

“Normal speech”

‘Thought’

(Silent magic)

[Normal magic]

{Change of location, time or POV}

So, it’s been a month... well, I told you I had some problems, so it’s not like I disappeared without reason. Ok, I don’t have much else to say apart from clarifying something some of you seem to have misunderstood. Rampossa didn’t change the line of succession. That would have been his downfall. To name his youngest as his heir would have started a war. What he said is that if he dies and NONE of his children are named king or queen (in short, if someone usurped the throne while Gazef was away), the one to inherit the title should be Renner (the only child outside the kingdom since; if someone usurped the royal line, they’d certainly take all the King’s children as hostages).

So that is what I meant with that part. As of now, Barbro is still the heir. Okay, now that this is clear, enjoy the chapter!

PS: Interesting fact about Renner. If we translate her NW’s birth date to our world calendry, we will discover she was born the 7th of July. In Japan, this day is known for being the biggest love-based festivity, similar to western Valentine’s Day. Coincidences? I don’t think so!

Beta reader: Don Orbit (go check out his amazing works!); SirWertsalot (My heart goes out to anyone trying to learn this blasted language. If one were to ask how I decide to make corrections as a native speaker, I’d only be able to answer with,

“it feels better this way.” Hope everyone is having a wonderful year and don’t forget to Follow and Review!)

Chapter 12: Determined Warriors Till the End

Ari placed a hand on her chin and huffed as she looked at the adventurers in front of her, examining the various gear and magic items exposed in the shop. It was boring as ever for her. Every day was the same; wake up, work, eat, go to sleep.

But she couldn’t bring herself to complain. Compared to her previous occupation, this was far more riskless and remunerative.

Ari was an orphan. She didn’t know who her parents were and she didn’t care. She grew up in an orphanage. She was kicked out when she was caught stealing from one of her caretakers. It didn’t matter that said caretaker was the one to steal from her first. She was just eight at the time.

Growing up in the streets of E-Pespe wasn’t nice. Become the predator or you will become the prey; that was the rule. It didn’t help that she was just a frail little girl. What could she do, apart from stealing? Nobles, commoners and even her fellow beggars; no one was safe from her.

The key to survival was to get only what you needed. Just enough to eat and cover yourself with. The ones who got cocky or greedy were the first to get killed or even worse... caught. Prisons in the Kingdom were horrible places, even more so if you were a young little girl like Ari. After hearing tales from released prisoners, she was sure she preferred death over prison.

She lived like that for some years, until she was contacted by the group known as Eight Fingers. Nowadays they called themselves Seven Hands. She always stayed away from them; dangerous

people they were. She heard horrible things about how they treated girls like her. The only reason she heard them out was because one of her oldest acquaintances vouched for them.

She was still doubtful, but it turned out that her fears were misplaced. They only wanted someone to work in a shop of theirs. She didn't want to accept at first. It seemed too suspicious. But when she heard that her acquaintance would be the one working with her, she was happy to at least try it out.

In that moment, a big hand patted her head, stopping her train of thought. That hand belonged to her acquaintance, Nerbo, a big oaf of a man. Muscled body, giant arms and a permanent scowl on his face. But she knew that under all that façade, he was one of the most honest and kind-hearted people she knew. That was what she liked about him.

“Remove that scowl from your face. You know they don't like it when you are like this.”

He whispered to her. She glared at him.

“You are one to talk. If it wasn't for me, there would be no customers in this shop.”

“And that is why you are the seller and I'm just the guy who deals with problematic customers.”

Those were their roles. The reasons why they were chosen to work here. Ari was the cute 14-year-old girl, who attracted customers with her innocent smile, and Nerbo was the one who dealt with the ones that became problematic. Not that it happened often after the first guy, who tried to grab her butt, was bashed against a wall.

“Uhm... we are getting low on scrolls. I’m going to get some from the back.”

He said but before he could take a step, Ari grabbed his big hand with hers.

“Wait, I don’t like how that big guy in the corner looked at me before.”

