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Isekai Walking

Walking around the Otherworld

Elesia Kingdom Arc


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“Two of your latest skewer recipe, sir.”

Ciel

A spirit who accompanies Sora. Can only be seen by certain people.

I looked around for a place to eat, holding my newly purchased skewers. One skewer was for me, and the other was for the spirit.

Sora

A high school student summoned from another world. Thrown out of the party of heroes, he travels to see his new world.

ISEKAI WALKING

Elesia Kingdom Arc



“Wow, it really is a potion...”

Chris

A mage adventurer. She's usually shy, but she opens up around Sora.

[Alchemy]

Consumes materials to create new items. Expending large amounts of MP can raise the quality of these items.

“These are for us?”

Rurika

An adventurer working with Chris. Uses twin blades. Has an energetic, sociable personality.

“The skill I learned was Alchemy.”

“Otherworlder
Fujimiya
Sora...I have
confirmed your
potential. You
will come with
me now.”

No. 13

??????????????



Current Stats



Fujimiya Sora

[Job] Scout [Race] Otherworlder
[Level] None

[HP] 340/340 [MP] 340/340 [SP] 340/340 (+100)
[Strength] 330 (+0) [Stamina] 330 (+0) [Speed] 330 (+0)
[Magic] 330 (+0) [Dexterity] 330 (+0) [Luck] 330 (+0)

[Skill] Walking Lv. 33

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 278491/430000

Total XP Accumulated: 4293491

Skill Points: 2

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. MAX] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 3]
[Enhance Physique Lv. 9] [Regulate Mana Lv. 8]
[Lifestyle Spells Lv. 7] [Detect Presence Lv. MAX]
[Sword Arts Lv. 8] [Dimension Spells Lv. 7]
[Parallel Thinking Lv. 6] [Boost Recovery Lv. 7]
[Hide Presence Lv. 5] [Alchemy Lv. 7] [Cooking Lv. 7]
[Throwing/Shooting Lv. 4] [Fire Spells Lv. 4]
[Water Spells Lv. 4] [Telepathy Lv. 4] [Night Vision Lv. 5]
[Sword Tech Lv. 2] [Resist Status Effects Lv. 3]

Advanced Skills

[Appraise Person Lv. 4] [Detect Mana Lv. 3]

Contract Skills

[Holy Spells Lv. 1]

Title

[Spirit Contractor]



Isekai Walking

Vol. 1

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Prologue

“All right, Sora. Here’s your job for today.”

The “job” handed to me by the familiar client was a backpack large enough to take mountain climbing. It was—without exaggeration—twice as wide as I was, with even more packages secured to it. It almost felt like they were testing my limits.

As I took hold of the shoulder straps, I could feel the pack’s weight for myself. It was every bit as heavy as it looked.

Once I got it on, I felt its full weight settle onto my shoulders and down through my body. I didn’t know how strong the average person in this world was, but I’d seen groups of fully grown adults struggling to carry objects of this size before. With that in mind, I reckoned my current strength was probably higher than average...to put it mildly.

Even so, the pack was probably heavy enough to make me fall over if I wasn’t paying attention.

“Hey, are you kidding me?”

“He really lifted it?!”

“Oh, come on...”

My client gasped in astonishment as I successfully shouldered the pack, while a few others behind him—probably employees—looked by turns delighted and frustrated. I was guessing they’d placed bets on my ability to hoist the full load, and I had to wonder if they’d tacked on extra weight just to tip the odds.

“Okay, I’m off,” I said, then took a step.

Instantly, the crushing weight of the pack vanished, and my hunched-over back turned ramrod straight. This was the activation of my skill, Walking—to never tire no matter how much I walked. When I was originally summoned here to the otherworld, Walking had been the unique skill I was assigned—much to

the displeasure of the ones who'd summoned me.

My straightening up brought out more astonished gasps from the onlookers, but I didn't stop to listen. I just hurried on my way.

As I set out, a creature floated its way to my side. It looked like a ball of fur as white as snow. I didn't know exactly what it was, but I'd been told it was a spirit. Most people couldn't see spirits, but for some reason, I could...and for some reason, this particular one was following me. I hadn't figured out *why* it was doing this yet, but it was harmless enough, so I just ignored it.

Okay, that's not quite true. Sometimes I'd glance over at it and find that watching it made me feel more at ease. I'd never had a pet before, but I figured this was probably similar to the way people with pets felt. Its temperamental nature, which it expressed by disappearing for long stretches from time to time, did seem rather catlike...though it looked more like an angora rabbit.

"Joining me again today?" I whispered. The spirit responded by tumbling playfully through the air around me as it followed.

The pack given to me by the guild had been loaded with packages for delivery, so my load grew lighter with each one I dropped off. Not that I felt the weight at all while I was walking, thanks to my skill.

Others reacted like it must have been tough for me, having to cart around heavy loads all day, but I actually felt just fine. I got to enjoy unusual sights, for one thing, but most of all, the additional hidden effect of my skill, "gain one experience point for each step taken," added an extra thrill to each step of the delivery process.

See, with every new level of Walking I gained, I received skill points, which I could then use to acquire new skills. Among these were "Appraisal," "Lifestyle Spells," "Detect Presence," and "Sword Arts." Leveling up increased my stats, too, which meant I was effectively growing more powerful with every step.

Plus, this world didn't have convenient forms of transportation like cars and trains. The primary vehicle was the wagon, so the ability to walk forever without getting tired had proven quite valuable in itself.

I stopped at an item shop on the way, picked up another package, and set out again. It was now around lunchtime, so on the way to my next delivery location, I cut down a street lined with stalls. I called it Stall Street—not its official name by any means, just a nickname I gave it. If someone from my world saw the place, they'd assume it was playing host to some kind of festival.

Carrying a huge pack would usually make it hard to get around on a busy street, but for some reason, the people here made way for me.

"Our soup is especially delicious today. Come have a bowl!"

"Sora, dear, our soup is better than his. I'll give you a discount!"

The rival stall owners were jeering at each other again. I couldn't have been more surprised when I'd learned that they were married. *Why don't they just run a shop together?* I'd wondered, but their irreconcilable soup differences had apparently led each of them to run their own business.

"Feeling thirsty? I've got cold fruit water!"

"Hey, Sora! We've got a special on our meat and veggie stir fry today!"

Stall owners on both sides of the street called out to me, but I just waved in response. As appealing as their offers were, I'd already decided where I was going to eat today.

When did it get there? The spirit was already waiting in front of the stall I had my eye on. It hadn't known I was planning to eat there today or anything; it had actually been stopping in that particular spot during each of my trips here the last few days, to gaze at the food cooking there. Almost like it was interested.

"I'd like two of your latest skewer recipe, sir."

At the sound of my words, the spirit's expression brightened... At least, its slightly drooping ears perked right back up, so that's how I interpreted it.

"Hey, that you, Sora? Hauling another big load, I see."

The fragrant smell of meat made my stomach rumble as I approached. I stopped to get my payment out, but as I was pulling the coins from my pouch, I felt something change.

“Hmm? What is it?” The stall’s owner, Grey, spoke up in concern as he saw me pause, but I told him I was fine and handed over the money.

As I took my purchase, I checked my stats out of the corner of my eye. The change I’d felt was in the weight of the pack while I was standing still. I was thinking that the burden seemed to have eased a bit and, sure enough, my Walking skill level had increased, raising my stats along with it. The sight of the steady progress brought a smile to my face.

I looked around for a place to eat, holding my newly purchased skewers. The spirit was clearly restraining itself from just pouncing on the meat and going to town. Stall Street was a busy place, so I wanted to find a back alley with some privacy. In a residential district filled with short buildings, I found a spot that seemed like a good place to sit for a while, so I sat down to eat there.

Most homes in this area were one-story structures made of brick. This was a perfectly normal method of house building, but I couldn’t help comparing it to the mostly wooden buildings of my original home. I’d gotten used to it by now, but the medieval-European-style cityscape really made the environment around me feel like another world.

Of course, it *was* another world...

One skewer was for me, and the other was for the spirit. To the rest of the world, the spirit’s eating would look like a skewer gradually vanishing into thin air. That was why I’d gone out of my way to seek privacy.

In a town we’d previously visited, the people there had celebrated the spirit’s arrival. It must have learned the taste of food from there, because since then it had tried to sample food from stalls, leading to angry shouts and cries of shock from those who witnessed the phenomenon. Apparently disturbed by this reaction, the spirit had gone and hid for a while, only returning to me a few days later.

I don’t know what it had been doing while it was gone, but ever since its return, it had firmly held itself back from eating without my permission.

Seriously, what could have happened there?

By the time I came out of my reverie, I’d finished the skewer. One meat

skewer for lunch might not sound like nearly enough food, but it was actually a big portion—four hunks of meat, each the size of a child’s fist.

The ability to get such thick cuts of meat cooked up as tender as these said incredible things about the skill of the cook. It almost felt like a waste to sell a dish like this at a stall. The depth of the flavor suggested the use of a base sauce that had been allowed to simmer and enrich itself for years on end. Grey’s latest also seemed to have a secret spice on top of that... I’d learned what it was with my Appraisal skill, but I wouldn’t reveal his company secret.

I took a brief rest, then decided to return to my afternoon deliveries.

As I stood, the contentedly resting spirit looked up and met my eyes. Its eyelids were drooping sleepily, but it floated up to my hood and nestled itself inside. It fit perfectly in there, as if it were meant to be.

Since I couldn’t touch the spirit myself, I couldn’t really explain how it was nestling in my clothing. Was this one of those “mysteries beyond the understanding of science”? I certainly had to appreciate the otherworldliness of it, but I’d have loved to solve the mystery so I could pet the fluffy little critter.

At one point during my deliveries, I passed in front of the south gate. I frequently went through it myself, and even now it was crowded with adventurers and merchants dressed in traveling outfits. They checked in at the gate and entered the town, and some of them passed coins to a group of people hanging around the gate dressed as mages. They were probably buying the use of the lifestyle spell “Cleanse” to remove the sweat and dirt on their clothes.

Mages who knew lifestyle spells were the most common kind of spellcaster, but any type of spellcaster at all was comparatively rare. So if you didn’t know anyone who could use that spell, you could pay someone near the gate to get yourself cleaned up. Baths were technically available as well, but practically speaking, they were only an option for people with money. Inns that catered to nobility or big-time merchants might have one, but one night at a place like that would be several days’ worth of expenses for me.

I wasn't exactly a bath connoisseur, but going weeks without one sure made you miss them. Nevertheless, they were out of my grasp. The inn I was staying at right now didn't have a bath either.

My skill meant that I didn't sweat very much anyway, but my clothing still got dirty from the road. I'd struggled with that a lot early on, so when I'd found out I could learn lifestyle spells with skill points, I'd pounced on it. Thanks to that, I didn't have to employ the services of those mages. As reasonable as their prices were, an expense like that could really add up if you had to spend money on it every day.

When my fellow adventurers would learn that I could cast lifestyle spells, they'd start asking me to clean them off after training. They'd act like I was doing them a favor, but I was really getting something out of it as well: the more I used the spell, the further I increased my skill proficiency.

My Walking skill was truly versatile.

Other things I spent skill points on were Sword Arts—allowing me to wield a blade despite my amateur status—and Dimension Spells, which gave me access to the Storage spell that was useful on adventures. I was hoping to someday learn Alchemy so that I could make my own potions, as well as the Cooking skill so I could eat delicious food even while I was out on the road.

I ended up finishing my deliveries for the day earlier than expected. Leveling up had probably increased my walking speed, which was okay because I could move as fast as I wanted when I was working by myself. Now I just had to report back to the guild, and I'd be done.

I looked up at the sky and saw that the sun was still high. My usual policy was to return to the inn before it got dark, but it looked like I still had plenty of time today. I was just thinking about whether to take on an additional delivery job when...

"Sora?" A sudden voice interrupted my thoughts.

I turned back and saw two girls standing there. Well, I say "girls," but they were more or less the same age as me.

I waved back and started walking toward them. As I did, the towering symbol of the royal capital, the castle, came into view behind them.

I knew more people now, and things were going better for me thanks to my skill. Still, life had been pretty rough when I first got summoned.

The sight of that castle brought the memories back to me in vivid detail...

Chapter 1

“You, who have answered my call... Welcome!”

As my vision cleared, I found myself in a place I’d never been before. Last I remembered, I’d been on the train heading to my high school, but now my school bag was gone, and my uniform pockets were empty... Ah, except for my handkerchief. That was still there.

Before me stood an extravagantly dressed older man. He was quivering in excitement, his arms outstretched dramatically...and was that a crown on his head? He was surrounded by a group of men—large, middle-aged, and bearded—who themselves were flanked by armor-clad, knightlike men who eyed me cautiously.

I, meanwhile, was surrounded by people dressed...well, similarly to me. School uniforms, business suits, casual outing wear... There were seven of us in all; three men (myself included) and four women. The others all seemed disoriented, and some even looked uneasy.

I couldn’t remember answering anyone’s “call,” so I was thinking that we’d actually been dragged here against our will somehow or other.

“Where are we? And who are you?” asked one of the men—a student like me, I suspected—taking a step forward.

One of the knights moved in response, but the central figure raised a hand to stop them. “This is the Kingdom of Elesia, and I am its king. I brought you here with Otherworldly Summoning, a secret technique handed down through our kingdom.”

After this, he proceeded to subject us to a long-winded monologue. The long and short of it was that summoned people were gifted spectacular skills, which they were expected to use to slay the revived Demon King.

The student asked if defeating the Demon King would return us to our world, and the king responded that the Demon King’s magistone *should* allow us to do

so. The magistone was similar to a heart in a human, so...

He wants us to kill a guy and steal his heart? I thought incredulously.

The king's men stressed to us that they couldn't be completely sure of this, because they were just working from old records that described heroes using the magistone to return home.

"Now, heroes," the king declared. "Say the words 'open status' and reveal to us your powers!"

I heard whispers of 'open status' around me and joined in obediently enough. My own recitation of the words made a translucent, panel-like display appear before my eyes, looking a bit like a status screen from a video game. Surprised, I looked around at the others, but I couldn't see their screens. However, they were focusing so intently on the air in front of them that I assumed they were seeing a similar screen to mine.

Name: Fujimiya Sora / **Job:** Jobless / **Level:** None

HP 10/10 / **MP** 10/10 / **SP** 10/10

Strength: 1 / **Stamina:** 1 / **Speed:** 1

Magic: 1 / **Dexterity:** 1 / **Luck:** 1

Skill: Walking / **Effect:** Never get tired from walking

"What's with these stats?" I murmured, but my mind was racing. Am I...cannon fodder? Can I even beat the weakest monster in this world? And even though I was a student in my old world, now I'm jobless?! Is it because I haven't done anything yet? And how come I don't have a level? Is this just how everyone starts off, or do I literally not have one? If I don't have one, does that mean I have no hope for improvement?

"Has everyone checked?" cooed an old man in a cloak standing next to the king. "Then kindly take turns touching the crystal, if you please." He gestured to a crystal atop a fancy dais and explained that it would make our stats visible to others.

One by one, the others proceeded to step forward and touch the crystal.

First came the student in the orthodox school uniform, the one who had first spoken to the king. He was followed by a slightly sleepy-looking woman in casual clothes, a young woman dressed professionally in a suit, and then her opposite—a man whose suit looked positively silly. The next to touch the crystal was a girl in a blazer-style school uniform with long black hair down to her waist, followed by a timid-looking girl whose hair was in a bleached-brown bob.

Their stats were displayed to the onlookers one after another, and with each job title revealed—Fencer King, Sorcerer King, Paladin, Swordmaster, Saint, Shaman—the king, the old man, and everyone around them let out shouts of joy. Along with fervent whispers of each job title came cries of astonishment at the levels displayed, ranging from a high of Level 50 to a still-impressive low of Level 30. Each profile also revealed multiple skills, the highest having around ten or so different ones with the lowest still having around six...

I decided to check my own stats again...and cringed internally. *This is a little too cruel, isn't it?* The feeling just got worse as I sensed the expectant gazes turning toward me. But there was no going back now, so after taking a few hesitant steps forward, I resigned myself to my fate and touched the crystal. It buzzed with static for a moment, then revealed my stats as it had done for the others.

Everyone in the room, including my fellow summonees, were stunned into silence at the sight...in the worst possible way! It felt like someone had just dumped a bucket of cold water over the whole celebration.

“What kind of stats and skills are those?!” the king cried.

I know, right?! I agreed internally. I'm thinking the same thing! Give me a mulligan here!

But just as the whispers and my own feelings of inferiority were about to break me, I happened to look at the text on my status panel again.

“Eh?”

Something there had changed.

Skill: Walking Lv. 0

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 21/1000

Skill Points: 0

This extra information hadn't appeared on the crystal's display, but now I could see it on my own panel. Was it saying I could raise my level just by walking around? But if I didn't have a level, what was the XP counter for? Was it related to the "Lv." number next to the Walking skill?

The XP counter currently read "21." Had it counted the steps I'd taken to walk up to the crystal? I couldn't be fully sure, but I thought it was about that many. And then there was the question of those "skill points"...

By the time I pulled myself out of my thoughts, I noticed that the room around me had grown quiet. I looked up at the king, who didn't meet my eyes. I moved my gaze to the man in the cloak, who also looked away.

At long last, the king spoke. "Erm... Well, we did manage to summon *six* Chosen Heroes, so...let's celebrate! Heroes, this way to your welcome feast!"

Six, huh? Guess I didn't qualify?

My fellow summonees didn't look happy with the idea—some seemed actively worried, while others just kept their eyes down—but in the end, they couldn't help but get dragged along. No matter how impressive their job titles and levels might have been, they had all come here from a peaceful society. They weren't prepared to fight back against a crowd of armed and armored knights.

I stayed behind in the room along with a single knight, who walked up to me, quietly whispered, "All right, come on," then began walking without waiting to hear my response.

In the end...you guessed it, I was kicked out of the castle.

I was marched to the front gate and told to wait there, which I did for thirty

minutes under the watchful eyes of the guards. Eventually, a rather fancy carriage pulled up. I was shoved inside, and it started rolling along.

I wasn't told where it was headed, and the curtains on the windows stopped me from seeing outside. *Are they going to throw me in prison or something?* I wondered.

Escape would be impossible, though. I was flanked by two burly knights, with two more sitting across from me. And even if I could get away, where would I go? The knights' metal armor chafed against me each time the carriage hit a bump.

At last the carriage stopped. I was told to get out and got unceremoniously ejected.

As my feet hit the ground, I looked back and saw an open gate towering above me. Through it I could see a well-tended road lined with expensive-looking houses leading up to a grand castle.

As I just stood there, staring at the sight in awe, one of the knights finally came out of the carriage and tossed a small bag at me, calling it a "farewell gift."

I managed to catch it and checked the contents: two shining silver coins and ten copper ones. I had no way of knowing whether that was a lot or a little, but when I looked back at the knight, he was wearing a mocking grin.

Do I detect a little spite in there? I thought.

The knight got back on board and, soon enough, the carriage drove back through the gate, which slowly closed behind it.

"People are the same no matter what world you're in, I guess..."

Thinking about how jerks were jerks the multiverse over, I reassured myself with the knowledge that I'd probably never see those people again, then turned my eyes to the town...and was greeted by a sight like none I'd ever seen before.

I just gasped, so taken aback that I couldn't even speak. All the negative emotions I'd been carrying with me were blasted away in an instant.

If I hadn't known better, I might have assumed it was a costume parade. The people walked the street carrying swords and staves, wearing the kind of armor I'd only seen in fantasy stories or wide-brimmed hats like witches in storybooks. Seeing the exotic outfits filled me with a strange sensation, like I'd stepped into a video game.

The buildings were also made of brick or stone, giving me the momentary impression that I'd traveled back in time. It had a medieval European vibe, the kind of architecture I'd only ever seen in books or on websites.

But though I stared for a while in fascination, I was brought back to reality when I realized that a lot of them were looking at me the same way.

At first I assumed it was just the sight of a single raven-haired young man among all the fair-haired individuals, but looking between their clothing and mine, I realized I must have stood out like a sore thumb. I guess my school uniform did set me apart...

I immediately began to walk, trying to put as much distance between myself and that spot as I could. As I did, I started mulling over the situation I'd found myself in, struggling to get my heart to stop racing and think practically.

First, I've got to figure out how much my money is worth—how far will it get me? If the answer is "not far," I'll have to find another way to make money.

Second, I've got to find a place to stay. An inn, I guess? I'm a little scared about camping out...

Some of the people I'd passed were dressed casually, but many of them carried weapons. If one of them ambushed me in my sleep, I'd be dead before I knew it.

Last...I've got to get basic information about the world I'm in now.

Suddenly, I found myself slowing to a halt. "Something smells delicious... What is it?" I started craning my neck around, my legs carrying me unconsciously toward the source of the pleasant aroma.



“Hey, kiddo. If you’re not gonna buy anything, kindly step aside.” It was the stall owner, mad at me for standing and staring.

I hadn’t thought I was especially hungry, but I still wanted to eat. I couldn’t fight that alluring smell.

That said, this seemed like a good chance to find out exactly how much my money was worth. “Is this enough for one?” I asked, holding out one silver and one copper coin.

Oof, he didn’t take that well...

The stall owner was squinting at me suspiciously. “There’s no way I’ve got change for a silver, kiddo. Pay with the copper and you’ll get eight commons in change.”

I gave him the copper coin and got back one skewer and eight “commons.” I had lots of questions, but I decided I should try the skewer first... Or so I was thinking, but I found myself hesitating.

It *looked* like ordinary meat on a stick, and other people around me were eating them, so they clearly weren’t poisonous. But...I’d once seen a TV show where the host ate some meat from a stall in a foreign country, only to get a rude awakening later when they learned what the meat was.

For some reason, I couldn’t get that sight out of my head. I’d bought food from a stall without even thinking, but was it really okay to eat? It certainly smelled delicious, and my brain was commanding me to eat it, but my hand refused to obey.

The man running the stall watched me with a scowl, clearly finding my behavior suspicious.

What to do? What to do? I thought nervously, but there was no one around to help me.

Just then, my eyes fell on a part of my still-open status panel.

Skill: Walking Lv. 1

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every

step)

XP Counter: 149/2000

Skill Points: 1

My level in “Walking” had increased, which had earned me a skill point. I could now see a list of skills available to learn. I noticed the skill at the top of the list—“Appraisal”—and chose it before I could think twice.

I was shown a pop-up message:

Are you sure you want to buy this skill with skill points?

Yes, I answered in response—mentally, of course.

I then used the skill and a message popped up in front of me:

[Wulf Meat Skewer] Edible monster meat. Quality: Good.

Skills can do this?! I thought in amazement. Some of those words would require further investigation, but the knowledge restored life to my paralyzed hand, at least.

“Wow, that’s good,” I found myself whispering. The meat was more tender than it looked, and each bite filled my mouth with more delicious juices. The thick sauce it was coated in made it even more delicious.

“Ah, you could tell?” Though I hadn’t meant to speak the words aloud, they’d clearly brought a big smile to the man’s face.

Seizing upon this chance, I said, “Yeah, I’ve never had this kind of meat before, but it’s good. What is it?” I already knew, but I asked him just to be sure.

“Oh, that’s wulf meat. Of course, I could use the meat of normal animals, but monster meat just has that special something. And then there’s our house

sauce. People say it's the best wulf meat sauce they've ever had, you see..."

That one little question had gotten him bragging his heart out. I decided to stay quiet and eat while he went at it.

Once he was done, he was in a completely good mood, so I decided to ask him more about the money here. My question seemed to surprise him at first. Then he gave me a once-over, seemed to decide on something, and explained.

This world had five kinds of coins: commons, coppers, silvers, golds, and platinums. The exchange rate was ten commons to one copper, a hundred coppers to one silver, a hundred silvers to one gold, and a thousand golds to one platinum.

The stall operator, who'd introduced himself as Grey, went on to say that most regular people went their whole lives without ever seeing a platinum; they were mainly used by royalty, nobles, and the biggest merchants. "Ordinary folk like us rarely even see a gold coin," he added.

"So this is pretty cheap for how delicious it is," I mused.

"'Cheap but delicious' is our selling point. Though that's true for anyone running a stall... Gotta say, I haven't seen you around here before, kiddo. Where'd you come from?"

"Pretty far away, I guess? I was brought here in a carriage."

"A boy of means, eh? And based on what you look like, I'd say you're from outside the kingdom? Ah, sorry to pry...but that clothing of yours is gonna get you unwanted attention. Not safe to walk around like that."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, there's some bad people out there. Even here in the capital, as close to the king as we are."

"What should I do?"

"Best move'd be to buy some normal clothes from a shop. A silver should buy you a whole outfit with some change left over, I'd reckon. As long as you don't go too pricey, of course."

He gave me directions to a clothing shop, and I thanked him and left, feeling

pretty full and satisfied from just the one skewer.

In the end, my quest to buy clothing somehow left me with more money than I'd started with. How? To put it simply, the owner of the shop had liked the feel of my uniform fabric so much that he'd bought it off of me. I didn't know what to tell him when he asked where it was made.

He'd ended up interpreting my uncertainty in negotiations as reluctance to sell, and so he jacked up his offer to three gold coins. I really had no idea whether I was being ripped off or getting a bargain, but if Grey was to be believed, three golds was a lot of money.

I'd ended up with an outfit that made me look like your average townspeople...other than my dark hair and eyes, which I at least hadn't seen on anyone else in town just yet.

While at the clothing store, I asked about different inns, weighed their reported quality against their prices, and chose one that hosted a lot of adventurers and traveling merchants while offering cheap but good food.



The next thing I knew, it was morning.

I seemed to have fallen asleep while thinking things over. Just being in an unfamiliar environment apparently tires you out a lot, psychologically speaking.

I walked up to the window and gazed out over the town. "So it wasn't a dream..." I muttered to myself.

I couldn't deny that I'd sort of hoped I would just wake up, but...

This is reality, I told myself. There's no two ways about it.

The king's men had said I couldn't go home until the Demon King was defeated, but something about their attitude and the way they explained things had made them seem far less than trustworthy. That meant I had no obvious way of getting home, so I decided I'd better focus on what to do next instead.

I used Appraisal on an object in the room that looked like a lamp, and the explanation popped up over it.

[Enchanted Lamp] A magic item. It consumes magistones to create light for a limited time.

These “skills”...they were abilities that didn’t exist in my old world. If I had the power to walk forever without getting tired, that meant I could go wherever I wanted. Even just here in town, the scenery was so different from anything I knew. The areas outside the town might hold things I’d never seen or experienced before.

“That’s right. I didn’t ask to be brought to this world, but as long as I’m here, I might as well look around.”

I turned my eyes back out the window. The Kingdom of Elesia’s capital was designed like a circle with the castle at the center. The closer you got to it, the taller and grander the buildings became, and the farther you moved to the outer edge, the humbler they got.

Clouds drifted through the early dawn sky above me. I’d looked up at the sky last night and seen two moons there, and for the first time, the idea that I was in another world had felt real.

The inn I was staying in was a comparatively cheap one near the city’s outer edge. It was two stories tall, with a dining area on the first floor. One night’s stay with morning and evening meals cost ten coppers. (In fact, it would normally have been a little more than that, but reserving ten days in advance had scored me a small discount.)

My attempt to pay with a gold had earned me an annoyed scowl from the proprietress, but since it was my first time, she managed to accommodate me. It seemed like golds really weren’t something you saw in everyday life here.

She’d told me that I could make change at the merchants’ guild, but they charged a processing fee to nonmembers. Maybe it would be best to spend my golds quickly at any shop that would take them? But it might be hard walking around with too much spare change...

This had also made me realize that, since my “parting gift” had been two silvers and ten coppers, I’d be almost out of money by now without that last-minute windfall from the clothing shop. I couldn’t imagine any decent person would give out such a measly parting gift, but then, I guess I shouldn’t have expected decency from people who kicked me out like that. And based on the way that one knight had been acting, I had a feeling he might have pocketed some of it...

Still, probably pointless to think too hard about it.

I would just keep burning through money at this rate, so I had to find a way to earn some for myself. Given the price of my lodgings and the stall food, the gold coins gave me quite a bit of leeway, but you never knew what life might throw at you. This *was* another world, after all.

“First, I guess I’ll need some kind of ID...” I mused to myself.

The proprietress had told me that I’d be in trouble without one. In particular, I’d have to pay a fee every time I left and reentered a town, and in some towns this could be quite a lot of money. They might even take you into custody to check your criminal record. An ID was something like a guarantee of your forthright standing, she explained; if you did commit a crime, it was confiscated.

When I showed surprise at this explanation, the proprietress looked at me suspiciously. She must have wondered why I knew so little about how to enter towns, given that I was currently inside one...

“And the fastest way to get an ID is to join a guild...” I recalled her saying.

The most basic one was the adventurers’ guild. Even if you didn’t have any special skills, they’d register you for a fee. There were also guilds for alchemists, healers, merchants, mages, and a few others, but you had to have special skills to enroll in a lot of those.

“Adventurers’ guild...yeah, that’s definitely an otherworld standard...”

Alchemy and various kinds of spell categories were on the list of skills I could acquire, and I definitely wanted to learn them after I’d investigated the world a bit more. Practical concerns like guild membership aside, how many times had I watched anime and movies wishing I could do awesome things like cast spells?

Now I was in a world where people learned those things as a matter of course.

Open status, I thought, making my stat sheet pop up. I'd run a few tests yesterday and learned that I could bring it up without speaking aloud. It would then stay open until I wished for it to close. It was also set up to automatically move out of my line of sight when I was walking, and I had to wonder who had designed it with that particular convenient feature.

Walking around town a bit before arriving at my inn had increased my level even further.

Name: Fujimiya Sora / **Job:** Jobless / **Level:** None

HP 60/60 / **MP** 60/60 / **SP** 60/60

Strength: 50 (+1) / **Stamina:** 50 (+1) / **SPeed:** 50 (+1)

Magic: 50 (+1) / **Dexterity:** 50 (+1) / **Luck:** 50 (+1)

Skill: Walking Lv. 5

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 452/6000

Skill Points: 4

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. 2]

Some good progress here. My XP counter had indeed ticked up as I'd walked, with my level increasing each time it rolled over. For now, it looked like the XP required to reach the next level went up by 1000 every time.

Each increase in level had raised my stats by ten as well, and I also now had a (+1) after each of them. *Maybe the numbers in parentheses represent some kind of job-related modifier?* I wondered.

I also seemed to be gaining one new skill point per level. The only reason I

was one short was because I'd spent a point to acquire the Appraisal skill.

I'd also learned that there were two ways to increase the level of these learned skills: proficiency and skill points. Proficiency increased with each use of the skill in question, with the number of proficiency points required to reach the next level going up each time. I'd managed to raise my Appraisal level this way. When I tried to raise its level with skill points, I'd been asked to spend two skill points to reach Lv. 2 and three skill points to reach Lv. 3, suggesting I had to pay as many points as the level I wanted to reach.

The last mysterious thing on the sheet was...probably the "Job" entry, but the options there were all grayed out and unselectable. I guessed I'd need to fulfill some kind of conditions to unlock them. The jobs on the list included Fencer, Mage, Alchemist, and so on, with no sign of my fellow summonees' fancier titles like Fencer King or Sorcerer King.

I think that just about covers everything I learned yesterday... I thought, bringing my reflections to a close.

It was at that exact moment that my stomach rumbled. I looked out the window again and saw that the sun was up now, with a few scattered figures walking here and there along the street.

Breakfast was bread and thin slices of meat along with salad and soup. It was lighter and less salty than the previous night's dinner. I was told that the evening meals were more heavily seasoned because it was important to recover all the salt you'd burned off throughout the day.

This breakfast was as bland as could be, and it couldn't be called tasty by any stretch. The bread was also tough and had to be dipped in the soup to be edible. But this must still have been considered pretty good for the price, because the others there were eating it without complaint.

I guess this is just standard for this world, I told myself.

After finishing my meal, I went back to rest in my room. Not long after, I decided to head out.

Upon leaving my room, the proprietress asked me what kind of room tending

I wanted for my nights there. I told her that just a change of the sheets would be fine.

“Guess I’d better learn some things first,” I said out loud. I really was talking to myself more often these days.

There were no maps in the town, so I’d have to find my way around by asking for directions. But each time I thought about asking someone, I ended up chickening out. Before I knew it, I found myself in sight of a certain stall.

“Hey, if it isn’t Sora. Almost didn’t recognize you. Here for a meal again?”

“Sorry, I just had breakfast at the inn.”

“Did you, eh? Well, you can’t eat when you’re already full. What’re you up to today?”

“I’m looking for the guilds.”

Grey told me that the guilds tended to be on the main roads, and there was no way to miss them. All but a few of the guilds tended to keep separate from each other as well, because they were rather territorial.

“After an ID, eh? What kind of job are you looking for, Sora?”

“I’ve got pretty good stamina, I guess. I’d like to try a variety of things too.”

“A variety of things, eh? That might be hard if you don’t have the right skills. Guilds often won’t let you in without ’em.” This matched what I’d heard at the inn. “If you’re not sure, I’d recommend the adventurers’ guild. They’ll give out monster-hunting and material-gathering quests...even delivering packages around town, I think? Either way, you’ll probably find something that suits you there. You also don’t need special skills to register, and an adventurers’ guild registry won’t stop you from joining any other guilds.”

“Oh, really? Sure, thanks. I’ll start by hitting up the adventurers’ guild, then.”

I decided to take Grey’s advice and go to the adventurers’ guild. Now I just had to ask for more details on different topics as they came up.

I walked down the path he’d laid out for me and looked up at the big building I’d arrived at. The sign out front said it was the adventurers’ guild. It wasn’t

written in Japanese, but I could still read it—I could see both the original words as written and a kind of speech bubble with the Japanese translation floating on top of it, almost like a subtitle.

My image of an adventurers' guild was a wretched hive of scum and villainy. Even though Grey had recommended it, I was still nervous.

I took a deep breath and stepped inside...

I had assumed it would be crowded, but there weren't that many people there. There was a reception desk at the front, and the left wall was completely papered over with notices, with just a few gaps here and there where they'd been taken down, like missing teeth. A handful of people stood in front of that wall, discussing something.

It was then that I heard a loud clamor, looked in the other direction, and saw what appeared to be a dining hall...except it looked like the apparent adventurers sitting around the tables there were holding tankards. I felt like I'd seen something similar at the inn last night.

Are they...day-drinking? I wondered, staring in disbelief.

One of the receptionists seemed to notice me standing there and called out cheerfully, "Welcome to the adventurers' guild! Is this your first time with us?"

I walked up to the reception desk in response. It was a long table, split into several sections, presumably to deal with multiple people at once, and a few of the receptionists were already occupied with adventurers. After listening in on their conversations for a minute, I realized they weren't discussing business; they were just hitting on the receptionists.

I had the sudden idea to use Appraisal on one of the adventurers, but I only got a pop-up text reading "unable to appraise." I tried the same thing on a receptionist and got the same result. So I apparently couldn't appraise humans, though I wasn't sure if that meant it was actually impossible to appraise people or if my level just wasn't high enough.

"Hi, there. I'd like to register with the guild."

The receptionist nodded and launched into an explanation: her name was Michal, she was fifteen years old, she'd been working as a guild receptionist for

one year and had only just graduated from her initial trial period...

“Er, right... Can I get an explanation of the *guild*?” I stressed.

She flushed in embarrassment and proceeded to explain.

The adventurers’ guild had six ranks—S, A, B, C, D, and E—with S as the highest rank and E as the lowest. To increase your rank, you needed to take on quests, and you’d be penalized if you failed to complete one. To ascend to Rank A and higher, you had to take a test. You could get as high as Rank A just by doing standard quests, but to reach Rank S you had to do multiple assigned quests and also get a guild master’s recommendation.

There seemed to be other, more complex rules to it, but the most important thing seemed to be that each rank had its own set period during which the adventurer had to take at least one quest. If they didn’t, they might be demoted or be forced to reregister. I made a mental note to be careful of that.

“Please take one of the quest forms tacked up on the wall and fill it out here at reception. If it’s an ongoing quest, you can just tell me the long and short of it. Gathered materials should be tallied up at the sales counter over there. Was there anything about my explanation you didn’t understand?”



“For hunting quests, what happens if I bring back a defeated monster without breaking it down first?”

“There are some monsters that we can’t buy, but for ones whose parts we can use as materials, we will pay you for the materials minus a processing fee. Please also note that there are monsters you’ll have to pay a disposal fee for as well. Like goblins, goblins, and goblins.”

Right. Guess she has some bad memories about goblins?

“Oh, and if you defeat a monster without officially taking a quest first, it doesn’t count as fulfilling the quest. We will only buy the materials. This can make trouble for the adventurers who did officially take the hunting quest, so please make sure to report in about it.”

I thought about whether I had any more questions to ask and decided that I didn’t for the moment. Anyway, I could always ask again later if I ran into trouble.

I paid the registration fee (three silvers), and she held a card out to me. I placed a single drop of blood on the card, which it absorbed; then it sparkled for a moment before turning pitch black. Michal handed the card to me, and after a few seconds, it turned white. Apparently the card changed color when held by the person it was registered to, and the color it turned changed in accordance with your rank.

It seemed like pretty fancy technology, I had to say. *Is the card itself a magical item?* Just the thought of it got me kind of excited.

That would also explain why, as Michal then explained, it cost a lot of money to get a lost card reissued—the handling fee for that was ten silvers. *Okay. I’ll make sure not to lose it,* I told myself.

While Michal was explaining things to me, the determined adventurers kept hitting on her fellow receptionists. I should mention that all of the receptionists were beautiful women, pretty enough to be idol singers back on my original Earth. Meanwhile, most of the men looked as rough and burly as mountain bandits. In fact, the number of them who *wouldn’t* qualify for that description were in the definite minority...at least, for those I’d seen here in the

adventurers' guild.

I got out of my seat, only for the next arrival to slide into my place and begin chatting up Michal. Once again, he wasn't discussing a quest—he was asking her out to dinner.

It was almost noon already, but I decided to take on a few quests. I started by checking the ones on the wall. Those in town offered fairly meager compensation, but they were generally safe and simple. Most of them were deliveries, but there were also quests that involved helping with construction and moving house.

A letter delivery? There was no deadline given. *Do they even really want it delivered?* The client wanted to remain anonymous, and the destination was a residential house in the southwest district.

There was a request to deliver lunch. It had a set day listed, so even if I signed up for it today, I'd actually be doing it on a different day. *What will they do if no one takes it, though? Deliver it themselves?*

There were various quests for delivering materials to item shops and other guilds, as well as quests issued by other adventurers. *Porter wanted for a long-distance journey?* They said no battle experience was required. Did that mean it wasn't dangerous? *Ah, this one says "self-defense capabilities welcome"...* The latter offered a higher reward.

At a glance, the material delivery stuff seemed like my best bet. It would be a great chance to learn where the other guilds were too.

The other man, having now been fully shot down, walked away, and I moved in his place to give Michal a few quest forms.

"Delivery of healing herbs to the merchants' and healers' guilds, and Ri—er, that letter delivery? The destinations are in the east and southwest districts, way on the other side of town... Are you sure you want to take three on at once?"

"I think I'll be okay."

"Well, here's the letter. Here's the map to your destinations...and once you

deliver the letter, please get the recipient's signature and...oh, well...please report to the client directly for that one. For the healing herbs, you can pick them up from the storage room in the back."

I headed down a hallway to the storage room and picked up my packages there. I had to deliver five bags to each of the guilds, and every bag weighed ten kilograms.

First, I had the five bags that would go to the merchants' guild set on a kind of metal carrier brace with straps. *Fifty kilograms, huh? So about the weight of a person...* It was heavy, but not unmanageable. And though it definitely felt cumbersome on my shoulders at first, the weight seemed to vanish as I took one step, then another. I paused.

"Well? Is it too heavy?" They crowded around me, seeming worried. I was smaller than your average adventurer, after all, and I didn't have a lot of visible muscle, so they'd probably assumed I was a bit of a weakling. They couldn't have been more wrong in this case, though.

I took another step to confirm my suspicions. It wasn't my imagination. As long as I was walking, it felt like I wasn't carrying the pack at all. Was this another effect from my Walking skill?

"Hey, could you load on the pack for the healers' guild too?"

The merchants' and healers' guild buildings were close to each other, so given that I had to deliver the letter as well, doing them all at once would save a lot of time. It would also give me more time to adjust if anything went wrong on the way. Of course, if my predictions were incorrect, I would apologize and just take them one at a time as originally expected.

"Hey, are you sure?" Thankfully, despite their complaints, they let me do it.

Once all ten bags were set on the brace, it resembled a mountain on my back. It certainly looked very heavy, and it weighed twice as much as before. I could feel that for sure the moment it was on my back. Nevertheless, the weight disappeared when I started walking. *I was right!* I decided triumphantly.

"Well, I'm heading off!"

“S-Sure... Good luck.”

The men in the storehouse seemed surprised by my cheerful tone.

At first, I'd been worried that carrying a large, conspicuous load outside would lead to me getting robbed, but I'd been told that stealing packages with the adventurers' guild mark on them was taken as picking a fight with the guild itself, so I'd probably be fine. Of course, that wasn't guaranteed, so I had been cautioned to stay on the main avenues and not take any back roads.

And so, as instructed, I headed off through the town's main roads. It wasn't like I knew my way around, anyway, so taking back alleys would quickly get me lost. The main reason I had taken these delivery jobs in the first place was to better learn the lay of the land here in the city.

Along the way, I found myself wondering, *Why do people keep looking surprised at me as I pass?* But then I remembered the size of the pack I was carrying. Since I couldn't feel its weight, I frequently forgot it was there.

I finished my herb delivery quests fairly uneventfully, but problems came up in the delivery of the letter. Despite checking the map many times, I ended up getting lost on the way, and it was only after timidly asking various passersby for directions that I finally made it. I felt comfortable enough talking to shopkeepers and such, but I had to muster a little bit of courage to speak to random strangers on the street.

The letter's recipient lived in a brick house with a garden full of pretty flowers. I knocked on the door and a young woman answered. She tilted her head in confusion when I handed her the letter, then looked openly surprised when she saw the sender's name. I was about to ask for her signature, but she was already ripping open the letter and reading it very earnestly. I decided to read the mood and stay quiet.

Suddenly, she ran back into her house, leaving me standing on my own and wondering what to do. Thankfully, a few minutes later, she returned, signed my letter of completion, and held out a letter.

“I... Could you please deliver this?” she asked. I could see her eyes quivering with nervousness.

What am I supposed to do with this? I wondered. *Well, I was told to tell the client directly after I delivered the letter...* It looks like her letter was addressed to them anyway, so it wouldn't take any extra effort on my part.

"All right. I'll make sure it reaches them," I said, and took the letter from her hands. As I did, a blush filled her cheeks, and she bowed to me very deeply.

Now to take it to the client's house. I was pretty sure it was back in the direction of the merchants' guild. That was close to the east gate, so it would be quite a walk, but that wouldn't be a problem for me. Calling up my status screen to check, I saw that I was steadily racking up XP and had already gained a few levels.

The client's house seemed more like a workplace than a residence, and as I entered, I found the walls lined with tools. The man standing inside asked, "How can I help you today?"

Does he think I'm a customer? "I'm here about the letter delivery quest you posted in the adventurers' guild." I told him that I had delivered his letter, and I handed him both the signed confirmation of receipt and the letter the woman had given me.

At first, the client—Righ—looked like he didn't know what I was talking about. Then, as he suddenly seemed to remember, his expression became dubious. But when he saw the confirmation of receipt and the sender's name on the letter I had given him, he looked surprised.

I tried to just get his signature and leave, but for some reason, he called me back. "Wait just a minute. I-I'm a little scared to read it alone..."

I didn't quite know what he was talking about, but I guessed it was a moral support thing. He timidly opened the letter, took a deep breath, and then began to read it. From his gaze, I could tell that he had probably finished reading, but he didn't react immediately... *Oh, no, he's started rubbing his eyes.* Then he read it over again.

"Oh..." he breathed.

"Oh?" I asked.

"Yessss!" he cried out all of a sudden, throwing his fist up in the air. Then, as

he noticed me staring at him, he suddenly turned bright red as if he'd forgotten I was there. Nevertheless, he sounded extremely grateful for some reason as he said, "Thank you. Thank you so much."

I've got no idea what's going on, man... I thought, so I decided to ask him for more details. He explained that he had sent a love letter and gotten a very pleasing response.

"Congratulations?" I said, not exactly sure how else to respond.

I returned to the adventurers' guild and found quite a few people already at reception. It looked like they were reporting recently finished quests. I lined up behind them and waited my turn.

I had been walking around all day since I registered at the guild, but I didn't actually feel tired at all. *That skill the castle kicked me out over is looking pretty amazing right about now, huh?* I mused.

"Oh, are you finished already?" Michal seemed surprised when I handed over the three completed quest forms, and she even checked my signatures of receipt multiple times. Part of it was that I had taken both batches of herbs at the same time, but there must have also been the fact that I didn't seem tired at all. Still, my paperwork was all in order.

"Oh, and what about the letter? Was she pleased?" At Michal's words, a hush fell over all the receptionists mid-conversation, and they seemed to be listening very closely.

"Yes, very pleased. Righ was also grateful," I said, and I got a look in return that made me wonder, *What? Did I say something strange?*

"What do you mean by that?" Michal pressed me.

"He got a response to his love letter and said that they were a couple now," I said, then winced. *Did I just leak someone's private information? Am I gonna have to pay a fine? I hate it when my mouth gets ahead of my brain...*

But it seemed that my fears were the opposite of the case. The receptionists, including Michal, whooped with joy, while the adventurers around them all collapsed and began pounding on the floor. I blinked at the sight. *Uh, is that one*

guy crying?

It turned out that Righ sometimes took jobs at the guild, and his infatuation with the girl was quite well-known among the others there. The reaction from the adventurers was one of frustration that he had gotten to her before them.



I finished up my adventurers' guild debut and initial quests with a degree of bewilderment.

I hadn't been expecting to be thanked so profusely for a simple delivery. Though I had only taken it to gain experience and money, I couldn't help but feel glad to be on the receiving end of such an explosion of emotion and gratitude. It really made me feel that we were all still human, even if we were from different worlds.

Those quests don't give much in the way of compensation, but I guess they're still rewarding, huh?

"Status open." I'd returned to my inn and eaten dinner, then decided to check on the fruits of my labors before bed. My plan was to learn a bunch of new skills based on the skill points I'd acquired.

Skill: Walking Lv. 9

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 4927/10000

Skill Points: 8

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. 3]

Eight skill points, huh? I'd doubled my total in just one day! Maybe I could learn some of those skills that had caught my eye when I looked through them yesterday? I selected four of them:

NEW

[Prevent Appraisal Lv. 1] [Enhance Physique Lv. 1]
[Regulate Mana Lv. 1] [Lifestyle Spells Lv. 1]

Prevent Appraisal—this one blocked Appraisal from being used on me. Learning Appraisal for myself had made me realize it might be dangerous if other people had a similar skill for appraising people or a device like the one at the castle. I didn't know how people generally learned skills in this world, but I had a hunch that I'd end up in a lot of trouble if the people from the castle were to learn that I had a lot of them. I had no intention of going back there now.

Incidentally, even though my Appraisal level was now up to three, I still couldn't appraise people.

Enhance Physique—this one seemed to boost my strength, stamina, and speed, with the bonuses growing as my skill level increased. I still didn't know exactly what my stat numbers signified, but I wanted to get them as high as I could. This was a dangerous, monster-filled world, after all.

Regulate Mana—this appeared to be a skill that let you feel the flow of mana in your body. Rather than being used actively, it seemed to passively improve your energy efficiency when casting spells. Learning it had allowed me to vaguely start feeling the flow of mana around me. I had mainly taken this one to help me with the use of Lifestyle Spells.

Lifestyle Spells—this skill gave access to a variety of spells that were useful in daily life, such as Cleanse and Ignite. The main reason I'd picked this one up was for Cleanse, a spell that let you clean the dirt from your clothes. A mage in the guild had kindly used it on me after I'd finished my quests, and I had really wanted to learn it. Even now, watching my dirty clothes instantly turn clean felt like a pretty wondrous sight, but the most important part was that I could use it on my body as well.

It had been a hectic but rather rewarding day. That, plus the fact that I'd learned new skills, gave me new motivation to work hard again tomorrow.



My routine for the next few days consisted of studying in the guild's library in the morning, then doing delivery quests for the rest of the day. Apparently not many people signed up for those quests, because even though I took them every day, I never seemed to run out of them. It felt unlikely that I ever would.

