

Broccoli Lion

Illustrator: sime

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The Great Cleric

White-Collar Survival

in Another World

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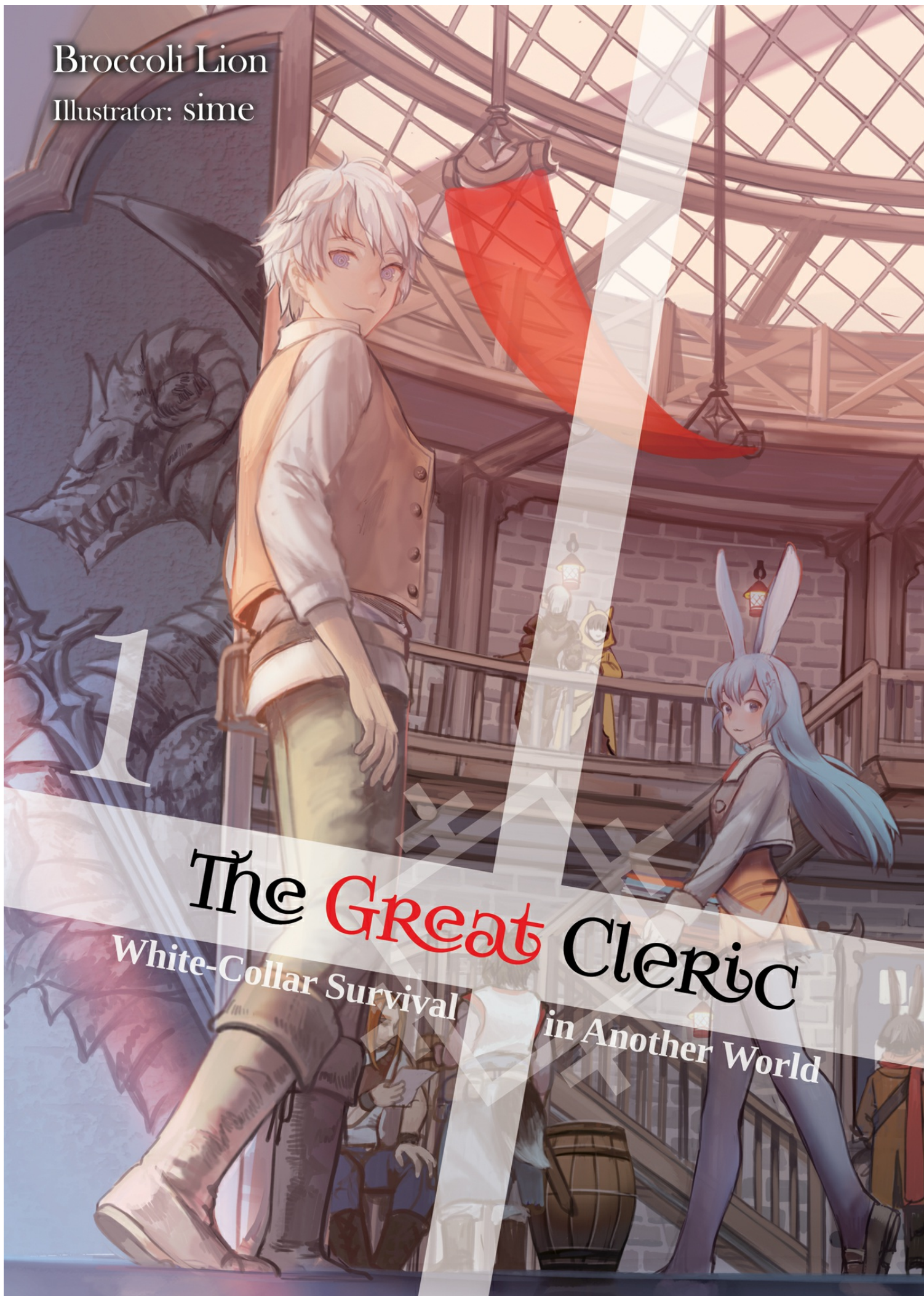
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Prologue

Beyond the towering buildings stretched the vast blue sky. When was the last time I'd taken the time to stop and just look up like this? No sooner had those thoughts crossed my mind than searing heat shot through the left side of my chest. I pushed against it with a trembling hand, but the pain did not fade. The warmth of my body proved that I yet lived. However, time did not flinch and my vision started to dim. The world around me faded.

But I had no intention of accepting this reality.

People grow by creating and surpassing their aspirations. Someone in the past once taught me the words that now rang in my head.

"My goal...is right there... I'm so...close... I'm not about to let a little...bad luck...make me throw in the towel!" I shouted. The burning in my chest began to dissipate.

"I'm not dying...not here... Not until...I get that promotion..."

My sight was still clouded, but surely the pain disappearing meant I would make it. The sky remained an unfocused blur, but that was fine. I was sure of it. It was dire times like these when you needed to smile and push through. That was how I'd made it through life thus far, and that was how I'd keep going now.

I steeled myself and rose up. At that very same moment, my consciousness left me.

When my awareness returned, I found myself in an immaculate white room. Amidst my confusion, a single word surfaced in the back of my mind.

Reincarnation.

Many of the light novels I'd often read as a student bore a striking resemblance to my current situation. Any normal person would fail to make the connection, but I couldn't stop the otaku-ness I'd sealed away after becoming an adult from seeping out. Still, reincarnation would mean I was dead. It sure

didn't feel like it, though. In an attempt to find answers, I thought back on the day's events.

I was in charge of office solutions for a modestly sized company, or, to put it another way, a businessman primarily dealing in office automation equipment. The sweat and tears I'd poured into my job since my late twenties were finally starting to bear fruit right as I entered into my thirties.

"Man, you've been on a roll lately. One more push and the target's met, then that 'assistant' chain's off your ankles. I'll be honest, I didn't think you'd make it. All you do is help out the grunts with their own numbers," the chief director called out to me.

"Oh, hello, director. Actually, I've just struck a new deal with a client. I hope I can look forward to drinks if I get that promotion," I replied.

"You know my wallet's on a leash and you're still gonna squeeze me dry, huh? Ahh, whatever. Get going."

"Yes, sir."

The director's wife was an intense woman, but we were once coworkers, so any time he went drinking he'd always call me up.

I waited for the elevator, beaming brighter than the sun. As long as the delivery on this contract happened within the month, my promotion was secure. And this one was big for two reasons.

The first was because I would be able to reach the level of a certain someone. Though our departments differed, there was a colleague I was chasing after. Ever since joining the company, my goal had been to catch up to and surpass this person.

The second reason was that I could then confess my feelings to the woman who had held me up when I lost sight of that. Our friendship spurred me on. Her smile kept me going when I had lost my ambition, so I decided I would tell her how I felt if I should make it up the ladder.

And I had finally made it. I was so close to my goal.

"About the delivery, sir, it should be here next Wednesday. Thank you again

for working with us.”

“Likewise. Oh, before you go, you’ll be here the day of the delivery, right?” the president asked, our long acquaintance clear from his friendly demeanor. We went way back to my newbie days and I owed him a lot.

“Of course,” I answered with a smile and a nod. My promotion was thanks to him, after all, so naturally I would be there.

“All right, then could you get in touch with me before you come next week?”

“Will do. You’ll hear from me next Wednesday.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you then.”

Our conversation over with, I left his office.

“Yes! That’s this month’s quota! That promotion’s as good as mine!” I whispered excitedly to myself.

Finally, with my personal target met, it was within my grasp. I was on my way from assistant manager to full-on manager and I knew just the person to share that happiness with. If you’d told me to skip down the corridor, I would’ve obliged right then and there, no questions asked, regardless of the curious eyes around me. Unlike the descending elevator, my mood stayed high as the sky. When I got off, halfway to the exit I noticed my shoelaces had come loose.

“These things just won’t cooperate,” I mumbled as I leaned over to retie them.

Ahh, I can’t wait to get back to the office and celebrate with everyone.

Despite that wish of mine, I started off towards my next negotiation and left the building. Then it happened. A dry *bang* rattled my eardrums.

“Whoa!”

Whether by reflex or out of shock, my knees gave out and I crumpled to the ground.

“What, am I that much of a scaredy-cat?” I groaned, forcing a smile. A sharp heat pierced the left side of my chest. “Come on, I don’t even smoke. My heart can handle a little jump scare, can’t it?”

My chest ached, but more importantly, I was in public. I had to keep up appearances at least a little bit, so I needed to get away from there.

“Man, my pants have got to be ruined now,” I muttered. I tried to stand, but my legs refused to work. “Did I slip a disk? It doesn’t feel like I did, at least.”

The sound of my own breathing filled my ears to an unusual degree. I looked around.

“Someone call an ambulance!” I heard a voice scream.

What? That sound couldn’t have been... Ah, I knew it. It was a gun, wasn’t it?

Finally, my situation became clear to me. Along with this revelation came a growing chill in my body.

“I’ve worked hard to move up in the world. I’m not dying in a place like this!” I roused my spirit and looked up. Beyond the towering buildings stretched the vast blue sky.

My chest burned, the world dimmed, yet I had no intention of accepting this reality.

“People grow by creating and surpassing their aspirations. Isn’t that right, sir? I’m going to live. I’m going to live and keep rising higher!”

The churning heat in my body suddenly turned cold and the pain vanished.

I’ve made my decision. I’m going to live, make my way to you, and surpass you...

“I sure acted tough, but so much for not dying. I *am* dead, right?” I said to myself. “I just woke up in this white room, so...I’m dead, aren’t I?” Each time I repeated it, I felt my heart grow heavier.

I couldn’t just sit around feeling sorry for myself, though. I set about taking stock of the situation. The first thing I noticed was my clothing. In place of my suit, I had on some stiff, unfamiliar outfit from a bygone era. My gunshot wound, too, was gone. Various thoughts flooded my mind, but I rejected each one in search of other possibilities. The gears in my head kept turning in spite of my mental disarray. Where was I? What was this place? Who put these clothes

on me? Answers soon came in the form of a disembodied voice, echoing inside my head.

“Oh, unfortunate soul. Allow me to reincarnate you.”

“Could you just return me to my original world instead?” I asked.

“I cannot return you to a body that is already deceased.”

“Then...where am I being reincarnated to?” I prayed it would be somewhere safe.

“A planet known as Galdardia. A world of land and sea, much like Earth.”

“Can I assume it’s the same kind of world?” I probed. If its civilization was on a similar level to that of Earth, chances were there could be somewhere as safe as Japan, or maybe even safer. Reality, however, was never fair and the voice’s answer came as no surprise.

“It is a world of magic and beasts.”

Magic and beasts? That would make it downright fantastical. “That’s certainly a common setting in Japan. You see it in novels, anime, and games, so I’ve been familiar with the concept of such worlds for a while,” I thought aloud. “I even wanted to see one for myself when I was younger, but I’m getting up there in years now. I’m not sure I would enjoy an adventure at my age.”

“Oh, unfortunate soul. I do not care for your yammerings. I have nine other souls in a similar situation to attend to, so if you insist on quibbling, I will pitch you into your new world without any preparation whatsoever. If you would rather I did not, be quiet and listen,” the voice threatened in a monotonous, inorganic tone.

“I’m very sorry. Please continue.” I lowered my head in apology.

Very much surprised that God (assuming that was who he was) would intimidate me like that, I shifted my focus to considering how I might survive in another world and nothing more.

“Oh, unfortunate soul. This world I send you to is as you envision. I will meddle not in your affairs. Should you wish to live, recite in your mind, ‘status open.’”

I obeyed the voice. *Status open.*

A hologram appeared out of nowhere.

Name: Unspecified

Job: Unspecified

Age: 15

Level: 1

HP (Health Points): 200 — MP (Magic Points): 50

STR (Strength): 20 — VIT (Vitality): 20

DEX (Dexterity): 20 — AGI (Agility): 20

INT (Intelligence): 20 — MGI (Magic): 20

RMG (Resistance to Magic): 20 — SP (Skill Points): 100

SKILLS

None

TITLES

None

“It’s like some kind of game,” I chuckled dryly.

The hologram listed what appeared to be my own attributes, as if I’d been plunged into a video game or anime reality. Fear filled me more than happiness or excitement. Surviving in a fantasy world with no such thing as a respawn would undoubtedly not be a walk in the park.

“This sure is fantasy, all right...” I mused. “Wait, what? The age listed is so young! Is that on the house?” For now, I needed information above anything else. “At least I can keep thinking forward. I learned that much from being a businessman.”

I pulled myself together, determined to push through this wild situation.

“Your time limit is one hour. Your race and age have been set. The rest is for you to decide. You will have no family name, only a first name,” echoed the voice. *“Soon, I will provide foundational knowledge of the world of Galdardia to you. In one hour’s time, you will be reincarnated. Oh, unfortunate soul, I pray your next life is one of better fortune.”*

A ping went off inside my head, followed by a new, mechanical announcement.

Obtained Protection of the God of Fate (increased SP)

“Oh, thank yooooAAAAAGGGHHH!”

The instant I attempted to offer my thanks, a flood of information beyond the limits of what my mind could handle surged through every synapse of my brain. Unimaginable pain gouged my head, like a club had been brought down on it. According to the clock on the status screen, this sensation lasted for less than a minute, contrary to how my senses interpreted it. Fifty-nine minutes and seven seconds remained.

I gasped for air and grabbed my head. “Ugh, that was some serious agony just now...”

After the dull ache subsided, a kind of stinging feeling came, as if my brain were being forcefully poked and dug around in.

“And now I have that ‘foundational knowledge,’ do I? It still hurts, but I don’t have much time, so let’s make some progress here,” I remarked to no one in particular.

The knowledge I had obtained included the countries of Galdardia, its races, the common language, alphabet, and currency.

I took a deep breath, calmed my nerves, and looked at the holographic window to find it was now in the form of a character creation screen.

“This is *definitely* inspired by games and anime,” I muttered as I proceeded with the creation process. And wouldn’t you know it, just like a game, you could alter your physical appearance. My current avatar looked European, with chiseled features, brown hair, and green eyes.

“Now for my name...which I can’t remember? Why is that?”

The answer to my question wouldn’t appear out of thin air, so I ultimately went with a name I had frequently used for video games in the past: Luciel. It didn’t seem like it would sound too out of place there, either. Then I tacked on an extra ten centimeters to my height, bringing me up to one hundred eighty centimeters, and changed my hair to silver, and my eyes to a pale purple. If my new knowledge was to be trusted, these weren’t particularly rare colors in Galdardia. Maybe a little edgy, I thought, but they looked good together, so I didn’t mind.

Fifty-three minutes remained.

I would have liked to know more about commodity values or local products, but I had to at least be grateful that I could speak, read, and write the local language. Life would likely be hard starting out, but fifteen was the age of maturity, so I would probably be able to quickly find work and, eventually, a peaceful living. Assuming this wasn’t all a dream, that is.

“Ouch, looks like the place I’m sent to is random. A field, a forest, a labyrinth, or somewhere near a town. Comes down to luck, huh?” I sat down and contemplated the skills I’d need to get by in such a place. “So, some skills have levels and some don’t. The ones that do have levels also have a cap. You get them either with skill points or through hard work.”

The skill list was massive and some of the more unpredictable ones relied heavily on luck. The categories were Attack, Defense, Magic, Support, Production, Lifestyle, Research, and Taming. Unfortunately, my perusing found no search bar of any kind. I would have to look things up the old fashioned way.

Luck came to mind first, and not just for gambling. If you wanted to snag clients at work, you needed luck, not just smooth-talking. Without it, you could even end up getting shot and having your life cut short like mine was. With that in mind, I began to calculate the SP costs of the more useful-sounding skills. From the Support category, I selected Attributes, and from there, Luck, which then displayed the following skills: Good Luck, Strong Luck, Super Luck, Monster Luck, Fiendish Luck, Supreme Luck, and Divine Luck. Both Supreme Luck and Divine Luck were out of the question at one hundred and five hundred SP,

respectively. For the time being, I went with Strong Luck for ten SP.

Next, magic. A life in another world without being able to use magic meant a life of backbreaking work somewhere without labor laws. Only a fictional protagonist or combat expert of some kind could make headway living like that.

I chose Affinities from the Magic section and found nine options: Light, Holy, Fire, Water, Wind, Earth, Thunder, Darkness, and Spacetime. Fire, Water, Wind, and Earth cost ten SP a piece, Holy was twenty, Thunder thirty, Light and Darkness fifty, and Spacetime one hundred. On top of that, there seemed to be other skills that were necessary to properly utilize the magic. Another subcategory called Casting listed Short Cast, Null Cast, Free Casting, and Magic Circle Casting. To my consternation, however, the SP I'd been afforded wasn't enough to acquire them all.

I decided on the Holy Affinity, given its propensity to be connected to healing and support magic. With enough practice and experience, my abilities just might be of enough use to someone to land me a safe position. So that was twenty more of my SP spent. Null Cast at twenty SP and both Free Casting and Magic Circle Casting at thirty would eat up a hundred points all together.

As far as other skills went, Lifestyle included things like Cooking, while Production offered Blacksmithing and other such conventional abilities. Attack skills similarly lacked anything particularly eye-catching. There was one major pitfall, though—there was no guarantee you would start out with a weapon, even if you chose the appropriate skill. Wherever you began, the Swordsmanship skill would mean nothing without the all-important sword itself. Therefore, I chose the safest option, Martial Arts, for five SP.

Whoever was dumb enough to sit in this white room picking up nothing but combat skills to boost their abilities... Well, I couldn't see them lasting very long. I searched for cheat skills like skill thieving or copying, but none popped out to me.

And so, after much deliberation and agonizing, I had my starting skills: Assess Mastery for twenty SP, Martial Arts for five SP, Monster Luck for fifty SP, Magic Affinity: Holy for twenty SP, and Magic Control for five SP.

Assess Mastery would allow me to find efficient methods of training, Martial

Arts would let me defend myself without having to rely on a weapon, and I had bumped Strong Luck up to Monster Luck after concluding that I could use a bit more of it, given the circumstances. I selected Magic Affinity: Holy and Magic Control based on their descriptions.

Eighteen minutes now remained.

While I scanned everything once again just in case, a job selector button drew my gaze. When I pressed it, a whole new screen appeared.

“Please select a job,” it read, followed by all kinds of options.

“Oh, you’ve got to choose this stuff yourself, too! Talk about a trap... Good thing I looked it over one more time.”

I took a deep breath and examined the available jobs. From swordsman, mage, healer, thief, merchant, and many others, I chose healer. Swordsman or mage may have been a better choice, but healer seemed like the safer bet to me, in case mages couldn’t learn recovery magic, or there was no magic in general for swordsmen.

Nine minutes and forty-two seconds remained.

Before finishing up, I examined all of my skills once more and memorized a few others that I might be able to work towards later, for future reference. With over three minutes to spare, I hit “Finish,” and a split-second later I stood in a grass field with three silver pieces in my hand.

“Time is money, even for the dead, huh?” I sighed at the sky, reflecting on my skills and how my remaining time must have correlated to the money in my hand.

Grassy plains blanketed everything as far as the eye could see. I surveyed the area and spotted what looked to be the walls of a city in the distance. The size of it must have been quite impressive, given how big it looked from this far away. After a deep breath to slow my churning thoughts, and with relief in my heart at the sight of civilization, I warily took my first step forward.

✱

“That makes ten souls. My end of the promise is kept.”

“It would certainly be interesting if this shakes things up down there, even if only slightly.”

“All were banal to the last. Those without an exceptional aptitude to adapt will meet only hardship.”

“Well, neither of us can meddle, so I’ll simply be watching from the sidelines. If they die, how about another bet? Let’s barter, shall we?”

“If the humor takes me. Farewell.”

One light faded.

“Ahhh, I hope something comes of it this time.”

So, too, did the other.

The God of Fate, upon losing a bet, had offered up ten middling souls, all strangers to peril, to the ruling deity of another realm, including the man who had just been reborn. And upon this one soul alone, the first of the ten, did that god bestow his protection.

The man who became Luciel had been destined to die, yet his unwavering strength of will to defy such an end had stayed the reaper’s hand as he clung to his world for a single minute longer. Thus, fortune had determined his place among the ten and driven the God of Fate to confer his personal protection on him. Assured that he would be the one to preside over Luciel’s destiny, the souls were granted. What this would bring about, neither god could say.

And with that, Luciel of Earth and the nine other souls were reborn into the world of Galdardia.

Name: Luciel

Job: Healer

Age: 15

Level: 1

HP: 200 — MP: 50

STR: 20 — VIT: 20

DEX: 20 — AGI: 20

INT: 20 — MGI: 20

RMG: 20 — SP: 0

Magic Affinity: Holy

SKILLS

Assess Mastery I — Monster Luck I

Martial Arts I — Magic Control I

TITLES

Shaper of Destiny (all stats +10)

Protection of the God of Fate (increased SP)

Chapter 1: To the Healer's and Adventurer's Guilds

01 — The Healer's Guild

On and on I walked towards the city. Unlike in my original world, the weather here was warm and springlike.

“It’s a good thing it’s not sweltering or freezing,” I muttered on the way. “Now as long as the salt and water don’t make me sick, I think I should be a little safer.”

All the walking from my job had conditioned me pretty well, so I wasn’t worried about tiring myself out so much as getting a blister from these unfamiliar boots, but everything seemed okay. After several minutes, my initial tension died down and I began repeating my new name under my breath with each step. That way, when the time came for me to introduce myself, I’d manage without stuttering. It was actually surprisingly important to practice. New employees would often do the same for their company name, position, and phone number.

“I am Luciel. Luciel. Luciel...” I decided to recite it until the word no longer made sense to my ears.

“I figured it was a good distance to town, but *wow* is it far away... I’ve been walking for over thirty minutes!”

I’d been through my name and dozens of introductions more times than I could count, but the city barely looked any closer, despite my previous judgment that it’d be about a half-hour walk. As if I could do anything about it but complain. With no source of water to quench my dry throat and a curse at my own carelessness for good measure, I single-mindedly continued treading along.

But this world was not so kind. Some beast-like creature in the sky, which had been far in the distance for some time now, flew into my vision. Imagining myself going toe-to-toe with such a thing conjured images of my life instantly ending inside its belly.

The urge to grumble about the absurdity of being sent to another world without a sword grew stronger. They didn't even have the decency to leave anything lying around, either. "In Another World Without a Weapon" was *not* a story I was interested in.

My current defenses? Oh, they were nothing much. Just two rocks I had picked up earlier that looked like they'd be easy to throw.

"How am I going to survive in this place?!" I groaned. Then, "Whoa!"

Right as my little monologue ended, I encountered my first monster—or rather, its corpse. A kind of canine creature that you'd see in just about any fantasy story. It didn't look like magic had done it in or that it had been cut down, either. It was simply beaten to a pulp. The merciless sight made me profoundly aware of just how peaceful a country like Japan was. Before my spirit could falter, I resumed my trek.

No cheats, no courage. I was no protagonist. I would lose to an ordinary goblin, and a loss in this world meant death, putting my second shot at life to waste. So, my primary objective was decided: die of old age, no matter what. *Survive*. In this, I was determined.

After another long hour of exhausting walking, the city walls became distinctly visible, as well as a number of people standing around the gates. Relieved to finally make human contact, I picked up my pace. As I approached, the beautiful craftsmanship of the stonework caught my eye.

"Those are some impressive walls," I commented. "If the outside's this fancy, that gives me some hope for the inside. Almost makes me excited to see streets that aren't filled with urine and feces."

When I finally arrived, I caught glimpses of other folks, although only a few, entering and leaving after presenting something to the guards. Presumably, some form of identification was needed for entry, but I just prayed to God that things would work out and waited for my turn.

"Present identification," ordered the spear-wielding sentry.

Relief that I was actually able to understand him washed over me as I sized him up. He was a bit shorter than me, but his arms were the size of my own

three times over. Those suckers would knock someone out in one hit flat. The spear, too, seemed a tad lethal. Freshly aware of the dangers of this world, I chose my next words carefully so as not to come under suspicion.

“I’m very sorry, but I have nothing to identify myself with.”

“What?” His spear hand clenched, or so I sensed.

I hurried to provide an explanation. “I grew up in a small village, you see. I became a healer at my coming-of-age ceremony, but they drove me out because I wouldn’t be of any use... I was hoping I might be able to find work at a clinic, if possible.”

“You’re a healer, you say? Wait there a moment.” The sentry not only loosened his grip on the spear but actually entertained my story and disappeared into the city.

I hoped I hadn’t said something wrong. Though I had used my new knowledge to the best of my ability, I might very well have dug my own grave just then. What if this country didn’t welcome healers?

As anxiety began to grip me and thoughts of running away entered my head, the guard returned with a girl cloaked in white. Almost translucently golden hair fell to her shoulders and her eyes, azure as the ocean, seemed to engulf all she laid them on.

She was stunning. Her appearance was beautiful, of course, but her dignified bearing, too, utterly struck me.

“You’re the one seeking a healing clinic, are you?” she inquired with a smile.

“Yes,” I answered, my words flowing smoothly despite my dry throat. The fruits of all that practice, I suppose. “At my coming-of-age ceremony, I found an affinity for Holy Magic and became a healer. I came here from my village looking for a job.”

None of this was a lie, other than the ceremony part, so I told myself there should be no problem.

“Very well. The Healer’s Guild can issue your identification. Follow me.” She promptly turned on her heel and set off.

“Um, what about the toll?” I asked, perplexed by the girl’s complete lack of explanation.

“Hey, you better get on after her, kid,” urged the guard. “We take no tolls from healers, so don’t sweat it.”

“Oh, really? Uh, thank you, then.”

“Work hard and be a good healer, son.”

I bowed to the guard and looked up to see that the girl was over ten meters ahead already.

“Is she doing that on purpose or did she just not notice? Maybe that’s just how people are in this world? Could be she’s an airhead, too, though.”

Running after her to catch up turned out to be a bad idea. I crashed into something hard and flew backwards. When I got a look at who I’d bumped into, I noticed that they appeared to be adventurers, and strong ones, too. Much stronger than the sentries at the gate.

“Ay, watch where you’re going, will ya?!” His deep voice pierced me like a dagger and turned my blood to ice with that single warning alone.

“Y-Yessir!”

“Where’re you rushin’ off to like that?”

“Um, the Healer’s Guild. I’m fresh out of my home village, so I was going to go get my identification made.”

The man clicked his tongue in annoyance. “You a healer, huh?”

“I’m sorry.”

“The hell’re you apologizin’ for?” he snapped.

Please just let me pass. I really don’t want to get mixed up with this group.

The idea of calling the girl for help crossed my mind, but I scrapped it. My male pride aside, I felt like I’d be putting something else on the line. Something...important.

“I can’t use magic yet, so maybe ‘healer’ is a little misleading,” I faltered.

“You better not end up a money-grubber, got it?”

“Money-grubber?” Did he mean, like, a dishonest healer? If so, I wanted to clarify that there was nothing to worry about in that regard. As it happened, I very much lacked the guts for such a thing. “O-Of course. Kindness is my motto. I aim to become a good-hearted healer, trusted by all,” I assured him.

“Good. Come on, we’re going.” The adventurers shot a glance at me, then made for the gate.

“Oof. I thought I was done for...”

“A little quarrel never killed anyone.”

I turned towards the voice and came face to face with the girl who had seemed leagues ahead of me just a moment before.

“Uh... Weren’t you way over there?”

“I was. But I saw you were in a bit of a bind, so I came back. Naturally, if they had laid a hand on you, I was fully prepared to engage them.”

Her extraordinarily casual demeanor spoke to just how strong she must be. I clasped her offered hand, pulled myself up, and we set off again, this time at a gentler pace. Complete silence would have driven me mad, though, so I fired off some simple questions.

“When I entered the city, they didn’t take a toll. Is that true for all healers?”

“Only the Empire requires tolls of its healers. It is a vital job that deals in and manipulates life and death, so its practitioners are treated with care here,” she explained with a smile.

“It seems being a healer has its perks, then.”

“Indeed it does. Although part of that favorable treatment is because this country, the Republic of Saint Shurule, operates and runs the Healer’s Guild.”

I must have won the lottery. That alone made taking the Monster Luck skill well worth it. With gratitude to both God and my past self burning in my heart, we continued towards the guild office. My sudden encounter with adventurers had made me tense to the point where I couldn’t quite take in my surroundings, but my chat with her certainly helped to loosen me up.

Beautiful stone roads stretched throughout the city, with no bodily fluids in sight. The buildings reminded me of medieval Europe. I would have liked to take my time and observe everything more closely, but that would've been rude to my guide.

Eventually, she stopped us in front of a large building.

“This is the Church of Saint Shurule’s Merratoni branch of the Healer’s Guild.” She stepped inside, then turned back to me.



I started to open my mouth to ask her why she'd stopped.

"Welcome to the Healer's Guild," she beamed.

"Thank you very much," I replied, her cute mannerisms causing my voice to falter. As awkward as it was for me to admit, at that moment, for the first time, her kindness made me glad to have been reincarnated.

"Miss Lumina, is something the matter?" A voice came from a desk in the back that looked to be used for reception purposes. Its owner was an alluringly gorgeous woman of about twenty, if I had to guess.

"This boy became a healer at his coming-of-age ceremony, but he has no identification. I found him in distress and brought him to the guild."

"His coming-of-age ceremony? Miss Lumina, if you'd only told us, an employee could have gone to meet him at the gate."

"Oh, it was hardly an ordeal. I was nearby at the time. Would you mind preparing his identification?"

"Not at all. Allow me to welcome you again to the Healer's Guild, young man. If you could just fill out a few things for me here..." She handed me some parchment.

"Oh, sure." But I had caught little of what the stunning receptionist said to me. More than the unfamiliar touch of parchment, the girl who had escorted me there occupied my mind. She looked so young, but the way the receptionist treated her made her out to be quite high-ranking indeed.

"Can you not write?" The receptionist hesitated, noticing that I had frozen up. Concern crossed her face.

"Er, no, I mean, yes, I can."

I finally looked down at the paper. There were sections for name, race, age, and birthplace waiting to be filled in. I wrote in everything but the birthplace, given I had no idea about the names of any villages in this world. Considering such villagers likely weren't well-traveled, if I filled it in with nonsense, I'd be busted in no time once someone actually looked into it. For the sake of building good relations, it would be better for me to play the ignorant fool.

“So, about the birthplace,” I said with my most innocent face, “would just putting ‘village’ be okay? I didn’t know villages actually had names.”

“You... Ahem, well, if you’re unsure, that will do just fine.”

For a brief moment, her face had betrayed her heart. And it had demanded to know what the hell I’d just said. It was for only a split second, though, so I could have imagined it. Her current beaming smile certainly made me inclined to think as much.

Once I finished filling everything out, the receptionist disappeared into the back room with the parchment.

“At home, we got by just calling it...well, ‘village.’ Does this town have a name other than ‘town’?” I smiled at the girl called Miss Lumina.

“You’re certainly quite the ignoramus,” she sighed. “This is a city in the Republic of Saint Shurule known as Merratoni.” She did not hide the coldness in her gaze, which did nothing to help the trembling in my boots.

“I’ll be sure to study up,” I promised in apology, along with a bow.

“That would be best.” A moment later, her expression softened. Ignorant or not, evidently constructive mindsets were thought of highly here.

Some time later, the receptionist returned. “Now instill some of your magic into this, if you please,” she said as she held out a card to me.

Thank goodness I had taken the Magic Control skill. If I just centered my focus, it should come to me.

I closed my eyes and let the energy—or magic, as it were—within me flow into the card. It seemed to work, as the parchment began to reveal words.

Healer’s Guild - Merratoni Branch

Luciel, G Rank Healer

“Your card, please.”

She took the card, then withdrew to the back again. Her constant disappearances felt strange to me, so I decided to ask Miss Lumina about it.

“What is she doing?”

“Registering your card with the guild’s magic network. This allows you to use it at any Healer’s Guild in the world.”

“I see.”

Kind of like data in a server. The workings of such a network piqued my curiosity a little. I did question the usefulness of it in my case, though, since I had no intention of moving around or adventuring.

In the middle of my ruminations, the receptionist came back once again and returned my card. “My apologies for the wait. Rest assured, you are indeed a healer,” she confirmed. “You have both the Holy Affinity and Magic Control.”

Somehow, my skills had been exposed. *By what brutal mechanism?* I wondered.

“Then there are no issues, I take it?”

Miss Lumina’s guidance was done. All’s well that ends well. Except...this was not “all well.” Although I possessed the proper affinity, I lacked the Holy Magic skill, meaning I couldn’t actually use any spells yet. The obstacle this posed for my employment prospects was as clear as the sun in the sky.

Well, I had already embarrassed myself once... What was one more time? “I’m sorry, but I’ve never used Holy Magic before, so I don’t think I can yet,” I confessed.

“You what? What do you mean?” The subtle intensity with which Miss Lumina glared at me taught me something: beautiful girls can still be terrifying.

“Um, is that a problem? I do know of magic grimoires, but we had none in my hometown. And I *was* our first healer, so I’d like to be instructed.”

“Ugh, I nearly forgot. You’re an ignoramus.” She sighed dramatically but seemed to believe my words and her intensity dissipated.

My previous stupid remark really ended up saving my hide. Now if only these pesky tears would stay put...

Surely I could expect the guild to act as an agency for healing clinics, so I hoped they could help to point me in the direction of one.

“Uh, so, now that I’m properly registered, would it be possible for you to

introduce me to a clinic where I might be able to learn while I work?”

“I could—”

“You have three options,” Miss Lumina interrupted the receptionist with a raised hand. “The first, grueling training. The second, go into debt. The third, work. Make your choice.” For some reason, she seemed to be pressuring me to make a decision. Perhaps this was a test.

“Could you please go into more detail for each option?”

“Hm. Your training will consist of rigorous study and casting to the point of magical exhaustion until you learn the art of healing. You will sleep, recover your magic, repeat. Should you go into debt, as there is no specialized education for Holy Magic, you will enter into a general institution and learn magic over the course of your three-year study. However, you will be indebted to the guild in the amount of one platinum piece that must be repaid. Lastly, you may learn Holy Magic during your downtime between menial chores for a year or more.”

The first wouldn’t kill me, but could very well be the most mentally draining. The second was basically a student loan, and I knew those dangers all too well. The third... I couldn’t say whether I would even *have* free time, but assuming the chores were sensible, this option struck me as the most viable.

However, I did have the Assess Mastery skill. As long as I could see my growth directly, no matter how grueling the training, it shouldn’t be *too* mentally taxing. Yeah. In that case, all I needed was the drive and I’d be on my way to an apprenticeship in no time.

I felt a fire spark inside me. “I’ll take the training course. And I’ll see it through to the end.” I bowed again.

I heard a sigh from the receptionist’s direction. She looked away when I raised my head. “I’ll handle things from here, Miss Lumina,” she said. “I’ll set him up with quarters where he’ll drill magic. You, follow me.” She walked out from behind the counter and down some stairs. I didn’t follow right away. Instead, I turned to face Miss Lumina.

“Thank you for everything, Miss Lumina.”

“The ‘Miss’ is unnecessary. Work hard and keep at it. I expect great things from you.”

“And I hope to meet those expectations. My name is Luciel, by the way, and someday I’ll repay you.”

“I hope to see that day. Now, you’d best be off.”

Needless to say, both her commanding presence and that captivating smile on her face would remain etched deep into my memory.

The sleeping-quarters-turned-training-room came with a toilet, albeit one straight out of a historical drama, capped with a lid, and with a pile of some weird, starchy scraps in place of toilet paper. However, it was a toilet nonetheless. The lack of a bath wasn’t surprising, although as a man born and raised in the prosperous nation of Japan, that discovery hurt quite a bit.

Furthermore, the lack of windows made the passage of time nearly impossible to track, even though I could check the clock on my status screen. This was clearly a room of torment. For the average joe like me, learning magic in such an environment would be downright Spartan. But I somehow managed to stifle my grumblings about any potential depression it might cause.

“This is where you’ll study. Read that grimoire and practice your magic,” the receptionist instructed. “We’ll bring you food every morning and evening. When your magic is drained, chances are you won’t be able to stand, so rest in that bed. When you wake up, you’re to get right back to it. Keep at it and don’t stop.” With that, she left.

Several minutes later, a thought occurred to me. “I never asked her name or introduced myself! I didn’t when I met Lumina, either. Come on, me, those are the basics of the basics!” I groaned.

After an appropriate facepalm, I shifted mental gears into hardcore work mode. I picked up the grimoire from the desk and sat down on the bed. Then, I commenced the pep talk.

“It’s all about the effort. Ten days. Ten days and you’ll learn magic. You can do this, Luciel,” I told myself. “Just think about it. There’s no danger, you’ve got

food, no one to bother you; this is the perfect environment for concentrating.”

If I worked hard and things went well here, I could emerge as not just some chore-doer, but a real apprentice, or maybe even a full-fledged healer.

“First, get the basic spells under your belt. Once you do, even a world like this can’t hold you back from a peaceful life.”

With a clear goal and an action plan, I psyched myself up and opened the grimoire.

02 — Promoted to Apprentice

As one would expect, the grimoire enumerated the basics of magical training. The gist was as follows:

Step 1: Perceiving Magic

In order to use magic, a person would first have to be aware of the magical energy within them. If one couldn't do that much, the book spared no shame in demanding that the reader reconsider where their talents truly lie... Harsh.

Step 2: Manipulating Magic

Assuming success in sensing one's magic, learning to move it—in other words, Magic Handling—came next. For many, the text explained, this was a stumbling block, and for some, it took all their magic to simply manage this much, but it encouraged patience and perseverance. Near the end, it explained that master mages could wield the same magic as a beginner at a fifth of the cost. It also instructed one to continue practicing these basics for the rest of one's life.

This made sense, of course. The lower your magic consumption, the more high-level magic you would be able to cast.

Step 3: Controlling Magic

After learning to perceive and manipulate magic came the ability to affect it beyond the body (i.e. Magic Control). Once a person learned this, spells weren't far off, but a level of skill was involved. Without sufficient control, others could interfere with your magic to cause mayhem.

Step 4

"Cast level one spells of your associated affinity," it read.

Casting a spell caused magic to leave the body, evidently, and succeeding in doing so increased your skill level. Those unable to successfully cast a spell after repeated attempts were sent right back to step one.

“If still you do not succeed, your talent is naught, with forfeit being your only option.”

The moment my eyes fell on those words, an intense desire to throw the book across the room welled up inside of me. After all that careful, meticulous explanation, I couldn’t help but expect better than an author who suddenly gave up on people right at the end.

Consideration for others’ respective starting lines likely played little part in the writing of this book, so maybe its lack of mercy for late bloomers made sense, but even so, how ruthless could you be? Some kid could read it and have their confidence utterly crushed, and then what? What’s more, none of its pages explained how to practice the sensing or manipulating of magic in any sort of detail, despite how vital they supposedly were. Still, this grimoire belonged to the guild, so I couldn’t just vent my frustration on it. I calmed myself and moved on to reading some of the points that were unrelated to training.

Magic is a phenomenon brought about by the offering—the casting—of one’s energy to the Galdardian deity Crya, through which a mental image is brought forth in reality.

By implanting said image clearly into one’s magic, one’s control will improve. Additionally, as one’s magical understanding grows, so, too, can one’s casting be abbreviated, or even culled entirely.

“This magical theory reads a lot like religion with all the Galdardia and ‘offering to deities’ talk. Well, God *is* real, clearly, so might as well give it a shot.” I took a deep breath and focused. “Okay, here goes. *Oh, Lord, receive my energy and mend this wound. Heal!*”

I solidified an image of a regenerating wound and chanted the spell with all I had...to no avail. I did feel a sensation like something leaving my body, but no magic was triggered.

“I guess that’s how it goes when you’re not a prodigy or a cheater,” I rationalized to myself.

With a prayer to Assess Mastery, I opened the status screen to verify my lack of progress and found a new skill: Holy Magic 0 at 5/1000.

“Phew, so I’m doing it right. Looks like I just need to do this two hundred more times. At least there’s an end in sight; otherwise, it’d wear me down for sure. Now, let’s test some stuff out...”

This time, I tried casting without a mental image. My mastery increased by exactly zero.

“Yeah, so you’ve definitely got to have the image in your mind.”

Seeing my MP at 40/50 led me to conclude that one Heal would consume five MP.

“I do wonder how much HP the target recovers, but I should get a feel for what this magic exhaustion is first.”

I cast the remaining eight Heals that were left to me, with a proper vision in my head as before. After the final cast, my MP showed a single point remaining from natural recovery, but the exhaustion hit me all the same. Intense dizziness and a splitting headache robbed me of my ability to stand.

Even after I had recovered and was able to stand again, I still couldn’t bring myself to get out of bed. Later, once my headache had faded and I could finally relax, I opened the status screen to check my MP, which now sat at 5/50.

“I can’t keep this up. At this rate, time’s the only thing that’ll be progressing.”

I stared up at the ceiling and thought things over. According to the grimoire, this downtime of fatigue was best used for Magic Handling and Magic Control, but my current state was less than ideal for practicing. I could reasonably assume the enervation started up once I dropped below ten percent of my total magic.

