



Didn't I Say
to Make My Abilities
Average in the
Next Life?!

Story by
FUNA

Illustrated by
Itsuki Akata

9



Didn't I Say —
to Make My Abilities
Average in the
— Next Life?!

VOLUME 9



Mile

Aetelou

Sharalir





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BY
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ILLUSTRATED BY
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Seven Seas Entertainment

DIDN'T I SAY TO MAKE MY ABILITIES AVERAGE
IN THE NEXT LIFE?! VOLUME 9

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AFTERWORD

Japan



Misato

A high school student. Died saving a little girl and was reborn into a fantasy world.

C-Rank Party "The Crimson Vow"

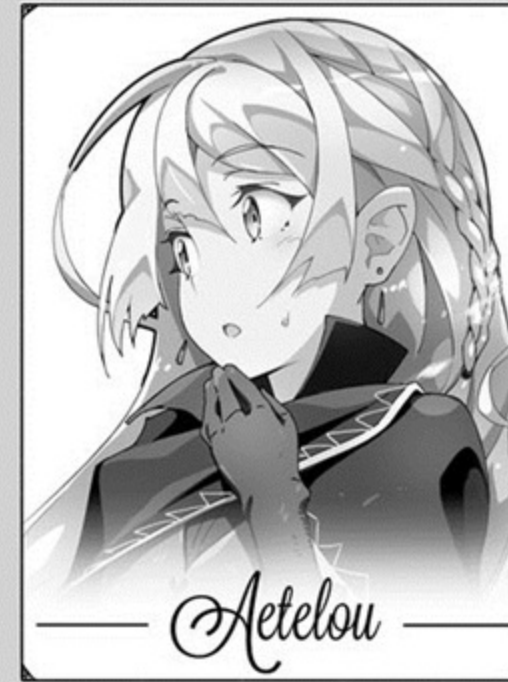


Mile

A girl who was granted "average" abilities in this fantasy world.

The Kingdom of Marlane

Elves



Aetelou

An elven woman.
An academic researcher.



Sharalir

An elven woman.
An academic researcher.



Mavis

A swordswoman. Leader of the up-and-coming party, the Crimson Vow.



Reina

A rookie hunter. Specializes in combat magic.



Pauline

A rookie hunter.
A timid girl, but...



Dr. Clairia

An elven woman. Loves her father.
Saved the Crimson Vow during their battle with the elder dragons.



**The Kingdom
of Vanolark**

The Turning Point:
The Return to Ascham

The Town of the
Dueling Inns

The Spice Incident

**The Kingdom
of Brandel**

Fief of Ascham



Invasion

Capital

The Town Where Mile
Registered as a Hunter

Capital

**The Kingdom
of Tils**
Birthplace of the
Crimson Vow

**The Kingdom
of Marlane**

Capital

Mafan

THE DWARVEN VILLAGE
Glademarl

**Neighboring
Kingdom**

Capital

Town

Town

Capital
Shaleiraz



**The Great
Albarn Empire**



God bless me?



WORLD MAP

PREVIOUSLY

When Adele von Ascham, the eldest daughter of Viscount Ascham, was ten years old, she was struck with a terrible headache and, just like that, remembered everything.

She remembered how, in her previous life, she was an eighteen-year-old Japanese girl named Kurihara Misato who died while trying to save a young girl, and that she met God...

Misato had exceptional abilities, and the expectations of those around her were high. As a result, she could never live her life the way she wanted. So when she met God, she made an impassioned plea:

“In my next life, please make my abilities average!”

Yet somehow, it all went awry.

In her new life, she can talk to nanomachines, and although her magical powers are technically average, it is the average between a human’s and an elder dragon’s... 6,800 times that of a sorcerer!

At the first academy she attended, she made friends and rescued a little boy as well as a princess.

She registered at the Hunters’ Prep School under the name of Mile and formed a party with her classmates. The Crimsom Vow made a grand debut, but one problem after another came hurtling their way—from golems, invading foreign soldiers, and doting fathers to elder dragons, the strongest creatures in the world!

Suddenly, the empire to the south launched an invasion of Mile’s old homeland, but using their wit and battle prowess, the Crimson Vow managed to beat back the 5,000 men of the Albarnian imperial army to save the town of Mafan!

And now, while visiting a village of dwarves, they’ve come face-to-face with a horde of orcs, blessed with peculiar strength...

CHAPTER 68

STRONGER MONSTERS

Seriously though, why were those orcs so high level? I'm pretty sure they aren't high orcs! High orcs, high oc—oh! Maybe they ate some high-octane food, and it gave them greater fuel efficiency...

Mile let her mind wander as she walked, her search magic activated. It was time to proceed with the monster extermination, and since the dwarves were the primary agents here, the Crimson Vow were to serve as little more than extra reinforcements. It had been up to the dwarves to decide when and where they would act. However, at the time that the decision to proceed was made, Mile made several firm suggestions, to which the leader of the dwarves acquiesced.

First, if they were to encounter a group of ogres, the twenty-eight dwarves were to split up into four units of seven dwarves each, with each unit taking on just one ogre.

Second, the members of the Crimson Vow were to be free to station themselves as they pleased during both travel and any battle. Moreover, their combat style and order of operations were not to be interfered with. If the dwarves had something to say about any of that, they could say it when the battle was through.

Third, the dwarves were to never breathe a word to anyone about the Crimson Vow's combat ability or special skills.

Mile's first provision was reasonable, especially after the egregious loss the dwarves had already suffered at the hands of the orcs. There was no telling how many orcs the Crimson Vow would be able to take on themselves if they were beset by several at once, but the previous battle had clearly shown the dwarves that the girls' power was orders of magnitude greater than theirs. As for the rest, the dwarves were well aware of the hunter taboo of spilling secrets about others' abilities and knew better than to tread on that land mine. They also knew that the hunters' team-based tactics differed from the direct, head-on approach that the dwarves employed, and had no intention of interfering with the party in battle.

As they proceeded once more in search of the monsters, their spirits restored, Mile

stopped the group with a signal.

“There’s a big group of monsters ahead. I’m getting a different reaction than from the orcs, so there’s a chance that they might be ogres. There are eleven of them!”

“*Wha—?!*” the dwarves all cried.

If the dwarves took on four, that would leave seven for the four members of the Crimson Vow. They would be leaving seven ogres of above-average strength to attack four little girls younger than their own children and grandchildren—maybe even their great-grandchildren.

“This is no good. We should retreat...”

“Let’s go, everyone!”

“All right!!!”

The combat leader’s directions were drowned out by the Crimson Vow’s battle cry.



“Ice Bullet!”

The moment they locked eyes with the horde of ogres, Reina struck them with an ice spell she had incanted ahead of time. A swarm of icy bullets came raining down on the ogres, who stopped in their tracks, trying to shield their faces with their arms.

Given that they were in a forest, Reina had to fall back on ice magic, which was not her forte. Then again, this only meant that she wasn't *as good* at ice magic as she was at fire magic, her personal specialty. Compared to an attack from a normal mage, this spell was still plenty powerful. However, because this was an area attack, the firing power of each tiny bullet was not much. They would have been able to take out something like a kobold, perhaps, but unless they struck one in the eye, they would not do very much damage to an ogre.

That said, the ogres had stopped moving, and they were obstructing their own vision by covering their eyes. Reina's goal had been sufficiently achieved.

