



THE HIDDEN DUNGEON ONLY I CAN ENTER

NOVEL

4

written by
MEGURU SETO

illustrated by
TAKEHANA NOTE

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“He he, it’s
simple—
so you can
lick my
back.”





"I thought I'd give
you a massage.
You must be pretty
tired, right?"

"Definitely."

"I thought so. If
you're tired, just
let yourself drift
off, all right?"

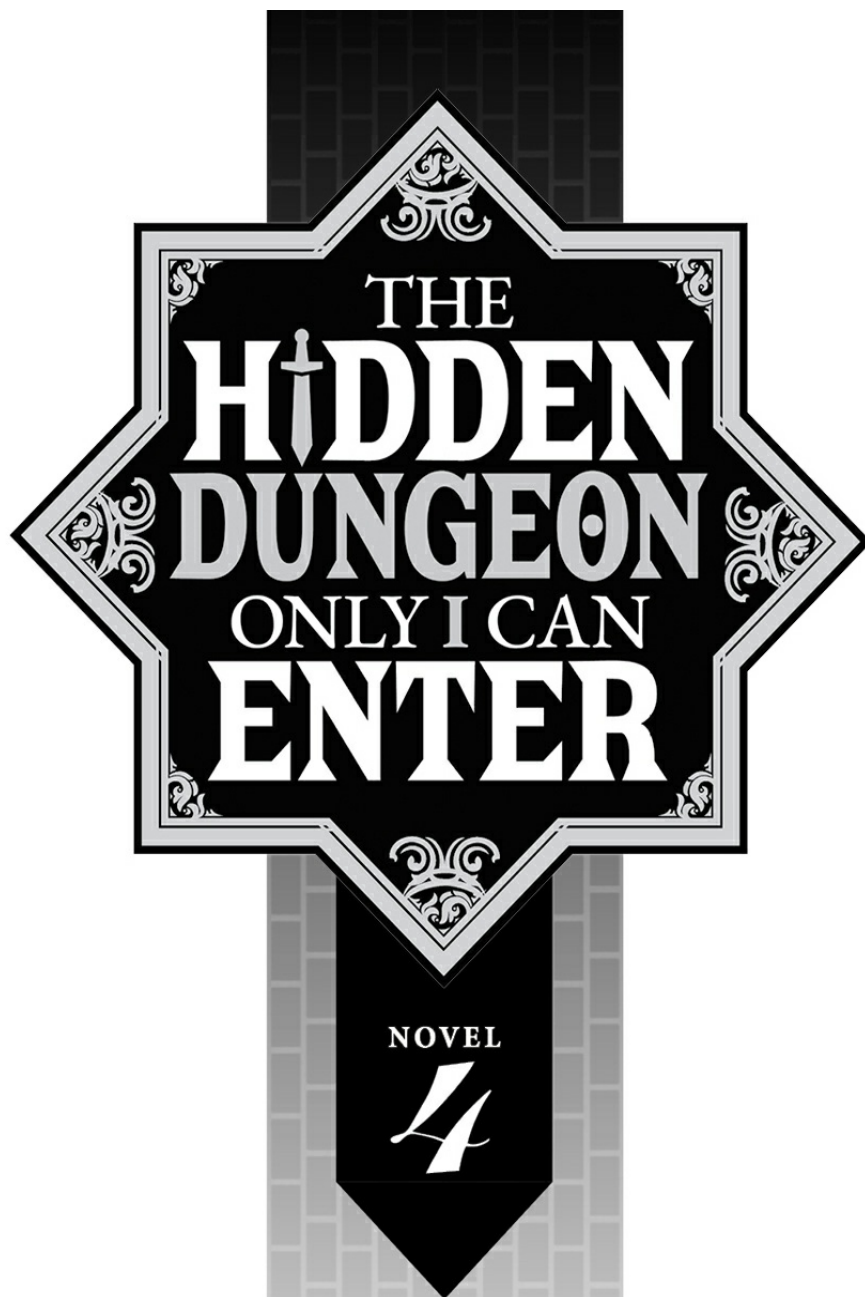
❖ LEILA OVERLOCK ❖



Emma slipped her arm through mine. She seemed to be having fun. She was probably trying to cheer me up after what the duke said about Olivia. I really couldn't hide anything from my best friend.

EMMA BRIGHTNESS

NOIR STARDIA



WRITTEN BY

Meguru Seto

ILLUSTRATED BY

Takehana Note



Seven Seas Entertainment

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Illustrations by Takehana Note

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TRANSLATION: T. Emerson

ADAPTATION: Cae Hawksmoor

LOGO DESIGN: Arbash

COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

PROOFREADER: Brian Kearney, Kelly Lorraine Andrews

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: E.M. Candon

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein

PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis

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Chapter 1:

A Letter from My Brother

POKE. Poke. Poke!

I wanted to sleep a little longer, but I forced my eyes open to find none other than my good friend Emma staring right at my face. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. Sure, I saw Emma all the time, but not usually from this close.

I stared at her smiling face. She really had gotten pretty lately, hadn't she? Even at such close range, I couldn't spot a single blemish.

"Eh he he, so you're finally awake, sleepyhead." Emma seemed to have taken a liking to my cheeks, because she wouldn't stop poking them.

"How long have you been here, Emma?"

"Not long. I have some stuff to do today, but I thought I'd help you earn a little LP first."

"What did I ever do to deserve such a wonderful friend?" I said melodramatically.

Emma lay down beside me and wrapped her arms around me, earning me some LP. We did a little more than that, but I'll just leave it to your imagination.

We went downstairs, but everyone else must have gone out already. The house was empty, although someone had left breakfast out for me—probably my little sister Alice. I sat down to eat, and Emma brought me some water.

"Thank you." We were close, but I think it's always a good idea to be grateful.

"Summer vacation is half over already, huh?" Emma said.

"Yeah. I wanna come up with a plan for the rest of our free time. Are you going anywhere today?"

"Heh, I have some secret training," she said. "It's not fair that you just keep getting stronger, Noir. I'm not about to let you get away with that."

She came off like an airhead at times, but Emma was a hard worker. I

probably shouldn't have been surprised that she was training behind my back. I used my Discerning Eye and saw that she'd already gone up a few levels.

Emma could just have asked me for help, of course. After all, she *was* providing me with a steady stream of LP. But when I mentioned that, she just flashed me a victory sign.

"All right," she said. "I'll think about it. But don't push yourself, Noir. Although, knowing you, you won't do anything to put yourself in real danger."

She knew me too well. The guy who crumbled under the slightest stress, that was me, Noir, the third son of the Stardia family! I guess it wasn't exactly something to brag about...

Joking aside, I had to decide what to do with the rest of my vacation. I wanted to return to the hidden dungeon, but the next floor was hot and dangerous as a volcano, and there were those magmafish monsters too. Not only were they high-level, they had some terrifying skills, to boot! I needed to consult my master Olivia before I attempted to face them again.

I'd also been neglecting my adventuring duties, so it was about time to pick up some requests from the guild. I figured I could ask Lola if she had anything good, then visit Luna, and end the day by training with Leila.

"Ohhh, you're thinking about other girls, aren't you?"

"I...can neither confirm nor deny."

"Noir, you're an idiot! And I know you're thinking about doing naughty things with them, aren't you?"

"N-no, it's just...you know, for the LP and...huh?"

"Is this the Stardia estate?"

We both looked up at the sound of an unfamiliar man at the door. When I opened it, he handed me a letter. That was, theoretically, a pretty uncommon occurrence. More prominent nobles often corresponded with other important people in neighboring regions, but our family was too low rank to receive much in the way of mail.

Either way, it turned out that the sender wasn't another noble at all. My older

brother had written to us.

“It’s from Gillan!”

“Well, that’s weird,” said Emma. “He doesn’t usually send letters.”

Both my older brothers had left home. Gillan was four years my senior; he lived in a town called Honest in a neighboring country, attending trade school to become a merchant.

There were two letters—one for my father, and one for me. I was happy that Gillan had remembered me. He had a tendency to get carried away, but he had always looked after Alice and I when we were younger.

I tore open my envelope and scanned the contents.

“Go on, read it out loud,” Emma insisted.

“Yeah, sure.”

It was written in his usual atrocious penmanship.

“Yooo!” I read out loud. “Noir, how you doing? I’m like, super great! Also like, dude, I’m like wicked popular with the ladies! My trade school’s only 20 percent women, but half of them are my girlfriends! The other half are massive uggos, so I let the other guys have them!”

I felt a headache coming on already. He’d been like this for forever, but he seemed to really be leaning into the shallow playboy thing.

“It’s kind of crazy to think you’re related to either of your brothers, huh?” Emma asked.

“You can say that again.”

My eldest brother was the polar opposite of Gillan—a straitlaced, by-the-book hard worker. When they were both still at home, a lot of people had seriously questioned if we all came from the same family.

I ran my eyes over the rest of the letter.

“You must be working at the library by now, right, Noir? With Emma, right? Man, she sure turned out to be a real looker. Her boobs were always big, but now they’re massive! You listen to me Noir, don’t let her get away! I don’t even

have any girls like that here! And she's a noble as well—a total catch in every respect. You'd best be grateful for what you have!

“Anyway, bring Emma and your friends to hang out with me sometime! I'm dying to see you again. Or if you just wanna fool around with some hot chicks, come by yourself. I can't promise anyone with boobs as big as Emma's, but there's some excellent tail here. Don't disappoint me, bro!”

“Can I hit him?” Emma asked.

“Th-that's my line! I mean, he is my brother.”

“Isn't he supposed to be in school? What is that idiot even doing there?”

Emma was already frowning, so I took care not to upset her further.

Gillan had included his address in Honest at the end. It seemed like he hadn't changed much, but I hadn't seen him in almost two years. I missed him. Plus, I'd heard Honest always had a ton of stuff going on—festivities and the like. A little trip abroad might not be such a bad idea after all.

“If you're thinking about going, I'm coming with you. We're two peas in a pod, remember?!” Emma declared as she made her way out the door.

I felt a bit lonesome after she left, so I decided to pay my master a visit.

I paused at the entrance to the hidden dungeon and said the magic words to get inside. After I made quick work of some golden slimes on the first floor, I headed down to the second.

When I got to my master's room, her voice rang out cheerfully in my head.
<It's been ages! Noir, you tease, I can't believe you left your poor dear Olivia hanging!>

“You always have to make things weird, don't you?”

<I mean, you're going through puberty, aren't you? Must be pretty rough. If the lovely Olivia could move, she'd give you so much LP that you wouldn't know what to do with it!>

It was embarrassing that I thought about it for even a second. I mean, well,

despite her personality, she *was* a total knockout, so maybe I didn't need to be so hard on myself.

"You're always doing so much for me, Master... I really want to set you free." I eyed the chains that kept her trapped.

Olivia didn't reply, but I heard an odd moaning. It almost sounded like she was crying. *<I-I'm so happy my pupil turned out to be such a good kid... But honest, I don't mind staying like this for a while. You should focus on clearing this dungeon before you worry about little old me.>*

She always wanted me to put myself first. How like her.

In any case, I got down to business and asked for her advice on the eleventh floor. Specifically, on how to cope with the heat and handle those dangerous fish.

<Here's your chance to prove yourself to your master. Give me a report on your abilities. Show me growth in other places, not just down there.>

"Get your mind out of the gutter."

All the same, I did as she asked.

Level: 127

Current Weapons: *Two-Edged Blade (Sharp Edge, Good Luck); Blade of Divine Punishment (Sharp Edge, Wolf Killer); Piercing Spear; Shield of Champions (Durable, Fire Resistance [Grade A], Water Resistance [Grade A], Wind Resistance [Grade A]); Unnamed Mallet (Stone Crusher); Octopus-Killing Harpoon (Octopus Killer [Grade S])*

Skills: *Great Sage; Get Creative; Bestow; Editor; LP Conversion; LP Conversion (Money); LP Conversion (Items); Stone Bullet; Holy Flame; Lightning Strike; Water Drop; Blinding Light; Throwing (Grade B); Discerning Eye; Discerning Eye for Items; Pocket Dimension (Grade C); Dungeon Elevator; Exorcism; Excavate; Improved Back Step; Passive Defense; Magical Fusion; Deodorize; Lucky Lecher; Shoulder Rub; Night Vision; Headache Immunity; Paralysis Immunity (Grade C); Panacea (Grade C); Courage; Hearing*

Protection; Dancing; Diving; Zero Breathing

Wow, that was exhausting.

<Heh, you sure have gotten strong, Noir, my boy. That's a fine list of skills.>

"Yeah, but the problem is I'm still not all that strong."

<Well, let's just say it's a trade-off for having stuff like Editor and Bestow in your tool kit. How much LP do you have?>

"About twelve thousand," I said confidently.

Olivia was impressed, but in fact it was all down to the hard work of Emma, Lola, Luna, Leila, my little sister Alice, and Ms. Elena.

<If you've got that much to burn, I'd suggest starting with Heat Resistance. You don't even need the S-Grade version. And, after that, some ice spells and a strong water spell.>

A-Grade Heat Resistance was 2,000 LP, so I started there. After that, I went with the two ice spells Olivia suggested. Icicle fired ice projectiles, similar to Stone Bullet, for 400 LP. It wasn't very strong on its own, so I used Editor to fiddle with it—adjusting the size and damage of the projectiles for an extra 1,000 LP.

Lastly, I grabbed Iceball for 500 LP. It was, as the name implied, the ice version of Fireball, and it froze instead of burned. I spent another 1,200 LP adjusting the size, which seemed to correlate directly with the area it could freeze.

<See? Even though Icicle and Iceball are pretty low-level skills, with Editor, you can transform them into mid-tier or even high-level skills.>

All that cost me 5,100 LP, burning up half my reserves. It was a lot, but if I could get the hang of these spells, then it'd be worth it.

<Now remember, Noir: don't you be stingy with that LP when you come up against a powerful enemy, okay?>

"Because it's all over if you die, right?"

<Exactly!>

I flashed her a thumbs up and was about to leave when she called after me with uncharacteristic panic.

<I mean it! Be careful, okay? From what you told me, this level's a lot harder than the stuff you've faced before.>

"Did hell freeze over? You're not usually this concerned."

<How rude! I'll have you know I'm always worrying about you.>

"I can't say I buy it, but I appreciate the thought. I'll be careful."

I reminded her that I was a coward and would always put my own safety first. Then I used my Dungeon Elevator skill to return to the eleventh floor.

As I approached the entrance, billows of hot air swept around me. It really was sweltering down there, but thanks to my newly acquired Heat Resistance, it didn't feel nearly as bad as before. Even better, the A-Grade version didn't just protect me against external heat, it also helped prevent excess sweating or body temperature spikes. No matter how long I spent down there, I wouldn't get dehydrated.

The eleventh floor was pretty big, but there were so many large rocks that my view was limited. The ground was ash gray and uneven, making it difficult to walk across, but the cherry on top was the endless bubbling magma.

All that being said, what really had me worried about the eleventh floor were the terrifying, Level 250 monsters.

I surveyed the eleventh floor to get the lay of the land. Shockingly, I spotted the stairs to the twelfth floor right away. They were on the other side of the room—but of course, it wasn't that simple: between me and the stairs was a giant pool of magma. A path led straight up to it, but it was impossible to avoid all the magma. In some places, the magma looked smooth and free-flowing, while in the other areas it ran much thicker, seeming almost sticky. I couldn't explain how multiple types of magma coexisted in the same room but, given the dungeon's power, it was probably some kind of trap.

And then, of course, there were the monsters. A dorsal fin stuck out of the magma, cutting through the molten sea at incredible speed. And it wasn't just lurking at a distance.

Name: Magmafish

Level: 260

Skills: High-Speed Swimming; Poison Sight

It was definitely the same one as before. Either it hadn't noticed me yet, or it had, and it didn't care.

"If Olivia were here, she'd defeat it in a second..."

That Poison Sight really worried me. I extremely did not want to get poisoned. Fortunately, I had some extra LP, so I looked into making myself a skill. A-Grade Poison Resistance was 1,200 LP, so I armed myself with that just in case. Then, cautiously, I approached the magma.

The fish swam swiftly toward me, and I prepared to use one of my skills when—splash! The fish leapt through the air. I couldn't help but stare. It looked a lot like a koi, although it was long—about three feet, and vivid red. It was sharper and sleeker-looking than a koi, too. But more than anything, I was caught by the deep green glint of—

"Ugh...ahhh..."

I let out an unseemly groan and stumbled back, sick to my stomach. I thought I might collapse, but I recovered soon enough. Could that have been the fish's Poison Sight? I had met its fishy gaze, so that was the most logical conclusion. My A-Grade Poison Resistance had saved me from any serious effects, but if I hadn't had that—oof.

As flustered as I was, I turned to counterattack—stretching out my left hand and firing off shards of ice.

Fwish!



I missed. The fish dove back under the magma, but I'd spooked it. It took off at incredible speed. I could still see its fin sticking up, so I fired Icicle after Icicle, but they disappeared in impotent puffs of steam as soon as they touched the magma.

"N-none of those hit."

It was starting to look like these spells were a waste of time, but I needed to stay calm. After all, the fish didn't have anywhere to run. Theoretically, I could use Iceball, but freezing magma would probably take more power than I had to call on. If only that dumb fish would jump again.

As if it read my mind, the magmafish soared back up into the air. This was it, but I froze in my tracks. The fish had launched itself right at me. Reflexively, I held out my left hand to shield myself.

"Ow! No way?!"

As soon as I touched it, pain lanced through my body. I succeeded in smacking it out of the air, but I'd burned my hand. Good thing I'd used my left!

"How dare you!"

I grabbed my sword and slashed at the magmafish as it flapped on the ground, but it was thrashing about so much that I missed again. It seemed to be trying to get back to the magma. I wasn't about to let that happen.

I made an Iceball about the size of my head and fired it off. This time, it hit. The creature froze solid, killing it instantly, and leveling me up in the process.

"I think I can keep going."

I had the Heat Resistance skill to thank for getting out of that situation with only mild burns. I'd have to ask Luna to treat me when I got back to town.

I checked to make sure there were no more fish and made my way to the back of the room. The stairs were right on the other side of the magma. About seven or eight yards of it separated me from more solid ground. It seemed like a pretty tough jump. I could always cast an Iceball to freeze it, maybe—I could make one up to three feet in diameter—but I wasn't confident that it wouldn't instantly vaporize. And there could be other critters hiding within the molten

rock. My best bet was to try and make the jump.

Jumping (Grade C) – 300 LP

Jumping (Grade B) – 700 LP

Jumping (Grade A) – 1,500 LP

Jumping (Grade S) – 2,500 LP

I had over 5,000 LP left, but I'd spent a lot of it today. I considered going with the cheapest option, but ultimately I concluded that the C-Grade version would end with me doing a cannonball into the magma, and B-Grade would barely get me across. With the A-Grade version, I'd make it with room to spare, and with S-Grade, I could make the jump with my eyes closed. Since failure would result in certain death, I couldn't chance it. I splurged on the A-Grade and found a safe spot to try a test jump.

"Whooooooooaaa!"

I flew through the air like a bird. A few seconds later, I was once again a regular human with two feet on the ground, but that had been exhilarating! I could jump thirty feet like it was nothing.

I stood at the edge the magma and took several deep breaths.

"Hyup!"

It was scary to look down and see magma roiling beneath my feet, but I made the jump easily. I glanced back over my shoulder and, without a second thought, dashed down the stairs.

Farewell, eleventh floor! Hello floor number twelve!

What would I find down there? I descended into a big room with a door in the back. That wasn't unusual, but the weapons littering the ground certainly were. I couldn't even see the floor!

"What the...? Maybe I should take some?"

I had a Discerning Eye for Items, so in theory I could avoid any with dangerous

skills. But the hidden dungeon had outwitted me again! All these weapons came equipped with Conceal, so I couldn't tell the good ones from the bad. While I pondered my predicament, a voice called out to me.

<Hey, will you take me with you?>

"What?!"

I spun around, brandishing my sword, but there was no one there. An icy chill ran down my spine.

<Down here!>

<What are you doing, trying to get him to take you out of here without us?!>

<Yeah! You might scare him off!>

<Fuchonheraza fuchonherami!>

I couldn't help myself. I ran. I mean, the voices were coming from the weapons! Swords, spears, axes, flails—all sorts of implements of violence had minds and voices of their own. Worse, they seemed hostile. From what I gathered, they all wanted me to use them. They were pleading with me to pick them.

<Come on, pick me,> a greatsword argued. *<There are probably tons of scary monsters up ahead. With a blade like me, you'd take them all out with one hit!>*

<Yeah, right! Don't forget all the narrow corridors down here,> countered a club. *<You really think you could swing her effectively? I'm the one you want!>*

It was strange that they could all talk, but they didn't seem able to move on their own. I hurried through the room to the door without touching any of them.

"Sorry, I'm full up on weapons already."

I flashed my pride and joy—my two-edged blade—and reached for the doorknob, but the door wouldn't budge. Strange. It didn't seem locked.

<Ah ha ha ha! Silly boy, did you really think you could escape us? Only those who search properly can open that door.>

"So, I have to pick one of you?"

<Exactly.>

Well, at least I knew what was expected of me. My inability to read them was probably part of the dungeon's plan too. Maybe I could get away with picking one to open the door, then immediately tossing it? But the weapons seemed to guess what I was thinking.

<Give it up. You can't clear this floor without one of us. It's impossible.>

"Hm..."

<Come on! Give in already and pick one of us!>

<Pick! Pick! Pick!>

I ignored their pressuring tactics and counted them up. There were forty-eight in total. If only one of them was the right one, the chances of me picking it at random weren't good.

<Come on, you don't have much time left!>

"Actually, I have all the time in the world. And I won't be picking any of you."

<Excuse me? Didn't you hear what we said?>

"I mean, I used a lot of magic on the previous floor. I'm not in any rush to push my luck."

<Liar. You didn't come all the way down here just to turn back. You'll die before you get out again.>

"I have a question for you: Do I look strong enough to come straight back whenever I want?"

<Not a chance in hell!>

I wasn't very happy to hear that, but I was glad that they agreed. And, by now, my Dungeon Elevator was ready to use again.

"Well, I'm off."

<Wait! When will you be back?!>

"Good question. Since you guys are so mean, maybe I'll wait five hundred years. Assuming I'm still alive," I said.

It was a little mean-spirited, but that didn't bother me in the slightest. I jumped in the hole the Dungeon Elevator created, leaving the weapons' anguished cries behind.

If I went to visit Gillan in Honest, I wouldn't be able to return to the dungeon for a while. That was exactly the sort of thing Olivia would make a big fuss about, so I stopped by the second floor again on my way out.

The moment I entered the room, my heart jumped at the suggestive sounds she was making.

<Ahh! Ahh! Yes! This is even more intense than last night!>

"Master...?"

<I've...I've never felt this way before! Yes! You're so much better than my husband!>

"I'm pretty sure cats in heat make less aggravating noise."

<Oh goodness! Noir, when did you get here?!>

Oh come on, I thought. I know you threw that last line in just because you knew I was here.

I had a feeling I already knew the answer, but I went to see what she was doing anyway.

<I was simulating a hot night of passion. Despite your cute face, you're a monster in the sack, Noir.>

"You were imagining *me*?!"

<Ah ha ha ha!>

"But...you're not married, are you?"

<Maybe not, but lines like that get men really fired up, don't they? Personally, I think it's pretty stupid.>

She probably wasn't wrong that some men liked that sort of thing, but I was extremely vanilla and had no such predilections. Still, joking aside, I told her about my outing and asked for her advice on how to handle those weapons.

<Well, if you have to pick one, maybe you should interview them.>

“But there are so many! Even if I had help, it’d take ages.”

<They why don’t you just threaten to break them?>

That was just like her. I appreciated the advice, and I resolved to try it next time. With that settled, I told her about my trip and, unsurprisingly, she threw a tantrum. I couldn’t even placate her by promising souvenirs.

<Fine! As an apology, I want head pats! And I want you to praise me with all your heart. Then I’ll give you permission to leave!>

Guess I didn’t have much of a choice. I reached out for her pretty, pale-blue hair. It was so shiny, it was hard to believe she’d been trapped here for two hundred years. It felt soft and silky. I patted her on the head and didn’t forget the praise.

“You’re looking lovely as ever today, Master.”

<I’m like, wicked haps!>

I’d never heard that phrase before, but it already felt strangely dated. I got the feeling I’d be hearing it a lot more from now on.

<Bye, my darling husband.>

“Now I’m the guy you’re cheating on?! I’m leaving.”

Weirdly, even though both of her arms were chained, I could’ve sworn I saw her wave.

When I got back above ground, the moon was already up, so I headed straight home and went to bed. Exploring dungeons sure was exhausting work!



Over breakfast the next day, I told everyone about Gillan's letter. Father, mother, and Tigerson were all in favor of my trip.

"He's such a good-for-nothing," my father complained. "I wanna give him a piece of my mind."

"I'm sure we could say the same about you, dear," my mother countered. "Isn't that right, Tigey?"

By now, Tigerson—a giant black lion with a tulip growing on his head—was just another part of our family.

<The other day, he was so distracted by a female customer's rear end that he broke some products.>

"I-I was not! That lady just, uh...she had a bug on her butt! That's all!"

There wasn't a soul in the house who believed him.

<I wish I could meet your elder brother as well, Noir,> said Tigerson. He sounded a little envious.

"Wanna come with?"

<Oh no, I would attract far too much attention. And I am so busy with the shop.> At Stardian Rarities, we sold things I found in the dungeon and whatnot along with monster materials Tigerson collected. *<There are occasional shoplifters, so I must keep watch.>*

"You're such a hard worker, Tigerson," I said. "I know the shop's in good hands with you around."

<Rwar!>

His "okay" growl was very convincing, but at least one person remained opposed to my trip. My sister Alice pulled a face and furiously smacked the table.

"I'm vehemently against it! I just know Gillan will be a bad influence on you!"

When Gillan lived at home, he had been a massive troublemaker. He had a pretty face and was always making passes at women. One time, several of his

girlfriends showed up at the same time and started a fight. More than once, he'd stolen someone's girlfriend and gotten himself beaten up. I'd tried to intervene once and received a punch in the face for my trouble.

"Uh, I did consider it might be a bad idea."

"I think that would be the right decision," said Alice. "You should spend the rest of your summer here, where you belong."

"Yeah," I agreed. "But it *is* my summer break. And I would like to see what Gillan's been up to."

"Ugh!"

I knew it upset Alice, but letters from Gillan were so rare. I had a feeling he wanted to ask me something in person. And it wasn't like my memories of him were all bad. I couldn't just abandon him.

Still mulling it over, I readied my sword and headed to Odin, my guild. I needed to get some proper adventuring done. The moment I entered the guild hall, I noticed Emma talking with two men. That was unusual. Did she know them? It certainly didn't seem like it.

"Like I said, I'm already in a party."

"All right, why don't you go shopping with us tomorrow then?" one of the men asked. "I know how we look, but we're pretty loaded. We could buy you some nice clothes."

"Yeah," the other agreed. "We got more than enough."

Emma poked her cheek. She always did that when she felt stressed, so I moved to intercept. I gave her a hug and said I'd been looking for her.

"Like I said," she told the two men. "I'm already with somebody."

"Tsk."

The men clicked their tongues in frustration and left the guild hall.

"Popular as ever, I see," I said.

"They just wouldn't lay off. It's such a pain! You have good timing, Noir. Were you watching over me this whole time?"

“What am I, a stalker?”

“Eh he he! More importantly, you need some LP.”

For a moment, I thought she was about to kiss me in front of all these people. I almost panicked, but I should have known that Emma wasn't so bold. Instead, she gave me a long, passionate hug. It wasn't much, but it did earn me some LP.

“Okay, okay, this really isn't the place for—”

Before I could finish, Lola tore us apart with brute strength. She was my managing receptionist at the guild, and I'd always had the feeling she was strong. Even so, she surprised me. If she wanted to, she could totally make it as an adventurer.

“Hey,” Emma complained. “Things were just getting good.”

“Well, as much as *I'd* like to hug Mr. Noir, I have work to do. Some of us have to make do with daydreaming about it.” Lola took my arm and sat me down on her side of the counter, next to where she worked. “You know, I have the perfect request for you. You really do have impeccable timing, Mr. Noir.”

“Ah ha ha...wouldn't this make more sense if I faced you?”

“This is *fine*,” Lola whispered, right in my ear.

Obviously, I appreciated the sentiment, but we were attracting a lot of attention. Lola was on the job, but this was very much like her. Not only was her standing among the other receptionists improving, she had taken first place in the chart on the wall.

The request in question was to capture a speed turtle. I'd heard they were quick and fiendishly hard to catch.

“Just one of them will score you three hundred thousand rels,” said Lola. “Sounds like the client really wants one.”

“They look kind of like green turtles, right?” Emma asked. “And they live in the river?”

“Yes. They may be small, but they're ferocious. There are probably large monsters in the area too, so be careful.”

Emma seemed excited, so I accepted the job.

“You can do it,” Lola said. “I believe in you. And, you know, I have a long vacation coming up. I’d love to go somewhere with you, Mr. Noir.”

She smiled like a cat. I knew right away what she was after, so I invited her along to visit Gillan. I mean, she always did so much for me. And besides, the more the merrier, right?

When I asked her, Lola clapped her hands for joy. “Mr. Noir, if you invited me, I’d join you on a trip to hell!”

I was glad she was coming, but Emma seemed annoyed as we walked down to the river, kicking pebbles as we went.

“You know,” she said. “You didn’t have to invite her. Lola isn’t that strong. It could be dangerous.”

“True, but she’s really smart. She probably knows the weak points of monsters we’ve never even heard of.”

“I wanted to go on a trip just the two of us...”

“Oh, don’t pout,” I said. “Come here.”

I took Emma by the hand and pulled her into an alleyway. It was cramped and dark, but a good place for kissing. When we were finished, her bad mood had vanished.

With Emma’s mood improved, the two of us headed out of town.

Tell me, Great Sage, where are the nearest speed turtles?

<At the riverside approximately 789 meters to the southeast.>

Perfect!

“You know where to find them already?”

“The Great Sage is very helpful. Let’s get going before someone else grabs them.”

We followed the Great Sage’s advice and headed to the river. The water was

shallow and clear, though we encountered a pair of monsters on the shore, probably looking for fish. They were bear-like creatures called dark ursi. Not only smart, but huge. Worse, they immediately noticed us.

