

Table of Contents

Color Gallery

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Table of Contents Page

Characters

World Map

Previously

Chapter 126: Storage Magic

Chapter 127: Rank

Chapter 128: The Inactive Request

Chapter 129: The Pact

Chapter 130: Meanwhile...

Chapter 131: The Merchant Girl

Side Story: The Perfect Balance

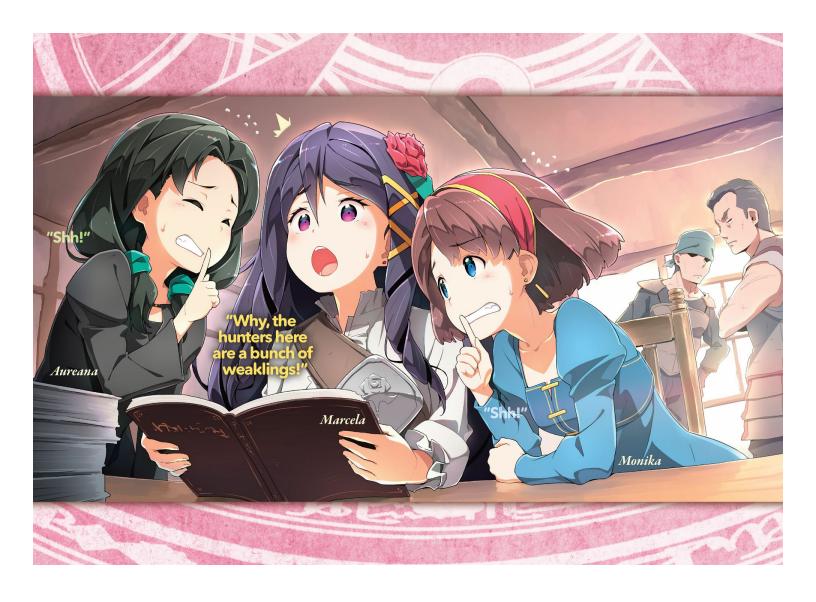
Afterword

Newsletter











Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities werage in the Next Life?!

VOLUME 18

by FUNA

ILLUSTRATED BY

Itsuki Akata



Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHI, NORYOKU WA HEIKINCHI DETTE ITTAYONE! vol.18 ©2023 FUNA, Itsuki Akata/SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD. First published in Japan in 2023 by SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD. English translation rights arranged with SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD. and SEVEN SEAS ENTERTAINMENT, LLC. through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc.

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TRANSLATION: Tara Quinn ADAPTATION: Maggie Cooper COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner PROOFREADER: Jack Hamm EDITOR: Nibedita Sen

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

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God bless me? CONTENTS

CHAPTER 126: STORAGE MAGIC

CHAPTER 127: RANK

CHAPTER 128: THE INACTIVE REQUEST

CHAPTER 129: THE PACT

CHAPTER 130: MEANWHILE...

CHAPTER 131: THE MERCHANT GIRL

SIDE STORY: THE PERFECT BALANCE

AFTERWORD

Japan ----

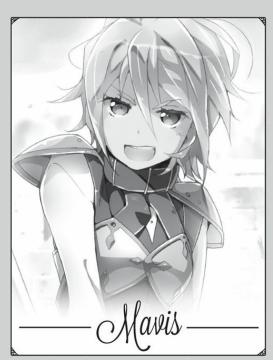
-Kurihara Misato -

A high school student. Died saving a little girl and was reborn into a fantasy world.

Hunting Party "The Crimson Vow"



A girl who was granted "average" abilities in this fantasy world.



A swordswoman. Leader of the hunting party the Crimson Vow.



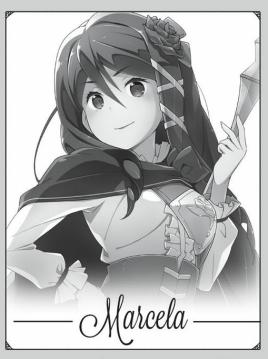
A hunter and healing magic user. A timid girl, but...

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Hunting Party "The Wonder Trio"



A strong-willed female hunter. Specializes in combat magic.



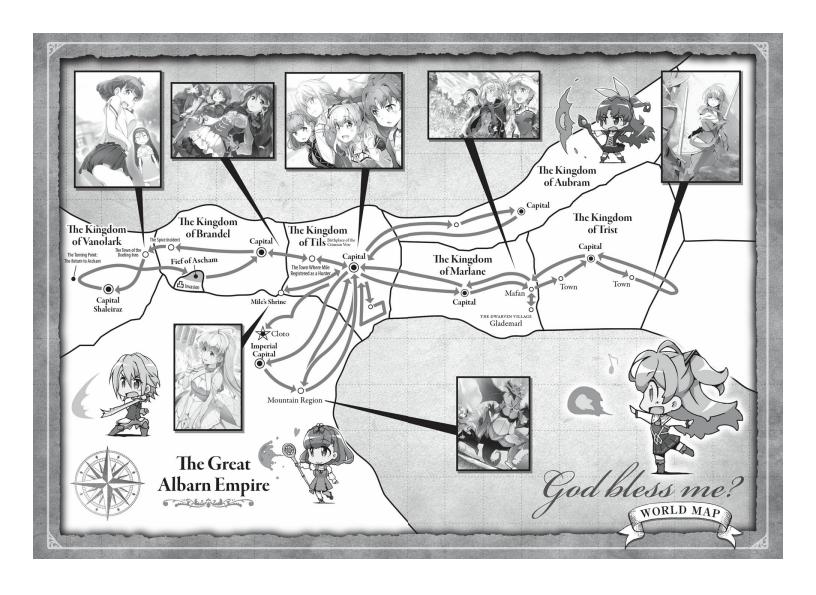
A young noblewoman and Adele's friend. Leader of the Wonder Trio.



The daughter of a merchant. A member of the Wonder Trio, as well as Marcela's childhood friend.



The clever strategist of the Wonder Trio. Owes Marcela a debt.



Previously

W HEN ADELE VON ASCHAM, the eldest daughter of Viscount Ascham, was ten years old, she was struck with a terrible headache and, just like that, remembered everything.

She remembered how, in her previous life, she was an eighteen-year-old Japanese girl named Kurihara Misato who died while trying to save a young girl, and that she met God...

Misato had exceptional abilities, and the expectations of those around her were high. As a result, she could never live her life the way she wanted. So when she met God, she made an impassioned plea:

"In my next life, please make my abilities average!"

Yet somehow, it all went awry.

In her new life, she can talk to nanomachines, and although her magical powers are technically average, it is the average between a human's and an elder dragon's...6,800 times that of a sorcerer!

At the first academy she attended, she made friends and rescued a little boy as well as a princess. She registered at the Hunters' Prep School under the name of Mile and made a grand debut with the Crimson Vow—the party she formed with her classmates.

The four girls rescued countless people over the course of their journey. Finally, at the behest of the Slow Walker, a remnant of an ancient civilization, they banded together with humans, elves, dwarves, beastfolk, demons, and elder dragons alike to defeat powerful invaders from another dimension and protect their home!

In the wake of their victory, the girls were heralded as the saviors of the world...until they rode an elder dragon to a distant continent, seeking an escape

from their monotonous lives. Thus begins a brand-new adventure for the Crimson Vow!

Chapter 126:

Storage Magic

"W HAT'S OUR NEXT MOVE?"

After surveying the situation for themselves, the Crimson Vow had reached the conclusion that what made the local monsters so strong was their intelligence, not their physical abilities. However...

"There's no point in telling the guild master," said Mile. "This is normal as far as the locals are concerned. No one will think it's a big deal for a jackalope to lead us into an ambush, or for an orc and an ogre to form a two-man cell..."

"Right. That's business as usual around here," Mavis agreed. "They wouldn't find anything strange about it."

Reina and Pauline were silent.

"But why are the local monsters so smart?" Pauline eventually wondered aloud. "What could be the reason? And how long has that been the case?"

"……"

No one had an answer for her.

"It's not a stretch to assume that the monsters that came from another dimension long ago grew soft and weak in our peaceful world," Mile mumbled. "After all, there was a marked difference in strength between the monsters from the old continent and those from the invasion...but there wasn't much of a difference in *intelligence*. If anything, the monsters that have spent all this time in conflict with the humans of our world seemed a bit smarter. Considering all that, I doubt the monsters on this new continent have retained superior intelligence as one of their old traits. That leaves only one possible answer..."

"They got smarter *after* coming here?" Reina was as quick on the uptake as ever. "And it wasn't all that long ago when things changed..."

"What? How do you know that?" asked Pauline.

"If the monsters had always been this smart, the humans on this continent would have gone extinct a long time ago," Mavis replied. "Or, at best, they would have been displaced to areas where monsters are scarce."

"Oh, I see..."

Though any single monster's intelligence was a far cry from any individual human's, had the continent been populated by a host of advanced creatures, humanity would have been overrun and overthrown ages ago. Monsters boasted big, tough bodies, formidable strength, superior stamina, and high fertility rates. Some among them could even use magic. The only reason humanoids had the upper hand on the old continent was because the creatures were stupid and uncoordinated. If they had ever acquired even the slightest bit of intellect, things would have gone very differently.

"And it's not something that happened all at once, either," Mile added.

"Exactly," Mavis agreed.

The girls were right. Had the change come on suddenly, it obviously would have caused a stir—one that the guild master would never have neglected to mention. To go unnoticed, the change in the monsters must have taken place over decades or centuries.

Even now, the monsters could be getting smarter by the second...

"……"

The quartet lapsed into silence as this possibility occurred to them.

"Still, there's no reason to worry!" Mile piped up after a long pause. "The locals have managed this long, and I doubt the situation will dramatically worsen in the next few years, or even decades. Besides, while the monsters are evolving and getting smarter, so are we humans. With stronger and more advanced weapons and armor, fortified bulwarks, and a growing population, humanity will be ready to show those monsters who's boss!"

Mavis agreed. "True. We should have faith in the people of tomorrow—and focus on living our lives to the fullest."

"I guess you have a point," said Reina. "It's not our job to prepare for every little crisis that might occur. We can leave those matters to the future humans of this continent and the world at large, and focus on doing what we can as individuals. Besides, it's not like we have a way to fix the problem."

"Exactly. For now, let's stick to our original plan and take it easy!"

"Yeah!" the other three chorused.

In the past, the girls might not have been quite as measured in their decision-making. However, the four members of the Crimson Vow had spent the past six months receiving a noble's education, and they had each acquired their own territories and subjects to protect.

(When they had left these lands behind, they had made sure to leave their deputies in charge, so their current absence certainly did not count as a dereliction of duty—or so they told themselves.)

Thanks to this crash course, the girls had learned exactly what they could and couldn't do, and which matters had to be delegated to the Crown rather than a lord. There were certain things they knew they had no choice but to accept, and it was with this in mind that the Crimson Vow unanimously decided to table the issue of the monsters' overwhelming strength.

"Taking it easy is all well and good, but I'm less enthusiastic about staying at F-rank," said Mile. "I know we can still go hunting for dailies, but won't that prevent us from taking on standard extermination jobs? And escort missions are completely out of the question. That rules out taking on escort jobs while we travel and making money on the side, or getting a free carriage ride on the condition that we help out if the merchants come under attack."

"It would eliminate those options, yes," Pauline confirmed. "Which means

that we either have to make the trip to the capital on foot or pay for a passenger carriage."

"…"

Though none of the girls were exactly strapped for coin, they were still incredibly averse to the idea of spending money on a carriage ride. Up to this point, carriages had been something they were *paid* to ride as part of an escort mission, so while they knew on an intellectual level that paying the fare was an option, it was a bitter pill to swallow. Such was human nature.

"Let's try to come up with a better plan. We can stay here until we think of something," Pauline suggested.

The other girls nodded vigorously.

"Oh!" Mile abruptly shouted.

"Wh-where did that come from?" a startled Reina groused.

Mile's next words, however, made her freeze.

"We forgot to test your and Pauline's aptitude for storage magic!"

"Oh!" Reina and Pauline were the ones who shouted this time.

"I-I can't believe we could forget about something so important... Ahhhh, I'm a failure as a merchant!"

"It totally slipped my mind. I can't believe we didn't think to check that first thing, especially after experiencing firsthand how big a deal it is for a hunter to have storage magic!"

The two girls shook their heads in mutual astonishment.

"I-I don't blame us! We've had a lot to do since we came to this new land, and it's been one thing after another... Anyway, we should wait until tomorrow to try it out. It's dangerous to experiment with magic indoors, even if it's just for storage."

Mile made a fair point. Pauline and Reina reluctantly nodded in agreement.

In their heart of hearts, they wanted to test their abilities without a moment's delay. Alas, there was no telling what might happen if they botched a spell as high-level as controlling a pocket dimension. They were experienced enough as mages to know better than to argue with Mile's reasoning.

"Don't look like that, guys! You're scaring me! Tomorrow we'll go to the forest and do some trial runs. Okay?"

"…"

In anticipation of the day to come, Reina and Pauline were unlikely to get a wink of sleep that night.

"Uggghhh..."

"Hrrrgggh..."

The following day, Reina and Pauline were fighting an uphill battle in the forest near the port city, a hunting ground for rookie hunters.

During Mile's previous attempts to teach them storage magic, Pauline had managed to craft the subspace itself, but its capacity had been limited, and she could only maintain it for a short period of time. Reina, meanwhile, had never gotten past step one.

As such, Reina's training was focused on forming the subspace pocket. Pauline's regimen involved filling her storage with pebbles, then having Mile distract her through a number of means—talking to her, presenting her with difficult riddles to solve, tickling her—so that she could learn to keep the magic going longer.

Unfortunately, their practice didn't yield much in the way of results.

"Come on, Reina, you watch me take things in and out of storage all the time! Try to visualize, like, tearing open a rift in the space-time continuum, then wedging that hole open... And after that, you build a warehouse and shelves inside that space... Call it 'mental compartmentalization'!"

"That terrible pun drove the image right out of my head! Thanks a lot!" said Reina, sulking.

For Reina, who had no idea what the space-time continuum was, Mile's explanation was lacking in specifics. As they say—smart people make bad teachers. People who can figure things out on their first try have trouble relating to those who stumble and fail to grasp the concept. They can't understand what part is unclear or why the other person is struggling so much.

"At least *you* managed to form the subspace, Pauline. Now all we have to do is teach you to increase its capacity and keep it functioning at all times, whether you're upset, distracted, or even sleeping. Take this—coochy-coochy-coo!" Mile cried as she reached out to tickle her student.

"G-ggh, agh, hrghhh... Ahhhhhh!!"

A stream of pebbles shot out of nowhere in front of Pauline.

"Well, you've learned to hold it longer, at least while you're not doing anything else...but it still falls apart the moment you get distracted. When it comes to storage magic, you're the equivalent of an unhatched egg. Needless to say, you have a ways to go before you can call yourself a full-fledged storage user. Reina, you won't even count as an egg until you can create your own subspace pocket."

"Ugh..." Reina and Pauline groaned, chagrin written all over their faces.

Mastering storage magic would be a tremendous boon to any hunter. The same was true for a merchant, of course. Neither Reina nor Pauline could afford to give up over such minor setbacks as these, so it was little wonder that both girls kept up their struggle until they were red in the face.

"It'll take more than this to make me quit! Do you have any idea how hard I've worked? How much I've endured to boost my magic skills to their current level?! I'd never waste the chance to have a mage who knows storage magic as my own private tutor!"

"Exactly! As both a hunter and a merchant, I consider storage magic a dream worth striving for! Anyone who would squander this opportunity has no right to call themselves a full-fledged merchant! I'll see this through, even if it kills me!"

Reina and Pauline each gave voice to their determination. They were clearly prepared to train for however many days it would take to get the hang of storage magic.

"Sounds like a lot of work, but best of luck to you, girls!" said Mavis, the sole bystander.

Mavis had no aptitude for magic, so she had opted not to participate in the training session. Even Reina, a gifted mage, and Pauline, who had declared with a frightening intensity that she would sell her soul to the devil to learn storage magic, were having a rough time. Mavis, who wasn't a mage at all, had decided that she had no business trying.

"Storage magic, huh? Sure would be handy to have. Unlike you mages, we swordsmen have to lug around bulky, heavy weapons and armor—and we consume a lot of water, too. Factor in the miscellaneous equipment and spoils we have to carry, and it really adds up... I don't need to worry about drinking water when I'm traveling with you guys, but I still have to carry my own supply in case of an emergency. I may have more stamina than a mage, but it seems like the drawbacks outweigh the advantages."

Having benefited significantly less from Mile's guidance, compared to the two mages, Mavis was in a bit of a huff.

"It would be great if I could at least have a place to stash my backup blade. You know, like one of the characters from Mile's folktales... How did it go, again? 'I am the bone of my machines'..."

On a whim, Mavis drew the sword at her hip and thrust it into the empty expanse before her.

Shlorp.

The sword disappeared—almost as if it had been absorbed into the void...

"Huh?"

Her trusty sword was gone.

This was a catastrophe.

"Waaaaah! Where'd my sword go?! Come back!"

Shlorp.

It reappeared.

Her newly recovered sword in hand, Mavis looked stunned. And then...

"…"

"…"

"……"

"WHAT THE HECK?!" Reina, Pauline, and Mile all shouted.

The first to master storage magic was the dark horse challenger: Mavis.

The subsequent investigation confirmed that Mavis had fully mastered storage magic and was able to maintain her subspace without any conscious effort.

That's right—whether she was otherwise occupied or even asleep, her storage magic would remain intact. Its capacity was also quite large.

I guess it's true that Mavis has always had an aptitude for magic. Her Austien heritage prevented her from casting more overt spells, but she could already use body-enhancing magic and Wind Edge, with her sword as an intermediary. She's also demonstrated flexible thinking, strong conviction, and formidable spirit power countless times in the past, whether it was through mouth-to-mouth healing, her "We are the inferno" fire attack, or the Mav-ius Strip.

What's more, the "folktales" I told her, combined with her overall powers of

imagination and adoration of swords both famous and divine, have led her to strongly envision "that" as a real thing... And by "that," I mean the Reality Marble known as Unlimited Blade Works.

Mavis can't cast magic outward...or rather, emit the thought pulse needed to command the nanomachines without the medium of her trusty sword. But opening a subspace pocket doesn't require a grand display of magic via the multitudes of nanomachines in the vicinity. The few nanomachines inside her are enough to get the job done. Unlike combat magic, storage magic calls for a vivid mental image and faith, not sheer power.

Oh, and plus, Mavis now has the nanomachines that service her two blades, along with the ones in charge of her left arm. Maybe those exclusive nanomachines can render her thoughts more accurately and for a longer stretch of time...

While Mile was lost in thought, Reina and Pauline had burned themselves out to pure white ash.

It was hard to blame them. The two girls were quite confident in their own abilities, and yet Mavis, a swordswoman who wasn't supposed to have any magical talent at all, had effortlessly mastered the magic they had both struggled to grasp.

They couldn't believe it—or rather, they didn't want to believe it.

"Reina? Pauline? It's no use. They might as well be walking corpses."

"Er... I feel like I should apologize..."

Of course, since Mavis wasn't using Mile's brand of pseudo-storage magic (read: inventory space), her storage didn't boast an unlimited capacity or the ability to halt the passage of time. It was just ordinary storage magic. Its capacity was roughly that of a six-tatami mat room.

"That's more than plenty!"

"Screw you!"

Reina had a point.

When Reina and Pauline learned this after rebooting their systems, they tearfully berated their friend.

"I'm sorry, guys. I really am!"

"Don't you dare apologize! It makes us look even more pathetic!"

Distress written all over her face, Mavis looked to Mile for help...and yet, despite her troubled expression, her eyes were sparkling with joy.

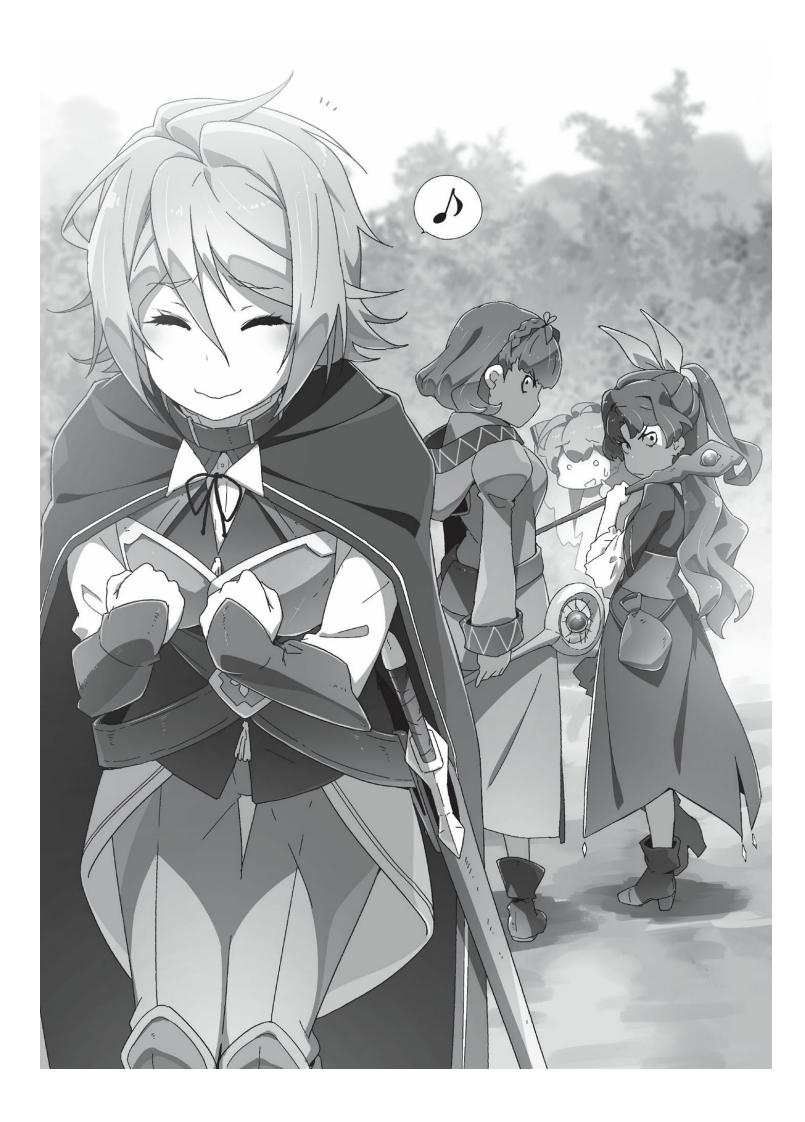
Storage magic would allow her to carry water, food, camping gear, backup weapons and armor, and game in large quantities. In the future, long after the Crimson Vow had disbanded, she could work as a "hassle-free hunter" who could carry bedding, cooking supplies, and ingredients, either flying solo or joining random parties on a temporary basis in between her lordly duties. In her capacity as a lord, she could also help out countless people in times of disaster by transporting large quantities of emergency supplies to places where carriages couldn't go.

"Hee hee. Hee hee hee..."

No one could blame her for the squeal of delight that escaped her lips.

No one could blame her, but still...

In the background, Reina and Pauline glared at Mavis with faces like thunder.



Chapter 127:

Rank

 $^{\prime\prime}$ N EXT UP, let's discuss the matter of rank!"

"…"

In the end, Reina had managed to craft a subspace, but its capacity was no more than two or three buckets' worth of water or supplies. To make matters worse, the magic would fall apart the moment Mile so much as spoke to her, spewing the subspace's contents everywhere. She was nowhere near the point of calling herself a proper wielder of storage magic. At this point, there had to be dozens—if not hundreds—of times more people as unskilled as Reina as there were bona fide storage mages.

Needless to say, this modest accomplishment served no functional use. But at least it placed her among the hundreds out of millions, and if she continued to put in the work, she stood a good chance of becoming a full-fledged practitioner one day.

Pauline had learned to sustain her storage space for slightly longer than before, but it still broke down the moment she directed her attention elsewhere. Holding it together for the short time it would take to get contraband through a checkpoint was the most she could manage.

When Mile said as much, Pauline insisted that she would never smuggle goods, but not a soul believed her.

"Staying at F-rank is going to keep us from taking on quests or escort missions... Oh, get over it already!" Mile snapped, finally fed up with Reina and Pauline's sulking. "There's no point in crying over spilled milk! Well, maybe it's my own fault for getting your hopes up..."

Mile had always held their magical talents in high esteem, and now both girls had been upgraded to a level-2 authorization, something nigh unheard of

among ordinary humans. Why, they were on par with most elder dragons! It wasn't unreasonable of Mile to assume that learning storage magic, which even a handful of level-1 humans had mastered, would be a breeze for them.

She knew that Kragon could use storage magic, as she had seen him pull out dragon balls and the like on numerous occasions, and he also held an authorization level of 2. Therefore, it stood to reason that her two companions could easily master the technique with her guidance. No one could blame her for assuming as much, anyway.

Unfortunately, her calculations had been wildly off the mark. Instead, the underdog—Mavis—had risen to the occasion.

But just think! If we keep all the things we need for camping in Mavis's storage, it won't disrupt everyone else's work if I do my own thing for a while. Unlike my inventory, hers doesn't have the ability to freeze the passage of time, so we'll have to be careful about how long we store produce, game, or foodstuffs. Still, six tatami mats is pretty big. As long as we keep everything on the small and light side, that's plenty of room for a bathtub, toilet, and folding beds.

About half of the time, Mile used her inventory while pretending it was storage magic, and the other half of the time she *actually* stowed things away with storage magic. In truth, her real storage magic wasn't fantastically capacious (nothing like the size of several Tokyo Domes, for instance). As such, she kept items that were oversized, that would lose value if they cooled or spoiled, or that she rarely used in her inventory, while her storage was reserved for only a select few of her belongings.

A regular storage space was a constant magical drain on its user. Not even Mile could afford to throw things in there willy-nilly.

All of which was to say that, as far as Mile was concerned, Mavis's storage capacity was plenty big. In fact, it was probably in the running for first or second largest on the old continent...if you took Mile out of the equation, of course.

I can't believe how cool Mavis is... She's the purebred daughter of an established line of counts, not some phony aristocrat like me. She's a master of the blade, a magical swordswoman who can use spells like Wind Edge or the Mav-ius Strip, a practitioner of mouth-to-mouth healing, and a paragon of chivalry... Plus, she's an apostle of truth and justice, not to mention that she loves cool things and practically oozes chuunibyou...

It's not easy to find a catch like her! Oh, if only she were a guy...

Mile was not yet enlightened enough to make an exception for Mavis where gender was concerned.

"Enough of that! We're supposed to be talking about rank!" With a furious shake of her head, Mile steered her thoughts back on track. "The Hunters' Guild here doesn't offer skip applications. But upon taking a closer look at the rules, I noticed another system they were missing..."

The dramatic lead-in had her friends on the edge of their seats.

"That's when it dawned on me... The guild rules here don't specify a minimum term at the previous rank to qualify for promotion."

"Whaaaaat?!" all three girls shouted in surprise.

Their reaction was only natural. This meant that if they completed a large number of difficult missions or profitable gathering requests, they could be promoted in no time.

On the old continent, the only reason the Crimson Vow had spent so long at C-rank, even though they had long since racked up the skills and contribution points to make B-rank, was because of the rule that they had to spend a minimum number of years at one rank before progressing to the next one. Here, that wasn't an issue.

Although, to be fair, that requirement had recently been abolished on the old continent as well.

"That'll be a cakewalk."

"A cakewalk indeed."

"Where's the challenge in such a cakewalk?"

"A total cakewalk..."

"We are four joined down to our very souls! And our name is the Crimson Cakewalk!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold on! That sounds ridiculous, you guys!" Mile chided her friends.

"Oh, please. You were just as eager to make the joke as the rest of us."

"Hrk..."

Reina's retort brought Mile straight to her knees.

"We're looking to sell our stock!"

"Sure thing! Lay 'er out right here!"

Thud-thump-thunk!

A mountain of dead ogres, orcs, jackalopes, and various other monsters, along with a slew of valuable loot, poured out of Mile's storage (read: inventory) and onto the floor in front of the purchasing counter.

"WH-WHAT IN THE BLAZES?!" the middle-aged man behind the counter shouted, attracting the attention of the rest of the guild.

Since they were still F-rank, the only monster extermination jobs the girls could take on were for jackalopes. So instead of doing quests, the Crimson Vow had opted to earn money and contribution points via dailies, which allowed them to sell raw materials without a prior order. If they kept this up until they reached D-rank, they would be eligible to take on standard quests.

That said, even if it made them technically *eligible*, not many people would hire a lone D-rank party to guard them, and many quests had stricter prerequisites.

In that case, what was their best possible play?

The solution was simple: They just had to make a name for themselves. That way, people would gladly accept offers from their D-rank group and start singling them out for jobs. And in order to do that...

"We're looking to sell our stock!"

Thud-thump-thunk!

"We're looking to sell our stock!"

Thud-thump-thunk!

"We're looking to sell our stock!"

Thud-thump-thunk!

Day in and day out, the Crimson Vow delivered massive amounts of monsters and loot.

"Do something about those girls!" yelled the man who worked behind the counter.

"Like what, exactly?" replied the guild master, clearly at a loss.

"No matter how you slice it, they're bringing in way too many jackalopes, orcs, ogres, and herbs! I appreciate 'em thinning out the growing monster population, but it's tanking the prices of meat, fur pelts, and other materials! The guild's profits haven't taken a hit, since we're making more sales at lower prices, but this is murder on the butchers whose workload has skyrocketed without a change in their wages!

"Still, it could be worse. At least the butchers ain't *losing* income yet. Meanwhile, thanks to the price drop of monster parts and loot, the earnings of mid-level and low-level hunters have taken a nosedive! As if we didn't have enough people dropping out of the hunter business already! What are we supposed to do, huh? Huh?!"

"Ugh..."

On some level, the guild master had realized this was going to happen. Still, the Crimson Vow was a party of pretty, powerful young girls—with loads of storage space, to boot—who had come from a faraway land to grace the local guild with their presence. He couldn't very well tell them, "You're catching too many monsters, so stop working for the rest of the week." The girls' livelihoods hung in the balance, and the guild didn't have the authority to issue such orders to its hunters.

"The problems don't end there. If we don't put a stop to the girls' overhunting soon, no matter *how* fast the monsters reproduce, the number hunted is going to outstrip the number bred, with the exception of the jackalopes. The local monster population will take a hit. And when that happens..."

"When that happens...what?"

"If the pool of prey dips below a certain level and the girls stop raking in as much dough, they'll pack up and move to another area. In their wake, they'll leave a guild branch reduced to a handful of members, the bulk of its hunters having quit the business due to the steep drop in income. And then..."

"There's more?!"

The guild master had had his fill of bad news by this point. He looked weary at the prospect of more to come.

"Once the girls are gone, the monsters will start multiplying again. Here, by this town where only a handful of hunters remain..." "...." "....."

"What are we supposed to do?!" the guild master yelled.

"That's what I'm askin' you!" the man who worked the purchasing counter yelled back.

"……"

"Give them a promotion," muttered the purchasing clerk.

"Huh?" said the guild master, a blank look on his face.

