

Ao Satsuki

Illustration:
falmaro

Shannon Wants to Die!

Eaten by a Dragon



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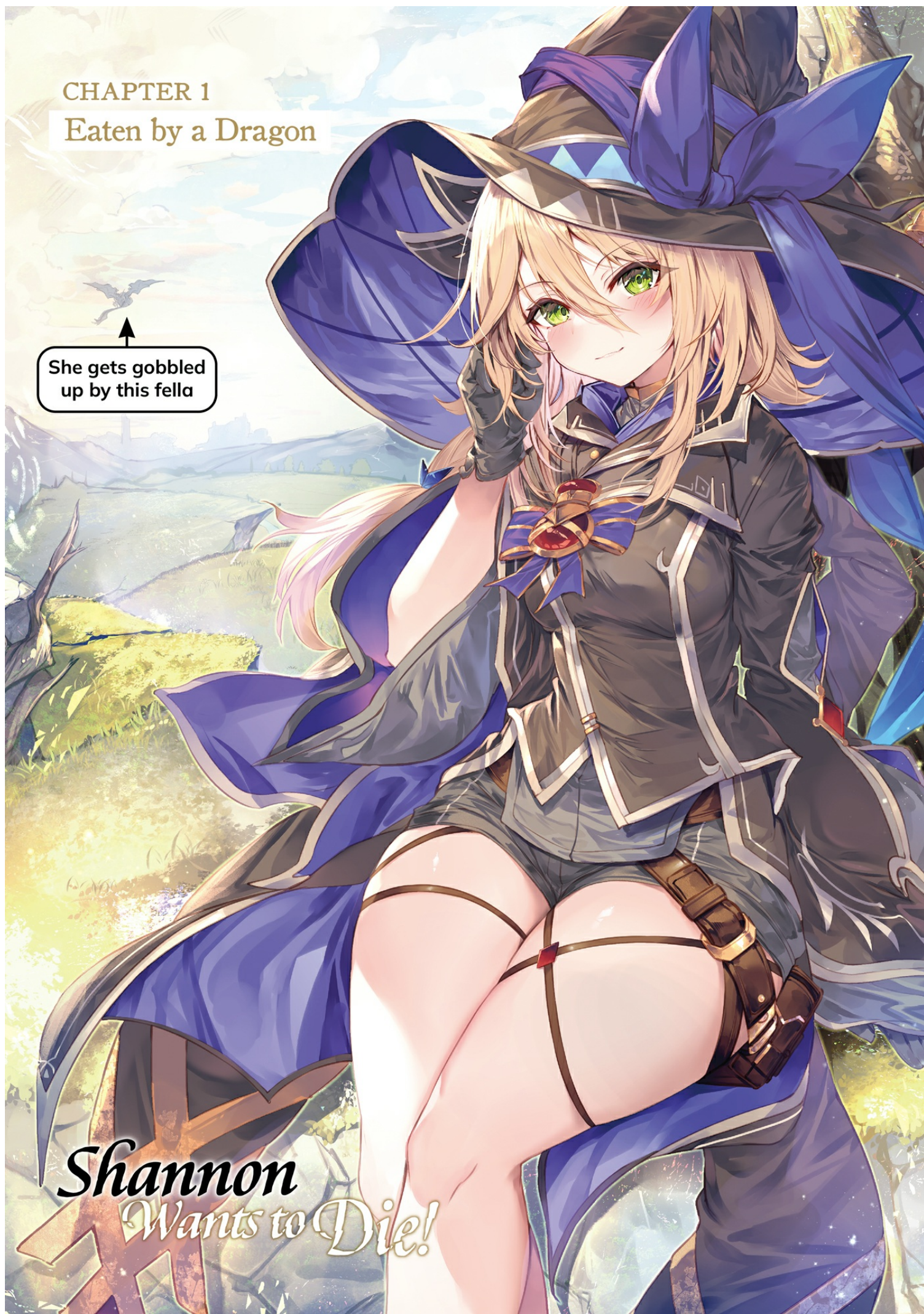


CHAPTER 1

Eaten by a Dragon

She gets gobbled
up by this fella

*Shannon
Wants to Die!*



CHAPTER 2
Overdosing

This here is deadly poison



CHAPTER 3

Death by Dungeon Trap



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Prologue

A lad of about twelve or thirteen walked along the precarious mountain path, sweat pouring from his brow and hair clinging stubbornly to his forehead. He wiped at the perspiration, and when his hand came away, it left his hair stuck out to the side.

“It’s hot...” he murmured. The seasons had changed, and they were well into summer.

The boy, Kyle, diligently walked on, the large basket on his back jostling his body with each step. It had become his job to gather edible plants out in the wild. He still wasn’t entrusted with more heavy-duty work, but of late, he had been permitted to go into the mountains by himself.

Complaining about the heat wasn’t any help, but he was just that parched. Without a proper supply of fluids, he would collapse. “Water...”

Kyle held his canteen upside down and shook it, but he had drunk it dry moments before, so only a small droplet trickled out. His face turned grim, and he glanced off to the left. If he remembered correctly, there was a river a little ways down the mountain. If he could descend that far, he’d find some cold, delicious water.

Past the tall, soaring cliffs on his right side shone the sun, ever higher. Jeez, the day was frighteningly hot. He considered that fact, turning his face to the sky and squinting at the sun.

“Hmm?” He spotted a black dot whooshing down from the top of the cliffs. “A falling rock?” But before the words had even left his mouth, he realized that the black dot was steadily growing larger until, gradually, he could make it out as a humanlike shape.

It was a person!

“Wh-What?! Is someone—?!”

A terrible inkling crossed his mind—that this was a suicide attempt. This

wasn't the time to think about that, however. He had to do something to save them.

He floundered left and right, wondering what he could do, but nothing useful came to mind. Meanwhile, the person was still in free fall and plummeting toward the ground, not slowing down at all. And then—

“Watch ouuut! Outta the waaay!”

“Wha—?! Ahhh!”

With a loud, dull thud, the person slammed into the earth. A cloud of dust rose and danced in the air, and beyond it, the stranger ricocheted off the ground, bouncing along toward the river.

Kyle was so surprised that, like an old man whose back had given out, he fell, hard, on his bottom.

“D-Did they just...warn me?” he thought aloud. He couldn't fathom a person in the midst of a fall crying out in concern for someone else below. Perhaps he had just been hearing things that weren't there.

The immense dust cloud cleared, and when he saw the bloodstain left behind where the person had first made impact, his face paled. *They really fell*, he realized.

After a few moments of bewilderment, he remembered what he ought to have been doing. “I-I need to help them!” Nobody would be okay after a fall from such a height, but he had to do something.

He sprinted toward the river, where the person had probably ended up. Perhaps it was futile, but if there was the slightest possibility that he could help them, he had the responsibility to try. He panted, out of breath, as he slipped down to the riverbank, wiping at his pouring sweat and running with all his might. The water ran below him, and the area felt cool, as if the temperature was lower by the river.

“I-I think they landed around here,” he gasped. He looked around wildly, searching for even the smallest thing that seemed out of place, and spotted someone collapsed just ahead. “That might be them!”

He dashed over to find that the person was a blonde girl, and she was lying on her side. She wore something black that looked like a coat, torn and revealing fleeting glimpses of her white skin. A large satchel lay nearby, its contents strewn around the scene. The devastation was a testament to the impact of the fall, and Kyle was left both speechless and breathless.

This was not what he had expected. No matter how sturdy they were, nobody who fell from such a height and then bounced like a ball across the ground could come out intact. Blood pooled over the ground, and the girl was completely still. She couldn't be alive after losing so much blood—it was preposterous.

But sometimes, preposterous things do happen.

White, slender legs extended from beneath the shorts she wore, but Kyle didn't see any obvious wounds. She was dusty from rolling across the ground, but he couldn't figure out where she was bleeding. Perhaps the coat had protected her lower body from harm? But no—it didn't matter where he looked; he couldn't find the source of the blood.

Thinking it strange, he moved to stand in front of her body and stared intently at her. Though her legs, arms, and chest were all filthy, he saw not a single scratch. *What in the world?*

He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Uncertain of what to do, his expression turned sober as he stared at the girl's face—and her sparkling, jade green eyes snapped open. And then—

“Aargh, really?!” she yelled, jumping to her feet with breathtaking vigor.



Kyle let out an unintelligent scream and flopped harshly onto his backside. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. The girl had surely been dead just a moment before. Well, it wasn't like he had done the correct thing and checked her pulse, but she'd at least been in no condition to move about so energetically. The huge pool of blood spilled on the ground was a testament to that. And yet...

Equal parts dumbfounded and horrified, Kyle looked up at the girl and finally caught a clear look at her face. He gasped in wonder; he'd never seen such a beautiful girl back in his village. She had medium-length blonde hair and lovely, jade green eyes set against snow-white skin and pink lips. He stared at her with his mouth agape, taken aback for a whole new reason.

"Ugh, another failure..." Not seeming to notice Kyle and his astonishment, she scratched her head irritably and puffed out her cheeks. "Did that old guy lie to me? Those were just ordinary cliffs." She sulked and kicked a pebble, then brushed the dust off her behind. "Well, I guess their height didn't give me any great expectations anyway."

She planted her hands on her hips and released a disappointed sigh as she shook her head vigorously. Her voice and actions suggested perfect health.

"Excuse me," Kyle began, his voice threaded with bewilderment.

"Hmm? What?" The girl finally noticed Kyle in his spot on the ground. She tipped her head. "Who are you?"

"Well, um..." He was about to point out that he should be the one asking her that, but then the girl squatted and examined his face.

"Hmm... Oh, did I fall on you?" She patted him all over—face, arms, and stomach. It kind of tickled, so he squeezed his eyes shut, only for her to pull them open with her fingers and stare at him. "Looks like you're fine. I guess you came to save me, huh? Thanks."

"Well, uh... Yeah, sorta."

She laughed and tousled his hair. "Well, aren't you brave?"

"Wh-Why did you fall from so high up?" he asked hesitantly.

“Oh, did I scare ya? Sorry. I was just a little curious, really.”

“C-Curious?” he repeated, flabbergasted.

The girl nodded. “I had my reasons. Oh, by the way, kid—are you from around here?”

Kyle hadn’t been expecting the question, and he nodded reflexively before he could consider how to reply. The girl’s face brightened with excitement, and she grasped both of Kyle’s hands firmly.

“Perfect! Thing is, I was looking for somewhere to spend the night,” she explained. “Can I stay at your place?”

“Huh...?”

Kyle stared dumbfounded at the girl, who was pressing her palms together as if to say *please* and looking at him with upturned eyes. Unable to comprehend a single thing about this situation, he found himself nodding his head.

Chapter 1: Eaten by a Dragon

“Oh, thank you, Kyle!” the girl who had fallen from the cliffs—apparently called Shannon—said with a pleasant smile.

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied. “It’s no trouble.”

They were on their way to Kyle’s village so Shannon could stay with him. Fate was strange; he’d never imagined making this trip with someone who’d fallen from the cliffs. Any kind of traffic into town was rare; it was a big deal when someone came from outside the village. Bringing in someone who had *fallen* was monumental.

But maybe this kind of thing happened all the time outside the village.

Kyle had lived his whole life in one place, so either way, Shannon was a wonder of the outside world. His immense curiosity was only natural.

“After all,” he continued, “I couldn’t just leave you there, Ms. Shannon!”

“You’re so nice, Kyle!” Shannon said, vigorously ruffling his hair.

“Stop that!” he protested, brushing away her hand, though he wasn’t as annoyed as he let on. Rather, it embarrassed him for some reason.

“Someone’s bashful!”

“N-No, I’m not!”

Shannon looked at him, a smug smile spreading across her lips. Intuiting that she was teasing him, Kyle briefly cleared his throat and started the conversation over again. “A-Anyway, Ms. Shannon, who are you?”

He had a mountain of questions he wanted to ask her. She was an undeniable bundle of mysteries. First of all, why had she fallen from the top of the cliffs? And second, how had she survived without a scratch?

“I’m a traveling mage.”

“A-A mage?!”

Shannon nodded.

“Wow!” Kyle exclaimed. Curiosity surged inside him. “Mages really exist!”

“That’s your reaction? Of course we exist. I mean, look at me!” Shannon grasped her robe and spun around. He’d thought of it as a black coat at first, but upon closer inspection, he realized it *was* a robe—a mage’s garb. “Is this the first time you’ve met a mage, Kyle?”

“Yeah! There aren’t any mages in the village. We do have an old magician, though.”

“Even a magician can be interesting.”

“Well, he’s not actually very good,” Kyle admitted. “The other day, he said he was going to make doves fly out of his mouth, but what actually came out was the dinner he’d had the night before.”

“Oh my!”

“A-Anyway, you’re the first mage I’ve ever met! This is awesome. And you’re on a journey and everything!”

There were far fewer mages in the world than there used to be. Of course, you could still find them in cities, but in Kyle’s village, at least, they only showed up in fantastical stories.

“Yup,” Shannon replied. “Just makin’ my way around the world.”

“Wow,” Kyle breathed. “It’s really unusual to see a mage so deep in the mountains. Most people don’t come to my village.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. People rarely leave either. It’s not like there’s some law saying you can’t get out, but everyone just stays in the area for some reason.”

Way back when, the villagers’ ancestors had pioneered the mountains, and the people who lived there now loved the land and would never dream of moving away. Of course, some people would venture out from time to time, but there had never been an instance where someone had left for good.

Kyle’s grandparents’ generation had a remarkable attachment to the region.

They deliberately led simple lives, untouched by knowledge of the wider world—as if knowing nothing of the world beyond their village were a virtue. Of course, their lives were happy, so perhaps it was the right choice for them; they certainly hadn't attracted any unnecessary problems.

Still, with no fresh breezes blowing through, the air in the village always smelled stale.

"To be fair, this place is smack-dab in the middle of nowhere," Shannon said. "The nearest town is five days out, and getting down the mountain is a real pain too."

"It sure is. That's why we don't even get peddlers very often. I do always look forward to when they show up with a bunch of rare stuff, though."

Shannon nodded to herself. "I bet. You're probably starving for some information and entertainment. Mm-hmm. I don't think there was a village here the last time I came around. I wonder when it was established?"

"Huh?" Kyle blurted, his brow furrowing. That was a joke, right? "Ms. Shannon, when were you here last? I'm pretty sure my village has been around for at least two hundred years."

Shannon tipped her head, a vacant expression on her face. "Oh, really? That long ago? Over two hundred years..." She paused. "Then I guess I just didn't come across it."

Despite his confusion, Kyle laughed. "Yeah, of course you wouldn't have found it. No way you were here two hundred years ago." Maybe Shannon simply had an overabundant sense of humor. That seemed like a skill a young mage might develop on her travels—a way to make others feel at ease around her. "Well, anyway, this area's really hard to navigate. The mountains are vast, and you have to go through ravines. Even I'd get lost if I didn't know the way, and if I did get lost, they'd probably never find me again."

"We sure have walked a long way. My feet are all swollen." Shannon stopped and massaged her calves, then said in a whiny tone, "I want a bath..."

Kyle laughed. "Mountain paths seem really challenging for girls. Can't you use magic to fly?"

“Alas, flight magic is outside my area of expertise. It’s a pretty unique kind of magic where you just float—” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Hey, you’re looking pretty excited there.”

“I am excited! I’ve never seen magic before. Ms. Shannon, what kind of magic do you—” Kyle turned his head and spotted Shannon picking a mushroom that had sprouted from the roots of a tree. The mushroom was a light, mottled blue. Panicking, he stammered, “W-Wait! Ms. Shannon, stop! That’s dangerous!”

“Huh?” Shannon pointed at the mushroom in her hand. “This?”

“That’s a bugshroom—a poisonous mushroom! It looks a lot like a holoshroom, which is really tasty, but these ones can kill you!”

“Oh, you’re quite the expert, Kyle.” In contrast to Kyle’s fluster, Shannon was calm. Maybe she was accustomed to dangers like this from her travels. “Are you a mushroom scholar?”

“Well, I’m not a scholar, but I’ve learned a lot about mushrooms. I’ve foraged lots of wild vegetables and medicinal herbs on my dad’s say-so, so I know a good amount about this stuff.” He couldn’t help but let out a little laugh. Nobody in the village would be impressed by this knowledge, so this unprecedented chance to show off to a traveler like Shannon made him happy despite the strangeness of the situation. “At any rate, you should get rid of it. It would be really bad if you accidentally ate it. We have tasty mushrooms at my house, anyway.”

“But I’ve already taken a bite.”

“Yeah, that’s why— Wait, what?! You ate it?!” With his heart in his throat, Kyle hurried to Shannon’s side and looked at the bugshroom in her hand. Sure enough, there was a bite mark on it. He looked up at Shannon next and saw that her mouth was moving slightly as she chewed. “N-No! You have to spit it out now!”

Shannon, however, didn’t appear concerned. Without hesitation, she gulped, and Kyle realized that she had swallowed the bugshroom.

Well, that’s it. Ms. Shannon is going to die.

“Ahhh!” he screamed. “Th-This is bad! What am I supposed to do?! I need

to...um...!”

Shannon hummed. “But this is pretty good. You know, there’s really nothing to worry about.”

“O-Of course there’s something to worry about! That mushroom is super toxic!”

As he spoke, he watched Shannon anxiously, but her expression remained undeniably nonchalant. Her condition didn’t seem to be changing at all; usually, someone who’d eaten a bugshroom would go instantly numb and then, over the next few seconds, start panting and vomiting.

“Huh?” Kyle said slowly. “You’re...not going numb or anything?”

“I’m perfectly all right.” Shannon cleared her throat, puffed out her chest, and patted her torso. “See? I’m fit as a fiddle!”

“Wh-What?” For a moment, he floundered for words. “That’s strange...”

Perplexed, he looked back at the mushroom. It really was difficult to tell bugshrooms and holoshrooms apart, but the pattern on this one was, without a doubt, that of a bugshroom. Yet Shannon had proven right in front of his eyes that it was safe to eat.

“Why in the world...?” he muttered.

“Looks like this mushroom was a bust.” Shannon giggled and shot him a broad grin.

Kyle, for his part, furrowed his brow, the very picture of confusion. He murmured, “That’s so strange... I’m really careful about mushrooms. I thought I knew them all, but...maybe I was wrong?”

He hung his head sadly. Shannon patted his back. “There, there—it happens! Don’t worry about it.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right,” Kyle said after a moment. “Thanks.” He was dissatisfied with the lack of explanation, but the fact remained that Shannon was unharmed.

“Anyway, forget about that!” Shannon exclaimed. “Let’s head to the village—I’m looking forward to it. I wonder what it’s like.”

“Y-Yeah. You’re all right, so...well, it’s fine.”

Having pulled himself together, Kyle headed off toward the village with Shannon in tow.

The sun was already sinking toward the west. They couldn’t see as far as the center of the small mountain village, but the road had flattened out, and it stretched straight ahead. Along the road, a wooden house slowly came into view.

“Is that your house, Kyle?” Shannon asked.

“Yep.”

“Ooh, it’s a nice place!”

He laughed lightly. “Thanks. Stay a while! I want to ask you all about your travels.”

“Of course. I’ll gladly take you up on that and stick around here for a bit.”

“Yay! Okay, come on in!”

Kyle’s mother and father were there to greet Shannon when she came in, and once they’d heard that Kyle had found her collapsed by the river, they readily agreed to let her stay. They seemed happy; it had been a while since they last had a guest. Shannon, being a particularly courteous girl, offered to do chores in exchange for the accommodations, and just like that, the family of three opened up to her.

Kyle’s father sat in a chair, his eyebrows raised, watching Shannon in the kitchen as if she were some new curio. “Oh, so you’re a mage, are you?”

“Yes, I am. Look!”

Shannon waved a wand. Instantly, the silverware, which had been submerged in water, was scrubbed clean, and the vegetables laid out on the cutting board were expertly chopped. The household chores had started to do themselves.

Kyle beheld the spectacle with sparkling eyes. “That’s... That’s so cool!”

Shannon chuckled. “Isn’t it? I’m pretty good at magic, if I do say so myself.”

“You really are a mage!”

“Hmm? Kyle,” Shannon said, narrowing her eyes at him, “did you doubt me?”

“Oh! No! No, that’s not it.” Kyle searched for the right words. “It’s just that...I hadn’t seen you do it, so...”

“Oh, I kid, I kid. It’s awesome, right?”

“Yeah!”

Kyle’s mother, who stood next to Shannon, said, “It’s been such a long time since I’ve seen a mage. This village is so remote that mages rarely ever come here. I wonder when the last time I saw one was.” She looked up, humming thoughtfully as she tried to remember.

“There was that one time,” her husband reminded her. “It was long before Kyle was born. At least twenty years ago.”

“Ah, that’s right! There were three kids who came to the village—apprentice mages. They could barely use magic.”

“Our numbers have really thinned out recently,” Shannon said. “You can see a fair number of mages in the cities now, but it’s not the same as it used to be. Makes things a bit lonely.”

Once, magic had been a routine part of daily life, but just as the number of mages in the world was decreasing, so too was magic gradually disappearing. Now, magic was a rarity. Mages’ schools and other facilities had been established in an effort to prevent the art from dying out, but it seemed that the decline was unstoppable. Mages as a class were fated to perish—and sooner or later, magic would come to an end as well.

“So mages have it rough too,” Kyle’s mother mused. “But Shannon, your magic is incredible compared to those kids I saw.”

“Thank you so much! I’m happy to hear that,” Shannon said.

Kyle thought back on what had happened on the road. “Oh! Ms. Shannon, did you use magic on that bugshroom, by any chance?” He couldn’t imagine that he had mistaken what it was.

Kyle’s father furrowed his brow. “What’s this ’bout a bugshroom?”

“Well, before we got here, Ms. Shannon accidentally ate a bit of bugshroom, but she’s just fine, see?” To Shannon, Kyle added, “So I thought maybe you used magic to take the poison out of it.”

Shannon laughed. “No way. I just ate it normally, remember?”

“No, no, that’s not what happened! I mean, it really *was* a bugshroom! I wouldn’t make a mistake like—”

Kyle’s father sighed in exasperation. “You’ve still got a lot to learn, Kyle. Sure you didn’t just confuse it for a holoshroom?”

“N-No, dad, that’s not it! That’s really basic stuff.” He paused, hanging his head dejectedly. “I don’t think I would’ve messed that up...”

“You should never be too confident, Kyle.”

“B-But—”

“Ms. Shannon here knows a lot more ’bout the outside world than you do. Mages are also s’posed to know all sorts of things. From what you know, sure, you thought she might’ve eaten a bugshroom, but there’s an exception to every rule. You can’t just look things up in books—you gotta see ’em for yourself to understand ’em. And that means it’s natural for Ms. Shannon to know more than you.”

“I—”

“While Ms. Shannon’s here, take the opportunity to pick things up from her. It ain’t every day you get to watch and learn from a mage.” He patted Kyle’s head. “You’re still green. Focus and become a good man who can contribute to the village.”

“Yes, dad...”

Kyle had been so confident in his knowledge of mushrooms, and now, all that confidence was gone.

Feeling understandably apologetic, Shannon furrowed her brow. “Sorry, Kyle. Did I do something wrong?” she whispered.

“N-No, Ms. Shannon, you’re all right. I just have to study more.”

“Perhaps, but...” Shannon awkwardly scratched her cheek, as if the words she wanted to say were difficult for her.

Kyle’s mother laughed lightly. “Well, that’s enough talking. Dinner’s ready—let’s eat.”

The four of them sat around the wooden table. Shannon took in the sight of the food set out in front of her. “Ooh!” she exclaimed, putting her hands on the sides of her face. “It looks delicious!”

“You put in more work than usual today, mom,” Kyle noted.

His mother laughed. “It’s rare that I have the opportunity to treat a stranger to dinner. I gave it my all!” She beamed. “So, Shannon, eat as much as you like. Then you can let me know what you think—I want an honest answer!”

“Of course! Now then...” Shannon eyed all the food lining the table and began with the vegetable soup. She scooped her spoon into it and lifted it to her mouth. “Mmm! This is good!” Her eyes sparkled as the spoon left her lips.

“Oh, really?” Kyle’s mother asked, looking pleased.

“Yes! It’s a light flavor—very nice! And the vegetables are delicious.”

“The soil around here is rich, so our vegetables turn out that way,” Kyle’s mother explained. “The merchants who come by every so often always buy heaps of them from us.”

“Wow! So the veggies are a local specialty.” Shannon brought the spoon to her lips again.

Kyle felt a little proud to see Shannon enjoying the soup, as if he had made the dinner himself. He followed suit and dug into the meal. *Yeah, it’s the same as usual*, he thought. Still, hearing someone else call it tasty—which he always thought it was—made him happy.

“Anyway, I’m glad it’s to your liking,” Kyle’s mother said.

Shannon nodded. Her beaming face seemed to shout out, *Of course!* She reached for the meat dish next.

“Oh,” she exclaimed. “The sourness makes it so tasty! I want to eat this every day.”

“I’m happy to hear you say that. Please have more!”

“I will! For the past few days, I’ve been surviving on what I could hunt outdoors.” Shannon paused, then murmured, “So it’s really special to eat a meal inside with everyone.”

“Wait, Ms. Shannon, do you mean you were sleeping outside all that time?” Kyle asked.

“Yep. Since I left the last town, I’ve been camping out. It’s been a while.”

“Whoa, that sounds tough.” Kyle could hardly imagine living outside. What would he even eat if he didn’t have his mother’s cooking?

“That’s the way it is when you’re traveling,” Shannon said. “Still, it can be fun, too, to live out in nature.” From the look on her face, Kyle knew that she believed that from the bottom of her heart.

“What town did you come here from?” Kyle’s mother asked.

“Wisteria. I was heading east toward Orwood.”

Wisteria was a large city to the west. Travelers from there occasionally visited the village—if they could find it—on their way east to Orwood, since they had to cross the mountains to get there.

“Speaking of Wisteria, I hear their wine is famous,” Kyle’s mother said. “When the peddlers come to replenish our stocks, they sell out fast.”

“Ah!” Kyle’s father exclaimed. “That’s some tasty stuff, that is. So you came from Wisteria, huh? Must’ve been hard, coming so far.”

“Not at all. I was just fine. I’m used to long trips.”

“You’re pretty hardy, Ms. Shannon,” he said. “It’s dangerous for a girl to travel alone, but you seem to be doing all right. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders.”

“Of course I am! I also know self-defense, so I’m way stronger than all the guys around here.” She made a show of flexing her biceps, putting her

surprisingly toned muscles on display. A girl who was always traveling by herself must have needed a suitable physique.

The conversation intensified Kyle's longing for a journey of his own. He'd always thought that he'd live his whole life in the village, but a whole wide world with mages in it lay beyond the village's borders. There had to be all sorts of interesting things to find out there.

Without thinking, he muttered, "Traveling, huh? Sounds nice."

"Traveling is fun," Shannon agreed, her expression serene.

"You're only a little older than me, right, Ms. Shannon?" Kyle asked. "It's amazing that you travel despite being so young."

For a moment, Shannon froze, looking stunned. Then she let out a little giggle.

"Wh-What?" Kyle stammered.

She laughed again. "Sorry, sorry. It just struck me as funny."

"Huh?" Kyle didn't know what she was chuckling at. He shot her a bewildered look.

"I'm...older than you," Shannon said after a pause. "Yeah, just a little older."

"Yeah? Did I say something strange?"

Shannon waved her hand. "No, it's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Really?"

Shannon hummed and nodded several times.

Well, she was a mysterious person; of course he would wonder about every little thing she did.

His interest far from waning, Kyle peppered her with more questions. "Anyway, what do you do on your travels? You're a mage, so are you studying magic?"

Apparently unperturbed, Shannon hummed thoughtfully. "I'm doing something a little different than studying magic. I mean, despite how I may look, I'm pretty confident in my magic."

“Wow... Ms. Shannon, are you a famous mage?”

“Huh, that’s a good question. There might not be that many people around anymore who know about me.”

“Um, I see. Well, then, why are you traveling?”

“Well...I guess my goal is to find myself? There’s something I just have to do, you see. And to accomplish that, my journey has taken me to many places, where I’ve met many people and experienced many fun things.”

“Whoa, so you have a reason to travel?” Kyle’s eyes shone. “That’s so cool!”

Searching for something on a journey... That was the stuff of epics. To Kyle, who had grown up in this cramped village, Shannon was radiant with her experience traveling freely around the world.

The four of them continued their friendly chat as they ate. Time passed peacefully, and just as the meal was about to end, Kyle’s mother said, “Oh, I meant to ask—Shannon, are you doing all right? You’re not injured? We have some medicine if you need it.”

Shannon tilted her head. “What for?”

“Didn’t you collapse at the river? I thought you might be hurt.”

Oh, right! Kyle had been so distracted by Shannon’s uniqueness that he’d actually forgotten.

“Oh!” Shannon exclaimed. “I’m perfectly fine. That was just me taking a little rest.”

“Really? Well, then that’s okay,” Kyle’s mother replied. “Did you know that area is famous for being haunted? They say ghosts will drag you off the cliffs. What a scary thought!” She shivered.

With gleaming eyes, Shannon leaned forward. “Yes! Yes, that’s right! An old man I met at the base of the mountain told me that. That’s why I went up.” She paused, then let out a dejected sigh. “Turned out it was just a story.”

Kyle’s mother was shocked. “You were that curious? Incredible...”

“Well, I’m just kinda like that.”

“Still, you should be more careful. You’re still a young girl.”

Hold on a moment, Kyle thought, remembering when he had found Shannon. She had been lying by the river, that was true, but something far more concerning had happened just before that. Shannon had—

“Wait,” Kyle said. “You weren’t just lying there, Ms. Shannon. You fell right in front of me!”

“Huh?”

Three stares pierced him, each demanding to know what he was talking about. “What’re you trying to say?” his father asked.

“I mean, it’s impossible for Ms. Shannon to have no injuries!” He had definitely seen her fall from the cliffs. It had happened right in front of his eyes. There was no way he was wrong about this!

But his parents exchanged looks and chuckled.

