

Table of Contents

Cover

Map

Act One: Wandering / The Ashen Princess of Slaughter

Chapter 1: The Heroine's Fight against Fate

Chapter 2: The Battle Maid of Shadow

Side Story: Elena's Vow

Side Story: An Afternoon in the Life of a Battle Maid

Afterword

Color Illustrations

Characters

Bonus Short Story

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Act One: Wandering / The Ashen Princess of Slaughter

Chapter 1: The Heroine's Fight against Fate

The Otome Heroine

"Fooound yooou!"

I met her in a back alley. That day, I was scared. Lost. Alone.

She wore a pink dress, typical for a young woman in the city, but it was oddly worn out. Her hair was filthy, disheveled, as though it were an old woman's. Bloodshot eyes and hollow cheeks made her look ghastly, straight out of a nightmare.

As I sat rooted in place, cowering in fear, she threw aside her pack and lunged at me.

"N-Nooo!" I shrieked.

"Be quiet, brat!" she hissed as she tore the pouch I carried around my neck from me. "Heh heh... This is..."

"Nooo! Give it back!"

"Shut up!"

The woman fished into the pouch I'd been told never to open and pulled something out, bursting into maniacal laughter. "Ah ha... Ah ha ha ha ha! I knew it! This confirms everything! This is the world of ****! Ah ha ha ha!"

I sat there, unable to move, terrified of her hysterics.

Until age four, I'd lived with my parents, just the three of us.

I'd wake up to the smell of my mother's soup, then go wake my sleepyhead of a father. He'd embrace me, rubbing his unshaven face against mine. I'd whine, and he'd lift me high into the air, instantly brightening my mood and making me laugh. My mother would scold us, but without a hint of anger on her features.

Those joyful days would never return.

Three years ago, our town had been attacked by a horde of monsters—there'd been a severe outbreak, the kind that only happened once every few decades. My father, who'd served as a town guard, had bravely set off to protect us, never to return again. The monsters had remained undeterred, and my mother, too, had lost her life to save mine.

I didn't know how that battle ended. I'd been crying alone amid the corpses of monsters and people littering the rubble when a surviving soldier picked me up and brought me to an orphanage in a distant town.

Never again would I feel the comfort of my father's broad back or my mother's gentle smile. All I had left of them was a pouch my mother had given me—a "charm pouch," she'd called it.

With no idea what would happen, and no time to mourn the loss of my family, I was exposed to the brutal realities of the world.

The orphanage was located in an old church, and about ten of us were brought in, crammed into a small room that looked like a barn. We were given thin, tattered blankets to use as bedding, and watery soup made with only salt and vegetable scraps—all of which was quickly snatched from us by the older kids who already lived there.

The old hag in charge of the place gave us only hardened brown bread and salt soup, twice a day. She made us do everything: fetch water, launder clothes, clean, tend the fields, collect firewood, lug things around, and even do work she'd take on that was unrelated to the orphanage. We were worked from before dawn until after dark, and the older orphans knew they could slack off by forcing the younger to do everything. One hungry boy who'd stolen into the pantry to nibble on potatoes was caught, and the old lady beat him with a rolling pin until he coughed up blood. The next day, he was cold and lifeless in his cot.

More than once, I thought I was going to die. The adults in town wouldn't help us; no one wanted to get involved with dirty, emaciated orphans. No one wanted to adopt us either. Not only that, the old hag got hefty sums to hand over the better-looking children to well-dressed adults who'd come over from

time to time.

I didn't want to be there, but the memory of what my parents had said kept me going. "No one is bad at heart," they'd told me. "Smile and let things go, okay?"

So I did. The violent old lady was probably in a bad mood, I'd tell myself. The older orphans stealing from the young were just a product of their bad environment. My smile never wavered, and I let it all go. For three years I endured, keeping my charm pouch safe.

It was only when the old lady came to me, telling me to wash up in the well and wear nice clothes because I had a *very special* visitor the next day, that I wondered where I'd gone wrong and fell into despair. I hated the way those adults looked at us. That day, no longer able to stomach my feelings of disgust or life at the orphanage, I finally ran away.

Which was all well and good, except I had nothing on me. Hungry and forlorn, I huddled up in an alley, hugging my knees to my chest. And it was then that *she* suddenly appeared before me.

The woman chuckled eerily. "Don't be scared, Alicia..."

I was stunned when my name suddenly left her lips. How did she know it?

"I've been watching you for two days now, you know," she cooed. "I only knew your name, age, hair and eye color, so finding you wasn't easy..." The woman looked down at me with a twisted grin, brushing my cheek and hair with her fingers as I stared back in horror. "Oh, look how dirty you are. But don't worry, you'll be clean soon. And so thin too... You need to eat better. Your grandfather will be in for a surprise."

"Grand...father?" I repeated quietly.

Her bloodshot eyes darted about in a maddened frenzy. "That's right! Your—no, my grandfather! Listen, okay? When I regained my memories of my previous life and realized this was the world of ****, I was beside myself! With both joy...and despair, you see, because the main plot would happen decades later, when the heroine joins the Academy! By then, I'd be an old woman

already. I wouldn't be able to take part in the story in any way. So I figured, you know, maybe I'd become a teacher or something. I became an adventurer, I learned magic, I studied and studied...to no avail. Only nobles could become students or teachers there. And so..."

"Eep!" I yelped as she gripped my neck and produced a knife and a pitch-black rock from her waist.

"I figured I'd just be the heroine. That is, you," she said, her smile twisting into a grotesque smirk. "Hey, do you know what an aethercrystal is? Beings that have absorbed a certain amount of mana form a crystal in their hearts, using their blood as a medium. Aethercrystals generate aether within the body. They not only accumulate high-purity aether but also retain trace amounts of the host creature's characteristics." The woman chuckled. "I was thrilled to discover this technique in ancient texts, you know. With it, one can imprint one's own memories and personality onto an aethercrystal, then transfer them into someone else!"

Mana? Aether?

She continued to speak as if drunk on her own jargon. "The sorcerer who'd been researching the method stopped at testing it on live frogs, but I knew I could develop it to completion! The only issue was that I couldn't use another creature's crystal! I drew my own blood, over and over, and patiently collected the coagulants containing my aether, until finally, after five years, my very own aethercrystal was complete! It was arduous... Painful... But..." The verbose woman grinned broadly, flaunting the pitch-black crystal. "All I need to do is embed this into your heart, and I can discard this old body and *become* you! I'll be the protagonist!"

"Eep!"

The woman was mad. She couldn't have been in her right mind. Even if she succeeded, wouldn't she just be creating a different person bearing her memories and personality? I was a child, and still I understood that much.

Nevertheless, she raised her knife. "Now, be very still. This'll be over soon."

"N-Nooo!" I screamed. In my terror, I flailed, and the knife nicked my hand, causing a small cut on my palm. When my bloodied hand touched the

aethercrystal in her grasp, something odd flowed into my mind. "Ack!"

Though I'd knocked the aethercrystal away, the woman's consciousness seemed to split from the tumbling stone. A feeling both hot and cold flowed into me from the cut on my hand—something disgusting, as though that woman were invading my body. I resisted it with all my might, and only remnants of it settled within me. The feelings of fear that had reigned absolute for the past three years sank coldly to the bottom of my heart.

I narrowed my eyes, realizing that thoughts of seizing the opportunity to strike back were at the forefront of my mind. As the woman continued trying to pin me down, I spotted a convenient rock nearby. I gripped it and, with all the force I could muster, brought it down on the woman's temple with a loud *crunch*.

She screamed in agony and tumbled sideways, dropping her knife as she lifted her hands to her head. I picked up the blade in my right hand, supported the hilt with my left, and plunged it into the woman's torso.



A gurgle rose from her throat and she coughed. "Wh-Why...you..."

The knife had threaded between the woman's ribs and settled into her chest, gouging out her heart. In her wide-open, disbelieving eyes, I saw a reflection of myself standing there, cold and emotionless. She reached for me and, unperturbed, I drove the knife farther in, even more forcefully, causing a large volume of blood to pour forth and the light to leave her eyes as she slumped motionless and silent to the ground.

My hand was shaking slightly as it held the knife. Slowly, I pried it off the hilt with my other hand's just-as-shaky fingers.

I understood now that what had flowed into my mind were fragmented shards of this woman's *knowledge*. While I didn't know what she'd been thinking or why she'd tried to do what she did, I understood that this woman's decades' worth of blood and sweat had been poured into something called an "otome game."

This world was called Ciel. It was a land of swords and magic, at the heart of which lay Claydale, the largest kingdom on the continent of Sars. Geography, history, sorcery, combat techniques—much of what was known to ordinary people throughout this world was too specialized for me to understand at the time, but I'd acquired the minimum knowledge necessary to survive on my own.

I retrieved my charm pouch and the ring that had once been within it from the woman's ever-colder corpse. The creepy aethercrystal that lay discarded nearby I smashed to bits, careful not to touch it. I tossed what shards remained into a ditch. Next, I rummaged through the woman's pockets, looting the knife's sheath and her wallet, then slung her discarded pack over my shoulder.

There was nothing left for me in this place, but...there was still one thing I needed to do.

With the pack still slung over my shoulder, I made my way back to the orphanage I'd escaped from, my footsteps ringing differently in my ears. Unseen, I peered inside and saw the old lady yelling at the other orphans, apparently having just realized I was gone. I quietly slipped onto the grounds

and concealed myself in a dark corner of the garden, holding my breath like a beast lying in wait.

I was so exhausted that I was quickly beset by sleepiness. I fended it off by slowly nibbling on the hardened brown bread I'd found among the woman's belongings. Trying not to doze off, I waited until the orphanage had grown silent and the light in the old lady's bedroom had gone out, then another hour still, before I began to move quietly in the shadows. My eyes, now well adapted to the dark, could spot the old lady even in the faint starlight.

None of the rooms in the old church-turned-orphanage could be locked, and so I quietly pushed the door open and made my way into her room, which smelled strongly of alcohol. Patiently, I waited for the snoring old hag to turn in her sleep. The moment she turned her back to me, I picked up a nearby hand towel, pressed it lightly to her neck, and brought down the knife between her vertebrae, putting all of my body weight into the swing.

A faint groan escaped the old lady's throat as her body twitched. Keeping pressure on the towel to stem the bleeding, I slowly slid the knife out of her neck, wiping it clean in the process, and released the breath I'd been holding. My fingers' tight grip on the hilt loosened as I returned the knife to its sheath, then tucked it into my belt.

She would never cause anyone anguish again. If the knowledge I'd acquired from that woman was to be believed, the orphanage where I'd lived was owned by a kindly old priest. Perhaps now he'd take over sooner, and fewer orphans would end up being sold off.

Still...

"How stupid," I muttered.

The old orphanage, the contemptuous children, the greedy old hag, the townspeople who turned a blind eye to the abuse, the woman's feelings, the whole idea of an "otome game"—all stupid.

This was what I'd been born for? This bullshit? My mother and father had died for this?!

I rifled through the old lady's room and the adjacent storeroom, finding

leather sandals for my bare feet and proper clothes to replace my bloodied rags. Then I took clean cloths, the woman's hidden savings, and the quality food and canteens she'd hoarded for herself, among other essentials, and packed everything into a sheet before running into the night, away from this stupid city.

Screw the otome game.

"I'm gonna make it all by my damn self."

Escape

First, I went over my newly acquired knowledge.

This was the world of an "otome game" called *Silver Wings of Love*, commonly shortened to just *Silver Love*. I wasn't quite sure what such games entailed exactly, but I grasped that they were like illustrated stories in which the protagonist could seduce various men, giving and receiving gifts and favors. Though I couldn't imagine someone like that really existed, according to that woman, I was this "protagonist."

My name, Alicia, was also the name of the game's heroine. In the story, my last name changed when I was taken in by a noble family. According to my new knowledge, my mother had been a noble lady and had eloped with my father, a knight's apprentice. This meant I had noble blood and relatives and could probably live a better life. If I were still my old self, not knowing any better, I might've been intimidated by nobles, who were so far above me on the food chain, though I would also have longed to live like a princess.

But now that I had all this "knowledge," I feared aristocrats far more than I longed to be one. I knew they were nothing but trouble. Besides, I had no intention of living a life on the rails of fate, following the plot that woman had been so passionate about. She'd fully believed this world was part of a game, but from my perspective, that notion didn't match with reality.

I wasn't some character in a story. I was *me*, a person living and breathing in this world.

Screw fate. I'd make it on my own. And now I had all the knowledge I needed to do that. Ideally, if I was going to stay away from the game's story, I needed to

know what it was about to an extent. But acquiring that information would've required embedding that aethercrystal with the woman's knowledge and personality into my heart, which I hadn't done, so what I'd gleaned about her former world was vague at best. Perhaps in my rejection of her, I'd subconsciously blocked that aspect of her nature and thus had been unable to absorb that information. And now the crystal had been smashed to bits and dumped into a ditch, so even if I'd wanted to do something about it, I wouldn't have been able to. And, honestly, I didn't want to touch it again either way.

Still, by piecing together the bits I knew about the game with what I knew about other stories, I was beginning to get a rough idea of what it may have been about.

The bright, kindhearted, hardworking heroine was born from the elopement of a noble lady and a knight's apprentice. She lost both parents to a monster attack and was raised in a church as an orphan. After various twists and turns, she was discovered by her mother's family, attended an academy for noble children, became friends with a prince and his entourage, and was bullied by his fiancée, the "villainess." Then, in a dungeon, she received a divine blessing. She went on adventures, and eventually got a happy ending somehow. It was truly a stupid story.

Seriously, how stupid. It wasn't like humans needed to be nobles or marry princes to live. I didn't care whether it was the gods themselves who had laid out that path for me—not even they got to tell me I'd been born for that kind of bullshit.

For now, I decided, based on the knowledge I'd gained from that woman, to head to the neighboring town. I'd learned I was in the Claydale Empire, on the continent of Sars, in a world named Ciel. Specifically, I was in the northernmost part of Claydale, in some baron's territory, whatever the name was. She didn't seem to have memorized the names of smaller places either.

Regardless, I wanted to go to the neighboring town because the place where I'd lived so far had felt more like a large village, and I figured that going to the town where the baron lived would afford me more places to hide in. Ideally, I would leave this man's territory altogether before any nobles found me, but as a child, I couldn't travel far. I'd been able to manage in the town where I'd been

living, but entering a larger, walled settlement meant paying a toll of one silver coin. Crossing into other territories also cost money, so ordinarily, commoners didn't travel.

There were ways around those fees, however. By paying income-appropriate taxes to the lord of a given territory, one could attain citizenship and move freely within those lands. Another option was to buy a merchant's pass from the Traders' Guild, which allowed travel to other territories at a discount.

Lastly, there was the Adventurers' Guild. By signing up and reaching a high enough rank, a member could move freely within the country. Of course, one didn't simply become high ranked overnight, but even an entry-level Rank 1 adventurer could freely come and go from the town where they'd registered.

"Adventurer?" I asked myself.

What was an adventurer, anyway? I thought about it, and some information surfaced in my mind. The Adventurers' Guild was an organization originally derived from a mercenary guild supported by the Traders' Guild, and adventurers were mercenaries who specialized in eliminating monsters while exploring ruins and other untrodden areas, either alone or in small groups.

Nowadays, however, adventurers could more accurately be described as jacks-of-all-trades, doing anything from looting ancient ruins to supplying cities with aethercrystals harvested from monsters. Even so, high-ranking adventurers capable of rallying a small elite force to bring down powerful monsters were still highly valued.

Considering that aethercrystals were used like batteries, as a means to store aether, it was a necessity to have adventurers who could supply them. But in order to register with the Adventurers' Guild, aspiring candidates needed to at least qualify for Rank 1. That is, they needed to have a combat-related skill at Level 1 or higher.

Skill? Level? I tilted my head at the words floating casually through my mind. Having grown up an orphan with neither wisdom nor knowledge, I wasn't sure what either of those words meant, but I didn't have time to try and find out.

My immediate goal was to get a Level 1 skill somehow and become an adventurer. The neighboring town had a Guild as well as some places for me to

lie low, but I couldn't simply head straight there.

The biggest issue was the fact that I was only seven years old. Even if I did manage to get into the town, there was a high chance I'd be tricked and sold by a grown-up with ill intentions. Before I ever ventured in there, I needed, at minimum, the combat prowess to fend off run-of-the-mill thugs. If I could learn a combat skill in the process, even better, but it was questionable whether that was possible with just the knowledge I had.

For now, I needed to ascertain what I could and couldn't do in my current state, so I thought of hiding somewhere along the road that connected the rural settlement I'd been in to the neighboring town. Apparently it took from dawn 'til dusk to reach my destination by horse-drawn carriage, which meant that on foot, it should take about two days. Considering the distance, there had to be someplace suitable for camping along the way, and there would likely be a source of water nearby. That was my first destination.

Gong... Gong...

The bell in the town's clock tower tolled twice, rousing me from my half-conscious state. It rang every four hours, and the two tolls meant it was now four in the morning. Field workers typically woke up to this bell, whereas town residents started working to the tolling of eight in the morning. The orphans in the church started working at four, but the old hag only woke up at eight, so it would be a while yet before anyone noticed she was dead. After making sure the night sky was indeed getting brighter, I left my hiding spot in the woods and started down the road to the neighboring town.

I wasn't sure how long it'd take me to reach the campsite, but even on my child's legs, I hoped to arrive by nightfall. Unfortunately, I'd overestimated my stamina. For four hours, I walked—not bad, all things considered. The sky had grown bright and the bell tolled for the third time today, far in the distance.

Logically, there was no way a child could've walked for hours without a proper meal and on virtually no sleep. I'd reached my limit, and I slumped to the ground, a dull ache in my head and a haze forming over my vision. This was bad, I knew, and I dragged myself a few meters off the road on weak, trembling

legs. I took refuge in the forest, under the shade of a tree, out of view from the main road.

I reached into my pack and took out a leather canteen, taking greedy gulps of the musty water to soothe my parched throat. It'd been mixed with fruit liquor to prevent spoilage, which made me cough violently.

After catching my breath, I brought the canteen to my lips again, drinking in small sips this time. As my consciousness cleared, the roar of hunger in my stomach grew more intense. I rifled through the food I'd stolen from the old hag and grabbed a piece of white bread, thinking it would be best to eat it before it got moldy. The first bite felt nostalgic, reminding me of a flavor I'd experienced long ago with my family.

Soft white bread was a luxury. Even when I'd still had my parents, we'd only eaten it on special occasions, which I'd looked forward to. My father, a guard, had apologized to my mother every day for not being able to afford white bread. I remembered finding it odd at the time, but if the knowledge I'd acquired from that woman was to be believed and my mother had been of noble stock, then my father's behavior made sense.

As if willing my wistfulness away, I tore into the bread, then washed it down with water from the canteen. On a full stomach, I finally felt more alert.

"Ow."

Now that I'd calmed down, I felt the pain in my feet and grimaced. At the orphanage, all the children were barefoot, so this was my first time wearing sandals. I wasn't used to it, and my feet were chafed and bleeding.

It hurt, but I wasn't scared. After making sure the injuries weren't serious, I plucked a clean-looking hand towel from my pack and used the knife to cut strips off of it to use as makeshift bandages. While I was at it, I treated the cut on my hand from my scuffle with the woman the day before. I'd already performed basic first aid last night, but now I cleaned the gash with the alcohol-laced water from my canteen before bandaging it up.

Though I now knew how to do these things, my child fingers were surprisingly clumsy, and it took me quite a while to finish patching myself up. That wasn't the main issue, however.

"I'm low on water." Having used it to treat my wounds, I was left with very little.

Perhaps due to my concerns over what remained of my drinking water, the knowledge I'd acquired from that woman surfaced in my mind—small children needed to consume plenty of fluids. Perhaps failing to do so had left me in my previous state. I wondered what to do and thought perhaps I needed "sugars" and "vitamins" from fruit and such.

I wasn't sure what vitamins were, exactly, but I figured they must've been important. But where in this forest was I to find fruit? Once again, the knowledge volunteered itself, and guided by it, I searched for a while until I found blackberries growing on a shrub about as tall as my chest.

I plucked one, pinched it between my fingers to break the skin, and gave the juice a taste. It was rather tart, not very sweet, and quite acidic. "So sour..."

People usually made these into jam or dried them before eating, but they were still edible raw. After making sure there were no snakes nearby, I picked more of the black fruit, using a large leaf—torsol grass?—as a makeshift plate to collect them on. Afterward, I organized my belongings, then began eating.

In the bag I'd brought with me from the orphanage I had a number of garments, cloths, food items, and some coin. The tunic I was wearing was standard among commoner children. A bit big, but it'd suffice for now. I had one loaf of white bread remaining, plus some jerky and a chunk of dried cheese, which meant if I rationed my food, I had enough for another three days. Adding in the money I'd taken from that woman, I had fifteen silver, eight small silver, and thirteen copper. It was quite a large sum, considering I could buy meals for a few copper, and a single silver covered three days' lodging.

As I checked the pack I'd taken from that woman in the alley, I found bundles of wilted herbs and two ceramic vials containing what appeared to be potions. And, tucked away at the bottom, there was a small book that seemed to be a pocket journal.

"Strange," I mused as knowledge yet again bubbled to the surface from looking at the book.

Books were expensive, but not that rare. According to my knowledge, plant-

based paper had come into widespread use on this continent around 120 years ago, replacing parchment made from animal skin. Torsol grass, the same plant I'd used earlier to collect berries, was used for pulp. The leaves were large, supple, and covered in short, fuzzy hairs. Originally, it had been used for cleanup after doing one's business. I myself had used it for this purpose, in fact, but it was fair to say it wasn't good for much else. While the leaves were soft, they were very fibrous, and the only animals that grazed on it were goats.

Supposedly, plant-based paper was discovered because ancient nobles, displeased with using the leaves for wiping, had ordered alchemists to research an alternative. When torsol grass was heated, it lost its coloration and turned into a yellowish paper. Over the decades, the quality of the process had improved, and books that had once cost over ten gold had dropped to a tenth of the price.

What I'd called "strange" was actually the fact that this book was made of parchment. The pages were flimsy, perhaps worn thin from having been rewritten on many times, and contained detailed information on various medicinal and poisonous plants, mushrooms, and minerals, complete with intricate illustrations.

I wondered if that woman'd really had a scholarly side. My gut told me she'd stolen this from whomever had taught her magic. What a waste of space she'd been.

Regardless, this truly was good news. My knowledge helped me understand what the letters on the pages meant, but I still needed to learn how to read and write proper sentences. This would be helpful for that.

The potions, it seemed, had also been stolen from her mentor. They were high-level healing potions which she'd apparently planned to use to treat me after embedding the aethercrystal into my heart.

As for the bundles of wilted herbs, they were just ordinary medicinal plants that grew everywhere and were used in most homes. I took one into my mouth and chewed it. Enduring the pungent, grassy smell that filled my nostrils, I rubbed the herb into my wounds, then re-bandaged them.

By then, the sun was high in the sky, and my consciousness was at its limit.

Before resting, I repacked my belongings and used the knife to chop off my long hair, which the old lady had told me to grow out to sell. I hungrily devoured the berries I'd picked, then hid in the shade like a wounded animal before quietly closing my eyes.

Until recently, I'd been afraid of the dark. Of pain. Hunger. Loneliness. But that'd been because I hadn't known how to survive on my own.

A quiet noise made me half-open my eyes, and I brought my knife down on the head of a snake that had been approaching my feet. I watched, unfazed, as it writhed for a while before growing still.

It was the unknown that had been frightening to me. Now, small pains no longer scared me. My knowledge helped me understand how much I could endure without dying. I had no reason to be afraid anymore. Had I become this way because I'd absorbed that woman's decades of knowledge? Still, I didn't think I'd become someone else as a result.

I was still me. Alicia. No one else.

With those thoughts in mind, I drifted off into a shallow sleep, remaining alert to my surroundings as I rested to heal from my physical fatigue.

Meeting

The next afternoon, I finally arrived at the campsite.

Of my remaining food, I'd eaten only a piece of white bread and jerky; I'd otherwise subsisted on the blackberries easily found all over the woods. According to my previous calculations, my supplies would last me three days total if I rationed them, which meant I had two days to think of some way to engage in combat.

There was no sign of anyone at the campsite. Cautiously, I stepped closer and touched the ashes of a fire. They were fresh, but no traces of heat remained. I had nothing to start a fire with, so I'd hoped there would be embers remaining, but there was no point in wishing for what wasn't there.

I grabbed a handful of the ashes from the extinguished fire and sprinkled it on my head. I'd already cut my hair, but the pink color still stood out. This could perhaps make it less eye-catching, which would make things easier for me later.

After hiding my belongings in a nearby bower a little ways from the campsite, I took my knife and canteen and decided to look for a water source. I was certain there'd be one nearby, and it didn't take much searching to find a watering place sprouting from the bottom of a well-trodden road. A little ways upstream from there, I found a small stream that flowed into the rocks through a crack-like hollow before emerging again below the road.

Generally speaking, the farther upstream one was, the cleaner a river's water, but since I couldn't boil it, I thought it prudent not to drink any, so I only used it to dampen a cloth to wipe myself clean—not because I necessarily cared about cleanliness, but it would have been stupid to stay caked in sweat and grime and give away my presence through smell.

The reason I was unable to get a fire going or make myself water was the fact that, at the orphanage, the older children used Practical Magic to ignite fires, so there'd been no flintstones I could've brought with me.

Magic existed in this world, but the form in common use was called sorcery. The difference was that magic was primal and had existed since ancient times, whereas sorcery was designed through academic analysis and meant for the majority of people to use. One way to think about it would be this: a carriage built by oneself from scratch was magic; a commercially available carriage was sorcery. It wasn't difficult to figure out which of the two was easier to use.

That woman seemed to have been a sorceress and quite well informed in that sphere, but she hadn't studied much beyond her areas of interest, so some parts of her knowledge were questionable. What a pain.

In magic, there were six different elements: light, shadow, earth, water, fire, and wind—although, technically, there was also non-elemental magic, so one could say there were seven types. When people had a sufficient amount of aether in an element that suited them, they could use sorcery. There was no convenient technique or tool to easily determine which element one was able to use, so researching it took some effort. At that point, most commoners would've given up on learning.

Apparently, that woman had thought there existed a convenient tool one

could use to find out what element one was compatible with just by waving a hand over it. She'd been quite indignant at how dry and boring reality was. I seemed to remember quite a bit of useless information, really.

I wanted to learn sorcery myself someday, but what I needed right now was Practical Magic, which was categorized as non-elemental. It could be used to start a fire or produce water, so the reason it was considered non-elemental was generally not well understood.

That woman's master had taught her crucial information about the amount of aether used to cast spells, causal laws that could interfere with space, and things likely related to the basic principles of this world, but sadly, she hadn't been interested, so she hadn't learned them very well.

There were six varieties of Practical Magic, and most commoner adults were able to use it, but not all. Even those who could use it could at most use one or two varieties, according to my newly acquired knowledge. For the record, the woman had been taught all six by her master as part of her pursuits as a sorceress.

Shine, to create a light source roughly the size of a candle.

Darken, to extinguish lights and lamps lit by Shine.

Harden, to solidify something of the earth element for a time.

Spark, to ignite a small flame at one's fingertips.

Flow, to produce enough water to fill a cup.

Gust, to create a gentle breeze in any direction.

Of these six, Shine was the variety most commonly learned, followed by Spark, then Flow. Hardly anyone cared to learn the rest. It wasn't so much that people weren't *able* to master all six; it was more that nobody *bothered* to. Wasn't this the foundation for elemental magic, though?

Since even commoners could use Practical Magic, it had never been subjected to academic analysis, and it was generally learned incidentally, through repeated observation.

One of the core principles of sorcery was that elemental spells required

incantations. Practical Magic, however, being non-elemental, could be cast just by saying a simple word, called an "invocation," as long as the caster had a clear mental image of what they wanted.

Since that woman's master had insisted that she learn, she'd had clear memories of the training process. I, however, was stuck at the preliminary stage. It involved practicing by feeling the aether within oneself, but I wasn't in touch with my own aether in any way.

"Oh well," I muttered.

For the time being, I searched the knowledge I'd acquired from that woman, looking for anything related to aether.

The first thing I found was that all living creatures in this world, without exception, possessed aether. This was because mana, the foundation for aether, existed in the environment—not just the air but water and soil, too, were filled with mana. Different theories posited that it was due to spirits, or generated by the soul, but basically, by performing essential functions such as breathing, drinking water, consuming the blessings of the earth, and eating animal meat, the body stored mana.

And it was this stored mana that was converted into energy—aether—that could be used for spells. And if one possessed above a certain amount of aether, said aether would supposedly produce an aethercrystal within one's body, capable of generating more aether autonomously. But that was beside the point. The crux of the matter was that I undoubtedly had aether within me, though, perhaps because mana was plentiful in the environment, I couldn't tell my own aether apart from it.

Mana formed aethercrystals using blood as a medium, which meant there had to be aether flowing in my blood. I brought my fingers to my wrist, feeling the *thump-thump* of my pulse. Closing my eyes, I tried to focus and sense the aether that I knew had to be coursing through my veins. There was something there. Something faint...

"No use," I said.

In the end, whether that faint feeling had been aether or just my imagination, I couldn't tell.

Impatience served no purpose, but I didn't have the luxury of time. I had much to do. For the time being, while searching for a safe place to stash my belongings, I surveyed my surroundings, picked some more blackberries, and breathed in repeatedly, trying to visualize absorbing as much mana as possible.

Still, I couldn't sense my aether. Perhaps I needed to change my approach, I thought. It was hard to feel, say, the moisture in the air, but rain was a different story. So perhaps it would've been easier for me to sense my own aether if someone directed a large amount of it at me, but considering I was avoiding people, that wasn't practical.

I hid myself in a gap between some rocks I found a little upstream of a creek. As I ate the berries, which I'd washed in the creek, I went over other, non-magical options in my head. I could use the knife, probably. The woman was a sorceress, but she also had Dagger Mastery, a skill for handling small bladed weapons.

I'd been putting off going over skills, and now was an appropriate time for it.

Skills were nothing to write home about—human abilities, little else. That woman had thought them to be a special gift, a cheat code of some sort, but reality wasn't so simple, much to her usual self-righteous indignation. That said, to be clear, there did seem to be something called a "gift," bestowed upon people by spirits. That was different from skills, though.

Her master had called skills the "imprinting" of general abilities. When one consciously repeated an action, the aether within one's body seemed to react, causing the action to be "imprinted" upon the soul. So "skill," in this world, was a simplified way of putting this phenomenon into words.

Of course, one could perform those same actions without having the related skill. All imprinting did was make the action less likely to fail and impossible to forget.

For instance, it was said that taking a single day off from swordplay practice meant you'd need three days to catch back up. But for someone who'd acquired the relevant skill, there was no decay, so practice was more effective, making the art even faster to learn. Even when one was in poor health or anxious, actions that would've otherwise required conscious performance could

now be done unconsciously, making things much easier in any field. However, skills weren't easily acquired, and even more training was necessary in order to raise one's skill level.

Skills had stages depending on one's proficiency and technique. Since there existed technology to measure and describe them, they were called "skill levels"—numerical representations of a skill's progression.

Increasing a skill's level was no easy feat; just learning the skill itself was often difficult. It wasn't as simple as memorizing the basics and slapping a Level 1 label on it. One couldn't acquire a skill until one could perform the same action flawlessly, over and over.

It'd taken that woman three years to achieve Level 1 in Dagger Mastery due to her unwillingness to practice. Fire Mastery, on the other hand, had only taken her months. This wasn't necessarily due to talent, however; it could've been a simple matter of preference.

She was a Rank 2 sorceress, which meant her relevant combat skills were all at Level 2. Her skills were Level 2 Fire Mastery, Level 2 Water Mastery, and Level 1 Dagger Mastery, I think? She had other skills, I was pretty sure, but they were general skills, so my memory of them was vague.

Having a Level 1 skill made one a beginner but not an amateur. Apparently, it was commonly agreed upon in this world that one was fully competent at any given skill at Level 2. A level of 3 made one a specialist in that field, and qualified to find employment with nobles and such. Meanwhile, nobles and governments would actively attempt to recruit people who attained Level 4. Finally, at Level 5, one was revered as an expert, commonly referred to as a "master."

It was possible to go even higher, however. At Level 6, one transcended human limits, able to serve as the chief court sorcerer of an empire, or a "sword saint"—the leader of an order of knights.

Though there was no concrete evidence of this, it was believed skills could go up to Level 10, at which point one became a demigod, no longer human. This was only seen in legends and fairy tales, however.

That woman had been disappointed that skills weren't special blessings from

the gods or whatever it was she'd been expecting, but personally, I was happy that they weren't simple handouts. Otherwise, it'd have meant there was some sort of divine entity pulling strings the whole time, right?

I had no interest in an easy "gift" that could be taken away just as easily on the whims of whoever had bestowed it. I'd just have lived in fear that way. For the same reason, I wasn't interested in, say, a one-of-a-kind, powerful weapon. Strength that could be lost or taken away wasn't what I considered *true* strength.

My surroundings had grown darker as I pondered this. Thanks to the berries I'd been eating, I wasn't too hungry, but the water in my canteen was running low. Though the berries had supplemented my hydration, it wasn't enough. If I couldn't learn Practical Magic, I'd have to drink water from the creek, dangerous though it might be. It wasn't something I could learn on the spot either way, so I decided to save my thoughts on my aether for after dark. Until then, I'd get some knife practice in.

To start, I gripped the hilt based on my knowledge of that woman's Dagger Mastery skill. Apparently, my grip had been correct from the moment I'd stabbed her. Then, taking on a half-crouching stance to reduce my exposure to attack, I thrust out the knife with one hand.

Too slow. Too clumsy, even for a first attempt. Instead of trying various techniques, I decided to stick with practicing this thrust for now.

After many repetitions, I exhaled. I must've been very focused, because I'd failed to notice the sun had set and my surroundings had grown quite dark, too dark to see well. The only sound reaching my ears was the gentle flow of the nearby creek. Maybe I'll practice sensing my aether for a bit, then go to sleep, I thought.

A distant, flickering scarlet light pierced through the darkness and caught my eye. Was someone at the campsite? I'd wanted to avoid people for a while longer, but if this was a bandit or something, it'd be prudent for me to leave this place immediately.

Careful not to make any sounds, I peeked out from the bushes to check the campsite. A man was sitting there, with his wide back to me, roasting meat on a

skewer by a fire. As I stared intently at his unusually broad shoulders, the man suddenly raised his voice.

"Who's there?! Show yourself!"

Aether

Had I been spotted?!

The large man who'd had his back to me silently rose to his feet, gripping the greatsword next to him. I couldn't see his face clearly against the backlight, but the sharp glint in his gaze made me think he wasn't ordinary.

"A monster? Come out or I'll make you," he threatened in a low tone, unsheathing his blade.

I felt *something* emanating from him, and my legs began to tremble slightly as my blood ran cold. Maybe it was a lack of hesitation to kill if necessary that I'd sensed in him. I'd messed up; I should've retreated as soon as I was noticed. Even with my knowledge, his overwhelming presence, the likes of which I'd never felt, paralyzed my mind for a moment.

Smacking my trembling legs with my fists, I quickly turned on my heel and ran. I could still escape. I'd been in the shadows all along, but the man had been sitting by a fire, so his eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness yet.

Crossing my arms in front of my face to protect my eyes from the bushes, I sprinted through the dark forest, keeping my center of gravity low.

Behind me, I heard the sounds of branches snapping as if someone was kicking through the brush. The man was chasing after me. I could feel his intense presence but heard no footsteps.

Trying to suppress the feeling that was swelling in my heart, I thought back on how it had felt to kill that old hag and took a deep, calming breath.

Forcing my screaming legs into action, I made an abrupt turn and raced off in another direction. The rustling behind me grew a little louder, which told me that I had thrown my pursuer off momentarily. Before he could recover, I turned again, careful to mask the sounds of my footsteps as I ran through the

forest, hiding in the shadows of the trees. If the man continued to chase me even now, then he was definitely going for the kill.

The tingling sensation I'd felt from his presence began to fade. Trying to be quieter, I slowed my pace and held my breath, but at that moment, I heard the sound of something cutting through the wind, and a hand axe whizzed past me and lodged itself in the trunk of the tree I'd been hiding behind.

I stifled a scream. The man wasn't far behind. He'd been suppressing his presence, trying to narrow down where I was.

Once he realized he'd failed to kill me, he broke out in a mad dash through the forest. My body, too young and frail to keep up with that kind of stamina, couldn't continue running. Instead, I waited for the moment when he raised his greatsword, and then I charged at him with my knife.

"Guh!" Before my blade could reach his thick leg, he quickly struck me with the pommel of his sword.

The sound of something cracking echoed through the air, and a surprised exclamation escaped the man's lips. The impact knocked the wind out of my lungs and lifted me into the air, sending me tumbling through the forest.

My consciousness began to dim, and the last thing I heard was the man rushing over before darkness claimed me.

And now here I was, quietly sitting by the campfire with my pursuer.

"Sorry, lad," the man said. "You were so quick I mistook you for a kobold and chased you down." Kobolds were low-level monsters that looked like bipedal dogs. I'd never thought I could've been mistaken for one.

This man was apparently an adventurer. His thought process was that a monster on the loose near the roads would've been dangerous for travelers, and so he'd given chase. And since I'd kept trying to throw him off my tail, he'd turned relentless in his pursuit.

"Now, this ain't an apology or anything, but go on, eat up," he said, offering me the snake he'd been roasting earlier, skinned and chopped. I'd never had

snake before, but I remembered someone at the orphanage mentioning that the older boys who couldn't deal with the meager food would venture out into the forest and catch snakes to eat.

There were a lot of green snakes in this area, and they only had a mildly paralytic venom. They wouldn't attack larger animals unless threatened. A typical girl might've been grossed out by the thought of eating a snake, but I wasn't, and the grilled-meat aroma was tempting, so I took a bite. The meat was quite juicy, and a mild taste spread through my mouth.

Frankly, it was bland, not particularly tasty, but between an empty stomach and a history of not having had much access to good food, I practically inhaled it. The man gave me water to wash it down with, and after drinking it, I finally felt like a person again.

He watched me eat, waiting silently for me to finish before speaking. "So, lad. What's a kid doing at a place like this? Where are your folks?"

I didn't respond.

The man must've mistaken me for a boy due to my hair, which I'd cut short. He had a rough look to him, but deep down he was kindhearted. Soft, perhaps, was a better term.

Noticing my silence, and possibly assuming I was an orphaned street urchin, he let out a small sigh and changed the subject. "Does that still hurt?"

I shook my head slightly in response. The man had Level 1 in Light Mastery and had used the spell Cure on me. A faint bruise remained between my chest and left shoulder, though. It hurt when touched, but it wasn't anything unbearable.

A brief explanation of Light Mastery: at Level 1, one could use the spells "Cure" and "Restore." While Cure could replenish one's vitality, all it did was close wounds, not completely ease pain. Restore, meanwhile, would fully mend one's injuries, but it had to be used at close range, it took time to fully work, and it actually depleted one's vitality.

Used promptly enough, Cure could completely heal a cut without leaving any scarring. Since it had a wider range and took effect faster, it was the most

commonly used form of healing sorcery. Restore was used in cases such as that of an unmarried young woman sustaining a severe injury that would've otherwise left a scar. Due to the complexity of the spell's structure, even those with an aptitude for light-based sorcery tended not to go out of their way to learn it. If the man had used Restore, my bruise would've cleared up completely in no time, but he'd said he didn't know how to cast it.

I could sense his growing impatience as I gathered my thoughts in silence, but I still couldn't fully trust him. Shifting my gaze downward, I looked at my knife, broken by the pommel of his greatsword.

"Oh, my bad," he said. "I ruined your knife, huh? But that one ain't good for combat, not really. Might be something for a noblewoman to use for self-defense. The blade's sharp but flimsy. Even trying to cut through a rabbit bone would've chipped it."

Though he was mouthing off excuses for having broken my knife, I didn't really blame him. Yes, it was inconvenient, but I'd been the one who'd run away for no reason, and it was better to have a broken knife than a fractured bone the man's Cure spell wouldn't have been able to handle. It could've been worse.

Seeing me shake my head without complaint, he seemed to grow restless. From his waist, he produced a knife, still in its sheath, and handed it to me.

"Use this instead," he offered. "It's a bit big for a child, but I use it to take monsters apart, so it's pretty sturdy."

Silently, I took the blade and pulled it from its sheath. Though it looked a bit aged, it had been carefully sharpened. It was sturdier than my previous knife, which would make it more challenging to get a deep stab in, but it wouldn't chip against bone, at least. And it was no simple iron knife—it was refined forged steel, making it relatively expensive. That he'd just casually offer it to a street urchin suggested he was indeed far too soft, and it made me feel silly for having kept my guard up.

"Thanks, mister," I murmured.

"I'm only twenty, you know," he pointed out.

I'd thought him to be at least thirty, but he was surprisingly young. Now that I

took a closer look, I could see that his skin appeared youthful, and the ruggedness probably came from his stubble. He wasn't bad looking, and his somewhat sullen expression had a certain charm to it that drew an involuntary smile from me.

"Oh hey, there's a smile," he said. "That's much better on a kid." He ruffled my hair roughly and I swatted his hand away as my smile faded back into a frown.

I stared up at him intently. "Hey, will you teach me how to use aether?" "Uh, what? That's kinda sudden."

"Learning practical magic would really help me."

"Uh, I dunno. I mean, I didn't really learn it from anyone else."

He went on to explain that upon using practical magic, he'd felt something different "course" through him, which had helped him understand what aether was. Meaning my learning process had been backwards.

I pondered the matter quietly. At this rate, learning practical magic would take far too long and be too difficult. In which case, as I'd thought, it'd be quicker to just sense a large amount of aether from someone else.

"Hey, can you use a lot of aether?" I asked.

"Hmm," he mused. "My sorcery ain't anything special, but I do use a ton of aether for Boost."

"Can you do that now?"

"I can, but... Oh, whatever. Just stand back. It's dangerous."

"Uh, okay."

Dangerous? Boost was a technique used by fighters to enhance their physical abilities by channeling aether throughout their bodies. Why would that be dangerous? I didn't fully understand, but nevertheless, I took a few steps back.

A surge of energy emanated from him, causing the fire's flames to flare up and sway intensely.

"Wow..." I murmured.

So this was Boost. Even just by watching, I could feel how overwhelmingly powerful it was. Drawn to it, I impulsively stepped closer and reached for his arm. The man's eyes snapped open in surprise, and the moment I touched him, I felt a sharp jolt and was sent tumbling backwards.

"Lad!" he exclaimed, rushing over in a panic. I wasn't injured, but my hand was still tingling. As I sat there in a daze, he began to scold me. "I told you to stay back! It wouldn't have affected someone who can already use aether, but a kid like you who's not used to it gets a huge shock!"

"Yeah," I mumbled. "That startled me." It'd been surprising and somewhat painful, but not incapacitating or anything. With a bit of a grimace, I pushed myself to my feet and flexed my tingling fingers as he gave me an exasperated look.

But that'd been—no, this, right now, was aether. I could feel a power coursing through my veins, similar to what I'd felt when I'd touched the man. That seemed to confirm my hypothesis that blood was rife with aether. As that woman's knowledge suggested, when I focused on the blood flowing through the veins and capillaries all throughout my body, the hazy aether spreading within me did indeed become more pronounced. With every heartbeat, blood and aether gathered in my heart and grew slightly stronger, and I felt a slight warmth as it circulated throughout my body once more.

"Wait. Lad, is that Boost?!" the man said. "Wait, no, it ain't perfect, but..."

Apparently, by making aether flow alongside my bloodstream, I had managed to use a sort of facsimile of Boost. With this, I could learn practical magic, and perhaps even elemental sorcery.

As I excitedly continued making aether circulate within me, I suddenly felt dizzy. The man caught my arm to keep me from collapsing. "Hey, you should stop that," he cautioned. "Using Boost gradually consumes your aether. You'll fall over at this rate."

"Okay..." I murmured. The woman had known Dagger Mastery, but that skill hadn't allowed her to use Boost, so my knowledge of how it worked was limited. I nodded obediently at him, and he let out a tired sigh for some reason. "Um, mister?"

"I ain't no 'mister,'" he grumbled. "Call me Feld." After a brief moment's pause, he continued, "Well, whatever. Won't matter if I'm a day late getting back."

The man—that is, Feld—stood up and loomed over me with a smile fierce enough to make an ordinary child cry.

"You better be ready, kid," he said. "Tomorrow I'm drilling the basics into you. All day."

Uh, what?

Training in the Forest

Feld, the big, kindhearted man, planned to "drill the basics into me all day."

I wasn't sure how, exactly, we'd reached this point, but I did trust him to an extent. And, given his skills, it wasn't as though I could've escaped, even if I'd refused. Since that woman's knowledge of close combat was lacking, which made me nervous, I'd decided to accept his offer.

The next morning, I rose with the sun. For breakfast, Feld lightly toasted some brown bread he had on him and shared it with me. Back at the orphanage, the kids would always complain about brown bread, calling it "bland and gross" and whining about wanting to eat white bread instead. It was true that some of it was so hard one may as well have been chewing on leather sandals, but I didn't hate it that much.

Sure, it wasn't as fluffy as white bread, but it was soft on the inside, and with proper chewing, the flavor really came through. If it was made with care, using flour ground finely enough, it wasn't that bad. It was the poorly made stuff made from low-grade buckwheat flour that was awful, so that was on the baker. That said, the brown bread at the orphanage? Horrendous.

"All right, lad," Feld asked after breakfast, towering over me. "First off, have you ever seen your own stats?"

I shook my head. At first, the term "stats" eluded me, but upon drawing from the woman's knowledge, I eventually understood what it meant. It hadn't existed in her original world, but in this one, there was a convenient method to numerically represent one's "power," including vitality, aether, and technical skill, among other things. These numbers were called "stats" and could be viewed through something called "Scan." There'd been no one close to the orphanage who could do such a thing, though, and I had no memory of my parents using it while they were alive either.

But according to that woman—rather, according to her mentor's teachings—Scan was a method of connecting the mind to the information out in the world. It was no fancy spell for peering into someone's soul or anything quite so grand. Rather, it used one's sight, hearing, touch, and aether to sense a target's capabilities, then converted this perception into numbers. Thus, what could be gleaned from an opponent through Scan was limited to their current aethereal and physical prowess, plus a numeric representation of their overall combat power.

There also existed something called a "Full Scan" that allowed one to glean every single bit of information about the target, but the woman's mentor had told her never to learn it, even should the opportunity present itself. For a mortal, looking into the minutiae of a soul or the world at large apparently came at a price: a cut to their life span. For this reason, only ageless species such as dragons and high elves could pull it off.

In the past, there had been individuals who had gained such appraisal abilities through "gifts" bestowed upon them. It was said, however, that such people were paranoid and never revealed this to others, and that they inadvertently shortened their own life spans. A convenient ability like that, seemingly at no cost? Something that was, essentially, a "cheat" like that woman had wanted? It was best to always assume there was a catch.

"Feld, can you use Scan?" I asked.

"Yeah. I finally learned it as a skill recently. Here's what I can glean from you. Can you read?" he asked as he began to write in the dirt with a stick.

Aether Points: 8/13

Health Points: 21/26

Overall Combat Power: 21

"About right for a kid," Feld said. "Got these numbers memorized?"

Apparently, my values were pretty low. While using my knowledge to identify the characters he'd written, I gave a small nod.

Feld tossed something to me. "What's this?" I asked.

"That's a scanning crystal," he explained. "It's a specially crafted crystal that reacts to aether. It helps you read the vitality and aether of living creatures. Use it enough times and you'll learn to use Scan naturally. For now, look at yourself through it and think, 'I wanna see my power.' There should be about two more uses left in this one, so go ahead and picture the numbers I showed you earlier while you use it."

I looked at the crystal silently for a moment. A tool to assist with scanning. As instructed, I looked at my own hand through the crystal while hoping to see my own power, and suddenly, there were numbers and letters floating within.

"So, match these numbers with the ones you saw earlier," he told me. "Can you do that?"

▼Alicia

Species: Human♀

Aether Points: 8/13

Health Points: 21/26

Strength: 3

Endurance: 4

Agility: 5

Dexterity: 5

Overall Combat Power: 21

I nodded to indicate that they matched. Feld activated his Boost and asked

me to use the crystal on him.

▼Feld

Species: Humanð

Aether Points: 177/210

Health Points: 354/370

Overall Combat Power: 1378 (Boosted: 1764)

Whether it was due to Feld being too powerful or me being too weak, the difference was so great that I couldn't even fathom how strong he was. As I read out the numbers in astonishment, he nodded quietly.

"That's more or less accurate," he said. "The numbers may be a little different depending on who's looking, but that crystal uses the method that the Adventurers' Guild, which I'm part of, set as the standard for our continent. Getting used to it should make it easier to compare against others in the future."

I watched Feld's stats for a while until the letters disappeared and the light emanating from the scanning crystal faded. "How many times do I need to use it to learn Scan?"

"Let's see... For me, it was about sixty times. Generally speaking, it should be under a hundred times."

"Can you buy these?"

"Typically, you can use one about ten times total, and they go for three silver apiece."

Rather expensive, I thought silently. Well, perhaps considering one could use it to glean the power of one's opponent, that was actually cheap. Still, since three nights at an average inn, with breakfast included, cost one silver, I figured most adventurers wouldn't use it often.

"And that's it for the basics of using a scanning crystal," Feld said. "Well, then, considering your overall combat power, you clearly don't have any combat

skills. Which I expected, anyway. So now we're going hunting!" Suddenly, he strapped his greatsword to his back and took off into the forest.

"Huh?!" Hurriedly, I chased after him.

"Keep low. Don't make a sound."

Feld, who'd been leading the way, suddenly crouched down in a thicket. I'd been so focused on following after him that I'd nearly lost sight of the man as his presence faded in an instant.

"What's..." I began.

"Keep your voice down," he cautioned. "I ain't very good at stealth myself, but I've hunted in the woods before, so I have the skill at Level 1. Also, don't use Boost, yeah? Prey animals are sensitive—they'll notice you. I'll teach you to use your aether later, but for now, I want you to feel the mana all around the forest."

"Okay."

As Feld said, there was probably prey nearby. I tried to calm my uneven breaths, focusing my attention on sensing the mana in my surroundings.

"Feel the mana flowing in the wind," Feld said. "Smell its scent. It's fine if you can't right off the bat, but being aware that it's there speeds up the learning process."

"Okay..." I repeated, nodding for the moment despite not really understanding what he meant. I could somewhat feel my own aether, but the mana in the environment was vaguely distinguishable at best, and I couldn't tell whether it belonged to plants or animals.

"Now, I want you to feel the difference between your aether and the mana around you. Animals will notice even the slightest of movements. So I want you to try and match the nature of your aether with that of the surrounding mana. If you can match the flow and size perfectly, your presence will diminish."

"Understood."

He'd really meant it when he'd said today would involve drilling in all of the

basics. Realizing that if I just stood there in a daze, the day would go to waste, I tried to focus on sensing the mana around me. To read the wind through the flow of mana.

That woman's knowledge told me that the "atmosphere" was rife with mana. If so, maybe rather than the flow of mana following the wind, it was more that the wind itself was a result of the flow of mana in the atmosphere.

As I concentrated on sensing the mana stirring around me, I thought I felt something shift, but I couldn't get a clear grasp on what it was. Keeping my focus, I struggled to follow Feld as he moved deeper into the forest.

"Wait up, lad," he said. "Look over there. Do you see anything?"

I assumed he was pointing to the bushes just ahead, but I had no idea whether something was there, let alone what it was.

"Plants spread their branches and leaves out horizontally, toward the sunlight, unless something's in the way," he explained. "Do you see any branches that look out of place?"

"Oh," I murmured. Now that I looked more closely, there was indeed an unnaturally bent branch. Once I noticed that, other parts of the forest that seemed out of place began to stand out.

"Now that you've noticed, watch how the leaves move. There are spots where they don't match the flow of the wind."

The breeze was making the leaves ripple from left to right in waves. Once that movement stopped, there was one branch that moved in a slightly different way.

"There's an animal over there," Feld said. "Can you feel it? It's the same sensation as when you used the scanning crystal."

That seemed like a reach, but by focusing on the thought that *something* was there, I did, in fact, begin to feel its presence.

"It's a rabbit," he told me. "We'll hunt this one first."

In one swift motion, Feld readied his hand axe and threw it. A faint cry echoed from the bushes. I followed him there and saw the axe had lodged itself in a

rabbit, killing it instantly.

"We'll dress this, then move on," he said.

From then on and all throughout the morning, we continued to hunt in the woods, with Feld making no concessions to my comprehension or stamina. I was still bewildered as he went over the techniques for gutting, draining, and skinning the animals.

When we returned to the campsite, I was exhausted. Feld sat a little ways away from me and began to skewer the butchered rabbit meat on wooden sticks he'd sharpened for the purpose.

"Hey, lad!" he called out. "Come over—we're gonna grill the meat!"

"Okay," I murmured wearily, less due to fatigue and more because it felt like all we'd had since yesterday was meat. Frowning at the lack of nutritional balance, I pushed myself to my feet.

"Spark," Feld chanted, igniting a pile of dried leaves.

From there, he used the flames to ignite several smaller twigs, followed by larger branches. While Feld could use sorcery, it wasn't his field of expertise, and so, unlike that woman, he could only cast three of the six types of practical magic: Spark, Flow, and Shine.

While placing the skewers around the fire, I stared at the flow of aether from Feld's magic. That woman's master had made her watch the flames intently, continuously, as she practiced casting Spark, so much so that she'd even dream about it at night.

Was this what Feld had meant by "reading" the flow of mana? The physical phenomena of this world were closely linked to the presence of spirits.

Believers in animism claimed that flames burned due to a fire spirit's presence—and it was true that flames could burn using only fire-elemental mana as fuel.

Regardless of whether or not spirits were involved, mana was undoubtedly tied to physical phenomena. Initially, the non-elemental mana became elemental through contact with a living being or substance bearing that element, and that was what served as fuel for elemental magic.

Extrapolating from that, I wondered if perhaps people with an affinity for a certain element converted the mana they absorbed into that element. Did that mean that whatever practical magic one had learned determined their elemental affinity? No, that couldn't be it. That woman had learned all six kinds. Her master had called it "part of a sorcerer's pursuits." Did that mean I was incorrect in my assumption that practical magic was somehow related to elemental magic?

Feld had learned Light Mastery and Fire Mastery, meaning those were the two types of elemental sorcery he was capable of using. That closely aligned with the types of practical magic he'd learned, barring Flow. Perhaps "elemental affinity" really was just a matter of compatibility, and while learning to use a less compatible element was difficult, it wasn't impossible.

The first practical spell that woman had learned was Spark, which was the one she'd spent the most time and effort on. She also had Fire Mastery and Water Mastery, so maybe someone's elemental affinity was simply a matter of whatever sorcery had left the strongest impression on them. Still, why were there so few people who could use multiple elements? Some people were eclectic, and even if they found something tricky to learn, they'd still persevere at studying multiple elements.

Maybe possessing a large amount of aether in a given element led to the formation of a matching aethercrystal in one's heart. There might be some disadvantage to having multiple affinities which that woman hadn't been aware of.

"They're done, lad," Feld said, interrupting my train of thought. "Eat up."

I took the roasted rabbit skewer he offered me. Honestly, I was too exhausted to have an appetite, but with no guarantee of when I'd get another proper meal, I forced myself to eat. As I did, I tried to commit the flow of mana in the burning flames to memory.

"Hey, lad! Wake up! We're starting our next drill!"

I'd been dozing off from a food coma when Feld's voice startled me awake. He'd promised to teach me how to handle weapons next. When asked what weapon I wanted to use, I replied with "a knife," and he nodded in agreement.

"Right, yeah. For Spear and Dagger Mastery, Level 1 is relatively quick to learn. I know Sword Mastery personally, but the combat techniques the skill lets you use vary depending on the type of sword. And even though they're both bladed weapons, Sword and Dagger Mastery are different because the way you wield a greatsword is totally different from a one-handed blade. But the fact I can't use the combat techniques doesn't stop me from handling a knife or even a club."

In other words, even if the only skill one had was Sword Mastery, that didn't make one totally inept with a club.

Techniques were ingrained in the soul. That meant if someone who'd learned them was at least somewhat competent, they wouldn't be amateurs in a fight, even if they weren't using their preferred weapons. Specifically, if one had, say, Level 3 in Sword Mastery, one could use similar weapons with a proficiency equal to Level 1 in one's own skill.

"What's a combat technique?" I asked.

My knowledge told me they were "special moves" used by fighter-types. But that woman, despite having Dagger Mastery, hadn't learned any.

"Supposedly they're, like, a type of non-elemental magic that requires a single syllable to activate. They can be used under Boost," Feld explained. "Some monsters can use 'em by shouting, so I don't know the details, but think of Boost and combat techniques as advanced non-elemental magic, equivalent to elemental sorcery."

"How do you learn them?"

"Hmm... Well, apparently, nowadays you can learn Level 1 techniques at the Adventurers' Guild," he explained. "But that costs money. Anything higher, though, and you'd have to learn from someone who already knows, or find some place to apprentice at."