"I'm telling you to raise their rank! The reason they bring in so much game and loot every day is because they're F-rank, the lowest a hunter can be. At F-rank, the only quests you can get are for picking herbs or hunting jackalopes. An experienced party ain't gonna take on such low-paying jobs for beginners! That's why they've been steering clear of quests and sticking to dailies, which lets them make money off meat and raw materials! If we gave them a promotion and made them eligible for a super-challenging 'Mission Impossible,' like an escort mission or a big-game hunt, I bet you anything those young ladies would jump at the chance."

"Oh, I see what you're saying now!"

"That's all you've got to say, you big buffoon?! You should've thought of it yourself and brought it to a meeting ages ago! You hear me?!"

"My bad... I swear I'll fix this somehow."

"It's a risky move for a guild master, but are you planning to invoke Clause A-3 of the Special Measures Regarding Guild Master Jurisdiction, 'Exercise of guild master authority in the event of danger to multiple human lives'? That would let you promote them two ranks, from F to D, right?"

The guild master shook his head. "No. I'm going to invoke Clause A-2 and promote them three levels at once, to C-rank. At D-rank, the number of quests they can do solo is still limited. Merchants who don't already know them won't

be willing to hire them as guards, so that rules out any caravans from other towns. Our best bet is to advance them straight to C."

"Wha... But Clause A-2 is 'Powers granted in the event of a threat to the town's survival'! If the Guild Masters' Council in the capital deems it an abuse of authority, you'll lose your post!"

A faint smile rose to the other man's face. "I may be a buffoon, but I'm well aware of the obligations that come with my position."

"Oh, Boss..."

Little did they know that this decision would later be applauded by the Council in the capital and earn the guild master a promotion.

There was nothing strange about it. If he were punished for acting to protect his town, knowing full well that it could cost him everything, there would be a sharp decline in the number of guild masters willing to put themselves on the line for the good of their home. The Council had little choice but to praise his judgment, even if it meant turning a blind eye to a few transgressions—especially since what he proposed was the most logical course of action and hurt no one.

"What?! We're getting promoted?"

"Hooray! All our hard work of hunting monsters and gathering materials paid off!"

"Exactly as planned!"

Mile nodded along. "Now we're finally E-rank. If we work even harder and get to D-rank, we can take on extermination jobs—with a few restrictions, mind you—and escort missions will be on the table if we team up with another party! In the meantime, we just do our best to supply more and more raw materials!" she rambled, delighted.

You've done enough hunting and material gathering! the guild master swore internally. He had summoned the Crimson Vow to his private office to tell them the news of their promotion, but he still had more to say.

He cleared his throat. "You're no E-ranks. You're C-ranks now."

"Whaaaaaat?!" the four girls shouted, astounded by the news.

Was that a "That was no Kafrizz spell. It was Frizz" moment?

As usual, Mile was lost in her own ridiculous thoughts.

"Wh-wh-what do you mean?!"

"I-I-I-Isn't that taking things a little too fast?"

"Th-th-there's gotta be a catch..."

"I-I-I-It's a trap! It's got to be!"

The Crimson Vow had worked as C-rank hunters on the old continent and later been promoted to S-rank, but even with all that experience under their belts, the shock of receiving a triple promotion had them reeling.

The old continent's skip system was one thing. It was designed to primarily serve super strong veterans, such as retired hunters returning to the field, soldiers, mercenaries, or disgraced ex-court mages. The occasional incredibly talented newbie shared in the benefits. As such, it wasn't all that uncommon to be registered as a D-or C-rank right from the get-go.

Here, however, there was no such system. Regardless of whether they had shown some skill in one-on-one combat or killed a slew of orcs and ogres for their dailies, it should have been impossible for a party of teenage girls, one of whom was underage, to receive a special three-rank upgrade. Though the members of the Crimson Vow had in fact been gunning for an accelerated promotion, no one could fault them for being suspicious.

"What are you scheming?!"

"Wait, I know... Is your plan to bump us up to C-rank, make us eligible for the

guild's emergency draft, and saddle us with all the dangerous quests you'd rather not give to the local hunters?"

"I bet that's it!" the whole party shouted.

"Oh, for crying out loud! NO! The purchase price for monsters and loot took a nosedive thanks to your overhunting, and it's making life hell for the other hunters! I was so desperate to get you girls to do *something* besides hunting and gathering that I threw my weight around and implemented special measures! Did you know that could get me fired, you little menaces?!"

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"..."

"......"

"We're sorry..."
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Even the Crimson Vow had realized they were in the wrong. The guild master was old enough to have a family to support, and they had forced him to risk his job—to say nothing of the problems they had caused for the local hunter community. They had no choice but to apologize. But still...

"We can't make a living on standard quests alone," said Reina.

"The reward for a quest is entirely dependent on the client, after all," Pauline added. "A child's allowance is one or two silver coins a day. A beginner job of For E-rank will net a hunter around four or five silver coins. Payment for less dangerous C-rank jobs could range anywhere from six to seven silver coins or a little under one half-gold. Finally, the escort jobs that involve fending off dangerous monsters or bandits typically pay around two or three half-gold per day. Of course, prices *can* soar depending on the conditions. For example, if the client is almost certain to come under attack, or if the enemies are professional mercenaries or ex-soldiers..."

"Well, if we're C-rank, I doubt we'll be looking at E-rank jobs or lower... The point is, escort missions or high-paying jobs don't come up every day, and

competition will be fierce for the ones with good terms," said Mavis. "We newcomers won't be in a position to snag many of them, and even if we could, we shouldn't. It would just make trouble for the other hunters again."

Mile nodded. "There's only one solution left for us, then..."

"We leave this town for a bigger city!" the four girls finished together.

"How did you get to that conclusion?!" the guild master wailed.

He didn't want them to keep overhunting monsters, but he had no problem with them hunting to a *reasonable* degree. In fact, he appreciated it. It thinned out the dangerous monster population, and the guild got to reap the profits by purchasing their hauls. It was important to him to keep the Crimson Vow in his town, both as a source of revenue for the guild and as a means of transporting emergency supplies and aiding evacuees in the event of a disaster.

Besides, the hunters and guild staff in the other towns would never believe that the Crimson Vow had brought in such an outlandish amount of goods. If it became known that the girls had left this town to move to another city, their guild branch would be the laughingstock of the nation for foolishly driving out high-capacity storage magic users, who were massive moneymakers and a potential godsend in emergencies.

Granted, any guild branch where the Crimson Vow set up camp would discover the truth within a few days...

"It'll be the same no matter where you go! Even if you go to the capital or a city of comparable size, I figure you could last about ten days tops."

"……"

The quartet fell silent.

"We totally knew that," they eventually muttered, acting like a bunch of sore losers.

"You're limited to three orcs and ogres per day. You can have thirty goblins and kobolds apiece. I won't place a limit on herbs. That said, you'd better not

pick our land barren! If you agree to follow those rules, I don't mind if you keep doing dailies. Also, don't juggle a ton of quests at once...except for the 'red mark' jobs or inactive requests with no takers. You're free to take as many of those as you like."

While the guild offered an extermination reward to incentivize hunters to thin out the numbers of orcs and ogres, the real reason such creatures fetched high prices lay in the value of their flesh, hides, horns, and tusks. If those prices were to tank, a lot of people would be in a tough spot. Without the lure of substantial profit, fewer hunters would be willing to haul back such heavy meat. And of course, no butcher would risk going in person to dress and skin a beast, knowing that the stench of blood might attract even more monsters. It was easy to see why the guild master would impose a cap on the Crimson Vow.

Goblins, on the other hand, provided no raw materials to sell and only carried the extermination reward. Kobold hides could be tanned and shipped off to the capital or other cities, but it didn't matter much if the girls brought in a surplus of one or the other. In these cases, the depopulation efforts took precedence over any concern over market rates. Plus, the Crimson Vow always delivered their kobolds whole, apparently loath to skin the creatures themselves, so the guild got to collect that sweet, sweet labor fee.

As for the herbs, those could be made into medicine and distributed to other towns indefinitely. In a world where medicine couldn't be produced by chemical or industrial means, medicinal herbs were always in high demand, even if their effects were minimal.

"……"

Powerless to challenge the guild master's terms, the Crimson Vow said nothing at all.

"Well, what can we do? He's right," Reina shrugged on the way back from the guild branch. "Besides, the whole point of those mass deliveries was to get to D-

rank fast—plus to establish ourselves enough to actually *get* decent jobs at Drank. Now that we're C-rank, we can make more than enough money doing things the normal way. No big deal."

"Yeah," Mavis agreed. "Our main goal isn't to make money or get promoted anymore. We're in this for the adventure, to help those in need, and to meet the expectations of our struggling clients."

"Wrong! Money always matters!"

"Ha ha..." Mile cracked a dry, amused smile at Pauline's comment. Her friends never changed.

"Anyway, we've hit our daily quota for everything but the herbs," said Reina. "I suggest we hunt in batches, keep our haul in Mile's storage so it can be frozen in time, and turn in our allotted amount each day. Though if we hunt too much at once, that will cause a discrepancy in the number of monsters turned in versus the actual distribution of monsters, which could make problems for the people monitoring the culling efforts. Let's be careful not to take it that far."

The rest of the party nodded along in agreement.

"Finally, let's grab all the most intriguing, challenging, and fun quests on the board!"

"Yeah!"

There were three types of hunters. First were those who worked to make a living. Second were those who sought to rise to the top, gaining status and rank. Lastly, there were those who did it for the love of the game, seeking out heart-pounding adventure and helping people along the way.

The current incarnation of the Crimson Vow was clearly this last type.

"On that note, here's the job I claimed on our way out..."

Back at the inn, Reina placed a job posting in front of the group. It read:

Exterminate whatever is preying on the livestock in Golba Village. Payment on completion: 3 gold.

From the sound of it, Golba Village was a small farming community about five or six hours' walk from their current location.

"We weren't going to get many requests to slay an earth dragon or a gryphon out here in the sticks," she added. "This is the best we can hope for from an extermination job."

"I guess..."

"We're in this one to help people," said Pauline.

She was right: Accepting this request was a form of volunteer work. A poor village might consider three gold a large sum, but for a party of four, it amounted to seven and a half gold per person. That was equivalent to a mere 75,000 Japanese yen. At a glance, that might seem like fair compensation...but within that figure lurked a trap.

First of all, the type of monster that needed exterminating wasn't specified. It could be a goblin or a kobold...but there was a nonzero chance that it was an orc, an ogre, a wyvern, a manticore, a gryphon, or something of that ilk.

The posting had also neglected to mention the number of monsters that needed exterminating or the duration of the job. In short, the girls had no idea how many monsters they would be expected to kill and for how long. In a worst-case scenario, they might be instructed to keep at it until harm ceased to come to the livestock. After ten, twenty, or even thirty days on the job, an injury as minor as a gopher chewing on a cow's tail could be what stood between them and completing the mission.

Most clients had more common sense than to subject hunters to something like that. Yet some unscrupulous villagers would deliberately phrase their request in such a way that they could claim, "You haven't done what I requested in full, so I can't sign the completion certificate" in order to get out of paying, just as some well-meaning villagers would earnestly believe "I'm paying"

good money for this, so it's their obligation to hunt down every last monster," or "I should work the hired help for all they're worth to recoup my investment." Consequently, few hunters would get involved with such a vaguely worded request.

Since no one was willing to take the job, it had been left up on the board indefinitely—a so-called "inactive" request.

Needless to say, the Crimson Vow knew all that. Still, they also knew it was very possible that the client wasn't up to any funny business. Maybe this was their first request, and they just didn't know the proper way to write one.

Normally, the clerk would explain all of this to a client and have them rewrite the request, but this one likely would have been entrusted to a peddler for delivery, meaning the guild had been left no choice but to post it on the board as it came to them.

Reina had, of course, made sure to go over the particulars with the clerk when she picked up the quest. Ever the professional, the clerk had told her, "If the village that made the request tries anything shady, don't give them the time of day. Just come back." If anyone tried to cheat the Crimson Vow—perhaps especially likely given how many people tended to underestimate a party of young girls—the guild would be sure to deal with them accordingly. All subsequent requests from that village would be rejected. The guild would neither buy nor sell materials, medicine, or anything else from them again. None of the villagers would be permitted to register as hunters.

There was no need to bring legal action into the picture. A small village would be powerless if an entire guild turned against it.

Occasionally, a village ignorant of this eventuality would try to pull a fast one on a party of hunters, but such conflicts were usually resolved by a conversation with the village chief. After laying out the situation in plain facts, the guild rarely had any need to tighten the noose. As such, there weren't likely to be any major problems.

Still, the last thing anyone wanted was to have their time wasted and their day ruined for a pittance, so the average hunter would still proceed with caution when it came to a request like this.

Chapter 128:

The Inactive Request

SO THIS IS THE VILLAGE that submitted the request..."

The day after accepting their new job, the Crimson Vow got right down to work. As they had set out first thing in the morning, they arrived at their destination just before noon.

"Okay," said Mavis. "The request was submitted under the village's name, and the commission is probably coming out of the community budget, so it's safe to assume that the collective body of villagers counts as the client. Of course, the chief will probably be acting as their spokesperson."

"Still, if it's only a five-or six-hour walk to the port city, shouldn't the villagers have gone in person instead of asking a peddler to deliver their request? If it were just the request form, that would be one thing, but they also had to trust him with the three-gold deposit for the commission. Isn't that a rather hefty sum for a small farming community?"

These days, the Crimson Vow didn't consider three gold—equivalent to 300,000 Japanese yen—to be a lot of money. But for a farming community that largely supplied its own food and necessities, it was probably no small sum. As the daughter of a merchant—or rather, as a merchant in her own right—Pauline found it odd that they would so readily put their deposit in the hands of a stranger.

Besides, why leave a request of such vital importance to the village to someone else? She was right to be asking questions.

Yet Reina, another daughter of a merchant—or peddler, to be precise—had a different opinion. "Five to six hours by foot means ten to twelve hours round trip. Factor in the time for meals and breaks, and they'd have to stay overnight in a town for their own safety. That's two days of adult labor lost, plus the

expenses for one night's lodging, food, and all that other stuff. Considering all this, it's not strange at all that they'd send the request via an intermediary. If they're trusting him with three gold coins, that peddler has got to be someone they trust—a reliable merchant who's been coming around for years or a former resident of the village."

"You think so?"

Back when Pauline lived with her parents, she hadn't been deeply involved in their business. In contrast, Reina had accompanied her father on his travels as a peddler, where she had learned a great deal from sitting in on his negotiations. Cognizant of this, Pauline chose to defer to Reina's experience.

Hmm...

Unlike Pauline and Mavis, who seemed satisfied with Reina's explanation, Mile was deep in thought.

It's a five-to six-hour walk from the port city. If it's that close, I'm sure they've submitted requests plenty of times before... I doubt this is the first one they've written since the village's founding. If I had to guess, they make at least one request every few years. And since they're dipping into the precious village funds to do it, one would expect the chief to drop by the guild during his trips to the port city to find out how to write a request or what the current going prices are. It's not so far that the chief wouldn't make the trek from time to time, whether it's to transport wheat for the annual tax or to make a petition to his local lord...

Something about it didn't sit right with her, but she had no hard evidence to back up her suspicions. On the surface, it was nothing more than a request from a farming community plagued by pests, and assuming there were no deliberately sinister intentions at play, it was a perfectly ordinary job for novice C-rank hunters.

Thus, Mile chose not to argue with Reina, either.

"Welcome to our humble village."

The members of the Crimson Vow were talking with the leadership team in the village chief's home. But it wasn't going as hoped...

The chief himself was gloomy and made no effort to mask his disappointment with the hunters in front of him. The rest of the village officials in attendance were in similarly low spirits.

It was understandable, really. They had paid three gold coins for the commission, scraping the bottom of the village's meager budget, and all they'd gotten for their trouble were four little girls no older than their own grandchildren. It was only natural that they felt disillusioned.

But it was too late to complain now. Since no age limit or gender restriction had been specified on the request, the guild had assumed there was no problem with the party and allowed them to accept the job. If this had been an escort job, the terms of the request might have stated that the final hiring decision would depend on the results of an interview—after all, no merchant would want to hire a group liable to ditch them and run at the first sight of a monster, or someone with a countenance so villainous that they looked like an undercover bandit. Alas, the villagers had no such luck.

"I understand your concerns, but I assure you that we're an established C-rank party. Besides, if we're unable to complete the request, the job will be considered a failure. We won't get paid, and your request will be passed along to the next taker."

The village chief looked relieved at Mavis's reassurances. The girls were used to being underestimated at first glance, so none of them were particularly offended.

"Now, I'd like to go over the specifics of the request..."

All the guild had confirmed for them was the broad strokes—basically, that no one other than the Crimson Vow was willing to undertake the quest.

According to the village chief...

"There's a place known as the Forbidden Forest a short way from this village. Lately, the monsters that live there have been invading our village and attacking our livestock. Each time, exactly one animal is killed during the night, and its carcass is discovered the next morning. That's a big enough problem on its own, but if this keeps up, there's no telling when the next victim will be human. We ask that you exterminate the monsters and make our village a safe place to live. No need to bother with the jackalopes or orcs, but we want every breed of wolf completely eradicated."

So went the story.

Jackalopes and orcs were probably excluded because the village needed them for their meat and resources. Orcs were a bit dangerous, but those were nothing compared to ogres or wolf monsters. An orc would never come all the way out to the village anyway, and occasionally taking one down would replenish the village's food supply.

"Aww, man..." the girls whined.

The situation had turned out exactly as they'd feared.

Even when they had discussed the worst-case scenario, they hadn't really believed it would come to pass. Imagine their surprise to discover that the village's request really was this outrageous.

It would be a little more understandable if this request were from a malicious individual trying to trick hunters into working for free, or forcing their hired help to go to extremes by dangling a breach of contract over their heads. As a legitimate request from an entire village, though? It was downright unbelievable.

"Do you seriously expect us to exterminate every single monster in the forest? For *three* gold?"

"You're out of touch with reality."

"Go ask your local lord, jeez!"

Mile, Pauline, and Reina each had a scathing comment to make.

Mavis, for her part, laughed dryly. "I wonder how many years this is going to take... Ha ha ha..."

"You little ladies already accepted our request, so we expect you to follow through! Otherwise, we'll consider it a breach of contract!"

"Nice try. The guild instructed us to drop the quest and come back if the details of the job were unreasonable."

Even a softie like Mavis wasn't about to put up with this treatment.

It was bad enough if *they* were the only ones getting a raw deal. But if they went along with something like this, the villagers might get it into their heads that stupider hunters could be duped into working for free if you played your cards right, or that they could tell anyone, "The party we hired last time accepted *these* lousy terms." That would spell trouble for future hunters. There was no room for compromise.

"Let's get out of here, girls!"

"Yeah!"

Everyone rose to their feet at Reina's command.

"Very well," said the village chief. "We'll drop a few of the terms."

The girls ignored him, simply walking out of the room.

"Huh? Where are you going?! Didn't you hear me? I said I'd drop some of the terms!"

The Crimson Vow clearly weren't of the mind to stop.

"Wait, h-hear me out..."

At that, Reina paused and looked over her shoulder. Her expression was flat. "We ask for reasonable terms, and you demand ten times more than what's fair. We refuse, so you say, 'Let's meet in the middle. That's a good

compromise, isn't it?' Except that's still 5.5 times above the standard. We're not stupid enough to listen to a grifter like you.

"Rest assured, we'll let the guild and other hunters know exactly what kind of request you made of us for three whole gold. From now on, only hunters who can appreciate what you're looking for will bother coming out to your village—well, if such stupid hunters even exist. Heck, we only took this on because we felt bad that your request had been ignored for so long. It was supposed to be volunteer work. Who knows how long it'll be before a party like ours comes along again?"

""

The village officials trembled, their faces white as sheets.

Reina turned back to the door. Her companions, who had stopped to wait for her, made to leave as well.

"St-stop! Please just hear me out!"

After pulling himself together, the village chief repeated his earlier words. However, no hunter was about to trust a client who had downplayed, disrespected, and made unreasonable demands of the party he had hired. Though he had already deposited the payment with the guild, things could get messy if he refused to sign the completion certificate. If the Crimson Vow made the facts of the case clear, they would probably be paid in full eventually, but they preferred to avoid the trouble altogether.

In which case, the simplest solution was to call off the job. Since money had yet to change hands, the cancellation would be considered the fault of the client, which would make the tedious back-and-forth with the guild that much easier for the Crimson Vow. Of course, to account for the inconvenience caused, they would still have to deduct a penalty fee and the travel expenses from the village's deposit. Based on past cases, it was safe to say this would likely entirely deplete their funds...

The Crimson Vow wasn't doing this out of greed. It was their duty as hunters

to pocket as much money as possible to prevent this from happening again, as well as to set an example for the neighboring villages. The "deposit" that a client had to leave with the guild in advance of the job's completion existed for precisely such situations.

If the Crimson Vow reported what had happened here, no more hunters would accept requests from this village, and the guild would never again step in to convince hunters to give them a chance. It was a common fate for villages that underestimated and disrespected both hunters and their guilds.

"Not interested," said Reina, dismissing the chief's pleas without a second thought. "We've already heard what you have to say, and it was outside the bounds of what we could deem acceptable. The negotiations are off, and *you're* the ones responsible for breaking our contract. Where's the need for further discussion?

"You planned to take advantage of us because we're young girls. You tried to trick us and pick fights with us, and now that the conversation isn't going your way, you think you can say, 'I take it back!' and get a second chance? Why the heck should we trust you? Worse, you're *still* acting like you're doing us a big favor by dropping the terms. What are you, stupid? If it were a party of toughlooking men who had accepted your request, I bet you would have offered a fairer deal in the first place."

The chief was utterly helpless in the face of her tirade.

Really, Reina was soft for even giving him another chance to explain himself. Most people would have left without another word, save for maybe a final insult or parting shot. Only a fool would try to negotiate or talk things out with an untrustworthy grifter. And yet...

"Please, little ladies! I'm begging you!!"

All the village officials present, including the chief, got down on their hands and knees *dogeza*-style (okay, it was a little different from the Japanese version, but it clearly and unambiguously conveyed the same sentiment), putting the

Crimson Vow in an awkward spot.

Of course, they could have just left and gone somewhere else. But while the thought did cross their minds, the Crimson Vow didn't have it in them to walk away.

"Do I have this right?" asked Reina, confirming the details one last time. "You want us to hunt as many of the wolves inhabiting the forest as possible. The minimum requirement is thirty, and the leader of the pack—a white one—has to be included in that number. If we fall short of thirty because the pack is too small or a few manage to escape, the quest still counts as completed provided we defeat the alpha and eliminate the vast majority of the pack. Correct? Also, if there's been a change in leadership and the alpha *isn't* the white one, then we should kill the new alpha instead."

The village chief nodded.

The girls would hate to have the job labeled a failure and their commission denied simply because the total number of wolves had fallen to less than thirty or because the pack had disbanded and scattered. So, Reina was careful to close any possible loopholes in the terms. There was also no guarantee that the leader of the pack was actually white. The client could be lying in order to later give the quest a failing grade on the grounds that the wolf they had described as being the alpha was not defeated.

Admittedly, whether the alpha was white or grey, letting the leader of the pack get away would spell trouble. However, it was unlikely that a wolf in that position would be among the first to run. Once Mile had set eyes on the alpha, she could mark it with her search magic, and it would be smooth sailing from there.

Yes, for all their big talk, the Crimson Vow had ended up allowing the village chief to make his case. After hearing him out, they agreed to do the quest. The request was shady enough to go inactive, and here they were, having gone out

of their way to accept it. The girls never had been the sort to turn their backs on someone in need. They knew they were being pushovers, but it was what it was.

"All right, now go ahead and put that all down in writing," Pauline instructed the village chief. She was far too cautious to blindly trust someone who had tried to swindle them once before.

If he refused, the Crimson Vow certainly wouldn't give him another chance. With that in mind, the village chief acquiesced without a fight.

"Well, since they apologized and came back to us with reasonable terms, we've got nothing left to complain about. I wish we hadn't had to go through all this rigamarole, but oh well..." Mavis sighed.

After receiving a more detailed description of the Forbidden Forest from the village chief, the Crimson Vow had set out without further ado. It was later in the day than the girls would have liked, but they were better off walking until it was dark and setting up camp somewhere than spending the night with the untrustworthy chief.

And so the group was walking along the narrow paths of the village, Mavis voicing her thoughts aloud. But then...

Thump.

"Huh?" Mavis said inarticulately, startled by a sudden impact.

She had been hit by a flying pebble.

Normally, if a member of the Crimson Vow came under attack, the entire party—not just the one who'd been targeted, but the other three, too—would immediately take up a defensive stance, determine the location and number of attackers, gauge the enemy's strength, and launch a swift counterattack. At the very least, none of them would just stand there defenseless. Let alone *all* of them...

In this instance, however, there was nothing else to be done. After all, the one who had thrown the stone was a child of about seven or eight.

"B-but why...?" mumbled Mavis. It was an understandable reaction.

Hunters of mid-level C-rank and below formed the lowest rung of the profession, with a fair number of idiots and ruffians among their ranks. As young women were likely to end up on the wrong side of their shenanigans, they often resented the whole occupation. Children, however—especially orphans and country kids—rarely shared that prejudice. For them, being a hunter was a dream job that was relatively easy to get into and allowed them to get rich quick. Some kids even grew up seeing hunters saving their villages from monsters and accordingly idolized the whole profession as heroic, an inspiring line of work that only the strong could pursue.

Add to that the fact that the Crimson Vow was a party of good-looking girls who had come all the way from the port city to help a village in need, and they ought to be getting showered with thanks, if anything. Why was this child throwing stones at them?

To make matters worse, this wasn't a playful gesture accompanied by laughter. The pebble had been hurled with a look of hatred, and it had been meant to hurt. Since it had hit Mavis's armor, the damage was minimal. But if it had hit an exposed body part, like her head or a limb, or if it had been aimed at Reina and Pauline, who weren't wearing much in the way of protective gear...

Even more puzzling was that a woman—presumably the mother of the stone-throwing child—hastily scooped him up in her arms and took him inside. It was almost as if she were protecting her son from a bunch of outlaws.

Usually, this would be the moment when a mother would scold her child and make him apologize. Yet, she had acted as if she had no problem with his behavior in and of itself, and simply wanted to distance him from the threat of retribution.

And when the members of the Crimson Vow glanced around...

Several other pairs of eyes were glaring at them with the same visceral hatred and fear. Others seemed full of hope that they would get the job done.

The crowd was clearly divided into two camps.

"…"

The girls had a hunch that the village chief was still hiding something from them.

"What's going on?" Reina wondered aloud.

The Crimson Vow had left the village and were headed for the Forbidden Forest.

"Some of the villagers don't take kindly to our presence, clearly. I'm guessing it's more than just a handful of them," Mavis said, her expression grim. "And that group includes children."

"It seems like more than a feud between the villagers themselves," said Pauline. "In that case, there would be no reason to drag their children into it—or us, for that matter! We're just the hunters hired to slay some monsters."

"You'd think a small village would have nothing to gain from antagonizing hunters from the guild," Mile agreed.

The pair was right. Whatever internal quarrels the village might have, there was no reason to involve outsiders...and especially not merchants or the Hunters' Guild. That would be detrimental to the village as a whole.

"Whatever it is, it's not our problem," said Reina. "We're here to get rid of whatever is attacking precious livestock and disturbing village life. Whether it's a monster or a wild animal, we just have to hunt it down and call it a day. Local infighting is none of our concern."

The other members of the party nodded along. So long as a request was reasonable and didn't entail misleading or cheating the hunter, they would proceed with good faith toward successful results.

Just as they would return malice with retribution in kind.

That was what it meant to be a hunter.

"Well, here we are at the Forbidden Forest..."

Allegedly, the attacks weren't the work of a lone, stray wolf but of a whole pack. The forest where the wolves lived wasn't far from the village; the trip was about an hour and a half on foot. However, since the girls had left late in the day, reluctant to spend the night in the village, night would fall in the forest if they were to go in now. And so...

"Let's camp here tonight and head into the forest tomorrow," Reina decided.

The rest of the party nodded in agreement.

Naturally, evening was time for dinner, baths, and Mile's Japanese folktales. There were more than ten hours between sunset and sunrise. The girls couldn't be expected to spend that entire time sleeping.

Though the Crimson Vow had set up camp on the outskirts of the forest, the barrier they had erected to shield their sounds and scents eliminated any potential danger. Without such protections, the smell of their cooking—and perhaps more to the point, the scent of "young, soft, and delicious human females"—would have attracted monsters and wildlife in droves.

The next day, as soon as it was light out, the Crimson Vow set out into the Forbidden Forest.

Granted, although the sun had risen, the inside of the forest was not exactly cheery or bright. It was an old-growth forest that had never been tended, pruned, or thinned, so it was dark and gloomy even during the daytime. And since no one ever ventured inside...

Slash!
Shing!
Thwack!

"The prey here sure looks tasty," the Crimson Vow remarked.

Indeed, the place was crawling with monsters and ordinary animals alike. Where humanoids were present, they tended to upset the ecological balance by hunting more prey than they could eat. Here, their absence had presumably allowed for a proper equilibrium between the populations of monsters and animals large and small.

"Orcs aren't the only thing worth hunting around here. Deer, boar, and cattle all provide delectable game. Whether you're eating them or selling them!"

Mile was right. Unlike monsters, which sprung up like weeds no matter how many you hunted, common animals like deer, boar, and cattle were delicious and often scarcer, meaning they could fetch a high price. Because they rarely attacked humanoids unprovoked, they were overhunted near human settlements. In remote areas, transportation was a hassle and often saw the meat damaged in transit, so there wasn't much supply despite the high demand.

Luckily for the girls, Mile's inventory meant they wouldn't have to worry about transportation or preservation if they hunted a bunch of the local wildlife. And seeing as there were no other hunters or trappers around, the forest may as well have been the Crimson Vow's own personal hunting ground.

"This place was practically made for... Hold on..." Mile trailed off, as if something had just occurred to her.

"What's wrong?" asked Reina. She was always quick to notice when Mile was acting strange.

"Er, well... Isn't this place named 'the Forbidden Forest'?"

"Yep, sure is."

"Doesn't that imply that people aren't supposed to set foot inside? Why do you figure it's called that? It could be because it's too dangerous, but maybe there's some legend or religious taboo. Are we sure it was okay for us to come here?"

"Oh..." the other three murmured in unison.

It was a little late to be asking that now.

"I-I mean, the request was to slay the wolves living in this forest..." Mavis protested, a hint of panic creeping into her voice.

"But couldn't we have waited in the village and ambushed the wolves when they came for the livestock? That way, we'd be sure we were fighting off the true culprits of the attacks, right? Instead, the village officials sent us into this forest to slay the wolves. In a forest this vast, we might encounter a pack that never once ventured into the village, and we might never find the one that actually did... Since I have my search magic, I'm sure we can avoid such mistakes. That's why I had no objections to the village chief's proposal—and I'm guessing the rest of you thought the same. But the *chief* doesn't know that I have search magic, so why didn't he have us stage an ambush guaranteed to catch the pack coming to the village?"

"Oh..."

If people were allowed in to kill monsters, it wouldn't be called the Forbidden Forest. It would be called the Sometimes-Accessible Forest.

"So maybe the hostile villagers were opposed to us entering the forest?" asked Reina.

"Yes. Either it's a village taboo, or they don't want us plundering their treasure trove of valuable game and loot."