She told him in a whisper indicating with her eyes the middle-aged man who was examining a silver axe.

“Don’t worry, I will be right back in a moment. If someone tries something, just scream and I will be right back.”

He said as he ruffled her long blonde hair. She reluctantly nodded in agreement and Nerbo went to the back, leaving her alone at the counter.

Almost in that exact moment, the door opened and a new figure entered the shop. They were tall. Very tall. At least as much as Nerbo. They wore an elegant and exquisite purple gown that covered their whole body and, if this wasn’t enough to unnerve Ari, they wore a dark mask that covered their entire face.

The figure attracted many looks from the customers as they advanced toward Ari. Said girl gulped as the figure stopped before the counter.

“Good afternoon, may I speak with the one in charge here?”

The figure’s tone was deep and masculine. Ari looked around to see if Nerbo had come back, but he wasn’t there yet. She turned back to the imposing figure and put up the most pleasant smile she could.

“I-I am the one in charge a-at the moment S-Sir.”

She managed to stutter out.

“uhm... you are?”

The man asked surprised as he placed a gloved hand under his chin. Ari tried to suppress her fear.

“Y-yes I am! Y-you got a problem with m-me?”

She tried to be more aggressive to cover her fear.

Before the man could answer, she heard steps coming from behind her. ‘Oh gods, Nerbo came back!’ She thought in relief. And indeed, the big man had just come back with a bunch of scrolls in his arms.

As soon as Nerbo saw the cloaked man, he stopped and the two stared at each other for some seconds before Nerbo did something that greatly surprised Ari. He deeply bowed his head to the stranger, even making some of the scrolls in his hands fall on the ground.

“W-welcome Lord Satoru! We didn’t e-expect to see you today, I’m deeply sorry for a-any inconvenience we caused you!”

Said the big muscled man. Ari’s eyes widened at his words. ‘S-Satoru? T-that Satoru?! The big boss?! The merchant magic caster?’ she thought in panic. Now that she looked at him better, he really fit the description she was given of him. An imposing man wearing a dark gown and mask.

She immediately bowed her head to him. All of the adventurers in the shop simply looked in amazement at the now revealed magic caster.

“Ah... do not worry. I just arrived in this city a few hours ago, but I thought Hilma sent you messages about my visit.”

The 5th tier magic caster said.

“Ah yes, of course. We received the message! But... considering your date of departure... we didn’t expect your visit for at least another week!”

Said Nerbo. The magic caster nodded in understanding.

“I see. Do not worry. It doesn’t matter now. May we go to a more private room to discuss the reason for my visit?”

He asked. Ari could practically see the aura of authority he emanated even while remaining cordial and well mannered. She gulped once more.

“Y-yes of course! F-follow me please.”

She said as she escorted the magic caster away from the crowded shop.

{The next day}

{Renner’s P.O.V.}

Renner lounged on her bed, looking at Lakyus training in their shared room. The inn wasn’t one of the fanciest in the city, but she understood Satoru’s reasoning behind not wanting to attract too much attention while in the city.

She and Lakyus were given cloaks to hide their identities while being inside the city. Even Gazef changed his clothes to avoid showing off his royal guard armor. Still, the thing that pained her the most was having to remove her precious crown from her head. She got so used to it that she felt quite naked without it. Of course, she understood the reasons for doing so, but she still insisted for Satoru to take care of it until she could wear it once more. She wouldn’t feel safe any other way.

But apart from those minor inconveniencies and the not so comfortable for sleeping cart, she was satisfied with their journey so far. Not being forced to act properly and being near Satoru everyday was really the greatest experience she had in her life so far.

Lakyus swung her sword vertically in an uppercut. Renner was no swordsman, but even she could notice how her handmaiden's swings were becoming more precise and quick over time.

She still remembered how the overexcited girl jumped up and down when Gazef told her he brought her sword with him, so they could continue their training while traveling.

"...nner? Renner?"

She was so focussed on her own thoughts, that it took her a moment to understand that someone was calling her name. Said someone was Lakyus herself, who stopped swinging her sword and was now looking at the princess.