At first I had to ask for directions at every turn, but soon enough I'd learned the roads pretty well. If I could manage my deliveries efficiently enough, I might even be able to actually support myself like this. If worse came to worst and I needed more leeway with my funds, I could move to a lower-quality inn, but the rock-bottom ones tended to be in more dangerous areas and didn't offer private rooms. I wanted to avoid that if I could. I didn't mind having a small room, but I needed my privacy.

Occasionally I'd see a high-paying quest that offered bonus compensation, but I was told to be cautious with these. Sometimes it really was an urgent quest, but other times you got malicious types trying to bait people into taking their quests. The guild would have liked to turn down such quests, but apparently there were circumstances preventing this.

"Another delivery quest today, eh?" said Grey as I returned to the stall area for lunch. I'd just dropped off another heavy load, and he offered me a skewer before I could even say anything. I blinked and took it, then suddenly found myself getting food handed to me by the other stall merchants as well.

"What in the world? There's no way I can eat all this..." I said, slightly overwhelmed.

"O-Oh, of course. Watching you make those deliveries just made us think..."

The others nodded in agreement. *You're making way too much of this, guys...*

"It's just that you seem to be taking delivery jobs every day. You're not pushing yourself too hard, are you? Is your health all right?"

"It's fine. I don't even feel very tired right now."

They continued to look at me in shock. *Seriously, you're making way too much of this, though...*

I ended up accepting a couple of their offerings and chowed down. I definitely ate too much—all of the stall food here was delicious, and they all used such high-quality ingredients that I had no qualms about any of their products.

I'd made deliveries in parts of town that used lower-quality ingredients, which they disguised with strong sauces. If I'd gone in without knowing better, I could have very well ended up eating some of that food. Appraisal helped me to navigate the minefield, but I had to be vigilant.

I visited the guild the next day and found myself looking at quests on a different message board than my usual one. These were the material-gathering quests—not monster materials, but healing herbs and other edible plants that grew naturally in the forest.

Talking with the Stall Street folks and the adventurers with whom I'd grown acquainted had piqued my curiosity about the world outside the city. But I still wasn't ready to hunt monsters yet, so I'd decided to check out the gathering quests recommended for solo adventurers just starting out.

It was apparently quite difficult to tell healing herbs from other kinds of plants, but I wasn't worried about that. Appraisal would let me sort the wheat from the chaff, a fact which I'd confirmed using healing herbs that were sold in stores. *I'll just need to look into where I can find them.*

Some would require a trip into the forest, where there was always a possibility of a monster attack. *I'll need to get some equipment...but how much will that cost me?*

While I was pondering that, Michal called me over. She sounded a little bit flustered, like she was in a hurry. "E-Excuse me. An assigned quest came in for you, Sora!"

"What? For *me*?"

The adventurers around us heard her and looked over in surprise. An assigned quest for a Rank E adventurer who only took deliveries? The idea seemed preposterous.

"Er, it looks like rumors about you have been going around, because we

actually have quite a few assigned delivery quests for you...”

Here, the adventurers’ expressions turned simultaneously knowing and confused. Michal’s face was similarly hard to read. Apparently, in the long history of the adventurers’ guild, they’d never seen an assigned quest for a delivery in the city.

“What’s the deadline?”

“Th-They all need to be done today...”

Michal held out the quest papers, and I read through them. Eight of them in all, with clients and destinations scattered all over town... I’d basically be doing a full tour of the capital.

“Um, it’s okay to decline if you think you can’t do it,” Michal said. That said, the quests all paid well. I remembered the earlier warning I’d received, but this really was exceptional. Completing them all would earn me a full gold piece.

Besides, although Michal had said I could turn them down, she also looked a little bit uncomfortable about the idea. Perhaps the clients were hard people to say no to.

“The guild stays open at night, right?”

“Y-Yes.”

“I’ll take them, then. Let’s fill out the forms.”

“A-All right. But if it gets too difficult, come in and let us know. I-I’ll find a way to get you off the hook.”

It seemed like she was really worried, because she kept offering to let me back out, right up to the moment the last form was filled out.

I worked out an order in my head, left the guild, and got started on the quests.

I started with a delivery to a somewhat dicey location. It was less efficient, but the listing had said that the package’s contents were fragile, so I wanted to get it out of the way first. Frankly, I didn’t think it was smart to ask the guild to deliver something like that, but...

At least the weight of the packages didn't matter much as long as I was walking.

"Here you are. Oh, but they said it was fragile, so please be careful." I let out an unconscious sigh of relief as I safely handed over the breakable item.

Ah, but don't rest easy just yet! The deliveries have just begun! I held up the remaining delivery locations to the mental map of the city I'd been making these last few days. "I could take a shortcut if I went this way, but..." *It would send me through one of the rougher parts of town.* Getting dragged into some kind of fight at this point would be fatal for my chances, so it would be better to take the longer, safer route.

For lunch, I grabbed a skewer at Grey's stall. I ate it while I walked, impolite though it was. I didn't have a single minute to waste just then.

The reason that the guild remained open at night was apparently so that adventurers who'd finished their quests could drink late at the bar, but that didn't mean reception necessarily stayed open. The city did have streetlamps, but they were only on the major streets, and you could end up walking around in pitch darkness if you weren't careful. I wanted to avoid that if at all possible.

"Thank you for the delivery. How are you holding up?"

"Oh, I'm feeling just fine."

"That's incredible. How many have you delivered?"

"This was my seventh. I've got just one left."

"R-Really. Just as the rumors said, then..."

What an odd thing for a client to ask...

By the time I set out on my last trip, the sun was pretty far down on the horizon. It was already halfway below the city wall.

When I reached the last client, he stammered out the words, "R-Really? Well done, then."

Another surprised client? What in the world is going on here?

By the time I'd made my last delivery, the moons had begun rising over the

city wall. I returned to the main thoroughfare and walked along under the lamplight. It occurred to me that this was my first time walking around outside at this hour. Even though I walked through the same part of town during the day and at night, it really felt like I was in a completely different place.

Arriving in front of the guild filled me with a sense of relief. I hadn't noticed it while I was still running the quest, but I'd been getting more and more nervous, and actually completing the task relieved all that tension in an instant.

Whoops, but the job isn't really over until I report in...

I screwed up my face and walked through the guild door, where I found all eyes turned on me. It startled me, especially because there were so many faces I didn't recognize... I'd also never seen so many people at the guild before.

"S-Sora! I was so worried!" Michal called to me, leaning over her reception desk. This just called even more attention to me.

As I approached Michal, I was allowed to cut right to the front for some reason. I felt a little awkward. *Is this really okay?*

Nevertheless, I held out the multiple sheets of paper, each bearing a signature of completion. "Well, here you go."

Michal looked through them intently over and over again, but the result remained the same each time. Inside, I was praying she'd just run me through the completion paperwork already...

"Y-You certainly did complete the quests. Well done, Sora. I didn't think you'd really do it... Y-You're incredible."

At her words, a cheer rose up from some of the onlookers while another portion let out a wail of anguish. I looked over at the latter group and saw that they were some of the men I often saw hitting on the receptionists. They were beckoning me closer. When I hesitated, two of them took me by each arm and brought me over.

"Nice work, rookie. I never thought you'd finish it."

"Yeah, seriously. I lost a bundle on you, dammit." Despite their frustrated

expressions, they were smiling for some reason.

“Meal’s on us today. On this guy, to be exact. Have whatever you want to eat.”

The man in question grinned. “Yeah. Plus, Michal called you incredible. That’s a rare compliment. Want to tell us about it?”

So these scary-looking guys are here because they’re fans of Michal’s?

Dishes were brought in one after another and packed onto the table. They seemed freshly made, and they released an aromatic steam that tempted the appetite.

I had never seen any of the dishes before, but they appeared to all use monster meat. Appraisal indicated that it was primarily wulf, with some birdeye and orc meat as well. There was no way I could finish it all by myself, so I just took a little bit from each plate to make a sampler platter. I thought the orc meat was the tastiest of all. The soup was good as well, but the steak with simple salt and pepper seasoning was a revelation.

I ate my fill, and once I hit the point where I couldn’t eat any more, I was released. The drunks were on the verge of dragging me into their company, but when they saw Michal standing behind me with a smile, a few voices spoke up to the effect of “Ah, Sora, I’m sure you’re tired. Go on back to your inn,” and nobody tried to fight it.

Michal said she was going back to the dorm with her fellow receptionists, so I said goodbye and headed back myself.

When I arrived at the inn, I found the proprietress worried about how late I’d been out. When I told her that some older adventurers had treated me to a meal, she seemed surprised, but also glad...I guess because she always saw me eating by myself at the inn.

The minute I lay down I felt sleepy, but I had things to do before I actually slept.

“I walked a whole lot today. I wonder how my stats are doing.” I hadn’t had time to slow down and check them during the day, so I figured I’d give them a

look now.

“Open status.”

Name: Fujimiya Sora / **Job:** Jobless / **Level:** None

HP 170/170 / **MP** 170/170 / **SP** 170/170

Strength: 160 (+1) / **Stamina:** 160 (+1) / **Speed:** 160 (+1)

Magic: 160 (+1) / **Dexterity:** 160 (+1) / **Luck:** 160 (+1)

Skill: Walking Lv. 16

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 44017/80000

Skill Points: 8

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. 4] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 2] [Enhance Physique Lv. 4] [Regulate Mana Lv. 3] [Lifestyle Spells Lv. 2]

NEW

[Detect Presence Lv. 1]

The new levels in everything but Prevent Appraisal had come from proficiency alone. My proficiency in Prevent Appraisal never seemed to increase on its own, so I'd spent skill points on that one.

My latest skill, Detect Presence, let me sense the presence of others around me, a bit like radar. I'd picked it up in preparation for leaving town, so I could sense monsters approaching nearby and prevent surprise attacks.

My stats were rising steadily, but I had no baseline by which to judge whether mine were particularly high or not. I wanted to test them somehow, but I didn't

know how.

And then there was my XP. Up through Walking Lv. 9, the amount I needed to gain a level had been increasing by one thousand each time. But now, starting from Lv. 10, it seemed to be increasing by ten thousand. Seeing the threshold to gain new levels increase by a factor of ten made me realize that I'd better keep some skill points in reserve, or I might not be able to learn a given skill when I really needed it. This was why I'd only raised Prevent Appraisal to Lv. 2.

Still, all the skills I had taken so far were practical ones. Appraisal had been the most useful one up to this point, but Lifestyle Spells wasn't far behind. Without Cleanse in my repertoire, I'd probably be feeling pretty gross by now.

If I wanted to take any nondelivery jobs in the future, I would have to leave town. At that point I'd likely need a weapon skill like Sword Arts or Spear Arts, or magic that I could use in combat, but I wanted to learn a little more first. For "multiple-choice" skills like those, I needed to pick ones that were best suited to me, or they would go to waste.

At any rate, I decided to give quests a rest tomorrow and start getting ready to leave town instead.

Chapter 2

The next day I stopped in at the guild as usual, and they were kind of... Actually, they were *really* worried about me.

“Hey, shouldn’t you take the day off?” one of the adventurers asked.

Thinking it over, I had worked every day that week since I registered with the guild... Maybe I *was* overworking myself? I definitely hadn’t seen any other adventurers taking quests every single day...though I did see adventurers hitting on receptionists every day. The guy talking to me now was one of them, in fact.

“Well, I was thinking I’d see what kind of gathering quests were available.”

“Really? You graduating from deliveries already? I always see you in those same clothes. Don’tcha got any equipment? For gathering quests, you’ll need to leave the city.”

“No, I don’t. I’ve got money from yesterday’s quests, though, so I thought I might buy some today.”

“All right. Hey, Syphon! Good timing. Come over here a minute.”

“Hey, Argo. Trying your luck with the girls again today?”

“Shut up. You free right now?” It was my first time hearing his name, but apparently this particular playboy was called Argo.

“Unlike you, I don’t have all the time in the world.” Syphon shook his head in annoyance. “Seriously, though, what do you want?”

“Oh, it’s this kid. His name’s Sora, and he wants to get some equipment. Give him some advice, okay?”

“Oh, him? Why don’t you show him the ropes yourself?”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m busy right now.”

Looked more like he had his eye on the receptionist to me... Syphon must have realized that as well, because he practically groaned in response.

“C’mon, you got a wife! Have a little sympathy for us bachelors and go teach him already!” Argo shouted, then ran off to his task. It looked to me like he was doomed to failure, though...

“Oh, fine. I’m Syphon. I’m the leader of a certain party.”

“My name is Sora,” I said, feeling slightly disoriented about the whole situation.

The other man seemed to be at a loss as well. “So, er...is this your first time dealing with equipment?”

I nodded, and he gave me the location of a certain weapon shop.

“Go talk to the owner there. He used to be an adventurer himself, and despite how he looks, he’s pretty friendly. I’d go with you if I had time today, but I was about to head out with my party.” He waved to me encouragingly, then left the guild, not forgetting to give a smack to Argo—who had indeed been shot down—on his way.

I knew just where to find the shop in question, as I’d passed by it during quests many times before. People seemed to like it, and I remembered hearing it recommended on several of my delivery jobs as well.

Still, this would be my first time going inside. As I pushed the door open and came inside, I saw the walls decorated with a variety of weapons. *Isn’t it a little dangerous to just have them within reach like that?* The sheer number of them was a little intimidating as well.

Armor was also lined up neatly on shelves, with some being mounted on objects that were a bit like mannequins. *Oh?* I looked over and saw a few more things hung up behind the counter, but I didn’t know how they were different.

But...first stop, weapons. A sword was the way to go, right? Axes and such looked pretty powerful but were probably harder to handle, and most of the adventurers I’d met in the guild used swords, so they were likely the easiest to handle. They also just happened to look the coolest.

“Welcome. Looking for something?” called a voice as I was just starting to look through the weapons. It was coming from a short man, almost impossibly

short given how burly he was.

“I’m a new adventurer...er, sir. I was hoping to leave town to gather materials, but I need equipment first.”

“Oh, yeah?” He gave me an appraising gaze.

Since my stats had been steadily ticking up, I wasn’t the same man I had been when I first arrived in this world! But my actual appearance hadn’t changed at all, so I couldn’t deny it if he told me I didn’t look impressive. Compared to the burly adventurers, I was skinny and short. It would be hard to describe my build except to say that I was about average in Earth terms. There was no universe in which you’d call me muscular.

“Any weapons or armor you want in particular? Or are you a mage? And no need to call me ‘sir.’”

“I was thinking of a sword for my weapon, s-so...” I stuttered, “for armor, something light and easy to move in. But I don’t like pain, so I’d like something that will keep me from getting hurt.”

“That’s a pretty tall order. You’d probably prefer a one-handed sword...maybe a breastplate or clothing made from monster material? The clothing’ll be more expensive, but easier to move in.”

Maybe clothing would be better, then? I also told him I wanted a knife for stripping down dead monsters, a bag to store materials, gloves that wouldn’t impede my movement, and good boots for walking in the forest. I added that my budget was one gold piece. He was surprised to hear that a beginner like me had such a large budget, and I told him that I simply wanted the best when it came to keeping myself safe. I also told him I’d just gotten a big windfall.

The shopkeeper thought for a minute, then started by bringing me a few swords which he asked me to try out. They were all about the same length, but when I actually held them, I found that they all had a slightly different heft. He told me to give one a light swing. I hesitated, but he showed me how to do it. One downward vertical swing, then one horizontal one.

Even though we had plenty of space, I was worried about hitting the inventory. It felt like a disaster waiting to happen. *Focus, man. Focus.*

I took a deep breath and swung the sword. If it was too heavy, I'd feel an extra pull on my body after each swing. If it was too light, I'd feel like I wasn't really swinging it.

"That one looks good," the shopkeeper declared as he watched me swing one. I'd been thinking it felt pretty good myself. "Now for armor. Clothing, boots, gloves, cloak..."

I tried on various gloves to make sure that they weren't too thick and didn't feel strange while I was doing delicate tasks. However, he advised me that I might be better off using my sword barehanded to start.

I picked sturdy boots with soles that would carry me through the roughest of roads. For clothing, he had me move my arms around while wearing it and adjusted it to make sure it wouldn't impede my movements. Every time I chose a piece of equipment, he gave me careful advice on how to use it and take care of it. He also showed me how to perform maintenance on my weapon and gave me the things I needed to do it.

Even though there aren't any other customers, isn't it strange that he's helping me out so much? But I guess this is why everyone recommended him...

In the end, I think I ended up with some pretty good stuff. He even made sure it was sized right. There was no mirror, so I couldn't say for sure, but I probably wouldn't have recognized myself.

In particular, the clothing that incorporated monster materials was blade-resistant and reduced damage taken. Of course, that didn't mean I could just throw myself headlong into the line of fire... It was more like insurance. I had also gone a little bit over budget, so he'd apparently even reduced the price on top of everything.

"Are you sure?" I asked, but his response was an encouraging "Give it your best, kiddo."

I reflected briefly on how the people at the castle had been such assholes, but the normal people in the town were so often friendly and kind. Then I thanked the shopkeeper and left his store behind.



Once I had my equipment together, I returned to the inn to try some test swings in the backyard. Of course, I was sure to get permission from the proprietress first.

NEW

[Sword Arts Lv. 1]

Sword Arts was, to put it simply, a skill that made you better at using a sword.

My movements had started out awkward, but they all got a lot smoother after I acquired the Sword Arts skill. Now my blade whistled through the wind when I swung it, and it felt like a completely different sword from the one I'd test swung at the weapon shop. It also looked like practice swings alone were enough to increase my proficiency.

These skills truly provided a myriad of blessings.

I didn't take any quests that day, spending my time instead on buying equipment and getting some rest. But I headed right for the guild first thing the next day and took a gathering quest. Michal was surprised, but she gave me an encouraging "Take care, okay?"

I had every intention of being back before lunch, but as a cautious person, I remembered to buy some rations as well. I tried a taste of one, and it wasn't very good, so I certainly hoped I wouldn't have to rely on them.

"Haven't seen you before. You an adventurer?" asked an armored man as I approached the gate. He seemed to be the gatekeeper, monitoring who came in and out of the town.

"It's my first time outside. I took an herb-gathering quest."

"Aha. Word to the wise, though, don't talk about your quests. You never know who might be listening. And while the part of the forest with the healing herbs is probably safe, you do sometimes get monsters wandering in, so be careful."

I left through the south gate and walked along the main road for about thirty minutes before the forest came into view to my left. I headed straight for it. A river flowed through the forest, and the healing herb patch was apparently on its banks.

I had a feeling that more than a few people had taken this quest before, because there was a well-worn path through the forest already. I walked cautiously along while using Detect Presence, but anything it picked up was faint and distant. After another thirty minutes of walking, I arrived at my destination.

It was a healing herb patch, but there were other plants mixed in with them. You could tell the difference if you got close enough, but examining each individual herb was a time-consuming process, and many of them were hard to distinguish.

But when I used “Appraisal” here...

[Healing Herb] [Healing Herb] [Vigor Herb] [Healing Herb]
[False Healing Herb] [Mana Herb] [Full Moon Herb] [Healing Herb]

...I could see the names of all the plants displayed for easy reading, together with their status.

[Healing Herb] Mainly used to make potions. Quality: Good

I made sure to only take the best of these. Freshness and quality were important, and a low quality in Appraisal’s eyes suggested that the herbs were either dying or too young. Apparently the lowest-quality herbs wouldn’t even count toward my quota.

Occasionally I saw one labeled “Mana Herb” and made sure to pick those. I also remembered to take other varieties like “Vigor Herb” and “Antidote Herb.” That said, I’d been told the polite thing to do was not to strip the patch too bare, so I did leave some.

Still, I eventually seemed to have more than enough. My special preservation bag was full to bursting, and I was getting pretty sick of using Appraisal.

All the standing and bending makes your back hurt, doesn't it? My legs had begun to tremble from all the squatting I was doing to pick the herbs. I checked and saw that it had even raised my proficiency in Enhance Physique. At the same time, kneeling directly on the ground would get my trousers dirty, and accidentally hitting a rock or something could blow out my knee. *This stuff actually hurts, man. I really wish I'd brought kneepads.*

Nevertheless, for the sake of money, I persevered. And while I was at it, I noticed something strange.

It sat there, motionless, on top of a leaf, skillfully balanced as if it were using it as a bed.

“What is this thing?” It looked fluffy and soft, like a white ball of...moss? I tried Appraisal on it and received an “unable to appraise” pop-up for my troubles.

Mysteriously, the leaf didn't seem to bend at all beneath it, as if the thing were weightless. *Ah, it rolled over and fell...* I thought, but it landed without a sound and with an almost bouncing motion. Something like eyes appeared on the thing's surface, which moved side to side as if scanning its surroundings. Its...gaze, I guess, seemed to land on me, at which point it fell still.

I stared back at it. This motionless staring contest lasted for one, two, three seconds, and then it silently rose into the air. It drifted right, and I followed it with my gaze. Seeing that, it moved left the next time, and my eyes continued to follow it. It hopped around a bit, as if in surprise, its rabbitlike ears twitching away.

It seems almost...confused? To be honest, I was feeling pretty confused myself. But since this was a kind of fantastical world, I probably should have expected to encounter unusual critters like this.

Another question came to mind. Since it looked a bit like a small mammal...would it eat? Impulsively, I took the energy bar-like ration pack from my pocket. The critter seemed cautious at first, but then it approached in

apparent curiosity. It leaned in with its...nose, I guess, as if sniffing it.



Just then, I remembered. *Crap. These things don't actually taste very good!* But before I could act on that thought, the ration bar in my hand was gone. The critter's body jiggled in an odd way. *Is it...chewing? Ah, it stopped.* As it did, its ears drooped, and it looked up at me, its "eyes" shining as if they were welling up with tears.

"S-Sorry..." I found myself saying, feeling rather guilty about it.

Just then, the critter began whipping its body around, as if suddenly on high alert. Right as I was starting to wonder what was going on, my Detect Presence skill activated.

Six *somethings* were coming toward us—and quickly, at that.

I ran full tilt for cover, trying to keep my attention focused on the presences as I did. The swiftness of my flight had left me a little out of breath, but I was hidden. I then glanced over at the strange...creature? But it was already gone.

A second later, six shapes flew into the clearing: two people and four monsters. It looked like the monsters were wulfs. Fast and quite hard to put down, so I'd been told—though if you had a way to counter their speed, they weren't too much of a threat.

One of the two people facing off against the wulfs stood in front with a pair of swords at the ready, while the other was off to the rear and wielding a staff. The latter seemed to be struggling a bit, shoulders heaving.

One wulf charged, but the twinblade-wielder dodged its blow skillfully. Just as they saw an opening and were about to counter, another wulf flew in and interrupted them. I thought the staff wielder would step in at that point to help, but they just stood there, steadying their breath. I thought at first they were holding off on interfering because the enemy was moving so quickly, but then I realized they were using their staff to support their weight.

It took me one instant to think and one instant to move. The moment the wulf sprang, I threw my skinning knife.

The wulf, still mid-leap, was unable to dodge and ended up skewered through sheer dumb luck. I'd just been trying to distract it, but I'd managed to score a proper hit.

With my ambush successful, the other wulf, thrown off its rhythm by my unexpected intrusion, turned and ran at me. I swung my sword down hard as it approached and felt my blade pass through flesh. I checked to make sure it was down, then searched for my next target...but all I saw was the twinblade-wielder standing in front of the three dead wulfs.

With the combat over, I flashed back to what I'd just done and realized how utterly reckless it had been. Still, if I hadn't done it, there was no telling what might have happened to the other two.

That said, I remembered being cautioned that horning in on another person's hunt could lead to trouble. In gaming terms, had I just engaged in "kill stealing"?

"I'm sorry." Unsure of the proper etiquette for the situation, I decided to settle on an apology.

The twinblade-wielder's face broke out in a look of surprise and then an awkward smile, as they finally seemed to understand what I was getting at. "I'm not going to be mad at you for bailing me out of a jam."

Now that I could calm down and take a good look, I realized the twinblade-wielder was a woman. She had golden hair cut just at her shoulders and golden eyes that watched me with great curiosity. And if my gaze happened to drift a little lower than that...well, I imagine any man would do the same. In fact, I did try hard not to stare. She wasn't especially busty, but her clothing was on the light side for mobility purposes, and it hugged her figure quite a bit.

The adventurer with the staff was female as well, and the face that was revealed when she lowered her hood had an almost childish quality to it. Her golden pigtails, trailing in the wind, added to that impression. She was quite petite, and had a lot of growing left to do... *Er, there's an example of a thing that would definitely be rude to think.* Her eyes were the same shining gold as her hair. They looked a bit like sisters to me, but since golden hair and eyes seemed fairly common in this world, maybe that wasn't enough to go on.

"You saved us," the staff wielder said in a whisper, then gave me a firm bow.

"How do we split things under these circumstances? I only just became an

adventurer, so I'm not too familiar with the rules," I said.

The twinblade-wielder again looked a little surprised for some reason. "I don't know many beginners who can beat a wulf that easily. And your equipment..."

"I know, but I've really only been an adventurer for a week and a half. I came here on an herb-gathering quest, and I think my sword did most of the work. I've only got good equipment because I lucked into a big payday." Indeed, the sword had torn through the wulf without resistance. *Thanks for the great weapon, Mr. Shopkeeper!*

Reflecting on that, though, reminded me of the way the steel felt as it tore through flesh. As I recalled it, I felt my hands start to tremble. Even if it was a monster, I'd killed a living thing, and that feeling was just now hitting home.

"Are you all right?" The next thing I knew, a pair of golden pigtaileds were streaming through the wind as the staff-wielding girl appeared in my personal space.

I looked up and met her eyes, took a step back, and tried to change the subject away from my moment's weakness. "So, what comes next? I've never broken down a wulf before, so..." I'd read up on the process, so I knew the important parts and materials you could get from them. I'd also more or less memorized how it was done. But even if it was a monster, actually taking it apart seemed like it might make me puke. Just the smell of the blood pooling around the bodies was already making me a little nauseous.

"Oh, we're definitely breaking them down. You don't want to throw good money away. Want me to show you how it's done?" The twinblade user must have read my mind, because a teasing smile appeared on her face.

I decided to let her show me. Then I could decide if I could handle it myself in the future!

While we went about the process, we made some basic introductions. The twinblade-wielder's name was Rurika, and the girl with the staff was a mage named Chris.

Chris, either due to hesitance or caution, tended to stay behind Rurika. But

now and then, whether it was out of impulsiveness or a simple lack of thought, she'd spring into action. The way she'd approached me before was the result of her concern overwhelming her caution. At least, that was what Rurika said.

"Chris, you take a break. You haven't recovered much mana yet, so you're probably feeling pretty bad, right?"

Chris took Rurika's advice, sat down, and began catching her breath. Then she quickly covered her face with the hood again, as if she'd just remembered to do it.

"I really let her overtax herself while we were running away," Rurika told me. "We left quite a trail of dead wulfs behind us, but there's no way to go back for them now."

While they instructed me on how to break down a wulf, we engaged in some small talk. Rurika explained that the two of them were a Rank D adventurer duo. They'd taken a quest to collect killer bee honey in this forest but had run into a pack of wulfs on the way. They'd managed to scatter them with magic and escape the pack as a whole, but a few stragglers had given chase. They'd managed to take out quite a few of them while on the run, but Chris's mana was on the verge of running out, so they'd lured them here for a confrontation.

I asked if it wasn't more difficult to deal with them in an open space like this, but Rurika explained that her plan had just been to hold out as best as she could until Chris's mana recovered. She also said that wulfs were at their strongest when they could hide among the trees before striking, so it was actually easier to fight in a clearing like this.

"I guess we've failed the honey quest. We can't exactly retrieve it with wulfs swarming the place. Ah, but once we report it to the guild, they'll probably penalize us...and here we were so close to Rank C..."

It seemed that defeating a pack of wulfs, depending on its size, was more of a Rank B project. When monsters formed a pack, there was a small chance of it spawning an individual of an advanced subtype, which significantly increased the difficulty of the endeavor.

"And that's about how you do it," Rurika said, going about the process of breaking down the monster while she talked. Her movements were sure and

confident, and several sorted piles of materials quickly appeared before my eyes.

As for me? Well...I tried my best, and I *did* manage not to puke. Don't ask how I actually did, though. Everyone's a beginner to start, right?

Rurika and Chris bundled up the extracted materials and put them in their materials bag. As for the meat, four wulfs' worth was way too much to carry even after being broken down. At first they were planning on leaving it behind, but I said I'd carry it, stuffed it into a spare materials bag I'd brought with me, and hefted it onto my back. It was quite heavy, but it looked worse than it actually was. I wasn't sure whether that was because of my level, my stats, or my Enhance Physique skill.

"You're stronger than you look."

"Only when I'm carrying things."

"What? What a weird thing to say," Rurika said in bemusement while Chris giggled away.

A wulf was a very useful monster, but it still had a lot of parts that couldn't be used. We gathered together the unusable parts, which we then incinerated with a fire spell from Chris. Obviously, we did this away from the herb patch.

"Well, ready to head back? Oh, Sora, are you done with your herb-gathering quest?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm finished with that. I got what I needed."

Chris's mana had recovered, and I'd gathered enough healing herbs, so we decided to head back. Collecting herbs took quite a while, so I was a little scared to focus my attention on a task like that with a pack of wulfs close by.

I looked around the clearing one last time before we left, but I didn't see any sight of that curious creature.



"Wow, a girl on each arm. Where'd you pick them up?"

Why is that the first thing you said to me? Shouldn't a gatekeeper's first priority be asking to see my guild card? Do your job, jerk! My first instinct was

indignation, but then I reconsidered. *Well, I guess anyone would be curious about somebody leaving alone and coming back with two beautiful girls...*

“That advice you gave me was pretty useful.”

“Oh? Run into some monsters?” he asked in concern.

“Yeah, and that’s where I met these two.”

I ended up thanking him for worrying about me, and though he seemed to want to hear more, I didn’t give him any details. Rurika had warned me that it would be best not to talk about the wulfs too much. Instead, I just held out my guild card to end the conversation. The gatekeeper didn’t push the matter, and he just checked the card obediently by passing it near some kind of object.

Watching our interaction, one of the girls looked exasperated, and the other openly winced.

“Anyway, let’s head to the adventurers’ guild. We can thank you for your help after that,” Rurika said.

Many sets of eyes stared at us as we came in together. Argo’s jaw dropped in shock. *This guy is at the guild every day, I thought. Does he ever do any actual work?* At the same time, I understood the sentiment. We were an unusual group, so we probably stood out. Still, I wished they wouldn’t glare daggers at me like that. *That includes you, Argo!*

“Meet up with you later,” Rurika said, seeming unbothered by the attention. I had a feeling her attitude was just making it worse, though.

“Here you are.” I handed my healing herbs to Michal. Healing herbs were ingredients in potions, an essential item for adventurers and other travelers, and periodically bought up by governments. Since the need for herbs never really went away, the quest was labeled a continuous one, and I got paid the reward for each pack of ten I delivered.

This wasn’t the case for other kinds of quests. If you took a quest that involved killing ten wulfs, that was all you’d be paid for, even if you killed thirty. (Though, obviously, you could still make money by selling their materials and magistones.)

“So how’d you end up with those two?” Michal’s eyes were flickering with earnest curiosity. *It seems I’ve got a busybody here as well.* In a way, she seemed to be speaking as a representative for everybody there. I had my doubts about the professionalism of all this, but Michal’s words did make the whispering die down, as everybody in the guild fell silent, hanging on my next words.

“Well, someone recommended a good place to collect herbs, so I went there, and I ran into them while they were running from wulfs.”

Michal looked extremely surprised by my explanation. “Running from wulfs? Surely at their ability level, they should have been able to take care of them themselves...” The other adventurers listening in seemed to feel the same way, because their expressions turned puzzled.

Then, as if to answer the question on everybody’s mind, the guild suddenly burst into activity. The guild employee who had been talking to Rurika and Chris took off for the back and returned with a man. Upon seeing him, the adventurers all fell silent, seeming to watch his movements carefully.

“Would you mind explaining that once again?” the man asked Rurika. He had a gentle demeanor, but his gaze was sharp and shrewd.

Rurika’s voice echoed through the silent guild, and her explanation kicked off another flurry of activity. The man swiftly gave instructions. Several parties currently relaxing in the bar were told to take part in the hunt. A number of employees also ran off, most likely to issue warnings to the other guilds and inform the gatekeepers of the danger.

A pack of wulfs spawning in a forest relatively close to the city—especially one often used by beginners for gathering herbs—was a threat to the guild. If not dealt with carefully, it could result in adventurers being badly hurt.

“We can leave all that to the guild master,” said Rurika, now freed, as she walked up to me. “Let’s get these wulf parts sold off.”

The three of us approached the sales counter together, but now nobody paid us any mind—another apparent sign of how shocking Rurika’s news had been. But more than that, they’d probably lost interest now that they knew why we were together. Even Argo was talking to his party members with a serious

expression on his face. *If he looked more like that when he was trying to pick up girls, he'd probably have much better luck...* I thought idly.

As far as our material review went, I'll just say that the only ones judged to be of poor quality were the ones I'd separated, like I expected. I cheered myself up by telling myself that everyone has to start somewhere.

The girls offered me half of the total haul from the goods. Since there were three of us, I asked if we shouldn't divide the pot in three instead, and they just told me not to worry about it. Even if we split it three ways, I'd probably make out well, but they said that since I was just starting out, I should probably take whatever I could. They also said they were going to treat me to dinner tonight as a thanks.

When I asked why they were going this far, they said the situation they'd been in was just that urgent. Given how relaxed they'd acted once the wulfs were killed, that was hard to believe, but...

I returned briefly to my inn, dropped off my things, and then headed to the inn they'd told me about. Theirs was closer to the center of town, and so it was of a much higher quality than my own. The place looked pristine, with nicely painted outer walls.

It seemed the first floor was a dining hall, but the tables were nicely arranged to offer lots of space between patrons. It looked like a nice place to eat that wouldn't feel stifling even when it was crowded.

I told the innkeeper why I was there and was led to a private room. I waited for a while, and then Rurika and Chris arrived, having changed out of their adventuring outfits.

"Sorry for the wait. We ordered a few things in advance, but was there anything specific you wanted to eat? Or anything you *can't* eat?"

I wasn't really sure, so I left it up to their discretion. I told them I didn't actually know much about the food here, so I'd eat whatever they got as long as it wasn't made out of bugs.

I was thinking that if something really didn't agree with me, I would just deal

with it then. It wasn't like I knew what anything on the menu was anyway.

"First of all, thank you for today. Cheers." Rurika kicked the meal off with a toast. Naturally, I was drinking fruit water, not alcohol.

As for the dishes themselves, I'd never seen any of them before, but one bite was enough to shock me with its tastiness. Each dish had its own distinct flavor, and I could tell that whoever had made it had wanted the diner to enjoy it. Compared to the more rustic meals I'd been eating at the guild, I guess this felt more like city cooking.

"It's delicious," I found myself saying.

For the first time since coming to this world, I felt like I was eating food on par with cuisine from my world. I'd been impressed by the orc meat the other day, but this was even better.

I'd started out very gingerly, but before I knew it, I was really chowing down. Suddenly, I heard a peal of laughter and looked up to see Chris giggling.

She had taken her pigtails down, so her hair was straight down her back now. It had made her look more mature at a glance, but the laughter made her seem younger again. Once she realized I was looking at her, though, she panicked and looked at Rurika for aid.

Rurika winced and spoke up in a peacemaking tone. "Hey, we're really glad you seem to like it so much. We picked this inn because they say it has the best food in the capital. And you have to pay extra to get to eat this food. Since it's a thank-you dinner, we really decided to splurge, y'know?"

It definitely seemed like it was worth the price, though I was too afraid to ask exactly how much it cost. I'd been wanting to eat some more normal cooking too.

Once the eating slowed down, we got to chatting. Rurika started by telling me that they hadn't been penalized for failing to complete the honey quest, then went on to tell me more about their adventures. I'd been wanting to know more about what adventurers did, so I was happy to listen.

Through Rurika's stories, I learned that she and Chris had come from another land. They had ascended to Rank D through adventures in their homeland, but

since then, they'd been traveling from kingdom to kingdom on escort quests.

"We come from the Eld Republic. It was a nice place, but..."

I recalled reading that the Eld Republic was a place where humans and demihumans lived together in peace. Here, the term "demihuman" seemed to refer to beastfolk, elves, dwarves, and the like. *Typical fantasy world, I guess. Things that are just myths in my world are totally normal here.* Still, it seemed strange that I hadn't met any demihumans yet. You would've thought there'd be at least one among the adventurers.

Rurika's stories reminded me of what I'd learned in the guild library, as well as what Grey and the other stall merchants had told me.



There were seven major nations in this world:

The Vossheil Empire, which preached human supremacy and said all others were wicked. The Kingdom of Elesia, which also believed humans were superior. The Eld Republic, where various species coexisted. The Las Beastland, which was led by a beastfolk monarch. The Holy Kingdom of Frieren, which preached the teachings of the Goddess. The Magic Nation of Eva, populated by magical researchers. The Lufre Dragonlands, where they revered dragons as gods.

For a hundred years, these seven nations had had their small conflicts, but they were all minor.

That all changed ten years ago, when the Vossheil Empire declared war on the Eld Republic. It was a small spark at first, but soon all seven nations were affected. Some invaded. Some defended. Some maintained neutrality. The world was exhausted, yet the battle continued with no end in sight.

Then, three years ago, the Saint of the Holy Kingdom of Frieren received a revelation from her goddess: *The Demon King has revived. My people, you must come together to defeat him.*

At first, the leaders thought her words were mere ramblings, but when organized monster groups began appearing, they signed ceasefires and turned their attention to eradicating them instead. The organized monsters came from

a magical wood known as the Black Forest, and they were still attacking its two neighboring countries.



“So were you born here, Sora? You’ve got good equipment for a beginner, so I thought you might come from a wealthy household.”

“No. I come from pretty far away, and I became an adventurer to survive. The reason I have good equipment is because of the big payday I mentioned earlier. For now, I was thinking I’d save up money, learn how to fight, and spend some time seeing the world.”

I honestly had no interest in the Demon King. The whole thing didn’t feel real to me, and I had no personal grudge against him. Honestly, the only thing I had against him was that I’d been called to this world because of him, but the lion’s share of my anger was reserved for the people at the castle. I didn’t want to fight for those jerks, no matter how much they begged me.

Of course, I also had some interest in acquiring real power in this world, if I could. It would be a lie to say I didn’t want to be stronger. And my skill made that feel like a real possibility.

Some of those feelings might have stemmed from a desire to rub it in the faces of those jerks, of course. I started to feel something rising up inside of me...

“See the world, huh? That’s a funny thing to say.”

Rurika’s words snapped me out of my thoughts. What had I been thinking about again? Rather...was something wrong with me?

“Really? I was pretty serious about it.” I tried to play it cool, but I was actually a little shaken by the sudden, aggressive thoughts I’d felt rising up within me, as well as the way they had disappeared without a trace.

“Oh, really?” Rurika stared at me pointedly when she heard that. She seemed to be taking my measure somehow, perhaps searching for something in me.

It was a little nerve-racking, honestly. I found myself looking away and realized that Chris was also staring at me. When I looked back at her, she

started in surprise, then quickly pointed her eyes downward.

“So, Sora, what are you doing tomorrow? Taking the day off, since you just did a quest?”

“I’ll probably check the delivery quests first, then decide.”

“Delivery quests? Are you that delivery guy everyone’s talking about?!”

“What do you mean, ‘everyone’s talking about’?”

She explained that other adventurers thought of me as kind of a weirdo who would quietly handle the delivery jobs no one else would take. “Oh, so was that windfall you mentioned the reward for the assigned quests? I heard the guy got a lot of money from that.”

I nodded since she was correct, but was it really okay for them to be giving out personal information like that?

“And that’s how you carried the wulf meat so easily...” Rurika nodded as if realizing something.

“It’s just that it’s safe in town, you know? I only just got here, so it was a good opportunity to learn my way around.” It didn’t seem all that special to me. Walking around helped me learn where all the shops were, and every time I went on a delivery, I learned something new. I’d really begun to enjoy walking around, even though I’d originally started doing it mainly to feed my skill.

“I can’t believe you carried out that difficult series of quests.”

“You’re amazing,” Chris agreed.

Plus, I hadn’t been brave enough to venture out of town...

“The way we met feels like it means something. Would you like to work together on a quest sometime?”

“But I only just became an adventurer. And didn’t you say you were almost Rank C?”

“We’re still a few quests away from that, actually. What do you think, Chris?”

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

“Right? Honestly, it’s always been just the two of us, but I’ve been thinking

that could get us in trouble if we run into another situation like today.”

“Seems like there’s no shortage of people who’d like to join up with you,” I noted, remembering the way people had looked at me when we entered the guild together. Looking back, I had a feeling it was envy.

“We have gotten offers, yeah, but no one’s really seemed like a good match so far. Most of them seemed to want something other than just the adventuring, you know? And Chris didn’t like them.”

That was understandable, I had to say. They were definitely good-looking girls, and they’d seemed perfectly nice in all our interactions so far. Rurika was cheerful and gregarious, and though Chris wasn’t as talkative, she added a strangely reassuring air to any conversation. Of course, I’d only just met them, so I might have had that wrong. But at least, that was how it felt to me.

“Besides, as relative veterans, we can teach you the ABCs of adventuring. And...maybe we can do some sparring and teach you how to fight. You’ve got a quick swing, but there’s something off about the way you wield your sword. Kind of like the sword’s in charge.”

Yeah, that’s because I’m an amateur, I thought sheepishly. *My skill is basically wielding the sword for me!*

I was grateful for their invitation, but the conditions seemed way too one-sided in my favor. I had to wonder if there were ulterior motives in play. At the same time, it was a good opportunity. I had been wanting to learn the basics of combat, and the offer sounded earnest enough.

“Okay, we’ll give it a try. It’s not like you’re staying in this kingdom forever, right? But I’ll be glad to have your help even just while you’re here.”

“That’s true. If we make it to Rank C and a good escort quest comes up, we might move on. Anyway, let’s meet up at noon tomorrow. There’s a place I’d like to visit.”

I said I’d take a delivery quest the next morning and meet up with them at noon.

“Whew, that was delicious, though.” I returned to the inn and lay down in my

bed. I'd thought I would be too nervous to eat with women, but thanks to Rurika's conversational mastery, things never had a chance to get awkward. The deliciousness of the food also helped.

Maybe because I was so stuffed, sleep threatened to overtake me the moment my head hit the pillow. Slowly, my eyes closed and my consciousness grew hazy. Then I remembered. *The lamp in my room will run out when the mana in its magistone does, but they'd told me to conserve it whenever I could.* I pulled myself up again to make sure it was out before I fell asleep...and then I saw it.

The fluffy white critter was hovering quietly in the air. I looked closer and saw its round button eyes focused intently on me.

"Um, nice...to meet you? I guess it's not our first meeting, though..." I wasn't sure if it understood human speech, but I ended up speaking anyway, unable to bear the silence.

The critter wiggled a little, seemingly reacting to my words. Was it happy?

"Hey, do you understand what I'm saying?" I asked. It made a motion like enthusiastic nodding.

Apparently it understood me, but it couldn't talk back. Instead, it just did circles in the air. I interpreted that as a happy gesture, but it wasn't like I knew for certain.

I couldn't be sure, but...I did want to touch it. In fact, it was so cute and nice and plush that I wanted to cuddle the heck out of it. Hesitantly, I reached a hand out to touch it, and...passed right through, as if it were a hologram.

I was surprised, but the critter, seemingly shocked to have a hand pass through it like that, started bouncing around angrily.

"S-Sorry. You just looked like you'd be really nice to pet."

Seeming satisfied with my honest apology, the critter gave a big nod and calmed down.

"I was about to go to bed. Is that okay?" I began feeling sleepy after watching its strange movements for a little while, so I asked that question and started to

lie back. Did it not understand what the words meant? But the act of lying down on the bed and closing my eyes seemed to get through to it, as it moved to my pillow and lay still. It seemed like it was going to sleep there. *You don't have to get home?* I wondered. But I watched it for a while, and it didn't move a muscle.

Finally I turned off the lamp and lay down. *My first time outside the city. My first materials quest. My first battle with monsters. My first dinner with women.* It had been a full day of firsts, but the most exhausting part of it all had been the short exchange with the fluffy probably-creature.

As I drifted off to sleep, I wondered if it would still be there when I woke up.



I woke up the next morning and saw the critter in my peripheral vision. *So it wasn't a dream, I guess.*

As I pulled myself up, it also began moving in response. Its eyes appeared and examined me closely.

"Ah, I've got some things to take care of right now. Sorry, but I can't really talk...unless you want to come along?" It seemed to answer with a nod, so I guessed it understood me. Even if it didn't, I'd have to get going anyway.

I ate my meal and headed for the guild earlier than usual. The critter floated along behind me without a sound, but I decided not to pay it any mind.

"You're here early," said an adventurer I didn't recognize.

"I've got something to do this afternoon. I came early to look at the quests," I answered as I headed for the delivery quest board.

As usual, there weren't a lot of people around this one. Actually, there weren't many people around *any* of the boards right now, and those who were there were also on the young side.

I had agreed to meet up with Rurika at noon, so I picked a quest I could complete before then. I handed the quest form to Michal and got started right away. In that whole time, nobody had mentioned seeing the critter hovering behind me. I'd gotten an inkling while I was back at the inn, but this more or less confirmed that nobody else could see it. I had lost sight of it myself a few

times, so it seemed like it could control when I could see it and when I couldn't.

I finished my quest on schedule, then went over to Grey's place and ate a skewer. I felt a gaze scrutinizing me as I did. Did the critter want to eat some too? I offered some to it, but it quickly turned its back on me. *Still feeling burned by that ration bar, huh?*

I walked around town doing my deliveries, but my level didn't increase today, since the XP I needed kept going up. It reinforced for me how cautious I had to be about spending skill points.

"Sorry, am I late?" When I arrived at the guild, I found Rurika already there. Just Rurika. Apparently Chris was taking the day off, needing more time to fully shake off her fatigue.

Rurika took me to a wide-open space in the back of the guild. *Is this the place she wanted to go?*

"This is the training hall. It's a place where adventurers can hone their skills with mock battles and swap information. They've got a stock of weapons with dull blades, so just choose one."

I picked a weapon and had a mock battle with Rurika, but things got even more intense when Syphon swapped in. The whole thing ended with me flat on my back, gazing up at the ceiling. *I think this is the most drenched with sweat I've been since I arrived in this world...*

The fluffy white critter watched me with what looked like concern. It seemed a bit out of place here, but I was grateful for its kindness.

"Your slashes are pretty fast, but they're too obvious. They'll probably work on the dumber monsters, but it won't fit the bill for the sharper ones roamin' about. Of course, to get over that hump you'll just need more experience. I'd be happy to fight you again if you get a chance." Syphon, seemingly still fresh as a daisy, threw himself right back into another group's mock battle.

"How'd it go?" Rurika offered me water. I took it and had a drink. It was just normal water, but considering the way I felt, it tasted utterly delicious.

"I'm exhausted. I think delivering packages might be less tiring than this."

“Yeah, that was a pretty intense match. But did it give you some confidence?”

“I’m not sure yet. I guess humans and monsters really are different, huh?”

“Yeah... Well, let’s check out the quests, then. Based on the way you were fighting, you can probably handle a goblin hunt.”

Don’t know if I care for that “probably” part... Perhaps my thoughts showed on my face, because she patted me reassuringly on the shoulder.

We went to the message board together. I suddenly realized that this was my first time looking at the hunt quests.

“Oh, wow, this one... It’s still here, huh?” Rurika said as she walked up to one particular quest notice.

I looked over her shoulder and saw a quest to eradicate goblins from a relatively nearby village.

Goblins were reportedly among the weakest monsters, along with slimes, and they were the archetypal beginner-friendly monster. The only materials you could take from them were magistones, so fighting them wasn’t especially profitable, but they were the best monster for gaining experience with little risk.

Of course, that should have meant a village could beat them themselves if they got enough people together... What did it mean that there was a quest involving them, then?

This particular quest had also been up there for five days. There were two reasons why: the distance to the village and the paucity of the reward. The rewards for goblin hunts varied greatly depending on who was offering the quest, and this quest was three days’ walk from the capital, so the effort to complete it didn’t match the reward.

