’re just gonna end up doing the same thing over and over.”

“Sniff... I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to! I—Waaah! I’m sorry, Chief! I’m so sorry!” Henrietta cries and storms out.

Dennis is reminded of a kid throwing a tantrum after having been grounded and sent to their bedroom.

Henrietta jolts awake, drenched in sweat.

“Was it a dream...?” Henrietta wonders as she slowly gathers her bearings. She checks herself and notices her clothes are soaking wet and clinging unpleasantly to her skin. She decides to take a shower.

Henrietta’s place is quite simple. It has a bedroom and a small place for her to bathe. It’s not a full shower, really: it’s a large holding tank of cool water with a sizable tap attached to it. It all works with a magical spell. Apparently, there are nice showers with hot water, but those are reserved for the luxurious hotels and wealthy families in the city. The only way a normal person like her could take a hot bath would either be to be a mage or to go to a bathhouse. A

private hot shower is a luxury few could afford—even the inclusion of a standard “shower” like Henrietta’s significantly increased the cost of rent. Although many men opted out of places with them to cut costs, Henrietta has always felt it to be a necessity.

As Henrietta starts to remove her clothes, she finds her mind wandering to Bibia. Does his room have a shower? It must have one, because he always smells so nice. It was one of the first things she noticed when she met him. She strips completely naked, steps into the shower, and activates it. A small, cool stream of water starts to trickle out of the tap. Slowly, she feels more refreshed and alert. She ruminates on the dream she had. Has she really been taking advantage of his kindness? The last thing she wants is for her “Chief” to hate her.



It's Dennis's day off. He's sitting at a table and looking rather grim. Bibia, who's sitting across from him, is clearly uncomfortable by his expression.

"...So, Dennis—what's the matter?"

"Well, you see..."

"Yes?"

"I think Atrielle's got a boyfriend."

"Wait... You're kidding, right?"

Dennis shakes his head.

"I've started to give her a bit of money, you see, and she's been going out a lot since then!" he exclaims, his voice getting increasingly louder as he speaks.

"Y-You sure are heated about this. I'm a mere level 17, Dennis. Don't scream near me, or you'll end up blowing me to smithereens with your level 99 vocal cords."

"So one day, I decided to tail her around, and what did I see? She was walking around with another man, that's what!"

"Oh, really? I-I mean, isn't that a good thing? That means she's found herself a friend, right?"

"You mean a boyfriend, huh?! A lover?!"

"Let's not hastily jump to conclusions. I mean, it's not like she's had a boyfriend before, I assume. She doesn't really have any experience or knowledge with this sort of thing, so I doubt that's the case." Bibia says, trying simultaneously to calm Dennis and his own nerves. "Why don't you just ask her directly? That would easily settle things."

"Whaaat?! Hell no! She's going to think that I'm some sort of weirdo. I don't want her to think her daddy like that!" Dennis wails.

"Why is this the only thing you lose your cool over?! Keep it together, man! Atrielle would never think of you like that!"

"O-Okay. Let's assume for a minute that she really does have a boyfriend. Wouldn't it be normal for her to bring him here and introduce him to me? He can bring a box of sweets as a present to offer when he introduces himself as well. You know what I mean?"

"Okay, you old coot," Bibia scoffs.

"Oh, come on—if she's dating some weakling, best know I'm not letting him anywhere near her. He's gotta be at least level 80 to even try."

"You sure have some high standards for your little girl."

Bethel, woken by the commotion the two men—mainly Dennis—were causing, comes downstairs. “Hm? What’s wrong, guys? she asks.

Instead of calming down, though, Dennis doubles down on his anger the moment he sees her.

“Bethel! Would you please not go around like that?! This isn’t your home, you know!”

“Are you even aware of what you’re wearing right now, Bethel?!” Bibia chimes in. “It’s a bit risqué...”

Bethel looks down to inspect herself. She’s wearing a thin, white sleeping gown. Unfortunately, in the light, it’s quite sheer.

“Ahaha! Come on, guys—you’re exaggerating. We’re not that far apart in age, Boss. It’s not that big of a deal, right? I’m not exactly naked or anything.”

“Shut it! You should be more aware of this sort of thing! You’re still quite young. Maybe not as young as Atrielle, but still!”

Bethel goes to change, and Bibia seems to be struck by a sudden realization. “I’ve just realized that you have two girls living at your diner, Dennis,” he whispers.

After Bethel gets into some new attire, she returns to the main room. Dennis continues his conversation by addressing her.

“Anyway, Bethel, you’ve got some great timing!”

“Oh really? What happened?”

Dennis pokes Bibia with his elbow and explains, “Bibia and I have to go into town for a bit.”

“Wait, with me? Where?” Bibia cries.

“Isn’t it obvious? We’re going on a tailing mission!”

“You’re the worst!”

“Um, I don’t really get what you mean, but... good luck, I guess? What are we going to do about the groceries, by the way?” Bethel asks.

“Hm, that’s true. You think you can go alone?” Dennis replies.

“I don’t know how much I should be buying, to be honest.”

Bethel crosses her arms and tilts her head a bit, thinking about her new task. The diner door then swings open. It’s Henrietta, trying to keep a low profile as always.

“H-Hello?” she calls out with some hesitation.

“Hey, Henrietta. What’s wrong?”

“W-Well, I, um...,” she laughs nervously as she fidgets a little bit, trying to get out what’s on her mind. “I was wondering if I could help you out with something...”

“What’s up with you wanting to help out of the blue? You’re creeping me out,” Dennis curtly replies.

“Ehehe, well, you heard me. I just thought that I should probably help out more around the place, so...”

“You came at a good time, then. You and Bethel can go to buy groceries together.”

“Got it, Boss!” Bethel answers.

“L-Leave it to us!” Henrietta chimes in, still rather nervous.

Dennis pokes Bibia with his elbow again.

“Alright, Bibia, we’re going too! It’s time to unravel the truth!”

“What?! You’re actually going to tail her?! You’re kidding, right? You sure you’re okay in the head?” the mage cries out.

“Let’s do our best! I’m gonna be useful! Yes!” Henrietta shouts.

“Wow, Ser Henrietta—you sure seem excited today,” Bethel remarks.



Atrielle is walking through town. Two figures trail behind her in the shadows.

“Dennis, we should really stop this,” Bibia whispers.

“Shut up. I’m basically her guardian, okay? This is natural for a guardian to do. It’s just to make sure she’s safe—crime and inappropriate behavior have been on the rise. And what about the youth of today? The wholesome moral values of good boys and girls have been in decay. Of course I’m worried about her.”

“Yeah, right. That was quite a tangent.”

As they follow her, they notice that Atrielle seems quite popular with the townsfolk. She’s greeted and approached by many people as she’s walking along. She, as per usual, silently replies with an expressionless face and her signature peace sign.

While Dennis is happy she’s found a way to express herself, he’s not quite

sure he should let “throwing up a peace sign” be the extent of her personality and vocabulary.

“Oh, if it isn’t the chef from the diner. What are you doing, sneaking around like that?” someone calls out to the duo. It’s the old man who runs a stable for the town’s carriages. He’s a frequent customer at Dennis’s diner and always orders the vritra katsudon.

“Shhh! I’m sorry, old man, but I’m busy right now,” Dennis hisses.

“What? Busy doing what? Stalking someone? That’s not acceptable behavior.”

“Yeah, you tell him. Get my point now, Dennis?” Bibia quickly jumps in.

“It’s fine. I’m not stalking her; I’m just making sure there’s no funny business going on.”

“I don’t think anyone else sees it that way.”

“Ah! That’s the guy! Look, Bibia!” Dennis exclaims, ignoring their critiques. He grabs Bibia by his shirt collar and yanks him to show what he’s looking at —it’s Atrielle, who’s now walking side-by-side with a brown-haired boy.

“Uagh?!”

Dennis can’t really hear what the boy is saying, but he can clearly tell that they’re talking about something. Atrielle doesn’t seem to be saying much other than shaking her head and nodding at times.

“Is he hitting on her?! That son-of-a-bitch! How dare he put the moves on our poster girl!”

“Hey, don’t be so quick to make a mountain out of a molehill!! Maybe he’s just her friend!” Bibia exclaims.

“Shut it! Everyone knows men and women can’t be friends!”

“Did you have a bad experience with women in your past or something?!”



Meanwhile, Henrietta and Bethel are visiting various shops in town and buying the things on Dennis’s shopping list. Henrietta is currently crouching in front of a kiosk, fixated on something.

“Hm, I wonder if Chief would like something from here...”

“Oh, what is it? Are you planning on buying a present for someone, Ser Henrietta?”

“Oh, well... haha. I just thought it’d be nice to express my gratitude for the Chief today, you know...”

“That sounds great! I’m sure he’ll love it! He’s always talking about you.”

“Huh?! Really?! W-What does he say about me?!”

“Um, mostly, he grumbles about when you’ll find a job and such.”

“Oh... right.”

They keep chatting in front of the stall, but soon they happen to eavesdrop on another conversation nearby.

“Hey, did you hear? The leader of the Night Fog Battalion got owned by that guy who runs the diner.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. Apparently, he used to be a member of the Silver Wings Battalion.”

“Yeah, man! That’s so amazing! I was seriously shocked!”

“I never liked Night Fog—they’re a bunch of asshats. It’s nice to see them get their asses handed to them for once.”

“Yeah. Plus, I’ve heard a lot of bad things about their leader.”

“Same. I’ve heard he used to be a part of some thief’s guild or something like that before starting this one.”

“Just don’t piss him off, and you’ll be fine.”

Bethel and Henrietta grow silent as they hear what the two men have to say.



While that’s going on, Dennis and Bibia are still in hot pursuit of Atrielle and the mysterious boy. Unfortunately, the townsfolk aren’t making their mission easy.

“Hey, Dennis! How are you doing?!”

“Shhh, Mr. Jeweler! Don’t talk to me!”

“Oh my, if it isn’t Dennis. How are things at the diner?”

“It’s the old smithing lady! Yeah! It’s doing rather well, actually, but please don’t talk to me right now! Thanks for the new set of knives, by the way!”

“Dennis! She’s looking this way!” Bibia whispers frantically.

Atrielle’s still quite a ways ahead of them, but she’d turned around for a moment. Dennis and Bibia dive behind a cafe signboard in an attempt to hide. Of course, because they’re lying facedown, they end up attracting more

attention.

“Are you okay, Mr. Chef? What about you, Bibia? You okay there, buddy?” someone calls out to them.

“I-I’m fine. We’re just... doing some crawling exercises! Yeah,” Denis says with some hesitant laughter.

“Crawling exercises, huh? At this time of the day? Are you sure that’s—?”

“Bibia! Look! They’re entering the store over there!” Dennis cuts them off and jostles Bibia, pointing at a building. Bibia follows his finger—Atrielle and the boy are going inside what looks to be a jeweler.

“A jeweler? Why would they go in there?”

“I-It can’t be... He’s going to buy her a wedding ring and propose?! Isn’t it too early for them to do that?! I told you! Kids these days are too rash!”

“You’re the one who’s being rash here, Dennis.”

“Wh-What should I do? Should I go inside? B-But I can’t. I...,” Dennis mutters with his hands placed over his head. He’s plagued by indecisiveness.

“Hmm... Oh! I just had an idea.”

“Wh-What is it, Bibia? Whatever it is, I’m counting on you!”

“Well, it’s not like it’s a big deal, but...”



Bibia and Dennis enter the general goods store that’s managed by Bolbo.

“Oh, isn’t this the store that’s run by that huge degenerate? What are we doing here?” Dennis asks. Bibia ignores him and approaches the counter, calling out, “Hey, Bolbo—I heard that you got your hands on some weird magical artifact not too long ago.”

Bolbo soon emerges, as rotund as ever. He chuckles, “Huhuhu... Indeed I did.”

“Do you mind if we borrow it for a bit?”

“Huhuhu... Give me 5 silver coins, and I’ll rent it to you.”

“You got some change on you, Dennis?”

“I mean, I do, but what is this for?” Dennis asks as he gets out his wallet.

Bibia winks and says, “Hehe, just leave it to me. I can actually be quite skillful when I want to be.”

In the meantime, Henrietta and Bethel are still checking out several of the

street vendors and their stalls. Bethel is looking for items from the shopping list, while Henrietta is inspecting a suspicious-looking stall that is most certainly not selling any stolen goods.

“You have a good taste, young lady,” the seedy merchant addresses her. “This vase right here is the fabled ‘Vase of Good Fortune!’ You bring that to any business and leave it, it’ll unleash a magical spell that summons hordes of customers in a matter of seconds!”

“Wh-Whaat?! That’s incredible! So I just need to leave it there, and it does the work by itself?!”

“Indeed! It’s a treasure that’ll make any business boom!”

“I guess it must be pretty expensive, then,” Henrietta says pensively.

“But of course! With an item this amazing, this miraculous, it would be a crime for me to sell it any cheaper than 300 gold coins!” the seller answers with a devilish smile.

“Whaaat?! That’s expensive, alright. Here I thought it would be perfect for the Chief.”

“Fret not, young lady! It just so happens that we’re in the middle of a sale right now! We’ve slashed the price way down, so now, it only costs 50 gold coins!”

“Whaaat?! Just 50 coins?!”

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance here! What do you think?!”

“It’s totally worth it! Okay, just gimme a second! I’ll go find the black market, sell some of my internal organs, and come back to get it!”

“Hold it!” Bethel shouts, quickly approaching the gullible knight.

“H-Hey, Bethel! You happen to have 50 gold coins on you?”

“You stupid or something? Of course I don’t! We’re going now! Don’t get distracted by junk like that!”

“Whaaat?! But Chief would totally love that vase!”

“More like he’d totally love to give you a whack on the head for being so stupid!”



Dennis and Bibia enter a rather narrow alley and position themselves near the jeweler. The magical item that they’ve borrowed from the general store is

rather large and shaped like a seashell. Bibia places himself on Dennis's shoulders so he can reach one of the building's windows. Bibia struggles for a while with the shell, which is almost as big as he is, but he finally manages to get a solid grasp on it. He opens the window a crack and waits.

"The hell are you doing, Bibia?"

"This thing is called a shellphone."

"A what now?"

"It's a device powered by wind magic. You use it to amplify your voice. It's commonly used in places like theaters for those who are seated far away from the stage, for example."

"How is that going to help us?"

"Hehe, this is where my expertise comes into play. See, by the logic of item usage, we can reverse this..."

Bibia gently pushes the smaller piece of the shell in through the window, leaving the wider end outside. Once he's happy with the positioning, he casts a spell on it. "Soft Palm!"

Soon, sounds start to leak out from the larger portion of the shell.

"Oh? Don't tell me you can use this to hear what's inside?"

"Shhh! Be quiet, Dennis! You're right, though—you can use this in its unintended way to pick up sounds instead."

"I see! Nice one, Bibia; that's quite useful! And here I thought you were just a useless scrub!"

"I can't really say your pride makes me happy, since we're basically committing a crime right now... Oh well, whatever."

The two of them finally shut up and try to listen to the voices coming out of the shell. It's mostly indistinct mumbling, though, and it's hard to make out what they're speaking about.

"What are they saying?" Dennis whispers.

"Let's wait a bit and listen. I'm trying to adjust this thing so the sounds are clearer."

Finally, the voices become distinct. "It's so big and hard..." Atrielle's voice seems to be saying.

"Huh?! What exactly is hard?!" Dennis cries.

"Yeah, seriously!" Bibia, just as surprised, joins in.

'Wow... and it's so dark...'

“What?! What’s dark!?” “Yeah, what!?” The two of them clamor. With all the noise they’ve been making during their play-by-play of the shellphone, passerby throw concerned looks at the dark alley.

“The hell are those two doing?”

“Are they right in the head?”

“I wonder what’s wrong with those two?” the old smithing lady mutters as she slowly approaches them with her cane in hand.

Suddenly, someone sneaks up behind her and snatches her bag.

“Whoa!” she shouts as she loses her balance and topples to the ground.

The thief flees, threading his way deeper into the crowded avenue.

Witnesses start crying out for help.

“H-Hey! What the...?! They just robbed her!”

“Hey! Someone catch that thief!”

They notice Dennis and Bibia in the alley and call out for help.

“Hey, Dennis! They just threw the old smithing lady to the ground!”

“You have to do something!”

“Y-Yeah! I mean, wait, what? What happened!?” Dennis shouts as he rushes into the main avenue.

“Dennis! That guy just robbed her! That’s the one who nabbed her bag!” The stable man says as he points to the thief, who, at this point, has managed to escape a good distance.

“Okay, we’re going to catch him, Bibia!”

“Yes! But first, let me off your shoulders! Also, can someone hold this thing for us while we go after him!?”



The robber, filled with a sense of security over his supposedly-successful escape, is sprinting lightly through the avenue. There’s no sense of urgency; he’d boosted his speed with wind magic prior to stealing the purse, so he’s faster than most people for the time being.

“Hehe, fucking idiots. Time to get out of here and see what’s inside this bag,” he chuckles to himself. There’s a concerning sound, though. Something that sounds like rapidly approaching footsteps. He turns around and realizes he’s not as safe as he’d once thought, because someone is rapidly gaining on

him.

“How’s someone out here in the sticks strong enough to use wind magic to follow me? I’m level 30, for god’s sake! Wait... He isn’t even using magic; he’s just running after me normally!”

Dennis is hot on his trail. He’s still carrying Bibia on his shoulders, who’s clinging onto his larger frame for dear life as he’s being whipped around by the wind.

“So this is how level 99 people run?! You’re so frickin’ fast!” Bibia cries out.

“Beats me! I’ve always been a fast runner.”

“That’s your best explanation?!”

Dennis and Bibia quickly close in on the thief, but the criminal uses wind magic to jump up onto a nearby roof.

“That little shit’s using wind magic!” Dennis yells.

“Looks like it. Why are you still carrying me on your shoulders, by the way?!” Bibia frantically replies.

“I’m bad at this cat-and-mouse stuff! I’m better at close quarters combat. Why don’t you make yourself useful and cast a spell or something?!”

“I only know one spell, remember?! Umm! Soft Palm!”

Bibia creates a small, springy platform slightly above the ground, which Dennis uses to propel himself toward the rooftop. Thanks to the bouncy material and his strong legs, Dennis is easily able to scale the building with Bibia perched on his shoulders.

“Waaah! We’re so high up! Dennis, we’re too high! I’m scared!” the young mage screeches.

“Don’t shit your pants now! We’re going after him!”

The thief quickly shimmies down the building and disappears into a narrow alley. He’s smaller and more agile than Dennis thanks to the wind magic, allowing him to create some distance between him and his pursuers.

“Shit! I can’t reach the guy! Bibia, get down! Don’t hurt yourself!”

“Why can’t you just stop and drop me off nicely? Why do I need to get down while you’re still barreling ahead at full speed?!”

The thief decides to swerve to the main avenue, but before he can reach it, Bethel and Henrietta appear.

