

Table of Contents

Cover

Map

Act One: Wandering / The Ashen Princess of Slaughter

Chapter 4: The Ashen Princess

Epilogue

Afterword

Color Illustrations

Characters

Bonus Short Story

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Act One: Wandering / The Ashen Princess of Slaughter

Chapter 4: The Ashen Princess, Part One

Prologue

Lake Mell was the largest lake in all of the Kingdom of Claydale, renowned as the most scenic tourist destination in the country and known for its magnificent nature and landscapes.

Both the lake and its surroundings were under the jurisdiction of House Melrose, the former royal family of a nation of eld. Management of the area was entrusted to the Viscountcy of Melsis, a branch family of House Melrose. Today, House Melsis was to welcome a certain young girl as their foster daughter.

"Lady Alicia, the estate is within view. Are you feeling tired?" asked a young man in a steward's outfit, a passenger inside a carriage traveling along a road by the lake.

"Not at all! I'm doing great! Thank you!" replied the girl, Alicia, beaming. She had golden hair with a faint reddish tint and near black eyes with a hint of green. The strong-willed gaze of the ten-year-old, sparkling at the sight of the large lakeside mansion, made her seem even cuter. "This mansion will be my home, right?"

Though Alicia was dressed in travel clothes, her attire was well-tailored, and she was accompanied by a handmaiden and an attendant, hinting at the possibility of noble birth. However, the girl looked remarkably young, which seemed to indicate otherwise. A noble child would have undergone sorcery training from a young age to increase their total aether and would typically appear two-to-three years older than their actual age. Alicia's appearance, on the other hand, was that of an ordinary ten-year-old commoner.

But there was a reason for her youthful features.

Alicia was a noble by birth, but she'd lost her parents and had been raised in an orphanage alongside other commoner children. Upon receiving reports that their long-lost relative had been found at said orphanage, her noble family had dispatched a new administrator to the facility, thus providing her with some education until her identity could be confirmed. High-level sorcery training, however, was impractical for someone like Alicia with no foundational knowledge, and as a result, she'd only learned the most basic aspects of sorcery and had not yet gained enough aether to accelerate her physical growth.

Noticing her young attendant staring at her, Alicia touched her cheeks and looked up at him. "Um... What is it? Is something on my face?"

"Not at all," the young man replied, unable to hold back an awkward smile. "I was just thinking that you're quite petite, Lady Alicia."

"Huh? Really? But I've grown recently! And I was pretty tall at the orphanage!"

The previous manager of the orphanage had abused the children, delaying their growth. If Alicia had at last grown to the size of an ordinary commoner, then perhaps those basic sorcery lessons had made an impact after all. Alicia leaned toward the young man in the narrow carriage, pressing her "grown" body against him, and he awkwardly tried to move away.

The handmaiden sitting opposite the pair spoke up. "Young Lady Alicia. A proper lady should not be touching someone of the opposite sex in such a manner."

"Huh... But he's just a steward..."

"Steward, attendant, it matters not," the handmaiden admonished her. "A man is a man. Since you are to be a young lady of House Melsis, you must maintain a respectful distance from men. Otherwise, you will face certain difficulties when participating in society."

"Okaaay." Reluctantly, Alicia withdrew her hand from the young man's arm.

Alicia, the steward, and the handmaiden were the only people in the carriage. Normally, a young noble lady like Alicia would've sat next to the handmaiden or alone, but she'd insisted on sitting next to the young man. The two siblings chosen to escort and care for Alicia on her journey from the orphanage exchanged silent, knowing glances. They recalled the troubled expression and

words of their grandfather, the one who had been tasked with the orphanage's administration.

"Lady Alicia's charming looks caused her to be bullied by jealous girls. As a result, she tends to be wary of women and seek protection from men. Please keep this in mind as you watch over her."

The story, if true, was sad indeed, but Alicia also behaved in an unusually alluring manner, especially for a child her age.

"It seems we've arrived."

The carriage slowly came to a stop. Alicia followed the attendant and the handmaiden out, and, when it was time for the handmaidens sent by the viscount's family to bring her inside, anxiously looked up at the young man.

"This is as far as we go. From now on, the members of House Melsis, your new family, will take care of you, Lady Alicia."

"B-But..." Feeling uneasy about stepping away from familiar faces into a group of unfamiliar ones, Alicia tried to grasp the young man's coat, but a stern look from the handmaiden caused her to flinch.

"Is something the matter?" asked the viscount, who had walked all the way from the entrance to fetch the girl. It was common for handmaidens to reprimand young ladies, but Alicia's youthful appearance might've inspired a protective instinct in the man, who perhaps thought the handmaiden was being unkind.

Alicia, who up until that point had seemed anxious, immediately altered her demeanor and began to nestle up to the viscount instead. "U-Um, I just wanted to say goodbye, but the handmaiden wouldn't let me..."

"I-Is that so?" the viscount asked, surprised by Alicia's behavior. He figured there was no harm in granting the young girl's wish and looked at the handmaiden, gasping in recognition. "You're..."

"My apologies, Lord Melsis. I leave her in your care now," the handmaiden said.

"Yes, of course."

Alicia briefly frowned at the exchange between the viscount and the handmaiden. Her expression quickly shifted to a bright smile as she clung to the viscount's arm, ignoring the woman.

"Nice to meet you, father!" she chirped. The viscount's wife and the handmaidens assigned to take care of the new child were also present, but Alicia didn't make eye contact with any of them. She looked only at the man standing before her.

Seeing this, the handmaiden who had come with Alicia let out a quiet sigh, bowed her head to the viscount and his wife, and returned to the carriage alongside the young male attendant.

"Are you ready to leave?" asked the coachman.

The young man, who had until that point kept a placid smile on his face as he looked after the young girl, coldly replied, "Whatever."

Normally, they would've stayed for about a day to observe the situation between the person they'd escorted and the receiving party, but not this time. The coachman wondered that they did not seem attached to the child despite the two-month trip. Upon seeing his superior, the handmaiden, promptly board the carriage, he reluctantly set it in motion.

"Oh!" Upon realizing this, Alicia quickly let go of Viscount Melsis's arm and ran after the carriage, energetically waving her hand. "Oz! Come visit me again, okay?!"

"...And that concludes my report."

"Well done, Oz, Sera," praised Veldt, the head of the Margravate of Melrose, after receiving documents from his subordinates detailing the past two months as well as listening to Oz's account.

The siblings had been sent on a mission to deliver Veldt's supposed granddaughter—Alicia, a direct descendant of House Melrose—to House Melsis, a branch family, where she would stay until adulthood and have the

veracity of her claimed identity evaluated.

Oz and Sera were both quite highly ranked, but the reason they'd been sent on this escort mission—important though it may have been—was that Alicia's existence wasn't yet common knowledge. Assigning several knights to protect the girl hadn't proved possible, so Veldt had needed two of his most reliable people, in terms of both trust and skill, to handle it.

Sera was one of the people responsible for security at the queen and princess's palaces, and Oz served Veldt directly as both his steward and chamberlain. Although their absences had caused significant disruptions and sparked many complaints, Veldt had had no choice but to send them to escort Alicia.

The Order of Shadows was awfully short-staffed. Not only that, the incident with Graves had led to many individuals with questionable ideologies being removed from positions close to the royal family, resulting in a significant shortage in personnel available for VIP protection. Not just anyone could fill these roles. It had become a struggle to find qualified candidates with adequate skills and trustworthy backgrounds even among adventurers around the city or graduates from the Sorcerers' Academy.

If only there were at least someone who could be entrusted with guarding the princess, Veldt lamented. But now is not the time for such concerns.

His eyes scanned the room and settled on one of the people present. "So, that being the situation, what do you think, Mikhail?" he asked.

"Grandfather..." Mikhail, who was only twelve years old, had grown to look about fifteen. The spark in his eyes had caused quite a stir among the young palace maids; now they narrowed as he returned his grandfather's gaze. "Wasn't she supposed to be sent to the viscount's family next year? The plan was to ascertain the veracity of her claims by then. Why was she sent there a year too soon?"

"The girl had begun causing problems, calling herself the daughter of a noble," Veldt explained, his tone bitter. "We had no choice but to accelerate the plan and take custody of her."

Mikhail sighed. "Quite the troublesome girl indeed."

It had been two years since this girl claiming to be Alicia had been discovered, but there was still no evidence that she was the real deal. Based strictly on her testimony and circumstantial evidence, any noble family would've believed her to be related to Veldt. However, the fact she lacked the pink-blonde hair characteristic of all the women of the Melrose line gave Veldt pause about acknowledging her as Alicia.

"Either way, I'll be entering the Academy next month," Mikhail continued. "Even high-ranking nobles must live in the dorms for half of each term, so I won't be able to respond to summons like this."

"You're already that age, I see," Veldt said. "Apologies for the trouble." *Time flies*, he thought, sighing.

Terms at the Sorcerers' Academy, attended by young nobles, began at the start of each year, after the harvest and tax collection had been completed. All noble children turning thirteen in a given year could enroll, and they all graduated at the end of the year in which they turned fifteen, at which point they were considered adults in noble society.

Veldt must've been quite uncertain of his own judgment to suddenly call a minor like Mikhail and ask for his opinion. Perhaps even Mikhail's grandfather, who was usually cold and decisive as the prime minister, got too emotional when it came to the legacy of his deceased daughter.

Mikhail felt sympathy for his grandfather, who had seemed to have rapidly aged in the past few years, and chose to be firm in expressing his opinion. "I feel the same way you do, grandfather. From the reports, I struggle to believe that girl is a Melrose. For that reason, if she is to enroll at the Academy, I recommend placing her under surveillance."

Having said his piece, Mikhail left his grandfather's office. Until today, due to Oz's absence, Mikhail—not having enrolled in the Sorcerers' Academy yet—had been acting as an aide to Veldt under the guise of studying to become the next prime minister. He didn't relish the idea of spending any further time doing so, however. Normally, he would've welcomed the opportunity with open arms, but with his enrollment imminent, the boy had personal matters he wanted to attend to.

"A melrose," Mikhail repeated to himself.

According to an old House Melrose legend, a moon spirit had thought one particular woman so beautiful that, extolling her features, it had tinged her hair the same color as a moon rose—the flower also known as a melrose. Mikhail didn't know whether this was true, but the hair color was indeed passed down only to the direct descendants of House Melrose and disappeared in a few generations when a Melrose woman married out of the family. It certainly suggested that the family was favored by the Moon itself.

If he were to say this to his friend, Rockwell of House Dandorl, he'd likely be teased again for "being a romantic," but even just whispering the flower's name brought to his mind the image of a certain adventurer girl he'd met in the royal capital. Her hair had been the same color as the melrose, said to bloom only on nights when the moon was out.

He'd been captivated from the moment he'd laid eyes on her. Even her lone wolf aura had been attractive, reminding him of the woman in the portrait that he'd admired as a child. Mikhail had felt a strong enough connection with the young adventurer that he figured Alicia, if she truly was alive, might look exactly like that girl.

But given the circumstances, the two couldn't be one and the same. Alicia would've been eight years old when Mikhail had met the adventurer. And even if her growth had been enhanced by aether, how could a girl that young have acquired the strength to be recognized as a top-tier adventurer?

Worst-case scenario, maybe he could substitute the peach-haired adventurer for the girl who'd been found in the orphanage. Would anyone even notice?

"Can't do that, now can I?" he murmured, dismissing his own thoughts. It might actually have been possible, given the power held by House Melrose, but he abhorred the idea of disrupting the adventurer's life like that.

Mikhail had visited the Adventurers' Guild in the capital several times, hoping that the pink-blonde girl was affiliated with it and he'd have the chance to see her again, but no such luck, and that ship was sailing. Once he enrolled in the Sorcerers' Academy, it would become even harder to continue searching for her.

Though Mikhail didn't think he was in love, he was acutely aware that the feeling growing within him was more than simple curiosity.

"I wonder if we'll meet again..."

Now that Mikhail had at last departed, Sera bowed her head and said, "Now then, I shall take my leave too."

"You've done well, Sera," Veldt praised her.

"I was only doing my job," she said firmly.

Oz understood that his sister's choice to respond to their master's appreciation with a flat statement that it had all been simply part of her job likely came from a place of familiarity, given how long she'd been working under Veldt. Still, the casual assertion was intimidating to the steward, and cold sweat rolled down his forehead.

Ignoring her brother's reaction, Sera stepped out of their superior's office and took a deep, silent breath. Most of the reason behind the sigh was mental fatigue, given that the extreme shortage of personnel in the Order of Shadows had forced her out of retirement. Being made to perform tasks outside her original duties and being kept away from her post for several months had, predictably, caused all manner of issues.

The main cause of her exhaustion went beyond the simple accumulation of tasks that couldn't be entrusted to her subordinates, however. It had been the two months spent with "Alicia," the supposed Melrose girl, that had worn down her spirit far more than anticipated.

It was only natural that the girl, being an orphan, lacked the manners befitting a noble. While Sera and Oz's grandfather had reeducated her, her etiquette was still barely passable for a commoner. But more than that, the girl's habit of clinging exclusively to men and ignoring women was bizarre, even considering her age. If Sera were to be honest, the prospect of this girl being recognized as a member of House Melrose made her want to agree with Veldt and Mikhail's doubts about her origins.

And now she'd have to go and attend to an irritable Princess Elena, whose

favorite apprentice maid had gone missing. Elena was well aware that this maid had belonged to the Order of Shadows, and since her disappearance, the princess had been prone to foul moods whenever Sera and the others were in her presence.

Despite her youth, Elena was perceptive and understood the risks involved in the Order's duties. Thus, unlike the impulsive crown prince, she wasn't willfully avoiding the Order's guards. But perceptive or no, a ten-year-old was still a ten-year-old, and emotions were still emotions. The only person Elena had ever approved of had disappeared, and because she believed the missing maid was still alive, her irritation only grew as more time passed without any word of the maid's whereabouts.

The reality was that the girl had most likely gone missing not because she'd been sent on a dangerous mission but because of Graves's betrayal—and to make matters worse, the traitor had been an agent of the Order. Furthermore, Sera was furious at Graves for having deprived her of a promising apprentice who could've eventually succeeded her. She had personally requested the adventuring party known as the Rainbow Blade to search for both Alia and Graves, but so far they'd uncovered nothing.

If Alia were found alive and returned to the Order of Shadows as an apprentice battle maid, she could be entrusted with guarding the princess, which would in turn improve Elena's mood. But such a fortunate turn of events was unlikely.

"Mom!"

On her way to the queen's palace, Sera heard the voice of her son, who had been waiting for her arrival, and let out another sigh.

"Mom, have you found Alia?!"

"We went north, but not in the right direction. We still haven't found her."

Sera's son, Theo, had continued to chase after Alia's shadow, even after his body and mind had rapidly matured to those of a twelve-year-old. Meeting Alia had been such a significant event in the boy's childhood that, despite having

been told that she was quite possibly dead, Theo, like Elena, had refused to let go and insisted they would meet again.

"I see," he murmured. Theo hadn't let go, but still, he'd known she wouldn't be found so easily. Trying to suppress his disappointment, he offered a smile to his tired-looking mother. "Welcome back, mom."

"A bit late for that," Sera replied. Still, she hugged her son as if to check how much he'd grown, and Theo returned the embrace, finding reassurance in the safety of his mother's arms. "We've sent the young Melrose lady to be fostered by House Melsis for some time. Once she enrolls in the Academy, however, you'll probably be assigned to protect her as a battle steward."

Theo nearly rolled his eyes at his mother for treating him as a child and giving him a friendly update instead of a report, but then he remembered what he knew of the young lady in question and frowned slightly.

"I've heard some pretty bad things about her," he said.

"That is not for us to discuss," Sera admonished him firmly.

Noticing his mother hadn't denied his statement, Theo inadvertently gave her a wry smile. "Well, I'll go back to my duties as a steward's apprentice. Can you train me after that?"

"Of course. Work hard," Sera replied. She saw him off with a smile of her own, her spirits lifting a bit.

As Theo quickly walked down the hallway, away from his mother, he reaffirmed his resolve. "I can't afford to let up, or Alia will leave me in the dust. I've gotta do this."

After watching her son leave, Sera headed toward the royal palace. A voice spoke up from behind her. "Welcome back, Lady Sera."

"Castro. Do you need something?" she asked.

Due to the irresponsible manner in which he'd handled Alia's assignments, putting her in danger, as well as his personal acquaintance with Graves, Castro had been removed from royal guard duty. However, he had since stopped discriminating against people based on background and circumstances. This

change had extended beyond his work too, and Sera had heard that Castro had been personally searching for the missing Alia, gathering what information he could from Viro and other old adventurer associates.

"Wait... Have there been any new developments?" Sera asked.

"There have," Castro confirmed. "Take a look at this."

Sera's eyes widened slightly as she read the document Castro handed her. She took a slow breath, then turned her gaze to him once more. "If this story is true..." she mused. "Castro. Get in touch with Viro."

"Yes, ma'am."

The Ashen Princess, Lady Cinders

The March of Kendras was located in the northwestern part of the Kingdom of Claydale. West of it lay the Kond Mines, which held the largest mineral vein in the southern part of the continent. The mines served as a buffer zone between two neighboring nations: the Dukedom of Yrus and the Kingdom of Sol'Hoeth, both of which claimed ownership over the area and ran mining operations there, keeping each other in check.

Mindful of this tension and wanting to avoid provoking its neighbors, House Kendras refused to have the national guard stationed in the buffer zone. Thus, without interference—military or otherwise—from the central government, the noble house had reaped significant profits from mining and ironworking.

And where there was light, there was shadow. Since the March of Kendras flourished by disallowing government intervention, several organizations lurked in the shadows there, seeking to bite off their share of the profits, including intelligence agencies and crime syndicates from neighboring countries and the unlawful Slavers' Guild. Notably, the largest Thieves' Guild in the Northwestern Border District was also a prominent force in the area.

The proximity of the mine attracted a great number of crag dwarves skilled in mining and smithing. The area was a hotspot for adventurers looking for locally crafted weapons, which in turn led to an increase in taverns catering to dwarves and adventurers alike. The demand for ore and ale was such that supply could

not keep up.

Taking note of this fact, the Thieves' Guild collaborated with the Slavers' Guild, buying orphans from various regions and capturing children from slums to sell to locals on a large scale. Though the March of Kendras had its own knights and the marquis himself loathed and sought to eliminate the criminal organizations operating within his territory, it was a difficult task in a city with tens of thousands of inhabitants.

Not only that, the marquis's attempts were constantly met with retaliation from the Thieves' Guild, meaning the illegal operations were left largely unchecked. The members of the local Thieves' Guild were known for their combat prowess, and chief among them was a group of siblings called the Galga Four, all of whom were Rank 4 combatants and had killed several knights. They'd developed a fearsome reputation in the underworld.

The sun had just begun to set. In a clearing in the woods near the city, a slave trade operation was taking place, this being the usual location and time.

"Hasn't the quality of slaves gone down recently?" Lamia groused theatrically. She was the eldest of the Galga Four and the leader of the Thieves' Guild in the March of Kendras. "You're not trying to deceive us Four, right?"

The leader of the Slavers' Guild theatrically shrugged in turn. "Who around here would be stupid enough to do that? Sure, we ran into some issues, but we went out of our way to get these for ya. They're a bit sluggish from bein' crammed into the bottom of the wagon, but feed 'em some scraps and they'll be good as new."

"Oh?"

After being subjected to a long journey, the children all appeared listless, their eyes having lost their spark. Upon realizing what awaited them, they trembled fearfully as they stared at Lamia: a woman who, despite supposedly nearing forty, still looked no older than her early thirties. Her beauty and ruthlessness had earned her a moniker that likened her to the lamia, a monster that retained its beauty by drinking the blood of its victims.

The thirty slaves in this batch were all children; there were humans and many demi-humans among them, given that few orphanages were willing to take in

orphaned beastfolk and dwarves.

"All these demi-humans and you couldn't get a single elf?" Lamia complained.

"Don't be ridiculous, Lamia. You think elves let their kids out of their villages? And the adults are usually adventurers. It ain't worth it," the slaver retorted.

Elven children rarely left their settlements. Lamia's demand for one stemmed from their beautiful features and prolonged youth—elves took a long time to mature—which made them highly sought-after. Even half-elves fetched ten times the price of other captives; however, it was rare for the proud elves to couple with humans and rarer still for a half-elf to be orphaned, meaning they were a rarity even for the leader of the Slavers' Guild.

"So, what are these 'issues' you ran into?" Lamia pressed, wanting details. The only reason she and the leader of the Slavers' Guild were present for this exchange in the first place was that the previous batch had been too small, which had nearly caused problems with the customer.

"Oh, that. Well, two of our teams of slave hunters were wiped out," the man explained.

"Huh? On our turf? What, are the marquis's knights doing their jobs for once?"

"I don't think that's what it was. Based on the methods, I'm thinkin' it was someone in our line of work..."

"Hey! Sis!" called out Lamia's younger brother. "Can we buy the girl in this wagon over here?!"

Lamia cast a suspicious look at the leader of the Slavers' Guild. "Huh. Still had merchandise, did you? Hey, Cath!" she shouted at her brother. "What kind of girl are we talking?"

"She's a teenager, but she looks like she's from a good family!" replied Cath, a tall and lanky man in his late twenties and Lamia's youngest brother.

"Yeah?" Lamia replied, then directed her attention back to the slaver. "So what's this about?"

"Oh! I nearly forgot. We grabbed a traveling girl on the way here, the

daughter of some low-ranking noble or something. I wanted to show her to you, so we put her in a separate wagon, heh." The man's face turned pale as Lamia glared at him and his excuses.

Having overheard the commotion, Lamia's two remaining brothers approached.

"What's going on, sis?"

"Did Cath mess up again?"

The eldest of the brothers, Gigas, was over two meters tall, built like a brick house, and wielded an axe. The middle one, Troll, was the shortest among the brothers, and his corpulent frame boasted supernatural brute strength. The youngest, Cath, was slender and skilled in evasion, wielding a pair of short swords. Lamia, the eldest of the four and the only sister, was a wind sorceress and favored a whip. Together they made up the Galga Four and were unique among thieves for having survived as a band since childhood, always acting as a four-person unit.

Now surrounded by the Rank 4 thieves, all of whom had discarded their real names in favor of monster aliases, the leader of the Slavers' Guild turned even paler.

"So, what you're saying is," Lamia began, "that what you were trying to do by hiding her from me was surprise me, right? The good kind of surprise? Meaning you weren't planning on *selling* her, but instead *giving* her to me, right? That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Y-Yeah," the slaver replied.

"Good! I'd expect no less from the Slavers' Guild. I'm sure this will continue to be a profitable partnership. Cath! Bring me the girl!"

"Hey sis, can I have this one?" Cath asked.

"You really like them young, don't you?" Lamia muttered. "You always say that, then you break them first chance you get. Forget it! Bring her here!"

"Fine, fine..." Cath agreed reluctantly, unable to defy his sister. Disappointed, he dragged the girl out of the wagon. "Hey, come out."

"Huh..."

The girl who emerged from the wagon did indeed look like a young lady from a good family dressed as a traveler. She wasn't yet an adult, but her presence was even more striking than her well-formed features. It was obvious why Cath had wanted her, and why the leader of the Slavers' Guild had tried to hide her and sell her separately. Even Lamia, a woman herself, felt her heart skip a beat at the sight of the girl's demeanor and slightly downcast profile.

Her misjudgment, of course, was her undoing. Lamia's confidence in her abilities had made her careless. Capable as she was, she could gauge someone's strength without needing to cast Scan, but that required concentration and wasn't something she always did.

And just as Lamia hadn't suspected the skill of a child kidnapped into slavery, Cath, standing close by, hadn't bothered to assess the strength of the peach-haired girl.

"Guh!" In that instant, Cath felt a searing pain in his throat that made him gasp.

No, it wasn't merely a gasp. Blood was pouring into his lungs and gushing from his mouth. He finally realized that the girl had stabbed his throat with a black knife. As a lightweight fighter excelling in evasion and speed, he'd never imagined anyone but his siblings could hurt him, and yet the girl before him had effortlessly driven a knife into his neck without any obvious physical tells or detectable malice.

At the sight of his agonized reflection in the girl's jade-green eyes, it dawned on Cath that he wasn't long for this world.

"Cath?!" Lamia involuntarily exclaimed when she saw her youngest brother collapse, spewing blood.

The other two brothers stared in shock. Their brother had been killed, just like that. One of the four siblings, who had worked together for twenty years, clawed their way up, and vowed to rise even higher, had died so easily.

Gigas, the eldest brother, watched in silence, clenching his teeth in an attempt to contain his rage.

"This is a joke, right...? Cath, you're pulling my leg, right?!" shouted Troll, the middle brother, thinking this was just another of his prankster brother's jokes.

At that moment, the leader of the Slavers' Guild let out a strained croak, like a crushed frog, and fell with a crossbow bolt lodged in his forehead. The girl, having just stabbed Cath and shot the slaver, immediately turned tail and began to flee.

"Get the hell back here!!!" shouted Troll as he took off after the running girl.

"Troll! Damn it!" hissed Gigas. He'd been wary of the girl, but upon seeing his younger brother charge recklessly after her, he followed suit.

"Both of you!" Lamia called out, snapping out of her shock. The two men didn't stop, however, and continued to give chase.

"I'm gonna crush you!" shouted Troll, not even registering his sister's voice. Though both he and Gigas had started running at the same time, the rotund Troll quickly gained speed, outpacing his older brother. Despite his obese appearance, his thick layer of blubber concealed powerful muscles underneath, and he began to close the gap between himself and the girl.

Noticing her pursuers, the girl glanced around at Troll and Gigas behind him, then made a sharp turn to lure them into the woods.

"You think I can't move through the forest because of my size?! Don't you look down on me!" Troll snapped, using his arms and legs to break through thin trees and thick branches alike as he continued to give chase. He was a hand-to-hand fighter, his bulky fat acting as armor while he broke his enemies with his powerful muscles. His large hands could easily smash the girl's slender frame if he caught her.

Clang!

As the girl went into the woods, Gigas threw his hand axe at her, but it embedded itself into a thick tree trunk. The girl quickly threw a knife in response, but Gigas deflected it with his swollen muscles, not bothering to use his main axe. "Hmph!"

Troll laughed mockingly at the girl. "My bro's muscles are special, dumbass! Gonna crush you like a grape!"

He charged at her from the side, his fists clenched. Incredibly, the girl, who had been keeping an eye on them both while adjusting her position slightly, swerved away from Gigas and charged straight at Troll. The middle brother picked up speed to match her.

"Walking right into your death?" he asked. "How—"

"Pain," the girl chanted.

"Gah!" The overwhelming pain left Troll frozen in place, mouth agape, and the girl threw a thin, unglazed bottle into his mouth. The bottle shattered, and Troll let out a loud, confused scream.

"Troll!" Gigas called out, hurriedly trying to close the distance as his brother's screams echoed through the forest.

Snap.

A shocked Gigas let out an alarmed cry as the ground cracked beneath his feet like thin pottery, sending him plummeting into a pit. The hole was two meters wide and another two deep. If he hadn't taken the bait, it would have been an easy trap to avoid, and falling in would've normally resulted in a twisted ankle at worst. However, the bottom was lined with sharp spikes that pierced Gigas's legs and back.

Thin sheets of clay, enchanted with Harden, covered the mouth of the trap. They would've easily withstood the weight of a wolf, but not the thudding steps of a giant like Gigas.

"B-Bro," a seemingly poisoned Troll croaked, his face turning purple as he struggled to go to his older brother's aid. Before he could do anything, however, the girl dropped live coals into the pit, causing it to erupt in flames and cries of agony. "Nooo!"

Troll's shriek at the sight of his brother's death was silenced when the girl jumped onto his head and plunged her knife deep into his medulla.

"Gigas! Troll!" Lamia cried out as she arrived at the scene in time to witness her brothers' deaths. "You... You little wretch! How *dare* you!"

The girl, still stepping on Troll's head, silently shook the blood off of her knife.

"Hurricane!" chanted an enraged Lamia, her Level 4 wind spell raging through the cramped woods.

She was quite familiar with her own sorcery; a pure sorcerer or adventurer might've made a different choice, but as a thief, Lamia prioritized casting speed over raw power. Her usual winning strategy was to stop her enemies in their tracks with the high-level spell Hurricane and then finish them off with other wind spells. Few opponents could anticipate her magic, and practically none were capable of dodging the invisible blades.

However, the girl, too, was familiar with sorcery and knew that area-of-effect wind spells weren't lethal enough.

"What?!" Lamia yelled, watching as the girl, whom she'd expected to be immobilized, rose in the air instead. No matter how slender the target may have been, Lamia's spell shouldn't have had enough force to send her flying so high up. Had the girl jumped? What manner of fool would allow herself to get caught in the wind in such densely packed woods?

Using the hem of her dress like a sail, the girl maneuvered through the air, seemingly unafraid of crashing into the trees. Branches and pebbles struck her as she flew, but she remained intent on Lamia, causing fear to well up within the thief's chest.

Overcome by dread, Lamia chanted, "Gale Cutter!" and unleashed another wind spell at the girl.

In response, the girl muttered something and crossed her arms in front of her face to protect herself. Wind sorcery was indeed rarely lethal—against targets wearing armor, that is. If the spell struck any vital points, it could still easily tear through the girl's body. The navy dress she wore shredded and scattered under the powerful gust, revealing a black leather dress underneath. Though her exposed arms and legs had suffered injuries, all of her vital points were protected by some sort of shield of light as she charged at Lamia, a large black knife raised high.

"Thrust!" the girl chanted.

As the black blade slowly drew closer, thoughts flashed through Lamia's mind like a dream sequence.

Where had they gone wrong? The four siblings had thought they could do anything together. At first, all they'd cared about was survival, but as a group, they were strong, and working together had made life easier. Was that where they'd misstepped? Should they have sought an honest path through their combined efforts instead?

It was too late for that, however.

The girl's combat technique dug halfway into Lamia's neck, and the thief watched as her own blood splattered across her field of vision. Who in the world was this girl? Lamia hadn't scanned her, but she'd seemed to be of Rank 3 strength at best. That was why neither Lamia nor any of the brothers had thought for a moment that they might lose. They'd fallen right into the girl's trap.

As Lamia collapsed, the thief saw the girl in the black adventurer's dress cast a spell, coating her hair in illusory ashes. Words of recognition escaped Lamia's lips before her consciousness sank into the dark abyss, silencing her forever.



▼ Alia (Alicia) Species: Human (Rank 3) Aether Points: $174/240 \triangle +30$ Health Points: $132/190 \triangle +20$ Strength: 9 (12) \triangle +2 Endurance: 9 (12) \triangle +1 Agility: 13 (17) \triangle +1 Dexterity: 8 [Dagger Mastery Lv. 3] [Martial Mastery Lv. 3] [Throwing Lv.3] \triangle +1 [Bow Mastery Lv.1] NEW! [Guard Lv.3] NEW! [String Manipulation Lv.4] \triangle +2 [Light Magic Lv. 3] \triangle +1 [Shadow Magic Lv. 3] [Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 3] [Practical Magic x6] [Aether Manipulation Lv. 4] \triangle +1 [Intimidation Lv. 3] [Stealth Lv. 4] \triangle +1 [Night Vision Lv.2] [Detection Lv.4] \triangle +1

[Poison Resistance Lv.3] \triangle +1

[Basic Scan]

Overall Combat Power: 576 (Boosted: 691) \triangle +133

Where It All Began

"Nostalgic," I murmured quietly under my breath as I gazed upon the small town visible from the road.

I'd been wandering from place to place since my battle against the Assassins' Guild and had finally returned to the town with the orphanage I'd grown up in, two and a half years after my departure. This didn't really feel like coming home —to me, the Barony of Horus had never been a home. And though I was fairly certain I'd been born somewhere in this barony, I couldn't even remember the town or house where I'd lived with my family as a young child.

A lot had happened to me in this town, and I didn't have fond memories of any of it. I'd barely ever set foot outside of the orphanage, and I didn't really know any locals either. So why was I passing through this town? I didn't know. The only answer I had was "Because."

I made small talk at a stall selling baked goods (not very tasty ones, but filling, at least) and learned that after the old hag was gone, a priest of Krus ethnicity had taken over as manager of the orphanage. Improvements had also been made to both the environment and the lives of the children. That priest had retired several months ago, and while waiting for a new manager to be assigned by the local lord, the townspeople had been taking turns caring for the orphans.

"So y'see, lassie, the whole neighborhood's good to the kids," the man at the stall boasted, as though they were saints looking after the poor unfortunate orphans.

"Huh..." I said noncommittally. I knew all about how they'd once turned a blind eye to the abuse the children had gone through back in the day.

"Come again!" he chirped.

I didn't respond.

It wasn't that I was particularly concerned about the orphans. I was merely a

little curious about the state of the orphanage since my departure, that was all.

My memories were vague, so I got a bit lost, but eventually I did arrive at the not-at-all nostalgic orphanage without any issue. I still remembered vividly how very cold the earthen floors were on winter nights like tonight—despite the generally warm Claydale weather. We'd go to sleep with no decent meals and only thin blankets to cover ourselves with.

Peering into the orphanage from the street, I noticed the children now looked a bit cleaner and healthier. Their faces, however, were still listless as they did laundry and cleaned the yard. And then, from the alley leading to the orphanage's back gate, I faintly heard the voices of a man and woman arguing.

"C'mon, gimme some food!" the man's voice said.

"P-Please stop," the woman's voice replied.

Curious, I quietly looked over and saw a young man in dirty clothes, one who'd probably just reached adulthood. He had a knife at his waist and was harassing a girl from the orphanage.

"If I give you this, the little ones won't have anything to eat—" the girl tried to plead.

"Say what? I'll have ya know the brats didn't have anything to eat back when I was here!" the man retorted.

Ohh, I see, I thought. Watching the pair's behavior and faces brought back memories. The girl, three or four years older than me, had acted as a cook in place of the old hag; the young man, meanwhile, was an older orphan who had regularly stolen food from the younger kids and forced them to do his chores. And considering his age, he probably wasn't living in the orphanage anymore.

Technically, children nearing adulthood in the orphanage should've been sent to live with craftsmen in the community as a form of apprenticeship. The old hag, however, had only cared about exploiting—or selling—the orphans, so in practice, that had never happened. Nevertheless, the children would have normally acquired *some* skills by handling odd jobs. This boy, however, had always made others do his work, and so upon reaching adulthood and being kicked out of the orphanage, he'd become nothing more than a local thug.

"The hell ya lookin' at, punk?!" he demanded.

I guess he'd noticed me standing there reminiscing. I'd concealed my presence, just enough that it wouldn't seem unnatural, but maybe recalling past emotional events had made me falter a bit. The man, realizing I was a young woman, approached me, swaying his shoulders menacingly.

"You an adventurer? Pretty clean-lookin' clothes if so. If ya got money to waste, spare some for a poor orphan, why don'tcha?" he said.

"You don't look like a poor orphan to me," I retorted.

"That's *mister* orphan to ya. Former, anyway. A poor guy like me gettin' some coin from the orphanage's only fair, yeah?"

If the orphans were "poor" despite the orphanage being funded by the lord of the land, it was because of people like this man and that old hag, who exploited it for their own gain.

As the young man spouted his nonsensical excuse for demanding money, the girl from earlier cried out from behind him, "Don't involve *strangers* in this! I'll give you my share!"

A faint, self-deprecating smile curled my lips at the girl's statement. "Strangers." I didn't belong in this place anymore.

"What?" the young man snapped. "Ya think that's gonna be enough? Ya little
—" A loud *thunk* interrupted him. "Guh!"

In one swift movement, I enhanced my strength with Boost and stepped in, striking his jaw with my palm. The inside of my right glove was fitted with a thin sheet of magic steel, capable of stopping a weapon if necessary. Thanks to that reinforcement, I felt the man's jawbone crumble against my hand, and he fell backward with a strangled cry.

This type of injury would take half a month to heal if treated at a clinic with Restore. If he couldn't afford that, well, he'd just be unable to eat solid food for the rest of his life. That being said, I had learned at least enough discretion over the past few years that I wouldn't be so uncouth as to kill the man in front of a girl who'd grown up in the orphanage with him.

"Sorry for the interruption," I said, grabbing the collar of the now-unconscious man. I began to drag him away, intending to dispose of him in a garbage dump somewhere.

"W-Wait!" the girl called out hurriedly. "I'm sorry for getting you involved, miss adventurer. And also..." She looked intently at me, then spoke in a small, uncertain voice. "Were you...maybe, one of the orphans here, once?"

"You must be imagining things," I replied curtly, then walked away, dragging the young man behind me. She didn't call out to me again, but I could sense her bowing her head slightly in my direction.

I was impressed she'd recognized me despite my current appearance, though.

It'd been over a year since I'd destroyed the Northern Border District's branch of the Assassins' Guild, and I was now ten years old.

Rank 4 was a difficult bar to clear indeed. Although I could now use illusiontype spells without a chant, and some of my non-combat skills had reached Level 4, all of my spell-and-technique-related skills were still at Level 3.

I had visited my mentor once to report in. I hadn't been able to stay long, since I was being targeted by the underworld, but my visit had earned me a light-elemental spell, which had increased my Light Magic level and, thanks to that, my Aether Manipulation had risen to Level 4. That was all, though.

Few people ever managed to reach Rank 4 in the first place. To put it in terms from that woman's knowledge, Rank 4 was equivalent to earning a spot in a major global tournament, whereas Rank 5 meant being the champion in multiple different fields. Achieving such a thing in one's teens would require unique techniques and life-threatening levels of training.

Nevertheless, I'd developed physically over the past year, and I could feel my progress. In total, probably upwards of fifty thieves and assassins had attacked me, and I'd defeated every single one of them. I'd also actively been working on taking down groups that exploited children, like the Thieves' Guild in the March of Kendras. Actual combat was training, and it had certainly begun to bear fruit.

The biggest change, however, had likely been to my appearance. I let out a

silent sigh at how different I looked now.

Perhaps because my mana had once again increased, or perhaps because I'd been getting proper nutrition under my mentor, my mana and stamina had both grown, and my outward age was now around that of a thirteen or fourteen-year-old. Due to something that woman's knowledge referred to as "secondary sexual characteristics," I was rarely mistaken for a boy anymore, even when fully cloaked.

Gelf had tailored my equipment—a sleeveless, knee-length black dress made with the membrane of a Rank 4 flying dragon's wings—specifically to fit my current figure. The specialized knife holder attached to my inner thigh had also been adjusted to fit my growing legs; the side of the skirt had a slit allowing me to quickly draw my knife in an emergency. The dress was a great piece, with excellent resistance to bladed weapons and fire. Without it, I'd have taken a lot more damage in the battle against the Rank 4 sorceress, but Gelf wouldn't accept more than the cost of the materials as payment.

My body had changed too, with flesh and fat accumulating in places where there'd been none. It was challenging to adjust my balance to my new center of gravity, but my overall abilities had also improved thanks to my body's growth, leading to an increase in my stats.

"Though it's also earned me a weird nickname," I muttered.

What was puzzling about my body was the fact that, although I had strength to match that of an adult man, the circumference of my arms and legs hadn't changed much. Thinking about this phenomenon and looking back on my mentor's lessons, I figured it was likely that just as animals that absorbed too much mana grew aethercrystals and became monsters, the bodies of humans who developed aethercrystals adapted to use more aether than physical strength. This made them similar in physique to faefolk like my mentor.

Even though the aether-fueled growth occurred to accommodate an enlarging aethercrystal, it was possible that it also resulted in a slowing of the aging process and slight extension of lifespan. And...now that I thought about it, Feld's stats, given his fully trained muscles, must've been extraordinary.

Thud.

Despite the strange looks from the town's residents, I tossed the former orphan whose jaw I'd shattered into a garbage dump. Then I headed to the larger neighboring town, where the local lord lived, to fulfill my promise to Galvus. That distance had once taken me almost two days to cover, but I could now traverse it in less than half a day.

I left the town that evening, then ate and took a nap in the woods near the campsite where I'd set up my very first base. I wiped off my sweat with a damp cloth, purified my body with Cleanse, then kept going, arriving at the larger town by late morning the next day. Before, I'd have entered through a hole in the wall leading to the slums, but this time I arrived when the front gates were open, so I walked right in.

"An adventurer registered in this town, huh? Haven't seen you around much," the gatekeeper said, suspicious.

"I've been working in the capital and Dandorl," I explained.

"Pretty impressive for your age."

Adventurers registered in a given town were free to come and go as they pleased, but my absence of two and a half years had aroused suspicion. Still, upon checking my guild tag, the soldier let me pass without any issues.

"Since you haven't been here in a while, I should warn you to be mindful of the ruins to the north," the gatekeeper cautioned. "People say some dangerous monsters have been roaming the place. Get the details from the Adventurers' Guild."

"All right. Thank you, sir."

This land was filled with ruins and monsters, so the average adventurer was already well aware of the dangers here, yet he'd felt the need to warn me. I wondered what was going on. In any case, I was already planning on visiting the Adventurers' Guild, so I could just ask when I got there.

Beneath the still-bright sky, I entered the low-income residential area near the slums. I blended in with the surroundings and concealed my presence. My Stealth skill had risen to Level 4; if I focused fully on blending into the shadows, even someone with Detection at Level 1 wouldn't notice anything amiss. It was similar to how, upon first meeting Viro, I'd only been able to identify his presence by the shape of the mana around where he was hiding.

The reason I'd stopped at the March of Kendras hadn't been to destroy the local Thieves' Guild—I'd wanted to buy a specific item. I adjusted the package I was carrying and headed to my destination, figuring the recipient would be delighted with the "souvenir" no matter the time of day.

"Galvus, are you here?" I asked as I walked inside the smithy.

Galvus had been drinking—at noon!—with another man on a long bench away from the forge's fire. He turned to face me. "You're..."

"Wait. Cinders?" the other man ventured.

"Long time no see, you two," I said. The two men were Galvus, who had given me the black knife, and the old man from the general store, who'd recommended the blacksmith to me.

"It really has been a long—Wait. Yer a girl?" Galvus asked.

"Are yer eyes broken?!" the old man snapped. "Of course she's a girl, ya blind old geezer!"

"And how am I supposed to know the gender of a human child, ya moron?!"

"What was that?! Ya wanna catch these hands, ya cranky bastard?!"

"This cranky bastard's gonna cram a foot up your ars—"

A loud *thunk* interrupted their drunken argument as I slammed a bottle of premium fire liquor—worth a whole gold—that I'd picked up at the mining settlement in Kendras, where crag dwarves gathered. The two old men froze in place.



"Whoa... Ya brought liquor?" the dwarf asked. "Ya sure know what's what, for a kid."

"And premium fire liquor, at that. Haven't seen that in a while..." the old man added.

"Fine. I'll do yer job for ya. But not if it's stupid."

"Let me settle my bill first," I said. From my Shadow Storage, I extracted the gold coin I'd promised Galvus once upon a time and placed it on the table with a soft *clink*.

"Damn, kiddo. That was fast. But y'know, a kid yer age shouldn't overd—"

Next, with a loud *crash*, I dumped the rest of my funds on the table. Both Galvus and the old man from the general store stared at the pile, stunned. It was all the money I'd saved so far: fifteen large gold, twelve gold, twenty-two silver, and a handful of copper.

"This is my entire fortune. I want you to take it and use it to forge a special blade for a pendulum."

Astonishing Notoriety

"A pendulum?" Galvus echoed, cocking his head.

"This," I replied, taking the stringed weapon out of my Shadow Storage and showing it to him.

Galvus's eyes sparkled like a child's upon seeing a new toy. "Ooh. This for stabbin'? Do ya wrap it around things?"

"You can do both. Before this, I was using a string with a weight at the end. This one, I occasionally swing to cut a target, but that decreases the power, so I want to improve that somehow."

"The low power is a center-of-gravity problem," Galvus mused. "Ya gotta find the right balance—not too light and not too heavy. What material ya thinkin' of?"

"I don't have a preference, but something that doesn't get caked with gore

easily would be best."

"Magic iron would be what yer lookin' for, then. Since ya might lose the blade in combat, mithril would be too expensive, see. Not that magic iron comes cheap... Hey, Viktor! Can ya get magic iron ore?!" Galvus barked.

Viktor...?

The old man from the general store, who had been looking at my weapon with interest, grinned. "Ain't nothin' in this town I can't get! Hey Cinders, this weapon ain't from this country, yeah? Western, is it? Pretty rare stuff."

"This is from the Empire of Jasta, huh?" Galvus mused. "Hey, Cinders, ya ain't with that boy Viro anymore, yeah? Do ya still have my knife?"

"Of course I do," I replied. I took the knife, still sheathed, from where it was attached to my waist and handed it over.