Generally, rewards were set based on the monster type, with no accounting for travel time. A three-day walk meant you needed six days’ worth of rations, and that was assuming a smooth trip without any issues. A quest like that might even leave you in the red. Having a wagon or a horse could shorten the travel time, but no adventurer with resources like that would bother taking on a

simple goblin hunt.

“Hmm. A three-day walk, huh?” Rurika mused to herself.

“Is there a problem with that?”

“Look, camping out is rough. Seriously rough. You need one person standing guard all the time, so you never get a good night’s sleep. We had this one ten-day walk that was seriously exhausting...and we didn’t have any money back then either.” She gazed off into space as she spoke. Apparently it was a pretty touchy subject.

It was true that this was a world with monsters in it, and things were way more dangerous outside the city. *Setting watch, huh?* The possibility of getting ambushed at night did make the prospect less appealing.

Still, this was also a good opportunity, in a way. If I was going to have to camp out eventually, I’d feel better if I started out with two skilled adventurers by my side. And while I’d felt nervous about leaving the city to gather herbs, I’d been even more excited. Stepping out for the first time had felt like a whole other world was opening up before me.

“If you’re okay with it, I’d like to take the quest. Though I can’t guarantee I’ll be a huge help.”

“Well, I guess it would be easier with three... And when you’re not used to something, it’s best to get experience by practicing. It’s still warm out, and you can spend the night well enough in just a cloak, I guess? And if we just follow the main roads, we won’t run into too many monsters, so as long as we watch out for bandits...” She stood for a few moments, muttering to herself as she sorted out her thoughts. Then she declared that we’d take the quest.

“Hey, shouldn’t you talk to Chris first?” I cautioned.

Rurika flinched in realization, thought for a second, then headed for reception with the quest form. Apparently she’d decided to get her approval later.

Is that really okay? I had to wonder.

“We’d like this one, please.”

“Um, you’re taking a goblin-hunting quest?” Michal looked at Rurika, then

glanced at me to confirm.

“Yeah. Figured I’d show the newbie here the ol’ adventuring ropes... Heh, well, I wish I were that cool. Mainly, I’m paying him back for saving us earlier,” Rurika said this a little louder than normally, and she patted me hard on the back.

“I see. I’ll get you started, then. It should be a good experience for him, as long as he’s with you two.”

It seemed there was no problem with us taking the quest.

“Tomorrow we’ll stock up on things we need, then we’ll set out the day after. You’ve got to tell your innkeeper as well. You never know when you’ll actually make it back, so you might just want to cancel your stay. If you tell them why, they’ll probably understand.”



The next day, we went shopping, and Chris came along with us. At first she was surprised when she saw me, but I didn’t think I looked any different than normal? I cast a glance at the white, fluffy thing, but it just kept bobbing along through the air with no sign of concern. It was looking all around, like it was curious about its surroundings. Another day of business as usual.

We bought rations and healing potions. Mana potions were expensive, but Chris needed them, so we bought some of those too. Then we checked the list of things we’d need for camping out and restocked anything we didn’t have.

Though not as expensive as mana potions, healing potions were quite pricey. Still, they were cheap when you considered you were basically buying more life. I also bought an item that acted as monster repellent, which I prayed I would never have to use.

We also purchased some rations. Rurika already had some basic cooking equipment, but I had to buy my own set of eating utensils.

We had time left after that, so we went to the guild training hall. This time, Chris participated a bit as well, but needless to say, she spent more time watching. There were quite a lot of people with time to kill, so we finished up early this time. Rurika seemed popular, and she fought anyone who asked to

duel her. Was it just my imagination, or were her opponents leering at her a bit?

We agreed to meet up at the gate first thing the next morning, then dispersed. In the meantime, I tended to my latest round of bumps and bruises.

Chapter 3

“Yep, beautiful weather for traveling!”

Rurika was already bursting with energy first thing in the morning. I hoped it wouldn't leave her burned out halfway.

“Hey, heading on a trip?” the gatekeeper asked, noticing our camping supplies.

We nodded, showed our guild cards, and headed out. The cards were inspected more closely on your way into a town, so on the way out it didn't take much time.

“It's been dangerous out there lately. You probably know that, but just be careful,” the gatekeeper added as we went.

There was no chance that we'd get lost while walking along main roads, but we were the only ones traveling in this particular direction. Rurika explained that people were avoiding this route as much as possible because the forest with the wulf pack was between us and our destination. That was why the south gate we were passing through was presently deserted.

The wulf pack would be deep in the forest, so there wasn't much chance we'd encounter it. They were essentially forest-dwelling creatures, so unless they'd run out of food or lost a fight for territory, that was generally where they stayed.

The main road itself just seemed to have been mowed through the surrounding grassland, so it was lined with grass and flowers. Naturally, there was no asphalt like you'd see in modern-day Japan, just a long stretch of packed earth extending toward the horizon. The grass and flowers stirred in the breeze, playing a mysterious melody that was pleasing to the ear. Were those butterflies dancing over the flowers? I saw flits of color here and there, and I found myself stopping to admire how picturesque it was.

After traveling for a while, we came upon the forest believed to house the wulfs, but we managed to pass through it without incident. Rurika said we'd be fine, but I could tell she was on high alert as we walked. I didn't get any pings on my Detect Presence skill, but it was still at a low level, so its range wasn't very far.

One thing I had learned from package deliveries and mock battles was that there were many different types of skills. Enhance Physique and Sword Arts were continuous skills, which didn't consume SP while in use. Meanwhile, Appraisal and Detect Presence required conscious activation, so they did use up SP. Running out of SP left you sick and exhausted, and trying to use another skill at that point would knock you out cold. I'd learned this while trying to use Detect Presence at the inn. In addition, using multiple skills at once consumed points even faster.

That said, even those activated skills wouldn't use SP as long as I was walking. This seemed to be part of the blessing of "never get tired from walking." As a result, I had Detect Presence running constantly. However, there was an exception to this rule: if I tried to use another skill at the same time, even while walking, it would consume SP.

Incidentally, any skill that wasn't a spell-type required SP. I also thought it was a stamina thing, as the user would be knocked out if they ran out. Using lifestyle spells consumed MP, so that seemed to be the resource you needed to employ spell-type skills. I hadn't seen my HP go down so far, but I had a feeling I didn't want to find out what happened when it hit zero.

"Let's take a break," Rurika said after about two hours of walking.

We'd decided to take regular breaks rather than force ourselves to press forward constantly. It was only our first day, and we absolutely needed to conserve our water supplies. Rurika had said you'd end up regretting it if you kept powering through just because you weren't tired yet. She also seemed worried about Chris, who appeared to have less stamina than she did.

"The sun is pretty bright today. Just walking around builds up quite a sweat."

"Rurika, need me to cast Cleanse?" Chris asked.

“Hmm, well, we don’t know what’s coming up. But by all means use it if you start feeling sick. You’re wearing heavier clothes than I am.”

“Oh? You need Cleanse?” I asked.

“Well, walking a long time does make me sweaty and tired...but Sora, you’re not sweating at all.” Rurika looked at me as if in disbelief.

“I’m sure he’s just used to it from all those deliveries. And oh, Sora, you can use lifestyle spells too?”

“Yeah, you want me to cast it instead?”

They both nodded enthusiastically, so I did just that.

“Ah, what a great feeling.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, it’s no big deal. That’s the only kind of spell I can cast, anyway.”

“You can’t use any other kind of magic?”

“Nah. I’m not even sure how you go about learning spells. I feel like I just woke up one day and knew how to use it...” Actually, I’d spent points to get it, but I figured most people in this world had to learn spells some other way.

“A lot of people just wake up knowing them one day, like you did. The method just kind of drifts into their mind.”

“So even if there’s a kind of magic you want, you just have to leave it to luck and fate?”

“I hear there’s also people who read grimoires and study and things like that, but grimoires are written in a specialist language, so you can only read them if you learn that.”

“I’ve also heard you can learn spells from scrolls found in dungeons and ruins, though they’re apparently expensive.”

If skills are something anyone could learn, why did I get kicked out of the castle? Because I had no job, no level, and low stats? I wondered.

“Oh, and regarding skills... If you’ve got any you want to keep under wraps, it’s best not to talk about them. Though, of course, revealing them can be

helpful when it's time to gather allies.”

“Yeah, and it makes it easier to coordinate with others if you share what spells you know and so on. In addition to lifestyle spells, I also know fire and wind magic. I wish I had a skill that would increase my stamina, but I guess I'll never get there.” Chris seemed self-conscious about her lack of physical prowess.

“I've got physical enhancement skills and search-type skills,” Rurika said.

“I've got Lifestyle Spells and...Conveyance? I guess.” The girls seemed to accept “Conveyance” as a plausible-sounding skill. *As for my other skills...maybe I should keep them to myself?*

We ended our break and got back to walking. Some of their things ended up in my bag, but I didn't complain. I never felt the weight while I was walking, after all.

At first I'd been a little nervous about traveling with strange women, but they had helped me out a lot, and I was gradually learning to relax and interact with them naturally. It really was nice to have two veteran adventurers showing a newbie like me the ropes.

Still, sometimes Chris seemed a bit shy around me, whether because of her general personality or a discomfort around men. She had the vibe of a sheltered girl from a well-to-do family, though maybe that was just in my head.

As a result, I sometimes found myself feeling self-conscious around her too. Rurika would see this and nod with a teasing smile, as if she understood perfectly.

“That's enough walking for today. Let's set up camp...maybe under that tree?”

We moved to the base of a tree a little ways off the main road and set up camp. When camping out with a small number of people, you frequently didn't use tents. Obviously it would be different when you were traveling around in cold regions, but in temperate climates you could make do with just your cloak. That made it easier to respond if you were ambushed as well.

“Since Sora’s inexperienced, we’ll take shifts with two awake and one asleep tonight. Having one watch at a time would let everyone get more sleep, but you’re not ready for that yet.” We agreed to try it that way tonight, and if I seemed able to handle it, I’d take my own watch shifts from now on.

We lit a fire and rested first. Chris taught me a few things while I used my lifestyle spells. It seemed they could both cook, and they quickly made dinner. I asked if I could help, but they said (quite emphatically) that I could just watch.

“When you’re camping out, you’ll eat basic soup, bread, and maybe dried meat if you have it. You generally make it using rations, but there’s not much that’s good or with a lot of variety. But if you have a high-efficiency magic bag, I hear you can walk around with whole restaurant meals packed away. I dunno if it’s true or not, though.”

“How much do those cost?”

“You generally buy them at auction, where the sky’s the limit. I think it depends on the storage capacity, though.”

“So the more they can hold, the more they cost? Is it like a storage spell or something?”

“There’s a spell called Storage in the category of dimension spells.”

“Not a lot of people can use it, though. People who can use dimension spells are rare. That’s why high-ranked parties often invite people who know them along, even if they can’t fight at all.”

Dimension spells, huh? I did have skill points to spare, and that one sounded useful, so it might be worth learning. There were also other skills I wanted to learn, though. *Hmm, what to do?*

“Okay, okay. I know talking is fun, but Chris, you sleep first. After you wake up, it’ll be just the two of you. Keep your guard up, okay?”



Chris turned bright red as Rurika said that. She covered her face with her hood and lay down on the tarp.

“You’re the first person besides me I’ve ever seen Chris talk to this much.”

“She does seem a little on the shy side. Some people just aren’t great at socializing.”

“That’s not really what I meant, but... Well, I admit it feels a little like you’re stealing her from me, but I’m happy to see Chris so happy, so keep on talking to her, okay? Feel free to get closer than that, even. But if you hurt her, I’ll never forgive you. Get it?”

I won’t. When you smile at me like that, I wouldn’t even dream of it! I thought, slightly frightened.

Still, Chris and I had mostly talked about skills and spells. Casual conversation seemed like a pretty high bar. I wasn’t sure if I could manage any kind of ordinary small talk.

Besides, I didn’t know how much I could really say about myself. “I’ve actually been summoned here from another world” wasn’t the kind of thing you could just tell someone.

Although, if there were records of summoned heroes defeating the Demon King in the past, maybe they already knew about other worlds. *Should I just bring it up sometime? Or would that be too dangerous?* Ever since I’d learned Detect Presence, I’d felt at times like I was being watched. I hoped it was just my imagination, but if it wasn’t, I could only imagine one entity being behind it—the people who had summoned me.

A little hypocritical to monitor me after kicking me out like that, isn’t it? Of course, maybe it was all in my own head. But since I wasn’t sure of the right thing to do, and telling Rurika and Chris could potentially get them mixed up in my drama, I decided to keep it to myself until I was sure.

I was in high spirits, partly because it was my first time standing guard. Hearing Rurika tell me about past adventures was also really nice. The fire was built in a pit we’d dug, so it was only bright enough that it just barely

illuminated the people around it. The sounds of our breath seemed especially loud, like the darkness had heightened my sense of hearing. It was hard to see very far, so I scanned our surroundings with Detect Presence from time to time. It would have been different if the moons were out, but unfortunately they seemed to be hidden by the clouds tonight.

Partway through the night, the girls changed shifts, and I learned a little bit more about magic from Chris—what kinds of spells there were, what different attributes did.

“You guys said you came from the Republic through the Empire to the Kingdom, but have you had any particularly memorable experiences?” Once we’d gone through most of that topic, I got curious about the other lands around us.

“Memorable? In a bad way, probably the training halls in the Empire. The adventurers there would invite me and Rurika to join them a lot, but I felt like a spectacle. I hated it.” Her tone changed there.

Did I hit a nerve? B-Better change the subject! “R-Really? Is there anything about being an adventurer that makes you happy, then?”

She thought for a moment. “When the client says thank you, I guess.”

“Yeah, I get that. When somebody thanks you, it makes it all feel worthwhile.”

“Y-Yeah. It really...does.” Chris’s voice tapered off at the end, perhaps from embarrassment because she’d said it so confidently.

Rurika was awake now, so I decided to take my shift sleeping. I’d just lain down on top of the tarp when something white popped out in front of my eyes. *A pale shadow against the dark sky!* I almost cried out, but it was just the mysterious little critter.

“Wh-What is it?” I lowered my voice so that the girls couldn’t hear me. The fluffy critter glanced briefly my way, but then its eyes disappeared as if it had closed them.

I tried speaking to it again but got no response. Its ears had drooped again and it had stopped moving. Maybe it was still sleepy? I waited a while longer

and saw no movement, so I closed my eyes and whispered, “Open Status.”

Skill: Walking Lv. 18

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 23371/100000

Skill Points: 9

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. 5] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 2] [Enhance Physique Lv. 5] [Regulate Mana Lv. 3] [Lifestyle Spells Lv. 2] [Detect Presence Lv. 4] [Sword Arts Lv. 3]

My skill level had gone up by two, and I now had nine skill points I could spend.

NEW

[Dimension Spells Lv. 1] [Parallel Thinking Lv. 1] [Boost Recovery Lv. 1]

I’d spent three of my skill points to learn three skills. That left me with six.

Learning Dimension Spells, as described, let me use the spell Storage. Putting things into my pocket dimension was apparently what raised its proficiency. It was like a spell version of a Bag of Holding.

Maybe because the level was still low, I still couldn’t hold much. Its proficiency seemed to go up not only when I put objects in and removed them, but also when I left things inside it, so I decided to put all my unused items in for now.

Parallel Thinking allowed its user to pursue multiple trains of thought simultaneously. I’d chosen that one with the idea that maybe I could split my

thoughts and use Detect Presence as I slept while camping. But since using it in my sleep would chug through my SP, I got Boost Recovery to counter that.

Boost Recovery increased the rate at which the user naturally recovered HP, MP, and SP. Nothing more, nothing less.

With that done, I decided to get some sleep while trying out Parallel Thinking.

Activating Parallel Thinking let me split my consciousness into two parallel tracks, with each one performing a different task. I let the right side rest to give myself a break while the left side activated Detect Presence. It felt a bit strange to have one half of me completely asleep while the other half was scanning the area around me like radar.

But then it suddenly cut off, as if I'd tripped a breaker in my brain. It looked like I'd run out of SP, which force-canceled the skill.

I woke up, looked at my stats, and saw my SP was down to single digits. Assuming it was a result of my low skill level, I checked my proficiency and saw that it had swiftly shot up. Using those two skills together must have drained my SP very quickly.

Incidentally, potions were expensive enough that I had wanted to learn Alchemy to make some for myself, but I wouldn't be able to level it up at the moment anyway, so I decided to hold off on buying it.

I used a lifestyle spell to wash my sleepy face with water provided by Chris. We ate breakfast, then got on the move.

The mountains in the distance remained the same size as ever. Being surrounded by prairie as far as the eye could see gave me the anxious feeling that we weren't making any progress. *Hmm, but this grass...* I really wanted to lie down in it. It looked so plush and comforting. *And even if I got dirty, I could always use Cleanse...*

"Sora, you're not getting any ideas, are you?" Rurika asked me sharply, shocking me out of my reverie.

"Rurika used to look at the grass the way you're doing now, Sora." Chris threw in a merciless jab that made Rurika flinch.

I found myself laughing, at which point Rurika challenged me to a mock duel under the pretense of an after-meal workout.

Ah, such a beautiful, cloudless sky...

It seemed Chris, who'd dropped the bomb, wasn't getting blamed.

After dinner, we took turns standing guard. I passed my watch with Rurika listening to her talk about the quests they'd taken and my watch with Chris hearing about magic. Then, when it was time to sleep, I spent it nestled up to the fluffy white critter that had shown itself once more.

Then, after noon on the third day, we left the main road for a side path and entered a nicely tended forest. The branches here had been pruned, so light penetrated the canopy and we could walk along without danger.

After we'd walked through the forest for a while, suddenly the view opened up, and we came upon a settlement surrounded by a fence. There were signs that the fence had been torn down in places and then repaired hastily.

"Who are you? Have you got business here?" asked the cautious gatekeeper.

"This is Sy Village, right? We're adventurers. We took your goblin-hunting quest from the guild." Rurika handed over her guild card and explained our business.

In response, the gatekeeper called someone over to take his place, then took us to the village chief's house. Even as he guided us, though, the man seemed restless and fidgety. "You can hear the rest from the chief," he said, then ran off to call the chief out.

"You're the adventurers?" The chief thanked us for coming, then launched into his explanation. When they'd first sent the request to the guild for help with the goblins, they'd thought the numbers were smaller, around ten or so. But lately, the raids had been more frequent, and they'd realized there were more goblins than they'd first expected.

"And now you think it's more than twenty?"

"Yes. We reinforced the fence after we learned about them, so we've

managed to hold them off for now...but we can't fully stop them. When things get too dangerous, we just let them prey on our livestock, and we've managed to hold out so far doing that."

"When were you last attacked?" Rurika asked.

"Two nights ago. At first we managed to defeat them ourselves, but there are just so many... The attacks keep getting worse and we're stuck on the defensive." The chief looked exhausted as he responded.

"I see. Then I think we'll just rest for today. Night's going to fall soon, and it'll be better to go to the forest in the morning. Just wake us up if they try to attack tonight."

It wasn't safe to walk around the forest at night, even with moonlight. That was even more true if it was your first time there. Especially since there wouldn't necessarily be a settled path of any kind, you might trip over a tree root, which could be fatal in battle.

"N-Now, about the quest fee..." the chief said hesitantly.

"You don't have to worry about that with us," Rurika said quickly. "Still, there are some adventurers who would leave you high and dry if you tried to stiff them on payment. We're risking our lives for this, you know? Even I'd turn you down under different conditions."

"O-Of course. Thank you..." the elder said.

There was no raid that night, but my Detect Presence skill did pick up a large number of creatures watching the village from a distance. Perhaps the goblins had learned of the new arrivals—us—and decided to be cautious.



The goblin hunt the next day was over in the blink of an eye.

We left the village, walked for two hours, and found the goblins clustered in a clearing in the middle of the forest. We'd also defeated a few on the way there, but these goblins were on another level of magnitude. It looked like there were at least twenty.

Chris kicked off the battle with a spell, and while I struggled to slay one goblin,

Rurika had already ripped through a group of them with her twinblades. Meanwhile, Chris eliminated a bunch with single-and area-target spells, clearing the battle easily. In the end, we'd taken out thirty-four, with five of those kills being mine.

Once I was sure the hunt had ended, I collapsed onto the ground. I hadn't even taken any damage that I knew of. It was like I'd just gone limp. My breathing was ragged, and my body was pouring sweat.

"Great job. Oh, hey, you're a little hurt. You okay?" Rurika asked.

I touched a hand to my temple in response and saw it was red with blood. It didn't hurt, so I hadn't noticed it. I didn't recall taking a hit, so it must have been a glancing blow. "It's just a scratch, so it should be okay. It doesn't even hurt."

"Really? Chris, bandage him up. Yeah, no need to use a potion."

Chris cast Cleanse on the wound to disinfect it, then wrapped it in a bandage. I was pretty sure I saw the fluffy white critter hovering over her shoulder. Had it followed us all the way here? Nobody else seemed to pay any attention to it, though, so I assumed they couldn't see it. Was it just my imagination that its eyes seemed sloped downward toward the outer edges, as if it were worried about me? Its movements seemed a bit flustered too.

I wanted to tell it that I was okay, but Chris was right there, so I couldn't say anything. It was time for...direct eye contact! I looked at it as if to reassure it I was okay. Our eyes did meet. But...sadly, it didn't have the effect I'd hoped for. *In fact, it backfired?!*

"Yeah, don't worry. Chris is great at first aid," Rurika said, and explained why she'd chosen to conserve our potions and have Chris bandage my wounds. She said it was better to let small wounds heal naturally than to use a potion. That might not be the case in an emergency, but since the fight was over anyway, it was okay to just let my body heal on its own. Besides, potions were really quite expensive—using one every time you beat up on some goblins would put you on the road to the poorhouse.

"Rurika's right. It's not a serious wound, anyway. It'll probably close by the time we get back to the capital."

The fluffy white critter looked relieved to hear Chris's words.

"Now let's recover the goblins' trophies and magistones, then burn the rest."

A goblin ear was their "trophy," the proof that you'd completed a hunt of them. However, they weren't salable materials, so it was typical to collect their magistones and burn the rest. If you just left the bodies of slain monsters sitting around, they could be reanimated as undead or attract other monsters into the region. Goblins weren't actually edible, which meant there wasn't much danger of their corpses attracting other monsters, but there was still the risk of them becoming undead, so you had to dispose of them no matter what.

We gathered the bodies in the center of the clearing and incinerated them with Chris's magic. After confirming that they were burnt through, we checked our surroundings, then returned to the village.

After we showed them the goblin trophies and gave our full report, the village chief thanked us profusely.

That night, we were invited to a celebratory banquet, where the villagers liberated from the goblin threat gave us their thanks as well. The children asked us how the goblin fight had gone, but the whole thing had been so chaotic I didn't really remember. Meanwhile, Rurika performed like a true actress, and though there were exaggerations here and there, the children's eyes shone with excitement as they listened. The adults laughed when they heard it as well.

"This food is delicious," Chris said in delight.

I looked over and did a double take. *Is that...bacon?* I appraised it and saw it was called something else, but it was definitely some kind of smoked pork. I took a bite and chewed it. It certainly tasted exactly like bacon. Obviously it was a little rougher than the kind from my world, but it was also perfectly delicious. Maybe it was just nostalgia at play, but that was how I felt.

As I was trying it out, the fluffy white critter floated up to me and stared at the bacon on the plate. It was interested, but it also seemed wary. Or was it dubious about the claims that it really was good? I kept an eye on the critter but decided not to push the issue just now. My first job was to learn more.

“E-Er, do you make this dish here?” I asked the chief’s wife.

“Yes, we make it for the whole village to use. It’s processed to last for several days, which is really helpful.”

You could eat the whole animal, but it might take days to get through it, even with all the villagers eating together. That was why they made it to stay fresh for many days.

“It’s not sold in cities?”

“Merchants occasionally come to buy it, but that’s all. Though it keeps for a few days, it doesn’t last as long as that—jerky, you called it?—of yours.”

It did seem like trying to carry it back to town ourselves would be pushing it. It was a long way, after all.

“Um, is something the matter?” The chief arrived just then, and when I asked him in detail about the bacon, he confirmed that it generally wasn’t treated as a product to be sold. “You really like it that much?” he asked. He turned his eyes to the pile of bacon on my plate...and then, suddenly, the bacon disappeared.

The chief was surprised, as were Chris and I. They were probably startled by the bacon disappearing, but my surprise came from seeing the fluffy white critter basically absorb it before my eyes.

I hesitated to say it had eaten it, because I couldn’t believe it could have taken in that huge pile of bacon with that tiny mouth. But after the bacon disappeared, I saw the critter’s body swelling and shrinking in a motion that resembled chewing, so it had clearly indeed eaten it. Its ears were also twitching in a way I interpreted as happiness.

As all eyes fell on the vanished bacon, the critter disappeared into thin air, as if panicked. I was the only one who could actually see it, so either it was running from my gaze or it was very sensitive to the thought of attention despite being functionally invisible.

“Oh, this is...” The chief stared for a moment in shock, then immediately fell into prayer, tears streaming from his eyes. As I was about to ask what had happened, all the villagers who’d heard what the chief had said turned to the plate the bacon had disappeared from and started praying as well.

According to village legend, it was either a trick of the fairies or an offering to a spirit. “It’s a thing to be celebrated,” he explained. An event like this would bring good fortune for a year, guaranteeing flourishing trees and strong and healthy livestock. “Today truly is a red-letter day!”

The chief’s excited words got the villagers even more worked up, and the banquet continued late into the night.

I woke up the next morning at the usual time and stopped by the chief’s house to ask the question I hadn’t been able to ask the night before. Chris came along, but Rurika was still asleep. She seemed to have stayed up late with the villagers, and so she was still snoozing away.

“Oh, Sora, Chris. What are you doing up at this hour?” A good night’s rest must have settled the chief down, because he was acting normally again.

“About last night. That, er...bacon. How do you make it?” I asked.

The chief offered to explain. I asked if it was a village secret, but he said not to worry about it. Our elimination of the goblin threat and the events of the night before probably played a big role in that decision.

The process he went on to describe was pretty similar to what I knew about making bacon. I asked him to show me the wood he used to make it, and he said he’d let me have some. I tried to pay for it, but he said not to worry because it was a common tree around these parts.

“Sora, what are you going to do with all that wood?”

Indeed, I had received several bundles of logs. Most people would assume I’d need a cart to carry all of them. I was realizing that I probably should have come by myself, but now it was too late. I decided it was best to come clean, and I told Chris about my newly acquired skill.

“I actually learned Dimension Spells,” I told her, provoking a very skeptical expression. *Ah, there she goes. She thinks I’m crazy.* “Um, the morning after we beat those goblins, the knowledge of Dimension Spells just popped into my brain.” I demonstrated by touching the wood and activating the Storage spell. The wood in front of me then disappeared, and “Firewood x1” appeared in the

spell's pop-up list.

"Wh-Whoa, you really learned Dimension Spells?" She looked extremely shocked by this. That was understandable, since she'd said it was rare.

"So, Chris, I'm sorry, but I'd like you to keep this as our secret. Though, of course, you can tell Rurika."

"Why is that? Dimension Spells is—"

"Yeah, I know. But I'm actually pretty weak. *Really* weak, in fact. So I think if high-level adventurers started inviting me along just because I could use dimension spells, I'd end up pretty far in over my head. Obviously there's no guarantee that anyone would invite me, but I want to build up my strength until I can properly live up to my ability that's in so much demand."

Chris seemed rather moved by my explanation, and she nodded in agreement.

I'd managed to string together an impressive-sounding sentiment, but that wasn't really why I wanted to keep it under wraps. I just didn't want to draw unnecessary attention. If the castle jerks heard that I could use an unusual skill, they might come after me again.

"Heh, then I hope you'll get strong very soon."

"I'll try my best. First, I need to at least get strong enough to beat goblins."

Chris grinned in amusement, which was so dazzling I couldn't look directly at it. *Not fair!*

"Ah, but all that aside, do those fairy and spirit things the chief mentioned really exist?" I asked. Chris seemed to know a lot, so I figured she'd be the one to ask. This seemed like a good chance to get at least a fragment of knowledge about what the critter was.

"Fairies and spirits are both believed to be real. Fairies look like humans with wings on their back. Some are larger or smaller than others. They can supposedly understand and speak human language, but I think the chief was right that they generally like to play pranks."

"I don't think I want to meet one of those." I could just imagine myself being

run ragged by a mischievous fairy.

“Probably not. Now, as for spirits, I don’t think they have a single standard form. They understand human language, but reportedly only a few can speak it. But I have heard that users of shamanistic magic can communicate telepathically. And...I believe elves share a particular affinity with them.”

Aha. So the critter is most likely a spirit, eh? It could also be some other, mysterious third thing, but of the two possibilities the chief had raised, it sounded a lot more like a spirit.

“You’re amazing, Chris. You know about so many things, not just magic.”

“O-Oh, well...”

It was just a basic compliment. Why’s she acting all flustered? “So I guess ordinary people like me can’t see spirits, huh?”

Chris paused. “Are you interested in spirits, Sora?”

“I dunno... If the chief was right about what he said, doesn’t it sound like a good omen? Hey, do you think that could have something to do with me learning Dimension Spells?” I asked with a slight show of excitement.

Chris winced and said, “Probably not.”

If I had received a skill because of the spirit’s blessing, it would be strange that I was the only one. And I knew that I’d actually just learned it with a skill point.

“Anyway, will we be able to head out today like we planned?”

“Oh, I’m sure we will. Rurika knows we have to get going, so she’s probably up already.”

We returned to find Rurika awake and already packed.

“Okay, let’s head back!” she declared. “They gave us some food for the road too.”

Chris and I looked at each other and laughed.

“Oh, right. You can cook, Sora?” Rurika asked around dinnertime that night.

I nodded. Obviously I couldn’t make anything too fancy, but I could handle

simple stuff as long as they didn't set their expectations too high.

"Want to help with prep tonight, then? Oh, but we'll need to test you first..."

She explained that they hadn't let me cook on the way because, out of the adventurers they'd teamed up with on their travels, they'd never met a man who could cook before. Nine times out of ten, they produced something utterly dreadful.

"It feels like it takes a special talent to make rations taste that bad."

"There were also a lot of people who said they'd just eat the rations straight." Rurika said that they probably tasted better that way, at least. But they weren't actually very tasty to begin with, so a lot of other people liked to mess with them and make them a little tastier. Rurika and Chris fell into the latter category. "But this meat tastes great if you just heat it up a bit," she continued, referring to the bacon. "It would be amazing to have it in our regular rations."

The bacon certainly was delicious with just a little light preparation. The problem was how quickly it would go bad. *If I were going on a long trip, and made it the day before, could I put it in a preservation bag and have it last? Maybe leveling up Dimension Spells would do the trick. Or maybe...*

"Hey, Chris," I theorized. "Is it possible to use water magic to freeze and preserve food?"

"Experienced users of water spells can freeze things, but it takes so much power that I don't think it would be worth it. Maybe if you had really excellent control..."

There were magic items in the world that acted sort of like refrigerators and freezers, but they were generally quite large and not very portable. Though it might be possible to make a portable one if you spent enough money...

It seemed like everything in this world required money...or alchemy. Would that skill let me make my own magic items? It would also allow me to make potions. I would definitely have to buy it once I got back.

And so, on the way back home, the girls gave me a passing grade on the food I'd made myself. I had made the excuse that I wasn't very used to it, and I wasn't as practiced as they were, so it did take me a lot longer. And the

taste...didn't seem bad. But we also ate the food that Chris had made as backup, so we ended up pretty stuffed.

Then, as planned, we returned to the capital on our third day of travel.

"Hey, are you okay?" The usual gatekeeper looked at me in surprise and concern as we entered the city.

"S-Sora. Are you all right?" Michal was the next person to show concern, when we went to the adventurers' guild to report the successful hunt.

I explained that although my head was bandaged up, the wound was closed and healing. Chris had also rewrapped it because she was worried about me, and I'd decided to leave the bandage there for my own purposes.

"They were a pretty tough enemy. I could have beaten one head-to-head, but it was really hard dealing with more than one at the same time," I said.

We reported that there were more goblins there than had been posted in the notice, and we handed over the trophies and magistones. Since there were no materials to sell, we squared up without having to visit the sales counter.

"Speaking of, what happened with that wulf pack?" Rurika asked.

Apparently, the wulf hunt had gone quite smoothly. As expected, there had been a unique individual leading the pack, and it was an advanced subtype. However, multiple parties of Rank B and C adventurers had proven more than a match for them. It was overkill, in fact, but the hunt location was close enough to the city that a lot of adventurers had been able to participate. They had extra motivation to do so as well, since having the south gate blocked off made it difficult to bring goods to and from the south.

But because the ecosystem of the forest might have been set off-balance by the wulfs, we were also told not to go too deep into the forest for a while. Obviously, we were warned to be careful when taking herb-gathering quests as well.

As we were leaving, we made sure to check if there were any new quests, then we split up to see if there was still room at our respective inns. Neither of us turned out to have any trouble in that regard.

The proprietress of my inn was surprised to see me come back with my head wrapped in bandages, but I explained that I had just done it for caution's sake. When I returned to my room, I removed the bandages and touched the wound, only to find that it was now fully closed.

The fluffy white critter—more properly, the spirit—flew around me for a while. Then, as if relieved, it settled into its usual place on my pillow, and fell still like it was sleeping.

As I watched it, I thought back on the battle with the goblins. During the fight with the wulfs, I had just swung my sword in a panic, and it was over before I knew it. But against the goblins, I had more successfully managed to keep my wits about me.

I clenched my fist. I could still feel the sensation of slicing through one of them. Obviously, I had defeated far fewer than Rurika and Chris, but I thought it was impressive that I'd managed to fight the monsters without flinching. The girls' presence had had a lot to do with that.

Still, I couldn't be satisfied with that. It was not only my first real monster battle, but also my first encounter with an entire group of them. Despite that fact, goblins were still the weakest creatures around. I couldn't afford to be struggling with them like this. I had already gotten injured and made the spirit worry about me, and sooner or later I wouldn't have Rurika and Chris helping me along. What would I do then?

I'd need to continue training to keep leveling up my skills such as Sword Arts, and I'd need to keep my cardio up to further raise my Walking level. And since all that walking would boost my stats, I needed to keep doing it to hone my basic skills and, most of all, gain more skill points.

I decided to see where I was currently at.

Skill: Walking Lv. 20

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 70002/130000

Skill Points: 8

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. 6] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 2] [Enhance Physique Lv. 6] [Regulate Mana Lv. 4] [Lifestyle Spells Lv. 4] [Detect Presence Lv. 6] [Sword Arts Lv. 4] [Dimension Spells Lv. 2] [Parallel Thinking Lv. 2] [Boost Recovery Lv. 2]

I wasn't quite sure if I should learn new skills yet, but since I'd just picked up three new ones, I decided to wait and see how things panned out. One reason for this was that, even if I learned new skills, I might not use them. The other was that even though I'd gained a level in Walking, the XP I needed to level up had gone up again. This time it had increased by twenty thousand.

But maybe I'd give in to the temptation and end up buying one...

Rurika had told me to take tomorrow off and start doing quests the day after, but I decided to go to the guild tomorrow for some more delivery quests.



I spent the entire next day on delivery jobs, then met up with Rurika and Chris the day after that to look for new quests. Rurika picked out hunting quests that looked friendly to beginners—always the kind you could handle with a day trip—and we executed them. Generally we'd take a day off between hunting quests, and I'd spend that time doing delivery quests. Rurika and Chris worried at first that I was overworking myself, but when they saw that I could still handle the hunting quests just as well as before, they decided to stop saying anything.

The spirit joined me whenever I took a delivery quest, and its reason for doing this was obvious. Eating the bacon in the village must have changed its opinion of food, because now that was the main thing it took interest in. I showed it one of Grey's skewers. It seemed to check the smell, and then one of the meat chunks vanished into thin air. I ate the rest myself, and as I found myself breathing the words "That's delicious" over the delicacy I hadn't had in a few

days, the spirit seemed to nod in agreement. The next time I offered it a skewer, it ate it without hesitation.

This occasionally led to minor trouble on Stall Street which people would blame on some kind of haunting, but the spirit had now become a true gourmand. I don't know if it really got hungry in the human sense of the word, but I loved seeing the way its eyes sparkled when it ate. Besides, food always tasted better with a companion.

The next thing I noticed about the spirit was that it really hated going near the castle. I would have avoided the castle if I could have, but sometimes I had to go in that direction for a quest. There were several times when it looked like it was going to try to stop me, but perhaps realizing it was pointless, it gave up and slunk back to the inn by itself. On days like that, the spirit would show an expression of relief and fly around me when I came back.

I ended up seeing many different monsters on our hunting quests. The large, bug-like ones sent a chill up my spine the first time I saw them. I really didn't like that, but I'd just have to get used to it. I knew I'd have to be able to handle these quests by myself someday.

Quests that involved hunting mammalian monsters tended to pay the best, as their pelts were quite prized. Some monsters had specific characteristics that made them harder to deal with, but they weren't that bad as long as you kept your cool. Many of them were also edible, so the most challenging part often was not the combat but the proper breaking down of their bodies afterward. Still, the sight of not just Rurika, but Chris working hard at this task made me redouble my efforts. I genuinely considered taking the Dissection Arts skill.

Sometimes I'd head out of town to pick some herbs, and my use of Appraisal let me bring in hauls so impressive that they shocked the adventurers. Obviously I wasn't going to tell them about my skill, so I lied and said I just had a good memory.

I'd found a roundabout way to ask Chris if a skill for appraising things existed. She explained with great excitement that it did, but it was very rare—even less common than Dimension Spells. *A more impressive skill than I'd previously assumed, then*, I thought. Chris went on to explain that people nowadays had

magic items they could use to figure out the qualities of various things, but they previously had to run just about everything past someone with the Appraisal skill.

As the girls and I continued to work together, the jealous gazes of the male adventurers gradually turned friendly and protective over time. Rurika's gentle instruction seemed to make me look more like a little brother than a romantic interest. Occasionally, one of the men even called out to me with a word of encouragement.

The various quests we took together filled my purse and raised my guild rank from E to D. Meanwhile, Rurika's and Chris's ranks increased to C.

But just as the time came for us to say goodbye, an idea came to me.



"Five days until we head out. Wanna rest, or should we take quests in the meantime?" Rurika asked, probably more to Chris than to me.

She was looking at an escort quest that called for ten days' travel one way and didn't require the quest-taker to have a wagon of their own. The destination was Fesis, a stopover city on the way to the capital. Originally they'd talked about leaving the kingdom once they'd reached their next rank, but maybe the idea was to take this job on the way to the Las Beastland.

Chris looked over at me thoughtfully. She must have just remembered that we'd decided to break up the party when they ranked up and took their next escort quest.

"Hey, Rurika. You think I could come along on your escort quest?" I asked.

Rurika and Chris both looked shocked by my proposal.

"I don't really know what escort quests involve, so I'd love you to walk me through one. Obviously I'll back off if you think I'd be holding you up or if the client wouldn't want me joining in."

"I told you before that we'll be heading on to the Las Beastland from there, so we wouldn't be able to go back with you. Is that okay?"

"Yeah. It looks like passenger wagons run between cities, so if worse comes to

worst I could tag along on one of those. And I figure other cities have other kinds of quests, right? I'd like to see what they're all about."

"Okay. I'll check and see if a three-person party would be all right. It seems to be a midsized caravan, so I bet they'll be recruiting a lot of people."

Michal looked genuinely worried when we brought her the escort quest sheet. The guild staff and adventurers all knew that Rurika and Chris intended to move on after their ranks increased, which meant I ended up having to repeat to her what I'd told Rurika and Chris earlier.

I told the proprietress of my inn about the escort quest, after which the girls and I met up with the client for more details. We then bought up the equipment we needed, and I used my free time leveling up with more delivery quests. You could never have too much money, after all.

"Speaking of, is it your first time here?"

My fourth delivery of the day ended up being somewhere I'd never gone before. I'd heard it wasn't a safe area, so I'd tried to avoid it in the past. I ran into someone I knew and asked him about the exact place, at which time he told me it was in the middle of the pleasure quarter. He then grinned at me in a particularly encouraging way.

C'mon, man... It's just a normal delivery, I thought. Still, the pleasure district—shops of the night. Though many of them apparently operated during the daytime as well.

I walked around, wide-eyed, looking for my destination, when suddenly someone tugged on my sleeve. I looked over and saw a familiar but unexpected face.

"Chris?"

"What are you doing here?" Her voice was a shade lower than usual.

I'd been using Detect Presence, but I'd been so distracted by my surroundings I hadn't noticed her. I hadn't been using Parallel Thinking either.

Normally I'd turn the question back on her, but it seemed like a bad idea in

this case. Her hood was pulled low over her eyes, but I still felt like she was glaring daggers at me. I knew I hadn't done anything wrong, but I still felt a chill down my spine...

"I-I'm here on a delivery quest. What are you doing here, Chris?" I answered honestly but stammered a bit. Her intimidating aura had made my mouth go dry.

"Looking for someone," she replied.

"Looking for someone?"

"Yes," she answered simply. "We'll draw too much attention here. Let's talk somewhere else."

"Erm, can it wait? I have to drop this off first..." I showed Chris the package in my hand as if to further protest my innocence. I started walking, and she followed me. *Seriously, it's a real delivery. I'm not going anywhere shady...*

I managed to complete my delivery safely, though I got an odd look from the person picking it up.

I'd only walked a short distance with Chris, but I was already exhausted. Tragically, though, it wasn't over. I had one more delivery to make. I got Chris's permission to finish that one, too, and thankfully, both the sender and the recipient for it were outside of the pleasure district area. The destination was also on the way back to my inn, so I managed to pick up the package and hand it over on the way.

"You've been doing this kind of thing all this time?" Chris asked me.

"You've never done a delivery quest?" I asked back.

"Yeah, in the city where we first registered with the guild, delivery quests were rare and popular."

In small cities with lots of newcomers, delivery quests apparently got snapped up quickly. By the same token, in large cities like the capital where you had a lot of adventurers leaving their homes to prove themselves, fewer people tended to go out of their way to take deliveries. Obviously, some people did take them, but the capital was so large that there was no way to keep up.

“They’ve been my saving grace, though I doubt I could make a living doing just those alone.” But I got along well enough thanks to my skill. Without it, I’d be lucky to take two or three a day, maybe five at most. And there’d be no way I could do them multiple days in a row without rest.

In a world without engines, the ability to walk without getting tired was exceptionally powerful, in a way. It wasn’t as if the average person could afford a horse or a wagon, and you couldn’t ride a horse around in a city anyway.

We made it back to Chris’s inn, met up with Rurika, then walked together to a building that reminded me a bit of a café. More precisely, Chris kind of dragged me there. The staff let us through to a back room that the girls seemed to have been to a few times before.

I was reminded that I hadn’t had a nice, quiet time in a coffee shop since first coming to this world. The room itself was a simple, wooden affair, but what I’d seen of the shop as we were walking through it suggested a quiet place full of flowers where it would be nice to spend an afternoon. It completely lacked the raucous air of the dining hall at my inn or the bar at the adventurers’ guild. It seemed popular among the local women.

“Okay, we’re all here. What’s going on?” Rurika asked us once we’d arrived.

“Oh...I ran into Chris in the pleasure district, and she kinda dragged me along?”

“The pleasure district? Chris, did you really go over there?” She gave Chris a rebuking gaze for a moment, then shook it off and patted her on the head magnanimously. “No, that’s okay. You explain then, Chris.”

“Okay,” Chris began. “Remember how we told you before that we were traveling between different lands, taking quests? That’s because we’re looking for our friends.” Chris stopped for a moment, took a drink of fruit juice, then continued. “When the Empire first invaded, our town was the first one they attacked. We were still young, so we were told to run away, and we didn’t know what to do. We all basically just ran off as fast as we could. Later, when we met up again, we found that some of our friends were there and some weren’t. So we’re looking for the friends we’re missing.”

“Back then, if they didn’t kill you, they’d take you as a slave,” Rurika picked up. “Basically a war trophy. And even after the ceasefire, most of the people who got taken then weren’t released. Only a few rich types. So we waited until we were old enough to become adventurers, and once we got good enough to go out on our own, our first stop was the Empire. Since we looked human, we had no problem getting around. But we didn’t find our friends there, so we came here to the Kingdom. Lots of slavers will travel around selling to other nations, and there’s a slave trader’s place near the red light district in the capital.”

“And that’s what you were doing there, Chris?”

“Yeah. We’ll be leaving this land soon, so I wanted to check one last time. I also asked for a favor.” She went on to explain that she’d bribed the clerk and asked them to contact her through the guild if they heard anything about the people she was looking for. Giving out that kind of info to a slaver meant they might rip you off when it came time to buy, but she clearly saw it as better than the alternative.

“Chris really likes you, Sora, so she wanted to stay with you a while longer. But we are trying to chase our own goal.”

“R-Rurika...” Chris blushed.

“C’mon, don’t be shy. Oh, and the people we’re looking for are a beastfolk and an elf.”

“Could I ask you a question, if it’s not too rude?” I asked. Listening to them talk had made me wonder something. “You seem to be assuming your friends are still alive, but do you have any proof that they are?” At the very least, they didn’t seem to think they were dead, or they wouldn’t be traveling the whole world searching for them. If I’d gotten separated from someone during a war, would I be able to convince myself they weren’t dead?

“Our talismans tell us,” Rurika said. “I almost didn’t believe it back then, but they tell us they’re alive. I couldn’t tell you how they work, but they do.”

“They’re called Spirit’s Talismans. Granny taught it to me.”

Apparently “Granny,” a woman named Morrigan, was a mysterious person

who'd taught them many things. Chris explained, with great fondness in her voice, that everything she knew about magic had come from her.

The girls held up two identical talismans and gazed at them lovingly. They also explained, with wry expressions, that she was a foulmouthed old woman who frequently lost her temper but dearly loved children and had protected them to the end. It sounded like a complicated relationship.

"I see. Do your friends have any defining features? Well, I guess they've gotten older since then, so you might not be able to describe them, but could you at least tell me their names? I plan on doing a lot of wandering myself, so I might run into them on my journey. Do they have the same talismans...or other things like that?"

"They might have talismans that are just like ours. It's an original design, so there should be only four of them in the world. They're a set," Rurika explained. She also told me the beastfolk's name was Sera and the elf's name was Eris.

I then asked a bit about each of them and heard more about the carefree beastfolk Sera and the older elf Eris, who was so reliable, like a big sister and leader to the group. The two girls spoke about the things they'd done together as if reliving pleasant memories while reminding themselves never to forget them.



Skill: Walking Lv. 24

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 38432/210000

Skill Points: 12

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. 7] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 2] [Enhance Physique Lv. 7] [Regulate Mana Lv. 5] [Lifestyle Spells Lv. 5] [Detect Presence Lv. 7] [Sword Arts Lv. 6] [Dimension

Spells Lv. 3] [Parallel Thinking Lv. 3] [Boost Recovery Lv. 2]

I checked back over my skills. I had plenty of skill points to spare, but I decided to keep Prevent Appraisal where it was for the moment. I didn't think I'd need new skills while we were together for the escort mission, but I'd want to start spending once I was by myself again, so I had to prepare.

My hope was to become a solo adventurer. I'd considered explaining the situation after the escort mission was over, then going along with Rurika and Chris. However, the growth of my Detect Presence skill had taught me a few things, and I'd come to the realization that it was too dangerous for me to go with them after all.

With that in mind, what should I do? I checked my list of available skills and made my decision.

NEW

[Hide Presence Lv. 1] [Alchemy Lv. 1]

Hide Presence let you mask your presence so that others couldn't detect you, though it might not work if the other person was more skilled than you.

Alchemy let you use materials to make items. You could expend MP to raise the quality of the item you produced. I'd learned it mainly to make potions, but you could also use it to craft knives, magic staves, lanterns, and such. You needed the right materials to do this, of course, but I liked the idea of traveling all around while searching for supplies. In fact, it lined up perfectly with my goals for the future.

I decided that was enough for the moment, then realized I'd forgotten one very important skill.

Cooking was the ability to whip up some ingredients into delicious food. It seemed to act kind of like an automated assistant. It wasn't suited for combat, and learning it wouldn't necessarily help me make money. *But...still...y'know...*

Wouldn't being able to cook delicious food for myself improve my quality of life? I couldn't tell myself no. Plus, learning it might be useful on the escort mission. Even if I couldn't help much during combat, knowing how to cook would help me contribute for sure.