“Ah! Bethel! Henrietta!” Bibia shouts out to them. The two girls turn toward the alley the commotion is coming from. The thief is rapidly

approaching them on his way to the main street, and he prepares to shove them aside and continue fleeing.

“Henrietta! Bethel! Stop that guy!” Dennis shouts.

“Please!” Bibia adds, yelling as loudly as he can.

“Wh-What?! What the—?!”

“Outta the way, idiots! Move!”

“Eeek!”

The thief uses his wind magic to jump toward Bethel. He hopes he can psyche her out and get her to dodge out of the way. The girl flinches, and—for a brief moment—the thief can see his escape route and has a glimmer of hope.

Unfortunately for him, Henrietta quickly moves herself in front of him, blocking his path. Before he has any time to react, she’s swinging her blade down.

“Huh?!”

“Blade Dance!”

The thief crashes against her blade mid-jump. With a nasty “thunk,” he crashes into the ground and stops moving.

Bethel loses her mind at the spectacle that’s just unfolded in front of her eyes.

“Eeek! The hell was that, Ser Henrietta?! Y-You just killed that guy, didn’t you?!”

“N-No... I figured if I hit him with the back of my blade, he’d be fine.”

“That’s not the issue here! You can’t just smack random people out of the blue with your gigantic sword! Hey, you okay? Are you still alive?!”

“But Chief told me to stop him!”

Henrietta tries to apologize to Bethel while Dennis and Bibia quickly catch up. They retrieve the stolen purse from the unconscious thief and rush toward Henrietta.

“Nice one, Henrietta! What a legend!”

“That was amazing! Simply outstanding! Nice one, Henrietta!”

“Wait, what? You’re saying I did a good job, Chief?” Henrietta, who’s confused by the situation and Dennis’s praise, asks.

“You did well, Henrietta! I love you so much right now! Nicely done!”

“Huh?! Seriously, Chief?! You’re not kidding or anything?! Nice! I did it!”



After they finish handing the thief over to the authorities, Dennis and the others return the bag to the old smithing lady. Fortunately, she's been given the all-clear after the townsfolk checked her for injuries.

"Thanks, Dennis. You've been a great help."

"You shouldn't be thanking me. Henrietta was the one who stopped the thief. She's the one who really taught him a lesson."

Henrietta shyly pokes her head out from behind Dennis and laughs in embarrassment. Everyone starts to cheer.

"Hooray for the diner man! He'll keep us safe!"

"As long as we have him in town, we'll be safe! Screw the Night Fog Battalion!"

"Whoa there, guys. I just told you that Henrietta's the one who stopped the thief, not m—" Dennis tries to explain, but he's quickly interrupted by the old stable man.

"You were the one who cornered him, though, right? Just accept our appreciation."

"Hmm, okay... Thanks, I guess. It would be nice if you guys also thanked the others, though. They helped out a lot."

"Thanks, guys!"

"So you weren't a good-for-nothing after all, Henrietta!"

Within the crowd and the cheers, Bethel asks Henrietta, "Ser Henrietta, I don't understand. How were you able to move so quickly? I panicked and froze up..."

"Oh, um, well... When I heard Chief telling me to stop him, I just kinda..."

"That's nice. I wish I had reflexes like that," Bethel says, looking enviously at Henrietta.

"Thanks, Dennis. You can count on us if anything bad ever comes your way," the old man says.

"If that ever happens, sure."

"We'll be there for you. I promise."



Later that day, everyone returns to the diner. Dennis and the others decide to rest for a bit at the counter. Dennis prepares some tea and serves it to everyone.

"Whoa, so Atrielle's got herself a boyfriend?" Henrietta asks, surprised.

"I didn't notice at all..." Bethel replies, echoing Henrietta's tone.

Dennis, who's clearly conflicted, has his arms crossed. "Yeah, that looks to be the case," he sighs.

"We can't say for sure—we don't really have any solid proof yet. Maybe it's not what it looks like, right?" Bibia says while he sips some of his tea.

"She's getting to that age, though. You know, when they start getting interested in the birds and the bees"

"Are you sad or something, Chief?"

"Naaah. It's not that, but..." Dennis hesitates.

"You sound like her dad."

"Hm... I can't really say anything about that. I don't really know how close we are, or what she sees me as."

"Oh well, isn't that still a good thing? It means Atrielle is growing up."

"I guess," Dennis, now defeated, says with a shrug. As if sensing they were talking about her, Atrielle opens the door and enters the diner.

The diner falls into an awkward silence—considering everyone had just been talking about her a few moments ago, no one really knows what to say. The subject of the conversation has a bag in her hands. She heads straight to the counter and presents the bag to Dennis.

"Hm? What's this?" he asks.

"This is for you," she says as expressionless as ever. She goes across the counter to sit with everyone else.

Dennis opens the bag, only to be greeted by a small box. He opens the small box and finds a bracelet adorned with a shiny black gem.

"What's this?" Dennis asks.

"A present for you."

"How did you pay for this?"

"I've been saving up the money you give me."

"A-And what about that boy? Isn't he your boyfriend?" Dennis sputters.

Atrielle shakes her head and answers, "I didn't know what to buy as a

present, so I asked the staff at the jeweler for help. I chose this one because it's the same color as your eyes."

Bibia and the others clap their hands in surprise.

"Oh! That kid she was with is the owner's son! He talked to us this morning, remember?! The guy who runs the jeweler? That's his kid!" Bibia exclaims.

"Wait, what?" Dennis says, still confused by the situation.

Atrielle's fidgeting in her tall chair; her legs are too short to touch the ground, so she's swinging them back and forth. She asks, "Do you like it?"

"Well, I..."

Dennis is at a loss for words. He's staring down at the present, but he doesn't know how he should react. "Um, thanks," he finally manages to utter.

"Oh, wow! So in the end, Dennis was just jumping to conclusions? What a shocker. Nice job, Atrielle!" Bibia exclaims.

Henrietta cuts in, "Oh! Um! I thought about getting you a present too, Chief!"

"Pay your tab back first. Then you can worry about presents."

"R-Right! Okay! You're right! Maybe I should start helping out around here. I should start being more useful, you get me?"

"Oh, you want to help? Sounds good, Henrietta."

"I'll make sure you have plenty to do, Ser Henrietta! Leave it to me! You just need a rigorous training regimen—led by yours truly—and you'll be a decent person in no time. Three days without any rest, and I'm sure I'll be able to whip you into shape! We'll start by washing dishes!"

"W-Wait a second, Bethel! Didn't you just leave a guild that worked you to the bone?! Why are you talking about a no-rest training regimen now?!"

Night cloaks the diner, but the business remains as noisy as ever thanks to our exiles. Amid the lively chatter, Dennis looks down at the black stone and briefly cracks a smile.

Chapter 7: The Exiled Slave and the Courtroom Conspiracy

It's just another ordinary day at the diner. Primetime has come and gone, and the place is no longer bustling with afternoon clients. Once most of them have finished eating and left, Dennis sits down to take a short break.

"Man, I feel tired just looking at him. Trying to make all those dishes and use all those skills at the same time must be exhausting," Henrietta notes.

"He makes even the smallest and most trifling of techniques look useful," Bibia answers.

"Well, thanks to all his hard work, he's able to provide food fast, cheap, and super delicious! What more could you ask for?"

As the peanut gallery chatter among themselves, the bell at the entrance rings again. This time, a well-dressed man who looks to be in his forties enters.

"Oh, so he's our last customer for the afternoon? Atrielle, Bethel—you girls start closing up, okay?"

"Got it, Boss," Bethel replies. Atrielle simply gives him a peace sign as confirmation. The two girls prepare to go close shop, but the dapper old man steps in front of Atrielle and kneels.

"Ah, so you are here! My goodness!" he exclaims and wraps Atrielle in an embrace.

"H-Hey! What in tarnation's wrong with you?!" Bethel shouts.

"Is he a creep?! He must be, right? Should I grant him a swift death?!" Henrietta shouts, her hands ready on the hilt of her sword.

"Come on, we shouldn't be hasty here! But... Yeah, he has to be some kinda creep. Just don't kill him, okay?!" Bethel shouts back.

"M-My lady! Lady Atrielle! It is I, the head butle—!" the old man frantically stammers.

"Lady?" Dennis, confused about the whole situation, asks the man.

Atrielle looks at the man, who's crying on her, and slowly asks, "Stevens?"

"Yes! That is correct! It is I, Lady Atrielle! My dear Lady Atrielle Workstat!"

"Workstat?" Dennis says. Henrietta, for her part, doesn't seem any less

confused. “Did he just say Workstat?” she asks, looking quizzically at Dennis.

“The House of W-W-Workstat?! Huumuh?!” Bibia shouts.

“The Workstat?! No foolin’?!” Bethel joins in, dropping her practiced accent in shock.

“Oh, so you recognize them?” Dennis asks the pair.

“How do you not know them?! Do you live under a rock or something?!” Bibia yells back.

“Never thought there’d be a day where you’d make fun of me for not knowing something.”

“I’m not familiar with the house either, to be honest.” Henrietta mutters.

“The House of Workstat! They’re at the apex of the magical world! They produce some of the strongest mages out there!” Bethel shouts excitedly.

“I have been waiting for this day, my Lady! Ever since we suffered that terrible humiliation! Finally, the day has come!”



Stevens is sitting at the counter and wiping his copious amount of tears away with a handkerchief. The tea that’s been served to him sits there, ignored and rapidly cooling. “Sob, sob! To think! To think that my Lady would end up working as a mere waitress in such a foul, low-class establishment!” he cries.

“I’m tempted to throw this guy out of here,” Dennis mutters.

“I understand how you feel right now, Dennis, but at least let him explain his story first.”

“My name is Stevens, the head butler of the House of Workstat,” he starts. “In accordance with a royal decree—issued by the King himself, I may add—I am here on their behalf to meet with Lady Atrielle.”

“And? What do you want? You haven’t explained anything to us yet.”

“I shall start from the beginning: My lady was expelled from her family, and it was all because of that blasted Joseph! He is the girl’s uncle, you see—her father’s younger brother. When her father’s condition started to worsen, he usurped the regency and toppled the family lineage! He claimed that her blood was impure! Therefore, she was expelled,” he rambles angrily, flecks of foam and spit flying from his mouth.

“So why come now, then?”

“Her father’s testament has recently been discovered, and it confirms that she is indeed a part of the family! She is to inherit everything—from the vast estate to the bountiful wealth! The documents had been so cleverly hidden that not even Joseph could find them when he took over!”

“Um, so what does that mean again?”

“It means that the documents have been officially accepted by the royal courthouse! They have decided to review her case once more! This is the perfect chance to claim revenge on Joseph!”

“Uh, it’s kind of hard to follow you, to be honest. Did you get any of that, Bibia?” Dennis asks.

“Most of it... Although I don’t get how the situation ended up like that in the first place,” Bibia says with a shrug.

“I don’t really follow, but it sounds like good news for you, Atrielle,” Dennis says.

Atrielle, who’s sitting on one of the chairs, looks at Dennis in silence.

“The time is now! We will expose that accursed Joseph in front of the judge for all of the crimes he has committed! When that happens, Lady Atrielle shall come back to the Workstat house and succeed her father. It is as he decreed in his will!”

“I don’t want to go,” Atrielle says curtly.

“Why?” Dennis asks.

“I don’t care about them anymore,” she whispers. Dennis takes note that it’s the first time he’s ever seen her flat-out reject something.

“Why would that be, my Lady?! Despite Joseph’s poison, your dear father never stopped worrying about you—even after his last dying breath, I’m sure! We must go back to the city and face Joseph in the courthouse posthaste!”

Atrielle doesn’t answer, at least, not with words. Dennis, who’s grown used to her mannerisms, notices her expression sour slightly. He speaks to Stevens, “Hm, she doesn’t seem to be fully up for it, but you should take her anyway.”

“But of course I shall! Did you think I would leave Lady Atrielle in this putrid doghouse that you call a diner?! My Lady, let me return you to your rightful place!”

“Would you just shut up and listen for a moment, you old bastard? Where were you guys when she was being sold into slavery? What have you done for

her until now, huh?!”

“I have been diligently searching for her whereabouts ever since she was expelled! Finally, after much trial and error, I have found her! That is what!”

“I don’t know... You appearing out of nowhere and claiming all of this sounds kinda dodgy to me. But at the same time...” Dennis trails off as he looks at Atrielle.

Atrielle returns his gaze with the same expressionless face she always wears.

“...So you don’t wanna go?” he asks her.

She nods.

“Well, I don’t know the details of what happened, but wouldn’t it be best for you to accept this offer? It sounds like a good chance for you.”

“Will you come with me, Lord Dennis?”

“Uh, sure. I’ll do whatever you prefer.”



“I’ll be away for a few days, so I hope you two can keep this place clean and tidy until I’m back,” Dennis instructs Henrietta and Bethel.

“Understood!”

“Leave it to us!”

“Do whatever you want once the place is closed. Just make sure to keep robbers out.” Dennis says. He puts on his ceremonial court uniform. The stiff, formal attire is something quite out of his comfort zone. Usually, he wears clothes that are easy to move in. This uniform is constraining; the tight collar, in particular, makes him feel claustrophobic.

He would’ve bought a tailored one if he could, but there had been no time. He had to buy a ready-made suit, which proved to be a little too tight for his developed physique. Bibia, beside him, dons a similar suit, but in blue.

“Are you really okay with having me tag along?” the young mage asks.

“Yeah, I’d appreciate it if you did. I don’t really know anything about how to act around nobility. I assume you’d know a lot about it, though.”

“Leave it to me! I’m excited, not going to liet. I bought this suit ages ago with some of my savings, but I never ended up using it. I must admit, I look pretty good in this! You know what they say, ‘The suit makes the man!’”

“Huh, I never expected to hear you of all people say that. Anyway, Atrielle

—you ready?” Dennis shouts from outside the diner.

Atrielle finally emerges wearing an elegant black-and-purple dress that Stevens had brought with him for just such an occasion. She definitely has the look of a daughter of nobility. “Damn, she sure looks like a rich kid. Well, not just looks, in this case—she really is a rich kid. You could dress a beggar up like that, and she’d still be a beggar at the end of the day,” Dennis thinks.

Atrielle doesn’t seem very happy, though. She goes up to Dennis and tugs on one of his sleeves.

“Come on, Atrielle, don’t give me that look. I understand how you must feel, but you should give it a shot. You might be able to become a noble again. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“I just want to settle this and come back here. I don’t want to return to them anymore.”

“Damn, you’ve said more in the last few days than the whole time we’ve been together. Okay, let’s go and settle it as you said. I’m sure you’ll have plenty of time to think things over while we’re there. I mean, that’s how it usually is. You might be sulky now, but I’m sure that once you’ve had some fun in the city, you’ll see things in a new light,” Dennis says as he pats Atrielle’s head. The young girl smiles in response.

Stevens pokes his head out of the carriage that he had hailed for them to go to the city in. “My Lady! We are leaving! You too, peasants!” he says.

“Can this guy chill with the insults?”

“Well, we are lowborn; nothing we can do about it.”

“So we’re all ready, yes? Let us be off!”



After a rather shaky trip, Atrielle and the others manage to arrive in the city in one piece. Dennis and the others step out of the carriage and are immediately accosted by the bustling city life. Unlike the town they live in, this city is filled to the brim with people. Dennis is quite used to it, having experienced life in the city before, and still likes it for what it is. Bibia, however, looks like a fish out of water.

“Whoa, damn! This is amazing! So this is the city?!” Bibia shouts, his eyes

gleaming with excitement.

"He looks like a kid in a candy store right now. Okay, he is a kid, but I like it when he acts his age and gets all excited. He's a little conceited, but I'm sure that'll change as he gets older," Dennis thinks.

"Don't look so surprised about everything, Bibia—people are gonna look at us like we're country bumpkins," he says out loud to the boy.

Atrielle gets off the carriage. She's as expressionless as ever, but Dennis notes a hint of sadness. He can tell she's not happy being here. Dennis has learned to pick up on any minuscule hints of emotion Atrielle displays, and this was the worst one yet. He wants nothing more than to give her a heaping bowl of fried rice and see the small glint of joy she gets when she eats his food. "What should I do? I've never seen her this upset," he thinks.

"What's wrong, Atrielle? Not comfortable being here?" he asks her.

She looks at him and whispers, "I want to go back home soon."

"Yeah, we will; don't worry. We'll settle this as quickly as possible and go back. Until then, let's do our best, okay?"

"Very well, Lady Atrielle; let us get going! You too, peasants!"

"Wait a second, we're close to the restaurant... Oh! I wish I could stop by to say hi to the chef, but I don't think I'll have the time. Besides, how am I even supposed to apologize to her? How do I start a conversation without making things awkward? I guess I'll have to put it aside for now, but sooner or later, I'll have to do it. I mean, I'm pretty sure that even if we talk, it'll just be about something depressing anyway," Dennis thinks as he makes his way through the city with the others.



The courthouse is a gigantic, modern building within the city. Dennis figures that he can fit several of his diners into just one of them. It's been constructed with every detail accounted for—there is no room for error, no matter how minuscule. It is the royal courthouse, after all.

The group makes their way up the grand staircase and through the theatrically-gigantic open doors of the building. Inside, they happen to come across a single man in a rather flashy garment. He seems to be waiting for Atrielle and the others, because the moment he sees the group, he smiles and

approaches them.

“I’ve been waiting for you two. Lady Atrielle, Stevens, and… who might the others be?”

“I’m Dennis, her guardian of sorts.”

“I’m Bibia. No relation, I’m more of a regular customer at a certain diner.”

The man looks puzzled by their presence, but ignores it and starts explaining the situation.

“I’m Sestapitch, one of the judges of this courthouse. I’m in charge of Atrielle’s case,” he says.

“I’m not very familiar with the details, so if you could clarify the situation to us later, that would be grand,” Dennis says.

“But of course,” the judge says with a smile. He faces Stevens and addresses him. “Leave the young lady to me, Stevens. You’ll have to notify the others about your arrival.”

“Understood, Mister Sestapitch. I shall leave her in your hands,” he says. He walks off while wiping sweat from his brow with his handkerchief.

“Hmmm… It’s pretty obvious that he’s on edge from the way he’s walking. Why, though? Is he nervous about being here? Well, I don’t blame him, but I can’t really relate either. Maybe I’m weird? I’ve never gotten nervous at fancy, high-class places like this that’re supposed to remind you of your inferiority. I’ve never really felt like I needed to obey the system,” Dennis thinks.

“Very well, my Lady. If you’d please follow me,” Sestapitch says. He tries to lead Atrielle away, but she’s glued to Dennis’s side and won’t move an inch.

“Oh, sorry about this. It doesn’t seem like she’s in the mood today,” Dennis says as he taps Atrielle’s shoulders. “Come on, Atrielle, go with him. I’ll follow you.”