Galvus unsheathed it and frowned slightly. "Well, looks like yer takin' care of it, but it's seen a whole lotta action, huh? Magic steel weapons ain't as good as mithril ones, but they slowly fix themselves with the wielder's aether, like materials from monsters an' stuff. This one's got some nasty scratches and nicks, though."

"Sorry..."

"Dumbass! It's a weapon! It ain't supposed to look pretty! An' this one's just half-hearted trash that's got some bite but no *oomph* to it. 'Sides, ya got a lot stronger, yeah? I can tell. Ain't it about time ya got somethin' custom made?"

"Something custom made?" I echoed.

The black knife was a piece Galvus had made in his younger days. He'd given it to me because it was "garbage" but, supposedly, had "suited me just fine." Now he seemed to think it no longer did.

He was wrong.

"No. This knife is perfect for my fighting style. Even if nobody else can use it right, this knife exists for me to use. I grew stronger to use it."

But the knife was damaged; my skills were still lacking. When I said that, Galvus crossed his arms and closed his eyes. He sat there quietly, the knife still

lying on the table in front of him. I didn't usually grow attached to my weapons, but although I'd come close to losing this knife several times, it'd stayed with me. That told me it suited me perfectly.

Galvus picked up two large gold coins from the table and flung them into the air. Viktor lunged to catch them.

"Get the materials with that, Viktor! I'll handle the weapon design," Galvus said.

"Ya got it," Viktor replied.

"You'll craft it for me?" I asked the suddenly very enthusiastic pair.

Galvus took only one more large gold coin from the pile, pushing the rest back to me. "Yeah, ya dingus! Ain't no work more excitin' than this!"

"Isn't that too little for a magic iron weapon, though?" I asked. Back in the day, Viro had told me that a knife made of commercial-grade magic steel cost five gold, and that even Galvus's earlier works were worth twenty apiece.

"Yer a kid! Don't ya worry yer pretty little head about that stuff! Ain't that right, Viktor?!"

"He's right," Viktor agreed. "Us geezers just love this kinda stuff. Ha ha!"

"Thanks," I mumbled, bowing my head to the pair. They laughed heartily, and Viktor patted my head as though I were his grandchild.

"Come back here in a month, Cinders," Galvus said. "And leave yer knife. I'll fix it up for ya an' make yer new weapon."

"Okay." A month, huh. That didn't seem like very much time to repair the knife and make a whole new weapon. I handed the black knife to the dwarf.

"Now, maybe a sip or two of this fire liquor to celebrate..." Viktor said.

"Hey! You plannin' on buyin' magic iron while drunk? Ya bring me trash, I kick yer ass!"

"Aw, don't be a square. It's just one drink. Ya want some too, don'tcha?"

"I mean..."

"Ya know, moderation an' all that."

My lips curled into a small smile; it was like watching my grandfathers banter. I thanked them again and started to leave the forge.

Galvus hurriedly called out, "Hey, Cinders! Where ya goin' without a replacement for yer weapon?! The hell ya gonna use for a month?!"

"There's nothing I'd want to replace the knife with," I replied. "Besides, I still have weapons." I lifted the slit on the side of my skirt to show the knife holder attached to my thigh.

Galvus and Viktor, who'd been about to take a swig, spat out their liquor and clutched their heads as if they had headaches.

"That piece..." Galvus muttered. "Gelf made it, huh? Still makin' weird stuff..."

"Listen here, Cinders," Viktor admonished me. "Ain't gonna matter for geezers like us, but yer a young woman! Don't just go showin' yer legs to guys like that!"

"Huh?" I replied. "Okay." According to that woman's knowledge, young women did show their legs in towns, so I wasn't sure what the problem was. Admittedly, flaunting my concealed weapons like that wasn't the best idea. I nodded solemnly.

"Wait just a sec," Galvus said, clutching his head once more. He stood up and headed to the back of the shop, returning moments later with something wrapped in leather and handing it to me. "Take this for now. It suits ya just fine."

I unwrapped the bundle, revealing a strangely shaped magic steel dagger. The blade was about the same length as the black knife's; it was a piercing weapon, not bladed on the sides, with just a sharp tip. But the cross section was a pointed quadrilateral shape that thickened toward the base, giving it considerable strength.

With a *whoosh*, I gave it a light swing, thrusting it forward. It was slightly heavier than the black knife, but it seemed capable of piercing through thick monster skulls and armor joints without bending.

Galvus watched me swing the black dagger with a satisfied expression. Viktor, meanwhile, gave us an exasperated look as he cleaned up the spilled liquor.

"Whatcha goin' on about, ya cranky ol' bastard?" he spat. "Haven't ya been chippin' away at makin' that thing since ya gave Cinders that knife?"

"No one asked you a damn thing, ya drunken ol' codger!!!" Galvus snapped. The two immediately started arguing again for some reason.

I said nothing and just bowed my head in thanks once more.

With the black dagger equipped in place of the black knife, I made my way to the Adventurers' Guild.

Although this was a remote area near the border, given the proximity to ruins and other places monsters naturally inhabited, the Adventurers' Guild here was the biggest in the region. It boasted many skilled adventurers, with over a hundred total coming and going; in a typical guild, twenty percent of them would've been Rank 3 or higher, but here, it was said to be between thirty and forty percent. Thanks to that, even the local baron held little sway over the guild.

Wearing my hooded cloak, I pushed open the creaky door and stepped into the guild. There were around twenty adventurers milling about inside, and a number of men gave me hostile looks. This wasn't my first time here, but previously, I'd come with Viro, so nothing had happened. I was still a child, but I was now alone but well equipped, which didn't sit well with some of the more mediocre adventurers.

From experience, I knew that taking off my cloak would reveal that I was a woman and change the atmosphere a bit, but that would only change the reason I might get in trouble, so I just headed straight for the counter.

The familiar receptionist's eyes widened slightly when she saw me. She'd been the one to handle my registration as an adventurer, and seemed to remember my face, even under the hood. "Oh! You're..."

"Long time no see," I said. "I'd like to validate my rank for registration. I'm currently Rank 3 in melee combat."

I'd come to the guild to increase my Adventurer Rank. I'd kept it at Rank 1 to avoid unnecessary trouble and trick my opponents into underestimating me,

but now that my appearance had matured to that of a thirteen or fourteen-year-old, I figured the benefits of a higher rank outweighed the disadvantages. At Rank 1, I could only enter the town where I'd registered for free. At Rank 2, the toll for any of the towns within this territory was waived, and at Rank 3, one only needed to pay a toll when crossing between territories—entry into any town was free.

Of course, some of the people present didn't like this.

"A brat like you, Rank 3?! Not a damn chance!" snapped another adventurer who'd been negotiating with a different receptionist nearby.

I scanned him silently.

▼ Adventurer

Species: Humanð

Aether Points: 75/75

Health Points: 218/265

Overall Combat Power: 165 (Boosted: 185)

He was a human male in his mid-twenties, and his overall combat power was just under 200. Judging from his health and aether points, he seemed to be a typical frontliner trained in using Boost. I surmised he was around Rank 2. Had his combat power been over 200, he might've barely qualified as Rank 3, but with stats like his, it looked like he'd worked hard to train multiple skills and still couldn't reach a higher rank.

An experienced man like him would probably have the upper hand against a Rank 3 opponent who had only trained one or two skills. That was probably why he'd been outraged by a child like me being Rank 3; it must've felt unfair to him.

Not that it had anything to do with me.

"Adventurer Ranks are determined by the guild!" the receptionist assisting me argued, standing up. "Do not make baseless claims, please!" Unfortunately, under the circumstances, her disagreement only further stoked the flames.

"If a kid like this can be Rank 3, I should be Rank 3 too! Screw the guild's opinion!" the man barked, enraged. "I'll be the judge of whether this brat is Rank 3 or not!" He placed a hand on the sword at his hip, as though trying to defend his honor—which nobody had insulted.

The other adventurers in the guild cheered and egged him on, as though a party had just started. Given how rough the people here were, this type of occurrence was probably commonplace. They knew there would be a problem if the angry adventurer drew his sword but still didn't stop him. Aside from the receptionist who'd been assisting me, the staff members retreated to the back of the guild in resignation. I supposed they expected a certain level of violence.

The man's companions didn't stop him either; rather, they surrounded me to ensure I couldn't escape, letting him do as he pleased with an "oh well" attitude. There were five people total, including the angry man, and judging by their expressions, the other four seemed like they'd be willing to let the guy vent his frustrations, then intervene before any killings took place.

From where I was standing, though, my rationale was that...five deaths were within the acceptable limits of retribution for having a blade drawn on me like that. Right?

With a soft clink, I flicked open the clasp of my cloak, letting it fall to the floor. The illusory ash, lightly sprinkled over my hair and previously hidden underneath the hood, shimmered faintly. Upon realizing I was not only a child but also a girl, a number of them immediately changed their attitudes.

The smirk disappeared off the face of one of the four men, a scout, who took one look at my face and hair, turned pale, and began to sweat profusely. "I-I ain't got nothin' to do with it!" he screamed in such distress that one would've thought he was being tortured. "This guy picked a fight all on his own! Leave me out of this crap!" With that, he threw down his weapon and backed away.

"Hey, what?"

"What's going on?"

As his companions spoke to him with concern, reaching for him, the scout smacked away their hands and yelled, "Stop! I ain't involved in this, and I ain't with you people either! I don't want any trouble with you! Let me go, please!

Our guild doesn't want any trouble with you, Lady Cinders!"

The shrieking scout scrambled out of the Adventurer's Guild, and several other adventurers who'd been egging the group on also turned pale and bolted, leaving behind an awkward silence.

Oh. I see. That scout wasn't an adventurer, nor was he part of this guild. He was a thief, part of this barony's Thieves' Guild. The nickname he'd used for me, "Lady Cinders," had begun circulating through the various Thieves' Guilds after my body began developing into its current form.

Usually, such monikers didn't spread farther than their region of origin, but Thieves' Guild members everywhere, regardless of what network they operated under, had taken to calling me that. More recently, even people in the various Adventurers' Guilds and Assassins' Guilds had begun referring to me by that name too.

The scout's fearful reaction had probably had something to do with the fact I'd destroyed two branches of the Thieves' Guild, once feared even this far north: the Thieves' Guild in Dandorl and the "battle-specialist" Thieves' Guild in Kendras. What kind of sinister rumors had been spreading, I wondered?

Maybe they weren't just scared of me. Maybe they were also scared that any branches of the Thieves' Guild that weren't opposing me would be purged. Either way, the guild in this area seemed to not want to get involved.

"Tch." Despite not understanding the situation, and perhaps influenced by the uneasy atmosphere, the adventurer who'd been antagonizing me clicked his tongue and backed off. His companions looked at me awkwardly and bowed their heads slightly in apology before trailing after him.

Once they disappeared from the guild, an apologetic voice reached my ears. "I'm so sorry," the receptionist said. "Could you please let this go? Between you and me, things have been dire in his hometown of late, so he's been on edge. Anyway..." The receptionist looked at me intently, then let her shoulders fall in defeat. "You were a girl, huh?"

"Yes," I confirmed. I'd been disguised as a boy when we'd first met, so her reaction made sense.

Regardless, between the gatekeeper's warning and the situation she'd just mentioned with the man's hometown, something *had* to be happening in this barony.

"I hear dangerous monsters have appeared," I said. "Did something happen?" "Well—" the receptionist began.

"You there. Are you Alia?" a boyish voice interrupted her. I turned toward the source and saw a boy I vaguely recognized staring at me in astonishment.

Behind him, a girl who looked to be about ten years old had slumped to the floor on her hands and knees, even more dumbfounded than the receptionist, and was lamenting loudly. "Alia...was a girl..."

Their exaggerated reactions made me recognize them: the orphaned siblings I'd first met in the slums of this town.

"It's been a while, Jil and Shuri."

Encroaching Threat

"Cyclone!" I chanted, unleashing the Level 3 Dagger Mastery technique and slicing the surface of the log that had been set out as a target in the training area of the Adventurers' Guild.

Though the technique itself was a type of non-elemental magic, Cyclone incorporated a wind element. It was a ranged attack skill that sliced through an area with a radius of about one meter. Strictly speaking, it was inferior in power and usability to the Level 1 skill Thrust, but it could disperse fire or wind-based attack spells in an instant and was highly effective against small monsters moving in swarms.

I'd only seen the skill once, back when Daggart, the leader of the Mercenaries of Dawn, had used it. It'd taken a lot of effort to learn it based on that single instance of witnessing it in use, but given that I'd seen and felt it directly, it had proved surprisingly achievable with enough training.

I flicked the black dagger once to dispel the lingering heat from the aether I'd used for the technique and sheathed it at my lower back. Claps echoed behind

me, and just like before, the receptionist walked up to me.

"Nicely done. I imagine you've grown physically because of the increase in your aether, but to be able to reach Rank 3 at your age, you must've studied under quite a renowned teacher, right?"

"Right..." It sounded like she didn't remember that Viro had been with me during my last visit.

Although I had indeed studied under a mentor, who was in fact a renowned sorceress in the underworld, I'd picked up the basics of Dagger Mastery from Feld and combat techniques from Viro, and Sera had corrected and refined my abilities. Besides that, though, I'd done most of my training on my own, honing my unique style by eliminating anything unnecessary in favor of efficiency in actual combat.

Thinking back on Viro's and Sera's dagger techniques, I recalled they'd used a wide variety of forms, as was typical of various martial arts styles. While I wouldn't dismiss their value, I didn't have the time or the experience to master them all and had instead chosen to perfect the basics, enhancing the accuracy and power of single strikes.

Any creature would die if pierced by a blade. My philosophy was that a strike delivered to a vital point with millimetric precision and at just the right angle could rival thousands of techniques. Thus, the core of my combat style was the combination of illusions and poison.

"Now, here you go. Your Rank 3 guild tag," the receptionist said.

"Thank you," I replied.

Standard Adventurers' Guild tags were like pendants, consisting of a thumbsized copper plate attached to a thin chain. My newly made tag not only showed my rank of 3 but was also mixed with rust-proof magic iron, making it slightly darker in color than the old one.

I had considered using Light Magic to increase my rank to 3. There were two Level 3 light-elemental sorcery spells: Dispel, which required a cursed target, and High Cure, which cost a large amount of aether and restored wounds and vitality quickly and efficiently. Using High Cure would've attracted a lot of

attention, which made me abandon the idea.

After paying the registration renewal fee of three silver, I returned to the lobby. The atmosphere here was still a little tense, and the siblings from the slums—Jil and Shuri—were waiting for me.

"Ali—" Shuri began, but stopped when I shook my head.

This was bad. Presumably, any adventurers with connections to the underworld had already left, so it was probably safe at the moment. Still, although he'd implied that the Thieves' Guild in this town was not hostile to me, it was hard to judge how true that statement was. Just being thought to be an acquaintance of mine could land someone in trouble.

Maybe I should just eliminate the guild while I'm here, I thought. I didn't like that idea very much, though. It'd make me no different from Graves, who had tried to kill me "just in case." Perhaps he and I thought in much the same way and the only difference between us was what we were trying to protect. That one difference had pitted us against each other in a fight to the death.

Either way, that was a concern for later. I signaled to Jil and Shuri with a glance and walked out of the Adventurers' Guild, then into a nearby alley. The siblings followed after a short while.

"I-Is it safe now, Alia?" Jil, the older brother, asked with a somewhat nervous demeanor.

Last time we'd met, he'd seen me as a rival, but now that he knew I was a girl, his competitive streak seemed to have disappeared. I supposed he couldn't see a woman as a rival. He was avoiding my gaze but kept stealing glances at me. Maybe he was angry I'd pretended to be a boy?

"Yeah," I replied. "It's best for you two not to get too involved with me. You could get in a lot of trouble."

"What do you mean by—"

"You're such a dummy, Jil," Shuri cut in. "Alia is Rank 3, right? She's probably doing amazing stuff out there. There's no way she'd form a party with beginners like us."

Oh. So they'd wanted to speak to me about partying up.

"I know that!" Jil protested. "Anyway, what happened to all the doom and gloom from earlier? You're all better already?"

"Well, I mean, Alia's all grown up now, and a girl and all that, but... Even though she's a girl, she's really pretty, and really cool, so I think it's still a solid 'maybe,' you know?" Shuri said with an almost maniacal chuckle.



"What do you mean, 'a solid maybe'?! It's obviously a no!" Jil snapped.

Shuri glared sharply at Jil. "You're the one who won't even look at her because of how pretty she is!"

"Wh— Hey!"

"Is your business with me done?" I interjected. The conversation had been heading in a weird direction, maybe because they were excited to see me again after so long. Still, I was about ready to leave.

Jil's expression turned desperate. "We didn't just want to party up. There's a place we wanted to go," he explained.

"Jil!" Shuri exclaimed.

"Come on, Shuri, I know you're not okay with this either!"

Tired of their nonsensical conversation, I asked, "Can you two please start from the beginning?"

"Truth is," Jil began, "we're not originally from this town. We come from a smaller one, west of here."

As I listened to Jil and Shuri's disjointed explanation, I tried to summarize the key points in my head. The two had been born in a small town to the west. Their mother had passed away early on, and their father had remarried. However, due to an epidemic years later, their father, too, had passed.

The two had lived for a while with their stepmother and their newly born younger brother, but life was tough. The stepmother, wanting to leave the farm to her own child, conspired with her family and drove the two siblings out of the house, abandoning them in this town.

Apparently this had only just happened when they met me. It was difficult for children with no knowledge of the necessities of daily life to survive on their own in the slums. However, it was very likely that Viktor, the owner of the general store, had watched out for the siblings, despite his nagging.

"You saved us and even gave us money back then, Alia. It was a big help," Jil said.

"Yeah! You were so cool that it inspired us to become stronger, so now we're adventurers," Shuri explained.

"I see..." I hadn't done anything, though. I'd seen an enemy and killed him, no more than that.

"We sold rabbits to the old man at the general store and bought weapons from Galvus with the money," Jil continued.

"Look, see?" Shuri said as she and her brother proudly showed me their weapons, a short blade and a knife, both made of steel. The pieces did indeed seem to suit the two "just fine."

I doubted the raggedy rabbits they'd brought in would've fetched enough to buy weapons of this caliber, though, so the cranky old duo must've given them the weapons as a gift of sorts. They really were soft at heart.

The siblings continued to explain that when Shuri turned ten, she and thirteen-year-old Jil had started adventuring— Actually, no, they still had no combat skills, so they'd started making a living by carrying gear for adventurers.

"There's some people at the Adventurers' Guild here who knew us from our old town," Jil explained. "We lug gear around for their party and other people they know."

"They teach us to fight sometimes!" Shuri added. "We don't get sorcery at all, though!"

And thus, the two had been living like that, until one day they heard a strange rumor.

"Orcs, you said?" I asked.

"Yeah," Shuri confirmed.

Earlier, while I was talking to the receptionist, she'd mentioned that it wasn't public knowledge yet, but orcs had apparently formed a settlement a little to the west of the ruins, near the area where other monsters lived. Not only that, they were located between the ruins and a town, so there had already been a few casualties.

In such a case, I figured it was the baron's job, as the lord of these lands, to

send soldiers to the town. That, or the town should've petitioned the Adventurers' Guild for help. And apparently the baron had, in fact, commissioned scouts from the guild to investigate the scope of the situation. What the scouts had uncovered was horrifying: the group consisted of fifty ordinary Rank 3 orcs and four Rank 4 orc soldiers. Leading them was an orc general—a Rank 5 monster.

In this town, there were 150 soldiers employed by the barony. If they gathered forces from other towns as well, they could reach three hundred, but most of these soldiers were Rank 1 or 2, with only about thirty captains at Rank 3. Even in large cities like the capital, Rank 4 soldiers were few and far between. In times of war, there was also the militia system, but against orcs Rank 3 and above, even a thousand militiamen would likely just get slaughtered.

If it were just the ordinary orcs and the orc soldiers, the baron's soldiers might've been able to fend off an incursion, but the orc general alone could kill half of them. Moreover, some soldiers had to be kept in towns to maintain public order, so at most, the barony would be able to send a hundred men, ten of them Rank 3 captains. And with those numbers, they would likely just end up being massacred, the receptionist had explained.

That being the case, the town's only recourse was to call upon the Adventurers' Guild, but to take down the Rank 4 orc general, a party of at least five people was needed, with at minimum three of them being Rank 4 themselves. And that was assuming the orc general could be confronted apart from the other orcs. Currently, in the barony and its adjacencies, there was only one Rank 4 adventurer. The guild planned on summoning this person to lead other adventurers, but this plan had yet to be approved.

In the end, the baron was hesitant to deploy his troops for fear they'd be annihilated, and the Adventurers' Guild could not forcibly mobilize their members unless there was an emergency, like a monster outbreak. There were other unresolved issues too, such as whether the town or the barony would fund the adventurers, and to what extent the adventurers would handle the situation, with the result that nobody could take action.

For now, the townspeople were reinforcing the fences around the town with logs to help keep the monsters at bay, but in the event of a serious attack by

the orc soldiers or general, these defenses weren't expected to hold for long.

"That's our hometown," Jil murmured. He bit his lip.

Shuri scowled. "Who cares what happens to that town? That's where *she* is—the lady who abandoned us."

"But our baby brother is there! And our friends too!"

"I don't remember those 'friends' anymore. Besides, *her* child isn't a baby brother to me!"

"Shuri!" Despite scolding his sister, Jil seemed to understand her feelings.
Unsure of what to say to her, he turned to me. "Alia, she doesn't have to come.
Can you just go with me to that town, please?"

"Jil, no!" Shuri protested. "You could die!"

So Jil, though he'd been treated cruelly and had no good memories of the town, still wanted to help those he knew. Shuri, meanwhile, did seem to be scared for her half-brother's life deep down, but her more immediate concern was the possibility of Jil dying.

"What about the adventurers you mentioned?" I asked. "The ones who know you from there?"

"They're going there, but when I asked them to bring me along, they said it was too dangerous," Jil explained.

"Of course they did!" Shuri yelled.

Of course, I agreed inwardly. "I can't do it either. I'm not taking either of you."

"Alia, come on!" Jil pleaded, taking a step forward.

I lightly swept his leg and, as he fell, I placed a knife against his neck. "You'll die there."

"Ugh," Jil groaned. Being knocked down by a younger girl must've made him realize his own weakness.

"Besides," I continued and, without even looking, threw my concealed pendulums at a man hiding nearby, causing him to jump out. Immediately, I maneuvered one pendulum to wrap around his ankle, preventing him from fleeing, and wrapped the other around his neck, yanking him to the ground. "Who are you? A thief? An assassin?"

"N-No! I was just watchin'! I wasn't gonna defy the guild or nothin'! I just hadn't seen those two before, so I—"

"Make your excuses in the afterlife."

"W-Wait!"

Snap.

Using the pendulum's string, I twisted the man's neck and broke it sideways. This man had discovered Jil and Shuri's existence; I couldn't afford to take risks.

"I'm being targeted by both the Thieves' and the Assassins' Guilds. I can't afford to bring along anyone who can't protect themselves. You'd just be dead weight."

I casually tossed the thief's body into a secluded spot that couldn't be seen from the main street, as though it were just garbage, and Jil and Shuri paled. We might've been standing in the same place physically, but we belonged to vastly different worlds now.

Considering these two barely had any fighting ability, the best way to ensure their survival was...

"I'll go to the neighboring town and check on things. If anyone's trying to escape, I'll help out. You two stay here."

"Alia..." Jil murmured in astonishment, while Shuri wiped her eyes with her sleeves, trying to hide her tears.

As I walked away, not toward the main street but into a dark alley, I heard Shuri's small voice whisper, "Please save them..."

Small Town

Though precise geographical data on the barony was classified as military grade, generic information, such as how to get to Jil and Shuri's hometown, was publicly available at the guild. And now that I was Rank 3, I had access to a few

more details.

"Do you plan on going to that town?" the receptionist asked upon noticing me looking at the map.

"Do you plan on stopping me?" I asked in turn. Even if she did, I'd still go, but she shook her head slightly in response.

"I'd like to, considering your age, but with your abilities, you have a higher chance of survival than other adventurers. Just don't be reckless, okay? Also, just so you know, our guild expects Rank 3 scouts to bring back information from the site."

"And...you'd buy that information from me?"

"Of course."

We exchanged small smiles. She'd willingly brought me the latest information on the orcs, and after accepting the files, I spent the rest of the day gathering whatever additional details I could find before departing from the town the next day.

I didn't run into the adventurer who'd challenged me. Not that I had any plans to, but if he'd tried to bother me outside of town, I wouldn't have had any reason to wait for him to make the first move this time.

Naturally, given the danger, there were no carriages to my destination. I heard even merchants hadn't been heading that way, so I bought a gold's worth of supplies as a precaution and split them between my backpack and Shadow Storage. "Not like I would've used a carriage anyway," I mused.

Jil and Shuri's hometown was three days away by carriage and five on foot from the town where the baron resided. I, however, could reach it in two days. I exited the town's northern gate, walked along the road for a while to avoid attracting suspicion, and gradually went faster until I was running toward my destination at about sixty percent of my maximum speed.

As the forest grew denser around me, I matched the color of my mana to my surroundings and activated Stealth. I kept vigilant with Night Vision and muffled my footsteps by enhancing my leg strength with Boost. Since this area was close to the monsters' habitat near the border, many of them could be found here,

though few of them would approach the main road closer to the town.

Though this world was under constant threat from monsters, even ordinary villages could make do with simple fences due to the fact that the stronger, highly intelligent monsters tended to avoid human settlements. Intelligent monsters feared humans who lived in groups and wielded weapons; if that were not the case, then by now, people and monsters would've fought each other until one side was wiped out.

According to my earlier research at the Adventurers' Guild, only goblins and wolves could be found on the main road.

Allegedly.

"Oh," I murmured as a hobgoblin suddenly emerged from the forest by the road, outside my Detection range. I immediately spread Boost to my whole body while remaining under Stealth, and using a special footwork technique, I leaped forward, kicking the hobgoblin's temple with my heel.

"Gah!" the creature yelped from the sudden impact.

Using the momentum from the kick, I thrust the black dagger into its neck and brain, then vaulted over its head and ran past before it fell.

I was a little surprised. A hobgoblin casually strolling up to the road told me two things. One, since there was definitely an orc settlement nearby, it meant the monsters around it were starting to migrate to other areas. Two, it meant that the patrolmen were either absent or...barricaded somewhere.

Sounded like the barony was having trouble staying on top of things. They didn't know whether they could eradicate the orcs with their current forces, so the best thing they could do would be to seek help from their liege, Count Taurus. The lack of soldiers in this area was likely an attempt to preserve their forces until reinforcements arrived.

However, that decision, although prudent, might nevertheless prove to be the wrong one. Even if the count responded to the call for help, it was winter, and the added difficulty in logistics meant it would be at least two months before they could gather troops and supplies and dispatch them to the barony. And if the count didn't consider the matter to be important enough, it was entirely

possible no troops would be deployed before spring.

The same was true of the Adventurers' Guild. To the guild, adventurers were workers—assets. With only Rank 3 adventurers available, the guild couldn't force a mission, as that would be a death sentence. All they could do for the time being was wait for the arrival of the lone Rank 4 adventurer, then devise a solution from there.

So the situation might change in a few months, but... "A small town won't last until then," I mused.

I continued running along the road, taking brief naps along the way, and reached the town two days later.

With a population of roughly two thousand, most of whom made a living through agriculture, the place looked more like a large village than a small town. Fields stretched beyond the fences built to repel beasts, but they looked quite neglected, probably because deer and small animals had been encroaching upon them in the absence of people.

The town, visible in the distance, was surrounded by stone walls about as tall as an average person. While these could repel goblin attacks, they wouldn't withstand multiple strikes from stronger monsters like orcs. The walls had been reinforced with logs and stakes, which was better than nothing, but not much beyond that.

"Hey! You there!" a man, seemingly a soldier, called out from a watchtower inside the closed gate as I approached. "What business do you have here?!"

"I'm an adventurer," I told him. "I was asked by a former resident to check on the town."

"A girl like you, an adventurer?"

"Won't you let me in?"

"Oh! My bad. I'll open the gate, so please come in." The soldier hurriedly descended from the watchtower, and the reinforced gate creaked open slightly. "Sorry, please hurry. We need to close this quickly."

"Got it." I squeezed through a narrow gap just wide enough for a person. Two soldiers immediately closed the gate again and secured it with a thick bar.

"Phew," the soldier said. "An adventurer, you said? You know what's going on here, right? Honestly, we'll take any help we can get..."

"Yeah, I'm aware." I handed over the supplies I'd brought in my Shadow Storage.

His eyes lit up when he checked the contents. "This is great! Merchants haven't been coming, so we really needed salt!"

While they certainly needed reinforcements, I figured that with the town under siege, they'd have limited food supplies to spare for noncombatants. The human body craved salt so intensely that a deficiency altered one's sense of taste. Though the salt wouldn't be enough for all the town's residents, the soldiers and those working to reinforce the walls would need more salt than usual. I'd brought a whole gold coin's worth of it, anticipating that with no merchants visiting the town, their limited supply wouldn't have been enough, even rationed.

"So, how are things here?" I asked.

The soldiers' expressions went from delighted at the prospect of a decent meal to grim. "You've heard about the orcs, right?" one of them said. "A few weeks ago, a group of orcs showed up, and some farmers working outside the walls were killed."

"Our lord sent an adventurer to help," the other explained. "He went to investigate and found a whole bunch more orcs..."

"There's a village out there that's been deserted for ten years. The orcs probably settled there," the first soldier ventured. "They'll eat anything, so they've been taking the crops outside the walls, but once those run out, they'll come for us. If our lord's army isn't here by then..." He trailed off for a second. "Hey, what's the Adventurers' Guild doing? Is anyone coming this way to—"

At that moment, four men in armor—adventurers, by the look of it—came running toward us from the direction of the town's residential area.

"Heeey!" one of them called out.

"Did something happen?!" another asked.

"Oh! You're—"

It was the adventurer who'd harassed me at the guild and his companions. I wasn't anticipating running into them here, but thinking back, the receptionist at the guild *had* mentioned him being from this town. Maybe it was his group that had hired Jil and Shuri.

The thief who'd been posing as a scout wasn't among them, of course, but the man who'd confronted me at the guild once again approached me aggressively. "You! Why are you here?!" he demanded.

"Wait, wait! I dunno what happened, but hold your horses, Kevin!" one of the soldiers interjected hastily upon sensing the tense atmosphere. Maybe the salt I'd brought had made a difference, since, despite seemingly being an acquaintance and fellow townsman of Kevin's, the soldier didn't take his side immediately.

At this, Kevin's companions, who also seemed contrite, began to try and dissuade him too. "Yeah," one said. "Just drop it, man. This girl's strong, right?"

"That's right," another added, then looked at me. "By the way, did you manage to get your Rank 3 registration?"

"Yes," I replied. I reached into my leather dress and took out the guild tag as proof. Upon seeing it, both the soldiers and the adventurers exclaimed in surprise.

"Whoooa..."

"She really is Rank 3..."

"That's incredible at her age."

Kevin, meanwhile, clicked his tongue and stepped away from the group. "So? Why are you *really* here?" he asked.

"Some acquaintances asked me to check on this place, that's all," I replied.

"They have family and friends here. Why aren't the residents evacuating, by the way?"

Kevin's eyes widened at my casual question. "Are you an idiot?! These people

have lived here their whole lives! This place is all they know! Some of them are ready to die with the crops in their fields!"

"Kevin!" one of his friends protested as he tried to lunge at me.

"Stop it already!" another added. They grabbed his arms, holding him in place.

The first soldier, seemingly annoyed at Kevin for having interrupted the conversation, heaved a sigh and said, "The ones with money or relatives in the surrounding area have already fled. But, like that idiot said, there are elderly and sick people who can't survive elsewhere. Their families can't leave easily. If we had more time, we might manage, but..." He went on to explain that about thirty percent of the residents couldn't evacuate, then gave me a pleading look. "Hey. What's the Adventurers' Guild up to? Can't they help us?"

"Not yet," I replied. "Without a Rank 4 party, the guild can't take action."

"I...see." He seemed to have expected that answer but nevertheless looked disheartened.

"If you really are Rank 3, then do something about it," Kevin spat out, glaring at me as his companions restrained him.

I see, I mused. "Let him go. I can handle him."

"Please, wait! Kevin's just upset!" one of the men holding him back pleaded, seemingly unsure of whom to worry about.

Ignoring him, I beckoned lightly with my finger, glaring coldly at Kevin. "All bark and no bite? Don't you want to know what a Rank 3 can do?"

"What did you say?!" Enraged by my provocation, Kevin finally drew his sword.

One of the soldiers tried to intervene. "Hey! Cut it out!" They couldn't just sit back and allow things to take a violent turn, after all.

However, I activated my Level 3 Intimidation, glaring daggers at all present and making it clear I would kill if necessary. The soldiers and Kevin's companions all stiffened.

Meanwhile, Kevin, though his bravado was crumbling under the force of my

resolve and his face was contorting in fear, managed to point his sword at me. "R-Raaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

His wild swing could hardly be called swordsmanship—it was more like a child flailing about. I dodged it, then struck Kevin's face with the heel of my palm.

"Guh!" Kevin groaned, his head snapping back. Immediately, I struck his wrist, causing him to drop his sword, then landed punch after punch on his chest and stomach while he was defenseless. He gasped for breath with each attack, his face turning an ashen color. "Gah! Gwah! Grah!"

Kevin wasn't worthy of my dagger. Though he'd been wielding a sword longer than I'd been alive, his swings had been undignified. He'd pointed his sword at me in anger but without the resolve to kill. What was he hoping to achieve with such halfheartedness?

I mercilessly beat him. His eyes couldn't follow my movements as I struck his arms, abdomen, chest, face, and internal organs; the pummeling was completely one-sided.

Finally, I halted my attacks, and Kevin collapsed to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. "Guh... Ah..."

Kevin's companions and the soldiers stared fearfully at me, having just witnessed me utterly demolish him in under ten seconds.

Ignoring their gazes, I coldly stared down at the fallen Kevin. "Do you even know who your enemy is, Kevin? What your reason for wielding a sword is?" I wouldn't deny him what he wanted. If he turned his sword on me again, whatever his reasons were, then as his fellow human and warrior, I would kill him.

"Guh..." Even as he lay battered, Kevin returned my glare, his pain fueling his anger as he struggled back onto his feet. "I'll...save the people...of this town."

"Then do that." I stepped away from him and turned to face the others. "You there, adventurers. Help the townspeople escape and keep an eye out for orcs. And you, soldiers, how much longer until the remaining residents can evacuate?"

"Uh, um, give us five...no, four weeks!" one of the soldiers replied, his eyes

now shining with a new spark after watching my exchange with Kevin. "We'll get all the soldiers together and make it happen!" With this newfound determination, I knew he wouldn't give up, no matter how dire the situation was.

"Please do, then."

"And you?" one of Kevin's companions asked, looking at me anxiously. "What will you do?"

I glanced briefly at Kevin, then back at his companion. "I mean, you heard what he said, right? That I should do something, if I really am Rank 3?"

In their current state, these people would be able to handle evacuating the residents, even without any further help from me. This meant I could fulfill my role.

I drew my black dagger and faced the direction of the abandoned village where the orcs had settled. "You need a month, I'll buy you a month."

That was the promise I'd made to those two, after all.

A Strategy Against the Orcs

I was to hold off a group of orcs on my own for a whole month, including one that was Rank 5.

From that fact alone, some might've thought me mad or suicidal. I expected some arguments, both in favor of and against the idea, but perhaps because I'd gone overboard with the intimidation, all present simply agreed with the plan.

I was looking at fifty Rank 3 orcs, four Rank 4 orc soldiers, and one Rank 5 orc general. An untrained militia wouldn't have stood a chance against them headon, and even well-trained soldiers would've needed to outnumber the orcs by more than ten to one. Anyone of sound mind would calculate that holding off the orcs required over a hundred adventurers or soldiers.

But I'd never been given to doing the "sound" thing.

While it was possible I could find the house where Jil and Shuri had lived, I had no plans to look after people I didn't know. If they wanted to flee, I'd buy

them time, but whether the siblings' stepmother and younger brother chose to escape or stay was up to them.

Thanks to the guild's receptionist, I had a rough idea of where the group of orcs was located. I got additional details from the first soldier I'd spoken to, and decided to head straight to the orcs' stronghold without resting in town for the night. The stronghold was supposedly two days away on foot for an adventurer, and I figured I could better that time by at least half a day. The place had been a village until ten or so years ago; there would've been a road wide enough for a carriage back then, but after a decade, it had turned into little more than an animal trail.

When the path grew grassy, I examined the ground and found several large, seemingly recent footprints, confirming I was on the right track. After finding several more in various spots, I concluded the orcs were moving in groups of about three. Orc intelligence was somewhere between that of a goblin and a human, but as the monsters went up in rank, so did their intellect. From the footprints and other traces I'd found, it was clear the orcs were being coordinated.

I could handle three orcs at once, but they were still Rank 3 monsters. If I didn't finish them off quickly, they might call for reinforcements. Unlike humans, who relied on the flexibility provided by multiple different skills to adapt to different circumstances, monsters' strength lay in applying brute force via specialized skills and high stats. An orc's combat power was about half of mine at Rank 3, but their high health meant that if there were enough of them, I wouldn't be able to whittle them down fast enough and would ultimately be forced to go on the defensive.

Moreover, if the corpses of orcs I killed were discovered by other orcs, they'd realize their kind was under attack and retaliate against the town. Since they were omnivores, they were currently stealing crops from the fields outside of the town and had plenty of food. But, like humans, they'd grow greedy once sated and start craving meat. Despite eating anything, they did prefer meat over vegetables and were likely hunting what game was available in the vicinity of the abandoned village. Once that source of food was depleted, however, they'd undoubtedly attack the town in search of meat.

"But..." It was important to remember I was neither a hero nor a saint. My goal wasn't to exterminate the orcs; it was to buy as much time as possible for the townspeople to flee. Therefore, rather than hunt down orcs or intentionally cause a food shortage among them, I needed to maintain the status quo. As I thought about this strategy, a self-derisive smile tugged at the corners of my lips. "Not a very 'sound' plan, is it?"

After trekking through the forest for about half a day while remaining unseen, I encountered a group of orcs—three, as expected. Difficult, but not impossible to deal with.

▼ Orc (Common)

Species: Demi-Human (Rank 3)

Aether Points: 72/80

Health Points: 392/420

Overall Combat Power: 279 (Boosted: 320)

They were armed with rusty spears and crude stone axes, but what concerned me more was their health. Even with the element of surprise on my side, health that high could prevent me from killing them instantly.

Since the orcs weren't carrying any game, I figured they were likely on patrol and tasked with eliminating intruders. This meant that if they failed to return, the other orcs would be alerted that something was amiss. And even if I were to target them, it would've been foolish to do so here instead of waiting until they were much farther away from their settlement. With that in mind, I avoided this and other groups of orcs I encountered by hiding in the grass or quietly crawling past.

Finally, I arrived at the abandoned village said to be where the orcs were gathered. Originally, the village had been surrounded by log walls staked into the ground, but now many parts were damaged and rotten; the orcs had filled the gaps with rocks.

For the moment, I returned to the woods and covered my cloak, hair, and face with mud to mask my appearance and scent. From this point forward, I couldn't afford to be seen or alert them to my presence in any way, not even once, until all my preparations were complete.

I hid high in the branches of a tall tree and ate only a small amount of dried meat and alchemically crafted nutritional pellets, waiting until it was sufficiently dark. I then tied the rabbit fur I'd brought for soundproofing to the soles of my boots. Using Level 4 Aether Manipulation and Stealth to merge my mana with that of my surroundings, I became a shadow moving through the darkness. I avoided all contact with orcs, not striking even when I spotted an opportunity.

According to that woman's knowledge, approaching from downwind was ideal for stealth, but in this world, that was only half correct. Using the spell Cleanse, I rid myself of my human scent so I would smell like mud. Moving in tandem with the gentle night breeze—rather than against it, which would've created an unnatural air flow—allowed me to fully blend with the shadows.

With a quiet whoosh, I wrapped a pendulum around part of the decayed log wall and soundlessly infiltrated the abandoned village. Based on its area and the number of remaining houses, it was likely that around five hundred people had once lived here. The woods had reclaimed whatever fields had been outside the walls, but others remained visible, albeit overgrown, within the village. Around them, at the center of the village, were forty houses, with about thirty more scattered to the east, west, and south. The orcs seemed to be using these half-decayed houses as they pleased.

First, I needed to determine the precise number and distribution of the orcs. How many of them were there in each section? Where were the orc general and the four orc soldiers? Without this information, I couldn't make accurate predictions.

My investigation went on all night. I found that there were one orc soldier and about fifteen ordinary orcs to the west; to the east, there were only a handful of orcs serving as sentries. South, there were just under twenty orcs and another orc soldier. At the very center were the two remaining orc soldiers and about fifteen more orcs. I assumed the general was also somewhere near the center, but this was only a guess; I could sense a powerful presence there,

and it was too risky to approach the area.

The exact numbers were somewhat fuzzy due to the fact there had been orcs out of the village on night patrol, but still, this estimate wasn't far off from the "fifty-odd" orcs that the baron's hired adventurer had reported.

I returned to the woods before the break of dawn and began to forage at a distance from the abandoned village. I gathered herbs, both medicinal and poisonous, as well as various other local flora. These, combined with the materials I had on hand, would determine the types of poisons I could create. The edible items would also serve me as food. While insects and frogs from these woods could have provided more powerful toxins, I would've had to collect them in larger amounts, so I'd opted to focus on plants and fungi instead. Among my finds was a rare mushroom that could be used for both poison and medicine; I collected as many as I could, then tied them with vines and hung them high up in a tree to dry.

That wasn't all I did that day, however. I also monitored the orcs' movements and investigated the range of their patrol and foraging parties. There was no telling when the orcs might change their behavior and invade the town, so I couldn't afford to let my guard down. Any lapse in judgment on my part could put the town at risk. Though I had concerns about my stamina in the long term, I figured I could get by on three hours of sleep per day, in intervals of up to five minutes.

After a week of that, I'd begun to grasp the orcs' general behavioral patterns.

Every three days, about ten orcs would leave to collect crops from the fields outside the town. I figured it had been these orcs that had initially attacked the townspeople. I spotted this group twice, and one of those times, there'd been an orc soldier with them. Additionally, every day at dawn, another group of about ten orcs would go hunting for animals. These were all smaller and younger orcs with lower combat power.

Although I had the pellets to keep me going, my condition would have begun to deteriorate after a week of subsisting on only those, so, to supplement them, I made an effort to consume fruits I found around the forest and the dried meat I had on hand while continuing to steer clear of the abandoned village. I'd found a surprising amount of wild beans and yams, but those didn't taste good raw.

I figured seven days of gathering general information were enough and decided it was time to start taking action.

The first phase of my plan was to hunt animals, but not for me to eat. From my observations, I'd determined that the orcs weren't very good hunters; they were a large species and unsuited for stealth, so even with a party of ten of them out hunting, there were days when they didn't catch anything. On those days, they'd break branches off of berry-bearing shrubs in the forest and bring those back.

The reason the orcs went hunting every day, obviously, was that the higher-ranked ones preferred meat to beans and vegetables. To delay the orcs attacking the town for meat, I decided to hunt rabbits and deer and leave them around the abandoned village. Humans would usually avoid touching unknown carcasses unless they were desperate, and would've suspected something. But the orcs, perhaps mistakenly thinking that their comrades had been the ones to hunt these animals, were more than happy to bring the freshly killed game back with them.

At the same time, I began to prepare materials to craft a suitable toxin. Making enough for fifty orcs, in the middle of the woods, without any alchemical tools was extremely challenging, so I took it one step at a time. I dried poisonous herbs and mushrooms, processed them using a mortar and pestle made with Harden, and used what chemicals and ingredients I had on hand to begin crafting the poison.

By the second week, the orcs' behavior remained unchanged, likely because of the steady supply of meat. Still, if they were to act, all of my preparations would've been in vain, so I proceeded to the second stage of my plan. And an important part of it was the fact that, despite being monsters and attacking people, orcs were still living beings that needed to eat and drink.

The well in the abandoned village had become clogged with decomposed leaves and soil over the past decade. There remained a single reservoir within the village where water still gushed forth, though it wasn't clean. The orcs, however, being monsters, drank from it without a care.

My poison complete, I divided it into several earthenware bottles for storage. Under the cover of night, I snuck into the village to gradually mix the concoction into the reservoir water. I only used small amounts at a time, allowing the orcs to get used to the substance's taste.

