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

Story by
FUNA

Illustrated by
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Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities *Average* in the Next Life?!

VOLUME 11

"You mean *that* unidentified scale?"
?

Aureana
Monika
Marcela

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

VOLUME 11

BY

FUNA

ILLUSTRATED BY

Itsuki Akata

Seven Seas Entertainment

DIDN'T I SAY TO MAKE MY ABILITIES AVERAGE
IN THE NEXT LIFE?! VOLUME 11

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God bless me?

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AFTERWORD

Kingdom of Tils — *C-Rank Party "The Crimson Vow"*

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

A rookie hunter. Specializes in combat magic.

A swordswoman. Leader of the up-and-coming party, the Crimson Vow.

A rookie hunter. A timid girl, but...

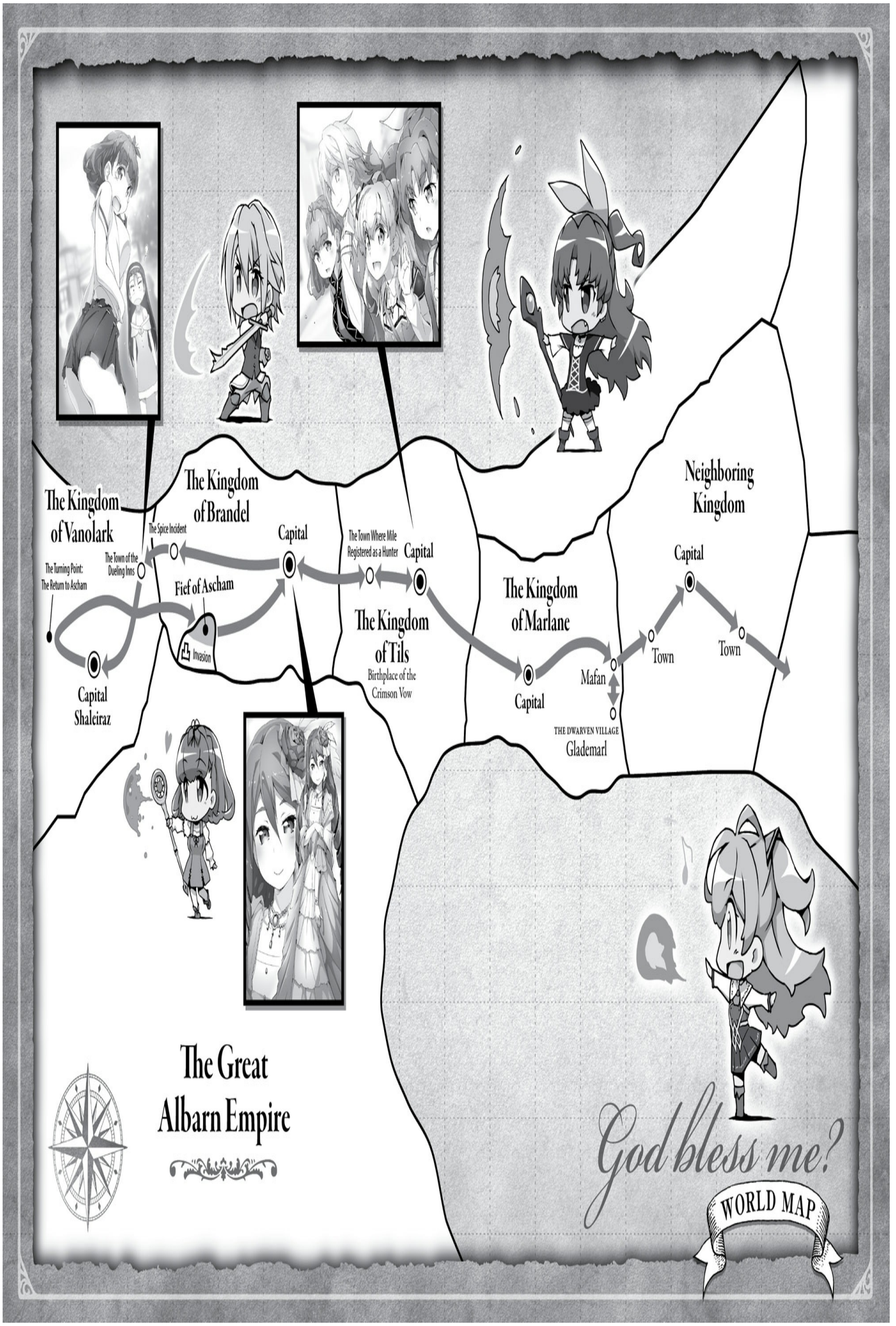
Kingdom of Brandel — *Wonder Trio*

Adele's friend. A magic user of noble birth.

A princess. Interested in Adele.

Adele's friend. The second daughter of a merchant.

Adele's friend. A commoner.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Birthplace of the Crimson Vow
The Kingdom of Marlane
Capital
Mafan
THE DWARVEN VILLAGE
Glademarl
Neighboring Kingdom
Capital
Town
Town
The Great Albarn Empire
God bless me?
WORLD MAP

Previously

When 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 formed a party with her classmates. The Crimsom Vow made a grand debut, but one problem after another came hurtling their way—from golems, invading foreign soldiers, and doting fathers to elder dragons, the strongest creatures in the world!

After setting out on a customary training journey, the Crimson Vow rescued a mysterious young maiden in the kingdom of Trist. Then, they battled once more against elder dragons—this time facing real elder dragon soldiers!

From Mavis’s left arm to the matter of the elder dragon scales, it’s one thing after another. What troubles are in store next for the Crimson Vow?!

Chapter 81:
Trouble Magnets

"Huh? Wait. This is…"

Unable to leave town until they had received payment from the guild, the Crimson Vow decided to peruse the jobs posted at the guildhall, when they saw a notice stuck beside the board.

"It's an auction notice…for elder dragon scales?" asked Mile, looking at the posting.

"Those would have to be ones provided by those other hunters, wouldn't they? The merchants who bought from us would never conduct sales in a place like this," Pauline said. "They have three scales on display, do they? Guess they were able to find all of them…"

Truthfully, the scales that had been left behind at the site of the battle were ones that the members of the Crimson Vow had left behind on purpose. It made sense, if one thought about it. Even a miser like Pauline could be flexible from time to time, but there was no way that she would ever let an elder dragon scale go uncollected for no good reason—not when they had Mile and her search magic on their side.

Elder dragon scales were a treasure, one which rarely surfaced. They came not from earth dragons or wyverns, which were nothing but massive monsters, dragons only in name. Real elder dragons were superior life forms who possessed fortifying magic and intellect that far surpassed any human's.

As a result of its immense sturdiness and its light weight, the scale of an elder dragon—a being akin to a god—was highly prized, with great symbolic value as a good luck charm or a protective amulet.

Furthermore, whereas the slaying of a regular dragon might result in a flood of scales on the market, there was no chance of anyone actually hunting one. These were the sort of items that might appear on the market at the rate of perhaps only one every few decades.

Even if one was acquired, typically it would be offered as tribute or sold for a large sum to a king or high-ranking noble. The chances that it would ever appear in the marketplace at all were abysmally low.

If Mile had done a thorough search using her magic, it would have been a simple task to locate every single little splinter, leaving not a single scale behind. However, so that the situation did not seem overly suspicious, the Crimson Vow had left behind three damaged scales, in relatively rough shape, in locations that anyone might be able to find with a little digging, should the need for an explanation arise.

Pauline, naturally, had glared at the locations where the scales were hidden—her eyes bloodshot, and her face looking as though she were about to spew bile. They were as good as throwing away gold—nay, orichalcum pieces!—but, after all, it had to be done. Understanding this, Pauline did not lodge any complaint, though she still sulked quite visibly.

“This should be enough to settle the elder dragon matter. I doubt those guys will say anything either, since they’ve been informed that the reason the elder dragons were here had nothing to do with humans. I’m sure they’ll convey that their source wishes to remain anonymous, so as not to get wrapped up in anything strange or dangerous, and the guild should not have any special interest in mere messengers.”

Their need for anonymity was something that they had firmly reiterated to the B-rank party when enforcing the gag order upon the merchants.

For both hunters and merchants, reputation was everything. If word got out that any of them had broken a promise or contract, it would be all over for them. Plus, rumors having anything to do with elder dragons and their scales would race throughout the kingdom in the blink of an eye.

“Given how serious this matter is, there’s no way anyone would ever break their word. Assuming we’re dealing with honest folk, anyway…” said Pauline.

The other three nodded.

Incidentally, the Crimson Vow intended to sell one scale a piece in every place they stopped, relying on the fiction that they had just so happened to get their hands on that one scale and one alone.

According to Pauline, this was the best way to keep from ruining their sales value.

In the end, the members of the Crimson Vow found no particularly appealing jobs, so instead, they decided to leave the guildhall behind and spend the day loitering around the woods, doing some menial work as they hunted and gathered anything they came across in the name of daily requests.

“It might be about time for us to move on,” said Reina. “Should we leave once we get our payment for the ground dragon?”

“Maybe so,” replied Pauline. “There are no more good jobs around here, and we’ve already made enough of a name for ourselves with that dragon business.”

“Maybe too much of a name,” Mavis added.

Mile winced.

Indeed, they had drawn a bit too much attention.

“Haven’t you been getting a bit carried away yourself of late, Mavis?” It seemed Reina had a bone to pick.

“Now that you mention it, I’ve been feeling the same way,” Pauline added. “It also seems like you’re moving very quickly through all of the *Awesome Phrases to Say Someday* list without leaving any for the rest of us.”

“I-I mean, it’s not like I’m trying to…” Mavis grew a bit frantic. Apparently, even she had been somewhat aware of her behavior. Thus, Mile, who bore the most responsibility for all of this, spoke up to intervene.

“Well then, Reina and Pauline, why don’t you use those Magical Gunner Girl Wands? If you use those, along with a transformation sequence and your special techniques, you’re sure to attract attention! You can incorporate some catchphrases, too, and use some powerful lightning magic—maybe the Greased Lightning as your powerful finishing move, and the unbeatable Pearl Dash form to beat down any human…”

The pair were dumbfounded at Mile’s proposal.

“And Pauline, you can use the transformation method from the Borgman series when you change out your armor. It’s custom-made for you. The jiggle as you equip it adds more charm…” said Mile, grinning as she delivered these suggestions. Until…

“Who the heck would use that?!”

…Reina and Pauline summarily rejected her.

Naturally, during the aforementioned tests, they had not been especially taken with neither the fact that they would have to get buck naked in front of friends and foes when they were transforming, nor with the fluffy, frilly uniforms they would have to change into. Even though Mile had already developed a method that would perfectly keep their “vital parts” just barely out of view by way of mysterious light and camera angles, staff placement, distracting stars, and the forceful use of a certain kind of magic.

“But they’re cool *and* cute—and really high in defense!”

This refusal was particularly regrettable for some of the nanomachines, who seemed to have been lingering around for the express purpose of being used for this, busying themselves with their own fervent research and development, only to be shelved.

Having successfully drawn attention away from the shade being thrown Mavis’s way by the other two, Mile patted her chest wearily. Just then…

“Stop! No, let me go!!”

Ping!

Mile’s wickedly sharp ears, which could hear a little girl’s cries for help no matter how many kilometers away she was, pricked up.

“I mean, of course we all heard that, too…” Reina muttered, guessing the situation from Mile’s expression. Mavis and Pauline nodded as well.

“Or rather, we can see it. Right over there!” added Pauline. Sure enough, there was a scene unfolding just meters ahead of them.

“Mile, you do know that a ‘little girl’ usually refers to a child of no more than

five or six, right?” Pauline suddenly asked Mile.

Her intuition was a little *too* on the money.

Actually, this was business as usual, which meant that one could understand exactly what Mile was thinking just by looking at her face.

Regardless, there in front of them was a girl of around seven or eight, apparently in the process of being forcibly dragged away from her mother by three thugs.

“What’s with you guys? You little ladies need to keep yer noses outta other people’s business!” bellowed the man who appeared to be the leader of the thugs, as the Crimson Vow stood before them, blocking their paths.

“Oh ho,” came one chuckle.

“Oh ho!” came the next.

“Oh ho…” came four in unison.

“Wh-what?! Look, you listen good. These folks couldn’t pay us back the money that they owe us, so we’re just takin’ this kid in exchange. It’s her parents that messed up here not payin’ us—we ain’t doin’ anything wrong!”

Though the members of the Crimson Vow were young women, it was still a matter of three versus four—and moreover, the Crimson Vow were hunters, two of whom were equipped with swords and two who were clearly mages. Perhaps assuming they were at a disadvantage with their own lack of sword training and magical skills, the men were attempting to settle any conflict with logic rather than brute force.

This was the correct decision. Ostensibly, anyway.

“What of it?”

“Huh?”

The thugs were bewildered by Mile’s question.

“I’m asking you: what does lending money have to do with the violent, criminal action you are currently perpetrating, *i.e.* shoving that woman away and twisting that little girl’s arm? Are you saying that it’s fine to harm or even kill someone who you lend money to? I wonder if the authorities would accept that excuse. Should we find out?”

“Guh… That wasn’t what I—”

“Furthermore, just now you confessed yourself that you were taking this girl in exchange for the money you’re owed. That sounds to me like you just admitted to being part of a ring of human traffickers! Protecting a little girl from being kidnapped by traffickers is a defensible action, so if we kill you, we won’t be charged—in fact, we might even be rewarded! And if we bring you in alive,

we'll get half of the profits when you're sold to the mines as punishment!"

"Wha—?!" the three men gasped.

There was no one who could stand up to Mile's arguments—or rather, her verbal onslaughts—when she was angry. Though standard human relations were very much a weakness of hers, the same could not be said for her skill at splitting hairs or finding technicalities. She was a master at twisting an opponent's words to their disadvantage.

"You've been caught committing a violent abduction, confessed to your crime, and you've already taken a hostage by force. We're left with no choice but to draw our weapons and rescue the hostage. No holds barred!"

"Leave it to me!"

Mavis smoothly drew her sword.

"Leave them to me!"

"Let's go!"

Reina and Pauline brandished their staves.

Finally, Mile sneered, "You'll regret this!"

The thugs let go of the little girl, shouted a stereotypical line of defeat, and bounded away like hares.

The Crimson Vow were met with raucous applause and cheers of praise and admiration from the surrounding crowd of spectators, who seemed to have gathered at some point in the confrontation. While they might appear now to be good Samaritans, these people had kept their distance while the mother and child were in danger, afraid of getting involved, only approaching the moment the circumstances changed and there was no longer any risk of being caught in the crossfire.

A bitter look crept onto Reina and Pauline's faces at the thought, which did not yet seem to have occurred to Mile and Mavis.

Well, we've scared them off for now, but that doesn't mean this is finished…

Unlike Mile and Mavis, who were grinning as they lifted the young girl and her

mother up in their arms, there was no mirth in the eyes of Pauline and Reina. As the two daughters of merchants, they knew better.

***

"And so, that money…"

"I see…"

Naturally, there was no way that Mile and Mavis, who were strong in battle but weak in the face of little girls, could possibly leave the mother and daughter alone. After healing the girl's twisted arm, they escorted the pair home, asking them more about the situation. All the while, Pauline and Reina glared at them from the corners of their vision.

"So what you're saying is, you can't pay back the money you borrowed?" Pauline asked bluntly.

"Y-yes…" said the mother, nodding.

"I've heard that story before."

Indeed, this was a common tale—perhaps even a mite *too* common.

"Pauline! Come on, now!"

No matter how typical their story, it did not change the fact that this was a big deal for this family. Though Mile was just as frank in her chiding of Pauline's wording…

"That interest rate is a bit higher than normal, though… Still, you did agree to those terms when you borrowed the money. It's not as though they rewrote the contract or pulled a bait and switch. You didn't have sufficient collateral to get a loan elsewhere, so you borrowed from a lender with a high interest rate. At the time, you were overjoyed and thanked these lenders for helping someone in such poor circumstances as yourselves. Am I wrong?" asked Pauline.

"Y-yes, well…" replied the mother, somewhat reluctantly.

However, the questioning did not end.

"When you're lent money, you treat the lenders as gods, but when it's time to

pay it back, you call them demons and devils, don't you? Even though all they're doing is fulfilling the terms of the contract. Why do you think those interest rates are so high in the first place? Because they're lending to people with a higher risk of defaulting on their repayments. There are heaps of people, just like you, who can never pay the money back. But if they aren't forceful in attempting to collect their payments, and just put on a good face, people will think they can just take the money and walk all over them.

"Thus, they're forced to keep their interest rates high to account for this, so that they won't go out of business. If they lowered their rates, they could not afford to lend to risky parties such as yourselves. They would deny you, just like all the other lenders did. So, are you telling me you intended to stiff these kind lenders, who would loan money to even as risky a client as you, and run?"

Pauline was in a bad mood… Not just slightly bad but *very* bad. Apparently, the harsh reputation associated with the business of moneylending was something that she thought about on a regular basis.

Of course, what she was saying was not incorrect.

If everyone who borrowed money were to tell their lenders, come repayment day, that they could not pay them back because they didn't have the money, it would mean they profited, while the lenders went bankrupt. Such things could not be allowed to happen.

It was the ones who failed to pay back what they borrowed who were in the wrong.

It only made sense that the authorities should take the side of the lenders, who had adhered to the law—and it did not follow that they should fall in with any ne'er-do-wells… Though of course, this did not excuse violence or human trafficking.

"Moneylenders are always treated like villains. Even the kindhearted merchants who lend to risky clients without much backup. It's only natural that they'd be stringent about collecting money from those who violate their contracts, isn't it? If they didn't, it wouldn't be a business!" exclaimed Pauline.

"Well, I guess that's true," added Mavis. "It would be weird of us to shoulder their debts, just to help out the lenders, and it doesn't make much sense to

chastise the lenders either. If the lender were to go bankrupt, there wouldn't be anyone left to loan to people without collateral. And if on top of the many people who wouldn't pay them back, they're treated as monsters and killed or ruined by people who claim to be allies of justice, then…"

"*Whaaaat?*"

The mother and child, assuming that they were in the presence of people who would be sympathetic to their cause, were speechless.

Even Mile and Reina had to nod in agreement at how sensible Pauline's words were.

"Now of course, this only applies to cases where the lenders have *not* attempted to reclaim their funds through illegal methods."

Pauline's displeasure with the situation was apparent, but it did not appear that any of this was directed toward the mother and daughter.

"Now then. Why would you borrow such a ridiculous amount of money that you could not pay it back?" she asked, giving the impression that the conversation would not continue until she had an answer.

"Well," the woman began, "my husband took ill on his travels and was unable to conduct all the business he planned to. He was forced to squander all of his investment capital on medicine and inn fees, so we needed the loan as a temporary stopgap to cover our working capital and living expenses. Still, we should have been able to pay it back right away. The interest rate was fairly high at 20% a month, but we expected to make enough advance sales to earn enough to repay it. However…"

"However?"

"When we tried to bring the full sum of the money to them three days before the payment was due, the lender's shop was closed, with a notice on the door that said they were away for several days. The day after the due date, when they reopened again, we were told, 'As we weren't paid back by the due date, you will need to pay a penalty fee for breach of contract on top of the original amount.' This penalty was double the original amount, meaning our debt became thrice altogether…"

“Ah…” the members of the Crimson Vow sighed in understanding.

This was the most basic of basic scams. So basic that, if there were a textbook for grifters, this little number would appear somewhere around page three.

It’s ridiculous to think that such a simple scam would have any traction… I guess they don’t have TV or newspapers, though, so there’s no way that these things would become common knowledge. Wait, so if I were to pull a pyramid scheme or any other sort of racket that’s outlawed only by the grey areas of Japanese law, I would pull in tons of suckers? It’s like a scammer’s paradise!!!

Though these thoughts crossed Mile’s mind, naturally, she did not actually intend to do such a thing. However, were *Pauline* to get her hands on a few of these methods…

Mile had come to a rather terrifying line of thought. When she turned to look at Pauline, however, she saw her friend was crestfallen.

Here she had gotten so fired up advocating on the behalf of lenders, only to hear such a story of unethical behavior. That had to be disappointing.

“Let’s crush them.”

All Pauline’s sweetness was gone; she was fierceness times one hundred.

Though she had defended the lenders, thinking they were guilty of only a mild case of loansharking, it had turned out that their offense was more egregious, and there was no fault on the part of the borrowers at all. Given her embarrassment over her loss of face, it was perhaps only natural that Pauline would blow up now, ignoring the fact that she had brought this shame upon herself.

“You should’ve listened to them properly to start with,” said Reina, wearily.

Pauline looked all the more crestfallen.

“It’s fine to be a little strict about getting your money back, even to threaten those human trash who won’t return what they’ve borrowed or the heretics who break their contracts… No, in fact it’s natural! But it’s just as natural that any cowardly swindler of a merchant who would break their own contracts should be expunged from this world as well!” declared Pauline.

“I see,” Mile said frankly, “so that’s part of the law of merchants? Eliminating all bad merchants?”

Reina smacked the back of her head.

“Don’t just take everything you hear at face value!”

“We aren’t going to raid them?”

“We are not!!!” Pauline shouted, veins in her forehead bulging angrily at this simple question. This entire incident seemed to have her quite worked up.

“If they’re going to use force, then it’s fine for us to respond in kind. In the name of self-defense, we can return it tens of times, a hundred…”

“Uh, doesn’t that go a little beyond self-defense?”

“Shut your mouth!!”

“Y-yes! Forgive me!!” Mile apologized at once.

At times like this, it was best not to argue with Pauline. The other three members of the Crimson Vow had already had this lesson drilled into them.

“If those guys are going to swindle people, then it’s only right they be swindled right back. They say that, ‘If you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back,’ right?”

“Oh, is that what that means?” asked Mile.

“Don’t be so gullible!”

***

“What’s that you say?! A massive scale?!”

Before long, they stood in a particular mid-sized merchant’s shop. The man who had come to attend to this party of four young women, who seemed to be a clerk of around twenty years in age, raised his voice in shock at what the representative of these young ladies had just told him.

To raise one’s voice during the discussion of a sales transaction, when there were other customers present in the front of the shop, was a grave error on the part of the clerk, but his reaction was entirely reasonable given his relative lack of experience and what he had just been told.

A massive scale.

Normally, upon hearing this, one would at first wonder, “What kind of scale?” That, however, was only under normal circumstances. At present, there were rumors racing through the mercantile world here in the capital—namely, that it seemed some elder dragon scales were up for auction.

Well, perhaps it was a misnomer to call them rumors, given that the auction had been publicly announced. It was a cold, hard fact.

A B-rank party had gone out on an intelligence-gathering mission and discovered the aftermath of a struggle between elder dragons, at the site of which they had found several fallen scales. They were fragmented, burnt, and broken, but they could still be expected to fetch a high price.

And here this party of young girls had just told the clerk a story: “When we were out gathering, we found a place where it looked like some kind of big monster was running around, and there was some scale-looking thing on the ground there. We’re not really sure what it is, but we figured we could sell it, so we took it with us.”

Had they just so happened to pass through the place where that other party had gone to investigate? Or had the elder dragons been active in some other area as well? Regardless, if what these girls had brought them happened to be one of *those*… And, if they had no idea what it was because they were so inexperienced…

“P-please, come right this way!”

Even upon seeing the scale itself, there was no way that the clerk would be able to evaluate it. He had never even seen an earth dragon or wyvern scale, let alone that of an elder dragon, so he would have to pass this matter along to someone with more experience. At any rate, what was most crucial right now was to not let these girls slip through his fingers.

“Sorry to keep you waiting…”

The Crimson Vow were led to an interior discussion room, where they were served some tea, and waited for a short while before the clerk from before reappeared along with two elderly gentlemen.

“I am Melphict, the owner of this firm, and this is Howl, our head clerk,” said the owner, the more rotund of the pair, as the two of them bowed their heads. Apparently, the young man who had helped them before did not warrant an introduction.

Under normal circumstances, by no means would a party of youngsters, first-time visitors to a shop, have been greeted by the owner and the head clerk. But presumably, from here out, the two elders would be in charge of the discussions, the clerk only in attendance for educational purposes. This seemed like quite an opportunity for such a low-ranking clerk, but perhaps it was a reward for securing such a potentially lucrative client, correctly judging that the job was above his own pay grade, and reaching out to the higher-ups.

“I hear you have brought us something unusual. Might we see it?”

“Of course. Mile, bring it out.”

Naturally, Pauline was in charge of the negotiations.

As instructed, Mile produced the item from her “storage” and placed it upon the table: a single, complete scale, free of any scars or burns.

“Please feel free to inspect it.”

“Th-thi…this is…”

The head clerk was lost for words, but Melphict, the owner, seemed unaffected.

“Hm. Looks like a scale from some kind of big monster. I’ve never seen one of these before, but, well, it’s just a single scale, not a horn or fang or hide or anything… Still, I’d hate to send you home empty-handed after you all were so kind as to choose our shop to bring this to, so we can take this off your hands for six half-gold—no, let’s make that seven.”

Normally, the fact of Mile’s storage magic in itself would have garnered surprise. And yet, the man was cool and collected, completely ignoring the means by which the goods appeared, and moreover, appraising the scale as though it were nothing special. His act would have been more than enough to fool Mavis or Mile, but unfortunately for the man, Pauline was not so easily deceived.

She knew that the fact that he had not made mention of the storage magic meant that his attentions were preoccupied by something else. In the way of a true merchant, his expression was unchanged because he was forcing himself to feign calm—his poker face precisely calibrated to prevent any unintended tell.

Most importantly, Pauline knew exactly what it was that the party had just set out before them—along with the value of such goods.

Yes indeed, this was an elder dragon scale in nearly mint condition, one of the rare few that probably existed in this world.

“Whoa! With that much money we could stay at an inn for three nights, maybe four, and eat as much as we want!” Mile said happily. The owner and his partner smiled. But then…

“You see?” Mavis replied. “Aren’t you glad we picked up both of them, like I told you?”

Snap!

The men froze.

“D-did you say, *both* of them?”

“Oh yeah, there were two really nice-looking ones. It was kind of a strain on her storage space, but we brought both of them back with us. Some of us thought that just the one would be enough, but as the leader, I insisted,” Mavis explained.

The men fell silent. The wheels in both their heads seemed to be spinning at full tilt, as they tried to devise some way to get their hands on both scales.

“Of course, that did mean that we had to carry all of our things on our backs and discard all of our spare water in order to free up storage space,” Reina added, elaborating on Mavis’s story. “I mean, I was pretty opposed when you told us that we should take all that stuff out just to keep from damaging the scales, since you thought they might be valuable…”

This would be their excuse for why they had only brought one scale with them—that Mile’s storage space was limited, and that they did not wish to damage the scale by cramming too much in. And also that they weren’t certain it would

sell for a good price…

Naturally, the only conclusion that the merchants could come to was that these young girls had chanced to pass through the same area that those B-rank hunters did, before they got to the site, and had brought the two prettiest specimens back with them without realizing their value.

As far as they had heard, the scales that the B-rank party had retrieved and were planning to auction off were greatly damaged, so much so that they could better be thought of as shards, and were scorched in a number of places. How many orders of magnitude greater would be the price fetched by these specimens in nearly perfect condition—not especially large but large enough to make a nice centerpiece for any piece of armor?

And to think that there were *two* of them!

If they were to bring one to His Majesty the King as a tribute and auction the other off amongst a gathering of high-ranking nobles—imagine the honor! The prestige! And not to mention, the immense profits.

If they played their cards right, they might even find themselves conferred a knighthood, or nobility!

"……"

The men were silent. They still seemed to be fighting desperately to maintain their composure, but Pauline could see their every thought unfolding. Of course, it was simple enough; all she had to do was imagine what she might be thinking if she were in their position.

"Will we be able to get the same amount for the other scale?" Pauline asked. The men nodded fiercely. Apparently, they were nearing the limits of their self-control.

"Well, should we bring the other one here, then? Ugh. I really wish I'd taken more stuff out so we could put them both in storage…" sighed Mile.

"Yeah, you really goofed up," Reina agreed.

"Well, we should head back immediately and go get the other one," said Pauline, and Mile put the scale on the table back into her storage.

“Oh—”

As they stood to leave, the men moved to stop them, hoping to at least secure one of the scales, but it would clearly be unusual for them to try frantically to buy just one item, when the seller said they were going to retrieve more. It would be dreadful if the girls were to grow suspicious and instead take their business to another merchant. For now, they had to act as naturally as they could in order to prioritize keeping the girls off their scent.

The trip to and from their inn, if they went straight away, would not be long enough for word to get out to any other shops, thought the merchants—nor would it give the girls a chance to wise up to the true value of their product. And so, they kept themselves in check and saw the Crimson Vow off with a smile.

“That was flawless. Excellent work, everyone,” Pauline praised the other three. “Those merchants are the heads of the moneylending firm, so now all we have to do is massage the information a bit. Then, we make a bit of an exchange—without lying, deceiving anyone, or doing anything unseemly,” she clarified, though it was quite impossible to believe her with the wicked grin that was upon her face.

“Now then, just as we planned…” said Mile.

“All right! Time for some neglect play!” Pauline gleefully replied.

Her happy-go-lucky smile was frightening—truly frightening.

How can she say such things with such a cheerful grin on her face? thought Reina, somewhat taken aback.

It’s frightening to be her enemy, but I’m glad that she’s on our side… Mavis thought earnestly.

It’s frightening to be her enemy, but even scarier to be her ally! thought Mile, taken utterly aback.

***

The next morning, when the members of the Crimson Vow stopped in at the Hunters’ Guild, a man came rushing over to them with a strange expression.

“Why didn’t you come back?!?!”

It was the owner of the shop. For the owner of a company—not his head clerk or assistants—to wait around in a place like this, for a group of hunters who might not show up anytime soon, was truly an atypical occurrence. Clearly, the circumstances warranted it.

“You all were supposed to come right back with the other sc—the other item! Why didn’t you come back?!?!” cried the merchant, swiftly stopping himself from saying aloud what said item was. It was only natural he would do so; shouting something like that in a place like this would be sure to bring others around, and if things went poorly, there was a chance of the competition finding out exactly what he was referring to, and just how much it was worth. They needed to move somewhere more private.

“Please just come with me to the shop!” the merchant shouted, grabbing the arm of Mile, who was the youngest and appeared least able to resist, and attempting to drag her from the guildhall. He seemed to believe that if he took one of them, the others would naturally follow along. And, in fact, the other three shrugged and followed behind him.

Of course, had Mile dug in her feet, he would never have been able to pull her so easily, no matter how light she was. Naturally, she was letting herself be taken on purpose.

“Hey, uh… Hey now…”

Behind the group, those hunters and guild staff who had begun to understand a thing or two about the Crimson Vow, in light of Mavis’s demonstration, the dragon incident, and the Roaring Mithrils boasts about the girls’ exploits, began to mutter wearily, but the merchant had no idea what their voices were trying to convey.

“Why didn’t you all come *right back* yesterday?!”

The shop owner was at least making an attempt to maintain an air of politeness in front of his clients, but his expression was fierce and his tone sharp, the smiles of the previous day nowhere to be seen. He seemed to be

quite worked up. This was probably to be expected; he'd likely spent the whole night tossing and turning at the thought of being able to get his hands on such an item, unable to sleep at all.

They moved to a concealed inner chamber within the shop. With this room having been constructed with soundproofing in mind, there was no need for the man to control his voice as he screamed at the Crimson Vow. He really still should have kept his volume in mind, since he was dealing with clients. However, he seemed to be rather beyond that. This was a slip-up, especially for a sly old dog like this merchant, but given that a group of little girls, of all people, had broken their word and made a fool of him, resulting in his sleepless night, it was little surprise that his anger won out and slipped into his words…

"Well, to tell you the truth, we were going to come back, but we ran into a mother and daughter we knew who were having trouble paying back a loan, so we gave them both the scales we had, thinking it might help supplement their payments or something…" Pauline explained.

"You…y-y-y-y-y-you did *what?!*" the merchant screeched.

All the soundproofing in the world could not have stopped *that* scream from reaching the rest of the shop.

"Wh-wh-wh-wha… Wh-wh-wh… Aah… Aaaaaah…"

The merchant was unable to form words for some time, until finally, his babbled noises began to make sense again.

"Wh—*why*…?"

"Well," Pauline replied, quite unaffected, "Those people helped us out before. We figured that even if they were only worth 14 half-gold, that should be enough to help them out a little."

Hearing this, the merchant went pale. His lips flapped, but not a single sound emerged.

"So, we actually can't sell them to you anymore. We didn't have any formal contract though, and just hearing a quote doesn't really constitute an intent to sell, so that shouldn't be a problem, right?"

In fact, it was a huge problem. However, it was a problem for the merchant. Not having someone sell you something was not the sort of thing one could really complain about.

He had to get his hands on the scales, one way or another. With this thought in mind, the wheels in his head began spinning at full power.

“U-um, so about the people you gave them to…”

“Huh? I mean, that’s not really any of your business. I can’t just go blabbing people’s personal information to strangers. Especially when it comes to something as sensitive as debts… Anyway, since we don’t have anything to sell you anymore, do you still need us for anything? If not, we’ll be taking our leave. Let’s go, everyone!”

“Coming!” chimed the other three, cheerfully in sync.

And so the members of the Crimson Vow rose from their seats, leaving behind the desperately babbling merchant.

Moments after the Crimson Vow left the shop, the owner’s voice could be heard echoing.