Mavis and Pauline gave this some thought. On foot and empty-handed, it had taken the girls an hour and a half to get from the village to the forest. It would

take longer if one had to carry their spoils, sure, but the townspeople were far from weak. If the cargo was worth the effort, they could endure the trek.

Assuming they were allowed to hunt and gather in the forest, that is...

"Do you think we might be the exception because we're young girls?" Pauline suggested. "Perhaps grown men aren't supposed to make a living off the area, but it's okay for women and children to go in on occasion and share in the bounty of the forest? If we fail the quest and different hunters pick it up, it's very unlikely to be another all-female party. At that point, the village's only option will be to stage an ambush, which could be why they decided to send us into the forest this time around. If it doesn't work out, it will be treated as a failed quest and the village will incur no financial loss."

The party considered this idea. It was true that if they failed the quest and another party was assigned, there would be no significant downside for the village other than lost time.

A taboo forest only children are allowed in... You've gotta be kidding me!

Once again, Mile was thinking her bizarre thoughts.

There was no point in standing around wondering about it. The Crimson Vow was a party of hunters, not researchers. Once they had accepted a request, all that remained was to see it through. Well...as long as it didn't constitute a criminal act or a violation of the Hunters' Code; as long as it wouldn't hurt themselves, the client, or any other humanoid or intelligent life-form; and as long as the client didn't lie, harbor ill will toward the hunter, conceal important information, or otherwise undermine the relationship of mutual trust.

And then...

"I'm not seeing any wolves!"

This wasn't a daily request for materials. While hunting the non-monsters was a delicious prospect, the job wouldn't be considered complete unless they

exterminated their main target: the wolves. That meant that, so far, they were heading for mission failure.

"Do it, Mile!" Reina commanded, breaking the forbidden seal at last.

It was time for Mile to unleash her search magic.

It wasn't that the Crimson Vow were always relying on Mile and her special talents. It was more that, in this one instance, Reina had made the judgment call that they would fail the job without her unique skills. If they didn't have Mile around—or if Mile were just an ordinary hunter—this request would be like playing a game on nightmare mode.

Basically, Reina had resigned herself to the fact that the only way to beat this mission was to tap into Mile's magic. To her, this was tantamount to a public admission of defeat. It frustrated her, of course, but her own stubbornness and pride mattered less than the party's successful completion of the job. And the villagers in need, of course.

It was a choice that Reina never would have made back when she was working alone. Then again, if she were working alone, she never would have accepted such a hopeless job in the first place.

In any event, she no longer operated as an individual hunter, or as a single party member doing her own part, but as one among the group of "The Divine Messenger and Her Merry Band of Friends." So, as much as the idea pained her...

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Mile sent out her search magic. It wasn't like one of those radar screens where a bar of light spins around at 360 degrees (a PPI display) but more like a sonar scan where a circle expanded outward with Mile at its center.

However, unlike sonar, Mile wasn't utilizing sound. Rather, she had the nanomachines whiz around the circumference of the circles she created, retrieve information, and transmit it to her via direct visual signals to her optic

nerves. In this respect, the Wonder Trio, who had created their own version of search magic after witnessing Mile's, and Mavis, who had invented her own close-range, full-radius information-gathering magic known as the "Mav-ius Strip," were far more gifted when it came to a flair for magic or the ability to invent and develop new spells. As her modern Earth knowledge should have given her an overwhelming advantage, this was a rather crushing defeat for Mile.

Regardless of whether "projecting" or "emitting" would be the more appropriate term, Mile spread her search waves—that is, army of nanomachines—all over the perimeter. To date, she had hunted countless wolf-like creatures, both monsters and regular animals, so identifying one was a doable task. It might be hard to tell the difference from a stray dog, but she wouldn't make that mistake with foxes, tanuki, kobolds, or the like.

And then...

"I sense one wolf fast approaching... Judging by the size of the echo, it's an adult!"

"Prepare to intercept!" Reina ordered in response to Mile's report. "If feasible, let's stick to blunt strikes, heat, and restraints!"

"Roger that!" the other three replied.

Their bond was long past the point where Reina needed to specify who each direction was for. The "blunt strikes" referred to hitting with the flat of a sword. Such a blow might still break a bone, but it was theoretically a method of attack aimed at capturing the target alive. "Heat" was, needless to say, shorthand for hot magic. The "restraints" were exactly what it said on the tin—binding magic.

If you wanted to get technical, Reina could also use hot magic, but none of her signature attacks were suited to live capture. Her fire and ice spells were designed to either burn or impale her opponent. If she was up against a human, it wasn't too difficult to inflict nonfatal injuries, but it was harder to go easy on wild animals or monsters. If she held back too much, there was a real risk that

they would go for the throat without a hint of fear.

Not that Reina would ever entertain such a foolish idea, of course.

The wolf was an insta-kill—well, without the "kill" part.

Perhaps too compassionate to inflict needless suffering, Mavis and Pauline refrained from their bone-shattering physical attacks and hot magic spells—which would be brutal for a wolf and its sharp nose—and instead left the task to Mile's binding magic. Within moments, a lone wolf was writhing on the ground. Its mouth had also been muzzled to prevent its inevitable, incessant howling.

"Okay, we caught it alive. What next?" asked Pauline.

Reina said nothing.

"Reina..." Mavis began. "Don't tell us you didn't think this far ahead?"

"O-oh, shut up!" Reina snapped. "With how sketchy the village officials' story was, I didn't want to blindly trust them and put the poor thing down!"

She had hunted countless other monsters and animals without batting an eye, so why was this wolf getting such special treatment? It was a mystery.

Mile cut in. "Well, since there was only one enemy, we had plenty of breathing room, and it didn't really seem like it was out to attack us. I didn't sense any sort of bloodlust, at least... Besides, even if we're all girls and only half of us smell like iron, I find it hard to believe that a lone wolf would charge four humans head-on. For starters, wolves hunt in packs, so isn't it standard for them to report back to the others when they spot prey? It would be weird for a single wolf to attack us on its own. That must be why she wanted to take it alive. Good thinking, Reina!"

"That makes sense!" exclaimed Mavis and Pauline, satisfied with Mile's explanation (read: cover story).

Reina made a smug face, her nose twitching. "Th-that's exactly what it was!

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Yes!"

And then...

"Okay, we caught it alive. What next?"

"......."
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Pauline repeated her initial question, but Reina still had no good answer. They couldn't exactly interrogate their new prisoner.

Despite being magically bound and crumpled on the ground, the wolf didn't seem to think it was in imminent danger of being killed, as it pleaded with its big, round eyes instead of lashing out.



There were two types of wolves. One was a kind of monster—ferocious creatures that had come from another dimension long ago and attacked humans and livestock—while the other could be classified as a kind of animal that originally inhabited this world. The catch was that there wasn't a clear difference between the two, since they were both ferocious creatures that attacked the same things. Generally, dark wolves were considered to be monsters, while steppe wolves were considered to be animals, but scholars disagreed as to which category timber wolves fell in. What's more, crossbreeding had given rise to packs of intermediate species, so the lines had long been blurred.

Judging from the relatively docile behavior of this specimen, it was likely a regular breed of wolf, not a monster.

"Do you think maybe it's an *okuri-okami*? An escort wolf?" Mile mumbled to herself.

"What? Isn't that what they call men who assault girls in the middle of escorting them home?" Pauline replied, shocked.

Due to her physical proportions, Pauline often found herself propositioned by men. As such, she was very sensitive to the topic at hand.

Reina was quick to declare, "Let's kill it and be done with it!"

Eep!

The wolf couldn't understand human language, but it cowered nonetheless, sensing danger from Reina's aura, tone of voice, and fiery gaze.

"No, no, no, I'm not talking about that—that's a human expression, which when you think about it, is actually slander to wolves everywhere! I mean in the original sense of the term! Some wolves have a habit of keeping an eye on the humans who enter their territory and stalking them until they leave. Once the person is gone, they slink back to whence they came. It creates the impression that they're protecting lost stragglers in their woods and escorting them home.

With a wolf on your trail, no other monsters or wild animals will dare to come near. They know how angry a wolf can get when someone swipes its prey in the middle of a hunt. And since wolves hunt in packs, more of its kind could very well be stalking their quarry from the shadows. No forest dweller would choose to get involved with that. In short..."

As Mile paused, Mavis cut in. "It's pretty much a benevolent guardian spirit for the humans it follows! And if the lost straggler happens to be a child, I bet the parents would be pretty grateful."

Mile nodded her head.

"Maybe wolves aren't so bad after all," Reina marveled.

"Mind you, if you stumble, trip, make any sudden movements, or raise your voice, there's a chance it might instinctively pounce and kill you. That habit is what gave rise to the negative meaning of 'escort wolf,' as well as the folklore around *yama-inu* mountain dogs and *okuri-inu* escort dogs. And if it's hungry enough, any wolf might just attack you and eat you right out the gate. Oh, and even though their name has 'dog' in it, both mountain dogs and escort dogs are actually wolves! Say 'dog,' and most people envision a pet, but a *yama-inu* is a kind of wolf. It's important not to get the two confused!"

"How do you know all this?!" Reina howled.

"We only just arrived on this continent, Mile..."

"Really, Miley?"

Mavis and Pauline were equally taken aback.

"Oh, no, this is all knowledge from my homeland! I just figured that the wolves around here might have similar habits, ha ha..."

"……"

In fairness, it wasn't anything new for Mile to know a bunch of weird trivia.

Meanwhile, the wolf wore a look of teary-eyed relief as it realized that the danger had passed.

"Okay, let's try this!"

Back when Mile had first mentioned opening a chain store (*not* a "chain seller"), Reina had bought her a steel chain as a joke. Now, Mile grabbed the chain from her inventory, along with her collection of collars and harnesses of all sizes, which she had made and designed herself in case she ever encountered a fluffy critter of any scale—cat, dog, tiger, Fenrir, you name it. She used these materials to leash the wolf.

Incidentally, Mile's inventory also housed a collection of underwear and clothing, which she carried around in case she ever encountered a soaking wet little girl in distress. She had a variety of child sizes but nothing for adults. Grown-ups could take care of themselves; they were hardly Mile's responsibility.

"Just to be safe, let's prove that we come in peace."

And with that, Mile gave the wolf some meat from her inventory.

Wild animals have a different palate than humans, so well-done meat might not have been to its liking. Fortunately, with just such an occasion in mind, Mile had stashed away some blue-rare ogre meat...which, to be clear, was decidedly not shorthand for "organic."

(Going by the Japanese scale of steak doneness, blue rare was closer to raw than rare. Rare meat, while pink in the center, was still cooked through. Bluerare meat was only seared for a few dozen seconds, and the inside remained more or less raw. One step below that was just plain blue, which was seared for no more than a few seconds and otherwise raw—in ramen noodle terms, it was equivalent to *kona-otoshi* or *yuge-doshi* levels of barely boiled—but that was essentially no different from a slab of fresh meat. If you ordered your meat rare, you might sometimes end up with a steak that was cold and raw on the inside. In such cases, never hesitate to ask for a little extra cooking time.)

The wolf seemed to relish the blue-rare ogre steak, which was seared just enough to give off a mouth-watering aroma but still mostly raw on the inside. Seemingly unfazed at being harnessed and leashed without its consent, it wagged its tail back and forth as it devoured the meat.

Blue rare... Wasn't there a space carrier with a similar name?

As usual, Mile was making her obscure references.

"Still, there are plenty of monsters and animals in this forest that would make a popular target for wolf packs. Why go all the way to a far-off village to hunt livestock one at a time?" asked Reina.

"Good question," Pauline replied. "A single goat or sheep would hardly make a filling meal for a whole pack. If I were the leader, I would have my pack devour four or five on the spot, kill four or five more and drag them back home, and limit myself to doing that a few times a year. I'd make sure the humans could recognize it as a loss reasonable enough to plan for, get them to accept that it's just the way things are, and establish a good, long working relationship. That's the trick to getting by in a place like this."

"Uh, I don't know about that," Mavis bluntly replied. "The humans are getting bled dry in that scenario. Wouldn't that lead them to exterminate the wolves?"

"She's got a point," said the other Vows.

Hold on a second. The chief said the "carcasses" of the animals are always discovered the next morning, not their "half-eaten remains." That makes it sound like the body retains its original shape... Besides, why not bring the prey back to their den for the pups and mother wolves to share?

Mile had her doubts, but she abandoned this train of thought for lack of information.

Once it was done eating the meat, the wolf led the Crimson Vow onward. Perhaps because Mile had used a harness instead of a collar, it didn't seem to believe that it was a prisoner on a chain, but rather that it had secured the four humans and was bringing them back to its pack. Which certainly explained its brazen attitude.

Suddenly, Mile spoke up. "Oh, I'm picking up a wolf-like echo straight ahead! There's only one of them!"

"Everyone, assume battle positions!"

Soon enough, there were two wolves leading Mile along by the leash in her hand.

Naturally, she had already fed the newcomer another blue-rare steak.

The sight of its companion enthusiastically dragging the humans back to their den had clearly dispelled any misgivings from the second wolf's mind. Eager to reward such exemplary servants for their offering of meat, it, too, was all for bringing the girls back to the pack.

"I'm picking up a wolf-like echo straight ahead! Just one!"

"Everyone, assume battle positions!"

And then there were six wolves leading Mile along by the leash in her hand...

"What was the name of that story, again? You know, the one about the guy who kept picking up animal companions on his way to battle..."

"The Loyal 47 Furballs?"

"No, that wasn't it!"

"Was it the one where they became his retainers in exchange for dumplings made from the honey of a killer bee?"

"Yeah, that's the one! The one where they join him for 'killer bee dango'!"

Pauline murmured, "Wasn't that *The Hero Peach and the Island of Ogres*?" "That's it!" Reina and Mavis exclaimed.

Meanwhile, the six wolves wagged their tails, pleased to be bringing home a curious, handy unlimited meat dispenser that could be activated with a tap of a paw on her shoulder.

"Say, don't you think they're a little too friendly with humans? I thought wild animals didn't get attached to people so quickly. Especially not regular wolves, who typically have a predator-prey relationship with humanoid hunters," Mile mused aloud.

Mavis knew something about this from having grown up in a family of knights, who kept dogs and horses. "Monsters never get attached to humans, but the same isn't true of animals," she said. "When an animal is extremely friendly upon first meeting, it usually means one of two things. One is that the animal is already used to being around humans. Maybe it had a previous owner, or maybe it has a human friend who helped it learn to love people. The second possibility is that it's meeting a human for the first time and has no feelings of hostility, as it sees the species as neither friend nor foe. Granted, even in those cases, it's common for animals to perceive the person as either an intruder on their territory or a potential snack and attack regardless."

Based on the information they had, the first option seemed unlikely. Assuming that the chief's explanation was accurate, at least...

However, the latter scenario didn't seem much more plausible. Would wild wolves really treat the soft, tasty-looking creatures they had discovered in their territory as friends rather than prey? The girls didn't look convinced.

"Oh!" Pauline seemed to be having a eureka moment. "What if they don't recognize Miley as human? Maybe they picked up on her strength and immense magical power with their animal instincts, realized that such a fearsome creature is better to have as a friend than a foe, and decided to treat her with

respect. And since the three of us are Miley's underlings, or maybe even prey she's already caught, they can't lay a hand on us, either."

"That's gotta be it!" yelled Reina and Mavis, the puzzle pieces falling into place.

"Excuse me?!" Mile fumed.

The six chained wolves cavorted and barked with joy. They didn't have a clue that they were prisoners...

"Looks like we made it..."

Although they were still far from the center of the forest, as Mile's words suggested, they appeared to have reached the heart of the wolves' territory. It was easy to guess as much from the way the six wolves were acting, along with the location pings of the other wolves on Mile's search magic.

"Their base is a cave, I take it. It doesn't look that deep. It's not a ruin or anything—just a naturally formed, shallow cave that they've made their home. Is it normal for wolves to live in caves, though?" Mile asked.

"Well, caves aren't that ubiquitous, so not every pack can find one to live in," Mavis responded.

"Still, doesn't it hurt to sleep on rocks, and wouldn't it be a shame to lose body heat to the ground in the winter?" Pauline chimed in. "If it were me, I'd much rather spend the night curled up on a patch of grass."

"What would you do if it rained?"

"If you're exposed to the elements, the wind can sap your strength and body heat, and you have no defenses against hostile animals or monsters."

"But unlike us humans, wolves have fur..."

A strange debate was unfolding.

"C'mon, you guys can argue about that later!" Mile yelled. "I enjoy these

mental exercises as much as the next person, and it's good for hunters to be curious and inquisitive, but meeting with our 'business partners' comes first!"

The girls were quick to apologize. "Sorry..."

Mile didn't get angry often, but when she did, it was terrifying. With how long the group had been together, they knew that much.

"But you're the one who brought it—gwah!"

Just as Pauline was about to say something ill-advised, Reina stomped hard on her foot, causing her to yelp.

Pauline, it seemed, had yet to learn her lesson.

"Okay, time to meet the final boss..."

With the six wolves dragging her along by the chains attached to their harnesses, Mile headed into the cave, and the rest of the party followed close behind.

If Mile got serious, she could have stopped the wolves by digging her heels into the ground, but unless she really made an effort, it was easy for them to drag a lightweight like her along, no matter how strong she was. In any event, she wasn't interested in stopping them.

Out of nowhere, a few more wolves popped up and started tagging along.

Of course, there were even more lurking in the cave ahead. But the Crimson Vow didn't seem to mind this. If worse came to worst, they could easily handle a mere twenty or thirty wolves. Compared to the all-out defensive battle they had fought in the Albarn Empire, this job was a walk in the park—and it certainly helped that the wolves didn't seem particularly hostile.

The cave did, in fact, turn out to be quite shallow, maybe twenty to thirty meters deep at most. The passageway was so small in diameter that the

hunters had to walk in rows of two if they didn't want to crouch down. If they spread out any further to the sides, they risked bumping their heads on the sloping ceiling—especially Mavis, who was the tallest of the group.

"Huh?" Mile cocked her head to one side.

At the far end of the cave sat a wolf. Judging by the placement of the others around it, this was clearly the leader of the pack—the big boss. Plus, it was white. If this wasn't the alpha, Mile was going to feel cheated.

However, the white wolf was *smaller* than the rest. The difference in size couldn't be attributed to an individual quirk. And it wasn't female, either. This wolf was definitely a pup.

The white wolf seemed flustered by the arrival of unexpected visitors. The reproachful look it gave the six wolves who had dragged the Crimson Vow to the den clearly said, Who the hell are these people?! or Don't bring weird stuff home with you!

Unperturbed, the six wolves pulled Mile over to where the white wolf was seated. The rest of the hunters stayed where they were, so it was only Mile and her canine friends who approached the leader.

As they came to a stop before the white wolf, the first of the six wolves that Mile had captured—or depending on who you asked, the first of the wolves to secure *her*—walked up to Mile, stood on its hind legs, and patted her shoulder with its paw.

"Ah, coming right up!"

Just as before, she responded to its begging by taking a blue-rare slab of ogre meat out of her inventory—and since time didn't pass in there, it was still hot off the grill and smelled delicious. She placed the meat in front of the white wolf.

" "

The white wolf regarded the offering with suspicion, which was only natural.

For an animal that knew nothing of inventories, the spectacle it had just witnessed was puzzling—perhaps even alarming.

Still, the meat set out before it looked and smelled delicious. Given the circumstances, it was definitely being offered as a tribute. To refuse to eat it would be to refuse the bounty its underlings had provided, thus bringing shame upon them and rejecting harmonious relations with this strange creature. As the leader of the pack, it would be an unwise move.

And most importantly, the meat smelled so darn good...

Nom!

The white wolf got up and took a bite of the meat offering. And then...

Gobble, gobble, gobble!

The wolf scarfed down the rest in an instant. Mile moved a step closer, and it stood on its hind legs and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Ready for seconds, huh?"

Mile pulled out an extra serving of steak.

The white wolf gobbled it up.

Тар.

Gobble, gobble!

Тар.

Gobble, gobble!

Тар.

Gobble, gobble!

The same scene played out again and again. Once the white pup had finally eaten its fill, it nuzzled Mile's leg.

"Ooh, it likes me! Just look how soft and fluffy it is! Such a cuddly little furball! I'm in fluffy paradise!"

Mile was over the moon!

She crouched down to pet the pup, but it pulled away from her.

"Ah..."

Mile was devastated.

The pup turned to its companions and gave a little woof. And then...

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

The entire pack of wolves pounced on Mile at once and began pawing at her shoulder, hoping for another helping of meat.

"St-stop! I mean, part of me is happy to be drowning in fluff, but I need you to back ooooff! Besides, you adults have some pretty coarse fur! It's not soft like the pup's, and it sorta smells! Ahhhh, but those little pawsies feel so good! I can't tell if this is heaven or heeeeell!!"

Her voice cracking, Mile was buried under the deluge of wolves and disappeared from sight. The other members of the Crimson Vow just shrugged at one another.

"Say, when a wolf nuzzles someone..." Reina began.

"Uh-huh. It's meant as a statement that this human belongs to them," Mavis replied. "They mark the person with their scent to stake their claim."

"And that little bark..."

"If I had to guess, that was the leader signaling to the rest of the pack that it's

eaten its fill, and now it's everyone else's turn."

"Yep—called it!"

An infinite meat dispenser. With just a tap on the shoulder, she would hand you a free steak. Lo, the magic *uchide-no-kozuchi* mallet had sworn allegiance to the boss of their pack. (She had done no such thing.)

The whole pack was having the time of their lives. Even the wolves standing watch outside had returned for the big feast.

Since wolves could neither drink booze nor give drunken lectures, the entire celebration was focused purely on the act of eating. Unsurprisingly, Mile hadn't prepared quite enough blue-rare ogre steaks to meet the demand, so she soon ran out. She stepped out of the cave to do an emergency restock, using Reina's fire magic to lightly sear some raw ogre and orc meat from her inventory.

The reason they had to leave was because using fire magic in that tiny cave could kill them all from a lack of oxygen. Reina and Pauline knew this without Mile having to tell them. It was common knowledge among fire-wielding mages. Mavis, too, had learned this from her time spent studying magical tactics.

Fortunately, there was plenty of monster meat to go around. After observing the huge mounds of monster carcasses left in the wake of the all-out battle for the Albarn Empire, Mile had feared that the vast majority would rot before their meat and resources ever saw use, transforming the former battlefield into a cesspool of germs and parasites. Her solution had been to stash a considerable number of the slain monsters in her inventory. In particular, she had kept an eye out for anything that looked tasty or could fetch a high price. Thus, in addition to the orcs and ogres that could reliably be sold anywhere for their meat, Mile's inventory included a huge stock of hippogriffs, manticores, earth dragons, wyverns, and a host of other species.

Later, in her spare time, Mile had also hunted a good haul of the exotic jackalopes that had given her the slip during the actual battle. Hoping that the

new breed might have more toothsome or tastier meat, she had sought a large supply for her research and cooking experiments. According to her, jackalope was the be-all and end-all of monster cuisine.

While this meant that the Crimson Vow had ample monster meat in reserve, they knew better than to sell any of it to the Hunters' Guild or the Merchants' Guild, be it on their old continent or the new one. Selling their endless stock would undermine the efforts of the experts and researchers who controlled monster populations by calculating the right number to cull, and could precipitate a disastrous collapse of market prices. The one exception to their policy was the first monster they had sold when they arrived on the new continent—which had been a native of their old continent, not one of the interdimensional invaders—but that was to get their foot in the door, so it didn't count.

Incidentally, the Wonder Trio had followed Mile's advice and stored a comparable number of dead monsters in their inventory after the battle. It was a large enough supply that they would be set for life if they sold it off bit by bit; however, they were finding that it was difficult to offload much without inconveniencing people who were making an honest living. So, much like the Crimson Vow's, their collection was gathering dust in their inventory.

In any event, Mile had a virtually unlimited supply of meat in her inventory, plus the magic to produce as much water as needed. As long as they had her around, the pack could expand its numbers indefinitely.

Satisfied after eating their fill of meat, the wolves returned to their cave, and the white one sat back down where it had been before. Apparently, that was its designated spot.

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And then...

Tap!

"Huh?"
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Tap!

The wolf looked at Mile and patted the ground beside it with its paw.

"Are you telling me to come sit next to you?! What am I, your mistress?! A concubine?! Uh, not that I don't have a soft spot for cute furballs, but I don't want to enter a marriage of convenience based on my meat stash! I refuse to join the pack!"

"You sure, Mile?" said Reina. "This might be the one and only proposal you'll ever get. Why not reconsider?"

"Grraaah!" Mile howled.

"I bet you'd fit right in with a pack of wolves, Mile."

"Agreed!"

Pauline and Mavis dealt the final blows, bringing Mile down to her hands and knees. Convinced that she had gotten down on all fours out of a resolve to join them, the wolves got more excited than ever.

Poor Mile was spent.

"If we can't communicate with them, we're never going to get anywhere!"

"Tell us something we don't know!"

"Actually, I have a feeling you could get through to the wolves, Mile..."

"True. They operate on the same mental level."

"Oh, shush!"

The shots her friends were taking at her had Mile seething.

"So what should we do?" she asked once she had collected herself. Despite giving it some thought, she couldn't come up with any decent ideas.

"Why don't you ask someone...no, something to translate?" Pauline suggested.

"Huh?" Then Mile struck her palm with her fist in epiphany. "Oh, I see what you're saying!"

Pauline had heard about the "mysterious creature that came down from the heavens" from Mile. Hence the proposal. However...

Asking the nanos to interpret for me feels like losing somehow... Oh, I know, I'll use translation magic! Instead of making the nanos translate every passing comment for me, I'll make it so that I can understand wolf language!

NO! ABSOLUTELY NOT! IT IS POSSIBLE FOR US TO INTERCEPT, ANALYZE, AND INTERPRET BRAIN WAVES, BUT SHORT OF IMPLANTING A MICROCHIP IN YOUR BRAIN, WE CANNOT MAKE YOU INSTANTANEOUSLY COMPREHEND THE LANGUAGE OF WOLVES! IT WOULD BE ONE THING IF OUR CREATORS WERE ASKING, BUT WE DO NOT HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO TAMPER WITH LIVING CREATURES, AND EVEN IF WE DID, WE WOULD NOT ATTEMPT IT! IT IS BETTER TO USE US AS AN OLD-FASHIONED INTERPRETER!

Hmph... Yeah, I don't like the sound of that...

Mile hated the idea of asking the nanomachines to translate everything for her, but having her brain tampered with or a microchip implanted in her head sounded even worse.

Then another thought occurred to her.

Here's an idea. Maybe I can call on someone else to translate...

COME AGAIN?

"I'll have an elder dragon come be our interpreter!"

"YOU'LL WHAT?!" the other members of the Crimson Vow cried out in surprise at the suggestion.

YOU'LL WHAT?!

There came another wail—one only Mile could hear—from the nanomachines.

"You always think of the craziest things!"

"Will an elder dragon even understand wolf language?"

"I have a bad feeling about this..."

Her three companions had concerns.

"Elder dragons speak our language when talking to us humanoids, but apparently, they don't use their conversation partner's language when talking to animals or monsters. Instead, they detect the creature's thought pulses—or, er, they read the creature's thoughts with magic and beam their own thoughts back. They can't adapt their vocalizations to the hearing range of other species, since their vocal cords are structured completely differently. It makes sense. Even if we humans could understand bird language, we still couldn't chirp, right? Besides, no other animal or monster has a language complex enough to hold a normal conversation with us. The reason elder dragons can speak to humans without issue is because they were *made* that way."

"That makes sense!"

When the elder dragons were created, their vocal cords had been tuned to allow them human speech, but the same wasn't true for all creatures with whom they might communicate. The nanomachines had told Mile as much before.

And then...

NO FAAAIIIR!!

The nanomachines whined in anguish as they realized the elder dragons were stealing their opportunity to show off.

"Are you going to summon Kragon, then? Might take a while."

"No, I'm going to try my luck elsewhere."

Reina shot Mile a dubious look. "Elsewhere? What's that mean?"

"Just before Kragon left, he said he was going to introduce himself to the elder dragons on this continent before heading back home. And I have the dragon ball he gave me, which is proof that I can call myself an honorary elder dragon and councilor. Do you know what that means?"

"There are elder dragons on this continent, too, and they're friendly with the ones back home!" the girls said in perfect unison. "And the chances of them doing us a favor are pretty high!"

The prospects were bright.

"Then, without further ado..."

Do your thing, Nanos!

YES, MA'AM...

The nanomachines seemed a bit put out, but they weren't about to refuse a request from Mile.

WE WILL CONNECT YOU TO THE NEAREST VILLAGE OF ELDER DRAGONS VIA AUDIO AND VIDEO. WE ASK THAT YOU HANDLE THE NEGOTIATIONS ON YOUR OWN.

Will do! Thanks a bunch, Nanos!

It was nice to have Mile thank them for the help, but it was still a bummer to lose their translation job to an elder dragon. Yet the nanomachines chose not to express their conflicting emotions, instead dutifully performing the task Mile had asked of them.

WE HAVE ESTABLISHED A TWO-WAY AUDIO AND VIDEO CHANNEL TO THE NEAREST ELDER DRAGON VILLAGE. GO AHEAD AND SPEAK.

A screen popped up in front of Mile. As for the image displayed there...

"Grrr! Grwah! Gorrelis! Gorlah!"

Multiple dragons were roaring nonsense, clearly caught off guard. From the looks of it, the screen had materialized just above a congregation of elder

dragons.

"Whoops... Of course they're not going to start right off with the human tongue if a mysterious screen suddenly appears overhead. Hello there! We are humanoids! Human beings! We are currently speaking to you from afar by means of magic. Do you happen to have a spokesperson?"

Mile's greeting seemed to send a wave of panic through the crowd.

Then, at length, one of the dragons spoke up. Evidently, he was the highest ranking among them. "How dare a lowly human address us without permission!"



"Oh, jeez," the girls sighed.

Clearly, word of Mile or the Crimson Vow's escapades had yet to reach the elder dragons of the new continent. So, their reaction was to be expected.

Luckily, the girls had a secret weapon.

"Excuse me, but do you know a dragon named Kragon from another continent?"

The elder dragon appeared shaken by Mile's question. "What? S-surely you couldn't be the one Sir Kragon mentioned..."

He was probably addressing a fledgling like Kragon as "Sir" because Kragon's visit would have been considered a courtesy call from a foreign clan, thus casting him into the role of emissary.

"I don't know what Kragon told you, so I can't say one way or another, but I am the one his clan appointed an honorary elder dragon."

Now they would be a little more willing to hear her out. Or so Mile thought...

"Y-you mean to tell us that you are the one who vanquished a battle squad of dragons? The one who, at the behest of God, helped our brethren on the eastern continent fulfill the mission entrusted to them by our creators?! The divine messenger, Honorary Elder Dragon Mile and her maidservants?!"

"Who are you calling maidservants?!" the other girls raged.

"The same one who adorned the talons and horns of the battle squad and council to make them irresistible to females?"

"How did my personal information become an open secret?! Just how much time have you spent gossiping about me, Kragon?!"

"Very well. We shall come to you at once. It's the place near Golba Village that the humans call 'the Forbidden Forest,' correct?"

"Yes, that's right. We appreciate it."

With that, Mile disconnected the call.

"Hmm..."

"What's wrong?"

The conversation had gone smoothly enough. Mile ought to have been happy, but instead she appeared pensive.

The wolves were likewise shooting their boss's new lover looks of concern.

