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Act One: Wandering / The Ashen Princess of Slaughter

Chapter 3: The Ashen Assassin

Prologue

I feel so gloomy, she thought, sighing inwardly.

Light poured in through the large windows as a handmaiden guided the girl along a corridor with a high, decorated ceiling. Months had passed since the end of Princess Elena's recuperation period; now it was Lady Clara Dandorl, daughter of Margrave Dandorl, who was visiting the royal capital.

Elena's recuperation hadn't been without incident, and it had nearly caused trouble for House Dandorl. However, not wanting the abduction of an unmarried princess to become public knowledge, and since the kidnapping had been prevented, the royal family had used its political influence to sweep the whole incident under the rug.

Still—though it was unrelated to this issue—an invisible rift had opened between Clara and Elena, who had once been as close as real sisters. Clara had regained her memories of her previous life, and with them came the knowledge that this was the world of an otome game called *Silver Wings of Love*. Clara knew she was a villainess in the game and had grown wary of Elena, whom she knew to be a villainess as well. The astute princess had picked up on something being wrong and begun to distance herself from Clara.

The main cause, however, had likely been the maid with peach-tinted hair—the same color as that of the game's protagonist. While there was no guarantee that this girl was the main character, she nevertheless bore a strong resemblance, and Clara, wanting to avoid the heroine, had a powerful aversion to her. Whether this outcome had been a result of Clara's feelings was unclear, but the girl had been sent from the Margravate of Dandorl to the even more remote Barony of Sayles, where she'd then gone missing after a run-in with the infamous "mysterious figure" that had plagued the area.

While Clara did feel sorry for the maid, inwardly she'd been relieved when the

girl disappeared. Perhaps because of this, the Dandorl princess had let her guard down. At a later occasion, she'd had the opportunity to meet with Elena again and had casually extended her condolences to the royal princess for the death of her favorite maid; Elena, in turn, had suddenly erupted in fury.

"Alia would never break our promise!" she'd exclaimed. Elena had been ignoring Clara since then, and the young margravine, after a harsh scolding by her mother, had been instructed to mend her relationship with the princess.

This wasn't the reason for Clara's visit to the royal palace, however. Out of all the candidates for engagement to the crown prince, three had been officially selected as his fiancées; Clara was one of them and had come to the capital to be formally introduced to the other two.

So why was she feeling so gloomy over what was a simple first meeting?

"Lady Clara Dandorl, daughter of Margrave Dandorl, has arrived," announced the steward who had escorted her.

The heavy doors opened, and she stepped into one of the reception rooms in the royal palace. It seemed Clara was the last to arrive, as the other two fiancées were already there and had made themselves comfortable.

A girl with pale silver hair was relaxing at the nearest table with a cup of tea. Upon noticing Clara, she nodded with a gentle smile. Clara was familiar with the girl's temperament; the two had spoken many times before during noble gatherings. This was Patricia Hoodale, daughter of Duke Hoodale, born to the man's second wife and two years older than Clara and the prince. House Hoodale, not having any suitable daughters by the duke's first wife, had submitted Patricia's name at the last minute.

All three fiancées were to maintain equal status until the crown prince graduated from the Sorcerers' Academy, at which point their merits would be evaluated and their ranks determined. The positions of second and third queen had been promised to the two not chosen as first queen.

The three were expected to maintain cordial relations with one another. This was because the current king had chosen a viscountess, who hadn't even been

one of his fiancées, as his first queen; he'd then only taken one fiancée as the second queen. The others would not have been queens but rather consorts; they wouldn't have been involved in politics, and their children would've been last in the line of succession. The other candidates had thus declined the arrangement entirely.

This situation had made cooperation between the queens impossible and, in retrospect, was the primary reason for the current scarcity of royal heirs. History could repeat itself if the crown prince were to fall in love with the heroine at first sight, which would likely lead to Clara being found guilty down the line. Still, thinking that far ahead would've just paralyzed her.

Cooperating with Lady Hoodale would be easy. She wasn't mentioned in the game and was a second wife's daughter herself, meaning it was unlikely she'd been raised to be a proper queen. The *other* fiancée, however...

The girl was a member of House Leicester, a countdom that had produced generations of chief court sorcerers. She was a year younger than Clara and, in the game, was in the same grade as the heroine. According to the plot, she possessed an affinity for all six elements and immense aether; she always emerged as the main character's greatest enemy toward the end of the story.

That's...Karla Leicester! The worst of the three villainesses! Clara thought, eyeing the other girl.

Karla's undulating jet-black hair almost seemed to swallow the sunlight. The girl was morbidly pale, with dark circles under her sunken eyes. Her violet eyes, gleaming fiercely from their hollows, shifted to look back at Clara.

This was the game's "final boss"—as infamous as the demon king himself.

The Mage's Unsociable Apprentice

In the depths of the dimly lit forest, under a light drizzle, a giant spider let out a threatening cry at an enemy. The spider had made its nest in a rocky area sheltered from the rain. Its body alone was a meter long; its total length including its legs was nearly three meters. The thing was huge, and while its biology wasn't much different from that of ordinary spiders, it possessed

exceptionally developed muscles and a strong exoskeleton to support its massive body. Its powerfully sticky web could capture even goblins and kobolds.

A thin-walled earthen jar, solidified with the practical spell Harden, shattered upon the rocky surface with a loud crash, spilling its contents onto the spider's web. Enraged, the giant spider let out a shrill cry and shot out its web, but its enemy pulled off a tricky evasive maneuver, then threw several more jars, further soaking the spider's web and causing the arachnid to slip.

The spider's enemy was aware of this trick thanks to her unusual knowledge. Normally, creatures like spiders and insects didn't grow this large, but this one was a monster, its sticky web and massive body enhanced by aether in order to support its weight. Nevertheless, it seemed unnatural that a thin web could keep the creature's massive frame aloft. Ordinary spiders used nonsticky string for mobility and a sticky version for catching prey, but giant spiders only produced sticky string.

Upon discovering the giant spider, its foe had observed that it didn't hunt outside on rainy days. Deducing the reason, she had filled the jars with water—and the sticky web's adhesive strength decreased drastically when wet. Unable to support its enormous form, the giant spider fell from its web onto the rain-soaked ground with a shriek.

Seizing the opportunity, the enemy launched a strange throwing knife, consisting of a diamond-shaped blade at the tip of a small ring, at the monster. Struck, the giant spider realized it was under attack and swung its legs in a threatening manner, but given how heavy its appendages were compared to those of an ordinary spider, they'd bent oddly from the impact of its fall.

Noticing this, the spider's foe drew closer, entering melee range. The giant spider responded by shooting out more of its sticky web, but from its half-flattened position on the ground, it aimed poorly, and most of the string flew off in the wrong direction; the enemy caught the rest in her wet cloak and quickly tossed it aside. As she dived in, her peach-colored hair, coated in ash and wet with sweat and rain, shimmered like a pair of silver wings.



The spider's enemy plunged a black knife deep into its head, drawing another shriek from the massive creature. Despite its wound, the giant arachnid turned its venomous fangs toward its opponent, who, without a hint of panic, pulled out her knife, put distance between them, and chanted, "Thrust!"

The moment the combat technique was unleashed, the territorial spider was decapitated and its life ebbed away.

"Phew," the girl exhaled. Now that the fight was over, she stood in the light rain, cooling her body.

She'd successfully dispatched the giant spider as planned. It'd taken her time to prepare for her first battle against this specific type of monster, but the results had been excellent, especially considering she'd managed to defeat a Rank 3 monster without sustaining any major injuries.

"Flow," she chanted, using the water produced by the spell to wash her cloak and peel off the sticky web stuck to it. She gathered the remainder of the string, which had stuck to a tree branch, then placed it in a specially prepared bag. The sticky web, when processed through alchemy, became a high-quality adhesive for binding books and such. What she'd been after, however, were the spider's head and torso.

A giant spider's fangs contained a dangerous paralyzing poison; even small amounts were capable of incapacitating someone within minutes. With minor processing, it could be directly applied to a weapon. She packed the spider's head into another bag, tied the creature's torso with rough rope, then wrapped it in her wet cloak and hoisted it onto her back. The torso weighed over twenty kilograms, but with Level 2 Boost, it wasn't too heavy to carry.

After an hour of carefully navigating the forest's familiar ups and downs, the girl saw a small house come into view between the trees. Its walls were made of mud, and a small field could be seen beside it. She placed the spider's torso outside the entrance, washed her cloak with water from a well and hung it up to dry, then opened the door and brought the two bags inside.

She was greeted by the faint smell of chemicals, along with a young woman's voice. "Alia, my unsocial apprentice, I thought I told you not to track mud into the house!"

"I'm back, Mistress Cere'zhula," the girl said.

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▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human (Rank 2)
Aether Points: 158/160 \triangle +25
Health Points: 92/105 \triangle +25
Strength: 5 (6)
Endurance: 6 (7)
Agility: 7 (8)
Dexterity: 7
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 1]
[Martial Mastery Lv. 2]
[Throwing Lv. 2] \triangle +1
[String Manipulation Lv. 1]
[Light Magic Lv. 2] \triangle +1 NEW!
[Shadow Magic Lv. 2]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 2]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 2]
[Intimidation Lv. 2]
[Stealth Lv. 2] \triangle +1
[Night Vision Lv. 2] \triangle +1
[Detection Lv. 2] \triangle +1
[Poison Resistance Lv. 1]
[Basic Scan Lv. 1]
Overall Combat Power: 128 (Boosted: 144) \triangle +30
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The Witch in the Woods

"Looks like you haven't been bitten anywhere, my unsocial apprentice. Did you take the body apart correctly?" my new mentor asked.

"I did it the way you taught me," I replied, showing her the bags containing the spider's head and silk.

Her expression shifted into a small frown. "One of the eyeballs is crushed. The kill could've been cleaner."

"I'll do better next time," I said earnestly.

With a grin, she ruffled my hair. "Well, it's already an achievement for a Rank 2 like you to defeat a Rank 3 monster. We'll work on the torso first, so bring it to the processing area in the backyard after you wash the mud off your feet."

"Understood, mistress."

My mentor took the two bags deeper inside, and I went back to the entrance to wash my dirty feet before hoisting the spider's torso onto my shoulders. Four months had passed since my arrival here, and I was now eight years old and had grown a little taller.

Who was this woman, my new mentor, whom I called "mistress"? The answer lay after the battle four months ago.

To escape Graves's pursuit, I'd jumped into the rapids of a swollen river. Just as I was about to hit the water, I'd used Harden to turn my mud-covered maid's uniform into a makeshift life buoy. That had afforded me little relief, however. Not wanting to fight the rapids, I'd curled up and dived deep, desperately trying to conceal my presence until I could put distance between myself and my pursuer.

My chances of survival had been slim. While I had turned my clothes into a life buoy, the dark of night had made it difficult to discern up from down; my small form had swirled about in the rapids as they relentlessly drained my strength.

Not only that, the waters were likely teeming with lower-ranked monsters,

though only a few higher-ranked monsters would approach the shore and attack people. I wasn't sure if they could be active given how turbulent the current was, but I'd have been helpless if attacked in my current state.

Sharpening my mind and focusing, I used Stealth. To orient myself, I relied heavily on Night Vision and Detection. Using Night Vision to "see" the reflection of mana particles was difficult in the rapids, and using it to see their color was equally tricky, given all I could see was the color of water. So, using Night Vision and Detection in tandem, I kept staring into the dark water, and just as I reached the brink of suffocation and found myself between life and death, my view suddenly cleared and I could identify which way was which.

I surfaced briefly to breathe. If I could see color even underwater, then I should be able to identify creatures swimming in the river. As I focused on that objective, my Detection range and accuracy expanded, and I could sense the presence of a serpentine creature approaching me from the direction of a school of fish at the bottom of the river. Instinctively, I used the combat technique Thrust and cut it down.

Being underwater didn't mean I couldn't still fight. Being able to orient myself meant I could draw breath as needed. The only issue, then, was holding out until the current calmed. Fortunately, the effects of the healing potion were still active in my body. I squeezed out light-aspected aether from the aethercrystal in my heart, minimizing physical exhaustion and the drop in body temperature as much as possible.

I wasn't going to give up. I couldn't die yet. As long as there was a possibility that Graves might harm Elena someday, I *had* to endure, grow stronger than him, and take him down.

As I used light mana to rejuvenate my body, I used Aether Manipulation to coat my form in water mana in an attempt to be as stealthy as possible. *How long have I been drifting in the current?* I wondered. My consciousness was growing hazy, and just as the sun began to rise and I was on the verge of losing focus, the current finally eased. After cutting down one final serpent, I emerged from the water, several hours after jumping in.

My body was chilled to the bone, and both my health and aether points were

almost fully depleted. If I was attacked by a monster or beast in this state, I wouldn't stand a chance. I dragged my weakened self to some nearby bushes and waited, keeping up Stealth, for my health and aether points to recover. In the meantime, I kept what little aether I had left circulating in my body to strengthen my internal organs—otherwise I would most likely freeze to death.

Hours later, with my aether having recovered somewhat, I used Cure on myself, lit a fire, and wolfed down the roasted carcass of the water serpent, focused solely on recovery.

It was a full day before my battered body could move properly again. My aether had recovered before my health points, so I used Restore to fully heal the plethora of wounds I'd suffered. Someone told me not to leave any scars on my body, I mused. Was it Sera?

Speaking of Sera, had I been targeted for assassination by the Order of Shadows, or had Graves been acting of his own accord? Whichever it was, since Graves was a part of the organization, it was all the same to me. I decided to break away from them.

I would grow strong and kill Graves. And if anyone else stood in my way—even Sera or Viro—I was prepared to turn my blade on them too.

But what to do now? The Order had ties to nobility, so approaching large towns seemed risky. My best options would be a village or a smaller town, but...it was probably safest to avoid urban areas altogether. The Adventurers' Guild was also out of the question until the dust settled, so I had to find a new way to live. I was near the border at the moment, so heading north to another country was an option.

But I did have one specific prospect.

Before doing anything, however, I checked my stats. Thanks to the fight with Graves and my struggles in the water, my skills Throwing, Stealth, Night Vision, and Detection had all leveled up to 2.

Throwing had probably increased in level due to my fight with the water spirit and my recent focus on throwing weapons. The increase in Stealth and

Detection wasn't surprising, but since humans could typically only learn Night Vision up to Level 1, reaching Level 2 was unexpected. Perhaps it was a result of combining the traditional method of Night Vision with my unique color sight.

I'd nearly died, but it hadn't all been bad; in the end, the whole ordeal had been fodder for my growth.

I used my stronger Stealth and Detection skills to remain hidden as I ran through the forest along the river, heading toward the simple base I'd previously made in the woods. Upon reaching it, I took off my ragged maid uniform and wiped away the remaining mud. Then I changed into my traveling jacket and trousers and wrapped a shawl around my neck to conceal my face.

I'd lost all of my weapons except for my black knife, but at the makeshift base, I had another knife that Sera had given me as well as Feld's steel knife, which I attached to my belt and boot respectively. Though I had no more throwing knives left, I figured I could manage with ordinary knives now that I had Throwing at Level 2. I did a test throw using the steel knife, and it stabbed into the trunk of a nearby tree without any issues.

My destination was about a two-day trek through the forest. I packed the money I'd hidden away, along with salt, small food items, and dried herbs, into the bag where I'd stuffed my clothes, then slung it over my shoulder. Lastly, I used a clay vessel solidified with Harden to boil salted water, which I then drank to replenish my fluids and electrolytes. As the forest began to grow dark, I started running silently through it.

With my levels in Stealth, Night Vision, Detection, and Practical Magic, the woods posed no threat. There would be goblins and wolves along the way, but no higher-ranked monsters that could detect me under Stealth.

Two days later, I arrived at a hut made of wood and stone with mud walls. I knew the place thanks to that woman's memories. The garden was a little bigger and more full of weeds than she remembered, but it was unmistakably the right place. My knowledge told me the front door was trapped; after disarming it, I walked inside.

A split second later, an oddly shaped knife stuck into the door frame next to

me with a thud.

"Who are you?" asked a woman in a robe, looking like a witch from a children's book. "Rude brat, walking into someone's home without permission." She was fiddling with a second oddly shaped knife and emanated a powerful, intimidating aura.

She was strong. I couldn't see her face, hidden under a hood, so I couldn't Scan her properly, but just based on the tingling sensation from her Intimidation, I could tell it was at least Level 3.

"I came to return this," I said. With small movements, so as to not provoke her, I shook the handwritten herbal almanac in my hand.

At this, the intimidating aura vanished, and that woman's mentor let out a half-amused, half-angry snort. "Hah! An acquaintance of my foolish apprentice, are you? What happened to the fool after she stole away with my coin and potions? Did she finally die in a ditch somewhere?"

"I killed her," I said quietly and flatly.

The robed woman fell silent for a moment, her anger seemingly dissipating. "I see. Sounds like she died a stupid death, then. You can have that notebook; it'll probably fetch a tidy sum. Now go on, get out."

Even that woman had appreciated her mentor to an extent. Originally, my plan had been to simply return her notebook, but now I had more important business here.

"I want to study sorcery under you," I said.

"I told you to leave," she replied. "Nothing good will come from associating with an old hag living in this remote place—one whose apprentices all turn out foolish." Despite calling herself a "hag," she still sounded young. That woman had often taken note of this too.

"Because you're a demon?"

She fell silent at my question, and a moment later, I could sense overwhelming malice coming from her, freezing me in place.

"Who told you?" she demanded. "Did that foolish disciple of mine blab? I

didn't think she'd turned out to be that much of a fool. What do you think I should do with you now that you know that, hmm?"

If I hadn't felt this level of danger from high-rankers like Feld, Viro, and Graves, I might've fainted or lost my fighting spirit entirely. But although she made me shiver, I wasn't scared. I could feel the threat but not the terror.

"I want to study sorcery under you," I repeated calmly, staring straight at her.

"Who *are* you?" she asked, the malice softening, replaced by an air of slight exasperation.

"It's a long story. A lot has happened since your apprentice attacked me," I said, hinting at the fact that I'd been the victim, not the aggressor.

That woman's mentor seemed to accept this and let out a long sigh as she stood up. "Come here. Tell me everything. I'll at least make you some tea." She removed her hood, revealing elegant obsidian-black skin and long ears extending through her silver hair. Based on her features, one would have assumed her to be in her thirties.

A dark elf... The color of dark elves' skin was said to be a result of selling their souls to the evil dark god. They lived on the western coast of the continent and were part of what was known as the demon race.

"Call me Cere'zhula," she said. "What's your name?" "Alia."

Although the great war had ended, demons were still in conflict with the southwestern human nations. Why she, a dark elf, was in Claydale in the southeastern corner of the continent, that woman's knowledge couldn't say. But that didn't matter to me; all I wanted was to expand my own knowledge and strength so I could defy my fate.

I told Cere'zhula about the day that woman attacked me and nearly took over my body, and about the knowledge I'd incidentally obtained from the aethercrystal that woman had imprinted her mind onto. Honestly, I didn't quite understand the whole "otome game" thing myself, and so I couldn't explain it, but when I revealed my inner desire to avoid my strange destiny as a noble, she nodded deeply, as though she'd suddenly understood that woman's actions.

She then leaned back in her chair and pointed with her thumb to a corridor behind her. "You can use the room in the back for now. It used to belong to that foolish apprentice, and now it's a storeroom of sorts. You understand, don't you?"

"Hmm?" I tilted my head, not grasping her meaning.

Cere'zhula grinned mischievously. "I'm saying I'll train you. Make you stronger, as you desire. So you'd best be ready, my new, unsocial apprentice."



Training Routine

When I stepped out the door, the rain had stopped.

I carried the spider's torso through the small field, where a handful of vegetables and a variety of herbs grew, and headed toward the processing area.

"Put that on the table, unsocial apprentice," my mentor told me. "You'll be doing the processing. I'll show you how."

"Yes, mistress," I replied, placing the torso on the table.

"Start with the legs."

I began to detach the legs with a dressing knife. After I finished with the first leg and received a nod of approval from my mentor, she left me to work on the remaining seven, took the spider's head out of its bag, and began to extract its eyes. They could be fermented into a powerful neurotoxin, but she hadn't taught me the method yet, so I couldn't participate.

My mentor was a sorceress, but she'd told me her main trade was actually alchemy. I'd been distilling my own medicinal and poisonous herbs based on what I'd seen thus far, but now I was slowly learning how to make potions as well. I'd mistakenly thought there existed skills for alchemy, but apparently that wasn't the case; though a certain level of Aether Manipulation was necessary to refine chemicals with high concentrations of aether, knowledge and precision were much more important, she'd told me.

Cooking was similar: there were skills that helped with cutting ingredients and discerning raw materials, but all they did was make one more likely to succeed at the cooking process. Cere'zhula had told me that the taste of the dish was determined by the ingredients and by the cook's sense.

"Are you done?" she asked.

"I am," I confirmed with a nod.

My mentor split the spider's abdomen open with a cleaver and added a chemical mixture to the mucus that the spider's body used to produce webbing. This mucus would rapidly turn into thread when exposed to air, so we had to

act quickly from here on.

"Now," she said.

At her signal, I made a small cut on my palm with a knife and let the blood drip into the spider's body. My blood reacted with the chemical mixture, and the yellowish-white mucus turned red. I patiently stirred it with a wooden stick, and eventually, a clump of red-black fibers formed at the tip.

"Not bad," my mentor said, inspecting the clump. "The materials are fresh, so the end result seems to be of good quality."

I let out a relieved breath in response.

In addition to telling her about my circumstances, I'd also spoken to her about my fighting style. My mentor, as a result of her demonic heritage, looked to be in her early thirties but was actually over three hundred years old. She hadn't told me why she was living in this country, but she'd mentioned she was skilled not only in sorcery and alchemy but scout-style combat.

The odd knife I'd been using, which consisted of a diamond-shaped blade attached to a ring, was an old piece of equipment that had once belonged to her; she'd let me borrow about ten of them. They were similar to a type of dagger called "kunai" that I'd learned about from that woman's knowledge. These, however, barely had handles and seemed to be meant for use as concealed weapons; one would put a finger through the ring and hide the blade in one's palm.

Either way, with respect to combat, my mentor specialized in spellcasting, not melee combat. She had Level 4 in both Light and Shadow, and even Level 5 in Fire and Wind. Moreover, she was a natural at *magic* rather than sorcery.

I'd thought sorcery was the standard and magic was an old, obsolete technique, but according to my mentor, any student of sorcery would eventually arrive at magic. Though rare, mages did exist, albeit at a likely rate of one mage for every several hundred sorcerers. And it was a good thing I'd learned this now; without that knowledge, facing a spellcaster could've been a fatal endeavor.

With how much she'd taught me, I couldn't have just stubbornly refused to

reveal my hand. On the contrary, the correct course of action had been to disclose all of my tricks and ask her for guidance. My mentor had shown interest in my arsenal, especially the illusion spells and my pendulum. In particular, she'd taken great interest in my manipulation of string mixed with my own blood and advised me to be more conscious of my choice of thread.

I'd decided to use spider's silk from monsters as the material for my string. The highest-grade materials would be from arachnes, however, and such items were rarely sold on the market. For that reason, I'd chosen the web from the giant spiders that inhabited this area. It was above average in quality, but when processing silk from monsters, freshness was more important than what monster it came from, according to my mentor.

Giant spiders only produced sticky web, but while still inside the body, the substance could be chemically processed to become a strong, nonsticky thread. However, the toughness of monster-produced thread came from what remained of the monster's inherent aether, which would interfere with my attempts at manipulating the thread with my own aether. In theory, dyeing it red with my blood would allow some level of control, but this much thread would've required a pot's worth of blood, which wasn't feasible.

So my mentor had come up with an alternative method: mix my blood with the monster's body fluid during the processing stage to make it compatible with my aether; this had to be done within a few hours of the monster's death. It'd taken me over a month to finally track and take down a giant spider.

"Now you have to loosen that fiber by beating it with a stick and gradually make it into thread yourself," my mentor explained. "If you channel your aether during this process, it'll further improve the flow of aether through the fiber, so no slacking!"

"Got it," I replied.

"When the thread is ready, bring it to me. I'll process it with alchemy to make it fire-resistant."

"Okay."

"But before that, dinner. As an apprentice, it's your job to cook. Now get to it."

My mentor was on the captious side, but I didn't mind. On the contrary—she'd taken in people as shady as that woman and myself as apprentices, so I actually considered her kindhearted.

I didn't make a habit of trusting others, but...I thought I could trust my mentor as much as I trusted Elena.

"Cleanse."

After cleaning up the processing area, I'd gone to the kitchen to begin meal prep. Over the last four months, I'd finally mastered the Level 2 light-elemental spells Cleanse and Detoxify. My master, a researcher of sorcery, knew many magical words. She'd taught me the words for light and shadow spells up to Level 3, and by stitching them together myself, I'd finally managed to cast those two.

Composing incantations was akin to being taught only isolated words and their meanings in a language one didn't speak, then being asked to write complete sentences. Just changing the order of the words could alter the meaning, so to create a new spell, one had to either make short sentences using only a few words or take the time to do methodical research beforehand. In this particular instance, however, I'd managed because I'd had the original sentence to work off of.

My master, however, wasn't satisfied with simple memorization. She'd given me an additional task: if I grasped the meaning of an incantation, I was to shorten it. After a month, I could shorten both of the light-elemental spells a little, even if just by one or two words. As a result, my skill in Light Mastery had leveled up and transformed into Light Magic. In all likelihood, however, that wasn't simply the result of shortening incantations; it'd possibly had more to do with my newfound grasp of the spells' meanings.

In contrast, my skills in physical combat had remained the same except for Throwing. This wasn't solely because of my overreliance on throwing weapons; my physical growth was also lacking. My aether had increased, and my body had grown thanks to that, but it wasn't yet at an appropriate stage for high-level combat skills.

I still had much to iron out in both spellcasting and physical combat, but for now, my focus was on prepping dinner.

"Detoxify," I chanted. In that woman's world, it was common knowledge that invisible microorganisms caused disease. While the people of this world had no such belief, we did believe that invisible toxins arose from impurities, and those led to illness. The Holy Church had spread this notion several generations ago, and now even the common man knew that personal hygiene and washing food kept disease at bay.

Once I'd cast both Cleanse and Detoxify, I picked up a large cleaver-like knife and began to take apart my "ingredients"—that is, the spider's legs. I cracked open the hard exoskeleton to extract the muscle tissue, which I then chopped into bite-size pieces. I cooked the chunks with ginger and other herbal roots over high heat. I repeatedly added more water to prevent the mixture from boiling over, easing the meat's foul smell, then added more herbs and let it simmer for about an hour. I discarded the liquid, replaced it, poured in a sweet liquor made from medicinal herbs, and added roughly chopped root vegetables, letting them cook until tender. Finally, I seasoned the stew with salt and pepper and added a small amount of lard. The spider stew was complete.

"Alia," my mentor muttered in a grave tone upon seeing the finished stew. "Did we not have venison? Why did you use spider meat?"

"It would be wasteful not to," I replied. "It's just as nutritious, isn't it?"

"I suppose I'll need to teach you common sense," she said. "My other apprentice was a fool, but at least she made decent meals."

"I prepared it just as my knowledge taught me, but maybe it didn't stew long enough?" Either way, I wasn't about to waste precious protein.

My mentor sighed deeply as she watched me tear into the tough, sinewy meat. "We'll practice light magic once you're done eating. Finish up soon."

"Understood."

My mentor had recently taught me two unique types of spells: light spells equivalent to Level 2, and shadow spells equivalent to Level 3.

The shadow spells were the ones I'd thought up myself, reconfigured with my mentor's help. With my current skill level and aether, however, I couldn't yet use Level 3 spells properly. Conversely, the light spells had been easy to learn, since I could just apply the same principles as with shadow spells, but *using* them was a different story.

"Here it goes. Try to defend yourself," Cere'zhula said as she stood opposite me in the garden. "Fire Arrow!"

Fire Arrow was a Level 1 sorcery spell, but since fire spells had high damage output, it could still be lethal if it hit the wrong spot. I wasn't allowed to move out of the way, however. The moment my mentor released the arrow, I held out a palm, focusing on the composition of the spell I cast. "Shield."

The principle behind this spell was similar to that of shadow magic: it bound light particles together, forming a circular shield. This was a unique spell, passed down to my mentor by her own mentor. Shield could defend against offensive spells, but it had a weakness: given that it was formed out of light particles, it was only as resistant as glass. Therefore, if hit by spells from elements that dealt physical damage, like earth or ice, it could shatter.

A sharp sound rang out as my shield repelled Cere'zhula's Fire Arrow. "You're using too much aether!" she scolded me. "Feel the magnitude of the spell and adjust accordingly!"

She cast a second Fire Arrow, and once again, it collided with my Shield. This time, the circle emitted a sound like shattering glass and disappeared.

"If you sense you didn't use enough aether, divert and parry!" she yelled.

"Understood," I replied.

The sound of breaking glass wasn't an actual sound but rather an auditory hallucination only I could hear, indicating I hadn't infused my shield with enough aether. Shield was equivalent to a Level 2 spell and theoretically could block any non-physical offensive spell, provided enough aether had been infused into it. However, with my current ability and aether, I could only defend against Level 1 spells; a Level 2 spell would dissipate the shield and hit me.

If I couldn't block a spell, I had to divert it. Since the shield had the physical

resistance of glass, I could in theory use it to protect myself from something like a knife. What I needed it for, however, was parrying magic itself, similar to how one would parry using a physical shield or sword.

Three things were necessary to that end: concentrating on the composition of my spell, discerning the type and amount of aether used by my opponent, and infusing the appropriate amount of my own aether into the shield to adjust the defense accordingly. Each of these was challenging on its own, so doing all three together was extremely difficult. Moreover, maintaining the shield consumed aether, so I needed to train even more if I was to use it on the fly.

Still, mastering this technique would be an incredible boon in combat against practitioners of sorcery.

"Now practice on your own," Cere'zhula said. "Dealing with kids tires me out." "Are you all right?" I asked.

My health and aether points had dipped to below half, but that wasn't why my mentor had ended the training session. Her own health points were high, but her expenditure had also been significant. "A kid shouldn't be worrying about an adult. Also, the spell you applied to your hair is fading. Remember to concentrate on the feeling of the effect's duration."

"Okay."

I was still dusting my peach-tinged hair with ash, but now the ash was actually an illusion, created through a shadow spell. Viro had mentioned once that my hair's sheen would grow with my aether and that ordinary ash would no longer be sufficient to conceal it, and he'd been right. I'd asked my mentor for advice, and she'd taught me a number of magical words and tasked me with changing my hair color through illusion sorcery.

While I did manage to complete a spell that let me do that, the words hadn't been arranged into a proper sentence, leading to excessive aether consumption and a shorter effect time, so I'd abandoned the notion of changing the color of my hair and instead used an illusion to make shadow mana particles appear as ash, successfully extending the spell's duration while still suppressing my hair's luster. Though that deviated from the task my mentor had given me, she'd still considered it a success (if barely), apparently because it was important to think

outside the box when it came to magic.

It was night when I finished training. Under the light of a magical lamp powered by an aethercrystal, I used a stick to loosen the spider silk fibers and make them into thread.

Cere'zhula sat nearby, sipping her homemade medicinal liquor, and began to tell me about that woman who'd attacked me. "That foolish apprentice of mine first came here at age sixteen, I think. She was already a fool then. One day she simply showed up and told me it would be my duty to 'help the heroine fight against the demons,' then demanded I teach her sorcery. She said that to *me*. A demon."

I listened in silence. So that woman had been, well, that way for a while. Or perhaps she'd always been that way?

"Honestly, I could barely understand the nonsense the fool spouted," my mentor continued. "But she spoke of her delusions with such confidence that I felt bad for her and her stupidity. I took her as my apprentice."

"Did she take it seriously?" I asked.

"She did. That's the one thing I could commend her for. But...she was horribly fickle, and everything she did was half-baked. I'd never thought my fool of an apprentice could succeed where sorcerers of eld failed and actually craft a strange aetherstone using frogs. She had more talent than I gave her credit for."

"Frogs..." I echoed. She'd tried to take over someone else's body using such a tenuous method?

Still, accident or no, if she'd successfully created an aetherstone based on vague information like that and actually managed to imprint her consciousness onto it, surely talent must've been a factor. Or perhaps *obsession* was the better word. Ultimately, however, her efforts had been entirely misdirected, which had caused her downfall.

Time passed slowly in the quiet of the woods.

There was something I had to do. But living with Cere'zhula gave me a sense of familial warmth I hadn't felt since losing my parents. I trained in sorcery and magic, learned alchemy, hunted monsters, and improved my combat skills.

No ordinary human should've known about this house—and yet, a month later, a suspicious visitor stopped by.

The Visitor

After a month of work, I finally completed a bundle of spider's silk threads. Each was about one millimeter thick, and laid end to end, they were forty meters long. While it might have sounded like a lot, my two pendulums needed eight meters each, leaving me with only three spare strings. I couldn't afford to be wasteful.

Before learning the String Manipulation skill, I could only correct my pendulum's hit rate by about ten percent. Acquiring the skill had improved my accuracy; using thread infused with my blood had increased compensation to twenty percent, and these monster-sourced threads should improve my hit rate even further.

But most importantly, these monster threads were incredibly resilient. Graves had easily cut through my cotton thread despite it being aethereally reinforced. These new threads couldn't stop a blade on their own, of course, but should nevertheless be much harder to cut as they danced through the air.

As my mentor explained to me how to treat the monster threads to protect them from fire and decay, I went about setting up the new concealed throwing knives I had acquired as replacements for the ones I'd lost in the fight with Graves. Suddenly, my mentor looked up, and I followed her gaze toward the front door.

"Someone's here," I said.

"Conceal your presence, Alia," she told me. "Stay in the back for now. I'll handle this."

"Understood, mistress."

No one had visited in the five months I'd been living here, yet now there was

a distinctive humanlike presence nearby. According to my mentor, a merchant she was acquainted with came by once a year to deliver salt and other items, but it wasn't that time of the year yet. Not only that, both my mentor and I had the scouting skill Detection, but neither of us had sensed this person until they were close to the house. Having the scouting skills to move around undetected like that wasn't necessarily indicative of power, but this person was no ordinary individual.

As instructed, I went inside a room in the back. While suppressing my presence, I peeked through the gap in the door.

"Come in," Cere'zhula said toward the door. It opened silently, and a tall man in his midthirties emerged from the outside light.

The man bowed his head. He had dark blond hair and an easy, shallow smile, and his mannerisms reminded me of a stage actor's. "It's been a while, my beloved mentor. How have you been?"

"I don't recall ever having *you* for an apprentice," she replied coolly. "What do you want, Dino?"

Dino gave an affected shrug. "I came to greet you in my capacity as the new head of the Northern Border District's branch of the Assassins' Guild. And to ask my beloved mentor, Cere'zhula, for her assistance with a rather troublesome matter."

"Oh? Is your organization so lacking in competent personnel that you need to resort to a hermit?"

"Normally we'd have no issues handling matters ourselves, but this time we're up against former adventurers of great skill. A direct confrontation would result in significant casualties on our side, and thus, here I am, humbly requesting your assistance."

"I've left the life of an assassin behind, you know."

So this Dino is from the Assassins' Guild, I mused. What does Cere'zhula have to do with that organization? And why is a leader within the organization referring to her as his "mentor"?

Dino must have expected that answer. Unfazed, he gave a small nod, then

spoke as though he'd practiced in advance. "Cere'zhula the Fiend, scourge of the Eastern Front of the demonic army. If word got out that you still live, no doubt the knights would mobilize en masse to take you down, even after all this time," Dino said with a smile, despite the implicit threat in his words. "So surely, for someone of your skill, a Rank 4 adventuring party would be no trouble at all."

My mentor didn't respond.

I knew precious little about her, but from Dino's tone, it seemed obvious she'd taken many lives on the battlefield. Why she'd left the demon army I didn't know, but it was likely she'd sought refuge in the dark side of society. It would've been the easiest place to hide from any prying demonic eyes.

"Also," Dino continued, "there's someone else here, right? And it's not that odd woman who used to live with you. Have you taken on another apprentice? As a fellow disciple, I simply *must* extend them a hand too."

"Dino!" Cere'zhula snapped, glaring furiously at him for trying to involve an unrelated party, but his smiling mask remained unchanged.

He probably knew my mentor couldn't oppose the Assassins' Guild. While she was likely the more skilled of the two, Dino was a leader within the organization. He likely had an escape plan ready in case she turned hostile. And if he did escape, his assassins would pursue not only Cere'zhula herself but also her apprentice—that is, me.

An assassin's tactics were different from those of a sorcerer. Allow an assassin to escape, and they'd turn the tables. Not only that, no matter how powerful an individual my mentor was, she couldn't possibly take on a never-ending fight against an entire organization.

Aware of this, she gritted her teeth. "Make this the last favor you ever ask of me. Understand?"

"Of course, of course. I shall never trouble my beloved mentor with unreasonable requests ever again. Now, as for the target..." he began with a twisted, delighted smile.

But I'd heard enough.

"I'd love to hear all about that," I interrupted as I emerged from the room.

At the sudden intrusion, both adults stared at me with wide eyes. "Alia!" Cere'zhula snapped at my disobedience. "Get back inside!"

I had no intention of retreating, however. And more importantly, I was done watching my mentor be coerced into action by a man using me as leverage. Ignoring her order, I stepped forward, taking in Dino fully as I addressed him. "My mistress has retired from fighting."

"You..." She trailed off, speechless.

Dino's eyes narrowed with interest as he watched our exchange. "Oh? Is this your apprentice? What are you, little one? A boy? A girl?"

"Does that matter?" I asked. "All you want is to kill some adventurers, right? Making my mistress use brute force would be far from ideal. I'm better suited for the task. I'll do it."

"What are you saying?!" Cere'zhula protested, so bewildered by my words she seemed to momentarily forget about Dino's presence. "Kids should stay out of adults' business! Do you understand what's happening here?! This man is requesting a hit! This is about murder!"

"It's a matter of probability," I explained matter-of-factly. My mentor had never said this explicitly, but she was probably in no condition to fight properly. She was stronger than both Dino and me, but she couldn't fight for long, and even if she *could* take down the targets, she couldn't approach a human settlement. Her odds of returning with her life were lower than mine. "If the opponents are humans, my chances of survival are higher than yours, mistress. That's all."

"You think a kid like you can carry out something akin to assassination?! Rank 4 adventurers are nothing like what you'll find around here!"

Indeed, it would be difficult for me, at Rank 2, to take down a single Rank 4 adventurer, let alone several. Dino had wanted Cere'zhula to do this because she was powerful, and assassins were ill-suited to fighting a coordinated and well-prepared party of adventurers.

My odds of defeat were high. But as a child, I could feign innocence to get

them to lower their guard, and had ways to fight that were unique to someone my age. And besides...

"I'll become stronger still," I said.

Cere'zhula was at a loss for words as she met my firm gaze. Despite my age, I'd amassed significant experience and gone through several ordeals already. Knowing this, despite her reluctance, my mentor understood that I had a higher chance of survival against humans, given that I could trick them into underestimating me. And she seemed to understand I was in the process of growing.

"So you're saying you can kill people?" Dino, who'd been silently watching our exchange, asked with a questioning gaze. I felt as though I could see a dark, murky pleasure lurking somewhere in the depths of his eyes.

Good. A twisted man like him wouldn't doubt me. "That won't be a problem." I was neither going to die nor let my mentor die. If that meant taking the lives of strangers, I was prepared to do it.

"Excellent," he replied with a delighted smile, nodding readily, as I'd hoped he would. "Then I shall entrust this task to my lovely fellow disciple. But would you mind killing someone first, as a test?"

"An enemy, no," I said, looking scornfully up at Dino. Anyone who became my enemy was fair game. But I wasn't about to take on any stupid requests to kill innocent civilians.

Understanding what I meant, Dino forced a smile. "Rest assured that we're not simple murderers and take great care in selecting our targets. Besides, all jobs I bring to my beloved mentor, Cere'zhula, involve getting rid of scum. I request the same of you, her beloved apprentice."

"I'll be the judge of the target's virtue."

The Assassins' Guild would only take two types of target: absolute scum, or the upstanding and virtuous. I had figured no one upstanding would be among those adventurers, but perhaps this was because my mentor would've never taken on that type of hit in the first place.

"Now then, please take this," he said, handing me a scrap of paper with no

more than a date, time, and location written on it. "Come to this location by the specified date. And with that, I bid you farewell, my beloved mentor, Cere'zhula."

Dino then left quite abruptly, and my mentor and I stood there in silence until his presence completely disappeared.

She gave me a conflicted look as we returned to the living room. My mentor's words were harsh, but she was kind at heart; surely she regretted having faltered in the heat of the moment and not having stopped a child like me from being sent into a potentially deadly situation.

To an observer, it might have seemed certain that the mission was a death sentence for a child, but I had no intention of dying. If I wasn't strong enough to handle this now, then I'd simply become stronger. Even the malice Dino had directed at me would become fodder for my growth.

And so, without any hesitation in my heart, I simply offered her a firm gaze in return. Seeing this, Cere'zhula sighed in resignation and disappeared into her room.

It was just as well that she hadn't pressed the matter. I returned to my own room and changed into my travel clothes, packed my knives and new pendulums, and stuffed the poison I'd brewed into a bag. It was almost evening, but I felt no need to enjoy a leisurely dinner before departing. After all, I'd started my journey as a wandering child, always ready for battle. I didn't need long to prepare.

I'd thought Cere'zhula would be holed up in her room, but as I walked out of the room with my things, she was waiting for me at the living room table. "Alia. Let's talk for a spell."

"Okay," I replied, still on guard, and took a seat at the table.

With a deep sigh, she began laying out several items on the table. "I won't stop you. You're not a child for me to coddle. From now on, I respect your autonomy as an individual."

Cere'zhula then began to tell me about her life. She'd been born into a fairly good demon family, lost her parents in the war against humans, and become an

assassin for the demonic army so she could provide for her sister. After decades of conflict, she had mastered powerful sorcery and come to be feared among humans and demons both. And then, over fifty years ago on the battlefield, she'd come to the realization that she had nothing in life.

The many strangers she'd cut down had had their own families and lives. Remembering the family she herself had once had, she'd grown keenly aware that it was meaningless to kill just because she'd been ordered to. Now that she'd achieved prestige in the military, she could leave her sister in a decent home. To ensure that her sister didn't have to follow in her footsteps, my mentor had faked her death on the battlefield and left the army.

That was likely why she'd been kind to shady individuals like myself and that woman.

Despite successfully escaping her meaningless existence, my mentor was still a demon, which meant being shunned by other races. She'd had no choice but to turn to society's underbelly, where strength was valued over race. And part of that underbelly was the Assassins' Guild, where she'd even taught sorcery to Dino, son of the then head of the branch in the Northern Border District.

"Listen carefully. This is important. I can't fight like I used to anymore, but not just due to how long I've been doing it. The primary reason is in here," she said, using a finger to tap her chest over her heart.

Cere'zhula had affinities for four different elements. Generally, this would be considered a sign of excellence, but history showed that most such heroes didn't live long. According to her, it wasn't because they got killed for their hero status, but rather because of the aethercrystals in their hearts.

Having an affinity for up to three elements wasn't much of a problem. However, heroes with exceptional talents who possessed all six elemental affinities ended up developing enlarged aethercrystals, which shortened their lifespans. My mentor, with four affinities, had pushed herself too hard over the course of her life and was no longer able to fight for prolonged periods of time.

Indeed, I recalled Elena mentioning her four affinities and that excessive aether had damaged her body. If Cere'zhula's story was to be believed, then perhaps the princess's young heart couldn't withstand the enlarged

aethercrystals. Maybe her body's rapid growth had been an evolutionary response to curb the strain on her heart from her increased aether.

With four affinities, one could still live a full life if one didn't push oneself too hard. However, some noble families of sorcerers, wanting the utmost excellence, would force many affinities upon their children despite knowing it'd lead them to early graves.

Similarly, the divine gifts that could be obtained in dungeons and such were too powerful for ordinary humans, and using them would significantly reduce one's lifespan. My mentor warned me never to go for such opportunities should they arise. Truly, there was a catch to anything that sounded too good to be true.

"Here. A parting gift," Cere'zhula said, offering me her old equipment.

The fabric items had largely been ruined over the past fifty-some years, but the short boots and gauntlets made of monster hide only needed a wipe of a cloth to regain their former luster.

"They're a little large for you right now, so you'll have to wait a bit," she added. "These boots are made from the hide of a monster called a nightstalker, and excel in acoustic absorption. Also, leather items made from high-level monsters will repair themselves over time with moisture and the wearer's aether. See how the soles are regenerating as we speak?" On top of that, the boots had several built-in gimmicks, useful for close combat.

Cere'zhula also gave me a left-hand gauntlet fitted with magic steel, a miniature crossbow that had a short range but could be concealed on the body, and various potions and potent poisons, along with a pouch made of monster leather she'd once used.

"Alia. My unsociable apprentice. I want you to live, and find your own meaning in life. Understand?"

"Yes...mistress."

Target confirmed.

Amid the trees, at a distance from Cere'zhula's hidden abode, a young man—a lookout for the Assassins' Guild—watched as a child left the home. Combatwise, he was only Rank 2, but his specialty was monitoring targets with his Level 3 Detection and Level 1 Far Vision. He'd been assigned to watch Cere'zhula and her disciple to ensure they didn't attempt to flee.

While Cere'zhula, as a dark elf, wouldn't have been able to easily blend in with human society, her apprentice was a different story. The watchman's primary duty was to observe and ensure that the child, who'd accepted a job from the guild, didn't do anything suspicious.

Dino had never trusted Cere'zhula or her disciple to begin with. He didn't think the dark elf would cross the Assassins' Guild, but he'd considered the possibility she might secretly help her apprentice escape.

What's that?

The child suddenly vanished from sight. The watchman could still faintly sense her presence thanks to his Level 3 Detection skill, but the accuracy of his surveillance relied on combining that with Far Sight, and thus it diminished once he could no longer see her. Regardless, he could sense that the child wasn't headed toward the animal trail that led to civilization—rather, she was headed toward *him*.

Wait. Did she notice me?

Likely the child had been on alert since Dino's visit, but sensing a man hiding in the dark woods from this distance should've been difficult with ordinary Detection. The watchman held his breath and waited as he felt the child's presence pass him by, a few dozen meters away.

Just as he exhaled in relief, thinking maybe he'd been imagining things, he noticed a blade drawing closer. Instinctively, he lifted his head to dodge it, but the next moment, the thread attached to it wrapped around his neck, yanking him backward off the tree.

"Damn!" he cursed as he fell headfirst, extending his arms to land on his hands. Just before he landed, however, he felt a kick from behind and was sent flying, his head hitting the ground.

A dull *crunch* echoed in his brain as his neck bones shattered. As the man lay on his back, staring skyward with his neck bent at an unnatural angle, his eyes reflected the image of a child gazing icily down at him.

Why was she here? What of the presence that had passed him by earlier? In his final moments, the man's gaze pleaded for answers, but the child—Alia—mercilessly slit his throat with a knife. After confirming he was dead, she spoke, her chilling tone spilling into the darkness around them.

"You've all become my enemies."

The Town with a Chapel

Just as I'd suspected, Dino had sent someone to keep an eye on me.

Cere'zhula was unable to oppose the Assassins' Guild, and not just because she could no longer fight for prolonged periods of time—she was a dark elf, so securing a safe place to stay in a human nation must've been struggle enough. She could've fled, but that would've meant relying on the dark side of society once more.

But I was different. I was human, so I could flee anywhere, blend into any settlement if I had to go into hiding. That was precisely why Dino'd had to assign someone to monitor me—not to ensure I'd do the job but to use me as leverage and keep my mentor under his thumb. I was still a child, and so Dino had probably been doubtful from the start that I could really do the job. But since he could keep me tied to the Assassins' Guild, he'd readily agreed to let me take my mentor's place.

There was something twisted in Dino's heart. I could see in his eyes the pleasure he took in using me to torment Cere'zhula mentally. But twisted as he was, he'd been far too accepting of this change in plans. Even I, despite being an apprentice sorceress, wouldn't have trusted a child with assassination. So, when he left so readily, I'd been certain he'd assigned someone to keep watch—and indeed, there'd been a lookout.

Finding him had been difficult, since he specialized in surveillance, but as long as I knew for certain someone was out there somewhere, I could find them

through my ability to see mana as color. As a precaution, I'd created an illusory copy of myself—through a spell called Shadow—so I could approach him under Stealth, catch him off guard, and finish him off with my pendulum. I'd anticipated that his specialty wasn't combat, but it had nevertheless been a stroke of luck that I'd managed to take him down without a fuss.

I was now an enemy of the Assassins' Guild, but I didn't want my mentor to know this yet.

I took what money the man had on him, drained his corpse of blood to make it lighter, and carried it to a place rife with wild beasts to discard it. That way, wolves and such would take care of it, down to the bones.

It was time to leave. After the five months I'd spent in this forest, the season had changed from early summer to late autumn, and I, now eight years old, had grown enough to look about eleven. I might have lacked bulk and weight, but I had agility close to that of an adult, which meant I could fight them better than before. My hair, too, had grown considerably—Cere'zhula had trimmed it, but other than that, I hadn't bothered to keep it short. I kept my longer hair in a braid wrapped around my neck so it wouldn't get in the way.