"Huh..." So they were like sorcery—you had to learn from someone. What a hassle.

After that, Feld corrected my form and taught me to wield a knife properly:

how to grip, swing, stab, and parry. It occurred to me that the woman's technique had been quite haphazard. It was a wonder she'd managed to learn Dagger Mastery at all.

He showed me some basic moves, correcting me as I went with taps to my arms and hips and such. There wasn't enough time for me to perfect the moves, though, so once my movements were acceptable enough, we shifted to practical training.

Feld had only a wooden stick and I was using the knife, and still I couldn't even break his makeshift weapon. We practiced my defensive stance, and I got thrown around over and over. Feld probably thought he was doing me a kindness by teaching me, but I couldn't help wondering whether this was appropriate training for a seven-year-old.

I was so engrossed in training that I ended up too exhausted to move. Feld used his Flow to pour water over my head, then forcibly restored my vitality with Cure.

"Typically, going overboard with Cure is a bad idea since it keeps you from building stamina, but we're short on time, so it'll do," he said. "You have guts, lad, so you should get pretty strong with time. Once you've picked up Dagger Mastery, you should be able to learn Boost... No, wait, you can do that already. Anyway, just be careful not to run out of aether, yeah?"

"What happens if I run out?" I asked.

"Usually, you faint," he explained. "Under normal circumstances, a night's sleep fully restores your aether, but if you faint from exhaustion, you'll be knocked out cold for half a day. And if your aether drops too low, you'll basically be starving. If you ain't careful, you could even die in your sleep from how weak you get. So, unless it's a life-and-death situation, make sure you don't use up all your aether."

"Got it."

That certainly sounded dangerous, especially for me—I could easily get killed by wild animals if I fell unconscious. It wasn't worth taking risks if there was a chance, however slim, that it'd cost me my life.

Afterward, he taught me how to use Boost, and what to watch out for. Typically, one naturally learned how to make aether flow throughout one's body while acquiring a Level 1 skill in melee combat, and that was when one would learn Boost. In my case, since I'd already picked up the basics of Boost, I should be able to learn dagger moves relatively quickly.

Also, though it varied with one's proficiency in manipulating aether, roughly speaking, Boost upkeep cost about one point of aether in the time it took to count to a hundred. Feld told me to keep this in mind so I'd know how long I could fight.

I was determined to remember every last thing Feld taught me. Possibly sensing how serious I was about it, he wasn't treating me as a child—rather, he treated me as an individual. Maybe we both could feel our time together drawing to a close.

"Well, we only covered the very basics, and in a rushed way too, but I think I managed to drill the essentials into you," Feld said as evening drew near and we ran out of time. "I gotta go now, lad. You take care, all right?"

"Okay," I mumbled, watching as he gathered his belongings.

Our meeting had been sudden, and the training session had been harsh, but in his words and those large hands of his, I felt a warmth and kindness that I hadn't felt from an adult since becoming an orphan. The child within me felt a pang of sadness at seeing him go. I lowered my head, and he ruffled my sweaty, ashen hair.

"Be seeing you, yeah?" he said. "Next time we meet, I wanna see you kick some butt."

"Okay," I replied.



And with those parting words, Feld set out in the direction of the town. Daylight was turning to dark, and I silently watched his wide back as he walked away.

His broad shoulders, tall stature, kind heart... In my mind, it all overlapped with the image of my father, whose shoulders I'd always thought were the widest of all. I watched until Feld's silhouette vanished into the sunset. With a deep breath, I pushed back the loneliness swelling in my heart.

Ordinarily, no one would have bothered with a vagrant urchin. I was nothing but grateful to Feld for teaching me the means to survive, even if our time together had been short. Holding the leaf-wrapped rabbit meat he'd left behind, I put out the campfire and hid in the woods before another traveler showed up.

After checking whether the food I'd hung on branches had been gnawed on by bugs or animals, I climbed atop a tree, sitting on a thick branch and listening to the sounds of the nearby stream.

Though I'd put out the campfire to avoid being discovered, I no longer needed a source of fire.

"Spark..." I chanted quietly as I held out my hand, igniting a spark, albeit a small and clumsy one. Then, as I listened to the flow of water, I chanted, "Flow," and drank the water droplets seeping from my fingertips. Taking short naps every few minutes to recover my vitality and aether, I ensured my alertness in the growing darkness.

A certain incident was now the talk of the town where Alicia had once lived.

In this country, noble houses with a rank of count or higher managed territories, which were split into smaller areas overseen by lesser, vassal houses with a rank of viscount and below. One such territory was a countdom under House Taurus. Near its northern border was a town, within the jurisdiction of Baron Horus, where two murders had occurred.

One of the victims appeared to have been a female sorceress and adventurer. Since her belongings had been stolen, it seemed as though a thief had

committed the crime.

While Baron Horus's domain was near the border, a large forest to the north of it, rife with monsters, made it a popular destination for adventurers. Though visitors to such a tiny town were rare, the locals were familiar with how wandering adventurers behaved and hadn't paid much heed to the incident, assuming it to have been some sort of petty squabble with another outsider.

The other victim, however, had turned out to be an elderly matron who'd cared for the town's orphans, and that had been a different matter entirely. Though the old woman hadn't necessarily been beloved by the townspeople, she'd performed an essential duty—caring for children everyone else saw as nothing more than a burden in exchange for small donations. Thus, even when she went too far with the orphans, people would turn a blind eye.

When she'd been found murdered, the barony knight in charge of the town's security had investigated the scene and found evidence that she'd been taking advantage of her position to grow rich by selling children as pet slaves. The knight, suspecting the murder to have been related to a slave-trading ring, had attempted to ascertain where and to whom the orphans had been sold. However, without a clear understanding of how many were missing, the case was dismissed as unresolved.

Upon receiving his knight's report, Baron Horus sought a new orphanage administrator from his liege, Count Taurus. Until the new manager arrived, the baron's servants were put in charge of the orphans' care, and the children were assigned various community service-type tasks throughout the town.

Among the orphans was a seven-year-old girl whose assignment was to clean the town's gutters. In them, she found a half-broken aethercrystal. Captivated by its mysterious glow, the girl picked it up, her eyes sparkling brightly.

"Yes," she muttered. "I...wanna be a 'heroine."



Surviving in the Forest

The night had ended without any more visitors to the campsite. Still, there was a chance that merchant carts and the like would stop by around midday for lunch. Most adults, upon seeing a lone street urchin, would've been worried that their belongings might be stolen. Ill-intentioned ones, meanwhile, might try to rob the child, given the road was unguarded. *Feld was probably an exception*, I thought. *It's best not to blindly trust any grown-ups*.

Still, I couldn't just hide away forever. While picking wild blackberries for sustenance, I began to diligently train in practical magic. Now that I could grasp my own aether, I was able to use Spark and Flow, albeit clumsily—I was still not proficient enough for them to be useful, and I couldn't use any of the other spells.

While Shine would've been the next handiest to learn, I wanted to learn Harden first instead. The spell could solidify soil into a hard mass. Typically, it was used in construction to keep mud walls in place until they dried, thereby speeding up the process, apparently.

I ventured out into the forest and dug up some soft-looking soil with a stick, taking a lump into my palm, pondering. What exactly did "hardening" entail here? When I squeezed the dirt tightly, it *looked* solid but crumbled easily with the poke of a finger and couldn't exactly be considered hardened. After I crushed the handful of soil, then took it apart a few times, it dried out and turned from brown to yellowish-brown. In that state, it no longer clumped together, no matter how hard I squeezed.

"Flow," I chanted for practice. Water dripped from my fingertips—a little more than last night—onto the dry soil, allowing it to clump together once more. I'd added too much moisture, however, and the dirt turned to mud. The dried soil was powdery, finer than sand. To solidify it, something was needed to bind the soil particles together, which was what the water had done.

"Harden..." I chanted, trying to will the soil into coming together with my aether. The lump in my hand solidified, maintaining its original shape. "Did it work...?" Had I just learned Harden?

To check how solid it was, I threw the lump at a nearby tree. The lump shattered easily on impact, reverting to ordinary soil as the aether dissipated.

I supposed that meant it'd worked, though not perfectly. That woman's master had made her practice exhaustively by kneading a lump of soil with her bare hands, exactly as I'd just done. Was I missing something? The soil that the woman had used was ashen in color.

For the moment, I stopped practicing magic and returned to the nearby creek to eat. I ate the blackberries for breakfast, then washed my hair, now gross with sweat and ash, in the river. After, I wiped myself clean with a wet cloth.

As the ash washed away, my hair, now the same pink-blonde shade as my mother's, sparkled conspicuously. It made me nervous. *Can I use this gray soil near the water instead of ash? Wait...* I stuck my fingers into the layer of ashen soil by the creek, digging some up and fiddling with it. What was it?

My knowledge gave me the answer. "Is this clay?"

I chanted Harden once more while channeling my aether into the clump, but it barely solidified. It felt much more difficult to handle than regular soil. What was the problem? Was there a difference between dirt and clay? I'd tried to channel my aether to fill the gaps between the particles, but...

"Oh. I see."

As I continued to fiddle with the clay, I noticed how fine it was. It clumped together so well that there were practically no gaps to begin with. And the woman's knowledge told me that clay particles were much smaller than those of regular soil.

"Harden." This time, instead of picturing my aether linking the particles together, I pictured it flowing in between the particles, permeating them.

The clump became quite solid, and when I flicked it, it emitted a sound like pottery. I threw it at a tree with force, and instead of chipping, it left a dent on the trunk. Not only that, the aether didn't dissipate the moment it left my hand; the lump retained both its aether and its hardness.

So this was Harden, then. I likely wouldn't have been able to learn it without that woman's knowledge from her "previous world." All that remained was to

collect the clump and see how long the hardness would last.

I looked at the sky and reached into my bag for the handwritten herbal almanac while it was still bright out. I wanted to learn other practical magic as well, but that I could attempt at night.

The book didn't only cover various herbs; it included information on other things that could be used for medicinal purposes, such as mushrooms and minerals, all carefully described and accompanied by illustrations.

However, though I had knowledge, I hadn't fully learned how to put it into practice yet. I had to commit the characters to mind, reading each word letter by letter. And right now, even with the illustrations, mushrooms were too difficult for me to identify; I had to find edible-looking wild plants, take the time to locate them in the book, then read the words one character at a time to see if they were safe to consume.

I'd spent a good while foraging and studying when I noticed the faint smell of a campfire drifting from some distance away. Was it noon already? Maybe a merchant cart had stopped by the campsite for lunch. They had to reach it by this time of day or they wouldn't make it to the next town by evening.

On my way back to the crevice near the stream where I'd stashed my belongings, I collected some dead branches. Consciously looking in the direction of the campsite, I focused on the strong scent of burning wood. Feld had told me to feel the aether around me and smell the flow of the wind. I took a step back and, indeed, felt the intensity of the smell. When I compared the mana I could sense in the environment to the flow of that scent, it felt as though I could see the mana moving through the air.

"Gust," I chanted, channeling my aether to match the scent and the movement of mana. The smell's intensity waned slightly. I had thought I'd learn quickly since I'd been practicing sensing the aether in the wind, but this had been easier than I'd anticipated.

My original plan had been to hide among the trees if any travelers stopped by, but since I'd learned Harden, I changed my mind and began collecting clay instead. After absentmindedly kneading it in my hands for a while—which was surprisingly fun, even though play hadn't been my goal—the drifting smell of burning wood faded to nothing.

After I finished my preparations, I took the leaf-wrapped rabbit meat and some food from my bag, along with the dried wood and edible plants I'd collected around the forest. I carefully made my way over to the campsite, but there was no longer any sign of people.

"Harden," I chanted at the crooked clay vessel I'd made to solidify it. Once that was done, I chopped up the wild greens and rabbit meat with my knife and put it all into the pot, then filled it with water using Flow.

"Ngh..."

My head felt a little woozy. I'd already used too much aether today, but I should be able to use it one more time without entering a state of starvation.

I put the clay pot next to the new campfire and chanted, "Spark," setting it alight. The fire crackled and a thin wisp of smoke rose from the dried leaves. It'd have been difficult for me to use Spark again, so I blew on the small flame and covered it with well-dried leaves bit by bit until the fire, thankfully, caught properly.

Apparently, I had thirteen aether points, and each use of practical magic consumed one. I'd already cast spells eight times, which left me with five points. *This must be my limit*, I thought as I felt the aether remaining in my body.

Since the pot was only next to the campfire, I figured it'd take some time for the heat to cook the greens. The clay solidified by Harden could only maintain its shape for about an hour, however, so I hoped it'd finish cooking by then and started carving a spoon out of a wooden branch I'd picked up.

An hour later, they *seemed* quite cooked, I thought as I used the poorly made, ladle-like spoon to eat the stewed greens and rabbit meat. It was...horrid. The side closest to the fire was cooked, but the rest wasn't, and the bitter taste from the undercooked greens was overwhelming. I'd also added some jerky for flavor, but it wasn't enough to cancel out the bitterness and the odd smell. My stomach told me I needed to be more selective about which plants to use for

cooking.

This had been my first time cooking, and it'd doubled as an experiment. I'd worried that the food, even preserved, wouldn't be safe to eat after being left to sit in the forest for a whole day, and so I'd wanted to heat them up to be safe. Though the result had been a failure, it'd taught me a thing or two about what to do next time, so I felt like I'd earned some experience, at least.

Though the stew was worse than the salty soup that the old hag had served us at the orphanage, it wasn't poisonous, so I ate it all. I mean, both were horrible slop, so it wasn't as though there was much of a difference. I had, however, been concerned about eating a meat-only diet, so eating the greens somehow made me feel better.

After finishing the meal—unkind to both my tongue and stomach—I took some of the newly formed ash and wrapped it in a leaf before returning to the forest. It was time to practice my knife skills, without using any aether. Honestly, I should've been securing food as well, but while I certainly could forage for plants and blackberries, I had no means of acquiring meat, so I decided to practice knife throwing alongside my melee stance.

Ordinarily, it was inefficient to practice multiple things at once without a skill to permanently commit the techniques to memory, but right now I was severely lacking in survival abilities, so I wanted at least one trump card.

I started by carefully mimicking the knife moves I'd been taught yesterday, over and over. Feld had told me that being able to perform the moves correctly made it faster to learn a skill, but I wasn't that optimistic, so I thought of repeatedly practicing his teachings to speed up my learning process as much as possible.

Skills weren't easily acquired to begin with. If a few days were all it took for people to learn skills left and right, even ordinary folks would acquire a multitude of combat skills by the time they reached adulthood.

Now, then, what did "Level 1" in a skill actually entail? That woman wasn't proficient enough at close combat, but still, her general knowledge served me well here.

Take, say, "Level 1 Sword Mastery." What did that equate to? Roughly, it was

something a child would learn after taking swordsmanship lessons under a local instructor for several years, until the age of twelve or thirteen.

To go from there to Level 2, one needed to accumulate experience in real combat and be skilled enough to make life-or-death combat into a profession. Reaching Level 3 meant being a career soldier or knight, on the job for over ten years. By that point, one could undoubtedly call oneself a warrior.

That was about as far as an ordinary person would get over their professional life, however. To go beyond that, one needed not only a level of commitment that required sacrifices in one's personal life but supposedly talent in the field as well.

Generally, nobody under ten years old acquired Level 1 skills, and reaching Level 3 by age twenty wasn't likely either, so for someone as young as myself to learn a skill, I couldn't simply practice willy-nilly. I had to be precise and have perfect form to a degree that would've been impossible for most kids. Focusing my mind, I executed the corrected forms slowly but accurately.

I was surprised to learn how well I could focus despite being a child. Under most circumstances, a child would have grown bored quickly and wouldn't have been able to keep at it for long. But I fully understood this was necessary for my survival, and my concentration never faltered.

"Phew," I breathed after two hours of repeating my dagger techniques. I felt both fatigued and thirsty. I should've replenished my water in the morning when I learned to use Flow, I thought.

As I pondered the amount of aether I could use today, something surfaced in my mind from my knowledge: even if one consumed one's own aether, in a world filled with mana like this, about ten percent of one's total aether was regenerated every hour—twenty percent during sleep, apparently. If so, even if I fully exhausted my aether, it'd only take me five hours of sleep to fully restore it. And since it'd been roughly two hours since my last use of aether, that meant with thirteen points, I should've recovered about two or three.

First, I washed my hands in the creek, discarded the contents of my canteen, which had started to smell, then carefully chanted, "Flow" to trickle water into

the container little by little. At my current level of mastery, I could produce about one cupful of water per point of aether. After using Flow one more time, I began to feel a bit lightheaded.

But with this, I'd confirmed that aether did recover at a rate of ten percent every hour. Learning a sorcery skill meant that using aether would cause one's capacity for it to increase gradually, but as it stood, I had too little of it to even practice properly. Then...was there some way to speed up the regeneration of aether? I made a mental note to think about this later. After drinking water to replenish my energy, I decided to practice knife throwing.

There were two types of knife throws: a no-spin throw and a spin throw. The no-spin throw was used to hit targets close by, while spin throws were for aiming a bit farther away...apparently. With Boost, the maximum range for knife throwing was about ten meters. For targets farther away than that, a bow was better.

First, I aimed at the trunk of a tree about two meters away. The grip was the same whether there was a spin to the throw or not; all that changed was how one swung one's arm and when to release. I decided to do a no-spin throw so the knife would fly straight ahead.

To my chagrin, I didn't even get to worry whether the knife would end up stuck to the trunk or not; it fell to the ground with a dull *thunk*. Apparently one was supposed to throw it using the forearm, but how to make it fly in a straight line? Well, all I could do was practice.

After several more attempts, however, I understood that a seven-year-old simply did not have the physical strength to pull it off. Change of plans: I'd give up on knife throwing for now and switch to stone throwing instead.

I'd been fixated on knife throwing because, knowing it required both the Dagger Mastery and Throwing skills, I could've trained both at the same time. Stone throwing only required the Throwing skill, however, so even I should be able to use it.

While pondering how to go about throwing a stone, the knowledge of a stone-throwing device called a "slingshot" came to mind. Apparently, it was simple to make with some string and a piece of cloth or leather.

Another change of plans. Since even a child could achieve relatively high power with a slingshot, I decided to make one. I also knew how, since that woman had used one to hunt rabbits when she was young.

As I set about making it, I realized I had no string. Would cloth cut into thin strips be a sturdy enough substitute? I also needed a part to hook my finger onto, so string would be better, I thought. While rummaging through my belongings, I found the hair I'd chopped off. I'd kept it thinking perhaps I could sell it, but since it was about thirty centimeters long, maybe it'd work as a string substitute if I twined it.

I began by tying several strands together at the base, then wove them into a three-strand braid. It turned out quite crooked and, when I pulled too hard, it came undone. It took me multiple attempts to finally attain a neat weave, but by then, it was already evening. *Time to pick some berries*, I thought.

It was quite dark when I finished gathering the blackberries, so I hurried back to my usual tree. Maybe my aether had recovered a bit by now? Among the plants I'd picked in the morning, some herbs I'd left on rocks by the river were fairly dry, so I rolled them up tightly and used Spark to start a small fire.

According to the book, these were bug-repellant herbs, so I figured I'd try them out. I didn't know whether this was the correct way to use them, but I placed the bundle at the base of the tree, then surrounded it with stones. The flame was quite small and not very noticeable, so it should be fine.

I climbed atop the tree, and since it wasn't fully dark yet, I went back to working on the slingshot and ate only berries for dinner. In the dimmed forest, I could see the light of a fire from the direction of the campsite but, of course, this time I wasn't going to go check it out; I'd remain hidden and keep my breathing quiet instead.

But I did shift my awareness to the campsite, curious whether I could use this to train myself to sense mana in the atmosphere, like Feld had taught me. I focused my gaze on the campfire, trying to sense the mana around me. As I concentrated, I started to feel as if something was there. Was I now able to sense the presence of small animals? Maybe there was something else around —the "fairies" and "spirits" I'd heard about in fairy tales when I was younger.

As if triggered by that thought, more knowledge surfaced in my mind—specifically, regarding the fact that some people said the mana in the world was produced by spirits. If that was indeed the case, then there really might be tiny spirits around here. But wait...spirits came in as many varieties as elements, right? If I was correct in assuming that mana changed as it came in contact with a specific element, then it stood to reason that spirits were the source of that change.

In which case...which spirits were producing the mana filling this place? Earth spirits, because it was a forest? Water, maybe? Since it was night, maybe it was shadow spirits producing it. When that thought hit me, I strangely started feeling as if the forest was filled with the power of shadow spirits. There was moonlight tonight, so as my eyes adjusted, I could make out faint outlines. Perhaps due to my thought process, some areas of the forest that seemed especially dark caught my eye. Was it the light from the campfire making everything else look darker?

Was it really? As I wondered about that, the dark spots began to look different from the others. If that was the power of the shadow spirits—the shadow-elemental mana—then what of the other spots? Areas with trees looked particularly different; was that because there were water and earth spirits there?

If shadow was black, what colors would water or earth be? I could picture water as blue and earth as yellow. Then light would be white, fire would be red, and wind would be...what? Going by the remaining colors, maybe a light green?

As I thought about this, I focused on the mana surrounding the trees, imagining it as yellow and blue. And then, curiously, the trunks of the trees suddenly seemed to have a mottled pattern of yellow and blue, and the area around the distant campfire took on a red hue.

"Strange..."

The gentle breeze rustling the leaves felt faintly green, and as this idea of color grew more vivid in my mind, so too did the forest—which had been dark until now—seem to suddenly grow colorful. Maybe I was just imagining things. It could've been my brain playing tricks on me. But if this was a real

phenomenon...

I took a deep breath, inhaling the mana I could see around me, matching my aether to the colors in my surroundings. It felt as though my presence, which had been obvious until now, had suddenly blended with the forest's.

The next morning, I woke up at sunrise. There were still people at the campsite, I surmised, and when I focused my gaze in that direction, I could see a faint red hue. It was harder to tell during the day than at night, but it seemed that my perception of mana as color had carried through the night. Apparently I wasn't just imagining things; my brain really did recognize mana as having color.

Still, both Feld and that woman's master had said to "feel" the magical elements. If that was the norm, perhaps "seeing" them was some sort of heresy. Right now, I could only *feel* mana around me up to a few meters away, but I could *see* it from much farther away.

I felt like this could be an asset. If I trained my ability to sense mana a bit more, perhaps the distance from which I could see it would also increase. I decided to focus primarily on my perception of mana and train myself to see the colors clearly.

With that goal in mind, I began my daily routine of gathering wild plants and blackberries, making a conscious effort to both see the mana as color and feel it. My food supply was very precarious. The jerky and cheese would be gone by tomorrow, so it was probably best for me to start heading toward the town.

On the way, I washed blackberries in the upper stream of a creek I'd stopped by, then washed my face. Rinsing my mouth thoroughly and using the grated stalk of a medicinal herb to scrub my teeth was a habit I'd picked up back when my parents had been alive, since they'd always remind me to do it.

Lastly, I used Flow to refill my canteen with water, thinking about what I'd managed to achieve last night. By seeing the colors of mana and inhaling the surrounding elements while remaining conscious of said colors, then matching my aether with them, I felt like my presence had blended in with the forest. If that hadn't been just my imagination, it would be very advantageous for stealth.

I silently took in my surroundings. As I focused on the idea that mana had colors, my surroundings subtly took on those hues, and I started being able to "see" even what shouldn't have been visible. Thinking back on how it had felt yesterday, I breathed in mana once more, gradually dyeing the colorless, non-elemental mana within me to match the mana in my surroundings.

The environment is overflowing with elemental mana, I thought. Why's my own mana still non-elemental? One entered a state of malnourishment from overusing aether because, in this world, mana was one of the nutrients living beings needed to survive. Did this mean my body was using up the elemental attribute of the mana it absorbed as a nutrient and leaving the rest?

Putting such thoughts aside for now, I decided to focus on Stealth. While taking stock of the mana around me, I absorbed the yellow of earth, the blue of water, the green of wind, a little of the black of shadow, and plenty of the white of light. It wasn't an exact match, but rather than the proportions of the elements I'd taken in, it was probably my lack of experience with controlling my own aether that needed fine-tuning. Also, the mana composition of my surroundings changed with every slight movement, which meant constant adjustments were necessary. Would I have to keep doing this the entire time while using Stealth?

Feld had told me that while in Stealth, one needed to read the flow of the surrounding mana and match it. What had he meant by "flow"? Perhaps he'd meant to match the density of mana, and unconsciously match the elements too? That sounded like a lot of work, but there was no other option, not really.

As I resumed foraging, I practiced aligning the color of my aether with that of the environment. This time, having learned my lesson from yesterday's "edible" plants, I focused mainly on herbs that could be used for medicine. Herbs commonly used for household remedies were relatively easy to find just about anywhere. There were a number of varieties: some would suppress bacterial growth when applied to wounds, others would relieve mild food poisoning when ingested, and still others could act as antidotes.

Suddenly, a green snake emerged from a nearby bush. Green snakes were typically docile and didn't attack prey larger than field mice. If they felt threatened, however, they could bite, and their venom could cause paralysis

that lasted an hour. I wouldn't have wanted to be paralyzed in a village, let alone a place like this.

Still, the snake didn't seem to notice me, despite the fact I was standing right next to it. Was it unable to detect me because I'd matched my aether to the environment? According to that woman's knowledge, snakes could sense the heat from other living beings. Did this mean aether alignment could deceive even thermal sensors, or was it that, in *this* world, snakes sensed aether rather than heat? Either way, it made me happy that I'd learned to conceal myself well enough to remain undetected by wildlife in such a short period of time.

Matching the flow of the surrounding wind, I drew my knife and brought the blade down on the green snake's head. It thrashed, trying to coil around my arm, but I calmly continued to drive the knife deeper in until the reptile went still. Lastly, I severed its head to drain its blood so I could use it as food later.

That afternoon, I practiced with my knife and newly crafted slingshot.

Knife practice simply consisted of practicing melee moves and occasionally, while keeping an eye on my aether reserves, using Boost. Generally, the reason that Level 1 skills took so long to acquire was that it took a while to achieve the baseline strength and dexterity necessary to move one's body efficiently enough. Therefore, I anticipated that if I integrated Boost into my drills, I could learn the skill faster than other children.

As for the slingshot, I kept flinging pebbles from the creek at a tree trunk. At first they didn't fly straight, but after I kept at it for about an hour, I started to hit the target a bit more accurately. Still, I could only hit targets from about three meters away, so I'd need more training to improve my accuracy.

"Huh?"

Just then, I noticed a strange phenomenon. When I practiced circulating my aether throughout my whole body while training with the slingshot, it felt as though my accuracy had suddenly improved. Did that mean I was subconsciously using Boost? Did Boost even have such an effect? I searched my knowledge but found no relevant information.

Once again I gripped the slingshot while making my aether flow within me, and noticed aether faintly emanating from the string I'd crafted from my hair.

Though I'd chopped it off, it seemed that trace amounts of my aether remained in it, flowing in sympathy with the aether in my body. I could feel my own aether and I could make it flow in my bloodstream. I'd thought that Boost meant simply that aether was flowing *alongside* my blood, but maybe I was actually *willing* aether to flow.

If so, then it was possible that I'd subconsciously been making my hair into an extension of my body, thus causing it to move and subtly correct my aim in the process. If I could consciously make my aether flow into the entire slingshot, treating the whole thing as an extension of myself, maybe I could improve my hit rate further.

I thought this could be an asset too, so while it was still light out, I went about crafting myself something new using the rest of the hair I'd chopped off.

"This might work," I mumbled to myself. At dusk, while trying out my new creation, I felt like my combat options had increased—provided I managed to catch my opponent off guard, anyway.

It was time to move on to the next town.

That same day, I replenished my water and organized my belongings, packing only the bare minimum and half of my coin into the bag I'd taken from that woman. The next morning, I set out as soon as the sky began to lighten.

The distance from the campsite to the town was roughly a one-day walk for an adult, leaving early in the morning and arriving by evening. Since I was still a child, maybe I could expect it to take about fifty percent longer?

As I walked, I practiced feeling the colors of the mana around me, occasionally enhancing my physical movements with Boost. I only had my own senses and the angle of the sun to help me gauge the passage of time, so I took special care not to overuse my aether. Still, I wanted to do what I could. The only two forms of practical magic I had yet to learn were Shine and Darken, and I decided to use this time to take care of that.

Shine was a spell that could produce a small light about the size of a candle's flame, whereas Darken could block light and nullify the effect of Shine. The reason I'd put off learning them both was that I didn't understand their principles, unlike those of the other spells.

I could visualize drawing moisture from the air for Flow, and after learning to recognize the color of the water element, I could consciously gather water-elemental mana to produce larger amounts. Did that mean I could use Shine by gathering the light-elemental white mana?

"Shine," I chanted, producing a small light on my palm. It was tiny and would've gone unnoticed by anyone who hadn't already known it was there. The moment my focus shifted, it vanished. Was just gathering light-elemental mana not enough? If I'd succeeded at casting the spell, the light should've lasted around thirty minutes.

Thinking back, I remembered seeing Shine cast on objects back at the orphanage. To sustain it, maybe I needed to detach the aether from myself and let it burn little by little, like fuel being consumed for a flame.

"Shine," I repeated, aiming for the tip of my knife. It lit up with an overpowering, dazzling radiance. "D-Darken!" I chanted in a hurry, channeling shadow-elemental mana and aiming it at the light. It vanished instantly, as if nullified by the shadows.

Had it been my mental image of combustion that triggered the blinding light? It felt as though the aether I'd projected had burned out instantly rather than diffusing over time. I needed to practice this spell more to use it properly, but at least I'd been able to use Darken on the fly, so I was content with that for now.

Threading between the trees, I avoided the passing carts and travelers, picking berries as I went. I filled up on what remained of my cheese and jerky, grilled over a small flame. Now my only remaining rations were berries and whatever wild plants I could find in the forest. I still couldn't hunt rabbits with my slingshot, and though I could've looked for snakes, my priority was getting to town.

As evening came and the sun began to set, I started to wonder whether I should try using Shine to keep going, or hide in the forest and wait for dawn. Before I could reach a conclusion, however, I noticed a change in myself.

"I can see at night..."

Though it'd only been two days, as a result of strengthening my awareness that the elemental mana around me had colors, I could—albeit barely—

distinguish plants, the ground, and the sky by their elemental colors. Focusing more intently, I felt I could even see the positions of animals, despite them being non-elemental. I could see clearly up to about a fifteen-meter radius, and that was just enough to let me travel at night.

Once again, I hid in the forest, looking for the blue of water and picking blackberries rich in that element. I decided to keep going today for as long as my stamina allowed. Possibly due to my sparing use of Boost, I wasn't very fatigued yet.

After a short break for food, I traveled along the road, erasing my presence by matching the color and size of the mana around me, taking short breaks every so often. Finally, for the first time, I saw the tall walls of the neighboring town come into view just as the night turned late.

Slums

It was late at night when I finally arrived at the town. The gates, surrounded by stone walls as tall as a two-story building, were already closed. Even if they'd been open, however, they would've seen me as a juvenile vagrant, given how dirty I was from my training and exploration of the forest. It would probably have been difficult for me to enter the town. Why, you ask? Because in this country, certain actions were restricted based on social class.

According to my knowledge, the people of this continent were broadly divided into four classes. First there was the ruling class—the nobility. They were free to travel anywhere within the country, and even internationally, provided there was a reason.

Next, there were commoners. These people paid taxes, either as citizens of the nation or as subjects in a fiefdom. They could travel anywhere covered by their family registry—say, within the territory overseen by the baron. To go to another noble's territory, however, a toll of one silver was required as tax.

Below them were the free people, also known as vagrants, who did not own homes. They didn't pay taxes, but they were restricted from traveling anywhere and had to pay the one-silver toll every time they entered a town.

At the bottom of the ladder were the slaves—essentially, people who had been sold into servitude, willingly or no. Perhaps the word "serf" might be easier to understand. They worked under their masters, tilling fields and earning wages based on the harvest. Within that limited scope, they could have families, but lacked the freedom to quit their jobs. While the old hag at the orphanage had sold orphans, and nobles and the wealthy were known to keep slaves as mistresses unlawfully, this wasn't commonplace, so let's exclude those cases.

Right now, my status was that of a free person, so one problem was that it would have cost me one silver to enter the town. Not only that, free people with no registry or residency ran the risk of being ignored by guards if they fell victim to crime. Finally, an ill-intentioned gatekeeper might've robbed and enslaved me, especially if they could tell I was a street urchin.

I wanted to get into town not only to replenish my food supplies but also because I wanted a weapon I could use, and...something else.

Technically, even a "free" person (funny term, that, since they were afforded few freedoms) could reach a status close to that of a commoner through affiliation with one of the four guilds, depending on their rank in the organization: the Adventurers' Guild, the Traders' Guild, the Sorcerers' Guild, or the Alchemists' Guild. Of these, the Adventurers' Guild was the easiest to register with, but even so, it required a Level 1 combat skill, which was beyond my reach at this point.

Back to the topic at hand: unlike the small rural town where I used to live, this was a larger town, where the ruling baron lived. Getting inside would've been difficult, but that woman's knowledge had taught me a secret way in.

After taking a short nap atop a tree in the surrounding woods, I began to explore the outer area of the wall as dawn approached. By the time it was bright out, I'd found what I was looking for.

Two people were walking in the forest near the outer wall. Children, maybe. They were gathering wild grass, and skillfully caught a snake. After, they looked around carefully before going into a bush near the wall and disappearing from sight.

While masking my presence, I approached that spot and investigated the bush. At the bottom of the wall was a hole, covered up with boards but large enough for a young child to crawl through. It figured. That woman had known that in large towns like this, with slums, residents would know of ways in and out.

I rubbed ash onto my conspicuously pink-blonde hair to dull its luster and wrapped a cloth around my neck to conceal the lower half of my face. Holding my breath, I quietly snuck into the town.

After passing through the small hole, I silently lifted the board covering the exit to take a peek at the situation on the other side. As I'd thought, it led straight into the slums. I made sure there were no signs of anyone around, then left the hole, covered it back up with the board, and made sure to erase any traces that I'd gone through.

Now, then...what kind of shop would sell to an urchin like me? It'd have to be somewhere within the slums, or at least close to the low-income areas, rather than in the main street. Checking that my hair's luster was, indeed, properly dulled by the ash, I began to explore the area while matching my presence to the mana around me.

It seemed to be an old residential district. When I peeked through the decaying, broken doors and windows, I smelled something rancid, like rotten food. Though I sensed no humans nearby at the moment, there were clear signs of habitation. I wasn't sure if the residents only came back at night, but it was harder to conceal my presence in town than in the forest, since there was less elemental mana in an environment full of inorganic materials and with very little nature. Though it wasn't exactly devoid of elemental mana, it felt like most of it was either light-, shadow-, or non-elemental. This would require a different sort of training than what I'd done in the forest.

Feeling a bit mentally drained, I looked around and considered getting some water from a well I spotted; I didn't want to use any magic in this state. The well wasn't dry, but the water seemed a bit murky, so all I did was wet a cloth and wipe my sweat. Then I sensed a faint presence approaching me.

"Hey! You there!" came a voice from a little ways away. "Who gave you

permission to use that well?!"

Was that...a child? Slowly, I turned around and saw a boy of about ten wearing dirty, simple clothing. With him was a girl about my age.

Right. Those were the children I'd seen outside the wall. Their hair and eye colors were similar, so they were probably siblings. The boy was trying his hardest to sound intimidating, reminding me of the older orphans who used to steal my food and boss me around. Before I knew it, I was glaring at him, and both he and the girl looked a little scared.

"Th-This is our turf!" the boy exclaimed. "If you wanna use that well you gotta pay me!"

I kept silent.

It was the town's well, so not private property, right? I had no reason to entertain an urchin's reasoning, but on second thought, every place had baseline rules. I flicked a copper coin at the boy's feet and was about to leave when he raised his voice again.

"Hey! If you've got coin, give us more!" the boy demanded. His greed must have taken over after he'd seen how easily I'd given him money.

"B-Big brother!" his sister said, trying to stop him by tugging on his sleeve. He shrugged her off and walked toward me.

I wasted no time in making aether course through my body and aimed at his legs, hitting him with a loud *whack*. "Whoa!" he cried out as he toppled over.

Straddling the bewildered boy, I glared down at him coolly, then drew my knife and raised it.

"N-Nooo!" The girl lunged at me just then, and I rolled to avoid her, maintaining my defensive stance with the knife. But all she did was cling to her brother and cry; there was no sign she wanted to attack me. The boy, too, seemed to have lost his will to fight. His face had turned pale and he remained sitting on the ground, trembling as he realized how close he'd come to being stabbed to death.

Still gripping my weapon, I approached the two. The boy flinched, still looking

fearful, but held his sister as she clung to him, as if to protect her.

"Do you know of any shops that will sell to a street urchin?" I asked.

"O-Over there," the boy said. "Two blocks down..."

"Yeah?" I replied. "Thanks."

Well, this was awkward, but at least I'd gotten the information I'd wanted. They'd already lost their will to fight, so I had no intention of killing them. As I began to walk away, I heard a grown man's voice behind me.

"Damn brats! What the hell do ya think yer doin' here?! I told ya to pay me if ya wanted to use this well!"

That piqued my curiosity, so I turned around and saw a grimy man, his cheeks flushed as he threatened the cowering siblings by brandishing a liquor bottle. *Oh, I see,* I thought. The man was extorting money from urchins for using the well.

"W-We didn't use it!" the boy protested.

"Shut yer trap!" the man snapped. "Do I look like I care?! Pay the hell up!" "Nooo!" the girl cried out.

The man yanked her away from her brother, then snatched the coin the boy had been holding. He clicked his tongue in disapproval. "A copper? Broke-ass brat."

"H-Hey! Don't do that, dude!" the boy said. "That was to get bread for Shuri
__"

"Then go steal it or whatever! Earn it!" the man replied, raising his liquor bottle at the children. Even a blow from something like that could easily kill a child if it landed in the wrong spot.

As I watched in silence, the face of the old hag who used to beat the orphans with a rolling pin flashed through my mind. A rock cut through the air with a whoosh and grazed the drunken man's head. He clutched it, letting out a cry.

The boy and girl looked on in astonishment, but I was even more shocked. My plan had been to avoid getting involved, yet I'd impulsively shot a rock at the

man with my slingshot.

"Y-You, you little—" Now angry, the man smashed his ceramic bottle against the wall, turning it into a much more dangerous weapon. He was drunk, but even so, there was no way a child who'd only trained in combat for a few days could take a grown man head-on.

So of course, I immediately turned tail and fled.

"Hey! Get back here!" he yelled, chasing after me as I ran. While I hoped that'd give the siblings a chance to escape, I was the one in immediate danger right now. Clearly furious, he continued to chase after me.

I took something from my belt, turned a corner, and waited. Maybe it was wrong of me to ambush him like this, but I couldn't just let him kill me. As soon as the man appeared around the corner, I swung the something down forcefully.

"Urk..." The drunken man took a blow to the top of his head with a loud *crack*, staggered forward, and dropped to the ground face first.

That'd worked well. What I'd used was a new weapon: a one-meter-long cord I'd made by twisting my hair together, with a weight wrapped in cloth at the end. Rather than a rock, I'd used about ten copper coins as the weight; not only was pure copper heavier than iron, coins had sharp edges. The centrifugal force paired with aether had enhanced the blow such that it had violently struck the target not as a blunt surface but as a sharp point.

I quickly drew my knife, climbed on top of the fallen man, and stabbed the blade deep into his spinal cord to finish him off. Keeping him alive would've only spelled trouble. I adjusted the fabric of his collar to prevent blood from spurting as I pulled out the knife, then rifled through his belongings to make it look like a robbery gone wrong.

After counting three small silver and five copper in his filthy wallet, I tossed it to the boy, who'd stayed rooted in place, still shaking as he'd watched the scene unfold.

"Here," I told him. "Take these and take care of the body for me. You live in the slums, right? So you know how, don't you?" The boy, having caught the wallet, silently nodded several times.

Life was cheap in the slums, and even more so if you weren't affiliated with the mafia. This included the two siblings and, of course, me as well. That was why, in order to survive, I had no intention of showing mercy to an enemy, no matter who that might be.

Silently, I glared at the frightened brother and sister, then immediately turned on my heel and walked away, heading in the direction of the store the boy had told me about.

First-Time Shopping

I decided to try the store the boy had told me would do business even with urchins. The old hag's secret stash of coins plus that woman's money added up to fifteen silver and eight small silver; since I was using the copper coins as weights in my weapon, those didn't count. I'd left half of the coin back at the camp with my other belongings, so I only had seven silver and eight small silver on hand.

The shop was somewhere between the slums and a low-income area of the town. So far it didn't seem dangerous, but I occasionally felt people gazing resentfully my way, so I kept my guard up. Inside the store, to the right, was a shelf with a scant few food items, and to the left was an assortment of goods. A mean-looking old man glared at me from the back as I made my way in.

"Now ain't ya a mean-lookin', creepy li'l bastard," the man said.

Apparently we both thought the other looked mean. He wasn't chasing me out, at least—either because I'd masked my presence, or...maybe he smelled the blood on my hands. One way or another, he seemed cautious of me.

"I want a small blade," I said. "Something I can use for throwing."

"Everythin' I've got is on that there shelf," the man replied, gesturing with his chin. "Ya want anythin' else, ya go to the smithy."

The shelf in question was lined with knives and cutting implements for taking game apart. Some were small but still too heavy for me to throw.

"Oh, do you have any scanning crystals?" I asked. That'd been my primary reason for visiting the town—to obtain said crystals so I could see my stats. Learning Scan would've required dozens of uses, but what I wanted was to check my current strength, and for that I'd deemed it necessary to use my limited silver on the crystals.

"Four silver apiece," the man said.

"That's higher than the market price," I remarked. Feld had told me the going price for these was three silver.

"An' that's how it goes in this kinda shop," the man retorted. "Don't like it, go buy it somewhere proper."

Ah. "This kinda shop," huh?

"Got any damaged goods, then?" I asked.

The man frowned at my question, which meant the answer was likely yes. Brand-new scanning crystals were clear and grew murkier as they were used. Most could be used about ten times, but what happened if someone died with a partially used crystal in their possession? Maybe an upstanding adventurer wouldn't, but I figured the ones who lived day-to-day definitely would loot those and sell them instead of using them.

That woman's memories, too, included collecting and selling scanning crystals she'd picked up. Most shops wouldn't deal in that kind of dubious item, so I figured people wanting to learn the Scan skill would usually buy them in bulk from "this kinda shop." And I was right, apparently.

"Over in that box," the owner replied. "Eight silver for the lot, or one small silver each."

"Can I pick and choose?" I asked.

"Ya got coin?"

"Yeah," I said, taking a silver coin out of my pocket and showing it to the shopkeeper.

While that didn't exactly earn me his trust, it was enough for him. "Then do whatever," he said.

Used crystals like these could range from those with three or so uses left in them to total duds with no more than residual aether. The box contained a hundred used crystals, give or take. Buying them all and getting fifty uses out of them would've been hitting the jackpot, but I wasn't planning on taking that bet.

I regarded the crystals in silence. Normally, one couldn't discern the residual aether in them, so they were sold cheaply. But I could pick out twenty of them without any worries. I lined them up on the counter. "I want these, and a sturdy backpack. Do you have one?"

"Don't come bitchin' to me if any of these are duds," the man said. "Two silver for the crystals. Eight small silver for a leather backpack."

"I won't complain," I told him. "The items and the prices are fine. I want these too. A small copper canteen, these food items, salt, this whetstone, and...this."

"Huh. The skewers?"

There were three fairly thick, metallic skewers that I'd decided to buy too. Maybe a cook had gotten fired and stolen them, then sold them here? They were sooty and blackened, but maybe they were made of steel. Sure, they were the kind of thing one wouldn't normally see unless one worked in a kitchen or camped regularly, but was it *that* surprising they'd sell at all? Why even bother offering them, then?

Other than those, I'd gotten a small bag of salt, a chunk of dried venison, and a bag of dried vegetables for four small silver, plus a rather expensive small copper canteen for seven small silver. Lastly, the whetstone plus the skewers cost two additional small silver.

"Here," I said, giving the man the coins. "Four silver plus one small silver in total."

"Look at ya, doin' fancy mental math at yer age."

Having obtained money, I'd started practicing calculations using my knowledge. I could only add and subtract, though. And for more complicated math, I needed to write the numbers down.

The shopkeeper muttered quietly to himself as he checked the weight of the

silver coins I'd given him.

"What would you be willing to buy from me?" I asked.

"Anythin'," the man replied. "Just don't go bringin' me herbs that sprout everywhere like the damn kids around here. Go hunt me a rabbit or somethin'. Skin and gut it nice an' good and I'll buy it off yer hands for a small silver."

"Got it." I packed my newly purchased items into the backpack and started out of the store.

The shopkeeper's displeased voice rang out behind me. "Hey, Cinders. If ya want a decent weapon, go talk to the dwarf blacksmith down the street. He's a cranky old bastard, but tell him the old man from the general store sent ya an' he'll probably make ya somethin', if ya have the coin."

"Okay."

Cinders? Was that me? Also, just how much of a curmudgeon did the dwarf need to be for this old man to call him cranky?

"Huh?" As I stepped out of the shop, I saw the two siblings from earlier waiting for me. Was there still something they wanted?

I shot them a glare, and the older brother flinched. "W-We cleaned that up, just so you know!"

Oh. That? "Okay," I said.

"A-Also, we won't tell anyone!"

"Okay."

"A-And—" He wasn't done yet? The boy looked around nervously, and his sister tugged on his sleeve. "M-My name's Jil! You better remember it!"

"Okay?"

"I'm Shuri!" added the girl, standing behind her stammering brother.

Why were they suddenly introducing themselves? Did they want to know my name? I had no idea why these two—whom I'd thoroughly intimidated—would approach me again, but they didn't seem suspicious. I figured I may as well give them a name.

"I'm A—" Wait. It was best for me not to give them my actual name. There could still be kids from the orphanage who remembered me, and things could get complicated if, because of that "otome game" or whatever it was, some noble claiming to be my relative showed up. "I'm...Alia," I said finally. Not a very creative choice by any means, but if I picked something that sounded too different from Alicia, I might not recognize it as my own name.

"What a girly name," Jil muttered. Hiding behind him, Shuri, with her cheeks flushed red, nodded.

Huh. Why was she blushing? And her eyes were sparkling as she stared at me, for some reason. That made me weirdly uncomfortable, but whatever. It wasn't as though I'd have much to do with those two anyway.

After that, I checked out the nearby shops and bought myself a loaf of brown bread from a stall. It was small but hefty and would last me a while.

Maybe it was due to the slums being nearby, but I felt gazes lingering on me, as if they knew I had coin despite being a child. If an adult attacked me head-on, it'd have very different results from my run-in with that drunkard. Towns could feel a lot more dangerous than the woods when one had money. There were still many things I needed in town, but it might be better for me to train in the forest until I got stronger, I figured.

"…"

"…"

"…"

All the while, those two siblings from earlier had been following a short distance behind me. Did they want to befriend me, as a fellow urchin? I would've considered it if I could trust them and if they were capable in a fight, but right now I could just barely manage myself. They'd have to give up on that idea. I consciously erased my presence and lost them. After I finally exited out the hidden tunnel to the outside, I let out the breath I'd been holding.

I considered making this area my temporary base, but monsters roamed north of this town, and running into them was a possibility. Returning to the

campsite along the highway, where dangerous creatures were scarce and I'd have access to water, was the better plan, I thought.

But I had things to do before I left. I set down my backpack and picked up one of the scanning crystals—it was partially used and barely emitted any aether, but my vision allowed me to see its color. All twenty of the ones I'd picked had vivid colors of various different attributes, and so they should have three, maybe four uses left in them. I felt bad for the shopkeeper, but only an idiot would have gone for the duds when they could tell them apart from the good ones, so I'd gone with the latter. I couldn't afford dozens of uses before learning Scan as a skill; ideally, I wanted to do so with just the crystals I'd bought.

I looked into the crystal in my hand, hoping to be able to scan my own stats, and the numbers were displayed on the crystal's surface.

```
Species: Human♀
Aether Points: 37/45 △ +32
Health Points: 23/32 △ +6
Strength: 3
Endurance: 4
Agility: 5
Dexterity: 5
[Practical Magic x6] NEW!
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 1] NEW!
```

[Stealth Lv. 1] NEW!

[Detection Lv.1] NEW!

[Night Vision Lv.1] NEW!

Overall Combat Power: 23 \triangle +2

▼Alia (Alicia)

That was a surprise. I hadn't learned a single combat skill, of course, but I'd learned several skills where before there'd been none. Maybe it was my ability to see mana as color that had unblocked several aether-related skills such as Stealth, Night Vision and Detection. If I managed to learn dagger skills, I'd be almost like an apprentice thief or assassin.

My current health points were quite low not because I was injured but because I hadn't fully recovered from fatigue due to the way I'd been living the past few days. My aether points had increased significantly, probably due to my aether-related and practical magic skills. I assumed these skills being seared into my soul, so to speak, had laid a foundation that enabled my aether to accumulate by that much.

That was a good thing, though. With forty-five aether points, I should recover four per hour, which would allow me to practice my aether-related skills more often.

As it got closer to noon, I cut some brown bread with a knife and nibbled on that along with a bit of dried meat. Then, carrying all my belongings, I began to move while keeping Boost active. My pack was quite heavy, but I still managed to return to the campsite in the same amount of time it had taken me to get to town.

I felt like I'd grown up a little.

The World of Magic

Two weeks had passed since I'd begun living as a vagrant.

In this continent, weeks, also known as "spirit weeks," were divided into seven days: Light, Shadow, Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, and Void. Lightdays were days of rest, and Shadowdays marked the start of the work week. Lamenting about how "the world's fallen to shadow" was a staple dad joke as a result.

Shadow was actually the element of rest, so Shadowdays were originally the days of rest. However, apparently, the Holy Church had mandated that Lightdays should be days of rest instead.

I'd gotten used to living in the woods over the past two weeks, but that was

strictly because this country was located in the southern part of the continent and the climate was mild. If it had been midsummer or midwinter, I might've already died of exposure. After what had happened with the old hag and that drunkard, I'd been on alert but never noticed any particular signs of being pursued. I'd also continued my usual exercises, both in physical training and in controlling my aether.

In the meantime, I'd returned to town once to replenish what necessities the forest couldn't provide. During that visit, I'd spotted the siblings, and they'd looked a bit better—perhaps they'd been able to afford decent meals with the money from the drunkard's wallet that I'd given them. My relationship with them, for the time being, seemed to hover somewhere between strangers and acquaintances. The older brother, Jil, seemed to see me as a rival for some reason, but the younger sister, Shuri, smiled widely and waved at me when she saw me.

As for my discovery that I could move my severed hair as an extension of my body, after a few tests I discovered I could only move it a few centimeters at best when swinging it around. Truly, nothing came easy in this world. Still, after about a hundred repetitions, my accuracy had increased to about twenty percent, and my hits were a little more powerful.

The bigger problem was that the hair itself had to be tied together for length, and after several dozen swings, it began to unravel. This was likely due to how low my dexterity was, but I found that after rebraiding my hair multiple times, my dexterity had gone up by one point.

▼Alia (Alicia)

Species: Human♀ (Rank 0)

Aether Points: $43/52 \triangle +7$

Health Points: $28/36 \triangle +4$

Strength: 3 (4)

Endurance: 4 (5)

Agility: 5 (6)

```
Dexterity: 6 △ +1
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 1] NEW!
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 1]
[Stealth Lv. 1]
[Night Vision Lv.1]
[Detection Lv.1]
Overall Combat Power: 24 (Boosted: 26) △ +1
```

I'd yet to learn any melee skills, but instead, I'd learned Non-Elemental Magic at Level 1. And while I hadn't learned Scan either, it felt as though when I concentrated, my readings became more accurate.

There were two things that fell under the umbrella of Non-Elemental Magic and had skill levels: Boost and combat techniques. This had to mean that I'd learned my new skill due to picking up Boost on its own, even if it was originally meant to be learned alongside melee skills. And judging by its effect on my overall combat power, Boost provided an increase of ten percent or so at Level 1.

This meant Feld could use Boost at Level 5...which meant he could also use melee skills at Level 5. And that was considered the limit of an ordinary human's capabilities. No wonder he was so strong.

It was likely I'd only been learning magic-related skills because my body was still small and unable to handle physical skills. Feld had told me I'd be able to learn melee skills quickly due to having already learned Boost, but given my current situation, even if I could cut the time to learn from two, maybe three years down to only six months, that was still time I didn't have. Was just repeating the movements precisely not enough? Maybe there was some kind of trick to it.

As for the increase in my aether, that was likely due to both my aetherfocused training and having learned Boost through Non-Elemental Magic. But the reason that my health points had gone up couldn't be just that I'd gotten used to life in the woods; I figured it was also related to the pain I felt in my legs.

At first, I'd assumed the sudden pain was muscle soreness due to fatigue and excessive training, but my knowledge told me a different story: these were growing pains. This phenomenon supposedly happened when the human body experienced rapid growth, but this typically only began with older and physically larger children, past the age of ten. I worried about why I'd be experiencing this at the age of seven, and searching my knowledge for answers told me it had to do with aether.

This wasn't the norm among commoners, but noble children who began their aether training at an early age seemed to grow faster. Some nobles claimed they grew quickly and aged slowly due to being chosen by the gods and possessing blue blood. However, according to that woman's mentor, that was simply a natural consequence of having a significant amount of aether. And indeed, my current aether was higher than that of the average adult.

Still, according to my knowledge, even among nobles it was unusual for seven-year-olds to grow this rapidly. Perhaps this had less to do with skills and combat training and more to do with the fact that most seven-year-olds wouldn't be undergoing such intense training in the first place.

To summarize, since my aether had grown to the level of an adult's, my body was also growing rapidly, causing pain in my joints. This meant rest wouldn't have alleviated it, and so there was no reason for me to interrupt my training. Still, it did make training less efficient, so I decided to focus on practicing magic instead.

I had to decide what kind of magic to learn, though. And before I could decide that, I needed to consider which type of mage I wanted to be.

The first choice was sorcerer, which I'd been considering for a while. They used their own aether to disrupt the mana in the environment, thus performing elemental sorcery. They were the most common variety of caster; their spells were versatile and suited for most situations. There was a downside, however—the power and effectiveness of spells depended on the caster's mental

fortitude. And although it varied with one's level of proficiency, long periods of mental focus were needed to cast, which meant the sorcerer was vulnerable while casting, which was risky.

Second were animists, whose specialty was bartering with nearby spirits for power. By increasing one's affinity with spirits, one could reduce aether consumption and easily achieve more powerful spells than were possible with human sorcery, which was the main advantage of animism. On the flip side, if the spirits were in a bad mood, the spells' power would decrease. Not only that, there were limitations, such as an inability to use earth-elemental spells while on paved roads, or wind-elemental spells in caves. Likewise, using fire spells in the woods would anger water spirits.

Summoner was the third option. Through the use of magic circles, they could summon spirits or demons they'd formed contracts with. Once a contract had been established, the summoned entities would usually obey and fight for the caster, which set summoners apart from animists. The act of summoning required mental focus, but once it was complete, one could join the fight as a fighter or sorcerer, which was its main selling point. Conversely, one needed to either entice or subjugate an entity into forming a contract, and maintaining the summoning steadily consumed aether. As a result, summoning was usually something advanced sorcerers learned for self-defense, and beginners rarely started with it.

All things considered, sorcerer was my only viable option.

There were six elements in magic. The general view was that one's elemental affinity determined which spells one could cast, but I thought that the elements one had an affinity for was likely influenced by one's experiences, preferences, and environment. Also, perhaps repeatedly using spells caused an aethercrystal of the corresponding element to form in one's body.

But was it really possible that no sorcerer had ever figured out something even a child such as myself could think of? If they did know and still couldn't use most elements, there had to be some other factor involved, such as the time required to learn.

For instance, let's say it took ten attempts to learn the skill for a favored

element, and a hundred for an element one wasn't good at. It'd take decades to master a single element—a long time even for an immortal elf, let alone a mortal human. In that case, it was far more efficient to ignore elements one was poor at and stick to one's area of expertise.

Besides, even among skilled elven sorcerers there were caveats. A forest-dwelling wood elf couldn't use fire-elemental spells. Most likely they subconsciously avoided the element, as fire could burn forests down.

And there could be other, hidden factors at play, such as gifts from the gods and all that. Either way, practicing too many types of sorcery was inefficient, and considering there could be additional factors I wouldn't know about, I figured I should stick to learning one or two different elements.

Thus, rather than trying out different things to see what I was good at, I wanted to choose based solely on efficiency when taking my combat style into account, before I had the chance to develop a preference.

Strictly from a combat perspective, fire sorcery was optimal. Fire was effective against most creatures, and if the flames spread, one could expect burn damage too. The only drawbacks were that said burn damage could backfire, and because fire had no physical weight to it, projectile-based spells were slow.