"I said I'm not becoming a wolf's concubine!" yelled Mile, more or less inferring what was going through their heads.

"Speaking of which, is it just me, or were the wolves oddly unfazed by your magic just now? You'd think they would react to a glimpse of an elder dragon, even if it was through a magic window... Maybe it's different when the dragons aren't actually close by, since they can't feel their magical power or fearsome aura?"

Mavis raised a good point. Despite the screen being in their line of sight, the wolves didn't seem particularly alarmed by anything that had just come to pass.

"Not to mention that the elder dragon knew about Golba Village and the Forbidden Forest, right? Normally, elder dragons don't bother to remember the names of human towns and villages, or what humans like to call certain places. They stick to using their own names. And those 'names' are generally along the lines of 'the town to the west' or 'the forest by the lake,' so they don't use proper nouns very often."

"Ah..."

Of course, the other members of the Crimson Vow knew all this. It wasn't hard to see what Mile was getting at.

"Do you figure those elder dragons have a vested interest in what goes on around here?"

"That must be why they were so willing to help us. Most elder dragons wouldn't be so eager to act as a human's translator, would they? Okay,

excluding Kragon."

"And didn't he say he would come at once? Not that he would send someone over. So, instead of dispatching some lowly dragon, their highest-ranking official is going to put in a personal appearance?"

"…"

"Well, if the elder dragon will be here soon, we can just ask him directly!" Mile concluded.

"I guess so," said Reina cautiously, only somewhat mollified. And then...

YOU ARE FRAMING IT AS THOUGH THE ELDER DRAGONS WILL BE YOUR INTERPRETERS, BUT WE ARE THE ONES WHO WILL ESTABLISH COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE WOLVES AND THE ELDER DRAGONS BY ANALYZING THEIR THOUGHT PULSES. WE WILL SIMPLY BE INTERPRETING THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE DRAGONS AND WOLVES INSTEAD OF THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN YOU AND THE WOLVES, SO THIS ACCOMPLISHES NOTHING BUT ADDING AN EXTRA LAYER OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN YOU AND THE DRAGONS. IT IS ENTIRELY ILLOGICAL.

Even with the addition of the elder dragons as a go-between, the nanomachines would still ultimately be the ones doing the translating. On the surface, however, it would appear that the elder dragons were the interpreters. They would be the ones Mile spoke to directly and thanked for the help, not the nanomachines.

The nanomachines didn't like that one bit.

Thud!

Two elder dragons landed in front of the Crimson Vow and their lupine friends, who were waiting outside the cave.

Once she saw the dragons in the sky, Mile had been planning to launch a

fireball or have the nanomachines send them her location, but that had proved unnecessary, as they somehow managed to beeline it straight for the group. Perhaps they had flown in at a rather low altitude to avoid spreading panic among the humans.

For whatever reason, the wolves didn't seem the least bit alarmed. Most animals or monsters would panic and run for their lives if an elder dragon suddenly landed in front of them, but not this wolf pack.

"Are they using some sort of search magic, you think?"

Mile found the idea questionable, but if she had managed to invent the magic, it was no surprise that elder dragons, who were more intelligent than humans, had a minimum authorization level of 2, and had accrued plenty of life experience, would be able to do the same.

The slightly larger of the two dragons—the one who seemed to be calling the shots—turned to Mile and said, "You are 'Mile,' I presume? As Sir Kragon tells it, you have done your part to uphold our creators' orders, so I will not begrudge you a favor. But in exchange..."

"In exchange...?"

"You must engrave our talons and horns."

"This again? Even here?! THAT'S THE WHOLE REASON YOU SHOWED UP?!" the four members of the Crimson Vow cried.

Unlike the elder dragons of the old continent, these did not put Mile on a pedestal. Which made sense. The elder dragons on the old continent had seen for themselves what Mile could do, and besides, she had been the catalyst for them to fulfill the mission their creators had entrusted to them. Plus, she had proven her status as the divine messenger before their very eyes.

These elder dragons, on the other hand, saw Mile as nothing more than a lower life-form that some fresh-faced emissary from a far-flung clan had raved

about. No doubt Kragon had appeared to them to have a feverish glint in his eye, like the one that appeared when one was telling a truly ludicrous cock-and-bull story. Although they believed him on some level, they saw no reason for elder dragons like themselves to show this human girl consideration or respect, let alone deference.

Indeed, to them, Mile was no more than a pet another clan had taken an inexplicable liking to. They had playfully given her the title of "honorary elder dragon" in order to convey to lower life-forms that she had fought among their ranks and was therefore worthy of respect. Thus, she could live freely among her own people without fear of harm. But that had to be all there was to it.

The young emissary's horns and talons, however, were a different matter.

Those were freakin' cool!

The fledgling had pretended to be troubled by his newfound popularity with the ladies, but the infuriatingly smug look on his face had made it clear that he was bragging.

The leader of these elder dragons wasn't about to let the matter rest. It was a fact that the females had swooned at the sight of the newcomer's horns and talons. There was no way he would let this opportunity slip through his fingers. Not a chance.

"Got it. We can agree to that much. Erm, should I do this one's talons, too?" Mile asked, turning to the smaller of the two dragons.

The bigger one gave that question some thought, then replied, "Yes. Let's make that part of the deal."

For a brief moment, he had considered keeping a monopoly on the talon art and the female attention that came with it, but he wasn't quite that petty. Since he often enlisted his current companion as an escort, he was rather partial to the lad. And such shows of consideration would serve to strengthen the other dragons' loyalty.

"Okay. So, about the thing we brought you here to do..."

"Right. Zalm will handle that."

Apparently, he was foisting the actual work onto his subordinate.

Well, that was no real surprise. It was probably the whole reason he had brought someone else along.

Hearing his cue, the smaller one—Zalm—stepped forward. "I am Zalm. I am to serve as translator for you and the Silva's pack, correct?"

"Yes, if you don't mind... Wait a sec, 'Silva'? Is that what this breed of wolf is called?"

As question marks formed over the heads of the Crimson Vow, Zalm explained, "This white one here is called Silva."

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"Huh?"
"Huh?"
"WHAAAAAAAAT?!"
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"H-how do you know the given names of these wolves?!" Mile sputtered, having lost the plot.

"Well, it is not a given name per se. It is more of a nickname for the commander of the pack, or perhaps a title... Either way, it is what their leader is called. The Silva of this generation is still but a pup, I see. I suspect its parents died prematurely."

"Okay, but wait! Again: How do you know—oh, I guess it doesn't matter right now. Let's put that aside for now and get to the translating."

"Yes, let's. Ask your questions."

The larger dragon appeared to have lost all interest after dumping the chore on his subordinate. Thus, the girls opted to ignore him and concentrate on their conversation with Zalm.

"Can you ask them, 'Did your pack go to the human village to the east and

attack the livestock there?""

"Pardon?"

Zalm made a face. It was difficult for humans to read elder dragons' expressions, but Mile sensed that he was skeptical.

Now if only she were that good at recognizing the subtleties of *human* emotion...

She didn't think much of his reaction, figuring that he just hadn't seen the question coming.

"Very well. One moment."

The elder dragon and the wolf spoke to each other in their respective languages. Or rather, the two individuals spoke, and the nanomachines provided simultaneous interpretation via EEG analysis and tympanic vibrations. It didn't actually matter what words came out of their mouths.

"The Silva said, 'Nuh-uh. We honor our promise to God. There's lots to eat here without going so far away."

"Knew it..."

The girls had a hunch that was going to be the answer.

"But who is this 'God' of theirs?! Are we introducing a new character this late in the game?! Did the Creator, a survivor of a prehistoric civilization, just wake up from a cold sleep?!" Mile yelled, but it wasn't long before she had her answer.

"The 'God' to which they refer is we, the elder dragons."

"Ah." Mile clearly found this to be a letdown. "Gotcha."

"We totally knew that," her three companions said to each other, like the bunch of sore losers they were.

But Mile did not miss a beat.

"So what 'promise' did they make you?"

Indeed. They wouldn't get anywhere without asking that question first.

"Okay, so... Long ago, the elder dragons acted as a go-between for the ancestors of this wolf clan and the villagers?"

"Correct. Several of their short-lived generations ago, a fight broke out among the lower life-forms—ahem, between the creatures of this forest and humans—in which countless were injured and died in vain. Saddened by these events, one compassionate elder dragon stepped up to facilitate a reconciliation."

As far as elder dragons were concerned, humans and wolves were both equally "short-lived."

"Wow! Awfully generous of such a mighty creature to bust their butt for us lower life-forms!"

Mile flattered the elder dragons in an effort to keep the conversation rolling, although it seemed as though there just might be a touch of sarcasm in her tone. But then...

"Yes. It was a job well done, if I may say so myself."

"IT WAS YOU?!"

Apparently, the mediator had been none other than Zalm himself. Perhaps, like Kragon, he enjoyed the company of lesser life-forms, similar to how humans enjoyed playing with cats and hamsters...

To be sure, what was generations ago for humans and wolves would be recent history in the eyes of an elder dragon. Now, it seemed that Zalm's superior had brought him along not as his right-hand man but because he had a stake in the matter at hand.

But Mile had another, even more salient question. "What was the 'promise' the white one—little Silva here—mentioned?"

"Oh, that. The humans had been gradually expanding their territory, and

their development efforts eventually spread to this forest. This escalated into a bit of a spat with the forest dwellers."

"I'd think that would be more than a spat... If both of their livelihoods were on the line, it was probably an all-out war."

At least that was how the Crimson Vow saw it. However, to an elder dragon, it would have probably looked like little more than a squabble between hamsters.

"After I stepped in to mediate, both sides backed down and made peace. Even lower life-forms are sometimes capable of listening to reason."

"No life-form in existence would dare protest if an *elder dragon* is trying to break up their fight! No matter *how* unhappy they are with the outcome!" Reina interjected, but Zalm ignored her.

Mile was the only one the elder dragons appeared to respect, which was only to be expected. The rest of the members of the Crimson Vow were still classified as mere "lower life-forms." The dragons would play with them or pry into their affairs when the mood struck, but the girls were not to address *them* unprompted.

"What were the terms of the truce?" asked Mile.

Zalm replied proudly. "The humans were not to build villages on forested land that hadn't already been claimed. Their farming, hunting, and gathering efforts were to stop at the halfway point between the village and forest. By the same token, the forest dwellers were expected to remain in the forest and restrict their hunting to their half of the land in between. As a precaution, a buffer zone was established at the midpoint, which both sides were prohibited from entering. For ease of identification, the boundary was drawn across an area with rocky terrain, large trees, and other prominent landmarks, so none would stray there by mistake. It was too far from both the village and forest for adolescents to go there alone, regardless.

"The forest dwellers were made up of many different species, and they did not speak each other's tongues. Some were predator and prey and could not coexist. It was only in the context of their collective relationship with the humans that the Silva's pack, the wisest of the forest dwellers, was chosen to represent them. The wolves functioned as a group and passed down their own traditions—making them the most able to relate to the villagers and their ways.

"Of course, I did not expect the problems to simply stop there, so I still come to check on the situation from time to time. I fly close to the ground after dark so as not to disturb the humans, which means only the forest dwellers are aware of my visits.

"In this way, the humans and forest dwellers have learned to live in peace. It was a job well done, if I may say so myself!"

Zalm repeated the same words as before for emphasis.

"And then the human villagers hired us to slaughter Silva's entire clan..."

"TH-THEY WHAAAAAT?!"

"Waaah! Keep your voice down, Zalm!"

Both the members of the Crimson Vow and the wolves tumbled backward, unable to withstand the impact of an elder dragon's roar.

And then the whole forest fell silent.

Well, of course it did. All the animals and insects had retreated to their homes, shaking with terror.

The bigger dragon stayed where he was, apparently thinking nothing of this. Contrary to Zalm, he didn't see aiding lower life-forms as a particularly interesting hobby, and he had no interests in act of charity. He didn't care one way or another.

"Y-you cretins would dare to break a promise I facilitated?! A promise I devised to make the lower life-forms respect each other and live in peace as much as their station allows?! This is inexcusable!" Zalm fumed, glaring daggers at Mile and friends.

"You've got the wrong idea! We had nothing to do with it! We just picked up a quest at the port city branch of the Hunters' Guild, thought it sounded fishy, and decided to check it out! Otherwise, there's no way we would have made nice with little Silva's pack or gone out of our way to summon you here!"

"A fair point... Mm, I shall concede to your logic. Go on."

"Now there's the elder dragon excellence in action! Much better than us lousy humans! I appreciate your understanding!"

Mile had dealt with her fair share of elder dragons by this point. She had a rough idea of how best to manipulate and pander to them.

She went on to explain everything: how they had accepted an inactive request at the port city branch of the Hunters' Guild and noticed the unsettling air about the village, how there was clearly more to the story than met the eye, and how the villagers' opinions seemed to be split down the middle.

"So the village leaders have broken the pact and seek to act against the forest, while some of their own stand in opposition? And they attempted to push Silva's pack to extinction by submitting a fraudulent request to this 'guild,' as you call it?"

"Sounds about right!" the Crimson Vow agreed, nodding their heads.

Zalm's opinion seemed to align with theirs.

"But what possessed them to do such a foolish thing? To break a pact that we elder dragons had a hand in making risks plunging us into a village-razing fury. That much ought to be obvious."

Oh, jeez...

The whole party had an inkling of what the reason might be.

"Erm... Didn't you say that you fly close to the ground at night so as not to disturb the humans? Doesn't that mean that only the forest dwellers know you're still keeping an eye on the pact, and the villagers haven't seen you for generations?" said Mile.

"Oh..."

"Worse, there are plenty of reasons why an accurate account might have been lost over the years," Reina pointed out. "Maybe the full story was only passed down to the clan of village chiefs, or a former chief died in an accident before he could pass the tale on to the next generation. It seems very possible that delusions, fantasies, and wishful thinking bled into the legend until it was unrecognizable...

"Still, maybe the village as a collective retained the parts about 'not venturing into the forest' or 'not antagonizing the wolves, especially the white one.' Those are the parts they'd *have* to teach everyone, so I guess that makes sense... But when people started to talk about prioritizing the profit to be made from the forest over a tradition that everyone had forgotten the reason for, the village would be divided among those who were for the idea and those who were against it."

Mile nodded vigorously. "Oh! So *that's* the reason some of the villagers seemed so hostile!"

"Hmm. You're fairly quick-witted for a lower life-form. Now then, if some of the humans are determined to uphold the pact, I suppose I cannot burn their village to the ground with a single breath attack... What to do?"

Oh, crap! thought the Vow, their faces frozen with horror.

Even if they had been tricked into taking on a bogus request, the girls had no desire to see an entire village, women and children included, wiped off the map for something only a few of them had done. Zalm didn't seem inclined to do that, but he was still an elder dragon. If something else happened to make him angry or annoyed, it would be all too easy for him to take the village out in a single breath.

Word had it that the rage of an elder dragon was a truly fearsome spectacle, and this one had every right to be mad. What was there to be done? The members of the Crimson Vow thought long and hard, but no good ideas came

to mind.

In their hour of need, Reina, Mavis, and Pauline all glanced over at Mile.

"Actually, I have a plan to teach the bad guys a lesson and make sure no one ever thinks of breaking the pact again..."

Mile always did come through when it counted.

Chapter 129:

The Pact

" | SEE! What a fascinating idea!"

Living such long lives meant that the elder dragons had lots of time to get bored. Zalm, much like Kragon, had found a form of recreation in mingling with the lower life-forms. Knowing this, Mile had been hopeful that she could get Zalm on board with her plan, and her hunch had proven correct.

"Shall we proceed, then?"

"Wait a moment. I have something to say before that," the boss dragon cut in from the sidelines of their conversation.

Clearly, he had zero interest in introducing himself to lesser life-forms. He might well get offended if such lowly creatures were simply to ask for his name. Therefore, the girls' only option was to keep referring to him as "the boss" or "the bigger one" in their heads and avoid using identifiers aloud.

So, the "boss" went on, "You must first engrave my horns and talons!"

"Sure thing!"

The members of the Crimson Vow could agree to that, especially since, once that was out of the way, the boss dragon might say his business was finished and head home. Hoping for exactly that, Mile decided to hurry up and get the makeover session over with. She had racked up plenty of experience doing decorative carvings for elder dragons, so it wasn't going to be a challenge for her at this point.

Besides, even if he wasn't satisfied with the final product, it was said that elder dragons could grow back their horns and claws. This meant that Mile could go about her carving with relative peace of mind. If the dragons were going to be stuck with her engravings for the rest of their lives, she might have

been a little more hesitant about it.

An elder dragon lived a long time, after all. As an artist, it would be pure torture to have the unpolished works of her youth endure for thousands of years.

"...And then I gathered light energy from the stars and unleashed it into the enemy's path of attack!"

"……"

Mile was chatting with the elder dragons as she did their talons. Carving in silence for hours on end would have been more psychological stress than she could bear. In her past life as Misato, simply talking to someone she had never met before would have been quite a hurdle to overcome, but in her new life, sitting next to someone in total silence was a different flavor of agony.

Aiming for a combination of small talk and information gathering, she had listened as the elder dragons regaled her with their stories. Eventually the boss dragon had said, "It's not a conversation if we are the only ones doing the talking. Tell us something about yourself."

Most elder dragons would never show curiosity about one of the lower lifeforms, and they certainly wouldn't be interested in or even understand their idea of small talk. So, naturally, Mile stuck to talking about her dealings with other elder dragons or the final battle on the old continent. Though it was hard for humans to tell, the two dragons wore dubious, bemused expressions as they listened.

The boss dragon had already heard the whole story from a young dragon named Kragon, an emissary from a foreign clan. Still, hearing it and believing it were two different things.

The divine messenger. The fulfillment of their creators' decree. And it was this fragile, female, lesser life-form who had made it all possible...

Unbelievable! He refused to acknowledge it!

What's worse, the foreign fledgling had spat in the face of his elder dragon pride to practically idolize this lowly creature. The only reason a dragon of the boss's status had deigned to come here in person was to confirm the facts for himself.

And yet...

"I think it would look cooler if I sharpened your talons a bit, but that might weaken them. Should I leave them be?"

"Shave them down all you like."

"Will do!"

And so the girl blithely continued to scrape away at an elder dragon's talons.

Impossible... This cannot be...

The talons of an elder dragon could tear through steel, rock, and everything in between. Yet according to the fledgling, they had been easier for the girl to whittle than a soft piece of wood with a knife. To prove his point, he had allowed a close inspection of his own horn and talons.

Even so, the boss had been skeptical—no, he had refused to believe it.

What would happen should the female lower life-form standing before him thrust the blade in her hand into his heart...

This is insanity...

Just then, the fledgling's words came back to haunt him.

"You must not make an enemy of Lady Mile. She may be human, but she is not to be trifled with by an elder dragon. She is a true messenger of the divine, one with compassion for all living things."

"This cannot be..."

"Hm? What did you just say?"

"Nothing."

The elder dragon had blurted out what he was thinking before he could stop himself.

This cannot be...

"How's it look?"

"Mm, let's see... I suppose it is acceptable."

The elder dragon was playing it cool, but there was a grin plastered across his face. He was clearly quite taken with the design.

"Next, for my horns..."

"Oh, hold on. I'd like to do the other guy's...the other *dragon's* talons first. If I have to alternate between doing talons and horns, it'll throw me off my game."

"Hmph... I once heard from a human that technicians and artists have their own self-imposed rules. Do as you see fit."

"Great, thanks!"

It was a little surprising that this boss dragon had once talked with a human about these matters. And he was rather accommodating, too.

This guy...er, dragon...may not hate humans as much as it seems!

That was Mile's take. It was probably truer to say that, much as few humans feel love or hate for water fleas, it was not often that an elder dragon went out of its way to develop positive or negative feelings toward a human. Or any feelings at all, really.

Though as the phrasing "not often" implied, it did happen on occasion.

"……"

The two elder dragons stared wordlessly into the giant faux full-length mirror

Mile had created through optical interference. Apparently, they liked what they saw.

Mile had explained that she would do the boss's horns after she got into her groove, which meant carving Zalm's talons and horns first. Then, she would finally get around to carving the boss's horns.

Even that explanation served to make an impression on the elder dragons. If an elder dragon said to do something, it didn't matter if it seemed like there was a better way to go about it. No living being would dare object! Though this was a nice ego boost for the elder dragons, it got boring when the same thing happened over and over again. But alas, there wasn't a creature in existence that would risk offending one of their kind.

This lower life-form, however, had flat-out refused the boss dragon's demand to do his makeover first. It wasn't out of some petulant need to rebel, either, but so that she could craft a better design for the senior than his junior. Out of pure consideration and attention to detail, she had risked the wrath of an elder dragon without a second thought.

If only she had kept her mouth shut, he wouldn't have known if her work was up to par or not.

She was an idiot, the elder dragon decided.

However, an "idiot" and a "fool" were two different things. And he didn't have anything against idiots like her.

It would be a waste to go straight home...and I have nothing better to do, besides. I suppose seeing this through to the end with Zalm could prove a suitable diversion.

"All right, time to begin the preparations for our plan. Let's start by building the dogsled...or wolfsled, I guess?"

Now that she was done rewarding the elder dragons, it was Mile's turn.

"We're in trouble! It's a monster stampeeeede!!" shouted the sentry posted outside the village perimeter, charging into the heart of the village with a face as white as a ghost.

"WHAAAAAT?!" the villagers screamed back, but there was little to be done.

If the news had come from a survey team sent from the capital, there might have been a way forward. They could fortify their defenses, even evacuate if necessary. Unfortunately, if the sentry had been the one to witness the incoming threat, the time lag between his report and the arrival of the monsters could be no more than a few seconds. A few dozen at best. With so little time, the most they could do was retreat into their houses and shut the doors. And against a stampede of monsters, a rickety wooden house would offer no more defense than a wet piece of paper.

We're done for! thought the villagers.

Just as all hope was lost, something burst into view.

And that something was a sled.

It was being pulled along by a team of dogs...no, wolves. Another two dozen wolves followed close behind. Riding atop the sled were four familiar girls and one pure white pup.

Relief washed over the villagers. Evidently, the sentry had mistaken this bizarre spectacle for a "monster stampede."

"Wait a second, nothing about that is a relief!"

"What in the blazes is going on?!"

The villagers went back to panicking.

Then Mile bellowed, "Ho ho ho, I've got a couple of village big shots on my naughty list!"

"АНННННН!!"

"...And you claim these wolves told you the full story?"

The bulk of the villagers were gathered in the town square, where the Crimson Vow, the village chief, and the other big shots had settled down for their talks. The wolves weren't allowed in any of the buildings, and both the opponents of the chief's faction and the neutral parties had insisted on being present, so the square was the only suitable place for the meeting.

Such a large gathering also meant that most of the village was currently accounted for.

The villagers had been terrified of the wolves at first, but they calmed down when they saw how obedient the wolves were to Mile and how the white pup, who appeared to be the leader of the pack, sat nicely beside her. Granted, this didn't mean they had let their guards down completely.

"Got it in one!" said Mile. "The wolves told us that they never went to your village. Submitting a fraudulent request to the Hunters' Guild means deceiving the guild and endangering its hunters, so it's considered a very serious offense. You won't get off with just a fine or a warning. In addition to guild sanctions, you'll be charged with attempted murder for intentionally putting hunters in harm's way. The authorities will come arrest you and sentence you to penal servitude."

The chief and village bigwigs were taken aback, but even a child should have known what she was telling them.

"B-but what of the damage to our livestock?!" the chief protested, distraught. "How do you explain—"

"Oh? Now isn't *this* curious," Mile cut him off, deliberately adopting a grating drawl. "The Forbidden Forest is filled with monsters and animals that wolves love to hunt. With such plentiful prey available to them, I find it *very* hard to believe that they'd go so far out of their way to look for quarries. Besides, remember what you told us when we first came to the village? One animal is

killed each night, and its carcass is left behind. Doesn't add up, does it? A pack of *this* size, hunting one animal at a time? And they don't even drag the body home? What about the pups back in the den and the females left behind to protect them? Are we *sure* this was the work of wolves or monsters from the forest?"

The chief's faction blanched and fell silent.

Anger began to overtake the villagers' faces as they realized what Mile was getting at.

"Wh-what proof do you have of these claims?!" the chief countered.

"Do you have any proof that it was these wolves, and not humans, who attacked the livestock? Surely you wouldn't blame them without proof and submit a fraudulent request to the guild?" Mile shot down his argument. "Heck, the people—the wolves in question have already flat-out denied the accusation, so you don't have much of a leg to stand on."

Aha! That's where we strike!

Backed into a precarious position, the chief seized his opportunity for a comeback. His opponent had screwed up and told a blatant lie. If he just exposed that lie of hers, he could write off the rest of her points as bogus as well.

With that in mind, he didn't hesitate to go in for the kill. "You expect us to believe that you can communicate with a wolf?! Nonsense! Everything you've said so far has been a bunch of lies and hogwash!"

Grin.

The corners of Mile's mouth turned up a fraction.

Oh, yes—she had left that opening on purpose. Just as the chief thought that he only had to expose her one lie, all *she* had to do was definitively debunk his counterargument.

"Oh, but I can."

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"Prove it, then!"
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Fully aware this was impossible, the village chief was assured of his victory. But then...

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"Okay. I will."
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"Huh?"

Ignoring the blank look on the chief's face, Mile shouted, "You're up, Zalm!"

No one by that name was present. Thus, Mile's call to action sounded like some kind of indecipherable nonsense to the village officials. Until...

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YES, YES, WE'RE ON IT!
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Though a touch disgruntled, the nanomachines relayed her message to Zalm, who was waiting just outside the village. A few seconds later, two elder dragons appeared in the sky over the town square, only to swoop down in a straight line and land gently in the middle of the crowd. It must have been done through some sort of gravity control magic, as their wings didn't kick up a gust of wind or send the villagers flying.

Indeed, after flying low enough that the humans wouldn't detect their approach, walking slowly and silently the rest of the way, and lurking in the nearby shadows, the elder dragons had finally made their entrance.

"AHHHHHH!!"

Despite their panicked screaming, the villagers just stood there, trembling. They were too scared to move a muscle.

It was an understandable reaction. Even if they tried to run, there was no escaping an elder dragon's attack on human legs. Besides, there was nowhere to go; at best, they could duck into their houses and bolt the doors. That wasn't going to help them against such a fearsome creature.

Just as it dawned on the villagers that the destruction of their village and their own deaths were imminent, one of the elder dragons said, "Are there any naughty humans around? Any naughty villagers here?"

This was a riff on the *namahage*, a child-terrorizing ogre of Japanese lore.

Mile was the one who had pitched the line, but Zalm seemed to be having fun with it.

"Wha-wha-wha-wha..."

The chief and his villagers slumped to the ground, shivering and shaking. The sheer presence of the almighty erased even the thought of escape from their minds. Not many could keep their wits about them in the face of an elder dragon. And these were ordinary villagers, not fighters...

Then Mile asked Zalm, "O mighty elder dragon, you interpreted for us and the wolves, didn't you?"

"I did indeed."

"And the wolves went on the record that they didn't attack the village livestock, didn't they?"

"They did indeed."



"And wolves don't have the intelligence or courage to lie to an elder dragon, do they?"

"Indeed they do not."

Mile turned back to the village officials. "There you have it! QED!"
"......"

It was all over in the span of a moment...

What kind of girl called upon an *elder dragon* to prove that she was telling the truth? Most people would rather shut up and take the false accusation than ask such a fearsome being for help with their petty human errands. It was what anyone with common sense would do, lest they anger the creature into wiping out the entire kingdom.

Yet Mile and friends had dared to seek an elder dragon's aid. And not just one —two of them.

There was no hope of standing up to such a mad bunch. Nothing was worth incurring their wrath. Not unless you were interested in seeing your homeland reduced to ashes...

Seizing real power over the village? Making a profit from the resources in the forest? What a joke *that* had all turned out to be. If it resulted in the destruction of not only this tiny village but also the entire territory and kingdom, what was the point?

The elder dragon turned to the village chief and said, "On that note, I have a question of my own for you."

"Mm-mmh?"

It was all the man could do just to get down on his hands and knees. He couldn't hope to form proper words.

"Several hundred years ago, I mediated a dispute between the forest dwellers and the humans and negotiated a non-aggression pact. What possessed you to violate it? Why would you disgrace me as a witness to the agreement?"

At these words, the village chief and most of his faction passed out cold, a few even frothing at the mouth.

"...In short, the wild animals and monsters of the forest all know to stay away from the humans or else face the wrath of the elder dragons, but on the human side, the villagers were just told not to venture into the Forbidden Forest with no further explanation. The details of the story were only passed down to the chief and elders by word of mouth, so parts of the story were lost over the generations. You never know when an old-timer is going to kick the bucket, so as the years went by, there were cases where the chief and elders died in quick succession before they could pass the information on."

In a village like this, it wasn't uncommon for deaths to occur at the same time from the same cause, such as an epidemic or food poisoning. Tragically, that could very well extend to the village chief and elders...

"One way or another, all that remained was a vague warning to not enter the Forbidden Forest. Eventually, it was assumed that the practice arose because of the dangerous monsters lurking inside, and people began to talk of hiring hunters to slay them in order to get their hands on the forest's resources. That's when a conflict arose between those who wanted to uphold the practice of staying far away from the forest and those who wanted to reap its bounty. In conclusion, no one here meant to disobey Zalm; they were simply unaware of the pact in the first place."

The elder dragon called Zalm huffed in acknowledgment of Mile's summary. "I am aware that human generations turn over in the blink of an eye. I shall grant that the humans did not knowingly violate the pact and drag my name through the mud, even if the forest dwellers managed to preserve the history by sharing a simple dictum among their kind. Can I trust you all to keep your

word henceforth?"

"MM-HMMMM!" squeaked the villagers.

With the non-aggression pact between the forest dwellers and the humans now reaffirmed, the elder dragons and animals prepared to take their leave.

Just then, one of the wolves pulling the sled nuzzled up against Reina.

"Eek! Aww, there, there. Are you sad to be saying goodbye?" asked Reina, ruffling its fur with gusto.

"No. It says its back was just itchy."

"....."

Next, the white pup licked Mile's cheek.

"Aww, there's a good boy!"

"It says you taste nice and salty."

"……"

"You don't need to translate every little thing!" both girls bellowed.

Sometimes, it was better not to speak an animal's language. That was Mavis and Pauline's takeaway.

With that, the dragons and wolves went home.

But before they departed, one of the elder dragons even told Mile to call on him if she needed anything else. The big surprise? It wasn't Zalm, but the older dragon, who offered his aid.

"He sure seemed to like Mile," Mavis noted.

"……"

Mile, Reina, and Pauline all looked spent.

"Well, we should have seen that coming..." said Reina.

"This is how it always ends," sighed Pauline.

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Mile objected.

The villagers shot the girls looks of incredulous amusement.

It shouldn't have been a particularly lighthearted moment, but the reality probably had yet to sink in. After being cross-examined by an elder dragon and living to tell the tale, the village chief's faction was praying to the gods with tears streaming down their cheeks, thanking the heavens for this storybook miracle.

Little did they know that the true danger had yet to pass...

"Now then, Mr. Chief," said Mile. The village chief looked up in surprise and stopped his crying. "I told the elder dragons that story to stop them from destroying the kingdom...but you really did know about the pact, didn't you?"