“Oh, Kyle,” his mother said. “Shannon may be a mage, but not even she would be up and walking around after a fall from so high up. She doesn’t even have any injuries.”

Exasperated, his father added, “Your mother’s right. Honestly, Kyle, what are you talking about? Just look at Ms. Shannon.”

“No, I... Ms. Shannon, you fell from the cliffs, didn’t you?!” Kyle asked, flustered.

“Huh? No way,” Shannon replied.

“Wh-What?!” Kyle froze, his mouth hanging open at this betrayal. “B-But...”

“Honestly, Kyle, what are you on about?” his mother asked.

“You weren’t the one who ate the poison mushroom, were you?” said his father. His parents both sighed and then laughed scornfully.

“No, but... But I saw it happen!” Kyle insisted.

It hadn’t been a dream! He was sure that he had watched her fall. Then, at the riverbank, he had seen her—blonde hair and all—lying in a sea of blood. He would never forget how beautiful she had looked or how harrowing the sight

had been.

Shannon, however, was shrugging her shoulders. “Kyle, even mages would usually die after a fall from those cliffs.”

“Why are you saying that, Ms. Shannon?! Y-You’re right, but... But you *did* fall! You bounced along like a ball!” He pantomimed the action.

“I did?”

“You did! It wasn’t something I ever thought was possible, but...” He paused. “Is there...something wrong with me?”

Shaky and troubled, he put his hands to his head. Having his judgment challenged so thoroughly made him wonder whether what he had experienced was real after all. *I know it was so hot that I was super thirsty... Maybe the heat made me hallucinate? Or maybe I really did eat a poisonous mushroom...*

She would not be okay after falling so far. A hallucination made far more sense.

Kyle’s mother, finding the argument unproductive, cut the conversation short. “Well, Kyle, it won’t do you any good to be so stubborn. Isn’t it enough that Shannon is alive and healthy? Surely that’s the most important thing.”

“I guess,” Kyle muttered.

“Then there’s no reason to further upset her. I’m sure she’s just as tired as you are.” Her expression was filled with affection for her son. “You’ve been working hard lately. Get lots of sleep tonight.”

It was true that he was tired. But...

“There’s still something I don’t get,” he mumbled, indignant, before stuffing his mouth with food.

Ultimately, the topic was dropped, and Kyle was left with hazy conclusions. They continued to discuss other matters well into the night with Kyle’s family’s first guest in a long, long time.

Three days had passed since Shannon came to the village.

Today, at Shannon's request, she and Kyle were heading out to the shops in town. Apparently, she wanted to know if there was anything else interesting to see in the village. Kyle cheerfully agreed to her suggestion, and they left the house together early enough to pick up breakfast.

It was common to see them walking together. By this point, few people in the village didn't know Shannon; she had become a bit of a local celebrity, and the villagers had really taken to her easygoing nature.

"Ahhh, we've got good weather again today," Shannon said, stretching.

"You're right," Kyle replied. "We've had clear skies ever since you got here, Ms. Shannon. Do you just bring good weather with you wherever you go?"

"Bring good weather? Of course not. I've also been in some truly miserable sandstorms, blizzards, thunderstorms, and tornadoes on my journey."

"Ah, I see. I can't imagine what it's like to travel to so many different places, but it must be hard." Kyle both envied and admired Shannon for traveling the world with just one bag in tow even though she was so close to Kyle in age. Before meeting her, he had never even thought about leaving the village to go on a journey by himself.

"Not really. And in any case, it's fun!" Shannon grinned. "This village is so interesting, and everyone is nice."

Abruptly, the shrill, lively voices of children filled the air:

"Oh, the mage is here! She's wearing a black robe again!"

"Let's go! Defeat her!"

Hearing them, Shannon snickered evilly. "They're back, huh?"

She was staring at some nearby bushes. Caught up in the moment, Kyle looked too, and he spotted small body parts and weapons sticking out of the foliage. Quietly, he murmured to Shannon, "It's the village kids."

"Yup. It's great that they've got so much energy."

The children leaped from the bushes all at once. Brandishing branches as if they were swords or bows, they pounced at Shannon, who nimbly dodged.

“Heh heh heh, you won’t get me that easily!” she said, pulling a wand from her fluttering robes and giving it a light wave.

The children erupted in astonished shouts.

“Wh-What? What happened?!”

“M-My sword!”

“She did it again?!”

In the blink of an eye, their weapons had left their hands and floated up into the air, where they now hung suspended. Only Shannon’s magic could pull off such a feat! With a quick swish of her wand, she gathered the floating weapons in front of her.

“Wow,” Kyle breathed. Things just floating in the air, right in front of his eyes—this was the kind of thing he had never seen before he met Shannon. “Your magic’s as amazing as always.”

He knew that magic defied the laws of nature. Furthermore, Shannon’s ability to take away her opponents’ means of attack was intimidating. The children, however, either didn’t realize that the scene unfolding before their eyes was unthinkable for most people or didn’t understand just how great a feat it was. At the sight of Shannon’s magic, they laughed and shrieked playfully, chattering as they ran around.

Shannon chuckled, a dark, impish smile on her lips. “Do you want these back?”

“Y-You evil witch!” one of the kids cried out. “Give us back our weapons!”

“Yeah!” yelled another.

The small children frantically ran after Shannon, who rushed to escape them. As one might expect from a person who was accustomed to traveling by herself, she was quite nimble.

“Hey, Kyle! Catch!” she called.

“Wh-What?!” Kyle screamed.

Somehow, Kyle caught the weapons Shannon threw at him without dropping

them—and the moment he did so, the children stopped chasing Shannon and set their sights on him.

“Kyle’s got ’em! We can beat him for sure!” one of the kids yelled.

“Wh-What?!” Kyle screamed again.

“Get him!”

All at once, the children set after him.

“H-Hey! Ms. Shannon, what do I do?!” Kyle called.

Shannon laughed heartily. “Run away! Run away! They’ll catch you!”

“But these kids are too rowdy!”

A kid shouted, “Hey, wait up!”

“They’re scary!” Kyle continued. “Are all kids this crazy?!”

The children laughed with glee as they chased him. Some of them looked terrifying to Kyle; he had never seen them like this before. Strangely, though, delight welled up inside him as they pursued him; somehow, this had become fun for Kyle. A ghost of a smile spread over his face.

Still, he ran, desperate and panting, away from the children.

“Whoa! I didn’t know Kyle was so fast!”

“He’s only fast at running away!”

“Dang it, I thought he’d be easier to get than the mage!”

Shannon was watching with her arms crossed and a cheerful look on her face. After he’d run around for a while, Kyle gave her the weapons.

“Hah...hah...” he panted. “Here... I’m exhausted...”

Shannon chuckled. “You’ve still got a ways to go, kids!”

“N-No fair!” one of them whined. “You two’re taking turns!”

“That’s just how mages operate,” Shannon said, happy to play the role of the villain. “If you’re annoyed by it, all you gotta do is get your stuff back.”

“You’re actually pretty strong, Kyle,” one of the kids admitted, breathless.

“Ugh, we’ll beat you tomorrow for sure!” another declared. “We’ll retreat for now!”

With that, most of the children ran off. One boy, left behind, cried, “Whoa, wait up, big brother!” and rushed after them in a panic.

“Oh, hey!” Shannon called, holding out the weapons she had confiscated. “Don’t you want these? Take ’em home!”

The kids approached her little by little, cautious and silent, then quickly snatched up their sticks. They fled again, and Shannon fondly watched them go.

“They really like you, Ms. Shannon,” Kyle noted. “Those kids are known for being pretty bratty.”

“Oh, really? They’re good kids. It’s nice for them to have lots of energy. Kids are supposed to be like that.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure they’re only a couple years younger than me.” He paused, thinking. “They might be pretty bored, stuck in the village. They seem to have been having a lot more fun than usual since you arrived, Ms. Shannon.”

She laughed. “I’m glad.”

As they walked through the village, people kept approaching Shannon. It was rare enough for a traveler to visit the village, and on top of that, Shannon was a mage. No wonder the villagers were drawn to her—they were starved for entertainment.

“You know, compared to when you first got here, things have calmed down a lot,” Kyle noted.

The day after Shannon’s arrival, Kyle had shown Shannon around the village. The news of a curious mage in town had spread quickly, of course, and before long, Shannon had found herself surrounded by a huge crowd of villagers. They asked a wealth of questions—*Why’d you come to the village? What do mages do? Why’d you become a mage?*—and badgered her with requests—*Could you show us some magic? Would ya do a spell to help me with my work?*

The crowd had included men and women of all ages. Most of the villagers had never seen a mage before, not to mention the fact such a cute girl had never

come to the village before. In their excitement, they were quite rude to Shannon, but she didn't seem bothered in the slightest. She was all smiles as she responded to them, and she effortlessly brushed aside any annoying topics of conversation. Because of that, Kyle had worried she might grow tired of the village and zip off somewhere else, but it seemed that worry was unfounded.

"It's natural for people to be drawn to rare things, you know. I guess that means people are more used to me being here now?" Shannon mused.

"That's pretty mature of you to say, Ms. Shannon."

"All of the people in this village—those kids included—are good people. I'm really happy that they came up to talk to me and approached me with open arms. Depending on the place or the time period, you know, people can be narrow-minded and shout all kinds of nasty stuff at you, like 'outsider,' 'heathen,' or 'wicked witch'! I guess that can be an interesting experience in its own right, though, and even that's heaven compared to having stones thrown at you."

"Th-That's happened to you?" Kyle frowned, taken aback by the serious things she'd experienced. It seemed inconceivable to him. He just couldn't believe that there were places in the outside world where a girl like Shannon would be ostracized. "There are really places like that? Where people would throw stones at you?"

But Shannon just said, "There are." She came close to Kyle's face and stared hard at him. "This village is receptive to mages, but that doesn't mean that all places are. There are plenty of teachings, religious beliefs, and other things in the world that motivate people to hate mages. In tough times, mages can even be imprisoned!"

"Imprisoned?!" Kyle echoed, shocked. "Just for using magic?"

"Yep. Cruel, isn't it?" Shannon spoke casually, as if imprisonment were just a minor inconvenience, but it was pretty rare for the average person to be incarcerated even once in their lifetime. "Well, it's not like that happens all that often nowadays."

It suddenly occurred to Kyle that Shannon seemed to have been journeying for an *astoundingly* long time. In actuality, though, she was about the same age

as Kyle; she could only have traveled so much.

“You’ve done and seen a lot of things, Ms. Shannon,” Kyle said. “I feel like the villagers could put on a huge festival for you and you’d still take it in stride.”

“Exactly! You’d understand if you traveled, Kyle. There are so many types of people in the world.” She beamed.

Kyle couldn’t imagine the world she spoke of, but it was true that Shannon was enjoying her time in the village. Caught up in the moment, he couldn’t help but smile with her. Then he realized: “Oh, we’re here.”

They had reached the heart of the village. In front of them stood a row of wooden structures—many of which were taverns, general stores, and street stalls—with a circular plaza spread out in the middle. Although it was still morning, plenty of people were walking around the streets.

“Looks like something interesting is going on,” Shannon said.

“Maybe folk crafts,” Kyle guessed. “I don’t know what else they have—probably nothing actually valuable.”

“That’s so cool. I’m excited!” Shannon burst out. “I hope there’s something I can get as a memento of the village.”

“A memento,” Kyle repeated slowly. “Right. You’ll be going off on your journey again soon.”

She had already been in the village for three days, and it wasn’t like she had planned to visit it in the first place, given that she had a goal in mind. He hadn’t asked her how long she meant to stay in case it made her decide to head out immediately. Still, he figured she had to be leaving soon.

“Do you buy a lot of things in the places you travel?” he asked.

“Yup. It’s fun to look at them and think back. They can even be useful sometimes.”

“That’s cool. But...don’t you have only one bag?”

“Yeah, but look here. I’m a mage.”

Kyle tilted his head curiously at Shannon’s words. Calmly, she held a hand out

in front of her.

“For example,” she began—and then something strange happened.

“Wh... Uh, what’s going on?!” Kyle shouted. To his amazement, Shannon’s extended arm had disappeared from the elbow down to her hand.

Shannon chuckled. “Watch *closely*,” she emphasized.

Kyle stared hard at her arm. He could see ripples spreading from where her lower arm had disappeared, like the air was water that had been disturbed.

“You’re...warping space?!” he realized.

“Well, something like that. When this sorcerous space here expands, I can put stuff in it that won’t fit in my bag.”

“Um... Huh? So this is magic too?” Kyle could kind of form a mental picture of items floating and wind being created, but a space created by magic? This was beyond the limits of his imagination.

“Yup, yup,” Shannon said. “I store a lot of things in here, so...I guess you could say it’s like a safe?”

“H-Ha...ha ha. That’s incredible magic,” Kyle said finally. A dry laugh was about all he could manage.

Shannon muttered, “Hmm, I’m pretty sure it’s over here...” She stuck out her tongue as she rummaged around with her arm in the sorcerous space. She looked as if she were searching for money that had fallen behind a shelf. Then, in triumph, she cried, “Aha, there it is!”

Shannon pulled something out of the warped space. It was a pendant, and she passed it to Kyle.

“Look at this,” she told him. “It’s pretty rare.”

The pendant was made of impressively old metal. It seemed like it had once been a shining gold, but now it was dull. Even though it was only about the size of a fingernail, Kyle could tell it was valuable.

“I got this a pretty long time ago in a kingdom to the south,” Shannon explained. “Guess I’ve got a lot of stuff like that tucked in here.”

“This is awesome!” Kyle breathed. “But I doubt anything from this village can compare to something as amazing as this.”

“Really, don’t sweat it. As long as it’s interesting, I’ll buy it. I’ll take anything. Besides, Kyle, I’m looking forward to shopping with you!”

“O-Oh, really?” Kyle’s heart skipped a beat, and he began to feel a little nervous. He cleared his throat and collected himself. “W-Well then, why don’t we take a look around?”

“My pleasure, Sir Kyle,” Shannon chirped.

“I’ll lead the way!” he declared. “Well, now, around here—”

Grrrrrr! Kyle was interrupted by something that sounded akin to an earth tremor.

“Um... Ms. Shannon?” Kyle asked. The sound had come from her. He looked at her and saw that she seemed a little embarrassed.

“Ah, um...” She laughed nervously. “S-Sorry. Got hungry.”

“S-So that was your stomach...”

“Well, I didn’t eat much this morning. I was a bit busy.” Shannon put her hands together and hung her head, shamefaced.

“I guess it’s almost lunchtime.” Kyle pointed at a tavern ahead of them. “Why don’t we go to that tavern and get something to eat?”

“Ooh, sounds good! Let’s go!”

Thus, they headed into the tavern. It was still midmorning, so there weren’t too many customers. A number of people were, however, sitting at the bar, already dead-drunk.

“Whoa,” Shannon said. “They’re going at it so early in the morning.”

“That’s...” Kyle paused. “That’s Mr. Reginald and his guys.”

“You know them?”

“Yeah. They’re village guards. They must’ve come off the night shift,” Kyle explained.

Just then, the drunkards took notice of the two newcomers in their midst. Alcohol in hand, they made their way over to Kyle and Shannon.

“Hey, Kyle! Been a while!”

“Hello, Mr. Reginald,” Kyle said.

Reginald was muscular, bearded, and a bit wobbly on his feet. He turned his gaze to Shannon. “The witch, right? You’re the talk o’ the town. I can tell just by lookin’ at ya. Ain’t nobody in this town like you.” He plopped down in a seat next to her. “Want a drink? I can tell ya some stories.”

“M-Mr. Reginald, you’ve had too much to drink,” Kyle pointed out hesitantly.

“Hmm? I ain’t drunk—not yet, anyhow! We’re bored!” Reginald barked. He grabbed a wooden cup filled with a fresh serving of ale and held it out to Shannon. “Here, girly, drink up!”

“Ooh, I haven’t had anything alcoholic to drink yet here in the village,” Shannon said. “I’ll just have the one cup. I have plans with Kyle after this.”

“Ah, good on ya for joining in. This town’s drinks are pretty good, ain’t they?”

Shannon took the cup and downed it in huge gulps. “Mmm! You’re right, it’s very good! A little tingly, and refreshing too.”

“Right? Figured someone who’s traveled a bunch would get it. Good! I like ya, girly!” Reginald laughed, loud and happy.

Reginald, in his improved mood, bought them lunch, and Shannon and Kyle enjoyed chatting with him for a while. In contrast to his usual cranky behavior, he was mooning cheerfully over Shannon and keeping the conversation lively.

Kyle sipped at his water, watching them. Shannon’s conversational prowess was incredible. He struggled a little to get in on the conversation—Reginald and Shannon were both speaking like adults—but even so, Shannon posed questions to Kyle, smoothly inviting him into what quickly became a three-way chat. Kyle figured that she must have cultivated that skill over her long time traveling. Feeling a little bit inferior to her but respecting her all the same, he ate some snacks.

“Being on guard until morning sounds tough,” Shannon was saying.

“Nah, not really,” Reginald replied. “Our village doesn’t have any enemies, just some small monsters. It’s a boring job.”

“But still, Mr. Reginald, it’s thanks to you and your men that the villagers can live in peace.”

He laughed. “That’s nice of ya to say. Can mages fight?”

Shannon hummed, thinking. “Well, we *can*. Mages are rare, you know? So we can actually get into a fair bit of danger.”

It figured that some ne’er-do-wells would want to abuse a mage’s power. It would take a lot of determination and skill to escape from or protect oneself against people like that.

“Oh, good on ya!” Reginald said. “Y’know, I’ve always wanted to have a fight with a mage. The ones that came to town way back in the day were all spring chickens, but you seem like you can hold your own.”

“I’m pretty strong,” Shannon boasted, grinning as she showed off her biceps. “I’m pretty good at magic *and* self-defense.”

“Hey, nice muscles. Kyle, you wouldn’t be able to beat the girlie here in a fight, would ya?”

“I-I’m fine,” Kyle stammered. “I don’t do that sort of thing.”

Yeah, it’s not like I specialize in fighting, Kyle told himself. I’m much better at going out into the mountains to gather plants. Otherwise, I’m the indoor type.

Reginald laughed. “Sorry, sorry. Still, Kyle, have ya thought about becoming a guardsman one day?”

“Um, I don’t think I’m suited for combat,” Kyle said haltingly. “Besides...”

He did think that being a guard would be a cool job, but since he met Shannon, his yearning to see the outside world had grown.

This boring village will never change, he thought. The townspeople are starved for entertainment; they were so happy when Shannon turned up. Me too, of course. Still, this is only temporary. As soon as Shannon leaves, the village will go back to how it always was.

I'm already a little lonely. I can't help but want to go see the world outside this village. But I have a hunch that I'll live here until I die.

Reginald laughed as if he'd guessed at Kyle's thoughts. "Well, no worries. It's a pretty boring job when there are no threats around. It'd be wise for ya to look for work that'll let ya grow your talents. This village is safe, after all."

"Oh! It looks like it's already about noon," Shannon realized. "We've been here a pretty long time. We'd better get going, Kyle."

Kyle looked outside. It was still technically morning, but the sun was high in the sky. "Oh, you're right."

"Leaving already?" Reginald looked at Shannon as if reluctant to part with her.

"Yep. I had fun, though, mister. Let's talk again if we get the chance."

"Ah, all right. Come back whenever, girlie—you're always welcome!" he replied. "And thanks. That was the tastiest drink I've had in a while."

"Don't forget to drink in moderation, mister!" Shannon said cheerfully. "See ya!"

Shannon and Kyle said their goodbyes to Reginald and left the pub. A refreshing breeze blew past, cooling down their hot cheeks.

"Whew! Well, that was fun!" Shannon said.

"It's been a long time since I last saw Mr. Reginald in such a good mood," Kyle said. "He's usually pretty tense at the end of the night shift."

"That so? Must be a tough job. Anyway," she added quickly, "sorry. Let's get going!"

They chatted as they walked around, looking at several shops and completing their original objective. As the afternoon wore on, there were a few instances where people spotted them from a distance and tried to talk to them, but Shannon and Kyle weren't stopped like they had been earlier.

During their visits to the shops, Shannon spent her money frivolously, buying strange ornaments, masks, and other things. Kyle didn't think they were particularly useful but figured that Shannon must have thought them

important.

Then, just like that, their fun times came to an end.

“Ah, good! That was a blast. I didn’t plan to come to this village in the first place, but I got to meet you, and I’m glad I visited. Thank you,” Shannon said with a soft, grateful expression.

“Heh heh, I’m glad you visited too!” Kyle replied. “But still, I haven’t shown you everything yet. Let’s pick it up again tomorrow.”

Shannon hummed thoughtfully, stretching her whole body in a fluid motion. “Well, I’m not in a hurry to get back on the road, so I’ll stay another night.”

“Yes! I thought you might!” Kyle was thrilled that his reprieve from boredom wasn’t over yet. He was bursting with curiosity, and he wanted to enjoy the sensation for a little longer. “Well, let’s get back before it gets dark—”

He turned on his heel and, in the same moment, an enormous shadow passed overhead. It was quickly followed by a violent gust of wind.

Shannon made a surprised sound, and Kyle screamed. He said, “What the —?!”

“GRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!”

An animalistic howl erupted out of nowhere and nearly burst their eardrums, startling the two. The sound was less of a cry than a screech—it was just that earsplitting.

Panicked, Kyle looked up. He couldn’t believe his eyes. Up there, in the sky, soared a gigantic *something* with gigantic wings. Between its size and its silver scales, its very presence was overwhelming.

Shannon looked up too. “A dragon!” she muttered.

“A dragon?!” Kyle echoed. “That’s... That’s really a dragon?!”

Dragons were even rarer than mages. It wouldn’t have been an exaggeration to call them mythical beasts. He couldn’t believe that they really existed.

But the look in Shannon’s eyes was serious. “Yeah, that’s a dragon. I haven’t seen one in a long time. Their numbers have dwindled so much that these days,

there are hardly any eyewitness reports of them... What in the world happened for one to show up here?"

"It's real..." Kyle whispered. He had only ever seen dragons and the like in picture books. Never in his wildest dreams had he thought he might actually see one in the flesh. "This is incredible...!"

But before he could spend too long feeling excited and thinking about how rare dragons were, an awful thought crossed his mind.

"No, wait a second," he said, growing pale. "A dragon would put the village in danger. It's flying low too... This could be bad."

Dragons possessed colossal strength. There were countless stories of dragons wreaking havoc on cities. A village like Kyle's didn't stand a chance.

"Look," Shannon said, pointing at the dragon as it flew away from them. "It's going to land."

The dragon was attempting to land in the forest that spread out from the other side of the village. It was barely a stone's throw away.

"We have to warn everyone!" Kyle said.

"Yes. It'll get bad if the villagers don't take shelter."

Together, they hurried back to the town center. Just as they feared, it was already pandemonium; everyone was panicking. The calmness they'd been enjoying just moments ago had shattered, and it was replaced by people running and screaming.

"Wait, what?! A dragon, you say?!"

"This has never happened before!"

"It landed in Urda Woods?! The village is in danger!"

"I don't want to die!"

"It's already too late to run!"

"What are you saying?! It's time to fight! Isn't this the home we inherited from our ancestors?! We must form a raiding party or see our lands devastated by fire!"

Kyle's sleepy village was utterly transformed. The air reverberated with alarmed shrieks and angry bellows. Most of the adults were rushing around frantically, and everywhere they looked, people's expressions betrayed stark terror. The villagers might have only learned about the threat a dragon posed from legend, but that was enough: Fear had overtaken them all at the sight of the immense silhouette in the sky. Everyone knew that the creature's arrival meant the town's destruction.

As he watched the villagers scurry around, Kyle tugged on Shannon's sleeve. "Wh-What should we do?" he asked, anxiety plain in his soft voice.

Unsurprisingly, Shannon's expression was grave. "The odds may well be impossible, but...well, that guy did say to form a raid party."

"Yeah, but..." Kyle had no faith that the villagers could kill the dragon. It had been so long since they had last faced any type of conflict—and those encounters really only went as far as hunting small monsters that came too close to the village.

"There *are* stories of people fending off dragons," Shannon pointed out. "It might work out if everyone can work together."

Kyle didn't answer.

"Still," Shannon muttered, "the people here..."

Burly men—village guardsmen, hunters, and the like—began to gather at the mayor's house. They were going to face the dragon.

"Hey, girlie!" someone called.

"Oh, mister! We met earlier!" Shannon called back.

It was the middle-aged man they'd met at the pub—Reginald. He was sober now, standing with a weapon in hand and a serious expression on his face. "You're still here?" he asked. "This place'll be a battleground soon. Hurry up and get going. You should be okay on your own."

"Ha. Figures I'd be the only one who *can* run away," Shannon pointed out.

Reginald laughed. "I don't need your pity. We'll slay that dragon, you mark my words. But just to be safe, you should leave the village now." When Shannon

didn't respond, he added, "Well, let's meet again someday. Bring us some good ale next time."

With that, he headed into the mayor's house, leaving a thick tension in his wake.

"A raiding party," Shannon murmured. "What do they even plan to do against a dragon? Let's go listen in."

"Huh?" Kyle blurted.

"You're worried too, aren't you?" she asked. "The village is in a state of emergency, so let's go hear what's going on. Maybe I can help somehow."

"R-Right!"

Just as Reginald had, they entered the mayor's house. A large crowd of men was gathered inside, and in the middle of the throng stood the mayor.

A man asked, "Who will go to the closest town and ask for help?"

"You mean Wisteria or Orwood?" someone else replied. "That'll be no good—each one is a five-day trip, minimum. The village will be destroyed while we're twiddling our thumbs waiting for help to arrive."

"I sent a letter," a third man chimed in. "If we can hold out for a week, they might be able to come help—"

Someone interrupted him. "I don't think they'll send people just to help out one small village. Even for a large city, it's no simple matter to take on a dragon. It's far more likely that they'll watch and wait. They're not going to needlessly send their own citizens to their deaths."

A gloomy air hung over the room, and everyone's face was steeped in despair. No one would be able to put up a proper fight like this.

"So waiting for aid is hopeless," someone muttered. "We have to decide on a course of action, quick."

"Taking down the dragon ourselves," the mayor began, but then he noticed the two newcomers. "Oh, Kyle? And who's that with you?"

"My name is Shannon." She quickly bowed her head.

“Ah, the traveling mage,” the mayor surmised.

“Th-That’s right!” cried a young man in front of them. He turned around and sank to his knees, bowing his own head with a solemn look on his face. “Ms. Shannon, please! You have to help us!”

Shannon’s face scrunched up in bafflement. “H-Hold on. Please don’t do that.”

“Y-Your magic can do something against that dragon, right?” the young man said. “Please! You have to save the village!”

“I’ll do what I can,” Shannon replied. “You’ve all taken care of me, and besides, I like this place.”

“You will?! Th-Then we can—”

“You think you can stop it?!” the mayor bellowed. His booming voice rendered everyone else silent as they straightened up in surprise and turned to him.

“S-Sir...” someone said.

The mayor paused for a moment. “I’m sorry, traveler. Everyone is terrified. But this is our problem. I do not intend to cause you trouble.”

“But it’s really not a bother,” Shannon said softly.

“I assume you’re putting yourself out there because you’ve taken a liking to our village,” the mayor went on, heedless. “But even for a mage, taking on a dragon is not an easy task. The mages I’ve met in the past were terrible fighters; they were far better suited to curing illnesses and healing wounds. I don’t know if you’re the same, but just because you’re a mage doesn’t mean you can do anything you want. This is our problem. I can’t have a traveler like you putting your life on the line. I’m pleased to hear that you want to help, but you need to escape.”

The mayor turned toward his men. Everyone remained silent, listening to him.

“And who are we if we rely on others?” he asked. “Are you going to beg a little girl for help?”

“W-Well—” someone tried.

“We will defend our own village,” the mayor continued. “How can we face ourselves if we depend on the mighty whenever it’s convenient? We will survive this by our own power. It’s time to show our strength—and live through this.”

All around the room, the look in the men’s eyes changed.

“You... You’re right,” someone said. “We... We can do this!”

“Let’s do it!” another cried.

“That’s right! We’ll protect our village with our own hands!”

With a cheer, the atmosphere in the room was transformed. The raiding party’s morale was at its peak.

Shannon’s face contorted with mixed feelings as she watched the proceedings. “I really am willing to help,” she pointed out quietly. “Do you understand how strong a dragon is?”

“And I’m glad you feel that way. I’m glad you like this village,” the mayor replied with a fond smile. “But we don’t need help. You ought to get going. Come back someday when it’s quiet again, and we’ll be sure to give you a warm welcome.”

With that, he returned his focus to the strategy meeting. He wasn’t going to give Shannon or Kyle any room to speak.

Kyle murmured, “I w-wonder if things’ll be all right.”

“Yeah... Dragons are powerful,” Shannon replied, just as quiet.

Ultimately, Shannon was an outsider; they wouldn’t allow her to meddle without permission. The mayor had said his piece, and the villagers had their pride.

“Y-You know...” Kyle hesitated for a moment, his face pale as he chewed on his lip. “They’re going up against the dragon with only swords and spears...”

The village would fall unless the raiding party could defeat the dragon—and defeating the dragon seemed nigh impossible. Morale was high, but even so, every man in the room had a grim expression on his face. The difference in power between the two forces was clear.

“A dragon’s fangs are strong, and its claws are tough,” Shannon said. “It’d be almost impossible for mere guardsmen and hunters to contend with one.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Besides, the fire from its maw could turn them into charcoal in an instant. Anything it ate would get thoroughly digested—”

Shannon abruptly stopped speaking.

“Ms. Shannon?” Kyle prompted, shooting her a questioning look. In an instant, Shannon’s expression had transformed. She no longer appeared worried about the village’s raid party or uncomfortable about having been rejected when she had offered her help.

She looked excited.

“Why didn’t I think of that before?!” she asked herself. Her eyes sparkled as if she was bursting with uncontrollable delight—as if she had found something she’d been looking for for days.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” Kyle asked hesitantly, an unpleasant inkling flashing through his mind.