As an example, Fire Arrow would indeed shoot a flaming projectile, but it was only as fast as a pebble thrown by a child at full force, and a proper warrior could easily dodge it. Meanwhile, the earth-elemental spell Stone Bullet did high physical damage and the projectile flew as quickly as a rock flung by an adult using a slingshot. However, if the caster's aether was low, sturdy armor or a shield was enough to easily defend against Stone Bullet.

Water spells could be used to create arrows of ice that one might think would pack a punch due to their speed, but many water sorcery spells had antibiological effects, and their physical damage was low as a result. Wind spells were not only speedy but also difficult to see, which made them less likely to be detected by an enemy. However, their antiphysical and antibiological effects were low compared to those of other elements.

Light sorcery could recover health and mend wounds and had other

convenient spells that could do things such as cure poison but provided very few offensive options. Shadow sorcery, meanwhile, had illusion and support spells, and if skilled enough, one could supposedly learn space-time spells for teleportation; only court sorcerer-level practitioners could achieve such feats, however. And, like light, shadow had very few direct attacks.

Each element had its own strengths and weaknesses. Considering all of this, fire sorcery was geared toward attacking, whereas water sorcery could heal injuries and perform simple medical treatments. That woman could use both, and so her choices had probably been ideal for a typical sorcerer.

I thought about what I wanted from magic in the first place: a tool I could use to help me survive. Relying on offensive magic that consumed large amounts of aether felt risky, especially considering my total aether was only about the same as, maybe slightly higher than, an average adult's. Besides, I could simply work on my Dagger Mastery and Throwing skills for offense—and thus, my choice of element should be something that complemented those.

With a *whoosh*, my skewer cut through the air, then fell to the ground, sticking into the soil. I'd been practicing my throws with the skewers for the past two weeks. Since they were hard to use as they were, I'd spent two days sharpening their points like blades on the whetstone. It'd taken a while, but thankfully, my efforts had paid off, and the skewers had turned out to be made of steel underneath the tarnished, rusty surfaces, like I'd hoped. I wouldn't have known what to do if I'd gone to all that trouble only to find out they'd been made of simple cast iron all along.

Nevertheless, it stuck in the ground, not the trunk of the tree I'd aimed it at. Maybe you're thinking this was a waste of time, but just getting the skewer to fly straight at all represented significant progress for me.

I figured that, to help me with melee combat and weapon throwing, Light Mastery and Shadow Mastery would be ideal. With those two, I could heal my injuries after fighting in melee range and restore my limited health points. And, since I'd already learned Stealth, I should have a good affinity with shadow sorcery's illusion spells.

Instead of attempting to defeat enemies head-on, I could outwit them, set

traps, and escape if the need arose. Let knights and muscle-bound giants like Feld do the fair-and-square fighting.

Now then, I was just about ready to get started, but...although that woman had more or less been trained in identifying her elemental affinities, she'd known nothing at all about shadow sorcery. Well, it was possible she'd never had any interest in it, and so her mentor's lessons had gone in one ear and out the other.

Nevertheless, she'd known a great deal about light sorcery. I wondered why her knowledge had been so skewed, and it turned out that apparently, the version of me she knew from the "otome game" had been a light magic sorcery, so the woman had done her utmost to study it.

Why had she never learned it, despite her keen interest? It seemed that she'd learned fire and water sorcery quite easily, thought those were more fun, and gotten bored with light sorcery. Focus was clearly very important for sorcerers.

Anyway, time to train light sorcery. Nobles could enroll in the Sorcerers' Academy and learn basic magic there, but how did commoners do it when they didn't even know what elements they had an affinity for? Level 1 sorcery—or, to use the proper term, Grade 1 sorcery—was available to learn in the form of books sold by the Sorcerers' Guild in a bid to produce more sorcerers. The only way to learn any spells above Level 2—Grade 2—was to apprentice under a mentor like that woman had, or actually *join* the Sorcerers' Guild and purchase the book for the spell one wanted to learn.

Training in elemental magic began with precise memorization of the incantation, then chanting it accurately. According to that woman's mentor, one also had to learn the meaning of the spell and understand how that meaning affected the world, otherwise the spell wouldn't activate.

To explain, incantations were adapted from the spirit tongue, which was the language spirits used to interact with the world. It'd been simplified by ancient elves so that humans could use it—put bluntly, it was a bastardized form of the language. Though it'd been adapted for human use, it could take months—or even years, if one was particularly bad at it—for a human to grasp, since it was originally the language of beings with different thought patterns. That woman

had only had a vague memory of the meanings behind most of the incantations she'd used, but she'd remembered the meanings behind the incantations for light sorcery spells (though she couldn't fully understand them).

The Grade 1 light sorcery spells were Cure and Restore. A brief review: Cure restored health points and forcibly promoted natural healing of physical injuries. Therefore, if used by an unskilled caster, it could cause bones to set incorrectly, or result in significant scarring. Restore, meanwhile, was more akin to reconstructing the body than it was to natural healing. It healed wounds completely and left no scars, but its range was small, it took time, and if used willy-nilly on deep wounds, it could consume the caster's vitality and leave them on the brink of death. Ordinary wounds could be taken care of with Cure, so the reality of it was that many people, like Feld, never bothered to learn Restore.

The incantation for Cure was "Reteewaarstrizahiekaa," meaning "heal the target." That was a somewhat long incantation, I thought, wondering whether there was a reason it sounded shorter when translated into the common tongue. Maybe modifying the spirit tongue into something humans could use was too tall an order?

For Restore, the incantation was, "Reteeshwaarvoldeanosstorriesten," meaning "restore the body to its original state." Both were somewhat difficult to remember. According to that woman's knowledge, sometimes sorcery failed to activate due to subtle imperfections in pronunciation. It seemed easier to activate a spell by chanting it in rhyme, but ultimately, the correct answer seemed to be the nagging point that the woman's mentor had always emphasized: to grasp the meaning of the spell and enunciate the incantation correctly.

For now, I figured I'd give the Cure incantation a try. Fortunately—or should I say unfortunately?—I had no shortage of minor injuries from living in the woods.

"Retewaarstrizahikaa," I chanted. Had I gotten it wrong? Sure enough, there were no signs of a spell activating, and when I peeked through a scanning crystal, my aether points hadn't gone down. Normally, one would add "Cure" at the end of the incantation, but that was in the common tongue, not the spirit

tongue, and it wasn't part of the spell—just an invocation, like the words used to activate Practical Magic. In other words, its purpose was to make the mental image of the effect clearer, and omitting it was no issue. Still, it seemed as though most people couldn't even activate non-elemental spells such as Boost or combat skills without saying those words out loud, so perhaps I should include them anyway until I got used to it.

Either way, my first attempt at casting had ended in failure. Had it been my pronunciation that was off, or my understanding of the meaning? I tried altering the pronunciation here and there several times, but still Cure showed no signs of activating.

I probed into that woman's knowledge. The Cure her mentor had taught her and the one Feld had used both had the same incantation, but now that I thought about it, their pronunciation seemed a little different. Feld had told me it'd taken him about half a year to be able to use it, and all he'd done during that time was repeatedly practice chanting the spell, so how was it that he'd finally succeeded? Had he attempted to pronounce the words over and over until he got it right? Though my memories of both were faint, I recalled the incantation Feld had used and compared it against the mentor's.

There was a difference, albeit a slight one, I thought. In fact, it seemed like the incantation the woman's mentor had used was a bit shorter than the one the woman herself remembered.

"Wait..." I mused. Had her mentor shortened the incantation? And it'd still activated regardless?

Let's see. According to my knowledge, there were slight regional variations in the common tongue, and some terms were shortened in everyday life, even if it resulted in sentences that were not considered "proper." So, even with abbreviated words, as long as both the listener and the speaker understood what they meant, communication could still happen effectively. This was likely the reason that it was necessary to "grasp the meaning of the spell" when chanting. It was likely that the spells passed down by ancient elves were written in "proper" sentences and were shortened simply because they were too long.

In other words, saying them in full was too cumbersome, so they were cut

short. In the process, the "proper" sentences fell into disuse, not unlike archaic language, which wasn't entirely a bad thing. People remembered words incorrectly even in the modern common tongue. Sure, the more familiar one was with the "proper" way to say something, the harder it was for them to discern the correct meaning of these shortened forms, resulting in failure to communicate. But to those who *could* discern the correct meaning, modern language allowed for a wider range of expressions than archaic texts.

Sorcery had both evolved and regressed in this way. It had become harder to remember and easier to mess up, but once the meaning was properly understood, it was simpler to use than the original version.

I had a hypothesis: incantations were originally sentences too. So, how had they changed over time?

Let's say, as an example, that in the common tongue, one might've said, "Treat and heal all of the injuries on that person's body." That, in turn, became, "Treat and heal the injuries on that person," which then became, "Treat and heal that person's injuries," then, "Heal that person's injuries," and finally, "Heal that person."

It was conjecture on my part, but maybe something along these lines had happened? Depending on the context and pronunciation, the meaning might just barely get across. To someone with no idea what the original meaning was, even just a slight accent could turn it into gibberish.

So how was that for a theory? Sure, one could use Feld's method to learn by feeling and through repeated practice of the incantation, but I was wary of that approach. How could one communicate properly through words with no grasp of what they meant?

Strength was a necessity for survival, and I was a female and a child besides. Sticking to methods that worked for men with impressive physiques like Feld's would cost me dearly when push came to shove. I had to be strong, no matter how—whether it took me longer wasn't important; I wanted to achieve true strength, through my own power.

I began a more thorough analysis of incantations.

Assuming the incantation for Cure, "Reteewaarstrizahiekaa," was a sentence,

that meant it was divided into several words. Among them, some had been shortened. I also thought there were instances where words slurred together. If I knew other incantations, I could look for similarities and do research from there, but that woman only knew spells up to Grade 2 for light, fire, and water. While it was commendable that she'd memorized that many, she hadn't really remembered the incantations for the spells she'd used less often, so I couldn't give her that much credit.

Either way, I figured I should switch my methods up a bit. First, I wanted to look for words hidden within the incantations. Haphazardly chanting them wouldn't tell me if I'd gotten them right, so I decided to try and find the one word that was sure to be there: "heal." Simply enunciating words in the dumbed-down version of the spirit tongue wasn't enough to cast a spell. Yes, understanding the meaning and vocalizing the words were part of it, but one also needed to infuse the words with aether.

It wasn't that difficult to do, really. Maybe for a beginner, yes, but essentially, even just activating your inner aether, in and of itself, consisted of infusing something with aether. For me, it was just like using Boost—ideally, I'd eventually be able to activate my inner aether without triggering Boost, but for the time being, I wanted to keep it active so I could train my combat abilities while I pondered the incantations and their component words.

I split the incantation for Cure into what looked like words to me, then chanted them while focusing on the word "heal," many times over. Failure wasn't a concern—I made sure to vocalize the word while carefully moving my body in the meantime so as to not neglect my combat training.

The first day yielded no results; I hadn't really expected to get it right so easily either way. Simultaneously training my body and mind must've taken a toll on me, however, because I slept like a log that night.

The second day was more of the same. Maybe I was missing parts of the words and not pronouncing them correctly—like, say, only having the "hea" part of "heal." So I decided to try mixing in various sounds.

The third day, again, yielded no results. My current health points went down a little, but my maximum health points increased by one.

By the fourth day I was getting used to training body and mind at the same time. Still no results, but I noticed I'd actually consumed a little aether this time.

On the fifth day I started looking for which words were consuming my aether. Also, possibly due to the fact I was constantly using aether, both my Boost and my practical magic had become more effective.

The sixth day came and went, and I started to wonder if this method was really going to help me find the words at all. If it were so easy to find them, surely other sorcerers would've already done that. Perhaps because I'd gotten distracted thinking about it, I cut my finger on a rabbit bone. It hurt.

And then, on day seven—

"Reteel Hiekaa," I chanted. At the sound, a faint wisp of light-elemental aether flickered in my hand.

I'd made a mistake. The word "heal" didn't exist in the incantation for Cure.

What I'd assumed—and most sorcerers would've probably thought the same—was that Cure was a healing spell, but no. What it did was restore one's vitality (that is, health points) and also gradually heal wounds. Meaning this was a *restoration* spell, and wounds were just being healed as a natural byproduct of the vitality restoration process.

"Reteel" and "hiekaa" were the two words that had consumed minute amounts of aether. There'd been other similar words, but it was these two together that had finally activated something that looked like a spell. Maybe these words fell under the umbrella of healing, but that wasn't their actual meaning? If Cure had a restorative effect, maybe "vitality" or "life force" were part of the incantation. As for the other word, to trigger the effect, maybe "restore"? So... "restore" and "vitality"? As I chanted, I felt like "reteel" might've meant "restore" and "hiekaa," "vitality."

Having figured this out, I began to slightly alter the pronunciation and use synonyms of those words, repeating the process over and over. Since this was consuming a modest amount of my aether, I couldn't continue my aether-fueled physical training. For now, though, I was focused on honing my sorcery, so it didn't matter.

And two days later, at last—

"Reteel Waarstriza Hiekaa," I chanted. "Cure!" A faint glow enveloped my hand, and the small cut on my fingertip from a few days ago vanished. "I did it!"

I still hadn't perfectly grasped the meaning, and the spell was weak, but I'd definitely just activated Cure. Upon viewing my stats through a scanning crystal, I could see Light Mastery Level 1 was now listed there:

```
▼Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human\ (Rank 1) \Delta+1
Aether Points: 24/65 \triangle +13
Health Points: 32/37 \triangle +1
Strength: 4 (5)
Endurance: 5 (6)
Agility: 7 (8)
Dexterity: 6
[Light Mastery Lv. 1] NEW!
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 1]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 1]
[Stealth Lv. 1]
[Night Vision Lv.1]
[Detection Lv.1]
Overall Combat Power: 26 (Boosted: 28) \triangle +2
                              ***
```

A hundred and fifty years ago, the Kingdom of Claydale—one of the great nations on the continent of Sars—had annexed the northern duchy of Dandorl. Thirty years later, they'd also annexed the southern duchy of Melrose. Neither

annexation had been peaceful, however; they'd been carried out through continued political and economic pressure and, ultimately, intimidation through military prowess: Claydale had invaded the two nations.

The ruling families of the two duchies were neither killed nor left destitute; instead, they were given the title of "margrave" and granted jurisdiction over their respective northern and southern territories. This had been done due to political considerations: although Claydale was superior to both nations in various fields, it lacked the military power to manage both territories through force alone. To curb the dissatisfaction among the people and nobility of the annexed lands, they needed the name and influence of the ruling families from both Dandorl and Melrose.

"Oh no," mumbled a young girl. "This is the world of Silver Love..."

The eight-year-old was the youngest member of one such former ruling family, House Dandorl. She was also the first daughter of Margrave Dandorl and heiress to that title. After spending days unconscious, suffering from a high fever, she'd finally awoken, having regained her memories of a previous life.

Though her memories and self from her current life up to the age of eight remained intact, her previous self had mixed in with them. After a period of confusion, she'd finally made sense of the situation.

Margravine Clara Dandorl, age eight, would go on to enroll at the Sorcerers' Academy at age thirteen. On the day of her graduation party, her fiancé, the crown prince, would break off their engagement. Then she'd either be exiled or, worst-case scenario, executed. Such would be her fate as the villainess of this "otome game."

Former high school girl Clara, realizing she and the villainess were one and the same, began to jot down her memories of the game in a notebook, away from her maid's prying eyes. After weeks of agonizing over how to avoid the worst possible outcome, she came to a conclusion.

"I might need to kill the heroine."

Targeted

After about ten days, I'd finally learned Cure and acquired Light Mastery at Level 1. Though that felt like a long time, it was actually astonishingly fast, and definitely not the speed at which children would have normally learned from scratch.

And because of that, my rank—which was determined directly by the highest level mastery skill for either sorcery or combat techniques—had risen from zero to one. With this, I met the minimum requirements to join the Adventurers' Guild, though I didn't plan on doing so immediately. Without at least one combat skill, a child like me would've been easy pickings for other adventurers.

Though I'd been keeping up with my melee training, I had yet to learn any related skills. I wondered whether I should continue doing that or research the meaning of the words in the incantation for Cure to improve its effect. There was also the option of learning Restore, another spell I wanted.

Still, my supplies were running low again, so I decided to go back to the town once more. Originally, I'd planned on foraging for items I could sell on my next visit, but I'd been so absorbed in my magic training that I ended up not collecting much. The cranky old man at the general store had mentioned rabbits too, but any rabbits I caught, I ate, and my skinning ability was still too crude for me to consider selling the pelts.

"Oh well," I muttered.

I decided to bring the more unique of the herbs I'd gathered over my three weeks of living in the woods. Herbs commonly used in home remedies like antidotes grew everywhere, and insect-repellent plants were relatively easy to find, so they wouldn't bring much money. It wasn't worth the hassle to bring them for just a few copper.

I'd been reading through the notebook that woman had stolen from her mentor. At first, I'd needed to use my knowledge like a dictionary, looking up words one by one, but I could read now, albeit slowly. There I'd found information on something called a mana apple. It grew on shrubs found in regions low on mana, only had two to three millimeters of edible flesh, and was far too tart to eat. But, since it grew in harsh environments, it had adapted to store mana in its seeds in order to survive.

Those seeds were used to create "Aether Potions" that could restore one's aether. The book also explained the basics of alchemy, and though I planned on learning how to brew potions eventually, I couldn't yet.

I'd been fortunate to come across some mana apples—I'd found a lone plant growing on a mountain cliff, and I'd only managed to harvest a few. Still, it was a good idea for me to sell them now. While, yes, only the seeds were used, meaning they could be stored for long periods of time, the fact that the flesh was intact indicated they were fresh, which meant I could sell them for a higher price.

Before leaving, I made myself a meal. The dried vegetables and meat from my last trip to town were almost gone, but I made soup with what remained, plus a bit of salt, and filled up on that. My utensils and pot were made from clay solidified with Harden; while I couldn't sell them, they'd been very useful to me over the past few weeks. The soup wasn't great, but I did feel more energetic from having something warm in my stomach. Besides, I'd built a tolerance to simple meals.

Afterward, I went to the creek where I'd set up base and washed myself. I'd been washing my clothes on occasion too—I didn't want to look too much like a street urchin, as that would have put me at a disadvantage when bartering, and unaccompanied children were easy targets for robbery.

Maybe it was time to get myself a new outfit. My clothes were relatively decent, even if secondhand, but they had begun to fray due to me living in the woods, besides which I'd grown bigger thanks to my increase in aether. The hem of my tunic, which had once hung down to my knees, now reached only about halfway down my thighs. It wasn't that I cared about being exposed, but if people caught on that I was a girl, I could get in trouble. I didn't understand why, exactly, but my knowledge cautioned me to be mindful.

It was time to go. As the sun began to set, I slung my bag over my shoulder and started walking. Right now, the soldiers patrolling the roads were the biggest potential problem for me; I didn't want to be taken into protective custody for being a child, and I wasn't confident in my ability to escape if I ran into an ill-intentioned patrolman. At night, however, I figured I could manage, since I did have the skill Night Vision—even if only at Level 1.

I'd acquired the skill from seeing mana as color, and its accuracy had definitely improved over my three weeks living in the woods. And though the soldiers were a nuisance, they did eliminate dangerous threats like wolves and such, so the nights were safest for me.

I made my way soundlessly down the path, keeping Boost active. As I walked, I practiced moving quietly while blending into my surroundings by matching the mana in the environment. One thing I'd learned was that in order to not make a sound, it wasn't enough to move slowly and quietly; one also needed muscle strength. Using the muscles in one's legs and body to absorb the impact of moving naturally reduced the noise. Moreover, moving in tandem with the flow of surrounding mana helped one's presence blend in even further.

So it's not that I was simply using Boost to go faster—I was using it to better absorb the impact of my steps so I could walk faster while still moving quietly.

"Phew..."

Normally it took half a day to get from the campsite to town by carriage. On foot, leaving early in the morning, one would arrive by nightfall. The first time I made the trip, I'd left in the morning and arrived close to midnight the next day, but this time, thanks to my increased aether allowing me to sustain Boost for longer, I arrived at just about the same hour, despite having left at night the day before.

Either way, I was very tired and decided to sleep in the nearby woods to restore my aether and vitality. I could've used Cure and kept going, but Feld had told me that exhausting one's aether made stamina build up slower, and if that was true, then I should conserve it as much as possible while I was still learning.

I took a nap in a tree, woke up to the sound of the bell tolling three times to signal it was eight in the morning, and snuck into the slums through my usual spot. Aligning my aether with the surrounding mana, I concealed my presence, then avoided putting my heels down as I walked so as to not make any noise.

Thanks to my having learned Stealth and Detection, the residents of the slums now noticed me less often. But since I still lacked real-world experience, I figured it was best to be cautious, knowledge or no.

I felt *something* nearby. A presence. What it was, I wasn't entirely sure. It wasn't easily recognizable like Feld's. Well, perhaps "presence" was the wrong word—it was more like a...discomfort? Less like something was there and more like something that should've been there was missing. That kind of discomfort.

Am I imagining things? I wondered as I picked up my pace. I had a bad feeling, and I wanted to hurry and get my shopping done so I could get away from town as fast as possible.

"Well, if it ain't Cinders," said the old shopkeeper, gazing sharply at me as I walked into the general store. When I didn't respond, he asked, "Preserved foods again?"

"Yeah," I replied. "Do you have anything that's, like...high in nutritional value and will keep for a while?"

"Nutritional value? Fancy words for a brat yer age," he groused. "I dunno what that means, but if ya want somethin' that'll fill yer belly, I got nuts." Annoyed, he fetched a small jute bag from the back. "Here. Buncha nuts of all kinds. Five copper for the bag."

"These are burnt."

The nuts had been roasted for preservation, but many of them were weirdly burnt or cracked.

"Ya know what kinda shop this is," the old shopkeeper said. "Ya want the good stuff, ya go to the good shops."

These were probably leftover items that couldn't be sold at stalls or carts; they looked bad and tasted bad. Still, merchants would rather sell them under the table for next to nothing than toss them out. After all, people like me would still buy them, as long as they were cheap.

"Throw in a little extra?" I asked.

"Buy more and I will," he replied. "Ya want anythin' else?"

I took the mana apples out of my bag. "Would you buy stuff like this?"

The shopkeeper's eyes widened for a moment before returning to their usual piercing glare. "Where'd ya get these?"

"I picked them deep in the woods. Dunno where exactly. No landmarks."

"Uh-huh," he mumbled. I wasn't sure what he saw in me that convinced him, but he understood I hadn't stolen them. The old man took a long look at the mana apples and gestured as if thinking for a moment. "Ya know what these are?"

"Yeah."

"They ain't bad quality, but they ain't perfect. Looks like ya picked them a while ago, so they're startin' to turn. An' considerin' how long it'll take me to find a buyer, I can't buy 'em at market price, ya know?"

"I don't mind. I know what kinda shop this is."

The old shopkeeper chuckled lightly. "I'll pay ya three silver for all six. Don't like it, go somewhere else."

"That's fine," I said with a nod. What he'd offered must've been about half of the going price, but a "proper" shop would've probably taken advantage of a child like me. Besides, this old man may have been unfriendly and mean looking, but my gut told me he was honest, even when bartering with kids.

I also bought some beans, dried meat, and—despite them being rather pricey—a small amount of salt and crystallized sugar. *I can probably get a better deal* for dried vegetables at a stall, I thought to myself.

Suddenly, the door to the store was flung open, and I noticed a pair of shadows on the floor flinching as the old man yelled at the new arrivals. "Don't just barge in, ya damn brats!"

"Brats?" I echoed.

Before I could turn around to confirm whether the people who'd just walked in were children, a young girl raised her voice. "Oh! It's Alia!"

The two siblings, then.

Forgetting all about her scolding, Shuri, the younger sister, came running over and gave me a hug. Jil, the older brother, shifted his bewildered gaze between me, Shuri, and the shopkeeper, finally settling on me to escape the old man's sharp glare.

"Alia!" the boy said. "Where have you been?"

"Outside," I replied noncommittally as I pried Shuri away from me. We weren't friends, nor did we associate in any way.

Seeming a little spooked, Jil closed his mouth, then quickly stuffed his hand into his bag as if remembering something. He took something out, then said, "I can go outside too, y'know! I came to sell a rabbit I caught!"

"Wouldn't it be better for you to eat it yourselves?" I asked. Also, while it did seem he'd caught a rabbit outside town, it looked ragged, and he hadn't drained its blood. I stole a glance at the shopkeeper, who sighed in annoyance as he saw the rabbit.

"Alia, did you grow bigger?" Shuri butted in. I had noticed the growing pains from the increase in my aether, and Shuri's eyes seemed to be a little further down than they'd been the last time I'd seen her.

I didn't want to bother explaining, so I changed the subject. "Why were you guys in such a rush just now?"

Jil jumped at the chance to respond. "Oh yeah! There was some weird dude! He was just staring at me and Shuri and sighing, see. We thought that was creepy, so we ran away."

"Huh..." Some weird dude? I wondered. Was it Feld? What a rude thought.

The shopkeeper, who'd seemingly been listening in, spoke up. "People been talkin' 'bout some strange guy 'round these parts. They say it could be a bona fide thief. Don't go gettin' kidnapped now, ya hear?"

"Okay..."

A thief, huh? That would be a problem, a much more dangerous one than some wannabe knight. Thieves weren't ordinary pickpockets or punks; they actually had thievery-related skills, and were likely to know their way around a fight too. They were part of a mafia-like criminal organization known as the Thieves' Guild, and while they wouldn't do anything so outrageous that the government would need to step in, they were all about money at the end of the day, so who knew what they might do.

Maybe the presence I'd felt on my way in had been this mystery man. If it hadn't just been my imagination and he really had been there, I felt I was outclassed.

I needed to hurry and get out of town. I wasn't done shopping yet, but I couldn't risk staying, so I left the shop and made my way back to the hole leading outside. Just as I was about to leave, moving stealthily in order to once again avoid the siblings, who seemed bent on following me, I caught another whiff of that presence.

Again, to be precise, there wasn't a presence. There was just the absence of one, and that disturbed me. And if this was the work of an adept thief, I thought, it likely meant they were under Stealth.

Looking around, I noticed an unusual color in the surrounding mana that I would have missed had I just been relying on ordinary eyesight. Even just sensing the surrounding mana wouldn't have been enough. But when the color of the mana seemed to take on the shape of a person, I focused on it, and suddenly the humanoid mana swelled.

Is that Boost?!

I only knew because I'd felt it close up when Feld had used the technique. No, actually, it was mostly a coincidence that the thought had even crossed my mind. As soon as I noticed what was happening, I almost involuntarily leaped sideways, and a split second later, an iron blade stabbed into the ground where I'd been standing.

"Well, well." A man revealed himself—likely having come out of Stealth—and smiled cockily at the way I'd dodged his throwing knife. "This might be fun."

Desperation Rewarded

In a deserted corner of the slums, a man who looked to be in his early thirties aimed a dagger at me. He was of medium build and height, had brown hair and eyes, and his face was the kind one would lose in a crowd. The moment I sensed danger behind his cocky grin, I activated Boost at full power and fled.

His Stealth skill was far superior to mine, and in combat, the difference

between us would've probably been insurmountable. Abandoning the idea of fighting or hiding from him and simply running at full speed was my best bet. The hole leading to the outside was too small for an adult man to fit through, so I figured I could escape through it and ran for dear life.

A sound sliced through the air as a sharp blade narrowly missed my nose.

"Hey, now! Don't run!" the man called out.

I said nothing and kept running, cold sweat rolling down my back at the man's dangerous aura. He was toying with me—that was how far above me he was in terms of ability. Though I didn't get the chance to use a scanning crystal, I knew this man was no ordinary thief; I could feel his overwhelming presence, of a different variety but similar intensity to Feld's.

Could I even escape him? Still, it beat fighting, I thought as I took off running. The man was hot on my tail, but he was also likely underestimating me, given I was a child. Otherwise he would've already put a knife in my back and ended the charade.

As I ran, I flung one of my skewers behind me, making the man exclaim in surprise. "Whoa!"

I'd been practicing but still hadn't acquired the Throwing skill, so my skewer wouldn't have pierced a living creature very deeply. My idea was more to make the man, who was still treating this as a game, not want to risk injury by coming too close.

A sharp sound rang out as he easily deflected the skewer with his blade. During his momentary lapse in attention, however, I gathered the light-elemental mana around me and aggressively changed my aether to match it, painting it white.

"Shine!" I chanted, rapidly burning the mana to emit a blinding light for a brief moment.

"Whoa!" the man once again exclaimed in shock. Not wanting to waste the opportunity, I made a sharp turn to try and lose him, but then he muttered something. "Noise!"

Was that magic?! In an instant, I heard the sound of his footsteps coming

from the direction I was heading toward, and I reflexively leaped to the side. Though I was sure I'd temporarily blinded him, the flash of light had impaired my own vision too. I was uncertain about the effect of the spell he'd just used, so I tried to guide myself away from there using the color and feel of the mana around me, but then someone suddenly grabbed the back of my head.

"Gotcha." The man I'd just heard ahead of me was actually behind me. Not only that, he knew exactly where I was, despite the fact I'd blinded him. How?

I had no time to think about it. Instinctively, I drew the knife at my waist, but a sharp metallic sound rang out as he deflected it with ease, sending it flying. Exhaling sharply, I pushed aside the storm brewing in my mind, enduring the pain in my scalp as I forcefully changed my posture and slammed my elbow into the man's wrist. His grip loosened enough that I broke free, and I rolled forward on the ground to put distance between us. On all fours, I glared up at the man, neither of us saying a word.

So this was real combat. The man narrowed his still partially blinded eyes, grinning wickedly at his now ash-coated palm. If it weren't for the fact I'd applied the ash to my hair to conceal its sheen, I wouldn't have been able to escape. The only reason I was still standing was the fact my opponent wasn't taking this seriously; the immense ability gap between us and the intimidating aura he emitted made my body tremble. I'd broken out of his grasp but was no better off. It was likely impossible for me to escape, and this wasn't someone I could beat in a fight.

Still, I wasn't going to go down easily. Suppressing the fear swelling in my heart, I took a sharp breath, inhaling the surrounding mana while again painting my own aether with light. Exhaling in an almost catlike hiss, I focused on restoring my vitality.

I had no time to cast Cure, but it still felt like focusing was having some sort of effect, perhaps due to my having acquired Light Mastery at Level 1. Placebo or no, I did feel slightly reenergized.

Escape was no longer an option. As my focus switched from flight to fight, it felt as though the gears in my head were clicking into place. I likely couldn't beat this man, but I hadn't given up on life. I was going to pry survival from the

jaws of death itself if I had to. I'd show him what I could do when cornered.

I pulled a skewer from my belt and gritted my teeth. I lacked strength and speed. My legs alone wouldn't have been enough to go as fast as I needed, so I activated Boost, digging all four of my enhanced limbs into the ground as if they were claws. Making my whole body taut like a bow, I was ready to shoot myself like an arrow.

There was no doubt the entire atmosphere had shifted, and some of the color drained from the man's cheeks. He was going to regret attacking me so flippantly. I couldn't win, but I was *definitely* going to leave a wound nasty enough to make him wish he hadn't done this. And if that wound caused him to lose a fight against someone else, that would be enough of a victory for me.

I readied myself to deliver my desperate, final gamble. Now die!

"Whoa, whoa!" the man shouted in a panic, discarding the dagger and raising both hands. "Hold up a sec! Time out!"

What was he planning?



"Wait! Wait, I said!" I was ready to attack when he raised his voice even more. "My bad, all right?! Sorry! I was just looking for some slum kids for a job!"

Say what?

"Seriously, I'm sorry!" the man repeated. "It's the first time a kid has ever seen through my Stealth, and then you ran off, and that was so brilliant I just couldn't help it! I had to chase after you!"

As if to show he had no intention of fighting, he sat on the ground and joined his hands together. I glared at him through half-lidded eyes in incredulous silence for a moment before using Cure on myself.

This *again*! *Another* of these adults! First Feld, now this guy! Was I emitting some sort of scent that attracted this kind of man?!

Assuming what he'd said was true, he was looking for kids to give jobs to. I wondered if children could even work. Knowledge came to me that apparently, they could be useful in various ways—navigating small spaces, for instance, or getting adults to lower their guard. And the reason that a veteran like this guy was looking for slum kids was that he wanted someone he could trust with jobs long-term, should they prove useful.

"Ooh," he exclaimed. "You're just a kid, but you can use Cure! Where'd you learn it?"

"Doesn't matter," I muttered. "What I wanna know is what a *thief* wants with a kid."

"Hey! I'm no thief! I'm a proper scout, I'll have you know! Got a guild membership and everything! Don't lump me in with those crazies. Look, see?" he said, shoving a tag—some sort of proof of affiliation with the guild, I guessed—in my face.

"Okay, okay," I mumbled as I looked at his tag, which read "Rank 4." As I'd thought, the man was skilled. While even thieves joined the Adventurers' Guild sometimes, it was rare to find one with such high-level combat capabilities.

To the average person, thieves and scouts may have appeared similar, but in reality, they were quite different. Thieves were criminals and focused more on

remaining undetected than combat abilities. They had skills such as Stealth, Detection, and Lockpicking. They were basically a greedy bunch, so while their technical abilities might not have been that great, they were exceptionally cunning.

Scouts, meanwhile, also specialized in Stealth and Detection, but their emphasis was more on finding things than not being found themselves. They spotted and disarmed traps in ruins and dungeons, and collected and delivered valuable information to employers. Since adventurers had originally been mercenaries specialized in information mongering and ruin exploration, many highly capable scouts were registered with the guild to this day.

"So? Believe me now?" the man asked.

"Yeah." The man spoke so proudly of his own job; I got the same "vaguely irritating older man" vibes from him that I'd gotten from Feld. Maybe that was why one had reminded me so much of the other.

"So, mister..."

"I'm no mister!" he protested. "I'm only thirty-five. Call me Viro."

That's "mister" age, all right, I thought. He was older than my father, at least.

"So, Viro. What do you want me to do?" I asked. "Adventurers' Guild work?" I didn't fully trust him, but with how capable he was, it would have been way more profitable for him to explore ruins than deceive and sell children, so I'd lowered my guard a notch.

"Nah, not that. The client's a guy who once hired me through the guild, but right now I'm working for him on a personal basis."

"I'm not doing anything bad," I told him. "Can I even do whatever it is you need?"

"It's nothing bad, I'll have you know. It's just helping with security. Which, by the way, you'd have no problem doing." Maybe my question had reminded him of something, because he started chuckling and slapping his knee. "See, around here I only ever find average kids, and even the ones from the slums take a while before they're actually useful. I was losing heart! But you're a good find. You've got good instincts, and you can use magic, even if it's kinda crude. Also,

you were practically overflowing with killing intent back there! Hot damn! Never seen a kid glare at me like that. I thought I was facing a cornered manawolf."

The way Viro described my desperation was really something. "Killing intent"? I wasn't sure what he'd meant by that, but I had killed three people already, so that wouldn't have been surprising. Still, how had he sensed it? Was it because I'd been practicing to imbue my spells with my will, so this "killing intent" seeped out along with the aether?

I wanted to ponder this more, but right now, I needed to focus my attention on Viro. "What if I refuse?" I asked nervously.

"Hmm? Uh, nothing?" he replied nonchalantly. "Not like I'm gonna waste my time trying to force someone to work."

"What's the job? What does 'helping with security' mean?"

"Let's see. Well, there are specific things I want you to do, but for now, I was gonna get you to do errands as a test. Y'know, see if you understand instructions, don't do anything stupid, and most importantly, see if you have the guts to do more dangerous stuff."

"Hmm." Well, if it was a matter of guts, I had more than the average child, probably.

"You're kinda reckless, but credit where credit's due, you knew how to recognize you were outmatched and needed to scram. Your guts get a passing grade. Maybe I can just speed up that process and evaluate you personally," Viro said, looking at me with a sharp gaze. This was the same look Feld had given me when he'd decided to train me. I guessed Viro had approved of me, but also had a feeling this was going to turn into a hassle.

However, my decision was already made. "Okay. Sure."

"Cool! That's a big help, seriously. My client's getting impatient, so I needed to bring someone soon." Relieved, he patted his own shoulder, which struck me as a very "mister" thing to do. I didn't trust him, but it was in my best interests to be on his good side, I felt.

As an adventurer and scout, Viro was superior to me in every way. If I stuck

with him, I could observe his stealth and combat techniques and make them my own. It seemed like the quickest way for me to grow stronger at the moment.

Viro, who'd been sitting cross-legged on the ground, stood up without making a sound. "All righty, then. Let's get going to the guild."

"Guild? You mean the Adventurers' Guild?" I asked. "Why?" Did he need to look into something? What was I supposed to do in the meantime, then? I had no business there.

He gave me a puzzled look. "What do you mean, 'why'? To get you registered, duh."

"What? You know I have no combat skills, right?" It was true I'd learned Light Mastery, but I felt registering with the guild with just that would be more trouble than it was worth. I argued this point, but Viro looked exasperated.

"You're the one talking nonsense. You're, what, ten? And you can use Boost and are pretty good in combat. There's no way you don't have combat skills."

"Huh?"

I didn't immediately understand what he meant, but I hurriedly took out a scanning crystal to check my own stats. And when I did, Dagger Mastery, which I'd been struggling to learn, was listed there alongside some other skills I didn't know.

▼Alia (Alicia)

Species: Human $\ (Rank 1) \ \Delta + 1$

Aether Points: $33/70 \triangle +5$

Health Points: $29/52 \triangle +15$

Strength: 4(5) +1

Endurance: 5(6) +1

Agility: 7(8) + 2

Dexterity: 6

[Dagger Mastery Lv. 1] NEW!

```
[Martial Mastery Lv. 1] NEW!
[Light Mastery Lv. 1]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 1]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 1]
[Intimidation Lv. 1] NEW!
[Stealth Lv. 1]
[Night Vision Lv.1]
[Detection Lv.1]
Overall Combat Power: 36 (Boosted: 38) △ +10
```

To the Adventurers' Guild

How had I suddenly acquired combat skills? And not only had I learned Dagger Mastery, I'd also learned Martial Mastery, which I hadn't been practicing at all. Plus Intimidation too. Had it all been because of what had just happened?

I'd probably learned Intimidation when I directed my "killing intent" at Viro. If so, it made sense I'd acquired the other skills at the same time. I'd been practicing for Dagger Mastery for a while and had probably gotten Martial Mastery from continuously practicing the bodily movements and defensive stances Feld had taught me. Maybe those skills had manifested as a response to the impact on my soul from the high-stress, life-or-death experience.

"Hey!" Viro called out, tapping me lightly on the shoulder and walking ahead. "Don't just stand there zoning out. We're going to the guild."

"Okay," I replied, hurriedly following after him as I continued to think.

Skills weren't easily obtained. Sure, I had the advantage of an adult's knowledge, and thus likely a better foundation than most other kids for acquiring skills, which had helped me learn Dagger Mastery. But from there to also learning Martial Mastery was a big leap.

In the woman's original world, there was a saying that each kill was equivalent to a "dan" in "kendo," which I was under the impression had to do with levels of mastery in whatever "kendo" was. Perhaps the desperate fight had been an experience equivalent to the training necessary for a Level 1 skill? Even though Viro hadn't been seriously trying to kill me, being caught by a thief would've meant certain death. From my perspective, I'd been fighting for my life.

Intimidation felt different, however. It wasn't something most adults, let alone most children, would've easily picked up.

A fight to the death. A clear intent to kill. And...experience, I supposed. The average person wouldn't really be intending to kill anyone, so a child doing so and learning Intimidation in the process was probably really strange to the average person.

I should probably grow a little stronger before I set my cards on the table.

We left the slums and I quietly followed Viro onto the main street.

I'd cleaned myself up a bit before coming to town, but it felt like that fight had left me pretty dirty. Mostly I kept myself clean to avoid being taken advantage of. Over three weeks had passed since I'd murdered the old woman, so it was unlikely anyone was still looking for me, but still, there probably were still people in the neighboring town who remembered the incident. And while the clothing I wore was a little frayed, it was common, cheap clothing, so it wouldn't stand out more than my hair, which without the ash coating was a conspicuous pinkish blonde.

Nevertheless, I felt a few eyes on me as we walked. Maybe they thought I was from the slums? Since I had an adult with me, nobody said anything, but if I'd been alone I might've been targeted.

As I pondered this, I noticed Viro, the adult in question, looking at me. With a small frown, I returned his gaze. "What?"

"Well," he said, "I was just thinking, you know, if you wanna hide your face, you should use something better than that rag. Let's get you something over

there."

"It's fine."

Ah, so it was the rag that was attracting attention. I'd just wanted to conceal my face, so I'd used my knife to cut a strip off some ragged clothes no longer fit to wear and wrapped it around my neck. It was clean but definitely didn't look good.

"Well, okay, then!" Viro said, seeming relieved for some reason as he looked around. "Oh! There it is." He spotted a stall and headed toward it. I followed after him, feeling people's gazes on us.

"Welcome, welcome!" exclaimed a middle-aged woman—probably the owner. The stall seemed to sell fabric and also had some simple clothing for sale.

"Do you have, like, a scarf or something that can be wrapped around the neck?" Viro asked. "Something to hide the face?"

"Well, it's the wrong season for scarves," the woman replied, "but I have a light shawl here."

"Oh, okay. I dunno anything about this stuff, kid, so go ahead and pick something out."

"Okay." I wasn't sure what was going on, but if he was going to buy something for me, I wasn't about to say no.

Since this country was in the southern part of the continent, there wasn't much available in terms of protection against the cold—only a handful of lightweight items. I picked out something long with a pleasant texture, and as I pulled off the rag wrapped around my neck, I heard a faint murmur.

"Oh dear," the shopkeeper said in disbelief for some reason.

Wondering what had happened, I looked around and spotted a young girl, maybe ten years or so, looking at me with bright red cheeks just like Shuri. Not used to that kind of stare, I wrapped the brand-new cloth around my neck and heard soft sighs around me.

A little lost, I looked silently up at Viro, who was holding his head with one

hand as though he had a slight headache. "Let's just go," he said.

"Okay," I replied, still confused. Apparently Viro's priority was just going to the guild.

As I walked behind him, he muttered in a very quiet voice, "Great, now the kid's attracting even *more* attention."

"Here we are! The Adventurers' Guild!"

Viro's loud—if slightly exasperated-sounding—voice boomed across the street. He picked up his pace and went in, with me following behind somewhat timidly. Knowledge or no, I'd never been to this place and couldn't be sure what was going to happen. As I cautiously stepped inside, I felt a number of adventurers look at me, but with Viro by my side, nothing in particular happened.

Looking around, I saw some bulletin boards with papers pinned to them and several counters manned by receptionists. The Adventurers' Guild, originally derived from a mercenaries' guild, was a group primarily aimed at providing support to mercenaries specializing in exploration. It was sponsored by the Traders' Guild and stayed afloat by selling items obtained from monsters and ruins, with the Traders' Guild having first pick.

Initially, it had undertaken surveys of undeveloped lands for various nations and such. Currently, most adventurers were more akin to miners harvesting aether crystals, but the higher-ranked adventurers—the ones capable of undertaking dungeon expeditions and killing high-level monsters—got a lot of benefits.

"I'd like to get a new member registered, please," Viro said at one of the counters.

A woman in her midtwenties, who'd been organizing papers behind the counter, looked up to see Viro and me standing behind him. Her long, catlike eyes widened. "You mean this beauti—" She cleared her throat. "I mean, this child? Does someone this young even have any combat skills?"

"Sure does," Viro said. "Got Dagger Mastery right there."

I nodded slightly, and the receptionist smiled at me, looking almost enamored, before she shot Viro a glance. "Very well, then. We'll conduct a test now, if that's acceptable."

"I mean, that's fine," the scout replied. "But, y'know, you're acting kinda weird—"

"A test?" I murmured.

Both of them turned to look at me. "Yeah," Viro confirmed. "It's to confirm you actually have the abilities you should as a Rank 1 and can use combat techniques. You can do that, right?"

"Um. no?"

"What?!" he exclaimed, having apparently forgotten that I did not, in fact, have any combat skills until just now. "You can fight like that and use Boost, but you can't use any techniques? Good grief."

"Well, if you'd like, you could take a training course for Level 1 Dagger Mastery for a fee of five silver."

"I mean, sure, but...can I just rent the space and do the teaching myself?"

"You'll do that?" the receptionist asked. "It costs one silver per hour to use our underground training facilities. Would that be acceptable?"

"That's probably quicker, yeah," Viro mused. Then, remembering something, he turned to me and asked in a hushed tone, "Wait, kid, can't you use Cure?"

Hearing this, the receptionist was surprised and also lowered her voice. "You have Light Mastery at your age?" she asked. "In that case, we can conduct your test with Cure. Most adventurers here have some sort of injury." The receptionist paused. "Ah, pardon me, wait just a moment." She went to the back briefly and spoke to another staff member before returning. "I'm very sorry, but young sorcery users—light sorcerers especially—are at risk of being exploited by unscrupulous adventurers. If you were going to add this child to a party, that'd be different, but if it'll be a solo act, we'd rather not make a child's personal information publicly available."

"My party's not active currently," Viro muttered.

"In that case, we'll have to wait for a trustworthy adventurer to return—"

"Viro," I cut in. "I wanna learn combat techniques." They both turned to me again. "I can pay the fee."

"Nah, don't sweat it," the scout replied. "I'll mark that down as a necessary expense. That does seem like less of a hassle than waiting around."

"Well, if that's settled, may I see your adventurer tag?" the receptionist asked Viro. "Also, please write down the child's name and age on this form."

"The age's...ten," he muttered.

"Ten?" the woman asked. "That's physically a little small for ten—"

"Eh, what's a year or two? Margin of error, I say." Apparently I looked to be eight or nine from Viro's perspective. "As for a name..." He looked up from the paper at me, realizing he'd never asked. "Hey kid, what's your name?"

"Alia," I said.

"Ooh, all righty, then."

Watching our exchange, the receptionist muttered under her breath and gave Viro a very skeptical look. "You had to ask for a name? You didn't kidnap this child, did you?"

"Don't be rude," he grumbled. "Give me a good look before you judge me, yeah?"

The woman stared intently at Viro's face. "You didn't kidnap this child, did you?"

"Hell no, I didn't!"

The Cranky Blacksmith

"Thrust!"

My combat technique lodged my knife in the trunk of a tree one meter away. Combat techniques were non-elemental magic, activated through simple incantations and using a weapon as a medium—like special attacks for melee fighters. Using them consumed aether and could unleash an attack several

times more powerful than an ordinary strike.

Though easy to use, they were restricted, and the higher their level, the more aether they consumed and the harder they became to pull off. One's body also grew rigid immediately after using a combat technique, and mana accumulated in the muscles; it felt almost like a fever. Using a technique again before this heat dissipated could cause muscle injury, and while the muscles themselves could be healed with Cure, the pain lasted a while. Continuing to use Cure to bypass this cooldown period could result in one being unable to raise one's arm for several days.

The Rank 1 combat technique for the Dagger Mastery skill was called Thrust. It involved thrusting the knife forward with one hand, then releasing it, doubling its impact. It could have a range of over one meter beyond the tip of the blade depending on the skill of the user and was a very useful technique to compensate for the short reach and low power of a dagger.

I'd thought it would be difficult for me to learn combat techniques because I lacked appropriate knowledge about them, but Viro had taught me the form and demonstrated how to execute it, and I'd been able to get the gist in less than the scheduled hour.

Thrust was just a form of magic that released non-elemental aether in the shape of a blade. Conscious of the fact that it was magic and not sorcery, I used it by visualizing the blade extending rather than shooting out aether, reproducing the flow of mana Viro had shown me. My experience learning (albeit crudely) all forms of practical magic had served me well here, although I did think it would have taken me longer had I not learned Aether Manipulation.

"Well done, Alia," said the receptionist, clapping. "Splendid technique. I welcome you to our Guild as a Rank 1 adventurer." She handed me an identification tag. Normally, I would've needed to wait a while after passing the test, but it seemed that since I had Light Mastery as well, she'd gone ahead and gotten my tag ready in advance. She handed it to me with a warm smile before her expression did a one-eighty and she glared daggers at the man behind me. "Mr. Viro, hurry up and pay the two silver for the use of our training grounds plus the registration fee."

"How come Alia gets treated way better than me?!" Viro protested.

"Alia is young and cute. You're practically an old man. Obviously the treatment you get will be different."

"Dammit! I can't even argue with that!"

Is this really okay? I wondered. Maybe I could just think of it as banter...

"C'mon, Alia. Let's get moving to our next stop," Viro said as he grumpily walked out of the Adventurers' Guild.

"Okay." I followed after him, glancing behind me at the receptionist. She noticed and waved.

Now that I thought about it, according to that woman's knowledge, there was traditionally an event in which a rookie got harassed by another, boorish adventurer, but perhaps due to Viro's presence, that seemed to have been put on hold for a bit in my case.

As we walked, I thought back on the job Viro had mentioned. His plan had been to have me run several short errands, and if I seemed useful, he'd personally train me in combat. Once he was sure he could trust me, he'd introduce me to the client for the actual job. And just like I didn't quite fully trust Viro yet, he hadn't completely figured me out either. He hadn't told me who the client was or what the job entailed.

I thought there was a chance the client was a noble, however. I couldn't imagine a noble would want an obvious urchin working for them, but now that I'd grown a bit taller, I didn't think even a noble would've pegged me for someone who'd just run away from an orphanage.

Also, there had been a slight shift in my wariness toward the nobility. Right now, I wanted to grow stronger in order to survive. But having watched Feld and Viro, I'd learned that growing stronger caused one to stand out. If I grew stronger, there was a possibility I'd eventually run into nobility. Whether I fled every time or tolerated them to an extent while keeping my identity hidden, it would nevertheless greatly affect the course of my life.

Therefore, I figured that while I had Viro acting as my guardian, it would be a good opportunity to interact with nobility. Besides, even if the client was a

noble, they couldn't have been a very high-ranking one, given their willingness to employ an urchin. Moreover, if I could ultimately grow strong enough to flee the country alone, it wouldn't matter whether or not I was discovered. And the quickest way for me to grow strong was to do the work Viro needed me to.

"All right," Viro said. "I'll train you so you can do the bare minimum necessary for the job."

"Got it." For a moment, the image of the practice I'd undergone with Feld—too intense for a child—flashed through my mind.

Still, Viro seemed willing to cover my living expenses during training and give me a silver coin on top of that as a daily wage. It was a low wage for the average commoner, but for a street urchin from the slums, it was exceedingly generous. I had no complaints.

"Also, Alia, let me see your knife."

"Okay...?" I was reluctant to hand over my weapon, but it was pointless to refuse a request from someone as strong as Viro. With his brows slightly furrowed in a doubtful expression, he took the knife I'd held out.

"Was this a gift?"

"Huh? Yes, but..."

Viro let out a small sigh and handed the knife back to me. "Either use that only to dress game or keep it as a spare weapon. Use it for both and all the gore will dull it quickly."

"But what do I use when fighting?"

"The main reason I came to this town was actually to do some business with the blacksmith here. I'll buy you a weapon that fits your hand. That knife's too heavy for a kid, and the handle's too big."

"Okay..." The knife had been originally Feld's, and he was quite the large man, so the handle was indeed big. If Viro was offering to buy me a new one, I'd gladly take it.

```
"And...put these on."
```

[&]quot;Huh?"

He'd handed me a pair of shorts. Maybe he'd bought them at a stall on a whim? They were roughly the right size, so they would fit me just fine. Were they necessary, though?

Confused, I tilted my head and looked up at Viro. He frowned and ruffled my hair roughly. "You're way too fluttery during combat!" he declared before walking away.

With no idea what he'd meant, I followed after him. For some reason, I had the feeling it was best not to ask him about it.

"By the way, Viro, you used sorcery in the middle of combat, right?" He had to have, I thought, since he'd chanted, and then, when I'd thought he was ahead of me, he'd actually been behind me.

Walking ahead of me, Viro looked over his shoulder. "Oh, that? I have Shadow Mastery. It's only Level 1, but it lets me use that spell. It can make noises anywhere I choose."

"Shadow Mastery..." That made sense. Shadow sorcery was mainly used for illusions. The ability to produce noises at a distance from oneself might not sound like much, but for scout-types like Viro and myself, it could be useful in many situations. "Teach me."

I'd learned nothing about shadow sorcery from my knowledge, so now that I'd actually found someone who could use it, I couldn't let this opportunity slip past me.

Viro stopped walking, looked down at me, and seemed to think for a moment. "Sorcery, eh? Well, I can't promise you'll learn if you don't have an affinity for the shadow element. Also, I dunno how to teach it to you, but I can tell you the incantation. That okay?"

"It'll do." It wasn't as though I'd ever had a teacher either way. As long as I knew the incantation and its meaning, I could take my time and analyze it bit by bit.

As we continued our conversation, we walked along the main street toward the residential area where the lower classes lived, which was near the slums. Wasn't this where the old man's general store was? Now that I thought about

it, he'd mentioned a cranky dwarven blacksmith. Maybe that was where we were headed.

After we'd done a bit of walking through the low-income area, the sound of metal being struck rang out in the distance. Seemingly familiar with the destination, Viro entered a winding alleyway, and after a while, we arrived at a fairly sizable stone-built workshop.

"Galvus! You there?!" Viro shouted loudly.

A beat later, a voice loud as a struck gong answered from the back of the shop. "Don'tcha be yellin' in front of my place!!!"

The voice practically vibrated in my eardrums. I instinctively covered my ears as an old dwarven man emerged from the back. Though short in stature, he seemed to be even broader than Feld. His beard was pure white—he was old, right? Everything I knew about dwarves came from my knowledge; this was my first time seeing one.

"Oh, it's you, boy," he said to Viro. "Ya bring me booze?"

"Hey! Quit calling me 'boy,'" the scout protested. "Here, I got what you asked for. An aethercrystal from a fire-breathing lizard. Top quality, yeah?"

"Oh, about time," the dwarf replied. "Can't get my furnace hot enough without it. Gonna put it to use right away!"

"Whoa, whoa, money first, crystal after. Was a lot of effort, y'know!"

"Oh, quit penny-pinchin'. Here, gimme that dagger I made ya. I'll get it good as new."

"All right, all right."

I didn't really understand their exchange, but they seemed pretty close. I watched with interest, curious as to how he'd repair the weapon, and the dwarf Galvus finally noticed my presence. "Hey Viro, that your kid? Nah, no way. Face's too good for that. A student, maybe?"

"Uh, harsh much?" Viro protested. "Also, I guess 'student' is a word for it. I want a knife for the kid. You got anything that works?"

"I ain't got no weapons for some brat!" Galvus paused briefly. "Well, that's what I wanna say, anyway, but whatever. Pick somethin' from that box over there. I'll put it on yer tab."

"My tab? You haven't even paid me for the aethercrystal yet!"

Ignoring Viro's grumbling, Galvus threw a piece of the aethercrystal into the furnace. The color of the flames burning within clearly changed, releasing an intense heat that felt as though it would scorch the skin. The dwarf then took some booze from a bottle into his mouth and sprayed it from his lips into the fire, causing it to flicker as if dancing.

I was sure that it was no ordinary booze. Between the fire-breathing lizard's aethercrystal and the alcohol, the color of the mana in the flame was quite vivid. I was entranced. "Beautiful," I murmured involuntarily.

Catching my mutter, Galvus looked up from the furnace and stared intently at me. "Hey, kid. Ya can see the color of the fire?"

The words escaped my lips before I could think about what I was saying. "It's a pure red..."

Galvus, still staring at me, slowly nodded as he stroked his white beard. "That hair... You the 'Cinders' the cranky old codger from the general store mentioned?"

Oh. So they both call each other "cranky." Okay, then.

"Hey, Cinders," the dwarf continued. "Ya use knives, right?"

"Yeah."

"Gotcha, gotcha. Hey! Viro!!! Stop looking at that pile of traded-in junk and answer me!!! You gonna be around until tomorrow?!"

Viro, who'd been very serious about selecting a dagger from a box in the corner of the smithy, turned around in shock. "You offered me junk to choose from?!" he protested. "Also, I guess I can be here tomorrow morning. Why?"

Galvus nodded and headed to the back. After a little while, he returned with a slender, pitch-black knife and handed it to me.

"See this? I made it long ago. I'll fit it to yer hand, Cinders."

Training Journey

"Hey, Galvus!" Viro exclaimed upon seeing the knife the blacksmith had brought. "That's made from magic steel, isn't it?!"

Magic steel?

Fragments of information from that woman's knowledge surfaced in my mind. Magic steel was a type of metal refined from magic iron, which in turn was a type of iron that had been exposed to a highly mana-dense environment over a long period of time. The exposure blackened the iron and made it incredibly strong, which also made it incredibly expensive. That was all the information I had; that woman hadn't been very interested in weapons beyond their price. Which made sense, in a way.

"That's right," Galvus confirmed. "It's garbage. I made it when I was a lad." He frowned as he called his handiwork "garbage." "Back then, I thought I was good, got in over my head, thought that if I used better materials I could make even better stuff, and ended up with this." The blacksmith looked at the black knife as though he'd tasted something sour, then gave it a light shake. "This thing's sharp, but it lacks *oomph*. I focused too much on what it looked like and not enough on how it'd cut. Still, it's light, since it's thin, and the fact it's made from magic steel means it's durable and it resists the effects of blood and gore to an extent. Pretty good weapon for a kid like ya."