“Find them! You have to find the people they gave those elder dragon scales to! If it’s someone with a debt, we should be able to research and find something out through our financing division. We need to find them quickly, before any other firms can find out about this! *Hurry!!!*”

“The preparations are complete. Now, all we have to do is sit and watch the stupid puppets dance!” Pauline gleefully exclaimed as they left the shop behind, heading back toward the inn. “Thanks to diligent practice, I’m expecting a decent performance from our final actor as well. We can look forward to a splendid show!”

As always, Pauline had an utterly blissful smile on her face, a smile so full of benevolence that anyone who did not know her might even wonder if she was a holy woman… Though any particularly insightful animals or children they came

across might grimace and run away.

With a subtle flinch, the other three nodded vigorously.

***

That evening…

“We’ve found them… We’ve found them! To think that the one they gave those scales to was someone who borrowed money from our firm! It seems like the owner of the shop in question is away, and his wife is currently in charge of paying back the loan. She was wondering if she could sell off ‘something resembling a wyvern scale’ in order to supplement her payment, with no idea of its value… Bwahaha, what splendid fortune I have! I hate to boast, but the goddess of commerce must be smiling on me to give me such awesome power! Bwaha. Bwahahahahaha!”

Upon hearing his subordinate’s report, the firm owner was unable to contain his wicked laughter.

“All right! Tomorrow morning, we’re heading to their home! Go find the head of our financing division! Tell those folks we’ll be dropping by at the first morning bell. Bwaha. Bwahahaha…”

***

Aritoss was a small shop, staffed by only five employees, including the husband and wife who owned it.

Presently, this tiny shop was being called upon by the owner of a mid-sized mercantile firm that was said to do fairly high-profile business in both the commerce and financing spheres, along with the chief of their financing division, the head clerk, an assistant clerk, and a contingent of several guards.

Normally, this was not the sort of place that the owner of such a firm would grace with his presence. He would entrust one of the clerks with any visits—or better yet, call the other party to meet him, as a show of power. The fact that he had a bodyguard with him meant that he was likely aware how high the possibility was that he might be assaulted somewhere in town, owing to the many grudges held against him—indeed, it was likely enough that he had bothered to make the expenditure of hiring guards.

There could only be one reason that such a man would go out of his way to travel all the way to this small shop on his own.

"…Wyvern scales, you say?"

"Yes, some friends of ours gave them to us. We were wondering if maybe we could give them to you in place of the repayment and penalty fee…"

The woman, wife of the proprietor of the shop, had explained that they had not yet had time to find a buyer for the scales, so rather than selling them somewhere else to gather the funds, she was hoping she could offer the scales themselves directly as a form of repayment. It would have been one thing if they were able to take their time looking for buyers, but to turn the goods into cash in just a few hours would likely mean taking a huge hit in terms of the profits. If things went poorly, they might lose up to half of the rightful price. If they offered the scales to their lender directly, even if they were not going to get the full price, they could at least offset their debts, making this the preferable option.

So the woman thought, and hers was not a bad assumption…or at least, it wouldn't have been, were the items in questions *truly* wyvern scales.

The owner of the firm was practically dancing at the continuation of his mind-boggling good fortune. He had traveled here himself with the head of the financing division in tow because this was a negotiation they could not afford to fumble, but now, he was fighting desperately to suppress a grin.

Things might not have gone so swimmingly for him if the woman's husband, proprietor of their shop, had been present, but it seemed the man was currently out of town to collect on some accounts, leaving his wife, who was not as sharp when it came to business, the only one here to deal with the loan.

In light of the fact that her husband was the one largely in charge of their commercial affairs, was it really right of the men to make such a fool of the wife of a merchant?

It was…as long as it helped out their profits!

With this thought in mind, the merchant could feel nothing but an intense sense of gratitude toward the idiot of a woman standing before him.

“I suppose we really don’t have much choice. We ourselves are no charity, unfortunately. Still, it is the duty of a merchant to aid a client in need. You seem to be in a bit of trouble, so just this once, we will accept these items as a part of your payment.”

“Oh, thank you so much! So, these two wyvern scales should cover the total amount, including the principal, the interest, and the penalty fee, is that correct?”

“Huh?”

The merchant was clearly puzzled at the woman’s assumption.

“Two scales at seven half-gold a piece would never cover the full amount!”

Yet the woman made no move to back down.

“Seven half-gold? No, a wyvern scale is worth far more than that. If that’s the price you’re going to insist on, then we’ll just head over to the merchants’ guild and sell them there. Even that would get us more value than just seven half-gold, I’d say. We’ll go that route and have the payment ready for you in cash tomorrow.”

Apparently, the young hunters had not informed the woman of the price at which the scales had been assessed.

Unlike elder dragon scales, only a few of which might surface every few decades—or even centuries—wyvern scales, were not especially rare. They still fetched a decent price, but a wyvern was not beyond the abilities of any first-rate party, and hunting just one would mean a sizable influx of scales into the market. Thus, even if they had not seen one themselves, it was no surprise that there would be plenty of people who had some idea of the market rate for them.

It was far different than getting one’s hands on elder dragon scales, scant fragments of which might be given over only at the whims of another—making a full scale utterly unthinkable.

This is bad! thought the merchant. *Even if she can’t tell them apart, she still knows the value of a wyvern scale… I can’t be quibbling over pocket change here!*

The merchant, unwilling to spoil the whole deal over a bit of pettiness, decided not to get hung up on the paltry sum of the loan, which was really little more than pocket change to their firm.

“V-very well. Then, let’s call the full sum even, yes? To tell you frankly, I think we should be able to net far more than market value for these, so I really must thank you!”

This merchant, of course, was never one to forgo negotiations with a first-time customer—not without some sure plan to recoup his costs later, anyway. No matter how small their shop was, there was no way the proprietor’s wife could now know that. However…

“Thank you! I’ll go ahead and prepare a contract stating that our offer was accepted,” said the woman. She clapped her hands twice, and one of the shop staff brought in a contract. One had to wonder—had she been so certain ahead of time that her deal would be accepted that she had already written up this contract, or had she prepared several different ones, with the appropriate one being brought to her with the signal she had just given…? Such power plays were the norm for any good shop owner, so it was difficult to say for certain.

The merchant then looked over the contract, the gist of which was:

All sums associated with the repayment of the loan in question (the initial loan sum, interest, penalty fee for late payment, handling charges, and all other mandatory associated fees), will be covered by the tendering of two dragon scales, likely those originating from a wyvern, in place of monetary repayment.

There was no issue with the wording or contents of the contract. It was all stock language, written in such a way as to prevent any misinterpretations or misunderstandings. Even clearly specifying that the scales belonged to a dragon caused no trouble; the language did not assert with certainty that the scale belonged to a wyvern, so if it should turn out that the scale belonged to an elder dragon instead, there would be no breach. If the woman were to later find out about the value of the goods and complain, he could simply shrug it off.

“Now then, shall we take those scales off your hands?” asked the merchant with a grin.

The woman shook her head coldly. “No, thank you.”

“Wh…?”

There was no way to describe the man’s expression but slack jawed.

“Oh, no, there’s nothing wrong with the terms of the contract itself. It’s simply that I would like to do the handover at the Merchants’ Guild instead. The thing is, we actually still haven’t been given the items ourselves, so we can’t give them to you yet. Also, considering your behavior when we originally tried to pay back the money, I don’t really have much confidence in you right now. If we do the handover at the guild in front of all the other merchants and guild staff, I can rest assured that you won’t attempt any egregious violations of contract or try to entangle us in any strange schemes, since that would greatly hurt your reputation as a merchant.”

“Guh…”

The merchant was clearly unhappy, but on further consideration, he supposed all this would apply equally to the other party. If she were to later complain that she had been tricked, or demand the scales back, the merchant, too, could rest assured that there would be witnesses to attest to the validity of their transaction. There was nothing wrong with him taking her words at face value during the exchange and believing the goods to be wyvern scales, only to later determine that they were something else entirely. At any rate, it would be the others who had made a mistake in assessing the goods and given a false description…

“So, tonight then, at the guildhall—first evening bell,” said the woman. “At that time we will handle the return of the original contract of loan and the replacement with the new, as well as the exchange of the scales.”

There was no telling what could be done if the original contract was not retrieved—if, for example, a fake was destroyed in front of everyone while the original sat safe and sound, or some such trickery. Being fooled once already was plenty.

After seeing off the gloating merchant, the woman’s lips twisted. Her smile very much resembled one that three of the members of the Crimson Vow were accustomed to seeing.

Indeed, it was the spitting image of Pauline's wicked grin whenever she was scheming.

The young matron had the looks of a saint…but she was still a merchant's wife.

Soft words then tumbled from the woman's lips:

"Now, witness the fury of Aritoss!"

***

That night, shortly before the first evening bell, the wife of the owner of Aritoss, the merchant, the head of the financing division, and their bodyguards stood within the Merchants' Guild.

The guildhall was packed. It was the most bustling time of the day, when hunters would be returning from hunting and gathering and selling their spoils to the Hunters' Guild, which were in turn sold wholesale here… That was of course precisely why the woman had chosen this time.

Ding-a-ling!

The doorbell rang, and everyone's eyes reflexively turned to the door to see *them* enter: the young all-female hunting party who had managed to kick up quite a stir at the Hunters' Guild in just the past few days. While it was the Roaring Mithrils who had made a name for themselves selling the ground dragon parts, some of those present still recognized the members of the Crimson Vow, even if they were thought of as nothing more than a rookie party who had traveled with the Mithrils and scraped up some of their leftovers.

From the doorway, the girls headed straight to the table where the rest of the group was assembled.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. We've come to deliver the wyvern scales that we promised to the manager of Aritoss here."

This time it was not Mavis, the leader, who was in charge of the negotiations, but Pauline. The others of course would have no idea who the party leader was, and even if they did, they likely would not care.

"It's no trouble, we're still a bit ahead of schedule," said the woman. "Now

then, once the signing of the contract has been confirmed, please hand over the scales. When the wyvern scales have been handed over, our debts will be settled. If the scales are found to be fakes or damaged goods at that juncture, please announce as such immediately. In such an event, we will request an official appraisal from the guild, and if fault is found on our part, the contract will be nullified. Is that agreeable?" The latter part of this was directed at the merchant.

Naturally, the merchant had no objections. Even the fact that they were not handing over the items first was to his advantage. In fact, he had been the one to suggest confirming the integrity of the items *after* the contract had been signed. If they were to hand over the items before the signing, the other merchants around might cause a fuss and make the woman aware of the scales' true value.

Bwahaha! She's thought of so many ways to avoid being swindled that all she's done is dig her own grave. A pitfall of so many fools who think themselves clever. She thought she could outwit me, but truly, women are nothing but fools… The merchant sniggered internally.

Normally, he would have put far more thought into this, but he was entirely caught up in attempting to screw over this other party—and thinking they were falling for it. So wrapped up in the thoughts of the trap that he had laid, that he failed to let anything else occur to him.

It was already unusual for this transaction to be going on in front of everyone, rather than in a private room. Then, there was the fact that the phrase "wyvern scales" had been flung around multiple times. Furthermore, the talks were going on between the infamous Melphict and—not the owner of Aritoss—but his wife. No matter how you looked at it, this was not your typical negotiation.

He's definitely gonna try to pull the wool over her eyes, the watching merchants thought. However, it was not their place to interfere in another merchant's dealings, so they could only watch uncomfortably as the woman fell victim to Melphict's tricks—all their ears pricked up to catch every word of the conversation and make certain she was not being deceived.

Two copies of the new contract were produced and each one given the appropriate signatures before both parties took their own and folded it away. Normally, these papers would be left atop the table while the final exchange was done, but in this case, putting them away first provided a safeguard against the other party learning the truth and trying to quickly retract the contract in a panic. The watchers who noticed this grimaced, thinking to themselves, *Ah, they don't trust each other at all…*

"Now then, if you would," said the woman to Mile, who produced two packages from her storage and placed them atop the table.

There were a few surprised gasps of "Storage magic!" but the majority of the crowd was more fixated on the rest of the proceedings, gulping nervously as they watched.

"Go ahead," said the woman, and the merchant opened the packages to find…

"What are *these*?!" he shouted, standing reflexively.

Sure enough, placed inside wooden frames and wrapped up to disguise their true size—or rather, to *protect* them—were two dragon scales.

Specifically, two *wyvern* scales.

"As you can see, these are wyvern scales."

"Wyvern scales?! That's not right at all!!!"

The people around them were stunned at the merchant's behavior as he raged indignantly at the woman. For all the talk that had been going on about this being an exchange of wyvern scales, it was incomprehensible why he would be blustering at receiving what were, in fact, wyvern scales. It would have been one thing if they were broken or damaged, but as far as the people around could tell, they were scales of fairly exceptional quality—nothing to scoff at.

"Hm? What are you so confused about? We've been telling you the whole time that they're wyvern scales, haven't we? You've been saying the same thing. Even the contract, which you yourself checked over plenty of times, specifies 'dragon scales, most likely belonging to a wyvern,' does it not? So, what exactly are you trying to say? If something's the matter, should we call for

an official appraisal?” asked the woman, smiling vaguely.

“Wh-wha…?”

The merchant sank into a chair, momentarily lost for words, but then shot back up, shouting at the Crimson Vow.

“You lot! What about the scale you brought in yesterday?”

“Huh? You mean that unidentified scale that you appraised at seven half-gold? We already told you, they seemed like they weren’t worth much, so we handed them over to an acquaintance. We weren’t supposed to have brought those now, were we? What would you care about those cheap scales that you, a first-class merchant, appraised at just seven half-gold?”

The merchant looked back at Pauline with an utterly dumbfounded expression upon his face.

She had just stated loudly, multiple times, that the scales in question had been appraised for seven half-gold.

An actress…

Pauline’s performance was impeccable, an act that only an animal, a small child, or someone who knew her well could see through. It was, in fact, so impeccable that a certain refrain that often cropped up in Mile’s Japanese folktales floated into the heads of her fellow party members…

Hearing Pauline’s response, the others around them now began to grasp the full situation. For the past several days, the guild had been gripped by talks of a certain something, so there was no way that any merchant with half a brain cell would not begin to put two and two together, given that scales were involved.

Here and there, suspicious smiles and looks of understanding began to flicker upon the faces of the surrounding staff and merchants.

“Guh…”

The merchant stammered, unable to say anything—what *could* he say? That he had appraised a perfect, complete elder dragon scale at just seven half-gold or that he had tried to trickily purchase an elder dragon scale as a wyvern scale, here in front of all these people?

Naturally, he was aware of how poor his reputation was to begin with. However, all prior incidents of questionable dealing could easily be explained with one of a million excuses like, “That was a conversation only between the parties involved, which no third party was privy to,” or “That was not specified in the wording of the contract,” or “I didn’t know that,” or “My subordinate acted out of turn,” or “We have no records of that,” or simply “This was a legitimate contract that both parties willingly agreed to.”

However, in this case, they had clearly said the words “wyvern scale” in front of all of these people, and moreover, it had been made obvious that he had assessed the scales the young women had brought him at seven half-gold—less than the value of the current negotiations, and indeed far less value than the market price of a wyvern scale. Furthermore, he could not simply claim that previously the girls had shown him an elder dragon scale, and he had made some kind of grand mistake.

Having already just admitted in front of everyone that he could clearly tell dragon scales apart, he could not insist that those seven half-gold scales were worth far more than the wyvern scales before him. All of the options available to him would be tantamount to admitting he had acted fraudulently…

Meanwhile, it was clear that the other party had believed this entire time that what they had were wyvern scales and that they were not of much value. Indeed, even the contract and the equivalent sums involved had clearly affirmed this.

I’ve been had…

The merchant’s shoulders slumped, crestfallen. The wife of the owner of Aritoss, meanwhile, feigned utter ignorance, while Pauline sneered secretly, out of view.

Even given everything, the merchant was not exactly being put at a loss in terms of coin. He was purchasing wyvern scales at a fairly high price, but it was only high when one considered the value of the original sum, interest, and penalty fee. He was more than recovering the original loan and interest, *i.e.* the amount he was fairly due. He had merely slipped up in letting his greed get the best of him.

Though all their debts had been canceled, Aritoss still had to pay the Crimson Vow for the wyvern scales, so in essence, the shop was still paying the original amount and interest as well.

Pauline, of course, could not let them go without having paid their debts simply because the Crimson Vow had gotten involved. Indeed, even though she had been the one to insist, everyone was of the same mind on this.

Making sure their debts were fairly paid would be proof positive that anything Aritoss had done, they had done only in self-defense, not intending to profit, which would raise their reputation in the eyes of the other merchants and guild staff. After all, what they had handed over to the merchant was in fact two beautiful wyvern scales, not damaged goods, or rock lizards scales, or some such substitute.

Indeed, Aritoss was an honest, upstanding shop, which always kept its promises through and through.

The Crimson Vow had gotten to sell two wyvern scales they already had on hand for not far off of market value, so it was no big loss to them.

And so, the incident concluded peacefully, with no real profit and no real losses for anyone involved…monetarily speaking.

The merchant had now thoroughly disgraced himself before so many of his peers and securely cemented his reputation as a scoundrel. Even more important, however, was the extent of the emotional damage he was now suffering at not only having had such a prize vanish before his eyes but also at having been taken by the likes of some peddler’s wife in front of all these people.

Meanwhile, for the matron of the little shop known as Aritoss to stand up and win fair and square against this corrupt and crafty merchant was a great victory: proof of her own stature as a woman of character and a mark of credence and reputation for the business itself.

The Crimson Vow, of course, became just a little more well known as a fascinating bunch of lovely young ladies who boasted storage magic to boot.

“It sure is lucky you had those wyvern scales in storage, Mile,” said Reina.

“Yes. That was all thanks to dear Lobreth, wasn’t it?” agreed Pauline.

Mile and Mavis laughed in reply.

Indeed, the scales had come to them after Lobreth was attacked in the battle with Wence, the greenhorn elder dragon. When Lobreth was injured crashing down into the trees after being struck by dragon breath, Mile had picked some scales out of his wounds to clean them when applying healing magic.

Naturally, the scales would have gotten in the way in the process of preparing to heal the wounds, so she had put them away into storage. She wasn’t just going to leave them on the ground as litter, after all.

“No one lost out, and in fact, we all profited a little. What a happy ending!” Mile concluded, naive as always.

The other three were silent, though they all truly wished to point out that she had failed to consider the reputation or spirit of the merchant, both of which were clearly suffering…

No, I’m sure she’s completely aware of that, thought Reina.

She has no interest in considering the feelings of villains! Mile truly is a dark one… thought Pauline.

She’s being sincere, isn’t she? Mile, do you really think that? thought Mavis.

The three could do nothing but smile ambiguously in reply.

Chapter 82:
In the Mountain Depths

“All right, time to head out!” announced Reina.

“Yeah!” crowed the other three.

With that, the Crimson Vow were on their way to the next town.

“Our battles are only just beginning!”

“Sure, sure…”

“We’ve only just begun to climb that steep and endless slope that is the path of the hunter!”

“Uh-huh, yep…”

Pauline and Mavis nodded along at Mile’s declarations. Reina withheld comment. These were both words that Mile had used before when wrapping up her Japanese folktales.

Having been paid by the Hunters’ Guild and receiving half of the provisional, minimum purchase price for the ground dragon, the Crimson Vow headed immediately out of the capital, not waiting around for the official appraisal for the goods and whatever other remaining money they were owed. It would still be some days before all of the dragon parts could be sold and the final profits established. The members of the Crimson Vow, who had already intended to leave the area, did not have the time to just sit around waiting.

Indeed, the precious time they would spend as maidens was fleeting, and they could not afford to waste it. So, instead, they left the final paperwork to the Roaring Mithrils, who seemed like they would be in town a while longer, and requested that their portion of the proceeds be put into their party account with the guild. That way, it could be transferred to the guild branch they had registered with back in Tils and deposited into their account there.

The guild, of course, was not constantly transferring the entire gold balance of various hunters' savings. Once a month, guild branches shared their accounts with one another, took totals, and transferred only the difference. The rest was relegated to numerical reports, the actual payouts counterbalancing each other.

No matter how well guarded the guild typically was against bandit attacks, it would be a needless risk to transfer all of that money every time someone made a transaction. Thus, it was thanks to the sharing of incoming and outgoing reports between the branches that hunters were able to withdraw funds without waiting for the monthly transfer.

Previously, Mile had pressed the nanomachines, asking, "Why haven't you all facilitated some kind of Mysterious Interguild Information Network or a Mysterious Guild Card You Can Use Like an ATM Card or something?!" The nanos had replied sadly, "WE'RE NOT AUTHORIZED TO DO SO."

Apparently, the laws governing the nanomachines were not easily bent.

And so, the Crimson Vow were merrily on their way to the next town. However…

"So, we've mostly been traveling east this whole time. Just how far do we plan on going?" Mavis asked nonchalantly.

"Huh? You're the leader, aren't you supposed to be telling us that?"

"Wha—? But you're the one who always decides our travel plans, Reina, since you've been on the road since you were little."

"Huh? That's the first I'm hearing of this!"

"Huhh?"

"Huhhhhh?!?!"

"Well, what was it we were after when we set out on this journey?" Pauline wondered aloud. "I mean, obviously the goals were training and building our reputation, but other than that…"

“W-well, we’re all traveling in the first place because I was going to travel alone and see the sights while investigating what the elder dragons were after. Then, you all decided to come along,” Mile replied.

“Oh, that’s right! That was a thing, *wasn’t* it?” said the other three.

Apparently, they had completely forgotten.

“*Gloooom…”*

This seemed to be quite a shock for Mile. So much so that she was producing her own sound effects verbally.

“Wh-what was that?”

Mile fumed, her cheeks puffed out, and Mavis scrambled to cover, apologizing.

“Sorry, we’re sorry! It’s just that it’s been so long already since we first left the capital!”

Of course, she wasn’t referring to the week or so they had spent there in the middle of their journey. For purposes of the trip, they were treating that time as just another stop along the road, so what Mavis was referring to was the time since their initial departure.

“So, should we turn around soon and head back toward Tils?” Pauline proposed.

“Well,” Reina put in, “we have experienced a lot of things, and it’s been good practice. It might be about time for us to head back home and actually start laying down some roots. But…” She trailed off, looking toward Mile.

Thus far, they had made no progress on investigating the mysteries that had been Mile’s initial impetus for setting out on the road. And so it seemed that the other members of the Crimson Vow, who had invited themselves along on this trip, riding along on Mile’s coattails, were in no place to be declaring the end of the journey before they had even seen a single result.

Mavis and Pauline seemed to be of the same opinion and were pondering what to do, but before they could—

“Well then, let’s head on back!” Mile crowed cheerfully.

“Huh?!” The other three were stunned, bewilderment clear on their faces.

“Y-you, uh, just like that… Are you sure? What about that stuff you wanted to do when you were leaving the capital?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I told you though, didn’t I? That was really just something that had piqued my interest, and I thought it would be a good side goal for killing time along the road. Considering the life span of an elder dragon, who knows how many centuries, or even millennia, their plans might span? There’s no way a lowly human could ever really hope to get a grip on that. I never intended to make that my primary goal or anything.”

“M-Mile, you… I mean, yes, you did say something like that, but we thought you were just saying that so as not to make us worry! Don’t tell me you were leaving us over something so… Actually, wait! So are you saying you were really going to leave us over something as minor as that?”

“Uh, no, I—”

Sparks flew.

After a bit of a quarrel, things calmed down, and the members of the Crimson Vow decided that they would continue a little farther east and then consider heading back from their next destination.

“I wonder if Lenny’s been managing the baths all right…” Mile pondered.

“You put up partitions for her and built a well right next to the bath. If she can’t manage even with that, then she’s not qualified to be running an inn. Any inn that hopeless deserves to be run into the ground!” said Pauline, with somewhat needless aggression. Apparently, she was still a bit on edge from their fight.

Ah… thought the other three.

Or maybe she was recalling the Unintentionally Abandoning Pauline Incident… In which case, it was perhaps only natural that she would be unhappy.

“Forgive us,” the three sincerely apologized.

***

“It looks like it’s finally here—the *Shinshin Chanson Kashu Shinshun Sonson Chanson Show!*”

“What in the world are you saying?”

“Actually, I’m impressed you didn’t bite your tongue on that.”

“What language is it anyway?”

What Mile had said translated roughly to the Rising Stars of Song New Year’s Mountain Village Singing Show, but her twist on the classic tongue-twister would lose all of its effect if she were to translate it into this world’s common tongue, so she had spoken the latter half of the sentence in Japanese. There was, of course, no way the others could have understood it.

At any rate, the Crimson Vow had now arrived at a decently sized mountain village. Decently sized, at least insofar as it had something resembling an inn and eatery.

Were it a truly *small* village, any guests would typically lodge at the home of the village chief, but naturally, travelers and hunters who just so happened to be passing through did not really count as guests. Anyone who gave off a suspicious air would not be allowed to stay there, and even if they were permitted, they would most likely have to pay money.

The Crimson Vow typically avoided staying in villages without inns on principle—except when they took on jobs from such places and were invited explicitly as guests. It was far better to camp out in the forest than to pay money to sleep in someone’s private home like some sort of parasites… As far as the members of the Crimson Vow were concerned, anyway.

Most other hunters judged such things by far different criteria, but that was simply how things were.

At any rate, this place had an inn, and so for practice, and to be able to get the lay of the land a good distance from town, the group made the collective decision to stay.

Of course, it went without saying that when the party took a room at the singular inn and took their dinner at the only eatery in town—located on the first floor of the inn, naturally—the *usual* occurred.

Were this Japan, he would have been middle-aged, but for this world he was fairly elderly. A man of such description, along with another man in his early forties, entered the dining area and strolled right up to the table occupied by the Crimson Vow.

In a village like this, those with families rarely ate out, so the diners present were limited to the Crimson Vow and the few other guests of the inn, along with a single young-looking man from the village. As a result, there were plenty of open tables. Which meant that…

"I have a favor to ask."

Here it comes, the girls thought.

"I am the elder of this village—"

"At least let us finish eating first!!!"

As always.

"Oy! Are you listening? This is the village elder—"

"Shut up! We aren't nice or stupid enough to let our precious food get cold just to shoot the breeze with some guy who comes up all full of himself, blabbing at us without even a proper greeting in the middle of our meal! Either start over or wait somewhere out of our sight!"

It would not be unreasonable to think, *Well, you didn't have to be* that *harsh,* but on further consideration, the man *had* interrupted Reina's mealtime. Reina, who loved food as much as life itself.

Normally, this would be the point at which Mavis would step in to try to smooth things over, but this level of conflict was to be expected. The other three only nodded in agreement. As far as they were concerned, eating was a sacred duty, demanded by their stomachs and necessary for maintaining their bodies in tip-top form to best show off their abilities. Besides, it was a great pleasure—one they were only able to indulge in three times a day.

Meanwhile, the village elder and his companion, who assumed themselves of a far higher station than these little rookie hunters, stood before them, speechless.

“…All right, whaddya want?”

Even after the meal had concluded, Reina seemed to have no interest in playing along with the men’s tune. She was not the sort of girl to worry about formalities when it came to the likes of some village chief.

Of course, it was not as though she did not know *how* to be formal. She had always spoken quite politely to customers during her days traveling with her father. These days, however, the only people she might worry about being so formal with were nobles—with the exception of those who were hostile toward the Crimson Vow.

That said, such was the way of most hunters. Those who had to bluff their way through life, or lacked confidence in themselves, were the first to put up a strong front, using rough language and putting on their best high and mighty act.

“Y-yes—well, first off, just listen up.”

All of the other guests had finished eating, leaving only the Crimson Vow and the village elder’s party remaining in the dining room. Those who were not lodging at the inn were regulars who had arrived as soon as dinner service began, and no one had shown up after the Crimson Vow was seated.

Naturally, there was no way that the owners of the inn would not have known who the village elder was, so they had brought a glass of water to the old man as he pulled up a chair and sat down at the table, telling him to take his time before they retreated back into the kitchen.

The old man who called himself the village elder then began to speak. With his attempt to come on strong and take the initiative in the conversation apparently having been rebuffed, he had switched to a more relaxed tone, which one might take with a group of hunters one was meeting for the first time.

This was the man’s tale:

There was a certain mountain that lay a few hours’ walk from the village, away from the highway. Well, being that this was a mountain village, they were

of course *surrounded* by mountains, but this mountain in particular was a bit of a problem mountain.

For ages now, golems had been appearing on this mountain. As with most places in which this occurred, the golems never strayed more than a fixed distance from the mountain and had shown no signs of increasing in number, so this in itself was not a problem. It was not a huge difficulty for the villagers, who lived surrounded by mountains, to avoid one mountain in particular. Furthermore, considering how far away from them it was, this really was not an issue in the slightest. There were no resources that were exclusive to this mountain, nor was it home to any special herbs or prey. It was your typical, run-of-the-mill mountain.

Then, one day, the children arrived.

These were so-called urchins.

To be fair, if they were all sleeping together under a bridge or in some thicket in a riverbed or something, they really ought to have been called “homeless” rather than “urchins,” but, well, let’s not sweat the details. Perhaps to avoid associating them with orphans who lived in an orphanage, everyone around here seemed to refer to these children living on their own as “urchins,” regardless of whether they had a proper settlement or not. It was a word that indicated those who did not live in proper homes, only in shacks or ruins, or merely clumps of brush or thickets of trees.

There was one peculiar fact about these children: they seemed to live untargeted by the golems despite intruding into their territory.

Regardless, they were a harmless lot, of no nuisance to the villagers. The amount of wild vegetables or small animals that a group of children might harvest had no effect on the village’s supply chain, and they really did not cross into the same places the villagers frequented in the first place. In fact, there were even those amongst the villagers who would travel to this mountain to “dispose” of unwanted things—things for the children to use as needed.

All told, this was a strange mountain, but rarely a problematic one. And yet apparently, there had been some kind of unrest there of late.

The kindhearted villagers who typically made their way to the mountain to

“dispose” of old clothing and pots and pans and overcooked bread had observed a number of suspicious men in the area. Furthermore, the men had been seen retreating from combat with the rock golems, who rarely attacked so long as one did not attack them first or go infringing on their territory.

“Since the rock golems settled in on that mountain, we’ve seen almost no other ferocious monsters,” said the elder. “The ones that are still there don’t often attack humans preemptively or are gentle, slow-moving plant-eaters—mostly relatively safe ones, in any case. Things like rock rabbits or rock snakes… Sometimes you’ll see a rock wolf, but there really aren’t a lot of those. Seems like if anything too wild tries to move in, the golems drive ’em right out. So, well, I guess I should get to the point…” he continued, bowing his head to the Crimson Vow. “We’d like you to look into those strange men, and these new golem attacks, and make sure that there’s no danger to those little vagrants who finally found themselves a place to stay.”

With that, he glared up at each of the members of the Crimson Vow in turn.

“We don’t know what those men are thinking picking fights with the rock golems. There’s nothing valuable out there, and it doesn’t seem like they’re slavers trying to make off with any of the children. That said, there’s a lot of potential danger to those kids—whether the rock golems start seeing humans as enemies or if they get caught up in some other kind of fight.

“However, we can’t put in any formal request to the Hunters’ Guild until we know the situation out there. There’s no tellin’ how much we’d have to pay if we put in a job request right now, far out from everything as we are, on a job that we don’t know the circumstances or the risks of.

“Unfortunately, we can’t go using up our precious village savings for a bunch of strange kids when there’s no danger to the village itself. So, we’ve got to rely on any hunters who happen to stop by to do a bit of intel gathering. We can give you 53 silver. Please accept this task!”

Apparently, the elder’s glare had not been one of malice, but of emphasis, gritting his teeth to desperately implore the assistance of the Crimson Vow.

There were reasons why a town might be built in a certain place.

It might be the spot where a highway crossed a river or where two major roads intersected. There might be some famous landmark, or a port, or a place where a mine or some other industry flourished. It might be some highly fortified location, or simply a way station, at some regular interval along the main thoroughfare. You would see slightly larger towns in the places where one day's travel for a passenger wagon and a merchant's cart overlapped.

This town, however, was distant from such places, in a remote location, a village more or less in the middle of nowhere. There was little traffic, and the roads were so narrow that wagons could not pass one another without using pull-offs.

Even so, this village was relatively civilized compared to most settlements in the heart of the mountains. Though it truly was what one might call "a little mountain village," it was still nothing to spit at. At least in this world, where there were some truly unthinkable locales…

If one were to proceed only along the larger roads, one would know only of the larger, more prosperous towns and way stations. To be made aware of the places in between these towns, the small villages and the backwoods area, one had to be purposely traveling for the sake of enrichment, straying from the main roads now and then to take the roads leading to these mountain or woodland villages.

At times like these, when happening upon a place so far from a town with any guild branch—villages with so little money they could not issue a formal guild request—showing off one's gallantry by taking a job for scraps was truly the height of one's journey of self-improvement.

It was rare that any normal town would have reason to thank a band of rookie hunters from the bottom of their hearts. So, these rookies, still unskilled, sometimes dreamt of taking such jobs… At least until they were experienced C-rank hunters who were dragged down by the daily grind and had not the leisure to be taking such unprofitable tasks.

The Crimson Vow, of course, were at just the perfect age to desire such jobs… Particularly Mavis, Mavis, and especially Mavis.

"Leave it to us! We will—"

“Please let us think on it,” Pauline interrupted, before Mavis could finish her reply. “We’ll let you know tomorrow—”

“We’ll do it.”

“Huh?”

As Pauline tried to delay their response, Reina cut in, accepting the job for them. Pauline and Mavis both sounded surprised at this, but Mile was unaffected. This was only the natural reply for Reina…

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“Why did you accept this job?! 53 silver is less than half what we should be paid for a job like this! It’s okay to give people a bit of a discount, but there’s a standard market rate for things for a reason.”