I'd done some cooking in my old world, so I felt like I could handle it well enough on my own, but dealing with ingredients and seasonings still felt like too high of a wall to climb. I didn't know what many of the available ingredients tasted like, and I didn't necessarily have a wealth of spices available. Having an automated assistant in my head might help make up for that. Rurika had given me a passing grade in cooking, but I suspected she was being generous.

After thirty minutes of thinking it over, I decided to take it. It's not like I was going off to defeat the Demon King, and I wanted to survive in this world and have as much fun as I could. *Nothing wrong with taking skills that'll help me do that*, I reassured myself.

NEW

[Cooking Lv. 1]

Maybe I'd go gather some more herbs tomorrow to try out my Alchemy and Cooking skills.

The next day, I took an herb-gathering quest, then headed back to the forest where I'd gone my first time around. After picking enough herbs to satisfy the guild quest, I then started gathering herbs to use in alchemy. It might not go well the first time, though, and even if I made potions, I wasn't sure if I could sell them. I figured I could just use the potions on myself, but I also didn't really want to end up in a spot where I needed healing potions in the first place. Meanwhile, mana potions and stamina potions restored what you spent on skills, so I could imagine using those.

I stuffed some herbs for practice into my preservation bag, then used a decoy bag to stick the rest into my Storage spell (which I'd decided to call my Item Box). I thought this would prevent deterioration to some extent, but it would

probably still be best to use them ASAP. I'd split them up like that partially so I could see how quickly they deteriorated.

"Okay, let's eat." It was noon, so I decided to take a break and make some food. At my words, the spirit flew to me and watched me carefully at work.

I'd start with a simple soup. I used my hunting knife to cut up some meat and veggies I'd previously bought and boiled them. Then I added some spices while checking the taste each time until it was done.

I'd bought some pork, so I tried making bacon. I decided to put some wulf meat in the mix as well. I dug a hole and piled up a wall of earth around it, followed my Cooking skill's advice to prepare the two kinds of meat, then put one of the logs I'd gotten in the fire. *So I just have to keep the smoke from escaping, huh?* I thought as I went through the process.

"Not bad, huh?" I drank some of the soup once it was done, and I thought it tasted okay. Was this the effect of the Cooking skill? I looked over at the spirit and saw it gazing up at me in front of its now-empty dish. *You want seconds?* I thought. I poured more soup into the dish, and it put its mouth to it happily.

I thought it would be a while yet before the bacon was done, so I decided to try out Alchemy. I looked right, looked left, checked the area with Detect Presence...and got nothing in particular.

"Th-The time has come at last!" As the opportunity to test my alchemy finally arrived, the words left my lips unbidden, causing the spirit to snap awake. It seemed to have been taking a post-lunch nap. I felt bad about waking it.

First, I got my herbs together. You needed five to create a potion. I willed, *Make a potion*, and the herbs in my hand were wreathed in light. A moment later, they turned into a potion, bottle and all.

Potion: Heals wounds. Drink or apply topically.

Healing effect: Slight.

Quality: Poor.

That was what my appraisal of it said. The color seemed a bit more dilute than the ones sold in item shops.

I made a few more, eventually raising my level and producing one with the characteristics “Healing effect: Small. Quality: Poor.” I felt like the color was also a bit richer than my first attempt.

But how does it taste? My curiosity won out. I picked up the first potion I’d made and was about to drink it when I felt some eyes on me. I looked over and saw the spirit staring at me. Did it want some? But this wasn’t fruit juice...

Choosing to ignore its gaze, I put it to my mouth and drank. My face screwed up. “It’s bitter.” I held out the potion quietly to the spirit, and it turned its face away.

Okay, the thing to do here is just never get hurt, I thought, swearing an oath to myself to stay as healthy as possible. By the way, I tried the slightly richer-looking potion with the same quality but greater healing effect, and it didn’t taste quite as bad. Maybe the quality affected the taste.

Some time seemed to have gone by while I was making potions, as the smoked bacon was finally finished.

It had a nice smell, which seemed to attract the spirit. *Quite a change from a few minutes ago, huh?* I glared at it scoldingly, but it didn’t seem fazed in the slightest.

“Want some?” I asked.

It nodded eagerly.

“It’s my first time making it, though, so I can’t guarantee it’ll be good.”

It seemed to hesitate over this for a moment, then stared at me with great determination. *Well, if you want it that badly, I won’t deny you. Caveat emptor!* I broke off a bit of each kind of smoked meat and put it on a plate. For some reason, the spirit and I nodded to each other. *When we die, we die together! Or something like that?* We then tried the pork at the same time.

It wasn’t bad, though it definitely wasn’t up to the standards of the stuff from

Sy Village. I looked at the spirit, who seemed to be thinking about it. We ate the wulf meat too, and that was a little less good. Maybe it was just a matter of taste, but it seemed a little tough to me.

“Which is better?” I asked, and the spirit deftly pointed an ear at the wulf meat. *Definitely a matter of taste, then.*

After that, I cleaned up my testing site, gathered a few more herbs, and then returned to town while using Hide Presence. Hide Presence felt a bit like holding your breath and sneaking around, and using it all the time was quickly increasing my proficiency. I couldn’t activate it without focusing, though, so I was hoping to get to a point where I could use it more naturally.

After eating dinner at my inn, I returned to my room and further increased my Alchemy proficiency with the herbs I’d gathered. I really had to wonder how using a potion-making skill created a liquid in a bottle just from herbs alone. *Where did the bottle come from?* I wondered. But it was more convenient that way, so I decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth. There was a lot about skills I just couldn’t figure out.

Another thing I realized from making potions was that if I actively channeled more MP into each use of the skill, it improved the quality of the final product. *Oh, right, that was part of the skill’s explanatory text.* That text had also explained that the quality of the herbs themselves could affect the quality of the potion. If their quality was bad, then you could never make a high-quality potion no matter how many MP you used.

Once I’d finished checking my newly acquired skills, the next thing on my mind was jobs. Increasing the level of my Appraisal skill had let me read the explanatory text for the available jobs, what skills I needed to learn to acquire certain jobs, and so on. For instance, the Alchemist job apparently became available with Appraisal and Alchemy skills. But there were still parts of the explanation I couldn’t read, so I decided to wait until it was fully revealed to select a job.

I was hoping it was possible to change jobs whenever you wanted, but if it turned out you were stuck with whatever you chose first, I’d end up regretting

it later. Or was there a temple somewhere in this world where you could change jobs, like in a certain video game?



After concluding my adventures in alchemy, I did delivery quests for two days, until the day before the day we set out. We met up to do last checks on our luggage and talked about food for a while, and then I headed out of town to make some bacon. It took a lot of time since I had to prepare the meat first, but its taste seemed much improved from my first try at it.

Clients apparently tended to offer food on escort quests, but we could also bring our own. The main reason for this was that the clients generally didn't prepare as much food as the rough-and-tumble adventurers wanted.

"How long will this last? It's tasty, and I'd like to take as much as I can." Rurika took a bite and gave me a passing grade. She said Chris would probably also like it. The spirit was watching jealously, but it would have to hold off for now.

"I'd rather chill it, but I think I need to find out how long it lasts in both the preservation bag and the Item Box. I'll be able to tell if it's gone bad or not, so don't worry about that."

My Appraisal skill would tell me that much, after all.

Chapter 4

On the day of our departure, I had breakfast and said goodbye to the inn's proprietress.

"We'll miss you," she said.

Looking back, I'd stayed at that inn for over thirty days. "I'll be back, so I hope you'll look after me then."

"Of course. If we have room, come back again. *If* we have room!"

I left the inn, met up with Rurika and Chris, and headed with them to the meet-up point. There were no clocks in this world, but all the inns served breakfast at the same time, so if we all left after breakfast we'd end up there around the same time.

We'd left through the south gate for the goblin mission, but the Las Beastland was to the west, so we'd be meeting at the west gate today.

Speaking of, where's the spirit? I'd told it that I would be leaving the capital the night before and I wouldn't be back for a while. I thought it would tag along like it had with the goblin hunt, but it hadn't been there when I woke up.

We'd arrived a little before the rendezvous time, but the merchant caravan that hired us was already there waiting. We greeted the clients, met up with the other adventurers who made up the escort, and did our final checks.

There were five parties of adventurers participating. Three of them were Rank C, and the other two were Rank D. One of the latter parties announced that it was their first escort mission. None of the parties had worked together before.

I was told that the escort's leader ran a veteran adventuring party called the Goblin's Lament. He came in to say hello, and I was surprised when I saw him: it was Syphon! He looked just as startled to see me there.

When one of the Rank D adventurers asked about the origin of his party's

name, he answered with a distant, surrendering look in his eyes and said that a group of more experienced adventurers had given it to them in a partly teasing way when he was first starting out. My gut told me that I shouldn't ask why they called them that.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Sora. But I've been hearing things about you from the girls, so I thought you might come along. Have you officially formed a party together?"

"No. There was just a lot I wanted them to teach me before we went our separate ways, so I asked them to take me along. So we're just partying up until we reach the stopover city."

"Got it. Well, there's a first time for everything. I won't say it won't be dangerous, but if you do as the girls and I tell you, you should be fine." He patted me hard on the shoulder. A little too hard, maybe?

"Well, everyone, please take care of us." Darton, the caravan's leader, issued a command and got us rolling.

The seven wagons started up, moving in a single file line, with the adventurers in preassigned groups walking next to designated wagons. The road was technically wide enough for the wagons to run three in a row, but they had to move in a line to allow for passing in the other direction. The line could get very long when you had a lot of wagons together.

From the capital to our first stop, the city of Orca, the wagons would be stuffed full of cargo, so they would move slowly and we'd walk alongside them. Though our final destination was Fesis, the stopover city, the merchants naturally wanted to negotiate with any other cities they came across on the way. I couldn't really argue with their priorities.

Still, you didn't want the escort exhausted if trouble came up, so the less physical women and magic-users were allowed to take shifts riding on the coachman's benches next to the drivers. When this was first proposed, one of the rookies asked, "What about the men?" In response, Syphon laughed and told them to just tough it out.

Of course, we had fewer women than wagons, so technically anyone could

have sat down when a seat was open. The question was if any of the men would be brave enough to sit down while everyone else was watching them.

“Hey, why aren’t you sweating at all?”

“My feet hurt. I never thought it would be this hard to have to walk at someone else’s pace...”

While we were resting, the young adventurers looked at me in disbelief. My skill meant that I didn’t get tired, and the more I walked, the more experience I got. This job was actually fantastic for me, but I couldn’t actually say that, so I just advised them to take more delivery jobs.

Incidentally, we’d been assigned to the third wagon, and the lead one was being covered by the Goblin’s Lament.

Four days passed uneventfully on our journey, and we arrived at our first destination, Orca. The merchants planned to do some trading here, so we stayed for a night to get some rest. Another reason was that our escort mission was just about to get serious.

Orca was still relatively close to the capital, so any bandits or monsters that showed up there would be instantly hunted, meaning encounters were rare. The fact that we had made it this far without incident was proof of that.

“Hey, you gonna make some?” As I was leaving the inn, Syphon called out to me.

The last few days, I’d busted out the bacon during camp, and both the merchants and adventurers had sung my praises for it. Syphon had paid particular attention. *“You can carry things and cook? You ever wanna join my party? We’ve got a guy who’s good at giving fighting lessons, and I think you’ve got potential,”* he’d offered.

Delicious food really did increase the morale of a party. In particular, about the only fun adventurers had on days that were all about walking was sleeping and eating.

Today was supposed to be a rest day, but because Darton had asked me to make bacon, I had to go outside the city to cook it. I wished there’d been a

place where I could make it in town, but I still didn't know how to use the kitchens in this world, so I figured I could do a better job if I made it the usual way. It was also the only way I knew how to prepare it.

While I was making the bacon, a familiar white form flew into view.

"So you did come, huh?" The critter nodded, then stared hard at the meat I was smoking.



I wanted to ask how it got here, and it shot a glance to the top of one of the wagons. Apparently it had been sleeping on top of the canopy. *Nice work if you can get it, I guess*, I thought wryly. Naturally, it proceeded to eat some of my bacon with an expression that insisted *“I’m just tasting it!”* and looked very satisfied by the result.

The next day, we finished breakfast quickly and left as soon as the gate opened. The merchants had already sold many of the goods they’d bought in the capital, then used the cleared-up space to add some food and alcohol brewed in a nearby village. Even so, the load was lighter on the whole, so the wagons could move faster. It also opened up enough space for everyone to sit, so all the adventurers rode in the wagons from then on. They were no longer going slow enough for us to walk alongside them, after all.

Two to four adventurers were assigned to ride in each wagon, so it was me and the two girls in the third wagon to which we’d originally been assigned. One adventurer from each group in the odd-numbered wagons rode on top of the canopy to keep an eye on their surroundings. This was my first time riding in a wagon, so Rurika rode on the canopy for us first. She said riding in a wagon for the first time could lead to motion sickness, so I should let myself get used to it first.

Unlike cars in my world, the wagons really were a bumpy ride. There was no suspension, so you felt every rattle and rock straight into your bones. In other words, my butt really hurt. Boost Recovery took the pain away quickly, but then it would start to hurt again just moments later. *Will this increase my proficiency faster?* I wondered. It felt like an indulgent way to use it.

“Here’s our itinerary going forward. We’ll pass a few points near the forest that are frequented by monsters and bandits, so be careful.” That was Syphon’s warning, issued to us on the second day before we set out. It was directed especially at me and the other Rank D party members on their first escort job.

I got up on top of the canopy and looked around the area with Detect Presence running. We wouldn’t reach the first spot of interest for two days, but

that was no reason to let my guard down.

On the way, we had to pass another merchant caravan, which made for the most tense scene in the escort mission so far.

There were three wagons coming our way. Our wagons moved to the side of the road and stopped as we waited for them to pass. Two people rode on the lead coachman's bench. We assumed they were adventurers. No merchants in sight... Were they inside the carriage? In this world, bandits sometimes disguised themselves as traveling merchants to get close and attack, so merchants tended to stay on their guard while passing colleagues whom they didn't recognize. In particular, you sometimes had people riding in the back of wagons instead of merchandise.

Everyone was tense, but I was a little more relaxed. Detect Presence let me identify what was inside the wagons, but I didn't breathe a word about that and pretended to be on guard like the rest. I cast a glance at Rurika, and she looked relaxed as well.

The rest of the day went by without incident, and when the sun was on the horizon, we moved some distance off the road and prepared to set up camp. I decided to help out the merchants with the horses first, giving them food, water, and a light brushing and also using my Cleanse spell. They whinnied as if they enjoyed it and ate heartily. They'd surely give us a good day of walking tomorrow as well.

The spirit took that moment to pop up again and gazed jealously at the horses. I don't know whether it was envious about the brushing or the food, but I decided to offer it some bacon either way. I couldn't actually brush it, since I couldn't touch the thing.

I'd asked to look after the horses because I wanted to learn the basic ways to take care of them, to prepare for when I would ride horses for myself. My request was granted primarily because I could use lifestyle spells.

Once that was done, I joined Rurika and the others to help with the cooking. The best cooks among the merchants and adventurers met up and got through the cooking quickly. The other people were split into perimeter watch and

setting up tents. Everyone moved swiftly and efficiently—the faster we finished, after all, the longer we could rest.

For mealtime, we broke up into groups. Generally we ate with the merchants we shared a wagon with, but sometimes there were changes in the rotation. While eating, merchants and adventurers would swap stories of hard times, the cities they'd been to, their dreams for the future, and much more. It was fun to hear about so many new things.

"I think every adventurer wants to try a dungeon sometime."

"Yeah, I hear you. I wanna strike it rich there and buy me a slave."

"A slave?" I asked.

"Look...this is real life." His gaze became distant. "You're lucky, Sora. You get to be in a party with Rurika and Chris."

"Only until the stopover city," I asserted. They didn't seem to know about Rurika and Chris's situation, so I explained the basic circumstances, leaving out the details.

"I'd go with them, myself," the man said. "Even if I had to say goodbye to these guys!"

"You said it," chimed in another.

Didn't you guys say your party has been friends since childhood?

"Why not join our party, then?"

"Sounds great. We'd be legendary!"

I politely declined, though they did seem like a pretty fun group.

Once that was finished, we took shifts standing watch. The moons were out that night, so it was brighter than usual. I could also see the stars in the sky above. I could only think of hoary old sayings like "drowning in the sea of stars," but the awe I felt looking at it never got old. The city I'd come from wasn't that large, but I doubt I could have ever seen a sight like this there.

Hoping tomorrow would remain uneventful, I rested in the tent until my shift.



It had been four days since we left Orca. After our afternoon rest period ended, the wagons got moving. If all went as scheduled, we'd reach Stopover City Fesis in three days.

The journey had gone smoothly so far. *The calm before the storm?* I wondered. To our right was the forest, to our left was a rocky mountain. And deep in the forest was...

I gasped silently. Detect Presence had picked up a large number of pings that were too far away to see with the naked eye.

If I called out now, the group could prepare. But if they asked how I knew, I wouldn't know what to tell them. Saying I had a skill that let me know would probably lead to even more probing.

What to do? What should I do? The closer the pings got, the larger they became, and I found myself readying my weapon.

"Hey, what's with you? See something?" asked the merchant sitting next to me on the coachman's bench.

"No...it's just that we're getting close to the danger zone, so..." I said evasively.

The merchant laughed wryly, perhaps dismissing my concerns as the nerves of a first-timer. But hearing his laugh made me realize even more that what I was doing was wrong. The adventurers could probably protect themselves, but the merchants were largely defenseless.

There was definitely something there. I turned my eyes to the forest, scanned for presences again, and noticed that they were quite far back. They seemed to be moving, but they might not be moving toward us...

But though I tried to reassure myself, I still wasn't sure. I tried to weigh my own well-being against that of the others. I shut my eyes tightly, then opened them and looked back to the forest...

And then, it hit me. The white creature was floating in front of me, staring at me intently. There was a scolding tone to its sad-looking eyes.

One second passed, then two...and I made up my mind. It was a somewhat

roundabout method, but I'd have to try it.

"Rurika. I think I see something in the forest, but I can't be sure. Could you check for me?"

I decided to get Rurika's attention and have her confirm it for me. She'd said she had search-type skills, so she'd probably be able to do it. If she said she didn't sense anything, then I'd think about taking more drastic measures.

Fortunately, everything after that went very quickly. Rurika seemed to sense something right away and sounded her guard whistle, stopping all the wagons. After waiting for a while, we began to hear a commotion in the forest.

The wulfs burst through the trees all at once.

"Wulfs, eh?"

"Get your spells ready."

"Wait, there's something else... A tiger wulf?!"

It flew out of the forest behind the wulfs, a massive creature a few sizes bigger than the others. My eyes were immediately drawn to its huge fangs, which were larger than knives. But the real danger was its foreclaws, which looked like they could tear apart a solid shield.

It was still distant, but it was moving fast—fast enough to overtake the wulfs if it kept up its current speed.

The wulfs seemed to be on the run, with the tiger wulf in pursuit.

"What do we do?"

Syphon shouted out instructions. "Mages should get spells ready and unleash them once the wulfs get closer. Everyone else, prepare to counterattack. The Lament will handle the tiger wulf. The rest of you, take out any wulfs that slip through. And get the wagons in one place. We can't defend them if they're too spread out! We still have time, so keep your cool and move!" He made sure the Rank D adventurers kept especially far away from the tiger wulf. Said adventurers, probably recognizing their own inadequacy, did as they were told.

There were two Rank D parties, so one of them was instructed to guard the merchants.

Rurika gave instructions to Chris and me as she jumped down from the canvas. “We’ll hunt the wulfs with the others. We’ll separate them from the tiger wulf to make it easier for Syphon’s group to fight.”

But Syphon contradicted her. “No, I want you guys guarding the merchants. Please.”

Rurika looked unsure for a moment, but she did as her leader said and led us over to the merchants.

Spells activated and crashed down on the wulfs. The mages seemed to be using spells that prioritized speed, mainly of the wind and water varieties. In the meantime, we circled the wagons like we did during camp at night and gave the horses some calming herbs to keep them from stampeding. On Rurika’s orders, I climbed onto the canvas.

While the magic attack barrage made one of the wulfs hesitate in its flight, the tiger wulf caught up to it, opened its giant maw, and chomped down. Its sharp fangs penetrated the wulf’s body easily, sending up a spray of blood. The other wulfs let out a sound like a scream, abandoned their comrade, and split up in two directions to get away from the tiger wulf.

The Rank C adventurers reacted quickly. They moved to intercept the wulfs’ escape routes with predictive powers that bordered on precognition and attacked. *How did they close the distance that quickly?* I wondered.

Seeing this, the tiger wulf let out a howling cry of dominance, seeming to interpret the situation as a theft of its prey. But before it could leap out, a spell landed. It was followed by a second, then a third, each one coming in with slightly staggered timing. But the tiger wulf dodged them all easily. These spells prioritized activation speed over power, designed to keep the monster’s movements in check. While this happened, Syphon finally closed the distance and attacked the tiger wulf.

The tiger wulf, which had been focused on lithely dodging spells, dove at Syphon as he drew in close, sharp claws at the ready. With shield raised, an adventurer leaped in to swap places with Syphon and block the attack. I guessed he was a shield specialist, because he wielded it with two hands and didn’t carry a weapon. No, that wasn’t right... It was more like he had equipped

just his shield for the purpose of defending against the tiger wulf attacks. But he also sometimes hit the creature with the shield to draw its attention.

While the tiger wulf was staggered, Syphon and his party rushed in to land a blow. Blood sprayed out, but perhaps it was just a flesh wound, because the tiger wulf didn't slow down. In fact, the injury just seemed to rile it up more.

In the meantime, the remaining adventurers went after the wulfs. The Rank C adventurers had no trouble with them at all, and they took them in rapid succession. One of the Rank D adventurer parties let a wulf slip through their ranks, though, and it charged at us. I wasn't sure if it was trying to escape the tiger wulf or selecting easy prey to try to vent the stress of being pursued, but it charged at us as if it instinctively recognized noncombatants.

While the merchants screamed, Rurika interposed herself and her swords flashed. She cut the wulf down in a single blow. But that wasn't the only wulf that had slipped through. To make matters worse, the merchants' screaming created a moment's distraction, during which the tiger wulf shoved off the shield-wielder, slipped through the defensive line, and ran toward us.

I'd gotten down from the canvas right as things started getting out of control. The tiger wulf was heading toward me, Rurika, and Chris. Syphon and the others quickly moved to pursue, trying to slow it down with ranged attacks like spells and arrows, but the tiger wulf wasn't deterred—if anything, the attacks seemed to enrage it further.

If I could have sensed the tiger wulf's emotional state at the moment, I'm sure it would have been glee. Its expression was twisted in sheer bloodthirsty malice. Chris tried to drive it off, but it seemed to anticipate her spells and dodged, dodged, dodged.

"Chris, get back!" Rurika shouted, her swords trembling in her hands. Then the tiger wulf, having reached melee combat range, leaped at Rurika.

Before it could reach her, though, I swung my sword at the tiger wulf's extended foreleg and knocked it off course.

"S-Sora!"

"Get back, Rurika. Your weapon is a bad match for it!"

My ambush, powered by Hide Presence, had been a success, but its claws had blocked the slash the second I made contact. The tiger wulf growled in displeasure and charged at me, using intricate footwork and incorporating feints. It was so fast I could barely keep up. I gritted my teeth to try to endure each blow against my sword. By using Parallel Thinking to its fullest, I could monitor even the tiger wulf's slightest movements to keep it at bay.

Meanwhile, I could see the form of Syphon growing closer out of the corner of my eye. *Gotta hold out a little longer... Just a little longer!* I thought, focusing fully on my defense...but then the strength suddenly drained from my body. My parallel consciousness looked at my status screen and saw that my SP had gone down to zero.

The stalemate collapsed. The tiger wulf's attack landed. I was thrown backward, unable to lighten the blow.

I had just barely managed to interpose my sword to keep the hit from being fatal, but my cloak was torn to shreds and I felt pain blossoming all through my body. I was thrown onto the ground, unable to move at all, like my body was no longer my own. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Chris saying something, but I couldn't hear her. More pressing, though, was the way the tiger wulf continued moving toward us.

What a sad end to my story...

Just keeping my eyes open was painful at this point. But just before the end, something came into view. *That fluffy critter...is it trying to protect me?* As my consciousness faded away, the last thing I heard was the high-pitched keening of metal.

◇Rurika's Perspective

We hadn't expected it at all.

The tiger wulf had broken free of the Goblin's Lament shield-wielder, then woven through all subsequent attacks to charge straight at us. The merchants had screamed when they saw it coming, as had the rookie adventurers. I was

feeling a little cowed myself, but I bit my tongue and held firm. Chris tried to keep it at bay with her magic, but the creature was undaunted, lithely dodging through her spells to continue on its beeline toward us.

Just being locked in the tiger wulf's gaze as it bounded closer had completely immobilized me. It was like I was frozen. But I had Chris behind me, and I needed to protect her no matter what. That was what I'd told myself on that day.

"Chris, get back!" I shouted as I readied myself. Buy as much time as I could and wait for Lament's members to arrive—that was all I could do right now.

Yet I was still paralyzed as the tiger wulf reared up to strike, even though I knew it was coming. But just as I was thinking it was all over...someone deflected the strike and moved in front of me protectively.

"S-Sora!"

Yes, it was Sora. Just a little while ago, he'd been so clumsy with his sword that he'd gotten injured just fighting with goblins. Yet now, as I stood there helplessly, it was Sora who placed himself at the fore, telling me to get back. It felt infinitely reassuring to have him in front of me...but I couldn't rest easy. Sora wasn't fighting just any monster. This was a tiger wulf.

Yet despite my worries, Sora was fighting well. He wasn't just rushing in and making himself vulnerable. He was focused on defense, on buying time. He seemed to be keeping calm, just as I'd told him to do.

Beside me, I heard a loud gulp. I looked around and saw Chris watching the fight worriedly. She probably couldn't support him with spells while he was fighting in such close quarters, so all she could do was stare. The way she was clutching her staff told me exactly what she was thinking.

"It's okay. Almost there..." I whispered to her.

Beyond Sora, I could see Syphon growing ever nearer, as he ran to the rescue. But just as I reassured Chris, I saw Sora stumble. The tiger wulf didn't miss the opening for a second.

Sora fell over, red blood arcing through the air. Chris screamed and took a step toward the fallen Sora. I called to stop her, then readied my swords to

protect her behind me. I felt like the tiger wulf cast a glance back at me. The next instant, it jumped...but we were saved again. One of the Lament's members, Gytz, leaped in and blocked the attack with his shield.

The tiger wulf leaped again and Gytz knocked it away with a counter, right into the spot where Syphon and his team were waiting. One blow chained into another, piling on the damage. The tiger wulf, seemingly cowed, flew back...exactly where another Rank C adventurer who'd just defeated a wulf was standing. They didn't attack, though; they just added to the ring around the tiger wulf.

It looked uneasily around, then let out another intimidating howl, turned back while its opponents were reeling, and knocked back the Rank C adventurer to run into the forest.

All I could do was stand there and stare, but the sound of Chris crying and wailing snapped me back to reality. Sora was on the ground, bleeding. I pulled out a healing potion and applied it to the wound. The bleeding stopped and the wound began closing, but it felt like it was healing slower than usual.

Then a priest adventurer ran up and cast a healing spell. A second later, Sora's body was wreathed in light, and his labored breathing subsided.

Amazing. I've never seen such powerful healing magic before. Well...not since Granny, anyway...

For some reason, though, the priest looked surprised about it.

"How's Sora doing, miss?" Syphon ran up and quickly checked his condition.

"He looks okay, but he's unconscious and probably will stay that way for some time. Let's lay him down in a wagon for a while." With the help of his party, Syphon got Sora into a wagon. He then checked the condition of the other adventurers and began discussing something with Darton.

Their conclusion—they'd set the caravan into full flight for as long as the horses held out.

The tiger wulf was still out there, after all. They'd wounded it and gotten it to retreat, but it would remain an unpredictable element as long as it was alive. Most of all, Syphon said, just seeing a tiger wulf come out this far into the open

was a problem in itself. It would be best to get out of this area as soon as possible.

Obviously, the others agreed. The image of the tiger wulf was burned into all of our brains. I trembled just thinking back on it myself. I'd seen many strong monsters in my life, but this was the first time one had gotten so close to me. I'd never felt so intimidated and terrified before.

"You okay, Rurika?"

"Of course I am. Are you okay, Chris?" I was playing tough. I wasn't okay at all, but my desire to be strong for her outweighed the truth.

"Yeah, thanks to you and Sora."

"Great. I'm gonna stand watch up on the canopy for a while longer. You look after Sora, Chris." I saw her nod quietly, then climbed by myself to the top of the canopy.

I felt relieved, but also a little pathetic. *I'll never be able to protect Chris at this rate. And...*

I shook my head to clear those thoughts out. *You can kick yourself later. Right now, just do what you can.*

I slapped my cheeks to get myself back on track, then went back to scanning the area with my search skills.

◇Chris's Perspective

You only start regretting things after it's too late to go back, and this was a prime example. If only I'd made up my mind earlier and put it into practice, maybe things would have turned out differently. But I couldn't do it. I was too afraid of being seen.

It was Sora who saved us. He was bleeding, and his ragged breaths seemed like they might stop any minute.

Seeing that he'd ignored Rurika's warnings, I went up to Sora. A spirit was looking at him worriedly—the same spirit that was always flying around him. It

seemed desperate to help him somehow, but it couldn't. It was probably still young and didn't know what to do. Of course, I was the same way.

I couldn't help but cry out. Tears streaked down my cheeks. When she heard me, Rurika took out a potion and applied it to Sora. It was the most obvious thing in the world, yet I'd failed to do it myself.

Then, an adventurer who could cast holy spells came by and cast Heal on Sora. As if in response, the spirit's body let out a flash, seeming to amplify the spell's effect many times over.

After that, Sora was loaded into the wagon, and we went on the move. I felt relieved seeing him stable and still breathing.

A mysterious person—that had been my impression when I first met Sora. The thing that most surprised me was that he had a spirit following him around. He didn't seem aware of it himself, but spirits didn't take to humans for no reason—I still remembered Granny Morrigan telling us that.

People like us were the only exception. Obviously we couldn't fully relay thoughts between us, but I thought I might have come far enough that I could at least talk with it a bit. I was wrong. I was still not capable of real communication. I'm sure Eris could have done it easily, of course, but...

I steeled up my nerves and asked my friend to help interpret between me and the little one. It was surprised at first, but little by little it told me what was going on, including some things I didn't really understand.

"I see. That's why you want to be with him?"

The little one nodded. It just cared about Sora. It had been alone for a very long time when it got interested in Sora, who had been the first one to notice it.

That's where things had started. It told me that it had decided it wanted to be with Sora more often after watching him for a while. That it worried when he was hurt. That it had eaten delicious things. But that it was frustrated because it couldn't tell him the things it wanted to.

"If you made a contract, you might be able to communicate better. But..."

The lifespans of humans and spirits...they were just too different, I explained.

We could spend some time together, but a human would die so much sooner than the little one seemed to realize. For spirits, which basically lived forever, it always felt like the acquaintance didn't last long.

"Ah. But you don't mind that?" I murmured.

It seemed very determined indeed. Or perhaps it still didn't understand what I meant. Either way, there was only one thing I could do for it.

I couldn't tell Sora myself. That was the rule. So I decided to tell the little one, via my friend, just how it was done.

To be honest, it might be difficult for the little one in its current state. But unless it could do it, it would never be able to walk alongside Sora.

Ah, but there was still one thing I could do to help it. It might have been a bit underhanded, but maybe it would be okay? I discussed it with my friend. They fretted about it for a bit, then agreed.

While I was talking to my friend and the little one, I saw Sora grimace in pain. Soon after, he awoke.



"Where am I?" My voice was hoarse enough that my first words didn't sound like my own, and even saying them was exhausting. I tried to move, but I couldn't. It felt like an anchor was resting on my chest. It was as if my body didn't belong to me.

The first thing I saw when I forced open my eyelids was the critter. It was perched on my chest, looking at me anxiously. The next thing I saw was Chris, and I noticed how her expression turned relieved as I opened my eyes.

I felt slight vibrations under my back...the movement of the wagon? When I turned my head slightly to the side, I also saw piles of merchandise.

"Are you okay?" Chris asked. I nodded and tried to sit up, but I couldn't. I coughed. Chris helped raise me up, then offered me a cup she'd filled with water using a lifestyle spell.

I'd been a little suspicious of this kind of thing at first, but now I didn't hesitate to drink it. I knew that it was safer and better tasting than most water.

I took a gulp and felt cool refreshment flow through my body. Suddenly remembering my status window, I called it up and checked it. Both my HP and SP were dangerously low. My HP, especially, was hovering in the low twenties. Despite my Boost Recovery skill, it was refilling very sluggishly, even though my SP had aggressively recovered in that time...

“Sora, do you remember what happened?” Chris asked me.

The memories came flooding back. The tiger wulf had been about to attack Rurika, so I’d stood between them and swung my sword in desperation.

“What happened to the tiger wulf?” I asked.

“We couldn’t defeat it, but we did drive it off.”

“Oh, Chris. Is Sora up?” I heard the old driver speaking to her. “I wish I could stop the wagons and let you get some real rest, but try to hang in there a while longer,” he said apologetically. Chris explained the reason.

“You pushed yourself too hard. We were really worried.”

The critter nodded in agreement with Chris’s words.

I hadn’t meant to worry them, but my body had moved before I could think. If you asked me why I did it, I don’t think I could tell you.

“You look a little pale, so please rest for now.” I regretted that I couldn’t help with the escort mission, but I decided to just do as I was told.

It wasn’t like I could move properly anyway, so even if I tried to stand watch, I’d just make trouble. Once I was lying down, I immediately felt tired again and closed my eyes. I thought I heard Chris talking to me, but I couldn’t remember what she said.

The next time I woke up was during the day, when the wagon had stopped. My body no longer felt heavy. I could move. I checked my stats and saw that my HP was fully restored.

I got out of the wagon and looked around. Syphon noticed immediately and walked up to me. “Hey, your color is looking better... Okay, I think you’re good,” he said, checking my condition and then patting me hard on the back.

I was thinking about how that “pat” actually kind of hurt when I heard a sharp clunk. A female adventurer in a wide-brimmed, cone-shaped hat and black cape—I think her name was Juno?—had gotten up behind Syphon, and was holding her staff in her hand with a smile. Syphon pressed a hand to his head, turned around, and opened his mouth to complain, then froze when he saw who it was.

“Is that any way to treat a boy who’s just recovering? Why don’t we talk about a few things over there?” She dragged Syphon away by the ear. He sent me a pleading glance, but there was nothing I could do to help him.

“How are you feeling, Sora?” Chris asked.

“O-Oh. I think I’m back to normal.” For a second, I thought she looked a lot like Juno, but it must have been my imagination.

“Well, well, Sora. Are you feeling better now?”

The next person to speak to me was Darton. I apologized to him for resting instead of helping to guard the wagons.

“Not at all. You put your life on the line protecting us already.” He was actually grateful to me. If I hadn’t stayed on that tiger wulf, it might have attacked the merchants behind me instead. But it had honestly been Rurika and Chris I was thinking about, not the clients...so I felt a bit embarrassed about that particular statement.

“You slept for two whole days after that. You should also thank Geque.” Rurika pointed to the priest, Geque, who was currently eating with the others. Adventurers who could use the Heal spell were even rarer than mages, so he was considered a very precious resource.

I just happened to meet Geque’s eyes as I looked over, so I bowed to him. He seemed to wave it off as nothing, then resumed conversing with his party.

Our break time ended and we resumed travel, but I felt like the wagons were moving a bit slow. I was told that they’d overtaxed themselves escaping from the ambush site, but they were out of danger now. Continuing to drive the horses too hard would ruin them, so they were going to proceed at this pace.

It was slower than we'd originally planned, but they said they'd bought up extra rations in case something like this happened, so it should be fine. We'd definitely make it to the city on the day they were set to make their trades.

"Hey, you mind if I walk along?" I asked the driver. He looked a little surprised and hesitant in response, so I said, "I've been sleeping a long time, so I want to check if I'm still in shape." He then said it was all right, so I jumped down from the wagon and started walking.

Feeling my feet on the ground for the first time in a while felt strangely reassuring. The spirit came to check on me in concern but saw that I was walking the way I usually did. Seeming relieved, it vanished again to wherever it went. I looked back around and saw that the forest from which the tiger wulf had come was on the horizon, looking very small now.

A few other adventurers were walking like me, for the same reason. I thought they might get worried about me if I walked for too long, so after ten thousand steps, I got back in the wagon.

The next night, we arrived safely in Stopover City Fesis, albeit a bit later than expected.

Chapter 5

“Oh, you’re awake.” I opened my eyes to find an old man—ah, no, it was Syphon—looking over at me.

Because we’d arrived in the city fairly late at night, we hadn’t been able to secure enough rooms for everyone. They’d prioritized finding private rooms for the girls, so the men had ended up all crammed together wherever they’d fit.

“You slept well?”

“I’m okay.”

“Sorry to take the bed. I think normally we’d let you have it, since you’re recovering from a nasty wound.”

“Just getting to rest inside a real room was enough. And I’m already feeling just about better.”

Yeah. There hadn’t been enough rooms, so I’d put a tarp on the floor and slept there. We normally wouldn’t be allowed to do that, but the innkeeper was a friend of Darton’s, so they’d given us special permission just for today.

We ate breakfast in the dining hall in shifts. Then we said goodbye to each other, and the adventurers went to the adventurers’ guild while the merchants went to the merchants’ guild. We had officially completed our quest.

I handed the escort confirmation sheet over at the guild and received my reward. Apparently they’d just left the wulfs we’d killed where they were because they wanted to move on quickly.

“So I guess we break up here. We’ll report to the guild about the tiger wulf. If we get a chance, let’s work together again.” At Syphon’s words, the parties went their separate ways.

First, I asked the guild for an inn recommendation and confirmed that I could stay there. The place where we’d slept the night before had some open rooms as well, but it was a bit on the pricey side. Even if I did have to stay there

eventually, I'd have liked to keep the price as low as possible.

The inn they introduced us to cost two coppers per night. I paid to reserve a room for ten days, while Rurika and Chris paid for five. It was a simple room, like the one I'd gotten in the capital, with no space going to waste. It was actually kind of nice and chill.

When I sat down on the bed and looked at the pillow, I suddenly remembered the spirit. I hadn't seen it since I'd gotten well enough to walk again. Recalling its relieved expression the last time I saw it, I could feel deeply how worried it had been about me.

I wonder what it's up to now... It was such an elusive creature, and this was the first time I'd felt frustrated that I couldn't contact it when I wanted to.

I had walked for a while, though, so I decided to check on my stats a bit. Focusing on my current situation made for a good distraction.

Skill: Walking Lv. 26

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 8204/250000

Skill Points: 11

I'd been traveling for at least ten days, but I'd spent over half of that time riding in a wagon, so I hadn't been able to level up as much as I could have. Of course, the increased experience requirement affected that as well.

Still, if something like that happened again, it might be dangerous to walk around alone. Maybe I'd walk on the safer roads and catch a wagon ride on the more dangerous ones?

While I was thinking it over, I heard a knock on my door. I opened it to find Rurika and Chris standing there.

"We were going to take today off. Did you have any plans?"

"As long as I'm here, I'll see what kind of jobs the guild has to offer. This place

isn't as big as the capital, but it's still a pretty major trading city. Since I'm planning to stay for a while, I'd like to gather some info."

"Um, in that case, could I come with you to the guild?" Chris asked.

"I don't mind, but are you sure?" I'd meant the question to show my concern, but she told me she was more worried about me.

I looked at Rurika, and she told me to go for it.

I returned to the guild with Chris and asked the staff for information about the city and its surroundings. I spent about an hour inquiring about monsters and materials like healing herbs. I also looked into their library, but it wasn't as big as the one in the capital and had fewer reference books.

I then spent some time looking at the message board and checking what quests they had posted.

"What will you do next, Sora?"

"I think I'll take quests in this city for a while. It's pretty far from the capital, and I'd like to see the sights while I'm here."

"See the sights, huh? I'm a little jealous."

"Well, you've got a mission, so you've got to focus on that. I hope you finish it soon, though."

"Yeah..."

"If you do find those friends of yours, introduce them to me."

"What?" Chris looked at me in shock, as if she hadn't expected to hear that.

"When you do, I'll tell them how much I owe you."

"R-Right..."

"Wow, big towns sure have a lot of delivery and odd job requests. Maybe I'll take another of those."

"You like them, huh, Sora?"

"It's safest in town. I know some people think they're hard, but walking is the one thing I can always handle."

We'd been talking so much I was starting to feel a little bashful. I saw that Chris's face, poking out of its hood, had turned a little red, and there was a strange energy in the way she spoke to me.

"Are you going to head back now, Chris? I was gonna walk around town on quests for a while."

Just then, Syphon, who'd sneaked up behind us, said in a teasing tone, "Wow, a date already? Gosh, how nice to be young!"

At those words, Chris flushed a deeper shade of red, and another loud clunk rang out. Some people never learned.

"I'm sorry. I really am," Juno said with a sigh in her voice. "How did that discussion turn out?" she then asked Syphon, who was cradling the back of his head.

"They'll probably form a search party. Well, they call it a search party, but it's probably more like a hunting party. We'll most likely end up joining in."

"When are they setting out?"

"They apparently have to talk it over, but probably in about ten days? Unfortunately, a lot of adventurers who would normally take the job are out of town right now. And from the way that thing fought, it could be mutating."

Rank C adventurers were allowed to take on tiger wulf hunt quests, but it was standard for them to prepare in advance. Typically, they'd set traps or cast spells before heading out on the hunt to create an environment their quarry couldn't escape from. You could incur penalties if you failed to slay your target after taking on a hunt quest, but tiger wulfs could make the disturbingly coolheaded decision to flee if they were in danger. The random encounter we'd had, too, resulted in it retreating when it understood it was at a disadvantage—without letting us realize it was going to do so, at that.

Because they couldn't prepare a hunting party right away, the only thing to do now was send a warning to the capital. They were apparently going to dispatch a similar one to Orca.

"How did you know it was mutating?"

“Hmm, it’s hard to explain. It just seemed a little different from a normal one. Argo said he thought it might be evolving, but I don’t really know a lot about it.”

“You mean it’s turning into an advanced subtype?”

“I’m not sure...” He trailed off, then changed the subject. “Will you be staying in town for a while, Sora?”

“That’s the plan. I was thinking about earning a bit of money before I go back to the capital.”

“I see. We’ll be here for a while as well. If you have some free time, how about we train you a bit?”

I had heard that their shield-wielder was a great teacher. And I’d probably be on my own for a while, so I should probably get serious about learning how to protect myself. Not that I was expecting to be able to train all day and all night...

“Is it all right if I do it between quests?”

“Yeah, we might be out on hunting quests for a while ourselves, but I expect we’ll mostly be in town.”

Under those conditions, I agreed to it.

After that, I parted ways with Chris and took on a delivery quest. While walking around town on deliveries, I learned the locations of the other guilds, weapon and armor shops, and other important buildings. I’d be spending at least the next ten days here, so it would be worthwhile to find out where everything was.

Stopover City Fesis was also called a trading city, and it prospered as one of the most important cities in the Kingdom of Elesia. Because there was a mine nearby, ore was an especially prominent commodity for trade. The village had been founded because of the nearby mine, and people apparently worked there as well. Monsters sometimes appeared in the mines, though not as often as in the dungeons.

“Where do monsters in mines come from?” I wondered aloud at dinner with Rurika and Chris. I’d heard that dungeon monsters spawned in dungeons, but I

was curious how the ones in mines got in there.

“I don’t know the details myself.”

“I once heard that monsters were born from mana pools.”

“Mana pools?”

“Like places where mana concentrates. They say the mana pool phenomenon isn’t very well understood, though. Some famous scholar or other thought that it’s based on the phases of the moons.”

“Ah, I think it was that researcher from the Magic Nation of Eva. Did you take a quest in the mine, Sora?”

“No. I just heard there were sometimes hunt quests there. I think I’d like to go if I have a chance at some point, though.”

“Hmm, we’ve never been inside a dungeon or a mine, so we can’t speak to the experience, but there are so many restrictions on them that it can be dangerous if you aren’t careful. It’d probably be better to go with a party.”

“A party, huh? There’s no one I want to party up with yet, so I’ll probably stick to gathering herbs for now. I’m pretty good at finding them, surprisingly enough.”

“That’s probably for the best. You’re great at gathering herbs, Sora.” Chris complimented me unreservedly, while Rurika frowned as she thought back on our time doing gathering quests together. She’d been surprised when she saw my aptitude for it. I had to admit that using Appraisal felt a bit like cheating, but it certainly was reliable.

“Ah, and Chris told me something. Did Syphon and his group really offer to train you?”

“Yeah, he said he’d be at the arena in the guild when they weren’t off on hunts.”

“I see. Well...we’d like to get in on that too. I was thinking of putting off our departure a bit so that we could.” I asked for more details, and it seemed Rurika was also interested in getting more training. Monsters didn’t exactly take your growth schedule into account, she explained, and there was no telling when

one might appear in front of her that she wasn't ready for. "So, since we have the chance, I'd like to get some training. And I hear Gytz is an amazing teacher."

Chris nodded in enthusiastic agreement.

"I see. Maybe I'll go there tomorrow as well, then. I'll take the gathering quest the next day."

We went to the arena together the next day, and there were already quite a few people there.

"Hey, ladies. You came along with Sora?" Syphon asked.

"I'd like to learn a thing or two from Gytz," Rurika said.

He rubbed the back of his head awkwardly at that. "Ah, he's actually got too many offers already. Gytz is pretty popular." Indeed, there was already an adventurer fighting with him. "Not that that's anything new...but we did work together on that escort, so I'll make sure he gives you priority. He's not available right this moment, though, so how about sparring with me for a while?"

We each started with a mock duel against Syphon.

"You really surprised me there," he told me after we were done. "I can see how you got to the level of parrying a tiger wulf's attack in such a short time. But don't be too straightforward in a fight. Throw in a few more feints and you might land a blow on me."

I'd fought my best, but it had still ended in a loss. It was definitely frustrating, since I really thought I'd improved a little.

"Now, miss, you move fast, so your attacks are tricky to deal with," Syphon continued. "But your blows lack power, so they don't feel that threatening to me. So you're fine while you're outspeeding your opponent, but you'll be vulnerable when you don't have that option."

Rurika looked down in frustration. Seeing this, some of the male adventurers threw a few jeers in Syphon's direction.

"First, build up your stamina," he resumed, regardless. "You've got good

potential, and it probably hasn't taken you too long to defeat an opponent before. So I suspect you'll most likely be vulnerable in a prolonged conflict. Oh, and make sure to go to Gytz for more detailed advice."

"Thanks. Fighting with people better than me helps me understand my current level, and I appreciate that." Rurika, who was listening quietly, thanked him with a smile and walked up to me. "Man, he really is strong. I can totally tell how weak I still am."

"I thought you put up a great fight," I said.

I honestly thought so, but she denied it. "It just looked that way. I think he could've ended the fight a lot sooner if he'd wanted. He was taking his time to make sure I realized all my weak points." If she said that was the case, she was probably right.

We then fought with other opponents for a while, until our turn to duel Gytz came around. I won about thirty percent of my matches in that time, while Rurika won seventy percent. My wins were in duels with adventurers of Rank D or lower. I often had strength and speed on par with my opponents, maybe even greater, but I frequently lost when it came to the actual act of crossing blades. It was a gap born of real-life experience.

My mock duel with Gytz afterward wasn't flashy, but it felt like a good experience. In the end, I didn't manage to land a single solid strike, but after the duel was over he gave me some advice. He told me what I was doing well and what I was doing poorly, all in easy-to-understand ways. *I can understand why he's popular*, I mused.

"You've got good power. More than most at your level, I'd say. Just get enough experience to learn how your technique should be applied and I think you'll become a solid attacker."

My technique was probably increasing along with my skill level, but I needed more experience to use it effectively. The balance wasn't right. Someone could easily make sport out of me. So once my experience did catch up, I'd probably do well enough. In the meantime, I had a few tricks up my sleeve. Parallel Thinking helped close the gap a bit, but I could only use it until my SP ran out, so it would be dangerous to rely on it too much.

“Like Syphon said, Rurika, it’d be best if you focus on strength and stamina,” Gytz continued. “You should try to wield longer swords if possible. Chris, you should try to learn a bare minimum of self-defense techniques. If it’s just going to be the two of you for a while, you might want to trade in your staff for a sturdier one.”