I stared silently at the knife. The blade was about thirty centimeters long and three, maybe four centimeters wide, with a single sharp edge that tapered toward the tip. It was indeed made of robust magic steel, but it felt unsuitable for cutting through hard objects or slicing through muscle. Still, for someone like me who lacked strength and focused only on attacking an opponent's weak spots, it did feel like a good fit.

"A magic steel weapon, 'pretty good' for a kid? What's the world coming to?" Viro muttered. "Also, you're giving one of your creations to a kid for free? Now that's unusual."

"And who said it's free?!" the blacksmith snapped. "Hey! Cinders! I'm sellin' ya this garbage for one gold! You come pay me before I die, you hear?! Now, then, let's get to work. You help too, Cinders! Get me some water from the well

in the backyard!" he barked quickly before stomping off toward the furnace.

He wants to be paid before he dies? I thought dwarves lived about three hundred years, I thought as I stood there dumbfounded.

Viro quietly approached and whispered, "A knife made of magic steel costs five gold minimum. Even if it's one of Galvus's early works and he thinks it's trash, it should still be worth at least twenty gold. I dunno what that stubborn old bastard sees in you, but take it and be grateful."

"Okay..." I mumbled.

When I'd left the orphanage, I'd decided to defy fate. There were many terrible people in the world—not just the old hag from the orphanage and the woman who'd tried to take my place. Plenty of adults in the slums would target me just for being a child with a little coin. And yet there were also people like Feld, the old man from the general store, Viro, and Galvus, who would willingly give away things to a destitute child.

I didn't trust others on principle. Some would readily sacrifice children to carry on living worry-free, such as the townspeople who'd turned a blind eye to the abuse at the orphanage. That was why I wanted to be stronger—to defend myself from the ill will of such people.

And that was why...I wanted to cherish these encounters with good people and pay back as much of their kindness as I could once I grew stronger.

After that, I drew water from the well in the backyard and carried charcoal for the furnace. When there was time to spare, Viro instructed me in the techniques used by scouts. At some point, he grew bored and went to a tavern, but I stayed and helped Galvus while continuing my dagger and shadow sorcery practice.

After night fell, Viro returned with alcohol and food he'd bought at the tavern. I ended up passing out from exhaustion and sleeping on the smithy floor. When I woke up in the morning, Galvus handed me the black knife, which he'd modified for me.

"Here, Cinders. This is *yer* weapon," he said. Originally, it had been a light knife for adults to use one-handed, but he'd modified the handle so a child

could grip it with both hands. "When the handle doesn't fit anymore, come back again with some booze. And make sure ya bring money too! Gah ha ha!!!"

"I will," I replied. "I'll make sure of it."

The black knife was longer than the one Feld had given me but surprisingly light due to its thin blade. While it was a little big for me still, the handle fit comfortably in my palm. Galvus also seemed to have done maintenance work on Viro's silver dagger. We took it, and then it was time to leave behind the sharp-tongued, cranky, and...kind-of-nice-to-children dwarven blacksmith.

"If ya ever visit the royal capital, go check out my brother's armor shop," Galvus said as we left. "He's an oddball, but tell him I sent ya and he'll probably pick somethin' out for ya."

One's cranky, the other's an oddball, huh? I didn't know whether I'd get the chance to visit the capital, but I did wonder what kind of armor an oddball dwarf made.

"Now then, Alia," Viro said. "Let's get ready to leave town, yeah? I'll teach you all sorts of things while we're on the move."

"Okay."

We emerged onto the main street and began preparing in earnest to leave the city. I wondered where we were going, though. North of this town, there were apparently monsters—were we going to train by fighting them? I'd been living in the forest since my escape from the orphanage, but I'd never done any proper traveling before. Still, I figured it'd take us maybe half a day to reach the area where monsters lived.

"All right. First order of business is to head to Count Taurus's territory," Viro explained. "We're not going by carriage, so be ready for that."

"We're not going north?"

Viro stroked his now slightly longer stubble and grinned. "What, you thought we were gonna hunt monsters in ruins like proper adventurers? I could hunt a fair few things alone, and even you should be able to take down a goblin or two,

but you're still way too green to venture into monster territory. Would be bad for me if you went and died, y'know. I'm gonna drill some scout techniques into you first."

"Understood."

That made sense. Monsters roamed deep in the forests throughout this country. They included weak ones, like goblins and kobolds, but also much more powerful ones, like manawolves and hobgoblins.

Goblins were ugly little things. Their intelligence was low and they were about the size of a human child. They were more or less considered a type of demihuman, but to distinguish them from more intelligent demi-humans like dwarves and elves, they were also sometimes called demi-beasts. And, well, that annoyed the beastmen, so in the end, everyone had just settled for calling them monsters too.

According to Viro, goblins' overall combat power ranged between thirty and fifty, which was about the same as that of an ordinary person armed with a weapon. Even the weakest goblins had higher combat power than I did, despite my Dagger Mastery, which was a bit disheartening.

Viro must've noticed my disappointment. "Level 1 combat skills don't have that much of an impact on combat power," he explained. "You'll really only start seeing a difference at Level 2. But don't put too much trust in the 'overall combat power' you see when scanning stats. You're a kid with low stats, so your combat power is low too. Like, the adults walking around town have a higher total than you, but in an actual fight, you could have the advantage. In real combat, skills matter, sure, but the most important things are experience and the smarts to use it. Think of combat power as, like, a rough guide at most."

"Okay." So combat power was just a guide. Still, if there was a tenfold difference in combat power between you and an opponent, it was smarter to just run away, no doubt.

The adults around town tended to have an overall combat power of around forty. I wanted a reference, so I asked Viro for permission to scan him.

Species: Humanð (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 170/190

Health Points: 278/310

Overall Combat Power: 900 (Boosted: 1094)

He was strong, just as I'd thought. His combat power was twenty times my own, so my initial instinct to flee had been spot on. Still, with a difference that great, even escaping would've been difficult.

We passed through the main gate as we left town—my first time using it. I'd been sneaking into town illegally until this point, but when I showed the gatekeeper my Adventurer's Guild identification tag, he gave it a brief glance and let us through without making any trouble. But the Rank 1 tag only allowed free entry and exit from the town where it'd been registered. I was sure we'd have to pass through several noble territories on the way to Count Taurus's lands, and as a vagrant, I'd have to pay a hefty one-silver fee to enter every large town. Viro, however, seemed not to be planning on going into towns that often.

"If we're just passing through a noble's territory, I can get us through using my own tag and saying you're my companion. Otherwise, people with tags of different ranks couldn't really go on expeditions together," he explained. "That won't work for walled towns, but basically, even if we're using the main roads, we'll be staying the night in small towns and villages along the mountain paths. Well, most days we'll probably be camping out, but I don't expect that'll be a problem for you, yeah?"

"Not at all."

When he'd first mentioned we were heading south, I'd worried we might pass through the town where the orphanage was, but that was more southeast than south and apparently not connected to the main road at all.

In Baron Horus's territory, there were only two walled towns that collected the one-silver toll: the one we'd just been in, and another inn town closer to some other noble's lands. But Viro said we wouldn't be stopping there—we'd

just be continuing straight to the next territory.

I wondered if we'd have enough rations for such an intense trip, though. We could hunt forest animals, but that'd delay our journey and our training if it was all we did.

"Don't worry about food," Viro said, patting his backpack lightly. It was a bit old but looked sturdy and was made with expensive leather. It didn't seem that different in size from my own backpack, though.

"You can fit that much in there?" I asked.

"Oh, you don't know? This pack's been enchanted with space-time sorcery. It can hold five times more stuff than you'd think from looking at it, and at a reduced weight too. It cost a damn pretty penny."

"Space-time sorcery," I echoed quietly.

My knowledge prompted me with what that woman had learned from her mentor. Space-time sorcery was a type of shadow sorcery, capable of altering space to change the weight of objects or, as in the case of Viro's backpack, expand their internal volume. It was far more complex than it sounded, however. Spells this useful—such as teleportation, which my knowledge had informed me about previously—were very advanced. Volume expansion required at least a Level 4 in Shadow Mastery, whereas teleportation, which allowed the user to jump through space, needed Level 6.

Viro had taught me the incantation for the shadow sorcery spell Noise, but there'd been no sign at all of it activating thus far. What was the matter, I wondered? Maybe I didn't have the right mental image of the shadow element yet? My hunch was that the key might be the fact that things seemingly unrelated to shadows at a glance—space-time spells, illusion spells—fell under the umbrella of shadow sorcery.

As Viro had said when we'd first set out, we could see the walls of the inn town by evening. We went around it along the outer wall, then crossed into the next territory, ruled by a viscount. The viscount's territory was smaller than Baron Horus's, but a village we stopped at along the way was larger and much

more prosperous than the tiny town where the orphanage was.

Three days after our departure, and after leaving the village we'd visited, we encountered three goblins on the road. Viro told me to take them down one by one, and as I did, he watched with a bemused, manly smile, stroking his stubble.

"If you can fight like this, Alia, you're set," he said. "Also, the chief of that village told me there are bandits 'round these parts. So tonight, for your training, we're gonna go bandit-hunting."

I stared at him in dumbfounded silence. Again with the sudden real combat drills? This man really did not go easy on kids...

Attack on the Bandits' Hideout

We were in the woods, a few days after having departed the nearby village, roasting a wild bird over a campfire. From where I stood, the idea of hunting down bandits had come out of nowhere, but it seemed Viro had been planning from the start to train me by raiding the strongholds of bandits, wannabe brigands, goblins, and the like. Pretty harsh of him.

Bandits and thieves weren't quite the same. Part of it came down to the places where one could find them, but the biggest difference was that bandits weren't united under an organization like the Thieves' Guild.

Thieves were people who, like the orphans in the slums, saw no other means to climb up the social ladder and, as a result, had lost their aversion to committing crime. That added another layer of meaning to scouts like Viro recruiting orphans into the Adventurers' Guild—it prevented them from eventually joining the ranks of the Thieves' Guild.

Bandits, meanwhile, often became such due to poverty. In rural areas—poor villages especially—it was common for families to have many children to use as extra pairs of hands. Being poor, however, the second and third sons and so on had no fields to inherit. For those who couldn't find work in neighboring villages or towns, it was easy to either become a bandit and live away from civilization—or become a failed thief in a town and get caught.

But Claydale was a relatively easy kingdom to survive in. While taxes couldn't

exactly have been called low, the climate was mild and the forests bountiful, so most adults wouldn't starve unless something extraordinary happened.

Simply put, most people who fell into banditry were those who had succumbed to a desire to steal from others and lead an easy life. Moreover, the Thieves' Guild cautioned its members to avoid escalation and not kill civilians if possible, but a bandit wouldn't hesitate to murder a traveler. Nobles had guards for protection, and so bandits targeted only the weak, taking their lives to silence them so they couldn't inform the local lords.

Some were bolder, taking merchants hostage and demanding ransom. Perhaps due to having been mere villagers once, they killed out of cowardice, fearing their crimes would be discovered.

"That's why, when we find bandits, the priority is to exterminate rather than arrest them," Viro explained. "Even if you do capture one, bringing them to a town with soldiers is difficult. And even if you do hand one over, there's no bounty offered for bandits and only a negligible reward. Plus, they'll just end up doing forced labor in the mines until they die anyway, so there's no point in showing mercy. You understand?"

"Yeah," I replied with a nod.

Bandits had no rights. The laws of the local lords didn't reach them and they did as they pleased; in turn, they were not protected by those laws. Knowing that, I could understand the existence of the Thieves' Guild better. By creating a guild, they'd made themselves into something powerful, and conducting their crimes under a code afforded them protection. This was likely why I was being trained on bandits instead.

"Bout time to get going," Viro said.

"Got it." I stood up, poured water over the campfire with Flow, then stomped out the flames. It was a bad idea to spend aether before doing something important, but a single point would recover quickly.

The sky remained faintly bright in the distance, but the forest away from the main road was already enshrouded in darkness so deep that nothing could be seen. Viro, having largely concealed his presence, wandered into the woods. I followed behind him, erasing my own presence. Though it was pitch-black out

here, I still had my Night Vision skill—and so, naturally, did the scout.

Viro intentionally kept his stealth imperfect so I could follow him. If I'd been a child from the slums without Night Vision or Detection, what would his plan have been? Like Feld, Viro didn't seem to think what he could do was special. Normally, one would've realized by then that this wasn't something children could do, but because I had no trouble starting a campfire in the woods and could navigate the darkness without issue, he seemed to be holding back less and less. Even his incomplete stealth was probably something done out of habit so his party members knew he was there rather than out of consideration for the fact I was a child.

Even so, he seemed to remember I was still in training and taught me all sorts of things at crucial moments. "Unlike Guild-affiliated thieves, bandits don't really have any special techniques," he explained. "This lot isn't *completely* daft, since they've hidden the path to their hideout, but they need to bring their loot there, so it doesn't seem like they're very zealous about concealing themselves."

"I see."

There was a path a bit off the main road that seemed to be a game trail, but it was too wide for just animals. "Look here. Must've rained a few days ago. See the dried, hardened footprints? Can you count how many there are?"

"I can't see that well," I pointed out.

"You've got Night Vision, right? Try to focus like you do when using Boost, but enhance your vision instead of your whole body. You should be able to see the shapes through the flow of mana. Humans have racial limits, so we can't get Night Vision higher than Level 1, but squint hard enough and you should be able to see."

Ah, so that was how people normally used the skill. Seemed like distinguishing shapes by the color of the mana like I did was unconventional. The original Night Vision skill didn't just enhance eyesight, it also made other presences and the flow of mana reverberate in a way that, combined with the improved vision, created a mental image of one's surroundings.

I also kept practicing my skill at detecting presences through the flow of mana

and visualizing the shadow element through the color of its mana. Viro had said humans couldn't get Night Vision above Level 1 due to basic physiological limitations, but beastmen and dwarves could probably go higher. According to my knowledge, underground-dwelling crag dwarves were born with Night Vision. Maybe since I'd acquired the skill through unconventional means, learning the usual method could raise its Level?

For now, I tried to direct aether to my eyes as if using Boost, and I could faintly detect an irregularity. But right now, I still couldn't see too well, so I tried to visualize it in my brain as I did when picturing the color of mana, and indeed, something that looked like footprints began to surface.

"Five, maybe six people?" I ventured.

"Bit more than that," Viro corrected me, "but fewer than ten. These two footprints here are similar. This one's a bit deeper. Maybe someone heavier, or carrying something... Oh, they're a bit all over the place, so it was some low-ranking grunt carrying something. You can also use stuff like this to determine the number of monsters when exploring ruins. You should try and imagine the enemy's body type from their pace and gait."

"Okay."

"Stop," he said suddenly, raising his hand and halting. "Look there. See that unnatural spot off the path? Can you tell what's there?"

I strained my eyes, and indeed, there was a spot where the direction of the branches and leaves was unnatural. There were broken branches all the way up the tree, and I tried to imagine what might have caused that. "A trap?"

"You got it. Probably a bear trap or some other thing meant for animals more than people. If someone small like you gets caught in it, even Restore might not be able to heal you to full. Be careful."

"Got it."

"We're gonna disarm all traps we find, just in case. Watch and learn how to do it without making noise."

As we disarmed traps and kept going, I could see faint fire-and light-aspected mana through the gaps in the trees. When I pointed silently in their direction,

Viro looked that way, gave a small nod, and signaled with his fingers to move forward. As we did, an open area came into view. I'd had the mental image of bandits living in caves, but Viro mouthed the words "ruined village" to let me know what it was.

I had no idea whether the bandits had originally been villagers or simply settled there, but as I quietly observed the small village, I noticed a desolate field and several decaying homes. The buildings around the village's center were relatively intact, and a group of bandits sat around a bonfire, drinking.

"Quite a few," Viro whispered as he checked the area.

I nodded. Since we'd seen fewer than ten distinct footprints, we'd assumed that, considering some would've been standing watch, there would be just barely over ten bandits total. Looking at them, however, we counted over fifteen. Around ten were near the central bonfire, and a few more, who seemed to be on watch, stood farther away, drinking under a roofed area. Near them was a carriage with conspicuous blood splatters, which confirmed to us that they were indeed bandits and not mere villagers or travelers.

"We'll pick 'em off one by one," the scout said quietly. "If you're scared, you can stay here."

"No, I'm coming too," I replied, shaking my head. Viro grinned. I wasn't about to be treated like a child after he'd brought me all the way here, mind you, but I wasn't sure whether he actually remembered I was a kid.

Having completely concealed his presence, Viro began to move smoothly along the flow of mana in the air. While I knew he was in front of me, it took all my focus just to spot the human shape hidden in the mana's colors. *So this is what Level 4 Stealth looks like,* I mused as I followed after him, trying to imprint his movements in my memory.

Unlike me with my paltry Level 1 Stealth, Viro was frighteningly quick when he was serious. He made no noise whatsoever as he crept up to one of the men, who'd staggered away from the group, and wrapped his arms around the straggler's neck. One swift movement, and the man's neck broke with a crack. The scout laid him down behind a dilapidated house, still without making a sound.

"I'm gonna take out the ones keeping watch first," Viro told me. "You watch those guys over there. If they start heading toward the lookouts, you come let me know."

I nodded in agreement and he gave my head a small pat before moving a few dozen meters away and vanishing from sight completely. He'd have no problem dealing with four or five lookouts. A normal child would have felt anxious being left alone near bandits, but I stayed focused on my task and began to examine the bandits using my appraisal crystals. I was running low on those but still hadn't acquired Scan. Maybe there was a trick to it? I'd have to ask Viro later.

The bandits' overall combat power ranged from forty to seventy. One of them had more, but the rest weren't that different from ordinary villagers. Then again, that was what they'd been originally, so unlike thieves and adventurers, bandits probably had few, if any, skills. It wasn't as though farmers would have sorcery or detection skills; at most, they'd have Level 1 Sword or Bow Mastery.

After some time, I saw a man break away from the circle around the bonfire and move toward me. That was a little nerve wracking. I didn't know whether he was coming to relieve himself or to look for the man from earlier, but if he found the body and made a fuss, Viro would have to deal with all of them at once. I had to decide whether to inform the scout or deal with the man myself.

Quietly, I buried my emotions deep inside my heart and narrowed my eyes. After roughly wiping the ash from my head with my shawl, I packed up my belongings and hid them in the nearby bushes before stepping forward resolutely.

"Mister," I called out.

"What? What's this? Some brat?" replied the distinctly inebriated man, who seemed to be in his thirties and had an axe at his waist. He didn't seem remotely concerned about the strange child who'd just appeared out of nowhere. "Are you a boy? A girl? I can't tell. Girls fetch a pretty penny, I'm told..."

"Oh, really?" I extended my left hand. "Say, mister, could you take a look at this?"

"Huh? What is it?" the man asked, carelessly leaning in to look at what I was

holding.

Hidden in my hand was the weighted string I'd crafted from my hair. Charging it with aether, I swung it down, and the counterweight struck the top of the man's head with a dull thud. He fell backwards, his eyes rolling into his head. I quickly sat on top of him and drew my black knife. My weight seemed to have brought him back to a semiconscious state, his hazy, confused gaze shifting to me. As he saw me brandish the knife, he trembled in terror, but before he could scream, I plunged the tip of the knife under his chin and into his skull.

The man let out a soft gurgle. I saw my reflection in his frightened eyes, as expressionless as it had been when I'd killed that woman. As he reached out a trembling hand, I twisted and pulled out the knife. A thick stream of blood came pouring forth, and his hand dropped to the ground.

A little tense, I let out the breath I'd been holding, then wiped the blood off the knife on the man's clothing. With this, I knew I should have no issues and could deal with any others who came my way while Viro finished taking out the lookouts. There was no room for faltering in a life-or-death situation, so I couldn't afford to hesitate to take a life.

The sharpness of this knife was something else. Just lightly wiping off the blood had restored the pitch-black blade to its original sheen. Once again, I realized just how fine a piece of equipment it was.

A while had passed. I turned my gaze toward the spot where the lookouts had been. The lights had gone out, and I could no longer see the silhouettes of people in the mana. Viro had to have finished with the men standing guard. He'd fought like an assassin thus far, but against the six men around the bonfire, he'd probably be fighting more like an ordinary adventurer and scout.

I had no intention of joining a group fight like that. It was still dangerous for me to take on multiple opponents at once, even with the element of surprise in my favor. A clumsy attempt at assistance could've ended up hindering Viro. Instead, I watched from a distance, ready to spot anyone trying to escape and take them down if possible.

"Wait, six people?" That was odd. There should've been nine men around the

bonfire. With me and Viro taking down one each, there should've been seven left. Where did the other go?

As I looked around in a panic, a voice rang out from the darkness. "Hey! Whatcha doin' over there?!"

I turned around to see a man in dirty hardleather armor drawing his sword cautiously. Viro hadn't started fighting yet. If I caused a commotion here and asked him for help, he'd have to fight while encumbered with a liability.

Without a choice, I drew my black knife, ready to buy Viro time until his own fight was done.

The Bandit Chief

"I knew I heard somethin'." Upon finding his comrade's dead body, the man glared at me in the darkness, his sword drawn. "Hey kid, did ya kill him?"

Maybe he heard me kill the guy, I thought. Either way, this one wasn't going to drop his guard if I acted like a child, so I pointed my black knife right back at him. Not counting the incident with Viro or the goblins I'd killed during my training, this was going to be my first real battle. After having been exposed to both Feld and Viro's threatening auras, however, I wasn't scared enough to flinch despite how intimidating the man's gaze was.

He wore hardleather armor and wielded a longsword; his equipment was old but typical of a fighter, and he seemed to be in his early thirties. One of the bandits here had a combat power of nearly a hundred—and if it was him, my guess was that he was either a deserter or a failed adventurer rather than an ordinary villager. I remembered hearing that some soldiers, having only ever fought humans, had fled from battles against monsters during the great outbreak that had killed my parents.

Assuming this man really had deserted, what if he'd stood his ground? Maybe my father wouldn't have died. Sure, this man couldn't have known then what I knew now, but I still couldn't help casting a cold, silent glare at him.

"Creepy-ass kid," the man muttered, frowning. "Guess ya did kill him, then."

I couldn't fault him for thinking a child showing up out of nowhere this deep

in the woods—and unafraid of a sword pointed at her, to boot—was creepy. I wasn't about to back down. But this wasn't personal, whether or not he was a deserter, so instead of projecting rage, I glared at him with clear intent to kill. My Intimidation drew a gasp from the man's lips.

A cautious opponent was easier to handle than one attacking in anger. With an overall combat power of a hundred, he was likely a Rank 2 fighter and had presumably learned Level 2 Sword Mastery, plus defensive and hand-to-hand combat skills, at Level 1. He only had fifty aether points, so my guess was he hadn't learned any sorcery, even at his age. And if he was indeed a former soldier, he might've been able to use a bow—but Bow Mastery was a skill separate from Throwing, so I figured that just as with magic, I had little to fear from him in terms of throwing knives and other projectiles.

Keeping surprisingly calm, I analyzed the situation as we glared daggers at one another, readied our weapons, and gradually shifted our positions in a clockwise direction. I decided to mentally call this man "bandit chief" for now and deduce his combat strategy.

Assuming the bandit chief's main combat skill was Level 2 Sword Mastery, a direct clash would've simply sent me flying, given my small stature, so fighting him head-on wasn't an option. I couldn't afford to be careless either; my experience with Feld and Viro might have given me more combat savviness than the average child, but the bandit chief's combat power posed a significant threat.

Whoosh!

"Gah!" The bandit chief dodged the metal skewer I'd suddenly thrown at him in an overly exaggerated motion. He was probably drunk. Maybe he thought some alcohol in his system wouldn't be a big deal when his opponent was a child, but that was because the inebriation had dulled his judgment. Since I didn't have the Throwing skill, his armor would've just deflected my skewer—but because his guard was up, my throw had disrupted his stance more than it should've.

Using this opening to attack would've been a foolish move. Instead, I backed off, putting more distance between us before breaking into a run.

"Where do ya think yer goin'?!" the man yelled at me, giving chase.

From a psychological standpoint, he was wary of me—a child, yes, but an intimidating one who'd killed his comrade. Still, he thought that at my age, I wouldn't have the forethought to call for help and that I was running away in fear of his sword. He might've wanted to be cautious, but his pride as leader of the bandits wouldn't let him be overly so when his opponent was a kid. That was why he didn't hesitate to chase me into the darkness, beyond the reach of the campfire's light.

I didn't need to defeat the bandit chief to win; all I had to do was buy enough time for Viro to arrive. Causing a commotion near the other bandits and getting caught in the middle of a chaotic scuffle would've been a much worse scenario.

Though there was a difference in speed between an adult and a child, I was light on my feet and unburdened by luggage, so I might've been comparable in terms of performance to the bandit chief, who was in armor and had his weapon drawn. The man continued to chase after me as predicted, but he slowed down once we entered the woods, where not even moonlight reached.

"Shit!" he cussed as he stumbled on a small tree root, throwing off his balance. "Shine!"

The practical spell created a small light at the tip of his sword, slightly brighter than the flame of a candle.

"Darken," I chanted from a distance, countering his spell and plunging the forest into darkness once more.

"Damn it!" he hissed. That gave me additional information: he did not have the Night Vision skill. "Shine!"

"Darken."

Time and again my Darken extinguished his Shine. The shadow-elemental spell could easily neutralize light as long as it was cast within range, so it took no effort to do. The bandit chief had about fifty aether points, whereas I had seventy—and he'd been using Boost ever since drawing his sword about ten minutes ago. At a consumption rate of one point every hundred seconds, Boost had been steadily depleting his aether the whole time. I, meanwhile, hadn't

been using Boost outside of combat, so at the end of this back-and-forth struggle of aether expenditure, the bandit chief at last gave up on casting Shine.

"Fuck you, brat!" he barked. "Fight me fair and square!"

What a ridiculous thing for a grown man his size to say to a child. That gave me even more information: he couldn't pinpoint my position, which indicated he likely didn't have the Detection skill.

He could still sense my presence, though, and when I moved, he swung his sword in the direction of the quiet sounds of my footsteps. "Slash!"

Slash, a Level 1 Sword Mastery technique, cut through the darkness right beside where I was—the first combat technique anyone had ever used against me. I felt sweat building on my palms; truly, Level 2 Sword Mastery was not to be underestimated.

Neither of us had a decisive advantage. I couldn't deal any damage without an opening to exploit, and the bandit chief couldn't attack me unless I made the first move. There was, however, one critical difference between us: I had the luxury of choosing when to strike. The man was on the defensive and couldn't afford to stop using Boost; meanwhile, my goal was to buy time, so I was in no rush and could simply conserve my aether.

But before Viro was done fighting, the bandit chief, having overused Shine, had seemingly reached the limit of his aether. His Boost faded, and his steps faltered slightly. "Fuck," he muttered under his breath. Finally realizing the disadvantage he was at, the man grimaced and made a run back toward the village.

Even without Boost, his power was higher than mine, but his excessive zeal had caused him to overuse his aether and end up fleeing when he hadn't needed to. He had poor judgment; the man had pride but lacked resolve.

Letting him go without doing anything would've rendered all my training pointless, however. As I jumped out from behind a tree, the bandit chief reacted to the faint noise and swung his sword behind him—a clearly clumsy, sluggish move. The former professional soldier was used to his body shape under the enhancement of Boost, and so, unable to use it anymore, he'd failed to account for his smaller size. Quick though his Level 2 swordsmanship

might've been, it wasn't too quick to dodge in the dark, even for someone like me with only Level 1 Martial Mastery.

The bandit chief let out a sharp groan as my knife sliced his leg. Though the blade was sharp, my strength wasn't enough to cut deeply through an adult man's muscle—which wasn't a major problem either way.

"You little shit!" he shouted angrily, though his attempts at intimidation didn't frighten me. Instead, he was the one clearly frightened of being attacked in the dark; his sword swings were becoming increasingly erratic, beyond what his Sword Mastery could compensate for. "Damn you!"

I took my time repeatedly slicing at the bandit chief's legs whenever the opportunity arose. This was partly to prevent him from escaping the woods, but also because, with my height, I'd have to get too close in order to reach an adult man's upper body. Trying out my own combat techniques was tempting, but considering the situation, it was a wiser choice to refrain from using longer, more sweeping attacks.

The bandit chief was stronger than me, so I would strike once, then immediately pull back. I was *not* going to let him leave this dark area. The wounds I had inflicted were hardly fatal; though I'd slashed and sliced at many different spots, leaving his bottom half covered in blood, I hadn't hit any vital organs.

But then what I'd been dreading finally happened.

"Hah! Ha ha! I see ya now, punk!!!" the man shouted as the first few rays of faint morning sunlight reflected off my ash-dusted, pink-tinged blonde hair, making it sparkle. "It's over, ya little shit!"

I stared at him in silence. Time was up, and my training was complete.

"Ha ha!" Now that he could see me at last, the bandit chief moved to strike. "Ha...guh? Wha—" The man collapsed to his knees as if coming apart at the seams. His sword slipped from his grip as I gazed coldly at his bewildered, everpaler face.

"It's morning, you know," I told him. "How many hours do you think it's been?" My goal had been death by blood loss. I'd deliberately avoided going

too far, only inflicting more wounds to worsen his bleeding. After casting Cure on myself to recover the health points I'd lost from staying up all night, I kicked at the longsword that had dropped from the bandit chief's hand, then approached him cautiously with my knife drawn. "Got any fight left in you?"

He didn't respond.

"Didn't think so. Goodbye."

Directly meeting the man's fearful gaze, I ruthlessly slashed my knife across his throat. There was no point in leaning closer or letting my guard down. Keeping my knife drawn, I watched intently as the blood seeped from his wound, slowly drowning his life in a pool of crimson despair, until he was no more.



In the now bright morning light, I made my way back to the deserted village, dragging the bandit leader's longsword as my reward for a victory well fought. There, at the center of the village square, beside a pile of bandit corpses, stood Viro, unharmed.

"Hey," he said, raising his hand in a quick gesture as he drank fruit wine from a flask. "Took you long enough. Tough fight?"

"I think that was the bandits' chief," I said. "Got this for my trouble." I handed him the longsword, peeved that he wasn't at least a little more worried about me.

He narrowed his eyes as he examined the blade. "This is cheap stuff. A noble placed the order. There's Baron Horus's seal on the hilt." He paused for a moment before continuing. "Anyway, nicely done, kid. The past life of a dead bandit doesn't matter anyway."

"I guess not..."

"What *does* matter is that I need you to light a fire. I sprinkled oil over all the bodies, but the fire in my tinderbox sputtered out, and I can't even light my cigarette."

"All right. Also, maybe you should quit smoking."

After he'd ensured the fire I'd lit wouldn't spread, Viro, contentedly puffing on his smoke, and I, nibbling on dry bread, left the deserted village.

He let out a yawn. "Man, staying up all night is rough. Let's find a decent inn when we reach the next town, yeah? The bandits had a good bit of coin. I'll give you half, so you pay for your own room."

"Thanks..."

Thus we continued our journey. Three days later, we arrived at Count Taurus's territory, where a major city was located.

Arrival

Two days had passed since we'd arrived in the largest city in the area, located within the territory of Count Taurus—though we hadn't had any plans there, not exactly. I must have been exhausted, because I had apparently fallen ill with a fever upon arrival and slept for an entire day.

Given the fact I was still a child and had been traveling and fighting through the night, it was no surprise. After my fever broke and my health recovered, I used a scanning crystal on myself and noticed a slight change in my stats.

```
▼Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human\ (Rank 1) \Delta+1
Aether Points: 47/77 \triangle +7
Health Points: 52/55 \triangle +3
Strength: 4 (5)
Endurance: 5 (6)
Agility: 7 (8)
Dexterity: 6
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 1]
[Martial Mastery Lv. 1]
[Light Mastery Lv. 1]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 1]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 1]
[Intimidation Lv. 1]
[Stealth Lv. 1]
[Night Vision Lv.1]
[Detection Lv.1]
[Basic Scan Lv.1] NEW!
```

I'd finally learned the Scan skill. Perhaps because of that, my aether points had gone up, in turn slightly increasing my overall combat power. One thing I hadn't expected, however, was that unlike the crystals, Scan as a skill cost around five points of aether to use. That was why my aether had gone down, even though I'd just woken up. As long as I was careful, that wouldn't be an issue, so I wasn't too concerned.

What really caught my attention, however, was the fact I'd woken up clean and in a thin nightgown of the kind typically worn by peasant girls. When I examined myself in the room's copper mirror, I looked just like an ordinary town girl, though I still looked mean.

The bed was soft, as if it'd never been used, and the sheets were immaculate. This seemed to be a fairly upscale inn, fitting for a high-ranking adventurer like Viro. He'd paid the waitress to take care of me, and when I woke up, she brought me some of her own brother's old clothes, which were fairly decent. Apparently, the clothes I'd been wearing had been so frayed that they'd come apart during washing; she'd asked me to please apologize to my "dad" for ruining them. Did she think Viro was my father?

After a whole day of fasting, hunger hit me like a sack of bricks. I was in the dining hall, savoring a proper meal of vegetable soup and bread, when Viro walked in and spotted me. He flagged the waitress and ordered brewed tea.

"Hey. Feeling better?" he asked.

"Good morning, papa," I said in a sarcastic tone.

"I keep telling you, I'm only thirty-five!" Which was still older than my father would've been. "If you're better, we're heading out soon. Think you can manage?"

"No problem." I was still a little fatigued, but it was nothing that would hinder my movement. Judging by Viro's expression and tone, he seemed to also be testing whether I was ready to be introduced to his client and handle tasks on my own. "Still..."

"Hm?" I looked up at him as I ate the remaining bread.

"You stick out like a sore thumb," he mused, looking at my pink-blonde hair.

Right, my hair. The peach-tinged color had been dulled with ash until now, but with a proper bath instead of just a quick wash, it was much glossier. "Could we ask for some ash from the stove?"

"Yeah, I'll ask later. But y'know, that sheen in your hair? That's because your aether's increasing. Pretty soon ash might not be enough to disguise it."

"Huh." The point of using ash on my hair was to avoid trouble by not standing out. With Viro around, I was safe for the time being, but once I was on my own again, I'd need to find something else to disguise myself with.

"So instead of worrying your pretty little head, study this," he said in a slight mocking tone, handing me a piece of paper. "If you have the right elemental affinity, you can use illusion spells to disguise yourself in the future."

"Is this shadow sorcery?" I asked.

The paper contained not only the incantation for the Level 1 spell Noise—which he'd taught me earlier—but also another Level 1 spell called Weight, which apparently could alter the weight of an object. Its incantation was "Mobathaorearnidelecleth," which was also a mouthful and difficult to remember. In the common language, it meant "change the weight of this object."

According to Viro, just like the light sorcery spell "Restore," this one was rarely used. Once cast, it could change the weight of an object small enough to be carried with both hands by about ten percent for a few minutes. That was...indeed a very small change. Meanwhile, the other spell, Noise, just produced sound. The scarcity of shadow sorcery users was understandable.

Knowing this spell, however, helped me understand a little better the solution to my long-standing question about shadow sorcery: it was likely that shadow-elemental mana was different from shadow itself.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Also, take these." He slid something wrapped in cloth across the table to me. "You've been using a metal skewer, but that's no good for throwing. Makes it hard to learn ranged skills."

Inside the cloth were several throwing knives, each with a blade about ten centimeters long and two centimeters wide. The handles were about seven centimeters long.

I'd been using three iron skewers as throwing projectiles, but after several battles, only one remained. I'd been thinking about replacing them, but apparently Viro had been paying attention to my choice of weapons. These types of throwing weapons, which could be used for assassination, fell under the category of "concealed weapons" and weren't sold in regular stores, so Viro had gone to a specialty store to get them for me. I tried to thank him again, but he waved me off, saying it was a necessary expense.

Several gold coins had apparently been hidden in that bandit stronghold, and Viro had given me three as my share of the loot—one of which I'd decided to stash away so I could pay Galvus back someday. On our way out of the inn, I gave them one silver and asked them to forward it to the barmaid who had taken care of me. At a cheaper inn, they might've pocketed it instead, but at a place like this, costing two silver per night, there was no risk of that.

"Now, then, let's hurry on," Viro said.

"Okay."

As we walked away from the inn, I once again felt several gazes following me—some young men included, this time. Was it because my hair color was unusual? Or did I look more like a girl now that my hair's sheen had returned? Now that I thought about it, it'd been about a month since I'd first cut my hair, so it'd grown a few centimeters. Maybe that made me look less boyish. Quite a bit of growth for only a month, but maybe my hair, like my body, was having a growth spurt.

For the time being, I stepped into an alley and dusted my hair with ash, which seemed to help me attract a bit less attention. The count's city seemed affluent, but even here, I could feel lingering, unpleasant stares from the alleyways.

The brightest lights cast the darkest shadows. Even in non-remote places like Count Taurus's lands, I'd need to grow much stronger to travel far.

"Hey," I spoke up as we left the city through the main gate and started heading east. "Can you tell me where we're going yet?"

Viro, after a moment's contemplation, hesitated surprisingly little before answering. "Guess it's about time, yeah. We're going to Margrave Dandorl's territory to the east. There's a health resort there where a certain noble is recuperating incognito. Our job is to be part of the security around that area."

"A noble," I echoed. So this *did* involve one. And if they were there incognito to recuperate, they might be of considerable status. It was dangerous for me, to be sure, but to grow stronger, I needed to tolerate some amount of involvement with nobility. Still, I was surprised he'd told an urchin like me that information. Not that I thought him a bad person, just...did he actually trust me? "Why do you need a kid like me for that, though?"

"That's a request from the client," Viro explained. "I have a guess or two. Could be that this recuperating noble is a child. Maybe."

"Hmm."

Though he hadn't revealed the client's name, knowing the noble in question was a child was a bit of a relief for me—it meant this wasn't a blood relative looking for me. If someone in my family found me, I might be forced into the nobility and, like the heroine from that woman's knowledge, end up leading a lot of men on and making many of them unhappy.

It was dangerous to get involved with nobility, being as powerless as I was, but this felt like a hurdle I had to cross. If all I did was keep running away, then I'd be running all my life. I had to gain the power to overcome fate.

On our way east, Viro and I crossed several territories, encountering bandits and goblins, which quickly turned into "nourishment" for my training. Though my rank and overall combat power remained unchanged, I was certainly growing in terms of experience.

And then, a week later...

"So this is Dandorl," I mused, feeling the cool breeze as I looked over the

gentle hills spread across a plain. Margrave Dandorl's territory was to be the place where I'd get my very own first job.

And...it was to be where I'd meet the girl known as the "villainess," pivotal to my life's journey.

Chapter 2: The Battle Maid of Shadow

Darkness in the Kingdom

"I trust Her Highness's departure from the capital went smoothly?"

In a room located in the royal palace of the Kingdom of Claydale—a great nation in the southern part of the continent of Sars—a young steward replied to the question his master had posed. "Her Highness the First Princess left the capital today with no complaints of ill health. Barring any issues along the way, she is expected to reach Margrave Dandorl's territory within two weeks, as scheduled."

"I see. Princess Elena's whims have been causing a good deal of trouble within the palace, but once she arrives safely at her destination, I can leave the rest in the hands of her grandfather."

This room belonged to Veldt Fah Melrose, Margrave of Melrose and Prime Minister of Claydale. He leaned back deeply in his chair, recalling the face of his old friend, Margrave Dandorl, whom he'd known since their student days.

The Kingdom of Claydale had originally been composed of three separate nations. Houses Dandorl in the north and Melrose in the south, formerly the royal houses of their respective kingdoms, had remained as political figureheads in their territories, now under the title of margrave.

While margraves were, generally speaking, regional managers, their current roles were the result of political unrest at the time of unification. The heads of both houses traditionally held key positions in the country which had originally served to placate the nobles and citizens of the former dukedoms of Dandorl and Melrose.

House Dandorl was in charge of military affairs, and historically, the position of Grand General—leader of all knightly orders—was held by a member of the family. House Melrose, meanwhile, was in charge of internal affairs, and historically, the position of Prime Minister was held by a member of that family.

In the more than one hundred years since the unification, the animosity between the nobility of the former dukedoms had faded, but changing the tradition had proven difficult, and the two families still occupied these two key roles.

Elena, the first princess in question, was the daughter of the second queen of Claydale, who in turn was a princess of Dandorl. At the time of the then crown prince of Claydale's engagement, there had been no suitable young duchesses of appropriate age, and so the princess of Dandorl had been considered the most fitting candidate for first queen, both in terms of familial status and beauty. However, the crown prince had chosen a viscount's daughter—a classmate of his, who hadn't even been a candidate for engagement—as his first wife.

The viscountess-turned-first queen had gone on to bear a male child who would become the next crown prince and, the year after that, the second queen, the princess of Dandorl, had given birth to Elena. Feeling that her beloved fiancé had been stolen from her, the second queen had been determined to make her child the next king, but those hopes had been nearly dashed when she'd given birth to a daughter.

Unwilling to give up, the second queen had subjected Elena to an intense special education from an early age, and as a result, Elena developed affinities for four different elements. Possibly as a side effect of the excessive increase in her aether, however, the princess developed a weak constitution. Ironically, despite the fact this had all been done in an effort to ensure that Elena would surpass the prince born to the first queen, it'd been the frail girl's half-brother who had consoled and supported her.

Young Elena showed an unusually strong affection for her half-brother, far beyond ordinary sibling love. Concerned that this might go too far, the king decided to send Elena away to "recuperate" in Dandorl, her mother's homeland, and to force her apart from the prince for a time.

Currently living in Dandorl was Clara Dandorl, one of the candidates for the crown prince's hand. Though one might've thought it unwise to bring the two girls close together, considering the princess's feelings for her half-brother, Elena and Clara were cousins and childhood playmates. The princess showed no

animosity toward Clara; in fact, perhaps as a result of her special education, Elena was an exceptionally talented girl with a calm personality—as long as her brother wasn't around.

"Lord Veldt," asked the steward, "are you not heading there yourself?"

"And what purpose would it serve for a prime minister such as myself to go there, Oz?" Veldt asked. "Though Her Highness's 'recuperation' isn't public knowledge, security at the health resort is to be handled by the Order of Shadows, correct?"

"My older sister Sera is in charge. There should be no issues."

House Melrose was responsible for internal affairs, with the head of the family doubling as head of the Order of Shadows, an organization within Claydale responsible for intelligence gathering, protecting key figures, and eliminating threats, all away from the public eye. The young man, Oz, came from a lineage that had long been serving House Melrose. He was not only the prime minister's steward but also a knight of the Order of Shadows.

The king's only children thus far were the crown prince, the first princess, and the newly born second prince. Though the king was still relatively young, it was a notably small number of heirs for so large a kingdom. As a result, some high-ranking aristocratic families had been scheming to send the king consorts, and both the crown prince and Elena had been targeted multiple times by people seeking certain privileges. Each time, the Order of Shadows had discreetly eliminated these threats.

Currently, the Melrose territory was administered by Veldt's eldest son as the acting lord. Veldt still juggled multiple responsibilities, however, and he glowered at Oz, wondering if the steward planned on foisting even more duties onto him. Although, thanks to his substantial aether, Veldt looked to be in his midforties, he was actually in his late fifties.

He would've preferred a life like that of the former king, who'd abdicated the throne in favor of his son and now spent his days traveling extensively with his wife the queen mother in comfortable retirement. Or like that of Margrave Dandorl, who'd passed on the position of Grand General to his son and now enjoyed life surrounded by grandchildren in his own territory. Veldt's

circumstances, however, wouldn't permit him such leisure.

Grandchildren, huh... he mused to himself.

Though Veldt hadn't given voice to his feelings, Oz noticed the sentiment in the older man's expression and brought up the topic. "Reports did state that the young lady was located in Baron Horus's territory, not far from Dandorl..."

Oz's words snapped Veldt out of his reverie, and the prime minister's brow arched slightly.

Veldt had two sons and a daughter. His favorite had been his youngest, his daughter, who at one point had even been a marriage candidate for the current king. The young woman had harbored secret feelings for a knight's apprentice of all people, however, and Veldt, not wanting his beloved daughter to go through hardship, had been unable to approve of their relationship. Tormented by this, she'd eloped with her sweetheart about ten years ago. Rumor had it that the two had settled in the north, and by the time their whereabouts had come to light, they'd already passed, having perished during a massive monster outbreak that had befallen their town.

The couple had, however, been blessed with a daughter during their time together. This child, Alicia—named after one of the aliases of a flower also known as the moon rose or Melrose, the family's namesake—was believed to have also perished during the monster attack. Recently, however, reports had emerged of a little girl fitting her description living in an orphanage in a small town within Baron Horus's territory. Still...

"So I've heard from my informant," Veldt said. "However, her hair is a dark golden color, close to red, unlike my daughter's, and her eyes are a dark blue, almost black. Those who have seen her have reported she doesn't look like my daughter."

"That could be because of her father, the knight's apprentice, no?" Oz suggested.

"All women in our family have peach-tinted golden hair, the same color as the Melrose. Why would this girl the reports speak of be different?"

Indeed, direct female descendants of the former royal family of Melrose all

had pink-blonde hair. It was said, however, that once they left the family and were no longer considered direct descendants, this trait would disappear over a few generations.

But Veldt's daughter, despite her elopement, was still officially part of the Melrose family. Thus, her daughter Alicia, born elsewhere or no, was a princess of Melrose too. This girl they'd found claimed to be Alicia and said that her deceased mother was the daughter of a noble family from the south, but her testimony alone didn't prove that she was Veldt's granddaughter. Nevertheless, it would have been too hasty to dismiss her claims based on hair color alone.

"We'll be sending someone from the Order of Shadows to manage the orphanage and monitor the girl for a few years, to see if her story holds water," Veldt said. "If it does indeed turn out to be true..."

"Would House Melrose take her in?" Oz asked.

"No. We would place her with another family until she comes of age. Let's see...perhaps one of our branch families. Viscount Melsis might do. I wouldn't call him talented, but he is quite trustworthy."

"The manager of the Melrose territories? He would be a good choice. But what of you, Lord Veldt?" Oz asked with a frown. He'd known Veldt from birth and was all too aware of the prime minister's character.

"Say, didn't Hoth know what my daughter looked like? I know he's retired now, but..."

"Indeed. My sister and I had little interaction with her, but our grandfather, having worked as a steward at your estate, would surely recognize her."

"Then we're sending Hoth to the orphanage as a manager. Have him confirm the girl's features before sending her to Dandorl. I will be there personally to take his report."

Viro and I had safely arrived in Margrave Dandorl's territory. The margrave was a major aristocrat, overseeing forty noble families with territories of their own in the northern part of the Kingdom of Claydale. A margrave was equivalent in rank to a marquis, but in this kingdom in particular, the two

margraves and their families had more wealth and political power than even the ducal families. It seemed our client wasn't the great noble himself but rather a different noble who'd rented a health resort in his territory.

The city where the margrave resided was large, with over a hundred thousand residents; we'd only stopped here to report to the Adventurers' Guild and weren't staying the night. On our way to the resort, located farther south, we crossed the stone-built cityscape and saw a massive, fortresslike castle in the distance, which...I had wanted to get a better look at...

After we'd walked a full day from the capital of Dandorl, a sizable lake came into view beyond a forest clearing. We circled it and spotted a modest castle on the lakeshore—well, modest in comparison to Castle Dandorl, anyway. It was still quite large. I thought that was our destination, but Viro didn't head there; instead, he approached the gate of a three-story manor with white walls just next to it.

"I'm Viro of the Rainbow Blade, here on request. I'd like to speak with Castro, the steward."

Rainbow Blade? Was that what other adventurers knew him as? Or maybe that was his party's name?

"Rainbow Blade," one of the gatekeepers echoed, looking slightly taken aback. "Very well. I will verify this and return shortly. Please wait here." The man then headed into the mansion.

Shortly after, the gatekeeper emerged with a tall, thin, somewhat eerielooking steward, who appeared to be in his thirties.

"Yo, Castro," Viro said. "Keeping on keeping on?"

"You're late, Viro," the steward said, seemingly unbothered by the scout's casual greeting. Instead, he focused his gaze on me. "Is this the one? Smaller than expected. You really think this child can do what we need?"

"Kid's learned the basics and is no ordinary brat, I assure you," Viro said with a grin.

Castro frowned slightly in response. "So you say. Viro, you go see Lady Sera. Child, you're coming with me." With that, he started toward the mansion.

I glanced at Viro, and he shrugged, giving me an awkward smile. "He looks creepy and mean, but he's just strict. Don't worry," he assured me. "Anyway, we part here for now. He'll tell you what to do."

What part of that was supposed to help me not worry? "Okay." For the time being, I followed Castro to the back of the estate. Even just his posture and gait strongly hinted at his competence.

▼Castro

Species: Humanð

Aether Points: 123/130

Health Points: 244/260

Overall Combat Power: 355

Still, he was no Viro. His steward attire aside, he might've been a scout, perhaps Rank 3 or so. His combat power would likely have exceeded 400 under Boost.

No sooner did I catch up with Castro than the man threw something at me without warning. Startled, I reflexively leaped to the side to dodge it—a very thin knife, now stuck in the ground. As I caught a glimpse of it, I took on a low stance and reached for the knife at my waist. Then the faint threat I'd sensed coming from Castro dissipated.

"Huh," he said. "So Viro is full of more than just hot air."

"What are you doing?" I asked. Was he testing me? Even if he wasn't actively trying to hurt me, an ordinary child would've been impaled through the foot.

"If that had hurt you, it would've been grounds for dismissal," he explained. "But, as Lady Sera said, having someone who can watch a child might be useful at times. Viro brought you here, so I'll take you on board. But I will say something..." Castro slowly turned back, glaring down at me. "I don't trust people from the slums like you."

The First Task

What was this man trying to say?

I kept my hand on the handle of the knife at my waist as I met Castro's piercing gaze. He seemed displeased with my attitude and raised an eyebrow slightly as he spoke. "People from the slums get used to having nothing and lose the will to lead honest lives. That's why crime comes as easily to them as breathing. Even when they have work, they betray others for the smallest of gains. There's no trusting people like that."

My gaze remained fixed on him, but I didn't react or say anything.

He clicked his tongue softly and turned his back on me. "I'll give you that needle dagger—and a task. Your post is this way."

"All right." I moved to pluck the thin knife Castro had thrown—a "needle dagger"?—from the ground and followed him.

There were people in the slums like those siblings, Jil and Shuri, who had no parents and no other choice but to live there. Likewise, there were worthless people like that man who'd extorted money from the siblings to spend on alcohol. The slums were a melting pot of people who couldn't lead normal lives —it wasn't a monolith and couldn't be understood from a single perspective. I wasn't sure if something had happened to Castro in the past to color his views like that, but regardless, I was a vagrant, not a slum kid, so if he'd been expecting a reaction, well, tough luck.

He took me west to a forest behind the castle. As I wondered why we were going there, he pointed farther into the trees. "Beyond here is a forested area that doesn't belong to any noble's territory," he explained. "This is a resort area, so the Forest Guard patrols regularly, but very rarely, a wild animal, like a wolf, may stray from its pack and slip past. Your job is to stay here and keep watch. Given Viro's high praise, surely driving away a wolf or two would be easy for you, yes?"

That was a pretty generic task. Sure, standing guard was something even a child could do, but any normal child would likely run off after only a few days at it.

"How long am I doing this?" I asked.

"A month minimum," Castro replied. "That lookout cabin should have food, so feel free to avail yourself of it."

"Understood."

That really was all Castro told me before leaving me in the forest and returning to the mansion. He seemingly had no intention of giving a proper job to an "untrustworthy kid from the slums."

From what Viro and Castro himself had said, it seemed that since the person being guarded was a child, they'd wanted a guard with that same point of view. If the child to be guarded was willful, they might run off when adults weren't looking, not comprehending the danger they'd be in. Maybe that'd been the thought process behind their decision, but Castro seemed so negative about it.

No, that wasn't quite right. He wasn't negative about the idea of a child acting as a guard; he was negative about a child *from the slums* doing the job.

It didn't matter to me either way; I was more at ease doing this than anything directly involving nobility. For now, I headed toward the lookout cabin Castro had spoken of, and found something barely deserving of the term "cabin," more akin to a half-rotted shed.

A cough escaped my lips as I opened the decayed, nearly purposeless door. The inside was dusty, littered with empty liquor bottles, and showed no signs of recent use. Maybe a guard on night patrol had applied for a budget on the pretext of using it for "food storage." Naturally, there was no decent food left, only moldy, dried meat, half-eaten by bugs and unfit for human consumption.

"Ah, well," I mumbled as I set down my bag and began to check my possessions.

For melee combat, I had my black dagger plus a spare steel dagger. For ranged combat, I had six throwing knives and one metal skewer. Additionally, I had the sling made from my hair and the slingshot I'd crafted before that. Lastly, I had the needle dagger the steward had given me, though I had no idea how to use it. The edges were thick and not bladed, so it was probably meant for stabbing.

As for food, I had a small amount of dried meat, one piece of brown bread, a small bag of nuts, and a bit of rock sugar and salt.

In addition to those, there was the small book of wild herbs that woman had stolen from her mentor and two healing potions, though I probably would not need to use them.

"Flow," I chanted, using the practical spell to wash the dust off my hands and then to quench my thirst. Next, I picked up my bag again. "First, I need to secure a base of operations and food..."

This cabin wasn't suitable as a base; it had virtually no defensive capabilities and was far too conspicuous (and dusty besides). After scanning the area and confirming there were no nearby water sources other than the lake, I settled on a tree about fifty meters away from the cabin as my temporary base. I deftly climbed the tree thanks to Martial Mastery and hid my bag in it before climbing back down to explore the surrounding forest. Once I found what I was looking for, I drew the knife at my waist, figuring I may as well continue my training.

"Thrust!" I unleashed a non-elemental magic spell—a dagger technique—and, shortly after, a nearby sapling of nearly three meters in height toppled over with a loud crack.

Using the combat technique had consumed about ten points of aether. That didn't seem like much, but it wasn't something I could afford to use repeatedly with Boost active. Until my total aether increased further, it would be safest to limit the technique to two uses per combat. Still, I cut down about three saplings, each roughly five centimeters in diameter, stripped them of their branches to make them into sticks, and brought them back.

Securing them with vines and the help of Boost, I pulled them up to the tree I'd settled on as my base. I then laid the three sticks across the tree's branches and tied them in place with the vines, creating a simple sleeping area. I could add more sticks later and make it more comfortable. Just in case, I tied together the branches I'd pruned earlier to conceal my sleeping area, smoked out bugs with repellent herbs, and had a meal of brown bread and water. Then I headed out to secure more food.

There were many large trees nearby, and though I didn't see many blackberry

shrubs, I found black-shelled nuts and dark purple fruits growing on vines. Occasionally, I spotted green snakes and threw knives at them for throwing practice, but since I still hadn't learned the Throwing skill, I couldn't hit such small targets.

Eventually, night fell without Castro ever stopping by to check on me. I'd spotted no soldiers on patrol either. Using Night Vision and Stealth, I returned to my base in the dark forest, wiped my body clean with a wet cloth, and had a meal up in the tree. Since I was technically on watch duty, I decided it was best not to light a fire at night, and so I ate only nuts and fruits. Now that I'd finally taken a moment to catch my breath, the exhaustion from the trip hit me, and I quickly fell asleep.

The next day, just before sunrise, I woke up to a slightly different feeling in the early morning air.

Generally, I wasn't a deep sleeper. While I couldn't say I was fully rested, the fact that I detected no other humans—the greatest threat to me—made me feel very refreshed upon waking. Even after sunrise, there were no signs of people—or wolves. It was odd that a child was being left alone to stand guard with no one to alternate shifts with; if I happened to miss a wolf, would that impact Viro's reputation, since he'd brought me here?

After another meal of just nuts and fruits for breakfast, I went for a walk around the forest. Partly to patrol, yes, but a bigger part of it was just the fact that my skills were only Level 1, meaning every action counted as training. This was the perfect opportunity to learn even more useful skills. If I could've chosen, I'd have liked to raise at least one skill to Level 2, but that was likely impossible, I thought.

For an ordinary commoner, it was rare to reach Level 2 in a skill before the age of twenty. This was probably more due to physical limitations than proficiency, I figured. My body had grown more than was appropriate for my age due to my rapid spike in aether, but I was still no more than a child under ten years old, and that growth seemed to be slowing down to a normal pace as the increase in my aether tapered off. If so, maybe I should prioritize training to

increase my aether?

That day, I managed to hit a rabbit with a throwing knife. I wasn't using fire at night, so I cooked the rabbit deep in the forest while it was still light out. I also took notice of the fact that overly sharp knives weren't suitable for skinning.

On my way back, I collected a few unusual herbs. If memory served, these herbs could be mixed with alcohol to craft a tonic that improved cardiac function. In large quantities, however, they could be made into a poison that caused heart attacks. *Can I use these for anything?* I wondered. It was about time I started thinking about how to make use of poison.

I returned to my base in the tree a bit early and started contemplating shadow sorcery while eating the remains of the rabbit roast. I had yet to learn Shadow Mastery, likely because I lacked a clear mental image of what "shadow" entailed rather than because of an issue with the meaning or pronunciation of the incantation.