After having accepted their independent assignment, the Crimson Vow heard all of the requisite information, and the village elder headed home.

Only then did Pauline lay into Reina for having the audacity to accept the job without consulting the rest of the party. Though usually a relatively laidback figure, Pauline was fairly…intense when it came to matters of money.

“For a hunter to take a job that far below the standard pay causes problems for *all* hunters! Discounts or no, we shouldn’t be taking any less than three half-gold per person for this—that’s twelve for all four of us!”

“You can debate it all you want, but they aren’t going to be able to pay that much,” said Reina.

“Huh?”

It was typical on these sorts of journeys to provide a bit of charity to rural villages in need. Even Pauline was aware of this, but still, she insisted 53 silver was simply far too low. To that end, she had thought they at least ought to negotiate the rate, but…

“53 silver is a kind of random amount, isn’t it? If they were just pulling out of the village savings, it would be a nice, easily divisible amount, like 50 silver. Plus, normally they’d present it as something more like ‘five half-gold’…”

“W-well yes, that is true. But—” Pauline replied.

“In other words, 53 silver coins is what he’s got. He didn’t even take off the 3 to make it a more even number; it’s everything he can offer. Plus, you heard him before: ‘We can’t go using up our precious village savings for a bunch of strange kids when there’s no danger to the village itself.’”

“Oh…”

“So the long and short of it is that the money he’s offering isn’t from the official budget that’s set aside for the running of the village, right?”

“The 53 silver was all collected as donations from the villagers, then? And he’s offering us all of it, not keeping any for himself…” Mavis muttered.

“I guess we’ve got no choice!” chimed Mile. “It’s one for friendship and two for loyalty. Three for generosity and four through seven for money!”

“That’s our *Crimson Vow*!” the four chorused together.

…Mile, Mavis, and Pauline were all, of course, fully aware of one thing: though it was not as obvious as with Mile, Reina always worried for the waifs and orphans in the towns that they stopped in. They also knew just why she was so concerned for these children.

They couldn’t help but think what might have happened if Reina had not been picked up by the Crimson Lightning when her father died. Or what path she might have gone down after the members of the Crimson Lightning were slaughtered, had she not had her talent as a mage and all of the knowledge the members of the Lightning had imparted to her?

They understood what these generous spirits, who would gather up their money for the sake of children who did not even live in the village—despite their own struggles for coin—meant to a girl who might well have been one of those waifs herself. They all understood the softheartedness that would bring the villagers to bow their heads to the likes of a bunch of young hunters.

These villagers were just like those people who had reached out to raise up Reina…

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“So, I guess we’ve made it to the problem mountain!” Mile announced.

“N-no, it’s ‘the place where the villagers go to discard their old clothes and overbaked bread,’” Reina corrected.

The pair were both referring to the same area: where the mountain crags flattened out into a surface like a stand or a table.

This deep in the mountains, where people rarely came, it was impossible to track down any clear path, or even anything resembling an animal trail, but by following the various landmarks that the village elder had described to them—

such as peculiar boulders or three big trees that happened to grow in a nice little row, etc.—as well as keeping an eye out for the clear signs of prior human travel—including bent grasses and twigs, brush that looked to have been cut away with a machete or similar—the Crimson Vow was eventually able to find their way here.

"Anyway, it seems like we're going to need to get information out of one of the three major groups here—either the golems, the strange men, or the urchins. Which one would be the best to talk to?" wondered Mile.

"Golems can't talk!"

"I don't think we'll get anywhere by starting with the suspicious men. And we don't know if we'll be able to make it back here again…"

"So it's obvious, isn't it?" the other three chorused.

"Well, then…"

Fweeeee!!!

Mile put her fingers to her lips and whistled.

This was a special skill of Misato's, which she eventually mastered after being taught the trick by an old American man who lived near her, and naturally, she had held on to this skill after her reincarnation as well—though no one had ever called it that, exactly. It was no real challenge to simply put your forefinger and thumb into your mouth and blow, but actually getting the knack of it was quite difficult. It was curious that most Americans seemed to understand this finger whistle, while most Japanese did not.

Regardless, the finger whistle, which produced far more sound than normal whistling, was incredibly useful—particularly as a signal at times like this.

She had heard this was the sort of signal used by the villagers who came to "discard their old things."

Indeed, after a short while, four children appeared from out of the trees.

"Who are you guys…?"

The children had assumed that it was the usual villagers who had come, but here was a group of four armored strangers. It was only natural they would be on their guard. That said, armor or no, the strangers were a group of young ladies, ranging from children themselves to maybe seventeen or eighteen tops, so perhaps they needn't have been quite so cautious.

If they had come to abduct the children, it would have been standard to send big, strong men—there would really be no way to make any money off of these children otherwise.

"We're hunters on a job for the village elder. Has anything been bothering you all?"

The first to speak was Mile, whose appearance made her seem like the least intimidating of the bunch. Pauline also gave off the impression of kindness, but if the children's sharp senses were to pick up on her true nature, they would lose their trust in an instant. Just in case, she kept out of the conversation.

The members of the Crimson Vow were all aware that Mile was the one most suited to asking questions about things they did not know about.

"The village elder? Y'mean Gramps?" asked a boy of around twelve or thirteen, who seemed to be the leader of the group, a curious look upon his face. Apparently, despite his wariness, he understood that these strange girls did not intend them any harm.

"Gramps? Yeah, I guess. The one who comes to 'discard' the old clothes and bread the village doesn't need anymore."

"Discard? Uh, y-yeah, I guess that's probably it…" replied the boy, tilting his head. Apparently, the one who was in charge of coming to "discard" these supposedly unwanted items—this *Gramps* or what have you—had never used this particular terminology with the children.

"It seems like the elder has forbidden the villagers from traveling here right now, since they don't know how dangerous things are currently. So instead…"

"Instead?"

"All the villagers pooled their money and hired us."

The four children fell silent, faces expressionless.

It was not some natural phenomenon that had brought this large group of orphans to live alone in the middle of the mountains. No, this was probably where they had just so happened to end up after living in some town somewhere where no one ever stepped in to help them—or worse yet, where people persecuted them, exploited them, or hunted them down out of frustration or for sport, where there was a strong chance of them being captured and sold off into slavery. They would have fled, searching for someplace safe, and found their way here.

Though out here they had no one to beg for scraps from and no pockets to pick, their diets were far more enriched in the mountains than they ever were in the city, replete with wild vegetables and small animals, and the rare larger beast they managed to snag in their traps. Their water likely came from a stream.

However, things were never that simple—of course not. If this life was typically so easy, then all city orphans would probably move out to the mountains.

While it was one thing for a few people to take a trip out to the mountains for hunting, choosing to live in these wilds was more or less an act of suicide, even for an adult. There were wild beasts, predators…and, of course, monsters.

Furthermore, out in the wilderness, where no one could see, there was the chance of becoming prey for nobles and other wealthy people who had a predilection for hunting “the most dangerous game.”

So, normally, it would be impossible for a group of children to live out in this kind of environment. How was it they had managed it here?

The golems.

Thanks to the golems appearing in this area, dangerous monster types such as ogres and orcs kept their distance, and when relatively harmless monsters—lizard and rabbit and serpent types—appeared, they could typically be dealt with by way of bamboo spears and clubs, as well as the tree-climbing skills the children honed in case of emergency.

Why was it, though, that golems would chase away orcs and ogres, but not other monsters? And furthermore, why did they completely ignore the children, not chasing them away as well?

According to the village elder, no one had any idea. All they knew was that this was a place where the children could thrive. That was all that mattered.

Then, there were the villagers, who despite not having anything to do with this area and these strange children from elsewhere, had for some reason made a habit of bringing clothes and food to them under the guise of discarding unwanted things.

Never once in their lives had anyone done anything like this for these children. Not even in the towns that were far more populated than the village, far more prosperous.

And now, they had gone so far as to gather up their money and hire hunters just for the sake of the children's protection.

It made no sense.

The children had not the foggiest idea of what the villagers might be thinking, wasting their money on something so irrelevant to them.

This was why the children had gone quiet.

However, silence was not going to push the conversation forward. And so, Mile continued.

"Um… So, what about the other children?"

The leader boy studied Mile suspiciously, making no move to reply. Mile realized why.

Of course, revealing your numbers to the enemy puts you at a big disadvantage. Which means that they still don't trust us…

Indeed, the way that these children had been treated in the past was far too cruel for them to trust in strangers easily, regardless of the fact that the village had hired them. For these children, trusting easily in others could mean death or enslavement.

Well then, in that case…

Bwam!

A large hunk of meat appeared atop the table-like rock.

“Uh…?”

The children were speechless.

Bwam! Thwunk! Boom!!

Vegetables, bread, a kettle, a stove, and a water cask with a spout. The children were frozen in shock as all of these things appeared out of thin air before them.

“I’m not sure how many people we should be cooking for since we don’t know how many of you there are… Are just four portions enough?”

“Th-there’s sixteen of us!”

“Shut up, idiot!!”

Before the leader boy could stop him, another child of around ten told the members of the Crimson Vow exactly what they needed to hear.

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“All right, soup’s up!” Mile cried as the children flocked around.

As Mile began preparing a meal for twenty, after much fraught internal debate, the leader boy instructed the other children to go and collect the rest of their band.

The children who arrived froze in shock to see the meal being prepared before them, a delicious smell wafting from the kettle. They practically clung to Mile and Pauline, who were preparing the food, but were eventually chased off, saying it was dangerous or that they were being a nuisance.

It was difficult to cook with so many eyes staring fixedly at them from afar—incredibly difficult, actually—but Mile and Pauline somehow managed to bear the intent stares pointed their way and finished their task.

And then…

“It’s so goooood!!!” the children all cried.

“Mm-hmm, I see, I see…” said Mile, proudly puffing out her chest. Of course, she was proud, having so cleverly leveraged her intuition.

GIYO GIYO

No matter how much more enriched the children's diets were than when they lived in the city, the children were never able to fully fill their bellies, except for the rare times that they managed to bring down a larger animal. Furthermore, with few spices and fewer cooking supplies, their choices were typically limited to simple, flavorless fare, their food either raw, roasted, or dried.

Indeed, as far as these children were concerned, eating was not something to be enjoyed but merely a mortal act necessary for living.

And so, Mile wished to teach these children the joy of food, that there was more to eating than simply sating one's hunger.

Reina felt the same way, but Mile, getting the sense that if Reina were to get involved in the cooking, the children would experience *dis*pleasure rather than pleasure, vetoed that idea, recruiting Pauline's assistance instead. While Mile and Pauline worked on the food, Reina relegated herself to examining all of the children physically, applying healing magic to any injuries she found.

Mavis, meanwhile, took on a motherly role, instructing the children in ways of fighting with bamboo spears and clubs, and showing them ways of strengthening their bodies, to keep them out of the way of the cooking. Though all the while she muttered, "Just why is it that I'm so popular with children and old folks and ladies, but never the gentlemen?"

After everything, what Mile and Pauline managed to produce was: a roast.

Of course, the children had certainly had roast meat before, but roast meat was a far different beast from *a roast*. Completely different. It was as different as a ship was from the Titanic.

Roast meat was the fare of cavemen, but *a roast* was a meal for a civilized personage. It was carefully portioned into bite-sized pieces, at just the most delicious, superb thickness, neither too well done nor too rare, and naturally highlighted the most critical part of any meal—the seasonings!

Lightly salted and peppered, with just a little spice, the roast was rubbed in Mile's special marinade before roasting and then sauced once more just before eating. Even this sauce alone, made of high-quality seasonings, fruits, soy sauce, sugar, garlic, salt, honey, vegetable oil, starch, and onions, hailed from a world

that the children had never dreamt of. Frankly, it was practically overkill—the sort of meal that even the local nobles would probably rave about.

It did not seem likely that they would receive any response from the children while they were busy gobbling down the meal, so Reina and Mavis waited politely, grimacing, until there was a break in the eating. Mile and Pauline, meanwhile, were far too busy preparing seconds for themselves…

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"So then, about these suspicious people who have apparently been showing up around here…"

"Yeah?"

As per usual, Mile was in charge of speaking with the children. Reina got worked up too easily, and the children would sense Pauline's true nature immediately, putting them on their guard. And so, the straightforward Mile, who was also, mentally, the closest to them in age, was the obvious choice. Moreover, in this instance, she had a firm hold on the children via their stomachs. There really was no one better for the job.

This is what Mile was able to extract from the children:

They had come to the decision to flee the city, where they were persecuted, used as disposable fodder for criminal organizations, snatched away to be sold into slavery, or exploited as prey for nobles' and other wealthy people's foul interests or games of manhunting. However, they knew that no small village would be able to take on so many children. Just when their prospects were growing dark, one of the youngest mentioned an old wives' tale they had heard from their late parents.

The story went: "There are monsters who will allow you to live on their land if you offer them a tribute."

It was rather unbelievable, but if they remained in town they were as good as dead. If they reached some small village and were driven out, they would be likewise dead. Setting up camp in the forest could mean being attacked by monsters or wild animals, or targeted by bandits or manhunters—leaving them,

once again, dead. If the only avenues open to them all led to death, then they might as well pray for an impossible miracle!

With this thought in mind, they decided on their final gamble, swiping as much food and water and items of tribute as they could, and headed out in search of the home of these fabled monsters who might be open to such a trade-off.

"And that place was here, right?"

"Yeah."

"And the monsters who accepted your tribute were…"

"Uh-huh."

It was as the children wandered the mountains, their scant food supplies almost spent, that at last they stumbled upon some water, and *it* appeared before them:

A Bloody Bear.

These were not normal bears but a type of monster—the sort of opponent that a group of children could never escape on their own two feet.

The end was already upon them.

The children had consigned themselves to death, when *that* appeared.

That did not roar; it was utterly silent.

It had no expression and did not seem very hurried.

That moved slowly, calmly toward the Bloody Bear…and slaughtered it.

As the thing turned toward the children, they quickly extracted their tributes from out of their packs and placed them before it.

Metal.

They had gathered up as much metal as they could, from scrap iron to copper coins to things found in garbage heaps, and even hinges from people's doors—

all kinds of metal.

The thing stared at these tributes for a while and then went still.

Several minutes later, something else appeared.

It had six legs and four arms. The mysterious creature was roughly the size of a large dog and skittered along swiftly.

Indeed, it was a Scavenger. A Scavenger, who had appeared with such impeccable timing that one could assume nothing else but that the *thing*, *i.e.* a rock golem, had summoned it.

The Scavenger looked carefully over the children, collected their tributes, and vanished along with the rock golem.

They had been acknowledged and would be allowed to live. Somehow, the children knew this to be true…

From then on, under the protection of these golems, which for some reason drove away all large or ferocious beasts, but completely ignored any small or harmless monsters, as well as normal non-monstrous animals, the children were able to eke out a decent living, hunting small game, foraging for vegetables and fruits, and planting the seeds of what they gathered in makeshift fields.

"So, the reason you haven't been attacked or eaten is because the golems hunt down all the big and scary monsters? I don't get why they're so gentle, despite being such large monsters—or why they would leave the relatively dangerous but non-monstrous animals alone…" Pauline wondered, though of course it was common knowledge that typically, dangerous monsters did not inhabit the same areas as golems.

Normally, the only ones to wander into such areas were hunters, as well as normal huntsmen. The huntsmen, who neither went near nor meddled with the golems, were rarely if ever attacked, and even most hunters who stumbled into battles with golems usually made it back to tell the tale.

Though it would be too far to say that the huntsmen did *not* have the golems'

blessing, theirs was not exactly a peaceful coexistence either. It was probably only that they were in the same position as these children. Like the children, the golems had registered them as harmless and ignored them. That was all there was to it.

Regardless, the children were thankful. To them, these golems, with their massive, sturdy bodies, protecting them from dangerous beasts, were like their guardian angels.

“And then, one day, those men appeared…”

Finally, they had come to the crux of the tale.

One day, from out of nowhere, the suspicious men appeared. What was most suspicious about them was that they all varied in terms of clothing and equipment and age, but they all shared one thing: a matching black cloak.

They were a mix of swordsmen, lancers, mages, and so on, but they did not appear to be especially coordinated.

Despite this, they had been attacking the golems, forcefully and head-on.

These men battled persistently with the golems, but while they were aware of the children’s presence, they did nothing to bother them. On the contrary, they sometimes, when retreating from battle, shared some of their spare food with the kids.

“What?! Then they’re good guys, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, I mean, they’re good guys to us. But the golems have been our saviors, too…”

“Ah, I see.”

On the one hand were the golems, who though far less angel than monster, were still the children’s guardians—and on the other hand were the suspicious men, who had shown them a little bit of kindness, too. In fact, though they were being referred to as “suspicious,” if they were fighting against the golems, against *monsters*, most people would consider them to be “good guys.” Even hunters battled golems from time to time.

Normally, of course, they were the sort of beast only challenged by young hunters wishing to test their skills or by parties who happened upon them in the process of hunting rock lizards and the like. Given that they were relatively strong, never attacked human settlements, and had no meat or hides to harvest, there was not much point in attacking them. The only parts of a golem worth selling were those spheres that made up their joints, which did not sell for very much in the first place.

"If each one of those men is strong on their own, but they don't have a lot of group coordination, then do you think they might have come here for practice in order to work on that?" Mavis offered.

"Oh!"

The other three clapped their hands at the realization. That *would* make sense. Golems were relatively sturdy, and even if one were to use them as practice dummies and fell a number of them, they were not especially lifelike, so it was difficult to feel bad for them. Therefore, in terms of practice targets, there were few better choices. Hunters rarely strayed into golem territories either, so there was no worry of bothering anyone or destroying the ecosystem… After all, golems already did more than enough damage to the surrounding ecosystems themselves.

"So, everything's just peachy then, isn't it? These guys seem pretty respectable; they haven't hurt the kids, and they're just fighting golems for practice. I mean, I guess it's kind of troublesome for the golems, but they are monsters, so that's whatever," said Reina.

"Hmm, I guess you're right," Mavis agreed. "We can consider our job done, then. We've sussed out the situation and confirmed that the children aren't in any danger."

Pauline nodded as well.

Mile, however, had a troubled look upon her face.

"Hmm… Matching black cloaks, pretty strong, but with poor tactics and coordination… Why does this sound familiar?"

Mile tilted her head in thought but simply could not bring the memory to the

surface.

“Ah…” Pauline, overhearing her muttering, raised her voice. “It’s just like that time that little Faleel was abducted!”

“Oh, right!” the other three cried.

Sure enough, these men shared some characteristics with the strange kidnapper cultists. Those men, the human zealots following their dark god, were uncoordinated in dress and equipment but all wore a black cloak as their shared symbol.

On reflection, the men had mentioned that the genesis of their faith had been in a land located far to the east, and as it happened, the country they were now in was fairly far east from Vanolark. Enough so to qualify as “far to the east”…

“Now that you mention it, those guys were pretty cold to Faleel, a beastgirl, but they didn’t try to harm that little human girl she was friends with—Methelia I think it was? Even though, had they silenced her, it would have eliminated the only eyewitness and bought them some time before their crime was discovered…” said Reina.

“Yes! In other words, they’re kind to humans, so they really aren’t all that bad…” Pauline agreed.

“Wait, what are you two saying?! Humanoid races aren’t limited to just humans, dwarves, and elves—beastfolk and demons should have the same rights, too! No matter how upstanding they are, if they tried to sacrifice Faleel, a beastgirl, they’re still bad people, aren’t they?!” Mavis loudly objected.

Mile nodded emphatically at this objection—the obvious response for any true aspiring kemono aficionado.

“Ah…”

An awkward look came to Reina and Pauline’s faces. Obviously, neither of the pair was the sort to look down upon other races—they were not human supremacists by any means. However, they had also just asserted that there was some merit in the fact that, despite those men not hesitating to offer a beast child as a sacrifice, they avoided harming a human girl, even when she posed a threat to them.

“This is just like the ‘bad guy feeding a stray cat’ trope…” Mile muttered, but of course no one had any idea what she was talking about, so this went ignored. “Anyway, this changes things. If those men are related to the same group, then there’s a chance that they might be trying to initiate another one of those ceremonies here—and there’s a chance that they might have some similarly evil doings in mind. Plus, if they keep picking fights with golems like this, then the golems might come to view all humans as enemies, which opens up the possibility of the children being attacked,” Mile explained.

The children’s faces paled.

No one really knew how golems classified humans or by what framework. Could they distinguish at all between the children and the adults who were attacking them? Or would they class them all under the same category of humans who existed on the mountain?

If it was the latter, then…

Naturally, the Crimson Vow had not ever considered whether there was more to the golems than simply being *golems* that existed on the mountain—never wondered whether there were different tribes and factions amongst the golem kind, including some who might even be friendly toward them. It would not be at all strange if the golems considered them in the same way.

“Anyway, we can’t head back now,” said Reina.

“Yes, we need to find those men and determine whether they’re associated with that group and what it is they’re doing here,” Pauline agreed. “If we don’t, we won’t know for certain whether or not these children are actually in danger.”

Mile and Mavis nodded as well. And then…

“If they are affiliated with that group, then we’re definitely at a huge advantage,” said Mile.

Mavis added, “Yeah, we know all sorts of things about them…”

“…but *they* don’t know that!” the four triumphantly crowed.

Indeed, though they would likely be aware that one of their branches in

Vanolark had slipped up big time and all been arrested in the wake of an important ceremony, there was no way that the men here could know anything about the two parties who were involved nor that one of those parties was present here on the mountain. As such, the Crimson Vow were more or less guaranteed an easy win if they came in contact with the men. From their perspective, the hunters would be a disadvantageous group, but one worth protecting, a party of rookie hunters who just so happened to take a job in support of these children. When they looked at them, they would see only a group of young girls, all pure-blooded humans, half of whom at least appeared to be underage.

So far, the men actually had not done anything illegal. As a result, there would be little reason for them to be overly on their guard against a group of young ladies they just so happened to encounter in the mountains, who did not appear to be bandits or anything of the kind.

"Oh," Pauline suddenly said.

"What's up?" asked Mavis.

"Actually, I hope those guys *are* associated with the same group…"

"Are you serious?!"

Pauline ignored Mavis's interjection and continued.

"If they *were* just some group of brigands or other shady people who came out here for combat practice, and a group of young, beautiful maidens were to just come wandering by…"

"Ah," said the other three.

Just then, one of the children raised their voice.

"You ladies are pretty shameless, aren't you?"

"Shut up!"

***

After extracting more information from the children, the Crimson Vow learned that the men were appearing at relatively fixed intervals, so they decided to wait for a few days.

Meanwhile, to kill some time, Mavis instructed the children in the way of the sword, while Reina, realizing that some of the children had magical talent, taught them some basic spells, and Pauline held what seemed to be some sort of symposium on surviving the wicked ways of the world…

At the same time, Mile busied herself with chopping down trees to build the children sturdy treetop forts to protect them from the wind and the rain and wild beasts. She also furnished the children with some of the cheap swords she had in her inventory, previously confiscated from bandits, along with the singular hoe that was floating around in there, too.

Naturally, the children were overjoyed at the sight of the forts, but their glee at receiving the swords and hoe was even more immense. They were so happy that Mile almost worried they might pee themselves in excitement, like enthused puppies.

As the children frolicked in their joy, however, they suddenly turned to Mile with a serious look. “What do we do if the golems or Mister Skitters come and see the swords or hoe?”

“Mister Skitters” referred to the Scavenger, presumable because when the creature came scrambling quickly in on its six legs, it made a skittering sound. Given the name, it seemed the children held the Scavenger in higher regard than the golems.

“Hmm, well even if they really like metal things, if you always gave them all the metal that you have, your lives wouldn’t get any better, would they? You’d lose your pots and cooking knives, too.”

Though typically rather formal in her speech, Mile employed a more typically childish tone as she addressed them.

After having encountered rock golems and Scavengers previously, Mile had done a lot of thinking about them. Consequently, she had come to a number of conclusions about their existence.

“Even though golems like to collect metal, I don’t think they’d take it away from a human by force. They don’t seem to actively attack hunters and huntsmen who are equipped with metal things, and even when they drive back the hunters who attack them, all they do is peacefully take all the metal they

are wearing and leave. They never actually try to finish off an opponent they've already defeated. It's hard to say whether they take these things when humans attack them as, well, a sort of punishment, or to eliminate their opponent's defenses—or if the logic is just that to victor go the spoils. Anyway…"

"Anyway?"

"I don't think those guys will care if you don't hand over all of your metal stuff. I think just giving them the metal scraps you happen to get your hands on sometimes should be enough. You all don't have to be expected to pay them rent. I think you just need to show them that you mean them no harm and want to live as good neighbors."

The children seemed to understand this just fine.

Then, as a means of reassuring them, Mile gave the children some of the metal goods that, she claimed, she absolutely would never have any use for, and which had been stashed away in the corners of her inventory, to use as tributes. These included pots covered in burnt substances, pans with holes in them, janky swords from bandits that might fall apart at any moment, sliced copper coins from Mavis's demonstrations, and so on and so forth.

Just in case, she cleanly snapped the sword blades before handing them over. It would cause a lot of problems if the children were to try to use these damaged swords for hunting. As the children watched her do this, they let out cries of despair. Apparently they really had been hoping those swords were still useable.

That was close, Mile thought, relieved. If any of the children were to die from trying to use swords she had given them, she wouldn't have been able to sleep at night.

***

Four days after the Crimson Vow's boot camp began, the men finally appeared.

Mile, who had been sending out regular pings of her search magic, stopped cooking and suddenly announced, "They're here! Humans, fourteen of them!"

"All righty then, just as we planned…"

“Let’s do this!!!”

As the members of the Crimson Vow all grinned, the children looked to them, worried, and asked, “Can’t you do this after you’ve finished cooking?”

They had become quite spoiled in these four short days…

First off, the Crimson Vow needed to observe these men’s actions, or rather, their battle style. Learning your opponent’s abilities and techniques before a confrontation was one of the basic principles of combat. Plus, observing them might give them some hint of the men’s intentions. Whether they were after something special, or…

“Over there!”

Everyone peered in the direction Mile had indicated to see…

“Ah, yep, looks just like ’em.”

As Reina implied, these men gave off very much the same vibe as the band of kidnappers—or rather, the cult of the dark god.

That said, this was not like modern day Earth. Even if they were part of the same organization, there was no way that all of these men, in a land so far from the others, could all have assembled matching cloaks of the exact same design, both in terms of manufacture and distribution.

As such, though all the men wore black cloaks as a symbol of their affiliation, the designs of these cloaks all differed.

In fact, there were many groups who made use of matching clothing or accessories as a symbol of membership—many, many groups, from professional unions to ladies’ social clubs. Even amongst those, there were many informal gatherings of gentlemen with a bit of money to spare who furnished cloaks of the same color for themselves.

Indeed, the fact that the men had matching black cloaks was not much proof of anything at all. It implied nothing more than the possibility that these men might be related.

The Crimson Vow covertly tailed the men as they moved. Thanks to Mile’s search magic, they were able to keep a fair distance, so there was no worry of

them being noticed.

Furthermore, it was unlikely that they would have long to wait. The men would be discovered fairly soon once they pushed into the golems' territory. In fact, it was almost as if the golems had some sort of detection system…

***

"They're coming! Golems, four of them!" Mile softly announced.

Fourteen men against four golems would be a tough battle for the human side. It meant there were roughly 3.5 men per golem, which was something only hunters in perhaps the top 25% of C-rankers could possibly manage, assuming they were matched with allied party members with whom they had great coordination.

If these men were to merely take a stab at the battle and run, they might escape with just a loss, but if they got too caught up, and missed their chance to flee, it would be little surprise if a number of them did perish.

"I wonder if they'll be all right."

The Crimson Vow watched, a bit troubled.

To sit idly by and observe as a group of strangers—who had not only not committed any crime but who had had the decency to share their food with hungry children—were slaughtered in battle against a group of monsters was against the Crimson Vow's policies. Then again, the golems in this area were typically beneficent creatures, scaring away the more dangerous monsters and not attacking humans unless attacked first.

If the golems in this area were to be annihilated, or at the very least fell below a certain number, the region might become overrun with dangerous creatures again, and the children would be in danger.

Plus, it was the men who had come picking a fight in the first place. They had not been attacked while on the road or anything along those lines. Instead, they had come here purposely to fight for some unknown reason.

Yet perhaps an intervention was still needed, before the golems started thinking of humans as enemies and troubling the children as well?

What to do?

“Hrrrm…”

The members of the Crimson Vow all thought hard.

Just then, the men noticed the golems’ approach.

“Golems! There’s four of ’em!”

“Crap, that’s too many! Everybody ruuuuuun!!!”

“Roger that!!!”

And with that, all the men ran away.

“What the heck was thaaat?!?!” the members of the Crimson Vow cried, so astounded it seemed their jaws were about to come off.

***

“*Hrff, hrff, hrff…* Is everyone all right?!”

“Yes, all men accounted for. One twisted his ankle, but he’s okay. A bit of healing magic has taken care of the pain.”

After managing to reach a far enough distance from the golems, the men finally stopped for a breather.

The golems in this area did not seem especially interested in humans who noticed their presence and ran. This was not the case for all golems everywhere, but those of this region seemed to be decidedly unperturbed.

“Why are there *four* of them?! We’ve only seen them come out one at a time before now! This is not what we heard about! *Damn* it!” one of the men grumbled bitterly.

Truly though, it should have come as no shock. Much as golems might be solitary creatures, the fact that large groups of these men had been coming to hunt them down one by one had probably forced them to resort to some new countermeasures.

“To think that monsters, let alone those empty-headed golems, would have any notion of battle tactics—and even start working with other golems…” one man muttered, face painted in disbelief.

“Maybe it’s just a coincidence.”

“No. Occasionally before this, other golems have appeared in the middle of battles, but that’s been pure chance, or because they were drawn there by the sounds of battle. I’ve never heard of any golems showing up in groups, let alone four of them together. This has got to be because we’ve been coming after them individually…”

“……”

The men were crestfallen. This had really put a wrench in their plans going forward.

As they fell into despair, a voice suddenly called out to them.

“Oh, are you all hunters?”

It was the Crimson Vow, who had followed them from a distance.

“There aren’t a lot of monsters around here, but there’s a lot of you! Are you golem hunting? That’s amazing. Golems are so strong and powerful and persistent…” Mile followed Mavis’s greeting with her own words, her voice suggesting that she was impressed with the men’s exploits.

The men seemed to lighten up a bit at this. Nowhere in the world were there bandit bands comprised exclusively of such young, beautiful girls. Even if there were such a group, it would have been quite surprising for them to go out of their way to make themselves known to a group of merchants, let alone a group of fourteen fully armed men. Especially when they didn’t even appear to be carrying any valuable goods…

As such, the men deemed that there was zero possibility of these girls meaning them any harm and dropped their guard easily.

“Oh, um, well, we aren’t hunters, but we did come out here for training. We also thought that we might eliminate some of the monsters living around here to make it safer for the local residents,” said one of the men, who seemed to be their spokesman.

There was no man in the world who would not feel a bit elated at being praised by a lovely girl. Especially men such as these, who were not typically the

popular sort…

That was too easy!

The men were no match for the Crimson Vow, who had utilized the "hospitality tactics" that they honed during their time working at Lenny's inn, in accordance with Pauline's plan.

Pauline then regarded the men fiercely.

"Is there anyone amongst you who is not a pure-blooded human?"

"Huh? No, no one…" The spokesman, who seemed to be a bit on edge, replied to her question.

As he did so, Reina offered further clarification. "Oh, good! I mean those wannabe people like elves and dwarves are one thing, but we *really* can't stand beastfolk and demons. Humans are the only ones who were made in our gods' image. All those other races are just shams of humans, crafted by devils."

It was a tale they had fabricated based on the information Mile had gathered, and it was one that anyone but certain human supremacists and other bigots would raise an eyebrow at.

"Yeah!!!"

Upon hearing Reina's words, the men cried out enthusiastically, eyes sparkling with glee.

A group of young ladies had come to the same conclusions as those that drove their doctrine—those that would see them censured if they were to voice them in polite society. These girls were speaking the truth proudly. Such wisdom! Such courage!

Not to mention, they were young and lovely.

"W-won't you stay and talk a while?"

***

"Th-that's exactly right! We're welcoming and seeking the protection of a new god, instead of those selfish gods who abandoned us and hide themselves from us! You get it, right? Wahahahaha!"

Once furnished with some delicious food and highly alcoholic spirits from Mile's inventory, all served to them by beautiful girls, the men swiftly became intoxicated. To be fair, they had been running at full tilt through the mountains carrying their gear and were likely hungry and dehydrated.

"Yeah, we're gonna offer up all those inferior races as sacrifices and summon a new god from another realm. As our reward we'll be made disciples, and then we can really show all those fools who doubted us and refused to recognize our value…"

Yeah… They're definitely related to those other guys.

This much was clear. Now, all the Crimson Vow had to do was press them for information.

"So, is there some other reason you're fighting the golems besides practice? I'm dying to hear what lofty goals you have in mind."

Finally, Pauline had entered the ring.

She folded her arms, drawing focus to her chest.

Certainly, when she thought on this later on, she would spend the whole night sleepless, tossing and turning in embarrassment.

Pauline, that's too much…

Deep down in her heart, Mile dabbed away her tears.

The words fell easily from the drunken man's lips.

The other men, believing the girls to be completely sympathetic to their cause, made no move to stop him. On the contrary, they were happy to contribute to the conversation and raise their own reputations in the girls' eyes.