The chief gave a start. "H-how did you—"

"Well, you instructed us to eradicate the wolves, with a special focus on the white one. You wouldn't give an order like that unless you knew that it spoke for the monsters and animals of the forest in diplomatic dealings with humans. The forest is home to bears and all sorts of dangerous animals, plus various species of monsters, but you went out of your way to single out the wolves—specifically the white one, who's still just a pup. What purpose would that serve but to nullify the pact?"

"……"

"Plus, there's a faction here that clearly opposes your actions. That implies a strong, deep-rooted taboo against trespassing in the Forbidden Forest.

Otherwise, those who insist on going despite the risks would be free to run off and get themselves killed. Not that *they're* any less guilty of tricking the Hunters' Guild and endangering its hunters. We've got you all on one count of attempted murder of a hunter by deceiving the guild with a fraudulent request. Plus one count of treason for angering the elder dragons and sparking a crisis

that threatened the very survival of the kingdom. Even if you believed the elder dragons hadn't resurfaced in hundreds of years, surely you didn't think you could get away with this, did you?"

"…"

The big shots in the village chief's faction slowly sidled away from him.

"Don't even try it! You guys are just as guilty!"

The other villagers slunk away from the chief's supporters, but Mile turned to them as well.

"Not so fast! The Hunters' Guild, your local lord, and His Majesty the King won't distinguish between the various factions within the village. They'll just consider it the work of Such-and-Such Village. All of you—from the village chief and the top officials to the regular villagers—decided this together, didn't you? You better believe that you're all in the same boat!"

"Noooooo!"

"P-please spare us!" the village chief begged, getting down on his hands and knees.

"Well, we can't exactly pretend like this never happened! If it comes out later that we covered up a serious scandal involving elder dragons, it'll be curtains for us," said Mile. "And if we let you off scot-free after the mess you made, word might get around to the other villages that you can be pardoned for any crime if you just get down on your hands and knees, or that you can scam the Hunters' Guild with impunity as long as you apologize. We certainly can't have that...

"If we go easy on you now, the secret will definitely get out, the village kids will go around bragging about it like it's some kind of epic tale, and heck, those same kids will probably go on to repeat your mistakes. Not to mention, we have to document stuff like the pact and the elder dragons in the city records, and we have an obligation to provide a full and accurate account of this quest to the guild. This is a responsibility that we, as hunters, absolutely must uphold. Sorry,

but our only option is to tell the guild the full truth."

"If you had just asked us to 'exterminate the monsters in the forest,' it wouldn't have been an issue," Pauline elaborated. "However, your request specified 'exterminating whatever is preying on the livestock,' when nothing of the sort exists. That means you dangled made-up bait and scammed the Hunters' Guild with a fraudulent request, endangering professional hunters by pitting them against monsters far beyond expectations."

The villagers swallowed hard.

"So what does that mean for them?" Mavis asked, and an ominous smile rose to Pauline's face.

Of course, all of this had been explained to the girls when they first came to the continent and registered as hunters, so Mavis knew the answer to her own question. She was just playing along with Pauline.

"Knowingly endangering a hunter with a fraudulent request is considered a first-degree attack against not just the Hunters' Guilds, but the Mercenaries' Guilds, Merchants' Guilds, Artisans' Guilds, Maritime Guilds, Medical Guilds, and so on. All the guilds on the continent will deem the perpetrator a common foe. While the different guilds may be in conflict more often than not, if someone picks a fight with the system in and of itself, they are considered an enemy of guilds everywhere. It's the only way to defend the authority of the organizations and ensure that no other fools attempt a similar stunt.

"If this village is deemed an enemy of the guilds' organizations, structure, and system as a whole, no hunters, peddlers, traveling doctors or apothecaries, herbalists, knife grinders, or tinkers will ever come here again. No one with ties to the guilds will purchase the crops or monster carcasses you bring to the port city, and no innkeeper will rent you a room. That's what happens when you antagonize a guild."

""

The villagers turned white as ghosts.

"We're your clients! You work for us! You little ladies are supposed to be following our orders! Refusing to exterminate the wolves is a breach of contract! We'll lodge a complaint with the guild about what happened here! We'll tell them that you used the ridiculous excuse of the elder dragons' appearance to extort a huge sum of money from us, and when we refused to pay, you started spouting utter poppycock! If it's the testimony of four novice hunters versus an entire village, including its chief, who do you think the guild will believe? But if you girls back down, I promise to sign your job completion form. You'll get the agreed-upon reward for completing the quest, plus the contribution points that go with it, all without lifting a finger! It's not a bad deal by any means!"

"Aww, he's still going at it..."

"He doesn't know when to give up..."

Mavis and Reina seemed unmoved by the chief's arguments.

"We're contracted hunters, so of course we plan to carry out the job we were hired to do. It's only right!" said Mile, a grin spreading across her face. Upon hearing this, the other members of the Crimson Vow smiled along with her. "Since the request was to 'exterminate whatever is preying on the livestock,' we need to take down the *real* culprits who harmed and killed those animals—and that means you and your crew! Isn't that right, Chief?"

"Huh? Wha...?"

"Whaaaaaat?!" the villagers exclaimed, flabbergasted by Mile's insane leap of logic.

And then...

Whoosh!

Many of the men gathered in the square had armed themselves with hoes or sickles, thinking a monster stampede was on the way. Those same men now surrounded the Crimson Vow with fierce glares and farming tools brandished

like weapons.

"You girls leave us no choice. We'll have to kill you here," said the elderly chief. "A group of young female hunters who lacked the skill to make it as hunters took on a mission beyond their abilities, failed, and never made it back from the forest. That's all there ever was to this story. We cannot risk offending the elder dragons, which means staying out of the forest, but they won't be any the wiser if you lot up and disappear, nor do I suspect they care overly much about our human affairs anyway. All we have to do is claim that you failed the job and died somewhere along the line."

Awww, c'mon, the girls whined internally.

The villagers had yet to see the Crimson Vow fight. All the girls had done so far was go into the forest and return with a bunch of wolves. From the villagers' perspective, it likely looked as though the girls had simply run into the wolves and the elder dragons, who just so happened to be checking in on the forest dwellers. It might appear they had simply talked things out and then all come back together. No combat was involved, which meant that the Crimson Vow had not had a chance to show their stuff. As far as the villagers knew, they were just some lucky little girls who had encountered a few gentle, understanding elder dragons and gotten lucky enough to make it out alive.

In that case, the difference in numbers would be far too great for them to overcome. What's more, the villagers' daily routine of farming, logging, fetching water, and hunting had given them quite a bit of muscle mass; any one of them could easily wipe the floor with a scrawny female hunter. Or, at least, it was inevitable that they would assume as much.

"Don't kill them," Reina instructed. "But feel free to hurt them all you like!"

With Mile and Pauline around, a few broken bones or mangled organs would be no big deal. Whatever injuries they suffered would be healed up with magic later on. For now, it was okay to inflict a little pain on people who were literally trying to murder them. Why, the men ought to be grateful they were willing to spare them at all.

"Roger that!" the other three cried out with enthusiasm.

"Get them!"

The villagers descended at their chief's command.

"I guess it wasn't gonna end any other way," muttered Mile, viewing the hellscape laid out before her.

The adults of the village littered the square, sporting all manner of broken bones and bruises. Not all of them, though—just the dozen or so who had attacked the Crimson Vow.

Needless to say, the girls had held back quite a bit. Unless the difference in strength was significant, it was difficult to capture an enemy who was out to kill without dealing them a fatal blow. Here, however, that hadn't proved an issue. The girls had barely had to hurt their attackers. The power imbalance had been so great that they could even take care not to break the farming tools the men were wielding as weapons.

The members of the Crimson Vow made sure to inflict enough pain to teach the villagers a lesson, but endeavored to keep injuries to a minimum. To that end, magic had only been used for restraining purposes, and Mavis and Mile had done most of the heavy lifting. All of their blows had been delivered with the flats of their swords—"blunt strikes," as the girls called them.

No matter how much the pair pulled their punches, a blow from an iron rod was bound to result in bruises and fractures. But with Mile and Pauline, both of whom were top-class users of healing magic, around, it was okay to rough the men up a bit.

Offensive magic was difficult to calibrate to the desired level of injury, and burns were both harder to heal than bruises or broken bones and tended to leave scars. Therefore, Reina had done the villagers the kindness of not using

her fire magic.

"Should we take these guys back to town with us?" Reina proposed. "There's no way we can remember all their faces. If we leave them here and head back alone, they'll blend in with the other villagers and we won't be able to tell which ones stepped up to kill us later on. If that happens, everyone in the village will be tried as accomplices to attempted murder, and I'd feel kinda bad for the ones who weren't involved in the attack."

The other villagers hastily bobbed their heads. They obviously valued their own lives more than those of their neighbors who had resorted to violence.

The peasants of this world were good at surviving against the odds, even if that meant resorting to cunning tactics and taking advantage of others. They were a bit like weeds, choking out their fellow plants for the sake of survival...

In the end, Mile drew sketches of the attackers and had a few randomly selected villagers whisper their names to her. She had explained beforehand, "If you give us a fake name, the fact that it differs from what the others tell us will be a dead giveaway. If that happens, the liar will be treated as an accomplice and face the same punishment as the culprits." And so, the testimonies had all been consistent. It seemed that not a single person had lied. Clearly, they really did care more about themselves than those who had mustered up the courage to resort to violence and protect the village.

Even under the circumstances, it was unlikely that any villagers would try to escape. They knew what became of farmers who abandoned their lands and fled. Furthermore, they were probably naive enough to think that no one would benefit from their arrest. The local lord would lose subjects, which would reduce crop yields—a.k.a. taxes. The Hunters' Guild would have fewer people to submit requests. These newbie hunters would gain a reputation as the angels of death who had brought a village to ruin.

They were citizens of the region who had worked diligently all their lives. If all

their testimonies were consistent, the accounts of a few fresh-faced rookies would mean nothing.

If they could just ride this out, everything would be okay. Even if the city police got involved, they could claim that these girls had made false accusations against the village and blackmailed them for money and goods without fulfilling their request. Such overly optimistic thoughts crossed many a mind. At their core, they were a sheltered bunch who knew nothing but what passed for common sense in the village and interpreted everything to suit their own convenience.

With that, Mile and friends returned to the port city, leaving the chief's faction and the other villagers behind. It would have been a pain to travel all the way back to town with the chief and his gang in tow, and on the off-chance the men deserted their land and ran, they wouldn't have the means to support themselves for long.

When the band of rookie hunters walked away without apprehending them, the villagers dismissed the girls as pushovers, assuming that all their threats had been empty words and letting them leave in peace. Of course, it wasn't up to the Crimson Vow to decide what to do with the villagers. The girls thought it best to turn the matter over to the proper officials.

"What?! The request from the village was a hoax?" the Hunters' Guild clerk exclaimed in surprise upon hearing the Crimson Vow's report.

As the guild staff and hunters listened in on the conversation, their expressions turned grim.

"Yes. No monsters or animals had attacked the village. It was all staged by the village chief and his clique. They tricked us hunters into trespassing in the Forbidden Forest and breaking a pact negotiated by elder dragons. And that's when a couple of elder dragons just happened to show up..."

Shouts rang out throughout the guildhall. "HOLD ON! BACK UP, BACK UP,

BACK UP, BACK UP!!"

"W-w-wait just a moment! Stop right theeeere!!" the clerk stammered. "By the power vested in me as an employee of the Hunters' Guild, I forbid you to say anything more here! L-Let's head to the second floor! Come upstairs to the conference room! All executives are to assemble in the conference room at once! Someone run to the Merchants' Guild and bring back the guild master coordinating next month's caravan escort schedule! This is top priority!! All hunters and staff present are forbidden to speak of what they just heard! Anyone who leaks this information before it's made public will be subject to disciplinary dismissal if they're an employee and permanent loss of their badge if they're a hunter!"



Silence settled over the room. The color drained from the faces of the hunters and staff.

If this information were to get out and wreak havoc across the kingdom, they would have more to worry about than a lost badge. Punishment from the local lord—not to mention the Crown—could very well entail a beheading or hanging. Worse still, the consequences probably wouldn't stop with the individual responsible. Their families, relatives, and loved ones who had helped spread the story would also be implicated.

"What are you standing around for?! Go summon the guild master!" With a start, a young staff member rushed out the door.

""

Silence enveloped the conference room.

Mile told the audience what had happened, exactly as it had transpired. This was neither the time nor place to show mercy or cover for the villagers. As a hunter, it was her sworn duty to report the outcome of the mission and the existence of those who would do the guild wrong. It wasn't a rule that she could break out of cheap pity.

If she gave an inaccurate account, it could trigger a catastrophe in which hundreds of thousands or even millions of lives were lost. Such was the case when elder dragons were part of the picture. Consequently, if it came out that she was withholding the facts, she and her friends would face punishment. And a rather severe one, at that...

Still, the Crimson Vow didn't want to see all the villagers punished and their home brought to ruin. There were people living there who had opposed the chief's actions. The whole fiasco could be chalked up to the village chief's faction and his supporters—in other words, a single subset of the village—getting out of hand. Thus, if she placed the blame squarely on the ringleaders, it

was unlikely that anyone else would attempt a similar stunt. Not for another few centuries, at least, assuming this episode became part of the local lore...

As such, the Crimson Vow may have gone a bit overboard in emphasizing that most of the villagers had played no part in the incident—or rather, that they stood in opposition to the chief's faction. In reality, the sheer clout of the chief and his cronies was a sign that the majority of the community tacitly condoned his methods.

To cover their bases, they had put a full confession in writing and made the chief sign it. Under the delusion that he could later dismiss it as something he'd been coerced into writing, he'd complied without much of a fight, but obviously this did wonders for the Crimson Vow's case.

"And there you have it. The matter is settled, more or less, and we reached an understanding with the elder dragons. Oh, and should the elder dragons get mixed up in this case again, just call for Zalm...uh, an elder dragon...and drop my name, and I'm sure he'll work something out."

Pfff!

Just as the guild master had taken a sip of tea to calm his nerves, he spat it back out...spraying it right into Reina's face.

Though Reina's first reaction was rage, it wasn't the guild master's fault that he had reacted thusly. She understood that, which was why she was shaking with the effort of holding herself back.

No matter how understandable his surprise had been, the guild master ought to have apologized to her straight away, but he was in no state of mind to consider her feelings. "Y-you exchanged names?!"

"Well, of course. It would be rude not to introduce myself to someone—well, some *dragon*—I'm meeting for the first time."

"It's not you I'm surprised about! Th-the elder dragon told you his name?!"

"Th-that's right..."

The guild master was right to be surprised. When poking an ant with a twig, most people wouldn't bother to introduce themselves. In the same vein, an elder dragon hardly ever deigned to tell a human being its name.

"…"

Silence reigned in the conference room once more. Apart from Mile and the guild master, no one made a sound save for the occasional breath.

"And you think the elder dragon remembers your name?"

"Yes, I'm fairly certain."

"……"

No way. It was impossible. The only way that could be true was...

"Ah!"

The guild master recalled a rumor he'd heard from a foreign sailor not too long ago. It was such a ludicrous story that he'd laughed it off and forgotten all about it at the time.

"One, two, three, four... Yeah, there sure are four of you..."

The numbers added up.

Almost without meaning to, the guild master muttered the title of the story to himself. "The Four Dragon Priestess Sisters..."

"Ack!"

The name that escaped his lips certainly rang a bell for the Crimson Vow. Perhaps a bit too much of one...

This being a port city, information of interest to sailors traveled blessedly fast, but the same could not be said for news from the royal capital. Unless a merchant caravan happened to be passing through on land, information was slow to arrive from that direction. And though news had spread among the residents of the capital within the day, the formal public announcement that their kingdom had established cordial relations with an elder dragon and his

foreign princess friend had been delayed a few days due to a slew of meetings, so word had yet to reach this town.

"No, hold up, the rumor said that the elder dragon and the priestesses were friends... These girls just so happened to encounter the dragons in a forest midmission, so I guess there's no connection. Maybe it's just a coincidence that both stories featured four girls..."

The Crimson Vow nodded along in enthusiastic agreement. *So* enthusiastic, in fact, that a few of the guild executives shot them skeptical looks. The guild master, who had more brawn than brains, carried on, oblivious.

"All right, I think I get the gist of it. For now, we'll proceed with our investigation under the assumption that everything you've told us is true. There's zero reason for you girls to lie, after all... You're new around here, don't know anyone, and don't have any attachments. And I know you're not stupid enough to risk expulsion from the guild by filing a false report about a low-paying quest that you basically took on as volunteer work. Why bother? You could make an honest living easily. We also have a written confession from the village chief, though we can't say for sure whether it was forged or not. Aside from the story itself sounding completely unbelievable, nothing seems amiss."

Indeed, the story itself did sound completely unbelievable. The Crimson Vow didn't need to be told this.

Oh, I know!

Eureka! A brilliant idea popped into Mile's head.

"Would you accept this as evidence?"

"Huh?"

She took something out of her inventory and set it on the conference table. And that something was...

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"A scale?"
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[&]quot;It's a giant...scale..."

"Yes, it's the scale of an elder dragon. He let me keep this as a memento!"

"WHAAAAAAT?!"

The scale wasn't a recent acquisition. All she had taken from this particular encounter were horn and talon shavings. Nail clippings wouldn't make much of an impression, however, and no one would even recognize talon dust at a glance. Instead, Mile had pulled out the scale she'd kept in her inventory from a previous incident.

Bending the truth and tricking others with false evidence was wrong, but lying to convey the truth and serve justice was permissible. It was a stance that Mile's flexible mindset (read: self-serving ideology) allowed her to embrace. It seemed that the rest of the party agreed with her philosophy, as they watched her do this without saying a word.

The scale of an elder dragon, let alone one in mint condition with no defects, couldn't be found on the market. Even if there were one for sale, a young hunter would have no way of acquiring it.

In other words, the item on the table must have been obtained directly from the source.

""

"Okay! In light of your testimony, our Hunters' Guild branch will let the villagers present any counterevidence they may have. At the very least, we know for a fact that an elder dragon was involved. None of us doubt your word."

The guild master and staff seemed to have resigned themselves to the reality the Crimson Vow had presented them with. And then...

"Hey, any interest in selling this scale to the guild? If we sell it to His Majesty through the capital branch, you'll get a boatload of money and contribution points, and our branch will score a lot of guild points! C'mon, whaddya say?!"

In fact, the royal palace was already in possession of two pristine scales, and a

third wouldn't be worth quite as much coin or contribution points. This scale had no connection to the other two, and the elder dragon to whom it belonged would never come around to inquire about the selling price. With that in mind, the royal palace would try to negotiate as low a price as possible, or even decline to buy it for "lack of budget" and tell the guild to sell it to a leading domestic merchant.

But the point was moot, anyway.

"It was a gift from an elder dragon, so we really shouldn't..."

"Yeah, I figured."

The Crimson Vow wasn't hurting for money, and theft wasn't a concern as long as they stored their belongings in Mile's enormous inventory. Thus, there was no need to rush to sell their valuables or anything that could be worth more if they held onto it. Once they made it to the capital, they could choose to sell their stock directly or put it up to auction.

For these reasons, the guild master had made the suggestion mostly just to see what they would say. He didn't actually seem too disappointed by their refusal.

With that, the case was closed. The rest was for the guild and government officials to handle.

Mile and friends left the conference room, stopped at the first-floor purchasing counter to sell a few premium monster corpses (which they claimed to have hunted in the Forbidden Forest but had actually removed from Mile's inventory), and went back to their inn.

A few days had passed when a handful of village youths showed up at the inn where the Crimson Vow was staying. Evidently, they had gone around and checked with all the inns in town to track them down.

Innkeepers never divulged information about their guests, lest it reflect

poorly on their integrity, so it was unclear how the youths had managed to find the hunters. Going to the guildhall likely would have been a quicker way to go about it. But regardless...

"One of the elder dragons says he wants to see you. He's waiting in the nearby forest, so we'll show you the way."

The girls certainly couldn't refuse a summons like that. Even if a dragon were to offer to come meet them in town, total panic would ensue at the sight of such a creature in a populated area. A happening like this could very well end in mass death. Their only option was to go where they were summoned.

Besides, the kids didn't look especially distressed. It probably wasn't about anything too serious.

The village kids led Mile and the rest of the Crimson Vow to the local forest, where they found the elder dragon Zalm.

"What can we help you with, sir?" Mile asked respectfully.

"Silva was worried that its meat dispenser wasn't coming back, so it asked me to look into the matter."

"Give me a break! And are they really calling me their 'meat dispenser'?! I thought I was supposed to be Silva's lover!"

Mile was furious to discover that the wolves hadn't thought of her as a lover or a mistress after all.

"What's your problem? Did you actually want to hook up with that white wolf?" Reina asked.

"I'm not surprised," said Pauline. "The only thing Mile loves more than fluff is little girls."

Mavis bobbed her head in agreement.

"It's not like thaaaat!!" Mile fumed.

Chapter 130:

Meanwhile...

"H OW DOES THE messenger fare?"

"She has been addressing her followers from the balcony every morning and evening without fail. Lately, the content of her sermons has been incredibly well received, and her reputation is on the rise."

"Excellent. I had my concerns when I heard that her old allies had absconded, so I'm pleased to hear that she has settled in well." The older of the two priests smiled with satisfaction. "And what of the other matter?"

"Her eating habits, I assume? She's been cutting back on food, snacks, and fruit juice, so I don't believe we have to worry about her getting fat anymore."

"Now that is splendid news indeed! When she asked to sample all the sweets from the surrounding kingdoms, or when she took to gorging herself out of boredom, I was afraid she might gain weight... It would seem she has finally embraced her role as the divine messenger. I'm truly glad to hear it."

"But what on earth could have sparked the sudden change of heart?" the young priest marveled. "She was so loath to perform her duties, and now she's like an entirely different person. You don't suppose she could have been replaced by an impostor...?"

"Ha ha ha! In that case, if the Goddess were to ask me, 'Did you drop this lazy messenger, or this diligent one?', I'd answer the latter!"

"Pfft! Did you lift that from one of Miami Satodele's comedy novels?! Ththat's too irreverent, Father! Ha ha ha ha!"

"Wa ha ha ha!"

The two priests erupted with laughter, perhaps forgetting that the author of Miami Satodele's comedy novels was none other than the divine messenger

herself.

Of course, the nanomachines were not ones to slack off on intelligence gathering.

THIS IS ALL IT TAKES FOR HER TO BE PERCEIVED AS DILIGENT? JUST HOW LAZY A LIFE HAVE YOU LED, LADY MILE?

"Shall we wait for them in this town?"

"Sounds good."

"If we proceed too far, we'll rob the Crimson Vow of their fun on this continent."

After departing the capital, it didn't take long for the Wonder Trio to hit pause on their journey. It seemed safe to assume that the Crimson Vow would travel from the port city to the capital. If the Trio moved too close to the coast, Mile wouldn't have much time to enjoy her journey on the new continent. Thus, they had revised their original plan of moving steadily seaward.

Why not wait for the girls at the capital, you ask? It seemed likely if they stayed there, someone would recognize the Trio, and they wanted to avoid making a scene in the place they planned to make their future base of operations. Instead, they hoped to meet up with the Crimson Vow in a provincial town, explain their and Princess Morena's current standing in the capital, and compare notes.

"While we're waiting for the Crimson Vow, we may as well register with the guild so we can work as novice hunters here. There's plenty of other work to be done, too, such as assessing the local monster threat and determining if the level of magic here is the same as back home. As we know, magic is conjured by 'magic spirits.' Different spirits will be in charge on a different continent, which could alter the power, speed, accuracy, and so forth of our spells. We must do our research to ensure that the slightest of differences doesn't prove fatal."

"Yes, ma'am!" Aureana and Monika chorused.

That was Marcela for you. Perhaps Aureana would have made the suggestion if she hadn't, but a true leader would never gloss over such important matters.

SHE SURE HAS HER ACT TOGETHER...

<IT DOES MAKE ME MISS LADY MILE'S DUMB ANTICS, BUT IT'S FUN TO</p>
WATCH A LOWER LIFE-FORM MAKE THE MOST OF HER WITS.>

[YOU SAID IT. ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, THE CRIMSON VOW AND THE WONDER TRIO WILL BE THE FLAGSHIP SHOWS OF THE NANONET FOR A LONG TIME TO COME.]

The nanomachines emitted a unanimous signal of agreement.

Ting-a-ling!

Three young girls entered the guildhall, the door chime announcing their arrival. Judging by their height and facial features, they were clearly minors. A single girl of such small stature could be written off as a malnourished orphan, but it was hard to imagine that being the case when there were three of them together. Furthermore, the entire group was dressed in the sort of high-end protective gear and partial armor worn by guards, and they were even equipped with daggers and staffs. There was simply no way they were hurting for money.

Alerted by the sound of the chime, the guild staff and hunters turned as one to look at the entrance. While typically their gaze would return quickly to whatever they were doing, this time, all eyes remained glued on the girls' every movement.

No one made a move to intercept the three newcomers. No matter how young these girls were, their robust, well-worn clothing and decent equipment made it clear that they were too experienced to qualify for newbie hazing.

Still, all of the hunters present were thinking the same thing.

This was a group of three girls, all good-looking for their age. And all three of them appeared to be mages.

Mages were the class most often missing from a party of hunters. They could take the place of a canteen, a fire starter, a healing potion, or an archer. It was a godsend to have even one in your ranks.

If a single mage was a wild card that could dramatically increase a whole party's survival rate, just imagine what *three* of them could do. And they were cuties, to boot.

Some men were thinking unsavory thoughts. Some weren't. But they were all agreed on one point—

I WANT THEM IN MY PARTY!!

There was one catch: There was no way the girls hadn't gotten offers before, yet they still chose to travel as a group of three. And despite the odds, their lone trio had made it this far in one piece. Nothing had ever managed to bring them down, be it hostile monsters or other humans. Approaching them without a plan would be far too dangerous.

With that in mind, everyone looked on in silence as the girls approached the reception desk at a brisk pace.

"We'd like to register as new hunters, please."

Clatter!

Clatterclatterclatter!

Most of the hunters were halfway out of their chairs before they could stop themselves. And then they exchanged glances.

Not yet! It's still too early!

Indeed. If the girls were about to register for the first time, it meant they were still civilians. A rugged hunter accosting an underage civilian girl would be

a huge red flag. If they laid so much as a finger on the girls, or if one of them screamed, it would be a disaster. At worst, they could be stripped of their hunter's badge and sent to the mines as a penal slave for years.

As soon as the girls were registered as hunters, however, they would be the men's colleagues, and a certain amount of fraternizing would be tolerated as long as it passed for a recruiting effort—and since that would be the honest truth, they could claim as much with their heads held high. It was common knowledge that everyone in the business wanted a mage, so it wasn't as though anyone would doubt their sincerity.

The situation called for patience. The hunters held each other in check with their gazes.

Once the girls had filled out their application and handed it back to the clerk, one of them asked, oh-so-casually, "Excuse me, but is it considered a crime here for a girl to fight or kill another hunter if she is coerced, threatened, or otherwise disrespected? Or would it be covered under self-defense laws or the right to strike?"

The clerk and guild staff froze. And then...

WHAAAAAAAT?!

These girls were untouchable.

Of course, this was a survival technique the Wonder Trio had picked up after being antagonized one too many times—a light jab of a preemptive strike.

"E-erm, about that... I'm afraid that is outside our guild's purview. That would be for the police to decide..."

True enough, the Hunters' Guild was not a judicial body of any sort. It could impose penalties related to the matters it oversaw, but it could only arrest or kill wanted criminals or those caught in the act, and it had no authority to determine guilt or innocence.

"That said, I imagine it would depend on whether the attack was purely verbal

or accompanied by violence. Generally speaking, if the other party touched a woman's body, put a hand on the hilt of their weapon, or began an incantation, they would be judged to have initiated the altercation, and any counterstrike would be classified as legitimate self-defense. As for the 'right to strike,' however..."

The clerk hesitated. Commoners were strangers to the "right to strike," unless they were the ones getting cut down. If this girl was asking that...

"Acknowledged. You have my thanks!"

Marcela took a step back and curtsied, very deliberately giving off an aura of nobility to keep the insects from swarming. Just as she had hoped, both the staff and the hunters were taken aback.

Normally, a curtsy was reserved for one's superiors, but a guild employee technically outranked a rookie hunter, so she figured that ought to count. Not that anyone in the guild usually cared about such distinctions.

These girls had the guts to give the guild staff and hunters only the barest attention and establish dominance over a den of ruffians. It seemed that the Wonder Trio had come out of their life-or-death battle with newfound courage.

No doubt this little show of hers had left everyone convinced that Marcela was a noblewoman. Which was, in fact, the case...

The other two were assumed to be either the daughters of lower-ranked nobles than Marcela, or perhaps even her attendants or sentry maids. Of course, she must have had even more guards in hiding, and it wouldn't be shocking if some of the guild staff or fellow hunters had been hired to protect her and feed her intel. Indeed, there was even the possibility that the guild master himself was at her beck and call...

There was no way anyone would try to mess with her now. Not unless they wanted to be found face up in the river or suddenly expelled from the Hunters' Guild come morning...

After a quick glance at the information board, the girls closely examined the job board.

"It's all material-gathering quests and monster extermination jobs below C-rank," Marcela noted. "Nothing of interest here."

"Well, we're fairly close to the capital. Any higher-ranked jobs or specialized requests would go to that branch. That way, more potential applicants and a wider variety of specialists have a chance to see the postings," Aureana explained.

"Interesting..."

Compatibility between the request and the hunter was important. This was something the Wonder Trio knew all too well, having racked up contribution points during their school days by sticking to specialized requests.

It was common knowledge in the town that if one had a more unusual request to make, it was better to skip one's own Hunters' Guild branch and go straight to the one in the capital, which was relatively close and had a larger pool of hunters. As a natural consequence, the requests found in capital suburbs like this one tended to be less interesting than those found in the capital, of course, and also those in the towns much farther away.

"Well, we only just got here, so perhaps we should start by deciding on an inn and getting some rest."

"Yes, let's!" Monika and Aureana agreed.

As soon as they had received their finished badges and chain lanyards, the Trio left the guild. Naturally, as newly registered hunters, their starting rank was F.

"…"

Everyone present desperately wanted to invite these girls to their party. Alas, they were also a dangerous commodity that could lead a man to his doom with one false step. Untouchable. It would be like shooting for an elder dragon's

treasure—a foolish, reckless act.

Not a single one of the employees or hunters made a move or so much as a peep.

Marcela's "insect repellent" technique had served its intended purpose, but it was going to create different sorts of challenges for the girls...

"It would seem there's no difference in the power, speed, and accuracy of magic here," said Marcela.

"Agreed," Aureana replied. "The magic spirits of this continent must have synced their parameters with the spirits of ours. Or perhaps a higher spirit unites and coordinates its brethren from all over the world."

"Whatever the case, I'm glad that we can wield our magic as we always have," Monika chimed in.

The next day, the Wonder Trio chose to test out their magic in a nearby forest rather than go to the guild. Their investigation revealed that their spells worked no differently than on the old continent.

Whether on the old continent or new, magic was something generated by the myriad nanomachines in the vicinity. It would be impractical for the same spell to vary based on the quirks of the nanomachines executing it, so although the nanomachines were granted a diverse range of personalities, their implementation of magic was standardized. (There was variance in "reception," which determined whether the machines would respond to a thought pulse and participate in the execution of the spell—if not, there would be no distinct hierarchy to mages' abilities.)