The girls both took the feedback to heart. I didn’t know how the staff influenced spell power, but if they were going to be traveling alone together, it probably would be good for them to equip themselves with a focus on defense.

“That’s enough for today. We might be taking quests tomorrow, so I can’t be sure, but we can train some more if I have some free time,” Syphon said, and all the participating adventurers nodded. We thanked him for his help and headed back to our inn for the day.

I mentioned that I’d ended up with quite a few bumps and scrapes for my trouble, and Rurika said that she had as well.

“Sora, what do you want to do tomorrow?” she asked.

“I was planning on doing the gathering quest I took.”

“I see. I’m gonna take half the day off, then head to the arena. Gytz said he’d be in town tomorrow as well. What’ll you do, Chris?”

Chris said she wanted to come along on my gathering quest. “It looks like the selling price for healing herbs has gone up a bit due to the tiger wulf hunt.” She said she’d need money for new equipment, so she was going to take a few quests to earn what she needed.

After we’d finished making our plans, Rurika left her in my hands.

The next morning, Chris and I left the city together and headed for a nearby prairie. It was the nearest gathering spot to the town and just two hours away on foot, but few people went there. The reason was simple: the herbs grew in the middle of a vast grassland, so they were hard to find.

“You really want to gather herbs *here*?” Even Chris could hardly believe it.

I walked around, looking for a fertile patch. A common feature of healing herbs was that if you found one, it frequently wasn’t alone. I spotted one with

Appraisal and discovered quite a few more around it. “I bet there’s a lot growing in this area.”

Chris followed my gaze curiously. “You’re right. How’d you know that?”

“Well, I have pretty good eyesight. I can probably find more if I look around. You want to focus on this spot, Chris?”

“Sure. I’ll search here,” Chris said after a moment’s hesitation.

“I’ll check around the area a little more, then.” Here I parted ways with Chris and embarked on my own gathering. In addition to the healing herbs, the place was filled with mana and vigor herbs as well. Mana herbs always fetched a high price, and from what I’d seen looking at price listings, vigor herbs tended to go for a bit more than healing ones.

My plan on this occasion was to collect what I needed to fulfill the quest and use any leftovers for making potions. The potions would be a going-away present to Rurika and Chris when we parted ways, and increasing my Alchemy proficiency would let me create something else I wanted to make.

I looked around me with Appraisal activated. Words popped up in speech balloons, displaying the names of each kind of grass.

I collected healing, mana, and vigor herbs in order of priority. There was a lot of new growth here, so I didn’t hesitate to take all the mature ones I found. My previous experience using Alchemy led me to pay great attention to the herbs’ freshness so that I didn’t end up with an Item Box full of dud potions. Even then, the relative obscurity of the spot meant that I never seemed to run out of good herbs to collect.

Ah, but would it be suspicious if I only turned in high-quality herbs? I wondered. Maybe I should mix in some low-quality ones as well...

I stuffed the herbs for the quest into my preservation bag and the rest into my Item Box. Since I’d been using Dimension Spells for the whole journey, the skill level had already risen to Lv. 4. The higher my level, the longer the things in the Item Box lasted. Or maybe the passage of time itself slowed there?

Appraisal was the skill I used most, but I also occasionally used Parallel Thinking to activate Detect Presence and Hide Presence so I could increase my

proficiency in those. These gains were minimal, but every little bit helped.

Once I'd collected a sufficient number of herbs, I'd have liked to use Alchemy to create potions and make use of my MP as well, but leveling up Detect Presence had made one thing clear: it was possible for people with skills similar to Hide Presence to not ping that ability. Originally, Rurika had only vaguely triggered my Detect Presence skill even when we were close by, but the more my level in that skill ticked up, the more clearly I'd begun to detect her. I intuited that my Detect Presence level had either caught up to or surpassed the level of Rurika's hiding skill.

Having this knowledge inclined me to avoiding using my most impressive skills—the ones that would be obvious even to a distant observer—while in public view. Especially at a time like this, when I was in a place with lots of spots where an observer might hide.

Chris and I met up briefly for lunch, then got back to herb gathering. We'd both worked up quite a sweat, so I cast Cleanse on her. *Why did that make her blush?* I wondered.

We timed our work to end early enough that we would make it back to the city before nightfall.

"When are you guys gonna start prepping for your journey?" I asked Chris.

"Rurika says she wants to do it soon. The price of potions and such might go up when the hunting party forms. But we'll wait until right before we leave to buy food, since it spoils."

"In that case, could I ask you not to buy any potions?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, I learned a skill I'd like to try. I just discovered it when I woke up after the tiger wulf battle, so I don't know how well it'll go...but I'll show you at the inn tonight."

Chris looked at me dubiously, but she nodded.

After returning to the city together, we reported in at the guild. Even though I

left quite a lot of herbs in my Item Box, I still turned in over twice as many herbs as Chris did, which surprised everyone. Then we ate dinner and met up in a room. My room was a very small single, so we were getting together in Rurika and Chris's, which left me feeling a bit nervous—even though it was seemingly just a larger version of my room from what I could tell.

“Chris filled me in. What's up?” Rurika asked.

“The skill I learned is Alchemy.”

“Alchemy? Can you even make gold?!”

“That's not how it works, Rurika,” Chris put in.

“J-Just kidding, of course.” Rurika tried to laugh it off, but I think she might really have meant it. Chris just glanced sidelong at her, wearily.

“Anyway, it would be quicker to show you, so let me try it.” I pulled herbs from my Item Box and started making healing potions. This time, I used healing herbs and vigor herbs to create healing and stamina potions until my MP ran out. Mana herbs were expensive, so I'd decided not to make mana potions until my Alchemy skill level was a bit higher.

Each time I'd used Alchemy, I'd watched how much my proficiency ticked up, and I'd realized something—the materials you used affected it. Or maybe, more accurately, the item you were making did.

There were many kinds of items you could create with Alchemy. When you activated it, a list of things you could create appeared in your mind and told you what materials you needed. If I then used Appraisal on that list, I'd see a detailed explanation of what level I needed to be and information on the materials I needed. If you didn't have the materials, you could still try to create it, and if you thought “create,” you'd still use the skill, but it would always fail and just consume your MP. It would also fail if you weren't yet at the appropriate level.

Even with the level minimums, you could still make a healing potion at Alchemy Lv. 1, but the quality would be worse at Lv. 1 than at Lv. 2. The quality of materials also mattered, but to make sure higher-quality materials became higher-quality products, your Alchemy level needed to be more than the

minimum.

“Wow, it really is a potion...” Rurika took the bottle and checked it out from various angles. “Hey, hey, this potion’s quality is pretty high, isn’t it?”

“Really? I think it should be pretty average...” I confirmed this with Appraisal, which told me “Healing Effect: Medium; Quality: Normal,” so it seemed about the same as the potions you could buy in item shops. Maybe the color did seem a bit richer? “Anyway, these are the healing and stamina potions I’ve made. What do you think?”

Rurika looked down at the thirty healing potions and ten stamina ones I’d laid out in front of her. “Um, what do I think of what?”

“I mean, is this enough?”

“These are for us?”

“Yeah, should I make more?”

They were both shocked by my words. “Well, um, these would cost a big chunk of money, you know? You’re just *giving* them to us?” Rurika asked.

“Sure, why not?”

“Come on, there’s no way we can take all this. Under no circumstances!”

“Yeah. You could make a lot of money selling these,” Chris added.

I told them it was a token of my gratitude, but they kept turning me down. As I was thinking about what to say next, my eyes fell on a certain item on the alchemy creation list I’d called up. “In that case, would you accept them as a reward for helping me with something?”

I told them my terms, and they agreed.

“But Rurika, aren’t you going training tomorrow?” I asked.

“Nah, Gytz and his crew are heading out on a hunt, and he said they’ll be gone for three days.” It seemed dicey to do that just before the tiger wulf hunt, but apparently he’d said he wanted to keep his monster-fighting instincts sharp.

“So can you help me out tomorrow?” I confirmed. “Oh, but it’ll be longer than a day trip, so what should we do about the inn?”

“Let’s talk to the proprietress. Worst case, we’ll keep our room, so if you can’t find one when we get back you can stay with us, okay?”

I’d been openly shaken by similar words before, but I had grown since then... Actually, I had learned that if I got flustered, Rurika would just tease me. *Keep it neutral, man!* I told myself.

“I’d be very grateful,” I said plainly.

But it was all a trap in the end, because Chris blushed hard in response to my words, I got openly shaken by that, and Rurika ended up teasing me anyway.

I guess I still have a lot more to learn!

The next morning we talked to the proprietress, and she said we could keep the rooms as long as we were coming right back to reclaim them. It was much appreciated.

“So we’re okay going to the mine, but what’s your goal there? It doesn’t seem like you’ve taken a monster-hunting quest.”

“I want a kind of ore you can get there. I asked a few questions on our first day here and they said you could pay an entry fee and mine stuff yourself, so I wanted to get that experience.”

“And we’re like insurance if monsters show up?”

“Something like that. And this may be a little selfish of me, but I also just wanted us to have one last adventure together.” While I was checking out the mine, I also wanted to find out if Appraisal could be useful in mining. I could buy anything I couldn’t mine for myself, and the mining town was a full day’s walk away, which just sweetened the pot for me.

To get to the mining town, you left the city through the south gate. As you went along you’d encounter places where the road branched off to the east, but if you just kept going straight you’d reach a road uphill, which you’d take up until you reached the mining city Alessa. When we arrived there, it really did look like a city carrying the mountain on its back.

“Just in time. If Sora hadn’t been carrying our things, it definitely would’ve

gotten dark before we reached the city,” Rurika said as we arrived.

The trip might indeed have been tough for just the two of them. A long walk up a gentle slope could deplete your stamina before you realized it, enough that we had to take several breaks even after eating lunch.

“Still, Sora, you never seem to get tired, even after all that walking.”

“It must be my skill. It doesn’t seem useful at all in combat, though.”

“Still, I’m a little jealous. My stamina is awful,” Chris lamented.

“Yeah. It sounds like a great skill for people who have to travel all around, like us,” Rurika added.

These things really were subjective, it seemed. A trash skill to those who’d summoned me was a valuable skill to those who needed it.

Upon entering the city, we were asked a lot of questions about why we had come. Perhaps women were a rare sight here. I told the gatekeeper that the girls were my escort, but he looked at Chris and her staff and asked us to refrain from using magic in the mines. *Magic is a powerful force, it’s true.* I trembled a little remembering how Chris had used it to blow away goblins.

There were fewer miners at the inn than there had been during the mine’s heyday, so we managed to get a room. “There’s less to take from the mine every year,” the proprietress told us. “They’re all off testing new areas to extract ore from.”

We stayed overnight, then went to the mine office in the morning for permission to enter the mine.

The mine office was host to lots of lightly dressed, burly men, so Chris pulled her hood deep over her face. Rurika also seemed a bit put off by all the sweat and grime.

“My, my. A group of adventurers, here to do a little mining?”

“The mining itself is only one reason we’re here. We mainly just want to see what it’s like in there.”

“Yes, I’d say you’re definitely not suited to be a miner... Ah, you said you want

to rent tools? Feel free to pick whatever you like from these boxes. Oh, but don't blame me if the one you pick is broken!"

From the speech pattern, you might think we were talking to a woman, but the receptionist was actually a man. Chris looked like she'd pass out if we stayed for too long, so I wanted to move quickly. Rurika clearly hadn't met someone like this before either, and she seemed a little flustered about it as well.

Still, we did have to pick up tools. There were pickaxes, hammers, and other things strewn around. I wasn't sure how to judge these things, but I could at least confirm their condition with Appraisal, so I picked the best one I could find compared to the others.

"My, you're surprisingly strong," the receptionist said.

"I do try to work out. And if it breaks while we're using it, do we have to pay for it?"

"Don't worry about that. Oh, but do bring back the pieces. We wouldn't want to clutter up the mine for everyone else."

A pretty lax operation, isn't it? I thought skeptically.

There were lights placed at regular intervals in the mine, with photoluminescent rocks glowing in the dark space between. Of course, these gave off less light than a lamp, so there were still many places that couldn't quite be seen.

I was walking in the lead, followed by Chris, then Rurika. There were signs that the path had been reinforced in places, which made me a bit nervous. The path was also quite rocky, which hurt my feet as I walked.

"Are you okay?" Chris asked, perhaps worried because I was walking a little strangely.

Rurika checked out my boots and said in a rather scolding tone, "Sora, your soles are completely worn down. These might still be okay on roads and in the city, but it's going to be hard for you here. And even if it's all right in the city and on the main roads, an adventurer should be more careful with their equipment."

Perhaps as a side effect of my Walking skill, I hadn't noticed anything off until now. Once I got back to town, I'd ask for advice again. I'd broken in these boots enough that I'd rather repair them if I could, though.

"There's no one here," I mused, after walking for a while without running into anyone at all. I did sometimes hear the regular *clink, clink, clink* of mining, so I had to assume there were people somewhere nearby. But the echo stopped me from pinpointing exactly where they were.

"They may be further in. They've probably picked these shallow areas clean," Chris said.

Chris was probably right; I used Appraisal all around the path we were on and it only displayed rocks. Which did mean I could appraise them, at least...

"Another fork in the road?" *How many have we been through already?* But each branching path had a number written on it, so at least we probably wouldn't get lost.

"Hmm?"

"What's wrong, Sora?"

"Oh, nothing..." While I was wondering which way to go, the spirit had suddenly appeared and headed down the path to the right. When I paused, it stopped, looked back at me meaningfully, then turned back to keep going as if it were telling me to follow it.

Thinking back, this was the first time I'd seen it since I got injured in the fight with the tiger wulf. I didn't have any clear destination in mind, anyway, so I decided I might as well follow it.

"Okay, let's try this way." I marched after the spirit until we reached a dead end.

"You want to rest here?" Rurika tapped a few times on the rock wall of our final destination.

In response to her question, I took out my pickaxe. "Get some distance, you two. I'm going to try digging here. Keep an eye out around us." I'd chosen the wall to my right a little before a dead end. I was picking something up there. At

first I couldn't see anything with Appraisal, but the moment I leveled up I could read it, faintly.

The surface still read entirely as "Rock," so I started by shaving it away with the pickaxe. Perhaps because we were in a confined space, the sound of the pickaxe's strikes was louder than I expected it to be. I gritted my teeth and kept digging until the sound suddenly changed.

The next thing I knew, I could see a red substance poking out from the uniformly gray wall. I swapped my pickaxe out for a hammer and began to strike all around it. The clanging and banging echoed out around me until I cleared the surrounding rocks, and the ore within gradually came into view. I didn't know exactly how to extract it, so—left with no other choice and being careful to damage it as little as possible—I shaved around the spot where it met the rock until it effectively slipped out of the wall.

I quickly reached out to catch it and found it to be lighter than I'd expected. Given its size, I'd thought it would be heavy, but I barely felt it at all.

"Do you know what this is?" I asked the girls. They responded in the negative.

I could tell the name with Appraisal, but I didn't know what it was worth. It wasn't an ore, but a magic crystal. I was still picking up other similar readings within the wall—both crystal ore and more magic crystals.

"You mind if I dig a little longer?" I asked.

"We have time, so sure. And that definitely doesn't look like an ordinary rock."

"Well, I hope it's valuable." I did know that these magic crystals were a necessary component in the next item I wanted to make with alchemy, so I wanted as many as I could get. If I got enough, I could probably sell the extras and use that money to buy the other ore I needed for the items I planned to create.

We paced the day according to the clocks in our stomachs, doing just a little more mining after lunch and then leaving.

"Looks like you got quite a few?" Rurika asked.

“Yeah, it’s weird. They’re not heavy at all.” My pack was stuffed with its load, but it was all actually a lot lighter than it looked. *What a strange mineral.*

“My, back already, are we?” asked the receptionist as we returned to the mine office.

“The sound was kind of bothering me, and my pack was already stuffed.” I’d also been feeling claustrophobic, but I decided not to admit to that one.

“I can see that! So, what did you get?”

“I don’t think they’re rocks. I don’t know what they are,” I said, and got a wince for my troubles.

“You didn’t do any research before you went? How irresponsible...” He shot me a dazzling smile, which was more unsettling than anything.

I did as I was told and pulled the ore I’d excavated out of my pack, then laid it down on the table. The receptionist’s face twitched and he stopped me. “Now, wait just a moment here. Where did you get this from?”

“I believe I turned at the path marked ‘No. 6’ and mined it from the dead end there,” I explained, thinking back over the course we’d taken. Chris nodded in agreement.

“Impossible! But... Really, you got it from there?” The receptionist quickly pulled out a map for me to confirm.

I thought back on the path I’d taken and traced it along the map. *Yeah, no question about it.*

“Wh-What are you going to do with it all?”

“I didn’t actually get the ore I wanted, so I was hoping I could sell these to buy it.”

“What *did* you want?”

“Steel ore, iron ore, and magic ore.”

“I see. Well, we can buy your magic crystals and crystal ore here, then sell those ores to you with the money you get from these. Don’t worry, I’ll make an offer that’s *more* than fair.”

Don't wink at me!

"Sora, I think we can trust him," Chris said, unfazed despite being subjected to that very same sight.

I glanced at her and she gave me a firm nod. I didn't know what she was basing it on, but she seemed quite confident. She probably had a better eye for people than I did thanks to her years of traveling experience.

"Okay. Let's carry on," I said.

"We'll do it, then. I love a good, forthright boy. Ah, but how much of the kinds of ore you requested do you want?"

I gave him a number and he checked his stock. What I sold ended up being worth more than what I wanted, so the rest was paid to me in cash. *Ten golds seems like an awful lot, huh?*

The receptionist seemed to pick up on my look of surprise and said, "That's just how precious the things you found were, child. They may be more common in other lands, but the delivery fees really add up, after all." Then he added, "Oh, and you'll get a finder's fee as well. If we manage to extract a large amount of crystal ore from the area you mentioned, we'll send you a reward if you give me your contact information."

We each handed over our guild cards.

"We're all adventurers, are we? We'll send your money to the guild after we check."

"E-Er, Sora was really the one who found it..." Rurika began.

"None of that, dear. If someone offers you money, take it. You'd prefer that as well, wouldn't you?" he asked me.

He may be a little odd-looking, but he really is a good person, very kind and considerate.

"No falling in love with me now, okay?" he added.

I take it back. He definitely has a lot of objectionable qualities too.

We stayed the night and then headed home. Rurika asked if it was really okay for them to take part of the reward, and I said it was fine.

“Besides, there’s no way to know if they’ll really find ore there. We shouldn’t set our hopes too high.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right,” she agreed.

“More importantly, we’d probably better start walking faster,” Chris suddenly interrupted. “I think it might rain.”

Since coming to this world, I’d seen clouds in the sky, but I’d never once seen it rain. I looked up to check, and the sky was clear...but Rurika said that if Chris was worried, it meant we’d better hurry.

I walked as fast as I could, keeping just under a run for the sake of Chris’s stamina. My XP was still going up, so even at this pace I was apparently considered to be walking. *Nice!*

Then, as we approached the city, the sky suddenly grew dark and cloudy. Clouds in this world seemed to sometimes appear out of nowhere. The current set of clouds was a dark gray, almost black, and felt heavy and oppressive.

“Whoa, you weren’t kidding, Chris. Sora, you should wear your hood.”

At Rurika’s words, I put my hood on, and not a moment later the rain began to pour.

“We’re almost there... Can you run?” Rurika asked Chris. I couldn’t see her face because of the hood, but I could tell Chris had nodded.

I felt bad about it, but I decided to follow her lead. Even in a world of magic, getting drenched could possibly make you sick. I hadn’t gotten sick so far, but that didn’t mean I never would.

We entered the city and headed right for the inn. Before going inside, I used Lifestyle Magic to dry our soaked cloaks and clothing. It was an application of the Cleanse spell you could use by pouring a little extra mana into it.

“Hey, you made it back. I got worried when I saw it was starting to rain,” the proprietress said.

“Ah, ma’am, is there...?”

“Yes, we’ve got an open room for you, don’t worry. Or is that a disappointment?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that one. I felt like any answer I could give would make things more awkward, so I settled on just smiling at her vaguely.

We decided to get some warm food and go right to bed. Running at full tilt for the first time in a while had taken its toll. It was odd, since my stats suggested my physical abilities had significantly increased.

The rain stopped the next day. I heard there’d been wulf sightings in a small forest a half day’s walk away, so we took the relevant hunting quest and headed for the forest in question.

There were seven wulfs in all, but with three of us there, we didn’t have any trouble taking them down. I asked the girls to let me have all the wulfs’ magistones. When they asked why, I answered honestly—to use in alchemy.

“Are you guys heading to the arena?” I asked the next morning. They said that that was the plan, since Gytz would be there today and tomorrow.

“What’ll you be doing, Sora?” Rurika asked me.

“I was thinking I’d take an herb-gathering quest today. I saw it was up again when we checked in yesterday. I’ll hit up the arena tomorrow.”

I did the gathering quest by myself that day, and after I got what I needed for it, I focused on picking up mana herbs. I could have gone straight back, but as long as I was on my own, I decided to cook for the spirit as thanks for its assistance in the mine.

The meal this time was wulf meat steak and soup with lots of veggies. Coming to the stopover city had taught me that monster meat was cheaper in some cities than others.

“Guess this’ll be our last day with you ladies, eh?” Syphon asked when I joined the girls in the arena the next day. He offered to spar with us before our bout with Gytz, so Rurika and I had our mock battles with him first.

“You’re stronger and faster than you were the first time we fought. Keep up

the effort and you'll be able to go toe to toe with a tiger wulf soon enough." Gytz's words inspired a cry of surprise from the adventurers around us, but the unspoken implication was that I still wasn't good enough to beat a tiger wulf. What would I do if I ran into one again, then? I had two ideas. One came from alchemy, and the other was...

While I was thinking, I felt a slap on my back. "Hey, now, I'm actually surprised. You've come a long way since I first fought you in the capital. Your swordplay, your strength, your speed. It's all shot up. Honestly, I'd love to know your secret."

The only possibility was the stat increase I'd gotten through Walking. I didn't know how much of an effect the increases had, and I couldn't check since I didn't know other people's stat values, but at least it felt worthwhile to raise them. Which meant the key right now was to keep doggedly getting more walking under my belt. At the very least, the steps and distance I walked wouldn't betray me.

My last day with Rurika and Chris was spent preparing for their trip. There was a transport wagon to the Las Beastland, so they planned to start by taking it to the next town over.

I had the condition of my clothing and boots checked at an armor shop, got repairs done, and also bought some spares. One part of it was a result of my recent windfall, and the other was because I'd never run out of room as long as I had my Item Box.

At the weapon shop, I bought a spare sword and stocked up on throwing knives. Rurika was dithering over whether or not to buy a new weapon, but she gave up on the idea in the end. The beastland put a lot of emphasis on fighting prowess, and she mentioned that she could probably find a good weapon there too.

"Depending on who's in charge, things work quite differently in those parts," the weapons shop owner said with a strained smile.

That night, we got a slightly more lavish meal from the inn's proprietress, then headed to their room. I'd made a bunch of healing and stamina potions

yesterday to increase my Alchemy level, so here I quickly used the skill to create mana potions.

“Are these mana potions?” Chris asked me.

“Yeah, aren’t you gonna have to use a lot more magic on your trip? So I thought you might need some.”

“R-Right, but...”

“We still don’t have any money to pay you. Wait, you’re not asking us to pay...*that* way?!” Rurika asked in exaggerated shock.

I certainly hadn’t expected to hear that phrase in this world. Chris even turned bright red as if she took it seriously.

“Um, I didn’t just do it for you guys. I did it for me too,” I said. They looked at me in confusion. “Chris, I think you know what I’m getting at. The level...or, well, quality of your spells increases the more you use them. In order to make something I want to make, I have to use Alchemy over and over to get better at it.”

“I don’t really get it. Do you, Chris?”

“Yeah, I think I do.”

“So what’s the thing you wanted to make?”

“Actually, I’m going to make it now.”

I took the magic ore, magic crystals, and wulf magistones from my Item Box and divided them into five piles. I looked again at the list of items I could create with Alchemy.

While checking the items I could make with Alchemy, I’d happened upon a group of items at the bottom of the list that had a “NEW” label beside them. I used Appraisal on those items, and the description that popped up said “Items that have never been created before.” The items didn’t have names, but I could see their effects and the materials required to make them.

For instance, one had the effect “Allows contact with distant people.” *Like a smartphone?* I’d wondered. *Maybe it lets you do something like call and text.* But the “required materials” to make it included magic ore, magic crystals,

mithril, high-quality magistones, and a lot of mana, so it was hard to form a picture of it.

While looking at the NEW items, I also realized that they functioned similarly to things from my world. Were they based on my knowledge, my memories? I couldn't help but think that was the case.

When I appraised the term "high-quality magistones," the explanation read, "Magistones taken from high-level monsters or from fusing multiple magistones." I looked through the list, searching for something.

I didn't have the items or Alchemy level to make the communication item, but this other item only required a minimum Alchemy level of 5, and I was currently at that very level. It was an item with the effect "Learn the location of another person." The materials needed were magic ore, magic crystals, and magistones. The higher the quality of the magistones used, the more durable it would be, meaning it could be used more often.

"I think this should work, but let's try it." I started up the usual process.

Failure. Create. Failure. Create. Failure. I failed three times, causing three of the piles of materials in front of me to disappear with nothing to show for it.

Eh? Does it have a lower chance of success than a normal item? Or are the conditions different than they are for potions and stuff? I'd readied spares just in case, but I hadn't really expected to fail three times in a row. I'd thought that, at worst, I'd end up with multiple copies that had different durability and usage numbers. I didn't have enough items to run another test. *I guess I should have kept more of that ore...*

Something inside told me that I should be able to do it, though. The only option I had left was to channel more mana during the creation process.

I took a deep breath and concentrated. *It's okay to fail this time*, I told myself. Still, this would be my second-to-last chance, and I wanted to succeed.

I willed the item to be created while channeling a large amount of mana into it. But instead of the image from the list, I imagined a transmitter and receiver like the kind I knew from my world.

The pile of materials lit up so brightly that I was forced to close my eyes, but I

made sure to keep channeling mana into it. The light eventually faded, and a pair of items lay there in place of the materials.

“What’s this? An accessory?”

“It’s basically an item that tells you where someone is.”

“Oh, really?”

“I want you to take it. This item here works with the transmitter...er, this other item here. When you channel mana into the item, it tells you where the other one is.”

She tilted her head at me questioningly. An understandable reaction.

“Look, I can’t go with you guys,” I continued. “But once I train and get better and more confident, I’d like us to adventure together. I thought this could help us meet up again someday.”

“Sora, didn’t you know you can ask the guild to get in touch with someone?”

I did know that there was a messaging service you could pay money to use, but I’d thought only guild personnel could use it.

As I sat there hesitantly, Rurika looked at Chris and saw her examining the transmitter intently. Then she took it. “Carrying this around won’t make any trouble for us, will it?”

“Yeah. The only thing it tells me is what direction you’re in. I think it would be hard to pinpoint the exact location unless you were close.”

That was the case under normal circumstances, anyway, but it also had a limit on its number of uses. With the help of Appraisal, I determined that it could only be used five times.

“Even though the guild has the messaging service, you might miss out on messages sent through it if you don’t visit a guild for a while, or you might send one and not get it answered right away. And if you ask them to send out a message for your location every time you’re in a city, you might lose out on some good weapons and stuff.”

It did seem like the service cost quite a bit. Even if it was between guilds, sending out messages to who knows how many people and places all the time

would definitely add up.

“If Chris doesn’t have a problem, then I’m fine with it. But don’t use it for anything weird, okay?” Rurika warned me.

Yes, ma’am, wasn’t planning to, ma’am.

I decided to try the last set and successfully used Alchemy.

“What should we do with this one?” I asked.

“Well, if we end up finding Sera and Eris before you find us, I was thinking we could use it to meet back up with you. You can use it, right, Chris?” Rurika said.

Since she could use magic, Chris probably could. And...there might be other reasons we wouldn’t be able to get in touch using the guild’s messaging service later on.

I ended up making a chain so the devices could be part of a necklace. For some reason, Rurika asked me to put it around Chris’s neck, so I did. Come to think of it, it might have been my first time giving a present to a girl. The thought had me feeling suddenly excited.

Oh, and I made my own set into a necklace too. It was actually a little embarrassing...



“Morning. Time to head out. Are you both ready?” I asked them.

“Morning. We’re very experienced, unlike you, so we know just how to prepare.”

“But Rurika, you kept double-checking all night...”

“Hey, that was supposed to be a secret!”

The two of them laughed merrily, but I sensed a little bit of forced cheer there.

As usual, we finished breakfast, then returned to our rooms. The girls got their things together, said their goodbyes to the innkeeper and proprietress, and thanked them for all their help.

I left the inn with them and we headed for the meeting place together. We walked in total silence, the air heavy around us. Rurika, who usually talked a lot, was quiet for once.

There were people all around us in the meeting spot. We even saw one of the Rank C adventurer parties we’d worked with on the escort quest. One of them noticed me and waved, and we waved back.

“Rurika, Chris. I feel a little self-conscious saying this out loud, but I really am so grateful to you. If I’d been by myself, I probably would’ve just kept making deliveries in the capital. It’s because of you that I’ve come this far, seen so many things, and had so many experiences.”

“Wh-Where’d that come from? Well, I got to revisit my early days as an adventurer and remember all kinds of things I’d forgotten, so I feel the same way.”

“Yeah, it was fun. Maybe it wasn’t the best idea, but I had fun.”

The reason it felt like “it wasn’t the best idea” to her was probably because of Sera and Eris. They were supposed to be diligently searching, but they kept delaying their journey in order to teach me things. Even if I told them it wasn’t a problem, they’d probably still think it was.

“Are you staying in this kingdom for a while, Sora?”

“There’s cities I haven’t been to yet, so yeah. I’m thinking I’ll go back to the capital for a while. Maybe I’ll take the long way there? Not because the tiger wulf scares me, but I’d like to stop by other towns while I’m out here.”

“Okay, got it. Just don’t push yourself too hard.”

“I won’t.”

“We’ll work hard so we can introduce you to our friends next time we meet.”

“Yeah, looking forward to it. So I’ll work hard and walk mo—er, get stronger.”

“Sure, sure. Don’t push yourself too hard. Or work too hard. Make sure to take regular breaks.”

We could’ve talked forever. The things I wanted to say poured out of my mouth one after another. We’d talked a lot the night before, too, but it apparently hadn’t been enough.

Even so, it was time to say goodbye. As time passed, one person after another got into the wagons. I looked around and saw other groups saying their goodbyes and encouraging each other—just like we were.

“Well, Sora, take care. Next time we meet, let’s see who’s become more skilled!” Rurika was Rurika to the end.

“Um, this is from me. A thank-you for everything you gave us.” Chris handed me a pack of paper.

I looked through it and saw it contained a lot of information about magic. “Wow, you really...”

“You asked me a lot about magic, so I wrote down everything I knew.”

“I see. Thanks.”

“No problem. And...good luck.”

With that, Chris also got in the wagon with Rurika, and I watched it go until it faded from sight, disappearing over the far horizon. They’d said they’d reach the Las Beastland in about twenty days if things went well.

I wondered when we might meet again. I’d have to do a lot of things to make sure that happened as soon as possible.

I watched until the caravan left my sight, then started walking back toward the guild.

◇Chris's Perspective 2

"Are you sure about this?" Rurika asked after we'd set up camp for the night. I knew exactly what she meant.

"Yeah, I'd feel bad about getting him mixed up in our business."

"Knowing Sora, he would've just laughed and said it was fine."

She was probably right. But if he'd stayed with us, he might've ended up getting drawn into something dangerous. Things were okay now, but they might not be okay tomorrow or the next day.

Besides, Sora seemed to have his own thing going on. We couldn't hold that against him, since we did too. In fact, maybe we were the ones who'd used him in various ways...which goes to show just how foul and corrupt the air in this land was.

"And you really saw it there?" Rurika asked, probably referring to the spirit.

I nodded. It had seemed to be a creature difficult to communicate with directly. It was able to understand my words, but I couldn't really comprehend what it was saying in response. It seemed concerned about Sora, and often hid out to keep an eye on him. Sometimes it boldly appeared in front of him and startled him.

At first it had been a bit on guard in my presence, but ever since Sora had been wounded by the tiger wulf, it had started coming to me more frequently. I could at least tell that it wanted to be with Sora. It wanted to protect him. That kind of thing.

I had told it that humans and spirits had very different lifespans, but I wasn't really sure if that had sunk in. But I could tell how genuine its feelings were, as shown by the way it had saved Sora when he was hurt.

So I ended up teaching it different things. That method... I could have just told it to Sora myself, but I hadn't had the courage. Obviously there were rules in

place as well, so even if I *had* had the courage, it might not have been possible.

So I told a single lie to the spirit...that this was a trial, and it had to work hard to tell Sora in its own words.

After that, we mainly practiced. Communicating in a small number of words...no, even concepts, seemed to use up its energy and exhaust it. Things might be different for a fully grown spirit, but it seemed to take a real toll on the little one.

But contrary to my expectations, it still arrived night after night to practice. Seeing its devotion reminded me again of just how seriously it was taking this.

So I told it one last thing before we said our goodbyes. "Give it your best."

The rest was up to the little one. I prayed that its feelings would get through to Sora.

I hoped that the papers I'd given to Sora would also be helpful.

A Quiet Conversation 1

In a room that stood among a dimly lit series of chambers, a man clad in dark clothing bowed deeply to one in a luxurious seat. The man in the chair had a cold glint in his eyes, lacking any glimmer of the warm smile he usually showed.

"I have a report, milord. As you've heard, the heroes have no combat experience. Most of them can't keep up in training with the knights."

"What do you mean, 'most of them'?"

"The Swordmaster, Paladin, and Fencer King are awkward but gradually adapting."

"And the others?"

"The Sorcerer King can use powerful spells, but their ability to do so is inconsistent. Regarding the Shaman, we don't have anyone who can use spirit spells, but the researchers are currently consulting the literature."

"The Saint?"

"Studying holy magic in a church."

"Then we can't send any of them to the front lines right away. Strange. The last time there was a summoning, the records say they struggled with the magic, but they took to the sword immediately."

"What shall we do, milord?"

"They're valuable assets. Sending them to immediately die on the front lines would defeat the point of having them. Get them accustomed to fighting first. We can focus on raising their levels after that."

A long pause. "Yes, milord."

"Wait. Regarding spirits... Is there any way to use *that one*?"

"The survivor?"

"Yes, it would know a lot about spirits, wouldn't it? Hmm, but it might be

dangerous to let it make contact...”

“It shouldn’t be a problem if we fully bind it with slave magic first. Getting permission to use the mask could make it much safer.”

“The mask requires slave magic... Yes, we could try it. If they can learn to use spirit spells, they’d be quite useful to us.”

“Yes, milord. I’ll work up a plan at once.”

There was a pause for thought. “Oh, by the way, what happened with the dud?”

“He appears to have registered with the adventurers’ guild.”

“Oh. He can fight, then?”

“It seems that he’s taking delivery quests.”

“Childish errands... His skill was Walking, I believe. Yes, I suppose that would suit him.”

“And I’ve received reports that he can carry significant weights like they were nothing.”

“And?”

“Well, I was thinking he could be useful as a porter...”

“We have slaves to handle that. If something went wrong and he died, it could have a negative effect on the others.”

“I see. That’s true, milord.”

“But let me see... Useless as he is, that dud is still an otherworlder. There could always be more to him. Let’s continue to watch him. Don’t let him leave the kingdom or tell anyone about the hero summoning, though.”

“What do we do if he tries?”

“Feel free to kill him.”

“I have a report. The knight captain wishes to take three of the heroes on a monster hunt.”

“I’ve heard. How are things going with the Saint?”

“They seem to have become the strongest in the capital church. There are rumors behind the scenes that the church is scheming to take the Saint to the Holy Kingdom. We’re investigating now.”

“Tell the Saint to participate in the monster hunt, then seek out the schemers and eliminate them.”

“Very well.”

“What about the Sorcerer King?”

“It’s been difficult to get them to engage in real combat. The problem seems to be that they’re too powerful.”

“So there’s a chance that they might harm others... What about the Shaman?”

“They seem to have contracted with a spirit.”

“‘Seem to have’? Is it unclear?”

“That’s what I was told. It was difficult to confirm the presence of a spirit. They did manage it, but as to whether the contract was made... Well, we have confirmed the use of spells, at least.”

“No need to force them to fight, but make them come along. Just seeing a monster can change a few things. I would like to make them fight if possible, though.”

“Very well.”

“What about the dud?”

“He seems to have been venturing out of town on various quests.”

“What kinds of quests?”

“Gathering herbs and hunting goblins.”

“By himself?”

“He seems to have befriended some adventurers, and he’s taking quests with them.”

“Can he fight now?”

“He was injured when they reported on the goblin hunt. He’s been spotted training with more adventurers, but he is believed to be weaker than a new-recruit knight.”

“Who are the adventurers he’s with?”

“They seem to have come here from the Vossheil Empire, but they were born in the Eld Republic.”

“Spies?”

“I’ve received information that they’re traveling around different lands looking for someone. Possibly slaves, as they’ve been confirmed making contact with slavers.”

“Just be careful. If it seems like he’s going to leave the kingdom with them, dispose of them all.”

“I have a report. The hunt was carried out successfully.”

“How did they fight?”

“They were hesitant on the first day, but they had no trouble beginning on the second. However, the knight captain reports that they’re sometimes overwhelmed by their own power. I’d like to give them regular combat experience.”

“Have their levels increased?”

“We’ve confirmed an increase in many of the low-level ones.”

“How did the others react?”

“The sight of the dead monsters made them sick at first, but everyone except the Saint and the Shaman seems to be getting used to it.”

“What about their abilities?”

“The Saint’s power seems quite good. Their physical abilities appear to be low, though, so they’ll need an escort.”

“Order the knight captain to train for that purpose. If the clergy is against it,

tell them it's for the sake of protecting the Saint."

"Understood. The Sorcerer King seems desperate to use their magic."

"They're becoming aggressive?"

"Less aggressive and more eager to test their magic on moving targets. They slipped away and tried some things on their own."

"Any indication they might go rogue?"

"Not while we were heading back, at least."

"How were their emotions? Did the operation have any effect?"

"They became slightly more violent, but returned to normal after a while. We may need to watch them a bit longer."

"Hmm. And how are things going with the dud?"

"He took a caravan escort mission and headed for Stopover City Fesis."

"An escort mission?"

"His companions are heading on to the Las Beastland. The slaves they're searching for are apparently a beastfolk and an elf."

"An elf?"

"Yes. They went missing in the war. What shall we do?"

"Keep a closer eye on the dud. If anything happens, kill him and make it look like an accident."

"Understood."

"Do you think they'll take him with them?"

"There's no sign of that at the moment. He doesn't seem to have told them about his origins either."

"Just don't let down your guard. And...yes, send that one as well."

"No. 13, milord?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No...forgive me. Shall we continue monitoring?"

“It might be worth provoking him and seeing how he responds. Or perhaps...”

Silence.

Chapter 6

I lay down in bed expecting to go right to sleep, then bolted up immediately. The spirit on the pillow sprang up and looked all around in shock from the force of my rebound. It glared at me when it realized I was the cause, and I bowed my head apologetically.

Part of the trouble was that I missed the girls, but there were also a lot of things I had to do. I had to read through the magic sheets Chris had given me, for one thing, but I also needed to get to work on some things I'd decided to start doing a while back.

First, I checked my stats.

Skill: Walking Lv. 28

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 16003/290000

Skill Points: 13

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. 9] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 2] [Enhance Physique Lv. 8] [Regulate Mana Lv. 6] [Lifestyle Spells Lv. 6] [Detect Presence Lv. 8] [Sword Arts Lv. 7] [Dimension Spells Lv. 5] [Parallel Thinking Lv. 4] [Boost Recovery Lv. 4] [Hide Presence Lv. 3] [Alchemy Lv. 5] [Cooking Lv. 4]

My Appraisal level had gone up, so I decided to see if any of the explanatory text for jobs had changed. In doing so, I realized that I could in fact change my job. Supplementary text did mention that once I selected a job, I couldn't switch it again until my Walking level increased.

I wished I'd known that yesterday, but it was a bit late for that. After some thinking, I chose Alchemist as my job. As I did, the numbers in parentheses changed.

Name: Fujimiya Sora / **Job:** Alchemist

Race: Otherworlder / **Level:** None

HP 290/290 / **MP** 290/290 (+50) / **SP** 290/290

Strength: 280 (+0) / **Stamina:** 280 (+0) / **Speed:** 280 (+0)

Magic: 280 (+0) / **Dexterity:** 280 (+50) / **Luck:** 280 (+0)

Apparently, becoming an Alchemist gave me a bonus when using Alchemy. I didn't know how effective it would be; it could have just been a psychological thing. Like a placebo effect, maybe? Well, if I was getting a stat bonus from it, surely it had to do *something*...

I pulled up the alchemy creation list and chose a handgun, which was one of the items on the "Never before created" part of the list. At the very least, in my old world, a gun had been a lethal weapon very effective for self defense. They weren't easy to get in the country I'd come from, so I'd never used one myself. Still, I had a strong idea of what they were like, so I thought I'd make one as insurance. Having it on the potential creation list was huge.

I fused iron ore, steel ore, and magic ore, then put in additional magistones and channeled extra mana into the lot to make the gun. I don't know how it worked, but it did.

"Wow..." The completed gun felt heavier than I'd expected.

There were a few different ways to make a gun. The one I'd used was the most basic method, but it looked like you'd get different results based on the amount and quality of materials you used, the quality of the magistones, and the amount of mana you channeled into the process. I'd managed to create bullets as well, but I couldn't exactly try them out here, so I stored them all in my Item Box for now.

Of course I hoped I'd never have to use it, but you never knew what might happen, so I wanted to have it, at least.

Whew... I let out a long sigh and flopped down onto my bed. The spirit landed beside me in a similar way, then stared hard at me. Its gaze suggested it wanted something from me, but as usual, I had no idea what it was trying to say.

But I felt bad about lying down when it wanted something, so I picked myself up and knelt on the bed facing it. Our eyes met, and as it looked up at me, I could tell that it wanted something.

...co...ct.

I felt like I heard a voice. It was seemingly sounding directly in my brain, but it was also as soft as a whisper and too low to make out. I found myself looking around, but of course, there was no one in the room.

"Is that...your voice?" My eyes went back down to the spirit on top of the bed.

...nt...

Once again I thought I heard something, but immediately the spirit's ball-like form collapsed, as if it had been crushed. It looked a bit like a fried egg.

"H-Hey..." I spoke up in surprise, but the spirit just disappeared.

I waited until the fuel in the room's lamp ran out before I drifted off, but I was too worried about the spirit to sleep soundly. I woke up several times during the night to check my pillow, but the spot where the spirit would have been remained empty.

The next day, I managed to reserve a spot on a transport wagon to the south gate city, and I decided to take a quest at the guild in the meantime. It was another herb-gathering quest, my specialty.

Then I proceeded to become legendary. Legendary how, you ask? For five days straight, I went to gather herbs. There were fewer adventurers in town because of the tiger wulf hunt, and the hunt had also depleted the local stores of herbs, so my enthusiasm was welcome.

The receptionist was thrilled at first, but her expression gradually became puzzled as the days went on, and it was extremely strained by the end. This was partly my fault for refusing to get the hint and stop taking the quests, but I couldn't help it. Herb gathering was just the most reliable way to make money. Most of all, reaching the gathering spots meant walking, which let me gain more XP. Raising my Alchemy proficiency had also depleted my own herb stores.

The most I managed to acquire over five days of herb gathering was one gold piece. The adventurers in the guild cried out in surprise when they saw it. More than one party invited me to join them, but I turned them down politely. I was already set to leave town, after all.

Yeah, these guys would really cramp my style... In exchange, I treated them to drinks at the guild's attached bar and let them tell me their tales of adventure. *Where did those ten silvers go?! How much drinking do you guys do?!* If the guild master hadn't come out and broken things up, I surely would have lost even more.

The adventurers I'd grown close with via mock duels had apparently learned I was leaving town and decided to use the occasion to throw me a kind of farewell party. And although I had been making good money, the fact that I was paying for it made it feel a little off.

Still, I'd been alone more often than not after saying goodbye to Rurika and Chris, so it was nice to blow off some steam in a group. Maybe that was why they did it? Or maybe I was overthinking it. They probably just wanted to drink.

I ended up humoring them until pretty late at night, then tottered back to my room, exhausted. I wasn't staying up late nearly as often these days as I had before coming to this world, and I went to bed especially early when I was staying at an inn.

But the sight I saw when I got to my room woke me back up in an instant.

"H-Hey, it's been a while. Are you okay?" I ran to the spirit and found myself calling to it out loud. I'd been so worried by the way it had disappeared before!

More importantly, I'd learned quite a few things reading the documents Chris

had left behind for me. First of all, elemental magic was primarily divided into six main kinds: fire, water, wind, earth, light, and dark, and she described the basics of each. Fire and wind were apparently what Chris used, so she wrote about those in particular detail.

Then, at the end, she had written something that seemed to relate to what I was seeing right now—spirit spells. These spells could be used by making a contract with a spirit. She said she'd learned about them from an elf friend, who I assumed was Eris, the person she was looking for.

According to what she wrote, spirits all had very different personalities, and they tended to follow you if they took interest in you. If you already had affinity with a spirit, they might even come when you called them. Individuals varied greatly, and there were even old records of some that were capable of speech.

There was no way to know what spirits wanted in the end, but they generally desired to form a contract and make a life with someone. To form a contract, you had to get ■△✱ and get the other to agree to it. (For some reason, ■△✱ was rendered as random characters I couldn't read.)

Thinking back, it did seem like the spirit had been trying to say something like “contract.”

“Hey, do you want to make a contract with me?” I asked, looking it in the eye.

It seemed to blink once, then bobbed up and down swiftly.

“Can I take that as a yes?” So the question was, how should I go about it? Actually, I did have some ideas about that... But that wasn't actually the issue.

“Can I give you a name?” I asked hesitantly.

Was that a happy nod it gave?

I thought so... A name, huh? I found myself racking my brain. “Since you're white, maybe Shiro or Haku or something...” I whispered, offering up common names for a mostly white pet.

This inspired a terribly sad air from the spirit, whose ears seemed to droop.

Yeah, figured. Even I thought those were a little too easy. “Are you even male? Or female?” Chris's writings had mentioned “he” and “she,” so it did

seem like they had genders.

I decided to check, and the spirit seemed to respond to the word “female.”

“Ciel.” I whispered the first word that came to mind, and the reaction was one of delight. That word meant “Sky” in the French language, just like my name was “Sky” in Japanese.

But...if she was happy about it, I couldn't change it now, right? I felt a little self-conscious, but it was what it was.

“Your name's Ciel, then. Mine is... You probably know, but it's Sora. A pleasure.” I reached out my hand, and the spirit moved onto my palm and began to glow.

It was my first time seeing that light, as far as I knew, yet it somehow seemed familiar. The light gradually expanded until it enveloped my entire body. A strange kind of heat filled me, and I felt warm all over.

Eventually the light receded, and everything returned to normal. I squinted hard at Ciel, but I didn't see that anything had changed. I tried moving, and everything felt normal.

Then I decided to check my stats and called up my status screen. The numbers didn't seem to have changed, but there was one extra row. I now had the title “Spirit Contractor.”

I appraised the title, and the explanation appeared: “A title given to one who forms a contract with a spirit.” I'd also learned Holy Spells, which hadn't been an option before. But “Spirit Spells” was still in gray, suggesting I still couldn't learn it.

“But one thing I wanted to confirm: is there anything I need to do now that I've formed a contract?”

No response came to my question, but I did have a vague feeling that I had made a connection with Ciel.

Just then, I noticed a slight weight on my palm. When I moved my hand, Ciel, who was sitting on top of it, moved as well.

“I can touch you now?” I moved my hand in all different directions, and Ciel's

ears twitched as if in pleasure.

I followed Ciel with my eyes, then unthinkingly petted her with my open hand. She felt soft and nice, but she quickly moved away in surprise.

“S-Sorry. Should I not have petted you?”

I apologized and she came up cautiously, then paused in midair. From there I timidly stroked her once, twice...and she smoothly moved away again. She apparently didn't like being touched too much—or, more likely, she wasn't used to it either.