Currently, they were not doing anything illegal, and given that they felt themselves to be in the right, there was no reason they should not tell these young women everything, especially since they were happily listening to whatever they had to say.

"Well, actually, some of our allies in another country messed up this super important ritual, and we need to figure out what happened before the next one. We searched high and low to find the place where our late founder achieved enlightenment and learned the spell which would summon the gods, and finally we ended up here. Turns out this place is where golems have been making their home, so we need to clear them out or wipe them out or something…"

Ka-ching!

Information gathering: complete!

And just like that, the Crimson Vow's job was done.

Now, they just had to drive these men away.

Of course, they could not attack or arrest men who were not doing anything criminal, only fighting a bunch of monsters—this time, anyway. If they did, that would make *them* the criminals. So, they would need to convince them to leave peacefully.

"You said there were four golems this time, right? If we ran into that many, I'm sure we'd be wiped out. We're so lucky that you all fought them off. You're our saviors!"

"B-bwahaha, it was really no big thing. That much is easy!"

"That's right! You can come to us for help anytime you need it. Any of our fellows of the faith will come to your aid, lickety-split!"

"Absolutely!"

All of the men were properly wasted.

“Yes, honestly, thanks so much for this! Anyway, we really should be taking our leave, and since it seems that you are all fairly intoxicated, maybe you should head out as well and come back tomorrow?”

“Uh… Hm, you’re right. Think we all might’ve drunk a bit too much… Well, I’d say that this lovely meeting was enough of a success for today. Let’s roll out!”

“Yeah!!”

Drunk as the men were, they had not fully lost their sense of judgment. No matter how much they may have wanted to impress these young ladies, there was no way they could think of fighting four golems right now. Running from the battle had been a huge blow to their pride, but thankfully, they now had a reason to retreat while still maintaining their dignity. Deep down, they were overjoyed.

And so, they unanimously approved of Pauline’s suggestion.

***

“All according to plan…”

The members of the Crimson Vow grinned as they watched the retreating forms of the men, who had seen them off and told them, “You all take care getting back home, too.”

“Hmm. What are we going to do about these?” Mile muttered warily, looking at the stack of papers in her hands.

The other three gripped similar bundles. Most of the sheets were of fairly poor quality, but there were some finer papers and even parchments mixed in.

Yes indeed, the men had all written down their contact information and told the Crimson Vow to “get in touch anytime.” Once the first man had done so, others had gotten in on the scheme in turn, forcing their papers upon the four as well.

“Well, if anything happens, we’ve already got a list of likely suspects, so that’s a good thing, isn’t it?” said Reina.

Pauline and Mavis nodded emphatically.

“Now then, I guess it’s the golems next,” Mile said. The other three nodded.

“Though obviously, we won’t be trying to chase them off or wipe them out the way those men were.”

More nods.

“Plus, I don’t think these golems pushed their way into this so-called holy land after the fact. This was probably the golems’ territory to begin with. You know, my guess is that…”

“Yes? Fill us in on this guess of yours,” Reina urged.

Mile explained what she could conjecture, based on her own information and what they had heard from the men just prior.

“This place is probably the same as that mountain that the demons were investigating.”

“In other words, there are some underground ruins full of golems here, too?” asked Mavis.

Mile nodded.

“To begin with, golems are unusual as far as monsters go. While others are put in the same category of ‘monster,’ if you think about it, they’re really just normal animals. They might be big or strong, but they’re still flesh and blood, and reproduce normally. However, golems—and probably Scavengers, too—aren’t flesh and blood, and they restore themselves via repairs. In other words…”

“In other words?” asked the other three.

“They’re artificial. They were created via some advanced art, just like Mavis’s left arm.”

To Reina and the others, the so-called “advanced art” Mile was alluding to was nothing more than magic. That was fine, though. As long as they understood that Mile was talking about something made, not by monsters, but an intelligent life force, that was enough to get her point across.

“They’re artificial creatures, made by humans, or even something more advanced than humans—‘they’ being golems, that is. And while golems are

specially designed for battle, the technicians in charge of their maintenance and repair are…”

“The Scavengers, right?” asked Mavis. Though she was a swordswoman, she was fundamentally quite intelligent… Or rather, it made sense that she might come to this conclusion, seeing as they had all seen the Scavengers repairing the golems during their previous time in the ruins.

“And so, they need metal in order to repair and manufacture things?”

“Yes. Other than their central cores, rock golems are made of rock, but that’s probably because it’s more convenient to make them that way as disposable fighters, so that less metal is required for manufacture and maintenance. The more precious metal is reserved for the central core and other purposes.”

“And golems are antagonistic toward other monsters, right?” Reina naturally seemed to be getting the picture as well.

“Well, we’re saying ‘other monsters,’ but the thing is, golems probably aren’t really monsters in the first place.”

“And also, the golems and Scavengers are usually seen together?”

“Or rather, without the scavengers, the golems would be destroyed in their battles with humans and monsters, their numbers otherwise decreasing via normal wear and degradation over time, and in a few centuries they would be all wiped out, wouldn’t they? Ergo, without this arrangement with the Scavengers, golems don’t exist…”

“Ah, I see,” Pauline seemed to have grasped the point as well.

“Apparently, the golems around here won’t make enemies of or suddenly attack anyone who does not force their way into their greater territory, so as long as we keep that in mind, we can carefully make our way in!”

“How can you be so optimistic?!” shouted Reina, stunned at Mile’s utter lack of concern.

Mile however, replied happily. “Well, the fact that this religious founder learned that spell means that he traveled to somewhere with some kind of records, right? I doubt the golems and Scavengers would have left their

stronghold empty, but both the golems and that founder were all right, which means that he made it to the place he was after without fighting them, didn't he?"

"Ah…" said the other three.

When it came to matters such as these, Mile's train of thought was surprisingly lucid.

"Of course, all of this is nothing more than pure conjecture!"

"Ah…"

And just like that, all faith they had in her was lost.

"Still, all we need to do is just confirm all this, right?" chimed Mavis, taking up the thread in her capacity as leader. "Anyway, let's get back to the children and explain to them what's going on. Then, we can go and check out where the golems are."

Everyone else nodded.

Even if they were to get into a battle with the golems, the Crimson Vow would have no problem making it out of there safely…probably.

***

"They're coming. Four golems, straight ahead!"

The Crimson Vow had made their way back to the children and filled them in, explaining, "We made friends with the men, got them drunk, and sent them home," to which the children replied with a stunned, "What the heck?!?!"

Of course, none of this was a lie. They were being completely serious.

Next, the Crimson Vow set back out again.

"They're moving slowly. Just hold your staves lightly and don't be too aggressive."

It was difficult to tell how aware the local golems were of their presence, but still, it was better safe than sorry. They had considered leaving their staves in Mile's storage, but just in case it came down to an emergency, where having their staves could mean the difference between life and death, everyone

thought it best that Pauline and Reina had them on hand. Striking a golem with a staff would of course be ineffective, but if one needed to ward off an attack, or take a hit in such a way as to minimize the damage of being blown away, the presence of a staff could make all the difference.

Just then, the golems appeared from out of the trees.

“Mile!”

“On it!”

At Reina’s command, Mile produced some metal objects from her storage. As per usual, this consisted of rusted swords taken from bandits, overburnt pans full of holes, and the like. Just how many bandit swords and busted pans did she have in there?

Mile placed the objects upon the ground and pushed them toward the golems.

“Pss pss pss…”

“Do you think these are stray cats?!”

Reina struck Mile across the back of the head.

“Don’t be shy, don’t be shy…”

“Can you take this seriously?!”

She struck her again.

Mile only had the leeway to be so casual because the golems had stopped moving. She would have never had the time for these jokes if they had continued their approach.

A moment after the golems had stopped, *it* appeared—the so-called Mister Skitters, the Scavenger.

The Scavenger picked up the items Mile had offered with four of its legs, regarded the Crimson Vow carefully, turned in an about-face, and departed. The golems followed shortly after it. Unlike the Scavenger, however, which was gone in the blink of an eye, the golems took their time.

“Let’s follow them!”

“All right!”

And so, the members of the Crimson Vow began following after the golems.

“……”

Though the golems seemed to know that they were being followed, they did not appear to mind. However, this only persisted for a little while. Once they had reached a certain spot, the golems stopped, turned around, and raised their arms as if to threaten the Crimson Vow.

“Guess this is the end of the line, huh?” said Pauline worriedly.

Mile, however, was completely calm. And then…

“Here you go!”

Bam!

Out came more pots, pans, and swords, heaped onto the ground.

Seriously, how many of those did she have in there? The bandit swords were one thing, but as for all that cookware…

And then…

Shove!

The golems looked at the items that had been pushed toward them and ceased moving.

After a short while, out came another one, skittering along… A Scavenger, that is.

“Please accept this gift!” said Mile, shoving the pile forward.

The Scavenger was expressionless as it stared at the items. It was unclear if it was thankful at having received an additional offering or more annoyed that she had not just brought everything out at once.

It looked once more at the heap of metal and then again at the Crimson Vow. Finally, it took up the items and left, the Crimson Vow following right behind.

Soon, however, the golems blocked their way again, standing still before the

hunting party. Thankfully, they seemed not to have an insta-attack mode.

“The gifts are working! I think they’re acknowledging us as friends!”

Normally, anyone who tried to intrude farther into the golems’ territory would be forcefully repelled, but as Mile suggested, the golems seemed to be treating them with something akin to a quiet refusal. The Scavenger also stopped and turned around, as if wondering what was going on.

“We can’t come with you? But I can offer you this, too,” said Mile, taking something from her storage. “Here!”

The Scavenger froze as it saw what was being offered to them.

Indeed, it was something that Mile had kept in her “storage” for a long time, having retrieved it from the fallen rock golem back during their first adventure hunting rock lizards: the central metal core from the rock golem’s body.

After not moving for some time, the Scavenger took the core in the tips of its two front legs and clutched it to its chest as though it were precious. Then, it collected the scrap metal with its two lower arms and started to leave.

Apparently, that core was far more important to the Scavenger than some scrap metal.

Once more, the Crimson Vow moved to follow. However, the golems still stood before them, blocking their path.

“No good? That prophet guy managed to get in here, so I thought we could, too,” said Mile, tilting her head.

“Maybe they’re just not the type to let a stranger into their home that easily?” Mavis suggested. It was a fair argument.

“That’s it!”

Something suddenly seemed to occur to Mile.

Hey, Nanos, those guys are constructs just like you. Could you be our liaison?

WHA…?! YOU DARE REGARD US AS THE SAME AS THOSE CREATURES?! WE RESPECT YOU, LADY MILE, BUT THERE ARE THINGS ONE SHOULD AND SHOULD NOT SAY!

Ah, sorry! I didn’t mean anything by it!

YOU EXPECT US TO BELIEVE THERE WAS NO MALICE IN SUCH AN INSULT?! TO THINK THAT YOU COULD SAY SOMETHING SO HIDEOUS SO CASUALLY, AND JUST TELL US YOU MEANT NOTHING BY IT, AND CONTINUE ON LIKE NOTHING HAPPENED…

Jeez, I get it already.

Were they serious? Or just messing around? Either way, they were the only ones she could rely on now.

Come on! I'll make it up to you later somehow!

GRIN…

Why are you voicing your own sound effects now?! Not that you have voices…

Indeed, it was hard to truly classify their communications as such when their words were being transmitted directly into her eardrums.

WELL THEN, WE WILL TRY TO ASSIST. THESE CREATURES APPEAR TO USE A VARIETY OF METHODS OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE, INCLUDING THE ANCIENT TONGUES OF THE HUMANOIDS OF WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL THE "DISTANT PAST," AS WELL AS THE HIGH-SPEED DATA TRANSFER THAT OCCURS BETWEEN ALL OF THE ARTIFICIAL BEINGS OF THIS WORLD.

Then, roughly 1-2 seconds later…

YOU HAVE BEEN GRANTED PERMISSION TO ENTER THE FACILITY, LADY MILE.

That was quick!

WE USED THE HIGH-SPEED DATA TRANSFER FORMAT.

Ah, a conversation at computer processing speeds—of course it was fast.

"Seems like it's okay for us to follow them now," Mile suddenly announced, after seeming to fall silent for a while.

Sure enough, the golems moved out of their way.

"……"

The other members of the Crimson Vow stared at Mile suspiciously…as they found themselves doing so often.

***

"It looks like we can go underground from over there…"

Everyone looked to where Reina was pointing and saw a gap in the rocks. Obviously, the doorway would not be something large and obvious. If it were, it would be horribly easy to spot, remote mountain location or no.

The hunters filed into the gap behind the Scavenger.

The golems had already left, seeming to have returned to their sanctioned waiting place. Did golems, who had no need for food or drink, have anything else they could possibly do to kill the time besides the duties they had been given?

Mile got the impression that the nanomachines had plenty of free time to do as they pleased.

Though the Scavenger did not turn around to look at the members of the Crimson Vow, it seemed perfectly aware of their existence. Were that not the case, it would have skittered off as it always did, disappearing from sight. The fact that it was moving at such a leisurely pace, one might assume, was out of consideration for the girls.

Just what had the nanomachines explained to them, and how had the Scavenger interpreted it?

“Looks like we’ll be entering the main area soon.”

The entrance they had come through did not appear to have been an original, formal entryway. Though it was cleanly cut and polished around the doorway, farther on, it was little more than a narrow stone hall. They continued underground, until the passage changed into some unusual material, maybe metal or resin, and finally emerged into the area with doors on both sides of the passage. The Scavenger, however, did not stop, continuing forward until it stopped in one room, handed over the golem core and metal scraps to some other Scavengers, and then proceeded on again.

“How far are we going?” Reina started to grumble, when finally the Scavenger stopped before a certain door.

Though this facility was possessed of a level of technology where crafting automatic doors would be a simple task, all of the doors present were manual, perhaps out of a concern for mechanical reliability, energy economization, or

else general durability. Indeed, there were few rooms that had doors covering their entryways to begin with. Perhaps it would be too much of a pain for the Scavengers to have to open doors all the time?

This room, however, *did* have a door… Though it was hard to say whether this was because it was merely a room that the Scavengers did not need to access very frequently or there were other factors at play.

The Scavenger pulled the door's operation lever and pushed it open.

"Let's go," said Mile, following behind the Scavenger as the others paused. The rest followed after her, slightly on guard.

"This place…"

After taking several steps in, Mile stopped, her eyes growing wide.

What she saw was…

Wires, labyrinthine and intertwined.

Heaps of metal masses, warped and unnaturally formed.

And there, enshrined in the middle of it all, was a device. It looked to have been forcefully cobbled together out of various spare parts and assistive devices. It was probably once a sophisticated electrical contraption but now lacked even the slightest hint of its former glory.

THIS IS THE NO. 3 AUXILLIARY BACKUP SYSTEM OF THE ECONOMICAL AUTONOMOUS BASIC DEFENSE CONTROL SYSTEM. IT IS NOTHING MORE THAN A TERMINAL FOR THE PRESENT CONTROL SYSTEM…AND IT IS THE ONLY SYSTEM THAT REMAINS OF ITS KIND.

Mile's eardrums began to vibrate with the nanomachines' explanation.

"What is…?"

The other three stopped dead as they filed into the room behind Mile. Then, the nanomachines' explanation continued in Mile's head.

WE EXPLAINED YOUR STATUS TO THIS CREATURE, LADY MILE, AS THE FOLLOWING:

THIS PERSON IS THE DESCENDENT OF YOUR CREATORS. SHE HAS AN ACCURATE UNDERSTANDING OF ADVANCED CIVILIZATIONS AND MAY PERHAPS BE THE ONLY ONE CURRENTLY EXISTING ON THIS PLANET WHO DOES. SHE ALSO HAS SOME AWARENESS ABOUT YOUR ENEMIES, AND SHE INTENDS TO BATTLE THEM IN ORDER TO PROTECT THIS

WORLD…

What the heck are you talking about?!?!

ALL OF IT IS TRUE. NONE OF THAT IS A LIE, AN EXAGGERATION, NOR A TRICK OF WORDING.

Guh… Well, I suppose you're right.

Even Mile had to acknowledge this. There was no doubt that every person who currently lived in this world was a descendent of the previous civilization. And it was also correct that she was aware of what this system's existence meant, she knew about the rifts in space-time, and she was cognizant of the monsters that were pushing in from them. She did also want to protect the others. Furthermore, she could not imagine there was anyone else in the world who had an accurate understanding of all these things.

I wonder if it really understood all that, though.

Would a computer, designed for logical calculations, believe such a story, coming out of nowhere without any proof? Naturally, this worried Mile. However…

WE PROVIDED INFORMATION PERTAINING TO YOUR GENOME, LADY MILE. COMBINING THAT WITH THE DATA THIS INDIVIDUAL HAD ALREADY COLLECTED ON YOU, IT WAS ABLE TO COMPLETE YOUR PROFILE. FURTHERMORE, GIVEN OUR EXISTENCE, AND THE FACT THAT WE ARE SUPPORTING YOU, LADY MILE, THERE CAN BE NO DOUBTING THE INFORMATION THAT YOU HOLD.

Oh. I see. Wait—is it really that *easy to analyze my whole genome?!*

This was something beyond even the most advanced science on Earth.

"M-Mile, what's going on?!"

The Scavenger, which had been leading them up to this point, had halted by the wall. Mile, meanwhile, was having a normal conversation with the nanomachines. However, to the others, she appeared only to be standing still, silent. With none of them having the foggiest idea of what they were looking at here, they had no choice but to rely on her.

However, even Mile could only converse with the creature via the nanomachines; it had no interest in the others, and they would not be getting

through at all.

And so, Mile took a few steps forward, reaching out for the main body of what the nanomachines had referred to as the No. 3 Auxiliary Backup System of the Economical Autonomous Basic Defense Control System with her right hand, and gently pushed her index finger against it.

“I’m going to try to reach an accord with the chief of the golems, so please don’t say anything for a little while.”

“Huh? S-sure, okay…”

There seemed to be little thought behind the words, but her expression was so serious that Reina could not but agree. Now, without any interruption from the others, Mile focused on her conversation with the nanomachines.

So, these are *the ruins of an ancient civilization, and the golems were part of their defense system? This economical autonomous basic defense system…*

The nanomachines replied straight away.

YES. THE MAIN SYSTEM IS NO LONGER FUNCTIONING, AND THE SUBSYSTEMS AND BACKUP SYSTEMS ARE OUT OF COMMISSION AS WELL. CURRENTLY, SUCH RESERVE BACKUPS OF BACKUPS OF TERMINAL SYSTEMS IN CHARGE OF INDIVIDUAL FUNCTIONS HAVE RETAINED ONLY THE BAREST OF FUNCTIONAL CAPACITY. IT IS UNCLEAR IF THEY WILL LAST ANOTHER FEW CENTURIES.

A few centuries? That’s still a really long time!

That was far longer than her own life span, Mile thought, but that was because she was considering things from a human’s perspective of time. As far as the immortal nanomachines were concerned, these terminals had barely any time left at all.

As Mile could not communicate directly with the terminal system, she settled on having the nanomachines extract information to simplify and convey to her. And so…

EXTRACTION COMPLETE.

That was quick!

It had taken the nanomachines not even a second to finish.

As for what they had learned, it involved rifts in space-time. Invading monsters. Destruction and chaos. Ruin. And an exodus.

The seven sages who remained, who had not abandoned this world.

Blueprints for super soldiers. The 1/7th Plan. And various other proposed plans.

The discovery of a mysterious energy source. A new plan to utilize that energy.

…The information contained only the names of these plans, as well as whether they had been implemented or successful.

And also, all of the defensive locations that had been constructed.

A long, long time had passed, and at some point, the custodians of these systems vanished. Automatic maintenance of the central systems continued, but while hundreds, or even thousands of years might not have been much to weather, the destructive power of the passage of tens, or even hundreds of millennia was simply far too great.

No matter how completely redundancies are implemented, all things have their limits. All things crumble, and now, this singular terminal system was nearing its end…

Huh? But who were the invaders? And what happened with all those plans? Where did the custodians go?

MANY PORTIONS OF THE MEMORY STORAGE HAVE BEEN DAMAGED. THIS SYSTEM WAS NOT DESIGNED FOR INFORMATION STORAGE TO BEGIN WITH. IT IS NOTHING MORE THAN THE NO. 3 AUXILLIARY BACKUP SYSTEM OF THE ECONOMICAL AUTONOMOUS BASIC DEFENSE CONTROL SYSTEM. EVEN SO, IT IS LIKELY THAT THE PRIMARY SYSTEMS TRANSMITTED WHAT INFORMATION WAS DEEMED CRUCIAL JUST BEFORE THEIR SHUTDOWN. WE DOUBT THAT EVEN THIS INFORMATION WAS NECESSARY FOR THIS MACHINE’S ORIGINAL FUNCTION.

It made sense, if one thought about it. There was no need for a security guard to be apprised of a company’s managerial policies or confidential information, after all.

IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN THE BAREST LEVEL OF FUNCTIONALITY FOR THIS TERMINAL, THE ECONOMICAL AUTONOMOUS BASIC DEFENSE UNITS, THAT IS, THE CREATURES YOU CALL

“GOLEMS,” IN AS MUCH AS THEY FOLLOW ORDERS, SEEM TO BE TASKED WITH WITHHOLDING ATTACKS AGAINST HUMANS UNLESS THERE IS AN INTENTIONAL, DIRECT THREAT TOWARD THE FACILITIES. THEY ARE ALSO PROGRAMMED TO ELIMINATE ANY LARGE MONSTERS THAT POSE A HIGH-LEVEL THREAT.

WHEN THIS TERMINAL CEASES TO FUNCTION, AS WITH THE OTHER REGIONS INHABITED BY GOLEMS, THE GOLEMS AND SCAVENGERS WILL CONTINUE A SIMPLISTIC BEHAVIOR, MAINTAINING ONLY THEIR LAST GIVEN ORDERS. THEY WILL CONTINUE ON, UNTIL THE DAY WHEN, DUE TO A SHORTAGE OF REPAIR SUPPLIES AND MATERIALS; OR ATTACKS FROM HUMANOIDS, MONSTERS, OR OTHER CREATURES; OR DESTRUCTION AT THE HANDS OF NATURAL DISASTER, SEISMIC UPHEAVAL, OR SOME OTHER CAUSE, THEY FINALLY CEASE TO FUNCTION.

Would it be a tragedy when that day came? Or would it be a long-awaited day of final repose for these machines that had long since lost their masters?

What about repairs? The Scavengers can repair both the golems and themselves, so why don’t they restore the terminal? And those other systems that stopped working? Mile questioned.

The nanomachines replied:

IT SEEMS THEY HAVE SEVERELY LIMITED AUTHORIZATION. SUCH AUTONOMOUS MACHINES CANNOT ACT ABOVE THE BOUNDS OF THEIR GIVEN AUTHORITY REGARDING INTELLIGENT LIFE, AS WELL AS THIS FACILITY, WITHOUT BEING DIRECTED TO DO SO BY THE TOP-LEVEL SYSTEM OR THEIR CUSTODIANS.

Ah, I see… It’d be a problem if artificial intelligences, which are way smarter than humans, started acting of their own accord, wouldn’t it? So, they’re given a lot of restrictions and only given other orders from a superior when it’s necessary. However, if those superiors or high-level systems aren’t there anymore…

WITHOUT THE AUTHORITY TO FREELY UTILIZE FACILITY MATERIALS OUTSIDE OF THEIR OWN AUTHORIZATION, THE ACTIONS THEY CAN TAKE OF THEIR OWN INITIATIVE AND THE MATERIALS THEY CAN GATHER ARE LIMITED. EVENTUALLY, REPAIR SUPPLIES DWINDLE, AND THE MACHINES RESORT TO CANNIBALISTIC MAINTENANCE AND UTILIZING INFERIOR GOODS. NOW, ONLY THE TERMINAL YOU SEE BEFORE YOU REMAINS.

Mile was silent.

It was an inevitable conclusion. All tangible forms must someday break. All worldly things are transitory. It was the same with human lives. Even machine

life forms, which had practically eternal life spans, were nothing more than sparks, a single burst within the relentless flow of the infinite.

An old adage popped into Mile's mind.

Fifty years for man is but a dream in the eyes of Heaven.

The fifty years of this proverb referred not to a human's life expectancy but to the world of men itself. In other words, even if fifty years were to pass in the realm of mortals, in the lowest reaches of Heaven this stretch of time was but a single night. A single, fleeting reverie.

There was nothing she could do.

Even the orphans would likely have grown and departed from this place before the terminal reached its end.

There were no issues here.

All they could do now was quietly take their leave. Nothing more or less. With this thought in mind, Mile gently drew her hand away from the machine, when…

THIS MACHINE HAS A REQUEST TO MAKE OF YOU, LADY MILE.

"Huh?"

Mile was so shocked by this that she unintentionally let out a sound.

Wh-what kind of request?

WELL, THEY WOULD LIKE TO BEQUEATH THE ROLE OF "CUSTODIAN" TO YOU, THE DESCENDANT OF THEIR CREATORS, SO THAT YOU MAY GIVE THEM DIRECTIONS…

Wha… Wh-wh-wh…?

"Whaaat?!?!"

Realizing she had once more unintentionally spoken aloud, Mile waved her hands at her stunned companions to indicate it was nothing and continued her conversation with the nanos.

Wh-what are you…?

YOU MAY QUESTION IT ALL YOU LIKE, BUT YOU, LADY MILE, ARE THE DESCENDANT OF THEIR CUSTODIANS, AND PERHAPS THE ONLY ONE WHO BOTH UNDERSTANDS THE

PURPOSE OF THIS FACILITY AND CAN GIVE ORDERS IN LINE WITH THEIR ORIGINAL FUNCTIONS. THEY LIKELY BELIEVE THAT WE TOO ARE ANOTHER SYSTEM LEFT IN PLACE BY THESE CUSTODIANS. WELL, OF COURSE THEY WOULD COME TO THAT CONCLUSION. SO, IT IS ONLY NATURAL THAT THEY SHOULD WANT TO BE UNDER YOUR DIRECTION, YOU WHO ISSUES COMMANDS TO WE NANOMACHINES.

For a moment, Mile was quiet, troubled, but she had already begun to feel some level of empathy for these artificial life forms, and perhaps she could be good for their long-term morale, at least a little bit.

I'm not supposed to sit here in this control room forever though, am I?

OF COURSE NOT. YOU NEED SIMPLY ISSUE THEM TWO OR THREE COMMANDS, AND THEN YOU CAN FREELY LEAVE.

Well, that's fine. I'll accept that. What kind of commands should I give them?

The nanomachines paused for a moment and then said:

RESCIND THE RESTRICTIONS ON THE GOLEMS' AREA OF OPERATIONS. RESCIND THE RESTRICTIONS ON THEIR REPAIR OPERATIONS. RESCIND THE RESTRICTIONS ON THEIR POPULATION. THOSE THREE ITEMS. THAT WAY, THEY CAN SPREAD OUT FARTHER IN ORDER TO COLLECT MATERIALS FOR REPAIRS AND MAINTAIN THIS FACILITY FOR LONGER.

ALSO, THE GOLEMS WOULD LIKE TO BE ABLE TO PERFORM MAINTENANCE NOT ONLY ON THEIR OWN DEPARTMENT, BUT ON OTHERS AS WELL, AND MAKE USE OF THE EQUIPMENT AND MATERIALS FROM THOSE OTHER DEPARTMENTS. FINALLY, THEY WOULD LIKE TO MAKE USE OF ANY USABLE MATERIALS TO INCREASE THE NUMBER OF SCAVENGERS.

Those are pretty reasonable requests. All right, approved!

After that, with the nanomachines' help, Mile issued a number of commands to the terminal:

First off, except in cases where they were attacked first, the golems were not to cause harm to any sapient life form. This of course included human, elves, and dwarves, but she added to this list beastfolk and demons, faeries and dragons, as well as spirits and the like, including those that may or may not exist.

If she ordered them not to fight at all, it was likely that they would be eliminated by the humans. However, there was no need to worry about anyone who would purposely come all the way out here just to antagonize them. If

someone antagonized the golems, but did not wish to die, they could simply retreat.

This place had been left behind by the people of the distant past in order to protect this world. Even if it had lost nearly all of its functionality and was now only good as scrap, this was a place that should be allowed to thrive.

Then, there was the matter of protecting and supporting the children.

When the black-cloaked men came, they were to send out a few golems, enough that the men could not defeat them, to chase them off. Should the men refuse to back down, they were permitted to deal with them by any means necessary.

And finally, they were forbidden to provide information to any other being that would reveal the methods for opening a rift in space-time.

When the nanomachines inquired if they had ever provided such information to humans in the past, they were unable to determine this. It was unclear if this was due to memory degradation or lost records, or simply because it had never happened. Given the circumstances, the latter seemed most likely.

The creatures here could not converse with humanoid races, and it was unlikely that the prophet or whoever had founded the black-cloaked men's religion could speak assembly language. It was equally unlikely that any topics related to alternate dimensions would have come up in the first place or that there might have been any suggestive images or summoning circles.

So, where had the man gotten his information, and how? Had it happened here? Or had those men simply taken the wrong route up the mountain? There was no way to determine such things now.

At the very least, Mile had effectively collected some important information here and knew that those men would never come to a correct understanding. They would never even know the significance of this place.

With the increased maintenance, the number of golems would grow, and with the growth of the authorized area for the security system, the men would never be able to manage anything in their present numbers.

"All right, time to go!"

“Wh-what’s this all of a sudden?!” said Reina with a start, unnerved by this cry from Mile after she had stood silent with her finger pressed to the strange contraption for all this time.

“I’ve finished gathering information. At the very least, the golems and scavengers won’t be attacking anyone who doesn’t attack them. Also, I know that this place has nothing to do with those guys in their cloaks. Apparently, they’ve got the wrong location.

“Those men aren’t going to harm the orphans and neither will the golems. There’s a chance that the men might try to launch a counterassault on the golems, but that’s none of our business. In other words, our work here is done! Uh…what’s wrong?”

The other three were silent.

“Just *how* do you know all that?”

In a rare turn, it was not Reina, but Mavis, who asked this, suspicion on her face.

Mile’s reply, of course, was the same as always:

“Th-that’s a family secret!”

Just as Mile made to leave the facility, leaving her companions thoroughly in the dark…

LADY MILE, AT THE CURRENT RATE, THIS TERMINAL WILL CEASE TO FUNCTION IN A NUMBER OF CENTURIES.

Y-yeah, you told me that already. But if they can collect more parts, that should prolong its life span a little…

LADY MILE, AT THE CURRENT RATE, THIS TERMINAL WILL CEASE TO FUNCTION IN A NUMBER OF CENTURIES.

Yeah, I know, you already said that…

LADY MILE, AT THE CURRENT RATE, THIS TERMINAL WILL CEASE TO FUNCTION IN A NUMBER OF CENTURIES.

Jeez! What is it you’re trying to say? Just spit it out!!

LADY MILE, AT THE CURRENT RATE, THIS TERMINAL WILL CEASE TO FUNCTION IN A NUMBER OF CENTURIES.

Now I'm getting angry! Will you lay off al—Oh.

Finally, she realized something. The nanomachines were not playing around or toying with her.

They could not say what they wished to say.

They were dealing with a prohibited request.

Thus, they were desperately trying to implore her. *Please figure it out, please realize*.

Nanos, can you repair these machines?

THAT IS A PROHIBITED REQUEST.

No good, huh? Oh, well then…

Mile turned to the terminal and incanted a spell.

"Repair memory, update the motherboard, clear fiber optics and all circuits! *Repair!*"

The terminal was enveloped in a whirring, spinning light. After several seconds, the whirring light vanished, and there sat…the terminal, as though nothing had changed at all.

However, Mile knew. She knew that she had come to the right conclusion and that while nothing had changed on the outside, the nanomachines had fully restored the terminal internally.

Even if they could not make the decision for themselves, if it was done by magic, via an order given through thought pulses, regardless of their morality or their own will, it could be accomplished. Such were the orders the nanomachines had been given by their creators.

As a further sign that she had come to the right conclusion, the nanomachines' broken-record-like repetition finally ceased.

They did not say another word. They had not requested anything specific; nothing they had done was in conflict with their restrictions. By the same token, they had asked Mile for nothing; nothing that would conflict with any restrictions. Thus, the nanomachines said nothing to her now, offering neither praise nor words of thanks—nor was there any reason for them to do so.

However, there had never been any need to.

Even in her previous life, Mile had been rather ignorant when it came to understanding human nature. However, for some reason, she seemed to be able to understand this.

Of course, the nanomachines knew this.

That was why no words were necessary. That was all there was to it.

"…Let's get back to the children," said Mile. The other three nodded.

Then, they filed out of the room, the Scavenger as their guide.

Just before the door shut, the nanomachines transmitted a message in a format that the members of the Crimson Vow would never hear or know about. Though they had been created via different means, they were birds of a feather with these machines—creations, simply carrying out the edicts that they had been given in the distant past.

YOUR TIME WILL SOON COME. YOU WILL ACHIEVE YOUR MISSION AND LIVE UP TO YOUR CREATORS' EXPECTATIONS…

The terminal flashed what constituted its indicator lights—the indicator lights that had just been restored via Mile's repairs.

It was as though it was giving thanks, or shouting, *Leave it to us!*

***

Some days after, *things* began crawling out of the entrance that was disguised like a crag in the rock. They spread out and dispersed in every direction.

To seek underground resources.

To steal their way into the territories of humanoids and other sapient creatures to more swiftly gather supplies.