Immediately, his hunch was proven right. “If the dragon eats me, I’ll—! Kyle, I’m going to the dragon!”

“What?! Wait, why?! What changed?!”

He reached out to try to stop Shannon, but she was even quicker than him, and she hurried out of the mayor’s house. Panicked, he rushed after her.

“W-Wait, Ms. Shannon! What are you thinking?!” he called. “They’re sending out the raiding party! What are you going to do all by yourself?!”

“I’m just going to see the dragon!”

“What are you talking about?!”

Shannon was so exultant that she barely took notice of Kyle’s utter bewilderment. “You need to run away!” she instructed. “This is goodbye, but I had fun with you! Be well!”

With that, she broke into a run.

He didn't understand anything. In the blink of an eye, something had changed Shannon's mood.

"What happened to you, Ms. Shannon?" he asked under his breath. "'Be well...' Wait, no!"

Kyle had saved her life. Could she be trying to repay him by going off to defeat the dragon by herself? With the mayor refusing her help as a mage and insisting she not involve herself, perhaps she intended, somehow, to save the village by going off alone, before the rest of them set out, to face off against the dragon?

That was suicide.

"There's no way she can stop it," he thought aloud. Even if Shannon was an incredibly skilled mage, fighting a dragon by herself was absurd! Besides, Kyle had never asked her to do something so monumental to protect the village. As much as he feared losing his home, he was more afraid of Shannon losing her life.

He could not afford to just stand around and wait.

"Ms. Shannon!" he called, breaking into a run, chasing her into the forest.

"Ms. Shannon, wait!" Kyle managed to choke out, wheezing and panting. He ran at full speed, shoving vegetation out of his way as he chased her. He was already deep in the forest, not far from where the dragon had landed. "Ms. Shannon!"

Perhaps his voice reached her, because Shannon stopped, sighing, and looked back at him.

"Really, you're still around? Go back, Kyle. You're in danger. I won't be able to protect you."

"B-But..." Kyle panted, his hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath. "Y-You're planning to take on the dragon alone, aren't you? That's impossible!"

Shannon's eyebrows knit together in a puzzled expression. "I think you've got the wrong idea."

"Huh? The m-mayor told you not to get involved, but you're still planning to

save us, aren't you?!" If that wasn't what Shannon was planning, then there was no reason for a traveler like her—an outsider—to face a dragon. She'd have to have a death wish to do it for any other reason. "I'm happy you want to fight for us, but I don't want you to die!"

Shannon was kind. He could tell by how she acted around the villagers. She listened to people without judgment and got along with everyone. It made sense to him: She had grown to love the village and was taking steps to repay the debt she owed the villagers for allowing her to stay.

Just as Shannon had grown fond of the village, however, Kyle had grown close to Shannon. He didn't want to just let her die. He had to stop her.

But Shannon continued, "I'm telling you, I'm not here for you or the village." She paused. "I'm here because of something super personal. So you have to run, Kyle. I don't want you to get involved."

"But what are you planning to— Mmph?!"

"Shh!" Quicker than Kyle could think, Shannon had clamped a hand over his mouth and pushed him into the shadow of a tree. "Quiet."

"Mmph!"

"I told you to be quiet."

Shannon's tone was grave, and, resigning himself to doing as he was told, Kyle held his breath and stood still in her arms. It was so quiet around them that he could hear his own heartbeat and Shannon's breathing.

He glanced up at Shannon, but her gaze was directed elsewhere. "Wh-What's wrong?" he asked softly.

Quietly, she replied, "Over there."

Kyle gulped, raising his chin and slowly turning his head to look where Shannon was pointing. Through a gap in the lush greenery, he could see something sparkling. Something silver.

His heart jumped violently, and his blood ran cold. He had seen that silver color only a little while ago. "The dragon...!"

"I got to it pretty fast," Shannon said in a livelier tone. The corners of her

mouth softened, and she gazed at the dragon with eyes full of curiosity. “It looks injured. I think something must have happened for it to have come all the way here.”

Kyle looked back at the dragon. Shannon was right; it had wounds scattered all over its body. It was hard to imagine a creature that could inflict damage against those scales. Perhaps it had been battling another dragon.

“Those wounds—” Kyle began, but then the dragon rumbled in its throat.

“Grrr...”

Kyle startled, his whole body tensing up. It really was a dragon—a dragon!—that stood there, only a few dozen meters away. A terrifying thought occurred to him: If he moved even a little bit, the dragon would immediately leap at him, ready to tear him apart with its sharp talons.

“M-Ms. Shannon,” he said haltingly, “we should run while we still—”

“Okay, I’m gonna move toward it.”

“What?!”

Unlike Kyle, who was so nervous he felt like he was having an out-of-body experience, Shannon looked excited to be so close to the dragon. She seemed nothing like the person Kyle had known until moments before. Now, Shannon showed interest in nothing except the dragon—not even her own life.

“Go back, Kyle,” she said in a warning tone. “I really can’t let you stay any longer.”

“A-Are you serious?!” Kyle asked, somehow managing to shout in a whisper. “You’ll die, you know! That’s a dragon!”

But Shannon said simply, “This is what my journey’s been about. That’s why you need to go back and wait for the raiding party. If it doesn’t look like they can deal with the dragon, then you should flee the village with your parents. I don’t want you to die.”

“But that’s what I should be telling you,” Kyle argued weakly. “I... I don’t care about your journey!”

He clung to Shannon desperately, his brow furrowing and tears pooling in his

eyes. She gave him a quick pat on the head.

“Thanks, but this is my chance. I’m grateful to you, Kyle—of course I am—but I don’t have any debt to repay the village, and this is something I really want to do.” Shannon beamed at him. “This is completely in my own self-interest. The village doesn’t have anything to do with it, so once I’ve finished doing what I have to do, they can defeat the dragon.”

This couldn’t have been happening. Who would pick a fight with a dragon for their own self-interest? It was a *dragon*!

“All right, I’m off! Be well!” With that, Shannon ran off toward the beast.

“Ms. Shannon!”

Kyle desperately reached for her, but she was already too far away. Shannon pushed vegetation out of her way, crossing the scant few dozen meters and throwing herself in front of the dragon.

In response, the dragon slowly turned its face toward Shannon, watching her with its yellow eyes. The fact that it was also facing Kyle’s direction made him cower in terror.

“Hiya, Mr. Dragon,” Shannon said, greeting it with her usual cheerful smile.

The dragon’s eyes glittered, and it slowly opened its mouth as if to reply. Then: “GAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The earsplitting roar sent out a shock wave that cracked nearby boulders and tore up the grass around them. Flying bits of rock and plants cut Shannon’s soft, white skin, and her red blood immediately began to seep out. This should have been more than enough to scare a normal person, yet Shannon’s expression revealed only that she found the dragon fascinating.

Every part of Kyle’s body was screaming at him to run, but he couldn’t just leave Shannon by herself. He had to do something to help her. At least, that’s what he thought, but his body refused to obey him. It wouldn’t even twitch. He was helpless to do anything but stand there, wide-eyed, his legs shaking with fear.

“You might be able to do it. You’re the strongest of creatures!” Shannon flung

her arms wide as if to embrace the dragon. “I might be tasty!”

In response, the dragon threw open its enormous jaws. “GRAAAAAARRR!” Massive fangs gleamed inside its mouth, and the dark depths of its black throat seemed ready to swallow her whole.

And Shannon, who could have used the magic she was so adept in to launch a counterattack, readily accepted that darkness.

The dragon lowered its head to her. Its vast, gaping jaws engulfed her and, in the blink of an eye, snapped shut. From the top of her head to the tips of her toes, Shannon fit cleanly in the beast’s mouth.

“Aaah! Aaaaah!!!” Kyle shrieked at the devastating sight. It was all he could do. He fell to his knees, staring dumbfounded at the dragon. “Aaah!!! Aaaaah!!! M-Ms. Shannon!”

The dragon chewed. Then, with a loud gulp, it swallowed.

Kyle had no words. This was the stuff of nightmares—something no one should ever have to see. Only a moment ago, Shannon had been there, talking energetically to the dragon...and the dragon had devoured her whole, right before his eyes.

All the hair on Kyle’s body stood on end. His blood ran cold, and he was struck by a sudden unsteadiness. His mind went blank with horror. But time did not stop.

“Grrr...” The dragon growled as if to say it was still hungry. Slowly, it turned its head in Kyle’s direction, fixing him with a stare cold enough to freeze his spine. His whole body trembled.

It was Kyle’s turn next.

His screams must have attracted the dragon’s attention, but Kyle had no energy left to run. The instant the dragon ate Shannon, Kyle’s heart had snapped in half. For a moment, he’d held out a bit of hope that Shannon, as a mage, could do something—that she could resist death. But reality was cruel.

Thud. Thud. The dragon came closer. It was in no hurry, perhaps sensing that Kyle had already lost the will to fight. The ground shook beneath his feet as it

slowly made its way over to stand in front of him. The stench of blood leaked from its mouth, overwhelming Kyle's senses, and its disgustingly warm breath struck him in the face.

Terrified, Kyle quickly squeezed his eyes shut. There was nothing he could do—nothing, that was, but wait to meet the same end as Shannon.

“GRAAAAH!” the dragon cried shrilly as it opened its cavernous jaws, overwhelming Kyle with its hot breath.

He stiffened. His trembling legs still refused to obey him; he couldn't run away. This was the end. He wasn't ready, but with his eyes still shut, he resigned himself to his fate.

Except...

Kyle let out a small noise of confusion. He waited for a moment longer, but he couldn't sense the dragon in front of him moving. Surely enough time had passed for the dragon to have swallowed him up, right? Thinking it strange, Kyle slowly opened his eyes—and found that the dragon in front of him had gone as still as a statue.

“Huh?”

Something was happening. The dragon was acting strangely. After a moment, a pained growl slipped from the depths of its throat: “Guh...aaah...” Bit by bit, its body began to tremble, the motion intensifying until it was violently slamming itself against the ground with heavy thuds.

“Wh-What the...?” Kyle gasped.

The dragon was suffering. “Gaaa...aaah... Gaaaah!” it screeched, sounding as if it might faint from the agony.

Then, out of nowhere, the dragon's middle burst open.

“What?!” Kyle screamed.

There came the sound of a violent explosion, and some kind of reaction to heat. A hot wind blasted Kyle and spewed chunks of meat and red liquid all around the surrounding area. He stared, astonished, then turned to look at the dragon's head. The dragon had lost the fearsome gleam in its eyes; now, they

were wide and lifeless. Then, unexpectedly, its body shifted to the side and collapsed onto the ground with a resounding thud.

“Huh?”

Kyle stood frozen again, dazed and bewildered. He approached the dragon timidly. It was undeniably dead; even if its face weren’t proof of that, the flesh and blood scattered all around certainly would have been.

“Did... Did it blow itself up?” he wondered aloud.

Just then, a rustling sound came from what had once been the dragon’s stomach, and golden hair emerged from inside. Next came a slender, white arm, almost like a corpse was rising from its grave. Whatever was in there, it was climbing out of the dragon as if clawing its way up a wall.

“Upsy-daisy,” a voice said. It was a person.

The person finally emerged and stood atop the dragon with their back to Kyle. They were stark naked, perhaps because the dragon’s stomach juices had dissolved their clothes. Specks of blood stuck to their pretty back and bottom, which Kyle’s eyes jumped to.

“Mmm...aaah!” The person stretched right there in the middle of the hellish landscape, grunting and sighing. They sounded as if they were pouting when they grumbled, “Jeez, dying is harder than living.”

“M-Ms. Shannon?!” Kyle gasped.

It couldn’t have been her. She had been devoured by the dragon. Nobody could survive that. And yet...

“Oh, Kyle, you’re still here?” Shannon asked. Her voice, her behavior, and her face when she looked back at him—it couldn’t have been anyone else.

“Honestly! I thought I told you to run away.”

“No, I... Y-You were eaten by a dragon. Shouldn’t you have died...?” He looked at her closely. Her skin was covered with burn scars. Were they from the dragon’s stomach acid? “Are you okay with those—”

As he spoke, and before his very eyes, the painful-looking burns returned to normal, pale skin.

“Huh?” Kyle said again. After only a few seconds, the wounds had vanished without a trace, as if time had turned backward. He blinked, unable to believe his eyes. “The burns...disappeared?”



“Drat! You saw?” Shannon raised her hand to the empty sky and slipped it into a gap in space that looked like a ripple in water. It was the sorcerous space that she had shown him earlier that day. When she pulled her hand back out, she held a fresh set of clothes; she put them on, turned around to face Kyle, and shrugged. “Thing is, I’m immortal. Forever young.”

Kyle’s brain screeched to a halt. “Excuse me?” *Immortal? Forever young?* “S- So that means you...”

“Yep. I can’t die. Not easily.” Shannon laughed.

To Kyle’s shock, she had come back unscathed from the belly of the beast.

“Our hero has triumphed!”

“Woo-hoo! Cheers, cheers!”

“Good job, girlie!”

The youths of the village sang Shannon’s praises as they drank. Everyone had gathered in front of the mayor’s house to share the news that the dangerous dragon had been defeated without a single casualty, and now they were celebrating its demise.

“What a great celebration! It’s all thanks to you, Ms. Shannon!” Kyle said.

“I guess,” Shannon muttered. In stark contrast to the merry villagers, her expression was dark and gloomy. She sat in a chair with her shoulders hunched, and the bonfire’s light cast shadows over her face. Thanks to this immortal witch, the village was safe...but their savior herself had been despondent for a while.

“What’s wrong, Ms. Shannon?” Kyle prompted. “You look so sad. You know you’re everyone’s hero, right?”

“A hero,” Shannon echoed, withdrawn and pouting. “Not something I ever had any interest in being.”

“Well, maybe you didn’t, but look! Everyone’s super happy. You’re being humble, but what you did was amazing!”

“Well, I guess so,” she relented. “I guess they don’t really have support like me around—”

“Right ya are, girlie!”

“Oof!”

A thick, solid arm had come out of nowhere and landed on Shannon’s shoulders. It was Reginald, the man they’d met at the tavern. The force of his swing pitched Shannon forward, and for a moment, she looked like she was about to fall.

“Eat up, girlie!” Reginald urged. “You’re the gal of the hour!”

She grunted. “G-Give me more warning next time! I’ll die! Not that I actually can, but...”

Reginald had both hands full of meat dishes and was rather forcefully shoving them into Shannon’s mouth. Her cheeks were puffed out fully as she frantically chewed, and Reginald let out a hearty laugh at the sight. “You’re a good eater, girlie! No, not girlie anymore—you’re our hero!”

“Oh, shut up,” Shannon grumbled. “You’re the one making me eat all this stuff.”

“Ha ha! Well, it’s good that I am! Ya really need to be more proud of what ya did. The only gloomy face around here is yours!” He laughed heartily again, but this time, it trailed off into a short sigh. After a quiet pause, he added softly, “Honestly, girlie, I’m really grateful to ya, understand? I really thought we weren’t getting out of this one—that the dragon would burn us all to death.”

Shannon listened, somehow managing to chew the meaty food stuffed in her mouth.

“But to think that the girl Kyle brought to the village was a mage... Shannon, ya blew up that dragon for us. I thought it was a joke at first, but when I went to the forest and saw that awful beast’s corpse strewn everywhere, I was overjoyed. It ain’t time yet for this village to die out. I know the mayor says it’s our custom to handle our problems ourselves, but I’d been thinking it was about time for us to get some help from outside. Better that than let the village die.” Reginald stared intently at Shannon. “Anyway, thank ya. Ya saved me,

girlie, and the other villagers too.”

He placed his hands on both knees and bowed his head. Shannon chewed and swallowed a piece of meat, then said, “No need for that. It just sort of happened. I wasn’t out there trying to defeat the dragon and save the village.”

Reginald laughed. “No need to be humble! There’s no other reason for ya to risk your life slaying a dragon. Ya even brought us the butchered parts of the dragon; it’s obvious ya knew what ya were doing.”

“I did have a different reason.”

“Oh? Then tell me,” Reginald said with a laugh, taking a swig of ale.

“I wanted the dragon to kill me.”

“Pfft!” Reginald spat out his drink. “Gah ha ha! What’re ya talking about, girlie?! Nobody would challenge a dragon *hoping* to die.”

Kyle nodded. *I thought the same thing.*

Reginald doubled over with mirth, slapping his knee. He cackled so hard there were tears in his eyes. “Oh, you’re funny. But girlie, I see how kind ya are. This was our problem, like the mayor said, but even knowing that, ya saved us anyway. Ya fought that dragon to slay it. Can ya admit that to us, or will ya not?”

“Actually, Mr. Reginald, Ms. Shannon really...” Kyle began, but when he met Shannon’s eyes, she shrugged her shoulders and snapped him a wink. He fell silent. Shannon was genuinely telling the truth; Reginald had the wrong idea. The truth was going to be a tough pill for him to swallow, though, because he hadn’t seen what had happened.

“I’m not that noble,” Shannon insisted. “I’m just a traveling mage. Here one day and gone the next.”

“Well, I’ll play along with that. Still, it doesn’t matter if ya just happened to kill the dragon or did it on a whim; we’re alive thanks to ya. Let us show our gratitude. We owe ya that much! I’ll see ya around.” With another booming laugh, Reginald returned to the feast.

Everyone in the village was just as grateful to Shannon as Reginald was. Even

when Shannon insisted that she didn't save them on purpose, their opinions didn't change. Shannon had wanted to die. She wished for that. Kyle hadn't believed it when he first heard her say it, but once he'd thought through all the events that had occurred since he met Shannon, he was convinced. Her fall from the cliffs had certainly not been an illusion.

"So you really want to die?" he asked.

"That's what my journey's all about: finding the ending to my life," Shannon replied. She was grinning, as if talking about her own death weren't a sorrowful thing. "Whaddaya think? Sounds pretty epic, right?"

Kyle paused, then eventually laughed a little. "Ms. Shannon, you really are interesting."

"Really?"

"Yeah. There's no one else like you."

"As if there could be another immortal person out there. One's more than enough."

They both laughed. They had only known each other for a few days, but their time together had been so incredible they would remember it for the rest of their lives.

"You know, when we first met, the mushroom I ate really was poisonous. You were right," Shannon said. "Sorry about that. I ended up lying to you."

"What?! I was right all along?!" Kyle exclaimed, and Shannon grinned. "But...in the end, you didn't die in the dragon's stomach. Your immortality sure is something."

Shannon let out a deep, disappointed sigh and hung her head. She sounded truly crestfallen when she muttered, "I thought the dragon was a once-in-a-lifetime chance...or at least once in a few hundred years."

"So, uh, what was the inside of its stomach like?"

"A lot like a hot bath. All splashy."

"I bet it felt strange."

“Want to try it together sometime?” Shannon asked, grinning impishly.

“Well, I’d just actually die, so...”

“I’m jealous.”

The next day, Shannon left the village. She gave Kyle a big wave, calling out that she would see him again someday. He waved back.

It would probably be decades—no, centuries—before she came to the village again. By then, the town would probably look really different. After all, there hadn’t even been a village in the area the last time she had passed through.

Until then, Shannon would travel the world, using her immortal body to help more people...*not*. She had no such noble aim. She had simply resumed her quest to find her own death.

“Now then,” Shannon said to herself. “How’ll I try to die this time?”

She began walking east.

Chapter 2: Overdosing

“Hah, hah, haaaah...”

The blonde girl’s breath came faintly as she stood alone in the clearing, wiping away her sweat. She had won the magical skirmish that had spanned the past several hours, but in the end, it didn’t matter who prevailed—smoke rose all around her, and the sky was dyed red.

She hadn’t made it in time. She stood by herself on higher ground, looking down at the tragedy. This was the town’s demise. People screamed and roared as they ran in all directions, trying to escape.

The girl’s blood ran cold. Her hands trembled and her heart pounded. Usually, the view from this overlook was picturesque, so she often came here to people watch. What she saw now was a far cry from that tranquility.

She swallowed hard. It was all over. All of it.

A sound came to her then, perhaps a voice from behind her. She turned around.

Behind her was a man with long, gray hair and blood pouring from his mouth. He was looking at her, his face contorted with suffering. With the last of his mortal strength, he slowly pointed at her. It was as if he were cursing her.

“Master,” she breathed. “How did this happen?”

The man smiled and said nothing.

There was nothing to be done for the burning town. The enormous magic circle floating in the sky began to fade, having fulfilled its purpose.

That was the end of everything and also the beginning of everything. She would never forget what she had seen. No matter how many hundreds or thousands of years passed, it remained in the deepest part of her heart, like a wound that had been carved there. It was her fate.

Gradually, the noises faded. The surrounding landscape began to flow past her

like a shooting star, and her vision became distorted. She felt her body slowly lifting upward. Then there was darkness.

“...up. Get up. Hey.”

She heard a man’s voice. It was followed by a tapping on her shoulder. Her eyes fluttered open. No longer was she in that town; instead, she found herself within the somewhat shabby walls of a horse-drawn carriage. Finally, she realized that what she’d seen was a dream.

“Hey, get up,” said the man next to her, shaking her shoulder.

Shannon rubbed at her eyes, then grasped her right shoulder and stretched her right arm upward. “Mmm...aaah,” she yawned. “Did I fall asleep?”

“Did ya?” the man scoffed. It seemed like she had. “You were out like a dang light. After the trouncin’ ya gave us and makin’ us transport ya, figures you’d feel fine enough to sleep defenseless! Honestly, if you can sleep that well, ain’t any of us gonna lay a hand on ya.” He pursed his lips, annoyed. “Anyway, we’re almost to Eldoa.”

“Eldoa,” Shannon echoed. “Oh, right. I wanted to go there, didn’t I?”

“Hey, give me a break! We gave you a lift *because* you wanted to get there!” He spread his arms wide to emphasize that he was right. However...

“Oh? Aren’t you forgetting something?” Shannon said cheekily. “You guys are bandits. By all rights, I should’ve handed you over to the knights. I’m choosing to look the other way.”

“Ugh, but...” The man frowned and bit his lip, annoyed. To his chagrin, Shannon had the upper hand. She had been walking at a leisurely pace toward Eldoa when his group caught sight of her and decided to attack. Unfortunately for them, she turned the tables on them easily. After examining some of their belongings, she ordered them to give her a ride the rest of the way to Eldoa. “B- But we didn’t think a mage’d be walkin’ on the road! Ya look like a weak little girl!”

“Exactly. I am a weak little girl. What are you going to do, try to force me to do what you want again?” She smirked.

The man shuddered. “Who would?! Some of our guys are injured now! We’re almost to Eldoa, so please just stay put and let us take you there!”

“Ooh, you’re so kind!” Shannon put her hands together, swaying left and right. The man dejectedly dropped his head.

It was sunset. The sun on the horizon blazed red, though it was an entirely different red than the one she had seen in her dream.

After a while, the wagon arrived at the castle gates, and her ears picked up the sound of lively voices. “Ooh, a festival!” Shannon enthused with shining eyes. She hung her torso out of the carriage to get a better look.

Stalls and booths stood all around, and people strolled happily through the street with sweets or kebabs in hand. Above the road, strings decorated with multicolored banners had been tied between the buildings. Lively music drifted from the throng of people; it seemed that there were poets and musicians among them. The street lamps sparkled in the dim light of the town at sunset.

“It’s Eldoa’s harvest festival,” the bandit said. “Did ya know about it? It’s the town’s biggest event and it lasts for a week.”

“Now that you mention it, it is that time of year,” Shannon said. “Even so, it’s really busy. Eldoa hasn’t changed a bit—it’s still lively.”

“Ha ha! It seems like a fun time. It’s all thanks to this place that we can get jobs. Anyway, we’ll stop here.” The man sent a signal to the driver, and the wagon slowly came to a stop. “End of the line, young witch.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“No reason to be thankful. Hurry up and get outta here. If word gets out that we were beaten by a witch, we’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Ha,” she laughed derisively. “It can’t be easy to be a bad guy. Anyway, see ya. Try to do less crime—it’ll be better for you.”

“Who do ya think you’re talking to?” The man paused. “Well, I guess we learned not to target young girls anymore.”

With that, the wagon returned to the road they’d come in on. Shannon saw them off with a wave, but the man left without even looking back.

“Well now, what should I do? Guess I should look for a place to stay first.” For the time being, she walked toward the inns.

It had been a while since she last came to a large town, and there were even more people in Eldoa than usual because of the festival. She stood out in small villages and therefore had many people come talk to her, but that wouldn’t happen in a big place like this. Sure, a few people caught sight of her and did a double take at her robe and wand, but it didn’t seem to stir enough curiosity for them to approach her.

The foot traffic in the town was incessant; it stood to reason that tourists were commonplace here. People didn’t pay attention to a single traveler. If someone were to stand out, it would probably be a criminal. It seemed like a bit of a lonely way to live, but still, blending in wasn’t a bad thing. For better or worse, standing out would be proof that she didn’t blend in.

Shannon walked along a brick road, searching for a high-quality inn. She had been camping out for a while now. She took pride in keeping herself clean—she bathed every day and kept a large stockpile of soap—but living outdoors still brought with it a certain degree of filthiness.

She grasped the neck of her robe and sniffed it to check, and an indescribable odor wafted into her nose. “Ew,” she muttered. “A girl needs her beauty rest *and* a place to clean up.”

Shannon had three requirements for her ideal lodging: one, her own room; two, a clean bed; and three, a reasonable price. To be frank, Shannon was short on funds. She had been aimlessly wandering between villages and hamlets for a while without a job, and that didn’t bring in any money. That being said, she also hadn’t had many opportunities to spend money during her day-to-day life lately.

Thus, she didn’t want an inn that was too expensive. Either way, though, if she planned to stay long-term, she had to find a job...and she couldn’t start working without a place to stay. Perhaps it was best to compromise on price for the first day, then downgrade her room to match her earnings once she found a way to make money.

“Kay, I’ll do that!” Shannon told herself. “Today, I’ll rest in style! Tomorrow’s

Shannon will deal with everything else.”

She walked a while longer before she found a high-quality inn. Being a bit farther up the road, it was a hidden gem, but because it was festival season, only one room remained available. Shannon pulled a paltry number of coins from her robe pocket to pay for two nights. This was her last stand; if she didn’t find a way to support herself the next day or the day after, she would end up having to leave town.

She wasn’t that concerned, though. Mages usually had no trouble finding work; magic was a specialized field that no one else could replace. She could, she assumed, quickly find a job by going to the local employment agencies or job bulletin boards. There was probably at least one mage in Eldoa already, and if push came to shove, Shannon could offer her services to them and make a decent amount of money.

When Shannon got to her room, she flung her bag aside and dove onto the bed. Her body bounced, then slowly sank downward. It was heavenly—nothing like sleeping on dirt or a swaying branch.

“Mmm! This is so nice. The best!” She stretched, grunting, and wiggled to find a good sleeping position. She rolled onto her back, then cast off her robe, shirt, and shorts. “I’ll work hard...tomorrow. Tonight, I’ll sleep.”

Within seconds, Shannon was asleep. She would investigate Eldoa in the morning.

The next day, Shannon sat in a tavern along the main street. It was moderately crowded with travelers coming in to fill their bellies and commuters on their way to work.

“Mm-mm! Tashtee!” She flashed a thumbs-up, signaling with all her power to the tavern owner that her meal—a thick omelet, bacon, and freshly baked bread—was delicious. It was simple, but bread was a breakfast staple.

Shannon held her bread in her right hand and the map the inn owner had given her in her left. *Now then, where can I get a job?* she wondered, looking over the map. *Hope there’s a job board somewhere.*

“Are you a mage, lass?” asked a man sitting next to her, peering at her over his newspaper. He looked to be in his sixties. His hair was streaked with gray, but he still looked fit.

“Hmm? Yeah, I am,” Shannon replied as she chewed on her bread.

“I knew it.” The man smiled happily. “Been a long time since I’ve seen mage robes.”

“Cute, right?” She grabbed the hem and swished it about.

“Yeah, it’s a sight to behold. They suit girls well! And those shorts and the healthy figure you have...” He stared unblinkingly at her legs. It seemed like he wasn’t just an old man; his core was still juvenile. Well, compared to Shannon, he might as well have been a baby chick. As if praying, he muttered, “I can live another ten years now.”

“Oh, I’ve extended your lifespan? Truly?”

“Truly! All I can do is thank you.” The old man chuckled. Well, he didn’t seem like a bad person—just a man with some bad habits. Maybe he’d even help her.

“Hey, mister, can I ask you something?”

“I’ll answer whatever you want as a thank you. What is it?”

“Yay! So are there any mages in this town? Besides myself, I mean.”

The man’s face turned grim. “There are some, but they’re men, so I’m not interested. Besides, their focus is on their research, so they don’t provide much of a benefit.”

“Oh, is that so? Research, huh... Guess I can’t rely on that.”

Mages often settled in towns. In the past, many of them had researched and experimented with new types of magic, but as their numbers dwindled, fewer mages wanted to master magic; it became far more important to them to find a home. Therefore, a lot of mages started to seek out various ways of making a living, like taking out monsters as an adventurer, taking odd jobs, and using their pharmaceutical knowledge to open apothecaries—all while using magic.

“Have you lived here all your life, mister?” Shannon asked the man.

“Yes, I’ve always lived in Eldoa. Did you come for the festival?”

“Nah, it was just a coincidence. You know, it’s pretty crowded.” She could see a throng of people enjoying the festival outside the window.

“You’re right about that. Seems like the town population has increased tenfold. But it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that I’ve lived this long because of the festival.” He laughed, stroking his beard. “It’s that fun.”

Though Shannon knew Eldoa, this was the first time she had been to the town during festival season. She’d been traveling for hundreds of years, but surprisingly, her timing rarely worked out. To be fair, though, the world was big.

The old man sighed. “They hold a women’s beauty contest every year. I can’t die until I’ve seen the prettiest woman in Eldoa with my own eyes.”

“Oh my, you certainly have a lot of worldly desires. Let’s switch to a more serious topic.”

He laughed. “There’s nothing serious going on during a festival! Lass, from what I’ve seen, you’ve got a great body. How about you join in the—”

“Oh, well, if I’ve got the time!”