"See you again, mistress," I murmured.

I didn't know yet whether I'd ever come back. There was no guarantee I could; I'd already said my goodbyes to my mentor, but still. With those four final words, I hoisted my belongings onto my shoulders and ran toward the spot where I'd set up my makeshift base. I wasn't going to go directly to a human settlement—five months had passed, so any surveillance set up by Graves's organization had likely relaxed by now, but even so, it was best not to let my guard down just yet.

I still had one thing left to do before leaving this noble's territory, though. Winter was approaching, but in the southern Kingdom of Claydale, it didn't get cold enough for snow. Camping without a fire had nevertheless grown a bit more difficult, but thanks to Boost, my body didn't suffer any ill effects.

After two days of navigating the forest using Stealth, Night Vision, and Detection, I arrived at the makeshift base; it felt nostalgic now. It was partly buried under dead leaves, but that was better than having to rebuild from

scratch. I used a branch to sweep away the leaves, replaced the rotting sticks, and burned some insect-repelling herbs. Then I went to the riverbank, collected clay, and returned to the base to start working on something.

The next day, I walked the night streets, keeping my face concealed under a shawl. I was glad to have arrived before the season had grown fully dry; my mentor and I had estimated a grace period of about half a year, but there had always been the possibility we'd been wrong. Nevertheless, I'd asked traveling merchants about a certain rumor before going into the city and confirmed that I'd made it in time.

That thing must've been unable to move while on the mend, barely clinging to its existence, tormented by intense hunger. It must've been struggling in a state of near death this entire time, but as the air began to dry, it must've reached its limits. Thanks to my previous experience, I had an idea of where it would be, and knew it had to be nearby. No doubt it would attack again in hopes of regaining its former strength.

Blending in with the dark of night, I used Flow on the waterway near the Sayles home, releasing water imbued with aether. I could sense its presence approaching rapidly; it was coming.

"I'm here to finish this, water spirit," I said.

▼ Lesser Water Spirit

Aether Points: 135/503

Overall Combat Power: 148/533

[Afflictions: Madness, Weakness]

So it was alive. The husk it had inhabited had helped prevent it from evaporating, and although Graves had destroyed that with a combat technique, the spirit within wasn't so easily undone. Still, Graves had certainly done me a favor. Now the spirit had possessed the waterlogged corpse of a stray dog and had no more energy to use magic. Instead, it attacked me directly by puppeteering the corpse.

With Martial Mastery, I avoided the attack, then chanted, "Harden" and launched a solidified pellet—a roughly two-centimeter ball of clay—from a small slingshot. The last battle had taught me that it was enough to simply deplete the spirit's aether; there was no need to be particular about the type of weapon.

I continued to sling pellets at it while dodging its attacks, not missing the mark even once, gradually chipping away at its aether. Its movements were sluggish, and it was afflicted with weakness. I really wished I could've finished it the first time around; nevertheless, I couldn't leave the water spirit be and endanger the Sayles siblings. Besides, I had my own reasons for wanting to defeat it myself.

Despite not fussing over the type of weapon, I'd made a small clay knife. Combat skills grew significantly through real, life-threatening experiences. I'd trained for five months and defeated the giant spider, but my skills hadn't improved.

"I'll use you as fodder for my growth," I said as I put away the slingshot and readied the clay knife to attack the spirit head-on.

I'd seen this combat technique several times and etched it into my memory and soul; Viro had used it to defeat bandits, and that female thief had used it against me. I imbued the knife with aether and fearlessly faced the approaching water spirit, fully confident that it would work.

"Double Edge!" I chanted. The incantation activated the Level 2 Dagger Mastery technique, smashing the corpse's fangs and piercing its forehead.

The aether-infused skill shattered the water spirit's defenses, and the earthelemental aether from Harden pierced through its core. With a silent death cry, the stray dog's bloated corpse released a massive amount of water, and the spirit's aether dissipated, leaving behind a glistening tear-shaped aethercrystal.

▼ Alia (Alicia)

Species: Human♀ (Rank 2)

Aether Points: $112/165 \triangle +5$

Health Points: $92/110 \triangle +5$

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Strength: 6 (7) \triangle +1
Endurance: 6 (7)
Agility: 8 (10) \triangle +1
Dexterity: 7
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 2] \triangle +1
[Martial Mastery Lv. 2]
[Throwing Lv. 2]
[String Manipulation Lv. 1]
[Light Magic Lv. 2]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 2]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 2]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 2]
[Intimidation Lv. 2]
[Stealth Lv. 2]
[Night Vision Lv. 2]
[Detection Lv. 2]
[Poison Resistance Lv. 1]
[Basic Scan]
Overall Combat Power: 143 (Boosted: 162) \triangle +15
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I wonder if it's returned to the spirit realm, I mused as I held the aethercrystal and gazed up at the night sky.

Both the victory and reaching Level 2 in Dagger Mastery had left me with a sense of fulfillment. The Level 2 skill would be essential for my future battles, and I couldn't have afforded to wait for my body to grow before acquiring it. Since it wouldn't have improved by fighting ordinary opponents, I'd wanted to

forcibly speed the acquisition along by cutting down a special foe, giving my absolute all to get the skill to activate.

Normally, it was quite difficult to acquire a Level 2 combat skill prior to turning ten, but I'd finally done it. I couldn't afford to bask in the afterglow for long, however; though they were a ways away, I could hear voices coming from the Sayles estate, alerted by my use of aether and a combat technique.

I immediately used Stealth and concealed myself in the dark of night. A quick glance in the direction of the estate revealed Maria and Rody, the Sayles siblings, peeking out anxiously from the terrace on the second floor. I had figured they were safe but was nevertheless relieved to see it.

With everything settled, I was about to leave the area when I thought I heard Rody's voice mutter, "Alia..."

I left the town in the Barony of Sayles and headed toward my destination, avoiding main roads and daylight as much as possible. I reverse traced the path I'd taken here from Dandorl six months ago, and it took me about ten days to reach the Countdom of Haydel.

There were two major cities in this territory. One was a thriving mercantile city centered on the Haydel estate, and the other thrived in industry and was home to many craftsmen. Important facilities like the Adventurers' Guild and the Traders' Guild were in the city where the count resided, but my business was in the other city.

The city was distinctly divided into a residential area to the south, where the craftsmen lived, and an industrial area to the north. Mornings and evenings were busy, with craftsmen going to and fro, but the city was surprisingly quiet and calm during the daytime. This was because at the border between the residential and industrial areas stood one of the largest chapels in the northern part of the country. It towered high above the low-rise city buildings, so it was quite conspicuous.

My destination was this chapel—which could also be called the regional headquarters of the Assassins' Guild. From the outside, one might have been doubtful that it was related to the guild at all, but according to both my mentor

and the note from Dino, the chapel was indeed the right place. My mentor had given me the exact location, unlike Dino's note, which only detailed how to find a guide.

Though I was hiding my face with the shawl, I didn't want to use Stealth much while in the city. Given that I didn't know where members of various organizations might be watching from, using Stealth wouldn't keep me hidden so much as be a dead giveaway as to my true identity.

I spent the day exploring the town. The next day, I went to the area where food and general goods were sold and tossed a silver coin to a beggar in one of the back alleys there. "I need a *guide*."

"To where?" he asked, swiftly catching the silver coin with one hand and slightly raising a dirt-streaked eyebrow.

"To the graveyard."

"Follow me." He stood up without a sound and walked ahead, with me following a few paces behind. This beggar was a guide to the Assassins' Guild, but not just any guide; he was likely also monitoring this area and had combat power of around Rank 2. "Heard about you from the boss. You really *are* a kid."

"You're not going to verify my identity?"

"We don't have to fear being caught by the local lord. Even if you're a spy from some other territory, acting funny would get *you* executed, not us."

"Right." So the lord was in cahoots with the guild.

"This is as far as I go. You're on your own from here. You want 88-6."

The location was a massive underground cemetery, accessed by a set of stairs next to the chapel. I walked through the darkness, barely illuminated by cheap tallow lamps, and went inside a mausoleum labeled "88." I opened the sixth coffin within, revealing another staircase leading farther underground. I descended the stairs, walking through a narrow and suffocating passageway before emerging into an open space.

As I stepped out of the passageway, I saw a young woman with bright red lips in a strange black dress. She gave me a sinister grin. "We've been expecting

you, dark elf's little apprentice."

The Assassins' Guild

Underneath the chapel, a young woman, wearing an odd dress and sitting atop a table that looked like it'd been carved out of rock, welcomed me to the Assassins' Guild.

She looked to be in her mid, perhaps late, teens. Her skin was startlingly pale, her features beautiful, her long black hair neatly arranged in a pair of springlike curls on either side of her head. The black dress she wore was ornately decorated, and she looked like what, according to that woman's knowledge, would be called a "Gothic Lolita."

"You're that demoness's apprentice, yes?" she asked, examining me as I eyed her in turn. "You have some aether, I suppose, being a fledgling sorceress and all, but can you actually kill anyone with that combat power? Well, if nothing else, you'd make a good target for knife-throwing practice." The words flowed like venom from her bright red lips.

"And you are?" I asked.

"Above you, newbie. Mind your tongue," she cautioned. "I'm not a fan of brats who don't know their place. I might just accidentally kill you."

I said nothing in response.

▼ Gothic Lolita Lady

Species: Human♀

Aether Points: 115/120

Health Points: 173/177

Overall Combat Power: 242 (Boosted: 297)

She was surprisingly strong, despite how she looked. With her stats, she likely had at least one type of elemental mastery, but I estimated her combat style to

be that of a Rank 3 lightweight fighter, or perhaps a throwing specialist. It was unusual to reach Rank 3 before the age of twenty, so if she had this much combat power at her age, she had to be quite skilled.

But was this one of the guild's assassins?

"What's wrong?" she asked, still perched atop the table. "You're the apprentice of a demoness, yet you can't even greet people right? Well, you look decent enough. Maybe I'll keep you as a pet, if I like you enough. Are those ashes in your hair? I think I'll call you 'Cinders.'" Her lips twisted into a smile and she pointed the polished tip of her black leather shoe at me.

What, is her idea of "greeting people" making me lick her shoes? I wondered. No chance. Worse comes to worst, I'll just fight her. Or...no, maybe she's been actively trying to goad me into doing just that. I likely couldn't beat her in a proper fight. I could win if I used one of my trump cards, but I didn't want to reveal my hand just yet. Now what? She's the kind of person who would take advantage if I showed any weakness, but I don't want to cause trouble here on my first day either...

"Kiera, what do you think you're doing?"

The Gothic Lolita girl turned her head slightly in the direction of the sudden voice, and I, while keeping my focus on her, also shifted my gaze toward it.

"Nothing, Dino," she replied.

"Then why are you here?" Dino asked.

"I had some time to kill, and I just figured I would teach the newcomer a thing or two, that's all." She chuckled.

"Is that so?"

The man who'd walked in on the conversation was Dino, head of the Assassins' Guild's Northern Border District branch. Based on his exchange with the Gothic Lolita girl, her name was Kiera, and she'd apparently known I was coming and decided to taunt me on a whim.

I supposed not every member of the Assassins' Guild was taciturn. Kiera's expressions were mercurial, changing at the drop of a hat. Gone was her

overwhelmingly coercive attitude, replaced by an innocent smile. Like other guilds, this one was full of free agents, but what stuck out to me was that they seemed even more eccentric and individualistic than adventurers.

Dino furrowed his brow slightly at Kiera, seemingly thinking it futile to say anything more, then turned toward me and gestured like a stage actor. "The Assassins' Guild welcomes you, Alia, my fellow apprentice."

"So, what about the job?" I asked.

"Fellow apprentice of mine you may be, but you're certainly a square," he replied. "Ah, well. You can loosen up with time. For now, allow me to show you the place. Our members should be around at this hour."

"Aw, I could do that," Kiera purred, smiling at me. She sounded innocent, but ever since Dino's attention had shifted to me, I could sense a faint malicious intent coming from her, just enough that only I would have noticed.

She seemed to be more of a killer for sport than a proper assassin. Why was someone like her in the guild? Did this place employ more murderers than trained assassins? How annoying.

"You two stop that," Dino reprimanded Kiera, seemingly having noticed her provocation. "Personal quarrels are prohibited within the guild. Drawing a weapon and attacking a fellow member *will* result in penalties. Are we clear?"

"Okaaay," Kiera replied cheerily. She hopped off the table casually, as though going for a stroll. But—

Swish.

Using the momentum of her jump, she slashed at me playfully with a knife she had concealed in her sleeve. I turned my face away, dodging it with minimal movement. I didn't trust her in the slightest, and the fact that there were rules and penalties in place to deal with unsanctioned attacks meant that there had to be people in the guild willing to commit such acts. This young woman was unbelievable in more ways than one, but I'd fully believed that she'd do something.

This was one of various possibilities I'd anticipated, and so, just as her knife left a small scratch on my cheek, I lightly cut hers in turn, using a concealed

weapon of my own. Maybe due to the unexpected counterattack, Kiera jumped back in surprise as our blood splattered through the air.

Keeping her in my sights just in case, I called out to Dino. "You're not going to say this is my fault, right?"

"I suppose not," he said, exasperated. I'd been attacked, after all, and he couldn't simply tell me not to retaliate.

"M-My face. She cut my face..." Kiera's voice was a low growl, her whole body exuding a murderous aura. "Cinders! You little worm! How dare you?!" she yelled, raising her knife blindingly quick.

"Kiera!" Dino snapped, stopping her before she could attack me again. "Keep this up and I'll deal with you myself! Your behavior has been a problem before, and if you intend to continue causing us trouble, we will target you for elimination."

The young woman fell silent. She might have been angry, but she hadn't snapped so badly she'd risk challenging the Assassins' Guild. She glowered at me silently, her eyes full of hatred.

Sighing, Dino once again turned to me. "And you, Alia, don't fall for her provocation either. Now then, allow me to give you a brief tour of the guild before we discuss your job."

"Got it," I replied, wiping the blood from my cheek and following Dino deeper into the guild. I could still feel Kiera's hateful gaze boring into me until her figure disappeared from view.

I hadn't wanted to, but I'd nevertheless caused trouble. That woman was a nuisance. Was her face really that important to her? Regardless, a child like me daring to injure her precious cheek must've been quite a blow to her pride.

If this guild was full of people like her, this was going to be a real pain. During the tour, however, I hardly saw anyone. "Not a lot of people here."

"Don't lump us in with places like the Adventurers' Guild or the Thieves' Guild. They'll take in total beginners," Dino replied. "We don't pretend at being goody-two-shoes like adventurer scouts, nor are we driven by foolish greed like thieves."

I'm pretty sure I've heard similar things from both a scout and a thief...

Given the nature of the work, members of the Assassins' Guild consisted only of those who had received special training, possessed special techniques, or had a special talent. To even reach the gates of the guild, according to Dino, one had to have already come to terms with taking lives.

There were tens of thousands of adventurers in the Kingdom of Claydale, beginners included. And counting the beggars and criminals from the slums, the Thieves' Guild had even more people than that. Meanwhile, due its high level of specialization, there were only a few hundred members of the Assassins' Guild in the entire country. They also hired surveillance and other such collaborators in each city, but to become a member, one had to kill.

This estimated number of assassins, however, was inaccurate. There were also professional hit men operating independently and assassination groups working under nobles. The biggest reason it was impossible to fully assess their numbers, however, was that it was difficult to ascertain whether an assassin who went missing after a job was simply lying low or actually dead.

According to my mentor, the number of branches of the Assassins' Guild in this country could be counted on the fingers of one hand. The Northern Border District branch took on assassinations throughout the region, which included the Margravate of Dandorl. Yet, according to Dino, even in a branch that encompassed such a wide area, there were fewer than a hundred bona fide members who could be physically present at the guild.

Even a sparsely populated guild like this should have had someone capable of healing Kiera's face with Restore. But if her pride was wounded too, not even I could heal it. Not that I'd want to.

I followed Dino silently. There were few people around, but I could sense something faintly—like eyes in the darkness. I was being watched, judged. Was I useful? Could a child be an assassin? What were my weapons? What was my combat power? How to best kill me? I could feel eyes on me, trying to answer those questions.

"Is something the matter, my fellow apprentice?" Dino asked.

[&]quot;No," I replied quietly.

Dino's lips curled into a small smile. What an awful man. Granted, I'd never doubted that. "Really? Well, then. To start, let's go over the request I was going to make of our revered mentor."

After the quick tour, Dino took me to a place with chairs that seemed to be some sort of break room and began his explanation.

The targets were a four-person party of adventurers called the Mercenaries of Dawn. Though they were categorized as a Rank 4 party, in reality, only their leader was Rank 4, while the rest of the group was apparently Rank 3. Dino referred to them as "would-be" adventurers: they weren't given to honest adventuring and instead were habitual con artists.

Sometimes, adventurers were tasked with the retrieval of precious materials or items. However, when the items retrieved were worth more than the commission, these individuals would report the mission as a failure and make off with the loot.

But this time, they'd picked the wrong mark. The client had been a noble who'd commissioned them to retrieve a family heirloom, which they had then absconded with. While the client could've reported them as criminals and pressed charges, or left the matter to the Adventurers' Guild to handle, the stolen item was seemingly of a private nature. Thus, the noble, seeking both payback and the recovery of the heirloom, had entrusted the Assassins' Guild with the assassination of the party and the retrieval of the stolen property.

"But first, as I told you initially, I'd like to conduct a test to see whether you're really up to this task. If you can indeed assassinate the targets I will assign to you, I'll consider you up to par. However, if you fail or run, Cere'zhula will have to take responsibility. You understand, yes?" Dino explained in a slightly threatening tone.

"And what are the details of this test?" I asked coolly, my expression unchanging.

Dino shrugged theatrically. "Our client is a former adventurer. Our targets are a trio of adventurers. However, their main trade isn't adventuring—the three of them are confirmed members of the Thieves' Guild."

The thieves had attacked the former adventurer at a specific location, where

he and his childhood sweetheart were caught in a trap and he'd had to watch them murder her. He'd appealed to the guards to apprehend the culprits, but due to the unique circumstances of the crime scene, there had been insufficient evidence to charge the murderers with anything. Despondent that the law had failed him, the former adventurer had turned to the Assassins' Guild, wanting the thieves dead even if it meant incurring a large debt.

The location in question was a place ordinary people dared not approach, and deaths would not raise suspicion. The thieves were a gang of "rookie hunters" operating primarily in dungeons.

Renewed Resolve

The first mission the Assassins' Guild had assigned me was the assassination of a group of "rookie hunter" thieves posing as a party of adventurers called the Bladefangs.

Back when my former mentor still took on jobs for the guild, she'd had an agreement with the guildmaster that she wouldn't take on any requests from evil clients. Those terms, it seemed, would apply to me as well. However, the reason Dino had approved this specific mission likely had less to do with that and more to do with the fact that if he ordered me to assassinate a civilian and I failed and got arrested, he'd have had to deal with the possibility that I might leak information. Plus, he probably didn't want the hassle of covering up his failure.

While failure to kill a civilian meant arrest, failure to kill a criminal meant death. It goes without saying which option one who had to protect the organization's secrets would choose as my test.

"You will be compensated for this test," Dino explained. "Consider this advance payment. Complete the test successfully and you'll be paid tenfold."

He flicked a few coins at me, and I snatched them out of midair. *Three gold as advance payment?* I wondered.

One gold coin was roughly equivalent to a month's pay for a young adult who'd just entered the workforce. A young couple with children could live on

two or three gold per month, so thirty gold was comparable to a year's income and might've seemed like a fortune to many. Considering the job involved a fight to the death with three thieves, however, the amount was questionable.

But if the guild took half of the commission, then a rookie adventurer facing premature retirement would've had to incur significant debt to make this request.

"Also," Dino continued, "there are weapons in that room back there, to the right—either equipment that could still be useful or items left behind by former members. If there's anything you can use, feel free."

"Got it."

The guild was spacious, seemingly a repurposed coal mine. The chapel aboveground had apparently been built to honor the victims of a mining accident centuries ago and was now a minor tourist attraction.

In an underground coal mine, one would've expected the air to be stagnant. I could feel a faint airflow, however, indicating there were likely ventilation shafts somewhere. There were hardly any lamps around, probably to help prevent air stagnation and because most of the members had Night Vision. There might have been other reasons too.

As I reached the room where Dino had said the weapons would be, I chanted, "Shine," illuminating the area.

There were indeed weapons, but the place was less an armory and more a warehouse, with most of the weapons being coated in dust or having rust on their blades. If these had once belonged to deceased assassins, that was to be expected. Though none of it was impressive, there were still some throwing knives as well as metal honing rods that could serve as whetstones.

As I picked them up, a young man's voice called out from the entrance. "All junk, right? Are you the newcomer? Cinders, was it?"

"Who are you?" I'd sensed his approach, but since he'd made no effort at all to be subtle, I'd decided to simply wait.

"Me? Call me Guy," he replied. "Nice to meetcha, Cinders!"

▼ Guy

Species: Humanð

Aether Points: 90/95

Health Points: 255/270

Overall Combat Power: 251 (Boosted: 294)

The young man, who had the dusky skin typical of the Krus people, flashed a friendly smile, baring his white teeth. He seemed to be about...twenty? His combat power wasn't much different from Kiera's, but given his aether points, his strength likely came not from being able to fight over a long period of time but rather from high physical ability. And assuming that to be the case, even if his combat power itself wasn't very high, he was probably as capable as a higher-end Rank 3 in a fight.

And his name was Guy, he'd said. It was a common male name in the country. Easy to remember, easy to forget. Either way...

"What's this about 'Cinders'?" I asked.

"You had a li'l run-in with Kiera, didn't you? Her voice travels far. I heard her."

Was he talking about when she'd yelled at me for cutting her face? Not that I minded being called Cinders. In fact, it was likely that Guy, with his overly common name, and maybe even Dino and Kiera were using pseudonyms.

Out of everyone I'd met in the guild, this Guy seemed the most decent. I didn't know if he was actually decent, and come to think of it, since he was an assassin, he couldn't truly be called "decent" no matter what his character was like, but he was probably more trustworthy than Kiera, at least.

"So, Guy, what are you doing here?" I asked.

"I was curious what kinda person the famous Cere'zhula's apprentice would be," he explained. "I didn't think you'd be this young, though. And I'm sure you've noticed, but there aren't a lot of upstanding people around here. Make sure you stay away from the likes of Gord and the Sage, mind you. They've made a whole lot of us disappear."

"The Sage...?" I echoed. That was obviously not a name.

Guy went on to explain that this Sage was an elderly wood elf shaman, nearly five hundred years old, who researched curses. Under the guise of conducting experiments, he habitually cursed his fellow guild members and had caused many to meet their ends without leaving behind any evidence.

And, as a wood elf, he was hostile toward my mentor, a skilled dark elf sorceress. That hostility could easily pose a threat to me as her apprentice.

Curses, huh, I pondered. My mentor's lessons had covered them. They were a form of sorcery that involved complex rituals to control or harm targets from a distance. My mentor had categorized the field as "impractical" due to the mismatch between the effort required to prepare curses and their overall effectiveness, but I could see now why she'd been so openly disdainful of them. She'd told me that there was a sorcery user in the guild, and she would've never approved of sorcery specializing in inhumane acts, so they must've despised each other's favored methods of spellcasting.

Guy warned me about many other individuals to be cautious of in the guild: Mad Sharga, a dwarven berserker; Rahda the Shadow Weaver, an assassin specializing in shadow sorcery; Delightful Kiera, the lying seductress; and of course the Sage, the old elven shaman. Most dangerous of all, however, was the name he'd first mentioned alongside the Sage: Gord the Executioner.

"Do you hear that faint voice, like a groan?" Guy asked.

I listened quietly. I'd thought it was just the wind passing through the ventilation shafts, but now that he mentioned it, I could indeed hear what sounded like the groaning of a living creature.

"That dude's not a man; he's a monster," he explained. "He's not all there, so he can't be a proper assassin, but he'll come out when a guild member's been targeted for elimination."

"Huh..." So *that* was why Kiera had backed off so readily when Dino threatened her with elimination.

"Welp, stay away from him and you're good. Oh, by the way, you get a mission yet?"

"The rookie-hunting thieves."

"Right, yeah, that one. It's more trouble than the pay's worth, so it was kinda in limbo. Can you do it, though? Not to, like, call you incompetent or anything, but it's a tough first job for a kid, isn't it?"

"Won't know until I try."

"Sure, I guess. Just don't go dying on your first go, all right? This guild won't hesitate to use a kid if they think it's worth it. I mean, if a target's guard is down, even a kid can use a nail or something to kill 'em. But this? This is pretty damn lethal for a first job. Careful, yeah?"

"Got it."

With a friendly smile that seemed to be an attempt at encouragement, Guy left the armory, his gait light as a breeze. I wasn't sure what his deal was, but thanks to him, I'd gotten the gist of quite a few things. How accurate any of it was I didn't know, but it was still useful as basic information.

Dino had readied a room for me at the guild, but I wasn't planning on using it yet. Even while talking to Guy, I could feel a hostile presence, always scrutinizing and suspecting me. Just being here put me at constant risk of death, and the underground facilities had this slight but pervasive *reek* of something. That same day, I left the Assassins' Guild and set off for my destination, avoiding people along the way.

My current targets, the thieves calling themselves the Bladefangs, were based in a town in the Countdom of Sentrae. The town had a dungeon and was located about a week's journey to the east of the Margravate of Dandorl.

A dungeon... I was already aware of those thanks to my knowledge, but since it was my first time visiting one, I needed to organize the information in my head.

Typically, a "dungeon" meant an underground prison, particularly in the

basement of a castle. In this case, however, it referred to ruins or mazes taken over by monsters. And by "taken over," I don't mean that monsters simply lived there; I mean they had *literally* taken over the ruins and become one with them.

The creatures were akin to ancient hermit crabs, transformed into monsters through mana. These "hermit crabs" had survived by inhabiting caverns in lieu of shells. They drew in living beings and lived off their aether and life force. In order to efficiently obtain this "food," they needed to make creatures fight each other to the death. For that purpose, dungeons had evolved to absorb even the knowledge from the residual thoughts of dead creatures. They were clever, capable of attracting monsters with low intelligence and even using minerals and other such materials to generate items of interest to humans.

It was said that in the kingdom's three largest dungeons, there were spirits—born of humans' residual thoughts—that granted "gifts," or blessings, to those who reached the dungeons' depths. These places were managed by the kingdom, however, and so it was difficult for thieves to infiltrate them. Therefore, thieves used midsize dungeons, like the one near my destination, as hunting grounds.

After a quick stop in town to stock up, I headed for the Countdom of Sentrae. The journey there from the Countdom of Haydel involved heading south, going into the Margravate of Dandorl, and from there heading east for about ten days. I figured I could make it in a week if I hurried, but I'd be pushing my limits, since I'd also be training along the way.

I wasn't strong enough yet. I'd done basic training under Cere'zhula, but I had yet to gain enough experience for it to be reflected in my skills and stats. My mentor's plan for me had been intensive training in the basics until age ten, with my abilities gradually growing in tandem. But an unforeseen circumstance had forced me to leave the forest while still weak.

Nevertheless, I chose to take this as an opportunity.

Stumbling upon my mentor and being taken under her wing had enabled me to sleep properly for the first time in years. That, however, had been nothing but childish dependence on my part. Without realizing it, I'd been relying on my

mentor's kindness like an ordinary child. Acidic though she might have been, she must've noticed my need for care, given my youth, and protected me.

That wasn't good, however. I understood that now. My progress during the five months I'd stayed with her had clearly been slower than during the three months when I couldn't sleep well. Now I had to reforge my mind and body to their limits. I was still just a child, so in order to take a stand against Graves and protect those dear to me, I had to undergo training severe enough to put a strain on my mind and soul.

Thanks to Cere'zhula, I'd managed to fill many of the gaps in my knowledge, and she'd taught me new skills and how to handle weapons, all of which was indispensable for my growth. To save her, to save Elena, to acquire the strength I'd need to face my destiny head-on, I had to keep moving forward. No stopping. Not even for a moment.

This forest would normally have been lacking in opponents powerful enough to kill me. Thankfully, the Assassins' Guild had graciously provided.

Staying away from towns and roads, I rushed through the night forest, suppressing my presence. The woods were my training grounds, full of beasts and monsters with stats surpassing my own. I had to be stealthy, sense their presence and intuit where they were, see through the darkness, and use all of my physical abilities to dash through the shadows and hone the skills and techniques I'd learned.

A surprised growl echoed through the night as a hobgoblin crossed my path, both of us momentarily stunned by the head-on encounter. I buried my emotions deep in my heart before the creature could regain its senses.

Letting out a breath, I struck upward at the hobgoblin's jaw, using the palm of my glove inlaid with magic steel. I slipped under its flailing arms, disappearing from its sight while simultaneously wrapping the cord of my pendulum around its thick neck. It yelped in shock, but I didn't let it see me.

As the string tightened around its neck, the hobgoblin, not understanding why it couldn't breathe, began to panic. I moved behind it and gave it a sharp kick to the back of the head with the heel of my boot while pulling the cord with all of

my body weight as if to lift it off the ground. Suffocated, the hobgoblin collapsed with a whimper, and I finished it off by stabbing my black knife into its ear, piercing its brain. The forest was silent once more.

I bear no grudge against your kind, I thought. Chance made us enemies. That was all there was to it.

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▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human (Rank 2)
Aether Points: 158/170 \triangle +5
Health Points: 123/130 \triangle +20
Strength: 6 (7)
Endurance: 7 (8) \triangle +1
Agility: 10 (12) \triangle +2
Dexterity: 7
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 2]
[Martial Mastery Lv. 2]
[Throwing Lv. 2]
[String Manipulation Lv. 2] \triangle +1
[Light Magic Lv. 2]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 2]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 2]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 2]
[Intimidation Lv. 2]
[Stealth Lv. 2]
[Night Vision Lv. 2]
[Detection Lv. 2]
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[Poison Resistance Lv. 1]  
[Basic Scan]  
Overall Combat Power: 171 (Boosted: 190) \triangle +28
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My mentor had taught me that combat skills didn't grow strictly through physical prowess. Knowing the precise locations of blood vessels and organs as well as how to incapacitate enemies through precise attacks—those things made both saving and taking lives easier. Skills grew through both physical ability *and* knowledge. That was the true reason I'd been able to learn skills and fight in only a few months, despite being a young child.

I continued to sharpen my mind and body during my travels. Ten days later, I arrived at the territory of Sentrae, located along the eastern coast.

The Rookie Hunters

"Welcome," the middle-aged shopkeeper said with a frown as the bell attached to the door jingled, announcing a new customer.

This was the town pharmacy, run by an alchemist. Though it was called a "pharmacy," it sold more than just medicine to cure injuries or illnesses; it also sold rat poison, weed killer, and a scant few alchemical materials.

The customer was draped in a worn-out cloak that concealed their entire body, their face hidden behind a hood. Since shady people looking for dangerous potions or materials occasionally came to this store, the shopkeeper had assumed this was one such customer. Not that the alchemist discriminated against suspicious types. Those who concealed their faces in particular might be servants of nobles, purposely dressed in dirty attire, and so refusing them outright could cause problems later on.

"Do you sell monster parts?" the customer asked. The voice indicated this was a young woman or child.

"We do, but only the ones that can be used for alchemy," the shopkeeper replied. "If you're looking for the rarer stuff, go to the Adventurers' or the Traders' Guilds."

The customer shook her head and placed her order, which included items that were commonplace in this town as well as a number of the more unusual materials in stock.

"You sound young. Are you an alchemist?" the shopkeeper asked, curious about the purchase. "That's a very unusual combination. Can you tell me what it's for?"

Just before walking out, the customer stopped for a moment and turned back slightly. "Pest control, that's all."

The main road from the capital to the neighboring country, the Dukedom of Gaudre, passed through this territory—the Countdom of Sentrae. Although its capital wasn't as grand as Dandorl's, it was quite prosperous. Maybe that was because it was a coastal city? A faint, strange smell lingered in the air, and I realized it was the "smell of the sea" that my knowledge spoke of.

Thanks to my training on the way here, both my travel clothes and cloak had grown quite dirty. Normally I would've snuck into the city through the slums or some other suitably inconspicuous location, but today I also wanted to visit the Adventurers' Guild, and so I'd cleaned myself with Cleanse before coming in through the main gate and paying the toll of one silver.

It's about time for a new outfit, I thought. Though I was clean, the gatekeepers had still given me odd looks because of how shabby my clothes were. I guess I need to take slightly better care of my appearance if I'm going to avoid suspicion.

First, I pulled the hood of my cloak over my face and took a look around the city. Most of the major facilities lined the main street, and just about anywhere, the Adventurers' Guild would be adjacent to the Traders' Guild. My target was a group of thieves who attacked rookie adventurers, and most of their crimes took place in dungeons, so I needed to stop by the Adventurers' Guild for information about said dungeons, but there were other things I had to take care of first.

To kill time until everything was in place, I had some soup at a stall and listened to the owner's stories. According to him, there was only one dungeon

nearby, said to be inhabited by insect-type monsters.

"So, the dungeon, right," the owner of the stall said, "it's all bugs in there, and it's not like 'you can hunt bugs' is gonna be the city's claim to fame or anything, y'know?"

"Is there nothing good about it?" I asked.

"Well, yeah, there's one thing. Apparently you can harvest the bugs' guts and get stuff to make medicine. Which...gross, but also, it makes meds cheaper, so that's nice. Even if, y'know, it's still no grand claim to fame."

"Hmm..."

In this world, where living creatures were enhanced by mana, sickness wasn't very common. Ordinary folk did sometimes get sick, but most illnesses could be treated by drinking fortifying tonics and resting.

So you can get materials for tonics from the bugs in the dungeon here, I mused. That meant I could possibly find something of use. I decided to find a reputable alchemist's shop and check.

After stocking up on alchemical materials, I waited for nightfall while blending into the city's streets. Just before the stroke of midnight, I reached my destination: the largest church in the city. The confessional there was open all day but always empty. I walked in, sat on a wooden bench, and waited.

The clock tower chimed once, signaling it was midnight, and I heard the faint sound of the lock on a magical tool clicking open. I lifted the previously unopenable seat and retrieved a stack of documents stored within, set down a handful of silver as payment for the information, returned the seat to its original position, and left the church.

This was a big city, so even at this hour there were people milling about in taverns and such. As I stepped out into the streets near the church, however, there wasn't a soul in sight. I took a look at the *presumably* deserted streets and sighed softly before disappearing into the slums.

I went into an abandoned building and began going over the documents I'd

obtained. They contained information on my targets, collected by a local contact. The most recent document was dated two days ago, meaning this intel was essentially up-to-date. According to it, the rookie-hunting thieves going by the name of Bladefangs had been to the dungeon, located about a half day away from the city, and stopped by the Adventurers' Guild at noon two days ago.

Their modus operandi was to "work" on a weekly basis, spending four days in the dungeon (counting the amount of time needed to get there and back), then resting for three days. During their downtime, they'd scout their next marks, who were usually beginner adventurers of Rank 2 or lower. If the target seemed affluent, the group would rob them of their money and equipment. They'd abduct the better-looking ones to sell through the Thieves' Guild.

In the event they couldn't find any suitable targets, however, they'd operate as ordinary adventurers rather than hunting people at random, thereby avoiding suspicion about their true nature as thieves. However, their reputation as adventurers had recently dropped. The client who'd ordered the hit on them had disclosed their activities to the guild. But without evidence, there was no way to punish them. In fact, rougher adventurers might even have sympathized with the thieves, believing the rookies they hunted to be at fault for their own misfortunes.

With the Adventurers' Guild keeping an eye on them, it was possible that the Bladefangs would change their base of operations, so prompt action was required.

"Spark," I chanted, setting the documents ablaze. Once they were fully disposed of, I left the abandoned building.

I had a plan of sorts. The rest came down to whether I had the ability to execute it. There was one more thing for me to deal with, and in order to handle that along with everything else, I infiltrated a private home, hid in the barn, and began to craft a little something.

The next day, I cast Cleanse on myself to freshen up and went to a decent-looking secondhand clothing store, one I'd scoped out the day before, as soon as it opened.

"Welco—" The young woman, who seemed to be a shop assistant, froze midgreeting as she saw me walk in fully concealed in a dirty cloak. "Um. This is a secondhand women's clothing store."

"That's fine," I replied. "I'm a girl, mostly."

Somewhat perplexed, the assistant blinked at me as I lowered my hood to reveal my face. I'd dispelled the illusion that made my hair look like it was covered in ash; without it, I apparently looked more feminine. Finally, the assistant's suspicion faded, her expression turning into a smile.

"Are you a traveler?" she asked. "From the way you're dressed, I thought you might be a street urchin. If you're looking for more clothes like that, we do have some clothes for younger boys, though our selection is small. Feel free to look around, and—well, there aren't any other customers yet, so I'll help you look."

Her tone had become more accommodating once she realized I was a child. Since I didn't have much knowledge about clothing, her offer was helpful, but I wasn't looking for children's clothes.

"Do you have anything more feminine-looking?" I asked. The reason I was shopping for clothes was to look like a girl, which might sound odd considering I was in fact a girl, but I very specifically wanted to dress in a feminine manner.

There were two types of secondhand clothing shops: those selling cheap, used items for commoners, and those selling relatively high-quality items given up by wealthy individuals or minor nobles. This store was an example of the latter and had decent items for sale. With the assistant's help, I picked out an elegant, easy-to-move-in green dress, a pair of lace-up fabric boots, and a new cloak. Though she gave me a suspicious look because of the shabby clothes I'd been wearing, she let me change inside the store.

When I emerged from the dressing room, her gaze changed. "Can I style your hair?" she asked.

"Sure?" I replied.

"And maybe put on a little bit of makeup?"

For some reason, she breathed heavily as she fiddled with my appearance for half an hour. When she was done, she looked a little tired but had an

My preparations complete, I went into the Adventurers' Guild. Immediately the faint buzzing of murmurs and chatter quieted down, and I sensed people looking at me—the same kinds of looks I'd gotten on the way here.

Most adventurers in this city hunted monsters outside or headed into the dungeon to obtain aethercrystals and materials. However, since the guild sometimes offered well-paying jobs like escort missions and manual labor at the port, many adventurers stopped by in the morning to check out the latest requests.

Previously, when Viro had signed me up with the guild, there had been a distinct feeling in the air, as though I would've been accosted without him there. This time, however, the way people were looking at me was different.

"Welcome to the Adventurers' Guild," said the receptionist. "How may I help you?"

"I want to register as a new adventurer," I replied. "I'm a Level 1 light sorceress."

The receptionist's face twitched slightly at my request, and the guild was abuzz once more.

One of the reasons I'd come to the guild was to falsify my identity and name. I suspected Graves's organization was monitoring my previous registration. They likely thought me dead, but it was best to be cautious, so having a throwaway adventuring license under a fake name was a smart move.

The other reason was to set a trap. The receptionist had likely twitched because of how few commoner mages there were, and because young light sorcery users were at risk of being taken advantage of by other adventurers, then cast aside. But I was depending upon that very fact as I baited my trap.

"This way, please," the receptionist said quickly and stiffly. She took me by the arm and led me into the back, where she scolded me for talking openly about my abilities in the guild, as I'd thought she would, and lectured me that I was now at risk of being taken advantage of. Sadly, her warning fell on deaf ears.

"I understand," I replied, using the polite mannerisms and speech I'd learned during my training as a maid. "Please, proceed with the test."

"Y-You're serious."

I knew she was worried about me, but I had my reasons. She looked as though she was about to scold me again, but as an employee of the guild, she couldn't refuse my request. I used Restore to relieve a guild staffer's back pain and thus successfully became "Anya," a Rank 1 light sorceress.

The name I'd been using, "Alia," was also fake, but one could never have too many alternate identities. An adventurer whose goal was to make a name for themselves had no reason to register with the guild multiple times, but for those involved with the underworld, using aliases was common practice.

"Please wait for about half an hour," the receptionist said in a slightly sour tone.

While I waited for my guild identification card, or "tag," I gazed upon the request board on the wall, full of labor-intensive tasks such as construction work. The whole time, I felt multiple probing gazes on me. I was wearing a green dress, lace-up cloth boots, and a lightweight cloak resembling a cape. My hair was down and I was holding the kind of weathered staff typical of sorcerers. I had a knife at my waist and a leather bag slung over my shoulder. It all came together to make me look like an inexperienced fledgling sorceress.

Having grown taller, I looked to be over eleven years old. Thanks to the strange exertions of the employee at the secondhand clothing store, I looked to be twelve, or maybe a petite thirteen-year-old. The disguise might have cost me around a full gold coin in total, but it was reusable, and given the substantial discount I'd gotten, I considered it a sound investment.

Though I could feel people watching me, no one seemed like they wanted to engage. I'd attempted to dress like a young lady from a minor noble family, but perhaps a more casual look would've been better? I'd already attracted attention and registered with the guild, though, so it was too late to go for something different now.

Just as I was about to resign myself to waiting a few days, I heard someone speak up hesitantly behind me. "U-Uhm, are you, uh, alone?"

"Yes?" I replied, turning around to see a group of men...no, young boys, aged maybe fourteen or fifteen.

"We've been adventurers since the summer," one of the boys explained. "But we're all frontline fighters and don't have any sorcery users..."

"R-Right!"

"So, if you like, maybe you could join us...?"

Not what I'm looking for, I thought to myself. "My apologies." I declined politely, bowing my head to avoid confrontation, but they gave no answer. When I lifted my head, I saw them all frozen in place, their faces red. Genuinely perplexed, I cocked my head.

"Uh, it's just, um," stammered the boy who'd first spoken, his stutter drawing the attention of other adventurers.

Did I upset them? Maybe I overdid the whole young lady act?

"Hey! You kids!" came a sudden voice, interrupting my train of thought. "You're bothering the little lady!"

Three adventurers, looking to be in their midtwenties, approached us. One of them had interjected and reprimanded the boys, and the other two took the boys by the shoulders, pulling them away from me.

Though intimidated by the evidently stronger group of adventurers, the boy who'd initially approached me persisted. "W-We're proper adventurers, I'll have you know!"

"Oh, are you?" the older adventurer retorted. "Then go outside and hunt some goblins instead of bothering girls."

One of the adventurers glared slightly at the boys, shooing them away, and they reluctantly left the guild, casting repeated glances back at me as though hesitant to leave. Once they were gone, the short-haired man who'd first interjected offered me a reassuring smile.

"Now that was a situation, wasn't it, little miss?" he said in a concerned tone.

"It's dangerous for a pretty girl like you to be all alone."

"But we sent them scurrying, so you're safe now," another man added.

"Not all adventurers are like that lot. Plus, they're still young. Cut them some slack, yeah?" said the third. I took note of their overly friendly smiles and the way they used soothing words while hinting it was unsafe to be alone.

"Thank you very much," I replied quietly, bowing my head and offering them the businesslike smile Sera had taught me. I wasn't very good at it, and they seemed to charitably interpret it as me still being apprehensive of them.

"Are you nervous?" one asked. "Don't worry. There's nothing to be scared of anymore."

"Those guys seemed pretty fixated on this young lady, though," another said. "Are we sure it's safe?"

"They might be lurking outside," added the third. One had reassured me, and the other two had subtly stoked fear under the guise of casual remarks.

"I see," I said, frowning slightly as if truly troubled by the situation.

The first man flashed me a bright smile and proposed in a practiced tone, "Well, if you'd like, you could stick with us today? And tomorrow, maybe? Just until we're sure you're safe."

"Ooh, good idea."

"That'd put us at ease too."

After feigning a moment of consideration, I gave an apologetic nod. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble..."

A man with short hair wielding a sword and shield. A red-haired man with an axe and a bow. A bald man dual-wielding swords. Their appearance matched the intel I'd received.

Now this is what I'm looking for.

The three members of the Bladefangs had become famous within the Adventurers' Guild. For all the wrong reasons, of course.

Several young adventurers who'd had dealings with them had gone missing in the dungeon. In dungeons, where death was always close at hand, it was common for beginners to lose their lives to carelessness. The Adventurers' Guild hadn't thought anything of it until one half of a young male-female adventurer pair brought an official complaint stating that the Bladefangs had attacked them in the dungeon.

However, bodies in dungeons were often consumed by monsters, and with no corpse left behind and no evidence to be found, the group hadn't been charged with any crime. Instead, the guild had grown suspicious of them.

"Can't believe that guy survived and made it all the way to the guild with wounds like those."

"We've been blinded by success. Instead of trying to sell that girl, we should've just killed her like usual and taken their coin."

"And she died anyway just so that guy could escape. It's about time we hopped towns. If we attract too much attention, the Thieves' Guild will have our hides."

While the three were adventurers, they were also thieves affiliated with the related guild. And they weren't masquerading as either: they really were both, but thievery was their true calling. As low-ranking thieves lacking in proper thievery techniques, they didn't commit crimes in towns, where skills were a must, and had instead come up with the idea of preying on rookie adventurers in dungeons and making money that way.

Thieves didn't ordinarily kill civilians because the Thieves' Guild thought the exposure was more trouble than it was worth. Since the scene of the crimes was a dungeon and the targets were adventurers, their activities had been in more of a gray area; however, now that this incident had aroused suspicion, the Thieves' Guild had begun to keep an eye on them as well.

"I mean, I don't mind moving wherever, but do we have enough money to last us until we're back in the swing of things?"

"You spend too much, man. Have you even been paying the guild their dues?"

"Either way, we've gotta get our hands on a bit more coin. This sucks."

To start their "work" anew elsewhere, they'd need to pay their dues to the local branch of the Thieves' Guild, which for low-ranking thieves like them was a painful expense. They'd decided to work in this city a bit longer to earn the necessary funds, which presented another problem: they could probably only get away with it one or two more times. The coin to be made from killing rookie adventurers was insignificant. Kidnapping girls was a better choice, but they lacked the skills to do it without hurting them.

Until this point, they'd been selling their victims to the guild regardless of injuries, even if it meant a reduced payout. But if they were to earn a significant amount of money over a short period of time, they couldn't afford to inflict injuries that would leave scars. Still, with combat abilities at around only Rank 2, it was very possible that if their targets—women, yes, but also adventurers—fought back, they could end up killing them like they had last time.

One particular night, however, as though sensing their dilemma, a certain thief had approached the group. "You guys need any sleeping drugs?"

The dark-skinned Krus youth, whose face they hadn't seen before, had flashed them the Thieves' Guild's sign. Supposedly, he was short on cash to pay his dues to the local district branch, and so he was offering the drugs at a low price of three silver coins. It was still costly for the group but far cheaper than having to pay a healer to handle wounds on the victim.

They'd figured that in order for using the drugs to be worth it, upon confirming their effectiveness, they needed to find a mark that would be guaranteed to sell for a high price, so the next day they'd stopped by the Adventurers' Guild looking for prey and spotted a girl.

This young girl was a fledgling sorceress, having come to the guild to register herself. And not just any sorceress—a light sorcery user, a rarity outside of the Holy Church. Between that and her beautiful features, she'd immediately attracted the attention of every adventurer in the guild. Or, more accurately, she'd caught people's eyes the moment she'd walked in, before anyone knew about her sorcery skills. Though she was still young, there was *something* about her that naturally made people want to look.

It was understandable, then, that those young boys had been so taken with

her. She'd likely been born into a good family; despite wearing a cloak and carrying an old staff, she had a refined demeanor that hinted at a noble lineage. Based on her attire, she seemed to have coin, and she looked good too. She was still far too young for that type of work, but a well-educated girl could go for a small fortune to a noble buyer. The fact she could use light sorcery only made her even more valuable.

Whether due to naivete or because the trio had come to her aid and offered her words of comfort in the face of the boys' persistence, she'd readily agreed to accompany them for a few days.

Her name was Anya, and she was twelve years old. Her newly issued guild tag had confirmed her name and status as a novice sorceress. Since the trio's reputation was poor, the receptionist at the guild had been keeping a wary eye on them, but she'd also seemed frustrated by the girl's naivete in some way. The men had taken advantage of this and managed to lure Anya out of the guild.

"You're an adventurer," one of them had said, "so you must be curious about dungeons, right? Want to try exploring one?"

It wasn't easy for new adventurers to explore dungeons; besides knowledge, one needed various things like lanterns, food supplies, and, if the plan was to camp there, thin blankets and other such items. So they'd subtly implied that she might not get another chance to enter a dungeon with experienced adventurers as her escorts, and Anya had hesitated for a moment before nodding gently.

She's cute, they'd thought. Not because they had any sort of interest in children, of course. But something about Anya and the way she hadn't said much and had only given them small nods—whether it was out of embarrassment at being treated like a princess by older men or something else—had gotten a genuine smile out of the men, even though they were planning on kidnapping and selling her.

The dungeon was a half day's walk from the city. It was still daytime, but if they were to set out on foot now, it'd be evening when they arrived. Anya might not feel comfortable staying there in such a scenario, or the guild might send people after them; therefore, they decided to hire an express carriage. While that made it look like they'd fled the guild with Anya, which meant they'd no longer be able to find "work" in the city, the girl alone should fetch enough coin for plenty of profit, even taking into account the carriage fee.

Anya had that *something*, after all. She didn't seem very talkative by nature and spent much of the carriage ride looking out the window at the passing scenery. Still, she exuded a somewhat ephemeral aura, reminiscent of a flower blooming just out of reach. It made them hesitate to speak to her.