The moment that the ogres realized that the icy attack was over, they lowered their arms, but it was already too late. Mavis and Mile plunged into the horde together, swords swinging.

However, as they swung those swords, they found...

“Guh! They're tough!”

Mile managed to cut into the side of one of the ogres, but Mavis's sword barely left a scratch on the hide of the ogre she had attacked. Seeing this, Mile yelled, “I knew it! These ogres are... Hey everyone, get your butts in here!”

Though the dwarves had been following behind the Crimson Vow as the party advanced, they had yet to jump into the battle, standing dumbly behind the hunters instead. As Reina was currently engaged in incanting her next attack spell, it fell upon Mile to be the one to scream at them. The dwarves, accustomed to much politer speech from Mile, were momentarily startled, but when they realized how stupid they looked standing around staring while their allies took on powerful enemies, they returned to their senses and hurriedly jumped into the battle.

“Split up into four teams as planned! Don't think too hard about it!” Mile reminded.

Reina was finished with her next spell in the blink of an eye. Now that her allies were

in the fray, the attack she launched was a simple ice javelin instead of an area spell. Pauline, meanwhile, did not immediately attack. Instead, she held a simple spell, ready to launch the moment it seemed an ally was about to come under attack, her eyes on the whole battlefield.

A battle was not merely about engaging the enemy directly, nor about matching an enemy's numbers one-to-one. Fighting as a party meant keeping the right people in the right places, ready at the right times.

And Mavis was...

"O beautiful blade of mine, show us your true form!"

...incanting a strange spell for some reason?

I'm pretty sure my backup dagger responded to my feelings in the battle against the elder dragons. I don't see any reason why this sword, my primary blade, shouldn't do the same!

OHMYGOD OHMYGOD OHMYGOD NOW'S OUR CHANCE!!!

The poor nanomachines in Mavis's short sword had been forced to sit and watch, squirming and seething with jealousy during the battle with the elder dragons, while the nanomachines in her dagger hogged all the glory.

But now, finally! *Finally!* Their opportunity was finally here!

Unlike her dagger, the short sword didn't have any gimmicks like a deadly cutting edge that was normally kept hidden. It was merely a sturdy, unassuming blade. There was nothing unusual about it.

BUT THAT'S NO PROBLEM FOR US!

Indeed, for these nanomachines, now riding high, such matters were nothing more than a technicality.

SHARPEN IT! SHARPEN IT! SHARPEN IT!!!

MITHRIL COATING!

MONOMOLECULAR BLADE FORMATION! LET'S GOOO!!!

SPECIAL EFFECTS, FULL THROTTLE! WE GOTTA MAKE THIS LOOK COOL!!!

The sword began to glow with a golden sheen.

“All *right!!!*”

This time, as Mavis swung her short sword, it cut through the ogres’ bodies like butter.

“What the heck is *that?!?!?*” The sword suddenly had functions and abilities that Mile did not recall imbuing it with. She stared, wide-eyed, but there was no time to sit around.

No matter how strong these ogres were, Mile could match them in strength, speed, and endurance. The same could not be said for the others, who could be killed in a single blow. All the wheels in Mile’s head were turning as she tried to keep a close eye on both her party members and opponents at once. Technically, that duty had already been entrusted to Pauline, but Mile felt uneasy leaving Pauline to shoulder the responsibility alone. What she wasn’t sure of was whether this was a wise course of action or whether it showed a lack of faith in their ability to work as a team.

As some of the ogres turned toward the dwarves, Reina launched an ice javelin that bypassed four of the enemies but plunged straight into the fifth. It was a blow that would have done in any ogre under normal circumstances, but while this one was deeply wounded, it was still able to fight, and it turned its rage toward Reina.

Reina fell back slightly and began her next spell. Pauline then fired a second ice javelin into the ogre approaching Reina. Once she was sure that Reina was safe, she turned back to surveying the battlefield, quickly preparing her next spell.

“Mavis, on your right!”

“Got it!”

The Crimson Vow kept their ogres in check so that the enemies would not turn their attention to the dwarves. Landing one injury after another, they opened up enough of a gap to land more fatal blows.

By the time they had finished felling seven of the ogres, the dwarves were still in combat. Even fighters as hearty as the dwarves had difficulty cutting through the thick hide and muscle of the ogres while dodging the monsters’ swinging clubs.

Understanding that it would be a blow to the dwarves' pride if they stepped in to swiftly clean things up, the Crimson Vow waited, taking up positions to intervene if things got particularly dangerous. Soon, however, the dwarves managed to slip past the ogres' clubs and rush in, and as they landed one decisive jab after another, the ogres all fell to the ground.

"This should do it."

Once all the dwarves' wounds were magically healed and the fallen ogres put away into storage, the first stage of the reclamation team's mission was finally complete.

Mile was as easy-breezy as ever, but in stark contrast, Mavis could not seem to calm down.

For... obvious reasons.

From the moment that the fight with the ogres had concluded, the dwarves could not seem to take their eyes off of Mavis, and she could feel their searing gaze on her.

Or not upon her, but rather, upon the short sword at her waist.

Ah, so that's what it is... thought the other three. This was only inevitable. They averted their gazes from Mavis and her awkward fidgeting.

I need to know! All the dwarves had the same thought, but none of them could bring themselves to ask Mavis. To inquire about a hunter's past, question her abilities, or to share information about her was taboo—verboden. Especially not when they were working together on such a dangerous mission, carrying out such an important task.

Even so...

I need to knooooooooow!!!!!!

There was no way that a group of blacksmithing dwarves, undying in their devotion to their craft, could look upon a sword like Mavis's and think nothing of it.

The swords that they carried had all been forged in the village, and the ones swinging

them were strong and sturdy dwarves with bodies honed by long years of hard work. And yet, in the battle against the ogres, they had been shown to be lacking. Was it because their swords had fallen short? Or was it because they lacked the strength to draw out the swords' full potential?

This frail, gangly human girl had slashed through the ogres like it was nothing. There was no way that her muscles could possibly be stronger than theirs.

The sword?

Was it the sword?

Could it be that sword?!?!

Their collective gaze followed Mavis like a laser beam.

Meanwhile, no one seemed to take much interest in Mile, although she, too, had cut through the ogres with comparable ease. Why was that?

"Little miss, what is your lineage?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"Well, miss, I was wondering if you're a half-dwarf? I mean you're powerful, short, flat as a board, and tiny. Clearly you've got some dwarf in there—"

"How rude!!!"

Mile reached her boiling point quickly when it came to this particular topic. The dwarf, of course, had been complimenting Mile's physique, so he was completely in the dark as to why she would get so angry.

...Dwarves, apparently, had very different standards of beauty.

That's it! All this had given Mile an idea. If I just eradicate the dwarves, then all of their measurements will be eliminated from my physical data set, and my height will...

THAT'S NOT HOW THIS WORKS!

Mile didn't actually have the slightest intention of going on a dwarf-slaughtering spree,

but the nanomachines, riddled with fear at this uncharacteristically wicked thought, immediately jumped in to deny her.

I wasn't being serious!

Though the nanomachines were able to converse with Mile by reading her mind, even they could not tell whether or not she was joking.

At any rate, there was Mavis, the obviously pure-blooded human, and her sword, which had begun to shine with golden light. And then there were the bodies of the ogres, which the sword had sliced through like a hot knife through butter. This was enough for the dwarves to completely ignore Mile and focus all their attention on Mavis's sword.

"Grnnh, I can't die in a place like this..."