“The higher your Magic Handling and Magic Control, the less magic you eventually end up using, so I think I’ll focus on those for now.”

And so I meditated and began the process of trial-and-error: sensing magic, controlling it, in search of greater recovery methods. How much time passed, I couldn’t say. I tirelessly studied and practiced, over and over, and right when I

was on the verge of magical exhaustion, three knocks came at my door.

“Come in,” I managed to croak.

“Oh, taking a break?” The receptionist entered, looking concerned by my condition and carrying food with her. “Wow, you’re pale as a ghost. Are you okay?”

“Yes, somehow. Also, I’m sorry for not introducing myself earlier. I’m Luciel, and I’m currently experiencing magical fatigue, so please, worry not.”

“You’re awfully diligent for your age,” she laughed. “My name’s Kururu. Here, eating should help you recover some of your magic.” She placed a tray with my meal on the table.

“Thank you for going through the trouble.”

“It’s nothing. Just leave the dishes outside your room when you’re finished. And one more thing, don’t overstrain yourself. We can’t have healers collapsing in our own guild.”

I laughed. “You make a good point. I’ve almost got the hang of this, though, so I’m going to keep it up. With appropriate breaks, of course.”

“Well, you can still speak, so you’ll probably be fine. Make sure you sleep, too, okay? It’ll help you recuperate.”

“Thank you for the advice, Kururu.”

She responded with a giggle, then left the room.

The food she had brought was a flavorless vegetable soup with a side of equally flavorless bread, but it did its job just fine and filled my stomach while doubling as a decent break.

Afterwards, I resumed my training. I toiled away, casting spells without any issues for some time, except once when I accidentally cast one too many. My sapped magic quickly shrank my motivation to nonexistence, so I finally called it quits for the day.

I had no idea how long I’d slept. The unfamiliar ceiling I awoke to reaffirmed the reality that I had been reincarnated, much to my disappointment. But

wallowing never helped anyone. At businessman-like speeds, I reset myself and put my best foot forward towards the task at hand.

“Your life should be gone right now. If you work hard, you could have an even better one than before. Come on, you can do it!” I encouraged myself.

With renewed vigor, I reopened the grimoire, but not before noticing that the room had never dimmed.

“I wonder what keeps this room at a constant level of lighting,” I mumbled. “Maybe the stonework is magic, or there’s some kind of magical tool powering it. I should ask when I get the chance.”

I used the time before breakfast to continue my painstaking training, casting spells right up to the line of exhaustion, then exercising my Magic Control. However, breakfast never came. I checked the time and saw that it was just about sunrise. My rejuvenated youth, it would seem, came bundled with the appropriate appetite. Nevertheless, my training went on.

Though I wasn’t aware of it just then, this second day brought even greater focus. Centering myself on magic in this cramped space felt like it did wonders for my grasp of it all. Suspecting that something inside me had changed, I used Assess Mastery and found all sorts of new skill improvements.

“Wow, those really exploded. Working towards a goal makes it so much more worthwhile. And seeing the results is pretty fulfilling, too.”

Knowing that my efforts, my pains, were actually paying off sent my motivation soaring. People work harder with clear aspirations, as opposed to constant uncertainty over when or whether it will even pay off. It was the same in my past life’s work. And throughout all of this, I made other discoveries as well, like how meditating improves the Meditation, Focus, and Magic Recovery skills.

My time here was a great opportunity to build up as many skills as possible and to test things out along the way. For example, in an attempt to boost Parallel Thinking I tried air drumming and playing rock-paper-scissors with myself, but neither worked. Tongue-twisters would boost Speed Casting, though, so I mentally made note of the most effective outcomes. This cycle of successes and failures fueled my experimentation.

“I’m just a plain old, average guy,” I murmured. “It’s amazing how heroes in stories can overcome just about anything, but as long as I’m in here and my efforts are being rewarded, my spirit will never break.”

My training continued.

“I’ve brought food.”

A new girl carrying my meal arrived in the middle of some stretches I was doing for a change of pace. She was beautiful, with refined chestnut hair that glasses would well suit.

“Oh, thank you.” This did nothing to quell the beating in my chest.

“Of course. Hang in there, okay?”

“Um, could I ask a question?” If ever there was a time, it was now. She tilted her head inquisitively. “So, how many times a day is food brought? There’s no clock in here, and I’d like to have a general handle on the time of day.”

“Twice a day. At six o’clock in the morning and six at night.”

“I see. Would you mind answering any other questions I come up with?”

“Not at all. Feel free to ask any time.” She placed my food on the table before leaving.

“And...of course I forgot to ask her name. But holy cow, is everyone that lives in this world insanely attractive? Not sure how saying that helps me, though, so I’ll just eat my food and stop thinking about all that.”

Tonight would be the same as the last.

That evening, Kururu brought my food again. Then, on the third day before breakfast, my two hundred-something cast of Heal emitted a pale light from my hands. It soon dissipated, but I knew without a doubt that I had successfully managed healing magic.

“Nice! I bet no one expected me to get the hang of it this quickly. I knew all that hard work wasn’t for nothing.” I couldn’t wait to see what sort of flattery everyone would greet me with. “I need to thank Lumina, and Kururu, too.”

The high probability that today would be the day I left this wonderfully safe and productive space, healing in hand, saddened me to an extent. The fear I'd felt when I bumped into those adventurers was not easily forgotten. Jumping head first into a world where such people existed was just asking for trouble.

Anxiety swirled around inside me.

"Maybe I should ask the receptionists if I can stay here until I find a place to work? Scratch that, I'd like to get my Holy Magic up to at least level two."

I made my decision. I would impose upon the Healer's Guild and put everything I had into training.

Breakfast today was brought not by Kururu, but the beautiful chestnut-haired girl. Monica, Kururu had said her name was. Which was all well and good, but every time she arrived I was doubled over from magical exhaustion, so my chances to get to know her were rather slim.

This didn't dampen my spirits, though. Before anything else, including romance and work, the goal of not dying took precedence. My training proceeded with that as my motto. As proof of its success, Assess Mastery reported that I'd successfully acquired the Meditation, Focus, and Magic Recovery skills after much labor.

Then, one week after my arrival at this sanctuary, the time came for me to emerge from my cave. At the receptionist's desk stood Monica.

"Monica, I've finally got Holy Magic down!" I declared.

"Congratulations, Mister Luciel. Can I borrow your card for a moment?"

I handed it over as requested and she set about the formalities with a smile. I'd learned earlier that the whole "mister," "miss" thing the guild did was because, to them, the healers were their patrons. Aside from how Kururu spoke to me, which was a special case, the staff referring to healers this way was basic guild etiquette.

I took my card back from Monica, which now had Holy Magic, Meditation, Focus, and Magic Recovery listed as skills.

"Congratulations again. You've worked hard, I see." She grinned. "Now, that

will be one silver.”

Er, this costs money?

On second thought, one silver for a week’s stay in a private room was a pretty good deal, so I paid up with a quiet sigh of relief that I actually had the money on hand.

“So, what should I do now? Kururu doesn’t seem to be here. Should I try looking for Miss Lumina?”

“Oh, my, you were the one Miss Lumina brought? My deepest apologies, this silver is yours.” She returned the coin. “Miss Lumina requested that we reserve a room for you, to be used for ten days of magic training, so there will be no charge.”

“Really? She did? She looks so young but she must carry quite a bit of weight around here.”

“She most certainly does. After all, she’s the captain of the Church’s newly formed female paladin regiment.”

What good fortune it must have been, then, for me to happen upon such an elegant and delicate-looking yet capable and distinguished person when I first arrived at the city gates. Monster Luck sure was putting in its share of work. I’d better start calling it *Monsieur* Luck at this point.

At any rate, Monica said the room was mine for ten days, courtesy of Lumina. From there, I put on my business face. “So, you can lend me the room for three more days, correct?”

“That’s right, if that’s what you wish. The guild has no problem offering help to someone as dedicated as you.”

With that, Monica concluded our negotiation, if you could call it that, with a smile. Her willingness to accommodate made me extremely happy, but my future was still as empty as blank paper. I wanted to have them introduce me to a clinic, but before any of that, I realized that I knew very little about the guild itself, and thought I should take the opportunity to ask about it in detail.

“Thank you, that’s very kind of you. By the way, I didn’t get a chance to ask

when I first registered, but I'm a little unclear about exactly what the Healer's Guild does, if you wouldn't mind giving me a bit of background."

"Oh? No, not at all. The Healer's Guild is an organization formed for the sole purpose of healing others. It's organized into a ten rank system based on your Holy Magic skill, which, in increasing order, includes ranks G, F, E, D, C, B, A, AA, AAA, and S," she explained. "The common practice is to build up your skills and expertise at a clinic in town, and many go on to start their own clinics from there. On the rare occasion where guild transfer requests are received, the healer in question may choose to accept and move, or decline."

"Furthermore," she continued, "if a healer is unable to find a clinic on their own, the guild will act as an intermediary, so you can rest easy on that point. We also provide financial support to those seeking to set up their own independent practices, so please come by for advice if you're ever looking to do the same."

Monica outlined the main points for me in a lengthy but easily understood explanation without faltering. I went ahead and used the chance to ask something else that had been on my mind.

"Thank you for such a great explanation. Also, is it possible to register with both the Healer's Guild *and* the Adventurer's Guild?"

"It is indeed, but I wouldn't recommend it," she said. "Healers aren't well suited to acquiring attack-based skills, and splitting off to a new job requires the appropriate experience to increase the level of that job. Additionally, you must be level six or above in a particular trade before you can change or take on multiple positions, meaning that because healers gain experience by healing, they will have a much harder time leveling up in combat-based jobs without having trained in the use of related skills."

Wow, she really has all this down pat.

"But once your level *does* go up, you should be able to do more, right?"

"Yes, but progressing as an adventurer requires defeating monsters to increase your overall level, which I think would be quite difficult for a healer to manage."

Hmm, it didn't sound like putting myself in that sort of danger would teach me much about defending myself from other adventurers.

"I see. So can a healer make a living with just the Heal spell?"

"I can't speak to your standards, so that's hard for me to judge, but based on the going rate for healing, I might put one silver per cast at a fair price."

"A whole silver?!" I shouted. If that and my god-given knowledge were true, this job seriously had it made.

Monica smiled at my shock and continued. "Just to be clear, the guild collects dues from all its members, based on rank. To maintain the rank of G, a yearly amount of twelve silver pieces must be paid. Please be aware that failure to pay means you will be found in violation of the guild's terms and banned from practicing healing."

So even a street healer would need to be registered with the guild? Or was this all under the assumption that one would be working at a clinic? It was hard to say.

Monica carried on with her explanation. She told me that with each promotion in rank, my yearly dues would increase by another twelve silver, but grimoires with more powerful healing magic could be bought for less at higher ranks. She also mentioned that these superior spells could cover a year's worth of taxes in a single cast, which I took with a grain of salt.

"Of course, some people reach the limits of their abilities and may find themselves unable to turn a profit, even when working at a clinic," she added.

I sensed a hint of caution in her words. These profitless healers sounded awfully similar to the corporate drone archetype.

"One last thing, and I hesitate to tell this to a new healer like you, but the guild currently holds no power over the actions of its members or clinics."

"What do you mean?"

"When clinics or healers charge unlawful prices or find themselves in conflict too often, the guild's head branch dispatches personnel. In the event that the practice is judged to be corrupt, the guild may revoke that clinic's license." She

paused for a moment, then went on. “Unfortunately, their schemes have become so sophisticated as of late that we cannot act and they are going unpunished.”

“Can the laws not be revised?” I asked.

“Until the head branch acts, we can do nothing, no matter how many petitions we send.”

“That certainly sounds like a headache. In that case, let me promise you this: I will *never* become a crooked healer.”

“You’d better not,” she giggled.

After thanking her for her time, I paid a silver for the month’s dues, steeled myself for what lay ahead, and left for the streets of Merratoni.

03 — The Adventurer's Guild

My first spell in hand, I set out in search of a clinic that would be willing to hire a greenhorn like me, as well as someone to study under. Unfortunately, according to what Kururu said the other day, certain clinics might have me doing more chores than healing work, leaving me little time to practice the skills I really needed. Enter my business experience. I was gonna sell myself like hotcakes. Where, you ask? Somewhere that was likely to have the most need of a healer's services: the Adventurer's Guild.

"Ah... Convenient time for me to remember that I have no idea where anything is."

I was a bit disappointed in myself for running out of the guild without even knowing where I was going, but surely I could find someone. I cleared my head and walked on.

An expansive road extended from the Healer's Guild, with several alleys along the side.

"Now if I can just not get lost..." I whispered to myself.

I felt like something of a tourist who was sightseeing in a foreign country. Shops and stands selling fresh fruit and skewers of meat lined the road, but the two silver pieces I had on me weren't exactly convenient spending money. Imagining lugging around all the copper coins I'd get back in change shot down any desire I had to pick up some food. Plus, I rather wanted to avoid painting a target on my back for pickpockets. I thought about using a silver to stock up on ingredients, but without some sort of income, I lacked that confidence. No eating out for me yet.

"But wow, these adventurers. Swords I get, but seeing them carry around those huge axes and whatnot like it's nothing is a little freaky."

"Wanna repeat that? Whose face is freaky?"

“What...”

I turned towards the voice to find that same scary adventurer from the day I arrived, along with two companions, looking my way. They were not smiling.

“Hey, you’re that healer I bumped into the other day, ain’tcha?”

“I-I’m very sorry about that,” I stammered. “I’ve been working hard since then and finally learned Heal, so I could use it on you as an apology, if you like.”

“Like I’m hurt enough to need that shit! We’re adventurers, pal,” he barked.

“Bazan, he’s shakin’ in his boots,” another chimed in. “You do something to ‘em?”

“Oh, I heard ‘im talking about adventurers and something being freaky, so it sounded like he was talkin’ trash, but I guess I misunderstood.”

“Hah! Who can blame the guy? Your face *is* pretty intense,” retorted the third guy.

“Zip it, Basura. So what’re you doing here, small fry?”

“Er, uh, well, I was trying to get to the Adventurer’s Guild, but I don’t know the way, so I was doing some sightseeing.”

“You were planning on going to the slums lookin’ like that? You tryin’ to get killed? Or tricked into being a slave? Slavery might be illegal here, but that doesn’t mean you won’t get robbed blind and left in a ditch.”

Apparently, my acting like a distracted tourist had me heading towards the slums without realizing it. My blood froze over.

“U-Um, you’re all adventurers, I take it? Could you tell me where the guild is? I’d really appreciate it.” I bowed, but no response came. I slowly looked up, and they looked back with the most confused expressions on their faces.

“You’re a human...right? You’re not half-beast or anythin’ are ya?”

“No, I’m a human. Did I say something strange?”

“You know we’re beastfolk, right?” one of them questioned.

“I do. This is my first time meeting any.”

“Your first time?”

“That’s right, so I apologize if I’ve done anything ignorant to offend.”

“Bazan, this kid ain’t right.”

Bazan clicked his tongue with a resigned sigh. “Fine. If we’re your first impression, guess we’ll take you to the guild.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Quit bowin’ all the time!”

“Yessir!”

“You’re gonna make the kid cry, Bazan.”

“He’s got a face only a mother could love,” the other two adventurers jabbed.

“Basura, *zip it*. Sekiros, you lead.”

“Sure thing. By the way, what’s your name, kid?”

“Luciel. I’ve just recently become an adult and my job is healer.”

“Luciel, eh? We’re the Lineage of the White Wolf, a B-rank adventuring party.”

“B-rank? You must be pretty strong, then.”

B-rank had to be a good deal tougher than your average adventurer.

“Eh, you know. Anyway, no more wastin’ time, let’s get a move on.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Putting my fear aside, I left my fate to Monsieur Luck and followed the beastfolk party in good faith.

“You’re a weird one, ya know that, Luciel?” the slender beastman called Sekiros smiled.

I tried to return his grin with one of my own, but the tension in my body most likely twisted it into something much less friendly. They said nothing, however, and guided me safely to the Adventurer’s Guild.

This building was more than twice the size of that of the Healer's Guild.

"This is the Adventurer's Guild?"

"Sure is. Walk in and there's a desk straight ahead where you can do whatcha need to do."

"Really, thank you so much. I'll work hard so that I'll be of some use if you guys are ever in any trouble."

"Man, just go."

"Yes, sir!"

Urged by the beastman Bazan, I prepared myself, entered the building, then froze in place. The room was packed, more so than I'd imagined, and everyone inside carried swords like they were nothing. What happened to my friendly Healer's Guild? Why were the walls of this place practically oozing intimidation? It was like I'd stumbled into the hideout of some neighborhood gang.

So much for my mental preparation. Times like this, all you could do was think nothing, make eye contact with no one, and move on. I set my sights on the reception desk and made my way over on trembling legs. Aloofness proved to be the right choice, as no one bothered me on my way there. All I had left to do was speak to the receptionist.

"Excuse me, is this where I register with the guild?!" I managed nervously.

Then, for a split second, time stopped for me.

She was the first beastwoman I'd ever spoken to. A dark blue-haired rabbit-woman wearing a uniform that suited her amazingly well. One glance was all it took to captivate me. I couldn't let my beguilement be noticed, though, so I stifled my beating heart, detached myself, and shifted into work mode. Maybe if I were completely deluded, people would laugh, but if I let myself appear smitten here, I could easily imagine threats coming my way. Specifically, those in the form of, "The hell are you doing acting buddy-buddy with my so-and-so?" If this prediction was accurate, my newly reincarnated life would be over after a measly ten days and that would be it. For good. No, thank you.



The adventurers here all held weapons, but that was irrelevant. Visualizing myself going up against these guys, all the size of pro wrestlers, brought only my demise to mind. For that reason, I sealed myself off, restricted myself to speaking with the gorgeous receptionist, and nothing more. Still, I believed in my heart that, one day, we would get to know each other better.

“It is,” she answered with a smile. “Welcome to the Adventurer’s Guild. Please fill in your name, race, and age here.”

She handed me some parchment, almost exactly like the one at the Healer’s Guild, except without a section for birthplace for some reason. Normally, I’d ask a question to segue into light conversation and calm my nerves, but I couldn’t even manage something that trivial at the moment.

“Now, if you wouldn’t mind placing a drop of your blood or infusing some of your magic into this card...”

Paying extra attention to the details, I nonchalantly carried out the registration process. I accepted the card, poured a bit of my magic into it, then returned it.

“Thank you...Mister Luciel? I see you have the Martial Arts skill, so no problems there.”

Would there have been problems otherwise? Despite the many questions in my mind, I held back for now. Finally, I received my guild card and officially became an adventurer.

The bunny-eared receptionist then proceeded to zip through the rules and regulations of the guild. Though I nodded and responded, none of what she said really penetrated. As to why... Well, that would be the fierce gazes I felt stabbing into my back. They weren’t so petrifying that I couldn’t move, but I certainly felt threatened. Without a doubt, they demanded to know what the hell I was doing acting buddy-buddy with their so-and-so, or so my gut told me. Her very important explanation thus went in one ear and straight out the other.

What did stay in my head was that you couldn’t register as an adventurer without an attack skill, and also the most basic details on how to accept requests. Thankfully, she repeated the vital points, such as how failing a request

would incur a fine.

Essentially, adventurers earned income through the completion of requests and the guild took ten percent of that for operational purposes. Even though I'd never even taken a request, I felt a chill go up my spine when she warned me about the penalties, and decided not to accept them lightly on the chance that a failure might mean the end of my days.

Obviously, I started out at the lowest rank, H. Higher ranks meant cheaper weapons and lodging, as well as being given higher priority for the more desirable requests. However, I deemed all that to be irrelevant to me, personally, as I had no intention of aiming to be the "strongest adventurer" or anything. Still, I was grateful that taking the Martial Arts skill had served some purpose.

After the rabbit-eared receptionist concluded her explanation, I internalized the important points in my head and got to the real reason I had come here.

"Thank you for explaining everything so clearly. Now, I had a question—can adventurers themselves make requests too?"

Her ears bobbed as she tilted her head. "Yes, they certainly can."

She was indeed exceedingly adorable, but I had no room in my thoughts to spare any attention to that. For the sake of my goal and my livelihood, I ignored the tears my heart was weeping and commenced business negotiations with Miss Bunny Ears.

"Earlier, you said there was a training area underground that adventurers can use for free, right?"

"Yes, it's open to all adventurers," she answered.

"Great. In that case, I have a request. I was wondering if it might be possible to introduce me to someone who can train me in my Martial Arts skill."

"I think that can be arranged, but personal training comes with a fee based on the time required for each session. Is that okay with you?" She looked concerned, which really wasn't helping my case in the event of any misunderstandings. No, forget that, the important thing here was my request.

Just how expensive would it be? Of course, this wasn't volunteer work I was asking for, so a fee made sense. Unfortunately, not even good old Monster Luck could hook me up with freebies all the time. Even so, if this training could increase my chances of survival, I had to do it. Without much money to my name, however, hard negotiation was my only option. Time to get serious.

First, the cost. "How much would a decent, polite instructor charge me?" I could very well end up with some hooligan who would beat me for my mistakes.

"Hmm, well, that depends on the agreement, but I would say about one silver per hour, give or take."

That was quite the sum given my current situation. As expected, I'd really have to sell my case. I took a deep breath and activated Negotiation Mode.

"If I might make an offer, do you ever receive requests for healing here at the guild base?"

"No...I wouldn't say we do," she replied, slightly dumbfounded.

What this meant was that there was *no precedent*. Offering something one wouldn't normally do or really notice was surprisingly crucial to negotiation. You could always go for safer and more orthodox methods, but at the risk of being easily turned down. In this instance, I judged there to be the possibility of a mutually beneficial relationship hidden away here, and prayed that she'd hear me out and take it up to someone with the power to accept. She seemed to be on the fence, so I offered an example.

"What if I, for instance, offered my healing to injured adventurers while I underwent training? Would that suffice as payment? Assuming my instructor is a staff member, I believe this would benefit both parties. What do you think?"

Now she *had* to take this to a higher-up, for sure. If I was declined, I'd just have to come up with something else.

"This...isn't something I can decide myself. Could you wait here for a moment?"

"Yes, of course. Please take your time."

I had done what I could for the moment. Now it was Monsieur Luck's turn. To him, I offered my prayers.

The moment Miss Bunny Ears left, my Negotiation Mode wore off and the invisible daggers in my back returned. Maybe because I'd gotten full of myself and piled more work onto her? Be that as it may, this was my top priority and I had to do what I had to do. I still prayed for my safety, of course, justified or not.

By some miracle, or perhaps the fact that I did not follow her nor move so much as an inch from the counter, the hostile gazes were all I ended up having to contend with, as much as I would've liked for that stabbing pressure in my back to ease off. Was I being hazed? Was my waiting here for minutes on end part of some cruel rookie initiation?

Finally, the receptionist returned and I let out a sigh of relief. Or rather, I tried to, but ended up swallowing it right back down.

The rugged man accompanying her bore a scar on his face and just about drowned the room in his overwhelming presence. He was taller than me, not extremely buff, yet undoubtedly someone to be reckoned with. How else could he give off such a powerful vibe?



Despite all this, his clothes looked simple and were meant for working. He had no weapons, either. Perhaps he was just a staff member, not an adventurer.

“You the twerp that can use healing magic?” he rasped in a gruff voice. I felt myself nearly engulfed by his aura.

Aside from his face, anywhere that his skin was visible revealed scars of all kinds, from blades and monsters alike. This was all the evidence I needed to conclude that this was no ordinary man. Whether due to his lack of weapons, or because his fierce expression was still that of a human, a calm gradually came over me. One of my clients in my past life had been a CEO with a similarly frightening face, but you couldn’t judge a book by its cover. Biases hurt yourself just as much as they hurt others. With that in mind, I offered a proper greeting.

“That’s right. I’m Luciel, a recently registered adventurer. I’m looking to improve both my healing magic and combat abilities, so I was hoping I could receive training in exchange for healing.”

“Do ya now? You’re a strange one, for a healer. What, you bored with your beloved money?” His eyes pierced me like a hunter’s upon its prey.

“Beloved money” caught my attention. Cautionary stares from all around added to my suspicions. Was this how people saw healers? My God-given knowledge lacked that answer. I’d need to do some filling in of the gaps later. Right now, everyone’s gazes made me want to curl into a ball. I couldn’t even bring myself to sigh, but I managed to maintain my composure long enough to get to the point.

“Money is important, but right now I need to boost my chances of survival as much as possible. To that end, like I said to the receptionist, I’d like to undergo training while working to cover the cost.”

“Hm. I get the picture. And ya don’t seem like you’re talking out your ass,” he said. “All right. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Brod and I’m the instructor here.”

“Pleasure to meet you.”

“So, kid, you’ve got the Martial Arts skill, but what would a healer want combat abilities for?” He stared at me intently, as if evaluating me, assessing

my very soul.

Putting on airs would get me nowhere. I had to be honest. “Because I’m useless in a fight. I’m not even remotely mentally prepared for it. If I ever went on a journey, even the weakest monster would be my last. I want to prevent that. I want to strive to get strong enough to defend myself.”

Brod nodded, then thought for a moment while rubbing his chin. “All right. I’ll hire you as an H-rank healer for our training grounds. You’ll be paid one silver an hour. You decide the training time and duration. When can you start?”

He actually agreed to take me on. Maybe he wasn’t so bad. “In three days, if that’s okay.”

“Got it. Nanaella, do me a favor and arrange everything.”

“Of course,” she replied. “Oh, Nanaella would be me. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nanaella, you said? The pleasure’s all mine.”

When Nanaella and I exchanged greetings, I thought—no, I *knew* the stares got more intense.

“Ahem.” Brod turned, coughed once, and the hostile eyes turned away from me.

My teacher-to-be sure was something. I could see myself getting a little stronger with this guy as my instructor. After thanking them one last time, I left and made my way back to the Healer’s Guild.

I found my way back safely without any trouble from the Lineage of the White Wolf or any other adventurers.

“You’re dripping with sweat; are you okay?”

Monica stood at the receptionist’s desk and I, apparently, was sweating buckets. I was so frazzled that I hadn’t noticed until she mentioned it.

“Thanks for the concern, but I’m all right. I worked up a bit of a sweat running here, I guess.” I smiled back, then returned to the room they’d so graciously lent me.

I sat on my bed while thinking about these remaining three days, and made

up my mind to use them to the best of my ability. If I didn't, true hardship would await me in this world. At least, that was what my gut told me.

"If I can't use healing magic properly, I don't doubt that Brod'll leave me out to dry. The possibility's certainly high. If that happens..."

Healers didn't seem all that well-liked, meaning I could find myself on the bad side of some adventurers. Not to mention the chances of that happening to me would likely be higher than the average healer.

What-ifs could go in circles forever, though, so I resolved to work as hard as possible to stay on Brod's good side and left it at that. Until one teensy little problem occurred, that is.

I'd anticipated that the amount of experience needed for skills to increase would go up with each level, but I later discovered that the amount of experience you could actually earn decreased as well. With a firm image of the wound in my mind, the very blood vessels, sinew, and bone envisioned, I cast Heal, and unlike before, my skill experience only increased by a total of four this time.

"Does this mean I need to learn more spells? No, even if I did, they'd just use up more magic."

Thinking in this windowless room sure wore on me mentally. All the same, if I wanted to level up Holy Magic, I had to actually cast the magic.

"At least I know how many I need, so my spirit won't break."

My goal was set. I continued to cast Heal, and nothing but Heal, meditating and stretching while taking great care not to overload on stress. My only joy was when Kururu or Monica would bring me food. That one act alone brought respite to my heart. How long it had been since simply talking with people gave me so much happiness.

And so, with these feelings hidden away inside me, my three-day-short Holy Magic Training Camp came to an end. Unsurprisingly, I never managed to make Holy Magic level up, but thanks to my efforts, Focus and Meditation, along with various other skills, did. Some skills must have been easier to improve than others.

“I’m not gonna become some hero overnight. There’s no need to rush.”

I’d spoken with Monica about the Holy Magic skill once before. She told me that increasing it to level five by the time I turned twenty would be quite impressive.

“Ugh, I can’t believe I got all excited over some little promise about a date if I managed to do it. I mean, when you think about it she’s basically saying I’m not even on the menu unless I’m some first-rate prodigy.”

That was probably the oldest trick in the book, too...what all the beautiful Healer’s Guild receptionists used to turn people down. And there I was, giving it my all for three days for a false hope. How simple-minded could I get? I forced a wry smile, bowed in gratitude to my trusty old room, then headed upstairs.

Kururu stood at the desk.

“Good morning, Kururu,” I greeted her.

“Morning, Luciel. If you’re out of your room, then I take it...”

“That’s right. Thank you so much for these past ten days. I’m incredibly grateful to you all for helping me to reach the starting line as a healer.”

“Be grateful to yourself. You managed to actually practice magic in that isolation chamber of a room.”

“You flatter me.”

“You have a workplace settled, don’t you? It might be tough at first, but I know a hard worker like you will make a fine healer. Keep it up, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll devote myself to meeting those expectations of yours. Thank you again.”

“You work hard now! And if you ever meet Miss Lumina, be sure to thank her, too.”

“I sure will, if we ever see each other. All right, Kururu, I’m off.”

She giggled. “Safe travels.”

I left the guild building, her gaze still on my back.

The sunlight outside warmed my cheeks. Yet more beautiful weather.

“Come to think of it,” I wondered, “I’ve never seen it rain once since I got here. Though I *was* cooped up in that room the whole time, to be fair.”

I surprised myself with this newfound composure that afforded me room in my mind to worry about the weather. More tension than I’d even realized I had was seeping out of my body. What froze me at the sight of an adventurer, however, was fear, which I very much wished to be rid of as soon as possible.

In spite of these thoughts swirling around in my head, I arrived at the Adventurer’s Guild without incident. One deep breath later, I went inside and was met with the exact same perilous aura that had filled the place last time. Except this time I felt even more stares on me. Or was that me being self-conscious?

Regardless, the mere thought of being looked at sent my knees shaking. At work in my first life, I’d gotten similar glares when I’d had to make sales directly after my numbers came up short, but this level of dread far outclassed that.

So as not to show any more weakness than I already felt, I hastily made my way to reception.

“Welcome. Can I help you with something? Have a report to make? Or would you like to commission a request?”

To my relief, the receptionist—this time a human woman of about twenty—immediately looked my way. It seemed like the conversation would go smoothly this time.

But still, why are these receptionists always so stunning?

She noticed me freeze up, then repeated herself. Grateful for her kindness, I got to explaining the reason behind my visit.

“I’m Luciel. I made a request of Brod, who I also accepted a request from. Is he in?”

“You’re that new adventurer, yes? If I could just borrow your card for a moment to process your request...” The woman looked me over and carried out

the procedures like an assembly line worker. “I’ve processed your request, Mister Luciel. Please head down those stairs. I believe you’ll find Brod in the training grounds.”

This lady really knows how to do her job, I thought to myself. Although I certainly didn’t say that out loud, I made sure to express my gratitude before going downstairs. “Thank you, I’ll do that.”

The receptionist smiled back and bowed. I followed suit, then made my way down.

A massive room extended from the bottom of the stairs, much larger than the first floor—about a hundred meters on each side, if I had to guess. Encircling the grounds was a partitioned path for running.

“This place is huge,” I muttered offhand.

Suddenly, a voice came from behind me. “Pretty nice training area, eh? Good on ya for not running, twerp.”

I spun around in surprise and there stood Brod, arms crossed with a grin on his face. I was about to ask how long he’d been there when I sensed bloodlust. My body reflexively squared off.

This is where I die.

For a moment, I genuinely believed that. My breath quickened. Never in my life, past or present, had I felt such terror. Not even when that bullet pierced my heart. Something clattered in my ears. Only when Brod quashed his menacing aura did I realize it had been my teeth, rattling together in fear.

Perhaps asking to be trained by someone like Brod, who would subject an average layman like me to such intensity upfront, was a mistake. Past me had some explaining to do. The bloodlust had lasted for only an instant, but in that instant, I’d succumbed to him. Once it was over, my trembling stopped, but my legs nearly gave out.

Still, I gritted my teeth, breathed deeply, and lowered my head calmly. “Th-Thank you for having me.”

“Oh-ho, I know you felt that just now, but you’re not running, huh? I thought

you'd get scared and back out."

"I-I need this to survive. I want you to train me properly, right from square one."

"Prove it with actions, not words. We're going hard on the basics right from the get-go, so no chickening out."

"Thank you. I'll do my best."

One look at Brod's smiling face, and his distinctly unsmiling eyes, was enough to fill me with regret. I bowed once more.

Training began immediately after. To start with, in order to gauge my overall physical ability, he had me sprint around the grounds. And so I sprinted. And sprinted.

"Hey, hey, hey, look alive! Run like ya mean it! You wanna be goblin food?! Well, you're *gonna* be with that wussy jogging!"

I ran and ran and ran with no end in sight. Any time my pace slowed, Brod lashed me with jeers. For better or worse, he and I were the only ones there at the time, saving me the pain of any weapons or magic that might've come flying my way. On the other hand, Brod showed no signs of compromising in this one-on-one fitness regimen.

I really should've asked for someone who could teach me plain old fighting. These thoughts and more filled my mind as I ran on, enduring Brod's verbal beatings all the while, until my fifth lap, when I just couldn't keep up the pace anymore and he spoke up.

"Your physical limits are what they are, but don't *ever* lose the drive to move forward," he instructed. "Assume that stopping means death for an adventurer."

My lungs burned, every breath echoed in my ears. My legs, my entire body, turned to lead. But just as he told me, I kept at it, frantically throwing my arms back and forth, and it was here that I noticed something. A burgeoning change. Where at first I had only felt pain, I now started to feel enjoyment. Why?

I knew the answer. I ran. Sweat poured off my body. I gasped for life-giving air, filled my lungs, then just as quickly spat it back out. That was all. I was breathing. I was moving. *I was alive.*

Compared to the last moments of my previous life, that horrible feeling of my body ignoring every one of my commands, this was nothing. On top of that, whether due to this world itself or to my returned youth, I found a simple joy in being able to move as much as I now could.

Then, my consciousness began to fade.

A splash accompanied a sudden chill washing over my face. I jumped up and saw Brod next to me with a wide grin and a bucket in his hands.

“Didn’t think that’d be all it would take for you to pass out on me,” he said.

My awareness gradually returned. No doubt, that bucket was once full of the water that now drenched me. I anxiously prepared myself for what his next demand would be.

“I’m sorry I’m a total weakling,” I apologized.

Brod heaved a sigh. “At least I’ve got a handle on that now. Let’s move on.”

“Um, move on to what?”

“We’re going to expand your range of movement. Stretches.”

“I’ve got nothing but bad feelings about this.”

“Once your body’s limbered up, we’ll move on to sparring. We can’t have you dislocating or breaking something just from tossing your arm out, kid.”

He raised an eyebrow at me, but I couldn’t help but feel anxious. My body was about as limber as a tree. As expected, only torment lay in store for me.

“Guh!”

Ah, so this was what it felt like to lose your voice from pain. So much for starting off easy. We went straight to doing splits. Even if I wanted to complain about my bursting capillaries, the intimidating aura emanating from Brod ensured that I could do no such thing.

“Your body’s too rigid. That’s how you wind up hurting yourself doing even the most basic shit. I’ll have you work in five more sets on your own later.”

As I stretched (and trembled at the thought of those five more sets), Brod went on to explain the point of all this.

“Fights are won with split-second judgments,” he began. “That’s why increasing your range of motion and enhancing your attack options is so important. If you’re dodging, you’re limited by what your body can do.”

I’d thought he was the type to spout idealism and whip me like some sort of Spartan, but my impression of him quickly changed. He really spelled out, logically, why these stretches were necessary.

“Ow, ow, that hurts!”

This did not change the fact that he was a demon, however.

“The pain means it’s working. It’ll go away in about a month.”

“A...a month?!”

“I thought you wanted to get stronger?”

“Gah... P-Please continue.”

I could only nod. I did want to get stronger. And after all that bending, I did feel nimbler than before. I also surprised myself by sweating almost as much as I had when I was running. Between a choice of clumsy exercises and stretching, I found myself thinking more highly of the latter.

“Oh, by the way, Brod... I didn’t mention this, but the truth is, the only spell I can use is Heal, and only eight at a time. Does that affect our contract at all?”

“Nah, that’ll work just fine. But it does put into question how much those spells can actually do in one go, doesn’t it? Okay, let’s test it out.”

He looked at me, a dagger gripped in his hand for some reason. Then he stuck the blade into his arm and pulled it right back out.

“What kind of test is this?! Where did you even get that from?! No, forget that, hurry and show me your arm!”

Blood oozed out as I panicked. Putting the absurdity of his actions aside, I

quickly cast Heal.

“Oh, Lord, receive my energy and mend this wound. Heal!”

The bleeding stopped, but the wound itself had clearly not regenerated.

“Not bad for a spell you just learned.” Brod pulled his arm away as if satisfied with the results, but if tetanus set in, it would be no laughing matter.

“I’m not finished yet. Please don’t take your arm away. *Oh, Lord, receive my energy and mend this wound. Heal!*”

With my second cast, the skin cleanly closed up and I sighed in relief. While I did question Brod’s sanity for stabbing himself out of nowhere, I felt a sense of accomplishment at seeing him fully recovered.

“Good now?” he asked.

“Yes, that was just for my own satisfaction. However, could I ask you to please refrain from hurting yourself like it’s nothing in the future?”

“Sure... You have my word.” Seeing him suddenly behave a bit awkwardly froze my brain for a moment.

Did I just lecture...? I cut that train of thought off early. If hell awaited me regardless, I much preferred one of a less skin-burning temperature.

I forced a smile. “Okay, let’s continue, please.”

“Now I want you to try to hit me,” he ordered. “However you can. I’ll counter, but keep the pain to a minimum.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

Yeah, he was mad, and I regretted making him so. I took up the gauntlet with the very clear goal of not getting myself killed.

Brod stood about three meters away, arms crossed. “Land one blow and I’ll end today’s lesson.”

“Um, so that means I can come back tomorrow, then?”

“You can. On condition that you don’t suddenly bail on us, and that you heal anyone, regardless of their race.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Then come at me.”

I promptly sent a full-force kick straight at him, which he caught mid-air with one hand, then let go as if it had never even happened.

“Are you being serious about this, kid? Or was that Martial Arts skill a load of bull?”

“O-Of course I am. And of course it wasn’t!”

“Who attacks that transparently? No feints? Straight at my stomach? Don’t tell me this is where you’re at?”

“That’s...why I made my request.”

“Er, right, sorry. So, you’ve got the drive, at least?”

“I do. If possible, I want to be able to go up against an adventurer without freezing in fear.”

He chuckled. “All right, then. Hit me with everything you’ve got and don’t stop until you can’t even lift a finger.”

“Yes, sir!”

He was right, I was a total newbie to anything related to combat. For now, I solidified my game plan and readied myself to attack—two loose fists, left foot half a step forward, boxing style. Only low kicks, to keep openings to a minimum. Where this would get me, I had no idea, but I would sure as hell do everything I could. I focused my mind and edged in closer.

“Punch! Kick! Slow! Too slow!”

That “one blow” never came. Instead, every one of my punches merely met with counter after counter. At first, he acknowledged my attempts with a gentle dodge, but with each swing, my breathing grew heavier and my tactics became simpler and simpler, until he finally started flicking my forehead and slapping me in retaliation. The lack of pain told me he was holding back, yet I still found myself passing out numerous times, only to be doused awake with water again.

“The real fight starts when you can’t fight anymore. Learn your body. Know how it moves. Focus on the present and don’t let your attacks get sloppy. Don’t get lost in hitting as fast as you can; really imagine yourself landing every blow.”

“Yes, sir!”

God, this was rough. Why was this hellish approach necessary? Where was the line between boot camp and straight-up bullying? And could regular adventurers keep up with it or did they not even bother given the lack of cold, hard money it brought? All these questions vanished from my mind as quickly as they’d appeared as I was overwhelmed by pure exhaustion.

I had never punched a person in my life. Maybe I’d done some kendo or judo for PE at school long ago, but never once had I gotten into a fight. While I understood how important visualization was, I had little grasp on my reach and attack range, so I couldn’t help but have doubts. Over and over I thought to myself how badly I wanted to give up, but my spirit did not break. If I ran here, my life would be over before it even began. I *couldn’t* give up.

None of my attacks were likely to reach the man in front of me. Fine. Then all I had to do was keep trying until they did. That was all I could do—attack a little closer, throw off the opponent a little more.

The joints of my body stung like fire, probably either because my body was still weak or from all the sprinting I was doing. One of the two. As the pain worsened, a light bulb went on in my head. Why didn’t I just use Heal on myself? Wouldn’t I be able to keep this up for longer that way?

“Brod, could I use Heal on myself?” I asked. “I think I should be able to fight properly once I’ve recovered a little.”

“Don’t. I’ll explain why later. All I want is to gauge your limits this time around. Now cut the chatter and come at me, twerp.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied hesitantly.