The girl was cute but not a dazzling beauty. She was quiet and not particularly winsome. Still, there was something strangely bewitching in Anya's mysterious aura. The men knew she was still a child, but they still couldn't seem to take their eyes off of her. All grown up, how many men could she charm? How many would forsake their fiancées and positions to pursue her? The men felt a collective chill run down their spines.

As they silently admired her peach-tinged golden hair shimmering in the breeze, Anya suddenly turned around, her jade green eyes making their hearts leap in their chests. "Are we there yet?" she asked.

"Oh, uh, almost," one of them replied.

Once they finally reached their destination, the medium-sized dungeon came into view. In the roughly three hundred years since its inception, it had only generated about thirty floors, making it relatively beginner friendly. Originally, it had been a natural cave, but since turning into a dungeon, it had developed flat and wide corridors with faintly glowing rocky surfaces, making it easy for people to enter and monsters to settle.

It was largely populated by insect-like creatures such as caterpillars. Hunting them offered no benefits other than gathering aethercrystals and harvesting their entrails to make medicine. This meant that many areas of the dungeon had gone unexplored, with a lot of blind spots people didn't venture into.

"This way, Anya," one of the men said.

"There's a good hunting ground this way."

"Don't tell anyone else, all right?"

To ensnare the girl, the trio lured her deep into the second floor of the dungeon, away from prying eyes. Their lack of combat ability made it difficult for them to capture targets unharmed, but they'd been gradually mixing sleeping drugs into Anya's drinks during breaks and meals, a little at a time so as not to risk death by overdose.

However, even with the drugs in her lunch and later tea, Anya's condition had remained unchanged. Were we too cautious? the short-haired man wondered, glancing over at the girl as she followed behind the group without suspecting anything.

The red-haired archer was the one responsible for spiking her food and drink. Though he was a womanizer, he was neither the type to go for little girls nor the type to ruin a job by chasing skirts. Still, he was constantly engaging with Anya, trying to get the girl's attention, and that irritated the short-haired man.

He can't be actually going for it, right? Is he being too gentle with her? Is that why the drugs haven't kicked in yet? How serious could it be, anyway? Anya was just a girl. Granted, if they'd met her ten...no, even just five years ago, maybe they'd all have gone on to walk an honest path as adventurers instead of becoming mundane thieves.

As he entertained such thoughts, the short-haired man instinctively gazed away from Anya. It was then that he saw the bald man was also watching the red-haired man with an unamused grimace.

Wait. Him too?! The short-haired man shuddered at how bewitching Anya seemed to be. Maybe each of his two companions was plotting to keep the girl all to himself instead of selling her.

Ten years ago, the three had just left the countryside, radiant and brimming with hope, looking forward to the road ahead, just like those boys who'd approached Anya at the guild. When had this happened? When had they given up on the honest path and started preying on people?

If the boys the trio had once been had formed a party with Anya, maybe they could've gone on to have a glorious adventure. Now, however, that was no longer possible. Even with Anya, their hands were far too dirty. Their future would never again be bright.

But is that true? Is it really? It's hopeless for us three, but what about...just me? It wasn't too late. He could turn over a new leaf. Instead of letting these two charmed fools have her, he could start over with Anya, on his own. Ah...

The short-haired man's vision blurred as he looked at Anya, the mere sight of her making his heart ache. As his mind swirled and he made a hazy attempt to focus on the girl, he saw the red-haired man suddenly collapse and pitch forward, landing face-first on the ground.

What happened? the short-haired man wondered. Was he thinking dirty thoughts? Did the gods punish him for it?

As he tried to take a step toward the red-haired man, the bald man's knees buckled too, and he collapsed onto his belly.

So he was thinking dirty thoughts too, the short-haired man mused, the thought making sense to his hazy mind. These filthy men had been punished for trying to keep Anya to themselves. The gods were watching. They'd given him a chance to start over.

His chest seized painfully, and his vision darkened. All he could see was Anya, her figure growing blurrier and blurrier in the light, and he reached for her as he fell to his knees, as though ready to pray.

What...the? He couldn't understand why he'd collapsed, why he was falling forward. Had they unwittingly triggered a trap? It was fine, though. They had Anya. She knew light sorcery and could surely cure poison.

Prone, the short-haired man reached for the girl again, but what was reflected in his eyes wasn't the compassionate smile of an angel. No, it was Anya's expressionless face, coldly glaring down on them as she drew a sharp black blade.

In a small chamber inside the dungeon, I finished off the three men I'd paralyzed with poison by slashing their throats.

The three adventurer tags should suffice as proof of the mission's completion to the client. They'd been surprisingly easy to finish off, but that was because they'd underestimated me. I'd dressed like this to make them drop their guard,

yes, but if they'd been even slightly cautious, I wouldn't have defeated them so easily.

Since these three had brought me to a deserted area that adventurers didn't normally access, I could leave the disposal of the corpses to the monsters in the dungeon. Now—

Whoosh!

I bent down low to dodge a crescent-shaped sword thrown at my back. The blade passed over me and plunged into the dungeon's earthen wall.

"You can come out anytime now," I called out into the darkness as I stood up.

The air stirred slightly, and a young man oozed out of the shadows. "Well, that's weird. I thought my stealth was pretty good. How long have you known?" It was Guy, the Krus youth who'd told me all sorts of things at the Assassins' Guild.

"Since last night at the church."

"Damn, from the start? Wow, what a blow to my ego."

"Don't lose heart. You were pretty well hidden." Not as well as Viro would've been, though. And thanks to my skills, I had been able to clearly see a human silhouette where Guy had been hiding.

"Not the compliment you think, coming from a kid," he muttered, scratching his head in mild frustration. He gazed at me coolly. "So, how did you sense that attack just now? I mean, even if you noticed it coming, dodging that suddenly isn't easy."

"Never mind that. What's your game here?" The weapon Guy had thrown at my back was something called a "scimitar," a crescent-moon-shaped blade. I had managed to dodge it, but if I'd been any more careless, I could've died. "Don't tell me that's just how you say hello."

"Of course not," he replied with a smirk, drawing a second scimitar from his waist and twirling it in his palm. "It's a request from Kiera. She wants a little payback. Dino's got his eyes on her, so she couldn't come herself. I came in her stead."

So Dino didn't want me—his leverage over Cere'zhula—killed. He knew Kiera might've tried to do just that, which was why he was keeping an eye on her.

"And hey, Cinders, how come you're not surprised? I played the role of nice guy perfectly, didn't I?"

"You don't seem surprised either. Did you guess my gender?"

"I mean, I'll say, dressed like that you're like a whole other person. If I didn't know better, you'd have fooled me for sure. But see, while most people don't know this, when a kid grows up enough, you can tell by the position of the hips if it's a guy or a girl."

"Huh..." I didn't know that. I'd keep it in mind.

"Anyway, you got them good. They even tried to drug you. Bet they didn't think you'd be poisoning *them* instead," he said, stepping toward the corpse closest to me and giving it a kick. He stopped just shy of reaching me, with the dead thief between us. "I gave them a potent drug with no smell or taste too. Incompetent jackasses..."

With Poison Resistance, one could indeed resist poisons to an extent, and that included the active ingredients in sleeping drugs. I *had* figured the thieves were using a potent drug, but the knowledge that Guy had been behind it went to show just how serious Kiera had been about her request.

"Either way, you being skilled is as far as your luck goes. Sadly, Kiera has it out for you. She'll be content with just a big scar on your face, so be good and tough it out, yeah? And try not to be so pretentious from now on, kiddo. You want to live a long time, right?" Guy gripped his scimitar, radiating malice. His aether was low but his stats were high, so he'd be a tough opponent in a straight fight.

"Okay, but I still haven't told you why I wasn't surprised and how I managed to dodge your sneak attack earlier."

Though Guy remained poised to strike, my words gave him pause. "Huh?"

"So about that," I began, strengthening the spell I'd been casting this entire time. "One, I fully believed Kiera would try something."

"What was that? Huh?!" Guy asked with a puzzled expression. He

attempted to take a step forward but ended up dropping to his knees, and his voice took on a confused tone. "Wh-What the...? Wait...you poisoned me?!" Bewildered, he stared at his immobilized legs. "When?! There's no way you had enough time to give me such a strong poison!"

As an assassin, Guy could probably resist poison to some extent. Potent poisons would nevertheless be effective, and he should've been cautious and considered the possibility I'd use one against him. Instead, he'd mistakenly thought I'd poisoned the rookie-hunting thieves by spiking their meals with something weaker—powerful poisons usually smelled and tasted strong, which meant one couldn't mix them into food. I could've coated my weapons with something, but I hadn't attacked Guy at all.

"Why won't my legs move? Damn it..." he muttered.

"This is a neurotoxin made from spider venom, crafted by my mentor. It's quite effective even against Poison Resistance, isn't it?" If one didn't have any resistance, the poison would muddle one's thoughts and eventually cause organs to cease functioning. Conversely, thanks to Guy resisting it, he hadn't been able to detect it initially. "I've been using poison this entire time."

I threw my spare ceramic bottle on the ground before Guy, and it shattered into pieces. He exclaimed, "This is...!"

"Recognize it? It's made with bugs' scent glands. You've smelled it before, right?"

The liquid was pungent but also smelled faintly sweet. It had been processed from the scent glands of a caterpillar monster, which I'd purchased at an alchemist's shop. The monsters marked their territory with that scent, so the smell permeated just about the whole dungeon. It could be diluted and used as pesticide, but in its purest form, it also acted as a monster repellent. I'd been using it to prevent monsters from interfering with my assassinations, and for one other reason.

"It's so pungent it can mask the smell of even small amounts of potent poison," I explained.

"Cinders... You..." he muttered, his eyes opening wide as he realized what I'd done. "You spread lethal poison into the air, knowing it'd get you too?!"

My mentor's poison was indeed potent. Even with Poison Resistance, I wouldn't have survived it. But I knew what it was made of—I'd been casting Detoxify the whole time. It wouldn't have been effective if I hadn't known the poison's ingredients, and the spell was weak, capable only of gradually neutralizing poisons. But vaporized poison it could handle.

Still, if I'd stopped concentrating for even a moment, the poison would've gotten me, which meant fighting head-on would've been difficult. I'd gambled with my life—and won.

Guy glared at me incredulously as this all dawned on him, then let out a nervous laugh. "You can't be serious. You're willing to poison *yourself*? You're out of your damn mind."

"I'm aware."

"Seriously? You're actually gonna take me on? You think you'll get away with this just because I attacked you? You have no idea what's gonna happen to Cere'zhula if you do this, do you?"

I was being used as leverage against Cere'zhula, and threats to her safety kept my own hands tied. That was why Dino and Guy and the rest thought neither I nor my mentor could defy the Assassins' Guild. They were missing a crucial detail, though.

"You may be an assassin, but you're not very sharp, are you?" I asked.

"What...?"

I hurled a second ceramic bottle at Guy. Thinking it was poison and still able to move his upper body, he tried to deflect it with his sword. However, I'd thrown my pendulum along with it, and the tip of its blade damaged the bottle, causing its contents to splash everywhere.

"Wait... This isn't poison?" he asked. "What's this smell?"

"The poisonous fumes in this room should dissipate soon. I could spread more, but there's no longer any need."

Guy looked shocked, as though he'd realized something. Without attacking him, I retreated into the back of the dungeon chamber, leaned against the wall

with my arms crossed, activated Stealth, and watched. Panicked, he began to struggle. Ten seconds... Tens of seconds... And before the count of a hundred, the distant sounds of monsters swarming closer echoed through the air.

"Cinders!" he called out as he desperately tried to flee the area where I'd spread the concoction. He couldn't move more than a few steps, however. "Are you crazy?! You're buying a serious fight with the guild here!"

The first liquid I'd spread was a monster repellent, made from the scent glands of a caterpillar monster. They didn't use their scent glands only to produce the monster-repelling smell, however. During a specific season, the females used these scent glands to attract males.

The second liquid, made from the females' scent glands, emitted a powerful pheromone when mixed with the repellent, thus attracting the male caterpillars in the dungeon. Knowing this dungeon was populated by insects, I'd prepared this little trick as my trump card.

"You die here," I said.

Stealth wouldn't help him. Small though the amount was, the liquid had sprayed onto him as well. As the swarm of monsters descended into the room and began to overwhelm him, Guy tried to fight them off with his scimitar. Though he was unable to move his legs, a few monsters wouldn't have been an issue with his level of strength. But a few dozen of them? Not only that, the more he moved, the more the poison circulated through his system, and the more pheromones he spread, attracting more insect monsters.

"Cindeeeeeeers!"

With a final angry cry, Guy threw his scimitar at me. I dodged it, and this one, too, stuck in the wall. Using it as a foothold, I leaped up to the ceiling to escape the swarm of bugs overflowing onto the floor and stuck a concealed blade of my own into the wall so I could stay hidden against a corner of the ceiling.

Guy stretched out a bloodied hand and weakly muttered something. "...Rah..."

In the cacophony of bones crushing and flesh tearing, I turned to Guy, not knowing if he was still capable of hearing me, and answered his remaining

question.

"Two, you've been my prey this whole time. Every last one of you."

Omens of Battle

"Grandfather, there's something I would like to speak to you about. Do you have a moment?"

Within the royal palace of the Kingdom of Claydale, Prime Minister Veldt Fah Melrose cast a sharp glare at the visitor to his office. Before him stood his grandson, a young man with strawberry blond hair and a smile just as sweet, meeting his gaze without fear.

Mikhail Melrose was the firstborn to the heir of House Melrose. A boy of ten who, thanks to his powerful aether, had grown to around the size of a thirteen-year-old commoner. He had inherited his grandmother's gentle features and youthful smile and was the talk of all the young maids at the castle.

The boy's father, Veldt's eldest son, governed the Margravate of Melrose in place of Veldt himself, who couldn't leave the capital due to his position as prime minister. Mikhail, meanwhile, although not yet old enough to enroll in the Sorcerers' Academy, was at the capital because he was a contender to become one of the crown prince's close associates—or "friends," as it were.

Just as Clara of the Margravate of Dandorl had been appointed as a playmate for Princess Elena, a number of children from prominent families had been selected to be close to the crown prince. Among them, two were said to have built solid relationships with the prince and each other: Mikhail himself and Rockwell Dandorl, Clara's older brother and the eldest son of the grand general.

"You don't crack easily," the prime minister said.

"I'm used to your sharp gaze, grandfather," the boy replied. "And we of the Melrose lineage are not overly given to concern with others' expressions."

"You have a point," Veldt conceded. He and his sister, who had married into the Empire of Kal'Faan, were much the same way. With a frown, he sipped the tea that his steward, Oz, had prepared for him. Members of House Melrose, which had once been the royal family of their own nation, did indeed have that side to them, for better or worse. It allowed them to be frank in their opinions even before the royal family, which in turn allowed them to curry favor with the royals. Veldt and Mikhail were both examples of this tendency.

"She was no different, looking back," the prime minister mused. His daughter had eloped, with no concern for her position, which might very well have been due to the strong character inherent to being a Melrose. If nothing else, his daughter had known she wasn't suited for queendom.

"By 'she,' do you mean the aunt I've heard so much about?" Mikhail asked.

"The older servants speak of her beauty, and I've seen the portraits of her back at the estate. And...I hear rumors of a girl who may be my cousin?"

"Where did you hear that?" Veldt demanded with a glare. The "rumors" Mikhail spoke of should've been known to very few, even within the royal family.

The boy simply deflected the question with a cheerful smile. It was likely that, even at his age, he had his own information network. If so, once the crown prince became king, Mikhail would be a much better fit to succeed Veldt as prime minister than Veldt's own son.

Sighing at his precocious grandson, Veldt continued, "We will be monitoring that situation for a few more years. Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?"

"I would like to speak to you in private, grandfather," Mikhail replied.

"Very well. Oz?"

"As you command," replied Oz, who'd been on standby in a corner of the room. He bowed respectfully to Veldt and Mikhail, then excused himself.

Now, what could possibly be the matter? What could be so confidential that not even Oz, a knight of the Order of Shadows, could hear about it?

"Is this better?" Veldt asked.

"Thank you, grandfather," Mikhail replied. "As you might've surmised, this

concerns His Highness the Crown Prince."

According to the boy, the crown prince had recently taken an interest in the lives of commoners. While that in itself wasn't a bad thing, the prince wished to explore the streets of the capital, not in an official capacity but by sneaking out incognito with friends like Mikhail.

The capital was relatively safe, with regular patrols and guard stations throughout to maintain order, so it was unlikely anything dangerous would occur. This level of security allowed, for instance, the daughter of a count to shop in the city with only about three guards or maids as escorts. However, this was the crown prince—such a thing would not be permissible. Even within the royal capital, he would need to bring around ten guards, and perhaps even fully rent out high-end stores for shopping. His desire to sneak around incognito likely stemmed from the influence of his free-spirited mother, a former viscountess turned queen, known for venturing into the city without proper security.

Truly a thorn in my side, Veldt grumbled inwardly, displeased at the current queen, who, despite her position, still relied on the second queen to fulfill her own political duties.

Picking up on his grandfather's displeasure, Mikhail decided to move the conversation forward. "I did manage to get him to consent to a few guards, at least, but it seems word of the attempted kidnapping of Her Royal Highness during her recuperation has reached him, and he showed reluctance at the prospect of having escorts from the Order of Shadows whom he doesn't already know from the castle."

"I see."

Indeed, that incident had been a failure on the Order's part. Despite the shortage of qualified personnel, only those considered trustworthy by the senior knights within the organization, like Sera, had been assigned to the royal family. Yet an internal investigation had revealed that Graves, despite having served the royal family for nearly thirty years, had intentionally thinned the security around the princess by altering personnel assignments.

Graves had been seen as excessively radical in his younger years, but it had all

been attributed to his loyalty to the royal family. Over the past ten years or so, he'd mellowed out. Considering that *and* his status as a royalist, his motivations for doing such a thing remained unclear.

Maybe it was his excessive zeal that caused him to act out, Veldt mused.

Veldt himself had ordered Graves to confirm the identity of a young girl with peach-tinted hair, but he had abandoned his duty and disappeared. The girl herself had reportedly been attacked by a suspicious individual and gone missing. Veldt had sent Graves on this mission due to personal suspicions regarding another girl claiming to be his granddaughter. He'd wanted to refute these claims, but now that it was uncertain whether the peach-haired girl still drew breath, locating her was impossible.

Sera and Oz's grandfather Hoth was competent, but perhaps he'd been blinded by the fact that Graves was the son of a late friend of his. The reason Mikhail had asked Oz to leave the room was so that they wouldn't be criticizing the steward's grandfather in his presence.

"You could've admonished His Highness yourself, Mikhail," Veldt said.

"How would that have gone, I wonder?" Mikhail replied. "And besides, as someone who will serve him in the future, his sheltered nature and naivete concern me."

"That's quite the bold statement. So? What is it you want?"

"Ah, yes. Well, all of the competent knights of the Order of Shadows are known to His Highness. Therefore, I would be grateful if you could permit the exploration of the capital and lend us a few guards outside of the Order who are knowledgeable about the city streets."

"Knowledgeable about the city streets, you say," Veldt echoed.

While he could've assigned highly competent knights as escorts, the higher-ranking ones weren't particularly familiar with the city streets. Ordinary knights, meanwhile, might have been familiar with them but could end up leading the group to bars or other dubious establishments, which would be quite problematic.

A thought came to Veldt suddenly. Come to think of it, wasn't that group

returning to the capital?

The prime minister rang the bell on his desk and called to a servant outside the door. "Someone send a messenger to the guild and issue a request specifically for the adventuring party known as the Rainbow Blade."

"That was fast," Dino remarked, surprised. "They weren't very highly ranked, but I thought killing three thieves would've taken you longer than that."

I'd returned to the headquarters of the Assassins' Guild's Northern Border District branch within a month—significantly ahead of schedule. Although he knew my overall combat power, he must've expected that a child like me would take much longer or fail. In reality, I had taken only three days after my arrival to complete the job, but I'd also used the opportunity to hunt monsters in the dungeon for a bit.

In that dungeon, Rank 3 monsters could be found wandering alone around the fifth floor. At this point in my training, fighting Rank 1 or 2 monsters wasn't much of a challenge and didn't offer much in terms of experience, so I'd purchased a map of the dungeon's lower levels from the Adventurers' Guild and snuck my way down to the fifth floor using Stealth and Detection.

Dungeons were the realm of monsters, and the laws of the surface world did not apply to them. The environment was richer in mana than the surface, and thanks to that, the monsters could live off of very little food. This also made them perpetually hungry, and any monsters who'd had a taste of human flesh became extremely aggressive.

I lacked combat experience. I'd somehow fought enemies stronger than myself and made it out alive, but I could count the number of those battles on the fingers of both hands. I'd ventured alone into the dungeon to gain as much combat experience as possible, pushing myself to the limits of my stamina and food supplies. While I would've stayed longer, the Rank 3 monsters had stopped approaching me individually, and beyond that floor, they would've attacked in groups.

Not that I'd reveal that here. Likewise, I was wearing a cloak to hinder scans of my combat power so as to not arouse suspicion.

Dino gave me a skeptical look, then sighed and pulled a small leather pouch out of his coat. "All right. Here's the rest of your pay, as promised. And your timing is excellent. Just moments ago, I received more information on the Mercenaries of Dawn from a courier, so I'll be giving you that as well," he said as he handed me thirty gold coins and the information on my next target.

The payment came at an opportune moment, since I'd spent quite a bit of money while on the mission. After a number of reckless battles, I'd had to buy new clothes and a cloak, and my remaining funds had dwindled to only a few silver. I put the gold in my pouch, which I then stuffed into my breast pocket, and checked the documents I'd just received.

Flipping through the bundle of unbleached paper, I skipped the personal information section to take a look at their current activities. "They're in the capital?" I asked.

"It's been some time, so they've left the Northern Border District and headed for the capital, yes," Dino confirmed. "Perhaps they plan on lying low in the major dungeon near there until things calm down."

"Another dungeon..."

"They are adventurers. Taking them out would be quite the challenging task for someone with only assassination skills." The implication, then, was that this was precisely the reason he'd sought help from my master and me, and that I had no choice in the matter. "Ideally, you'd finish the job while they're still in the capital, but it would be a tall order, since security there is tight. We don't have a contact in the area, so maybe I'll send one or two of my people with you..."

"Is there not an Assassins' Guild in the capital?"

This guild was one of several branches across the country, after all. "Branch" implied the existence of a headquarters, so I'd assumed that was in the capital. But maybe not?

Dino gave a theatrical shrug. "It's complicated, my beloved fellow apprentice. We may all be part of the same Assassins' Guild, but we are not a monolith. While we're not enemies—not really—we would be best described as 'worthy rivals' chasing the same objective."

"I see."

So the branches weren't fighting so much as competing for performance. Or, no, maybe it was more like a sense of disconnect from the head office, as might happen in a company that had branched off from a larger one and become independently managed. Even the Adventurers' Guild had a similar side to it, but I thought it silly to go so far as to refrain from sharing information. Still, it was easier for me that way. That concluded the conversation, then.

As I turned to leave, Dino called out. "By the way, Guy left a few weeks ago and has yet to return. You didn't happen to see him during your mission, did you?"

"Why would I have seen him?" I replied.

"I suppose you have a point," he said with a shrug.

I watched him carefully as he walked away. Did he suspect anything? Maybe because the man who'd been put in charge of watching my mentor had gone silent too? But Dino knew my previous combat power; surely he didn't think I could've defeated Guy. And since lone-wolf assassins often disappeared without a trace, he couldn't simply accuse anyone of anything and had to keep his questions subtle.

The members of this guild must've used Scan on me when I first arrived. That had to be why he'd given me a tour of the facilities. And normal people didn't grow significantly in a few months' time, besides which Scan consumed both aether and mental energy, so they wouldn't be using it on me again without a good reason.

And this was exactly the kind of oversight I could exploit.

My business with this guild branch was finished, but I had no intention of taking it easy in the quarters they'd provided me with. I was worried someone would be up to something, so just in case, I decided to take another look around the guild before departing.

I didn't see many people here, but that was because almost everyone had the Stealth skill. I could still sense many of them with Detection, though, so I didn't

imagine they would be good enough to see through my own superior Stealth. Still, given that survival in this kind of environment *required* training in Stealth and Detection, it made sense that individuals who were highly skilled in those areas would be present, even if their overall combat power seemed low at a glance.

One presence I couldn't sense, whether because she was outside or busy with work, was Kiera's. Annoying as it would've been to run into her, her absence was uncanny and posed a problem. Other dangerous individuals in the guild included Rahda the Shadow Weaver, Mad Sharga, and a shaman known only as the Sage.

Based on just her name, I figured finding Rahda would be difficult. Sharga, meanwhile, didn't bother to conceal his violent presence, but that meant approaching him without a plan was risky. Instead, I quietly stole a glimpse of him from behind, at a safe distance. Amid scattered food and barrels of liquor reminiscent of tavern fare sat a dwarf silently guzzling ale, clad in what looked like full-body armor made of magic iron and clutching a halberd crafted from magic steel.

In appearance, he reminded me of a wounded beast baring its fangs at anyone who dared approach. No one would come closer. And no one would take him for an assassin either—yet Dino and his predecessor had both chosen to keep him around, which spoke volumes about his melee combat prowess.

Before Sharga could spot me, I moved away from there and stopped just shy of walking into a certain area within the guild. *Something* was here. This place was different; the color of the mana around me was oddly mixed, hinting at a chaotic, unsettling blend.

What an awful feeling, I thought with an involuntary grimace. Was this a curse? As I stood in place, hesitating to move any farther, I spotted an old man in a robe, watching me from the darkness at the end of the corridor. We stared at each other in silence, keeping a distance of several meters.

Then the strange mix of mana colors slowly encroached upon me, and I stepped back. The old man, presumably the Sage, narrowed his eyes at me. I continued to put distance between us, and the curse stilled before retreating to

its original position.

So the Sage's combat style is defensive. That was all I needed to know for now. After confirming that he wasn't following me, I exhaled, wiping the sweat from my brow. "Even elves age, I suppose," I muttered. A strangely trivial thing to say, considering I'd just narrowly escaped with my life.

As I continued deeper into the former coal mine that now served as the Northern Border District branch of the Assassins' Guild, a low, bestial growl rang out, borne on the wind from somewhere nearby.

I didn't need to come any closer to know what it was. Even my legs grew heavy, unwilling to approach. Most likely no one ventured there, since death was all that awaited any fool who did. Anyone who didn't realize this probably had no business being here in the first place. I pushed my fear deep down into my heart and stepped forward, eventually reaching the "beast" enclosed behind iron bars as thick as a woman's arm and chained at the very back of the cell.

"Gord the Executioner," I murmured, prompting Gord—the source of the low growl—to lift his head.

▼ Gord

Species: ???

Aether Points: 167/186

Health Points: 531/546

Overall Combat Power: 1381

Standing at nearly three meters tall, with long, twisted arms spanning two meters, the man was swaddled in soiled bandages. His clouded yellow eyes harbored a vicious glint, and he suddenly lunged at me with a bestial roar. The chain tethered to the rocky wall reached its limit, and his claws struck loudly against the thick iron bars, missing my nose by mere centimeters.

His entire body was coated in the same chaotic aether I'd seen near the Sage.

Perhaps the Sage had used one of his curses to rob Gord of his freedom. This man was no mere beast either; even through his apparent madness, glimpses of the skills engraved in his soul were evident in his movements.

As I reached out to touch his claws, extended at me as though he were seeking something, Gord withdrew his arms as if in shock.

No one approached him.

No one dared to look directly at him.

No one thought to touch him.

Staring straight into his clouded eyes, I spoke to him softly. "Have patience. I'll prepare a grand stage worthy of you."



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▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human♀ (Rank 2)
Aether Points: 162/180 \triangle +10
Health Points: 132/145 \triangle +15
Strength: 6 (7)
Endurance: 7 (8)
Agility: 10 (12)
Dexterity: 8 \triangle +1
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 2]
[Martial Mastery Lv. 2]
[Throwing Lv. 2]
[String Manipulation Lv. 2]
[Light Magic Lv. 2]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 2]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 2]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 2]
[Intimidation Lv. 2]
[Stealth Lv. 3] \triangle +1
[Night Vision Lv. 2]
[Detection Lv. 3] \triangle +1
[Poison Resistance Lv. 2] \triangle +1
[Basic Scan]
Overall Combat Power: 213 (Boosted: 236) \triangle +42
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Journey to the Capital

The Mercenaries of Dawn were a Rank 4 adventuring party consisting of four members:

Daggart, thirty-one years old. Male, blue eyes and red hair. Rank 4 fighter.

Randy, twenty-nine years old. Male, brown eyes and thinning blond hair. Rank 3 heavy fighter.

Duncan, thirty years old. Male, blue eyes and black hair. Rank 3 scout, former hunter.

Glinda, twenty-six years old. Female, black eyes, brown hair. Rank 3 sorceress, specializing in light and ice spells. Daggart's lover.

These four were my next targets. A nobleman had commissioned them to recover a family heirloom—a necklace—and they had absconded with the loot instead. The wronged client had requested that the Assassins' Guild kill them and recover his property.

"A family heirloom, huh," I mused, unconsciously touching the pouch that hung at my chest—a memento from my mother.

Since my plan was to oppose the Assassins' Guild, I didn't really need to take on this mission. However, Dino had sent one or more associates to keep an eye on me, so I couldn't afford to do a poor job.

I'm just glad they're not good people.

The Mercenaries of Dawn were headed to the major dungeon near the royal capital. They were few in number for a party of their rank but well-balanced. With the right equipment, they could stay in the dungeon for a long time.

It'd be difficult for me to catch up with them on my own if they delved into the deeper layers of the dungeon. If I was to safely eliminate them, it was best done either in the royal capital or in the town to the south where the dungeon was located. If I couldn't catch up with them in time, however, my only choice would be to wait for them to return for supplies.

Nevertheless, the best place to do it was within the dungeon. The royal capital had tight public security, which posed a different type of danger. In the

dungeon, my life would be in danger, but so would theirs, and the more dangers there were, the more openings for me to exploit.

Overthinking things was a bad habit of mine, but by taking various possible scenarios into consideration and devising suitable countermeasures for each of them, I could immediately spring into action whenever something happened. Regardless, right now, acting was more important than thinking too far ahead. There were too many unknown factors about the environment and situation on-site that could easily cause my assumptions and estimates to fall flat. To make more accurate predictions, I needed detailed information.

After leaving the Northern Border District's branch of the Assassins' Guild, I went to a neighboring town and stayed there for about three days, making preparations between the local Adventurers' Guild and shops before departing for the royal capital.

Even during those three days, I was unable to ascertain anything about the guild associates tailing me. I expected they would contact me once I reached my destination, but I wanted to know how many of them there were. As long as they were around, I couldn't act in a way that would arouse suspicion. If there were many of them and I failed to eliminate them all, I'd be exposed as a traitor. I prayed that at the very least they'd be easy to handle if it came to that.

There were two routes from the Countdom of Haydel to the capital. One was the relatively safe route, which Elena must've used, that followed the main road along the coast from the east, through the Countdom of Sentrae. The other was a dangerous but faster route going straight south from Dandorl through a mountain valley.

Likely the main road was faster if one used a private, high-speed carriage like Elena's, but on foot or when taking several shared carriages, it required more than a month. The valley, meanwhile, wasn't impassable by carriage, but ordinary carriages and travelers steered clear of that path due to the avian monsters that often appeared there. A large merchant caravan guarded by Dandorl soldiers passed through once a month, and even commoners could travel with it by purchasing a ticket from the Traders' Guild, but that was very

costly. Ordinary travelers, therefore, commonly took the safer route, if not pressed for time.

I would be taking the dangerous valley route, though; the more dangerous path would allow me to grow stronger in a shorter period of time. After ten days, having crossed multiple noble territories under the supervision of the Margravate of Dandorl, I arrived at a barony near the mountains.

As a vagrant, I could avoid costly travel by steering clear of larger towns. This time, however, I entered the last town and paid the toll of one silver coin, then bought food and other essentials. Afterward, I headed to the Adventurers' Guild to inquire about local monsters.

The guild was deserted. Most of the people there were hunters bringing in parts from monsters they'd happened upon. The staff, lamenting the scarcity of full-time adventurers, told me about the local monsters in great detail.

Various monsters could be found in the valley, but high-ranking ones like griffins would quickly be hunted down and killed by organized bands, and so there hadn't been any sightings of those in about ten years. That, and the creatures tended to favor hunting female quadrupeds, which meant that even in the event of a griffin attack, deer were more likely to be targeted than passing travelers on foot.

For pedestrians crossing the valley, then, the problem came from the smalland medium-sized avian monsters. One such predator was the galebird, an incredibly fast falcon-like monster that shredded its prey before consuming it. Another threat were the giant crows, which would capture travelers and bring them back to their nests to eat.

Though the small galebirds were classified as Rank 1 and the medium-sized giant crows were Rank 2, in terms of difficulty level as determined by the Adventurers' Guild, galebirds were Rank 2 and giant crows Rank 3. The reason for this was simple: they were flying monsters, and the valley offered nothing that could be used as cover nor ceilings to hide under.

Bringing down those creatures was difficult even for adventurers with Rank 1 or 2 in Bow Mastery, and a Rank 2 or 3 fighter couldn't attack unless the birds descended on them. In order to truly hunt these valley monsters, a party

absolutely needed a sorcerer capable of using wind magic and the means to shield the sorcerer from attacks.

Typically, anyway.

Early next morning, while it was still dark, I headed out into the valley on foot and unseen. The bottom of the valley was at most ten meters wide, flanked by sheer cliffs about fifty meters high, and it was dimly lit except at noon. If one had the necessary skills to overcome the darkness, however, the darker hours were actually safer. Though monsters attacked by sensing their targets' presence, these had a smaller detection range in the dark, likely due to their avian eyes.

I'd been practicing a certain shadow sorcery spell on the way here, but it was still difficult to get it to activate, so I continued to practice while walking along the valley. Finally, at noon, the sunlight shining down from directly above illuminated the road, and the monsters found me.

"Here they come."

There was the distant sound of something cutting through the air, and a moment later, my Detection skill caught the presence of something small approaching me from behind. Reflexively, I twisted my body backward to dodge and sliced at it with my black knife, but the presence, too, spun to evade, then circled in the air as if taunting me.

I guess it's hard to hit a flying enemy with a knife, I mused. And if it can move like that, it'd take a lucky shot even with a throwing knife.

My thoughts were interrupted when a second bird came at me from the side, fast as an arrow. Galebirds, the falcon-like monsters, attacked humans in groups. In an ordinary fight, visually keeping track of each one would've been difficult, but the galebird slowed down for just a moment right as it was about to attack. Taking advantage of that and focusing on Detection, I threw my pendulum at the second galebird. As it tried to dodge the blade by spinning in the air, I manipulated the string to match its movements.

The pendulum's blade sliced through the galebird's wing, and it crashed to the ground like a spent arrow. My attack hadn't been lethal, but a fall at that speed wouldn't have left it unscathed. I threw a second pendulum from my left hand, this time in an arc rather than a straight line, and cut through the wing of another of the attacking galebirds. I kept moving, using complex footwork to dodge the flock's attacks and using the pendulums' curved attacks to take them down.

I wasn't worried about accuracy. A thirty percent hit rate was good enough for the blades, and even if the birds managed to dodge those, they still had to dodge the attached string. And the string, made of giant spider silk reinforced with my aether, was resilient enough that the birds' claws couldn't sever it.

A total of about ten galebirds fell within minutes, their wings cut and bodies tangled in the strings. Another galebird, which had stopped trying to approach me and had been circling in the air above me, shot a blast of wind-colored mana at me. They weren't called "galebirds" just for show; they could also use the Level 1 wind spell Gale Cutter.

Wind sorcery was fast and invisible, which made it difficult to dodge, but since I could see the color of mana, I could still evade it with enough distance. Given the galebirds' aether, they'd only be able to use the spell once or twice at most, and if they used it twice, their aether would be depleted, slowing them down significantly. Gale Cutter, therefore, was a last resort for them.

The galebird, frustrated that I'd managed to dodge the spell, flew at me while using the spell at point-blank range.

"Shield!"

A shield of light, about thirty centimeters in diameter, formed in my left hand, and I held it out at an angle, deflecting the brunt of the incoming green mana. Then, as the galebird flew at me, I sliced its wings with my black knife, sending it crashing to the valley floor. The remaining galebirds took to the skies and fled.

The next moment, as if replacing the galebirds, a high-pitched cry echoed through the valley, followed by the sounds of flapping wings. Whether the galebirds had fled from me or were scared of what was coming, I couldn't tell. A huge black bird with a wingspan of four meters descended onto the valley like a shadow splitting the skies in half.

Species: Large Corvid (Difficulty Rank 3)

Aether Points: 69/73

Health Points: 212/215

Overall Combat Power: 145

As the flapping of its wings sent forth a gust of wind, the giant crow flew straight at me. I threw both of my pendulums at it, but the blades were deflected by its black wings, barely scratching them. The intelligent creature, noticing this, seemed to mock me as it aimed its sharp talons in my direction.

At that moment, however, I released a third pendulum from my palm, dodging its talons while wrapping the string around its wings. The giant crow cried out and hurriedly attempted to take flight, but I used String Manipulation to hinder its movements.

The crow shrieked in anger, trying to pull me into the skies by the pendulum's string, but I wasn't going to let that happen. I pulled the thread even harder to interfere with its flapping and quickly struck the heels of my boots together. Blades popped out of the soles, and I kicked them into the ground like wedges. These were the boots I'd gotten from my mentor, and they had a mechanism whereby small blades would slide out of the toe and heel when those were impacted from a certain direction.

Anchoring myself to the ground with the blades in my heels, I put my whole body weight into pulling the string and used Boost at maximum power. Though my overall Rank was still 2, some of my support skills had already reached Level 3. I channeled aether through my whole body with my Level 3 Aether Manipulation and used Level 2 Intimidation to momentarily stop the giant crow's movements.

"Haaaaaah!" I shouted as the beast dragged me across the valley floor through sheer inertia.

The giant crow cried out in fear as I used all my strength to slam it headfirst into the ground.

First Time at the Capital

As the giant crow's dying cries echoed across the valley, its head crushed by the fall, the galebirds that remained overhead scattered like leaves in the wind.

"I think I can catch my breath now..." I'd fought it head-on, without using any illusion magic, as a warning to other creatures.

Monsters tended to be more intelligent than ordinary animals. Traversing this valley would take me several days, and so even under Stealth, there was a risk I'd be attacked while eating or sleeping. Therefore, I'd demonstrated to other monsters that attacking me was dangerous. Thanks to that, even the crag rats I'd sensed nearby, waiting to scavenge the winner's leftovers—mine or the crow's—had backed off.

I slit open the giant crow's torso with my dressing knife and gouged out its aethercrystal. That aside, most of the crow's parts were worthless. The beak and claws weren't sellable, and while its massive flight feathers could be sold for quill pens, they'd only fetch about one small silver each. And even its aethercrystal wasn't that valuable—giant crows had a *difficulty* Rank of 3, but they were actually Rank 2 monsters, and non-elemental besides; the crystal didn't sell for much, barely fetching one silver.

Galebirds, meanwhile, did have elemental affinities. However, either due to their low Rank of 1 or their small size, their aethercrystals were tiny and amounted to junk, and so I decided they weren't worth bothering with. Still, I collected a few of the grounded galebirds for their meat. The crow's meat was tough and far too gamey, making it unsuitable for consumption, but the galebirds' meat, while on the dry side, was perfectly edible.

Using the practical spell Spark, I cooked the galebirds before wrapping their meat in large leaves and storing it in my bag. I'd have liked to use the shadow magic spell I'd been practicing, but I was still not accustomed to it, and because of its high aether cost, it wasn't yet practical.

I untangled the thread of the spare pendulum I'd used to kill the crow, and, with a whoosh, it disappeared into my grip.

The technique I'd used during the fight wasn't sleight of hand; it was a

legitimate shadow spell. Viro had a bag enchanted with shadow sorcery to expand its carrying capacity; through study and experimentation, I'd learned that the essence of shadow mana wasn't shadow itself but rather "shadow-colored particles," and that through a combination of caster intent and precise manipulation of aether, it could take on various shapes and be imbued with a number of effects.

This principle was applied in both illusion and spatial sorcery. The most basic of spatial spells, Weight, didn't simply change the weight of its target; rather, the spell enveloped the target in shadow mana, and thus the motion of the mana moved the target in turn. In other words, the foundation of spatial sorcery lay in enveloping the target with shadow mana.

The bag's enchantment, therefore, was a spell that created a fixed space within the bag by lining its interior with shadow mana, thereby expanding it. Once that was done, items could be freely put in and taken out, and the enchanted bag absorbed the owner's surplus aether in order to maintain its function. Cere'zhula had told me that the requisite sorcery was Level 4 due to the vast amount of aether necessary to structure the spell.

Hearing this, I'd had an idea and asked her about it. She'd thought it interesting and decided to help me think of how to create that particular spell's structure. The plan was to turn myself into an expanded storage space—human bodies always cast shadows no matter what, and there were dark spaces not only in the gaps of clothing and inside the mouth but within the body itself. Assuming these shadowed areas could be turned into tiny pockets of mana, I'd figured that using my own aether to expand them at will should therefore yield the same results as an enchanted bag.

By using the mana already flowing within me rather than casting it onto a separate entity, I could eliminate some of the complexity in the spell's structure. And by using aether each time I needed to take an item in or out, I could omit the part of the spell that created a permanent opening for that purpose.

With these adjustments, the structure became usable with Shadow Magic at around Level 3. But, since mine was still Level 2, I had to focus constantly in order to maintain the shadow pockets, and with my current total aether points,

I could only maintain a pocket large enough to contain a pendulum. This all made it an experimental spell, not yet ready for practical use. I'd have liked to use it to store the cooked meat, though, and for good reason.

According to conventional wisdom about magic, living creatures couldn't be stored in a space expanded by shadow magic, but this wasn't entirely correct. More accurately, living organisms couldn't survive in such spaces. My best guess was that the inside of an enchanted bag was filled with mana rather than air, which in a way made it akin to a vacuum.

There was a misconception that food stored in enchanted bags wouldn't spoil, but the reality of it was likely that the creatures that caused the spoilage —"microorganisms," as that woman's knowledge put it—died inside the bag, thus achieving the same effect as the bottled goods used by sailors, or, as per that same knowledge, "canned foods." However, there was one caveat to this: using these expanded spaces to store fermented foods like cheese killed even the beneficial bacteria, making it unsuitable for preserving such foods.

Regardless, things being what they were, I had to consume the galebirds within the next two days. After storing the cooked meat in my ordinary pack, I continued my trek through the valley toward the royal capital. Just as I'd thought, after I'd made a flashy example of the first few monsters that had attacked me, no others tried. The crag rats that had been watching me before were probably busy with the remains of the giant crow and the galebirds I'd left behind and thus were unlikely to come around for a while.

I'd cooked the meat in bulk so as to avoid needing to use fire while camping. That way, bird-type monsters would only be able to spot me when the sun was directly overhead. It was still winter, so camping without a fire would normally have been dangerous, but since I could rejuvenate my body with light spells, it wasn't that bad. There was little reason to light a fire.

A merchant caravan took about five days to cross this valley, but with my light load and quick pace, I could make it in three. To sleep, I burned some weak animal-repelling herbs and rested in crevices between rocks. I'd become adept at maintaining Stealth even while asleep, so in the absence of cunning enemies like humans, the darker spots that would've been dangerous for caravan folks were safe for me.

On the last day, another giant crow attacked, but there was no need for a show of force this time; I dealt with it safely using a combination of illusions and poison. Once I emerged from the valley, my body felt stiff, so I took the time to stretch my back thoroughly. I'd thought I was somewhat used to camping in dangerous places, but perhaps the tension had still gotten to me.

Even with my knowledge, my lack of experience meant my body would unnaturally tense up in uneven or difficult terrain, leading to fatigue, which didn't happen when traveling on flat surfaces like roads and streets. Up until now, I'd been making do using Boost and what Viro had taught me about how to walk, but going forward, I figured I should train myself to walk normally while keeping the type of terrain in mind. Fortunately, I'd attained Level 2 in Night Vision, surpassing the limits of human ability, so with enough training, I would be able to grasp my surroundings as skillfully as a beastman.

After finishing the last of my meat in a simple meal, I started back on the road to the royal capital. Once I was inside lands overseen by a noble, the journey wasn't that dangerous; I didn't encounter so much as a single bandit, since I was staying off the main roads to avoid being seen. My Level 3 Stealth handily concealed me from wildlife, and although a monster of Rank 3 or higher might have been able to find me, such creatures were rare in populated territories close to the heart of the country.

Or so I thought, until I ran straight into a monster and promptly stood corrected. Granted, I had once bumped into a hobgoblin in the woods, so maybe lightning could, in fact, strike the same place twice. This monster was a muscular humanoid creature about two meters tall with a wide build, but its head was not humanlike, more closely resembling that of a wild boar.

▲ 555

Species: Demi-Beast (Rank 3)

Aether Points: 108/110

Health Points: 343/413

Overall Combat Power: 374 (Boosted: 430)

An orc, perhaps. They were dangerous creatures—born warriors that formed settlements and attacked humans in groups. I hadn't expected to run into one, but judging by its reduced health, I figured this was a stray that had wandered here.

Our sudden encounter had left us less than five meters apart. Yet the orc remained unaware of my presence behind it thanks to my use of Stealth. In a moment, I activated Boost at maximum power to accelerate my thoughts. This was an opportunity. The opponent might have been superior to me, but with my current combat power, it wasn't an overwhelming adversary.

Facing it head-on would put me at a disadvantage given our difference in brute strength, so I was going to use everything I had at my disposal to dispatch it. My plan was an ambush—an instant kill using all of my power. Within five seconds of spotting the orc, I wrapped one of my pendulums around a branch and used my momentum to swing up into the tree.

"Buh?" I hadn't made a sound, but still the orc turned around with a grunt, sensing the slight disturbance in the air caused by my movement.

I was no longer there, however. Using shadow magic, I created the shape and sound of a rabbit leaping into a nearby bush. The orc's senses were keen, and it was instantly able to spot the illusory animal through Detection, which made it lower its guard. I took the opportunity to leap up from the branch. Instead of my usual black knife made of magic steel, I drew a slender knife from my boot in midair.

This slim knife was the last of the ones I'd gotten from Sera. It was of mass-produced steel make, which meant it was unsuitable for cutting, but it had excellent piercing power. As long as the orc had Boost active, the muscle covering its body acted as armor. However, it was distracted, off guard, and relaxed, and so I managed to plunge the slim blade deep into its neck from above, putting all my weight behind it.

"Bwooooah?!"

Before the orc's brain could register the attack, I let go of the knife, pivoted into its blind spot, and used my black knife to slash at the other side of its neck. Though the orc's health points were drained rapidly, my knife halted midslice,

caught on its muscles. I let go of that knife as well, then drew yet another from my waist—the steel dressing knife Feld had given me. Though I normally reserved this one for taking apart game, the blade itself was quite good, with the attack power of a single strike being comparable to that of the black knife.

I circled around behind the orc and, fully confident that it would turn around, brandished the steel knife with all my might. "Thrust!"

As the creature finally realized it was under attack and turned, my Dagger Mastery technique shot through its mouth, avoiding its thick skull, and pierced its brain.

Two weeks after chancing upon the orc, I finally arrived at the royal capital of the Kingdom of Claydale.

I hadn't collected any of the orc's parts other than its aethercrystal. That woman seemed to think orc meat was gourmet, but in reality, meat from monsters like that with foul diets was too gamey to sell. Its hide could've been sold as material for armor and the like, but lacking the time to skin its massive body, I'd decided against it.

"Next," called out the gatekeeper, interrupting my train of thought. It was my turn.

The public gate to the royal capital was one of the most heavily guarded locations in the entire country, but the guards were only human and saw no reason to suspect someone who looked like a child and had an Adventurers' Guild membership tag. I used the tag that said "Anya" and not "Alia" but didn't encounter any issues. Still, I was worried about the possibility of arousing suspicion, since "Anya" had disappeared alongside the rookie hunters, so I figured maybe I should reregister in the capital.

Compared to the relatively new Anya tag, the Alia tag was quite worn thanks to the numerous training sessions and battles it'd been through. It made me realize just how much time had passed. It had been the beginning of winter when I'd left my mentor's home, but I could sense a hint of spring in the air already. It'd been nearly a year since my escape from the orphanage; in another six months, I would be turning nine.

Up until now, I'd been trying to keep my identity concealed as much as possible, but being constantly on the run also limited what I could do. To mitigate that, one option was to get myself a new tag at the Adventurers' Guild in the capital. I had to go there regardless, to gather information on the Mercenaries of Dawn and one other person.

"Galvus's 'oddball' brother lives here, doesn't he?" I figured I should look for him, if I had the time.

Entering the capital for the first time, I took in the cityscape. Dandorl was considered a metropolis, and still the capital looked more prosperous. As I walked through the crowded streets in silence, I felt somewhat unpleasant gazes on me. I was used to being on the receiving end of curious looks, but this was different.