“What do we do, Noir?”

“What else can we do? We’ve gotta take them out if we wanna find those turtles.”

“They look like they’re together, though,” Emma said. “I feel kinda bad ruining a fellow couple’s day.”

“We’re, uh, not a couple,” I told her. “Just for the record.”

“We’ll take them out together! Yeah!”

Unfortunately, my little correction didn’t seem to register. Emma grabbed her daggers and I drew my blade. Then the dark ursi charged. My first priority was dodging their attack, but—

“Hah! Hiyah!”

Emma countered with a slash, then fired several Wind Strikes at her opponent. She finished by driving her knives into the creature’s eyes. She really had gotten stronger, but I didn’t have time to admire her.

“Grrrr!”

The monster’s long claws flashed toward me and I countered with an Iceball the size of my head. It shrieked as the Iceball froze the flesh where it touched, turning it white. I hadn’t fully frozen the creature, but it was having difficulty moving. I sliced its head in two to finish it off. Its skull was thick, but my blade had a Sharp Edge. There was no contest.

“Yay!”

Emma and I high-fived in celebration.

“Hey,” she said. “Do you think we could sell their parts?”

“Bear paws *are* pretty delicious,” I agreed. “Although I hear the cooking process is super involved.”

“That sounds perfect! It’ll earn you some more LP too!”

I'd already gotten LP from eating bear paw, but maybe a monster would be worth more? We worked together to harvest four of the paws, and I put them in my Pocket Dimension. It may have only been C-Grade, but there was plenty of space.

Now the real question was who we could get to cook it.

"Huh?! Noir!" Emma said. "This is no time to be sitting there thinking with your stomach!"

"Oh, right, the speed turtle. We better get that—wait. Who goes there?!"

A group of four adventurers were stomping through the river. They were obviously looking for something.

"Excuse me?" Emma asked. "What are you doing?"

"Huh? Don't talk to u—ooh, aren't we a beauty?"

Yet another man had fallen for Emma after a single glance. Still, there was something more pressing about this encounter. I knew one of the people in this group.

"Leila?!"

"Noir? What are you doing here?"

Leila was a striking foreign exchange student with long, golden hair. She was currently attending the same Hero Academy we did. Although she was in the class below us, Leila excelled at hand-to-hand combat—so much so that I'd asked her to train me.

"Are you looking for something?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Leila. "We got a request to exterminate monsters and catch a speed turtle, so we formed an impromptu party. We finished with the monsters already, so now we're looking for a turtle."

This was bad. Not only were we after the same turtle, but these guys were in Lahmu, Odin's rival guild.

"What guild are you two from?" asked a young man with a shaved head.

Guess I couldn't avoid talking about it. He was glaring at me, so I answered

honestly. The second they heard we were in Odin, the other members of Leila's party turned hostile.

"What are you brats here for? Fishing?"

"We're looking for a speed turtle," I said, mentally asking the Great Sage for the precise location of the nearest one.

<Six yards diagonally to the right.>

It was so close! If we didn't do something soon, they would find it first.

"There's no way I'll let you beat us," said the boy with the shaved head, narrowing his eyes.

"Emma...we'd better get looking," I said. I lowered my voice and whispered in her ear. "There's one just over there."

Before the other adventurers could do anything, we waded into the water and tried to surround it. We counted down silently, then shot our hands down into the water, but it was small and fast and it slipped out our hands.

"I don't know if this is going to work," I said.

"Just leave it to me!"

Emma gave chase. She'd always been good in the water. She moved through it like air. No matter how fast the turtle was, Emma was faster. She caught it by the shell and pulled it out of the water.

"I did it!"

"Nice job! Now put it in here."

I took out the cage we'd bought in town earlier, and Emma put the turtle inside. After all, we had to find a way to take it back to the guild hall.

As we waded out of the river, Emma bent down to wring out her skirts. Right away, I could sense the Lahmu adventurers staring at her thighs. I stood in front of her to block their line of sight.

"You bastard! Wait!" one of them shouted.

"We got here first," said another. "If you run off with that turtle, doesn't that make you a thief?"

“That’s not a very compelling argument,” I said.

They were probably just mad because I’d ruined their fun.

“Shut up!” said the guy with the shaved head. “Hand over that turtle.”

Talk about pushy. Sure, we were in rival guilds, but there was no need for violence. Leila was the only one with any common sense.

“Noir’s party caught that turtle fair and square,” she said. “We should go look somewhere else.”

“Whose side are you on?” asked the shaven-headed man.

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Oh, come on,” he said, gesturing to me. “It’s obvious you know each other, but you’re in our party now. And besides, you’re Lahmu, and you’re siding with some Odin jerk? Do you want people to start talking?”

“No, I...”

He had her cornered. If rumors like that started to spread, Leila would never find another party. It wasn’t fair, and that irritated me.

“I know where the turtles are,” I said. “If I tell you where to find one, will you drop it?”

“Who cares about the damn turtles?” he said. “I want to fight. If I win, that girl of yours is joining Lahmu.”

What were they after? I mean, obviously they wanted Emma, but why try and fight *me* for her?

“What’s in it for me?” I asked.

The guy with the shaved head glared at me, then tossed a bag of coins onto the ground.

“All our money. All of it. You three, throw yours in too.”

“Hey! Where do you get off betting our money without asking?” Leila said.

“Shut up!” shouted the guy, rounding on her. “I’m the leader. If we take her, it’ll weaken Odin, duh!”

If that's what you're after, you should take me instead.

It seemed to work, though. The other members of his party reluctantly added their purses to the pot.

“Let's do this,” he said, squaring off against me. “Man to man.”

It all seemed a little silly, but then again, it didn't look like I had much choice.

“What do you think?” I asked Emma.

“Go for it,” she said. “I know you'd never lose to some stupid, selfish jerk like that.”

“St-stupid, selfish jerk?!” he stammered.

Well, he was selfish. No question about that. I straightened up and gripped my sword. He was more muscular than me, but his sword had less reach, and besides, I didn't feel particularly threatened.

“All you really want is to be in a party with Emma,” I said. “Isn't that right?”

“I do, and I want her to date m—wait! No! Of course not!”

Ha ha, busted! Time to see what he was really made of.

Name: Togaro Tous

Age: 21

Species: Human

Level: 54

Occupation: Adventurer

Skills: One-Handed Swordsmanship (Grade C); Throwing (Grade B); Improved Back Step; Stone Bullet

Given how big he talked, I expected him to be a pushover, but he was actually pretty strong—even if he wasn't even half my level. Still, best not to go into this thinking it would be easy. With that high-level Throwing skill, he might have something up his sleeve.

“The rules are simple,” Togaro said. “We fight until one of us surrenders or gets knocked out. We don’t fight to the death, but, other than that, anything goes.”

No restrictions on weapons either. He really could try to throw something.

With that, he gave the signal, and our blades clashed. I didn’t have a swordsmanship skill, but I held him off with no trouble. Looked like I had more raw power too.

“You aren’t half-bad for a scrawny pipsqueak.”

“I’m not?” I said. “Oh, well you’re wide open.”

I slashed, and Togaro backstepped away. He kept his balance pretty well. Now that he was a few paces away, I waited for him to use a ranged attack.

“Eat this!”

Right on cue. He stretched out his hand and fired a Stone Bullet toward me. I responded in kind with a much larger projectile. It knocked him away easily, then hit him square in the shoulder.

“Oww?! B-but how? Why was it that big?”

“My Stone Bullet skill is just a little special, that’s all.”

I had Editor to thank for that.

Togaro used his uninjured hand to pull out some hidden throwing knives, and I countered by pulling the Shield of Champions out of my Pocket Dimension. It had everything I could possibly need: Durable, A-Grade Fire Resistance, A-Grade Water Resistance, and A-Grade Wind Resistance. It deflected his knives with ease.

“You even have a Pocket Dimension?”

“Do you surrender, Togaro?” I asked.

“You...you know my name? So you have Discerning Eye too?”

“I’ll take that as a ‘no.’”

I readied my shield and charged. He had no chance. He was already completely off-balance.

“Gah?!”

That Durable must’ve made it especially painful. Togaro fell dramatically, gritting his teeth. When he hit the ground, I pointed my sword at his head.

“I could end you at any moment, you know.”

“F-fine,” he growled. “Let’s call it a draw.”

“Really?” I asked. “It’d just take one little swing.”

I demonstrated, stopping just before my blade reached his face. Togaro winced. I wasn’t going to kill him. If nothing else, it was against the rules, and I wasn’t about to lose either way. But Togaro didn’t know me. He had no way to be sure.

“Do you give up?” I asked again.

“Fine! I...I surrender...”

“Guess that means I win,” I said, reaching for the coin purses. “I’ll be taking these.”

They were all pretty heavy with coin. The party had been working hard. I stowed three of them away and returned the last to Leila.

“That belongs to you now, Noir,” she said.

“All right,” I said. “Then I guess I can do whatever I want with it, right? There’s no reason I can’t give it back to you of my free will.”

“I... Thank you,” she said. “I’ll stop by again when I have some free time.”

“I can’t wait.”

For good measure, I asked the Great Sage for the location of another turtle and told Leila where to find it. Then I turned to leave with Emma, but Togaro had other ideas.

“I just have one thing I wanna say to you,” he said, stumbling past me to stand in front of Emma.

I couldn’t tell if he was nervous or if he was panting from physical strain. He didn’t even seem to notice how put off Emma looked.

“Please,” he begged. “Will you go out with me?!”

Somehow, I’d seen that coming.

Emma pointed right at my face.

“Dye your hair brown,” she told Togaro. “And grow it out. Then change your face to look just like his. Do something about your height, and behave just like the third son of the Stardia family. After that? Sure, I’ll date you.”

“Emma,” I said. “I’m flattered, but—agh, my head...”

It seemed I’d asked the Great Sage too many questions again. I did have Headache Immunity, but that had limits. Fortunately, Emma instantly guessed what was wrong. She pulled me close and kissed me with all her might. It did cure my headache, but we ended up kissing for almost a full minute in front of the others.

Togaro’s mouth hung agape. One of his comrades even had to help him away. The others all left with him. Leila’s face was bright red.

“Does your head feel better?” Emma asked.

“Yeah, it does. I appreciate the help, but couldn’t we have done that somewhere a little less, er, public?”

I could feel my cheeks burning already, but Emma seemed unfazed.

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “But this way I cured your headache and made that guy lay off—two birds with one stone!”

So it was calculated? I hadn’t thought Emma was so mature. It got me hot under the collar.

With the other adventurers long gone, we headed back to the guild with our speed turtle. Emma and I split the reward, and I asked Lola if she knew of anyone who could cook the dark ursus paws.

“There’s a good cook under my management,” she said. “Want me to ask?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

“Oh,” she said. “I never mind helping you, Mr. Noir.”

Once we’d handed the paws over to Lola, I said goodbye to Emma and

headed to the temple where Luna worked. The burn from the magmafish wasn't serious, but if Luna could heal it, I wouldn't have to worry about wound care.

As always, hundreds of people were lined up outside the temple. From the look of the crowd, they were a mixture of the sick and injured, along with Luna's own personal fan club. Honestly, I admired her for her work as much as they did. I ended up waiting for about an hour before it was my turn.

"Sir Noir!"

"Looks like you've been hard at work again today," I said. "Think you could take a look at me?"

"Where are you hurt? I promise I'll heal you."

"Right here."

"Healing Shot! Extra power!"

Luna was skilled with her magical firearm, firing off attacks that healed instead of harmed.

As the shot hit my injured hand, everything suddenly felt pleasant and warm. It was like the burn was never even there.

"That's my Luna!" I said, delighted.

"It's nothing, really. You know you can always come to me. Anyway, I'm just about done with work, so why don't we walk home together?"

I didn't have anything in particular planned, so we headed off. We attracted a fair bit of attention walking side by side. As we went, I asked about her plans for the rest of the week.

"I'll be working at the temple again tomorrow. I wish I could do more with you and the others, but..."

"You're busy," I said, "I get it. So would a trip out of the country be out of the question?"

"A trip?"

I explained about Gillan and how Emma, Lola, and I were going to visit Honest.

Surprisingly, Luna seemed interested.

“I’m going too!” she said. “I need a break anyway. Yeah.”

She was positively buzzing with excitement. It was pretty adorable. With everything that Luna had to deal with, she was probably completely stressed out. Working day in and day out really had to wear on her nerves. Well, if I could help her get the break she desperately needed, then I was only too happy to do so.

“I was planning to finish work early tomorrow afternoon,” she said. “Do you have some free time?”

“I do.”

“Then I have somewhere I’d like to go with you. Do you mind if I pick you up at home?”

“Of course not,” I said.

I was a little confused, but Luna wouldn’t tell me where she wanted to go. Still, she was excited about it—so excited that she even made me pinky promise, like a kid.

Chapter 2: Setting Off

THE NEXT MORNING, there was no one in the house, so I spent all morning in bed. Just before noon, I went down to the kitchen for some bread, when I heard Leila knock at the door.

“Hi, Noir. I had some free time, so I thought I’d stop by.”

“Please, come in.”

She hadn’t eaten lunch yet, so I offered her a seat at the table.

“Um, is this all you’re having?” Leila asked, making a weird face.

I looked down at the bread. “We’re more comfortable now than before, but old habits die hard. We used to be quite poor.”

When things were at their worst, lunch was always tasteless soup, if you could even call it soup. I’m pretty sure it was mostly hot water. Thanks, father!

“I could make you something,” said Leila, “if you like.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Only if you don’t mind.”

Leila took one look at what we had and got to work. She didn’t seem to want my help, so I went into the yard to train. I reviewed defensive stances she’d taught me last time, as well as how to throw punches and whatnot.

“It’s ready.”

Heading back in, I found a beef stir-fry and some egg dishes lined up on the table.

“It looks delicious!”

“Eat up.”

I gobbled up every last bite. In fact, I ate so fast my throat hurt. I’m sure everyone’s done that at least once in their life, right? It felt wrong to even think it, but her cooking was probably even better than my mother’s!

“Heh,” Leila said. “I’m glad you liked it.”

“It was delicious. Also, um, sorry about yesterday. Did those guys give you crap afterwards?”

“It’s fine. I’m the one who should be apologizing. I should’ve stopped Togaro.”

She didn’t have anything to apologize for, but her expression darkened all the same. I’d seen her like this before, during the Phantom incident. Was she not fitting in at Lahmu?

“You know,” I said. “If it isn’t working out for you, you could join Odin.”

“Th-thanks,” Leila said. “But I don’t think I can just leave and join a rival guild. I wanna keep trying.”

It wasn’t impossible. Sometimes, people left one guild to join another, even a bitter rival. Admittedly, it usually ended up with them being branded a traitor and earning the wrath of their old guild. Right then, I decided that, if it came to that, I would help Leila in any way I could.

With lunch finished, we went out into the yard to work up a sweat. We’d settled on practicing approaches and locks.

“Excuse me?” a voice called after we’d been training a while. “Are you in, Sir Noir?”

“Oh, Luna, come in.”

Luna walked into the yard and raised an eyebrow at Leila and me.

“You’re not alone.”

“Am I being a bother?” Leila asked.

“Oh,” said Luna. “No! But, I mean—not exactly, um—you’re not a bother.”

“So...I am?” Leila asked.

“It’s a joke,” Luna insisted. “But I was hoping, well, expecting to be alone with Sir Noir. No matter. Would you care to join us, Lady Leila?”

“Sounds fun. I think I will.”

Great! I mean, the more the merrier! We left the house and walked into

town. As I followed behind Luna, I couldn't help wondering why she was carrying two shovels. I tried to ask, but she wouldn't answer.

"Well, look at you!" the gate guards teased as we left town. "Being protected by a pair of beautiful ladies!"

That really was how it looked. I mean, I'd gotten much stronger, but I looked as weak as ever.

We kept walking and soon arrived at the small wood that Luna had in mind. It was a fairly dangerous area, known to be full of monsters. Luna had to know about those, right?

"A man who comes to the temple every day told me about this place," she said. "He says there's treasure in these woods!"

Luna seemed excited, but that information didn't exactly sound reliable. These woods were often full of adventurers. If anything was ever there, they would have found it already. But before I could say anything, Luna noticed my expression.

"Don't you worry—it's not easy to find. I heard that the late, great Olivia is the one who hid it here!"

My master had done this?! If that was true, the treasure was probably pretty impressive, but she'd never mentioned anything to me. I tried suggesting it might just be a rumor, but by this point, even Leila was excited.

"I've heard a story like that, even in my homeland. That Olivia hid a treasure chest somewhere near your town."

Apparently Olivia was famous everywhere. Still, given her personality, it wouldn't have surprised me to learn she'd just started a rumor because she was bored.

"My intuition is telling me it's buried somewhere," said Luna. "Let's all look for it."

"Hang on," I said. "We can't just start digging random holes. We'll be here forever!"

"It's not random," said Luna. "Let me explain. There are a lot of monsters

around here, right? So if someone hid treasure here, they'd have to pick a spot they could easily reach *and* escape from if they were attacked. That leaves us with two options: inside a tree or underground. Common sense dictates that underground is the more likely option."

Hence the shovels, I suppose.

Honestly, it would have been easier to ask Olivia directly. But then, there was a good chance she'd forgotten where she'd hidden it, assuming it was real, or even forgotten it was there. And besides, this did seem fun, so I decided to play along.

After that, we spent about two hours digging. Thanks to my Excavate skill, I managed to dig out six large holes, but we found no sign of treasure.

"Grr! Grrr!"

Suddenly, a monster hound showed up. It was much larger than a regular dog and covered in bristly hair, but one of its most notable characteristics was the perpetual drool hanging from its mouth.

"Please!" Luna shouted. "Leave us alone!"

When it didn't back off, she fired off a few shots from her magical firearm, killing it instantly. But there were more of them. Suddenly, the dogs were everywhere. This time, Leila rushed in. Her magic-imbued fists sent the dogs flying.

"Energy Shot!"

Luna backed her up with powerful projectiles, blowing the dogs' heads clean off.

I was both impressed and terrified, and I made a mental note never to upset either of them.

The monsters were no great threat, so we kept digging after that. It was just starting to get dark when the tip of my shovel hit something hard.

"Wait, it can't be."

It was. There was definitely something there. It was covered in dirt, but it was a proper treasure chest!

“I knew you’d find it, Sir Noir!” said Luna.

“Wow! I can’t believe it,” Leila agreed. “Could this really be Olivia’s treasure chest?”

The two of them were uncharacteristically excited—holding hands and jumping up and down. Even I could feel my heart thumping against the inside of my ribs. My hands shook. Slowly, I reached out for the chest. It didn’t seem to be locked, and we all peered down in anticipation at the sparkling gold and silver within—which was nowhere to be found.

“Is that...women’s underwear?” I asked.

Why would anyone put that in a treasure chest? If Olivia really was responsible, this stuff had been here for over two hundred years. And yet, the titillating purple bra and panties showed no signs of wear. I checked with my Discerning Eye, and found they had an Anti-Aging skill applied to them.

What a stupid waste of LP, master...

There was a letter with them too:

Advice from Olivia: If you are a woman, put these on and go after that man you have your eye on. You’ll probably get what you want. If you’re a man, put these on your head and parade around town!

“Is she trying to get someone arrested?!” I groaned.

It really did sound just like her.

“U-um, Noir?” Leila asked. “Do these have some kind of special skill on them?”

“No, just Anti-Aging.”

“Oh. Then, do you mind if I take them?”

What? Why would you need those?

Leila reached out for them, but Luna smacked her hand away.

“I want them! And don’t think you can pull one over on me.”

“Aren’t you a cleric, Luna?” Leila asked. “Are you even allowed to wear something like these?”

“Hmph, of course I am. God would totally allow it. But I’m taking them for safe-keeping.”

“Then let me take one-half.”

Luna grabbed the panties and Leila took the bra. Both of them were utterly beside themselves.

“Why are you both so excited about this?” I asked.

“Are you kidding?” said Leila. “Just the fact that these are Olivia’s undergarments makes them valuable.”

They also both seemed pretty stoked about the whole “getting the guy you like” part.

“Well, now that we’ve got the ‘treasure,’ let’s go home.”

At least they both seemed happy. Who was I to take that happiness away from them?

When we got back to town, Luna gave me a long hug as a thank you.

“You need to earn LP, don’t you?” Leila asked. “Let me help. I mean, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t.”

And so Leila hugged me too. I stored the LP away for when I’d need it and took the opportunity to invite Leila on the trip.

“I’d love to come!” she said, grinning at me in the moonlight.

We talked out there for quite some time before going our separate ways.

The next day, I had something I wanted to ask Ms. Elena, so I went to school for the first time in ages. I went to the teacher’s lounge first, and sure enough I found her there with her feet up on a desk, cracking her shoulders. As always, she seemed horribly stiff. When she saw me, her face lit up. She’d spotted her prey.

“Oh, did you miss me?” she asked.

“I just had a question, that’s all.”

“Perfect! Ask away! But in return...”

“Yeah, I know.”

She was the reason I’d picked up the Shoulder Rub skill, after all. I set about working on the knots in Ms. Elena’s shoulders, and she made a lot of unseemly sounds, kind of like an old man.

“So, what did you wanna ask me?” she said. “Lemme guess, you wanna know my measurements—”

“Pretty sure no one’s cared about those in decades.”

“Oh, shut your mouth. Don’t say things like that.”

She had to be feeling the pressure. A lot of people in our country were already married by twenty-four.

“Will you take me if no one else does?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure if she was being serious, so I did a magnificent job of ignoring her.

“Have you ever been to the town of Honest?” I asked.

“Of course. The one in Rosette, right?”

I’d known she was the right person to ask. After all, she was an ex-mercenary. The Kingdom of Rosette was our closest neighboring country. I explained my plans and asked what she thought about the area.

“It’s a pretty average kingdom,” she said. “Education is very important there, so there are schools for all sorts of things: mages, soldiers, merchants, knights, and so on. They even have a special one just for oracles.”

“Can you think of anything I should watch out for?” I asked.

“Only if you put your back into it.”

I obliged, rubbing and drumming her shoulders with more force whilst she let out moans of delight. As her mood improved, Ms. Elena told me all about Honest.

Firstly, there were more monsters than usual in the area. Second, roughly once every ten years, a massive horde of them attacked the town. Lastly, the whole town was full of shallow playboys.

“Why do the monsters attack every ten years?”

I had to wonder if there was a dungeon in the area. Of course, it wouldn't be anything like the hidden dungeon, but it was useful to know. I was also a little worried.

“No idea. It didn't happen while I was stationed there. Men tried to attack me, though.”

“Wow,” I said. “They must've had a death wish.”

“Yeah, I nearly killed them. That town is notorious for sex crime. You're almost twice as likely to be assaulted there, so be careful.”

“But I'm a man.”

“Men get targeted too. Especially cute boys like you.”

It didn't sound like she was joking, so I took her warning seriously.

When I finished the massage, she gave me a hug as a thank you.

“I'm kind of jealous of how strong you've become,” she said.

“Call me any time your shoulders are giving you trouble.”

“I will. I know you're more than capable of handling yourself, but take care on your trip.”

“Thanks.”

It was definitely the right decision to talk to her.

I headed straight from school to the guild hall to ask how the bear paw situation was going.

“You have absolutely perfect timing!” Lola said. “I was just thinking about calling you, Mr. Noir.”

Lola introduced me to another adventurer. He looked to be in his thirties, with a beard and a tan. She said his name was Enol.

“So,” he said, “you’re Noir. I cooked those bear paws for you.”

“Thank you for helping me,” I said. “You didn’t have to.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just can’t say no to sweet little Lola. Just a sec.”

Enol brought out a big plate with four bear paws. The black, hairless skin was kind of grotesque, but they were covered with a special sauce. Either way, I couldn’t exactly refuse when he told me to try it, so I steeled myself and took a bite. It was incredible! The combination of elegant seasoning and decadent fat was delicious. The meat kind of resembled pork, but it felt like the sauce was doing a lot of the heavy lifting. I had to ask what it was.

“Sorry,” Enol said. “I can’t share that. It’s a trade secret.”

“Figures. It must’ve been hard to get all that fur off.”

“Not really. I’ve got a special skill for it.”

I was curious, so I used my Discerning Eye.

Name: Quatre Nadon

Age: 29

Species: Human

Level: 48

Occupation: Chef; Adventurer

Skills: Spearmanship (Grade B); Target Weak Points; Butchering

Either he had a restaurant on the side, or he made most of his money as a chef. And Butchering, huh? I checked it out with Editor.

Butchering: Improves the user’s ability to butcher and dismantle creatures, including removing blood.

How handy! It seemed useful for butchering monsters for parts to take home, and it was only 400 LP, so I went ahead and got it—hold up. Wasn’t his name

Enol?

“He’s using a fake name,” I whispered to Lola.

“Nothing gets past you, Noir. He’s on the run from debtors, so he’s been using a pseudonym.”

“O-oh...”

“His face is fake too,” she said. “I introduced him to a surgeon.”

So *that* was why he couldn’t say no to Lola: he was hiding from someone, and she’d helped him. The world really was a harsh place. There were probably a lot of people like him in the guild.

“Everyone carries some darkness they can’t talk about,” Lola said. “But it’s made me an excellent judge of character!”

I’d been so distracted that I only realized then that the dark ursus paw got me 900 LP! I was up 500 LP even after acquiring the Butchering skill. I felt bad keeping the rest of the meal to myself, so I offered it to Lola and the other adventurers.

“Thank you, Noir! I appreciate it.”

“Dig in!”

It was nice to do this sometimes. After all, no matter how strong you get, you can’t survive all by yourself. Even just getting information from the people in your network can prove critical. In the end, I saved a piece for Emma and said my goodbyes to Lola.

“I was thinking about leaving for Honest the day after tomorrow,” I told her. “Does that work for you?”

“I’m ready any time. I can’t wait.”

Great! And I’d already talked to Leila and Luna, so Emma was the only one left.

When I went to her house, her mother greeted me at the door and told me that Emma was in the yard with her coach.

“I think she wants to try to keep up with you as best she can. Please, come

in.”

“Thank you.”

From the living room window, I could see Emma sparring in the backyard with her instructor. The other woman was over Level 100, but Emma was trying her hardest. She was drenched in sweat, and it seemed best not to interrupt them.

“Could you give this to Emma?” I asked, handing over the bear paw. “And let her know I’m leaving for the trip the day after tomorrow.”

“You always take such good care of her.”

“Oh, I think she’s usually the one taking care of me!” I said.

With that settled, I headed out.

It seemed that was how Emma was getting so much stronger—she was training hard. I didn’t really understand, though. After all, if she wanted a skill, she could always have just asked me for it.

Finally, the day of our trip arrived. I awoke to the sound of birds chirping, but I was a little surprised to find Alice in my bed.

“When did you get here?”

“Last night,” she said. “I couldn’t sleep, so I came in here. You were sleep-talking and asked me to sleep in with you.”

Well, that was definitely a lie! But I was worried about how unhappy she sounded.

“I won’t see you for a while, brother dearest,” she said. “Why won’t you take me with you?”

“You have to go to school over summer break, right?” I said. “Plus, you didn’t sound like you wanted to come.”

“Well, no, but...I just think going to see Gillan is a waste of time...a waste of your precious time on this planet...”

What had Gillan done to upset her so much? I would have to talk to him about that when we met.

We got up, and Alice gave me a hug. I appreciated the LP but couldn't help but notice how tired she looked.

"You have bags under your eyes. Did you not sleep well?"

"I got distracted counting your pores," she said. "And then it was morning..."

Did I really have so many pores? No! No, everyone has lots of them, right?

I headed down to the living room where my parents were checking my bags. Fortunately, it seemed like I had everything I needed.

<You're up quite late,> said Tigerson. *<Shouldn't you be going?>* "Oh crap, what time is it?!"

<It's only ten minutes before you are meant to leave.> "Dammit! Alice, why didn't you wake me?"

Alice scuffed her feet. "Sorry."

She probably just didn't want me to go.

I said my goodbyes and took my bags from my father.

"Noir, the coach should be at the gate soon," he said. "Take care."

"Thanks for making the travel arrangements for me."

"If Gillan's causing trouble," he said, "tell him I'm cutting him off!"

"Got it. You stay out of trouble too!"

"I never cause trouble! Ah ha ha ha!"

He seemed very relaxed. That always made me suspicious, but there was no time to worry about his shenanigans now. I stuffed some bread in my mouth and headed for the door, but Alice chased after me, grabbing my hand.

"Please be careful," she begged, staring up at me. "I will keep the house safe while I wait for your return, brother dearest."

"Well, that puts my mind at ease."

"Also," she said, "if you're running with bread in your mouth, then watch where you're going—especially around corners. Or you'll get distracted and smack into some pretty lady."

That seemed very specific! Before I could ask her about it, Alice went on.

“And then some weird romance might start—so please, be super careful.”

“Ha ha ha, yeah, sure,” I said.

I mean, what else could I say? Like that would ever happen!



I chuckled as I left home, but I was also short on time. I had to hurry. It was pretty hard to run with bread in my mouth, and I slowed down as I approached a corner, just to be careful.

“Look out! I’m late! I’m late!”

Look out?! A girl swung around the corner right in front of me. She had bread in her mouth, just like me. As she rounded the corner, she tripped over thin air and tumbled toward me.

“Eep! Owwie!”

She ended up on all fours. She was wearing a miniskirt, and I got an eyeful of her blue underwear. My Lucky Letcher skill was at it again.

“Oh, this is just the worst!” she complained. “I have to hurry. Five-second rule!”

She got up, collected her fallen bread, and shoved it back in her mouth. Then she set off running again.

Five-second rule? Is food really still good to eat if it’s been on the floor for that long?

Regardless, Alice’s prediction had come true. I took extra care around corners the rest of the way.

When I got to the gate, Emma, Lola, Luna, and Leila were already waiting.

“Sorry I’m late.”

“Morning, Noir. Looks like the coach is already here.”

“Guess we should get going.”

We greeted the coachman, then loaded up our bags and climbed on board.

It was time to go to Honest!

Chapter 3:

On the Road

IT WOULD TAKE US three days to get to Honest. There weren't any particularly strict entry requirements—our kingdoms were on good terms with each other. There were occasional checks along the way, but Emma was the daughter of a baron, so everything went smoothly. Being a member of the nobility opened a lot of doors like that. Gillan had probably asked me to bring Emma along specifically to smooth our journey.