She doesn’t reply, but starts to follow him with a sour expression on her face. She clings on to Dennis’s clothes stubbornly.

“So what happens now?” Dennis asks Sestapitch.

“First of all, we’ll need to check if she is indeed Lady Workstat’s daughter… I mean, the late Lady.”

“And how do you plan to do this, exactly?”

“We’ll draw her blood with a small injection and cross-check it with her mother’s. Fortunately, we have the magic items at our disposal to achieve this. It shouldn’t take too long, and it won’t be a very invasive procedure.”

The moment Sestapitch mentions an injection, Atrielle's grip on Dennis's clothes tightens. She stops dead in her tracks—a first for her.



"Atrielle! They're just going to draw a little blood! Listen to me!"

Dennis and Bibia are forcibly dragging Atrielle to the doctor's office so she can get her blood drawn. The girl, for her part, is trying her hardest to show her fear and discontentment by staying rooted to the spot. She plants her feet into the marble floor, putting her all into battling the strength of the two men moving her.

"Is it really so bad, Atrielle?!" Bibia cries.

"I think that's pretty obvious! Just look at her! She looks like she's about to kill someone!"

Finally, they manage to carry her to the office. The doctor is ready and waiting with a syringe. Atrielle grabs Dennis's sleeve with all her might. She's shaking like a leaf, and her face is pale white. She looks as though the end of the world is near.

"I don't wanna! I don't wanna! I'm scared! I'm scared! I'm scared! I'm scared! I'm scared!" she cries out.

"Yeah right. You look scarier than that needle right now, Atrielle."

"This will sting just a bit," the doctor says as he prepares the syringe.

Atrielle opens her mouth and screams without making any noise.



Once the doctor has finished, Dennis carries Atrielle—who has passed out—out of the room. Bibia is waiting for them outside.

"How much blood did they take?" Bibia asks, looking at the girl skeptically.

"Only a little. She's just exhausted herself from her own anxiety, so don't worry."

Sestapitch emerges from the room with a small vial of blood. He starts walking off down the hall, and Dennis and the others follow him.

"So what now?" Dennis asks him.

“Well, as I said before, now we’ll use the magical item to cross-check the blood. It’s a pretty large machine, so it’s exclusively reserved for use here at the courthouse.”

“I see. You mind if I take up a bit of your time first, though?”

“Not at all. But why, if I may ask?”

Dennis hands Atrielle over to Bibia to create some space between them and the judge. Dennis then leans in and asks quietly, “Can you explain her situation right now? I don’t really know what’s going on in general.”

“Very well. Atrielle’s late father, Lord Famas, was the head of the Workstat house until very recently. He was an exceptionally powerful illusionist. Both literally and figuratively, he was the head of the mental side of the magical arts. No one was better than him at it. The Workstat lineage already boasts a powerful magical line, but he also had the ability to back up the name,” the judge replies.

“Huh, so he was an illusionist. Impressive.”

Much like other skills, some people take to certain types of magic easier than others. Some people are just not born all thumbs—try as they might, they’ll never be truly skillful with a weapon. Conversely, there are others who are born gifted. They turn into natural aces soon after picking it up. Katey is, as far as Dennis is aware, a genius with the blade. It all comes to what one can personally do, though. While someone might not be good with weapons, they may be proficient in magic instead. That’s why acknowledging and focusing on gifted skills is possibly the most important step one can take in their life. Dennis, for example, is a chef because he discovered that he excelled at cooking above all else.

It becomes even more complicated with the introduction of family lines and power dynamics. Some skills or spells are restricted to certain lineages. Only some bloodlines and houses are allowed to learn certain magical skillsets. For example, the Workstat family has a monopoly over the Illusion branch of magical arts. Illusion magic is simultaneously one of the rarest and one of the strongest skill trees. As a result, the Workstat family have become the face of the magical world.

In summary, this means that Atrielle has access to both a powerful, restricted branch of magic and a natural talent thanks to her bloodline.

“Indeed, he was an impressive man, a great man, even. Unfortunately, Lord

Famas was poisoned. His younger brother Joseph, who was aiming to take the head seat from him, accused the late Lady Workstart—Lord Famas's wife—of the crime. Unfortunately, this thrust Lady Atrielle into the middle of the scandal, as well. Joseph cast doubt over her lineage, so she had her status stripped and was tragically exiled from her house. This was all Joseph's ploy."

"How could someone like her end up in a slave market, though?" Dennis asks.

"Sir Dennis, you're likely unaware of how dire the power struggle between house factions are. Once she was exiled from her family, Joseph made sure to put her through hell so she wouldn't be able to return and usurp him," Sestapitch explains as he glances at the blood vial. "Lord Famas foresaw this happening and acted in advance, however. He devised a secret plan that gave her a rebuttal in case his brother tried anything. In the end, the royal house has personally asked for her case to be reopened so she can have a fair trial. I intend to rule this in her favor, as it should've been the first time. I'll make sure Joseph pays for this."

When they finally reach the end of the long corridor, Sestapitch opens the final door to reveal a spacious room with a gigantic machine in the center. The menacing machine looks almost as if it rose from hell itself. Sestapitch approaches it, opens the top lid, and adds two vials: Atrielle's, as well as another vial of blood he had placed in his robe's pocket. The machine roars to life as soon as the blood is introduced, and numerous magical circles begin to form on its surface; the circles illuminate the room with a powerful light.

"Observe—what I just introduced was Atrielle's blood and her late father's. The machine can tell us if the blood matches or not, thus proving their relation."

"That sure is useful," Dennis says.

"We have a lot of magical devices here at the courthouse, but this is the one we use the most. The majority of our cases deal with lineage and inheritance, and... Well, to put it rather bluntly, it's quite an odyssey to prove or dispel claims without this. Ah, the results are in."

The mechanism radiates a plethora of patterns and colors. After a few seconds, the patterns all converge into a single red circle. It seems as though it's a match.

"Well, at least it's an easy-to-understand system," Dennis observes.

“I have one more sample here with me—her late mother, Lady Elisa Workstat’s,” he says. He produces another vial from his robe and activates the machine again. It gets back to work, roaring and producing visuals. Finally, it displays the same pattern that was just shown.

“Very well; the results are in. Just as we suspected, she is indeed related to Lord and Lady Workstat by blood,” Sestapitch declares.

“Huh, looks like this clears all doubt,” Dennis says.

“Indeed. Now we only have to display this piece of evidence to the other judges at the courtroom. With Lady Atrielle present, we’ll prove that she is, in fact, the daughter of Lord Famas and Lady Workstat.”



After exploring the courthouse for the rest of the day, Dennis and the others head to an inn that they’ve booked for the night. Dennis is walking with an exhausted Atrielle on his back, and Bibia is still checking his urban surroundings with wide-eyed amazement.

“Whoa! The city is so nice! Maybe I was born to live in the city after all!” he exclaims excitedly.

“You sure are energetic today. I’m completely exhausted,” Dennis replies.

“Ah! A city boutique! Man, these clothes look so different compared to the ones we get in town! I feel like we’re at least two years behind the city in terms of trends.”

“If you like it so much, why not go quickly check it out?”

“You mean it?” Bibia asks, his eyes widening and glistening with excitement.

“It’s not every day you get to come to the city. Might as well make the best out of it. Just try not to constantly freak out.”

“Understood! Well, I’m off then!” Bibia happily exclaims as he practically skips straight over to the clothing display. For the young mage, who has never seen such stylish clothes before, this is a brand-new experience. Looking at all the trendy attire lined up makes his suit seem old-fashioned and dull by comparison. He turns around to check where Dennis and Atrielle are. They’re fairly close by, so he still has some time to browse.

“Whoa, this is so cool. My suit looks like crap compared to this.”

“I don’t think so. It suits you well.”

“You think so, Denn—” Bibia says, but stops mid-sentence as he turns around. The one who just spoke to him wasn’t Dennis. That should’ve been obvious to him, given how far away Dennis was the last time he checked, but he hadn’t been thinking straight. Bibia is a bit nervous. Just who did the mystery voice belong to?

At a glance, the man standing next to him could be confused for Dennis. Upon closer inspection, though, it’s obvious they’re not the same person. This man’s hair, attire, and general atmosphere is completely different. The mysterious man, who’s looking over Bibia’s shoulder at the clothes on display, continues speaking, “Buying these clothes will only serve to quench a temporary thirst. Trends come and go, but you’re wearing something timeless.”

Bibia smiles and examines the man. He’s wearing a black suit with ornate golden garnishes. His hair is black and swept back, completing the formal look of his ensemble and complimenting the color of his suit well. His facial features are similar to Dennis’s, but there’s just something... off about it all, and that makes Bibia uncomfortable.

“Don’t you think so, too?” the man asks.

“He even sounds like Dennis, but something’s off... maybe the tone?” Bibia ponders. It’s disconcerting how similar and yet how different these two men seem. “Um, I-I guess, yeah,” he stammered.

“I take it this is your first time in the city?” the other man asks.

“Y-Yes.”

The man places a finger over his lips and looks up, clearly thinking about something. “There’s a very nice cafe in front of the royal castle. If you’re staying for the night, I recommend going there for breakfast. It’s quite beautiful in the morning.”

“R-Really? Thank you...”

He seems friendly, but Bibia can’t shake the bad feeling in his gut that something about him isn’t quite right. The younger man looks down the street to try to locate Dennis. He finally spots him, but he and Atrielle are pretty far away now.

As if sensing Bibia’s nervousness, the other man kindly asks, “What’s your name?”

“I-I’m Bibia. Bibia Strange.”

“That’s a nice name. Mine’s Heath.”

“H-Heath? Um, anyways, I’ll be going now. Thanks for the recommendation,” Bibia awkwardly says. He bows and tries to leave.

The man smiles in response. “I’m sure we will meet again,” he says.

“Okay...” Bibia says, suddenly frozen in place.

“Bibia! Hey! I thought I told you to not wander around too much!” Dennis suddenly bellows from a distance.

“Ah! I-I’m sorry! See you!”

With Dennis’s yell jolting him out of his frozen stance, Bibia breaks into a sprint. Heath waves his hand goodbye.

“What happened, Lord Heath?” a woman with short, silver-hair emerges from behind Heath and asks.

He looks at her and smiles. “I was just introducing myself to one of the members of their group.”

“Just one of them?”

“Indeed. I’m sure that we will meet again. We definitely will,” he says. His smile then twists into a sinister sneer.



After a good night’s rest, Dennis and the others head back to the courthouse. The courtroom is located in the deepest section of the building. Inside, there are three judges sitting behind a platform. Dennis, Atrielle, Sestapitch, and Stevens sit on the left side of the judges. Meanwhile, Bibia sits in the visitors gallery as the sole spectator to the trial.

There are a few other people present, but they’re doctors waiting on standby in case they need to draw more blood. After a short wait, three men enter the courtroom and walk toward the right side. They’re opposite of Dennis and the others and therefore face them directly.

“Which of them is Joseph?” Dennis whispers to Sestapitch.

“The man in the center with the silver hair.”

As Sestapitch described, Joseph is proudly sitting in the middle of the three men. He’s in his forties and has long, silver hair like Atrielle. Stevens has been looking at Joseph, too. He’s been visibly on edge the entire time,

constantly dabbing at the sweat around his brow and neck. Dennis notes that the butler seems to sweat buckets whenever he's nervous.

Since everyone is present, the trial commences. The head judge, an old man sitting at the center of the two other judges, starts the proceedings. "The court is now in session for the trial concerning the succession of the Workstat house. The case has been reopened by the royal decree of His Majesty, who wishes to see that Lord Famas's will is fulfilled as it states in its entirety. We will determine if the plaintiff is indeed the true successor of the house."

He looks at Dennis's group and then, holding a pair of old-fashioned glasses, checks the documents on his desk. He reads out, "On the plaintiff's side, we have Atrielle Workstat. Representing her are the second-class judge, Sestapitch, the former head butler of the Workstat house, Stevens, and her guardian—the former sous chef at Blacks' Restaurant, former chef of the Silver Wings Battalion, and current restaurant owner, Dennis Blacks."

As he calls out each person's name, they each rise to their feet and bow to the judge.

"On the opposing side, we have the defendant and current head of the Workstat house, Joseph Workstat. Representing him are the first-class judge Andrew, and the current head butler of the Workstat house, Rodrigo Cervantes."

Like the others, they also stand up and bow to the judge.

Joseph and Dennis exchange a quick but intense stare. "Hmph. I never would've expected to see you here. I've heard a great deal about you, former Silver Wings member Dennis," Joseph says.

"Huh. I don't remember you very well, but I do recall that you were a client of ours at some point, 'Lord' Joseph. You really screwed our precious poster girl over. I won't go easy on you, you hear me?"

"Goodness. It would appear you're just as brutish as people say. Both your class and your attitude are that of a barbarian. Know your place, maggot."

"Order! Order, I say! I declare this session open!"



"In the late Lord Famas's will, he explicitly states that Lady Atrielle Workstat is his and his wife's daughter. This would mean that she is eligible

for her family's inheritance. However, the inheritance is split in half: there is a division between the 'inheritance of bloodline' and the 'inheritance of knowledge.' The former represents wealth and family power, while the latter represents knowledge and the family's secrets. The inheritance of bloodline is granted to Lady Atrielle Workstat, while the inheritance of knowledge is given to Lord Joseph."

The head judge reads the entire document in one go. He takes a deep breath and continues, "The objective of this trial is to ascertain the legality and veracity of this document."

"Your honor," Andrew, the judge sitting next to Joseph, says as he stands up. "I believe that a decision has already been handed down in regards to Atrielle Workstat's legitimacy. It was proven that she was indeed the daughter of Lord Famas, but not the daughter of his late wife. We believe that she is the bastard offspring of one of Lord Famas's affairs. Hence, she is ineligible to inherit his legacy."

Sestapitch stands up and retorts, "That is the purpose of this trial. We wish to review those facts once more. I believe that some of the procedures were not handled in a proper manner in the last trial. I'm sure that once we prove that Lady Atrielle is indeed the late Workstats' child, all will be cleared of doubt."

"It matters not how many times attempted, as it will all be in vain. This is a pitiful waste of my time," Joseph scoffs.

Dennis is blocking Atrielle's ears with his hands so she doesn't have to listen to the courtroom banter. He wishes he could drown the voices out himself. "The best thing to do here would be to shut up and listen. I swear I'd love nothing more than to smash my fist into their stupid, prissy faces, but I can't. So what if she's a bastard child? She's still his child, right? What's wrong with that?" he thinks to himself.

"We will see if we are wasting time or not soon enough. Doctor!" Sestapitch calls for the man they saw yesterday. He walks to the center of the room, carrying a syringe in his hand. Atrielle is just as scared now as she was then, but at least she's had some time to prepare for this moment. She shuts her eyes and squeezes Dennis's hand as she waits for the doctor to do his job. Dennis knows how scared she is, as if her trembling wasn't enough of an indicator, so he pats her back in an attempt to soothe her.

Once the doctor finishes taking her blood, he divides it into two different vials. One of the judges descends from the podium carrying a small box.

"We will now perform a blind selection. In order to ensure there are no biases or foul play, people within this room will be selected at random to test the blood machine. In this box are several slips of paper—everyone must draw one. If you are selected, you must present the vials to the machine."

"Hm, so that's how they decide. Pretty impartial," Dennis thinks.

Everyone in the room pulls a slip from the box.

Dennis, Atrielle, and Sestapitch pull a white paper, signaling that they're not chosen. So who was chosen? As Dennis looks around, Stevens stands up.

"I... I was chosen," he says, producing a red piece of paper to show to everyone.

The old judge urges him to step forward. Stevens, as tense as ever, steps out from the podium and approaches the gigantic apparatus. He's still frantically wiping sweat off his face.

"I hope he doesn't get too nervous and drop the vials. I don't think Atrielle would be able to withstand another round of getting her blood taken. Seeing him so nervous makes me super uncomfortable, too... I'm feeling dehydrated just looking at him sweat. Then again, if he's as loyal to Atrielle as he claims he is, he should fulfill his duties just fine. Damn, he's awfully high-strung, though... Maybe he's scared of something?"

"I shall insert Lady Atrielle's and Lord Famas's vials first," Stevens announces. He takes the two vials placed on a desk beside the machine, opens the machine's lid, and places them inside. The magical instrument does the same thing that Dennis saw yesterday. After some racket, it displays a bright red circle.

"Now, I will introduce Lady Atrielle's and Lady Elisa's vials," Stevens mutters, continuing to sweat buckets. Compared to the rattled butler, Dennis has calmed down. The machine has acted just the way it had yesterday, so he's sure everything will turn out fine. Once the initial noise and lights have died down, the machine produces the result—this time, however, a blue "X" appears.

"...What?!" Sestapitch shouts as he bolts out from his seat. Dennis can't believe his eyes either.

"Sigh. I do believe I warned everyone of this," Joseph says, grinning, as he

gets to his feet. “I think this should be conclusive proof. That child is not my sister-in-law’s daughter. She’s a bastard child born from my brother’s affairs with a lowborn tart. She sullies the Workstat name.”

“Well, it appears that she is indeed the daughter of Lord Famas, but not of his late wife,” the head judge states as he scans the papers. “Based on the evidence shown, we can ascertain that this ‘inheritance’ letter by Lord Famas is nothing short of a forgery; hereby making it null and void.”

“W-Wait!” Sestapitch shouts, “I did the test yesterday, and both of them resulted in a positive match! There must be something wrong with the machine! Let us try once more!”

“Nothing will differ from a second attempt; I have informed you of this already. What? Are you going to sit here and try to make a red circle appear? We would be here for millennia!” Joseph exclaims with a smug grin.

“Second-class judge Sestapitch, your request is overruled. The examination has been conducted based on an impartial system. Thus, we cannot allow it to be done again.”

Dennis looks over at Stevens, who’s standing still in front of the machine. He notices that Stevens is giving Joseph a strange look, but when he notices Dennis’s stare, he averts his eyes.

“I told you so. No matter how many times you try it out, that blue mark will continue to appear,” Joseph says a bit more gently, as if trying to appear compassionate to the judges. “My brother probably tried to veil his wrongdoings by making her his heir. I can understand how he felt. Unfortunately, one should not lie—especially when it comes to inheritance. As a powerful mage and the head of the house, my brother was a great man, but alas, he made a grave mistake. That mistake is this girl.”

The judge nods and says, “We accept the fact that the will is a forgery, but we must still recognize that Lady Atrielle is Lord Famas’s daughter.”

“Indeed, that is true,” Joseph answers.

“Therefore, based on the will, I propose the following: we must swap the recipients of Lord Famas’s inheritance. Lord Joseph shall receive the ‘inheritance of bloodline,’ as it has been so far. Lady Atriella shall receive the ‘inheritance of knowledge,’ meaning she will receive the family’s ‘residence of the knowledge.’ What are your thoughts on this, Lord Joseph?”

