

“I really miss central heating.”

“Definitely.”

“And Japanese food.”

“Yeah.”

“And you know what? Busses were convenient.”

“For sure.”

My head rested against the dining room table. Udo was taking the time to try and clip his nails using some scissors he found. Even basic hygiene had to turn into a struggle. I'd read a little of both tomes before I slept the night before, but it was dry reading. I was expecting something a little more exciting, we were in an RPG fantasy world! At least I had an ongoing project to focus on.

“They're really just going to keep us sitting around all day.”

Udo was silent as he tried to focus on cutting his nails. I heard the metal clinking as they made contact, followed by a frustrated sigh. He threw the scissors down with frustration, “This is no good. Maybe if we sold out and did what they told us, we'd have more to do.”

“Hell no. I'd rather be bored than a stooge.”

The doors to the hall swung open, and Ken strolled through without a care in the world, “What are you two guys up to?”

“Not much. Weren't you supposed to be helping the Count with this cult thing?”

He shrugged and took a seat at the head of the table, “The Count told us to go down to the ward and solve the problem, but then he got into a big argument with the Commander over it. Those dudes are crazy.”

“What, he just told you to go to the ward and kill everyone you saw?”

“Pretty much.”

“What an asshole.”

“The Commander wants us to learn how to fight first. He paired us up with some soldiers and they showed us how to use our weapons, finally.” Kaoru was going to see Redd today for the very same purpose. I'd told him about her during dinner and cashed in that extra favour he owed me in return for giving her some training. “I thought we'd be slaying dragons and shit,” he continued, “But man, we're just sitting around doing nothing. I could have done that back home!”

“It looks like this fantasy has a healthy dose of reality included. Just because we were given powerful weapons doesn't mean we were going to become overnight killing machines.”

“Do not throw away normality so easily,” Udo warned, “Once lost it is hard to take back.”

“Yeah, listen to Udo.”

Ken didn't seem interested in his wise words, he'd started admiring his katana with starry eyes and a gaping mouth. That guy is a total lost cause. I pulled out one of the two books at random, drawing the Common's interpretation of events, and found the page that I'd stopped at the previous night. I could best describe the feeling as running headfirst into a brick wall.

I slammed the book shut and stood up from my chair, “Let's go find a job to do.” I walked out of the room with Udo in tow.

The walls by the gates to the city were a colourful place. Hundreds of pieces of coloured parchment were nailed, hammered and taped to every surface available. Some had been left out so long that they had become drenched in the rain or rotted away by the passage of time. The composted layers of requests and contracts were reinforced by newer contracts placed over the top.

Organized chaos? No, this was just plain chaos. Udo looked a little bit daunted by the scale of the mess we'd gotten into. I walked up to the first paper that caught my eye, a light pink note written with fancy cursive writing, “Botanist looking for herbs.” I let it flop back down. That was no good for us. We'd need to learn the art of botany to even recognize the right goods and retrieve them in good condition. “Where do they keep the combat ones?” I pondered aloud.

I turned back to see Udo scouring the wall across the street. Everywhere you turned there were dozens and dozens of them. “How do they get anything done in this city?” he complained, “This is madness.”

“I don't think they do. They don't have magic things like job boards around here.”

I'd caught the ear of a passer-by. I could tell by his equipment that he was an experienced warrior or hunter. “I know, it's a mess. I just came back from the Capital, and they have properly organized places for these contracts. Makes life much easier. It's a City tradition at this point.”

I addressed the man, “We're looking for something easy.”

He stroked his chin, “Easy? You two could probably handle most of the hunting contracts put up around here – most of the powerful monsters get scared off by big cities like this, or people only build cities where they don't live. The only ones left are small fry, not good for SP, but you can make a living doing it.”

“Thanks for the advice.”

“No problem, always happy to help out.”

He slipped back into the crowds without even giving us his name. “Alright, Udo, let’s look for a hunting quest to do.”

We searched for half an hour, eventually putting together a shortlist of five jobs that were looking for small quantities of animal carcasses – and one quest that was asking for a warrior to clear out a nearby water source of Kobolds. “Which one do you like Udo?”

Udo hummed to himself before pointing to the kobold job, “That one. We know where to go, and if they aren’t there we still get paid.”

I ripped the flyer down, “Done.”

Contract Accepted!
<u>Clearing the Pond!</u>
Investigate the disturbance near the Rockhopper pond.
Reward: 50 Red Pieces

Udo grunted, “First order of business, finding out where this pond is.”

Stigma spoke into my ear, “I can direct you, if you’d like.”

“Wait a minute Udo. I know where it is already.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, passed it when I was out hunting a few days ago.”

Stigma smiled and led us out through the gate. Udo couldn’t see her. Her nudity was only more conspicuous now that she was out in public and not inside my room. I tried to avert my gaze from her nude rear and pay attention to where we were going. I wanted to learn the lay of the land myself.

“This is a beautiful place,” Udo commented.

“It is. Too bad it’s impossible for me to appreciate right now.”

“Too much on your mind?”

“Way too much.”

We crossed a wooden bridge and began to walk into the forest that lay beyond the farmland. The scenery changed rapidly from here on out. Udo’s head was always twisting and turning to look at something new, “I can’t stop thinking about my family back home, do they know where I am? What do they think happened to me?”

“They’re probably searching for us.”

“I don’t know. I am the only one living in Japan. I’d call them and send them money when they were in a tough spot. But now? How do they know that I have gone missing?”

“What about your boss?” Udo kept his silence, “Would he not?”

He sighed, “No, he wouldn’t. He’d get in trouble.”

It clicked, he was working illegally. “Oh. I see. Seriously? Even if one of his guys just up and disappears?”

“It happens all the time, and we don’t ask questions when it does. I’ve ghosted more than my fair share of jobs that didn’t feel right.”

I sensed an opportunity to press him on something I’d been thinking about since we arrived, “How good was your Japanese?”

Udo’s brow was raised, he’d heard this line before. “Decent. Why?”

“Don’t you feel like... I don’t know – the knowledge about the language from around here got injected into us? We’re not speaking Japanese anymore, we just slipped into it.”

He stopped walking, “I never thought about it.”

“Exactly. What kind of crazy magic just teaches you a whole damn language on the spot like that?”

“The same magic that lets us learning blacksmithing in a few hours.”

“I don’t like it. It feels like someone is messing with my head.”

Stigma waved us through. We breached the trees and came out onto a small clearing. I could hear something through the next treeline ahead of us. I shushed myself and knelt down. I focused my eyes and used Stigma’s ability to see through the trees and underbrush. Several creatures were gathered around the pond.

“Kobolds, looks like we have to do some work for this one.”

Udo knelt down next to me and drew his sword, “Do you have any idea what to do?”

“I took some of these things on with Kaoru. They’re pretty stupid, but fast. If we split them up we should be able to beat them in a head-on fight. You’ll have it easier than me, Mizun is nimbler than Stigma. I’m counting seven.”

“...How?”

“Just trust me. We don’t have all day, let’s clean this up and get paid.”

I stood up and drew Stigma, these kobolds were about to have a very bad day.