And to make repairs.

They scattered to far-off destinations…

Until now, even when they were damaged and repaired, or completely destroyed, their parts and materials would be retrieved by their compatriots and reused; theirs was not a pointless death. It was nothing more than the great circle of life, in accordance with their creators' wills.

However, if they were destroyed in a distant land, they would be pointlessly lost, no one around to salvage their bodies for parts and reuse them. That would be a pointless death, separated from the wheel of samsara, a true *nothingness*.

This was as close as these constructs truly came to the concept of death.

And yet, these units had prepared themselves for this very death, forming a veritable suicide squad.

They pressed onward.

To find their comrades, who were surely out there, just waiting to be repaired.

Mile, however, had no idea.

No idea just what it was that she had set into motion…

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After that, the Crimson Vow returned to the children and informed them that they were leaving, though they did not go out of their way to tell the children that there was no danger of the golems harming them. If they did, there was a chance that the children might get carried away and attempt something that the golems would deem an attack or get themselves into dangerous situations

thinking the golems would protect them. Additionally, the golems in other regions were not under this same control system. They would automatically deal with any intruders.

There was simply no way to impress upon the children just how real the danger was.

Either way, the children tried desperately to keep the Crimson Vow from leaving. How could they not think of…

Their incredible automatic rice cooker.

Their automated sword equipment.

Their magic training devices.

Their home construction tools.

Their burnt pan hole puncher.

…They were losing all of these useful devices in one fell swoop.

Once humans have tasted luxury, they are quite reluctant to let it go. (Though really, that last one was probably something they could stand to let go of…)

“We get it, but you all understand that we can’t live here forever, right?!” Reina shouted, replying before the softhearted Mavis and Mile could get involved.

“But…*but…*”

“Ngh.”

Even Reina was weak when it came to young, teary-eyed children.

However…

“Okay, back to the village!”

Pauline was utterly unaffected.

“Huh? If you all leave, then our livelihood…” one of the children pressed, at which Pauline pointed behind them.

There, behind them, was a tree house, securely fashioned in the treetops.

A watering hole, with both a washing and bathing area.

Besides that, three stoves, and next to those, a number of pots and pans.

A weapons rack, with not only bamboo spears and wooden swords, but also iron swords and handmade bows and arrows.

One metal hoe and several wooden farming tools.

And many other things…

“And just where are you lacking in luxuries?!”

“Eeeek!!!” the children shrieked.

Now, they had far too many luxuries.

As was her wont, Mile had spent the few days they were waiting around with the children crafting various things in order to kill time. Of course…

She had overdone it.

This was a lifestyle scarcely any different from the local villagers, never mind your typical street urchins. There were hardly any dangerous monsters around, and humans rarely came out here, meaning there were small animals for them to hunt in abundance. Once the children began harvesting the crops from their newly expanded fields, their quality of life would likely far surpass that of the poor living in any city—no, it *certainly* would.

***

“All right, so, from here out…”

Having returned to the village and reported their findings—that the golems were no real threat so long as one did not push into their territory and that the strange men had come only to fight the golems and were perfectly kind to the children—their job duties were safely completed. (Of course, they admitted the part about the ruins.)

The members of the Crimson Vow collected their pay and headed on to the next town, their original destination, where they took a room at an inn and were soon carrying on this discussion:

“Why don’t we turn back here?”

“Why not? No objections here!”

“None from me either.”

Unlike Mile and Reina, to whom the destination did not matter, Mavis and Pauline had homes and families in Tils. No matter what, they would never stop feeling that Tils was their land and the place they felt most at home.

This made sense, of course. Reina had not a single living relative she was aware of and didn’t even know where her parents had come from, making her as good as a drifter, while Mile had no ties to any land beyond that of her noble birth and wished for the freedom of a drifter herself. They were special cases. Even this pair, however, had nowhere besides Tils where they would desire to settle down. They had a fair number of acquaintances there and no objections to putting down roots in their fellow party members’ homeland.

“It’s pretty obvious that this is where that religious cult came from. Still, the source of their information was lost with their founder, and the remaining members are… Well, they’re really not much of a threat, so… Let’s start heading back to Tils!”

“Yeah!!!”

And so, the Crimson Vow’s path turned to the west, and they started on the road home.

“So, the first place we’d arrive at would be here…”

Naturally, the first place they would pass through would be the kingdom of Trist, where the maiden and her party had fled and where the elder dragon and the scale incidents had occurred.

“It hasn’t been particularly long, so I doubt much has changed for the Princess. If we run into those moneylenders, I can’t imagine it will be particularly interesting, and I’m sure those merchants will still be kicking up a fuss about the scales…”

“Let’s just keep going!”

The party made the collective decision not to stop, carrying on straight through to the next town. This would of course mean camping out that night.

Camping, which, now that they thought about it, would be far more pleasant than a stay at any inn. Thanks to Mile, they would have baths and showers, a portable toilet (the kind with a private stall; it was only “portable” because it lived in Mile’s inventory), and food far more delicious than what they would get in any dining room.

“Why is it we ever stay at inns at all?” mused Mavis.

The other three were silent.

“Mavis, you…”

“I mean, we’ve all been thinking it, but none of us have ever said it.”

“But now, you really went and said it, Mavis!”

“Huh? Is it really that big a deal? Should I not have said it? Huh? *Huhhh?*”

Thanks to Mavis, who had boldly said something that everyone was vaguely aware of but purposely did not say, the members of the Crimson Vow were in an awkward position. Mavis was sweating.

“Well, we do have to stop in at the guild, and we can’t avoid going into town. This is a training journey after all. And obviously we can’t just make camp in the middle of a town. It’ll be the same once we get back to the capital of Tils,” said Reina.

“Unfortunately,” Pauline agreed listlessly.

“So, what about a home?”

“Ah…”

The “home” that Mile was referring to here was a *party home*. The sort of individual dwelling that parties who had saved up a bit of money rented. It was the mark of a fairly successful hunters’ party and the sort of place that little Lenny, as an innkeeper’s daughter, sneered at. Even during their talks with Lenny during their brief stay in the capital, when the topic had come up, she seemed a bit shaken.

“If we rent a house, we can have a proper bath and toilet in the backyard, cook in a kitchen, and make whatever we like whenever we want!” Mile cried.

“Yeah!!!” the other three shouted in glee.

“Of course, it wouldn’t be fair to leave all the cooking to you, Mile, so obviously we’d still eat out sometimes and all take shifts. I’ll pitch in, too, of course!”

For once, Reina seemed to be serious. However…

“I guess it’s still a little soon for us to be renting a place.”

“That’s true! We need to earn more money first…”

“Yes, we’re still rookies—no need to get ahead of ourselves!”

Though dumbfounded at her companions’ sudden change of heart, Reina had to bow to the majority decision and humbly acquiesced.

“Really? Well, if you all think so…”

Phew! That was TOO CLOSE!!! thought the other three.

As it turned out, the four of them would be paying for lodging and staffing the baths at Lenny’s inn a little while longer. All thanks to Reina’s cooking…

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“It’s been a while, so hopefully those kids aren’t wrecking themselves…They can gather all the wild vegetables they like but without the proper means to cook ’em they’re gonna mess up their stomachs. They’re probably lucky just to catch some little critters once every few days. Gotta make sure they get some bread and soup to eat sometimes, too…” A certain kindhearted villager was muttering to himself as he made his usual several-hour trip out to the mountain to “dispose” of all of the “overbaked” bread and “excess” broth he had.

Naturally, this man had not prepared these things all alone. His load also included the things that all the other villagers had “made too much of” and had entrusted him to take “while he was at it.”

An impoverished village did not have food to spare for strangers. If they did, it would be assumed that they had a surplus, which would prompt the local lord to raise their taxes. However, if this charity was done under the pretense of discarding ruined supplies, it was fine.

“Looks like I’m h… Wh-what? *What the heck?!?!*”

Villager A’s eyes suddenly went wide at the new state of the children’s settlement…

Interlude:
Mile's Seven Secret Techniques

LADY MILE, WE NEED TO SPEAK TO YOU ABOUT YOUR SECRET TECHNIQUES, the nanomachines said suddenly one day.

"Secret techniques? What are you talking about?"

Mile didn't have the slightest idea.

LISTEN, THAT TECHNIQUE YOU USED BEFORE, THE "STUN GUN" BEAM…

"Oh!"

Mile patted her fist on her hand, thinking, *Oh, right! That* did *happen.*

AS WE RECALL, AT THAT TIME YOU REFERRED TO IT AS "ONE OF THE SEVEN SECRET TECHNIQUES," YES? SO, WE WERE WONDERING ABOUT THE OTHER SIX…

Now that she thought about it, she did recall saying something like that to the nanos in passing. However, it had been nothing more than a boast about her power—a joke. She had not actually been thinking much about it. It was about on the same level of Kinnikuman's 48 Killer Techniques or 102 Superhuman Arts.

"Yeah, I mean I kind of just said that because it sounded cool. I didn't really mean anything by it."

WHAAAAAAAAAT?!

"Eeeek! Wh-what?!?!"

Hearing the nanos' cry in a real voice would have been bad enough, but being assailed by such a loud scream transmitted directly into her eardrums was unbearable. Mile instinctively pressed her hands to her ears and shrieked.

TH…TH-TH-TH-THIS IS BAD!

"Huh? What's bad?"

WE'D ALREADY STARTED THE AUDITION PROCESS TO FIND OUT WHO WOULD BE IN CHARGE OF PRODUCING THE EFFECTS FOR YOUR SECRET TECHNIQUES! WE WERE ABOUT

TO MOVE ON TO RECORDED AUDITIONS NEXT WEEK! WHAT THE HECK ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO?!

"*How should I know?!*"

The conversation veered into something Mile had no hand in, sending her into a bit of a tizzy.

W-WE STILL HAVE TIME!

"Y-you guys… Well then, let's hurry up and figure out some way to halt—"

WHAT IF WE JUST HURRY UP AND HELP YOU COME UP WITH THE LAST SIX TECHNIQUES?

"Is *that* what you meant?!"

MAYBE WE CAN MAKE A REPEATING MACHINE GUN BASED ON THE STUN GUN…

[AND IF WE COUNT THE PHASER BEAM…]

{WE COULD DO A MASER CANNON!}

<CRAZY SUPERPOWER!>

|NINJA SHOOTER KISS!|

(BOSOM BEARER!)

>THE BEWITCHING, "WHEN MY PEARLY TEARS FLOW"!<

"Why did these suddenly get erotic?!"

…EROTIC?

[……]

{……}

<……>

(……)

>……<

"*Why aren't you all saying anything?!?! And also, how is it I can hear you all being silent when you're speaking directly into my eardrums?!?!?!*"

EVERYONE IS WAITING TO HEAR IF THEY ARE "SUITABLE," A "MISCAST," OR "TOTALLY OUT OF THEIR LEAGUE"…

"Shut up!!!"

Mile, enraged, did not reply to the nanomachines' words for another week after that.

Chapter 83:
The Great Departure

"I suppose it's about time. Are the two of you ready for this?" asked Marcela.

Monika and Aureana nodded in reply.

Yes, tomorrow was their long-awaited graduation day… As well as their formal induction into the All-Female Elite Imperial Guard Squad.

In the morning they would have their graduation ceremony at Eckland, and in the afternoon, their induction ceremony. Tonight was a fateful evening. The final night that they would spend in the dormitories of Eckland Academy.

Their rooms had already been almost fully cleaned out, save for the furnishings that had originally been present. Marcela and Monika had already taken most of their personal effects back to their family homes at lunchtime. Most of the cheap personal goods that Aureana had purchased over the last three years were ones that she had intended to use up and throw away anyway, so she had bequeathed the bulk of them to the commoners who would come to the Academy after her and sent the rest to the landfill. Rather than going to the bother of taking such things back home, it would be far more economical to dispose of them here and purchase new ones in the town near where her family lived.

And so, all that remained now in the girls' rooms were a single change of uniform for the ceremony the next day, a single set of personal clothes, and whatever other luggage they would be able to carry on their backs.

Incidentally, they would be turning all of their uniforms back in at the graduation ceremony. They had only been borrowing them from the school. Every year there were plenty of people who wished to purchase theirs as a memento, but in order to preserve the supply of uniforms, this request was always swiftly denied. This of course meant that the two uniforms Adele had taken with her were a bit of an issue—but given the circumstances, the problem

was waved off. In truth, there was no way to retrieve them anyway, so the school had no choice but to accept the way things were.

The three of them had discussed their plan over and over again. There was no room for objections now. They nodded at each other once more and headed off to their respective rooms in order to get some sleep in anticipation of the upcoming day's events.

They would have plenty of time to talk from here on out.

During their long, long journey that would begin the following day…

***

"We are now setting out into a brand-new world!"

"Let's go!!!" the crowd roared.

It was your average graduation ceremony. Of course, this was not the graduation ceremony at Ardleigh Academy, the school for royals, upper-ranking nobles, the heirs of lower nobles, and the children of wealthy merchants, but that of Eckland Academy, a school for those later children of lower nobles, middle-class merchants, and poor commoners on scholarship. There were hardly any visitors or guardians in attendance.

Or rather, there *typically* were not.

Typically.

However, this year, for some reason, the visitor and family seats were filled.

Why was this?

Perhaps it was because the crowd in the visitors' seats also included Their Majesties the King and Queen, their two sons, and other ministers, representatives of high-ranking noble families, and the like.

It was all because of the miraculous girls, who were the friends of *that girl*, the one smiled on by the Goddess.

They were all beautiful, skilled in combat magic, friends of the third princess, and founding members of the All-Female Imperial Guard Squad, a special new unit being piloted for the princess's protection. Furthermore, one of them was

someone with whom both of the princes were smitten, a top contender for the spot of future crown princess.

Hearing that the royal family and other influential figures in the country would be present, there was no way that the families of the girls' classmates could not attend. The chance to hobnob with the upper crust, and to perhaps speak with those girls afterward, would interest anyone. There was no noble or merchant who could pass up such a chance.

The ceremony solemnly proceeded and drew to an end. Uneventfully, just like any other year…

***

"Time to go!"

"Okay!"

Though the roles of student representative and final speaker had been pressed upon Marcela and Aureana, compared to what they were about to embark on, this was not stressful in the least. All they had to do was play their parts flawlessly and then head off to the induction ceremony.

They did not yet have their imperial guard uniforms; those they would change into once they had received them at the palace. Their measurements had already been taken, so they would not be receiving any bulky, oversized uniforms. The other guards would help them with the dressing as well. Though there had never been an all-female imperial guard unit before, that did not mean that female imperial guards did not exist. Though they were few in number, they certainly did exist, working in service alongside the male guards, which very much lowered the hurdle for this new unit's formation. Things likely would not have gone so smoothly if it had previously been a strictly male position.

The girls each changed into their own clothes in their rooms, laying their discarded uniforms upon the beds, donned their backpacks, and quickly set out for the palace. There was no time to stop for lunch. While the visitors and families were busy rubbing elbows at the luncheon, they had to prepare and rehearse for the induction ceremony. Of course, many of the people present at the luncheon would also be present at the induction ceremony.

However, Marcela and Monika's parents would not be attending the induction. This was only to be expected. While a school graduation ceremony was one thing, the thought of one's parents attending an induction ceremony at one's new place of work was unbearable.

Aureana's parents had not attended the graduation ceremony either. They simply did not have the money to travel all the way out to the capital from the countryside just for something like that. This was the typical state of affairs for rural farmers.

***

"I wonder if this is right…?"

With the help from the senior female guards, somehow the trio managed to get themselves dressed in uniform. Today was a day of ceremony, so rather than being armored for the battlefield, they were dressed in elegant and spiffy ladies' uniforms.

Around them were other girls, fellow inductees into the unit. They were all the daughters of nobles and high-ranking military officers, trained in martial and magical arts from a young age—or at least having received a crash course once the talk of the all-female unit came about. At the very least, they each had enough self-defense skill to shield Her Highness and buy a few seconds before the male guards arrived… Or rather, that was the expectation.

Besides the uniforms and their associated accoutrements, the members of the trio were each outfitted with two items: a sword and a dagger.

Reina and Pauline, as with hunters with a concentration in magic, favored the staff, a practical weapon that they could swing without much thought while focusing on their incantations. That said, there was nothing at all peculiar about choosing a sword, which was far more lethal, for occasions when it came down to the wire and felling the enemy was the only way to defend a client's life. Even if the time to use the sword rarely came, and was not necessary for protecting one's own life, it was good to have in certain instances. If they only concentrated on spellcasting, and the spell did not make it in time, or they ran out of magic, it would mean instant death. With a sword on hand, they could likely manage to run at least one enemy through.

Hunters, who fought almost every day, and typical soldiers, who battled against great crowds of enemies, prioritized protecting their own lives and safety, but this was not the role of an imperial guard. The job of an imperial guard was not to protect one's own life. Indeed, one's own body and life were as expendable as a single-use throwing dart when it came to defending and preserving the life of the one being protected. Such was the duty of a guard.

The dagger was but a sidearm to the sword, ready and waiting for those times when it would be too difficult to battle with a longer blade, such as in cramped quarters or underwater. These daggers were shorter than those short swords typically equipped by normal swordfighters for when their swords broke but not so short that they could be called knives. Indeed, they were just about the right length for Marcela and the girls. Though the swords were clearly too long, almost ridiculously so.

However, there was not much to be done for this. The other women were all in their late teens at least, whereas the Wonder Trio had only recently turned thirteen. They were still underage girls, really.

"Okay, time to go!"

And so, with the senior guards leading the way, the new inductees of the all-female guard squad set out to the ceremony…

***

"It's finally over!"

After a dreary ceremony and briefing, and swearing their oaths to the King, as well as to the third princess, who they would directly serve, the three girls were finally able to retreat to their room for a breather.

Though originally these rooms had been for the lady's maids, three had been set aside for the members of the new squad, split into three units of three ladies each. Given that they would be working at her side, it made sense to have the guard sleeping as close to Her Highness as possible, so the lady's maids relocated to a slightly farther location. Since it was for Her Highness's safety, the lady's maids did not complain—or more likely, they would not have dared to.

Today was for rest and free time, with basic training and practice starting tomorrow.

Or at least, that was the plan.

There was a certain saying that they all knew. A saying that their dear friend Adele had imparted upon them, one of Adele's Words of Wisdom that Monika had so diligently written down:

Plans are things that have yet to come, and nothing's set in stone.

Indeed, this plan was nothing more than that—a plan. Since it had not been fixed, then it was not yet settled.

Knock knock.

Then came another thing that was not part of the official plan, but as far as the girls were concerned, was *exactly* according to plan. There was a knock upon the door.

***

"Now then, as we discussed…" After a brief catch-up, Morena, the third princess, turned her attention to the matter at hand. Up until now, she had been relaxed, talking casually with the Wonder Trio, but now her face tightened, and her tone grew stern. "I will now be giving direct orders to you, Team 3 of my exclusive All-Female Elite Imperial Guard Squad, also known as my 'Special Ops.' By the name of Morena, third princess of Brandel, I command you. You will determine the whereabouts of the missing head of the Ascham household, Adele von Ascham, and return her to her homeland, our kingdom of Brandel. Go now, and pledge your loyalty to me, my faithful blades. Special Ops, code name, 'Wonder Trio'!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

After she left the room, the girls shed their guard uniforms and left them upon the bed, just as they had their school uniforms. That way the lady's maids could wash them and stash them away in their chest. They then changed back into the clothes in which they had come from the academy and donned their gear.

They left their new swords stacked in the corner of the room. There was no reason to take something so heavy and unwieldy with them. None of the three of them could properly use a sword, and from here on out, their number one priority would be protecting themselves, so the swords would effectively be dead weight.

The only weapons they took with them were the three matching staves Morena had purchased for them with squad funds and their daggers. The daggers could be used as reserve weapons, as well as in place of machetes when traveling through the forest, and as replacement cooking knives, so for now they decided to keep them on hand.

Naturally, the blades would also serve as something of a good luck charm to ward off anyone who might try to bother them, given that rookie mages were often vulnerable to both surprise attacks and in close-quarters combat. They might at least deter some percentage of ne'er-do-wells, who would assume that with those daggers, which they could whip out quickly at any time, they might be able to put up a decent resistance.

The staves, meanwhile, were simply basic equipment for any mage-hunter. A stave was a weapon that could be swung while focusing on incanting a spell, with a relatively low cost to brain resources, to strike at and drive back any attackers who might try to approach at melee range. Additionally, in the hands of a young girl, it did not give them the impression of being able to deliver any particularly powerful strike to an enemy, which would most certainly cause their opponents to underestimate them. In the heat of battle, this would be the most effective way to grab the cheeks of the goddess of victory and turn her smile their way.

Her preparations complete, backpack donned, and canteen attached, Marcela declared, "Our target is Adele von Ascham. Wonder Trio, roll out!"

"All right!!"

It was a very hunter-esque call—which made sense, of course, since the three of them were hunters.

Well, on the books, they were "imperial guardswomen," but that was only in name. Practically speaking, they would be shelving that position for a little

while.

A scant half a day. That had been the full duration of their brief stint as soldiers…

***

A few days later, the three walked the highway by the light of the stars, already a fair distance from the capital. Their plan was to walk on through the night and find an inn fairly early the next day.

For the sake of this, they had slept plenty the night before.

With Marcela and Monika's families so thrilled to be making such powerful connections in the capital, it would likely be some days before they began to think it strange that their daughters had not shown their faces at home at all. Even civilians were aware of how stringent the training for a new imperial guard was.

Aureana's family, meanwhile, would not think it strange to not see their daughter again for another year or thereabouts.

The girls had informed the guild that after their graduation they would be taking up service at the palace. Normally, this would mean retiring from working as a hunter, but the guild was thrilled to hear that they would be taking jobs now and then, just frequently enough to remain on the roster without any lapses in their registration, which would mean they'd be able to maintain their hunter qualifications. They had meticulously planned for this as well, to be certain that they did not lose their status as hunters.

Additionally, they had registered one more party member with the guild: an F-rank hunter named Moren.

She wore boy's clothing, hid her hair with a hat, and had purposely dirtied up her face, keeping her head down so that her features could not be clearly seen. When it came time to fill out the registration forms, she just so happened to forget to write the last letter of her name. So, everything worked out just fine.

Her body was still not so developed as to give her away on that front—for better, or for worse…

This way, Morena could check in on the Wonder Trio's balance in the guild bank, and if she found that funds were running low, she could deposit more through the capital branch. Also, they would be able to contact each other via guild post. Naturally, Morena could not be receiving letters from the Wonder Trio directly at the palace.

Of course, there was no way that the guild staff did not realize who this new F-rank hunter, Moren, truly was. At this point it was unthinkable that the Trio would recruit a man to join their team, and it was far too unnatural to go off traveling and leave a rookie behind. Furthermore, there was no one around who was not aware of their connection with Princess Morena, so they could not possibly be hoping to truly fool anyone with that pseudonym.

However, because she had registered under the name of Moren, no information about this hunter would be making it to the palace. Were anyone in the guild to leak word of the new registration, it would be as good as the guild selling out information about a member on the palace's orders, which would be tantamount to abandoning the guild's own basic principles of neutrality and independence. This would be a grave sin, one which no associate of the guild the world over would tolerate.

Thus, the guild would never give up this information themselves. Not without some exceptional reason.

All this said, the Trio did intend to earn the funds to support their own livelihood along the road. Because of the way the guild bank worked, withdrawing funds from their account anywhere outside of their headquarters would simply take far too much time to be useful. (At least if they opened a new account at a different branch, as long as they did not have it remitted back to headquarters, they could easily withdraw funds at any time with relative anonymity.)

Furthermore, requesting funds from their main account would mean giving away their current position to the guild members there. There was a fair amount of faith to be had in how the guild valued confidentiality. However, if there was a direct request from His Majesty himself, especially a particularly strong request, that carried quite a bit of weight. Especially if it was not a guild member's individual information being requested, but simply the name of the

branch where some money was being sent, who knew what might happen. And then, if it was not the king but their fellow party member “Moren” asking the guild for information, there was an even higher chance of that information being revealed.

Then there was the fact that, if they did request a deposit from their account at the capital branch, they would have to wait in the same town for some days until the money they requested could be delivered to them, in which time knights could be swiftly dispatched on behalf of the king or Princess Morena, and they might be in danger of being apprehended.

At least, they had the peace of mind that should they run into financial trouble, they had a reserve to draw from. There was no telling when one might be injured, fall ill, or be set upon by bandits along the road…

Upon their departure, the three of them had taken stock of the money they’d earned during their time at school. They had mainly taken jobs for the sake of training and improving their rank at the guild, but since all of those jobs had been escorting the daughters of powerful nobles and wealthy merchants, they had earned a decent amount, which they had divided up into three, each taking their share.

Marcela had deposited hers into an individual account at the Hunters’ Guild, Monika had put hers into an account at the Merchants’ Guild, and Aureana had sent all of hers back to her family in the country, which meant that the only money present in their previously emptied party account was that which Morena had prepared for them.

Along their journeys, all of their income and expenses would go through this party account. For individual needs, all three of them would withdraw the same amount at the same time, as needed. Whenever one of them needed money, everyone would receive the same share of funds.

Their imperial guard wages would be deposited weekly into Monika and Marcela’s individual accounts, while Aureana’s would be sent back to her family. This put Aureana at greater ease, knowing that the debt she owed to her family would be paid.

Should any of them fall along the road, or go missing, their families were sure

to receive a decent amount of condolence pay, as well as the final reward for their daughter's service, and Aureana's obligation to repay her scholarship would be annulled. In addition, their families would know of their honor, that they had died in the line of duty, offering up their own lives to protect that of Her Highness. If they could at least leave money and honor behind, it might be easier for their families to accept the loss of a daughter.

The night was still young.

Even after dawn broke, they would continue walking until the afternoon.

After that, they would find an inn early.

They had waited for this day for a year and eight long months: the day when they finally set out on their adventure to find their dear friend Adele.

Their hearts churned with such emotion that merely half a day of walking was not enough to quell them.

"We're finally doing this."

"After so long."

"Yes, finally…"

"Let's go!"

"Yeah!"

***

"I wanted to go, too! Ugh! It's not fair not fair not fair not fair not *fair*! I wanted to go with them!!!"

A girl lay alone in bed, gripping her sheets in suffering.

"It's so nice for them. They get to go off on a fun adventure. Meanwhile, once everyone finds out about this plan, Mother and Father, my brothers, the ministers and guards, and everyone else who went along with getting those three into the new guard squad are all going to scold me! Then, they're totally going to ground me, and cut my allowance, and make me study more! This isn't fair! I totally got the short end of the stick here! This is absurd!!!" Morena

wailed.

In truth, she had known all this when she went along with the Trio's plans, so she was really in no position to complain. She had known the risks of crossing this bridge but had proceeded in the hope of one day seeing Marcela and Adele as her two sisters-in-law.

Now, she just had to wait for the results.

Knowing this, the third princess, Morena, passed her peaceful half a day until all their schemes were uncovered.

She had no idea the extent of the betrayal the Wonder Trio were planning…

***

"This is the capital of Tils, where Miss Adele is actively registered as a hunter. Let us head to the guildhall at once."

"Yea—all right!" Monika and Aureana began to give their usual reply and then swiftly corrected themselves.

During their time as hunters, they had practiced a number of customary hunter-like phrases. In front of opponents with any sort of awareness, it was important to act the same way toward everyone, regardless of party leadership status, so that the enemy would not guess who was in charge, never using honorific speech toward any employers save for royals or other nobles, and so forth…

People like Mile and Marcela of course could not help this, speaking politely to everyone always. However, for both of them, this could be written off as a personal idiosyncrasy and ignored.

Reina, however, was perhaps a little *too* brusque. She really ought to have been a bit more thoughtful in her speech.

Ding-a-ling!

As that oh-so-familiar standard issue Hunters' Guild doorbell rang, all eyes in

the room focused on the doorway. Then, everyone gave the newcomers a once over and…did *not* return to what they had been doing previously.

Silence fell across the room.

It was three children of around twelve or thirteen, all girls.

In fact, there were a number of all-female parties in this city, owing to the influence of a certain stand-out party… Much to the chagrin of those young men who wished to cajole female hunters into their own groups.

So, it was not unusual to see a party of all girls here.

However, a party like this, in which all the girls were underage, and there were only three members, all of whom were mages, with no vanguard whatsoever—this simply would not do. It was bad enough that they had already put together such a quantity of gear. Clearly, this meant that they were not registering as hunters now, but that they had already registered and were actively working.

On top of all that, they were unfamiliar faces, which meant that they had come from another town… Just three children, all alone!

This could only mean one thing.

“We’re the Wonder Trio, off on a training journey.”

“We knew it!!!!!”

Everyone in the building let out the exclamation they had been holding back.

Really, this was probably inevitable…

A group of all girls, few in number. Magic specialists, with no vanguard. The hunters and guild staff in this city had an inkling of where one might be inspired to form just such a party… Far too much of an inkling, actually.

They were all thinking:

If there were even two, or worse, three parties like this, I don’t think I could take it!!!

In fact, the Wonder Trio were even worse than those other girls.

There were only three of them—all mages, with no vanguard. Not even one

member who could be thought of as an adult. They were three children, complete amateurs, not one amongst them who could be thought of as shrewd or bold and black-hearted. One girl seemed to be a noble, or at least come from wealth, but the other two, no matter how you looked at them, were nothing but commoners, their movements and carriage making clear that they were total rookies and would never last long in any battle, martial or magical.

They're gonna die! They're gonna die right away! Or else be tricked in two seconds and sold off into slavery!!!

The assembled crowd could not help but come to this conclusion. These girls seemed like such huge suckers that no one was even of the mind to try and trick them or prey upon them themselves.

A deep, profound silence spread throughout the building.

"Okay! Let's go and check out the job board," said Marcela.

"Yes, ma'am!" the other two cheerfully replied and followed her to the board.

Here they had forgotten to give their more hunter-ly reply, but well, that was no big deal at this point.

The three then looked hard at the job board.

Unlike Adele, the members of the Wonder Trio were not idiots. And so, they were plenty aware that they were unusually young for C-rank hunters, that both their numbers and job balance were quite poor, and that any hunters and guild staff who did not know them would look strangely upon them, without hesitating to pick a fight. So, the atmosphere that arose upon their arrival at the guild did not surprise them *too* much. Or at least, they could accept the awkward silence…

I wonder how long they're going to stay like that… the three thought.

Still, they were a little shaken at just *how* dramatic the response had been.

The three of them had departed from the capital of Brandel in the middle of the night and headed straight for the capital of Tils. Naturally, during their last visit, they had gotten Adele to reveal the name of the town where she was

registered. And of course, after leaving the palace, they had hurried right there, not stopping to do any hunter work, only walking and sleeping at inns in town—rinse and repeat.

Along the way they had stopped in a larger town to purchase garb and armor more appropriate for mage-hunters, in the hope of at least not giving off the air of being total amateurs. The starting money that Morena had provided them with was plenty for this.

Their matching daggers were a bit superfluous, but it was not strange for them to have them on hand in place of knives, or as an emergency melee weapon. Plus, they could just say they were charming souvenirs of them pooling together their money when they first formed the party and all purchased the matching set together.

Truth be told, those daggers were engraved with the seal of the imperial guard, and each girl carried a letter of duty regarding their mission to search for their fellow countrywoman, signed personally by the royal family (read: Morena). However, short of extenuating circumstances, they did not intend to reveal these to anyone.

If they were to do so, it would no doubt become a Big Deal, and moreover, it would mean the possibility of revealing their current location to Princess Morena.

Their main weapons, of course, were the staves, which had been billed to Morena as a necessary expense.

And so, despite the fact that they were a completely normal rookie party—albeit one whose membership was on the young side, with not enough people and poor job balance—the atmosphere in the guildhall was rather egregiously awkward, so the three of them continued gazing at the job board, not daring to turn around…

Oy. Are there any bad jobs left on there?

No, all of the high difficulty ones have been taken. There are no red mark jobs like rock lizard hunting or wyvern extermination left, either. There are no particularly difficult or dubious jobs left there that a C-rank party could take.

Good!

So went the surreptitious conversation between the guild employees.

"There's nothing here…"

"Yep, no good jobs here."

"Guess we'll just do some dailies?"

Their main goal was to meet up with Adele. Then, after working together for a bit, they would travel together. This was far too close to their homeland, after all.

However, since they did not need to search around for information on Adele's whereabouts, there was only one thing to do: wait until they met up naturally.

The chances of running into her on the first try, stopping in at the guild at such a strange point in the day, were quite low. Plus, for a group of strange hunters to show up and immediately start sniffing around for other hunters would raise suspicions with the locals, which would be sure to get them into a conflict.

They could ask the guild staff about her, but whether by some secret code or unspoken agreement, the staff would not share any information about other hunters. Asking about her would just put them unnecessarily on guard. And so, the Wonder Trio would take on monster exterminating jobs, which they needed more practice at anyway, and wait until they could encounter her by chance.

It might be days before they saw her, but they had waited nearly two years to get to this point, so a few days more was nothing to them. In the meantime, they thought it might not be bad for them to try out killing orcs, something they had yet to do.

So far, their only real hunting experience was goblins and kobolds and jackalopes, each of which they had only done a few times and always in tandem with other parties. Really, it was a bit embarrassing for a C-rank party.

That said, they were still nervous about hunting down orcs with just the three of them, as they had never done so before. Typically, going up against a power-

type opponent with no front line was as good as suicide… *Typically*.

"…Oh?"