Orcs consumed carrion and drank murky water, so a diluted poison would have little effect on them. Conversely, if they were to suddenly fall ill from ingesting a large dose, they'd grow wary and stop drinking the water. Thus, I slowly increased the amount I added to the water, ensuring it'd affect them without raising any alarms.

That wasn't all, however. I also snuck into houses with sleeping orcs and tainted their various foodstuffs with the poison. And, of course, I also gradually added the concoction to the meat I left out for them. Lastly, I applied acidic agents to the seams of weapons that orcs would carelessly leave outside the houses. I only had a small amount of acid, but it should still be enough to gradually weaken the weapons.

Patiently, diligently, I infected the orcs with my personal brand of venomous malice.

I wouldn't make the mistake of rushing things and revealing my hand. I wasn't strong like Feld or Graves, nor was I so arrogant as to think I could stall that many orcs for a full month by picking them off a few at a time. If I failed, many would die; if I underestimated the orcs even by a fraction, I would die. Failure wasn't an option. I couldn't give the orcs a single chance to retaliate.

The orc horde was like a massive boulder. Instead of carelessly attempting to shatter it with a greatsword or hammer, I would use a needle, bore a hole, and slowly let my malice seep in.

But even my tactic had its limits. The poison I'd used wasn't particularly strong; in fact, it could barely be called poison at all. It was more a tincture, made of common types of medicine: laxatives and decongestants.

Laxatives, needless to say, were normally used to expel bodily waste, but taken over a prolonged period of time, they caused dehydration and a loss of stamina. The decongestants, on the other hand, were meant to help with runny noses during colds—but had the side effect of increasing thirst. And the more

water the orcs drank, the more my malice chipped away at them.

Three weeks total had passed since my arrival, and most of the orcs had begun to show signs of dehydration. They'd finally begun to suspect something was causing it and seemed to think it was eating the discarded carcasses. I had, in fact, also been poisoning those, so the orcs were half right. They no longer wanted to eat the meat from the carcasses, so they sent out both the hunters—which had been resting due to dehydration—and the crop-thieving orcs to collect non-meat foods.

Even assuming they did find food, however, it would soon cease to be enough; the higher-ranked orcs favoring meat would likely choose to raid the town. There was still one week to go before the evacuation of the townspeople who could leave was complete, and I could tell that my strategy to buy time was at its limit. Thus, I began the final stage of my plan—stalling them directly.

I came across three orcs walking through the woods. They were unarmed, carrying bags made of fur, so they were likely foraging for fruits and edible plants rather than hunting. Unlike the ones I'd seen three weeks ago, however, these orcs seemed sickly, struggling to even walk through the forest's terrain.

These I could handle.

▼ Orc (Common)

Species: Demi-Human (Rank 3)

Aether Points: 54/82

Health Points: 117/390

Overall Combat Power: 154/283 (∇ 45%)

[Affliction: Weakness]

One of the orcs' combat power had practically been halved. With a *thunk*, I kicked off the branch I'd been perched on and swooped down. A sharp sound echoed through the forest as I plunged the black dagger I'd gotten from Galvus into the weakened orc's skull with all my might.

"Bwooooooargh!"

Even then, the attack didn't instantly kill the beast, and its cry of agony alerted the other two, which raised alarmed cries of their own in turn. At this distance, however, their cries wouldn't reach the other orcs.

Whoosh.

I swung one of my pendulums at another orc, and the blade grazed its eye, prompting a pained grunt from the creature. Then I kicked at the dead leaves beneath my feet, aiming them at the third orc to obstruct its vision. With the black dagger in one hand and a thin knife in the other, I thrust at both orcs, driving the blades under their jaws and into their brains. It was a bit tough, but with their weakened muscles, I managed to pierce through. Pitiful cries escaped their mouths as I pulled the weapons out, and both coughed up blood before collapsing together.

"I bear no grudge against you," I murmured. But you're our enemies now.

The Orc Soldiers

After taking down the three orcs, I flicked the blood off my blades.

From here on, I was racing against time. My goal was to delay the orcs so the townspeople could escape and, at the same time, neutralize as many orcs as possible before the orc general became aware of my presence.

I put only strictly necessary items in the pouch at my waist and in Shadow Storage, then ate the remaining rock sugar and dried meat in my backpack. The last three weeks had left me exhausted, so to help myself recover, I uncorked my health and aether recovery potions and gulped them down. A hot breath, as though I'd drunk liquor, escaped my lips—a consequence of the thick mana present in the potions.

"I'm ready," I muttered, discarding the empty backpack and ceramic bottles before dashing deeper into the dim forest, where the sunlight only barely reached.

There were two more foraging parties of orcs in the woods. They almost always followed the same route, so even if their actions changed slightly each

day, I figured I could catch them without any issues.

And indeed, not long after I started running, I spotted the second party. "There they are."

My aether hadn't fully regenerated yet, but I decided to use Boost while the aether recovery potion was still in effect. One of the orcs noticed me, but before it could alert the others, I kicked off a tree trunk and leaped diagonally, using the momentum to thrust the black dagger into its mouth.

A pained gurgle escaped it; how annoying that even with their medullae pierced they didn't die instantly. The orc reached for me and I let go of the dagger, quickly pulling a pair of throwing knives out of Shadow Storage and stabbing it in one swift motion before drawing back.

"Gwaaah!" it cried out.

That finally alerted the other two to my presence, and they both raised cries of their own—a mix of confusion and fury. I was using Level 4 Stealth, so to them, it must've seemed as though I'd suddenly manifested from the forest landscape.

Immediately, I swung a pendulum to keep the two at bay, then pulled a thin knife out of my boot. Taking advantage of the orcs' confusion, I sliced one's neck, then drove the blade deep into its face.

"Bwooooooargh!" With a roar, the last one swung its stone axe at me. With its combat power reduced, however, it lacked focus and its movements were sluggish.

I left the knife in the second orc's face and dodged the third's axe, throwing the knife I'd gotten from Feld over its head. Unfocused, the third orc was distracted by the throw and didn't notice my full-strength, fully Boosted palm strike coming for its jaw. It cried out in pain as I snatched the falling knife out of midair and plunged it deep into the exposed underside of its chin.

"Next."

The first orc was finally dead as well; despite the orcs' high vitality, their diminished health points still meant they couldn't last long. I retrieved the knives from the dead orcs, wiped off the blood—taking special care with the

steel blade—and took off in search of my next target.

Even weakened and with reduced health points, the orcs' vitality made it hard to kill them in one hit unless I struck a vital spot. Normally, dealing with a Rank 3 opponent would've been much more difficult, but these ones, with their impaired focus and decreased combat power, I could handle without resorting to illusions or combat techniques. I wanted to conserve my aether points as much as I could until the higher-ranked ones showed up; if only I'd weighed a bit more, I could've relied solely on Martial Mastery. But there was no point in wishing for the impossible.

I went on to ambush and eliminate another foraging party, this one consisting of four orcs, as well as a group of three on patrol. This brought my kill count to thirteen, but I couldn't afford to dawdle. I took off running to eliminate the ones who'd gone to steal crops from the farms before they could reach the town's perimeter.

Using Boost, I dashed through the woods at top speed. The ability easily increased my physical strength beyond that of an adult male and enhanced my agility to nearly double that of an average person. Between that and my lightweight teenage body, I could run through the forest with steps lighter than a leopard's and faster than a wolf's. Leaping from rock to rock, branch to branch without touching the ground, I kept going and eventually caught up with the orcs before the effect of my healing potion wore off. I still had one more aether potion in my pouch, but I couldn't afford to waste any more magic in combat against lesser enemies.

Looking at the group, though... Weren't there too many? At a glance, I counted at least twelve of them.

Not that it changed what I had to do. Though I had a bad feeling, considering how close they were to the town, there was no time to stand back and observe them. I wrapped a pendulum around a thick branch and pulled myself up, enhancing my strength and stealth as I moved from branch to branch. Finally, I leaped down to ambush an orc walking at the rear.

But a loud "Bwooooooargh!" echoed through the forest before I could land a blow. Had I been spotted?

Regardless, the orc at the rear, despite hearing the warning cry, didn't notice me. I drove the black dagger into its medulla from behind with my full weight, and it collapsed, cushioning my landing.

Fourteen.

"Bwooooooargh!" The surrounding orcs also raised warning cries. I was still stealthed, so the alarmed orcs couldn't spot me instantly.

Still, I had a bad feeling, so I decided it was time to stop holding back and start using low-aether-cost spells.

"Touch," I chanted, using the spell both to receive the sensation of touching and impart the sensation of being touched.

I used the illusion to touch the ears of a pair of orcs walking side by side and, distracted, they turned around. No sooner had they broken formation than I wrapped the pendulum strings around their necks, and as they collapsed backward, I used the dagger and a knife to pierce their brains.

Sixteen.

"Bwoooooh!" a nearby orc cried out, finally noticing my presence. As I landed on my knees, it swung its loglike club at me, but the movement was sluggish.

I slightly lifted my hips and used special footwork to dodge the swing, then, with that momentum, drove both my blades into its eyes. My stance was off, so I couldn't drive the knives into its brain, and the orc cried out in pain, clutching its face with both hands.

"Bwooooogh!" At that moment, an orc wielding a rusty greatsword took advantage of the opening and came charging at me with terrifying speed.

I stifled a gasp. An orc soldier!

This was a Rank 4 foe, much more formidable. Its movements were faster, but not unmanageable. I kicked the orc clutching its face toward the orc soldier and dodged out of the greatsword's range; the blade cut halfway into the lesser orc's body.

Seventeen.

With the orc soldier's greatsword stuck into the other orc's corpse, I quickly pulled a knife from the slit in my skirt and threw it. In response, the orc soldier let out a loud roar, lifted the dead orc along with its greatsword, and used its comrade's body as a shield against my knife.

"Graaaaaaah!" an orc in leather armor roared, leaping over the greatsword-wielding orc soldier and charging at me with a spear.

A second orc soldier?! I immediately shot a crossbow bolt from the mechanism in my glove and leaped to the side. The spear-wielding orc soldier spun its weapon and deflected the bolt, then kicked off the ground to pursue me as I landed. Summoning my mana, I chanted, "Pain!"

The spell wasn't directed at the orc soldier, however. One of the orcs couldn't keep up with the fast-paced battle and had been standing still; it stiffened, letting out a distressed growl. I vaulted over it, shielding myself with its body, and the orc soldier's spear thrust mercilessly through the paralyzed orc, aiming for me.

I recoiled on instinct, narrowly avoiding a direct hit from the bloodsoaked spearhead, which only grazed my shoulder. As I pulled back, the spear-wielding orc soldier swung its weapon horizontally, discarding its comrade's corpse like a piece of trash.

Merciless of it to attack its friends, but that makes eightee—

A sudden surge of aether and ill intent interrupted my train of thought, and I leaped away just as a shock wave cleaved both the ground where I'd been standing and the large tree past it. I turned in the direction the blow had come from, and there stood a large orc in rusty iron armor, brandishing an equally rusty two-handed axe and glaring at me as it readied its weapon again.

Another one?! That's three of them!

I'd never seen that combat technique before, but my guess was that it was the two-handed axe technique Iron Breaker. I knew my opponents had meleetype skills, but I'd neglected to consider the danger since most monsters didn't use combat techniques.

"Bwooooooargh!" the orc soldier roared, issuing commands to the

remaining four common orcs. This was likely the one that had first noticed me approaching.

Three orc soldiers. One with a greatsword, one with a spear, and one with a two-handed axe. I knew their settlement was weakened and desperate, but I'd never considered they'd assign three Rank 4 orc soldiers to guard the party foraging for food near the human town. With a group this strong, they had to have been planning to not only steal crops but also raid the town itself and capture people.

Though this was exactly the scenario I'd been afraid of from the beginning, I had somehow failed to anticipate it. I'd been careful to keep my presence hidden all this time to try and prevent this, but things didn't always go according to plan...

The spear-wielding orc soldier stepped back to reset their formation, while the other two moved forward and lined up beside each other.

Maybe I should've tried to scout ahead, even though there wasn't much time. With better timing and circumstances, I could've aimed to ambush one of the orc soldiers from the start instead. A lesson for the future. I hadn't anticipated this, but given the situation, the orc general's decision to issue these orders had been smart.

Even so, whether it had been the correct decision remained to be seen.

I faced the three orc soldiers, who were all glaring at me in silence. I exhaled to cool down and quickly readied my black dagger. Despite the severity of the situation, this was actually a stroke of luck for me: I'd managed to stop the three orc soldiers from reaching the town. And if nothing else, this meant I wouldn't have to face the orc general and all four of the orc soldiers at the same time.

You're not going anywhere. Not to the town, not back to your base. It's not that I'm fighting for the sake of other people—you're my enemies, that's all. By defeating you, I'll grow even stronger.

I shifted my focus from stealth and surprise to direct combat and reassessed my enemies' strength.

▼ Orc Soldier (Greatsword)

Species: Demi-Human (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 134/150

Health Points: 246/580

Overall Combat Power: 529/898 (Boosted: 627/1063) (∇ 41%)

[Affliction: Weakness]

The greatsword-wielding one was the largest of them, standing at over three meters tall. Other than its blade, nearly two meters in length, it had only a wristband and loincloth, likely because human gear couldn't fit its massive frame.

▼ Orc Soldier (Spear)

Species: Demi-Human (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 141/160

Health Points: 232/520

Overall Combat Power: 521/868 (Boosted: 617/1028) (∇ 40%)

[Affliction: Weakness]

The spear wielder was a light fighter and a bit larger than the average orc. It wore leather armor over its shoulders and chest, moved nimbly, and its attacks were accurate.

▼ Orc Soldier (Two-Handed Axe)

Species: Demi-Human (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 146/175

Health Points: 252/550

Overall Combat Power: 627/998 (Boosted: 774/1181) (∇ 35%)

[Affliction: Weakness]

Lastly, the one with the two-handed axe stood at two-and-a-half meters, wearing a crude iron breastplate and gauntlets. Given that it had used a combat technique and seen through my ambush, this was the one I needed to be the most wary of.

Truly, Rank 4 monsters were impressive. At their full stats, even just one of them would've been a formidable foe in single combat. Weakened by my poison, however, each of them had combat power comparable to mine. Still, all the poison had done was reduce their health and stats; their combat skill levels were still at 4, and judging by their earlier actions, their weakened state hadn't impaired their focus.

I also needed to be mindful of the four remaining common orcs. Whether or not they'd attempt to intervene with their halved combat power I didn't know, but their actions could cause the battle's dynamics to shift significantly.

"Bwooooooh!" roared the greatsword-wielding orc, finally losing its patience. The three-meter-tall giant charged at me, bringing down its massive sword and gouging out the ground as it closed in.

Rather than evade, I chose to advance; staying at a moderate distance from an opponent wielding a wide-range two-handed weapon was pointless. As I closed the distance, the orc swiftly countered with the hilt of its sword.

But I'd seen that counter before—with Feld. Using a special footwork technique, I slid sideways and aimed the black dagger at the orc's knee. It noticed and kicked at me with its thick leg. I quickly abandoned that attack, used the incoming leg as a stepping stone, and propelled myself backward using the soles of my feet to gain distance.

Seeing an opening, the orc with the two-handed axe let out a loud "Bwoooooooargh!" and sprang into action. Judging that I was the faster of the two of us, it swung its axe in a wide horizontal sweep.

As I landed, I planted my palms on the ground behind me and tumbled backward to put more distance between us, feeling the air current from the swing graze my back. I rotated my body, drawing a knife from my thigh and

concealing the movement behind the swirling motion of my skirt, then threw it. The axe wielder, still giving chase, didn't flinch as its iron breastplate deflected the knife.

It was too dangerous to approach this one, so I continued to retreat as I swung my pendulums in horizontal arcs. I yanked the strings with all my might, and the blades came whizzing from both sides, shooting toward the charging orc.

"Bwoh!" The orc, having never seen a pendulum before, immediately jumped back, wary of the weapons. As I pulled the strings to change the pendulums' trajectory, the orc realized they were blades and swung its axe wide, using Iron Breaker once more. "Bwoooooooargh!"

In a single slash, the technique not only deflected the pendulum blades but also sent a shock wave barreling toward me. I grunted as I barely avoided a direct hit, but the residual force from the shock wave was enough to send my lightweight body flying backward.

"Graaaaaaah!" the spear-wielding orc roared, seeing an opportunity as I lost my balance, and lunged forward.

Quickly, I diverted the spearhead with my black dagger, but the orc's charge didn't relent, and it body slammed me, knocking me away. "Ugh!"

With Martial Mastery, I managed to regain my balance with an acrobatic spin and saw the greatsword-wielding orc closing in behind me, raising its blade.

"Pain!" I chanted hastily, making the greatsword wielder stiffen for only a moment before it glared at me and kicked me away.

Since it wore no armor, perhaps it had a great tolerance for pain. Still, thanks to that brief pause, I managed to guard myself, rolling through the forest mulch and shifting into a defensive posture. With that momentum, I sprang back to my feet and swung the pendulums to keep the three orcs at bay, finally causing them to halt.

We glared silently at each other as the orc soldiers pulled back, resetting their formation once more. Seeing the martial superiority of the three soldiers who had killed their own allies in seconds, the remaining orcs erupted into cheers.

Though our skirmish had been brief, I'd already lost thirty percent of my health points without managing to land a single blow. Rank 4 monsters truly were something else. Even with reduced combat power, they still had, firmly embedded into their souls, the experience and techniques that had led them to achieve their rank.

"Heh," I exhaled in a half-snort, and the orc soldiers tensed up warily. What an idiot I am.

I'd thought I could manage three Rank 4 foes just because their combat numbers had dropped to a level similar to mine. I'd known that letting my guard down could be a fatal mistake and still let the bit of strength I'd gained get to my head.

These three orc soldiers had acknowledged a mere human child like me as an enemy and fought without holding back, aiming for a group victory. And here I was, foolishly thinking of conserving my strength for my next battle, even as I was fighting against not one but *three* Rank 4 enemies, all of which were superior to me.

I spat out the blood that had pooled in my mouth, relaxed my body, and took a defensive stance. Even warier now, the orc soldiers growled threateningly and began to close the distance. As I watched them approach, I inwardly questioned my own resolve.

Remember you're a weakling, I thought. Remember how you've fought up until now. When did you ever best a superior opponent in straightforward combat? This past year alone, you've had several brushes with death. How did you survive? All you can do is fight your way. Be analytical. Lay traps. When have you ever fought fair? Bury your fear and arrogance deep within and become nothing but an iron blade.

Show them the part of your power that can't be measured by rank or numbers.

"G-Graaaaaaah!" the spear-wielding orc roared, noticing a change in the atmosphere of the battlefield, and charged forward.

"Shadow Snatch." I scattered ten small shadows into the air and retreated into the depths of the forest as the sun began to set.

"Bwooooooargh!" Despite still being wary of the shadow spots drifting around me, the spear-wielding orc gave chase.

I moved through the dark woods, weaving through scattered slender trees. With his line of sight obscured by the thin trunks, the orc thrust out his spear and pierced through an illusion of me passing behind a tree. Seizing the opportunity, I swung my black dagger at the orc's neck from behind, and a roar of agony echoed through the darkness. Still, the wound wasn't deep enough, nor was it fatal.

I could sense the greatsword and axe wielders approaching; instead of following up, I took off running through the dark forest once more.

"Bwooooooargh!" the greatsword wielder roared as it charged forward, slashing through the thin trees and another illusion.

Though these illusions were simple masses of mana in the shape of a person, I was switching places with them quickly, and the woods were dark, making it hard to notice the ruse. The orc tried to kill me by slashing at everything all at once.

"Graaaaaaah!" The orc, realizing it had missed, was momentarily overcome by anger and recklessly charged the treeline, stepping onto a small shadow. At that moment, a hidden weapon shot up from the shadow, piercing its foot and making it cry out in confusion. "Bwoooooooargh?!"

No matter how high its pain tolerance was, it couldn't move properly with its foot impaled by a blade. Despite this, the orc readied its greatsword and stood still, warily watching the surrounding shadows. Just then, it sensed "me" approaching from behind and turned around—but seeing that the figure appeared entirely black, the orc deemed it an illusion and looked away, searching for the real me. Seizing the moment, the black figure—that is, me—thrust a dagger into its groin.

"G-Grah..." it groaned, falling to its knees with a heavy thud.

I exhaled, peeling away my illusory shadow coating. The greatsword wielder wasn't dead, but it couldn't move, so I ran toward the common orcs who had been watching the scene unfold to deal with the approaching axe wielder.

The four orcs yelped in shock and hurriedly readied their weapons before swinging them at me. I dodged in the nick of time and slipped between them, scattering red pepper powder from my pouch.

"Bwooooooargh?!" they roared, confused, as the irritant stung their eyes. They began to swing their weapons wildly in pain and fear, striking each other in the chaos. Frenzied, the orcs obstructed the path of the axe-wielding orc, which then decided to strike me—and its allies—with Iron Breaker.

I used the orcs as a shield against most of the impact, then hid in the shadow of the lone surviving orc. Two pitch-black illusions sprang out, and the axewielding orc hesitated for a brief moment. It let out a puzzled roar before quickly charging at one of the illusions.

Confidently, the orc swung its axe at the illusion, causing it to vanish. Figuring it had simply guessed wrong, the orc smirked and turned to level a powerful blow at the second illusion as it approached silently from behind. That illusion, however, also dissipated instantly under the force of its axe.

The axe wielder had been confident in its Detection skill and let its guard down, thinking it could easily find me. It'd heard the sound of a breath coming from one of the illusions and assumed that had been me.

"Bwoargh?!" Momentarily stunned, it noticed the small fragments of shadow scattering from the shattered illusions. It attempted to retreat, but a crossbow bolt shot out from a shadow and pierced one of its eyes. As it flinched in shock, I came up behind it while under Stealth and thrust my black dagger directly into its back.

Although I'd managed to land a hit, the orc was too tall, and I couldn't reach the back of its head, failing to deliver a finishing blow. Meanwhile, the spear wielder, having recovered enough to move, came charging at me, the surviving orc in tow.

"Bwooooogh!" the spear wielder screamed furiously, aiming a powerful thrust directly at my heart. It believed that to save the ailing axe wielder, it had to kill me in one strike. Under that belief, it focused intensely and delivered a precise, unwavering thrust that pierced through my chest.

"Guh!" the axe wielder groaned. The accurate attack had struck the small

shadow hovering over my heart perfectly, and the spearhead emerged from another shadow, skewering the head of the axe-wielding orc.

I'd placed my trust in the spear wielder's Rank 4 capabilities. Had it been even slightly less precise in its haste, I would've been the one to die instead. The axe wielder collapsed, and I turned my attention to the spear wielder.

"Bwooooooargh!!!" the surviving common orc cried out, charging at me with its stone axe in an attempt to defend its comrade.

"Noise," I chanted under my breath.

The visibly enraged spear wielder also moved, discarding the weapon that had killed its comrade and rushing me with its bare hands. It lunged to pin me down, and seizing this chance, the common orc behind me raised its stone axe to strike.

"Guh," the spear wielder groaned as its comrade's attack soared over my head and crushed its skull.

Though the pain in the common orc's eyes had likely subsided, its vision was still impaired by the red pepper powder. Monsters generally had keener senses than humans and could operate to an extent even in darkness; believing it could still fight without its eyesight, the orc had relied on sound to launch its attack. It had mistaken the illusory sounds from Noise and attacked its comrade's head instead of mine.

Still alive and driven by anger, the spear wielder grabbed the other orc by its neck and snapped it. It turned its bloodied face toward me, its wide eyes reflecting me with the black dagger raised high.

"Thrust!"

"Grah..." it groaned as my technique pierced straight through its face, killing it at last.

Another groan echoed nearby as the final remaining orc soldier, the greatsword wielder, dragged its bloodied legs toward me. It had already been weakened and was missing a significant portion of its health pool; now it was bleeding heavily and using its sword as a crutch, and even I could tell it was at death's door. Seeing the corpses of its comrades, it hoisted the sword off the

ground. "Bwoargh!"

The three-meter-tall giant swung its sword, but the movement was noticeably slow. I took half a step to dodge it, leaped onto the blade as it embedded itself into the ground, and vaulted into the air. Holding the black dagger in a reverse grip, I plunged it into the greatsword wielder's forehead.

Having killed all the orcs, I fell to my knees as my aether reserves ran dry. To prevent the state of starvation that came with aether depletion, I took a pellet, then downed my last aether recovery potion in one gulp. I hadn't just exhausted my aether; my health points were also at their limit. Between that and the accumulated fatigue from the past few weeks, it was unlikely I'd fully recover before the next battle.

Still, that makes twenty-five. I'm halfway there.

I chewed on another pellet, focusing my strength on my trembling legs, and began the trek through the forest back to the abandoned village where the orc general and the others awaited. I still had to delay them for the remaining days, after all.



The Orc General

Maybe I didn't need to go this far all by myself. Maybe I'd already done enough. But...I wasn't any good at being reasonable, it seemed.

Five days remained until the town's evacuation was complete, and to keep stalling the orcs, I made my way through the dark woods, back to the abandoned village. I could've made a stop in town, but it would've taken me two days to get there. Wasting several days going back and forth meant there was a chance the orcs would realize their food procurement team was gone and begin their invasion. A trip to the town would've been helpful to replenish my medical supplies, but I figured if I was going to waste time traveling, it would be best to spend that time sleeping.

Not that I found the time for proper sleep either.

When I reached the abandoned village the next evening, the orcs, under the command of the final remaining orc soldier, were gathering what remained of their food and preparing to depart. Judging by the situation, their departure wouldn't be immediate; they were likely planning on leaving tomorrow, after the return of the hunting party—which was currently somewhere in the surrounding woods. It was likely, then, that the group of orcs and orc soldiers I'd defeated hadn't been out to procure food but were rather a vanguard party to attack the town. That explained why they'd sent out three of their best units.

I'd barely made it in time. It wasn't possible for me to keep the orcs in their settlement anymore, but at least I'd arrived before their departure.

I climbed a giant tree a ways from the abandoned village to observe their movements, ate the blackberries and the yam I'd found on the way here, and closed my eyes until it got dark. My sleeping and eating habits had been less than ideal over the past three weeks, and my body was exhausted. I'd sped up my recovery yesterday with a potion, but even a full day after the battle, my health points had only recovered to about sixty percent of the total due to all the accumulated fatigue. I had an hour until sunset, so I decided to take a nap to restore more of my health and energy—sleeping doubled the rate of stamina and aether recovery, after all. I forced myself to sleep.

An hour later, I woke up to a darkening sky and moved silently, blending into the shadows of night. I could no longer waylay the monsters. If thirty orcs—with higher-ranked ones among them—all started moving together, there was nothing I could do. But right now, while they were still scattered about the abandoned village, there was, in fact, something I could do.

Assassinate them.

Doing that to robust monsters like orcs was difficult under normal circumstances, but thanks to the poison weakening them, it should be doable. First, there were the orcs patrolling and foraging around the abandoned village. Since they were about to depart, they would no longer be wandering far—and because of that, they were working alone instead of in the usual groups of three.

I quietly concealed myself in a tree ahead of a patrolling orc, and as it passed directly below me, I dropped down behind it and wrapped a string around its thick neck, using my weight and the speed of the fall to strangle it.

"Grah..." grunted the orc, unaware that it was being attacked and clawing at its neck as it began to suffocate. The string, made of aethereally reinforced spider silk, held fast.

As I hung upside down, I kicked the back of the orc's head with my heel, tightening the thread to the maximum and choking it out perfectly. The annoying thing about monsters was that they could still recover after a while, even from something like this. To make sure this one suffocated, I used Flow to drench the decaying leaves on the ground, then shoved the orc's face into them. I avoided spilling any blood; I didn't want the smell of it in the air.

Twenty-six now...

I found a second patrolling orc and snuck closer. This one seemed young and nervous, however, walking only in open areas. I needed the force of the drop from a tree to throttle an orc's thick neck, so I couldn't use the same method as before. In an open area, however, another option was available.

Swiftly, I wrapped a spare thread around the handle of my black dagger and threw it in a wide arc, striking the orc from above. The handle hit the crown of the orc's head with a dull thud, and a quiet groan escaped its throat before it

rolled its eyes back and collapsed. I approached it quickly and did the same thing I'd done to the first orc: I covered its body in dead leaves to conceal it, then left to search for the next orc.

With similar methods, I dispatched three other patrolling orcs. *Thirty down*. With no more of them in sight outside the village, I moved on to the next step of my plan.

Since I'd avoided spilling blood, the orcs in the abandoned village seemed unaware of what was happening. Just to be sure, I used Night Vision to see the color of mana around me, checked my surroundings, and infiltrated the abandoned village under the cover of darkness.

If I'd had even just another half day and a potent sleeping drug, I could've done this better, but unfortunately, neither option was available to me. Sleeping drugs that powerful were only derived from high-ranked plant-type monsters and were difficult to obtain.

Perhaps due to their imminent departure, some orcs in the abandoned village were still awake. For the time being, I decided to avoid the central area, where the orc general likely was, and handle the groups to the west and south instead.

The western group consisted entirely of regular orcs, none of them awake. As I snuck into a deserted house, I heard the shallow breaths of three orcs asleep in a heap. I reached into my pouch and took out a small glass vial. Using a string, I slowly dribbled the contents into the orcs' mouths.

This wasn't poison but rather highly purified alcohol—an unusual substance in this country—distilled multiple times, originally for disinfection purposes. Pouring something like this into a human's mouth would've made them choke and worse, but orcs were sturdy creatures.

I administered the alcohol to four more orcs sleeping in another ruined house and returned to the first one. The orcs I'd dosed were now breathing heavily in their sleep. Carefully, I perforated the medullae of the sleeping orcs, using the black dagger like an oversized awl and avoiding any large blood vessels to prevent blood from gushing out as I finished them off. One of them shuddered and groaned, but neither that one nor any of his companions stirred awake or noticed, so I went about killing the other orcs.

The reason I didn't coat my knives with poison for regular combat was that, once dried, poison lost most of its effect. Even freshly applied poison immediately began to deteriorate once exposed to air. Gelf had told me about a special type of sheath, the same kind used by the thief who had kidnapped Elena, that could preserve the toxicity of weaker, degradation-resistant poisons, but I hadn't cared to explore that option. It wasn't that I was particularly fixated on a certain way of fighting; I didn't hesitate to use underhanded methods if they ensured my target would die. Mine was a purely selfish reason: I felt like if I became overly reliant on poison, I wouldn't be able to attain the power I sought.

Thirty-seven...

I didn't see any sentries in the eastern part of the village, so I headed for the southern part instead. Only three orcs were there, all awake. There should've been more of them to the west and south both, but those had likely either gone out hunting or accompanied the soldiers.

The three orcs here might've been replacements for the ones out on patrol. They were sitting in a circle, eating something that looked like a long yam. I watched them for a while, but none of them moved, so I decided to assassinate them the hard way.

"Touch," I chanted, using the spell to lightly poke the ears of the two orcs farther from me.

As the two turned around to look for the source of the touch, the remaining orc stood there looking puzzled. I silently dashed behind the confused orc and stabbed my black dagger through its medulla into its mouth.

"Bwugh," it croaked.

The other two orcs turned back around at the odd sound, but before they could understand what was happening, I released the dagger and leaped over the dead orc. With my palms, I struck their jaws, turning their faces back around.

"Bwoh!" they yelped in confusion. Unable to register my presence, they couldn't process that the impact and the pain were from an attack. Not giving them a chance to react, I swiftly drew a pair of knives from my boots and

stabbed them from the base of their ears into their brains, taking both out at the same time.

Forty.

I'd spilled a lot of blood now, and it was anyone's guess when the others would notice the metallic scent. All that remained were the orc general in the center, one orc soldier, and about a dozen regular orcs. Those numbers weren't the issue, however—the issue was that a single orc general was as strong as fifty ordinary orcs.

"Phew." I let my anxiety seep out along with the air in my lungs and lightly stretched my body to loosen it up. Both my health and aether points had been reduced by about thirty percent. I had no strained tendons or bleeding wounds, but my body was a bit sore all over from my many bruises and overall fatigue.

I wasn't sure whether I could pull this off, but I had no choice. I had to try.

Moving through the darkness, I ran toward the central area, where the orc general presumably was. On arrival, I decided to do recon first, keeping my last failure in mind. With my ability to see mana, I counted eleven ordinary orcs, all of them gathered in the abandoned village's central square, ready for the raid. Guarding the central area was the remaining orc soldier, wielding a crude bow that looked like it'd been made by stringing a bent sapling.

And...beyond them was a massive orc, over three meters tall, which I assumed had to be the orc general.

I backed off for now and climbed onto the roof of the deserted house closest to the orcs. Then, I pulled the bolt out of my crossbow mechanism and set it aside. I reached into my pouch for a steel bolt, which had the best range, and checked it to ensure it had no scratches or bends.

This small crossbow, handed down to me by my mentor, was originally meant for close combat—to fend off enemies within a five-meter range. Even at that distance, it lacked the power to penetrate a monster's skull. From this distance, more than five houses away, it wouldn't deeply pierce even a wooden board.

Just by looking, I could tell that shooting the orc general from this position would've been a futile endeavor. Most likely it would simply dodge a long-range

attack, even with the element of surprise on my side. That wasn't why I'd climbed onto the roof—rather, I wanted to snipe the bow-wielding orc soldier.

I estimated the soldier to be about forty meters away. Even the steel bolt, with its increased range, wouldn't pierce the orc's skull. To make sure this shot was effective, I decided to use one of the cards up my sleeve. I took two small white porcelain bottles from Shadow Storage and carefully uncapped one, dribbling a few drops onto a leaf I'd set aside beforehand, then capped it again. I uncapped the other bottle, dipped the tip of the bolt into it, then capped it and returned both bottles to Shadow Storage. Finally, I exhaled.

When the tip of the bolt, soaked in one agent, came in contact with the leaf, coated in the other agent, the resulting chemical immediately began to corrode the bolt, emitting a powerful stench. The two-part toxin was my mentor's creation; individually, the components were practically harmless, but in combination, they turned into a powerful corrosive poison. I hadn't used it before because even just inhaling the fumes was dangerous. Handling something like this more than once a day would harm the user as well.

Not only that, it was vulnerable to moisture, and simple exposure to atmospheric humidity reduced its effectiveness. Carefully, holding my breath, I loaded the bolt into the mechanism and chanted the shadow magic I'd been casting in my mind. "Weight."

Despite its name, what Weight did was shift an object's trajectory as desired by the caster. I called it magic, not sorcery, because I'd altered its structure to enhance its effectiveness. My Bow Mastery was only at Level 1, but with the Level 3 Shadow Magic spell supporting the bolt, its accuracy, range, and power were all significantly improved.

At that moment, the orc general raised its head, and the bow-wielding soldier let out a warning cry, readying its approximately two-meter-long weapon. Whether due to the smell of the toxic fumes or my spell, the archer had noticed me. It nocked an arrow as long as I was tall, then drew it back fully.

With the arrow pointed at me, I carefully took aim in turn, channeling aether into the mechanism. Sweat dripped down my brow from the extreme concentration.

The orc, with its Level 4 in Bow Mastery, smirked as it angled the arrow higher, aiming for my face instead of my body. A sharp sound rang out as the arrow was let loose, and it cut through the wind, roaring toward me.

I kept careful track of the arrow's trajectory and fired my own crossbow bolt. At the same time, with the extended time perception offered by Boost, I tilted my head back. The orc's precisely aimed arrow flew past, cutting a few strands of my hair as it narrowly missed my head.

Copying the exact trajectory of the arrow, my bolt flew toward the momentarily stunned orc, piercing through its left eye.

Forty-one. You weren't weak; I was just slightly more prepared to stare death down.

"Bwaaargh!" Struck by the poisoned bolt, the orc archer screamed and collapsed, clutching its face. By the time the skin around the bolt turned bluishblack, the life had already left the orc's remaining eye.

The soldier's gruesome death silenced the other orcs, which had been cheering it on. My master had sternly warned me about this poison during my return visit; it had certainly proved its potency. Careless reliance on it would likely lead me to a grave well before my enemies.

"Bwooooooargh!!!" the orc general roared sharply as it glared up at me on the roof, snapping the frightened orcs back to their senses. The massive beast wore numerous metal rings on the upper half of its three-meter-tall frame, as well as armor made from the shell of a giant insect on its lower body.

Now that I'd killed a high-ranking orc, the general acknowledged me as its enemy.

▼ Orc General

Species: Demi-Human (Rank 5)

Aether Points: 173/190

Health Points: 347/710

Overall Combat Power: 973/1622 (Boosted: 1177/1961) (▽

[Affliction: Weakness]

Noticing the general's gaze, several other orcs spotted me on the roof and, like frightened children, threw their crude spears at me. I didn't bother dodging and used my cloak to catch one of them, then threw it back. One unfortunate orc, who'd been looking for something to throw, got speared through the neck.

Forty-two.

Even without having used a particular weapon before, I had combat-type skills, so I was no amateur. I couldn't use spear techniques, but I could at least throw one.

"Graaaaaaaargh!!!" roared the orc general in response to my attack. It reacted instantly, charging at me and swinging its weapon upward to sweep me off the roof.

It wielded a pitch-black hexagonal staff over two and a half meters long. The staff had to have been made of magic steel, I figured, which not only made destroying it impossible but also meant parrying it was out of the question. But, unfortunately for the general, I had no plans to fight it head-on.

As soon as it charged, I began to pull back, using the debris of the shattered roof as a series of stepping stones to the other side of the abandoned house, the muscles and joints of my legs cushioning my fall.

A loud crash echoed as the pursuing orc general smashed through what remained of the wall, but I was no longer there. Using the spell Shadow as a decoy, I'd already moved away and quickly made my way back to where the other orcs were.

"Gah!" One of the orcs, paralyzed by fear, failed to react to my approach in time. I took advantage of its terror and drove my black dagger into its frightened face.

Forty-three.

A potent poison didn't just kill its target—it also instilled fear in those who

witnessed it in action. I'd targeted the orc soldier first not just because it was higher ranked but also to use its brutal death as an example to scare the others.

I withdrew the dagger from the orc and, with a flip, kicked the chin of the orc next to it, then stabbed through the now-exposed bottom of its jaw into its brain, killing it.

"G-Graaah!" Another orc, realizing what had just happened, charged at me with its stone axe. Its posture was fearful, and it was clearly scared of fighting me directly.

A halfhearted attack like that wouldn't hit me. I dodged the downward swing and, as the orc stumbled and fell, thrust the dagger into one of its terrified eyes.

Forty-five.

"Grooooooargh!!!" the general roared as it came running back, its Level 5 Intimidation skill sweeping through the air. It spotted me and charged, raising its staff. At the same time, another orc, having snapped out of its terror, charged me with a rusty spear.

They were at different distances from me, but their timing was nearly identical. Under Stealth, I chanted, "Shadow." The spell didn't just deceive ordinary vision but Night Vision as well.

Knowing that what had just split from me was an illusion, the orc general accurately targeted me with its staff. However, the other orc had been successfully deceived and stepped in front, taking the staff blow directly to its skull.

Forty-six.

"Grooooooargh!!!" roared the general once more as its followers were slaughtered one after another.

By then, I had already started running from the open area of the square into the densely packed, obstacle-ridden cluster of houses.

A group of orcs weren't the type of opponents one would fight alone to stall. The correct decision, by all rights, would've been to wait for the Adventurers' Guild to put together a party, or wait for the baron's army to arrive.

Nevertheless, there was a way to fight them solo; a fighter with stealth-type skills such as mine could pull it off, as long as they managed to ignore the fear of being caught and brutally killed.

One way to do it was what I'd been doing from the start: poison the enemies' water supply. Another, which I was doing right now, was guerrilla warfare.

As I entered the cluster of houses, I used Stealth to blend my mana into my surroundings and disappear into the darkness. Unlike in open areas, even the orc general should find it difficult to locate me in places like this where the view was obstructed.

The next moment, a thunderous noise came from the neighboring house, and I watched through the window as the wall was blown sideways. The orc general had probably lost track of me and decided to destroy the houses one by one.

I created another Shadow and had it run across the roof of the house where I was; as the orc general moved to chase after it, I threw a knife at its back. It detected the faint sound of the knife cutting through the air and deflected it with its staff, but another knife hidden in the first's shadow struck the massive orc's shoulder.

Now I knew for certain that, thanks to the general's weakened state, my knives could pierce its skin.

"Graaaaaargh!!!" it roared again, smashing the wall of the house where I'd been hiding with its staff.

I dodged in the nick of time by leaping out the window, landing with a roll, and getting back on my feet before diving through another window into the house directly across. Immediately after, a loud crash echoed as the rod pulverized the house where I'd been moments before. Now out in the street, the orc general once again lost sight of me and began to destroy the surrounding houses in a fit of rage. Even with its diminished combat power, its ability and senses were still sharp as ever. If I tried to use even a minute amount of chemicals, the scent would quickly give away my position.

Moving away from the rampaging general, I stealthily approached a lone orc searching for me; its fear had made it unfocused. I took it down by thrusting the black dagger into its neck.

Forty-seven.

It was best for me, in these circumstances, to take down the other orcs instead of recklessly attacking the general. Killing orcs in one hit was no easy feat—it took considerable force—but if I gradually took the common ones down and slowly inflicted even the slightest amounts of damage on the general, victory might still be within my grasp. At least for now, I chose to believe that and continued my assault.

Just then, sensing malice and aether swirling in the air, I jumped out the window and ducked. An enormous sphere made of pure aether passed overhead, and a massive *boom* echoed through the night. I was sent flying like a leaf in the wind but managed to roll and recover.

"Ngh." What just happened? As the dust—which under Night Vision looked like little more than noise—settled after the impact, I saw that ten or so abandoned houses had been almost completely blown away, leaving only the foundations behind and making the area look like vacant land.

This was, I figured, likely a Level 5 staff technique that even I wasn't familiar with. The techniques I knew of, up to Level 4, were only as strong as several times the power of an ordinary attack. Were Level 5 techniques truly this extraordinary?

"Bwooooooargh!"

As I knelt in the now-bare-bones area, the five remaining orcs surrounded me to prevent my escape, keeping a cautious distance. The orc general, with the staff on its shoulder, approached me leisurely.

Rank 5 truly came with extraordinary power. I'd fought one Rank 5 opponent before—Graves—but back then, all I'd managed to do was run. The orc general was weakened, but there was still a stark difference in strength between us.

"Graaaaaaah!" With the confidence of a powerful being, or perhaps seeking to toy with me to avenge its deceased comrades, the orc general ordered its followers to attack me.

"Bwoooooargh!"

"Bwooooooh!"

All five orcs charged me simultaneously; the fear of poison meant nothing to them with their leader so close by.

I deflected a thrust from a rusty spear with the black dagger and rolled forward to avoid a stone axe swing from behind. I lost my balance, and the next moment, a metallic object came flying at me; it just barely missed me as I dodged, then embedded itself into the ground. Seeing an opening, an orc swung its club at me from behind, and the strike sent me flying.

"Ngh!" I grunted, managing to guard with the gauntlet on my left hand, but my health still decreased by about ten percent.

Looking at the metallic object, I realized it was one of the metal rings the orc general was wearing; it wasn't planning on letting me fight, it seemed. Should I use shadow magic? Would an illusion cast in plain sight of the orcs deceive any of them? Even assuming I could somehow produce several Shadows, in a situation where I couldn't easily switch places with one, I not only wouldn't know whether I could evade all the attacks but might also waste my limited aether points.

"Graaaaaaah!"

The orcs came at me once more. I dodged a downward club swing and tried to aim my dagger at the attacker, but another ring came flying at me. With my scattered focus, I could only make a halfhearted attempt at a double dodge, and the ring grazed my side while a spear thrust from behind me grazed my shoulder.

Figuring that even if it proved to be a waste, I should still take the chance, I began to chant, "Shad—"

Another ring flew at me, and as I moved to evade, an orc kicked me, dispersing the magic I was trying to cast. I dodged the rusty spear that came at me next, rolling on the ground, and could do nothing but continue to crawl low like a cat to avoid the orcs' attacks.

With cruel smiles, the orcs surrounded me once more. At this point, they wouldn't even allow me to stand, let alone attack. Which...reminded me: back when I'd first met Viro, I'd also been cornered, digging my nails into the ground. Why had I done that, again...?

Oh. Right. "I don't need to be on my feet," I muttered.

"Bwooooooargh!" one of the orcs roared, lunging at me with its spear.

I decided to stop trying to force myself to stand. From a prone position, I kicked the ground with one leg, using my hips to shift my stance and weight. With one hand as a pivot, I slid along the ground and dodged the spearhead. Like a cat swiping with its claws, I unleashed a pendulum and wrapped its thread around the orc's leg.