It'd take us two days to reach the Kingdom of Rosette. From there, we just had to get through one more town. Pretty soon into the journey, everyone was tired. The four girls had fallen asleep in the carriage, but it was already evening. If I slept now, would I be able to sleep again at night? It probably wasn't such a terrible idea, even so. We'd be sleeping outside tonight and would have to take turns on watch.

The carriage came to a stop and Perrido, our coachman, opened the door. He was about the same age as my father.

"Noir, I know you wanted to sleep outdoors today, but are you sure about that?" he asked.

"Yeah, it shouldn't be a problem," I said, stepping out of the carriage.

We were on a wide grassy plain, with nothing as far as the eye could see.

"Is it safe here?" I asked.

"Actually," said Perrido, "it's famous for its lions."

I looked at him, startled, but Perrido just smiled at me warmly.

Well, sorry for freaking out about that, but I think it's pretty serious!

"There are other options," he said. "But this one is probably the best. You understand, right?"

"You mean there are monsters everywhere else," I said.

He nodded. We couldn't exactly rest easy around ferocious animals, but they were much less of a concern than monsters. Guess we'd be spending the night out here after all.

After dinner, we split into pairs to keep watch. Emma, Luna, and I all had Night Vision, so we each paired off with one of the others. I ended up with Lola, and we were scheduled for the third watch. For now, we lay down. Lola snuggled up against me. Her arms were shaking.

"I'm scared," she said. "The lions..."

"It'll be fine. We'll work together, and nothing bad will happen."

"I'd feel so much better if you held my hand."

She was trembling, so I did as she asked, but Emma immediately came over to glare at us.

"You're not seriously buying that act, are you? She's not actually afraid."

"But..." I said.

"No buts!"

"I really *am* scared!" Lola protested. "And you're on duty, go do your job!"

"Ugh! Fine. But I won't tell you if any lions show up."

And thus Dark Emma was born. She took up her post, her hair blowing behind her.

Lola squeezed my hand tight. "I guess we'll die together!" she said cheerfully.

Well, that might work for her, but I definitely didn't want to die! I was a little anxious as I closed my eyes, but, as uncomfortable as I was, I fell asleep right away.

"Huh?"

I woke to something tapping on my head. Lola put a finger to her mouth to quiet me, and I strained to see in the dark. Everyone else was already up and gathered in close.

"Are we under attack?" I asked quietly.

“Yes, we’re surrounded,” said Emma. “We took out a pair of lionesses that approached, but there are a *lot* more of them.”

I got up right away and grabbed my sword. There were fourteen or fifteen other lions around us, all of them females.

“Lola,” I said. “If worse comes to worst, use this.”

Even Perrido was Level 80, which meant that Lola was the only one with no combat skills to speak of. I handed her the Blade of Divine Punishment. We could do this.

“Emma, Luna, and I will attack with ranged magic. Leila, you and Mr. Perrido keep guard.”

“Roger that.”

“No problem.”

At least the three of us all had Night Vision and could see our enemies clearly.

Emma used Wind Strike on the attacking lions, while Luna fired off rounds from her magical firearm, and I started throwing knives. My B-Grade Throwing skill helped out a lot with that. I nailed one of the lions right in the eyeball. They were easier to take out than I’d anticipated. Before we knew it, the fight was over.

Perrido tapped me on the shoulder.

“You’re strong, Noir. Your father was also quite the fighter back in the day, but I think you’ve nearly surpassed him.”

I definitely already have! I thought. But I didn’t say that out loud. Best to protect my father’s honor.

Perrido was smiling, but as I watched, his expression soured. “Something’s odd. There were far too many. Normally they only move in groups of five or six.”

Almost before he could finish speaking, his fears were confirmed. More lionesses closed in on us, and this time, they had a massive boss in tow.

The lumbering beast was much larger than any lion, and its tail seemed to be

split in two.

“That’s a metal lion,” said Perrido. “It probably came here looking for females to mate with.”

“How is it different from regul—”

“Oh no, it’s coming right at us!”

There was no time to talk. The metal lion rushed us, and Leila and I sprang to the front of the group.

“Haaaah!”

“Eat this!”

Leila struck the creature with her fists while I used my sword. We did it! Or... so I’d thought, but certainty shattered as my blade bounced off the monster’s body. Looking across at Leila, I could see the same had happened to her. Its flesh was rock solid! There was no time to use Discerning Eye, but I realized it had to have a skill that allowed it to turn into metal.

“Look out!” I shouted.

The metal lion rushed on toward the other four. Everyone except Lola leapt forward to try to bring it down, but it outsmarted them all. It had to weigh several hundred pounds, but it flew through the air clean over the lot of them, landing straight in front of Lola. Was it targeting her on purpose?!

“Uh, wh-why me?”

“Grrrrrr!”

It swiped at Lola and its massive paw slammed right into her.

Everyone fell silent. I suddenly couldn’t stop thinking of the first time I’d met her, when she was testing me at the guild. I thought of how she always had a smile for me.

“L-Lola!”

“Aaaaah!”

Someone shouted, and a shadow moved quickly through the dark.

“Grmph?!”

The metal lion lurched back in pain, blood spewing from its mouth. I looked around to see who was responsible and standing next to it was...Lola? She'd dodged the killing blow and countered with the blade I'd given her.

“Somebody! Anybody! Save me!”

She might have been crying for help, but she was still fighting the creature off. She swung her blade again and the metal lion collapsed. How had that happened? Wasn't it made of metal? Somehow, she must have produced enough destructive force to break through it!

“Huh? I beat it?” she asked, looking around with a puzzled expression.

She wasn't the only one! As the lionesses retreated, Lola jumped into my arms.

“I was sooo scared!”

“Um, so about what just happened...?”

“The weapon you leant me saved my life!” she said. “It must be super strong.”

Only it wasn't. The only skills on the Blade of Divine Punishment were Sharp Edge and A-Grade Wolf Killer. But lions weren't wolves, and my sword had the same Sharp Edge, with no effect.

“Lola, hang on,” I said. “I need to use Discerning Eye on you.”

It revealed something absolutely shocking.

Name: Lola Metrose

Age: 16

Species: Human

Level: 15

Occupation: Guild Receptionist

Skills: Memory; Speed Reading; Superhuman Strength (Grade S)

The first two skills made sense. After all, she always knew so much, and she

could read extremely quickly. But the third one?

“What is it?” she asked.

“Y-you have S-Grade Superhuman Strength...”

“I don’t think that’s very funny.”

“I’m not joking, it’s true.”

Lola seemed shocked; she’d really had no idea. She had always seen herself as weak and seemed happy with that role. Only Luna, who’d known her for a long time, didn’t seem surprised.

“You know,” she said. “You always were weirdly strong. Like when you caught that falling store sign with one hand.”

“That was just a freak accident,” said Lola.

An accident? Catching a falling sign single-handed sounded like a little more than that!

I told her about her Memory and Speed Reading skills, and she was pretty stunned by those too.

“It’s incredible to have S-Grade Superhuman Strength without even training,” I said. “Do you have any idea where it came from?”

“Well,” she said. “My father used to be an adventurer. Guild muscle, I think. And my mother had superhuman strength. They always said she was the second strongest in the guild...”

So it was all down to her incredible bloodline! Plus, she’d leveled up when she killed the metal lion, so now she was even stronger.

“I suppose you should quit your job as guild receptionist and become an adventurer,” Emma grumbled.

Lola shook her head. “Absolutely not! I like my job! And I like this uniform!”

It did look good—professional and serious in the front, but open and just a bit scandalously cut in the back. No one could argue that it suited her.

After that, things settled down a bit. Lucky for us, we got through the rest of the night without any more attacks.

The next morning, we got back in the carriage and headed to the checkpoint. Emma showed them proof of her status as a baron's daughter, and soon, we were in the Kingdom of Rosette.

Perrido did a great job with the carriage. It made me wonder if it might be useful to pick up a Driving skill. Meanwhile, Lola was wrestling with what had happened the night before.

"You don't have to force yourself to fight," I told her. "We can handle things."

"But I at least want to be able to protect myself."

"Then you should keep that blade," I said.

She could probably make better use of it than I could, but Lola seemed indecisive. She'd taken a liking to the weapon but didn't like the idea of carrying it around. It was pretty large, and it didn't go with her outfit.

"What should I do?" she asked.

"What if I give you a storage skill?"

"Are you sure?!" she said. "This is why I love you, Mr. Noir."

It seemed like the least I could do. I mean, Lola had done so much for me. A C-Grade Pocket Dimension would be more than sufficient, and it would only cost me 400 LP to produce the skill. The real question was how much it would cost to Bestow it on her. That was all down to her personal affinity. So I checked and, in this case, it would only cost 450 LP. That was a total of 850—hardly anything in the grand scheme of things. I gave her the skill, and she tried it out right away.

"You really do bring out the best in your friends, Mr. Noir. It makes my heart pound."

"Just think of it as a thank you," I said. "You know, for all the LP."

"Right! But you must've used quite a bit just now."

"Nah, it wasn't that much."

"Well, when we get to town, I'll have to repay you," Lola said, flashing her

back to me.

The sight of her silky smooth skin made my heart thump. What did she mean when she said she would repay me? Lola was extremely bold, so it could be anything.

After that, my mind was in the gutter until we reached Landan, the town where we'd be spending the night. Still, we'd arrived a little earlier than planned and, as we got out of the carriage, the sun was still up.

"Noir, let's talk to the guards."

"Good idea."

We went to present ourselves to the guards, but there was no one there. The only thing standing at the gate were two statues. Even more strangely, they looked like they were running from something.

Landan was right on the edge of the Kingdom of Rosette and was sometimes considered the gateway to our kingdom. The town had large outer walls and a single gate in and out to prevent monster incursions, even if the walls weren't too high.

"Why are there no people here?" I asked. "And what's with all these statues?"

"I don't know, but a lot of them are carrying luggage..." Emma frowned. "Do you think the townspeople are eating?"

She sounded pretty certain. The people of Rosette were known to like their food, sure, but wasn't it far too early for dinner? It was a pretty decent size town too, so it seemed unlikely that the entire population could have been wiped out by an enemy force without anyone noticing, leaving only these weird statues behind.

"Let's take a look inside," I said. "Carefully."

"Sounds like a good idea."

Perrido and I were the first ones through the gate.

"There aren't any guards inside either," he said. "Maybe the town really was

taken over? But then, wouldn't an enemy force have guards stationed by the gate?"

"There are more of those statues inside," I said. "Is this place usually like this?"

"This isn't the Landan I know, that's for sure."

Something was clearly wrong, so we cautiously ventured further into the town. The statues really were everywhere—all ages and genders. Their faces were strained, and a lot of them looked like they were running. That was in pretty poor taste. Where had they even come from?

"I have a thought," Leila said as she touched one of them. "What if these statues are the townsfolk?"

"Is that even possible?" I asked.

Even as I said it, I knew she was probably right. These people, if that's what they were, were all running away with expressions of abject terror. Some were even reaching for their swords. What had happened to this town? Even the houses were full of these statues.

"In my country," said Leila, "there's a monster that can turn people to stone."

"But can it turn several thousand people all at once?" I asked.

"No, of course not. That's what makes this so scary..."

Could a whole pack of those monsters have descended on this town? If so, why?

Perrido frowned. "Perhaps it would be wise to report this to Honest first."

I shook my head. "Hold on."

If these statues really *were* people, I could read them. So I did. All of them, without exception, had the skill Eternal Petrification. That confirmed it.

"Is something wrong, Noir?" Emma asked.

"Hold on. I'm gonna try something."

"Try what?"

These were exceptional times, so I explained the basics of my abilities to Perrido.

“Th-that’s the stuff of legend!” he stammered, wide-eyed.

“I just got lucky,” I told him. “One day I woke up and realized just what I could do.”

“He really does have an amazing son...” he muttered. “Go on. I won’t delay you further.”

I opened up Editor to investigate one of the nearby statues.

Eternal Petrification: Permanently petrifies the target.

No time limit. How horrible. I tried adjusting the phrasing, but it would cost a whopping 6,000 LP to break the skill. Surely there had to be something I could do!

“It costs a lot more than I expected. I don’t have enough LP right now,” I said.

“Then why don’t we all help you earn some more?” asked Luna.

It was a good idea. I was only a thousand short. Perrido was the first to volunteer.

“You can do that?! If there’s anything I can do, I will!”

“I’m not really sure you can...”

“I’m not good enough?” he asked.

Sorry, I’m just not into guys.

I found a building that looked safe so we could earn me more LP, but Lola stopped me.

“Wait. Can you make an Alchemy skill?”

I looked into it.

Alchemy (Grade C) — 800 LP

Alchemy (Grade B) — 2,000 LP

Alchemy (Grade A) — 4,500 LP

Alchemy (Grade S) — 8,000 LP

“I can manage a B-Grade version,” I reported.

“B, huh?” said Lola. “Grades A and S must be particularly powerful.”

I was curious what was so different about them.

Alchemy (Grade B): Grants the ability to combine suitable ingredients in a variety of combinations to produce novel substances.

Alchemy (Grade A): Grants the ability to combine suitable ingredients in a variety of combinations to produce novel substances. Further grants the ability to intuitively know if combinations will be successful.

With the A-Grade version, you could never fail.

“There’s a lot of trial and error with alchemy,” Lola explained. “You can waste a lot of ingredients.”

“Why would I need Alchemy anyway?” I asked.

“I remember an alchemist once made a potion that cured petrification. It could be mass-produced too. But he only recorded a part of his research...”

Still, there were several thousand people here. If curing just one cost 6,000 LP, we’d never help them all.

“All right, I’ll earn the LP to produce an A or S-Grade version of the skill. No, wait! What if...”

Why didn’t I think of it before? I mean, all we needed was the knowledge of how to make the potion. And I had the strongest possible ace up my sleeve in

that respect!

Great Sage, how would you produce an item that cures Eternal Petrification?

<There are two alchemic concoctions that will serve that function. The first is the Cure All, which can heal all status ailments. The other is Stone Salve, which can restore petrified flesh to its original state.> Thank you, Great Sage, for your boundless knowledge!

So, how do I make it?

<The recipe is as follows: seven ounces Holy Water, one Sustenance Pill, one Spirit Stone (small), and a container such as a bottle or a gourd.> Great! I explained to the others how I'd found out the recipe and what we would need to make it.

"None of those ingredients are particularly rare," said Perrido. "We might even be able to collect everything we need in town. There should be holy water at the temple, and the pills and spirit stones at the general store. We should split up."

I had a Discerning Eye for Items, so I went with Emma to the store. And anyway, I'd used the Great Sage quite a lot. If I got a headache, I'd be more comfortable having her around.

"Hello!" Emma called out as we entered the store. "Oh. Sorry. I couldn't help myself."

"I know how you feel."

We looked around, and Emma immediately found the spirit stones. "There are a ton of them too. How lucky!"

Spirit stones contained magic energy and had a boat load of uses. The larger ones were rare, but the small variety were easy to find.

"How should we pay for them?" I asked.

"We're trying to save everyone in town, so maybe they'll let this one slide?" Emma said. "If not, I can just pay for them later."

"Sorry, but we'll have to borrow these," I said to the shopkeep, though he was frozen in stone.

Several drawstring pouches caught my eye, tucked away on the top shelf. They probably contained some kind of medicine.

“Noir, gimme a lift. I can get them.”

“Yes, princess.”

I knelt and helped Emma up onto my shoulders. Her thighs pressed against my face.

“I-I’m not too heavy, am I?”

“No,” I said. “You’re a lot lighter than you look.”

“Well that’s good—no, wait, what did you mean lighter than I *look*?!”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by that. Could you hurry up and grab those pills?”

There was no way I was getting into that discussion. Fortunately, Emma grabbed the pouches and I helped her down. They were full of black pills roughly one inch in diameter. When I used Discerning Eye on them, I shouted with joy. Here were the Sustenance Pills we were after, and there were tons of them.

“I wonder what they’re made of...” I mused.

“I remember asking about it when I was a kid,” Emma said. “Apparently they’re made from monster excrement.”

“Ugh, I wish I could unhear that.”

“They gather the safe kind,” she said. “Though sometimes the human stuff gets mixed in.”

“Emma! Stop it. Please! I touched them!”

“Don’t worry, we wouldn’t abandon you over something like that.”

“A likely story! Why are you backing away?”

Emma giggled, and I decided to hold her hand later as my revenge.

At any rate, if even a small shop like this had the items we needed, I didn’t think it should be too hard to acquire the large quantities we would want to

cure everyone. The only thing left now was containers. We needed something that wouldn't leak, so I slipped into the living space behind the shop and collected the owner's cups.

With everything gathered, we met back up with the rest of the group. The other four were already waiting with their various ingredients. Luna was carrying two buckets filled with water.

"Did they really have that much holy water just lying around?"

"There was more, actually. I can go back and get it if we need. Lucky, right?"

"You can say that again. Looks like we have everything. Now I just need to learn the skill."

Since we already knew the recipe, the B-Grade skill would be more than enough. I went ahead and acquired it, then we laid out the ingredients. I focused my intent on producing the Stone Salve. There was a flash of light and, just like that, the ingredients vanished. In their place was a cup filled with liquid. It looked just like water, but I inspected it with my Discerning Eye and confirmed that it was Stone Salve.

"You did it! That's our Noir!" said Leila.

"Wow, it really worked!" Emma said.

Everyone was smiling. We had plenty of ingredients left, so I made several batches. The only thing left to do after that was to see if it worked.

"Who should we start with?" I asked.

"Sir Noir, what about this person?"

Luna gestured toward the statue of a tall, muscular woman.

"She looks like she tried to fight while everyone else ran. She was frozen whilst swinging her sword."

"She looks strong too."

She had short hair and was swinging her massive claymore. The way she was positioned, she must've seen whatever did this. Even so, she had the courage to hold her ground.

“We could probably get some useful information from her. Any objections?”

No one said anything, so I went ahead and poured the Stone Salve over her head. About ten seconds later, she transformed before our eyes. The stone faded away, and her body returned to normal!

Finally, we were about to get some answers!

Chapter 4:

The Petrifying Woman

AS THE STONE WOMAN returned to living flesh, I marveled at the effectiveness of the Stone Salve. The woman seemed a bit dazed as she straightened up and looked around, but she was strong too. It was hard to miss the muscles under her brown skin. When I looked into it, I found she was Level 107 and had several combat skills to boot.

“Where did she go?” the woman asked, eyeing us carefully.

“She?”

“Her bottom half is a snake and—actually, who on earth are you all?”

We explained the situation. She was clever, and she immediately understood what we were doing.

“Thank you for curing me. You can call me Aisha. I’m from a small town in the central part of the continent. I stopped here on a trip.”

“I’m Noir. We were really surprised when we arrived. Everyone in town has been turned to stone.”

“*She* did it. She has the face of a beautiful woman, but her lower half isn’t human at all...”

“A snake, right?”

“Yeah. She’s dangerous. Everyone who looks at her turns to stone. At first, I thought it was magic, but it was too fast and too powerful. I’ve never heard of a spell that could turn so many people at once. She approached me with her eyes downcast and asked, ‘Where is the House of Weldt?’ I told her I didn’t know. Then she raised her head and...that’s all I remember.”

It sounded like Aisha had been turned to stone the moment their eyes met. If this was the result of the snake lady’s skill, it was a pretty vicious one. Unless you had Petrification Immunity, you were done for.

Also, it turned out that all of this had happened only a few hours ago. We sure had incredible timing.

“I’m acquainted with the lord of Honest,” said Perrido. “I think it would be best if we went on ahead and informed him of the situation.”

“Mr. Perrido, do you know about the House of Weldt?” I asked.

“That I do.”

The Weldts were a noble family and Sir Weldt was the mayor of Landan. He was well-liked and always thought about the needs of his people. Not exactly the type to attract ill will.

“He *was* aggressive about eradicating monsters and keeping this area safe,” said Perrido.

“Now that might be something,” said Leila. “How would a powerful monster feel about that?”

Everyone fell silent. If any monsters in the area could speak, they might well also harbor a desire for revenge.

“Mr. Perrido,” I said, “could you take a few bottles of Stone Salve to Honest?”

“What do you plan to do, Noir?”

“I’m going to Weldt’s house to see what’s happened to the mayor.”

“Seems risky. What if you’re all turned to stone?”

“That’s why I want you to take the Stone Salve,” I said.

“Ahh, now I understand.”

If the worst did happen, Perrido could save us with the salve. Aisha was suffering from the aftereffects of the petrification, so she decided to go with Perrido to Honest.

“Don’t push yourselves too hard,” she said.

“Oh, don’t worry, if anything dangerous happens, I’ll run.”

Perrido told us where to find the mayor’s house, and off they went.

On our way across town, I started to worry. Should I give myself Petrification

Immunity? I had just under 3,000 LP, and the S-Grade version would leave me really hurting, but I could get the A-Grade variant for only 1,200. I went for it. After all, it was best if we could avoid getting our whole group wiped out. I wanted to add the phrase, “renders gaze-based petrification ineffective,” but I didn’t have enough LP.

In one corner of a residential area, there was a large building that looked a little fancier than the others. That had to be the mayor’s house. The front door was wide open.

“You should probably keep watch,” I told the others. “I have the immunity skill, so I’ll go inside.”

“I’m going with you!” said Emma.

“All right,” said Leila. “Then I’ll go around back.”

Lola and Luna stood guard out front, in case any enemies tried to make a break for it.

We tiptoed into the house and quickly found a woman near the entrance who had been turned to stone. Judging from her outfit, she was a maid. We followed the trail of stone maids and butlers down the hall and up the stairs, then froze in our tracks when we approached a room at the back of the house. The doors were also wide open.

I listened carefully. I couldn’t hear anything, so I flattened myself against the wall and peered inside. There was no sign of either monsters or humans. When I found the courage to go inside, I found a stone man, reaching for something on a shelf. Emma joined me and looked at his face.

“Seems to match the description Mr. Perrido gave. He must be the mayor.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate. But we have some Stone Salve, so we should definitely use it.”

“Wait, Noir, what’s that?”

The room hadn’t really been disturbed, with the exception of one area. There were several shards of glass on the floor by the wall. No, it was...a mirror?

“Something seems odd about that area. If those came from a mirror, there

has to be more of it somewhere.”

“Maybe the petrifying woman smashed it and stole something?”

That made sense. If I had to guess, the mayor had probably been reaching for that mirror.

“Hey,” said Emma. “Look at this.”

She’d found a bundle of parchment in a desk drawer. On closer inspection, it appeared to be the town records. It detailed how monsters had been appearing frequently around Landan; what soldiers had been sent to take them out; monster exterminations; the capture of a notorious thief, and so on.

It also described how Yga, the vice-captain of the mayor’s private guard, had been caught committing petty theft, and how resentful he had been when the mayor confronted him about it. The next day, he stole a great sum of money and goods and ran off, leaving only a note that read: “I’ll never let you live this down.” It sounded like an awful situation.

The papers included other issues the mayor was dealing with, among them, a description of a specific monster hunt.

“This must be related to what happened.”

Apparently, there were caves in the marshes to the east of Landan, and some particularly vicious monsters had taken up residence there. The caves were famed for their hidden riches, and a group had disappeared down there in search of them. Others were sent to investigate and discovered the first group had been turned to stone. Based on eyewitness reports, a woman with the lower body of a snake was responsible.

“It matches Aisha’s story. Sounds like the mayor tried to defeat her.”

“Seems like he had a plan too.” Emma pointed at a page describing the strategy.

The mayor had obtained an item that nullified petrification—a Reflect Mirror. It would reflect any spell back at the user. If he could get the petrifying woman to look into it, it might turn her to stone.

“How do you think she figured out his scheme?” I asked.

“No idea. Maybe she’s just really perceptive?”

“Hm, that could be it...”

But now that the mirror was destroyed, what could we do? Best to start by curing the mayor. I prepared to splash the Stone Salve on him when I felt a profound sense of unease.

“That’s weird...”

How had he been turned to stone while standing like this? He would have had his back to the woman and been staring at the shelf. There was a wall right behind the shelf. I couldn’t understand it.

“Maybe she doesn’t need to make eye contact, she only needs to look at someone. Emma, if that’s the case then—huh?”

I felt a chill run down my spine.

I turned around and looked at Emma. She stood exactly where she had been, but she wasn’t Emma anymore. She had been turned to stone.

The door creaked. The situation was even worse than I’d thought. The petrifying woman could probably turn people to stone just by looking at them, even if they had their backs turned. To make matters worse, someone—probably that very same petrifying woman—was standing in the door. She was clad in black with purple hair and exposed shoulders. She had a beautiful face, but her twisting snake’s tail was utterly grotesque. She matched the description exactly. Her eyes gleamed purple, and I investigated her with my Discerning Eye.

Name: Magra

Level: 95

Skills: Petrifying Gaze; Tail Whip

I hadn’t turned to stone yet, so I took the opportunity to investigate her most troublesome skill.

Petrifying Gaze: Consumes magic. Turns anything the user looks at into stone permanently. This effect is frequently ineffective against individuals with C-Grade Petrification Immunity and completely ineffective on those with B-Grade variants and above.

It wasn't nearly as bad as I'd feared, and this confirmed that the ability wouldn't work on me at all. She seemed a bit shaken when she saw I was still moving.

"Look into my eyes," she hissed.

"I am, and I have been this whole time. Your Petrifying Gaze won't work on me."

"Tsk."

What?! I'd expected a head-on assault, but instead, she just turned tail and ran.

"Emma, I'll be right back!"

I felt awful about leaving her, but I couldn't let the culprit get away. There was a crashing sound downstairs as the magra broke through the front door and out into the street. She was fast. I leapt down the stairs and dashed after her.

"You guys, that's the—"

My words caught in my throat. Lola and Luna were already turned to stone. I saw the magra slithering away and chased after her.

"I'm not letting you get away!" I shouted.

I raised my voice, loud enough that Leila would hear, but I didn't wait for her to catch up. Instead, I gave chase as the magra disappeared down a side street.

"Agh?!"

I rounded the corner and was knocked backward. The magra had ambushed me and struck me with her tail.

"Hisss!"

Her hands closed around my head, lifting me up off the ground. She was so strong!

“Don’t get ahead of yourself!”

I kicked her in the stomach and she let me go. I managed to put some distance between us, and I turned to see that suspicious purple light in her eyes again. When she realized her skill wasn’t going to work this time either, she cried out in frustration. “Why won’t you turn to stone?! Why? Why?!”

“You just don’t know when to give up, do you? I have Petrification Immunity.”

“Get rid of it! Get rid of it, or I’ll kill you!”

Is she stupid or something?

Hadn’t the records in the mayor’s office said she was an unusually intelligent monster? Whether or not that was true, I couldn’t miss out on an opportunity to question her.

“Did you enter the mayor’s residence because you were afraid of the Reflect Mirror?”

“I fear no such thing! It was a hindrance, that’s all!”

Well, what she was lacking in intellect, she certainly made up for in pride.

“I’m impressed you knew he had it. Let me guess, you had allies in town?”

“I have no allies. Humans are inferior beings. A man named Yga told me of it, nothing more.”

“That name sounds familiar...”

Wasn’t he the one the mayor had caught stealing? And the vice-captain of the guard, too. Had he told her about the mirror to get back at the mayor? That didn’t seem quite right. Surely he’d known what would happen? Maybe he wanted revenge on the whole town.

“Can you tell me where Yga is now?”

“I neither know nor care. Now it is my turn: How did you learn this Petrification Immunity?”

She really was surprisingly detail-oriented. I bet it was a real shock that her

signature attack had failed. This was a real opportunity. If I could goad her into losing her temper, it might be easier to take her down.

“I just looked at an ugly painting every night until I developed the skill naturally,” I said.

“A painting?”

“Yeah. It’s a painting of a hideous monster. It looks *just* like you!”

“I’m going to kill youuuuuu!” she screamed, charging right at me.

Maybe it was her human half that made her so emotional. She leapt in without any sort of plan, and I took advantage of it to fire off a flash of Blinding Light. At such close range, the light was overwhelming.

“Urghh!”

She flailed about, completely blind and clutching her face. That’s when I made my move, stabbing her through the chest with my two-edged blade. She collapsed to the floor, gasping for breath. For some reason, she started laughing.

“Ha! Ha ha ha ha!”

“What’s so funny?”

“They’ll never come back. If you kill me, none of them will come back.”

“I guess.”

“Does it not vex you that you cannot save them? Those girls who were with you will remain stone for all eternity.”

She meant Emma and the others. She was hoping that I’d break down when I heard that. What a rotten person. Although, I probably had given her a run for her money in the cruelty department.

“I already found a cure,” I said. “In fact, I’ve already started curing the villagers. Everyone will get a happy ending. Well, everyone except you.”

“Damn you to hell!”

She gathered the last of her strength and used her Tail Whip on me again. I countered it with a point-blank Icicle to the face. It was a much easier victory

than I'd expected.

"Maybe I have my experience in the hidden dungeon to thank for that."

Now that it was over, something bugged me: Leila hadn't joined me. Maybe she hadn't heard? It was unlikely she was petrified. After all, the magra had come out the front door. Leila should have been in the back.

I headed back to the mayor's house and soon saw the source of the problem. There was someone else there with Leila.

"Please, I'm begging you, let me go..."

He was a well-dressed middle-aged man. He was pretty burly too, but all the same, Leila had him in an arm lock. When I got closer, I saw a sword on the ground. They must've been fighting.

"Leila, I took care of things on my end. What's going on?"

"He was hiding. When I noticed him, he ambushed me."

I bet he got one hell of a surprise. Leila was much stronger than she looked.

"What do you want?" I asked him.

"Save me, man!" he pleaded. "She's got the wrong idea. She thinks I'm in league with that monster."

"Monster?"

"You've seen all the people turned to stone, haven't you? The monster's the one who did it."

So he knew all about it, but somehow he was totally fine.

"What's your name?"

"Tamzan."

I used my Discerning Eye to be sure. It revealed something very interesting: his name wasn't Tamzan, it was Yga. Did he even feel guilty about lying to me like that? Did he feel bad about any of this?

"Noir, should I let him go?"

"No, hold him for me. I'll tie him up."

“What?! Why?!”

I pulled some rope out of my Pocket Dimension and bound his arms and legs. He didn't appear to have any special skills, so the rope would be enough. When I told him what I saw in the mayor's records, and what the magra said, Yga went into a panic.