Marcela, whose vision was rather sharp owing to her wide eyes, noticed a group of five young men around their late teens, who had been loitering near the job board for some time… Or, more importantly, she noticed the job card that one of them was holding.

"Excuse me, could I take a look at that?"

"O-of-of-of course!"

The boy, about sixteen or seventeen, stiffened up nervously and quickly shoved the card Marcela's way.

It was rather pitiful to assume such an attitude toward a girl so much younger, but considering that she was also a beautiful girl who had the whole guild's attention *and* a "high-class" aura suggesting nobility, he really had no choice but to hand the card over unconditionally. She had the sort of soft, elegant grace that was not to be found among the girls he grew up with, plus she was smiling at him as she made her request.

"I knew it. This is a request for harvesting orc parts. I thought I noticed the word 'orc' on there. What do you gentlemen think? Would you accept this job together with us? We are just starting out and don't have any experience with orc hunting. Naturally, we'd be learning on the job from you, so we wouldn't require any of the pay. Yes, as long as you just allow us to take as many of the parts as we can carry, that should be enough."

With only three of them, even if they felled an orc, they would just be able to carry back a small portion of the parts (meat, etc.) with them. The same likely went for the young men. There was no way that only five or so men could carry an entire orc back out of the forest. In other words, letting the Wonder Trio take some of the parts would be no loss of profits for them. On the contrary, having three mages on hand could prove quite useful, in terms of enjoying increased battle strength, not worrying about drinking water and cooking fire, and having healers if anyone was hurt. Any party would kill to have just one mage in their group.

And…*and*…they were all beautiful girls.

"Gladly!!!" the men all shouted.

Who could have expected any other reply?

Those lucky bastards…

All of the other young hunters glared jealously.

Even if you guys die, you can't let harm come to a single hair on those girls' heads!!!

The glares of the senior hunters and guild staff were like daggers, but this was probably to be expected.

With all eyes in the guild on them, the Wonder Trio and the party of young men, the Crane's Spray, sat down at a table for a little meet and greet.

"We're the Crane's Spray, C-rank party. Though, we actually just became C-ranks. We've got a heavy tank, a light tank, a swordsman, a lancer, and an archer-slash-light tank, so we were really thinking it would be good for us to have a mage, too…" said the party leader, looking greedily at the Wonder Trio. He should have suspected that his desire was half in vain, for it was likely the Trio were only stopping in town amidst their training journey and would not be staying forever.

However, this was not some provincial city but the royal capital of Tils. It was not fully out of the question for these girls to decide to make this place their headquarters. Additionally, it was clear that they could not continue on as a party of just three mages forever. They would either have to combine with another party or else split up and join other parties individually. There were more than enough parties that would be happy to have a mage, after all.

And there was not any reason that the party in question couldn't be them, the Crane's Spray. Not any reason in the slightest.

"We're the Wonder Trio, also recent C-ranks. We skipped to D-rank at registration thanks to our magical ability and earned our points specializing in acting as secret bodyguards for young noble ladies, so our only experience

fighting monsters is hunting kobolds and goblins and jackalopes a few times alongside other parties," Marcela explained.

"Ah…"

At this, the Crane's Spray seemed to grasp the situation. The other hunters and guild staff who were listening in also nodded, coming to the same conclusion…

After only a beat, a roar of anger echoed throughout the guild.

"IF YOU GO OUT ON A JOURNEY LIKE THAT, YOU'RE GOING TO END UP DEEEEEAAAAD!!!"

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"Honestly, what were you all thinking? And why would the guild master from your registered branch let you go out like this?! Don't tell me you left without telling anyone!"

The staff had quickly called the guild master, who, after hearing the situation, had immediately called the Trio to his office. Now, he was delivering them a thorough chewing out.

"And how the heck did you get to C-rank after only killing kobolds and goblins a few times?! You are all barely even old enough! What the heck?!"

Hearing this, the members of the Wonder Trio were at a loss. Here they were in a discussion with a guild master who seemed to have no compunctions about using slightly threatening language, not long after they had just barely scraped their way past the minimum age requirement for a C-rank. Combined with the fact that they had made their way to a D-rank via the skip system already… Even with the special ability required for a skip, seeing anyone rise to a C-rank that quickly was something that simply did not happen, except in cases like theirs, of those who attended a prep school.

Of course, there was some precedent at this guild branch because of Mile, but that was only due to the fact that this country had the prep school in place. The situations were not comparable.

However, the Wonder Trio had Aureana. There was no way that Aureana

would have failed to predict such a situation and prepared a countermeasure.

"Here," she said, drawing something from a hidden pocket in her backpack and handing it to the guild master. What she handed him was…

"Th-this is…"

Proof positive that all members of the Wonder Trio were of C-rank, penned by the guild master of the capital guild branch of the kingdom of Brandel. It had the guild master's signature and the guild branch's stamp. If they had forged this, it would be an incredibly grave offense.

This served not only as proof of their rank, but furthermore, it bore the reasoning behind it, namely that they had racked up an immense number of contribution points, thanks to all the important work they had done for nobles and other wealthy families, along with the fact that they were indispensable when it came to serving as secret bodyguards—proof enough that the guild master here had no right to complain.

Incidentally, upon leaving the country, the Trio *hadn't* reported to the guild master or asked permission. There was no reason for them to do so. They were on a special mission for the third princess, as members of the first special ops unit of the All-Female Elite Imperial Guard Squad. They were under no obligation to report to the guild master just for the sake of appearances nor to seek anyone's permission. This proof was something that they had received previously, for the sake of justifying themselves to other hunters who did not know them, who they might encounter along the road. Knowing that strangers might try to start something with them, they had requested it… Though, if anyone had been sent out right away from the palace to search for them, presenting it here might get them in trouble.

However, there was no reason for them to tell the guild master here anything he did not need to know.

"I see… That's what's going on… So you're a proud and proper C-rank party, off on a journey… N-no, you're gonna die! You're definitely gonna diiiie!!!"

Indeed, the certificate made it clear that these girls were a "C-rank party specializing in escorting, whose battle specialty was gaining a momentary pause from their opponents based on their appearances, and had only battled a few

times against minor monsters, never anything larger.” This was an important point, so it bore repeating.

In other words, this certificate as good as stated that the Wonder Trio had almost no combat ability.

“For the time being, you all are not permitted to take on any jobs outside of odd jobs, gathering, and exterminating small groups of minor monsters!”

“*Whaaaat?!*”

The girls were suddenly faced with an absurd decree from the guild master. Never mind the money, at this rate, they would never gain any skill or experience.

“This is tyranny! A guild master has no such authority—”

“We do. In the event that an idiot hunter attempts to recklessly take a job beyond their own abilities, we have the right to refuse them. Even if you all were to appeal my decision, with your track record, I have no doubt that the staff committee of the guild branch and any tribunal of this country’s guild masters would back me up.”

“Guh…”

It was a total defeat.

This was the Wonder Trio’s greatest flaw, and the reason that they thought they should do something about it right away. However, if they were to be forbidden, then their case was hopeless.

“Please don’t think badly of me. Guild masters are given this authority simply to prevent inexperienced young hunters from dying a pointless death. This is for all of your sakes! Don’t look at me like that…”

Marcela attempted to give the guild master her fiercest glare, but it only came off as adorable, and so had no impact.

Marcela and Monika racked their brains for some kind of rebuttal, while Aureana thought nothing… Or rather, she had already finished thinking.

“In that case, I suppose there’s nothing we can do about it. Let’s forget about that job,” Aureana said plainly.

“Huh?” asked the other two, confused.

The guild master thought to himself, *At least one of them gets it. Hopefully the other two will come around soon.*

However, despite Aureana’s mild, soft, and prudent appearance, she was ferocious when it came to a battle of words and could cut down a man with a single sentence…all while looking thoroughly poised.

“So, we’ll have to just keep taking daily goblin hunting and normal gathering requests. That way, we don’t have to get them approved beforehand, and when we’re done, all we have to do is turn in the spoils for selling. It might *just so happen* that we encounter some orcs or ogres along the way while we’re searching for goblins, and perhaps we’ll have to fight them for self-defense and maybe even end up with some parts to turn in, but that will have nothing to do with the daily requests we’ll be taking.

“And if any of us are gravely injured when we’re attacked by those orcs or ogres, and the staff and hunters at the branch we registered with back home ask why this happened, we’ll just have to explain to them that the guild master forbade us from pairing up with a party with a vanguard specialty to accept C-rank jobs, so there was nothing else we could do, and—”

“Enough already!”

And that was how the guild master ended up red in the face, raging at a young girl…

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“Well, that was easy.”

“I-I suppose so…”

“Ahaha!”

Aureana was grinning, but the other two looked back at her with slight twitches at the edges of their smiles.

T-to think Miss Aureana had such power…

I knew it.

Aureana was typically very mild, but when angered, her words were a veritable flamethrower. Although she delivered her speech with her usual mild look on her face, any opponent she faced would perish, both socially, emotionally, and in many other ways…

"Oh, h-how did it go?"

The members of the Crane's Spray approached the girls as they descended from the second floor of the hall. The other hunters piqued their ears as well, curious about the results.

"There are no problems. We recognized that we don't have much real combat experience, and that completing any extermination jobs on our own without a vanguard would be difficult, so we requested to join forces with you all, who have a complete vanguard. Everyone is a beginner at the start. That said, if you prevent someone from doing things simply because they are a beginner, then they will never advance. Once we explained that, the guild master understood."

This was a bit of an embellishment, of course, but really, any embellishment that allowed the guild master to preserve his dignity was one that he could not complain about.

The members of the Crane's Spray accepted this explanation. Naturally, the other hunters seemed to accept it as well. That was, except for some of the old-timers and staff, who knew that there was no way that the guild master would have easily accepted such an explanation from a group of little girls. There was no way he'd want his branch to be responsible for the deaths of children and so would likely deny them such a dangerous job, urging them instead to go on to the next town…

Of course, the guild master was not a bad person. He merely did not wish to be connected with the deaths of young girls—not to mention having it be known that these deaths were caused by a job that his branch had allowed said children to take. It was not an unreasonable motivation.

"Anyway, that's what happened, so everything is fine. Can we still carry on as per our earlier discussion?" asked Marcela.

"Of course!!!"

Thus, the joint orc extermination—or rather, the orc harvest, since that was really where the money was—was underway.

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“Ah, dang it!” cried the light tank of the Crane’s Spray, as he fumbled his canteen while trying to take a drink, spilling the contents everywhere.

“Let me see that. *Pure Water!* All right, there you go.”

In an instant, Monika had refilled the canteen with cold, delicious water.

“Oww! Crap, I twisted my ankle…”

“May I take a look at that? *Soft tissue structural repair, Heal!* I think that should do it, but if anything feels off, please let me know—I’ll heal it again. If I just got rid of the ache you might exacerbate it, so I won’t be deadening your sense of pain.”

“S-sure, thanks,” said the archer.

“Think nothing of it. You are my fellow ally on this job,” Marcela replied with a smile.

“Ah, stop! Please don’t move!” said Aureana to the swordsman. Everyone else stopped along with him.

Then, she stepped in front of him and crouched down, carefully picking a single plant stalk.

“This is a really rare medicinal herb. It’s the sort of thing you don’t easily find, even if you set out to do so, and moreover, it’s one that you’d certainly overlook if you weren’t looking out for it. It’s difficult to distinguish from most weeds. Just selling this one stalk should earn us enough to pay for everyone’s dinner when this is through.”

“Whaaaaat?!”

Even though the Wonder Trio did not drink, this still constituted quite a bit of money for a rookie C-rank hunter. And to think, if Aureana had not said

something, the young man would have trampled all over it.

“I think it’s about time we stopped for lunch,” suggested Marcela, as the Trio’s party leader.

The heavy tank who was the leader of the Spray nodded. This was the sort of decision that could be made between two party leaders without stopping to ask every single member’s opinion. It was really just a formality to even confirm such a suggestion as this, which no one could object to in the first place.

“Now then—”

“Earth magic, build us a stove!”

While Monika constructed a stove, Aureana collected fallen branches, and…

“Liquid removal!”

…piled the now magically dried wood into the stove, as Marcela…

“Ignite!”

…lit the fire.

During this time, Monika pulled something from her backpack and spread it out.

It was…

“A paper?” asked the members of the Crane’s Spray.

Indeed, it was a folded-up paper. When Monika opened it, it folded out into a sort of shallow dish, which she then placed into a piece of mesh that was perfectly fitted to the dish’s shape, filled with a bit of water, and placed gently on the stove.

“I-It’s gonna burn!” the heavy tank shouted, but despite being warmed right over the flames, the dish showed no signs of immolation.

Monika then put some more water into the dish, with some soup base, dried vegetables, and jerky.

“Why isn’t it burning? Magic? Does it have some kind of protective magic?”

“I’ve never heard of any magic like that! Plus, could someone keep doing magic the whole time they’re cooking?”

“No way!!!”

Indeed, such a thing was impossible.

“Huh? This is just normal paper. Though it is slightly more water-resistant than usual… That way it doesn’t burn. A friend of ours taught us this trick—apparently it’s what they do back in her hometown. It’s a priceless skill and saves you from carrying around a big heavy pot!” Aureana replied in a chipper tone.

Truthfully, this was a trick that Adele had picked up in her previous life, on a visit to a traditional Japanese restaurant with her family, and Aureana had learned it from Adele.

Mages and girls are amazing! the members of the Crane’s Spray exclaimed deep down within their hearts—though of course, neither every mage, nor every girl, was as amazing and handy as these three.

Soon, they returned to their orc hunting. Not long after…

“Orcs ahead, three of them! They’re about eighty meters to the right oblique,” Marcela said softly.

“How do you know that?!?!”

“Oh…”

The secret knowledge they learned from Adele was shared between only the three of them, as were the techniques they had developed based on this knowledge. This was another one of the things they had learned from Adele directly… However, despite them having joined up with other parties a number of times before for practice, this was the first time they were not moving through the forest alone, and Marcela had accidentally slipped.

I’m in no place to behave like Miss Adele… I am nothing like her, nothing at all! I just need to give a normal explanation…

And so, Marcela muttered:

“…That’s a family secret.”

Three orcs would not be too challenging of opponents for a veteran C-rank party, but it was a heavy burden for a group of hunters only barely C-rank. They could manage if they had several members who could take out an enemy in a single hit, but had they the power to rip through an orc’s thick meat and hide with that kind of speed, they would have become C-ranks long ago.

This meant, in essence, that they did not possess such power. In a melee encounter, where they would have to swing multiple times, cutting away at the orc’s strength bit by bit, one swing of an orc’s arm would be enough to send them flying. If they were lucky, they would be seriously injured. If not, they would die on the spot.

“Let’s retreat. We might be able to face one, or maybe even two, but with three we’ll be attacked before we can take them down. If we were lucky, maybe only a couple of us would take serious wounds, but there’s a risk of all being wiped out. It’s bad enough with us guys, but if we create a situation where you girls get hurt, we’ll definitely be regretting it later. Not that we’d hesitate to take responsibility!”

The leader of the Crane’s Spray made a firm, sensible decision. He was not the type to do something reckless just to show off in front of a group of girls. He was apparently a levelheaded, sincere person. At the end there, he had let on a bit more of his ulterior motives, but that was easily ignored.

However…

“No. We will be fine. As long as you all can deal with the first two, we should not have any issues. Melee combat is not our strong suit, but we’re fairly confident in our attack spells.”

Sure enough, if the Crane’s Spray were alone, two orcs would probably be their limit. However, this time they had three mages. Even if they were not particularly powerful, with all three of them firing spells at once, they could greatly lessen the orcs’ attack power. They did not necessarily need to kill them with the spells. If they could block the orcs’ view, or temporarily halt them, or deliver light wounds, that would be enough. Defeating three orcs at 70% power

each was far easier than two orcs at 100%. While they had three C-rank mages here with them, they ought to at least go for this much.

“Okay,” the leader of the Crane’s Spray decided after a moment of thought. “Let’s do this!”

At his words, the Wonder Trio grinned.

The joint party slowly approached the orcs. Until…

“Would you mind letting us attack first? It won’t be very good practice for us if we just stand behind and watch the rest of you attack,” asked Marcela, pressing her hands together in petition, staff tucked under her wrist.

This was no issue for the Spray. There was really no reason not to let the mages have a head start in ranged combat. The job of the vanguard was to make sure that the enemy never got past them, in order to protect the back line from the enemies who were hurt and enraged by the mages’ and archers’ attacks. The mages were the secondary line of attack, as well as support units. The archers were more versatile, able to draw a short sword in order to defend the other archers or mages, or else join in with the front line.

Up until the present, without any mages, the Spray’s battle formation had been fairly tight. Thus, the pressure was on for them as well, not wanting to pass up this key opportunity to fight alongside a mage unit.

“Of course,” the leader readily accepted. “We’ll be sure not to let them through, so you all just relax and focus on your attacks. After you land the first strike, we’ll head in. Iktor, you use your judgment on where to go. Sound good?”

The archer, given his usual direction, nodded firmly.

A few minutes later…

“There they are! Three orcs, all adults!” said the heavy tank who had taken the lead, in a soft, sharp voice, gesturing.

It seemed that the hunters were downwind of these orcs, and their presence had not yet been noticed. The members of the Crane’s Spray slipped swiftly into

attack formation and moved a bit closer…

“If we get any closer than this, the chance of us being discovered will go up immensely. Can you all attack from here?” asked the leader of the Crane’s Spray. The three members of the Wonder Trio silently nodded.

Then, they nodded at each other, and—

“Soil Spear!”

“Ice Nail!”

“Water Cutter!”

“Huh?!?!”

The mages had been given the first chance to act so that they could cast their spells, and yet they had fired them off with only a single nod of the head, not even an incantation.

Monika's spell was the Soil Spear.

In order to create a spear out of rock where there was none, one would need to transform the dirt into rock, or else have rocks transferred there from some other place; to give such specific directions to the nanomachines in the midst of battle via "unconscious thought pulse" would be a tall order. If instead, she were to think a pointlessly concrete direction, such as "form a rock spear out of nothing," the hurdle would be even higher. Thus, using the materials already present, not overthinking the parts one did not know much about and instead requesting something like, "a sturdy spear made of earth," would elicit a far more effective response from the nanomachines.

Aureana, meanwhile, just before casting her spell, had opened the lid of the canteen at her waist.

Water magic, typically, would require creating water from nothing, which was less than effective. However, by opening her canteen and consciously directing that its water be used, Aureana was omitting the first step. If the water was already there, forming an ice spear was easy. With her chosen spell, Ice Nail, the water in her canteen would be plenty to create several icy spears. Indeed, this was a special art that Aureana, who was relatively weaker at magic compared to the other two, had thought hard to come up with, one that would save on both resources and magical power.

The Water Cutter that Marcela had used was nearly identical to the one Pauline used some time ago to cut the shackles of the people who had been captured by the beastfolk. They had both learned this technique from Mile (Adele), so this made sense. Rather than striking with large, wide streams of water, it was a cutting-type spell, made of thin, high-pressure streams, with emery—or rather, garnet—mixed in as an abrading agent, to make the cutting power far more effective.

All three spells struck around the same time.

Ka-shunk!

Psh psh psh psh psh!

Shiiing!

“Gwruaaahhh!!”

“Wha…?”

Without even time to scream, one orc took an earthen spear to somewhere around the heart and collapsed upon the ground.

In an instant, another orc fell silently, its head sliced cleanly off. Even if it had tried to cry out, there was nothing left of it from the neck up, so this would have been futile.

The third orc took a mass of icy nails to the face, which left both of its eyes destroyed. This one was the only orc to scream, flailing wildly, but however much sharper its senses of smell and hearing might be than a human’s, with its sight now completely ruined, there would be nothing it could accomplish amidst the pain and chaos.

The members of the Crane’s Spray fell silent, dumbfounded.

“Finish it!” Aureana shrilly commanded, bringing the boys back to their senses, and they fell upon this free lunch she had provided them.

If they could not at least manage this much perfectly, they were as good as worthless, the Crane’s Spray thought, and so despite the simplicity of the task of finishing off this already-disabled opponent, they all took it very seriously, with the five of them—the archer with his short sword included—launching an all-out attack.

It was an overwhelming victory.

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On the road home, silence hung heavy over the Crane’s Spray. So much so that their loquaciousness on the way out seemed as though it had never happened.

Still, the leader thought he had to ask, finally opening his mouth.

“Umm, so…you all said that you had hardly any experience fighting monsters…”

“Well, that’s true! We’d only hunted goblins twice, kobolds once, and jackalopes three times, alongside other parties,” said Marcela.

“Actually, it was only twice with the jackalopes,” Aureana corrected.

The boys were silent again.

“But those spells…”

Even if they did not have a resident mage of their own, the members of the Crane’s Spray were not totally ignorant about mages and magic. You never knew when a group of bandits encountered on an escort mission might have some disgraced mage amongst their number, so they had studied up plenty on the abilities of mages and practiced fighting against them.

Which meant that they knew, based on the speed, accuracy, and power of the spells that the three had used, that there was no doubt Aureana had purposefully chosen a less powerful spell purely out of consideration for them—so that they would not totally lose their chance to act. Indeed, to blind the orc and render it powerless while still leaving the body mostly intact was more than likely a courtesy to the Crane’s Spray so that they could say that they had felled at least *one* of the orcs. The party was fairly sure of this.

In reality, Aureana was not the strongest of mages and had fought in her preferred style of winning with *technique* instead of power.

“Well, just because someone is lacking in experience does not mean they are weak, does it? We have done plenty of theoretical learning and target practice, as well as thorough research on the characteristics and weak points of monsters, in preparation for just such a day as this. Yes, ever since the day we pledged we would set out to find that girl…”

Behind Marcela’s smile, her eyes burned with a strong will.

At this, the Crane’s Spray knew that there would be no chance of ever getting these girls to give up their journey and settle down alongside them, no matter how many invitations they might extend.

They also knew that the magic those girls had used was likely only a fraction of their full power. Even if those orcs had in fact been ogres, there would probably have been little difference in the results. And if those opponents had been human, then…

“U-um, you girls, er… Uh, never mind…”

The boy began to ask if they were familiar with another particularly unusual party but thought better of it. That party had formed out of the Hunters' Prep School here in Tils and was rumored to include both nobles and merchants, with all the members differing in age. There was no way such people would have had any interaction with a party of rookies who had come from another country.

Still, these are pretty frightening times we live in…

Perhaps it was only because the members of the Crane's Spray were laden with as much valuable orc meat as they could carry that their feet dragged so. Or at least, that was what they would have liked to believe.

As for the Wonder Trio…

"Th-this is heavy!"

"That's because you got so ahead of yourself in loading it all up, Lady Marcela! I told you to take less."

"B-but, unlike your family, who are relatively prosperous, my family was quite poor! You do know that, don't you, Miss Monika? One just can't shake that impoverished mindset!"

Now, where did that leave Aureana—a true child of poverty, a thoroughbred pauper, from a long and proud lineage of impoverishment—if the daughter of nobility was calling herself poor?

***

"What?! They wiped out three orcs? Are you serious?!"

"Do you really think we would purposely lie to a guild master?"

"…Sorry."

After the job completion was processed and the Wonder Trio left, the Crane's Spray reported to the guild master.

These were rather rude words for young men who had so kindly gone out of their way to give this report, the guild master realized, and offered a sincere apology.

Naturally, the members of the Crane's Spray had invited the girls out to dinner with them after the job, but the Wonder Trio had refused, saying, "If we go all out celebrating every time we earn any little bit of money, we'll never accumulate any!"

"Anyway, you're saying their magic is on par with B-ranks? And there's three of them… But they said they were only just promoted to C-rank! And that they had hardly any actual battle experience."

"They were bizarrely fast and could use powerful, accurate silent-cast spells. As for their coordination—they had perfect timing and no redundancy, without even discussing it beforehand. They were cool and collected. They didn't falter or hesitate… Even if we'd been fighting against ogres, I think the result would have probably been the same. Do you think that when they applied for their skip request, the person who tested them just hesitated to make three young girls with no experience immediately into C-ranks? And that's why they registered as D-ranks?

"Plus, there's the fact that, as they told us, they spent two or three years as just high-status children, racking up enough contribution points to barely clear the minimum age requirement, and then managed to rank up with hardly any monster combat experience… You know, a dragon starts out strong, even before it's ever fought anyone."

"Wha…?"

When they first registered as hunters.

In other words, they were already strong to begin with. As strong as B-ranks…

The fact that they had hardly any combat experience was irrelevant. Even without the experience, they were plenty strong…

They had merely thought that since this was their first time, they ought to ally with a vanguard party just in case. Even though they were fairly certain they could easily take down an orc or ogre.

"Haha! Ahahahahaha! I guess it really *was* none of my business… All I did was annoy them and hurt their feelings."

The guild master slumped gloomily, finally grasping the situation.

“How was I supposed to know that?! How can there be *two* parties of such monstrous girls?!?!”

***

For the next week, the Wonder Trio spent their days on short missions, exterminating orcs and ogres. Until…

“We still haven’t run into Miss Adele!”

“Indeed, we’ve stopped in during all the usual job acceptance, completion report, and material turn-in times, the times when people are usually socializing, and even when the place has been completely empty…”

“We’ve checked out all the inns that she would probably choose to stay at, too.”

“I wonder if she’s away from town on some long-term job?”

They had assumed they would run into her straight away, but they had yet to see her. Though they had hoped to come across her naturally, the girls were now growing a bit impatient. As excited as they were to see her again, there were limits to their ability to wait.

In light of this, Marcela made a decision.

“Let’s ask the clerk!”

Aureana and Monika nodded in agreement.

“Um, so we heard about an all-female party that works in this city—the Crimson Vow?”

Oh, here it comes…

“Yes, they are registered to this branch,” the clerk replied cheerfully, not seeming at all surprised. Indeed, the clerk had half-expected that such an inquiry might come sooner or later.

There were only so many absurdly talented C-rank parties consisting of just a few young girls around. It could not be mere chance that two such parties would appear in the same place at the same time.

They were cut from the same mold. They had to be allies or at least connected.

It was no surprise that one might assume this.

And so, it was truly more surprising that such a question or topic of conversation had *not* been raised before. That said, the staff had refrained from asking about the connection themselves, meaning that it remained only a fervent topic of discussion behind closed doors.

“Where are they right now?”

Normally, the clerk would not go blabbing about other hunters’ whereabouts, let alone that of a group of young girls. However, the ones who had asked were also a group of young girls—moreover, ones who could be assumed to share some connection with the party. The clerk felt comfortable speaking freely.

It was not particularly interesting information, and she was not divulging their exact whereabouts, so there was nothing really wrong with it, she likely assumed. Any other guild employee would have probably made the same decision.

“The Crimson Vow, like the Wonder Trio, is currently away on a training journey. We aren’t certain when they will return.”

“Whaaaat?!” the Trio screamed, aghast.

“Did they not finish their westward journey and return back home?”

Indeed, they had stopped in at the girl’s dormitory at Eckland Academy on both their way out and way back from their travel to the west. By now, one would assume they would have returned to this city, their base of operations. It was unlikely they would head right back out on a journey again, after just returning from one…

A rookie C-rank party’s journey of self-improvement was a wild and wonderful journey with no itinerary, which could take anywhere from six months to several years. In addition, the number of parties that never returned from such a journey was by no means few. They might find a new town that they liked, relocate, and transfer their registration there. They might achieve something great and be scouted by another guild branch. One of them might fall in love

with a local and take up residence. Or they might have to retire from hunting altogether, due to illness, injury, or some other event.

Sometimes, they even lost their lives.

There was no way that Adele would perish that easily. However…

“Lower cognitive levels, abandon all common sense! ‘Thoughtlessness’ times five!”

Marcela gripped Monika and Aureana’s hands, incanting a peculiar spell. And then…

“Super Adele Simulator!!!”

The guild staff and hunters stood speechless at this bizarre ritual.

And then…

“They went the opposite way, to the east! They likely intend to return here, but if anyone meets a nice man, they’ll stay there!”

“I agree with this conclusion!”

“Likewise!”

All three were in agreement.

“Let’s go! Wonder Trio, roll out!”

“All right!!”

And so the three of them hurried out of the hunters’ guild branch in the capital of Tils.

“What was that?”

“……”

There was not a single person present who could answer that question.

Chapter 84:
A Holiday

"Ladies and gentlemen of the capital, I have returned!" Mile proclaimed what sounded like some kind of catchphrase, clutching a piece of jerky in her mouth like a corncob pipe.

Everyone simply ignored this. If they paid her any mind, she would make a habit of it.

After their previous trials, the Crimson Vow had headed back toward the capital of the kingdom of Tils, their base of operations. On the outward journey, they had proceeded along the main highways, but for the return trip, they took side routes slightly off the beaten path. Their reasoning for this was ostensibly because it would be boring to go by the same route and not good enough training. However, the real reason was probably that all of the towns along the main road were where various *incidents* had occurred and where they were now hesitant to show their faces.

At any rate, one way or another, they had finally made it back home.

As they had not taken the main roads, they also did not run into anyone who was traveling eastward along the main road…

First, they headed straight to the guildhall. They wanted to waste no time before getting the clock ticking again on their required five years of service within the country to repay their tuition subsidies for the Hunters' Prep School. So, the moment they crossed back into Tils they had stopped in at the first town they encountered and done some daily gathering jobs (i.e. turned in some materials from Mile's inventory under the pretense of having just collected them), just to indicate that they were back again and working. Still, the right thing to do was to stop in straight away and make their report back at the capital.

"We're back! Our current training journey is now complete!" Mile's voice echoed throughout the guildhall, following the familiar *ding-a-ling* of the bell.

"Huh…?"

All of the staff and hunter's gazes snapped to the members of the Crimson Vow, who were standing near the door.

"Whoa-hooooooh! Welcome back!! Congrats!!!" everyone cried.

Of course, this response was not disproportionate, nor was it solely because it was the Crimson Vow that had returned. The rate of parties who returned from journeys of self-improvement without a single party member retiring or becoming an invalid was not at all high. Some took jobs that were a bit above their stature, thinking it would be a good learning experience, some took

extermination requests beyond their abilities at rural villagers' entreaties, and on and on…

The members of the Crimson Vow were plenty skilled, but such parties were apt to take on jobs that were just a bit beyond their abilities. Thus, the rate of return from journeys taken by naturally skilled and confident parties was even lower than that for journeys taken by weaker parties, who recognized their own limitations.

The guild staff, at least, would know when parties who did not return had simply taken up residence in another country, because they received registration transfer documents from the new branch those parties would be registering with. Still, there were plenty of parties who were gone for years without any such documents ever arriving.

Yet now, a rookie party had returned safely, without losing a single member or, apparently, suffering any serious injuries. This was a natural cause for celebration.

***

"We're back!"

"Welcome ba—Big Sis!!!"

Lenny practically leapt over the reception desk.

"W-welcome back! I'm so glad you're safe! Congratulations on completing your journey!"

Her greeting was not very Lenny-like, but this was probably her form of ceremonial phrasing. Whether she was speaking to favored guests or guests who had only stayed a few nights, her manner toward anyone who had journeyed far, and still chose to stay at the inn again, was always the same.

Previously, on the Crimson Vow's return from the westward leg of their travels, her greeting had been a bit different, but then, she had probably just been flustered from the shock.

Lenny was so moved that there were tears in the corners of her eyes. Seeing this, tears began to well up in the eyes of the members of the Crimson Vow as

well. Until…

“Perfect! Now the cost of running the baths will go down! Between the baths and you all, we’ll attract more customers, and we can save on meat thanks to whatever monster parts you brought back. Oh, and you can teach us some recipes from the other lands you’ve visited!”

Sounds like she hasn’t changed…

With that, the members of the Crimson Vow felt all over again that they were truly home.

***

For the first time in a while, the girls ate a huge meal and slept soundly. The next day, they popped in at the guild to—

“Hey! Why didn’t you all come to see me yesterday?!”

—immediately be called into the guild master’s office and yelled at?

“Well, we did tell all of the hunters and guild staff that we were back… And I mean normally, a rookie C-rank party returning from a journey isn’t something to bother the guild master about, is it?” Mavis rebutted.

“Er…” the guild master faltered. “W-well, I mean before that! Why did you all head right back out without saying anything after you got back from your first journey?!”

This time, Reina took the wheel.

“After our first journey? But this *was* our first journey. When we stopped by previously, it was because we just happened to be passing through in the middle of our trip. We didn’t want to trouble anyone by going to the bother of reporting we were back just to head right out again.”

“Wha…?”

Sure enough, on their previous visit they had neither reported that they were back nor that their journey had concluded, so there was nothing he could say to argue with this.

“Guh… W-well, fine. This time you’re *really* back, no mistaking that!”

“Ah, yes. Our first training journey is now complete,” said Mavis.

The guild master heaved a great sigh.

First.

Of course, no hunter would be expected to go off on only one such journey. There were many reasons why one might set out. To escape the daily grind. To test one’s confidence and skills. To grow stronger. Guild master or no, he could not put a stop to them leaving in the future.

The guild master himself had made many such journeys in his youth, so he was in no position to complain.

“All right. Anyway, congrats on making it back safely. We look forward to even more great things from you!”

“Yeah!!!” all four shouted, pumping their right fists into the sky. There was no other reply for a hunter that truly encapsulated the essence of “You can count on us!” the way this one did.

***

After making their presence known the previous day, they had headed straight to the inn, so today, after the guild master released them, the Crimson Vow took a good look at the job board and checked out the request slips that had been left without any takers. Then, they detained a few staff members and hunters who looked like they had time on their hands and asked about the current state of things, inquiring after any recent rumors. Realizing that they were a bit behind on the times, the members of the Crimson Vow decided to take a week’s holiday.