The man chuckled. “I’m looking forward to it.” Grinning, he turned back to his newspaper.

“Hey, wait, besides that,” Shannon said. “I’m looking for work. Do you know where I can find a job?”

“Let me think. There’s a job board in front of the knights’ office on Hawkit Street. If someone in town’s got trouble, they put up a written notice there. You might find something to your liking there, lass.”

“Hawkit Street... Ah, here!” Shannon found the street on her map. “Thanks. I’ll go check it out.”

“Don’t mention it. I should be thanking you for the chance to see a witch for the first time in a while.”

She laughed. “You really like witches, huh? Live a long life, mister. See you!”

With the job board as her destination, Shannon left the tavern.

Hawkit Street was straight down the main boulevard and past the commercial district. That meant that Shannon had to pass right through the heart of the festival, and the resulting foot traffic was unexpected. She climbed some stairs and stood on her tiptoes, looking down at the street and the tops of the festivalgoers' heads. Crowds stretched out as far as the eye could see.

"Wow, there's a ton of people," she said, awed.

There had been a lot of people around when she arrived in Eldoa the previous night, but that was nothing compared to how many there were at midday. According to what the bandit had told her, the festival would last a week, and today was its third day. That meant that, including today, there were still five full days to go.

"Mm, delicious!" Shannon had purchased four meat skewers at a food stall, and she was stuffing her cheeks with them, her eyes sparkling. Juices spilled out of her mouth as she ate. Mouthwatering scents wafted from all over, and naturally, she had gotten hungry; throughout her long life, food had remained an eternal source of delight. "This is super juicy stuff!"

As she chewed, she made her way slowly up the gentle slope without going against the flow of the people around her. A building with a pointed roof towered ahead of her, so tall it seemed to split the sky in two. In fact, she was pretty sure it looked even taller than it actually was, perhaps because it was crammed so tightly between the buildings on either side.

According to that old man, there was a job board in front of the knights' office, and people posted requests there. She hoped she could find something just right for her.

She gave in to the flow of the crowd and continued walking, and gradually, the foot traffic around her began to ease off. She passed through an archway and came to the end of the main street, where she could see more of what was around her. At last, she was able to relax enough to walk at her own pace toward—

"Eeeek!" A sudden loud shriek came from an alleyway off to the side.

“Hmm? A scream?” Shannon murmured. It had sounded strained, like someone was afraid for their life. *In an area like this?*

Still chewing on her kebab, Shannon peered down the dim alley. Wooden crates and empty bottles sat lined up against the walls, and there was a slight dampness in the air that wasn't present on the main street. At the far end of the alley stood the imposing figure of a man. He was staring down at another man, this one blue-haired, who was on his knees.

“I-I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!” the blue-haired man said tearfully. Snot dripped from his nose as he planted both hands on the ground in front of the other man.

This didn't seem like something that should have been happening. Curiosity piqued, Shannon slipped into the alley.

The imposing man—who, Shannon saw now, wore spectacles—spoke in a calm, rational tone. “You know, doctor, I won't be happy if you don't return the money. You've already missed the due date.”

“I-I can't do that right now. I, um, don't have—”

“I'm afraid you borrowed the money, so it's your responsibility to pay it back,” the bespectacled man said lightly. While his tone was exceedingly polite, he gave off a wrathful aura.

“Ah... Aha ha, w-well, yes, but circumstances being what they—”

The bespectacled man violently kicked the stacked boxes next to them, creating a sudden bang that made the blue-haired man jump.

“Doctor, do you remember the medicine that you were making? The one we saw potential in and lent you the money for? It's been half a year since then—was that enthusiastic presentation you gave us a lie?”

“N-No, no, of course it—”

“If you don't give us the money back, we'll have to collect something else from you. We're not a charity.”

He grabbed the blue-haired man by the collar, pulling him close, and the blue-haired man cried out in fear. The bespectacled man pulled a knife from his belt

and, with a practiced hand, held it close to his victim's throat.

"W-Wait!" cried the blue-haired man. "P-Please let me go. I'll do anything!"

"Then you'll return the money?"

"I-I told you, I don't have any right now! I used it all to b-buy the ingredients! Just p-please give me a little more time!"

The bespectacled man smiled at these desperate pleas, and the other man smiled back, as if lulled into a sense of security.

"I guess I'll have to kill you after all."

"You can't say that while smiling!" the blue-haired man screamed. "Someone heeeeeeeelp!"

But the bespectacled man's expression didn't change at all. He brandished the knife. "Well then, goodbye."

"W-Wai—"

"Hooold it! Hold it!" Shannon called out, running out in front of them and holding out her hands. The two men froze, flabbergasted at her sudden appearance.

"Huh...?" the blue-haired man said, gaping at her.

The bespectacled man, holding the knife perfectly still, gave Shannon a suspicious look. "And who might you be?"

Shannon bit off another piece of meat from her kebab, somehow swallowed it, and said, "Y'know, bro, it's not okay to kill someone."

The knife-wielding man had sharp eyes, a stern countenance, and swept-back hair. Looking at him closely, Shannon knew without a doubt that he was a hardened criminal from the underworld. By contrast, the blue-haired man, who was still being held by the collar, was older, more of a fellow who already had one foot in the grave. His furrowed brow and pitiful expression were pointed at Shannon.

"I really don't want to kill him either," the bespectacled man said. "It's dirty work. I have to, though—he didn't pay back the money we lent him."

“You know that if you kill him, no one’s getting any money, right?”

“We stopped thinking in such naive terms a long time ago. Please get out of here. I’ll look the other way if you do.” He let out a long sigh and turned his attention back to the blue-haired man, who looked certain that he was about to face his end.

“Nah. Now that I’ve seen what’s happening, I can’t just leave. Just how much does this fellow owe you anyway?” Shannon asked.

Sounding pained, the blue-haired man choked out, “Three million, five hundred thousand...”

“Whoa,” Shannon breathed. “That’s more than I expected.” Three and a half million gal was enough to eat for a whole year. What in the world had he used all that money for?

“I-I need it to make the medicine,” the blue-haired man gasped.

“I’m tired of hearing that,” the other man said. “You haven’t even finished it.”

“No, but I’m so close! I-I just need a mage’s help!”

“A mage?”

“Yes! I was on my way to the job board to post about it! With a mage’s help, I can definitely complete the medicine!”

The bespectacled man only sighed, exasperated. “I don’t think something like magic can do that.”

“A mage might know...how to help with the potentially fatal side effects!”

“Potentially fatal side effects?!” Shannon’s eyes lit up. This was the best she could have asked for. Suddenly, she was even more interested in this than in her food.

“I thought that, surely, at least one mage would come to town during the festival, so please, I just need a little more time to—”

“What nonsense,” the bespectacled man began, but Shannon interrupted him, raising her hand.

“Me! Me, me!”

“Calm down, pest. Do you want to die?”

“I’m a mage!”

He stared at her. “Huh?”

“Y-You are?!” the blue-haired man stammered.

Shannon grinned and nodded, but the bespectacled man just let out a deep sigh.

“Kid, are you making fun of us? There’s no way a mage just happened to stumble upon us here.”

“Aw, you don’t believe me?” She tipped her head in confusion. It was strange he didn’t, given how she looked. She tried waving her robe around, but he still didn’t seem to believe her.

“A robe,” the blue-haired man breathed. “You do look like a mage!”

“Would you please stop with this nonsense? I despise jokes.” The bespectacled man switched his target to Shannon, tossing the other man aside and holding up his clenched fist. “It seems like I’ll be forced to hurt you. You’d do well to take a little nap.”

It seemed like her claims of being a mage had finally ticked him off. He aimed a swift right straight at Shannon, and a moment later, a dull thud resounded.

“Gah! Wh...”

“What are you doing to— Huh?!”

It wasn’t Shannon lying face up on the ground but the man who had raised a hand against her. She relaxed from her martial arts stance, then patted her hands clean.

“Phew! Honestly,” she said. “Obviously a girl on a solo trip would know how to defend herself, but even so, that was over way too soon.”

“Self-defense...? Y-You’ve gotta be kidding me!” said the man. He seemed to be in pain, pressing his hands to his stomach and scrunching his face. “What kind of self-defense...stops a killer punch?”

“Oh, would you rather I have defeated you with magic? Maybe you’d believe

me then.” Shannon retrieved her wand from a holder on her thigh and brought it close to his head.

“A... A mage’s wand...”

“Hmm, what to do? Should I make your brain all mushy or get it over with quickly?”

“W-Wait—”

“Oh, or maybe I should make you think about what you’ve done by taking away your hearing and sight?”

“N-No, no! Wait!” He trembled, terrified, standing up on shaky legs like a newborn fawn and stepping back. “I-I get it. Y-You’ll get more time on your repayment. But you *will* get us the money, Glim.”

He scurried off. It seemed that being trounced by simple self-defense was enough to make him fear that she really was a mage.

Shannon let out a satisfied breath and offered a hand to the blue-haired man—Glim. “You okay? Uh-oh, looks like your clothes are dirty.”

“Oh, uh...thanks.” Looking apologetic, Glim took Shannon’s hand and slowly stood. He dusted himself off and straightened his clothes, then looked in the direction to which the bespectacled man had fled. Scrunching up his face, he spat out, “Hmph! What a hoodlum, running away. Don’t come back, coward!”

“Oh...that’s kind of lame,” Shannon commented. “You only find the guts to say that after he’s gone?”

“Hmph!”

Shannon just shrugged, exasperated and kind of regretting having helped. “Anyway,” she managed, “I think you’re the bad guy here for not returning the money.”

“H-Hey! It’s true that I can’t return it, but...well, my research is important!” Glim insisted. “There’s a child suffering in her bed right now, and I have to make that medicine as fast as possible.”

He hung his head sadly. Despite his weak demeanor, his expression didn’t show any signs of deceit. It seemed like he really did want to make medicine to

help people; sure, he had a bit of a troublesome personality, but he wasn't a bad person.

"So, Mr. Glim," Shannon said, "are the side effects of your medicine really that bad?"

"Hmm? Oh. Yeah, in the experiments, the mice have convulsed, vomited, had diarrhea, and kicked the bucket, all in a matter of seconds. It's terrifying, if you don't mind my saying so, almost like it would be better suited as poison. I'm at my wit's end."

"Kicking the bucket... Cool!" Shannon's eyes sparkled. Death by a medicine's side effect—that was a potential loophole that she hadn't considered.

"Cool?" Glim echoed hesitantly. "I don't see what's cool about it."

"Oh, you know, it's not that bad," Shannon said vaguely. "Hey, let me help you out—I'm a mage."

She raised an eager hand to volunteer. Glim put his own hands together. "Ah, that's right! You really are a mage?" he asked desperately.

Shannon grinned, nodded, and flashed him a thumbs-up. "Sure am!"

"What good luck! I can pay you. Well, it'll be a sore expense on my part, given that I borrowed the money in the first place, but you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. My name is Glim, and I'm a doctor."

She took his offered hand and squeezed it. "Nice to meet ya! I'm Shannon."

"Shannon, huh? Nice to meet you too. Now, there's a patient I'd like you to meet straightaway. After that, I'll explain things to you."

"Hello, doctor," said the girl. She was laid out in a bed, wearing a nightdress, with her long, black hair draped over her shoulders. Her face was pale and her cheeks a bit hollow looking.

"Hi, Lily. How are you feeling?" Glim swept aside the girl's bangs and felt her forehead.

"Well, not bad," Lily replied with a feeble smile. Food, drinks, and many

changes of clothes were available all around the bed; she likely found it difficult to move very far. Looking at Shannon, she asked, “Excuse me, but...who are you?”

“Oh, me? I’m Shannon, a traveling mage.”

“A mage?!” Lily cried, sounding weak but happy. She looked up at Shannon with desperate, hopeful eyes, but it seemed like her body wouldn’t move the way she wanted it to.

“Yes, Lily,” Glim said. “She’s going to help me cure your illness. I’m sure that things will be all right now that she’s here. Don’t worry.” He squeezed her hand.

“Thank you, doctor... I’m looking forward to it.”

Glim tucked Lily in again and led Shannon out of the room. To Shannon’s eye, Lily really, really hadn’t looked well. She seemed to be pretending to be fine to try to keep Glim from worrying.

Once they were outside the room, Glim turned to Shannon with a grave look on his face and explained, “Her name is Lily Clavel. She’s my patient.”

“Lily, huh? She’s a cute kid.” It was the truth: Lily had a fragile cuteness to her. It stood out, given that she seemed liable to fade away at any moment. Shannon didn’t have that—the beauty of someone who was dying.

“Until a few years ago, she was an innocent and incredibly healthy little girl. But for the last few years, a disease has kept her cooped up in that room.” Glim cast his sorrowful eyes downward.

“Judging by the way she looked, I assume it’s saluena?”

Glim’s head snapped up. “Y-You recognized it?! It’s such a rare disease nowadays!”

“Sort of, yeah. I haven’t been on such a long journey for no reason, you know.” The corners of her mouth stretched up into a grin. “Anyway, I’ve even seen a few people with it recently. They all died, though.”

“Recently, huh... I didn’t know that there were other people still fighting this disease.”

Saluena was an incurable disease that was rare in this age. It slowly robbed

the body of its vitality and, eventually, its movement. In the end, without fail, the victim stopped breathing and fell into their final slumber. The only saving grace was that saluena didn't bring about suffering like coughing, vomiting, or diarrhea—but of course, the lack of symptoms made it hard to identify in its early stages. It was a terrifying disease.

Shannon wasn't sure how far Lily's illness had progressed, but judging by her inability to leave her bed, the disease had advanced considerably. Saluena also acted faster the younger its victim was. She probably only had about one month left.

"You knowing about saluena makes matters easier. Follow me," Glim said.

He led her into the basement, which turned out to be where his laboratory was. It was a dimly lit room filled with all sorts of things, like chemicals, herbs, the fangs and hides of animals, and blood. Shannon saw evidence that Glim had performed lots of experiments in his laboratory, trying over and over again to develop his medicine.

Glim opened the cabinet in the back and pulled out a single vial. "This is the experimental drug in its current stage. At the moment, its side effects are too strong. I haven't been able to test it on people yet. I've been doing a lot of experiments on animals, but they've all failed. The animals always die before I can verify the results." He sighed. "And then there's the unicorn horn. I thought it might be helpful in curing the illness, but..."

Understanding dawned on Shannon. "I see. That's why you had to borrow the money."

Glim nodded despondently. "A single gram costs fifty thousand gal. The price is exorbitant because unicorns are so rare. I took all my assets plus the money I borrowed and managed to procure a hundred grams, but...well, the results are as you can see. It seems I lack the ability to make it work. I'm afraid that at this rate, that girl's life will end before I can finish developing the cure."

"Unicorns are strange and don't show themselves often," Shannon pointed out. "I've seen them only a few times myself."

"I see. Well, since you're a mage, I'd like to make use of your pharmaceutical knowledge. I hear that many mages are well-versed in medicine." He gave her a

searching look. “You seem young, but...”

You don’t need to worry, Shannon thought. I’m a mage who’s been around for thousands of years.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Despite how I look, I’m pretty good with medicine.”

“Oh, thank you. Somehow I feel like I can trust you, and desperate times call for desperate measures.” Glim bowed his head. “Please help me!”

“Of course. But I will need to be paid. I don’t have any money at all right now.”

“If we can make the medicine, I don’t care what happens next. I’ll make sure you’re paid. And if you don’t have anywhere to stay, you can use the second floor here. This house is too large for just Lily and me.”

“Wait, free of charge?!” Shannon blurted. Glim was treating Lily in a two-floor house with a basement that stood outside of Eldoa, on a small knoll a little ways to the east. Lily was quarantined in a corner room on the first floor, and Glim’s room was to the immediate left of the entryway. Shannon wondered if the second floor was just being used for storage.

“Well, yes. It’s a bit messy up there, though.”

Shannon’s eyes lit up. Glim was a lifesaver! She’d thought she would have to save money while paying for hotels, but if she could live for free where she worked, she’d have a lot of money left over. “All right, you’ve got yourself a deal! I look forward to working with you, Mr. Glim.”

“Same to you, Shannon.”

Just like that, Shannon began working under Glim to help him make the cure.

Saluena was a peculiar disease. The symptoms were internal, almost like an error inside the victim’s body, and it spread through bodily fluids, meaning it was contagious. Because of that, Lily had to be confined to the treatment room in Glim’s home.

“It doesn’t matter how good the medicine is—when I add powdered unicorn horn, it instantly becomes trash. It’s utterly useless.” To demonstrate, Glim deposited some powdered unicorn horn into the half-mixed potion in front of

him, and the liquid turned a sinister purple.

“Whoa,” Shannon said. “It even *looks* bad for you.”

“It does,” Glim agreed. “No matter how I compound the mixture, it always turns out like this. I’ve already sacrificed almost fifty mice. I’m at the end of my rope here. I want to research other methods of doing this, but using unicorn horn is rather unprecedented.” He grimaced, vexed.

“Well, do you know what unicorn horn is used for?”

“Used for? Well, not especially... By chance, I got one by gamb—I mean, I received it, so I tried compounding a small amount of the powder, and the test mouse’s condition improved instantly. I went crazy searching for more and ordered it. Honestly, I didn’t have time to look into its original use.”

“Gambling, huh?”

“I-I was invited along! A-Anyway, that’s not the point.”

“Jeez, so that’s why you don’t have any money.” She’d assumed he’d run out of money and then had to borrow some in order to save Lily, but it seemed he was useless from the start in that regard. “Well, back to the main issue. Unicorn horns are actually used to make mages’ wands, and also furnishings and tableware for nobles to look at.” The more high-ranking a noble was, the more likely you were to find unicorn horn in their house. Even these days, you could find lots of houses like that.

“So it’s for the amusement of the wealthy?” Glim asked. “Even I knew that much. What surprised me was that it could be useful in medicine.” He folded his arms and nodded, as if he was proud of his accomplishment in discovering that.

“Exactly. Anyway, on top of unicorns being few in number and the powder having to be manufactured, only the rich can afford to buy unicorn horn. Because of that, it’s not very well-known that unicorn horns actually contain poison.”

Glim’s face twitched. “Poison?! Wait, now that you say it...” He paused, thinking. “Poison, huh? I didn’t realize that. It’s such a high-end item that I didn’t even consider that possibility.”

“Yeah. Unicorn horn is so expensive that no one would think to make it into medicine. Very few people are aware that it’s toxic. But by itself, it’s not a very strong poison, so it rarely causes symptoms. I think it’s likely you’ve been compounding it into a stronger poison.”

“I see...” Glim was scribbling down notes. He had already composed a list of herbs and compounding techniques that might neutralize the toxin. It occurred to Shannon that Glim might actually have been kind of brilliant. “All right, thank you! My knowledge was too limited, but thanks to you, this might work. I’d been thinking so much about the cure that my brain wasn’t working anymore.”

“No need to thank me, but the hard work starts now. Not even I have any idea what’ll happen with the stuff you make from now on.”

“You’re right. Please continue helping me as my assistant. We’ll go buy some ingredients right away!”

With that, he and Shannon headed out to buy various herbs that might compound with the unicorn horn in a way that made it safe to consume.

“How do you like this? It’s an ingredient used in medicine out east. It’s a crude drug called arrowroot,” the wrinkled old woman said, showing off the winding, tree-root-like plant in a wooden box.

“What effect does it have, ma’am?” Glim asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” the woman said.

“You don’t know, but you’re still selling it?! And can this really be used in medicine? It looks like garbage...” Glim picked up the plant timidly, as if he were touching something filthy.

The woman’s humpback shook a bit as she chuckled. “You’re a doctor, aren’t you? If you don’t know something, you can figure it out yourself.”

“Saying something so illogical like it’s a good point,” Glim scoffed. “You’re trying to trick me. Don’t you think it’s strange that you don’t know anything about what you’re trying to sell?”

“It’s not strange; it’s fair. If someone who wants to buy it knows what it’s

good for, then all's well that ends well. Anyway, I'll start writing up your bill. If you want anything else, make sure to let me know." Without even asking Glim, she headed off to prepare the bill.

"At this rate, my debt will just keep growing," Glim grumbled.

"Yeah, but you have to try everything you can," Shannon pointed out. "Isn't this a good opportunity?"

"I suppose."

"I know about crude drugs too, and I don't think there's any harm in trying that one out."

"Oh, you do? I thought she was scamming me. Mages have such extensive knowledge."

"Just comes from living a long life."

Glim snorted. "Ha ha, I suspect you haven't even lived half as long as me yet. Good grief." He paused. "Anyway, even if we buy a lot of ingredients, I don't think we'll be able to try them all."

"Why?" she asked. It was important to try lots of different things when experimenting. Even mages had to sift through the vast amount of knowledge they had about the world and figure things out through trial and error. There was no other way.

"We're limited," he explained. "I'm running low on unicorn horn already. At most, we have enough left to compound it about fifty more times." He put his head in his hand at this bleak number.

The old woman shouted, "Didn't I tell you I'd have a bit of that in half a year?!"

"I can't wait that long!" he shouted back. "Lily doesn't have that long left."

"Then we have to make the medicine within those fifty attempts," Shannon said, patting Glim's back. "That's what I'm here for." There was no point in her working with him and saving money if she couldn't help him and Lily.

Glim looked at Shannon, let out a short breath, and squeezed his eyes shut. "You're right," he said after a moment. "And that's what I intend to do, of

course. I'm counting on you."

"Leave it to me! I'll show you what a mage can do."

"Oh, that's right." Glim looked at her with an expression she couldn't quite read. "Can I trust you about that other thing?"

"Other thing?"

"You know...the clinical trial. Even if we're able to test successfully on a mouse, in the end, we have to do clinical trials on people to complete the formula. Otherwise, we won't have proof of its effects on humans. But I do have an idea for what you could do..."

His words reminded her of her original goal. "Oh yeah, of course! Don't worry. I'm fully prepared." She flashed him a V-for-victory sign.

"Well, I suppose I have no choice but to believe you."

They filled a bag with the ingredients they'd purchased, then escaped the shop before the old woman could coerce them into buying even more expensive products. They returned to the laboratory without delay and began compounding a new mixture. There were so many limitations that they had to keep in mind; between Lily's deteriorating state and the dwindling supply of unicorn horn, there wasn't much time left.

"We'll combine your knowledge and my experience and start with several different mixtures," Glim said.

"For sure. How about we begin by compounding the materials with a basic antidote?"

"Let's!"

With practiced ease, Glim started mixing components together, beginning the trial and error process. Shannon executed her role as assistant well, advising Glim on appropriate herbs and introducing him to crude drugs, not to mention heading out to buy more materials and equipment when they ran out. Although Glim hadn't known until Shannon told him that unicorn horn was poisonous, his ideas were already beginning to take shape; he was, after all, a brilliant doctor.

The compounding continued throughout the night. Shannon knew she

wouldn't make any money if she didn't work.

"Phew! The air tastes great up here." Shannon extended her arms, stretching. She'd been stuck down in the basement for a long while, and even though she was still inside, the air felt fresh up on the ground floor. "Now then— Huh?"

She saw the little girl, Lily, out of the corner of her eye. Perhaps Lily had needed some air as well; the door to her treatment room was open.

"Are you awake, Lily?" Shannon called.

Lily turned her head toward the doorway. "Ah, um...yes. You're Ms. Shannon, right?"

"Yup yup. Glad you remembered my name." Quietly, Shannon entered the room and approached the edge of the bed. Even if she were trying to be nice, Shannon wouldn't have been able to call Lily's face anything but pale. Well, at least Lily didn't seem to be in pain at the moment.

"I remembered because no one but the doctor comes to see me," Lily replied.

Speaking of which, Shannon hadn't seen anyone else around except Glim. It didn't seem like anyone even came close to the house. Who was Glim to Lily in the first place, anyway? "Is Mr. Glim your dad?"

Lily giggled. "No. The doctor is my mom's childhood friend." She paused. "I think my mom brought me here and asked him to take care of me."

"Oh, I see. So that's how you two know each other." There seemed to be something peculiar going on with Glim, but Shannon had decided not to get herself too involved in all that. "And that's how you came to this faraway house to get treated."

"Yes. It's been almost half a year. Not even my mom can come visit me...but I guess that's to be expected." Lily cast her gaze downward sadly.

"That sounds hard. But we'll have the medicine ready soon. You just have to hang in there a little longer."

"Okay, thank you. By the way, Ms. Shannon, are you really a mage?"

“I sure am.” She pulled out her wand and held it up as if she were about to cast a spell.

Lily’s eyes sparkled. “That’s amazing! And you’re traveling, right?”

“Yup, here and there.”

“Whoa, that’s so cool! I want to go on a journey too...”

“You do?”

Lily’s nod was reserved, but Shannon could tell that inside, she was excited. “I look out my window all the time.”

“Well then, where do you want to go first once you’re better?”

“Right now...” Lily paused, thinking. “I want to go to the festival. It’s really close, I know, but it seems fun.” She looked out the window, her expression blank but her eyes spilling over with envy.

Saluena was a rare disease of unknown origin, and it spread through body fluids. Therein lay the problem: trying to care for bedridden patients caused the number of infections to increase. Of course, the original saluena epidemic had occurred over three hundred years ago. Shannon hadn’t been in that region at the time, but she remembered how prevalent it had been.

Back then, patients infected with saluena had been abandoned in deserted houses deep in the mountains and left to die. This inhumane approach had rapidly reduced the number of people infected with the disease. Without the source of the infection, saluena had no way to spread.

For that reason, very few doctors or physicians ever tried to find a basic cure. There had been few people to cure left in populated areas, and once the sick were disposed of, the strange disease had been mostly eradicated. No one was willing to risk exposure to pursue a cure.

“I’m sure you’ll get to go next year,” Shannon said.

“I hope so.” Lily smiled. It seemed Shannon had given her some peace of mind.

Shannon took out a necklace with a goddess-shaped pendant that she had obtained a long time ago. Slowly, she moved her hands toward the back of Lily’s

neck.

“W-Wait, don’t get too close!” Lily protested, squinting and ducking her head. Then she seemed to notice the weight on her neck. “What’s this?”

“I’m pretty sure the pendant is of a goddess of journeys. I don’t wear it, so you can have it.”

“Th-Thank you so much...” Weakly but happily, Lily touched the necklace. “I’ll take good care of it.”

“This means you’re sure to go on a journey. Look forward to it.”

“I will. But...” Unsurprisingly, Lily’s expression turned dark. She must have felt what her own body was telling her—that she didn’t have much longer.

Even so, Shannon said, “We’ll get you fixed up soon, so take it easy. For now, plan on going to the festival next year.”

“Okay.” Lily smiled faintly. “I’ll look forward to it.”

“Yeah, we really do need to do clinical trials to complete the medicine,” Shannon said.

“They’re vital, of course,” Glim agreed. “But we’re in no state to start them yet—the toxin is still too strong. That’s why we’re trying to neutralize it first.”

Two days had passed since Shannon joined Glim, and while they had certainly made some headway on the cure, their overall progress had been stymied by the limited number of trials they could do and the fact that no one had ever tried to cure saluena before. In the meantime, their ingredients were running short, and so was Lily’s time.

“But unless we make a breakthrough, we’re gonna be in a real pinch,” Shannon pointed out.

Glim’s expression was stony. “I know, I know, but doing clinical trials with this medicine is too dangerous! Who knows how many people would die?”

Shannon gave Glim a sidelong glance as she picked up the unfinished potion. Her goal was to die, wasn’t it? Maybe now was the perfect time to make that

dream come true. Her eyes lit up with anticipation. “Hey, why don’t we try it out on me?”

“Huh?” Glim’s expression hardened. He blinked rapidly in surprise, furrowing his brow. “No, no, no. What, do you think—”

“Try it on me.”

“Why?! Y-You know you might die, right? I think you’ve seen this yourself over the past few days, but the side effects are really, really bad! Did you see how violently those mice died?! It’s made me pray to any gods who are listening that when I die, I’m not reborn as one of those rodents. You *will* die if you take the medicine. Funny joke, but I’m not laughing.”

“But don’t we have to make sure of that?” If they tested the medicine now, then sooner or later, they’d manage to eliminate any toxic side effects. If they were ever going to do a clinical trial, this was the time.

Glim pressed his lips together. His eyes seemed sad. “Shannon, you are a kind girl, and you even saved me from the debt collector. Are you thinking of sacrificing yourself to save Lily?”

“Oh...no. I’m not trying to come off as noble as that.”

Thinking that she was trying to be modest, Glim patted her head comfortingly. “I’m grateful you feel that way, but the side effects are no joke. You don’t have to push yourself. You can keep sharing your knowledge with me just as you have been.”

Shannon tutted and wagged her finger. This was bad; if things continued along this path, she wouldn’t be able to achieve her primary goal. Of course she wanted to save Lily, but her first concern was finding a way to die.

“Besides,” Glim went on, “if you did take it, the only thing we would be able to confirm is the medicine’s toxicity. You aren’t infected with saluena.”

“Oh!” An idea pinged in Shannon’s head. *There’s no way he could refuse me if I was sick!* “You know, Mr. Glim, you’re right. If I don’t have the disease, then there’s no point.”

“You get it now? That’s why you— Hey! Hey, wait! Where are you...?”

Shannon, smiling widely, was bouncing up the steps to the ground floor. “I’m going to go get infected. Then we can test it on me.”

“Well, it’s true that if you were to contract the— Wait, what?!” Glim’s eyes bulged so much they looked like they were about to pop out of their sockets. For a second, Shannon thought he might drop the vial in his hand. “A-Are you an idiot?! Saluena is terminal! Unless we finish the cure, you’ll die too!”

“I know that.”

“Do you have a death wish?!”

She laughed. “I caught it once and didn’t die.”

“Ah, I see, it was all fine because you’re a mage. As if! Stop with the jokes! I’ve known mages who died of saluena! What’s your aim? Are you trying to martyr yourself?!”

Shannon just shook her head. “I’m telling you, this will be faster—and aren’t we running out of time? I’m going to do it!” She smiled radiantly, flashing a thumbs-up.