“Please! Please, let me go! If it's money you want, I have plenty. I'll give you half! I'll make you rich!”

“Double it, and even then we'd turn you down.”

He'd risked the lives of everyone in town for his own petty revenge. To make matters worse, he wasn't even justified.

Instead, I left him in Leila's capable hands and went about helping our friends. They all returned to normal as soon as I applied the Stone Salve. Emma and the other girls didn't even remember being petrified.

When I was sure they were all right, we returned the mayor to his original form. He was a serious man, around fifty.

“What on earth...? And who are you all?”

“Good afternoon, let me explain.”

I went through the whole thing while the mayor turned white as a sheet. When I told him that we could cure all the villagers with the correct ingredients, he let out a sigh of relief.

“Another win for Noir!” said Emma.

“I knew you'd save me, Mr. Noir!” Lola agreed.

“We didn't really stand a chance on our own,” Luna sighed.

I got a bit distracted by all the lavish praise. It took me a moment to remember that we'd caught Yga. When I told the mayor, he dashed out into the backyard at full speed.

“You complete and utter fool!”

He pummeled Yga with his fists until the other man begged for help. None of us lifted a finger.

“If you hate me, then hate *me!*” said the mayor. “Don’t drag the entire village into it!”

He was a good leader. The townspeople could rest easy from now on. We could probably leave him to deal with Yga. I used the remaining ingredients we had to produce more Stone Salve, and we went about curing townspeople until the sun went down. By then, several hundred people were back to normal, and I’d run out of ingredients. We’d have to wait for assistance from Honest before curing the rest.

“Noir,” said the mayor said over dinner. “On behalf of the town of Landan, I would like to extend a heartfelt thanks to you and your friends. You have saved us!”

“Thank you very much!” echoed the restored villagers.

I smiled. It was good to be able to put my master’s powers to good use.

The next day, Perrido returned with a large group of soldiers. When they saw all the stone people still standing around the town, they were at a loss for words. As it turned out, some of the townsfolk had survived unharmed—either by escaping the town or by hiding. It was great to have some more good news.

“You really did it, Noir,” said Perrido. “You did your father proud. Now, do you think you could work your alchemical magic on these?”

Somehow, Perrido had talked the lord of Honest into giving him large quantities of the materials we needed to make more Stone Salve. While I was working, though, it occurred to me that I could make much larger batches if I had a larger vessel. After that, the work was done in just about two hours. All that was left was for the soldiers to distribute it to the affected townsfolk.

As for us, it was time to head on for Honest at last. I was so tired that I fell asleep in the carriage but, as I slept, I felt something soft on my cheeks. I opened my eyes to find that Emma and Lola were kissing me.

“Wait, what?”

“Oh, sorry for waking you,” said Emma. “Just, you know, gotta earn that LP,

right?”

“You must’ve used up a whole lot of LP in town, Mr. Noir. I wanted to do *all sorts of things* to help, but *someone* wouldn’t let me.”

“Excuse you!”

They both seemed pretty worried about my LP. That was kind of them. I had used a lot recently, so I was grateful to have it replenished.

“I came up with a *really* good idea for earning you some LP,” Lola whispered in my ear. “Let’s try it when we get to Honest. But let’s make it our little secret.”

She punctuated her promise with a wink. I nodded and tried to go back to sleep, but my heart was pounding too fast.

Chapter 5:

Honest, the School Town

THE SUN WAS HIGH in the sky as we arrived at Honest's southern gate. Going by the outer wall and the large number of guard towers, the town was quite large. Mr. Perrido talked to the guards, we paid our entry tax, and in we went. As we passed the gatehouse, the guards welcomed us in with a smile.

Apparently, the happenings in Landan were already a hot topic in town.

We left the carriage outside and walked in with Perrido as our guide.

"Let's head to Duke Schoen's residence," he said. "He wants to meet you."

Duke Schoen was a member of the nobility with an impressive lineage. The idea of going straight to meet him was pretty scary, let me tell you.

As we walked toward Duke Schoen's estate, I noticed how wide Honest's roads were, and how there wasn't a speck of trash to be seen anywhere on them. This town really was an incredible place. There were so many shops and different kinds of people walking around. I saw all kinds of folks, from adventurers to dancers of all races and even a few beast folk. It was incredibly exciting.

The duke's estate was much smaller than I'd imagined. Of course, it was grander than the Stardia residence, but it didn't really hold up to Emma's house. Perrido seemed to know exactly what I was thinking.

"Surprised, aren't you? Duke Schoen is famous for his frugality. He prefers to live as close to the common folk as he can."

"Oh, wow."

That spoke pretty well of him. As soon as we approached the doors, the servants showed us into a grand living room. A few minutes later, a man of around sixty burst in. He seemed to be in a bit of a panic—his long white hair swinging behind him in a ponytail. He ran over to Perrido the moment he saw him. Apparently, this was Duke Schoen himself.

“Perrido! You’re back! How did things go in Landan?”

“You can rest easy, Your Grace, Landan is safe. The monster was defeated and the petrified townspeople returned to normal.”

“Goodness! It’s a miracle!” Duke Schoen said joyfully.

Perrido shook his head and put his hand on my shoulder. “This is my dear friend’s son, Noir Stardia. He did most of the work.”

“But he’s so young!”

Duke Schoen looked me over and offered me his hand. I greeted him formally, but he just kept gripping my hand. The duke was excited to hear Perrido recount the tale. When the duke asked about my powers, Perrido graciously glossed over them.

“You are the savior of Landan—no, perhaps the entire kingdom!” said the duke. “You must be tired from your travels. Allow me to arrange lodgings for you.”

“Thank you very much.”

“In the near future, I shall require your advice on a certain matter, Noir. Would you care to indulge me when the time comes?”

“Of course, I’m always happy to help,” I said, but in truth I was painfully curious.

Perrido and the duke wanted to talk a little longer, so we asked for the location of our inn and headed out. We arrived at our lodgings without issue and took our bags to the room. It seemed like a really nice place. Even better, when I gave the innkeeper Duke Schoen’s letter, he told us that our stay was on the house.

“The duke sure is generous,” said Emma.

“Well, Mr. Noir did save Landan,” Lola said, turning to me. “More importantly, why don’t we go somewhere? Just the two of us.”

I appreciated the invitation, but I had things to do. And besides, Emma swiftly rejected it.

“No, Noir needs to go see his brother.”

“If he’s your brother, he must be pretty incredible.”

Emma and I both pulled a weird face. That was certainly *one* way to describe Gillan. My brother was something of an acquired taste, but we were free for the rest of the afternoon, so everyone headed out to the trade school to find him. Along the way, Leila pointed something out.

“Honest sure has an awful lot of schools. Almost too many.”

“Judging from the advertisements, a lot of them are combat-focused.”

There were schools for swordsmanship and all sorts of martial arts, and even ads aimed at people wanting to improve their magic skills. Honest was known as a school town, so perhaps the duke provided some kind of financial incentive to boost the education industry.

We headed to the residential area where the trade school was, which seemed a little odd to me. By then, it was around four in the afternoon. I figured people would be going home from school around then, so we waited by the gate but, after thirty minutes, only a few people had come out. Among them was a woman around twenty, I asked her if she knew my brother.

“What did you say about Gillan?”

“I, uh, wanted to see him.”

“What business do you have with him, kid?”

“Umm, well, he’s my older brother.”

The second the words left my mouth she slapped me across the face. Ow! That hurt! I must’ve offended her somehow.

“You’re *related* to that creep?! Get the hell away from me!”

She walked off in a huff, but Emma ran after her.

“That’s awful, smacking someone like that! Noir didn’t do anything to you!”

“Oh, shut up. He’s related to that slimeball. Come one step closer and you’ll get the same treatment.”

She seemed really upset. Probably best to leave things at that.

“Sir Noir, do you need a Healing Shot?” asked Luna.

“No, I’m fine. It wasn’t anything serious.”

It didn’t even hurt any more. Gillan must really have done something to upset that woman. Still, I couldn’t exactly blame Luna for being confused. She didn’t know what he was like.

“Why on earth was she so angry?”

“My brother’s always been popular with women. He usually has several girlfriends at once. Once he had over ten at the same time.”

“And, um, they weren’t okay with that?”

“Now, that’s an interesting question...”

Harems weren’t exactly unusual among people with high social standing, and polygamy was recognized in both my kingdom and this one. Gillan must have informed his girlfriends of his intent, so why did they end up so angry?

My guess was it had to do with how he broke up with them. My brother had a habit of saying things like, “I’ll keep you safe for the rest of your life,” or, “You’ll be my first wife,” or, “When I’m a merchant, it’s you I want by my side.” He led the girls on about getting married, then one day, out of the blue, he’d dump them for no reason. Historically, it had made all of his girlfriends livid. I had a feeling that the woman we’d just met had endured the same crap.

“I guess we can rest easy knowing that Gillan’s still his usual garbage self.”

“Emma, I don’t think that’s something to be relieved about.”

She was right, though. It didn’t seem like he’d changed at all. I sighed, and then the culprit himself entered the stage.

“If it isn’t Noir! Hey, Noir! My beloved little brother, you really did come!”

Gillan laughed as he jogged over. I feebly raised a hand to wave, and he hugged me as hard as he could.

“Hey! Stop, Gillan!”

“Oh don’t be like that, Noir! I haven’t ever stopped thinking about my dear baby brother, you know.”

“That’s kind of creepy...”

“Ah ha ha ha!”

My brother smiled from ear to ear as I peeled him off me. He looked at me, a little shocked.

“My, haven’t we gotten strong!”

“I *have* been working pretty hard.”

“I can see that. I actually got a letter from mother, saying you were growing up fast. But you’re not the only one who’s changed, Noir. I have too,” Gillan put his hand on his hip and puffed out his chest. He certainly didn’t look any different. He had always been tall and his hair was the same brown as mine. He looked strangely knight-like. What was a merchant doing with a cape and a sword on his hip?



“What does a trade school student need with a sword?”

“Excellent question! I don’t really, but it makes me stand out, and the ladies love it!”

Now it made sense. Admittedly, Gillan did have the muscle and bravery to wield a sword. He was probably stronger than a lot of the other students in town.

“But, Noir, you sure have an entourage of cute friends with you. You’re not interested in introducing them to me, huh? Oh, isn’t that you, Emma?! You’ve gotten so humongous—I mean big! I’ve missed you!”

“Your little ‘correction’ didn’t make much of a difference there,” said Emma. “Anyway, it *has* been ages, but I don’t think I’ve ever missed you.”

My brother didn’t hear a word of it. He was too excited.

“Anyway, Gillan, give us a tour of the famous sights, would you?”

As soon as I said that, Gillan’s mood did a one-eighty. His enthusiasm vanished and he suddenly looked apologetic.

“I’m sorry, Noir, I sent that letter at the *worst* time. I sent another one right after, but it must’ve just missed you.”

It did take a few days for letters to get between kingdoms. It seemed he’d told me not to come after all. Just as he was about to explain why, all the bells in town tolled thunderously.

That didn’t sound good.

“Crap, I wonder what it is this time? We should evacuate for now.”

Odd, I’d heard Rosette was a peaceful land.

“Is it monsters? Or thieves or something?”

“Monsters. There have been way more of them lately. So many that I’ve started thinking about moving to another town.”

That’s right! Ms. Elena had mentioned how this town experienced a massive monster attack once every ten years. If that was happening now, our timing really was awful.

I glanced toward the sound of the bells and saw a group of twenty to thirty monsters had already launched an aerial surprise attack. They were still quite a way off, but I could see them attacking the people below.

“Let’s take refuge in the school for now,” Gillan urged.

But I couldn’t just let this happen. What about the victims? This could end up like Landan all over again. Luna and Leila were ready to kick some monster butt too.

“Lola,” Leila said. “Will you take cover with Gillan?”

“No, I’ll go along for a bit. I want to see what kind of monsters they are.”

After all, we’d just learned Lola was unbelievably strong. With some pointers, she wouldn’t pose a problem—on the contrary. Our whole group decided to head over.

“Are you serious? Um, Noir, don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re going to get yourself killed.”

Gillan was shaken, but Emma just smiled at him. “Noir’s been training in secret in a hidden dungeon. He hasn’t wasted all his time chasing skirt like you, Gillan.”

“So *that’s* what he’s been up to.”

I shrugged. “I can’t deny it.”

But this was hardly the time for chatting! Gillan dashed back into the school, and we started running toward the screams. We took care not to crash into the people running away and, after a few minutes, we finally reached the monsters. The attack was a public park, so it was crawling with a ton of mothers and children.

The monsters were a sort of bird people. They had human-ish faces with purple skin, wings for arms, and three large talons on their feet that they used to grab people, fly up into the sky, and drop them. Several people had already been incapacitated.

“They’re harpies,” said Lola. “Half-human, half-bird, and very clever. The guild gets requests to eliminate them from time to time, but these look like a

different sub-species: purple harpies.”

I confirmed Lola’s information with a quick Discerning Eye.

Name: Purple Harpy

Level: 35

Skills: Eagle Grip

They weren’t especially strong, but flying monsters were always a hassle, and there were a *lot* of them. Luna would be particularly useful in taking them out. Each time she pulled the trigger of her magical firearm, a harpy’s head exploded.

The people fleeing the park kept slowing down to thank us.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Luna. “Let’s go!”

Cool as ever. Luna took her late mother’s wish to protect people very seriously. Since ranged attacks were kind of my specialty, I backed her up. The others helped guide the remaining civilians to safety.

There were about fifteen purple harpies left, all of them flying up high, out of range.

I fired off a Stone Bullet. It had a fair bit of speed, but the distance made it easy to dodge. Icicle had much the same result, and Lightning Strike only had a range of about nine feet, so it couldn’t reach. I thought Throwing might be the way to go, but it wouldn’t work if the harpies noticed what I was doing.

Wait, am I totally useless here?

Luna, meanwhile, was firing shot after shot. Even if I had her weapon, I couldn’t dream of being that fast and accurate. So, I decided I needed a new skill. Something that the harpies couldn’t predict. Something that would hit them hard. So how about this?

Thunderbolt — 400 LP

It was powerful and would be hard to dodge. I went for it without hesitation. By now, the park had already been evacuated, so I gave it a shot.

There was a boom of thunder followed by a flash of lightning. It was pretty powerful! Even though...it...missed? *How did it miss?* I investigated using Editor.

Thunderbolt: Consumes magic to produce a thunderbolt. Will not always land on the specified target. The skill is rendered unusable indoors or anywhere the sky is not visible. It cannot be used over long distances.

At least now I knew why I'd missed! It sounded like it might take a few shots to score a hit. Just how inaccurate was it? If I only hit one time out of ten, I'd quickly run out of magic. I looked into it with Editor.

Replace “will not always land on the specified target” with “will always land on the specified target” — 500 LP

That was more than the skill cost! I did have the LP, though, and it did seem like it would be useful. I made up my mind and immediately put it into action.

“Gyah?!”

A purple harpy shrieked and crashed headfirst into the ground. The skill worked perfectly. With the combination of my skill and Luna's attacks, we defeated the swarm with surprising ease. I finished off the fallen harpies with my sword. About half of them survived the fall, which taught me an important lesson in not dropping my guard.

“Hm, I think that's all of them,” said Luna.

“Your magical firearm really is powerful. And you never miss, do you?”

“Don't sell yourself short, Sir Noir. When did you learn that Thunderbolt skill?”

“In the middle of the battle. I have you to thank for the extra LP.”

Luna hugged me, which was *very* useful in recovering some of what I’d spent.

“You can even get stronger in the heat of battle. You’re clever and quick on your feet. Soon, you’ll be completely unstoppable.”

“Oh, you flatter me. Of course, I appreciate the compliment. But, you know, this is a little weird though. Where are all the guards?”

“Yeah, where are they?”

Not a single one had appeared. Surely they had heard the uproar. Even if we had managed to handle the situation quickly, it was odd that no one else had shown up. Were there other monsters attacking other parts of the city? We hurried to catch up with Emma and the others.

Near the south gate, Leila roundhouse kicked an orc into the air and Emma slit its throat with her daggers. Meanwhile, Lola landed the final blow on a pig-like monster with the blade I’d given her.

That’s the sight that greeted me when we reached them. Several orc corpses and injured soldiers were littered around the area.

“Emma, is everyone all right?”

“We’re all fine, but some of the soldiers are injured.”

“I’ll take care of them!” said Luna.

She used her Healing Shot on the soldiers. Some of them were more gravely injured and didn’t fully recover, but she helped a lot of people. The evacuees were all safe inside buildings, so I took a look around town. Things seemed to have calmed down.

I asked some of the nearby soldiers what had happened. It sounded like the invading monsters had come in two groups: harpies and orcs. Several orcs had appeared at the north and south gates, so the guards hadn’t had enough people to send to the park.

“These attacks have been happening more often recently?”

“They have, but they’re always pretty common around this time of year.”

“So you wouldn’t say it’s out of the ordinary?”

“No, well, the frequency has been unusually high. This is what happens before they make a big move.”

If these attacks usually culminated with a large strike, this really might be the year. That was bad. I rejoined my friends and we returned to the trade school.

“You’re safe! I was so worried about you!”

Gillan rushed out of the building to greet me. I explained what had happened, and he sighed with relief.

“It might be for the best if I leave sooner rather than later,” he said. “Maybe I’ll go home tomorrow or the day after. You’ll join me, won’t you, Noir?”

“Hold up, Duke Schoen said he needed to talk to me in a few days.”

“Duke Schoen?! Wow...”

“We’re spending the night in an inn. Come get me if anything happens.”

The sun was starting to set, so we headed back. We had bear meat for dinner—apparently people often hunted them around here. Bear seemed to be a common theme in my life as of late.

We had three rooms prepared for us: two for the girls and one for me. I sat down on the bed and just spaced out for a bit. We’d been so busy since we entered the kingdom that I hadn’t had any time to myself. Eventually, I fell asleep.

“Hm...?”

I was awoken by a knock at the door. It wasn’t very loud.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me, Lola. If you’re decent, I’d really appreciate it if you opened the door.”

I wasn’t exactly lounging around in my underpants, so I did as she asked. She giggled and stuck out her tongue. Was that a calculated move to charm me?

“Would you mind if I came in?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t mind if I do!”

Lola casually locked the door as she skipped in. What was she up to? Before I could even offer her a chair, she sat down on the bed. I was a little unsure of what to do next.

“Oh, don’t hold back, come and sit with me. This is your room, isn’t it?”

“I-It sure is...”

I sat down next to her. Lola stared at me nervously for a moment, then she smiled.

“Nervous about what I might do to you?”

“No, not exactly, but maybe kinda.”

“Don’t worry. Nobody’s gonna attack you, not in the open.”

So my chastity might be in peril with the lights off? The room was illuminated with magical devices. Cheaper hotels used candles and oil lamps, but this one had light gems.

“Did you just get a bath?” I asked.

I could tell from how she smelled and how flushed her skin was. She nodded.

“I mean, we can’t exactly *do it* if I’m all sweaty...right?”

“D-do what exactly?”

“Don’t play coy, you know what I’m talking about. We need to earn you some more LP!”

Oh right, she was worried about that. But wait, earning LP could mean something sexual! We’re not going to cross that line, are we?

Lola turned around and touched her back.

“Why do you think this part of my uniform is so exposed?”

The back of Lola’s outfit was tailored to be open. She was the only one with a uniform like that, as far as I could tell. All of the receptionists wore green, but

they had their own unique elements to their uniforms. Lola's was the most striking of them all—with a sexy exposed back that was a common point of conversation among the adventurers.

"This is just a guess," I said, "but you must've requested it to be made that way?"

"You'd be right."

"So, you did that to attract more adventurers to manage?"

The receptionists with poor performers under their management got reduced pay and might even get fired. The most popular receptionists were either good-looking or had appealing personalities.

"You're not wrong, that was part of it. But I have an even more important reason now."

"Now I'm interested, why does the back of your uniform need to be so exposed?"

"He he, it's simple—so you can lick my back."

D-did she just ask me to lick her? I didn't really understand.

"I see you're a little confused. But that's why I took a bath first. I mean...you wouldn't like it very much if I was sweaty, would you?"

"I don't think I'd particularly mind either wa—no! No! You want *me* to *lick you*?!"

"Shh! Shh!"

Huh?

Her attention was suddenly focused on the wall.

"Careful," she whispered. "The walls are pretty thin."

She was worried about the people in the neighboring rooms hearing us. My room was sandwiched between Emma and Luna on one side, and Lola and Leila on the other. I could even hear the conversation going on in Emma's room.

"I just heard a strange sound from Sir Noir's room."

“It was kind of concerning. Should we go check on him?”

“Before we do that...Sir Noir, can you hear us?” Luna called through the wall.

“Y-yeah,” I said. “I’m fine.”

It was a little unsettling that we could hold a conversation just by raising our voices slightly.

“Don’t worry about Leila,” said Lola. “She’s already sleeping. But you understand now, right? Do anything funny and they’ll catch us, and that’s not gonna be pretty.”

She was right about that. Plus, it’d be embarrassing. But Lola didn’t hesitate. She turned her back to me, waiting for me to make my move.

“You want the LP, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then earn it! I prepared everything for you, you just have to actually do it.”

I didn’t have much of a choice, did I?! I brought my face close to her back. The closer I got, the more apparent it became that she took very good care of her skin.

I stuck out my tongue. The moment the tip of it touched her, the air in the room turned warmer.

“Ahh!”

Her reaction startled me so much that I pulled back.

“S-sorry. You came on stronger than I expected,” she said.

Well, sorry for that.

“Don’t worry about it, keep going,” she urged.

“O-okay.”

I ran my tongue down her back and moved it up and down. I couldn’t help imagining a salmon swimming upstream. The fish risked their lives to swim up the river. Only the fish knew the real reason but, according to my father, they spawned when they got to the other end. I’d die without LP so, in a sense, this

was a life-giving act. Perhaps I was no different from a salmon, fighting the current.

Sorry, salmon, I'm not so noble! I'm probably just a regular pervert!

"Aha! Ah...nmph...ahh!"

"Lola, please keep it down."

"B-but, Noir, you're being so aggressive. I knew you'd be into it."

I silently continued to work, and Lola stifled her voice so that our neighbors wouldn't hear, but she couldn't keep it all in.

Several minutes passed. I caught my breath and checked my LP. I was shocked to discover that I'd gained over 3,000. I told her as much.

"Good. I think I'm about at my limit, though."

Lola flopped down on the bed. Only then did I notice how much I was sweating. Maybe LP gain worked best when I was nervous.

"I suppose I should get going," said Lola.

"Yeah. Thanks for doing that for me."

"I've got all sorts of ideas for next time. And of course, this is our little secret, okay?"

She smiled cheerfully and threw in a playful wink before she returned to her room.

Once I was alone again, I laid down in bed and stared up at the ceiling.

I bet if you looked up "coquettish" in the dictionary, you'd find a picture of Lola.

"You know what I found out yesterday? Prostitutes hang around outside this inn at night," Emma said over breakfast.

I nodded without thinking, but when I lifted my head, Emma was glaring daggers at me. I almost jumped out of my seat.

"Did you have a prostitute in your room?"

“You think I’d hire a prostitute?”

“No, I don’t think you’d do something like that, but I *did* hear you making some weird sounds last night. What was that about?”

Blood rushed to my cheeks. *Did she catch us?* I looked over at Lola for help, but she looked completely undisturbed—demurely wiping her mouth with a napkin.

The message was “think fast and save yourself.” I mean...did we really have anything to hide? We were just earning LP...weren’t we? On second thought, I’d better keep quiet. I wasn’t brave enough to admit I’d been licking Lola’s back.

“I, uh, had a nightmare last night. That must’ve been what you heard.”

“Really? It was definitely a girl’s voice. Luna and I were talking about it all night.”

“Yeah. I’m half-elf, so I’ve got particularly sharp ears. I’m pretty confident that was a woman’s voice.”

This was absolute torture! Thankfully Lola finally decided to step in and save me.

“If Mr. Noir says it was him, shouldn’t that be enough? Plenty of gentlemen make effeminate noises from time to time. It sounded cute to me. No need to be embarrassed about it, Mr. Noir.”

“Yeah...”

I wished I had her mental fortitude. I was beginning to think that I just didn’t have the personality for that sort of thing.

Just then, a man in a tailcoat entered the inn and stopped right in front of me.

“Mr. Stardia, I presume? I have come on behalf of Duke Schoen.”

It was hardly unexpected. After all, Duke Schoen had said he’d need to speak to me again in the near future. Admittedly, I didn’t think it’d come quite so soon. It was fair to assume the matter was urgent. We finished eating and headed out to meet the duke. It wasn’t very far, but he’d even prepared a carriage.

When we got to the duke's living room, Duke Schoen and Perrido were already there.

"Apologies for troubling you so soon. You must've been resting."

"Oh no, we had actually just finished breakfast, so the timing was perfect."

"Please, have a seat. Admittedly, there aren't many of them, I know!"

So Duke Schoen was funny as well as friendly. A lot of the higher-ranking nobles thought far too highly of themselves. He seemed to be an exception.

"To be honest," said the duke. "I'd rather start with some small talk, but it's a bit difficult under the circumstances. Are you familiar with the monster incident that happened yesterday?"

"Intimately. We fought in it."

"So it was you who defeated the harpies and orcs. I had a feeling it was. I must thank you for your courage." Duke Schoen brought his hands together in gratitude. It was a common gesture in this kingdom.

It seemed like a good opportunity, so I asked him about something that had been bugging me. "Isn't Honest a little short of soldiers?"

"The incidents started occurring while our main force was out on a training drill, so their return has been delayed. That said, even our full ranks wouldn't be enough, should the monsters make a large-scale attack."

"Have you considered petitioning for reinforcements?"

"Oh, I've already sent a request to the capital. If things go as planned, they should arrive tomorrow."

That was a relief. The town was in a complete panic after yesterday. It would be absolute pandemonium if the real siege happened now. Duke Schoen was a capable man, and he'd done quite a bit of research on past attacks. He vowed to get through it this time.

"However, I would like to increase our chances of success. That's why I need your help, Noir."

Exactly what I was expecting. The chances of the siege happening in the next

week or so seemed pretty high. He wanted our assistance.

“Honestly, it pains me to make such a request of people so young, but you demonstrated your skill when you saved Landan. And, of course, you would be compensated handsomely. Will you lend us your aid?”

Duke Schoen bowed until his forehead was almost on the table. I couldn't blame him for being desperate. He was a kindly lord and wanted to do whatever he could to reduce the harm to his people. The thought of losing half the population to repel the attack was too much to bear.

I checked with everyone else, but we were all in agreement.

“Raise your head, Duke Schoen. We'll gladly lend you our strength if you'll have us.”

“Ohh, thank you so much. I have a bit more hope now.”

Besides, it wasn't like the siege was set in stone yet either. There was a chance it might not happen.

We decided to meet up with the reinforcements when they arrived from the capital the following day.

“Noir, I'll send an express letter to your father,” said Perrido. “And, of course, I'd be happy to do the same for your friends.”

“Thanks. This was only supposed to be a two-or three-day trip, after all.”

Emma, Leila, and I were in the middle of our summer break, and Lola had taken a lengthy vacation. Luna, on the other hand, had only taken as much time off as she thought she'd need.

“Are you okay staying longer?” I asked her. “I know you have work at the temple.”

“It's fine. All I care about is helping people. Whether it's back at the temple or in another kingdom, it's all the same to me. I'm sure they'll understand if I'm a little delayed.”

I did feel more comfortable knowing we had Luna and her Healing Shot to rely on.

Just like that, the five of us decided to extend our stay in Honest.

We were free for the rest of the day, so we opted to spend the time looking around. The town was divided neatly into districts, with grid-like roads forming natural boundaries between them. Each district was clearly marked.

“We don’t know where we’re going to be stationed, though I hope I’m with you, Noir.”

Emma was right—we might end up having to get around quickly if things got messy, so it made sense to learn the lay of the land.

“But why don’t the townspeople just run away?” she asked.

“It’s not that simple. I mean, maybe if they had the kind of money your family does, sure.”

No one knew exactly when the attack would come. Even if they did, moving to another kingdom wasn’t easy—especially for people who had jobs here. The situation was painfully clear from the children playing with wooden swords in the streets.

“I’m not gonna lose! I’m not scared of any monster siege!”

“Me neither! Monsters are weak!”

Whether or not the monsters were actually weak was beside the point—even the children loved their hometown enough to want to defend it. The adults’ conversations weren’t much different; none of them wanted to lose their home.

“You know, maybe that’s why there are so many martial arts schools in town.”

“Makes sense. The town would stand a better chance if every citizen was combat-ready.”

Apparently, the large-scale attacks had started over two hundred years ago. This town had experienced it at least ten times, so its residents were more prepared for it by now.

By the time we’d made it around all the districts, we were hungry, so we headed back to the inn. It was about lunch time anyway, and as we got closer,

the smell of food tickled our noses. But any thought of a delicious meal was wiped away the moment we set foot inside.

“There are a lot of men in this world you just can’t trust, but I ain’t one of them. I’d protect you to the bitter end, no matter what happened, and you can count on that. I’m gonna become a soldier so I can keep you safe.”

A brown-haired man was trying to woo one of the women who worked at the inn. He fired off line after mind-blowingly cringey line, and he topped it off by cornering the woman against a wall like in some cheesy romance novel. The woman, who was in the middle of her shift, seemed at a bit of a loss. The customers around her were all visibly annoyed.

“When I strike it rich, the first thing I’ll do is buy you a new pair of shoes. Some real fancy ones to help support your precious feet.”

Did women really fall for that sort of stuff? It seemed impossible to me, but, for whatever reason, a lot of them seemed to be in love with this dirtbag. Maybe his persistence was more effective than it looked.

I sighed and put a hand on my brother’s shoulder. “You’re bothering everyone. There’s a time and a place for this stuff, and it’s not here or now.”

“Noir, my boy! Where’ve you been? I’ve been so lonely!”

Gillan hugged me and rubbed his cheek against mine. I pushed him away as hard as I could.

Urgh, Gillan, quit it!

“I’m only doing this because you ran off,” he said.

“You came to look for your little brother and ended up hitting on a girl instead? And what’s with that luggage?”

There was a large backpack on the floor. Gillan picked it up and suddenly turned serious. “I told you yesterday: I’m leaving. My intuition’s never wrong, the monsters will attack soon.”

“What about trade school?” I asked.