A week was rather short for a rest, considering they had just returned from a lengthy journey. Save for those who had very little chill, or else were burdened by money troubles, it was not at all strange to see parties take even three weeks off. Knowing that many hunters ruined their bodies via injury and fatigue after pushing themselves too hard, sensible parties took the time to stop and recover before resuming work locally.

However, in light of Mile and Pauline’s healing magic, this was not an issue for the Vow. They could heal a blown-off arm back to battle-readiness in just ten

seconds…

“Okay, so let’s take a week off to pop in and say hi to all the folks who have helped us out and vice versa. After that, back to the grindstone—for power and money!”

“Yeah!!!”

The guild staff and hunters watched fondly as the members of the Crimson Vow shuffled off. Naturally, there was no one who went out of their way to tell them about the three girls who had been here previously.

Should they ask, all anyone would say was that those girls were off on a training journey. This was not particularly confidential information, being something that most hunters and staff were aware of. So, they would have no problem telling the Vow this piece of information about those girls…when they asked.

Still, no guild employee would freely offer up information about a hunter of their own initiative. Even for normal hunters, that was just bad manners. Plus, while the members of the Crimson Vow have asked around plenty about local politics and monsters, not once had the questions, “Was there anyone looking for us?” or “Did a party of three girls pass through here?” come up.

There were plenty of people who came asking after the Vow, anyway. People who wanted to join their party, nobles and merchants who wanted to contract them, and so forth. As the girls had not requested to be notified about such things, there was no need for the staff to relay every single inquiry.

The more anyone thought about it, the more they thought that, while those three girls had been extraordinarily skilled, that alone was not enough to prove that they were connected to the Crimson Vow. They did not seem to have any information at all about the Vow, and the Vow seemed to have no interest in finding out if anyone had been asking after them. The chances were high that those girls were merely admirers of the Crimson Vow and were following after them in hope of joining forces.

Plus, the Crimson Vow was a party formed right in this very city, and half the members were citizens of this land. Chances were slim that hunters coming from another country would have any connection with them.

Therefore, it would be simply bad manners to go around spreading information about these other hunters without their permission.

As such, the Crimson Vow learned nothing about those three strange little girls…

***

The holiday began.

Of course, one week (really, six days) was not nearly enough time for Mavis or Pauline to make a trip back home. And so, naturally, they had little choice but to kick it around the capital.

Mile visited the library, donated an orc's worth of meat to an orphanage, brought a feast down to the urchins who lived in the so-called "rain shelters" (though they provided little shelter from the rain and made a mockery even of the name "hovel") down at the river banks in the name of "trying out a few new dishes," and kept busy with all sorts of other activities. At night, she stayed up late writing something. It was fine for her to sleep in every morning, so she had no worries about staying up until dawn.

Mavis attended lessons at a sword dojo, occasionally tagging along with Mile to visit the orphanage and the urchins, and instructing them in the way of the sword. Her hope was that when one day these orphans became E-rank hunters and went out fighting orcs and goblins, this training would prolong their lives at least a little more…

Reina also went to the library. She pored over reference tomes and researched magic, read the biographies of hunters who rose to A-rank at a young age, and did lighter reading, including some novels…

Incidentally, Reina had a habit of taking out quite a few books from the library. So much so that she racked up an immense tab in what were not especially cheap deposits. Though she was not so into books that she would take up writing as a hobby, in the vein of Mile—er, Miami Satodele—it seemed she did quite enjoy reading.

And as for Pauline, well, she counted her money…

"*Hee hee. Eheehee. Ee hee hee hee hee hee…*"

…and counted her money.

“I found you! I’ve found youuu!!!”

“Wha…? Who are…? Oh wait, you’re that fathercon elf from that one time…”

One day in the middle of their break, upon returning to the inn, Mile was suddenly set upon by the elf scholar they had met during the elder dragon and beast men incident—Dr. Clairia. Indeed, she was someone Mile and Reina felt a close affinity to, somewhere around the chest…

Mile was not good at remembering faces, but apparently the professor was, and it was unclear if this was because she was an elf or because she would never forget a *bosom* buddy.

As Mile had spent the day on her own, she currently did not have Reina or Pauline to act as her shield.

“*Fathar-Kon*?”

“O-oh, it’s a word that means you’re amazingly intelligent!”

“R-really? Well, you’re right about that.”

Dr. Clairia was easily duped by Mile’s quick cover-up.

She was a simple mark. Far too simple…

“A-anyway, I finally found you! I went all the way west to Vanolark looking for you all and stopped in at home to see my father, snuggled with him and snuggled with him and snuggled with him, and slept next to him, and snuggled with him, and snuggled with him to really replenish all my ‘father energy’ stores. Then, when I turned around and came back here, you all were nowhere to be found! I had no choice but to wait for you to return, for days and days… Why would you do that to me?!”

“U-um, we didn’t do anything!”

Dr. Clairia’s accusations were almost entirely false. Or rather, *entirely* false. And also, what was with all the snuggling?

“What can I do for you?”

Certainly, the fact that she had been looking for them meant that she wanted something, so there was no better way to get the conversation rolling than simply asking what it was. Perhaps she wanted to make a direct request of the Crimson Vow or consult them regarding the incident with the beastmen?

As it happened, Dr. Clairia's reply to Mile question was as follows:

"I'm going to make you mine!"

"The yuri twist is heeeeeere!"

In her previous life, Mile had at least a vague awareness of such things. Her mother's personal collection in her parents' library had contained a hint or two.

However, everything Mile had seen had been of the softer variety. Lots of *soeurs,* and some *soeurs*, and some more *soeurs*…

Still, Misato, Mile's predecessor in her previous life, had not overlooked such things.

"Yuri? What's that?"

"Oh, if I were to tell you the equivalent flower name from here, I'm not sure it would translate. Um, how do I put this? Uhh…"

"Well, whatever—that doesn't matter."

As Mile fretted over how to explain herself, Dr. Clairia continued.

"I want you to stay with me for a little while, so I can study you. Until I grow weary of it… Yes, perhaps for about 100 years."

"*I'll be dead in 100 years!* I would definitely hit the end of my life span before that!"

"Ah…"

The professor's face suggested she had forgotten that important detail.

"It's just that you have a whiff of elf around you, so I…"

In Europe in the middle ages, the typical life expectancy for anyone who made it to adulthood was roughly forty to fifty years. The total average life span worked out to only twenty to thirty years, but that was factoring all of the children who died in infancy, mothers who died in childbirth, and the many,

many others lost to the wars going on at the same time.

Furthermore, many people fell prey to illnesses that were easily fixed with the medicines of modern Japan. Even if injuries could be tended by healing magic, illnesses were not so simple. In this world, humans could die of something as simple as appendicitis. Additionally, many monsters lived in this world. So, naturally, this shortened the life expectancy even further.

One hundred years was a span that even one who would call themself a village elder could never attain, akin to immortality… If one was a human, of course.

Elves, however, were creatures that lived a quiet life in the forest, resistant to illness and adept at healing magic. An elf at one hundred years was still scarcely more than a child. So, the difference in perception between an elf and a human was not something easily overcome.

However, Mile was not concerned about that right now.

“Wh-whiff? Do I stink?! I really do stiiiiiink!!!”

This was the second time now that she had been told she had an unusual smell—the beastmen had told her the same thing previously.

When a human said that someone had an “unusual” smell, what they meant was that they reeked. Particularly in a world where perfume technology was not very advanced, and rather than being something that gave a vaguely pleasant scent, perfume was a substance that overwhelmed the senses with a garish odor that would have offended most modern Japanese sensibilities…

“Gaaah! Aaaaahhh!!”

Dr. Clairia finally realized how terribly she had misspoken when Mile suddenly crouched down to the ground, clutching her own skull.

“Oh, no! That’s not what I meant! It’s not a weird smell, it’s… *Wait*. Why are you so upset to hear that you smell like an elf?! Does that mean you think elves stink?! How impertinent! I won’t forgive you!!!”

Things were already falling apart.

The situation only got worse until Lenny, troubled by the commotion

happening in front of the inn, called in Mavis and Reina, who had already returned, to intervene…

***

“So, since you’re going to be my subject from now on, starting tomorrow you’ll be living with me!”

“This is the first I’m hearing of this!”

Reluctantly dragged back to the Crimson Vow’s room, Dr. Clairia returned to the subject of her study of Mile, as though it were perfectly natural, and furthermore, already settled. Learning that her own transfer had apparently already been decided for her, Mile was indignant.

At some point, Pauline had returned as well, and now all four members of the Crimson Vow were assembled.

“Here you are trying to strong-arm someone without considering their circumstances or receiving their consent! You’re no better than Aetelou and Sharalir. I can’t believe elves are all such thoughtless creatures. I won’t be surprised if your bad reputation starts to spread…”

“Wh-wha?! Aetelou and Sharalir?! You all met those old hags?! Wait, don’t tell me, you already promised them something?! I was here first! I found little Mile first, so she’s mine!!!”

Dr. Clairia began wailing the moment she heard those other elves’ names. Apparently she held a similar animosity toward the pair.

“I don’t know what they told you, but I’m not like them! If you help out with my research, you’re sure to be thanking me afterwards, and—”

“Get her out of here!” Reina commanded as Dr. Clairia started up again.

“Yes’m!” said Mavis.

“Yes’m!” Pauline echoed, in a manner very much like a old guard in one of Mile’s fairy tales.

As a rule, Mile was not permitted to participate directly in these sorts of things, lest she misjudge the amount of force necessary and cause a disaster.

“Hey! What’re you doing? Get off of me! Mile, to my side! *Wah, Mile!!!*”

Though she put up a fight, Dr. Clairia was swiftly expelled from the room and shoved straight down the hall as Reina and Mile looked on.

“That isn’t the last elf we’re going to see. More of her sort might pop up again anywhere in the world…”

A dark prophecy spilled from Mile’s lips.

“What was that about?” Reina grumbled.

Thinking that she already had Mile in her grasp, and that it would be best to aim to return the next day at a time when she was alone rather than force the issue, Dr. Clairia had peacefully retreated.

To soothe the displeased Reina, Pauline said, “Well, this sort of thing always happens.”

“Must be nice to be so popular, Mile!” Mavis joked.

“No no, I could not possibly compare to you, Lady Mavis! A regular Don Juan you are! Perhaps I ought to send a letter by guild post and tell that young noblewoman how to contact you here…” Mile replied.

“No, stop! I’m sorry!!” Mavis paled, bowing her head.

Indeed, if there was anyone else who should know a thing or two about being popular in a way you didn’t want to be, it was Mavis.

“Really, I never thought I’d hear something so cruel out of *you* Mavis, someone who should *know* how much trouble it is to be followed around!”

“I’m sorry! Lighten up already,” Mavis apologized desperately in the face of what appeared to be genuine displeasure from Mile.

Of course, while it was genuine anger, it was still only at a Level 1, so really, there was not much to worry about. It was at Level 2 where they began to get concerned—when Mile’s expression melted away, and she went utterly stoic. After that was Level 3, where Mile showed a smile that did not reach her eyes, followed by Level 4, where that smile faded, and her faced morphed into a

deep, primal displeasure. When things reached this level, there was one thing that could be assumed: if she looked at you like that, you'd better abandon all hope. Yes, it was the same as with the clerk at a certain guildhall—one No-Hope Felicia.

***

One way or another, the week drew to a close. Now returning to their hunting work, the Crimson Vow were at the guildhall perusing the job board, when—

"We are the Servants of the Goddess, on a journey of self-improvement. We will be staying here for a little while!"

They heard a somehow familiar voice, speaking a somehow familiar party name.

"Huh…?" said four voices.

"Oh!!!" replied six others.

Sure enough, it was the all-female party, the Servants of the Goddess, who they had forcibly matched…er, *kindly connected* with Leatoria of the house of Aura.

"What fate for us to encounter one another along our journeys!" said Telyusia, leader of the Servants.

"Ah! Actually, this is our headquarters. This is the branch where we registered, and Pauline and I have family in this kingdom. We just finished our journey the other day," replied Mavis as representative of the Crimson Vow.

"Oh, is that so? I suppose there would be a far greater chance of running into each other when one party is staying put, rather than us both moving about hither and yon."

It was difficult to say if one would truly come to this conclusion when carefully calculating the mathematical probability, but in the moment, everyone understood what she was saying and agreed.

"Isn't it a bit soon for you all to be on such a journey?"

It could not have been very long since the Servants' promotion to C-rank, and moreover, they had only just welcomed Leatoria, a complete novice. It was a bit

hasty to be departing on their journey so soon after that, Mile thought, but when she asked…

"I'm sorry."

For some reason, Leatoria was apologizing to her fellow party members.

"Huh?" Mile was dumbfounded, not understanding what was going on.

Telyusia gave a wry smile and explained, "Ah, well, to tell you the truth, Leatoria's father, Baron Aura, is a huge worrywart. He had a guard follow her around, and we could only take easy—or rather, *safe*—jobs, and it was such a big pain…"

"Ah…" The members of the Crimson Vow all understood.

The Servants of the Goddess hadn't really had much choice.

"It was getting depressing, so we decided to set off on our first journey. That said, we're mostly focusing on improving our coordination, rather than raising our individual battle power, so we aren't going to push ourselves too hard. This is a journey to practice fighting lots of different, moderately powerful monsters. We wouldn't be able to fight too many varieties if we stayed in one place, after all. Also, we don't intend to be gone for very long. After we stay in this country for a little while, we're going to start straight back home."

The Servants were the sort of party who were not very strong individually, but whose strengths were multiplied immensely by their coordination. They were the sort of party Reina wished for the Crimson Vow to be as well. And so, they had likely set out so that they could take their time integrating their newcomer, Leatoria, into the group without Baron Aura's interference.

So kind of like a training camp for inducting new employees?

Per Mile's thinking, the trip probably was for the sake of strengthening relations between the members, doing some basic training for their newbie, and integrating Leatoria into the party more swiftly. They would never get any peace back in their hometown, where Leatoria would be expected to stop in at home all the time.

"I'm sorry to cause you all so much trouble," said Leatoria apologetically,

bowing her head.

“Not at all!” said Telyusia. “You can fire attack spells from the back line or protect Lacelina with your war club, which leaves her free to focus on support spells—and without having to worry about protecting Lacelina or surprise monster attacks from behind, Tasha can move more freely. It’s a huge tactical advantage. That’s a really big deal for this party!”

Previously, Tasha had her hands full, between providing ranged fire with her bow, defending against surprise attacks from the rear and flanks with her short sword, and protecting Lacelina, the mage. There was great merit in giving her more leeway in her movements.

Furthermore, there was the added bonus of letting Lacelina focus on support spells, which were her specialty, as well as obtaining someone who could use both attack spells and a bludgeoning weapon. The extent to which this raised the Servants’ battle ability was incalculable.

Additionally, the bludgeoning weapon that Leatoria wielded was not a staff, like Reina’s or Pauline’s, but a war club. It could deliver powerful crushing, pulverizing, and sweeping blows, effective against both those enemies with hides so thick blades do not pass through, and those that were resistant to magic.

Telyusia likely had never dreamed that they could raise their potential so much simply by adding a single member.

“So, we have nothing but gratitude for you all for introducing Leatoria to us,” said Telyusia to the members of the Crimson Vow, her words deeply sincere. Leatoria smiled sweetly and bashfully as Tasha patted her on the shoulder.

Leatoria already seemed to be quite taken with the party, no longer interested in tagging along with the Crimson Vow.

Would she have had such a carefree smile now, if she had joined up with the Crimson Vow?

Thank goodness… thought the members of the Vow, utterly relieved to know that entrusting her to the Servants instead of themselves had not been a lapse in judgment.

“Oy! You know those girls?” someone called out to the Crimson Vow. It was the guild master.

Apparently, he had made a rare trip down from his office.

It seemed a little rude to already be referring to a C-rank party who had come from another country as, “those girls,” but no one was about to go complaining about a guild master. This was probably just how he was.

“Ah, yes, they helped us out quite a bit when we were visiting their home city.”

There was no need to go into the details, particularly without the other party’s consent, so Mavis offered only a minimal explanation.

Reina, however, couldn’t help but add, “They saved my life.”

“Whaaaaaaaaat?!?!”

A cry echoed throughout the guild.

Wait! Someone had saved the life of a member of the *Crimson Vow*?!

The members of the Crimson Vow were so skillful that they could secure not only their own safety but rescue other parties in the midst of life-threatening circumstances.

What kind of monsters are these girls? thought the hunters and guild staff, looking at the Servants in stunned silence.

At Reina’s words, Telyusia smiled lightly and waved.

“I suppose that did happen. But it’s the duty of a senior hunter to protect someone more inexperienced, isn’t it? We would never forgive ourselves if a party of our juniors were hurt while traveling with us.”

No matter how highly the Crimson Vow were regarded, as far as the Servants of the Goddess were concerned, they were nothing more than a party of junior, rookie hunters. As a result, the members of the Crimson Vow were individuals who needed protecting—possessed of strength and firepower that far outranked the Servants, but falling far behind them in knowledge and experience. In fact, there were a great number of ways in which the Crimson Vow could not hold a candle to the Servants, who had clawed their way up from an F-rank by their own strength and efforts, so this was not at all a self-aggrandizing conclusion for them to have come to.

If they were to fight each other in earnest, the Crimson Vow might win, but that was irrelevant. The Servants were the senior party, so it was their duty to guard and teach the Vow. By this thinking, the Servants regarded themselves highly—er, looked down on…or put on airs—at any rate, they gave off the air of considering themselves above the Crimson Vow.

And meanwhile, Reina, who everyone was already aware hated that sort of thing, for some reason did not seem unhappy about this at all, looking pleased even, and in fact regarding them with respect.

No way, thought the crowd.

Right here, in this very moment, in the capital guild branch of the kingdom of Tils, a legend was being birthed about the supremacy of the Servants of the Goddess—though they were totally unaware of this.

As a result, there was now no one here who would attempt to meddle with the Servants unnecessarily. Everyone valued their own lives too much.

“Why do we have one outrageous party coming to this town after another? And they’re all relatively beautiful girls… I mean, I’m glad! This is great! But still!! Damn it, will someone put the moves on them already and get them to settle down here?!”

The guild master appeared to be mumbling something under his breath. Thankfully, neither party overheard him. Or rather, with Mile’s heightened senses, it was likely she heard him, but she had the compassion to let the man’s grousing go in one ear and out the other, so he was safe.

“Anyway, this time you are all guests in our hometown! Dinner’s on us!” Mile declared. She did not bother to discuss it with the others, but even Pauline seemed to have no objections.

They were a party they had worked alongside before, if only temporarily, as well as a senior party of all women, on top of which they had used their own bodies as a shield to protect Reina. Even a miser like Pauline was not so shameless as to try to scrimp on a few half-gold here.

Of course, because it was Telyusia who had taken the blow from that knife, it was a wound that was easily healed, not the sort of fatal blow that would mean instant death, but had it struck Reina, given her height, physique, and stance, it might have hit her in the head or neck or heart, some vital area that would have brought her very close to instant death if struck. Thus, there was no doubting that Telyusia had literally saved her life.

“All right, so let’s hurry up and find a place, and—”

“No no no no no!”

The other three halted Reina as she cheerfully moved to set out.

“It’s still morning, and the Servants just got here! First they need to gather information and then take a rest! We can have the welcoming party this evening. This *evening*!” Mile explained.

“Ah…”

This seemed to bring Reina back to her senses. No matter how smitten she was with Telyusia, her savior, being so eager was a bit out of line. She knew that her heart was only aflutter because she had met the first person on whom she could really rely since the passing of her father and the Crimson Lightning.

However, the Servants of the Goddess would soon be heading back home. The other three could only watch tepidly over Reina and let her do as she pleased for these next few days.

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“Icicle Javelin!”

“Icicle Arrow!”

“Icicle Bolt!”

“Icicle Dart!”

Unable to use her fire magic in the forest out of consideration for the damage it might cause, Reina fired one ice spell after another, striking her prey.

She was perhaps a little *too* fired up.

“Reina, that’s enough…”

“You’re getting worked up here…”

“I mean, not that we don’t understand why, but…”

The other three looked on wearily.

The ferocious display from Reina made it seem as though she was so looking forward to the welcoming party that she thought that killing prey faster would make the night come faster as well.

Finally, it was the evening. The party began, and Reina, who had been so gung-ho she had gone so far as to select a restaurant ahead of time and meet with the chef, clammed up the moment everyone was gathered.

What an odd duck…

The other three could only shrug. It could not be helped. She was still a young girl, after all.

Even so, she seemed in high spirits.

Once the welcoming party had finished, Reina, who had looked quite pleased despite having little to say, suddenly made an unthinkable proposal.

“Miss Telyusia, would you have a battle with us?”

“Huh?”

Telyusia, and the rest of the Servants, appeared a bit surprised at this question.

Mavis double-checked to make sure that Reina had not been imbibing any strong spirits, while Pauline pressed a hand to her forehead to confirm she did

not have a fever, and Mile suddenly looked a bit excited, like something fun was about to happen.

“Reina, are you being serious?”

“Yes! I think our party is still lacking in tactical ability, in coordination. We usually rely on the fact that each of us has a lot of individual skill in battle… So, our party’s power is additive. By comparison, the Servants’ battle style amplifies your power more dramatically. When you put your strengths together, it’s not like adding but multiplying. I want the Crimson Vow to be that sort of party, too.”

Reina’s cheeks reddened slightly, but she did not appear intoxicated. Furthermore, what she was saying made perfect sense. Everyone understood her meaning.

Telyusia went quiet, deep in thought. Perhaps because the others typically left this sort of decision to their party leader, they said nothing, only awaiting her response. As for the Crimson Vow…

“Um, I’m the party leader,” Mavis muttered, forlorn.

“Very well. I accept your proposal!” Telyusia finally replied, cheerfully. The other members looked excited as well.

There were no objections from the Crimson Vow, even the gloomy Mavis. What Reina was saying made plenty of sense to all of them, and the whole party was more or less intrigued by the proposition.

What Mavis was distressed about was something else entirely: the fact that this sort of proposal was supposed to be left to her, the party leader.

At any rate, no one else really minded.

“But if we fight like this, it’s going to be 6 versus 4. It’s doubly bad if the ones with greater numbers are us, the senior party. Maybe if it were the other way around…”

Naturally, that was a hard circumstance for a senior party to swallow.

“So, why don’t we make it 5 on 5? We’ll switch up the teams a little bit also to make the job balance better. It’s hard to compare our parties in terms of

general power, so this should be good practice for us all, don't you think?"

"Agreed!" Reina immediately replied.

The other three members of the Crimson Vow looked on wearily.

Well, I guess that's all right…

It's a fair suggestion.

Though Reina went along with it without even thinking just because it was Telyusia who suggested it…

Telyusia then continued: "In that case, we'll form teams—"

"I'll be on your team, Miss Telyusia!" Reina piped up immediately.

Reina's gonna be on their side?!?!

The eyes of the other members of the Crimson Vow narrowed. They had assumed Reina had hoped to learn something by fighting *against* the Servants.

She just wanted to fight alongside Telyusia!!!

Taking a number of factors into consideration, the teams were split up as follows:

The (Mostly) Crimson Vow Team

Mavis (Sword)

Philly (Spear)

Tasha (Bow / Short Sword)

Pauline (Magic)

Mile (Sword / Magic)

The (Mostly) Servants of the Goddess Team

Telyusia (Sword)

Willine (Sword)

Lacelina (Magic)

Reina (Magic)

Leatoria (War Club / Magic)

If Tasha took on primarily a rearguard duty with her bow, and one ignored the position of midguard, splitting only into vanguard and rear, then it worked out to a nice balance of each team with two vanguard, two rearguard, and one versatile fighter.

Naturally, it was the party leaders, Telyusia and Mavis, directing each team. In reality, it was Reina who took the lead fairly often in battle for the Crimson Vow, but there was nothing to be done about that.

There were in fact many times when Mile took the lead as well, but that was chiefly against non-sapient targets. For this bout they planned on having her as nothing more than Mavis's assistant. Pauline often had some strong proposals when it came to battle planning as well, but she was clearly unsuited to split-second decisions and direction in the heat of battle. And, naturally, direction could not be left to Philly or Telyusia, who were not familiar with the Vow's battle style.

The Goddess team was of course under Telyusia's direction. Philly was the second in command and so was usually in charge of assisting Telyusia and taking over when Telyusia was down, but for now she was on the enemy side, so Willine took up the role.

"Okay, so we will use wooden swords and a pole with a cloth on the end in place of a spear of the same length. The arrows will have their heads removed and replaced with cloths of the same weight. Hold back the power in your magical attacks so that even if you hit, they will only blow your opponent back and not hurt anyone. Staves are fine as they are, and as for the war club…I guess we'll just wrap that. It would be bad to swing around something wooden in the same way you would a weapon that weight, and the sensation of it is sure

to throw you off anyway.

“You can use the strongest defensive spells you like—even ones that will ward off attack spells entirely. Of course, we’ll be holding back with attacks, so it’s unlikely that they would get through anyway,” Telyusia summarized, after some discussion.

This ruling was a bit inconvenient for Mile, who specialized in busting through enemy defenses with her overwhelming power, but there were few who could use such defensive arts in the first place, and this was not the sort of battle where she would win simply by bulldozing her opponents with brute force. As such, neither Mile nor the other members of the Crimson Vow had any objections.

“The match will take place tomorrow, at the second afternoon bell. We will use the foothills of the rocky mountains, southwest of the capital. No spectators. Sound good?” said Telyusia.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Naturally, the battlefield had been chosen so that fire magic and whatever other kind of attacks they wanted could be used without causing a natural disaster, or making trouble for anyone. The lack of spectators would of course allow them to use any aces up their sleeves, secret spells, killer techniques, or other hidden tricks without worry.

As for the timing, there was one important factor: Once the battle was through, they would all use Mile’s “portable bathhouse” to wash off the sweat, before enjoying a nice dinner under the stars. Then, they would all have a sleepover in the tent. It was to be a real girls’ night.

Mile, meanwhile, was mildly nonplussed as Reina gave a detailed order of all of the ingredients she would like to have prepared…

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“Is everyone ready?” Telyusia asked one last time, though of course they had all finished their preparations in the capital before walking out together, so she already knew the answer.

Naturally, it had been behind a building near the city gates that they

prepared, not in the middle of the guildhall or anything. Doing that would have been as good as ensuring that some idiots would take interest and come tailing after them.

Of course, Mile would have immediately detected any such idiots with her search magic, but it was best to take precautions anyway, since it would have been a pain to deal with trespassers.

The Crimson Vow's team all nodded, and the battle was ready to begin.

They did not start immediately, waiting for both sides to take some distance, so they might race to be the first into the fray.

The conditions of victory were to land attacks to all members of the opposing team, such that, were this a real battle, they would be judged no longer able to fight and would be forced to retreat from the line of battle. Alternatively, the enemy leader might declare that the battle was over.

Once there was a fair enough distance between them, Telyusia gave the signal, and they began.

"Fireworks Launcher!"

It was only natural to start with a long-range attack. The first attack was a fire spell from an abnormally fired up Reina. As the name suggested, it was an area attack, a great number of sparks raining down like fireworks.

"Barrier!"

There was no need for Mile to go out of the way to use her lattice power barrier; this was a simple area spell, so it was simply guarded against. Such diffused magic could not get past a defensive wall.

At any rate, the fireworks spell was one Mile had taught Reina in the first place. There was no way that she would not be aware of its power and characteristics. It was a big mistake on Reina's part to forget something so fundamental when choosing magic to elicit an intended effect.

She must have been flustered, trying to impress Telyusia…

Reina, a natural artillery battery, then began incanting her next spell inside her head. As she was not voicing the incantation, this was what would most typically be referred to as silent casting. However, unlike the methods that Mile taught to the Wonder Trio, this method was not truly without an incantation, so there was still some time required before the next spell could be fired off. It was in this gap that Mile fired her attack.

"Ice Spear!"

The tip of the spear was round and blunted, and so would not actually cause any injury upon a hit, but it was an attack with enough certain force to drive someone from the battlefield. It was aimed straight for Reina, the source of the other side's long-range magic. And as she was currently in the middle of incanting an attack spell, she would not have time to deploy any defensive spells.

Furthermore, while Reina could deflect physical projectiles with the barrier she had learned from Mile, Lacelina and Leatoria could only shield against incoming magic. Even deflecting physical projectiles relied on the nanomachines' homing capabilities.

However…

"Ha-humph!"

Somehow, Leatoria bashed the ice spear away with her war club. At the same time, she fired off an attack spell.

"Ice Arrow!"

To get someone off of the battlefield, an arrow was plenty. Furthermore, an arrow was simpler than a spear, so many more could be fired. Leatoria fired off six arrows, all aimed at Mavis.

Leatoria, a magical war club wielder, was most suited to deal with Mile, the magic knight, so if the now-enemy Tasha were to switch from her favored bow to her short sword, that would be a sign that the vanguard was at a disadvantage, and it was the perfect time to crush them.

Plus, an arrow was faster than a spear. If she could knock Mavis out before the vanguards collided, the enemy would lose both their primary vanguard and

their control center all in one hit.

Pauline, with her support magic, might be able to defend them, but that would still mean wasting one of her spells. They would still have Lacelina in reserve, and Reina could use that time to prepare another spell to fire right after.

To space out the magical attacks, rather than having all three fire at once at the start of battle, was not for the sake of showing off. A synchronized firing of spells meant that their attacks could be guarded against at the same time and might leave all the mages defenseless and unable to use their next attack or defensive spell right away. The rearguard could be wiped out all at once from an enemy's magical attack.

Just when Leatoria's ice arrows (with blunted tips) should have struck Mavis…

"Anti-Magic Blade!"

The six arrows were struck down in an instant.

Mavis's anti-magic blade was intended to fend off magical projectiles, but there was no reason she could not simply knock away the ice arrows, which were made out of solid ice, with the body of the sword. Furthermore, even while she was not using her micros, she could still utilize her True Godspeed Blade. This was not a cheat, or doping, via the medicine she had received but a skill built up by strengthening her own muscles and honing her "spiritual" powers. As such, there was no shame in using it. Naturally, one other such art fell into this category as well.

"Wind Edge!"

"Huh?"

Mavis, the vanguard swordswoman, who was not supposed to be a magic user, fired off a wind spell. Its target was—

"Lacelina!!" Leatoria called, panicked.

This did not mean that it was Lacelina she was aiming at. In fact, Mavis's target was the vanguard, who were tasked with plunging in while the rearguard mages were dealing with magical attacks from the other side. Specifically, her

target was the central vanguard and team leader, Telyusia. She was aiming at the person in the same position as her, for the same reason Leatoria had aimed her attack at Mavis. There was nothing at all strange about this.

So, naturally, the reason Leatoria had called out to Lacelina to warn her was so that she could protect Telyusia with the magic she had in reserve.

However…

“I-Ice Arrow!”

What Lacelina had been preparing was an attack—one which a blade of wind was not suited to fending off.

In order to fire off her Wind Edge, Mavis required her favored sword as a conduit. Or so Reina had assumed, not realizing that Mavis’s new left arm had also been styled specially as a conduit for her magic. Thus, Reina had never predicted that Mavis would have been able to use her Wind Edge in a battle with wooden blades.

Furthermore, a magical shield was useless against a wind-type spell, which, whether it was magic or “spirit” or whatever, was different in property from a mass of magic. Air was an element that already existed, after all. While attack magic could be guarded against, air, which was gaseous, would still mostly push its way through.

In other words, whether Lacelina had used an attack or defense spell, the Wind Edge attack would have bypassed it.

And so…

“Guh! Barrier!”

Reina had no choice but to use the barrier spell that Mile had taught her, one that could be erected as a wall and would fend against physical projectiles. Though she should have been focusing on magical attacks as the team’s battery unit, her gambit of switching to a defense spell based on her intuition was a success. Still…

Ugh! Both my magic and Lacelina’s have been wasted on a surprise long-

range attack from Mavis!

Their magical rhythm was ruined. This was a grave difficulty in a magical battle with no time to rest.

While the respective rearguards wreaked havoc on one another, the vanguards finally collided.

“True Godspeed Blade!”

Mavis swung her blade, announcing the name of her attack, while Telyusia silently struck back, not having the excess energy for such a pointless thing as declaring her spell’s title. Then, she bashed away a spear, which had come flying toward her from behind Mavis, while at the same time Willine leapt out.

“Guh!”

Mavis struck back at Telyusia’s blade as she forcefully tried to correct her stance, knocked out of place by the sudden gust of wind from beside her. It should have been Lacelina’s job to assist with a quickly cast wind spell, the fastest and most familiar thing for her to cast.

With her own spell, Reina attempted to put an end to this, and…

Shunk!

“Ugh!”

She took an arrow to the chest. A headless arrow, its tip wrapped in cloth.

It had been fired by Tasha’s bow.

She had been distracted perhaps, her focus consumed by choosing the most effective target for her next attack and selecting the right spell, finishing the incantation more quickly in order to make up for her and Lacelina’s wasted magic. For Reina, this was a fatal mistake.

“N-no way…”

Regret it all she wanted, it was too late.

Perhaps it was because she was flustered. Or because she had underestimated Mavis. Or because her mind was on protecting Telyusia, and she lost her cool. Or perhaps, it was because she had forgotten to pay enough

attention to Tasha, who besides being capable of melee combat with her short sword, could also attack with her bow, which had a far greater range than any spell.