Glim watched her, looking like he was about to be sick, then covered his face. “Is there something wrong with your head?” He laughed nervously. “Are you so desperate to complete this medicine you’ll make me a murderer?!”

“Lily’s the one who’ll die if we don’t get results.”

Glim stood in silence for a moment, and Shannon took the opportunity to rush up to Lily’s sickroom. “Hey, wait!” he called after her.

Shannon hurried into Lily’s room and over to her bedside.

“Oh, Ms. Shannon,” Lily began. “This necklace you gave me—”

“Don’t move for a sec,” Shannon instructed her.

“Huh?”

“I’m telling you, Shannon!” Glim called. “Don’t—”

A shocking scene awaited Glim when he came into the room. Shannon was leaning in, right in front of Lily’s face—and then she pressed her lips to Lily’s in a kiss!

“Wh-What?” Glim gasped.

“Mm?!” was Lily’s response.

Glim was gobsmailed and trembling all over. He had never met anyone like Shannon before.

“Pah! Think I got infected?” Shannon said, smiling and licking her lips.

“Wh-What...” Lily touched her mouth, her face beet red.

“Oh, was that your first kiss?” Shannon asked. “Sorry about that...”

“Oh, um, that’s not it,” Lily stammered.

“Good! So, Mr. Glim...”

“Wh-What?” he asked.

“I’m now another patient with saluena. Let’s start the clinical trial.”

Glim’s face went slack with astonishment. She was insane...but, he realized, now they had a chance. “We *can* conduct a clinical trial, but...Shannon, you’ll—”

“Oh, I’ll be fine.” Glim looked sorrowful, but Shannon smiled as if nothing was wrong. “I’m immortal. Forever young.”

There was a moment of silence. It felt like time had stopped. Not even the air in the room moved. Then, finally, Glim broke the silence:

“Huh?” His face contorted with shock that came from his very core. Then he snorted. “Ha ha ha, I was wondering what you were going to say. No, no, my brain immediately refused to believe it—I was just thinking about how terrifying people can be. I was completely frozen.”

“Aw, you don’t believe me?”

“Of course I don’t believe you.” Glim shook his head, exasperated. “I guess you don’t want to worry me, but listen here. I may be a crappy doctor, but I’m still a doctor. I know that there is no such thing as immortality. I don’t care how good a mage you are; no one can change the laws of nature. Hmph.” He crossed his arms.

It didn’t seem like he was ready to believe in a fairy tale. Well, circumstances being what they were, it was probably inevitable that he’d assume she was lying

to try to keep him from worrying about her.

“Well,” Glim continued, “I guess I’m happy you feel that way, at least. Now, more importantly, I need to evaluate whether you’ve been infected. Come with me.” He said this simply, as if nothing had happened.

Shannon puffed out her cheeks, miffed. “Honestly, why won’t you believe me? You’re a stubborn one.”

“No, I’m not. I doubt you’ll find anyone who would readily believe a person who said they were immortal. Even my superstitious grandma would’ve laughed at you.” Fed up, Glim turned to head to his laboratory, but Shannon followed him down the stairs and startled him by grabbing his arm. “Whoa! What’re you doing?”

“It’ll be so much better for you if you believe me. Follow me.”

“No! I told you, immortality is impossible, no matter what magic you use. I need to test to see if you’ve been infected— Hey, wait, what are you doing?!” His eyes widened.

Shannon had grabbed a knife from the desk and brought it close to her arm. “Watch this.”

“W-Wait! Why are you going so far?! You don’t have—”

“Whoop!”

“AAHHH!”

Shannon forcefully brought the knife to her arm. It swooshed through the air and bit into her skin, and then blood seeped from the line she had cut.

“Argh, I’m no good with blood! What are you doing?! We have to stop the bleeding!” Glim cried. With wide, panicked eyes, he rushed to retrieve some bandages and a first aid kit. “Come on, give me your arm! The wound, i-it... Huh?”

His forehead wrinkled as he frowned. Before his eyes, the blood flow slowed to a halt and the wound closed and sealed itself. He blinked in surprise, and for a moment, he was speechless.

“You’re...healing?” he said finally. The gaping wound she had carved in her

arm was disappearing, as if time were running backward. His mouth hung open; this was impossible. “Immortality... No, this is healing magic, right?”

“No healing magic is as convenient as this,” Shannon explained. “I’m immortal; a wound like this is nothing.”

“No way...” Glim pinched his cheeks hard. “I’m not dreaming...”

“Do you get it now?”

Still flabbergasted, Glim took Shannon’s arm and traced the spot where the wound had been. Once he had confirmed that her skin showed no traces of a scar, he rubbed his chin, seeming deeply impacted by what he had just seen. “It’s healed. What happened, really?”

Shannon’s only response was a confident nod.

“You’re immortal?” Glim breathed. “I couldn’t just believe it without evidence, but...” He had seen the gash heal with his own eyes. No matter how much he wanted to deny it, it had happened. He scratched his cheek. “You’re immortal, huh. I have to believe it—I saw it.”

“Yup. That’s why I told you I’d be fine.”

He paused, then said, “I get it. I’m prepared now too. Please continue helping me. You were right: The only way to do the clinical trial now is to do it fast.”

“Of course! I do also have another goal, but I really want to help Lily.”

“Jeez, you’re a strange mage.”

“Well, now that we’re on the same page, let’s get started with that latest mixture!” Shannon took a vial in hand and tilted it a little. It was small, but it held a mouthful of transparent green liquid.

“Wait, maybe it’s better you don’t drink it after all,” Glim said.

“What, you think I’ll die from this?” Shannon said dismissively.

“Don’t say such a terrible thing! I don’t want to become a murderer!”

“It’ll be fine. If you save Lily at the cost of me dying, everything will even out.”

“Your worldview is far too pragmatic. Are all mages this unfeeling?”

“Aw, c’mon, I’m kidding. You’re so sensitive. I’m immortal! Anyway, bottoms up!” Without even a hint of fear—on the contrary, she was excited—she downed the concoction in one loud gulp.

Glim shrieked. “You didn’t even hesitate! Are y-you okay? I wasn’t ready!” Panicked, he moved closer to her.

“Mm... It’s bitter,” she replied.

“I don’t care about the taste! How do you feel?!”

“Hm.” She paused. “I’m not particularly—”

Abruptly, Shannon grabbed her throat, and her eyes widened in pain. She hopped back and forth quickly from foot to foot. The tendons in her arms bulged. Her whole body was having an adverse reaction.

“Aahhh! AAAHHH!!!” Glim screamed. “This was a bad idea! So bad! Shannon, I’m so sorry! You aren’t immortal after all! What do I do?!” He clutched at his head and plopped down onto the ground. It was all over for him.

But then...

“Pah! My insides were all messed up for a second there.”

“Huh?” Glim slowly raised his head to find Shannon standing there, calm and composed. Her apparent agony had vanished, and she glanced at the empty vial, looking fit as a fiddle. “Y-You’re all right?”

She hummed in thought. “Well, there wasn’t really any change. The poison is still too strong; it’d kill Lily if she took the medicine as it is.”

“You really are immortal... Ah, I have to write this down!” Flustered, he jotted down some notes about her condition, even taking her pulse and recording minute details. “It’s early, but you’ve definitely contracted saluena. The fact that you haven’t been cured means the medicine isn’t effective. But still, it’s amazing to be able to gather all this information so quickly! If we can keep this up, we’ll be able to make the perfect cure!” His eyes glittered with excitement, and his pen raced single-mindedly across the page. “There’s hope for us yet! We can do it! I have an immortal mage by my side! Okay, okay! Let’s keep going!”

Now that he'd accepted the situation, Glim was far more daring. They continued the clinical trials with vial after vial of medication. Each time Shannon downed a mixture, Glim checked her vitals; if there was no change to her saluena symptoms, they carried on, testing new materials and different compound ratios in their search for the optimal solution.

Never in the history of humanity had there been such a frightful clinical trial. Shannon "died" ten separate times.

With glittering eyes, Glim persisted. There was little unicorn horn remaining, but he had an idea which direction his work should take. Before, he had excluded certain ingredients and ratios as options for fear of their effect on the human body; now, he tested each of those ideas in turn.

"Urp... H-Hey, Mr. Glim..." Shannon put a hand over her mouth, desperately trying to keep something from spilling out.

Glim paused and stared at her, wide-eyed. He had a new compound in each hand. "Wh-What is it? Your illness hasn't gotten worse, has—"

"N-No, I'm just..."

"Just?"

"I'm full." Shannon's face was pale, and she touched her stomach delicately, teetering on her feet.

"Oh! I'm sorry. No matter how many times you die, your stomach keeps filling up, huh? I didn't realize." He briskly rubbed his head, looking embarrassed and apologetic. "Let's take a break. I didn't realize that I was getting carried away."

"No worries," Shannon said. "I get what it's like to be impatient when you're so close to your goal. I digest faster than most people, so I'll just rest for a minute."



“Okay. Let me know when you’re feeling better. Then we’ll jump back in and head into the homestretch.” Glim went up the stairs, leaving Shannon alone in the basement laboratory. It was already late at night; Lily was undoubtedly asleep.

The innumerable side effects of their concoctions had left Shannon’s insides in tatters. She laid a hand gently on her chest and let out a long sigh. “I still can’t die, huh... Acute poisoning like this won’t work. My regeneration overcomes it.”

She’d been expecting that. She had experienced death many times over the thousands of years she’d been alive, and she knew all too well how quickly her body regenerated and how much pain and suffering she could endure. Still, she couldn’t just stop looking for new chances to die.

“Well, you never know what’ll finally kill you. I guess the clinical trials were a bust.” Shannon took a deep breath. All that was left was to complete Lily’s cure. She took half an hour to get some air outside before returning to the laboratory. “All right, let’s continue the experiments. Bring on the side effects! For Lily!”

“You’re back?” Glim said. “Good! Let’s continue!”

With that, they dove right back into testing compounds, and Shannon died-but-didn’t-die five or six more times as they worked. The side effects gradually lessened, and a light emerged at the end of the tunnel. Finally, with only enough ingredients for a few more attempts remaining, they perfected the formula.

“I-It’s...” Glim’s hands trembled as he lifted the vial. The mixture within was an entirely different color from the early versions of the potion; no longer ominous-looking, it was now a mysterious mix of purple and white, much like a unicorn’s horn. Glim’s creation was a compound of crude drugs, herbs, and various organs from butchered monsters.

“So that’s the finished product?” Shannon asked.

“We’ve done it at last, with only three tries left.” Glim paused. “Shannon, will you try it?”

Shannon nodded; she had the disease, after all. She took the vial and brought

it to her lips. Then, at Glim's nod, she downed the medicine.

After a moment, Glim asked, "How do you feel?"

Shannon paused. "Huh," she said finally. "I don't feel anything."

"What? How is that possible?!" Glim rushed over, panic clear on his face. Shannon lifted her shirt to expose her stomach, and Glim, looking grave, checked her vitals and inspected her whole body. He swallowed hard. "You're cured. The medicine worked!"

"What?! There wasn't even a single side effect!"

"It's done!"

"Woo-hoo! Cheers!" Shannon flung her arms around Glim and hugged him, yelling gleefully.

"We did it!" Glim roared in triumph. Then, in a more halting tone, he said, "O-Oh, sorry for hugging you." He pulled away from her hurriedly and turned to gaze once more at the concoction in the vial.

Shannon laughed. "Oh, it's fine. Besides, we did it!"

"Yes, finally."

Glim had perfected his wonder drug.

"Thank you so much, Ms. Shannon!" Lily said. She looked up at Shannon and smiled radiantly.

"You should be thanking Mr. Glim," Shannon told her. "All I did was take a bunch of medicine."

"No, no, it's all thanks to you," Glim insisted. "I'm glad we crossed paths in that alley. Thank you."

"It was a lucky meeting, that's for sure," Shannon replied.

Shannon's bout with saluena had been short and the disease hadn't had time to progress, so she had bounced back quickly, but Lily would need more time to recover. Regardless, her condition had already improved enough that she could stand and walk around. She still had to stay inside the house, but being able to

wander freely within its walls must have brought her an indescribable joy. Her smile, once weak, now burst with brightness. She was a small girl, only reaching Shannon's chest, and she was so adorable that Shannon couldn't help but hug her.

They could still hear the sounds of the festival drifting in from outside. "Aw, today's the last day of the festival, Lily," Shannon said.

"I know, but it's okay." Lily smiled. "I'll go next year with the doctor!"

Her smile was full of hope. That hope hadn't been there when Shannon met her. Shannon's suspicions were correct: Lily had been putting on a brave front this whole time. She'd seemed mature beyond her years, but now, that quality had melted away, leaving youthful innocence in its place.

Shannon giggled. "That'll be fun. Make sure to get even stronger by then, okay? Now, I'm off."

"Leaving already?" Glim asked. "I was hoping you'd stay a while. I still have some of that borrowed money, and you know, we could make a killing off pharmaceuticals—"

"That's so like you, Mr. Glim," Shannon said with a laugh. "But I'm a traveling mage. I like the free-spirited, solo wandering kind of life."

"I see. It's a shame to see you go, but I had fun."

"Yeah, me too. I'm off in search of my next deathbed."

"You really are a strange mage. Well then, I'll pray for your successful death. If we meet again, make sure you're prepared to explain to me why you're not dead yet." Glim laughed, and Shannon giggled.

"I'll look forward to that."

"Oh, and take this." Glim picked up a vial on the desk and handed it to her.

"What's this?"

"The last of the saluena cure."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure you help plenty of people on your journeys; you should hold on

to it. Use it well.”

“Thank you. I’ll take care of it.” With that, Shannon gently flourished her robe.
“Farewell!”

“Let’s meet again someday!” Lily said.

“Goodbye!” Glim called.

They saw Shannon off, and she left Eldoa.

Chapter 3: Death by Dungeon Trap

Shannon was sitting in a dimly lit tavern when an older man next to her said, “Oh, is this fate?”

“Hmm?” Shannon looked around, but there were no other customers in the place. It seemed like the man was either speaking to her or just monologuing.

Earlier that day, Shannon had been on her way to the next town when she decided to stop over in this village and rest for just one night. She was renting a cheap room and had come to the desolate tavern in search of dinner.

The village was pretty lifeless. Everyone on the street kept their head down, taking no notice of the robe-clad mage who walked among them. In Shannon’s experience, when she came to a new place, people usually showed at least a little bit of interest in her and someone often approached and spoke to her, but none of that had happened here. Well, some villages were like this. She wasn’t about to complain, anyway; it could get tiring to be fussed over.

Having surmised that she would be left to her own devices during her stay, she was surprised to hear the older man speak. He had a different air about him than the villagers, though. She figured he wasn’t a local.

The man swirled the glass in his hand and narrowed his eyes behind his glasses. “I feel like I’ve met you somewhere before.” He stroked his beard, inspecting her thoroughly from top to bottom as if getting a taste of her.

“Fate, huh? Well, aren’t you a smooth talker?” Shannon said. “I may be pretty, but that line you’re using is ancient.” In her thousands of years in this world, that one had never been abandoned.

Her skin was firm, her hair was smooth, and she didn’t have a single wrinkle on her face. Time, in some ways, had stopped for her; her immortality meant that she lived on a different timeline than everyone else. She should have been heading toward the future that all humans inevitably faced, but in reality, she was the only one not moving at all.

Women all over the world yearned for eternal beauty like hers. It was true that the goal of her journey was to find a quick end to her long life, but her agelessness also benefited her in some ways. Because she was physically young, guys often reached out and treated her to meals.

This man, however, became upset. “I-It’s not like that! Don’t assume I’m some perverted old man! I’m a gentleman—a gentleman!”

“Oh, so you weren’t about to cop a feel?”

“C-Course not! What are you thinking?!”

“Well, that’s the only reason I can imagine an older man in a tavern wanting to—”

“Your perspective is terribly narrow,” the man protested. “No, no, no—I’m not a smooth talker. I really do think I met you before, a long time ago... But no, you couldn’t have been there. That girl was about the same age as me, and she...she died there.” He laughed heartily and took a gulp of ale. “I must be drunker than I thought.”

He must have been confused. If the girl he was thinking of had died, then she certainly hadn’t been Shannon. Shannon was alive unwillingly, after all.

She put her chin in her hands and let out a small sigh. “Honestly, you’re already drunk enough to be mixing up your memories? You look old enough to know better. If you don’t pull yourself together, you’ll dig yourself an early grave. I’m jealous.”

“It’s nothing to be jealous of! I’m the one who’s jealous of you, for being so young. Besides, I’m not about to die yet. There’s something I need to do first.”

He curled his arm, flexing his bicep. He might have been nearing old age, but he was solidly built, and his muscles and general demeanor gave her the impression that he knew his way around a battlefield. Even the equipment he wore was meant for combat; it was clear his occupation involved fighting.

“Oh, neat! Are you a soldier, mister?”

“You can tell?” He grinned. “Well, times have changed, but back in the day, I was a soldier. Now I’m an adventurer. Name’s Rowe. White-Haired Rowe. What

have you heard about me?" He flashed her a cool smile, leaning his chin on his hand.

"Don't think I've heard of you at all."

Rowe's elbow slipped off the table and he lost his balance as if he were doing a bit. "O-Oh... And here I thought I was a pretty famous person. I guess I still have a ways to go."

"The only famous adventurer who comes to mind is...um...King? If someone's not as famous as him, I don't know them," Shannon explained.

"K-King is at a whole different level! Don't compare him to someone like me!" Rowe insisted. "Honestly, you younglings these days are a few bricks short of a load. King is a living legend."

Adventurers were people who explored the remaining blank spaces on the world's maps. Sometimes they battled monsters, and sometimes they explored mysterious dungeons. They made a living by selling the treasures and resources they found.

In every era Shannon had lived through, the masses envied adventurers for their strength and their knowledge of the world's unknowns. Children thought of them as heroes. The world still had lots of mysteries in it, and even Shannon, who had been exploring it for thousands of years, didn't understand it all.

"So, girl," Rowe continued, "that robe and wand mean you're a mage, right?"

"You know that?"

"Don't patronize me; of course I know. Not knowing would be discourteous to you, considering how you're dressed. I'd be more surprised if you said you weren't a mage."

Realizing how true that was, she laughed. "I'm Shannon. I'm traveling all over the world."

"Oh, a traveling mage? That's incredible. The last time I saw a mage was in the depths of a dungeon, where they were suffocating to death from their own flames. Using fire in such a small space took up all the oxygen." He tutted and stroked his white beard.

“That was more of a failure of their education,” Shannon said. “There have been mage schools around for a while. Someone should have taught them that.”

“The way you say that makes it sound like you were self-taught.”

“Nope, I had a master, but he died a long time ago. I learned some pretty unique magic from him, though, so I’m kind of a rare mage.”

“Hmm. Way I see it, all mages are rare. But that might not be the case in this village.”

“What do you mean?” Shannon tilted her head inquisitively.

“The villagers didn’t really talk to you, did they? Don’t you think it’s a bit less lively than the other places you’ve visited?”

“That’s exactly what I thought.”

“Well, it’s no wonder you did. Everyone here has dead eyes.”

“Huh? Dead eyes?” So she wasn’t the only one to have picked up on the village’s vibes.

“There’s a famous dungeon nearby, so this village is full of family members of deceased adventurers, plus former adventurers who’ve had their souls crushed by the dungeon. There’s no drive or ambition in this place. If they don’t even have the energy to walk around town, they don’t have it in them to try becoming adventurers again. It’s a depressing place.”

Shannon understood. That explained the gloomy atmosphere that enveloped the whole village. “Then what’re you doing here, Mr. Rowe?”

“Interested in what this old man has planned?”

“Of course I am. My eyes are a lot livelier than those villagers’, aren’t they?”

“Ha! You’re an interesting one. Well, that’s to be expected of a mage.”

“I don’t think being a mage has a lot to do with it.”

Rowe hesitated for a moment, then let out a short sigh. “Have you heard of the dungeon called King Sadra’s Tomb?”

“Sadra? I’m sure that was the name of the king who governed this region back

in ancient Lydonian times.”

“You’re smart. Yes, Lydonia was a civilization that flourished close to ten thousand years ago. Sadra was a king during that time. His tomb is the dungeon here.”

“Oh, a dungeon? So that’s what the adventurers of this village were after,” Shannon said. Rowe nodded. “I don’t really have any connection to dungeons.”

Dungeons were products of the ancient past—from well before even Shannon’s lifetime. They appeared unexpectedly in the world due a variety of circumstances, such as natural disasters and excavations.

“The Adventurers’ Guild labeled King Sadra’s Tomb as a dangerous S-rank dungeon,” Rowe explained. “One of only eight in the world. It has a one hundred percent death rate. A dungeon of the ultimate difficulty, from which no one has come back alive. In reality, no one knows if it *is* Sadra’s grave.”

“Whoa, that’s pretty intense. Did you come here to challenge that scary dungeon?”

“Well, you could say that...but you could also not say that.” Rowe’s expression was strange as he took another gulp of ale. He looked like he was trying to suppress his fear and anxiety.

“From the way you’re drinking, I’m guessing you didn’t come all the way here to the tomb because you wanted to.”

“Ha, you can tell? Well, I think I wanted you to understand. It’s a bit embarrassing.” He laughed self-deprecatingly. “Doesn’t matter what I want; I have to get to the end of the dungeon no matter what. That much has been decided by fate.”

Shannon saw fear in his eyes but also determination. This old guy was serious. His expression looked like that of a man on his way to his execution. It was almost the same as the villagers’.

“Why’re you so scared that you had to get drunk?” Shannon asked. “There’s no need to rush to your death when you’ve got one foot in the grave already.”

Rowe laughed. “You’re a pesky one, but you’re interesting, really. Ironically,

you saying that cheered me up. Yeah, I'm getting up there in years, which is why I've got to go." He looked at his palm. It was etched with wrinkles but also large and strong. "My son is in that dungeon."

"Your son?"

"Yeah. I'm sure he's waiting in there for me. Has been for the last two years."

Shannon didn't reply for a moment. Rowe had said that King Sadra's Tomb had a one hundred percent death rate. His son hadn't simply been waiting there patiently for his father to arrive. She knew what Rowe must have meant and said it: "You're going to collect his belongings."

"He's my only son," Rowe said at length, "and my wife died long ago. I'm all by myself. If nothing else, I want his personal effects."

"But isn't it pointless to go into such a dangerous dungeon?" Shannon asked. "I'm sorry to say it, but at your age, you're not as strong as you were in your prime. You'll end up losing everything and joining your son in his grave."

Rowe laughed. "You're right. You're a kind girl. I know that my son and wife would be angry that I came here. But even so, I'm a humble adventurer and a former soldier. At some point, even knowing that I'll die, I've got to get out there."

He tipped his glass, looking a little lonely. He seemed aware that, as he was now, he didn't have the strength to return from the dungeon alive. Perhaps, knowing his end was near, he'd come to the tavern to drink in hopes of cheering himself up. And just as he'd been drowning his fear while immersed in old memories, a mage who looked just like a girl he once knew had sat down next to him. It was an incredible coincidence.

"So it's a dungeon no one can leave alive. Do you know what it's like?" Shannon asked.

"From what I've heard, there are heaps of instant-death traps and wandering skeleton monsters. Rumor has it that they keep reviving unless you defeat them with a holy weapon, so they can surround you in an instant."

"Certainly sounds like a tomb."

“Yeah. It sounds like the type of dungeon where you just keep going down and down. There are probably ways to die down there that you could never experience aboveground.”

“Never experience...aboveground?!” A smile burst over Shannon’s face, radiant with enthusiasm. His words had struck a chord, making her heart beat faster. She was the only one fit to go down there.

“Oh, you’ve finally changed your expression. So even the great traveling mage can get a little scared sometimes, huh?”

“I want to go to the dungeon too!” Shannon exclaimed.

“Oh, that’s fine by me! If one of us dies, then the other one might be able to continue on. One of us can trail behind and watch our backs. Two birds with one stone. You know, just saying the name of the dungeon makes an adventurer turn white as a sheet. How lucky am I to find a comrade in a place like this?” Rowe laughed heartily and took another drink. He’d had a lot, but his speech wasn’t slurred; he seemed like a heavy drinker.

“Then it’s decided—we’ll go tomorrow!”

“Tomorrow sounds good. Tomorrow! Nothing like a kick in the rear to get me going! This should be fun!” He laughed again.

“Great! Let’s meet up here tomorrow morning and get ready!” Shannon quickly paid, stood, and grabbed her bag. Once she was back at the inn, she would get things ready for the dungeon exploration. A place no one had returned from alive... What an opportunity! She relished the thought that she might actually die this time. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Mr. Rowe!”

“Sounds good. I’ll be waiting.”

Shannon went to prepare for the following day, then quickly fell asleep.

Early the next morning, Shannon stood, imposing and fully prepared, in front of the tavern with her hands on her hips. She was watching for Rowe, and as soon as she laid eyes on him, Rowe covered his face and sighed in exasperation.

“Goodness, girl, why are you here?”

“Huh? We talked yesterday about going into the dungeon together. Did you forget? Honestly, it’s not a good sign to be so forgetful at your age. Guess that means you’ll die soon.”

“But we’ll die in the dungeon!” Rowe yelled angrily. “We won’t come back! I was joking yesterday; don’t take it seriously!”

“Oh, but I am serious,” Shannon declared, smiling. “I’m a mage. Surely I’ll be useful!”

Rowe grimaced and groaned as he scratched his beard. “Having a mage around while tackling a dungeon is worth a hundred men. But you’re so young...” He was worrying over her as if she were his late son. He might have been ready to face his own death (for all that he feared it), but he showed concern for others. He seemed like a pretty nice man.

“Oh, whatever. It’s fine. You want to bring home your son’s personal effects at any cost, right? You should use the tools you’ve got, and that includes a mage with suicidal tendencies.”

“Well...you do have a point.”

“Besides, it’s a dungeon with a hundred percent death rate, so we’ve got the same goal.”

Rowe looked puzzled. “Huh? Then why did you act like you were just hearing about the dungeon for the first time yesterday? And how would you know that if you’re not an adventurer?”

“Whatever,” Shannon said vaguely. “I have my reasons. That’s why we’re going together. We’re comrades!”

“But...are you certain? I might abandon you to save my own life.”

“That’s fine! More than fine. Your goals come first! That’s what’s important.” She flashed him a peace sign.

Her easygoing attitude calmed him a bit, and his nervous expression became more peaceful. He let out a short sigh. “Jeez, what a bluff. Well, I guess you must have nerves of steel to be a traveling mage at your age. I won’t ask you what your intentions are. You do know that no matter what, you’re doing this at

your own risk?”

“Yup! I’m looking forward to it. I think I’ll bring some snacks.”

“You’re acting like this is a field trip!” Rowe snapped. “You could really die in the dungeon, you know!”

“I know.”

“Jeez, just be prepared. You really are just as carefree as the girl I met when I was a child. You’re making me feel young again.” With that, Rowe made up his mind. They were going into the dungeon, together. “All right. Let’s go to King Sadra’s Tomb.”

They left the village and headed west toward the Great Ransals Forest. Several decades ago, a large earthquake had caused the ground in the forest to crumble, and King Sadra’s Tomb had risen up out of the earth.

“There’s only one entrance,” Rowe explained. “Dungeons from this era usually have three levels, so the tomb is probably the same. If all goes well, we’ll be able to get back out in two days.”

“But you said no one’s ever managed to come back alive,” Shannon said.

Rowe nodded. “Now, I’ve brought a lot of supplies. Jerky, water, a knife, a change of clothes, bandages, rope, a simple first aid kit, a needle and thread...” He looked at Shannon, who was outfitted quite lightly. “Are you going to be okay like that? Your robe is flimsy, and those shorts don’t cover your legs. And what happened to the bag you had yesterday? You’re completely empty-handed.”

“Did you forget that I’m a mage?” Shannon retrieved her wand from the holder on her thigh and waved it without ceremony. The space in front of her distorted as a rift appeared. She reached her hand inside, fished around for a moment, and pulled out her bag.

Rowe blinked. “What? A sorcerous space?!” He stared fixedly at the spot from which she had pulled her bag. “That startled me.”

“Yup. I’ve got a lotta things in there, so we’ll be fine if there are any

emergencies. And if you happen to die, the least I can do for you is put your body in there and get you out of the tomb. Living people die when they go inside a sorcerous space, though, so I do have to wait until you're actually dead."

He laughed. "That's reassuring. If you do get my body outta here, bury me near the tomb." He paused. "Well, I think we're ready. Shall we?"

With that, they entered the dungeon.

"It's pitch-black in here," Rowe noted as they went down a narrow staircase. There were no torches or lanterns on the walls, and the farther they descended, the smaller the light leaking in from the entrance became. "We won't be able to keep going for much longer."

"Oh, let me take care of that." Shannon pulled out her wand and gently swished it through the air. The tip lit up faintly, illuminating their way. Its light was more powerful than it seemed; they were able to see pretty far ahead.

"Well, that's a mage for you!" Rowe said. "Handy."

"For sure. Now we'll be fine."

"Yeah— Whoa! Wait!" Rowe yelled, leaping backward.

"What is it?"

"Look down!"

Shannon peeked in the direction he was pointing and saw that the next step was missing from the staircase. A hole gaped below, and it went so deep that the light from her wand couldn't even reach the bottom. A breeze whistled as it blew up at them through the gap.

"You'd die if you fell here," Shannon noted.

"Yes. It's a basic trap, but if your focus wanders and you miss it, that's it for you. Looks like this place has dangers everywhere."

"I'm getting kind of excited!"

"Don't!" Rowe snapped. "Jeez, are all you younglings so terrible at self-

preservation nowadays?”

Shannon laughed. “Nah, just me.”

They pressed on deeper into the dungeon. After a while, the stench of death began to pervade the air around them.

Then, suddenly, Rowe swore. “We stepped on a trap! Duck!” In the same second, they heard something whizzing through the air.

Shannon gasped. Rowe drew the sword at his waist and, with a shout, swung it powerfully. Something fell to the ground with a soft clatter. Shannon had to hand it to Rowe: For an old, retired soldier, his movements were sharp.