It didn't seem like someone from the Thieves' Guild, nor one of the Assassins' Guild's associates. This city was said to be the safest in the kingdom, after all, so no professionals would be foolish enough to cause trouble out in the open like this. That being the case, this gaze could be from some stupid thugs trying to make easy money off traveling children or newcomers to the city.

I could've just ignored it, but it was irritating. I could've complained to the guards, but nobody had attacked me yet, and I wasn't sure they'd take a vagrant like me seriously. And, well, these might be just the right people to rough up a bit for information. So I moved away from the main street into the back alleys, and the unpleasant gazes followed after me.

Were there three people? Four? Their gait was sloppy, which seemed to indicate these weren't proper thugs but rather young delinquents. There went my plan to squeeze information out of them. With that in mind, I passed through what looked like a tavern district of sorts and headed toward a less populated area. Once I was completely alone, I stopped, and the sounds of footsteps breaking into a run echoed through the alley.

Four people, I confirmed. All boys, mid-to-late teens. As they approached me with smirks on their faces, one of them, probably their leader, took out a small knife as if to show off how tough he was, but before he could do anything—

"Hey! You four! What do you think you're doing?!" echoed a voice from the

entrance of the alley behind them, accompanied by the familiar tall, built silhouette of a man.

"Feld?"

Reunion

"What's yer problem, old man?!"

"None of yer business, old man!"

"Scram, old man!"

Despite the noticeable large build and apparent strength of the "old man" in question, the young delinquents, perhaps emboldened by their numbers, flashed their iron knives threateningly.

This is Feld, right? It was hard to say for certain after a year had passed, but I still remembered him.

At the youths' words, the man, seemingly Feld, cracked a smile so vicious that it was visible even though he stood in silhouette against the backlight. "'Old man' my ass!"

Ah. Yep. That's Feld, all right.

He charged at the teens with his bare hands. Each of the boys had a combat power between 40 and 50, so they likely all had Martial Mastery at Level 1, but Feld with his 1700 combat power couldn't possibly have cared less about whether or not they were armed.

Feld said he was twenty. Twenty-one now, I guess? Well, Feld is Feld. I guess his age and appearance don't matter all that much.

Without much of a spectacle, Feld and his bare fists easily knocked the boys around. Now with a clearer mind, he finally noticed me staring and raised both of his hands with a smile. "You there, you good?"

"Yeah," I murmured. Really, I should've excused myself before getting involved in any trouble. But he'd been kind to me—an urchin he'd only just met, back then—and the first to teach me how to survive. The thought of just leaving

pained me a little.

At my tepid response, he grinned as though baring his fangs. "You know, it figures. You're pretty young, but you look talented. I figured you'd be fine against these guys, but *they* yelled at me to intervene, so..."

So he doesn't remember me, I thought silently. It figured he wouldn't; we'd only been together for a day, and I looked very different from the skinny seven-year-old I'd been back then. Thanks to my aether, I'd undergone roughly three years' worth of growth in just one, and being taller than average, I looked about twelve at a glance. I was also wearing shorts and an oversized shirt, which made it difficult to tell whether I was a boy or a girl.

Nevertheless, if he didn't remember me, there was no need for me to remind him. Back then, I'd been just a child, unable to do anything. That he would think of me as strong now was enough. I needed only to remember his kindness, not to show my gratitude outwardly.

"Who's 'they'?" I asked.

"Those boys," he replied.

I looked in the direction Feld was facing and saw two very handsome boys, seemingly in their early teens, peeking out from the entrance of the alley. There was also a hooded person, likely a woman, behind them. Based on the three's demeanor, I figured the woman was acting as the boys' guard. The two youths were dressed as though they were commoners, maybe the sons of merchants, but the need for guards suggested refinement in their upbringing. I didn't know who they were, but since they were dressed to blend in with the townsfolk, I decided it was best not to get involved with them.

"Hey there," said one of the boys. He had blond hair with just a hint of red, and his smile was overly sweet. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I replied.

"Would you mind extending him your thanks?" he asked, looking at the other boy. "He was very worried, you see."

The other boy, also sporting a genial smile and golden hair, approached slowly. I figured it was best to just express gratitude for now. "Thank you."

"Ah, do not worry about it," the golden-haired boy replied. "Protecting the citizenry is my duty."

So he's a noble after all. In the end, it would've been best for me not to linger after my reunion with Feld. "Still, I'm grateful," I insisted, albeit noncommittally, before trying to take my leave.

The first boy, the strawberry blond, whispered to me as I walked past, "You're dressed like that, but you're a girl, aren't you?" His words were so unexpected that I froze. He moved to block my path, peered into my face behind the shawl, and smiled sweetly. "I'm interested in strong girls, you see. The man who came to your aid said you looked strong enough that you wouldn't have needed help. So tell me, what's a girl dressed as a boy doing, walking into a back alley like this?"

It seemed the second boy was genuinely interested in my well-being, but the first had approached me out of suspicion.

"What's the matter, Mikhail?" the second boy asked.

"Nothing, El," replied the first. "I just can't shake the feeling that this one is familiar to me."

"Huh. Now that you mention it, his hair color is very nondescript, but you two have a similar aura," said El, the golden-haired boy.

Perhaps El's words piqued their curiosity, because Feld and the previously indifferent hooded woman also approached me with interest. This wasn't good, but I couldn't force my way through; it could hinder the job I'd come to the city to do.

Besides, I could sense how capable both Feld and the hooded woman behind him were, and getting away from them would be difficult if they grew suspicious. I owed Feld a debt of gratitude, so I wasn't planning on becoming his enemy. That didn't mean, however, I was about to trust everyone around him.

As I tried to think of a way to leave without a fuss, Feld casually struck up conversation again. "Hey, you're young, but you're an adventurer, right? Your clothes and gear are pretty ratty. Shouldn't you get those fixed?"

"Yes," I replied. "I'm looking for a dwarf armorer said to own a shop here in

the capital."

Just like my first guild tag, the hand-me-downs from my mentor were worn. They were a century old, and although the metal and leather parts were fine, the fabric parts were at their limit. Getting my gear fixed wasn't urgent, but since Feld had conveniently broached the topic, I figured I could use that as my excuse. I had planned to visit Galvus's brother, so it wasn't a lie either.

I didn't know any details about his armory, though. I tried to excuse this by saying I'd received a recommendation from a blacksmith I'd previously bought a weapon from when the hooded woman, who hadn't spoken until then, suddenly chimed in.

"I know a dwarven armorer," she said, removing her hood to reveal soft chestnut hair. A forest elf—curious, since those were known to not get along with dwarves.

From their conversation, I'd gleaned that Feld and the forest elf lady were escorting a pair of noble youths sneaking into the city incognito, which I'd already suspected. Now, for some reason, I found myself heading for the dwarven armorer in the midst of this group.

How it had come to this, I didn't know. I'd thought about inventing an excuse to leave, but the strawberry blond, Mikhail, seemed particularly invested in me. Thanks to that, the other boy, El, had also taken an interest, and now here I was, walking the streets sandwiched between the two of them.



Being flanked by two well-dressed, handsome boys made me stand out when all I wanted was to avoid attention.

"You're quite reticent," Mikhail said. "What are you so wary of?"

"There are a lot of *people* around," I replied.

"Oh? You can tell?"

There was another reason I couldn't flee: several more guards were blended into the crowd, protecting the pair. Since they were nobles, I'd worried that their guards might belong to an organization like Sera's, but their footsteps were heavy and conspicuous, so these people were likely used to heavy armor and weaponry. Knights, maybe, or soldiers. I didn't get why they wouldn't hire professional guards from an organization, but maybe people like Feld were their public-facing protection.

Either way, attempting to escape from these two would only make me seem suspicious.

"Mikhail, what are you two discussing?" El asked. "It's rare for you to take such an interest in someone else."

"I told you before," Mikhail replied. "He's familiar to me."

I kept walking in silence. Though I couldn't tell what was on Mikhail's mind, El had mentioned thinking Mikhail and I were alike. Impressions could be fleeting and unreliable, but I could understand why I seemed familiar to Mikhail. Though he and El looked to be friends, he seemed to keep a certain distance from the other boy, not unlike the way I kept a certain distance from people in general.

El apparently hadn't caught on that I was a girl, but Mikhail had, and now he seemed to be probing for my true identity. Of the two following closely behind us, Feld presumably didn't care, but the elf woman was regarding me with an intense stare, so she, too, might've realized I was a girl.

Smiling and seemingly unfazed by the awkward atmosphere, El struck up a conversation. "Say, what kind of jobs does a young adventurer like you take on?"

I was under no obligation to respond, but under the weight of Mikhail's

amused gaze, I reluctantly replied, "Goblin hunting. Gathering medicinal herbs."

"Goblins, you say? I'd like to try my hand at fighting them too. I wonder if I could..."

Likely, his uncertainty was due to his status, not his ability, but I pretended not to catch that. Instead, I feigned thinking he was simply insecure about his combat aptitude. "Anyone can do it. As long as you're willing to kill them, you can."

Ultimately, combat boiled down to whether one could finish off one's opponent without hesitating. No matter how powerful one was, or how overwhelmingly stronger than one's foe, lacking the resolve to kill was a weakness. From my perspective, refusing to end an enemy in a life-or-death scenario was simply arrogance.

"Hmm," Mikhail murmured in amusement.

I looked around me to find him, El, Feld, and the elf woman all looking at me with curiosity. Maybe I've said too much...

The atmosphere once again grew awkward, but fortunately, it didn't take long for us to reach our destination—the dwarf's armory. The shop, located on a side street away from the main road, was surrounded by clothing and general goods stores aimed at commoners. It was an ordinary building made of white stone and plaster, and a sign at the door was the only indication that it was a shop. Without knowing that beforehand, one might've passed by thinking it an ordinary home.

Also, although this was an armory owned by a dwarf, it was likely there were several of those in the capital, and so it was no guarantee that this shop was owned by Galvus's younger brother. Still, there was a chance that this dwarf, by virtue of being in the same trade and of the same race, knew the mystery "oddball armorer."

"Huh..."

The two little lordlings, El and Mikhail, were curiously observing the small shop's exterior, likely unused to this type of place. In contrast, the forest elf looked oddly distant and contemplative. Seemingly familiar with the place, she

opened the door and went inside. The rest of us followed suit to find that the shop was stocked with surprisingly light gear. The pieces almost looked like dancer costumes, specifically designed for women.

But these were no ordinary clothes—these were, in fact, armor. Both metal and leather models were available, possibly made with rare metals and monster hides. Many were imbued with aether, which made me wonder about their actual protective capabilities.

"Is Gelf here?" the elf woman called out toward the back of the shop.

A few seconds later, a strong, deep voice that seemed to belong to a middleaged dwarf responded, "Goodness me! If it isn't little Mira! And you brought a whole entourage of the most *adorable* little ones! What brings you here, dear?"

The Oddball Armorer

The second I laid eyes on him, I knew that this dwarf, who was wearing a leather outfit with a large opening at the chest and striking a ladylike pose, was the "oddball brother" Galvus, the blacksmith I'd gotten the black knife from, had mentioned.

Gelf could be described as a man with a feminine side. I'd never met one before, but I knew of them thanks to that woman's knowledge. Of the others, only Mira the elf seemed to have been aware of this. Feld likely didn't know and, like the two boys El and Mikhail, was frozen stiff for some reason.

I stepped forward between them, took off my left glove, and placed it on the counter. "This is an old piece. Can you repair it?"

"Oh, sweetie, what a rare item you have there. I'm not very familiar with this leather. I wonder what kind of monster the hide came from?" the armorer replied.

"I was told the boots were made from nightstalker hide, but I don't know about the glove. It's not the same material, since the strength and elasticity are different. The leather portion is fine, but the other parts are fraying."

"Wow! That monster lives in the west! That's so unusual! Also, you know, even the leather needs care. It does regenerate with moisture from the air and

the wearer's aether, yes, but there's a limit to how much that can do. I could fix it up for you, but I do have a little favor to ask. Would you mind coming to the back of the shop with me?"

"Uh. Okay."

As Gelf took my hand and began to lead me to the back, Mikhail grabbed my other hand in a panic and stopped me. "W-Wait! Wait a moment!"

"What is it?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'What is it?' Just look at—um, him, I suppose? You don't think there's anything strange here?"

I'd thought Mikhail was wary of me due to not knowing my true identity, so I wasn't sure why he was so eager to stop me from being led away—even going as far as to grab my hand. "Are you talking about the way Gelf looks?" I asked. "I'm aware people like him exist. I don't see why I should worry about it."

Feld's and Mira's eyes went wide in apparent shock at my reply. Gelf, meanwhile, was likely used to being spoken of in that way, and watched the exchange with amusement. He spoke up with a hint of admiration in his voice. "You know, dear, you look cute, but you can give any man alive a run for his money in terms of grit, can't you?"

Then, as if a light had turned on in his head, El clapped his hands together. "Oh, I see! Mikhail, you were worried about him! That's why you were talking to him so much."

At the golden-haired boy's words, Mikhail, who'd been wearing an easy smile up until this point, turned sullen like a pouty child. "And what's wrong with that? You want me to just ignore someone who's reckless enough to wander off into dark places alone?"

What's this about? I wondered silently. Had all of his probing questions thus far been motivated by concern for me? While yes, maybe I had inadvertently been reckless, this boy was exhausting. Why couldn't he just say what he meant?

"Now, now," Gelf interjected, "don't worry. I won't take your precious princess away. I'm an armorer, remember? There's a piece I'd like her to try, so

be a dear and wait, all right?" With a fluid motion of his long eyelashes, Gelf winked at Mikhail, who stiffened in place. Gelf then took me to the back of the shop.

From there, I could hear El and Feld mumble in unison, "Wait, princess?"

Though he'd been quite pushy, I hadn't resisted Gelf leading me away because—and this might sound strange—I felt that he, despite being a man, had a maternal aura about him.

"You have guts, sweetie. Even little Mira teared up and made a face when we first met. No wonder Galvus likes you," Gelf said.

"How did you know that?" I asked. Galvus had been the one to recommend I come here, but I'd never mentioned that.

"That knife at your waist, that's Galvus's, isn't it? I seem to remember him not liking it, but it still meant a lot to him. If he gave *that* to you, it's proof that he likes you a lot."

"Well, technically, I...bought it." Though I hadn't paid for it yet.

"Same difference! If he didn't like you, he wouldn't have sold it to you. Now, with that said, I'm going to give *this* my all!"

"And 'this' is...what, again?"

"W-Well, I'm sure it'll be fine," Mira assured them in a not-very-assuring manner. "He's an oddball, but he's not a bad guy."

She seemed to have known the armorer since her days as a low-ranking adventurer, which was reassuring, but even as she said that, she wiped cold sweat from her brow, which wasn't reassuring at all, and Mikhail scowled.

The fighter Feld and the animist Mira were members of the adventuring party known as the Rainbow Blade, whom Mikhail's grandfather had recommended as guards for the crown prince. The renowned group had been friendly with Mikhail's grandfather since the man's youth. Other than the dwarf leader and Mira, who was an elf, the roster had changed several times, but due to their achievements and trustworthiness, House Melrose had continued to request

their services.

The party had been on hiatus from their full-scale activities for a few years, as they were down to four people after their sorcerer's retirement. The remaining members, other than their scout, who had been on the lookout for a new sorcerer, had been acting as a group for about a year now, as going solo was inefficient. Presently, two of the three—their dwarf leader excluded—were undertaking this escort mission.

Elvan von Claydale, the crown prince, had been the one to request a trip around the city. He took after his mother, the first queen and a former viscountess, who also lacked caution. Mikhail, wanting to show the prince the reality of the streets, had been the one to make the outing happen. While Mikhail and Elvan were friends, their attitudes toward their roles as nobles were different, and Mikhail wanted to discern whether Elvan was fit to be the next king.

Mikhail, at his core, didn't trust others. While he did trust his family to an extent, the only two relatives he had full faith in were his father and grandfather. Whether or not Mikhail had faith in Elvan as a noble, what he wanted to know was whether the crown prince would someday become someone he'd have enough faith in to serve. If not, he was prepared to abandon Elvan and either support the still-young second prince as the heir or throw his lot in with the first princess—truly highborn on both her father's and mother's sides.

Or that had been the mindset with which he'd begun their trip around town, but then they'd run into *her*. The girl had been blending seamlessly into the crowd, and yet she'd caught his eye.

From a young age, Mikhail had enjoyed looking at a particular painting of his aunt, who had left their noble house prior to his birth. She'd been a beautiful woman with a dignified aura and a gentle smile, and the young boy's feelings for her had probably been something akin to puppy love. And this stranger, who he'd instantly known was a girl disguised as a boy, had exuded the same aura as the woman in the portrait, drawing him to her.

Mikhail had found himself involuntarily following her with his gaze, and the

adventurer Feld, for a different reason, had also taken notice of the girl and pointed out that "he" was being targeted by ruffians. The girl looked younger than Mikhail but seemed capable despite her age, and Feld had thought "he" would've been fine on "his" own but had nevertheless asked Mikhail what he should do.

Normally, Mikhail would've ignored the situation, but as he hesitated to answer, the sheltered Elvan had spoken up and suggested they should help "him." Thus had Mikhail gotten involved with this girl.

Blockheads that they were, Feld and Elvan hadn't noticed her true gender. Mikhail, meanwhile, had been irritated by her lack of common sense. She was almost like a careless child. How could she not recognize the way people were drawn to her appearance, and the way it attracted unnecessary trouble? Mikhail, who normally kept others at arm's reach, had found himself so oddly disturbed by the girl's presence that he'd even made unkind remarks to her, despite meaning to help.

When Elvan pointed this out, Mikhail had sulked. And then, upon realizing that a forgotten part of his childhood self had bubbled to the surface, he'd stood there aghast as the oddball dwarf Gelf dragged her away.

A while later, the dwarf returned, chirping, "Sorry to keep you waiting, dears!

As a matter of gentleman's honor, Mikhail hadn't tried to sneak a peek at what had been going on in the back of the shop. Now he turned his gaze to the girl to see whether she was unharmed.

Only Mira spoke up, perhaps having anticipated what had transpired. "Whoa! You haven't lost your touch, huh, Gelf?"

Mikhail and the other men, meanwhile, were stunned speechless.

"This is a little difficult to move in," the girl complained.

"Perhaps it's still a little big for you, sweetie," Gelf said.

Her new outfit was nothing like the one she'd been wearing. The girl was now clad in short boots and a sleeveless dress, both made of leather. Her shoulders and upper arms were bare, and the near dazzling white of her calves peeked

out from underneath the skirt. Mikhail instinctively turned his gaze away in embarrassment.

Still, it was her facial features that caught his attention the most. The unbecoming shawl that had kept them hidden was gone, along with the dirt and ash that had marred her hair. With radiant peach-tinted locks cascading over her shoulders and vivid jade-green eyes, the girl resembled the woman in the portrait Mikhail had admired and harbored a childish crush on.

"You, uh... You're a girl?" Feld asked, showcasing his inability to read the room.

But more than the man's clueless question, it was Elvan's behavior as he stood there, staring and blushing, that rubbed Mikhail the wrong way.

"This was a prototype for fitting, but fortunately, I managed to adjust the size with a few simple alterations. Use it for now, while I fix your armor, and next time you're here, let me know how it felt to wear," Gelf said.

"Okay," I replied. So the outfit he'd changed me into was meant as a temporary substitute until my armor was repaired—but I couldn't understand why, instead of just loaning me a glove and boots, he'd given me a full makeover. He'd even seen through my illusory ash and combed my hair.

"See, I was planning on wearing this one myself, but I focused too much on form and function and ended up with something not fit for *me*."

A dwarf wanting to wear something this...fluttery? I wondered. Though he'd called this a prototype, it seemed to be made of genuine leather, and, although thin, provided decent defense. It was even soft and stretchy to a degree.

"Also, take these with you," Gelf continued, grabbing something from a shelf filled with frilly fabrics and pressing it into my hands. "Make sure you wear them, okay?!"

"Okay."

I wondered what that was about. While I was getting changed, Gelf had held his head in horror. Maybe this was related? Either way, he'd told me the outfit

was inconspicuous since it was made of ordinary leather, but was it really?

I'd been disguising myself as a boy because I didn't want to stand out while working. According to Gelf, however, my body could no longer convincingly pass for a boy's. He'd persuaded me to ditch cross-dressing in favor of hiding my gender and age with a cloak or something similar, and said I should go for function over form. And supposedly, this outfit was standard for female adventurers these days, but seeing how astonished Feld and the others were at the sight of it made me a little uneasy.

Maybe that was why I was reluctant to thank Gelf for his generosity, even though it was similar to what Galvus had done for me by letting me have the black knife.

"You, uh... You're a girl?" Feld asked awkwardly, making it clear that my new outfit revealed my gender. Still, he seemed to not care either way, which irked me for some reason.

The atmosphere had turned odd, and so I decided to leave. I could ask Gelf about this outfit and the pieces of equipment I'd left with him after the repairs on the latter were complete. Not wanting the others to end up tagging along all the way to the Adventurers' Guild, I stepped out of the shop ahead of them, pointed behind me to indicate to the nearby knights that the rest of the group was still inside, and blended into the crowd once more, ignoring the voices calling out for me from afar.

Upon checking the extra item Gelf had given me, I discovered it was a pair of small cotton undergarments, tied at the sides, similar to the ones I was familiar with from that woman's knowledge.

Originally, my plan had been to drop by the Adventurers' Guild next and collect information on my targets, the Mercenaries of Dawn, but considering Feld and the others might head there as well, it seemed better to steer clear of it for a few days.

But that didn't mean I couldn't obtain information. I was ahead of schedule, so it was possible that my contacts from the Assassins' Guild hadn't reached the capital yet. If they'd sent a competent observer to keep an eye on me rather

than a simple liaison, however, then that person might've taken the same route that I had.

Nothing else happened that day. The next day, just like the day before, I ventured into an alley near the capital's grand cathedral and sat on a fence to kill time, using just enough Stealth to avoid the eyes of the general public.

After a moment, a voice came from the shadow of a nearby tree. "Cinders. I have a question for you."

So there was an Assassins' Guild member nearby. I didn't respond, since instead of information, whoever this was had...questions? What did this mean? I jumped down from the fence and started walking in the opposite direction of where the voice was coming from.

"Hey!" the same voice called out from a different shadow.

I, however, had no intention of stopping. "I have nothing to say to someone who won't show themselves," I muttered.

The observer fell silent and, a few seconds later, a cat beastwoman with long black hair emerged from a dim alley just ahead. "I said, I have a question for you," she repeated. "Cinders...what did you do to Guy?"

I didn't immediately respond. Is this...Rahda the Shadow Weaver?



Rahda the Shadow Weaver

▼ Rahda the Shadow Weaver

Species: Beastwoman (Cat)

Overall Combat Power: 855 (Boosted: 1017)

This must be her.

I remembered that while I had been exploring the Assassins' Guild in the Northern Border District, I had felt a certain *quirk* in the air, like the loose sense of someone's presence hiding in the dark. Stealth wasn't about hiding, after all—it was about not being found. There was a sense of unease that came with the certainty that someone was hiding nearby. That unease gave rise to this quirk, and awareness of it enabled one to see through the stealth.

And out of everyone in the guild, the only one whose presence I was certain of but who hadn't shown her face yet was Rahda the Shadow Weaver. Based on that information as well as what could be surmised from her moniker, I could safely assume this stranger was indeed her.

Faced with her questioning glare, I buried my emotions deep within and tilted my head slightly. "Guy? Dino asked me the same question," I said. "And as I told him, how would I know? I was away from the guild on a mission."

I'd taken down Guy along with the rookie-hunters and left no trace of a corpse. There shouldn't have been any evidence of his elimination, so why did Rahda suspect me?

"Kiera said she asked Guy to teach you a lesson," Rahda replied, glowering at me with the sharpness and intimidation unique to cat beastmen. "And you're saying you never saw him?"

My heart almost leaped at her piercing gaze, but I managed to calm it further, and my expression remained unchanged. "Stop with the strange accusations," I said, narrowing my eyes back at her. "If he did come for me, maybe he got killed by monsters in the dungeon."

I'd never imagined there would be such a strong connection between any of the members of the Assassins' Guild. It was also surprising to me that Kiera would share information for no benefit to herself, but surely there was a reason she'd felt at ease telling Rahda.

"There's no way Guy would've lost to trash like that! That boy could go toe to toe with me in direct combat! He'd never lose unless he fell into some sort of dirty trap!"

At that moment, shadow mana infused with malice burst forth from Rahda's whole body. In turn, I called forth my own aether, drawing the throwing weapons I'd concealed in the shadows in my palms. Our waves of bloodlust collided, causing the presences of the small creatures around us to scatter.

Was she planning on fighting to the death in the middle of the city, in broad daylight? As I accelerated my thought process, going through several different combat patterns, Rahda suppressed her thirst for blood and threw a bundle of papers at my feet.

"We can talk after your job's done. This has info gathered by a different contact who's been tailing the Mercenaries of Dawn. Let's see how you fare against a Rank 4 adventurer," Rahda spat. She began to retreat without turning her back to me.

"Hey," I called out just as she was about to disappear. "Why do you care so much about Guy?"

For a moment, Rahda turned her furious glare toward me. Her answer came in a whisper, lingering as she vanished into the darkness of the alley.

"He's my brother, and I love him."

Rahda and Guy had grown up in an orphanage in a small northern town.

Both of her parents had been adventurers, having left the beastmen's nation in hopes of striking it rich. One day, they'd left young Rahda behind to go dungeon diving, as they often did, and never returned.

The Kingdom of Claydale was a human nation but was still home to a fair

number of demi-humans. Nevertheless, prejudice against them was commonplace in the border district, and not many could hold regular jobs. It was an adventurer acquainted with her parents who placed the young girl, now alone, in the orphanage, and to Rahda—who was not only beastkin but also lacked a formal citizen register—just being accepted into the institution was a blessing. Nevertheless, five-year-old Rahda couldn't blend in with the human children and remained isolated.

And then a Krus baby was brought to the orphanage.

While discrimination against the Krus people and their different color skin was rare among adults, it was a different story among children with no understanding or ability to hold their tongues; they would cruelly exclude anyone different from themselves. The orphans were supposed to take turns caring for the infant, who'd been given the name "Guy," but the children resented the obligation, so they thrust it upon Rahda, still only five years of age.

"The black cat should take care of the black baby!" the children spat cruelly. Rahda was the only beastkin in the orphanage, with black hair and eyes, and was derisively referred to as a black cat by the others.

Unsure of what to do, the young girl tentatively reached out a hand, which baby Guy grasped with his small fingers and a smile. At that moment, the girl made a decision: *I will protect this boy.*

She clumsily changed his diapers, patiently fed him goat's milk, and fiercely shielded him from the cold and the other orphans. Guy came to adore Rahda as an older sister, and she in turn cherished him as a younger brother. They grew up with each other's company to stave off loneliness, and when Rahda was twelve and Guy seven, the two stole food and money from the orphanage that had treated them so cruelly for being different, and ran away.

"Guy," Rahda said, "if this country's gonna call us 'dark,' then we'll just live in the shadows."

"Yeah, Rahda," Guy replied. "We'll show 'em what we're made of."

Rahda, with the combat and shadow sorcery training she'd received from her parents, and Guy, with the physical prowess inherent to the Krus people, quickly grew strong. The two hid themselves in the slums, attacking and killing

old people and drunkards on moonless nights and taking their meager possessions. Naturally, their actions enraged the local Thieves' Guild, but before the thieves could find them, they were discovered by a member of the Assassins' Guild.

Several years later, Rahda, thanks to her innate talent for stealth and shadow sorcery as a cat beastwoman, came to be known as the "Shadow Weaver," and Guy, despite only being Rank 3, became a respected warrior within the guild thanks to his one-on-one combat skills.

Until one day Guy went to greet a newcomer and never returned.

It wasn't uncommon for guild missions to take several months. Rahda had been concerned but not anxious until Kiera approached her to talk. The two weren't close and barely ever spoke thanks to their differences in personality. However, Kiera confessed that she'd asked Guy to teach the rookie kid a lesson.

"So you see, Rahda, it's a simple job, right?" Kiera said. "Don't you think it's odd that Guy is taking this long?"

Rahda realized then that Kiera, knowing of her relationship with Guy, was trying to turn her against the kid. She had been aware of the quarrel between Kiera and the rookie and was annoyed that her fellow assassin would rope her into such frivolous matters, but protecting Guy was still Rahda's priority.

In order to avoid causing problems with the guild, she volunteered to act as the liaison who was supposed to meet the kid in the royal capital. Rahda would also double as an observer, tasked with eliminating the rookie in case of a blunder or attempted escape.

And then, upon meeting the rookie in the royal capital, Rahda noticed her unusual grit and bravery, far beyond an ordinary child's—and above all, her cold-as-ice gaze—and became convinced that this kid was capable of killing Guy. No, not just *capable* of it. This kid had *actually* killed Guy.

"Cinders," Rahda hissed, "your death will be slow and painful."

Upon sensing that Rahda's presence had completely vanished from the shadow she'd sunk into, I finally took a deep breath. She was still suspicious of me, but it didn't matter. Our brief exchange had provided me with a wealth of information. To begin with, Rahda was the liaison the Assassins' Guild had sent, and there was another contact tailing the Mercenaries of Dawn. And no matter what kind of "siblings" those two had been, the fact that Rahda cared enough about Guy to come all the way to the capital to kill me was a significant piece of information.

Rahda was strong, but no matter how powerful one was, the propensity to be overcome by rage was a weakness that could be exploited. And understanding the reason behind the anger could give me an indication of just how much of it there was. Intimidate the weak, enrage the strong; an old-as-time trick to create weak spots.

Though it might've seemed like a throwaway remark, Rahda's emphasis on my foe being a Rank 4 adventurer suggested her own Rank was also 4. Considering her aether points and overall combat power, and assuming she'd been truthful in saying that Guy, at Rank 3, could've gone toe to toe with her in direct combat, I figured she was Rank 4 due to her level in Shadow Mastery.

Moreover, Rahda had made a mistake. Whether due to underestimating me, thinking I was just a child, or losing herself in anger despite attempting to appear calm, she'd unwittingly revealed to me her shadow sorcery technique of emerging from and disappearing into the shadows—not realizing I could see the color of mana. From what I could tell, she seemed to be able to move from one shadow to another, but since the movements had limited range, it likely wasn't teleportation. Maybe her technique operated similarly to my own, which used the shadows in my body as storage space.

She enveloped her whole body in shadow mana, allowing her to "move" between shadows. Likely the shadows had to be either connected to one another directly or linked via aether. While a space isolated by shadow mana was like a vacuum in which living beings couldn't survive, it was likely one could endure it for a few seconds, much as people could dive underwater.

But this shadow-crossing technique had a flaw: if it really was anything like diving underwater, then hiding in the shadows for more than a few seconds

would leave a "hole" in the isolated dark space.

The most important thing I'd learned from this encounter was how to recognize when Rahda was nearby. Her Stealth was higher than mine, so I couldn't detect her presence perfectly, but I did get a sense of discomfort every time she entered or exited a shadow. And, just as I'd become capable of identifying people based on their presence, she must have remembered my presence as well, considering that she had recognized me despite my new outfit and my hair color not being masked by ashes.

While it may have seemed unfavorable for me that she could identify me fully while I could only get a sense of discomfort from her, knowing this had actually given me an advantage. A clash between shadow sorcerers was one of cunning and deception. This meant raw combat power wasn't as important as the insight and observational skills needed to grasp the opponent's state of mind and anticipate the tricks up their sleeves.

Rahda the Shadow Weaver was my worst possible matchup; if my betrayal of the Assassins' Guild were discovered and they turned on me, just the fact that they had someone like her, who I couldn't read, drastically decreased my chances of survival. And that was precisely why it was a blessing in disguise that Rahda was the contact they'd sent to the capital.

As a fellow weaver of shadows, Rahda, I will defeat you and grow even stronger.

"Your death will feed my growth."

The Town with a Dungeon

After parting ways with Rahda, I decided to head for the territory under the royal family's jurisdiction where a large dungeon—and my next assassination targets—could be found.

Well, "parting," since the beastwoman was, no doubt, keeping tabs on me from somewhere. There was a possibility the information she'd given me wasn't accurate—that she'd altered it for her own benefit—but I wasn't going to bother checking its veracity. Rahda wasn't the only contact the guild had sent,

which meant she wouldn't have been able to tamper with the info significantly. Either way, she was too smart to make simple alterations that I could debunk with only a few days' investigation. And above all, if she had messed with the documents for her own convenience, it meant she, too, would have to act in accordance with the altered intel, which would inform me of her actions in turn.

I stocked up on salt and spices and went to various alchemists' shops to purchase the alchemical ingredients I still needed for the trip. In addition, I decided to buy myself a cloak made of monster materials. Such armor, like the boots and glove my mentor had given me, was capable of repairing minor wear and tear on its own by absorbing moisture in the air and the wearer's aether. How well it could regenerate varied with the monster's rank, so the effect was minor in a cloak made from low-ranking monsters, but it was still leagues better than ordinary fabric or leather at protecting against the elements.

And so, two days after my run-in with Feld and the others, I was once again at the dwarf armorer's store. I'd waited a couple days to avoid running into the group a second time. Feld I did want to see again, but I didn't want to deal with the noble boys, who had given me strange looks.

"Gelf, I'd like to buy a cloak," I said.

"You're about the only customer who comes to my shop asking for something cheap and with no care for the design, dearie," the armorer replied. "Well, no matter. I'll pick out something reasonably priced, just for you."

He gave me a wink of his false eyelashes, the gesture so exaggerated it almost made a sound. I nodded quietly, pinching the skirt of the leather outfit he'd given me. "Are the repairs done? If so, I'd like to get changed."

"My, but you're stoic, aren't you? The repairs *are* done, mind you, but is that outfit not to your liking? It's not made from monster leather, but I didn't skimp on it, you know," Gelf said, sighing.

I shook my head. "No, I like it. It's thin, light, and comfortable. I do get more glances now that I'm wearing it, but a shawl around my neck takes care of that."

"And you're back to having ashes in your hair too. You know, honey, since you're using an illusion spell, you should use a lighter touch. Just coat it a little

to reduce the sheen. Otherwise, it only makes you stand out more."

"I see. I'll try that."

"Anyway, why do you want to get changed?"

"Hmm? I thought this outfit was just a replacement until the repairs were done." I had wondered why I'd needed to change my entire outfit when he was only repairing one glove and a pair of boots. Had Gelf planned from the beginning to give me this entire outfit as a gift?

Galvus had sent me, but that didn't mean Gelf was under any obligation to be so generous to me. When I asked about the reasoning behind his kindness, the dwarf explained, "I made that so I would have something pretty to wear! But I'm a little too plump, so it doesn't look cute on me. Therefore, I've been hoping for an adorable little one to come along and wear it in my stead!"

"Right."

I understood what he'd said but not what he'd meant. Honestly, his particular passions were beyond my comprehension, but I could grasp that they were important to him. Even armed with that woman's knowledge, I didn't really get what "cute" entailed—it seemed to cover a very broad range of things—but anything Gelf made was sure to perform well, if nothing else.

At the very least, I wanted to pay him, but like Galvus, he refused to accept more than a single gold coin, despite the fact that it would only cover the cost of the cloak. "You can pay me when you're all grown up, all right? For now, just take it. And be sure to come again, you hear me? There are so many things I'd like you to try on."

"Thanks."

I returned the boots he'd lent me and donned the repaired boots and glove. Wearing them felt a little different than before, as though they were brand new, which was perfect for ease of movement in the dungeon. And he'd added a little gimmick to the inner part of the glove where it attached to the arm. One I could make use of.

"I'll be going, then."

I stepped out of Gelf's shop and took in the sight of the tall castle in the far distance, visible through the streetscape of the royal capital. Was Elena there, I wondered? All alone, fighting against those who wished to use her? She'd vowed to me that once and once only, she'd stand by me, no matter who she had to stand against. It wasn't time yet, however. I wasn't strong enough to kill those who'd oppose her, and I wouldn't need her help for something as simple as this.

Until we meet again, Elena. I'll grow stronger, and come see you.

According to the information I'd received from the Assassins' Guild, the town where the large dungeon was located was called Eld. It was part of the royal family's territory, but in practice, it was managed by the neighboring Countdom of Leicester. The Sorcerers' and Adventurers' Guilds had a strong presence in the town, which made its atmosphere a bit different from the norm.

It was a four-day journey by carriage from the capital to Eld, stopping at the inn towns along the way. That distance didn't necessitate a carriage, however, so I chose a route that cut through the woods. That way, I could also test whether I could evade Rahda's watchful eyes.

In the middle of the first night, I felt a subtle sense of discomfort trailing behind me, but it vanished as I ran through the woods. I figured perhaps I'd managed to shake Rahda off around then. Opting for a cloak made of monster leather had been a good idea after all—even with her superior Detection skill, the magic imbued in the cloak could trick her to an extent.

When finally I arrived in Eld, I was greeted by a hustle and bustle that was indeed a little different from that of an ordinary town. Given the large dungeon nearby, the city's industry consisted primarily of goods made from monster parts, but the main reason for the different atmosphere was probably the abundance of adventurers and sorcerers. Even if one was behaving a little oddly, it would be difficult to stand out here, and compared to in the capital, causing a disturbance was less likely to be a problem.

The first thing I did was buy a cheap meal of stewed vegetables at a street stall, where I asked how to find the Adventurers' Guild before heading there.

The dungeon was located in the center of the town and surrounded by high walls. A few soldiers managed the entrance, restricting who went in and out and ensuring monsters didn't escape. While it might've seemed dangerous to have a dungeon in the middle of a town, apparently the original settlement had been formed around the dungeon when it was first discovered, so none of the residents were ordinary people.

The Adventurers' Guild was also located near the dungeon and was larger than any other I'd seen, bar the one at the royal capital. I arrived there after noon, a time when adventurers were generally scarce, and even then, upon pushing the door open and going inside, I saw the figures of a dozen adventurers. Perhaps due to the abundance of adventurers in this land, people's comings and goings didn't ordinarily attract much attention, but seeing a child like me still prompted some frowns from older folks.

It wasn't uncommon for kids to make a living as adventurers in the border districts. They'd often work very hard to learn skills, end up with poorly balanced skill sets, and meet an early grave. But it wasn't pity that made the adults here frown; instead, they likely felt uncomfortable with the idea of a child like me doing battle within a large dungeon, which was usually the domain of veteran adventurers.

I silently took stock of them. Judging by their presences, they were about Rank 3, and I found it odd that these people would be so-called mid-tier adventurers when they couldn't discern someone's ability based on her presence or how she carried herself. In that sense, the thief who'd kidnapped Elena had been better than these guys, but maybe this was standard for Rank 3 adventurers with little experience fighting other people.

Ignoring the odd atmosphere entirely, I headed to the guild's reception desk and picked a friendly-looking clerk to talk to. "Excuse me. How many parties are there that would be willing to act as dungeon guides?"

After I explained I was looking for a party that could guide me through the deeper layers of the dungeon, the kindly middle-aged clerk cordially informed me, "This dungeon is famous, so we get a lot of requests for guides for the first few levels, but it's hard to find a party for the deeper levels. Rank 3 parties can go down to about the tenth level or so. Does that suit your needs?"

"Is there nobody willing to go deeper?"

"For that, you'd need a Rank 4 party at least. There are three Rank 4 parties in town currently, but you'd need to negotiate with them to see if they'd accept your request."

After all, most adventurers were here to delve into the dungeon, not to take requests. The dungeons contained treasures that appealed to human greed, and chancing upon them could earn one hundreds of large gold coins overnight. However, such finds were rare, only happening once every few years, and most adventurers made a living by collecting monster parts and aethercrystals.

On top of that, this particular dungeon was famous for housing demi-beasts such as goblins and orcs. Besides powerful treasures, dungeons sometimes produced metal weapons, and demi-beasts might find and take these pieces for themselves, which made killing them even more profitable for an adventurer. However, a monster was also much more dangerous when armed, and so this dungeon was known as a profitable but perilous place. Therefore, the guild did not offer intermediate guidance for excursions into the deeper layers.

For the time being, I asked what the going rate for one such request might be and got the names and schedules of parties that could accept. Among them was my current target, the Mercenaries of Dawn, who were scheduled to return to town in two days.

Two days, huh, I mused. That was perfect timing, since Rahda was likely to catch up with me and resume her surveillance by then.

I left the guild, and as I considered checking out the dungeon in the meantime, I sensed I was being followed. Maybe it was a pitch from a Rank 2 adventurer who'd overheard my conversation with the clerk, or maybe someone who'd seen that I was a child and, underestimating me, wanted to attack. It was a bother either way. I could entertain an offer for a tour of the early levels of the dungeon, since it was my first time here, but what to do in case of aggression?

One strong and two weak presences. I moved away from the main street, where the guild was located, toward a less populated back alley. I wasn't sure what would be the ideal deserted spot, but whether they wanted to make an

offer or attack me, they'd likely approach me wherever was most convenient.

A pair of adventurers looking to be in their early twenties approached me in the dark alleyway. One of them said, "Yo, Cinders. You're looking for a dungeon guide, yeah? We'll do it."

That nickname again. I'd followed Gelf's advice and reduced the amount of ash, and still people were calling me that.

"And we'll do it for the low, low price of all the money you've got on you. And we're taking you into the dungeon whether you like it or not."

Oh. So it's an offer and an attack. But these guys each have a hundred combat power. Can they even guide anyone? I wondered idly. Where's the stronger one, though?

I tried to scan for the presence, but the same man interrupted me. "Hey! Cinders! Don't just stand there! Say something!" he snapped, reaching for me.

"I'm busy," I replied, taking a step forward.

I struck him in the chin with my palm, and a fifteen-centimeter arrow shot forward from the trick compartment in my glove, piercing through his jaw and brain.

"Huh?!" the other man exclaimed in astonishment as his companion suddenly collapsed.

I jumped backward, away from him, and the next instant, the man was engulfed in flames, as though his whole body had suddenly ignited. He collapsed without a chance to scream, overwhelmed by the staggering heat.

"I knew you were strong," came a cheerful girl's voice from behind me. "How about I guide you through the dungeon?"

Dubious Girl

There stood a girl wearing a pure-white robe, with long pure-black hair cascading over it in waves. Her skin was a sickly, pale shade, her eyes framed by deep, dark rings.

I'd just killed a man, and she was smiling innocently at me, as though she didn't think that counted as murder. She might've been around my age; judging by the amount of mana surrounding her, I figured she'd had an aether-induced growth spurt like I had. If I were to describe her in a single word, perhaps "dubious" would be a good fit.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"What difference does that make?" the girl replied. "Although I suppose I could make an exception just for you. I am called Karla."

▼ Karla

Species: Human♀

Aether Points: 375/395

Health Points: 31/45

Overall Combat Power: 323

She had a massive amount of aether, with the health points of a child. Her sorcery was powerful enough to reduce a man to charcoal, and she seemed to think nothing of it. How abnormal. *Dangerous*. Could I kill this girl? She'd likely go down in one hit, given her low health points, but my gut told me making a careless move was a bad idea.

I killed for survival, but this Karla... It was an odd way of putting it, but she just killed for the sake of killing.

"I like you," she said. "You're nothing like the rest of the trash around here. Even after my display of power, all you're worried about is whether you can kill me or not."

"Is that why you approached me?" I asked.

"It is," she confirmed. "The scent of blood you give off... It's different from other people's. Or are you one of those who go on about how 'life is precious' and the like?"

There was a bizarre pressure emanating from her. She didn't need a reason to

kill, but perhaps my answer could become a reason for her not to kill me.

"Does it make a difference to the person being killed?" I asked.

Karla chuckled. "Yes, I like you, indeed. You want to kill, but you don't. It's wonderful, don't you think? Like a love story out of a book."

Well, then. Still on guard, I kept an eye on her but stopped using Boost.

"Say, won't you tell me your name?"

"Alia."

"Alia," she repeated, smiling in amusement. "The name suits you. I know I asked, but why did you decide to tell me?"

While I worked on searching the two corpses, collecting anything that could've identified the men and disposing of it by tossing it into the gutter, I glanced over at her. "I, too, have realized I have no reason to kill you."

At my answer, Karla burst into laughter so intense it reduced her already feeble health by another three points, her purple irises gleaming brightly behind my reflection in her eyes. I wasn't sure what her logic was, but it seemed I'd measured up to her expectations. At the very least, she seemed to think it a waste to kill me immediately.

I felt the same way about her. I had no reason to kill her, and she'd found a reason not to kill me.

This girl was dangerously abnormal, but somehow I understood her perspective better than the thousands of sugar-coated words so-called "fine" people tended to favor.

Perhaps she felt the same way, as she closed the distance between us by about half a step. "I'm on my way to explore the dungeon. I've been doing it on my own this whole time, but I'd like you to come with me, Alia."

"You can explore a dungeon with health that low?" I asked. A child her age, dungeon diving solo? Dungeons were dangerous places. Even for me—a scout with stealth training—a surprise attack could mean instant death.

For Karla, with no stealth-related skills, it was even worse. Going alone into a dungeon seemed like suicide. Yet it didn't feel like she was lying. She was just

like Elena and me, desperately struggling to live with the power she'd been burdened with. Just as I had a reason to fight and grow strong, Karla, too, had a reason to risk life and limb for strength.

"It's fine. If I die, my father might be sad over losing a pawn, but I think my mother would be genuinely pleased." Despite the topic, Karla laughed cheerfully as she said that.

Taking me to the dungeon was probably just something she'd brought up in order to start a conversation with me. To an ordinary person, her words and actions might have seemed outrageous and perhaps even horrifying. But...she was so free, so true to herself. Dino, in contrast, was all smiles and pretty words, but I would trust Karla's words over his. She was true to her own beliefs, if nothing else.

"I'm not helping if you go down," I said.

"Of course," she replied. "I'd be glad if you could join me in death, should that happen."

"You can die on your own."

After our odd exchange, the two of us decided to take on the large, perilous dungeon alone.

Despite our aethereal growth spurts, to an adult, we still looked very much like children. When the two of us made to enter, a concerned soldier tried to stop us, but a knight coming out of the guard station saw Karla and, seemingly frightened, cleared the way for us.

"Rude, isn't it?" she said. "Staring at someone like they're a mass murderer just because of what they look like."

"Do you have no mirrors at home?" I asked.

"My mother is only interested in herself, so we have mirrors to spare. You're quite pretty, Alia. I'm sure you'd be pretty even covered in blood. Your own, or someone else's."

Karla had the air of a noble lady about her, and yet she could wander around

without so much as an escort. She must've been just that capable, influential, and dangerous.

"This is a demi-beast dungeon," she continued. "Rumor has it that there are a hundred floors, but only fifty have been officially cleared."

"Officially?" I asked.

"Nobles spared no expense to reach the last floor, throwing money at an expedition until it succeeded and causing an enormous number of casualties in the process. I'm sure you've heard, yes? That in the deepest parts of old dungeons, there are dungeon spirits?"

"So they wanted the spirit's gift."

I'd heard of that. Supposedly, spirits resided in the lowest layers of older dungeons, and, upon those who reached them, bestowed gifts of their choosing. Was that why Karla was dungeon diving solo? According to my master, one could gain powerful abilities, albeit with burdensome restrictions. Karla seemed ill—maybe she was hoping to heal her body using the gift.

"The first floor only has goblins and kobolds," she explained. "Look, here they come."

"Yeah." I'd already noticed three presences approaching.

"Can you kill them for me?" she said, as though she were asking me to pick her some flowers.

Without a word, I drew a concealed blade from my waist and threw it. It pierced one goblin's throat, and the creature fell onto its back, dead.

The other two yelped in confusion, standing there unable to comprehend what had just happened. I approached them silently under Stealth, and the moment they noticed me, I swiftly ended their lives by slicing their necks with the black knife and another thinner one.

As she watched me take their lives, Karla said admiringly, as though appreciating freshly picked flowers, "You really are pretty, Alia."

"Don't make others do all the work for you," I told her.

"You're right. I'll do it next time."

Two more goblins appeared and were swiftly dispatched when Karla simultaneously cast the spells Fire Arrow and Gale Cutter. So she had the skill Dualcast...which meant she could use sorcery up to Level 3. The spells she'd used were Level 1, but they were far more powerful than any spell that woman could have cast.

I felt certain that Karla could kill a Rank 4 target.

It turned out Karla's intention truly had been to show me around the dungeon. Choosing the shortest route, she took me all the way down to the third floor.

"Say, Alia," she began. "Why do you think monsters don't trigger traps in dungeons?" Karla was surprisingly chatty. When we weren't fighting, she would talk about all manner of things, both meaningful and otherwise.

Dungeons were themselves monsters, attracting both people and other monsters so they would fight and the dungeon could harvest their life force and mana. Some older dungeons had grown smart enough over time to set traps. These weren't complex—simple mechanisms such as pitfalls to lower floors or walls that collapsed on contact—but they were large-scale and could easily prove fatal.

"Monsters don't trigger them?" I asked.

"They don't, for some reason," she confirmed. "And not because they know where they are, but rather, it seems traps simply don't activate for them. Some say that the dungeon, being a monster, wills it thus. So don't rush in carelessly, okay? Death by crushing isn't pretty."

"I see..." What an interesting piece of information.

"Hey, Alia, listen. I have a lord fiancé. I just met him for the first time the other day."

"Huh..." Another change of topic. I wanted to hear more about the dungeon, but I didn't think she'd return to that topic, so I decided to leave it alone.