"Uhm.. yes, what is it?"

The noble girl had an unsure expression on her face and seemed to hesitate before speaking.

"A-are all the kingdom's cities... like this?"

She asked with an unsure tone. Renner raised an eyebrow at the question.

"What do you mean?"

She asked, now curious what her companion meant with those words.

"I-I mean there are a lot of people suffering here... mostly in the I-lower district. I saw them. Many seem ill or hurt."

Lakyus said in a low tone. Renner thought for a moment before answering.

“Well, I can’t speak for all cities, but the capital is pretty much the same and it wouldn’t surprise me if the other cities followed its example. Not to mention the small villages who do not even have guards to enforce the law...”

She said in a flat tone. Her handmaiden flinched at those words.

“H-how can you say that so casually? That is horrible!”

She said with a shocked expression. Renner simply shrugged.

“It’s always been like this since the founding of the kingdom. It is the curse of the weak to be continuously crushed by the strong.”

‘The law of the world we live in is a cruel one Lakyus, but now I wonder, what will you do?’ she wondered inside her head.

“B-but shouldn’t the nobles stop this?! Ensure peace in their lands? Shouldn’t the church help the poor? Like in the holy books?”

Lakyus asked in desperation. Renner couldn’t stop the small smile that came to her face at those ingenuous words.

“You have been reading the holy books, Lakyus?”

The princess asked a little surprised. The handmaiden blushed a little.

“I-I want to become a holy swordswoman, so I won’t only be able to rescue people but heal them too!”

She revealed with flaming passion in her eyes. ‘You are a kind soul Lakyus... that kindness will be your doom... but maybe there is still a chance for you...’ The princess thought darkly.

“Oh, my dear Lakyus, but why... the nobles and church are exactly the ones who are causing the problem in the first place.”

Said Renner to a dumbfounded Lakyus. The girl remained silent for few seconds.

“W-what do you mean?”

Weakly asked the blonde girl with emerald green eyes.

“Ah... The noble titles are hereditary... This means that they are born around gold. They are raised and educated. They are told by their parents how much common people are beneath them and how nothing they do can be wrong. This is our case too, you know? We all grow up so distant from common people that we no longer care for them. We will think ourselves to be entitled to everything we want and who would care if some unknown uneducated family will suffer because of us?”

She explained.

“No this can't be true... Nobles are supposed to guide people to better themselves!”

Lakyus cried out.

“Open your eyes Lakyus! Who do you think paid for all those clothes you have? For your house, your food, your instructors, the bed you sleep in every night? It's all money coming from tributes that nobles force people to pay just to live on their lands. What do you think happens when a noble is in need of money? They raise their tributes and if someone is unable to pay, they are exiled from the land and their house is used to pay the tribute.”

The princess continued.

“And the church... oh the church! They are just as bad. Did you know that the price to cure a normal disease is around the yearly earning of a merchant with its own shop? Common people could work their whole life and not be able to cure themselves. And oh... don't let me tell you what happens to those who offer to cure people for free... In the best-case scenario, they are exiled from the city. In the worst, they are accused of using dark magic and are burned as heretics.”

Renner concluded. Lakyus' eyes were filled with tears.

“T-this cannot be...”

She mumbled.

“I will not force you to believe what you don't want to believe, dear friend. But from now on, try to look at the world with eyes not clouded by your education and the tales from your books.”

{Next day}

They left the city of E-Pespel early that day. Lakyus has been very silent since their conversation the day before, but that was natural. She was probably digesting everything Renner told her yesterday.

The cart was still uncomfortable, but she was beginning to get used to it. It was also starting to get colder since the Earth season began a few weeks ago. At first, the princess thought that they should have stayed a little longer in E-Pespel in order to buy some new heavier clothes for her and Lakyus, but then Satoru used his magic to create some for them both to wear.

She stopped being surprised by his magic months ago, but she was still impressed by how many uses magic could have. ‘Should I try to learn some?’ she wondered. Maybe it could be an excuse

to see Satoru more often in the future after their return to the capital.