Light was energy with a clear source, like the sun. But shadow was simply a result of an absence of light rather than its own thing, so I figured ordinary shadow and shadow-elemental mana had to be different things.

Still, shadow spirits were summoned from darkness, and it was the mana in darkness that became the shadow element. Maybe the shadow attribute referred to the very mana that spawned from darkness? So maybe the shadow element wasn't an absence of light so much as some kind of physical substance that blocked out light.

If so, it might be possible to treat shadow as a cluster of particles and to manifest thoughts—like sounds or mental images—by "wrapping" them in shadow, creating something you could direct to a particular physical location. Or maybe illusion sorcery was about projecting one's mental image onto the shadow particles themselves.

The light element was pure energy, so it could be converted into vitality. And unlike other attributes, the shadow attribute had no form; the interior of Viro's expanded backpack was pitch black, and I couldn't see anything inside. I'd thought it was because shadow was formless that one could use it to do things like increase the carrying capacity of an object by visualizing the mana as a bag.

But maybe space expansion didn't have to be confined to the shape of a bag at all?

Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a shift in the color of the nearby mana. Though I could only clearly make out shapes up to thirty meters away, I could detect simple mana movements at up to twice that distance.

This wasn't the wind. Had a wolf really wandered into this part of the forest? Or maybe a soldier on patrol had finally shown up?

"No," I muttered quietly. There were five or six moving figures. The more intently I focused on them, the clearer their shapes became. Or maybe they were getting closer? "Are those goblins? But..."

One of them was particularly large. Goblins were low-level monsters, about the size of a child, with an overall combat power of 40, equivalent to that of an average adult. I could handle them without any issue, but...that larger one...

I used a partial Scan, without consuming any aether, and knowledge about the creature surfaced in my mind.

▼ ???goblin

Aether Points: 66/68

Health Points: 332/340

Overall Combat Power: 101 (Boosted: 116)

"A hobgoblin?"

Hobgoblins were a stronger variety of goblins—Rank 2 monsters, I believed. Were they strays? I wasn't sure why these monsters were here, but they were beyond what I could handle currently. Annoyingly, however, the hobgoblin and its pack approached my tree, as if looking for prey.

I held my breath and waited. They came just shy of five meters from me and were walking past when I noticed a small light approaching the lookout cabin. Was this a soldier? No, that silhouette...a maid? All alone? A petite woman, holding a small lantern and a small basket, walked closer, her steps uncertain in

the darkness. If I called out to her, we'd both be discovered. But if I did nothing, the pack of goblins would likely spot her.

After a moment of silent hesitation, I realized I had no choice. Sighing internally and quieting my heart, I pulled out the needle dagger, which had better penetration power than my black knife. Silently, I followed the flow of mana and pressed my feet against the branches, held the dagger firmly in both hands, then leaped down straight onto the hobgoblin.

The creature howled in pain. My dagger didn't penetrate its skull, instead sliding down and gouging its face before stabbing into the neck. A gush of blood spurted out, painting me a dark crimson.

Guess you'll die.

Battling the Hobgoblin

"Has anyone seen Meena?"

As the sun set, a maid with a light tan, who'd been giving instructions to the other maids at the estate next to the castle, noticed that one of the young women had gone missing.

The lakehouse castle was one of the guesthouses owned by House Dandorl and was currently being rented by the royal family for the recuperation of the first princess. The castle wasn't very large, so soldiers, servants, and ordinary maids all had their quarters in the adjacent estate. Although some maids had been dispatched from the palace, it hadn't been feasible to send dozens of them over, so several maids working for House Dandorl and other noble families had been reassigned to assist.

Meena, a young woman who'd only just come of age, was one of the maids who'd been dispatched by another noble family; she was the daughter of a merchant and had been sent over to train in etiquette. Though she was hardworking, she was somewhat detached from the ways of the world and behaved in unpredictable ways—for instance, by feeding her own lunch to stray cats.

The maid who'd spoken—a senior maid serving the royal family at the palace

—had decided to keep a close eye on Meena. As she looked around, trying to find her charge, one of the maids on standby at the estate timidly raised a hand. "U-Um, Ms. Sera?" the shy maid said. "Meena might've gone to offer food to the child who arrived recently."

"A child?" the senior maid, Sera, echoed. "And who brought this child here?"

"An adventurer who arrived the day before yesterday, though I didn't personally see it."

"Viro, then."

Sera had previously asked people she could trust to refer quick-witted children to her. One child, a nine-year-old brought by a certain knight, had turned out to be the child of a relative. Though this child had been clever, they'd never done menial work before and had reached their limit after a few days. Another, a bright and hardworking ten-year-old brought by a merchant, had clearly been indoctrinated by their parents in a scheme to make connections with high-ranking nobility. Noticing this, the merchant had apologized and taken the child back.

The reason that Sera had specifically requested children was twofold: one, she wanted someone with a child's perspective who could monitor the princess, and two, she wanted to secure potentially useful personnel for the future. If all she'd needed was a guard, her own son would have sufficed, but the plan was to find reliable associates for her son in the future, when the current crown prince became king. However, finding a useful child ten years of age or younger was proving to be much more difficult than she'd anticipated.

Sera was a knight of the Order of Shadows working directly under Margrave Melrose. The Order had a total of four hundred and twenty-seven knights, but they weren't all in the royal capital; most were scattered across the country. The Order supplemented its personnel by employing scouts and others from known, reliable sources, such as military circles and branch families under House Melrose. However, even so, they were short staffed when it came to information gathering—not just domestically but internationally as well.

Though she'd retreated behind the scenes upon her marriage, Sera, now in her late twenties, had been obliged to return to the field and take command

due to the Order's shortage of knights—especially those who, like her, could directly engage in combat.

Then, about two days ago—just before the deadline—the adventurer Viro had brought a child to the estate. His party, the Rainbow Blade, was one of the most prominent Rank 5 parties in the kingdom and, even through several member changes, had remained on good terms with House Melrose for over a hundred years. Currently, the party was on hiatus, but Viro had personally requested to handle part of the security of the surroundings.

At the time of his request, Sera had asked Viro to refer a capable child to her, but since he hadn't said anything upon greeting her after his arrival, she'd forgotten about it until now. The child had been put under the supervision of Castro, a former adventurer and scout, himself a referral from Viro. Though his inflexible personality made him difficult, he was diligent and reliable for behind-the-scenes work.

What had Castro done with the child? If the new arrival hadn't been suited for the work, the steward would've submitted a report over the last two days, but she'd heard nothing from him. Adding to her concerns was the fact that a goblin extermination that'd taken place a few days ago in a neighboring territory had allegedly failed to eradicate them all. With that in mind, he should've put the child to work within the castle grounds, where there would've been no issues, and yet—

"Call Castro," Sera commanded. "Right now."

My goal had been to pierce the hobgoblin's skull with the needle dagger, but it'd slipped, torn through the creature's face, and lodged in the monster's neck, eliciting a shrill cry of agony from my target. Since my surprise attack had failed, I made a snap judgment, swiftly leaped away from the flailing hobgoblin, and instead targeted one of the smaller goblins, which was still dazed and unable to grasp the situation.

I pulled my weighted string from my waistband and swung it sideways at the goblin. Considering how much I'd practiced, I was almost guaranteed to hit a stationary target with the makeshift weapon. The lump of copper coins—now

fifteen total—struck the top of the creature's head with a loud *crunch*. It groaned in pain and immediately lost consciousness. As it collapsed, I fatally wounded it by thrusting the needle dagger into its throat, then rolled away to put distance between myself and the rest of the pack.

"Grahhh..." The hobgoblin, holding its face as if to endure the pain, glared furiously at me between its fingers. The remaining three goblins, finally noticing the presence of an enemy, hurriedly brandished their rusty daggers.

I let out a silent inward curse. How thick was that thing's skull? My attack had failed partly due to my own lack of ability, but even so, being completely unable to kill it despite getting a surprise vertical jump on it and putting my whole weight behind the blow was unexpected. Moreover, the impact had left a slight numbness in my hand—not enough to hinder my actions but still a bit grating. If this had been a human target, that neck wound would've been fatal, but of course, a monster could endure more damage than that.

▼ Hobgoblin

Aether Points: 63/68

Health Points: 214/340

Overall Combat Power: 96 (Boosted: 111) ▽ -5

Its health points had dropped significantly, at least. And I'd seemingly torn through its left eye when I'd gouged its face, reducing its combat power.

On closer inspection, though, the tip of the needle dagger had bent. I'd thought it was made of steel, but it seemed to be cast iron instead. Now what? I couldn't figure out a way, with my current abilities, to kill the hobgoblin while also dealing with the other goblins.

A loud, angry roar from the larger creature echoed through the forest, followed by smaller cries from the other three. The hobgoblin, still clutching its face, pointed at me, and its minions charged forward. But in that decision I saw a slight chance of victory. If they'd all attacked at once, I'd have had no choice but to flee until exhaustion. There had to be a reason that the hobgoblin itself

wasn't moving.

My knowledge presented several possible explanations, and I instinctively settled for the most plausible one, turned tail, and ran. The hobgoblin let out an angry cry, and only the goblins followed after me. Maybe this had been the right call.

The impact from the needle had been enough to bend its tip and numb my hand. Surely the creature's brain couldn't be completely unharmed. It must've been dazed; perhaps it had a concussion. Its feet faltered slightly when it tried to step forward to chase after me, making this theory seem likelier.

Still, I couldn't focus only on the larger creature; the smaller goblins chasing after me may have been weaker, but their individual combat power was still equivalent to mine. I'd fought goblins a few times before when, as part of my training, Viro had told me to kill three of them that had attacked us on the road —one at a time. Now I was again facing three, but all at once.

A goblin's combat power was almost the same as that of the average adult townsperson, but as Viro had told me, combat power was only a guideline. High aether, for instance, increased one's combat power, but all that meant was the ability to use combat techniques more frequently, sustain Boost more easily, and fight longer. Goblins were unintelligent but cunning and merciless, attacking a foe's weak spots without hesitation. That, however, also created opportunities for me.

As I ran, I threw my slightly bent needle dagger at the leading goblin. It yelped and made an exaggerated motion to dodge it. The next second, I noticed its gaze drawn to the dagger, grabbed a throwing knife, and flung it at the creature's exposed throat. My knife hit its shoulder instead, but I took the opportunity to swing my weighted string at it.

The coin weight missed the mark slightly and hit the goblin's temple with a dull *thunk*. Since that hadn't been enough to knock it out, I moved on to the next part of my strategy. Before finishing the injured one off, I looked at the next goblin and hesitated, acting as though I wanted to retrieve my needle dagger. It smirked, threw away its own rusty dagger, and picked up the seemingly superior needle dagger to attack me.

It swung the needle dagger at me like an ordinary blade, striking me in the shoulder. My black knife, in turn, slashed at its throat, causing blood to gush forth as it let out a pained groan. Goblins were said to be nocturnal, but that didn't mean they had Night Vision. They could only perceive light to the same extent as wild animals, and this one hadn't even realized that the needle dagger wasn't bladed.

That doubled as the conclusion to an experiment. I'd thought maybe some goblins might have Night Vision, but that didn't seem to be the case. Now the creatures were down to two, just as I'd planned. I erased my presence and blended into the shadows of the trees, confusing the third goblin as it suddenly lost sight of me. I snuck up behind it and, avoiding bone, stabbed its back, piercing its heart.

"G-Grahhh?" The first goblin, having recovered from the damage I'd inflicted, saw its dead comrade and looked around but couldn't find me hidden under Stealth. Nevertheless, I remained cautious and refrained from approaching it recklessly, instead taking out several throwing knives and doing my best to aim at it. "Grahhh!"

The first knife, again, struck its shoulder. Where to aim in order to reduce its combat power with one strike? Where to stab for a one-shot kill? Real combat was the best training method—the more dangerous the fight, the better the results.

A second knife stabbed into the goblin's arm, making it drop its rusty dagger into the darkness. Finally, as it started to flee, I threw a third knife at its back. The knife's trajectory was far cleaner than I'd expected, and it pierced the creature's spinal cord. *Did I finally learn it?*

I had no time to sate my curiosity, however. As I hurried to collect the knives I'd thrown, the hobgoblin, now able to move once more, caught up to me. It'd already stopped bleeding... This was why creatures with high health points were such a nuisance.

Whether because I'd killed its minions or because I'd hurt it, the hobgoblin let out a loud, furious roar when it found me. I gazed coldly at it. What are you mad about? You're my enemy. What's the problem? Enemies kill each other.

As if it'd heard my inner voice, the creature let out another cry of anger.

All right. The irritating numbness in my hand had gone, and as I flexed my fingers to check their condition, I assessed my opponent. The wound on its neck—fatal to a human—had already stopped bleeding, but I'd managed to stab quite deeply, and its health was halved; its combat power remained reduced due to the loss of its left eye. Even then, said combat power was more than double my own. Normally, this wouldn't have been an opponent I could beat in a head-on fight, but this was a golden opportunity I might never get again. My enemy was far stronger than me, but injured and unaccustomed to only having one eye.

Since the hobgoblin had found me, despite my Stealth, I assumed it either had Night Vision or Detection. It hadn't noticed me in the tree earlier, however, so the former possibility seemed likelier. Another possibility was that it'd smelled blood, but the creature itself was covered in it, so that seemed unlikely. Which meant...if it had Night Vision, then it could still find me even with my Level 1 Stealth.

Its weapon was...a hand axe? It was an axe a lumberjack might use, but in the hands of a large hobgoblin, it looked like a hand axe. Since hobgoblins were Rank 2 monsters, I assumed it had Axe Mastery at Level 2.

Higher-ranked creatures sometimes had the Intimidation skill, but since it was making all that noise without intimidating me, this one likely didn't have it. As for other skills, perhaps Martial Mastery and some defensive ones? I'd heard there were goblin species capable of using elemental sorcery, but if this had been one of them, its combat power would've been higher.

Even assuming it had Night Vision, though, it wasn't used to only having one eye, so it was unlikely to throw rocks or its axe at me, since that'd just give me an opening to attack instead. For the time being, I decided to assume it had magic and ranged capabilities, but at minor levels.

I inhaled slowly, then exhaled as if to expel my fear. This was it; I was going to settle things with this creature here and now. Running away would've been the smart, correct choice, but whatever. You're going to feed my growth.

With a guarded growl, as if it sensed my resolve to fight to the death, the

agitated hobgoblin cautiously approached me, clutching the rusty axe in its right hand. In turn, I readied my black knife, moving to the right—a blind spot, thanks to its useless right eye. I had no need for Stealth anymore, and though it hardly felt like it made a difference, now that I was conscious of it, I realized hiding had slightly hindered my movements. If I survived, I'd have to practice more.

Mindful of my footwork and using Boost at maximum strength, I threw a knife at the hobgoblin from its blind spot without warning, just as Castro had. With a grunt, the creature instinctively blocked the knife with its left arm, seemingly having realized something was coming its way. Unlike the bandit leader, this thing had resolve. I hadn't been underestimating it, but now I was even more cautious.

Roaring, the hobgoblin charged forward, swinging its hand axe down. I dodged to the right, into its blind spot, but lost my balance. Normally, that would've been a fatal mistake, but the creature, thrown off by its missing eye, couldn't follow my movements. Still, it roared again and swung its axe wildly into its blind spot—if even one hit landed, it was death for me. Fear was rising in my heart, but I pushed it to the far back of my mind and continued to evade the hobgoblin's attacks calmly, circling once again toward where it couldn't see me.

A moment's carelessness in this back-and-forth would lead to my demise; I had to put an end to this before it got used to its limited vision. I had no choice but to rely on my combat techniques to defeat it, but if I couldn't take it down in one hit, even the slightest counterattack could easily be fatal for me, especially given the cooldown period after I used a technique, when my movements would be impaired. I might stand a chance if I could blind its remaining eye, but given that the hobgoblin had deflected the knife I'd thrown at it, it seemed to be defending against that risk.

Was there nothing else I could do? Wait. There is something. If I failed, I'd be in an even more precarious situation, but it was probably still better than rushing in carelessly or being slowly worn down. Live or die. Let's do this.

As I tried to retreat into the dark forest behind me, the hobgoblin, clearly recognizing my intentions, cried out and gave chase. My plan involved making use of its Night Vision skill; unlike mine, which allowed me to see through the

color of mana, normal Night Vision involved visualizing one's surroundings in one's mind by detecting the reverberations of mana caused by the movement of the wind or living beings in the surrounding area. Viro had taught me that humans could only reach Level 1 in the skill because their basic sensory capabilities were diminished relative to those of demi-humans and monsters. This creature, being a monster, likely used Night Vision regularly—and that was key to my strategy.

In accordance with my plan, I entered the dark forest, where Night Vision was a necessity, and immediately went into Stealth, simultaneously focusing on casting a spell.

"Tone Ple," I chanted. The words meant "that place" and were part of the incantation for the shadow sorcery spell Noise. The rest relied on my ability to visualize, control my aether, and see the colors of mana.

I inhaled only the shadow mana in the air, dyeing my own essence with shadow. As I used Aether Manipulation to direct that energy to the area I'd designated, the sharp decrease in my own aether caused me to stagger.

The hobgoblin, catching up to me now that I'd momentarily stopped, saw an opportunity and raised its axe high with a shrill roar to, I assumed, perform the Axe Mastery technique Break. Powered by aether, the axe swung down, releasing a shock wave that would pulverize the spot where I stood. As a Level 2 technique, it would've literally broken a child like me if it'd struck me directly. However—

"Grah!" The hobgoblin, caught off guard by a blade thrust from its *side*, flailed its arms in confusion as its attack connected, knocking me away.

I hit the ground, cutting my lip in the process. Bearing the pain, I pushed myself to my feet and spat out a wad of blood. The creature didn't use the opening to attack me—it couldn't have. Its remaining right eye had been deeply pierced by my metal skewer, robbing it of what remained of its sight. Left in the dark, the hobgoblin howled into the night.

What it'd struck at was my shape, crafted from shadow mana. In a bright place, the trick would've been easily exposed, but with no light, a creature accustomed to using Night Vision was more likely to be tricked at first glance.

Shadow mana was composed of formless particles. Therefore, depending on one's control of aether and the mental image one conjured, it could be used for almost anything. That'd been my hypothesis, at least, and I was glad it'd worked. However, since this was a mix of magic and sorcery, it'd consumed nearly all my remaining aether points. Running dry on aether felt similar to starvation, and I licked at some of the hobgoblin's blood that had splattered on my face, the metallic taste giving me a slight thrill.

"Now, then..." I muttered.

The hobgoblin flinched, letting out a weak growl like a cornered animal.

I don't have enough aether for combat techniques anymore. I don't have the strength to take you down in one hit anymore. But you—you can't see, but you still have the will to fight, don't you? Then struggle. Give survival all you've got. I'll be right here with you, to the end. Until you die.

Upon finding the younger maid in the dark, Sera slumped in relief. "Meena!" "Oh! Miss Sera!"

At the estate, upon questioning Castro, Sera had learned he'd left the child in the woods at the border. Castro, having come from the slums himself, despised people from the same background because the crimes he'd committed in the past weighed down on him. She didn't know what had happened in his past, but perhaps due to whatever it had been, he found traitors loathsome and unforgivable—which was one of the reasons he was so trustworthy. Sera, however, hadn't thought him so extreme that he'd even direct those feelings at a young child.

Not only that, there was a possibility that goblins might stray into the forest where the child had been left—though Castro had been unaware of this fact. The realization that the naive Meena had gone there to bring the child food, meaning two casualties were possible in a worst-case scenario, had made even Castro turn pale.

Sera and Castro, then, had decided to go searching for the two immediately.

"Calm down, Meena," Sera said. "What happened?"

"W-Well," the young maid stammered. "I heard many monsters screaming deeper in the forest and I...got scared and ran, but if...if the child's there... If...
I..."

Hearing Meena's testimony, Sera and Castro exchanged glances. "Very well," Sera said. "Castro, escort her back and go fetch Viro. I'll look for the child."

"No, I'll look!" Castro exclaimed, regret etched on his features. He hadn't meant to send the child to a grisly end; all he'd wanted was to drive out a kid from the slums he so despised.

Sera, however, shook her head at him. "I'll deal with you later. For now, do as I say."

"Understood," he replied, obediently backing down at the realization that he'd nearly committed an act of insubordination.

Entrusting Meena to Castro, Sera, blending in with the darkness, ran into the woods, holding thin mithril knives that had been concealed in each of her sleeves. The child Viro had brought might've been able to defeat a goblin, but young, overconfident people often got taken down by enemies beyond what they could handle. When facing numerous enemies, the best option was to flee —but what if escape hadn't been possible?

Meena had reported hearing multiple monsters, which meant they must've been close. And if they'd been screaming, that meant it was possible they'd been in combat. Who had they been fighting? How had Meena, despite having come so close, been able to escape? And if it'd been the child that the creatures had been fighting, why hadn't the child fled?

Don't tell me...

Castro had said the child looked to have been from the slums. But even for Sera or her son, both of whom had been trained from a young age as members of the Order of Shadows, it was no simple feat to hold off an unbeatable enemy in order to save someone. A child from the slums, accustomed though they might've been to violence, wouldn't have stood a chance. If so, then this child might already be dead. Worst case, Sera would have to show Viro the corpse; the thought weighed heavily on her.

Catching the scent of blood in the forest air, Sera changed directions, running silently between the trees, and soon spotted the trail of gore. She found only the corpse of a single goblin, however, and saw no trace of other monsters or the child. Using her Level 4 Detection skill, she followed the bloody trail. Then, in the far darkness of the forest, she saw something.

What's that?

Involuntarily, she stopped in her tracks, sensing a sharp intent to kill in the shadows. There was no way that came from a goblin; this had to be at least a Rank 2—worst case, a Rank 3 monster. Even for her, facing a Rank 3 creature would be challenging with her current equipment. Still, undaunted, Sera gripped her knives and stepped forward.

"What is this?" she muttered in astonishment. On the ground lay the corpses of three goblins and a larger creature that appeared to be a hobgoblin, its body bearing numerous wounds that spoke of a fierce battle.

And...before the bodies was a child covered in blood, emanating a chilling, deadly aura, standing there like a wounded animal and clutching a knife.

Offer

"You're..." As Sera addressed the blood-soaked child, the icy aura in the air softened slightly. Still, the child remained uncharacteristically sharp for one so young and stayed on guard, knife in hand. Observing this, the maid suddenly realized the little one didn't trust adults. "The child's safe," she told the others.

At that, the child finally seemed to reach the conclusion that Sera wasn't a threat, and as she looked up at the maid, what remained of the chilling aura melted into the night air.

It seemed that, indeed, this child had thrown caution to the wind and engaged in combat to draw the monsters away from Meena and, despite being ragged and battered, had successfully taken down the hobgoblin—a Rank 2 monster. The little one might not trust people, but they hadn't yet lost their humanity.

The resemblance is uncanny, Sera thought as she looked into the child's eyes,

similar in color and intensity to those of her superior, the margrave. Who might this child be? Bold, sharp, deadly—unexpected qualities for one so young. And so skilled in combat too—even more so than Sera's own son, who had been trained from birth.

As if seeking answers, Sera took an involuntary step forward. The child tried to put distance between them once more but stumbled, collapsed, and immediately lost consciousness. Startled, the maid closed the distance of several meters in a split second and caught the young one's light, thin frame before it hit the ground. Fighting a hobgoblin had fully drained the little one's spirit and strength.

Asleep like this, the child looked adorable. Sera, who had a son of the same age, stroked the little one's bloodstained cheek with a motherly touch. "Let's go," she murmured.

As she picked up the knife and other equipment the child had dropped, she spotted a weighted string woven from hair and felt a pang in her heart. She tucked the string into her pocket.

When I woke up, I found myself in an unfamiliar room. I remembered fighting the hobgoblin to death. What happened after that? I couldn't quite recall everything, but I thought I remembered seeing someone dressed as a maid.

Well, it didn't matter. Strangely, I'd dreamt of my mother for the first time in a while, which had felt rather nice. My body felt a bit sluggish, but I was relieved to see I had no major injuries. In fact, I had no injuries whatsoever. I had old scars, yes, but all the wounds I'd suffered over the past month or so had vanished without a trace. Maybe someone had been kind enough to use the Restore spell on me?

I checked my condition. The blood-soaked clothes I'd been wearing were gone, replaced with a run-of-the-mill nightgown. My body was clean, but not the kind of clean one would get from a bath; the finer dirt had been removed, but some larger stains were still faintly visible. Maybe some sort of magical cleaning method had been used.

My weapons were nowhere to be found. Had I left them behind? I'd have at

least liked to retrieve the knives I got from Galvus and Feld, but at this point, I was just glad to be alive.

What nagged at me the most was something else, though: the quality of my aether—no, not just that. The *flow* of my aether felt unusually smooth. I used Scan on myself to check, and my stats were astonishing.

```
▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human (Rank 1)
Aether Points: 107/112 \triangle +35
Health Points: 48/60 \triangle +5
Strength: 4 (5)
Endurance: 5 (6)
Agility: 7 (8)
Dexterity: 6
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 1]
[Martial Mastery Lv. 1]
[Throwing Lv.1] NEW!
[Light Mastery Lv. 1]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 1] NEW!
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 1]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 2] \triangle +1
[Intimidation Lv. 2] \triangle +2
[Stealth Lv. 1]
[Night Vision Lv.1]
[Detection Lv.1]
[Basic Scan Lv.1]
```

What the...? I had more or less assumed I'd learned Throwing, sure, but Shadow Magic? Wasn't that supposed to be Shadow Mastery? Because of that, my Aether Manipulation skill had increased to Level 2, and though my Rank remained at 1, my aether points had shot up along with my combat power.

And for some reason beyond my comprehension, Intimidation had gone up a level too.

A glance at my stats more or less explained the increase in the quality of my aether. Maybe a shadow-elemental aethercrystal had formed in my body. I'd thought those wouldn't form without repeated usage of sorcery of the corresponding element, but apparently it could happen this way too. I tried using Darken and felt shadow-elemental mana begin to overflow from within me, even though I hadn't deliberately changed my mana's color.

"Well, it's fine," I mused. It wasn't as though this was a bad thing. Whether it was due to an aethercrystal or simply the increase in Aether Manipulation, the smoother flow of aether seemed to make me feel better than before.

Hmm? At that moment, my Detection skill warned me of someone's approach. The vibrations told me the footsteps were rough, yet the person's gait showed an unconscious lightening of their body weight—

The door opened with a sharp clack. "Yo! You're awake!"

"I figured it was you, Viro," I said. What would he have done, had I still been asleep? Well, this being Viro, he'd likely picked up on the fact I was awake while on his way here, so he'd probably deliberately made his presence known as a greeting of sorts.

He strode right in and casually sat down on a chair beside the bed, then looked at me. "So you defeated a hobgoblin?" he asked, his features expressing a mix of playfulness and incredulity. "You really just keep going overboard, huh? A hobgoblin and four goblins all at once, at your combat power? By all rights, you should be dead, kiddo."

"I'll do even better next time," I said sharply, showing neither enthusiasm nor

regret.

Viro's expression grew even more incredulous.

"Hey, what's that?" I asked, pointing at a pleasant-smelling basket in Viro's hands.

Looking like he'd only just remembered he was carrying it, Viro opened the lid on the basket. "You've been out for a whole day, Alia. I figured you might be hungry, so I got us both some breakfast. Go on, eat up."

"Meat..."

I'd thought it was the morning after my fight with the hobgoblin, but it turned out it was the morning of the day after that. The breakfast Viro had brought consisted of boiled sausages, thickly cut ham, and grilled bone-in lamb. Nothing but meat, and first thing in the morning—typical for a single man living the adventurer's life, I supposed, but after not having eaten anything for over a day, I'd have preferred something easier on the stomach...

"Thank you," I muttered. My body was desperately craving food, possibly because I'd nearly depleted my aether. Besides, I had no idea when I'd next get to eat, so at this point, anything that wasn't poisoned would do. Still, the greasy flavor made me queasy, so I nibbled on the ham like a small animal while asking Viro about what had happened.

As it turned out, the goblins had indeed been strays. A nest sweep had been conducted in a nearby region but had missed some of the creatures, which had seemingly drifted here. Upon receiving a report on this, House Dandorl had dispatched its knights to clear up the remaining monsters in the area—a matter of dignity for the prestigious knights.

"What about the work I was assigned?" I asked.

I asked because I'd defeated the hobgoblin, but if I'd prioritized watch duty, the correct course of action would've been to alert the maid and give preference to reporting the matter rather than protecting her. That, of course, was not what I'd done. Not only that, I'd collapsed immediately afterward and had been slacking off for a whole day since. I couldn't imagine someone like Castro, who hated children from the slums, just letting that slide.

Viro tore off a piece of mutton and washed it down with wine (this early in the morning!), then crossed his arms, thinking. "Well, seems you have a new job."

"A new job?" I echoed.

"Yeah, and—oh, perfect timing. You can hear all about it from the woman herself. You can come in, Sera," Viro called out behind him, right as there was a knock at the door.

A stunningly beautiful woman with tanned skin—a maid?—walked in. Viro had apparently noticed her approaching, but I hadn't detected anything at all.

▼ Beautiful Maid

Species: Human♀

Aether Points: 178/220

Health Points: 245/260

Overall Combat Power: 929 (Boosted: 1126)

This was no ordinary maid. Her combat power was roughly equal to Viro's, meaning she was exceptionally skilled. And her skin color... Was she Krus?

The word "Krus" had surfaced naturally in my mind, along with related knowledge. Just as there were canine and feline varieties among demi-human beastmen, there were also different ethnicities among humans.

Among dwarves, there were mountain dwarves, skilled in woodworking and handiwork, and crag dwarves, skilled in smithing. Among elves, there were forest elves and dark elves.

And on this continent, there were two ethnicities of humans. The indigenous people, the Krus, had tanned skin. They weren't particularly skilled in elemental magic but were known for being agile and dexterous, making them adept in combat. The other ethnicity, the Mercenian, were pale skinned like Viro and myself and descended from the Mercenia people, who'd migrated from the northern continent about a thousand years ago. In the Kingdom of Claydale,

about seventy percent of people were Mercenian, twenty percent were demihuman, and only ten percent were Krus.

The maid Sera, seemingly of Krus descent, cast a cold glare at the tray of "breakfast" Viro had brought. "What do you think you're doing, feeding that to a convalescent child?" She lifted the dome-shaped lid from the metal tray she'd brought in and turned to me. "You should eat this. I've made you milk porridge."

With that, she thrust a bowl of faintly sweet-smelling porridge at me in a surprisingly assertive manner, leaving me with no choice but to take it. Still, it was far better than meat, and frankly, as long as it filled my stomach, I wasn't picky.

"Now, listen to me while you eat. First of all, here's your equipment. I collected it from the woods," she said, seemingly satisfied to see me eat. She pushed Viro aside, sat on the chair, and placed my equipment beside the bed.

Newly acquired information: Viro has a strange weakness to strong-willed women.

"This magic steel knife is a fine piece of equipment," she said. "I also found some money, which I've kept safe for you. Please verify the amount."

"What about my weighted string?" I asked. The black knife aside, everything else was replaceable, and it wouldn't have been a big deal if anything were missing. Still, other than my throwing knives and my spare knife, there was only a single bent copper. My braided hair string wasn't there.

"I found it too damaged for reuse and made the decision to dispose of it. That won't be a problem, correct?"

"Okay." Well, if it was unusable, it was unusable. I didn't have enough hair left to braid a second one, though. I need to think of a new alternative weapon, I mused as I finished the porridge.

Sera cleared away the bowl before turning to face me again. "Now to the topic at hand—I'm giving you a new duty. Though you may only be Rank 1, you are an adventurer, I'm told, and so I'm requesting this job directly from you rather than going through Viro."

"A request?" I echoed.

The maid nodded. "I would like you to work under me as a maid-in-training. Would you like to train to be a guardian maid?"

Maid's Work and a Krusian Boy

"A guardian maid?" I echoed. I'd never heard the term before. Sera nodded slowly in response.

She wanted me to be a maid...so she must've figured out I was a girl. Viro showed no reaction to this, so he must've known too.

"Before I explain," Sera began, "what's your name? And how old are you?" "Alia," I replied. "Seven."

"Whaaat?!" Viro exclaimed, in stark contrast with his lack of reaction to the revelation of my gender. "Alia, you're only *seven*?!" He seemed genuinely shocked.

Sera cast him a cold glance. "What's so surprising about it? That's about the same age I was when I became a maid-in-training. And isn't it normal for children that age to start helping their parents?" She paused. "Viro, did you bring her here without knowing her age?"

"I mean, hell, if I'd known she was seven, I wouldn't have made her kill goblins or taken her on a bandit hunt! The girl has grit, so I figured she must've been ten or something and was just small."

Well, that explained why he didn't treat me much like a child.

"If she were an orphan from the slums, sure, malnutrition could've explained that," Sera said. "But look at this girl's total aether points. You should have figured out she's having a growth spurt."

Viro tried to explain himself. "Sure, yeah, but still—"

"Is the decision final?" I cut in.

Sera's gaze shifted back to me. "We were in the middle of discussing something," she said coolly. "If you're asking about the job, it's your decision to

accept or decline. We won't force you. We don't need halfhearted people." Her tone carried a hint of provocation. She gave me a small smile, then continued, "Are you satisfied with your strength, having barely been able to take down a hobgoblin?"

I fell silent for a moment. Despite knowing the risks of involving myself with nobility, I'd decided to take Viro up on his offer because I wanted to become strong enough to overcome those risks. Being a guardian maid would likely mean even more involvement with nobles and other important people. But the woman before me, Sera, had a level of strength close to what I wanted.

"I'll do it," I answered at last.

"Good," Sera said. "Allow me to introduce myself, then. My name is Sera Leighton. I manage the maids in this estate and the neighboring castle, and am responsible for behind-the-scenes security. Now, your turn."

"I'm Alia...orphan and adventurer, nothing more."

Sera's smile widened slightly, as if she'd understood the meaning behind my choice of words. "I have high hopes for you. Perhaps in time, you could fulfill a role similar to mine as a battle maiden."

From that day on, I became an apprentice maid and began working at the estate. Though this meant being separated from my guardian, Viro, it didn't matter. The man was too hands-off to be a proper guardian one way or another.

Normally, maids worked in the neighboring castle, but an uneducated street urchin like me couldn't be put to work in front of nobility without any training. Regular maid apprentices would start by helping behind the scenes, shadowing other maids, but as an apprentice guardian maid, I was to act under the direct orders of my superior, Sera.

Sera Leighton, huh... From her demeanor and position, I'd suspected she might be a noble.

She easily picked up on my thoughts. "I'm but the wife of a humble baronet, who oversees a provincial town. We don't even own any territory."

A mere "wife of a humble baronet" shouldn't have a total combat power of over a thousand, I mused silently. She'd referred to herself as a "battle maiden." Typically, Sera's peers were focused on guarding targets and gathering intelligence. Guardian maids were tasked with protecting important figures, using themselves as shields against attacks, poisons, and other dangers. She'd told me it was rare to find someone adept at combat, capable of chasing after and taking down assailants.

I wasn't ready for anything of the sort yet, but Sera seemed to think I could be someday. Right now I wasn't even sure I could handle a regular maid's duties, honestly.

"Now, to continue the explanation... Ordinary maids commonly address nobility by their corresponding titles. Your peers can be addressed by name only regardless of their background, but your direct superiors should be addressed as 'mister' and 'miss.' You may, however, call me by my first name, even in front of guests."

"Got it."

"You should respond with 'yes, ma'am' or 'understood.""

"...Yes, ma'am."

"And...Meena!" Sera called out as we walked through the estate's corridors. "Meena, are you here?"

"Yes, maaa'am," replied a drawn-out voice from one of the rooms, from which emerged a young woman in her mid-teens, looking surprised to see Sera with me. "Miss Sera, is this the girl?"

"That's right. Meena, you're relieved of your duties for today. Bathe this girl, pick out work clothes that fit her, teach her how to dress, and tell her about this estate. Her room will be the empty one near yours, so please show her there."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Alia, your work starts tomorrow," Sera told me. "Until then, please learn the bare minimum social etiquette. Tomorrow, be in your work clothes and come to the backyard as soon as the sun is up."

The girl, Meena—seemingly the maid I'd seen in the forest—had been told she had me to thank for her safety, and so she was more than happy to show me the ropes.

"Handmaidens like Miss Sera can take warm baths," Meena explained, "but ordinary maids like us have to use the leftover water to bathe. You must clean yourself every day no matter how tired you are, or Miss Sera will be mad, so be careful, okay?"

"Okay," I replied. I wasn't quite sure that I'd fully grasped what the distinction was between a handmaiden and a maid, but I'd learned a maid was more akin to a housekeeper, serving in various capacities within the household, whereas a handmaiden specifically served nobility, and the two had fundamentally different roles.

Meena bathed me thoroughly in lukewarm leftover water and what seemed to be soap. My peach-tinged hair, now lying a bit longer from the wash and back to its natural sheen, stuck to my cheeks.

"All right!" she said. "You're all clean. Next, let's pick out a maid's uniform for you."

Sera's handmaiden attire was a long black dress that covered her to the neck and wrists, minimizing exposure. The uniforms for maids like Meena and myself, however, consisted of a long dress worn over a white blouse as well as an apron-style dress and cuffs. I wondered whether they'd have uniforms in my size, given I was a child, but as it turned out, they'd been expecting new maids, and so they'd prepared uniforms in a range of sizes, from those suitable for a ten-year-old to larger sizes for adults.

"Alia, you shouldn't wear the shoes on bare feet," Meena explained. "Put on these socks first, okay?"

"Okay."

Until now, I'd only ever been barefoot or worn sandals. This was my first time wearing shoes, and I had a lot of gripes with them. Also, the maid's uniform meant for ten-year-olds was a little too big on me. Meena told me it looked

cute, but I wondered if that was the same kind of "cute" one might see when dressing up a pet.

She then showed me around the estate, broadly explaining where things were kept and what kind of work maids did. Food was prepared in the dining hall from early morning until late at night, and we apparently could take stew and bread from there to eat during our breaks.

"I'm a commoner from a merchant family myself, but some of the maids are nobles' relatives, so be careful," she told me. "Some people will get mad if a commoner takes a bath or eats before they get the chance to."

"Huh..." Keeping a weapon on hand would be smart, I figured.

Meena then briefly went over how to speak and behave. Essentially, it boiled down to not running and keeping quiet. We were supposed to walk with our backs straight, look ahead, and not shake our heads any more than we had to. Maids were not to speak directly to nobility; instead, if there was a need, we'd communicate through a handmaiden. If a noble or guest spoke to us first, however, responding took precedence.

Everything was new to me, but with my knowledge, I felt like I'd be able to manage somehow. For example, I'd only ever used my hands or a spoon to eat, but thanks to this knowledge, I wouldn't be confused if I had to use a knife and fork.

A maid's work ended when the sun completely set and night fell. Some maids did work later shifts, but their efficiency inevitably declined under lamplight.

"Sleep tight, Alia," Meena said. "Good luck tomorrow."

"Okay," I replied. "Thanks, Meena."

My room was right next to Meena's. It was about four by three meters and had a bed, a closet, and a small desk and chair, seemingly for writing. I could've asked for a candle, but I didn't need it. After changing out of my maid's uniform into simple nightwear, I shaped the blanket on my bed to resemble a person and, holding my black knife, curled up in a corner of the room, concealed my presence, and quietly fell asleep, thus ending my day.

The next day, I woke up before dawn.

"Shine," I chanted, since I wasn't used to putting on my uniform yet and needed to see what I was doing clearly. I took off my nightwear and put on the white blouse. The experience of buttoning it up was new to me, but perhaps it'd be faster than tying a sash once I got used to it.

Though it was a blouse, the cuffs and collar were detachable, likely because they got dirty easily. It was loose around the chest; Meena had told me it was to "prevent chafing," but for maids with chests as large as Meena's, a special type of padding was needed. Then I put on socks and cloth shoes, a black dress that reached down to my ankles, and the apron-style dress to complete the maid's look.

Where can I conceal a weapon, though? Maybe the throwing knives would be easier to hide? My body was still small, however, so tucking them into my sleeves would've been too conspicuous. There was nowhere to tuck them in the chest area, and they'd easily be spotted if I hid them in the apron. "This is my only option..."

I took the leather straps from my old sandals, attached the black knife and throwing knives to them, then tossed the oversized bloomers I'd been supplied with yesterday onto a corner of the bed; I couldn't have worn them either way.

Dressed in my maid uniform, I snuck out of a window on the second floor and, using Stealth, headed to the hidden temporary base I'd set up in the forest. My belongings were few, but the money and herb almanac were important. I retrieved the almanac and potions and smoked them with insect-repellent herbs just to be safe, left the rest hidden for now, then headed to the backyard as Sera had instructed me to.

The backyard of the estate was out of view of the house. It was easy to tell if anyone was approaching too, so it seemed like a good spot for secret training.

I looked around quietly. Though I'd arrived as the sun rose, Sera wasn't there yet. For a moment, I wondered if I was too early, but then I remembered I wouldn't have noticed her if she'd been using Stealth. Maybe this was part of my training. As I carefully scanned my surroundings with Detection, I sensed a

faint presence in the woods.

"Huh. You can tell I'm here?" asked a voice as I looked in that direction. A figure, slightly smaller than me, emerged from the treeline. "You seem competent. Are you the newcomer people keep talking about?"

"Who are you?" I asked the figure—a boy, with tanned skin and black hair, seemingly also of Krus descent. His eyes were blue-gray and sparkled with curiosity as he looked me over.

Instead of answering my question, he approached me with an impish grin. "Don't get too cocky just because the adults praised you," he told me. "I bet I could take down a goblin too. There are tons of attacks out there that you've never heard of, y'know."

"Such as?"

"Let's see..." Did this boy live here? He didn't seem threatening, despite his talk of "attacks." Smirking, he approached me casually, then suddenly vanished from sight. "There's this!"

Whoosh!

Both the way he moved and his "attack" were unexpected. If this had been an attempt on my life, I would probably have been able to react, but I was caught off guard by his not-very-attack-like attack. He lifted my skirt almost fully, exposing the knives strapped to my thighs and calves.

His eyes widened in shock, likely at the sight of the weapons I'd concealed under my skirt. As he froze in a panic, I, under maximum power Boost, kicked up at his chin in a split second, dropping him to the ground with his head thrown back. I leaned over him, drew the black knife from my calf, and pointed it at his throat.

"I'm sorry! Forgive me!" he pleaded, his voice weirdly strained for some reason. "I didn't mean to do that! I'll take responsibility! I promise!"

I stared at him intently in silence. He wasn't my enemy, so I had no intention of killing him. He flushed red up to his ears and turned his face away, covering it with his hands.

Guardian Maid Training

"What are you doing?"

Sera's voice suddenly cut in as I held down the Krus boy, my knife pointed at his throat. She'd appeared without a sound or any hint of her presence; judging from the volume of her voice, she was still a few meters away. I kept my eyes and my knife pointed at the boy.

"Mom!" he cried out.

Oh. So he was Sera's son. Good thing I hadn't killed him; at my current level of skill, facing Sera would've been a death sentence. To demonstrate I had no intention of opposing her, I lowered my knife and moved away from the boy.

Sera spoke to me rather than her son. "What happened?"

"He flipped my skirt," I told her.

"Did he, now?" She glanced at her still-blushing son and frowned slightly in disapproval, then looked straight at me and gave a small bow of her head. "As his mother, I apologize for his inappropriate actions toward a lady."

"It's fine."

"Then let's consider the matter settled." She turned to her son, speaking sternly. "Theo, on your feet. We're starting training."

"Mom..." the boy mumbled. He got up reluctantly, his cheeks still red, and avoided looking at me.



"Well, it looks like introductions are in order. This is my son, Theo," she told me, then addressed him, "and this is an apprentice maid, Alia. Theo, you will be continuing your daily training routine, and Alia will be given the bare minimum education necessary to present herself to nobility, so that she does not behave inappropriately before the target she's supposed to be protecting, who arrives in ten days' time."

Right. They needed someone to keep an eye on a child. I guess that's my job, I thought. "Education? You mean in etiquette?"

"That too, but we'll be doing that at night, after our regular duties. In the morning, you'll be training in martial techniques with Theo."

"What about sorcery?" I asked. With her level of aether, Sera had to know at least *some* spells. I told her that, even if she hadn't been the one to heal me, I wanted to learn light sorcery if possible.

She gave me a look, as if sizing me up. "I hadn't planned on it due to time constraints, but... Do you happen to know your elemental affinities?"

"Light and...dark," I replied.

"Two, then. Did you learn dark sorcery from Viro? I could teach you light sorcery up to Level 2, so if we have time, I don't mind instructing you."

"So it was you who used Restore on me, Miss Sera?"

"It was," she confirmed. "If you can use light sorcery, then you must learn to use Restore. In our line of work, injuries happen, but guardian maids need to interact with nobility, which means visible injuries are too conspicuous; you may even need to change clothes during work. Try to heal your wounds as much as you can."

"Understood."

"I can teach you wind sorcery!" the boy, Theo, suddenly interjected, stepping closer to me.

I see. So he probably lifted my skirt using the wind-elemental practical spell Gust, I mused. But... "I can't use wind sorcery."

"But I'd like to train against it," I added.

"Okay! You can leave that to me, Alia!" Had I won this kid's trust by knocking him down and pointing a knife at him? The world was full of strange boys.

"Alia," Sera said, "from your movements, I can see you've trained yourself to an extent, but we'll need to correct that. Specifically, I'll be teaching you the unique martial arts and footwork used by guardian maids that will allow you to fight even in a skirt. I'll demonstrate." Having said that, Sera slid sideways without making a sound.

"I don't understand," I murmured.

"Of course. It's not that simple. Watch my legs closely," she said, lifting her skirt to her knees and repeating the same movement. Her footwork was highly complex, involving shuffling, crossing, accelerating, and decelerating. Learning this would come in handy for me, both for stealth and for fighting. This technique wasn't a part of my knowledge, so I watched intently so as to burn it into my memory.

"Normally, when teaching children, one drills these movements into them as part of the basics, as I do with Theo. But since you already have some groundwork laid and actual combat experience, Alia, and since we're short on time, I won't be teaching you step by step. Learn by observing, as you did with Viro and the others. You don't mind, do you?"

"It's fine." I paused, remembering my manners. "It won't be an issue, Miss Sera."

"Good," she said with the first small smile I'd seen from her.

Wow. All the adults I ran into sure were strict with children. Still, I was used to absorbing combat practice with only my knowledge to guide me, and this wasn't that different.

"Additionally, we will issue you a weapon. Ordinary maids are strictly prohibited from carrying weapons, but we are allowed minimal equipment, similar to soldiers. Normally, outsiders are required to relinquish their armaments upon entering the estate, but you've been granted a special permit with me and Viro of the Rainbow Blade acting as your guardians." Sera passed

me something wrapped in cloth. "If you do anything foolish with that weapon, Viro and I will be responsible for dealing with you, so be mindful."

That had to mean death. "Yes, ma'am."

"And...where were you hiding that black knife from earlier?"

"Strapped to my calf."

Theo, who knew I also had throwing knives strapped to my thighs, opened his mouth to speak, but I glared at him to stop. Having multiple weapons at my disposal was always better, and I had no intention of causing trouble with them. Still, if my life was in danger, I wouldn't hesitate to use them. This frilly attire in particular meant most of my combat would involve throwing weapons.

"That should be fine," Sera said. "Just make sure nobody finds it."

The weapons she'd given me were a pair of thin knives and four throwing knives. One of the thin knives I could attach opposite my black knife, but two might've been too cumbersome, so I decided to keep one as a spare. As for the throwing knives...my thighs weren't thick enough to strap all of them there. They were thinner than the knives Viro had given me, so maybe I could hide one in each sleeve? I'd need to make or buy a specialized holster eventually.

After that, Sera taught me footwork and combat techniques using the thin knives, as well as martial arts techniques I could use while wearing the maid's uniform, such as throwing and immobilizing opponents. For practice, she had me spar with Theo, whose build was similar to mine.

"A-Alia!" Theo stammered. "You can't use kicks, okay?!" He still seemed to be concerned about my skirt.

"I know." Sera had also mentioned that since the skirt was used to conceal the movements underneath, kicks should be reserved as a last resort.

Theo was six years old—one year younger than me. He was tall for his age, likely due to his aether accelerating his growth just as mine had. I lacked experience in hand-to-hand combat; it'd only been around two months since I'd started my training, so naturally, I had deficiencies. When exchanging moves back and forth with Theo, who'd been formally trained, I often came out on the losing end.

"It's time to wrap up morning training," Sera said. "I'll clean the sweat and dust off of you. Both of you, come here." Curious about what she meant, I approached her quietly. She began muttering something, and light-elemental mana began to gather around her hands. "Cleanse," she chanted.

As the light reached me, the scent of sweat vanished from my body, and the specks of dust on my uniform disappeared. "What's this...?" I asked.

"It's a Level 2 light sorcery spell, Cleanse," Sera explained. "It's primarily used to purify negative energies, but it can also remove small amounts of dirt and odors from the body. It can't remove larger debris, however. How was it?"

"I want to learn it..."

"Please do. We have a few people who can use it, and you have an affinity for light, so I have high hopes for you."

Light Mastery Level 2 offered two spells: Cleanse and Detoxify. I'd never seen Cleanse before; it erased outward impurities. Detoxify, meanwhile, removed minor foreign substances within the body. They both sounded quite effective.

According to Sera, however, Cleanse required the user to understand which impurity—physical or otherwise—they were dealing with. Likewise, Detoxify required knowing which poison was being treated. Since both spells were difficult to use in practice, besides which there existed herbs that could treat mild poisoning, only healers and adventurers typically learned them. Not only that, mastering these spells required specialized knowledge. That was probably why there were so few high-level light sorcery users.

"Also, Alia, from today on, you should drink this every morning," Sera said as we wrapped up training, handing me a potion in a ceramic bottle.

"What's this thing?"

"You should say, 'May I ask what this is?'" Sera corrected me. "And the answer is, this is poison."

It was a specially concocted weak poison. It didn't cause any pain, but it reduced one's physical strength by approximately ten percent for a whole day after ingestion. I wondered why I'd need to drink such a thing, but Sera explained that continuous consumption could potentially lead to me acquiring

the skill Poison Resistance. Sera told me that, since guardian maids occasionally had to act as poison testers for their masters, it was vital that I take this task seriously if I didn't want to die. She was very strict indeed...

After our morning training concluded, I had breakfast with Theo. Apparently, there'd been other children in training as well, but they'd given up quickly. Maybe that was why some of the maids had been eyeing me with suspicion. At this point, however, that sort of thing no longer bothered me. If they'd been looking for a fight, like the hobgoblin, sure, but whenever I returned their gazes, they'd inexplicably avert their eyes.

"You look really mean, Alia," Theo pointed out.

"I know."

After breakfast, Theo had to go tend to his duties as an apprentice steward. As he left, his cheeks reddened and he mumbled something or other about "taking responsibility," whatever that meant. Was he going to be involved with my work in some way?

In the morning, I helped Meena with collecting bed sheets and doing laundry. There were specific methods for cleaning and doing laundry that my knowledge wasn't much help with; apparently that woman hadn't been very zealous with her duties at her old mentor's place. Still, I focused on being thorough, just as with my combat training, even if it meant taking things slow. Learning things properly was my priority; speed and efficiency could come later.

Lunch was nearly the same as breakfast. Meena told me the stew was cooked in a large pot and the menu wouldn't change until the pot was empty. But, since I was used to eating snake and rabbit every day, this didn't bother me in the slightest. In the afternoon, Sera took over and showed me around the estate and castle, teaching me the key points of the security routine.

As we were walking around the estate, we ran into Castro again. He seemed to want to say something when he saw me, but he ended up just silently bowing to Sera and walking away. I said nothing to him either.

"He feels guilty about what he did, you know," Sera explained.

"Huh..." Honestly, I'd forgotten all about him until that point.

Soon evening arrived, and with it another meal. I was famished, perhaps because my aether was increasing and my body was going through another growth spurt. I ate my food in silence.

At night, Sera gave me lessons in etiquette and manners. She corrected my posture and gait, and even adjusted the angle of my bow. Having that woman's knowledge helped, since I knew the basics, but it was still a challenge to commit everything to memory. Sera drilled into me the protocols and nuances of polite language when interacting with nobility until the four-hour-interval bell tolled six times. Since it was too dark to do anything else, she proceeded to teach me how to write letters, as well as the names of northern nobles and their assigned territories.

And, of course, I had my own matters to attend to at night, as usual.

First, I needed to understand my newly acquired Shadow Magic. I'd accidentally learned that instead of Shadow Mastery, but apparently, that still allowed me to use the Shadow Sorcery spell Noise. Mana consumption for a Level 1 sorcery spell was approximately ten aether points, but when I tried using it via Shadow Magic, it cost me over twenty points. Magic was more versatile than sorcery but also more difficult to handle. No wonder the former had fallen out of use after evolving into the latter.

As a form of comparison: it was cheaper and tastier to purchase stew at a stall than to gather the ingredients and cook them oneself—unless one was particular about the flavor. Even then, there existed recipes to help one make the stew cheaply and easily by omitting some of the meats and spices.

I didn't need to achieve both great power and effectiveness. Sorcery aimed for versatility and perfection, but for shadow illusion magic, I didn't need something perfect—momentary deception, like what I'd achieved with the hobgoblin, was enough.

"Now, which sense to deceive?" I muttered to myself, chewing a bit of a dry cardiotonic herb both to keep myself awake and to build poison resistance. There were sorcery spells to deceive sight and hearing. What other senses were there? Smell? Taste? "Touch, maybe?"

Trying to give form to the faint idea in the back of my mind, I continued my

shadow magic practice, preparing for my impending encounter with nobility, until I was overcome by sleepiness.

Encounter

Late at night in the living room of Castle Dandorl, a young girl heaved a sigh in between sips of fragrant tea.

"What are you sighing about, Clara?" asked a boy.

"Brother..." Clara Dandorl smiled at her older sibling in this life. "Her Highness Princess Elena will be here soon. I'm simply looking forward to it."

"Ah. You and the princess *are* close. I, too, am excited to see our cousin again."

"Indeed," Clara said, looking at the boy with mixed feelings. She had memories of her previous life, and her memories told her she was the villainess in an otome game.

Meanwhile, the brother standing before her—Rockwell Dandorl, a stunningly beautiful boy who shared his sister's red hair and gray eyes—was one of the romance options. He was honest and virtuous in character, his cheerful demeanor loved not just by Clara but by their entire family. Upon meeting the heroine, however, Rockwell fell in love for the first time. Blinded by his feelings, he continued to wish only for her happiness, even if she married the crown prince. In the end, he accused Clara, despite very little evidence of her supposed crimes.

Had it been a different noble, it wouldn't have mattered as much, but an accusation by the eldest son of Margrave Dandorl counted as substantial proof. If convicted, the game version of Clara would be sent to a convent in a freezing-cold region of a foreign northern country, never to see the outside world again.

She couldn't stand the thought. In her previous incarnation, she'd died young; was there anything wrong with wanting to take this second chance and live an ordinary, happy life, like an average person? Yes, the Clara in the game was disagreeable in the way game characters often were, but the real Clara and her brother Rockwell had a solid relationship. This meant that perhaps even if the

heroine married the crown prince, there was a chance Rockwell wouldn't accuse his sister. However, if Clara herself became engaged to the prince, the heroine wouldn't be able to marry him unless she stepped down.

Clara had no intention of antagonizing the heroine. Trying to become friends was an option too, but if she did this while engaged to the crown prince, it could spark jealousy among the other ladies of the court. Even if Clara herself was innocent, others might do something against the heroine, then claim that it was "for the prince's fiancée," inadvertently painting her as the mastermind behind their actions.

She'd also considered simply withdrawing from the list of candidates for engagement to the prince, but since her aunt had failed to become queen, her father—who held the position of grand general—and his wife were desperate to make Clara the next queen.

More than anything, however, Clara feared the heroine's natural charms, capable of cracking even her gentle brother's conviction. Granted, there would be no issue if the heroine were to choose someone other than the prince. Even if the chosen was Clara's brother, the worst that might happen would be Clara being sent to another country.

But this was reality, not a game. She couldn't simply do it over if she didn't like the results. She knew she couldn't afford to fail.

In the game, the heroine was a viscountess, but in the crown prince's route, it was revealed she was actually from the Melrose family. Clara had heard from her grandfather that the missing princess of Melrose had allegedly been located, though the authenticity of the information had yet to be verified.

To ascertain the truth, Clara had, in utmost secrecy, sent out a Dandorl spy. According to the spy, the Melrose family controlled an organization operating from the shadows all over the nation and beyond, and investigating any further would mean inviting the ire of all of Claydale's underbelly.

Above all else, since the head of the Melrose family had been good friends with Clara's grandfather—former head of the Dandorl family—since their student days, it would be nearly impossible for Clara to persuade anyone from her family to take action against the Melrose princess.

Clara needed some other means, some sort of intermediary unrelated to the Dandorl family, to eliminate the heroine. And she needed it done before the heroine enrolled in the Sorcerers' Academy, which marked the beginning of the game.