I lowered my stance, clenched my fists, and went straight for Brod’s gut. He swiveled out of the way and swept at my feet, sending me to the ground.

“Bad idea, kid. Unless you’ve got the overwhelming ability to back it up,

charging straight in like an idiot's a good way to get killed. Stand up."

What an absolute blunder I'd made, asking this guy for help. Was this level of torment simply par for the course here? Just one hit; that was all I needed to end this. I thought of nothing else as I relentlessly threw myself at my instructor.

It didn't work. I finally lay face down on the floor, not a single successful blow to my name.

"You held out for a good while there. You've got tenacity, I'll give ya that much. Now watch what I do while you take a breather."

I observed obediently as Brod began his lecture on the basics of martial arts.

"What do you think the most important thing to remember in combat is? I'll tell you. Don't die, don't get hurt."

"I didn't expect to hear my own philosophy from someone as strong as you."

"Is it that surprising? You're not always gonna be in top condition for every fight, and sometimes you'll find yourself in two or more in a row."

This was true, but all it made me want to do was hole up somewhere safe in town and never ever leave.

Brod demonstrated movements at a slow enough speed for me to follow. They were well-polished and refined, that much I could tell, but the gap between my skill level and his made me wonder how helpful it actually was to see someone else doing them. He explained that learning to use my body would not only increase the power of my attacks but my ability to dodge the enemy as well, although there was an element of pure instinct to it all.

"Don't go using what you've learned right out of the gate, either. Practice. Drill it into your body. Make it second nature. I assume you get why I'm telling you this?"

"Yes. A house built in a day won't stand the rain."

"That's right. Watch, learn, test things out in sparring like we just did. Just don't expect anything to actually work."

He flashed a ballsy grin. This guy was absolutely messing with me. Then again,

I didn't doubt that he had the confidence to back up that claim. He was the guild's instructor, after all, so he was more than likely stronger than the average adventurer in this world.

"All right, looks like your breathing's steadied. Get ready for the second set."

"Um, the second set?"

"The second set. Get those legs moving and start doing laps."

"Yes, sir," I acquiesced with a face that couldn't have resembled anything but utter despair.

However, this would do little to stay Brod's hand. Miss Bunny Ears came to mind, the one who had deemed him to be the man for the job. I thought I recalled asking for someone "polite" and I was noticing a distinct lack of that here. Filing a complaint was starting to seem like a reasonable response.

To be fair, he *was* teaching me properly nearly the entire time, and he *did* offer to do it for free, but still, this was pretty rough. In all my years, this level of madness was...well, not uncommon, I suppose, but still.

"Man, I'm gonna cry," I laughed deliriously.

"Hey, get your ass going! We don't have all day!"

"Yes, sir!"

Praying that he would refrain from turning up the heat any further in this already-sweltering personal hell, I obeyed and ran.

The second set was no different from the first. My fatigue, however, was much, much worse. As I lay flat on the ground, I looked up at Brod and contemplated my situation. Maybe this *was* considered civil training. It hurt to high heaven, but I wasn't dying. Compared to adventurers who put their lives on the line every day, maybe this was the easy approach.

Thinking of it that way eased the burden on my mind slightly, allowing me to refocus on training and push on through. It still tore me down, though. That didn't change. Would there ever come a day where that wouldn't be the case?

Over five sets later and my body was simply down for the count.

I take back all of that earlier positivity.

I'd never imagined it would be this intense. I had vowed that I wouldn't run away, but now death-by-exhaustion wasn't looking too far off. Beads of sweat dripped from my brow. Anxiety filled my head, one thought after another flying around. But I had asked for this. Somehow, I roused my spirit back up.

Just then, Brod spoke. "We'll call it here for today. Don't want you falling apart."

"Er..."

"What, you want more?" he challenged.

"No, no, no, I just thought it was a little early."

"You'll wind up hurting yourself if you keep at it in this state."

Wow, so he really had been gauging my limits. Maybe he wasn't so bad, but given how far he'd pushed me, he was still undoubtedly someone not to be messed with.

Wonder if I'm allowed to switch teachers... Probably not...

Actually, would I even be able to come back tomorrow? I still had to find a place to live before long, too. My future wasn't looking especially bright.

"Oh, Brod, can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"You said not to use healing magic earlier. Can I do it now?"

"No, you can't. If you let your body do the healing naturally, you'll build up skills for recovering on your own."

"Really?"

"Really. If you're hurting badly enough...well, you do what you gotta do. But if surviving's your goal, you should avoid it for anything but when you're really injured."

"Understood. Thank you for telling me."

Now *there* was an unexpected pitfall to recovery magic. I decided I'd check

my skills later to test that information.

Brod was surprisingly well-informed. Throughout our training, he had explained the theory and logic behind everything we did, so he had to be a good guy, right? If I could build up skills by enduring this without healing, then I'd just have to prove that I could.

On another note, we'd spent a good amount of time down here, but not a single adventurer had shown their face.

"Is this place always so empty?" I asked.

"Pretty much. We don't get many newbies this time o' year. The low ranks don't have much in the way of money, either, so they'd rather stick their necks out in the field over formal training."

"Being an adventurer sounds tough. I'm not sure how much help my healing will be, but I hope I can be of some use to them."

Brod said nothing. He just stared.

"Is something wrong?" I maintained my composure and desperately hoped that this man was right in the head.

"If there were more healers like you, the world'd be a better place, kid," he sighed, shaking his head.

"Are you sure you aren't exaggerating?"

"I don't know what your image of healers is, but if someone comes to you needing healing, do me a favor and help 'em out, will ya?"

"Right... Of course." I thought I saw a shadow cross over his eyes for a moment, but I ignored it. "So, is anyone else even going to come by?"

"They will. Soon."

As he said that, a party of adventurers came stumbling down the stairs. It was a group of four, both boys and girls. They looked no older than I was. Ignoring me, they called out to Brod and shot off all sorts of questions, asking if the free healing was true, if it wasn't a scam.

"So, what're you gonna do?" Brod asked me, that intimidating aura

surrounding him again.

The boy who seemed to be the leader of the group turned to me. “Could you...heal us?”

I smiled wryly at his curtness. It was just like a confused new hire looking to a coworker for help.

“Where were you injured?” I inquired.

“Right here. My right thigh.”

Congeaed blood had seeped through his clothes in the shape of a bite mark of some kind.

“How did it happen?”

“We were surrounded by Forest Wolves and I got bit.”

I had no idea how strong Forest Wolves were, so I couldn’t judge whether they were too weak to actually tear off flesh or if the adventurers just had defense abilities that high. What I could judge, however, was that I did not want to tangle with those things.

Heal would probably be enough here, but did I need to see the wound itself or was the visualization part more important? I figured avoiding a sexual harassment lawsuit if I ended up working with women would be prudent, and went with the latter. Were Forest Wolves poisonous, though? Rabies seemed a likely contender for diseases they might carry. Still, I didn’t have any poison-curing magic anyway, so thinking about it would do no good.

“I see. Okay, I’m going to cast Heal on you. *Oh, Lord, receive my energy and mend this wound. Heal!*”

My hands emitted a pale blue light, which enveloped the adventurer’s thigh. A success.



“How’s that? Does it still hurt?”

“N-No, I’m okay now,” he mumbled as he stared blankly at me.

Was he not expecting all that much from me? Or had he thought I wouldn’t heal him in the first place? Either way, he seemed oddly shocked.

“I’m glad to hear that. Is anyone else injured?” I asked.

The others stepped forward for the same treatment. After I finished healing them all, they thanked me repeatedly on their way back upstairs. I kept my slight embarrassment from working with the girl a secret.

“Was that all right?” I asked Brod, turning to face him. “I’m not sure how it usually goes, so I tried healing with an image in mind, but...”

“How much do you know about healers, kid?” he cut in.

“Not a lot. We didn’t have any back home.”

“None, huh? You’re probably about to get real busy.”

The certainty with which he said that piqued my curiosity. But as long as I did everything I could, I’d get some nice skill boosts for my trouble. And it wasn’t like there could be all that many adventurers looking for a healer. Still, reminding Brod of my limits would be a good idea. The smallest miscommunication could create a rift in even the most well-founded trust in a relationship, and I spoke from experience. I wasn’t about to retread old ground.

“That’s fine, but Heal is the only spell I can use, and I can’t do too much of it all at once.”

“I know, and I have a proposal. I want you to heal as much as you can, right up to the point of exhaustion, then have you work out like you did today before we start training. How does that sound?”

That was, of course, under the assumption that adventurers actually came to me for healing. At the same time, he wanted me to train my butt off all day, sleep, repeat. What was this, the army? But the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like there were no downsides. Back in my old life, once I’d started working, my home had become a place to sleep and nothing more. This would be no different; just replace work with militaristic combat training and

studying. I wanted to refuse but could find no reason to, so I merely bowed.

“I accept.”

In order to survive in this world, I needed a certain minimal amount of strength, and although I did want to earn a profit somewhere, I decided that relying on Brod for now would be in my best interests. There was one fly in the ointment, however.

“Um, so does that mean our deal still stands from tomorrow on? Or, wait, didn’t the training already start today?”

True, I’d assumed that today would be more working out than combat, but if he was telling me that today’s session was just a basic workout, then the adventurers in this world were straight-up monsters. The fact that he wasn’t tossing me out right away must’ve been a stroke of good fortune—no, the work of Monsieur Luck.

If I wanted to get stronger, I first needed the strength to actually keep up with this training. And that was where Brod came in. Martial Arts would increase naturally with practice like today’s. In between workouts, during the breaks, I could meditate, boosting both my physical recovery and magical abilities at the same time. Two birds, one stone. Coming to this guild was definitely the right choice.

“Hey, kid, you listening? Kid!” Brod interrupted my train of thought.

“O-Oh, I’m sorry,” I answered quickly. “I was spacing out a little.”

“Maybe I whipped you a bit too hard.” He studied me with a concerned expression.

I felt a little bad about worrying him. “No, I’m okay. I was just thinking, that’s all.”

“Well, good. I’ll say it one more time. You’ve got guts and tenacity to spare, kid. I’m gonna train you for real, so stay here at the guild center. Starting today.”

He offered this up casually, but it was anything but casual to me. The Healer’s Guild had a room that I’d stayed in, so of course the Adventurer’s Guild would

have one, too, but it had never crossed my mind that a place to stay would just fall into my lap. Although...were we talking for free, or did they charge like the Healer's Guild?

"Are you sure? I was planning on staying at an inn somewhere and, just so you know, I barely have any money on me."

Brod grinned, then continued. "Keep your money. We'll throw in three meals a day, too. And you look like you could use a change of clothes, so we'll find you some hand-me-downs. Washed, of course, so don't worry."

Excuse me? Where was this royal treatment coming from? Was I about to be sold off somewhere? Don't tell me this guy had...other intentions. Cold sweat trickled down my back.

"This seems really fishy. Are you after something?"

"Yes. I want to help new adventurers live longer. If you're here, I can do that. That's what I'm after," he replied firmly.

I sensed an undercurrent of intensity to his words. If there were lives I could save, of course I wanted to save them. Making a living as a healer in this world didn't seem all that difficult, either. If I continued healing here, I'd likely become closer to these adventurers, who might be there to help me out if I ever found myself between a rock and a hard place. I truly believed that working here, putting everything I had into it, would make my future all the more secure.

"Brod, I want to become stronger. And I don't want *anyone* to die, not just adventurers. If those are your terms, I gratefully accept."

"Good. I'm glad. For the record, I'm putting a ban on running off in the middle of your training. Any objections to that?"

Er, is that the safest thing to agree to? I wondered, but only for a moment. If I refused, I'd lose out on training, which would open up a whole new can of worms.

"How about we renew the deal monthly. Would that be possible?" I countered.

"Works for me. I'll get you to see just how much these guys need you."

“Great. I look forward to this first month.”

“Likewise, kid. I’m gonna get you ready for real training by the time it’s over, so no quitting on me, got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

These weren’t bad conditions. If anything, they were nothing but beneficial to me. All I did was ask for self-defense training, and ultimately made out with not only that but free room and board to boot. This was most certainly the benevolence, the true nature, of Monsieur Luck.

But wait, was Brod even in a position to decide all this on his own? No way, he wasn’t the guildmaster, was he? Yeah, no way. Assuming a guildmaster would even spend all day instructing some newbie, the rest of the staff probably wouldn’t be calling him “Brod.”

“Hey, you sure you’re all right?”

I’d lost myself in thought again. “Er, um, yes. I was just blanking out with joy. But is this all above board? Will the guildmaster really approve everything?”

“Count on it. I’ve got plenty of weight to throw around here,” he said with a smirk.

Apparently, the higher-ups would be no issue, so I decided I’d go ahead and move from the Healer’s Guild to the Adventurer’s Guild. Considering dues were the only thing I’d actually spent money on so far, my luck seriously had to be through the roof.

Many thanks, Monsieur Luck.

“Are you able to move?”

“Yes, somehow,” I moaned.

“All right, follow me.”

He walked off and I trudged along after him, my worn-out body screaming. Up the stairs and behind the receptionist’s desk was a door that led to an enclosed backyard, in the middle of which was a hand-operated well.

“Rinse yourself off here. I’ll bring you a change of clothes,” he instructed,

pointing to the well with his thumb before disappearing back inside.

“I’m bathing at a well? Sounds like torture by modern standards. Well, when in Rome, I guess...”

I pumped the lever and water soon came spilling from the spout. I’d heard of these things before, but never actually used one, so the fact that it worked properly got me pretty excited. But water may have been a precious resource for all I knew, so I grabbed a bucket, filled it up, and dumped it over my head.

“God help me...”

Freezing water splashed over me, chilling my body to the bone. It did not feel good, oh no, but the more I did it, the more I felt my head clear up.

“Yeah, that’s cold. But wow, am I tired,” I said to myself. “My body feels even heavier than before. Well, this is gonna be my everyday now, so I’ll just have to stick it out.”

“Stick what out?”

I spun around. Brod stood there, carrying my new clothes.

“Please don’t scare me like that. I meant my training.”

“Yeah? Here, your clothes. Get changed, then come to the mess. You know where that is, don’t you?”

“Yes, but does that mean I’ll have to pass a bunch of adventurers?”

“I don’t know what’s got you so worried, but don’t be. No one’s gonna come at you, kid.” He returned to the guild interior.

“I sure hope he’s telling the truth.”

I had my doubts, but ignored them for now and started changing.

“Can I just hang my dirty clothes here?” I wondered. “Eh, I’ll just come get them later if they tell me I can’t.”

After rinsing off my sweaty clothes, I draped them over a convenient branch.

“You’ll get them dirty again like that, you know?”

“Oh, Nanaella!”

I turned to see the rabbit-woman, Nanaella, standing behind me.

“Good work on your training. I hear you healed some adventurers afterwards, too. Thank you so much.”

“Oh, no, I’ve done nothing you need to thank me for. Did you need something?”

“Right, Brod asked me to wash your clothes.”

And what had I done to deserve such a lavish-sounding reward?

“I really can’t let you do that,” I insisted.

“So...you don’t want a beastperson handling your clothes, then?”

I’m sensing a misunderstanding.

“No, that’s not it at all. If anything, I’d be over the moon to have your help, but if word got out that such a pretty girl was doing my laundry, I’d be up against your fans, and I value my life,” I carefully declined with a smile. And it was no lie. Those adventurers terrified me.

“If that’s all, then allow me. I’ll hang your clothes with the rest of the guild’s laundry tomorrow. I take it you won’t have much time to be dealing with dirty clothes, will you, Mister Luciel?”

Now that she mentioned it, she had a point; my time would be very limited. Plus, leaving my own clothes out willy-nilly certainly was no skin off my nose, but it might be in the way of the people who did the laundry. This would probably be for the best moving forward.

“Okay, you win. I’m sorry to add to your workload, but thank you. If there’s anything I can do, please let me know. I’ll help out however I can.”

She giggled. “Consider these clothes washed.”

I would have to show my gratitude later somehow, even if she *was* doing it with a smile.

I made my way to the dining hall, enduring the menacing vibes oozing from each of the adventurers, of which there were now many fresh off the job. Despite my trembling, I arrived at the mess without incident.

“I might’ve had a hole stared into me, but at least no one came at me.”

Brod waved me over to a table already filled with plates of food. “Finally made it, huh?”

“Sorry, I was cleaning the clothes I took off.”

“Hm? Did Nanaella not catch you?”

“She did, so I handed them off to her.” Come to think of it, where did I need to go to pick them up?

“Good. Anyway, eat everything here. Force yourself if you have to.”

“Um, *all* of it?” I asked timidly.

There was enough on the table to feed five people, even if it did look delicious.

“You can take it slow, just eat it. When you’re done, leave the dishes and come downstairs again,” he ordered before leaving.

“Is stuffing all this food down part of the training too?”

I got to work on the task before me, only to discover that the cuisine was downright mouthwatering. I single-mindedly stuffed my face and somehow managed to clear all the plates, then headed back downstairs as directed.

I had thought there would be plenty of adventurers around, but there were nearly none after mealtime. When I arrived, I saw Brod standing in front of a room on the periphery of the training grounds.

“You’ll be staying here from today onward.”

Inside, four beds lined the walls.

“Okay. Will there be no more adventurers needing healing today?”

“None today. Get some rest for tomorrow.”

“Thank you for all of this.”

Brod replied by raising a hand as he left. I tossed myself onto the bed he’d pointed out to me and slept like a rock...if a rock had insomnia, that is. In truth, I wasn’t the least bit sleepy.

“As tired as I am, no modern person could go to sleep at 7 PM...”

My status screen showed me the time, and even if I did fall asleep, I’d no doubt wake up in the middle of the night. And that was a hard *if* I managed to get to sleep this early in the first place. I was exhausted, sure, but my joints ached and I highly doubted my ability to drift off.

“This place is perfect for the kind of training I did back at the Healer’s Guild, though.”

So for three hours, I drilled Magic Control and Magic Handling, practiced increasing my Heal casting speed, stretched, and meditated until the sandman finally came knocking and I hopped back into bed.

“Man, so much happened today. It feels like things have finally started to take off for me in this world. I’ve gotta keep this up.”

And so began my new life at the Adventurer’s Guild.

I awoke to yet another unfamiliar ceiling. It took a few moments before I remembered that I was at the Adventurer’s Guild.

“What a cliché. Those light novels were a bad influence on me,” I muttered.

I sat up and opened my status screen to check the time. Just past four in the morning.

“Man, I’m so used to sleeping for six hours. It’s amazing how little my muscles hurt, though. Just like my grade school days.”

Over the course of close to ten years, I’d made a habit of getting six hours of sleep every night. For all the changes my body had undergone, including how durable it now was, some things stayed the same.

“Guess I’ll get up and wash my face.”

On my way to the well, I met with some of the staff, who seemed shocked to see me.

“Good morning,” I greeted them. “Maybe you didn’t hear that I’d be staying here from now on? I have Brod’s permission, if that’s an issue.”

“Oh, um, no, all the staff knows. It’s just, many healers are very...lax with their

schedules, so we were surprised to see you up so early.”

“Really? Well, I’m going to wash up a bit.”

I thought over these last few days. Healers seemed to be recognized in ability, at least, but a good portion of them must have let the special treatment go to their heads. Personally, I didn’t feel like getting the daylights knocked out of me by adventurers, so I wouldn’t dream of acting that way.

The sun still hadn’t risen, but cracks of dawn were gradually starting to brighten things up. I splashed the frigid water over my face and pulled my thoughts together.

“There’s a lot I need to block from my mind for now. I know what I have to do, and I can’t let myself get lost in overthinking things. I just need to make every effort to improve. One month and I’ll get over this fear. That’ll be my goal.”

I went to the training grounds for some morning exercise. After stretches, I started doing laps.

“Running and nothing else seems like a waste. What if I practice healing someone while running away?”

I kept my pace to a jog and cast Heal with a clear visual in mind as always. The pale blue light came out dimmer than usual.

“So, I can’t use Heal while running just yet. I’ll make overcoming that weakness another goal of mine for the month.”

As I continued my jogging and healing practice, Brod arrived. “Hey kid, breakfast! Come on.”

“Good morning, Brod. On my way.” I hadn’t worked up much of a sweat, so I followed right after him.

“While you work here, you’ll have your meals at the dining hall. Consider it part of your training, so eat up and don’t leave scraps.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. It was so delicious, I’d love nothing more.”

“Good.”

Did Brod just smile? And why did I feel a chill run down my back? I had to be

imagining things, so I put it out of my mind and went on to the cafeteria. It was a small room with only four tables to stand at and four counter seats.

Thank goodness I'm being fed.

Upon entering, I discovered a giant standing behind the counter—a massive man about two meters tall and appropriately vast in width.

“Gulgar, this is Luciel, the kid I mentioned yesterday. I want you to make him three meals a day from now on, if ya don’t mind. He ate here yesterday, too, but you get my point,” Brod said to the lumbering man.

Wow, he remembered my name, I noticed. However, my surprise was quickly cut short by the absolute bear of a man before me, supposedly named Gulgar.

“Hey, there he is! Food’s all hot ’n ready for ya.”

“Um, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Luciel. Thank you so much for taking care of my meals. This may be rude of me to ask out of the blue, but what race might you be?”

A bear, right? This guy was totally a bear. Any other kind of beastperson would be a bold-faced lie, I tell you.

Unfortunately, I was mistaken. “Sure is out of nowhere, you got that right. But I don’t mind. The name’s Gulgar. I’m a wolf-man, and proud of it.”

“I see. Thank you for answering.”

I felt utterly betrayed. As we spoke, he placed dish after dish on the counter and I froze up.

“Er, is all of this...?” I trailed off.

“Brod’s paid up, so don’t you worry. You can chow down as much as ya want.”

That was not what I’d been getting at. There was even more piled onto the plates than yesterday.

“I’m not sure I can finish all of this.” In fact, I was very sure that I couldn’t finish it.

“It looks like a lot, but it ain’t so much. Oh, almost forgot, wash it down with

this. It's disgusting as all hell, but good for ya." He pulled out a glass mug filled to the brim with some rancid-smelling purple substance that looked thoroughly poisonous.



“A-And what is that?” I stared at the ominous Substance X.

“Basically, it helps ya grow. Drink it and your muscles, endurance, reflexes, everything gets a boost.”

That sounded overpowered to me. Wait, how valuable was this stuff? Was it balanced by some kind of demerit?

“I’ve never heard of anything like that. How long does the effect last for? What are the downsides here?”

“Lasts for six hours. The only downside’s that it’s absolutely vile, don’t worry.” A fierce grin spread across his face.

“Is this stuff not expensive?”

“Nah, the Sage of Time made it. It’s totally on the house. No one wants to get strong so bad they’d actually drink the shit, though.”

Was this stuff really *that* catastrophically revolting? Would drinking this leave me on the floor?

“Brod, have you ever drunk...” I started to ask the empty space where Brod had been standing moments before.

“That guy’s long gone.”

He must’ve high-tailed it to get away from the stench, the fiend.

“Oh. Okay, then I’ll go ahead and dig in,” I said, redirecting my attention to the feast before me.

“Go for it. Gimme a shout if ya want seconds and I’ll whip somethin’ up!”

“Thank you.”

It was just as delicious as yesterday. I felt bad to think it, but it made the meals I’d had at the Healer’s Guild seem like peanuts. It was just that good.

I eyed Substance X as I ate. If its effect lasted for six hours, did that mean I would see it at every single meal? Surely no living being was meant to put that stuff in its mouth. I was genuinely worried about the chances my stomach had of keeping it down.

I suddenly realized that I'd finished eating while lost in my thoughts. Surprisingly, I still had room for more but judged it best not to overeat with training coming up. The wonders of a growth spurt, I suppose.

I picked up the mug and glanced at Gulgar. "Here goes."

One sip and my brain immediately rejected all notions that it was potable. Heat spread through my body and beads of sweat coalesced on my brow. "Substance X" was indeed an apt name for this liquid horror.

The taste invaded my mouth while the smell laid siege to my nostrils, nearly sending my consciousness to the hereafter, but the bear—er, I mean Gulgar's presence scared me into keeping it down. A thick bitterness, the stink, the pungency, spiciness, sourness, all manner of sensations took turns assailing my senses. If I let my guard down for even a moment, I'd surely black out, so I decided to go bottoms up and chug it all at once, which I miraculously managed to do. I felt a strange bubbling, a brimming sensation of some kind within my body.

"I'll be damned, you actually drank it! Luciel, was it? Brod wasn't lying about your nerve," Gulgar praised me.

"Um, thank you." Seriously, though, was that safe to drink? I took stock of my body, just in case, but everything seemed to be in order.

"Now go on and put in some hard work today."

"Thank you for all the food."

"I'll have lunch waitin' for ya too, so have at it," he replied.

I made my way downstairs.

*

"Luciel, eh? Can't believe that kid chugged the whole thing," Gulgar said to himself, looking into the empty mug. Any normal person would've thrown up or passed out from pure revulsion. "Oh, yeah, he's got guts."

He watched the boy leave the mess. He had never seen anyone but Brod manage to stomach the stuff, so the newbie was all right in his book. An idea came to him just then, but cleaning out the reeking mug took priority.

04 — Training Part 1: Martial Talent

Time flew by. A whole week had passed since I'd come to the Adventurer's Guild. I thought I'd gradually get used to the grueling lifestyle, but reality was not so kind.

"Ugh, sore again today."

That morning, I awoke to pain in my joints yet again. Aside from the first two mornings, they'd been tormenting me throughout the week.

I was in no position to grumble, though. After all, the source of this aching was ultimately my own stupidity... On the second morning, I'd kept up with my independent practice, but the session had consisted of nothing different from day one. After downing Substance X, and given the fact that my muscles weren't hurting, I'd wondered about stepping it up a notch. I had gotten a bit full of myself, thinking that with this young, new body, I could increase my level of training and become even stronger.

"Coach Brod, yesterday's session was definitely rough, but I'm not feeling any soreness. Do you think you could lay it on a bit more?" I blurted out like an idiot.

"Hmph, you're sturdier than I thought, for a healer."

I'll never forget those eyes, their intensity, the way they pierced me like a spear. It wasn't until the beginning of that afternoon's session that I discovered he had been considerate in his teaching so far, allowing even a healer like me to slowly but surely work up to the hard stuff.

Why, God, why did I have to let it go to my head? As much as I regretted my idiocy, I couldn't turn back time. We did the same things, that didn't change, but now there were penalties. For example, if I slowed down while running, he would show no mercy during stretches, no matter how much I cried uncle, or he would start parrying blows during sparring as opposed to simply dodging them. Clumsy punches and kicks got swiped away, this time with additional pain for

good measure.

I also started calling him *Coach* Brod around then. This seemed to make him happy, so I was hoping that it would soften him up, but our training didn't get any easier. Far from it, in fact. He continued to gradually ramp things up.

My schedule started with twelve hours of instruction, from seven in the morning to seven at night. Including breaks here and there, it was a little over eight hours start-to-finish.

Seventy percent of this time was working out and the remaining time was spent training martial arts. The rest of my day was used for magic training. The little bit of respite I'd felt at the Healer's Guild was nowhere to be seen. But I had brought it all upon myself. Maybe it was wishful thinking to hope that things would improve after this first month.

"Don't rest. Don't think. Just run. As fast as you can."

And today, I once again found myself doing laps around the training grounds. Not out of obligation but out of desperation to get past this stage as quickly as possible.

"You think those flimsy fists are gonna take down a monster? Lower your stance. Use your hips. Don't stop after one swing, no monster's going down that easy!" Brod lectured. "What, you wanna die? Huh?! You're not answering, so I guess that means you wanna die, don'tcha?!"

Brod's lambasting once wore on my spirit, but I now took his unbiased viewpoint with gratitude, although that wasn't to say I was used to it by any means. Any time my speed fell, I got a taste of that menacing aura of his. If he had cranked it up to pure bloodlust, I was positive my legs would be shaking too much to run, but thankfully he kept it toned down to reasonable levels.

How much free time did the guy have on his hands? On the first day, he had only coached me, but today he was running *with* me. He started out matching his pace to mine, but slowly pulled ahead until he had lapped me, closing in from behind like some kind of vicious predator. I knew it was Brod, sure, but my fight or flight response couldn't quite tell the difference and screamed at me to keep sprinting.

He'd eventually catch up, shout his sharp-tongued abuse, then pull ahead again, rinse and repeat. It never lost its sting. And throughout all of that, he never even broke a sweat, leading me to doubt whether we were actually the same species.

On the bright side, it made the regular adventurers a whole lot less scary, at least. That progress had to count for something.

Next, we stretched. This routine had changed little throughout the week. It was just a bunch of exercises with me bending my arms in directions they were never meant to go. I was grateful that he at least let me cast Heal the one time I dislocated something.

However, hands down the most crushing part of my training that week was the sparring. All throughout our stand-offs, Brod never let up on the menacing glares and stances that sent shivers down my spine. According to the adventurers I'd been healing, he was a completely different person during training. Everyone avoided that circle of hell like it was the plague.

I very much wished I'd had that information sooner. Thanks to that knowledge, or possibly how intimidating Brod constantly was, my stamina plummeted and my body felt heavy, like an anchor was weighing it down. I forced out trembling punches, barely managing to throw out kicks with stiff poles for legs.

The moment I gave up was the moment Brod would really start coming at me full-on, like a true enemy, or so he had warned me. I couldn't back out now. I had to keep going.

Every dodged blow drained my energy, but this was nowhere near being my biggest problem. That prize would go to the intense pain that shot through my arms and legs each time he retaliated. Although he did so lightly, the damage kept piling up. How much more unfair could he get? I continued attacking, enduring the pain, until I fell face-first onto the floor. But we weren't through yet.

"What, that's it? You'd rather die? If you say so, kid, guess I'll start coming at you for real. Keep those eyes open and take your stance. Now, I'm going to start attacking, but I'll go easy on ya, so block my hits. If you can't, then dodge." He

wasted no further breath and went on the offensive. How very “Brod-like” of him.

I had no stamina left. I was beaten and bruised. Moving was a chore. In a situation like this, all I could do was rack my brain and try to survive. Brod knew this and began sending out attacks at a slow enough pace for me to watch and use as references. Yeah, that perfect stance, this would definitely—

“Ah!”

I caught myself staring at the fist coming my way a little too late. One hard *thud* later and I was down for the count. Until another splash of water woke me up again, that is.

“You’re awfully full of yourself if you think you’ve got time to sit on your ass counting daisies when I’m right in front of you, kid.”

“Shorry...” I croaked, cradling my nose. I could’ve fixed this pain with Heal, but he hadn’t given me the go-ahead, so I was out of luck. Guess it was for my own good.

“I’m up now. Please, let’s try again.”

It wasn’t that I enjoyed pain or anything... Coach Brod would just be in a bad mood if I didn’t keep my head up, and that wasn’t conducive to a healthy learning environment. Rather than wasting time moping around, it would be more beneficial to use said time to try to get one over on him instead. He was attacking with my limits in mind, meaning if I somehow pushed past those limits, landing a hit wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility. I closed my fists tight.

“I told you, kid, don’t tense up before a hit. You’ll lose your edge. It makes you slower and your punches lighter.”

“Oh, right, sorry.”

“And don’t forget *I’m* doing the attacking right now. Get ready.”

I thought I would be able to dodge his slower movements, but his attacks seemed to almost stretch and chase me down. I would manage to jump back, take the hit with my arms, and get knocked into the air slightly after the impact

sent electricity shooting through my nerves. We'd repeat this dance over and over.

Every time offensive training turned into defensive training, I felt my spirit wilt a little, but Brod never waited. It took everything I had and more to block each and every blow. Pain always followed, and if I failed, I'd meet with a whole lot more of it and quickly pass out.

"It's because you're not *thinking*. Every attack has an intention behind it and if you misjudge it, you're gonna hurt," Brod barked. "Watch how you're attacking, how I deal with it. Think. Pound it into your head like your life depends on it!"

His heckling, in spite of how harsh it sounded, gave me direction. Brod was an excellent teacher, if a little extreme in his methods.

Pound it into my head like my life depends on it...

Well, that certainly made a lot of sense. My fighting experience consisted of one measly week of training, so now was the time to absorb as much knowledge as physically possible. Thinking of it that way made things a bit easier to swallow. I had a superior to rely on here. My only job right now was to try, fail, learn, repeat.

The fog cleared from my mind. "One more go, Coach Brod. Please."

"You really creep me out the way you smile after all that pain, y'know that?"

"It keeps me going. I'm going to land a hit on you, just you wait."

"Hmph, if you've got the steam left to talk shit, fine by me. I'm gonna break you just enough not to snap you, kid."

I laughed nervously. "Just a little joke!"

My dumb mouth and I had opened up a fresh new hell, but right then my salvation came in the form of people descending the stairs: injured adventurers.

After my first few patients, my healing services had spread by word of mouth. Before I knew it, I had droves of timid adventurers coming to test the waters, many of whom would return for particularly bad injuries that hampered their movements. Brod, unsurprisingly, wouldn't let the lighter wounds fly. He also seemed to be keeping track of who came, and how many times, but I just

focused on the task of healing. Obviously, we couldn't train during this time, so it served as a short breather as well. Injured adventurers were restored and I got a bit of rest—a win-win, really.

The patient in front of me today was a cat beastwoman, a rarity. And she was a girl, at that. On account of the glares from her party, however, casual chat seemed to be out of the question.

“So, what’s bothering you today?”

“Will you...really heal me?” she asked dubiously.

Honestly, the fact that she didn't throw in a “meow” stole my attention even more than her suspicious tone. Yeah, in my dreams, maybe. People didn't go out of their way to toss weird words into their speech for no reason. I felt a bit more cultured now.

I nodded. “I will. That’s what I’m here for. What seems to be the matter?”

“I was attacked by a Wererat. It bit my back and legs.”

A wererat, huh? This world had poisoning and paralysis, but what would happen if bacteria infected a wound?

“Heal should close up the wound itself,” I explained, “but it’s possible it could be infected, so I recommend you see a doctor if you start feeling ill. May I heal you?”

“Yes, please.”

I healed up the bite, as offered, and the girl burst into tears. *Oh no, did I do something wrong?*

“Um, what’s the matter?”

“Hey, healer, what’s your name?” one of the adventurers asked.

“I’m Luciel.” *Uh-oh, I’d better keep my composure here.*

“Luciel...you use magic on beastfolk.”

“Er, I’m not following. Humans, beastpeople, they’re all patients in the end. Is that not a given?”

From the way this man, who appeared to be the leader, spoke, it sounded an

awful lot like beastpeople were discriminated against, but I felt no such biases towards the folks who worked at the guild. Was it a problem with the attitudes of healers in particular?

“You’re a good guy, Luciel. Can we come back if we’re ever injured again?”

“Of course. My doors are always open.” I smiled and bowed, when the girl who was crying suddenly hugged me tight and my heart stopped.

“Thank you. I’ll come again next time I’m hurt, okay?” she whispered in my ear before letting go.

“Let us know if you’re ever in a bind,” said the leader as they headed back upstairs.

“Brod, who were they?”

“I’ll look into it later.”

Well, yeah, I guess I couldn’t expect him to have the members of every single party memorized. With our short break over, we resumed sparring. Not once had it crossed my mind that with this one act of healing beastfolk, my number of patients would quickly skyrocket.

“So you made it through your first week.” Brod patted my shoulder as we finished, looking pleased. I supposed not many people lasted that long.

“Somehow. And I do feel my body improving little by little, so I don’t plan on running off.”

“Of course you don’t. Now come on, I don’t wanna see any scraps on that plate today.” He started towards the dining hall and I followed, wondering if he truly was worried that I’d ditch them.

If healing adventurers was a respite, then mealtime was paradise. Even compared to the food I’d eaten in my past life, Gulgar’s cooking was nothing to sneeze at. That wolf-man boasted quite the repertoire and every dish he put out was different from the last. From steak to hamburgers to a kind of hodgepodge of beef stew and pot-au-feu, to something like fried udon, all (to my surprise) making liberal use of spices.

Unfortunately, there were no sweets, but it would be no exaggeration to say that this delicious food was what carried me through the hell of training. If none of it had been palatable, I might very well have booked it by now. I wasn't sure where I would have gone, exactly, but still.

At any rate, this nirvana that sandwiched my training sessions kept my motivation fairly high. If I had to find something to complain about, it would be just how much food there was, but any time I brought it up, I got the same reply:

"Eating's part of being an adventurer. Leave nothing on your plate."

Greens weren't generally included with the main dishes, but Gulgar was always kind enough to make a warm, nutritious salad for me at breakfast. He was a man of few words but many adventurers often came to him for advice.

"So, how was training today?"

"Hard to say," Brod answered. "He's not up to snuff yet... Gonna take a month or so to get to the real stuff."

"A month, eh? Think he'll survive your boot camp?"

"Ask the kid yourself."

They both turned to me.

"All...all I can do for now is my best. It's only been a week, but I've been improving, even if only a little at a time. I really think I have. But to be honest, it's Gulgar's food that keeps me going."

"You've got a good mouth on ya. Oh, finished already? How's about seconds?"

"No, thank you, I'm stuffed."

"Oh, yeah?" Gulgar went back into the kitchen, leaving Brod and me alone. Awkward...

My instructor took a swig of ale from his mug and thought for a moment. "Listen, kid. Personally, I say it's still too early to start on weapons, but what do you think? Want to give it a shot?"

Hesitating over which direction to take his teaching in, was he? I'd definitely be worried about having only close-quarters combat options on the off chance I actually left the city. It would be nice to learn some sort of ranged techniques as well.

"I don't intend to get myself into any fights, but in case I ever get sucked into one, I'd like to have mid-to long-range options on hand so I can escape."

"Mid-to long-range. Got it. I'm heading back first. Let Gulgar know."

"I will. Thank you again for today."

"Yep."

He left the mess. Not long after, Gulgar returned carrying a mug of Substance X.

"Do I *really* have to drink all this?"

"Sure do. You wanna get stronger, don'tcha?"

I could say nothing to that, so I accepted the mug and downed its contents.

Gulgar's food was oh so delicious. It was a shame I never got to savor the tastes seeing as I had to destroy my nose and tongue after every meal.

"Disgusting" didn't even begin to describe it. Drinking the solution took actual physical effort to keep from blacking out and I really could do without it. Although, in a way, this *was* part of my meal, so if I turned it down, Gulgar would most likely force me to drink it anyway, blowing our relationship to smithereens.

Once, several days earlier, I'd seen a group of adventurers who had failed to polish off the mountains of food stacked on their plates. Gulgar had blown a fuse.

"Look at all these ingredients you've wasted! If ya couldn't eat it, why'd ya order all of it? I'm not letting any o' you outta this mess hall 'till you eat every last crumb!"

The adventurers flung back complaints but quickly shut their mouths after the cook glared at them with the rage of a grizzly. Their subsequent sobs were muffled by mouthfuls of food. Ever since, I've made it a way of life to never ever

leave leftovers.

After carefully turning down Gulgar's offer for another dose of Substance X, I returned to my room, threw myself onto the bed, opened up my status screen, and reviewed my progress.

"I don't think I'd have managed to learn even Heal without that Assess Mastery skill. It's nice to know I'm doing things right."

At the end of every day, I made full use of the special advantage that one skill afforded me, then practiced Magic Control and Magic Handling before heading off to bed. That was my life now. It was a full one, despite one small problem... I kept getting this feeling like I was being watched. I hadn't noticed it at first, but every passing day I felt eyes on me more and more.

In the beginning, I'd chalked it up to me overthinking things, until I started suspecting some kind of stalker. In that case, though, I wouldn't have felt like the gazes on me were increasing, so I abandoned that line of thought. All the same, it made me uneasy. I decided I'd bring it up to Brod tomorrow.

The next morning, I mentioned my concerns.

"Lately, it feels like I'm being watched by someone... No, by several people. It's always when I leave my room and when I'm on the first floor."

Neither Brod nor Gulgar said anything. From the way they averted their eyes as opposed to answering me like they usually did, I knew who the culprits were: the guild staff and the adventurers.

"Can you please explain why I'm being put under surveillance?" The only privacy I had at this point was in the confines of my own room, and it was starting to wear on me.

"Sorry, kid. I know it doesn't excuse it, but I promise no one means anything bad by it," Brod said. "Folks who become adventurers usually aren't born into well-off families. They don't know better, so they take reckless jobs and get themselves hurt. That doesn't matter to them, though. They need money to live, so they get back up and take more requests because that's all they *can* do."

Rinse and repeat a few times and before ya know it, you've got no choice but to retire young."

Starting out as an adventurer had a lot of overhead costs for sure, so getting by in the beginning must have taken about as much effort as one could muster. If I weren't a healer, I'd likely be in the same boat. Was there no training course for newbies? I certainly didn't recall hearing of anything like that when I registered.

"Does the guild not do any training or guiding of these fresh adventurers?"

"Nothing compulsory."

The oppressive gloom behind his words made me realize something. For the sake of stabilizing what little, shaky income new and weaker adventurers could make, I, a healer, was a necessity. When they inevitably got hurt, my healing would allow them to get back out into the field and bring in money again the next day. These people's lives had been forced into my hands without me even realizing it. At the very least, I understood why he didn't want me to leave. Evidently, the trust in our relationship still had a ways to go.