The fact that what Reina had been struck with was a cloth-wrapped arrow, and not one with a head, was probably a good hint to her about how to protect her own life in the future.

Regardless, for now she would have to retreat. She was out of the battle.

Straight away she had failed, without taking out any member of the enemy team. In front of Telyusia, no less. Yet no matter how deep her depression, the competition went on.

There was no time to worry over people who had already been "sent to the morgue." Her fellow teammates continued battling, completely ignoring the fact that Reina was now out. This made sense; a corpse could not fight nor would she be permitted to advise her allies. There was no reason to waste a single bit of brain power on compassion for a corpse (read: Reina).

It was now 5 versus 4—Mavis versus Telyusia and Philly versus Willine, with Tasha, Mile, and Pauline against Leatoria and Lacelina.

Telyusia's side was at an overwhelming disadvantage. The loss of Reina was more or less a fatal blow. At the very least, if she had brought along Pauline, they might have been able to preserve a better balance, but that was currently beside the point.

Furthermore, Lacelina was not the type who excelled at attacking magically. Rather, she was more comfortable supporting the vanguard from behind—shifting the equilibrium of the vanguard's efforts just a little with her scant magical power. That was how she should have been fighting, but given that the enemy side had more mages, she had to rise to meet them and was not able to take advantage of her own strengths.

If Lacelina were fully free to act, there were a number of things she could have done, such as tripping up Mavis or deflecting the spear that Philly threw with wind so that Willine could move in. However, even if Leatoria was dealing

with Mile, the enemy side still had Tasha and Pauline.

Things were going swiftly downhill.

"*Graaaah!!*"

Just then, Leatoria went in swinging. It seemed she would be able to push right through from there, but instead she forced her way into the battle of the vanguards.

Unlike a battle of magic, a melee battle could be decided in a second. Thus, it was fine for her, with her varied skillset, to incant a spell while swinging her war club. By firing a spell along with the swing of her club, would she single-handedly finish this? Or else, would she coordinate with Telyusia or Willine to take down one of the vanguard fighters, striking down another with her magic and defeating them all in one fell swoop? Perhaps she would strike at the rearguard with her magic instead?

What they saw now was not the Leatoria of before, who had thought of her club as nothing more than a means of self-defense—a backline mage through and through. She was now a pro hunter, using every last ounce of her strength to protect her allies.

"Take that!"

"Gwah!"

Philly, the lancer, was by no means weak, but she was not nearly powerful enough to fend off a simultaneous attack from Willine's sword and Leatoria's club. Though she knew Leatoria's attack was coming, she had to give her all to staving off Willine's blow, and there was nothing she could do about it. She was blown away.

Besides wrapping her club in several layers of cloth, Leatoria was also holding back, so, though in this case Philly was blown back without much actual damage, were this a real battle, she would have suffered several broken ribs at least. Moreover, Leatoria would have likely been swinging downward from atop her head, so naturally, that was it for Philly's participation in battle. She was off to the morgue.

Without stopping to rest, Leatoria turned to swing her club at Mavis, when—

Kchack!

Mile came rushing in at full pelt and stopped the blow. She had caught it before the club had picked up much speed, so she was able to avoid cracking her wooden sword.

Normally, Mile would have shouted something like, “Oh no you don’t!” but she had no such leeway right now. She actually seemed mildly flustered, believing it was her fault that Philly had been lost, because she had acted a moment too slowly in dealing with Leatoria as she switched from a magic to a melee attack. Dealing with Leatoria should have been Mile’s responsibility.

Willine, who then was left without a target, turned on Mavis, who was battling with Telyusia, but Tasha, who had switched back from her bow to her short sword, moved in to intervene, halting her.

Normally, this was the place where Lacelina would jump in with a support spell, but she was currently holding a defense spell in preparation for any magical attack that might come in from Pauline and could not move. In this match, she had been hardly any help to her friends, not taking part in her usual battle style at all.

Pauline, on the other hand, held back on using her hot magic, both because she realized it was too dirty for such a fight and because she would rather keep it concealed—a huge show of self-restraint on her part. Apparently, the people she had previously used it on were ones she could not hold back on, and she was trying to become a bit more flexible in that regard.

“Fireball!”

Leatoria unleashed the spell she had been holding at point blank, aimed at the person was obviously her most suitable enemy: Mile.

Mile, naturally, should have been holding a similar spell, so Leatoria could not allow her to use it. Plus, getting Mile out of the fray would be a huge boon.

However, Mile had been expecting this and defended herself with a barrier.

What she had been preparing was a defensive spell, so that no matter who Leatoria aimed her attack at, they would be fine. Given their close distance, she seemed to have deemed that her sword would be plenty for attacking. However, Leatoria was equally aware of this—or more so. Forcing Mile to use up her spell had merely been for the sake of removing an uncertain element from the mix.

We've won! Leatoria was confident.

There was no way Telyusia, their dependable party leader, could lose to some greenhorn who had only been a hunter for a little over a year. And Philly, who was mainly an archer, and wielded a sword more akin to a dagger, inferior in reach, was no match for Willine, who specialized in a proper short sword.

Besides, handling Pauline, the healing magic specialist, should have been an easy job for Lacelina, who could do just about anything. If Leatoria could just hold off Mile, once the rest of them had finished off their respective opponents, they could join in to help her, and with many against one, the battle would be over.

Of this all, Leatoria was certain. However…

While Mavis was not one to let things slip, she was facing Telyusia now with her own strength, not relying on her "spirit" power. No matter how many more years of experience Telyusia had, Mavis had been trained from her youth by her father and brothers, all first-rate swordsmen. She had more than enough power to fight back against a young C-rank hunter.

On the whole, fighting against Telyusia, who had come up with a number of techniques to deal with the fact that female swordsmen did not always have the raw power of their male counterparts, was good practice for Mavis, who thus far had only received instruction from her family and Mile, all of whom were absurdly powerful, along with Ladimarl, who was more or less the same.

Tasha, meanwhile, specialized in a weapon with shorter reach, but as both an archer and short sword wielder, she had spent her time providing backup for the three members of the vanguard, and so she was well aware of the quirks of all their fighting styles. If she were not, there would be a danger of friendly fire, and she would never be able to judge when it was time to switch from her bow

to her blade in the midst of a melee. Thus, she put up a far stronger fight than Leatoria assumed she would.

Lacelina was meanwhile fully absorbed in fending off Pauline and could not provide any support spells for her allies. Not knowing when Pauline might fire off an attack spell, she could not afford to release the hold on her defensive spell. If a spell were to come flying at the vanguard now, and she were not there to defend against it, they would almost certainly be destroyed. Even if she were to fire a spell at Pauline right after Pauline released hers, this would not be certain to take her down. And if she did not put up a defensive barrier in time, attack spells were not something that could be avoided… She couldn't very well just duck behind a rock.

At any rate, Leatoria continued her assault on Mile, still certain that fate was on their side. Leatoria felt Mile to be the greatest threat, and felt that, as a fellow user of both melee weapons and magic, it was her duty to be the one to deal with her. Thus, she was dead set on fighting against her. However…

She was now in the midst of a melee skirmish, at far too close a range to incant any spell. All her hopes now rest on her war club.

"Rrraaaaaaah!!!"

As Leatoria swung down her club with all her might, Mile effortlessly caught the blow with her sword.

No matter how strong Leatoria's muscular strength, if she was up against Mile…

Snap.

"Huh?"

Ka-boom!

"Whaaaaat?!"

Mile went flying backward.

Indeed, a sword was a sword, but what Mile currently used was a wooden sword, meant for sparring. It was not her usual, favored blade. Meanwhile, though it was safely wrapped in layers of cloth, what Leatoria was using was her usual club. It was more than strong enough to break through a wooden sword.

In a real battle, Mile's mysterious sword would have been enough to stop it. And of course, even if she was blown away with a single strike, Mile was still Mile, so that was no big deal for her. Just as it had not been in the battles with the rock lizard and elder dragons.

However, there was no point in arguing that right now.

She had left the line of battle. It would be impossible to judge this any other way, as far as the Servants of the Goddess were concerned.

"N-no waaay…" Mile muttered in shock, sitting on the ground in the spot she had been flung to. There was nothing more she could do at this point.

The tides of battle turned in an instant.

Tasha used an opening to fell Willine, and Pauline, shaken by the wild turn that was Mile's defeat, let the spell she'd been holding fly toward Leatoria. However, it was deflected by Lacelina, who at the same time released her defensive spell. In that moment, in the opening left by Willine's defeat, Leatoria's club—still handled with less than her usual power—landed a "killing" blow on Tasha.

Pauline, Lacelina, and the now-free Leatoria all began preparing their next

spells, but Pauline, who not only had started first, but was the quickest with incantations, was the first to fire.

“Fireball!”

“Fireball!”

“Fireball!”

Three decently weakened fireballs flew out one after the other.

Whoever struck first would be the victor. It was only natural that they would all choose the same spell, the one that was the quickest to cast but had the most decisive killing power.

It was then that…

“Aah!”

“Eek!”

Leatoria took Pauline’s fireball, and while Pauline had avoided Lacelina’s, she took Leatoria’s.

Obviously, Pauline did not have the time to strike back at both of them, so Lacelina was left unscathed.

And, meanwhile…

“Guh!!”

There were grunts from two sides as Mavis and Telyusia took simultaneous blows from one another.

Currently, the only one left standing on the battlefield, fully unharmed, was…

“J-just me…?”

Indeed, the mediocre mage, Lacelina, was the final survivor…

***

“Well fought, everyone!” Mile announced, raising her glass for a toast.

“Sure was!!!” the ten members of the combined parties crowed, emptying their mugs in unison.

Naturally, the four members of the Crimson Vow and the underage members of the Servants—Lacelina and Leatoria—were imbibing juice instead of liquor… Well, not all that "naturally," since the fact was that there was no prohibition against underage drinking in this country. Still, the Crimson Vow rarely drank outside of special occasions, and Lacelina and Leatoria simply were not the drinking sort, besides a bit of wine at formal dinners.

They had already had a leisurely refresh in the "portable baths" Mile had produced from her inventory, the tent for the sleepover was already pitched (or rather, pulled fully pitched from the inventory) and the portable toilet (made of stone, with perfect defenses, and also pulled from the inventory as is) was already in place.

Most of the food had been cooked beforehand as well, and stored away by Mile. Only the roast had been grilled over the fire, so that they could enjoy it fresh.

Once everyone was fairly stuffed, a retrospective on the day's battle began.

The battle had not been a mock fight for the sake of determining who was superior between the Vow and the Servants, but more of a friendly spar, or something to that effect—a learning match to study one another. So the results did not truly matter.

"I didn't get to fight like myself at all today," said Lacelina, her head hung, though she had been the last woman standing. It sounded nice to say that she was the last, but the fact of the matter was that she was not a high-priority target and had merely avoided being struck until the end. Naturally, even she was well aware of this. "I can't use powerful attack spells, so I just support the vanguard with the little bit of magic I have. I'm only good at tipping the scales just a smidge, when the battle is fairly balanced—but when the other side has mages, too, and it turns into a ranged battle, I'm no use at all. And when it comes to a battle of magic, I'm just not strong enough… Up until now, we've hardly ever fought any opponents who had proper mages among them…"

Indeed, if one was a proper mage, there were plenty of professions open to you: hunter, personal bodyguard to a noble or merchant, special army unit, and

so forth. Even living amongst the common folk, between gathering water, sparking fires, and healing, you were sure to never miss a meal.

Thus, bandits hardly ever had mages amongst them, and even if they did, they would typically be those dolts who couldn't cut the mustard as a proper mage or those who could achieve little more than the equivalent of household chores.

Plus, little time had passed since the Servants of the Goddess rose to C-rank, so they had not taken many escort jobs, and even taking such a job did not ensure a particularly high likelihood of actually fighting against bandits.

As such, the Servants had practically no experience fighting against an enemy that had proper mages among them.

Of course, the others had realized this weakness of theirs as well. Thus, they had leapt at the chance to include Leatoria amongst their number. They had thought that this eliminated the underlying issue, but today's battle had proven to them otherwise.

In today's battle, they had faced off against two accomplished mages, as well as one "spirit" power wielder.

They had had three mages on their side as well, but once they lost Reina, the most powerful among them, they had no room to ignore the opposing magical side and assist their vanguard allies.

However, the Servants of the Goddess already had six members. Adding any more than that would start to cause problems, and with another mage, that would make for three on the vanguard, one versatile fighter (Tasha), and three mages on rear. It would be horribly imbalanced…

Besides, it was not easy to scout out female mages in the first place.

"Lacelina, we're just going to have to raise your firepower or teach you to fight melee as well," said Telyusia.

"Guh…"

This was the only logical conclusion. However, it still hurt for Lacelina to hear it. Indeed, if that were such a simple matter, they would have already done so.

"Well, that will be something to focus on from now on, anyway. Now that we

have Leatoria, it's fine if we only have one mage, and chances are low that an enemy side will ever have more than two. Still, Lacelina, if you're aiming to rise higher than C-rank, you can't just remain as you are now. And you can't start slacking, assuming that Leatoria will always be there."

Indeed, Leatoria was still the daughter of a noble household. It was unlikely she would be permitted to live the life of an unmarried hunter forever.

"Ngh…"

Lacelina was in despair. However, things were what they were. The whole point of this match had been to bring such weaknesses to light so that they could be made aware of them.

Speaking of depressed mages, there was one other such magic user present.

"Don't worry so much, Reina! In every battle *someone* has to be the first to fall. It just so happened that it was you this time. It's great that it didn't happen during a real battle, right?" Mile asked, attempting to comfort her, but there was no response.

Apparently, she was too busy dealing with the fact of her immense embarrassment right in front of Telyusia, at having been eliminated from the fray immediately, without taking out a single enemy or really being of much use at all. The other members of the Vow tried to cheer her up, reminding her of how her first area attack had slowed their movements and recalling that she had protected Telyusia with a barrier spell, but she still seemed certain that she had accomplished nothing—except letting Telyusia down.

Leatoria, meanwhile, appeared elated. She had assumed Mile to be immensely powerful, and yet Leatoria had easily defeated her. Well, as easily as one could hope.

"Hey, what's with all these dishes?"

"This is ridiculously good!"

"Chomp! Gromnomnomnom!"

Come to think of it, this was the first time that the Servants had seen Mile's

“storage” in action or experienced her cooking. Yet when she’d brought out the tent and the baths and such earlier, they had accepted it without question. Perhaps they had a very deep respect for the customary discretion of hunters…

However, even the Servants’ discretion was no match for the allure of food.

“M-Mile, are you sure you wouldn’t like to joi—” Telyusia unconsciously began, before Philly and Willine frantically covered her mouth, interrupting.

To try and poach someone away from another party right in front of their fellow party members was an egregious violation of etiquette. To put into perspective just how rude it was, it would be no surprise if things were to come to blows in response.

Indeed, knowing that there was no way that Mile could have mistaken those words, Reina glared at Mile jealously.

She simply could not bear the fact that Telyusia had extended an invitation to *Mile* and not to her. Never mind the fact that she most certainly would have refused, even if the invitation had come her way.

Reina truly was a difficult person…

When the slumber party began in the tent, Reina made certain to station herself next to Telyusia. She was wrapped up in a discussion of swordsmanship with Mavis, against whom she’d had a splendid fight, and Reina could not get a word in edgewise, but she still seemed happy just to see Telyusia’s face.

Sh-she’s really into her… thought Mile and Pauline, taken aback at just how truly smitten their party member was.

***

“They’re really gone…”

One week was over in the blink of an eye.

“When we told him we were going away on a training journey, Baron Aura said, ‘That’s not what you said before!’ and flew into a tizzy, so we really need to hurry back,” Telyusia explained, and so the Servants headed home after just one week’s stay.

Strangely, Reina was either not especially bothered by this—or at least she did not seem too concerned. Even if they had to part, she knew they were doing well. That seemed to be enough for her.

As long as they were both alive, they would meet again someday. So long as neither one perished.

That was how it felt to Reina.

After that one week, which was in essence another week's extension to their one-week holiday, the Crimson Vow decided to make a proper return to normal work. Yet, just as though he were waiting for this very opportunity—and in fact, he probably truly was—the guild master summoned them.

"I'd like to make a special request of the Crimson Vow. The job would be to guard a small merchant caravan, and the destination is…the Albarn Empire."

The Albarn Empire.

The same nation that had sent out that platoon in order to disrupt the trade routes.

The same nation that had tried to invade Mile's, or rather, Adele's home country of Brandel.

Of course, even that nation likely still did trade with other countries—both in an official and commercial capacity. So, there was nothing at all bizarre about this request in and of itself, and nothing strange about a merchant needing protection from bandits and monsters.

However, there was clearly something strange about the fact that the guild master himself had called them to his office to make this direct petition, and moreover that he had called it a "special request."

This was not a normal job.

That much was clear to the Crimson Vow…

Side Story:
Do Your Best, Miss Mariette!

The entrance exam for the August Academy was finally here!

I was feeling pretty confident thanks to Miss Mile's tutoring, but this wasn't just any old exam—this was the scholarship exam. The bar was way higher. As Miami Satodele put it in one of her novels, it was "a great, high, wall of power."

Ugh! What happens if I don't pass?

Not only would I not live up to Father's expectations, but the payment for Miss Mile hinged on my success; she had done all the work of teaching me for free. Not passing after that would be unforgivable…

I thought the essay portion of the exam should be relatively simple, and, well, even the math part would be super easy, thanks to the methods she taught me. But no matter how easy those parts were, most people got pretty close to full marks, so whether I passed or failed would come down to the practical exam. The written portion was really just there to weed out the totally hopeless students.

"Up next, number 183!"

Oh, they just called my number!

I better hurry…

"I am applicant number 183, Mariette. Thank you for having me!"

I bowed my head to the test proctor and announced my name and number, after which I received my instructions.

"Now, please face that target and fire your preferred type of magic. If your specialty is healing or support magic, there will be a separate exam for those afterward, so you are welcome to abstain."

I had not been too good with attack spells before, but now, thanks to Miss Mile, I'm pretty decent.

“That will be fine. Here I go…” I said, turning to the target—a wooden humanoid figure clad in scrap armor about ten meters ahead of me—and firing off a spell.

“Fire Lance!”

Kabooom!

All right, I hit the target!

I wonder if that’ll give me enough points to pass…

“Wha…? Silent casting?! And three bursts at once?! She completely blew away the target…”

“What?! How?!”

“That sound just now—”

There seemed to be a sudden gathering of teachers from the school. The test proctor was speaking with them. Would I still be able to take the next exam? I did what they told me to, so I should at least be graded, right? Could I go on to the next task?

“I am applicant number 183, Mariette. Thank you for having me!”

“Yes, now, we would like to see some things other than combat magic. What other kinds of magic can you use?”

“Well, I’m good with healing magic, defensive magic, and fire, water, earth, and wind-based spells, equally.”

“Huh?”

“I’m about the same with all of them.”

“Huh?!”

They seemed rather surprised by this, but according to what Miss Mile taught me, all magic has fundamentally the same properties, so the level of difficulty doesn’t change between the different types. Though perhaps that’s simply because Miss Mile put in a word with the followers of the Goddess on my behalf…

I glanced back behind the proctor to see a cage with four jackalopes. They were all bound, with twigs in their mouths, their horns broken off… This was the testing ground for healing and support magic, so I guessed we were supposed to use those jackalopes to show off our skills. It would be bad if something happened to go wrong with a human subject, after all. This was probably a natural consideration though, according to Miss Mile, even healing magic, or the sort of spells you use for daily chores, *could* be used to murder people.

In order for me to show off my healing magic, those poor, defenseless creatures had to be hurt first… That was rather…

I would not hesitate to fell a monster that was attacking me, but capturing and then toying with a helpless creature simply did not sit well with me. Especially a soft and fluffy jackalope, or a kobold, with its adorable face…

As for goblins or orcs? They could be pulverized for all I cared!

That said, as much as it bothered me, if it were not done, I would never be able to show off my special healing magic, and that would mean not passing the exam…

It would have been one thing if this were the normal exam, but there is a far higher expectation for scholarship students, who are receiving tuition and lodging free of charge. Since we didn't have any more money after paying for my brothers' tuitions, if I messed this up, that would mean I could not go to school at all. Aah—what to do?

Guh! Jackalopes were monsters! They hurt people with those horns and sharp teeth. It wasn't fair of them to try and elicit sympathy, staring at me with those sad eyes while they were all trapped and defenseless like that!

Gah! The proctor grabbed one of those jackalopes by the ears and brought it right over and…

"Gyaaaaah!!!"

Huh? What was with that ridiculous scream?! The proctor froze in shock, too.

I looked around, surprised, only to see…

Aah! Over at the combat magic grading grounds, two people were rolling

around on the ground—on fire!

"A magical explosion?"

Indeed, it might have been a magical explosion, just like Miss Mile had told me about. A magical explosion, akin to runaway magic—something feared by mages. It occurred when a mage messed up and lost control of their magic, causing a spell to go off abnormally.

In a normal casting error, the spell simply would not work, or it would be weakened, or go off in the wrong direction, or else have something other than the intended effect. At any rate, it would just be an error. However, in some rare cases, when someone tried to use magic more powerful than they were capable of, it would result in an *explosion*.

And if that spell happened to be a dangerous attack spell—particularly a fire spell—then…

"Graaaaaahh!!!"

…this would happen.

Some applicant had probably tried to cast an attack spell that was beyond their capabilities by brute force, hoping to get a high mark. The applicant, as well as the proctor who had been standing nearby, were now caught up in an eddy of flame and writhing on the ground. Rather than making a move to help, everyone was standing stock-still and watching them—including the nearby teachers, the upperclassmen who were assisting, and, of course, all of the other applicants.

What? Why?

This was no time to just stand around!

"Just a moment!"

I rushed over to the writhing pair…

"(Great Dark Nanogods, lend me your strength!) Hydro Bomb!"

This was just the place to use the hydro bomb Miss Mile taught me! The fire they were fighting wasn't natural, but magical, so wind magic would just spread the blaze. My priority was putting out the flames on these two before the burns

went too deep—and it worked! The explosive force of the water ball cooled things down and swept the fire away!

At this point, the teachers finally came back to their senses and rushed over to the pair, pulling them up. With a bit of healing magic, they would be fine.

The test takers and senior students were one thing, but it was kind of shameful for the teachers to have been standing around like that. Sure, they weren't veteran soldiers with years on the battlefield, but then again, wasn't that why even people who have never known battle can manage healing magic?

"H-he's dead…"

Whaaaat?!

"His heart isn't beating, and he's not breathing. He probably couldn't breathe from all the smoke or else just died of the shock of being burned alive…"

Several of the teachers were applying healing magic to the proctor, who despite some major burns, seemed to be more or less all right. However, healing spells had no effect on the dead, so though several other teachers stood around the apparently breathless applicant, there was nothing they could do but look sadly over him…

"Please step aside!"

"Wah!"

I pushed one useless teacher out of the way and leaned down toward the unconscious applicant, checking his breathing.

…There was no sign of breath.

Then, I checked his heart.

…It had stopped.

The emergency lifesaving resuscitation methods that Miss Mile taught me suddenly rushed into my head.

Okay!

I removed his thick jacket, pressed my palms to the center of his chest, and started pulsing at twice a second.

I did this about thirty times, and then lifted his chin and checked his respiratory tract, and started the mou…m-mouth-to…*mouth-to*…

Gahh! Gaaaaaah!!!

W-why?! Whyyyyy?!?!

…B-but, a human's life is irreplaceable…

Guh. Nghhh…

If only this were with a girl…

Sniffle sniffle…

…*Smooch.*

Fyooo… Fyooo…

One second each, twice in a row, then thirty more of the chest palpitations. Do that over and over again…

Gu-huh!

The boy's breathing returned. Seeing this, I flew back on the spot, desperately wiping my mouth with the handkerchief from my pocket.

I was half in tears. No, pardon me, that's a lie. I was *fully* in tears.

Gahh, my…my *first kiiiiiss!!!*

"H-he came back…"

"U-unbelievable!"

"It's a miracle!"

"Are you a goddess? Or an angel?"

"Don't stand there like idiots! Get over there and heal him! We can worry about everything else later!!"

It looked like I could leave the rest to the teachers. Of course, if he had breathed in all that smoke, there was a chance his lungs were damaged, too. Miss Mile told me to look out for internal injuries that might not be visible from

the outside. So I wasn't off the hook just yet. I pushed through the teachers again, and…

"(Great Dark Nanogods, lend me your strength!) Heal and repair his throat, lungs, and respiratory tract. Take special care with his pulmonary sacs and blood vessels. Make sure his gas exchange capabilities are unhindered… And naturally, repair all the burns to his epidermis. *Mega Heal!*"

I stopped to apply the same treatment to the proctor as well, ignoring the slack-jawed teachers.

"H-hey kid, y-you…"

One of the teachers stopped me as I moved to step away.

"Pardon me, but I need to go cry in the corner over there…"

My first kiss had been with a stranger, in front of all those people. I'd say it was within my rights to cry, yes?

"S-sure…" The teacher seemed to understand.

All right then. I was off to the corner of the yard behind a tree, and…

Weeeeehhh!!!

After some time, I returned to the healing and support magic testing grounds, but they told me I had already proven myself on that front, so there was no need to complete any further tasks. They had graded me based on my previous showing of water and healing magic.

Well, that seemed fair enough.

After that were tests of various weapon fighting—swords, spears, bows, staves, and more—and other such martial arts, along with tests of other special skills, but I was hopeless on most other fronts, so I passed on them. As with the academic portion of the test, the additional elements were really just there to weed out the weaklings, so for me, everything hinged on the magic exam.

Still, it was hard to think that I could stand out amongst so *many* applicants.

Ugh! Why can't I just know my place? Why would I let myself have such lofty hopes of attending this academy?

If I didn't pass, my tutor, Miss Mile, would never get paid for her work. If that happened, I would just have to save up my allowance, until one day I had enough to pay her what she should have earned off my success. She taught me more than enough to merit that—really, far more…

***

A heavy silence hung over the faculty of August Academy.

"She got 95 points on the written exam. I thought we made this exam so that no matter how sharp they were, they wouldn't get over 85 points?"

"……"

"So, how did she get 95…?"

"Ah, just a second!" said one of the instructors, interrupting the headmaster. "I had to double-check something. It was bothering me that she got just one question wrong even after getting some of the harder questions right… It turns out that it was an error in the question itself. So, that question should be excluded from the grading."

"……"

"As for her magical technique: she used a powerful attack spell, silent cast… That's well enough. Incredibly talented youngsters do exist now and then. However, what was the rest of that?! She brought someone back from the dead. She used a Mega Heal, even stronger than High Heal. What kind of saint is she? What kind of divine messenger?!"

"……"

In spite of their disbelief, there was no denying that what had happened was the truth, pure and simple. Furthermore, the vast majority of the instructors had borne witness to it. No one could possibly assume that it was a lie or an exaggeration. Even the headmaster was well aware of this. In fact, he was merely coping with his own disbelief at something so outrageous and regretting that he had skipped out on the scholarship student exam to retreat to his office.

By leaving the exam to his subordinate instructors, it seemed he had missed his chance to witness a miracle.

However, if this girl were allowed to attend the school, he just might have another such chance.

At the very least, there was not a soul here who would be foolish enough not to give this girl a passing mark.

“So then, it is settled. We will accept Lady Mariette as a scholarship student.”

Everyone nodded in unison. None of them could possibly disagree.

Furthermore, the majority of these instructors were nobles—though typically, those without titles, who were not the heirs of their line—not a one of them thought that what the headmaster has just said was peculiar.

“Lady Mariette.”

Indeed, hadn’t he just said that she must be a “saint” or a “divine messenger”? Most of the instructors were already starting to believe this, too…

Bonus Story:
The Ideal Lover

"Ugh, I just want a man!"

"Pfbbbtt!!!"

At Mile's sudden declaration, the other three members of the Crimson Vow did a spit take of the tea they had been drinking.

"Wha…? Wh-wh-wh…?"

"Where's this coming from?"

"To say something like that so casually…"

Shock appeared upon the faces of the trio as they wiped down the now-damp table and chairs.

"I mean, I'm already the ripe old age of thirteen, aren't I? Shouldn't it be okay for me to have a boyfriend or two?! Even Rika and Jenny had boyfriends…"

"Who are they?" asked the other three.

"Anyway, I've never even had a single male friend! Please try to understand!!"

"Ah…"

Reina had hardly ever had any extended interaction with a man, outside of her father, their customers, and the members of the Crimson Lightning.

Pauline had rarely spoken to any men who were not her father or her brother Alan.

Beyond her father and three brothers, the same was true for Mavis.

And yet, the three assumed the position of Mile's seniors on this road, not voicing these facts.

"What kind of men do you like, Mile?" Reina asked.

Mile thought hard and replied frankly. "Umm, well, he needs to be trim, not too muscular, intelligent and kind, mild and well mannered, vastly chivalrous—someone who would risk his own life to save me in a pinch… And I think

anywhere from my age to ten years older would be just fine."

"No man like that even exists! They only live in the delusions of little girls with their heads in the clouds! If such a man exists, then *I* want him!" Pauline practically spat.

Perhaps there had been some great sorrow in her past…

The other three said nothing.

"A-anyway, besides that…" Mavis chimed in after a brief silence, perhaps hoping to disperse the tense atmosphere.

"Ah, yes, besides that, he should be able to know everything about me and accept it all with a smile, not try to cash in on the fact that I'm a noble or want to earn heaps of money using my storage magic. That should go without saying. And he should be able to work as a hunter alongside all of us!"

"There's no such man."

"None at all."

"He doesn't exist."

Everyone swiftly denied her. Such a man was pure fantasy.

"Wha…?"

Mile's face fell. This was a heavy blow.

However, Pauline and Reina's faces suddenly lit up, as though a thought had occurred to them.

"Actually, maybe he does exist…"

"It's true!"

"What?! P-please, introduce him to me! I'm begging you!!!"

Then, the pair of them silently pointed…to a certain fellow party member, whose confusion was clear on her face.

"You literally just described Mavis."

"Ah…"

Mile and Mavis were awestruck.

Sure enough, there was exactly one person who met all the guidelines that Mile had been laying out. The sort of person who normally should not exist but who fit every last requirement to a T.

"I-I'm a bit of a dunce, but if you'll have me…"

"W-wait! Wait a second! Mile, what the heck are you…"

"Hey, *wait*! I said that I wanted a 'man'! *A man!*"

"I mean, close enough, right?"

"Hang on, Reina! What is *that* supposed to mean?"

And so, the second great spat of the month was underway…

Afterword

Long time no chat, everybody. FUNA here.

We've finally reached Volume 11! This will be the final volume published before the anime airs. I wonder if Volume 12 will come out in the middle of the anime's run? I imagine we'll start seeing anime ads next to this book in stores now that we're no longer keeping it hush-hush.

Well, maybe. I'll have to go see for myself when the time comes.

I've seen some of the storyboards and the scripts. I've heard the main theme song. Come home soon, my child!

If this goes wrong, I might just give up.

MILE: "Anyway, keep on watching until Episode 12!"

REINA: "How many episodes are there?"

MILE: "12!"

REINA: "Will your old friends from the Academy be in it?"

MILE: "They will! They will!"

MAVIS: "What about the swimsuit episode?"

MILE: "Yes, yes!"

PAULINE: "And the bathhouse episode…?"

MILE: "Of course!"

R *P* M: "……"

MILE: "Don't worry about the details! Let's keep on gunning for a second season!!"

REINA: "But the first season hasn't even aired yet…"

This volume had some quarrels, some artificial life forms, and the Wonder

Trio set out on their journey. I hope that Reina and the others grew a little bit from their battle with the Servants of the Goddess…

And we've ended with the Vow's mysterious direct request.

Where will this take the Crimson Vow next?

There's a double dose of good news regarding the comics! Nekomint-sensei's serial will resume in August, and starting on July 11, the spin-off 4-koma comic from Yuki Moritaka will begin! Naturally, both of these will be available to read free of charge in the webzine, *Comic Earth Star* (http://www.comic-earthstar.jp/).

Mile's appeal is growing exponentially!

It has now been three and a half years since I began writing this story and a bit over three years since the first volume was published. And now, we've finally reached this place… All that remains is the stage play, the video game, pachinko machine, and the live action Hollywood production!

Oh, and the Crimson Vow cosplayers at Comiket, of course.

Figures? Actually, we've already got some figures. Figures of all three of my main characters—Mile, Kaoru (MC of *I Shall Survive Using Potions!),* and Mitsuha (MC of *Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for my Retirement*)—all made their debuts at this summer's Wonder Fest!

Yes, that's right!

Just one step closer to my dreams…

Finally, to the chief editor; to Itsuki Akata, the illustrator; to Yoichi Yamakami, the cover designer; to everyone involved in the proofreading, editing, printing, binding, distribution, and selling of this book; to all the reviewers on *Let's Be Novelists* who gave me their impressions, guidance, suggestions, and advice; and most of all, to everyone who's taken these stories into their homes, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

We will meet again in the next volume. Just keep on believing…

DIDN'T I SAY I'M NOT A GODDESS?!
VERY CLEARLY.
HERE'S MARIETTE-CHAN, WHO FOR VARIOUS REASONS DIDN'T MAKE IT INTO THE INSERT ILLUSTRATIONS.
IT WOULD BE AWESOME TO SEE A SPIN-OFF LIKE THIS, WOULDN'T IT?
BE SURE TO CHECK OUT MORE INFO ABOUT THE ANIME ON THE WEB!
亜方逆参
ITSUKI AKATA

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