There were three villainesses in the game: the first was Clara, the crown prince's fiancée; the second was a countess and the daughter of the chief court sorcerer; lastly, there was Princess Elena, who was currently on her way here. Despite being classified as a villainess, however, Elena was only ever jealous of the heroine over the crown prince, and her only sin was being overly critical. Over the course of the game, she warmed up to and accepted the heroine, and by the end, the two were allies. This meant that, effectively, the main villainesses were Clara and the countess.

With that in mind, Clara had begun to seriously consider trying to goad Elena into eliminating the heroine.

"Good," Sera said, finally granting me her approval. "With this, you've learned the bare minimum footwork. But remember, these are just the basics. Don't neglect your training."

"Yes, ma'am," I replied.

On the morning of my ninth day of training as a guardian maid, I finally managed to master the basics of footwork. Still, it was only enough to take a few steps when fully focused—far too difficult to use in combat. According to Sera, however, only a few people in her organization had been able to learn these movements even to the smallest degree while under the age of ten.

"I learned it when I was seven, myself," Sera noted.

"I'm six and I can do it!" Theo said proudly.

"You'll be seven soon."

I was still training with Theo every morning. He was a year younger than me but could use more advanced techniques, which had made me think that was the norm. Despite his talents, however, it seemed like the boy had once been quick to lose interest and had only started to take training seriously after

practicing with me. Sera had secretly thanked me for that, even though I hadn't done anything special.

Another thing I'd learned recently was the other Level 1 Shadow Mastery spell, Weight, which allowed the caster to increase or decrease the weight of an object by approximately ten percent. The incantation,

"Mobathaorearnidelecleth," meant to change the weight of the object. Starting with nothing but the incantation to go by was difficult, but since I'd already learned the skill Shadow Magic, I could notice even the slightest signs of the spell activating, so I was able to pick it up in only a few days.

Upon expanding the shortened incantation, I learned two words: "earni," meaning "spontaneous," and "deilecleth," meaning "direction." This meant the purpose of the incantation wasn't to change the target's weight but rather to move the target. From there, I realized the word "weight" wasn't in the incantation for Weight at all, and so I finally managed to activate it. Who'd come up with such a random translation?

It was difficult to use, but once I noticed via Shadow Magic that a faint effect remained on the object even after I let go of it, I started consciously using the spell to increase the range and accuracy of my ranged weapons.

Additionally, I was starting to grasp how to use Shadow Magic to create the illusion of touch. Right now, the effect was slight but still enough to momentarily distract someone if they'd never felt it before.

▼ Alia (Alicia)

Species: Human♀ (Rank 1)

Aether Points: $111/115 \triangle +3$

Health Points: $55/64 \triangle +4$

Strength: 4 (5)

Endurance: 5 (6)

Agility: 7 (8)

Dexterity: 6

```
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 1]

[Martial Mastery Lv. 1]

[Throwing Lv.1]

[Light Mastery Lv. 1]

[Shadow Magic Lv. 1]

[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 1]

[Practical Magic x6]

[Aether Manipulation Lv. 2]

[Intimidation Lv. 2]

[Stealth Lv. 1]

[Night Vision Lv.1]

[Detection Lv.1]

[Basic Scan Lv.1]

Overall Combat Power: 62 (Boosted: 66) △ +4
```

There hadn't been much of a change in terms of overall stats, but I'd gotten better at the finer technical aspects, so I had a feeling that as my body grew, Martial Mastery and Stealth would increase in level.

My growth might've seemed slow, given I was surrounded by borderline monsters, but having a Level 2 skill at all under ten years of age was by itself incredible. In fact, my overall combat power was higher than Theo's—yet I often struggled to beat him in hand-to-hand combat, which brought home to me the importance of basic techniques.

I had yet to learn the light sorcery spell Restore, however. Sera had taught me what she knew of the meaning of the spell, and while I could chant it and see signs of activation, it didn't produce any effects. I'd worked out the words "retees" and "ostorrie sten," meaning "regenerate" and "true form" respectively, but maybe something was still missing. There had to be some sort of secret to it, but I didn't know what it was.

I'd have liked to take my time to contemplate and research sorcery more, but our client was due to arrive any minute now, so the maids—including myself, despite the fact that I was an apprentice—were all very busy.

Now that I'd learned the basics of etiquette, I was put to work not at the estate but at the castle. Sera did, however, caution me that I only knew the bare minimum; therefore, I was to remain silent unless directly addressed by a noble, and my work was to be done largely from the shadows.

According to Theo, the senior steward at the castle was a colleague of Sera's and very intimidating; I'd only seen him once from afar. He had black hair and was in his forties, and even just looking at him, I could sense how dangerous he was—to the point that approaching him to use Scan felt risky.

Being silent made me so sleepy. I struggled to stay awake—especially since I trained alone late into the night—as I sat by myself in the linen room sewing up cloth articles that had grown too loose. I knew how to sew thanks to my knowledge, but it was my first time actually doing it, so it was taking a while despite Meena having instructed me in it.

I dozed off for a moment and jolted awake as I accidentally pricked my finger with the needle. It'd stabbed deep enough that a bead of blood formed on my fingertip; I was debating whether to stop the bleeding with Cure or to try using Restore for practice when the blood began to drip, staining the unbleached thread red.

I'm losing focus, I thought with a sigh. I can't afford to be careless when I don't know what could happen. Reluctantly, I snipped off the bloodstained portion of the thread and meant to put it away in my pocket to discard later, when unexpectedly, it moved. "Wait..." Was aether flowing through my blood on the thread, just like it did through my hair string?

Finally, the day arrived on which I would meet the noble child I was supposed to keep an eye on. A carriage arrived, guarded by several knights on horseback, and, to welcome its occupants, the stewards and maids lined up on either side of the palace entrance. I stood at the far end among the maids with my head bowed low, surreptitiously casting sideways glances at the scene while

enhancing my sight with Boost.

A knight pulled the carriage door open, and a beautiful young girl with red hair stepped out, escorted by a steward. She looked about ten years old, so perhaps not that much older than me, if she, too, had undergone a growth spurt due to aether.

As I wondered whether that was the child I was supposed to watch, another girl, this one with beautiful blonde hair and wearing a luxurious dress, followed after. Though I wasn't sure why, I immediately understood that *she* was the one I was to keep an eye on.

Escorted by the senior steward, the blonde girl walked in front, with the redhead behind her. Just as they were about to enter the castle, the blonde suddenly came to a stop before me. Even as I continued to bow my head, I could tell her mannerisms were graceful as she glanced at her surroundings.

"You have pretty hair," she said to me in a clear, beautiful voice—like chimes swept in the wind. "I would like this girl, please."

The Villainess

A little while ago, within a carriage headed for a lakeside guest palace owned by House Dandorl, two young noble ladies—and, judging by their attire and demeanor, from *very* high-ranking families—had been conversing.

"We'll be arriving soon, Your Highness," the red-haired Clara Dandorl said respectfully. Though she was still a child, her intelligent gaze and calm disposition hinted at a blossom that would eventually bloom into a beautiful flower.

"I'd have preferred staying in town..." replied the beautiful blonde, First Princess Elena of Claydale. She was no less stunning than Clara, but her expression was laced with obvious dissatisfaction.

At the princess's prickly remark, Clara offered her friend and cousin a small, awkward smile.



First Princess Elena's adoration for her brother, Crown Prince Elvan, had been deemed excessive, and she'd been sent to "recuperate" in Dandorl—home of her mother, the second queen—as a means to put distance between the siblings and get her to cool her head. The princess was neither willful nor foolish, however, and only lost herself when her brother was involved. Otherwise, she was dignified, as expected of royalty. Though the rigorous education enforced by her mother had made her body grow weak, it had also instilled in her an intellectual spirit beyond her seven years of age.

Elena only allowed her dissatisfaction to show because she was alone with her friend and cousin, Clara. Despite her frustration over being unable to see her brother, she understood that her behavior had been cause for concern for the king—her father—as well as the first queen.

Eyeing Elena as though she wanted to say something, Clara exhaled softly. How do I broach the topic?

Clara's reason for riding alone with Elena—one of the villainesses of the game—was to convince her to eliminate the heroine. With the pretext that she and her cousin hadn't spoken privately in a long while, she'd arranged for a private carriage for just the two of them.

In the otome game, Elena was jealous of the heroine for catching the crown prince's interest and would berate and criticize her. As the story progressed, however, the heroine and the prince fell in love, and Elena accepted and befriended her. Right now, Elena wouldn't befriend the protagonist, since she and the prince weren't in love, but there hadn't been *any* sort of interaction between the prince and the heroine either, so getting Elena to be hostile toward her would be difficult.

Elena was astute enough that she'd immediately pick up on a clumsy lie, so Clara had to be careful. I still have time, though. If I can somehow instill hostility toward the heroine in Elena during this "recuperation" period, then...

"Clara, you're so quiet today," the princess said, as though she'd picked up on her contemplative friend's thoughts. "Is something on your mind?"

"No," Clara replied. "It's nothing."

Silence fell upon the carriage as it continued toward its destination. The two girls had been like sisters before, but after Clara regained her memories of her past life, their relationship had changed slightly. Now the atmosphere between the two was laced with awkwardness.

Looking out the window as the lake came into view, Elena asked, "Clara, is that the castle?"

"Yes, Your Highness," the red-haired girl replied. "That castle will serve as a guesthouse for your stay with us."

As Clara, too, peered out the window, the sight of the castle reminded her of her own position. Though they were cousins and childhood playmates, Clara, as the margrave's daughter, also had the role of welcoming Elena to the castle.

As the carriage drew closer to its destination, the two saw servants—provided by both House Dandorl and the prime minister—arranged in rows along the path from the gate to the entrance. Though staff from the royal palace and Castle Dandorl were both present, maids and other servants from other households were inevitably needed as well. Among the relatives of nobility, many hoped to work for House Dandorl or the royal palace, and so this was the perfect opportunity to demonstrate their eagerness...or, in worse terms, ambition.

Huh? Clara noticed, at the very end of the line, a boy with a darker skin tone typical of the Krus, trying to make himself inconspicuous. She recognized the face—it was Theo Leighton, one of the romance candidates in the game. Though he was still young now, he would eventually be in the heroine's service as a steward when she joined the Academy.

His true role was to protect the heroine, secretly a princess of the Melrose family, from the shadows. Initially, however, he wasn't very serious about his duty to guard the then-powerless protagonist—what eventually changed his attitude and inspired him were the feelings he later developed for the hardworking, diligent young woman.

Clara hadn't expected to encounter him here of all places, but if he belonged to the Order of Shadows, it made sense. What truly shocked the red-haired girl, however, wasn't the apprentice steward—but a girl standing opposite him, with

characteristic peach-tinted golden hair that Clara had seen many times before.

Is that the heroine?! No, that cannot be. She should still be in the orphanage at this point in time, and that maid may be a child, but she looks to be about ten years old. It must be some sort of mistake...

"Clara?" Elena asked, quick to notice the change in her friend. "Are you concerned about one of the servants?"

"N-No, not at all."

"Hmm." The princess narrowed her eyes suspiciously and looked through the gap in the curtains in the same direction that Clara's gaze was pointed. Elena's lips curled slightly. "Well, it seems we've arrived. Clara, please lead the way."

"Of course, Your Highness."

Upon stepping out of the carriage, the insightful Elena spotted a girl in the direction Clara had been looking and declared she wanted this girl.

The blonde I was supposed to secretly keep an eye on had said she "would like" me. From my perspective, it was somewhat understandable that a girl close to me in age would've been interested—but Sera and the others, better acquainted with the norms of nobility, didn't think an aristocrat would've wanted someone incapable of doing work, and so they'd been trying to reason with the girl ever since she'd singled me out.

"That one's still under training and only assists with tasks," they explained. "We're very sorry, but we simply cannot assign her to be Your Highness's attendant."

"Once her training is complete and she is deemed apt, she may be considered for a position as a trainee maid in the royal palace. Until then, we ask that you reconsider."

"She may be a commoner, but if she's an apprentice, she must be at least ten years old, right?" Elena countered. "I don't intend to suddenly thrust such a young maid into the position of handmaiden. But I do like her appearance. I wish to have her close to me and have her perform certain tasks a handmaiden

normally would, at least to a limited extent. Surely that's not an issue?"

I stood silently in a corner of one of the palace's various living rooms, awaiting a decision regarding my status.

The handmaidens and stewards in the room showed no reaction whatsoever to this conversation. However, the blue-blooded maids who wanted to build connections—and who also had to stand in a corner—were glaring daggers at me. Not that being glared at by noble ladies with no combat experience bothered me anymore.

What did concern me was the term "Your Highness." Was that girl royalty? I wasn't strong enough to flee the country yet, so I silently hoped to be spared the hassle of dealing with her.

After several more minutes of back-and-forth, the senior steward heaved a deep sigh, seemingly resigned. "This is just a child who hasn't even learned proper language yet. If Your Highness understands this, we will assign her to be one of your personal attendants, but strictly during your stay in this castle. We cannot make any further concessions."

"That is, of course, fine," Elena said. "And if it turns out I do truly like her and this is more than a mere whim, send her to the castle to be my handmaiden in an official capacity once her training is complete. This is as far as my own willingness to compromise goes."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Alia," Sera called out. "Come here and introduce yourself."

Ultimately, a decision had been made with no consideration for my wishes. Though I was prepared to run and become a fugitive if my life was ever in jeopardy, I accepted the decision—for now. If nothing else, it'd make my task of keeping an eye on the noble girl easier.

As instructed, I stepped forward. In my current state, I was no match for Sera, the senior steward, or even one of the knights tasked with the blonde girl's protection. Resolving to match their power level someday, I bowed my head to her the way I'd been taught to. "I'm Alia, a maid's apprentice. It is an honor to meet you."

"Alia," the girl echoed. "You may call me Elena."

▼ Elena

Species: Human♀

Aether Points: 120/120

Health Points: 33/35

Overall Combat Power: 50

It was the first time I'd seen a child with an aether level higher than mine, especially considering I'd already learned both Light Mastery and Dark Magic. Judging by her health points, it was likely that she had no melee combat skills and instead possessed multiple sorcery-related skills. She spoke with a haughtiness that was, according to my knowledge, typical of nobility, but her tone was softer than her choice of words.

The red-haired girl standing behind the blonde didn't approach me, but she did cast a sharp glare my way.

"Alia, while your primary duty remains to assist us with surveillance as much as possible, you will now serve as a liaison as well. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now that you've been assigned as Her Highness's attendant, we have additional information to disclose to you: Princess Elena is a member of the royal family of this country, and the other young noblewoman is Lady Clara of House Dandorl. Your task is to keep an eye on them both, but with respect to protection, your priority is the princess."

"Yes, ma'am."

"With both of them having come to this castle, we've received reports that individuals from certain factions who may harbor animosity toward them are watching their movements. We do not expect these individuals to take any direct action, but should anything occur, given that you will be physically close

to the princess, you must at least protect Her Highness."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Furthermore, since Her Highness has given you permission to address her by name, you may call her 'Princess Elena' rather than 'Your Highness.' You must still call Lady Clara 'my lady,' however."

"Yes, ma'am."

After we went over all these subtle but significant changes to my duties and I nodded to Sera, I accompanied her to the gardens, where the two girls I was supposed to be watching were taking a stroll. This didn't mean I had anything specific to do, though. If not for this situation, I'd have just been picking weeds or doing other odd jobs so I could watch them at a distance, "from a child's perspective," to make sure they didn't suddenly disappear. With my new role as an attendant, my job was simply to observe silently from behind the other maids.

"Alia, come here," the princess called out. It seemed she wouldn't let me just stand by. I didn't understand what it was about me that she found appealing; I couldn't serve or do anything at all, really, yet she insisted on keeping me by her side.

"Yes, Princess Elena." As I came closer, Lady Clara of House Dandorl stepped away, as if scared of me. Not only that, addressing the princess by name earned me dirty glares from other maids who weren't permitted to do so.

Elena's lips curled into a pleased smile as she noticed this. What a character. "Alia, you're very unique, aren't you?" she asked. "Do you not care what others think?"

"I'm flattered."

She and I seemed to be birds of a feather, in some ways. Our personalities were different, of course, but to successfully navigate the treacherous landscape of aristocracy, she must've had nerves of steel. Elena didn't behave like a child, which to an adult might have seemed disconcerting, but I personally appreciated that aspect of her.

The maids filed out of the room once their tasks were complete. The other

handmaidens, meanwhile, kept their distance unless their presence was needed. Since Lady Clara Dandorl also tended to keep her distance when I was around, as time went on, I often found myself the only one near the princess.

After a few days, she grumbled in a tone that she only used when we were alone, "Truly, my mother is too weak of spirit. The first queen is a kind woman, but she was a mere viscountess, not properly educated to be a royal. Without my mother, the second queen, the country's politics would be in disarray. My mother should've taken this opportunity to build her influence both domestically and internationally...do you not agree?"

Was she truly a child like me? I'd heard she'd been treated as a prodigy and subjected to an abnormally strict education—perhaps she, too, was desperately trying to survive using the knowledge that had been forced upon her.

"I can't form an opinion on that," I replied.

"You're quite cold, Alia, are you not? But it does suit you," she mused. "Tomorrow, we're going shopping in town. You will accompany me."

"All right." Elena never reprimanded me for my blunt way of speaking when it was only the two of us; the intelligent girl even adapted to my tone. That didn't mean we were friends, however. She was firm in her position as mistress to a maid, and I didn't overstep my bounds. I would never be a proper servant to her, but I didn't dislike the atmosphere between us.

As time quietly went by and Elena savored the aroma of tea at the white table on the terrace, she occasionally glanced over at the lake, the clear blue of her eyes mirroring the shade of the water. I found myself wondering what she, as someone who'd also had knowledge forced upon her, had seen and felt until today. What did she see right now, as both of us looked out at the same scenery?

"Alia," she spoke up, breaking the silence of the moment without shifting her gaze from the landscape. "What do you see?"

I, too, kept my gaze on the lake. "The same as you, I think."

A week had passed since Elena's arrival at the castle. She'd decided to go

shopping in the city where Castle Dandorl was located. Since it wasn't an official visit, she only had three knights as guards. In addition, she traveled with three handmaidens, a steward, and four maids, myself included. Neither Sera nor the senior steward were among her entourage; the reason given was that their absence would negatively impact the castle's operations.

They knew, however, that it was in large part due to Elena's dissatisfaction with the pair, whom she considered irritating. Because of this, the senior steward himself had proposed blending discreetly into the crowd for the princess's protection; the man was capable enough that even were the princess to be directly attacked, there would be no issue. Not only that, a few of Sera's men were also providing security inconspicuously, so it was unlikely I'd need to step in unless something very significant occurred.

Though Lady Clara Dandorl had originally been meant to come on this outing, she reportedly alleged "illness" and a need to recuperate (after hearing I was coming along).

"It truly is a magnificent city, second only to the royal capital," Elena remarked. "Even commoners have access to a variety of clothing stores. Alia, shall I buy something for you?" I shook my head silently in response. Elena's eyes narrowed and she smiled, as if amused. "Ah, yes. Obtaining things through your own efforts suits you more."

Shortly after, we arrived at one of our destinations—a high-end clothing store. One knight circled to the back of the building, another stood by the entrance, and the third accompanied us inside. The store had been reserved for the whole day, and no other customers were present. It'd also, presumably, been thoroughly investigated ahead of time. The only staff present were three female clerks and the owner. My Detection skill revealed no other presences either.

"We are honored by Your Highness's visit today," said the owner. "Please feel free to browse at your leisure."

"I shall. Thank you," Elena replied.

After the brief exchange of pleasantries, Elena began to browse the fabrics and ready-made scarves. Perhaps someone had overheard her statement about

buying something for me, as the maids who hadn't come with us in the carriage were giving the princess covetous looks. Accompanying her as she shopped was the duty of her handmaidens, however, so the four of us maids had no choice but to stand back and watch. But at that moment—

"Isn't one of us missing?" I said.

"I do not know," replied a highborn maid who viewed me as an adversary, turning her nose up and away.

Though the maids' attitudes were less than ideal, it was unlikely they'd willingly saunter off on their own. A bad feeling settled in the pit of my stomach, and I carefully checked my surroundings with Detection—realizing then that Elena's presence had vanished from the fitting room.

Immediately, I rushed to the fitting room's door but was stopped by one of the knights. "You may be allowed to serve at her side, but you may not enter without permission."

"I can't feel Princess Elena's presence," I told him. "And I smell something strange. Check the fitting room, now."

"What are you—"

"Very well," said one of the handmaidens. Perhaps Sera had informed her of my abilities, given her quick reaction to my alert. She knocked on the door and, upon not receiving a response, opened it. "Your Highness!"

The rest of us followed her in and were immediately struck by a faint chemical smell; Elena was nowhere to be seen. The two handmaidens who had entered the room with her had collapsed with no visible injuries, possibly incapacitated by some sort of drug.

"Where is Her Highness?!"

"The clerk who went in with her is gone too!"

"There's a hole in the floor here!" the steward yelled out. I peered from behind a knight and spotted a hole in the floor, large enough for a child or a slim woman to fit through.

"They're below ground!"

"Where are the stairs?!"

As they started looking for a staircase, I said, "I'll go down," and squeezed between them. I folded the hem of my skirt like an umbrella, activated Boost, and jumped into the hole. After dropping several meters, I landed softly and immediately checked my surroundings with Night Vision. I could sense disturbances in the mana farther down the corridor, but Elena wasn't there; instead, I spotted the missing blue-blooded maid. "What are you doing here? Where's Princess Elena?"

"I-I didn't know," the maid stammered. "I... All I did was leak a little bit of information, and that clerk said she'd pay me... I didn't know it would lead to this..."

"Where is the princess?"

The maid yelped and flinched under my Intimidation, but pointed a trembling finger at a small side tunnel in the corner of the basement.

So the clerk is behind this, I mused quietly to myself as I took a piece of charcoal I'd been supplied with and wrote down the necessary information on the plaster walls for the knights to see. I then ventured into the small tunnel, following the kidnapped princess's trail. Stay safe, Elena.

Rescuing the Princess

As I rushed forward, chasing after the kidnapped Elena, I pondered the small side tunnel I was in. Even if that maid had leaked information, there wouldn't have been enough time to dig this passageway in advance. It was likely that there was a practitioner of earth sorcery among the kidnappers.

Even if Sera's people were keeping watch, they probably didn't have eyes underground. After all, they were so short on manpower they even needed to use children like me. Only one of Sera's peers, a handmaiden of Elena's, had reacted to my alert—and she wasn't particularly skilled in stealth or detection. Not only that, I'd heard she only had a handful of knight techniques that enabled her to use her body as a shield. Not everyone in the Order possessed high-level scout techniques like Sera did; most were probably spies and the like,

gathering information and little else.

Right now, however, what mattered was Elena. Even if word reached the senior steward outside, he'd take at least ten minutes to catch up. Until then, I needed to find her and buy time by myself. If she'd managed to move so easily through a tricky space—one that only a child or a small-framed woman would've been able to fit through—my opponent was either a scout, a thief, or...

"An assassin?" I mused quietly. An assassin capable of sorcery was the worst possible opponent I could imagine, but nevertheless, I had to give chase—and not just because it was my job to do so.

After crossing about three houses' worth of distance, the tunnel suddenly ended, and I found myself at the bottom of a pit. I activated Stealth and Boost and climbed smoothly upward, my bare hands gripping the earth, then peered outside the hole while on alert for any presence.

I spotted a somewhat dirty-looking man hastily preparing to escape. So this wasn't a lone offender; she had accomplices. There was a chance this was just a common thief, but I'd already gone on the offensive.

"Touch," I chanted under my breath. The man looked back at the entrance, startled, and I took the opportunity to leap out and throw the knives concealed in my sleeves.

"Argh!" The man, struck in the back by both blades, lost his balance. A swift kick to his legs knocked him easily to the ground, face first.

I pressed one knee into his back and my black knife to his neck. "Where have the woman and child gone?"

"Wh-What the hell?!" the man exclaimed, trying to feign ignorance. "I don't know any—aaargh!"

After dragging the blade down to his back and leaving a nasty gash, I pressed the knife to his neck once more. "Torturing you in a way that Cure can fix would cost me time I don't have, you see," I said, intimidating him by slicing into his neck.

The blood drained from his face instantly. "I-I was just paid to keep watch!

Mercy, please!"

"That's not the answer to my question." I drove one of the knives deeper into his back and twisted it.

"Aaargh!" Unable to bear the pain, the man started talking. "The woman took the kid to the right—" He tried to be sneaky, but when I gouged him even more, he hastily corrected himself. "No, the left! There's a wagon there!"

"Are there any other accomplices? And you'd better tell me the truth if you don't want me to come back and kill you."

"N-No! There aren't! They said the others are outside the city! I'm telling the truth, I swear!"

"Good."

"Ugh!" Enhancing both hands with Boost, I brought the handle of my knife down on the man's head with a dull *thunk* and knocked him unconscious. I couldn't extract any more information from him either way, but if I left him alive, Sera's people could further question him once they caught up.

After retrieving my knives, I stepped outside and found myself in a narrow, deserted back alley. The man had said the kidnapper had gone left, but initially he'd claimed right, so just to be sure, I boosted my eyesight and brought my face just inches from the ground. There were indeed footprints headed right, but I also spotted faint traces that indicated a faded trail of footprints leading left; I took off running in that direction.

This had been my first time using Touch in combat, and I'd managed to confirm it worked as intended. It was an illusion spell of my own creation, made by combining shadow magic and shadow sorcery. I used sorcery to pinpoint a target while using magic for the desired effect: my opponent would get the illusion of touch on the part of their body I'd designated. Granted, the spell didn't actually touch anything, so it couldn't move so much as a leaf. However, because I'd narrowed the composition down to its barest parts, it cost only five points of aether to cast.

Magic required structuring the spell in one's head, so it was still difficult to use Touch on the fly. But in a situation like this, it could be used effectively—

and the low cost meant it would be useful in many different scenarios once I got used to it.

"This way..." I continued to track down the culprit, occasionally looking down to check the footprint trail. There was only *one* set of footprints, and while the kidnapper was walking carefully enough not to leave any clear tracks, there were faint traces indicating she was carrying a load and adjusting it as she went. Whether Elena was heavy or conscious and struggling as the culprit carried her away, I couldn't be sure, but considering the kidnapper was a woman, I figured her strength probably wasn't that great.

As I followed the tracks, I tried to picture the enemy as Viro had taught me to do. Assuming she was an assassin, why hadn't she killed Elena? Sera had anticipated that hostile factions may have wanted to take action. If that was the case, then the kidnapper's goal would be to bring Elena back alive for political purposes, in which case there would have been no need to send an assassin. And considering their apparent lack of strength, perhaps the enemy was a thieftype whose main focus wasn't on combat?

If that was the case, which seemed quite likely, it was safe to assume the princess's life wasn't in jeopardy, but I couldn't be so naive as to think they wouldn't kill her if necessary. My primary goal was to secure Elena's life, followed by her rescue; defeating the enemy wasn't one of my objectives, nor was ascertaining their identity. I had to get my priorities straight or the consequences could be dire.

Even if my foe wasn't combat focused, she would likely be a formidable opponent, and stronger than a hobgoblin. Why am I taking such a big risk and pursuing her alone? I wondered. When did my heart begin to feel lighter in Elena's presence?

Elena was like a shining light. In this twisted, cruel world, she was the only kindred spirit I'd run into; the only thing faintly illuminating my dark, lonely path. This wasn't just a job for me—I just...didn't want her to die.

As I ran through the back alley, I came across a peddler's wagon in a somewhat open area. "Found it." Outside the wagon was a slender figure, and within it, I saw golden hair swaying. Still running, I flipped my skirt and pulled

Before Elena had even become self aware, her mother had already begun her intensive education. Seeking only the warmth she'd never felt from her mother, young Elena had endured harsh lesson after harsh lesson. As a result, she'd gained mastery over four elements and intelligence beyond her tender years, but it had come at a cost: her small four-year-old frame was ravaged by her elemental mastery and powerful aether, leaving her unable to run around like other children her age.

Even among the nobility, it wasn't widely known that the great power a caster gained by cultivating affinities for too many elements came at a cost to their own life span. Elena might be able to live an ordinary life if she reached adulthood, but having children would be difficult. This was fatal to her prospects for ascension to the throne, and so her mother had rapidly lost interest in her.

With her mother's warmth out of her reach, the now-frail Elena received support from her older brother, the crown prince and son of the first queen. The boy was empathetic and gentle, and Elena adored him; she was so attached to him, in fact, that she thought he was the only one she could count on—or so she'd made it seem.

Had Elena remained under her mother's thumb, the country would someday have descended into turmoil, torn between the royalist and noble factions. While the princess was grateful to her brother for his kindness and personally held affection for him as a sibling, she knew his kindness wasn't the type of strength needed to unite a country divided in two.

At her young age, it was difficult for Elena to reject the noble faction and their arguments—and that was why she had to pretend to be "obsessed" with the crown prince; that way, she could make a show both domestically and internationally of aligning with the royalists. Only a few close associates, including her father the king, her grandparents the former king and the queen dowager, and her wet nurse, knew this fact.

Elena's education to be queen continued in secret, away from the prying eyes

of her mother, the second queen. This was so that, should the crown prince be deemed too weak to rule as the next king, she would be prepared to act as queen regent and educate the prince's child until it came of age.

The second queen had trained Elena to usurp the throne from the child of the first queen, but contrary to her intentions, her ploy had resulted in the princess being endowed with enough intelligence to put the nation's stability first—to the point of betraying her own mother.

The true purpose of this trip to Dandorl wasn't to help an overly attached Elena "recuperate" and cool her head but rather to afford her a period of rest, something her father had suggested out of concern; at only seven, the princess already carried the heavy burden of keeping the kingdom in balance. The reason Dandorl had been chosen was her cousin, Clara, who lived there. From the ages of three to six, Clara had lived in the royal capital and attended the castle as the princess's playmate.

Other children would either fawn over the royal princess or be overly coarse; Clara, however, was a year older than Elena and a dignified princess of Dandorl herself. Elena deeply loved Clara, almost like a true sister, and had come here seeking that comfort. After two years apart, however, Clara seemed a little different. Elena felt a strange sense of discomfort—Clara's gentle disposition remained unchanged, but she now seemed to possess knowledge even the royal princess didn't.

Though at first Elena had been happy to have a friend to talk to, the more they'd conversed, the more she'd felt she was talking to someone else entirely. Clara's once purely affectionate gaze had grown guarded; something had happened to her in those two years, and she wasn't sharing what.

To get to the bottom of this—or, more accurately, in a bid to restore their previous relationship—Elena had pulled her weight to recruit a maid who looked at her with the same wary gaze as Clara. It had been a gamble, but even if the results weren't as expected, it wouldn't have mattered. The girl had peach-tinted hair, the same color Elena had seen in the portrait of the queen from two generations ago, a color the princess had secretly longed for in her younger years, preferring it to her own golden hair.

The girl with pink-blonde hair was named Alia. Elena hadn't asked her age, but if she was a commoner, she would be around ten years old. She was close to Elena in size, after all, and the princess had been growing faster than the norm thanks to her aether. And Alia's eyes were striking; the girl's features were lovely, even to someone like Elena, who was accustomed to seeing beautiful and glamorous women—but her jade-colored gaze was powerful, like that of a warrior sizing up an opponent.

Not only that, Alia's behavior was different from what one might expect of children. She was cool, collected, meticulous, and observant: whenever Elena needed anything, the girl was quick to notice and approach. Perhaps this was empathy—Alia's solitary existence gave Elena, who had struggled alone all her life, a sense of relief. It was a reminder that she was never truly alone.

Once, a different maid had dropped something, and in an instant, Alia had been at Elena's side to protect her. It had made Elena wonder whether the girl was perhaps one of the covert guardian maids she'd heard whispers about—girls in the employ of the Order of Shadows.

As for Clara, Elena had wanted to confirm whether it had been Alia that the Dandorl princess had been concerned about. But, before the royal princess had even had the chance to ascertain her friend's reaction, Clara had distanced herself, as though the maid's hair color were somehow traumatic to her. Not that Elena minded; right now, more than Clara, it was Alia that the princess wanted to be with—the only person in this world who shared her perspective.

That was why, for the first time in a while, Elena had felt like going out. No matter how intelligent she may have been, however, she was still a child, and her inability to keep her emotions in check had come back to haunt her. Though she was perceived as a royalist, Elena was still a ray of hope for the nobles' faction and posed an inconvenience to those within that faction who sought to establish a new symbol for it.

Had she been drugged? The handmaidens in the fitting room had collapsed, and Elena, too, had lost control of her limbs. The perpetrator had been one of the shop's employees, supposedly assigned with taking her measurements. Taking advantage of Elena's incapacitated state, the woman had easily carried her out through a hole in the floor, hidden underneath the furniture.

Where had the information about her location leaked from? She didn't have any servants from the nobles' faction in her employ, but as she was being abducted, she had spotted one of the maids—a relative of nobility—and realized that the young woman must have been the source of the leak. She'd glared at the maid, trying to memorize the young woman's face as she attempted to neutralize the chemicals in her system by flooding it with light-elemental mana generated from the aethercrystal in her heart.

"Oh?" her kidnapper said. "You can move already? No wonder they call you exceptional, princess."

"Are you not going to kill me?" Elena asked. She'd managed to neutralize some of the drug, but her body still wouldn't move. Despite her young age, she had Light Mastery at Level 2; without knowing what chemicals had been used, however, she couldn't completely cleanse them with Detoxify. Still, now that the kidnapper was aware she could move slightly, it would be best to try and gather information rather than to remain silent.

"As specified by the client. Besides, I wouldn't have accepted a hit request, even through the guild," said the surprisingly chatty, unremarkable shop employee with a smile and even a wink. So she wasn't going to kill Elena. And she'd mentioned a "guild," which meant she had to be either an adventurer or

"You're a thief?"

"That's right. We're proud to have honed our skills to a high art. Unlike, say, scouts, wagging their tails for their countries and lords, or those barbaric assassins who only know how to kill."

So someone from the nobles' faction had commissioned the Thieves' Guild. Scouts were adventurers and therefore specialized in combat against monsters. Assassins, meanwhile, had mastered the art of fighting people. Thieves were the perfect fit for a kidnapping job, having instead mastered the arts of infiltration and stealing.

"Fun as it is to talk to a smart, pretty little thing like you, I need you to stay quiet until we leave the city. I'll just poison you a bit more, all right? Feel free to struggle. I'll make sure it hurts—a *lot*."

"Ngh..."

Judging by the woman's efficiency, struggling would've been pointless. If Elena were to be handed over to some noble, however, she'd likely end up being forced to sign something, pressed for information, then disposed of. With her tongue feeling slightly numb, she wasn't sure she could chant a spell. Unable to do anything, she nevertheless glared at the female thief.

Seemingly pleased, the woman reached out to touch Elena, but—

Thunk!

A knife flew between them, sticking into the side of the wagon; the thief managed to use her dagger to deflect a second blade. Surprised, both Elena and the thief turned to look in the direction from which the knives had come. Reflected in the princess's blue eyes was the figure of a girl with pink-blonde hair, wearing an oversized maid's uniform.

"Alia!"

I threw two knives at the shop employee in an attempt to intercept her, but despite having the element of surprise, I failed to land either throw. At least the fact Elena had called out my name meant she was unharmed.

"Huh," said the kidnapper. "I thought it'd be a while longer before anyone caught up. Did you crawl through that hole to follow us?"

Not bothering with a response, I readied my black knife.

Instead of getting angry, however, the woman clapped her hands, laughing with delight. "Well done, little maid! I never thought I'd get to meet not one but *two* cute girls while working a job like this! This is why I love taking requests involving nobles!"

I observed the strange kidnapper, trying to glean relevant information. She seemed to be in her midtwenties, with dark red hair and brown eyes. Her features were well proportioned, but overall, she was so unremarkable that I felt I might forget her face the moment I looked away. She wasn't particularly short, but she was slim, as I'd expected. Maybe because she'd dropped her act,

I could see well-defined muscles underneath her clothing store uniform every time she moved.

All things considered, she was indeed likely either a scout or a thief. Had the kidnappers played the long game and laid a trap at the shop well in advance, or did the fact this woman left so little impression on people mean she could easily masquerade as other people on an as-needed basis?

Taking all of that into account, I surmised that although the woman seemed to be acting solo, she must be part of an organized group. If that was the case, I couldn't let her get away—if she managed to leave the city, I'd never track her down. Who was she, anyway? She was very brazen for a mere kidnapper looking for money.

"This woman is with the Thieves' Guild!" Elena warned me. "Beware the poison she uses!"

At the princess's revelation, the thief gave her a wry smile and a theatrical shrug.

I see, I mused. So she's a thief specializing in abductions, hired by the faction opposing Elena.

▼ Thief

Species: Human♀

Aether Points: 174/180

Health Points: 155/170

Overall Combat Power: 388 (Boosted: 440)

This was certainly better than dealing with an assassin, but her combat power was higher than Castro's. However, while her total power was certainly significant, her aether points weren't that impressive. From what Viro had told me, thieves typically had excellent skills in stealth and martial techniques, but not many specialized in combat. Assuming that was the case for this female thief, and given her level of Boost...this meant her melee combat skills were

probably around Level 2.

Assuming that was Level 2 Dagger Mastery, I could probably take her, depending on my approach. But with this combat power and only Level 2 in a melee skill, that meant her Earth Sorcery, which she'd used to dig that tunnel, was likely Level 3.

Normally, I would never have tried to fight a Level 3 thief, but I couldn't back down now. Elena was apparently unharmed but unable to move. Her speech seemed a little off, too, so she had to have been drugged, which meant she couldn't use magic.

"Release Princess Elena and I won't pursue you," I said.

"Is that your idea of a deal?" the thief asked. "I'd like to mock you for being childish, but I'm not interested in helping you buy time. I don't normally kill in my line of work, but sorry in advance if I can't hold back."

The woman's hand blurred slightly, and I sensed something dangerous in the air, dodging reflexively just as a thin knife whizzed past me. Like Castro, she didn't telegraph her movements. I'd been practicing that myself but had only managed to pull it off a small handful of times, including against the hobgoblin.

Before I could ponder further, however, I felt a surge of earth-colored mana from the thief and leaped back as she unleashed her sorcery. "Stone Bullet!" At the sound of the invocation, earth-colored mana scattered through the air as several small rocks sprung from the ground and flew straight at me.

"Ngh!" Using Boost and my Martial Mastery skill, I twisted my body to dodge the pebbles. I stepped back farther and placed one hand on the ground, getting down low.

"Wow!" she exclaimed excitedly. "I didn't think you'd dodge that!"

I glowered at her in silence as blood trickled down my forehead and along my cheek; I hadn't managed to dodge every projectile. At the very least, one had grazed my forehead and another had struck me in the shoulder. My health points had been reduced, but I wasn't going to use Cure just yet.

So this is attack sorcery, I thought. It was my first time seeing it in action. If I'd taken the full brunt of it, it would probably have knocked me out in one hit.

Whether she'd thrown the knife to buy herself time to cast or chanted the incantation while throwing, I wasn't sure, but either way, I needed to learn to use spells during combat myself, as well as learn her spellcasting patterns.

My shoulder still had full range of movement despite taking a hit, and as long as the blood from my forehead didn't leak into my eyes, I could just ignore it and brace for a follow-up attack.

But instead, the thief, hugging her arms and trembling as if anticipating something, said, "Nice, little maid, nice! Bright red blood, flowing down your pretty little face... See, this is why I'm not cut out for killing. I much prefer to watch people suffer! It gets me so excited, and I can't help but torment them. *Especially* cute little girls like you."

Oh, I thought as I stared at her in silence. So she's a pervert. I'd been told that thieves usually didn't kill civilians, but as it turned out, some of them just didn't find it appealing enough. Knowing this wasn't at all reassuring, however. Elena, in fact, had turned so pale she couldn't even speak.

"Shall we dance?" The woman drew her dagger and slid to the right.

I drew my knife in turn and silently started walking in the same direction. She seemed to prefer melee combat to sorcery, perhaps due to her depraved tastes. It beat being directly targeted with Level 3 spells, but still, I couldn't let my guard down; she could be using direct attacks as a feint tactic to cast stealthily. And even if her highest melee skill was only Level 2, I couldn't underestimate it. Used as a trump card, a Level 2 technique could take me out in one hit.

After slowly approaching one another, we both lunged forward simultaneously, and our blades sparked with a loud *shing*. Due to our difference in skill level and physique, however, I was forced back several paces, and she didn't miss the opportunity to slice at me. In response, I threw a knife with my left hand, but she seemed to have anticipated that and deflected it with her dagger.

"Dust." A cloud of dust blew toward me as the thief cast a spell. Had she been chanting while moving?

This was bad. I relied on color to see mana, and with my vision obscured, the

effectiveness of my Detection took a massive hit. Though I hurriedly attempted to put distance between myself and the dust cloud, the area it covered was too wide. Resigned to the possibility of being hit, I closed my eyes to help conceal my face, and the next moment, I felt an impact on my abdomen and was thrown back several meters.

"Alia!" Elena shrieked.

I couldn't move, having taken a kick to the gut. As I rolled on the ground, coughing in pain, I noticed the sounds of the woman's footsteps—silent until now—growing louder.

"Wonderful! Fantastic! This time I'll make sure to mangle you right!" she exclaimed, her voice revealing her position to me.

Whoosh!

"What?!" she yelled out in shock. I'd stopped the Cure spell I'd been chanting mid-fight, and, while swinging the aether-imbued cord in my hand, I opened my eyes and threw the "blade" attached to the thread at the thief. "What the hell is this?!"

The woman, unable to comprehend my attack, hurriedly drew back but couldn't dodge at this range. I swung the thread a second time, drawing a large arc with the "blade" and distracting the thief enough that the knife I threw found its way into her arm, eliciting a groan from her.

I quickly pulled the thread back and hid the "blade" in my sleeve. We faced each other once more, but this time, she maintained a cautious distance from me, and the smug smirk from earlier was gone from her face.

"What was that just now?" she demanded. "Sorcery?"

"Maybe. Maybe not," I replied sarcastically.

The weapon I'd just used was the one I'd crafted as a replacement for my weighted string. I'd soaked unbleached cotton thread in my blood, braided several pieces together, and made it so that I could move the braided cord at will to some extent by channeling aether into it—like I'd done with my hair. The "blade" at the tip was made from several bent copper coins that had once been part of the weighted string; I'd asked a lower-ranking blacksmith in the castle to

melt them down into one piece, then patiently hammered and chipped away at it until the edges had been sharpened. I'd taken to calling it a "threadblade."

Half of my sleepless nights of late had been spent on this, but the end result was worth it; the blade, moving horizontally at high speed due to centrifugal force, was difficult to predict. While it didn't do much damage, it couldn't simply be ignored, making it a perfect weapon to keep an enemy in check.

"Guess you got me," the woman said. Either the initial attack or the second hit had left a shallow cut on her cheek. As blood flowed down her face, her appearance changed; she discarded her red wig, revealing short, haphazardly cut, unassuming gray hair underneath.

So she *had* been disguising herself using thief techniques. I didn't know whether she'd used magic or a skill, but although her features had barely changed, the way she could completely alter her appearance with just makeup and mannerisms... Thief techniques were not to be underestimated.

Either way, she'd finally decided to get serious. Normally, it was better to keep them off their guard, but I'd rather an opponent take me seriously than act unpredictably. My plan was to have her reveal everything, then calculate my path to victory from there.

With that in mind, I gripped my knife once more. The thief narrowed her eyes slightly. "You're no ordinary child. Who are you?"

There was no point in revealing anything to her, but to keep her focus on me, I decided to play the part of loose-lipped. "I'm just an orphan. An adventurer," I said. I glanced briefly at Elena, who was staring intently at me, and readied my black knife. "And a battle maid. My job is to kill enemies and protect Her Highness."

At my words, the thief's gaze seemed to shift slightly. I'd been told a guardian maid always stayed by her master's side, ready to act as a shield. Someone like Sera, however, who would relentlessly pursue and ruthlessly take down enemies, was called a battle maiden. I wasn't as strong as Sera yet, but to take back Elena, I decided to call myself not a *guardian* maid but a *battle* maid. From the kidnapper's point of view, maids and handmaidens guarding nobles and other important people probably symbolized something loathsome.

"Huh. A battle maid, you say?" she asked. Then, suddenly, while keeping her eyes on me, she threw a knife at the wagon.

It stuck into a wooden board with a dull *thunk*, and Elena yelped from behind it. I noticed a puff of mana scattering from that spot.

"Quite the tomboy, aren't you, princess? Even if you keep your aether and your voice down, I can still hear the rhymes of your incantation, you know. Try anything stupid again, and I'll—"

Whoosh! Taking advantage of the thief's momentary distraction, I used centrifugal force to fling the threadblade sideways. She clicked her tongue, leaning back to dodge it.

"Eyes on your opponent," I told her. "And that's me, remember?"

"You little..." She refocused her attention on me. I gave Elena a small shake of my head, signaling for her to not do anything. "You know what? You're right. I have no time for this. Let's end our little game."

The thief kicked off her uniform, revealing a formfitting leather ensemble underneath. Loose clothing could indeed hinder movement; I myself had felt restricted at first, before getting used to the maid outfit, but it had its advantages too. She discarded the weapon she'd been using and drew two new daggers. The blades gleamed with an unnatural sheen—likely coated in poison. There were many different varieties of poison, but even just a graze from one used by a thief could be dangerous.

Whoosh!

Sensing my attack, the thief jumped out of the way. "That again!"

I kept her at bay with the threadblade, careful to stay out of range of her and her poison. She didn't seem to understand what my attack was, exactly, but treated it as a projectile and dodged by sensing its presence. This weapon and my illusion magic were my trump cards; I'd wanted to inflict some damage the first time I used the threadblade, but now I couldn't make use of its full effectiveness anymore and could only keep her in check.

Even if I managed to stay out of range of her poisoned weapons, however, she still had her sorcery. Right now, the speed of the centrifugal force kept her

from seeing my weapon for what it was, but once she figured it out, she'd soon counter it with spells. Nevertheless, it was all I could do to keep attacking with the weapons I had to try and create an opening.

"Snare!" she chanted. To escape my threadblade, she cast a spell that opened a hole beneath my feet. I rolled to avoid falling, and she took the opportunity to throw one of her daggers at me. Still on my knees and unable to get to my feet, I parried the dagger with my knife—but she lunged forward in tandem with her throw, pulling her second blade far back in preparation for a thrust. "Double Edge!"

Double Edge was a Level 2 Dagger Mastery technique. It had the same range as Thrust, but with its tremendously high power output and increased speed, it allowed for two consecutive thrust attacks. Off-balance as I was, I shouldn't have been able to dodge it, but I slid sideways, lowering my body as if kneeling.

"What?!" she exclaimed as her attack sliced through nothing but fabric.

I'd anticipated that, in her haste and without time to cast a follow-up spell, the thief would count on landing a powerful technique, so I'd managed to avoid the attack by using the footwork I'd learned from Sera—while keeping my legs hidden under the spread of my long skirt. Granted, the other half of it had been intuition on my part.

Regardless, I couldn't miss the opening created by her missed combat technique. Firmly planting one knee on the ground to support my weight, I twisted my upper body and pulled back my knife. The thief grimaced slightly, realizing what I was about to do.

"Thrust!" I chanted. I only ever used combat techniques when delivering a finishing blow or when a clear opening presented itself—and now that the enemy had given me such an opening, I had no reason to hold back.

The thief, however, clicked her tongue and managed to dodge my attack by bending sideways at an unnatural angle. A word surfaced to my mind —"contortionist." I couldn't have anticipated such a bizarre evasion. Still, she couldn't dodge my attack fully, and it grazed her flank. She fell sideways, kicking sharply at me in the process.

Now our roles were reversed and I was the one momentarily rooted in place

after having executed a combat technique. In a split-second decision, I raised my hip and deliberately allowed her kick to land against it, using the momentum to create distance and spring to my feet.

By then, however, she, too, had stood up and begun chanting a spell—a powerful one, judging by the amount of mana converging on her. I flipped my skirt and threw a knife, but her spell was completed a split second before my blade reached her.

"Stoneskin!" As she finished her chant, my throwing knife deflected off of her leather outfit with a shrill metallic noise.

A defensive spell, not an offensive one, I mused. I flung my threadblade at her to test her reaction, and she smirked, smacking it away with her bare hand.

"Huh. A blade attached to a thread," she said. "A pendulum? Interesting choice, but your clever little attacks won't work anymore."

So that's what her spell does. I eyed her silently. Her appearance hadn't changed, but her whole body was coated in earth-elemental mana. Probably some kind of sorcerous armor.

"It's game over for you," the thief continued. "Honestly, I never thought a Rank 1 child could give me such a hard time. Now that you've forced me to reveal the ace up my sleeve, at least scream nicely for me, all right? I'll make this as painful as possible for you!" With a twisted smile, she began chanting another spell. I threw my threadblade to interrupt her, but she didn't even attempt to dodge it; the blade deflected harmlessly off her cheek. I wasn't sure what kind of spell she was casting, but as I started running to avoid making myself into an easy target, she finished. "Stone Bullet!"

Several small rocks rocketed off the ground toward me. I crossed my arms to shield my head and leaped away, but several of the projectiles still hit me, knocking me to the ground. "Ugh!"

"Quite the sturdy kid, aren't you?" she said with a chuckle.

I still had some health points left, but there was a difference between that and being injured. If my health points were fully depleted, I wouldn't die; I'd simply faint and be unable to move. Meanwhile, even at full health points, a

stab to the heart would be fatal.

Since the pebbles caused blunt-force damage, they wouldn't inflict any grievous wounds as long as I kept my vital points protected. Still, it was difficult to dodge so many simultaneously, and all it took was one of them hitting a vital spot for the spell to be fatal. I couldn't just keep buying time—my attacks were ineffective, and she could easily kill me with either her daggers or her magic.

"Aw, are you out of tricks already?" she asked. "You did well for a kid, see, but you could grow up to be a menace, so I'll just have to kill you right here and now."

As I eyed her silently, I considered my final trump card. I hadn't met the conditions to use it yet, though; in order to do so, I couldn't afford to give up, so I continued to analyze my enemy's capabilities.

My knowledge didn't offer much information about sorcerous armor, but what I could gather suggested that it either dissipated after incurring a certain amount of damage or reduced the damage from each hit received by a fixed amount. Since the spell was earth elemental, it likely did the former. She'd called it "the ace up her sleeve," so my guess was that it was Level 3 sorcery; she must've had absolute confidence in it. Thinking that this overconfidence would be her downfall, I pushed through my pain and continued to chip away at her magical armor.

"Ah ha ha! You're wasting your time!" she exclaimed as the two knives I threw and my threadblade—or "pendulum," as she'd called it—deflected off her skin. She charged straight at me, not bothering with a defensive stance.

Since my weapons weren't working, I tried to fend her off using Martial Mastery, but my injured body couldn't move right, and her dagger grazed my shoulder. The wound was shallow, but the pain was overwhelming; I couldn't help but cry out.

The thief's face twisted in ecstasy. "Oh! Oh, finally, a scream! But don't worry. This poison doesn't kill quickly... It's just *very* painful, right?"

A groan escaped my throat at the sharp pain. My muscles spasmed from the agony, and it was hard to breathe. An ordinary child would have begun screaming and crying or perhaps passed out, but I couldn't afford to fall

unconscious here.

Just a bit longer... I thought.

Looking down at me and smiling, the woman kicked me. Unable to move properly, I was sent tumbling and landed on my back. I bit my lip to keep from screaming, and the thief pressed a foot down on me, trembling, in an ecstatic trance. "You're so wonderful, little maid. How I wish I could torture you more, hear more of those screams... I didn't want to kill you so soon, but I don't have time. Ugh! I *really* wanted to keep tormenting you!"

I glowered at her in silence.

"Oh, look at that perfect little face! Let me hear your voice again!" She raised her arm and plunged her poisoned dagger deep into my abdomen.

"Ahhhhhhhh!!!"

"Yes! Cry more! Scream more! Let me see your face twist in pain! It hurts, doesn't it? Agonizing, isn't it?!" she said, cackling.

Yes, it was painful. Agonizing, even. But I couldn't afford to lose consciousness here. Not when the conditions had finally been met. It was payback time.

"Pain," I chanted.

The woman gave me a bewildered look as my dark magic activated. A second later, her face contorted horribly and she began screaming like a pig in a slaughterhouse. "Eee!!! Ahhhhhh!!! Aaaaaaaaaargh!!!"

Perhaps due to being a thief sorceress and not engaging much in combat, she seemed to not have much pain tolerance. Seemingly not concerned with shame or decency, the thief—who'd had, until moments ago, a clear upper hand—was now rolling on the ground, shrieking madly.

Illusion sorcery could only replicate what one had already experienced. The spell Noise, for instance, would recreate sounds the caster was familiar with; Touch, meanwhile, reproduced sensations the caster had previously felt on their own skin. So the spell I'd just used, Pain, inflicted the illusion of pain on the target by channeling it through shadow aether, based on pain I'd felt before.

To use it, however, I'd needed to experience a level of pain that fell just short of killing me and use that as a baseline. The spell's composition wasn't much different from Touch, but Pain consumed over twenty points of aether to cast, so I couldn't use it too many times. Though the pain caused no physical damage, I'd hoped it would at least immobilize my opponent for a few seconds.

The intense pain, not being her own and thus impossible to pinpoint, seemed to confuse the thief's mind, tricking her nerves into spasming to the point of incapacitation.

With a dull rattling sound, her dagger slipped from my abdomen. Enduring exactly the same pain as the woman, I mustered enough strength in my trembling legs to stand. It wasn't that my mind was particularly resistant to pain—just that now I finally saw a light at the end of the tunnel, uplifting my spirit and giving me the boost I needed to push through the agony.

"Eek!" The thief, slowly recovering from her confusion, tried to crawl away from me, pleading in broken sentences. "Guh... N-No... Stop... Stay away! I can't mov—gah!"

Her spasming body couldn't muster the strength, however, and her movements were slower than mine as I dragged my injured body toward her. I had to finish this before her nerves adapted to the illusory pain. Her body was still coated in sorcerous armor, impervious to blades and blunt damage, but—

A yelp escaped her as I wrapped the thread around her neck and chin, halting her retreat. After winding it multiple times to secure it, I pushed my knee down on her neck and yanked on the thread with everything I had, causing blood to gush from my own abdominal wound. "Eee! No! Stop... Help—"

I cut her off. "No. You die here." With the last of my strength, I kept pulling the thread, enhancing my strength with Boost and using the leverage of my knee.

"Argh! Aaaugh! Gah! Gwahhh!!!"

No matter how much of a contortionist she may have been, her body had limits. As I continued to pour all my strength into pulling, she spasmed, her neck muscles trying to resist. Using my Level 2 Aether Mastery, I boosted my body to its fullest and yanked on the thread again. Her neck slowly gave up its

resistance and began to twist, turning little by little until—

Snap.

With a sound like a dry twig wrapped in a damp rag breaking in half, her head turned completely backward. The thief, her face twisted in terror, stared at me in astonishment, one final spark of life flashing in her upside-down eyes.

I could see my own expressionless face reflected in her irises as they quietly faded into darkness.

A Vow With Elena

As I watched the thief collapse, her neck broken and her sorcerous armor dissipating from her body, I slit her throat with the knife just in case.

A faint cough escaped my own throat, and a spurt of blood gushed from my lips. Either my innards had been damaged when she stabbed me in the gut or this was an effect of the poison she'd used. As I dropped to my knees and then toppled over onto my back, a shriek cut through the silence.

"Alia!"

I barely managed to shift my gaze in the direction of the voice and saw Elena, still quite weakened from the poison and able to move only spastically, crawling toward me.

She's safe, I thought. No major injuries either. Exhaling, secure in the knowledge my job was complete, I used the last of my strength to cast Cure. That probably helped a little; my health points were likely at their limit.

Considering the spells and technique I'd used during combat, I figured I had about half of my aether points remaining. After I used Cure, that would've dropped to thirty to forty percent; at this point, that was synonymous with what remained of my life.

"Oh, Alia," Elena murmured as she reached me, growing pale at the sight of my injuries. "What terrible wounds..."

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

"Worry about yourself, not me!" she snapped. "You fought so recklessly! Cure won't suffice for wounds as deep as these. I will use Restore right away to—"

"Don't," I managed weakly. "Can you...use Detoxify?"

"I can, but it won't help! I don't know the type of poison, so I can't eliminate it from your system!" she said, shaking her head in horror as she realized I'd been poisoned.

```
"Kirig grass...crag snake...saqual fruit...or weeping blossom..."

"Huh?"
```

"It...was probably...one of those." In the process of learning to read and write, I'd repeatedly read through the handwritten herbal almanac that woman had stolen from her master. And I planned on learning alchemy eventually, so I'd memorized its contents down to the footnotes.

According to the book, those four were the easiest ingredients to obtain in this country for the purpose of concocting a poison to induce pain. There were others, but if the poison was to be routinely reapplied to a dagger, it was unlikely that anyone would use rare and labor-intensive materials. Therefore, it was probably either one or a combination of those four. Perhaps other ingredients had been mixed in to enhance the effect, but if the root component was eliminated, the rest should naturally dissipate over time.