“I told them I’m taking a little break. By the time I get back...well, there probably won’t be much of a school left.”

Cynical much? That said, he was probably right. If I were as weak as I used to be, I would have left too. But things were different now.

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but we’re staying to defend the town. Duke Schoen asked for our help.”

“The duke did?! But why would you stay behind and fight? This isn’t your home.”

Gillan wasn’t wrong there either. To be honest, I think I’d let myself get a little carried away after we arrived. Even so, if I decided to leave, I knew Luna and Leila would stay behind. Emma and Lola might come with me, but those two? They were too kind, and they cared too much about doing the right thing. And besides, this trip had been my idea to begin with. I couldn’t exactly run away and leave my friends behind because things got a little dicey.

“Maybe it’s fate that we ended up here,” I said. “And who knows, maybe it won’t happen after all.”

“Wait, wait, wait, I understand how you feel, but you’ve gotta know your limits. I know you’ve grown a lot stronger, Noir, but these monsters are serious business. Like that insane monster that hit Landan the other day—turning people into stone!”

“Yeah, I know. I was there for that.”

“Hya hah! Your joke was so good it made my laugh come out funny!”

“It wasn’t a joke,” I said.

“All right, all right, if you insist...I’ll let you prove it.”

“You will?”

“Look, I’m not trying to be mean. It’s just, of us three brothers, you were always the most, uh, lacking in talent, Noir.”

Right again, Gillan.

My father had been a swordsman when he was granted his title. His genes were passed down to his sons, but they weren’t equally distributed—his first son was a prodigy, his second fairly talented, and the third, me, completely and utterly ordinary. Clearly our eldest brother had taken more than his fair share of

the family talent. With Gillan taking the remainder, there had been nothing left for me. Admittedly, I *was* extremely grateful for my Great Sage skill.

“Fair enough, then,” I said. “Why don’t we spar? It’s been a while.”

“Yes! I love it! You know, I’ve gotten pretty strong since then. I’ve been doing endurance training.”

Had he even been training while he was studying at trade school? That showed a level of commitment I hadn’t expected.

“There’s a small training ground nearby,” he said. “Follow me.”

We went with him into a public space established by the town government. There were already a lot of people there—exercising and practicing with weapons. Gillan struck a smug pose and drew his sword with needless flourish. It was his old faithful saber.

“Listen, Noir, I know it might not always be obvious, but I love you. You’re thoughtful and careful, but also daring at times. You always keep your dear friend Emma safe and put our family first. To be honest...I wish I could date you.”

“Ew, Gillan, stop it! You’re my brother!”

“Ha ha ha! All jokes aside, I care about you a great deal, little brother. So I won’t let you get yourself killed for nothing. If I win this match, you’re coming home with me, got it?”

I nodded and drew my sword. My brother may have gotten stronger since we’d last seen each other, but I had too. Still, it was better to be safe. Back home, the priest had appraised him at Level 38. I used Discerning Eye to check where he was now.

Name: Gillan

Age: 20

Species: Human

Level: 34

Occupation: University Student

Skills: C-Grade Swordsmanship

He'd *lost* levels?! I was so shocked I couldn't find the words for a moment. I glared back at his smug face.

"Gillan, tell the truth, have you *actually* been training?"

"Of course! I've been pulling all-nighters to improve how long I can last in bed."

"But you haven't *actually* been using your sword or fighting monsters, have you?"

"I mean, I'm an aspiring merchant so..."

That was a fair point. After all, a merchant could just hire muscle if he needed it. But it was hard to give him a pass for actually *losing* levels. That took some true commitment to laziness. I raised my sword—inviting him to come at me whenever he wanted.

"I thought I taught you better than that, Noir. Only amateurs leave their whole torso open to look cool!"

Gillan rushed me, not even bothering to feint, and sliced at me with his sword. It wasn't hard to match his blade's trajectory with my own.

Ktchink!

Gillan's sword hit the ground. In a contest of sheer power, I had the upper hand by quite a margin.

Gillan's blade trembled. "A-a fluke, for sure."

"Absolutely not. We can do this all day if you want, but it's going to end the same way."

"H-have you learned other skills beyond Great Sage?"

"I've learned a ton," I said. "And I can even use the Great Sage way more frequently. I'm over Level 100."

“I am so sorry!”

Gillan fell to his hands and knees, humiliating himself to demonstrate his sincerity. He could be so earnest sometimes. It was one of his better qualities.

“By the way, Gillan, I noticed with my Discerning Eye that you’ve dropped to Level 34. You’ve been slacking on your morning training, haven’t you?”

“I-It’s so hard to get up in the morning when you’re spending all night with pretty ladies...”

I didn’t even know what to say. To be fair, how many people would actually choose to do something hard instead of something fun? Either way, what mattered was that I’d won.

“I’m staying put,” I said. “So you go on home. I’m sending a letter, but I’d feel better if you explained the situation yourself.”

“All right,” said Gillan. “But I want you to hold onto this for me.”

He pulled out a pair of silver rings and handed one to me.

“These are Communication Rings. They’re a magical device. You can use them to send a message to the other ring.”

Apparently, they worked even between two kingdoms. However, they would only work once. Also, one of them had been used, so only one could send a message, and the other one could only receive it.

“Either way,” said Gillan, “remember it can only send one message, and it has to be short.”

“It’s really limited, huh?”

“Maybe, but it could be useful. If there’s some monster you just can’t beat, you could send me a message, and I would find a way to bring some strong guys to help out. Your big brother will find a way!”

I’d forgotten about this side of Gillan. When I was younger, he’d always protected me from the bullies. Gillan might have had plenty of negative qualities, but it was hard to hate him when he got like this.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll take it. But it seems like a pretty rare item.”

“Don’t worry, I got it from my rich girlfriend.”

That...wasn’t something he should be so proud of, surely? Either way, things were settled for now. He wanted to get going straight away, so I saw him off at the entrance to the training grounds. He’d probably be fine running away by himself.

“He’s the same shallow playboy, huh?” Emma said, watching him leave.

“He might be a shallow playboy, but he’s my big brother.”

“Aww, how cute, you love your brother,” she said. “Wait, is that someone chasing Gillan?”

She was right, there was a young woman running after him. When she caught up, she smacked Gillan upside the head, knocking him over. Then she gave him a kick in the stomach for good measure and walked off as though nothing had happened.

Emma and I weren’t surprised. Not even a little.

Chapter 6:

The General and the Archer

IT HAD BEEN THREE DAYS since we arrived in Honest. At a glance, the town didn't look much different, but, on closer inspection, many of the shops were closed. There wasn't much point in staying open when your supply chains were breaking down and so many people were fleeing for other towns.

That morning, just as planned, the reinforcements arrived from the capital. One of the duke's messengers came to tell us, and we went out to the joint training ground right away to meet them.

The space was huge, and all the relevant forces were gathering there. Even Perrido had come, waiting to take us where we needed to go. The sight of so many soldiers in one place was completely overwhelming.

A young general named Stey was to be in command of the siege. He was in his early thirties, with black hair and a calm, confident air. We arrived just in time to hear him go over his plans in the event of an attack. He planned to have many of the forces fortify the perimeter, preventing the enemy from getting inside the town. But these big ten-year attacks had never once been stopped outside the town walls, so another group was stationed inside the city itself.

Stey assigned some of his soldiers to each specific district, organizing everyone so that we had the best chance of defeating the monsters. We listened to him talk, but none of this would apply to us. After all, we weren't regular soldiers.

"Volunteers line up over here. We're making selections now."

He worked through the volunteers with the help of a young woman with a Discerning Eye. Those with the will to fight, but no ability to back it up, were ordered to protect their own homes and neighborhoods. I was a little relieved by the length of the volunteer line. A lot of the people in Honest were willing to fight for it. Just as Stey was about to get to us, Duke Schoen came running over.

"General Stey, this man does not need to go through the selection process."

He is a powerful warrior who I personally asked to assist us.”

“I’m sorry, but the king has ordered me to properly vet *all* civilian forces.”

“This is Noir,” said Schoen. “The man who resolved the incident at Landan.”

“Ooh, you’re the man who slew the petrifying monster?” Stey asked.

“I am.”

The general trained his sharp eyes on me, and I felt a stab of anxiety. I could tell how strong he was, even without Discerning Eye. His aura was even more overwhelming than Ms. Elena’s!

However, even with Duke Schoen’s personal backing, General Stey was unconvinced. I was a little uncomfortable with the idea of having my abilities exposed, but we were supposed to be allies, weren’t we?

“Don’t worry, Duke Schoen,” I said. “I want to be vetted properly, just like anyone else. If I can’t pass his standards, I won’t stand a chance against those monsters.”

“I’m dreadfully sorry to put you through this,” said Schoen. “Especially when I’m the one who dragged you into it.”

General Stey didn’t wait for me to answer.

“All right, read him.”

The woman next to him stepped forward and used her skill on me. I felt strangely anxious about it, even though I did the exact same thing to other people all the time.

“Huh?! What on earth?”

The woman’s stone-faced mask crumbled away. She was definitely shocked by my rather, ah, unique gifts.

“What is going on?” said Stey. “Answer me.”

“He’s over Level 100 and he has *dozens* of skills...”

“Oh ho, so you’re the real deal.” General Stey’s lips curled into a slight grin, but the fun was only just getting started.

“He has several skills with which I am unfamiliar,” said the woman. “Of which, the most unusual appear to be Get Creative, Editor, and Bestow.”

“Wh-what?” Stey stammered. “You aren’t mistaken, are you?”

“Absolutely not. He is unquestionably in possession of those skills.”

Even Duke Schoen started looking at me strangely after that. They weren’t just impressed, they were *afraid*. It was starting to make me a little anxious. Stey even put his sword to my neck.

“Answer me, how are you related to Olivia Servant?”

Huh, they knew about her connection to those skills, even here in this neighboring kingdom. I couldn’t exactly say that I was in active contact with her, so I had to make something up.

“Someone who knows a lot about skills told me that they’re some kind of spontaneous mutation.”

“Did you really think that lie would work?” Stey asked.

I took a step back. Before I knew what I was doing, I drew my sword and started screaming. Why? What was I doing? I had absolutely no idea.

“Noir? What’s wrong?”

“No, Emma, stay away!”

My body was moving on pure instinct. I took up a combat stance and squared off against Stey.

“He’s pointing a sword at the general!” someone shouted. “Capture him!”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Stey snapped. “He has taken the only course of action left open to him. If he had not drawn his sword, he’d be a coward.”

The soldiers all stopped in their tracks. I prayed that General Stey would put his sword away, but I had no such luck.

“If I called you the progeny of that vile rat Olivia,” he said. “Would that make you angry?”

“Don’t you dare sully her name! I won’t let you get away with it!”

“Interesting. Very well, then, let us fight. Then I’ll make my decision.”

There was no way I could survive against him if I relied on instinct alone. I had to get my breathing under control! I tried using Discerning Eye, but that only got me more worked up.

Name: Stey Anatha

Age: 32

Species: Human

Level: 324

Occupation: Soldier

Skills: Longsword Ability (Grade A); Abnormal Condition Recovery (Grade A); Abnormal Status Effect Immunity (Grade B); Demon Slice; Flame Slice; Iron Cutter; Full Moon; Afterimage; Stealthy Step; Intimidate; Night Vision; Improved Back Step

Whoa! This guy was seriously strong! Not only was he high-level, he also had some powerful skills and no obvious weaknesses. My strange anxiety was probably down to that Intimidate skill.

He was clearly a close-range fighter and he had a longer reach than me. It’d be best to attack from a distance. I reached back, sneakily pulled a knife out of my Pocket Dimension, and threw it at him. Stey didn’t move a muscle. The knife flew right past him and thumped into the shield of a soldier behind him.

“Is that how you wish to be judged?” Stey asked. “That throw didn’t look very confident.”

“Ugh...”

“As far as I see it,” he said. “There are two kinds of warriors: cool-headed and hot-headed. Those who are stronger when they’re calm, and those who only show their real strength under intense emotion.”

Given what had happened over the past few minutes, I was clearly the former kind. That was probably what he was trying to teach me. This wasn’t a real fight

—it was training.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, Stardia. Don’t bother trying to quench the fire in your heart. Just keep your head cool and your heart hot. If you’ve still got it in you, come at me again. Like you want me dead this time.”

“All right, here I go.”

I sprinted toward him and slashed with my sword. We exchanged a flurry of blows. Stey’s longsword was thin, but it was heavy. My blade couldn’t slip past him. I took a step back and fired off a Thunderbolt.

Bwoooooom!

As the roar echoed in my ears, I noticed Stey’s afterimage. He seemed to blur for a moment, before somehow splitting in two. The copy that got hit by the Thunderbolt vanished immediately, and several nearby soldiers dropped to their knees.

“That’s enough,” said Stey. “You’ve done enough to demonstrate your strength. You pass.”

“Haah haah, I passed...”

“However,” he said. “You have room to improve. For example, your Thunderbolt hit several friendly soldiers.”

“Oh...”

I was so wrapped up in the fight that I hadn’t even noticed.

“Well, you’re in for now, Stardia. Your strength will be a great addition to our forces.”

He seemed so kind and friendly now. A world away from the monster he’d seemed to be when I was under the effect of his Intimidate. And he’d done an amazing job of honing in on my weaknesses.

“You’re not going to press me about my skills?” I asked.

“I don’t particularly care. My job is to judge if you are fit to serve, and I have deemed you worthy. You didn’t even use your special skills.”

“You weren’t exactly fighting seriously either.”

“I’m saving that for the monsters,” he said. “You ought to do the same.”

He gave me a cool smile, and somehow, I felt calmer. He was undoubtedly a terrifying opponent, but the thought of having him on my side? That was pretty comforting. Still, this wasn’t the end of my troubles.

“General Stey,” said Duke Schoen. “I cannot allow you to invite one of Olivia’s progeny into our ranks.”

Stey frowned. “Were you not the one who recommended him?”

“I-I knew nothing of this,” Schoen stammered. “To think he has that dastardly Olivia’s blood in his veins...”

Wow, he *really* hated her. Back in my own country, Olivia was a hero, but here? Here, everyone seemed to see her in a completely different light.

“And because of that,” said Stey. “You don’t want him to participate? Do I understand correctly?”

“Even if I approve,” said Schoen. “The townsfolk will not. They will never accept this!”

“I know the history here, but it has nothing to do with this,” Stey said. “I am here to fight monsters and ensure they are driven back when they attack the town. This boy may be lacking in experience, but he’s a valuable asset. His potential far exceeds my own.”

“Goodness, is that really so...?”

Duke Schoen wasn’t the only one shaken. Even the general’s own soldiers looked uncertain.

“He has the three most powerful skills in recorded history,” Stey went on. “Get Creative, Editor, and Bestow. If he had fully utilized those skills, I would not be standing here right now. Although, perhaps, if I had not held back, he would not have fared much better.”

“But...” said Schoen, “he was so afraid of you...”

Too right, I was! But Stey just shook his head.

“Take that Thunderbolt, for example. That isn’t an easy skill to control and

often misses its target, but he struck me with a single hit.”

“It must have been a fluke.”

“Of course,” said Stey. “It could have been. But I kept up the pressure with Intimidate. It made him miss his Throw, but the Thunderbolt landed perfectly. I’m assuming he has improved the skill itself.”

“How is that possible?”

“He has the Editor skill. Although, the only way that we can know for sure is to ask him for ourselves.”

Stey wasn’t just strong, he was smart too. It seemed pointless to try and hide this from him.

“The general is correct,” I said. “I modified the skill.”

Some of the soldiers stared at me, wide-eyed. Other people shouted or just stood there, completely dumbstruck.

“My only goal here,” said Stey, “is to drive off the monsters and minimize the number of casualties. Stardia’s powers will be useful in achieving that, and I say he should join us. Do you have any objections?”

Duke Schoen dropped his gaze. “I shall abide by your decision, General.”

“I appreciate it. Next in line, step forward.”

And thus, I joined the Honest defense force. Emma and the others all passed inspection straight away.

Speaking to some of the soldiers later, I found out that it was exceedingly rare for the general to test someone personally like that. There weren’t many people in the world that could compete with him.

I got a sense I was going to learn a lot from him.

The town’s offensive force was mainly made up of soldiers stationed outside the town, ready to launch a head-on assault on the monsters, and a defensive force inside the town walls. The defensive force, which included us, had to be able to move fast and, as such, we were composed mostly of archers and

people with special skills. After all, if anything was going to make it into town, the aerial enemies would probably come first.

I was leading our special unit. That way, we could act independently, without having to wait for orders. We could also support other units if they needed us, or help lead civilians to safety. To prepare, we spent much of the day studying the previous sieges. Around early afternoon, we broke for the day.

“Noir, do you have a moment?” Duke Schoen asked. It sounded like he’d been waiting for me.

“Is this about my participation in the guard force?”

“No, not at all. In fact, I owe you an apology. I must have seemed like a horrible old man yesterday.”

Real talk, I had been pretty shocked when he started arguing with Stey that I shouldn’t be involved.

“But there was a reason for my behavior,” Schoen went on. “If you have some time, I’d appreciate your company.”

I joined him in hopes of learning more about Olivia. The rest of our group came along too. We left the training grounds and headed toward the center of town. There was a large square there, with a fountain and benches. It was a nice place to relax.

“This is Gaien Square,” said Schoen. “Please, come this way.”

He stopped in front of a statue of a man with only one arm. Next to the statue, there was a large black stone, almost like obsidian.

“Urgh,” said Luna. “After what happened in Landan, that statue almost looks like a real person.”

“Seriously,” Lola agreed. “I feel like I should splash some Stone Salve on him.”

Duke Schoen looked at them warmly. “Ha ha, unfortunately this is just a statue. Look over here.”

He pointed at a pair of signs which read: “Gaien’s Ambition is Eternal” and “The Rock of Peace.” Gaien had to be the man in the statue.

“Gaien was an alchemist who lived over two hundred years ago,” Schoen explained. “He was a great hero who saved this town from monsters numerous times.”

“So he lost that arm to a monster, huh?”

“Oh, no, not at all. He lost his arm to an evil foreign—excuse me, the famous adventurer, Olivia.”

“Master—I mean, Olivia did that...?” I asked.

She’d fought their greatest hero and cut off his arm? Duke Schoen thought I was descended from her, so he chose his words carefully.

“She may be a hero in your kingdom, but here...she was a villain. Let me explain.”

I listened closely as he told the story.

According to Schoen, Gaien had been born in the village of Tonnelles. From a young age, he showed a talent for alchemy. When he got older, he moved to Honest and used his abilities to save the town several times over. Then, one fateful day, Olivia paid the town a visit. She caused utter chaos and, eventually, ended up facing off against Gaien as he tried to put a stop to it. Olivia’s special skills made it a difficult battle, and Gaien lost his arm in the fight. Then, just as the jaws of defeat closed around him, a miracle happened: the people of Honest joined together to drive Olivia off.

The facts matched up, at least. Olivia had been active two hundred years ago and she certainly had overwhelming power at her disposal. The one thing that didn’t make sense was why she had attacked Gaien. As wild and uninhibited as she was, she wasn’t a monster. Perhaps Gaien had wronged her in some way?

“Ultimately,” said Schoen, “Gaien protected Honest for the rest of his life. Just before his death, he used his alchemy to create the Stone of Peace. He filled it with his academic ability and his desire for our children to grow up healthy and strong.”

The children of Honest often came here to touch the stone and make offerings to it. Parents would do much the same, praying for their children.

“Now I understand why you reacted the way you did,” I said.

“No,” said Schoen, “I was wrong. You may have Olivia’s powers, but you are not her. You saved this town, and I want to have faith in you. However, I must ask that you keep your relation to her a secret from the townspeople.”

I was happy enough to agree. After all, discretion suited me too. The last thing I wanted was people throwing rocks at me every time I went out the door.

“Why do you think Olivia fought with Gaius?” I asked.

“I have no idea. Perhaps she just didn’t like him. Or perhaps she simply wanted to fight a powerful opponent. Ultimately, all I can do is guess.”

I sighed and looked up at the sky. Perhaps it was the clouds that made the fuzzy, anxious feeling in my chest grow stronger. The woman Schoen was talking about was nothing like the Olivia I knew. She just wasn’t like that. I couldn’t believe she would attack someone for no reason at all.

After we parted ways with Duke Schoen, Emma and I decided to go shopping.

“Come on! Come on! Come oooooon!”

Or rather, Emma decided. But then, I couldn’t exactly ignore her! The two of us walked around the shops and Emma bought whatever grabbed her attention.

“What if we get matching hats?” she asked.

“I don’t think that’s a thing people actually do.” I mean, sometimes people wore matching clothes, but even then they were just asking for weird looks.

“Isn’t that more reason to do it?! Bah, I guess you’re right. I wonder what else we could get to match?”

Emma slipped her arm through mine. She seemed to be having fun. She was probably trying to cheer me up after what the duke said about Olivia. I really couldn’t hide anything from my best friend.

“They have a ring toss!” she said. “Let’s try it.”

It was a simple game: tossing rope loops onto wooden dowels. If you won,

you got a little doll.

“Emma, I’m pretty sure this is for kids.”

“Oh, come on! Let your inner kid have some fun! Or are you scared I’m gonna beat you?”

“All right, I’m not going easy on you!”

Each of us had five loops, and we had to land them all to win. It was actually pretty difficult. I got the first, the second, the third, the fourth, and the fifth... got caught on a nearby child’s head.

“S-sorry about that.”

“You suck, mister,” said the vendor. “Looks like your friend got a perfect score.”

“No way...”

I looked across to see Emma celebrating her victory.

“Yay! I win!”

She jumped for joy, and some of the local boys gathered around her to leer.

“Wow, they’re so huge and bouncy.”

“Her skirt’s so short! I can almost see her panties.”

Emma scowled at them. “What do you think you’re looking at?! This isn’t a zoo!”

“Eeek! She’s an evil old crone!”

“A crone?! How dare youuuu!”

Emma looked like she was about to explode. Unsurprisingly, the kids scattered.

“You know,” I said, “maybe you should try bouncing a little less.”

“I can’t control how much they bounce!”

Right, my bad. Now our roles were reversed and I was the one trying to cheer her up. I’d best do something quick. I took her to one of the street food vendors so we could have something to eat as we walked. We came across a vendor

selling something called the Pineapple of Happiness.

“Is it really just pineapple?”

“Why don’t you try it and find out?”

Well, that wasn’t exactly helpful! I’d been earning good money lately, and had quite a lot of local currency, but all the same, it was pretty expensive.

“I wanna try!” Emma said. “Come on, Noir, let’s have a taste!”

“Uhh, but, I mean...”

“If it makes you happy, then it’s gotta be tasty, right? Like super sweet or something.”

I wasn’t really convinced, but Emma was so excited that I bought one for each of us. It was already cut into nice, bite-size portions, so I closed my eyes as I put one of the vivid yellow pieces in my mouth.

Argh! Why was it so *sour*?! Surely an expensive pineapple shouldn’t make you pull a face like that? This was a total sham!

“I don’t think eating this will make anyone happy,” I complained.

The vendor smiled. “Oh, that’s all part of the process.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’ll feel it when the tingling starts to fade. You will feel grateful the pain has stopped. That is a kind of happiness. Happiness awaits most people in the future, but sometimes you grow numb and begin to forget that, which makes you dissatisfied with the present. And that makes you grow unhappy.”

Somehow, this had turned into a weird philosophical lecture.

“So eating something painful reminds you of what happiness feels like?” I said.

“Exactly! And now there is more happiness in your day. Congratulations.”

I couldn’t argue with that, so we just quietly left the stall. I had no intention of going back there, but it was a good learning experience.

“Let’s eat something a little more substantial,” I said.

“What about that?” Emma pointed at a friendly older woman serving skewers of beef with a signature white sauce.

“Have a taste,” the woman said. “These are a specialty here in Honest: Bullseed Skewers of Happiness.”

“There’s that word again...”

I’d had quite enough of this “happiness” nonsense! I wanted to pass, but once again, Emma was really excited to try.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you,” said Emma. “Time to give it a taste... Mmm, wow this is delicious! The sauce is amazing!”

Wow, had we lucked out this time? I was still a little hungry, so I decided to order one too.

“I’ll take one, thanks,” I said. “What’s in the sauce?”

“The seed of a monster called the Bull of Happiness.”

“Blegh!”

Emma spat it out and I immediately withdrew my order. The old woman started to panic.

“Don’t worry!” she said. “There are other varieties mixed in to give it the proper viscosity!”

I don’t think you’re helping, lady!

Emma was on the verge of tears, so I picked her up on my back.

“Ughh...I hate this,” she said. “Why me...?”

“I’m not going to tell you not to worry about it,” I said. “There are a lot of strange things in this town.”

“You should eat it too, Noir! After all, it’ll get you a ton of LP...I’m sure of it...”

Why was she so eager for me to join her in her suffering?!

By the time we got close to the inn, Emma had recovered enough to walk on her own again. She slipped her arm back through mine.

“Feeling any better?” she asked.

“Yeah, that was a nice change of pace.”

“Well, good!” she said. “Now we just have to keep our spirits up until the siege.”

“We’ll just have to do what we can.”

What else could anyone do?

Whatever else Olivia had done, I had my powers because of her. Maybe she had been a bad person to the people of Honest, but right now I had no way of knowing. But I knew she had helped me, and that was something I could believe in.

Before bed, we held a little meeting. We discussed our plans for the next few days: taking part in training drills and waiting for the siege. There was only so long we could wait. If nothing happened in the next ten days, we would go home.

“I wish I could get stronger before the attack, but there isn’t enough time,” Luna said.

“Yeah,” Lola agreed. “Actually, I had a thought about that. What if we all work together to earn Mr. Noir some more LP? Then he can make us stronger. Assuming he’s okay with that...”

“Of course I am!” I said. “I think that’s a great idea.”

I’d actually been thinking the same thing. I was just short of 4,000 LP, which was probably enough to give one of them a skill. But which skill would be most useful?

“We will have to decide between us how to earn LP for you,” Lola said. “Okay?”

“S-sure,” I stammered.

She winked at me for good measure, and my heart thumped a little harder in my chest. I left them alone to discuss the matter and headed up to my room. As

I climbed the stairs, I heard Lola make a suggestion.

“What the...?!” Emma spluttered. “There are some lines you just don’t cross!”

I went back to my room, at a bit of a loss for words. About an hour later, I was in bed ready to sleep when I heard a knock at my door.

“We’ve decided to take turns,” said Leila. “It’s my turn tonight, if that’s okay with you.”

I nodded silently. She’d caught me off guard. I had no idea they meant to start immediately! Leila told me to lay down on my stomach. I did as I was told and felt her press gently on my lower back.

“I thought I’d give you a massage,” she said. “You must be pretty tired, right?”

“Definitely.”

“I thought so. If you’re tired, just let yourself drift off, all right?”

Okay, things weren’t going to get questionable right away. Thinking about it, Leila was probably the least indecent member of our group. I wasn’t sure if a regular massage would earn me LP, but at least it would help me relax.

Leila pressed down firmly on my muscles, working out the knots. She started at the back of my neck and worked down to my hips, then down my thighs to the soles of my feet. It felt so good I started to doze off.

“All right, could you turn over for me?”

“Okay!”

I rolled over, my eyes half-closed.

Wait, was it always so dark in here?! Only one of the light gems was on, but whatever. Leila carefully massaged my chest with her practiced fingers.

“Mmph.”

It felt odd being groped like that. I was relieved when her hands moved on to my stomach.

I was getting sleepy again—until I was jolted wide awake. Leila’s beautiful hands were massaging the inside of my thighs! And she was being incredibly thorough.

“Wh-what’s wrong?” she asked. “Did I make a mistake?”

“No, you didn’t, just—”

“Good, I’ll keep going, then.”

Keep going?! Why was she fixated on that area? I looked down at her. She seemed to be hesitating. Her eyes were fixed firmly on my crotch.

“Pardon me. Ah!”

“Ow?!”

She smacked me suddenly, and in the most sensitive area.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I stammered.

“I-I’m sorry,” said Leila. “When we were talking earlier, the others suggested doing this sort of thing to stimulate you, you know? For the LP.”

“It’s a little *too* stimulating! Men are delicate down there! If you’re not careful, I think I might die!”

“Oh, okay... I really am ignorant,” Leila sighed.

She hadn’t meant any harm, but it felt strange asking her to be more gentle.

“Hey, do you think if I touch it gently, you’ll earn LP?” she asked.

“Um, well, I kind of already did.”

“Oh, you did? What worked?”

I wasn’t sure! I wasn’t sure about anything anymore.

“Probably the hip massage,” I said. “Right? I don’t think it was the smack.”

“There are some people who enjoy pain,” said Leila, thoughtfully. “Let’s continue with both.”

“Okay, but, a little softer next time, please?”

I’d thought Leila only cared about strength, but she could be surprisingly daring.

In the end, we went on like that for a while—Leila carefully watching my reactions and adjusting the amount of force she applied.

I think I lost that contest, but I earned a bunch of LP, all the same.

Chapter 7:

I Want to Master the Bow

THE NEXT MORNING, training started early. As soon as we arrived at the training grounds, we stood out. Not only were we much younger than everyone else, our clothes and mannerisms clearly indicated that we were foreigners. The fact that I was surrounded by pretty girls probably drew attention too.

“Those kids are participating? Will they be okay?”

The soldiers’ unease disappeared as soon as the drills started. They were all shocked by our abilities—not that we completely outclassed them. According to my Discerning Eye, quite a number of them were over Level 100, and many others had powerful skills to make up for it. Of course, no one was stronger than General Stey, but there were a few around Level 200.

As we took a break from working up a sweat, General Stey approached us. He’d been watching me practice for a while.

“Stardia, are you proficient with any other weapons?”

“Not really. I don’t have any swordsmanship skills either, to be honest.”

“Then you should use Get Creative and make some. You might have gotten by with passable skills before, but that won’t work against anything that’s truly strong.”

Ow! Why don’t you say what you mean, Stey?!

I didn’t fight traditionally to begin with, so I hadn’t placed much importance on martial arts. But maybe the general was right.

“If you’re keen,” said Stey, “why don’t you produce an archery skill?”

“Archery?” I asked. “Why?”

“We’re a bit short on archers right now,” he explained. “You may have noticed that a quarter of our forces are beast folk.”

He had a point. There were a lot of beast folk in Honest, and quite a few more

in the reinforcements sent from the capital.