"It's not fair of me to say all this. I just wanted you to know the circumstances these greenhorns are in."

"I'm not going anywhere this month, so please, would you stop all the spying? That's all I ask."

Brod paused for a moment before replying. "Sure."

I had confirmed my intention to remain for the month, but a shadow still lingered over his face. Seeing a man who was normally so merciless during training suddenly look so downtrodden was too much for my heart to bear, so I let my promise be the end of it.

"And I mean it. The next time I feel like someone's watching me, I'll make them down a mug of you-know-what with me."

He cracked a dry smile. "That's pretty low, kid."

"Just so you know, that includes you, too," I grinned back. The look of despair that spread across his face sent me cackling.

Brod looked like he had more to say, but he kept silent. Gulgar clunked a mug of Substance X down in front of me, then promptly disappeared back into the kitchen without a word.

From that point on, my relationships with the staff and my ties to the adventurers would begin to change.

“Hey, thanks for the healin’ earlier, boss. I’ll be back again if I need some more.”

“Just be careful and try to keep that to a minimum, okay?”

The eyes I’d felt on me vanished the day after my talk with Brod. Everyone started coming up to me directly instead. Not to intimidate me or anything, thankfully, but it was going to take some time for me to get used to it. Heck, they even outright apologized to me for their previous hostility. I still couldn’t believe how fast I’d gone from barely managing to ask *why* I’d been under surveillance to outright telling them to stop.

Not all the adventurers were scary-looking, by any means. Many of them seemed quite gentle, although a particularly obstinate one with a short fuse could have easily put me in my place. Nevertheless, I’d begun to enjoy my time at the Adventurer’s Guild. Clothes and other small trinkets started coming my way as tokens of appreciation.

“Thank you for everything,” they would say.

“I heard you were short on clothes.”

“Thanks for makin’ the guild a nice place to be.”

And so on.

Adventurers weren’t the only ones giving me things, either. Even the guild staff got in on the action. I was sad, however, that not one of these presents came from a girl. Very sad indeed.

But my relationships with everyone were looking up and I was running out of places to put all of my new stuff. When I mentioned this to Brod, he had the spare beds in my room removed and set me up with a chest and a dresser. Such privileged treatment left me dumbfounded. I was determined to do everything I

could to repay their kindness.

Within a few days, I had everything I could ever need and realized that I'd lost any and all reason to leave the grounds. Well, aside from hightailing it to escape my training, I suppose, but Coach Brod would undoubtedly come after me, so that'd be the very definition of pointless. I was sitting pretty here, though. Stepping outside of the guild walls no longer seemed necessary.

"They're not trying to butter me up, are they?" I wondered to myself. "Nah, I'm thinking too much."

Reconvinced, I finished my morning Heal, Meditation, Magic Control, and Magic Handling practice, then made for the dining hall.

"Hey, kid. You're early today." Brod was already sitting at the counter when I arrived.

"Good morning, and same to you, Coach Brod. Oh, good morning, Gulgar. Can I please have breakfast?"

"Comin' right up. I'm gonna start givin' ya a bit more from today."

"Er, I think we're already at the limit of what I can stomach."

"You're 'bout to learn the *real* definition of 'limit,'" the wolf-man sneered. After laying out all my plates, he slipped into the kitchen to fetch some Substance X.

Brod slowly began to speak. "Listen, kid, I'll be honest with you. As far as combat goes, you don't have a shred of natural talent."

I didn't recall ordering a side of depression with my morning meal. My mental fortitude wasn't all that great to begin with, so his words hit me pretty hard. However, his eyes were sincere and unflinching. There had to be a reason he was telling me this.

"I had a feeling," I confessed, my voice trembling. My mastery was increasing, therefore I was improving. I had used that line of thought as an excuse to ignore the truth—I had no actual talent. And it wasn't just an imbalance of offense or defense. I didn't want to attack. I didn't want to get hit. My heart and mind were in conflict.

When I first came to this world, I had wanted power—specifically, the power to avoid an unfair death. But in my past life, I'd never once gotten into a single fight. Deep down, I was afraid of harming someone. That much became clear to me during my daily training with Brod. To rub salt into the wound, I couldn't even *try* to follow his attacks, nor had I found any semblance of a knack for martial arts myself.

I waited for Brod to continue. He closed his eyes and nodded. "But what you do have a talent for is putting in the effort. You've got a tenacious mindset that pushes you to keep going."

"O-Oh, um, thank you." I was relieved, if a little embarrassed, that he didn't come right out and say he was abandoning me. I fidgeted and awkwardly scratched my cheek.

He opened his eyes and looked into mine. "As long as you keep trying, I won't hang you out to dry, kid. Don't give up, and at the very least, you'll learn how to defend yourself. I know you will."

I turned to him and bowed. "I'm counting on your teaching until then."

"All right, finish eating and it's back to training. We're gonna start building up your body for real from now on. Weapons are joining the curriculum, too."

"Weapons? You mean the sharp kind?"

"I do. But don't worry, I'll be sure to cut shallow," he said with a glint in his eyes.

I predicted many a near-death experience in my future if I let my guard down. My head started spinning.

"Hurry up and finish that plate, kid," he pushed.

To be honest, I'd lost my appetite entirely, but fear of Gulgar outweighed that concern. *Speaking of the devil, here he comes now, carrying a mug of Substance X.*

"Huh? Not done yet? Here, this is what you're drinkin' from now on." He set it on the counter.

The sinister nature of the drink was unchanged, except there was now more

of it. A lot more. About one and a half times more than my usual amount, at a glance.

“This is a joke, right?”

“You can drink it, can’tcha? It’d make ya stronger if you did.”

Like I was gonna fall for that. I finished up my breakfast. “I really can’t stand this stuff, so if you could make it the usual—”

“Kid, just drink it. We’ve got work to do.”

“Yes, sir.”

So, Brod was in on it, too. Making these guys my enemies would certainly spell disaster for me. They held the reins when it came to my relaxation time. But this was no simple beer mug, it was a full pitcher! I decided that someday I would give them a taste of their own medicine, and then downed the vile solution. Brod told me he’d be at the training grounds and left.

Substance X wasn’t at all filling, so I wasn’t worried about bloating myself right before our session. In fact, the taste and smell would’ve brought the entire meal right back up if Gulgar’s intense presence hadn’t forced me to keep it down.

“Phew, that was close. You must be pretty strong too, Gulgar, if you’ve got that same crazy aura as Coach Brod.”

“Gimme a shout if you ever feel like testin’ your luck!” he howled as he cleaned up the dishes.

He’s gotta be one tough guy... I swore to myself I would never go toe-to-toe with him for any reason. “I think I’ll pass. See you later.”

Gulgar guffawed again behind me as I made my way out.

When I reached the training grounds, Brod was standing right in the middle, menacing as always, but something was different today.

“Sorry for the wait. So, um, why is there a mountain of rocks here?”

And that something was the massive pile of stones next to him.

“Starting today, you’re not gonna be running after breakfast. You’re gonna practice throwing these rocks at the target over there. Get used to it enough and you’ll be able to nab the Throwing skill.”

“This is what I requested before, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. No matter how much we polish your combat skills to the point where you can actually hold your own up close, there’ll still be all sorts of folks—and *things*—that are stronger than you. So I’m gonna have you get the Throwing skill to a level that’ll at least give ’em pause. Something to look out for.”

He picked up a rock and tossed it lightly. A second later, a loud *bang*, like a gunshot going off, echoed across the grounds and a hole appeared in the middle of the target. That had to be what the Throwing skill was capable of, but I hadn’t caught so much as a glimpse of it. The sound sent my heart pounding like crazy. It seemed that memories of one’s death weren’t so easily erased.

“You’ll eventually be able to do the same. What’s the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

As worried as he was for me, I couldn’t start talking about another world. They would think I was insane. I forced a smile and shook my head. “It’s nothing. So I’m just throwing rocks?”

“Right. You’ll start with rocks, move on to daggers, then javelins. But for now, just rocks.” He handed me a smooth, round stone. It was light and easy to hold. It must’ve been specially chosen for training purposes.

“Is there anything I should know first?”

“For now, throw it as hard as you can, like you’re actually trying to inflict damage. When you’ve got that down, figure out for yourself how to boost the speed, distance, and power of your throws.”

“Yes, sir.”

I understood that independent practice was important in its own right. Back in the day, I’d been all about playing baseball, so I knew a thing or two about throwing, but it’d take years for me to get to Coach Brod’s level. I already felt my spirits plummeting. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, though.

I pitched the rock, tapping into all those years of playing catch. It drew a parabola through the air towards the target, which it hit less than thirty centimeters from the center.

“You being serious, kid? You think the enemy’s gonna lie down and cry for mommy ’cause you tossed some shit at a bullseye?!”

Yet again, I’d royally ticked off my instructor. Thank God there were no other adventurers here. I could hear the stifled laughter now.

“I’m sorry, I just wanted to get a feel for the weight and distance.”

“We don’t have all day. And rocks aren’t all going to be the same size or weight, anyway. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Like I said, you’ll move up in difficulty slowly. From stones to daggers to javelins. That way, even a healer like you should be able to keep your distance from the enemy if you’re ever attacked.”

“Thank you, I’ll do my best.”

“Now listen. Don’t think about taking anyone down with this. That’s not the goal. Hammer that into your head.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I want to see all those stones gone in the next hour.”

“This many...?”

“Not enough?”

“No, sir... I’ll get right on it.”

I picked up a piece of the mountainous stone pile and got to work throwing as hard as I could. Some tosses hit their mark, some didn’t. This process repeated, and repeated. Then, something came to me. A month of training wasn’t nearly enough time to learn anything. I was the one who had asked to renew our deal on a monthly basis, but my assumption that I’d get strong enough to handle myself in such a short time was so off base that it hurt.

“I acted like I understood, but somewhere deep down I must’ve still thought I

was the protagonist.”

How was I supposed to progress to throwing javelins in only two weeks? I couldn't. It was impossible. Hell, one month wasn't even enough time to work out and fully condition my body. Brod had surely known this and gone along with my terms in spite of it. Maybe he hadn't expected me to be able to withstand the pressure.

“Slow and steady wins the race, I guess,” I said thoughtfully. “Three years... Maybe that'll be enough for me to learn what I need to get by in this world.”

As the days passed, I spent them going between my room, the dining hall, and the training grounds, and held on to that determination.

I woke up and practiced my Magic Handling while stretching. After throwing practice on my own, I ate my fill of Gulgar's cooking and downed some Substance X. An hour more of throwing and I started sprinting laps while enduring Coach Brod's usual pressure.

In place of stretches, our sparring time had increased, along with the number of adventurers coming to me for healing services. Some even timidly came knocking from outside Merratoni itself, swelling the population of adventurers in the city.

I peered at Brod, who was off to the side, cheerfully rattling on about it to Gulgar. Although it left me a bit embarrassed, it made me happy, too. It was like I'd been accepted, in a way. Brod never outright praised me; it was always indirectly, that hardhead.

The other adventurers, too, had begun to see me as an actual guild-affiliated healer because I was practically at his side twenty-four seven. I was glad to have their support. That way, they wouldn't go baring their fangs at me. For now, at least.

“Now I'm really, truly accepted. Or at least I'd like to think that, but life's never that simple, is it?” The reason for that acceptance was probably because I was a member of the guild staff.

“What're you mumbling to yourself about, kid?”

“Oh, excuse me. I was just thinking about how fast this first month blew by.” I couldn’t go blurting out that I’d been getting all sentimental while thinking back on everything.

Brod and Gulgar were currently eating breakfast together. Today marked the end of our contract. Anxiety was mixed in with the relief that I felt. I had no idea how things would look going forward, or if I would be able to renew our agreement. The terrifying aura that I felt continuously emanating from my coach didn’t help matters.

“Well, that’s your first month done, kid. You really hung in there,” he said.

“Thank you. Somehow, thanks to Gulgar’s cooking, I managed to make it out without mentally snapping. Really, thank you for everything.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he grinned. “I still can’t believe I got to watch you chug that crap after every meal, so I’m plenty satisfied.”

“Don’t get me wrong, that stuff was rancid. But again, Coach, thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“So, about moving forward... I’m going to go work at a clinic to save up some more money. After that, I’d love to train under you again.”

He paused. “Money?”

“Yes. The guild’s taken care of my every need here, every day, but I have almost nothing to my name. I need to pay my dues at the Healer’s Guild and buy grimoires in order to learn new spells.”

“That’s what you need money for?”

“Right. I can’t let myself get blacklisted from the guild for not paying my dues on time.”

“So, say you had the money. What would you do then?”

“Er, I don’t. That’s why I brought it up.”

“Just suppose someone paid your dues for the year. What then?”

“That’s hard for me to say, but I suppose I would ask if you would continue my training. I still can’t defend myself in the slightest.”

Brod smirked and pulled out a leather bag from his coat pocket. “Oh, yeah? Well, here’s your reward for sticking it out for a month. And for saving all those lives. Take it. Use it to pay your dues, then get your ass back here.”

Inside were twelve silver coins. “Wh—This—What?!” I was a bit dumbfounded, to say the least. I should have been paying *them*, but *I* was the one being paid?

“You worked hard, healing all those adventurers. Thanks to you, fewer of them are dying. I figured you deserved a little something.”

Frankly, I wanted to accept, no questions asked, but that would be in poor taste. Declining once out of politeness was the right move here. “I’m extremely grateful, but twelve silver coins is a lot of money, isn’t it? I can’t just accept this from you. Especially after you’ve given me food and a bed for so long.”

Saying it out loud really drove home how ridiculously lucky I’d been this month.

“Just take it. You’ve got a long way to go, twerp, so your training doesn’t end today. Now get to the Healer’s Guild and do what you need to do.” He grinned again, and it goes without saying that the look sent a chill down my spine.

I took the bag. “Understood. I gratefully accept. I’ll head out as soon as I down this pitcher.”

“You do that.”

To mark off the acquisition of my year’s dues thanks to Brod’s goodwill, I chugged the dose of Substance X, then let out a hearty sigh.

“Okay, I’m off.”

“I think you’d better give it thirty minutes, kid.”

Now that he mentioned it, I probably shouldn’t go to the Healer’s Guild with my breath smelling like it currently did, so I took his advice and waited.

Thirty minutes later, my breath cleared up and my enthusiasm slightly dampened, I finally left the Adventurer’s Guild. It had been so long since I last set foot on the streets of Merratoni that I found myself slightly flustered.

“Now that I think about it, I don’t know much about this place, do I? Just the way from the city gates to the Healer’s Guild, and from there to the Adventurer’s Guild. That’s about it.”

I looked up at the sky. The pleasant weather made me want to laze around and just soak it in, but I settled for a nice stretch and started walking. Seeing all the people bustling about the streets reminded me that my fears still remained.

“Well, if it isn’t Luciel!” a fellow staff member called out to me.

“Where ya off to?”

“You’re not leavin’ the guild, are you?” another asked.

“What?!” the rest blurted out in unison.

“Quiet down, everyone. Was today the end of your request, Mister Luciel?”

I knew Nanaella would have a grip on the situation. “That’s right. I’m heading for the Healer’s Guild right now. I’ll be back later.” I cut the explanation short to save time and slipped past them.

“You’d better be!” I heard them call out behind me. It warmed my heart. I silently thanked them and picked up the pace.

Along the way, I met with no adventurers, but the fact that I was still so conscious of those kinds of encounters proved that my phobia was alive and well.

I sighed. “How long’s it gonna take me to talk with these people like a normal person?”

As I entered the healers’ office, a girl’s voice sounded from behind the counter. “Welcome to the Church of Saint Shurule’s Merratoni branch Healer’s Guild!”

I looked over and saw that it was Monica.



“Good morning, Monica.”

“Oh, you’re Mister Luciel, as I recall.”

“I’m flattered that you remember me. When did the guild start welcoming people this way?”

“Just recently, actually.”

“Sounds like you guys are hard at work.”

“That we are.” She forced a smile, then put her work face right back on, just like a receptionist. “So, what can I do for you?”

“I’d like to pay my dues. For the remaining eleven months, to be exact, if that’s all right.”

“Yes, sir, thank you very much. Can I have your guild card, please?”

“Here.” I handed it over.

“Mister Luciel, G-rank healer. The remaining year’s dues will be eleven silver pieces.”

“Right.” I set the silver that I’d gotten from Brod onto the counter.

“Thank you. However, I should ask, are you certain? Your rank is still low, and if you are promoted within the year, we’ll need an additional tax from you.”

How kind of her to caution me. The value of a healer changes with one’s rank, and paying my full year at the lowest rung was akin to saying I had no intention of improving or moving up. I also had to consider the fact that I needed to reach higher ranks to learn more magic. Because a healer’s rank and Holy Magic skill are proportional, my level two skill could get me up to F-rank, but this would also mean an increase in my taxes. Seeing as I wanted to bide my time at the Adventurer’s Guild for *at least* a year, increasing my expenses didn’t sound too appealing. Although I was certainly intrigued by the idea of acquiring new magic.

“Yes, I’m sure. Learning more magic is important, but I need to be able to stand on my own two feet first.”

“Understandable. Opening a clinic is rather costly, but I do have to

recommend that you learn new spells regardless.”

“I’ll take you up on that once I’ve saved enough to handle a promotion.”

She giggled. “You’re awfully interesting, Mister Luciel. I understand. Thank you for your payment and here’s your card back.”

“Thank you.”

“Keep working hard, okay?” She saw me off with a smile.

On my way back to the Adventurer’s Guild, I thought about how dead silent the healers’ base had been. Sitting in there, not a soul to be found, had to be harsh. There’d always been a kind of energy around the office in my past life, but there was none to be found here.

Maybe I’ll bring a little something with me next time.

When I’d first arrived in this world, I didn’t have the slightest awareness of any of that. Maybe that was thanks to Lumina or Kururu. More likely, it was thanks to how little time and room I’d had to think about it. Even less than I had now.

I hurried back to the Adventurer’s Guild.

“Well, you made it,” Brod smirked. This was the first thing out of his mouth, the moment that I returned. He’d totally been hanging out to see when I returned.

“Um, were you waiting on me this whole time?”

Behind him, Nanaella and two other human receptionists, Melina and Mernell, were giggling like schoolgirls.

“Not really. Come on, we’ve got training to do.”

“Shouldn’t we set up a new agreement first?”

“Nanaella, his card?”

“Got it right here!” she bubbled.

“Go renew it.”

“Roger that!”

“Is consent a part of this equation?” I asked.

“There, contract’s taken care of.” Brod grabbed my arm and dragged me towards the training grounds.

“Ow, hey, Coach! That hurts!”

I searched for someone, any kind soul, to save me, but they had all abandoned me. The receptionists waved goodbye.

After I somehow endured the far-worse-than-usual training and finished up my lunch, Brod pulled a grimoire from his bag: “A Guide to Low-Level Holy Magic.” It looked a little worn, but this was the first grimoire I had seen outside of the Healer’s Guild, where I’d learned my first spell. I was kind of excited.

“Thought I’d give you something for making it back, kid. Should come in handy.”

“What am I, some lost puppy?!” I quipped. “Why do you have a Holy Magic grimoire?”

By “low-level,” I could assume it wasn’t all that expensive, but it was still strange for an Adventurer’s Guild to have such a thing.

“The Heal spell for wounds and the Cure spell for poison are a healer’s bread and butter. Right now, you’ve only got Heal. Study this and complete the set.”

He hadn’t answered my question, but at least I’d found out that this book tackled the Cure spell. Gulgar was over at the counter, chuckling to himself about Brod’s huffy attitude, but if I did the same, I’d be seeing stars at evening training.

“Thank you. I’m happy you thought of me. I’m going to keep doing my best, so I appreciate your continuing instruction,” I said with a bow.

“Right,” he answered curtly, causing Gulgar to burst out laughing.

“You’re raring to go, aren’tcha? Down this and get on with it!” The wolf-man clunked a mug of Substance X down in front of me, as he did with every meal, then disappeared into the kitchen to escape the smell.

“Drink,” Brod ordered. “We’ve got work to do.”

“Easy for you to say when you’re not the one who has to taste it,” I grumbled.

“No reason for me to. I’m heading out first.” With that, he was gone.

“Well, if I’m late, I’ll never hear the end of it...” I heaved a sigh. “Down the hatch, I suppose.”

I stomached the nasty goop and then hurried after Brod, certain that I would manage to land a hit on him within the year.

And so began my life at the Adventurer’s Guild in earnest.

05 — Substance X and Something New

Adventurer's Guild - Healer's Guild - Luciel

Occupation: Offering free healing services to adventurers.

Hobbies: Training and sparring.

Personality: Mild-mannered, hard-working, masochistic, defective tongue, shut-in.

This was how the adventurers saw me three months into my life since joining the guild. My job was saving lives with the Heal spell and, more recently, Cure as well. As for my listed hobbies, those were based on how often I worked on combat with Coach Brod.

“Training and sparring? I’m sensing a misunderstanding here, but oh well.”

Working out and sparring were just parts of my daily routine at this point, and Brod was the one who decided on the schedule, so I couldn’t do much about how it looked from the outside.

My inability to land a single blow drove me mad. Motivation wasn’t an issue, since he’d started actually complimenting me lately, but still. Other things that kept me going during this time were my three meals a day, my bed, and the recent gifts of clothes and such that I’d been receiving. It was quite the positive work environment. I was getting along well enough to have conversations with women, but not so well that any of them offered their own presents. And my eyes were sweating again...

Now, about that “mild-mannered” part of my personality. There was something to this that they just weren’t getting. Think about it... Who in their right mind would go acting all pompous towards the bigger fish? Try it and see if you don’t get swallowed whole.

Thankfully, I passed my days in peace without any adventurers attempting to rough me up. There had actually been one who’d come at me saying that I needed to prioritize who I treated, before Brod and some others dragged him

off somewhere. Needless to say, I had never expected that to happen. Still, many adventurers mistook me for an employee, so I didn't have to worry about anyone jumping me within the guild's walls. I'd once been spotted wearing a guild uniform for fun, which only added to the misunderstanding.

At any rate, I had healed plenty of adventurers. I wasn't too worried about getting into trouble, and even if I did, I was sure that someone would come and save my hide. That was one less source of anxiety, at least.

"Apparently, they say I'm a hard worker because of how hard I train every day, but I'm only doing it to get stronger. Is that weird?"

I let that little bit of nerves take over, but only for a moment. There were mercenaries in this world, not just adventurers, who strutted around in full combat gear. If I didn't learn how to defend myself, I'd be buying a one-way ticket to the afterlife should worst come to worst.

Training makes perfect sense, I convinced myself. "Still..."

"You say somethin', Luciel?" Gulgar tilted his head at me.

"According to my reputation around the guild lately, I'm a 'masochist with a defective tongue.' And that 'defective tongue' part is one hundred percent thanks to that hideous stuff you make me drink with every meal."

"I bet. You never cease to amaze me." He shot me a thumbs-up and a grin, but I was not entertained.

"Rather than praise me, would you mind doing something about the taste?"

"I'll think about it. But y'know, Luciel, you keep on drinkin' the X, so you musta noticed the benefits, am I right?"

I grimaced. "You've got me there. What *is* it, even? What's it made out of?"

Its effects were nothing to sneeze at. I couldn't help but be curious about what sort of ingredients went into it.

"I dunno the details. Every Adventurer's Guild's got a supply, though. Heard the Sage of Time made it."

"A sage... Wait, hold on, you mean you've been making me drink something you don't know anything about?"

To say I was put off would be an understatement. This was not how trust was built in relationships.

“Yep. It’s not for everyone. Some pass out; beastfolk can’t stand the smell. By the way, every registered adventurer here’s had at least a sip.”

This absolute scoundrel, I thought. Gulgar, however, looked completely innocent and unfazed.

“So, how much do the guild’s stores have?”

“It’s unlimited. Every guild’s got a magical tool that the Sage of Time made. Put magic into it and Substance X comes out.”

Unlimited... I’d been praying and hoping his stock would somehow run dry. But I guess there was no hope of that.

“I get that it’s good for me, but what I don’t understand is why you make me drink it. Any normal person would outright hate you for putting this crap in front of them. Is there some reason I’m getting this very special treatment?”

“There is, but that’s what you call ‘classified.’” He smirked and vanished into the kitchen.

“Well, now I’m even more curious.” I looked at the purple, reeking ooze in the pitcher before me. Official name: Substance X (no, seriously). By some twist of fate, this absolutely rancid beverage held strange benefits. Drinking it, or rather *continually* drinking it, was practically cheating. It was pretty darn overpowered. You wouldn’t know this without the Assess Mastery skill, though, so I was the only one who’d regularly consumed it these last three months.

Gulgar surely had no idea. Blind belief truly was a double-edged sword. He’d hinted that drinking it would make me stronger, and with the way it heated you up, as if a fire had been lit inside of you, I could see why he would think that. The truth, however, was far more unbelievable.

I’d discovered it purely by coincidence. After my first day of training, I had noticed all sorts of skill increases—including resistances to every status condition, aside from charm, and skills for increased stats growth. I had assumed that was simply because it was my first day, but it was strange how skills related to status conditions had been affected. Then, I remembered

Substance X.

The next day, I checked my skills before and after drinking it and confirmed that they had indeed increased again. It was then that I'd decided to drink it after every meal.

"Calling me masochistic and saying that my tongue's defective is still kind of harsh," I said to Gulgar when he returned. All I was doing was trying to improve myself. Dubbing it "masochistic" was uncalled for.

"If you can drink that junk, you ain't normal. And there's that smile you sometimes crack while Brod's puttin' you through the wringer."

"I do *not* smile. Anyone who can smile at that demon's torture has got to have a couple screws loose."

"Exactly. You're just not noticing it. And you're not the first Brod's taught fightin' to. There've been plenty, and the only ones who kept at it were partial to a certain fetish." Gulgar looked off into the distance contemplatively.

If I didn't deny this here and now, there'd be no turning back. "Nope, nu-uh, I'm perfectly *normal*, thank you. Insult and injury absolutely do *not* get my rocks off," I vehemently protested.

"You're young. I get it. You're shy." He gently patted my shoulder.

"You don't get anything!" I shouted. "I'm going to train."

"Work hard. And make sure you drink all of that."

"Chugging this first thing in the morning really sucks, you know?"

"Hey, you're used to it, ain'tcha?"

"Fair enough."

I picked up the pitcher, put a hand on my hip, and gulped it all down at once. It was putrid, rank, sickening, yet I swallowed every last drop. A sense of fulfillment bubbled up inside of me.

"See? You're smilin'," Gulgar remarked.

I shot him a look, then headed downstairs where Coach Brod was waiting.

My three months with Brod had passed in the blink of an eye and I was finally beginning to feel the progress on some level. I could run for longer, had become more flexible, and could throw more accurately. I still couldn't lay a finger on my instructor, but I'd built up quite the resistance to his counter-attacks, even if he was still holding back. My Martial Arts skill was now at level two, with Holy Magic sitting just below level four after a full month at level three.

Another thing that I'd noticed about my casting ability was how spell efficacy increased with each level, meaning my Heal casts were far more potent now, no doubt thanks to all of the patients I'd been tending to. No matter how vivid the image in one's head when one casts a spell, nothing beats hands-on experience. It didn't take much time at all for my room to turn into a small-scale clinic, what with my new and improved capabilities.

My Martial Arts skill had progressed slower than I'd hoped, but this came as no real shock, nor did it deter me. I wasn't exactly an experienced fighter. The exceedingly normal rate at which my stats and skills were improving kept me grounded, made me understand that I wasn't special, and for some reason brought a sense of relief. It made me happy.

Several days after I had returned from the Healer's Guild, I'd asked some adventurers who'd come in for treatment what *they* did to get stronger. Most of them had stated, "Defeating monsters," while others simply had said that "bodybuilding" was the way.

When I brought it up with Brod, he taught me that a person could indeed improve their stats through weight training, even without leveling up. The next day, I got to work, all fired up over the idea, but he immediately put a stop to it.

"Did you listen to a thing I told you? Bodybuilding makes you 'stronger,' but only in the most basic sense of the word. It completely throws off your balance. It's ineffective. Didn't I tell you to use the time to squeeze in as much combat training as you can?"

"I just wanted to verify it for myself. To see if it was really true."

"Yeah? I thought you finally broke and got sick of losing. If that ever does happen, go up against some of the other adventurers," he said with a vicious grin.

I couldn't tell if that had been meant to rile me up or to pile on the pressure. Either way, a new curiosity—an interest in just how strong the others were—had sparked within me. My fear and the desire to test myself were in brutal conflict, but I suppressed the inner turmoil.

“It improves your stats, though, doesn't it?”

“That's right, but stuff like push-ups or sit-ups make it harder to improve flexibility. It's better to build up that muscle in combat.”

“Understood.”

“Also, just say the word if you ever wanna try sparring with someone else.”

“I will, thanks.”

For several days after that, I continued to devote myself to training, the nervousness roiling inside me. But in the end, nobody came to the training grounds for anything other than healing. I had no options left. I mustered up my courage and petitioned the adventurers I had healed to join me for training, yet I received no positive replies. My utter lack of popularity devastated me, but Brod's daily drills spared me from losing motivation.

Normally, a person pushing themselves to their absolute limit day after day would eventually break them down. Guild staff and adventurers had even voiced their concerns to me. At the same time, they'd seemed almost thankful that I could withstand the brunt of Brod's whipping, evidently because, before I'd shown up, he'd made other adventurers his victims.

“I can't believe you can stand it...” they'd say in awe.

As always, the reason for my determination was Assess Mastery. As slow as my progress was, being able to see the numbers rising along the way kept me going.

“Wait, is that why everyone says I'm a masochist? Because I haven't called it quits yet?” I could not believe it had taken me so long to notice. Nevertheless, I descended the stairs to the practice grounds, where Brod stood menacingly, arms crossed as usual.

“Slow start today, huh?”

“I’m sorry. But do you not need breakfast, Coach?”

“I’m fine. Had a light one.”

“Then it’s back to throwing practice?”

“First, there’s something we need to talk about.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m about to get busy for a while. I was thinking about giving you a bit of a vacation for a change.”

“A vacation?”

I’d never had one before. Rather, I’d had no *reason* to take one. Pleasure was hard to come by in this world and I had no money for shopping or luxuries.

“What, that doesn’t make you happy? I’ll put together a schedule for you, but other than that, you’re free to do what you want. Or, if you’ve got nothing better to do, you can help out the staff with some butchering.”

“Er, butchering? You mean people bring in monster corpses to be butchered? Wait, you *butcher monsters*?” I’d never even considered it a possibility.

“You’re just now realizing that? What do you think you’ve been eating, kid? It’s all butchered here in the guild.”

“That was *monster* meat?”

I could not believe what I was hearing. That delicious food was from *monsters*? So, it wasn’t just Gulgar’s cooking ability that gave it such a...presence, for lack of a better word.

“And?” Brod prompted me.

“But...I’ve never even seen any monsters since coming here. Or any adventurers carrying any in.”

“Kid, what are you going on about? They’ve got magic satchels, obviously,” he replied in exasperation.

Magic satchels? The knowledge that God had given me included nothing about such items, so I was absolutely floored. “You mean like a bag that can hold things much bigger than the outside? Ones that nullify weight?” I

questioned. “And time stops for the items inside in order to preserve them?”

“What? How are you supposed to stop time? But yes, they do fit items much bigger than the bags themselves are, up to a certain amount, so they’re pretty nifty.”

Aside from the use of magic, nothing about this world really screamed “fantasy,” so this had my heart racing. “They must be expensive.”

“They are. Three gold, at least, but they pay for themselves over time.”

That was about three hundred casts of Heal. A hardened adventurer or someone from a well-off family might have one, but I had no need for one myself at the moment. Still, I wanted to experience the magic of an item like that someday.

Now, the butchering... It felt like I was being tested here. I didn’t have anything better to do, and everything’s an experience, after all, so what was the harm? I wanted to get a peek at some monsters, too. How different were these life-threatening beasts from my old world’s animals?

I had to prepare myself mentally, or I might find myself frozen and trembling the moment I met my first monster. I had to see for myself whether I’d end up like I had on my first day in this world. I shared my interest with Brod, who looked shocked to hear me outright ask to help with the butchering, but he quickly acquiesced and my plans were set.

“All right. I’ll let the guy in charge know.”

“Please do. Also, I’m not sure when it’ll be relevant, but would you mind telling me where I could buy one of those magic satchels?”

“Sure, as long as you keep up with your training. Okay, that’s enough chatter. We’re fighting with these specially-made wooden swords today.”

I hesitated. “Um, do you think you could make sure to hold back a little more than usual? Or a *lot*, rather?”

“What a wimp.”

“I’m fairly certain these things can break bones.”

“Oh, I’ll hold back, but I won’t let up. Just do your best not to break anything

and come at me.”

Sure, we’d used blades before, but this still looked pretty painful. And how was I supposed to “do my best not to break anything”? I looked at my instructor, who seemed ready to start swinging at any moment, and said a quiet prayer for my life before charging.

With yet another life expectancy-shortening day behind me, I returned to my room. It hadn’t begun as such and now doubled as a clinic to boot, but it was really starting to feel like *my* room now. Ever since returning from the Healer’s Guild several months earlier, it had been filling up with the new clothes and fancy bedding I received as gifts.

Whenever I thanked Brod or the staff, they always gave me the most pitiful looks, which I chose to ignore. I didn’t want to hear their answers and therefore didn’t ask why. Debts were debts. I threw myself into Brod’s training so as to meet his expectations. Then, after practicing my magic skills on my own, I drifted off to sleep. This was my daily routine.

Back when I had mentioned to Brod how cramped my room had been getting, I’d gotten an unexpected answer from him and a complete refurbishing of my quarters.

“Guildmaster’s orders,” he’d stated. “I’d accept his kindness.”

“I’ve never even met this Guildmaster, but if you say so. In that case, I’d like to thank them. Where are they?”

Brod looked at me, not even trying to hide the annoyance on his face. Still, I had to at least try to offer my thanks to them for having personalized my room in this way.

“He’s not usually in. I’ll pass the message along.”

“Oh, I see. All right, if you don’t mind.”

We both let the tension in our expressions fade at the same time, then broke into awkward laughter. It would appear that Brod had a high enough status in the guild to speak with this guy. All I could do was offer a bow, although I wasn’t sure it was even necessary, seeing as they had remodeled my room without me

even asking. I decided not to overthink it.

Three days later and my vacation had arrived. After the day's grind, stretches, running, throwing practice, and so on, I stuffed myself with breakfast and Substance X.

"You sure got an appetite, huh?"

"Hey, it's good. And if I didn't drink that nasty stuff, you'd chase me down with it."

He'd actually done it before, the one time I had forgotten. I remembered it like it was yesterday: Gulgar had parted crowds like the Red Sea, wielding the mug of horrific liquid like a mage's staff. He had caught up and forced me to gulp it down right then and there. Consequently, this made the rumor that my tongue was defective gain even more traction.

"That was your fault for forgettin'."

"Yeah, and I *didn't* this time," I sighed. "I'm off."

"Enjoy your little break."

"I'll try."

I placed my dirty dishes onto the counter and left the hall. Normally, this would be when I went off to train, but today, I made my way to a room next to the mess hall instead. I knocked on a door in the back and it promptly opened.

"Welcome to the butchering room. You can call me Galba. You're Luciel, yeah? Thanks for coming to lend a hand today."

"Thank you for having me. I don't have any experience in this sort of thing, so I apologize in advance for any mistakes I make."

Galba, who I pegged as another wolf-man, was tall and slender, yet well-built. Another name for the list of people I shouldn't mess with. He looked awfully familiar, too. I couldn't quite put my finger on why until he gave me the answer himself.



“Not a problem. And no need to be so formal. Speak freely like you do with my little brother.”

It suddenly hit me. Subtract a few pounds and they were the spitting images of each other. “You mean Gulgar?”

“That’s the guy,” he replied cheerfully.

“You two do look very similar,” I laughed.

“I’m happy to hear that.”

The pure joy on his face led me to believe they were extremely close. “Okay, I suppose I’ll take you up on that.”

“Please do. And no rush; act however makes you comfortable. Now, we don’t have much time, so let’s get right to it. Depending on the monster, the bodies can be pretty rigid or sometimes poisonous, even after death, so just observe at first.”

“All right,” I nodded.

Galba reached into a satchel and casually yanked out an enormous wild boar.

“M-Monsters get that big?”

“Hm? Oh, I’d say this one’s pretty average.”

My nervous question only served to provide me with knowledge I would rather have remained ignorant of. How was I supposed to survive in a world where giant boars generally ran the size of a small car?

Galba hoisted up the carcass and dropped it onto the table with a thud. “They got sloppy draining the blood here. That’ll be a deduction from their points. Okay, I’m going to get started, so watch closely.”

Despite how effortlessly he’d raised the beast, it had to have weighed close to a hundred kilos. If any of these guild staff members had lived on Earth, no one would have recognized them as anything resembling human, and Galba was no exception. Talk about superhuman (or maybe superbeastman) strength. I went ahead and bumped him up on the aforementioned “not-to-mess-with” list.

Meanwhile, he’d already started butchering the creature. He skinned it, dug

out the organs, and then cut the meat into blocks, placing them into a separate satchel. It was all done so smoothly that I just stood there staring as the work flew by. Galba had a smile on his face throughout the process.

“And just like that, it’s over,” I remarked.

“Well, when you’ve done it hundreds of times...”

“Is all the meat used here at the guild?”

“Not all. We sell some of it to other guilds or butcher shops to help pay for expenses.”

Butchering seemed like an awfully plain job, but also a rather admirable one if it was directly related to the guild’s profits.

“Really? Then is it a bother for me to be helping out?”

“Not at all. Brod wanted you to get some hands-on experience, but that’s not the only reason he sent you here.”

“What’s the other?”

“We see monsters of all types come through here. He wanted you to train your eye to look for weak points, where you could slip in attacks.”

“What do you mean? You make it sound like I’m actually going to be fighting these things.”

I knew that Brod’s training was hellish, but did he really plan on putting me up against live monsters at some point? I was all for power-leveling, myself. Brod, however, wasn’t the kind of guy to let me use such an exploit.

Galba chuckled. “I think it’s to boost your survivability in case you do ever find yourself on an adventure. There aren’t many rookies these days who bother with the diligent preparation you’re doing.”

“Frankly, I just don’t want to die.”

I’d completely forgotten the fact that I was, technically, an adventurer. In which case, that made me a sort of student studying at adventuring school.

Galba seemed to like my answer and beamed at me, but quickly stopped and shook his head regretfully. “No adventurer does...but too many of them want to

play the hero.”

“I never got that impression. I’ve just been so focused on trying to land a hit on Coach Brod.”

“You’re important, Luciel. We need people like you.”

“I’m...important?” I parroted.

“Yes. There still aren’t many willing to study under Brod like you’re doing, but for many—and particularly the rookies—a weight’s been lifted from their shoulders. Fewer of them are dying, thanks to you.”

“Me?”

“That’s right. Fighting monsters is physically draining, make no mistake, but it’s mentally exhausting, too. Even more so if you’re injured.”

“That makes sense.” Where was he going with this? How was it related to *me*, specifically?

“Those ‘heroes’ I mentioned before... After their first scrapes with death, they realize they’re nothing special. Many realize too late. Many get injured so bad they can’t go on adventuring, ‘cause of long-term problems.”

“So, you’re saying my healing helps them let go of these ideas of grandeur? But my magic isn’t all that effective.”

“Without you, a lot of these cases would go without any healing options whatsoever.”

Right, the poorer adventurers. The ones who just barely scraped by. “I’m happy to hear that, but doesn’t it also mean people might start acting recklessly, knowing they can be healed?”

“The guild’s rank system keeps that in check. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

Admittedly, I hadn’t focused all that well on the introductory explanation I’d received when I first registered. I might have missed some points regarding the guild’s ranking and internal affairs. But if he said it was fine, I’d take his word for it. Still, if a measly healer like me was so valuable, why hadn’t they hired one sooner?

“Is there no system in place for adventurer’s guilds to borrow healers?”

He paused. “I hear there was in the past.”

“I see.”

Time goes on and things change. Amazingly, throughout our conversation, Galba had been pulling out monster after monster from the satchel and butchering them one by one. I did my best to pay attention to the things I would need to know when my turn came.

By lunchtime, the smell of blood had spoiled my appetite, but Gulgar cared little and fed me his usual mountain of food, including copious amounts of meat. Thankfully, one delicious bite was all it took to rekindle my motivation to eat.

That afternoon, I took a turn butchering a monster called a horned rabbit while watching Galba. I hesitated when it came to sticking the knife into the body, but telling myself that it was just like cooking helped to pull me through.

I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this.

The sensation of meat and flesh splitting apart sent shivers through my body. But I had to do it to survive. I needed to make that clear in my mind.

“Come by next week, if you have the time.”

Galba’s voice pulled me back to reality. Once again, I’d lost myself in a whirlpool of thoughts.