“I've got an early day tomorrow, so I should sleep now. But let's keep on working together!”

Ciel seemed to answer my words with a firm nod.

I turned off the light and lay down in bed, and Ciel moved to my pillow and curled into a ball...so to speak. She was pretty ball-like to begin with.

The next morning, I finished getting ready for my journey and left the inn. Chris and Rurika had departed from the west gate, but I was leaving from the south. While waiting for the transport wagon, I called out to some folks I recognized who seemed to be heading out on a quest.

“You're leaving town, too, Sora? We'll miss you,” said one.

I said goodbye to the adventurers I'd grown close to and boarded the transport wagon.

The group that had gone out to find and hunt the tiger wulf hadn't returned yet. Some people were still intent on forming a large caravan that would take the road to the north, but not many. Most capital-bound folks had decided to take a route that detoured through the South Gate City instead.

While the wagon bumped and jostled around me, I thought a little about what to do next.

First, I'd head for the South Gate City, Epica, which lay to the south of the capital. From there, there were public roads leading back to the capital, as well as the Magic Nation of Eva and the Holy Kingdom of Frieren.

“The road to the Holy Kingdom is very well tended. It’s harder to make it to Eva, since you have to cross the mountains. But there are lots of unusual things you can only find there, so a lot of merchant groups still make the trip.”

There was a lot of talk going on inside the wagon; I heard about various rumors and places to avoid. Several people seemed to be discussing monsters growing more active.

“Does that mean there are lots of hunting quests getting posted?” I asked.

“Yeah. That’s fine in the large cities, since there’s a lot of adventurers there, but it’s apparently trouble for the smaller towns and villages. The local lords can’t just abandon the villages, so they’re sending a lot of their own soldiers out. It’s a busy time.”

A village’s destruction meant a loss of income for the fief. But they still had to choose where to dispatch soldiers first, so some often slipped through the cracks nevertheless.

“But soldiers mainly specialize in fighting other humans. They’re not used to dealing with monsters. I hear the first incursion from the Black Forest went very badly indeed.”

“That’s the forest to the north of the capital, right?” I asked. I felt like I’d heard that it was between the kingdom and the Demon King’s castle.

“Yeah, it used to be just a scattering of simple forts, but now it’s a full-on castle town. I hear they even send Rank S adventurers there.”

There were several reasons I’d decided to ride the transport carriage instead of walking. Gathering information was one of them—traveling merchants had a lot of practical knowledge, so listening to their stories was very useful indeed. There wasn’t much to do on the wagon, so my companions would give me a lot of information on whatever I asked about.

“By the way, I heard there’s a village between Alett and Pullum that makes unusual foodstuffs. Is that true?” I asked.

“Oh, Fuse Village? I did hear lately that the area dealt in unusual ingredients. I think they process the milk of livestock?”

“But other places do that too, right? It just isn’t usually taken to the big cities, so you don’t get a chance to taste it.”

“Yeah. Even if you buy it up, it’s hard to transport. The biggest companies can handle it because they have high-quality item bags and other magic items for storage, but the cost of transport jacks up the price way higher than ordinary folks like us can afford.”

“Yeah. So if you wanna eat it, you gotta go to the source.”

That confirmed the information I’d gotten earlier. I was in no hurry, so I decided to stop by Fuse Village. Ciel was listening to the story, too, vibrating with interest.

We arrived at the first town, Alett, after three days. We would stay the night there, then get back on the wagon to the next city, Pullum. I’d reserved a small room at an inn in advance, and I stayed there alone.

I spent the rest of the day wandering around the town as I always did, but it didn’t really have anything worthwhile to justify a visit. Heck, even the adventurers’ guild was a ghost town. Apparently most of Alett’s adventurers moved on to the Stopover City once they’d become experienced enough. But quite a few returned later, which was why there were still some people there.

That night, I checked my skills again at the inn. Specifically, I was examining the new ones I’d learned. I had thirteen skill points, which was enough to significantly expand my repertoire.

NEW

[Throwing/Shooting Lv. 1] [Fire Spells Lv. 1] [Water Spells Lv. 1] [Telepathy Lv. 1]

Throwing/Shooting granted a bonus to accuracy when attacking something from a distance. Raising my Alchemy level enough that I could make guns was a major reason I’d taken this skill. I also used throwing knives, so it would apply there as well.

I was still waiting for an opportunity to try out my gun, but since the alchemy list had said they weren't native to this world, I had to be careful with how I used it. It would be risky to fire it when there were people around, but I intended to use it without hesitation if I were ever in danger. Survival was my number one priority.

Fire Spells let me use spells of the fire element. I'd learned this one mainly so that I could incinerate the bodies of monsters like goblins. Obviously, I was planning to use it for attacks as well.

Water Spells let me use spells of the water element. I had Lifestyle Spells already, so I didn't have much use for it at the moment...maybe when I needed a large amount of water? I'd also learn ice spells if I leveled it enough, so maybe I could use it for temperature control and freezing things?

Speaking of magic, I'd need to know a spell from at least three of the elemental classes in order to switch my job to Mage. So, I'd decided that I'd start with Water and Fire, then pick up other elements as the need arose. After watching Chris, I couldn't help but want to learn magic, you know?

My last new skill, Telepathy, let me communicate with others without speaking aloud. But apparently this didn't work on just anyone, because I'd tried it on several people and got no response.

I'd learned it because Ciel had seemed sad that I couldn't talk to her while riding in the transport wagon. She could bear it when I was talking to other people, but sometimes I'd see impatience in her eyes as she hoped that I would talk to her. But talking to Ciel would look like I was talking to myself, so the telepathy would help me get around that. I couldn't stand having those big round eyes staring at me like that all the time.

Hello, hello? Can you hear me? The first time I tried telepathy on her, Ciel looked wildly all around, her hair standing on end. I immediately let her know it was me and apologized. When I then told her I could talk to her like this even while we were in public, she flew around happily. What a relief!

The next morning, we boarded the transport wagon to Pullum. We were set to arrive in four days, but I'd decided to get off on the second day. I'd discussed

this with the coachman in advance and he said it wasn't an issue, but I still had to pay the full fare for passage to the South Gate City. That was fine by me.

Two days later, when we reached the road that branched off to Fuse Village, I got off the wagon. The coachman asked me, "Are you sure about this?" I'd told him I was an adventurer, but he was still worried about me being on my own. Or maybe he was just trying to keep up appearances...

"Yes. I heard about Fuse Village and wanted to visit it for myself."

"What, kid, you're getting off here?" one of the merchants I'd gotten close to during the journey asked. "And going to Fuse Village... Well, if you get a chance, treat yourself to some of that cheese!"

"Sounds great. Get me some too," another merchant said with a smile. I wasn't sure how serious he was being, though.

Ah, so this village's unusual foodstuff is cheese, eh? I thought to myself. If they had cheese, they might have milk and other dairy products like butter. I hadn't had any of that since coming to this world.

Okay, let's head on over, I thought directly to Ciel. After watching the wagon ride off, we started walking the road toward Fuse Village. I kept using telepathy even though there was no one else around, partly to get used to it and partly to increase my proficiency. I wouldn't want my inner monologue accidentally leaking out later, after all.

But first, it was time for a spell.

"Show automap."

While I was learning my new skills, I'd also realized that my Dimension Spells skill had reached Level 6, which allowed me to use a spell that displayed a map of my surroundings. At first, this map would show only a very limited area, but I could expand the range by channeling more mana. Like my status screen, it didn't seem to be visible to anyone but me.

The spell seemed to create the map as it went, and it held a record of places I'd already been. If used in a standard way, it wasn't particularly more useful than the maps you get in the guilds, but by combining it with another skill—Detect Presence—I'd extracted its true value. By using them together, I could

see any presences I was picking up around me reflected on the automap itself. Previously, I'd just had a sort of general idea about where certain readings were coming from, but now I could pinpoint their exact location.

At the moment, there were no readings on the automap. I channeled mana into it to expand its range, but the only presences I could detect were still on the departing transport wagon, and the number of people on it matched up to what I knew.

At the very least, there seemed to be nobody monitoring me nearby for now. That didn't rule out people with higher-level Hide Presence skills, but if I started worrying about that I'd never stop.

This was my other goal. I was curious about the cheese, too, but I also wanted to run some tests to find out if anyone was watching me. *Still, cheese...it would be delicious with the bacon...* I thought to Ciel. She suddenly looked over at me, perhaps responding to the word "bacon."

While pointing out that this only referred to the ingredient as I knew it, I started explaining passionately about foods that used cheese and its potential. Apparently I was craving it even more than I'd realized.

But this created a problem, as my words inspired Ciel to zoom off past me, occasionally turning around as if to hurry me on. Since I couldn't get the benefits of my skill if I ran, I asked questions like *What do you want to eat, Ciel?* to slow her down while we walked in that direction.

I think we're almost to a road that leads up a hill. Do you want to eat before we get there? I asked Ciel after we'd continued for a while.

Ciel nodded in response.

I stepped off the road and began preparing our meal. On the transport wagon I'd made do with my rations, but my custom of eating three meals a day seemed to have made me crave something more substantial. The rations also just didn't taste very good.

For lunch today, I lightly fried up some finely cut meat and vegetables, put them in water, added some seasonings, and let it boil down. That enhanced the

flavor quite a bit. I wasn't just doing it to make soup, but also to have something to soak bread in. I paid attention to make sure I was using fire and water spells for these tasks rather than lifestyle spells.

Only the highest-quality bread was soft, and it cost a pretty penny, so the only bread in my travel bag was the hard stuff. Once the soup warmed up and began to give off a nice smell, Ciel began to shift around anxiously.

Spirits didn't seem to need to eat, but Ciel was curious about food, and she often watched intently as I ate. Since we'd been traveling as a group in the wagon all day, I couldn't feed her then, but I could do it now that we were alone. Ciel didn't seem to like rations, anyway.

I poured out soup for two.

"What about the bread?" I asked.

She seemed to want some, so I dished it out, and she ate the bread first. A third party watching us would simply see the bread "disappear," but the expression on her face suggested she didn't love it.

I myself soaked some bread in the soup, then ate it. She stared at me hard, following my motions intently as I swished the bread back and forth in the soup.

I took out another piece of bread and soaked it quietly in Ciel's soup for her. She watched, then waited a moment and swallowed it whole. The dish was now empty, just like magic.

I continued eating my own food while watching Ciel, who now seemed to be dancing happily.

After the meal, I cleaned my plates with a water spell, then used a fire spell to dry them and started traveling again. Just as I'd heard, I ended up on a leisurely upward slope after diverging onto a side road and walking for a while. The mild slope continued for a while, then grew steeper, and I came over the final crest to find Fuse Village.

Fuse Village was built on a hill, and it certainly looked the part. The summit of the hill was quite wide, and it was surrounded by a large fence. Since they let the livestock roam free, the fence was probably there to prevent them from

either running off or falling off. It looked sturdily made, so maybe it also kept monsters out.

The man at the gate looked surprised when I told him why I'd come.

"Is it odd to come to buy cheese?" I asked.

"It is quite unusual. Merchants usually come with wagons. It's been years since I saw someone walk here to buy. I can't even remember how long." The merchants who did come tended to be from big trading companies, he explained.

"Do you have an inn?" I asked.

"Yes, one. They serve food that includes our local products, so you can look forward to that." I could hear the pride in his words. They must have really been proud of what they served there.

"I'm a traveler. Could I stay two nights or so?"

"Of course. Just you?"

"Yeah, I heard about you and wanted to stop by."

"Hmm, but I wouldn't say that we have enough around here to warrant a recommendation..." The man tilted his head in curiosity. Indeed, people often didn't recognize their own strengths.

"I heard there was cheese here. I'd love to try it."

"Cheese, eh? We do make it here. Is it that unusual?"

At least, I hadn't had it anywhere since I arrived in this world. As for the preservation, I could either stick it in the Item Box or smoke it.

The food they served that night definitely had cheese in it. They sliced the bread thinly and stuck cheese and vegetables in between, basically making a sandwich. The potatoes were also stir-fried in butter, with more melted cheese on top. I picked up one of the potatoes and the cheese stretched and dribbled down. Ciel's eyes went wide at the sight and followed the dripping cheese all the way to the plate. She brought some to her mouth, ate it, and...a drippy, happy expression appeared on her face.

“Is it good?” I asked.

She nodded, then bounced up and down as if asking for more.

The pièce de résistance was tomato soup. When I asked about it, they said they grew their own tomatoes as well. I told them I wanted to buy some, and they said they’d introduce me to the seller. They gave me a few more dishes that included pork and beef, and I basically ended up stuffing myself.

“I thought it would be too much, but you’ve got a good appetite,” the proprietress told me happily after I cleaned my plate. Ciel had helped, of course, so I’d ordered extra. It was also hard to stop when I was tasting such nostalgic flavors.

“It was all so delicious, I couldn’t stop myself,” I simply said.

“I see, I see. You can look forward to more tomorrow, then.”

It was Ciel who reacted most strongly to those words, looking at the proprietress with shining eyes. Even though minutes ago she’d seemed to have eaten so much she couldn’t move...

“Ma’am, is there anything unusual to see in this area?” I asked as she cleaned up, while I was basking in my postmeal glow.

“Unusual, eh? I’m sure it all seems unusual to outsiders, but if I had to say one thing... You’ll see a forest on the right if you leave the village heading for the main road. If you pass through that forest, you’ll come to a small lake. You can also pick rare mushrooms in the forest, I believe.”

“Is it all right for me to pick them?”

“Should be fine. They grow naturally, and the village doesn’t exactly guard them or anything. We also don’t go out of our way to pick them.”

I had looked around the town a bit before coming to the inn, and the people all seemed busy with ranching and farmwork. I asked why the proprietress knew about it, then, and she said it was known as a resting spot for the villagers...or rather, a date spot for the young people. Then she talked my ear off with boasts about fond memories with her husband there.

The next day, I bought all kinds of ingredients and put them into my Item Box. I also asked if they'd teach me how to cook with butter and cheese, and they gladly agreed. I asked if it was okay for me to use their techniques, and they said it was fine. Such generous people!

I spent my full two days exploring every corner of the village.

"Are you leaving tomorrow like you planned?" the proprietress asked me.

"Yes, though I'm planning to stop by that lake on the way."

"I see. Then I personally recommend spending the night there. There's a shack you can stay in nearby. It's not furnished, so it's basically just protection from wind and rain, but I think you can handle it."

I took the large packed lunch she gave me, thanked her, and left the town. The people I passed all called out to me and wished me well. They really were kind folks.

Okay, let's go, I said to Ciel telepathically. She nodded in response.

Ciel seemed to like this village too. She particularly seemed to enjoy riding on the backs of the cows and pigs that were kept there. I'd gotten it into my head that spirits must like places with lots of nature, and maybe the area's laid-back atmosphere just suited her.

But if you asked me if I wanted to live here, I'd have to think about that one. Though it might be a nice place to settle down eventually, I still craved to see more of this world.

As I walked down the leisurely slope, a forest did indeed come into view on my right. The proprietress had said that I'd reach my destination if I just headed into the forest from the town, but she'd also told me there was a path, albeit one that was hard to spot.

I looked carefully around and eventually saw a path. I wouldn't have noticed it if I hadn't been told. It was reasonably well trod but didn't seem to be consciously maintained, so there were pebbles and rocks strewn all around. I'd had my boots repaired, though, so I wouldn't even notice if I stepped on a rock.

I kept going along the path, which soon became swallowed up by the forest. There was still hardened earth beneath my feet, but branches also grew across the road, and sometimes I had to break them off to proceed. Of course, I kept the branches with me so that I could use them as firewood later.

As we entered the forest proper, Ciel began to look restless. I told her she was free to look around, and she flew off happily in response. Forging a contract with her must have allowed her to sense my location more clearly, because she moved around freely during the day. But she always seemed to come back at night, and when I'd open my eyes I'd always find her beside me, curled up into a ball.

After watching Ciel go, I used Appraisal on the area around me but saw no mushrooms growing nearby. It didn't look like people came here a lot, but maybe the ones closest to the path were most easily picked? I gave it some thought, then checked my current location and the lake's on the automap. This would keep me from getting lost, even if I left the path. Since I wasn't exactly in a hurry, I decided to go looking for mushrooms. I figured I'd probably be fine as long as I reached the lake by lunchtime.

As I left the road and went deeper and deeper into the forest, I gradually began to find mushrooms, but Appraisal told me they were toxic and inedible. It looked like I could use them to make something like antidotes with Alchemy, though, so I did pick a few. I kept walking further in, but I couldn't find any edible mushrooms. I also picked up some faint readings with Detect Presence, and I wondered if something was eating the poisonous ones. The readings seemed too small for it to be humanoid or monster, but I decided to keep my guard up until I actually saw it. When I approached, it moved away as if it were running, so it was probably fine, of course...

In the end, I passed through the forest without acquiring any new food ingredients.

As I exited the forest I came out into a flat plain covered in a carpet of flowers, with a lake out beyond it. At its edge stood a shack, which must have been the rest stop the proprietress had told me about. I was about to make a

beeline for it, but I felt guilty about the idea of trampling on such pretty flowers, so I first moved back to the preestablished path.

The flowers swayed in the passing breeze, playing pleasant music. It wasn't exactly a tuned orchestra, but it was very soothing. As I walked on, listening, I soon arrived at the lake. From up close, I could tell that it was clear enough to see straight through to the bottom. I put my hand in and it was cold. If it had been a bit hotter out, I would have dipped my feet in.

I gazed at it for a while before Ciel came flying up to me. It was lunchtime, after all.

I took out the packed lunch the proprietress had made, and Ciel happily ate it together with me. Even though it was cold, it was as delicious and satisfying as it would have been hot. "Professional cooking really is great," I mused. If I could raise my Cooking skill high enough, would I be able to make food this good someday?

Incidentally, Ciel was so focused on eating that I don't think she heard my musing.

After lunch, I decided to check out the shack. It was unfurnished except for a stack of firewood in the corner, probably to stop people from moving in. But just having a roof made it better than camping out.

The proprietress had recommended that I stay the night, so would something happen after night fell? The sun was still high in the sky, and there was plenty of time before it got dark. Part of me wanted to try out my gun and my spells, but I was hesitant to disturb the peace of this place.

"Maybe I'll try cooking something." The resting Ciel sprang up in response to the word "cooking."

I decided to try making different sauces using the milk, as well as tomatoes and other vegetables. Ciel seemed to think there was something mysterious about it, but she watched with great interest when I started smoking things. I'd smoked bacon before, so I decided to try it with cheese as well. I felt like I'd seen that on TV.

As I was about to put it in the smoker, my Cooking skill set out a warning. *I see. It'll melt away if I try to smoke it as is, so I need to treat it somehow first...* "This Cooking skill is way too handy," I said out loud.

Also, though normally you'd have to chant spells and use them to raise their proficiency, I seemed to have found a shortcut. I'd discovered completely by accident that using fire-and water-related lifestyle spells had ended up increasing my Fire and Water Spells proficiencies as well. I could level them up that way much more conveniently. But the proficiency ticked up very slowly, I guess because that wasn't their primary mode of usage. *Even if the gains are small, they're still real*, I told myself.

While adjusting the heat level with fire magic, I tried some things with water. I could mainly use water spells for temperature control and chilling things, and I could even create ice by expending more mana. Unfortunately, I couldn't make hot water the same way. To create hot water directly, I had to use it in tandem with Fire Spells. I tried this to produce hot water in a spare pot, but it turned out to be boiling. *Guess I need more practice.*

I lost track of time as I went through my trial and error, and soon the sun went down and it got chilly. I must have been focusing pretty hard on my tasks. I'd produced a number of sauces and soups and put them in preservation vessels I'd created with alchemy, so I could just heat them up whenever I wanted to eat them later. I didn't have to worry about food poisoning, either, because Appraisal would tell me if they were edible or not.

I left what I planned to eat that night on low heat to keep it warm, then looked back around me. The surface of the lake, which had been glittering in the sunlight, turned from blue to black as if slowly consumed by the darkness. The flowers, which had been of many hues, began to lose their luster like they were being repainted in darker colors.

The sight felt a little sad, but not for long. After the sun went down and the surroundings sank wholly into darkness, a radical change suddenly took hold. Spots of light began to appear over the flowers and somehow floated upward until they reached a certain height, then burst and disappeared, reminiscent of soap bubbles.

The lake also acted as a mirror for the stars coating the sky, creating a well of light bright enough that you didn't need artificial lightning. *Well, that explains why it's a date spot*, I thought. I could understand why the villagers would make the trip. I even found myself wishing I could have seen it with Rurika and Chris.

I gazed absently at the sight, and Ciel also looked at it, blinking. Just then, my stomach rumbled loudly. I met Ciel's eyes, felt embarrassed for some reason, then cleared my throat and took the lid off the pot. The smell wafted out and tantalized my empty stomach. Ciel approached the pot, too, as if drawn in by it.

I ladled soup out into a bowl and placed it in front of Ciel. It ended up looking a bit like putting food into a pet dish for an animal, but there wasn't really another choice. I was serving one of the meals I'd prepared in advance, a vegetable soup with a tomato base.

I prepared my own portion, spooned a bit up and blew on it, and put it into my mouth once it cooled. It was...not great. To put it kindly, it was a sweet soup that utilized the ingredients' inherent flavors. But if I were to be mean about it, I'd say it was underseasoned and tasted too raw. It was edible, but the flavor was certainly less than satisfying. *There has to be more I can get out of these tomatoes. Will I have to level up my Cooking skill to bring out their true potential?*

Still, I looked at Ciel and saw her eating it happily. Then again, had I ever seen Ciel *not* enjoy a food? Ah, yes, I had...the rations. Given that, her sense of taste couldn't have been that different from ours. Still, just watching her enjoy the food was rejuvenating, so I wasn't going to argue.

I added a little seasoning while still testing the flavor, but it was a struggle. Adding in too much at once would be risky, so I fine-tuned the flavor little by little. I felt like I might mess it up this way, but I continued resolutely, believing in the potential. My skill would tell me if it wasn't okay...surely.

I was fully focused on my work when I noticed the light around me start to dim. I looked and saw that the glowing flowers were gradually losing their radiance. They continued to get darker, and by the time the moons were directly overhead, their light had completely disappeared. I looked at the

surface of the water and saw the two moons reflected.

I now had only the moonlight and the campfire illuminating my surroundings, and staring at the flame in the darkness was strangely calming. It had a curious power to make me forget the passage of time as I watched it. Ciel gazed at the flame with me, and at last, as if tired of the pastime, closed her eyes and fell still.

I gazed at the fire for a while longer, and when it went out I picked up the motionless Ciel and moved back into the shack. I could certainly sleep outside if I had to, but I might as well use the shack as long as it was there.

The main thing that had changed since establishing a contract with Ciel was that now I could interact with her physically. She was pleasant to the touch, and I could pet her forever if she'd let me. But she didn't seem very used to it herself, and if I petted her too much she would disappear, so I refrained from doing it. I could take my chance now while she was asleep, but the sensation felt different when she was conscious and when she wasn't. Nevertheless, I did give her a single pet in secret.



Before sleeping, I used my automap and Detect Presence to check for any potential dangers in the area, then decided to rest using just Parallel Thinking. Using multiple skills at once tended to run through my SP fast, but I'd learned that if my current SP was at maximum thanks to Boost Recovery, I could make it easily through the night as long as I used just one skill.

I felt like I used Detect Presence the most out of all my skills, but I decided to hold off this time. If I used it while sleeping it would compromise my rest, as I'd wake up in response to the slightest ping. The increased sensitivity that came from leveling up the skill apparently had negative side effects. It seemed possible to increase or decrease the sensitivity, but I was still practicing that.

My night sleeping in the shack passed without incident, and I was able to wake up feeling completely refreshed. Ciel looked a little wobbly, as if she were still sleepy. Finding that understandable, I carried her out, laid her on the tarp, and began cooking.

Are you awake now? As if responding to the sound of the cooking bacon, Ciel, whom I'd left on the tarp, was now beside me. *Wait just a little while longer. It's almost ready,* I told her telepathically.

I put some cheese on the bacon and grilled it one more time. Ciel seemed to be fully awake now, because the shape of her mouth had deformed hungrily.

Breakfast is your fuel for the rest of the day. You've got to eat a good meal, I told her.

Ciel nodded firmly in response. I'd learned from Chris's notes that spirits didn't need to eat, but food still tasted better when you had someone to eat it with.

After our meal, we started walking in the direction of the south gate city.

We arrived in Pullum three days later and spent a night there, then heard from the passengers in the next transport wagon about the results of the tiger wulf hunt.

It seemed they'd successfully killed the thing, but some of the adventurers had stayed behind to survey the forest, and it would be a while before

transports to the capital resumed. I couldn't get passage on the transport wagon from there, so I decided to walk to the south gate city. I wasn't in a hurry and didn't have a particular goal, so walking would be best. Traveling alone could be dangerous in many ways, but there were lots of people on the roads right now—probably because so many people couldn't go directly to the capital—and camping out in groups was relatively safe.

I wasn't quite sure how I'd manage camping out while traveling, but after negotiating with people camping nearby, I decided to camp with them. The negotiations involved offering food and standing watch. Ciel was the one who determined if they were good people or not. If Ciel seemed suspicious of someone, I didn't approach them and just kept walking at a distance so that they couldn't see me. This let me learn a new skill that I would probably need in the future, so I didn't mind it.

NEW

[Night Vision Lv. 1]

Night Vision's effect allowed you to see even in darkness. It was the kind of skill that was always active, but I could also switch it off at will. Increasing its level would allow me to see even farther. I hadn't had to fight at night yet, but as long as I was traveling I might be attacked after dark, so it was a good skill to have. It also meant I could spend more time on the move, and so I ended up arriving in the south gate city in just four days instead of the anticipated five.

South Gate City Epica was surrounded by two layers of walls. There was arable land in the area between the outer and inner walls, and inside the inner one was the city. In terms of total walled-in territory, it was larger than the capital. The space was mainly filled with...wheat fields? And beyond that, there were signs of dairy farming.

After doing my check-in procedures, I headed for the guild, as it would be easier to get an answer about an inn there than to ask random passersby. I also checked the quest board while I was there and discovered that most quests

around here were focused on farmwork instead of making deliveries. There were hunting quests too—quite a number of goblin hunts, including both direct requests from villages and regular hunt quests issued by the local lord. Apparently those really piled up if they were ignored for too long.

Herb-gathering quests...were available, but the spots to pick them were quite far from town. If you took one, you'd have to set up base camp in a nearby village. It seemed a number of the spots were even far from the villages, and you'd have to be prepared to camp out to use them.

I got a good inn recommendation at the guild and proceeded to pay for five nights in advance. My general plan was to take delivery jobs while getting information about the area. Then, if I saw a quest I could do, I would take it. I still had plenty of money, but there were also things I wanted to buy.

Skill: Walking Lv. 28

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 16003/290000

Skill Points: 13

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. 9] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 2] [Enhance Physique Lv. 8] [Regulate Mana Lv. 6] [Lifestyle Spells Lv. 6] [Detect Presence Lv. 9] [Sword Arts Lv. 7] [Dimension Spells Lv. 6] [Parallel Thinking Lv. 5] [Boost Recovery Lv. 4] [Hide Presence Lv. 4] [Alchemy Lv. 5] [Cooking Lv. 4] [Throwing/Shooting Lv. 1] [Fire Spells Lv. 2] [Water Spells Lv. 2] [Telepathy Lv. 2] [Night Vision Lv. 3]

Contract Skills

[Holy Spells Lv. 1]

Having access to Holy Spells let me use the recovery spell Heal, but this apparently consumed MP quickly. I wasn't sure if it was always that way or because I hadn't learned it through the usual route, but I'd have to be cautious with it. Not that I was expecting to get hurt badly enough that I'd have to use it so much, but...

Still, Contract Skills, eh?

"Maybe I can use spirit spells now too?"

Ciel was nestled deep in the bed, seeming to enjoy the sensation. We'd been spending most of our nights camping recently, after all. Even though she'd originally been rugged enough to have been camping out on a healing herb when we first met...

As if feeling my eyes on her, Ciel stopped nestling and flew up to me. I watched her closely as she did. I'd thought I'd feel lonely after I parted ways with Rurika and Chris, but thanks to Ciel my days had felt quite full. It was a huge help, honestly.

Thanks, I said in a telepathic message, but Ciel just tilted herself to the side uncomprehendingly. *Just...well, tomorrow, we can't exactly take it slow, but let's look around the city.* I'd be taking my usual delivery quests while I did, of course.

Okay, good night. As I thought those words, Ciel moved to my pillow and curled up into a ball. I kept watching her as I lay down on the bed and closed my eyes.

Chapter 7

The day after my arrival in town, I went ahead and took my usual load of delivery quests. I mainly wanted to walk around town and find out where everything was. There were deliveries out to the farming region too, so it was quite a ways, but that wasn't an issue for me.

On the way, I saw someone who seemed to recognize me, so I called out to them. It was the middle-aged merchant who'd told me about Fuse Village on the transport wagon.

"Hey, kiddo. Did you make it to the village okay?"

"Yeah, I had a great time. I also managed to buy some cheese, so..."

He grabbed me hard by the shoulders and seemed about to lead me away, but I told him I was on a quest and promised to get together with him later. I'd be meeting him at the trading company mansion he was acting out of at the moment. I headed over there after finishing my quest and was surprised by the size of the place where he was staying. I offered up ingredients (mostly cheese), and we chatted a bit while the food was being made.

The man, Cloud, was apparently the head of a small trading company. I wondered why someone of his station would be riding around on a transport wagon. Well, he told me that his business operated out of Epica, but he'd frequently travel to Fesis and the capital to sell foodstuffs. On this particular occasion, he was heading home when he happened to hear that there weren't enough wagons to carry everyone, and so he offered to let his own wagon be used as a transport.

"Well, this is quite delicious, but..." We were eating food that incorporated the cheese I'd bought, but he also seemed to be doing calculations in his head. "The color on this is a little different. Is this cheese too?"

"That's smoked cheese. It lasts a little longer than the other stuff."

“It would go well with wine if it were a little stronger,” Cloud said. Then he took a bite and reached for his drink. “You don’t drink, kiddo?” he asked me.

I nodded. I hadn’t asked the laws of this world or anything, but I didn’t especially want to drink just then. “I smoked it myself, so someone who knows more about cooking might know how to make it better.”

“Really? You made this, kid? Wanna join my company?”

Apparently cooking was a valued skill in this world. “I’d prefer to keep being an adventurer for a while. There are some things I want to do.”

“Too bad. Well, if you ever need anything, just come by and ask!” It looked like he was getting a little tipsy and saying things he didn’t fully mean.

Over the course of the next three days, I walked around pretty much the entire south gate city. I made it to the outskirts of the farming region just once, and I wasn’t sure if I’d make it back again.

I also visited a slaver’s for the first time since coming to this world. I partly wanted to look for Rurika and Chris’s friends, but people had also told me that if I wanted to keep going as a solo adventurer, I should think about buying a slave. They’d sounded pretty serious about it. It apparently wasn’t unusual for adventurers to buy themselves a party of slaves. There were limits to what you could do while traveling alone as well. I’d run into adventurers in the south gate city whom I’d first met in the stopover city, and this was the advice they’d given me when I turned down their offer to let me in their party.

Going to the slaver’s taught me that there were several types of slaves:

Crime slaves: Their enslavement period was based on the severity of their sentence. They had to be set free when their sentence was up, so individuals generally didn’t buy them. They were mainly bought by entrepreneurs to work in mines and on farms. Right now, many of the worst offenders in the kingdom were being sent to the front lines in the Black Forest as well.

War slaves: These were people taken as prisoners of war. If you were a VIP your home country might pay a ransom to get you back, but that was unlikely for regular folks. And the more people who were captured, the easier it was to

lose track of the person offering to pay the ransom in the chaos. Even if you did find them, they frequently weren't able to pay, so many prisoners were forced to work until they could afford to buy themselves, and they became slaves as a result.

Debt slaves: Locals who couldn't pay their bills would frequently sell themselves into slavery to help their families. In those cases, you could place conditions on your purchase. The better conditions you could negotiate with your buyer, the more money it cost when a slaver bought you, since that made you easier to sell.

War slaves and debt slaves didn't have a clear term of release, but they could buy their own freedom once they made enough money. Obviously, when they were hired to help with a business, they could be paid less than half of what a regular employee would get, which meant their pay could be very low. And though they were slaves, the buyer was obligated to provide them with the bare minimum of comfort. You'd get penalized for things like not feeding them. If they died under suspicious circumstances there would be an investigation, and if you were found at fault, you could end up becoming a crime slave yourself.

An adventurer's slave had to have a little combat prowess, or at least have agreed to a scuffle or two. But you generally wanted someone who really could fight—it was easier to fight alone than to fight with someone who didn't know what they were doing. Apparently some adventurers hired slaves to serve purely as decoys as well. It would be hard to prove that a death was intentional while out on a hunting quest, after all. Of course, if the same thing kept happening...you'd inevitably come under some scrutiny, it seemed.

After hearing all that, I asked about prices, and it was all higher than I could afford just then. If I lowered my standards it might have been achievable, but it still wasn't something I could do lightly.

I asked if they had any beastfolk or elf slaves, and they told me that they didn't. Both males and females of their kind were popular, so they tended to sell quickly in the kingdom as long as they didn't have any obvious issues. I had to wonder why they were so popular among those who practiced human supremacy, but it seemed beastfolk tended to be strong, so many people hired

them for heavy labor. The slavers said they hadn't seen an elf there in over ten years.

It seemed to be Ciel's first time at a slaver's too. At first she looked around wide-eyed, but toward the end she seemed to get sick of it and tucked herself into my hood, which she'd taken a liking to recently.

I left the slaver's and headed back to the guild, which hung under a tense air.

"Did something happen?" I asked an adventurer I recognized. He told me that a caravan that had left for the capital five days earlier had been destroyed. It wasn't a large one, but they'd had at least ten escorts accompanying them. I remembered passing by them on their way out just as I'd arrived.

"What got them?" I asked.

"Monsters, apparently. Someone from the nearby village who found the bodies came to let us know."

"What's everyone doing here, then?"

"Putting together a hunting party. Apparently the word got in yesterday, but the party's survivors were taken to a church, so they had to go to ask for more details."

"Will there be conscription?"

"People based in this guild might be conscripted. There might be rank requirements depending on the monsters responsible, though."

While we were talking, a man came out. He was a big, brawny man who fit the phrase "meat wall" quite well. Apparently this was the guild master. "You're all here, I see. I'm sure you've heard the story already. Adventurers of Rank C or higher will be conscripted for this. The monsters in the hunt will be orcs. You can expect thirty at the very least."

"What's the reward?"

"Ten silvers for participation. Extra if you distinguish yourself."

"Are Rank D or lower forbidden?"

“You can participate if you have experience fighting orcs. But be warned that we may see an advanced subtype.”

“When do we set out?”

The adventurers peppered the guild master with questions, and he answered each one precisely. “We head out first thing tomorrow. We’ll be traveling by wagon, so if you have one of your own, we’d appreciate you bringing it. We’ll provide food and potions. Any other questions? If not, participants, please fill out the paperwork and disperse for now.”

Adventurers of Rank C and higher took their turns filling out the paperwork while the remaining Rank Ds with orc-fighting experience discussed whether or not to participate. It was quite sudden to call a hunt, but having the road to the capital closed off like this was just that inconvenient for everyone.

“Going to join in?” I was asked, but I told them I’d never fought orcs, so I couldn’t. I was Rank D as well.

But does this mean the road to the capital is blocked off now? My reservation with the inn would end today, and I was trying to figure out how many days to extend it for. I looked over the quests on the board while thinking about my next move. There were quite a few hunts on there... Would those go unaddressed while so many people were off fighting the orcs?

As for quests in directions away from the capital...there was one about gathering mana herbs that was close by. If there turned out to be monsters in the forest where I went to get them, that could give me a chance to try out my gun.

The next day, I watched the wagons of the orc hunt depart, then headed in the opposite direction, to the south. I could gather mana herbs at all the other herb patches, but I was heading for nearby Kiet Village (which was still half a day’s walk away, they said), where the mana herbs were said to be quite abundant.

In most herb patches, the common wisdom was that you’d be lucky to get about one mana herb for every ten healing herbs. I felt like that wasn’t quite true in my experience, but that might have been because I was always using

Appraisal to search. I'd never searched for them the normal way before, after all.

I set out at a stroll in the direction of the village. Perhaps because she hadn't been outside the city in a while, Ciel seemed quite excited about traveling. Maybe she was thinking she'd get to eat anything she wanted now, since there had been so many eyes on us in the city.

I arrived in Kiet Village before sunset, as expected. Most people would get tired from all that walking, but obviously, I wasn't one of them. I'd walked with Detect Presence activated and noticed some monsters' auras in the forest some distance away. There were...five or so?

"What do you want?" said the gatekeeper.

"I came to collect herbs. And stay at an inn, if one's available."

"All right. But don't wander around the village too much. If you make trouble for the locals, we're throwing you out."

They didn't seem very happy to see me. Maybe some other group of adventurers had made trouble here before? I'd heard they came to this village to gather herbs quite often... I also got the vague impression that the whole village was on edge.

The inn charged one copper per night. In addition to a large bed, the only other furniture in the room was a shelf to put my things on. The food was bare-bones, scarcely better than rations. The people were unfriendly and only talked the bare minimum.

Before going to bed, I took some fruit from my Item Box. I asked Ciel if she wanted it, and she flew up to me happily.

After looking around a bit, I sized up Kiet as the kind of place where people were putting everything they had into basic survival, with no pleasures at all. Yes, they felt very on edge.

"Going off to pick herbs, eh? Even if you see beasts out there, don't hunt them. Though I guess you'll have to fight if you're attacked. There've been monster sightings lately too. Be careful," I was warned. There didn't seem to be

any damage done to the town itself, but maybe they were on edge from the monster sightings. Probably the ones I'd detected on the way here.

Kiet was a small village with few people in it, which was why monsters presented such a threat. The villagers apparently did go on monster hunts, but they were amateurs, so it never came without a cost. But monsters were also an important source of food, so you weren't allowed to hunt them without permission.

I headed into the forest, with gathering mana herbs as my first priority. Mana potions seemed to have been bought up because of the orc hunt, and I'd heard there weren't many in stock. They'd also said there were other parties going to different gathering spots.

I managed to reach the herb patch before noon. My path through the forest was difficult, with lots of tree roots in the way that made it hard to walk. Just avoiding them while making progress would probably have been extremely exhausting for most people. It might have been the hardest walking experience I'd encountered in a forest so far.

This herb patch is a bit small, isn't it? I thought. But my use of Appraisal told me that that small area was packed with mana herbs. They comprised over half the herbs in sight.

I picked quite a few mana herbs while avoiding the new shoots, also being careful not to take too many. After picking enough, I sat down to take a rest and eat. Ciel joined me, of course. I put one of my premade soups on the fire and started getting lunch ready. Making enough for two didn't take much longer than for one, and it always tasted better than eating alone.

Having Ciel nearby really did bring me comfort in my day-to-day life. If only we could have had a conversation, it would have been perfect. Maybe that thought proved I really was lonely.

After taking a breather, I activated my spells again. I called up my automap and used Detect Presence.

"These are the monsters I sensed yesterday... Wulfs? I feel like they're coming toward me. Are those fainter presences animals?" *Maybe I'll hunt them*, I decided. There was no one around, so this was a good opportunity to try out

my gun.

I'd test the gun first by firing at a tree. If that worked out, I'd use it against the wulfs. They might possibly respond to the noise by coming after me.

Ciel, I'm going to fight monsters. Move away, I told her, telepathically. I knew they couldn't hurt her, but I couldn't focus on my swordplay if Ciel were nearby.

I approached my target while using Hide Presence. I looked at my automap as I walked, but I had to be careful not to trip over any roots while I did so. At first I wasn't used to it at all, but using Parallel Thinking helped me overcome the disadvantages it brought. Skills really were such handy things, assuming you used them right.

Once I got close enough, I readied my gun. I was aiming at a fruit-like object hanging from a tree branch about twenty meters away. Maybe that was too far away, but I also wanted to test the effect of my Throwing/Shooting skill.

I took my aim and got ready. I wanted to use one hand if possible, so I tried that out. I counted three, two, one, then pulled the trigger. I'd assumed there'd be a recoil, but my hand remained steady, maybe because of my stats. The bullet grazed the fruit and hit the tree behind it. I'd been hoping to shoot through it, but even grazing a target that small could be taken as a victory.

Then there was the gunshot. It rang in my ears with a tremendous noise. Ciel was a little ways away, and the thunderous sound made her fur stand on end. Also, the monsters moving around three hundred meters away had clearly changed course. They'd sped up now, and they were coming toward us. *Judging by their speed...definitely wulfs.*

If they were reacting to the gunshot, it must have been audible from quite a ways away. Either that, or their hearing was very sharp indeed.

I dropped Hide Presence and began to move. I found some terrain with good visibility for taking aim, stopped there briefly, then activated Hide Presence again and resumed moving.

Soon enough, I found the wulfs sniffing around the place I'd previously been standing. Some had their noses pressed to the ground, probably catching my scent.

I quieted my breathing and readied my gun. I took in a deep, silent breath and pulled the trigger.

The bullet I fired went right into a wulf's neck. It let out a cry and fell over immediately.

The wulfs, caught off guard, looked up and around. I made eye contact with one of them and pulled the trigger instantly. The bullet landed before the wulf could move, leaving a hole between its eyes.

When I pointed my gun at my next target, the remaining wulfs began to move. Some hid behind trees, some came at me. When I pointed my gun at them they dove to the side, making it hard for me to aim. Could they instinctively sense the danger?

They were moving too fast for me to use the gun. I pulled the trigger, but they skillfully dodged. I couldn't hit them like this. My skill modifiers couldn't keep up.

I hid and put some distance between us. I put away my gun and swapped it for my sword. I briefly dropped Hide Presence, then moved around behind a large tree and activated it again. Then I closed the distance and swung my sword just as the wulf came out from behind the tree.

The wulf seemed shocked to see me there, and it fell to a single blow. Then another wulf dove out at me from behind the first one's corpse. I couldn't get my sword into a proper swing, but I did manage to block the wulf's attack with it.

The wulf was sent back, used its momentum to land, then turned right back to me. It used a slightly staggered pattern of steps to advance this time, perhaps on guard for the gun now. I pointed my sword straight at it, ready for any attack. This was a lesson I'd been taught in my mock duels—more precisely, one that had been beaten into me. I used minimal movements to counter the wulf's feints, then used a feint of my own to lure it into an attack. The wulf took the bait, and I dispatched it easily.

Only one was left. The remaining wulf must have realized it was in a bad position, because it was rapidly moving away. I checked my automap again and saw its readings eventually disappear from the map. It seemed to have left my

Detect Presence range, heading in the direction opposite the village.

After the battle I looked for Ciel, and she seemed a little down.

Was it aggravating for you? I asked. She nodded in response, looking a bit wary for some reason.

The sound of the gunshot certainly had traveled a long way, so I decided maybe I should make a silencer or something like it. I'd have to check the list.

I broke down the two wulfs I'd finished with the gun on the spot. I exsanguinated the other two but left them intact. *Yeah, I haven't got much better at that. I have improved a little, though. My Cooking skill seems to know I'm breaking them down for cooking purposes, and it's giving me some bonuses in that regard. I'm also getting a slight improvement to my proficiency.*

As I packed the bodies in my preservation bag, I thought a bit. If I wanted to keep hiding the existence of my Storage spell, the Item Box, I'd have to pretend I was putting things in a magic item bag. But I'd heard those were really expensive, so could I make a small one with alchemy? I didn't have the level or materials for that, though.

On the way back from the herb patch, I found some mushrooms and picked them. They were edible, not poisonous. Well, some were poisonous, but I could avoid those with Appraisal. Ciel watched me with great interest. Grilled mushrooms would be best with soy sauce, but maybe I could just fry them up with salt? I expected the base ingredients themselves to be quite good.

Gathering mushrooms and breaking down the monsters had taken a lot of time, so the sun was already low on the horizon by the time I got back to the herb patch. It was even darker since I was in the forest, but my Night Vision skill made walking a breeze.

I didn't go right back to the village, partly because I assumed Ciel wanted to enjoy her first leisurely meal in a while and also because I was hoping to improve the proficiency of my Cooking skill. I couldn't cook inside a city, so I didn't have many chances at it there. Besides, even if they weren't local delicacies, there were stalls with foods I could only eat in a given city, so I ended up trying those.

For dinner, I had wulf steak and a soup made from wild herbs and wulf meat. I'd collected edible wild herbs during my walk. I also fried up and salted some of the mushrooms I'd recently collected.

I kept thinking how much it would help my camping situation to have powdered soup stock, but I still worked tirelessly. I boiled the wulf bones and added salt. I kept the flame low, and once the broth had reduced, I took out the bones and added the herbs and wulf meat.

For the steaks, I just cut the flesh and fried them with some salt. After all, spices and seasonings were expensive. A luxury, really.

I tried the thin soup and thought a bit. I was getting pretty comfortable in my current situation, so it was time to start thinking about my next move. It had to be the food that did it. Delicious food was what gave people a magnanimous heart...or something like that. The ingredients I'd picked up in Fuse had expanded my repertoire, but I hadn't yet reached a skill level I could be satisfied with.

While eating, I didn't forget to dish some out for Ciel as well. Based on her behavior, she seemed to like mushrooms. Her eyes were shining.

Ah, Ciel. I'm glad you like mushrooms, but don't go around eating them recklessly. Some of them are poisonous. I decided to at least warn her, though I didn't know how poison mushrooms would affect Ciel.

I drank my soup and thought it over. If I could get good enough at cooking to sell what I made, I wouldn't have to keep up the adventuring gig. If I wanted to travel around a lot, I could just serve as a traveling merchant. I could also shift to selling potions as an alchemist if the price on those was good.

That left the guild card to worry about. I had it to serve as an ID, but I didn't know the full scope of what that meant in this world. Currently I used it when I was entering a city or town or taking a job or reporting in at the guild, so I wondered if they held some kind of record of past uses.

Thinking back, when I presented my guild card to enter a town, they seemed to hold it up to some kind of magic device to check it out. I believe they said it involved checking for criminal history? Smaller villages didn't seem to have the same ability. When requesting quests and reporting in after, I gave my card to

the guild staff, then saw them manipulating it somehow behind the reception desk. The most conspiratorial reading was that they could trace your recent activities.

This was fine enough while I was in the kingdom, but I was thinking that I might be better off getting a new ID card made if I ever moved on to another land. It would be nice if the top brass here had completely dismissed me as useless, but I had a feeling they wouldn't give up that easily. I needed countermeasures. I felt like I was being watched while I was in the capital.

But...what about now? I thought to myself. At the moment, at least, I couldn't sense anyone who seemed to be spying on me with Detect Presence. But since there were skills that could be used to evade such detection, it would be dangerous to automatically assume the best.

I finished my meal, took a break, then shifted gears to think back on today's battle instead. I'd confirmed that the gun could be useful in combat, but it wasn't without its issues. Part of it was that I wasn't used to using it yet, but I also couldn't use it calmly when an enemy was charging me. I also couldn't aim properly if my opponent was moving in deceptive ways. Maybe that was understandable, though, since it was a mid-to long-range weapon anyway.

What if I made another and tried dual wielding? Or altered it to fire faster? It felt like using my nondominant hand would make aiming even harder, though. Since I had the bonus from my skill, maybe enough practice would let me wield it well enough regardless.

Then there was its power. The bullets had gone right through the wulfs' bodies. Would they work on monsters with tougher skin? Orcs, for instance? Since that particular hunt was on, I was thinking a bit about orcs. There seemed to be lots of monster trouble happening lately, including the orc attack. Was the trouble following me? It wasn't my fault somehow, was it?

Ah, I'd gotten off the point. The question was whether the gun would work on orcs. If it didn't, maybe I could buff up the gun or the bullets themselves. Modifying them to increase their toughness might also boost their power, but then would the gun be able to withstand it?

There were lots of issues. There were many kinds of iron ores out there, so I'd

have to experiment to find out which one I could use to improve my gun.

I spread out my tarp and decided to wrap up in my cloak for the night and sleep. This time I used Detect Presence while I slept. It seemed like it might be just about to level up.

I was in no hurry to get back, so I decided to spend a few days exploring the forest. I gathered ingredients—wild herbs and berries, and especially more of those mushrooms Ciel liked. Whoever called nature a storehouse of food was right. A lot of it could be poisonous, so it was important to be careful, but I had Appraisal to deal with that.