"What a blasé response. Ah, well. He is very cute, you see. I like him quite a

lot, for different reasons than I like you."

"How unfortunate for him."

"Oh, I won't do anything quite so terrible. I doubt he's ever harmed a fly. It's like he's spent his whole life in a beautiful field of flowers. I can't wait for the day I get to taint and defile him. Oh, but I'll wait until after marriage. It's much more fun when they can't run away, don't you think?"

"Hopefully he, too, will find it fun."

"No, no, I won't let him die so easily. I've always dreamed of keeping a cute pet. But you know, he has other fiancées too. I don't mind, though. I doubt I can have children anyway, so I'll keep him alive until he produces an heir."

"I see."

"But I will not forgive any further infidelity. I hate it when other people leave fingerprints on my toys. So if he ever looks at a woman other than his fiancées, I might just kill her right in front of his eyes."

"That'll be on him for cheating."

"See? You agree. I can hardly wait for it to happen."

Multiple fiancées. Karla might've been a high-ranking noble. I wondered if she had any involvement with Elena. If she were to become an enemy of Elena's...

"Don't go too far," I told her. "I wouldn't want to be asked to put a stop to you."

Perhaps sensing something in my words, Karla halted and looked me in the eyes. Her violet gaze was piercing, a mix of loneliness and amusement. "You think you're capable of that, Alia?"

"I can kill you, if that's your wish."

"Ah, how wonderful. If I am to die someday, I hope it's by your hand, Alia."

Our dungeon tour came to a close when Karla's health points could no longer be restored through magic or medicine. And indeed, although she was pale as a corpse by default, she had only about ten health points left in the end. Still, if she were so easily killed, her parents wouldn't have had anything to worry about.

Why did she go to such lengths to dungeon dive? It couldn't be a simple desire to kill. It felt more like there was *something* that she wanted to kill so badly that she was willing to risk her life to obtain the strength to do so.

When we left the dungeon and stepped outside into the dusk, a luxurious black carriage was waiting for Karla, as though it did so regularly. That was where we parted ways. I kept a respectful distance upon noticing the steward who emerged from the carriage to pick her up.

Karla, smiling innocently, whispered, "Say, Alia? I think someone's after you."

"I know," I replied. This vague sense of discomfort was...Rahda, I supposed. How Karla had noticed was a mystery to me, but I wasn't surprised that she had.

"Shall I help you dispose of her?" she asked in a mocking tone.

I narrowed my eyes in a silent threat. "Touch my prey and I'll kill you."

Karla may not have been as strong as Rahda, but if she said she'd kill the beastwoman, that meant she actually would. She chuckled and continued, "That sounds quite amusing, but very well, I'll leave it for now. I'll be seeing you then, Alia. Don't die before you get the chance to kill me, all right?"

I didn't respond. With those ominous words, Karla disappeared into the black carriage. Though I wanted to continue training in the dungeon, Rahda was watching, and I didn't want to show her my hand.

Besides, my Shadow Magic was reaching its limit. To throw Rahda off guard, I decided to stay in the general vicinity of the Adventurers' Guild and focus on basic dagger practice and mental discipline.

Two days later, in order to meet up with the Mercenaries of Dawn—who should've been back from the dungeon by now—I headed for the guild.

The Dungeon Trap

Every few days, the Mercenaries of Dawn had to return to the surface.

Having angered a noble client by absconding with the family heirloom he'd commissioned them to find, they'd chosen to hide in the dungeon until the dust settled, taking advantage of the fact the item couldn't be exposed to the client's noble peers. However, they still had to leave regularly to replenish supplies and rest.

Though the guild had told me roughly how often they returned, I couldn't be sure they'd be back on a given day. Thankfully, when I peeked inside the guild, I saw a party of adventurers who seemed to fit their description trading in aethercrystals and monster parts. It was a group of four people between their late twenties and early thirties, three men and a woman. Among them was a red-haired man whose combat power exceeded 700, so I assumed that had to be their leader, Daggart, a Rank 4 adventurer.

▼ Daggart

Species: Humand (Rank 4 Fighter)

Aether Points: 155/155

Health Points: 326/380

Overall Combat Power: 733 (Boosted: 918)

While matching the information I had on the targets with each group member's appearance and equipment, I scanned them one by one. If my preliminary information had been wrong, it was possible they had skills I couldn't detect, but on first inspection, I noticed no major discrepancies.

Daggart's companions were categorized as Rank 3, but their combat power seemed higher than was typical for that rank.

▼ Randy

Species: Humand (Rank 3 Heavy Fighter)

Aether Points: 121/121

Health Points: 378/423

Overall Combat Power: 442 (Boosted: 504)

▼ Duncan

Species: Humand (Rank 3 Scout/Hunter)

Aether Points: 135/135

Health Points: 250/286

Overall Combat Power: 403 (Boosted: 468)

▼ Glinda

Species: Human♀ (Rank 3 Sorceress)

Aether Points: 212/248

Health Points: 179/217

Overall Combat Power: 541 (Boosted: 570)

My skill, Basic Scan, couldn't read information directly off the soul. Instead, it estimated the target's ability based on external information, such as build, muscle, gait, height/weight balance, perceived life force and aether, and so forth. Now that my Detection skill was Level 3 and with my ability to perceive mana as color, my reads were probably more accurate than anyone else's in the guild.

It was likely that the Rank 3 members had higher combat power than was typical for their rank because they possessed multiple skills, just as I did. Even within the same rank, acquiring multiple combat skills made a clear difference in aether points and overall stats. In other words, they had trained themselves to be worthy of being in a Rank 4 party rather than simply choosing to ride their leader's coattails.

Conversely, Daggart had lower combat power than Viro and Sera, probably due to his lower aether points. In other words, my guess was that since he delegated to his comrades in arms, he'd focused solely on improving his melee combat skills.

These people would've indeed been too much for Kiera or Guy to handle. Even Rahda would've had difficulty taking them on solo. This party was troublesome, but that didn't surprise me. After all, they'd stayed safe despite angering their clients—this meant they had to be either very cunning or suitably strong. As an entire party of individuals at that level, they were the first truly superior opponents I'd encountered.

While I'd previously engaged in combat against enemies stronger than myself, it had always been one-on-one and against people who'd underestimated me due to my youth. By taking advantage of that and targeting their weaknesses, I'd just barely managed to eke out a win every time. A whole party of adventurers, however, could cover for each other's weaknesses and leverage their individual strengths, making them more powerful than their raw numbers would suggest.

This battle would likely be a turning point for me. I felt like I was at a crossroads, and the path I took would determine whether I'd be just another assassin, relying on cheap tricks, or a proper adventurer who also had the powers of an assassin.

I stealthed myself just enough that I wouldn't attract suspicion and blended into my surroundings. As a precaution, to help hide my true reason for coming to the guild, I was trading in the aethercrystals I'd gotten from exploring the dungeon with Karla. A friendly-looking older staff member, perhaps having recognized me from when we'd spoken before, approached me at the exchange counter.

"You there! You have great timing. The Rank 4 party I told you about before is back. It looks like you've already gone into the dungeon, though," he said.

"A kind girl offered to be my guide for free," I replied, covering my face with my shawl to escape the gazes that had shifted my way once the staff member started talking to me.

The man nodded, smiling gently. "That's good to hear. Perhaps because of the dungeon, there are hardly any young adventurers in this town, so the veteran staff and adventurers were concerned. Have you decided to form a party with her?"

I didn't care much about how younger people saw me, but if the veterans had been paying attention to the point of concern... It wasn't *bad*, necessarily, but I was trying to hide my identity, so getting involved with them was probably more trouble than it was worth.

"She's a noble lady, so it's not like I could form a permanent party with her," I replied casually.

The older man paled. "Was this a girl with long black hair? Sickly looking?"

The guild considered Karla a person of interest. He didn't tell me the details, but she seemed to be suspected of involvement in the disappearances of several adventurers in recent years. Since she was the daughter of a high-ranking noble, even the guild couldn't look into her circumstances. Therefore, the advice was to avoid involvement with her to the extent possible.

"Keep this between us," the man continued, "but a pair of adventurers disappeared a few days ago. Please be careful. We recommend forming a party as soon as possible."

"I'll keep it in mind," I said. So she was being blamed for the disappearance of the two guys we'd killed. Unsurprising, since she didn't seem to be the type to bother covering her tracks.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the Mercenaries of Dawn leaving the guild. After thanking the staff member, I stepped out too. Although the group was no longer in sight, the heavy fighter Randy and the sorceress Glinda didn't seem to have stealth-type skills, so I could just barely track their presences from a distance. As I followed them, unseen, they stopped by a general goods store for adventurers and an apothecary to replenish supplies before disappearing into a nice-looking inn near the dungeon.

Assuming they continued to operate the same way, they were likely to go back into the dungeon after staying the night. Since they'd stocked up on supplies, they must've still been wary of pursuers dispatched by the noble. I decided I'd continue to keep an eye on them for the time being.

I still had an intermittent sense of discomfort from Rahda's presence. When I couldn't sense it, I assumed Rahda was moving between the shadows, or having meals and such. She was a person too and needed to eat and sleep. Whenever I

tried to do anything during those intervals, I picked up on the faintest sense of movement—a sensation I committed to memory.

Even when I was alone, Rahda didn't attack me. I was certain she thought I'd killed Guy, so she had to have a reason for staying her hand. Even if the guild's branches weren't connected, it would probably still reflect poorly on her branch if she caused a major incident in another branch's jurisdiction.

That, and considering how furious Rahda had been over Guy's disappearance, I assumed a quick and easy death was off the table for me, and so she would be selective over where she made a move. Since she thought I was acting based on the information she'd provided, the ideal place for her to do so...would be inside the dungeon.

From within a shadow, Rahda monitored the child known as Cinders.

She figured that this Cinders was the one who'd killed Guy. Dino, head of the Northern Border District branch of the Assassins' Guild, seemed intent on not bothering with the matter, given the nature of their profession and how often assassins simply vanished. Rahda, however, was convinced that Cinders was the culprit, especially after questioning the child.

Though she had no proof, she could pick up the familiar scent of blood on Cinders—a smell she was quite used to as an assassin herself. Rahda had appraised Cinders upon the child's arrival at the guild, and her reading had indicated a combat power of under 200. Still, by playing dirty—and one would expect no less from a demoness's disciple—she could've caught Guy off guard.

Nevertheless, Rahda couldn't just kill Cinders immediately. Dino had called the girl his "fellow apprentice," acting almost as her guardian. Most likely that had been a subtle warning to his people to leave the child alive so that he could use her as leverage to keep Cinders's mentor, the demoness, at bay. If her apprentice were to be killed, there was a possibility that the demoness would direct her ire at the assassination targets; however, this strategy was akin to setting off a bomb and could only be used once. Worst case, after killing the targets, she could even turn on the guild as a whole. Likewise, while Rahda was prepared to go against both Dino and the demoness to exact revenge for her

brother's death, she still felt indebted to the former guildmaster for taking her and Guy in, and couldn't bring herself to betray the guild outright.

Cinders was an eerie child, even to Rahda, who had also been killing since childhood. Assuming the child's body had matured through aether, that meant her actual age was about ten. And yet she'd defied expectations and effortlessly taken down the rookie-hunting thieves, a bizarre display of skill that was completely at odds with her youth.

But the eeriest thing about Cinders was her *aura*. She looked twelve at most, yet upon noticing her, the townspeople couldn't help but follow her with their gazes. She had a bewitching air to her, in a sense. Though the child herself might not have been aware of it, perhaps even Dino and Guy had been drawn to that aura. Currently, her youth was still apparent, but it was already clear that should she grow into adulthood, she could charm a vast number of people. A chill ran down Rahda's spine, more out of fear than anger at her brother's killer. Not killing the child here could easily sow the seeds of future trouble for the guild.

Just as planned, Cinders was on her way to assassinate the guild's current targets, the Mercenaries of Dawn. Due to the presence of another liaison from the guild, Rahda had decided against killing Cinders in the streets and instead opted to assassinate her in the dungeon. Rahda had provided the child with information about the mission and altered it just subtly enough that it wouldn't arouse suspicion. Still, she hadn't touched any of the information on the mercenaries themselves—not because Rahda had been worried that Cinders might've actually been able to take them down solo but because she'd wanted to see what cards the girl had up her sleeve.

Rahda knew Cinders couldn't be underestimated, regardless of combat power. The beastwoman fully expected the girl to use underhanded methods she'd learned from her demoness mentor. At the same time, however, while Rahda believed that the girl could cause some serious damage to the targets if she managed to get their guard down, her combat power was still low. Rahda didn't think Cinders could actually kill them.

It was said that through guile, one could fight against an opponent at most a single rank higher than oneself. With a rank difference of two, it became

difficult to dodge the opponent's attacks, and even magic resistances could be overridden. Though Rahda wasn't careless, she still hadn't given up on the idea of killing Cinders directly. She didn't want to just strike back at the girl and kill her—no, Rahda wanted to crush all of Cinders's traps, push her to her limits against the targets, drive her to the brink of despair, *then* kill her.

Just as expected, the Mercenaries of Dawn had once again gone into the dungeon, and Cinders had followed them in. Weaving through the shadows, Rahda slipped past the guards at the entrance undetected and started monitoring Cinders as she tailed the party. Soon, however, Rahda felt a faint discomfort.

What's this?

Cinders was skilled at stealth for a child, true. But she was skilled as far as humans went. Scouting skills like Stealth, Detection, and Night Vision had significant differences depending on the user's race. Cat beastfolk like Rahda had bonuses to Stealth and Night Vision, and dog beastfolk had a bonus to Detection. Humans were notably inferior at Night Vision, which in turn affected their Detection skill, and this led to slight disadvantages in Stealth, even at the same level as a beastkin. Yet for some reason, Rahda had found herself nearly losing track of Cinders several times since entering the dungeon.

She's keeping an unusual distance from the targets too. What's going on?

Rahda was confident in her Shadow Walker spell, but it had its drawbacks. As was characteristic of all space-traversing shadow sorcery, it wouldn't work unless one was fully isolated with shadow mana, and while in isolation, one received no information about the external world. Spaces isolated by shadow sorcery, such as expanded bags, were inhospitable to living creatures, and so Rahda could only stay within those spaces for a few seconds while weaving between shadows. Typically, she only partially opened the isolated spaces to hide in the shadows, but even then, she was still cut off from external information for those few seconds of movement.

Cinders was drawing closer to the Mercenaries of Dawn. How could she get that close to a Rank 4 adventurer without being detected?

Upon descending to the fifth floor of the dungeon, where no other adventurers were in sight, Rahda began to grow impatient. She still didn't understand the situation, and so she used her Shadow Walker spell to get closer to the group and gather information.

What the...?

As soon as she left the isolated space, Rahda was faced with a small, floating black shadow. Normally, she would've recognized what it was, but between being in the dark to stay hidden and her own impatience, her mind was a moment too slow to grasp its true nature.

In that instant, something shot out from the shadow, and before she could dodge, a throwing weapon designed for ease of concealment pierced through her throat. She was unable to speak, unable to breathe as blood flooded into her windpipe. Confused, not thinking straight, she leaped out from the shadows to escape the attack, only for her unprotected torso to meet with an iron arrow and an Ice Javelin spell.

As she collapsed, Rahda was hit with the finishing blow: a small shadow appeared on the ground, and from it sprang forth a blade, piercing through her right eye.

Is this Cinders's knife? Then was that little shadow her magic?! If so, then the spell was similar to her specialty, Shadow Walker.

Feeling her life ebbing away, Rahda spotted Cinders standing among the Mercenaries of Dawn and scanned the child. At that moment she realized they'd been deceived from the start.

▼ Cinders

Species: Human♀ (Estimated Rank 3)

Aether Points: 135/210

Health Points: 141/148

Overall Combat Power: 374 (Boosted: 432)

What had Alia done to Rahda? Why was she with the Mercenaries of Dawn? It all went back to this morning.

Around noon, the Mercenaries of Dawn left their inn and headed straight for the dungeon.

The heavy fighter Randy and the scout Duncan had shared a room and eaten together at the inn's ground-floor tavern in the morning. Daggart and Glinda, who'd also shared a room, had woken up late, which was why they'd all left at that time.

Upon making the short walk to the dungeon, they bought ready-to-eat meals from a nearby stall and went past the guards. For a group that planned on staying for several days, they'd packed unusually light; I realized they had an enchanted bag upon seeing Duncan place the food they'd just bought into it. This meant my strategy might change depending on what they had in the bag; it would be pointless to gradually inflict damage or use poison if they had high-level healing potions.

While wearing them down wouldn't have been a waste, these weren't opponents I could strike leisurely at. My initial strategy had been to neutralize Glinda, the sorceress, but it seemed a change of priorities was in order.

That is, after I dealt with Rahda.

"One with cheese, please," I said.

"Here ya go! That'll be three copper!"

To avoid suspicion, I bought brown bread stuffed with cheese and pickled vegetables from a different stall and at a different time. As the Mercenaries of Dawn entered the dungeon, I confirmed that Rahda was tailing me, paid the stall keeper, and headed for the entrance. Last time, I'd nearly been denied entry due to my age, but they'd let me pass when they saw Karla. This time, a younger soldier was on duty, and he didn't try to stop me.

Inside, as I'd expected, the Mercenaries of Dawn were nowhere to be seen. Without delay, I concealed my presence and started running straight down the path. According to the intel, the group based their operations around the safer

zones near the tenth floor. While they were certainly capable of delving deeper, their objective wasn't to make money from the dungeon but to safely bide their time until the dust settled. Figuring they'd head straight down with no detours, I'd planned out the shortest route down in advance, back when Karla and I had been here.

I ran through the dungeons' corridors for several minutes, noting the conspicuous absence of monsters, and eventually spotted the Mercenaries of Dawn far ahead, cutting down several kobolds. The Rank 1 monsters, resembling bipedal stray dogs, were slightly taller than goblins and occasionally wielded weapons but posed no more of a threat than actual stray dogs. Such low-level creatures stood no chance against a Rank 4 party, so Glinda, looking bored and yawning, watched as the three men effortlessly dealt with the kobolds.

Without bothering to collect the Rank 1 aethercrystals, they went farther inside. I followed after them cautiously, maintaining a safe distance. Normally, even the shortest route through this dungeon would take about half an hour per floor, but they progressed a bit faster, taking about two-thirds of the usual time to reach the next floor.

The second level was mostly the same, with Rank 1 monsters and the occasional lone Rank 2 hobgoblin. By the third floor, Rank 2 monsters became slightly more frequent, and by the fourth, Rank 3 high kobolds also began to make rare appearances. The fifth layer had practically no Rank 1 monsters, featuring mostly lone hobgoblins and high kobolds.

This was the limit for low-rank adventurers. Conversely, since even low-level adventurers could get to this point, it was almost impossible to turn a profit without descending deeper, so parties challenging this dungeon were typically Rank 3 and above. Past this point, adventurer sightings became rare. Those who just wanted to dungeon dive for the day would wrap things up on the earlier floors, and those staying several days would hunt beyond the tenth floor, where groups of orcs could be found.

I'd avoided combat up until now. Lone Rank 2 or 3 monsters wouldn't have stood a chance against the group, after all. But this was about the right time. I removed the cloak I'd been wearing to disguise my gender and tied it around

my waist, then dispelled the illusory ash in my hair. Slowly, I closed the distance between us.

One, two, three...

As I timed my approach, the scout Duncan sensed my presence and turned around, alert. "Wait! Something's here!"

"Please, wait! I'm not a monster!" I called out, simultaneously using scout signs I'd learned from Cere'zhula and Viro, signaling caution, attack, and move through hand gestures.

Surprised, Duncan whispered to his comrades to keep going, then turned to me, mumbling softly, "A woman? No, a girl?"

I'd removed my cloak to make them less wary of me, lowering their guard. I'd grown taller lately, and it'd become harder to get people to underestimate me, but being a girl helped with that. Also, I'd timed my approach to coincide with Rahda vanishing into the shadows so she wouldn't notice.

The Mercenaries of Dawn's perceptive scout immediately understood my message. "Randy, make noise as you walk," he whispered to his comrade before turning to me. "You there, girl, is something coming at us from behind?"

Just as I'd initially kept a distance of several dozen meters from the group, Rahda was keeping a similar distance from me. Between that and the noise Duncan had asked his friend to make, she wouldn't notice us whispering.

I gave a small nod in response, and, using that woman's knowledge, played the part of an innocent girl without making it obvious. "Yes. Something's been following in the shadows. At first I thought I was the target, so I hid using Stealth, but since it continued to follow, maybe it's targeting your group instead. I figured I should say something."

"Were you following us?" he asked.

"I-I'm sorry. It's only been for a few floors. I just want to reach the fifth floor. I don't have much money, but I can pay..."

"Keep your voice down. We don't need the money." He turned to the others. "What do we do?"

"The girl's combat power is about 200," whispered Glinda, who must have scanned me. "She's not strong enough to trick us or do anything, really."

"What do you think, Duncan?" Daggart asked, skeptical. "Is there really something there?"

Duncan concentrated for a moment. "Nothing... No, wait, there is something."

Even with the knowledge that something was there, finding Rahda's presence as she blended into the shadows was no easy feat. This scout really was good. The party instantly became alert, acknowledging my intentions, and sprang into action.

I felt a chill run down my spine as I watched what a Rank 4 party was capable of. At the same time, I admired Dino's foresight in considering how dangerous to the guild's members it would've been to engage the group directly, and going to my mentor for help.

"Think they've finally found us?" Randy murmured as he continued to stomp along. "If so, that makes whoever this is our enemy."

Daggart nodded slightly, and I felt his suspicion toward me lower. "Right. No need to doubt such a cute little lady," he half joked.

I wasn't sure if my looks had anything to do with it, but being a woman and a child did seem to have lowered their guard. Duncan and Randy chuckled at Daggart's words, but Glinda, the only woman in the group, cast a mildly annoyed glare at me.

But all in all, my helpless act seemed to have been well received, since I was a child and a girl to boot.

"So what do we do?" Glinda asked.

"Right," Daggart replied. "Duncan, can you pinpoint where the guy's hiding?"

"No, not precisely," Duncan said, then turned to me. "What about you?" He must've acknowledged me as a fellow adventurer scout if he wanted my opinion.

"Whatever this is hides in the darkness, and occasionally its presence vanishes

entirely, but I can sort of sense when it'll reappear," I explained. "Should I try attacking with sorcery?"

"You're a sorceress?" Duncan asked.

"You do that, then," Daggart whispered. "Glinda, Duncan, get ready."

At Daggart's soft command, Glinda gripped her staff and Duncan readied his bow. The whole group really was competent, and that was precisely why I could set this trap without Rahda noticing.

"I'll go on the count of ten," I said.

I began to chant a shadow *sorcery* spell and focused my mind on the half of it that was composed of shadow *magic*. This was my first time using the spell, but I'd gone over its composition repeatedly and had successfully half activated it. The reason I'd never cast it to completion was to avoid increasing my skill level.

"Shadow Snatch." A blade that crossed through shadows, and a shadow that claimed lives. I chanted the spell while walking, and a small dark spot emerged from my palm. I flung it behind me, minded my timing, and just as I finished counting to ten, I threw a concealed knife into the shadow at my feet.

My spell had been inspired by Rahda's Shadow Walker. Her spell was powerful, but to me, it had two glaring flaws. One, it consumed a large amount of aether, which meant she kept it in a suspended state to minimize expenditure. That in turn meant she couldn't use other spells at the same time. Two, and most importantly, she was cut off from the outside world while traveling through shadows. That might not have been a problem when ambushing an opponent to assassinate them, but in direct combat like this, having no information during those precious few seconds could be fatal. Not only that, if the opponent could tell when and where she would emerge, they'd have a significant window of opportunity.

This was why, instead of transporting myself, I'd limited my version to only carry the weapon across, thus reducing aether consumption and avoiding the risk of getting cut off from the outside world. As a result, what would've been a Level 4 spell was reduced to Level 3, and Shadow Snatch's aether consumption was only a tenth of Shadow Walker's.

I had to more or less guess where to aim, but thankfully, I managed a direct hit to her throat. Caught off guard in what she'd assumed to be a safe zone, a confused Rahda stepped out of the safety of the shadows to avoid further attacks. Even I could've attacked her in that state, but for the sake of my *other* traps, I let the pair behind me handle it. Glinda's spell and Duncan's arrow both pierced Rahda's torso.

Proper control of Shadow Snatch was still challenging, but I could nevertheless maintain it for a few seconds. The dark spot slid across the floor, sending my next throwing knife shooting upward into Rahda's face. I saw my own reflection in her astonished eyes as she lay on the ground, staring at me.

Still alive, I see, I thought to myself. Rahda. You die here.

Duncan let loose another arrow, and this one pierced through Rahda's skull, killing her. I dispelled the dark spot and felt something growing within me—an increase in my aether and overall strength.

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▼ Alia (Alicia)
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Species: Human $\$ (Rank 3) $\$ +1

Aether Points: $135/200 \triangle +20$

Health Points: $138/148 \triangle +3$

Strength: 7 (9) \triangle +1

Endurance: 7 (9)

Agility: 10 (12)

Dexterity: 8

[Dagger Mastery Lv. 2]

[Martial Mastery Lv. 3] \triangle +1

[Throwing Lv. 2]

[String Manipulation Lv. 2]

[Light Magic Lv. 2]

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[Shadow Magic Lv. 3] \triangle +1

[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 3] \triangle +1

[Practical Magic x6]

[Aether Manipulation Lv. 3] \triangle +1

[Intimidation Lv. 3] \triangle +1

[Stealth Lv. 3]

[Night Vision Lv. 2]

[Detection Lv. 3]

[Poison Resistance Lv. 2]

[Basic Scan]

Overall Combat Power: 374 (Boosted: 432) \triangle +161
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Just as I'd planned. My skill levels had increased, and with Shadow Magic now at Level 3, Aether Manipulation had gone up too. My ability to control my movements through Martial Mastery had also improved. *Now* I could do this.

With Rahda confirmed dead, the men breathed a sigh of relief, and Glinda, the sorceress, approached me excitedly. "What was that spell?! I've never seen anything like it! How did you do it? You have to teach me!"

"Oh, okay, um..." I looked at her prominent, bouncing chest, upon which rested a necklace with a green-tinted gem that I recognized as the Spirit Tear I'd been looking for. Although the size had been different, the water spirit I'd defeated had dropped a crystal of the same kind, so there was no mistaking it.

Noticing my gaze on the necklace swaying over her chest, Glinda smirked proudly at me. "You're a girl, right? The guys didn't appreciate this, but you do, don't you? It's super pretty, and apparently it enhances my spells! But never mind that! Teach me that spell you just used! I'll show you the necklace later!"

Normally, it was taboo to ask another adventurer about their techniques. However, relieved over having just thwarted an "assassin," the others let it slide, smiling awkwardly at Glinda's giddy behavior.

"Yes, of course." Smiling politely at the stolen goods swaying before me, I held out a hand at Glinda, my palm facing up. "Shadow Snatch..."

As I activated the shadow magic, creating a small darkness on my palm, Glinda leaned in excitedly to take a look. "So, how do you attack with this—"

Shk!

"Huh?"

At that moment, the small crossbow mechanism hidden in my left glove fired a dart. Concealed by the darkness, it pierced Glinda's eye and lodged itself into her brain. She collapsed quietly, my expressionless face reflected in her remaining eye.

One down, three to go.

"Huh?" I said as Glinda collapsed, moving to catch her. "What happened?"

Glinda had died instantly, without so much as a scream. My fake concern drew the attention of the Mercenaries of Dawn.

"What? What is it?"

Their scout Duncan, with his guard down and an exasperated look on his face, approached carelessly. "Hey, Glinda, did you get too exci—" His voice died as our gazes met. He must've seen something in my eyes, because he instantly tensed up. I thrust Glinda's corpse at him, and he exclaimed, "What?!"

No one had realized she was dead yet. As Duncan caught her, I quickly pulled out my black knife and drew it back in a wide motion. "Double Edge!"

"Gah!" Still holding Glinda's warm body, Duncan twisted his body away from the attack and managed to dodge the first of the twin strikes. But, perhaps because he was subconsciously trying to protect Glinda, the second strike connected, leaving a nasty, deep gash on his right arm.

So I couldn't finish him off, I thought. Truly, this party was skilled. Maybe it'd been my gaze that had given my intention away, but I hadn't thought their scout would be ready for battle so quickly with just one of them down. I clearly still had a ways to go before I could match my mentor.

"What the—?! What's happening?!"

"Duncan! How's Glinda?!"

"She's not moving! This girl's an enemy!"

Though still confused, the other two readied themselves for battle as well. I threw a knife at Duncan, but their leader Daggart quickly intervened and deflected it with his greatsword. "Duncan! Use potions to treat yourself and Glinda!" he shouted, holding out his sword as if to protect the pair.

But I knew this group's healer had been the sorceress. Randy, the tank, also seemed to have some light sorcery but likely could only use Cure, as was true of most ordinary adventurers. Not only that, the majority of healing potions sold on the market had no more than a mild restorative effect—they might close wounds but wouldn't fully restore function to an arm that had been cut so deeply.

My plan had been to take down Duncan and steal the enchanted bag where the group kept their potions, but things didn't always go according to plan. With a small sigh, I flicked the blood off my black knife with a light swing, then provocatively beckoned with my palm up, curling my fingers toward myself.

"You little shit!" snapped Randy, their tank, infuriated by my clear provocation.

"Randy, don't!" Duncan tried to warn him, clutching his badly wounded right arm. "Something's not right with that girl!"

Their scout had grown cautious of me after taking a hit, and their leader had chosen to protect the injured and keep his cool so they could regroup. Their tank, however, enraged at me for wounding his companions, didn't share the others' restraint. Randy drew his sword and, ignoring Duncan's calls, charged at me.

This was what I considered the downside of an adventuring party. The reason the Adventurers' Guild recommended forming parties over dungeon diving solo was that teamwork compensated for one's weaknesses and amplified one's strengths, thereby making survival more likely. But adventurers could be broadly divided into two types: "commanders," who could look at the bigger

picture and think of what would benefit the party as a whole, sacrificing the individual for the collective if necessary; and "craftsmen," who focused solely on fulfilling their own roles.

This didn't mean craftsmen were bad. Under a commander, they could perform beyond their capabilities. But alone, they were less effective—and Randy, who from the beginning had focused only on acting as the party's tank, was having trouble performing outside of that role.

"You're not getting away!" he shouted as he chased after me deeper into the dungeon.

"Randy!" Daggart called out, but his comrade didn't listen.

In this situation, their best course of action would've been to treat the injured, then hunt me down as a group or simply retreat. And normally, Randy would've chosen to do one of those things—but not this time, thanks to the very first trap I'd laid.

"Don't think you can get away from us! Your combat power's only 200!"

And it had been around that—when I'd first entered the dungeon, that is. The estimated combat power provided by the Basic Scan skill could vary slightly, depending on how skilled the user was at Detection. Thus, since Glinda had told the others that my combat power was "around 200," Randy believed I was only half as strong as he was. But my level in Shadow Magic had gone up, and with it, my body's aether pathways had expanded, making my level in Martial Mastery grow in turn and strengthening my ability to use Boost. Thus, my current combat power had risen to nearly match Duncan and Randy's.

That didn't mean I could underestimate them. My Dagger Mastery was still only Level 2, perhaps due to my physique. Not only that, daggers were meant to slice through skin and flesh and would hardly do any damage to someone like Randy, covered head to toe in armor.

While remaining alert to Randy's presence as he chased after me, I loaded an arrow into the mechanism hidden in my glove. Said mechanism had been crafted from parts of a small crossbow my mentor had gifted me, which I'd asked Gelf to embed into the glove. My mentor, a sorceress, had used the crossbow to keep enemies in melee range at bay; the weapon had been crafted

out of a mithril core encased in treant wood, with a string made from the tendons of flying dragons. All of the materials could regenerate by drawing upon the wielder's aether, so even when loaded with an arrow, the string didn't grow slack. There was also a mechanism in place to load the arrow with one hand, making it easier to use in close combat than throwing knives.

I couldn't wait long or Daggart would catch up. Judging this distance to be ideal, I decelerated about thirty meters away, and Randy charged at me like a cannonball. "I've got you!"

"Pain," I chanted.

Randy stopped mid-charge and screamed like a crushed frog in the grips of the intense pain from my illusory spell. As a tank, he should've been virtually immune to pain, but he'd underestimated me, and the intensity of the sensation caught him off guard. "Guh!"

Seizing the chance and using my newly improved Boost and my Level 3 in Martial Arts, I lunged at Randy's chest, delivering an upward palm strike to his chin, then stabbed my knife deep into his throat, now fully exposed. Tanks did best with support. His mistake had been failing to realize that while his armor could absorb blows, yes, it put him at a disadvantage in solo combat.

Randy's eyes rolled back and his muscles grew tense. Before they could fully stiffen, I pulled out the knife and leaped over his falling body to return to where Daggart and Duncan were.

Two down, two to go.

"The girl's back!"

"Where's Randy?!"

"I saw him fall, but I don't know what happened!"

When I returned, I saw Glinda's body laid out in the corridor. Duncan, who'd spotted my approach, had a dagger in his left hand, his injured right arm hanging limp at his side.

Daggart had his greatsword out to protect Duncan but extended his palm

toward me as I approached. "Wait! The nobles sent you, right?! Do you even know what they're after?!"

I didn't respond. There was no reason for me to ease up here; given enough time, their confusion would clear and they'd formulate a plan to fight back. Still, I stopped moving upon noticing their somewhat combat-ready stances.

The corners of Daggart's lips curled up slightly. "So you're willing to listen, then. Look, what they had was a Spirit Tear. Those things are forbidden, you know. They're spirits' aethercrystals, banned by the Holy Church of Fandora."

"And what does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

Spirits, despite their incorporeal nature, sometimes left behind gemlike aethercrystals, though the exact conditions that caused them to drop were unclear. The one the water spirit had dropped hadn't been of much benefit to me due to its water attribute, but apparently these aethercrystals weren't just powerful in their own right; they could also slightly enhance the power of spells corresponding to the same element. Moreover, they looked like beautiful gems, and so there'd been a time when people would deliberately summon and kill spirits to obtain them.

"Don't you get it? I don't know what they told you to make you come after us, but the nobles are the true criminals here! If you care at all about justice, then you should be joining us, not trying to kill us!"

"Daggart!" Duncan exclaimed, casting a critical glance at his leader. Daggart's sudden attempt to recruit me must've disturbed him; I was their enemy, after all. "This girl killed Glinda! And Randy—"

"Face the facts, Duncan," Daggart interjected. "We only kept the damned Spirit Tear because of Glinda's whims in the first place, and now the nobles are after us. We need strong people on our side!"

Duncan clicked his tongue. "Damn it. Fine," he said with a grudging nod, seemingly convinced by Daggart's insistence that the theft had been Glinda's idea. He then turned toward me and walked closer, protectively covering his immobile arm. "Look, girl, we want to know your true skill, scanning crystal be damned. And if you were just deceived by those nobles, we want you to hear our side, all right?"

"All right," I replied with a small nod.

The scout smiled slightly, sheathed his weapon, and reached out a hand as if to shake mine. "So, first we—"

Shing!

At that moment, Duncan's knife—which he'd hidden in his right hand—and my black knife collided, the resulting sparks lighting up the darkness of the dungeon. "Tsk!"

I quickly shifted my position to use Duncan as a shield from Daggart's followup attack.

"You little—" He tried to pull away, but I held down his right arm, still not fully functional, and managed to get close enough to touch him. Immediately, I fired the crossbow bolt into his mouth. "Guh—"

Three down, one to go.

"Duncan!"

I rolled to dodge the greatsword's swing and gained some distance. Daggart caught Duncan as the scout convulsed and collapsed. His face twisted into a furious scowl and he turned toward me. "You...! How did you figure it out?!"

"Why did you think I wouldn't?" I retorted.

I'd known from the start that the noble who'd hired the Assassins' Guild had chosen to do so because the item in question couldn't be dealt with openly. Not only that, the job had two conditions: One, recover the stolen heirloom. Two, deal with the thieves. I'd never had any intention of listening to the nonsense of those who would abscond with a family heirloom out of greed.

Besides, perhaps a commoner or adventurer with no experience watching actors could've been deceived, but I had that woman's knowledge on my side. There was no way a third-rate performance like that would've fooled me. Not only that, but I also knew that if Duncan had used a high-grade healing potion on his arm, it wouldn't have been as useless as he'd pretended.

"It was difficult for me to finish Duncan off while you were shielding him," I

taunted. "Thanks for letting him approach me in his weakened state."

"Y-You—damn yooooou!" Daggart snarled. Perhaps feeling mocked by my candid statement, he angrily threw Duncan's lifeless body aside. "You little wretch! You're gonna pay for this!!!"

Time to get serious, I thought.

A guttural roar echoed off the walls of the dungeon as the last remaining member of the Mercenaries of Dawn, a Rank 4 fighter, charged at me with his greatsword.

Sensing the incoming attack through both his presence and the displaced air on my skin, I just barely dodged at the last moment, the blade slicing through a few strands of my hair as it missed me. Rank 4 fighters truly were something else... If my Martial Mastery hadn't increased to Level 3, I might not have been able to dodge that strike. As I evaded, I took a concealed weapon from my waist and threw it point-blank, aiming for his face.

"Ugh!" Daggart dodged the throw by tilting his head.

Quickly, I released a pendulum from the shadow in my palm, and Daggart arched his back to dodge the curving blade. On guard, he retreated, creating distance between us.

With my Shadow Magic having reached Level 3, the Shadow Storage spell, which I'd just barely managed to activate before, was now fully usable. Still, it could only produce a space about the size of a small bag, barely enough to hold a few knives. I'd deliberately chosen to not hide my black knife—my main weapon—and instead opted to conceal the smaller blades and pendulums.

"What are you plotting?" Daggart asked with a puzzled expression, no doubt wondering why I hadn't performed a follow-up attack.

Our fight had made me realize something: no matter how fast Daggart could swing his blade at Rank 4, as long as he was blinded by rage and could only manage dull and predictable attacks, I could take him down even at my level of power.

But I didn't want that.

"Come at me with everything you've got," I muttered.

Daggart's eyes widened. "What?"

This was something I couldn't compromise on. All my schemes, the deaths of Rahda and the Mercenaries of Dawn...all of it had served to prepare me for a one-on-one fight with a Rank 4 adventurer. After this, I'd be facing the Assassins' Guild—even if just one branch of the organization. Within it were individuals like Dino and the Sage, who were also Rank 4...and then there was Gord the Executioner, whose power was closer to that of a Rank 5.

Up until now, I'd been deceiving the guild about my true strength while gradually chipping away at their forces and making myself stronger. Rahda's absence, however, was certain to rouse suspicion. Eliminating the Mercenaries of Dawn would buy me some time until I returned to the guild, but I'd have to return sooner or later. An updated scan of my abilities would turn the guild's suspicion to certainty.

If I was going to win, I had to lay a trap for them before that happened. And that was why I absolutely needed to experience direct combat against a Rank 4 fighter. I'd initially considered fighting Rahda instead, but although she was Rank 4, her main tactics were stealth and surprise. Without factoring in her shadow weaving—which I'd already figured out—her direct combat power was closer to that of a Rank 3.

This was the reason I'd baited the Mercenaries of Dawn into killing Rahda and then used her death as bait to kill the other mercenaries: I wanted to face Daggart and his Rank 4 melee combat skills head-on. And that was why I couldn't waste this opportunity by fighting him while he was in a state of blind rage.

You're an emotional man, aren't you, Daggart? I thought. Your lover, Glinda, died, and you spat on her memory by pinning the blame on her in an attempt to trick me. And when your trick failed, in your rage, you just threw Duncan's corpse aside like it was trash. Cool your head. Look at me. It wasn't a little girl who killed your friends—it was an assassin, capable of killing Rank 3 adventurers. So use all your power. Fight with everything you have. Die and feed my growth! Or win and take my life instead.

"You little punk," Daggart hissed, his mouth twisting into a scowl as he met my steady gaze. "Staring me down like that." After a moment's pause, he cooled down. His anger gave way to fighting spirit, and he gripped his blade. "Maybe it's too much for a brat like you to understand, but there are people in the world you just don't mess with, kid."

As I listened quietly, I steadied my breathing, slightly ragged from the continual combat.

"Those people, something's not right with them. Even monsters are afraid of stronger opponents. But those people? If it means winning, they'll risk their lives without a second thought."

I remained silent.

"You're no little girl to me, not anymore. You're a *beast*. And my number one enemy. So have it your way. I'll give this everything I've got, and I'll kill you!"

To counter my speed, Daggart gripped the hilt of his greatsword closer to the blade and edged closer, on the tips of his toes. In turn, I readied my knife and concealed weapons, sidestepping to keep out of his range.

"Raaaaaaah!!!" he roared as he kicked off the ground with a thunk.

"Hyah!" I yelled, throwing a concealed blade at him.

He again tilted his head to dodge it, then used the momentum to swing down his greatsword diagonally. The slash would've crushed me even if I'd tried to parry—and in a split-second decision, I dodged the blow by stepping forward, into his reach.

"Tsk!" Thrown off by the move, he quickly swung down the hilt of his sword.

I caught it with my left armguard, but the sheer difference in strength sent me flying back. Seizing the opportunity, he dropped his greatsword, quickly drew a pair of daggers, and slashed at me. Although I'd taken damage from his strike, switching to the daggers was his best option to kill me, given my superior speed. But this decision, while correct, was also a bad move.

Daggart's Sword Mastery, Martial Mastery, and Guard skills were all Level 4, but was the same true of his Dagger Mastery, for his secondary weapons?

Ka-shing!

I knew the moment our blades clashed that his Dagger Mastery skill wasn't much better than mine. Yet, due to the difference in our physiques and the damage I'd just taken, my knife strike was deflected slightly.

"Die!" he yelled. When wary of an opponent in close combat, one minimized the risk of creating openings by avoiding combat skills. Determined to kill me, Daggart seized the opportunity and quickly thrust at me.

Sharply exhaling the breath I'd held in, I pressed forward without hesitation. I narrowly dodged his strike, only taking a shallow cut to my flank. It was foolish to face an opponent of a higher rank head-on like this, but I wasn't going to back down. A Rank 4 adventurer had challenged me in my own ring. If I was going to surpass him, retreating now wasn't an option!

Clang! Clang! Ka-shing!

Gripping the black knife in my right hand and the steel knife in my left, I clashed with Daggart's dual blades. He was superior to me in every aspect—physique, strength, technique, experience. Few of my attacks so much as grazed him, and every lucky hit was repelled by his hardleather armor. Meanwhile, every blow from him depleted my health points, and little by little, my shoulders and arms became covered in wounds.

"Seems you're at your limit, kiddo!" he taunted.

I didn't respond.

It was believed that generally speaking, children couldn't reach Level 3 in close combat skills before adulthood because their bodies couldn't perform the necessary techniques. This applied to me too, even with my aether-driven growth spurt. I'd grown taller, but my muscles were still smaller than a typical young teenager's. But was that *really* true? If it was believed "generally speaking," didn't that mean there were exceptions?

The black-haired girl I'd explored this dungeon with flashed into the back of my mind for a moment. With a complexion pale as a dying man's, and acting as though killing was her purpose for living, that girl had been fully willing to throw her life away in the pursuit of strength. What was the difference between us?

I'd compensated for my lack of strength and stamina through skill and knowledge, fighting as though weighing my life on a scale.

Sharpen your gaze. Understand your opponent's movements. You can't match his strength. You can't compete with his stamina. If you don't have the strength, use your wisdom. If you don't have the stamina, deflect with technique. And if it's still not enough, put your life on the line.

Such was my train of thought.

Eyes ahead. The mold for your technique is right here. A fighter with over a decade of experience is right here. Steal his technique—take his blade as your training! If you can't do that now, you're just going to die here!

"Hngh!" As I received his attack, I twisted my wrist, using both my arms and body to deflect the force and softening the impact with my legs and hips. I deflected a second, then a third strike, and all the power I'd gathered, like a taut bowstring, was finally released in a blow that sliced through Daggart's leather armor.

"What?!"

At that moment, something inside me changed.

Clang! Clang! Shing!

The sound of my knife blocking his attacks shifted from the sharpness of metal on metal to a clear tone. And although the exchange of blows between Daggart and myself had only just become somewhat evenly matched, a slight panic flashed across his features. The fighter, who had dominated the duel up until now, wielded his daggers as though spurred on by this panic.

"Cyclone!" he chanted, unleashing the Level 3 dagger technique.

By shaping aether into a pseudo-blade of wind, the technique enabled the caster to attack even from a distance. Its main selling point was the fact that, like sorcery, it could strike a wide area. He'd likely opted for an area attack instead of something single-target, despite the close range, out of fear that I'd dodge.

But although point-blank skills were difficult to dodge, they were nothing to

fear as long as one came prepared. Releasing aether from my whole body, I used magic resistance to counter the technique's effects. Daggart was momentarily immobilized as a result of using the technique, and I took the opportunity to throw my steel knife at him even as the wind blade slashed into my skin.

He'd known a throw would be aimed at his head or neck. Just barely recovering in time, he again tilted his head to dodge the knife coming for his face. But I'd seen him dodge like that before.

"Gah!" he groaned. The steel knife had been a decoy, and I unleashed a pendulum from the shadow in my palm, slashing his neck. "Hngh!"

The cut was still too shallow, falling short of lethal. But my attack had broken his stance, and so I wound up a large swing of my black knife.

Daggart must've thought I was about to use a combat technique. Without hesitation, he discarded his daggers and, despite not yet having regained his balance, scooped up the greatsword he'd dropped earlier and lunged forward, slashing at me in a sweeping motion.

But my intention had never been to use a technique—I had deliberately left an opening. And when he struck at that opening, I dodged using the momentum of my knife swing, allowing my body to fall backward, and quickly clicked my heels. Daggart's miss caused him to overextend, and I kicked upward into his exposed neck, stabbing the concealed blade in the toe of my boot into his carotid artery.



"Gahhh!!!" A spray of red gushed forth from his wound, and he spat out blood, but still he had life in his eyes.

So this is what a Rank 4 fighter can do, I thought. You're quite the beast yourself.

Daggart's arms reached for me as he collapsed forward. A knife likely wouldn't stop him. With arms that thick, he could use the last of his strength to snap my neck and take me with him.

But no. He was going to die alone.

"Shield!" I chanted, discarding my knife to create a shield of light with all the aether I'd amassed in both hands.

The shield was meant to counter magic, but because it consisted of light particles, it was no harder than thin glass. This was a downside, since it meant that powerful magic that also dealt physical damage could smash through it. Still, I bet everything on that flimsy physical form.

If I'd used it for defense, it would've simply shattered on impact from the momentum of Daggart's fall. However, I'd manifested it not as a surface facing him but as a "line"—the shield was on its edge. Fixed in midair, the shield sliced halfway through a shocked Daggart's thick neck as he was carried forward by the force and weight of his fall, then shattered like glass, though without a sound.

At that moment, I grabbed Daggart's face with my left hand. Still conscious, he looked at me as if I really were a beast, and I delivered a hand chop into his neck wound with all my might. His final scream was voiceless as he collapsed on top of me, the blood that still gushed from his wound painting me red.

His head, now completely lifeless, fell on my lap. I looked down at him as though sending off a warrior. "Thank you," I whispered. "I've grown even stronger."