Shannon picked up what he had sliced out of the air—an arrow. There was a purple liquid spread across the tip. “A poisoned arrow?”

“Seems like it. One of the tiles here is raised a tiny bit above the rest. Putting weight on it activates the trap.” He paused. “Hey, girl, did that arrow—”

“Oh, I’m fine. See, it just passed through my robe, is all.” She showed him the hole.

He inspected it. “That’s sure what it looks like. Good. We’d be in a lot of trouble if one of us died this early on.”

“You can count on me!” Shannon declared, carelessly tossing the lightly bloodied arrow into the darkness. It had pierced her, of course, and spot-on too. The poison wasn’t about to take her life, however, and the wound had closed immediately. “Come on, dungeon! You must have more dangerous stuff than this! Give it your all!”



“You’re a go-getter,” Rowe muttered. “Oh, there’s another body here.” He stepped carefully over a corpse that was lying on the ground.

“We’re starting to see more and more of them. Guess a lot of people kicked the bucket around here.” Shannon looked around at a number of scattered skeletons. They must have been taken out by the previous trap.

“Hang on a second. I’m gonna look at them.” Rowe moved the skeletons around, checking every part of them and making them rattle a little. He looked like a grave robber scavenging for treasure. Finally, he said, “My son’s not here. They seem like they’ve been here too long to be him, anyway.”

That reminded Shannon. “Speaking of which, is there anything we should be looking for in order to identify him?”

“Yeah. He should have a pendant I gave him when he became an adventurer. He always wore it; it hung down around his chest. The pendant has an ‘L’ on it for his name: Leo.”

“Got it. Since no one’s come out of here alive, we can probably also assume no one’s come down here to loot any corpses. We should be able to identify him by the pendant.”

“Thanks for helping me keep an eye out for that. Though you should be keeping an eye out for traps. Stick close behind me, or I won’t be able to protect you.”

“Well, aren’t you reliable!” Shannon said in a teasing tone. “Lead the way.”

On they went into the depths of the dungeon. They braved pitfalls, poisoned arrows, toxic gas, narrow bridges over wide beds of needles, walls pushing in from both sides, and hordes of wandering skeletons. They also rallied both their caution and their battle prowess to exchange blows with monsters. The deadly traps continued, one after another, as if the dungeon itself were desperate to kill them before they could get any farther.

“AARRGH!”

“Hiyah! Hah!”

Rowe slashed at the undead around them with the holy sword he had bought

before they took on the dungeon. Next to him, holy magic enshrouded Shannon's hands. Together, they were pulverizing their enemies.

"You're a scary one, girl," Rowe told Shannon. "Remind me not to make you angry, or I'll get punched!"

"Better be careful—you never know when I'll strike!" she bantered back.

They purged the lavishly dressed undead being who had risen from the last casket, and then the largest of the coffins in front of them slid to the side. In its wake, they saw the path to the next room.

Rowe plopped himself, panting, down onto the ground. "This old body can still keep up after all!" he exclaimed.

"This place has such crazy mechanisms and magic," Shannon said. "They're really advanced, especially for their time."

"I'd expect no less from one of the world's most difficult dungeons."

"Yup. We should take a break, though. We've been going for almost a full day. Let's get a nap in."

"Wow, I'd say we're already about halfway through. We've kept up a good pace."

They set up a tent in the middle of the pharaoh's room among the caskets, then took out the food they'd each brought. For Rowe, this consisted of dried jerky, wine, and bread; for Shannon, it was fruit and fresh vegetables.

"Oh, so the food you put in that sorcerous space of yours doesn't go bad?" Rowe asked.

"Nope. This way, I can eat fresh food whenever I want. It's a girl's best friend."

"That's handy. Maybe I should've put a sandwich in there."

They had been on guard and fighting this whole time. Now, they ate, restoring some of their energy and resting their bodies.

"You really aren't a typical mage," Rowe noted, "what with your hand-to-hand abilities."

“Well, I sort of picked those up along the way, ’cause I’ve been traveling so long. I’m an expert at fighting by this point.”

“Seems like it. Those fighting skills alone would make you a fine soldier. Can you use any weapons?”

“A lot of different ones, to varying degrees. Swords, spears, bows, and throwing weapons too. I’ve had a lot of time on my hands so I learned everything, really.”

“You’re quite the mage to have had such a rich life at your age. Of course you wanted to travel.”

“Well,” Shannon said, elongating the word, “it’s not quite like that.”

“And on top of all that, your magic is excellent. I’ve met a lot of mages in my time, but I’ve never met one as good as you. You have this dignity about you too—it’s like you’ve been training for decades. Have you fought anywhere specific?”

Rowe was smiling, sprinkling his words with jokes, and Shannon forced a smile in return as she scratched at her cheek. “I guess I was in a bit of a fight not that long ago. I get caught up in a lot of things in my travels.”

Rowe thought about this. “I see. So even at your age, people rely on you for your strength.”

A silence fell between them. A while back, she had gained some experience in fighting with magic as a soldier. She’d been forced to kill due to circumstances beyond her control, and even now, she could recall how it felt to slaughter her enemies.

Murder was something she wanted no part of. No matter how badly she got herself hurt, she always did whatever she could to bring other people back alive. Yet she was trying to end her own life. Those two ideas didn’t seem compatible, but that was just who Shannon was.

“Anyway,” Shannon said finally, “there aren’t many bodies around here.” She looked back toward the passageway, but she didn’t see anything that looked like a corpse. There hadn’t been very many corpses in front of the pharaoh’s room either, compared to the heaps of them they’d found in the earlier parts of

the dungeon.

Rowe grunted in agreement. “Most of the people who’ve come into this dungeon probably died in the traps upstairs. We wouldn’t have made it this far without my moves and your magic.”

“If he got all the way here, your son must’ve been an excellent adventurer.”

Rowe smiled broadly. “That’s my boy. I trained him myself, and diligently too. His specialty was the katana. He was strong and clever. Even the head of the local government came to pick his brain from time to time—nothing I was smart enough to help with.” He scratched his beard and closed his eyes for a moment, probably yearning for days past. “But one day, he just up and said that he’d decided to take after me and become an adventurer. I don’t know what prompted him to do it, but he was talented, and he probably thought about it long and hard before he came to that decision. I gave him my blessing, and the next thing I knew, he was a famous adventurer. All he ever did was challenge himself by taking on dungeons and fighting monsters.”

“Whoa,” Shannon said. “He really must have been brilliant.”

Rowe laughed. “He took after me. He was incredibly ambitious. Ever since this tomb showed up, there have been rumors that a vast treasure lies at the end of it...but of course, no one has ever returned. He thought that if he could conquer it, he’d come back out as the greatest adventurer of all time. He told me that he’d come back, no two ways about it. But...”

“...he never did,” Shannon finished. Rowe nodded.

“Honestly, he was such an easy kid to raise, but then, right at the end, he had to go and become a troublesome brat. I guess that’s the trade-off. I can’t even hold a service for him without going all the way through this blasted lethal dungeon.” Shannon didn’t respond, and after a moment of silence, Rowe smiled, banishing the dark mood that had briefly hung over him. “Ha ha, sorry about that. Sometimes you can’t shut an old man up. I hope you get what you’re looking for here too, girl. Let’s get some sleep.”

“Thanks. You’re right, we should get some rest.”

They went to bed without speaking another word.

The next morning, they delved deeper into the dungeon. Together, they estimated that they were about two-thirds of the way through, and thanks to Shannon's magic—specifically, a search spell that used sound waves—they had a vague sense of the framework of the dungeon ahead of them. They had both grown accustomed to working around the traps, and gradually, their pace increased. Shannon didn't even really need to help in battle; as a former soldier, Rowe handled their enemies swiftly.

They crossed a muddy river, then stopped to dry their clothes before forging on. It was then that Shannon spotted an unmistakable trap ahead.

This trap was different from the ones that had come before it, though the smell of death that hung in the air was the same. There wasn't a single corpse to be seen, but the floor was dyed black, save for one section that had a light brown hue. It wasn't that the lighter part was dirty; on the contrary, the rest of the area was steeped in blood. Many, many people had died there. It occurred to Shannon that the reason they hadn't seen many bodies for a while might have had less to do with the number of people who died there and more to do with corpses having been hidden in places off the main passage.

The trap in front of them was the same sort of pressure-sensitive trap that they had encountered in the beginning of the dungeon, and it seemed that stepping on any bit of the floor for the next ten meters would set it off. In other words, it didn't matter how cautious they were; if they advanced at all, they would activate it.

Shannon's whole body shivered as she took in the deathly aura. This trap was an elaborate murder machine, and maybe—just maybe—it was what she had been looking for.

Rowe walked behind her. Given the limitations of his old body, they had been taking turns leading the way. If Shannon went now, it was possible she'd get caught in the trap.

"I won't know unless I try. I'm off!" Shannon said to herself. Just as she was about to step forward, however, she noticed a sphere glowing at the far end of the passage. It glittered dimly with a blue light. "Hey, that's..."

It was an item that housed magical power. Shannon's intuition as a mage told her that it was far, far more dangerous than any trap.

"Hey, Mr. Rowe, there's— Huh? Is something wrong?"

Rowe, who should have been following from behind, had come up right beside her. But he didn't so much as glance at her; instead, he reached his hand out and shouted, "Leo! Why are you running?! Wait, it's me, Rowe! It's your dad!"

"Leo's your son's name," Shannon said, confused. "But there's no one here but us." Indeed, their immediate surroundings were as devoid of other living people as the rest of the dungeon.

Rowe didn't respond to Shannon, though. Her words didn't even seem to reach him.

Shannon looked at Rowe's eyes. His pupils were enlarged and unfocused—hollow, even. "This is... This is mental magic! Then that blue sphere—"

"Leo!" Rowe yelled again. "What—over there? Okay, got you. Honestly, I don't care how old you are; you're still just a kid."

His eyes remained hollow, but his face radiated joy. Shannon surmised that he was seeing an apparition of his son. "Mr. Rowe," she urged, "you've got to get a hold of yourself!"

Immediately, Rowe took his blade and slashed Shannon's arm. She gasped.

"Let's go, Leo!" he called. "We'll live together again; don't worry!" He pivoted toward the minefield and ran toward it at full speed.

"Not there!" Shannon yelled. She reached out her hand—and in the same moment, her vision warped.

The next thing she knew, her surroundings had been transformed. A familiar face appeared before her. No, that wasn't quite right—it was too indistinct to be called a face. The girl's hairstyle and clothing were the same as they had been back when Shannon last saw her, but she couldn't see her features; she looked to Shannon like an inky black silhouette.

Shannon hesitated. Her heart ached with nostalgia. "It's you."

“Don’t go, Shannon,” the girl said. “Let’s just go home. Master will forgive you.”

“Guess we’re skipping lessons again, even in an illusion,” Shannon said at last. She knew that this was all fabricated, but she couldn’t say as much with one hundred percent certainty—she harbored the slightest doubt. The mental magic was powerful; the illusion’s voice, aura, smell—everything—were just as they had once been, and in her gut, Shannon wanted to believe that the illusory girl was real.

“You’re too serious, Shannon,” the illusion said with a giggle. Even her mannerisms were the same. She looked at Shannon again and offered her hand. “Hey, Shannon, at this rate, we should just leave everything behind us. Just like back when—”

A bright flash interrupted her, obscuring the illusion with white light. Shannon, who hadn’t been swayed, lowered her wand. The holy light she’d cast had obliterated the illusion and returned her to reality.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. Vestiges from her distant past would never again be real. The only surviving relic of that time was Shannon herself.

With the illusion gone, Shannon could see the dimly lit passage and the trap again. Unfortunately, while she had returned to her senses quickly, Rowe hadn’t—he was running ahead.

“Mr. Rowe!” she called, panicked, but she was probably already too late. Rowe was going to activate the trap and get himself killed. Maybe she could use magic to destroy their surroundings and—

Rowe came to an abrupt halt.

Shannon stared at him. “Huh?”

Quietly, Rowe said, “Leo’s already dead. Just who do you think I am? Did you think you could use magic to mislead the living with the dead? Did you think that would work on me?” He slapped his cheeks with both hands. “I’m White-Haired Rowe! I’m not the kind of adventurer who would fall here!”

He drew a dagger from his belt and threw it at the glowing sphere. It hit its target dead center, and with a resounding smash, the sphere shattered.

“Whoa, cool!” Shannon cheered.

“We should be fine now,” Rowe declared. Somehow, he had broken free from the illusion with his own power. That was an incredible feat; normally, when faced with their ultimate fantasy, people didn’t want to leave. “I was in a real bind, but I heard your voice.”

“Of course you did—I’m your partner in this dungeon!”

“Ha, guess so. We’re helping each other out.”

“Now then, how do we get through this?” Shannon asked. They’d destroyed the illusion, but the trap remained. This might have been the ideal place for Shannon to die, so she had no qualms about plunging forward...but she didn’t want to get Rowe caught up in that. *What should I do?*

Just then, they heard a clacking sound ring out from the darkness.

“What was—”

“Watch out, girl!” Rowe shouted, and Shannon felt something tighten around her neck, making her gag. He must have intuited something about that mechanical sound, because he’d instantly reached out from behind Shannon, grabbed the hood of her robe, and pulled with all his might to yank her behind him.

The floor in front of them disappeared. To their left and right sides, the walls rotated, and before they could react, arrows fired at them from both sides. Rowe swore and used his sword and overwhelming strength to knock them out of the air. He nearly lost his balance, but before he could fall, he seized hold of the wall with one arm to support himself.

His power was otherworldly. Rowe wasn’t just any ordinary former soldier. Focused as he was on the arrows and the hole in front of him, however, he didn’t notice the danger from above: an enormous axe. It was about to swing down right at his head.

Finally, Rowe caught sight of the axe, but no sooner had he looked up than an arrow pierced his right leg. “AAAH!” he roared. His face contorted with pain, and sweat poured from his brow.

In that same moment, Shannon flourished her wand and cried, “War Hammer!” A hammer of light nearly three meters long appeared in front of Rowe and followed the movements Shannon made with her wand: right, left, then up. With a violent clang, the hammer smashed the enormous axe to smithereens, and the fragments of it fell down the hole to the depths of hell.

“Whew,” she gasped. “You okay, Mr. Rowe?!”

Rowe groaned, crouching and pressing his hand against his leg. “The arrowhead’s poisoned. The shape of it will make it hard to pull out.”

There was no magic that could automatically heal a person’s injury. This was because a person’s healing depended on their physical and mental fortitude; damaged tissue didn’t heal by itself. A spell that could directly heal someone would have to be called time manipulation magic, and in her thousands of years, Shannon had yet to see magic that could restore a part of the body to the condition it had been in before it was wounded. Well, with the exception of her own immortality, of course.

For now, Shannon’s only option was to improve Rowe’s ability to heal by himself. She pointed her wand at the wound. With a soft sound, the tip of her wand glowed green, and Rowe’s bleeding seemed to slow.

“I’ve got to get the poison out before it goes through your veins,” Shannon said.

“Okay,” Rowe groaned.

Shannon waved her glowing wand again. This time, a black, granular type of poison emerged from the wound. Once she had extracted it, she tossed it away, toward the wall. “Okay, the poison’s gone. Maybe not all of it, but enough so you won’t die.”

Shannon took out some clean bandages and wrapped the arrow in place to stop the bleeding. Her first aid was flawless. He would be fine for a while.

“Th-Thank you. I blundered there.” Rowe leaned against the wall. His body was covered in wounds, and he looked like death warmed over. Shannon had used magic to channel his natural stamina toward his injuries to help him heal, which must have tired him even more.

“It’s my fault for being careless,” Shannon said.

“I wasn’t mentally prepared enough.” Rowe paused for a moment. “I couldn’t let someone die in front of me, though.”

Shannon’s heart squeezed painfully. She hadn’t realized he’d been trying to protect her. This was all her fault.

“Let’s just...go home for now,” Rowe said. “My leg is busted. We’ll wait for a good opportunity and try—”

“No, I’ll go. I’ll make it all the way to the end!” Shannon declared. She stood and dusted off her backside. “I’ll bring back Leo’s stuff for sure. Leave it to me.”

“H-Hey, you can’t go alone!” Rowe protested, but then he immediately broke out in a cough.

“Look, you can’t push yourself. For now, I’ll leave the torch and food here.”

Without asking, Shannon took those items from Rowe’s bag and lit the torch, illuminating the area around Rowe. Next, she set the other items up around him. Making him more comfortable—even by just this much—would probably help him too.

“I’ll be back soon,” Shannon assured him. “I have a feeling that there isn’t much left ahead. Maybe even nothing. I’ve gotten you hurt, so I’m not gonna up and die on ya. I’ll get it done.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Rowe growled weakly. “Going alone is a death sentence.”

“Okey dokey, be good while I’m gone!”

“H-Hey, wait!”

Rowe tried to stop her, his voice echoing off the walls, but Shannon paid him no mind. She headed off farther into the dungeon alone, and soon, she disappeared into the darkness.

She made quick work of her solo dungeon dive. Traps that would have taken numerous adventurers working together to overcome—giant rolling boulders, a rain of spears, and waves of hostile undead—were no match for Shannon. They

were child's play in the face of her magic. Earlier in the dungeon, she had held back her power so that she could properly enjoy the dungeon's traps, so she hadn't used much of her magic. Now that she was taking over for Rowe—after having been the cause of his injuries, no less—she wasn't focused on dying. Her only goal now was to reach the end of the dungeon and collect Leo's effects.

Shannon waved her wand, entirely focused on pushing forward through the dark corridors. She destroyed the giant boulder that was rolling straight at her, nullified the rain of spears with a gust of wind, and purged the waves of undead with holy magic. Shannon had fought in all sorts of places in all sorts of time periods, and she could have eaten this dungeon for breakfast.

She saw fewer corpses littered around her; only a few people had made it this far. Finally, thanks to her focus on reaching the dungeon's innermost depths rather than trying to get herself killed, she conquered the labyrinth and found herself in front of a set of doors twice her height. They were adorned with magnificent carvings, lending credibility to the idea that this was a monarch's resting place. The doors glittered like they were brand-new, and they didn't have a single scratch on them. It looked like hardly anyone had ever touched them.

"So this is the last room of the king's tomb," Shannon murmured, gently laying her hands on the cold doors and slowly pushing them open. They let out a dull creak and a cloud of dust. Beyond them was an incredible sight: "Whoa, gold!"

The king had left behind a gold coffin, gold cups, gold bars, and gold dinnerware—masses and masses of gold, all of which glittered dazzlingly. Shannon, who was mostly unconcerned with dungeons, let out a breath at the awe-inspiring tableau. "I don't think I've seen anything like this," she said aloud.

Enchanted, she let her gaze travel around the room. She didn't care much for money, but she felt drawn to the gold. The treasure was laid out in an orderly fashion; no one, it seemed, had ever touched it. The golden coffin in the center of the room was likely the king's casket.

"Ah, no, I've got a job to do," she remembered. Treasure wasn't her goal; she had to find Leo's body. None of the corpses she'd seen along the way had

looked to be his, which meant it was probable that he'd made it all the way to this room.

She decided to search the area and went to look at the blind spots created by the glittering mountains of gold. She approached a table heaped with gold bars, and in front of it, she found scattered bones.

"These, maybe?" she murmured. Upon closer inspection, she could tell the bones didn't belong to a single skeleton—there were three skulls there, likely all from the same group of adventurers. They had all died together, and their flesh had decayed, leaving behind only their bones and the things they had brought with them. Interestingly, several gold bars were mixed in among their skeletons.

"So they died holding the ingots?" Shannon mused. "I get it. There's something off about the gold in this room."

She picked up one of the gold bars and cast a spell on it—the same one she had used to extract the poison from Rowe's body. Instantly, purple liquid bubbled out from inside the bar. That was when Shannon realized what was strange about the chamber: The treasure was toxic.

The gold bars had all been crammed full of poison and then charmed to captivate those who beheld them. It had even dazzled Shannon; no regular person would have been able to resist the magic. The gold lured in its victims, bewitched them, and finished them off with poison. It was the tomb's last defense against grave robbers.

For the moment, she decided to search the skeletons for their personal effects. "Let's see," she muttered. Shannon had to push aside clothes, bags, and weapons that still covered the bones as she searched the chamber for her target. "Oh, here it is." She picked up a dull, silver pendant that had been lying directly underneath a skull. An L was inscribed on it, just as Rowe had said. "Looks like he actually made it all the way in."

Shannon stared at the skeleton. Though Leo had died in the final chamber, he'd made his dreams a reality. He'd made it all the way to the end of one of the most dangerous dungeons in the world. There was nothing more he could have achieved.

She gathered his skeleton's belongings and put them in her sorcerous space.

“Now then, let’s get back to Mr. Rowe.”

“Ugh...” Rowe grimaced in pain and slowly opened his eyes.

“Oh, you’re awake! Good morning.”

“Where...are we?” Rowe sat up on the bed and looked around. It dawned on him he had been sleeping not in a dungeon passageway but in a village inn near the dungeon. “An inn? What about the dun— Ugh!”

Rowe’s face contorted in pain. Moving his body and wounded leg must have hurt. He pressed on his injury with both hands and groaned.

“Nuh-uh, don’t do that,” Shannon chided. “You’ve got to rest. You’re still recovering! I got a doctor to treat you, but you still shouldn’t be moving around.”

“Right, I messed up and got injured,” Rowe muttered. His expression turned sorrowful. “But more importantly, what...what happened to Leo’s effects? I have to bring him back.”

Shannon grabbed the silver pendant she had left on the bedside table and held it up for Rowe to see. It flashed dully in the light.

“It’s...” Rowe blinked and reached out gingerly. He took the pendant in hand and reverently traced the engraved L with his finger. Abruptly, his face crumpled further, though this time, it wasn’t because of physical pain. “Leo...!”

“Looks like I got the right one,” Shannon said.

“I... Thank you! I can’t believe you actually got this...” Tears appeared in Rowe’s eyes. He grasped the pendant tightly and brought his forehead to it.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t?”

“No, I didn’t mean it that way. I just... I just knew it was easier said than done. I’m already a senile old man who’s lost both his wife and his son. I thought it would be a good way to end my life as an adventurer. I was going to end it there.”

Shannon shrugged her shoulders at his earnestness. She could understand

how he felt. “So should I not have gotten it for you?”

“That’s not it! I’m truly grateful. There’s nothing better than realizing your goals while you’re still alive.”

“Then I’m glad.” After a moment, though, Shannon groaned. “I still haven’t died.”

She heaved a large sigh. Rowe stared at her, wide-eyed.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” she asked.

“What you just said. I... I remember now!”

“Huh?”

“During the war between the Kingdom of Aust and the Valkia Empire, there was a battle at the Silano Plains. And you... You were there.” Rowe held a hand to his mouth. He looked dead certain of what he was saying. “Blonde hair and pale skin... Round green eyes... I’m sure you were the girl I saw there on the battlefield. There’s no way it was someone else.”

“The battle at the Silano Plains,” Shannon murmured, dredging her recollection of the conflict up from the depths of her mind. Back then, she had been working for the Valkians as a fake soldier. She had acted as a mercenary, and for reasons beyond her control, she had found herself with no choice but to serve on the battlefield. Her magic had greatly influenced the course of battle. “Oh... Oh, you were there?”

“You remember me?!” Rowe gasped.

“No, I can’t remember if you were there or not. But I think I was there.”

“S-So that really was you?” Rowe’s voice rose in excitement. Perhaps he was recalling his youth.

“Hmm, maybe? I know I was at the battle, but I don’t remember if we met.”

“No, no, no! If you were there, then you must have been the girl I saw! I know I met you there! My life changed that day.” He closed his eyes, seeming moved. “When we were at camp, you said, ‘I still haven’t died.’ I remember wondering what in the world you were talking about. After that, you took an arrow meant for me and helped me escape enemy territory even though you were covered in

blood. I'm still alive because of you! I thought for sure you had died there."

"No way. I'm immortal—forever young."

Rowe gasped again, but a moment later, he was smiling. "Ha ha ha! No wonder you look exactly the same. That wouldn't be possible unless you were immortal!"

Shannon laughed. "You're pretty quick to believe me."

"I only believe the things I see. So there's nothing strange about you being the girl I met back then or about being immortal. After all, you're alive even after I saw you take a fatal wound." Rowe stroked his beard, beaming. "After that, I vowed to get stronger. In some ways, you made me the man I am today. Thank you."

"Oh, you don't have to be all grateful about it. It's fine! I just really wanted to die then, is all."

"I see now. That's why you're traveling, huh? That's why you were on that battlefield and why you went with me into the dungeon. You've saved me twice now. Guess I'm lucky." He smiled contentedly. It turned out that his muttering about "fate" in the tavern hadn't been a pickup line after all; it really had been about his memories.

This was their second meeting in the span of many, many years. The world was wider than most people could imagine, and in her lengthy travels, Shannon rarely met the same person twice, especially after decades. Other humans had such short lifespans; Rowe was right when he said their reunion was lucky.

"So will you be leaving to look for another place to die?" Rowe asked.

"Guess so. I finished what I wanted to do here, so I'll be heading out again."

"I wonder if dying is even possible for you."

Shannon shrugged. "I believe it is. But I've been like this for a long time."

"Sounds troublesome. Maybe we'll end up meeting again."

"If we do, Mr. Rowe, it'll be when you're dead."

He laughed. "Don't say such cruel things! But you're right. I've already been

saved twice; any more times and I'll have to pay big for it." He smiled, looking happy. Shannon wondered if he had only been living to collect his son's pendant. He looked much more amiable now than when they had met at the bar, as if he were a string that had been pulled taut but now had some slack.

"Anyway, I'll be off now." Shannon shouldered her bag. "Enjoy the rest of your life, and make sure not to move around until you've properly healed."

"You're in a hurry." Rowe's eyes widened, and the look he gave her was a little sad. "Leaving already?"

"I only meant to stop in this village for a little bit. I had fun though, Mr. Smooth Talker."

"I told you, I'm not a smooth talker!"

She laughed. "Bye now. If we do happen to meet again, try another line on me."

"I'd do it even if you hadn't told me to."

Shannon gave him a lighthearted wave before leaving the room. Rowe waved back and watched as she closed the door. He turned his gaze back to his son's pendant, then closed his fingers around it tightly.

After fifty years, he had reunited with the girl who had saved him. Rowe smiled to himself. No one would ever believe what had happened to him.



Chapter Four: Getting Ambushed with a Novice Mage

Shannon hummed, carefree, as she walked alone, following the highway through the forest. The sky was clear as could be, and a gentle breeze stirred the trees around her. It was the perfect weather for traveling.

A month had passed since she'd left Eldoa, and she had yet to approach another large town. It was a good time to do so. She had been stopping at various small villages along the way, but she wanted to stock up on her dwindling daily necessities in a proper town. Also, she was running out of undergarments, which tended to get worn out while she was traveling. And that wasn't even to mention how badly she wanted to wash up in a large bath.

If she followed the highway, she'd end up in a big town called Olfess. It was a remote place, but lots of travelers stopped there, and it had plenty of entertainment establishments. She figured she could get there in another half day of traveling.

Still walking along the highway, Shannon caught sight of someone's bottom sticking out of the bushes. She paused. "A butt?"

The butt in question was practically fluttering about while whomever it belonged to did something on the other side of the thick bushes. Shannon stared, and after a moment, she heard a voice:

"Um, this one is chamomile, and this one is comfrey..."

Those were the names of herbs. It seemed that the butt's owner was out foraging.

After another moment, the bushes rustled loudly, and a girl popped out. She had a head of bushy red hair that was full of grass and twigs—a testament to how desperately she had been searching. Her hands were full of herbs, and her cheeks swelled with satisfaction.

"This might be really good!" the girl exclaimed. "Maybe I do have talent!"

Her eyes sparkled and she spun in place. Shannon was standing right behind her, and when their eyes met, the girl came to an abrupt stop. Then, as if seeing a ghost, she let out a gorgeous shriek.

“AAAAAAAAAAAH!!!”

The girl flung her haul into the air as she fell backward, right onto the butt Shannon had spotted. The herbs came fluttering down around her.

“Whoa, are you okay?! Sorry about that. I guess I startled you!” Shannon offered the girl her hand and an awkward smile.

“Ouch... You d-did startle me. That’s bad for my heart, you know,” the girl muttered. Sulkily, she took Shannon’s hand and stood. There was a brief pause, and then she clutched at her head, and Shannon saw tears forming in her eyes. “No, the herbs! I just gathered them!”

“Ah, sorry again. I’ll help you pick them up.”

“You know which herbs are which?!”

“Of course I do. Let me help.”

“Th-Then please!”

Together, they gathered up the herbs that had been scattered on the ground around them. Shannon put everything she grabbed into the basket the girl had brought, then let out a “whew!” when they were done.

“Thank you,” the girl said. “It looks like we got them all.”

“No worries. It was my fault for startling you.”

“No, no, I’ve always been a scaredy-cat.” The girl paused. Now that she was more calm, she asked, “Um, what’s your name?”

“I’m Shannon. Nice to meet you! I was just passing by when I saw you. I got curious, so I watched you for a little bit.”

“Hmm? Curious?” The girl’s brows creased in confusion.

Shannon pointed to the girl’s clothes. “That’s a robe, right? And that hat that fell over there is a mage’s hat. So I take it that you’re a mage?”

While dirty, the robe and hat were likely new; they had no stains or tears. The

wand holder on the girl's thigh didn't show any wear and tear either. She had to be a novice.

The girl gasped, and her mouth fell open. "Oh, that's right! My teacher said that since mages are rare, I'm bound to have lots of people come up to me to— Wait. Are you...?" The girl pointed to the robe Shannon was wearing, which was similar to her own. "That robe means you're a mage too, right?"

"Yup! You know, mages are really rare, so that's why I was so curious. I wanted to talk to you!"

The girl raised both hands excitedly. "Oh, I want to talk to you too! The other mages my age are scattered all over the world, so I don't have any peers nearby. It's a bit lonely." She rubbed at her eyes to wipe away imaginary tears. "I'm Sarah! I just graduated from a nearby mages' school, so I'm still a newbie." She giggled, sounding a little nervous, and scratched her head.