That would certainly create quite a disorder at court. A princess of the kingdom learning magic? By a commoner no less? That would not go well with the court and she doubted even her father could cover her this time.

She glanced at Lakys. 'Still some secret lessons could still be arranged I guess.' She decided to make a mental note to regard at a later date.

Returning to her main point, now she was wearing a white dress far more comfortable than her usual heavy and fancy clothes. It wasn't anything special, but it wasn't supposed to be. They were meant to not attract attention after all.

While she was absorbed in her thoughts, Gazef and Satoru were discussing their food supplies. Since Satoru thought he would travel alone, they had restocked at E-Pespe. Now they should have enough to reach the Empire, but they could still buy some in E-Rantel if it was necessary.

"So how did the visit to your shop go Satoru?"

Asked Gazef.

"Not bad. As I expected, the request for magical items is very high. Mostly because of adventurers, but city guards have also shown interest in buying some weapons and magical lanterns. There are also some rare nobles here and there. They are mostly interested in weapons for their guards, but some also buy other kinds of items to adorn their-"

Satoru's explanation was stopped when Gazef gestured at him with his hand. The Warrior Captain's body had tensed up all of a sudden.

"Satoru, be ready. Protect the princess."

He said in a low tone. Even with his face covered, Renner could feel a change in the air when Satoru nodded. Something was about to happen.

In an instant, many things happened; Satoru moved his right hand and the horse stopped. A dome of green light engulfed the area all around the cart, just in time to stop a rain of arrows that were destroyed as soon as they touched the dome. At the same time, Gazef jumped down from the cart and unsheathed his enchanted blade.

From the bush and trees all around them, a dozen men revealed themselves, encircling them.

"Tch... magic caster..."

One of them spat out.

"You are surrounded! Surrender before we gut ya'!"

Another yelled.

"I'm the Warrior Captain, Gazef Stronoff! In the name of the king, surrender now and your lives will be spared!"

Said Gazef loudly, making many of the bandits laugh.

"Yeah, and I am the emperor."

One of them mocked Gazef as he waved his ragged armor as if it was a great and precious gown.

“They got some girls with them. They will sell well on the market!”

Another said after noticing Renner and Lakys.

“Kill that wannabe warrior and magic caster!”

Roared the one who seemed to be the leader.

At that command, four men charged toward Gazef, while three charged at Satoru. Gazef avoided two strikes, before swinging his sword and decapitating the closest man, making the other three jump back in surprise.

“You are the first opponents I fight seriously with this sword... let’s see what it can do.”

The Warrior Captain said before swinging the blade again. This time missing his targets or at least that is what Renner thought before two of the remaining three bandits fell on the ground, lightning sparking all around their dead bodies.

“[Triple magic: Ice Lance]”

Renner turned just in time to see three light blue magic circles appear before Satoru. From each of them a lance made out of ice materialized before instantly impaling the three figures charging at him, killing them instantaneously.

She felt nothing as she looked at the dead bodies. The gruesome display didn’t affect her at all. The same could not be said for the girl next to her who became very pale and began to tremble. Renner placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Lakys... stay focussed. If you want to be an adventurer, this is not something you will see rarely in that field of work. You must overcome it.”

Lakyus nodded at her words, but didn't stop trembling.

As this was going on, the battle was coming to an end as only four bandits remained now and they didn't seem eager to fight anymore.

"What is happening here?"

Asked a new voice as some more bandits came out of the forest.

"These damn monsters are killing us! That's what's happening ya' bastard!"

The boss roared at the newcomers.

"Out of my way."

Said a new calm voice. From behind the new bandits, a figure revealed itself. It was a man around the same age as Gazef and Satoru. He had a well-muscled body, but the feature that jumped out to the eye most was his blue hair.

The man's eyes fixed on Gazef.

"You... you are Gazef Stronoff!"

He exclaimed in surprise as shock appeared on his face.

"The Warrior Captain?"

"Is he serious?"