“They have a great deal of strength, but they can have trouble with higher dexterity tools and weapons. And not many humans train with the bow from a young age.”

Perfecting your archery skills seemed like a lot more work than melee weapons like swords and spears. Apparently, most of the townsfolk thought close-range weaponry more effective against monsters, so few of them ever picked up a bow. But flying monsters would likely be part of the siege force. They typically ignored the offensive forces at the perimeter and moved right in on the town.

“Of course, we have artillery and magical firearms, but they’re rather scarce and not many soldiers possess the relevant skills to use them. Some people will fire arrows and magic from the watchtowers, but they can only handle so much. So? What do you say? I have a special bow in mind, depending on how your skills develop.”

“General!” cried one of the soldiers nearby. “You can’t seriously be thinking about letting him have the enchanted bow!”

“Silence. This is my responsibility. And besides, getting to the level at which I would consider allowing him to use it won’t be easy.”

I straightened up. “I’ll give it a shot.”

“Then come with me.”

As I followed Stey, I investigated archery skills. Thanks to Lola and Leila, I had 5,700 LP to work with, and I likely had more on the way.

Archery (Grade C) — 500 LP

Archery (Grade B) — 900 LP

Archery (Grade A) — 1,700 LP

Archery (Grade S) — 3,500 LP

Of course, an S-Grade skill wouldn't suddenly make me the best in my field. It would improve my natural ability, sure, but there were bigger factors, like your feel for the weapon and how long you had been practicing. That was why you'd sometimes see an inexperienced fighter with S-Rank Swordsmanship outmatched by someone with thirty years of experience and training but no skill to speak of. Having said that, in most cases the skill made a huge difference.

Since I had so little time to prepare, I splurged on the S-Grade variant. By then, the general was introducing me to the woman who would be my coach. I used my Discerning Eye as we exchanged greetings. She was only twenty-eight years old, but she already had a homegrown A-Grade Archery skill. Impressive.

"Lyrica, teach this boy archery. He's a candidate for the enchanted bow."

"Is he now? Those are certainly some high expectations, young man."

"Right now, he's a total amateur," said Stey. "Let's start by seeing what he can do."

"I'm not sure how much I can teach him in just a few days."

All the same, Lyrica handed me a wooden bow and told me to fire at a round target across the field. I picked up an arrow and remembered what my father had taught me when I was a child before loosing the arrow.

"Oh my, my, my!"

Lyrica covered her mouth. General Stey glared at me.

"Have you really never practiced with a bow?"

"I haven't, honest," I said. "I just gave myself the Archery skill."

"What grade?"

"S, sir."

"Unbelievable."

Stey shook his head and wandered off, leaving me alone with Lyrica. Her eyes glistened as she bombarded me with questions about my abilities. Somehow, I managed to dodge most of them, and we started training. My next arrow missed the target.

“Oh no, that’s no good. You’re shifting when you release.”

“This is harder than it looks.”

“It is, but your form is good. In fact, you have an awe-inspiring talent for it. If you just do as I say, I might even make you my boyfriend!”

I stared at her blankly. Was she being serious? I had no interest in becoming her boyfriend.

“Oh, I know that face!” she complained. “You’re wondering why you should date an old hag like me, aren’t you?”

She turned her bow on me, and I jumped back.

“I am not! Please, knock it off.”

Lyrice put the bow back down. “Relax. It’s a joke.”

Then why are your eyes so serious?!

Despite her fooling around, Lyrice was a good teacher. By the time the sun set, I was hitting the target almost every time.

“You’re obviously a serious outlier, Noir,” she teased, making exaggerated, girlish gestures. “I’ve taught a ton of people and no one’s picked it up as fast as you. Your skill is just too powerful, I guess! I’m sooo jealous!”

I didn’t know how to react. Was she joking again? Fortunately, she quickly snapped back to strict teacher mode.

“Don’t let it go to your head. The real test will be hitting a moving target.”

That made sense. I mean, those flying monsters weren’t exactly going to sit around and wait for me to pick them off.

“I’m upping the difficulty next time,” said Lyrice. “So you better be prepared.”

I bowed my head. “Thank you for being so patient with me.”

“Ahh, look at how earnest you are! I lost that look so long ago...”

She ruffled my hair, and I straightened up again. Something about her reminded me of Olivia.

At any rate, my training was over for the day. Heading back to the inn, I went

to my room and started thinking about the skills the others had and how I could improve them.

Emma was around Level 50 and mostly fought with daggers and wind magic. She had a B-Grade Dual Wielding ability and could use magic to attack and increase her speed. She was a close-to mid-range fighter.

Luna was about Level 60 and used a magical firearm. Her ability with the gun was B-Grade, and she could use it to attack and to heal. She was a mid-to-ranged fighter.

Lola was only Level 15, but she had S-Grade Superhuman Strength. She had almost no combat experience.

Leila was the real standout of the group and the only one of them who probably didn't need the boost.

Lately, Emma had been improving spectacularly, and Luna had also gotten stronger since I met her. Therefore, my first priority was to give Lola a skill that would keep her alive. After that, I'd improve Emma and Luna's strengths even more. I noted it all down on some paper and sat down in bed. Just as I did, there was a knock on the door.

"It's Luna. Can I come in?"

"Perfect timing. Go ahead."

I wanted to discuss her skills, but that wasn't what she had in mind. She came into my room wearing only a bath towel.

"Why are you..."

"I thought I'd clean your ears, but Lola said that wasn't 'stimulating' enough on its own, so..." Luna came inside, fidgeting awkwardly before sitting down on the bed next to me. "I brought a proper ear cleaning tool."

"Well, uh, all right, I'll give it a shot."

"Good, no holding back."

I could see steam rising off her body, which got me all dizzy and *thinking*. I laid my head on her thighs. She was so warm! We didn't talk, we were both too nervous, but Luna turned out to be pretty good at cleaning ears. Soon, I started

to relax.

“So, I’m actually not wearing any...I mean...”

What the?! I’d finally started to calm down, but my heart was pounding again. She wasn’t wearing any panties...?

“Nothing on top either,” she said. “I’m totally naked under this towel. Kinda funny, don’t you think?”

“Y-y-y-your skin is very pale, isn’t it?” I stammered.

I was just trying to avoid saying “yes.” Somehow, that was the first thing that came out of my mouth. As the heavy silence continued, Luna gradually got more aggressive in her cleaning.

“Sir Noir, is that something you’d like to...see?”

“I, uh, can’t say I don’t, but...”

“I don’t mind, you know. I am a little worried about what might happen after, though.”

I was worried too! It was a whole new world to me. Luna lifted my head off her lap, stood up, and put a finger under her towel.

“I want you to earn LP without feeling guilty about it. I feel no shame.”

She took a deep breath, tensed her trembling finger, and...

Bam! Bam! Came a knock on the wall.

“Oh, Mr. Noooir!” Lola called through. “Did you get your LP yet? Did Luna clean your ears properly?”

“I did! She did! Everything’s fine!”

I bowed formally toward the wall, even though they couldn’t see me. They must’ve been listening to our conversation.

“Well, that’s it for me,” Luna said, standing up.

She kept a tight grip on her towel as she left. All the same, when I checked, I’d earned 2,300 LP!

I was also pretty exhausted. I rolled over in bed and fell into a deep sleep...

Until, late that night, I was woken by a sudden scream.

“Nooooir! Noir, please, save me! I’m gonna die! Save m—”

The sound cut off abruptly. I was the only person in the room. When I looked around to see where the sound had come from, I found myself looking at the communication ring my brother had given me.

“That must have been Gillan.”

It could only be used once, and the plan had been for me to use it if I faced a monster I couldn’t defeat. Now that plan was out the window.

What was happening? Had Gillan been attacked by a monster on his way home? Where was he? I couldn’t just charge out blindly looking for him.

Great Sage, where is my brother, Gillan Stardia?

<He is in the town of Tonnelles, approximately twenty-five miles to the north-northeast.> What?! That was the complete opposite direction of home. Though that town name sounded familiar. Wasn’t that where the great hero Gaius had been born?

“I should wake everyone up... No, wait.”

Everyone was exhausted from training. Maybe it would be better go to alone.

I scribbled a note about where I was going on my desk and quietly left the inn. Maybe Gillan had been ambushed by robbers in the forest or attacked by the monsters invading the area. Whatever it was, I hoped he could stay safe until I got there.

Chapter 8:

The Hero's Village

I ARRIVED IN TONNELLES early the next morning. I encountered several monsters along the way, and the journey took longer than expected. I got away without injury, but I was worried for my brother. There sure were a lot of nocturnal monsters around here! So far, I'd avoided using the Great Sage to find out how he was doing. I couldn't risk the headache, especially not when I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Besides, if he was already dead, that'd be a dreadful way to find out...

From the outside, Tonnelles looked like a small agricultural village. There were probably only a few hundred people living there. I approached the gate and called out to the guard.

"Did a tall, brown-haired man come through yesterday? Around twenty, dresses kind of like a knight?"

"A brown-haired knight? No, never seen anyone like that."

"Are you sure he didn't stay the night?"

"I told you, I've never seen anyone like that. And he wouldn't have stayed the night. It's Gaien's birthday this week. We don't allow outsiders to stay during this time."

Strange, the Great Sage said Gillan was here, and there weren't any other towns or villages in the area.

"Have any monsters or thieves attacked you recently?" I asked.

"No," said the guard.

He was starting to get suspicious. I needed to make up a cover story.

"I was just expecting to meet my friend here. We were supposed to visit the great hero's village together. Can I come in?"

"As long as you leave before sundown."

“Thank you.”

Why was he being so prickly? In any case, I entered the village and started to take a look around. Some of the people I passed paused to greet me, but most of them treated me like a nuisance.

Worse, Gillan was nowhere to be seen. The village seemed to be composed of single-story wooden houses, small fields, farm implements, and a well. I peered into the well just to be sure, but my brother wasn't in there either. There were traces of a bonfire in the main square, so I went over to investigate.

“Clothes...?”

I found a scrap of singed cloth. Thankfully, it didn't look like anything Gillan had been wearing.

Guess I had no choice but to ask the Great Sage where to find him.

<*He is thirty yards directly to your right.*> There was some kind of storehouse over there. It had a heavy iron padlock on the door, so the chances of getting inside easily seemed slim.

“Hey! What are you doing over there?!”

A fierce-looking middle-aged man came running over as I approached it.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I just got curious.”

“There's nothing in there but the village's farming implements. Stay away!”

Well, he seemed unreasonably angry. The more I saw of this place, the more suspicious I got.

“So, the thing is, I'm writing a research paper about the great hero's village,” I said. “Any chance you could show me those farm tools?”

“No. Absolutely not. Why would I do that?”

“If you let me have a little peek, I'll thank you handsomely.”

The man wasn't swayed. “Money isn't the issue.”

I was running out of options. It wasn't like I could just force my way in there. At least, not without alerting the whole village. While I pondered my next move, an old, white-haired man appeared.

“What’s all this yelling about?” he asked.

“Chief! This kid demanded I open the storehouse.”

“Welcome to the village of Tonnelles,” said the old man. “Unfortunately, we cannot do that. We keep our village’s treasure within those walls. Please, come to my home. I will explain everything.”

Every minute I spent here was another minute that Gillan could be in danger, but I didn’t think I could refuse. The chief’s home was just a little fancier than the surrounding houses. He offered me some tea, but I was more interested in finding out about Gillan.

“I had plans with a friend to meet up here,” I said. “He’s tall and has brown hair.”

“No one fitting that description has come here,” said the chief. “Even if he did, we don’t allow outsiders to stay overnight during this time. We choose to celebrate Gaien’s birthday alone.”

“I see. So this is where the great hero Gaien was born, huh?”

“Yes,” said the chief. “I am one of his descendants.”

“Well, I’m very honored to meet you.”

I distracted him with a little flattery while I used Discerning Eye. His name was O’Aura Gaien, he was Level 38, and his only skill was C-Grade Alchemy. That confirmed his relation to Gaien. The chief encouraged me to try the tea, but I turned it down—telling him I didn’t have much of a taste for it.

All the same, he spent basically the whole morning telling me about Gaien. Even more than two hundred years later, the town benefitted from his legacy. Apparently, they even got a tax break because of his contributions to the kingdom.

“That reminds me,” I said. “I was wondering if you have some sort of fire-related festivities at night?”

“What makes you ask that?”

“I noticed the scorch marks,” I said. “And what looked like some burned clothes.”

He looked shaken by that. He quickly concealed it, but his eyebrows continued to twitch. “Oh, yes, a drunk last night nearly set himself on fire.”

What an obvious lie! I forced a smile, but I knew for certain now: they had captured my brother.

“It’s about lunchtime,” said the chief. “Would you care to eat anything?”

“Oh no, I’m quite all right.”

“I’m sorry,” he went on, “but I’m going to have to ask you to leave this afternoon.”

“I know. If my friend *does* show up, could you tell him that Noir is looking for him?”

“Certainly.”

I bid the chief farewell and left him staring at the tea I hadn’t touched. My brother was probably in that storehouse, and the whole village seemed to be in on it. Maybe they had burned him yesterday, leaving only a charred corpse to hide away. Although, that scrap of cloth hadn’t looked like it belonged to him. Our family was poor, but Gillan always did have an eye for the finer things. He’d never wear such a cheap undershirt.

So, he was probably just kidnapped. Or he had seen someone being burned and had called for help?

I approached the storehouse again, but that old man still stood guard. “You don’t know when to stop, do you?”

“Oh no, I just wanted to apologize for being a bother earlier. I’m leaving now.” I bowed and walked off.

Near the entrance to the village, I asked some kids about my brother.

“Beats me.”

Even they were in on it! I walked out of the village and looked for a good place to watch the storehouse. I couldn’t find many places to hide, so I put a boulder into my Pocket Dimension and set it down about five or six hundred yards outside the village. That way, they wouldn’t see me hiding.

Even then, I couldn't get close enough to see anything, so I spent 400 LP on Variable Visual Acuity. There were limits to what the human eye could do, but that skill more than covered the distance.

I peered out from behind the boulder to see what was going on. The village chief had come to the storehouse to talk to the man outside, probably to let him know I'd left. I kept watching, biding my time.

Then, that evening, some more strangers came to the village.

"It's Emma and the others!"

They had seen my note. But the sun had already set, and the village guard turned them away. I considered going to speak with them, but I couldn't risk attracting anyone's attention. As much as it pained me, I sat where I was and watched them leave.

Once darkness fell, I crept closer to the village. I had Night Vision, but I couldn't see all *that* far. I detected movement, however—a man and woman chatting near the storehouse. When they finally moved off, that was my cue to sneak back into the village.

First, I tried to break the lock on the storehouse, but, before I had the chance, the villagers streamed out of their homes. I had no choice but to hide in one of the empty houses. They all headed for the main square. A bonfire had already been lit there, and the villagers made merry around it. As I watched, several men approached the storehouse and dragged someone out.

"Nmm! Mmmph!"

Gillan! Gagged, hands bound, and face bruised, but Gillan, no doubt about it. His injuries didn't look too bad, but suddenly anger surged through me.

"Come on," someone shouted. "Hurry up and bring him over here."

The villagers swarmed around Gillan. I assessed most of them at between Levels 10 and 30, just a few at around 40, and none of them had any skills worth mentioning. But they numbered over two hundred all told. Brute force wouldn't get me through this.

They dragged Gillan to the center of town, sat him down in front of the fire,

and removed his gag.

“Please, save me!” he cried. “I swear I won’t taste very good!”

“What? I can’t hear you.”

“I’m begging you! I-I’ve been training, so my muscles are all hard and gross! I’ll make you sick...”

“You sure are weak for someone who ‘trains’ so regularly,” said one of the men. “Ha ha ha ha!”

They sneered at Gillan as he begged for his life. Even the kids got into it!

“You should be happy. You’ve been chosen as the grand finale.”

“What kind of person would be happy about being eaten?”

“The man we roasted yesterday couldn’t stop laughing.”

“I-I’m pretty sure those were screams...”

“Don’t think so. But don’t worry, we aren’t going to roast you. The fire’s just for light.”

“Wait, does that mean...”

“We’re gonna eat you alive!”

What?! These people were *insane*! The chief clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention.

“Today is the last day of the festival,” he said. “And we shall feast on his flesh so that we might live another year, healthy and strong.”

The villagers shouted and cheered—so loud it shook the ground. Their chief pointed at my brother.

“First come, first served!”

And just like that, they all charged toward him. They were going to tear him apart like animals!

“Eeek! I don’t care if it’s a god or a demon, just somebody save meeee!”

That was my cue! I ran into the square, firing off Stone Bullets. I knocked down several people and tripped those behind them, killing the mob’s

momentum. The man who had guarded the storehouse earlier stood right next to Gillan. I brandished my sword at him.

“Step away from my brother!”

“Tsk.”

The man retreated a step, but I expected that. I already knew he had the Improved Back Step skill.

“Noir?!” Gillan cried. “How—I’m not dreaming am I? Ungh...”

“Gillan, if you start crying, you won’t be able to see where you’re going.”

Holding the villagers off with a sword, I pulled out a knife to cut Gillan’s bonds. Fortunately, he didn’t seem any more hurt than I’d already seen. He stood up right away.

“Can you move?” I asked.

“Absolutely! I can run, even. As long as they don’t catch me...”

“Use this.”

Gillan wasn’t too good with anything except a sword, so I handed him my two-edged blade. I could use other weapons. I debated whether to pull out my Piercing Spear or mallet.

“Fools,” said O’Aura. “Don’t hesitate.”

“But, Chief, that kid is pretty strong!”

“Then I will handle him. Step back.”

He advanced on me, holding a red stone. I used my Discerning Eye for Items and—an Explosion Stone?! The chief lobbed it at me. I instinctively pulled out the Shield of Champions and covered my brother.

Bwooom!

The explosion was powerful, but it didn’t leave a scratch on us.

“What on earth is that shield?!” the chief shouted.

He had no doubt made that red stone with his alchemy skills. Come to think of it, I could probably make them myself. No, there was no time for that now!

We had to get out of here! I switched to my mallet and swung it around to make way.

“Don’t let them escape,” the chief shouted behind us. “You won’t get away!”

Annoyingly, the villagers heeded his call. They were right behind us! I fired some Stone Bullets right into their faces.

“Gah!”

“Ugh!”

Most of them were pretty low level, so it didn’t take much to take them out. The crowd pursuing us gradually dwindled, until only two or three remained. I slowed down to let them catch up and hit them with a Lightning Strike. The last one standing was that ill-mannered man who had guarded the storehouse. He swung his flail, but I blocked it with my shield and froze him in place with an Iceball.

“What the?! I can’t move.”

That’s because you’re frozen, buddy!

We were free to make a break for it now, but I had one thing to do first.

“And this is for the person you ate yesterday!”

I punched the man in the face as hard as I could, breaking several teeth. Blood spewed from his nose and he slumped to the ground. Some people only listened to violence.

“Let’s hurry, Gillan.”

We made it through the gate out of the village and escaped into the night.

Of course, I’d known cannibals existed, but seeing them in person left me feeling sick. I felt bad for all the people who had fallen prey to them in the past. From what Gillan said, Tonnelles had been practicing cannibalism for over three hundred years.

Had their great hero Gaien eaten people too? Or had he been disgusted by them? Was that why he’d left?

At any rate, we made it back to Honest the next morning with all our limbs intact, and I finally asked Gillan the question that had been on my mind the whole time.

“Why were you even in that town? Home is in the other direction.”

“Oh, uh, um, I, uh, do I have to answer that question?”

“Yes. Especially after everything you put me through back there.”

“Fine...”

Gillan sighed, and told me everything. Shortly after leaving Honest, he’d run into a cute girl who had sprained her ankle. He tended to her, and she asked him to see her home. It was a little strange, but my brother never could think straight when a girl was involved. Playing the part of the chivalrous knight, he turned around and took her back to her village. The girl invited him into her house to thank him, and, once he sat down, she punched him in the face and knocked him unconscious.

“She definitely didn’t punch like a girl...”

When he woke up, he was in the storehouse with someone else the villagers had captured. The moment they dragged the other guy out in the middle of the night, Gillan contacted me. His hands were bound, but he had been able to reach the ring.

“I’m sorry, Noir, I never thought *I’d* be the one calling *you* for help.”

“Well, I’m just glad you’re okay,” I said. “We should really get some rest at the inn.”

I headed that way, but Gillan just stood in the middle of the street—staring at me with tears in his eyes.

“You’ve gotten so strong, Noir. And grown so much! It’s incredible.”

“Well, I’ve been through some difficult things to earn it.”

“I-I want to live a more honest life,” he said. “I want you to be proud to call me your brother.”

“Maybe you should start by cleaning up your romantic life,” I suggested.

“Yeah. I’m...going to take a vow of abstinence for a while. Focus on my studies. Get back into training with my sword.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen him so serious. Maybe this could be a turning point for him. I hoped so.

When we got back to the inn, I explained what had happened to Emma and the others. Their eyes went wide with shock. I wanted to tell Duke Schoen about it too, but I needed to get some rest first. I passed out for a few hours, then headed to Duke Schoen’s residence just after noon. After I told him what had happened, I formally asked him to arrest the people of Tonnelles.

“The town is under my jurisdiction but...this isn’t for me alone to decide. I’ll have to consult with the other nobles.”

“There have to have been more victims,” I said. “Have there never been rumors about this before?”

He looked uncomfortable at that. Made me think. I suspected they’d heard reports of this sort of thing, but it was hard to go after the great hero’s hometown without solid proof. This time, however, things were different. Gillan and I had both seen the villagers’ dark hunger with our own eyes. Surely they couldn’t deny it now.

Either way, it would take some time for Duke Schoen to speak to the other nobles.

For now, I headed to the training grounds to practice my archery.

“I’m gonna work you twice as hard for the practice you skipped yesterday,” said Lyrica.

Today, it was time to try and hit moving targets. She asked a pair of soldiers to throw a ball—about the size of a fist—between them. My job was to hit it. The men were strong. They could throw the ball hard and fast, and the target was quite small. All in all, a rather difficult task.

“Of course, you of all people can manage this, Noir,” Lyrica teased.

If I got mad, I’d mess this up. I had to keep a cool head! I loosed an arrow and it missed. Just barely.

“You grazed it on your first shot?!”

I did! Huh, that Visual Acuity skill really came in handy!

I took a deep breath and watched the next ball’s trajectory. Luckily for me, the soldiers threw at a fixed rhythm, without any significant fluctuation. My next arrow went right through the center of the ball.

“Amazing! It took me three whole days to manage that!” Lyrica said.

“Three days?” said one of the soldiers. “*That’s* incredible! *This...*this is impossible.”

I practiced for the rest of the day, focused on improving my accuracy.

That night, Emma came to my room to earn me some LP. She brought fruit and fed it to me, mouth-to-mouth. We enjoyed a few other “stimulating” activities as well, but just as the two of us were getting worked up, there was a knock on the wall—Lola checking in on us.

Regardless, I earned plenty of LP!

After everything that had happened, Gillan decided to stay in Honest. When the siege came, he planned to escape to the basement of a friend’s house. I was glad he had a plan. We had no idea how strong our enemies were, and I really didn’t want him to die.

The next day, Duke Schoen summoned both of us to his residence. Several prominent nobles I hadn’t met before were there, and you could have cut the tension in the air with a knife.

“Several monsters attacked this morning. They almost broke through. The great siege isn’t far off.”

The duke had dark circles under his eyes. He was busy securing shelter for the townsfolk and putting out calls for additional manpower. This cannibal situation had just added to his heap of worries.

One of the older nobles cleared his throat, and Duke Schoen took the hint.

“Regarding the incident in Tonnelles,” he said. “We have decided not to take

any particular action.”

“You what?!” Gillan flew to his feet. “They almost killed us!”

“Sit back down this instant, young man,” one of the nobles shouted. “Now, listen to me. Tonnelles is the birthplace of Gaien, and you say that its people practice cannibalism? You have no proof.”

Yeah, well, if you went looking, I bet you’d find the bones, but it would be difficult to prove the townspeople had eaten the people those bones had belonged to.

“And we do not believe your story” the noble went on. “We have grave concerns about your character.”

“What did I ever do?” Gillan demanded.

“Our investigation determined that you are a womanizer, that your marks in trade school are poor, and you have no particular positive qualities to speak of. In short: you are exceedingly untrustworthy.”

Gillan groaned. He couldn’t argue with that!

There was nothing to discuss after that, and the other nobles left the room. Gillan and I just sat there in silence.

“You should know that I believe your story,” said Duke Schoen. “Every year, around Gaien’s birthday, people go to that town and don’t come back.”

The duke was a good man, and kind, but he was powerless here. Clearly the other nobles didn’t agree with him, and he had the threat of the oncoming siege to deal with.

“I’ll pursue it once again after all this is settled,” said Schoen. “On a different note: Noir, have you ever heard of a double-layer door?”

I shook my head.

“I see,” he said. “I’m told you have the Great Sage ability. You can use it to acquire all manner of knowledge, correct?”

“I can,” I admitted. “But it can’t predict the future, and it doesn’t know everything.”

“Do you think,” asked Schoen, “that he could tell you how to open a double-layer door?”

“I can ask.”

One of the other nobles came back into the room. He looked impatient.

“Duke Schoen, it’s time.”

Duke Schoen rose reluctantly, saying he’d like to talk to me again in the future. Gillan and I finished our expensive tea and left the room. Gillan wanted to go to the library to research Tonnelles.

“I’m gonna find out if Gaien was a cannibal or whether he left the village because he was against it!”

“Great. Let me know what you find.”

I needed to use all the time I had to improve my skill with the bow. First up on the training menu today: learning how to hit multiple targets in quick succession. Once I mastered that, Lyrica tasked me with shooting apples off the top of soldiers’ heads. Missing was out of the question, even with medics on standby. The soldiers all had tears in their eyes. I felt bad for them, but they all cheered when I pulled it off.

“A cool head is the most important thing for an archer,” Lyrica explained. “Almost as important as the confidence to shoot someone right up the butt, he he he.”

Despite her rather, ah, unique personality, Lyrica was a skilled teacher. I was already progressing extremely well. When I finished my own drills, I watched the others train for a while, then headed back to the inn. It was time to talk to the others about their abilities.

“First,” I said, “I was thinking I’d give Lola Physical Resistance and Flee.”

She had very little combat experience and would mostly be helping lead the townspeople to shelter. I wanted to give her a defensive ability and something that would help her escape if she needed to. Lola agreed, so I Bestowed her with B-Grade Physical Resistance and Flee.

“Emma, what would you say to an upgrade to your Dual Wielding skill?”

She already had some mid-range skills like Wind Strike, so I thought I'd prioritize her primary skills.

"Sounds good to me. Go for it."

I edited her B-Grade Dual Wielding skill to upgrade it to A-Grade—it worked out cheaper than just producing the A-Grade skill and Bestowing it.

Luna was last.

"Shall I improve your skill with your magical firearm?" I asked. "Or do you want something else?"

"Could you give me Speed Shot?" Luna asked.

It would cost 500 LP to produce and another 100 to Bestow. Luna's aptitude for magical firearms meant it was pretty inexpensive. I gave it to her and investigated it a little further.

Speed Shot: Fires a single Energy Shot at high speed via a magical firearm. Individual potency is low.

That could be especially handy for catching enemies off guard or taking out those with lower defenses. I didn't have the LP to change the potency, but perhaps I could adjust the number of shots? Changing "a single Energy Shot" to "a rapid succession of Energy Shots" only required 400 LP. When I told Luna, her eyes lit up.

"If you can afford it, I would really appreciate that!"

When that was done, I'd used about 4,000 LP in total and had over 2,000 left.

"Leila, is there anything you'd want improved?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. You should save some. I mean, it could be useful if you face a powerful enemy or whatever."

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

With some LP in reserve, I could break enemy skills or level them down if I needed to. Or I could improve my own abilities to get out of a tight spot.

“I’m up tonight,” Lola said with a sparkling smile. “And I’m gonna work extra hard to fill your LP riiiight back up again.”

Chapter 9:

The Hidden Cellar

THE SUN SEEMED especially cheery and bright the next day. It was still morning, but it was already pretty hot. I was sweating as I stood out on the training ground. It must have been the hottest day since we arrived here, and it was the day of a very important test.

Lyrica explained the rules of today's training. It was time to face off against her. Many of the soldiers had gathered around the area, including General Stey. This test would determine if I was worthy of the enchanted bow.

I was pretty familiar with the various stages of the test: hitting a target at long distance, shooting a ball out of midair, firing arrows in quick succession, and so on.

"Don't you think you can beat me!" said Lyrica. "If I lose...I'll give you the panties I'm wearing!"

Another perverse comment? Really? Now? Wait. Would getting her panties earn me LP? Urgh, I wanted to punch myself just for thinking about it.

With everyone staring at us, we began. I was a little nervous, but I treated it just like any other training day. In the end, Lyrica's skills were too much. As someone who had only just picked up the bow, I stood no chance against her. No matter how many skills I had, nothing beat experience.

When we were done, General Stey walked over with a stony look on his face.

"You pass."

"I figured," I said. "I mean I didn't—wait, I *pass*?"

"Of course, you're no match for Lyrica, but I've never seen someone learn so fast. I'm giving you the enchanted bow. Learn how to use it."

He handed me what looked like a normal short bow. The wood was almost black, and the design rather simple. It looked easy to use, but it didn't seem especially powerful.

“It only has one skill, but it’s a strong one,” said Stey. “I’m sure you can check for yourself.”

He was right, I could. I went ahead and used my Discerning Eye for Items. The first thing I noticed was its name: the Enchanted Bow of Progress. Its single skill was Enhanced Archery—which made all other archery skills more effective.

“There are a variety of skill-based attacks you can use with a bow that will increase their efficacy,” said Stey. “Lyrica, would you demonstrate?”

“Watch closely.”

She drew her own bow and paused for a moment before releasing the arrow with a twang. The moment it landed in a target, the arrow exploded into a ball of flames, leaving nothing behind.

“That’s Exploding Arrow. Think you can manage that, Noir? Why don’t you try? He he he.”

She seemed pretty excited. Exploding Arrow only cost 500 LP, so I went ahead and bought it. It seemed pretty likely that it would come in handy later. I checked with General Stey to make sure it was safe, then aimed at a target with the Enchanted Bow of Progress.

I loosed; the arrow hit the target and exploded. The whole sequence was just the same as when Lyrica did it, although perhaps mine had a little more power? Judging from her reaction, it seemed so.