After picking up a variety of ingredients, I realized I was running out of space in my Item Box, so I decided to head back to town. *I should probably report in about the wulfs too.*

The gatekeeper at Kiet looked shocked by my return. After all, I'd originally told him I was leaving to collect herbs, yet I'd spent three whole days in the forest even though the herb patch was close enough for a day trip.

"Did you run into trouble?"

"I got caught up in gathering and lost track of time. I also ran into some wulfs and got a little lost."

"Wulfs? Where?"

"A bit south of the herb patch. There were five of them. I took out four, but one got away."

"I see. Would you be willing to sell us any meat you got from them?"

"If you don't mind leftovers, sure. How about the pelts?"

"You'd probably get more money from the guild, but we'd be glad to buy them if you make an offer."

"I'm looking to lighten my load, so sure. In exchange, I'd appreciate it if you could ask the innkeeper to make me a nice dinner tonight. Especially if he could make something unique to this village."

"Got it. I'll call someone. Wait here."

I sold the wulf meat and hides, then spent the night in the village. As I'd hoped, the food that night was much improved. The portions were a bit larger, and there was more variety than there had been on my first night there. Though, as usual, the innkeeper's demeanor was silent and surly.

For some reason, my rent also got knocked down to half price. The gatekeeper came by to explain it was my payment for slaying the wulfs, though it felt less like a payment and more like an expression of gratitude. Apparently they'd had sightings of the wulfs and had been struggling to actually get a hunt going.

When I left the village the next day, the gatekeeper's tone felt a little gentler than before. It looked like monsters really were a serious threat to small villages like this one.



When I got back to the city, I found it hanging under an uneasy air.

Wonder if something's happened, I speculated telepathically to Ciel. The strange atmosphere made her droop her ears, then fly into my hood as if to hide.

The guild was over the moon when I handed in my herb haul. They'd already been running low on mana herbs when the orc hunting party sent in a request for more mana potions, and it had left their larders nearly bare.

"Did the hunting party run into some kind of trouble?" I'd known they'd packed up in a rush, but I felt like they'd had more than enough time to pack the supplies they needed.

"When they got to the site, they realized the orcs' numbers were greater than expected. It seems like there was a lot of chaos too."

"Will they be okay?"

"Apparently they were hit with an ambush and managed to repel it, but... Ah, well, I'm sure there'll be an announcement from the guild if anything happens. If you're curious to learn more, come by tomorrow morning to check in."

They also asked me to sell any healing or vigor herbs I had, so I let a few of

those go. I couldn't just sell them my potions, but having the ones I'd made for alchemy just sitting around was getting to be a problem. I could theoretically use them on myself, but the opportunities for that were few and far between. That was why my Item Box was so close to capacity all the time.

As I walked around town, I heard lots of people talking about the orcs. The departure of the big hunting party had made them a topic of great interest to the locals, and because the merchants were keeping tabs on their progress, the information ended up filtering down to the townsfolk.

The inability to safely take the road to the capital made trouble for merchants going that way. The tiger wulf's appearance had already blocked off the route that way from Fesis, so quite a few merchants had decided to head to the capital via the south gate city instead, and now that route was cut off too. It was similar to what I'd done, though our motives were...not quite the same.

At any rate, I paid for a room at the inn for one night. There were lots of vacancies, probably because most adventurers were off on the hunt. But it might fill up quickly if more people ended up getting stuck in town.

First thing in the morning, I had to head to the guild and learn more. If the orc hunt was still stalled, I'd have to find quests to take in the meantime. I'd be able to live without quests for a while, but it was always better to have money than not. Besides, I might need to buy a slave at some point.

I went to the guild the next day and found new information posted there. The adventurers were swarming around it, forming a wall between me and the posting. It didn't look like I'd be able to check it for a while, so I looked at the quests instead. *Seems like there are more herb gathering quests than before... Oh? And the reward's gone up...*

When I looked on the map at the harvest locations, it seemed the closest to walk to was still the one I'd gone to last time. At least, that was true for places where you could get a large haul all at once. There were spots closer to the city, but they weren't as reliable. It looked like there was a good chance that so many people had taken the quests that they'd been stripped bare.

The place I'd gone to last time had been flush with mana herbs, but I'd felt

like there weren't as many healing or vigor herbs. Plus, I'd gathered up so many that it would probably take time for more to grow in.

While I was thinking it over in front of the quest board, I noticed that the crowd had thinned in front of the notice, so I went to check it out.

What's this? The posting described the scale of the orc forces and said that, because there had been several sightings of advanced subtypes during the first attack, they were sending out scouts to check on things ASAP. They were also building a simple fortress as a defensive base and writing a request for aid to the local lord. The larger than expected number of orcs meant they might also have created a settlement.

They were probably hoping they could clear the problem out before the knights arrived, but it seemed they were building a base deliberately to draw the enemy's attention from the scouts.

"E-Excuse me..." I was still looking over the message board when someone spoke to me. I seemed to remember her as one of the receptionists. "Er, are you Sora?" she asked.

"Yes; why?"

"Oh, thank goodness. I have to talk to you. Can we speak over there?" She pointed toward an open reception desk.

I followed her as requested. "What is it?"

"I wanted to ask you to take on a quest..."

"Do you mean an assigned quest? I'm only Rank D," I said. I hadn't taken many delivery quests here, so I couldn't imagine why I'd stand out.

"Well, I guess so. I wanted to ask if you'd collect some healing herbs. They said you were a professional at collecting things..."

"Who told you that?"

"The adventurers talk about it, and the adventurers' guild in Fesis also sent a report."

Did that answer make sense? I guessed I was pretty well known among

adventurers in Fesis, and Rurika and Chris had said that guilds had ways of communicating with each other.

“If you need herbs for the hunt right now, you shouldn’t get your hopes up.”

“Wh-Why not?”

“I don’t know how much you’re asking for, but the main place to get a big haul right now is nowhere near here. I couldn’t make it up and back in just a day. It might take two.”

She paused. “You’re right, the main places to get them are far away. What if we arranged a wagon?”

“That might save time, but I’d rather not have to gather in a group.”

“What? Why not?”

“I just like to focus, that’s all,” I responded.

I was lying. I really just didn’t want people to see me gathering. I mainly relied on Appraisal, after all, and someone might get suspicious if they saw me. I was also a little paranoid about working with people I didn’t know well. I wasn’t really afraid of being stabbed in the back or anything, but working with strangers always carried some degree of risk.

“So, what should we do? I don’t mind taking a gathering quest, of course. It sounds like they’re paying well.”

My anxiety might have shown on my face, because the receptionist looked at me carefully for a moment, then... “Wait just a minute. I’ll consult with my superior.” She quickly stood up and disappeared into the back.

So they’re low on herbs, eh? Maybe it would be efficient to just gather the herbs and have them take them back for me? They might try to cut me out of the profits, though. It was a tricky question.



I rode in the bumpy wagon, watching the scenery go past. The rhythmic clunk of wooden boxes was like background music for our travel.

The wagon was carrying me, four other adventurers, and wooden crates to

hold the herbs. On the coachman's seat sat the driver and an adventurer who was serving as our escort. There was another wagon behind us as well.

"You think it'll rain soon?"

"Maybe. Camping in the rain is tough, so I hope it holds off until we make it back."

The gathering quest would be an overnight deal. There were several herb patches, so we were going to split up into two groups.

The wagon stopped just off the road, and we set up a small base camp, after which we split up to start working. It was probably more efficient than having everyone work together. It seemed unlikely monsters would show up here anyway.

"We'll head to the other location, then. The plan is to meet up around noon, but if we're late, feel free to go back without us." The other wagon would be going to another gathering spot.

Our wagon stopped at the tree that marked our meeting spot, and we split up, leaving the coachman and escort behind. I was somewhat familiar with the adventurers who'd come along. We hadn't talked much except when we were mock dueling together in the stopover city, but they seemed to know about my herb gathering prowess, and they said they had high hopes for me. This was because we'd be paid based on how much we collected as individuals, but we'd also get a special bonus if we got a large enough amount as a group.

Still, I'd just be doing my usual thing. I walked around, analyzing the field with Appraisal and picking herbs as I went. I'd gotten kneepads for the work by now.

The guild had said they'd buy what we collected today for an especially high price, so I kept at it for as long as I could. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my fellow quest-takers as much as possible.

Thanks to Night Vision, I could continue even after it got dark, but I called it a day when even Ciel started looking bored. She was currently resting inside my hood.

After getting a campsite ready, I lit a fire and started cooking. I poured water

into a pot, then added some of the ingredients I'd prepared ahead of time for soup. I'd gotten it all ready a few days earlier. I'd also bought some bread at a shop and stored it in my Item Box, so I got that out now. It was rather cold, of course, so I toasted some slices over the fire, which made a huge difference in the taste. Then I smeared the slices with salted butter and put some cheese between them. Perfection.

Around the time I was finishing, Ciel woke up, drawn to the smell. I prepared servings for two and we ate together. We passed the meal quietly this time.

After eating, there was nothing for us to do but sleep, so I cast the Cleanse lifestyle spell on myself and got ready for bed. But before I slept, I called up my automap and used Detect Presence for good measure. I'd been using Detect Presence while I was gathering, so my surroundings were probably safe, but I double-checked with the automap just to be sure.

Just then, I saw something on the map that Detect Presence alone hadn't picked up. It was an unsteady red light flickering in and out of existence. I wouldn't even have noticed it if I hadn't been paying close attention.

"What's going on there?" I whispered to myself. Ciel looked over at me curiously.

I wasn't sure what to tell her. She understood my words, but that didn't necessarily mean she could grasp their overall meaning. And even if I told her, that didn't mean she could help. It might just give her more to worry about. But still...

Ciel continued to stare at me, motionless, as if she were waiting for me to talk.

I told you about my skills before, right? I said, switching to telepathy. She nodded. *I used one and picked up a presence nearby that I can't account for. At the very least, I don't think it's anyone in the gathering party.*

I'd told Ciel before about how I'd been summoned from another world, and that someone might be watching me because of it. I'd told her partly because she couldn't tell anyone even if they asked, but also just because I needed things to say to practice my telepathy. I think I mostly just wanted to tell *somebody*. She hadn't seemed to understand most of what I was talking about,

though—the concept of coming from another world, especially.

After I explained what was going on, Ciel blinked, and then a sort of determined aura seemed to rise up around her. I rubbed my eyes, and it was gone. *I guess it was just my imagination.* Still, her round, button-like eyes had turned cold, the cast of someone now on guard for an enemy.

If the mystery signal was indeed the someone who was watching me, I couldn't show that I was suspicious of them, or else they might notice. From what I could see on the automap, the other signal wasn't moving. It was staying in the exact same spot. I stayed still for a while, and then the signal disappeared. It hadn't moved out of my scanning range; it was just...gone.

The signal disappeared. I don't know what it means, but I was thinking I'd set my skills and get to sleep. What about you, Ciel?

She bounced up and down, trying to assert something. Was she saying "Leave it to me"?

If that had been the person who was monitoring me, as I suspected, they probably wouldn't come to hurt me. Still, I would have to be careful. My SP was most likely high enough that I could use Parallel Thinking and Detect Presence together overnight without running out before the night was over. This was where doing a lot of mundane walking to raise my levels every day had come in handy.

I awakened to a faint sound. My sleep had been shallow enough that I'd reacted to the smallest of noises. Was it because I'd been thinking about the unseen...watcher, or whatever they were?

I brought up my automap and used Detect Presence, but I didn't see anything. *Maybe the readings yesterday were a mistake on my part?* No, probably not. I'd felt strange presences in cities before as well, so I was right to be suspicious.

Yes, it was probably that their ability to hide themselves exceeded what my Detect Presence skill could pick up. I'd have to keep that in mind when choosing my actions in the future. For instance, what would they do if I were to try to leave the kingdom?

I unfurled my coverings and looked up at the sky. It was covered in light clouds and rain was drizzling down. That was the sound I'd heard.

Ciel, are you okay with rain and stuff? I said telepathically, expecting to find her beside me as usual, but she actually wasn't there. I looked up and saw her flying around, perhaps enjoying the rain. She reminded me briefly of myself when I was a child—romping about without a thought in my head, including whether I'd get wet... Yeah, I knew it was fine, but I also knew we couldn't hang around. We had to get back before it got really serious.

Ciel, let's eat, I called telepathically, and she flew back to me. She came to a stop right in front of me and shook the rain out of her fur. The raindrops spraying off of her spattered on my face and robe.



Ciel panicked a little when she saw this.

Hey, that's okay, I reassured her and quickly used a lifestyle spell to dry off.
Did you have fun?

Ciel nodded happily in response.

We quickly ate our meal and then returned to the road we'd come from, wishing for the rain to stay light. As I approached the base camp, hoping I hadn't kept the other adventurers waiting too long, I found their signals were quite dispersed. It looked like they were still gathering.

"Oh, you're back? Hey, what's all that?" The coachman was surprised to see the bag I was carrying on my back.

A totally understandable reaction. I'd gotten pretty carried away, after all, and gathered until my pack was bursting.

"I worked hard for that bonus," I said with a smile, and he winced in response. *That's right. The coachman is a member of the guild staff,* I remembered. "Are we going to stay a little while longer?"

"Nah. Better head out before the downpour starts. I think we got what they needed, after all." The coachman blew the signal whistle and the dispersed adventurers all returned.

"Are we going already?" one asked.

"I'd like to head out before the rain gets too heavy," the coachman responded. "Looks like he worked hard on your behalf."

Someone called out to me as I transferred my herb load to the crates. I looked over and he gave me a thumbs-up. *Well, that's fine.* I raised my hand in polite response.

We didn't wait for the other wagon before heading out. The rain was picking up, after all.

We delivered the herbs we'd gathered to the guild, received our pay and bonus, then went our separate ways for the day. We'd turned in enough that we didn't even need to wait for the other team to arrive.

The day after we finished the gathering quest, I went around town doing deliveries.

The town seemed a bit on edge, with a listless air around the stalls and street shops. I asked about it while getting lunch, and indeed, it seemed motivated by fear about the orcs. Meanwhile, I was walking around the town doing deliveries very cautiously. Using Parallel Thinking to its utmost, I walked around, scanning with Detect Presence. Normally I wouldn't have used Parallel Thinking with Detect Presence when I was in town. Doubling up on the skill wouldn't increase its sensitivity; it would just tire me out faster.

Still, I was using it for a reason. During the gathering the day before, my Appraisal level had increased and begun reading "Appraisal Lv. MAX." This, in turn, had inspired a new addition to my repertoire...

NEW

[Appraise Person Lv.1]

This was a skill I'd learned when the selection appeared after Appraisal reached its upper limit. At Lv. 1 I'd learn the person's name, at Lv. 2 I'd learn their job, and at Lv. 3 I'd learn their level.

Just like with Appraisal, Appraise Person conjured a pop-up window display when I used it while looking at a person. Now I was using it in tandem with Detect Presence on everyone all at once to raise its proficiency. As a result, it left me feeling a bit sick. Part of it was the drain on my SP, but having my entire vision filled up with pop-up displays was also a factor.

Even I could tell I was feeling pretty mentally exhausted by the time my deliveries were done. I'd been hoping I could use Appraise Person to identify anyone suspicious around me, but it had proven less than fruitful.

I wasn't very hungry, but I managed to down my food and then lay down in bed. I checked my skills and saw [Detect Presence Lv. MAX] among them. I'd already maxed it out. Appraisal had also topped out at Lv. 10, so that might be the case for the rest of the skills.

After steadying my breath, I activated Detect Presence again. I divided the readings I picked up into strong and faint ones. The fainter readings might be people using something like the Hide Presence skill. It would be hard to figure it out from here, though. I had to check. With my own eyes, if possible.

From there, I found a new entry on my skill list.

NEW

[Detect Mana Lv.1]

Detect Mana was a skill that let you perceive a given target's mana. *How is it different from Detect Presence?* I wondered. Since it appeared when I maxed out Detect Presence, it was probably a search skill of some kind. It had taken two skill points to learn Appraise Person, but I had plenty left over.

I'm sure it will prove useful... I hoped. But apparently it would also cost two skill points to learn.

After thinking it over, I selected Detect Mana and spent the points to buy it. I used it right away and got my readings. The search range must have been narrow, because my level was low. I could only scan as far as the inn's immediate surroundings, and the size of each reading differed in intensity.

Does this skill just detect how much mana a person standing nearby possesses? Surely Detect Presence is enough for that... Did I mess this up? I wondered. *No, it's too early to make that call. Let's keep trying things out as I raise my level. It's still an advanced skill—probably—so it can't be too useless,* I reassured myself.

Finally, I checked my jobs list and saw that Scout was now an option. *A job related to reconnaissance, huh?* It apparently gave bonuses to search-type skills. *Since I'll be adventuring on my own for a while, maybe I should switch to that?*

"Hey, your color has improved. Feeling better?" The proprietress was the first person who spoke to me as I entered the dining hall. She must have been worried about how bad I'd looked the night before.

"I think I've been working too much lately. I'll probably rest today."

“You adventurers sure are busy. They’re not back from the hunt yet either. They’re gonna put me out of business like this.”

I wasn’t sure if she was serious or joking, but I left anyway. She was probably talking about the orc hunt, of course.

At the guild, they said that the knights would be setting out with the potions today. *Should I go and watch?* I wondered. I didn’t have anything else to do, and I wanted a look at those knights.

I finished my dinner and headed to the gate, where I saw quite a crowd forming. We were all looking at a band of knights moving in precise formation and dressed in matching equipment. When the person I assumed to be their leader gave the order, the knights and wagons began to move out. There were maybe two hundred in all, and as they all set out in lockstep, it felt like an earthquake. That sound was quickly drowned out by the cheering, though.

Once the knights were out of sight, the cheering crowds dispersed. In their place, a transport wagon entered the city. I watched it until a familiar face came out of it.

“Hey, if it isn’t Sora. Thanks for coming to greet us.”

“Hey, the leader of Gobli—” I spoke up reflexively, and he closed the space between us quickly. I didn’t love having a scraggly old man in my face like that. It felt like punishment.

“Hmm? What was that?” he said.

It’s not nice to threaten people, man. “It’s been a while, Syphon.”

“Good to see you too. You’re looking well. We passed what looked like the knights on the way here. What’s that all about?”

“You’ll hear more from the guild, but it’s the orc hunting party.”

“The orc hunting party? It seemed like a pretty big group.”

Indeed, it was a large group in terms of numbers. “It’s apparently a major operation. They say there might also be some advanced subtypes among them. There’re quite a few adventurers already there, so the inns are pretty empty.”

“I guess that’s lucky? So you didn’t go on the hunt?”

“You have to either be Rank C or higher or have experience fighting orcs. Oh, and they’re on the way from here to the capital, so all traffic’s stopped up that way.”

“Really? I guess I’ll have to check in at the guild.” With that, the Goblin’s Lament party headed off to the guild as a group.

Rather than follow them, I decided to explore the city a bit. I mainly looked at different stalls and tried out local delicacies. It was a hit-or-miss venture, but some of the offerings were really quite tasty.

Once I’d finished eating, I asked for maintenance at the weapon shop, then walked around town while checking the prices of different types of ore. Maybe because the road to the capital was blocked, the prices on all kinds of items seemed to be gradually increasing. Potions had already gone up twenty percent.

“Orcs, eh?” I hadn’t even seen one in person. Unlike goblins, they were two meters tall, burly and swift. Their skin was tough and required decent weapons to penetrate, according to the documents. Their meat was delicious, though.

I wanted to avoid danger, but part of me also wanted to try fighting one. More precisely, I kind of wanted to see if I could beat one... But how effective would I be at my current skill level? Would a mock duel with Syphon make it clear?

The next day, I stopped in at the guild and checked out the quests.

There were fewer gathering quests now. I figured people with nothing better to do were taking them, since the payment for them had gone up. I’d done my part in reducing demand too. On the other hand, there were a lot of hunting quests available. Hunting quests were an adventurer’s bread and butter, so there was a lot of competition for them. They were popular enough that people came by early in the morning and fought over them. A lot of adventurers were hot-blooded in that particular way.

The way they were piling up now was collateral damage from the orc hunt.

There simply weren't enough people to take care of all of them. Some folks were coming in from other cities like Syphon and his party, so I assumed they'd have enough people to handle them, but I wasn't sure what would happen if the hunt dragged on for too long.

"Hey, Sora, you looking for quests too?"

"You're in good spirits this morning. Taking quests already, Syphon?" Taking quests the day after his arrival in town... Who had that kind of energy? Not that I was one to talk...

"Not possible today, for sure. Though if I was on my own, I might."

Indeed, his broad smile showed none of the exhaustion I'd expect after a long journey. But his party had to restock, and the other members who hadn't been to this city in a while wanted to have a look around.

"Seems like there's still some hunting quests," he added. Yeah, it figured he'd notice. "Are you thinking of taking one, Sora?"

"Hunting quests aren't really my bag. I've accepted that I'll have to deal with some things I run into while I'm traveling, but I don't really want to actively go out and fight. Safety first."

I would feel safe fighting a monster I'd slain before, but I wasn't about to go out hunting a totally unknown enemy. The thought scared me, quite frankly.

"That's a shame," he said after a pause. "What kind of monsters have you been fighting?"

"Goblins and wulfs, mostly." I'd fought other things, but I didn't like to think about them. I certainly couldn't have beaten them by myself.

"Ah, the beginner's pathway to success. They're one of the easier kinds to fight, since serpents, arachnids, and hornets tend to be a little more tricky."

The serpents in question were blood snakes. The arachnids were spyders. The hornets were killer bees. They each had their individual traits and points of interest written about in the guild reference guides. Unfortunately, I hadn't hunted them at all.

"Oh, right. There's something I wanted to ask you, Syphon. What do you think

would happen if I fought an orc right now?”

“You interested in fighting one?”

“I’m not actually sure. But monsters tend to come out of the blue, like that tiger wulf from before. So I’d like to get an idea of how strong I am.”

“Aha. Why don’t we have a fight, then? It’s been quite a while since our last spar.”

He started walking toward what I assumed was the arena. I nodded and followed him.

The arena was entirely deserted. We each picked up a wooden sword and got ready. And then...

“Hey, don’t sulk.”

We were eating lunch in the dining hall-slash-bar located in the guild. I’d known he was better than me, but I hadn’t realized how easy he’d been going on me during our fights. I wasn’t angry about that, just feeling pathetic that I hadn’t been able to see it before now.

“Well, I think you can feel confident. You’ve grown a lot in not so many days.” Gytz, who’d come to meet us halfway through, gave me some encouragement.

“Yeah. And in a one-on-one setting I think you’d hold your own against an orc. You can have confidence in that. But as conflicting as this may be, you also need to be careful. Just like humans, individual monsters fight in different ways.” Syphon smiled broadly as he drank down his glass.

“How very true,” came a smooth voice. “And don’t you think you’d make a much better role model without that thing in your hand?”

Syphon’s tankard suddenly disappeared, and then I saw Juno standing beside him with a smile. I’d always heard that the more agreeable a person was, the scarier they were when they were angry, and this was the moment I really felt it. A tremble ran through my body.

Syphon winced, and Gytz sighed. She’d stopped him from drinking many times before, after all.

We kept sparring after our meal, and by the time dinner was done, I was so exhausted I felt like keeling over. I'd been thinking way too hard about so many things lately, but that night I was able to sleep soundly.

On days when I wasn't leaving town on quests, I was always fighting someone. I'd get invitations to join parties at those times, but I'd turn them down, saying I'd be heading back to the capital once the road was clear.

Fighting a variety of people taught me something. As I'd surmised, my actual physical abilities were on the high side. My strength, stamina, and speed, at least, were above average. Outside of Syphon's group, I only lost to one person in a duel, and he was a bodybuilder with arms like tree trunks. If I could see their stats it would have made things much clearer, but unfortunately, the best I could see just then was their levels. Of those in the town at the moment, Syphon's group had by far the highest level, and the levels beneath them were all in the teens at the most.

Syphon's group threw themselves into hunting quests, and on days off we met up and they dragged me to the arena. Syphon was kind enough to spar with me, but I didn't tell him that Gytz's teachings afterward were way more useful to me than his. Gytz was the quiet type, but he was apparently famous for his skill as a shield-wielder. Perhaps the perception needed to intuit his opponent's movement and block their attacks was what made his opinion so highly sought after. That was clear enough in the way the adventurers flocked to him day after day when they weren't out on quests.

The mock duels weren't all one-on-one. Sometimes we grouped up and fought in team matches. Teams weren't always divided by party either; I worked with all kinds of people. Syphon said this was practice for thinking on your feet, and everyone looked at him with suspicion. But for some reason, whenever Gytz agreed with him, they all nodded and did what they were told. I felt a little bad for Syphon, but his constant grin of amusement probably helped explain why they were skeptical.

That was my routine until the day when the orc hunting party returned.

The townspeople, waiting with bated breath to hear the results, saw them

coming back and gathered in front of the gate. The group was approaching from afar. The townspeople let out a cheer when they saw them, but as they came into better view, the cheers died down and uneasy expressions appeared on the faces of all assembled.

The party was in bad shape, and the phrase “fallen warriors” naturally came to mind. They had none of the elation of a hunt gone well, and a heavy air hung around them as they passed through the gate. Their numbers seemed greatly reduced, with less than half as many knights as they’d started with.

The assembled townspeople, at a loss for words, just let them pass silently.

“They don’t look like people who just ran a successful hunt,” I muttered. But had they been rushing back after a total rout, they surely would have looked more panicked.

I could also see the corpses of dead orcs through the gaps in the wagon canvases. There just didn’t seem to be enough to suggest they’d defeated an army. Maybe that explained why everyone was so uneasy. Something had clearly gone wrong.

I ended up learning the answer at the dining hall that night.

Syphon asked me out to dinner once again. When I sat down, we were joined by one of the adventurers from the orc hunt. He and Syphon apparently knew each other, and they had even taken quests together in the past.

“Syphon, you came here too?”

“You bet. I was in Fesis; thought I’d come this way heading back to the capital. You working out of this area now, Draco?”

“Yeah, guess so. You can get a lot of good quests here, if not as good as at the capital. Things are a little quieter here than there, for one thing. Not much fighting over quests either.”

“So. What actually happened? Or are you sworn to secrecy?”

“Nah. The guild’s gonna make an announcement tomorrow. This is honestly a thing where we need to spread the word.”

Syphon poured more alcohol into his glass and urged him on.

Draco took a drink and spat out his next words. “We met a demon.”

“Wha...?”

At that point, the eyes of everyone listening fell on Draco, including people at other tables. The unexpected word brought a mix of surprise, confusion, and fear.

“You’re kidding.”

“It’s true. No question about it. It was...a demon.”

His face contorted in fear, as if he were suddenly reliving that moment. His previously dry face welled up with cold sweat. He opened his mouth several times as if to speak, then closed it, seemingly not sure what to say.

He went through that routine several times before finally speaking in a hushed voice. When he did, it was like he was trying to expel the fear of the moment and put it behind him.

◇Flashback: Draco’s Perspective

They’d found a settlement in the forest during the orc hunt, so the knights had gotten together to mount a raid. We rescued the hostages, then embarked on a divide-and-conquer campaign and made good progress. The adventurers who’d saved the hostages went back to the wagons right away and kept a good distance from the front lines. We drove back the orcs that tried to come after the hostages and started getting ready for our next move. The Rank A adventurers and the knights made quick work of the advanced subtypes, the high orcs and orc generals in the village. All in all, the battle was going well.

We were down to just a few orcs when...it happened.

It came down from the sky and just hovered there looking down at us. Just the sight of it threw everyone into a panic. Then, as if it’d been waiting for the frenzy to start, it held up a hand. A mage friend of mine said it felt like an explosion of mana. There was a flash of light and a blast, and part of the knights’ regiment went flying. I looked and saw a big hole in the ground where they’d been. The thing did it again, then a third time.

Then it touched down. Even from a distance we could see its eyes were as red as blood. I didn't even meet its eyes, but just feeling them on me sent a chill up my spine.

It began to stroll toward us as casually as you please, lightly swinging its arms as it went. Sometimes it pushed adventurers away, sometimes it sent them flying. It was like a literal rain of blood. The knights snapped out of their daze and tried to attack, but they were helpless. Even their carefully coordinated team attacks wouldn't work on it. It tore right through their armor and into their flesh.

It went on that way, killing people, walking forward, looking around like it was searching for something. Gradually it got closer to me, and then I think I made eye contact. I don't really remember what happened after that. I just ran as fast as I could. Next thing I knew, I was in the forest trembling and cradling my head and waiting for the sounds to stop. The screams seemed to sear themselves into my brain, and even when I covered my ears I felt like I could still hear them.

I don't know how much time had passed, but the sounds stopped, and I wandered back to the settlement in a trance along with the people around me. My body didn't want to go back, but I felt like I had to see what had happened.

The sight was...awful. I thought, *If there really is a Hell, it has to look like this.* Gobs of flesh, bodies everywhere, mashed together, human and orc alike. I think the ones who died instantly were the lucky ones. The ones who'd just lost an arm or a leg and were barely hanging onto life were worse off.

I just stood there at a loss for words until someone's voice snapped me out of my trance. Then, I started moving to help the ones who were still alive. I didn't have a lot of potions on hand, but I think instinct made me save whatever lives I could.

The adventurers and knights who were still there just said they drove it off. But they couldn't actually wound it. The thing just had its way with them, muttered the words "Not here, eh?" and left.

We held a funeral for the dead and gathered up what mementos of theirs we could. Then we loaded up any whole orc bodies plus as many materials and magistones from the not-whole ones as possible to serve as proof of the hunt,

and got the hell out of there.



The guild hung under a heavy air the next day. One-third of the adventurers who had gone on the orc hunt hadn't returned, and many of those who had were so badly wounded it was unlikely they could stay in the job—not without the help of a high-level holy mage or extremely potent potions, at least.

The adventurers hadn't been hit as hard as the knights, but the loss of so many of their comrades had left a lot of people shaken. They'd known that they were in a potentially deadly occupation, but the fact that the extermination had come at the hands of a demon must have made the whole thing all the more shocking.

Demons were said to be the Demon King's vanguard, creatures that appeared in this world when the Demon King manifested. For many people who had heard the revelation of his revival three years earlier but hadn't quite believed it, this encounter might have been their first real confirmation of the Demon King's existence.

While the rest of the adventurers were stewing, I went about my usual routine. I'd decided to take a hunting quest to check the fruits of my training, but I'd also wanted to get space—I couldn't spend any more time in the doom-and-gloom atmosphere of the guild.

As for what hunt I took, I'd decided that a wulf assignment seemed to be the most profitable. They gave a lot of saleable materials and you could use the meat in cooking, so they were useful in more ways than one. I'd also used my gun to beat half of them last time, so this time I wanted to try a hunt using only my sword.

Wouldn't fighting goblins be a better test of my training in fighting humanoids, you ask? Maybe so, but the money was more important.

"Hey, Sora, did you come to take a quest too?"

I turned around to see Syphon, the man who always showed up somehow or other.

“Morning. I wondered where you were. I didn’t see you at breakfast.”

“I drank too much. And...Juno got mad at me.”

His wife got mad at him, huh? Gytz had said Juno could be really scary when she was angry. I’d seen her hitting Syphon with her staff a lot too, and I also recalled him saying yesterday that he was drinking to commiserate with Draco.

“If you’re here, does that mean you guys are taking a quest too?”

“Yeah, I hear those hunting quests are really piling up. I can’t go back to the capital in good conscience until we clear some of them out. And with *that* thing running around, I’d bet that all traffic to the capital will cease for a little while longer. What are you taking on, Sora?”

“This wulf quest.”

“The old standby, huh?”

“Safety first, like I said. Besides, I thought familiar monsters would give me a good baseline for how much I’ve improved.”

“Well, I think I’ll take this one,” he said, pointing at a different quest.

“Shouldn’t you check with your team about it?”

“We talked things over yesterday. I may be their leader, but I obviously don’t decide things without them. How about we share a wagon on the way?”

It looked like the village that put out the wulf hunting quest was in the same direction they were going. *Just a coincidence? Surely not. The guy’s pretty considerate, despite his ugly mug. Is that how he scored a wife like Juno?*

The staff seemed glad we were taking on hunting quests. They really must have been piling up.

I ate an early lunch, then boarded the wagon. My destination was a day and a half’s walk away, but this would get me there within the day. Light wagons like this one were especially fast.

On the way, we talked about a lot of things. Syphon told me his goal was to get to a dungeon city, make lots of money, and secure a comfortable retirement. I thought maybe he was just talking about Juno and himself, but the

other three party members seemed to feel the same way. Gytz and another party member named Jinn wanted to open their own shops.

Syphon then asked what I wanted, and I said I'd like to travel around and see all different lands. He gave me a slightly skeptical look, then said maybe we'd meet up in a dungeon city someday. There were no dungeons in Elesia, after all.

We'd made good conversation, but we'd reached the point where our paths split apart. I got off the wagon at my destination and said my goodbyes.

"Thanks," I told them. "Both for taking me this far and for the fun conversation." Ciel had seemed to be listening in with great interest as well.

"Hey, take care on your way home," Syphon responded.

The Goblin's Lament had taken a spyder hunt, and were going to travel two more days up the road in the wagon for that purpose. Juno seemed less than happy about it, but the client was paying well, so they'd taken it. Really, I doubted anyone particularly enjoyed fighting creepy giant arachnids. It seemed they'd also chosen that particular quest because it was far from the place where the orcs had made their settlement.

I walked along the road, which had now grown narrower and seemed a lot less well paved than the main thoroughfares. It would be possible to traverse it via wagon, but probably not easy.

I arrived in Lupowa Village a little bit before dark.

Well...a village? I guess you could call it that...

I stood in front of the deteriorated gate. As for the gatekeeper...well, I just kept standing there until a villager finally came over to speak to me.

"What do you want?!" he demanded.

I seemed to be getting that a lot. Did I not really look like an adventurer or something? "I came here for the wulf-hunting quest," I responded.

"Oh, the wulf hunt?" Did he look a bit disappointed? I hoped I hadn't said something wrong. "Sorry," he said, seemingly noticing the discomfort on my face. "I'll take you to the headman. Come along."

He led me to the house in question, then called out.

“Mr. Headman. This man’s here about the wulf-hunting quest.”

A man in early old age came out from the back and looked at me, then around me. “Just you?” he asked at last.

“Yes, I’m Sora, a Rank D adventurer. I’m going solo.”

“I see. Thank you for coming all this way. Lantz will explain the details. Show him to Lantz’s place.”

“Sir. Right this way,” said the gatekeeper, who then led me out to Lantz’s house.

As we walked around the village for a little while, I couldn’t help but feel like I was being watched. The whole place looked to be in pretty bad shape, with damage to a lot of the houses.

“Lantz, an adventurer is here about the wulfs.”

The pleased-looking man who came out had bandages on his head and one arm. “The wulf hunt, eh? You know the terrain around here?”

“I had a look at the map, yeah.”

Lantz went over it with me just to be sure, and his explanation was clear and precise. It also matched what I could see on my automap. But there were other readings on it that worried me.

“Are the people here...?” I started to ask, but I was interrupted. A group of men and women had sprung up all around me. I’d seen them approaching on the automap.

“Hey, you’re an adventurer, right?” one asked.

“Please, save my daughter!”

“Please, defeat them!”

“They took my wife! Can’t you please do something?”

“Didn’t you bring anyone else? Is it really just you?”

“Please, please avenge my husband...”

S-So close. Back off, please! Plus, they all seemed so desperate, which was a little scary. It was so overwhelming that even Ciel looked unsettled.

“Calm down, folks. I’ll explain everything. He won’t be able to handle it, though,” Lantz called out.

“But Lantz...”

“He just came here for the wulf hunt, and he’s Rank D. He can’t handle this alone. You people are basically telling him to go out and get killed.”

“But Lantz, your daughter—” a man started to say, but Lantz glared him into silence.

Whoa, that guy’s intimidating! I thought. Reluctantly, the people went their separate ways.

“Sorry about that,” Lantz said. “They’re really on edge.”

“What happened here? The village is in shambles, like something attacked it...”

“Yeah, it all happened the other day. But first, come by my house. We had an inn, but it’s not in any shape to take in guests now, so you can stay the night with me.”

I took him up on his offer. Inside, the house was neatly tended. I sat down on a rug at his urging, and he brought me a cup of water.

“It happened just the other day,” he continued. “We were attacked by orcs. Most of the men were out of the village at the time, and they kidnapped the women and took our livestock. We ran to get them back, but as you can see, it didn’t go well,” he said, clenching the fist of his bandaged arm ruefully.

“I see. So that’s what they wanted help with?”

“Yeah. Have you ever fought orcs before?”

“No. And I should tell you that I don’t have much combat experience at all.”

He paused. “You sound very sure of that.”

“It’s the truth. I don’t want you getting your hopes up.” That statement made him wince for some reason. “Still, orcs, huh? You should probably send

someone out with a quest request tomorrow.”

“Yeah. You’re right,” he agreed.

Well...as long as he’s not counting on me! Yes, right. That’s good. “Have there always been orcs around here?” I asked.

“Not that I know of. We hadn’t even seen a goblin in years. Same for the wulfs.”

“I see.” It was a ways away, but they could have been stragglers from the settlement. Maybe there were some they missed, especially since the demon had thrown everything into chaos. “So can I just go hunt the wulfs like I came here for?”

“Please do. Just because we have an orc problem doesn’t make the wulfs any less dangerous. But right now, ironically, the orcs will probably keep the wulfs away for a while.”

Wulfs had a strong sense of smell and wouldn’t come into a village that still smelled strongly of orcs.

“You’re staying in town? Isn’t there a chance the orcs might come back?” I asked.

“We thought about it, but many of us are elderly, so we aren’t sure if that’s the best move.”

They seemed to be thinking that the chance of an ambush would be too high if they moved slowly away. At least in town they could use their livestock as decoys and hole up in case of an attack. The orcs weren’t the only threat, anyway—and the kidnapped people were still out there.

“The bedroom’s that way,” he said in conclusion. “Sorry it’s small.”

“I’m just glad to have a roof over my head.” I ate a simple dinner and took advantage of the spare room.



“Open status.”

Skill: Walking Lv. 32

Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)

XP Counter: 339521/400000

Skill Points: 8

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. MAX] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 2] [Enhance Physique Lv. 8] [Regulate Mana Lv. 7] [Lifestyle Spells Lv. 6] [Detect Presence Lv. MAX] [Sword Arts Lv. 8] [Dimension Spells Lv. 7] [Parallel Thinking Lv. 5] [Boost Recovery Lv. 6] [Hide Presence Lv. 5] [Alchemy Lv. 7] [Cooking Lv. 6] [Throwing/Shooting Lv. 3] [Fire Spells Lv. 3] [Water Spells Lv. 3] [Telepathy Lv. 4] [Night Vision Lv. 3]

Advanced Skills

[Appraise Person Lv. 4] [Detect Mana Lv. 2]

Contract Skills

[Holy Spells Lv. 1]

Appraise Person had reached Lv. 4, meaning it would give me more info in the pop-up window when I used it. I appraised Lantz just as a test and got the following display:

[Name: Lantz / **Job:** Hunter (Former Adventurer) / **Lv:** 8 / **Species:** Human]

It was probably his judgment as a former adventurer that had led him to believe I couldn't handle the orc hunt.

I'd also learned a new dimension spell, Barrier. This let me form what was basically a magical shield, a thin defensive wall around myself kind of like a force field. I could strengthen it by channeling mana into it, but even just using it normally consumed a lot of MP.

I'd run some tests and found that it was strong enough to deflect bullets if I kept it small and focused enough. Even ten straight shots didn't faze it, but it faded when the shield's time limit ran out. Focusing it like that also seemed to reduce how long I could use it. Meanwhile, if I expanded it to cover a wider area, bullets could break it easily. Still, it did slow the bullets, and it would probably offer decent protection.

I really wanted to test what it would let me defend against in combat.

Orcs, huh? Ciel, what do you think? I thought the words casually, not expecting an answer. Indeed, Ciel didn't really respond; she just blinked her eyes. I reached out and stroked her gently, calmed by the warmth of her little body.

I brought up the automap and saw seven wulfs in the place Lantz had mentioned they'd be. Then, on the far edge of the map, I noticed five monster signals and seven human ones. Those must have been the orcs and the kidnapped villagers. I was surprised that neither was that far from the village. Close enough to pick up on the automap in territory I hadn't visited yet, at least...

In addition, there was one extra signal, far from the village. Even with my Detect level maxed out, it was still hazy. I'd easily lose track of it without careful focus, but it was definitely there. I added on Detect Mana, and the signal became a little more solid.

"So that's the one," I whispered.

Ciel, who had her eyes closed contentedly, now opened them and looked at me. I patted her as if to say *Nothing*, then started to think.

The signal I'd picked up on the gathering quest before... If I focused on it now, I could definitely track it.

"I'd better do something about that too..."

I definitely felt like I was being watched. Whoever it was had followed me on my herb-gathering quest and was tagging along for this one too. Maybe it was a servant of the king who'd summoned me. That said, this was my only evidence that I was being surveilled.

"The bigger problem is over there..."

The displays for some of the kidnapped people and the orcs had begun to overlap and merge. I'd read in the guild library that humanoid monsters liked to capture human women for carnal purposes.

I shut down the automap to keep my eyes off it and focused on trying to sleep. Still, those seven signals remained burned into the back of my eyelids.

"Gotta stop that," I told myself. It wasn't my problem anyway, right? Yet the desperation that dominated the faces of Lantz and his neighbors kept flashing like an alarm in my mind. I really could fight the orcs. Syphon and the others had told me I'd be fine one-on-one, and that was just based on my sword skills. If I added in some magic, I could probably take on a few at once.

Still, I was nervous. It was too late to build up my levels with any last-minute walking. About my only option was to learn some new skills that would be useful in combat, but...

"This one looks like it could be useful, I guess?"

NEW

[Sword Tech Lv. 1]

This skill consumed SP to let you deliver high-powered sword attacks. It looked like it had become available once I got Sword Arts up to Lv. 5. The only technique it made available for the moment was "Sword Slash," a beginner skill that sped up your slashes to twice or more their previous power. It was still better than nothing, though. It could be an ace in the hole.

My thoughts continued to swirl around the unknown quantity that the orcs represented, which made it impossible to sleep soundly. I'd made up my mind to fight them, but maybe memories of that busted-up orc hunting party kept

haunting me. I covered my head with a sheet, shut my eyes tight, and told myself to sleep.

Chapter 8

My Sword Slash tore down through the monster's body, and it sank slowly to the ground. Just as I was letting out a sigh of relief, a sword thrust out from behind the slain monster. Having let my guard down, I was slow to react, but I managed to haul my sword back into position to deflect it. However, it was such an awkward position that I still ended up knocked off my balance. A follow-up came slicing down at me, unstoppable...

And then I bolted upright.

I let out a deep sigh, put my hand to my forehead, and found it covered in sweat. I used my Cleanse spell to wash it off, then stood up and stretched.

I hadn't slept well, but I was determined. I checked my stats and skills once more, then clenched my fists. It wasn't like I was acting entirely out of the goodness of my heart, anyway...

"Can we talk for a minute?" I asked Lantz after I got my things ready.

"What is it?"

"Do you know how many orcs and kidnapped villagers there are?"

He shot me a hard glance, but there was a sliver of doubt in his eyes. Perhaps an internal conflict? "Why are you asking that?" he said at last.

"I guess it would be rude to say I just got curious, right? I thought some things over before going to sleep last night, and...if you'll help me, I think I can hunt those orcs. Well, at least, I'm pretty sure I can lure them away while you guys save the kidnapped villagers."

From what I'd seen, Lantz's house was too big for just one person. Too many dishes too. And what he'd said to those people yesterday...it looked like he was holding back his feelings.

"If you're worried about what they said yesterday, don't be. This is just part of being an adventurer," he said.

“You’re speaking from experience?”

He paused. “Yes.”

“It’s not just about helping you. I also want to fight orcs. Or rather...I want to see if I’m good enough to beat them.”

“You’re saying it’s a test of your abilities?”

“I doubt you’ll believe me, but I’m also not here to get your permission. If you won’t help me, I’ll talk to the others. They’ll be down for it, don’t you think?”

I was playing tough, but I definitely wanted Lantz along if I could get him. The people who’d asked me to hunt the orcs yesterday were ordinary villagers. One of them was a hunter, but he probably didn’t know much about orcs. I wasn’t exactly an experienced leader either.

Lantz stared at me hard and didn’t look away. I met his eyes firmly. I don’t know how long our deadlock lasted, but it was Lantz who looked away first.

“Why go this far?” he asked. “You don’t even know us.”

“That’s right. But people have been kind to me, too, even when they didn’t know me. And I really do want to fight those orcs.”

If you asked me whether I really wanted to fight, the answer would be about fifty-fifty. I certainly didn’t want to die. And though Syphon and his buddies had given me their seal of approval, they probably hadn’t imagined I’d try to take on multiple orcs at once.

My feelings weren’t simply based on logic, though. Rurika, Syphon, and the others surely hadn’t taken me under their wings purely out of the goodness of their hearts either. But their willingness to help a clueless newcomer to this world (even if I did have my skill to help me) had meant more to me than I could say.

“I’m partly doing it to satisfy myself. So don’t feel bad,” I said curtly, then waited for his answer.

Lantz seemed hesitant, seeming to weigh his history as an adventurer, his life as a citizen of the village, and his position as a husband and father against each other. I suspected he was a good man with a kind heart deep down.

At last, he relented. “All right. I’ll talk to the others.”

“Please do. I can lure the orcs away, but I don’t know how many captives there are, so I’ll need you guys to get them out.” I actually *did* know the number of captives, but it wasn’t like I could tell him how I knew.

As Lantz and I left his house together, a villager came up and pleaded with me once more. He was so desperate, he was literally clinging to me. Lantz pulled him off with a wince and asked him instead to bring all the villagers to the headman’s house.

Once the villagers were all present, we talked things over, discussing how to save the kidnapped villagers and defend the village in the meantime. After all, there was a chance the orcs might pass us on our way out, so we couldn’t take for granted that the village would be safe in our absence.

After talking things over with the headman, Lantz and four other villagers agreed to go with me. The villagers remaining behind would send a fast youngster to put a quest in with the guild, while the others would hunker down in the storehouse. We picked the storehouse because it was more solidly built than the other houses and had a basement that could serve as a shelter.

“Please, be careful.” The headman bowed deeply to me.

We walked out, Lantz leading the way. They didn’t know exactly where the orcs were, so the villagers described which way they’d seen them leaving and we moved in that direction.

As we walked along, the forest grew thicker around us. I pretended to be scanning the forest, finding traces of their passage and guiding others along. Lantz seemed shocked, so I told him I’d picked up some methods of tracking monsters and beasts during long stays in the forest on gathering quests. That made-up excuse seemed to work well enough.

In fact, I was using my automap to track the orcs down, but we really had seen a couple of likely-looking traces of their passage on the way here—signs of intentional damage to trees, made roughly equidistantly, as if somebody were marking their turf. Lantz must have noticed these, too, because he grew more cautious. At some point, I’d ended up taking the lead.

“Wait. I think the forest thins out ahead. I’ll check things out, so you guys wait here.”

“Will you be all right on your own?”

“It’s easier if I travel light. Lantz, you take the group, and...yeah. Hide around there.”

I spoke firmly, hoping they would stay disciplined and in place. As understandable as it would be—their families had been abducted, after all—I didn’t want anyone getting impatient and doing something reckless.

“If anyone runs out there and gets seen, it could put the hostages in greater danger. If you can’t do as you’re told, leave now. You’ll put not just yourself but your comrades in jeopardy.” I was pretty sure they understood, but I decided to reinforce it just in case. Emotions could always cloud good judgment.

Some of them clearly didn’t appreciate being ordered around by someone much younger, but I ignored them and looked at Lantz. He must have gotten my drift, because he nodded and then started moving, urging the others along. I watched them go, then began moving myself.

I couldn’t actually see what the orcs were up to, so I first had to confirm what kind of place they were holed up in. I wanted a good look at the surrounding terrain too.

I approached while using Hide Presence. I saw an outlier in the signals... A lookout of some kind? I checked with the naked eye and saw a single orc standing in front of a run-down old building. The building was rather large, but dilapidated enough to suggest it was very, very old. It was up against a rocky slope, which would make it hard to get around behind for an ambush. The only option was to lure the five orcs away.