"Isn't Evando the mages' school near here?" Shannon asked. She wasn't aware of any recently established magic academies, and she recalled that there was one called Evando in this area.

But Sarah shook her head. "No, I'm pretty sure that one closed about thirty years ago."

"Oh." The passage of time was appalling. Did this count as a generation gap?

Sarah laughed. "Is that the kind of joke you like to make? It's funny. I went to Ellemore."

"Oh!" Shannon put her fist in her palm. "That one! I see. Mm-hmm, so many of them have closed down that I get them confused."

In truth, she'd never heard of Ellemore (or, in fact, several other newer schools). While she was off on her journeys that lasted hundreds of years, the world changed at dizzying speeds. She was always able to find about as much information about nearby magic affairs as she found mages, but there were far fewer mages around now than there once had been, so she received much less news. As a result, she was out of touch with the current generation of mages.

"Wait, we're around the same age, aren't we?" Sarah asked. She scrunched her face in confusion. "Is it really that easy to mix up Ellemore with somewhere

else?”

“Well, I’m actually self-taught. I don’t know much about the mages’ schools.”

Sarah pushed her face in close to Shannon’s. “D-Did you say self-taught?! That’s amazing! You m-must be a genius.”

“No, no. I mean, it’s not that rare to self-study, right?”

“What?! It totally is. The right way to become a mage is to go to a mages’ school! Even my mom and grandma did that!”

“Oh, well, um...” Shannon forced a smile. Was that how things were now?

Sarah was a fellow mage, so giving her a sloppy lie would backfire on Shannon. Mages were naturally curious people, however, so if she told the truth about being immortal, Sarah would want to know how Shannon had come to be that way. Shannon really didn’t want to mess up her words here. To the extent that it was possible, it was best for them to stay on the same page. She had to come up with something.

“Well, I am self-taught,” Shannon explained, “but I learned all the fundamentals from my master. He was the only mage in my town, and when he saw my talent, he decided to teach me.”

“Oh, I see! I guess that happens too. Then going to a mages’ school isn’t the only way to learn magic.” Sarah nodded, satisfied. “You know, I haven’t met another mage since I graduated! I’m so surprised—and happy—to see you in a place like this! We’re even around the same age!”

“The same age... Oh, yeah, we are! Glad to meet you.”

They shook hands vigorously, both gripping tightly.

“I live up the road, in town,” Sarah said. “I was just about to head back. Where are you headed, Shannon?”

“You live in Olfess?”

“I do!”

“I was just on my way there. I really wanna soak in a big bath.”

“Ooh, sounds nice! We can take one together!”

“If you’re comfortable with that, then let’s!”

“Yeah! Oh, wait, I need to get my things!” Sarah quickly put together her belongings and crammed them into her largish knapsack. When she was all ready, she grinned and gave Shannon a thumbs-up. “Let’s go!”

Shannon and Sarah talked about whatever came to mind. There were many things that mages couldn’t tell the average person, and it was rare for them to be able to let down their guard and talk to someone else who could use magic. People who couldn’t use magic knew very little about it, and that ignorance created a divide between mages and other people. Magic was also a very convenient power, and if a mage revealed any kind of weakness, they risked someone taking advantage of them.

Sarah seemed delighted by their conversation. “Wow, it’s nice to be able to talk freely about magic with someone.”

“We don’t get many opportunities to chat like this,” Shannon agreed. “There just aren’t that many mages.”

“Nope. And it’s tough to buy tools for magic too, since what few shops there are have a pretty limited stock. Even picking out a wand was hard.” Sarah patted the holder on her thigh.

“I get it.” People were particular about their wands. Shannon had had the one she currently used for over a hundred years. “First you have to find the wood you like, which is a pain, and then you have to make sure it’s suitable for magic. Well, I guess all that work just makes you more attached to it in the end.”

Sarah’s mouth dropped open, and she cast Shannon a confused look.

“Wh-What?” Shannon asked hesitantly.

“Oh, I was supposed to laugh! Sorry, sorry!”

“Well, that wasn’t really what I was going for,” Shannon muttered. It seemed that the current generation got their wands some other way.

“But you buy wands at stores! I haven’t heard about anyone making their own wand these days. There’s no telling how it’d turn out.” Sarah put a hand in front of her mouth, giggling. Shannon guessed that mages nowadays got their wands

off of store shelves, even though a mage produced better magic with a wand they'd crafted themselves. So many things had changed with the times. "By the way, Shannon, are you any good on a starbroom?"

"A star...whatsit?" Shannon frowned at the strange word.

"What?! You're a mage my age, so I thought you'd know! It's a broomstick you race on. They're pretty popular."

"You fly on a broomstick?"

"Well, you have to stay within the grounds set aside for mage use. Wow, so you really don't know?"

"W-Well, my master was pretty up there in age, so I'm not really up-to-date on recent magic..."

"Oh, okay. You might've had more fun at a school." Sarah shook her head.

She didn't seem that satisfied with Shannon's explanation; starbrooms must've really been common knowledge. Shannon was always gathering information on her travels, and she'd thought she knew everything, but apparently she was out of touch with the young mages these days.

The generation gap bewildered her, but she still had fun talking to Sarah. Shannon genuinely enjoyed learning about young spellcasters, and Sarah was friendlier than she'd expected. She opened up to Shannon quickly, and for the first time in a long time, Shannon felt like she was hanging out with a friend.

"I see. So that's the trick for getting it to fly..." Sarah opened a worn book, licked her lips, and jotted down what Shannon had told her.

"You must've opened that book a thousand times," Shannon noted. "You're pretty dedicated to your magic studies."

"Oh, this?" Sarah closed the book and showed Shannon the cover. There wasn't anything written on it, but as a whole, the book looked expensive.

"The bumps and smeared ink really show its age," Shannon told her. Sarah must have really loved it; it looked like she'd been using it since her school days. Shannon figured she'd studied from it a lot and become a splendid mage.

But Sarah looked embarrassed. "Well, the thing is...it got rained on and got all

messy and soggy. It stayed that way after it dried. It's not like I've been using it for a long time."

"You're just too cheap to buy a new one?!" Shannon gasped.

"B-But paper is expensive and my wages are low! I'm serious!" Sarah turned her teary eyes on Shannon entreatingly. "Shannon, buy me a new one!"

"O-Okay, okay, fine! When we get to town, I'll buy you a new one."

Sarah's eyes sparkled. "Really?!"

"I mean, I'm the more experienced mage and you're a newbie, so it'll be a present."

"Yay!"

Sarah jumped up and down in glee, pressing against Shannon, and Shannon pushed her off with a sigh of "yeah, yeah, whatever."

"Anyway, Shannon," Sarah went on, "you know a lot about magic! I get that there's a lot I don't know, but you act like you've been studying forever!"

"Oh? Well, I've been learning since I was little, so maybe that's why."

"Hmm, maybe you're actually an old lady using magic to make yourself young!"

"Are you joking or serious?"

"Ah ha ha... It's sort of a joke." Sarah scratched her cheek awkwardly and cast Shannon a narrow-eyed look. It was true, though, that Shannon looked like she was in her teens despite being thousands of years old.

"Magic that keeps people young makes their lives shorter. I don't want to use magic like that."

Sarah burst into laughter and slapped Shannon on the back. "What are you talking about?"

"Huh?" Shannon's mouth dropped open. What was there to laugh about?

"You... Huh?" Sarah echoed. "Don't you know youth magic is a fairy tale?"

"No, it's..." That was strange. Youth magic had been a real societal issue

among mages once upon a time. Witches, especially, had wanted to stay young. But there were no quick fixes like that, and the more a mage rejuvenated their body, the shorter their life became and the faster they aged. It was a double-edged sword. Sarah, however, didn't seem to know about youth magic at all. "Oh, um, I'm just joking," Shannon said finally with a forced smile and laugh.

"Y-Yeah, I thought so! You're a real kidder."

"Well, of course! It's invaluable to get in some laughs on a journey."

Sarah seemed to accept Shannon's explanation, and they continued to chat. Shannon was a talker, but it turned out that Sarah was even more talkative than her. Something about her reminded Shannon of her former master. He had been an authority on magic, and he'd specialized in certain types. Back during the height of magic, he'd been called a genius.

He was also responsible for Shannon's immortality. It was his fault that Shannon couldn't figure out a way to die. She had no idea how to rid herself of eternal life. He was why she was searching for a way out, and she figured the answer had to be *somewhere*.

"It must be nice," Sarah said.

"What is?"

"You get to go where you want and use whatever magic you like. You're free."

"What are you talking about?"

Sarah's expression clouded, like she was tormented by something. In the next moment, though, she turned her gaze to the long grass on the side of the road and brightened. "Oh, wait a sec!" she said before leaving Shannon in the dust to squat down in front of the vegetation.

"What's up?" Shannon asked.

"There's chamomile here too!" Sarah called back, cheerfully collecting the plants.

She'd already gathered so much! Shannon was shocked that she needed any more. "You really need a lot of it, huh? Are you going to make potions for your training?"

“Nope, these are for my mom—”

“Oh,” a voice cut in, “I see we’ve got ourselves a pair of little mages who know nothing about the world. How unfortunate for them.”

Sarah and Shannon gasped. Simultaneously, a man grasped Sarah by the shoulders and two more men surrounded Shannon. “Wh-What are you doing?!” Sarah cried.

One of the men tutted. He was dressed like a brigand and gripping a sword in his hand. “Don’t move, or you’ll get hurt.” He grinned and fiddled with his wavy hair.

Sarah was terrified, frozen stiff. Shannon knew it would be easy to flatten these guys with magic, but a couple of her internal alarm bells, well attuned to danger, were going off. “Getting all rough with us out of nowhere,” Shannon said. “Who are you guys? Somehow, I don’t think you’re just lost.”

“This one’s cheeky, Mr. Gaine,” one of the lackeys said. “Should I give ’er a warnin’? She ain’t got nothin’ to do with things, right?”

The leader—Gaine—raised one hand to stop his subordinate. “Hang on a sec.”

Upon closer inspection, Shannon saw that beyond the few bandits flanking them, they were also surrounded by grunts. It wouldn’t be easy to run away. In a sense, though, Shannon didn’t find her circumstances all that troubling. In fact, she was excited.

“This girl ain’t got a bad face,” Gaine went on. “She’s not our target, but we can sell her. A pretty mage would make for a good showing.” His men laughed in agreement.

“If you want to show me off, it’ll cost you a lot,” Shannon warned him.

“Ha ha! You’re feisty too. Good. I’ll deal with you later. Right now I have business with you, newbie witch.”

“M-Me?!” Sarah’s whole body trembled in fear.

“You heard of Victor Odim?”

She gasped, her face going rigid. It seemed like that was the last name she wanted to hear. She managed to stutter, “H-How do you...?”

“We know him real well,” Gaine replied. “We lost a lotta men and money to that jerk’s research. Torturing and killing you will at least make us even.”

“Y-You...? B-But his research—”

“His research is a bunch of crap!” Gaine was smiling as he spoke, but his words dripped with fury. “I’m gonna make you understand what we went through. He thinks that just because it’s magic, he can say whatever he wants—that we won’t get it! That jerk lied to us! There’s no such thing as eternal life!”

Sarah looked terrified of him. Shannon, on the other hand, was unbothered. In fact, she trembled with delight at the possibility that this Victor Odim guy was just whom she was looking for. They said he was researching eternal life—immortality!

No matter the era, people always wanted everlasting youth. In thousands of years, the only real example of it that Shannon had ever seen was her own body. Everything beyond that was a sham. In all likelihood, Victor wouldn’t have the answers she needed, but she had to at least meet him.

“Even if...you say that...” Sarah panted loudly, on the verge of tears as she struggled against the man’s grip. He only tightened his arms around her further. She couldn’t escape. “Ugh!”

“That guy has the money and power to do what he wants whenever he wants, so it’s hard for people like us to get back at him. It was frustrating. But then I had such an amazing idea.” Gaine tapped his temple. “I’d grab up the mage working for him and make her feel a world of hurt!”

The men around them offered cries of “that’s right” and “you tell ’em, boss!”

“Heh, cut it out,” Gaine said. He rubbed under his nose, looking full of himself.

“You’re lame,” Shannon cut in.

All of the grunts turned toward her. One of the lackeys yelled, “H-Hey, you! How dare you say that about our boss!”

“Just look at your so-called boss. He can’t even speak from the shock!” Indeed, Gaine was dumbfounded, opening and closing his mouth wordlessly. “Looks like I hit a nerve!”

“Y-You stop that!” another grunt blabbered. “He’s sensitive about that sorta stuff!”

“You idiot!” barked his comrade. “You think anyone’ll take us seriously if you say things like that?! Besides, our boss doesn’t think like that! Right?!”

“Oh cr—” the blabbermouth began, but then a cacophonous thunk echoed through the air. He collapsed to the ground with his limbs splayed.

For a moment, no one spoke.

“So...” Gaine cracked his knuckles, and his eyes glittered darkly as he pretended that mortifying exchange hadn’t just taken place. “Which one of ya said I was lame?”

But Shannon was not the type to back down from a threat. “You *are* lame. You can’t stand up to Sarah’s boss, so you went the coward’s route and came after her. You’re just taking out your anger on an innocent person!”

“Shut up,” Gaine growled. “My idea is genius! If we beat the girl to a pulp and bring her to Victor Odim’s house, even he’ll understand that he should be terrified of us. Then we’ll drag him out. He won’t be able to beat me.”

“That’s right!” yelled one of the grunts. The other lackeys joined in with roars of admiration. Gaine was an idiot, but he did, at least, seem to be competent as their leader. They were all united in loyalty to him.

“Sorry to tell you this,” Gaine went on, producing an enormous knife from within his clothes, “but I’ll be cutting you up now.”

The knife had been designed with torture in mind. It was stained with blood, and rust too. It wouldn’t kill someone easily, but it would make their pain that much more agonizing. Sarah went pale at the sight of it. It seemed she had lost the willpower to even scream.

“And I assume you’ll torture me as well?” Shannon asked.

“Obviously. You dared to insult me, so you’ll be joining her.”

Shannon slapped her hands over her mouth.

“Ha ha, you shoulda been scared earlier. It’s too late now. Your foolishness is about to bring you a world of...” He paused. “Hey, are you laughing?”

It had been a while since Shannon had been tortured. There were plenty of ways that torture could kill someone, and this Gaine guy probably didn't mind taking people out. Unlike Sarah, Shannon was going to get tortured as revenge for deliberately making him angry, so it was possible he'd agonize her to the very limit before offing her. Maybe torture would be the way she'd finally go!

True, torture was not as cruel as some of her previous deaths, but she hoped that the evil intent behind it would help her transcend her immortality. In fact, Shannon didn't know how much pain and death her body could withstand. Even if the chances were low, she couldn't suppress her curiosity about the possibility of dying by way of torture.

As soon as that thought flashed through her head, Shannon smiled. "Go ahead and torture me. I can take it."

Gaine paused for a moment. "You're crazy. What are you laughing about? Did fear make you lose your marbles?"

"Hmm? This is how I always am," Shannon replied, puzzled.

The men could sense that there was something off about her. A healthy dose of apprehensiveness sprung up among them.

Sarah finally found her voice again. "W-Wait, Shannon! Don't do that just for my sake. I just met you, another mage—I don't want to lose you! You're my friend!"

"Sarah..."

Shannon had to admit that the idea of getting tortured was tempting. If she got hurt, however, Sarah would too. Involving this weak, greenhorn mage in the kind of torture that might get Shannon killed was something she wouldn't stand for. And Sarah's words were true: She was Shannon's first mage friend in a long time.

She wasn't going to drag this girl down into death with her. Most people only lived one life, after all, and Shannon valued justice; she wouldn't get such a terrified girl mixed up in her affairs.

"I changed my mind!" Shannon declared.

“Huh?” Gaine boggled.

“No torture for me! Things are different now.”

“Oh, so now you’re getting cold feet?”

“Nope, that’s not it. Don’t you think it’s wrong to use a cute girl like Sarah for your revenge?” She folded her arms, nodding righteously. “I guess I’ll just have to eliminate you guys!”

Gaine burst into laughter. “Whoa, whoa, you really are crazy, girl! Thinking you could beat all of us?!”

“That’s funny! Outrageous, even!” someone roared. The other goons erupted in laughter.

Shannon might not have had the home field advantage, but she wore a calm smile as she looked at Gaine. It gave him pause.

“I don’t like that look you got,” Gaine said. “That cocky attitude either. You think you’re the center of the whole world, don’t you?”

“That’s not my belief, no.”

“No? But you don’t seem scared, grand mage that you are,” Gaine said sarcastically. “Your head must be empty! Ain’t that right, Sullivan?”

A bespectacled man with swept-back hair stepped forward. “Indubitably,” he said in a polite tone.

“You have a go at her. Start with one of her arms, then take your time toying with her.”

“Understood,” Sullivan replied, quietly drawing a sword from his belt.

“Sullivan here has a top-class sword arm,” Gaine boasted. “Think he can take on a mage who ain’t even had more than a few years of training?”

Sullivan adjusted his glasses, then slowly turned his sword on Shannon. “I must admit, I don’t like killing women and girls.”

“Well, you aren’t going to prove a point like that when you’re shoving a sword in my face,” Shannon replied.

“I don’t like it, but when I’m ordered to kill, I won’t hesitate to do so. Personal

hang-ups have no place in my work.”

“Show her what you can do, Sullivan!” Gaine urged him. “Teach her what the world’s really like, who she’s really up against!”

“Sh-Shannon!” Sarah screamed. Tears streamed down her face, and every bit of her radiated despair.

Gaine laughed. “Cry, you witches! Today’s the day you d—”

Abruptly, Sullivan’s body swayed, then pitched forward. He fell flat on his face with a resounding thud, and his sword fell uselessly from his hand and clattered onto the ground.

“Huh? Out in just one hit?” Shannon said, bemused.

Gaine and his goons had been smiling, but their expressions rapidly turned grim. Shannon had used a simple spell in her one-on-one match against Sullivan: Air Cannon, an all-purpose attack.

“Uh...?” Gaine couldn’t seem to find any words.

Looking quite pleased with herself, Shannon blew on the tip of her wand and put a hand on her hip. “Thing is, I’ve actually been studying magic for over a thousand years.”

“A thousand?! D-Don’t insult me! Hey, Sullivan! Get up!”

Sullivan, however, had taken Shannon’s magic straight to the gut in a clean KO. His open eyelids showed the whites of his eyes, and drool was leaking from his mouth.

“What is she?” one of the lackeys asked hesitantly.

“Are all mages like that?!” another cried, panicked.

“Sh-Shannon?” Sarah stared at her in astonishment, unable to comprehend what was unfolding before her.

Gaine trembled with rage. The veins in his forehead throbbed. He drew his sword and turned back to Shannon. “Everyone! Kill her!”

His lackeys roared, and just like that, the melee began. The grunts surrounding them all jumped at Shannon, but one by one, she countered them

with her knowledge of self-defense. As she blasted them beyond any hope of recovery, they cried out in outrageous ways.

“Ugh!”

“Ahhh!”

“Oh!”

“Ow!”

“Oof!”

“Gaaah! My back!”

In addition to using hand-to-hand combat for short-range attacks, Shannon sprinkled in some magic for long-distance shots. She didn’t give the grunts any openings against her.

The man who had been holding Sarah captive joined the fray too, and Sarah—the bandits’ original target—was freed. She didn’t leave the battlefield, though. Even trembling like a leaf, she watched the fight with great interest.

It wasn’t long before most of the men had collapsed—out of breath, bodies and spirits wounded, no match for Shannon’s combat skills. A heap of goons lay sprawled across the ground like a rug.

“Th-That girl is crazy!” one groaned.

“How’d she d-do that?! I thought being a mage was a desk job,” whined another.

“Honestly...she can’t be a teenage mage. She’s more like an expert old hag—AH!” The man who said that got a clean hit to the face with a stone. It knocked him back, and his nose broke with a burst of blood.

“That’s what you get for calling a girl an old hag!” Shannon called.

“Shannon...” Sarah’s voice was full of wonder. “You’re awesome! I’ve never seen a mage fight like this... You’re so strong! Who in the world are you?!”

Shannon laughed and said what she always did: “I’m just a traveling mage!”

“But, like, not even a traveling mage could be this strong...”

“For all you know, I could have been just a fighter back in the day!”

“You don’t even look like a mage—just a brawler!”

“Aw... Well, I would be cool as one of those too!”

Shannon smiled, elated...but Sarah’s face froze. Her gaze was no longer on Shannon. Instead, it was pointed behind her.

Behind Shannon, there came a roar. “Sucker!” a man yelled, and then—*shink!*—a shock jolted through her body as something sank deep into the left side of her back, through her robe. Gaine stood there, riddled with wounds and clutching a bloodied knife in his hand.

“SHANNON!” Sarah screamed.

The man chuckled breathlessly. “How about that? I did it! I’m... I’m stronger than you!” He tossed aside the bloody knife and let out another roar, this time in triumph—he was certain that nothing stood in his way now. But...

“Ugh, that hurt,” Shannon whined.

Gaine gave a start. “Huh?”

“You put a hole in my robe,” she pouted, turning her head to look at the tear in the back of her clothes.

“H-Hey, wait... I stabbed you in the back. Why aren’t you screaming?!”

“Hmm. Sheer willpower?”

“That’s impossible! You’re a monster—”

Shannon waved her wand and summoned a strong wind that steadily pushed him back. He grunted, struggling to endure the tempest, but the force of the wind was too much; it even yanked his skin back.

“Hanging on, huh? Then how about this?!” Shannon swished her wand again, and the wind grew even stronger. The men who’d already lost their will to fight were caught up in the gale and blown away into the trees. They screamed, and then their cries ceased as they crashed and fell unconscious.

Only Gaine remained, and he’d toppled onto his behind as if his legs had given out. With an airy movement, Shannon pointed her wand at the tip of his nose.

He swallowed, blinking fiercely and desperately waving his hands.

“W-Wait! Wait, please! I get it!” Gaine cried. Shannon didn’t understand what he “got,” but she could tell that he was begging for his life. “W-We won’t ever touch you guys again, I promise! Why don’t we just agree to leave things be, huh?”

His words disgusted Shannon, and she heaved a deep sigh. “Slimeball. You should be glad that your lackeys are all out cold right now so they can’t see their exalted leader like this. They’d cry,” she said. Gaine laughed nervously. “Anyway, what’s this about an agreement? We didn’t need to be tortured in the first place, so there’s no reason to ‘leave things be.’ What agreement is there to make?”

She smiled sweetly, and from her grin, Gaine learned the true meaning of fear.

“N-No, well, I mean, if we just think about it a little—”

“Anyway, I think you’ll learn your lesson better if I show you a bit of pain.” She pressed the tip of her wand to his temple.

“No, w-wait, w-we can talk abou—”

Light flashed at the end of the wand. In the next instant, with a violent *zap!* like a lightning strike, Gaine’s eyes rolled back into his head. He landed face up on the ground with black smoke streaming from his skull.

That was it for the bandits.

“Mm...ahh! I’m wiped out after that. Honestly, what an annoying bunch of weaklings.”

Sarah rushed over to her, panicked. “Forget about that! Are you okay, Shannon?!”

“Huh? What’re you talking about?”

“What am I— Just show me your wound!” Sarah forcibly turned Shannon around so that she could take a look at her back. There was a hole in Shannon’s robe where that bandit’s knife had gone through, and the fabric around it had taken on a brownish red color. “I thought so! We have to hurry and treat it. I

have herbs...so... Huh?” Her words grew quieter by the second until they trailed away.

“What’s wro— Hey, what are you doing?!” Shannon cried. Wordlessly, Sarah tore off Shannon’s robe and then pushed aside her clothes. She traced a finger across the pale skin of Shannon’s back, and Shannon’s face scrunched up as she giggled. “Ah! Th-That tickles!”

“Hold on, the wound should be... Wait, it’s...gone? But I saw you get stabbed!”

There was no stab wound on Shannon’s back. In fact, her skin wasn’t even marred by any scars or blemishes—every inch was flawless. Sarah ignored Shannon’s peculiar giggles from the unintentional tickling and single-mindedly continued to inspect her body.

At last, Sarah came to a conclusion: “This is just like...super healing.” She paused. “No, I think there’s more to it...”

She hadn’t yet connected all the dots from Shannon’s words and actions. Then, finally, she remembered Shannon saying something about having studied magic for over a thousand years. Sarah’s brain jolted into gear.

“You can’t be... No,” Sarah murmured, righting Shannon’s clothes. “You must be.”

“Finally done, huh? Satisfied?”

“I... I think so.”

“Well, I’ll take your word for it. Anyway, Sarah, are you okay? That guy was holding your arms pretty tightly.”

Sarah waved her hands. “I’m fine. He wasn’t holding on to me for very long. What should we do about all these guys? Can we just leave them here?”

“Hmm, I guess a lot of them are blocking the road. Let’s bring them off to the side.”

“Okay. Oh, Shannon, there’s something in your hair.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. Hold still a minute.” Shannon did just that, and Sarah gently put her wand against Shannon’s temple.

“Hmm? Huh, what’s the wand—”

Magic burst from Sarah’s wand, and Shannon’s eyelids started to close. She collapsed into Sarah’s arms. As her consciousness started to slip away, she heard Sarah murmur, “Sorry, Shannon. You see, I...”

But before she could hear anything else, Shannon fell into a deep darkness.



Chapter Five: Immortality

Shannon awoke to the sensation of chilly air blowing down her neck. She groaned and, with some effort, slowly opened her heavy eyelids. Everything was dark. She couldn't see anything. It seemed she was in some gloomy, frigid place.

She lay face up on the ground, and once she'd managed to turn her eyes upward, her vision gradually adjusted enough for her to get some sense of her surroundings. Naturally, the bright blue sky was above her—*not*. What she actually saw was a stone ceiling; apparently, she wasn't outside. Her head also rested on something far too hard to be earth. It felt like a floor made of cold stone.

Her eyes were drawn to an area that was slightly less dark, and there, she made out a number of metal rods lined up vertically. "Iron bars... This must be a jail cell," she muttered weakly. She scrubbed at her sleepy eyes and slowly sat up, then sneezed. With a sniff, she patted herself and realized that she didn't have her robe—it had been stripped from her. "Ugh, chilly!"

Shannon assumed from the lack of light that she was being detained in an underground dungeon. She grabbed the bars and pushed on them, but they didn't budge. The cell, it seemed, was sturdy.

In her head, she ran through what had happened before she lost consciousness. She had met Sarah and been hassled by some bandits, and then...Sarah had knocked her out with sleep magic. Shannon hadn't been caught off guard, though. She had seen that Sarah was deep in thought, waiting for the right time to make a move and even readying her wand. Shannon had known, of course, that Sarah had intended to cast some kind of spell on her.

Most people would lose their composure if they woke up in a cell, but Shannon treated her captivity like an everyday occurrence. She wasn't surprised. Rather, she was waiting in eager anticipation to see what would happen to her. She'd actually woken up more excited than usual! She couldn't

have hoped for better circumstances. She wasn't even mad at Sarah, only grateful, though she still didn't really understand why Sarah had done this to her.

Shannon did have one small concern, though. From Sarah's conversation with that bandit, Gale-whatsit, Shannon had inferred that Sarah's boss was studying immortality. He'd probably been looking to capture someone like Shannon for a long time.

Actually, there was one person who could have been after Shannon for a *very* long time. A person who was dead but not dead. He wasn't immortal like Shannon, but his existence was more...ambiguous. He continued to live on more like a thought than a person—a formless spirit who drifted through the world and occasionally resided within people. This phenomenon was a lot less clear and straightforward than immortality, but Shannon knew the person who studied that field of magic. It was the culprit behind her eternal life, her teacher, and the first person in the world to analyze the nature of the soul: Orlando the Spirit Sorcerer.

He existed only as a soul, but he still sought immortality. Only he would know how to end Shannon's eternal life. "If Orlando is up there..." she murmured. If he was truly up there, keeping her hostage, then that meant she could finally die.

If he could grant immortal life, then surely he could take it away.

The click-clack of footsteps beyond the bars met her ears. Then someone appeared and came to a stop right in front of her. "I'm sorry, Shannon, for what I did," said a terribly hoarse, weak voice. The silhouette was blurry but unmistakable.

"Oh, Sarah."

"Here." With gentle motions, Sarah put the plate she'd been holding into a gap under the bars and pushed it toward Shannon. It held bread and lukewarm soup.

"Whoa, for me? Thanks!"

"No, don't thank me. I..."

Shannon didn't really take in Sarah's mournful expression, and she ate her food in silence. Her stomach was remarkably empty, and in a matter of seconds, she devoured everything. "Ah, delicious! Prison food isn't so bad once in a while."

Sarah stilled, then quickly lowered her head in a show of apology. "Shannon, I'm so sorry! I know how awful that is to say under the circumstances. I don't expect you to forgive me. I'm so selfish..." Her voice grew strained, and her face contorted with sorrow. She wrapped her arms around her own trembling form, looking for all the world like she was about to cry. "I really didn't want to do it. Please believe that. You... Your body is special, so I..."

"I'm not really bothered about it," Shannon said. "This is hardly my first time in jail."

"But—"

"I'm immortal—forever young! That's what you're researching, right?"

"H-How did you...?" Sarah's eyes widened.

"I just knew. Anyway, you probably thought I'd be good research material, so you put me to sleep and brought me here."

"You... You're right. I brought you here to research you. It was unforgivable of me."

Sarah, apparently, had resigned herself to her fate. They had only just met, but Shannon could see that Sarah was a good-natured, if somewhat weak-willed, mage. She was probably the type of person who'd doubt herself no matter what decision she made. Now, though, even though she had apologized, she wouldn't go back on her decision. She was prepared to be hated; she even hated herself.

There had to be some explanation for her behavior, so Shannon said, "But I do forgive you."