"So he wasn't lying..."

Some bandits whispered.

"You are... Brain?... Brain Unglaus?!"

Gazef asked, shock displayed all over his face.

{Brain's P.O.v.}

“We meet again, Stronoff... I didn’t expect this to happen so soon... only 3 years after our duel.”

Brain said as he drew his curved blade. ‘Today is the day I waited for so long. Today I will show who is the greatest sword in the kingdom!’.

“I always considered you a worthy opponent... a man of honor... to think you would fall so low as to become a bandit.”

His opponent said in a dark tone as his eyes hardened.

“I am no bandit. I am a mercenary. Prepare yourself Gazef, for today is the day you fall.”

Brain retorted.

“You lot take care of that magic caster.”

Ordered the boss of the bandits with renewed vigour.

“Attack him all at once, he already put down some of us easily, surround him and finish him!”

He ordered as the ten remaining bandits charged at once. Brain was still analysing Gazef’s combat stance for possible opening when a roar deafened him. He turned toward the powerful sound just quicky enough to see the group of bandits being engulfed in lightning and turned into dust.

His jaw dropped a little ‘Who is this magic caster? I never saw magic that powerful’.

“I see you are as surprised as me, Unglaus. I knew Satoru was powerful, but I never thought such powerful magic could be so masterfully controlled.”

Gazef told him.

“Enough talking! Show me your power!”

The blue haired warrior said before taking his newly developed combat stance.

“[Ability Boost] [Capacity Building] [Fortress] [Strong Assault]”

He muttered as he felt the Martial Arts strengthen his body.

“[Body Strengthening] [Flow Acceleration] [Mental Enhancement]”

His opponent was doing the same. ‘Good, I would not have it any other way. Come at me with your full strength, so that I can strike you down at your peak!’.

The both of them launched at each other at the same time. Their blades crossed in the middle of their battlefield. Brain could feel the strength of Gazef’s blow forcing him back. ‘Even Fortress wasn’t enough to stop it.’ Brain grimaced.

“[Front Cut]”

His blade moved so fast that even he had problems following it with his eyes. Gazef tried to avoid it and almost succeeded.

“[Instant Reflex]”

The Warrior Captain used his Martial Art to partially dodge the fatal attack directed at his head. Brain’s attack left a not so light cut on Gazef’s cheek.

‘Yes. I did it! I knew it! All these years were not for nothing! Now fall to my blade Gazef!’ But before he could attack again, he was forced to block a heavy strike from Gazef. Their blades locked once more, but this time Brain felt something different. There was something wrong with his muscles. He jumped back.

His hands started shaking, he could not control them anymore
'What is this?' he looked at Gazef.

"What have you done?"

He asked in shock.

"So, it finally worked. Well, I must thank Satoru once more for this blade. You see, Unglaus, this blade is enchanted with lightning and every time our blades met a little bit of the spell would take effect on you. Not enough to harm you, but still enough to alter your body's internal workings. Without being in control of your own power, you are vulnerable. You have already lost, Unglaus!"

Those words hit him like a dragon's paw hit an ant. 'No... this can't be... he is lying... I'm the greatest swordman of the kingdom... how could I lose? No no no nonono!' With a roar Brain launched himself at Gazef once more. The man easily blocked his shaking blade and pushed him away with a kick.

"[Instant Counter]"

Gazef roared as he mercilessly assaulted Brain, who could only partially try to dodge or defend thanks to his debilitated body. With a powerful final strike, Brain was sent sprawling to the ground.

"Do not rise, Unglaus. If you do, you will force me to go all out on you."

The Warrior Captain threatened, Brain's mind was crushed
'What?! He is still holding back?... W-what is this?! I'm supposed to be the strongest! Why... why... after all these years... WHY IS THE GAP BETWEEN US STILL GROWING?!' In a fit of rage, Brain forced his shaking body to rise and activated his trump card.

“[Cutting Edge] [Instantaneous Flash]”

He felt like his arm was breaking apart, but he didn't care. As long as he won, he didn't care if he lost his own arm.