“I don’t mind. Even if her very existence is foul, she is still my brother’s

daughter, after all. That much, I must accept," he says with a theatrical shrug. He sits down and whispers something to the judge next to him. Dennis uses a special skill to listen in on them.

"...Good chance for us to get rid of that disgusting speck of dust. It'll be two birds with one stone," Joseph whispers.

Dennis bolts out of his seat and heads over to Stevens and the machine.

"S-Stop right there, Dennis Blacks! The session isn't over yet!"

He ignores the judge's orders, grabs Stevens by his collar, and raises him up.

"Ugh! Uaaagh!" Stevens yells.

"Stop! What do you think you're doing, Dennis Blacks?! Return to your seat at once!"

Dennis notices that, even while hoisted up, the old butler is still clinging tightly to his handkerchief. The handkerchief is stained with blood, and Stevens has a cut on his hand.

"So when he introduced the vials of blood into the machine, he mixed his own blood in to skew the results?" Dennis realizes. He gives the older man a shake and roughly asks, "Why would you do that?!"

"Forgive me! Lord Joseph promised my old position back if I did as he said. I'm truly so sorry; however, I need to make a living, as well," Stevens stammers while sweating like a pig.

Dennis casts a fire spell over Stevens' coat, burning it to ash. Judging by the man's screams, the fire is even hotter than usual—likely because Dennis is constantly using it to cook his food.

"I-It burns! Agh!" Stevens screams. Finally, Dennis releases him, and he falls flat on the marbled floor. Two pieces of paper flutter out of his remaining garments: one white, and the other, the red one he'd claimed to have pulled from the box.

"I knew it."

"Dennis Blacks! This is your last warning! Return to your seat this very instant! You insult the court of law!" the head judge yells out.

"Insult the court of law? You bastards are the ones who're insulting this court of law!" Dennis roars back as he picks up the pieces of paper. He spreads them out and shows them to the judges. "Everything was rigged from the start! There was no 'blind selection!' It was all planned out so this piece-of-shit could tamper with the evidence and win the case!"

“Enough with your conspiracy theories! You have no proof of this!” the judge retaliates.

“Why would he have two pieces of paper, then?! He should just have the red one, shouldn’t he?!”

“Th-That… That’s inconclusive proof! You’re the one who sabotaged the trial with your sudden manhandling! You could very easily have slipped that white paper into his clothes!”

“Participating in this farce of a case has been one of the biggest mistakes I’ve ever made. You act morally superior, as though you’re on the side of justice, but you’re all just actors in your little pretend courtroom! No, even worse than that—you’re crooks who accept bribes!” Dennis yells angrily. He squeezes his fists so hard that the paper slips in his hand are completely crumpled and tattered beyond recognition.

“Call the Courthouse Knights! Expel this man!” the head judge commands.

“You set this whole act up so you could get rid of the real will! You put this little girl through hell twice—first, you expelled her from her family and sold her into slavery. As if that wasn’t enough for you, you had to drag her back to make her attend this circus! And for what?! If this case was reopened and decided in courts, I bet no one would dare oppose your rule, huh? Am I right?! Of course I’m fucking right!” Dennis screams as a dozen knights flank him. “You’re the ones insulting the court of law! You ganged up on a little girl and spat on her humanity! You made her go through hell! For that, I’ll give you hell! I’ll burn this whole godforsaken place to the ground!”

The knights draw their blades, and Dennis starts to chant a spell.

“Flaming Hammer!” he bellows and flames erupt from both of his fists. He turns to the group of knights and throws a powerful flame-packed punch at them. Fire crackles menacingly around the knights, and they freeze in place. They’ve never seen anything like this before; Dennis looks to them like some sort of flame-engulfed demon. Dennis, for his part, can’t control the fire well. He’d never been able to master the spell, and the fire burns his sleeves to a crisp as a result.

The knights are unsure of how to react, but they’re afraid to approach him. They begin to blindly and frantically brandish their swords, trying to land a hit on him.

“If anyone has a death wish, they can feel free to come closer,” Dennis says

menacingly. He slowly walks toward the knights, but he's tackled from behind by Bibia.

"Stop, Dennis! Stop this! Agh, so hot!" the mage cries.

"I'm not stopping, Bibia! I've never been this angry in my entire life! I'll give them a taste of hell!"

"And what will happen after you do that, huh?! You'll get arrested and become an enemy of the realm! What are you gonna do then? Run away for the rest of your life?! What about Atrielle?!"

Dennis looks over to where he was sitting a moment ago. Seeing her causes something to well up inside him, something that he's never felt before.

"Sh-Shut up! Fuck! Shit! Fuck you all!"

"Calm down, Dennis! I said calm down! Agh, man, you're on fire!"



Finally, Dennis manages to leave the courtroom to calm down. He and Bibia are waiting in the corridor. Sestapitch approaches Dennis.

"I didn't know anything about this; you must believe me. I never would've thought that it would be rigged from the start," the judge pleads.

Dennis doesn't answer. Instead, he looks down at the burned, tattered remains of his clothes—could they be even called clothes at this point?

"The court has ruled that your outburst was out of sheer ignorance. It's unprecedeted, but they won't press any charges or pursue the case any further."

"I was wrong," Dennis whispers. "I should've listened to Atrielle. We never should've come here in the first place. I should've just listened to Stevens and stayed in my dirty diner. I was dead weight here."

"But what can you do in the end, Dennis? Come on," Bibia says, rubbing a bruise on his cheek.

Dennis and Bibia had struggled with the group of knights as they'd tried to remove them from the room. As a result, both of them are covered in bruises.

"...Oh well, at least your trip wasn't in total vain, Sir Dennis. Lady Atrielle now has ownership over the state of knowledge. Let's go see what that is."



Led by Sestapitch, Dennis and the others arrive at a small residence located at the city's outskirts. Sadly, the building's state does not reflect its grandiose name.

"So this is the 'Residence of Knowledge,' huh?"

"It looks like anything but a residence, to be honest."

As they enter, Dennis's mood immediately fouls. The interior is blanketed with dust and cobwebs. It looks as though ages have passed since someone last entered. Massive bookshelves scaling even larger than Dennis span the residence. The place is utterly packed to the brim with books. Unfortunately, like the rest of the place, many of them are in a state of decay. Many of the books are covered in mold. Combined with the thick layer of dust, it makes the atmosphere inside the house damp, musty, and hard to breathe in.

"So this is the Workstat's Residence of Knowledge..." Bibia whispers.

"This state contains all of the family's books spanning back to the original house leader. The collection has been increasing along with the years, but, unfortunately, it was neglected for a long time and used primarily as a storage house. The lack of care has ruined many of the books," Sestapitch explains.

"I'm sure these books can fetch a pretty hefty price. At least we have that," Dennis remarks.

"You're not wrong. There are quite a large number of ancient grimoires and historical records. Unfortunately, due to the collective state of decay, their collective worth isn't very high," Sestapitch says.

"Great, so it's basically a residence filled with trash. What do you think, Bibia?"

"Uh, hm... I'm sure that if we look hard enough, we'll find some good books," he replies.

A thunderous roar bellows behind the group. Everyone turns around to see what happened and finds that the floor has given way where Atrielle was standing. There's a large hole now leading to the floor below.

"What the—?! H-Hey! Are you okay?!" Dennis shouts.

"Whaaat?! Atrielle, are you okay?! Wait..." Bibia says.

Dennis and the others rush to the basement to check on Atrielle. She seems rather dazed, but she attempts to get up and compose herself. Her head is spinning, and she's unsteady on her feet.

“Hnnngh...” she groans.

“Are you hurt at all? Jeez, I swear. You have pretty bad luck sometimes,” Dennis says, looking her over for any external injuries.

“Nghhh... It hurts...”

Suddenly, Bibia starts screaming like a madman as he looks around.

“What the—?! Hey! What is this place, anyway?!?” he screeches. He tears around the basement, plucking random books from shelves and looking over them feverishly.

“Ne-Necronomicon?! And a Yuzuto manuscript! Why are these here?! Are they real? Like, are they really real?!”

“What? Are those valuable or something?” Dennis asks.

“Not even! These go beyond just mere valuables. They’d be considered national-heritage treasures! Hell, I’d say even world-heritage! What?! Wait a second! Don’t tell me that this basement...? A-Ah! I knew it! All the books here are—!” Bibia babbles excitedly.

“Looks like we found ourselves a nice trove.”

Sestapitch looks at the books on the shelf with surprise. “The entire Manglemore series is here, and the Enuma series, too... Whoa, I-I can’t believe this. All the most renowned books in magical history are right in front of my eyes right now... and even the infamous prohibited Black books?!”

Many of these books are considered and referred to as the “Legendary Lost Books of History.” They’re mentioned numerous times in the records of ancient kings, but appeared to have been lost to the sands of time. Their titles were taught in academic circles and bemoaned for the loss of valuable knowledge. One of them was the collective journals of King Yuzuto, considered to be the father of the magical arts. Another was the cryptic magical memorandum of the great Adventurer-King Natura, who was reportedly the first person to have ever discovered a dungeon. And even further, there was a historical record of King Yungfrey, the first king who ever existed. He was reported to be the one who discovered the existence of special abilities.

“S-S-Sestapitch, sir, are these books the genuine articles?! M-My hands are trembling!”

“B-Bibia, calm down for a minute. L-Let’s call in an expert so we can ascertain their v-validity. Then, um...”

Dennis notes with some mirth that the two of them seem like they're on the brink of fainting.

"Hey, Atrielle—in the end, it looks like you got quite the inheritance."

"Maybe... Maybe this is what her father wanted for her after all? To have these books and knowledge?" Sestapitch stipulates. He continues by explaining, "These are all Workstat relics—a wonderful heritage of mankind—that have been stored in this place for generations. It's a place that only heads of the family would know about. Joseph only cares about money and power; perhaps Lord Famas foresaw this happening? Perhaps he arranged his will in a way that left Joseph to his own machinations, inheriting the 'useless' part, while Lady Atrielle inherits his treasure?"

"Pfffft! That's funny. That would be a master plan, all right. Let's leave it at that, then—it's funnier to think this went all according to plan. Right, Atrielle?" Dennis chuckles and looks at the young girl. She nods.

"Okay, so what should we do with all of these, anyway? These are yours, Atrielle, so it's your call," Dennis says.

"...Let's take them back to the diner and leave them there. Customers can read them while they wait for their orders," she mumbles.

"That sounds good! Nice idea, Atrielle! You're a genius!"

"Whaaat?! That's how you want to use these sacred texts?! As waiting room magazines?! Are you planning on giving your customers a legendary, one-of-a-kind book with their daily special?! Huh!?" Bibia screeches at the girl. Atrielle answers with a peace sign.

Dennis usually knows how she feels, even if she seems inexpressive to others; right now, she's happier than she's ever been before.

Chapter 8: Just before the Start of Rush Hour

It's afternoon, during the diner's busiest time. Bibia and Henrietta stand in front of the diner, eyes agape at the spectacle.

"Wow..."

"You never get tired of seeing it."

They're referring to the seemingly-endless queue formed in front of Dennis's diner. Bethel's at the back of the line, holding up a sign to signal where it ends. Bibia and Henrietta take a look at the people making up the queue. There are all sorts of magicians and magically-inclined folk, from mages to sages. The only thing they have in common is that they're clearly outsiders who've traveled to line up here. There's even an old man who appears to be a sage being carried on a palanquin by his servants.

The duo peeks inside. They catch a glimpse of some of the diner's regulars, but they're largely outnumbered by strangers who probably came from very far away just to eat here.

Only a week has passed since Atrielle had brought the books she'd inherited from the residence, but word of mouth spread quickly. Soon, the diner had become absolutely packed.

Inside, customers are chattering excitedly while they're reading and eating.

"How can this be?! A complete set of the legendary Yuzuto's manuscripts, plus several other legendary grimoires?! People have been scouring the world for ages for them, and they show up at a simple diner?!"

"They have the Necronomicon here?! But it's a legendary book! So the rumors about this place were true after all!"

"Aaah! The legendary records of the realm's creation by the first king and the wicked Inis?! It's so incredibly detailed! The association would be shocked if they could see this! The very foundation of our beliefs has crumbled!"

Dennis, meanwhile, is jumping from one place to another and shouting at everyone.

"Hey, you over there! I don't mind if you read the books while you're eating, but you need to leave once you finish your food so we can seat another customer! This isn't a library!"

"P-Please, just give me a little longer! Let me finish this page of the

Manglemore Treaty! It has the info that could save my wife from her crippling disease. Please!” the customer begs.

“Atrielle! Looks like we have a troublemaker over here!”

Atrielle makes a peace sign with one hand and has a tray in her other that she was clearing from a table. “I’ll make an exception for you. You can loan it for a bit,” she tells him.

“S-Seriously?!” he exclaims.

Bethel suddenly shouts at the group outside. “That’s it for today! We’re not opening tonight, guys. Sorry about that!”

“What?! You’re not opening tonight?!” unhappy potential customers shout back.

“Sorry, but that’s today’s special. We’re not opening tonight. Please come back tomorrow!”

“You’re hindering the advancement of the magical arts... no, of the entire human race! Please let us in!”

“Sorry, but no,” Bethel states flatly.



Once the afternoon rush hour has finished, Dennis quickly cleans the diner. When he finishes, he grabs a towel and a small bucket and wraps them up into a large cloth bundle. Bethel and Atrielle come down the stairs with similar bundles in their arms.

“Are you two ready?” Dennis asks.

“But of course!” Bethel exclaims. Atrielle, as always, replies with a peace sign.

Suddenly, the diner’s door bursts open. Henrietta and Bibia enter, carrying their own bundles with accompanying wide smiles. Dennis checks over everyone, hoists his own makeshift bag over his shoulders, and shouts out, “Okay, guys! Let’s go!”

“Time to have a bath before the great feast!”

“Yaaay!”



The diner crew arrives at the bath house, which is located in the southern part of town. The baths are divided by gender and barred off from each other by a thin wall.

The group splits up and enters their respective baths, but the entire

establishment soon hears Bibia shouting. “Daaamn, Dennis! Amazing! You’re jacked!”

Bibia is gawking at Dennis’s body. The mage is wearing only a towel wrapped around his torso, while Dennis is fully naked. The chef’s muscular physique is on full-display.

“Hahaha, I guess this is a result of hard work,” he says as he flexes a bit, showcasing his large arms and firm abs.

“How the hell do you get back muscles like this?! Whoa, and they’re so firm! What do you do, eat solid steel bars for breakfast?!” the smaller mage shouts.

“Meanwhile, look at you, Bibia. You’re so scrawny! No wonder people confuse you for a woman—your face matches the body!” Dennis jokes.

“What do you want from me? I’m a mage, remember? I don’t need a body like yours... though I am curious about how to get that big, not gonna lie. You know, hypothetically.”

“Do 2,000 pushups a day, and you’ll look like this in no time.”

“Are you even human, Dennis? How can you expect anyone to do that daily?”

“Oh, come on—even you can reach this stage. How about we cut it to 100 pushups a day at first? That’s doable, right? Maybe you can start by doing 20 when you wake up. Sooner or later, you’ll be doing 2,000 in a flash!”

“I can only imagine how much time that would take,” Bibia groans.

“Also, why are you wearing your towel like that? Take that shit off, and face me like a man. Don’t worry; I won’t peek, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Oh, uh, I’ll pass. I feel more comfortable this way.”

“Oh, shut up already, and take it off.”

“N-No! I’m not taking it off!”

“Quiet. Here, I’ll even do it for you.”

“Shit! Why are you one of those weird guys who like to strut around buck-naked in places like this?! Why can’t you just be a normal person?!”

“You think you can take me on in a fistfight, you punk?”

“Aaagh! Someone help me! He’s gonna do nasty things to me! Help!”



Meanwhile, on the other side of the bath, the girls are washing themselves as Bibia’s frantic screams echo through the room.

“Looks like they’re having fun on the other side,” Bethel remarks as she sprays some magical washing powder over herself.

Atrielle’s sitting on a stool next to her, and Henrietta is seated behind Atrielle and washing the young girl’s hair.

“Your hair is so silky, Atrielle! I love it!” she exclaims. “Are you fine with me washing it? It doesn’t hurt or anything, does it?”

Atrielle’s eyes are blissfully closed, but she tilts her head back and gives the knight a peace sign to let her know nothing’s wrong.

Bethel looks at Henrietta and frowns. Unlike her, Henrietta’s body is far more developed, with a shapely silhouette and full, rounded hips.

“I’ll be honest, Ser Henrietta—I’m surprised,” Bethel tells her.

“Hm? What’s up?”

“How should I put it... Like, how long have you been like that?”

“What do you mean?” Henrietta asks. She suddenly notices Bethel looking directly at her body.

“Hm, it’s just that... you’re pretty well-endowed.”

“You’re not bad yourself, Bethel. Why are you so upset?”

“I don’t just mean well-endowed in that area. Your whole body is nice, and you’ve got a slim waist. And, to top it all off, you’re quite tall. Man, do I envy you,” she mutters as she looks down at her own figure, dejected.

“Huh? I didn’t realize there was such a big difference between us,” Henrietta says.

“Of course there is. You’re way sexier than I am.”

“S-Sexy?! ”

As the two of them talk, Dennis’s booming laugh can be heard through the narrow wall.

“Hahaha! You’re even dainty down there, dude!”

“Dammit! This is why I didn’t want to take it off! I’m a grower, not a shower, okay!? You haven’t seen my full potential!”

“I remember mine being bigger when I was your age, even when it wasn’t so-called ‘growing.’ ”

“You can’t be serious!”

Bethel and Henrietta listen in on their antics in silence, while the latter continues to clean Atrielle’s hair.

“Nice conversation they’re having over there.”

“Guess it’s not a surprise, considering where we are.”