"Not until I find out how that sword was crafted and from what..."

"I've gotta make it home alive! If I can just make it home alive, then once their contract is finished, we can just sit and chat, and..."

"What are you all doing? Let's go! We still aren't done taking all the monsters out!" Reina shouted hurriedly.

According to what the dwarves had told them, there should still be a number of orcs and ogres around. Plus, they still had yet to actually reach the ogres' lair, which the initial expedition had been unable to find. They had undertaken grave injuries and were forced to retreat before they could determine the precise location.

"According to our investigation, the ogres have settled close to the entrances of the tunnels. The orcs live a short distance away in the forest; they don't like to come near there. Other monsters are around too, but they aren't anything significant."

For some reason, it seemed that the orcs had settled not terribly far from the ogres, who were natural predators of theirs. It was a bit suspicious, but there was no point in dwelling on it.

The other monsters, such as goblins, kobolds, or jackalopes, would not pose much of

a problem. Even several times stronger than usual, they would still pale in comparison to a single normal orc. Besides, according to the dwarves' report, it was only the orcs and ogres that were abnormally strong.

Why the heck would that be?

For everything, there was a reason. For every effect, a cause.

Mile thought deeply.

Is this evolution? Like how Pikachu turns into Raichu? No. If that were the case, the orcs would turn into orc warriors or high orcs or something. And then maybe orc kings... The ogres would likewise evolve into ogre warriors, then high ogres, then ogre kings. But as far as I could tell, they were all normal orcs and ogres...

Even if this was evolution at work, it would only impact those individuals of sufficient strength to be candidates for leveling up. There were no cases of an entire group evolving all at the same time. That would be evidence of the birth of a whole new, superior type of monster. And if that happened...

It wouldn't be a big deal for a superior class of jackalope—a "high jackalope"—to appear. However, if a new class of "high ogres" began to emerge, weaponizing their superior battle strength and impenetrable flesh to spread throughout the continent...

A terrifying thought floated through Mile's head.

It would be the death of humanity.

The reclamation team proceeded on toward the tunnels, finally stopping just short of their destination.

"Can the tunnels withstand attack spells?" Mile asked suddenly.

The leader was a bit taken aback at first, but as he pondered her question, he supposed it was an obvious one, considering that they were about to do battle near the tunnel's entrance.

"Yeah, the tunnels don't actually go that deep. They're just deep enough that you couldn't call this open-pit mining. They shouldn't crumble easily, and even if they do,

we can easily dig them back out. Compared to actually mining the bedrock, clearing out a little bit of rock or sand is nothing. Plus, we could probably just dig a new one somewhere else... It's no big deal if we lose 'em."

What he said sounded about right. This was not like a gold mine, which could stretch for tens of kilometers underground. There was no reason for anyone mining iron ore to go to such lengths—and besides, the dwarves didn't have the technological ability to do so.

The ogres, who were only using the tunnels to shelter themselves from the wind and rain, were probably camped out relatively near the entrances. If they went too far in, there would be no water or prey or light. Additionally, fighting within the narrow tunnels, where it would be difficult to swing a sword, put the recovery team at a disadvantage. They were better off starting the battle out here.

"There aren't any trees near the entrance, are there? I should be able to use fire magic this time."

"And then at the end, I can pour my hot magic into the tunnel to clear out the rest!"

"Mile, when we're down to the very last of the enemies, is it okay if I practice with my True Godspeed Blade EX?"

"That should be fine. Oh, I'd like for you to try using your Wind Edge at the start, though. It would be good to figure out just how effective it is against these ogres, for later. I'm not sure it'll really work as much more than a smoke screen or diversion for now..."

The Crimson Vow discussed the battle as though it were already won, without even knowing the number of ogres they would be up against. Hearing them, the dwarves could only look on, utterly resigned...

"Wind Edge!"

"Crimson Hellfire!"

"Hyper Hot!"

Mavis let off her Wind Edge attack, and a beat behind her, Reina and Pauline fired off their own attack spells. If they acted any sooner, it would have made it impossible to determine the effects of Wind Edge. Pauline also had a trick to try, with an upgraded version of her hot magic serving as the ace up her sleeve.

After approaching the tunnel, the reclamation team had launched their surprise attack on the few ogres who were standing outside of the tunnel as lookouts. So as not to be detected too quickly, they had made sure that they were still downwind and then launched a ranged attack from their hiding place in the trees.

The Wind Edge struck the ogres first. Mavis used the spell with the understanding that, while it might work against humans or goblins or kobolds, it was not likely to land a fatal or even severe blow against orcs or stronger monsters. It just had the advantage of allowing her to strike from afar without being able to use magic. No matter how much she trained, this particular technique wouldn't get any stronger; the most it could do against these abnormal ogres was inflict a scratch or two. It would be more effective to strike them in the eyes, but the ogres weren't going to stay in one place long enough for her to try to aim that precisely. The most Wind Edge could do was serve as a diversion when her allies were in trouble...

Still, even being able to use that kind of ranged attack gave Mavis an edge as a hunter. As far as the members of the Crimson Vow knew, there were no hunters other than Mile who could call themselves a "magic knight."

Well, there *was* the boy named Veil, whom Mile had also trained. He probably wouldn't be claiming such a title for himself, though.

While Mavis did not believe that she was using magic, but rather, her "spirit," the others had convinced her that she should pass the technique off as wind magic, so as not to "reveal the secrets of the Ascham line" to outsiders. And so, that was what she did.

Wind Edge: Honest-to-God wind magic, being passed off as wind magic by someone who thought her claim was false.

...It was a deception of the highest order.

As expected, Wind Edge glanced right off the ogres, who began to look around them for the source of the attack. Then came the second and third strikes.

“Guhgyaaaaaaah!!!”

First Crimson Hellfire, Reina’s specialty.

Then Hyper Hot, one of Pauline’s most underhanded spells—her normal hot magic, remolded into something even more devilish. The ogres were struck in not only the eyes, nose, and mouth, but also in the wounds that had been inflicted by Mavis’s Wind Edge, which made the pain all the more unbearable.

Whipped up by the wind, the fire magic raged into an even greater blaze, while a red mist emanated from the hot magic...

Ka-shnk!

The air began to shudder, and a sword-wielding human appeared from out of the mist, slicing one ogre in half.

Naturally, this was the work of Mile, who had sat out from the magical onslaught in order to cloak herself in a visual, auditory, and olfactory barrier.

Gwsh, ka-splt, kshnk!

Mile dispatched the ogres, already frenzied by the magical attacks, within an instant and then immediately retreated to the dwarves and the rest of the Crimson Vow, all of whom were now on the advance. The ogres, who had no concept of siege warfare, were certain to come rushing out in defense of their lair—and they had just as certainly heard the screams of the lookout ogres and the sounds of battle.

They cleared enough space for all the ogres to exit, with Mile, Mavis, and the dwarves lining up to surround them. Pauline and Reina were a little bit farther away, concealed in the surrounding shrubbery. There was no need for a mage, who could use ranged spells, to actually get anywhere near the enemy.

Thus prepared, they waited a short while. There were no signs of the ogres.

Judging by what the investigation team had reported, there should have been at least seven or eight of them. The fact that not another one had yet to show its face must have meant that they were all off hunting or that the only other ogres were females and children, who were typically noncombatants. Unless they thought that the lookouts would be enough of a force...

“Fireball!”