"I-I've heard of kirig grass and saqual fruit, but I've never seen a crag snake or a weeping blossom!" Elena said in a panic.

"Then...think of...sajure seeds, and...lavender...when you...cast," I explained between labored breaths. "Those are...the antidotes..."

```
"Alia... Where did you learn—"

"Hurry..."

"A-All right. But even if I cleanse the poison, your wounds—"

"In...the pouch..."
```

"Your pouch?" Elena asked. She took the two ceramic potion bottles out of the pouch around my waist. "These?" "The newer one...is cheap... The old one...is...potent..."

"So I should use this one, then."

These potions, too, had been stolen from that woman's mentor. I'd wanted to return them if possible, but the dead couldn't return anything. With unsteady hands, Elena broke the seal and pulled out the waxed cork, then tipped the bottle over my wound and poured the contents directly onto it. A sharp pain assaulted my senses and I let out an involuntary groan.

"This potion alone won't be enough!" Elena exclaimed. "I should've used Restore from the—"

"Please...use Detoxify," I pleaded. "I'll...use Restore." Healing potions were less about "regeneration" and more about "recovery," so I hadn't expected that one would fully heal me. I'd also never successfully cast Restore before, but in my current state, the only way for me to survive was for Elena to use Detoxify while I used Restore.

"Detoxify," she chanted, successfully casting the spell on me.

"Restore," I chanted in turn. My spell, however, only glowed faintly for a moment before fizzling out.

Elena looked anxiously at me, but I shook my head and signaled for her to continue using Detoxify. The spell's effect wasn't instantaneous; it took concentration to fully grasp the foreign substance and cleanse it, especially in cases like this in which the poison wasn't immediately identifiable.

Since my previous failures with Restore, I'd been trying to understand why I couldn't get it to activate. What was I missing? The incantation was generally understood to mean "restore the body to its original state." When I tried to pick the incantation apart, however, I'd found the words "regenerate" and "true form" hidden within.

Perhaps I lacked the necessary knowledge in biology. My hypothesis was that casting Restore in different ways involved varying levels of difficulty; though Elena could use the spell, it was likely that she could only heal what she could see. For what wasn't immediately visible, like internal organs, wouldn't specialized knowledge be necessary?

That had to be why I couldn't use it. I'd settled on Cure for ordinary wounds and failed when I tried to heal internal injuries with only a vague grasp of them. Most likely one needed an understanding of vital points, like Sera had, to cast Restore. And while that woman had learned about anatomy in school in her previous life, she didn't know the exact placement of the organs. Considering my remaining aether points, I couldn't afford another failure. I did, however, have a way to supplement my knowledge now.

"Touch," I chanted. This spell was cast by directing an amount of mana to a specific part of a target's body. However, its effect was not to make the target area feel as though the mana were touching it—rather, it imparted the sensation of touch to the target area. So, by casting it on myself and feeling my organs react, I could pinpoint their positions and identify the injured parts, which were...the stomach and the liver. As I once more chanted, "Restore," my fingertips glowed faintly, and at last, the spell activated.

I thought of the functions of the stomach and liver as found in my knowledge, applying the spell to their precise locations, and the pain began to subside as the aether restored my organs to their uninjured state.

My consciousness slowly slipped away to the sound of Elena calling out my name.

When next I woke, I was again in a room doubling as an infirmary, lying in a bed. It seemed about three days had passed, and my injuries had completely healed. However, I still needed to rest for a while due to the damage to my internal organs, as Viro informed me when he came to visit, again bringing meat.

From Sera, I received words of both praise and reprimand. The thief was well known in this area as a kidnapper specializing in nobles, so it was good that I'd noticed and thwarted her ploy. However, engaging her had been risky and the odds of failure high; therefore, the correct response would've been to mark her and track her until the senior steward arrived.

Despite that, the senior steward seemed to be taking sole responsibility. I was still an apprentice, after all, and he'd not only changed the princess's security

and allowed her to go shopping regardless, he'd also failed to notice the presence underground. I wasn't going to be punished but rewarded.

I'd initially thought I'd lucked into saving the day, after a fashion, since they couldn't have placed an experienced scout at Elena's side out of consideration for her feelings. That didn't seem to be the case, however—Viro had sneakily informed me that, in truth, the second Elena had been kidnapped, they'd begun cutting off all escape routes. No matter how accustomed the thief had been to abducting nobles, the senior steward had a retrieval plan.

So the reason I was being rewarded wasn't that I'd risked my life to retrieve Elena but that I'd resolved the situation before it escalated, thus avoiding a potential situation with Margrave Dandorl, who was in charge of public security.

Sera, specifically, did highly appreciate that I'd minimized the strain of the incident on an already-frail Elena. Theo, however, scolded me in tears for being reckless and getting injured. Still, I was alive, and Elena and Sera had seemingly erased any scarring I would otherwise have suffered, so I figured I could simply resume work right away.

But I hadn't seen Elena since that day. Incognito or no, Elena was still the princess of this country, and I was an urchin turned maid's apprentice. There was no reason for her to worry about or come see me. She was staying in the region for another two weeks, and I'd figured I could've resumed work in a few days as my strength returned, but since my job had been to keep an eye on her and she was no longer acting on her whims, I'd been ordered to rest for the remainder of her stay.

I would have been lying if I'd said I wasn't concerned about her, but I'd resigned myself to it and focused on both training and repairing my damaged equipment—until, that is, Sera handed me a note and told me to burn it after reading.

On the eve of Elena's return to the capital, I headed for the designated location, still in my maid's uniform as I climbed the castle walls.

The appointed time was midnight—the first strike of the clock tower. At the bell's toll, I wrapped the string of my pendulum around a banister on the

terrace and strengthened it with aether before descending. The girl, still in her nightwear and seated at the terrace table, smiled faintly at me, a hint of surprise on her features.

"I'm here, Princess Elena," I said.

"Right on time," she replied. "Welcome, Alia."

That note had been an invitation from Elena, specifying that I come meet her in secret tonight at midnight, and arrive from the outside. I sensed the presence of Sera's associates on the grounds, but they'd let me pass without incident.

I couldn't feel anyone else's presence inside Elena's room. Sera herself might've been hiding somewhere, but if I started worrying about that, I'd never stop, so I decided not to bother.

"First of all, Alia, thank you for saving me," the princess began. "Thanks to you, I was able to finish my stay here without becoming indisposed."

"It was no problem," I told her. "I was doing my job."

"That sounds like something you would say," she remarked, chuckling for some reason. She moved near me by the banister, and we faced each other, staying just over an arm's length apart due to our difference in position. "Who are you, Alia?"

I saw my reflection in her earnest eyes, shaking its head slightly. "Just an orphan and adventurer. Just Alia."

"Is that so?" She seemed a bit sad, as if she'd expected a different answer. "You won't enter my service, will you?"

"I have no intention of serving anyone."

"Not even as a guard?"

"I'm just an adventurer."

For a moment, both Elena's golden tresses and my growing pink-blonde locks danced in a passing breeze.

"We're not friends," the princess said.

"We're not," I agreed.

"I'm a princess, and you're a mere adventurer. We can never stand side by side."

"I know."

"Then... How is it..." Elena's voice rose for a moment, then trailed off as she searched for the right words. The usually dignified and mature princess was gone; now she was as a child her age, her eyes growing moist and her gaze wavering.

I replied before she had the chance to say anything unbefitting her status. "We're birds of a feather."

"Birds of a feather...?"

We both possessed unusual knowledge for our age, having constantly fended off loneliness and the fates that had been imposed upon us. But we were never alone—not anymore. Even if our paths diverged, our feelings would always be with one another, traveling toward the same destination.

"In that case, Alia, my fellow bird..." Elena understood what I meant, and her expression instantly shifted to that of a princess governing the nation, her clear blue gaze directed straight at me. "I, as princess, hereby swear to you this: once, and once only, I shall be your ally, and use all of my power for your sake, no matter what position you may be in."

"In that case, Elena, my fellow bird, I hereby swear to you that once, and once only, I will lay my life on the line to reap the life of anyone you wish, no matter who that may be." I paused. "Even the king—whether it be of this nation or of all demons."

Thus did we make a vow, not to anyone else, but to each other and ourselves. Elena's vow meant that she would save me that one time, even if it meant rebelling against the king and facing punishment. Therefore, I vowed in turn that if she so wished, I would kill anyone, be it the king of this country or the demon king, even if it meant forfeiting my life in the process.

We were not alone.

"Just one more thing," she said. "Tell me your name."

"I will if I can drop your title," I replied.

Elena gave me a small smile. "You could've asked sooner."

"It's Alicia," I whispered into the wind.

As if etching my real name into her memory, she gave a small nod. "Goodbye, then, Alia. And goodbye, my Alicia."

"Goodbye...Elena."

The princess turned around and disappeared into her room without looking back. I, too, silently left the terrace, vanishing without a sound.

The next morning, Elena, still with the regal bearing of a princess, boarded the carriage. As an apprentice, I stood at the end of the line of maids to see her off. *Will I ever see her again?* I wondered. Still, we remained birds of a feather, and no matter how far apart we were, our vow lived on within us.

Thus did the job for which Viro had brought me here come to an end.

But the next day, to my surprise, I received a summons—this time not from Sera but from the senior steward.

Forced Assignment

After Elena's return to the royal capital, the job for which Viro had brought me here had concluded. I'd received a summons from the senior steward, however, to inform me that I had a new assignment lined up.

"Alia, we've arranged a new task for you," he told me.

▼ Senior Steward

Species: Humanð

Aether Points: 185/190

Health Points: 332/350

Overall Combat Power: 1216 (Boosted: 1550)

He was as strong as I'd initially surmised, but likely one of those people Viro had mentioned whose combat power didn't tell the whole story. His score may have been lower than Feld's due to low aether from focusing primarily on scouting skills, but I had the sense he was no weaker than Feld.

The senior steward narrowed his eyes at me, likely having realized I'd just scanned him. "Her Highness has granted you freedom. However, now that you're aware of our existence, we cannot let you simply roam free. Therefore, from this day forward you are granted the status of 'collaborator,' working with us as an ordinary adventurer, just as Viro does."

"Understood," I said.

Though I was a bit upset that this had been decided without my consent, had I refused, this man would not have hesitated to take drastic measures, even in defiance of the princess. If I thought of it as a matter of building connections while retaining freedom as an adventurer, however, it didn't sound as bad. The only problem was that this would likely involve further dealings with nobility.

Still, I'd chosen to face the aristocracy head-on rather than run. So, to prepare for the day when my vow would come into play, I had to grow strong enough to stand on my own two feet.

"What is this new task?"

"Your duty is to infiltrate a certain noble house as a maid and resolve an ongoing issue there. You will be on-site for a month. This isn't a mission of great importance; it's simply to assess whether you're as trustworthy as Sera claims. Should you fail, at worst it will spell the death of one noble girl. It wouldn't be a matter of particular national significance."

The death of a noble lady isn't significant? I wondered. "Understood...boss?"

"I am not the boss of this organization," he corrected me. "Prove yourself trustworthy, and you may get the chance to meet them. You may call me Graves."

"Understood, Mr. Graves. And where am I going?" In reality, I wasn't interested in being a part of the organization or meeting its boss, but talking

with this man was exhausting due to his overwhelming aura, and I wanted to wrap up the conversation quickly.

I had no intention of getting deeply involved in noble affairs, but I wasn't planning on slacking off either. After being told the location, I felt a little more motivated for this forced assignment. My task was in the northern territory of one Baron Sayles.

This was also where that woman's mentor in the art of sorcery could be found.

The problem in Baron Sayles's territory had begun about six months ago, when a mysterious figure first appeared—though they were referred to as a "figure," they were believed to be a human rather than a monster. This individual, obsessed with the baron's daughter, showed up night after night near her chambers and left bloody handprints, all while going unnoticed by the guards. Could it really be a human?

Stationing maids there at night had proven ineffective, and the young lady was reportedly very frightened. Fearing that hearsay might harm his daughter's marriage prospects, her father the baron didn't want to draw unwanted attention to the issue by getting knights or adventurers involved. Desperate, he'd secretly sought help from Margrave Dandorl, a relative of his; the assignment eventually wound up in my hands.

While my task involved "resolving the issue," Graves didn't seem like he'd be too fussed if that didn't happen. This job seemed to be outside of the jurisdiction of the organization Sera and Graves belonged to—and though I hadn't been informed what this organization was in the first place, I had some guesses.

With Elena's return to the royal capital, the servants and collaborators who had been stationed here had begun their preparations to leave. I, however, was not to assist with that and was told to leave immediately. My own preparations hadn't taken much time at all; I'd gone to my temporary base in the woods and packed my bag with the money and herbs, both poisonous and medicinal, that I'd stashed away there. Then, I assessed my abilities before departing.

```
▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human\ (Rank 2) \triangle +1
Aether Points: 130/135 \triangle +20
Health Points: 67/80 \triangle +16
Strength: 5 (6) \triangle +1
Endurance: 6 (7) \triangle +1
Agility: 7 (8)
Dexterity: 7 \triangle +1
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 1]
[Martial Mastery Lv. 2] \triangle +1
[Throwing Lv.1]
[String Manipulation Lv.1] NEW!
[Light Mastery Lv. 1]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 2] \triangle +2
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 2] \triangle +1
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 2]
[Intimidation Lv. 2]
[Stealth Lv. 1]
[Night Vision Lv.1]
[Detection Lv.1]
[Basic Scan Lv.1]
[Poison Resistance Lv.1] NEW!
Overall Combat Power: 98 (Boosted: 111) \triangle +36
```

My overall combat power had increased sharply and I'd finally reached Rank

2. My aether points had also gone up due to the new skills I'd acquired, but the increase in my combat power was primarily due to my increased stats. In particular, even a one-point increase in dexterity had a significant impact on combat power due to its direct effect on combat skills.

Had my stats increased because my Martial Mastery had leveled up? It had to be; I figured that despite my aether-fueled growth spurt, I was unlikely to reach Level 2 in melee skills before the age of ten. Even my Shadow Magic had reached Level 2, possibly due more to the Pain spell I'd used against the thief, which was equivalent to Level 2 magic, than to my continued analysis of magic over sorcery.

I'd also learned two new skills: String Manipulation and Poison Resistance. The latter I'd been deliberately training for but had likely acquired due to having been poisoned during the fight against the kidnapper. The former was most likely due to my usage of the pendulum as a weapon. That almost sounded as though it had been too easy to learn—but, thinking back, I'd been infusing the weighted string with aether for months before switching to the pendulum, so it was likely less "easily" and more "finally."

There wasn't much else for me to do before my departure. I'd likely cross paths with Viro again if I kept working as an adventurer. I did want to learn more about adventuring, but I'd grasped the basics and could manage on my own. Likewise, I'd probably see Sera again. Theo, meanwhile, had come to visit me in person upon hearing I was leaving.

"Alia, when I turn twelve, I'm gonna go to the royal capital," he told me. "When that happens, I'll come get you, okay? There's something I wanna tell you."

"You can't tell me now?" I asked.

"Nope. Well, I mean, you know, as a guy, I gotta be taller than you to tell you!"

Tell me what? I wondered. Did something special happen when people turned twelve? I didn't really understand Theo's behavior, but back at the orphanage, when one of the children was about to be sold, their close friends would cry about not wanting to be apart. Maybe it was a child thing. Watching Theo run

off with his cheeks bright red, I felt a sense of melancholy, as though I were saying goodbye to a younger brother.

I quickly packed my belongings and left the estate where I'd just spent the last month, carrying only a small trunk with me. If I had one problem, it was my clothing. My old outfit had been torn to shreds in the fight against the hobgoblin, so I had no personal clothing left. Out of options, I'd considered borrowing something from Theo, but Sera had let me take the maid uniform; there might not be work clothes that fit me where I was headed, and if I removed the apron dress and replaced the blouse underneath with something cheaper, it wouldn't look too out of place for everyday wear.

Traveling in boys' clothing would've been easier, but my body had yet again grown due to aether, and now I looked less "small ten-year-old" and more "ten-year-old girl." My hair had been growing uncomfortably fast too and was now down to my shoulders. I could no longer pass for a boy without hiding my hair somehow. I'd wanted to cut it for convenience, but Sera had advised me to keep it long for the maid disguise (and Theo, for some reason, had made me promise not to cut it), so I'd left it as it was.

Dressed in an unbleached blouse with a black dress that reached my ankles and laced ankle boots, I concealed my equipment under the skirt and sleeves so as to appear unarmed to a casual observer. The small trunk I had on me had been a gift from Meena. It was tiny and barely fit my maid uniform and a change of blouses, but it was old and sturdy, potentially useful as a makeshift shield.

I was at the very edge of the Dandorl territory. From here to Baron Sayles's domain it would take about three weeks on foot or two by carriage. I had been told to arrive as soon as possible, but since my arrival had been communicated three days ago, scheduled for a month from then, I had a bit of leeway.

Due to the threat of monsters, an ordinary traveler would've chosen to take a carriage with a guard, which typically would've cost five silver, with overnight stays at inns along the way incurring additional costs. My pay as an apprentice maid had been fifteen silver, plus five gold as my hazard pay, but since my next job was to be unpaid until completion, I didn't want to waste any money.

After a half day's walk, I arrived at the capital of Dandorl. An evening arrival would've typically meant an overnight stay, but I wasn't planning on sleeping in an inn. I replenished my rations and bought a small amount of salt from street vendors, then decided to leave the city immediately.

On my way out, I finally got a closer view of the massive, fortresslike Castle Dandorl. I wondered if that Dandorl lady, whom I hadn't seen since my third day at the lakeside castle, was there. Unlike Elena and I, who only had knowledge, she was unnatural, behaving like a true adult. Her gaze had clearly been cautious whenever she directed it toward either of us, and her frightened demeanor, as though she were the victim of some misfortune, had irritated Elena. The handmaidens, despite showing concern over her strange absence, had seemed relieved internally that she was gone.

I'll keep an eye on her, I decided. She may become an enemy to Elena.

It was close to evening by the time I was done shopping, so the soldiers at the gate were hesitant to let me leave the city. They relented after I showed them my Adventurers' Guild tag, however. As a Rank 1 adventurer, I would normally have had to pay a one-silver toll upon entering and be searched upon exiting. But for now, I had a letter of introduction from Graves, the senior steward, to Baron Sayles, granting me privileges close to those of a noble and thus free passage.

I didn't want to rely on this type of thing much in the future, however; being associated with nobility could attract unnecessary trouble. Besides, I didn't fully trust Sera or Theo, let alone their entire organization. Maybe I'd even have to fight Graves one day. I had to grow stronger by then.

As I stepped out of the city, I exhaled in relief. I wasn't good with crowded places, and even though I was disguising it as everyday wear, my maid uniform was made of fine fabric, and that was enough to attract attention. While some adults were genuinely concerned about children, there were also those who would prey on them; I couldn't afford to let my guard down.

Several carriages and travelers passed me by in the vicinity of the city, but after about an hour, in the absence of daylight, there were no more people to be seen, and it grew quiet, save for the faint cries of animals in the background.

Another hour of walking brought complete nightfall, and I finally started running, concealing my presence and blending into the darkness.

Perhaps due to my growth spurt, I felt faster than before. My increased health points—and consequently stamina—meant I could jog for hours, but keeping in mind there was no need to rush, I maintained a light pace to avoid sweating too much. Traveling only at night as per usual was more comfortable for me, but traveling in the dark on an unfamiliar road made me worry about getting lost.

Even the light jog had made me sweat a bit, so after checking my surroundings for any signs of danger, I wet a cloth with Flow and used it to wipe the sweat off my whole body. I didn't have many changes of clothing, so it was best not to sweat too much. It made me wish to learn Cleanse soon; if Elena was able to use Level 2 Light Mastery spells, I figured I could learn them too.

I climbed up a tree in the woods and settled on a thick branch for the night. My waist felt a bit heavier than usual, possibly because I'd been eating better recently. It wasn't a major concern, but I felt a bit softer in places, so I decided to have nothing but brown bread and water before sleeping.

The next morning, I woke up just before sunrise. I gave myself a sniff and decided a change of clothes wasn't in order yet, so I just wiped my body clean with the damp cloth again.

I was at the border of the Dandorl Margravate; beyond here, the woods didn't belong to any particular noble, so knights and soldiers didn't patrol there and it was practically a lawless land. It'd have been safer to travel through the forest, but my fine skirt could have gotten snagged and torn, and the area could have monsters besides. Goblins I could handle, but for fighting creatures I was unfamiliar with, an open space was preferable.

"Something's here," I mused quietly as I walked along the road with the sun beginning to rise. There were sounds of conflict ahead, but that wasn't what had caught my attention. I halted in the middle of the road, and three men, all dirty and wielding swords, came rushing out of the woods.

"Hey, girl—" The throwing knives I'd concealed in my sleeves whooshed through the air, striking the throat of the man farthest from me. He collapsed lifelessly to the ground before he could finish his sentence.

Two more.

"Wh-What the hell?!" the remaining two men exclaimed in tandem, panicking at their comrade's sudden fall.

Each of them had a combat power of around sixty. Considering the situation and their equipment, they were most likely bandits. There was a possibility they weren't, of course, but the fact that they'd been lying in ambush on a road far from the city and had rushed a child with weapons drawn was enough for me to deem them hostile.

"H-He's dead!" one of them said.

"What the—did this brat kill him?!" the other replied, then turned and charged at me.

"W-Wait! Something about her ain't right!" the first cautioned, though his companion didn't listen.

Too slow, I thought. The bandit's movements were sluggish. Did he lack combat skills? Right now, Boost allowed me to dilate my perception of time by around twenty percent, but even without it, his footwork seemed incredibly slow to me.

"Touch," I chanted.

"Gah!" the raging man yelped, suddenly dropping his dagger and clutching one eye. He hadn't been injured, nor did he feel any pain; he'd simply felt the sensation of having his eyeball touched. His confusion had rooted him in place, and my black knife sliced smoothly across his neck.

One to go. Before the blood even had the chance to spurt from the second bandit's wound, I darted past him and closed in on the last man.

"Wh-What the hell is this kid?!" he screamed in confusion, having seen his two companions killed in the blink of an eye. He tossed aside his rusty hand axe and ran off in a panic toward the sounds of the scuffle.

I nearly threw my knife into his back but stopped mid-movement. My Throwing skill was only effective within a range of about five meters; beyond that, even a hit would only cause minimal damage. After retrieving my throwing knives from the first man I'd killed, I wiped the blood off their blades onto his clothes, then searched the two men's belongings to ensure they had nothing that could identify them. With that done, I followed the tracks of the one who had escaped.

Normally, I wouldn't have chased down a fleeing bandit. No matter how advantageous the situation may have been, it could easily turn against me depending on his allies ahead. Carelessness and overconfidence were luxuries I could ill afford; I killed when I knew I could kill.

However, the bandit's comrades were clearly fighting *someone* up ahead. Though it had nothing to do with me, to them it may well have looked like I'd driven another enemy toward them. Which wasn't an issue if they were strong enough to handle it, but I still didn't want to risk incurring their wrath, or worse, risk causing them to lose and all of their enemies to come after me in turn.

I had no choice but to pursue the fleeing man to avoid future complications.

The three young men had become adventurers this spring. They were all sons of families in the service of a certain barony and, not being the eldest, had given up on inheriting that duty. Before being driven out, they'd willingly left their hometown.

Trained in fighting since childhood, they could've become soldiers for the barony. Gaining combat skills around age fourteen had made them overconfident, however, so they'd chosen the path of the adventurer instead. But Dandorl, the largest city in the north, had only menial jobs for novice adventurers—if any at all. Believing such work to be beneath their abilities, the boys had set out for a certain noble's border territory, close to where monsters resided, in order to hunt them.

Despite their combat training, the three youths had no experience in killing. Still, they'd thought they would be able to easily trounce bandits such as their attackers. Reality had not been quite so kind.

The bandits—mostly former villagers with no more than sixty points in overall combat power—were no match for the boys, each with nearly a hundred points. Outnumbered three to one and faced with relentless attacks by

physically strong bandits, however, they had gradually been driven into a corner. To make matters worse, they'd suddenly found themselves facing even more enemies.

One of the bandits' lookouts came running in, awfully confused. The leader of the bandits, upon turning to look in his direction and seeing a figure approaching not far behind, smirked contemptuously.

Only one of the boys could use Scan, and his heart sank at the sight of the figure and her overall combat power. It was a young girl, wearing a fine dress that resembled the attire of a noble's servant. She looked to be about ten at a glance, though her calm demeanor suggested she might be older than that. What caught the attention of both the boys and the bandit chief, however, was the certain aura she exuded.

With her beautiful features and serene air, there was *something* to her that suggested she would no doubt grow into a stunning beauty. The bandit leader smirked, thinking a girl like her could fetch a good price; the boys, meanwhile, despaired, thinking she would only get in their way.

Her combat power was around the same as the boys', at roughly a hundred points, which meant she was likely a sorceress. She must've been confident in her skills to travel alone on the road, but rich amateurs who learned low-ranking magic for the fun of it were often useless in combat. Not only that, her delicate appearance suggested she'd never hurt so much as a fly. The boys were despondent, thinking she would no doubt need rescuing.

Both the youths and the bandits had evaluated her based on their own standards, made assumptions, and felt let down before anything had even happened. Her actions, however, promptly shattered all their preconceptions.

At first, nobody understood what was happening. A discreet hand movement from the girl sent the bandit who had come rushing in tumbling to the ground, blood gushing out of his carotid artery. She kept walking toward the group, with everyone else frozen in place. Another wave of her hand sliced open a nearby bandit's throat and plunged a blade into his eye. Only then did they all finally realize the attacks had been coming from her.

"Kill the kid!" the bandit leader bellowed, and the others scrambled to obey.

Not all of them were as enraged as he was, though; most of them looked intimidated. It made sense, of course. Bandits were mostly displaced farmers who lacked the fortitude to lead an honest life and wanted to take the easier path. A young girl killing emotionlessly while walking steadily toward them was frightening, to say the least.

"Arrrgh!" one of them screamed as he lunged forward, dagger in hand. The girl ducked to evade the blade and threw the man off-balance. She then swiftly pulled a black knife from her boot and slashed his throat as she rose to her feet.

Before his body had so much as hit the ground, she muttered something, and another bandit clutched his eyes in shock. The girl stepped forward and stabbed her knife underneath his chin; the blade pierced through to the top of his head.

The truly terrifying part was that the girl had yet to break into a run. She walked at a seemingly leisurely pace yet still glided away from the bandits' attacks with ease, approaching them in the blink of an eye for the kill. When two attacked her simultaneously, her skirt fluttered, momentarily attracting their gaze; in an instant, throwing knives lodged into their eyes and throats, and they both fell.

The girl looked on, seemingly mystified, as though she were wondering why such minor injuries had proven fatal. Noticing this, the boys all paled. They hadn't been able to join the fray since her arrival; frankly, they were too terrified to approach her. How could this girl kill so nonchalantly? Did humans really die so easily? Her combat power was similar to theirs, yet her strikes were decisive and lethal, whereas the boys hadn't been able to kill a single bandit. They couldn't bring themselves to approach her, fearing they, too, might be cut down just as easily.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

"Forget this!!!"

With only four bandits remaining, two of them had finally realized the disadvantage they were at and made a run for it.

"Cowards!" shouted their leader. "Wai—"

The next moment, throwing knives whizzed past, impaling the fleeing bandits

in the backs and sending them screaming to the ground. As the others looked for the source of the knives, they saw the girl's skirt settling back down, and before they could grasp what was happening, her knife effortlessly sliced through the throat of the nearest man.

"Y-You... What the hell..." The final remaining bandit—a man of around fifty—dropped onto his rear as his legs gave out beneath him. As the leader, he was nothing without his underlings. He'd been boisterous when in the company of his failed farmer buddies, but when faced with a real fighter stronger than himself, it was all he could do to break into a twitchy, forced smile.

Whoosh.

People might think no one would kill an opponent who'd lost the will to fight, but the expressionless girl simply stepped forward and slashed the leader's throat with her knife. Not bothering to look as the man's lifeless body slowly toppled to the side, the girl quietly picked up her discarded trunk and started walking toward the boys, casting them a sudden and strange glance.

Paralyzed by fear, the boys couldn't utter a single word. The girl simply walked past and finished off the two bandits still writhing on the ground with knives in their backs. As they watched her small figure walk away and disappear into the distance, the boys remained rooted in place.

For hours they stood there, surrounded by corpses, before finally rising slowly to their feet.

"Let's go back to the countryside," one said.

Having witnessed real combat, the boys changed course and went home, unwilling to ever wield a sword again.

Two days after Alia had left the lakeside castle, the prime minister and head of the Order of Shadows, Margrave Melrose, had arrived there.

"Hoth. What are your thoughts on the girl?" the margrave asked as he sat in one of the rooms of the castle.

"Allow me to proceed with my report, my lord," replied Hoth, Sera's

grandfather. "The girl does indeed hold memories of a woman resembling your daughter. The information matches up with much of what we've uncovered, which leads me to believe there is a high probability that she may be your surviving granddaughter."

Margrave Veldt Melrose's daughter had eloped with a knight's apprentice to parts unknown and perished alongside her beloved in a monster attack. The margrave had heard the couple had borne a child, and that his granddaughter—a girl named Alicia—had been found. He'd then sent Hoth, who knew what his daughter had looked like, to confirm the girl's identity. To discuss this matter, they were now meeting neither in the royal capital nor where the girl had been discovered, but rather in the territory of Dandorl, to avoid attracting attention from either his political enemies or relatives looking to inherit the margravate, who might target the child if she was indeed his granddaughter.

"If that were all, I wouldn't have come all the way out here to speak with you," the margrave said. "What I want to know is your impression of this girl. Something only you could sense."

"To speak candidly, she is quite beautiful, but she doesn't give the same impression as your daughter," Hoth pondered. "And her hair color is more akin to a reddish-gold, not the characteristic pink-blonde shade that all women of the Melrose lineage share."

"I see..."

Based on the information gathered, if white were a match, this girl had seemed initially to be a pale gray. However, based on Hoth's impression of her, she was more of a dark gray, almost black. In other words, there was enough circumstantial evidence to identify her, but Veldt felt something was amiss. A gut feeling, perhaps. If the girl had been in possession of his daughter's ring, it would've been a clearer-cut case, but without it, there was no tangible proof. Operating strictly off of circumstantial evidence made Veldt uneasy.

"Will you meet her in person, my lord?" Hoth asked.

"That would be premature," Veldt replied, shaking his head and glancing at the peach-tinted braided string on the table.

Sera had brought him the string after taking it—under the pretext of throwing

it away—from a young girl who claimed to have woven it of her own hair. The girl's eyes, Sera had reported, bore a resemblance to Veldt's, and her locks had the characteristic pink-blonde tint, aligning with the traits of his family lineage. Though the hair was considerably damaged and had lost its luster, it did indeed resemble the color Veldt remembered his daughter's hair had been. Moreover, the girl was reportedly seven years old, which aligned with his granddaughter's age.

However—how could a seven-year-old girl, who had supposedly led an ordinary life with a housewife for a mother and a soldier for a father, possess the skills to single-handedly take down hobgoblins and Rank 3 thieves? This raised doubts about whether she really was only seven.

"Carry on as planned, Hoth," said Veldt. "Continue to oversee the orphanage and keep an eye on this girl. Also, dispatch one of your best to check whether the girl this string belonged to is hiding anything."

"Shall I send Sera?" Hoth asked.

"No. If Sera is absent from the capital any longer, it will compromise the queen's security. That said, we cannot send someone untrustworthy either..." Veldt trailed off, deep in thought.

Hoth, already retired from working in the field, also pondered the matter. He recalled a man who, despite having been somewhat radical in his youth, had mellowed with age. While not the ideal choice to fetch a child, his loyalty to the nation was beyond question, and there was no one in the vicinity more skilled than he.

"In that case," Hoth ventured, "shall we ask Graves to take on this task before he returns to the royal capital?"

Undercover Investigation & the Suspect's Identity

After I departed the Dandorl territory, it took me about three weeks to reach the barony of Sayles, located almost in the northernmost part of the Kingdom of Claydale.

The journey itself had been uneventful, with only minor disturbances.

However, as a young girl, I'd found myself more prone to encounters with both good and bad people than in my days as a filthy street urchin. I still couldn't accurately judge the goodness of others; even if they appeared normal at first, they might attack me suddenly if the opportunity arose.

Therefore, during the latter half of my journey, I'd purchased men's shirts and loose breeches to conceal the area around my hips. It'd cost one and a half silver and, as far as I was concerned, had been a necessary expense.

It would be summer soon. Claydale never saw snow, even during winter, so the summers were quite hot, but this town, perhaps because of the river that split it into northern and southern halves, was breezy and a little cooler.

"What a big town," I mumbled. The territory itself was smaller than the barony of Horus, where I'd once lived, but most of the towns and villages were located along the waterside, seeking the bounty of the river that flowed down from the northern mountains. It made the entire region feel like one large city, with the town where Baron Sayles lived at its heart. It felt more vibrant than Horus's territory.

The river was fairly wide and plied by cargo ships. However, I spotted no small boats, for fishing or otherwise, which was unusual for a riverside town like this. While buying preserved food at a stall, I asked the owner, suspecting maybe the rapid currents were the reason, and was told that the water level was high due to recent heavy rains. The absence of fishing boats was due to the fact that the river upstream was infested with monsters, and occasionally a straggler emerged. Water monsters appeared only rarely, but still, a number of fishermen were harmed each year while fishing along the river, making swimming in it akin to suicide.

Before starting my work, I casually made inquiries around the town. Almost everyone knew of the "mysterious figure," which had first been seen around town about half a year ago. The details, however, varied greatly, with some claiming this was a man, others a woman, and a few even claiming that it was an elderly person or a child. There was no consistency whatsoever.

I also investigated the situation outside the town. Around these parts, monsters could be found even in the vicinity of the settlement, and with it

being so large, the outskirts were extensive, making it more likely bandits would be lurking nearby.

That woman's mentor in sorcery lived on the outskirts of the woods beyond this town. It was quite a ways from here, so I wasn't heading there yet, but I was considering whether I should set up a base in a safe space in the woods and hide important items there, like the herbal almanac I wanted to return to its rightful owner. Though I couldn't conduct a detailed survey of the surroundings, the forest along the river fairly close to town seemed like a good choice. Traveling along the relatively deserted riverside meant I wouldn't need to pass through the gate, thus avoiding the one-silver toll. There was the risk of running into water monsters, but if incidents only happened a few times a year, the odds were low. Besides, with my current skills, I believed I could sneak away unnoticed.

"This should do."

For my temporary base, I chose a large tree in the woods that seemed to get plenty of sunlight. Sunlight was a consideration not because of the added comfort for a living space but rather because monsters tended to avoid sunny spots. I cut down some saplings with straight trunks, laid them across thick branches, and secured them with vines. As a precaution, I burned insect-repellent herbs and applied the sap of poisonous trees to the saplings. Wild animals tended to dislike that, so hopefully it would prevent mice from gnawing on my herbs.

Before nightfall, I explored the surrounding area and gathered more medicinal herbs. With my current knowledge of Cure and Restore, I didn't need that many herbs, but even without alchemy skills, some poisonous herbs were effective when ground into powder; I collected a few and hung them from the branches.

As day turned to night, I wiped my body with a damp cloth and climbed atop the tree. I lay on the wooden sticks I'd placed across the branches, finished my meal of blackberries and brown bread, and gazed up at the night sky through the gaps in the leaves.

I wasn't strong enough yet. Yes, I'd defeated a Rank 2 bandit leader and a

hobgoblin, and even a Rank 3 thief, an opponent well above my level. But I'd won each of those battles by the skin of my teeth, and I wasn't at the level of power I wanted—not yet.

My main combat skill was Dagger Mastery. I had Martial Mastery for grappling and evasion; Throwing for ranged attacks; String Manipulation for wielding my pendulum; Light Mastery to restore vitality; Shadow Magic to conjure illusions; Non-Elemental Magic for Boost and combat techniques; Aether Manipulation to improve the effectiveness of all of those; Stealth and Night Vision to move unseen in the dark; Detection to locate enemies and avoid surprise attacks; and Poison Resistance, essential for my usage of poisons.

I had acquired all of the basic skills I'd anticipated I would need in battle. Being female and a child besides, I was naturally at a disadvantage in close combat against grown men, but that didn't mean I couldn't win. Even if my opponent and I both had the same skills, the way we used them and our respective levels of proficiency could make a significant difference. Now I wanted to hone those skills and sharpen myself into a blade.

The next morning, I woke up before sunrise. After making certain I sensed no presences nearby, I climbed down the tree and, with soap and water from the practical spell Flow, carefully washed my hair. I then wiped down my body with a cloth and got my equipment ready. I put on thin socks and short lace-up boots, secured my black knife and one thinner knife to each of my calves, then tied eight throwing knives around my thighs, all with leather straps. I pulled the blouse over my bare skin, donned the long black dress over that, and slipped a throwing knife into one sleeve and my pendulum into the other. After doing my hair the same way Sera often did, I straightened my clothes and packed my belongings—essentials into the small trunk and the rest into a bag I hid in the branches—then headed into town.

As I walked in, dressed formally, staring and walking straight ahead, a number of gazes turned my way. The attire I'd changed into was appropriate for knocking on a noble's door, but it really stood out. Still, I managed to reach Baron Sayles's estate, where I showed a man—the gatekeeper, seemingly—the introductory letter from House Dandorl. The man's eyes widened in surprise, and he hurried inside, returning in roughly two hundred counts with a steward

in tow who seemed to be nearing old age.

"We have reviewed your letter of introduction from House Dandorl. Please, come in," the steward said.

"Thank you," I replied. As I entered the estate, several servants glanced subtly my way. Not understanding what their gazes meant, I followed the steward farther inside to be introduced to the family members in what seemed to be the baron's study.

The steward knocked and led me into the room, where a middle-aged, weak-willed-looking man greeted me restlessly. "We received a letter from House Dandorl saying they would send someone to be employed here for a fixed period as one of my daughter's caretakers. Are you...?"

I'd been told to play the role of a young maid who'd served House Dandorl from childhood. Given my age, if I'd said I'd been sent by a mysterious organization to solve their problem, it would've naturally aroused suspicion, so the plan was for me to pose as an ordinary maid and work on the issue from the shadows. The baron, however, as the one who'd petitioned House Dandorl for help, seemed to have an inkling as to my true identity. Or perhaps the information that had been made available to him had been deliberately arranged in such a way that he would come to that conclusion himself; while an outright statement of my purpose would've aroused suspicion, if the baron came to the conclusion himself, he was less likely to doubt its veracity.

In which case my best bet was to act accordingly. "Please refrain from prying, my lord."

"R-Right, of course. I understand," the baron replied, possibly satisfied with my response. "Now, allow me to introduce you to my daughter, Maria." He anxiously sent the butler to fetch the girl.

Maria, the daughter in question, was to turn twelve this year. She didn't seem to possess much aether and looked her age physically, or perhaps equivalent to a thirteen-year-old commoner. Though she was pretty and seemed composed, there was a hint of fear in her eyes as she looked at me, possibly due to the incident with her mysterious stalker.

"Lady Maria, it's an honor to meet you," I said. "My name is Alia."

"Y-Yes, nice to meet you as well," she replied nervously.

For now, my job involved assisting a housemaid who looked after the young lady. The woman, also nearing old age, seemed to be the steward's wife and told me their whole family served the baron.

After touring the estate and greeting the servants, I finally understood their odd behavior. The staff consisted of the older couple, four maids, three manual laborers who doubled as gardeners and gatekeepers, and two cooks, but that was it. I'd been used to the princess, who'd had nearly a hundred servants and guards during her recuperation period, but this seemed to be normal for a country baron's estate. Most likely the young lady of House Dandorl had a level of prestige similar to Elena's—and so, despite my young age, the servants here had probably been worried about making boorish mistakes in front of me, given the story was that I'd been sent by a high-ranking noble family.

Well, not that it mattered. Perhaps my laconic nature frightened them, but if it meant they'd make fewer attempts to interact with me, that would give me more freedom to do what I had to. Pondering this while surveying the manor and assisting the housemaid, I suddenly sensed someone's approach.

"Hey! You! The new maid! Are you the one scaring my sister?!"

Turning around toward the source of the voice, I saw a boy, about ten, who looked a lot like the baron's daughter Maria. Assuming he was her younger brother, that made him a noble, but...he looked different from what I would've expected a noble to look like. He wore breeches, and his knees, covered in scrapes, were on display. Cuts were visible on his cheeks and nose, and if not for his clothes, he would've looked more like a street punk than a noble's son.

"Hey!" he snapped. "Don't just stay silent! Say something!"

"Are you Lady Maria's younger brother?" I asked.

"That's right! Ever since you got here, Maria and everyone else has been acting strange! If you're a bad guy, I'm gonna beat you up!"

"You're confident in your fighting abilities?"

"Yeah! I'm the boss around the neighborhood! Not even Chico and Harry can beat me in a fight!"

Who? Either way, I was starting to get the picture. He may have been a noble, but in a remote area like this, there wouldn't have been many other noble children, and the few who were around would have been children of minor barons or knights overseeing towns and villages; besides, odds were there would've been no more than ten of them. So his playmates were most likely the children of servants or soldiers, and in this region, where the countryside and the towns were so close together, he might've been engaging in rougher play, more typical of commoners.

But that made it easier for me. I'd been having trouble gathering information subtly, since the young lady and the other maids had all been keeping me at arm's length. If this boy wouldn't complain about rougher treatment, that was exactly what I needed.

I turned to face the boy directly.

"What? You wanna go at it?" he asked, taking on a fighting stance and balling his hands into fists.

"Come with me," I told him, walking ahead. "Show me around."

"Huh? What? Hey!" Seemingly unable to process my sudden command, the boy grumbled inarticulately. Then, once the reality of it dawned on him, he hurriedly caught up with me. "Y-You! You're just a maid!" he snapped, his hand reaching for my shoulder. "How dare—"

Before he could grab me, however, I smoothly evaded his grasp, then pushed his chest lightly, cornering him against the wall. Then, with a loud smack, I slapped the wall next to his face and looked closely into his eyes. "You want to save your sister, right?" I asked. "If so, help me."

The boy was silent as I stared him down, despite us being around the same height, from inches away. For some reason, his eyes were wide as he stared back. His cheeks flushed a bright red, and he nodded repeatedly.

"So you don't know when this mysterious figure appears?" I asked.

"Nope," he replied, suddenly cooperative. "Sometimes they'll come back after, like, three days. Sometimes it takes nearly a month. One time another

noble sent a sorcerer to act as a guard, but then the stranger didn't appear at all, so..."

The boy's name was Rody, and he was the baron's eldest son. He looked about ten, though since nobles typically developed earlier than other kids, I'd assumed he was about my age—but no, he'd just turned nine this year. I'd been thinking of him as a little punk, but he was actually older than me. Still, I myself was turning eight in just a few months, so we were close in age regardless.

Just like with his sister Maria, I'd thought it odd that he hadn't grown much for a noble, but it turned out neither of them had sorcery skills, so their low aether seemed to be the reason. As I wondered why there was such a disparity among nobles, my knowledge prompted me with information.

Educational pursuits, be they cultural or sorcerous, require a certain environment. As an orphan, I wasn't educated because I hadn't grown up in an environment where it was possible to learn things that weren't essential for survival. For an orphan, survival came first and seeking wealth second. But an uneducated orphan wouldn't know that culture was necessary to become wealthy, and so they placed a lower premium on education.

In other words, culture was necessary for wealth and wealth was necessary for culture, which meant only those who maintained the status quo would continue to be wealthy generations down the line. And in this country, that meant only the upper nobility would retain power. Since that woman had known this, maybe she should've studied more? Goodness.

As I walked around the mansion with the baron's son, the other servants cast quiet glances our way. Since this family had no maid outfits for children, I was wearing the dress and apron I'd brought with me. Those clothes were fit for a princess's maid and of a different quality than those a baron's maids wore, which might have been one of the reasons they kept their distance.

"Do you know why Lady Maria is being targeted, Rody?" I asked.

"Why don't I get a title too?" he protested.

"Tell me."

"All right, all right..." According to Rody, this mysterious figure had first

appeared in town about half a year ago. Though they hadn't killed anyone yet, those whom they'd attacked had sustained injuries, some of which had been quite serious.

The figure had begun to obsess over Maria about three months ago, leaving bloody handprints near her chambers at night. It had yet to harm her; the handprints were getting closer and closer to her, however, and her family was likely anxious over when she would be attacked. And since this figure seemed to be human, the situation could seriously jeopardize Maria's engagement prospects if it were to continue.

Since this was outside of Graves's jurisdiction, he'd judged it unnecessary to resolve. However, if it were to be resolved, then the sooner the better. Personally, I wanted to bring it to a close before the next attack. I was also curious about this mysterious figure's motivations, however. Why would they have attacked the townspeople immediately but not Maria? Based on the accounts, there was no consistency in the intervals of this figure's visits or the attacks on the townspeople. Was that really true?

When an enemy's motives were known, their actions became more predictable, and one could speculate about their weaknesses and identity. But so far, despite multiple investigations by officials and sorcerers, neither the figure's identity nor their purpose had become any clearer. Various motives typical of humans had been considered: a grudge, a political reason, infatuation. No evidence had been uncovered for any of them, however.

Therefore, I figured I should investigate from a different perspective. Granted, I likely wouldn't have understood the subtleties of human relationships one way or the other.

The sorcerers' investigation had identified traces of aether in one of the figure's handprints and thus had concluded they, too, must be a sorcerer. The servers hadn't witnessed anything, but Maria had seen a "fat man." Testimonies from the townspeople also mentioned a fat or old man, so the prevailing theories currently were that either the figure was a Level 4 shadow sorcery user capable of changing their appearance with magic or that this was the work of multiple individuals acting in concert.

But was that really the case? If multiple people had done this, they'd likely have left more evidence behind, such as personal effects or footprints. Even if it'd been a sorcery user concealing their presence, such a powerful spell would have left traces, as when one used elemental spells, residual mana of the respective elements remained in the environment. This disappeared quickly in the case of a Level 1 or 2 spell, but the earth-elemental mana from that kidnapper's sorcery had lingered for quite a while. With my mana-as-color vision, I would've spotted any residue, but from what I'd seen, there didn't seem to be much shadow-elemental mana around.

"Tell me your family's elemental affinities," I said.

"Father's is wind and mother's is water, but my sister and I can't use sorcery yet," Rody explained.

"What about practical magic?"

"Um... I think my sister can use Flow?"

That matched with my initial survey of the estate, abundant in wind and water residue. Even if one's aether was low, just by living in a space, one left mana traces of the same element as one's affinity. And from what I'd seen, the estate contained strong traces of water mana. This meant I needed to investigate the town once more.

On my fifth day working at the baron's house, Maria, despite her initial avoidance, approached me while I changed the linens in her chambers. "I hear you're looking into the situation for my sake," she said.

"From Ro—Lord Rody?" I asked.

"He seems to have taken quite a liking to you. He was excited when he told me, saying it was a secret," she explained, smiling cheerfully at me. Perhaps her brother's trust in me had dispelled her fears.

Now it wasn't much of a "secret" anymore, however. Boys were prideful, so I'd thought he wouldn't tell anyone about losing to me, but maybe he'd grown fond of me after I threatened him?

"Are you able to help me?" Maria asked.

"If you're lucky, yes. Still, if you're pious, I would suggest you pray," I said in a deliberately detached tone.

"I see," she replied softly. She lifted her face, an expression of concern etched upon her features, and smiled gently. "Then I will pray to the same deity as you."

I said nothing to that.

That night, like the last, I used the practical spell Flow to send water through the estate's drainage system. Yesterday I'd been unsuccessful in luring my target out, but the water should nevertheless have reached its mark.

I'd walked around the estate, searching for places with high trace amounts of water-elemental mana. It was present on this estate in abundance, and perhaps because of that, I'd had to change the linens in Maria's chambers daily. But it wasn't just the mana in the environment—Maria herself had a strong water affinity. The only reason no one else had noticed was that her aether wasn't high. But since I could see mana as color, to me, Maria was enveloped in a very deep navy blue, the color of water mana. She was supposed to enroll in the Sorcerers' Academy starting next year; perhaps then her talents would quickly blossom.

Hers was not the only mana lingering on the estate, however.

The timings of the mysterious figure's appearances had seemingly no rhyme nor reason, but all testimonies agreed that the figure always came on "dark nights"—meaning nights when the moon and stars were hidden from view. They would appear on cloudy or rainy days with high humidity, and all of the victims they'd attacked had the water affinity. The figure's first appearance, six months ago, coincided with the river flooding; at the time, a simple barrier had been built to suppress the power of the water spirit that had caused the flood. The barrier had been temporary and had soon come undone, but by then, being cut off from the water had driven the target of my Flow spell—the water spirit—to madness.

What this spirit had been seeking was water-elemental mana. Because Maria's water mana was strong, the spirit had, so far, been satisfied with the residual essence that had accumulated in the estate from the years she'd lived there. But due to Maria's low total aether, the mana residue had gradually been depleted, and the spirit had begun to approach Maria herself. With the rainy season having passed, it had been starving—and that was why it was attracted to the mana in the water that I kept producing with Flow.

Suddenly, I exclaimed, "There!"

I threw a rock over the drainage, and the *thing* that had appeared leaped aside to avoid it, sticking to the wall and dissolving the water veil that had been concealing its form.

A drenched, swollen man clung to the wall, looking like a waterlogged corpse. The body was bloated and several spots were oozing a thick mixture of blood and water where the flesh appeared to have burst open from the inside. This was neither a living being nor an undead monster; it was a spirit animating a corpse as a hermit crab might inhabit a mollusc's shell, likely to prevent itself from evaporating. This was—

"The mad water spirit..."

At my murmur, the waterlogged corpse realized its true identity had been uncovered and turned its murky eyes toward me.

The Mad Spirit

Initially, I'd speculated that the mysterious figure wasn't human but rather a monster—one of the water monsters common to this region—based on the residual mana and the overall circumstances. However, after paying the Adventurers' Guild for information, I'd hypothesized that it wasn't a water monster either; it was a water *spirit* gone mad. I'd been hoping my theory was wrong, but it'd turned out to be right, as bad hunches often did.

▼ Lower Water Spirit

Aether Points: 337/503

Overall Combat Power: 371/533

[Affliction: Madness]

Even a lesser spirit was very difficult to handle. Spirits controlled the laws of the world, and a mortal normally wouldn't be squaring off against them. However, spirits like this one, cut off from their elemental source or unable to return to the spirit realm after the death of their summoners, entered a state of madness, attacking humans and creatures alike to steal their mana.

A typical lesser spirit had a combat power of about 500, making it equivalent to a Rank 3 monster on the stronger end of the scale. However, subjugating a spirit was considered to be as difficult as handling a Rank 4 monster, and the Adventurers' Guild suggested a party of Rank 3 or higher, including at least two sorcerers, to take on the task. This was because physical attacks were largely ineffective against spirits, which weren't corporeal beings.

Even an attacker with mental fortitude and a strong desire to bring down the spirit would only deal about ten percent of their usual damage. Since a spirit's health points—which corresponded to their aether points—regenerated at a rate of one point every few seconds, fighter-types had no means to keep up.

Elemental magic of the same type as the spirit's was also ineffective and could even restore its aether. Therefore, when fighting one, it was necessary to have sorcerers capable of using attack magic of a different element than the spirit's, thus aiming for a quick and decisive win.

For this reason, I had no intention of involving the local soldiers in this battle. Even if they could have dealt ten percent of their usual damage, low-level attacks would barely have made a dent. I could have used them as meat shields, but damaging the spirit was hard enough without the risk that it would restore its aether by attacking the soldiers. Worse, frightened soldiers could have run around and ruined my traps inadvertently. Granted, with enough numbers, it might have been doable—but out of consideration for Maria's engagement prospects and to avoid numerous casualties, I didn't want to escalate the situation or gather a large force.

I wasn't exactly eager to engage in combat either, but after checking the

water spirit's aether points, I'd confirmed that it hadn't been regenerating. The reason I'd suspected as much was that if it was desperate enough for mana that it needed to attack people, that had to mean it was using its aether to maintain its existence and couldn't regenerate it. If so, then even I, despite not knowing any offensive magic, stood a fighting chance. Knowing my opponent's identity and having over a day to get ready had allowed me to come well prepared.

Water gushed forth from the mouth of the bloated corpse on the wall. It was probably a magical version of the water-elemental sorcery Splash; it was moderately fast, dealt both physical and magical damage, and was easy to use, but its power was low enough that the tree I quickly hid behind was sufficient to block it.

Since spirits were resistant to physical attacks and my spells were mainly for conjuring illusions and healing, I had no means of dealing damage. But I had the knowledge to compensate for that deficit and the wisdom to put it to good use.

"Harden," I chanted, directing the practical spell at a clay knife I'd hidden under a shrub. I picked it up and flung it at the spirit.

Seemingly having realized what the knife was, the water spirit controlling the corpse from within moved it out of the way, leaving a bloody handprint on the wall. Now that it'd dodged both the rock I'd thrown at the start and the clay knife, I was certain my attacks would be effective.

According to that woman's knowledge, back in her previous world, there existed a concept called *wuxing*, or "five agents," that governed the elements of nature. Water extinguished fire, fire melted metal, metal cut through wood, wood dug into the earth, and earth blocked water. While that didn't translate perfectly into this world, in sorcery, water opposed fire, and light and shadow were also said to oppose one another. I'd figured that if I could use the element that opposed water, even if the attacks had little aether behind them, I could still deal damage. Though I didn't know any earth-elemental sorcery, I could use the practical magic Harden. I'd figured that by shortening the duration of the solidifying effect, I could make a clay weapon stronger and slowly whittle away the water spirit's aether with that.

I picked up the clay knife once more, reapplied Harden to it, and threw it a

second time. The water spirit, trapped within a fleshy shell, couldn't dodge the throw in midair and took damage. It once more retaliated with Splash, but I rolled out of the way. I didn't rush, I didn't give chase, and I stayed out of its range. A sorcerer had to rely on strategy, but for me, maintaining distance was enough to just barely dodge the repetitive spells.

When I scanned the water spirit again, I saw that its aether had decreased further, to about sixty percent of its total. My clay knife had dealt about five points of damage, whereas each spell it'd cast had reduced its points by ten. It wasn't much damage overall, but it would still add up.

Intense aether began to emanate from the water spirit's body. Sensing a surge of aether similar to when the kidnapper had used a Level 3 magic spell, I backed away just as the spirit unleashed its magic. It fired a water sphere, two meters in diameter, mowing down the neatly arranged shrubs in the garden. Though I didn't take a direct hit, the force of the splash swept me several meters away. Was this the water equivalent to the fire spell Fireball? The damage wasn't as extensive as Fireball's, but upon impact, it turned the ground muddy, hindering my movement and effectively keeping me in place.

"Harden!" I chanted in a hurry to solidify the ground beneath my feet and dodge another Splash from the spirit.

Despite my lack of external injuries, I felt as though I'd lost twenty, maybe thirty percent of my health points, which meant I was sustaining a modest amount of damage. The clay knives I'd made had disappeared into the mud. However, having used a major spell, the spirit was likely down to about half of its aether at this point.

I ripped my ankle-length skirt from the hem all the way up to my thigh, checking for pain in my tendons and muscles. As I steadied my footing to escape the mud, I heard multiple voices coming from within the mansion.

```
"What was that noise?!"

"The garden..."

"Alia!"
```

That water spell had made more noise than I'd anticipated, and so not only

the gatekeeper but Rody, too, had come to check. I'd picked this location because it'd had the highest probability of luring the spirit out, but they'd found me sooner than I'd expected. I'd told Rody not to come, but to him, that may as well have been an invitation. I would have preferred to do more damage to the spirit before anyone arrived, but there was no point in worrying about that now. It was time to move on to the next phase of my plan, even if it was earlier than I'd have liked.

"Flow," I chanted. I reduced the duration of the effect to increase the concentration of the water element, and the waterlogged corpse, which had been facing the other two, turned toward me. All my efforts would go to waste if it were to attack Rody or Maria now, after all.

I climbed the fence, letting the water trail behind me, turned back for a moment to shake my head at Rody and signal for him not to follow, then jumped over the fence, making sure to show off the water mana to the spirit. I could feel its presence following after me.

Wandering the dark streets at night, I found a less populated area and climbed onto a roof, then gulped down an aether recovery potion. Ever since fighting that kidnapper, I'd made sure to carry at least one with me at all times —though at three silver each, they weren't something I wanted to consume too liberally. Either way, drinking it should gradually restore my aether points over the next hour or so.

I had just enough time to cut off my muddied skirt at around knee length before the water spirit caught up with me. I chanted, "Harden," then threw the discarded, muddied hem at the waterlogged corpse to hinder its casting. There was no need for me to destroy the corpse, however—it acted as a shell for the spirit, yes, but it also served to suppress its consumption of mana while hindering its actions and preventing escape. Essentially, it doubled as a cage.