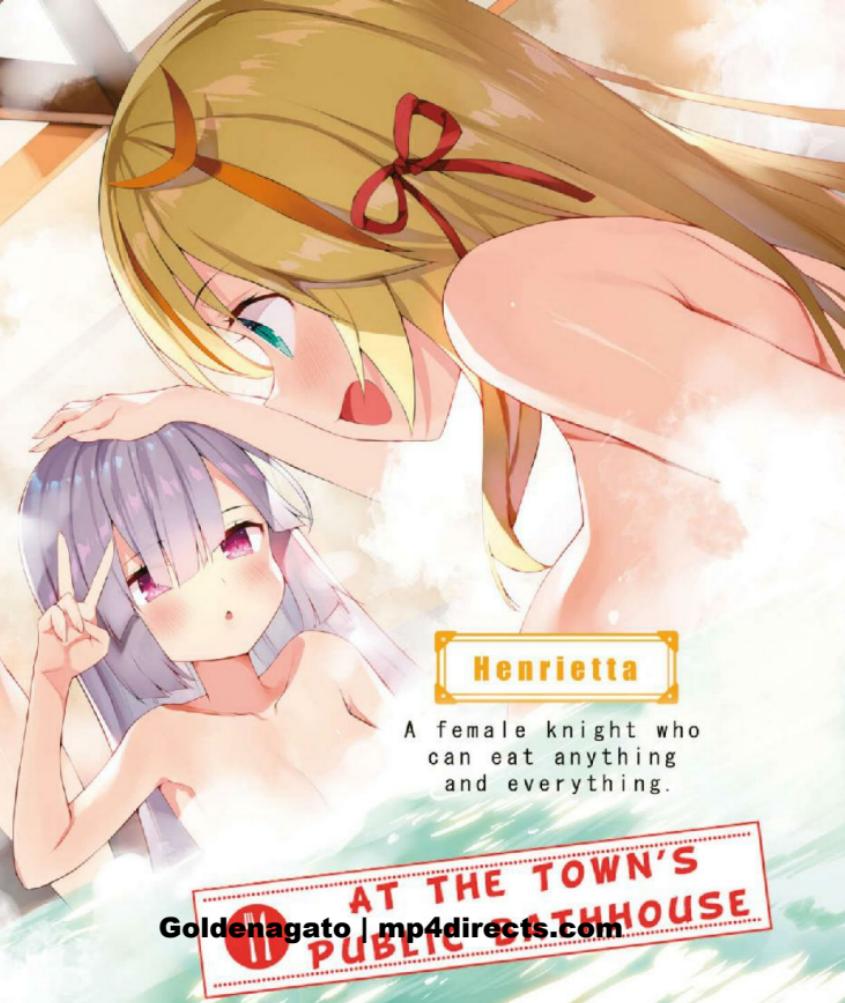
Bethel

A young countryside girl.
She's surprisingly wise
for her age.



Henrietta

A female knight who
can eat anything
and everything.





Dennis and the others leave the bath and return to the diner. They change their clothes and place a sign that says "Closed for the Day" over the door. Then they head toward the town's plaza. Since it's already nighttime, the area is almost deserted. The group set up a camp of sorts at one of the ends of the plaza—they set up a table, some chairs, and a small barbecue. Once they finish, everyone grabs a drink.

"Henrietta, you should be the first one to give a speech," Dennis says.

"Whaaat!? Me?"

"It's gotta be you. Bibia thinks so, too," he nudges the knight.

"Wait, I do?" Bibia asks with an awkward smile.

Henrietta stands up, takes a few deep breaths, and starts her speech.

"U-Um... Well, the reason I asked Dennis to give you all the night off, and the reason we've all gathered here today is... ahem..."

"Booooring." "Just get to the point!" Bibia and Dennis heckle Henrietta a bit from the sidelines.

"Ugh! W-Well, um, basically, I know you guys have had to look after me so far, but, um..." she pauses for a moment, fidgeting awkwardly, and the rest of the group remains silent. Finally, she continues, "I finally found a job! Thank you all for your support! And a special thank you to Chief! Thank you so much for taking care of me!"

The group all have something to say.

"Ohhhh!"

"Not a freeloader anymore! Nice!"

"Well, where's your new job at? Which guild? Don't leave us hanging here," Dennis says.

"O-Okay. Um, well, I actually didn't join an adventurer's guild. I... I've enrolled in the knight's order. There," she stammers.

"Wait, for real?"

"Y-Yeah... It's something I've considered for a long time, b-but...", she chokes up a bit as she attempts to continue her speech. "I... I just want to help others, you know? Part of it was all thanks to Chief. He's b-been such a big inspiration to me. But it's other things, too. And after thinking about it for a while, I ended up applying for the 'police force' with the knights. It means I'll have to leave town though."

“I see...” Bibia says solemnly. Dennis pats his back in support.

“Don’t you have something to say as well?” Dennis asks the mage.

“Oh, right. True,” Bibia says. He stands and faces everyone. “Um, I’ve actually been accepted into another guild. It’s not a big party or anything like that, but I’d like to do my best regardless. I’m still going to stay in town, though. Hopefully, we’ll still continue to see each other often.”

“Ohhh! Nice one, Bibia!”

“Thanks, Bethel!”

“Nice, Bibia! You’re no longer a freeloader—just like me!” Henrietta exclaims.

“Whoa there. Unlike you, I’ve paid for my food from the get-go,” Bibia replies.

“Huh?”

“Well, in any case—today, we’re celebrating with a barbecue! Some people have to leave us after today, so let’s make it a night to remember! Let’s eat!” Dennis shouts and raises his drink. Everyone follows his lead, raising their glasses excitedly in a cheer.



“Please forgive me, Chief! Pleaaase!”

“You sure did eat a lot of free food at my place.”

“I-I already paid you a big chunk of my advance pay, didn’t I?! I promise I’ll come back and pay the rest once I save up a little more! Look, I’ll admit it—I know I was in the wrong to come to the diner so often, but please forgive me!” Henrietta cries.

“Okay, okay. You can pay me back later. Anyway...” Dennis mumbles, his face red from the beer he’s been swigging.

Meanwhile, Atrielle lifts a slice of meat she’s been cooking on the barbecue and presents it to Bethel.

“You can eat it now,” she says.

“Obviously I can’t! This is still basically raw!” Bethel cries.

“You can eat it now.”

“You’re stubborn as a mule! I’m not eating anything raw! I swear, sometimes, you’re just...!”

Bibia watches the two girls argue and talks to Dennis. “Atrielle and Bethel sure have gotten along quickly,” he says.

“Yeah... Bethel’s leaving too, actually,” Dennis replies.

“Really?”

“Mhm. She needs it, though. She seems better now, but it’d be best for her to go back to her village and take it easy for a while. At least, that’s what I think she’ll do.”

“Maybe we should actually ask her about her future plans instead of just speculating?”

“I also heard she has an interest in becoming a teacher at her alma mater since a few of her former teachers recommended the position to her.”

“Oh, yeah. She graduated with all honors, didn’t she?” Bibia says. His expression darkens as he ponders something over, and then says, “Looks like everyone’s going their own way.”

“Yup,” Dennis replies with another gulp of his beer.

“Actually...” Bibia says, glancing over at the slightly-intoxicated man, “I just remembered that the judge called you Dennis Blacks back at that trial. He said you were the former sous chef at the Blacks’ Restaurant.”

“Yeah. What about it?” Dennis asks.

“I heard you took that as your last name since you grew up there.”

“Mhm. The head chef was the one who let me take her surname. But we had our differences, and we ended up growing apart. That’s why I don’t really mention my full name anymore—I don’t really feel like it. That’s how I’m registered at the census, though.”

“You had your differences with her?”

“Meh, I was a cocky brat back then, my head always in the clouds. One day, we started provoking each other, and let’s just say one thing led to another. We ended up fighting because of it. Thinking back on it, I must’ve been just barely over level 90.”

“Huh. I didn’t know you went through a cocky stage.”

“I don’t think I’ve grown mentally that much after that, to be honest. The only thing that’s changed is that I now know what my limits are, but nothing else.”

“I still find it impressive that you managed to reach level 99, though. Do you even have any limits, being as strong as you are? I can count the number of people who match you in level on one hand.”

Dennis laughs and replies, “I used to have that same train of thought. Back

in the day, I thought that I'd break the absolute limit and manage to reach that unconquerable peak—the much-coveted level 100. I figured that once I did, I'd be unstoppable. I'd run away from the restaurant, see the world, et cetera. I wanted to prove to the head chef that I could be something more. I guess you could say I wanted to surprise her."

"So you ended up joining the Silver Wings Battalion."

"Yep. I stayed with them for a long time, too. It brings back good memories... they were quite nice to me," Dennis reminisces as he stares blankly off into the distance. "But in the end, I never ended up reaching level 100."



"Haaah... we drank too much."

Dennis stumbles along, his weight propped up on Bibia's shoulder, as they head back to the diner after the barbecue. They had been at it for almost two hours, constantly eating and drinking. Like Dennis had said, they had tried their hardest to enjoy it to the fullest; it was, after all, a farewell party for much of the group.

Henrietta and Bethel would soon be leaving the town, but they decided to stay a little longer to help Dennis tidy up the place. As they're talking about hosting another party sometime in the future, Henrietta notices something. She stops pushing the cart with all the equipment they'd brought for the party and looks out into the distance.

"Wow, something's burning over there. Maybe someone else is having a campfire party, too?" she wonders.

Dennis follows Henrietta's gaze. Sure enough, something is definitely burning off in the distance. It isn't a campfire, though—it's too bright to be one, and there are thick, dark plumes of smoke emerging from the bright light. That's when they hear the screams.



"The diner is burning, the diner is burning!"

Dennis and the others watch the furiously crimson flames twist and consume the small diner. Everything inside is being reduced to ash.

"The hell is this...?" Dennis says quietly, his strength completely sapped.

The crowd is in a frenzy, shouting orders and trying to help out.

"Water! We need water! Is there anyone around here who can use water

magic?"

"The fire's too big! Someone, please help!"

"B-Boss, we have to do something!" Bethel shouts, her voice trembling.

"Y-Yeah," Dennis answers lifelessly. "We have to extinguish the fire..."

Another commotion sprouts up in the crowd. The two witch girls who are regulars at the dinner are shouting something.

"They did it! It was those guys over there!"

"They were the ones that lit the place up! I saw them do it!"

"Yeah! We didn't know the place was closed tonight, so we came to eat as we usually do. That's when we saw them!"

Dennis looks over at the suspects the girls are pointing at. He remembers their faces—they're the ones from the Night Fog Battalion who abandoned Bibia in that dungeon a few months ago, the ones that Dennis had kicked out of his diner.

They seem rather unperturbed at being caught. "Hahaha! You guys got too cocky, and now you've paid the price! You've got no one but yourselves to blame for the fire! These aren't even orders from our higher-ups at the guild; they're from someone way more influential and powerful! Hehehe!" As they're arrested on the spot, they continue to cackle wildly, as if they've already won.

"Both the Silver Wings Battalion and the Workstat House are after your head! Hahaha! You're done for! You got too cocky! Soon enough, you'll be tasting the ground!"

Dennis looks at them silently as they're carried away, both still crowing in victory. He can still hear cries of "the diner is burning!" and "the diner's on fire!"



With the help of some townsfolk, they somehow manage to put out the fire. Unfortunately, at this point, almost everything has been destroyed. The first floor has been completely flooded by the water they used, and that's not even accounting for the damage done by the fire itself. The thin walls of the building had been easy prey for the flames, and so everything in the diner had been quickly engulfed in flames and burned: all the cooking utensils, the bookshelves, the menus, the tables, the chairs, the counter, everything. Even the second floor had been scorched.

Dennis inspects one of the few chairs fortunate enough to survive the fire. It's slightly scorched, but still intact. He sits on it, disregarding the fact that it's completely covered in ash. Atrielle looks for a chair of her own and joins Dennis.

Meanwhile, Bethel and Bibia look around the place. They're still shocked by what has happened.

"H-How could they do something so horrible?" Henrietta, who's on the brink of tears, whispers.

"Dennis," Bibia says. "If what they said is true, then we can assume that Joseph contracted the Silver Wings Battalion to burn this place down. I'm guessing they had the Night Fog Battalion do their dirty work for them, though. We're lucky those two idiots revealed the real culprits."

"Looks that way, yeah," Dennis answers lifelessly. He can't even muster the energy for his usual cheerful bravado.

"What should we do, Boss? Um..." Bethel asks hesitantly.

"Don't just lie down and accept it, Dennis," Bibia says sharply as he approaches him. "I want to help you. If you need anything—anything at all—let me know. Let's take them down together. That's how you've always done things, right? It shouldn't be any different this time."

Dennis looks in Bibia's direction, but his eyes are blank. He doesn't reply; he just stares right through Bibia and strokes Atrielle's hair absentmindedly.

"I know you're in shock right now, but we have to think about our next move here," Bibia says.

"Right," he answers. Finally, he says, "I think... I think Atrielle and I will go deeper into the countryside."

"...Wait, what?" Bibia asks.

"They were right. We got too cocky, and we stood out too much," Dennis says. He takes a deep breath and continues, "I'll try hiding out in another little town and set up an even smaller diner this time. I'm not really mad. I'm just... I'm just tired. Nobody got hurt, so that's good."

"Wh-What are you even saying, Boss?" Bethel cries.

"We have to face them, Chief!" Henrietta shouts.

"Easy for you to say," Dennis says as he scratches his head. "Sure, I'm really strong, but I can't do everything alone. What am I supposed to do when the strongest guild in the entire kingdom, one of the most influential noble

houses, and a local commanding guild decide to band together against me? I can only make so many enemies before I get overwhelmed,” he says. He takes Atrielle’s hand and rises to his feet. “The case is closed for the day. This was a good lesson to learn—I can’t solve everything with brute force like I’m used to. Anyway I’ll see you guys. Take care of yourselves, and return to your homes.”

He and Atrielle head up the stairs to the second floor. Bibia shouts as they go, “H-Hey! Wait! What’s wrong with you?! Where’s the Dennis I know is in there?! You didn’t care about making the whole kingdom your enemy if they decided to hurt Atrielle way back when! What changed?!”

“Nothing. I’ve just had time to think about it more calmly. See you.”

“Dennis, I’m telling you to wait! Wait!” Bibia shouts.

Dennis ignores him and goes upstairs.



Dennis and Atrielle are on the second floor of what it used to be their diner. The roof had also been engulfed in flames, so now, patches of the night sky can be seen through the burnt cracks of the roof; moonlight pours in and floods the floor.

Dennis creates a small magical fire to light up the place and starts to look for things that can still be salvaged. The safe where he stashed all of his money has remained untouched, so he opens it and retrieves his savings.

“Are you really okay with this?” Atrielle says.

“What do you mean by that?” Dennis says as he packs his valuables. He doesn’t look at her.

“...Leaving things like this.”

“I’m fine with it. If I tried to retaliate, they’d only end up following me,” he whispers. He finishes packing, though there isn’t much left to pack due to the fire. “If they fought any of the people here, they’d end up slaughtering the entire town. I’d rather keep them safe.”

He pets Atrielle and says, “And to keep them safe, I must leave this place. Are you coming with me, Atrielle? If you wanna stay, that’s your call.”

“I’ll follow you, Lord Dennis,” she answers.

“Okay, then let’s get going.”

“But...” she interrupts, looking straight into his eyes. “I don’t want to see you sad, Lord Dennis.”

“Well, you know what they say... life’s a bitch sometimes. I enjoyed my stay here; this is a good town.”

Atrielle nods and says, “I like it more than the city.”

“Your books were burned, too. I’m sorry about that.”

“I don’t mind. I just wanted our customers to be happy reading them; that’s all.”

“Oh, okay. Well, once things calm down, we can take a short trip and then come back. What do you think?”

“We have to return,” she says.

“Yeah. We will.”



As Dennis emerges from the burned diner with Atrielle, he’s surprised to see everyone from town lining up outside and waiting for him. The amount of people is enough to block the duo’s path. They’re all people who’ve frequented the diner, and at the center are Henrietta, Bibia, and Bethel.

“Heh... I never would’ve expected you to be such a wimp, Chief,” Henrietta scoffs.

“And here we thought that you were our hero, Boss,” Bethel chimes in.

“I finally understand what kind of a person you are, Dennis,” Bibia says with a step forward. “You can’t stand when others are hurt, but when it happens to you, you just try to grin and bear it. Whenever someone’s in need of help, you try to reach out to them; when it comes to yourself, you just back down! You hate seeing others sad, but when you are, you don’t take care of yourself!”

Henrietta and Bethel join Bibia.

“Chief! We can’t just sit here and let this happen!”

“It’s not just us—everyone who’s gathered here are loyal customers! Everyone’s here for you! Do you know what this means?!”

“What do you think of this?! All these people are here at this late hour just for you!” Bibia shouts.

“If you feel bad, then we feel bad, as well!”

“If you’re hurt, we feel your pain, Chief!”

“Why can’t you understand that?!”

“G-Guys...” Dennis stammers.



“All of us have been exiled somehow, and fate brought us to your diner! That includes you, Dennis—you’re an exile, just like us!”

“And what are you gonna do about that, huh?! I don’t care about being exiled when I’m neither wanted, nor needed! I’ll just look for greener pastures!” Dennis retorts.

“But what if we still want you here?! What if we care about you and don’t want you to go?!”

“We have to stop you, and then we’ll face them! We won’t let you be exiled from here, Dennis! You said earlier you were up against them alone, but why would you be alone? Don’t you have us?! Everyone’s here with you!”

The townsfolk gathered behind them start to interject as well.

“Huhu... How dare they try to hurt Atrielle. I won’t forgive them... Huhuhuhu.”

“The general store degenerate?!” Dennis cries in astonishment.

“Hehe... I wouldn’t be able to live if I couldn’t eat your food anymore, Chef!”

“We will help you, Dennis!”

“The two mage girls!” Dennis exclaims.

“Hey, bro—we’re going too, right?”

“Lemme think. We’d need to go to the city. Hmm... When are you guys going? We’ll join you.”

“And who the hell are you two?!” Dennis shouts at the mysterious pair.

Everyone is now surrounding Dennis and Atrielle.

“Man, I don’t think I can’t control this crowd,” Dennis whispers, overwhelmed by everyone’s support.

“We can’t let you leave on a night like this, Chief!” Henrietta cries.

“Let’s fight them together, Boss!”

“Stop trying to play all cool, Dennis. We have to fight!”

Dennis looks up at the night sky filled with glittering stars, and then looks at the crowd gathered around him. He reminisces,

“To think everything began with me storming out of that restaurant. On that day, I vowed to myself that I would prove that chef wrong—that I’d reach level 100 and show her. I wandered from place to place, managed to scale the ranks of the strongest guild in the realm, got expelled from said guild, pretended it didn’t affect me, wandered off again, and ended up here. I

thought I'd finally had everything figured out and started acting like everyone's older brother. Man, how wrong I've been this whole time. I remember telling that girl with the balloon, 'Don't let go of the things you cherish.' Why would I tell her that when I should've been following my own advice? All I've been doing is letting go of the things I love and running away from responsibility. I'm the one who's unconsciously let go of my balloon, and all I've been doing is watching it slowly drift away."

Atrielle tugs on Dennis's pants and snaps him out of his thoughts. She gives him the same expressionless look she always does.

"Anything you wanna say, kid? What do I want? What should I do?" he muses. Brooding to himself for a while, he finally whispers, "I... I don't know..."

He knows he can't just stand around here and do nothing. He looks at everyone, the people who told him they wouldn't let him be banished from the place he's grown to love, and smiles.

"Will there be a time where I'll have to stand up and fight for the things I care about? Maybe, but I can do it. And to think I had to rely on these dummies to set me straight," he thinks to himself. Finally, he shouts to the crowd, "Looks like we'll have to do something about this, then! Whaddaya guys think?!"

Everyone shouts joyously after his rousing call to arms.

"Nice! He's got his willpower back!"

"What about our team name, huh?! Come on, we have to come up with one!" Henrietta chimes in excitedly.