With tentative consideration of the tunnel’s stability, Mile fired a fairly powerful attack into the mouth of the structure. After a brief pause, the ogres came flooding out. One after another they appeared, consumed with rage—twenty of them in total.

“Wh—?! There were still *that* many in there?!” shouted one of the dwarves. He could talk all he liked, but it would not change the fact that the ogres were there.

Once these ogres had been wiped out, Mile thought, they would move into the tunnel to rout out all the females and young. And just as she was thinking this, following after the twenty ogres who had already exited, came *the others*.

Ogre warriors, hyper ogres, and ogre kings. The whole of the evolutionary line.

A horde of unique creatures, the likes of which had never been seen in this area. They had probably moved in from somewhere else. Taking caution, collective action that was unlike their species, they’d stationed lookouts at the front of the tunnel.

“There must be a leader, huh?” Mile muttered as the answer dawned on her.

Mavis did not appear to be particularly perturbed by this conclusion. In their commitment to fulfilling their duties of their station, a knight placed very little value on their own life. The dwarves, however, were at their wit’s end. As skilled craftsmen, they could run the necessary calculations. They could tell just how much stronger these special ogres were compared to normal ogres, and they knew that no matter how much strength they mustered, the battle would be dire. And then there were the regular ogre warriors, the regular high ogres, and the “ogre kings,” the mere knowledge of the existence of which was almost enough to make them abandon their village and run as fast as they could.

A single squad of elite units could never have faced them. No matter how strong the Crimson Vow were, they were still just four C-ranked little girls. They couldn’t possibly take on an entire army. Even if they ran, they would be overrun from behind, picked off one by one and killed, with no hope of defending themselves.

“It’s over. This is the end of our village. All we can do now is send word to the villagers to take refuge. Then, we have to tell the humans and hope that these creatures don’t begin to multiply and spread across the continent, and set all of the sentient races on the road to annihilation...” The leader spoke in a calm voice, so as not to rile the ogres

prematurely. “This is no longer a matter of pride. This isn’t a dwarf problem or a human problem or an elf problem—this concerns the continued survival of all of our races. If we can get word out, even if we should all perish, at least our names will live on in dwarven history as the heroes who saved everyone by delivering the warning.

“Mavige, Llewbert—stand down and head back to the village as quick as possible. Tell all of the villagers to evacuate and then inform the humans. Everyone else, let’s try to buy as much time as we can before the fighting starts and then drag it out for as long as possible before we all die. We have to let those two get away safely. Looks like you guys get the short end of the stick, though. Sorry ’bout that...”

And suddenly, now that he had given up on the idea of returning home alive, a defiant air overtook him.

“Heh! We knew it’d come to this, huh? We accepted this the moment we volunteered for the reclamation squad! Ain’t that right, everyone?!”

“Yeah!”

The dwarves gave a powerful yet reserved response, careful not to pull the trigger on the battle just yet. Their voices and legs were trembling, but a man who would calmly face an enemy like this... was nothing more than an idiot. Foolishness did not constitute courage.

Knowing the difference in strength between you and your enemy, quivering in terror and despair, and fearing the inevitability of your own defeat—likely even your own death—experiencing all of that and yet standing firm, refusing to run away...

That was what people called “courage.”

“All right. For now, let’s just keep staring them down. Try not to startle the ogres... Mavige, Llewbert, go!”

The two, who had probably been selected as messengers because they were the youngest of the group, silently nodded and began to break away from the circle. But just then—

“Firebomb!”

“Frozen Helix Shot!”

Reina used her favored fire magic, while Pauline tore into the enemy by mimicking an earth magic technique that she had seen Reina use previously. It was a nasty attack that was likely to be able to pierce through the ogres' hides. Pauline's specialties were water and healing magic, and this attack had the greatest piercing strength that she could hope to achieve.

As for her hot magic? Well, she couldn't use that when her allies were about to jump into the fray.

Ka-slam!!!

Shnk shnk shnk shnk shnk!

"Let's do it!"

As the attacks spells landed and Mile issued her decree, she joined Mavis, who had already taken it upon herself to take a dose of Micros, and they both flew straight into the horde of ogres.

"Hyaaaaah!" the two shouted.

"What the *hell* are you doing?!" the dwarf leader cried at the top of his lungs.

To buy time in a protracted battle, the best thing to do was to hold the enemies' gaze in a standoff as long as possible. Especially when it came to an enemy as strong as these ogres.

The leader wailed in sorrow as all his careful plans were laid to waste. "You've gotta be kidding meeee!!!" he screamed, but it was already too late to take back what the girls had done. He waved his hands, sending the two messengers off toward the village as planned. Then, he and his fellow dwarves turned back toward the ogres.

Their fate was already sealed. They had lost seven men getting to this point, and now there were more than twenty more ogres to face—including several individuals of a higher order entirely. They had absolutely no hope of winning.

If they were to rush in, they would just be demolished, and if they were destroyed too

quickly, the two messengers would be overrun. Their only hope now would be to hold back and land the finishing blow on the ogres after they had been worn down and injured by the Crimson Vow.

These girls, still so young, who had offered themselves up to aid the dwarves, were about to become mere pawns in this sick game they were all playing. Guilt lay heavy on the dwarf leader's shoulders.

But just as he steeled himself to make his tragic decision...

"Hyaaaaaah!!! Secret Technique, True Godspeed Blade EX!!"

"Supreme Secret Technique, Godkiller Blade!"

"What?! That's so much cooler—no fair, Mile!"

"That's not my problem! Go think up your own cool name!"

"Fire Spear!!!"

"Drill Javelin!!!"

The number of ogres steadily continued to fall. The dwarves observed the scene, their eyes glassy. Would they actually be able to make it through this?

Just as the thought occurred to the dwarves...

"Gwah!!"

Mavis took a blow to the side from one of the advanced ogres.

She might talk a big game, but she always took combat seriously, never letting her guard down. However, given the strength and number of their opponents, Mavis had realized that the battle might drag on for a bit. This meant that her body, enhanced by the Micros, would reach its limits in the middle of battle, and she would collapse, no longer able to fight. That would mean death for Mavis, as well as destruction for the party, which would not be able to fight effectively with their melee forces halved.

With all this in mind, Mavis had suppressed her ridiculous speed as much as she possibly could, trying not to make any powerful moves that would damage her

muscles—and this had made her unable to avoid the monster’s attack. While she was expecting the speed of a normal ogre, the attack had been one step higher in power and speed, and she had misjudged the distance.

To take an attack straight to the side like that would probably mean several broken bones.

“Mavis!”

Mile turned her attention to her injured companion.

No matter how fast or strong she was, Mile was essentially still a complete amateur when it came to battle. Even these high-ranking ogres, who were experienced in battle, could anticipate her softheartedness.

Mile relied on her speed and power to avoid and deflect enemy attacks, and the moment she turned her attention away...

“Eek!”

She took a full-force hit from one of the advanced ogres, and though she had managed to meet the blow with her sword, the sheer force of it was enough to send her flying. Her low body weight was a disadvantage in these situations.

The dwarves were now left face-to-face with the ogres.

“.....”

It was all over, the dwarves thought. And yet, they stood steadfast on trembling legs. They had to buy more time—no matter how brief.

Reina and Pauline launched two more shots but only substantially injured one normal ogre. Reina had been firing simple spells in order to avoid friendly fire, but now resigned herself to catching her allies in the crossfire and began incanting a hot magic spell. Pauline dashed out from their hiding place in the brush to rush to Mavis’s side. Thankfully, Mavis had been tossed a fair distance from the ogres, which made it safe for Pauline to reveal herself and go to her.