The spirit let out a soundless scream. I wasn't sure whether this was out of anger toward me or simply hunger, but I also had no desire to try and understand the feelings of a non-living entity when I couldn't even fully grasp my fellow humans' emotions. Either way, if it wanted to fight for its life, I'd at

least keep it company until its death.

Having finally realized that I could dodge out of the way of Splash, it cast Waterball a second time. With its wider range, it was difficult to avoid and seemed certain to inflict damage on me—but that had been the wrong choice. I'd climbed onto a rooftop for a reason, after all. At two meters in diameter, the sphere was heavier and thus slower than Splash, giving me time to hide behind a brick chimney and avoid both taking a direct hit and being swept away. The water quickly drained off the roof.

A non-living entity gone mad was limited by its inability to assess the situation. No matter how overwhelming its aether and magic were, without combat experience or strategic decision-making, it posed little threat. Still, it wasn't as though I hadn't taken damage too. I could simply let the spirit continue casting big spells and reduce its aether that way, but I would be incurring significant damage too. Instead, I chose to launch my counteroffensive. The clay knives I'd made with Rody were gone, swallowed by the mud, but I still had a weapon I could use.

My pendulum's blade whizzed through the air and grazed the bloated corpse's forehead, making earth-and water-elemental mana clash. Harden's effect on the blade forged of copper coins was risible, but I'd replaced the damaged blade with a ceramic one made from baked clay. The spell could still be used with unglazed clay, and while such a blade would've normally shattered upon impact, under the effect of Harden, it became as strong as iron.

The attack caught the water spirit off guard. Constantly reapplying Harden to the pendulum, I continued my assault, whittling away at its aether. In its desperate struggle for survival, it continued to launch spells at me. It even body slammed me in its desperation to kill. I expected its aether to be down to about thirty percent now, but my own health and aether points were also nearly halved. And while we may have seemed evenly matched, if I took a single direct hit from its attacks, I would no doubt be incapacitated.

I couldn't afford to be complacent or greedy. The only way I could win was to keep calm and coldly chip away at the spirit. But then—

A sudden sword strike of light burst forth, and a combat technique unknown to me sliced the spirit's waterlogged corpse into several pieces. Losing large amounts of water, the body fell from the roof, and a man in travel garb, holding a one-handed sword infused with magic, appeared from the darkness behind where the spirit had been. It was Graves.

Why is the senior butler here? Given his personality, I couldn't imagine he'd come to help. Either way... "That was my enemy, you know," I groused.

"Was it?" he asked dismissively. "Things like that should be left to the Adventurers' Guild."

Then, instead of sheathing his sword, he pointed its tip directly at me.

"Who are you, Alia?"

Farewell

One of the agents of the Order of Shadows in the Kingdom of Claydale was a man named Graves.

He wasn't from Claydale originally. Born the son of a baron in the northern Theocratic State of Fandora, he'd been raised in a deeply devout family. One day, however, Graves's father was disgraced due to the machinations of his political enemies—not only had the man been ousted from his position as high priest, he'd also been left to die in prison.

After that, Graves's mother had taken him, then still a young boy, and fled the country, making the harsh journey south to Claydale. The difficult trip had deeply affected his mother's health, and she had soon followed in her husband's footsteps. Alone in a strange land, Graves had done whatever was necessary to survive, living in resentment of both the nobility and the world as a whole for the fate they had brought upon him and his family.

Yet it was a nobleman who saved Graves—a man of Krus origin named Hoth, a knight of Claydale's Order of Shadows, apparently a friend of his father's. Hoth apologized to young Graves for having been unable to save his parents and welcomed him into the family, despite the life of near-criminality Graves had been leading in the slums. However, Graves refused to be formally adopted

by Hoth due to his status as an aristocrat and instead chose to fight as his subordinate.

Though Fandora was a religious state, its upper echelons were rife with corruption; Graves assumed the same had to be true of Claydale. But learning of decent nobles like Hoth made Graves think the key difference between the two lay with the influence wielded by the upper echelons of Claydale—the royal family. So long as the royal family used its power righteously, order would prevail. Thus, Graves disciplined himself with rigor, honing his abilities in combat and sorcery both, occasionally going as far as committing insubordination to root out any evil that could cause a disturbance in the nation.

In a sense, Graves's passion could have been considered fanaticism—for both the state and the royal family. To cleanse the nation of the pus festering beneath its surface, he was outwardly loyal and obedient, but deep down, his passion burned dark and fierce. A strict, inflexible man, Graves began to demand the same conduct of others as well.

He particularly disliked it when those of unclear origins, regardless of competence, got too close to the royal palace. It had been Graves who'd assigned Castro—whom he knew harbored a deep hatred for the people of the slums—as a caretaker upon hearing that Sera was planning to use children as part of the princess's security. To him, anyone who demeaned the power of the royal family, which he saw as the glue that held the country together, was evil—even those of royal descent themselves.

Graves hadn't yet determined to eliminate the crown prince, weak-willed and raised by a queen lacking any sense of responsibility, given that the boy was still young. However, Princess Elena had been raised by the twisted second queen and was likely to become a seed for succession disputes. If she were to cause any trouble, Graves would not hesitate to eliminate her, even if it meant his own execution.

There was a certain maid-in-training who was a favorite of Elena's. It had been Viro who'd brought the girl—a child from the slums, yet possessing aether surpassing that of nobles and capable of single-handedly defeating a hobgoblin. Graves had been keeping an eye on her. To test her reaction, he'd even turned

a blind eye to Elena's kidnapping. The result had been that the girl had defeated a Rank 3 thief, all on her own.

It was unfathomable that such a child could exist. Graves had no intention of compromising the safety of the palace by allowing such a suspicious girl inside, whether or not she was a favorite of Elena's. He would not abide any disturbance to the peace of the nation, not even the smallest seed. He'd thought of assigning her to do work in the countryside and dealing with her in due time, but the Order of Shadows had instructed that her belongings be searched for a certain *item*.

The reason for this was kept confidential, even from him. Since he'd been specifically told that no harm was to come to the girl, and that only her belongings were to be searched, he assumed perhaps she was the illegitimate child of a noble whose identity could not be revealed.

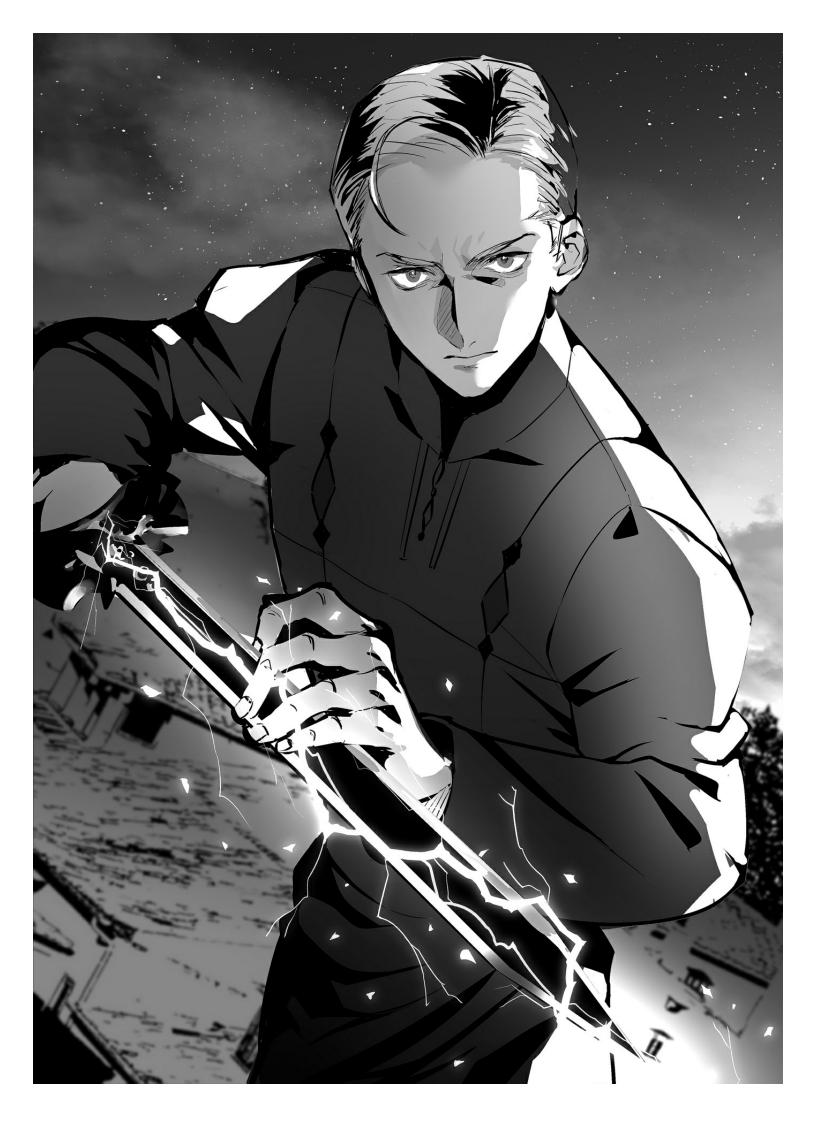
She's a danger, he thought. The girl was far too peculiar, and her existence could rattle the nation—and even involve the royal family in the process. So, if she really was in possession of this item and was indeed the illegitimate child of a noble, to Graves she was an outsider—blue-blooded or no—and had to be eliminated.

"What do you mean?" I asked Graves, my employer, as we both stood under the moonless night sky on a rooftop in town.

"Answer the question," the senior steward demanded. He'd appeared out of nowhere and cut down the enemy I'd been fighting, then pointed his magic sword at me.

"You know who I am, don't you?"

The tip of his sword didn't so much as tremble as he kept it pointed at me, gripping the hilt with one hand. His posture was relaxed, but he emitted an aura of danger, as though ready to cut me down the moment I behaved suspiciously.



"Alia. You're a strange child Viro brought to us, capable of killing a hobgoblin single-handedly and slaying thieves far above your capabilities without mercy. You're one abnormal brat."

I said nothing to that.

"How can a kid like you exist? How did you get so strong? How can you kill without hesitation at your age? Did you kill that thief to keep her mouth shut about something? What are you hiding? Why would a noble be interested in you? I'll ask you one more time," he said, his sharp gaze piercing through me. "Who. *Are*. You?"

The air was practically vibrating with animosity. I steeled myself, pushing my fear into the deepest recesses of my mind, and replied with a simple "Who knows?"

How much did this man know? No one should've been able to find out about my noble heritage. Was he just questioning my combat ability? But explaining that would naturally lead to the matter of my origins. If anyone learned of the ring in the pouch my mother had passed down to me, which was how that woman had been able to identify me, I'd just end up caught in the gears of fate once more.

As I tried to assess the situation with a cool head, I inadvertently touched the pouch hanging around my neck, and Graves noticed. "So you *are* hiding something. Hand that over. If you have a connection to nobility—"

"Pain!" I chanted quickly. The spell caused Graves to stiffen momentarily, and I took the opportunity to make a dash for it. This man's combat strength was more than ten times my own; fighting him offered little chance of victory. Even escaping would be difficult at my current level, but my trump card, Pain, would still create an opening, even if only for a moment.

My gut told me to dodge, and I leaped out of the way, despite not sensing anything concrete. A knife grazed my shoulder and stabbed into the roof. A sound slicing through the wind was the only warning I got; when I rolled to evade, Graves's kick sped past me and shattered the thick roof tiles.

"So you are related to nobility," he said. "I don't care who you are. You're

dangerous. I can't let you near the royal family. You die here."

"Why are you trying to kill me?" Graves had managed to endure the intense agony from Pain and give immediate chase. I'd figured some advanced warriors might've been able to withstand it, but he'd recovered entirely too quickly. I tried to engage him in conversation to buy myself time to plan my next move.

"It's a precaution," he answered honestly. "All potential threats to the peace of this nation must be crushed before they have the chance to blossom. That includes the princess you're close with."

So he wanted to eliminate Elena? That was why her security had felt so flimsy, then. "You die," I said, pulling out a knife and throwing it with my right hand as I used my left to fling the pendulum at him.

He calmly stepped back to dodge the pendulum's blade and parried the knife with the sword in his hand. "Hmm?" A second knife, thrown in the shadow of the first, grazed him. I took a small bag out of my breast pocket and tossed it at him, scattering powder everywhere. "Poison, is it?!" Instantly realizing what it was, Graves covered his mouth and lunged at me; he likely had Poison Resistance. I threw a second bag, and that one halted his advance. "A cheap trick!"

The first powder had indeed been a toxic herb, though its effects were tolerable to a target with Poison Resistance. The second, however, had not been poisonous—rather, it was a stimulant, made from the seeds of red-hot peppers I'd found in the forest. Graves dodged it, then threw a knife at me; I deflected it with my black knife and started chanting a spell while jumping from the roof of the three-story building.

"I won't let you escape!" he declared, immediately jumping after me.

I finished chanting Weight on my way down and used it to shift my trajectory, then, before landing, wrapped the pendulum around the railing of a window frame and used the centrifugal force to run up the wall back to the roof, just barely avoiding Graves. I wasn't confident I could repeat the acrobatic feat, so I had to use the time I'd bought to my advantage.

I scattered the rest of the pepper powder where I thought Graves would climb back up from, trying to buy even a smidge of time, then started running

across the roof without looking back. A knife flew past me from behind, grazing my shoulder before disappearing into the night; he'd already climbed back up. But at this range, even if his knife hit me, it wouldn't cause significant damage—barring it striking a vital spot, of course, but that was up to luck.

In an attempt to delay him, I threw my remaining projectile weapons at him as I ran across the dark roof. Now I was out of poison, he'd dodged my final knife throw, and the string of my pendulum had been cut, its blade flying off somewhere. Left with only my black knife, I found myself cornered at a large pier along the river.

"That was quite the chase," Graves said, having finally cornered the suspicious child, Alia, by the river.

She had acrobatics, a variety of poisons to inflict status effects, throwing knives, and an odd weapon consisting of a blade at the end of a string. Between all those and that odd spell that had caused Graves intense pain, the child had acquired a multitude of bizarre techniques. They all appeared to be designed for single combat against stronger opponents, particularly that spell, which had caused Graves—although accustomed to pain due to his rigorous training—to stop momentarily. Had Alia possessed strength above Rank 4, even he might've been killed thanks to that element of surprise.

I knew it. She's dangerous, he thought. I must kill her before she turns that sharpness against the nation.

This had been more trouble than he'd anticipated, but it ended here. Alia was cornered against the edge of the pier, with no weapons remaining other than the black knife in her hand.

"Well? Are you going to struggle, knowing it's pointless? Or are you turning that knife on yourself?"

Alia didn't respond immediately. She was glaring daggers at Graves, searching for any possible path to survival. He didn't hate her gaze; he could understand, to an extent, why Sera and Viro cared about this girl and had trained her as though she were their beloved apprentice.

"I have no intention of dying by your hand," she said finally, leaping off the edge of the pier, her small body fluttering in the air.

Graves could've thrown a knife right then and there. Instead, captivated by her strong gaze and her desperation to cling to life, he just watched as she disappeared into the dark, turbulent waters. "So you did choose death in the end..."

It would've been best to retrieve whatever it was she'd been hiding and identify her, but the elimination of a potential future calamity was sufficient. Though her eyes had still reflected a strong attachment to life in those final moments, in a pitch-black night like this, it was unlikely she would survive jumping into these monster-infested rapids. Night Vision allowed one to visualize mana reverberations but was practically useless in a raging river like this. Up and down weren't discernible underwater, and Alia couldn't use any water-breathing spells; her chances of making it out alive were even lower than her chances of fighting her way past Graves.

He figured her choice was a final act of spite toward him. Many of the wiser people he'd driven to the brink of death had taken such actions in the end to destroy evidence. Attempting to recover her body would likely be a futile endeavor; it was unclear how far the current would carry her, and hungry monsters downstream were likely to consume the corpse.

"I may as well move on," he mused. Up until now, he'd acted discreetly to avoid suspicion, but having ignored the Order of Shadows's instructions and killed the target, he could no longer return to the organization.

If the girl's fall into the river were to be deemed an accident, it might serve as a reasonable excuse. However, Graves had originally joined the Order in search of information and had lately begun to notice mounting suspicion from people like Sera; he'd already judged there to be little benefit in remaining with the organization. If anything, he found his current circumstances, in which he couldn't dispose of targets as he saw fit, to be more trouble than they were worth.

For some reason, he felt compelled to cast one final, silent glance at the dark rapids. There was no way the girl could've lived. But if, by some manner of

miracle, she had...

"If we meet again, Alia, I will acknowledge your worth."

With that, Graves disappeared into the darkness of the moonless night, vanishing from the public eye.

The threat of the mysterious figure terrorizing the barony of Sayles had been laid to rest, its final victim a young maid gone missing.

And then—

Having made its lair in the slower downstream currents, a water serpent sensed the presence of flesh in the river. Compared to its usual diet of fish, the rare human or animal carcass was a feast for the Rank 1 monster. Its meterslong body slithered through the water as it unhinged its jaws, opening them wide enough to swallow a kid goat whole, and lay in wait.

What it had thought a carcass, however, suddenly emitted a sound, almost like a voice, and a surge of aether sliced the serpent's head clean off. If any consciousness had remained in the decapitated head as it floated away, it might have noticed the headless corpses of several other water serpents following suit.

Whoever had cut off the serpents' heads grabbed the tail of one and surfaced in the shallow waters, a black blade between her teeth and her peach-tinted hair drenched. She swam to the shore, using her mud-caked maid's uniform as a makeshift floatation device.

Alia removed the effect of Harden from her clothes and, with fingers cold as ice, took the knife from her mouth and turned her gaze toward the city. Graves had targeted her for elimination as a "precaution." And if that assassin's blade were to be so much as pointed at Elena...

"You're a dead man, Graves."



Side Story: Elena's Vow

Father's hair was golden, and mother's was red. I, Royal Princess Elena, was born with golden hair. Maybe that was why my face never reflected in my mother's eyes.

When had I gone from being me to being the royal princess?

Mother never once said she loved me. My earliest memory of my mother was her telling me, "Grow up into a splendid monarch." She never once smiled at me. Well, she had "smiled," but it had never felt like a smile to me.

By the time I became aware of the world around me, I'd already undergone multiple forms of education. The etiquette of the nobility, manners, general knowledge, the history of both this country and the continent, politics and economics, the art of charming people, self-defense, magic, and even how to kill my own heart.

Mother only ever "smiled" when I did well. Even if she wasn't truly seeing me, I kept studying through my tears, seeking her warmth. As a result, instead of the usual one or two, I acquired four elemental affinities. I also developed strong aether and demonstrated high aptitude in the art of sorcery. As a child, however, I couldn't bear the strain of that aether or the crystals in my heart, and lost the robustness of health expected of a monarch. It was then that mother lost interest in me.

She, who had lost both the man she loved most and the position in which she would've been most loved, had only been able to maintain her peace of mind by focusing on taking the throne from the child of the woman who had stolen both things from her.

In my despair after being abandoned by my mother, I found comfort in my half-brother, the first prince and the son of the former viscountess my mother so loathed. He was a year older than me and extremely kind. He drew near when I cried, shared fun stories, took me to many new places, and showed me a wider world at a time when I was shut away from everything and everyone.

What a kind, wonderful prince. Seeing him, I thought, *How fortunate he is*. At that moment, the strands of knowledge that had been pointlessly drilled into me came together like the branches of a great tree, granting me intelligence beyond my years. Now that I no longer possessed the qualities required of a ruler, it was certain my brother would be chosen as the heir apparent. *Will my brother truly be the next king?* I wondered. *This boy, who knows nothing of the burden and significance of the role? He, who has at best the sense of a middling noble's eldest son, or perhaps a count's third son?*

Blaming him alone would've been unduly harsh of me, however. He was ignorant in the ways of a ruler because his mother, the first queen, a former viscountess, had wanted to raise him in freedom and had kept him away from the education he required. Her insistence that she was the legitimate queen had split the nation into royalists and partisans of the nobility, and my brother's kindness in helping his poor sister wasn't the strength a ruler needed to stabilize such a precarious situation.

And so I secretly requested an audience with my father, the king, and used my knowledge to present what I would be capable of doing for the country. Fortunately, father was no fool. No, father—deeply regretful that his indulgence in love had caused turmoil in the country, yet still loving the queen and prince—had no choice but to accept my proposal.

Apologies, my poor mother. Your actions gave me intelligence, and now I can no longer be your doll.

The highest priority of the nobles' faction was to increase the influence of the aristocracy over the royal family. They favored free trade with and concessions to foreign nations over domestic demand. To them, I was a convenient puppet.

As a young child, it was difficult for me to continually refuse the advances of the high-ranking nobles within the faction, so instead, I pretended to be obsessed with my brother, thus signaling I was aligned with the royalists. At only seven, I was adjusting the balance of power within the kingdom. Father suggested I take a break from it all under the guise of recuperating from illness. Mentally exhausted, I readily agreed.

I was alone. My father and grandparents were kind to me, but it felt as though this had more to do with my status as princess; they saw me as nothing but a member of the royal family they could use for their own ends. While the maids and stewards who had been with me since my birth were among the few I could trust, ultimately, they were but servants to the royal family. I was disconnected from everyone. No one knew the real me. Not a single person truly understood me.

Until, that is, a certain girl appeared before me.

Both the palace and the margravate of Dandorl had gathered servants in preparation for my recuperation—this girl, a maid-in-training, among them. At first, I'd paid her little mind; I'd only thought to keep her close because my cousin Clara, whose demeanor had taken a sudden turn, had seemed frightened of her. I'd wondered whether keeping the young maid around would make apparent the reason for Clara's reaction.

Seeing the girl up close, however, was a shock. On a wall at the castle in the royal capital there hung a portrait of my great-grandmother, the former queen, whose hair color I had always found enchanting. This apprentice maid's hair was exactly the same peach-tinged shade of blonde. Her name was Alia, and meeting her gave me the distinct feeling that our encounter might change everything, not only for the two of us but for many others as well.

I somewhat forcefully brought her into my service. Being a royal and viewed as a capricious princess worked in my favor, allowing me to make Alia into one of my personal maids.

At first, it had been her appearance that had caught my attention. Alia's features seemed more refined than even those of nobles typically considered to be of fine stock. Though she was only an apprentice, I'd figured she must've been at least ten years old to be allowed to appear before royalty. Still, even with her adorable, youthful features, her expressionless face made her look older than that. Later, I learned she was actually around my age, which came as a bit of a surprise to me.

What had surprised me the most, however, were her behavior and speech. Servants of common stock rarely appeared before me, but when they did, they all shied away, making proper conversation impossible. Even maids of noble stock, when they did not likewise shy away, would fawn over me, so I tended to find genuine conversation only with those who had graduated from the Royal Sorcerers' Academy, attended exclusively by nobility.

Alia was different. She showed no fear and made no attempts at cajolery; her flat, emotionless words conveyed a certain intelligence and strength of will. Never before had I seen a child like her, not even among the more rigorously educated nobles.

Even the more mature children of higher-ranked aristocrats, like Clara's brother or the prime minister's grandson, still behaved like children. Clara's former childlike innocence, meanwhile, had seemingly vanished, replaced by something akin to the fear ordinary citizens seemed to feel toward me. She was drawing a line between herself and others, making her own decisions, acting of her own accord. Such a disconcerting child shouldn't have existed.

Well, that is, Alia and I aside.

Perhaps that was what had drawn me to her—what had drawn us to each other. It had nothing to do with the time we'd spent together. Alia's presence was like a light on my dark, lonely path as I continued to try and resist my fate. When the nobles' faction hired a thief to kidnap me, Alia fought, risking life and limb to rescue me.

Seeing her fight to the point of raggedness made me wish she'd leave me and flee. Her opponent wasn't one a child should've been able to defeat, and yet she'd put her life on the line for me—a girl she'd only known for a few days. It was almost irritating. What manner of fool was she?

I had been prepared to end my own life if necessary; it was preferable to becoming a pawn. If protecting me were a mere job to her, she would've fled the moment she was at imminent risk of death. If I'm to die as a result of my royal duties, I thought, then I at least want to die for your sake.

But then Alia saved me. Not only my body—my heart as well.

No matter how much Alia had come to mean to me, the day of our parting

was nevertheless approaching. I was only scheduled to stay in this territory for a month and had to return to the royal capital after.

I hadn't been able to see Alia since she'd suffered those grievous injuries. Whether or not she was my personal maid and escort appointed by the Order of Shadows, my position didn't allow me to visit someone of her stature—as pointed out by Graves, senior steward and agent of the Order. With no other choice, I had to behave myself until the day of my departure from this lakeside castle. However, Sera—a senior handmaiden and agent of the same organization—quietly informed me that Alia was recovering.

Alia wouldn't come to me of her own accord. If I tried to forcibly bind her to me, she would someday chew through her chains and disappear to parts unknown. We were not equals; as such, we needed a reason to be together.

As I pondered this, Sera whispered so only I could hear, "Will you meet up with her one last time?"

One last time. The implication was that Sera would allow me to speak to Alia alone. The girl wouldn't come to me of her own accord; I would be content just seeing that she was safe. Clinging to my last shred of hope, however, I nodded silently at Sera's words.

"I am here, Princess Elena," she said.

"Right on time," I replied. "Welcome, Alia."

At midnight, the appointed time, Alia landed gracefully on the second-floor terrace. Relieved that there seemed to be no ill aftereffects from her injuries despite her slightly thinner appearance, I nearly wept but managed a smile.

"First of all, Alia, thank you for saving me," I began. "Thanks to you, I was able to finish my stay here without becoming indisposed."

"It was no problem," she told me. "I was doing my job."

"That sounds like something you would say," I remarked. I had known she'd respond that way; Alia wasn't one for boasting. She'd used the same tone she always did when it was just the two of us, and I felt us grow a bit closer. Still,

the gap in status between us remained. In what was likely a subconscious attempt at bridging this distance, I approached the railing and faced her. "Who are you, Alia?"

I'd always wanted to ask her this but could never bring myself to. I'd feared she would vanish the moment I uttered the words.

"Just an orphan and adventurer. Just Alia."

"Is that so?" I sensed this was the way of life Alia had chosen for herself. We couldn't be together. "You won't enter my service, will you?" I asked, the words slipping out before I could stop them. I wanted her at my side. Not the princess's. Mine.

"I have no intention of serving anyone."

"Not even as a guard?"

"I'm just an adventurer."

For us to be together, one of us would have to give up on her chosen road. But having resolved from an early age to brave the thorns along the way, neither of us would ever stray from her path by choice.

"We're not friends," I said.

"We're not," she agreed.

"I'm a princess, and you're a mere adventurer. We can never stand side by side."

"I know."

"Then... How is it..."

I understood full well. I, of all people, understood! We were not equals. We could not stand side by side. We could not be friends. The mere acknowledgment of those words made my heart ache. I, of all people, understood! But deep beneath all the knowledge that had been forced upon me, underneath the guise of a princess, the seven-year-old wept for loneliness.

Before my princess mask could crack, Alia replied gently, "We're birds of a feather."

"Birds of a feather...?"

I tried to process the meaning of her words. Both of us walked barefoot on thorny paths, with only darkness ahead. But that wasn't all. Our paths may have been separate, but we were no longer truly alone. Once again, Alia had saved my crumbling heart. And so, I...

I wanted to show her, at least, that I could stand on my own. And so I donned the mask once more. "In that case, Alia, my fellow bird... I, as princess, hereby swear to you this: once, and once only, I shall be your ally, and use all of my power for your sake, no matter what position you may be in."

I knew she would face most difficulties that came her way on her own, so my earnest wish was that, when she found herself in true trouble, when the obstacle before her was insurmountable, she would remember me. And I— Elena, not the princess—would risk my life for her.

"In that case, Elena, my fellow bird, I hereby swear to you that once, and once only, I will lay my life on the line to reap the life of anyone you wish, no matter who that may be." She paused. "Even the king—whether it be of this nation or of all demons."

I gasped at her words. Not once had I spoken to her about my brother or the precarious state the royal family was in. And still she made her vow, as if foreseeing the worst-case scenario.

We were not alone anymore.

"Just one more thing," I said. "Tell me your name." It wasn't that I'd realized there was some sort of pretense. I only wanted to know the real her.

"I will if I can drop your title," she replied.

"You could've asked sooner," I told her. Indeed, it was far too late for that. I couldn't help but smile.

"It's Alicia," she whispered into the wind.

Alicia... So that was her true self. Very well, then. If her choice was to hide that name, then I would be the only one to remember her by it. "Goodbye, then, Alia. And goodbye, my Alicia."

"Goodbye...Elena."

This was not farewell. Still, those words marked our parting as we returned to our separate paths. I turned my back on her, wanting her to remember me as strong. This would be the last time I cried. With a single tear, I bade goodbye to the young me and readjusted the cracked mask of a princess to save this country.

Goodbye, Alia. Until our thorny paths cross again.

Side Story: An Afternoon in the Life of a Battle Maid

It had been nearly three months since I'd gone from Alicia to Alia.

I'd been hired as an observer and guard for the princess, learned combat techniques from Sera, retrieved Elena from a thief specializing in abduction, and sustained severe injuries in the process. Now, I was being advised to rest.

But the princess's personal light sorcerer had already thoroughly healed my body with the spell Restore. I didn't have so much as a scratch left, and though my internal organs hadn't fully healed yet, considering how badly I'd been poisoned, it was barely worth the concern.

"Alia! What are you saying?!"

Meena—who had been put in charge of caring for me—had caught me about to change into my work clothes to do menial tasks. I'd recovered enough to move, and tried to explain my thought process to her, but she scolded me and sent me back to bed. I was fine physically. But to Meena, who came from a common background, my injury had seemed devastating. Sera had said the same thing, so my wishes had gone unheeded.

After a few days, I was finally permitted to leave the bed. I still wasn't allowed to fully return to work, however, and was exempted from physically demanding tasks for the time being. Not that I had any easy tasks, per se—but I wasn't allowed to do any heavy lifting, fetch water, or return to my near-never-ending job of looking after the princess. I was allowed to clean and make beds, but I was usually done with that by noon, so Sera told me to spend the afternoons resting.

While I could still participate in the early morning training sessions, my sparring partner Theo was being far too cautious with me, so there was no point. Since the fight with that kidnapper, my combat abilities had improved, my Martial Mastery level had gone up, and I'd learned the skill String

Manipulation, so I'd wanted to adjust to it all through mock combat, but...ah well.

Not strictly due to all of that, I'd decided to spend my time maintaining my equipment.

The most important piece of equipment that needed maintenance was the pendulum. The once-sharp blade had crumpled into a lump after repeatedly hitting the kidnapper's sorcerous armor. It'd been crafted from simple copper coins, melted down, and hardened once more. Copper was heavier than iron but much more pliable, so I could've reshaped the blade to an extent by simply hammering away at it with a stone, but it seemed quicker to simply remake it entirely for continued use as a weapon.

However, the castle's forge, where the blade had originally been made, was busy sharpening and reforging blades in preparation for Elena's departure in two weeks, and it didn't sound like they could take any personal requests from me. All I could do for maintenance, then, was sharpen my blades or disassemble and clean them. The black knife, with its blood-repelling properties, didn't take much effort.

"I guess that's that..."

If I kept going like this, my body would only grow weaker. Sure, skills and techniques were engraved in the soul due to the influence of aether, and a few days of bed rest wouldn't lower my abilities, but for someone as weak as I had once been, any time not spent improving myself felt like a waste.

With no other options, I decided to go back to the basics and practice the moves I'd learned from Viro and Sera. The foundation of my combat abilities had come from that kindhearted giant who used a greatsword as his main weapon, so I had the tendency to swing with brute force when I wasn't mindful of what I was doing. Both of my mentor figures had worked quite a bit to correct this, but I still exerted too much force at times. If I had focused less on killing and more on disabling that kidnapper, back when I took advantage of an opening and used a combat technique on her, I would've had more leeway when she dodged out of the way.

In short, I still had much to learn. Calling myself a combat maid, then getting

cocky and aiming to kill a much stronger opponent really showed my inadequacies, so in a way, going back to the basics was a good opportunity for growth. Black knife in hand, I repeated the basic exercises, incorporating the footwork I'd learned from Sera and my improved Martial Mastery into my movements, to ingrain them in both my body and soul.

I spun to slash at a tree trunk, then stepped back as though kicking it away, the recoil causing some of the leaves to fall. "Thrust!" I cried out, slicing through the airborne foliage. Some of it seemed to disintegrate rather than being cut in half, however, signaling I was still using too much force in my techniques.

After about half an hour of practice, I exhaled, feeling as though something heavy were pressing against my insides. I took off the white apron of my maid uniform, then flopped down under the shade of the tree.

Lying on my back, I squinted up at the sunlight filtering through the branches. My health points had recovered to about eighty percent of their total, but it seemed I still had some lingering internal damage from the poison.

As I lay there in silence, I thought about Elena a little. I hadn't seen her since the incident. She'd witnessed the killing of another—thief or no—and had also seen me on the brink of death. It made sense that she'd be somewhat affected. While she should have refrained from worrying about me, that was easier said than done. Like me, she may have looked ten due to her aether but was still only seven. No matter how much like an adult she may have thought due to the vast amount of knowledge that had been crammed into her, one couldn't get used to life-and-death struggles without ever having been exposed to them.

But...I thought she was fine the way she was. Not that it was my place to say, but I, perhaps selfishly, didn't want Elena to be tainted by blood. That was my role and not hers.

Though our backgrounds were different, there was a strange sense of understanding between us. With her innate brilliance and composure, Elena was on the path to face the colossal beast that was the nation itself.

A seven-year-old girl. All alone.

If I could've, I would've remained at her side, protecting her. But I also felt that I shouldn't. I was...weak. I couldn't protect her yet. At her side, I would

likely be facing even greater adversaries, and as I was currently, I might die and leave a scar in her heart.

I wanted to be strong. Strong enough to defy fate.

Underneath the warm glow of the sun, filtering through the leaves, I reached out toward something unseen. I will become stronger, I thought. So, just for now... Just until I'm strong enough to carve out my own fate... I can't be by her side.

I wanted to be strong. So that Elena could smile in the light I'd left behind.

"Meow."

At the sudden sound, I turned my gaze sideways, still lying down. There stood a cat, staring at me with a mix of caution and curiosity. What's a cat doing here?

I found myself staring at the cat. The cat stared right back at me.

The little creature was still young, maybe around three years of age. It was a light brown tabby, with stripes of a slightly darker shade and bright amber eyes that shimmered with curiosity.

Oh. Right. Doesn't Meena feed stray cats?

I'd never had a cat at the orphanage or when my parents were still alive. My father used to say cats were good because they caught mice and bugs. Thinking back, I remembered a stray cat at the orphanage had dropped bugs in front of me one day; I'd been crying from hunger after the others had stolen my food. I didn't understand at the time, but that cat had been sharing its food with me.

Maybe I'd grown a bit soft, because I found myself oddly intrigued by this cat that had appeared out of nowhere. I gazed silently at it.

"Meow."

On a whim, I broke off a piece of a cracker I had in the pocket of my skirt and tossed it to the cat.

"Meow!" The cat jumped, took off running, then stopped partway. It cautiously drew closer again, strongly wary despite having once again initiated

the approach itself.

I plucked a nearby long-stemmed plant with a tuft at the end and waved it lightly.

"Meow!" Surprised, the feline alternated its gaze between the swaying tuft and the fallen cracker. It seemed curious but afraid of people. It wanted the cracker but was interested in the swaying plant too. It continued to approach slowly, keeping an eye on both me and the cracker, stealing several glances at the tuft. It then lunged for the cracker, grabbed it, and ran away.

Hmm?

It hadn't run far; it was sitting a few meters away from me, crunching on the cracker as its gaze continued to follow the movement of the plant. "Meow..."

Once again, the cat and I exchanged glances from a distance.

I see. If Meena were here, cat lover that she was, she might have understood the creature's feelings and given it what it wanted. I, however, didn't understand the language of cats, even with all the knowledge I'd gotten from that woman.

As I rose from where I lay on the grass, the cat took a wary step back and hissed softly.

The threat didn't dissuade me, however. I continued to quietly swish the grass. The cat's eyes followed the movement, but it remained cautious and didn't approach again. It seemed interested, but this wasn't what it wanted, so I took the last of the crackers, wrapped in a handkerchief, out of my pocket.

"Meow!"

So this is what it wants, I thought. But it won't be that easy to get food from me. I stood up without a sound, then crouched slowly, shaking the handkerchief to show the cat that this was the final cracker.

The cat hissed again, its wariness intensifying and its gaze almost accusatory.

What you seek is right here. Keep your pride as a wild animal and stay hungry, or cast it aside for the sake of survival. The choice is yours. Still squatting, I held the cracker between my fingers and shook it.

The cat's eyes quivered slightly and it took a step forward. Suddenly, it gave me a look and stepped back once more. Its heart was clearly wavering. I needed something more, something to push its courage a little further. But what?

Slowly, I brought the cracker to my lips.

"Meow!" From the sound, I could tell it was agitated. But I wasn't eating the cracker, only holding it in my lips.

I gave the cracker a shake to show I wasn't eating it, and the cat became even more unsettled. To push it further, I placed both hands on the grass, bringing my face closer to the ground to meet the cat's gaze.

It hissed lightly and mirrored my posture, staring at me intently. Perhaps having made its decision, it slowly approached me as I continued to silently shake the cracker in my lips.

After what felt like a few dozen seconds, the cat finally came close enough to snatch the cracker from my lips. With a snap, the cracker broke. The cat, having snatched about two-thirds of it, dashed away.

I ate the piece of the cracker left in my mouth, enjoying the saltiness, and lay back in the sun-dappled grass, closing my eyes and feeling accomplished. As I lay there, feeling the breeze caress my cheeks, I felt something else, something wet, touch my fingertips.

"Meow."

I looked at my hand and saw the cat licking my fingertips. Why? There were no more crackers left. Was it licking what salt remained on my fingers? I looked at the cat, trying to convey my confusion, and it went to fetch something from the bushes, then dropped it on my chest as I lay there.

"Meow."

It was a tiny grasshopper.

I gently stroked the cat's back as I looked at it, sitting on my chest, purring and nuzzling against me in a seemingly affectionate manner. *I see*, I thought. This cat had accepted me as its fellow rather than a human.

"Did something happen, Alia?"

Later that day, Meena—a maid from a merchant family who had been instructed by Sera, her superior and head handmaiden to the princess, to look after Alia—noticed the door to the young girl's chambers was open. Peeking in, she saw the girl changing into a spare maid's uniform, despite it being just past noon. The girl had supposedly been injured in a carriage accident and told not to work too much; had something happened to make her need a change of clothes?

"No," Alia replied in her usual not-very-childlike manner.

"Really?" Meena said. Just as she was thinking that Alia was like a particularly wary cat, she noticed the uniform the girl had removed was covered in fur. "Oh! Did that stray kitty jump on you? Sorry! That little guy is very timid. Maybe it was startled and lashed out?"

Meena had secretly been feeding a certain stray that, despite eating the food she offered, kept its distance from her. Several times she'd tried to use food to coax the cat into letting her hold it, but every time it had acted out and run away, so naturally, Meena had assumed that Alia must've carelessly approached it while working and startled it into jumping on her.

"You're a hard worker, unlike me," Meena remarked. "You wouldn't play with a cat. Did it hurt you?"

"No."

"All right. Well then, take care, okay?" Relieved that there seemed to be no issue, Meena was about to leave when she glanced back at Alia.

For some reason, the girl's ears had turned a bright shade of red.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Harunohi Biyori.

Thank you so much for picking up this book! It's my debut novel, originally released in web format. I used to write all sorts of nonsense, but luckily, this work got a lot of reader support and caught the publisher's attention, and now it's being published in book form. I'd like to sincerely thank all my readers and everyone involved in making this possible.

Now then! About this novel... Personally, I wanted to write about a strong girl, so the concept of this book was "a merciless protagonist." It's based on my favorite theme: otome games.

But the protagonists in those stories are typically sweet to others and don't kill people. Even if they're darker at the beginning of the story, they'll generally reform into wonderful protagonists in the second half. Maybe it's because of the target audience's age, or modern readers being uncomfortable with a protagonist who kills without mercy?

I noticed this tendency for the protagonist to become overly merciful halfway in my other stories too, so I decided to write one who would never show her enemies any mercy at all.

The protagonist, Alia, is quite weak. She's just a little girl, after all, but she understands that if she doesn't take lives, her own will be taken instead. If she shows any mercy, she puts everything she holds dear in harm's way. Alia understands those things because she's a native of this world, but she fights with the knowledge of someone from our modern world, which makes her a little different from the average isekai protagonist.

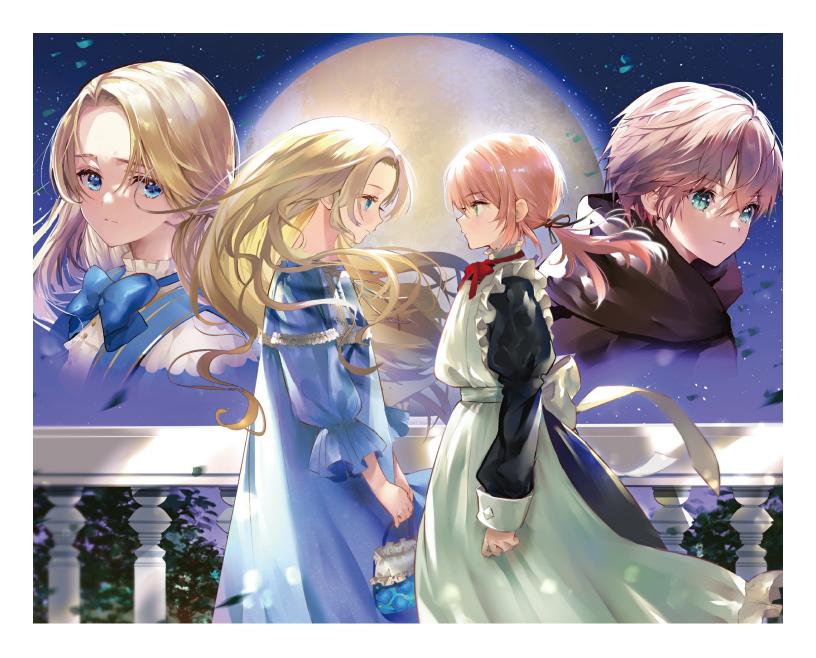
This all-important "knowledge" comes from "that woman," a reincarnated individual originally from Earth, whose name has never been mentioned in the story and must not be said. The amount of knowledge that Alia gains affects both the difficulty level for her and the reader's sense of discomfort with the story. I set that woman's knowledge level to be about the same as mine—that

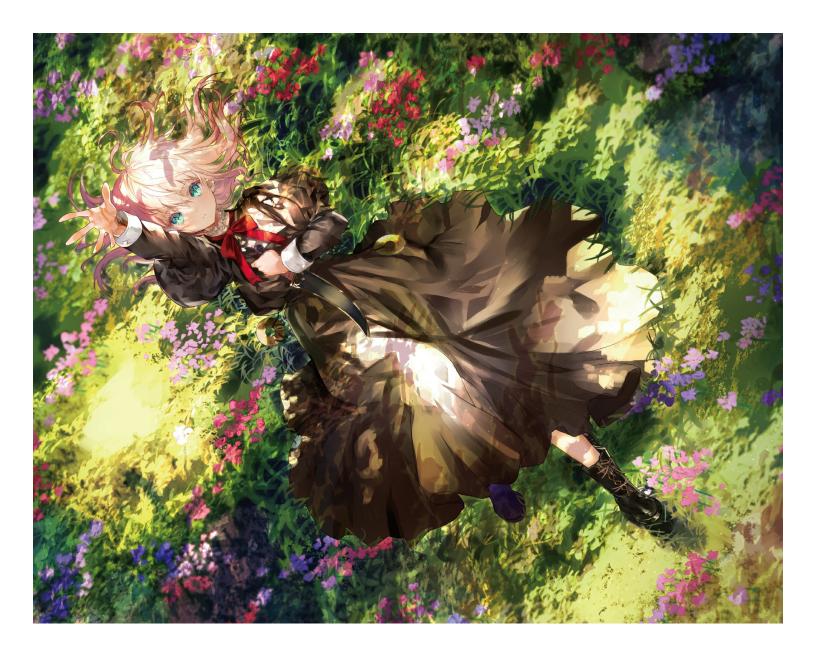
is, someone who's been a fan of fantasy novels and manga since my student days (lol).

And so, the heroine of the otome game, armed with knowledge from another world, decides to abandon said game. The portrayal of the protagonist—a young girl who doesn't sound like one, talking like a hard-boiled adult and with a cool head on her shoulders—was almost unaltered in the book version, for which I'm grateful.

What's in store for Alia? What will become of the otome game now that the heroine has changed so much? Her relationships with the noble villainesses and such, created alongside the readers (which is the best part of a web novel), have now been compiled in book form by the publisher, TO Books!

Please enjoy Alia's ongoing tale!











Physically eight years old.
To keep her gender a secret, she cuts her hair short, dulls it with ash, and wears a shawl around her neck to conceal her face.
Her simple garments and leather sandals were taken from the orphanage.

characters

EUS











Like Alia, she's seven years old, but physically appears to be ten.

৫\$১

characters

Bonus Short Story

The Misadventures of Mentor(?) and Apprentice(?)

In the woods along the highway, beside a campfire, a man sat cross-legged near a girl, both eating porridge out of dented copper bowls.

"Alia, there's something I want to tell you," said the man after slurping up some of his meal, a sour expression on his face.

"What is it, Viro?" asked the girl as she sipped from her own bowl.

"Weeds are not food!"

The girl, Alia, had met the man, an adventurer named Viro, in a town within a barony. She'd agreed to assist him with a job he'd taken on. Viro, tasked with the mission of protecting a noble, had received an additional request from his client: to bring along a capable child. Despite the questionable nature of this job, so secretive that even the particulars and the destination hadn't been disclosed to her, Alia had decided to accept, thinking that the skills of a (self-proclaimed) Rank 4 scout like Viro would come in handy.

Still, the whole situation was dubious, and thus it was only natural that Alia would occasionally cast suspicious glances Viro's way.

"Hey, are you listening?" the scout asked. "You're kinda glaring daggers at me right now."

"I know," she replied. Despite everything, Alia wasn't that worried. From her perspective as a child, Viro sounded like an unreliable man who went with the flow. Still, she could tell he wasn't a bad person and was surprisingly kind at heart. "That's not a weed. Haura grass is nutritious enough that kalf mountain goats can survive off of that alone during the dry season. It's just bitter and tough, so only the goats eat it."

"That's basically a weed!"

Incidentally, records from fifty years ago, during the war with demons, spoke

of soldiers mixing haura grass into their porridge, so it was edible for humans as well. Viro'd had beans and whole wheat in his spatially enhanced bag, and Alia—thinking it would make for a nutritionally unbalanced diet—had added the grass.

Looking like a little scholar, Alia flipped through the pages of a small book as she explained this to Viro, who in turn cast a dubious look her way that just screamed *What's this kid's problem?* and then quickly gulped down the rest of the porridge from his copper bowl. He was, after all, an adult, so he decided not to get worked up over a child and opted to praise and encourage her instead.

"Now, whatever *this* is, it's good," he said of another mystery ingredient the girl had added to their porridge. "It's thick and smooth..."

"Oh, that's the black beetle larva I found in a hole in that tree over there," Alia explained.

"All right, all right! You can stop talking now!"

And so the night went on.

"Alia," Viro said the next morning as he stood imposingly with his arms crossed. "I'm gonna be strict with your training."

"Huh?" Alia replied, not fully understanding what he meant. "Um, okay."

Eating bugs was common practice on this continent in places like the Federation of Melrune to the north or the desert-ringed Empire of Kal'Faan, but it wasn't typical in Claydale with its bountiful forests. Viro had explained as much, but Alia, with her strange knowledge and stranger terms—words that a scholar in the capital might use, like "nutritional value"—had argued for its benefits. Frustrated because that hadn't been his point at all, Viro had just given up trying to convince her.

So in the end, he had indeed gotten worked up over a child, and his declaration was but an immature act in hopes of exhausting Alia to the point that she wouldn't be able to cook anymore. Still, both of them had their reasons to continue on: Viro needed to train Alia so that she'd be at least somewhat useful by the time they reached their destination, and Alia was eager to grow

stronger. And so—

"If we see a goblin, try taking it down," said Viro without missing a beat.

"Okay," Alia replied to the unreasonable request without hesitation.

Though this was a very unusual agreement, to Viro, goblins were, at worst, barely a concern; Alia, meanwhile, wanted real combat experience. They were both on the same page.

Goblins weren't particularly strong individually, but were known for reproducing quickly. They were commonly sighted along country roads, and despite their weakness, they could, if armed with weapons or rocks, still be lethal to ordinary people. Nevertheless, when the pair ran into three of the creatures on the highway, Alia instinctively drew her knife and prepared for a fight.

Viro quickly grabbed the girl's shoulder to stop her. "They're goblins, you know."

"They are goblins," she agreed.

"Their combat power is higher than yours, you know."

"I know."

"Well, okay, then." Viro felt conflicted about Alia's nonchalant replies, even if he'd been the one to encourage her to fight goblins. Though it was irresponsible of him, he decided to let her give it a shot.

In the end, though, she managed just fine. Initially, Viro had thought it unwise to allow her to take on all three at once, so he'd changed his mind and told her to kill them one by one. Alia, despite his reservations, showed no hesitation in taking the creatures' lives and was quite calm about doing so.

Watching her silently, Viro wondered if he'd been this decisive with his own first kill. He'd become an adventurer at the age of ten; his parents had both been adventurers as well—his father a fighter and his mother a scout. His mother had been Rank 3 and had trained Viro rigorously from a young age as they traveled from place to place. He'd met his current party leader around that time too. When Viro was only twelve, however, his parents had left, playfully

saying they were going to "meet with a powerful guy," and never returned.

Despite his thorough education as an adventurer, Viro remembered being quite nervous the first time he'd had to take a life. He couldn't help but wonder what kind of strange upbringing Alia could've had to be so nonchalant in the face of danger. "You're not scared of taking lives?" he asked.

Alia, wiping the blood off her magic steel knife, replied coolly, "Fear clouds one's vision. If a life made me stronger, it didn't go to waste."

"What kind of manly-ass statement..." The hell's with this kid? he couldn't help but wonder.

Though he'd called her statement "manly," Viro had noticed quite early on that Alia was a girl masquerading as a boy—not at first glance, but since commoner children didn't typically wear undergarments before the age of ten, with all the flitting about Alia did while dressed like that, it'd become obvious very quickly. He'd been concerned about the physical toll that constantly camping outdoors would take on such a small, frail girl. Viro had estimated her to be around ten years old, assuming that her stature was a result of malnutrition due to being a street urchin.

Food options in the forest were limited and Alia, with her strange knowledge, would collect strange ingredients if Viro wasn't careful. Though that wasn't the main reason, it was part of why they'd started making regular trips to villages and towns to replenish their supplies.

Though Viro was used to camping, he didn't necessarily enjoy it. He preferred to sleep in an inn bed, thought cooking was a pain, and wanted to drink, smoke, and flirt with attractive women. Yet his apprentice (according to him, anyway) Alia seemed more comfortable among trees than people and sometimes said things that made her sound like a fugitive, which concerned him somewhat.

The reason they were camping out more often than not during this trip was twofold: it made the journey shorter, and it taught Alia—whom he thought was a street urchin—the harsh realities of adventuring. The girl's monk-like stoicism, however, made him look forward to stopping by towns and villages.

Not all villages had inns, however—in villages with more than five hundred inhabitants, taverns commonly offered cheaper lodging options. The village

they'd stopped at the day before was a larger one with nearly a thousand people and was governed by a knight. Said knight had told him about a *certain* problem, and Viro (having grown tired of minding Alia) decided to use it to test the girl's capabilities.

Yesterday afternoon, Viro and Alia had stopped by a village so the adventurer could grab himself some drinks and the pair could replenish their rations. The two had split up; Viro had gone to visit the knight's estate to gather information about nearby bandits, and Alia had gone to the general goods store to restock their food supplies.

The scout had felt somewhat uneasy about leaving the food shopping to Alia, but it wasn't as though their roles could've been reversed. Instead, he simply hoped that even Alia wouldn't go digging for caterpillars over buying dried meats and vegetables.

"You can do this, right?" he'd asked.

"Leave it to me," she'd replied.

After sending her off like a mother entrusting her young child with their first errand, Viro, in his capacity as a high-ranking adventurer, met with the knight and obtained information about bandits said to have appeared nearby. Among those bandits, supposedly, was a clever individual—either a mercenary or a former soldier. For the sake of the villagers, the knight had assembled a force of retainers and militiamen to subdue the bandits, but they had been skillful at covering their tracks and remained at large.

A subjugation party would generally have been formed after the bandits' hideout was located. Since that had yet to be done, petitioning aid from adventurers was standard practice. However, most scouts and adventurers capable enough to take on ten-odd bandits were closer to the monster-infested regions of the barony, and so the knight had yet to find any he could request help from.

The task was well within Viro's capabilities, even without a party. However, the knight was hesitant to pay the appropriate fee for a Rank 4 adventurer, and so he'd been coy and merely hinted at the problem, weaving it into other small

talk and local news. This information wasn't particularly novel, nor was it enough to motivate Viro to do something himself, but he did think it could be useful for Alia's training, so he kept it in the back of his mind as he left the knight's estate.

Wonder if Alia's done with shopping yet, he mused. Though the village was large, it was still only a village, with no shops offering potions or high-quality weapons. All she had to do was buy supplies like dried vegetables and salt, so she shouldn't have encountered any problems. Still, a bad feeling stirred in the pit of Viro's stomach. He hurried toward the inn and, sure enough, there was a commotion underway.

Farmers rose early, and after a long day of hard work, some might start drinking even with the sun still up, leaving smaller tasks like weeding to their children. Peering over the scene, Viro did indeed spot a man, already drunk despite it being early evening, who seemed to have caused some trouble.

"What was that?" said the man, who'd apparently made a scene in his inebriation.

A familiar face was confronting him about having hassled a young waitress—it was, unmistakably, Alia. Viro didn't want to get involved and watched in astonishment as Alia immediately got herself into trouble. He contemplated using this as part of her training, but upon seeing her face, he changed his mind.

The drunk man lacked combat skills but looked physically strong due to manual labor and surpassed Alia's combat strength. Normally, this would've been a good test for a capable (prospective) apprentice, but seeing Alia unfazed, staring at the much larger man as though he were just another goblin, Viro hurriedly intervened before the situation could escalate to bloodshed.

"Whoa, whoa," Viro interjected in a charming tone. "What's a grown man like you doing picking on a kid?"

The bystanders stared agape at the scout, and Alia's you-may-as-well-be-a-goblin gaze shifted to him. And, well, speaking plainly, Viro's main reason for stepping in was the beauty of the waitress, who seemed to be in her early twenties, was uncommonly attractive by rural standards, and had a certain edge to her that he liked; he figured perhaps he could spend a pleasant evening

with her if everything went smoothly.

In the end, Viro quickly subdued the drunk man—a trivial task for a Rank 4 adventurer—and turned him over to the villagers before returning to the waitress.

"Thank you," she said in awe with a bright smile and a faint blush. The waitress reached for Alia's hand, having mistaken the girl for a handsome boy given her clothing. Only then did she notice Viro and flash a radiant, professional smile. "And thank you to your dad as well. Please, come to our inn. I'll have my husband make both of you a delicious meal."

"I'm only thirty-five," Viro protested. It was anyone's guess whether he was bothered by having been mistaken for Alia's father or by the fact the "waitress" was actually the innkeeper's new wife, but regardless, Viro had been grumbling the entire way out of the village.

"You've said that before," Alia pointed out calmly and matter-of-factly, neither validating nor negating the scout's logic. An outsider might've mistaken them for a mentor and apprentice with a strangely solid relationship.

Though from her child's perspective Viro was the epitome of an unreliable adult, Alia's opinion of him hadn't changed. She was a child and a girl besides, but he didn't patronize her, instead treating her as an equal. Alia respected that. But, worried that telling him as much would go to his head, Alia kept it to herself.

Instead, she gave him a pat on the shoulder as they walked. "A human's life may seem short, but it's not. You'll find someone in time."

"Uh, right..." he mumbled.

And so it was that after reflecting on the day's events, the information he'd gleaned at the village, Alia's display of bravery, and her recent success in combat against goblins, Viro decided to ask something of the girl that would've been too much for an ordinary child.

"The chief of that village told me there are bandits 'round these parts. So tonight, for your training, we're gonna go bandit-hunting."

Alia only stared at him in dumbfounded silence.

Thus did the mentor(?) and apprentice(?) pair continue their journey, challenging each other's good sense with unreasonable demands, and ultimately leading Alia toward a fateful encounter in the margravate of Dandorl.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

The Otome Heroine's Fight for Survival: Volume 1

by Harunohi Biyori

Translated by Camilla L.

Edited by Shakuzan

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 Harunohi Biyori Illustrations by Hitaki Yuu

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by TO Books This English edition is published by arrangement with TO Books, Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

<u>j-novel.club</u>

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: March 2024

Premium E-Book