"A team name? The hell do you mean by that?" Dennis asks.

"Like, a team name for the group we're making! You know, it's like the resistance!"

"We gotta have one, come on!"

"Do we really need one?" Dennis says, trying to ignore Henrietta's request. Everyone seems roused by her suggestion, though, and they all stare at Dennis expectantly.

"...The Diner of the Exiled," Atrielle whispers out of the blue.

"The Diner of the Exiled? Isn't that kinda lame?" Dennis scoffs.

"I like it! Everyone here's been exiled at some point, so it makes sense!" Henrietta chimes in.

“Really? It sounds so bad, though. Is that really what we want to be known as?” he asks skeptically, looking to the crowd for support. Unfortunately, no one raises their voice in his favor, and the group falls into an awkward silence.

“...Come on, do we really have to?” Dennis groans.

“Of course we have to!”

“Please, leader!”

Dennis clears his throat with a cough, raises his fist, and shouts, “W-Well then! Team Diner of the Exiled, Team Pleasant Townsfolk! Let’s gooo!”

“Yeah!”

“We will smite the heathens that burned the diner! We won’t let those evil bastards get away with this!”

“Yeah!”

“No matter where they are, we’ll seek them out and exact our revenge! Our counterattack starts today!”

Chapter 9: Retaliation! The Exiles Gather to Smite Evil!

Dennis and his crew load up a wagon and resume their journey. This time, however, they're not heading to the bathhouse—they're heading toward the city. So as not to rouse suspicion from the Night Fog Battalion, only a select group of people have been chosen to go. At least, that had been the initial plan—eventually, so many people ended up joining that it's become a sizable spectacle.

The old man in charge of the town's stables is driving the wagon. Dennis and the others are riding inside and discussing their plans.

"We'll need all the help we can get. I'll meet up with some acquaintances and try to get their support. First, I'll see if Katey and the head chef of the restaurant I used to work at will join us," Dennis relays to the group.

"You mean your adoptive mother, right?" Henrietta asks.

"Yeah. Jeanne Blacks, the head chef of Blacks' Restaurant. She just so happens to be level 100," Dennis answers with a sigh.

"Level 100?! Are you serious? Isn't that the maximum level?!" Bibia shouts in amazement.

The absolute highest level one can hypothetically achieve is 100. As mentioned previously, most people tend to cap at level 60; those who go above and beyond are rare exceptions. Even then, most of those gifted individuals peak at level 80. It's very unusual for people to surpass level 60, and it's even rarer to find someone able to surpass level 80. People like Dennis and his adoptive mother, therefore, are few and far between.

Within that realm of near-impossibility lies the dilemma of the adventurer who has obtained level 99, but is never able to reach that final step. Those who have obtained the fabled level 100 are recorded in the annals and often referred to as the "Legendary Royals." Contrary to what the title may imply, they're not necessarily related to the kingdom's monarchy. Rather, they're adventurers or distinguished citizens who have been immortalized and inscribed into the pages of history due to their immense achievements.

Notable examples are Yuzuto, the creator of the magical arts, Natura, the founder of the modern ideal of adventurers, and King Yungfrey, the one who

discovered abilities and was the first monarch of the kingdom. Not only were their discoveries revolutionary, but all of them had achieved level 100.

“Yeah, but she’s not really super powerful or anything like that. I bet even you could take her on in combat, Henrietta... Okay, that might be a slight exaggeration, but she’s not much in a fight. Jeanne’s got a singular focus on cooking. Both her skills and her mentality are just completely different from mine; we’re like worlds apart in that respect. Sure, I’m more powerful than her when it comes to fighting, but she’ll always be way better at cooking than I’ll ever be,” he says with a sigh. He sticks his elbow out of the carriage’s open window and rests the crook of his arm on the frame.

“Sigh... Who’d have thought that I’d end up coming back here because of my frickin’ business burning down?”



Blacks’ restaurant is located in the wealthy residential district of the royal capital. When Dennis opens the door, he’s immediately overwhelmed by a sense of elegance. It’s a completely different aesthetic and demographic than his diner.

“Welcome,” a waitress greets them with a sweet, clearly-rehearsed voice. When she takes a proper look at Dennis, however, her professional facade shatters. She drops the plate she was holding and stammers, “S-Sous Chef Dennis?”

“Uhh, hey. You been doing okay?”

“G-Guys! Chef! It’s the sous chef! Sous Chef Dennis is back!” the girl yells. Chefs and other staff come out from the kitchen and flock to Dennis.

“You came back, Dennis!”

“Sous Chef! How’ve you been?!”

“We heard you left your guild!”

“And what’s this about you opening your own place in the countryside?”

“W-Wait, guys; hold on,” Dennis stammers, “I came here today to see the chef, and, uh...”

Another woman comes out of the kitchen. Unlike the others, she’s wearing a blue chef’s hat.

“Besmoch,” Dennis greets her with a smile on his face. “Heard you’ve been

following in my footsteps.”

“I don’t really consider myself a sous chef just yet, to be honest,” she says as she takes off her hat and returns Dennis’s smile. “Guess you could call me a ‘Sous chef wannabe.’ Anyways, welcome back home, Sous Chef Dennis. Chef Jeanne is inside.”

Besmoch heads back into the kitchen. The nostalgic aroma wafting out of the kitchen makes Dennis follow suit. He already knows exactly where the chef will be—he had worked and lived here since he was a child, after all. Besmoch pushes the doors open and then closes them again once Dennis has entered.

Jeanne is at the very end of the kitchen, sampling some soup with a small spoon from a pot. She’s a tall woman with striking raven-black hair. She’s in her forties, but possesses a youthful charm about her that makes her seem years younger. She notices him out of the corner of her eye and gives a slight smile.

“Look who it is; the fried rice maniac himself has returned,” she says.

“Hey, um... I’m back?” Dennis says awkwardly.

“Did you find the answer you were looking for?” she asks.

“Um, no. I still don’t really get it. I’ve traveled all over the place ever since I left, but I haven’t come up with anything. Guess you were right, after all—maybe I’ll never be able to reach level 100.”

“Hm,” she replies. She eyes him up-and-down while continuing to sample the soup. “You look better than the last time I saw you.”

“Really? It’s so weird to hear you actually praising me, to be honest,” he says with a forced smile.

She smiles back; hers is more genuine in comparison.



“Um, it looks like we have some mages and magical researchers to get in contact with while Dennis does his thing. I have a list here with their names. Seems like they’re all over the city,” Bethel says as she examines the rather lengthy list of names.

“Will they even be open to meeting with us in the first place?” “Will they really?” the two witch girls with the cute hairstyles ask.

Bethel pumps her fist in response and enthusiastically exclaims, “No worries! We’re the exiles from the Diner of the Exiled, after all! We can do anything together!”

Bethel walks toward Bibia, who’s in front of a clothing store and ogling the window display. She asks him to use his trademark spell to create a piece of cone-shaped material. She then grabs it and shouts into it as if it were a megaphone.

“Gather ‘round, Team Pleasant Townsfolk; gather ‘round! Um, guys, hellowo! Make a single line around me! A single line, do you know what that is? I’ll be quick; don’t worry! Come on, guys!”

The witch girls chatter to themselves as they gaze at the megaphone.

“Oh, so you can use the Soft Palm spell in that way.”

“That’s a creative way to use magic, Bibia.”

“And he’s cute to boot!”

Bethel checks over her memo while holding the magical megaphone.

“Um, I’ll leave the carriage work to the old man, and as for the rest... Ser Henrietta, I’ll leave this task to you!”



“Hm, I see...,” Sestapitch says, mulling something over at the royal courthouse.

“This could easily be considered arson, right? That’d definitely be enough to get those criminals prosecuted and make sure they’re kept locked behind bars. Wouldn’t you agree?” Henrietta asks.

Sestapitch shakes his head and explains in a rather despondent tone, “Unfortunately, knowing who ordered this arson, I doubt we’d be able to pursue this case in a legal manner; it would most certainly be dropped. We also need to take into account the fact that Joseph wasn’t directly involved. He contracted the Silver Wings Battalion who, in turn, subcontracted the Night Fog Battalion. It will be hard to pin the blame on all the parties involved.”

Henrietta doesn’t say anything, so he rests his chin on his hands and continues in the same melancholy tone, “Sigh... I mean, even if we were to drive them into a corner and eventually convict the head of the Night Fog

Battalion, that says nothing of the others. I doubt we'd graze even a single hair on the Silver Wings Battalion. Consider the fact that they have very strong connections to both nobles and royalty.”

“Well, about that... we actually have a plan,” Henrietta replies.

“Oh?” he says, crossing his arms and looking directly at her. “Let us hear this plan of yours, then.”



“Huhuhu... Here’s all the furniture we’ll ever need! All the tables and chairs have been expertly calculated down to the last person! Come, everyone! It’s time to pack them onto the wagon. You can think about your plans as you move everything!” Bolbo commands. The crew is inside the biggest general goods store in the city and preparing to pack the necessary materials.

Bolbo isn’t garnering a lot of sympathy with his commandeering nature, though.

“That fat degenerate sure likes to boss people around,” one of the townsfolk helping out grumbles.

“Well, you know him. He’s used to ordering his slaves around like this. I’ve heard he works them to the bone.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard some of them have even died. He’s just so weird.”

“Just look at the way he’s shouting at us. Try and tell me he’s not a crazy slave driver.”

Everyone carries on working while mumbling complaints to each other. Meanwhile, Atrielle is squatting by a shelf full of magical items and inspecting something.

“Huhuhu... Well, well. Has something caught your eye, Atrielle?”

“This looks funny,” she replies.

Bolbo takes the item and checks it out. It’s a shellphone, the magical gadget used to amplify noise. This one is a brand new model similar to the one Bolbo had rented out to Dennis and Bibia a few weeks ago. While this model is clearly the more expensive of the two, it’s also broken. Bolbo tests it out by trying to speak into it, but his voice doesn’t come out amplified.

“Huhu... Looks like it can’t be used right now, but it’s so cheap. It’d be a crime not to nab it,” he says.

One of the men who's come to help carry out the furniture passes by Bolbo and Atrielle. He definitely stands out from the crowd with his striking emerald-green hair. Other than his unique appearance, his deep green hair indicates that he's a wind mage, as well. Those who specialize in wind magic are few and far between, and their bodies often undergo strange changes when they pursue the field. He's also the mage with the sick wife that Atrielle had lent a book to a few days ago. He stops to look at her and stutters, "Y- You're the girl who lent me that book..."

Atrielle nods.

"Th-Thank you. I'll return the book to you; I don't need it anymore—I was able to save my wife thanks to it. I'd thought she was a goner already, and—"

"It's okay. I'm just glad it was useful for you," Atrielle says in her typical expressionless tone.

"Please let me help you. I'm actually very well-known in some circles for my mastery of magic. As long as it's related to wind magic or something similar, nothing is impossible for me. Is there anything you need from me?"

"Hm. Huhuhu... If that's the case, you can help us out right now," Bolbo chuckles with a wide grin plastered on his face.

Atrielle replies with her signature peace sign.



"Katey told me that Hopper, Viggo, Joseph, and a few of the royally-appointed judges are going to have some sort of celebratory dinner," Dennis explains.

Jeanne shrugs and says, "Doesn't sound like something that happens often."

"I don't know if it's to celebrate burning my diner down, or if they're using it to plot another evil scheme. Whatever it is, I know that they're all going to be in one place. That's when I want to strike. The issue is, I don't know when or where they'll be meeting."

"I assume you want me to find out for you, then?" Jeanne asks.

"Chef—you're the greatest cook in the city. If you use some of your contacts, I'm sure you could find out the details without many issues."

"Aren't you ashamed to barge in on their celebration and destroy the establishment? Chefs don't do that," Jeanne scolds.

“I’m well aware that what I’m planning to do isn’t the most respectable thing in the world.”

“And here you are after years of not showing your face. I figured you’d finally be back for good, but it turns out you just came here to ask me for help with your revenge plan.”

“Never thought I’d ever reach this point... but yeah, pretty much.”

“Why are you taking it so far this time? You’re the kind of person who normally gives up when the going gets tough. After all the years you’ve spent training and helping others, you’ve finally realized that the only one who’s never received your helping hand is yourself. You figured you were the only one you could ever rely on. It’s only natural, given your background—you used to wander the streets alone, relying on yourself for survival. Am I right?” she asks.

“I can’t just let things go this time,” he answers.

They both remain silent for a while, looking at each other. As she’s looking straight into his eyes, she can sense something there—something different.

“Looks like you’ve ended up learning some unexpected things, huh?” she suddenly says.

“I still don’t really understand anything, but I know I have to do this. I have to face them. I can’t run away anymore.”

“Very well. I’m the one who taught you everything, after all—your trade, a place to call home, and your identity.”

“I’m grateful for that.”

“But there’s one thing I still haven’t taught you. I’ll do it now.”

“What’s that?”

She takes off her hat and places it on a tray beside her.

“The last piece of the puzzle that’ll allow you to reach level 100. I’ll give you a hint on how to get it.”



A few days later, the special day has arrived at the most luxurious hotel in the royal capital.

The hotel is an old, repurposed mansion. It’s used exclusively by nobles who not only frequent it to spend the night, but also to host grand parties. This is

in honor of the late owner of the mansion, who was famous for throwing lavish parties and events here on a nightly basis. One day, he suddenly died of illness; several of his acquaintances, missing the festivities he used to host, bought the place and transformed it into a hotel where they could do just that.

The hotel is well-renowned for its delicious cuisine and can often be seen packed with nobles eating fine foods and gossiping with one another. Acquaintances were seen, and new connections were made. In other words, the hotel was any socialite's dream.

Today, however, is different. Every room has been booked for the night by four influential parties. All the curtains have been closed, even though it's still early the afternoon; despite this, the room remains beautifully illuminated by the chandeliers with their bright crystals. As a matter of fact, the room is brighter like this than if it were to be brightened by mere sunshine. It's an ideal setting for a secret meeting.

"Hmph. How dare that filthy cretin I begrudgingly call a niece attempt to outwit me of all people," Joseph grumbles. He pierces the table with a fork to emphasize his displeasure.

"There's no need to worry, Lord Joseph. As far as I've been told, the... hm, the diner, was it? The diner she was working at has been burned to the ground," Viggo says. He's wearing his usual attire: a striking suit of gold-and-blue armor and his blade strapped to his back.

"I just loathe it when people take me even slightly for a fool! What she did that day was inexcusable! She spat in my face and laughed at me. I never comprehended that the piece of rubble they called a 'residence' held those secrets, either... The mere thought of that place makes me utterly sick to my stomach. Leave it in ashes, as well."

"Understood, my Lord. We'll take care of it as soon as tomorrow," Viggo answers. He turns and winks to Hopper, who's sitting next to him. "You did well. That man, Dennis... The two of us are connected by fate, you see. I exiled him from my guild not too long ago, but I couldn't let him keep doing what he was doing. With this, I think he'll finally stop giving me trouble."

"Hehe. As long as our alliance with the judges and the nobles persists, I'm sure we won't have any issues."

"I wouldn't be so confident," Joseph cuts in as he idly fiddles with a knife.

"I'm working on taking control of the kingdom as of this moment. Everything from the law, to the military... Everything. We'll take it from the Kingland royal family. Our 'peace,' as you describe it, is over. Now is the time for action. We must see to it that Dennis is taken care of as soon as possible —I believe he won't let what happened stand."

Everyone laughs for a bit, but a judge notes with some confusion, "It's rather noisy outside today."

Indeed, there is a bit of a ruckus outside, and the sound is leaking into the room. Since the curtains are shut, they can't see what's happening outside. Judging by the amount of noise, they presume there's a gathering of people outside.

"Sigh... Perhaps it's some sort of street performer?" Joseph mutters.

"Just give me the order, and I'll drive the rabble away," Viggo says. Joseph shakes his head and responds, "No, we cannot risk being seen by others. Let's just see how this pans out. We wouldn't want to cause any sort of trouble, would we now?"

"Maybe we should open the curtains a crack and see what's going on, then?" Hopper chimes in with a suggestion.

"Very well. Let us do that instead."

Hopper gets up from his seat to draw the curtains, but he's interrupted by someone suddenly bursting into the room.

"Hey! Didn't we say no one could enter?!" Viggo roars. He whirls around to see who the intruder is.

It's a meek bellboy with blue hair and matching blue eyes. He's wearing a hat, making his face hard to discern. He's startled by Viggo's outburst, but eventually composes himself enough to get out, "Um, a-apparently the chef had forgotten to serve y-your food..."

"Hey, kid, do you have a pair of ears on you? We said that no one's allowed to enter until our meeting's over, and—"

"Sigh. No need to vent your anger on him, Viggo. Boy—leave the tray here, and go," Joseph says with a dismissive wave of his hand.

The bellboy places the tray on the table and lifts up the lid, revealing four grand portions of crab fried rice.

"Fried rice? Why would they serve us this?" Joseph says, turning up his nose. "Um, a-apparently, it's the head chef's specialty. W-We've used the highest

quality crab, and—”

“Oh, I see. Ignore me—it was a foolish question. You may leave now,” Joseph commands with a dramatic sigh. He takes a spoon and tries a small sample of the rice. The instant it enters his mouth, his expression completely changes.

“Hmph?! Hey, you! Boy! Halt! What did you put into this?!” he shouts, stopping the bellboy just as he’s about to leave the room. The bellboy spins around, clearly nervous.

“I-Is there something wrong with it?!” he asks.

“No! It’s absolutely delicious!” Joseph exclaims as he takes a large spoonful and shoves it rather ungracefully into his mouth.

“L-Lord Joseph. Mind your manners a bit, please,” Viggo stammers, shocked at the older man’s sudden behavior.

“Try it yourself, Viggo. Hopper is surveying the window, so you don’t have to worry. Please, try some. I am a fool for having assumed that fried rice was a lowly food for the masses—a peasant’s dish. I never expected it could be so delicious.”

“Hm?! Indeed, this is delicious!”

“Even the judge says so?” Viggo says unconvinced.

“Hey, boy! Tell the chef to make more of this and deliver it to us. Do you understand?!” Joseph commands.

The bellboy smiles and says, “Understood, my Lord. I’ll bring some as fast as I can.”

“Wait! Fetch the cook, as well! I’ve never felt the need to congratulate a chef as much as I do at this very moment! I want to hire him! Genius! This food is absolutely genius!”

“Very well. I will relay this information to him,” the bellboy says. He then rushes out of the room.

Joseph eats his meal with great gusto, clearing even the smallest grains of rice from his plate. Viggo looks at him in a mixture of puzzlement and disgust. He’d never expected to see Joseph act like this.

“This is the head of the magical world? He’s nothing more than a vulgar pig and a usurper. I respected the late Lord Famas; he was a great magus, and his knowledge about hypnosis was unrivaled. Joseph, though... He doesn’t even care to learn about the rare magic he’s privileged enough to access. No—

instead, all he cares about is power. He's no more than a putrid, disgusting animal, and that's all he'll ever be. Always plotting his next wretched scheme, there's nothing else to him but pure evil. Just a rat," he thinks to himself. He examines the room, trying his hardest to maintain a blank expression to disguise his true impressions. His eyes land on Hopper.