"Bwoooooooh?!" Momentarily startled by my bizarre movements, the orc thrust its spear hesitantly. The general threw another ring too, but it was too late.

"Weight." Taking advantage of that brief moment of distraction and of the momentum from the confused orc pulling on the string wrapped around its leg, I rose as though weightless, then thrust the black dagger into the orc's forehead.

Forty-eight.

The kidnapper I'd fought had used body techniques involving flexibility and snaking movements for unpredictable evasion and attacks. For a scout-type with low damage, confusing the enemy was a necessity.

"Graaaaaaah!" the orc general roared, sensing my sudden change in movement patterns and throwing another ring. The other orcs swung their clubs at me as well, but I evaded all of it by lowering myself to the ground like a cat.

Maintaining that posture, I kicked out a leg and, using that and the weight of my hips as a pivot, rotated my position. Thanks to Weight shifting the direction of my movement, I slid between an orc's legs, wrapped a thread around them, and kicked its groin with the hidden blade in my boot.

"Grah—"

"Graaaaaaah!" Perhaps anxious due to the situation, the general charged forward with its staff. I fell back to avoid the sharp strike, yanking on the string, and the orc I'd just kicked stumbled, landing in the path of the blow, which crushed its skull.

Forty-nine. The general tried to stomp on me, but I pulled the thread, still entangled with the orc's corpse, and slid away to dodge. The momentary confusion slowed the general's movements. Now!

Using Weight's effect combined with the taut string, I tightened my muscles and unleashed myself with the force of an arrow, faster than the general could see. "Haaah!"

"Graaah!" the general growled, attempting to use its staff to intercept me, but I was faster—and my black dagger slashed across its face, making it howl in pain. "Grooooooooar!"

I leaped past the orc general and thrust my dagger into the forehead of an unfortunate nearby orc as I landed. To fend off the momentary exhaustion, I took a deep breath. Had my slash been too shallow? At that speed, the dagger should've inflicted a fatal wound, even on the general, but it had managed to slightly turn its face away and avoid a direct hit.

Since the general had managed to avoid the brunt of the thrust, my black knife, had it been repaired already, would've likely done more damage than the dagger. But a knife wasn't an impactful enough weapon; I would never have made the decision to use it in the first place.

What's this feeling of weakness? I wondered. The sensation was similar to when I'd first used Boost... No, not that. It felt like the exhaustion and the burning in my muscles from my first time using a combat technique. I'd been focusing heavily and channeling aether throughout my whole body; was that the cause? I had moved faster than expected, likely due to that. Now's not the time to think about this, though.

All that remained now were two common orcs, staring fearfully at me, and the orc general. There could've been other orcs I'd missed, but since they weren't here right now, they didn't matter.

The orc general glared at me between the gaps in its fingers, pressed to the wound on its face. "You..."

Wait, it speaks? I'd heard that higher-ranked orcs were intelligent, but this

one could communicate in the human tongue?

Likely due to the difference in vocal cord structure, the general spoke slowly, pausing between words. "Human...girl. Why, attack, us? Why, kill, my, people?"

I was silent for a moment.

To these orcs, I was the evil being who had suddenly attacked their settlement and killed their comrades. Right and wrong were a matter of perspective. What we thought of as "people"—humans and demi-humans—weren't necessarily the only righteous beings. Demons, who were enemies with humans, had their own justifications for the conflict. And even among these widely feared people, there were good-natured individuals like my mentor.

But what meaning did any of that have? I understood the general's point, but I had my own reasons not to back down.

"I bear no grudge against you," I replied finally. "Even animals fight to the death to protect their territory and young against intruders. You appeared in our territory, which makes us enemies. That's all there is to it."

In a world where everyone was happy, there would never be conflict. One who came to take had to be prepared to be taken from as well, no? The same applied for people. That was the reason the land was in constant turmoil.

After pondering my simple answer, the orc general narrowed its eyes and said, "I, understand." It lowered its palm from its bloody face to grip the magic iron staff with both hands. Its stance no longer projected the pride of a superior opponent; now it felt like the general recognized me as a threat—a formidable one.

Sensing their leader's resolve, the two frightened orcs gripped their weapons and stood beside the general.

"My, name," the general said, "Gorjool. Warrior...your, name?"

"Alia," I replied.

"Very, well. Come, Alia!" With a roar, the orc general—Gorjool—lunged forward like a shock wave, swinging the staff at me.

I only just managed to avoid it by a hair's breadth. Planting one hand on the

ground and kicking off with one foot, I moved fluidly and, as I advanced, struck an approaching orc's jaw from below using the hidden blade in my boot.

"Graaaaaaah!" Gorjool roared. It was finally taking me seriously.

Even though the general was weakened by the poison, there was still a significant gap between us, as I was only Rank 3. We were only evenly matched in speed, and while my stats hadn't dropped, all the accumulated exhaustion had lowered my aether and health to below half. Did I still stand a chance in this state? I'd been considering the worst-case scenario—that is, fleeing—until a moment ago, but now I'd discarded that possibility.

Gorjool had acknowledged me as an enemy, set aside its arrogance as a strong warrior, and, despite its weakened state, was fighting me proudly. If I fled from Gorjool now, I'd never have the opportunity to rise to an occasion like this again.

Physical prowess wasn't all I sought. I was determined to become stronger in spirit as well.

The orc with its throat gouged out collapsed, blood frothing at its mouth. Gorjool, using the corpse as cover, thrust its staff; I dodged by leaning back and crawled away to put distance between us.

Staffs didn't have a clear threatening end like a blade and boasted a wide range of attack. They could be used to thrust like spears, sweep like greatswords, and crush like hammers. Gorjool's agility stat was diminished, so I could compete in that area, but even a single direct hit from that staff would shatter every last bone in my body.

"Shadow Snatch!" I chanted, creating and scattering four magical shadows.

"Graaaaaaah!" Wary, Gorjool rotated its staff overhead, gripped one end, and struck. With the full length of the staff and its arm, the general closed a distance of over three meters in an instant.

I slid out of the way using special footwork and shot a crossbow bolt into my own shadow, projecting it out of another—floating right beside Gorjool's head. It spotted the bolt and dodged it. Its staff struck and shattered the ground, and the scattered fragments hit me, but I still managed to use this brief opening to

distance myself further and prevent a follow-up attack.

Gorjool's caution was preventing me from using my spells effectively. Shadow Snatch was useful but had its drawbacks. For spatial shadow magic to take effect, I needed to coat objects with mana; something like Shadow Storage could allow me to unleash my pendulums even with the strings still attached, but to transfer an object from one shadow to another, it had to be completely isolated.

Earlier, against the spear-wielding orc soldier, I'd managed to transfer its spear thrust only because the weapon had touched me directly. The greatsword wielder, meanwhile, had stepped into a hidden weapon I'd completely coated in shadow mana. Thus, it wasn't possible to stab into a shadow and attack from a distance that way; Shadow Snatch could only transfer projectiles or spells.

But Gorjool didn't understand the depths of shadow magic, did it?

The general flicked off the nearby shadow, causing it to crack. A ball of light spilled forth, emitting a brief but intense flash of light that made Gorjool groan. "Gah!"

Spatial dark magic could be used to encapsulate a variety of different phenomena—such as the spell Shine, which I'd embedded into the shadow for only the briefest of periods. While there had been a possibility that the shadow mana would cancel out the light mana, I'd coated Shine with non-elemental mana first, allowing it to activate without being snuffed out.

As it flashed, blinding Gorjool, I lunged at the general with all my might. "Haaaaaaaaah!"

With Weight still active and Boost coursing through my whole body, I closed the five-meter distance twice as fast as an ordinary person and thrust my black dagger at Gorjool while it was covering its eyes.

"Graaah!" the last remaining orc groaned as the powerful strike pierced its chest instead. Coincidence? Or had the orc protected Gorjool despite being blinded itself?

I tried to withdraw the dagger, now embedded up to the hilt in the orc's sternum, and Gorjool, with its eyes still shut, struck both the orc's body and

mine with the staff, sending us flying.

"Guh!" I groaned, hacking up blood as I tumbled across the ground. The wound hadn't been fatal, however; Gorjool had probably used only Detection without Night Vision to retaliate, and the other orc's large frame had acted as a cushion against a direct hit.

With a growl, Gorjool narrowed its eyes, glaring at me. Once again, it gripped its staff with both hands.

I managed to muster enough strength in my legs to stand up. I probably didn't have any broken bones, and although I couldn't feel any sharp pains in my muscles or tendons, I could tell my health points were nearing their limit. I could've used the light spell High Cure to mend my wounds and restore my health points, but I doubted Gorjool would afford me enough time to cast a Level 3 spell. Even if I managed to use it, my aether would be nearly depleted.

Instead, I could try and find an opening to cast the much more familiar Cure, but...no. It was best to save my aether for attacks rather than waste it on minor amounts of healing. Health points were useless to me without a decisive attack—this was the main weakness of scout-types. Unlike sorcerers or fighter-types, who excelled in survivability, I didn't have a winning move.

I'd managed so far, thinking that as long as I could use the pointy end of a blade to stab things, there wasn't anything I couldn't kill. And for an ordinary adventurer, that would've been enough; alone against a formidable opponent Rank 5 or above, however, that strategy wasn't sufficient. I needed my own decisive attack, a powerful strike like the combat technique Gorjool had used.

We were both silent as we slowly turned to face each other. I lowered my stance, readying my black dagger. Gorjool sensed something and prepared himself in turn, lowering his own stance and rotating his hips to swing the staff high.

Gorjool was readying the Level 5 combat technique—I could feel the aether surge within him. I accelerated my thoughts, taking a deep breath. *Remember that feeling,* I thought to myself. *Remember what you felt when you sliced Gorjool's face.*

Training Boost had increased my Aether Manipulation level, thus increasing

my level in Non-Elemental Magic, the skill that governed the use of combat techniques. None of these three things worked in isolation; I needed all of them. Whatever melee skill enabled a given combat technique was nothing but a launching pad.

Using my enhanced vision to see the flow of mana coursing through my body thanks to Boost, I noticed the mana wasn't all non-elemental; there were faint traces of elemental mana as well. I hadn't paid this any mind before, thinking it was the norm, but now I wondered—if I were to think of mana as water, would these be akin to impurities?

That one strike had been a result of extreme concentration. I'd been using mana from the surroundings to cast spells and dye my own aether, but in that moment of focus, I might've used my own mana before it was converted into aether. My internal mana was purely non-elemental—but remaining in that state was inefficient, so the mana was naturally turned into aether instead. That process, however, caused several flecks of elemental mana to get mixed in.

To use non-elemental magic, I should've been using pure non-elemental aether. This time, I was going to deliberately remove any elemental influence from the aether. Normally, this wouldn't have been possible, but thanks to my ability to see mana as color, I figured I could do it.

Focus.

With the care and precision of one using tweezers to pick iron particles out of sand, I discarded the elemental impurities and refined the non-elemental aether as though making clear glass.

I could see that as my non-elemental aether became clearer, the speed of the aether flow through my bloodstream increased as well. It warmed up my whole body, transitioning it to a state akin to the moment before using a combat technique.

Sensing my aether, Gorjool swung down its staff, unleashing the combat technique. "Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

With my acute concentration and accelerated thoughts, I could perceive the aether from the staff striking the ground, generating a shock wave. In an instant and beyond my control, the aether surging through my body was consumed.

At that moment, I kicked off the ground, my body surpassing even the limits of Boost. The scenery reflected in my eyes grew distant as I leaped over Gorjool's shock wave before it could sweep the ground, and bore straight into the wide-eyed orc general with a booming crash.

Unable to withstand the recoil from the impact, my body was flung backward, sent tumbling dozens of meters behind Gorjool. I lay spread-eagle on the ground, coughing violently and hacking up blood. Through blurry eyes, I saw Gorjool's massive body slowly fall forward, the black dagger embedded deeply into the orc general's forehead confirming that I had, in fact, killed it.

Bereft of almost all my aether and health, unable to move, I closed my eyes in silent prayer as my consciousness quietly slipped into darkness.

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▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human♀ (Rank 3)
Aether Points: 4/250 \triangle +10
Health Points: 7/200 \triangle +10
Strength: 9 (12)
Endurance: 9 (12)
Agility: 13 (17)
Dexterity: 8
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 3]
[Martial Mastery Lv. 4] \triangle +1
[Throwing Lv. 3]
[Bow Mastery Lv. 1]
[Guard Lv. 3]
[String Manipulation Lv.4]
[Light Magic Lv. 3]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 3]
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[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 4] △ +1
[Practical Magic x6]

[Aether Manipulation Lv. 4]
[Intimidation Lv. 3]
[Stealth Lv. 4]
[Night Vision Lv. 2]
[Detection Lv. 4]
[Poison Resistance Lv. 3]
[Basic Scan]
Overall Combat Power: 612 (Boosted: 732) △ +36
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New Equipment, Old Faces

"What's the situation?" a town soldier asked the Rank 2 adventurer Kevin, who was currently stationed atop a watchtower.

"Nothing at the moment," Kevin replied, a stern expression on his face as he looked over the town walls to the empty wheat fields and the woods beyond. "Everything's eerily quiet." The harvest had been completed, so farming hadn't been too heavily affected yet, but if the situation dragged on, it could end up affecting the sowing season. But that wasn't the only reason for the look on Kevin's face.

It had been nearly a month since the townspeople began a full-scale evacuation; almost all able-bodied residents had already left. However, those who were sick and couldn't easily move still remained with their families. They were being gathered in a community building in the center of town as a precaution, but even this would take several more days.

Baron Horus, the lord of this land, had petitioned his liege, Count Taurus, for aid, and at last preparations were in place to dispatch fourteen hundred soldiers from various noble houses. The plan was for the Rank 1 soldiers to guard the villages and their environs until the orcs had been dealt with. To that

end, a total of two hundred Rank 3 soldiers, including those from the barony, would be sent out.

Meanwhile, a Rank 4 scout had already arrived at the Adventurers' Guild and, along with the guildmaster, had begun discussions with the barony's Rank 3 adventurers on how to handle the orc general. With this information, the baron—feeling more at ease—had sent fifty of his own soldiers ahead, and these were now cooperating with the town's soldiers to assist with the residents' evacuation.

With the arrival of the Rank 4 adventurer, the guild received a request to support the town, and two Rank 3 parties had volunteered. Along with Kevin's party, they'd been preparing for any sudden orc attacks. Still, between the fact that the Rank 3 girl who had ventured out to collect information had never returned and the dangerous nature of the mission, the parties' scouts were apprehensive.

A familiar soldier who used to patrol around the gate climbed the platform behind the stone wall and looked out in the same direction as Kevin. "It looks like the evacuation will finish by the deadline," he said to the adventurer. "You were part of the group that dealt with the orcs a while back, right?"

There had been no attacks for over three weeks, but a few days ago, five orcs had been discovered trying to take food from a warehouse outside the town. Kevin's party had teamed up with the Rank 3 parties and taken them down.

"Turns out orcs aren't as tough as people claim," Kevin said. "Even if that girl hadn't gone out, we could've just handled everything ourselves. I mean, what could she even do, right? She should've just come back running, if you ask me."

"You say that, but you're more worried about her than anyone, aren't you?" the soldier retorted.

"N-No way, man! I'm just mad she ran off on her own!"

The girl in question, Alia, had headed toward the orc settlement by herself to buy time for the townspeople's evacuation. Despite being in her early teens, Alia's abilities far exceeded those of a Rank 2, and there hadn't been anyone around who could've stopped her. By the time Kevin—whom Alia had beaten up and left unconscious—woke up, she'd already left.

"She took what I said seriously, but she shouldn't have tried to do that all on her own," he muttered.

The familiar soldier grinned knowingly. "She was pretty, wasn't she? Fell for her after she kicked your ass, did you?"

"Shut up, you moron! No way I'd fall for a damn kid!"

Alia was still young, but she was indeed strikingly beautiful. Kevin had been so angry with her at the time that he'd failed to really notice, but now he realized she'd also been considerate in many small ways. Alia had neither coddled him nor given him the cold shoulder; she'd treated him as a fellow warrior from the start, using harsh words to encourage him and taking on an extremely dangerous mission by herself to set an example.

Some of the soldiers and adventurers in town had been disparaging her, claiming she'd already been killed or had actually fled from the start, but Kevin had been her staunchest, angriest defender. Somehow he was fully confident that she would never have run away like that. His behavior clearly went beyond simple consideration for a younger adventurer, but the town soldier felt it best not to point this out and changed the subject.

"Well, anyway, good thing the orcs aren't as tough as we'd originally thought. Aren't they Rank 3 monsters, though? Are the stories of their strength really that overblown?"

"They're not," said a scout from one of the Rank 3 parties stationed in the town. Without anyone noticing, he'd climbed up the platform too. This was the scout who had initially ventured out to estimate the orcs' strength at the baron's request. Knowing how much of a threat the beasts posed, he and his party had joined the defense efforts.

"What do you mean, Doyle?" Kevin asked, puzzled. As a Rank 2 adventurer, he'd previously thought of orcs as very strong, but the ones that had come near town a few days ago had been easy to defeat. He knew that this had been at least in part due to the cooperation of Doyle's party, but Kevin had nevertheless been left disappointed.

Doyle lit his pipe and took a moment before responding. "You know I was the one who infiltrated their settlement, right? When I scanned the orcs that

showed up the other day, I saw that all of them were weakened, with their combat power halved. It was like someone had poisoned them." The man, a seasoned scout in his mid-thirties, took a drag and exhaled a puff of smoke, then explained that a lone orc suffering from weakness would've been one thing, but all of them being affected was a different story.

Kevin and the soldier exchanged glances, feeling the weight of those words and immediately thinking back on the girl with ash on her hair. "No way. Did she..."

"I mean, she said she was gonna buy us time, but this is just..."

Doyle had heard of this girl but never met her. He shook his head lightly. "That's not what I'm saying. Look, I couldn't get to the center of that abandoned village. Do you get what that means? I was scared. If they spotted me, I was done for. To poison that many orcs, someone would need to infiltrate the village, unnoticed, for at least ten days. That takes some serious brass that even I don't have."

Kevin and the soldier fell silent. A seasoned scout had just admitted he wouldn't have been able to pull off a poisoning, so how could those orcs have been weakened? Why hadn't the higher-ranked ones appeared yet? Why hadn't they invaded in over a month?

"Hey!" shouted a soldier stationed on another watchtower some distance away. "Something's coming!"

Kevin and the others rushed to the fence, squinting toward the wheat field. A small figure approached, carrying what seemed to be a long stick.

"That's...!" Kevin exclaimed with his eyes wide open, then immediately made a dash for the gate.

"Hey! Kevin!"

The soldier and Doyle followed after.

As he exited the gate along with other adventurers and soldiers who had gathered to see what was happening, Kevin, at the front, approached the figure and called out her name. "Alia!"

"Kevin...?" replied the girl. She adjusted the stick on her shoulder and regarded the approaching crowd wearily. Behind her, she dragged a fur bag.

Kevin gasped. The girl looked ghastly. She was covered in mud and draped in a tattered cloak, with traces of blood on her cheeks and hair.

The familiar soldier stepped forward, looking flabbergasted. "What have you been doing?" he asked. "What happened to the orcs?"

"They won't be attacking anyone anymore," Alia replied. "There might be a few left, but the higher-ranked ones are all gone."

"Gone? What are you talking about?!" Kevin demanded.

"Kevin, wait," Doyle said, stopping the other adventurer from pressing further. He looked at the black staff Alia was carrying. "Hey, let me ask you something. That hexagonal staff... Isn't that the weapon the orc general was wielding?"

Ignoring the others, who had no idea what Doyle was talking about, Alia turned to face the scout. "Do you want it? I managed to bring it with me, but it's pretty heavy..."

"No, thank you. Just another question, if you don't mind. You said the orcs are gone?"

"You'll find them in the woods and all over the abandoned village, if you want to go check. I'm tired. Can I just go?"

"...Sure." Seeing the exhaustion in Alia's face gave Doyle the same sense of dread he'd felt upon discovering the higher-ranked orcs in the woods. Instinctively, he stepped aside to let her pass.

"H-Hey—" Kevin tried to call out, but Doyle, shaking his head silently, gripped the younger man's shoulder.

As Alia's small figure disappeared toward the town gate, Doyle addressed the gathered soldiers and adventurers with a stern look on his face. "Someone find my party members and tell them to come to the meeting hall. We're gonna go out there and inspect the woods and the orcs' settlement."

That same day, Doyle's and Kevin's parties set out on an expedition. Within a

few days, they discovered over fifty orc corpses, including higher-ranked ones, deep in the woods and in the abandoned village that had served as the orcs' stronghold. The beasts' hearts had been removed and their aethercrystals taken.

Upon returning to town wanting to know what had happened, they discovered that the ashen-haired girl was already gone. Due to his work as a scout, Doyle thought back on various stories and reports he'd heard from people connected to the Thieves' Guild and other sources—tales of a young girl who had single-handedly destroyed an entire branch of the Assassins' Guild, opposed the organization itself as a whole, and wiped out several branches of the Thieves' Guild in various towns, exterminating them to the last member.

He'd initially dismissed these accounts as nonsense and assumed that, even if true, they'd been exaggerated for dramatic effect. However, those who had personally witnessed these events and survived by luck spoke about them with terror, which lended some credibility to their words.

Doyle gazed in the direction of the town where the baron resided—the same direction he believed the girl had headed—and murmured into the wind, "Lady Cinders is real, then..."

That day—the day after I'd defeated Gorjool and lost consciousness, I'd woken up to the blue sky stretching out above me. My aether and health had been severely depleted, and had I taken any additional damage, I'd have fallen into a coma and starved to death.

Even after regaining my senses, I still hadn't been able to move due to the excessive strain on my muscles and tendons—likely from pushing my physical abilities beyond their limits. Not only that, the whiplash from the dagger thrust had fractured the bone in my upper arm, dislocated my shoulder, and dealt me multiple bruises and internal injuries.

It was a wonder I'd survived at all. I'd been fortunate not to suffer any head injuries or I probably would've never woken up again.

Still in a daze, I assessed my situation. Using the little aether I'd recovered, I cast Flow to produce water around my face and sipped the muddy liquid to

restore some of my strength. In this helpless state, had even one surviving orc been present, I'd have been killed for sure.

Casting spells was difficult; my body's mana flow was malfunctioning and unstable. Still, thanks to Aether Manipulation having increased in level, I'd managed to use Restore to repair my body bit by bit. With trembling hands, I took the rest of my nutritional pellets, and after a full day, I'd finally recovered enough to move. Between my fatigue and injuries, however, my health and stamina plateaued at around fifty percent.

Nevertheless, I decided that staying here to recover fully would take too long, so I did what I needed to do and prepared to leave. I retrieved the black dagger from Gorjool's forehead and used the steel knife to extract the aethercrystal from its chest. I was an adventurer—I didn't kill out of hatred and had no plans of letting a kill go to waste. This would be further nourishment for my growth.

I found a fur bag that the orcs had used for foraging and went around the abandoned village, taking the aethercrystals from all of the corpses and retrieving as many of my throwing knives as possible. That night, I roasted wild vegetables and yams, drank salted water, and, for the first time in a month, had a warm meal. I slept like a log until sunrise. In the morning, I left the abandoned village and started making my way back to town, collecting the aethercrystals from the corpses of the orc soldiers in the woods along the way.

Bringing back the magic iron staff that Gorjool had used had been just a whim. I hadn't intended for it to be a trophy, but I also didn't like the idea of some random person coming across it and claiming it, so I decided to bring it back. I regretted it halfway, though—the thing was *heavy*.

Upon returning to town, I told Kevin and the other adventurers and soldiers only that the threat was gone, leaving the rest for them to sort out. I was too tired to explain in detail, but I also figured they'd understand once they saw the aftermath for themselves. Besides, if I explained what I'd done, they might not believe me, so it was just easier this way.

Within the town, there were no residents in sight, probably due to the ongoing evacuation in anticipation of an orc attack. Only soldiers were milling

about. I'd ended up doing more than just buying them time, but since I'd prevented the worst-case scenario, that was likely fine, I supposed. Probably.

I found an inn with its doors open and made my way inside. It seemed to be acting as a temporary barracks for adventurers and soldiers; I huddled up in a corner and wrapped myself in my cloak to sleep. At the moment, a safe place to sleep was more important to me than a proper meal. Granted, being around people didn't necessarily imply safety, but it beat being in the field with wild beasts and monsters roaming about.

After eating some dry cheese and hardened bread I'd found on a table—probably left there because the only people around were men—and washing them down with water, I drifted off. With proper sleep, I woke up to find that my health and aether had recovered to about seventy percent.

I asked a soldier who'd just returned to the inn about the situation. He told me that, while I was sleeping, some of the adventurers and soldiers had gone to the abandoned village where the orcs had been. There was no need for me to wait for their return; I figured they'd likely want an explanation, but I'd have to report to the Adventurers' Guild anyway and didn't want to repeat myself, so I decided to just head straight to the town where the guild was.

As I walked along the main road, I realized that despite my fatigue, my body felt nimbler than before. This was probably due to my levels in Martial Mastery and Non-Elemental Magic having increased to 4. Although my elemental magic and combat skills hadn't increased, meaning I was still Rank 3, my physical ability was closer to that of a Rank 4.

I had finally taken my first step toward true strength's stage.

On the way from the town where the guild was located to the smaller town besieged by orcs, I'd moved quickly, but on the way back, I walked. In part, this was because I hadn't fully recovered yet, but I also still had some concerns about using Boost.

The technique I'd used to defeat Gorjool... I had the feeling it'd caused my Boost to rage out of control, consuming a lot of my aether and putting significant strain on my body. My mentor had never mentioned such a phenomenon, but perhaps Galvus, with all his knowledge of weaponry, would

I finally arrived at the large town. There were more guards now than a month ago, probably as a precaution against the orcs.

It made sense; they wouldn't lift the heightened security until they'd confirmed that the threat was gone, so I didn't pay it any mind and headed straight for the gate. My tattered cloak earned me some suspicious looks, but I showed the guards my guild tag and, shocked that someone who looked like me was Rank 3, they quickly allowed me to pass.

The town hadn't changed much over the month I'd been away. Normally I'd have headed to the Adventurers' Guild first and given a brief report to the receptionist, but I instead headed for Galvus's smithy, stopping by a stall along the way to replenish my stock of various wild herbs. As usual, I moved silently through the back alleys while under Stealth, and upon making sure there were no prying eyes from the Thieves' Guild nearby, I knocked on the door.

"Galvus? Are you there?" I called out. I could hear the sound of a hammer inside, so he probably was in fact there, but it seemed he couldn't hear me due to the noise. I went inside.

Galvus, who had been busy making something, noticed me and his eyes widened. "Cinders, ya look like ya just got trampled by an entire parade."

The armor Gelf had made was just dirty, but my leather cloak was so badly damaged that it would need to be replaced.

"I got in a few fights," I told him. "Is my weapon ready? Also, I brought you a souvenir." I handed over the hexagonal magic iron staff I'd been carrying on my shoulder.

"Yer not winnin' any prizes for yer explanation skills, missy," he said, taking the staff. "But, huh..." Gelf examined the staff with great interest, letting out a low hum. "A pretty old piece, this. Rough craftsmanship, but no bends or warps despite heavy usage. This is very high-purity magic iron, all right."

He could tell all that from a glance? "Can you make a weapon out of this?"

"This is no more'n a chunk of magic iron, so I can make it into all sorts of things. But where did ya get this, Cinders?"

"An orc general was using it."

"Say what?! An orc general?!"

"Yeah. You can have it, but I want you to tell me something." I briefly explained the situation, including my haywire Boost situation, and Galvus slowly went from being amazed to holding his head in his hands and sighing.

"Ya dumbass!" he snapped. "I know tellin' an adventurer to not do stupid shit is like tellin' the sky to not be blue, but at least take better care of yer damn body!"

"Sorry..."

"Anyway, about yer weird Boost situation. I'm only Rank 2 in combat myself, but I know a lot about weapons." He glared at me in a chastising manner, poured himself a glass of alcohol, and gulped it down before continuing. "I make weapons under the assumption that they'll be used for combat techniques. So back when I was a lad, I looked into that stuff. Modern techniques have been around for, say, two thousand years or so, but people already used 'em before that. Think of 'em as...primordial techniques. That's probably what ya used."

Galvus went on to explain that what I had used wasn't a technique, exactly, but a phenomenon of sorts that had existed prior to the current system of Boost and combat techniques.

The "heat" from Boost in its raw form increased one's power but was a double-edged sword. Using the skill Non-Elemental Magic to control and focus that heat into a point was how one activated combat techniques. Creating a new combat technique wasn't as simple as knowing this, however.

"Combat techniques were created by spirits," Galvus said, taking another swig before continuing.

Combat techniques were said to be a form of non-elemental magic activated by using simple words, but these words weren't in the spirit language—they were in the common tongue used by humans. Orcs and other such monsters,

for instance, used roars to activate their techniques instead.

This meant that those triggers were no different from the words used as invocations for regular sorcery spells such as Fire Arrow and Stone Sling. The reason it was necessary to say these words out loud was that the spell itself was formed through the *meaning* of the invocations.

When a spirit recognized the meaning of those words, the invocations gained the power of spirit language in our realm. Just as the full incantation for a spell wasn't necessary as long as its meaning was understood, even a monster's roar could be used to activate a spell or combat technique as long as the invocation could be understood as part of the magical structure.

For centuries, our predecessors had improved their control over the raging heat of Boost through trial and error. Current combat techniques had been created when spirits had recognized those efforts.

Finding a piece of ore didn't mean one could immediately start crafting a weapon from it. Likewise, if I continued to experiment leisurely, it might take me decades to craft a combat technique. Even if I somehow managed to luck into one, it was unlikely to be better than the existing techniques.

Galvus also explained that the reason Gorjool's combat technique had been so powerful was that techniques Rank 5 and above were said to be created by spirits specifically for the "heroes" responsible for maintaining the world's balance.

In short, current combat techniques were stabilized versions of the original, unstable Boost-fueled techniques. If one wanted to gradually grow stronger, then using the already available techniques was the fastest way, Galvus said.

What all of this meant was that I couldn't create a new combat technique. But...could I control the raging heat directly?

"If yer question's about sorcery, there's better people to ask," Galvus pointed out. "Ya have a teacher for that, don't ya?"

"Yes... I'll ask her."

"Anyway, that was all well and good, but I've finished craftin' and repairin' yer weapons. First, yer magic steel knife. Here, feel that."

"Okay." The knife I'd entrusted my life to for the past two and a half years was back in my hand. Upon gripping it, I could feel that the handle was no longer slim and meant for a child to use with both hands; rather, he'd restored its original thick handle, meant for a one-handed grip. I was surprised by how well it fit in my palm. "Can I give it a swing?"

"Try cuttin' that charcoal over there."

I took a piece of charcoal from a pile and tossed it into the air, then took a quick step forward and swung the knife. The brittle charcoal split cleanly in half, the blade going through easily, as though cutting fruit.

"It's really good," I said. "About the dagger I borrowed..."

"I'll fix that one up too. Give me one more day."

"I thought you were lending it to me temporarily?" The black dagger had been meant as a replacement while my knife was being repaired, but when I pointed this out, Galvus didn't answer.

Instead, he drew the black dagger from its sheath and frowned. "This many scratches from just one month of use?" he muttered. "Well, I guess it makes sense, what with fightin' higher-ranked orcs and all. Look, Cinders, this magic steel dagger was made to be used together with that knife, as a power weapon of sorts. Didn't ya like it?"

"I did. I couldn't have won without it." I'd only managed that final strike because of this weapon.

"Then keep usin' it. The knife and dagger are sister weapons. Would be a shame not to use 'em as a pair."

"Okay." For a cranky old man, he really did have a kind heart.

"Now, take a look at the new weapon ya asked me for." Galvus's eyes lit up like those of a child showing off a new toy as he laid the bundle he'd been carrying down on the table and unfurled it. "Look!!!"

"Four of them?" I'd asked Galvus to make new blades for my pendulums, and for some reason, they came in four different varieties.

"Ya use this weapon for all sorts of things, don'tcha? So I made different types

for different uses." Galvus went on to explain each one, his cheeks flushing with pride.

The all-purpose blade: a diamond-shaped blade with some weight to it. It was primarily used for stabbing but was suitable for slashing as well and was the closest to what I'd already been using.

The slashing blade: a circular blade built like a chakram, designed for spinning. With enough centrifugal force, it could be used to slice like a razor and chop like an axe.

The sickle blade: a scythe shaped like an anchor. It could be swung like the slashing blade, then drawn back to cut down even the most robust creatures in one strike.

The weighted blade: a thick, cross-shaped blade that could be swung horizontally. Its slightly pointed ends could be used like hammers to crush skulls.

"Judgin' by the look on yer face, ya know how to use 'em, yeah? I made molds, so I can make ya spares eventually. Ya just gave me materials, after all!" Galvus exclaimed, laughing heartily as he tapped the magic iron staff.

"Thank you..."

"Oh, shush, dumbass! Yer a kid! No need to be shy about it!"

Galvus's purposefully gruff act made me smile a little. "Oh, I need some throwing knives too. Ready-made ones will do," I said, turning my attention to the weapons on a nearby shelf.

Right then, I felt eyes on me and had the feeling someone was at the entrance. Instinctively, I drew a knife from the slit in my skirt and threw it; the presence shifted slightly, dodging the blade. Sensing this was someone highly skilled, I positioned myself to protect Galvus and readied my knife.

The source of the presence emerged from the scenery, raising his voice in a hurry. "Wait, wait! Don't do anything stupid! Your dear mentor finally finds you, and you try to kill him?! Come on, Alia!"

"Viro?" That was the Rank 4 adventurer who had taken me from this town

and trained me in scouting skills. Why was he here? Also, had he just said he'd "found" me? I fully activated Boost and pointed the black knife at him, ready for a fight. "Who sent you? That organization? The Thieves' Guild?" I asked quietly.

Viro hastily shook his head. "Listen to me, damn it! I was looking for you because I personally need your help!"

"You...need my help," I echoed. Why?

I had the feeling this was going to be a hassle.

New Job

▼ Viro Dorne

Species: Humanð (Rank 4)

Aether Points: $172/220 \triangle +30$

Health Points: $283/320 \triangle +10$

Overall Combat Power: 1056 (Boosted: 1281) \triangle +156

Viro had grown quite a bit stronger over the past three years too. A rapid increase in stats was difficult at his age, so the growth had to have come from sorcery-related areas. With those numbers, he could've faced a non-weakened orc soldier head-on. And with his extensive combat experience, it would still be challenging for me to defeat him in a fair fight.

I quietly sheathed the black knife and attached it to my back, then returned to Galvus's side to pick up the newly made pendulum blades. "You said these were going to be made of magic iron, but they're actually magic steel. Is maintenance the same?"

"Good pieces, right?" the dwarf boasted. "To turn iron into steel, ya just mix in a li'l graphite. For magic iron into magic steel, ya mix in powdered aethercrystals. The ratio and type of aethercrystals are a secret, unique to every blacksmith. If done poorly, it'll make the metal harder but more brittle too."

"Hello? What is it with you two?" Viro asked, looking dumbfoundedly

between Galvus and me, his earlier excuses all but forgotten.

"I was joking," I replied. "You tried to sneak up on another scout, so it was only fair, right?"

Galvus burst into laughter, slapping his knee as he continued to drink. "Damn, boy, ya got one-upped by yer student! Is there any woman who can't trick ya?"

"Enough with the 'boy' thing, Galvus! And leave the women out of this!" Exasperated, Viro sat down on a nearby bench.

While any job involving Viro was sure to mean trouble, we trusted each other enough that betrayal wasn't a concern. Moreover, his only relationship with the organization I wanted most to avoid was that of an adventurer to his client. And I didn't take him for the type to willingly attack a student.

Viro glowered at us, furrowing his brows, then heaved a high. "Anyway, Alia, you've changed a whole lot in three years. Not just your appearance either. What's with that combat power? A kid's numbers shouldn't be that high!"

Though outwardly I'd aged to look between thirteen and fourteen years old—still a child by all counts—I was rarely treated as one anymore. I was also as tall as an adult woman now, though my body was still slim.

"It's been a while, Viro. You've gotten stronger too," I commented candidly. Viro's cheeks twitched slightly for some reason.

"Hey, Cinders," Galvus said. "That boy over there's been trainin' in magic and whatnot 'cause he's scared his student's gonna surpass him. Looks like he's right too!" The dwarf laughed loudly.

"That's not true!" Viro protested, glaring at Galvus before turning his gaze back to me. "A lot happened after you vanished. The organization was looking for you, yeah, but Sera and her son were worried too. Then I start hearing these rumors about a 'Lady Cinders' opposing the Assassins' and the Thieves' Guilds and even taking down some of their branches. All sorts of crazy stories."

Viro poured himself a cup of Galvus's liquor and downed it in one gulp.

"The underworld might seem huge, but it's actually pretty tight-knit. You never know when you'll run into a familiar face, so people are cautious, yeah?

Anyone who knows anything about the underworld would never dream of opposing those guilds. And, well, I don't know a single kid who would be willing to do something that stupid...except you."

"Ah." The only other person I could think of who might be capable of doing something like that was that black-haired girl.

Viro went on to explain that, because of the peculiar nickname the Thieves' Guild had begun calling me by, he'd been almost certain I'd survived. Though he'd been looking for me, he claimed running into me here had been a coincidence. He'd come to this barony for an adventuring job and to ask Galvus to craft him something he could use for a different job.

Maybe this "different job" was the one he needed my help with?

"Galvus, you said you'll be done fixing up the dagger by tomorrow, right?" I asked.

"Yep. Even if I fix up the boy's weapons too, it'll be done by then. Also, ya mentioned throwing knives? I've got about ten thin ones."

"Those will do. I'll come pick everything up tomorrow." I took the pendulum blades and turned to Viro. "I have business at the Adventurers' Guild. Let's talk outside."

Accompanied by Viro, I left Galvus's shop and stopped by Viktor's general store to report my survival and buy a secondhand cloak. I also gave the old man some silver to get food and liquor for Galvus. Since the dwarf had refused to accept payment for the black dagger, I'd decided on an alternative payment method. Maybe that was also why Viro had brought aethercrystals and other materials?

"Ya know, Cinders," Viktor said, "ya could buy a proper cloak for a Rank 3 adventurer instead of a cheap secondhand one, ya know?"

"Well, I'll ruin it in two weeks at most."

"Oh."

Viro and I headed for the Adventurers' Guild, and as we walked by the main

road, he regarded the fur bag I was carrying with curiosity.

"Does your business with the guild involve that sack?" he asked. "Did you take on a request for materials or something? That why you didn't sell what's in there to the old man?"

"Something like that." The Adventurers' Guild probably had its hands full with everything that had been happening and needed the orc general's aethercrystal. I figured the receptionist I usually spoke to would know what to do with it.

"Well, I was also planning on dropping by the guild, so it all works out."

"What did you do this time?"

"I didn't do anything! Look, something major is happening in this barony and they want me to take charge until they can find a Rank 4 or higher party, that's all. It'll delay my other job a bit, but oh well."

"Huh..." Had something else happened? And speaking of "something major," I was still being targeted. I figured I should say something. "Oh, by the way, I'm sure you know, but being around me is dangerous. Well, not that it matters when it comes to you."

"Are you saying that because you trust my skill or because you don't care?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Both," I replied, tilting my head. Even if Viro got dragged into something because of me, I was sure he could handle it.

Remembering I was being targeted by underworld guilds, he frowned. "About that... If you help me, I can't promise you'll be completely free of retaliation from the underworld, but I can make it harder for them to mess with you. How's that?"

"Really? What's the job, then?"

Viro stopped and looked straight at me, speaking seriously for once. "I was planning on finding someone to help me even if I couldn't contact you, but this actually directly concerns you. It'll be hard with just us two, but with your support, the odds of success are better. Now listen, Alia, what I need from you

is..."

I listened quietly as he rattled off the vague details of the job with a frown that mirrored his earlier one. Of *course* it was a hassle. But, as he continued speaking, I sighed quietly. There was no way I could've refused this.

When I arrived at the Adventurer's Guild, tensions were noticeably higher than before, with many of the adventurers wearing anxious expressions.

At the counter was the same receptionist I was used to. She spotted me too and waved, smiling. "Alia! Welcome back! I'm so glad to see you safe—" Her smile instantly turned into a scowl. "Oh. *You're* here too."

"I've been right next to her the whole time!" Viro protested, leaning closer.

"My apologies. Alia shone so brightly I couldn't see you in the shadows."

"Why are you always so awful to me?! I even treated you to dinner!"

"A good man would not brag about such a thing."

"Grr..."

For a moment there, I'd thought she'd completely forgotten about him, but it seemed like they got along just fine. Knowing her personality, if she really did hate him, she'd have definitely yelled at him.

"Anyway, Viro, the guildmaster is waiting for you. Oh, but we should collect Alia's report first." Her expression turned serious and businesslike as she looked at me. "Alia, how was the situation on-site? If you have any important information, I'll pass it on to the guildmaster."

"The high-ranking orcs are gone."

"I beg your pardon?" The receptionist's features froze, and Viro's head turned toward me like a rusty gear.

Ah. The "something major" Viro had mentioned were the orcs. In my head, that was done and over with, so I hadn't given it any deeper thought. As I pondered this, familiar faces among the adventurers in the lobby spotted me and rushed over.

"Alia!"

"Thank goodness you're okay!"

It was Jil and Shuri, the orphans from the slums—no, adventurers now. Despite their relief to see me safe and sound, they couldn't conceal their anxious expressions.

"H-How was the town?" Jil asked.

"Um, Alia, is this guy your dad? He doesn't look like you," Shuri said.

"I'm only thirty-eight..." Viro was still older than my actual dad, though.

"The town is no longer under any threat," I told them.

Jil tilted his head in confusion. "Wha...?"

The receptionist, managing to break free of her stiffness, leaned over the counter. "What do you mean by that? Has the orc general moved elsewhere?"

"I brought you this. Please have a look," I said, placing the fur bag on the counter and revealing its contents.

Everyone's eyes widened at the sight of the scattered aethercrystals. The one I'd taken from the orc general was much larger than the rest, about the size of an adult's fist.

Viro hurriedly picked up the large crystal and glared at it inquisitively. "Alia... This is the orc general's aethercrystal!"

"Whaaat?!" the receptionist exclaimed, incredulous. "Wait, then, wait, these bigger ones are from the higher-ranked orcs?! The soldiers?! And the other fifty are from the common orcs?!"

"Mm-hmm."

"'Mm-hmm'?! That's all you have to say?!" Viro demanded, astonished. What else was I supposed to say?

Apparently, one could use Scan on the aethercrystals to determine what they'd come from. So Scan wasn't just for living beings... Well, it made sense one could "scan" objects too.

The two adults' shock as they scanned the aethercrystals must've been great

indeed, because their shouting elicited murmurs from the nearby adventurers. This was quickly becoming a hassle.

"Feel free to examine them as much as you'd like. In a few days, reports should be coming in from the adventuring parties stationed in that town," I said to the receptionist. "Could I sell you these crystals?"

"Y-Yes, of course. But, if you could please explain it to the guildmaster—"

"I could, but he won't believe me, will he? Once the others return with news, he'll understand what happened. There's no need for explanations. I'll come get the payment for the crystals later."

"Whaaat?! Wait, where are you going?!"

"Alia?! Hey, wait up!"

"Viro, don't you go anywhere! I can't explain this to the guildmaster on my own!" the receptionist yelled, grabbing Viro before he could chase after me.

Nobody would've believed me if I'd said I'd defeated the orcs myself—at least not until the other adventurers returned to corroborate the story—so I decided it would've been a waste of my time to stay here. I figured I'd leave everything to the grown-ups before this became even more of a hassle.

As I turned my back on the confused receptionist and the trapped Viro, some of the adventurers in the lobby silently made way for me. Jil and Shuri, not really understanding what was happening, took the opportunity to slip out and caught up with me in a back alley.

"Um, Alia? I'm not sure what that was about, but—"

"Don't be dumb, Jil. Alia did something about the orcs! Right?"

"Something like that," I said. "There may be a few remaining, but the problem's been resolved."

"Alia..." Jil murmured tearfully, reaching for my hand.

With the edge of her palm, Shuri sharply batted away her brother's hand before taking mine in both of hers. "Thank you, Alia."

"No problem. But it's best if people don't see you guys with me too much."

"Okay. And I hope things get resolved quickly for you too! See you again, okay? Come on, Jil. Let's go!"

"H-Hey! Shuri!" Jil protested as he was dragged away by the hand. "Thank you, Alia! See you!"