▼ Alia (Alicia)

Species: Human♀ (Rank 3)

```
Aether Points: 92/210 \triangle +10
Health Points: 84/170 \triangle +22
Strength: 7 (9)
Endurance: 8 (10) \triangle +1
Agility: 12 (15) \triangle +2
Dexterity: 8
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 3] \triangle +1
[Martial Mastery Lv. 3]
[Throwing Lv. 2]
[String Manipulation Lv. 2]
[Light Magic Lv. 2]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 3]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 3]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 3]
[Intimidation Lv. 3]
[Stealth Lv. 3]
[Night Vision Lv. 2]
[Detection Lv. 3]
[Poison Resistance Lv. 2]
[Basic Scan]
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Attack on the Assassins' Guild

"Alia! How did this happen in only a month?!"

I'd returned to the dwarf armorer's shop in the capital, and as usual, there

Overall Combat Power: 443 (Boosted: 514) \triangle +69

were no other customers around. Gelf, upon seeing the state of my equipment, shrieked like a little girl (albeit one with a deep voice).

I'd defeated Rahda the Shadow Weaver and the Mercenaries of Dawn and just barely eked out a win one-on-one against the Rank 4 fighter Daggart. That had come at the cost of a significant amount of damage to myself, however, and I'd spent two days on the mend. My armor had fared no better; the countless blows and techniques had left my leather dress stained red, as though I'd gone for a dip in a pool of blood. Perhaps due to the number of times I'd washed it and used the Cleanse spell to purge it of the stench of blood, the dress's surface now felt stiff and rough to the touch.

"Can you fix it?" I asked.

"Honestly, sweetie! You really only ever dance to the beat of your own drum, don't you? With the dress in this state, even treating it with special compounds and overhauling it won't restore it completely," Gelf said with a sigh as he looked at the dress he'd given me. As a craftsman with artistic sensibilities, he likely had sentimental attachment to his own work.

"I'm sorry..."

"Aw, come on now, don't make that face! I chose to give you that dress, after all."

"I really am sorry, but could you fix it as best as you can?"

"Well, if you insist, I have just the thing for you." He chuckled. "I'm so glad you came to see me, sweetie."

"Huh?"

Gelf pulled me by the arm into the back of the shop yet again. "Don't worry too much about this dress. It was just a prototype. You should wear the *real* deal!"

"This?" My eyes widened at the sight of the sleeveless, knee-length dress Gelf had brought out. It had the same shape as the dress I was wearing but was a finished product, made out of monster leather—and my exact size.

Not only that, he'd also made thin tights suspended by a garter belt, with a

knife holder attached to the left side. And there was a slit going over it too, to make it easier to draw the knife. The dress didn't hinder me equipping the left-side bracer or the boots I'd gotten from my master, and they all perfectly matched the unobtrusive, all-black matte look. It was more comfortable than I'd expected.

Gelf watched with a serious expression as I flipped the skirt to test pulling out a throwing knife, then heaved a sigh of heartfelt relief. "Looks like you are indeed wearing them..."

"Huh?" Oh. Right. Those. I remembered him asking me to wear them.



It used to be that women's underwear in this country primarily consisted of these things called bloomers, but starting about a year ago, a different style of underwear had become trendy in Dandorl. They were much, much shorter than bloomers, with added frills and tiny pieces of fabric tied with strings and so forth, looking a lot like some of the novelty underwear I remembered from that woman's knowledge.

Now that their popularity had spread to the royal capital, they were favored by young ladies of marriageable age and female adventurers who liked novelty. Gelf mentioned he, too, loved wearing them. Even with that woman's knowledge, I didn't really understand the need, but since Gelf had told me it was essential that I wear them, I considered them a must and had bought several spares.

"Could you do maintenance on the mechanisms in the glove and boots too, just in case?" While I could handle a little bit of basic upkeep on my own, it was best to leave it to a professional.

"Of course, honey. They're not in bad shape, so I can get that done in a day."

Sounded good. A day would give me time to take care of other business in the capital. "Oh, and could I buy a quality necklace? I'd also like to borrow some tools for a bit, please."

After finishing at Gelf's shop, I headed toward the Traders' Guild.

The workflow at the Assassins' Guild went as follows: a client would request an assassination through underworld connections, and, if there were no problems with the job—anything involving the nobility, in particular—the guild would collect payment and dispatch an assassin. The deadline for completing the assassination was between six months and a year after payment, and if the job exceeded that time, the commission fee would be refunded. A penalty fee for failure to complete the request would also be paid out to the client.

Though that might seem surprisingly forthright considering the unlawful nature of the work, in this kind of industry, which nobles were often involved in, credibility was all-important—ironically even more important than it might be

for certain less savory legal businesses.

After the assassination was completed, the assassin submitted evidence of completion to the guild. If the job was done locally, the assassin themself would bring the evidence to the guild. In my case, however, since the job had been carried out near the royal capital—outside of the jurisdiction of the Northern Border District branch—the proof was to be turned over to the guild's liaison, who would then send notice of the job's completion ahead of their return.

The documents Rahda had given me mentioned a safe deposit box at the Traders' Guild where the proof should be placed, so I was going there to submit both the necklace and the guild tags I'd taken from the Mercenaries of Dawn. At the appropriate time, the other liaison would come collect them, inform the guild, and then make their way back with those articles as part of their report.

Thanks to this, a lack of contact from Rahda before my own return in a few weeks wouldn't raise any eyebrows.

I could've waited and kept watch to find out who the other liaison was, but I didn't see the point—it could be that an unknowing civilian was the one who'd come to collect, for instance. Besides, to keep the guild from becoming wary, the job's completion should be reported without any cause for suspicion. As long as they got the information, they'd let their guard down.

Still, if the liaison returned and Rahda, who was supposed to be monitoring the operation, did not, that could put them on alert. Since the liaison was likely to take the standard route back, I expected them to arrive in a month. If I took the shortest route instead, through the valley, I could make it in half that time. The other half I could spend on-site planning out the guild's demise.

To that end, I replenished my throwing knives and food items in the capital and stowed some of them, along with the *real* necklace, in my Shadow Storage. I'd heard the necklace belonged to one Baron Norph; while I would've preferred to return it to him immediately, I'd have to wait until everything else was done. It'd take longer, but if the necklace made its way back to the baron's hands too soon, the Assassins' Guild might realize I'd resurfaced.

The Mercenaries of Dawn had owned other convenient items, like the enchanted bag, but I'd left those behind in the dungeon. They might've been

criminals in the underworld, but on the surface, they'd been accomplished adventurers; stealing their belongings would've ruled out their deaths as accidental. While a passerby might loot the bodies, that'd only make them the prime suspect. As a precaution, I'd checked with the guild before leaving the dungeon town, but they hadn't seemed aware of the Mercenaries' deaths yet.

I also hadn't seen that girl, Karla, a second time. Despite everything she'd said, I wondered whether we'd ever run into each other again.

The next day, after collecting my equipment from Gelf's shop, I departed the royal capital.

It was crucial that the Assassins' Guild didn't notice I'd returned ahead of time. To lay out traps for all their members, I had to conceal myself perfectly.

Unlike the Adventurers' and Thieves' Guilds, the Assassins' Guild had few official members, but they still had eyes among the common folk. This didn't mean they were necessarily assassins, however—they could be just ordinary citizens, unaware of the true nature of their patrons. Those people weren't my targets, but I would still be in trouble if they spotted me.

To avoid that risk, I activated my Level 3 Stealth before entering the Countdom of Haydel and, remaining hidden, headed to the town where the chapel was located. I napped in the woods until sundown, then slowly snuck my way into the town. Once inside, I hid in abandoned buildings during the day and gradually crept closer to the chapel at night.

From here on, I was on my own. Keeping my breaths quiet and my presence concealed, I sharpened my fangs in the dark, waiting patiently for the right moment. Thanks to Flow, thirst wasn't an issue; with Night Vision at Level 2, neither was total darkness. For food, I had pills I'd made in advance using alchemy. This required taking potion ingredients, crushing them into a powder instead of boiling them, and mixing them with salts, honey, and aether. The pills weren't as effective as potions, but they had longer-lasting effects, and eating about ten a day could maintain my health points and physical condition for about a week. They weren't tasty, but I was used to eating poorly and going hungry thanks to my orphanage days.

Normally, it would've taken me a day to reach the chapel from where I'd entered the town, but because of my careful strategy, it took me three. Though my Stealth skill was only Level 3, I could match the colors of my surroundings thanks to my special Night Vision, and so my Stealth in deserted locations was actually comparable to Level 4 or higher. In fact, I walked unnoticed past a lookout masquerading as a beggar who had Level 3 stealth-related skills.

Having a Level 4 skill would've certainly made this plan easier, but I wasn't assuming I'd be reaching Level 4 anytime soon. Level 3 was considered the ceiling for ordinary people and achievable with enough time, but Level 4 was a significant barrier that only truly talented individuals could surpass. Still, having defeated the Rank 4 Daggart, I understood that rank and combat power were only estimates for strength, and that *true* strength lay in how one used the powers at one's disposal. That made me believe I could take on the Assassins' Guild with the right approach.

My current destination was the cemetery beneath the chapel where the guild was located, but I wasn't just going to walk in through the front door. Last time I'd returned to the guild, I'd thoroughly explored every corner of the underground complex. Since the guild was inside an abandoned mine, its layout was sprawling and intricate, with several ventilation shafts. I'd briefly considered releasing poison into the shafts, but my opponents were professionals. If they sensed anything amiss, they'd immediately coordinate an evacuation, and after that their guard would be up. To prevent them from working together, I had to make my way in unnoticed.

Using my Detection skill to enhance my sense of direction and counting steps as a measure of distance, I roughly memorized the positions of each ventilation shaft. It took me two days of meticulously investigating every relevant area of the cemetery under the cover of darkness, but I finally managed to locate every last shaft.

During this process, I also discovered an escape hatch—one I'd been certain had to exist. There were no signs of it having been used for decades, so I figured it was sufficient to simply lay a trap there and leave it alone otherwise. It was at the deepest part of the coal mine, where an accident had once occurred, making it dangerous to enter that way. And, if things went as I'd planned, that

would be the most lethal place in the guild.

I snuck into the mausoleum labeled "21," where I'd found one of the ventilation shafts, removed the rocks around the fist-sized opening, and began to dig with one of my concealed weapons. While I didn't want to waste a weapon on such a thing, time was a luxury I couldn't afford. Five days had already passed since I'd first entered the town, and I only had about ten days left until the liaison's return. The soil was surprisingly soft, so it only took me around three days to make the hole large enough for me to fit through, and I infiltrated the Assassins' Guild that way.

A piece of rock fell from the ceiling, struck the ground with a thud, and rolled down the corridor. Anywhere else in the guild, that sound would've given my position away, but I knew that in this exact spot, there was nothing to worry about. There was only one person to be found here.

As I entered the room from the narrow ventilation shaft, the grotesque shadow behind the thick iron bars growled as if on alert, directing its clouded eyes at me.

I smiled gently. "Gord the Executioner. I'm here to give you freedom."

My preparations were complete.

A few days after infiltrating the headquarters of the Northern Border District's branch headquarters, I left the town briefly, then reentered through the main gates and headed toward the chapel. Along the way, I stopped at a street vendor and, after ordering a dish of baked broomcorn with vegetables, savored my first proper meal in a while.

The town looked the same as when I'd first seen it. In the early morning, a crowd moved from the residential area toward the industrial area, then made its way back in the evening. In the residential district, I could hear the distant voices of children and what sounded like a mother scolding them, and from the industrial district, the clang of hammers on metal. It was a peaceful town—yet, unknown to many of its smiling citizens, beneath it lay the Assassins' Guild. It was one of the country's darkest secrets, striking fear in the hearts of those unfortunate enough to be aware of its existence.

As I sat near the chapel, my gaze locked with that of a "beggar," and when I flicked a silver coin at him, he caught it in midair, then felt it between his fingertips and smirked. "Quite generous, ain'tcha, Cinders?"

"Just a little pick-me-up," I said.

The beggar seemed surprised at my lighthearted remark, given my usual taciturn demeanor.

To anyone in this town with ties to the guild, and also to those unwittingly under its patronage, I was a potential enemy; I was an evil, a destroyer threatening their peace. Not that I was complaining, mind you. They had their own reasons to fight, and if they decided to stand against me, I was prepared to face them all. The Assassins' Guild had become my enemy, and anyone who became my enemy, I had to kill. That was just the way it was when one antagonized such a massive organization.

I descended underground through a passage next to the chapel and went inside through the usual entrance, the one disguised as a mausoleum. There was no one in sight, but I could sense many people within the guild concealing their presences. My confrontation with Rahda had borne fruit; I could now feel *something* unnatural from people using Stealth nearby. I stopped at a door deeper within and knocked.

"Come in." Inside the room, there was only a faint sense of unease and no readable presence, and yet a voice still called out. "Ah, my beloved fellow apprentice. I received word from our liaison. Not only did you finish off the whole group unharmed, you even recovered the Spirit Tear! Truly you are an esteemed disciple of Cere'zhula."

"It was no problem," I replied.

Dino had received the liaison's report, but he'd probably never truly believed that a child could've defeated a Rank 4 adventurer and his party. Based on the developments thus far, perhaps Dino's plan had been for me to defeat one or two at most, and then, when they were distracted with me, have Rahda swoop in just as I was about to lose. She'd finish off Daggart and the rest, rescue me from the brink of death, and get me and my mentor in the guild's debt that way...

He wasn't surprised that I'd come back so soon—he knew I'd finished the job, based on the report and the fact I'd retrieved the Spirit Tear as ordered. Rather, what surprised him was the fact that I'd come back in one piece, without any serious injuries.

"You truly are something else," Dino said. "Here's your reward for the job. Normally, I would've waited for the liaisons to return with the proof of completion and the requested item, but there shouldn't be any problems in your case. Just to be on the safe side, however, remain on standby until both of them are back. In the meantime, take your time and rest, despite how oddly humid it's been since yesterday..."

"Got it."

He gave me a small leather pouch. A light shake to gauge its size and weight indicated it contained about twenty large gold coins. About half of the commission fee went to whoever was assigned the job, so the noble must've paid the guild over forty large gold total. Truly an amount only a noble could afford; it probably exceeded the value of the Spirit Tear I'd recovered. That went to show how much the heirloom...no, how much the client's family was worth to him.

Whether the reward was worth the hassle of taking down an entire Rank 4 party was another matter.

"Still, how did you manage to return so quickly?" Dino asked as I was about to leave the room with the reward. "You're back before either of the liaisons. How?"

Rahda had been there more to monitor me than to act as a liaison, though...

"I came through the valley south of Dandorl."

"Through there?" he asked. "Even well-balanced parties struggle in that place. Did you manage thanks to your new combat power?"

Ah, so he'd scanned me. I was wearing a cloak and trying to disguise myself as much as possible, but from this close, someone as experienced as Dino would know my approximate power.

"Fighting makes you stronger, no?" I said.

"You must've gone through some rather intense battles, then," he replied. "I hope we can maintain a good working relationship, Alia."

I said nothing in return, unsure whether he was simply asking for my help in the future or warning me not to get any rash ideas. Dino must've at least had the vague sense I'd killed Guy, but he was letting it slide, perhaps thinking it unavoidable given my feud with Kiera—that, and wanting to keep me as leverage over my mentor. Still, he had probably only believed me because I'd turned in the requested item without a fuss; maybe he thought I could still be of use to him as a pawn.

But his hopes for a working relationship had come too late. My trap had already been set in motion.

After leaving Dino's office, I headed to my assigned room in the basement, which had a faint smell, as always. There was no reason to wander around aimlessly and risk allowing more people to get a read on my combat power. Besides, this guild was already in a precarious state.

Upon returning to my room, I noticed that the mark I'd left there was gone, and there were signs someone had broken in. I hadn't left anything worth stealing inside, but running into a trap would've been less than ideal. Just as I was about to leave, however, the person waiting inside came out to greet me.

"Oh, Cinders. Welcome back. Why are you standing there?" asked the Gothic Lolita girl—Kiera—who had first "welcomed" me to the guild.

"I should be the one asking you what you're doing," I retorted. Dino was supposed to have warned her to stay away and avoid trouble with me, but apparently she'd nevertheless been lying in wait.

In response to my question, she licked her bright red lips and gave a small smile. "I thought I'd comfort you when you came back ragged and beaten. Did you somehow manage to not run into Rahda? And after the trouble I went to set it all up for you. You're more useless than I thought." She gave an exaggerated shrug, then stepped back to clear the entrance to the room. "Why don't you come in? The room's dirty, but it's better than standing out here in this heat, isn't it?"

"I don't want to go into a dirty room," I said bluntly. I had never used the

room, so if it was dirty, that was her doing.

Kiera seemed momentarily irritated at my refusal. "Just get in, you stupid brat. All I put in there were toys. Little pranks. Nothing to worry about, see?" She stepped on the scattered trash, and something resembling a crossbow arrow shot out from a shelf directly at the door, grazing my head and sticking into the wall behind me. "Now relax and come in. Or are you scared of me?"

I sighed and muttered under my breath before stepping into the room. The moment I did, there was a slight sound from above as a crossbow bolt came flying down at me. Before, I would've been pierced right then and there. Generally speaking, one could dodge an arrow with Level 4 Martial Mastery and catch it in midair with Level 5. Mine was still only Level 3, but with the various combat skills I'd acquired recently, I could still handle the bolt by predicting its timing and the target area of the shot.

"Shadow Snatch," I chanted, manifesting the spell between my brows and catching the bolt that way.

Spatial shadow spells required coating the target in shadow-elemental mana. Both Rahda's Shadow Walker and my Shadow Snatch involved enveloping the target—herself in her case, and an object in my case—in a thin film of shadow mana, then transporting it to a connected shadow.

I'd predicted Kiera would go for the kill, so if she had set up her trap to aim for somewhere less vital, like my stomach or limbs, I wouldn't have been able to avoid the shot. Even correctly predicting the target necessitated predicting the exact timing as well; otherwise, the bolt would've simply pierced my forehead. Timing wasn't difficult to get right, however, if one stayed calm in the face of impending death.

"What?" Kiera muttered, staring at me in mute astonishment. The crossbow bolt had missed me, then flown directly up at her and into her stomach.

Truly she was a predictable person. The only trustworthy thing about her was how untrustworthy she was, and she'd been kind enough not to betray my expectations. That was why, in the face of her obvious provocation, I'd extended my aether to connect with her shadow. During our first meeting, I'd thought she was dangerous and would give me trouble, but after my run-in with

someone *truly* threatening in that dungeon, she felt no more dangerous than lukewarm water.

"H-How did you dodge? Why did the arrow hit me?" she mumbled. "How... How? You, your combat power's— Guh!"

Before Kiera could scream, I curled my fingers in like a cat's paw and struck her throat, combining the movement techniques I'd learned from Sera with the striking techniques I'd learned from Viro. Had she finally scanned me and seen my current combat power? If only she'd developed the habit of observing more carefully, she'd have discerned my approximate strength without the need to scan.

Really, she hadn't changed one bit. Her nature, her abilities, and her hubris in looking down on others were all exactly the same.

"Urk!" Kiera hurriedly tried to draw knives from both her sleeves, but I'd seen her do this before. I released my pendulums from the shadows on my palms and cut the tendons in her wrists. Then, I circled behind her and wrapped the pendulums' threads around her neck tight enough to break it, ensuring she couldn't make a sound.

She struggled to remove the strings from her neck, but with her tendons cut, she couldn't do anything. Her eyes turned back in a plea for mercy, reflecting my expressionless face as I pulled the noose tighter.

The so-called strong people of this world were far too arrogant, too careless, too complacent for their own good. Why would they expect an enemy to show mercy? Why would they think themselves immune to death? Why would they make a show of their superiority instead of going all out? Why would they not watch their backs against someone they'd once antagonized?

Kiera's final expression was one of terror as I snapped her neck. I laid her on the bed gently, without making a sound.

Well, the timing works out, I thought. Now...to eliminate the rest of the guild.

[&]quot;What happened to Rahda?" Dino asked.

A few hours after Alia's unexpected early arrival, the guild's liaison had returned as well. However, Rahda the Shadow Weaver, a top operative at the Assassins' Guild who had been sent to monitor Alia, was nowhere to be found.

The returning liaison's expression turned grim under his boss's probing gaze. "I haven't seen her since Cinders finished the hit. Boss, has the kid said anything?"

"No," Dino replied.

This liaison, though lacking in combat abilities, excelled in the skills Detect and Stealth, and could even use wind spells to overhear conversations from afar. He was one of the guild's best at espionage, but with only Rank 2 combat skills, he couldn't enter the dungeon, and thus combat support duty had fallen to Rahda.

So what had happened in the dungeon, where the assassinations had been conducted?

It was true that Alia's combat power had increased remarkably since Dino's first meeting with her. For a child around ten years old to improve so much in just four months was extraordinary, even under the guidance of Dino's demoness mentor. But still, with her combat power around 500 at most, it would've been difficult for Alia to handle a Rank 4 party without meticulous planning. Dino had assumed Rahda had assisted in taking them down, but perhaps the targets had killed the beastwoman?

If that had been the case, however, why would Alia not have reported it? And besides, even Dino had trouble detecting Rahda when she was hiding in the darkness. Since the opponents had been a Rank 4 party, there would've been a chance of her being discovered, yes, but that would've nevertheless been unlikely...unless someone had hinted at her presence.

Was she betrayed?

Someone had to have betrayed Rahda. Assassins were individualistic and often acted according to their own interests, so any one could potentially turn on any other. It was for this reason that Dino and his father, the former head of the guild, had—with the help of the Sage—created a deterrent in the form of Gord the Executioner.

After all, selfish people were particularly concerned with their own survival. Being part of the guild was a way to both ensure one's personal safety and make money. As the branch leader, Dino knew full well that nobody was there out of a sense of camaraderie. But he also knew that the members wouldn't go against the guild, as that would pose a risk to their own lives. They'd have nothing to gain from that.

There were instances in which disputes between members led to murder, yes. But this liaison had neither the motivation nor the skill to kill Rahda and, as a veteran member, knew of her importance to the guild. So then, assuming Rahda was indeed dead, what objective could her killer have possibly had? The self-serving members of the guild had no need to betray the organization and were acutely aware of the risks and disadvantages of fighting a top operative like Rahda.

Out of everyone in the guild, there was only one person Dino could think of who didn't fit that mold.

"So, for now, can you at least take the stuff I've brought?" the liaison asked, looking displeased.

That snapped Dino out of his reverie. "Oh. Yes, of course." He nodded. "Let's see. Adventurers' Guild tags, and...is this the Spirit Tear the client requested?"

"Yeah. I've never seen it before, but it matches up with the description. Is something wrong with it?"

"No."

Dino had heard the aethercrystal had come from a mid-tier spirit, but this one seemed a bit small. The necklace itself was of good quality, but it didn't seem fitting to adorn an aethercrystal worth multiple large gold coins. Had someone swapped the items? But the aethercrystal was genuine, which was why the liaison had reported securing the requested item. What was the point of replacing a genuine item with another genuine item? Who would've done such a thing?

Yet again, Dino only knew one person who wouldn't care about the disadvantages of opposing the guild: Alia, the assassin known as Cinders. After all, Dino had coerced Alia into cooperating with him by using their mentor,

Cere'zhula, as leverage. Alia, in turn, was being used as leverage to keep the demoness in check.

Dino had subtly reminded Alia that Cere'zhula's safety was at play the moment he'd noticed her increase in power—and her new numbers would certainly have been enough to lay a trap for Rahda. However, while Dino could understand Alia having minor disputes with someone like Kiera, he still couldn't fathom what the girl would've stood to gain from killing Rahda. With her mentor's life at risk, why would she have taken action against the guild?

Not a single person who'd ever defied the Assassins' Guild had lived to tell the tale. Doing so meant being hunted down by professional assassins for the remainder of one's life, after all. In the past, there had been statesmen who'd tried to shut the guild down, but even they had paid the price. The assassins had simply remained hidden for however long it took, waiting for their chance to strike.

Not even a fool would dare oppose such a massive organization. Assassins lived in the shadows and subduing them with legal methods was impossible. Despite fearing the guild, even nobles had no choice but to walk a path of coexistence. Therefore, no matter how suspicious the situation might've seemed, it was inconceivable that a child, who saw her mentor as a parental figure, would turn against the guild with said mentor's life on the line.

Although Dino was an assassin, and as such had spent much of his life in a world that defied societal standards, he was still an adult man, viewing Alia's actions through the framework of common sense. He didn't know, couldn't have known, that a woman with memories of a past life, driven by selfish reasons, had granted wisdom to the girl. That this had given birth to an aberrant child, set on annihilating the enemies who'd disrupted her and her mentor's peace and quiet.

"I'll look into it," he said finally. Dino stepped out of the room, wanting to confirm Alia's intentions. If he saw the intention to oppose the guild, he'd eliminate her on the spot.

Unfortunately, that decision had come a bit too late.

There weren't many in this world who could be called powerful.

Level 1 combat skills, necessary to achieve Rank 1, could be obtained by people in their early teens after a few years of training. Anyone who achieved Rank 1 was considered a beginner, but no longer an ordinary person; in a large enough group, they were sufficiently skilled to handle even Rank 2 monsters. Most soldiers, even those with many years of service, remained at Rank 2, with the ones who reached Rank 3 considered competent enough to be promoted to captains of their squads.

Even within the Adventurers' Guild, where all registered members were considered capable of fighting solo, nearly eighty percent of them were Rank 1 or 2. Powerful members were relatively rare. There were probably only a few hundred people at Rank 4 and above in the entirety of the Kingdom of Claydale, which had a population of nearly ten million.

The Assassins' Guild was much the same. Unlike adventurers, assassins didn't need to recklessly pit themselves against powerful opponents; what they needed was the discernment to collect information and kill targets, even if that took more time. Very few of their members boasted combat prowess. The Thieves' Guild was similar.

In the Northern Border District branch of the Assassins' Guild, the elven shaman known as the Sage, the dwarven berserker Sharga, and the shadow-weaving beastwoman Rahda were all Rank 4. While they were seen as exceptional, even Rank 3 operatives like Kiera and Guy were rare and seen as highly skilled since most of the others focused on stealth-based, thief-and-scout-type skills.

Many of the guild's members blended in with the townspeople. Even excluding citizens unwittingly used by the guild as observers, a number of assassins worked ordinary jobs, with their assassination skills only coming into play whenever a hit request on a civilian came in. These people didn't go out of their way to take on hits, and didn't even know what the other members looked like; unless they received an assignment, they were virtually no different from a common person.

Management of these assassins was also part of the guild's work, and so the

people currently milling about the guild could be roughly divided into three categories: those responsible for assigning jobs to the incognito members, those responsible for gathering and sorting information, and the frontline assassins with significant combat abilities—the last group being the core of the Northern Border District branch.

Combined, around eighty members were currently in the guild's premises. Most of them knew of a child named Cinders, the disciple of a demoness, who'd recently joined the guild having a combat power of around 200. The members with combat abilities ranging from Rank 2 to 3 knew that information was a powerful weapon, and therefore they understood that while Cinders may have been strong for a child, she was still generally only as capable as someone at the upper end of Rank 2.

And this had made them careless.

Since they saw her as a child, they'd figured that she would easily lose her temper. That there wasn't much she, as a child, could've done. Even if she were to act out, what could a child do against other powerful individuals? She was just a child. They could simply ignore her.

A fatal mistake for assassins to make. Clearly defined levels and numerical combat power values could lead the weak to unduly fear the strong, but they could also cause the strong to grow overconfident, leading to their downfall.

"Hmm?" A middle-aged man felt a momentary sense of discomfort and tilted his head.

He was a middleman, responsible for receiving assassination requests from contacts in various locations and assigning jobs to members based on their difficulty. Five people within the guild worked under him and would sometimes head out into the field to gather information. Since each of them had some kind of stealth skill, the man wondered if one of them had just passed by him while concealing their presence.

"Sure is muggy today," he mumbled. Even in the relatively cool underground headquarters, it could get uncomfortably warm depending on the season. Perhaps due to the heat, his mind felt a little foggy. He tried to walk toward the

couch in the room, but didn't make it, letting out a startled groan when his legs refused to work properly. He fell face-first onto the hard stone floor. What's happening?!

Had he been poisoned? But he had Poison Resistance. He should've been able to notice a poisoning, even one lethal to an ordinary person, before it proved fatal. The guild smelled no different than usual, and while there were tasteless and odorless poisons, those were slow-acting; even if such poisons had been used, he should've been able to manage them.

"Ngh..." The man crawled toward a shelf stocked with medicines in the hopes of saving himself. As he grasped at the floor, dragging himself across it, he felt the faint presence of someone coming into the room. One of his subordinates, perhaps? He trembled unconsciously, as though seeking help.

At that moment, he felt the cold sting of a blade sinking into his neck, without so much a hint of malicious intent in the air. His consciousness sank into darkness, never to resurface.

I'd spread poison around the guild, using the basics I'd learned from my mentor's lessons, though the concoction was almost entirely of my own devising. It seemed to have activated as expected and was effective even against those with the Poison Resistance skill.

My mentor had taught me that Poison Resistance didn't unconditionally counter all toxins. Instead, the skill prevented further absorption of a foreign substance if and only if the body recognized it as poison. I'd even drunk poison myself to verify this. The principle behind this phenomenon was simple: if Poison Resistance countered all substances indiscriminately, it would interfere with the absorption of potions and food.

The poison I'd concocted was a two-parter. On its own, the first half of it was just "medicine"—a nerve relaxant. A week ago, I'd begun to mix small amounts of the relaxant into the guild's water supply, thus gradually administering it to all members.

Poison Resistance couldn't counteract the effects of poison immediately; the toxins needed to be absorbed into the organs and start to metabolize before

the skill would kick in. So, I set about spreading the second half of the mixture in front of the rooms where the people I wanted to eliminate were. When inhaled, the drug would cause toxins to form in the bloodstream. The resulting neurotoxin wasn't strong enough to cause instant death, but it did impair organ function and obstruct blood flow.

As those affected became unable to move, I carefully stabbed them one by one, and gradually a commotion began to spread through the guild.

"Have I been noticed already?" I mused. That's faster than I thought...

I'd been deliberately spreading the poison since my return because I'd figured that I could spray it quickly, arousing no suspicion even if someone were to see me. My plan had been to avoid detection for as long as I could before anyone found the people I'd killed, but perhaps the second chemical I'd been administering had carried through the air and now people were feeling its effects even when not directly in the area of application.

Still, that was within my expectations. Nearly half of the people in the guild were likely dead or unable to move, so I could actively go about killing those whose movements had grown sluggish. Keeping my presence concealed with Stealth and unleashing the blades of my pendulums from the shadows on my palms, I silently glided through the corridors.

"You—" An unfamiliar woman ran into me, and I released my pendulum. She dodged reflexively and, upon confirming that her movements were indeed slowed by the poison, I slashed her neck as I walked past her.

I ran on, extinguishing lamps with my pendulums and lights from the Shine spell by using Darken. While most of the guild's members likely had Night Vision, they still had lights on because humans typically could only acquire the skill at Level 1. However, since the darkness wouldn't greatly hinder them in combat, they probably wouldn't turn on any new lights.

To them, the darkness was an ally. They hadn't yet visualized their enemy's true form and didn't consider that their opponent might be more used to the darkness than they were. This gave me a small but meaningful advantage.

Whoosh.

"Gah!"

"You little—"

Though their minds were clouded, the people I passed still understood they were being attacked. However, between the darkness and their somewhat slowed movements, it took them just a moment longer than usual to register me as an enemy. Just an instant, a second or so—that brief window of time was enough for me to deliver the finishing blow.

As I went, I scattered cloths soaked in the drug that turned to poison in the bloodstream, encountering and killing guild members one after another and making sure to finish off the ones who were incapacitated inside side rooms. Some of them were pretending not to be able to move, but since I was using my pendulum, I could simply snipe them from a distance. The ones noticeably stronger than the rest took bolts from my concealed crossbow, delivered into their ears and through their brains with Shadow Snatch.

With a loud, resounding *boom*, a wooden crate and barrel of liquor that had been sitting at the end of the corridor were smashed to bits. A dwarf wielding a massive halberd hacked his way through the debris and turned his bloodshot eyes toward me and his dead comrades at my feet before letting out a vicious roar.

"Cindeeers!!!" he howled. "You're the traitor! You bastard!"

▼ Sharga

Species: Dwarfd (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 135/150

Health Points: 393/450

Overall Combat Power: 825 (Boosted: 979)

Mad Sharga, the berserker. He'd been bound to notice me now that I'd gone this far, I supposed. He'd found me a bit earlier than I'd anticipated, however,

and with his angry shouting, my betrayal was now known to the entire guild.

Sharga charged at me, kicking up debris in his path, and I subtly threw a knife from inside my cloak. Although the draw had not been obvious, the dwarf deflected it with the shaft of his halberd. He was agile, despite the sheer size of his weapon—but more than that, he was *jittery*.

I knew the poison's effect was minimal on a Rank 4 fighter like him, so I decided against engaging him further and made a run for a certain location. I wasn't foolish enough for a head-on confrontation with a stronger opponent in full armor and wielding a massive weapon.

"You're not getting away, Cinders!" Sharga's eyes changed color as he gave chase, making him look even more intimidating.

Berserkers were known for their sudden bursts of mad rage. In that state, they exceeded their physical limits and fought relentlessly to death. That was likely Sharga's trump card, and indeed, with that power, he might've even been able to hold his own against a Rank 5 opponent. But in exchange for the rush of strength, the trance made him reckless, unaware of his surroundings.

Sharga was powerful. But he hadn't stopped to consider why there'd been no other guild members around, had he?

Come out. I've brought your target.

The corridor wall creaked as I rushed past it, cracks suddenly appearing across its surface. With a loud crash, a long-limbed aberration burst through the earthen wall and crashed headfirst into Sharga as the dwarf chased after me, sending a shrill metallic sound echoing through the air.

"Gord?!" the dwarf exclaimed.

"Grooooooooooo!!!" The cries of the unshackled Gord the Executioner shook the coal-mine-turned-guild as he clashed against Mad Sharga, a piercing shing echoing through the air as the abomination's claws collided with the berserker's halberd.

"Gord! Damn it! Where's the Sage?!" the dwarf shouted down the corridor. "Come calm your thing down!"

But his voice reached no one. Even in an emergency like this, no one dared approach this area—not with Gord rampaging here. I'd been lurking in this section since my infiltration. Not just because it was a suitable place to hide, since people rarely came around, but primarily because my aim had been to release Gord the Executioner.

Though he now looked like an aberration, I suspected he'd once been human. My theory was that he was something akin to a chimera, created by the Sage using curses and drugs. Whether any human memories or emotions remained in Gord's drug-addled brain, I didn't know. The Sage had not only stolen Gord's freedom of thought through curses but also turned him into a beast whose sole purpose was to fight. And the elven shaman had done this not just because the guild had requested it of him but out of a rivalry with a dark elf—my mentor.

It wasn't that I was sympathetic to Gord's plight, but... "Aren't you mad that these people did with you as they pleased?" I'd whispered to him. "Don't you hate them?"

I'd spoken softly to him, taking the time to gradually remove the curses placed on him and neutralize the effects of the drugs as best as I could. Of course, such a task hadn't been simple.

My master had taught me that curses involved imbuing simplified spirit language, written using one's own aether, into a specific type of mana. It would then activate when it came into contact with the target creature's aether. Though this technique was inefficient compared to other types of sorcery and had thus fallen out of favor, once active, a curse would continuously exert its effects on the target through their own aether. It was, essentially, permanent.

To lift a curse, one had to read the commands within the cursed mana and offset it with opposing spirit language. All I'd been able to do was use opposing mana against the cursed mana surrounding Gord, neutralizing it bit by bit. Though I couldn't completely dispel the curse on my own, I had still been able to almost fully negate the commanding spell binding Gord to the Sage's service.

All that had remained was to bait him into breaking what was left of his shackles. And there was no better bait than the objects of his hatred. That was why I'd lured a high-ranking guild operative here—to serve as that bait.

With a cry, Sharga, who was half the size of Gord's nearly three-meter-tall frame, braced himself, muscles bulging, to withstand the incoming attack.

"Grooooooooooar!!!" Gord roared back.

Gord was technically Rank 4 like Sharga but, perhaps due to the influence of the drugs and curses, had stats nearing Rank 5. Sharga had grown stronger due to his berserk state, but desperation was slowly beginning to seep into the dwarf's features.

Different, isn't it, Sharga?

"What?!" the dwarf exclaimed when my pendulum's blade, directed by String Manipulation, slid between the gaps of his armor and sliced through his skin as he battled Gord. "You little—"

"What's wrong, berserker?" I asked. "You're going to die at this rate."

Sharga's eyes snapped wide open at my words, and his panic intensified.

Don't do that, I thought. I need you to get serious.

Something had happened in this dwarf's past that had led him to become a berserker. He was clearly not cut out to be an assassin. And with his power, even if he couldn't be out in the open, there would've been plenty of opportunities for him to make use of his abilities, like as a bodyguard for the mafia, for instance.

Yet he'd locked himself up in this den, never taking off his full armor, always clutching his weapon, drinking with abandon while intimidating everyone into keeping their distance. I was certain that he was actually jittery and cowardly. Even a strong coward froze in a fight. That was the reason he could only defend himself by lashing out in rage like a cornered rat. Otherwise, why would he have shouted for help from the Sage, instead of facing the rampaging Gord himself?

Sharga was too afraid of death, which was why he'd lose himself to anger. And in his fear, he'd never crossed that final line. But this was different, wasn't it?

"So, what'll it be?" I asked. "Die, or...?"

Sharga was a crag dwarf born in a human village.

From a young age, he'd been confident in his resilience. He'd become an adventurer with his human childhood friends, serving as the shield to his trio of companions.

But, still young and overconfident, the group had ventured deep into a dungeon and encountered a formidable monster. They might've survived had they combined their strengths, but between Sharga's competence, their first-ever life-threatening crisis, and their lack of experience in fighting strong monsters, Sharga's human friends had turned tail, leaving the dwarf to hold off the monster alone.

Had Sharga been an ordinary adventurer, that would've no doubt spelled his demise. But at that moment, the extreme fear of losing his life ignited a furious rage at his companions' betrayal deep within the dwarf, and he threw his weapon at the back of one of his friends.

When he came to, both his friend and the monster had been torn apart, lying dead at his feet. All he could remember was the monster attacking his friend, who had been split open by Sharga's own axe. Then he'd picked his weapon up again, and the rest was a blank.

The berserker phenomenon was said to come about when one forgot oneself in fear and anger on the battlefield, losing all restraint and rampaging to death. Yet Sharga had been able to regain his senses—perhaps due to being a crag dwarf and more resilient than humans. Terrified by the fact he'd caused the death of his childhood friend, he fled the dungeon, his body battered and bleeding.

Outside, he ran into his other two companions, who'd managed to flee and seen Sharga throw his axe at their deceased friend. Despite having abandoned the dwarf to die, they now called him a murderer. Sharga was terrified—of having killed a friend, of being accused by his other friends. And he knew only one way to escape that fear.

After slaughtering his remaining companions, Sharga fled into the underworld. He worked as a bodyguard for thieves and bandits, killing innocent civilians to protect himself when necessary. And if he sensed the group was

about to get rid of him, he'd simply massacre everyone. Even if it meant dirtying his hands and falling into darkness—no, because he'd already fallen that far, Sharga would not tolerate betrayal from his companions.

But as time went by, he became a target in the underworld, and since he was also a wanted man on the surface, he eventually found his way to the Assassins' Guild, where competence was more important than one's past. But even there he found no solace.

One day, a man thought to be a spy for the government was captured, and Sharga witnessed the horrifying torture and bodily modifications the man endured at the hands of the guildmaster and the Sage. The spy, whom Sharga considered to have been a brave and admirable man, had been stripped of his dignity, wailing like a child as he was transformed into a hulking beast. The sight alone would've been unbearable to any ordinary man.

After that day, Sharga had secluded himself in the back of the guild's canteen. He never took off his armor, always clutched his weapon, and drowned himself in alcohol to protect his own sanity.

With that final push, Sharga's eyes lost all semblance of rationality, and the dwarf let out a piercing war cry. Bellowing, he spun his massive halberd like a windmill, smashing through the surrounding dirt walls and knocking Gord's massive frame away.

"Graaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

"Raaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

The loud sounds of iron clashing against iron filled the air as Sharga and Gord continued to pummel each other. Even the surrounding walls broke, defenseless in the wake of their intense brawl. That was good, but still not enough.

"Weight," I chanted, rushing toward the pair.

The Level 1 shadow sorcery Weight was believed to alter the target's weight by about ten percent, but what it actually did was allow the target's weight to be shifted in any direction, with its effect increasing by ten percent with each

level of Shadow Magic. While thirty percent might not sound like a significant change, it made quite the difference if the caster also had a comparable level in Martial Mastery.

Sharga instinctively sensed my approach and let out a roar as he flung a hand axe from his hip at me. The axe cut through the air of the narrow corridor, and I, unable to sidestep it, ran up the wall and across the ceiling, then slashed down at the two combatants below.

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"Raaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"
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"Grooooooooooar!!!"

My blade only grazed the pair, but that minor attack had been enough to boost me up onto the stage of their clash. I leaped over them, shifting my position, and threw knives while retreating back the way I'd come. Sharga and Gord, still fighting one another, inadvertently keeping each other in check, followed after me.

As I led the two back to the hall where Sharga had crashed through the door, we ran into several guild members who'd been out looking for me, the traitor.

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"You! Cinders!"
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"Is that Gord?!"

"And Sharga!"

Shocked gasps echoed through the air. The two madmen continued their fight, roaring loudly at each other and paying no mind to the other guild members' proximity. As Gord's massive frame collided with the enormous halberd, several people were caught in between thanks to the poison having dulled their movements, their necks and spines snapping as the impact violently threw them back.

I wove in between the other members, seizing any opportunity to kill, while Sharga and Gord mowed them down like dry stalks. In such a chaotic battle, there was no way for anyone to focus their attacks on just one target. Amid the carnage, where a moment's distraction spelled certain death, I finished off several people weakened by the poison, until *that man* showed up.

"Aliaaaaaa!!!" he cried out, his voice filled with hatred.

Reacting instinctively to his malice, I swung my black knife, and it clashed against his silver dagger with a shrill *shing*, sending sparks flying. "You're late, Dino."

"Look what you've done," he hissed angrily as our blades locked, his trembling eyes twisted with loathing as they reflected my own cold gaze. "Don't you care about Cere'zhula's life?!"

"All I have to do is take out everyone who would try to use her," I said simply.

Understanding what I meant, Dino stared at me as though he were looking at a madwoman. "This...was your plan all along?!"

"Of course," I said, tugging at the thread around my little finger to shoot an arrow from the crossbow concealed within my glove.

Dino just barely dodged it, and we kicked off against each other to create distance, staring each other down once more.

Five months ago, when we first met, there had been other roads for us. But the moment he'd tried to use my mentor, our paths were set in stone.

"You've been my enemy from the start, Dino."

Dino had joined the Assassins' Guild as a boy of ten.

He'd been born to the Northern Border District's guildmaster and a tavern wench, and lived as a civilian with his mother until circumstances led to him being handed over to his father. Since his father's profession hadn't exactly been praiseworthy, his mother had never revealed the man's real line of work, only telling Dino that his father made a living by punishing bad people.

The young Dino, enamored of his image of his father, began to use reason to reform "evildoers"—people whose opinions differed from his own. Those who weren't amenable to the boy's idea of justice were met with violence instead. Thus, his "justice" earned him antipathy from other children, and they in turn used further violence to silence him. This was when Dino first began to grow twisted.

He strove to become stronger for the sake of enacting his own justice and, at the same time, started venting his frustrations by using excessive force against "evils" weaker than himself. At first, he did so by stealing and cruelly killing the pet dogs and other animals of those who'd been violent toward him. This was his way of letting off steam while at the same time punishing those who didn't understand his justice.

As he grew older, his actions worsened, and he began to kill the children he saw as bad. The twisted smile he wore on his lips was what finally led his mother to hand him over to his father. And when that happened, Dino learned that his father's "justice" was actually the Assassins' Guild. This shook his own ideal of justice, and the boy grew even more twisted.

But he'd realized by then that his ideas of justice weren't shared by the majority. The Assassins' Guild, meanwhile, punished evil even in defiance of the law. Dino accepted this dogma as his own and became devoted to the guild and what it represented. Meanwhile, his father had no interest in him—the former guildmaster provided for the boy's needs, yes, but never truly saw the child for what he was. With no one to notice his true nature, Dino only grew worse.

When Dino was twelve years old, a dark elf, whom people called a demoness, joined the guild. Cere'zhula was a beautiful woman, but more than that, she was powerful. Dino admired that. She'd left her wicked fellow demons behind to become an assassin, an agent of justice. She was the embodiment of Dino's ideals.

Dino pleaded with his father to let him become Cere'zhula's disciple, wanting both the strength to be the executioner of his own justice and the very essence of the woman he so admired. Though she was reluctant, Cere'zhula taught Dino wind and earth sorcery within a year's time. His aptitude, however, never proved more than ordinary.

While this was sufficient by most people's standards, he figured that to a dark elf like Cere'zhula, he must've seemed lacking. Dino felt only contempt in what was more likely resignation and pity from his mentor, and his pursuit of strength saw him twist further still. He grew even more fixated on Cere'zhula for the perceived pain she'd inflicted upon him; he wanted to make the powerful woman he admired yield to him, to inflict pain upon her in turn.

His obsession was what ultimately brought destruction upon the Assassins' Guild.

"Aliaaa!!!" Dino cried out as if spitting blood, having finally seen me for what I was.

▼ Dino

Species: Humanð (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 145/180

Health Points: 223/290

Overall Combat Power: 795 (Boosted: 933)

Our blades clashed with a *clang*, sending sparks flying through the darkness of the guild and lighting it up like fireworks.

"Stone Bullet!" he chanted, bringing forth a flurry of pebbles from the bare rock corridors of the former coal mine.

Seeing the earth-colored mana surrounding him, I quickly leaped away and over the pebbles. As I dodged, several shrieks rang out behind me.

"Argh!"

"Ugh!"

Thanks to my fight against that female thief, I knew the exact timing of the earth spell. Taking advantage of this, I'd moved out of the way so his spell would hit the other guild members behind me, who'd been waiting for a chance to strike. Distracted by the sudden attack, they were defenseless as I moved to slash their throats with my knife.

Dino likely had Earth Mastery at Level 3, the same as that thief. His cast speed was superior, but the projectiles themselves weren't as fast. Though I could've commended him as a fellow disciple for his quick casting prowess, his spell lacked force.

"Damn you!" he hissed as he realized he'd inadvertently struck his own allies. His hatred, sharp as a blade, was directed at me, but I wasn't the one who'd made a mistake.

"You lost yourself to anger. You messed up," I taunted.

Dino took the bait, further losing his cool. "Aliaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

I'd spread poison around the guild and incited a chaotic fight by pitting Sharga and Gord against one another, but this didn't mean I was at an advantage. About ten assassins had survived the poisoning and had now banded together, including beastmen who, like Rahda, had enhanced Night Vision and Detection skills. Even though the poison would've slowed their movements, they were all likely Rank 3 like Guy and Kiera.

I pushed my emotions to the back of my mind and quietly steeled myself, narrowing my eyes to intimidate those around me. I wasn't a fan of strategies this risky, but I was one child fighting an entire organization. I needed that resolve.

Come out, now. You're watching, aren't you? You've been thinking about killing me since the moment I got here. You hate everything related to my mentor, after all.

The moment I saw it, I quickly chanted, "Shield!" and leaped back.

"You're not going anywhere!" cried one assassin, throwing knives at me.

"Die, Cinders!" yelled another, shooting a bow.

The projectiles grazed my arm and shoulder for a decent amount of damage, but I gained even more distance. Just in time.

"Gahhh!"

"Eek!"

"Gwahhh!"