"There have been two occasions in the past when the power, accuracy, and reaction time of our magic increased exponentially. One was when Miss Adele assigned us exclusive spirits, and the other was when she asked them to raise our level as mages," said Marcela. "Honestly, a minor change in our abilities

wouldn't have come as a surprise at this point."

"That's what we were thinking!" Monika and Aureana chorused.

"Excuse me, may I have a moment?"

"Y-y-yes, of course!"

Over by the job board, Marcela approached a party of four who looked several years older than her.

From the look of them, they were so-called self-made hunters who had been in the business for almost a decade. The party consisted of three men and one woman, and the fact that this composition was working out for them suggested that they had grown up together in the same village. Unless the group had been friendly to start with, a 3:1 boy to girl ratio—especially one in which the girl was fairly attractive—almost always led to trouble.

Of course, being childhood friends didn't eliminate friction altogether, but apparently it helped. The Wonder Trio had learned as much from a senior female hunter in the past.

"Wh-what is it?"

Hm...?

Marcela tilted her head in confusion. Calling out to the boy she had observed to be the leader had clearly put him on edge. This party hadn't been around when the Wonder Trio showed up at the guild two days earlier, so they shouldn't have overheard Marcela's "insect-repelling" conversation with the clerk.

Or so Marcela thought. In fact, over the past couple of days, the branch had sent out an official notice to its affiliated hunters to prevent any unfortunate incidents. The guild had no intention of letting its hunters die in vain.

As a result, all the local hunters knew about the Wonder Trio—and the facts had been exaggerated to the point of misinformation. Thus, while the boy's

party had been vaguely aware that the Trio had them in their frights—er, sights—they had convinced themselves it was their imagination and refused to make eye contact.

Why us?! the leader screamed internally. He was sweating buckets despite the brisk weather, desperate not to incur the displeasure of Marcela's hidden guards or the escort that had surely been sent from her family's estate.

Then Marcela told the boy what she was after. "Why not come hunt some orcs and ogres with us, boy?"

It was a rather haughty way to address someone older than her, but she'd chosen her words in accordance with the "insect-repelling" strategy. And so, despite internally trembling with embarrassment, she valiantly played it cool and kept her composure.

There was a reason she had specified "hunting" rather than "exterminating": It wasn't common for people to offer rewards for killing orcs and ogres, unless they had settled near a human village or proliferated to the point where they needed to be culled. Furthermore, even if there were such a request, there was little chance that a party of three F-ranked, underage girls who had registered as hunters only a few days prior would be allowed to take the job, even if they teamed up with more experienced C-rank hunters. Such a request was bound to specify "C-rank or above," and even if it didn't, the clerk would most certainly turn them away for safety's sake. Complaining or lodging a formal protest would just get the guild master to show up and reject them under his own authority.

For these reasons, the Wonder Trio didn't have the option of exterminating orcs and ogres as part of a standard quest. Still, no one would object to them handing in materials such as tusks, hides, meat, and testes, which could be used as ingredients for aphrodisiacs. It was perfectly acceptable to test your blade on a monster that just so happened to wander into your path and strike first.

Get it? Testing your blade for testes!

All the Wonder Trio wanted was to err on the side of caution and bring along a local hunting party as a guide. After surviving that hellish ultimate battle, there was no way an orc or an ogre was going to give them a run for their money. However...

Clatter!

Clatterclatterclatter!

"DON'T DO ITTTTT!!"

A chorus of screams filled the guildhall. And it was coming from both sides of the reception counter...

Marcela and her friends were taken aback by the intensity of the reaction. It would have been one thing if they were discussing going it alone, but they were planning to take local hunters with them.

The girls still didn't know the truth: The monsters of this continent were far smarter and more formidable than the ones they knew.

"Don't do it!"

"Oy, don't you dare take them up on that offer, Endless Journey! Kick 'em to the curb!"

The party known as Endless Journey didn't need to be told twice; they had never planned on accepting Marcela's offer in the first place. Even on their own, they would be looking at a total party kill. It would take at least three B-rank hunters to take monsters of that level down while also protecting three underage girls who were new to the guild and virtual amateurs.

This blatant display of bullying and obstruction had the Trio steamed, but this wasn't their first rodeo. They had no intention of backing down over such a minor setback.

"Will you accept? Or will you let these insignificant bullies cow you into running from a few paltry orcs and ogres?" Marcela added, deliberately phrasing it as a taunt in hopes of spurring the group to action. But then...

"Sorry, no can do! We could handle one or two orcs, but we don't stand a chance against ogres!!" the leader wailed. Within seconds, he and his party had booked it right out the door.

"What ...?"

The Wonder Trio watched in a daze as their chosen prey gave them the slip.

"It's not gonna happen, little miss. Don't blame those kids. The most they could handle is one stray orc. A pack of orcs or ogres would wipe 'em out. Maybe one or two of 'em could get away if they're lucky, but they'd spend the rest of their lives with emotional scars from letting their friends die. That's not to mention the risk of injuries that might force 'em out of the hunter business. No matter how hard you try, some things are just impossible.

"You girls ought to do a little research on the correlation between hunter rank and monster level before you go around making offers like that. Those kids made the smart choice to run, but I bet you could find some idiots who'll be desperate to show off in front of a pretty girl. I can picture the total party kill so vividly that it's making me feel like crap over here."

"What ...?"

After hearing this advice from the hunter hanging nearby, the Wonder Trio were left gaping.

"Is it truly that serious? Why, we're only talking about a few orcs and ogres..."

Their combat magic could end any battle in one hit. Even relying on physical attacks, a C-rank swordsman or lancer should have been able to put up a decent fight against a couple of ogres. If a balanced four-person party teamed up with three mages, they should have been able to take out five or six orcs or two or three ogres without taking damage. That was common sense, as far as the

Wonder Trio was concerned.

"What kind of high-ranking hunter do you think you are?! Only a B-rank or higher could manage that!"

All three girls were flabbergasted. "Huh?"

"Orcs and ogres tend to work in groups of two or three. If our two parties teamed up, and assuming all three of you ladies have decent combat magic, we could probably handle about three orcs. But two ogres? Not a chance. Even if we managed to take 'em down, we'd take casualties in the process. No one's gonna agree to that."

"WHAAAAAT?!"

The Wonder Trio was stunned. His explanation was the last thing they had expected to hear.

"Well for the record, all three of us can use pretty powerful combat magic..."

"SERIOUSLY?!" all the hunters present interjected, but the Wonder Trio ignored them.

"Unless they're near their den, don't orcs and ogres usually act alone?" Aureana asked, mystified.

"Nope. Hrm, you ladies oughta head to the second floor to study up on monsters before you do any hunting! No matter how good you are at combat magic, you'll get wiped out on your first day if you go in blind. A jackalope might stab you through the belly with its horn, or a slime might cling to your face, block your nose and mouth, and suffocate you to death. Even a five-year-old can kill a seasoned soldier if he lowers his guard. If you underestimate the lower-level monsters, you're gonna wind up dead."

"……"

It was sound advice.

Still, the Wonder Trio was only F-rank because they were new registrants. In truth, they had the capabilities of a lesser C-rank party overall and an upper B-

rank in terms of pure offensive power.

None of them were about to say as much, however. No one would believe them, and even if they did, it would only cause the girls trouble in the long run. Furthermore, it was better to keep their rivals' guards down and not give them more information than necessary—especially if they weren't planning to keep their high-capacity storage magic a secret.

"…"

Marcela and her friends were completely lost; everything they had just heard contradicted their own experiences and common sense. Their points of reference were so different that it was impossible to wrap their heads around this new information or reconcile the discrepancies between what the hunters here were saying and what they had seen in the past. Until the Trio gained a proper understanding of the monsters in the area, there was nothing to be done for it.

"Very well. To the second floor we go."

One of the other hunters had told them to go study upstairs. If they followed his advice, perhaps they would understand why the local hunters considered the monsters to be such a threat.

When it came to matters like this, the Wonder Trio always endeavored to make rational judgments rather than rebel for the sake of rebellion. They took the advice of their veteran peers seriously. Whether they would follow it was another matter, but this particular suggestion was one they found useful.

"H-have at it..."

Most of the time, youngsters overconfident in their own abilities would simply ignore an old-timer's advice. The veteran hunter had expected the girls to blow him off, so he was thrown for a loop when they seemed to have taken his words to heart.

Still, if at all possible, he didn't want to let a bunch of youngsters—not to

mention the priceless treasure that was three pretty young mages—die in vain. Plus, he'd feel pretty good about himself if they survived thanks to his advice. He could look at them and think, I raised those girls!

He had taken on a thankless role with the full expectation of being resented and written off as an old geezer, and this was the result. You better believe he was happy.

"Well, if you ladies run into trouble or have any questions, don't hesitate to come to me."

Once the Wonder Trio had moved to the second floor, the man's party members clapped him on the back and praised him for getting a leg up on the competition for the Pretty Combat Magic-Wielding Noble Mage Trio. Around them, the other hunters shot him baleful glares.

"What am I reading?!" Marcela exclaimed despite herself as she read the pamphlets for new recruits on the second floor of the guildhall.

"'Recommended personnel to engage a three-orc cell: 10+ C-rank hunters'..."

"Do you suppose the idea is for three C-rank hunters to subdue one orc each, while the sole remaining hunter goes for the vitals? Still, that means..."

"It takes more than three hunters to kill a single orc without injury!" all three girls finished together.

"Why, the hunters here are a bunch of weaklings!"

"Shh!" Monika and Aureana scrambled to shush Marcela, putting their index fingers to their lips.

Not many people were around, but that didn't mean the second floor was empty. They weren't far from the guild employees who worked on the floor as well as a few local hunters.

When Marcela's insult reached their ears, they gave her the stink eye.

"My apologies..."

She had indeed gone too far with that verbal gaffe. Marcela owned up to her faux pas and apologized.

The other hunters and staff were used to overconfident newbies coming in with a skewed perspective, so they weren't seriously upset. Still, it would have taught the rookies the wrong lesson if they hadn't reacted at all, so they had feigned offense for the sake of education. It wasn't uncommon for young hunters to yell back, "You got a problem?!" and fly off the handle, so the fact that this girl had regretted her slipup and apologized left a decent enough impression.

It didn't hurt that she was a pretty young girl, either.

The crowd all accepted the apology with a slight flick of their wrists. When it came down to it, being a pretty woman got you far in this line of business.

"Allow me to try that again. Unlike in our kingdom, here it takes several C-rank hunters to kill a single orc..."

"Lady Marcela, that's a better way to phrase it, but you're still saying the same thing!"

There were several good reasons why the Wonder Trio was classified as a lesser C-rank party overall, despite their upper B-rank offensive power. They lacked stamina, so the longer a fight dragged on, the more sluggish their movements became. Their travel pace was slow. They had poor close-combat ability. Their paper-thin armor meant that a single hit would leave them down for the count. They had little to no experience in PvP combat.

People also looked down on them because of their appearance. No matter how much of an advantage they had, very few would heed their calls to surrender. If an assailant conspired to kidnap them, it might be easier to fend them off for lack of lethal intent, but no one was going to hold back for a woman or child in mortal combat on the battlefield.

They were a mess. Given their failings, their overall rating as hunters was bound to be low, no matter how formidable their attacks were.

Now, to be clear, the Wonder Trio had plenty of merits beyond the increased magic power their exclusive nanomachines and level-2 authorization granted them, or even the repertoire of original spells they had developed based on Mile's teachings about the essence of magic. They were capable of true silent casting, not the "spell-free casting" that still required reciting the incantation in one's head. They could wipe out enemy forces unopposed with their long-range detection and ranged magic attacks. Their inventory allowed for easy transport of items. They could leverage their looks to catch their opponents off guard. Not being recognized as a hunter could be an advantage in some scenarios. They also had the option of working as undercover personal bodyguards for other women.

Still, it was inevitable that they would be treated as either eye candy or a curiosity. No merchant in their right mind would consider hiring the Wonder Trio to guard their caravan. Having three pretty girls come along for the ride wouldn't deter bandits; it would serve as bait.

Of course, the three girls were aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. Thus, even if all their members could use offensive, defensive, support, and healing magic, and their attack power was on par with the best of the B-ranks, they were careful to team up with a party composed mainly of frontline fighters when they accepted requests with even the slightest element of danger or uncertainty.

No matter how minor the risk, if you worked enough jobs, there was a high probability your luck would run out at some point. Even if the odds of getting injured on a particular job were one in a hundred, mathematically speaking, if you accepted one of those quests once every three days, you would hit the "jackpot" within a few years at most.

And there was no telling when you would hit it. It could be the hundredth time. It could be the fiftieth. It might even be the first.

So, now that they knew their own perceptions were out of sync with what was considered common sense around here, they had no intention of taking on an extermination job all by themselves.

Really, even before learning that, they hadn't planned to do their first job in an unfamiliar land alone, which is why they had approached that boy's party...

Marcela huddled close to her friends and spoke in a whisper so no one else could hear. "In any case, we must figure out why the hunters here are so weak. We confirmed that our magic is just as strong on this continent, so the only remaining possibilities are that the spells used here are of a lower level, the incantations are inadequate, the hunters' magic reserves are so low that they can only fire a few spells at a time, or there are fewer types of magic available."

"Even if we assume their magic is weaker, with four or five C-ranks together, wouldn't physical attacks from the vanguard and middle guard be enough to take down several orcs with ease?" Aureana argued. "If we assume a configuration of, say, two swordsmen, one lancer, and one archer..."

"Fair point," Monika agreed. "And if you add a mage into the mix...no matter how weak their attacks may be, a proper use of blinding magic or support magic ought to be a big help."

"If nothing else, we've learned that there are unknown factors at play. Beyond that..."

"All that's left is to investigate for ourselves!" the three girls finished together.

"Easier said than done, I suppose," said Marcela, still keeping her voice to a whisper. "If we want to find out what the hunters here are capable of and how they fight, it won't help us to take on a request alone..."

"We need to invite the right party to join us," said Aureana. "An established party, stronger than the one we approached earlier."

Monika grinned. "I have an idea of a party that looks reasonably tough and might accept our offer to team up."

Marcela and Aureana struck their palms with their fists. "Oh!"

"Excuse me," said Marcela, flagging down the veteran hunter who had given her party advice earlier. "We are interested in observing one of your orc hunts as a learning experience. Would you care to take on a joint mission with us? We don't need the reward for the kill. If we can have whatever is left after you've extracted the resources you plan to keep, we won't ask for more."

The veteran's eyes widened with surprise, but when one of his companions prodded him in the back, he blurted, "S-sure thing! It pays to be both cautious and studious. That's the trick to living a long life. Since you said 'observe,' should I take that to mean you girls won't be fighting?"

Marcela nodded.

"In that case, I'm a little worried about us going it alone. Well, if we were really alone, we could handle it... But if things get hairy, I dunno if we can protect you girls and still make it out unscathed. Mind if we rope another party into it?"

He was cautious enough to give the Wonder Trio a run for their money. That was the way hunters had to be if they wanted to live long enough to become an established party.

From the looks of it, his party didn't have any mages. That meant there was a high probability of him seeking out a party that did, which was a welcome development as far as the Wonder Trio was concerned. Not only would they get a look at the physical attacks of the frontline fighters, but they could also gauge the level of the local mages.

So, naturally...

"We don't mind at all. By all means, be our guests!"

And with that, the Wonder Trio's first (observation of a) monster hunt on the new continent was set.

"We're the C-rank party Heroes of the Goddess. It's a pleasure."

"We look forward to working with you."

There were five members in the veteran hunting party, the Winter Fortress, and four members in the Heroes of the Goddess. Both of them were apparently counted among the upper C-ranks. The Winter Fortress was a team of physical fighters, with swordsmen, lancers, and archers (who could also use daggers). Meanwhile, the Heroes of the Goddess were a more unusual party. With two frontline fighters, a combat mage, and a healing/support mage, they relied on preemptive magic strikes and support for the vanguard.

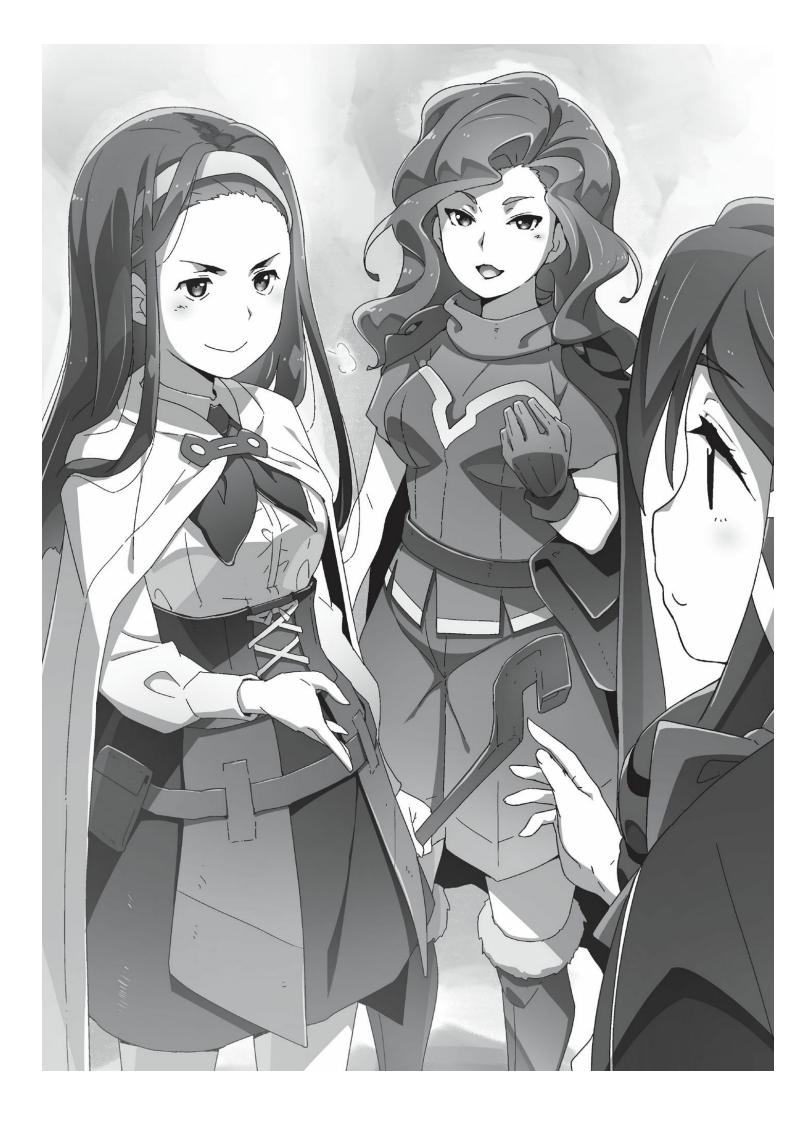
Since mages were in short supply and high demand in the hunter business, the fact that two out of their four members were mages—and both of them were women—undoubtedly made them the envy of all the other parties.

Though the two parties were previously acquainted, the true reason the Heroes of the Goddess had accepted the Winter Fortress's invitation was because their mage duo had taken an interest in the Wonder Trio. As fellow female magic users, the two more experienced women found it hard to watch a trio of underage girls plunge headlong into danger. They themselves had been lucky enough to make it as established professionals, but they had surely seen their fair share of female colleagues drop out along the way, picked off by monsters and humans alike.

I swear to protect these girls!! each of the two female mages thought in a frenzy of excitement.

"There are three orcs up ahead. Let's get 'em!" whispered the frontline fighter of the Winter Fortress, making a hand signal so that those at the rear

ould also get the message.	



Some nodded their heads, while others gave a quick wave of their hand to show they understood.

"As we discussed earlier, the mages will attack and provide support from a distance, while the Wonder Trio will hang back with them and watch. We make the first strike with magic, and then everyone else swoops in at once. We good?"

The party members nodded along with their leader's instructions—or rather, his last-minute confirmation of what they had already discussed several times now. As redundant as this seemed, it was always worth reiterating one's plans to help prevent any mistakes or mishaps.

"I see no issue with the leader's orders or his party's reactions," Marcela whispered, to which Monika and Aureana nodded.

The problem didn't seem to lie in their teamwork or preparedness. And as for their combat skills...

"Icicle Javelin!"

"Ice Needle!"

After quick incantations, the women shouted their spell names and unleashed their magic attacks. One of the two mages specialized in support magic, but it seemed she wasn't completely incapable of combat magic, as she joined in the initial assault on the defenseless enemies.

Those who were adept at attack spells could fire off powerful bursts of magic to thin the enemy ranks. Those who weren't could forgo accuracy and focus on AoE spells, which were less powerful but could still chip away at the collective enemy's strength. It was the optimal choice of attack to make before the frontline fighters headed into the fray.

The Icicle Javelin pierced one orc's shoulder, and the Ice Needles spread out and rained down upon all three.

"Charge!" yelled the leader of the Winter Fortress, and the frontline fighters

sprung forward at his command.

The Ice Needles yielded the best results when they managed to blind their targets, but failing that, they were still useful for confusing the foes and weakening their will to fight. The party threw themselves into the chaos, two fighters taking down the orc with the punctured shoulder, while the rest descended upon the remaining two monsters and slashed them to pieces.

Just like that, the three orcs went down.

Marcela had a somewhat unreasonable complaint to lodge. "Why, they're quite strong! We've been tricked!!"

"I told you we're strong! We're upper C-rank hunters, damn it! And with the two frontline fighters and two mages from the Heroes of the Goddess in the mix, we're as good as a B-rank team!" the leader of the Winter Fortress shot back, clearly taking offense at Marcela's unjustified accusation.

The Heroes of the Goddess cracked a mirthful smile. They knew the circumstances that had led to this joint-party hunt, so they weren't altogether surprised.

"The parties that would have trouble orc-hunting are the regular C-ranks and below, especially those without mages. We're upper C-ranks, so if we didn't have to worry about guarding you girls, we could have handled this on our own. I said that at the start, remember?"

"Uh, y-yes, I suppose you did..." Marcela clammed up as she recalled their conversation back at the guild. "W-well, let's move right along!"

As the whole party proceeded onward, it suddenly occurred to Marcela to store the three orcs behind them in her inventory.

The other parties had left the carcasses to rot, figuring they couldn't lug them around if they planned to do more hunting, but Marcela thought it would be a shame to waste perfectly good game. She may have been a viscountess now, but as the third daughter of an impoverished baron, she had been raised to be a

penny-pincher.

Given their plans for the day, Marcela had no intention of keeping her inventory a secret...but the two parties marching ahead of the Wonder Trio still failed to notice her stashing the three orcs away.

Next up was a battle in which the assembled hunters functioned as a stereotypical, run-of-the-mill C-rank party. The five members of the Winter Fortress would be fighting alone. No mages would be involved—only melee combatants such as swordsmen, lancers, and archers-slash-knifemen.

"With our lineup, deliberately holding back and fighting with the strength of a middle-of-the-road C-rank party is just asking to get hurt. We're gonna go all out with our attacks, so adjust for our strength however you want in your calculations."

"Very well. Rest assured, we'll be ready to assist you with magic if necessary, and we're fairly confident in our healing spells. Though I'm sure you'd rather avoid the pain regardless, and we can't repair broken armor or torn clothing," Marcela replied. She was half joking, but it was true that if their expensive armor got destroyed, the reward for the quest and profit from selling whatever meat they could carry wouldn't be nearly enough to offset the loss.

"It ain't gonna come to that!" the leader snapped as the party moved through the forest in search of prey. And then...

"Three orcs straight ahead!" the scout who had gone ahead reported in a firm whisper upon his return.

"The orcs really do fight in groups of three..."

Now that it had happened twice in a row, Marcela was finally beginning to believe that orcs operated in groups of three, even a good distance from their dens.

"As we discussed, the Heroes of the Goddess should focus on guarding the

Wonder Trio and keep attack spells in reserve for emergencies! Beware of friendly fire!"

"We're not some rookie F-ranks, so it's not going to come to that! Well, as long as you don't bumble into our line of fire after we've already cast our spells!"

The leader of the Winter Fortress had only been following protocol and reminding everyone of the plan, but one of the Heroes of the Goddess's female mages ripped him a new one for hurting her professional pride. The Wonder Trio couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him.

"...Okay, let's do this!" the leader yelled as soon as he had pulled himself back together. Not that he was nursing a crush or anything, but he had still been a little demoralized to hear a woman bite his head off.

No matter how high the odds of victory, letting one's guard down was a recipe for disaster. Before heading into a life-or-death battle, it was crucial to have not only the body but also the mind in top condition.

So, no matter how dejected he might be, he could always switch mental gears when it came time to fight. He was a professional, after all...

"What on earth is going on?!" Marcela murmured, dumbstruck.

Monika and Aureana had also gone stiff.

The Winter Fortress had won the battle soundly and unscathed. However...

"Were those orcs employing teamwork?!"

Indeed. Orcs normally fought separately, but these had each other's backs and fought as a team.

Five members was on the large side for a party. That, along with the fact that they were some of the highest-ranked veterans among the C-ranks, had scored the Winter Fortress a decisive victory. But what if they had been a smaller party of three or four members? Or a lesser C-rank party?

Even if they won the battle and wiped out the orcs, just one person getting injured would result in a heavy financial loss. Not to mention the chance that the wounded would have to retire as a hunter, the party would be forced to disband, and so on...

No one could routinely accept a request like this for such a small reward.

There was a difference between three orcs, fighting individually, and a three-orc cell. A *huge* difference. If you just had three orcs together, their strength would be three times that of a single orc. However, if the three orcs were cooperating, covering each other's blind spots, and fighting together, the threat level would skyrocket.

"They travel as a pack and fight in a coordinated fashion rather than separately... Although they certainly don't possess the superior physical capabilities of the new species we fought in that ultimate battle, their ability to work together upends the overwhelming advantage we humans are supposed to have in a fight, turning it into a contest of pure physical prowess," Aureana remarked.

Before Marcela could stop herself, she uttered one of the vulgar swears commonly thrown around by hunters. "That's freakin' nuts!"

It was language unbecoming of a noblewoman, but that went to show how rattled she was.

"Still, their physical attack and defense specs are no different than an ordinary orc. Won't we still retain the advantage, since our traditional style is to get the first hit with long-range magic, followed by a one-sided, rapid-fire assault?"

"Th-that's true... In the first battle, the attacks of the two mages from the Heroes of the Goddess got the job done. And one of them doesn't even specialize in combat magic... Which means..."

"We're in the clear!"

"Scuse me?" said the leader of the Winter Fortress, appalled.

His reaction was understandable. Three underage girls in the rear guard were treating a fight against three orcs like it was no big deal. It was the sort of thing only an overconfident, conceited fool would say.

And people like that were always the first to die.

The leader hadn't taken these girls for idiots, but now they were making asinine remarks at odds with their previous displays of intelligence—and in all seriousness, too. As he listened to them, he started to think that he shouldn't have expected any better from a bunch of kids.

"Um, about how the orcs were fighting just now... Is that normal?"

"Hm? Yeah, pretty much. What about it?"

The girls lowered their voice to whispers.

"So that was normal..."

"That must be tough on the parties with no mages."

"So wherever we go next, we can expect the recruiting wars to get even more intense..."

"Ughhhh," all three of them sighed.

"Wait, now isn't the time to worry about that! It would seem we were mistaken all along!" said Marcela.

Monika and Aureana nodded.

"The hunters here aren't weak..."

"The monsters here are strong!" all three of them exclaimed.

The Wonder Trio had finally realized the truth.

"The monsters' physical capabilities are no different from those back home, but they're smart enough to employ strategy!" Marcela murmured. "I can see how this would pose a challenge for a lesser C-rank party."

"I've been saying that this whole time! Why are you acting like it's some big revelation?!" the leader snapped.

"…"

He was totally right, so Marcela couldn't argue.

"Ahem. We shall hunt the next ones alone, so we ask that you stand by to protect us should things go awry."

"Uh, sure, fine by us..."

They had already confirmed that the physical defenses of these orcs were no different from those of the old continent. So what, you might ask, drove Marcela to lay their cards on the table?

If we don't prove our combat ability here and now, we won't be able to take on extermination jobs in this town, and none of the teenaged parties will be willing to do joint missions with us. Even the older, veteran parties won't undertake a mission as tedious and low-paying as babysitting three little girls, unless they're simply kind souls like the two parties we have here.

So Marcela thought, but she was forgetting that once word of her storage magic spread, her party would be inundated with requests to team up. Even she had her airhead moments.

"Next, let's... Oh, I almost forgot! Storage!"

And then the three orcs vanished.

The members of the Winter Fortress and the Heroes of the Goddess were paralyzed with shock, their mouths dumbly hanging open.

"Hm? Didn't I mention that I have storage magic?"

"NO!!" the two parties screamed.

After that little mishap, Marcela was grilled about her storage magic and confessed that its capacity was quite large. No one even thought to ask if the

other two girls could use it, and she never specified one way or the other. After all, the existence of *one* user of storage magic was enough of a shock, and it wouldn't do for the Wonder Trio to share all their secrets.

"So all this time, you were a storage magic user with a mind-boggling capacity... Is *that* why you girls are always walking around empty-handed? I was wondering how you were planning to camp with nothing but your staffs, daggers, and canteens... If you can fit three orcs in there no problem, I'm sure you've got room for the tarps and fur pelts to pitch a tent," the leader of the Winter Fortress muttered.

"Of course. We have tents, beds, and blankets."

"B-beds? Seriously?"

He could concede the tents and blankets.

But beds? No way.

The members of the Winter Fortress and the Heroes of the Goddess stared into space, their eyes glazing over.

For the purposes of this job, the Wonder Trio had opted not to use their search magic. The point of the mission was to test the abilities of the local hunters; there was little immediate danger. With so many experienced frontline fighters, even if they were ambushed—by, say, a monkey monster attacking them from the treetops or a goblin or kobold charging at them from the shade of a tree—they would be able to withstand the first hit. If they could buy that much time, the Wonder Trio could use their defensive magic to handle things from there.

Besides, seeing as the girls planned to keep their search magic a secret, they wouldn't be able to alert the other parties if they detected a monster in the vicinity even if they were to sense one.

And so...

"I see ogres! Four of them... Damn, they spotted us!"

In most cases, ogres worked in pairs. With two parties together and mages among their ranks, the group could handle ogres, even with the Wonder Trio slowing them down.

Or so they thought. However, they hadn't anticipated they would be dealing with *four*. Worse, the enemy had already spotted them.

The color drained from the faces of the members of the Winter Fortress and the Heroes of the Goddess.

"This is just like that line Miss Adele loves to say! 'Though you stood downwind, you fools never noticed me!'"

"It's the opposite, Lady Marcela. We were caught unawares because we stood upwind and allowed the enemy to detect our scent."

The Wonder Trio, apparently, felt no sense of urgency.

"We'll buy some time. You girls run—"

"Rock Javelin!"

"Water Cutter!"

"Hot Mist!"

The Wonder Trio simultaneously fired off their attacks with the names of their spells alone.

An ogre's muscles were tougher than an orc's, so Marcela had chosen the more advanced Rock Javelin over Icicle Javelin in hopes of getting through.

Different people cast Icicle Javelin differently—some condensed the moisture in the air into a spear shape and then froze it, while others froze the moisture first and then chiseled it into the proper shape. (The latter version was more powerful.) Regardless of your method, it wasn't a particularly difficult attack spell. However, if you were casting Rock Javelin without any solid rocks nearby, you either had to create them from the soil or retrieve them from a distance,

and both methods were extremely difficult.