“Thank you for today. I look forward to next week.”

“Oh, I might as well have you take this to Gulgar.” He handed me a magic satchel. It held the horned rabbit that I’d butchered, but was still exceptionally light.

“Got it.”

I bowed, left the room, and headed straight for the dining hall.

“Gulgar, this is from Galba.” I handed him the satchel.

“You didn’t have’ta go outta your way for that. So, how was the butcherin’?”

“I think I’ve found a new appreciation for the meals I eat.”

“Oh, yeah? Also, I’d get changed if I were you.”

I looked at myself and noticed blue blood stains all over my clothes. I felt the color drain from my face.

As I dashed to the well, Gulgar called out to me, “Be back for dinner, y’hear?”

The familiar remark calmed my nerves a bit. After stopping by my room to pick up some spare clothes, I made for the well where I washed my hands, threw off my clothes, and doused myself in water. Only after scrubbing every inch of my body did I fully relax.

“God, I’m pathetic. Someone had to have butchered all the meat I ate in my past life. One moment in their shoes and this is how I end up?”

I took a deep breath, two, three, then dried off and dressed myself. Just as I finished, Nanaella showed up. Her rabbit ears brought back images of the creature I had carved up.

“Mister Luciel, are you all right?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Were you worried? If so, I’m flattered.” A weak effort at banter was all I could manage. Every time I glanced at her face, that horned rabbit just kept popping into my head.

“Yes, you were so pale earlier. You helped with the butchering today, didn’t you?”

“You’re well-informed,” I answered.

“Was it your first time?”

Aside from gutting a few fish in my past life, it was. I wondered when people of this world usually slaughtered their first monster.

“Yeah, it was. I’d never even seen anything like it before.”

“I see.” She stepped closer. “It must have been quite distressing.”

She smiled, then gently took my hand. With all of my training, even given how deliberate her movements were, I couldn’t bring myself to dodge her touch.



“Your hands are cold.”

“Because of the water,” I replied casually. But she was standing right there, so close to me. The beating in my chest wouldn’t slow down.

“I think you’re exhausted, Mister Luciel. More than you’re aware of.”

“Exhausted?”

“It happens with some new adventurers. In the heat of their first battle, when the adrenaline’s flowing, they don’t hesitate to cut down the enemy.” She peered into my eyes. “But when the dust settles and they’re alone, it dawns on them. It tears at their mind, like it has yours.”

“Is that why you came after me?”

“Yes. The guild staff is incredibly grateful to you, and that includes me. We want to be there for you.”

I felt a burden lift from my chest. “Thank you, Nanaella. Would you mind holding my hand for just a little while longer?”

“Not at all.”

My face had to be redder than a tomato. I noticed that her cheeks had flushed slightly at my candidness as well. In this moment, however, I allowed myself to indulge in her kindness.

Afterwards, when we went back inside together, I was met with sharp glares from the other adventurers, but none of them took any action beyond that. I found it strange at first, until a wink from Melina and Mernell told me they must have said something to cool the crowd off.

What the two failed to realize was that their fluttering eyelashes usually fanned the flames even more. That the surrounding adventurers kept their reactions restricted to angry looks in spite of that must have been strictly out of consideration for the ordeal I had been through.

I spent the time before dinner training on my own while waiting for adventurers to return from their tasks in need of healing.

Gulgar spoke little that evening. My dinner made use of the very horned

rabbit that I'd butchered, which admittedly shook me up a bit. Holding back my tears, I managed to eat every last bite of the stew with much more gusto and appreciation than usual. Not a single scrap remained.

"Doin' all right?" Gulgar finally asked.

"Thanks to Nanaella. I'm not sure I could've picked myself up on my own."

He stared at me for a moment. "Luciel, you sure you're not half-or quarter-beast or somethin'?"

"Er, yes. Both my parents and my grandparents were human. No question. Why do you ask?"

"A feeling, I guess."

"A feeling, huh?"

Our conversation died there. Gulgar brought out the usual pitcher of Substance X, then slipped back into the kitchen.

"It certainly seems like beastpeople are discriminated against here, especially based on the reactions of the ones I've healed," I whispered to myself.

I quickly gulped down my least favorite drink.

After two days of training with Brod, I was given another holiday.

"I wonder where Coach Brod's been getting off to? Come to think of it, I don't know a thing about him."

Yeah, it was a bit strange not knowing the first thing about someone who'd been taking care of me for three months. He never seemed to want to divulge much about himself, though.

He was out yet again today, apparently having left the night before. I mentioned my concerns to Gulgar and asked whether Brod had the time to be paying attention to someone like me.

"Do me a favor and don't say that to his face," he shot back.

I didn't know how or why, but our training sessions seemed to be a sort of stress relief for him. Gulgar said to let him know if I ever got sick of running all

those drills, but I told him that I was doing just fine.

“What am I supposed to do with this ‘vacation’ thing?” I exited the mess, deep in thought. I could practice magic, but at this point casting Heal by myself increased my mastery by a measly two points on a good day, whereas healing someone else increased it by three, sometimes four points. My solo magic training was therefore centered around Magic Handling and Magic Control, and that was starting to get old.

“I suppose learning more about butchery with Galba isn’t a bad idea.”

I was lost in thought when my arms were suddenly grabbed, snapping me back to reality. I tried to jump back, but my assailants read me like a book and held me in place.

“Nanaella, what are you doing?”

The receptionists Melina and Mernell were in on it, too.

“Listen, Luciel. Your knowledge of things is a bit spotty, to say the least,” Mernell said with a smug smile. “Lucky for you, Brod’s entrusted us with the job of fixing that. We’re going to help you study.”

“Study what? Am I that ignorant?”

“That you are. It’s honestly kind of amazing how you’ve managed to survive up to this point.”

“Um, thanks?”

I had a few things I would’ve liked to say in reply, but instead tried to make my escape and slip away. However, I’d completely forgotten about Nanaella clinging to my arm with a vice-like grip. There was no way out. My three wardens led me upstairs as my fight-or-flight response struggled to make a decision.

I was far too confused to resist, and this wasn’t such a bad opportunity anyway. I had never outright hated studying or learning new things, after all. There was but one fly in the ointment: these three were beautiful, had great personalities, and were the focus of groups not dissimilar to fan clubs, according to the grapevine. If they were to become my own private tutors... I

broke out into a cold sweat.

My mind was filled with worry. Later, though, I would discover that these anxieties were unneeded. To the staff and adventurers, I was just a training nut, completely harmless. Also, some of the poorer adventurers that I'd healed over the last few months were part of these "fan clubs," so I wasn't lacking in approval. All-out war with the fanatics wasn't on the horizon just yet.

What's more, most people saw the girls as shepherds, leading around a lost, ignorant lamb, which boosted their popularity. I was merely the lamb. No one cares about the lamb.

But I wasn't aware of any of this at the moment, and so began my studying with trepidation.

I'd never been to the second floor of the guild before. At the top of the stairs was a sort of library, with bookshelves lining the walls. There were several other rooms as well, similar to those of the Healer's Guild, perhaps used as lodging for staff or adventurers. Since I hadn't really listened to Nanaella's explanation when first registering, I couldn't bring myself to ask her about it now.

We sat at a table, Nanaella across from me, Melina and Mernell to my right and left, respectively. I was just about as tense as anyone could be in this situation.

Nanaella smiled. "No need to be so nervous."

Melina did the same. "Yeah, we won't bite. You know how to read, so memorizing stuff'll be easy!"

"Let's begin," Mernell said with a smirk, noticeably more devilish than the other two.

Nanaella was much more relaxed and casual now than when we'd first met. Although I knew Melina and Mernell were only teasing, escape was still not an option. My eyes wandered about, searching for some way to shatter the tension, several items on the table roused my interest.

They weren't small booklets like the first grimoire I'd seen in this world, but large, hardcover books. Along with strips of parchment, each girl had three of

them. I couldn't help but feel excited. Finally, my eagerness overpowering my nervousness, I began to relax.

"Hey, guys, personal space. And what about your jobs? While I'm at it, what are those nine books?" I silently hoped they weren't all identical texts.

Nanaella spoke first. "I have 'An Illustrated Guide to Monsters,' 'Monsters and their Weaknesses Volume 1,' and volume one of 'Using Monster Parts to Craft Weapons and Armor.'"

Melina spoke next. "I brought 'The Complete Guide to Wild Herbs,' 'The Complete Guide to Mushrooms and Fruits,' and a beginner's volume on medicine."

"Mine are about the countries and laws, religions, and mythology," Mernell finished off.

I was very grateful for the rundown, but Nanaella's collection came off as the least relevant to me.

"Um, is *all* of that important?"

"Of course!" they all cried at once.

I was clearly going to have no say in this situation, so I cut my losses and decided to choose the topic that interested me the most.

"Then I'd like to start with Mernell's books. I know the country names, but not a single town name."

"Well, he's in your hands, Nanaella!" said Mernell.

"I didn't think you'd pick something so reasonable," Melina remarked.

They left their books on the table and went downstairs. I looked at Nanaella. She smiled back.

"Brod asked us to teach you common knowledge, you see."

"That, I don't doubt." If it had all been a lie just to mess around with me, I'd have felt pretty hurt.

"Melina and Mernell just wanted to have a bit of fun. They wanted to find out what you were interested in."

“They did, huh? Well, I intend to look through the other books anyway. Do you have more?”

“We have lots. Do you like reading?”

“Yeah, I’d say I enjoy a good story.”

“Like the story of Reinstar?”

The story of what now? I couldn’t say that out loud, of course. The story was likely to be world-famous and I’d had enough of being rebuffed for my ignorance.

“I prefer novels, personally.”

“‘Novels’? Is that something you wrote?”

“Um, no, I’ve only heard of it.” I really hoped she didn’t push the matter any further.

“You’ll have to tell me about it sometime.”

“If there’s ever time,” I said offhandedly. “Let’s get to reading. Er, are you sure it’s all right for you to spend this much time here with me?”

“It’s a job that needs doing,” she beamed.

I really loved her smile. It soothed my soul as my studies began.

In the center of this world was a nation run by the Healer’s Guild called the Republic of Saint Shurule. At its heart stood the Holy City of Shurule. It was there that the Healer’s Guild headquarters was located, supposedly within a grand castle. Merratoni, where I was, lay within the nation’s borders but was far removed from the capital.

The Holy City’s guild was officially known as the Head Church Healer’s Guild. They had once operated an orphanage, but no longer did.

“Why did they stop running it?” I asked.

“There are many healers who value their wealth above anything else,” she answered sadly. Seeing the gloom in her expression, I couldn’t bring myself to ask more.

Thanks to a barrier around the capital that weakened dangerous creatures who passed through it, that city wasn't often threatened by monsters. But considering how many adventurers were harmed around *here*, the Holy City was likely the only place afforded such protection.

Shurule was, apparently, also the only nation to have outlawed slavery.

To the northwest lay the Illumasian Empire. Once a small nation, they had become the very model of militarism and eventually swallowed up the surrounding countries, making their nation the power that it was today. A mountain range marked the border between it and Saint Shurule, staving off war, but Illumasia had long been in conflict with its neighbor to the east, the Kingdom of Luburk. Slavery fueled Illumasia's war machine, putting it entirely at odds with Shurule's ideologies.

Moreover, Illumasia was directly connected to the Dark Land, the home of demons and devils. The region was sealed, however, so none of its evil inhabitants could pour out.

The Kingdom of Luburk, currently at war with Illumasia, was an ideal environment for fishing and logging. Evidently, elves inhabited some of the forests there. Their primary business had once been the performing of magic and production of magical items, but when the floating city-state Neldahl rose in prominence, they chose not to cling to the old ways but rather to push onwards with raw manpower.

"Have you ever seen an elf, Nanaella?"

"I have. They're beautiful, like sculptures, but just as expressionless."

"Interesting. Speaking of races, are rabbit-people rare? You're the only one I've met." Then again, I rarely left the premises.

"There aren't many in Merratoni, but we're around," she replied. "They don't leave Yenice very often, though, because we were once hunted down and captured as pets."

"I'm sorry, it was rude of me to ask."

“No, it’s okay. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I’m glad I didn’t offend you,” I said awkwardly, feeling relieved.

We quickly moved to the next topic.

Yenice was an independent city-state. The book described it as a melting pot of races, home to all kinds of beastfolk. It was ruled not by a king or queen, but by democratically elected representatives.

This land was the birthplace of nearly all beastpeople. Many who left their homes during their youth would later return to start families there. The spices that Gulgar used also seemed to be imported from Yenice.

The only country to lack a Healer’s Guild, its inhabitants were cared for by a Doctor’s Guild. The territory was vast and included much undeveloped land, three times the size of Saint Shurule. However, to my surprise, few other towns existed outside of its capital city.

I should ask Nanaella and Gulgar more about that later on.

Next was the labyrinthian city-state, Grandol. Located to the east of Shurule, and separated from Merratoni by mountains, they were the people who steered the adventurer’s guilds, much like Shurule operated the healer’s guilds. It was both the birthplace of the Adventurer’s Guild and the site of the first discovery of a labyrinth.

These famous crypts spawned monsters, who would turn into magical stones and vanish upon death. But stones weren’t the only thing to be collected there. Rumor had it there were weapons, magical items, and gold to be plundered as well, drawing powerful individuals from all over the world who were looking to take home a piece of the pie.

These days, things were relatively well-organized and overseen, so you wouldn’t simply be cut down in the streets, but it was still a rugged place to be.

To the south of Grandol and the east of Yenice was the dukedom of Blanche. Long ago, there existed a country that devised a kind of summoning magic used

to call forth a hero to defeat the King of Darkness. They succeeded in unifying the world for a time, but their hero was eventually killed, the monarchy fell, and the aristocracy subsequently took control, giving birth to the Blanche duchy. With their hero-summoning abilities still acting as a useful shield that protected them from enemies, they touted human supremacy and implemented particularly harsh policies against beastpeople and elves.

Perhaps it wasn't only Blanche that held these beliefs, but certain groups of healers as well. Then again, while the lack of a Healer's Guild in Yenice certainly suggested a certain bias, there was no guarantee that the people of Yenice weren't dishing out the same sort of discrimination towards humans. Here in Shurule, there was nothing religiously calling for human superiority, but the sentiment probably did persist, especially among healers. A lot of things were starting to make sense to me.

Surely no one would leave a patient to die when they were on death's doorstep, solely on account of their race, right? You would have to be an utter failure of a healer to pull a heartless stunt like that.

"Do you know why there's no Healer's Guild in Yenice?"

"I don't know the details," she said hesitantly, "but I think there used to be. I did hear that the sages would keep their distance from any adventurers who visited the city."

"Why is that?" I pressed.

"I'm sorry, I can't say that I know."

"No, that's okay. I'm sorry for all the prodding."

We apologized back and forth for a while in that vein. It felt like we were really starting to connect.

I borrowed the other books and decided I'd make sure to ask any questions I had during my next day off. Nanaella offered me parchment, a pen, and ink to keep track of my thoughts.

Activities like this would begin to fill my days off as my life as the Adventurer's Guild shut-in continued.

Another Perspective — An Innocent Healer Enters the Lion's Den

I was working up a sweat in the training grounds of the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild that day.

"Still not a single person's showed up. They're just gonna pass up the opportunity to train with the guildmaster? Maybe I'll drag some of their asses down here."

I'd become guildmaster for one reason: to foster future generations. That was why I'd shifted from adventuring to management at a young age. But adventurers these days would rather go chasing coin over committing to grueling instruction. They were looking only at their feet and not at the path ahead. No one even *tried* to understand that getting the basics down would make their lives easier in the long run. I sometimes forced them into lessons, but that only made them avoid the guild entirely.

"I need someone to pass all this on to."

As I mumbled to myself, a sight rarely seen down in the training area came to interrupt my uneventful routine.

"Do you have a moment, Guildmaster?"

"Oh, it's just you, Nanaella. What is it?"

"Words are hurtful, Guildmaster. Even if you don't mean them to be," she scolded.

"Sorry. So, what's the problem? Monsters take over the town?"

I joked, but Nanaella never came to the training grounds during work hours unless she had a good reason. She didn't seem to be in a panic, to my relief, although it'd be a lie to say I wasn't hoping for a bit of excitement to break up the monotony.

"Also, stop calling me Guildmaster. I keep telling you to call me Brod." I was

still in my forties, way too young for people to be addressing me like some old hermit. “Now, what’s going on?”

“My apologies, Brod. There’s a fifteen-year-old boy at reception who’s just registered as an adventurer, and, well...”

Seeing Nanaella down here had gotten my hopes up for something special, but it couldn’t have been more mundane. She was eighteen, and including her probationary period, it had been just about a year since she’d arrived. Up until then, she’d been in a party. When it disbanded, she’d come in for an interview and the rest was history. She was good at her job and the adventurers loved her, so why was she bringing up some random kid to me?

“He’s a healer,” she continued.

“A healer? You mean...a *healer*?”

“The kind that heals, yes.”

Healers... One of a few occupations I despised. Everything made sense now. They sat on their high horses with their god-given powers, bleeding their patients dry with absurd prices. Money-grubbers, every last one of them.

Human supremacists weren’t rare among them either. They rarely recognized elves or beastfolk as people, and too many of them refused to heal other races altogether. A lot of adventurers loathed them, even if they weren’t outright at each other’s throats. And one had just waltzed up to an Adventurer’s Guild to register, which meant he was one of two things: a complete numbskull or a saint.

“Did you register him?”

“Yes, I completed the process a few minutes ago.”

I was starting to understand her troubled look. “So why come to me?”

“He says he wants to learn how to fight. He has no money, though, and wants to offer healing as compensation.”

“What are his combat skills?”

“Only level one Martial Arts.”

Okay, this was *way* too fishy. A normal healer would hire bodyguards. A normal healer wouldn't be broke, for that matter. Hell, no sane healer would want to train in *martial arts*.

Wait, she said he was fifteen. Then maybe he wasn't completely spoiled by reality just yet? "Have any idea what he's after? How'd he seem to you?" I asked.

"I didn't ask about what he might be after, but..." she trailed off.

"Spit it out. Say what you want to say."

"He seemed different from normal healers. He looked at me and he didn't recoil."

There were some who did—human supremacists. Only, when those types of people waltzed into the guild, they usually ended up in a ditch somewhere in the slums the very next day, robbed of everything they owned. The guy Nanaella was talking about seemed like he would be avoiding that particular fate.

"Different, huh?" I thought for a moment. "This could be a good thing, as long as the guy's not just nuts."

It was often said that only humans could use Light or Holy magic, but that was a flat out lie. Maybe it was true for elves, who used Spirit magic, but beastfolk were fully capable of wielding both Holy and Light magic. They just weren't that inclined to use magic in general and had small MP pools, so it was hard for them to learn if they weren't brought up practicing it from childhood.

Spirit magic had healing abilities, too. Healers didn't have a monopoly on such spells by any means. But elves looked down on excessive use of the spirits' powers and avoided that type of magic outside of extenuating circumstances.

"Assuming he isn't crazy, why not make him a proper adventurer?" Nanaella suggested.

I nodded, then decided that I'd see the kid for myself, but not before hammering something in one more time. "Oh, and make sure you don't call me Guildmaster, got it?"

“Got it.”

Standing at the counter was a tall, spindly kid who looked like he’d never lost his childhood innocence. I could tell at once that he wasn’t the scheming type. He stood there, stiffer than a board and red in the face.

While I debated calling out to him, Nanaella was barely managing to stifle her giggles. The other receptionists weren’t even trying.

So nervous that he’s got tunnel vision, I’ll bet. Let’s put the brat to the test.

“You the twerp that can use healing magic?” I asked sharply. A little intimidation would reveal his true colors.

The kid jumped and looked my way. “That’s right. I’m Luciel, a recently registered adventurer. I’m looking to improve both my healing magic and combat abilities, so I was hoping I could receive training in exchange for healing.”

“Do ya now? You’re a strange one, for a healer. What, you bored with your beloved money?”

Now the whole guild knew who he was. *What now, kid?*

“Money is important, but right now I need to boost my chances of survival as much as possible. To that end, like I said to the receptionist, I’d like to undergo training while working to cover the cost,” he explained.

Oh, yeah, he was terrified, but he kept his eyes locked on mine and they weren’t lying. Fundamentally, this kid thought in a completely different way from other healers.

Something occurred to me then. He was the type to judge himself and recognize his own weaknesses—the type of adventurer with the most potential. His lack of attachment to money was already unusual for a healer and this willing attitude only added to the mystery.

“Hm. I get the picture. And ya don’t seem like you’re talking out your ass,” I said. “All right. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Brod and I’m the instructor at this guild.”

“Pleasure to meet you.”

He wasn't lacking in courage, since he didn't flinch. I could have some fun with this one, if he had the strength to last.

“So, kid, you've got the Martial Arts skill, but what would a healer want combat abilities for?”

“Because I'm useless in a fight. I'm not even remotely mentally prepared for it. If I ever went on a journey, even the weakest monster would be my last. I want to prevent that. I want to strive to get strong enough to defend myself.”

I made up my mind. I was not about to let this healer out of the lion's den he'd stumbled into. We could save lives with his magic. That said, the recklessness of his request gave me pause.

“All right. I'll hire you as an H-rank healer for our training grounds. You'll be paid one silver an hour. You decide the training time and duration. When can you start?”

“In three days, if that's okay.”

Prudent. That was good. He looked as broke as he said he was, so I wondered if he'd settle down at the guild if we squared away his room and meals. It was worth a shot.

Nanaella had a wide grin on her face.

“Got it. Nanaella, do me a favor and arrange everything,” I instructed her.

“Of course.” She looked at Luciel. “Oh, Nanaella would be me. It's nice to meet you.”

The kid returned the greeting, bowed, then left the guild.

“I never thought I'd meet such a modest healer.”

As one could gather from Nanaella's shock, healers were about as stuck up as people could be. Money was their passion. Everyone knew it. The man who ran the largest clinic in Merratoni was a demon disguised in human form.

“He's a bold one, that's for sure.”

“Brod, don’t tell me you were intimidating him like you always do?”

“Yep. Wanted to get a read on who he really is.”

“What is wrong with you? That boy could never be dishonest!” she snapped. Nanaella didn’t get angry often, which only spoke to how earnest the kid came off.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have. That’s my bad,” I apologized. “But anyway, that kid’s a blank canvas and I’m gonna make him into a work of art. I’m gonna get him to stay here, Nanaella.”

“You’re serious about this?”

“Yeah. Mind cleaning out the resting room for him? I’ll have Gulgar cook his meals.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

Huh, she wasn’t protesting for a change.

Ah, almost forgot something. “Anyone who roughs up that kid’s going to be punished. Hard. Pass it along to your friends,” I announced to the adventurers nearby.

I was probably grinning like an idiot. Things were finally about to get interesting again. *Damn, I hope he’s got the drive!*

And if he was as innocent as he seemed, having Gulgar pour him some of that disgusting shit wouldn’t be a bad idea, either. Even a healer could get at least a little stronger with enough of that stuff, as long as he could stomach it.

Three days came and went. I woke up that morning, unsure if he’d actually show up, and waited. He arrived earlier than expected.

“This place is huge,” he muttered to himself, completely unaware that I was standing behind him.

That lack of awareness worried me, but I was still smiling. I certainly had my work cut out for me. Maybe this obliviousness should be the first thing to go.

“Pretty nice training area, eh? Good on ya for not running, twerp.”

He managed to nod and reply, despite the aura of pressure I was crushing him with. I was right about him having the nerve.

From then on, I trained the twerp hard. He had almost no physical strength, likely from his occupation, and he couldn't maintain a sprint without dropping his pace after a short while. He was practically an infant. Well, he *was* level one.

We had to do something about that body of his or we'd get nowhere. For now, I made him run. It was a boring way to train, to say the least, but a good way to test how long he'd last. The adventurers I dragged down here tended to throw in the towel fast. In fairness, I'd usually have to force them into it in the first place, but all the same, they were a bunch of pansies.

The kid did as I told him (almost too readily sometimes). It was like looking at my old self. He was weak and slow, he looked just about ready to fall over and die, yet he followed my instructions like his life depended on it. I was starting to like him. My one worry was how long he'd hang in there for.

With only one day behind us, the kid looked like he'd gone through hell and back. I was relieved that he managed to finish off all his food, though.

The next morning, I asked Gulgar to add *you-know-what* to his meals.

"You sure that won't scare the poor kid off?"

"I'm willing to bet he'll down the whole glass." I was more than certain of it, in fact. "Wanna make it official?"

"You're on. If I win, I've got some rare ingredients I'd like to get my hands on."

"And if I win, you let me drink here."

And so began our silent battle. While the kid was eating breakfast, Gulgar drew a mug of Substance X and set it in front of him.

Son of a bitch, that stuff reeks.

It didn't matter how far away you were. He'd even diluted it and it still smelled like absolute garbage. I pretended to leave the mess and hid for a bit. The kid looked disgusted, which was to be expected, but forced himself to drink it anyway.

Whoa, hold on, he chugged it all at once?!

Gulgar shared my utter disbelief, from the looks of it. Not once during my decades of being at the guild had I ever seen a chump *chug* that shit before. This kid—I was really starting to believe he was a diamond in the rough. He could become strong.

It was then that I resolved to train him for real, until he came at me with something so unexpected, it made me doubt my own ears.

“Coach Brod, yesterday’s session was definitely rough, but I’m not feeling any soreness. Do you think you could lay it on a bit more?”

“Hmph, you’re sturdier than I thought, for a healer.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Was he the type to shine under pressure? The type to show results the more you drove him into a corner? From that day on, I started pushing him to his limit, one step away from breaking. Curiosity took hold of me. How would he turn out with enough training? His progress was slow but certain, building up his strength one step at a time.

With the excitement also came frustration. If only he’d shown up *sooner*. What a complete waste it was to find such a gem only after he’d become an adult. Carefully instructing him while minding his limits, so as not to totally break the guy, was a slow and somewhat aggravating process.

“How’s Luciel doin’, Brod?”

Gulgar, who’d never been the least bit interested in humans, had taken a shine to the kid...to Luciel. I couldn’t blame him after seeing the way the boy downed that liquid trash.

“To be honest, he’s no prodigy,” I admitted, “But he’s also not average. I mean, you’ve seen the way he’s adapted to all of this. He doesn’t complain, he doesn’t give up, he keeps at it. He’s a natural at working hard and putting in the effort.”

“Hear anything from the Healer’s Guild?”

“Not a word. He’s only G-rank.”

In the past, the healer’s guilds had sent their members to service adventurer’s guilds, up until a growing rift between the two groups reached the point of

disrepair.

“Gotcha. Why not give ‘im a book on magic? We had one lyin’ around, didn’t we?”

We sometimes held onto items from adventurers who’d failed their requests, as collateral. If they didn’t pay within a certain period, we put the items up for auction. If no one bought them, it became guild property, and we’d had a Holy Magic grimoire sitting in storage since before I was guildmaster.

Right now, Luciel only knew Heal and nothing else. Our grimoire had a spell for curing poison, as I recalled.

“Maybe I will, but he’s only here for the month.”

“So, is he strong yet?”

“Not even close,” I stated flatly.

“Then figure out what he wants to do, and if he wants to stay, send him to the Healer’s Guild with enough money to keep his rank.”

“Galba said the same thing.” I could always rely on those two. “You think he’ll stay?”

“It’s up to him, but I think he will. He’s logical and I get the feelin’ he’s not the type to leave things half-finished.”

“If he weren’t a healer, I probably would’ve made him my pupil at this point.”

These talks planted a little seed in me that sprouted into joy when Luciel made it back from the Healer’s Guild later that day. I didn’t think I’d be as glad as I was.

“All right, let’s kick things up a notch.”

I began to think up a new regimen for the boy, grateful to whatever god may have been out there for bringing something new to my once-boring life.

06 — Growth and Departure

I passed my days as efficiently as possible, doing everything I could to work towards long-term survival in this world. It sounded strange when I put it like that. Never had I thought about needing to “survive” in my past life, but in this world any day could be my last.

Several of the adventurers who had come to me for healing had already been slain. I sometimes thought to myself, *What if I’d been there?* But my job, healer, was the weakest class one could be in this world. If I joined a party, I’d be nothing but dead weight.

I took this frustration out during my training matches with Brod. I attacked with everything I had. At the very least, I could rest easy knowing I wouldn’t die within the guild’s walls. Assuming I wasn’t cut down where I stood, that is.

Brod was as much of a demon as ever during our sessions. Once he got started, he would rain down blows on me one after another, holding back just enough to keep me from blacking out for as long as possible, until I finally did just that. Only when I woke up afterwards would he rediscover his humanity. I never stopped persevering, yet I couldn’t land a single hit. It irritated me to no end.

Half a year came and went at the Adventurer’s Guild. Nanaella’s tutoring ended a month after it began, so I used my free time to help Galba with butchering, assist the staff with chores, or simply train on my own.

Galba’s instruction was very informative. He taught me all kinds of things, like how dead monsters didn’t exude a miasma right away, so they were edible as long as you cooked them quickly enough. Also, if you skinned one right after defeating it, the hide would retain the properties of that creature.

The chores and odd jobs that I assisted with were mundane things like making lists of adventurers by rank or earnings. Interestingly, the top earners were a party of three beastmen that I was familiar with—the Lineage of the White Wolf. According to the rumor mill, they were A-rank now, and they’d made a

deal with the receptionists. Apparently, the girls had agreed to go out to dinner with them once they made it to Rank A.

Mernell had laughed her head off, saying they were more than likely after Nanaella, the only beastwoman among the receptionists. Still, I wasn't sure what her point was in telling me that. Sure, she was gorgeous, but I had my hands full already. I wasn't prepared to start supporting someone else. And there was no point in crying over what-ifs—such as, “If only this were my past life”—either.

Speaking of which, I was getting along quite well with Nanaella and the other girls, although I had never grown past being the little brother of the group. Lately, however, Mernell and Melina had started getting awfully touchy-feely with me under the pretense of “skinship.” Nanaella would usually get red in the face and make them stop, but sometimes she let herself get pulled into the fray and hesitantly joined in.

As far as this world's standards went, they were all of marrying age, so I couldn't prevent certain thoughts from crossing my mind. I remembered one particular instance of poking and prodding.

“Luciel, your clothes're looking a little tight there, big boy,” Melina teased.

“You're looking a bit taller, too. And look at those new muscles,” chimed in Mernell.

“Mister Luciel, I think you ought to wear something a little more fitting,” Nanaella advised.

“I don't have a mirror, but I guess it's a bit sloppy just throwing on whatever's lying around, isn't it?” I admitted. “I don't have any money to replace them, though. Maybe I should talk to Coach.”

So on one of my days off, I brought it up with Brod when he returned from business in the evening.

“Coach Brod, I wanted to ask you something, if you've got a little time to spare,” I said.

“What's got you so formal?”

“I’ve grown a lot over the last few months, and I’d like to buy some new clothes. Would it be okay for me to spend some time outside to work for the money to replace them?”

“If it’s money you want, we’ve got it, so stay here.”

“I’d really like to get some new underwear, at least.”

“Just a sec. Nanaella,” he called.

She came trotting over. “Yes?”

“Luciel needs to buy some new clothes. I want you to take him.”

“Sure thing.” She looked at me and nodded. “I’ll just go change.”

Uh-oh, this was starting to feel like a date. My life (lives?) flashed before my eyes.

“Don’t bother. Treat it as guild work, otherwise you’ll put the kid’s life in danger,” my instructor laughed. His little joke undoubtedly saved me, because I could easily foresee the Nanaella Fanclub coming for my throat.

“Tell me where it is and I can go alone,” I offered.

“Things have been noisy lately, so let Nanaella escort you. She knows the way. I’m heading out for a bit.”

Whatever he meant by “noisy,” it made me want to stay inside, but who knew how long I’d end up going without new underwear if I did that. I decided to accept.

“All right, then. Thanks, Nanaella.”

“Consider those clothes bought,” she grinned, putting a hand to her chest in pride.

Brod gave Nanaella the money, then headed upstairs. After watching him leave, we set out ourselves.

Sunset had dyed the sky a dark orange.

“The sky sure is beautiful, but we’d better hurry before it gets dark. Are you sure you don’t mind coming along?” I asked.

“Not at all. When I first came to Merratoni, I had people take me shopping too.”

“Really? I guess you’re from Yenice, aren’t you?”

“Nope. Grandol, born and raised.”

“Oh, sorry about that. That was presumptuous of me.”

“Don’t apologize; it’s all right.”

“Does that mean you used to be an adventurer?”

She smiled. “Maybe.”

The clothing store was a three-minute walk from the guild. Inside, garments were hung neatly on racks all around us. From what I’d heard, these kinds of stores were normally quite disorderly, so maybe this place was considered upscale.

I browsed through a number of items, but without a mirror on hand, I mainly relied on Nanaella’s input. Aside from the underwear, of course. With her help, my little outing was quite successful.

“I wonder why something this mundane makes me so happy.”

The store clerk gave me a sad look when Nanaella covered the bill, and then I remembered—it was my first time shopping in this world. I felt the tension drain from my body.

“I’m glad you’ve got some new clothes now,” my companion beamed.

“Thank you again for the help.” Her genuine happiness only made me feel embarrassed.

Our trip had lasted just twenty minutes or so, and the sun had yet to set completely. We started making our way home when fate suddenly intervened.

A woman’s blood-curdling shriek split the air nearby. With a haste that shocked even myself, my body sprang into action. The skills that I’d been honing these past six months took on a new purpose at that single scream—they were no longer skills with which to live my own peaceful life, but to save another’s life instead. Truthfully, that wasn’t all that spurred me on, but there was no

time to focus on the second reason just then.

I ran down a side street and turned into an alley, where I spotted a girl on the ground, covered in blood. After checking the surroundings and confirming that no one else was around, I gently placed my hand on her. She was still alive.

“Let’s see the wound.”

I followed the trail of blood on her clothes, found the source, and cast Heal without a second thought. Once, twice, thrice, then four times. The skin finally closed up and the bleeding stopped, but her breath remained ragged.

“Why isn’t it working?” I wondered aloud.

I investigated her clothing for the cause and spied additional stains that weren’t blood. I immediately cast Cure on her as well. Unsure if the poison had been neutralized yet, I cast it a second time, then one last round of Heal for good measure.

I heaved a sigh. “I think she’ll be okay.”

“Did you save her?”

I turned to see Nanaella standing behind me along with two familiar faces.

“Yes, somehow. Healing magic can’t return the blood she’s lost, though, so we should move her somewhere safe.” I looked at the injured woman’s face and realized that I knew her.

“Let’s take her to the Adventurer’s Guild,” Nanaella suggested.

“Wait, I know her. Her name’s Monica. She’s a receptionist at the Healer’s Guild.”

“What would a Healer’s Guild receptionist be getting attacked for?” the male adventurer with Nanaella remarked.

“Receptionists aren’t healers. Maybe it’s a personal grudge or something,” offered the girl next to him.

I recalled what Monica had told me about the guild’s more unsavory members. “The culprit could be a mercenary hired by a healer. She’s against corruption within the healing community, so it’s possible that word got out,” I

guessed.

“What are we going to do with her?” asked Nanaella.

“The Adventurer’s Guild might be the safest bet, but let’s stop at the Healer’s Guild first. We might learn more there.” I couldn’t say it in front of them, but the chance of her attacker being an adventurer was very real. Brod wasn’t around to keep the peace at the moment, either.

Since I was no help in a fight, I carried Monica on my back and trusted our companions to protect us.

“You guys sure got here fast,” I commented to the two adventurers who had joined us. “Were you two my secret bodyguards?”

The second reason I had been able to jump into action so quickly was that I had assumed some sort of backup was following us. The man looked away, proving my assumption correct. I had misgivings about whether they were actually there to protect me or keep me under watch, but it didn’t matter.

“The outside world sure is scary,” I lamented. I would have been perfectly happy to just stay inside and never come out. “Do you think we’ll find the culprit?”

“We’ll know more once she wakes up,” Nanaella replied.

“Right...”

No one stopped our strange procession, despite there being many people along the road that evening, and we reached the Healer’s Guild safely.

Kururu stood at the counter. Thankful to see someone I knew, I carried Monica over, although the adventurers gave her pause before she realized that I was accompanying them. “Welcome to—wait, Luciel? And is that Monica?”

“Long time no see, Kururu. Have you been well?”

“Just fine, now can we please skip the pleasantries and get to the part where you explain why you’re carrying her?” she asked gently.

We must have looked pretty bad. A couple of adventurers, a rabbit-woman, a healer, and a nearly-dead receptionist.

“Long story short, we found her in an alley, covered with blood. She’d been attacked by someone, but the culprit wasn’t around when I got there. I healed her, then we brought her straight here,” I explained.

“What?!” Kururu froze up in shock.

“We only found her because we heard someone scream. We didn’t know who it was at first.”

“How...how is she?”

“She was unconscious and bleeding profusely when I got there. The blade that cut her must have been poisoned, too. I think I managed to fully heal her, thankfully.”

Kururu glanced at Monica on my back. “Thank goodness. I can’t thank you enough for saving her.” She looked back at me and lowered her head.

“Do you have any idea why she might’ve been attacked? Any at all?”

Kururu’s face turned grim and her silence told me everything I needed to know. My guess earlier hadn’t been far off.

“I take it you do but can’t give us the details?”

“What would you do with that information? You have no proof to charge anyone with.”

“The person who attacked Monica did so with the intent to kill her. Why else would she have been poisoned? Based on that alone, I can only guess this was the work of a professional. No adventurer would do something like that, so it must be a mercenary, and given enough money, a mercenary can become an assassin. The only candidate with that kind of wealth would be a healer.”

“You’re a smart kid, Luciel. I can’t believe he went this far. This wasn’t intimidation, it was attempted murder.”

“It sounds like someone has a grudge against Monica. You know who, don’t you?”

She paused. “This is just my guess, but it’s likely Bottaculli, the owner of the largest healing clinic in Merratoni. A friend of Monica’s went to him for treatment, but she couldn’t pay his fee, so she was sold into slavery, and

Monica protested publicly. Bottaculli was furious. This was probably revenge.”

I’d never heard of the man, but this Bottaculli must have been the puppet master behind the hit. Why would he offer treatment that his patients couldn’t pay for? And wasn’t slavery illegal here? I had no end of questions that needed answering.

“You can’t enslave people in this country, can you?” As far as I knew, it was the one place in the world where such a thing was outlawed. Selling someone into slavery couldn’t be all that simple.

“No, but that’s not the case for selling them in *other* countries.”

Every law had its loopholes, but this was ridiculous. “Do you think we can prove he committed a crime?” I wasn’t holding my breath without any fancy DNA analyses. Identifying the criminal wouldn’t be an easy matter.

“Sorry, but I wouldn’t count on it. Not unless you were planning on storming the man’s clinic.”

That was too dangerous. Out of the question. Monica’s safety took first priority.

“Can you protect Monica from him here at the guild?”

“As long as she’s within these walls, he can’t openly touch her, but...”

“What about if, say, her food was poisoned?”

“I wouldn’t rule it out.”

So she wasn’t entirely safe here. And if this incident involved the head of the city’s largest clinic, there was a chance it went all the way up to the local guildmaster. To err on the side of caution, it would be best to let the Adventurer’s Guild protect her until the heat died down.

“Nanaella, does the Adventurer’s Guild have rooms for women to stay in?” I asked.

“Yes, I’m sure we can accommodate her,” she replied.

“Then let’s get back.” There was no reason to linger here any longer.

Kururu stopped us. “Luciel, she’s a staff member of the Healer’s Guild. You

can't be serious about taking her to the *Adventurer's* Guild."

"It's okay, Kururu. It's not as dangerous as you might think. I've never run into trouble there, myself."

Unfortunately, that wasn't enough to convince her. The two guilds had a rocky relationship, to say the least.

"I think it'd be best to have her stay at the clinic where you're working," she urged.

I had forgotten that she was unaware of my life at the Adventurer's Guild, which worked out well for getting her permission.

"All right. I thought the adventurers I know might be able to keep her safe, but if you say so. I'll take her to where I'm working right now."

"Thank you. Where is it, exactly? I'd like to come visit her later."

"I'm concerned about information leaks, and I don't want to be a bother to my coworkers, so I'm sorry, but I can't answer that. I hope you don't mind considering this a sort of leave of absence for her."

She took a breath. "Okay. Will do. She's in your hands, Luciel."

"We'll keep her safe. I'll see you again when I need to renew my membership."

As we left, I heard a voice just behind me. "I'm so sorry for all of this, Mister Luciel." It was Monica.

"I'm glad you're back with us."

"I woke up some time ago," she whimpered. Her voice was feeble, but she was responsive. I decided to tell her the truth while I could.

"You may have heard all that just now, but we actually are going to the Adventurer's Guild. It's the safest place for you." I felt her body stiffen. "Don't worry, I've been training and working there this whole time, not at a clinic."

"But healers and adventurers don't get along," she protested weakly.

Apparently, this was common knowledge, except that I hadn't learned it until *after* becoming an adventurer myself.