"Speaking of rats, there's Hopper. He's more akin to a sewer rat, though—scampering around in the shadows and doing everyone's dirty work. I wasn't expecting him to become one of my right-hand men... Oh well. These tools are just stepping stones for me to use as I rise to the top. Sure, I'll play along with their little game for now, but when the time comes, I'll dispose of all of them. I'll round up all those pathetic groups in the countryside that dare call themselves guilds and have them attack the city. Once the king is in danger, I'll swoop in, gain his favor, and expose the corruption oozing out of his legal system. The judges will be removed in one swift strike. It'll be easy to gain control over the Knight's Order and become a noble. I'll finally have everything I've ever wanted. Even though I'm in charge of the strongest guild in the world, we're nothing but a bunch of very strong barbarians with weapons; nothing but lap dogs at the nobles' beck and call. To think I used to be just a little street urchin... I hit level 99 by working myself down to the bone. And after all that, I'll be the one who gets everything in the end. You think I'll let you vulgar beings hoard what is rightfully mine? If everything goes according to plan, I'll finally be able to forget about Katey and Dennis."

As he thinks over his plans, he tries a spoonful of the rice.

"Hm?" he says, snapping out of his thoughts. "This tastes familiar. Don't tell m—!"

The door swings open again, and another man enters the room.

Viggo whirls around, his senses on high alert. Something is wrong, and he's the only one who realizes it. Nobody else present can sense the newcomer's strength.

The man has a paper bag over his head with two holes cut out for his eyes. He's wearing a white sleeveless shirt that showcases his muscular physique. His posture is rigidly straight, and he's carrying a platter of fried rice in each hand.

Everyone in the room gapes at the enigmatic presence. Even Viggo is taken aback. The man slowly approaches the table while examining his

surroundings. It's natural, given the noticeably-mounting tension. He places four more plates of fried rice and then his hands on the table, leaning over the seated men.

"The one who made that fried rice..." Dennis declares as he looks straight at Joseph and removes his mask, "is me, the legendary fried rice man himself. What do you think?"



"What?! Y-You are...!" Joseph shouts as he nearly tumbles off his chair.

"I gotta say, you sure did a number on my diner. I figured I should come repay the favor, you feel me?" Dennis says. He starts cracking his knuckles, and some veins begin to bulge out from his forehead.

"V-Viggo! Hopper! Do something! Stop him!" Joseph shrieks.

Viggo's already up and ready to fight. His sword is unsheathed, and he's giving Dennis a death glare.

"What are you doing here, Dennis?! How? Why?" the guild leader barks.

"Let's just say I had some help," Dennis answers.

Viggo activates "Absolute Focus"—it's a skill that concentrates all of his senses on physical strength, thereby enhancing it beyond its normal limits. He doesn't care about the guards or anyone else in the room—he might need help taking the other man down, but everyone else is no more than a puny fly compared to him. All he knows is that Dennis is an obstacle, an obstacle that he must eliminate. This is between him and Dennis now.

"What do you want?" he asks.

"To beat the shit out of everyone here," Dennis replies.

"I'm not planning on losing to someone like you, but I'll be clear to everyone else here—I can't guarantee anyone's safety once we start fighting," Viggo says.

Joseph and the judges' faces pale deathly white at his words. It takes Hopper a little while longer to process it, but his face quickly matches the others once he does.

"I couldn't agree more, 'Boss,'" Dennis mocks.

"You'll achieve nothing by doing this. You're attacking not only the head of a noble house, but the royal judges as well. You're done for. Capital

punishment will be the least of your worries once the law's through with you."

"Like I give a shit about that. You know how I am, Boss—an eye for an eye."

"Not at all," he says with a shake of his head. "I figured you'd throw a tantrum and then get over it. I never thought you'd face us like this. I figured you'd know when to admit defeat. You're up against insurmountable odds here."

"I guess I've changed."

"I don't think so. I bet you're just putting on a show, pretending to be you're brave. You're just doing this so your pathetic friends won't see you as a failure; that's all. That won't amount to shit in the end."

"I'm sorry to break it to you, but this time, it's different—I'm dead serious, and I'm fuming. I'll make you regret ever being born. I'll do all of you a favor and end your pathetic lives. When I'm done with you, no one will be able to recognize who you even are," Dennis growls as he takes a step forward.

"W-Wait! Wait! This has to be a misunderstanding!" Joseph squeals.

"Oh, so burning my diner down was a simple mistake? Huh, you vile bastard?!" Dennis yells.

"C-Calm down! I'll give you whatever you want! I'll grant you the finest building in the city! You can open your new restaurant there! I-I can do it if I want! Just say the word, and I'll give it to you! I'll do anything!" Joseph screams and sputters.

Dennis cracks his neck and says, "Sounds interesting. Okay, how 'bout this—I'll let this go if you give Atrielle her books, her former life, and her parents back. How's that sound?"

"W-Wait a second. I obviously cannot do that. Let's talk this out, hm? Surely there must be something else you want. J-Just calm down, and let's discuss this like civilized human beings," Joseph flounders; his voice is so faint that it's barely audible. He sticks his arms out in front of his head, as if to protect himself.

"Okay, sure. Let's talk it out. First, I have a very important question for you: did you and your goonies here conspire to burn my place to the ground? Huh?!" he roars, shaking the room.

"N-No, you misunderstand. Let me explain myself," Joseph says weakly.

"Now you're playing dumb, huh? Joseph Workstat, I'll kill you!"

Joseph jumps, scared by the strength in Dennis's voice. What he doesn't know is that Dennis had just used "Dismay Roar" to intimidate him, something only Viggo can recognize.

"Eeeek! O-Okay! It's true! I did indeed order everyone in this room to set your place ablaze Y-You see, I'm not the only one who's at fault! Everyone here is guilty as well!"

"I can't hear you. Speak up so everyone can hear you, Joseph! You ordered the Silver Wings Battalion to burn down my place, and they had the Night Fog Battalion carry out their dirty work. It wasn't just my diner that was lost, either—Atrielle's books were destroyed as well! And you're telling me that this judge over here, appointed by the goddamn king himself, is behind it, too?! Huh?!"

"Y-Yes! It's not just me! Everyone here i—!"

A chill runs down Viggo's spine, and he jumps in, "Wait! Don't you dare continue, Lord Joseph!"

"Everyone did it! All of us shall compensate you! Please, calm down! I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry!" Joseph screams, pleading for his life.

The room falls silent, punctuated only by Joseph's erratic crying.

Dennis scratches one of his ears and says, "You got all that, right, Bibia?"

"Perfectly!"

The window's curtains part slightly, revealing the bellboy from earlier sitting on the window frame. Beside him is a green-haired man who's carrying some sort of bizarre, shell-shaped contraption.

"I can see them now, but I can't feel their presence at all. Are they masking it with some sort of wind magic?" Viggo ponders. He examines the two mages and their device. It seems as though the larger end had been facing outside and tampered with, allowing them—and anyone in the near vicinity—to hear everything that had been said in the room. "Y-You bastaaards!" Viggo screams.

Bibia frantically grabs the other mage by the scruff of his neck and shouts, "Sh-Shit! Let's get out of here!"

"Y-Yeah, please!"

As Viggo rushes toward them, blade drawn at the ready to strike, the green-haired man performs a skill that allows the two of them to jump far away.

"Agh! They're so fast! How could I not make it?!" Viggo yells in frustration.

His strength is so great that when he falters, his blade crashes into the wall next to the window. The spot of impact is reduced to rubble.

“Waaah! Help us, Henrietta! Bethel!” Bibia cries out. He, the other mage, and the rubble start falling out of the third floor of the building.

“If he can use wind magic to hide his presence, how long has he been here?” Viggo wonders to himself. “This has to all be according to Dennis’s goddamned plan. It must have been put into action when he came into the room with that weird bag over his head, distracting us all with that bizarre farce! No, it had to have been before that. Was it when that bellboy came in the first time? Yes, that’s it! That’s when the other man swept inside. Dennis was just another distraction!”

Viggo regrets his imprudence. He grasps his blade and peeks through the hole he created in the wall. “What the—?” he exclaims in a shocked tone.

“Are you surprised, Viggo?” Dennis says, fully opening the curtains. Below, Henrietta and Bethel—who have already helped Bibia and the other mage land safely on the ground—wave up toward them.

“When did this...?” Viggo says weakly.

“Let’s just say that we’ve opened a temporary diner. It’s called the Blue Sky Adventurer’s Diner. Pretty cool name, huh?” Dennis says, looking down at the impromptu establishment. “The waiters are all people from my town. There were also a lot of folks who donated some furniture. Blacks’ Restaurant helped us with the cooking.”

Viggo can’t believe his eyes. Right underneath them are chairs, tables, and parasols all neatly lined up in front of the building. There are a myriad of chefs and waiters walking around, presenting the customers with their orders. Most of the customers are sages, mages, and members of the Magical Research Association. They’re buzzing among themselves, discussing what they’d just overheard.

“Hey, everyone—you heard that, didn’t you?”

“They burned down the famous diner that contained all that magical knowledge?!”

“And did you hear what they said after that?!”

“What is the meaning of this? Are you telling me the rumors going about were true all along?!”

“How could they! Those books were priceless! Do they even understand the

severity of their actions?!"

"How could they ever hope to pay him back?! His entire fortune wouldn't be nearly enough! I would've killed for one of those books!"

"Those bastards! We cannot let them live! Let's go, everyone! Move!"



Viggo unconsciously runs his hand over his forehead—a mob of mages from all over the realm, many of whom are from the Research Society, are storming up to the room right now. "Did they use that magical device so everyone outside could overhear us...?" he thinks.

"Oh, well. It looks like that's that, Viggo. You were right, by the way—I was putting on a show. Just as you said before, I know when I'm outnumbered. That's why I decided to try a different approach. I'm not the one who'll be judging you guys—they will. I don't give a shit. You've lost your edge. It doesn't really matter who you guys are at this point."

Viggo silently glares at Dennis.

"I don't normally like doing this, but..." Dennis says with a confident point of his finger at Viggo. "It's time you admit defeat, Viggo! Your time is up!"

"Dennis, YOU BASTAAARD!" Viggo roars.



Viggo's shout reverberates throughout this floor and the ground floor, where the group is waiting.

"Nice, guys, we did it! Our plan was a success!"

"Victory! Yes, we did it!"

"Good job, guys! You too, Dennis!"

Henrietta, Bethel, and Bibia exclaim joyfully.

Atrielle is making her usual peace sign, but this time with two hands—a double whammy.

"We also happened to hear everything that went on inside. We'll take care of them now," Sestapitch says, followed by a group of other judges. "They're done for, legally speaking. They can't run away now that we have all of this evidence against them."

At that exact moment, the ceiling crumbles, and a shadowy blur bursts out of the hole. It smashes into the ground, crumbling the floor around it. It's Dennis. Another shadow is in hot pursuit, kicking up a thick blanket of dust as it lands on the ground. Spectators cough and squint, trying to make out the second figure hidden within the cloud. A sudden gust of wind dissipates the dust and reveals its identity.

Dennis glares at the figure, the legendary "Blue Blade That Destroys All." The impact has granted him some energy, and his blade pulses with a radiant blue light.

"Didn't you tell me just a moment ago that resorting to violence would lead to nowhere, Viggo?" Dennis asks smugly.

"I'll kill you! You can be certain of that! You always got in my way when you were in the guild! I should've killed you back then instead of merely exiling you!" he shouts and squares himself up, ready to fight.

"Looks like I have no choice but to fight you, I guess."

"I'll ensure your death is a painful one, Dennis!"

The pair prime their weapons for the inevitable clash. There's a good distance between them, but they know they can easily close that gap in a matter of seconds. In fact, they could easily finish each other off in a matter of seconds.

Bethel, Henrietta, Atrielle, and Bibia watch silently.

"A battle between two level 99s..."

"It's the leader of the Silver Wings Battalion!"

"And is that the guy who runs that diner?!"

"They're both ready to go!"

Everyone's gathering around them, eagerly waiting for something to happen. The two men stare at each other in silence for a tense moment that seems to stretch on for hours. Suddenly, they both pounce at the same time.



Chapter 10: The Strongest Chef of Them All!

“So you’re saying I can’t reach level 100?” Dennis exclaims. “What the hell do you even mean by that?!”

“You heard me. You should just stay where you are and be happy with what you have,” Jeanne answers.

“Huh? Yeah right. I shot up to level 99 with ease, and now you’re telling me I won’t be able to overcome the final hurdle? Just watch—I’ll catch up to you in the blink of an eye.”

“Reaching level 100 requires unconventional means, Dennis. I doubt someone as rowdy and noncommittal as you could achieve it,” she says, giving him a sidelong glance.

He crosses his arms and laughs in response. “Hah! And what exactly is this ‘unconventional thing’ I need to do, then?”

“It doesn’t matter. You wouldn’t understand even if I told you.”



Blades clash against each other, gleaming brightly in the sun. A sharp sound reverberates throughout the battlefield. It’s not from the sound of the blades hitting each other, though—Viggo and Dennis had both used several buffing skills when they’d leaped at each other. Dennis receives the first blow, and Viggo’s sword, strengthened by his boosts, completely shatters one of Dennis’s knives.

“I need to start stacking my own buffs. Otherwise, he’s going to turn me into bloody mincemeat,” Dennis thinks.

He takes a step back and starts performing a transmutation skill on his remaining knife. Since Viggo had made quick work of one of his enhanced knives, he needs to make sure that this one can withstand a lot more damage. If not, he’d be doomed.

Viggo doesn’t give him much room to breathe, however. He rushes toward Dennis and casts a magical spell. His blade positions firmly over his shoulder, and his knees bend ever-so-slightly. Eight purple spears materialize out of nowhere and circle in the air around Viggo. Eventually, they close in for an

attack.

“Agh!” Dennis yells. He summons steaming-hot pots and pans to form a barrier and prepares to take the brunt of Viggo’s onslaught. He initiates one of his herbal skills to create a chemical reaction. A thick fog begins to emanate from the ground at his feet; in a matter of seconds, the area is completely enveloped by it. He knows he won’t last long if things continue in this direction.

◊

The Diner of the Exiled crew is watching the spectacle, albeit with some difficulty—the two men are moving around so quickly that it’s hard to tell who is doing what. One wrong move from either of them could easily signal their demise.

“Dennis has more skills than Viggo. If he plays his cards right, he could win,” Bibia muses out loud. He’s keeping a close eye on the fight with his sweaty fists clenched tightly.

Bethel, standing beside him, is also having a hard time watching. Her voice trembles as she points out, “He’s facing a level 99 vanguard, though... Look, Viggo’s using a lot of melee skills.”

“I can’t even follow what’s going on, to be honest,” Henrietta chimes in. She looks down and realizes that Atrielle is pulling tightly at the hem of her clothes. She looks incredibly concerned.

Suddenly, Dennis comes flying out from the fog. Atrielle’s face pales.

◊

“Augh. I thought I’d gain the upper hand by taking away his vision and boosting myself with my predatory instinct skill, but...”

In a battle where one hit could mean certain death, Dennis was unfortunate enough to receive one. He was able to see Viggo’s movements in slow-motion thanks to his buff, but he hadn’t prepared himself in time. He was in the process of readying a counter when Viggo had suddenly appeared out of the fog and struck the wounding blow.

Dennis remains downed on the ground, frantically sorting through possible strategies in his head. “I need to get back up, or I’m done for. But even then, what can I do? He’s just too fucking strong, and I’m all out of ideas... What

the hell am I even doing here? It's not like me to get all serious like this. I've always just done whatever the hell I feel like doing and hope things turn out for the best. Everything up 'til now has been done my way at my own pace. That was back when level 100 didn't seem so far away."

Dennis gets up and tries to transmute the remnants of his knives once again. Viggo had eliminated the second one like it was nothing with his "Destructive Touch" move. Dennis tries to be as evasive as possible, circling around his opponent and doing his best to dodge his attacks. Suddenly, he trips and throws his arms forward in an attempt to break his fall. Viggo uses his stumble to his advantage, taking the opportunity to attack. His powerful legs bear down on the ground and propel themselves with force toward the chef.

"Denniiis!" he roars, charging at the target like an enraged bull.

The target in question tries to calculate if he can feasibly handle the incoming blow. His hands are numb, and his mind is racing. "Why did I even become a chef in the first place? Was it because my mentor took me in, essentially forcing me to learn her trade? It can't be that—I wouldn't have gotten this far if that were the case. There has to be something else; something to explain this passion for cooking. Is it because of that night long ago when she fed me the most delicious plate of fried rice ever? Maybe, unconsciously, I've been wanting to replicate a meal that's just as delicious ever since then."

In a flash, Viggo swings his sword downward. It seems Dennis's skills have run out, and thus the vanguard appears in front of him faster than expected.

It's such a fast, forceful attack that it will kill him if he doesn't react in time. Right before Dennis's skill had dissipated, he could tell that Viggo was aiming to decapitate him. He doesn't have time to counter or cast a spell. The only option left available is relying on natural reflexes and praying he can accurately predict Viggo's trajectory in order to duck his head at the right time. The chef quickly re-equips one of the repaired knives, only to see it shatter again within milliseconds.

"My mentor and I are so unbelievably different... She fully dedicated herself to increasing her cooking abilities. In reality, I never really had much interest in that. What I've been seeking is the same feeling of warmth from that one night. The feeling of eating something so appetizing and filled with care that

it brings tears to your eyes. I wanted to repay her, the one who taught me everything. And not just her, either—I'd wanted to repay everyone with empty stomachs, those who struggled as I'd struggled, those who were suffering. The quality of my food didn't really matter; even if it wasn't a five-star gourmet dish, I just wanted it to exude some sort of warmth. All I want to do is make people happy with my cooking and protect their smiles. That's my reason for becoming a chef."

Members of the group shout out to him.

"Boss!"

"Chief!"

"Dennis!"

Dennis looks over at them for a brief second: Bethel, Bibia, Henrietta, and Atrielle are watching him with great worry. Miraculously, he manages to evade one of Viggo's attacks, but almost immediately feels a stinging pain in his cheek.

"Look at those dumbasses cheering me on. Can't they see I'm at my limit here? I'm clearly about to lose. Buncha idiots..." he thinks.

◊

Dennis recalls what Jeanne had told him a few days prior.

"You can't reach level 100," she said. "It's not something that you aim for, or something you can reach through the typical grind. It's something that comes quite suddenly, before you even notice it."

"Huh? 'Before you notice it?' What are you talking about?" he asked, puzzled.

He'd been expecting some sort of grandiose reveal; an epic of sorts explaining what it takes to reach the coveted top. Her answer was a bit of a disappointment.