"Don't!" Sarah shouted. "Don't forgive me. You protected me from all those guys, and now I've given you over to such an awful man. You're going to suffer, all because of me..."

Sarah was bad-mouthing herself as if she wanted Shannon to punish her. But the girl was beyond exhausted; Shannon knew that there had to be something else at play here. “Hey, why don’t you tell me what’s going on? Did that man—uh, was it Victor?—order you to capture me?”

Sarah didn’t respond.

“I might be able to help you. Just tell me.”

Sarah hesitated a bit longer, then, in a timid voice, began to explain. She sounded like she was about to cry. “It’s...my mother. She’s the only relative I have. She raised me by herself and sent me to a mages’ school. When I graduated and came back home, she’d contracted an incurable disease. None of the magic I’d learned was any help. I studied herbs too, so I’ve tried making medicines with them, but nothing has worked.” She did cry then, her tears sliding slowly down her cheeks.

At last, Shannon understood why Sarah had been collecting so many herbs. She hadn’t been ordered to by whoever owned this dungeon; she’d believed she could one day cure her mother with them. Shannon could tell just by looking at her that today’s mages’ schools specialized in research; they taught their students nothing about fighting or upsetting the balance of the world.

Perhaps there were no more mages around who could teach those subjects. That explained why Sarah had been so surprised to see Shannon use combat magic.

Sarah wasn’t finished. “That’s why I had no choice but to turn to Victor for help. He said that if I used the magic I’d learned to help him with his research on immortality, he might cure my mother. So...I have to do whatever he asks, no matter how awful it is.” She paused. “But when I saw you, Shannon, you seemed so free...”

“Sarah...”

“What am I even doing? I’ve just been looking the other way and sacrificing so many people. How can I live with myself after all I’ve done?”

Still, Sarah couldn’t stop. Shannon didn’t know exactly what kinds of things Sarah had done, but it was clear that the girl was being crushed by her own

guilt. That was probably why Sarah wouldn't stop, in fact. She had already come this far, and offering up Shannon was the only way to end this fruitless research.

"I see what's going on. What a mean guy, taking advantage of your circumstances like that. You know, people searching for immortality are fundamentally twisted." Shannon smiled.

"Why are you taking this so lightly?" Sarah asked. "I'm pretty much at my limit..."

Shannon laughed. "I'm sorry. But really, immortality research is all the same." On that note, she recalled the possibility that she had deduced earlier, and her face lit up. "That Victor guy might be the person I'm looking for."

"Huh?"

Orlando the Spirit Sorcerer had analyzed the invisible and uncertain existence of the soul and applied what he learned to the miracle of magic. His research had gone on and on until, before anyone had realized, he had created a magic that could surpass even the physical limits of immortality. But the price of eternal life was far too great. Shannon hadn't been able to turn a blind eye to it, so she had thwarted him.

Orlando had died, but his research had flourished. His soul had escaped oblivion by separating from his flesh to wander the world in search of one thing: immortality. When his spirit inhabited another person, that person pursued eternal life from the moment they were born. Orlando's thoughts and personality had been scraped off his soul, but some of his knowledge remained.

His soul picked different kinds of hosts depending on the era. Occasionally, he resided in a mage; sometimes, a mercenary; once in a while, a religious leader. Regardless of time or place, when his soul came into the world, he guided his host toward the quest for eternal life. All of his hosts contained some of his knowledge, though the amount varied. If, perhaps, the body was a perfect match for his spirit, he might even have been able to pass along all of his research information.

If that was the case this time around, then the knowledge of how to deliver Shannon to her true death slept within Orlando's current host. Orlando had

made her immortal, so it stood to reason that he knew how to kill her once and for all. That was why she'd been searching for her late mentor at the same time that she chased her own death. The thought that he might be waiting for her now, high above the dungeon, filled Shannon with strength.

"Hey, Sarah. Thank you."

"You're thanking me? Did you hit your head when I knocked you out or something?"

"Nope. You may think you're sacrificing me, but I'm actually also using you for my own reasons. So we'll call it even."

Sarah said nothing. She lowered her face, looking pained.

"If I meet him, I might finally realize my dream," Shannon explained.

"Is he really the person you're looking for?"

Shannon stood. Her beautiful golden hair gleamed strikingly in the dim dungeon. "That's what I'm going to find out. Please take me to Victor. Then we'll put an end to my long life!"

The shackles on Shannon's wrists clanged together as Sarah led her up the stairs and out of the dungeon, and the sound reverberated harshly in the stairwell. Shannon didn't yet know exactly where she was, but the dungeon was spacious, and the prison food was some of the best she'd ever eaten—it seemed likely to have been leftovers from a meal on a higher floor. She suspected she was being held in a noble family's house. If this Victor guy was highborn, that explained why the bandits found it tricky to meddle in his affairs.

"Hey, Shannon," Sarah whispered, turning her head.

"Yeah?"

"What's it feel like to be immortal?"

It was clear that Sarah was not asking solely out of curiosity. Considering her circumstances, it was a natural question. Her mother had an incurable disease, and in trying to heal her, Sarah had sacrificed numerous people. If her mother were immortal, then Sarah wouldn't have to fear her mother's death.

“What’s it feel like?” Shannon echoed. “Well...it’s like I’m on the side of the road, watching people walk by.”

“Huh?” Sarah gave her a puzzled look. “What do you mean?”

“Normal people like you are limited by their lifespans. I think that’s why they keep moving forward. They just push on, day after day. That’s because there’s an end to it all: death. They want to enjoy the journey and grow while they can, because they know that one day, it’ll end.”

“I kind of get it, but I kind of don’t.” Sarah stopped walking and just stared at Shannon. She was trying hard to understand such an abstract concept.

“It’s amazing. Because people have limited time, they live their lives to the fullest. Everyone has a shining soul.” Shannon put her hand on Sarah’s chest. “But being immortal, I’m just an onlooker. No matter how much I pretend, in the end, I don’t belong with other people. Time works differently for me. Yes, immortality means that I don’t have a limited lifetime. But it’s like a prison that I’ve been in for so long that I can’t see the value in living anymore. Sarah, would you continue on a journey by yourself if you didn’t have a goal, or if your friends found out and you had to leave them? Would you see meaning in continuing on and on?”

Sarah didn’t respond. She seemed to have understood what Shannon meant about the meaninglessness and emptiness of her existence; her confused expression had turned to one of pity.

“Well, that’s what it’s like,” Shannon said conversationally, as if it were a trifling matter. She had long been accustomed to being an onlooker. “I guess it makes me want to find even just a little meaning in my life, so I talk to a lot of different people and go to a lot of different places. The goal of my journey is to die, but I meet people along the way. I see them running at full speed on the road next to mine, and I want to join them—I want to get involved.”

“I...see.” Sarah didn’t say anything more. Perhaps learning that immortality wasn’t as lovely as she thought had disillusioned her. That, or she pitied Shannon.

For all that eternal life was meaningless, empty, and sad, Shannon did have fun. Her journey in search of death was full of excitement, and meeting people

made her feel alive. That was something that she was certain united normal people and an immortal person like her. And while their journeys looked very different, in the end, everyone was marching toward death. The average person coveted immortality, the immortal craved death... The grass is always greener on the other side.

“Can I ask you about your mom?” Shannon asked.

“Go ahead.”

“What kind of person is she?”

“Well, she’s kind and gentle, and she doesn’t like getting angry. But if I do anything dangerous, she gets angry anyway.” Sarah giggled before continuing more seriously. “By the time I came home from school, she had already contracted the disease. She had kept quiet about it because she didn’t want to worry me. That part wasn’t very kind of her.” She wiped at her eyes with her sleeve.

“She really loves you.”

“My mom’s an idiot, really. She’s bedridden now and growing weaker. But I can’t go see her or else I’ll get infected.”

“I see...”

Sarah nodded. “Anyway...I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. You know, I deliberately let you knock me out because it was the most convenient thing to do.”

“Huh?! What?!” Sarah’s voice rose, approaching hysteria. “B-But I’m good at sleep spells! My teachers praised me for that!”

Shannon laughed. “You’ve still got a bit to learn. If you can detect the mana fluctuations in the moment a spell is cast, you can tell what type of spell it is.”

Sarah’s eyes narrowed to slits, and she shivered. “Yikes. Ancient mages are terrifying.”

“I’ll teach you my magic if you like.”

Sarah paused. “Okay, if the opportunity arises.”

During this conversation, they came to the top of the stairs and found themselves at the start of a long hallway. Sarah led Shannon down the hall until they stood in front of a huge door. So far, Shannon hadn't sensed any other people around. She wondered if the immortality research was being kept under wraps and therefore hidden from view. Perhaps the building wasn't Victor's home but a secondary residence dedicated solely to research?

Sarah took a deep breath, then looked at Shannon and nodded. Shannon nodded back. Victor—no, Orlando's soul—was on the other side of that door.

Shannon's journey had been long. On several occasions, she had confronted Orlando's past hosts but failed to discover how to end her immortality. In none of those cases had Orlando's soul managed to transfer all of his knowledge to the host. Every single one of his hosts sought immortality, and they all had something about them that reminded her of him. But surely, this time, he had some kind of information.

Shannon would end things here. Her mind sharpened, focused singularly on her goal. Her heart thumped in her chest, and her skin felt hot. Finding an end to her immortality was her dearest desire, and she was going to question him about it.

When she saw Shannon's hopeful expression, Sarah's mouth dropped open. "You're the first person I've brought here who looked happy about it."

"Oh, you can tell?" Shannon asked. When Sarah nodded, she giggled. "Then I bet I made you feel better."

"Now that you mention it, maybe." She paused. "Okay, I'm going to open the door now."

"Yes, please!"

Slowly, the door creaked open to reveal a spacious chamber reminiscent of a throne room. A red carpet stretched straight across the room; flags and swords hung on both sides, and suits of armor stood at attention. At the front of the room, a man sat in a chair, flanked by two brawny soldiers.

"You've done well to deliver her here," said the man, who had long silver hair and sharp eyes. He rested his chin in his hand and looked at Shannon.

Sarah sank to one knee as if to prostrate herself. “Lord Victor, I have brought Shannon.”

“I appreciate your efforts. You are a hardworking witch.” Victor looked Shannon up and down disparagingly. “Now then, you must be the immortal mage. You appear to be far more vulgar than I expected.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” Shannon trilled. “I rather like being vulgar.”

“Sh-Shannon!” Sarah gasped.

“You’d do well to curb your arrogance,” Victor bit out. “You may be long-lived, but it appears your intelligence never developed. It truly seems that there is no one more suited to immortality than myself.”

“You’re pretty haughty yourself. Just as I’d expect from Master Or...Orlan... Huh?”

Shannon realized something then. At this distance, she should have felt Orlando’s presence coming from this Victor guy—but she couldn’t pick up a whiff of her former master. Not even the teeniest hint. Not a single micron.

“Um... Uh... Is that possible?” Shannon muttered, tilting her head in bewilderment. Could someone other than Orlando crave immortality this much?

“You look troubled. What, pray tell, is the matter? Are you only now realizing how outmatched you are? It is not often that a traveling plebeian has the opportunity to meet the likes of me. I am, after all, Lord Victor Odium.”

But Victor’s words did not register in Shannon’s ears. She had been so happy ever since she left the dungeon, and it had all amounted to nothing! She felt unsteady, almost at the end of her rope. But things could still change.

“U-Um, Mr. Victor,” she began.

“What?”

“You wouldn’t know how to kill an immortal being, would you?”

His reply was immediate. “No. What would I be doing here if there were a way to do that? It is precisely because there is no way to kill an immortal being that they have eternal life. Are you an imbecile? Has your brain rotted with

age? That is a risk I must consider further...”

Shannon was at a loss for words. She had completely missed her mark. Victor was not Orlando’s current host. Her head drooped in shock.

“Regardless,” Victor said, “you are proof positive that immortality is possible. We shall test you now, in case Sarah was feeding me drivel about your abilities.”

At his signal, his soldiers snatched Shannon, laid her on a cot, and fastened her in place. Her drive to keep moving had hit rock bottom. For her part, Sarah could offer up no resistance; she just watched. There was no reason for her to remain there any longer, but the matter with her mother still stood, so she decided to stay for the time being.

“You,” Victor said to one of the guards. “Let’s see how she does when you stab her side.”

The soldier nodded, unspeaking, and drew the sword at his hip. Without hesitation, he thrust it into Shannon’s side.

“Shannon!” Sarah screamed.

Shannon grunted. The sword stopped halfway through her body, and blood gushed from the wound. When she spoke, though, it was as if she had only been pricked with a needle. “Man, that hurts, but I’m used to it. The pain will stop eventually.”

Victor hummed. “Interesting. Now take it out.”

“Yes, sir.” The guard yanked his sword out of Shannon’s side. Fresh blood spouted from the wound.

“Shannon!” Sarah yelled again. Her voice shook with fear, but a moment later, she realized her fear was unfounded. Before her eyes, the hole left by the sword closed up, and the skin knit itself back together.

Victor quivered with joy. He stood from his chair, eyes wide with excitement. “You... You are the genuine article! An immortal! You truly exist! Incredible. Simply incredible! In truth, I had thought immortality unachievable even after all the materials I’d bought, the mages I’d hired, and the evil I’d done. But now

it's right in front of my eyes! I can use you to forward my research. I can cut you, burn you, crush you, even melt you! I will research every inch of your body, every cell! You're the perfect research subject—no matter what I do to you, you won't die!" His laugh reverberated throughout the room, reminiscent of a villain in a play. "Wonderful work, Sarah! Thanks to your efforts, I shall achieve immortality!"

"Th-Thank you, sir! Then that means..." Sarah stared up at Victor, her eyes glittering with a mix of guilt for all that she'd done and happiness for her mother's safety. "You can heal my mother...?"

"That's right, we did agree on that." Victor grinned broadly.

"W-We did! Oh, thank you so—"

But Victor put his hand on his chin and hummed. "There is no cure for such a rare disease."

"B-But...Lord Victor, you said you could do something about it."

"It can't be cured."

"Wh—" Sarah's face turned pale. "B-But you said... You said you could do it. That's why I..."

"I was lying, Sarah. Honestly, you can perform magic but you can't tell when someone is lying? This is what happens when you can't think for yourself."

"But what about my mother?! What about medicine?!"

"There is no medicine," Victor said without ceremony, as if he had no more interest in the conversation. "She should just hurry up and die."

Sarah gasped. Shell-shocked, she shrunk in on herself, tears spilling down her cheeks from her wide eyes. Just like that, all her strength left her, and she sank to the floor. "Then... Then why did I do those things?! I even sacrificed my friend... Why?!"

She tore at her hair, anguished. All of the guilt she had been keeping at bay crashed down on her, all at once. Her mental state had crumbled in on itself.

"Sarah," Shannon murmured.

“Your efforts to serve me were laudable. You did many things for me on the basis of a single lie,” Victor told her, clapping. “But... Oh, how do I put it? You have served your purpose.”

“Huh?” Sarah muttered weakly.

“You and I were involved in a fair number of crimes together. To let a witness live would be to risk putting all of my work to waste. You never know where a leak might spring from. Therefore, I must have you killed.”

“B-But...” With her hopes crushed, Sarah no longer had the will to resist.

But Shannon did.

“I won’t let you do that,” Shannon spat from where she lay strapped to the cot.

“Hmm? Oh, the experiment speaks. We should have shut your mouth up as well. You,” Victor said to one of the guards, “gag her with something.”

Shannon wasn’t finished. “I won’t forgive anyone who makes my friends cry!”

“Shannon...” Sarah said in a weak voice.

“You’re just a cheap imitation of my master—you can’t even achieve immortality! You’re like a kid playing pretend!”

Victor’s eyebrow twitched. “What did you say, witch? Shut your mouth, unless you’d like to receive ceaseless, undying agony.”

“That’s just what I want, actually, but I’ll have to take a rain check. I’ve made a change of plans.”

“What?”

“You know, I was kind of looking forward to those experiments you talked about, but I think I’ll pass.” With no effort at all, Shannon removed the bindings keeping her tied to the cot.

“What?! You two were supposed to tie her down so she didn’t escape!”

“W-We did!”

Shannon removed the ties around her wrists and dropped them to the floor. She was free, and she headed to where Sarah sat on the floor and extended her

hand. “Let’s blow this joint.”

“Shannon...” Sarah hesitated. “But I—”

“C’mon.”

Sarah didn’t say another word. She slowly took Shannon’s hand and let Shannon pull her up, then wiped away her tears, exhausted.

“I won’t let you leave, immortal witch,” Victor declared. “I must offer you to the gods so that I might evolve and become eternal myself!”

“Immortality isn’t ‘evolution,’” Shannon said.

“Enough of your trivial jibes! What more could I want than everlasting life and an invincible body? If we don’t call that evolution, then what is it?!”

“Well, I guess everyone’s got their own priorities. But Orlando didn’t choose you. You’re just an ordinary scoundrel.”

“Nonsense! I care nothing about this Orlando of whom you speak. I don’t even know him! I am everything; I am what matters! Soldiers, arrest them! They’re nothing without their wands!”

“Yes, sir!” The guards drew their swords and advanced on the girls.

“You think mages can’t perform magic without their wands?” Shannon asked. “Since when?”

“You’re bluffing! You must realize I have no qualms about killing Sarah!” Victor cried. Shannon reached for her chest and pulled a wand from her cleavage. “Huh?!”

Shannon grinned, sticking out her tongue. “Say hello to my wand, the Almighty.”

“What?! Didn’t anyone check— Sarah! You little brat!” Victor seethed.

Shannon ignored him and turned to her friend. “Sarah, you’re tired of this mansion, right?”

Sarah glanced at Victor, then clenched her fists, shaking. She screamed, “Y-Yeah! Destroy it! Destroy the whole thing!”

“What drivel is this?!” Victor roared. “Soldiers, kill her at once, or our world

will suffer! I must become the immortal ruler who guides this world into the future!”

“I don’t care what you say! I’m leveling this whole place!” Shannon pointed her wand to the sky. Light gathered around its tip like a whirlpool, expanding steadily until it formed a two-meter sphere.

“Wh-What... What is this energy?!” Victor cried.

Sarah looked at the light and whispered, “Condensing and releasing light... It’s a Sanctuary spell! I didn’t know there were any mages who could really cast it!”

The dazzling light shone so brightly that the shadows it created looked as if they were seared into their surroundings. The air in the room should have been still, but a tempest swept over them, and everyone’s clothes flapped in the wind. The light had come alive, and it would not be stopped.

“This is the end for you,” Shannon said.



“How daaaare you?!” Victor screamed. “I’m supposed to become immortal! Me!”

“Then you should’ve done your research the proper way, without making anyone suffer!” Shannon declared, swinging her wand downward.

For an instant, all was still. Then the light exploded. It covered the room, obliterating every shadow. The brilliant glow wrapped everything up, and the room was engulfed in a warm wind.

Then, without fanfare, Victor’s mansion crumbled from the inside out, swallowed by a torrent of light.

Shannon used a suspension spell to pull Victor and his two subordinates out of the mountain of rubble. She let them thud clumsily to the ground, then checked them for injuries, just in case. Just before the impact of the Sanctuary spell, Shannon had cast magic to protect everyone in the room, and the spell itself wouldn’t have affected any humans anyway. Still, someone could’ve been injured from a fall or the like.

She checked the three of them thoroughly, but they were all unharmed—only knocked out. Somehow, they were also stark naked. Shannon laid them out on the ground and giggled to herself.

Sarah, on the other hand, had already woken from her own bout of unconsciousness. Dazed, she sat atop the mountain of rubble, staring at the town in the distance. The mansion had stood in the forest on the town’s outskirts, but people would have seen and reported the explosion of light. Soldiers and knights were likely on their way.

“You all right, Sarah?” Shannon asked, sitting beside her on the rubble.

“Yeah, somehow. Thank you, Shannon. How are you?”

“I’m fine. I’m immortal, after all.”

“That’s true.” They both giggled. Sarah’s expression was dark, however, and she murmured, “I guess, in the end, everything I did was for nothing.”

Shannon wanted to tell her that that wasn’t true—that it wasn’t her fault that

Victor had taken advantage of her—but the things she'd done couldn't be erased. Sarah's quickest route to recovery involved accepting that.

"I wonder if my mom will die," Sarah murmured.

"It's a rare disease, right? One where she gets weaker and weaker?"

"Yes." Sarah looked like she was holding back tears. "She used to be really healthy. Now she can't water the flowers in her garden or cook her favorite foods..."

Sarah's wish had been smashed to pieces, and her heart was broken, but Shannon had a hunch. The symptoms Sarah described reminded her of a certain little girl and doctor. There was no reason to hang on to what the doctor had given her for some future occasion; it was best to give it to someone who needed it here and now.

"Hey, Sarah. I want you to have something."

"What is it?"

Shannon waved her wand, opening her sorcerous space, and Sarah gasped.

"Wh-What is that? That's incredible... Ha ha, old magic is so cool."

Shannon reached her hand inside and stuck out her tongue as she groped around. "Hmm, I think it was around here... Oh, there it is! Yeah!" She pulled out a small vial of transparent liquid and handed it to Sarah.

"What's this?" Sarah held the vial up to the sun, looking at how the light passed through it.

"A doctor named Glim, who I met in Eldoa, made this. It's the cure for saluena."

"Saluena... W-Wait, what?! Th-That's what my mother has!"

Shannon nodded. "I had a feeling. I can guarantee that this is safe for her to consume. I'm the one we experimented on to develop it."

"You experimented on yourself?" Sarah laughed, and the tense look on her face vanished, leaving behind the gentle aura she'd had when she and Shannon first met. "That really is something only you can do."

“Yep, because I’m immortal. You weren’t wrong to bring me here. Yeah, things didn’t go as Victor had planned, but because of my journey, I was able to help you. Thank you for that.”

“I’m the one who should be thanking you.” Sarah bowed her head deeply. Tears flowed down her cheeks again, but this time, her eyes were filled with happiness. She squeezed Shannon’s hands. “Truly, thank you.”

After a short while, Shannon recovered her bag and robe from the pile of rubble and started preparing to head out.

“Are you leaving already, Shannon?”

“Yeah. Victor wasn’t the one I was looking for, so I’m off on the next step in my journey to find a way to die.”

“I see. So that means we won’t see each other again?”

“Who knows? But if we do, then the next time we meet, you won’t be a greenhorn anymore. I’m looking forward to hearing about how you’ve grown.”

She grinned broadly, and Sarah smiled back. “I want to thank you somehow, but I don’t have anything on me at all.”

“Oh, it’s fine. I didn’t have any use for the medicine anyway.”

“But—”

“Fine, fine. If you really want to pay me back, then think of a way to kill an immortal being.”

Sarah’s eyes spun and her body swayed. “But how can I think up a way to kill a person I owe so much to? Isn’t that like psychological torture?”

“Don’t worry about it! Finding a way to kill me would just be repaying the favor. So one day, come find me and kill me, ’kay?”

The conversation had turned so absurd that Sarah had to laugh. “Okay, I’ll study up on a way to kill you.”

“Yay! Please and thank you!”

Just then, they heard the thudding of horse hooves from the forest. From the sound of it, there was more than one horse headed their way.

“Uh-oh, they got here fast. I’ll head out now,” Shannon said. “I can’t really explain things to them. Can I leave it to you?”

“Of course. Bye, Shannon. I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

“Let’s! We didn’t know each other long, but I had fun!”

Shannon grabbed her bag and dashed off into the woods, and Sarah watched as she disappeared.

Epilogue

White clouds swam across the tranquil blue sky, making their way across Shannon's field of vision. She lay in a wagon bed, gazing up at them on her leisurely trip east.

"The weather's nice," she said absently.

"You're right about that," the coachman replied. He probably had no inkling that the girl riding in the back of his wagon was searching for a way to die.

Her only hope lay in Orlando, the man who knew more than anyone about immortality, but he wasn't going to make it easy to find him. Ironically, eternal life gave her all the time in the world to seek death. For her, immortality was an eternal, uncertain prison, and death was the light at the end of her tunnel. That was why, once again, she was following death's trail and sticking her nose into trouble. She would meet any unexpected events head-on in her hunt for her own end.

After all, Shannon wanted to die.

Shannon's robe flapped in the breeze, and her golden hair rustled. She inhaled a deep breath of peaceful air and let out a satisfied sigh. It was a beautiful day. The perfect day to die.



Afterword

To everyone who picked up this book: Thank you. This is Ao Satsuki.

Maybe it's strange for me to admit this, but I long for immortality. I yearn for it. I want eternal life, if only it were possible. I wouldn't even mind becoming a cyborg.

For a long time, I've had the vague sense that I wanted to write a story about an immortal, traveling person. I never wrote it, so it sort of slept in the depths of my memory. But finally, I had the chance to pull the idea back out and turn it into a book. Thank you to everyone!

The protagonist of this story is Shannon, a mage. Ever since an incident in her past that gave her eternal life, she's been on a journey. She can be cut down, set on fire, or crushed, but she won't die, and she remains a teenage girl for eternity. She is truly immortal and forever young.

At first glance, she seems to be perfect, but she butts into all sorts of situations and events. "This is where I'll die!" she declares, eyes sparkling as she charges ahead, determined to meet her end. Hence *Shannon Wants to Die!*

There are ordinary people who, unaware of her goal, rely on her, help her, and deceive her. No journey like hers could be free of surprises and mishaps. How will the immortal Shannon act, and how will she face her death? I hope you enjoy reading about Shannon on her travels.

Many people helped me in writing this work. To everyone in the editorial department at Sneaker Bunko, the proofreaders, and the designers; to falmaro-sensei, the illustrator who brought this world to life so wonderfully with their art; and to my editor, who supported me in so many ways: Thank you so much.

I am especially grateful to everyone who has picked up a copy of this book. Seeing the book take shape and reach you all is deeply moving to me. I would be very happy if even one person thought, "Wow, I really like Shannon."

I hope to see you in my next afterword. Until then, goodbye.

Ao Satsuki

Illustration:
falmaro

Shannon Wants to Die!

Eaten by a Dragon

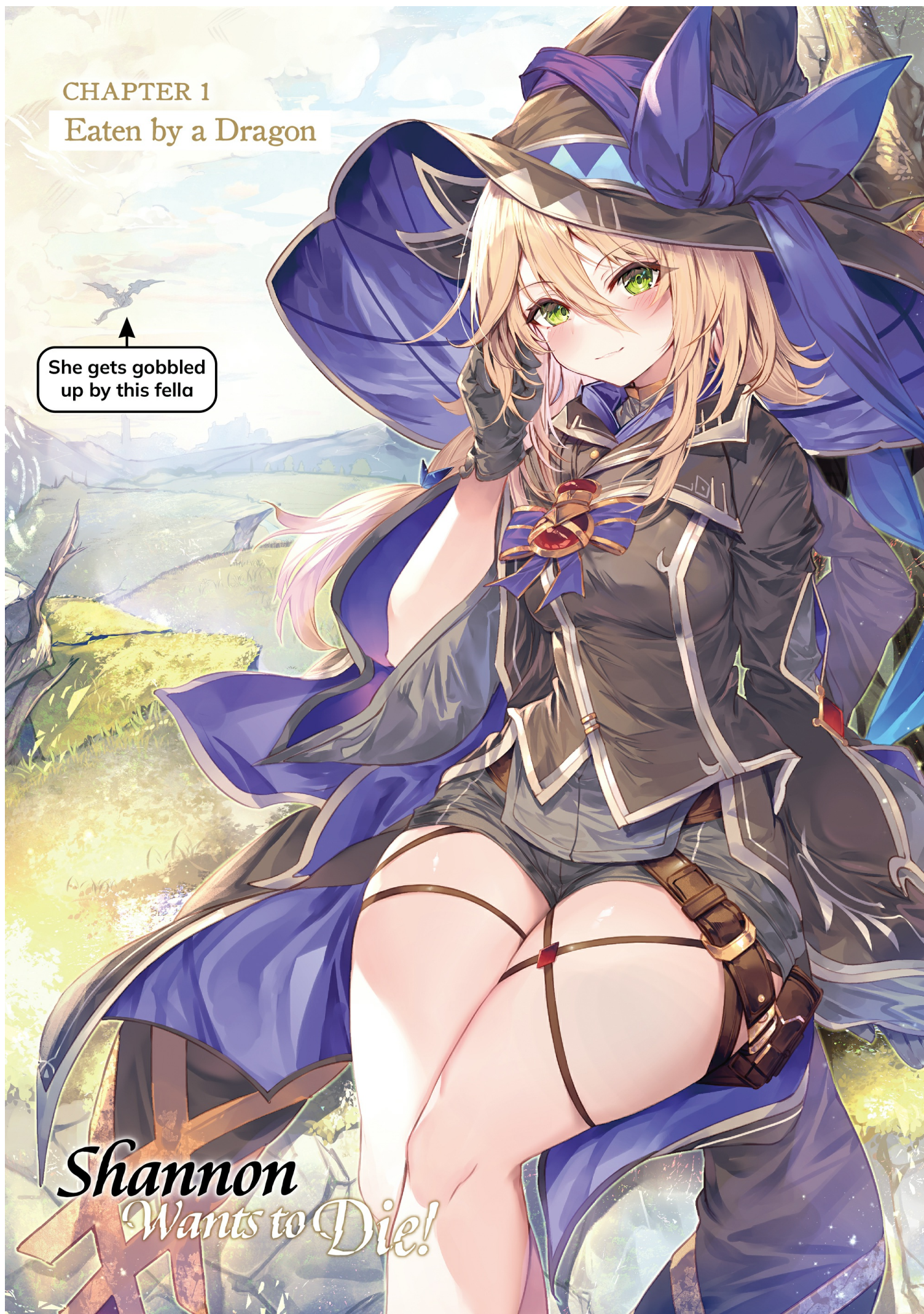


CHAPTER 1

Eaten by a Dragon

She gets gobbled
up by this fella

*Shannon
Wants to Die!*



CHAPTER 2
Overdosing

This here is deadly poison →



CHAPTER 3

Death by Dungeon Trap





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by Ao Satsuki

Translated by Olivia Plowman Edited by Max Machiavelli

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2025