Monika's Water Cutter was also rather sophisticated: Ice was one thing, but few would think to cut a hard object with water. Then there was the fact that Monika used more than just a stream of pure water. She mixed in silicon carbide as an abrasive to dramatically enhance the stream's effectiveness, and the creation of silicon carbide required a similarly very high level of imagination.

As Aureana's magic reserves were low, her choice of Hot Mist was the most effective attack spell available to her. It was a "hot" mist made of capsaicin that she had developed alongside Mile—or Adele, rather. The low cost of chemical weapons was a constant among all worlds.

Two of the ogres had survived the hits from Marcela and Monika, while the other two were still untouched. Aureana had gone with an AoE attack to weaken them and throw their ranks into chaos. This bought the girls more than enough time for a second round of attacks. Once again, they yelled only the spell names without incantations.

"Rock Javelin!"

"Water Cutter!"

"Ice Arrow!"

To prevent wildfires, it was common practice to avoid using fire magic in the forest for anything but cooking or keeping warm. However, the Wonder Trio had self-imposed restrictions on other types of magic as well.



Unlike orcs, ogres had edible flesh, and their other parts fetched a good price as raw materials. The girls avoided using attack spells that would tear their opponents to shreds so as not to diminish the value of those resources—which only proved they could afford to hold back.

"Who are these girls?"

As an awed whisper escaped the Fortress's leader's lips, all four ogres toppled to the ground.

"So you've got no plans to keep your storage magic a secret?"

"Correct. If we tried to hide it, we would have no means of bringing raw materials back to the guild, which would drastically cut into our profits. As rookie hunters, we cannot make a living from job rewards alone."

The other hunters were forced to accept Marcela's explanation. No matter how strong their offensive skills, rookie hunters couldn't take on high-ranked extermination jobs, so the ability to bring back the spoils of their hunts was indispensable.

It made sense. But still...

"People are gonna come after you. For recruitment purposes, of course, but kidnapping is also on the table."

"It's a little late to be warning us about that. Do you honestly think no one has ever tried? Yet as you can see, we're still alive and well. I'm sure you can guess what that means," Marcela replied. "Furthermore, who could hope to sell off three mages capable of silent casting, who can fell any opponent with a single blow? Gagging us or wearing out our voices will do nothing to stop us. We would simply feign helplessness until it came time for the prisoner exchange, then round up all the criminals at the scene."

"……"

This world had nothing so convenient as magic collars that enforced absolute

obedience to a master or enslavement spells that could brand someone for life. And silent casting meant the girls' counterattacks would be instantaneous.

"Wait, you girls can use silent casting? Not just spell-free casting? Oh, what am I saying, of course you can..." The leader's shoulders slumped.

After how thrilled they had been at the prospect of mentoring the newbies and saving them from an untimely death, the two female mages of the Heroes of the Goddess were feeling similarly deflated. It turned out the girls they had been looking forward to tutoring far outclassed them in skill...

And they were minors, to boot.

The group was unbelievably bummed.

"In any event, we've found out exactly—no, even *more* than what we were hoping to learn. We couldn't have done it without all of you. I sincerely appreciate you all taking the time to team up with us rookies. Now, it's a touch early, but why don't we wrap up today's joint mission here?"

The members of the Winter Fortress and the Heroes of the Goddess nodded listlessly.

"What in the blazes?!" the head butcher back at the guild screamed in surprise when he saw six orcs and four ogres dumped onto the floor. And who could blame him?

The first surprise was the girls' storage magic and its stupidly immense capacity. The second was the monsters themselves. Although this trio of girls had a storage magic user in their ranks, he couldn't imagine them having any combat ability to speak of. It should have been impossible for even the combined forces of two parties to hunt this many orcs and ogres while protecting three helpless girls.

"D-did you hunt all these yourselves?!"

The storage magic had obviously come as a shock, but the sheer number of

monsters seemed to have made the bigger impression. Three orcs would provide more meat than anyone could hope to carry, so it was normal for parties to pack up and go home after a single fight. For a moment, the butcher had been under the mistaken impression that all these kills had come from the same battle.

"Wait, I see now! You didn't hunt these all in one go! With that humongous storage space, you can fight multiple battles and still bring home all the spoils! Damn, I guess common sense goes out the window when you've got storage magic! So I'm guessin' you guys fought two trios of orcs and two pairs of ogres? That's still pushing your luck when you've got a bunch of child apprentices along for the ride. Or was it the kids who made you want to show your stuff? Don't go showing off around cute girls, you jerks—it'll get you killed! *You* guys can drop dead for all I care, but don't drag a bunch of beautiful wannabes into your stupidity!"

As a longtime acquaintance of both parties, the guild butcher knew what the Winter Fortress and the Heroes of the Goddess were capable of. He was aware that four consecutive battles—some involving ogres—were more than their combined forces could reasonably handle.

And so, he had assumed they had gotten reckless—and lucky.

"

The entire group was left dejected, red-faced, or exhausted by these comments. The hunters of the Winter Fortress and the Heroes of the Goddess had been thoroughly chewed out, while, for their part, the Wonder Trio didn't enjoy being repeatedly complimented (if you could call it that) as "cute" or "beautiful wannabes."

Not even the higher-ranked hunters would dare to cross an important guild employee like the head butcher. Heck, even the guild master had to watch himself sometimes around the person in this position. Typically, the head butcher was a retired hunter, often a veteran who had taken care of some of

the guild's most important officials when they were still fresh out of the nest, or the instructor from their beginners' training course, or a former high-ranked hunter who had once saved their life in the forest.

The same tended to be true of the old guys behind the purchasing counters.

"Ooh, this is a clean cut. You guys have gotten better," the head butcher remarked as he examined the ogres' cross-sections.

The butcher had never seen a cut made by a high-pressure stream of water mixed with silicon carbide, so he apparently thought the slice was the work of a skilled swordsman. He also thought the hole left by the Rock Javelin was made by a lancer...

He might as well have been blind.

"……"

The member of the Winter Fortress and the Heroes of the Goddess hung their heads, embarrassed. Getting complimented for something they hadn't done felt shameful.

Still, attempting to clear up this misunderstanding could lead them to violate the greatest taboo for hunters: revealing another hunter's secrets learned on the job. Of course, "secrets" included fighting styles, special skills, and weaknesses. This was to be expected, as the disclosure of such information could mean the difference between life and death in a PvP battle—especially for female hunters, who were often targeted by illegal slave traders and other unscrupulous characters.

As such, the two parties couldn't correct the butcher even if they wanted to. The girls broadcasting news of their storage magic put them in enough danger as it was; the two other parties weren't about to hand out free advice like "You'll be countered with combat magic if you charge them head-on, so a surprise attack or an ambush is your best bet."

"...."

It was a very awkward time for all the hunters present.

"Are you sure you don't want your cut of the extermination reward? You girls took down all four of the ogres! I don't even think we could've handled them on our own. At best, a few of us would've been injured, and at worst, we all would've been killed. Doesn't seem fair for—"

"A hunter is only as good as her word," Marcela cut the leader off. As per the original agreement, the Wonder Trio insisted on forfeiting the entire reward to the other two parties.

The Winter Fortress and the Heroes of the Goddess seemed to feel a bit guilty about this, but even accounting for this forfeit, it wasn't as though the Wonder Trio had earned nothing from the venture. Since the agreement was for the girls to keep what was left after the other two parties had taken what they could carry, the Wonder Trio ended up getting most of the materials from the orcs and ogres for themselves.

Of course, they didn't actually carve the monsters up on-site but instead distributed the profits based on everyone's self-assessment of how many of each body part they could have carried. It came down to how much of six orcs and four ogres seven men and two women could haul from the forest back to town.

Indeed, in the end, most of the proceeds from the sale of the monsters had gone to the Wonder Trio.

Easy money, as they say.

"Until Miss Adele and her friends arrive, let us use this town as a base to undertake all manner of jobs and get to know the area even better than the Crimson Vow! Then we will be the ones poised to lead our next venture!"

In this fashion, the Wonder Trio steadily accumulated points for promote	tion

Chapter 131:

The Merchant Girl

"OH! YOU'RE THE CRIMSON VOW, right? I have a request for you!"

"Come again?" all four girls responded.

Upon popping into the guildhall, the Crimson Vow were accosted by a girl of about fifteen or sixteen, who stopped them before they could even make it to the information or job boards.

"You personally sought us out for this? Um, do we know you?" Mavis asked, flummoxed.

It was an understandable reaction. The Crimson Vow might have made a name for themselves on the old continent, but here they were a party of brandnew mega-rookies, so it didn't make sense to be singled out like this. While they had been bringing in mountains of kills to sell, those monster parts could just as easily be purchased from the guild. There was no reason to pay extra money to handpick the girls for a job.

Plus, no one other than Hunters' Guild personnel and the local hunters was supposed to know about the Crimson Vow's mass deliveries, and for reasons of confidentiality, those people were discouraged from actively spreading the word.

"Oh, gee, I forgot to introduce myself! I'm Arli, a free trader."

"Uh-huh... So what can we do for you?"

A free trader neither owned a storefront nor peddled their wares by cart or wagon. Instead, they were more of what one might call a non-store retailer. Whatever name you gave them, they were small-time, underfunded, greenhorn merchants who earned their profits through intermediaries and other means.

Any request made through the Hunters' Guild required that the payment be

deposited with the guild in advance, so even if this greenhorn merchant had little credit to her name, there was no need to worry about getting shortchanged.

Plus, no matter how much of a small-time greenhorn a free trader might be, to be handpicked for a job by *any* merchant was an honor for an ordinary rookie hunter, as it was testament to their skills and reputation.

Yes...for an ordinary rookie hunter...

"I want you to bring me four orcs. The reward is eight half-gold."

"Huh?" the Crimson Vow said in unison.

All four of them doubted their ears.

"Sorry, could you run that by us again?" Mavis timidly ventured.

The girl repeated herself loud and clear. "I want you to bring me four orcs for eight half-gold. Oh, and let's cut out the Hunters' Guild and make this an independent request—a direct transaction between the client and the contractor!"



The four members of the Crimson Vow, along with all the hunters and guild employees who had been listening in on the conversation, couldn't help but exclaim, "ARE YOU SERIOUS?!"

"L-L-Listen, you!" Reina roared. "Did you know we could sell four orcs directly to the guild's purchasing counter for several times what you're offering?! Are you stupid?!"

The girl matter-of-factly replied, "No, not at all. But I was hoping you girls might be..."

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?!"

The girl made such an impression that the Crimson Vow looped back around to being intrigued. Thinking there might be a story behind her request, they decided to inquire about the specifics over in the guild's dining hall.

A classic case of curiosity killing the cat.

It helped that the Crimson Vow took an interest in unusual requests and wasn't hard up on coin. Any hunter who was struggling to get by would have turned her down without hesitation.

Since the name of the game was investigation, Mile took the lead.

"Why did you come to us with such absurd terms?" she asked, assuming there had to be a good reason for the girl's behavior.

All around the Crimson Vow, the ears of the other hunters and guild employees perked up with interest.

"Isn't it obvious? I'd make more money that way."

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?!"

The same cry had filled the guildhall multiple times now, but that was only to be expected. No hunter or guild employee could keep their mouth shut after hearing something like that!

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"Wh-why, you little..."

"That was too blunt!"

"Have some shame..."

"Ha ha ha ha!"
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"And you had the nerve to suggest an independent contract that cuts out the guild?! That means you don't have to pay a deposit, so we risk getting screwed over! Plus, if the request doesn't go through the guild, we can't count on support if we run into trouble, and we won't get a sympathy allowance if we get hurt! And to top it off, we won't get any contribution points! Who in the world would accept such an impractical request?!" Reina howled, highlighting all the obvious flaws with the deal. The other hunters and guild staff nodded along with her points.

The guild would lose out on its commission, too. Pitching this to a hunter one came across elsewhere would be one thing, but doing it in front of the guild's reception desk was a ballsy move.

As unorthodox a party as the Crimson Vow was, they were definitely the more sensible ones in this scenario.

"Merchants are supposed to have integrity!"

"Well, there's a fine line between integrity and naivety! I'd say there's still room for negotiation techniques or white lies..."

"Mile, stop giving this girl advice on how to swindle people," Mavis chided.

Everyone chose to ignore Pauline's lack of self-awareness. The word "integrity" sounded somewhat ridiculous coming out of *her* mouth.

"Anyway, are you sure there isn't a story here? Like, say, your family is being held hostage or your little sister will be sold into slavery if you don't pay ten gold coins by the end of the day?"

"Nope. Nothing like that."

The girl unceremoniously torpedoed Mile's last glimmer of hope.

"...."
"...."
"

"What the heck do we do now?!" Reina raged, pounding her fists on the table. "I can't believe we brought her to the dining hall to hear her out. Since we're the ones who invited her, I bet she's planning to make us foot the whole bill! You can tell by the fact that she ordered all the most expensive stuff on the menu! No, forget it, it's no big deal. It was going to be our treat, anyway. Still, it speaks to a serious personality defect to take advantage of someone doing you a favor and order yourself a lavish banquet like it's nothing! Who in their right mind would commit to an independent request from someone like that?! Be responsible for once and tell her to buzz off, Mile!"

The bees were abuzz... In other words, Reina was livid.

"Don't be like that! You and Pauline know so much about the merchant business! This is your time to shine!"

"Not interested!"

"No thank you!"

"Ha ha ha..."

Reina and Pauline were quick to reject Mile's proposal. Unsurprisingly. Not a single merchant alive would want anything to do with this.

Even a non-merchant would feel the same way.

Of course, the Crimson Vow had planned to refuse the girl's request from the beginning. Still, there remained the question of who would take on the arduous task of explaining their reasoning and getting it through this girl's thick skull. At this point, they were all desperate to push that responsibility onto someone else. It should have been as simple as saying "no," but the three girls had a hunch that it wasn't going to be that easy... No, they were sure of it.

Meanwhile, perhaps under the illusion that none of this was her problem, Mavis just cracked a rueful smile.

"Mavis, as our party leader, maybe you should—"

"Can't!" Mavis shot down Mile's desperate plea in a second flat.

Even a softie like her wasn't willing to deal with this.

In fact, her soft side was probably the reason she didn't want the responsibility of refusing someone a favor.

And so, the Crimson Vow began to bicker over who should decline the request right in front of the client in question. Most people would have taken the hint by now.

But this girl wasn't most people...

"So you're an aspiring merchant?"

"I already am a merchant! I may be a free trader, but I'm still a member of a proper Merchants' Guild!"

"…"

There was zero reason not to reject her outright, but somehow the Crimson Vow ended up hearing even more of what this eccentric self-styled merchant had to say. Call it morbid curiosity, or perhaps an endeavor to learn more about humanity by studying a specimen beyond their comprehension...

The merchant girl then asked, "Your party can only turn in a max of three orcs and ogres per day, right? The guild imposed a cap on you just to regulate prices and make life easier for themselves?"

"Huh? Uh, yes, that's true..."

The girls weren't exactly hiding it, but they weren't going out of their way to mention this information, either, so no one but the guild staff should have known about their agreement with the guild master. And since it was a bad look

for the guild to impose restrictions on hunters for their own convenience, it was unlikely that those at the guild would go out of their way to publicize the arrangement. In fact, the guild staff had probably been instructed not to talk about it.

"How do you know that?!" Reina demanded, in sharp contrast to Mile's casual admission.

"You expect a merchant to blab about her sources?"

"Erg..."

As much of an offbeat greenhorn as she was, she still seemed to grasp the most important aspects of being a merchant. Reina, who also fancied herself a merchant of sorts after her stint as a peddler with her father, couldn't argue with the girl's logic.

"You could be making a fortune with your boundless storage magic, but here you are letting your talents go to waste. So let's say, sell your vast stock of materials wholesale to me, an independent merchant who has no connection to the Hunters' Guild... Then, you wouldn't have to worry about the guild's restrictions holding you back."

"Good point!" the Crimson Vow chorused, finding her argument convincing.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!" the hunters present groaned, appalled that the girls were loudly broadcasting the guild's confidential affairs.

"STOOOOOP!" the guild staff screamed, distraught on two counts: first, that information they didn't want spread was being aired for all to hear, and second, that the Crimson Vow was boldly discussing a loophole in the guild's careful efforts to fix prices.

"Get your butts over here! Now!"

That was the guild master, who had appeared behind the five girls at some point during all this, now far behind them as they fled into the distance...

"Give me a break!" the guild master fumed.

"Um, look, we didn't intend for this to happen... We just wanted to hear the specifics of the request this merchant girl had for us," said Mavis, doing her best to stress that none of this was the Crimson Vow's fault.

"Can it! I can't believe you were running your mouths so loudly! It's embarrassing for the guild to be imposing limits on our hunters out of self-interest! That much should be obvious. Use some common sense!"

Unfortunately, the Crimson Vow didn't have much in the way of common sense when it came to matters like this.

Besides, the guild really had no business scolding its own hunters under such circumstances as these. If the guild found their need to impose restrictions "embarrassing," it was because they were ashamed of the limits of their own power in the first place.

And when Pauline pointed out as much...

"Argh! You think I don't know that?! If I don't take it out on you girls, the shame and self-loathing will eat me up!"

Clearly, this guild master had some unresolved issues.

"What a disgrace of an adult..."

"Shameful."

"What kind of person screams at innocent young girls as a form of stress relief?"

"This is piling shame on shame..."

The poor man was getting bashed from all sides.

"I'm sorry for the trouble our dimwitted guild master has caused you." The clerk who had come along earlier to advise the muscle-brained guild master stepped in again, this time to apologize to the Crimson Vow and the merchant girl. "But we would appreciate it if you all could give it a rest..."

"Huh?"

"Please. Give. It. A. Rest."

There was a smile on the guild clerk's face, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"Y-y-yes, ma'am!" the members of the Crimson Vow promptly replied, their faces frozen in fear. The merchant girl said nothing.

To be fair, if her life as a merchant was riding on this opportunity, she wasn't going to abandon her get-rich-quick scheme because some clerk had glared at her or threatened her. Even without so much at stake, no merchant would easily drop a profitable deal due to outside interference.

It was notable that none of the other merchants around had given much thought to the temporary oversupply of monster parts or the return to normal that followed. No doubt, they simply assumed that a high-ranked hunting party had stayed in town for a few days before moving on. Being the first to uncover the truth of the matter was a once-in-a-lifetime underdog victory for this girl. There was no way she was going to relinquish that advantage so easily. And so...

"Okay, how about we take our business discussion elsewhere? As a member of the Merchants' Guild, the politics of the Hunters' Guild aren't really my concern."

"Enoough!" the clerk and guild master yelled, matching blue veins popping out on both their foreheads.

Seeing this, the Crimson Vow determined that this clerk was just as bad as the guild master.

It was clear that this conversation would go nowhere as long as the guild and the girl refused to see eye to eye. And so, after assuring the leadership that they understood the reasons for the cap and would do their best not to inconvenience the guild, the Crimson Vow took the girl with them and left the Hunters' Guild.

"So, can someone please explain to me why we're traveling with this girl?"
"......"

Somehow, the greenhorn merchant girl, whose name was Arli, was still hanging around the Crimson Vow. And somehow, Mavis was the only one who had the good sense to think it was about time to get rid of her.

Reina and Pauline had both been seized by some inexplicable sense of duty—something along the lines of, As a would-be merchant myself, I can't let this dangerous, delusional creature loose in the wild!

For Mile's part, she simply thought the girl seemed interesting. Perhaps she was reminded of her friendless, socially awkward past-life self.

Granted, where Misato had trouble expressing herself, Arli had the habit of blurting out the most outrageous things, so they didn't actually have that much in common... Still, the "friendless" aspect felt like strong enough grounds to make the connection.

In the end, Arli followed the girls all the way back to their inn.

"If you think it's a bad idea to bypass the guild and flood the market with monster parts, I have other ways for you to make money!"

"Like what?" Pauline took the bait, her interest piqued by the mention of profit.

"We could start a delivery service! You girls are perfect for transporting heavy, bulky, and fragile goods. Just imagine, a mass transit system without the need for a wagon! Great idea, right?"

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"Ah..."
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"Mm..."

"Aww..."

"Huh?" Arli was taken aback by the Crimson Vow's underwhelming reaction.

"We're C-rank hunters, in case you haven't noticed."

"Delivery jobs are a chore that either dedicated professionals or low-paid D-ranks and below do to make ends meet!"

"It would be downright shameful for a C-rank hunter to accept a job of that caliber. It's tantamount to stealing work from professionals and newer hunters."

"Storage magic means we can operate on a much bigger scale, sure, but that won't change the rules of the industry."

"Seriously...?"

A greenhorn merchant wouldn't know much about the world of hunters, so it couldn't be helped that her first idea was a bust. As for her next suggestion...

"Okay, what if you walked past a jewelry shop and stored their wares?"

"That's a crime!"

"That's just stealing!"

"We would never stoop that low!"

"Wow, I can't believe I never thought of that before!"

"Pauline!"

"Pauline, please..."

Pauline's friends shot her a frosty look.

"I-I was joking, you guys!" She rushed to defend herself, but they were all well aware that when a comment like came out of her mouth, it was no laughing matter. In a panic, she added, "Oh, come on, what kind of person do you think I am?!"

"A greedy miser."

"A money-grubber."

"Someone who would do anything for a profit."

"The same kind as Arli," all three of them said in unison.

"How could yooooou?!"

Pauline's party definitely had her number. She sulked until Mile, worried that they had teased her too much, turned the conversation back to Arli.

"Why did you choose to become a merchant, Arli? I don't think you're cut out for it."

Mile could be pretty rude sometimes. Most people wouldn't say that to someone they had just met. If her sister from her past life were here, this was the part where she would have said, "See, this is your problem, Sis..."

"Because of my dad..."

"Oh, is he a merchant? You wanted to follow in his footsteps, then?"

"He said it was an easy way to make money without doing physical labor..."

"So he's not?!"

"Apologize to merchants everywhere!!"

Mile was gobsmacked, while Reina and Pauline were furious.

This conversation wasn't going anywhere.

Arli's voice was getting lower and flatter, too. Her expression had gone blank, and she had none of her earlier pep. She was speaking more slowly and saying less.

"Why'd you get so subdued, deadpan, and untalkative all of a sudden?! What happened?!"

"This is the real me... I just force myself into character when I'm on the job. At this point, I've hit my limit."

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?!"

Mile was right. This girl wasn't cut out to be a merchant at all.

[&]quot;You're from the capital? Then why come all the way to this provincial town?

Your average merchant would rather do business in the capital, I'd think," said Mile. Reina and Pauline nodded along in agreement.

"It's true," Arli said. "All the savvy merchants born and raised in the suburbs head straight for the capital, leaving only the talentless hacks behind... So I figured it would be easier to rise to the top here."

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They understood the point she was trying to make. They could even understand where she was coming from on some level. But still...

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"ARE YOU SERIOUS?!"
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Understanding it and approving of it were two different things.

"Not all provincial merchants are idiots!"

"By your own logic, you're a hack without the talent to make it in the capital!"

"And it certainly doesn't seem like you've risen to the top here..."

"Ha ha..."

Arli was a force to be reckoned with. And not the type they could fight...

The whole party was starting to feel tired.

And the next day...

"Let's do our best out there today!"

"Yeah!" came four voices in unison.

"…."

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"Why do we have an extra person?!"

Yes. Four voices had responded to Reina's rallying cry.

That was one too many.

What is this, the entrance exam for Galactic University?

As usual, Mile was thinking her weird thoughts.

"Now that it's come to this, we have no choice but to expose the interloper in our—"

"It's obviously Arli!" Reina cut in coldly.

Mile was devastated to have been robbed of her game of deduction.

"We're about to go do our hunter work!" Reina began. "Why is a merchant like you tagging along?! Even if you were a hunter, there would be no reason for you to join us!"

"She's right!" Pauline chimed in after Reina, her mood decidedly foul. "Plus, now that I think about it, you're a merchant and a money-grubber! That's stealing my whole gimmick! Are you out to jeopardize my position?!"

Oh, she didn't notice the overlap until now... the other members of the Crimson Vow thought. And she admits she's a money-grubber.

What's more, Reina was also a self-styled merchant. If there were three merchants among five girls, their personas would start to blend together. Thanks to her strong personality, Reina didn't seem too concerned about this prospect, but Pauline, who considered herself plain and unremarkable, considered it a huge dilemma.

Of course, as their resident big-boobed, black-hearted money-grubber, Pauline's party considered her a strong personality in her own right...

"Well, I guess it's not a problem for us if you come along. We've already advertised our storage magic to the rest of the Hunters' Guild, and the only reason we were ranked so low before was because we were new registrants. We hunt orcs and ogres every time we go out, so everyone knows we have the skills of an upper C-rank to a B-rank... In fact, we *are* C-ranks now. If there's a

problem here, it's whether you can brave the danger of the hunting grounds we like to frequent."

Mile claimed Arli's presence wouldn't be a problem; however, the other members of the party weren't so sure. It was a bad idea to let an outsider discover the true nature of Pauline's hot magic—or rather, that it was possible to extract the pungent component known as capsaicin and use it for spells. Information like that was the trifecta of profitable, reproducible, and attractive to money-grubbers. But this had not occurred to Mile.

"Huh?" Fortunately, Arli had her own concerns upon hearing Mile's description of the party's hunting grounds.

Arli, who had apparently started out as a farmer's daughter and worked her way up to merchant, obviously had no experience fighting monsters. There was no question that even a goblin or a kobold could take her out in a heartbeat. And the hunting grounds where the newly C-ranked Crimson Vow were headed was not the kind of newbie-friendly area where only slimes, goblins, or kobolds would appear. It definitely wasn't a safe place to bring an ordinary girl who wasn't even a hunter.

"O-on second thought, a merchant's job is to buy and sell game and materials! Interfering with the work of those in another industry would be wrong of me!" Arli babbled, back in the "peppy" mode she supposedly adopted to act like a proper merchant. "I'll be here eagerly awaiting your return!"

"What are we gonna do about her?" Reina grumbled as the group headed for the forest.

"I'm not sure how to answer that," said Mavis, her expression equally pained.

"If we don't want to cause problems for the guild and its hunters, we can't break our promise to the guild master. Which means we also can't exploit a loophole in the agreement by selling to the Merchants' Guild or a small business. Even if we decided to do something like that, we'd just sell our stock

directly. There'd be no reason to make her the middleman and give her a cut of the profits, right?"

"Yes, precisely! We already have a business manager—me!" Pauline seemed unwilling to back down on that point. "Besides, she's just a small-time merchant who came to us hoping to take advantage of Mile's storage. What do you think will happen if we take pity on her and let her exploit us like that?"

"All the small-time and greenhorn merchants in town will flock to us..." Mile sighed.

"No, worse," Pauline shot back. "All the merchants and regular old money-grubbers will come swarming in. Why shouldn't they? We'd be as good as a magic mallet that spits out super-profitable materials with a little pestering. If we don't want to get dragged into trouble, we shouldn't supply goods to anyone but the Hunters' Guild, irrespective of any promises we've made. We should also avoid direct dealings with the Merchants' Guild. I'm sure they've settled on a division of duties with the Hunters' Guild, and they can't resist the pressure from the more influential merchants. The Merchants' Guild doesn't enjoy the same freedom as the Hunters' Guild."

"Whoa..." Mile's eyes widened, but she seemed to buy Pauline's explanation. "So you're saying we should totally ice Arli out and refuse to give her the time of day? I'd feel kind of bad about that. Didn't she come to us after picking up on something that none of the other merchants did, convinced that her livelihood hung in the balance? I feel like we should honor her powers of investigation with at least an Outstanding Effort Award or a Passionate Performance Award, if not a Zojirushi Award..."

"As usual, I have no idea what you're talking about," said Reina, exasperated. (Though at least this time she could understand most of it—apart from the mysterious "Zojirushi Award.")

"It doesn't seem like any of the other merchants have caught on to us yet, so what if we helped her make some coin just this once before cutting her off?"

Mile proposed.

"You're too much of a pushover! Whatever our intentions, no merchant would let a perfectly good moneymaker go without a fight. She'd follow us around for the rest of our lives!"

That was a pretty convincing argument coming from Pauline.

"This is a problem," said Reina.

"Quite a dilemma," said Mavis.

"A real pickle," agreed Mile and Pauline.

Were the average hunter to be plagued by someone who sniffed out their secrets, followed them around, and hounded them relentlessly, they would speedily dispose of their stalker in a discreet and efficient manner. Obviously, the Crimson Vow had no intention of doing that. And so...

"I stand by my earlier idea. Why don't we give her a one-time wholesale of something valuable as a special gift, then say, 'This is the first and last time. If you don't like that, we'll cancel the sale and cut you off now'? And we make it clear that we won't be taking requests from anyone else after that, either," Mile suggested.

"Hmm, maybe it's not the worst idea... We don't have any real obligation to do it, but I know you have a policy of rewarding hard workers. Sure, I'm fine with that. If we run into trouble afterwards, we can always just leave this town for the capital."

"I have no objections."

"If everyone else agrees, I don't mind."

Reina, Mavis, and Pauline were all on board with Mile's plan.

"What if we sold her one of the rare, high-level monsters in Mile's storage?" Mavis proposed. "That wouldn't affect the market price of the other monsters, and it would probably bring in enough profit for her to rent a small storefront. Maybe then she'd be satisfied and concentrate on running her shop."

"No way," Reina argued. "She'd demand that we fork over more of those high-profit monsters and latch on to us harder than ever. Plus, the other merchants would come swarming as soon as they heard about it. We need to make it something she'll *know* is a one-time thing.

"Worse, if people find out we've killed such high-level monsters before, they'll get on our case about where and when we hunted them, the Crown will send an investigation team to look into it, and the whole thing will turn into a big to-do. Since a lone monster can't just appear out of thin air, they'll assume there are at least a few dozen packs living in the area. As a natural consequence, it will become public knowledge that we killed them, and that we did it as a party of four young girls with no backers aside from the Hunters' Guild. And when that happens..."

"Oh man..."

Reina didn't have to finish that sentence.

"Plus," Pauline added, "if the regional or royal army is sent in, the local population is agitated, and the operations of hunters in the area are restricted, all to deal with the threat of some high-level monsters that don't even exist, we'll be disrupting the lives of an inordinate number of people. If it comes out later that we were lying, we'll have to pay exorbitant damages, and we'll be taken into the custody of either the Crown or the local lord and put to work however they see fit."

"Good point. Though at least it would serve the kingdom much better to keep our handy four-man cell as compliant combat slaves than to send us to the mines," Mile said with her usual optimism.

All four of them agreed on this before losing themselves in thought for a time.

"Oh, I know! How about a sea serpent?" Mile suggested. "That way, no one would ask where we hunted it or if there are schools of them around. And since the materials don't appear on the market, we wouldn't have to worry about a price collapse. No matter how many of them we hunt or how the price

fluctuates, no one else would be inconvenienced. And if she wants more, we can tell her to go hunt one herself, 'cause we refuse to brave that danger again."

"Great idea!" the other members of the party concurred.

Sure enough, no hunter alive would brave the open sea in a tiny fishing boat just to hunt sea serpents, so the only time the materials were ever in stock was when a dead one happened to wash up on the beach, and by that point, most of its flesh and skin would have rotted or been eaten by marine life, leaving its bones and teeth as the only usable resources.