“[Fortress]”

With that Brain's blade was stopped dead by Gazef's own sword. With that Brain's body gave up and just fell limp on the ground.

Brain felt tears gather in his eyes. 'Why? I gave up everything to defeat you. Why can't I...? Is this not enough? What more should I do?' He internally asked to no one in particular.

“I trained without anything else in mind for three years... and instead of closing the gap between us... it got even bigger... how? How did you get so strong?”

He croaked out; his broken spirit could take no more of this. Gazef sheathed his sword.

“My strength is not something that belongs only to me. To achieve this level, I had to borrow both my King's support and Satoru's help. It is thanks to them that I reached this point. Humans are weak singularly. We don't have the strength of the demi-humans nor the powerful magic of the dragons. What we do have is the ability of gathering strength from others around us.”

No. He couldn't accept it! How could all his diligence and sacrifices have been useless? It was all that blade's fault! If it wasn't for it, he... No, it was that magic caster's fault! He was the one who made Gazef this strong! It was all his fault!

The flames of rage reignited in his heart as his eyes fixed on the distant figure of the magic caster named Satoru. He gritted his

teeth as he pushed himself back up. He felt some of his bones crack.

With a final push he rushed toward the figure.

“SATORU! LOOK OUT!”

He heard Gazef scream from behind him but it was too late ‘you will PAY DAMN MAGIC CASTER!’.

“[CUTTING EDGE] [INSTANTANEOUS FLASH]”

The blade flashed toward the magic caster’s head, a deadly slash.

Brain completed his move and fell on the ground now completely drained of any kind of energy. ‘I did it! Even if I’m going to die... I did it!’ He smiled. But then, why didn’t the headless corpse fall on the ground. Why was it still standing before him... and why did it seem like... it still had a head?

Brain’s smile disappeared. Surely it was just his eyes playing games with his head. Yes, that was it! To confirm his doubts, Brain turned toward his blade expecting to see blood on it, but instead what he saw confused him. Not only was there no blood on his blade. The blade itself was missing from the hilt.

He used his eyes to look around him, but he saw nothing as his vision was starting to get blurry. Then he felt like something heavy was on his chest, so he used his only moving hand to check what it was. There was indeed something lying on his chest, it was hard and sharp. He lifted it up. It took some time to understand what it was. The thing lying on his chest was a piece of metal. To be more specific, a piece of a sword he knew far too well.

“Uhm... it is rude to attack someone like that, you know? You should announce your challenge before attacking. Also, it wasn't very nice of you to shower me with all these metal shards. You could have ruined my robe.”

A deep voice above him said. Brain let the piece of metal in his hand fall on the ground. ‘I must be dreaming... yes... this is just a bad dream... I want to wake up...’

“Eheheheh... ahahahah... ahah... ahah... ah...”

With a final, barely audible laugh, Brain's mind decided to shut down as everything went black.

A.N.

Ok, that's it! To all those who wanted to know if I was still alive... yes, and seeing what is happening around the world, I find that type of wording quite distasteful at the moment. Please refrain from using it in my reviews or PMs, thank you.

Now, as for the chapter, I hope you enjoyed the little spar between Brain and Gazef. As I said several times before, I'm not very good at describing battles and so they are hardly the main focus of my stories. As you can see for yourself.

Next chapter will come sooner (I hope) and it will probably not be what you expect. I'm still busy with my Uni, but one of the last big problems ahead of me has been solved during this last month of pause.

As for those who ask for more frequent chapters (a lot of PMs are about this), I'm confident to say that I could easily release a chapter per week if this was my main job. But since, unfortunately, no one is paying me to do this, and I'm just using

it as a stress reliever, I'm afraid the pace will remain like this until I finish my Uni degree.

Hope to see a lot of your reviews as always. I missed those the last month. What do you think will happen to Brain? Will I ever be able to begin the Empire Arc or will my brain continue to put out more ideas to insert during the travel? Who knows?

Well, until next time, have a nice day and stay safe!