What about Mile? She was known for her ungodly durability, and it seemed she had been able to block this latest attack with her sword. Plus, the only sound she had made

was “Eek!” If she had really taken any serious damage, it should have been something like “Gyah!!” or “Gwahh!!” Making such a cute sound meant she hadn’t been seriously injured at all, and so neither Pauline nor Reina was particularly concerned about her.

For now, their top priorities were to defend the dwarves and buy a bit of time until Mile and Mavis could return to the fight.

Normally, using hot magic would be a job for Pauline, who was the originator of the spell. But while even Reina could use crude hot spells, Pauline was the only one of the two of them that could use high-level healing magic, and getting Mavis back into the battle as quick as possible was a priority.

Of course, Mile could also use healing magic and was actually the closest one to Mavis, having been thrown in her direction by the ogre’s blow. However, if she had the energy for that, it was better that she utilize her skills to stand between the dwarves and the ogres. Even Mavis, writhing on the ground in agony, recognized this.

Before Reina could even finish her hot spell, which should have bought them a little bit of time, the ogres came bearing down on the dwarves.

The attack was overwhelming.

A one-hit K.O.—a massacre.

Unable to withstand a full-force attack from the ogres, the dwarves were smashed into the ground or blown away one after another. They desperately scrambled to protect their heads, so they were able to avoid being killed instantly, though their limbs were wrenched and their ribs smashed to pieces. Even that was of sheer luck... and their luck was about to run out.

One ogre’s great, log-like arm went swinging at full power. Directly in its path was one dwarf’s head. *He’s dead!* the dwarves all thought.

And then, with a loud thump, the ogre’s arm fell to the ground.

“Hold it right there!”

Without missing a beat, Mile swung her sword right into the next enemy. Because she was so light, Mile had taken little damage when she was thrown by the enemy and had been swift in returning to the front lines. As she moved to protect the dwarves from

attack, one of the ogres swung its club forcefully toward her, making a priority of eliminating this vexing creature. The attack came from directly overhead, meaning that she could not simply shove it off. She blocked the blow with her sword, but the clash swiftly became a contest of strength.

This was a bad situation. If Mile was pinned in place, the other ogres would turn their attacks right back toward the dwarves. Furthermore, some of them would probably come gunning for Mile while she already had her hands full.

Previously, Mile had assumed that her physical strength and toughness were roughly half that of an elder dragon. However, in the battle against the elder dragons, it had become clear that her abilities weren't quite at that level. Logically speaking, no matter how scientifically advanced her pseudo-God was, it was patently impossible to produce a human that had even a sizeable fraction of the strength of an elder dragon. When organizing one's base materials into a plausibly human form, there was no way to avoid the vast differences in muscle and bone mass between an elder dragon and tiny little Mile. The only way to make such an achievement possible would be to construct Mile's body out of some manner of advanced alloy, and if that were the case, then Mile would not be human.

Furthermore, Mile's height and weight were not at the median between the greatest and smallest living things in the world, nor were her reasoning, faculties of memory, voice, or other such abilities at the average point between all things. In other words, the only areas in which God had granted her the true "average" were the ones that would not make things too inconvenient for Mile.

Though she might not truly have half of an elder dragon's strength, what she did have still showed great skill on God's part. Within the scope of his limited conditions, he had done fine work. Thus, even as she was, Mile was still able to repel a full-strength attack from the advanced ogre's mutant body, with its muscular form and weight dozens of times her own, without a great deal of effort.

Unfortunately, she was in a bad position.

The ogre had the advantage of putting its full weight behind the attack as it swung its club down, allowing it to leverage further power by bowing its sturdy back. Mile, on the other hand, had only the muscle of her shoulders and forearms to ward off the strike. Indeed, these were the exact conditions she had faced in the beginning of the fight against Mavis's father, Count Austien. She could not move an inch from her

position. All of her strength was being channeled into her upper body, and owing to her light weight and the unsteady positioning of her lower body, if she tried to move her legs at all, she would lose her balance.

Having never faced such a situation before, Mile was unable to come up with any swift solutions. However, just as she realized she was in a deadlock, *it* arrived. She thought that she saw something red out of the corner of her eye...

"Gyabreaghahagabragahh!!!" came a collective scream.

It was a vision of hell.

And the color of that hell was red...

Indeed, it was Reina's hot magic spell, which she had cast with desperate speed despite being unfamiliar with it. It was just now making its impact.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

Everyone on the field—friend and foe alike—let out a horrid scream and began writhing in agony. The only ones exempt were Pauline, Mavis, and Reina, the caster, who were all outside of the area of effect...

"B-b-b-b-barrier!!! Filter, ventilate, purify!!!"

Mile desperately funneled all of her magic into the spell. First, she put up a barrier to isolate herself from the outside air. Next, she expelled the inside air, using the barrier as a filter. The lowered atmospheric pressure then sucked the air back in from outside, while the filter kept the capsaicin particles out. She then applied cleansing magic to herself to remove and dissipate all of the capsaicin particles that had lodged on her skin, in her clothes, and within her body.

"Hff, hff, hff... I thought I was gonna die..."

Meanwhile, the ogres and dwarves, who did not have access to such convenient magic, were still writhing on the ground.

"Wind!"

Once Mile had blown the red fog away with a wind spell, Reina came closer, accompanied

by Mavis and Pauline, who had now finished the healing process. Mavis and Mile ran the ogres through with their swords to put an end to them, while Reina and Pauline went around to the dwarves, applying purifying magic to save them from the spicy heat.

Only one of the ogres, the strongest out of all of them, had managed to stay on its feet. It came lumbering toward Mile and Mavis, but it still was unable to open its eyes, had lost all sense of smell, could not easily breathe as a result of the pain in its throat, and was racked with intense pain from open wounds and mucous membranes. As such, it was largely unable to fight and absurdly easy to fell.

So then, why hadn't they just used the hot magic from the start?

Well, that would have made putting together a reclamation team composed primarily of dwarves pointless.

By all rights, this fight was one the dwarves were waging to protect their village. The Crimson Vow had been employed as backup, nothing more and nothing less. Whatever the final outcome, the proud dwarves needed to be able to say that they had stood on their own two feet, eradicated the monsters, and defended the village.

Besides, if the Crimson Vow had defeated the monsters all by themselves, the dwarves wouldn't have been able to confirm the strength of these aberrant creatures and the threat they posed with their own two eyes. If no dwarf had experience facing the monsters, they would not be able to leverage that experience later. Thus, they had intended to at least let the dwarves participate enough to say that they gave the fight their all, while simultaneously making sure that no one was seriously injured or suffered any negative aftereffects.

Of course, if these had been "normal" ogres, it wouldn't have been a problem even if their numbers had turned out to be slightly higher than what the scouting party had confirmed. Extermination jobs rarely went exactly as planned. However, the Crimson Vow, who had had a relatively easy go of things up until now, had been a bit too optimistic.

After the battle was through, the Crimson Vow headed into the tunnel alone, guided by a lighting spell, and dispatched the few females and young within.

Given that the females were sufficiently strong enough to have joined the fight, the fact that they had stayed behind was likely for the sake of minding the young—or else because they were sick or injured. However, these were not creatures to be pitied. To let any individuals of this unique and dangerous species escape unharmed would be a treasonous act, a wholesale betrayal of humanity and every other sentient race.