I forced a wry smile. “I wish I’d known that half a year ago, before I became one,” I joked before shifting tones. “Still, like I said, I’ve never run into any trouble there. It’ll be okay. I promise.”

She exhaled and her body relaxed. “Okay. I’ll trust you.”

I felt the weight in my arms grow heavier.

“She passed out again,” Nanaella observed.

“Oh, okay.”

Upon reaching the Adventurer’s Guild, we ran into a wall—namely, a group of shocked adventurers that surrounded us as soon as we walked through the door. Once we had finished explaining, and they noticed Monica’s torn, blood-stained clothes, they started showering me with compliments.

Brod came down to investigate the fuss and gave us permission to shelter her after hearing what had happened. The other men were on cloud nine at the addition of a beautiful new girl to interact with. I, of course, had no intention of joining in on their nonsense, even if it meant that Monica and I would never end up becoming closer.

I handed Monica off to Nanaella and brought my new clothes back to my room. Staff and adventurers sent tepid yet sympathetic gazes my way... a combination of curiosity about my shopping trip with Nanaella, and pity over the fact that my first outing had ended in trouble, I imagined.

Figuring they’d go away if I just ignored them for a while, I made my way downstairs, where I ran into the two adventurers who had guarded me during my trip.

“Thanks again, guys. Do you need any healing?”

They looked at each other, smiled, then turned back to me. “Let us know if you ever need anything,” offered the man.

“Or if there’s anything you’ve got your eye on,” the woman added.

They said nothing more, simply looked at me with the sort of warm gaze one might give a younger sibling, then headed up the stairs.

I thought about the exchange for a moment. “I guess it still depends on the

person, but I wasn't afraid of those two at all." Changes were happening inside of me, and I was starting to take notice of them.

I returned to my room and nearly dove into bed, until I remembered that my shirt was still covered in Monica's blood. Changing seemed like a good idea.

Seeing the splotches on my clothes reminded me of the fragility of life in this world, and of the power that I had to protect it. I wasn't a doctor. I had no technical knowledge. And yet I could heal people. I held the power to stave off unfair deaths. That fact made me happy.

Training was hard—*really* hard—but I was improving, my masteries were increasing, and they weren't going to decline over time. Or at least they hadn't so far, so I could only assume the skills in this world didn't work that way. I got as much out of my training as I put into it, and that kept me going.

"I know my training's going to last a good while, but it still feels like cheating, being able to see my progress."

My face relaxed into a smile. *If only I'd had that Assess Mastery skill back on Earth.*

"Eh, not like it would've changed much," I muttered as I began my nightly magic training.

When I finished, I had my usual dinner at the mess, in the middle of which Nanaella showed up with Monica, who had also changed into fresh clothes.

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked her.

"Yes. You saved my life, Mister Luciel. Thank you so much."

Her face was rather pale. Why had Nanaella brought her here? I looked at my friend inquisitively but got only a nod in response for some reason. It was anyone's guess what the heck that was supposed to mean, so I moved on.

"Please, it was nothing. I'm glad I was there to help you after you did the same for me when I was first learning magic."

"So..." she said hesitantly, "how much will it cost me, do you think?"

Her poor complexion made perfect sense now. I still wasn't fully in tune with how things worked in this world, but it occurred to me that if ever there was a

time to extort a patient for money, it would be now.

“Monica, it may have been your job, but you were so kind to me during my days at the Healer’s Guild. Please consider this my repayment. Let’s just say that you paid my fee in advance.”

“What?” She looked utterly flabbergasted. I, however, had no intention of ever sinking low enough to demand payment in such a situation.

“If that’s not enough, then you can join me for a meal, if you like. Gulgar makes the best food.”

Monica burst into tears and bowed deeply. “Thank you. Thank you. So... so much.”

I’d never had someone thank me that vehemently before, and while crying no less, so I was at a total loss. Luckily, Gulgar arrived to save the day.

“Had a rough time of it, didn’tcha, little lady? Here, drink this and get that pep back in your step,” he said cheerfully, placing a cup of soup onto the counter.

“Thank you, sir.”

The four of us spent our meal chatting with each other. I explained that she wouldn’t be able to go home and would need to stay here for the time being. She would need to make one trip back with a group of adventurers to gather her clothes, though. Unsurprisingly, the party who ended up taking the job was composed entirely of women.

We were having fun shooting the breeze, but I had a head start on eating and Substance X was at hand, which would turn my breath rancid for half an hour. Out of consideration, I excused myself somewhat reluctantly.

Nanaella and Monica wished me goodnight on my way out, which kept my spirits high. *How easy can I be?* I thought to myself.

After some more magic practice, I drifted off to sleep.

One month later, the mercenary who had attacked Monica was captured. Rumor had it the guy was completely in the nude when they picked him up. No connection was found between him and any healers, though. With things as

ambiguous as they were, Monica was faced with a difficult choice, and she chose to join the Adventurer's Guild staff.

"I always heard adventurers were brutes and ruffians, but the ones in Merratoni have been wonderful," she gushed. Unbeknownst to her, this comment would trigger the formation of her own fan club.

In contrast to this peacefulness was a building frustration in my training with Brod. I was still throwing all I had into landing a blow, *any* blow, against him, yet it was like bashing my head against a brick wall.

Then, nine months after my training had begun, an enormous earthquake shook the town. Monsters poured out of a mine to the southeast of Merratoni, deep within the forest. None were particularly dangerous on their own, but their numbers were overwhelming. Every single adventurer aside from myself was called out to help stem the tide. All I could do was sit tight and pray with the other staff.

I had assumed there would be many injured adventurers, but surely there would be no fatalities. I'd convinced myself of it somehow. But reality—the fragility of life in this world—was once more thrust into my face.

That day was the first time I lost friends, including the two bodyguards who had helped to rescue Monica. From what I heard, a miasma-amplifying monster had paired up with a beast that grew stronger the more it absorbed its partner's toxin. Reports noted that the Lineage of the White Wolf were the ones to finally stop the lethal duo.

Before I had time to even let out a sigh of relief, Brod showed up, covered in monster blood, and grabbed my arm. "Every last one of the Lineage of the White Wolf is on death's doorstep. I need your help to save them."

I immediately nodded and hurried after him. We arrived at an inn, if it could even be called that. How could the top earners at the guild be roughing it in such a pigsty? Before I could continue with that line of thought, we entered their room and I found myself frozen in shock.

They were dying.

"Luciel, these two were poisoned. Basura's wounds are deep, but all other

signs show that he's otherwise normal."

I prioritized Basura. My magic could rejuvenate skin and reset bones, but blood lost was lost for good. Even though it was too dark for me to be sure, my gut told me that he was in the most immediate danger.

Several casts of Heal later, his wounds had fully closed. I went to look for wounds on the other two and found none.

"They took in poisonous gas. Did 'em in quick, since they've got nearly no resistance to it," Brod explained.

I cast Heal on each of them, then switched to Cure, covering their entire bodies—the head, ears, nose, mouth, heart—praying the toxin would vanish.

"What was the monster?" I asked.

"A Gastle. Likely mutated."

A Gastle's poison, if I recalled correctly, caused fever, vomiting, paralysis, and decreased immunity. Cure was for detoxification, so as long as it was poison causing the symptoms, the spell should be enough to alleviate them. I held on to that hope and continued casting until my magic was sapped dry and exhaustion overtook me.

Brod brought me two magic potions, which allowed me to quickly resume my work. I cast, and cast, and cast, until finally, just as fatigue was starting to hit me again, they seemed to stabilize.

Once I was sure of their recovery, I returned to Basura to let him know.

"They should be okay now. If anything else happens, please bring them...to the...guild..."

That was all I could force out before consciousness left me.

The next morning, I saw the list of those who had died, those I hadn't been able to save. I cried for them. I was not all-powerful, I knew that, and still my weakness gnawed at me.

To stave off the sadness, even if only a little, I swore to the departed that I would push myself harder than ever before.

Progress began to pick up in response to the rekindled fire inside me.

“Martial Arts level three. Nice job, kid.”

It was the baseline for most F-rank adventurers. At this level, one could generally take several goblins at once in a fight, and goblins weren't anything to sneeze at. About a quarter of fresh amateur adventurers ended up having to flee from encounters with them.

It put a smile on my face. I'd worked hard for it, even if it wasn't an achievement I could go flaunting. Anyone with a high enough aptitude would've gone through life and reached level three naturally as an adult. And, according to a book I'd read, training in earnest for an extended period of time with a proper instructor would allow even a layman without a job to obtain such skills.

I had set an example, and as adventurers grew more interconnected after the mine incident, more of them started showing up at the training grounds. Brod and I continued to conduct our training among them, when one day a man complained about Coach's preferential treatment and decided to test his luck.

My instructor promptly knocked him out cold, and we returned to sparring.

If I wanted to land a hit on Brod, I needed to move faster, be sharper, strategize. I couldn't just rely on my body; I tried using my eyes or magic to feint, but to no avail. The man was a beast. Not even when the Lineage of the White Wolf joined up with me for a round did we put so much as a scratch on him.

My request to observe one of their own matches was met with a polite refusal, although they did compliment me on reaching a proper adventurer's skill level in such a short time, which made me forget to press harder.

In regards to how the stats worked, frontline vocations and support classes were *very* different subjects. To put it simply, each one had certain attributes that were easier or harder to increase after a level-up. What this meant was that if a level ten swordsman fought a level twenty healer in close-combat, the healer would lose more often than not. That was just how job classes worked. I couldn't change that, so I made my peace with it.

It had taken me ages just to get my Martial Arts skill to level three and I was

curious about what a monster like Brod's stats would be. I was afraid to hear the answer, though, and never asked.

"I couldn't have made it this far without you, Coach," I said.

"Keep your flattery. You're the one who put in the effort...Luciel."

"That means a lot to me."

"Just don't get soft," he warned. "It's gonna get even harder to level your skills from now on."

I nodded. Each level took a significantly higher amount of experience to reach. Brod knew this firsthand.

"Luciel, you came here because you wanted to be able to survive, yeah?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Well, today we're adding a new skill to your repertoire: Ambulation."

"Ambulation? I'm going to practice walking?" I asked, slightly confused.

"That's right. You can use it to muffle your footsteps and stay light on your feet. It'll help you keep your stance low without wearing yourself out, too."

Like a ninja. Neat. Now some kind of invisibility skill would really complete the look. Brod wouldn't train me in anything that wasn't immediately practical, though, so I gave up on the idea.

"I'm ready to get started when you are," I said with gusto.

"Right. If you can get good at this technique, it'll work your calves and thighs real well, even without the skill. Then your kicks'll get sharper; no more of that clumsy shit you do now."

Music to my ears. "Yes, sir!"

Ambulation training began and for the first time in a long while, Brod's jeers echoed through the grounds once more.

"I can hear your every damn step! What're you shuffling those feet for, practicing for a dance recital? Your stance is too high! Yeah, great work, if you feel like gettin' charged by a wild boar!"

“Wild boar” conjured up memories of that car-sized monster Galba had taken apart on my first day of butchering. I broke out into a nervous sweat at the image of such a creature heading straight for me.

Fearing that he’d turn this practice session into a field exercise if I didn’t pick up the skill quickly, I poured my focus into getting it down fast.

My routine had become as follows: wake up, magic training, breakfast with a dose of Substance X, Throwing training, Martial Arts sparring, lunch with more Substance X, Throwing Training again, more Martial Arts sparring, dinner and yet more Substance X, then one last bit of magic training.

Every day, I would cast Heal at least ten times, sometimes more than fifty times on particularly busy days or for the uglier wounds, but everyone left my clinic satisfied.

I’d started spending more and more of my meals with Monica and Nanaella, and we would’ve been getting along swimmingly if it hadn’t been for Substance X, which Gulgar still forced on me like a madman.

All the same, my time with them provided at least some form of respite from all the training. It held me together. And thanks to that, I managed to squeeze in an extra hour in the mornings and nights to practice Ambulation.

After Brod caught me at it, he started giving up some of our sparring time for even more Ambulation drilling, although personally, I wasn’t too sure about cutting down sparring in favor of this new technique.

“Aren’t I doing a bit too much Ambulation work?” I asked him.

“That skill’s the most important one for you to learn right now. Got it? Good. Let’s get started.”

I wasn’t convinced, but I doubted he would explain further. Maybe he figured I was at the right age to start getting cocky and want to test out my newly developed Martial Arts. A reasonable concern, but I wasn’t that childish, nor was I so reckless. However, given my current physical age, there wasn’t much I could say about it.

Looking at things in a more positive light, maybe my body was too weak to

build up my Martial Arts skill any higher and I needed to recondition myself first. Either way, all I could do was trust my coach. I may not have been able to read him well just yet, but I dreamed of the day his intentions would become clear to me.

Life went on, days passed, and before I knew it, it had been a year since I'd arrived in Merratoni.

Status open.

Name: Luciel

Job: Healer III

Age: 16

Level: 1

HP: 320 — MP: 100

STR: 34 — VIT: 38

DEX: 35 — AGI: 32

INT: 42 — MGI: 50

RMG: 48 — SP: 0

Magic Affinity: Holy

SKILLS

Assess Mastery I — Monster Luck I — Martial Arts IV

Magic Handling IV — Magic Control IV — Holy Magic V

Meditation IV — Focus IV — Life Recovery II

Magic Recovery IV — Strength Recovery IV — Throwing III

Butchery II — Detect Danger II — Ambulation II

HP Growth Rate Up II — MP Growth Rate Up II

STR Growth Rate Up II — VIT Growth Rate Up II

DEX Growth Rate Up II — AGI Growth Rate Up II

INT Growth Rate Up II — MGI Growth Rate Up II

RMG Growth Rate Up II

Poison Resist II — Paralysis Resist II — Petrify Resist II

Sleep Resist II — Charm Resist I — Curse Resist II

Enfeeble Resist II — Silence Resist II — Disease Resist II

Shock Resist I

TITLES

Shaper of Destiny (all stats +10)

Protection of the God of Fate (increased SP)

As a result of all the blood, sweat, and tears I'd poured into training throughout the year, my attributes had increased by about one and a half times across the board, some stats even more than that.

I had no point of reference to know whether this was good or subpar. But despite that, I was proud. I was unquestionably stronger than I had been one year ago; I had weathered so much in that time. I'd been punched, kicked, thrown at, cut, blown away, and utterly beaten into the ground, and yet here I was. Alive.

"What're you mumbling about over there?"

"Oh, good morning, Coach. Nothing, really. Just thinking about how it's been a whole year, but I can't really tell if I've grown all that much."

"Well, stop worrying. You're improving," he said gruffly.

"You think so? I still can't see your attacks sometimes, I can't lay a finger on you, and the only spells I can use are Heal and Cure."

When I listed it like that, it almost sounded like I hadn't moved an inch.

"You and I are in entirely different leagues when it comes to our experience and stats. I'd die of shock if you *did* manage to land a blow on me."

"That's very true." Going up against even a mid-level enemy while at level one in a video game would result in a "game over" faster than you could blink.

"Come on, keep your damn chin up." He smacked me on the back.

"Ow! That hurts, you know?" I grumbled. "Well, I do think I did all right, buckling down and seeing this out for a whole year. Thank you for everything, Coach. I feel like I could at least manage to run away now if I came across a monster."

"Nah, you could take one outright, I'd say. Wouldn't you? You really held in there. Good work not ditching halfway through."

"I really wanted to at times, to be honest, but I'm the one who started it. I was the one who decided I needed to go through with it in order to survive."

That, and I had nowhere to go, I thought, but kept that part to myself.

"Say, Luciel, why not stay here? Make it official? Look at Monica, she's makin' her way just fine."

Did he really have to put me on the spot? *Here*? Where all these adventurers, including Monica herself, were watching?

"Oh, well, I dunno. I mean, I'm a pragmatic sort of person. I'd like to make some money and learn whatever new magic I can."

Brod paused for a moment. "Makes sense."

"And you paid for my dues last year. Plus, I can't buy new grimoires unless I start saving up. The more I learn, the more lives I might be able to save."

No one had yet to die while I was treating them, but some people I knew were gone forever and it hurt. Dying when one's time came was one thing, but I couldn't stand deaths of any other kind—untimely, unfair, or otherwise. I really needed to learn new spells.

"Well, it seems like your mind's made up," Brod yielded. "Still, consider

working here like I offered. Keep it in mind.”

“I will. Either way, I intend to stay in town, so I’ll be back for more training. And you can give me a call any time you need a healer. I’ll cut you a good deal.” I never imagined the day would come where I’d chat with Brod so casually.

“So, what’s your plan now?”

“I’m off to the Healer’s Guild to find a clinic, where I hope to save up enough money to buy some new spell books.”

“And then what?”

“Study and work hard until I can cast them perfectly, save up to pay my dues, then someday open a clinic of my own that’s easy on the people’s wallets.” The number one thing I had learned this year was the importance of living a quiet life.

“Huh. Sounds like you,” Brod chuckled.

“I still have some things in my room, so I’ll be back to clean it out.”

“Gotcha. And hey, it’s been fun, Luciel.” He smiled at me.

“Thank you so much for everything.” I grinned back and we traded a firm handshake.

I made my rounds, thanking the staff and saying my goodbyes to the adventurers. No one tried to stop me. On the contrary, they all saw me off with a smile. My life at the Adventurer’s Guild had reached its bittersweet end.

I stepped outside and looked up at the clear, blue sky. “Perfect weather.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I held them back. As long as we all kept on living, we’d meet again. I faced forward and took my first steps back to the Healer’s Guild.

07 — U-Turn

I arrived at the Healer's Guild several minutes later, where I lost myself in thought for a moment before entering.

"It's strange. I'm a healer, but the Adventurer's Guild feels more like home to me than this place."

I opened the door but no cheery "Welcome!" greeted me. For a second, I wondered if anybody was in before seeing a receptionist at the counter. She was looking down at the floor and hadn't noticed me yet.

"Excuse me, I'd like to renew my rank. Wait, is that you, Kururu? It's been a long time."

"Oh? Luciel?" She looked away. "What are you here for?"

Had I offended her somehow? She seemed to be in awfully low spirits.

"Um, yes, it's me. Have I done something to upset you?"

"Not directly, no, but don't think I don't know about your dragging Monica over to the Adventurer's Guild."

"You've misunderstood. I never pushed her to stay. She was no longer in danger and decided to work there on her own. At least, that's what I heard," I explained earnestly.

She sighed. "Yeah, I know. It's just been rough since she left. Not a single person's even come in for an interview, and we've been looking to hire this whole time."

She did look a little haggard, but were they really that busy? The place was as barren as a ghost town. And Monica often said the Adventurer's Guild had more work for her to do. I suppose just waiting around could be pretty tiring, though.

"How about a healing? On the house."

She giggled. "I'm good, thanks. How've you been? Oh, wow, I just realized, have you gotten kind of buff or am I imagining things?"

“Well, I’ve been working my butt off training this past year,” I joked, flexing my biceps.

“What kind of clinic does that? Where are you working now?”

“I know I kept it vague when I last saw you, but the truth is, I was never actually working at a clinic.”

“What?! You mean you never got a job? Did we not set you up with a place?” she replied, completely bewildered.

The confusion was understandable. I had asked about finding a place to work back then, but never followed up on it.

“I heard about how you mediate between clinics, but after thinking about my future a little, I decided to set myself up at the Adventurer’s Guild for a while.”

“You became an adventurer? So, what was the point of being a healer?” she asked, this time looking utterly exasperated.

She certainly had quite the colorful array of facial expressions. What was she doing working as a receptionist in a place like this?

I laughed. “I mean, all I could use was the basic Heal spell. I assumed the best way to increase my Holy Magic would be hands-on experience.”

“You’re one crazy kid, Luciel. And did it work out?”

“I’m not sure what’s considered normal for skill levels, so I couldn’t say. I got food and a bed while I was there, though, so I think it worked out better than if I’d gone to a clinic.”

“Look at you. The *Adventurer’s* Guild? How’s Monica doing?”

“Well. She seems to enjoy what she does.”

“I’m glad. What specifically made you choose the Adventurer’s Guild, anyway?”

“You see, my motto is, ‘Don’t die.’ That’s why I spent the last year polishing up my self-defense skills as much as possible. When I first got there, I was sure that a single smack from an adventurer would be enough to knock me into the afterlife.”

“You’re so weird, you know that? Oh well, that’s just who you are, I suppose. Anyway, I’ll check your Holy Magic skill when I renew you and figure out what rank it’ll put you at.”

“Please do.”

“Once your rank is settled and you’ve paid your dues, we’ll talk grimoires. Lemme see your card.”

“Right.” I handed it over.

“All right, let’s see how hard you worked. And whether your choice to go to the Adventurer’s Guild over a clinic was a smart one——” She couldn’t even finish her sentence before complete astonishment came over her face. “Wh... Hold on! Luciel, what in the world *is* this?!”

“Er, is there a problem?”

“Oh, yeah! A *big* one! What in the Goddess’s name was this training you were doing?! What have you been *doing* to yourself? Explain!” she snapped.

Holy crap, she’s practically fuming! “Kururu, you’re kind of scaring me. I’ll talk, so please calm down. You’re much prettier when you aren’t livid.”

She cleared her throat to regain her composure, then shot me an icy stare, urging me to continue.

“Um, well, after I learned Heal...” I proceeded to recount the last year for her.

When I finished, Kururu looked at me and, in the most deadpan tone imaginable, said, “Luciel, are you some kind of deviant?”

“Ow, okay, that’s a little harsh. I’m just trying to keep myself from dying, that’s all. And I wanted to improve my Holy Magic as much as I could. Don’t they say that it’s best to start young? That’s why I went to the Adventurer’s Guild, to find a place where I could do both. I’m confident I made the right choice.”

“But there are plenty of clinics to choose from. You might’ve started out doing grunt work, but you still could have made connections. You didn’t need to push yourself to learn how to fight, either.”

Maybe it was a strange approach, but it sure produced results, and it wasn’t

like I was hurting anybody.

“I did make lots of connections, even if they’re all adventurers. This is just my own philosophy, but I think the most important thing for improving as a healer is to cast the spells as many times as you can. If you want to be good at something, you need to put in serious time and effort.”

Kururu’s face was stiff and awkward. She probably knew that even if I was right, she couldn’t officially endorse my actions, given the current situation with the guild’s clinics.

“I also think there’s a difference between healing for money and asking for compensation once the patient is satisfied with your services,” I continued. The incident that had befallen Monica was the fault of the guild’s lack of leadership and direction. That difference seemed to be lost on its healers. “I wanted to learn to defend myself this past year. Money can’t buy that.”

“You’re...you’re right. I apologize.”

Immediately, I realized I’d said too much. None of the guild’s shortcomings were her fault. Something about the Healer’s Guild just...didn’t sit right with me.

“No, I’m sorry for acting pretentious. Just for the record, I’m not a masochist, okay? I’m only trying to survive.” Once my position, not to mention innocence, were well and truly clear, I smiled.

She finally smiled back. “You’re a man of ideals, Luciel. I’m surprised to see that someone Miss Lumina dragged in actually has his head on straight.”

Um, is that supposed to mean they’re all nutjobs? She could diss Lumina all she wanted, but why did it have to be at my expense? It sounded like everyone had thought I was a complete weirdo for an entire year. And now I was kind of depressed.

“You know, I never actually saw her again after that,” I mused.

“She left town quite a while ago. Returned to Church Headquarters in the Holy City.”

“The Holy City? Is she one of those upper-class elite types?”

How lucky did you have to be to not only have beauty but also be living it up as one of society's finest? In this world, where hard work and effort were everything, maybe the day would come when we would stand together as equals.

"Something like that. So if you ever want to see her again, you'd better keep working hard. Anyway, you can make it up to rank C. How far you wanna go?" she asked with a smirk, as if she were somehow testing me. I wasn't about to fall for it, though.

"Before that, can I buy any grimoires without ranking up?"

"Sure, we can sell you some," she replied, looking bored by my response, "but that comes with a big asterisk. Spellbooks above your current rank will cost ten times the normal price, so I wouldn't recommend it. The expensive ones can get upwards of ten times your yearly dues."

Talk about extortionate pricing. I thought it was the healers themselves who were supposed to be the greedy ones. Narrowing the options down by necessity would be smart.

"Could you explain the different kinds you can buy at each rank, then?"

"F-rank lets you buy grimoires for poison, paralysis, and sleep recovery spells. E-rank has mid-level healing. D-rank, barrier magic, and C-rank gets you area healing."

"Okay, and how much would the E, D, and C grimoires cost all together?"

"One sec... One gold and twenty-four silver if you get them now, but only ninety silver if you buy them at rank C."

I didn't have anywhere close to enough. Taking my dues into account, it'd take me three months to afford all that, assuming I kicked myself into high gear. No, probably even longer. Really, I wasn't sure what I was expecting, seeing as I only had three silver to my name. I needed her to introduce me to the best-paying clinic in town.

Just as I opened my mouth to speak, a weighty *thud* along with the characteristic clinking of metal came from the counter between me and Kururu.



I looked down to find a leather bag, held by none other than Coach Brod. “Your wages. Two gold and thirty-one silver,” he rasped in that husky voice of his.

“Uh, what are you doing here, Coach?”

“Nearly forgot to give ya your pay,” he grinned, then looked at Kururu. “Now, Miss, I’ll pay one gold for you to dispatch Luciel here to the Adventurer’s Guild. We’ll cover his wages.”

“Um, and who might you be?” The receptionist looked absolutely bewildered.

“Sorry, my bad. Name’s Brod, of the Adventurer’s Guild. Ask the guildmaster who I am. Should clear things up.”

Wow, that was some pompous attitude on display. Brod was as ruthless as ever.

So, this is the system I heard about. How the Healer’s Guild used to send people to the Adventurer’s Guild.

Kururu looked at me nervously.

“Right, this is Brod, Kururu. He’s my combat instructor,” I clarified. “I promise he’s not here to cause trouble or threaten anyone. And when you say ‘dispatch,’ Coach, do you mean what I think you mean?”

“I’m officially hiring you as the guild’s resident healer, Luciel,” he stated.

He was probably completely confident that I couldn’t possibly turn the offer down. And as much as I would’ve liked to mess with him a little, this really wasn’t the place. Especially since Kururu seemed a bit freaked out.

“Well, I still haven’t managed to hit you yet, so if you’re willing to pay me, I’d be insane to refuse.”

“Are you sure? You’re certain that’s okay?” Kururu whispered anxiously. Her concern warmed my heart.

“It’s okay. Like I said, he’s my instructor, I swear. I’d love to be stationed at the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“If you say so. Then I’ll start processing everything. Keep up the good work

and make some money for yourself this year, got it?”

“I will. Thank you for the advice.”

After that, we finished up the official paperwork for my new post. I bought all the grimoires available to me, covered my year’s dues, and then it was back to the familiarity of the Adventurer’s Guild.

I spoke up as soon as we stepped outside. “You scared the heck out of me, Coach. I can’t believe you just showed up like that.” The possibility of him doing so had never even crossed my mind.

“Training with you got my own Martial Arts skill up to eight. Credit where credit’s due.” He shot me a smug look. “I’m gonna teach you everything I know, including the jobs that keep the guild running. Oh, and no slacking on your Holy Magic, either.”

Putting aside wherever that triumphant attitude was coming from, I was amazed to hear that his skill was level *eight*. That wasn’t even human. No wonder he always treated me like a kid.

I was still going to land a hit on him, though. Someday.

Not an hour after I’d left, we arrived back home. I steeled myself for the typhoon of teasing that surely awaited me, then entered.

Later, I returned to my room, where the placard that had once read “Resting Room” now had a different label: “Healer’s Room — Luciel.”

“Yup. This one’s mine, all right.”

Somehow, a room that had been filled with my own personal belongings for months now felt more personal than ever. It otherwise hadn’t changed a bit since this morning.

“Guess I was only gone for an hour. I wonder how long Coach was planning that?” The man was an enigma.

I put my books on the desk, then glanced around the room. “Looks like we’re in it for another year, old pal.”

After I finished straightening things up a bit, I had afternoon training, which

was followed by reading my newly-bought grimoires. There were tons of important points listed, as well as various tips and tricks. For example, it said that the Null Cast skill was more cast-efficient than Short Cast or Magic Boost, which increased magical efficacy by consciously utilizing greater amounts of your energy. I'd never heard much of the advice before and it seemed quite handy.

What they failed to mention, however, were the demerits or effects of anything they described. To build on the previous example, trying to use Null Cast without the Free Casting skill would increase MP consumption eightfold. Stuff like that just wasn't explained. It was actually *less* efficient for me to practice Free Casting because my own magic pool was still rather low. Maybe I could give it some extra study time down the line.

I also found myself craving the Magic Cost Reduction skill more than anything else, despite all the other spells I'd just gotten my hands on. It most likely wouldn't trigger without first increasing Magic Handling and Magic Control, but I just wanted to have fewer limits on my spellcasting.

Holding back these impatient urges, I focused my mind and set a goal. Within this next year, I would reach the starting line and become at least strong enough to be able to set out on my own.

08 — A Welcoming Party and Lurking Shadows

Foolishly, I thought things in my life would change a little, but my days passed as they always had—I trained and healed.

“Things aren’t too different from before, are they?” I thought out loud.

“What’d you expect?” Brod replied. “Your job’s healing people. And you wanted to keep training, didn’t you?”

“Of course. Anything if it’ll keep me alive a bit longer.”

I really meant that. My goal from last year, to overcome my fear of adventurers, had reached fruition, and I felt comfortable within the guild’s walls now. It was quite true that people feared what they didn’t know. Get to know a person and you’d find, more often than not, that they weren’t so bad, just like I’d learned during job training in my past life.

“Luciel, try to hang in there this year. I swear to you, I’ll get you to the point where you’ll be able to at least survive bumping into a low-level thief.”

Coach was as dependable as always, but I had to wonder if it was actually okay for me to be training on the job. He did hire me as a *healer*. *But if he says so, I won’t complain.*

“I’ll do my best.”

“Good. Now, let’s get some dinner.”

“Yes, sir.”

Together, we made for Gulgar’s domain, although something felt off. Where had everyone gone? Brod said nothing and kept walking, so I ignored it.

The moment we entered the mess, a grand voice cried out, “Presenting our Adventurer’s Guild healer!” A chorus of applause followed.

“Uh, what?”

Within the crowd that greeted me were the guild staff, who should have been

off duty today, and many adventurers I knew.

“What’re you so surprised for? You’re stationed at the guild, and that means you’re a temporary staff member. Why *wouldn’t* we throw a good old-fashioned welcoming party?” My instructor grinned from ear to ear and burst into a hearty laugh.

The dining hall was set up in a standing buffet style, but was still awfully cramped with this many people. I felt nothing but gratitude for everyone who had shown up.

“Ay, Luciel, c’mere a sec,” Gulgar called from the kitchen. Near the counter was a single, lone chair, waiting to be sat in.

What is this, a birthday party? Man, this is embarrassing...

“Sit down and take this.” He handed me the usual.

Seeing the girls all escape to the entrance near the back was exceedingly depressing. They were practically running away from me. A rancid smell wafted from the pitcher of Substance X in my hand.

“Um, do I really have to drink this? I haven’t even eaten yet.”

“Naw, you’re gonna shower in it. Yeah, you’re gonna drink it! How’s the party s’posed to get started unless that’s your toast?” he prodded. The other adventurers gave me similarly expectant looks as well.

“Fine. So, who’s actually giving the toast?”

“The floor’s all yours, Luciel.”

I knew it. I was going to have to put up with this treatment for the rest of the year, wasn’t I?

“Well then, allow me to kick things off,” I began. “I’ve made a lot of fond memories here over the last year. Good ones, and not so good. Here’s to this year being nothing but good ones. All you adventurers, I expect you to make it back home every day, even if you’re half-dead and have to drag yourselves. I’ll be here to save you. Guild staff, I hope you can put up with me for a bit longer. Here’s to happiness and fortune. Cheers!”

“Cheers!” roared the room.

I threw my head back and chugged the poison in my pitcher. No one joined me. Every single person stared in astonishment.

“Holy crap...” I heard from the crowd.

“I knew that guy was a masochist.”

“Maybe his nose is defective too?”

My nose is just fine, thanks. It reeks to high heaven, but we humans work differently, I thought to myself. Maybe I could get Gulgar to force the comedians over there to try some Substance X themselves.

Once I finished, it was some time before I could speak again.

“Oh, and no alcohol for you, Luciel,” Brod warned.

It took me a moment to process what he’d told me. I hadn’t had a single drop of alcohol since coming to this world, but in my past life, I used to drink just about every other dinner. I really would’ve liked to have had a drink tonight, at least.

My voice finally returned. “Why not? It’s a party, isn’t it?”

“It amplifies Substance X so much, you wouldn’t be able to get out of bed tomorrow morning.”

“You’re joking.”

How the hell does one “amplify” an already overpowered item? It was my own party and I couldn’t even drink. What utter nonsense.

Brod set a plate piled high with food in front of me while pinching his nose. “Here, eat up so you can grow big and strong,” he teased, holding back laughter. “Ya can’t drink with us, but you’ve got as much food and Substance X as you could hope for.”

He’s just straight-up bullying me at this point. It was my own welcoming party, and no one could stand to be near me for half an hour while my breath cleared. I faded into the background and picked at my food alone.

Just as I was nearing my limit, Gulgar showed up with another huge platter.

“I’m beyond stuffed, seriously.”

“Yeah? I noticed you eatin’ more than usual lately.”

“Just trying not to be wasteful. Also, have you seen Galba anywhere?”

“Ah, my bro’s out on an important job. Not here today.”

“Sounds mysterious.”

A trio of adventurers came over. “Hey, healer, how come you can drink that stuff?”

“It’s ’cause his tongue’s all jacked up, ain’t it?”

“I heard healers have dulled senses.”

They prattled on about their theories one after another, although I was sure they didn’t mean anything bad by it. As I fended off their accusations, Gulgar returned with three cups.

“If you’ve got a bone to pick with the guest of honor, I’ve got a little somethin’ to shut you folks up with,” he threatened.

“I’ll drink it for a date with Monica,” one of the adventurers retorted.

“I call Nanaella,” added another.

“I’ll take anybody, I don’t even care at this point,” said the last.

“Gulgar, bring me a pitcher of Substance X,” I requested.

“O-Okay, sure,” he responded, looking rather shocked.

They could say what they wanted about me, but I wasn’t cool with the way they were about the girls like objects. A bit of liquid hell would do them some good.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Thanks. Now, I’ve got a game, you guys. If you can finish what’s in those tiny cups, I’ll have to down this pitcher. Win, and I’ll talk to the girls for you.”

“You’d better not be lying.”

“We’re holding you to that.”

“Fine, you’re on.”

They began to drink.

The moment the first sip passed their lips, they were down for the count. And just so no one could complain later, I guzzled my own pitcher as quickly as I could. According to Gulgar, they had all passed out.

I bowed to Monica and Nanaella, who giggled in response. Whether they were laughing with me or at me, I was never able to figure out as three shadows suddenly obscured my vision: the Lineage of the White Wolf.

At first, I'd been terrified of them, but ever since I'd saved them from the brink of death, they'd gotten pretty attached to me. They came right up to me, in spite of the fact that I must have reeked.

"Say, Luciel. There's somethin' I've been wanting to ask you." Bazan hesitated.

"What's that?"

"Are you into dudes?"

I immediately choked on my own spit. "Where in the world did that come from?!" I sputtered. "No! I like girls!"

The utter randomness of his question caught me totally off guard. I hadn't meant to get so flustered, but I couldn't help it. Thankfully, no one else had been watching.

"Oh, gotcha. You just hang around Brod so much and you haven't made a single move on any of those pretty receptionists."

That was because I was in no position whatsoever to test my luck. Brod would be on me faster than I could blink if I tried anything, and frankly, I wasn't in a suicidal mood.

I sighed. "Romance is important, yes, but lives can end in an instant. I've just been so focused on making sure I can survive that I haven't had any time for other stuff."

"Damn, kid, you're too young to be gettin' philosophical. You gotta cut loose while you can, man!"

The entire room seemed to be listening in now. Playing along was my only

escape.

“I suppose so. I’ve gotten used to it, but where I grew up, people didn’t carry around weapons everywhere they went, so when I first came to Merratoni I spent half a year scared out of my mind.”

“You’re brave enough to drink that garbage, but adventurers had you shittin’ bricks?” Bazan howled with laughter. “You’ve got some weird priorities.”

“Hey, *that* stuff won’t kill me, but when I bumped into you the day I arrived, Bazan, I was completely petrified. Ever since, I’ve been terrified of what adventurers might do to me if I ever got on their bad side.”

“You can keep gettin’ back up after Brod knocks you down like some kinda zombie, but being on ‘the bad side’ of adventurers scares you? Well, you don’t gotta worry about anyone around here gettin’ in your business. Let us know if somethin’ happens.”

“I appreciate it.”

Bazan and I got along surprisingly well. Then, Sekiros and the taciturn Basura joined in.

“So, you’re really a ladies’ man, Luciel?” Sekiros badgered.

“Again?” I groaned. “Yes, I like girls.”

“Now, now. Don’t be a sourpuss.”

“Whose fault do you think that is?”

He chuckled. “Well, ladies’ man, what do you say to comin’ with us on a night on the town one of these days? Have a bit of *fun*.”

“This city has places like that?”

“That they do. Interested? You stand out like a sore thumb, though, so we’ll need a disguise or rumors’d spread like wildfire.”

“I-I was just curious, okay? As if I even have the time or money to spend on that.” I laughed dryly at myself. The party of three cracked up as well and threw back their mugs of ale.

The party continued well into the night. Once the stench of Substance X had

finally dissipated, it was the women's turn to interrogate me. They were rather tipsy, though, and didn't pry too deep, giving me a chance to chat with Monica.

"Kururu asked about you."

She hesitated. "How were things at the Healer's Guild?"

"It was kind of empty. Like they didn't have anything to do. They're trying to hire another receptionist, but I guess no one wants to do such slow work. At least, that's how it seemed to me."

"That's too bad..." She paused. "There's certainly more for me to do here than there was there. The pay was good, but not too different from what I make now."

"Do you think moving here was the right decision?" I asked.

"I do," she replied. "I get to interact with so many people, like you and the other adventurers. And there's always just enough work to busy myself with. The days fly by so fast I can barely keep track. It feels like I'm *living*, like I'm actually doing something." She looked up at me and smiled. "If you hadn't saved my life, Mister Luciel, I would never have had the chance to experience all this. I can't thank you enough."

I caught myself moving to gently pat her head, when—

"Dude, that's nasty, quit throwin' up!"

"I'm vomiting 'cause you're vomiting! Don't blame me!"

"It's that damn masochist's fault for makin' us drink that shit!"

Suddenly, I was no longer in a head-patting mood. Monica and I sighed in unison, looked at each other, and smiled.

I was trying out some new spells after my morning stretches.

Middle Heal: about three times the recovery effect of Heal for eight MP.

Area Heal: novice-level healing magic that could restore everyone within a two-meter radius of myself, by an amount equivalent to a standard Heal spell. Fifteen MP.

Attack and Magic Barrier: two novice-level barrier spells that reduced damage from physical and magical attacks, respectively. Ten MP each.

Area Barrier: mid-level barrier magic that applied both Attack and Magic Barrier to anyone within a two-meter radius. Note: this did not create a protective field to keep out monsters. Thirty MP.

“This is some hard practice to be doing first thing in the morning. A single Area Barrier knocks me down thirty whole MP. There’s gotta be a way to make these spells easier to use.”

Thoughts of magic had begun to fill my daily meditation.

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While Luciel pondered his spells, furious roars echoed through the halls of a certain Merratoni clinic.

“Would you dunces care to enlighten me with an explanation for this? Our income *and* slave sales are down by half! *Half!*” bellowed a portly, middle-aged man, wearing a flowing white robe adorned with ornaments and various jewels.

The dozen or so men gathered before him hung their heads in fear of his contorted, rage-filled expression. One of them came forth as representative and bowed.

“Our deepest apologies, Sir, but it is as we said. The Adventurer’s Guild healer is to blame.”

The middle-aged man’s fury did not abate. “Then why was he not dealt with, you inept imbeciles?! You fumbled the assassination of that receptionist too, if memory serves! Is another one of you looking to die? Well, *are* you?!”

He took an ornate, expensive-looking glass and hurled it at the representative, who did not so much as attempt to dodge. The cup collided with his head, and as blood began to trickle down, he continued.

“Pardon my insolence, Sir, but in an entire year, the healer has stepped outside no more than four times. We have been unable to make contact.”

“Then go there yourself!”

“You see, well...he trains with the guildmaster every waking hour. While he

sleeps, high-ranking adventurers guard his room. He is untouchable.”

“Damn it all! That guild and their healer are a real thorn in my side. What gutter did he even crawl out of? Something needs to be done soon. You! Convene all the subsidiary clinics!”

“At once!” answered the subordinate, then hastily exited.

“It would seem I’ve missed a little ant who thinks he can upset my rule of this town. And pests must be crushed.”

The remaining men turned pale as the middle-aged man’s uproarious cackling shook the very air of the room.