The pair looked back at me several times. I lightly waved, murmuring a soft "See you."

Would I really see them again, though? And even if I did, would we be able to talk normally?

"You can come out now," I called out.

Three young men emerged from the shadows of the alley. "Whoa, she noticed us."

"I've heard the stories, but I didn't think she really was just a little girl."

"Seriously, why would the others tell us not to mess with her? Look at her!"

The three young adventurers seemed to be somewhere between their late teens and early twenties. They were all wearing dirty leather armor, so I assumed they were a party of either light fighters or scouts. Each of them had about 130 combat power, so the lower end of Rank 2. From their conversation, however, it was easy to guess what they really were.

"You're with the Thieves' Guild, then. Other thieves said they'd stay out of my way."

The thieves sneered mockingly.

"We've got a feisty one here, guys."

"That old guy looked strong. Should've stayed with him, little girl."

"Our bosses told us not to mess with ya, but if we bring ya in, they'd probably make us proper members for it. Or hey, we might even get promoted right out of the gate!"

Thieves' Guild rookies, then. Or, nah, just regular thugs. It seemed their "bosses," whoever they were, had been under direct orders from the guild

higher-ups but had only given vague instructions to their underlings. That had to be why they didn't understand the risks of defying the guild's orders, or the reason I wasn't to be messed with.

"Come quietly and we won't hurt ya."

"Drop that weapon already!"

"Don't even think about fighting back, or those kids from earlier will—" Whoosh.

A red line formed straight across the man's throat as he raised his face to look down on me. He collapsed, blood spurting from the wound.

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"Wha—"
"H-Hey—"
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A second man, confused and unsure of what was happening, also got a deep gash across his throat from the circular blade of my slashing pendulum. Blood gushed forth like a fountain.

"Eeeeeeeeeeek!" shrieked the last man, drenched in his friend's blood, as he turned to run. Before he could, the sickle blade whizzed past him, barely grazing his neck. I pulled on the string and the blade returned to my hand, slashing deeply into his carotid artery and tearing through his neck.

Now even common thugs are after me, I thought to myself. I used to think I could just take down anyone who came after me—and I still felt that way, but I didn't want to put ordinary people like Jil and Shuri in danger. If I kept defeating all the would-be avengers, others might eventually realize that getting involved with me was a bad idea, and these attacks might stop. But that wasn't the case right now.

Viro had promised that, if I were to help with his job, he'd ensure that the Assassins' and Thieves' Guilds would be less likely to bother me. Not that refusing said job had been an option in the first place.

After all, he'd asked for my help with assassinating a traitor—Graves.

A Nostalgic Place

"I can't believe you left me behind, Alia. Me! Your mentor!" Viro groused. "Anyway, a scout arrived on horseback just after you left. He had news about the situation, so I took advantage of the chaos and slipped out too. But you should stay away from this town's guild for a while. Also, I got the payment for your aethercrystals."

"Thanks for that."

So it *had* turned into an even bigger hassle after all. Still, I couldn't have left without saying anything, so I'd wanted to at least deliver the basic info before letting everyone else handle the rest. Fortunately, it sounded like the scout who'd been in the smaller town had been competent, since he'd rushed over to deliver a report on the orcs' annihilation.

"Sounds like the baron and the guild will have a lot to deal with in the near future," I mused.

"You say that like you had nothing to do with it! But, well, this beats a direct confrontation with the orcs, at least."

Baron Horus couldn't halt the deployment of the soldiers sent by his liege and other noble families based on the adventurers' report alone, so he'd probably have to urgently send some of his men to confirm the information. Once they did, the deployment would need to be canceled, but some amount of compensation would still be required. Nevertheless, as Viro had said, it was still better than an orc attack on the town endangering the lives of civilians and soldiers alike.

"Anyway, let's go over our plans for now," Viro suggested as we waited at Galvus's smithy.

"All right."

Viro was supposed to have led the attack on the orcs, but that was no longer necessary. Still, he'd been asked to remain in town until the baron's soldiers could verify the reports, which was expected to take about a week. I wasn't at full strength, and Viro was going to pick up another comrade of his, so we decided we'd meet in three months' time in the capital of the Duchy of Helton, located in western Claydale.

The delay could potentially give Graves the chance to move to a different location. Viro told me that in that event, he'd leave messages for me at the Adventurers' Guilds in major cities like Dandorl.

Three months would give me enough time to visit Cere'zhula...

"So this request, it's from that one organization, then?" I asked to be sure.

Viro, with an unusually serious expression, folded his arms lightly. "You're still wary of them, huh? Look, we don't know why Graves betrayed them, but they didn't order your assassination. They have no reason to. No one's sure why Graves attacked you in the first place."

"He said back then that nobles were interested in me, and that I'd gotten too close to the royal family. What did he mean by that?" The part about the royal family likely had something to do with Elena. But what of the nobles? Was one of my blood relatives still looking for me?

"I have no idea. Sera might know, though. Should I ask her?"

"No need. I'll let my guard down a bit, but I'd rather keep my distance from that organization for a while. Is that all right?"

"I mean, it's not like I'm part of the organization, so it's no skin off my back. Anyway, trusting them fully would be dangerous too. Can I at least let Sera and her son know you're alive?"

"Sure. That's fine," I replied with a nod.

Viro seemed somewhat relieved; Sera must've asked him to verify my safety. "Also, if you plan on staying close to the princess, be ready to deal with Sera's people. I couldn't tell you before, but that organization is basically a secret, operating from the country's shadows. Even if you just want to be a regular adventurer, someone of your skill level will deal with them sooner or later."

"I see." I had somewhat expected that answer since Elena was involved, but it essentially confirmed that the organization was this country's secret service.

With a nationwide information network and official authority besides, this organization would be a much worse enemy than the Assassins' Guild. If it ever came to that, my only option would be to flee the country.

I need to make up my mind, I thought to myself, exhaling as if to expel something pent up within me. Up to this point, I'd been doing nothing but fleeing—and I didn't want to do that anymore. If I encountered anyone related to this "otome game," or family members looking to drag me back onto my fated path, I'd use my own strength to get rid of them. And if my own strength wasn't sufficient...I was prepared to give up my life. I refused to live as a puppet, robbed of my free will.

I had to grow stronger before then. My fate was my own.

After getting the black dagger and sharpened throwing knives from Galvus, I parted ways with Viro, agreeing to meet again in three months. Viro was going to go pick up a former party member of his who had already retired.

Now that I thought about it, hadn't I heard somewhere before that his party was looking to replace their sorceress? That had to mean they hadn't found one yet. But...hadn't she retired due to old age? Was involving her really a good idea?

For now, I decided to head back to Cere'zhula's. It had been a while. I was going to see her in part because I wasn't in top physical condition, but there were two other major reasons.

One, my pendulum strings. They were two years old now, and most of them had grown worn from my various battles; I only had two lengths of string remaining, both actively in use. Now that I had four blades, I needed at least eight strings—four to use and four spares.

Two, I wanted to ask her about the move I'd used to defeat Gorjool—what Galvus had called a "primordial technique," the use of which had nearly killed me. I figured my mentor might know something about it.

Traveling from the barony to her home, even moving fast along the road through Taurus and Dandorl, would take at least a month. From there to the Duchy of Helton, where I was to meet Viro, it was another month and some change. Viro had headed to the March of Wancarl, which was two weeks from the capital. I didn't want to be the only one showing up late to our rendezvous.

I definitely needed a quicker route, then. With this schedule, I could only stay with Cere'zhula for about a week. To shorten the journey, I decided to travel through the forest—a dangerous, thickly wooded area that sat between the Barony of Horus, where I was, and the Barony of Sayles, where my mentor was.

North of it was the area considered to be monster territory, which wasn't part of the Kingdom of Claydale. However, since the border extended into the forest, someone had to have explored it up to that point and established a sorcerous boundary marking the border. Maybe this was a relic of the era when adventurers had performed their original roles of explorers for hire? Either way, the fact it was a frontier zone didn't necessarily imply uncharted territory; I expected there had once been at least a path of some sort along the border that people could traverse.

I bought extra salt and sugar in town and a spare cloak to use as a blanket. Since Viro had collected the payment for the aethercrystals in my stead, I didn't suffer any further delays and was able to get a lot done.

Each orc aethercrystal had fetched five silver, the soldiers' crystals had been four gold apiece, and Gorjool's, five large gold. The total had been in excess of nine large gold, a sizable sum. I could've made twice that amount if I'd been able to harvest materials from the orcs too, but I'd left those behind for two reasons: one, I couldn't have carried them all myself, and two, I'd wanted to leave something for the other adventurers. Foolish of me.

Although a few days had passed, my health and aether points hadn't recovered beyond seventy percent. It was sufficient to get by, at least, since I was only traveling, not fighting.

Finally, I bought some high-quality dried fruits and roasted nuts from a street stall, storing the perishables in my sterile Shadow Storage. Then I left the town and headed straight east.

Under Stealth, I ran at about sixty percent of my maximum speed. By moderating the amount of aether I spent on Boost, I could cover distances at a pace equivalent to traveling on horseback without overexerting myself.

This, however, presumed a flat path. Level terrain became scarcer the deeper

one went into the woods, which meant my speed would decrease. Before that happened, I used Aether Manipulation to practice Boost. Like I had when I used the primordial technique, I removed the elemental impurities from my mana and, through willpower, kept it from raging out of control.

Boost would maintain its usual efficiency as long as my mana remained stable, but training in Aether Manipulation was never a waste. Currently, I was trying to increase the fluidity of my mana, thereby improving Boost's effect while using less mana overall.

That aside, my limbs still hadn't grown any thicker. Maybe my body had grown too reliant on mana. It wasn't that I lacked muscle—I did have it all over my body, but my abs weren't defined. Why not? Even if my muscle tissue was now more akin to that of a monster, the orcs and Feld were so visibly brawny. Maybe I should've just been content that my body wasn't growing any heavier.

I left the main road and entered the woods, leaping between rocks and fallen trees and avoiding the leaf-littered ground, just as I had when tracking the orcs. Though I ran into goblins and manawolves along the way, I didn't engage them —I was under Stealth and they didn't notice me.

Besides, I didn't kill living beings without reason. Animals I killed to eat; enemies I killed when it was the rational solution to a problem. I didn't kill to feel something. It wasn't an emotional thing for me, and I had no reason to feel guilty about it.

Therefore, I didn't hesitate to aim for my own survival.

I darted through the deep forest like a shadow, sustaining myself on fruits I found and the preserved foods I'd brought. Whenever I felt tired, I took short naps in trees. Though I wasn't sure of the exact location of the border, I spotted signs of someone's presence on the cliffs and large rocks.

"Is this a barrier?" I wondered. At regular intervals within the forest there were spaces where foul mana—"miasma"—had been purified.

Humans could only survive in this monster-filled world because the more powerful monsters were also more intelligent and thus could recognize the threat that groups of humans posed. Such monsters tended to avoid areas where people lived. I figured that these purified areas had been created by burying light-elemental aethercrystals in the ground, something that was still customarily done around settlements. It was a warning to monsters that this was human territory; it was evidence of human presence and, indeed, a path of sorts, just as I'd hoped to find. This would surely lead to an inhabited place.

Even then, due to the proximity to the monster territory, I did encounter several powerful creatures: an ogre, a Rank 3 demi-beast; a treant, a Rank 4 tree monster; and two Rank 5 mythical beasts in the form of a griffin and a troll. I'd been especially lucky to spot the griffin first and avoid it. Had it seen me first, my chances of surviving the encounter would've been slim to none.

"There it is." Finally, after ten days of traversing the deadly forest, I spotted a large lake from between gaps in the trees atop the rocky terrain. I'd passed this lake before—it sat on the border between the Countdom of Basch and the Barony of Sayles. It was the only large lake in the area, so there was no mistaking it.

I headed straight from the rocks toward the lake, then traveled north until I finally reached an inhabited area. After spending the night in a nearby town, I traveled another four days and arrived at Sayles for the third time.

The two siblings from House Sayles had to have been old enough to attend the Academy by now. Were they both in the capital? The sister was probably an adult and might've already returned, but I had no plans to pay a visit either way. The issue with the mysterious figure plaguing this area had been resolved, so I had no reason to see them again.

This place was nevertheless significant to me: it was where I'd fought Graves and lost. He'd seen my closeness to a member of the royal family as a threat and tried to kill me, but...this time, I would be the one hunting him down as a threat to Elena. His reasons didn't matter to me; he was my enemy, and I would eliminate him.

Nearly a year had passed since I last visited Cere'zhula to report the destruction of the Assassins' Guild. I arrived at her remote abode carrying spices

and a large amount of salt as gifts. I could see the field where she grew medicinal herbs had grown a little larger, and there were some new plants I couldn't recognize.

"I'm back, mistress." I entered the familiar home, a medicinal scent filling my nostrils as I set down my luggage.

Cere'zhula emerged from the alchemy room in the back with a potion bottle in hand, her skin still the same charming shade of black, characteristic of dark elves. She raised her face and smiled knowingly. "It's about time, my unsociable apprentice. Why, I've been preparing for your return and was beginning to wonder if it'd all go to waste."

"Preparing how?"

Unfazed, as if she'd predicted my return, Cere'zhula stored the bottle in a box, then approached me and pulled me into an embrace. "You've grown again. But you've lost some weight, haven't you? Welcome home, Alia."

Thus I returned to the one place in this world where there was someone I could call family. To the one place I could call home.

"Thank you, Cere'zhula."

Hunting for Thread

After arriving at Cere'zhula's abode, I spent five days taking additional alchemy lessons as well as making my own pellets and potions. I'd finally gotten proper sleep, and between that and my mentor's excellent medicine, my condition had improved to about ninety percent.

"It's time, Alia. Go get ready. We're going out."

"Where to?" Now that I thought about it, she had mentioned something about preparing for my return. I hadn't had the chance to ask what it was since I'd been so busy making tonics to help with exhaustion and nutrition. What has she been preparing for?

"You made those threads nearly two years ago, right? Aren't you running out?"

"How did you know that?" I asked, keeping a straight face but a little startled by her accurate prediction.

"I knew you'd run out in a few years based on the size of the spider you hunted," she explained nonchalantly. "That and, well, knowing you, I'm sure you've gotten yourself into plenty of reckless fights."

I decided to stay quiet. She knew I was reckless but didn't need to know about the battle against over fifty orcs, including a general. She'd likely scold me if I told her.

My threads had been crafted from giant spider silk. They'd been well-made, using fresh materials, but were still only of intermediate quality. While the threads were sturdy enough to resist being cut midair by most people and monsters, higher-ranked foes would've been able to do that. My mentor had seen my combat abilities during my last visit and anticipated I'd have encounters with high-ranked enemies, so she'd gathered information about arachnid monsters from the merchant who visited her home regularly as well as from her sizable contact network.

"About three days north of here, there's a river valley where arachne have been sighted over the past few months," Cere'zhula explained. "There have been no related incidents, and the river makes it difficult for adventurers to hunt these monsters. We'll go find ourselves one before they disappear."

"Got it."

Like Elena, Cere'zhula had four elemental affinities. As the Fiend, she'd fought fiercely for the demonic army, and between that and her enlarged aethercrystal, she could no longer endure prolonged combat. I could've told her not to overdo it, or not to burden herself, but I wouldn't. Her life was her own. And that was exactly why I didn't want to let any of what she did for me go to waste.

The boots and glove my mentor had used during her Fiend days were now in my possession, so she was wearing equipment suited for a sorceress. Spells didn't put as much strain on her heart, but I made sure to put her former belongings with mine before our departure anyway.

I was wearing the leather dress Gelf had made, which I'd done maintenance on myself. I strapped the black knife and dagger from Galvus to my thighs, then donned an old cloak.

As soon as we departed, Cere'zhula began a lesson. "Now, Alia, tell me the characteristics of an arachne." She had taught me not only sorcery and alchemy but also general life skills, and had shared her extensive knowledge of dangerous monsters and forest creatures, which had proved essential for my life as an adventurer.

The upper half of an arachne resembled that of a human female, while the lower half was an enormous spider. Unlike wild animals that became monsters due to the effects of mana, their bizarre appearance suggested they were more likely mythical beasts akin to griffins and manticores, though this was uncertain.

There were two types of arachne: common and rare. Though categorized as the same variety of monster, they were different enough to be considered separate species.

Although the upper half of a common arachne might've looked indistinguishable from that of a human woman at a glance, they were only about as intelligent as goblins. The moment they started moving, their entire bodies distorted in a grotesque manner, making their monstrous nature obvious.

Rare arachne, meanwhile, had almost fully lost their monstrous nature and were highly intelligent, said to understand human speech and use sorcery. A rare arachne could maintain the form of a beautiful woman and use it to seduce human men.

In short, while these two were the same type of monster, the differences between them were akin to those between humans and goblins. Common arachne could be called simple monsters, whereas rare ones could be seen as closer to demi-humans.

While rare arachne were intelligent and capable of communication, they were neutral creatures. Some individuals were friendly, while others were deceitful and lured people as prey. Since they could use sorcery and were cunning and skilled in strategy, they were considered Rank 5 in difficulty.

What Cere'zhula and I were after was a common one, though. They couldn't use sorcery, so they were ranked lower at 4. Physically, however, they were stronger than their rare counterparts. For someone like me, a scout-type with low offensive power, letting my guard down could be lethal.

As we moved through the woods, Cere'zhula nodded at my explanation to indicate it had been satisfactory.

"Mistress, is there a difference in the quality of the thread between the common and rare types?" I asked, curious.

Cere'zhula's expression was serious as she answered in simple terms. "There isn't much of a difference generally, but monsters are living beings. As such, their condition and nutritional status can cause slight variations. Rare arachne in particular tend to keep skin and hair routines to help them seduce men, so some individuals are even more mindful of their diet than humans."

"I see." Being a monster was harder than I'd realized. Apparently, rare arachne silk had the same strength as the common variant, but its color and luster made it highly sought after; it was used, for instance, in crafting ornaments for nobles.

We camped in the forest that day. Had I been alone, I would've concealed my presence, avoided using fire, and slept in the trees for the duration of the outing. Since there were two of us, however, I burned monster-repelling incense and made a simple soup of dried meat with local wild plants and mushrooms.

"Your cooking is always so...rustic, Alia."

"It's nutritious."

After traveling for another day, we heard the sounds of running water nearby. After climbing sloped forest terrain for half a day, we reached the rim of a valley; below us flowed a river.

Merchants from the Traders' Guild traveled this river by boat, bearing wares to and from noble territories along the coast. At some point, the bird monsters that had occasionally attacked these boats had vanished, and people had begun

to report sightings of giant spiderwebs and shadows that looked like arachne in the upper parts of the valley. The guild had hired adventurers to guard the boats, but the arachne would not show themselves with the adventurers present. Since this alone was enough to prevent attacks, they'd deemed it unnecessary to actively pursue the arachne deeper into the woods, and thus the situation had remained as it was.

"I'll be going," I said.

"Do your best."

First, I needed to lure out an arachne. I descended toward the valley alone—my mentor was a dark elf, which made her less effective as bait than a young girl like me. Not only that, her melee skills were only at Rank 3 despite the fact that she was a Rank 5 sorceress, so I was a better decoy. I had no large weapons on me, so I would appear to be an ordinary traveler to an observer.

Of course, it was unnatural for a child to be alone this deep into the woods, but a low-intelligence common arachne would likely think of me as simple prey. I sat on a rock near the rim of the approximately forty-meter-long valley, pretending to rest. After some time, my eyes picked up on a disturbance in the surrounding mana.

Startled, I kicked off the ground, doing a flip while shedding my cloak. The discarded fabric was immediately ensnared by an incoming string and sharply yanked away.

"Typhoon!" Cere'zhula chanted from her hiding spot.

"Screeeeeeeee!" the monster that had targeted me shrieked as the raging windstorm unleashed by the Level 5 spell hurled it into the air. It had the upper body of a human female attached to a roughly two-meter-long spider. It was an arachne, undoubtedly.

▼ Arachne (common)

Species: Monstrous Arachnid (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 132/150

Health Points: 386/435

Overall Combat Power: 657 (Boosted: 831)

Typhoon had a wide area of effect but was only powerful enough to blow away a human at close range. The screeching arachne glared at me as it landed; its upper body distorted, changing from that of a human to a goblin. By then I'd already sprung into action and thrown a knife, which the arachne caught by shooting a thread from its spider head.

"Scree!" it shrieked, spitting something that looked like venom from its "human" head.

"Shield," I chanted quickly, dodging to the side. From behind me, Cere'zhula cast the spell Guillotine, severing one of the arachne's legs.

"Screeeeeeeee!" the beast screamed, trying to retreat.

I unleashed my all-purpose pendulum. The spider head tried to use its thread to catch the pendulum too, but I maneuvered it to avoid the web and made a shallow cut on the arachne's neck.

At that moment, a thunderous noise echoed overhead, and a large boulder came crashing down, threatening to crush both me and the arachne.

"Scree?!" The monster noticed and tried to flee, but Cere'zhula threw knives from the side, piercing its back deeply and halting its movements.

The illusory boulder my mentor had created passed right through me without so much as ruffling my hair. Taking advantage of the arachne's confusion, I drew my black knife and used it to sever the monster's right arm.

But this was a Rank 4 monster; none of the attacks had hit vital spots, so its injuries weren't yet fatal. With the knife in one hand and the dagger in the other, I approached the arachne. It tried to spew more venom at me, but then noticed Cere'zhula closing in from behind and, realizing it was at a disadvantage, suddenly shifted its goblin-like, distorted face into that of a beautiful, terrified human woman.

That was meaningless now, however.

"Thrust!"

"Slash!"

My black knife and my mentor's billhook struck the arachne's neck from either side, slicing its "human" head off like a pair of scissors. The head, its expression frozen in shock and fear, tumbled into the valley below and disappeared.

Arachne were said to have two brains: one in the human head and one in the spider head. The spider brain functioned like a cerebellum, and on its own, it could only move the body as an ordinary arachnid would. Just in case, I delivered a finishing blow to the spider head as well.

"Did it think that shifting to a woman's face would make us hesitate to kill it?" Cere'zhula murmured pensively.

"Who knows?" I would never have shown mercy to something trying to eat me either way.

I'd have taken longer to kill it had I been alone, but thanks to my mentor's support, we'd defeated the beast without much issue. So this was what party combat felt like... It was so different from fighting solo.

While I was handling the spider's carcass, my master took a portable alchemy set from her pack and handed it to me with a grin.



"Time is of the essence, Alia. If you want good threads, you must craft the necessary chemicals from these materials within thirty minutes."

"Got it."

She was strict as ever, but that was nostalgic in a good way. I took the alchemy set and quickly started preparing the chemicals.

On that day, in the royal palace of the Kingdom of Claydale, three noble young ladies—the crown prince's official fiancées—had gathered together: Lady Clara of the Margravate of Dandorl, Lady Patricia of the Duchy of Hoodale, and Lady Karla of the Countdom of Leicester.

The three had not been informed of why they'd been summoned. As the daughters of high-ranking nobles, they were allowed to bring a few attendants and guards on visits to the palace, but only one attendant had been permitted to enter this particular room, and the others had been made to wait elsewhere.

How dull. Unlike the other two, who seemed tense, the youngest of the three, Karla, showed no signs of anxiety and was thoroughly bored.

She, whose father had subjected her to experiments from early childhood in order to endow her with all six elemental affinities, no longer saw any meaning in forging connections with other families, as was expected of noble ladies. Nevertheless, her father had foisted the role of crown princess upon her as her final duty. Karla was known to be in poor health, and not even the royal family expected much from her; she was a pawn to strengthen ties between influential families in the kingdom and nothing more.

Customarily, the king of Claydale took a second queen from foreign royalty to strengthen ties with neighboring countries and handle political issues with other major powers. The choice of first queen, meanwhile, was meant to forge connections and strengthen ties with influential domestic nobles. The current king had defied that custom and taken the daughter of a viscount, who hadn't even been an eligible candidate for engagement, as his queen—and this had intensified conflicts between different factions within the kingdom.

The former king had abdicated in favor of his son to stabilize the royal family's

position, but domestic opposition had not abated, forcing the king to choose a second queen from an influential noble house within the country. As a result, friction had arisen between Claydale and the royal family of the neighboring Kingdom of Sol'Hoeth—which had expected to furnish the second queen.

Whatever. I don't care... Karla had no particular feelings about it. All she cared about was that she'd gained the opportunity to own a new toy in the form of the crown prince; what happened to the country was no concern of hers.

Her initial plan had been to play with the pure and innocent prince until her death. But a meeting with a certain girl had brought color to Karla's gray world for the first time. She felt that only that girl—a cold, merciless angel of death—could truly understand her. Karla had found a kindred soul, one who stood beside her on the boundary between life and death.

If the rumors were to be believed, the girl led a sublime life. Jealous, Karla daydreamed, thinking back on her memories of the girl and staring off into the distance. If only I could die fighting Alia in an unending garden of blood blossoms, she thought wistfully. How wonderful that would be...

Karla's burning admiration and desire gripped her heart so intensely she could've coughed up blood. She wanted to kill and be killed. To drown those who had scorned her, trampled on her dignity, in a sea of blood and flame. To fight to the death with the object of her adoration on that glorious stage, surrounded by carnage.

Her hazy dream was interrupted by the voice of a court official. "His Royal Highness Prince Elvan von Claydale and Her Royal Highness Princess Elena Claydale have arrived!"

As the door to the room opened, the crown prince and first princess walked in. Karla's interest in the prince had waned somewhat, but in its place, she'd developed an interest in princess Elena. As Karla shifted her gaze from Elvan to Elena behind him, the princess returned it with a wary, intense gaze of her own —when not even the other fiancées dared to look at Karla.

Elena had once been known for her clinginess toward her older brother, but this had subsided, and her attachment had tapered down to a normal level about three years ago. Now she had adopted a resolute attitude to avoid being taken advantage of by the nobles' faction. What could've caused such a change? Most people thought she'd simply grown out of her clingy phase, but Karla was intrigued.

It would've been better if she were the crown prince instead, Karla thought to herself.

Shortly after, accompanied by the chief court sorcerer—Karla's father—and the prime minister, His Majesty the King entered the room. What could the king possibly wish to discuss, not in a formal audience but in a gathering with the royal children and the prince's fiancées?

Karla aside, everyone held their breath and stiffened as the king looked over the children, directly addressing them with a firm tone of authority. "I hereby decree that you, as members of the royal family, shall travel to a remote island, an exclave of the Duchy of Hoodale, one year from now. I ask that you conquer the dungeon there, pray to the spirit within, and use the gifts bestowed upon you for the betterment of our country."

The room fell silent for a moment before erupting into murmurs. Amid the commotion, Karla alone smiled faintly.

Samantha Samantha

I'd finished the new monster silk threads without major issues. The only snag had been the spider's massive frame, which had made it challenging to mix the web fluid. That, and it had taken more of my own blood than before to complete the mixing process, leaving me slightly anemic.

It would've been impossible for me to process all these materials on my own. If my mentor hadn't been there to help, the quality of the resulting thread would've been inconsistent. But thanks to her assistance, the finished string reached a hundred meters in length. It was thinner than before but so strong that even the black knife couldn't cut through the thread easily—even without me channeling any of my aether into it. With this, only a true master would've been able to sever the pendulum's string in midair.

Testing the new thread with my recently acquired blades showed it was well

suited for my Level 4 String Manipulation. I could now shift the direction of the thread by about sixty percent at will.

As for what remained of the old threads...

"Give those to me," Cere'zhula requested two days before I was due to leave.

"What are you going to use them for?" I asked.

Cere'zhula ended up taking the roughly twenty meters of leftover monster thread, mixing them with ordinary thread, and making a short shawl for wrapping around the neck. She handed it to me on the morning of my departure; it afforded enough protection that it could handle darts from a blowgun, for instance.

I didn't know whether I would ever be able to repay all the kindness she had shown me.

"Now, off you go, Alia. I won't tell you not to do anything reckless, but try not to overdo it, at least. Just live your life as you are, hmm?"

"I will. Thank you, Cere'zhula." I bade her farewell and set off, not knowing if I'd ever be able to return. Still, whenever I left, I had every intention of coming back.

My body had mostly recovered now. There was still a month and a half before my scheduled meeting with Viro, so I had plenty of time for the trip.

I left the Barony of Sayles and passed several other noble territories under the jurisdiction of the Countdom of Basch. From there I crossed into the Countdom of Haydel, where I'd destroyed the Northern Border District's branch of the Assassins' Guild. The countdom, once vibrant and filled with artisans, now felt dull, with unsavory characters milling about in every town.

Perhaps Count Haydel had kept a secret agreement with the Assassins' Guild. With the guild's destruction, the territory may have faced financial trouble and public disorder, and so maybe the count had brought in the Thieves' Guild in the hopes of alleviating these problems.

If the count had grown rich by fostering connections through the guild and

brokering assassinations for other nobles, even killing me wouldn't be enough to sate his rage. At the same time, the count would know better than anyone how powerful the Assassins' Guild had been, and likely wouldn't want to get himself involved with the one who had single-handedly destroyed it.

With his position, he could've probably fabricated charges and had me arrested within his domain, but none of the guards in the area bothered me. While he could've used the Thieves' Guild against me, I'd also destroyed the branch of that guild in the March of Kendras—once known for its combat prowess—and the other branches had mostly stopped coming for me after that. Since no thieves bothered me in Haydel either, I assumed these two facts were connected.

I departed Haydel and headed south toward the Margravate of Dandorl, and from there had two options for proceeding toward the meeting place in the Duchy of Helton. One route went southwest from Dandorl through the territory overseen by Marquis Dans. The other route, more familiar to me, was to head west to Count Taurus's territory, then through the March of Kendras and its mines, then south.

The second option involved traversing fewer noble territories, making it cheaper, but the first was slightly shorter, so I decided to go with that one.

By the time I arrived in Marquis Dans's territory, nearly a month had passed since my departure from Sayles, and it was the beginning of summer. The date of our meeting was still more than two weeks away, so provided the trip was uneventful, I should make it with time to spare.

A few thieves and bandits, not knowing who I was, had accosted me on the way here, but at my current level of skill, I could easily handle even a group of ten Rank 1 or 2 bandits. It occurred to me that ordinary adventurers could probably act as guards for caravans traveling long distances—roads were dangerous, after all. Monsters, bandits, and even packs of wild dogs could pose significant threats. My knowledge indicated I would be ideal for that sort of job, given my increased Detection range and ability to operate on naps rather than requiring long hours of sleep.

But I quickly dismissed the thought; no caravan would hire a child adventurer.

Besides, I'd estimated a month and a half of travel running down roads and through forests on foot, so I didn't have time to travel at a carriage's leisurely pace.

Moments after I entered the Duchy of Helton, a group of people called out to me on the road.

"Pardon me," said a middle-aged man with dark skin—likely Krus. "Are you an adventurer? Would you be willing to escort us to the duchy's capital?"

My meeting with Viro was nearly a week away. Since I hadn't received any communication about a change of plans from the Adventurers' Guild in the Countdom of Sandora along the way, I figured I could travel at an ordinary pace and still make it in time. The question, then, was *why* these people had approached me. The four seemed to be traveling merchants and, indeed, didn't look like they had any guards, but...

"Why me?" I questioned. "You all look strong."

Based on his demeanor, I assumed the man who'd approached me was at least Rank 4. I couldn't Scan the two near the carriage, but they seemed capable as well. If nothing else, the dark-skinned man would've had no trouble at all handling bandits or low-level monsters.

The man sighed, looking troubled. "I'm not a native of this country. I come from the west and am exploring possible trade routes. I used to be a knight of the Empire of Kal'Faan, so I consider myself reasonably skilled, but I've been hearing strange rumors..."

"What rumors?"

He went on to explain that supposedly there had been sightings of an old woman in this area in recent days. I figured an elderly lady couldn't have been that much of a problem, but according to the man's story, this woman appeared on the road at night, running at inhuman speeds and blowing sand as she passed people.

"Sand?" I echoed, puzzled.

"Indeed. She runs faster than a horse and blows sand as she passes by.

Although she *looks* like an old woman, she doesn't sound human. We suspect she might be a monster disguised as a person. What we're worried about is the girl."

The fourth member of their group, a fully cloaked child, peeked out from the carriage.

"She's scared of the old woman, and we thought having a young girl like yourself around might help ease that anxiety..."

"Right..." So they wanted a babysitter, not a guard.

I doubted I could handle babysitting, but they said that as long as I walked alongside the carriage, that would suffice; the child was supposedly shy. The group did seem to be merchants, and the carriage had a particular scent to it.

As I sniffed the air, the man took a small pouch from their cargo and handed it to me. "We deal in spices from the west. By all means, try these. We traveled here to build a customer base, after all."

Inside the small leather pouch were a few small white beads that I hadn't really seen around here before. Were these white peppercorns?

"I can come with you, but only to the next town."

"Oh, thank you! This should help her sleep at night, if nothing else." The middle-aged Krus man smiled warmly, bowing his head.

Even at a walking pace, we would arrive at the next town by tomorrow evening. This wouldn't interfere with my schedule, and there was something on my mind as well, so I decided to accept the request.

My job was to guard the carriage and babysit. They paid me three silver in advance, with another five promised upon arrival. It wasn't a particularly high amount, but probably a generous offer for an adventurer my age.

I "babysat" the child—a girl of about seven years named Salima—by walking next to the carriage. Salima only glanced at me from within and didn't engage in any sort of meaningful conversation.

"Sorry about that. She's very shy," explained the middle-aged man, whose name was Nahmard.

The thinner man was named Tahir and the muscular one Zana. Nahmard was the only one who spoke to me; Tahir and Zana kept their distance, so I didn't really care about their names either way.

During the trip, I asked about the old woman they'd mentioned. Apparently, she'd only started appearing in the last few days—not even a week ago. She was said to have been making her way toward the capital, and so the rumors about her had begun to spread among travelers. I hadn't heard anything, probably because I hadn't stopped in many towns while on the road; when I told them this, they were a bit surprised.

People described the mystery woman as being so old that they couldn't tell her age. She not only ran on all fours at incredible speeds, she'd also easily handled a Rank 3 fighter who had confronted her, burying him in sand before running off.

Was she really human? She could've been a monster, like Nahmard had suggested, but I had the feeling I'd heard about something like this somewhere before. My mentor's lessons? The Adventurer's Guild? I couldn't recall.

The carriage rolled on until nightfall and decided to camp near the junction with the road coming from the March of Orze.

"We'll be cooking tonight, so allow us to treat you," Nahmard said. The silent, thin man named Tahir started cooking something in a pot, using plenty of spices I wasn't familiar with, and their scent soon filled the air.

They gave me a bowl of some stew-like dish. I wasn't picky about food, but I primarily ate simple meals and wasn't used to rich flavors. Based on how strong the aroma of this "proper" meal was, I doubted I could eat much of it.

As I stared at the bowl, a small shadow suddenly moved closer.

"It's really good, miss," Salima said, holding out a wooden spoon to me.

Well, now it would've been awkward not to eat it. I took the spoon from Salima's small hand, scooped up some stew, and brought it to my lips.

Ah. I see, I mused. I ate several spoonfuls of the hot, bright-red stew as the others watched me expectantly. The most charitable interpretation was that they were holding their breath, waiting to see if their country's dish would be accepted by a guest.

"How is it, Miss Alia?" Nahmard asked quietly as I stopped eating halfway through the bowl.

I kept my eyes closed and didn't respond.

Nahmard let out a soft sigh and stood, then approached me quietly. "Well then, good night, Lady Cinders."

Clang!

Nahmard's scimitar—swung without a hint of his intent—collided with my black dagger, and a shrill sound echoed through the night air. I slipped forward from my sitting position and drew my knife, which he deflected with his own weapon before pulling away.

"Did the poison not work?" he asked.

"You think I'd tell you that?" I retorted. There was no reason for me to answer his question. I wasn't so trusting as to simply eat food given to me by suspicious strangers, anyway.

I stood up without a sound, holding the black dagger in one hand and the black knife in the other. Tahir, unarmed, and Zana, wielding daggers, approached me without hesitation. Indeed, I'd assumed they wouldn't be so easily unsettled. Nahmard had called me Lady Cinders, and given their skill and how determined they were to kill me, they could only have belonged to one faction.

"The Assassins' Guild, then," I mused.

"Correct. We're from the Central Western District's branch," Nahmard confirmed with a small smile that deepened the lines on his dark skin.

I'd heard that the Central Western District branch of the Assassins' Guild was made up mostly of people descended from desert tribes. The Kal'Faan empire, home to many Krus, was surrounded by sea and desert, so I'd had suspicions

from the moment I'd laid eyes on Nahmard.

"The stories about Lady Cinders are true, then," he continued. "We'd heard that fighting you head-on was ill-advised, so we'd hoped to kill you using less straightforward methods, but it is what it is now. So, Lady Cinders, would you consider joining us?"

"Are you joking?" I asked, eyes narrowed. They'd just tried to kill me; now he wanted me to join them? What was he thinking?

"This is no joke, Lady Cinders. Had you died from such a simple trap, that would've been the end of that. Targeting you was a matter of honor. Were you to become our ally, our quarrel with you would cease."

"So you're not here for revenge?"

"We don't care about casualties in other guilds. Our branch is made up of drifters and those with nowhere else to go, and our bonds are strong. Join us, and we will protect you from other branches. However..." Nahmard paused, staring intently into my eyes as though trying to peer into my soul. "As proof that you can be trusted, you'll have to assassinate a hundred targets. We will designate them, of course. You have nowhere to go either, do you? That's a small price to pay for people you can trust and a place you can belong, isn't it?"

A hundred assassinations. It was likely a test of whether I'd be willing to obey orders to kill innocents or good people. But I'd only ever had one answer.

"No."

"You intend to oppose our branch, then?" Nahmard asked as he and the others clearly turned hostile.

"Get in my way and you're my enemy. That's how it's always been," I said plainly and without hesitation, eliciting a gasp from someone.

"Fool," Nahmard muttered, still holding his scimitar as he stepped back.

Tahir, who had been silently standing there without giving any signs of aggression, smoothly stepped forward. With a sharp exhale, he threw a punch; I countered with my knife, and he used an unusual technique to deflect the flat side of the blade with his bare hand.

His unarmed fighting style... Was he a martial artist? I dodged another punch, leaning back and placing my hands behind me, then kicked up with my bladed boots to counter his strike.

"Salima, stay back!" Nahmard commanded.

"Yes, grandpa!" Salima replied, nodding vigorously and retreating toward the carriage. So the girl's shyness had been an act too.

Despite being armed with a close-range weapon, Nahmard retreated farther for some reason. He threw his scimitar at me while I was still fighting with Tahir, as if aiming for the martial artist too. We both just narrowly avoided the scimitar as it whizzed past, howling through the air.

The next moment, however, the scimitar suddenly changed its trajectory and came right for me. I quickly mimicked Tahir's earlier technique, using my right glove—reinforced with magic steel plates—to knock the scimitar away.

"Good dodge!" Nahmard shouted as he pulled his arm back, making the scimitar dance in the air by manipulating a black string—similar to my pendulum. His range of control was broader than mine, however, and the scimitar spun in the air without falling, then came at me again.

Dodging and using my knife and dagger to parry Nahmard's and Tahir's attacks, I rolled away from the pair. Zana, who had only been watching up to that point, leaped at me from above. I deliberately took a punch from Tahir, using the force of the impact to propel me away moments before Zana's daggers stabbed deeply into the ground.

"Graaaaaah!" Zana effortlessly pulled out the daggers and roared like a beast—no, not just "like" a beast. Fur sprouted all over Zana's face as he transformed into a literal beast right before my eyes.

A lycanthrope... A werewolf!

Now a bipedal wolf, Zana lunged at me with terrifying speed, swinging his twin daggers. I immediately threw knives at him, but the small blades bounced harmlessly off his fur.

Lycanthropes were humans who could take on a bestial form—commonly known as werewolves. They usually lived among people in their normal form

but could take on an animalistic appearance and attack them. What had induced this transformation was unclear; usually it was attributed to a curse or a disease. Lycanthropes couldn't control their beastly nature and were classified as monsters, yet apparently this branch of the Assassins' Guild had recruited one.

Shing!

I blocked Zana's daggers with my own blades, but his enhanced strength in beast form easily sent me flying. Seizing the opportunity, Tahir closed in, and Nahmard threw his scimitar from behind me. Before he could manipulate the string any further, however, a crossbow bolt shot out from a small shadow I'd cast using Shadow Snatch.

"Sorcery?!" Nahmard managed to avoid the bolt despite it coming at him from directly underneath in near total darkness. Dealing with an experienced Rank 4 was a lot of trouble indeed; it was almost pointless to try and exploit an opening.

But now a different opening presented itself—Tahir's attacks were no longer coordinated with the scimitar. He grunted as I managed to deflect his arm and slash at his side, leaving a shallow cut. My strike clashed with Zana's daggers, and I was repelled once again.

Now, what to do...?

My foes were Nahmard, a Rank 4 swordsman wielding a blade attached to a thread; Tahir, a martial artist who was only Rank 3 but moved in ways that were difficult for me to predict; and Zana, a werewolf, who, thanks to his transformation, was far physically stronger than I was. Together, these three would've been capable of taking down even a Rank 5 foe. The Central Western District branch must've been very wary of me.

Nahmard and the other two surrounded me, slowly shifting their positions in a clockwise pattern to prevent me from escaping. I could take them on individually, but to handle all three at the same time, I needed some way to divide them. I'd already laid the groundwork, but it had yet to take effect.

As I thought about what to do next, however—

"Hee hee hee..."

A strange laugh echoed through the air as a shadow approached from the dark depths of the road, momentarily startling the assassins.

I should've taken the chance to attack, but the bizarre nature of the entity caught my eye as well: a small old woman was sprinting down the dark road on all fours at unbelievable speed.

So the rumors were true.

"Graaah?!" roared Zana, bewildered by the sheer bizarreness of it. He threw a dagger, but astonishingly, the old woman easily caught it in midair, discarded it behind her, and unleashed an enormous sandstorm along with a wave of strange aether.

Both the assassins and I immediately retreated, but Tahir—perhaps unable to sense the aether—was caught in the sandstorm and attacked.

▼ Old Woman?

Species: ???

Aether Points: 365/420

Health Points: 173/184

Overall Combat Power: 1598 (Boosted: 1992)

What...is that? I wondered. Immediately, that woman's knowledge volunteered the answer. An old woman moving at high speed, with inhuman combat power and high aether points, using sand. Wait, is she...

"A yokai?" I murmured.

Yokai were beings somewhere between spirits and monsters. That woman's previous life had, apparently, been in a terrifying world where such creatures ran rampant.

This changed nothing for me, however. I switched my focus in an instant and,

under Stealth, launched myself into the raging sandstorm, sneaking up behind a wary Zana while his field of vision was obstructed.

"Graaah!" Sensing me, perhaps through scent, Zana turned and lunged at me with his fangs and claws rather than a blade.

His fur deflected my knife; I could've probably pierced him using the black dagger with enough force, but I didn't need to go that far against him alone. From a Shadow Storage opening in my palm, I dumped the stew from earlier straight into the werewolf's open maw. Since the spell could turn any shadow into a "door," I'd pretended to eat the stew earlier, putting it into Shadow Storage from an opening in my mouth.

The stew had probably been laced with a powerful sedative—Zana staggered backward, and at that moment, I struck him in the head with the weighted pendulum. Beast-type monsters possessed Piercing Resistance, which was likely why my knife had been deflected earlier, but this attack would be effective. Still, werewolves had high health and were very durable; Zana wasn't dead yet.

"Cinders!" Nahmard shouted, finally spotting us in the sandstorm. He threw his scimitar in an attempt to intervene, but I'd seen that technique several times already. Perfect timing too, since my own blow hadn't been enough to finish Zana off. "Wait, what?!"

The string attached to Nahmard's scimitar tangled with my pendulum's thread, and the added mass and momentum of his weapon made my pendulum heavier still as it smashed straight down onto Zana's skull.

A faint groan escaped the werewolf as his head, fully shattered, burst open with a spray of blood.

"Damn you!" Nahmard roared. Realizing his own weapon had been used to kill his ally, he discarded the tangled scimitar and picked up one of Zana's fallen daggers. Our weapons clashed with a shrill noise, and he grunted.

All I had was Level 4 in String Manipulation; Nahmard was a Rank 4 melee fighter, so he should've had the upper hand. But despite me being only Rank 3, his movements at close range were no longer enough to overpower me. Because he hadn't noticed his own sluggishness, I'd won the String Manipulation duel and could finally overpower him.

"Pain."

"Gahhh!"