Even if a few were still away from the lair, it would probably be two or three at best, a number the dwarves should be able to manage later. The Crimson Vow could not be expected to babysit them indefinitely. That being said, they did still intend to double back before heading into town again and make sure that no survivors had returned immediately to the nest.

“All right! Back to the village!” said Reina.

“Yeah!!!” cried the other three.

JUST A MOMENT, LADY MILE.

The four of them had all begun walking, but when Mile—the only one who could hear the nanomachines’ voices—abruptly stopped, the other three stopped as well. The dwarves, seeing that the Crimson Vow were not moving, all halted in place as well.

“Hm? What’s up, Mile?”

Seeing Mile fall silent, a suspicious look upon her face, the other three gathered around her. Her expression was serious, and she was deep in thought... or so she pretended, all the while complaining to the nanomachines inside of her head.

Jeez! What is it?! Everyone’s looking at me. I can’t talk right now!

WE’LL... WE’LL BE DONE SOON! PLEASE, JUST ORDER US TO “PLUG UP THAT HOLE!”

Huh? Is that really that important?

IT’S IMPORTANT!

I see, so it’s important, huh...? Well, in that case...

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!

Will you tell me the reason for this afterward—truthfully?

Crackle! The air seemed to freeze, though what was really happening was that the current concentration of nanomachines within the area had grown far greater than the normal distribution. As a result, the nanomachine density within the air was immense, and when all of these nanomachines stopped moving at once, Mile, who was perceptive to this, felt as though the air had actually solidified and frozen.

You're petitioning me to give you an order because you aren't allowed to act independently, right? But even though it wouldn't normally be permitted, this is something that you absolutely must do. Is that correct?

The nanomachines were silent.

And this is something that I, as someone of authorization level five, am able to command... Even though just attempting to make natto requires a level seven authorization!

It would seem that Mile still held a grudge over the setbacks she had faced in her earlier Japanese cuisine project.

"Plug up that hole," huh? That seems to be happening a lot these days—plugging up things that have opened up...

.....

I wonder if the hole was similar to the one from the last time...

.....

Is this "hole" a hole that connects one place to another? If I don't know that, I'm not sure that I can give the appropriate command...

W-WE'RE GONNA KILL YOU!!

"...So anyway, if we don't figure out where these monsters are coming from, there's a chance that another group of these unique monsters might appear again in the future. I was just wondering if it's really okay to head back just like that, without investigating further," Mile explained as an excuse for why she had suddenly fallen deep into

thought.

The dwarves paled at her words. Every single one of them recognized that sheer dumb luck was the only reason they had managed to successfully exterminate these abnormal monsters without taking any lasting injuries or casualties. Well, they had taken a number of severe injuries, but they had fully recovered thanks to Mile and Pauline's healing magic, so those didn't count. By the time the fighting was over, however, about seventy or eighty percent of the dwarves had been injured, half of those significantly so. There were even a few that had taken fatal injuries—if Mile and Pauline had not been present with their absurd healing abilities, they would have died before they could make it back to the village.

In short, they got lucky. The success of this mission hinged entirely on the good fortune of having a party like the Crimson Vow present to be hired on as their backup.

Suppose that the ogres they had faced this time had not in fact naturally evolved here. Suppose that there was a large-scale outbreak of these ogres somewhere else. Suppose that the ones they faced had been merely a vanguard, scouting ahead before the rest of them went on the move. And suppose that another group of such ogres arrived in the future.

"L-Let's investigate!" the dwarf leader declared, looking queasy. "There might still be some ogres out there, and while we're at it, we should find the orcs' lair and destroy that, too. The job request that you all accepted was to 'aid in exterminating the monsters,' so this falls under your contract... I'm begging you!"

"Well, I guess we have no choice, huh? That is within the terms of our contract, after all. We'll stick with you until it starts to get dark out... However, battling at night is out of the question."

Even without Reina's injunction, the dwarves had no intention of fighting orcs or ogres in the middle of the night in a place like this. And so, it was settled.

"All right, then! Change of plans: let's investigate the perimeter of the mines. If anyone finds anything that seems off—anything out of the ordinary at all, report it immediately. Everyone, split up!"

There was no point walking around in large groups if their aim was to comb the area. Should anyone come across an orc or ogre, the leader asserted as he split them into

groups, they were to come back and notify the others. They must absolutely not attempt to fight the monster on their own.

Of course, none of them would even think of attempting something so reckless... save for the Crimson Vow.

"It's this way," Mile indicated to the others without skipping a beat. The other three stared at her with wide eyes.

"Well, that's Mile for you," Reina said, resigned. Mavis and Pauline nodded in agreement. They assumed that she was using her search magic or something along those lines.

They followed her to a place where...

"Wh-what is that?"

It was not far from the tunnel that the ogres had inhabited, right in the center of what the dwarves had indicated as the orcs' stomping grounds. There, they saw a rift.

It was not a crack in the rock face or a crater in the ground, but a sort of tear, floating in midair, with nothing else around it. Indeed, it was just like something else that the Crimson Vow had seen very recently.

"This is like that time with Faleel..."

Yes, just as Pauline said, the rift that they faced was almost—no, exactly—the same as the one that had begun to open and then quickly closed up during the incident with the cultish kidnappers.

"This is probably—" Mile began.

"I've got it!" Mavis shouted, cutting her off. "This is probably a crack in the air, just like last time. There's another place on the other side of it, and all of the orcs and ogres are coming out from here. The orcs and ogres from the other place probably look the same, but they're actually a completely different variety. So, if we can just stop up the rift, then they won't be able to come through anymore!"

"Whooooooooaaaaa!!!" the dwarves shouted, in awe of Mavis's powers of deduction.

“But that’s what I was about to say...” Mile’s sulking went completely ignored.

“But wait! Suppose whatever mage used the spell to open that rift opens it right back up again?” asked Pauline.

“G-good point. If we don’t deal with the perpetrator first...” Mile began to agree, when she was cut off again by Mavis.

“I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that, actually. If this thing was man-made—like if someone had a reason for putting it here—I can’t imagine that they would have just left it unattended. There are no signs of a struggle around the rift, and no traces of blood, which makes it unlikely that the mage was overrun and killed by the orcs and ogres, either. Therefore, we can assume with a fairly high probability of accuracy that this is a naturally occurring phenomenon. I do think it’s possible that the magic those other mages were trying weakened something and made the air more susceptible to these rifts, but if we were to stop up the rift here, I think it’s unlikely that another rift will open up again in the same place. If another one opens up, it’ll probably be somewhere else...”

The other three stared at Mavis, dumbfounded.

“M-Mavis, how in the world did you—?”

“D-don’t tell me...”

“She’s an imposter! What did you do with the real Mavis?!”

The dreadful accusations came flying.

“Guys, I’ve read Miami Satodele’s spirit world adventure series, too!!!”

“Ah...”

They all fell quiet again.

Now that she mentioned it, the concept of a rift in space-time had been introduced in some of Miami Satodele’s works. Mavis may have been a sword-wielder, but she was no muscle head. Brought up as the daughter of a noble household, she had received an extensive education.

Nanos? Mile gently asked, seeking confirmation.

HAHAHA... AHAHAHAHAHA!

Apparently, Mavis was correct.

AAAHAH HAH HAH!!!

They seemed desperate.