09 — Merratoni's Top Healer, Bottaculli

The Healer's Guild, a society of those with the ability to wield Holy Magic, founded with the sole purpose of saving lives, was the product of the efforts of Lord Reinstar and his companions.

In the beginning, healing was compensated by charitable donations, and the local population grew in response to their services. These donations consisted not only of money, but of fruits, vegetables, daily necessities... Anything was accepted, so long as it was given with good intentions.

However, as the population ballooned, men began to squabble and war with one another. The healers began to prioritize their services to the downtrodden. These two events became the catalysts for significant change in the world.

War sent more and more to their deaths, the population declined, and healers became nothing more than tools. Thus, Lord Reinstar and his companions set out to establish their own nation of healers, a nation that would see great prosperity. That is, until its founders passed on.

The remaining healers were not all of the same mind. Many were furious, contemptuous, of the abuse and hatred flung at them when their life-saving magic failed to deliver. And so, healers from every branch around the world revolted by going on strike. As a result, prices were left at the mercy of individual healers, and the guild was powerless beyond only the most extreme circumstances, relegated to mere grimoire-selling and tax collection.

Dues were used to cover expenses, as well as wages for staff members, leaving no funds for the establishment of new clinics or the operation of the orphanage. This gave rise to the "greedy healer," an archetype that saw only reinforcement as time went on.

This was what Brod told me about the state of healers in the world. His explanation was for good reason—two months had passed since my official employment at the Adventurer's Guild and my life was currently in danger.

“I can’t believe someone out there hates my guts just for being alive.”

During my time at the guild, I’d saved all sorts of adventurers. Unfortunately, the clinics I had apparently been “stealing business” from were losing profits, so they dug into the reason and there I was. Since I had set up shop at and was a member of the Adventurer’s Guild, assassination wasn’t a major concern, but, as reported by Galba, the city’s top money-grubber was on the move, so anything could happen.

“That’s why I’m setting you up with bodyguards any time you need to leave from now on,” Brod said, clearly not realizing that I’d never even set foot outside under such circumstances.

Yeah, not likely.

“It’s just so weird to think about there suddenly being people out there who want me dead. Like, out of nowhere.”

“I’ll bet. But don’t forget, you’ve got just as many, if not more, people on your side, ready to lend a hand. The staff, the adventurers... You’ve got a family that’s glad to have ya. All the work you’ve put in wasn’t for nothing. You’re sitting pretty.”

That was certainly a plus. Mercenaries in this world were essentially assassins, and there were distinctly fewer of them than adventurers. They were also considered generally weaker. And with the Lineage of the White Wolf as my personal guard, virtually no one could get near me. My instructor himself was a calming presence, too, of course.

“Well, it’s not like I’m doing anything wrong. Still, if someone’s after my life, I’ll need all the training I can get.”

“You’re the weirdest healer I’ve ever met, y’know that? In a good way.” He grinned at me like an insane, battle-crazed maniac. I had to remind myself not to think about that the next time we were fighting.

“I’m just me. By the way, where did you get the info that I was being targeted?”

“Townfolk, adventurers, people who’re sick of other healers besides you.”

“Really? Even citizens?”

“Right. ‘Course, that info came with the condition you’d start healing them along with your usual patients.”

“What?” I’d been healing townspeople? Since when? *Wait, there was that old lady in full armor and the old man in the robe. Now, that was some serious cosplay.*

I must have missed them, since I’d stopped paying close attention to people after learning Area Heal.

“What, you think people give intel for free?”

Reading between the lines, I assumed he was trying to tell me that you did what you had to do to get information.

“Sure, I can heal them,” I sighed. “Just make sure I’m properly guarded, please.”

“Not a problem.”

I felt relieved, letting him handle the fighting. Was that related to my ongoing losing streak in some way? Perhaps.

“So, do we have any idea who’s got the grudge against me?”

“We do. The director of the biggest clinic in Merratoni, Bottaculli.”

The name rang a bell. It didn’t take long for me to recall that it was the man we’d suspected of trying to have Monica killed.

“The city’s most powerful man can’t stand a single newbie healer? Talk about a Napoleon complex. But that could mean Monica’s in danger, too. He was probably the one who sent the assassin after her.”

“I heard about that at the time, but everything was just conjecture back then. He made sure the guy kept his mouth shut. Also, I’m trying to figure out what you mean by ‘Napoleon,’ but I’m comin’ up short.”

“Gah!” Critical hit by an unintentional dad joke.

“Hey, you all right?”

Aside from the gaping wound in my heart, yes. I’d better watch what I say in

the future.

“Y-Yeah. Anyway, are there no clinics on my side?”

“I’m sure some of ‘em support you in spirit, even if they can’t go public with it. Your honest rates and the fact you give them upfront are good things.”

“How’s my reputation, anyway?”

“Good with adventurers. You do your job well and treat everyone respectfully. We got lots of requests from regular townsfolk asking to come by for healing, too.”

Apparently, we were *already* healing townsfolk. Then again, it was thanks to them we had learned about the assassination plot before I ended up with a knife in my back. Give and take, as they say.

“Wait, then have I already treated quite a few of them at this point?”

“Noticed, huh? Word’s gotten around about a healer who’ll treat people for a single silver coin without squeezin’ their wallets dry.”

For a moment, I had been worried about Brod’s plan, about whether he had intended to completely crush the clinics, but that price was higher than expected.

“Er, isn’t a silver pretty expensive?” It came off as pretty overpriced to me. It wasn’t like I was giving each and every one of them my undivided attention, after all. If a single Heal cost a silver, at the going rate, fifty copper for Area Heal felt more appropriate.

Coach tilted his head and raised his eyebrow. “I thought I told Nanaella and the girls to teach you common sense.”

“Hey, I might be a healer, but I’m still a complete novice. I’ve just barely started my second year.”

And what a great place I was in for that second year. Not just for my healing skills, but for improving my general knowledge as well. There were books of all genres here, covering all sorts of topics, which I could read at my leisure while asking anyone if I had questions.

I had been worried for the guild staff at first, seeing as they interacted with

the big, scary adventurers I had been so afraid of, but it took something more than pencil-pushing to hold a position at the guild office. Everyone here had a wealth of knowledge and experience. It was a veritable gathering of minds. And in a world without many options in the way of pastimes, reading was how I relaxed, so I'd learned a lot over the course of a year.

Despite the grueling training I had endured, I was a skittish person at my core. I'd once feared for my life whenever those gruff adventurers came looking for help. No matter how used to casting Heal I had become, I would enunciate every single syllable of the chant, the thought that I might die if I failed filling my mind. I would drill, practice, and visualize every single day.

Then, a year later, my fear vanished entirely, but I didn't let it go to my head. Another thought occurred to me: *What if this is how I live a safe life? Healing adventurers, whoever needs it, honestly and reliably.*

The fire this thought would light in me, and the hard work it would inspire, continued to bear fruit even to this day. But without a doubt, the number-one thing that kept me going was the environment I worked in. It was nothing like the hell I'd seen doctors endure on TV shows. There were no all-nighters, no collapsing from overwork. Rather, we were all in it together. Everyone helped each other.

My new life wasn't a bad one. Brod understood all this, the story behind my words. After a pensive moment, he smiled.

"Yeah, you're right. I guess I've gotta make sure my temps can survive, don't I? Starting today, we're upping the weapons diversity in your curriculum."

"Um, you don't need to get excited," I stammered. "Hey, don't pull me! Are you even listening? Coach! Hey, Coach!"

Off I went to the underground training grounds, dragged along by the neck of my shirt. The staff and adventurers, unfazed, looked on with little interest. They'd seen this act a million times before.

Days later, on an afternoon like any other, I was focused on my Martial Arts and Ambulation practice, getting my butt handed to me by my instructor, when an authoritative voice stole my attention.

“Are you this guild’s healer?” it demanded.

I turned and saw a rotund man accompanied by two bulky guards making his way towards me. The other adventurers at the training ground immediately stepped between us, blocking his path. Who was this man? I’d never seen him before in my life.

“You deaf, kid?” one of the mercenaries shouted. He had some nerve to talk big like that while surrounded by this many people.

“And who might you be?” I replied calmly. “I don’t recall being acquainted with hooligans who show up without so much as an appointment just to cause a ruckus.”

I’d let my frustration get the better of me. My body ached and I was not in the mood. I had no reason to answer someone who had failed to offer the common courtesy of providing their own name. This pudgy man, come to waste my valuable time, must have been Bottaculli. With my instructor and the others nearby, I wasn’t afraid. I had free rein to stand my ground.

“I see you’re not only cheeky but dim-witted, too, you brat. Listen, and listen well, because I’ll only say this once. I am the director of the largest clinic in all of Merratoni, Bottaculli!”

“Botticelli?”

“*Bottaculli*, you insolent little...! I am giving you an order. Cease your healing at the Adventurer’s Guild. Do so and I’ll hire you at my own clinic. I’ve taken time out of my busy day specifically to tell you this in person.”

What healer in their right mind would be swayed by the smug smirk of some fat, old guy?

“I’m very sorry, but I can’t do that,” I politely replied. “This is my official posting from the Healer’s Guild. It’s out of my hands. Though to be fair, I suppose I’d decline regardless, since I’m here for a reason.”

Botticel— Bottaculli’s face turned a vibrant shade of red. “Now listen here, *whelp*. I’m giving you this chance out of the kindness of my heart. If you mean to turn your nose up—”

He went no further. The adventurers around me were staring cold, hard daggers at him and his bodyguards, making sure the intruders were well aware of just how unwelcome they were.

“You threaten me and try to steal me away from my workplace and call that kindness? I can’t comply with your order, but I would love to offer you a dictionary, if you like.”

Evidently, his inability to speak didn’t mean that he was incapable of glowering. The healer hid none of the fury behind his own glare, his face somehow growing even redder.

The hired help with him stood by, awaiting orders. Their presence proved that he had mercenaries under his command, and validated Brod’s decision to have guards with me if I ever went out.

“Why are you being so pushy about me going to your clinic?”

His visibly boiling blood seemed to cool somewhat. “Since your arrival at the Adventurer’s Guild, my clinics have seen fewer and fewer patients.”

“Are you marketing properly? Clinics are supposed to help people. And I don’t think anyone wants help from a place with a bad reputation. Also, what are you complaining about? Are you a child? I highly recommend you learn some business sense.”

“Are you saying my clinic has a bad reputation?!” he yelled.

All the rumors said so. However, his clinic was still the biggest in town, and had no shortage of patients.

“I never said that. I just believe in common sense. People want to go to a clinic that treats them with respect, somewhere they can be attended to promptly and with honest, transparent pricing.”

“You think you can lecture me on how to run *my* business?”

“No, not at all. Why would I lecture a man I’ve only just met? Has something I’ve said hit home, maybe?”

“You worthless little ant! A greenhorn healer like you is nothing to me! I could crush you in an instant!” he cried, the veins on his forehead bulging.

In his world, I was an invader, and he was at least somewhat justified in thinking that. At first, I had been conflicted. I knew I had to have been hurting clinics all around town with what I was doing. But the extortion, the slavery, it was all but denying others the right to live, no different from rejecting a peaceful coexistence.

I decided to hear him out. I had allies all around to protect me, so I wanted to use this chance to glean some understanding of Bottaculli's way of thinking.

"Right, you're a far more experienced healer than I am and the director of Merratoni's largest clinic. I'm interested in hearing some of your wisdom, if you wouldn't mind."

"Hm. Very well." Like taking candy from a baby. His smug aura had returned in an instant. "For my own reference, what magic would you use to mend a patient with, say, broken bones or a serious illness?"

"Listen and be amazed, for my clinics employ those, such as myself, with the ability to cast the advanced healing spell High Heal. That is what we use. For the price of just thirty gold coins, it's practically a steal."

He talked so big that you'd expect him to float away from all the hot air in his head, but if he could use High Heal, he had surely undergone a good deal of training. What had once driven him to study magic? And now he charged thirty gold for a single spell? He was right about it being 'a steal,' just not in the sense he meant.

"What about, for example, an adventurer who's bleeding from a Forest Wolf bite?"

"High Heal, of course. The patient, I assume, would prefer to be healed entirely."

"But what if they don't have the money?"

"Now that, I can't divulge. We have our ways of getting the compensation we're owed."

"Like selling them to slavers from other countries?"

Bottaculli's expression immediately soured. An intimidating aura emanated

from his mercenaries. Compared to Brod's, though? It was like a gentle breeze.

"Well, never mind. Would Heal or Middle Heal not be sufficient for that type of injury?"

"Why should I lower myself to perform such basic level magic? Are the patients' financial circumstances any of my concern? They come to my clinic looking for help, so we offer it. They have no right to complain," he stated without the slightest trace of a conscience.

And this was the man who had built up Merratoni's top clinic.

"Humor me a little. Wouldn't it be more profitable to consider each case, use the appropriate magic, and help as many people as possible?"

"How naive. We are healers, not slaves. Why should we busy ourselves with work that doesn't pay?"

"You'll earn nothing but animosity with thinking like that. Is magic not a gift from the Goddess meant to save lives?"

The egg-shaped man chuckled. "Naive, boy, naive. Just like I used to be. You haven't experienced the contempt and abuse yet, have you? The clamoring for your healing when you're starved of magic. The slander, despite your sincerest efforts."

Bottaculli could use High Heal. He wasn't a novice; he'd been through the training. There may have been a time long ago when he had been admired and respected for his profession. It was a shame. A damn shame.

"I can't say I have. Sure, maybe that would make me lose my faith in people."

"You see? Come to my clinic. We'll treat you well."

"But I have to wonder if you were really *that* backed into a corner. Were you truly so antagonized by every single person around you? You didn't have a single friend? A single hand to reach out to? Have you spared even a thought for the families of the people you threw into slavery?"

"Don't talk to me like you know who I am, wretch!"

I had stepped on a landmine and Bottaculli was beside himself with fury. Nothing I said would make any difference now. Yet I was still hoping to find

some good within that was clinging on, deep down in his heart, and continued.

“The fact that you can cast High Heal means you clearly have the skill, but patients still don’t come. So why do you not consider that the issue might lie with your own management? The way you do things brings nothing but misery to others.”

Silence followed...but only temporarily.

“Have you said what you needed to say? Good. Because my compassion has run dry. You’ve well and truly enraged me.” Bottaculli turned to the mercenaries. “Kill him! I don’t care how, I want his head!”

That very instant, I felt a breeze blow by me. The mercenaries had stopped moving. Or rather, they *couldn’t* move. Faster than I could blink, Brod had brought daggers to both of the men’s throats. One wrong step and they were done for...and they knew it. They were leagues apart in skill.

Even without Brod, there was no shortage of adventurers around me, each now radiating an aura of such intensity that I didn’t need to be the target of their ire to notice.

Brod’s anger, however, was on a whole other level. The color had completely drained from the hirelings’ faces. “Name’s Brod, of the Adventurer’s Guild. Sir Bottaculli, how would you like it if I conducted an investigation into those clinics of yours? I’m a little interested in your finances, I gotta say. Maybe I’ll find some skeletons in your closet,” he growled.

Bottaculli, now shaking like a leaf, wasted no time. He let out a pitiful shriek, then bolted up the stairs as fast as he could. The mercenaries didn’t wait either, and quickly followed their boss the second Brod let them go.

“Wow, that was amazing!” I cheered. “You scared him off like it was nothing. I never stop being impressed by you, Coach. And the rest of you, too. Thank you for standing up for me.”

My companions looked rather on edge, so I took care to thank them from a safe distance. As I lowered my head, everyone went back to their own business like nothing had even happened.

“So, that was the big boss who hates my existence? I can’t believe he just

marched right in here. I get the impression he used to be a decent healer, though.”

“Yeah, but now he’s a grubby penny-pincher who extorts people and throws them into slavery,” Brod spat. “Doesn’t matter what he was before.”

“True.”

Maybe something had happened in the past to make him distrust others, but that was then. Extortionate pricing and debt enslavement were probably happening all over the world right now, so what was Guild Headquarters doing sitting on their hands for so long?

“I wonder why things like this are allowed to happen. There really should be laws in place,” I mused.

“Some healers actually hide their prices ’till after it’s all said and done, then make you out as a criminal for not paying. It’s rough.”

“Anything goes, I suppose. Lord Reinstar must be rolling in his grave.” Not that I had ever met the guy.

“Those sick healers who scam people into debt are no better than criminals,” Brod snarled.

I finally understood why the Healer’s Guild was so disliked. And I, a healer, had just waltzed up to the Adventurer’s Guild looking for a job. I genuinely owed Brod a lot.

“Sounds like it’s a deep-rooted problem.”

“Yeah. I’m glad an airhead like you was the one who showed up here.”

“I can’t tell whether I’m being complimented or not, but I’m glad you hired me, too.”

If I had started out working at Bottaculli’s place, I might’ve ended up being tainted by him. Or maybe I would have protested like Monica and eventually been assassinated.

“Yeah? Well, anyway, if you didn’t before, you’ve definitely got a target on your back now.”

“Why do you seem happy about that?” I laughed. “You like fighting *that* much? I guess it’s better for us to be on guard from now on. I’m not a fan of assassins.”

“The guild’ll keep ya safe. I’ll have eyes on your room, too, so you just keep doing what you’re doing. You’re with the Adventurer’s Guild. You couldn’t ask for a better group of people to watch your back.”

His overwhelming confidence was reassuring. “I’ll leave it to you, then. Let’s pick up our session where we left off, if you don’t mind.”

“You got it. We’re gonna ramp up the difficulty now that you’ll really have people comin’ for you.”

“As long as it doesn’t kill me, please and thank you.”

And so, the screams of anguish below the Adventurer’s Guild began to grow in frequency. In between sessions, I found myself thinking about Bottaculli’s past. How, if my healing ever stopped being enough, the people’s affection for me might turn to hatred.

New thoughts occupied my mind: thoughts of Merratoni’s top healer, Bottaculli, of the Healer’s Guild, and of the clinics and the healers who worked there.

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Bottaculli, having fled with his tail between his legs, vented his anger on the two mercenaries and his head slave.

“Damn that child, making a fool of me! He brandishes his ‘righteousness’ as if he understands the way the world works. I won’t let him get away with it. You buffoons, find out as much as you can about him, every detail, no matter how small. If the chance presents itself, kill him.”

The mercenaries could not reply. Bottaculli was evidently unaware of Brod’s constant proximity to their target. The two were virtually never apart and that alone made the job a troublesome one.

“Sir Bottaculli, trying to threaten or trap him’s not gonna be easy,” one stated carefully, so as not to incur more of his employer’s wrath. “He’s totally

surrounded by the guild, and that monster never leaves his side. We can't touch the guy."

"Yes, I know! Just shut up and do what you're told!"

The two hirelings looked relieved that their master understood the obstacle Brod posed. However, they still had very little intel to go on regarding Luciel. He was a healer who shut himself up in the Adventurer's Guild. Despite his age, his skills were exceptional. His relationships and acquaintances extended no further than those within the guild. That was all they knew about him.

"But Sir, if we kill him, you'll be the first one people suspect. Even if you were innocent, the adventurers would immediately turn on you."

"Yes, yes, I told you, I'm aware!"

"All right, well, this isn't necessarily *good* news, but he's only stationed there for a year at most. We just gotta make it so he has to leave town after that."

"Idiot, you think I'll wait that long? Why's that twerp even wasting his time with those cheapskates in the first place? You, find out more about him at the Healer's and Adventurer's Guilds."

"Understood," replied the slave, promptly departing.

"I need to ask the guild's director whether the boy can be recalled mid-tenure. That won't work if the Adventurer's Guild can't be bought off, though. There has to be another way."

The portly healer fell deep into thought.

10 — Training Part 2: Numbers, Strength, and a Report

It had been a week since Bottaculli had marched into the training grounds.

“That asshole’s been diggin’ around for dirt on you, apparently.”

“I’m not doing anything wrong, so he can dig as much as he likes.”

I had only been in this world for a little over a year. He wouldn’t find anything.

“Sure, but if word gets out to people who want a guy like him to owe them a favor, they could turn on you.”

“Are the people on my side or not?!” I held my head in my hands in utter, exaggerated despair. As long as I was with the guild, though, I knew my life wouldn’t be in danger.

“That’s why I’m done training you like a healer,” Brod suddenly declared.

“Pardon?” *Did his brain just short-circuit?*

“I’m gonna train you for real, like a novice pugilist or paladin. Starting today, I’m making you my apprentice.”

He hadn’t been training me “for real” this whole time?

“Um, Coach?”

What had him so eager all of a sudden? My job was a support class. I might have started looking more like a swordsman lately, what with all the muscles, but that didn’t change what I was: a healer.

Pugilists or paladins were front-line classes, for people with endurance and talent, something Brod had told me outright that I lacked. I couldn’t fathom why he would make me his apprentice. Even considering the current danger with Bottaculli, there were adventurers to protect me and townspeople to feed us intel in exchange for healing. I was totally lost.

“Don’t worry. We’re just gonna go about twice as hard and up your meals and

Substance X.”

“I am *extremely* worried. Do you have a fever, Coach?” I had been pushing myself past my limits all year and he wanted to go “twice as hard” now? I was done for.

I guess I’ve always just barely managed to pull through somehow.

He interrupted my thoughts with a hand on my shoulder. “Sometimes a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

“Excuse me? Was that supposed to convince me? I still don’t want to.”

Life didn’t care, and neither did Brod.

“If you wanna live, shut up and do what I say,” my instructor growled with commanding intensity.

I felt none of his usual murderous aura but still found myself gripped by the same feeling that would overcome me when he got that demonic glint in his eyes during sparring. Declining was not an option.

“Yes, sir,” I bowed.

“Good. Now, let’s head downstairs. Oh, and I want you to start calling me ‘Master.’”

“Yes, Master!”

Rumor had it that from that day on, Brod’s shouts, as well as my screams, howls, and occasional sobbing could be heard echoing from beneath the guild.

They weren’t just rumors.

At least the adventurers stopped making fun of me. Quite the contrary, they suddenly all became extremely kind. They even stopped glaring at me for talking to Nanaella and Monica.

I, however, lost the ability to care about anything beyond how I would make it to tomorrow. Apparently, my perseverance—my constant insistence on getting back up in spite of how drained and pained I was—inspired the others, but I simply couldn’t care. If I spared a moment to think about it, I’d be on my back a second later, unable to breathe and in agony.

My focus was on my new master. Nothing else.

Onlookers would observe until the sight of me, a healer, working myself ragged finally got to them. More and more people started to train in earnest, just as Brod had always wanted. But he didn't take his eyes off me. I answered in kind, devoting myself more than ever to landing just *one* blow on him.

It was around this time that the survival rate of Merratoni's adventurers began to see significant spikes. And I, the one who had set it all in motion, would be known for years to come.

Not like I particularly cared. I did everything I possibly could have to land any sort of hit on Brod that day, to no avail. Instead, for all my efforts, I was given the absolute *worst* possible name in history among the adventurers—the Masochistic Zombie Healer—to which I promised myself I would never respond. Ever.

A debate began in my mind. Which would be harder, running away from Brod or hitting him?

One day, Brod seemed to be thinking something over, then finally asked, "You can use barrier magic now, right?"

"Yes, thanks to the grimoires you bought me."

"Huh. Cast one on yourself."

"Uh, sure."

The moment I threw out an Attack Barrier, the world around me began to spin. Excruciating pain shot straight through my chest, all the way to my back. I couldn't breathe. The gears in my head groaned as they attempted to make sense of what had just happened. I had been hit, that much was certain, but why?

"Hm. I hit you with all I had and you're still kickin'. And you're conscious. No broken bones, either," he said calmly while I continued to gasp for breath like a fish on land. "Bet you didn't see it, did you? I just smacked the shit outta you. I was planning on building you up to it gradually, but I figured that barrier would keep you alive."

“You couldn’t have...tested that...any other way?” I wheezed. It felt like my spine was about to snap.

“Don’t gimme that, I gave you time to put up the barrier, didn’t I? That’s more than I can say for some folks out in the world.”

I hacked and coughed as my diaphragm slowly returned to normal. “Sure, but I can’t react when you sucker punch me like that. That’s not training, it’s just flat out bullying.”

“You’re damn right. What we’ve been doing up till now’s been ‘training.’ Nothing’s killed you so far, or knocked you on your ass *that* bad. But today, we’re adding pain into your routine.”

My master, clearly having lost his mind again, had forgotten that pain was, in fact, already a key component of everything we had done. It was just like Brod to surpass the limits of absurdity.

He handed me a longsword and shield, real ones that were clearly not meant for training. If we were going that far, there must have been some fearsome assassins after my head.

“Are things that bad?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nope. Not even remotely.”

“I’m sorry? Then what are we doing?”

“This past year, we’ve laid a solid groundwork for you. You’re sturdy, no bad habits. You may not be a natural, not by a long shot, but you know how to keep pushing, how to put in the effort. How could I *not* want an apprentice like that?”

“I’m not following.”

“Like I said before, I’m going to train you as my apprentice. That’s that. No buts. Oh, and no checking your status or skills until I say so.”

I hesitated. “Why?”

My one joy, my greatest source of motivation, banned. Nothing could have been worse. But Brod never did anything without a reason, so I had no choice but to trust his judgment.

"I don't say that to be an ass. When you start chasing numbers, you stop being able to tell the difference between strong and weak."

"Strong and weak?" I repeated.

"No matter how high your stats are, you'll die if a blade severs your head. Even you, right now, could stick a sword in my neck and I'd be done. People obsessed with numerical values are dead weight when push comes to shove."

I sensed a persuasiveness behind his words, as if he were speaking from personal experience. "Understood."

"No more sucker punches. Put up your barrier and let's get started."

"Yes, sir. I'm ready."

"Concentrate on your opponent's body. Their *entire* body," he instructed. "Some feint with their eyes, some with their center of gravity, but I doubt you're at the point where you can tell what's even a feint in the first place."

"I can kind of see them. I just can't keep up with your speed." He was inhuman. There was no way his level of agility should have been physically possible.

"First, understand how the enemy moves. Then we'll work on defense in steps, from parrying to dodging."

"Just like we've always done."

"Right. Except I'm gonna be stronger and faster. I'll be throwing in some feints, too."

"Got it."

Greater speed alone would take his attacks to another level, as well as the pain they would inflict. At the end of the tunnel, though, was a peaceful life. That belief gave me strength.

"Once you get used to things, start envisioning the fight from a bird's-eye view."

"That's, like, master level stuff!"

He couldn't have possibly asked for something more unreasonable. That type

of mental imagery would take incredible spatial awareness and perception. The gap between my actual level and the one Brod expected of me was far too wide, yet all I could do was trust in my master.

It didn't take long for my spirit to start wavering. Assess Mastery had been my pillar, but without it, I was on the same wavelength as everyone else. Perhaps this was his way of training me mentally. Regardless, running away now would accomplish nothing, so I focused on attacking. I *was* going to hit him.

"By the way, I hope you don't plan on backing out now," he said with a smirk.

Why did he always make those faces? Maybe he was just shy about that kinda stuff. He sure had good timing, though. Almost like he could read my thoughts.

Hmph. I will hit him if it's the last thing I do. "I'll sure try."

"That's where you're supposed to say, 'Not on your life' or something. Man, you're one cheeky kid sometimes."

"Nothing in this world is for certain, Master."

He stared at me for a second. "I'm not gonna hold back, so try not to get crushed, all right?"

"I'm very sorry for being rude. Please go easy."

He stared at me for a bit longer. An instant later, I was in the air and my sword and shield had fallen. Brod didn't allow me the mercy of passing out. I was his sandbag for the next hour.

"All right, that's enough of that today. We're moving on to your usual lessons now. I'm teaching you Martial Arts, Swordsmanship, Shields, Spears, and Archery. Get 'em all down pat for our next special session like today," he ordered my ragged body, as if it were the easiest thing in the world to do.

"Yeshuh..." I barely managed to croak out an unintelligible reply before falling face-first onto the ground.

Fifteen minutes and one bucket of water later, we were on to Martial Arts practice. Ignoring my shame at still managing to fall victim to the bucket more than a year later, I focused my mind.

"Strong foundation, strong body. Study the basics..."

I supposedly mumbled this to myself repeatedly, like an incantation of some kind. Any adventurer who heard my incessant chanting fell prey to the curse, finding themselves unable to neglect the fundamentals. Consequently, the Merratoni adventurers grew even stronger.

On the Day of Light, the first of the six days in the Galdardian week, as well as the Day of Wind, I trained in Martial Arts and live combat. The Day of Fire was spent on Swordsmanship and Shields. The Day of Water was for spears, the Day of Earth for Throwing and Archery, and I split the Day of Dark between studying and refining my magic.

The days where we used swords and spears always left me bloodied and covered in cuts, which I was, of course, allowed to heal. The first time I felt myself enveloped by my own magic and experienced its effects for myself, my understanding of spells began to suddenly and rapidly deepen. I hadn't expected such powerful side effects from my physical growth, but I welcomed them nonetheless.

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Meanwhile, Bottaculli poured over a report.

Findings on Luciel — Occupation: Healer — Age: 16

Ignorant and village-born, Luciel became a healer at his coming-of-age ceremony last year, and obtained an affinity for Holy Magic.

He arrived at Merratoni on the seventeenth day of the sixth month and was guided by the paladin Lumina to the Healer's Guild, where he registered. Although initially unable to cast even Heal, after a ten-day stay at the guild's quarters, he learned spellcasting.

Later, he made his way to the Adventurer's Guild, as opposed to seeking out a clinic, requesting training in Martial Arts for reasons that remain unclear. He took up residence there, working for one silver an hour, which was used to cover the cost of his instruction. He subsequently spent every waking hour of the year undergoing combat training.

Upon renewal of his Healer's Guild card this year, his Holy Magic skill was found to be level five, believed to have been achieved through continual self-

healing throughout his training. This is substantiated by his many nicknames, muttered from the shadows, including the Zombie Healer, the Masochist Healer, and the Masochistic Zombie Healer.

His relationships include the guildmaster, primarily, as well as many staff members and adventurers. He prioritizes training over interacting with others, and thus lacks many deeper connections. Nonetheless, he is greatly trusted by the guild and its members. It is believed the majority of them would accept any reasonable request of his.

Surprisingly, he has no set fees or charges. He is compensated for each healing with a single silver. This may be due to his residence within the guild office, but it is also highly likely to be related to the underlying circumstances of his employment.

The paper rippled in Bottaculli's trembling hands. He crumpled it into a ball, threw it to the floor, then crushed it beneath his foot.

"What drivel is this?! He's healing for one silver an hour? It's idiots like this who make us look like greedy pigs!" he shouted in disbelief. "What's so wrong with using my divine gifts to acquire riches? The filthy hypocrite! The fake!"

He continued to stomp and pulverize the report until he was out of breath. Gasping for air, he then trudged over to his desk and scribbled a letter.

"Bring this to the guild director. And this, too."

"At once."

The letter spoke of a young healer who belonged to the Merratoni Healer's Guild and was charging absurd prices, therefore obstructing other businesses. However, his talent was exceptional, so once his tenure ended, he would do well to be transferred elsewhere. Somewhere far away...like the Guild Headquarters. Should he be unwilling to go, a sum of money was enclosed to order the move and incentivize the boy with grimoires.

"That way, even if my name gets out, my reputation won't suffer." He chuckled maliciously. "If anything, it'll improve. And for such a small price, too!"

With that, Bottaculli's quiet revenge was set in motion, to take effect in a year's time. But he could never have anticipated the ripples that this action

would create, nor how they would ultimately affect his own fate.

11 — The Writ

Half a year had passed since my “training as a healer” had become my “training as an apprentice.” Bottaculli was gone from my mind, or rather, I had no *room* for him in my thoughts.

Metal sliced the very surface of my skin at speeds imperceptible to the human eye. Pain followed surprise, which was then followed by panic. Fear froze my body while my brain, finally perceiving the wound, intensified the pain. All the while, I continued to be amazed at the sheer skill and control it took to purposefully wound someone so lightly.

I just had one little problem. “Master, I’m defending properly, so why do you keep aiming for my arms and legs?”

“‘Cause I was gettin’ sick of you acting smug about learning how to read my attacks.” Brod looked to the side like a pouting child.

“It’s not becoming of a master to be envious of his pupil’s talents,” I smirked. “Also, it’s not cute when old men pout.”

“Well, this old man’s about to cut you up for another hour.”

I immediately prostrated myself, full of regret. “I’m very sorry.”

“Sheesh, don’t be such a baby. Come on, it’s about time for some grub. Let’s go see Gulgar.”

“Yes, sir.”

My body had changed considerably over the past six months. I could feel it.

“Early today,” Gulgar noted.

“Yeah, well, someone’s had enough of me slicin’ him up.”

“I’d like to think that’s reasonable,” I shot back.

Gulgar was waiting in the dining hall with my food and Substance X just as he

did every day. *Some things never change.*

I took my first bite.

“He used to be king o’ the twerps when he first came here,” remarked the wolf-eared chef, “but now look at him.”

“Got that right. If we’d trained back then like we’re doing now, I probably woulda cut the poor guy’s arm off by accident.”

I grimaced. “Don’t give me that image.”

“I betcha no one’ll be able to tell you’re even a healer anymore, Luciel,” Gulgar replied.

“I sure as hell can’t think of any who’d train like he does,” Brod added.

“You guys are too late to be teasing me. I’ve been cut up so much lately, blades hardly even scare me now.”

Gulgar stared at me a bit. “Aren’t they supposed to?”

“I’ve messed up and gotten slashed for it a bunch of times now, but I’m still alive. What I mean is, I feel more confident that I can survive a few cuts.”

“What can I say, you figure things out in a weird way. Sometimes you catch my attacks out of nowhere and I end up takin’ an extra swing. Freaks me out every time.”

“A masochistic zombie and a demon instructor. You two’re a match made in heaven, I swear,” Gulgar jeered. “You’ve both lost your damn minds.”

“Please, I’m begging you, stop calling me a masochistic zombie.”

“How am I a demon? I’m a soft teacher, aren’t I?”

Gulgar and I stared at him...judging.

“The hell’s that look for? Knock it off. Gulgar, where’s my food?”

“Comin’ right up.”

In the middle of our meal, Nanaella showed up holding some kind of paper. “Luciel, you have a letter. Something from the Church of Saint Shurule Guild Headquarters?”

“Oh, thank you for bringing it.” I took the envelope and, sure enough, it was from Guild Headquarters. “I wonder what it is.”

“I don’t know much about the Healer’s Guild. Open it,” Brod suggested.

*By order of the Church of Saint Shurule, Healer’s Guild Headquarters,
The healer known as Luciel, of the Merratoni Healer’s Guild, is hereby
transferred to Guild Headquarters, located in the Holy City of Shurule.*

*We are aware that this is highly irregular; however, our decision is informed
by a glowing recommendation that we received on your behalf. We were told of
your exceptional talent and efforts, as is demonstrated by your attainment of
level five Holy Magic at such a young age, as well as your admirable devotion to
the cause of saving lives.*

*Out of consideration for your current position at the local Adventurer’s Guild,
we will expect your swift arrival only after your duty there has been completed,
at the start of the sixth month of the year.*

Pope Fluna Alludelli de Shurule

“It’s an order. I’m being transferred to Church Headquarters, apparently.”

“They got us. Dammit, the sneaky bastard,” Brod hissed.

“What do you mean?”

“Bottaculli. He knows you’ll never leave on your own, and that you’re protected here, so he had you transferred to Headquarters.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He was never after your life, necessarily. He just wants you to stop healing here in Merratoni.”

“So his solution is to send me all the way to Headquarters?”

“Exactly. And it’s signed by the Pope, so you’re probably gonna be given some position that you won’t be able to back out of for a while.”

“Is this...a promotion? Am I moving up?”

“Pretty much. How nice of him,” he snarked.

“I feel kind of bad about this.”

“What’s done is done. At least we’ve got half a year. We’re gonna start piling you up with more patients on top of your training. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“You can take a look at your skills now.”

I immediately obeyed and found a plethora of new acquisitions: Parallel Thinking, Short Cast, Swordsmanship, Shields, Spears, and Archery.

I felt a flood of relief. These six months hadn’t been for nothing. Happiness welled up inside me and poured out as tears. Brod, seeing my weakness, didn’t waste the opportunity to tease me.

The next day, the guild lifted its restrictions on the number of patients and the severity of injuries that I could heal. From that day on, I cast absurd amounts of healing magic, every single day, until I effectively shriveled up. Then I’d be brought some Substance X, which offered a small amount of magical recovery, and got right back to it. One thing I didn’t realize at the time was that, along with the intensity of my training, they’d increased the concentration of that crap.

Days passed, I gained new skills, remained firmly at level one, and eventually my year-long tenure at the Adventurer’s Guild came to an end.

The Adventurer's Guild Triumvirate — Fear for Luciel's Future

All guilds operated twenty-four hours a day, all three hundred and sixty days of this world's year. Merratoni's Adventurer's Guild was no exception. The staff worked in shifts (mornings, evenings, and nights). But there were some who didn't.

"Make sure you do your laps in the morning."

"Yes, Master Brod!"

Luciel, having finished his dinner, went downstairs to his room.

"Wanna have a drink?" Brod called to Gulgar behind the counter.

Guilds didn't normally stock alcohol, but being the guildmaster had its perks. The bet he had won a year ago over whether Luciel would manage to stomach Substance X played a large part in that privilege, too.

"Why not?" the wolf-man said. "By the way, Brod, you're lookin' spry lately. Or am I imaginin' things?"

"I'm shocked, myself. Training that guy's got my Martial Arts up to level eight. Can ya believe it?"

"Wow, that *is* somethin'. Look at Mister Whirlwind, the guy who climbed to S-rank with swords and Instant Movement, learning Martial Arts."

"Tell me about it," Brod replied with a quiet chuckle.

The strongest adventurer at the guild was typically the guildmaster, and Brod, the very peak of human ability and one of the few to have achieved S-rank, certainly fulfilled that requirement. He had actually retired along with his party members, Gulgar and Galba, just before hitting SS-rank, with the specific goal of training a successor. And it just so happened that a certain young healer, who had left the mess moments before, was currently at the front of all three of their minds.

The staff liked to say that when Luciel had shown up, he'd brought smiles with him on account of how much more chipper Brod and Gulgar had supposedly become.

"So, what's Luciel think about all this?"

"Still just trying not to die, he says. That's all. But I'm willing to bet he's so hyper-focused on training, he's got no time to think much about anything else."

Gulgar sighed as if he had expected nothing less. "The guy's been chugging the X for a while now, but you have any idea what it even does?"

"Beats me. Those old documents said the Sage of Time made the stuff. Supposed to make you sturdier and make your stats easier to boost. Hell if I know if it actually does, though."

"Sure would be awkward to tell him he can stop at this point."

Neither of the old friends knew that Substance X had to be continually imbibed in order to be effective. Only Luciel knew the truth, and he paid for it with mockery. They called his tongue "defective," but Brod and Gulgar had stopped caring about that long ago.

"See any fruits from his labor yet?"

Brod hummed in thought. "He's leagues better than his first day, don't get me wrong, but still only on the level of an E-or F-rank."

"I can't get over how he keeps drinkin' that stuff, though. If only there wasn't such a nasty after-smell. I never get enough of that horrible face he makes when I hand 'im some while he's chattin' with Monica and Nanaella."

"Don't be too much of an ass to him. He's at a sensitive age. We don't wanna have to deal with a rebellious phase."

"It'd be easiest if he'd go out with one of 'em so he'd stick around."

"Right, but we're not exactly matchmakers here."

Luciel's privileges and rights were practically on lockdown. Although they sympathized with his adolescence, they knew he wanted to become stronger. Forcing Substance X on him was cruel, but it was for his own good.

Galba made his entrance. “Hey, Brod, Gulgar, done with work today?”

“Hey. Appreciate your help,” Brod said.

“Oh, no, being guildmaster’s a much tougher job.”

“How’s it goin’, bro?” the younger wolf-man greeted his brother. “Ale?”

“Please.”

“So?” Brod urged.

“Right. Negotiations ended well. His life won’t be in danger once he leaves,” Galba reported.

“And who was behind it?”

“Bottaculli, taking a hands-on approach for a change. Also, I was awfully shocked to find out the head slave tried to start a coup d’état.”

“Huh. Sounds like a tough time.”

“So, what’s the plan now?” Gulgar asked.

“I hear the Healer’s Guild’s director found himself quite a bit of pocket change,” Galba answered, “so I think it’s about time for a certain someone to go bankrupt.”

“Never thought I’d see the day the Recluse got serious,” Brod cackled.

Galba’s job didn’t end at butchery. He worked from the shadows, gathering intel and evidence. In other words, espionage. In the past, he had even conducted assassinations.

“Luciel’s hiding something,” Galba said, “but he’s living as best he can. He’s a weirdo who came all the way to the Adventurer’s Guild just because he ‘doesn’t want to die.’ I can’t leave a kid like that out to dry.”

“You make a good point.”

“How ready you think he’ll be once these six months’re up?” Gulgar asked.