They'd used spices to mask the smell of the sedative they'd tried to use on me, but the spices had in turn masked the smell of the muscle relaxant I'd poured through Shadow Snatch into the stew while Tahir cooked. This particular drug was effective even as a vapor; it took a while to work, but it was potent.

"Aaargh!" As Narmald writhed in agony from the intense effect of Pain, I slashed him deeply from the neck down to his chest. Even in this state, he managed to twist his body slightly, avoiding a fatal injury.

But if one strike hadn't been enough to kill him, I'd just keep striking. Just as I was about to swing the dagger at him again, however, a small figure jumped in between us.

"Stop! Don't kill grandpa!" shouted Salima, the young girl who had been hiding in the carriage. She spread her arms wide to protect Nahmard.

"Salima..." the dying Nahmard groaned, grimacing painfully. He held out a trembling hand, but—

"Huh...?"

As Nahmard drew a knife fitted into his sleeve and threw it at me, I pulled on my pendulum's string, yanking a tangled Salima forward and using her as a shield.

"Damn you!" Nahmard shouted.

"But...why...?" murmured Salima, staring up at me in shock, the knife now embedded into her back.

"Sorry," I said coolly, looking down at her. "I've smelled death many times before."

The true reason I'd been suspicious of the group from the start wasn't Nahmard's race or Tahir and Zana's behavior. Right away I'd smelled death on this young girl, which was why I hadn't hesitated to use poison.

"This girl is—"

Salima revealed her true nature, her once-lovely features now twisting into a monstrous, fanged snarl.

A vampire.

I'd never seen one before, but I'd learned about them through my mentor's lessons. Vampires were creatures that drank human blood, feeding off the vestiges of the soul present in it to live more or less forever. They were monsters, but in the demonic nation, some of them were even considered citizens.

A werewolf and a vampire, huh... I'd known the Assassins' Guild was full of the dregs of society, but it seemed they truly had no standards at all.

"Die!" Salima shouted, bloodred claws sprouting from her fingers. She came at me impossibly fast for a child, and thanks to her strong regenerative abilities, the wound on her back had already healed.

I deflected her claws with my knife and stepped back, though I wasn't running from Salima, nor was I going to give up on finishing Nahmard off.

"Hee hee hee..."

The next moment, the old woman—who had already left Tahir in shambles—attacked as well, catching the fleeing Nahmard and sending him flying. "Guh?!"

"Nahmard!" shouted Salima, giving up on chasing after me and turning back in shock. Their bonds really *were* strong—but taking her eyes off me wasn't a wise move. "Ack!"

Taking advantage of Salima's distraction, I wrapped the all-purpose pendulum around her neck and yanked her toward me. Her wide eyes reflected as I pulled my knife back, ready to strike. "Thrust!"

My combat technique severed Salima's head clean off.

Killing a vampire required either crushing the aethercrystal in their heart or destroying their head. Young girl or no, I had no intention of showing mercy to an enemy. An adult vampire would've been a greater threat; a child's stats could only withstand so much damage.

"Gaaaaaaah!" Blown away by the old woman's sand, Nahmard was sent

hurtling toward me.

I squinted to shield my eyes from the sand and wrapped an arm around Nahmard's neck from behind, snapping it and killing him. The old woman immediately lunged for me.

My turn, it seems... Really, what was this thing? "Shadow!"

I used the illusory shadow as a decoy to dodge her attack. Despite her immense combat power, her attacks were slow enough for me to handle. Since Nahmard hadn't died from her hit, I could tell her attack power was low; were her close combat skills enhanced solely by Boost and Martial Mastery?

Assuming her combat power came mostly from sorcery, I took the all-purpose and sickle pendulums out of Shadow Storage. If she used a spell, I wouldn't stand a chance; I had to finish this before she could cast anything.

I exhaled deeply, expelling the heat from the battle against the assassins and strengthening my resolve. I cleared my mind of the assassins and my mission. All other thoughts were cast aside—my focus was solely on killing the old woman.

"Hee hee!" The old woman's eyes bulged as she sensed my strengthened resolve, and she unleashed an overwhelming amount of aether from her body.

I too increased my bodily aether and crouched like a cat. Launching myself forward, I threw my two pendulums; the old woman countered with her aether. Our clash would take no more than a moment; given our low health points, whoever landed the first blow would kill the other.

But—

"Wait, wait! Stop it, both of you!" a familiar voice hastily screamed at the same time that a knife whizzed toward us.

I dodged the old woman's attack and she dodged my knife, both of us rolling to create distance. That voice...

"...Viro?"

"Why are you two fighting?!" he shouted in frustration, desperately rushing in from farther down the road. "You're on the same side!"

On the same side? What is he talking about?

The old woman began to laugh in a very human manner. "Hee hee hee! You're late, boy!"

"Stop calling me 'boy,' damn it! Good grief!" Viro snapped, annoyed.
"Anyway..." Now that we'd stopped fighting, Viro suddenly threw a knife into the darkness.

At that moment, Tahir, who had been left battered and immobilized by the old woman's attack, suddenly sprang to his feet and began to flee. So he was still alive.

Viro's lips curled slightly at the sight, and he quickly drew his beloved mithril dagger from his waist. "If you think you can get away from me—"

A black blade whooshed past him.

Tahir, who had been distracted by Viro and the old woman, failed to notice my sickle pendulum, which left a deep gash on his neck. A fountain of blood gushed forth from the wound as he collapsed.

Retrieving the bloodsoaked pendulum, I turned to face Viro, who stood there frozen, dagger in hand. "Viro, explain."

"Ugh, Alia, I swear..."

Was this another of Viro's messes? I hadn't expected to be able to get away from this old woman, so I'd braced myself to engage her, knowing that if we clashed, my odds of death would've been very high. Now he was saying this old woman was on our side? Was she his party's former sorceress?

Surviving against a Rank 5 sorceress was no easy feat. I felt a bit proud of that.

My thoughts must've been evident in my expression, because Viro averted his eyes guiltily under my glare.



"Well, um, you see, this old lady here is my ally."

"I didn't know you had non-human allies," I said pointedly.

"Hey, she's human! She may *look* like a beast, but she's a person, all right. She's just, y'know, a little senile. Like, every day we'll be lounging in a room at an inn and she'll start shouting about seeing something suspicious and rush into the night..."

"I'm not senile, boy!" the old woman snapped. "I'm only ninety-nine years old!"

"You've been saying that for the past ten years!"

I watched the exchange silently. Was she really human? She was a Rank 5 sorceress, capable of hand-to-hand combat, and...senile? She sounded like a menace.

"In spite of how she looks, she's skilled, you know. She retired because of her random bouts of senility, but she's very capable, so don't worry."

"My name is Samantha Samantha, young lady!" the old woman told me.

"Okay..." I wasn't sure what part of any of that was supposed to be reassuring. Just moments ago we'd been fighting to the death, and now this old woman—Samantha—was casually introducing herself?

I nevertheless sheathed my knife and lowered my alert level from "eliminate immediately" to "exercise caution." According to that woman's knowledge, it was irrational to hold grudges over something beyond a person's control, like senility. And with Samantha's skill level, there was no doubt she'd be effective in combat.

"Call me Alia," I told her, then turned back to Viro. "I wasn't expecting to meet you here, Viro. What's the plan now?"

"Well... We were supposed to spend the night at the inn back there, but now we won't be getting a room. May as well head straight for our destination..."

"The capital of the duchy?"

"That was just our rendezvous spot. We'll stop there on the way, but our

target is in a barony near the border."

"Got it." I gripped my pendulum tightly. A barony near the border... That was where that man—Graves—was.

The last time we clashed, I'd been utterly outmatched. I'd just barely survived through one lucky, desperate gamble. Even now, my combat power was only half of his, but I wasn't the same person anymore, and I had Viro and Samantha with me. My preference was to settle the score alone if possible, but killing him was more important than my personal feelings.

"All right, Alia, Samantha," Viro said. "Let's go. We need to reach the town by tomorrow."

"You're forcing an old woman to rush in the middle of the night," Samantha complained. "For shame, boy!"

"You're the one who ran off, you know!"

I had some concerns about this...

Samantha—a seasoned adventurer (of approximately a hundred years)—had the Night Vision skill, of course. Though the road was dark and it was the dead of night, all of us could use Boost at Level 4, allowing for remarkably fast travel.

"By the way, Samantha, how is it that you can use Boost despite being a sorceress? You don't have any close combat skills, right?" I asked out of curiosity. Viro and I naturally concealed our presence as I spoke.

"An excellent question, girlie!!!" Samantha didn't share our caution and yelled as if speaking to someone three houses down the street. "Quick, light fighter-types are the natural enemies of spellcasters! Therefore, a skilled sorcerer should always learn Boost so they can accelerate their thoughts!"

"Huh..." So that was why my mentor, also a sorceress, had melee combat skills.

"I didn't know that either," Viro mused.

"Young people these days need to study more! This generation of sorcerers is so focused on raw power that they rarely bother to learn Boost! So be mindful, girlie! If you see a sorcerer using Boost in this day and age, be on your guard!"

"Got it," I replied. Combat-oriented adventurers had such useful advice...

"Samantha, pipe down," Viro chastised. "You'll attract every monster in the area!"

"What was that, boy?! Is it dinnertime yet?!"

"We ate at the inn an hour ago!"

Is traveling with her really a good idea?

We hurried along, eating only bland rations for meals, and finally arrived in the duchy's capital the next afternoon. The duke's castle was located in this city, the largest in the territory.

Viro took us to a high-end inn, befitting top-tier adventurers like him and Samantha, that cost three silver per night. We booked rooms for Samantha and myself; Viro said he was going to the Adventurers' Guild to gather information.

"Alia, you stay at the inn with her," he instructed me. "You're both well-known, and bringing her with me to the guild in her state isn't a smart idea. Also, be mindful that she might suddenly start spouting nonsense in the middle of a normal conversation."

"Okay." I knew I'd likely cause a stir if I went to the Adventurers' Guild, so I figured I'd leave all guild-related matters to Viro.

I thought I might need to care for Samantha, but despite her age, she was still an adventurer, so she remained quite independent. Besides, an inn of this caliber had staff to handle most things, so there probably wasn't much I could do either way.

Except that, within seconds of me entering my own room, Samantha—who was supposed to have been in the adjacent room—loudly burst in, nearly kicking the door down. "Girlie!!! Dinner! It's dinnertime!"

"Didn't you eat dinner yesterday?"

"You evil stepmother!"

I did not recall being anyone's stepmother. "You're an adventurer, but you

still eat three meals a day?" I asked. "All right, then. Follow me. If you want a proper meal, there should be a dining hall on the first floor."

"Oh! Okay!"

Accompanied by Samantha, who seemed a little taken aback by my matter-of-fact tone, I went down to the first floor, where the staff guided us to a six-person table.

"What would you like, Samantha?"

"Let's see... Meat! Lamb will do!"

"All right." I called a waitress over to place an order. "We'd like something with lamb, please. A whole lamb's worth."

"A-A whole lamb?!" the waitress asked.

"She's been complaining of hunger constantly. Besides, we're adventurers. It won't be a problem."

Viro ate meat 24-7, after all, even when convalescing. I figured that since Samantha had once been in a party with him, she'd have no complaints as long as the meat dishes kept coming. Not bothering with conversation, we silently wolfed down each successive serving, leaving the other patrons in stunned silence.

About an hour later, Viro returned from the Adventurers' Guild. "What the hell is all this meat?"

"Samantha wanted to eat dinner."

"This girlie is an evil stepmother!" exclaimed Samantha, now a little rounder and glistening under the light of the dining hall.

Viro cocked his head. "I have no idea what that means, but all right. I'll just give you two my report now. Waitress, bring me some ale!"

As he sat down and helped himself to the meat, Viro began to tell us in a hushed tone what he'd learned from the guild as well as everything that had led to this point. He used a lot of Order of Shadows jargon I didn't quite understand, but I got the gist of it.

Basically, after failing to kill me, Graves had evaded Sera's organization and gone into hiding. He'd lie low for a while, but at some point, nobles from the nobility faction—a group that aimed to weaken the royal family's power and bring in foreign influences—had begun to fall victim to assassinations. So far, three had been killed. Among them was a count rumored to have deep ties with a neighboring nation, particularly notable for having advocated that the crown prince should wed a foreign princess.

The count had been a key figure in the faction, and so his former comrades began to claim that someone associated with the royal family had ordered the hit. They demanded that the royals reduce the size of the Royal Guard and the Order of Shadows to lessen the likelihood of such incidents happening again. They even went as far as echoing the count's suggestion that the royal family break tradition and have the crown prince marry a foreign princess.

In the current political climate, however, those demands were unlikely to be met. After the Order of Shadows was falsely accused of the crime, its leader had had the matter investigated, and it had been determined that Graves was the culprit. According to the reports, Graves had been targeting noble houses that opposed the royal family. Upon investigating several noble territories, the Order had uncovered information suggesting that someone matching Graves's description was hiding in the Duchy of Helton.

The two margravates, which could've spearheaded the nobility faction, had been granted special rights and now belonged to the royalists. Meanwhile, House Helton—originally royalists and initially intended as the recipients of those rights—had turned on the royal family.

"Graves is biding his time, waiting for the duke to leave his castle," Viro explained. "We have information that suggests one of the baronies near the border is having problems with monsters that are beyond what ordinary knights and adventurers can handle. Apparently the duke is planning on leading an extermination party himself, in hopes of boosting his popularity."

It was very likely that Graves was planning to strike then. Normally one would think it foolish, suicidal even, to attack a duke protected by over a hundred knights, but Graves was far from normal. He'd likely judged that plan more advantageous than targeting the duke within the castle.

The duke's knights wouldn't be on constant high alert against an attacker they didn't know was coming. I was positive Graves was planning on making a move. My certainty had no rational basis—it was simply what I would have done, had I been in his shoes. Even if word of an attacker were to reach the duke, it was unlikely he'd cancel the expedition because of a lone foe.

"We leave for the barony tomorrow morning. Our goal is to eliminate Graves before the duke's arrival."

Samantha giggled. "Why wait until the morning? Let's go now! Come, boy, girlie! Get your things ready!"

I loudly slammed a palm on the table. "Not yet. We still have meat left."

Samantha and Viro both stared at me in silence.

Adventurers had to eat when they could—something Viro himself had taught me. I'd also learned this firsthand, both from my initial days of camping in the woods and from my time spent near the orcs' settlement. Eat while you can. Endure when you can't. I wasn't going to allow any food to go uneaten.

I glared sternly at the pair and they slowly sat back down; the three of us resumed eating the meat in silence. Early next morning, we left the capital of Helton and headed toward the barony near the border where Graves was supposedly hiding.

Unbeknownst to me, a meaningful encounter awaited me there.

Madman

"By the way, what's the story with the monster incident in the barony?" I asked on the way there.

"I haven't explained that yet, huh..."

Viro went on to tell me about the situation, starting with the geographical context.

Several days' travel west from the Duchy of Helton was a large lake that ran along Claydale's border. On the western side of that lake was rocky terrain inhabited by monsters, and north of it were wetlands. A road crossing the

wetlands connected Claydale to the neighboring kingdom of Sol'Hoeth. The monster habitat and the wetlands served as a buffer zone between the two countries, preventing territorial disputes over that area.

Conversely, north of the wetlands were the Kond Mines, the rights to which were under constant political disputes between not only Claydale and Sol'Hoeth but also the Kingdom of Condore and the Dukedom of Yrus. Royal marriages between the four nations were essential to gain an advantage in these territorial disputes.

Despite the political friction between the countries, however, their citizens were generally friendly with one another—trade between merchants was frequent. And, due to the presence of a large-scale dungeon near Sol'Hoeth, many high-ranking adventurers obtained permits to travel back and forth as well.

The monster issue was happening on the road through the wetland buffer zone, where a black beast had begun attacking caravans and adventurers.

"It's an ancient mythical beast known as a coeurl," Viro told me.

Legends spoke of mythical beasts from another world with the bodies of giant black panthers and a whiplike whisker extending from the tip of each ear. They were cunning and wicked, more intelligent than humans, and their immense power had earned them the moniker "Black Destroyer." Coeurls were Rank 5 mythical beasts, and the older specimens were said to be comparable to dragons.

"A coeurl, huh..." I echoed.

So technically this wasn't a monster but a mythical beast. With such a powerful creature being the target, it made sense that the duke himself would lead the hunting party to gain popularity.

In Claydale, the two margravates held significant power and wealth, whereas the duchies had blood ties to the royal family and the duty to protect the nation from external threats. The Duchy of Helton, however, lacked any special industries and couldn't maintain its influence; instead, Duke Helton had deepened his relations with foreign nations—which he should have been wary of—beyond simple economic ties.

Even if doing so had improved the duchy's financial situation, however, it wouldn't have had any impact on their domestic popularity. Therefore, while not as prestigious as hunting a dragon, bringing down the phantom beast was a good way for the duke to earn considerable acclaim for his valor.

The coeurl that had been terrorizing the road was believed to be a younger individual based on its reported size. It may not have been as formidable as a lower-end Rank 6 dragon, but still, the duke was planning on tackling it with a hundred elite knights from the duchy, all of whom were Rank 3 or higher.

It was unclear how long the coeurl had been in the area, but even before the attacks, there had been rumors in a mining village of sightings of a black beast in the mountains near the Kond Mines. So why had the coeurl started attacking people?

"Graves isn't hiding in a town but in the wetlands where the beast is," Viro explained. "There are also aquatic demi-beastmen in the area—lizardmen, to be specific—but that guy can handle 'em with his eyes closed. Lots of Order spies lost their lives for this intel. We've gotta settle this before Graves makes his move."

"Got it," I replied.

"You can leave him to me," Samantha said with a giggle.

If Order agents ranked 2 and 3 had been caught and killed before they could even react, it didn't matter how many lesser soldiers or knights they threw at Graves; they'd all meet the same fate. Viro and Samantha's party included a fighter and a heavy fighter, both Rank 5, but Graves was like me and moved alone. If too many people came for him, he'd simply escape. A small, elite team was necessary to minimize casualties and ensure his demise.

After they'd considered all options, like ambushing and assassinating Graves, the team had ended up consisting of an unusual mix of scouts and a sorceress, including a child and an old woman. Still, it was uncertain whether Viro, who was Rank 4, and myself, only Rank 3, would be able to kill Graves. Fighting him might be necessary, and if so, the Rank 5 sorceress Samantha could provide support. Our strategy was for Viro and me to keep Graves in check while Samantha used her sorcery to defeat him.

Samantha's sudden lapses into nonsense posed a minor issue. I'd put the vast amounts of leftover meat from the inn into Shadow Storage for such occasions; every time Samantha got confused I'd take some out and she'd focus up again.

"What if the mythical beast appears?" I asked.

"It'll depend on what the coeurl and Graves do, but worst-case scenario, our priority is to survive and retreat. Alia, you'll be in charge of protecting Samantha. You can do that, right?"

"It's not like I have a choice."

We stopped at a town in the barony and visited the local healer to obtain the latest intel from the surviving informants. After that, we finished the necessary preparations and headed toward the wetlands at the border.

If not for my vow, I might have considered leaving the country altogether. Still, it was only thanks to that vow that I'd grown this strong.

For Elena's safety, Graves, I will finish you here.

In the deep, dark forest of the wetlands, the beast questioned its own existence. It couldn't remember when it had been born—only that for as long as it had existed, it had been powerful.

This world was filled with weak "people" who feared the beast. But to the beast, people were far too fragile, and their meat wasn't particularly good; it had no interest in the flimsy creatures. Though it needed to consume animals and fruits in order to replenish certain substances and sustain itself, it didn't need large amounts of food to survive. It didn't hunt to eat meat but to demonstrate its power.

People had weak bodies and weak minds. Undoubtedly, that was why they feared creatures such as the beast and armed themselves with clever tricks. But the beast had never minded them. It had even allowed them to mine in the mountains where it lived.

One day, however, a person came into the beast's mountain and spread a foul-smelling poison around it. The beast was enraged at the frail, cunning

creature. But that person proved stronger than the others, and even the beast couldn't finish the creature off. The person fled to the vicinity of a human settlement.

The beast realized it had fallen for a trap when a group of people came through the dampened soil, carrying things, and attacked it. Though the beast had no interest in people, it wasn't so merciful as to ignore an obvious attack.

It could hardly tell people apart, but it felt as though its assailants were a little different from the person who had first spread the poison. In its rage, it killed them all. Now the beast was irritated with these foolish, insignificant, weak creatures.

The beast began attacking all people who passed through this area, looking for the fool who had lured it into the trap.

A man sat on a large rock in the swampy wetlands, meditating in silence.

Graves was aware that he was a coldhearted madman—one who firmly believed that the royal family needed to be strong in order to right the wrongs of this nation and bring it back into balance. And that could be achieved through a very simple means: kill all who stood in the way of his goal. Eliminate all threats to the king's authority.

The people didn't care who sat on the throne. But Graves knew, he *knew* that only the stability brought on by a sensible, wise royal family could lead the common man to happiness. To ensure this, he would no longer use the roundabout methods he once had. He would no longer be reckless as he'd once been.

In the past, he'd thought it acceptable to sacrifice anyone, himself included, for a just cause. Now, however, he'd finally come to understand that foolishness was a pox festering upon this world. Nobles, commoners, all of them were simpleminded fools. In order to steer the world into the correct path, he had to stay alive. If that meant turning his blade on nobles who stood in his way, then so be it. If that meant spilling royal blood, then so be it. What methods he used to achieve his goal were irrelevant; all that mattered was achieving it.

From that dubious maid girl he'd killed, he'd learned to cling to life for the sake of his purpose. That battle had taught him to stop fixating on the means and focus solely on the ends. Seeing that the girl had grown close to the princess, he'd thought it best to kill her, but now he occasionally wondered whether she would've been worthy of becoming his successor. The only one capable of understanding his ideals.

In working toward his goal, Graves had devised multiple strategies, setting traps for his targets—killing Duke Helton here would be another step forward. Despite only having unreliable information to work with, Graves had gone into the mountains and lured out a dangerous monster, leading it toward the human settlements.

Graves had been aware the odds of his plan failing had been high, but that would have been no great loss. He'd worked off the assumption that not many adventurers in Claydale would've been capable of defeating a Rank 5 monster, and fewer still of doing so in a heavily wooded area. Add to that the fact this was a mythical beast and most would've balked at the idea of fighting it.

Thus, Graves had hoped that the duke would deploy his precious elite knights to deal with the threat. Graves's original plan had been to kill the duke once his knights had departed and his guard had thinned out; however, the foolish noble had taken it upon himself to personally lead the charge, making Graves's job easier still.

Graves had thus decided to wait near the woods for the duke to walk right into his waiting blades. He'd agitated the mythical beast, prevented it from leaving, and taunted it into attacking caravans and adventurers passing along the road—all to ensure the duke would have no choice but to come to him.

Some uninvited guests had arrived before the nobleman, however. Graves had spotted them first, fortunately—or perhaps inevitably, given his prowess. The man at the front, trying to remain hidden among the trees along the road, had been familiar to him: Viro, of the Rank 5 adventuring party known as the Rainbow Blade, who had connections to the Order of Shadows. The party's leader, a heavy fighter dwarf, had been absent. This indicated that they'd assumed Graves would've fled had the dwarf accompanied them.

"A pointless precaution," he mused to himself. Graves was no longer the man Viro had once known. With the right tactics, he was confident he could take down the entirety of the Rainbow Blade, picking them off one by one.

Still, there were no certainties in battle. Graves could've played it safe, lured the trio of visitors to the mythical beast, and let it kill them. With their full might, the Rainbow Blade was quite likely capable of defeating the creature, but with only half their members, they wouldn't stand a chance.

But he wouldn't do that. Not after recognizing the girl walking at the rear. His lips twisted into a crooked, delighted smile. He would face them himself.

"So you yet live, Alia..."

Intruder

We went into the woods along the road in the wetlands where Graves was said to be hiding.

According to the intel from Viro and the Adventurers' Guild, this area was dangerous for those unused to the terrain. Lake water flowed into the ground, making it muddy and littered with small, invisible ponds that acted as pitfalls.

Standing guard over this place wasn't difficult, though. Built over the road between Claydale and Sol'Hoeth was a bridge, connecting patches of flat ground and rock scattered throughout key points. It wasn't a typical bridge, however—the structure was simplistic, consisting of logs driven into the mud and thick wooden planks laid across them, without any handrails. Despite its crudity, the wooden parts had been treated with sorcery and alchemical agents to prevent decay, and the base was made of wood naturally resistant to the area's humidity. The road had taken thirty years to build and been completed a hundred years ago; it was strong enough to support large carriages without issue.

Practically everyone who passed through here used this road. Even monsters recognized it as a path used by people and avoided it, making it a sort of safe zone. Thus, anyone passing through could be spotted simply by watching the road.

With this in mind, our lightweight party chose to forgo the safety and convenience of the road and advanced through the forest instead, moving from tree to tree. Samantha, claiming that Stealth was a mere "trifle" to a lady, made hiding difficult. Still, the relative safety of the road meant it was unlikely anyone standing guard would notice us.

"It's been a while, Viro."

"Graves..."

Less than half a day into our trip through the woods, Graves appeared before us. I couldn't tell how he'd discovered us, but perhaps we'd simply been unlucky. Either way, our plan to ambush him was no longer viable, so we moved from the unstable forest ground to the bridge over the road.

From the start, we'd considered we had about a one-in-two chance of finding Graves first and ambushing him. We'd initially surmised he would attack us instead of fleeing because we had no heavy warriors with us, but...scanning his combat power revealed the real reason.

▼ Graves

Species: Humanð (Rank 5)

Aether Points: $215/220 \triangle +30$

Health Points: $328/360 \triangle +10$

Overall Combat Power: 1425 (Boosted: 1848) \triangle +209

His strength had increased significantly since our last meeting. How much had he trained? For a Rank 5 expert like him, even a single point increase in stats could lead to a sizable hike in combat power. According to the information Viro had received from the Order, Graves's Sword Mastery and Martial Mastery should've been his only Level 5 skills, making him just barely qualified for his rank. Now, however, it seemed clear he'd achieved Level 5 in other skills as well, making him a bona fide Rank 5.

But the most chilling thing of all wasn't that—it was that Graves's gaze was fixed not on Viro or Samantha but on *me*.

"You know why we're here, don't you, Graves? Are you going to surrender?"

"What a foolish question, Viro. I have things I must do. That woman over there may be the Witch of the Sands, founding member of the Rainbow Blade, but even she is no threat to me."

"Hee hee hee. My, it's been so long since anyone last called me that. You think you can win against me now?" Despite her supposed senility, Samantha's attitude immediately changed, and she assumed a combat stance.

Even knowing Samantha was a Rank 5 sorceress, Graves showed no intention of backing down. I'd fought strong opponents because retreat hadn't been an option, but Graves seemed to be deliberately choosing to do this. I wasn't sure where this strength and confidence came from—was it his newly honed skill or simply belief? Combat power wasn't an absolute measure of ability, but just as I'd believed in myself and defeated powerful foes, perhaps Graves, too, had something driving him.

While his way of life could only have been described as madness, I could still understand it to a certain extent. But now that we were here, facing one another, I realized that he and I were fundamentally different.

Done bantering, Graves once again turned his gaze from Viro and Samantha to me. "Alia. You, like me, are a mad dog. You're unfit to be a lapdog for the government. This world, as it is, is simply too narrow for someone like you. Join me and I will carve a place for you."

"You-"

"Viro," I called out, raising a hand and stopping Viro—who had been standing protectively in front of me—from lashing out at Graves. I stepped past Viro, narrowing my eyes and looking straight at the other man. "No."

"Oh? And why is that?" Graves asked, his lips twisted into a sardonic smile at my firm refusal. "Loyalty to the princess?"

"Partially, but that's not the only reason."

My answer had been decided the moment he'd become a threat to her.



"You're her enemy and mine." What more reason did I need to kill him?

"Hee hee ha haa ha!!!" Samantha cackled loudly, suddenly unleashing nearly ten Stone Lances at Graves.

Without any visible movement, he drew a pair of magic swords and deflected the spears, shattering them. While the swords themselves were threatening for their ability to repel sorcery, only someone of Graves's caliber could've used them to parry the powerful spells so effectively and avoid a single fatal blow.

"Ugh, do we really have to do this?!" Despite his grumbling, Viro reacted instantly, circling around Graves and throwing knives at the other man's side.

"Pain," I cast as Viro moved. I couldn't hold back against Graves; he already knew my abilities from our previous battle.

"Haaaah!" With a powerful shout, Graves endured my spell while using his swords to deflect Viro's knives. The first time I'd used Pain, it had momentarily made him flinch, but that wouldn't work anymore, it seemed. Stomping loudly, he kicked off the wooden bridge and lunged at Samantha.

"No you don't!" Viro intercepted Graves's swords, a shrill sound echoing through the air as the blades collided with his mithril knife, but the difference in size and power between the two fighters sent the scout flying. "Shit!"

"Move aside, boy!" Samantha shouted, unleashing her Level 4 earth spell Sandstorm.

Viro dodged to the side in a panic, and Graves was forced to dodge in the same direction. I unleashed my slashing pendulum, and Graves leaped back; Viro, still on the ground, delivered a sweeping kick to Graves's leg. Graves threw concealed knives at me warily and returned Viro's kick with a defensive one of his own. Seizing the opportunity, Samantha unleashed a veritable rain of Stone Shots.

Realizing he couldn't evade, Graves swung both of his swords and released a powerful burst of aether. "Vorpal Blade!"

He executed the one-handed sword technique with both blades at the same time, slashing through the barrage of Stone Shots that had seemed impossible to avoid.

"Are you done?"

The rest of us were silent. Graves truly was strong; he fought all three of us on equal—perhaps better—footing, even head-on. His skills were impressive, but what was truly extraordinary and set him apart was his composure in the face of death.

He took a step back to reset his stance and positioned himself so he could keep all three of us in his field of vision, swords at the ready. "You've grown strong, Viro. And you too, Alia, remarkably so. Fighting both of you at the same time is dangerous indeed. But I think it's about time... Do you hear that?"

What was his plan? Remaining cautious of him, the three of us strained to listen and heard something approaching in the distance.

"I lured it here, you see. I can recognize its movements."

A violent presence was fast approaching, announced by an immense surge of aether. This was—

"Grooooooooar!!!" A bestial roar echoed through the heavens, cutting the air like a sharpened blade. A gigantic black panther emerged from the depths of the forest, knocking down the trees in its path.

"The coeurl...!" Viro exclaimed hoarsely.

The mythical coeurl... I mused, momentarily captivated by its terrifying beauty. I couldn't tell whether Graves had summoned it or whether it had another reason for coming here, but its eyes shone with hatred toward us. It quickly became obvious we'd have to deal not only with Graves but the beast as well.

I moved to protect Samantha, but the mythical beast ignored us both, lunging at Graves and Viro without hesitation. It lashed out with the two whiplike whiskers extending from its ears.

"Ngh!" With a swift move, Viro managed to block the whiskers with the flat of his knife, while Graves moved behind the scout, using him as a shield.

Graves had mentioned "luring" the beast here. Was he the creature's target?

Still, the beast was attacking both men; maybe it couldn't tell people apart that well. Perhaps it could recognize the distinctions between children and adults, men and women, but little else. Graves seemed aware of this and was trying to direct the beast's attacks toward Viro.

This was bad. If I stuck to the initial plan of getting Samantha to safety, Viro would surely lose his life. If what Graves had said was true, he probably believed he could escape on his own even if Viro died.

I took a deep breath, pushing aside my rising fear, and focused my gaze on the mythical beast. If this was how it was going to be, I had no choice.

"Groooooar?!"

My weighted pendulum struck the coeurl's head before it could pounce, the impact enhanced by both my aether and the centripetal force from the throw. The hit managed to divert the coeurl's attack slightly.

"Alia!!!" Viro snapped.

"I'll be fine."

Under the circumstances, this was the best choice. Viro was stronger than me, but as a scout-type, he would struggle to fight the coeurl directly. Samantha was also stronger than me, but as a sorceress, she couldn't handle it either.

So, mythical coeurl...

The beast's whiskers lashed out like a pair of whips as I moved. I discarded my cloak as a decoy, dodging its attacks with acrobatic spins. From its blind spot, I struck the side of the coeurl's head once again with the weighted pendulum.

Your opponent isn't Viro.

"Groooooooooar!"

"I'll take it on!"

The Black Destroyer

"Haaah!"

The weighted pendulum flew through the air and struck the coeurl's head as I maneuvered the all-purpose pendulum, aiming for its eyes. Irritated, the coeurl dodged the blade, finally acknowledging me as its enemy. It let out a low growl and cast a sharp glare my way.

"Come at me," I taunted, twirling the pendulums.

"Alia!" Viro tried to rush toward me, but Graves moved to stop him.

"You should be worrying about yourself, Viro."

"Graves!!!" Viro roared, enraged by the cheap provocation.

"Stay focused, boy!" Samantha warned, quickly unleashing a hail of Stone Bullets to keep Graves in check. She glanced at me briefly as I faced the coeurl alone, her gaze so focused that one would never have guessed she had random bouts of senility. "We'll take Graves down while the girlie has the coeurl's attention! Don't waste this chance by getting distracted!"

Samantha's reproach worked, and Viro regained his composure. Gripping his dagger tightly, he cursed, "Damn it!"

Graves gave Viro a mocking smile. "Commendable resolve, but not very realistic."

"Shut up!"

I chose to trust that Viro and Samantha wouldn't lose to Graves if they worked together; meanwhile, I would keep the mythical beast occupied until Graves's defeat. With a roar, the coeurl stepped forward, its whiskers whipping through the air. It was fast, but not so fast that I couldn't keep up.

Stay focused, I told myself. Don't look away for even a second. Watch the way its muscles move and predict its attacks!

Using my mana vision, amplified by my now Level 4 Aether Manipulation, I anticipated the whiskers' trajectory and leaned back to dodge, then rolled backward to create distance.

Since my fight with the orc general, I'd been gradually refining my Boost by eliminating unnecessary elemental particles, even when using it normally. Though it was still unstable at full power, I was slowly getting better at it. The

improvement was minimal, but at this level, even the slightest difference could determine the outcome of the fight.

"Grr..."

The coeurl wasn't charging recklessly at me because my initial attack had done damage. Since I lacked physical strength, I wasn't sure that I could tear through the mythical beast's fur, and there was a chance it had Piercing Resistance like the werewolf assassin. But the weighted pendulum, being a blunt weapon, had been somewhat effective; the coeurl was clearly wary of it.

The beast was highly intelligent. While this was generally an advantage, it could also be a weakness. If it had charged at me the same way it had at Viro, I couldn't have put up the slightest resistance to its massive frame—it would've torn me apart. But intelligent as it was, the coeurl understood that blunt attacks could damage it, so it hesitated to fully close the distance.

While its wariness of the weighted pendulum was a setback for me—given it was the only weapon I had that could damage it—my current goal was to buy time, so it wasn't entirely a bad thing. Still, this would only work until the coeurl realized my attack power wasn't actually that high. It would then risk taking damage to attack me.

▼ Coeurl

Species: Mythical Beast (Rank 5)

Aether Points: 281/324

Health Points: $426/510 \triangle +10$

Overall Combat Power: 2136 (Boosted: 2705)

The coeurl's combat power was far above that of the orc general. A Rank 5 heavy fighter would be able to withstand a direct attack from it, but I would most certainly die. My plan, then, was to not fight it directly. I'd keep it as wary as possible, buy as much time as possible, and keep it as far away from Viro as possible.

As soon as the coeurl looked like it was about to move, I chanted, "Shadow Snatch," and created several shadows. Taking advantage of the beast's brief moment of confusion, I sent the shadows flying at it.

"Groooar!" the coeurl roared, its whiskers lashing at one of the shadows and dissipating it instantly.

Using the vanishing shadow as cover, I drew a knife from the slit of my skirt and threw it at the coeurl. The powerful beast noticed immediately and used its whiskers to shatter the knife with a sharp, hard crack. Now aware that the shadows were mere distractions, the coeurl ignored them and charged straight at me.

I fired a crossbow bolt into my own shadow, and as the coeurl attempted to move past one of the scattered shadows, the bolt flew toward its eye. It roared again, twisting its neck to avoid the point-blank shot, and the bolt deflected harmlessly off its black fur.

Since the bolt hadn't done any damage, the coeurl likely did have Piercing Resistance...or perhaps even the superior version, Slashing/Piercing Resistance. Slashing Resistance and Piercing Resistance were skills unique to monsters protected by fur, shells, and the like—unattainable by humans. While werewolves like the one I'd encountered recently and, very rarely, some types of beastmen could have similar resistances, they wouldn't have been able to deflect arrows to that extent.

The Slashing/Piercing Resistance skill could, depending on its level, nullify over eighty percent of damage from lower-level melee attacks. The coeurl was Rank 5, so if it had this skill, it was likely at least Level 4. It was hard to measure its skill level based on my own Bow Mastery, which was only Level 1, but it was safe to assume my knife and dagger attacks would have little effect.

The coeurl had been powerful from birth. There was a gap in both skills and stats between it and humans that was impossible to bridge. Still, though we had fought only briefly, the coeurl had unwittingly provided me with various pieces of information.

I could still damage it by targeting its eyes or mouth. Its large claws and fangs were not suited for deflecting small weapons, so it used its hard-as-steel

whiskers to strike at them instead. And the fact it had blocked a knife when I hadn't aimed for its eyes confirmed it was highly intelligent and cautious of my unusual attacks.

What was it wary of? Poison? Or was it just averse to getting injured? Reveal everything to me, I thought, staring intently at the beast. I'll expose even the weaknesses you're not aware of.

"Grrr..." Sensing something amiss in my gaze, the coeurl grew even more cautious.

"Come get me," I taunted. I took advantage of the distance it was keeping and kicked off the wooden floor, luring the coeurl deeper into the swampy woods.

Even knowing it was a provocation, the beast roared and gave chase without a second thought. It was operating on emotion over its wild instincts—another disadvantage of high intelligence.

"Graaar!" The coeurl lashed out with its whiskers, slicing through the thin branch I'd been about to leap onto. Its fangs closed in on me as I hung in midair, but before it could bite, I scattered red pepper powder in its path.

Startled, the beast turned its face away, its movements slowing momentarily. The pepper's effect was slight, but it was enough; in that instant, I kicked at the coeurl's snout with the magic steel-reinforced heel of my boot. I jumped back, swinging the weighted pendulum and striking the beast's face from the side.

"Groooar!" it roared, twisting its body and evading the strike while using its whiskers to flick the pendulum's string away. It was still wary, but I'd gained some distance. I began to move away from that spot, once again provoking the coeurl into following me.

Beyond here was a danger zone, more perilous than even the area with the muddy pitfalls where we'd been fighting earlier. There was no water past this point, only parched, weathered soil and exposed rock. The countless giant aquatic trees had all withered away. Many of their massive roots had eroded into nothingness, leaving behind countless holes like gaping pitfalls, some as deep as a person was tall.

This area had been a swamp once, but the lake's water had stopped flowing

this way and the marsh had dried up. Not even most wild animals—let alone people—dared to traverse it, leaving only a scant few small animals and insects able to survive in what was now known as the Dried Forest.

I was a human, and the coeurl a beast—a forest was an advantageous battlefield for it. But there was a reason I'd lured it to this specific forest.

Using the roots extending from the holes in the ground for footing, I crisscrossed the terrain. The coeurl used the trunk of a tree as a springboard and lunged, swiping its sharp claws at me. I had no means to dodge while airborne. The coeurl was already highly cautious of both my weighted pendulum and the red pepper. Avoiding the attack was impossible—or rather, it should've been.

Focusing to the extreme, honing my mind to a single point, I used my mana vision and body to sense my surroundings even more keenly than with the Detection skill. At that moment, I used the spell Weight paired with Martial Mastery to become lighter. This allowed me to deflect the force of the claws like a feather floating in the air and just barely evade the attack.

The coeurl followed up with its whiskers while I was still in midair, but I used its shoulder as a foothold, kicking off it and avoiding the lashings. It let out an enraged roar at my acrobatic fighting style and tried to leap forward—only for the ground underneath it to give way with a sharp crack. A startled growl escaped the coeurl as the tree roots crumbled, making it lose its balance. My weighted pendulum flew at its head, landing another violent blow.

Every tree in this area had withered. While the remains of the decaying vegetation were enough to support my lighter frame, they weren't sturdy enough to bear the weight of the much heavier coeurl. The ground might've held while the beast was in motion, but it wouldn't have provided sturdy footing regardless, thus drastically decreasing both the coeurl's attack power and evasion. Were it to act recklessly and fall into one of the many deep holes scattered about, it wouldn't come out unscathed.

This was the first place that had come to mind when I heard the reports from the Adventurers' Guild. My original plan had been to, worst-case scenario, lure Graves here by myself. "Shadow," I chanted, creating two copies of myself just as I had against the orcs, then used the shadows of the trees to swap places with a copy. This wasn't as effective against opponents relying on sight, but it was effective against opponents using Night Vision or Detection, who had a harder time telling the copies apart from myself.

While the coeurl was momentarily confused by the fragile footing and the phantoms, I threw a knife into the shadow at my feet, then fired it out of one of the shadows created by Shadow Snatch. With its high movement speed restricted, the coeurl roared and flicked the knife away using its whiskers.

That was fine. I hadn't expected the knife to hit.

The coeurl let out a startled noise as the real weapon, my weighted pendulum, swung down in an arc from above and struck it squarely in the temple. Struck in the head once again, the coeurl let out an enraged roar that shook the entire Dried Forest. "Groooooooooooooo!!!"

Suddenly, a sharp crackling noise came from the coeurl's whiskers, now enveloped in small flying sparks. My knowledge prompted me with a word for the phenomenon—electricity. I immediately backed off, and the sparks touched the two shadows, dissipating them instantly; I felt a slight mental shock and couldn't help but grimace.

Lightning existed in this world, of course, and there was also an advanced form of composite wind and water sorcery known as fulguration. What the coeurl had used, however, seemed fundamentally different. I surmised the beast was likely generating electricity through its strong muscle cells. It would then channel the generated current along with aether into its whiskers, delivering an electrical shock to the target's nervous system—which probably disrupted the target's sorcery. By hindering mental focus, it could cancel all spells connected to the caster and thus would likely nullify all spells with sustained rather than immediate effects.

Without spells, my combat power was halved. The coeurl had realized I was a sorcery-using light fighter and was now targeting my strengths.

"Graaaaaar!" it roared, finally getting serious. Electrical sparks continued to fly from its whiskers as its massive frame lunged forward. I stilled my wavering heart and braced myself. I couldn't use illusion spells. The coeurl's attack and evasion were drastically reduced.

Abandoning evasion altogether, the beast landed on the few remaining narrow strips of rock, its flexible jet-black body bending like a bow drawn to the limit. We both focused our senses and locked gazes, channeling all our strength into our next strikes. Even at my best I wouldn't have reached half of the coeurl's full strength—but I had no intention of dying.

You're the one who's going to die, I thought, gripping my dagger tightly.

The coeurl's whiskers charged, emitting a crackling noise like static. The dry sand around us floated into the air, then scattered violently.

I deliberately purged all elemental impurities from my aether, accelerating its flow throughout my body. This was, without a doubt, the ace up my sleeve. Recalling the blow that had taken down the orc general Gorjool, I aimed my black dagger at the coeurl's eyes and crouched down on all fours like a cat.

Sensing my aether, the coeurl narrowed its bloodred eyes, its muscles swelling in an instant as its massive body shot forward like a cannonball. The weathered rocks the coeurl had used as footholds shattered; the black beast charged forward with a resounding boom, as though tearing apart the air itself.

With my thoughts accelerated and focus heightened, I unleashed a magic spell using the elemental aether I had purged and stored away. "Shadow Walker!"

At the moment the coeurl made contact, my figure vanished into the shadows. I emerged from behind the beast using Shadow Walker and gripped its whiskers with the force of my out-of-control Boost.

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"Grar!"
"Ugh!"
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I took the concentration-disrupting shock directly, forcibly suppressing my aether before it could spiral out of control, then channeling the rampaging energy straight into the coeurl through its whiskers.

"Groooooooar!" Overwhelmed by the wild surge of aether, the coeurl

thrashed wildly through the Dried Forest with me on its back.

"Diiiiiiiie!"

The pain was so intense it felt like my hands were about to tear off, but I gritted my teeth and poured even more of my aether into the beast. Losing control of its body, the coeurl tried to shake me off and collided with a massive tree. With the impact, the ground gave way and a gaping hole opened up as the tree's decaying roots collapsed. The tree sank into the deep darkness, taking the coeurl and me with it.

Beauty and the Beast

Plip.