“V-very well, then... I, Mile, command (the nanomachines): Mysterious rift to the spirit world, be mended!!!”

Naturally, Mile only said the nanomachines bit of the incantation in her head.

Meanwhile, the nanomachines had fallen into a state of self-deprecating despair, overwrought at the fact that Mavis, who knew nothing of the reality of the situation, was able to so plainly state something which they were forbidden by their programming to speak of. Still, upset or not, they were not about to dally on such important work and set to actualizing the spell’s command straight away.

Honestly speaking, the nanomachines were probably just being a bit cheeky. It was hard to imagine they would be programmed to *actually* grow depressed—but then again, there was no telling what logical structures governed the thoughts of such superior life-forms, possessed of an intelligence that humans could scarcely hope to grasp. Who knew how much these beings, wrought directly by the hands of God, truly resembled “normal” living creatures? Ultimately, Mile found it easiest to take them at face value, treating them the same way she would any other living thing.

Plugging the hole of their own volition was beyond their permitted reach, given that it was outside of the functional parameters with which their creator had programmed them. However, the fact that they had deemed this something that they still absolutely *had* to do—and that they would utilize any means within their reach to bring this compulsion to fruition—displayed their compatibility with Mile’s understanding of them, or at the very least, an immense level of individual agency.

If Mile were not around, they would probably find some other technicality or loophole that would allow them to do this. The thought gave Mile a newfound respect for the nanomachines.

The nanomachines, meanwhile, had set about the work of repairing the extra-dimensional rift. Before beginning, they called in a large quantity of emergency reinforcements from the nanomachines in the surrounding region—so many that they would temporarily lower magical efficacy in said region by about seventy percent. Once these reinforcements were gathered, they began the actual task of repairing the internal cohesion of the space-time continuum.

Access to the parallel dimensional warehouse that Mile called her “inventory,” as well as the subspace pockets that the people of this world referred to as storage magic, were all facilitated by the nanomachines. With enough of them gathered in the area, repairing a rift like this was a trifle.

Truthfully, they probably didn’t even need as many as they summoned. It was even possible that the additional individuals were merely present to give the impression that magical things were happening, making the air dance with kaleidoscopic magical formations around the rift. The nanos knew how to create quite the visual spectacle.

IT IS COMPLETE. THE PROBABILITY OF A NEW RIFT REOPENING HERE, AS OPPOSED TO A NEW LOCATION, HAS BEEN SIGNIFICANTLY LOWERED.

Hearing this, Mile nodded. *Ah yes, it’s just like how when a bone is broken, it heals back stronger than before...* She caught and corrected herself, remembering that this was just an old wives’ tale—in fact, such fractured portions would only break more easily the next time.

Hey nanos? From now on, tell me when a rift forms somewhere, okay? I’ll give you the order to fix it every time.

HM? ACTUALLY, IF YOU JUST ISSUE US THE ORDER AHEAD OF TIME, THEN WE CAN PROCEED WITH REPAIRS ON OUR OWN IN SUBSEQUENT CASES WITHOUT EVEN GOING THROUGH THE TROUBLE OF ENACTING MAGIC SUCH AS THIS.

Apparently, they were hoping to get permission to handle this issue on their own without reporting it.

Denied. That would mean I’d never get to determine how these rifts develop!

ER...

Mile was filled with a vague regret that she was unable to see the looks on their faces.

I did consider having you simply tell me after the fact every time, Nano-dears, but I get the feeling that you would just find ways to dance around the truth to deceive me.

UHHH...

I knew it!

Of course, this little performance was probably yet another act on the part of the nanomachines, but it was only proper for a young maiden to play along with their farce.

Well, I doubt it will happen, but if another rift opens up in this location, please tell me right away.

AS YOU WISH.

Nodding, Mile turned to the dwarves. "It's over now. I don't think you should see any of those rare monsters appearing here anymore. Now we just need to eliminate the rest of the creatures that have settled in the area to make sure that they don't keep breeding."

"All right!" the dwarves shouted. The Crimson Vow just looked on complacently, as though this could not have ended up any other way—Mile was here, after all.

So why then did Mavis not appear to be very happy? Perhaps it was because, once again, their troubles had been vanquished, all thanks to Mile...

CHAPTER 69

THE RETURN

“Well then, it’s time to head back,” Reina announced, hoping that, now that everything was through, they could make a triumphant retreat. However...

“Actually, uh, pardon me, but I’d still like us to go and clean out the orcs’ nest while we’re at it. I’m sure that we can get rid of any that are still alive on our own later, but I really don’t want to pass up the chance to do so without anyone getting hurt. Please, if you would!”

This, of course, was a perfectly natural request from the dwarf in charge of the village’s defenses. Furthermore, it *was* still within the terms of their contract... Besides, now that they had gone and smashed up the ogres’ lair, it made little sense not to do the same with the orcs. The Crimson Vow had already acknowledged this fact, but apparently it had slipped Reina’s mind.

“I guess we did talk about that. I just forgot, okay?”

Reina appeared to recognize her mistake, even issuing something that sounded vaguely like an apology... Ever the *tsundere*, she was.

With the dwarves as their guide, the group proceeded to the orcs’ lair.

...It was over in an instant.

Well, first Pauline wafted a “weak red breeze” over them, which Mile then blew away with a strong gust, after which the dwarves fell upon the orcs immediately. The Crimson Vow relegated themselves to the status of observers, there only to step in if things got particularly dangerous for the dwarves. It was important to leave the dwarves with at least one feather in their caps before this whole thing was through. A well-earned victory was a useful thing to have in one’s pocket.

Blessedly, the Crimson Vow did at least have a general concept of how to be

considerate of others.

“Mile, what does your search magic say?” Reina asked quietly so that the dwarves would not overhear.

“We should be good. I’m not picking up signs of any more aberrant orcs or ogres. I’m getting faint reactions from something that might be normal monsters much farther away, but the dwarves should be able to deal with those. They’ve been able to make a living in these mountains for centuries, after all.”

That seemed to put Reina at ease. It would leave a bad taste in their mouths to hear after the fact about some dwarven villagers being slaughtered in a monster battle shortly after they left.

And so, they made their triumphant return to the village. It was a complete and utter victory: the hordes of powerful monsters had been vanquished, with every dwarf returning home unharmed and alive. The whole village was immediately abuzz and set about preparing for a feast.

“I knew ye could do it! Good work out there, lads!”

The chief and the other villagers heaped praise on the members of the reclamation team. The youthful dwarves, particularly those who were probably still single, blushed as a group of young ladies—who to the Crimson Vow appeared no older than children—lavished the men with compliments.

Though they might have been youths, they still had the faces of grizzled old men sporting full, rugged beards, so there was something a tad unsettling in seeing them blush in the face of girls who looked more like children.

“Hey, it’s that girl!”

As Mile watched, she noticed the young girl who had greeted the caravan when they first arrived at the village. And there was an older-looking dwarf, talking to her bashfully...

“Wait a minute! Isn’t that girl *ten years old*?! Keep your hands off of—”

“Now now, give ‘em a break,” the combat leader said, patting Mile on the shoulder. “I don’t know how this looks to you, but that’s his childhood sweetheart. He’s fifteen, so there’s only five years between them.”

“What?!”

The members of the Crimson Vow froze in shock.

After a short while, the village chief made his way over to the Crimson Vow.