A number of the people behind me were immobilized, their bodies turning black. They dried up like withering leaves before crumbling to dust. Meanwhile, I dodged, using my Shield to protect me against the eerie, haphazard mix of mana. My cloak, struck by the curse, faded away as I discarded it.

"So you dodged it," came a voice from the dark depths. "Despicable, like your dark elf mentor." An old forest elf dressed in a dark robe—the shaman known as the Sage—showed himself, his dark eyes staring directly at me.

Though curses were inefficient as a technique, if one disregarded efficiency and limited the time and scope of the effect, they could surpass other types of sorcery in power. After all, if they were trivial, my mentor wouldn't have bothered to teach me about them. This was why the Sage, and not Gord, was the one I was the most wary of.

"Sage! What are you doing?!" Dino shouted, enraged that the shaman's attack had hit the guild's own.

The Sage snorted, glancing derisively at the guildmaster. "Green fool. Your kind is gravel under my boot."

"What?!"

To the old shaman, this guild was a research lab. He strove to maintain it, but the people here were no allies of his. Ignoring the stunned Dino, he focused his attention solely on me. "Tell me, disciple of the dark elf. How did you dodge that?"

"I was sure you'd do something," I replied.

Wood elves and dark elves were of the same species but despised one another. On top of that, my mentor had disavowed the art of curses, which was the Sage's life's work. He loathed her, and that was why I'd been waiting all along for him to make his move.

I'd known he would attack, just as I'd known Kiera would, but it was a gamble whether or not he'd be so brazen as to risk the lives of others like that. Pride was paramount to elves, and Cere'zhula was no different. Those who left their woods didn't usually go quite this far, but the Sage's hatred for her must have been just that intense.

His determination to kill me even at the cost of his own allies' lives, however, had nearly wiped out the guild members in its wake. There were probably survivors elsewhere, but they had yet to show themselves here, which meant they were either insecure in their fighting skills or extremely cautious.

A deafening death cry pierced the air.

Mad Sharga, with one of his legs dyed black—likely having been struck by the curse earlier—collapsed to the ground as Gord's claws pierced his heart. The victor, Gord the Executioner, noticed the Sage and let out an enraged roar at the man who had bound him with curse magic.

The aberration wasn't uninjured, however, having sustained deep cuts all over his body from his clash against Sharga. Gord's right arm had also been struck by the Sage's spell and was now a blackened, withered wreck.

"You can't even follow orders," the Sage said, realizing I'd altered Gord's curses. "Truly that dark elf and her disciple are absolutely detestable." As Gord lunged at him, the old elf gripped one of his own twiglike fingers and snapped it in half. "On your knees."

With a pained cry, Gord was forced to the ground, vomiting blood.

"A curse with a price," I mused. My mentor had considered this the most inefficient type of curse, and it was likely the primary reason for her animosity toward the Sage.

Spells were cast by paying a price, in the form of one's own aether, to create an effect. Curses, however, were far more costly and demanded not only aether but also time. Pushed to the extreme, curses required the caster to offer themselves up as payment to life-forms like devils and spirits.

Elves were said to not age, but that was because typically they'd die of illness or accidents before reaching old age. Yet the Sage, a forest elf, appeared very old. This was likely because he was expending his own lifespan to cast his curses. He would cast a curse, then keep it in a suspended state by leaving the final price unpaid. Then, when the timing was right, he'd activate the curse through self-harm—such as by breaking his finger—to pay the price.

He still had nine fingers remaining, which meant he potentially had nine more attacks of that scale, in which case I had little chance of beating him in a fair fight.

And then there was the matter of Dino. Right now, he was hesitant to make a move, since I was facing off against the Sage. But if he understood that the

Sage, though not on his side, wasn't his enemy either, Dino would likely take action to prevent me from escaping.

I was still at a disadvantage, but I had no plans to run away. Especially since it seemed that my trap had just been activated.

The Sage lightly furrowed his brows and turned around silently.

Dino, noticing this, turned toward the guild's entrance. "What...?"

When I'd come inside through the main entrance, I'd set up a trap. It was oddly warm today, wasn't it? Strangely muggy? That was because I'd shut off all of the underground complex's ventilation shafts.

There had been an accident in this place hundreds of years ago, back when it was still a mine, that had killed many miners and led to the creation of the massive graveyard and the chapel next to it. An investigation had revealed that the accident had been caused by a lamp igniting natural gas that had seeped into the complex from the rock face.

Even today, the walls still emanated a small amount of gas—the source of the ever-present, strange smell in the guild. But it wasn't enough to cause any adverse effects to the human body, and as long as the gas could escape out the ventilation shafts, lighting lamps wouldn't cause any problems. Nevertheless, there were few lamps around, partly due to everyone having Night Vision, but also because the founders of the guild had been wary of the gas building up.

With the ventilation shafts blocked for the past several days, gas must've been gradually accumulating within the guild, making some people groggy. Those who had lived here for many years, however, were accustomed to the smell and wouldn't have perceived it as dangerous.

With poison filling the air, Sharga and Gord wreaking havoc, and the Sage using curse spells indiscriminately, someone with no combat ability would've thought to escape. The trap I'd laid at the entrance wouldn't have activated when people came in, but anyone trying to exit that way would've dislodged the string I'd set up, causing live coals to ignite oil.

If I could smell something burning from here, that meant the flames had begun to spread from the entrance. I'd avoided using this tactic from the outset

because in a situation like that, the assassins, individualistic though they may have been, would've still cooperated to escape. But it was too late for that now.

"This place will be your tomb," I muttered, to the astonishment of the few survivors.

Realizing I'd set fire to the underground guild, Dino stumbled backward. "You're insane."

I wouldn't have been able to fight them all off without going this far. The fire was spreading, and eventually it'd ignite the gas in the air. Time was now ticking down for every last person in this guild.

You'll all die here.

"You little bastard! Bastaaaaaaaaaad!!!" Dino roared, thrusting his dagger at me with terrifying speed. I intercepted the attack with my black knife, the blades colliding with a shrill metallic sound. "You dare! You dare to attack my guild!!!"

"I suppose I do," I replied nonchalantly as our blades clashed again and again.

To someone like Dino, this organization may well have been a symbol of status—a representation of his outward self. He'd maintained it by bringing together a group of unique individuals, acting as their head, gathering talents as one might collect trinkets, and even going so far as to disrupt my mentor's peace.

Now his precious guild was a candle in the wind.

"You've brought this on yourself," I put it plainly.

Dino screamed in response, attacking me with bloody fury, and I leaped back as though repelled by his violent strikes.

His dagger was likely made of mithril. Viro's weapon had been too, so I was familiar with the metal's properties. Mithril was created when underground silver veins were exposed to high-density mana over a prolonged period of time. A mithril dagger was slightly less hard than my magic steel knife but had better aether conductivity and could damage spiritual life-forms, much like a magic sword.

Given our current situation, the difference between the weapons was negligible, but my knife prioritized sharpness over power, and my combat level was lower than Dino's, so there was a limit to how many of his attacks I could withstand.

"You're in my way, Dino," the Sage called out, snapping another of his fingers and releasing an eerie, chaotic mix of mana.

"Ngh!" Even without seeing it, Dino realized the shaman had just cast a curse and rolled away. Thanks to that, I, too, just barely managed to keep myself safe using Shield.

"You little wretch!" the Sage spat in anger as I dodged his curse yet again.
"You can see my curses, can't you?! Your shield, your dark elf mentor, you're all detestable!"

Perhaps deep down the Sage knew he needed Dino to preserve his "research lab"—that is, the guild—and so he hesitated to potentially harm the guildmaster. It was thanks to this that I was somehow managing to fight two Rank 4 opponents at the same time, but this wouldn't last long, for a multitude of reasons.

The flames erupting from the entrance were now widespread enough that I could feel the heat from here, and the smoke had begun to seep into this area, roughly at the heart of the complex. I pulled up my shawl, soaked with antidote, to cover my mouth.

If that woman's knowledge held true, this place wouldn't last much longer. But more importantly, these two were likely starting to feel a sense of urgency. At the moment, their hatred for me was stronger than their panic, which made them prioritize fighting, but once they calmed down, they'd no doubt realize their lives were in danger. While they were lost to anger and hatred, they couldn't think with cool heads, but once they did, they'd be in a hurry to get out. Which meant I had to finish this before either of them came to his senses.

"Dino! You go secure an escape route! You're in my way!" the Sage demanded.

"Shut up!" Dino snapped. "Don't take that tone with me!"

"Rest assured, I'll deal with the dark elf's disciple myse—"

Whoosh!

"I won't give you the chance," I said coolly, throwing both my pendulums out in an arc.

"Damn!" Dino dodged frantically, but one of them lightly slashed his nape.

My basic tactics depended upon an element of surprise and outlandish attacks; that was why I hadn't used my pendulums or dark magic much in this fight. But I'd hold back no longer. This was it. I was going to use everything I had to make sure nobody got out alive. They were staying here until it was too late for them to leave.

Snap.

"Rot away!" the Sage chanted, unleashing another curse. Perhaps having realized I was able to see and dodge his curses, he increased the spell's area of effect rather than its power.

If one of his curses struck me head-on, it could mean instant death. Curses were a formidable technique under the right conditions and at the right place and time, but they still had their weaknesses. If a curse hit, it would always activate, which made it difficult to counteract, but in direct combat like this, that type of spell was too slow.

Also, between you and me, you've shown your supposedly lethal curses a few too many times.

"What the?!" the Sage exclaimed.

As I ran, I dodged the intricate mix of mana while simultaneously releasing my own mana to neutralize it. Earth against water, water against fire, shadow against light... Matching each intertwined component of the curse was impossible, but within a very limited range, for a very limited amount of time, I could use my Practical Magic paired with Aether Manipulation at Level 3 to eliminate part of the mana comprising the curse, effectively countering its wider area of effect. This was all thanks to the practice I'd gotten from dispelling Gord's curses little by little.

"Aliaaa!!!" Dino yelled as the wider-reaching curse approached him. For a moment, he hesitated between countering my incoming attack and dodging the curse, and I took the chance to unleash the ace I'd kept up my sleeve.

"Pain," I chanted. The effect wasn't strong against a superior opponent, but it could still cause them to flinch momentarily if they'd never encountered the spell before.

"Guh!"

I slid past Dino's legs, slashing at his side with my knife. The Sage's curse followed behind me and struck Dino's left arm and leg, prompting a guttural shriek from his lungs. Even as he lay dying, his rage and hatred drove him to slash at me, screaming furiously as he swung his dagger with his good arm. The attack was too close in range for me to dodge, but a faint *clink* echoed through the air before it could connect.

A familiar necklace slipped from Dino's pocket and rolled to my feet, and in that second, I chanted, "Flow." The nearby spirit aethercrystal combined with the surrounding heat instantly turned the minor spell into a massive burst of steam.

"What?!" Dino cried as the steam obscured his vision and the dragger he'd thrown flew past me.

I stepped forward, slashing vertically across Dino's face with my black knife. "Haaah!"

"Damned dark elf and her damned whelp!" the Sage barked, grabbing several of his fingers and snapping them all at once. Three different curses, like manifestations of the shaman's fury, chased after me as I emerged from the steam and dashed through the guild's corridors.

Still, no matter how slow curses were, I wouldn't be able to dodge them in time. But... Why do you think I put out all the lights on my way here?

"What the?!"

The version of me caught up in the three curses vanished into thin air.

I knew there were beings like beastmen and elves in the guild who excelled in

Night Vision, but I'd still deliberately extinguished all the lights. This hadn't been just a countermeasure against humans. My plan had been to use an illusory figure, created through the spell Shadow, to trick Night Vision users. It was that copy of myself that I'd sent running, using the steam as a distraction. Even with his Night Vision at Level 2, the elf would've still been deceived by the unknown spell.

I seized the opportunity and sent my two pendulums flying at the Sage from unexpected directions, and they slashed diagonally across his neck.

"Guh!" Despite the seemingly fatal wound, the Sage, blood spewing from his throat and mouth as he let out a loud, long groan, was still trying to find me in the darkness, readying another curse.

"Hmph!" At this range, I couldn't dodge his next attack. Realizing this, I decided to confront him directly and instantly came out of Stealth, huffing as though I were on my last breath. I admire your persistence, I thought. I'll face it head-on.

I flipped my skirt to draw the throwing knives strapped to my thighs with both hands. My perception of time was expanded thanks to Boost, and in that dilating moment, I spotted the Sage gripping his own finger for his next curse and threw my knives in turn, figuring we'd take each other out.

A whooshing sound rang out. My knives pierced the Sage's throat and chest, but his curse failed to reach me.

"Guhhh," came a weak groan as Gord, having acted as my shield against the curse, gripped the Sage's withered neck with what remained of his battered left hand.

"You! You're just a test subject! You raaaaaaaaaaat!"

"Graaaaaaaaah!"

Gord proved to be more tenacious than the Sage, viciously gripping and tearing out the old shaman's throat. With his tormentor finished, Gord stood still, a faint flicker of reason in his gaze.

"Gord... You win," I murmured. You regained yourself in the end.

He turned at my words, his eyes reflecting me as his body decayed from the curse's effects. As he crumbled to blackened dust, I saw the faint hint of a smile on his face.

Suddenly, a *boom* echoed from deeper within the guild as the accumulated gas ignited, and the resulting flames swept through the corridors and swallowed both Gord and the Sage. Someone must've tried to use the escape hatch in the depths of the complex, where the most gas had built up, triggering my final trap. The dying screams of the surviving guild members echoed from afar.

No one could escape now. This guild was finished.

"Are you...satisfied?"

"Dino," I said. His face was slashed and his body half consumed by the curse, but he was still alive.

In this scarlet hellscape of flame and heat, Dino lay immobile as we stared at one another. "To think a child like you could bring down my guild like this," he muttered with a sarcastic smirk. "You saved Cere'zhula. Are you happy? You're finished too. No one can get out now. You may have won, Alia, but our beloved mentor will never forgive herself for losing you."

Our mentor was a deeply emotional woman. She would surely mourn my passing. Dino sneered sadistically at my hollow victory. Truly he was a twisted man to the very end.

"Is that everything you have to say?" I asked. "Goodbye, then."

As I methodically loaded a bolt into my crossbow mechanism, Dino's face gradually distorted and his cold, wide eyes looked at me with contempt. The arrow flew, and his expression was never to change again.

"Go on to the next world. Alone."



There had to have been a gas deposit in the old coal mine's depths.

The explosions reverberating underground shook the rocky formations and the massive stone-built chapel, causing the spire to collapse, engulfed in flames. The bell came tumbling down, ringing out over the rubble, the sound striking the ears of the stunned townspeople as they watched it all unfold.

I was quietly looking over the scene from the shadow of a distant building, having managed to escape the seemingly inescapable underground. It'd been a gamble, but one with a decent chance of success.

What had saved me was Rahda's Shadow Walker technique.

Though it was a Level 4 shadow spell, I'd grown accustomed to using a modified version of it called Shadow Snatch. It'd cost me nearly all my aether, but I'd activated it just in time.

Shadow Walker allowed one to move between shadows, but only those connected by the caster's mana. To that end, while closing off the ventilation shafts, I'd run threads of my aether through several places. By using Shadow Walker to cross through those spaces, I'd managed to get myself to the graveyard's burial chamber.

Using a spell beyond my level had drained my aether to the point of nearly killing me from exhaustion. Fortunately for me, I'd learned to always carry an aether potion, and that had allowed me to recover enough to move and escape the collapsing building.

I'd done it. The Northern Border District's branch of the Assassins' Guild was destroyed. It was unclear how the nobles they'd had dealings with or the other branches would react, but...

"I'm prepared for anything."

Taking one final glance at the crumbling chapel, I turned to the shadows and disappeared.

An Invitation from the Darkness

It'd been the beginning of winter when I left my mentor's home. The seasons had since changed, spring had passed, and it was now early summer. One more season and I'd be nine years old.

After spending five months dismantling the Assassins' Guild, I left the Countdom of Heydel, the site of the Northern Border District branch, and headed for the Barony of Norph, which neighbored the Margravate of Dandorl.

Baron Norph was the one who'd commissioned the retrieval of the heirloom that the party I'd killed, the Mercenaries of Dawn, had stolen. It wasn't that I wanted to finish my assignment from the Assassins' Guild—bit late for that—but an heirloom... Well, to someone like me, whose parents had died suddenly, that felt like something precious. I wanted to return it to the nobleman, if I could.

I'd carefully stashed the necklace away in my Shadow Storage so as not to lose it. It clinked softly as I took it out and examined the Spirit Tear—an exceedingly rare item left behind when a spirit was vanquished in this plane. The Tear, despite being treated as a gemstone, was actually an incredibly high-purity aethercrystal. Activated with a simple magic circle, it could be used as an amulet.

The high value of Spirit Tears attracted many would-be hunters, who would summon spirits and often be killed in turn. The Holy Church, responsible for disseminating this world's guiding principles, saw spirit hunting as a grave offense—and so the Theocratic State of Fandora, the church's headquarters, declared trading and even simply possessing Spirit Tears to be a crime. While this law wasn't strictly enforced, no authority would publicly oppose the Holy Church and its many light-elemental sorcerers.

I had no interest in learning how Baron Norph had come across this. Its value didn't exceed forty large gold coins, which was what he'd paid for its retrieval; to me, that implied it must've had great sentimental value to the family. He was willing to pay whatever it took to get it back.

Out of an abundance of caution, I avoided large cities, passing through forests and small towns, and reached the capital of Baron Norph's domain after about a week. I'd encountered no remnants of the Assassins' Guild on the way. Had I

been overly cautious? No, maybe not. Though I figured few had picked up on the fact that I was responsible for the guild's downfall, there was no harm in staying cautious. The monster leather cloak I'd purchased from Gelf's shop had been destroyed in the fight, so I was currently wearing one bought at a common store. This meant my appearance was unlikely to attract attention.

After paying the one-silver toll to enter the gate, I stopped by a stall and ordered soup. While sipping it, I asked the stout woman running the stall about the state of the town and about the baron. She wasn't busy, so she told me all manner of things.

"You see the estate up on that hill? Our lord lives there," she explained.

"Huh."

The estate was visible from the street and looked even more impressive than Baron Sayles's manor, where I'd worked undercover as a maid before. Perhaps this was due to its proximity to the city of Dandorl.

"If you're from a big place like Dandorl, this town may not look like much, but it's not so bad here. Taxes have been going up the past few years, though."

"Did something happen?" I asked, lowering my voice.

The woman, seemingly a fan of gossip, leaned closer and whispered, "About two years ago, the lord's previous wife was killed by bandits while traveling by carriage to another territory."

"His previous wife? Bandits?" I echoed.

"Ohh, you didn't know? His current wife is his second. After the first died, he gathered a big hunting party of knights and adventurers and took down the bandits. But he ended up overspending and had to borrow money from a shady trading company."

"Sounds rough." Had that been when the Mercenaries of Dawn had stolen the heirloom? Had the lord borrowed money to pay the Assassins' Guild to retrieve it?

"I don't know how much of this is true, you know. But after that, the daughter of someone from the trading company joined the estate as his second wife.

Taxes have gone up since, so word has it that the baron couldn't refuse her."

"I see..."

"Well, this town isn't so bad. If you're an adventurer, little lady, you're welcome to make us richer," she said with a hearty laugh.

Wait. "You can tell I'm a girl?"

"You're really pretty, even dressed like that. Could tell at a glance."

I considered this in silence for a moment. Even with the cloak covering me down to my ankles and my face half concealed behind a shawl, I still looked plainly female, it seemed.

Regardless, the information I'd gathered suggested that the baron had a decent reputation among his people. Despite the increased taxes, no one had a single bad word to say about him, which meant he had to be a good ruler. Perhaps the tax hikes had been imposed by his second wife to recoup the borrowed money.

Even if the trading company was shady, it was only natural for them to expect returns when lending out difficult-to-recover funds, so I had no opinion on the matter. It'd been the baron's decision to borrow from a group of ill repute and to hire the Assassins' Guild. What he did next was up to him. I'd come here strictly to get closure and return his family heirloom.

For now, I decided to take a look at his estate. Since I'd entered the town as an adventurer, stopping by the Adventurers' Guild might've seemed like the obvious next step, but doing so could leave a record of my visit. I might have been under an alias, but it was still best to avoid any unnecessary stops.

Besides the situation with his wife and his debt, I'd also learned he supposedly had a daughter, so perhaps it would be easier to hand the necklace to her rather than directly to the baron. I decided to wait until nightfall; from what I could see, the estate didn't seem to have any magical wards, so sneaking in should be trivial.

As I pondered all of this and got ready to leave, a voice suddenly came from behind me. "Hey, are you an adventurer, by any chance?"

"Yeah," I replied with a nod, turning to see that the speaker was a young woman in a slightly worn-out dress. I'd noticed her approach, but initially, I'd ignored it; her manner and presence both seemed rather ordinary, so I'd figured that paying her any special attention would've seemed unnatural.

"Ooh, I thought so! You're young, but you have an aura about you, so I figured you might be," she said, clapping her hands in delight and smiling cheerfully.

"Who are you?"

"Oh! I'm sorry. How rude of me. I'm Nora, the daughter of the baron who rules these lands," she explained, her cheery behavior giving way to the polite curtsy typical of nobles.

"The baron's...daughter?" I muttered. I hadn't expected to find her so easily.

She quickly reverted to her bright demeanor, waving her hands in the air. "Don't worry about it! I'm a noblewoman, sure, but I'm just the daughter of a minor local lord, so... Um..."

"What's your business with an adventurer?"

"Oh! Right. About that! I've been meaning to talk to a female adventurer. If you don't mind, could you spare me a moment of your time?"

"Sure." Normally, I'd have avoided that. But her choice of wording had somehow given me a sense of urgency, and so I agreed.

I'd neglected to consider, however, that even if she was only the daughter of a minor lord, and approachable and unassuming enough that one could forget she was a noble, she was still the daughter of a baron with tens of thousands of subjects. A noblewoman like her wouldn't simply approach a random stranger on the road for small talk.

"Sorry about the tea. I brewed it myself," Nora explained as she personally poured me tea in what appeared to be the mansion's parlor.

"Don't worry about it," I replied a bit stiffly.

On the positive side, I'd wanted to enter the estate anyway. But why was Nora making tea instead of leaving the task to a servant? Granted, it wouldn't

have been unusual for her to work as a handmaiden for royalty, even as a baron's daughter. But her clothes were unrefined, and she'd been wandering outside unattended. Perhaps that had something to do with it.

"See, I have to get married soon," she said. "I'm a noblewoman, so I have no objections to marrying whoever my father chooses, but...I don't know, I'm feeling a little insecure. I wanted to ask the opinion of a well-traveled adventurer."

"What do you want to know?"

At Nora's request, I shared some unremarkable stories about my time as an adventurer—stories she wouldn't be able to glean any information from—and gradually, she began to open up. Apparently, she'd been engaged since childhood to the third son of another baron, who was initially supposed to marry into her family. Nora was fond of him, but last year, something had happened and a new fiancé had been chosen for her.

"I hear he's been talking to his parents about it too, but... It's no use. We're both nobles. We can't go against our families' wishes." Nora's tone was cheerful as she said this, but her smile was tinged with sorrow.

"I see." I didn't really grasp the finer points of courtship and love, but it was obvious to me that Nora still longed for her previous fiancé.

The door suddenly opened without a knock, and a gaudy-looking woman in her late twenties walked into the parlor. "Nora, what are you doing?"

"Ah, my stepmother..." Nora said.

"Oh? You have a guest?" asked the woman, likely the second wife from the trading company I'd heard about. Her dress was well tailored, different from Nora's. She must've immediately recognized me as an adventurer upon seeing me sitting on the couch without my cloak on. She scoffed, ignored me, and resumed addressing Nora. "Have you finished the errand for the company? You are marrying my brother, so presumably you've gone and greeted him as you should've, yes? Linus will be the next baron of these lands, so you'd better ingratiate yourself with him now, or you'll regret it later."

"I understand."

"And yet here you are, with this little girl who..." The second wife trailed off midsentence.

I hadn't done anything. I hadn't inserted myself into the conversation or tried to intimidate her at all. And yet, when she looked into my eyes, she saw something that made her step back slightly, a hint of fear crossing her features.

"H-Hmph! Ill-mannered brat!" she spat, then stormed out and closed the door with a slam.

"I-I'm sorry about that," Nora said quickly despite her shock over her stepmother's attitude.

I shook my head lightly. "Don't sweat it."

She really didn't need to worry. After all, the exchange had made me realize something.

After parting ways with Nora and leaving the baron's estate, I noticed a number of presences had been following me for a while.

Two at first. The second wife could've sent them, based on the timing, but that explanation seemed almost too straightforward. After a while, however, it was down to one presence, then up to four, and finally around ten total.

I deliberately went into a back alley, stopping when I reached a deserted spot. "Why don't you all come out?" I asked.

I could feel the men's surprise as they revealed themselves. "Well, well. Impressive. You must be Cinders, yeah?"

"And you guys are?"

The men were all dressed like ordinary commoners, but their presences were anything but ordinary. Besides, the number of people who knew who I was and called me Cinders was limited. And considering how many had come here just to confront a child, I doubted all they wanted was a friendly chat.

Among them, the man who'd first addressed me—in his midtwenties, wearing slightly better clothing than the rest—bowed with a theatrical flourish, mimicking a noble, and gave me a reptilian grin. "We've come to take you with

us, on behalf of the Thieves' Guild."

I stared at him in silence. The Thieves' Guild? Why? And take me where, exactly? How did they even know about me?

The answer to my many questions came from an unexpected source as a man at the back of the group raised his voice. "Hey! What are you doing, Linus?!"

Linus, the man who had spoken first, turned around with a sly smile. "Oh, we're very grateful for your information. Not only did you help us quickly solve the mystery of the destruction of the Northern Border District branch of the Assassins' Guild, you also informed us of who was chiefly responsible!"

"You! You said you'd help me get revenge!"

"Oh, did I?" Linus said with a chuckle.

I'd heard Linus's name before, hadn't I? And the voice of the man behind him also rang a bell. When I glanced toward it, I saw a man with a bloodstained cloth wrapped around his face and body, hatred burning in his glare.

Ah. This man. "You're the beggar," I said.

"Cindeeers!!!" hissed the watchman and guide who'd once sat outside the guild. So he'd survived, had he? "The liaison who went to the capital with you and Rahda stumbled out of the guild on fire, but before he died, he told us about your betrayal! All the guys who'd been outside headed for the chapel and got caught in the collapse! All because of you!"

"Oh."

"Youuu...!!!" At my nonchalant response, the beggar erupted with fury and drew a dagger.

So it'd been the mystery liaison who'd triggered the fire trap at the entrance. If he'd leaked information, then that was on me for not making the trap lethal enough. Still, it was useful to know almost everyone stationed outside of the guild had died and that my role in the destruction of the branch had been exposed.

"Guh!" the beggar groaned, spitting blood suddenly. One of the thieves had stabbed him through the stomach from behind. "What... What are you—"

"You know, we're grateful and all, but it's rude to interrupt people when they're talking." Linus snapped his fingers. "Get him."

Several of the other thieves surrounding the beggar stabbed him in the neck and chest. He reached out toward me with his final breath, but the light in his eyes soon faded.

"I thought thieves didn't kill," I said as I glanced at the dead beggar.

The thieves' attention turned back to me, and Linus flicked his hair with a flashy gesture. "You're well-informed. But that rule only applies to civilians. And this one was about to attack you, so of course we dealt with him."

It seemed to me they'd gotten rid of him because he'd outlived his usefulness, though. "How did you know I was here?"

"Before I answer that, do you have the Spirit Tear, by any chance? Our plan was originally to buy it off the Mercenaries of Dawn. Mind handing it over? We'll pay you what we would've paid them."

Oh. So *this* was what they were after. Maybe the beggar had heard about it from the liaison. I nodded slightly and, with a sleight-of-hand movement, briefly showed them the necklace in my Shadow Storage. Linus's eyes immediately lit up.

"What's the reward?" I asked.

"Thirty large gold coins. Join us and we'll pay you ten more," Linus said, assuming I was interested and flashing a sly smile as he made his additional offer.

"What do you mean?"

He chuckled. "It's only natural we'd want someone as skilled as you on our side. Though the Northern Border District branch was destroyed, the other branches of the Assassins' Guild are still active. Plus, survivors will keep coming after you. But the Thieves' Guild and the Assassins' Guild have a noninterference pact. My offer might not seem like a big deal, but think about it. Once you're with us, the Assassins' Guild won't be able to touch you so easily. So how about it? It's a bargain, if you ask me."

"I see." So that was what they were planning. The Thieves' Guild didn't have many skilled fighters, so they'd bind me to their exclusive service as an assassin under the pretense of protection. "Also, I didn't think this necklace was worth that much."

"The fact that it's illegal to trade makes it all the more valuable. You were probably thinking of selling it directly to the baron, yeah? Sorry, but he has no money left. Besides, even if he got his hands on it, it'd just end up with us eventually. And that being the case, we'd prefer to deliver it to our client sooner rather than later."

So what he meant was that I should sell it to them because they were paying more. Were they anticipating that I'd try to sell the necklace to Baron Norph? Had they been waiting for me? Well, they were thieves. It was only natural for people who cared exclusively about money to think that way.

Everything seemed to be coming together, but one thing was still unclear: why had he said the baron's family heirloom would end up in the hands of the Thieves' Guild? I used Boost to accelerate my thoughts and reorganize the pieces I'd gathered, and then I realized something.

"Linus...Nora's new fiancé," I murmured.

His eyes widened slightly. "So you know that, huh," he said with a chuckle. "Impressive. Truly you're worthy of our ranks. And yes, you're right—the baron's family is already in the grasp of the Thieves' Guild. Now come! Take my hand!"

Linus offered his hand with a bright, easy smile, and I stepped forward. But I didn't take his hand; instead, I drew a concealed weapon from my Shadow Storage and slashed at his neck.

He screamed, but my blade only left a shallow cut across his face. At this distance, Linus had just enough space to dodge. "Wh-What are you doing?!" he demanded. "Without the patronage of the Thieves' Guild, you're—"

"I'm not interested," I interrupted.

Linus was the fiancé of Baron Norph's daughter and the younger brother of the baron's second wife. Both of them were from a merchant family to which the baron owed money, and which was likely part of the Thieves' Guild. Had the guild pulled strings through the merchant family to secure the Spirit Tear? Or had they used the first wife's death to take control of the barony itself?

Perhaps both. The baron's first wife had died in a bandit attack—which had likely been orchestrated by the Thieves' Guild. It was also possible that the Mercenaries of Dawn had been connected to the guild from the start. If so, then every misfortune that had befallen Baron Norph had been arranged by the Thieves' Guild to secure wealth and status for themselves.

There was no way I'd join hands with people who had killed Nora's mother out of greed.

"Kill her!" he barked, dropping his thin veneer of pretentiousness and letting his rough nature show. "She's just one damn brat!"

The other eight thieves quickly drew their blades and took up positions. Surely at least some of them had looked at me and been displeased about bringing a child my age into their ranks; disdain for me was plain on their faces.

I silently took stock of the thieves. Their combat power ranged from around 150 to 350; most of them, Linus included, were Rank 2, with only three of them at Rank 3. One of them was likely a sorcerer, if health and aether points were any indication.

A younger man, the one with the lowest combat power of them all, looked tense as he watched me hold my knife at the ready. It was likely he was using either the Scan skill or a crystal to read my combat power, but his reaction was too slow, and he failed to alert his comrades in time.

"Be careful! This one's—"

"Pain," I chanted before he could finish speaking.

"Gah!" The young man was stunned for a moment—long enough for me to throw a knife between his eyes and silence him for good.

"What?! Hey! Don't underestimate her!"

"Spread out!"

Seeing one of their own killed so easily, the other thieves, who'd been waiting

for a chance to strike, realized the seriousness of the situation and pulled out all the stops.

"Stupid kid! You think you can win against this many of us, Cinders?!" a man yelled, charging at me with practiced—but slow—knife strikes.

No matter how high their combat power or ranks might have been, they were still only thieves. Their skills were meant to intimidate ordinary people and nothing else. Without averting my gaze, I tilted my head to evade the attacker's knife, then slashed his neck as I moved past him.

Seven to go, I thought. "Shadow Snatch."

I dropped a fist-sized shadow sphere to the ground. As one of the men charged forward, an arrow shot up into his groin. The man crumpled with a groan, and my pendulum's blade pierced his throat, leaving a mist of blood in its wake. The blade danced in the air, slashing the stunned face of another young man who'd been watching his comrade die, before my black knife stabbed into his jaw and through his brain.

Five.

"Flame Javelin!" chanted the one I'd assumed to be a sorcerer. Normally, a direct hit from this spell would've killed me instantly, but the man was clearly panicked.

"Shield," I chanted in turn. In my haste, I'd used less aether than would've been ideal, and my Shield broke with an illusory sound like shattering glass. Still, a moment was all I needed.

The deflected Flame Javelin struck a thief who'd been sneaking up behind me, engulfing him in flames and sending him to the ground writhing. I leaped over him, discarded my now-burning cloak, and threw it at the sorcerer, obscuring the caster's view before he could ready the next spell.

"What?!"

I threw multiple knives through the cloak, and a muffled scream came from behind it. By the time the cloak dropped to the ground, the sorcerer's corpse was already falling over with a knife stuck in his throat. Three to go.

"This wretched girl!!!"

"Die, damn you!"

The remaining two Rank 3 thieves charged at me, lost to their rage.

"Weight." I used the spell to scale the wall, then jumped over the first man's head and cast a shadow spell at the one behind him. "Pain."

The second man froze in pain with a muffled shriek, and I hurled a knife at him, taking him out of commission. Just as I landed, the first man came charging at me, his face red with rage.

"Don't you da—ugh!" He failed to notice my pendulum's string stretched taut from my leap and ran right into it. Thanks to his momentum and weight, the string dug into his neck, and I quickly circled around him to pull it tighter still, then delivered a kick to his head. The dull *crack* of snapping bones echoed in the air as the man's neck broke.

I looked around and saw no one still standing. The last of them, Linus, was nowhere to be found.

So he ran, I mused. Unsurprising.

I kicked the jaw of the man still writhing from the combined agony of Pain and the knife stuck in his gut, then took a vial of poison from the pouch at my waist and poured it into his stab wound. The poison was an imitation of the unbelievably painful one that the female kidnapper had used on me.

The man shrieked, convulsing and shaking his head, unable to comprehend his situation as various fluids dripped from his face.

Now then, let's have a chat. You don't need to understand what's happening, but you do need to remember one thing: the Assassins' Guild became enemies to my mentor, so I crushed them. And you all?

"You've become my enemies too."

Whimpering, Linus clutched his bloodied face as he ran through the back

alley, thinking back on how things had come to this.

He'd always thought he deserved better than to live out his life in obscurity in a rural barony. Along with his sister, also born in the slums, he'd spent years dreaming out loud, trying to devise ways to climb up the social ladder. It had been fortunate, then, that the head of the Thieves' Guild in his town had recognized his wits and taken him in.

Linus and his sister learned that the baron possessed a rare gem called the Spirit Tear. Seeking wealth and status, the pair wanted to use this information to connect with a higher-ranked noble who was in the market for such a gem. Linus's plan, perhaps a result of his inferiority complex, was twofold: make his sister the baron's second wife and marry the baron's daughter himself.

His plan was perfect. The Mercenaries of Dawn, the adventurers commissioned to retrieve the lost Spirit Tear, had been recommended by a contact from the Thieves' Guild. Not only that, it was Linus and the Thieves' Guild who had lent the baron the money to hire an assassin to kill the Mercenaries of Dawn—Linus and his associates had planned on getting rid of the adventurers from the very start.

Linus had accounted for two outcomes: either the Mercenaries of Dawn would repel the assassin and sell the Spirit Tear, or they would die and the gem would be returned to Baron Norph via the Assassins' Guild. One way or another, it would end up back in the hands of Linus and his associates. However, things took a sudden and unexpected turn when they were, unbelievably, informed that the Northern Border District of the Assassins' Guild had been annihilated. Not only that, its destruction had been brought about by the same young female assassin who'd taken out the Mercenaries of Dawn.

Assassin or no, how could a child have done such a thing? According to the survivor from the guild who'd relayed the information, the girl was a demoness's apprentice and had played dirty, poisoning the members of the guild, setting the place on fire, and killing everyone. Lastly, the Spirit Tear was now in the hands of that very girl—an assassin known only as Cinders.

Linus saw that as the perfect opportunity.

He didn't know why Cinders had betrayed the guild, but doubtless she had no

means to part with stolen property and thus would come to sell the item back to the baron directly. And a child this cunning would surely see the benefits of joining the Thieves' Guild. Linus's plan was to hint at the possibility of survivors and other branches of the Assassins' Guild seeking payback, offer protection against this, and thus secure both her abilities and reputation.

Even if Cinders's *actual* abilities turned out to be nothing to write home about, just having someone who'd wiped out an entire branch of the Assassins' Guild would make the local Thieves' Guild highly respected in the underworld.

And this initial plan was, he thought, flawless. But Linus had failed to understand that the mental fortitude and capabilities of a child who could massacre an entire guild were far beyond his comprehension. Upon finally meeting Cinders, he saw a beautiful girl appearing around twelve years old, still retaining some of her childlike innocence. Despite knowing she'd destroyed the Assassins' Guild, the thieves, seeing her delicate appearance, underestimated her. They thought there was no way the girl could've been powerful.

Cinders suddenly bared her fangs at Linus and his associates, and in the clash that followed, his comrades were killed one after another. Though thieves didn't excel in combat compared to adventurers, they were still significantly more skilled than bandits, as many were former thugs or came from the slums. Linus had brought with him about ten capable fighters, ranked between 2 and 3, to intimidate the girl. Still the battle ended in an instant. Without a moment's hesitation, the girl danced across the battlefield and reaped lives as effortlessly as one would pick flowers, her movements both terrifying and beautiful.

The girl was indeed beautiful, so much so that Linus nearly failed to notice the sting of the gash across his face. Yet her delicate appearance combined with her merciless killing made her look like something otherworldly, like a grim reaper; Linus, overcome with the fear of impending death, abandoned his dying comrades and fled.

It was still bright out, the sun high, and Linus—who had a front as the head clerk of a trading company—knew he could be saved if he went to the main street and appealed to the guards for help. However, he still had his pride as someone who lived in the underbelly of society, and he knew that resorting to such measures in an underworld dispute would spell his end in that world.

Or so he told himself, anyway. Truthfully, he knew it was pointless. Cinders was definitely coming for his head, and if necessary, she would take down anyone in her way to get to him. This much he'd instinctively known, as someone who operated in the underworld himself, the moment he'd looked into the girl's eyes.

"Hey! Open up! Open the hell up!" he yelled, pounding furiously on the back door of the trading company he worked for.

A man opened the door. "Mr. Linus?! You're hurt! What happen—"

"Quiet! Out of my way!" he snapped, pushing the man aside and rushing into the building.

This trading company had long been used as a front by the Thieves' Guild in this barony. When the decision had been made to set a trap for the baron, the guild's base had been moved here, and now nearly every person on staff had been replaced with a guild member.

"Close up shop! She's coming!" he barked.

Though it was still dusk, he hastily closed the shop's doors, drove out the few employees with no knowledge of what was happening, and began to gather weapons from the storeroom to prepare for a fight. Without bothering to treat his wound, Linus stood in the back of the shop, shaking like a leaf and clutching a weapon tightly. The remaining dozen or so thieves were left bewildered; they exchanged confused glances.

Linus had told the others to prepare for battle, but he'd taken the skilled fighters with him earlier that day, and those remaining here were at best Rank 2, specializing in stealth or scams, not combat. With Linus in no state to explain, the shop's thieves were left even more puzzled.

"What the hell is happening, Linus?!" From a room toward the back came a burly middle-aged man whose muscular upper body was on full display. Half naked women were draped around him.

"Old man!" Linus exclaimed. The bare-chested man was the head of the barony's Thieves' Guild and also the one who'd taken Linus and his sister from

the slums, acting as a sort of father figure to them. "Y-You've gotta help me, old man! She's... That *girl* is coming!"

"Girl?" the man echoed, heaving an exasperated sigh at the sight of Linus's bloodied, terrified face. "Messed up badly, did ya? All right. Hey! Send someone to fetch those ex-adventurers—"

"Hey, old man?" Linus said, turning around in suspicion when the guild leader abruptly stopped mid-command. He let out a silent scream upon noticing two knives stuck in the man's throat and a short arrow through the right eye, the area around it turning a dark, sinister color.

The guild leader's massive frame fell backward with a thud, and no one could comprehend what had just happened. Even the women who'd been at his side were left stunned. A light breeze swept through the closed space, and everyone in the room turned to it, realization dawning on them that one of the skylights had been left open. Outside, silhouetted against the darkening indigo sky and rising moon, stood a girl with ashen hair, her icy jade eyes looking down on them.

"I've come to kill you all."

A mass murder had occurred in a town within Baron Norph's domain.

First, nine bodies had been found in an alley; of these, eight had been identified by the guards as members of a certain trading company. Upon visiting said company, the soldiers discovered that the doors had not been opened that morning; within were upward of twenty corpses, including that of the head clerk, Linus.

Over thirty people had died in total, making it the largest murder case in the history of the barony. However, documents were found within the company related to criminal activities and suggesting ties with the Thieves' Guild. Given that almost every one of the victims had been killed in a single strike, the incident had been ruled a conflict between underworld factions before it could become a public scandal.

The company had been the headquarters of the local Thieves' Guild, but more

thieves would soon flock to this town from other regions, and the guild would be reestablished elsewhere. Among those thieves were the ones lucky enough to have been away from the guild that fateful day; they would fearfully caution new thieves not to get involved with Cinders.

A few months after the destruction of the Thieves' Guild, a wedding was held at Baron Norph's estate for his only daughter, Nora.

The groom wasn't the head clerk of the trading company who'd once been made her new fiancé. Rather, she was finally able to marry the third son of another baron, her original fiancé and beloved, who reciprocated her feelings. He would join House Norph as Nora's husband and study governance under her father in preparation for eventually taking over as the next baron.

The baron, moved to tears at the sight of Nora in her bridal gown, was not accompanied by his second wife. Rather, the baron held a small portrait of his first wife, who had passed away several years prior. His second wife, who had joined the family some time after, had divorced him around the same time her family's business closed down. The woman had already been in a state of terror and confusion, and upon the divorce, she had fled the barony and reportedly been killed by bandits in the mountains en route to Dandorl.

Around Nora's neck as she smiled at the groom she'd known since childhood was a necklace, decorated just enough to obscure its true nature—a Spirit Tear. According to the servants I'd spoken to, the necklace was a memento of her mother, who had gotten it from her own mother, an animist or spirit user. In other words, it wasn't an accursed item obtained by killing a spirit, a practice which the Holy Church had forbidden.

I watched the happy bride for a moment before silently turning my back.

With all the trouble I'd caused in this town, I'd been unsure of how to return the necklace, but in the end, I'd simply snuck into her room and placed it by her pillow. Alongside it, I'd left a note that said, "Revenge has been taken," though in hindsight, that might've been unnecessary.

The other, scorched Spirit Tear necklace clinked softly in my hand. I'd had it made to deceive the liaison and recovered it during the battle with the

Assassins' Guild, but having fulfilled its role, the gem was now just a rock. Said gem had been dropped by the water spirit I'd defeated quite some time ago; without it, I might've burned to death in that fire.

Spirits very rarely left aethercrystals like this behind, so why had that particular spirit? Maybe it had been seeking its end all along. The truth, however, had perished with the water spirit.

"No use thinking about it," I told myself.

I glanced back one last time. Nora looked happy. The words I'd left for her had probably given her closure; now she could move forward. In the same instant, she looked back, and our gazes met. Despite the distance, she seemed to recognize me, given that her eyes widened slightly. She beamed and waved at me, and I gave her a small wave in return before leaving the scene.

In the past few months, I'd finally turned nine.

My body had grown quite a bit, but even though I'd managed to destroy individual branches of the Assassins' and Thieves' Guilds, I couldn't claim to be truly strong yet. I still lacked the strength to fulfill the promises I'd made, and I had yet to settle the score with Graves, who'd not only attacked me but could also harm Elena. I was also still keeping my distance from Sera's organization, uncertain whether they were friend or foe. Occasionally, survivors from the Assassins' Guild came after me, and because of this, I still couldn't return to my mentor.

I wasn't strong enough yet to repel everything that tried to tie me down. But I'd stopped running. I'd stopped hiding. If anyone wanted to kill me, then let them come, I thought. The stronger they were, the stronger I'd become. I would fight—for the sake of my promises to my mentor and to Elena, I would become strong enough that the nobility could not bind me, strong enough that even those in the underworld would fear me.

Perhaps these were just the delusions of an arrogant child. But I would get what I wanted. And to do so, I would become not an assassin but an adventurer. I wanted *true* strength, not just the ability to fight other people.

I tossed the dog tag with the fake name Anya into the air and cut it in half with a *shing*. I was now simply Alia, the adventurer. And so—

"Come out," I called out on the darkened road.

A figure in black emerged from the shadows, as if oozing out of the darkness. Most likely an assassin from a branch somewhere; their entire body was concealed, making precise identification impossible, but from their aura, I surmised their strength was around Rank 4.

The assassin drew a black one-handed sword, and I drew my black knife in turn. Our blades clashed.

"I'm not running ever again."

In a dimly lit alleyway of a certain town, a young girl appearing to be about twelve years old narrowed her violet eyes, framed by heavy dark circles as though she were ill. Her long black hair billowing behind her, she calmly looked down at a filthy man.

The man, whom the girl had thrown to the ground, opened his mouth with a terrified expression, sweating profusely. "I swear, I don't know anything else! Please believe me! I only heard rumors of this Lady Cinders girl from a traveling merchant!"

He belonged to the Thieves' Guild in the royal capital. He'd ended up in this unfortunate situation because the noble lady before him was seeking information about a certain girl, and he'd had the misfortune of having heard that particular rumor. How much of this rumor was true was hard to say, but the substance of it was that a girl, supposedly in her early teens, had single-handedly massacred an entire branch of the Assassins' Guild and was now opposing the Thieves' Guild.

On a first hearing, it sounded like a drunkard's tall tale, but even though the event had supposedly happened far to the north, the story had traveled all the way to the royal capital through the chatter of traveling merchants and thieves. Though absurd, the story was captivating enough that it had brought a level of prestige to the merchants from the north, who'd even managed to secure

business partnerships through it.

Neither those telling nor those hearing the story truly believed it quite yet. However, the noble lady—Karla Leicester—had listened to it with stars in her eyes.

"So you're alive, Alia," she muttered, entranced.

If Alia set her mind to something, she would see it through, no matter the consequences. And in this pain-filled world, Alia had been the only one to acknowledge Karla's existence, having promised to end it.

With eyes wide open, Karla dreamed.

She thought of a single time in her childhood when her father had taken her to see the graduation party at the Sorcerers' Academy. Only nobles bearing the title of baron or higher, along with their partners, had been invited to the royal castle. They wore splendid outfits, took the hands of their chosen partners with bashful smiles, and danced gracefully.

In an instant, that dreamlike, beautiful scene was dyed crimson.

There, in pools of blood, lay Karla's fiancé, the crown prince, and the sons of various high-ranking nobles. On the grand stage, framed by the city burning below the castle, stood Karla and Alia, wearing dazzling ensembles. Their eyes reflected only each other as they fought to the death.

In the back alley, Karla's delicate, pale fingertips gripped the thief's head, and flames of a brilliant scarlet seeped between her fingers, charring the man as he let out a voiceless scream. Karla's enraptured voice, like that of a girl looking at her Prince Charming, echoed through the darkness.

"Hurry, Alia... Come and kill me..."



Wish upon a Star

In the deep, deep, endless darkness, on the never-ending path of despair leading only to death, you revealed yourself to me, like an angel on silver wings.

"I can kill you, if that's your wish."

"Ah, how wonderful. If I am to die someday, I hope it's by your hand, Alia."

The Countdom of Leicester was a renowned noble house of sorcerers, tracing its origins back to those of the Kingdom of Claydale itself. My father was the kingdom's chief court sorcerer, as had been my grandfather and great-grandfather before him. My mother would tell my brothers and me stories about our ancestors, urging us to become honorable nobles and powerful sorcerers.

As Karla Leicester, the youngest daughter of the count's family, I had been subjected to magic training alongside my three elder brothers from a young age. My father was strict but honorable, and my mother, beautiful and elegant. My brothers were blessed with abundant talent in sorcery—a trait I did not share. At three years old, I'd only managed to conjure a small flame.

Still, my brothers had treated me kindly. The numerous house servants had also comforted me, in spite of my shortcomings. My parents had been strict, but my brothers and the servants had soothed me by saying they simply had high expectations of me, which helped me endure the rigorous training.

But I had misinterpreted their kindness.

"Karla, I'll be performing a procedure on you," my father declared suddenly one day. Thus did the various experiments begin.

I was made to drink myriad alchemical potions; had magical engravings placed on inconspicuous parts of my body, such as my scalp and internal organs; and was used for sorcery practice by the servants, who were also my father's apprentices. Whenever I neared death, I received just enough healing to keep me alive, under the guise of light sorcery experiments.