If I attacked head-on, would the ones inside the building come out? Or would they realize they were under attack and use the hostages as shields? It really was a kind of gamble. I couldn’t decide it all on my own. I had to talk it over with the others. I checked the terrain and surrounding environment one more time and headed back.

I met up with the others and explained what was going on.

“They might use them as hostages, huh?” Lantz asked.

“Yeah, I don’t know how orcs tend to act. I’ve got an item that can make a big noise. If I can use it to get the orcs out of the building, maybe then I can show myself and lead them on a chase. If that doesn’t work, we’ll just have to attack then. Do you know how many orcs there are?”

“Four or five, I think. I wouldn’t expect any more than that.”

“I see. Do you think my plan will work?”

“Why don’t we watch for a while and see if any of them come out? It’s about lunchtime, so they might leave to eat. Having a lookout suggests there must be orcs in the building, but there might also be some outside.”

He was right about that. I’d forgotten—I knew thanks to my skill that there were definitely four orcs in that building, but most people would be on guard for the possibility of a few scouts walking around outside as well.

“Lantz is right. I don’t want to risk it.”

“Do orcs eat the same way humans do?”

“I’m not really sure...”

“All right,” I said. “After we get into place, we’ll watch for a bit. But if we don’t see any signs of movement, can we go with my first plan? Lantz, you keep an eye out too.”

Nobody had any better ideas, so we’d just have to go with the risky plan. If we waited to attack at night and didn’t defeat all the orcs on the spot, we’d have to run away in pitch blackness. I could handle that, myself, but I couldn’t be sure about the others.

The others seemed to understand my reasoning. Though they weren’t thrilled about it, they agreed to go along with my plan.

“That’s right. I’ll give you this too. Use it if you think you need it.” I gave them a bag of healing and stamina potions.

Lantz refused at first but eventually accepted, perhaps thinking of the state

the hostages might be in. However, to avoid odd rumors, I just gave him the lower-quality ones I'd made in my early days. He thanked me profusely, so I couldn't tell him he was actually helping me by freeing up my inventory space.

Any kind of potion was probably a high-quality item to these villagers, and they were probably shocked to get ten each.

I started walking off on my own, using Hide Presence and cover to gradually move in closer.

Looks like this is as close as I can get... Once I arrived at my chosen location, I leaned against my cover and let out a deep breath.

Ciel looked at me in concern, which was understandable. Even I knew I was nervous. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared, but I'd come too far to turn back now. I closed my eyes and remembered the pleading faces of the villagers. *Didn't I come here on a wulf hunt?* I thought wryly.

I tried to dispel my nerves by fiddling with the gun in my hand. The first time I'd fought wulfs, I'd acted out of pure desperation, with no time to think. I'd volunteered for the quest where I had my first fight with goblins, but I'd had Rurika and Chris with me then. Then the fight with the tiger wulf had been unforeseen, and I'd been acting fully on instinct.

This would be my first time fighting orcs. And this time, unfortunately, I was alone. Maybe I wasn't ready or prepared for this battle. But I was definitely standing here of my own free will.

Lantz and the others were holding in place at the locations I'd assigned them to. The orcs seemed to be moving around inside the building. The lookout looked irritable and unhappy somehow.

The sun was high in the sky. There was no need to wait any longer. I pointed my gun upward and steeled myself.

I was about to pull the trigger when I saw two orcs moving toward the building's front door on the automap. I waited a while, and they finally came out. They had a brief exchange with the lookout orc. Were they talking?

I waited a bit longer, but the two still inside the building didn't move. It was

do or die now. I pulled the trigger and the gunshot rang out. The bullet fired into the sky.

The orcs looked surprised and immediately began scanning their surroundings. I dropped Hide Presence and stepped into their sight, coming toward them with my sword drawn—walking, of course. I wasn't trying to look overly confident.

The orcs raised up a war cry and charged. I ignored them and closed the distance, swinging my sword down at the lead orc. The sound of metal on metal rang out; it had blocked my sword with its own. It was pushing hard to try to drive me back, but I matched it strength for strength, thanks to either my stats or my Enhance Physique skill. I didn't want to get cocky about that, though—some orcs could be stronger than others.

I focused all my power into shoving the orc back, then leaped away. Without my support, the orc's body pitched over a bit. I used that instant to slash my sword down at it. I thought I'd timed the slash perfectly, but a spear thrust in from one side to throw off my aim, and all I did was nick the orc's skin. Then another orc attacked from the other side, this one carrying an axe. The thick blade felt dangerous to clash with.

Time to regroup. I moved back, retreating from the three orcs. The one whose skin I'd nicked realized it was injured, reeled back, and let out a howl of rage. As if hearing its cry, the remaining two orcs came out of the building. They hadn't come out for the gunshot, so...was that howl a signal of some kind? The people inside the building...seemed to be huddling over to one side.

I took out my knife and threw it, aiming at one of the orcs that had just come out. My knife made a beeline for its eyes, but it brushed it away as if swatting a mosquito. The orc locked its eyes on me and glared at me hatefully.

Had I successfully gotten their attention? An orc attacked me as I made the throw, but I parried its blow with my sword.

While carefully monitoring the distance between us, I looked out over all five of the orcs. Each one carried a different weapon—sword, spear, axe, club, and twinblades. *Do monsters have weapon proficiencies too?* But what concerned me most of all was that one was a slightly different color than the others. It was

just the slightest difference in hue; if I hadn't seen them all together, I wouldn't have noticed it. I appraised them and all five were labeled "Orc," but that one definitely had a higher level than the rest.

The orcs formed a crude formation around the different-colored one—the twinblade-wielder—and charged at me. While swinging my sword to parry their blows, I kept making big, exaggerated dodges, moving backward each time. My real intent was to draw them away from the building.

"Should be about time..." Time to kick off phase one. It would be dangerous to keep it up for too long, but I activated Parallel Thinking for the moment. I employed checking strikes to keep the two orcs closest to me at bay, then swung my sword down at the one with the axe.

The orc, expecting that, blocked it and deflected my blow. I lost my balance and fell. Then the club-wielder tried a strike. I blocked it while still on one knee, but I couldn't fully brace myself and it sent me flying backward. A long way, at that.

I got back on my feet as quickly as I could and readied my sword. I'd made it back to the edge of the forest now. While steadying my heaving breath, I looked around at the orcs as if I were afraid. I locked eyes with the twinblade orc, who smiled a mocking smile. I crept back and then...

"Waaaagh!" I cried, then dashed off into the forest.

A second later, I could hear footsteps coming after me. I looked at my automap display and saw the five of them in hot pursuit. I carefully measured my running speed to make sure I didn't lose them. Maintaining a modest distance like that was harder than it seemed. I had to keep it just right while minding my surroundings and using automap at the same time, so I'd never have been able to handle it without Parallel Thinking.

Hearing the footsteps and shouts and war cries behind me, I ran and ran and ran. I could see five signals moving toward the building. *They've found them!*

Just then, I heard a sound of something whizzing through the air, sensed danger, and hit the dirt. A spear had flown by where my head had been moments ago. It stuck into a tree and wobbled from the force. Close call!

I'd thought I was being cautious, but they'd struck during the moment my attention had been on Lantz's group on the automap. That moment of relief had almost been my downfall.

I dug down deep and took off again, weaving through the trees to use them as shields. I ran for five minutes, ten minutes. I sometimes revealed myself, sometimes threw knives back to provoke them, and eventually stopped in the clearing that would serve as my final destination.

I stood on the outskirts of the wide-open space so that I could duck back into the trees if I needed to. I stopped using Parallel Thinking now. I was no longer running, and using it consumed a lot of SP. I gulped down a stamina potion, caught my breath, then turned around and waited for the orcs to emerge from the forest.

I used my automap to confirm the location of the orcs as well as Lantz's party, who were heading for the village now.

Phase one was over. My true trial was just beginning.

I took in a deep breath and sheathed my sword. I readied my gun and prepared to fire. I felt insanely nervous. When it really sank in, the realization that I was going to be facing down burly orcs more than a full head taller than me got me trembling.

At the same time, remember...that just makes them bigger targets.

I slowly let out the breath I'd drawn. As I did, the tension left my body.

Three, two, one... The scattered orcs came out of the forest one after the other, in a blind rage. I aimed for the one at the front and pulled the trigger when it was halfway across the clearing, no more than twenty meters away.

Two gunshots rang out. The orc collapsed with a thud, even as the fury still steamed in its expression. Then the sound died out and everything went quiet. There were no more of the angry shouts, the war cries, or the footsteps. The orcs just stood there, looking down at their fallen comrade in surprise.

Time had stopped. At least, that was what it felt like.

I couldn't let this chance get away. While the orcs were frozen in hesitation, I

used Hide Presence, sneaked over to one, and thrust out my sword. The strike, made from behind and bolstered with all my weight, pierced the orc's hide, tore through the flesh, and ran it through.

As it let out a fresh cry, the eyes of all the orcs turned from their fallen comrade to me. I quickly pulled my sword out and moved away. Without me to hold it up, the orc slowly fell to the ground. That made two.

The orcs, who'd previously acted like creatures tormenting far weaker prey, immediately changed their attitude. Now they seemed to be preparing for war. They hunkered down and readied their various weapons. Then they fanned out, so as not to get in each other's way despite going after the same target.

The real battle was starting now. I wished they could have underestimated me a little bit longer, but there was nothing to do about it now.

While I faced them down, I thought things over. They'd be on guard for tricks I'd already used, so I had to be judicious in what I pulled out. At the same time, I couldn't be too cautious. They still outnumbered me to a dangerous degree. They'd outlast me if things went on too long, so I needed to keep this short. The only time my stamina would win out was when I was walking.

I cleared my thoughts, activated Parallel Thinking again, and got some spells on standby. I was going to use fire magic. It would be my first time using it to attack, but the skill told me how it should be deployed, and I'd double-checked the papers Chris gave me to be sure. The only question was how powerful it would be.

The sword-, axe-, and twinblade-wielders were left. The axe-wielder seemed like the easiest to defeat. It appeared to be the slowest, maybe due to its weapon. And given that weapon's power, I also wanted to beat it first.

I shifted my grip on my sword and charged, trying to keep my new target positioned between me and the other orcs. That meant staying in constant motion, which wore down my stamina quickly, but it was the only way to keep things one-on-one.

That worked for a while, but then the orcs' tactics changed. The other two split up to charge at me from opposite sides. I could clear the encirclement if I ran straight at the orc in front of me and then kept up my inertia to run past it,

but I knew they wouldn't let me get away with that.

Still, this was a good chance. I took one of the knives from my belt and threw it straight ahead, then changed direction and charged at the orc with the axe. The axe-wielder stopped to meet me and readied its weapon. I raised up my sword as I ran and unleashed my spell the moment I was in range. "Fire Arrow!"

The arrow of flame delivered at close range hit the orc right in the face, just as planned. The strike must have been completely unexpected, because it didn't even move to dodge. Still, either because my skill level in that class of spells was fairly low or because I wasn't very experienced with it, that hit alone wasn't enough to take the orc out of the fight.

Instead, while the orc was reeling in pain from the spell, I raised up my sword and swung it, effortlessly taking its head from its body. It seemed almost too easy, but blood spurted from the wound and the body first began to topple, then collapsed.

But I had no time to savor the victory before turning and shifting to my next action. I had an orc on either side of me. I swiftly closed the distance with the sword-wielder, and we clashed. As my sword came down, it deflected it with a minimal movement.

On my follow-up strike, then, I used the skill I'd learned with Sword Tech. "Sword Slash!" My slash sped up, and the orc reacted too late. The tip of my sword plunged into the orc's chest and effortlessly pierced through it. Blood spattered my cloak. The moment I pulled my sword out, the skill's effect ended, and I suddenly felt drained. Was the loss of SP catching up with me?

But that meant my reactions were slowed. The final orc had gotten in close to me, swinging its twinblades down with enough force to run through us both.

Can I dodge it? Not in time... I slashed my sword upward, invoking Sword Slash again. It was slower than it should have been thanks to my awkward positioning, but I would still make it...probably.

Thanks to the skill, my sword swung toward the twinblades, collided with them...and got cut in half for its trouble. Nevertheless, I'd managed to throw off the orc's trajectory. Its blades passed by my side and stuck into the ground. I tried to scramble away, but my body felt sluggish. I looked at my stats and saw

my SP at zero. Normally I'd have been passed out at that point, but I managed to maintain consciousness this time.

The orc turned back to face me, readied its blades, and swung at me horizontally. I looked up and saw the orc smile as if in victory. I drew my gun from my Item Box and activated my barrier spell to block its incoming strike. As the shield deflected the twinblades, a look of shock appeared on the orc's face. Because the shield was invisible, only I knew it was there.

I pulled the trigger and unloaded as many bullets as I could into the orc. The final look on its face seemed to be one of disbelief. Its body fell backward slowly, then it fell still, its life expired.

I pulled a mana potion and a stamina potion from my Item Box and drank them both down. As usual, they tasted like bitter tea. I could stomach it, but I'd never drink something like this for pleasure. I didn't mind it when I was drinking them in the heat of the moment, but drinking one when you could think about it was...unpleasant.

Still, they worked, and my body quickly recovered from its fatigue. I wondered if I could modify potions to taste more like soft drinks. I used my Cleanse spell to remove the bitter aftertaste from my mouth. A total waste of magic, but still...

While thinking about all that, I turned back around.



A person was standing there.

They seemed hesitant over whether to approach me or not. If they started walking away to tell someone about this, I could use that chance to run away. But maybe that was what they were afraid of. Was this guy's group short-staffed for some reason, or was he just that good?

He was just standing there, but I had a feeling his defenses were perfect. Was he on his guard? He was standing a little too far away to engage in combat...

"Who are you?" Since he wasn't attacking me right away, I decided to see if he wanted to talk.

Still, what was with that outfit? Dressed all in black with a mask covering the eyes... *What are you, a ninja or something?* I guessed he was about two heads shorter than me, but I couldn't be sure because of the distance between us. Still, I could tell he was short.

At last, the other person spoke.

"I am No. 13. Otherworlder Fujimiya Sora...I have confirmed your potential. You will come with me now."

I sized up the new figure. "You're the one who's been watching me. Why?"

"I don't know. I was simply told to catch you if you showed potential."

"I was just hunting some monsters. Any adventurer could do that."

The figure paused. "You beat five orcs alone. Not just anyone could do that. There have been no reports of you having such abilities." He spoke in a voice that was light and emotionless, almost machinelike. "There have been no reports that you have access to magic attacks either."

"And if I don't consent to go with you?" I asked.

"Your consent is not relevant."

Suddenly he was coming at me, so quickly that his body was a blur. At some point, a dagger had appeared in his hand. I leaped back as fast as I could, but he would be in my personal space in a second. The moment I pointed my gun at him, he flew back and to the side, as if avoiding its aim.

Does that mean he knows what it is? I thought. *No...he was watching me.*

My attacker moved back to thirty meters away and then held that distance, watching me. I was grateful for his caution, but my gun was actually out of bullets now. If he'd realized that, I'd be a goner right now, but that wasn't my biggest problem just then.

I put the gun back in my Item Box and picked up the sword the orc had been using. I gave it a test swing, and it didn't feel heavy. Then I readied it and faced off against the man again. "Sorry, but I'm not going back there. You guys kicked me out, and now because I'm strong you want me back? Give me a break," I jeered at him.

This time, I acted as the aggressor and ran toward him. The one thing I couldn't do right now was let him get away. It would have been one thing if he'd immediately ran off to file his report, but at this moment he was the only one who knew what I could do. If I didn't finish him here and now, he'd pass the info to his superiors and I'd have more pursuers on my trail.

I swung my sword in a downward stroke. He dodged it lithely, then counterattacked a split second later, not wasting a single movement. Using his short turning radius to its utmost, he kept slicing away at me. No individual blow would be fatal, but by hitting the same spot multiple times, he broke through my armor and drew blood from the bare skin beneath.

Did I pick the wrong weapon? I wondered. But the sword was the weapon I was most used to. Even if I'd tried a knife, my opponent clearly had me beat in skill and experience. And then I wouldn't have the benefits of my Sword Arts skill.

It was no longer a question of not letting him get away—now I was the one who couldn't get away. Maybe after watching the battle with the orcs, he had decided I would be easy to capture. And given how things were going, he was right.

I used a combo of slashes and Fire Arrows, but he dodged them all, so I took a big step back to put space between us. I tried using feints as well, but he didn't fall for them.

I was righting my posture to try again when the sword slipped out of my hand.

What the...? I moved to pick up the fallen sword, but my body wasn't being very responsive. I felt numb... No, my hand was actually paralyzed and I couldn't move it well.

I sensed someone watching me and looked up. I couldn't see his eyes because of the mask he was wearing, but I definitely felt him watching me.

I activated Appraisal and looked at his dagger. *Ah, that explains it.*

Just as I drew a potion from my Item Box, a knife came flying at me. It hit the potion and broke it. I'd tried to avoid it, but my body was barely responsive.

I found myself gradually losing mobility. Still, my opponent didn't approach me. Maybe he knew that if he just waited, I'd be completely paralyzed eventually.

Not good, not good, not good... This is seriously not good. I thought the words "Open Status" and saw the status effect "Paralysis" on my status panel. I'd drunk a mana potion to restore my MP earlier, but I'd used some spells in the clash with No. 13, so I didn't have enough to use any more dimension magic. Even with Boost Recovery active, it would take time for my MP to tick back up.

What to do? I kept my gaze focused in No. 13's direction while looking at the panel. *Any useful-looking skills here?* I searched, trying to hold back my rising panic. *Not that one, that one, no, or that one...* Then my eyes stopped on one point:

[Resist Status Effects] Offers protection against status ailments. The higher the level, the more resistance granted.

Would that do it? I wondered. Nothing else seemed to even be in the ballpark. But I also didn't know if this one would let me resist Paralysis.

I hesitated for one moment and decided the next. But as I was about to learn the skill, my brain suddenly felt jumbled. My consciousness wouldn't obey my choice to pick the skill. I felt my mind growing muddled, like my nerves themselves were numbing over.

I clenched my teeth and tried to fight, but it kept on dragging me down. The next thing I knew I was on the ground, my eyes pointed down and my vision blurred. My ears were hearing something that vaguely sounded like footsteps, but my thoughts were hazy and my brain wouldn't work right.

In the midst of my fading consciousness, I saw something fluffy and white in the corner of my eye. Ciel had been flying around me in a panic, and now her body was pasted to mine. I felt like her eyes were pleading with me to do something, but I couldn't figure out what.

My eyelids felt heavy, and my body fell slack. Then, I saw a sudden flash of light, blinding even through my now-closed eyes.

Wondering what it was, I opened my eyes and looked over. Ciel was lying there, seemingly exhausted, flattened into a shape like a fried egg. Along with a sense of shock, I found my consciousness returning. I also sensed someone approaching.

I was recovering. *Is this holy magic?* I remembered the skill I'd learned by contracting with Ciel. My body still wouldn't obey my brain, but at least it was better than before.

Thanks. You saved me, I thought at Ciel. Then I remembered what I'd been about to do before I'd passed out and spent my skill points. I had six left.

NEW

[Resist Status Effects Lv. 1]

Effect: Provides resistance to Poison.

Not enough. I spent more points. Four skill points left.

NEW

[Resist Status Effects Lv. 2]

Effect: Nullifies Poison.

Still no good. I didn't want nullification. I spent points again. One skill point left.

NEW

[Resist Status Effects Lv. 3]

Effect: Nullifies Poison. Provides resistance to Paralysis.

As soon as it was mine, I felt the effects of the paralysis fading. My proficiency was steadily ticking up. I checked my grip strength, then with a great lurch of effort, I picked up my sword. I stumbled my way to my feet, as if I'd only just barely made it. Breathing heavily, I readied my blade and started slowly shuffling forward.

It was all an act. I thought it was a pretty good one, myself. But would it work?

I took one step closer, then another. No. 13, stunned into stillness by my sudden revival, readied his dagger.

I closed in and used my skill, Sword Slash, with a visible heave of exertion. As the sword came down, it slipped out of my hand and went flying. While I followed its flight with a dumbfounded expression, he took advantage of my vulnerability to strike.

Got you! I reached past the tip of his dagger and grabbed his wrist, applying crushing power.

No. 13 let out a voiceless cry. The dagger fell from his hand. Our speeds were equal... No, I might have been slower, but I was stronger. Seeing my chance, I shoved the clearly panicking No. 13 down and put all my weight onto him. His mouth twisted in pain and he writhed, trying to escape me. While I held him even tighter, my already activated Appraisal ability noticed something.

[Slave Mask] Drains the user's will and turns them into a loyal doll following orders. Also raises physical abilities

considerably.

I stared at it for a moment, then looked back at him. He was short and slender. I couldn't see his expression through the mask, but a closer look revealed that his nose, mouth, and skin all had a young cast to them. *A child, maybe?* Appraise Person didn't show me his age, after all. I'd tried the skill on him, but it didn't seem to be working.

I tried to figure out what to do next. We were enemies right now, but I didn't really want to kill him. Odd...I'd never felt that way when I was dealing with monsters. Was it because he was human?

What do I do? Should I take the mask off, or maybe break it? While I was thinking that over...

"I thought I heard a commotion. What an interesting show this is." I heard a sudden voice behind me. Even if I'd mostly been focused on No. 13, it was a surprise that I hadn't heard them coming up at all.

I turned back and saw it standing there calmly—eyes as red as blood, two horns on its head, and a bat's wings growing from its back. It was the demon.

Now that I'd seen it, it had my full attention. It was just a moment's lapse, but No. 13 took advantage of it. He noticed immediately that I'd weakened my grip and slipped away. By the time I'd realized my mistake, it was too late.

I might regret letting him go, but there was nothing else to be done. My priority had to be the demon. I faced off with him, trying to keep my behavior calm and natural.

To my left, the demon. To my right, No. 13. You could have drawn an equilateral triangle between the three of us.

"A slave mask, eh? Humans never change." There was disgust in the demon's cold eyes, and the contempt in his words made me shiver. "But the greater issue is your presence here, is it not, otherworlder?"

His eyes were not amused. They weren't especially hostile, either, but I found myself shrinking back.

I had to keep it together. “How do you know I’m from another world?” A servant of the Demon King... If he knew otherworlders had been summoned to fight them, wouldn’t that make the two of us mortal enemies?

Still, could this be an opportunity, in a way? Assuming he’s willing to talk... I think I’d had the same idea some time before. I’d heard from other, more experienced people about the threat the demon posed. There was no question that I didn’t stand a chance in my current condition.

“Heh. If I said I used a skill, would that make sense to you?” the demon asked wryly. “Then let me ask you this: What are you doing here?”

“Hunting orcs. That...person attacked me.” I pointed at No. 13.

“Hunting, eh? Even more puzzling. What’s an otherworlder doing alone all the way out here?” the demon asked, as if he found it genuinely incomprehensible.

“Why do you ask that?”

“Otherworlders are weapons against the Demon King, are they not? I fail to understand why the reigning king would let one exhaust itself out here in the middle of nowhere...though I personally welcome the waste.” The demon smiled happily.

Interesting. Do otherworlders have some kind of special advantage over the Demon King? It felt to me like high-ranked adventurers would probably be more able. I couldn’t even beat C-rankers at the moment. *Well, maybe the others summoned with me would do a better job...*

“I am an otherworlder, but unfortunately I arrived here so weak that they threw me out of the group. I’m honestly really pissed off at them, and I don’t plan to do anything they ask. So I’d appreciate it if you’d just let me go.”

The demon paused. “How intriguing. But I’m not sure I can believe you. Humans as a species love to harm others, lie, and betray.”

I couldn’t deny that one. That much was true both in this world and my old one: humans were selfish and egotistical; the few who weren’t were definitely in the minority. Thankfully, I’d been lucky enough to meet some of the good ones—Rurika and Chris.

“You won’t deny it?” the demon prompted me.

“I agree with it, actually.”

“Hmm. Nevertheless, it’s best to eliminate uncertain elements. I still feel like I should pluck you out here.” Suddenly, I felt an overwhelming bloodthirstiness well out from the demon. The feeling hit me head-on and almost knocked me off my feet, but I dug down deep and managed to bear up under it.

Just then, something happened that neither I nor the demon could have expected—reacting to the air of hostility, No. 13 suddenly charged the demon. It was a completely unexpected attack from a total blind spot. But despite its perfect timing, the demon blocked it with a single sweep of the arm, not even looking over.

“First you attack him, now you defend him? I struggle to understand this. Is it the mask at work?” the demon asked.

Meanwhile, No. 13 flew off like a batted ball, hit the ground, and rolled. But when his momentum stopped, he righted himself immediately. “I have my orders: Return with Fujimiya Sora; eliminate all who try to stop me.”

The demon watched thoughtfully. “You can’t even comprehend the strength of the one you attack. You’re nothing but a puppet, then. You might as well die here.”

He was focused on No. 13 now, but there was no way I could run away. I’d be dead the minute he decided to attack me, so running now would just prolong the inevitable. Instead I looked around in search of a weapon and saw the dagger No. 13 had dropped.

I moved in tandem with No. 13, picked up the dagger, and threw it. It flew at No. 13, cutting off whatever the demon meant to do next.

“Oh? You intend to hinder me? And save an enemy, at that?” the demon asked me.

So the demon had indeed been trying to kill No. 13. If I hadn’t stopped him, he definitely would’ve succeeded. “I’ve got some questions for that guy. Speaking of, you mentioned that slave mask. How does one go about taking off something like that?”

“Hah. What would I gain by telling you?” the demon mused. “You wouldn’t gain anything either, since you’re about to die.”

We were both going to die here, so there was nothing to gain, eh? *A fork in the road of life—maybe that’s where I’m standing right now. If I fail now, I’ll have no future.*

I swallowed hard, and the sound of it echoed in my ears. “Can you use the kind of spells that make someone a slave?” I asked the demon.

“Slaver spells?” he asked. “No, I can’t.”

“What about something similar? Spells that stop someone from betraying you or causing you harm?”

The demon pondered. “I do have such a spell.”

“Then cast it...” If a chance existed, I was going to take it. Everything would be over if I just died. “...on me.”

He looked me up and down, probingly. I met his eyes, not looking away. Everything went silent. Time stopped. Tension hung heavy over us. Every second felt like an eternity. Then, after waiting for who knows how long...

The demon opened his mouth. It was the moment of truth.

“Interesting,” he said at last. “Why would you go that far?”

“I don’t want to die a pointless death after being dragged to some world I don’t understand!” I started. No...this wasn’t quite the same feeling I’d had when I’d first been driven out. Right now, there was something I wanted to do. “I want to see a whole world I’ve never seen before. The culture, the scenery, everything... It’s so different from our world. And, quite frankly, I don’t want to die. So if it keeps me alive, I’ll serve you. At least as best I can...”

He considered. “Very well. If you accept my binding, I’ll let you live.”

Basically a deal with a devil, right?

“And first... Let me see...” He walked cockily up to No. 13. His steps were as easy as if he were out for a stroll.

No. 13 was on his guard, but in an instant he was in the demon’s grasp. He

grabbed the slave helmet with both hands, then lifted the boy up to his own eye level. No. 13 kicked his legs and swung his arms, but the demon was unfazed.

“What are you...?” I began.

Then there was a feeling like an explosion of mana. I felt it crash against my skin, powerful enough to make the air around me tremble. It was intense enough that I could see the waves of mana with my naked eye, a thing that should have been impossible.

I heard a high-pitched crack, and No. 13’s body fell to the ground. In the demon’s hands lay the broken slave mask.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I infused it with pure mana and it broke. Of course, the safer and surer method would be to kill the one who made the contract.” He spoke very casually despite the incredible feat he’d performed. “Now, let’s keep our promise. Are you ready?”

He was in front of me before I could even answer. I’d known it was coming, but I almost had to laugh about the gap in our abilities. “What should I do?”

“Just stand right there. I’ll do what I need to. The binding I’ll put on you will forbid you to do anything that would harm the Demon King,” he declared. Then he recited some words I couldn’t quite make out and loosed his mana on me.

The concentrated flow of it coming from his fingertips seemed to permeate my body, then sink into my heart. The thought struck me that this might harm my contract with Ciel, but I would deal with the consequences later. I could only pray that it wouldn’t influence our contract in any strange way.

As I was thinking that, I suddenly realized the demon was staring at me, like he was examining me. The feeling was unpleasant, but it stopped right away. I wasn’t sure what it was, but it felt like the time Ciel cured my paralysis—a sensation like the poison draining from my body.

“Mind if I ask a question?” I asked.

“What is it?”

“You said you were forbidding me from harming the Demon King. Does that mean I can’t do anything to oppose him?”

“No. It stops you from physically harming the Demon King.”

“Physically?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s just not quite what I was expecting.” The fact that it wasn’t something more restrictive felt almost anticlimactic somehow.

“Ah, it’s not a kind of magic I specialize in,” the demon explained. “A simpler spell is more effective than one with all kinds of conditions. Greater complexity just raises the chance of it failing.”

“You guys care about the Demon King a lot, don’t you?” I mused. Maybe that was a strange thing to say, because a surprised expression appeared on the demon’s face. Perhaps it wasn’t something he thought about very much. “So what do I do now?”

“Whatever you like. Obey the taboo and we won’t have a problem.” He spoke very offhandedly indeed.

“No problem if I hunt monsters?”

“They do not fall under our domain, so do as you wish.”

“What about other...demons? What should I do if I run into one?”

“Fight them, if you wish. We generally just do whatever we like, anyway.”

I couldn’t understand the demon’s ways of thinking at all. He’d put a restriction on me, but it didn’t feel like much of one at all. I wasn’t going to complain about getting a good deal, though. You could go crazy overthinking these things.

“And what about him?” I gestured at the now-unconscious No. 13, who’d been lying perfectly still up to this point.

“There must have been some blowback from the forced removal, but I expect a return of consciousness soon enough. I can’t speak to what will happen afterward. The subject’s mind could be broken, or they might continue to follow

their initial orders. Nothing is guaranteed. It depends on the individual.”

He spoke dispassionately, but his suggestions were quite serious indeed. A person’s mind could be broken by something like that.

“Well, I think I’ll be going now,” the demon said. “I doubt we’ll meet again, but do keep your promise.”

“Wait. I still have more I want to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“I heard you showed up during the orc hunt. Were you leading the orcs?” He’d said that monsters weren’t under their domain, but maybe the demons used them as pawns.

“Merely a coincidence. I’d sensed the pulse of the summoning, saw a crowd, and went to see if an otherworlder might be among them. Ah, and as for why I killed them, it’s because they charged me unprovoked. I had to put them in their place.”

“So you don’t just attack humans at random?”

“I don’t, at least. Others may differ; all people have different priorities. Though even I will fight if I have to.”

“People,” huh? I guess “demons” is just the name we gave them, anyway... Maybe they use a word other than “people” to refer to us too.

“One last thing,” I said. “When I was summoned to this world, I was told that I could get back to my old world by defeating the Demon King and using his magistone. Is that true?”

“Preposterous. I’ve never heard of such a thing, nor seen any evidence of it, at the very least.”

“I see.”

“You’re not surprised?”

“It’s a pretty common story. ‘Do something for us and we’ll get you what you want.’ You need a good quid pro quo to keep people doing what you want them to. But okay, I see now...” So the king and his minions weren’t just crafty, they

were also unscrupulous. Unforgivable. “Sorry, but I want to ask you one last thing. Is that okay?”

An irritated expression appeared on the demon’s face. It was understandable, I guessed, to be annoyed about all the questions. Honestly, the fact that he continued to answer me was more surprising.

“This is only if it’s possible, but... If you meet any other otherworlders, could you protect them?”

Ah, that seemed to catch his interest. But it wasn’t that unusual a request, right? I remembered the others’ expressions in that moment... I was still a little mad at them, but I also couldn’t blame them under the circumstances.

“They’ve also been called here against their will, lied to, and exploited. If you get a chance to talk to them and they’re willing not to fight, I’d like you to please protect them.”

He thought. “That seems very unlikely. I can’t promise anything...but I will try, otherworlder.”

“Please do. Also, I’m Sora. Thank you, Ignis.”

The demon—Ignis—looked surprised, but he seemed to immediately understand what I’d done. He floated wordlessly into the air, then suddenly expelled a huge amount of mana. A roar rang out and dust billowed around me. When it cleared, the forest immediately surrounding me had turned to bare, desolate land. I looked up at Ignis in surprise, but he flew off without another word.

Must be nice to just fly around like that... I thought, letting my thoughts stray for a moment from the reality around me.

As he vanished into the distance, a thought occurred to me. Ignis was incredibly powerful. If he was in the kingdom because he’d sensed the pulse of summoning, wouldn’t the castle in the capital be the first place he’d check? With power like his, it felt like he’d be able to attack the capital and take it down all by himself.

Are there others in this world on his level of power?



I'd gotten off track. I had lots of things to do right now. Too many things, in fact.

I pulled up my automap and used Detect Presence. Maximizing its range, I saw a group moving at the edge of my viewable area—Lantz and the others. It seemed they'd made it safely back to the village, met up with the others, and were now on the run.

I didn't see any other readings, so I could infer that No. 13 had probably come alone. Which meant there was no one watching me now.

It was my chance to escape. But if I just ran away normally, I might be detected. What should I do, then? I had to make them think I was dead.

I packed two of the orc corpses—the ones I'd killed with my gun—into my Item Box with their weapons, staging the scene. My thought here was to hide any traces of my gun and make anyone who came looking think two of the orcs were still alive. Lantz and the others had probably seen that there were five of them, after all.

After this, I tore up my blood-spattered robe and threw it aside. I left my broken sword lying there, broke the chain of my pouch, and threw it near an orc's body. The pouch contained a broken potion bottle and my guild card.

I left the broken slave mask where it was, tore up No. 13's jacket, and threw that aside as well. Suddenly...

Hang on, you weren't wearing anything under that?! No. 13's exposed chest was rising and falling slightly. Proof he's alive, huh? No, wait... Whoa, he's a girl? I'd thought the voice had sounded a little high, but I'd just assumed "prepubescent boy"...

I quickly moved to wrap her in my spare robe. *Sheesh, this is more exhausting than negotiating with Ignis...*

I also decided to keep her dagger. It seemed like a handy thing to have.

Now I just had to get moving before it really got dark. As for my destination...I remembered a map I'd seen at the guild and decided to head for the Holy

Kingdom of Frieren. I'd have actually liked to seek out Rurika and Chris, but they were in the other direction, and crossing the entire kingdom raised the risk of being seen. Besides, if I wanted to help them look for their friends, it might be more efficient to visit a land they hadn't been to yet. Kind of like we were splitting up to search.

Then I had another thought. *Ah, is Ciel okay?* If she were unconscious I might not be able to touch her, and maybe I'd have to leave her where she was. *Yeah, she's not there...*

As I started looking around, Ciel suddenly flew up to me. I felt her weight and was relieved to know for sure that she was there. I scritched her lightly and she let me do it. I was so glad. *You okay? I see... Thanks for saving me. I don't know what I'd do without you,* I thought at her. *I'm gonna go on a journey now, so will you come with me?*

Ciel answered with a nod, then set herself up to ride on top of my head instead of in her usual position. Riding in my hood would kind of get in the way of carrying a person, after all. I was grateful for her consideration.

I hefted No. 13 onto my back and entered the forest that lay before me.

A Quiet Conversation 2

It was the usual dark chamber. Having ascended to the executive ranks of the organization, they had been here several times. Even so, they still hadn't gotten used to it. Especially when it was just the two of them, it always felt like the flow of time had slowed.

Smother your feelings and render your heart void. If you don't, you'll end up devoured. You couldn't let the other person realize that either.

"I have a report. The target went sightseeing in Fesis, then stayed there a few days before heading to South Gate City Epica," the figure began.

"What did he do while he was there?" asked the other.

"Mock battles with adventurers in the arena. It appears he also went to a mine and took herb-gathering quests. His herb gathering gets high marks, and he seems to do it quickly."

"Is herb gathering a difficult task?"

"Most adventurers struggle to acquire similar quantities."

"Ah, I believe many tend to turn in worthless weeds. They're only adventurers, after all."

"Yes. He may be quite intelligent, then."

"Hmm. How did the tiger wulf situation work out?"

"Investigations turned up a nest deep in the forest."

"Tricky. Can adventurers alone handle it?"

"Multiple Rank A adventurers seem to be in the area. They can most likely take care of it."

"It's far enough away that we may have to let them. How is the heroes' equipment?"

"I've spoken to the blacksmith. They're working on it now."

“Check it the minute the weapons are ready. If there’s no issue, send them to the Black Forest.”

“The Black Forest? Are you sure?”

“No need to go too far in. First have them camp on the outskirts and see what happens. They should be within the effective radius there.”

“Should we intervene?”

“If things get dangerous. Watch until the very last moment. We also can’t afford to lose any of them, though. Make sure that’s understood.”

“Very well. How shall I direct the knights?”

“Activate the Second and Third Knights Corps. They seem to be lacking discipline of late, so this should buck them right up.”

“I have a report from the south gate city.”

“About the orc hunt? Was it completed successfully?”

Silence.

“What’s the matter?”

“It appears the orc hunt has ended. Several advanced subtypes were present.”

“Quite a lot of them, then. And? How did the hunt itself go?”

“Sir. We’ve received reports that a demon attacked during the hunt.”

“A demon?”

“Yes.”

“Did they slay it?”

“It departed unharmed, and it seems our side suffered severe losses.”

“I see. A demon sighting at last. As I thought.”

“The casualties were so great that rumors are already flying around the south gate city.”

“That’s fine. In fact, spread word of this to other lands through the guilds. Maybe it’ll finally spur them to action.”

“Understood.”

“Can the heroes beat a demon at the moment?”

“Not likely, based on the reports.”

“I thought they’d handled the battles in the Black Forest, didn’t they? Yet it’s still too much for them?”

“I don’t think they’d stand a chance. I’ve also heard reports that they didn’t gain any levels in the recent battles.”

“They’ll have to go deeper in to gain levels at this point, then?”

“The deeper regions are the Demon King’s territory. It would put them at greater risk of encountering a demon.”

“I know that. Is there a better place to send them, then?”

“What about a dungeon?”

“A dungeon, eh?”

“Yes. They might be able to get unknown magic items and weapons there as well. It should increase their combat potential, and it’ll give them good experience in hunting a variety of monsters. If they want to slay the Demon King, they’ll have to pass through the Black Forest eventually.”

“And demons won’t be found in dungeons. Conduct an investigation to see which would be best.”

“We’ve lost contact with No. 13.”

“While she was monitoring that dud?”

“Yes.”

“Might she have been exposed and killed?”

“I don’t think so. He was just off hunting wulfs, as usual. I doubt he could beat her in a normal fight.”

“That’s your *unbiased* opinion?”

“Yes.”

“What was he doing?”

“It seems that while he was on his wulf hunting quest, he heard about an orc raid on the local village and went to fight the orcs.”

“It *seems*?”

“Nobody actually saw him fight, just him running away. But since he didn’t return after several days, they took some adventurers to go search for him and found his broken weapon and guild card next to a bloodstained cloak, along with a few orc bodies.”

“Did the dud slay them?”

“Unknown. The villagers say there were five orcs, and only three bodies were found. A broken mask was also discovered there.”

“You think he was about to get killed by orcs and she interfered?”

“It’s possible.”

“Could No. 13 have beaten the orcs?”

“She has the ability to do so, I think. But it would’ve been a bad matchup. And a villager who was a former adventurer said one of the orcs might have been an advanced subtype.”

“Were the bodies found?”

“They were not. Orcs sometimes eat human flesh, so...”

“They might’ve taken them for their larders, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Investigate the area. If there’s an advanced subtype, it’d be dangerous to leave it at large. And...don’t forget to control the flow of information so the other heroes don’t hear of this.” A pause. “What is it?”

“There have been reports of a possible demon sighting there as well.”

“You think the demon might have killed them?”

“Yes. In fact, that seems the most likely possibility. Apparently wide-scale traces of destruction were found there.”

“Well, that’s fine. Maybe better for us? If he admitted he was an otherworlder while begging for his life, they might think they took out one of the otherworlders.”

“Is that why you set him free?”

“Demons have keen noses. They surely know that we used Otherworldly Summoning; their presence inside the kingdom is proof of that. Letting them kill one useless otherworlder might trick them into thinking that they’re all equally useless and they’ve already taken one of them out. That will let the others move more freely. In that sense, by dying, he managed to make himself useful to us in the end.”

Silence again.

Epilogue

“You’re awake?”

I was cooking by the fire when the sleeping girl stirred and awoke. She sat up and then froze. Her gaze fell to her hands.

“Sorry, but I had to tie you up. Do you know why?”

She tilted her head, her eyes glazed and rather sleepy-looking.

She didn’t know, then. “Do you know who you are?”

“I am No. 13. You are...” She seemed a little uncertain and hesitant. Maybe her brain was kind of jumbled.

“It’s okay to take it slow. Can you tell me what you remember?”

“I had orders. Orders. To watch you and take you back if necessary.”

“Are you still going to follow those orders?”

She paused. “I don’t know. I don’t know what to do.” The way she drooped her head suggested she really didn’t. If this was an act, she could’ve been a professional actress.

“Is there anything you know about yourself?”

She paused again. “I was found. Then I was trained. Nothing else.”

Just then, a rather cute little rumble rang out. The pot in front of us was letting out an appealing smell.

Yeah, I think this soup turned out pretty well myself. Maybe thanks to the orc meat. “I’m going to untie you now, but do you swear you won’t attack me?”

She looked at her hands, then at the soup, then at her hands, then at the soup again. She nodded. I put some soup into a bowl, then used Alchemy to break her bonds and handed it to her. Ciel watched the whole time, but I communicated that she should hold off.

“Eat slowly,” I said.

The girl nodded and brought the soup to her mouth. Her expression didn't change as she ate, but she did do it quickly. Soon, the bowl was empty. She looked at me pleadingly, so I refilled it.

She'd eaten most of what was in the pot before she started looking drowsy again. Maybe she was full? She most likely wouldn't be able to answer any more questions like this, so I was about to bind her hands again...but seeing the calm on her face as she passed into sleep, I decided to just let her rest for the day.

Naturally, I made a meal for Ciel as well before I went to bed myself. If I was going to walk around with this girl from now on, I'd have to think a few things over.

Even I felt tired after two straight days of walking. If not physically, then mentally—Night Vision skill aside, walking in the forest took a lot of focus. And even if I didn't get tired, I did get sleepy.

I was thinking I'd pushed myself a little too hard. I'd taken breaks here and there, but I hadn't gotten any proper sleep. Cutting through a forest where I wasn't used to walking had probably played a role in that.

I checked my surroundings on the automap and fell asleep as soon as I lay down, but I heard a faint sound that brought my fading consciousness back to me. I listened closely and soon found the source of it.

No. 13 was tossing in her sleep, a pained expression on her face. This hadn't happened the first two days. Had waking up and talking to me changed something in her? I'd seen on TV that the best way to set a sick person at ease was to hold their hand. I thought back on that and, not really expecting it to be effective, took No. 13's hand.

Then, as if she were feeling better, her restful face returned. I was feeling a little impressed by the fact that I'd gotten it right when she suddenly reached out and grabbed me. Her grip wasn't that strong, but the level of calmness on her face made me hesitant to shake her off. *Though if a policeman saw us now I'd definitely get arrested...*

After a little arguing with myself, I gave up on it and decided to sleep. I hoped I wouldn't wake up with a knife in me.

I woke up the next day and found the expressionless girl still lying next to me. Her eyes slowly opened, and I made eye contact. She looked back at me quietly, not seeming panicked at all by the way she was pressed against me.

Feeling a little awkward, I pushed her away and sat up. I then quickly tidied up and started making breakfast. *Calm down, man.* I told myself. I offered her some soup, and she ate it quietly and uncomplainingly. *I guess she was just hungry?*

“So, do you know your name?” I prompted.

“I’m No. 13.”

“Not that. Your real name.”

She tilted her head in confusion. Had she never learned it, or had she forgotten it? Obviously I couldn’t call a person “No. 13.” Could I use Appraisal to learn her real name? That information had been hidden from me while she was wearing the mask, but...

“Your name is Hikari,” I said after trying again. “Do you remember ever being called that?”

She tilted her head again. “Hikari, Hikari, No. 13, Hikari...” She whispered it a few times with no apparent sense of recognition.

Maybe she’d just been called No. 13 all her life. She couldn’t have acquired skills like those in just a year or two.

I asked how long she’d been doing this, and she said she didn’t remember. All she knew was that she was ten years old.

“Do you feel any resistance to being called Hikari?”

She thought it over. “No. If that’s your order, I’ll follow it.”

So she’ll take any other name I give her, then? She seemed to just assume she’d be ordered around. Was it brainwashing?

I liked to think I was as good as anyone at naming things, but if I was going to have to “order” her either way, it would probably be better to just use her

original name. “Okay. Your name is Hikari from now on. And you can call me Sora.”

“Hikari... Sora...”

Her reactions were worrying me. It was hard to tell if it was the aftereffects of the mask or just her original personality coming out. It could also have involved the environment she’d been living in.

“Do you remember my situation, more or less?”

“Yes. Fuji— Sora, you came here from another world. I was watching you.”

“And you were trying to bring me back, right?”

“Yes, I was told to bring you back if I discovered that you were strong.”

“I have no intention of going back to them. Do you still plan to take me back, Hikari?”

She paused. “I don’t know.”

“You can’t say you don’t know. You have to figure it out.” I looked her right in the eyes. Maybe I could’ve just ordered her to lay off, but given what was to come, I had to let her figure it out for herself. For her sake as well.

“I don’t want to go back there. Sora gave me warm food,” Hikari said plainly after a moment of thought.

Is she like a pet now? I winced as I looked over at Hikari, then blinked in shock.

Tears were welling up in her eyes. Ciel also started looking a little panicked at the sight. I was sorry to say it, but it was actually a little funny. She didn’t seem to realize it herself, but I found myself patting her head.

Hikari looked at me curiously, but she didn’t resist, and her expression softened. The corners of her mouth seemed to be twitching awkwardly.

I had one more thing to do now. “In life, have compassion; in travel, have companions.” Wasn’t that the saying?

The small companion was now part of my party.



Afterword

A pleasure to meet you. I'm arukuhito. Thank you for purchasing *Isekai Walking: Volume 1 Elesia Kingdom Arc*.

My life was so busy that I'd ruled out writing and devoted my life to being a reader, but after reading various stories I decided to try writing again. I submitted this story to the website Kakuyomu and eventually got contacted to make novels out of it. At first I was dubious. Like, seriously? Me? But as I worked on it, it started taking shape, and the whole thing began to feel real. I'll especially never forget how amazing it felt when the characters I'd written about got an illustration.

The meat of the story hasn't changed with the novelization, but I added a lot of new episodes over the course of the whole thing, so I think it should be as enjoyable to people who know the story as it is to those who don't.

In particular, the spirit who accompanies Sora on his travels is a new character. If you only know the web version, please refrain from shouting "Who the heck is that?!"

Finally, let me express my thanks to my personal editor O who first gave me feedback, and also to chief editor A. Being able to ask for advice from all different kinds of people is what let me finish this book back when I barely knew what I was doing.

To Yu-nit-san, who did the beautiful illustrations, I'm sorry for making so many awful requests, but thank you for fulfilling them.

The various messages of support people left on the web version also really encouraged me. If you think "I'm the one who pointed that out!" you're probably right. Feel free to brag about it.

And to everyone reading this book right now, thank you so much. I hope we get to meet again in the next volume.


author
arukuhito
illustrator
Yu-nit

1

Isekai Walking

Walking around the Otherworld

Elesia Kingdom Arc



“Two of your latest skewer recipe, sir.”

Ciel

A spirit who accompanies Sora. Can only be seen by certain people.

I looked around for a place to eat, holding my newly purchased skewers. One skewer was for me, and the other was for the spirit.

Sora

A high school student summoned from another world. Thrown out of the party of heroes, he travels to see his new world.

ISEKAI WALKING

Elesia Kingdom Arc



“Wow, it really is a potion...”

Chris

A mage adventurer. She's usually shy, but she opens up around Sora.

[Alchemy]

Consumes materials to create new items. Expending large amounts of MP can raise the quality of these items.

“These are for us?”

Rurika

An adventurer working with Chris. Uses twin blades. Has an energetic, sociable personality.

“The skill I learned was Alchemy.”

“Otherworlder
Fujimiya
Sora...I have
confirmed your
potential. You
will come with
me now.”

No. 13
??????????????





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