Even that only happened once every few years or so. Sea serpent materials were exceedingly rare.

Everyone knew where to go to hunt the creatures. Yet it was far too dangerous a hunting ground, and far too dangerous a prey, to tell a hunter to go back there and slay some more.

"I like it. The only question is, how do we get out to sea?" asked Reina.

The other three froze. "Ah..."

Sure, they had slain a bunch of sea serpents with ease one time, but that was because they had Kragon for transportation and the ship as a platform to fight on.

They didn't need Kragon, but they *did* need a ship. Mile could fly if she had to, but that still left the other three, the fight, and the retrieval of their catch to worry about.

It was hard to imagine any fisherman lending his boat for such a risky venture. A boat was a fisherman's fortune. It was perhaps as valuable as a house in a prime urban location would be to a modern Japanese person.

A fisherman's boat was his very soul. A precious asset to pass on to his son when he took over the business. Who would take *that* out to sea to indulge the nonsense of some little girls from out of town who wanted to hunt sea

serpents?

Only a fool would agree to something like that.

"All right, I'm in!"

"How stupid are you?!"

By some miracle, an old fisherman had taken them up on their reckless proposal. He was about sixty years old, give or take.

"I've lived a long life! I was already thinkin' of taking my partner out for a voyage instead of withering away and burdening my loved ones. My son just built himself a new ship, so he gave me back my old faithful. It's no loss to anyone if a battered old geezer and a battered old boat go down together! And to do it alongside four pretty ladies is a luxury not even the highest of nobles could afford. I'll ascend straight to heaven, no doubt about that!"

Sixty was pretty old in this world. Appendicitis and pneumonia killed people all the time, and more died in childbirth than in war—both babies and mothers. Plus, poor nutrition meant that people aged quickly. A fisherman's skin was especially prone to cracking and wrinkling from decades of exposure to the tides and sun.

Anyone who could live to this man's age and leave behind children and grandchildren would have no regrets. Indeed, it could even be joyful to escape the ugliness of old age through a glorious end.

"No fair, Viral!"

"I want that job!"

"You don't even have a boat!"

"Please, take me with you!"

When the old men who had overheard their conversation began to crowd around them, the situation quickly got out of hand.

The Crimson Vow had returned to the first fishing village they had visited after arriving on this new continent. Upon arrival, the old men from the welcome feast had gathered to say hi, providing the perfect opportunity for them to ask around to see if there were any foolhardy fishermen who happened to own a boat. This was the outcome.

"We're not heading off to our deaths! If you're looking to die, please do it on your own! As young girls with bright futures ahead of us, we have no interest in going down with you!"

"Wa ha ha, fair point!"

"Wa ha ha ha!" roared the whole crowd.

And so the girls secured a boat and a helmsman.

But at what cost?

The fishing boat left the harbor and headed out to sea. It was a small boat with only a single triangular sail, but there was still plenty of room for the Crimson Vow to fight. All the spoils could go into Mile's storage (a.k.a. inventory), so there was no need to worry about running out of space. The vessel was designed to be propelled by a combination of oars and sail, but thanks to the Vow's wind magic, the sail would be playing a much larger role on this journey.

Of course, it wasn't feasible to keep the wind magic going for the entire voyage, but it was handy to have for setting sail, docking, and other such key moments.

And as for the rowing part...

"You girls are somethin' else!"

"Either of you wanna marry my grandson?"

"Ha ha..."

Indeed. Loath to leave the grueling task of rowing the boat to a bunch of old men, Mile and Mavis had volunteered for the job...but they were a little *too* good at it.

Mile's strength went without saying, and Mavis had a mechanical left arm and a body modified to withstand the recoil of its output. This was not to mention strength-enhancing magic that went by the name of "spirit power." The men, who took pride in their well-toned bodies despite their old age, were shocked to find that the girls' combined powers far surpassed their own.

"There wouldn't be a point!" Reina snapped. "No matter how good a fisherman's wife is at rowing, she's stuck at home taking care of the house!"

"Good point..."

For a moment there, the old men seemed almost convinced. But then—
"Wait, but what if they pass their strength on to our great-grandchildren?"
"Great idea!"

"I have no plans to get married in the foreseeable future!"

On board were the four members of the Crimson Vow and four retired fishermen, including the boat's owner, an old man named Viral. The old men had come along to, in their own words, "balance the ratio of girls to escorts." Supposedly, there was a "fishermen's version" of Valhalla, where all the brave warriors who died at sea were summoned after death.

The Crimson Vow had no desire to end up in an afterlife like that, but they refrained from saying so. It didn't matter, since they had no intention of dying, anyway.

As the boat headed out to sea...

"Ready the line!"

"Heave ho!"

"Huh? We're going to use a longline to catch a sea serpent?" asked Mile, skeptical.

"Oh, nah, there's just no telling when we're gonna come under attack. Since we've made it all the way out to the open sea, we figure we might as well see what's lurking in these virgin fishing grounds! It's a fisherman's lifelong ambition—his dream—to fish out on the ocean where sea serpents abound. It couldn't hurt to make that dream come true at the very end!"

"Oh. Cool."

Mile was somewhat familiar with the concept of male dreams and ambitions. Mavis also bobbed her head in understanding.

Of course, this longline wasn't like the ones found on Earth, which could have a mainline anywhere from several kilometers long to over a hundred. It was a single rope a few dozen meters in length. In fact, it was an entirely different type of fishing gear from anything used in this world and known by a different term in the local language—"longline" was really just the closest Japanese equivalent.

"We've got something! Urgh... B-blast, either it's a big one or a bunch of medium-sized fishies took the bait all at once... It's too heavy to reel in! A little help here!"

Though only one longline had been used, several snoods were attached to the mainline so that a large number of fish could be caught at once. Instead of letting the line sit for a while before retrieving it, the men had tried to pull it up immediately after casting; however, since they were quite literally out on the open ocean, where the fish population was still abundant, they already had a significant catch. With either an unexpectedly large fish or too many smaller ones on the line, the call went out for all hands on deck.

A total of six people—the four old men, plus Mile and Mavis—struggled to pull up the mainline with all their might. There was no handy electric winch to

help them. They had no choice but to put some elbow grease into it, all the while watching out for the bait hooks that had no fish on them.

Mile was strong, but she weighed very little. And since the deck of the boat was slippery and wet, it was hard for her feet to get purchase.

In short, it was difficult to exert her full strength.

With her left arm to aid her, Mavis contributed more to the effort.

Reina and Pauline were out of the game from the start. Staying out of the way would be more helpful than anything else.

It took an awfully long time to reel in just a few dozen meters of line.

At long last, piles of caught fish lay before an exhausted heap of old men. The small ones were somewhere around thirty centimeters, while the larger ones were over two meters long. Some had been even bigger than that, but those had been plucked directly from the sea into Mile's storage rather than hoisted onto the deck.

The ones that were poisonous or otherwise inedible were released back into the sea, save for those whose skin and teeth could be sold as materials. These were no goblins. Even fish that weren't useful to humans could play a role in the balance of nature, so it would be wrong to kill them for no reason.

"Whew! Would ya take a look at this?!"

"I see silver salmon, rainbow tuna, and marlins..."

"Why, I haven't seen a rainbow tuna this big in decades!"

"I'm glad I could make a catch like this at the very end..."

"I CAN END MY LIFE AS A FISHERMAN WITH NO REGRETS!!" all four men chorused.

"Um, hello? Sorry to break up the excitement, but our goal here isn't to catch regular fish."

The boat charter fee, labor costs, and even the extra money to cover the hazards of the voyage had all been paid in advance, but the old men's chances of survival were so slim that they had given the money to their families. Their loved ones had wept, but no one had tried to hold them back. There was no stopping an old man who was on his way to perform his swan song. Surely that's what they were all thinking.

It was just that kind of world, and a fishing village was just that kind of place.

"Our catches and bait have bled quite a bit. Our guests should be here any moment now. Everyone, please huddle in the corner and assume a defensive position! Reina, Pauline, prepare for battle!"

With these words, Mile cleared the deck, storing all the catches, lines, and other obstacles that she had left out to let the old men savor the moment.

It was time for a player substitution. Reina and Pauline gave up their spot in the corner to the old men and proceeded to the center of the deck.

Though the fishing boat was small, there was still ample space for four girls to fight. This was especially true since the enemies wouldn't be joining the fight on the deck; rather, the girls would strike the serpents down as they rose from the water. Mile and Mavis were also the only ones wielding swords, while Reina and Pauline barely had to swing or move their limbs at all. There was plenty of room to work with.

"Here it comes! Starboard, two o'clock, thirty meters away and ten meters deep! A swarm of long and slender monsters is approaching at high speed!"

Naturally, Mile was using search magic. Otherwise, any attack from the water would qualify as an ambush.

Letting the old men die or sinking the ship were not options. The girls had to vanquish the enemy forces before they could bore a hole in the bottom of the boat. If their opponents were ordinary serpents with sinuous bodies, that would be one thing, but if they were pointy like swordfish and strong enough to pierce wooden planks, things could get ugly fast.

Thus, Mile's role in all this was to protect the old men and, if she detected enemies gunning for the keel of the ship with her search magic, to erect a barrier. Whatever strength she had left could then go toward killing the sea serpents.

Reina could also put up a barrier, but she wasn't as skilled as Mile; she could only surround herself and those around her—though that would still suffice in this scenario. That said, if she put up a barrier, she couldn't attack from inside of it, and maintaining the shield would prevent her from using other types of magic, so it would exclude her from the strike force. As such, Reina had no plans to play defense unless the enemy forced them into a precarious position.

"If it's the same type of serpent we fought when we first came to this continent, we should be fine," said Mile.

Sea serpents were rarely seen in their entirety, and the testimonies of the few survivors of attacks were unreliable, so the creatures had yet to be properly classified. As a result, almost all giant, slender sea-dwelling monsters were called "sea serpents," and you had no way of knowing what you were up against until you encountered one. The smaller, serpentine ones they'd fought last time had been manageable, but if these turned out to be some wannabe Jörmungandr or what would be called Chinese dragons on Earth, they might prove too much for even the Crimson Vow.

The civilization of this world had once been quite advanced, so Mile wanted to believe that no monsters so extraordinary or mythical existed, but...

I mean, we do have elder dragons... And since the sea serpents probably came here during the interdimensional invasion long ago, it wouldn't surprise me if some gigantic ones had been part of the initial group of monsters to make their way here. It could be that survivors or their descendants are still around—say, for example, some long-lived species of sea-dwelling monster, or a giant type that has continued to breed quietly in the unchanging sea...

Even while she was thinking all this, Mile still made sure to stay attentive to

the task at hand.

"The enemy is rocketing to the surface! They're poised to bypass the bottom of the ship and come at us from both sides! Prepare to intercept in five, four, three, two, one...now!!"

With a splash, several slender figures shot up from either side of the ship and towered overhead.

The monsters' heads snapped forward as they lunged at the people aboard the ship.

Slash!

Chop!

Thud!

One was cut down by a sword and a Water Cutter.

Another was felled by an exploding fireball. As there was no danger of a fire spreading at sea, Reina had used her specialty magic. She was confident enough in her aim that she would never screw up and burn the ship by accident.

From the looks of it, these sea serpents were different from the ones that the Crimson Vow had fought before—their bodies were a bit fatter and they had more sinister-looking heads, with glinting eyes and sharp rows of teeth.

Slash!

Chop!

Thud!

Slash!



The Crimson Vow's three-man cell fired off the same string of attacks over and over again.

Every now and then, the slash of Mile's sword was added to the mix, mostly whenever the sea serpents aimed their attacks at the old fishermen.

As Mile was responsible for protecting the ship's keel with her barrier, it looked like she was taking it easy, but her mind was perpetually occupied with her search magic.

Sea serpents piled up one after another on the deck, while others floated on the surface of the surrounding sea. Anything that looked liable to get in the way or sink to the ocean floor, Mile collected in her storage.

On the deck, a number of sea serpents that hadn't quite died before being retrieved were writhing and thrashing about.

Next thing the girls knew, the old men were joining the fight against the monsters, harpoons and files in hand.

"It's too dangerous! You should stay back—"

"This is for my brother! Take that! And that!"

"You'll pay for taking my father from me!"

"Gimme back my soooon!"

"This is the harpoon Johan left behind! I'll take revenge for him here and

now!"

"…"

Is this why the fishermen were so interested in such a dangerous fishing trip? It also explains why it was so easy to pick the members for the group, when so many people seemed eager to go...

Anyone who had been in the fishing business for decades was bound to have seen monsters stray into inland waters. And then there were those fishermen who had gotten greedy and taken their boats too far offshore.

In the same way, men who had been fishing their whole lives were also bound to have lost beloved family and friends...

Even if these monsters weren't the same ones that had taken the lives of their loved ones, a sea serpent was a sea serpent. These men had clung to the hope that they would one day get their revenge...

They didn't actually want to die at all. But killing a sea serpent in a final blaze of glory would be worth throwing away what little remained of their lives.

"These fishermen have waited a long time for this, haven't they? For the day when they could finally give their lives to strike back at the sea serpents."

No one could find the words to respond to Mavis, but the chanting of attack spells and the sounds of swords slicing through the air filled the silence.

And not a single one of the girls tried to stop the old men from putting themselves in harm's way.

"It's over," said Mile. At her words, everyone on board finally stopped what they were doing.

Both the deck and all the crew's clothes were sticky, slimy, and stained red with the sea serpents' blood and mucus.

"Clean!"

Mile cleaned everyone up with a spell, then stowed the dead monsters in her inventory. She also cleaned the deck while she was at it.

After that came healing the old men. This part probably ought to have come before the cleaning, but it was possible Mile had good reason to prioritize hygiene, so her party members didn't feel the need to comment.

Even as Mile cast her cleaning magic on them, the old men stood there motionless. Every single one of them was sobbing, letting tears flow freely down their cheeks...

"Would you like to do a little more sea serpent hunting?" Mile asked. "And after that, we could use the longline to catch a bunch of rainbow tuna to bring back to the village."

At first, no one reacted to her proposal.

Gradually, however, the old men lifted their heads and wiped their eyes, the expressions on their faces warping from ones of sorrow to smiles.

"Yeah!"

"Bring it on!" they shouted.

A small fishing boat sailed toward a dock in a small fishing village, one so humble it could not truly be called a harbor. The boat's triangular sail billowed in a magical wind, and two flags flew from its mast.

One was a flag indicating they had caught a big haul of fish—what is commonly known as a *tairyo-bata* flag.

The other was a victory flag, signifying the defeat of a sworn enemy. It had been nearly twenty years since this flag had last flown from a village ship.

Though it was still some distance away, the villagers spotted the boat returning from its raid on the open sea—along with the two flags fluttering above its mast.

News spread, and the entire village gathered at the harbor to await the ship's arrival.

On board, Mile had loaded the deck with sea serpents, rainbow tuna, silver salmon, marlins, and all other manner of fish. As many as she could fit without sinking the boat...

And then...

"Three cheers for the raiding ship! Hip, hip, hooray!"

The villagers cheered, and the women began to head home before the boat had even docked, eager to begin the preparations for a village-wide feast.

Coastal dwellers had good eyesight. From the *tairyo-bata* and the piles of fish on the deck, they could see that the haul included not only their long-time nemeses the sea serpents but also a large number of gourmet fish.

At the dock, the village chief belatedly called for a village-wide feast and announced that alcohol would be served from the village's stockpile.

A group of just four old retired fishermen and four little girls from out of town had made an all-too-reckless venture into the open sea. What's more, they had gone looking for sea serpents, not fish.

Clearly, these were four girls with a death wish...and four old men who weren't much different.

No one could bear to stop them, but everyone had seen the group off expecting it to be a final farewell. Yet against all the odds, they had come back alive...and come back victorious, with an enormous haul!

Tears of joy streamed down the faces of the village chief and his people.



The next morning, exhausted from celebrating with the villagers all night long, the Crimson Vow got ready to leave for the port city they had made their home base. The villagers had strongly encouraged them to stay for a while, but the girls had the hunch that tonight was going to be yet another feast. Since the village now had mountains of perishable fish in supply, it only made sense to concentrate on consuming those rather than going out and fishing more... The Crimson Vow decided to get out before they overindulged in the festivities.

Before leaving, Mile asked her four new comrades-in-arms, "Are you sure you don't want to keep one of the sea serpents as a trophy?"

"Yeah, we're sure. We can't possibly dry such a large catch. Even if we wanted to keep one, it'd just rot," one of the old men replied, a touch wistfully.

"Huh? Sure we can. It's easy with magic."

"YOU CAN?!"

Mile proceeded to dry—or maybe "mummify" would be the right word—one sea serpent for each of the men, magically draining the water from the monsters' bodies. She took requests as to how the serpents should be posed before she began the drying process, and her ability to make them look cool without taking up too much space was a testament to her attention to detail.

After that, the Crimson Vow departed the village...

With the old men in tow.

"Sorry to impose! It's tough to carry our share into town to sell, and it's easy to damage the goods. With such a big ol' haul, it's easier to sell it wholesale to the Merchants' Guild than to each shop individually, even if it means the price takes a little hit. We'd sure appreciate it if you little ladies would deliver these goods straight to the Merchants' Guild for us!"

"Ha ha, I imagine so! Sure, don't sweat it. We're headed back to town anyway, so we won't be going out of our way!"

Seeing as this dangerous mission could easily have resulted in the loss of their boat and their lives, the fishermen had received half of the successful haul as a completion bonus, in addition to the gold coins paid up front. If the men wanted to take their reward into town to be exchanged for coins, Mile didn't see an issue with carrying it in her "storage" for them.

And so, all four old men, eager to brag about their exploits in town, decided to accompany the Crimson Vow. To be fair, it was dangerous to walk home carrying a lot of money, so the more people in the group, the better. The four men together should be safe. Not many would have the guts to attack a bunch of men who were quite buff for their old age, brandishing harpoons and casting menacing looks.

Poke. Poke.

Everyone was all smiles. There were no problems at—

Poke. Poke.

"What is it, Reina?! Why do you keep poking me in the back?" Mile turned around, only to find a somewhat conflicted look on Reina's face. "Huh? What's wrong?"

Pauline muttered, "Remind us again why we went hunting for sea serpents?"

"Huh? Well, uh, you know... Oh, right! We wanted to help Arli make a little profit as a severance of sorts, so we decided to bring her one...sea serpent... because those rarely appear on the market..."

""

[&]quot;And as we speak, these old fishermen are on their way to sell their vast

supply of fish through the Merchants'	Guild,"	said Reina.	"Along with	a huge
quantity of sea serpents"				

"....." "...."

"Our whole plan is ruined!" the girls cried.

The Crimson Vow had won the battle but lost the war.

Side Story:

The Perfect Balance

HAVE A QUICK QUESTION for you, Mile."

"Oh, sure, what is it?"

A few days had passed since the Crimson Vow's arrival on the new continent.

Considering it an information gathering exercise-slash-tutorial, as well as a chance to make a bit of a name for themselves in the region before heading to the capital, the girls had made the port city where they were currently staying their temporary home base.

It was mostly coincidence that this had been their landing point on the continent, but a port city was also a good place to gather information and ingredients from all over the land, and a great place for seafood. This latter fact meant that all those who appreciated Mile's culinary skills and knowledge—and Mile herself most of all—had been quite eager to hang around.

Meanwhile, Reina seemed to have something to ask Mile.

"Just how much are you planning to screw us here?"

"Pardon?" Failing to understand the meaning of Reina's question, Mile shot her a blank look. And then...

"R-Reina, how could you?! Have some shame!"

"P-Pauline's right, Reina! Mile is the youngest of us all, a minor, a somewhat respectable girl...and a noblewoman yet to be engaged! Don't talk about her as if she were some kind of harlot!"

"Huh? What are you guys talk—ah! Y-you've got it all wrong! I didn't mean it like that!"

Apparently, Pauline and Mavis had wildly misconstrued her meaning.

"Oh, so that's what you meant... Why didn't you just say so?"

"That's some attitude to take when *you* jumped to the wrong conclusion!" Reina snapped.

"Sorry." Pauline and Mavis backed down without a fight.

"So what you actually meant to ask Miley was..."

"Right. I wanted to ask her how much trouble she's planning to get up to on this new continent. She has stupidly strong magic and a stupidly huge storage capacity, friendly relations with the elder dragons, and incredible spells she can cast by calling upon the spirits of the magic realm. If we do all the same things we did on the last continent, we'll end up right back where we started, with merchants, nobles, and royalty hanging all over us. Then we'll be forced to pack up and flee to the next continent, right?"

"Umm..." Mile had nothing to say for herself.

"Reina makes a good point," Mavis and Pauline agreed.

"So the first thing we need to do is lay down some clear ground rules as to what's acceptable and where we have to be more careful."

All three girls had to admit that was a good idea. "Okay..."

"Although, frankly, I think that ship may have sailed."

"Ha ha..." Mavis and Pauline couldn't help but laugh.

Even Mile could concede that there might be some truth to that statement.

"Okay, it's been a while since we've done this, but it's time for a group meeting!"

"The first question is whether or not to make Mile's storage magic public knowledge. It's inconvenient not to be able to use it freely, and we can't make much money if we can't bring back the spoils of our hunts. Besides, I think the

secret's already out..."

The other members of the Crimson Vow all nodded.

"However, the existence of the spirits and Mile's role as the divine messenger need to stay top secret. We can't tell a soul."

More nodding.

"Everything that happened on the old continent should be confidential as well. We did tell some of our stories to the elder dragons, but they wouldn't bother repeating those to humans, so that shouldn't be an issue. Oh, and of course, our connections with the elder dragons are also classified. Our recent dealings with them were a one-time thing where we just happened to run into them by pure chance! Got it?!"

Again, all nodded.

"Well, that much has always been our default policy, so there was no real need to go over it again. The real problems start after that. First of all, we have to present ourselves as a young, up-and-coming party with upper C-rank capabilities that's aiming for a promotion to B-rank. It's not like that's a *lie*, really. If we do that, we can take on whatever missions we want without worrying about our clients or the other hunters looking down on us. But we won't mention our rank back on the old continent, our peerage, or our kill record. Okay?"

There were more nods all around.

"Now, as far as money goes... We're not really hurting for coin, are we? Aside from Mile, we've all left most of our old fortunes back at our manors, but it's not that hard for us to make a living from scratch. To be fair, most of that is thanks to Mile's storage magic, but the fact remains..."

Indeed. It took more than just raw strength to make an easy living. While being strong did allow one to accept high-paying requests, those were inherently dangerous and difficult endeavors, with a high probability of serious

injury or loss of life. There were no other jobs as relatively safe and lucrative as the Crimson Vow's mass orc deliveries.

"So we can stop being so stingy and—"

"I disagree!" Pauline interrupted Reina.

"Come on, Pauline, you're making more than enough money from your business now! You even said that while you're away, the head clerk you left in charge of your store and the deputy you left in charge of your territory are working hard to rapidly grow your own personal assets *and* those of your lands. There's no need to get so worked up about your earnings as a hunter when they're nothing compared to the income from your company."

"Wrong! If we go around talking like that, we won't look like ordinary hunters in our attitude toward work and money! That will invite suspicion from others, as well as give the impression that we're financially illiterate fools and easy marks to exploit and suck dry, which will be detrimental to our personal relationships and safety!"

"That's...actually a good point."

"Yeah. That's thinking I can get behind..."

Mavis and Mile both saw where Pauline was coming from on this one.

"Besides, a game we don't play seriously is no fun at all!" Pauline continued her rant.

"Okay, true... Then as far as money goes, let's treat our finances like any ordinary C-rank hunters would. We'll go back to the basics and operate with the same sense of money we had six months after graduating from the Hunters' Prep School. Still, everyone here knows that we're making money off Mile's storage magic, so let's not worry about being too cheap. Certainly, we can keep staying in decent inns and preserve our dignity as a party of young women."

"No objections!" the other girls cheered.

Pauline wasn't the same miser she had been right after graduating from the

Hunters' Prep School. In the intervening time, she had experienced six months of life as a countess and the noble's education that came with it. As such, she seemed more willing to pay a small price for safety and comfort, and she no longer insisted on staying in the cheapest back-alley inns.

Of course, the Crimson Vow could use their magic to deal with fleas and mites, and human pests—thugs, that is—were easy enough to subdue, but none of them wanted to be fighting for their lives where they were supposed to be sleeping.

"Also, Mile's definitely banned from flying."

"Aww..." Mile whined, none too happy with Pauline's suggestion.

"No sending *others* flying, either!" Reina added, some past trauma perhaps bubbling to the surface.

"Aww, come on..."

Mile puffed out her cheeks, looking more and more displeased.

"Now, now... Let's say that rule only applies when other people are watching, okay?" Mavis cut in to mediate.

Mile looked more cheerful, almost certainly thinking something along the lines of, Well, if I put up an invisibility field, that means I can do whatever I want!

"Also, since it would be crazy for two out of the four of us to know storage magic, Mavis is banned from using hers in public."

"Whaaaaat?!" Mavis yelped in surprise.

"Well, what did you expect?" Pauline asked.

"It's a statistical impossibility, and I'm sure people would say, 'It's not fair to have two storage users in one party!' or 'It's a total waste of talent!' and try to poach one of us. Worst case, the guild or local lord might even step in," Mile finished as Mavis's frown deepened.

"Of course, if that were to happen, we would pack up and move on to another town, territory, or kingdom," Reina added. "We're the Crimson Vow! We would never give up one of our own to serve someone else's interests or agenda! Our own agenda is the only one that matters. Who cares what some strangers think?!"

"You said it!" the others chorused.

Threats and coercion were only effective if the victim had a weak point—such as family, relatives, dear friends, or their own well-being. However, the Crimson Vow had no family, relatives, or friends in the whole continent, let alone in this town or kingdom, and not a single one of them was concerned for her own well-being.

The party was invincible in both position and skill.

"Well, all that matters is that no one knows we have two storage magic users, so it's okay for Mavis to use hers when there's no one else around, like when we're in our room at the inn, or in the woods where we work, or on the road with no one in front of or behind us. Be careful, though, because if someone sees you, you'll have to keep them from talking."

"K-keep them from talking?"

"You heard me."

Mavis and Reina exchanged serious looks.

"Like with a kiss?"

"OBVIOUSLY NOT!!" Both girls shot down Mile's attempt at a joke.

"Actually, if the person is a girl, Mavis could make it work," Pauline quipped.

"Shut up!" Mavis howled. She was even-tempered compared to the others, but even she occasionally rose to their bait.

To be clear, what Reina had been implying with "keep them from talking" was nothing so cruel as murder. She simply meant that Mavis would have to talk to them and persuade them not to say anything.

Probably, you know, while holding a giant fireball or magic explosive over the person's head...

"Well, the bottom line is, let's take things one step at a time," said Reina.

"Yeah!" the other three cheered, pumping their arms.

Mile beamed with delight, unaware that all three of her friends were thinking, I wonder how long our peaceful life on this continent will last...

Afterword

LONG TIME NO SEE, everyone. FUNA here. We've made it to Volume 18 of *Average*! The big 20-volume mark is finally in sight... And the third volume of the manga reboot will be released on March 10th! Please support both the novels and the manga if you can!

The Crimson Vow have successfully leveled up to C-rank and finally begun to tackle proper quests on the new continent. As part of their first "inactive request," they encounter a bunch of furballs, get acquainted with the elder dragons of a new land...and then meet a strange girl.

C'mon, girls, cut that last one loose!

On the other hand, it's so typical for the Crimson Vow to keep her around just because she's interesting...

Zalm: "Silva demands that you hurry back... He has even offered to take you as his lawful wife if you so desire."

Mile: "Can it!"

Old Fisherman: "Whaddya say to another raiding voyage?"

Mile: "What, you want us to make that a regular event?!"

Mavis: "Well, of course he does. He gets to avenge his friends and family, and he gets a good haul as an added bonus..."

When will the girls depart for the capital? And how long before they're reunited with the Wonder Trio? Only time will tell.

Now, forgive me for talking about my series under a different publisher, but if you picked this volume up in a bookstore, please take a look around. Do you see

anything else? Say, for instance, *Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for My Retirement* Volume 8 or *I Shall Survive Using Potions!* Volume 9 (both published under Kodansha K Light Novel Books)?

Now take a look at the obi...

Oh, yes! Following the Fall 2019 anime of *Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities*Average in the Next Life?!, my remaining two works are getting anime adaptations! This means that all three series I've written have been published in print, adapted into manga...and now animated. That's an incredible batting average of three times at bat and three home runs! And I owe it all to my readers. Thank you so much!

Average was the last of the three series to be launched but the first to be published, adapted into manga, and animated, so I'm delighted that the others are finally getting the same treatment. Every last one of my works has crossed the finish line, shoulder to shoulder. Could there be any greater joy for an author?

Pauline: "There's still hope for a video game!"

Reina: "What about a movie?"

Mavis: "Wasn't there an early screening of 80,000 Gold at Shinjuku Wald 9?"

Reina: "Oh, good point... No, it may have been on the big screen, but that doesn't count as a movie!"

Mile: "Don't forget about the Hollywood live-action film!"

Reina, Pauline, and Mavis: "Anything but that!!"

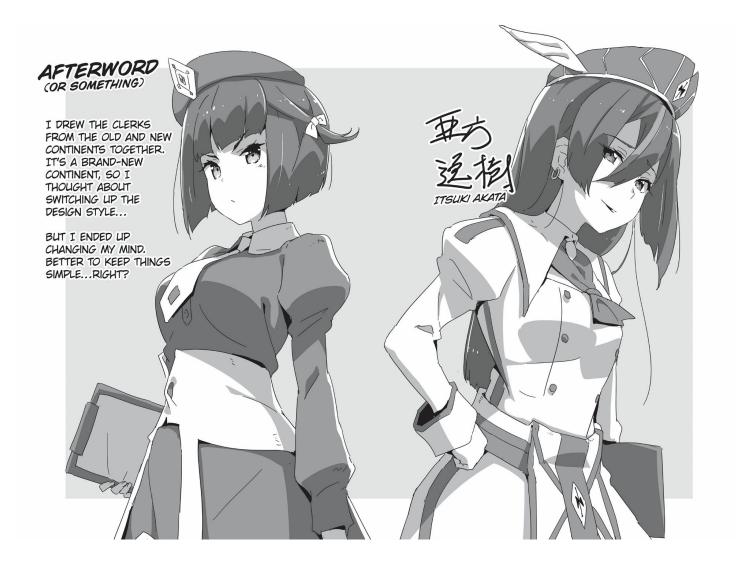
Thanks for supporting my "Tiny Girls Who Look 12 or 13" trilogy in book, manga, and now anime format!

And finally, to the chief editor; to the illustrator, Itsuki Akata; to Yoichi

Yamakami, the cover designer; to everyone involved in the proofreading, editing, printing, binding, distribution, and selling of this book; and to everyone who's taken these stories into their homes, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

I am sure that we will see each other again with the next volume...

— FUNA





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Table of Contents

Color Gallery

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Table of Contents Page

Characters

World Map

Previously

Chapter 126: Storage Magic

Chapter 127: Rank

Chapter 128: The Inactive Request

Chapter 129: The Pact

Chapter 130: Meanwhile...

Chapter 131: The Merchant Girl

Side Story: The Perfect Balance

Afterword

Newsletter