“Aww, General, I’m quitting archery. Do you know how long it took me to learn that?”

“Calm down now, your skills with a bow are much more well-rounded...for now.”

“I heard that! Now I really want to quit!” Lyrica sobbed and clung to his leg.

Wow, she was pretty daring to behave like that around the calm and collected General Stey. I could almost see them as a couple in the future.

“You should try it out on some of the monsters outside town,” said Stey. “Real experience is important.”

“Yes, sir, General Stey, sir!”

“Also,” he went on. “I saw Duke Schoen earlier, he asked for you and your friends to come to his home as soon as possible.”

I bet it had something to do with that door he asked about. I was free to go for the rest of the day, so I went to find Emma and the others. Leila and Lola had just left on a training expedition for close-range fighters. I would have been more worried, but they were only just outside the town walls. So, I invited Emma and Luna along to Duke Schoen’s house.

As soon as we approached the door, the duke himself came out to meet us, as though he had been waiting. He served us that expensive tea again, and we happily indulged.

“You were asking about a double-layer door, right?” I asked.

“That’s right,” said Schoen. “I didn’t explain this yesterday, but there is a hidden cellar in town.”

A hidden cellar? Well, that sounded suspicious! Suspicious and *intriguing*.

“We believe Gaien himself built it,” said the duke. “It may be full of his tools, his documents, even his alchemical recipes, perhaps. But no one’s been able to open the door.”

Whatever was in there, Gaien wanted it well-protected.

“I asked some people with Discerning Eye to look into it,” said Schoen. “All they could tell me was that it’s a ‘double-layer door.’ That’s it. Just the name. We have no clue as to how to open it. Yet I hope something in there will help with the siege.”

Gaien’s secret room, huh? Had he ever told anyone else how to open it? Talk about interesting.

“Well, I’ll happily give it a shot, if you like,” I said.

“Please do! I’ll take you there immediately.”

He was really keen! Truth be told, me too. Maybe whatever we found inside would tell me more about Gaien’s connection to Olivia, or the cannibalism in Tonnelles.

Surprisingly, Duke Schoen took us to a church. After exchanging a few words

with a priest, he brought us to a small room. It looked like a study, with shelves of books and a desk. Duke Schoen moved one of the bookshelves, revealing a hidden passage—a tunnel, and a set of stairs leading downward.

“This church used to belong to Gaien,” said Schoen. “Let’s head down.”

At the bottom of the stairs, we found a set of iron double doors—the double-layer door the duke had described. Even the brute strength of beast folk couldn’t budge it, and neither could magic or weapons. Eventually, people had given up trying to get in. It seemed impossible.

“Well, I’m here now, Noir,” Emma said happily. “So you don’t have to worry! You can use the Great Sage as many times as you like!”

Well then, we’d better get started. Oh, Great Sage, tell me how to open the double-layer door!

<There are two layers to the door. The first is opened by placing the Stone of Stability in the depression in the lower right corner, the second by placing the Stone of Faint Light in the same depression.>

I repeated the instructions to Duke Schoen.

“The Stone of Stability and the Stone of Faint Light? There *are* records of Gaien’s love for magical stones, but we’ve never discovered anything of the sort in his possessions...”

Perhaps Gaien had hidden them? Or maybe produced them through alchemy...

Oh, Great Sage, can those stones be produced with alchemy? If so, tell me their ingredients.

<They can be produced with C-Grade Alchemy and above. The Stone of Stability requires stone, brick, and iron. The Stone of Faint Light requires stone, a light gem, and a black insect.>

Well, all of that was surprisingly common! The inn we were staying at even used light gems for illumination. Though a little expensive, they were easy enough to obtain. And I had B-Grade Alchemy, so I would be able to make them as long as I had the materials. The second I asked Duke Schoen about the

ingredients, he went about making arrangements.

A few hours later, the duke's subordinates had acquired all the necessary materials. Those guys sure were good at their jobs! The stones they'd found were just the right size to fit in the depression, and they'd picked up a rhinoceros beetle for the insect. I was especially grateful for that one. A roach would have been just disgusting.

I set about my work right away and produced a Stone of Stability and a Stone of Faint Light without issue. The Stone of Stability was light brown and the Stone of Faint Light glowed slightly. A real shocker, I know.

I picked them both up and stood in front of the door.

"All right," I said. "Stand back. Here we go."

I touched the Stone of Stability to the depression, and right away, the doors slid open—revealing a second set of metal doors. The Stone of Faint Light opened the second one in much the same way.

"And that's it!"

Duke Schoen stared down the passageway beyond in awe. It kinda reminded me of the hidden dungeon, although this was probably much smaller.

"It seems Gaien was very cautious," I said. "Who knows what's waiting for us down there. Maybe my group should go in first."

"No, wait."

Duke Schoen disappeared and returned with a sword in his hand. He really was raring to go!

"I was quite the swordsman in my youth," he said. "I hope you will allow me to join you."

He wasn't even Level 20, but he did have a swordsmanship skill, so we all proceeded down the hall together. The stone passage was large enough to walk three abreast. Had Gaien built this place all by himself? The passage was very elaborate—full of twists and turns.

"Uhh...gah...uuuh...agh..."

We stopped just before a bend in the path and listened to the strange sounds ahead of us. They sounded like low, pained groans. I couldn't tell if they were human.

"I'm going in," said Luna.

"Please do."

She flipped her long, silvery hair out of the way as she disappeared around the corner. I followed close behind her, just to be safe. A single monster lurked at the end of the hall. A goblin—no, it had purple-blue skin and injuries all over its body. Its eyes were completely and ominously white.

Was it a zombie? I used my Discerning Eye to check, which confirmed my suspicions. It had the Zombification skill. The goblin zombie bared its black fangs and came hurtling toward us.

Psht!

A round from Luna's magical firearm pierced the goblin's forehead. Luna moved faster than usual—she'd probably used her new Speed Shot. But the zombie just kept coming! Time for Luna to show her real strength. As the goblin kept charging, she fired off a rapid-fire barrage of rounds.

When she'd turned the monster into swiss cheese, it finally stopped moving.



“That thing was tenacious!” I said. “If we mistook it for a normal goblin, that could have been nasty.”

“Some zombies live for hundreds of years,” said Schoen. “Perhaps Gaien brought it down here to study.”

When we set off down the hall again, I took the lead—just in case any more monsters appeared. We turned another corner and saw a door at the end of the passage.

“That’s probably Gaien’s room.”

That’s when I made a heinously bad call. I got impatient—I mean, the door was right there! I hurried forward but, before I could reach the door, the floor gave way beneath me.

“Huh?”

I’d fallen for a trap, quite literally!

“Gotcha!”

Emma reached out and grabbed my arm, but it was no use. She lost her footing, and we both tumbled down into the darkness.

“Owww...”

“Well *that* didn’t work out so well...”

Neither of us were seriously injured, but we’d hit the floor pretty hard. Sure, it hurt, but the hole we fell into wasn’t that deep. When I looked up, I saw the trapdoor above us. Closed. We had no way of getting back to Luna and the others.

“Are you okay, Emma?”

“Yes, somehow. It’s pretty dark in here.”

“At least we can see.”

I’d Bestowed Night Vision on both of us a while ago. We had landed in a big, empty space, with only one way out—a set of stairs leading further down.

“I guess they expected you to see the door and rush forward, falling through the trap floor. And I took the bait, hook, line, and sinker...”

“Well, it happens,” said Emma. “So, what do we do? Go down?”

“There isn’t really anywhere else to go, but...I kinda don’t want to.”

The trap wanted to lead us somewhere. The further we got into this hidden cellar, the more doubts I had about this Gaijen person. Perhaps we really did need to look for other options.

“I’d like to consult the Great Sage again, but...would you give me a kiss first, Emma?”

“Well, I suppose I don’t have any choice, do I?”

Despite her tone, Emma happily obliged. After that, I could ask the Great Sage about any hidden paths without fear of a headache. It turned out we had two options, and both involved some kind of mechanism hidden in the wall. Emma and I quickly got to work looking for them, pressing various parts of the wall until we discovered the hidden paths. One had a set of stairs going up.

“I wonder if it leads back up to the others?” I asked.

“It is kinda weird though, don’t you think? If this whole thing is designed to catch intruders, why would you give them an escape route?”

Emma had a point, so we checked out the other hidden passage first. A short way in, we found a door. Could the door above be a fake, and this one be the real deal? If so, everything down here made much more sense.

“I’m gonna open it.”

Emma pushed the door open. Inside, we found a middling-sized room with an old, worn desk, bookshelves, and burlap sacks strewn about. It didn’t look like a trap, so we split up to search around. The sacks brimmed with bones. Human bones. Gross! Urgh, what had Gaijen been *doing* down here? Maybe he’d used them in his alchemy?

“Noir, there’s some kind of journal over here.”

“Let me see?”

I could barely make out the words on the age-thinned pages. The entries were sporadic, the dates all over the place, but all the long passages rambled about eternal youth. Had he been trying to achieve that?

“Oh.”

I spotted my master’s name and read the section out loud.

“I met a woman named Olivia who can produce new skills. I asked her to make one that would give someone eternal life. She said anything is possible, so long as she had the LP, but when I asked her to give it to me, she refused. I tried to force her to cooperate, but she fought back. I’ve never met anyone—or anything—that strong!

“She destroyed my works, one after the other, and cut off my arm. She seemed to know everything about me, but how? She would have killed me if the townspeople hadn’t intervened. I think she could probably kill anything if she set her mind to it. Unfortunately, it may be best to abandon the idea of creating a skill to bring about eternal life.

“There must be another way! If I can’t have immortality in the flesh, I want to become immortal in the hearts and minds of the people. No, it is not a simple desire. I *deserve* to be immortalized! I deserve it!”

Wow, so this Gaien guy had been quite the shady character after all. Olivia only fought him in self-defense.

“Hey, look! There’s something under the floor here. I think it’s a treasure chest!”

“Wow!”



Emma had found a part of the floor that seemed out of place. Together, we pulled the chest up out of the hole. It wasn't locked, so we opened it right away. Inside, we found precious stones, pendants, and even knives. Though it all had to be pretty old, everything seemed to be in good condition. When I checked the equipment with Discerning Eye for Items, I found every one of them had skills. Gaien's work, presumably. I stowed the treasures in my Pocket Dimension along with his journal.

"If we're done here, we should head back" said Emma.

"Yeah, the others are probably getting worried."

We took the stairs up to the floor above. They stopped at what looked like a dead end, but the wall was a different color from everything around it. When we pushed against it, we came out right in front of the trap door we'd fallen through. The others were still there, and we quickly explained what we'd seen.

Apparently, Luna hadn't just been standing around either.

"I investigated that room beyond just in case," she said. "I found only bones, and a lot of them. I was just wondering whether I should jump in the hole and go after you."

"There are more stairs down there," I said. "It's probably just another trap, though. Shall we go?"

They all agreed, so we made our way back to Duke Schoen's house. There, I pulled out the treasure and the journal we'd recovered.

"Would you care to leave these under my care for now?" asked the duke.

"Absolutely. If any of the items seem useful, please give them to whoever can make use of them."

"I knew coming to you was the right decision. I'll have to report all this to the king. Was it all about eternal youth, in the end? I mean, that's why he fought with Olivia, isn't it?"

Yep, Gaien had been completely obsessed. The journal proved it. But, even with the highest-grade skill in alchemy, he never found eternal youth. Out of curiosity, I looked into how much a skill like that would cost...

Whoa! Olivia wasn't joking! That was a *lot*!

When we returned from Duke Schoen's house, Lola requested that I meet her in the town library. She was pretty exhausted after her training expedition, but she wanted to look into some things. I hoped something there would satisfy her curiosity.

"So, did you kill any monsters today?" I asked.

"I did! Though don't you think it's weird to make a fair maiden like myself fight?"

She seemed pricklier than usual. Upset, even. But she had gone up a whole five levels, so her training had worked, one way or another. She was going through a book about items. Every now and then, she looked absolutely spellbound by what she was reading. Once or twice, she even did a little celebration when she found something especially exciting.



“This one’s a love potion. You should read this, Mr. Noir.”

The book laid out the whole recipe. To seduce a man, the potion required the highest-grade Alchemy skill, the “fluids” of ten thousand women, blood, and ambition weed. For a woman, it was a mixture of ten thousand men’s “fluids,” blood, and illusion weed.

That seemed like a, uh, a lot. Could you even *get* that much of the—the stuff? It had to be way easier to win someone over the old-fashioned way! All the same, I couldn’t shake the feeling that Lola wanted to make some.

“You’ll just have to wait a little longer. But I’ll get it, Mr. Noir. Don’t you worry.”

“I’m not sure I’d want to drink something like that!”

“He he, wait and see, Mr. Noir. Wait and see.”

She sounded so confident! For a moment, I worried she’d actually talk me into it.

We read for a while after that, picking through the books until someone called out to us.

“Hey, Noir, you on a date or something?”

“What are you doing here, Gillan?”

Oh yeah, of course. He was looking into Gaien and Tonnelles. Lola emanated a “stop interrupting us” vibe, but my brother never could take a hint.

“Listen, let me tell you what I’ve found.”

Gillan’s research had paid off. He’d found a memoir written by someone named Tainelles, describing the misdeeds of the people of Tonnelles. In the end, Tainelles had fled the town for fear of being eaten. He was a contemporary of Gaien, and he even mentioned the alchemist in the text.

“It’s right there in the book—this guy was a cannibal!”

“I’m surprised Tainelles got away with writing about the land’s great hero like that.”

“Tainelles was criticized heavily by his contemporaries and was considered a

compulsive liar,” said Gillan. “But he was also a first-class adventurer. That’s why we have his memoir.”

The general public probably assumed the part about Gaïen was made up, but we knew now. It was all true.

The text contained one more important piece of information. Gaïen had craved fame and attention and had assassinated rivals on more than one occasion. He even used human bodies as material for his alchemy. That confirmed my suspicions about the bones in the cellar. Under that heroic mask, Gaïen was a monster. However, he’d died ages ago, so we couldn’t do anything about it.

“If nothing else, I want to stop the villagers of Tonnelles from hurting anyone else,” said Gillan.

“Yeah, we don’t want to see any more victims.”

“I wanna get revenge for all the people they’ve hurt too.”

Lola, who had been listening this whole time, raised her finger. “Don’t you think it’s weird that so many relics here are dedicated to Gaïen? Maybe studying those would give us some more information.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “We should go and check them out.”

“All right,” said Gillan. “Better bring some weapons. Then we can destroy them if we need to.”

The events in Tonnelles had really affected my brother. He hated Gaïen with a passion. Setting aside the question of whether wanton destruction of public property was a good idea, the three of us left the library and headed to the central square.

Ding-dong! Ding! Dong! Ding! Dooong!

Just then, the bells rang out throughout the town. Everyone stopped in their tracks, frozen in fear. Soldiers flooded the streets.

“It’s the monsters!” they shouted. “It’s the siege! Take shelter! Soldiers, assemble on the training grounds!”

Disaster had finally arrived.

Chapter 10:

Battle Is Always Sudden

FOR THE LAST WEEK, Honest had been sending soldiers out on patrol to watch for monsters. At the first sign of the siege, they were to fire signals into the air to warn the town. The signals they sent now gave us a little warning, but not much: in a few minutes, the siege would descend.

Most worryingly, the signal shots came from all directions. According to records, that was typical during the siege. The monsters came from everywhere. Even sea monsters assaulted the town.

I still didn't understand how this worked. I mean, it's not like the monsters had a meeting to decide on the right date and time to attack. Did they have a leader? I couldn't think of any other way to explain it.

As I mulled over this, we ran as fast as we could to the training grounds. A ton of soldiers were already there, and we soon met up with Emma and the others. Everyone seemed much calmer than I'd expected. Even the soldiers kept their cool. Well, we'd prepared for this for a while.

"Listen up!" shouted Stey. "The siege is upon us. It is time to execute our plan. Everyone, take up your posts!"

Everyone started moving all at once. As an independent unit, we were free to position ourselves wherever we liked. We headed up the main street, guiding civilians to shelter as we went. Most of the stragglers were street vendors who couldn't simply abandon their wares outside, so we lent them a hand moving everything out of the way.

"Hey, I found a lost kid," Emma shouted. "I'm going to go look for his mom."

"Good idea!"

Some people had panicked at the sound of the bells—they'd tripped or fallen and injured themselves. Luna tended to their wounds and, after about fifteen minutes, the majority of the town's population were shut away inside. The only

ones left were those who couldn't move easily, and people trying to escape along the road.

"Save me! Demons are coming!"

Some aerial enemies had already slipped past the watchtowers and gotten inside the town.

"Let's go!" I shouted.

"Yeah! Let's do this!"

The five of us ran toward the sounds of the attack. Near the south gate, a purple harpy was trying to snatch a man up in its talons and drag him into the sky.

"I don't think so!" Luna cried.

She nailed the harpy right in the ankle, shooting off its foot. The man dropped safely to the ground, and we all set about performing our roles, just as we'd practiced. Our melee fighters, Lola and Leila, helped get the man out of the way, while I pulled out the Enchanted Bow of Progress and aimed at one of the harpies.

"Whah?!"

The creature crashed out of the sky. Easy as pie! Lyrica's training really had helped. These weren't weak creatures by any means. If anything, they moved faster than the ones that showed up last time.

"Ah! They're too high up!"

Emma's Wind Strike had a limited range, and she started to struggle.

"Hnnnnngh!"

"Whah?!"

"Egh!"

"Gahh..."

Unsurprisingly, Luna's Speed Shot was unstoppable. It didn't take long for us to put down ten of the harpies, but they just kept coming. Seven or eight falcon monsters crossed the walls, ignoring us and heading further into town.

“Let’s go after them.”

We leapt to action, but Lola raised her hand to stop us.

“What are they even doing here?” she asked. “And why are they all headed for the town square?”

“You think they’re after something in particular?”

They *could* just be driven by instinct hunting down the few people we hadn’t yet gotten inside.

“Somebody save me!”

The voice came from an alley. Were there other monsters down there?

“What shall we do, Noir?”

I was technically the leader of our unit, so I gave the order to split up.

“Emma, you and Luna press on after the falcons. The three of us will help whoever’s shouting.”

After all, Leila and Lola couldn’t do much against flying enemies. They would do better with me.

Down the alley, we found several soldiers on the ground. One of them bled badly from the neck, while five or six more stood back to back with their swords drawn.

“Please, help us!”

“Where’s the enemy?” I asked.

“In the shadows! It’s lurking down there.”

In the shadows? I observed the area carefully for a moment before it hit me: I could use Discerning Eye to get a read on anything hiding there.

Name: Shadow Ghoul

Level: 88

Skills: Shadow Weaving; Sharp Talons

Talk about lurking in the shadows! And it was pretty strong too. That Shadow Weaving Skill had to be helping it hide. I inched toward it. Then something shrieked right behind me.

“Eeek!”

A monster appeared out of the ground behind Lola. It looked human, but for its blood-red eyes and pure-black body—almost like it had been charred. It also, bizarrely, had three talons growing out of each of its hands. The creature lurched toward Lola. She swung the Blade of Divine Punishment, but the monster was too fast.

“No! Lola!”

“Hngh!”

With a grunt, Leila struck the creature smoothly and powerfully. The ghoul’s head went flying. Her insane destructive power came from her Demon Fist skill. She turned toward me.

“Noir! Behind you!”

“Huh?”

Crap, I’d completely forgotten to check for more! I barely managed to parry the second ghoul’s talons with my sword, but the power of the strike knocked me back into a wall. Pain shot up through my body, but I didn’t have time for that. Yet another ghoul popped out of the ground where it had hidden to land a finishing blow. This was it.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing to Mr. Noir?!”

Lola swung her blade down on the ghoul with overwhelming force.

“Guhh...”

Well, that killed it. Splitting a monster clean in half will do that. As I picked myself up, Leila closed in on the one that had thrown me and finished it off.

“Th-thanks.”

“Are you hurt?” Lola asked. “That looked nasty.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “But only because of you, Lola. You saved my life.”

“I was so scared I froze up! But when I saw you in trouble, I felt my body surge with power.”

Lola’s smile sparkled. I’m pretty sure she’d looked completely terrifying to that monster. The soldiers told us they thought a couple more ghouls had been in the pack, but they never showed. I couldn’t detect them with my Discerning Eye either. I suspected they had fled when we wiped out their friends. Surprisingly clever for monsters.

For now, we needed to get medical attention for that bleeding soldier. We kept guard while his comrades picked him up and carried him. As we went down the main road, a shadow suddenly fell over us.

“No way...”

Honest was doomed. We couldn’t hope to win this now. The shadow of a looming draconic form swept over us, its body surging across the sky.

I shuddered, but there was no time to quake in fear. And besides, the dragon flew right past us. Maybe it hadn’t noticed us? Still, something that big could do some serious damage to the town.

“That’s a wyvern,” said Lola. “They’re small as far as dragons go, but extremely ferocious.”

Even a party of high-ranking adventurers would have trouble taking that down. Emma, Luna, and I had fought an earth dragon not long ago, but it hadn’t been as strong as this thing.

The wyvern had flown past us so quickly that I hadn’t had a chance to use my Discerning Eye. Should we follow it? No, we had to get that injured soldier to safety first. Several medical tents had been set up throughout the town during preparations. When we reached one, it was already chaos inside. Tons of beds were filled with people receiving treatment.

Were things already this bad? We turned over the wounded soldier and his friends for treatment, then headed back out.

I had no idea what to do next. Go after Emma and the others? Hunt down the ghouls that got away? Or try to do something about that wyvern? I looked to Leila for advice.

“The ghouls seemed pretty powerful,” she said. “We probably shouldn’t leave them to their own devices. Lola and I will look for them, you rejoin Emma and the others.”

“That makes sense. Then the three of us can go after the wyvern.”

With that settled, we split up and got to work. But things couldn’t go smoothly, not now. The town teemed with monsters, and not just harpies and ghouls. Goblins and other creatures stormed the streets, wrecking everything in their path.

I caught a blue-skinned goblin dragging a young woman out a broken door by the hair. A middle-aged man nearby tried to fend it off with a sword, but another goblin launched itself at him, knocking him over. Goblins were small, but they were pretty powerful.

“Haaaaah!”

I rushed in, swinging my sword. My blade ripped through the goblin’s unsettling blue skin, spraying blood all over the ground.

“You’re strong, kid! Thanks.”

“Thank you for saving us.”

Neither of them seemed to be seriously injured, so I suggested that they head somewhere else.

I pushed forward again, disposing of any monsters I encountered as I went. There were so many different species! Some of them were especially lowly creatures, the sort lacking in any kind of intelligence. How had they all ended up in Honest at the same time?

By now, the wyvern was attacking one of the watchtowers. Emma and the others were in the opposite direction, but I couldn’t just let this happen. I hurried toward it.

Soldiers in the tower fired arrows and magic at the creature, but its skin was

so tough that arrows couldn't penetrate. The wyvern paid them no mind. It focused entirely on destroying the tower. It would soon succeed. Cracks ran down the building's walls. That tower wouldn't hold much longer.

"Get down from there!" I shouted to the soldiers. "The building's going to collapse!"

They disengaged and ran for the stairs. At almost the same time, the wyvern slammed into the tower and the whole thing came crashing down. This thing was so strong! This time, I made sure to get an accurate read on it.

Name: Fire-Breathing Wyvern

Level: 105

Skills: Fire Breath; Body Blow; Hard Body

It was quite a bit stronger than most of the other monsters I'd seen, but nothing I couldn't handle. Having said that, I immediately had to dodge back as it dove down from the tower, and fifteen feet of scaly beast with two horns and pitch-black eyes landed right in front of me. Its uneven skin shone dark blue, and its wings spread from its arms, just like the harpies.

The wyvern glowered down at me and opened its mouth. Oh shoot—was this its Fire Breath skill?

"Cover your ears!" someone shouted.

Everyone else did as the soldier said, but I raised the Shield of Champions instead. I wasn't sure I could survive a direct hit from its Fire Breath, but—

The wyvern let loose a terrible roar.

My whole body went suddenly numb. Only I had failed to plug my ears, and the loudness of the roar shook my bones. I readied myself to attack but, to my surprise, the creature flew off instead—heading for the center of town.

"Are you okay, kid?!" One of the soldiers ran over to me. He looked pale as a sheet.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I have a hearing protection skill.”

I’d made it back when we fought the earth dragon. It had been useful then, and it’d saved me again now.

“Glad to hear it,” said the soldier. “If you hadn’t warned us, we would all be dead in the ruins of that watchtower. We owe you.”

“You really don’t. I’m more interested in how you knew the creature was going to roar rather than use its Fire Breath!”

The soldier laughed. “Most wyverns have a tell when they’re going to breathe fire: their body starts to shake.”

“Good to know. I’m going after it.”

“Hey, are you crazy? You don’t stand a chance!”

“Don’t worry!” I called back. “I’ll work something out.”

“Oh, wait! Are you the kid that held his own against General Stey?”

Well, I couldn’t really claim that. Stey had intimidated me from start to finish. Instead, I gave the soldier a vague shrug and ran off to catch up with the wyvern.

How long was I going to play tag with these monsters?

The closer I got to the center of town, the more monsters appeared. The majority were cannon fodder, but stronger creatures were mixed in with them. I couldn’t let my guard down. I made a point to use my Discerning Eye on everything before attacking. At least nearly everyone had taken cover by now, which made things easier. However, the orcs and goblins were destroying buildings. I couldn’t let that happen.

I took out my Piercing Spear and snuck behind a goblin demolishing a wall. I stabbed it repeatedly in the back, ignoring the pathetic look it gave me as it died. These monsters killed everyone they could find. No mercy.

As I switched back to my sword, another goblin burst out of a water barrel but, with the brilliant flash of silver light from my blade, it split clean in two.

Even I had to admit that was pretty impressive.



“Noooo!”

A scream came from the house behind me. A harpy had broken a second-floor window and forced its way inside. The scream sounded like that of a child. I had to act fast. I headed for the house, but the door was locked.

“Sorry, but I have to break down your door!”

I smashed it with a large Stone Bullet and dashed up the stairs to the second floor.

“No, stop! Don’t eat me! I don’t taste good!”

A harpy was trying to kidnap a man in full plate armor who cowered in the corner of the room. He looked like some kind of noble.

“Close your eyes!” I warned.

I hoped he’d done as I asked—and I used Blinding Light. It had proved pretty effective on harpies in the past and, sure enough, the bright flash disoriented the creature. It smashed into the walls like a moth bouncing around in a basket. Soon, it cracked its head into the ceiling and fell to the floor. I quickly finished it off with my sword.

“Seems it forgot it was inside.”

Blinding Light had proved to be super effective at close range. Also good to know.

I turned to the man I had rescued. It turned out he was a bit of a character.

“My deepest thanks for rescuing me! Sir, if you had not come to my aid, I am afraid I would have been finished!”

“N-no problem. I really should apologize for breaking your door.”

“Fear not, good sir. You are my knight in shining armor.”

Actually, I’m pretty sure you’re the one in the armor here...

I wasn’t entirely sure what to make of him. What was with the armored hero look? Clearly he wasn’t prepared to fight any actual monsters. Maybe he just had more money than brains? I suggested he hide in the closet, and he quickly agreed.

“Excellent plan, sir. After all, there are many valuable garments in there, and someone must defend them!”

“Just make sure you keep the door closed, okay?”

Even if he did come under attack again, he would be fine with all that protection. I wished him well and used the broken window to hop out onto the roof.

I had a good view of the area from up there, and I took the opportunity to survey the situation. I soon spotted the wyvern in the center of town.

I jumped down and deliberately landed on a goblin to break my fall. I got back to my feet and ran, passing a number of partially destroyed buildings on my way. Was wrecking homes a monster hobby or something?

The second I got to the square, the wyvern slammed into an expensive-looking building. How much did they need to destroy before they were satisfied?! Worse, I knew some people were hiding in there.

“Why don’t you pick on someone your own size!”

The wyvern was big, but I stood a pretty good chance against it. I fired off several arrows with my enchanted bow, but they just bounced harmlessly off the wyvern’s skin. It sure got the creature’s attention though! I watched for just the right moment and then...

“Roaaaaar!”

“Did you really think that was going to work?”

Bwooomph!

I scored a direct hit with an Exploding Arrow. This time, it pierced the wyvern’s skin, even through its Hard Body skill. It staggered aloft, flapping its wings and trying to get away. Not on my watch. I fired off a Thunderbolt. The wyvern crashed into the fountain in the middle of the square.

Now I needed to take out the creature without getting me killed. I had two options: wear it down with long-ranged attacks or get in close and use the Piercing Spear.

Before I could decide, the wyvern opened its mouth and made a strange

coughing noise. Then its body started to tremble—starting at the tip of its tail, then up through its torso into its neck. The Shield of Champions had A-Grade Fire Resistance, so I whipped it out and hid behind it.

Then the fire came. Even with the shield protecting me, the heat was tremendous. I only managed to withstand it because I had Heat Resistance too. If I hadn't, the shield alone wouldn't have been enough.

Once the fire died out, the wyvern coughed violently. This was my chance! I fired a pair of Icicles at its wings, freezing it to the ground. It looked hurt now, so I ran over and stabbed it through the head with my spear.

As soon as the wyvern was dead, some adventurers ran over, drawn by the commotion. Embarrassingly, they exploded into a round of applause.

“Wow, you're incredible!”

“I can't believe you defeated a wyvern.”

Ack—it was definitely time to get out of here!

As I left the square, I met some familiar faces coming from the other way.

“Noir!”

“Sir Noir!”

No matter how relieved I was to have defeated the wyvern, I was even more relieved to see Emma and Luna again.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I ended up fighting the wyvern all by myself.”

“Those falcon monsters took more time than we thought.”

It sounded like they'd had a pretty hard time, but I was hardly surprised to hear they'd gotten the job done. Leila and Lola were probably finishing off those ghouls even as we spoke. I wanted to know how they were doing, but it wasn't safe to stay here and chat. Monsters kept coming from all directions.

“Hey, doesn't it seem like there are more monsters in this area than anywhere else?” Emma asked.

“It does,” I agreed. “It's weird. What could they want?”

Even as I said that, I caught sight of the statue of Gaien and the Stone of

Peace. That's right! Right before the attack started, Gillan, Lola, and I had been about to investigate it.