"You ever hear the story about the blue bird before?" she suddenly asks.

"Nope."

"The blue bird flitted from place to place in search of his elusive happiness. In the end, he discovered that happiness was far closer to him than he'd ever expected."

"Sounds like a pretty lame fable," Dennis scoffs while crossing his arms. "You know I hate it when you try to lecture me like this."

"It's true, though—that's all there is to it. Levels are just indicators of how

many skills you've learned; nothing else. There's no meaning behind the concept. In fact, I'd dare say there's

little-to-no difference between level 99 and 100. It's just a matter of whether it happens or not. That's all."

"You're getting real cryptic real quick."

"Let me ask you this—what do you think the last thing you need to achieve is?" she asks.

Dennis thinks for a second, then tilts his head in confusion. "No clue," he finally replies.

She lightly pokes his chest and says, "It's been inside of you from the very beginning. You just don't get it yet."

"Whoa. So that's it? You're just gonna say that and not tell me what it actually is? Well, this was a waste."

"Well, you'll understand it in time. After all, it's what shapes your entire world."



He hadn't understood her back then, but now he believes he does. Raw strength isn't the be-all and end-all in the world—one can't reach level 100 through brute force or pushing known skills to the limit.

"I can do this," he thinks to himself, now full of determination. "I'm reckless, and I tend to half-ass things, but as long as I can protect someone's smile, I will become the strongest chef of them all."

Dennis takes a step forward, and a kaleidoscope of dazzling colors and lights burst out from his feet.

"Wait, the boss is—!"

"Chief's—!"

"Dennis is—!"

"Leveling up?!" everyone exclaims at once.

Viggo watches Dennis as he levels up. It had happened right when the vanguard was about to lay the decisive blow. He moves again, aiming his blade upwards in an attempt to slash Dennis in half. As he does, the chef lunges forward. Both of them go on the full offensive, looking to end everything immediately.

“Viggo, you bastard!”

Their blades collide. Dennis’s knives begin to break apart once more, but he quickly invokes his new ultimate skill.

“Enforcement: Kick out any and all undesirable customers!” Viggo—consider yourself banned from my diner! Uaaagh!” he screams, throwing Viggo into the air with tremendous force.

“Aughh!” Viggo screams, the attack completely demolishing his armor. He starts to plan his counterattack midair, thinking about his next move once he hits the ground. Unfortunately, he ultimately never reaches the ground—the “undesirable customer” is suspended in the air, as if time itself has stopped. Indeed, everything in his vicinity has stopped—the dust cloud that had been kicked up during the attack, the shards of rock that had been flying everywhere. They all lie motionless in the air, as though from a fragment of time that has been immortalized by a painting. It’s an eerie scenario that’s completely dominated by silence.

Although it seems like ages have passed to Viggo, in reality, it only lasts for a few seconds. The flow of time starts again, and everything crashes to the ground.

“Ugh! Guaaagh!” he yells out in pain. Normally, he wouldn’t have taken much damage from the fall, but it’s as if gravity itself is now his opponent, crushing him into the earth.

“Aaaagh! What the hell is this?!?” he screams. He thinks hectically, “A skill that controls gravity itself?! No, that’s not possible. How could something like that even exist?! What the hell is going on?! What did he do to me? Wait—it can’t be...”



“So that’s Dennis’s unique level 100 skill?” Bibia says, looking surprised.

Bethel simultaneously looks incredibly confused and shocked. She yells, “What in tarnation was that?! He threw the guy an’ now he’s bein’ dragged down into the ground. I ain’t never seen anything like it! What is it!?”

“Is it a gravity-related skill? It doesn’t really look like anything I’m familiar with,” Bibia muses.

“Whoa, that was epic! He turned that guy into a crater! Daaamn, Chief!”

Henrietta shouts excitedly.

Jeanne comes up behind them. “I see,” she says, a happy look on her face. “People gain a unique skill when they reach level 100. It’s a representation of their raison d’être. Of course that’s what his shaped out to be.”



“Aaaugh!”

The ground crackles and quakes as Viggo is continuously crushed by the impressive force pressing against him. A sizable crater starts to form, and he’s powerless against the maneuver’s force. Like a ragdoll, he lies there limply while Dennis forces him further and further into the earth. The only reason he’s even still conscious, let alone alive, is because of his strong constitution.

“Somehow, he’s controlling the air currents around me and forcing me into the ground. How can a skill like this even exist!? ‘Enforcement: Kick out any and all undesirable customers!?’ So this is what it does? What a stupid fucking nam—Uooogh! Aaaugh!” his thoughts are interrupted by an increase in pressure, causing him to scream out in pain.

Viggo maxes his strength buff in an attempt to endure it. The force is so strong, it would be more than enough to pulverize several average people at once. He isn’t sure how much longer he can hold out against the relentless attack. It’s as if he’s been chained to the ground. Each second lasts an agonizing eternity. The crater grows so large that it also consumes its caster.

Finally, the skill wears off. Dennis emerges from the gigantic crater unharmed and undeniably victorious. Viggo lies at the center, unconscious and covered in rubble.

The four members of the group rush over to Dennis and give him a big hug.

“Boss, you okay?! Boss?!”

“Chief! You did it! You won!”

“Y-Yeah...” Dennis stammers in response. He’s so exhausted that he can’t even make his friends’ faces out—they’re all a blur. “I... I’m tired. Like, done for the day. I just wanna eat some fried rice. Someone make some for me. Please.”

Everyone clamors around him excitedly.

“We will! And everyone will help. Right, guys?!”

“Y-Yeah! We’re having a fried rice party tonight!”

“Let’s all make some fried rice!”

“The chef’s not cooking today, by the way.”

“You heard me, right? Fried rice. Don’t go making some porridge,” Dennis wearily retorts.

“We know!”

He doesn’t have the strength left to respond. He collapses onto his back, looking up at the sky with his mouth hanging open. A small figure approaches, casting a faint shadow over him. He can just barely make out silver-colored hair: it’s Atrielle. She grasps one of his hands, and he tries to answer by pitifully squeezing hers back.

Just like that, with Atrielle holding on to his hand, Dennis falls into a deep, deep sleep.

Epilogue: Welcome to the Diner of the Exiled!

“Um, where to begin...” Bibia mutters. He sits down on the grass and explains, “Okay, so after he fainted, everyone from the Magical Research Association managed to corner Viggo, Joseph, Hopper, and the corrupt judges. Right now, they’re in prison and waiting on their trials. I don’t really know what Stevens’ situation is, but I’m pretty sure he’s going to be judged alongside them. Plus, they captured the Night Fog Battalion for their involvement in the arson case. I guess since Hopper’s been arrested, and most of the members are in some sort of trouble, the guild is set to dissolve. Oh, right—since the Workstat house no longer has a head of the house, Atrielle’s the obvious candidate. She doesn’t really seem up for the task, though, so she’s discussing the situation with Sestapitch and the other mages at the Association to see what can be done. They’re also considering the possibility of somehow saving and reconstituting the legendary books that were lost in the fire. It’d be amazing if they can pull that off, right? They’re so fixated on the idea that I think they’ll manage to do it eventually.”

The mage laughs a bit and then pauses to regain his breath. He continues, “Meanwhile, everyone’s been helping out with rebuilding the diner. And as it happens, today is the second grand opening. Actually, I’m planning on heading over there right after I’m done here. Today also happens to be the day Henrietta and Bethel leave, so I’m glad I’ll be able to see them one last time.”

He shifts his body and lays down on the grass, gazing up at the beautiful, endless expanse of blue sky. He says, “Among the faint-hearted pessimists are those who manage to get back on their feet. Even if you don’t have it in you to pull yourself up on your own, there’s always someone who’ll be willing to lend a hand. It truly makes me wonder what I’ve been doing this whole time, but the future looks bright. I did make a promise to become the strongest mage in the world, after all. To become as strong as Dennis... Well, I don’t know if I can manage that, but we’ll have to wait and see. What’s most important is taking the first step. We need to keep moving forward and see what the future has in store for us, right?”

Finally, he swings his legs and hoists himself back up. He takes a final look

at the recently-made tomb before leaving.

“Bye-bye, Cynthia. I’ll be back soon.”



Back at Blacks’ Restaurant, a lady in a rather flashy set of skimpy red armor is chowing down on some lunch.

“Anyways, as I was asking...” she starts, using her fork and knife to cut into her meal. Today, she’s having a steak glistening in pepper sauce. “So Dennis finally leveled up? What’s up with that?”

Sitting in front of her is Jeanne, the head chef.

“Crimson Blade Storm... or should I say, the new leader of the Silver Wings Battalion. You came to watch their fight, didn’t you? You wanted to see how things would unfold.”

“I did, yeah. Mainly because I knew Dennis would have a rough time. I figured I should probably try to help him,” Katey replies.

“Maybe you should’ve intervened in the fight earlier, then.”

“Well, it was the first time I’d ever seen Viggo fight with everything he had. Not gonna lie, I was kinda scared. If I’d tried to interfere during a poorly-timed moment, he would’ve slashed me in half,” she says in between huge mouthfuls of steak. “With both of them going all-out, I never had a chance to step in. So...”

“I agree,” Jeanne says while leaning her head on her hands.

Katey finishes her steak and eagerly jumps over to a bowl of soup accompanying the main course. “So in the middle of the fight, Dennis leveled up? Just like that? What the hell was that all about?” she asks.

“Why are you asking me?” Jeanne says flippantly.

“I mean, you’re level 100 too, right?” Katey says while staring at the other woman. “It’s a feat that not many people in recorded history have achieved. There’s some sort of requirement, but most people still don’t understand what it is. Why is it so difficult to overcome that final barrier?”

“You mind if I state my opinion on the matter?”

“By all means. I’m the one who’s asking, after all.”

Jeanne flashes a proud smile and starts to explain, “The entire concept of level 100 is different compared to the ones before it. The closest equivalent I

can think of is finding one's reason to live—when you find the one thing that you and only you can do. I said it before; it's a person's *raison d'être*."

"Wow. Just what I'd expected of the world-renowned Chef Jeanne. You make it seem so easy, but it all sounds like mumbo jumbo to me."

"Well, there's also a reason why there was such a contrast between our final skills, despite both of us being chefs. He and I are virtually polar opposites from each other. I've always aimed to become the best chef I can possibly be in order to make advances in the culinary world. By discovering my true motivations, I achieved level 100. Dennis, on the other hand..."

"What about him?"

Jeanne takes a deep breath and continues, "He realized that his purpose is to protect the smiles of those he holds dear and that he could accomplish his goal through cooking. That's where his ultimate skill originates from—he can simply 'ban' anyone that would threaten their happiness. That's how he managed to hurl Viggo into the ground and keep him pinned down. I believe that because of it, he's now likely the world's strongest chef."

"Huh? The strongest chef? But his ultimate skill has nothing to do with cooking at all."

"Indeed. That's why he's a stupid child and always will be. It's pure tomfoolery," she says with a hearty laugh.

Katey follows suit, laughing so hard that tears well up in the corners of her eyes. After a while, she wipes them away and regains her composure. "That's Mr. 'Legendary Fried Rice' for you. You never know what he'll do next."

"With all that said, though, I do believe he's one of a kind. He truly is the only person in the world who can do what he does."



Meanwhile, in a different restaurant in the city...

A distinguished-looking man is having his lunch at an establishment located in front of the royal palace. He's wearing a tailored black suit that compliments his swept-back, black hair exquisitely. His lunch consists of a dry-cured ham sandwich paired with a salad with cherry tomatoes and lettuce. Judging by his smile, he's quite content with the meal.

Suddenly, he turns around to address a person standing behind him. "Why

don't you join me, Florenza? The food here is quite good.”

“No, thank you. I cannot eat right now,” the woman replies.

“Oh, don't say that. This salad right here is one of my favorite dishes.”

“I need to ensure your protection, Lord Heath. It is not possible for me to indulge in a meal and keep you safe at the same time.”

“You're such a stickler for the rules. You know full well I don't need protecting,” he says with a sigh. He returns to eating his food.

“By the way, it appears that Joseph and Viggo have been captured and prosecuted. You're not concerned at all?” she asks.

“Why would I be? Oh, my—this sandwich is something else. The sour sauce they've spread inside it is just indescribable. I would happily eat it even on a plain slice of bread. Would you like to try some?” he asks, offering half of the sandwich to her.

“No need. To return to the topic at hand, though—I thought that those two were a part of your plan, Lord Heath. Was I incorrect?”

“I didn't exactly have high hopes for those cretins. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't considered using Viggo as my pawn for a while, but that's in the past. I no longer care about that which is impossible. He doesn't even have any unique skills originating from his bloodline.”

“I never would have expected that Dennis fellow to defeat him, though.”

“What do you mean, Florenza?” he says, turning around again with a smile. “Of course he'd defeat him. He's my little brother, after all.”



Bibia arrives at the new diner located in the city. Dennis, Henrietta, Bethel, and Atrielle are standing in front of it. The owner of the establishment is scrutinizing the new signboard above the entrance with a great deal of skepticism. He crosses his arms and says hesitantly, “Hmm... Don't you guys think this name is a little bit... meh? I'm not entirely convinced.”

“What are you saying, Chief?! You gotta leave an impact with the name, you get me? Gotta make it a head-turner,” Henrietta answers enthusiastically.

“Exactly! ‘The Adventurer’s Diner’ was a little too bland, if I’m being honest,” Bethel chimes in.

“Um... What about you, Atrielle?” Dennis asks. The girl answers with her

trademark sign and a “happy” expressionless face. It appears the name has gotten her approval, as well.

“Oh, right. You were the one who came up with this name in the first place, weren’t you?” he says with a sigh.

He finally notices Bibia and turns to the mage. He asks, “Hey, Bibia—what do you think of the new name?”

“What name?” Bibia asks. He looks up at the sign and smiles upon reading it. “Sounds good. I like it.”

“Ugh. Okay, fine! I get it. I guess I just have shit taste when it comes to names.”

“Hey, Chief! We didn’t say that!”

“Yeah. What are you even talking about, Boss?”

“No need to feel inferior just because everyone disagrees with you, Dennis. If I may reference the ‘Buck Naked Adventurer’s Restaurant Business for Dummies’—4th edition, by the way—there’s a specific chapter that discusses the importance of a restaurant’s name, an—”

“I know, okay?! I’m well aware of that already!” Dennis shouts. He storms inside the store and fumingly walks behind the counter. Atrielle follows him.

“Anyways, this is everyone’s last meal here. What do you guys want?” Dennis asks.

“I’ll have a vritra katsudon,” Henrietta answers.

“Hm. I’ll have the crab fried rice,” Bibia says.

“And I’ll have the daily special!” Bethel chirps.

The bell at the entrance rings, signaling the arrival of new customers; or rather, it’s more akin to a small crowd.

“Hey, Dennis!” “Congrats on the second reopening!” the pair of witch girls, looking as spirited as ever, exclaim.

There are also two men who look familiar, but Dennis can’t quite put a finger on where he’s seen them before. One turns to the other and asks, “Haha! What are you gonna order today, bro?”

The other man addresses Dennis. “Remember us, Chef? We were part of the group that helped out during your grand plan. Anyways, we’ll have the kingfish meal. Thanks.”

With that, they go and find a table to sit at.

Dennis hears a signature creepy chuckle. “Huhuhu. I wonder what I’ll have

today?" Bolbo mutters, as off-putting as ever.

"Looks like it's gonna be a busy day," Dennis says with a forced smile.

Bibia, Henrietta, Bethel, and Atrielle turn around to greet the new guests. The young girl makes a double peace sign while the others happily exclaim, "Welcome to the Diner of the Exiled!"

Afterword

I first had the idea for this story after watching Rocky Balboa. I don't really know how popular this movie is—maybe it's some niche title, or maybe everyone knows about it, and I've just been living under a rock all my life. In any case, by now, you can probably guess that I enjoy the Rocky movies. I've watched the whole series countless times. I especially like the first and the last movie in the series.

To be completely honest, though—the last movie has a lot of flaws, in my opinion. While the movie is still quite entertaining, it makes me seriously wonder if it was made by amateurs. Some parts lack flow and feel like they've been carelessly rushed or tacked on.

But I digress. One day, while watching one of them for the trillionth time, I decided to start working on this.

The point is, despite its flaws, I still really like the movie and wanted to base my novel on it. I really hoped to capture some of its essence into this book. Not really sure how the protagonist ended up as a chef, but that's neither here nor there. Although this book probably doesn't have anything to do with the movie series itself, I wanted to give credit where credit is due. I'd like to make it clear that Rocky Balboa inspired me, regardless of the final product.

I had this vague idea to make a group of people that weren't quite... perfect, if that makes sense. The protagonist would help them out with their troubles, and in return, they would help him out at some point. Then his worldview would slowly change, or something along those lines.

When I refer to "exiles," I refer to people who are rejected from society, to those who feel out of place compared to everyone else. All of them are people who have been ousted by the small portion of society they had made their home—either due to their own mistakes or through no fault of their own—and this story is meant to describe their struggles in a way.

This book isn't solely about Dennis's adventure: it's also about the adventures of every other character and the journey of their development. I wanted them to join forces and stand up against adversity. Nobody is perfect, no matter how they may appear on the outside. Everyone has some sort of weakness within them. But as long as you have people by your side who you

can rely on as well as support you, everything should be fine. Actually, you need one more thing: in order to rise up with everyone against adversity, you also need something you feel the need to protect; something you feel the need to fight for.

Anyways, since I needed a place for this ragtag team of misfits to gather, I thought to myself, “Well, why not a diner?” All in all, those were my thoughts when I was creating this novel.

I’ve had a lot of help from other people. Without them, this book wouldn’t have been possible.

First, I’d like to thank all of the people who read this back when I uploaded it to the internet. Seriously, thank you so much.

Second, I’d like to thank my editor from Overlap. Let me tell you—he got me out of quite a few “rocky” situations. Really, I can’t thank him enough.

Third, thank you to Gaou-sensei. He drew what I’d describe as “breathtaking images” for this book. I swear, he’s a literal god at drawing.

Everyone helped me, lent a hand, and carried me throughout my journey until we arrived at where we are today. I’ve run into my fair share of issues while writing this. I considered giving up more than once; at some point, I almost did, thinking that I couldn’t write anymore. Every time something like that happened, I felt everyone’s support behind me. In the end, I managed to finish it. Thanks to my editor—let’s call him Mr. Y—and Gaou-sensei’s amazing illustrations, this novel has become a reality.

This has been a journey that’s made me realize that, contrary to my own expectations, I can’t manage everything alone. I learned that I need to rely on others. Yes, just like Dennis, I must admit I came to this realization only as I was writing this.

Anyways, to wrap up: I also want to thank you for picking this book up. Our exiles’ story at the diner has only just begun, so I really hope we can meet again in the next volume.

See you around!

Thank you for reading the book! We hope you liked it as much as we did when we worked on it!

— Tentai Books' Translation Team

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