“Well, he’s still only level one. Maybe I can get ’im good enough to be able to hold his own against an E-rank fighter, at most. C-rank if he fights dirty. But I’m just talkin’ near-future stuff. He’s got a lot of potential, that kid.”

“Maybe...” Galba said thoughtfully, “I’ll teach him some things if he’s still the same a few years down the road.”

“You’d kill the guy.”

“It’d be fine. I don’t take to swinging blades at children like you do. I work *differently*. And I feel like he’s the type to find himself in trouble a lot, whether he likes it or not.”

“Your predictions are never good, but I’ll be damned if they aren’t always right.”

Gulgar interjected with his own concerns. “When d’ya think he’ll find himself some romance?”

“Huh?” The cook’s brother looked puzzled. “I thought some of those reception girls were interested in him.”

“Only as a brother, I hear,” Brod snorted. “He’s tall and not bad looking, but they call him a masochist and a zombie all the time, so whaddya expect?”

“I think that’s his demon of an instructor’s fault. Not to mention a certain Bear Chef’s.”

“I’m doin’ the guy a favor, feedin’ him that stuff, so don’t go makin’ me out the same as that fighting freak.”

“The hell you call me?” Brod snarled, then thought for a moment. “I dunno what his type is, but I hope he’s at least *someone’s*.”

“Don’t worry,” Galba reassured them. “I heard he likes cute girls with pretty smiles.”

Gulgar hesitated. “That’s a little concerning...”

“Yeah...” the guildmaster agreed.

“We’ll be there for him if he ever needs a broken heart soothed.”

Gulgar and Brod sighed in unison.

The next day, they started treating Luciel just a little more kindly.

12 — Onward

The previous day, two days before my departure, there had been a farewell party.

“How am I supposed to fearlessly bum-rush monsters without a healer?” one adventurer asked me.

“Don’t go makin’ me have to chew on gross plants or suck down those nasty potions,” warned another.

“How am I supposed to save up for my wedding when healing costs me an arm and a leg?” This particular comment was followed by wild cheering and congratulations.

I heard all sorts of things at the party. Many asked me to return to Merratoni someday, many had their goodbyes interrupted by an onset of tears. All of them left an impression on me. They met my departure for the capital with reluctance and sadness, and that made me happy. The adventurers I had been so afraid of were now my friends, people I could shoot the breeze with. Life was a strange thing.

Then came my last night. I stood face to face with Brod in the training grounds beneath the Adventurer’s Guild, where I had spent nearly every waking moment of the last two years. Memories flooded back to me. Two years. Such a vast period of time, yet so short. My unfaltering drive to survive, Assess Mastery, the delicious food, and my instructor before me. Without a single one of those, I would never have made it.

Pain and suffering filled my memories of this place, and yet I felt reluctant to leave it.

“A lot happened these two years. I’m glad you becoming my master was one of them.”

“I hope you don’t think my course is over after two measly years.”

“Not in the slightest. It’s not over until I land a hit on you, is it?”

“Glad you understand.” He paused. “So, you’re really headin’ to the Holy City.”

“I am. I talked to Monica about it, and apparently, they send inquisitors or throw false charges at you if you refuse, so...”

“If those Headquarters bigwigs are rotten, get outta there and come on back. I’ll raise ya like a real adventurer.”

“As long as my life’s not in danger,” I laughed. Brod’s readiness to pick a fight with the entire Healer’s Guild was a bit scary.

He shrugged, but his eyes stayed focused. “So, what’d you call me out here one last time for? Guessing I can’t get my hopes up for a profession of your undying love, can I?”

I smiled. “Unfortunately not. I have a request. Once I leave, Bottaculli and the other clinics will most likely be back to business as usual.”

“I’d bet money on it. I’ve thought about ways to fight back, but they’re not breaking any laws when you get down to it.”

“Right. I particularly worry about novice adventurers. They’ll push themselves, do whatever it takes to make ends meet, get hurt, go to a clinic for healing, and that’s it. That could be all it takes for their lives to end. You and I both want to avoid that, don’t we?”

“So what’re you saying?”

“If possible, what do you think about starting classes for newbies? You can teach them the fundamentals of training, how to butcher, how to tell different herbs apart... The teachers could be guild staff or even high-ranking adventurers.”

Brod looked pensive for a moment. “You mean, to help keep them alive longer.”

“Yes. Even if it’s just once a week, I think it would be extremely effective. It would also give loners the chance to connect and network. So long as they understand the lessons properly, I think you’ll see a decrease in injuries.”

“I get what you’re saying. But why ask me? Adventurers are responsible for

themselves.”

“I’m a healer, yes, but I’m also an adventurer. And I don’t know any other healers, so frankly, I feel closer to the latter.”

“That...doesn’t answer my question.”

“The clinics will do what they will. But ultimately, they still need patients in order to function. Without that, they’re stuck. But in order to keep the clinic numbers down, adventurers *need* a way to improve. There has to be an environment built around upping the standard, advancing the status quo.”

“And that’s where the training comes in.”

“Exactly. Everyone I’ve met, they’re all good people. I want them to succeed. I want there to be a system that *allows them* to succeed.”

“I see what you’re saying. What about you? You feel better after training under me?”

“In regards to actual combat, I still have a long way to go. Mentally, though, I think I’m much more prepared now.” The sight of sheathed weapons didn’t make me break into a cold sweat, so yeah, I’d say I felt more confident these days.

“Hm, all right. I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you. That way, I’ll feel better about leaving.”

It wouldn’t mend the rift between adventurers and healers—it wasn’t even close to enough—but I hoped it would be a step in the right direction towards the day the two groups would be on equal footing.

“I’ve got somethin’ to ask, myself. Would you hear me out?”

“What’s got you so formal all of a sudden?”

“It’s about Monica. She does a damn fine job, don’t get me wrong. But are you sure she should stay here?”

Monica had two options: return to the Healer’s Guild or keep her position at the Adventurer’s Guild. I was the one who had dragged her here, but her life was her own.

“That’s up to her, not me,” I replied. “It’s her life. Personally, I want her to be safe, so I’d like her to stay on as your receptionist, but ultimately that’s for her to decide.”

“Right. You two’re close, so I was wondering if she came to you for advice or something.”

“She might’ve talked to Nanaella.”

We had known for half a year that I would be leaving. She probably thought talking to me about whether she should stay at the guild or not would be...insensitive.

Monica, Nanaella, and I took our meals together often. We would chat about all sorts of things, all while I endured the sharp gazes of those around us. It was a risk well worth taking, though. It was nice. First, we’d talk about my training, then they’d talk about weird adventurers or healers they had dealt with, then we’d share stories, chat about what I’d been studying at the time... It was always all over the place.

One thing all our talks had in common was how they had always been, at their core, about me. I wasn’t the one to turn to for advice; quite the opposite, in fact.

“Maybe. Don’t forget, we’ve got our match in front of everyone after breakfast tomorrow.”

That was Brod, all right. A match on the day I was supposed to leave, first thing in the morning. I couldn’t help but smile.

“I’m going to land that hit tomorrow, just you wait. I’m not leaving with any regrets.”

“Ha! Well, I’m gonna make sure I wipe the floor with you. You’re gonna have to come back for a rematch someday if you wanna settle things.”

“Your apprentice is leaving; this is where you’re supposed to pass the torch and let me win.”

“Sorry, but I hate losing. Be ready for tomorrow.” Brod’s hearty laughter echoed through the grounds as he headed for the stairs before suddenly

stopping. “Go on, you two. I’m not letting anyone down here today. He’s all yours.”

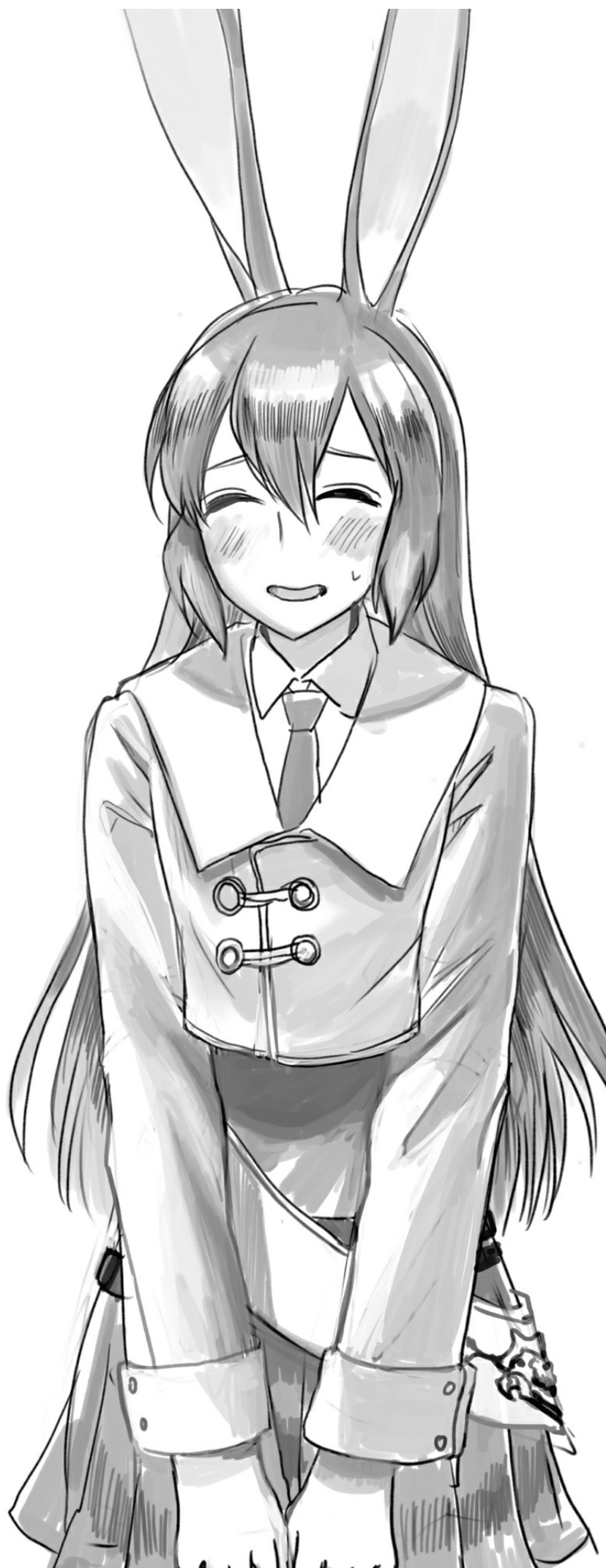
Before I could process what that meant, he disappeared.

“What was that about? Oh well. I’ll finish the day with some magic training, then some combat simulations for tomorrow’s match.”

On my way back to my room, I noticed some movement at the edge of the training grounds. When I looked over, I found Monica and Nanaella skulking around.

“What are you two doing?”

They laughed awkwardly. They must have been eavesdropping on my talk with Brod, but I hadn’t sensed their presence at all.



“Actually, this is perfect timing. I wanted to thank you both before I left. In earnest. You’ve done so much for me since I came to this city.”

“We heard your thanks yesterday, Luciel,” Nanaella said. “You represent hope for beastpeople, so please, stop bowing. A lowered head is only seen when looked down on.”

“Luciel, you saved my life,” added Monica. “I wouldn’t be here without you. I’ll always be grateful for that, and for giving me a place where I feel safe. I want to be able to repay that, to help you if you ever need it, so I’m going to keep hanging in there.”

I smiled shyly. Nanaella’s gentle reprimand reminded me of Lumina and how much I owed her for saving me that first day. The three of us were close now, to the point where they no longer added a courteous “Mister” to my name. So I owed it to them to be frank.

“You were always there for me, Nanaella, whether handling my laundry or to comfort me in times of weakness. You’re the reason I made it through my training.”

“O-Oh, um...” she stammered, flustered and clearly not used to being thanked so unabashedly.

“And Monica,” I continued, “don’t worry about repaying anything. You’ve paid me back plenty, with interest.”

“Oh, no, I haven’t,” she protested.

“Of course you have. You do laundry with Nanaella, clean my room, all sorts of things. Also, I had a bit of a selfish reason for bringing you to the Adventurer’s Guild, to be honest.”

She stepped closer to me. “What do you mean by that?”

“Er, well, Master Brod’s training is tough. So tough that it made me want to run away a few times. But bringing you here was my decision, and my responsibility. Knowing that kept me tied here.”

“You mean I was a burden,” she said meekly.

I gave her a gentle smile. “No, not at all. Running away is addictive. Do it once

and suddenly you can't stop. The moment the going gets tough, you feel the urge to escape. But you kept me from running away from my training. You were my anchor."

"Your...anchor?"

"That's right. Ships use them to keep from being washed away by the tide. Right when my lessons were at their worst, I found you and saved you, which made me dig my heels in and see it through. You were no burden. I'm incredibly grateful to you."

"Luciel..." Tears fell from her eyes, carrying the torment she'd held inside for so long with them. Nanaella rubbed her back comfortingly.

"Affection" didn't quite capture the feelings I felt for them. They were like comrades in arms, always by my side for two whole years. I didn't want to leave my allies, my friends, with nothing, so I decided on a promise. Another reason to keep living...to survive, to keep going, to make it in a world where any day could be my last.

"Do you guys remember when you asked about my dreams? What I wanted to do in the future? It was all I could do just to get up in the morning at the time, so I couldn't give you an answer then," I said. "Well, I still don't have one. So promise me we'll eat together again sometime. I'm sure I'll have plenty to tell you by then."

"Of course!" they cried together.

For some time after that, we recounted the past with recollections of old memories, and then finally said our goodbyes.

The next morning, my fight with Brod turned out to be less of a match and more of a one-sided beatdown. Every one of my attacks were swatted away without effort. I was thrown, beaten to a pulp, and even cut up, just for good measure. Middle Heal, attack, Middle Heal, attack. I kept up the pressure, not letting up for a second, until I reached the limits of my magic and our match was decided. Cordial applause came from the onlookers, but I wasn't satisfied.

So I made another promise.

“Master, one day, I’m going to land a hit on you.”

“Hm, remind me I owe ya a favor if you ever do.”

There was that smirk of his. There wasn’t really anything I wanted from him, though, so I decided to be a bit petty. “How about you drink five whole pitchers of Substance X?”

He winced. “That’s downright dirty, Luciel.”

“I learned from the best,” I laughed.

I finally got back my Adventurer’s Guild card from the reception desk. It had been taken from me so long ago, I only now saw that I’d reached E-rank, to my surprise. Probably a thoughtful touch by my master so I wouldn’t have trouble getting by as an adventurer.

And then it was time for me to leave.

“Well, everyone, this is it. I can’t possibly thank you enough for taking me in and giving me such wonderful memories. But I’ll try nonetheless. Thank you.”

“I think I speak for everyone when I say this.” Brod came forward. “You did good. You saved a lot of lives, a lot of people’s livelihoods, and a lot of families from grief.”

“Thank you. I was happy to help.”

“I ain’t good at this sappy shit. Here’s a parting gift.” He held out a leather sack and a bag. “The sack’s got money. And this is a magic satchel. It’ll hold up to ten things inside, doesn’t matter what. It’s stocked with equipment already... All of it’s yours. Consider it a show of appreciation from us.”

“I... I haven’t...” My voice began to crack. “I don’t...deserve all this...”

Screw it, I couldn’t hold it in anymore. Everything I’d done had been for myself and only myself. I was so small and shortsighted, while everyone here was so warm and kind. The waterworks started to flow and wouldn’t stop.

“Quit crying. Just make sure you come back someday and work for cheap again.”

“Don’t forget to bring souvenirs!” Mernell chimed in, lightening the mood

with a few laughs.

“Take care, okay?” said Nanaella. “I look forward to the day you open a clinic that treats beastpeople equally.”

“I’m sincerely grateful to you for saving me. And for your kindness. I’ll be waiting for you to make it back,” Monica added.

Tears welled up in their eyes and I could no longer keep my emotions in check. I pulled them close and the three of us shared a hug.

“Thank you both. For everything.”

Destination: The Republic of Saint Shurule’s capital, the Holy City of Shurule. We would make the journey by way of a carriage owned by the Adventurer’s Guild. But before that, I had some business at the Healer’s Guild.

“Hello, everyone. It seems you’ll be my guard for the next few days,” I said in greeting.

“We got your back.”

“Sure do!”

“We’ll beat down anything that comes your way. ‘Cept maybe dragons.”

Bazan and his party, the ones who had accepted the guild request to be my escort, gave firm replies one after the other.

“I can’t say I expected my bodyguards to be an A-rank party.”

“We owe ya our lives, y’know?” Bazan grinned. “You’re part o’ the reason we even made it to A-rank. Man, there was a big fuss over who’d get to take the job, though.”

I looked at each of them and wasn’t afraid. My image of adventurers had done a complete one-eighty. *Man, I used to be so stuck in my biases*, I found myself thinking.

“Before we head out, I’m going to finish up some formalities for my former position at the Adventurer’s Guild and renew my rank. Hold on just a second.”

I hopped out of the wagon and entered the building. It was quiet, as always.

“Welcome to the Church of Saint Shurule’s Merratoni branch Healer’s Guild!” Kururu announced as I made my way to the counter.

“Hello, Kururu. I’m here to wrap up my Adventurer’s Guild assignment and renew my membership, if that’s all right.”

“Er, hold on, *what?*! Is that you, Luciel?”

“In the flesh. You didn’t recognize me?”

“How could I? You were so scrawny before, but now you’re all big, and grown-up, and...buff!”

“You think so? Oh, and I’m transferring to Headquarters. I was told to pick up grimoires here.”

Kururu’s face took on a slightly red tinge. “Oh, you’re the one going all the way out there? Wait, *you’re* the one going all the way out there? Didn’t you just turn seventeen?”

“Yep. I heard I’m a pretty special case.”

“My poor womanly heart can’t take all these surprises,” she sighed dramatically.

I laughed. “Well, I’ll take the grimoires I don’t have yet once I finish renewing.”

“Actually, healers who make it to Headquarters are given all grimoires up to A-rank as a gift.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

“You’d think so, right? But we only sell those spellbooks to people who have actually made A-rank already.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t make it to A-rank or higher without going above and beyond for the guild. They’re kind of like honorary positions.”

“Which means you’d probably be at Headquarters by then anyway.”

“Exactly. Well, let’s get you renewed.” She sighed as she got to work. “So young and already aiming for HQ. You’re really something. I can raise you up to

A-rank now if you want.”

“I’d like to be promoted as high as I can be, then.”

“Got it. And...there. You’re an A-rank healer now. Hang on.” She disappeared into the back, then returned with several grimoires. “This is everything. The books are free, like I said, and your dues won’t be necessary anymore now that you’re a big-time HQ healer.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to stop by the next time I make it back.”

“Do me a favor and become a big shot so you can give me a raise.”

“I’ll try,” I chuckled.

We exchanged modest goodbyes, then I returned to the wagon.

“Sorry for the wait. Let’s go.”

After two years, my life in Merratoni had come to an end. It was time to move on to someplace new.

Name: Luciel

Job: Healer IV

Age: 17

Level: 1

HP: 420 — MP: 160

STR: 42 — VIT: 51

DEX: 47 — AGI: 54

INT: 72 — MGI: 64

RMG: 54 — SP: 0

Magic Affinity: Holy

SKILLS

Assess Mastery I — Monster Luck I — Martial Arts V

Magic Handling VII — Magic Control VII — Holy Magic VII Meditation V —
Focus VI — Life Recovery IV

Magic Recovery VI — Strength Recovery V — Throwing III Butchery II —
Detect Danger IV — Ambulation III Parallel Thinking I — Swordsmanship I —
Shields I Spears I — Archery I — Short Cast III

Null Cast I

HP Growth Rate Up V — MP Growth Rate Up V

STR Growth Rate Up V — VIT Growth Rate Up V

DEX Growth Rate Up V — AGI Growth Rate Up V

INT Growth Rate Up V — MGI Growth Rate Up V

RMG Growth Rate Up V

Poison Resist VI — Paralysis Resist VI — Petrify Resist VI Sleep Resist VI —
Charm Resist II — Curse Resist VI Enfeeble Resist VI — Silence Resist VI —
Disease Resist VI Shock Resist II

TITLES

Shaper of Destiny (all stats +10)

Protection of the God of Fate (increased SP)

Adventurer’s Guild — Rank E | Healer’s Guild — Rank A

The Lineage of the White Wolf — A Recusant Healer

Name's Bazan. I'm in a party with my old buds, Basura and Sekiros, called the Lineage of the White Wolf. The name comes from me, the strongest of the bunch and a descendant of the sacred White Wolf.

The three of us were relaxing in the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild lounge. There weren't many places where beastfolk could live a nice life. Depending on genes, some of us had lots of body hair, some shed a ton, some had tails, and that was most humans needed to act like you were a plague victim. The nicer looking ones were treated like pets.

We had just finished an escort request and were heading back to the inn after making B-rank at the guild when I saw a human I'd bumped into a few days earlier. He was glancing around the place, muttering to himself.

"...it's a little freaky," I heard him say under his breath.

I felt like scaring him a bit. "Wanna repeat that? Whose face is freaky?"

"What..."

"Hey, you're that healer I bumped into the other day, ain'tcha?"

"I-I'm very sorry about that," he sputtered. "I've been working hard since then and finally learned Heal, so I could use it on you as an apology, if you like."

I hadn't expected him to be *that* scared. The damn weirdo was lowering his head and offering to heal *beastfolk*. Suddenly, I didn't feel like ragging on the poor kid anymore. It was just bullying the weak, and the White Wolf wouldn't do that.

"Like I'm hurt enough to need that shit! We're adventurers, pal," I snapped. Well, I tried. I was pissed off, so I couldn't help my tone. The hell was this guy even doing?

Sekiros and Basura finally showed up to save my ass.

"Bazan, he's shakin' in his boots. You do something to 'im?" Sekiros asked.

“Oh, I heard ‘im talking about adventurers and something being freaky, so it sounded like he was talkin’ trash, but I guess I misunderstood.”

“Hah! Who can blame the guy? Your face *is* pretty intense.”

“Zip it, Basura. So, what’re you doing here, small fry?”

“Er, uh, well, I was trying to get to the Adventurer’s Guild, but I don’t know the way, so I was doing some sightseeing.”

The moment I heard that, I felt a headache coming on. We were on our way to the slums and this jackass was going the same direction. Folks wouldn’t let him out alive if he went too far, and if he did somehow make it out, they wouldn’t forget his face. Not the best start to becoming a semi-decent healer.

“You were planning on going to the slums lookin’ like that? You tryin’ to get killed? Or tricked into being a slave? Slavery might be illegal here, but that doesn’t mean you won’t get robbed blind and left in a ditch,” Sekiros warned.

“U-Um, you’re all adventurers, I take it? Could you tell me where the guild is? I’d really appreciate it.”

A human, a *healer*, had bowed to Sekiros. We exchanged glances, then looked back at the kid. Sure enough, he was human.

“You’re a human...right?” Basura verified. “You’re not half-beast or anythin’ are ya?”

“No, I’m a human. Did I say something strange?”

“You know we’re beastfolk, right?”

“I do. This is my first time meeting any.”

“Your first time?”

“That’s right, so I apologize if I’ve done anything ignorant to offend.”

How many times was this human gonna apologize? He reminded me of the beastfolk in the slums. And if this was his first time meeting some, maybe we could get him to owe us a favor. Maybe he could heal some of us. At least, I hoped he would.

“Bazan, this kid ain’t right.”

I clicked my tongue in resignation. “Fine. If we’re your first impression, guess we’ll take you to the guild.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Quit bowin’ all the time!”

“Yessir!”

He looked about ready to start bawling, but all I’d done was shout at him a little. *Yeah, there’s that headache...*

“You’re gonna make the kid cry, Bazan.”

“He’s got a face only a mother could love.”

“Basura, *zip it*. Sekiros, you lead.”

Those two jokesters could handle things if they wanted to act like asses. But wait, what the hell was a healer going to the Adventurer’s Guild for?

“Sure thing. By the way, what’s your name, kid?” Sekiros asked.

“Luciel. I’ve just recently become an adult, and my job is healer.”

“Luciel, eh? We’re the Lineage of the White Wolf, a B-rank adventuring party.”

“B-rank? You must be pretty strong, then.”

“Eh, you know. Anyway, no more wastin’ time, let’s get a move on.”

“Yes, let’s.”

“You’re a weird one, ya know that, Luciel?”

Damn right he was. A human healer had just introduced himself to a group of beastpeople...*politely*.

We saw him to the guildhall and pretended to leave so that we could watch him for a bit longer. No way that twig was planning on becoming an adventurer. Was he putting in a request?

He made it to the reception desk, then started asking Nanaella about something.

“He tries anything, we jump in,” I ordered.

“Don’t overdo it. We’d kill the kid.”

“Let’s *not* kill the kid.”

“Relax, you two. I know.”

I, er, we wouldn’t let anyone put Nanaella in danger. The Whirlwind wouldn’t either, and no one would dare try with him around. Merratoni’s Adventurer’s Guild was an oddity in that they hired lots of beastfolk.

The Whirlwind, the head honcho, didn’t tolerate racial discrimination. He was leagues above everyone, a man of unreachable talents. And with the Bear Chef and Recluse—legends among beastfolk—here with him, those snobby Healer’s and Mage’s Guilds couldn’t touch us.

Nanaella stood up and left the kid standing there alone. Clearly, this was a plain old guild request and she had left for a reason. If she were running, some of the guys would’ve gone after her to help. She had looked a bit troubled by something, but her smile never wavered. Maybe he wasn’t the discriminating type... Rare with humans. After several minutes, she came back with Brod.

Is...he gonna be okay?

The kid went on explaining himself, as if Brod weren’t exerting that ridiculous pressure of his. I was damn sure he was, though.

“Hey, is that pipsqueak stronger than he looks?” I heard onlookers comment.

“He’s gotta be if he can withstand Brod’s pressure. Maybe he’s a mage.”

Their guesses, of course, were wrong. How would they have reacted if I’d told them he was a healer? The Whirlwind wouldn’t take that knowledge lightly.

The kid had the guts of an adventurer, that was for sure. The contrast between his courage and how much of a scaredy-cat he was piqued my interest.

After he left, the guild made an announcement... Not something often done. Three days from then, a healer was to be stationed at our branch. He was a novice and could only cast Heal, but would take patients of any race or gender for a single silver. New adventurers would get treatment for free.

It was that kid. It couldn't have been anyone else.

Along with that information was a warning in bold, plain letters: anyone who started a fight with the healer would be punished by having their rank lowered, as well as possibly receiving a fine. Complaints were to be directed to Brod.

As far as announcements at an Adventurer's Guild went, this one was pretty out there. Lowering a rank as punishment was *extremely* irregular and essentially meant that the kid was being given VIP treatment. By the guildmaster himself, the Whirlwind, no less, which was the most shocking part.

At any rate, this healer was no ordinary kid if he was willing to heal regardless of race. In a world where folks like us could be denied care or charged extortionate prices, it was a dream come true.

"No doubt about it. It's that Luciel kid from before he's talkin' about, isn't it?"

"Probably."

"I dunno, a healer with balls that big? I'm takin' this with a grain o' salt."

The other adventurers all had their own ideas, but we knew for sure.

"At least that means Nanaella wasn't in trouble."

"Ya got that right."

And that was how we met him. Luciel, the scrawny ass healer. Before heading out on an escort request from Merratoni to the Empire of Illumasia shortly after, we made a bet on how long he'd last.

We returned to Merratoni three months later.

"This trip was a long one," Sekiros said offhandedly.

"That merchant was such a damn penny-pincher," Basura grumbled.

"Hey, he shut up when we took out the monster, didn't he?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Oh yeah, who bets that healer's still at the guild?" I interjected.

"Not me," answered Sekiros.

Basura thought for a moment. “I think he’ll be there,” he finally replied. A surprising choice for him.

“I don’t think he will,” I said. “Why d’ya think that, Basura?”

“Forget what the healer thinks. No way Brod would let him leave.”

“That’s your theory, eh? All right, drinks’re on the loser once we finish this request.”

Basura and Sekiros agreed, and we made straight for the Adventurer’s Guild.

“I don’t see the twerp, do you? Man, smells like free drinks in here,” I cackled.

Basura clicked his tongue angrily in reply.

“Welcome, Lineage of the White Wolf,” Nanaella greeted us. “Are you here to report in?”

“Hey, Nanaella. You remember that healer who came here three months ago? How long’d he end up stayin’?”

“Oh, you mean Luciel?” she beamed happily.

“No ‘Mister’? Not many have that privilege. So, what was it, ’bout a month?” Sekiros asked.

“Not quite,” Nanaella giggled, her smile growing even brighter.

I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

“So...” Basura’s mouth twisted into a shit-eating grin. “He’s still here?”

Nanaella broke into quiet laughter for a moment. “I-I’m sorry. He’s actually living in the resting room downstairs.”

“He’s what?!” we cried in unison.

She explained that he had, in fact, been living at the guildhall, and had been drinking a certain substance that Gulgar made all new adventurers try. *Every single day.* I felt my stomach lurch at the thought.

On top of that, he’d been going up against the Whirlwind, day in and day out, and hadn’t stepped outside in three months. People were saying he was addicted to training.

“Damn, and they’re calling him Defective Tongue, the Masochist, Zombie... Those’re some wild nicknames.”

“You’re talkative today,” I groaned.

“Yeah, ‘cause I’m not payin’.”

“Live it up while you can. ‘Least the guy seems nice enough. We’ll have to check him out if we get hurt.”

At the time, Luciel was just a weirdo healer to me...to all of us. None of us expected what would happen half a year later.

We were cutting down monsters in a mine on an urgent mission. “Eliminate all monsters pouring from the mine,” were our only orders. They were all small fry, easy stuff. Except for one creature deeper inside.

Sekiros and I coughed our lungs out. That smoke, or flammable mist, or whatever it was the monster spat out had done a number on us.

“Hang in there, guys! We’re almost there! Stay with me!”

“Why the long face?” I wheezed. “We’ll be fine.”

“You think we’ll kick the bucket that easy?” Sekiros hacked. “We’ll sleep it off.”

“No, we’re going straight to a clinic.”

Basura had a rare aptitude for magic (or rare for beastpeople, that is), so he was tougher against status ailments. Sekiros and I shut up and let him take us to a healer, but the result wasn’t surprising.

“Who’re those dogs to me? If you must force my hand, we’ll say fifty gold.”

“What?! Who the hell has that kinda money?!”

“That’s your problem, pal. I’m a busy man. If you don’t like it, leave.”

“Please, there’s gotta be something you can do.”

“Fine. Dogs make for good slaves. That should cover the cost.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“Don’t like it? Then leave.”

The clinic was a bust. Back at the inn, Sekiros and I rested while Basura ran off to the Adventurer’s Guild. The moment he left, I passed out.

A strange warmth washed over me as the haze started to lift.

“They should be okay now. If anything else happens, please bring them...to the...guild...”

“Whoa, easy there. Ya did good, kid.” Brod caught him from falling. “That’ll be two silver from you guys.”

“That’s all? That’s really all?” Basura asked in disbelief.

“That’s all. That’s what he’d want.”

“Who the hell is this healer?”

“A weirdo. That’s who. I dunno what kinda life he’s led, but he busts his ass training. All to ‘survive,’ he says.”

“Does two silver even turn a profit?”

“He says he’s still inexperienced. If you feel like you owe him more, just be there to help him if he needs it.”

The Whirlwind said nothing more and left, carrying the healer on his back.

“Basura? Was that the Whirlwind?”

“Yeah. The guild healer came.”

“So he did. ‘Inexperienced’... You think he got all the poison?”

“Bazan, I’m just gonna give it to you straight. Without him, without that healer, you’d be dead.”

“O-Oh. Wait, what? I would?”

“The Whirlwind said that monster we took out was a mutated gastle. The poison would’ve killed you without the right antidote or cure magic.”

“Huh... Magic’s pretty amazing, ain’t it?”

“I use magic, and magic’s not amazing. The ability to use it, and use it right, is what’s amazing.”

“What’s your point?”

“I told you, without that healer, you two would’ve been dead meat. How many times do you think he cast his spells on you both? I couldn’t even keep count. Over and over, right until he couldn’t... and then he *kept going*.”

“And that’s...what’s amazing.”

“I can’t believe he didn’t pass out. He just gritted his teeth and kept at it. He was bleeding, Bazan. And for *two silver*. Can you believe that?”

“We owe him our lives, don’t we?”

“The hell you think I’ve been getting at? Look down on that healer and I’m going to start doubting you. I’ll leave it at that.”

“What was his name again?” Sekiros groaned. “Luciel? I’ve never in my life seen a healer like him.”

“Sekiros, you’re awake?” I asked.

“Yeah. I heard him while I was out. He told me to keep hanging on. It felt like a warm light was wiping away the darkness.”

“I felt it too.”

“We need to thank him next time we see him,” Basura said.

“I know.”

“Right.”

The next day, we did just that.

“You’re alive because you fought for it. Don’t ever give up on life. It’s your only one.”

That was all he said before going right back to sparring with the Whirlwind.

“Is that kid a damn saint?”

“When you look at all that hell he puts himself through, makes you wonder if he might end up like the founder of the Healer’s Guild someday.”

“We gotta be there for him if we wanna repay what he did for us. The Whirlwind said so himself.”

“Right. The Lineage of the White Wolf never forgets a debt.”

I...or rather my entire party was incredibly grateful that we'd met the guy. For three months after that, we watched his progress from the sidelines, cheering him on. Then we finally hit A-rank. And so came our long-awaited date with the receptionists, minus Nanaella...supposedly because they couldn't leave the guild empty, but I knew it was at least partly because she wanted to avoid marrying and having to quit her job young. Her not being there was a bummer, but it was still a good time. And we had Luciel to thank for being able to experience it.

When Bottaculli started causing shit, I thought we'd finally get our chance to return the favor. That was wishful thinking, though. The whole damn guild already had Luciel on lockdown. The Whirlwind was with him twenty-four hours a day, the Bear Chef double-checked all of his meals, and the Recluse gathered outside intel during his downtime.

The Recluse, in particular, put in significant work. He took out mercs, manipulated info to threaten the guildmaster of the Healer's Guild, and passed information to Bottaculli's slaves. In a single month, Bottaculli's hands were tied. He couldn't act out in the open anymore.

Luciel, none the wiser, just kept on training. No one told him he was perfectly safe and the danger had passed. Then again, we didn't either. I mean, the kid was training because he wanted to. Who were we to rain on his parade?

Everyone expected him to end up a full-time, permanent staff member, until Bottaculli pulled some strings behind the scenes to have him sent off to the Holy City, making the Whirlwind turn up the heat even more.

This made chatting with the kid a bit hard, to say the least. Every day, he'd be dead tired but still gave each of his patients his full attention. What the hell drove him so hard? How was his spirit not in tatters at this point? They called him a “masochistic zombie,” but he was only doing it to get stronger. He was dead set on it. But why? Why did he push himself so far?

I would learn the answer to that question on the day we accepted the request

to see him safely to the Holy City.

A job had been posted at the guild for an escort to the Holy City. The request came from the guild itself, and the target to be protected was Luciel. The one requirement: parties of C-rank or higher only. There was no pay listed.

“Those who would like to undertake the job of seeing Mister Luciel to the Holy City, please submit a proposal for your escort plan,” Nanaella informed us.

“Please mention the compensation you think appropriate for your proposal, as well,” added Monica, a receptionist Luciel had dragged over from the Healer’s Guild.

It was a bizarre request, to say the least. By wagon, it wouldn’t take more than two days to reach the capital. Any normal job would pay twenty silver at most. But this wasn’t a normal job. Was that the right price?

I decided to ask the guys for their take. “Whaddya make of that request?”

“I don’t think the asking price is what’s important here,” Sekiros said.

“There’re lots of villages between here and the Holy City, yeah?” Basura brought up. “How about we make a bunch o’ stops and get Luciel’s name out there?”

“Like, distinguish him from the other healers, you mean? That feels like using him, though.”

“Why don’t we ask him, then?” Basura countered.

“I’m sure he’d agree, it’s just we probably won’t get the job with a plan like that.” I thought it over for a moment. “So, what’s with him? Why’s he train his ass off, only to heal for basically no pay? The Whirlwind’s not makin’ him, is he?”

“It’s because he knows pain.” I turned around and saw Nanaella. “When he sees someone hurt, he can’t help but want to do what he can for them.”

Monica was with her, as usual. “He hates early deaths. He told me no one deserves to die from anything but old age.”

I had heard those two hung out with him a lot. They’d know him best.

“Sekiros, Basura. We’re going with that plan.”

There were no objections.

A kind-hearted journey for a kind-hearted man. Someday, all those villages might just be there for him. Maybe they’d help him out like he helped others.

I wrote it all down, our village-hopping plan along with our price: two silver. That’s all we’d need. Just enough to cover food and supplies.

The next day, we got the job. I was grateful to the Whirlwind for giving us this chance, and I was gonna repay him by seeing Luciel to the capital safely. No matter what.

Afterword

It's nice to meet you all! I'm Broccoli Lion.

First things first, thank you so much for taking the time to read volume 1 of *The Great Cleric*. I started writing this story on a website called *Shousetsuka ni Narou*, a place where all sorts of people upload their stories, many of which I have personally sincerely enjoyed. At first, I was just another reader, until my imagination got the better of me and I thought to myself, "Hey, why don't I try putting my own ideas on paper?" And that's essentially how I started writing.

Full disclosure, this was actually my first time writing pretty much anything. So I set a goal to write a hundred thousand characters and just got down to it, regardless of whether it was "good" or "bad."

It didn't take long for my lack of writing ability to get to me. Still, I kept chugging along. I was having fun putting my imagination to work. Eventually, I started receiving feedback. Some of my readers taught me a lot about writing stories, which was a huge boost to my motivation.

About ten days after I started, I landed on the daily rankings for the first time. I still remember that rush of emotion. I even took a picture of my computer screen with my phone.

Around that time, Crowd Games opened applications for their Web Novel Award. Funny thing is, I actually applied because it said that professional editors would offer feedback on submissions, not for the grand prize that would eventually lead to my novelization. That was the turning point for me. I guess I have a certain Monsieur Luck to thank.

More and more people started to see my writing, readers piled on the support, and my motivation was sky-high. I channeled my gratitude into my work. Just like our protagonist, Luciel, I kept up the grind, revising and improving, until the unthinkable happened: I got published.

This work represents the final version of the web series, and I hope you folks

transitioning over have enjoyed it. For those of you starting with the novel, please give the web version a look. Compare the differences and experience the true magic of the original: a harem of a bunch of old guys.

Now, during the process of this publication, I ran into computer trouble a grand total of three times. The first incident happened during editing, when, unbeknownst to me, an update had begun. I'd been leaving my computer on sleep mode for several weeks, so when it rebooted, I lost over half of my revisions. Back to square one. I was badly shocked, but binge eating candy saw me through the crisis.

You bet I made sure to start turning my computer off properly from then on. I wasn't about to let myself have another computer scare. And so my work continued...until the machine just flat out froze while I was in the middle of writing, that is.

An hour later and it was still dead, so I was forced to put it out of its misery. Three steps forward, two steps back. Thankfully, I had a backup, so I only lost about thirty thousand characters. I didn't even need alcohol! Several days later, however...

My trusty PC, after a long, nine-year partnership, bit the dust. Right at the very end. I was beside myself, but a backup I kept on an external hard drive saved the day. I immediately rushed online to buy a new computer. The days leading up to its delivery were filled with anxiety, dread, and many troubles for Mister I, my editor. When it finally arrived, I was so unused to it that my speed took a pretty heavy hit.

All the unfortunate technical troubles aside, I pushed through and came out having achieved one of my dreams. I was the author of a published book. My deepest thanks to everyone who helped to make it happen.

Readers of the web novel, your comments, impressions, and support fueled my motivation. Without you, I'd probably have thrown in the towel ages ago. Many thanks to each and every one of you. I look forward to hearing more from you all.

Thank you to my editor, Mister I, who always let me crash at the office when meetings ran well past the last train. Without his insistence and enthusiasm,

this novel wouldn't have been possible. We would have likely seen far fewer scenes with the female cast, as well.

Thank you to my illustrator, sime, for your beautiful artwork, and for putting up with my obstinacy. I can't wait to see this world continue to be brought to life through your drawings.

Thank you to Crowd Games for giving me this opportunity. To everyone in management, the proofreaders and designers...everyone. I'm extremely grateful for your help in bringing this all together.

Lastly, I offer my deepest and most sincere thanks to you, the reader, for buying my book.

I'm going to do my best to keep you all entertained, so I hope you'll look forward to more of *The Great Cleric: White-Collar Survival in Another World!*





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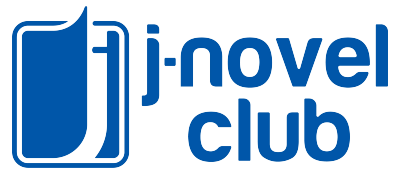
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The Great Cleric: Volume 1

by Broccoli Lion

Translated by Matthew Jackson Edited by Tess Nanavati

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