I went over now to take a look. I started with the statue, but it seemed completely normal. The real question was whether something was hiding in the Stone of Peace. After all, hadn't Gaius made it right before his death?

I used my Discerning Eye and discovered the stone had two skills: Life Seal and Monster Call. I looked into them with Editor.

Life Seal: Seals a living creature inside an object. The creature will remain alive until the seal is broken.

Monster Call: Once a certain amount of magical energy is accumulated, an item will emit a power that attracts monsters. As the energy pool grows, it will attract more monsters, even distant ones. Once the call goes out, the magical energy is consumed, and the process begins again. The process repeats until the item is destroyed.

"Th-this is the source of it all..."

It all made sense now! This stone gathered up magical energy over time and, when it reached its required amount, it called monsters to it, creating the siege. The call depleted its reserves, at which point it would just start the whole process over again. That's why the cycle repeated every ten years!

"Listen, you guys, the stone is attracting the monsters."

"Seriously?!" said Emma. "I mean, I suppose a first-rate alchemist would be capable of making something like that, but..."

"But why?" Luna asked. "What was he trying to achieve? Didn't the townspeople say Gaius fought off the monsters? Did he have some kind of grudge against Honest?"

I didn't think so. I had suddenly remembered something from Gaius's journal—about how, if he couldn't become immortal, he wanted to live on in people's

hearts and minds.

In times of peace, people forgot their heroes. But maybe, if monsters regularly attacked the town, they'd inevitably remember how they'd once had a hero who protected them. That way, the legend of the great hero that saved Honest would be passed on and on, through the generations. If that memory was what Gaien had been after, he'd succeeded.

"Let's destroy it. Right now."

I pulled out my unnamed mallet. It had a Stone Crusher skill, which had proved extremely useful in the hidden dungeon before.

"Smash it to bits!" Emma cheered.

"Indeed, Sir Noir shall sever the chains of misfortune that bind Honest!"

Breaking it would destroy the skill and stop the monsters from gathering, right? I wasn't sure if it would break the Life Seal skill, too, but it was worth a try.

"Eat this, Gaien!"

I brought down the mallet and the stone cracked down the middle. Nothing happened. One hit wasn't enough, so I kept going. Before long, the stone was a pile of rubble and my Discerning Eye showed that the skills were gone.

"You did it!"

"That's Sir Noir for you."

Emma and Luna high-fived, but I had to wonder: Would the monsters really retreat now?

Before I could check the situation across town, smoke billowed up into the air from the stone, pouring out of the rubble. A powerful gust of wind rushed past us. I closed my eyes against it.

By the time I opened them again, something truly strange had happened: an unfamiliar creature stood right in the center of the square.

The thing wore full plate armor. It stood at least fifteen feet tall and carried a sword just as long. With the seal skill broken, the creature inside had been

released.

“GLORY TO GAIEN!” it bellowed.

Was *that* Gaien? No, he’d probably sealed it in the stone to prevent its destruction...or to get revenge.

Either way, Gaien was an absolute piece of crap.



Chapter 11:

The Hero's Parting Gift

THE OVERWHELMING FOE that emerged from the Stone of Peace utterly terrified me. I just wanted to run away. Clad head-to-toe in gleaming plate armor, it wielded a sword that could cleave a mountain in two. When I used my Discerning Eye on him, I just wanted to cry.

Name: Gaien Guardian 4

Level: 250

Skills: Greatsword Ability (Grade C); Physical Resistance (Grade A); Abnormal Status Effect Immunity (Grade S)

The perfect offense combined with the perfect defense. In life, Gaien had probably used it as a guard. It's level was on par with the magmafish, but it towered over that monster. At least the fish had been kind of cute.

"I'm, uh, not sure we can handle this..." Emma said.

"I agree," I said. "Normally, I'd say we should run."

But it was *right* in the middle of town. That was a massive problem. If we left it here and it started joining the destruction, it would do more damage than that wyvern ever could have.

"We don't have a choice," Luna said. "We have to protect the townsfolk."

She struck a gallant pose and fired off several Speed Shots. I was about to cheer her on, but they had no effect on the creature at all. Not only did this thing wear armor, its body had a strong resistance to attack. How were we supposed to fight something like this?

The guardian prepared to swing its sword.

"We should get back."

We turned and ran away together. The guardian was heavy, so its movements were slow. We safely dashed out of range, but it brought the sword down anyway—reducing the fountain to rubble. If that had been us, we'd all be dead.

We split up and surrounded it. That way whoever stood behind it could attack. Tragically, we *still* couldn't do any damage. I dodged toward the creature's feet with my mallet. I mean, its greatsword was so long that it would struggle to attack something at close range, right?

"PRAISE BE TO GAIEN!"

"I'd rather die than praise that evil jerk!"

I hit the guardian hard as I could, but my mallet bounced right off the armor. That wasn't going to work either.

"Noir, look out!"

"Wah?!"

The guardian lifted one massive boot and tried to stomp down on me. If it succeeded, I'd be crushed to a pulp. I scrambled out of the way as fast as I could.

That was close!

Luna and Emma kept firing off rounds and spells, but the creature didn't even flinch. It just continued swinging its sword, smashing the cobblestones to pieces and sending fragments flying. What were we going to do?

I thought back to all my previous battles and remembered another strong-but-slow opponent I'd faced once: the dead reaper on the third floor of the hidden dungeon. It had a one-hit kill attack, and I'd defeated it by slowing its movement.

I checked how much it'd cost to Bestow the skill Heavy on the guardian. On a more nimble enemy, that required a large amount of LP, but on this guy? It was only around 400 LP to create and Bestow the skill. I went ahead with my plan, and it slowed the guardian down considerably.

"Did you do something?" Emma asked.

"I gave it Heavy."

“Smart!”

“But it’s just slower, it’s not weaker. Also, it doesn’t seem particularly interested in us. It looks like it’s trying to get to the houses.”

That greatsword could do some serious damage to those buildings.

“What if we all attack the same weak point together?” Luna suggested. “Could we get through its armor that way?”

“Might as well give it a shot.”

We focused our attacks on the guardian’s right foot. I fired off an Icicle, a Stone Bullet, and an Iceball, but none had any effect. Lightning Strike was much the same. The guardian just kept moving like nothing had happened. I could always break its Physical Resistance skill, but that would take more LP than I had to call on.

“Damn... What do we do?”

“Hey, look over there!”

Emma pointed toward a man rushing toward us, cutting through monsters like butter. Before we knew it, he was at our side.

“General Stey!”

“Stardia, situation report.”

The general listened to my hasty explanation as he held guard against the creature.

“Gaien’s Stone of Peace attracts the monsters,” I said. “But breaking it meant unleashing a powerful enemy. Under the circumstances, I opted to break the stone. This is what came out.”

I was afraid he’d think I’d made a grave mistake, but he clapped me on the shoulder.

“Excellent judgment. I knew you had potential.”

“Th-thank you!” I stammered.

I explained the guardian’s abilities as quickly as I could.

“I’m going to see if I can get past its skills,” said Stey. “Back me up.”

The general charged the guardian head-on. Honestly, I thought he had lost his mind. The guardian swung its greatsword but the general just dodged and ran up its greatsword as though it was nothing.

“PRAISE BE TO GAIEN! GLORY TO GAIEN!”

“False heroes deserve no such honor.” Stey jumped and buried his blade in the guardian’s shoulder.

“Gahh?!”

We hadn’t even put a scratch on the guardian, but Stey flew in and chopped off an entire arm. I couldn’t tell if Stey had aimed for a gap in its armor or just cleaved right through it. One thing was clear either way: General Stey was no ordinary fighter.

Maybe it was his Iron Cutter skill? Before I had the chance to figure it out, General Stey called out again.

“Why don’t you show me your skill with that bow?”

At first, I thought he was talking to me, but I wasn’t holding a bow. Then the arrows came flying in, aiming for the wound where the guardian’s arm had been and exploding in plumes of fire. I followed the paths of the arrows and found Lyrica, master archer, smiling on the rooftop.

“Listen up, Noir,” she called. “One of the keys to archery is attacking from a spot your opponent can’t reach. Gotta take ’em when they can’t fight back, you know?”

Despite the rather unsavory undertone, it sounded like good strategy, and her attack had visibly weakened the guardian. The general took the opportunity to lob off its other arm, and its greatsword clattered down into the square.

“You’re up next, Stardia.”

“Noir,” Lyrica shouted, “just follow my example and you’ll do great.”

“Got it.”

I took out my enchanted bow and aimed an Exploding Arrow at the guardian’s

exposed flesh. At last, the arrow did considerable damage.

“Good job,” said Stey. “But the enemy isn’t finished yet, don’t let your guard down.”

With no other way to attack, the guardian tried to trample us under its feet.

“I’ll bait it,” Emma said. “Then all of you can attack.”

She was quick on her feet and had wind magic, so she provoked the creature into following her, dashing out of the way just before getting trampled. My heart was in my throat the whole time.

Luna fired off several rounds with her magical firearm and the guardian lurched backward.

“Hm, it’s weak where its head connects to its body,” she said.

Thanks, Luna! Now I knew just where to attack.

“You need a spear,” Stey called. “Do you have one?”

“I have one with piercing strength.”

“All right,” he said. “I’ll toss you up. Aim for its throat.”

“Got it.”

The general clasped his hands and held them out to boost me up. I took a running start and jumped onto his palms.

“Go!”

His arms sank slightly, then launched me straight up into the air. As expected, his aim was excellent. I didn’t even have to maneuver in the air. I flew straight at the guardian’s neck.

“Ooooh!”

I let out an unseemly yell and stabbed the guardian right through where its Adam’s apple should’ve been. There was a lot of resistance, but I pushed through using every ounce of my strength. With the help of all my skills, I drove the spear into the guardian’s neck. It groaned and toppled backwards.

Once it landed, I yanked the spear back and took a deep breath, shaking.

“Noooooir!”

It was Lola and Leila! I was so glad they were okay.

“We got the ghouls,” Leila reported. “Wow, this thing looks like a real nightmare. Look at that sword...”

“You can say that again. I thought I was gonna die.”

“Goodness, sounds like you had it rough,” said Lola. “Good work!”

I smiled at her, but my good mood was destroyed by an astonished shout from General Stey.

“Stardia! It’s still alive!”

A shadow fell over me. And when I turned, I saw the guardian looming over me like a mountain. It was trying to crush me under its boot again! My first instinct was to run, but I was so exhausted. Instead, I tripped and landed on the cobbles.

No way could I escape in time, but I could at least make sure Lola and Leila were safe. I glanced toward them and saw that, for some reason, Lola was holding the guardian’s massive sword.

Wh-what was going on? Surely that was too heavy, even for her.

She swung it with no problem.

“Be a good boy and die already.”

Shwump! The guardian’s head split cleanly in two, right through the helmet. It definitely couldn’t survive that.

It was finally over. The square fell deathly silent as everyone stared at Lola. She calmly set the sword down and wiped the sweat from her brow.

“The neat thing about humans is that we can do anything if we set our minds to it,” she said.

“I’m pretty sure you’re literally the *only* person who could do that.”

“Oh, don’t be silly.”

But I was right. She really was exceptional. Who could have guessed that she

could go toe-to-toe with a monster like that? Her superhuman strength was really something!

Chapter 12:

False Hero

WE WERE LUCKY General Stey and Lyrica had come to find us when they did. We could never have defeated the guardian without them. Apparently, they'd been on the walls when the monsters had simply stopped attacking and started to withdraw. That must have been when we destroyed the Stone of Peace. Since they were no longer needed on the walls, the general and remaining soldiers had turned their attention to exterminating the monsters left in town.

That's when they found us, and thus ended the final monster siege. The event left behind many dead and wounded, as well as a great deal of property damage, but, compared to previous assaults, the casualties were few this time. We all spent the next few hours working to save people trapped in the wreckage and getting medical treatment for them.

To my relief, Gillan was safe as well.

Two days later, we were still in the Kingdom of Rosette. We really wanted to head home, but we were obliged to meet the king first. He wanted to reward us for our actions.

But presently, I was not in Honest or the capital of Rosette. I hadn't gone home either. Rather, I had joined Duke Schoen, his soldiers, and my brother on an excursion to the village of Tonnelles. The duke glared angrily at the villagers gathered in the square.

"Village Chief O'Aura Gaien, do these two men look familiar to you?" Schoen asked.

"N-no, I've never seen them before in my life."

"What about the rest of you?"

The other villagers shook their heads. They'd all agreed to play dumb. How brazen. Gillan couldn't bear it.

“Drop the act, you vicious cannibals! Your crimes against humanity have been exposed. Confess!”

“I see...” said the chief. “Duke Schoen, you don’t actually believe this madman’s story, do you?”

“I do.”

The chief was a little taken aback by that, but his arrogant attitude quickly returned.

“Tonnelles is the birthplace of Gaien. Do you really think the great hero’s own people are cannibals? What proof do you have?”

“We’re here to look for physical evidence,” said Schoen. “And, we have these two eyewitnesses. And, there have been an unusually high number of disappearances in this area.”

“Your Grace, I mean no offense, but for you to trust the words of these strange fellows over your own people, the people of the great hero’s own town, no less, it is simply—”

“Gaien was no hero. Noir, tell them what we learned.”

I stepped up and explained that Gaien’s own relic was the source of the great monster sieges. On hearing this, the villagers went pale. They finally understood what a mess they were in.

“Gaien wanted immortality,” I said. “When he realized he’d never achieve it, he summoned those monsters to make people suffer. It was all so that he’d be remembered as a hero. But he was no hero. He was a liar, and so is everyone in this village!”

The village chief hung his head, but I saw him slip his hand into his shirt.

“It’ll take you two seconds to throw that exploding stone,” I said, “but it’ll only take me one to cut off your arm. Is it really worth the risk?”

“Ughh...” O’Aura fell to his knees and ground his teeth in frustration.

“Arrest him,” said Schoen.

The soldiers moved in. Before long, they had all the villagers in custody. Gillan

noded enthusiastically all the while.

After that, he and I built a simple grave to honor the people who had been killed by the villagers of Tonnelles and left some flowers on it.

On the carriage ride back, Duke Schoen apologized to us.

"I should have done this the moment you told me what happened. I'm sorry."

"It's fine," I said. "The other nobles had their own opinions about the situation too. Right, Gillan?"

"Yeah. I feel so much better now, though. It's like they say: good always triumphs in the end. Plus, I had a lot of time to reflect on my life before Noir saved me. I want to do better in a lot of ways, but my number one regret is not taking my studies more seriously."

Huh. He had really changed this time. I was shocked to discover that he'd broken up with his many, many girlfriends.

Gillan wrapped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close to him. "I'm going to become a great merchant," he announced proudly. "So I want you to become a great hero, Noir."

"I'm not really interested in the whole hero thing. I just wanna live a safe and comfortable life."

"Oh, Noir, you haven't changed one bit!"

"They say that people only ever change when they're so scared or so sad that they feel like they might die," I said with a smile. "I've not experienced either of those things yet."

Both Gillan and Duke Schoen seemed to understand.

When we got back to Honest, we had to transfer to a carriage headed to the capital. It was already waiting for us outside the gates when we arrived, as were Emma and the other girls.

"You're finally back. How'd it go?"

"Well, I think the villagers got what they deserved," I said. "I guess we should get in, huh?"

“Hang on, hang on, we had a little talk.”

What was this about? Emma, Lola, Luna, and Leila all surrounded me with their hands outstretched. I was pretty confused, but all of them were grinning. Was this about LP? I hoped they wouldn't do anything too weird out in public...

“You worked so hard this time, we all wanted to acknowledge that,” said Emma.

“Now, relax.”

“And here we go.”

“Get ready, Noir, we're gonna toss you!”

And that's exactly what they did. The four of them lifted me up and threw me into the air. I felt like I was flying.

“Ah ha ha, this is pretty fun!”

I let myself enjoy it, laughing up at the big blue sky.



Extra Chapter: Olivia's Memories

ON THE SECOND FLOOR of the hidden dungeon, once again Olivia found herself bored and with nothing to do. Worse, Noir had gone home, so she had no one to talk to.

<I wish he would come back. I'm so lonely.>

Olivia repeated this thought, over and over again, before finally giving up. She never wasted much time reflecting on the past, but in her current situation there wasn't much else to do.

<Where did he go again? Oh right, Honest. Haven't thought about that place in ages.>

Olivia had traveled to all over the world as an adventurer, both on jobs and for pleasure. Now she thought back to her sightseeing trip to Honest.

<It was a pretty nice city. I remember having fun. But I vaguely recall something bad happened...right! I met that awful man.>

Of course, everyone encountered good folks, normal folks, and downright nasty folks during their life, but you didn't always immediately know which was which.

Olivia thought back to a day long ago.

Olivia was in a bad mood when she arrived in Honest, and the cause of her ill humor was wyverns. They weren't usually pack monsters, but the keyword was "usually." That morning a flock of them flew over her head and all happened to evacuate their bowels at once.

"Ew?!"

Thanks to her catlike reflexes, Olivia deftly avoided the dung raining from the sky. However, even with the most careful of steps, she couldn't avoid the flecks

of foul matter thrown out as it smashed to the earth. A small amount had dirtied her clothes and utterly ruined her mood.

Even as she sulked down the road, her beauty attracted the gaze of all she encountered. One man in particular saw this as an opportunity.

“Hey, you with the blue hair. You’re the prettiest woman I’ve ever seen. Wanna have dinner with me?”

“No thanks. I’m in a bad mood, so if you know what’s good for you, you’ll get out of my sight.”

“Ha ha ha! If I know what’s good for me, huh? I know how I look, but I’m a pretty strong adventurer, you know. They call me Fire Fingers, check it out!” He created a flame in the palm of his hand, trying to show off. “I’ve used this baby to put hundreds of monsters six feet under. Pretty hot, huh?”

Olivia performed the same move, but her flame seemed to reach all the way to the heavens. The man’s eyes went wide. Some of the people in the street stopped to stare.

“Did you say something?” she asked. “I didn’t quite catch that.”

“N-never mind. Sorry for bothering you.”

Funny how many men backed down the second they realized how strong Olivia was. Either way, he was of little consequence to her.

It was only the middle of the day, but Olivia went to a bar anyway and demanded a drink. People were staring again, but she wanted to wash away her troubles. So she drank, and drank, and drank. As she carried on into the night, her bad mood finally abated. She was even enjoying chatting with the bartender.

“You know, I can make like, any ability,” she told him. “Don’t put me in the same category as those other adventurers.”

“Wow, does that mean you could even extend someone’s life?”

“Oh yeah, that’s easy. I can make someone live longer than an elf or even give someone eternal life, if I wanted.”

“Did you say...eternal life?” another voice asked.

It came from a man sitting behind her, wearing a hood. Olivia paid him no mind.

“But straight up immortality would require so much LP it’d be practically impossible. I could probably afford to do it for myself, but in order to give it to someone else? The cost would be massive.”

The bartender assumed she was joking. Or drunk. “All right, then,” he teased. “So why don’t you do it? Give me a skill. I’ll cut your tab in half if you can.”

“Oooh, you can’t take that back now.”

“What are you going to do?”

Olivia pondered the question, red in the face from drink. She had over ten million LP, so almost anything was possible. She used her Discerning Eye on the bartender and laughed when she noticed he had Lower Back Pain.

“You know that people who have a skill for back pain never get better, right?”

“I...never told you that.”

“I saw it with my Discerning Eye, dummy! If I cure your back pain, I want my drinks on the house.”

“That’s impossible,” the bartender scoffed. “Even doctors and healers said so. But...if you really *can* cure it...your bar tab would be a cheap price to pay.”

He polished a glass while he spoke. He’d been humoring her because she was beautiful, but he was getting tired of keeping a stupid drunk company. All he really wanted was to go home. It was after closing time already, and he’d been on his feet all night. His back was really starting to bother him.

“All right,” said Olivia. “All better now.”

“Heh, well, thanks. Now, ma’am, it’s closing time, so you had better pa—”

The bartender paused and frowned. How strange. The pain had completely vanished. He must have been imagining it! Timidly, the bartender moved into a position that usually caused him pain. He always regretted it, but...strangely, there was no pain at all.

“Doesn’t hurt, huh? That’s because I fixed you.”

“I-It’s just a coincidence.”

“Oh ye of little faith! All right, I’ll give you a bonus, C-Grade Superhuman Strength. There, it’s yours. Try picking up something that’s usually too heavy.”

The bartender did as she suggested, trying to pick up a barrel of beer. Normally, he needed another person’s help.

“What? I can pick it up, and with such ease!”

“Yeah,” said Olivia. “Because I got rid of your back pain and I gave you superhuman strength. My bill will be my bar tab for today. Byeee!”

Olivia left in high spirits, and the bartender didn’t try to stop her. Instead, he thanked her and asked her to come again with a smile.

After she left the bar, Olivia wandered through the town in a drunken stupor. She had booked an inn, but she couldn’t remember where, so she just picked a direction and started walking. There were fewer and fewer people around now. She was just considering giving herself a better sense of direction when a creepy feeling slid down her spine.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked. “I don’t like the way you’re looking at me.”

The man from the bar had followed her from the tavern. He kept staring at her from under a hood, a faint smile on his lips.

“Can you do it for anyone?” he asked. “What you did to the bartender, I mean?”

“Yeah, sure. Depends on compatibility and stuff, though.”

“Could you give me eternal life?”

“I’d have to work myself half to death, so that’s a no.”

“Well, you just met me, so that’s understandable. But it’ll change, just you wait. Sounds like you have a Discerning Eye, so why don’t you try it on me?”

His arrogance irritated Olivia, but she scanned him nonetheless. She couldn’t read any of his abilities. He had some kind of concealment skill.

“What’s wrong?” he taunted. “Can’t see anything? He he he.”

“Ugh.”

Now she was really annoyed. She created a Nullify Conceal skill and Bestowed it on him. It cost her over 100,000 LP, but it'd be worth it to see the look on his face. She used her Discerning Eye again, and read him like a book.

“Northrad Gaien, forty years old, and Level 820. You have quite a few skills, but your strongest is probably S-Grade Alchemy.”

“Huh?!”

The man, Gaien, was so astonished that he took three steps back. What had she done to him?!

“You will do what I ask,” he said. “You will!”

“You’re gonna make the great and powerful Olivia do what exactly? You know, I was finally in a good mood before you came along. I wish you’d knock it off.”

“Don’t worry,” said Gaien, “I’m not going to kill you. Just make you submit to me.”

Gaien pulled a sinister purple sword out of a pocket dimension. The blade had Poison and Paralysis on it, and even the slightest touch would drive a target mad. Gaien rushed Olivia. Just before he made contact, Olivia jumped away.

“Huh?!”

It was no ordinary human jump. Olivia leapt over a two-story building and landed on the roof. “I’m done entertaining drunks for the night,” she called down. “Byeeee!”

“Wait, you’re *the* Olivia, aren’t you?! The insanely powerful adventurer?”

“You’re pretty famous too, Gaien,” Olivia retorted. “Aren’t you meant to be the hero of this town?”

“Something like that, but I want to be a hero for all eternity.”

“Give it up. Everyone dies someday. You just need to accept it.”

But Olivia’s words didn’t get through to Gaien. Instead, he threw an amber-colored pebble at her. Olivia backhanded it away with ease, but Gaien punched

the air for joy.

“S-Grade Spearmanship! I shouldn’t have expected any less from the great Olivia.”

“Ngh.”

When she used Discerning Eye on herself, her S-Grade Spearmanship skill was gone—somehow Gaien had it instead. When she examined the amber pebble, she realized it had a skill-stealing effect. But just as Olivia was about to get serious, Gaien disappeared.

“Clever. Well, whatever.”

She didn’t use spears very often anyway, and she could just make it again if she needed to. Olivia yawned and laid down on the roof, figuring she’d sleep there for the night. After all, it wasn’t very practical to steal someone else’s bed. The roof would do just fine.

She awoke around noon the next day. She headed for a restaurant, already regretting having drunk too much the night before. Disappointingly, the place was much more crowded than she’d anticipated. Instead, she bought something from a street vendor and headed for the town square. She sat down on a bench and watched the children playing in the fountain. They were pretending to be adventurers and goblins. Why had they picked such weak monsters? There was an old man making repairs to a piece of green stone, and she asked him the question.

“Goblins invade the town rather frequently,” he said. “I’d guess that’s why.”

Olivia looked at what he was working on. “What a ghastly looking stone.”

“I would watch my tongue were I you, traveler. Lord Gaien made that for us.”

Urgh, surely he hadn’t done it just for the good of the town, had he? To be sure, Olivia used Discerning Eye and discovered that the stone had a skill that attracted goblins. She pushed the old man aside, made a fist, and hit the stone hard—smashing it to pieces and breaking the skill to boot.

“What are you doing?!”

“You know, that thing’s the reason goblins keep showing up. You can thank me later.”

“Guards! Guards!”

Unsurprisingly, the guy didn’t believe her. Olivia was about to run when a much more irritating opponent showed up. Even without the hood, she could tell he was the same man from the night before.

“My preparations are complete,” he said.

He had four, giant, armor-clad, massive-weapon-wielding guardians in tow as he marched into the square.

“Oh,” said Olivia, “I see you’ve brought friends.”

These Gaien Guardians were Levels 1,050, 880, 440, and 250 respectively. Gaien was also carrying a spear. Anyone else would have been terrified. Olivia, however, was feeling relatively motivated to fight. Unfortunately, Gaien had no intention of fighting fair. He pulled a scarlet stone out of his breast pocket.

“Use your Discerning Eye on this.”

“What? It burns you if you touch it? Good luck hitting me with it.”

“Take a good look.”

He threw the stone, but he wasn’t aiming at her—he aimed at the children playing in the fountain.

“Ugh.” Olivia caught the stone, setting herself aflame.

“Now!” Gaien shouted.

The guardians attacked as one. Each of them had a different weapon, but the strongest one, and the only one that landed a hit, wielded a mallet. Olivia was knocked back against a wall, and Gaien laughed when he saw her tattered clothes and how she swayed as she stood.

“I’m surprised you’re alive!” he said. “Although I suppose I shouldn’t be too shocked. You are the great Olivia after all!”

“...”

“What?” Gaien cried.

The space near Olivia distorted and a black knight on a horse appeared. It held a sword as black as its armor. Olivia had used Summoning Magic to call Odin himself.

<You have not called upon me in quite some time, Olivia.>

“Take out those four guardians.”

<Understood.>

Slash! Slash! Slash!

Odin sliced Guardians One, Two, and Three in half with a single swipe a piece. He was about to return from whence he came when Olivia called out to him.

“Hey! I said *four* guardians.”

<Yes, and you know well that I will not touch the weak. I won't fight a creature below Level 300.>

“Worthless.”

<Hmph. I await the day when next we meet.>

Olivia stuck her tongue out as he left through the dimensional rift.

“M-my guardians...” Gaien stammered.

He trembled as Olivia used a gap-closing skill to appear right beside him.

“Take that!” she shouted.

“Eghhhh!”

The fight ended with a single blow. Olivia snatched Gaien's spear and deftly chopped off one of his arms.

“Aaaagh!”

As she listened to his screams, Olivia pondered whether she should end the life of this phony hero. In the end, she didn't have the chance. The villagers all gathered around Gaien's fallen body, risking their lives to protect him.

“You know he's the one who's been summoning monsters to the town, right?” said Olivia. “He even attacked *children* to try and score a hit on me just now.”

“Lord Gaien would never do such things!” said one of the townsfolk. “Please, we’re begging you, spare him.”

“Yes, please. Lord Gaien is our hope.”

Olivia was impressed by how thoroughly Gaien had deceived them. He would have made a better conman than alchemist.

“I have no particular attachment to this town,” she said. “If that’s what you want, go ahead.”

Instead, Olivia turned around and headed for the gates. On the way, she paused to destroy a stone in front of the inn that attracted harpies.

“Think of it as a parting gift.”

Gaien drew monsters to Honest just so he could look like a hero. How pathetic. Olivia wanted to warn someone about it, but they wouldn’t have believed her any more than the townsfolk in the square had.

“Oliviaaaaaa!”

As she was about to leave, she heard a voice call out behind her. An exhausted-looking Gaien limped toward her.

“If you try something again, you’re dead,” she told him.

“Did you see?” he demanded. “I’m the hero here. And you’re nothing but a villain.”

“Hmph.”

That wasn’t the reaction he’d wanted. The veins popped out of Gaien’s forehead.

“I shall live on forever!” he shouted after her. “Even without eternal life! I’ll be immortalized in their memories!”

“Yeah, sure, cool story, bro.”

“Ha ha! I shall live out the rest of my long life doing whatever I want. Secretly committing heinous crimes, eating people...it doesn’t matter what I do! They’ll herald me as a hero! Ah ha ha ha ha!”

He really was a piece of garbage. Time to give *him* a parting gift as well.

Lifespan Minus Fifty Years

“Huh? What did you just do?” Gaien asked.

“Oh nothing. Enjoy your life, or at least what’s left of it,” she said.

She gave Gaien a wave and walked out of town, Gaien’s deranged laugh echoing behind her the whole way.

“Nothing is eternal,” she muttered. “One day, your evil deeds will be exposed. And I bet the person who reveals it will be a total hottie!”

It wasn’t until almost two hundred years later, but Olivia’s prediction came true.

Afterword

HELLO AGAIN, Meguru Seto here. Since this is the fourth volume, I'm assuming there aren't any new readers just picking the story up from here.

Well, it's 2019 now, huh? Let's make it a good year! I feel like I say that every year, but before you know it, another year's over and we have to do it all over again. Time seems to flow faster as you grow older, doesn't it? Or did I learn how to use some kind of magic to speed it up without realizing?

Jokes aside, I hope I can avoid getting injured this year. I sprained my finger and my wrist last year while playing sports, and I endured a variety of other minor injuries. I hope you all take care. Even if you're not doing a lot of exercise, you could slip and fall on icy ground. That happened to my mom around ten years ago: she slipped and fell on the ice and broke a bone. The human body is a lot more fragile than you think.

And on that note, I must give a heartfelt thanks to all my readers, my editor Shou Ji, and everyone who worked on the book.

Also, the first volume of the manga adaptation for *Hidden Dungeon* went on sale in December of 2018. It's really excellent, and I'd be overjoyed if you took the time to check it out.

Until we meet again!

The Hidden Dungeon
Only I Can Enter



ANIME COMING SOON TO  **crunchyroll**™

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