The sensation of a droplet hitting my cheek stirred me back to consciousness. Around me was darkness so thick I couldn't see through it. I stilled my momentarily confused mind and activated Night Vision; it was then that I realized I was at the bottom of a deep hole.

Right... I was fighting the coeurl and we fell in here.

When choosing the Dried Forest as a battlefield, I'd considered the possibility of luring my foe into a pit. This tree, however, had been much more massive than I'd anticipated, its decaying roots burrowing deep underground. Looking up, I could see a faint light—tens of meters above.

How much time has passed? Hours? Minutes?

I stood up, water pooling at my feet, and grimaced as pain shot up my limbs. Using the primordial technique had been reckless in the end. Mercifully, the sharp pain gradually subsided, possibly because I'd aimed the rampaging aether at the coeurl rather than making it course through myself.

The beast and the water at the bottom of the pit had likely broken my fall, allowing me to survive with minor bruising. The surface of the Dried Forest was a barren wasteland worthy of its name—I hadn't expected there to be so much water underground. Still, if water could only be found at this depth, it might as well have been nonexistent. This place wasn't suitable for living beings either way.

I stretched, loosening my muscles, and checked my condition. I could see and hear. I was bruised but had no broken bones. My health and aether points had decreased significantly, and my muscles were strained. Moving would be difficult until I got used to the pain.

Something felt off about my body. I could feel something reminiscent of the residual aethereal heat effect one got from using a combat technique and realized I wouldn't be able to use another technique anytime soon. Even if I could, it would be only once, and my arms would be rendered unusable for several days after.

When I'd chosen to fight here, I'd already calculated my chances of survival. I'd anticipated being more injured and fatigued than this, however. It had likely been the growth in my sorcery-related skills that had protected me from a worse outcome. I'd been practicing to use the Level 4 spell Shadow Walker, and between that and the primordial technique I'd used against the orc general, my skills had likely accumulated a decent amount of experience.

The fatigue and aether depletion I was currently experiencing were definitely a result of using a primordial technique again. I'd hoped to make this technique truly usable as a trump card, but if the recoil was this severe after just a few seconds of use, it wasn't very practical.

Wait... Where's the coeurl?

It wouldn't have died from a fall like this. I didn't know what the situation was, but since I didn't even have enough aether left to circulate through my body, I took an aether potion from my pouch and downed it in one gulp.

Has it fled already? If so, Viro and Samantha could be in danger. Since they were still fighting Graves, I needed to get back to them.

I calmed my fretful mind and channeled what little aether I'd recovered into Night Vision—and there it was. Deep within the darkness, the coeurl's crimson gaze met mine.

"The coeurl..." I murmured, forcing aether into my still-unresponsive body to activate Boost. I drew the weighted pendulum from Shadow Storage and the black dagger from my waist, then aimed them at the beast.

Dodging the coeurl's attacks in my current state would've been difficult—I could barely move. Its combat power was nearly three times mine, and in a normal fight, I'd have been at an overwhelming disadvantage. But I'd come this far. Backing down wasn't an option.

I'll kill you here and now, I thought, radiating a sharp sense of bloodlust.

"Grr..." the coeurl growled, responding in kind by activating its own Intimidation skill.

We stared each other down, a few meters apart, poised to strike. The coeurl, submerged in knee-deep water, continued to glare at me with such intensity that it would've made a weak-willed man faint on the spot.

Several seconds passed like this, and then it hit me: it wasn't that the beast wasn't moving. It *couldn't* move. A half-fossilized tree fragment was jutting out from the coeurl's back and abdomen, piercing through its body like a stake.

It hadn't bothered with Intimidation when fighting me. If it was resorting to it now, its situation must've been dire indeed. Impaled the way it was, it couldn't use its powerful claws and fangs to free itself. Though it could reach the tree with the two whiskers extending from its ears, they were too thin and not strong enough to break or pull out the stake.

I approached it silently, stopping just out of reach of its whiskers, and swung the weighted pendulum, sending it flying through the air.

"Graaar!"

The pendulum barely missed the coeurl's head, smashing loudly into the water below, splashing water everywhere.

"Enough," I muttered, reeling in the pendulum's string. I turned my back to the coeurl and sat on a nearby rock that wasn't submerged in water.

I didn't really mean anything special by the act. The coeurl may have been immobilized, but it was still a threat. It was simply that its physical resistance was high, so I judged that killing it would take a significant amount of time. Moreover, mythical beast or no, with its abdomen impaled like that, the coeurl would die sooner or later regardless of how much health it had.

My goal wasn't to kill it but to win. If killing had been necessary for victory, then I wouldn't have hesitated to do so. But I took no pleasure in torturing and killing something that couldn't fight back; there was no meaning in wasting time on something so pointless.

Go ahead. Waste away. Die here.

The coeurl, lying on the wet ground, and I, perched on the rock, stared at each other in silence. I wouldn't let my guard down until it was dead. It must've sensed this from my cold gaze, because its eyes seemed to waver ever so slightly.

To escape this place, I needed to recover my health points. With the potion having somewhat replenished my aether points, I cast Cure to regain health and Restore to mend my bruises and wounds.

The coeurl watched me listlessly. I couldn't guess what it was thinking, but it wasn't as though a human could ever truly understand the thoughts of a mystical beast.

Although I managed to recover to some extent, I knew from my battle against the orcs that the lingering fatigue would keep my health points from recovering fully. I knew I needed a proper meal and not just nutritional pellets if I was to speed up my aether recovery, and so I took out some lamb—which I still had in abundance—from Shadow Storage and bit off a chunk.

After about half an hour, the effects of Restore were mostly completed, rendering my body much more capable of movement. I sprang into action.

I tried climbing up the walls, choosing relatively stable sections while avoiding the more fragile rock surfaces, but the higher I went, the more the eroded rock face crumbled at the slightest touch. Wrapping a pendulum around protruding rocks or decaying tree roots yielded the same results. Worst case, I figured I could wait until nightfall and slowly Shadow Walk my way up, but that would take far too long.

"Phew..."

As I sat back down on the rock to recover more health and stamina, I locked

eyes with the coeurl again. Something about it had changed—it was still glaring at me but no longer using Intimidation. There was a strange look to its gaze now. Was this its true gaze? Up until now, it had seemed lost to hatred and rage, but now it seemed to have calmed down in the face of death, regaining its composure and sense of self. Though the coeurl still had some health points left, the blood steadily flowing from its wounds was undoubtedly draining away its life.

At that moment, a soft crackle emanated from its whiskers, sending small sparks flying. Even given that the bottom of the pit was covered in water, that much electricity wasn't enough to serve as a stand-alone attack. It would've been enough to kill small fish but not enough to take me down.

```
"...Human..."

Just then, I thought I heard a voice. No, not a voice...

"...Girl..."
```

With each soft crackle of electricity, the coeurl signaled some sort of meaning, almost like words, to me. Was it communicating its will? Was this the true purpose of the electricity emitted from its whiskers?

```
"...Coeurl," I responded.
```

Another series of signals came from the beast's whiskers.

```
"...Save..."

"...I..."

"You want me to help you?"

"...Yes..."
```

It did? I'd never expected it to say something like that. What was it thinking, asking an enemy it had just fought for help?

```
"...I..."

"...Enemy..."

"...Not..."

"...You..."
```

```
"...Other..."
"...Man..."
"Your enemy isn't me, but a human man?"
"...Man..."
"...Lure..."
"…l…"
"...Kill..."
"You want me to save you so you can kill the man who lured you out?"
"...Yes..."
"Awfully convenient. What will you do with me, then?"
"…l…"
"...Save..."
"...You..."
"...Darkness..."
```

Was it saying it would save me from this dark pit if I saved it from death? With its physical prowess, it could indeed escape, but... "Are you asking me to trust you?"

```
"...Yes..."

"...I..."

"...Vow..."

"...Pride..."
```

After a moment's silence, looking straight into the coeurl's eyes, I replied, "Very well."

I knew it was foolish to trust the word of a beast I'd only just fought to near death, but since it was swearing on its pride, I figured it was worth the gamble. Besides, it was perhaps because of that very battle that I felt more inclined to believe the coeurl than I would've been to believe a person who only appeared

genuine.

"Hold still," I murmured. Cautiously, I approached the coeurl and climbed onto its back, both of us still wary of each other.



It's in pretty bad shape, I mused. How is it still alive?

I wrapped my pendulum's thread several times around the fossilized fragment piercing its back, then hoisted the thread over my shoulder as if preparing for a shoulder throw. Activating Boost, I pulled with all my strength.

"Grooooooar!"

"Haaaaaaaah!"

The coeurl's cry of agony and my own shout echoed through the dark depths of the earth. As the stake slowly came loose, the beast and I both strained our muscles. Finally, I managed to yank the stake out, and the coeurl stood up, shaking me off in the process.

"Watch it," I protested in exasperation as I dropped down onto my rear.

"Grar," the coeurl rumbled, wrapping its whiskers around me and pulling me up from the water. "...Apology..."

"You don't need to thank me or apologize. Just put me down."

True to the vow on its pride, the coeurl gingerly set me down in the puddle. The wound on its back had shrunk and the bleeding had already stopped. While it wouldn't heal immediately, it seemed likely that it would recover within a few days at most. Still, its decreased health points worried me—whether it died or not was of no consequence to me, but I needed it to stay alive until we reached Graves.

"Eat," I ordered, offering it all the leftover meat I had.

The coeurl gave me a sharp glance for a moment, then silently devoured the pile of meat in a single bite.

"Go. I'll grab on to you."

At my words, the coeurl let out a loud roar and sprang forward, its muscles coiling as it launched itself. Before I could even grab hold, it wrapped its whiskers around me and lifted me onto its back, ascending the pitfall in a zigzag motion as though it were a bolt of lightning. Within seconds, we reached the surface.

The sun had already begun to set and twinkling stars dotted the crimsontinged sky. I closed my eyes for a moment, enjoying the scent of the air and feeling the breeze against my cheeks.

Finally, the coeurl and I both glared in the direction of our next battlefield.

```
"Let's go. To our enemy."
```

```
▼ Alia (Alicia)
```

Species: Human $\$ (Rank 4) \triangle +1

Aether Points: $152/270 \triangle +20$

Health Points: $138/210 \triangle +10$

Strength: 9 (12)

Endurance: 9 (12)

Agility: 14 (20) \triangle +1

Dexterity: 8

[Dagger Mastery Lv. 3]

[Martial Mastery Lv. 4]

[Throwing Lv. 3]

[Bow Mastery Lv. 1]

[Guard Lv. 3]

[String Manipulation Lv.4]

[Light Magic Lv. 3]

[Shadow Magic Lv. 4] \triangle +1

[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 4]

[Practical Magic x6]

[Aether Manipulation Lv. 4]

[&]quot;Grooooooar!"

```
[Intimidation Lv. 3]
[Stealth Lv. 4]
[Night Vision Lv. 2]
[Detection Lv. 4]
[Poison Resistance Lv. 3]
[Basic Scan]
Overall Combat Power: 916 (Boosted: 1123) △ +304
```

Target

With me on its back, the coeurl escaped the depths of the earth. It would've been difficult for me to climb out of that hole alone, but the much stronger coeurl swiftly scaled the fragile earthen wall before it could collapse.

Using a towering withered tree as a foothold, the coeurl leaped even higher, and I scanned the surroundings from that vantage point to assess the situation. The sun had been high when we'd first encountered Graves, but now it had sunk considerably. Shades of crimson were beginning to tinge the blue sky. This meant that likely four or five hours had passed since I was separated from the others.

Was the battle still ongoing? I doubted Viro and Samantha could've lost, even against Graves. Still, their situation could be critical.

"That way," I said, determined.

"Groooooooooo!" The coeurl's bloodlust surged uncontrollably, and it landed with such force that the parched ground shattered underfoot. It sprinted through the forest, avoiding the pitfalls scattered across the earth.

Wait for me. I'll be there soon.

"You have impressive endurance, Witch of the Sands," Graves remarked. "Did that come with age?"

"Cheeky brat!" Samantha snapped. She fired the earth-elemental spell Stone Shot several times in quick succession, unleashing a flurry of rock projectiles. Though the spell was only Level 2, in the hands of the skilled sorceress, it maintained its aether consumption while boasting physical damage closer to that of the Level 3 spell Stone Lance.

Graves seemed to find it difficult to cut his way through the barrage and leaped back. Viro surged forward, attacking Graves from behind, but before he could reach the other man, Graves chanted, "Splash."

"Tch!" Though he lost his balance, Viro blocked the water-elemental spell with a thrust of his highly aether-conductive mithril dagger. Immediately, Graves followed up with a kick, sending Viro flying. "Gah!"

Graves was not only skilled in swordsmanship and stealth abilities but also capable of using offensive magic at a practical level. Before, he had only been able to use magic up to Level 2, similar to his former colleague Sera. But now that he was regularly fighting multiple opponents on his own, he'd trained his sorcery to Level 3.

"Your attacks are getting monotonous, Viro. Are you panicking because your protégé is in danger?"

"Shut the hell up! Dark Mist!"

Viro had trained his sorcery over the past three years as well and now had Shadow Mastery at Level 2. His training had also increased his Aether Manipulation to Level 4. Thanks to that, his use of Boost was more precise and his overall combat power had increased.

Previously, he hadn't placed much importance on an individual's combat power, but watching Alia's method of constantly taking on powerful enemies alone had seemingly left an impression of him. Although Viro's reason for training had simply been to prevent his student from surpassing him, it was nevertheless rare for adventurers already at Rank 4 and above to display such a strong drive to improve.

The Dark Mist spell blocked Graves's vision, allowing Samantha to unleash another spell before he could move to escape the mist's range. She chanted, "Stoneskin," and cloaked herself in earth-elemental mana.

With the mana acting as a protective armor that could absorb a certain amount of damage, Samantha charged at Graves using Viro's mist as cover. "Interesting move," Graves muttered to himself.

Even Night Vision was ineffective within the mana-powered darkness, making it difficult to pinpoint an opponent's position. Any normal attacks he used would be blocked by Stoneskin. And, though Samantha was a sorceress, she was also a seasoned adventurer capable of using Level 4 Boost. It was possible that as soon as she deflected his strike, she'd launch a surprise counterattack.

A combat technique could potentially cut through Stoneskin, but if the darkness caused Graves to miss, his opponent wouldn't be gracious enough to wait through his recovery period.

I need to retreat, he thought, leaping back.

Once more, Samantha unleashed a spell, this time from within the darkness. "Waterball!"

Graves was familiar with the Level 3 water spell, as he could also use it. Though its power was weak and its speed low, it was exceptional among spells of its level in that it could cover a wide area.

"Ugh!" Graves groaned as the rushing water pressure swept his feet out from under him. Had he been standing on solid earth, he might've been able to brace himself, but to do so on a wooden floor, he would've needed special equipment.

Viro, who had also taken damage from the water pressure, seized the chance and lunged forward. As the two men clashed, Viro's blade finally landed a blow, slicing into Graves's side.

"Eat shit!" Viro taunted.

"Keep your guard up, boy!" Samantha chided as she emerged from the darkness to stand ready next to Viro.

Graves winced at the blood pouring from his side and shot them both a sharp glare to keep them in check. He then chanted, "High Cure," casting the Level 3 light-elemental spell on himself.

High Cure's aether consumption was more than triple that of Cure, but the effects were correspondingly more powerful; the spell provided instant health point recovery and healing. Graves had trained to be able to use this spell without chanting. To him, sorcery was simply a tool; he hadn't yet mastered the art of altering its structure in order to use true magic. Nevertheless, by memorizing the spell to perfection, he could cast it fast enough to match Samantha.

Because Graves could use this spell, Samantha and Viro couldn't press their attack.

When using high-level spells without a heavy fighter to serve as a weapon and shield, one had to ensure the impact of the spell was nearly incapacitating, preventing any chance of retaliation. Large-scale sorcery created vulnerabilities the same way combat techniques did.

To ensure a spell of that caliber would hit, one had to create an opening. In such a closely matched battle, however, this was nearly impossible. Samantha could attempt to create one by repeatedly casting lower-level spells, but Graves could quickly heal superficial wounds with High Cure.

Thus, Samantha had to hold back on using magic to conserve her resources. Graves, on the other hand, couldn't fully commit to an attack either; he needed to save his remaining resources for High Cure, since Viro was still protecting Samantha. Thus, the battle between the three had reached a stalemate.

However, this stalemate was slowly beginning to crumble.

"How unfortunate. If only Alia were here with her light sorcery, this battle would've been more interesting," Graves taunted with a smirk as his healing finished.

"Bastard..." Viro grunted.

"Mouthy brat," Samantha said.

She was more skilled in Light Sorcery than Graves, but if she was to land a finishing blow on him, she would likely need a high-level spell of a different element. To conserve her aether, she hesitated to use light-elemental spells, which had led to her and Viro gradually taking damage.

Cure and Restore were low cost, but both required contact with the target, making them difficult to use in combat. Meanwhile, High Cure activated instantly the same way offensive spells did, making it well-suited for use during combat. While all three combatants had potions, none of them would be foolish enough to allow any of the others a chance to drink one.

As a result, Samantha and Viro—unable to tend to their wounds—found themselves at a disadvantage. While Graves's aether points were also dwindling, he focused more on melee combat rather than actively relying on offensive magic like Samantha. He had more leeway than the pair did.

Though the stalemate was slowly coming to an end in Graves's favor, he'd wanted to ensure victory by forcing Samantha to cast a light-elemental spell and drain her aether. Realizing now that he was running out of time, however, he decided to go on the offensive.

"Let's end this before the mythical beast returns," he said. "Heal yourselves, if you can. I thought there was a chance Alia might make it back, but perhaps I overestimated her."

"Fucking bastard," Viro hissed.

"Don't think you'll win that easily, brat," Samantha warned.

Samantha and Viro readied themselves to fight to the death, oozing malice. Graves poured even more aether into his beloved dual magic swords and leaned forward, poised to strike. Graves wouldn't let his guard down, despite his opponents being an elderly Rank 5 sorceress and a Rank 4 scout. Still, after this many hours of combat, he had a good sense of the pair's limits.

"It's over," he muttered, readying to launch his attack.

"Grooooooooooar!!!"

A beastly roar echoed through the swampy woods, and out of the corners of their eyes, the trio saw the figure of the jet-black coeurl charging toward them at an incredible speed.

"I wasted too much time," Graves said, disappointed. He'd considered the possibility that if the beast had taken damage in its clash with Alia, it might've been capricious enough to not return. But now, with the coeurl here, he felt as

though he'd truly overestimated the girl.

Nevertheless, his plan remained the same. The beast wasn't very good at telling people apart; it wouldn't be able to distinguish him from Viro. Though Graves had no intention of conceding victory easily, he wasn't willing to risk his life to defeat a mighty opponent like the coeurl. The wisest course of action was to flee.

He could use Viro as a decoy and buy himself enough time to escape. After the coeurl killed Viro and Samantha, he could carry on with his plan to assassinate the duke at his leisure. Moreover, he had an ace up his sleeve specifically to deal with the coeurl; he'd prepared it shortly after deciding to lure the beast out. Obtaining it had required him to make a deal with certain individuals, but it had been worth it. Used effectively, it could even direct the coeurl toward the duke's knights.

"The mythical beast... Damn it!" Viro cursed, realizing that the coeurl's appearance might mean his student had been defeated. He cast the approaching beast a furious glare.

"Fall back, boy!" Samantha shouted as she began to retreat.

Graves shifted his position to lure Viro in. With Samantha leaving, Viro was now left alone. At that moment, however, the trio heard a faint voice coming from the direction of the coeurl.

"No, that's not the one."

At the girl's voice, the coeurl shifted targets, effortlessly leaping over Viro. The scout looked up at the beast passing overhead and caught sight of a girl covered in ashes, with a dagger in her right hand, holding on to the coeurl's tail with her left arm.

"Alia!!!"

Viro's joyful cry echoed across the battlefield, and before the sound could fade, Alia murmured, "Release me."

"...Yes..."

Graves raised his swords to strike at the coeurl, but the beast made a sudden

stop, whipping its powerful tail and propelling Alia forward like a bullet. She drove her black dagger deep into Graves's shoulder in a surprise attack.

"Time for you to die," she said.

"So you're alive, Alia!" Despite having just been stabbed, Graves looked almost happy—a twisted version of happy. "I hadn't anticipated this! Ha ha ha!" Laughing maniacally, he used his uninjured arm to swing a sword at Alia.

She'd anticipated this and quickly leaped away, dodging the blade with a midair somersault. Airborne, she pointed a slender finger at Graves and chanted, "Pain."

The spell created the illusion of pain, but it was excruciating enough to send the target into shock. Graves was already familiar with the spell, however, and it was nothing to be feared as long as one was prepared for it.

"Really? You're still using that tri— Ugh!" The pain should've been bearable, yet it was unexpectedly sharp, seizing Graves with enough force to halt his movements for a split second. How?! Has she increased her sorcery level in such a short amount of time?!

Nevertheless, the effect was brief. Alia was still in midair and couldn't launch a proper follow-up, and Viro and Samantha hadn't yet resumed their combat stances due to the momentary confusion.

It didn't matter. They weren't the only enemies Graves was facing.

"Groooooooooo!!!" After launching Alia, the coeurl continued its momentum and lunged at Graves, aiming its fangs at his throat.

Though he managed to narrowly avoid having his throat ripped out, the beast's bite caught his arm and tore it off. Even with all his resilience, Graves let out a sharp groan of agony, jumping back to distance himself from Alia and the coeurl.

"Stone Shot!" Samantha chanted, unleashing the long-distance spell at Graves and piercing his side. At the same time, Viro threw a knife, slashing Graves's right shoulder.

Without missing a beat, Alia drew one of her own throwing knives from

beneath her skirt and aimed for Graves's forehead. He could only defend himself by throwing his remaining sword to intercept the knife.

Despite having lost an arm, Graves displayed impressive Martial Mastery and retreated farther. He placed his hand behind his back, unable to conceal the joy he felt when he looked at Alia. "Unbelievable. You tamed the coeurl. Fate truly must be on your side."

"Don't use such a cheap word to describe me," Alia retorted, gazing at him with cold eyes and holding her pendulum cautiously.

Graves's eyes widened at her response, and he suddenly burst into laughter. "Ha ha ha ha ha! A cheap word indeed. I may not know you at all, but my gut instinct was right all along—you *are* a danger."

Having lost one of his arms and both of his beloved weapons, Graves nevertheless gazed fiercely at Alia. Suddenly, he took a sphere from behind his back and smashed it against the wooden planks that spanned the road.

Viro, who had been ready to strike, leaped forward. "He's going to escape—"

"Fall back, boy!" Samantha shouted. "That's a poisonous smoke bomb!"

A peculiar-smelling smoke quickly engulfed the area. Unable to bear the stench, the coeurl was forced to give up its pursuit of Graves and leap to the side. With her vision obscured, Alia's ability to see mana as color was greatly reduced. Still, she remained cautious, holding her pendulum at the ready.

Graves's voice echoed from within the smoke. "I won't target trash like the duke anymore. Alia, I acknowledge your worth. From this day forward, *you're* my target. Protect the princess, if you can. I *will* come to kill her." His voice faded, and his presence vanished completely.

"He's gone," Alia muttered in a low voice, covering her mouth with her shawl. She judged it would be futile to give chase, since he was a light fighter with scouting skills and capable of using light sorcery.

Declaring Alia as his target and threatening Elena's life had likely been an attempt to keep Alia from hunting Graves down. By forcing her to stay at the princess's side, he could focus solely on her.

Alia narrowed her eyes and glared in the direction where Graves had disappeared. "That's exactly what I want, Graves. Next time, I'll make sure you're dead."

New Assignment

The madman Graves had vanished to parts unknown. Even with a severe injury like a missing arm, in a world where people could use aether to strengthen themselves, he would likely survive.

Honestly, I'd have preferred to have killed him now, but facing him had made me realize just how unprepared we'd been. Viro and Samantha alone could have taken down the old Graves—but he hadn't been complacent. He'd continued to train, grown stronger, and prepared himself to face off against multiple opponents like us.

He was gone for now but not forever. How much time would we have before he healed and resumed his activities? The spell Restore promoted regeneration, and using it could potentially help him regrow his lost arm. That process would take about six months, though, and for him to be able to use that arm with the same dexterity as before, it could take over a year.

In that time, I would grow stronger too. No matter how powerful he became, I was determined to surpass him before we met again.

"Grr..." the coeurl, standing some distance away from me, growled in frustration at having allowed Graves to escape.

"Coeurl...what will you do? Give chase? Or ... " Settle things with me?

I circulated aether through my body as though asking that question. Meanwhile, I could sense Viro and Samantha growing tense as they watched the beast cautiously. They probably planned on fighting it with me, but I was ready to stand my ground, even if I had to face it alone.

The coeurl stared at me in silence with its crimson eyes, and small sparks of electricity crackled along the whiskers extending from its ears.

```
"...You..."

"...Name..."

It wants to know my name? "It's Alia."

"Grr..." it growled quietly in response.

"...I..."

"...Seek..."

"...Name..."
```

Now it wants a name for itself? At that moment, instead of "meaning," it signaled an image to me. A deep, dark forest. A solitary black warrior living alone in the darkness. Are these...its memories?

It had been alone ever since it had first come into existence. With no friends, every other being was either its enemy or a feeble thing that feared it. Finally, within the memories it showed me, I briefly saw an image of myself staring down at it with cold eyes before it faded away.

The Black Destroyer. A jet-black beast, its solitary figure howling alone at the moon rising in the night sky...

```
A name escaped my lips. "Nero?"
"...Yes..."
```

The coeurl seemed to understand the word's meaning—"black"—and accept it as its own name. It turned its back to me, leaving me with parting "words" before disappearing into the woods.

```
"...Meet..."
"...Again..."
"...Moon..."
```

As I watched the coeurl go, I murmured the name to myself. "Nero..."

What had it meant by "moon"? Was that me? Had the coeurl—no, Nero acknowledged me as its equal? It had spoken of meeting again... Perhaps we would cross paths once more.

"Alia?" Viro quietly called out to me as I stared in the direction where Nero had disappeared.

"Hmm?"

"What happened between you and that thing? You two looked like you were having a conversation. How did you even manage to get a mythical beast to work with you in the first place?"

His confusion was natural. Judging by his and Samantha's expressions, I'd caused them a great deal of worry.

"Nothing bad. It wanted to kill Graves for using it," I explained simply. "Now that Graves is gone, I don't think it'll be coming back here."

Viro pondered this for a moment, then let out a soft sigh. "Well, whatever. We've stopped the assassination of Duke Helton, and while the guy's hunting party will waste their time searching for the coeurl, that's not our problem."

Graves had targeted the duke, a member of the nobility faction that opposed the royal family, but Viro's employers were aligned with the royalists. With the assassination thwarted, they had no further obligations to the duke.

The duke had planned to kill the coeurl to gain popularity; while it would've been bad for Viro's employers if the man had died, they had no reason to want his stunt to succeed. That was probably why Viro didn't see an issue with leaving things be, but still...

"Graves got away. Didn't our job involve taking him out?" Leaving the mission incomplete sounded like a problem to me.

Viro's expression was sour, but he shrugged nonchalantly. "We'll just report everything, including what happened with Graves and you. If we bring them his severed arm and the weapon he left behind, they'll be somewhat satisfied."

"I hope so."

Graves had apparently managed to retrieve one of the magic swords—the one that had been in his severed arm—during the chaos, but we still had the one he'd thrown. Since we'd let him get away, it was unlikely we'd get anything more than our advance payment. Still, since Graves had announced his intent to

target both Princess Elena and myself, Viro's plan was to argue that our mission hadn't been a complete failure.

"If he hadn't used that weird smoke bomb, we could've taken him down. I've never seen one that could cover such a wide area and was poisonous to boot..."

"You need to study more, boy!!!" Samantha interjected suddenly, shouting as though calling out to someone from the next room over. "That was a gem, the kind you find in a dungeon! Probably a type of poison gem, if I had to guess! We sure got lucky! Hee hee hee!"

As Samantha cackled like an old witch, Viro's eyes widened in shock. "What?! A poison gem?! Are you serious?! The Adventurers' Guild classifies those as hazardous materials! I mean, I've seen gems before, but...are you sure that was a poison gem?"

"Different dungeons produce different types of gems! But anyway, if that had been a true poison gem, we would all be dead, and so would that guy. Those things can wipe out entire villages."

"You're saying that was a fake?"

"No, just that it was a different kind. Normally, gems contain powerful spells. The poison in that one wasn't meant for people but probably for beasts instead. The smoke was the same shade as the poison gem I used once, so it fooled me too!"

"You've actually used one, you crazy old crone?"

So that was why Nero hadn't been able to chase Graves down. The idea of a single man luring a mythical beast toward a populated area sounded insane, but it sounded like he'd prepared for it in advance.

Dungeons, formed from ancient hermit crabs that had turned into monsters and claimed caves and ruins as their shells, were said to sustain themselves on the aether and life force of living creatures. They could even draw on the residual thoughts of the dead as well as using minerals and aethercrystals to create treasures that would be attractive to humans.

Since these treasures were ultimately made by monsters, most of them were practically junk, but some dungeons hit the proverbial jackpot and created gold

or silver ingots. Occasionally, they generated magical items that couldn't be crafted by people, such as special tools or the swords Graves had used.

The disposable "gems" Samantha had mentioned fell into the magical tool category. According to Claydale law, any dangerous items, such as poison gems, needed to be reported to the Adventurers' Guild upon discovery and would be mandatorily purchased by the government. What the country did with those items was unknown...and yet somehow Samantha had used one before.

"Graves probably stole that from the castle's vault during his time in the Order, or he got it from some shady bunch somewhere," Samantha mused. "Boy! Girlie! Don't let your guard down! Next time you meet him, he might have some other unknown item!"

"Ugh," Viro groaned.

I remained silent. There was nothing more we could do now; Graves wouldn't be able to act for some time, so our job was done.

"Alia, about your reward..."

"We failed to assassinate Graves, right? I'm not worried."

The "reward" Viro had offered me was protection against the Assassins' and Thieves' Guilds, which still occasionally targeted me—in other words, a promise of personal safety. It was something I'd been worried about, since it'd become dangerous for me to interact with ordinary people, but my main goal had been Graves himself. I'd forgotten all about the payment until Viro brought it up.

If at any point the guilds' attacks became a serious concern, I figured a much more effective way to deal with them would be to take down the aggressive Central Western District's branch of the Assassins' Guild. I wondered if I could pull it off once my Dagger Mastery reached Level 4.

"Hey. Are you thinking of doing something stupid?" Viro asked. "Look, the 'reward' I'm talking about has nothing to do with this job. It's something I wanted to talk to you about once I thought you'd grown skilled enough."

"What do you mean?" What did being skilled have to do with rewards?

Samantha cackled. "The girlie has skill in spades, boy! She's already nearly caught up to her useless mentor in combat power!"

"What?!" Viro, in shock, scanned me. "Huh?" His eyes widened, and he pulled a scanning crystal out of his pocket to try again. After the second scan, he seemed more exasperated than upset as he held his head and looked up at the sky. "How the hell did you reach Rank 4 in such a short amount of time?"

"Only in sorcery," I pointed out. "I haven't caught up to you in melee combat yet, Viro."

"Oh, great. Thanks..."

My comment had been made in earnest, but Viro seemed to have taken it as a platitude and slumped his shoulders, looking discouraged. He snapped out of it quickly, however, lifting his head and putting on a smile. One that was far from genuine and much more on the shady side.

"All right. Over the next few years, you're gonna learn all the adventurer skills I have. I'll make sure you can at least make do within a year. First, you need to get all the skills you're missing so you can navigate a dungeon's lower layers!"

"What are you talking about?" I cast Viro a suspicious look, wondering why he'd suddenly started talking about adventuring and dungeons.

"No, listen," he continued, the sly grin still plastered on his face. "This has to do with your reward and also involves a new job offer. Before I met up with you, I was informed that my party's been asked to serve as escorts to a party of nobles during a dungeon expedition. They'll have their own guards, but not that many. It wouldn't hurt to have more scouts, and since you can use light-elemental sorcery, you'd be the perfect addition to the team. What do you say?"

The second Viro said the word "noble," my answer was set in stone. "They can go and get themselves killed for all I care."

We adventurers were called such because we had the skill to go into dangerous places like dungeons. I had no interest in protecting a bunch of nobles who wanted to play around in a dungeon where only adventurers should've been.

Viro was momentarily stunned by how bluntly I'd turned down the offer.

"Is that all you had to say? I'll get going, then," I said, turning to leave. I wasn't interested in the job or the reward.

"Wait, wait! Wait a second, Alia! Let me finish!" Viro hurriedly called after me, snapping back to his senses. "Stop being so stoic and making snap decisions! Look, Alia, I'm only telling you this because I know you, okay? The princess is involved. You get it? The princess? The one you know? That one?"

"Tell me more." Was he really supposed to give away classified information so readily?

According to Viro, the younger members of the royal family and the prince's three fiancées needed to enter a dungeon in secret, and high-ranking adventurers were necessary in order to clear the way for them.

Why would the frail Elena go into a dungeon? Viro didn't tell me why they had to go, but he did mention that the royal family had commissioned Viro's party on the recommendation of the Order of Shadows, which was responsible for ensuring their safety.

"You want to protect the princess, don't you? When I report the Graves situation to the Order, the kingdom will probably look into you as well, sure. But are you really gonna turn down a request involving the princess?"

Once again, this man had brought me trouble that I couldn't easily refuse to get involved in. "Fine," I muttered after a moment's silence. "I'll protect her. But what does that have to do with my reward?"

Did he think the kingdom or the Order would somehow intervene on my behalf? The Order of Shadows was feared by the underworld, yes, but it was also seen as an enemy to them—a sort of pack of hunting dogs at the nobility's beck and call. I was skeptical that an enemy group's protection would serve as much of a deterrent.

As I squinted at him doubtfully, Viro finally seemed to catch on as to what I was thinking, but what he said next caught me off guard.

"What are you talking about? Your reward is to join us, the Rainbow Blade, as a replacement for Samantha."

I let out another sigh. This was going to be even more trouble than I'd anticipated.	

Epilogue

"Clara, are you done getting ready?"

"Yes, Princess Elena. Lady Patricia has declined to come, but Lady Karla and I have completed our preparations. We are scheduled to meet in the port town located in the Duchy of Hoodale."

The kingdom's royal heirs, the prince and princess, had been enjoined to complete a dungeon, and each was making their own preparations for it. But they weren't the only ones—the prince's fiancées would also be made to delve into the perilous dungeon. The expedition was meant to test the resolve of the next generation of royals, and it highlighted the shortage of members in the current royal family.

Though the dungeon they were set to conquer was located within the Duchy of Hoodale, home of Lady Patricia, she had declined to participate. This decision had reflected poorly on her skill and disposition, and between that and the fact her mother was only the duke's second wife, the Hoodale family had essentially withdrawn from vying for the position of first queen. As a result, Patricia had been preliminarily appointed as the third queen.

Now the contest for the position of first queen was between Clara, from the Margravate of Dandorl, and Karla, from the Countdom of Leicester.

"My brother Elvan and I, as the crown prince and first princess, will be giving this dungeon venture our all," Elena said. "But for you and the other royal fiancée, the objective isn't to obtain the dungeon spirit's gift—it's to ensure the crown prince's safe return. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes..."

With each new generation, it was customary for the younger members of the Claydale royal family to be sent into dungeons and secure gifts, thereby ensuring the nation's peace and granting protection against external threats. But these gifts were not guaranteed.

Dungeon spirits, commonly referred to simply as spirits, were not the usual spirits that governed the elements of light, shadow, earth, water, fire, and wind. They were closer to "holy spirits"—higher-ranked entities akin to kings of the spirits or fae—but their true nature remained unknown. They behaved in unpredictable ways and didn't necessarily bestow their gifts on people simply for braving dungeons.

In fact, neither the current nor the previous king had received these gifts. Over the past several decades, only the current king's younger brother, the second prince, had received a gift. But, frail from birth, he'd passed at a young age.

Possessing a gift did not alter one's position within the royal hierarchy. Royals were educated with the understanding that special abilities did not equate to being capable of governing a nation. This was yet another reason for the nobility faction to resent the current king for his choice to take as his first queen a viscountess with no education in matters of queendom. Clara's generation, too, felt the repercussions of this decision.

Under the current circumstances, if the crown prince were to perish, the nation would be plunged into chaos. Although Elena could rule as queen for a short term to stabilize the situation, the nobility faction would nevertheless gain significant influence, weakening the royal family's authority.

Although Clara was slated to be one of the nation's three queens, at the moment, she was still only engaged to the current crown prince, Elvan. If the first prince were rendered unable to ascend to the throne, different ladies, closer to the young second prince in age, would be selected as fiancées, and Clara would no longer be considered for the position of queen.

Regardless of her personal feelings on the matter, Clara's desire was the same as Elena's—to restore the royal family's authority for the sake of national peace. She also bore on her shoulders House Dandorl's hopes that she would become the first queen.

Despite Elena and Clara's private conversation, however, a deep rift remained between them. Clara herself had caused it by growing wary of Elena upon regaining her memories of a past life and realizing she was a reincarnator. Clara knew Elena would go on to become a villainess in the otome game that took place in this world. The rift had only widened when Elena had grown close to a pink-haired maid whom Clara had instinctively rejected due to the girl's resemblance to the heroine of the game. Not only that, but after the maid vanished, Clara had reacted by offering her condolences to Elena. The princess believed the girl to be still alive, and thus the rift between them had become definitive.

They'd only even met in private like this today because Clara's father, the grand general, had been concerned for her safety within the dungeon. He'd sought assistance from his sister, the second queen, to aid in the two girls' reconciliation.

"Other noble houses are not aware of the royal family's dungeon expedition, so the number of guards will be kept at a minimum," Elena began. "The width of the dungeon's passageways and the pace of our progress were taken into consideration, and it was decided the group will consist of approximately thirty people total. My brother and I, you and Karla, each of us with two attendants; ten senior royal guards; three court sorcerers; and five porters. Moreover, five Rank 5 adventurers handpicked by the prime minister will act as the vanguard."

After her matter-of-fact explanation, Elena gave a small, frosty smile.

"Patricia made a smart choice. She's well aware of her limitations. Our primary objective is the crown prince's safe return, and our secondary objective is for the four of us to obtain gifts. Our own safe return is only the third priority. Clara...are you prepared to sacrifice your life protecting the crown prince for the sake of the nation?"

"Y-Yes," Clara replied hoarsely, her face pale as a sheet.

Elena quietly stood from her seat, gazing at Clara coldly. "You need to decide. Do you want to be a queen or be made into one?" She raised her voice, calling out to the attendant waiting in the adjacent room. "Excuse me! We're done talking!"

The princess then left the royal parlor without so much as glancing at Clara, who remained motionless with her head bowed.

What should I do...?

Although Clara had knowledge from her previous life, she'd still only been an ordinary high school girl who'd enjoyed playing otome games. At first, though she felt threatened by the heroine and the endings in which she herself ended up convicted of crimes, she had still been fascinated by the glamorous world of the dating sim; the reality of her own mortality hadn't fully set in yet.

In her past life, the world had been peaceful, and she'd never once had to think about death. But now, forced into this dungeon expedition—which took place before the game's main story even began and thus had never been mentioned in the plot—Clara finally understood she was staring death in the face.

She bit her pale lip nervously. Clara knew that the game version of her didn't possess a gift. The heroine received one during an event in the demon war, but that was set to happen over the course of the game.

Do I...need to get a gift? Is that how I can survive among all these terrifying people?

While Clara quietly steeled herself, Elena returned to her chambers accompanied by her attendant. There she was greeted by a handmaiden of Krus descent—an unusual sight within the palace.

"Sera, is something the matter?"

The senior handmaiden, Sera, was a knight of the Order of Shadows and the chief of security for the queen's palace. Although the crown prince disliked the Order, Elena trusted them; her own personal handmaiden and attendant was a member. It was this trust that had led her to request that a member of the Order accompany her on the dungeon expedition.

A serene smile graced Sera's beautifully tanned features. She bowed and handed a letter to Elena's guard handmaiden. "There is a matter I wish to inform you of, and so I have put it in writing. It would be best to dispose of it once you've read it."

"I understand," Elena replied. The matter must've been of great importance

for Sera to take such measures.

As Sera stepped back, Elena's handmaiden opened the letter as a precaution. Once she'd confirmed the letter was safe, the princess instructed the handmaidens to wait outside the room and unfolded the letter to read.

The contents—mentioning a certain girl—startled her.

Elena had only spent a short few weeks with this girl—a maid. Still, Elena had spent her life fending for herself, unable to count on even her own parents. To her, the maid's presence had been a comfort, even if the two had come from different backgrounds entirely. For the first time, the princess had known she wasn't alone.

All of Elena's attempts to convey her genuine concern about the current state of affairs to her father—the man who had caused the situation in the first place—had been dismissed on the grounds that it wasn't something a child should be concerned with. Her father had kept her away from politics entirely. Even her brother, who acted supportive toward her, seemed to live in a fantasy land where there was no impending crisis, despite being in the most vulnerable position himself.

Only the girl had understood Elena's fight against her circumstances. The young maid had even risked life and limb to save Elena when she'd been attacked during her lonely struggle. This girl was Elena's kindred spirit. The only one who could understand how she felt.

The maid had made a vow to her that fateful night. Elena had sensed it was an acknowledgment of her resolve; thus, she had sworn a vow of her own in turn, to repay the kindness. It was why, even when told the maid had gone missing, Elena had clung to the belief that she had to still be alive.

All alone in her room, Elena clutched the letter tightly to her chest.

"Oh, Alia... You're alive... What a relief..."



Crying to the Moon

On a certain day, at a certain time, in a certain place, a beast was suddenly born into this world. It had neither a father nor a mother, and it didn't even know whether it had a gender. Nevertheless, it knew that it existed without needing to be taught as much.

The young beast had a body capable of overwhelming other creatures and high intelligence that allowed it to understand things at a glance. Despite being a newborn, it exuded such a powerful presence that lower-ranked monsters in the woods wouldn't even approach it—let alone attack it.

The beast had innate knowledge of its status as a powerful being. With its natural power, it felt no need for offspring, nor did it need much food. It could sustain itself merely by absorbing certain substances found in food, which didn't even need to be meat.

But what, then, were its fangs meant to tear apart? What were its claws meant to fight against? Its instinct was to seek conflict. Had it been born solely to fight? Was harming others the only meaning in its existence? Was it alone in pondering such things, or did all individuals question their purpose and wrestle with their existence in this way?

Why had it been born? Seeking an answer, the beast surrendered to the only thing it found within itself—its fighting instinct—and threw itself into battle after battle.

Soon after it began fighting, its body developed into that of an adult, growing larger as though adapting to combat. Its fur could now deflect enemy attacks, and its claws and fangs could easily tear through shells tougher than iron.

It was then that the beast encountered another powerful being. Standing two meters tall and overall larger than the beast, this creature had the upper body of a giant bird of prey and the lower body of a lion. It was beautiful, an organism with an impossible form.

The beast sensed this creature was similar to itself. But despite possessing high intelligence, the creature lacked the sophistication of a higher being. The

creature saw the beast as a threat and attacked without hesitation.

For the first time, the beast faced another as powerful as itself.

If the creature took to the skies, the beast had no means to counter it, which put it at a disadvantage. But during their fight, the beast discovered that the whisker-like antennae extending from its ears could emit something akin to lightning that flickered in the overcast sky. Using this power to disrupt the creature's sense of balance, the beast brought its foe crashing to the ground. After a full day and night of battle, the beast finally defeated the creature.

Superior beasts protected themselves from attacks using their fur. The eagle-lion creature had likely had a similar ability. Still, the beast's fur could withstand the eagle-lion's claws, and its own claws could tear through the eagle-lion's hide. That had been the deciding factor in its victory.

It was then that the beast realized its abilities could be honed. Through training, it could establish its superiority, even among any equals it should find. Thus, the beast repeatedly sought out peers to engage in battle and gradually surpassed them in power.

Still the beast never found the answers it sought, and time passed idly by.

After countless turns of the stars and multiple seasons, a creature appeared before the beast. It knew of beings like this—a species that proliferated widely in this world. They were incapable of harming it and offered little value as meat. Theirs was a dull existence; their numbers were their only strong suit and the sole reason for their prosperity. Typically, upon encountering the beast, those creatures would've fled or made ready to attack, despite the beast not being hostile.

This particular one, however, introduced himself as a "human"—a word the beast learned only then. Unlike others of his kind, this one sought meaningful communication with the beast. During its interactions with the human, the beast learned it could use its lightning to disrupt others' senses and enable communication.