Out of all the experiments, my father's chief interest was determining what

would happen to a person who acquired affinities for all six elements. In spite of my growing aether, the pain, suffering, and sadness, I gave training everything I had, clinging desperately to the belief that my family still loved me. As a result, by the age of four, I had acquired all elemental affinities. My father's small smile at the result of his experimentation was tinged with despondency.

With all elemental affinities, my body was in a state such that I would likely not live to adulthood. I could no longer fulfill my role as the daughter of a noble, to marry into another noble family and form an alliance.

My father scoffed. "Now you're useless, Karla. Ah, well. This concludes the experiments. Whether or not you can bear children, you will be sent to the royal family as a fiancée to the crown prince to strengthen our ties with them. Your final duty is to stay alive at least until another fiancée bears the prince an heir. Do not disappoint me any more than you already have."

"Yes, father." I was wrong. Everything I'd felt had been make believe. Whereas I'd imagined that my father was strict but honorable, he was simply uninterested in anything other than the sorcery and history of the Leicester family.

As my health deteriorated, I was left bedridden. My skin took on a sickly tint, and my eyes were framed with heavy dark circles. My mother began to regard me with disgust, as though she were looking at something abominable. She never took me into her arms again. All she wanted was a brilliant and beautiful child by the chief court sorcerer to serve as an accessory to her own image.

Amid the pain and suffering, the unrelenting agony, commanded to live and nothing more, my only solace was the prospect of death. I confined myself to the Leicester mansion's old library, which housed thousands of books on sorcery. I buried myself in those books, as if to avert my gaze from the very doom I secretly sought. The servants, my father's apprentices, stopped smiling at me, deeming me worthless. They treated me like livestock, merely bringing me meals.

A little over a year passed while I remained secluded in the library.

"Hey, Karla. You really are here, huh?" said my eldest brother, whom I hadn't seen in a long time. He was a student at the Sorcerers' Academy and, according

to the servants' gossip, their most outstanding and highest ranked.

"Brother...?" I replied in a hoarse voice, as though I'd forgotten how to speak. I extended a hand toward him, and his own mercilessly smacked it away.

"Do you mind not touching me with those filthy hands? You look horrendous. Even orphans in the slums look better."

"Why...?"

"Is it so strange? It's only natural we wouldn't want to associate with you. Granted, without a failure of a sister like you, it would be harder for us to recognize our own talent." My brother's kindness had never been genuine. I knew that now. But would he truly go out of his way to tell his dying sister that? "Father ordered us to keep you alive. But still, even though you will eventually perish, I am loath to think of bowing my head to you when I become the court sorcerer to the crown prince. So I figured instead, I could make your final role to be to serve as my dummy for target practice."

"Oh." At that moment, something inside me shattered completely.

No one in my beloved family had ever loved me. Their love for me had never existed, not for a moment. And indeed, one book had said as much. Another as well. Many of the forbidden books hidden in the shelves said exactly the same: this world was just an ugly, cruel place.

This was the day the humanity within me died.

"I've reached Level 3 in sorcery before adulthood. My professors say it is a grand achievement, the first of its kind in decades, but it's only natural, of course. I am the eldest son of the great Leicester family. Father will be cross with me if I kill you, to be certain, but if I tell him it was a necessary step to further the development of my excellence, he will surely forgive me." My brother pointed his hand at me. "Now then, behold my sorcery!"

He began to chant a Level 3 fire spell, Flame Javelin, which could easily kill a person. However, the aether emanating from my extended hand easily stopped the javelin as it hurtled toward me.

"What?!" he snapped.

Why? Was this all? This crude construct was all he could cast? How come? Books explained all of this. He could experience sorcery through his own body, so he should've been able to understand everything, like I did. The pain of burning skin. The agony of frozen bones. The crude, excruciatingly painful healing. The fear of being broken. The despair of having my hand slapped away by those I loved.

It was all so simple, so easy to understand. Just experience it. What had my brother been studying all this time? Destroying a person was as simple as turning a page. The forbidden books, hidden away in the shelves, detailed so many spells for torturing and killing people.

Ah, my dear, uneducated brother. And still I loved him so. He was beautiful. How hard it must've been for him to exist in this ugly, filthy world. Allow me to teach you a little of the many lessons I've learned.

"Flame Javelin," I chanted, forgoing the incantation.

My fire spell engulfed my brother's, turning him into a living, shrieking torch.

"I'm sorry, brother. I've never done this before, and I couldn't gauge my power correctly." Burning him alive must've caused him so much pain. I hadn't wanted to accidentally burn my precious library, so I'd tried to control my spell's power but done a poor job of it. "But, brother, you're at fault too. Your slow little incantation was so cute, I couldn't help myself. Please, forgive your incompetent sister."

I smiled fondly and watched my brother writhe, no longer able to speak as his lungs burned.

"What's the matter? You need to veil your whole body in aether, or you'll burn to death. And if you can't speak, you need to be able to cast a spell without the incantation, otherwise you'll just suffer. If even your inept sister can do it, surely you, my brilliant brother, can do it too? Ah, can you not hear me anymore?"

How unfortunate. I'd burned him so slowly, so carefully, and still he couldn't do it. Ah well. I watched with a smile until he stopped moving, then crushed his charred skull underfoot.

"Well then, farewell, my brother. I hope to be your sister again in the next life. Then perhaps we can pick up where we left off? It'll be delightful, I'm certain," I whispered.

Just then, I heard multiple footsteps rushing toward the library. Had they heard my brother's shrieks? The door burst open with a loud *bang*.

"What the hell is this?!"

"A corpse?! Wait, those shoes!"

"Young master! You! What have you done?!"

Ah, what excellent servants they were, recognizing someone from what remained of their charred feet. Granted, addressing their master's daughter as "you" warranted the deduction of one point.

"Dust. Stone Shot." I mentally readied, then fired two spells simultaneously, instantly obscuring their vision and halting their movements. The rocky projectiles shattered the servants' heads. "Lucky you. Now father can't scold you for failing as servants."

Thankfully, no blood had gotten on any of the books. I picked up what remained of my charred brother and, stepping out into the bloodied hallway, began to look for my mother and my other brothers, all of whom I expected to be somewhere in the mansion.

"Guillotine." I hadn't seen the outside of the library in a long time, but it hadn't changed at all. Still, the view looked different, thanks to my growing aether. "Or perhaps it's because I've changed a bit that the world looks brighter. Don't you think so?" I asked the servant, now only a head, who'd attacked me as I walked past.

Oh, but now thanks to my brother and this servant, I was covered in ash and blood just as I was about to see my mother. I cast Cleanse on myself to tidy up, but was there anything else? No, surely my mother would forgive me. Her precious daughter was bringing her a little bauble, after all.

"Let us go, then, brother," I said to my dearest sibling and to part of the servant as I resumed walking down the hallway.

When finally I reached the courtyard with both my brother and part of the servant cradled in my arms like a bouquet, my mother, who'd been enjoying tea in the gazebo, let out a high-pitched sound at the sight of her daughter for the first time in a while. "Y-You!" she exclaimed.

Conveniently, my other two brothers were there as well. The youngest, feminine and cute as a button, was my mother's favorite. But my dearest brother, why so pale? Why, you'll make our eldest brother and the servant sad. Mother will be so upset to see you like this.

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And so—
"Ice Javelin."
"Ugh!"
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The ice javelin blew away my brother's face. My mother and middle brother froze, their bodies stuck in strange positions as they stared at the now-faceless boy. Perhaps I could lend him the servant's face?

Then my mother, who had been staring down at her son stiffly, like a doll, screamed in so improper a fashion that her voice echoed throughout the entire mansion.

"Oh, father, welcome back."

"Karla. You..."

My father only came home every two or three days, yet he'd hurried back. One of the servants had to have informed him of what had happened. My father looked over at my mother, whose complexion was even more—no, just as pale and sickly as mine—and my middle brother, also white as a sheet, fussing over her. He then glared sharply at me.

With our father's return, my middle brother finally looked—glowered, perhaps—at me, but when I smiled at him, he looked away awkwardly. Since our eldest brother was gone, that made him the next heir, right? Surely he was happy now? He was our beloved mother's only remaining son. Why wasn't he delighted? Was he shy? That was a new discovery for me.

"Karla, why did you do this?" my father asked.

"Oh, father, have you forgotten? You raised me this way." I chuckled, elegantly placing my hand over my mouth like a proper lady.

My father's face turned dark with anger, and I could sense magic gathering at his fingertips. "You...!"

"Are you certain?"

"What do you mean?"

"Try and kill me now and I'll kill my brother first." After all, I could manage at least that much before my father finished me off, no?

At my words, my mother's half-glazed eyes shot open, and my middle brother's already pale face turned a remarkable shade of ashen gray.

"You want to marry me off to the crown prince and use me as a pawn, correct?" I continued. "You don't want to lose both your pawn *and* your heir, do you? You'd have to start over."

"What do you want?" my father growled. His face was still red with fury, and he gritted his teeth so hard it seemed they might shatter.

"I would like freedom, for the time being. Rest assured, I will marry the crown prince and fulfill my duty as a noble lady."

"Where did you learn about that?"

"What are you talking about? I studied, of course. As a talentless wretch, diligence is my only strong suit." If one studied to death—quite literally—it was a given that knowledge would come in time.

"Do as you please."

"Oh! Truly? How wonderful!" My father loved the Leicester family and its reputation. I'd known he would say that, despite the sour expression on his face.

I beamed in response, hoping it would be a source of comfort for him. *Now then*, I thought, looking around before saying, "I would like a bath. Someone, please."

The pale-faced servants all lowered their heads at once. They were no longer defiant, but still, how rude, to look at me like I was some sort of deranged murderer. The least they could've done was respond with a bit of lighthearted humor.

"I shall escort you, Lady Karla," an older butler replied, stepping forward. This was...Joseph, the chief steward. I remembered him. Among the servants, he was the only one who had tried to coax me to return to my chambers and take my meals.

Although the other servants had hesitated in terror, Joseph, who didn't have much time left, seemed willing to be the sacrificial lamb. His complexion was horrid, and all this had likely shaved off several of the few years that remained to him. But it was no matter. I would probably still die before he did.

"Please do, Joseph," I replied. "Also, could you gather a handful of capable servants? Their origin doesn't matter to me. Just make sure they're properly domesticated."

"Yes, my lady," Joseph replied.

I followed after him under the hateful glare of my father, who stood there motionless; I felt, too, the fearful gazes of the others on me. I had to become stronger. If my father, a Rank 5 sorcerer, had truly considered eliminating me, I would have indeed died.

While I did wish for death, I couldn't simply perish without killing my father first. And the rest of our family. The servants. *Everyone* associated with the Leicester family. I would kill them all. But most of all my father. He had to die in the despair of seeing his precious House Leicester fade into oblivion.

I would die too. That wouldn't change. But the beloved family who'd toyed with my life, and this Kingdom of Claydale that had condoned their games—they would all accompany me in death. Ah, how I looked forward to it. How many people could I kill before meeting my own end, I wondered? I would've liked to annihilate the entire country and its people if I could, but how to achieve that?

And how to avoid being killed by the wrong hand? I didn't want that, if it could be avoided. I especially loathed the idea of dying by the hand of one of

those disgusting people who claimed to be on the side of righteousness.

And so I sat on my bed, with sheets reeking of impending death, and wished upon a star for my prince to come to me. With all my heart, I wished for someone who would put an end to my madness. "May a wonderful person come along to kill me one day..."

Three years had passed since that day. When I wasn't fulfilling the bare minimum of my duties as a noble lady, I continued to delve into the large dungeon overseen by the crown and located in Leicester territory.

I couldn't join a party, so I couldn't descend to the deeper layers, but even so, my forays had made me remarkably better at using sorcery. It would've been a bit easier had I reached Rank 4, but that was difficult for an eight-year-old to achieve, even with my body having grown due to my aether.

One reason I ventured into the dungeon was to try and make it to the deepest level, where a spirit who granted wishes was said to reside. Perhaps that could change my fate.

At one point, I had also met the crown prince, who was to be my fiancé. Such a sweet and charming boy he was. The thought of this boy, who lived life as though prancing through a field of flowers, becoming the next king... It reminded me of playing make believe. Surely his sister the princess, who was around the same age as me, would make for a more respectable ruler. Nevertheless, the idea that I could corrupt such an innocent prince became something of a motivator for me to continue living.

Yet he was not *my* prince. There was no way he could stop me. Someday, my true prince, for whom I had wished upon a star, would come. And then, with the burning royal capital as our grand stage, we would fight to the death.

Surely my prince would come. Surely...

And then, on an impromptu visit to the Adventurers' Guild, I met my destined one.

"How about I guide you through the dungeon?"

The Mentor and the Unsociable Apprentice

I couldn't remember how long it'd been since I'd found my way to this kingdom.

As a dark elf, I was called a demoness by humans and had gone through a lot before settling down here. Now, however, I had come to believe that was for the best. I had a child with me, one who called *me*, of all people, her mentor. During my time with the demon army, I had been too focused on myself to take care of the younger ones, but after coming to this country, I'd found several youths I could call my apprentices.

Well, one of them I hadn't quite wanted to call my apprentice. But the troublesome lad, the son of the leader of the Assassins' Guild, had formed a strange and concerning attachment to me.

Due to my physical condition, I'd settled in these woods within the Barony of Sayles. Around then, my foolish apprentice—a young woman who had just entered adulthood, a bit older than the guildmaster's son—appeared on my doorstep. I had been cautious at first. How could she have known about this place? I had just settled here. I'd intended to inform a trusted merchant I'd met through the Assassins' Guild, but the only other person who'd known of my whereabouts was the guildmaster.

The young woman had haughtily told me, "You're the demon sorceress, right? I know who you are. In a few years, you'll help the heroine and teach her sorcery. So teach me too."

At that moment, I was completely speechless. Had she not considered that exposing someone of the demon race could've gotten her killed? She was so foolish that I couldn't help but pity her, and I ended up taking her under my wing as an apprentice. Truthfully, when she got onto the subject of an "otome game" and a "heroine," I couldn't understand a word she said, but if nothing else, she had enthusiasm, even if it was misdirected.

She was a slow learner. At first, she asked me to teach her light sorcery, but she only managed to learn the elements she was good at. I felt bad for her, thinking she'd die quickly out there, so I taught her basic dagger techniques as well. All in all, it took five years to teach her just the basics. She complained that

she'd wanted to "debut" as an adventurer in her teens, but her pace was not my problem, now was it?

Then she finally set off on her own as an adventurer, but whenever she found herself struggling, she came back to help herself to my potion stash. I didn't mind parting with a handful of potions, but when I pointed out she was still single, my foolish apprentice answered with nonsense along the lines of "I'm a femcel," whatever that meant.

Despite her limited knowledge, however, she'd been able to come up with something impressive. If she'd been more diligent, she could've become a respectable researcher, even if being a great sorceress was beyond her. But because of that particular fixation she had, she vanished one day. In her place, another girl came to me.

"Mistress Cere'zhula, I've fetched the water."

"Next is chopping firewood. We'll train after dinner, so make sure you take no more than half an hour, Alia."

Alia. Poor child. Her fate had gone awry when my twisted, foolish apprentice tried to take over her mind. Well... I called her a child, but in truth, she was surprisingly pragmatic. Alia didn't see her hardships as hardships at all. At first, I'd thought she might've been influenced by my foolish apprentice's memories, but that wasn't quite right. She'd rationalized those adult memories as "knowledge," and though she no longer behaved like a child, her heart had remained unspoiled.

She was single-minded in her pursuit of strength. Children, in their ignorance, were usually quick to become distracted by new things and tended to learn slowly. This girl, however, had willingly and without hesitation thrown herself onto the thorny path. That was the key difference between her and that foolish apprentice, who had possessed the same knowledge yet had somehow taken life for granted.

Truly, what a fool that other apprentice had been.

Alia, meanwhile, was diligent to the point of excess but was sorely lacking in

aesthetic and emotional sense, not having been educated in such things. I corrected her where I could; I figured the average adult, seeing that she was capable of doing most things normally when instructed, wouldn't treat her as a child.

Ordinary children couldn't use Practical Magic to fill a water jug to the brim and would tire out partway through chopping firewood. I'd initially assumed she wouldn't finish the many chores I'd given her, but she completed them all without a peep. And that was fine. A good thing, even.

On the other hand, this girl couldn't do the most ordinary things. When it came to food, she understood what she needed in order to grow and ate well, which was good. But she had no regard for ingredients. For instance... I regularly made my own herbal wine. And so Alia, claiming it would be good for my health, had once shown me a wine bottle packed with carnivorous wasps. Frankly, I'd wanted to scream.

Granted, she still had issues, but she'd made leaps and bounds recently. Despite having asked to be my apprentice, she'd been wary at first, like a wounded stray cat. I'd allowed her to use my foolish apprentice's old room, and outrageously, she'd slept wrapped in a blanket in a corner of the room, despite the perfectly serviceable bed. Not only that, simply walking past the room was enough to wake her up. I wondered what kind of awful environment she'd been living in.

Anyway, it was time to enjoy whatever creative dish my unsociable apprentice had whipped up today.

"Now then, today's training will be in the woods. Follow me, Alia."

"...All right."

I noticed the slight delay in her response. I hadn't told her any details, but she'd nevertheless caught on that my body was beginning to wear out.

When one's aether increased and one began to use spells of a given element, an aethercrystal of that same element formed in one's heart. Animals possessing these crystals were commonly referred to as monsters. Monsters

grew larger as their aethercrystals increased in size, and those that instinctively knew that a stronger crystal strengthened them in turn would seek out aether-rich humans for sustenance.

Even non-elemental monsters could reach high amounts of aether by enlarging their bodies and aethercrystals both. People, however, couldn't become monsters; thus, they could not develop a significant amount of aether without an element and could increase their aether only through the formation of an elemental aethercrystal. This meant that for a person, possessing multiple elemental affinities was considered beneficial; however, each additional element caused the crystal to enlarge, putting pressure on the heart.

One or two elements posed no problems. Even with three, there would only be issues if one was a melee combatant. With four or more elements, however, strenuous activity became impossible. A child who developed an aethercrystal with that many elements at a young age could even die.

Someone foolishly attempting to acquire all the elements would live a short life in constant pain. I had four elemental affinities myself, and after decades on the battlefield, I could no longer endure extended fights.

"Why so glum?" I asked. "I'm fine, so buck up."

"Okay," Alia replied.

Having her hunt low-ranked monsters in the woods was no problem. Alia had already been capable of defeating Rank 2 monsters when she came to me. She compensated for her small stature and low stats with wit and spells, fighting in a manner that took advantage of her childlike body but wasn't very childlike at all. And while she was strong for her age, it nevertheless limited her.

Alia had come from somewhere she'd been staying with a human noble she called a "bird of a feather," and said she'd been eating well there. Still, she'd been thinner than other children her age—skinny as a child from the slums, despite her aether-fueled growth spurt. Perhaps it was because I'd stressed that she should always add some type of meat to a meal, but since coming here, she'd grown significantly less frail. At the moment, I was only going over the basics with her, but once her skill levels in sorcery and melee combat went up, I expected her growth spurt to continue even further.

The reason behind the rapid growth seen in humans whose aether increased in childhood was still unclear, but perhaps the principle was similar to the way an enlarged aethercrystal caused a monster to grow larger in turn. Animals that turned into monsters had longer lifespans. Perhaps humans, too, could maintain their youth if, by attaining higher aether levels, they became closer to elves like me.

Alia complained that growing heavier had caused her center of gravity to shift, but I figured that was likelier to have happened due her body having begun to display secondary sex characteristics now that it was getting enough nutrients other than plain mana; these past few months, her shoulders and hips had grown quite round. As a dark elf, I wasn't quite sure just how quickly the human body typically developed, but I still felt this was a bit too soon for her. Wasn't it?

It was generally believed that human children who experienced growth spurts as a result of aether would grow, at most, to appear about three years older than their actual age. But different children developed at different rates. On arrival, there'd been a certain boyish quality to Alia, but once her development began in earnest, she would no longer be able to pass for anything but a girl.

The thought worried me a little.

I'd only raised my younger sister and left her with our clan, so I had no idea how much education a girl approaching adulthood needed. Alia was quite lacking in what was common sense to most girls, since her mother hadn't gotten the chance to teach her much. She had my foolish apprentice's lived "knowledge," but I didn't think she could fully comprehend it, nor did I think my foolish apprentice had experienced an ordinary girlhood either. I wasn't sure how to instill in her the average person's level of modesty.

As her body grew, likely the people around her would begin to see her as a young woman, but she was still only eight years old. Though her overall mentality was less "eight-year-old" and more "brutal veteran mercenary," her level of modesty was closer to "clueless toddler"! Moreover, this girl was quite beautiful by human standards, wasn't she? If she just carelessly exposed her limbs to teenage boys, why, it could easily lead them astray! It was only natural! The girl had a certain je ne sais quoi that belied her age.

Although, well, in a way, it could've been worse. If she'd grown up pure and innocent while looking like that, even young nobles might've lost her minds over her.

Ha. We'd only met a few months ago, and already I was fussing over her like a mother hen.

"Mistress?" Alia murmured.

Oh dear. I'd gotten distracted. Alia's voice pulled me back to reality. She stood before me, signaling with her fingers: "caution," "enemy," "ahead." These hand signs were used by adventuring scouts, and they had become commonplace among members of the Mercenaries', Thieves', and Assassins' Guilds due to their convenience. An adventuring scout had taught Alia the basics, and I'd taught her more practical and combat-oriented uses of the signs.

Clear proof that I was the superior master, incidentally.

"Go, Alia," I said.

"Got it," she replied, then silently dashed forward.

Our enemies were a pair of manawolves. Parent and child, or mates, perhaps. I could sense no pups within range, so perhaps these two were lone individuals seeking to mate. Manawolves were regular wolves transformed by mana; they were about twice the size of their animal counterparts. Though their strength and ferocity increased accordingly and they were Rank 2 monsters, their behavior remained similar to that of ordinary animals.

The faint rustling of Alia's footsteps in the grass alerted one of the manawolves. Just as it growled, Alia's concealed knife went flying toward the beast, which dodged it, but the knife changed trajectory in midair and sliced into its paw.

Upon noticing the attack, the other manawolf immediately lunged at Alia, letting out a fierce roar.

"Touch," Alia chanted.

The manawolf's physical abilities surpassed the girl's, but still it flinched midleap, letting out a confused whimper as Alia's spell touched its eyes. She took advantage of this opening and, grabbing the wolf's snout for leverage, deftly avoided its charge by rolling onto its back. She then wrapped a string around its neck, took a sitting position, and, while strangling it, plunged her black knife into its nape.

"Pain," she chanted, casting the spell on the first manawolf, which had tried to jump her from the side. She then leaped at the stunned wolf, pulling her knife back in a wide arc. "Thrust!"

Her technique sliced the wolf's head clean off. In only a few seconds, she'd executed a perfect ambush and eliminated both threats. Despite her young age, Alia had been through a unique kind of hell, having survived confrontations with various powerful opponents.

"How was that?" she asked.

"Not bad, not bad," I replied. "If I had to point anything out, I'd tell you to consider targets for Touch other than the eyes. Canines' sense of smell is stronger than their eyesight. You'd do well to remember the different characteristics of other monsters too."

"All right," Alia said, nodding so calmly one would never have thought she'd just fought two monsters.

She hadn't needed my assistance at all. I drew the aether I'd gathered in my palms back into my body.

The concealed weapons and string she'd used were things I'd had lying around at home that suited her abilities. The string had been made from monster spider silk but didn't conduct aether very well. I figured we should procure something specially for her. And the hunt for the materials would make for good training.

She was truly exceptional for her age. Alia had no physical strength, and her reach was short. If she took just one hit, she would be done for. Her speed was her one forte, but it still only barely compared to that of an adult. Even so, she'd made up for her deficiencies through wit and sorcery. Thanks to her guts and her ability to keep her emotions in check, she'd been fighting and winning against enemies more powerful than herself.

I was gradually teaching her not only sorcery but also the skills I'd honed over my century-plus tenure on the battlefield as the Fiend. Though this was beyond her capabilities right now, once she grew to Rank 3 and beyond, she should be able to go toe to toe with me, at least in melee combat. If anyone could do it, it was her.

Because of the aethercrystal in my heart, I'd been unable to master physical skills. But if Alia continued to grow like this, she could become the ideal fighter. With high-level sorcery and physical skills, she could be a true fiend on the battlefield. And then perhaps she could achieve what I could not and combine light and shadow.

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"Alia," I called out.

"What?"

"Stare all you like, but we're not bringing the manawolf meat back with us."

"...Right."
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Alia was more feral cat than child, and yet she'd adapted to life here. It'd been like taming a wild animal. She'd slept poorly at first, but as of late, she seemed to feel safe enough to sleep deeply while I was around.

I approached the sleeping girl and took a seat next to her bed. Even an unchildlike child was still a child. At her age, she should've been relying on her parents. But she'd taken her loneliness and buried it deep beneath layers of knowledge. Her "bird of a feather," the princess, was much the same, but the world had never gone easy on noble children.

Gently, I brushed my fingers through Alia's hair as she slept. She didn't stir but clung to my hand. I had no desire for children of my own, but...perhaps this was what it felt like to be a mother. I felt guilty toward her real mother for harboring these feelings, but perhaps I could be forgiven, just this once?

"Sleep well," I murmured. "As long as you're here, I won't let any harm come to you."

Afterword

Volume 2 of *The Otome Heroine's Fight for Survival* is here! To all new and repeat readers, hello! I'm Harunohi Biyori.

Honestly, I started writing this story as a hobby, hoping, like "Wow, it'd be nice to find people with the same interests," and I was legitimately floored by the response I received. And that response grew even louder after the release of the third chapter, "The Ashen Assassin," which was covered in this book.

When I start writing a story, I always do it with the final scene in mind. That way, wanting to write that scene keeps me motivated to continue writing. This third chapter contains a lot of essential content to reach that ending, so I was very anxious while writing it, wondering if it'd be well received. But then I got an overwhelming amount of support and realized that the greatest source of motivation is actually the readers' encouragement.

In the same vein as Elena from the first volume, two important characters made their first appearance in the second.

One of them is Cere'zhula, Alia's mentor in sorcery, alluded to throughout the first volume. I was delighted to finally introduce her! She's like a brash older sister figure.

The second is Karla, whose popularity equals that of the main character, Alia! She's an incredibly dangerous character, with an intense psychopathic aura. Every time she made an appearance in the web novel, the readers' response was outstanding. She's also one of the characters I like most, and her conversation scenes with Alia are my absolute favorites! They're must-reads, in my opinion. I absolutely love reading and writing conversations with a bizarre atmosphere like that.

You know, the villainesses I write are always totally morally bankrupt, so I always wonder why they end up being horrendously popular (LOL).

Anyway, naturally, that's why the side stories feature Karla and Cere'zhula.

The main story is told primarily from Alia's perspective, so please enjoy the rare insights into these two's emotions.

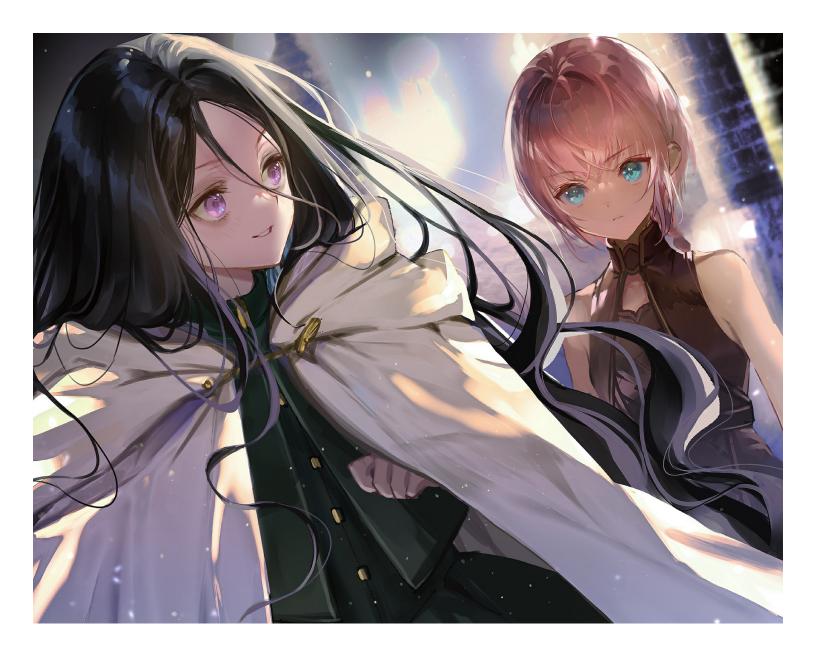
Also, to those wondering about Elena: sorry she didn't show up this time!

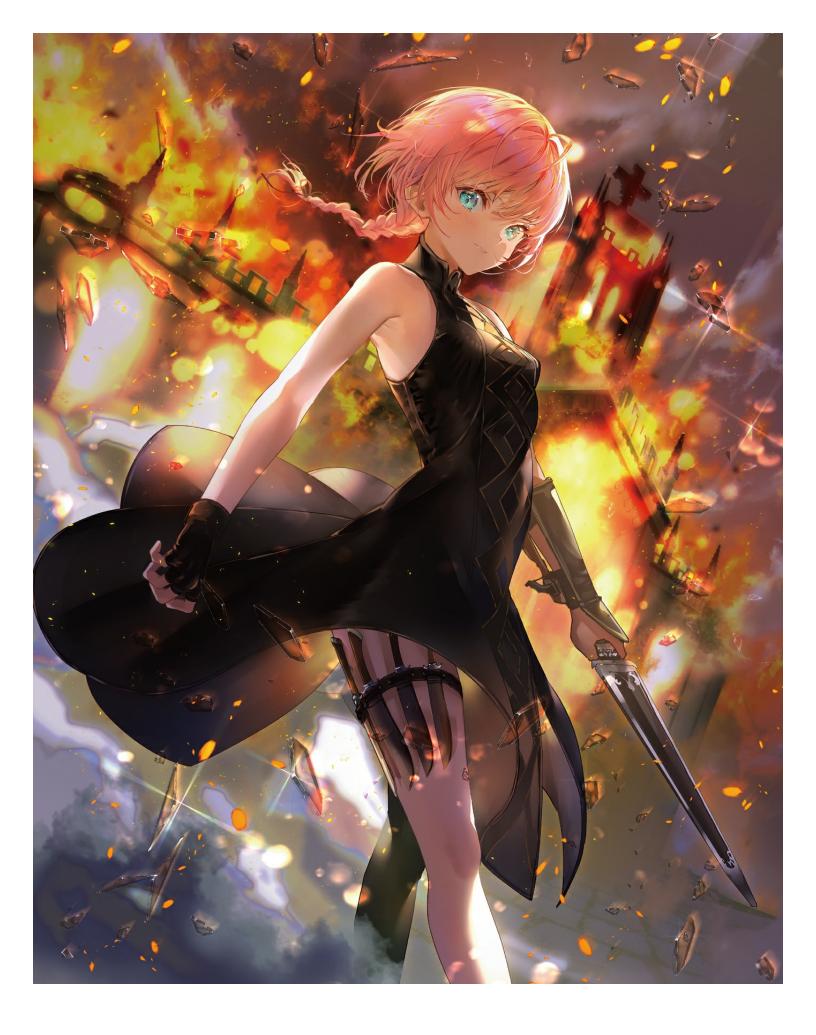
This volume's illustrations were also done by Hitaki Yuu-sensei! Even those of you who have only seen the cover know that Yuu-sensei's artwork is, yet again, amazing. And not only that, a manga adaptation is now being published too, beautifully and awesomely drawn by Kobato Wakasa-sensei!

Volume 2's release was only possible thanks to all our readers, all the bookstores that chose to stock it, the support TO Books offered my clumsy self, and everyone who took part in its publication. Thank you so much!

I'll do my best to not keep you all waiting too long for volume 3, so I hope you come back for it! Let us meet again then!

- Harunohi Biyori





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 A 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

characters-



Feld

A highly skilled, good-natured adventurer. He's the first person to teach young Alia combat skills.

Viro

An adventurer and a 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 maid.



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

The Fae Armorer (Maidens Only!)

Over a decade before the start of our story...

In the royal capital, there was a shop run by a fae. There, women's armor, cute and cool alike, could be found on display, and the wonderful fae would custom-make pieces for clients.

Today, as usual, the fae was busy crafting adorable armor, hoping to see everyone's happy smiles.

"You sure this shouldn't say 'goblin,' not 'fae'?"

"Hmph!"

"Aaaaaargh!"

A male dwarf, Gelf, had to teach the careless young man the meaning of love by hugging him very, very, very hard. The young man was released after just a few hours, and still he left the shop in tears, screaming, "I'm never coming back here!"

"I'm sorry for bringing over that sort, Gelf..."

"Oh dear, little Mira, don't worry! I'm glad you introduced me to a boy. I'd expect no less from my bosom buddy! He was just a bit...unfortunate."

"He's not a bad guy, just...unfortunate, yes," she agreed with an exasperated sigh.

Miranda was an adventurer, a friend of Gelf's, and a regular at the fae armorer. She'd stood there in astonishment, watching as the young man received Gelf's love for a number of hours. The young man in question, often described as "unfortunate," was Viro, who had just joined Miranda's party a year ago. He looked to be about twenty years old, had a somewhat dubious smile, and was a little careless with his words.

"But you know," Gelf continued, "seeing a boy like him reminds me of the first time you came to my shop, Mira."

"O-Oh, come on, now! Let's not talk about the distant past. I'd only just arrived in this human nation, and I was on edge for all sorts of reasons!"

Gelf chuckled. "I am very pleased we can have our girl talks now, though."

"I couldn't have guessed then that we'd become so close."

Gelf was a crag dwarf with the heart of a maiden whose dream was to make wonderful armor for lovely women. When he'd set up his small shop in the royal capital, his very first customer had been Miranda, a wood elf. Gelf had been delighted; her petite and delicate figure had been perfect for the beautiful armor he crafted.

However, elves and dwarves generally did not mix. This was because dwarves were known for being stubborn, and elves were a prideful people. Dwarves often interacted with humans through their blacksmithing, whereas the haughty elves rarely left the depths of the woods and had a tendency to look down on others despite being little more than country bumpkins themselves.

Back then, Miranda had just joined an adventuring party known as the Rainbow Blade, which also included a mountain dwarf and a human mage, so they'd been relatively tolerable country bumpkins. But during her first meeting with Gelf, Miranda had been as wary as a small animal encountering a natural enemy.

How do I even deal with a dwarf in a gold lamé dress?! she'd wondered.

But, despite her wariness, Miranda gradually shed her characteristically elven arrogance as she met a variety of people and interacted with the humans of the royal capital, slowly smoothing out her rough edges. Miranda and Gelf had eventually become good friends, transcending race, gender, and other significant differences. These days, they could even be called bosom buddies.

But although Miranda became close to Gelf's ideal model, he never made her wear the many designs he'd carefully created over the years, though he did craft armor for her. Why was that? Miranda had changed, having lost her rough edges over her time in a human nation. Perhaps Gelf's dreams had changed in a

similar vein?

No, that wasn't right. Miranda, now that she regularly consumed human food, had rounded out, in body and soul both. She was no longer Gelf's ideal model.

"Gelf, what's on your mind?" she asked.

The dwarf was tactful enough not to put any of that into words; he wasn't blunt, unlike that human named Viro. Miranda might've gained weight and become a bit chubby compared to the average elf, but she was still not overweight by human standards. She simply no longer had a model's figure.

He didn't blame her; it was her new environment at fault. In the elven settlement Miranda had come from, fruits were only faintly sweet and powerfully acidic; there were no varieties specially bred for sweetness. For the young elf, the only sources of sweetness had been flower nectar or honey, a rare treat that the adult elves occasionally brought back from foraging. Even in the remote village where she'd first met her companions, the common sources of sweet flavors were no different from those found in the woods, and sugar candies were rarely available and only sold by merchants.

The capital, however, was a whole other beast. Tens of thousands of people lived there, and the demand was met with supply; as long as one had the money, sweet things were readily found and plentiful besides. Money wasn't an issue for Miranda at the time, since she was making a killing as a renowned adventurer. As a result of Miranda's indulgence in treats not available in the forest, her figure had gone past what Gelf considered an acceptable range.

But why was Gelf *that* specific in his passion for making wonderful armor? "Well, that story begins long ago," Gelf said.

"Huh?" Miranda replied. "Why are you reminiscing all of a sudden?"

Gelf had been born in a crag rock settlement located within the dwarven nation.

Dwarves were divided into mountain dwarves, skilled in woodworking and craftsmanship, and crag dwarves, skilled in blacksmithing and handling fire.

Rock dwarves were akin to rabbits in their love for digging holes; their skill in blacksmithing came from a desire to create better tools to dig even more holes.

However, while Gelf had been born a crag dwarf, even as a child he'd much preferred admiring cute things to excavating. He favored making clothes and accessories over rocks and digging holes. Mountain dwarves were the ones said to excel as craftsmen, but a dwarf was a dwarf. It wasn't impossible for Gelf to do it too.

Thus, Gelf honed his skills by making various small items, but his fellow crag dwarves didn't understand him. Male crag dwarves were as stubborn as a pigheaded old man, and even the women were generally obstinate. Most dwarves looked like bearded geezers but, beneath the facial hair, had surprisingly childlike faces; the beards were generally grown to hide that fact. Because of this, younger female dwarves were as cute as human children. They were still stubborn as mules, however, and obsessed with digging holes and not fashion.

"Why don't they wear cute things?" Gelf wondered. If he'd looked as adorable as the lady dwarves did—even somewhat stocky as they were—he would've been sporting cute and sexy outfits all the time!

That was when Gelf realized something: he didn't just want to make lovely, wonderful things; he wanted to wear them. Finally it dawned on him that he didn't do this for anyone else: he wanted to dress up cute himself. His heart, in its earnest pursuit and love of cuteness, was more maidenly than anyone's.

After acknowledging the maiden within, Gelf naturally began to adopt a more feminine behavior and attire. But he was still a dwarf. No matter how passionate he was, there were limits to the cute outfits he could wear. Plus, he loved his facial and chest hair. He continued to dress in feminine fashion while proudly displaying his dwarven traits, which made the other dwarves in their settlement grow distant from him. His older brother, Galvus, was the only one who accepted him.

"Wait, Galvus, are you interested in this kind of thing too?" Gelf asked.

"I'm interested in my boot up yer ass, idiot," Galvus snapped. He, too, was a stubborn crag dwarf, after all. He couldn't understand Gelf's hobbies, but as a talented weaponsmith himself, he could recognize his younger brother's skills and passion, and became his supporter.

At the time, the war between demons and humans was growing more intense, and the dwarves, who were all part of the same surface faction, were in high demand for their skills at crafting weapons and armor. Good-natured Galvus decided to move to a human nation to test his skills and invited his poor brother, Gelf, to come along.

"I'm makin' the best weapons there can be," Galvus said. "Gelf, you put that degenerate passion of yours to use an' make the armor. We're goin' to a human country—someone there's gonna wanna wear it."

"Oh, Galvus, thank you for praising my desires."

"I ain't praisin' nothin'."

Thus did the two brothers leave the dwarven settlement, crafting equipment while moving from battlefield to battlefield. After several decades, the war went from large-scale battles to local skirmishes, and the pair decided to leave the fray. They ended up settling in the Kingdom of Claydale. Though the war was still ongoing, the two believed only the strong would survive on the battlefields of the future. To make specialized equipment for those people, a fixed environment was best.

Unfortunately, demand in the royal capital of Claydale was only for ornate equipment. Gelf, who enjoyed making beautiful armor from the start, didn't mind this. But Galvus, who loathed the idea of dealing with nobility, ended up settling on the frontier, near where monsters lived, to craft weapons for adventurers.

The two brothers, who had set off together, went their separate ways to master their respective crafts. Gelf opened a small yet charming shop in the royal capital, making women's armor and crafting cute clothes for himself. Over time, watching female adventurers and knights get stars in their eyes as they tried on his creations, Gelf was motivated to craft even better equipment for them.

"Oh, are we done with story time?" Mira asked. She was munching on sweets, having tuned out Gelf's precious tale entirely.

"Mira! I told you to lay off the fried pastries!" Gelf chastised her. She was now even further from being his ideal model.

"Well, what did you expect? I just got back from an expedition!"

Mira's excuses aside, it was true that she and her companions had been on an expedition out of the country until a few weeks ago. This was rare for average adventurers, but Miranda and the others had become so famous that they had formed connections with nobles and now received personal requests to go abroad. This last expedition had been requested by House Melrose, a major noble family of this nation; the Adventurers' Guild, alongside the related Mercenaries' Guild, had been engaged to escort important persons after a demon attack in a neighboring country.

Usually, Miranda's group didn't actively involve themselves in foreign affairs, even at the behest of a noble. However, Miranda'd had her own reasons this time.

"The demoness wasn't there either!" she lamented.

"That's rough," Gelf commented.

"Rumors say she died on the battlefield, but if that pest could die so easily, I wouldn't have gone through all of this!"

The term "demon" referred not to terrifying devils but rather to an "evil" race of this continent: the dark elves. The reasoning behind this was unclear, but apparently it was the Holy Church of the Mercenians, a racial group that had immigrated into the continent, that called the native dark elves by that moniker. To this day, the dark elves were regarded as a symbol of fear by humans.

Wood elves, like Miranda, had never been on good terms with dark elves. It was generally believed—as per the Holy Church's claims—that the dark elves sided with evil gods. The wood elves had their own reasons for their distaste, but these were considered taboo, and speaking of them was strictly forbidden.

Gelf wondered what had happened between Miranda and the dark elf

woman she spoke of.

"Damn that woman, getting all cocky just because they call her the Fiend and because she's a *little* strong. She could've killed me, but nooo, she went and decided not to!" Miranda ranted.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Gelf asked.

"Every time we've met on the battlefield since, she makes a mockery of me! She ruins my plans! Ugh, she pisses me off!"

"She makes a mockery of you? On the battlefield?"

"Dark elf women are always like that! Just because their chests are a *little* big, they think they can lord that over our heads!"

Gelf stood there in stunned silence.

"Hey, Gelf. Tell anyone about this, and a wood elf assassin will personally come for you," Miranda threatened.

"Oookay." Some things in this world were best left unknown.

Over a decade had passed since then, and still the perfect model for Gelf's designs had yet to appear.

There were elven girls with ordinary builds in the royal capital, yes, but how many decades would these conservative girls take to understand the beauty of Gelf's craft? Besides, they, too, were falling victim to the capital's gourmet offerings.

Is there no hope for me? Gelf found himself wondering at one point. Until...

"Gelf, are you here?"

One day, after a lengthy absence, Miranda had suddenly shown up with a number of children in tow. Among them, as though brought by fate itself, was a young girl. She appeared to be still young but wore a stern expression, framed by an aura of danger; she was an adventurer, despite her age. Perhaps due to her youth, she seemed indifferent to adorning herself despite her beautiful features. The moment Gelf saw her, it dawned on him like a divine revelation

that his destiny was to make her more feminine.

Gelf's fastidious brother had given Alia weapons, so if Gelf himself didn't do something for her too, his inner femininity would've been mortified.

This was only Alia's third visit, and it'd been only a month since her last, when he'd given her a prototype he'd been working on. Although not a finished piece, it'd still been made of real leather, and even so, she'd damaged it beyond repair. The girl had looked apologetic, but armor was meant for protection; as long as she was safe after however many battles, the armor had served its purpose.

Originally, Gelf had wanted to dress her in proper armor made of monster leather and intended for actual use, so the prototype's condition wasn't an issue. What had *really* relieved him, however, was to see Alia wearing a certain article he'd given her previously.

The girl still didn't seem to understand what the purpose of wearing it was, however, and Gelf hadn't had the chance to explain before she set off once more. He spent many days fretting over it, until finally, a year later, Alia showed up again.

"Long time no see, Gelf," she said.

"Oh my!" Gelf exclaimed. "If it isn't little Alia! It's been so long, sweetie! Look how you've grown!"

"Yeah. I'll be ten soon."

"Ten... You're still that little. Humans are strange, aren't they? Why does more aether result in faster growth, I wonder?"

"Don't dwarves grow?"

"We do, all of us. But faefolk like elves and us dwarves are born with high aether, so we don't experience a significant difference in growth like humans do."

"I see."

"You know those two who came here with you the first time? Mira and Feld? They had a friend...a girl, a retired sorceress, who'd grown up really quickly

too."

"Did she grow up quickly because she was a sorceress?"

"That's right. She had a lot of aether, much more than you, Alia, so I was shocked to hear her age. At first, anyway."

"Just at first?"

"That girl was...short. 'Puny,' according to Mira. It seems she'd stopped growing taller at some point. Oh, but on the other hand, she looked really young for about forty years! She looked no older than a teen."

"Was she really human?"

"One-hundred-percent a human girl, yes. She was so beautiful that she had five husbands, eleven children, twenty-seven grandchildren, fifty-four great-grandchildren, and, um...many great-great-grandchildren."

"And you're calling her a... 'girl.'"

"She'd been an active sorceress for over a hundred years by the time she retired."

"You're sure she was human?"

"Well, now you're making me wonder."

"But what about Feld? He looks pretty old."

"That boy has the face of a geezer, I'm afraid."

"The face of a geezer..."

"Oh, but that's not necessarily a bad thing! People like that look the same for about thirty years, so eventually they look young for their age! Though they'll never quite be popular with the younger ladies."

"Oh. Right."

"Alia, I feel like you're growing very fast too. Usually aether makes people look two, maybe three years older than their age, but look at you! You're already a young woman. Even if you dress as a boy, you'll look like a girl for sure."

"It sucks."

"Well, when you're as pretty as you are, Alia, it's only natural. Maybe you look more mature because you're taller than average."

"I'm tall?"

"The average thirteen-year-old around here would be a bit shorter than you. I wonder what makes you different? Though there *are* individual variances in growth between people..."

"Maybe it comes down to the necessary nutrients for a child's growth. A balanced intake of fats, sugars, and proteins is important. Also, they should consume dark green vegetables high in beta-carotene, get moderate exercise so their bodies can efficiently process those nutrients, keep their muscles flexible to avoid injury, and train other abilities to keep the body supple, preventing muscles from growing stiff and hindering bone development. It's not just about consuming nutrients from food either. They should also identify their elemental affinities and absorb sufficient mana of the corresponding elements. Maybe doing all that helps make a child taller."

"R-Right..."

"And besides that, maybe using monster parts that wouldn't ordinarily be considered edible—"

"Okay, okay, I get it!" Gelf interjected. "I get it, all right?!"

"You do ...?"

"Alia, do you have no interest in sweets and things like that? They're sold everywhere in the capital, you know. Little Mira loves fried pastries..."

"Expenditure of carbohydrates and oils is difficult."

"Right, yes... Wait, no! You're a girl! You must love sweets, right?! You do, don't you?!"

"I make sure to consume what my brain needs."

"O-Okay. I have heard sweets are good for brain fatigue."

"I always carry an efficient brain fodder made from alchemically refined

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brown sugar."
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"Brain...fodder?!"

"It's very convenient for when I have to fight continuously for longer than a day."

"You're very adorable when you tilt your head cutely like that! But yes, I've heard about something similar. The Sorcerers' Guild in Dandorl published a paper on it."

"Huh. Gelf, do you know much about sorcery?"

"Not at all! I can only use Boost and a little bit of water and earth sorcery. But I also do magical processing on armor, so I visit the Sorcerers' Guild and the Alchemists' Guild often."

"I've never been to either."

"You had a mentor, did you not, Alia? People like you don't have as much of a need to go to places like that. Unless you're making a business out of doing alchemy, the local shops are enough."

"Right."

"Anyway, I see that your overall femininity hasn't changed. Which is a pity. So, are you here today for armor repairs?"

"I think it's about time to get something new made."

"Can you come to the back and take off that cloak to show me?"

"Sure."

"Ah, it's scratched all over again. The small scratches didn't regenerate...

Maybe orc leather was a bit flimsy?"

"Some parts are torn too. And..."

"Yes, yes, I can tell. It's getting tight around the chest and hips, right?"

"It is."

"Such remarkable growth. Your body's a lot more feminine than it was a year ago."

"I'd like my limbs to be thicker, though."

"Don't say things like that. You might make a certain pastry-loving elf depressed. You're fine just the way you are, sweetie. It's better to sharpen your skills than to simply force yourself to develop heavy muscles."

"Got it."

"Anyway, this definitely calls for new armor. Let's go with materials one rank higher, this time."

"I have twenty large pieces of gold, but I want to use half to commission weapons from Galvus."

"My, but you've saved up a tidy sum. I'm sure whatever you did to earn that was extraordinary, but I don't want to know. However, since your budget is that high, perhaps I could use dragon wing membranes? I'll charge you for the materials only, though. You *are* my exclusive model."

"Thanks. Are you sure that's not too little?"

"It's not. Besides, I'm sure Galvus won't want too much money from you either."

"He's given me a lot."

"Yes, I know. But Galvus is just doing what he wants, so don't worry about it, okay? It's enough for both of us that you're using what we make."

"Okay."

"Aww, don't make that face, now. I'll take your current measurements, so could you please take off your equipment?"

"All right."

"And still no hesitation at all to strip. I'm glad, though, to see you wearing those properly. You *have* been, right?"

"These? Yeah. You told me it was important that I wear them."

"So you still don't know why... My, how do I instill a sense of modesty in you?"

"I do know why they're necessary."

"You do, do you? Oh, Alia. All right. First, I'm going to explain to you the current situation surrounding underwear in our continent."

"O-Okay."

"Do you know what the most common type of women's underwear is in this country?"

"...Bloomers?"

"That's right. But before that, both men and women just wrapped lengths of cloth around their waists. A few hundred years ago, however, as the battles against the demons intensified, women started going to the battlefield. That meant getting changed became a hassle, right?"

"...?"

"I didn't expect you to tilt your head in confusion at that. Anyway, being seen naked is a big deal for noblewomen especially, isn't it?"

"...Yes, I suppose it is."

"You don't look like you get it, so you really don't need to agree out of consideration, sweetie! Anyway, that being the case, women started wearing bloomers because it made changing clothes faster, but some had complaints."

"Why?"

"A lot of the women on the battlefield were sorceresses, but not all. For mercenaries with a lot of muscle, bloomers were annoying, just like they are to you. Also, having high aether makes you less sensitive to cold."

"Yeah, bloomers just get in the way."

"And that's why shorter bloomers were introduced, made of thinner fabric and with a higher cut. Noblewomen and young adventurers with high aether switched to those. Of course, ordinary people and the more bashful women still wore ordinary bloomers."

"I've never seen these shorter versions."

"Most ordinary people probably haven't. The short ones are often made from quality materials and aren't usually sold in shops for commoners. But recently,

someone shook things up. The shops in Dandorl started selling fashionable, informal underwear for both commoners and young adventuring women."

"Dandorl again."

"Yes. Dandorl has been at the vanguard of various innovations in the past few years: information, basic cosmetics, new fashion... Rumors say the princess of Dandorl is behind this, but she was five, six years old at the time. That doesn't seem likely."

"Huh..."

"Initially, existing clothing stores resisted the new offerings because the fabric was significantly reduced and tied on the sides, which was up until that point unheard of. But, just like with short bloomers, female knights and adventurers began to favor them."

"Yes. Because they're easy to wear."

"Cheaper too, which helped their popularity. Commoners have plain cotton versions with less fabric and simple designs, and nobles have versions made of silk with frills. There are various types now."

"You have more varieties in your shop too."

"By the way, I'm wearing red-dyed silk lace, myself."

"Oh. I see..."

"Hee hee. Have I piqued your interest, Alia? Nothing to be embarrassed about, of course. You *are* a girl. So, my recommendation to you is this underwear right here, which I have personally designed!"

"Huh?"

"Short bloomers made as short as possible, not tied around the thighs for a loose and comfortable feel, and they can be tied at the sides, so they're adjustable! Perfect for noble ladies used to bloomers! They're made of silk, so there won't be any chafing, even during intense activity! Now, Alia, sweetie, which color do you want?!"

"I want this cotton one. The cheapest."

"You still don't get it?!"

Gelf had initially meant to teach Alia a sense of modesty, but he'd completely failed at instilling any femininity on her, and so he ended up just stuffing Alia's bag with underwear in all colors.

After that day, Gelf began to worry about things other than just his designs.

"Mira, how do I help a young girl be more feminine?"

"Why are you worried about that all of a sudden? What are you, a mom?"



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The Otome Heroine's Fight for Survival: Volume 2

by Harunohi Biyori

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Ebook edition 1.0: July 2024

Premium E-Book