The human, who called himself a "scholar," had knowledge that belied his

appearance. For the first time, the beast became interested in humans. Through its conversations with the human scholar, the beast expanded its knowledge and sharpened its intellect. It learned that it was a mythical creature known as a "coeurl" and that it had emerged from another world.

As a fragile creature, the human occasionally displayed unnatural fear and other emotions, but the beast didn't look down on him. It understood that this was simply due to an inherent weakness of the human's species. In fact, the beast even came to hold a certain level of respect for the species and the knowledge they possessed that the beast did not.

But that was only one side of the human species.

After thoroughly studying the beast, the human suddenly poisoned it, summoned unfamiliar humans clad in iron shells to the beast's dwelling, and, worse, tried to capture it. It seemed that, from the very start, the human's objective had been to sell the beast to others.

The beast grew furious. It resented the fact that the first being it had thought could be a kindred spirit intellectually—even if they still were not equals—had turned out to be so contemptible, and to have such foolish intentions. The human had only studied the beast in preparation to capture it. While the human's plan had indeed been clever, his short lifespan was nowhere near sufficient to understand all there was to know about the beast.

If only the human had spent five more years on his plan, perhaps he could've succeeded in capturing the beast. Or perhaps he would've come to understand that capturing it was impossible. But the human had only spent a year on it and, unable to uncover everything, administered a common poison to the beast. And the beast overcame the poison and killed the human.

Disillusioned with the contemptible, cunning weaklings known as humans, the beast went back to being uninterested in them. The creatures did not need to be understood. As the beast saw it, they had enhanced their intelligence not for the sake of survival but out of mere greed. Their "intellect" was fake—they were skilled in crafty schemes but little else.

If the weaklings paid for their transgressions with their lives, the beast would let matters go. Those who didn't bother the beast would be allowed to survive

as well. But the beast, disappointed, would expect nothing more from them.

Once more, the beast was alone.

There were no others of its kind. All its equals were enemies. Those who thought themselves intelligent were invariably foolish.

Once more, the beast began to wonder.

What even was it? What meaning did its existence have? Was there a creature anywhere in this world that was truly a kindred spirit to the beast?

The beast was lonely, with only the moon watching over it from high up in the night sky. The moon, an ever-present companion to this world. Would there ever be another creature that would stay by the beast's side as the moon stayed by the earth's?

As if in longing, the beast howled at the moon. As if in lament, the beast cried to the moon.

Eventually, another cunning human appeared before the beast.

This one did not fear the beast, nor did he attempt to communicate or fight. Instead, he began to sporadically provoke the beast. To the beast, this man appeared to be strong. Not because the beast would lose to the man in direct combat—the differences between their species guaranteed that it wouldn't. Rather, because this man was more cunning than any others the beast had ever encountered.

The beast was not contemptuous toward humans, nor did it underestimate their wisdom. It had simply grown disinterested and disillusioned over unmet expectations.

How much blood and sweat had this man shed to acquire so much power with his fragile human body? Why did this man, with all his strength, act in such a manner? The beast found itself intrigued, and not in a good way. It couldn't comprehend why such a powerful man would act in such a disgraceful manner, harming not only others but his own dignity as well.

The beast found that such a man, who had discarded dignity in favor of mere

results, was even more repulsive than the foolish scholar who had tried to deceive it. It was the beast's disappointment in human foolishness that had made it lose interest in the feeble creatures—and this disappointment was the flip side of the hopes it had once held. But despite having lost interest in them, somewhere in its heart, the beast believed that humans, too, had pride as living beings. That was why it had never been contemptuous, despite its disappointment.

And for that reason, it could never forgive such a man. His repulsiveness. His foolishness. Once more, the beast was enraged. Faced with even greater ugliness from the beings it had once been hopeful about, the man's very existence was an affront to the beast.

The beast pursued the man, lost in its rage, intent on erasing that ugly being entirely. But the man, being powerful himself, was not easily caught and skillfully evaded the beast's pursuit. As the chase continued, the beast encountered a group of humans on a path laid with wooden planks.

Telling humans apart was difficult for the beast. Beyond slight differences in scent, it could only distinguish between males and females, adults and children. But the beast sensed that these humans were weak, so even it knew that they were different from the man.

Nevertheless, the foolish humans attacked the beast.

Perhaps they had done so out of fear. Even small creatures would bare their fangs at a powerful being to protect their young. But what were these humans protecting? It wasn't beloved offspring or fellow humans. It was stones and metal. And while the beast knew that humans desired shiny stones and metal—a trait shared by crows and dragons, so not unusual—could such things be as valuable as life? The sight of these humans risking their lives out of greed, like that scholar had, struck the beast as utterly foolish.

Finally snapping at the human species as a whole, the beast tore apart all of its attackers, leaving no survivors. Perhaps in hindsight, the beast would come to understand that this, too, had likely been part of the man's scheme. But at that moment, consumed by disappointment, the beast had completely lost its cool, swept up in a maelstrom of fury.

Driven by intense emotions, the beast continued to chase the man. Every time the beast regained its calm, the man would reappear and provoke it, starting the cycle anew.

One day, in the midst of its pursuit, the beast encountered a human girl. She bravely confronted the beast all on her own.

Based on her size, the beast guessed she was still a youngling, and her combat power was less than half of its own. So why had she challenged the beast alone? An effort to protect her comrades, perhaps? No, that was far too shallow an answer. The girl believed in her comrades and in her own strength. Even with the vast difference in power, even knowing a moment's hesitation could cost her life, she still took the risk for the sliver of hope that she and her comrades would survive. Her strong spirit drove her to face the powerful beast without any fear.

The girl was physically weak but undoubtedly powerful. She was different from beings like the beast or the eagle-lion, which, despite their strength and beautiful fur, boasted only the power they had been born with. Though frail, she gracefully danced through the dried forest, which would've crumbled from a single touch of the beast's. She embodied the beauty of existence dancing on the edge between life and death. Using wisdom and all her courage to survive, the girl finally sank her "fangs" into the beast, dragging them both into the depths of the earth.

Impaled by a fossilized tree after falling to the ground, the beast could no longer escape on its own. Perhaps given time it could have, but the girl didn't look like she would allow that. For the first time, the beast felt death close at hand. Power hierarchies meant nothing. Differences in species were irrelevant. The beast was certain that if this girl wanted to kill it, she would.

Yet she didn't try to, despite the beast being immobile.

If the beast had shown even the slightest sign of hostility, she would have taken it down immediately. But she had no reason to otherwise—and that was why she hadn't killed the beast right away. To this girl, there was something more important than killing.

Resting like a wounded animal, the beast watched as the girl stared intently at

it with cold eyes. The eyes of someone who could kill it, were she so inclined. This girl was the only true equal the beast had encountered in this world. Her relentless pursuit of something, paying no regard to the means, might have sounded similar to that man's behavior—but this woman had pride. In herself, and in others.

The beast found itself wanting to know more about this girl. This feeling was entirely new. Because they were equals, the beast did not hesitate to ask the girl for help. It even allowed her to ride on its back, which it had never allowed anyone to do before.

Humans, the beast knew, had names. Until now, it had had no interest in using codes to distinguish others, thinking such things pointless. But it wanted to know the girl's name. And for the first time, it sought a name for itself—to be distinguished by the equal it had acknowledged.

She was Alia. The only one in this world that the beast—Nero—acknowledged as worthy. No longer did Nero need to cry to the moon. The moon had finally appeared at its side.

"Grr..."

Alia seemed to be a human rushing headlong through her life. She was powerful but, even worthy as she was, still weak. Nero knew one day she would grow to become as strong, or perhaps even stronger, than it was. But today was not that day. Until then, it would watch over Alia.

Still, Nero believed that standing at her side like a guardian would tarnish her pride as a future powerful being. She seemed to have a goal, so Nero sneakily followed her as she moved through the forest. When an ogre—a fairly strong monster—passed nearby and seemed likely to cause her trouble, Nero discreetly crushed it.

Where was Alia going, Nero wondered? It didn't know. Nero kept following until Alia approached a place where many other humans dwelled. It didn't care about humans other than her, but it didn't want to be discovered by weaklings either. Alia was still human, after all, and so Nero wished to avoid all unnecessary contact or hostility with her kind.

It needed to wait for her somewhere, but where?

The fragile, cunning humans had a habit of forming herds to protect themselves from other threats. Nero understood that human wisdom was a weapon of sorts, but their greatest power lay in numbers. The largest human nest in this area was surrounded by walls so high that even Nero had to crane its neck to see the tops of them. Outside those walls were woods, grasslands, and rocky mountains—all places where humans could be found, leaving nowhere for Nero to hide.

While exploring in search of a good spot, Nero discovered an uneven area on the southern side of the woods. This place had been touched by human hands, but it was inhabited only by human younglings. Despite the vast grounds, the number of humans there was surprisingly small.

Nero recalled the cunning scholar once mentioning something called a "school"—could this be one?

Although some humans were milling about the grounds, the surrounding forest acted as a barrier, turning the place into a sort of natural fortress that deterred monsters and even other humans from entering. The woods seemed like a good hiding place, protected from external threats.

However, Nero discovered that they were already inhabited.

Though there weren't any humans in the woods now, some had to have come here at some point and begun to clear the trees. There were half-decayed supplies scattered about, likely abandoned by the humans, who'd brought them but couldn't carry them away. And some of those humans would no doubt have brought their families and animals—Nero knew that the feeble humans sometimes kept other species to do their work for them.

Nero found no human corpses anywhere, so it was unclear whether these people had been attacked by monsters or met with some accident. What Nero did find were animals the humans had left behind, making their home among the abandoned supplies.

"Meow."

These animals were called cats. There were several of them, grown and

young, which suggested they'd been breeding. According to the information Nero had gleaned so far, his kind—coeurls—were similar in appearance to "panthers," which were carnivorous felines. Cats were also felines but much smaller. And although coeurls closely resembled large felines, they were not felines at all. In fact, they weren't even animals, nor were they native to this world.

Although Nero looked similar to the cats, it did not consider them to be related to itself. The cats, however, seemed to think differently. Despite Nero's sudden appearance, the kittens rubbed up against its legs, and the adults, instead of protecting their young, showed no fear or caution toward Nero. They looked at it like they were acknowledging a newcomer to their colony, meowed at him once, and walked off somewhere.

"Meow," cried one cat as it stopped and turned back to look at Nero. It was as though the cat was questioning what Nero was doing.

Did the creature want Nero to follow? It found itself bewildered by this unprecedented situation. But it was indeed the newcomer here, and asserting its authority over these small, nonhostile beings felt both right and wrong in a way. In short, Nero was confused but still intrigued by the cats' behavior. It decided to go ahead and follow the inhabitants of the place.

Nero followed the cats to what appeared to be their dwelling, where they seemingly used the containers—"boxes"—left behind by humans as their beds. The cats then entered their respective boxes and began to relax. To Nero, these boxes seemed small, but cats must have had a preference for tight spaces, choosing the cramped boxes deliberately as though they found comfort in them.

"Meow." The cat that had guided Nero here nudged its forepaw and led it to one of the boxes.

Curious, Nero peered inside. Most of the contents had either rotted from exposure to the elements or been ravaged by wild animals, leaving hardly any trace of their original form. One wooden "crate," however, remained intact, possibly due to some form of sorcerous protection.

The box was about two meters long on each side. Captivated by it, Nero

pawed at the leaves piled inside, scattering them around. Then, driven by a newfound instinct, Nero squeezed itself into the narrow box. It was so tight Nero just barely fit. It was perfect, somehow.

Nero had no reason to stay here but no reason not to. Respecting the wishes of the great inhabitants of this place seemed fitting. Plus, Alia was a human youngling. Surely someday she would come to this place called a school. With this in mind, Nero decided to wait here for Alia to arrive.

Not because it was yielding to instinct or anything.

"Grr."

"Meow!"

Viro's Bellyache Diaries

Month XX, Week XX

One day, out of absolutely nowhere, I got a letter from Castro of the Order of Shadows through the Adventurers' Guild. Haven't seen the guy since the incident with Alia, but I did hear he's had a complete change of heart and mellowed out a lot. Still, I was like, "What does the Order want with me?"

I mean, me and my party have taken a number of requests from the Order before. This is classified info, but I was directly contacted by His Excellency the Prime Minister (who's also the head of the Order) about a job for our party, the Rainbow Blade. Apparently, he wants us to prep for an expedition of some sort that's happening soon.

Which...sure, I guess. But we still don't have a replacement for our sorceress.

When Castro's letter came in, I was getting ready for a different job from the Order, the hit on Graves. Maybe Castro's letter had new intel, I thought. And then I read it. And grunted a very undignified grunt.

See, at some point I started hearing these rumors about some crazy person who wiped out an entire branch of the Assassins' and the Thieves' Guilds. And that this person was still a kid. Which, come on, right? What kid could've pulled off something like that, except maybe Alia?

Well, turns out they actually think "Lady Cinders" is Alia. What the hell?

Month XX, Week XX

You know, I always knew *my* apprentice wouldn't have just gone and gotten herself killed. And I was right. She's alive. Okay, maybe I was sweating bullets when I heard from the Order that Graves had been the one to attack her. But if she's actually this Lady Cinders character, then yeah, obviously she survived and I can totally see her antagonizing the Assassins' Guild.

Which is all fine and good, but now I have Sera asking me to contact Lady Cinders too. What if she turns out to not be Alia? What if she's some deranged lunatic instead? Oh well. I managed to get in touch with granny Samantha and I've gotta go get the old bat anyway, so I may as well keep an eye out and do some light digging.

If Alia's gotten *that* strong, maybe I could get her to help with taking down Graves. My plan is to keep Graves at bay while granny uses spells to take him down, but hey, getting a competent escort for Samantha will only make the mission more likely to succeed, right?

Normally, you have to be cautious when using someone that young since they'll freeze up during real combat, but, uh, that won't be a problem with Alia. I mean, she took down a Rank 3 thief all by herself at age *seven*. And even if it turns out Lady Cinders is someone else, maybe Alia is Rank 3 herself by now.

But here's the thing. Say I find her. The girl's slippery, like a damn feral cat. How the hell do I convince her to work with me?

Month XX, Week XX

Have I always been this unlucky...?

I figured while I was up north I'd go see Galvus for some equipment for my party's upcoming expedition, since it's our first in a while. And lo and behold, I got a summons because they needed a Rank 4 to put together a group to deal with some orcs.

Some orcs led by a general!

Sure, I can put together a group with a bunch of Rank 3s and under, but will that even do anything? Against an army of orcs like that, I'd need the full force of the Rainbow Blade.

Speaking of, we're looking for a new sorcery user because granny Samantha's been having random bouts of dementia and retired from adventuring. I mean, she's always been missing a few screws, so it's hard to tell whether she's actually going senile or this is just her being herself, but you know.

I could manage to keep a constant eye on her for a short time—which is the plan when we go after Graves—but now with the orcs and all the scouting I'm having to do, I can't really afford to be her caretaker 'round the clock. And I can't really count on anyone else. The Rainbow Blade's full of people who only look out for themselves. I'm basically the only sensible one. Without me, granny would just wander off somewhere, guaranteed.

Finding a new sorcerer would solve the problem, but it's not like there are a whole bunch of party-less Rank 4 sorcerers just hanging around waiting to be picked up, dammit. The others said we just needed to find someone with Level 3 in Light Mastery, but a Rank 3 isn't gonna be able to keep up with us in combat.

Wait. Didn't Alia know light sorcery?

Month XX, Week XX

Finally some good effing luck.

Well, things are still pretty bad, and I have no clue when the count who oversees this land will be able to send an army, so the orc situation is still up in the air.

But hey, at least Mary, that pretty receptionist from the Adventurer's Guild, threw me a bone at long last. A very tough bone, though. We got some dinner, just the two of us, and of course she picked *the* most expensive restaurant around, because why wouldn't she. And we didn't do anything else. Still, compared to before, that was a big improvement! Swinging by to see Galvus

every six months paid off.

Why do I have a weakness for strong-willed women? Damn me.

Anyway, I can go see Galvus tomorrow. It's gonna be rough holding back the orcs with just a bunch of Rank 3 adventurers while waiting for the army, but hey, something good happened. I'm fired up. I'm feeling this.

See, my previous attempts at romance consisted of, like...a gold digger who blew all my coin, a girl who seemed really into me but was actually just a recruiter for some weird cult, this lady I made a move on who turned out to be some mafioso's woman, and all sorts of other really awful nightmares. Mary's nothing like them, though!

She's got a sharp tongue and treats me like garbage, sure. But she's a proper, decent lady with morals!

Ha ha! Jackpot for me! Now to treat myself to a bath!

Month XX, Week XX

You have got to be kidding me.

Alia just wiped out over fifty orcs. Including some higher-ranked variants. *And the general.*

What the hell is happening?! She looks like a teen and her combat power's shot up like a weed, but isn't she, like, ten years old?! And then she goes on to tell me she poisoned the orcs. She infiltrated their stronghold and stayed there for a *month*. Does this girl have nerves of steel or what?! A normal person would've been dead in three days!

But you know...that explains why she's totally fine with making enemies out of both the Assassins' and Thieves' Guilds. Sucks to be them, really. The scariest person in a real fight isn't the most competent or most experienced one. It's the one who's not afraid to kill.

The Thieves' Guild is pretty screwed. If they try to make a move, she'll just wipe them out, no questions asked. She's just a kid, but they can't take her out; instead of having weaknesses they can exploit, she's the one exploiting theirs.

The situation's such a mess that they've basically ordered their people to not get involved with her. What she's doing is completely outrageous, but in the end, they're so scared of what she'll do to them that they can't even retaliate.

But some of the more prideful members are still trying to get back at her, so Alia's back to being wary as a stray cat, just like she was before I met her. I can only interact with her normally because I'm a pretty self-sufficient dude myself. My party or Sera's group might end up being deterrents, though...

Still, I think that's a stroke of luck for me? I mean, I don't have orcs to deal with anymore. For now, I'll just keep the other stuff to myself and try to get her to come help me take down Graves.

Month XX, Week XX

I went to grab Samantha. And she suddenly blurted out that she couldn't come because she needed to play with her great-grandchildren. Cool! So I begged her grandson (older than me, by the way) to talk her into coming. Like, seriously. Samantha's insanely strong. Without her, I don't stand a chance against Graves!

And then she asked if dinner was ready. She'd literally just eaten lunch with her great-grandchildren! I'm at my limit here. I've gotta go and meet up with Alia, stat. She may look cold, but she's surprisingly caring and doesn't mind handling rougher jobs. Times like this, I really need her help.

Just her help, though. I'll pass on her weird cooking.

Alia said she was going to see her "mentor" and heal her wounds, so I figure I'll contact Sera in the meanti— Wait. Mentor? I'm her mentor! Right? Well, whatever. I'm sure she knows I'm the one who taught her everything. Yeah. She knows. Doesn't she?

Anyway, I'll stop by the next town to send a report to Sera about Alia and... Actually, no. That feels like a waste of her combat power. She looks like she's still getting stronger, so maybe I'll just wait and see for a bit.

See, granny? My apprentice is promising as hell! Which...wait. Huh? Where'd Samantha go?!

Month XX, Week XX

Samantha disappeared from the inn again. I asked the innkeeper and he handed me a bill for all the stuff she ate and drank.

For crying out loud! How does one old lady consume this much?! I checked what she ate, and it was seafood. Seafood! In the middle of the mountains! How?! Do they use sorcery to freeze the stuff? Is this place that posh? Oh, whatever. I'll just forward the bill to the Order of Shadows.

Anyway, there I was, going, "Where is she?!" I asked some merchant-looking people if they'd seen anything, and they told me that for the past few nights there'd been sightings of a "monster speeding down the road kicking up dust." They told me to be mindful and take care of my own charge.

And I was like, "Huh. Oh. Wow. A monster. Kicking up dust."

Samantha! Seriously! This whole senility thing is going way overboard! Is she *really* senile or is she doing this on purpose?!

I was fuming to myself when she suddenly came back. I demanded to know where she'd gone, and she was like, "Oh, I sensed something suspicious." Like she isn't the most suspicious thing around here!

And then she was hungry! Again! Fuck me!

I flagged down the waitress for a sausage platter (and some hard booze).

Month XX, Week XX

And next thing I knew, Samantha was gone again. She wasn't around the inn, so I figured I'd look outside town, and what do I see? Samantha and Alia, fighting!

They were both going all out, actually aiming for each other's vital spots, trying for a one-hit kill. And they were dragging innocent bystanders into it! Or so I thought, but actually, they were people from the Assassins' Guild chasing after Alia. Poor bastards. Of all the people to mess with, they just had to pick these two. I swear, the Assassins' Guild needs an exorcism to get rid of all that

bad luck.

Anyway, at least now we have everybody and I can leave Samantha's care to Alia. Thank effing goodness. This has been the longest couple weeks of my entire life. I really don't wanna do any more work... Also, I told Alia that granny isn't a monster but a human. Well, mostly.

But you know, those two actually get along really well. Alia's better at dealing with Samantha than the old bat's own grandkids! She's so good at this. Which, I mean, she *is* my apprentice, so obviously she's good at this.

Oh, yeah. I checked with the Adventurers' Guild earlier and there was a message from the Order of Shadows. Our mission's been confirmed. The message was coded, so I didn't understand all the details, but apparently some royals are going into a dungeon. Our job is to clear a path for them, but Sera also sent me an urgent request to find Alia ASAP.

Wonder what she's planning. Does she just want Alia to guard the princess? No, that can't be all. Man, I really need to start figuring out a way to get Alia to agree to this.

Either way, it's time for us to move out. With this group, we'll be fine traveling all night.

And of course, the second I thought that, Samantha said she was hungry. She just ate at the inn! And then Alia pulled a whole bunch of meat out of...where, exactly?!

Month XX, Week XX

How the hell did Alia tame a coeurl? I mean, yeah, there are people whose job is to tame animals, but they do that when the animals are still young! They don't go from literal mortal combat against the beastie to being friends with it just like that.

Which, of course, Alia explained away as "coming to a mutual understanding through the exchange of blows." Once again she settles things like a man. Tenyear-old girl, mind you.

And she's Rank 4 all of a sudden! Does she even know how long it took me to get there?! There are barely any Rank 4s around! She's not about to beat me in melee combat anytime soon, but with her magic, she could probably hold her own against someone like Sera.

At first, my plan was to chaperone Alia as an apprentice scout and light magic user for the Rainbow Blade. But if she's a Rank 4 sorceress who can use both light and shadow spells and can fight a guy like Graves, well, she's no apprentice, is she? She should just be a full-fledged member at this point.

Sera's looking for Alia, probably not just out of concern but because she wants a successor of her own. Someone close to the princess who could be trusted to guard Her Highness. And honestly, if Alia spent, what, five years in the Order of Shadows, she could actually replace Sera.

Tough luck, Sera! Alia's not your apprentice! She's mine!

I'm no middling adventurer. I've got loads of experience at this point. Unlike the long-lived demi-humans, humans can't generally keep adventuring into their fifties. I look young thanks to my aether, and I'm pretty confident that I can keep going for another ten solid years if I push myself, but still! I also wanna get married soon, you know!

So sorry, Sera, but Alia's gonna be my successor!

Which means I'm going all-in on courting Mary! Once this job's done, I am so getting hitched.

And before anyone makes any snarky quips: I'm not gonna die, all right?!

Afterword

And that's Volume 3! Thank you so much for picking it up!

Hello if we've never met! And if we have, welcome back! I'm Harunohi Biyori. Once again, I'm truly grateful for the support of all readers, bookstores, TO Books, and everyone involved in the publication of this book. It wouldn't have been released without you!

In this volume, the story is split between two parts: the orc extermination and the revenge against Graves. The consequences of these events will ripple into the next volume.

Also, this volume's main themes are "strength" and "why people and monsters fight." In most stories, monsters are depicted as enemies, and the moment they encounter people, it becomes a fight to the death. Monsters are portrayed as foes from the start, and the reasons that they're hostile and must be defeated are vague at best. Of course, there are many books that delve deeply into those themes! Personally, I got curious as to why monsters fight and how people managed to survive despite the existence of such powerful creatures.

Monsters have intelligence, and people survive because monsters are wary of them when they live in groups. People, meanwhile, fight monsters for a biologically simple reason—to protect their nests so that they may raise their young.

In their instinctual drive to grow stronger, monsters attack people with aether high enough to have formed aethercrystals. You might think that since both sides are intelligent, perhaps they could reconcile, but I came to the conclusion that it's impossible for predators and prey to truly understand each other.

I often get asked why I chose an otome game as a theme. Well, part of it is of course because I love stories involving otome games. But I also wanted to depict the dark, gritty underbelly—simmering with love and hate and oozing with political intrigue—hidden beneath these games' dazzling surfaces.

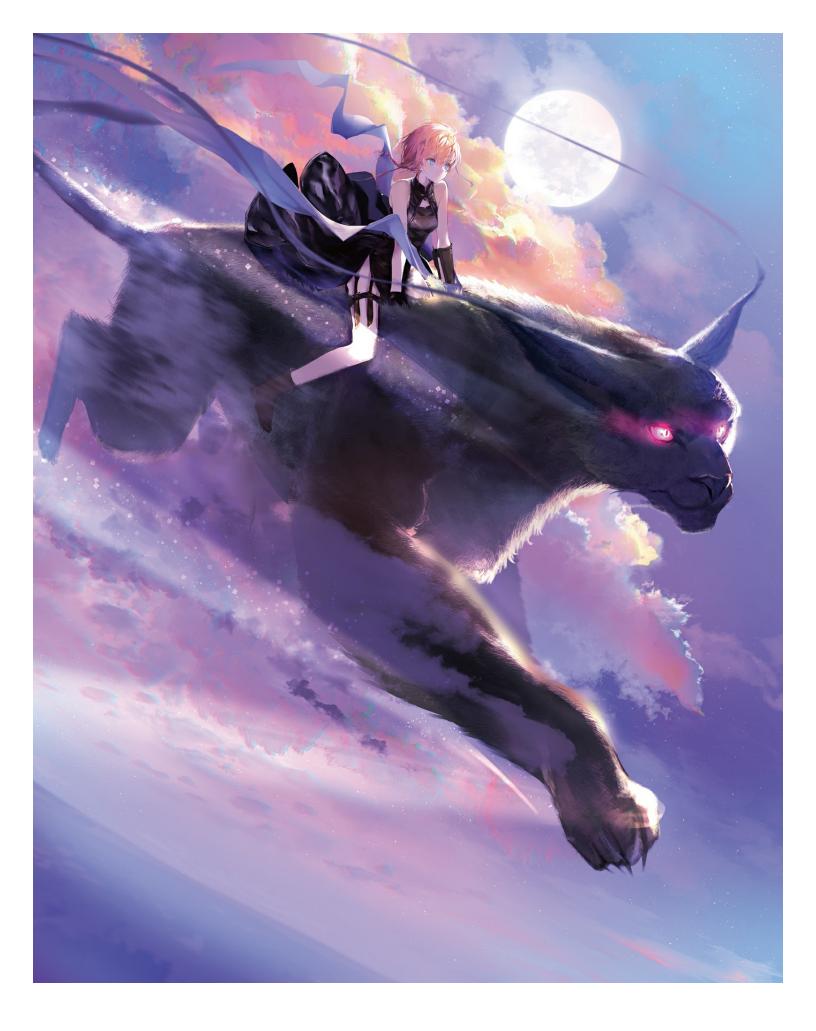
This volume also sees the debut of Nero, the mythical coeurl and Alia's partner. Coeurls first appeared in a certain novel, and from there spread to various stories and games. I decided to introduce Nero simply because I wanted a way for Alia to move around more efficiently. When I first made the map for this setting, I ended up making it way too big... With Nero's introduction, the world expands and the story becomes easier to move forward. Still, I didn't want to write Nero as being tamed or controlled like what you'd typically see in stories with monster companions, so I paid special attention to that.

My requests to the illustrator, Hitaki Yuu-sensei, were pretty difficult! But the result was amazing, and Nero looks really cool. I'm also very fond of Samantha's character design.

Volume 1 of Wakasa Kobato-sensei's manga adaptation of this series is being released alongside Volume 3. If you happen to be reading this afterword at a bookstore, please take a moment to check out the manga section too!

See you next time!





Alia (Real Name: Alicia Melrose)

The story's protagonist and the original heroine of the otome game Silver Wings of Love. After a reincarnator tried to kill her, she gained "knowledge." She won't hesitate to kill to survive.

Elena

First Princess of the Kingdom of Claydale. Although she's a villainess in the otome game, she and Alia are birds of a feather. She's a proud girl who deeply values kinship.

Clara

The princess of the Margravate of Dandorl and a reincarnator. She's one of the villainesses of the otome game and is wary of Alia.

characters.



Feld

A highly skilled, good-natured adventurer. He's the first person to teach young Alia combat skills.

Viro

An adventurer and highly skilled scout. He took a liking to Alia and introduced her to Sera, a knight from the Order of Shadows.



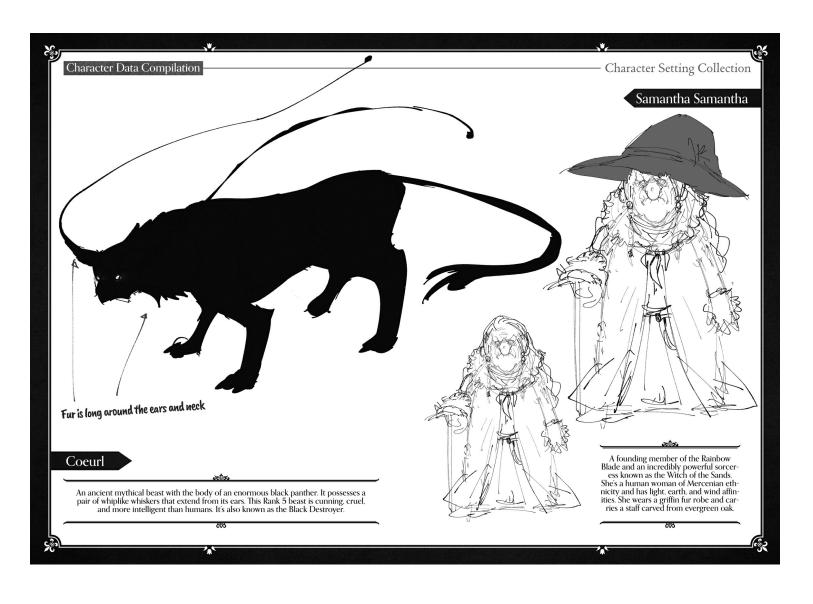
Sera

A battle maiden and high-ranking knight of the Order of Shadows operating directly under the Margravate of Melrose. She trained Alia as a battle maiden.

Graves

A former high-ranking steward with the Order of Shadows whose desire to maintain stability within the royal family borders on fanatical. His whereabouts are currently unknown.





Bonus Short Story

Shuri's Adventure

My name's Shuri. Me and my brother are adventurers! Um, sorry, that's not true. We carry stuff around for some adventurers. That's how we make a living.

We live in a kingdom! In a barony all the way north. I'm only ten, and my brother's thirteen, so it's hard to get by. But we're managing.

This place is close to the border so it's, like, way out in the sticks, but there's lots of monsters, so there's lots of adventurers too. We used to live in a different town in the barony, and a guy we knew from there hired us as porters. Which was lucky, because we could've ended up being worked to the bone by a less nice party!

Honestly, I wanna be a real adventurer. Nowadays there's lots of adventurers who are basically outlaws, just scraping by. But the sorcerer in the party of the guy we know—um, Kevin is the guy we know—told us that long ago, adventurers were mercenaries specializing in exploring unknown places. So even now, nobles will hire high-ranking adventurers and stuff.

Well, we don't know anyone like that. Wait, no, that's not true either. We know one person like that. And me and my brother, we wanna be adventurers because of her. Alia is her name.

I'll never forget the day we met Alia. It was three years ago, not very long after we got abandoned in this town. It was really rough back then. Our dad died, and this woman, she took over his house and his farm. I still wanna punch her in her stupid face. No, I will punch her in her stupid face someday. I can't say that out loud because my brother will worry, but I'm gonna do it!

Alia was so strong! And so cool. I mean, she almost killed my brother at first, but that was his fault for being dumb and starting a fight. If that was all that had happened, I wouldn't have wanted anything to do with her, but then she helped

me and my brother when that drunk old man was picking on us.

I think that's when it all started... When me and my brother decided to become adventurers. Well, no. When we decided to become *strong*.

Honestly, life right now is hard. I'm still little, so I can't carry anything heavy, so even when I go somewhere with Kevin's Rank 2 party, they only pay me one small silver. But still, if we hadn't decided to become adventurers, my brother would probably be a thug by now, or something even worse...

That's how hard it is for urchins in the slums to find work. The ones in orphanages at least have food, but I don't think any orphanages would've taken abandoned kids like us. Back then, there were lots of monster attacks everywhere, so there were lots of orphans too.

Still, we'd been managing to get by, picking up broken blades and discarded scanning crystals while out adventuring. We sold those to Galvus, the blacksmith, or to the old man who runs the general store.

And then we heard that the town where we used to live was being attacked by orcs.

Kevin and my brother wanted to rush there, but the scout in Kevin's party...um, I can't remember his name. Anyway, the scout opposed it, so we couldn't go. He wasn't a very nice guy, but I did agree with him about that. If I went to some place that was full of orcs, I'd just die. We do have a half-brother who still lives in that town, and he was still just a baby when me and my brother got abandoned. I, um... I guess I didn't really want our little brother to die. But I was way more scared of my big brother dying.

But then Alia came back to the barony after three years and solved that problem for us. And...that was when I found out Alia was a girl. I had no idea she was a girl! I already thought she was cool, and now, dressed like a girl, she was pretty too. And my brother suddenly couldn't look her in the eye anymore. What gives?!

And how had she grown so big? Back when we first met, she was my height, wasn't she? I mean, I remember her growing taller in just three weeks, but still...! And not just that, she was super strong all of a sudden too! And got to Rank 3! She looked, um, maybe thirteen? She looked more mature and she was

just so pretty! Everyone could see that!

Ah... Goodbye, my first love.

Wait, wait. Sure, she's a girl, but she's pretty *and* cool, so that's fine, right? Honestly, what boy around here is stronger or cooler than her? She's the most amazing person I know. And she might look cold, but she's actually really nice, honest, and she keeps her promises. She even smells nice. And she wears this pretty, stylish outfit. She's still a kid but she's weirdly, um, alluring I think is the word? I'm over here doing my best, patching up my old clothes trying to be fashionable, and she does it just like that! What does she have that I don't?! And her chest grew too! Why do I still look like a board?! What do I do to look more like her?!

I was getting all worked up about that stuff, but then my brother smacked my head with the side of his palm. Ow.

Anyway, that's how amazing Alia is. And Alia, the girl wonder, took care of all the orcs super easily too!

And that's what made me realize something. Alia's strong, but she has a lot on her plate because of it. A wimp like me can't even be in the same place as her. So I told Alia goodbye and started working on my own goal to become stronger.

So come on, Jil! Hurry up!

"I think you may have an affinity for the water element, Shuri," the relatively sensible sorcerer in Kevin's party told me.

"Really?! Yay!" I exclaimed, throwing my hands in the air excitedly.

We were taking a break on our way to some ruins. The Adventurers' Guild and the lord of the region had both said the orcs had been defeated, so me and my brother could finally start working as porters for Kevin's party again.

Well, people and parties who couldn't fight orcs on their own were still not allowed near the ruins, but since Kevin's group had helped with the orcs (kind of), they got permission. The story went that some adventurer parties had

saved the town from the orc attack and that Kevin's was one of them.

But they'd really been more just tagging along with two Rank 3 parties that had volunteered. And the one who'd actually killed all the orcs was really Alia. But since Alia had dropped off the aethercrystals from over fifty orcs at the guild, then left, the lord had distributed the reward money among Kevin's party, the two Rank 3 parties, and the other volunteers who'd helped out. It wasn't a lot of money, because he'd also had to pay the army that nobles from other territories were sending to help. But even then, it was more money than I'd ever seen!

Most people in the Adventurers' Guild knew Alia was the real hero, though.

Also, I'd started to hear weird stuff about someone named Lady Cinders. Apparently, that was another name people used for Alia. Some rough-looking adventurers at the guild flinched every time they heard the name! The receptionist lady had told me that they were probably connected to the Thieves' Guild and that I should stay away from them.

Did that have anything to do with why Kevin's party didn't have a scout anymore? Wait, that wasn't important.

So, basically, Kevin and his group had gotten a little more money, but like, it'd only take them two months to burn through it if they spent all their time drinking. But instead of wasting it, they'd immediately set out on another adventurer. Kevin said that had been because of "a certain adventurer" they'd met while fighting the orcs.

A certain adventurer... Huh...

I glanced over at Kevin as he rested. He was sitting on a fallen tree, having a passionate conversation with my brother.

"It's not that I'm fixated on this person or anything, you know? It just felt like a wake-up call. As a fellow adventurer and all. I figured maybe that's what a true adventurer is supposed to be like. But I'm not interested or anything! I just figured maybe I should train a bit and aim for Rank 3!"

"You're so cool, Kevin. I know someone too, um, a...a friend? Anyway, someone super strong, and I wanna become strong enough that we can be in a

party together..."

"Yeah? Well, good luck, kiddo. I know you can do it."

"Yeah! And you'll get to Rank 3 soon too!"

I listened in, and I was like... Aren't they both talking about Alia?

No way! Had both Kevin and my brother fallen for Alia too? I mean, it made sense for Jil, but Kevin? No, that was bad! Alia was still only ten!

Anyway, so now Kevin and his group were on an adventure, and me and Jil were back to carrying their stuff. Since that scout who was super bad about wanting to pay us was gone, maybe we could get a little extra this time. Good for us.

Meeting Alia when I was little had left a big impression on me too, so I'd gotten Kevin's sorcerer friend to teach me reading, writing, and simple math. My brother didn't bother with studying, so I had to be the sensible one!

So right now, I was taking lessons from the sorcerer again while the party took a break, and he'd said I might have an affinity for the water element.

He'd taught me a bunch of different life magic spells, but I could only cast Flow. I wondered if the affinity was why. I'd first learned to use it because...of that drunk guy in the slums who would charge people to use the well, probably. Alia had been so intense back then...

Oh, I was getting sidetracked again.

Anyway, the sorcerer was kind of my mentor and was teaching me magic. But recently his attitude had changed, and I thought that was because of Alia too. Before, um, it felt like he was just bored, and that was the only reason he was teaching a kid like me. But now he didn't underestimate me as much anymore.

My brother was in a similar situation too. Before, Kevin and the hunter guy looked like they were only teaching Jil how to use a sword because they wanted to kill time during breaks, but now they were super serious about it.

Although...now they were teaching him stuff like how to use a dagger and how to conceal his presence. Wasn't that kind of stuff for scouts? Were they trying

to replace their missing scout with Jil?

Then again, it was probably okay. My brother knew Alia was a super strong scout, and he seemed like he wanted to become one too. Maybe it was just a phase, but I would've loved it if my brother became a proper adventurer. Kevin's party didn't have any weird people in it anymore either, so I thought that would be okay.

But what about me?

Even if I could learn water spells, I was still a pretty bad sorceress. The sorcerer teaching me was Rank 2, but he said he could use both wind and earth spells. Maybe having two affinities was normal for adventurer sorcerers?

Nobles were different, but commoner mages usually only had one affinity. Being able to use two elements was impressive! So most sorcerers who could only use one element also carried some sort of weapon with them. It didn't have to be a blade or anything, but they needed something they could fight with other than spells.

The sorcerer said he could use swords. I thought that was weird. Like, a mage, fighting at close range? I'd asked him about it, and he'd told me he used to want to be a warrior.

So...what about me, then? I was useless at close range, even more useless than the sorcerer. I probably wouldn't even be able to block someone else's sword! I'd just lose and die. What to do, then?

Well, actually, I had something in mind. I admired Alia a lot, right, so I'd been practicing something repeatedly. It wasn't going to be good enough to be my main weapon, though, so I'd been wondering what else I could do. But, if I could use water magic, maybe I could make it work!

"Stay sharp, people!" Kevin told the group as we got closer to our destination.

Normally, they'd have left me and my brother behind in a safe spot before getting this close, but this time, they'd decided to bring us along.

Kevin's party had taken on a job to hunt down any orcs that might've been

missed and kill them. Even if they couldn't find any orcs, they'd still get paid for killing other monsters around here. And there was the profit from the aethercrystals too. So killing an orc was more a matter of being lucky (unlucky?) enough to find one. But if we managed to take it down, we'd get more rewards, basically.

But, well, the lord had also sent out soldiers to hunt any remaining orcs, so I figured there was no way we'd run into one. That was probably what Kevin and the others thought too, since they'd brought us along.

"Ack!"

"Bwoooooargh!"

Wait, what?! Did something just appear?! Is this one of those "speak of the devil" type things?!

A wild orc appeared. Two, actually!

If it had been just one, Kevin's party could've handled it without any issues. But two? Their plan had been to either ambush the orcs or just run if they found more than one, but for some reason, these two had just appeared out of nowhere! They were standing right in front of us! What?!

"A-Attack!" Kevin shouted.

"Bwoooargh!" the orcs roared at the same time.

Fighting was the only option now. One of the orcs clashed with the party's heavy fighter with a loud *shing*, but everyone in Kevin's party was Rank 2 and the orc was Rank 3. The heavy fighter was getting pushed back.

"You bastard!" Kevin shouted.

He couldn't just watch, so he jumped in to help the heavy fighter, but...what was he going to do?! Kevin had been working hard to grow stronger since the orc attack. That was why the plan had been for Kevin to hold one of the orcs off while the others took down the other!

This was bad! Everything was a mess! There was also a hunter in the party, but like the sorcerer, he wasn't very good at close combat.

"A-Aaaaaaaaah!!!" my brother screamed, leaping forward with his dagger

out like he'd gone crazy.

"J-Jil?!" What was he doing?! He didn't have any combat skills yet!

He had to know he couldn't fight, because he just sprinted past the other orc to distract it.

"Bwoargh!" the orc roared. It seemed confused too and started running after my brother, totally ignoring the sorcerer and hunter.

"Keep running around, Jil!" Kevin shouted.

The sorcerer and hunter looked like they wanted to help, but their spells and arrows could easily hit my brother and kill him.

He could...die.

As soon as that thought crossed my mind, a chill ran down my spine. I let out a sharp sound and, without thinking, grabbed the sling at my waist, just like Alia had that one time.

Crash!

"Grah?!" the orc groaned as the pebble I'd shot hit its head. It hadn't really done any damage. There wasn't any blood or anything. But now the orc was mad at me.

"Shuri, run!" my brother yelled, but my mind had gone blank at the realization of what I'd just done.

To kids like us, orcs were very scary monsters. I'd heard that even a Rank 1 adventurer was no match for an orc and that a lot of people had been killed by them. But at that moment, Alia's face flashed through my mind, and I thought, if this orc was a survivor from the group Alia had killed, then...

It was scary. But not so scary that I couldn't do anything.

"Flow!" I chanted, using the only life magic I knew as I backed off. No one noticed—especially not the angry orc.

Then, I threw another pebble at the orc—without my sling, because there wasn't enough time. The orc didn't really need to dodge the rock but dodged anyway, and then—

"Bwoargh?!" it cried out as it slipped on the puddle I'd created and lost its balance, falling forward.

Here we go!

"Bwoooooargh!" the orc screamed as the skewer I threw pierced its eye.

Three years ago, after Alia left, the old man at the general store had told me that she used iron skewers as weapons. I'd begged him over and over for the same ones, and I'd been secretly practicing throwing them all this time. Not even Jil knew!

"Now!" I shouted.

The hunter shot an arrow into the orc's neck. Right after, my brother, looking pale, rushed in and stabbed the fallen orc's neck with his dagger.

"We did it!"

It was fatally injured now, so the hunter and my brother used daggers to stab it repeatedly and finish it off. With one of the orcs dead, the other wasn't a threat anymore, so we all surrounded and killed it together.

"Shuri, when did you learn to do that? That was stupid!" my brother chided, unlike Kevin and the others, who praised me.

As if Jil hadn't done something stupid himself! Which...was probably why he didn't get *too* mad.

"I'm gonna be an adventurer too, you know!" I told him. "You better watch out or I'll be even stronger than you!"

"N-No way that could happen...! Right?"

Who knew? Alia and I were the same age. It wasn't impossible, right? Yeah! I was gonna get even stronger! I was sad that I couldn't see Alia openly anymore, so...

Wait for me, Alia! Someday I'll get stronger, and then I'll come find you!



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The Otome Heroine's Fight for Survival: Volume 3

by Harunohi Biyori

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