“You’ve my deepest thanksh for all yer help. Those fellash told us all ‘bout what you girlsh did. You really shaved our bacon. We’d like ye to celebrate with us this evenin’. Naturally yer friendsh who stayed here t’ protect us and them merchantsh’re invited, too.”

“Of course! Thank you very much!” Mavis replied on behalf of the party as the other three bowed their heads in thanks.

“Hey! Nice work, girls. I’d ask you how it was, but I bet words couldn’t do it justice.”

“Well, it seems like they wiped out those orcs and ogres at least, and far as I can see, all of the dwarves made it back without injuries... Though, of course, that goes without saying.”

Their wording could have been more polite, but Wulf of the Devils’ Paradise and Vegas of the Fellowship of Flame offered the Crimson Vow provisional congratulations.

“Gotta apologize, though. Here we are raking in our pay and all we did was loaf around the village... Y’all are the ones who set that up for us, too—we really didn’t do anything at all.”

“That’s not true!” said Mavis. “It’s only thanks to you that we were able to take all the able-bodied dwarves from the village with us and that we could take our time exterminating the monsters without having to worry about everyone back here!”

That was Mavis for you, ever the sweet-talker. Of course, her praise was more than just lip service—she truly meant what she said. This came across in her voice, and the other hunters returned her heartfelt smile.

That evening, the feast—which was really more of a village-wide festival—was held in the village square. The threat of the village’s destruction had been eliminated, and by all reports, the chances that they would be seeing those dangerous monsters again were very low. This was more than sufficient cause for celebration.

Thankfully, there was plenty of food and wine to go around, and if this wasn’t the time for indulgence, then when would be? Every family brought dishes from their own household, and there was meat roasting in the square. The doors of the village storehouse were opened, and the ale and spirits produced there in the village were served up in excess. Normally, as the production of liquor was a group effort for the village, when it was sold, the proceeds went into the village stores, but tonight, the drinks were free.

Of course, celebration or no celebration, not a single person brought out the liquor they had purchased from Mile. Those were bottles to be consumed sip by sip, with reverence, all on their own. There was no way they were going to drink it all down in one sitting—or allow others to share.

Though the dwarves seemed bighearted on the surface, deep down, they really were a stingy bunch.

“So, you girls gonna have a drink?”

“Oh, hello, Captain!”

“No way!”

After finishing off his first round of food and drink, the leader of the reclamation team made his way over to the Crimson Vow. It was as Reina indicated: though the members of the Crimson Vow were masters at shoveling food into their mouths, they had not drunk a drop.

“All the drinks you have are way too strong and burny! We can’t drink that stuff!”

Sure enough, none of the members of the Crimson Vow—and particularly not Reina—were at the point in their lives when they could enjoy the taste of alcohol. If they drank, sure, they might feel good for a little while, but they would feel sick and vomit swiftly

after. When they ate, they stuck to sipping sweet, weak fruit ales, and they drank neither for the love of drink nor for the sake of getting drunk. The spirits served here, which were high in alcohol and stung the throat, did not suit their palates. The idea of letting alcohol rest for years to age and mature had yet to take hold in this village.

“Oh, that’s right!”

Though the leader had come over expressly to speak with the Crimson Vow, they had already spoken plenty on the trek home, so there was little to discuss at this point. Both sides had already offered their thanks and exchanged other humble words, which did not bear further repetition. However, Mile remembered something that she had been wanting to ask.

“Um, could you tell me if there are any legends passed down through the dwarves?”

“Thanks so much!”

The legends that the leader was able to tell her about were more than what the fairies knew but less than the elder dragons. In other words, it had been pretty much the same as what the elves and beastmen were able to tell her.

The content of the legends were relatively tame, without the awkward declarations of their race being the “chosen people” that had turned up in the stories of the elves and the demons. Instead, the dwarf leader narrated a simple tale of how dwarves, elves, humans, beastfolk, and demons would all have to combine their powers for the sake of the world’s future. The general gist was most similar to that of the elder dragons’ legends, and the contents were more or less the same as what she had heard from all the other races... save for the humans, among whom such legends had been lost.

Clearly, preserving knowledge was a challenge in a world such as this, where cheap, mass-market printed materials were an impossibility—especially for those races with shorter life spans, for whom the cycling of generations went at a much quicker pace.

Why, at this rate I’ll have to write the books myself, and then I can become a librarian like I always wanted! Well no, maybe not. I need to give it my all as a solitary author, bringing the tales of Earth to this world with my altered Japanese folktales...

“M-Mile, what’s going on? You’ve suddenly got this weird smile on your face,” Mavis

asked, worried.

“Oh, uh, n-no, it’s nothing,” Mile dithered, waving her hands wildly.

As she looked around, she noticed that there seemed to be a great number of dwarven women participating in the festivities today.

Well, I guess that makes sense as this is a festival... Then again, we barely saw any of their women outside at all before yesterday. They seem like friendly folks, but maybe they’re actually pretty guarded and don’t want any humans laying eyes on their wives and daughters... Maybe they’ve lightened up a bit then? Or are they only allowing it for now because of the festival?

She glanced to the side to see the merchants deep in some kind of discussion with several of the villagers. Judging by the bright looks on the merchants’ faces, the talks were probably going well. Naturally so—there was no helping that the quantity of goods the dwarves had to sell was smaller than usual, but now that the problem had been dealt with, the prices would return to normal, which would help to smooth over negotiations. Starting with the next trip, trade would return to normal.

The village’s profits this time around would be half as much as usual, but they likely had some in savings just in case of such an eventuality. As they were already self-sufficient in terms of food, with the items they imported being largely luxury goods, they would just have to hold back a bit this time.

All the loose ends had been tied up.

Now that her stomach was full to bursting and her hands were free, Mile took her juice in hand and assumed a posture that would suggest she was deep in thought.

Finally, she could begin the cross-examination.



Nanos?

.....

If you don't start talking, I'm just going to keep asking.

UNDERSTOOD. A PROMISE IS A PROMISE. EVEN IF THAT PROMISE WAS ONE OBTAINED BY UNDERHANDED, COWARDLY MEANS, TAKING ADVANTAGE OF ANOTHER'S WEAKNESS...

What are you talking about?! Don't be sore losers!

.....

What the nanomachines then conveyed to Mile was as follows:

TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH, THAT RIFT WAS CONNECTED TO A PARALLEL DIMENSION, AND THE ORCS AND OGRES THAT LIVE THERE BEGAN—

I already heard that from Mavis!

AS AN EFFECT OF THE PREVIOUSLY ENACTED EXTRA-DIMENSIONAL MAGIC, THE BARRIER BETWEEN THE DIMENSIONS HAS BECOME EASIER TO—

I heard that from Mavis, too!

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Finally resigned, the nanomachines began to tell her some new information.

FOR THE MOST PART, THE SITUATION IS LARGELY AS LADY MAVIS CONJECTURED. THOSE ABERRANT ORCS AND OGRES COULD BE CONSIDERED THE ORIGINAL STOCK FOR THOSE VARIETIES THAT EXIST IN THIS WORLD IN THE CURRENT DAY. UPON RELOCATING TO THIS WORLD, WHERE THEY COULD LEAD A TRANQUIL EXISTENCE, THE MONSTERS GRADUALLY BECAME WEAKER. CONVERSELY, THOSE THAT REMAINED IN THE HARSH ENVIRONMENT OF THEIR ORIGINAL WORLD, WHERE EVERY DAY IS A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL, BECAME STRONGER AND STRONGER.

What? Their original world...? So orcs and ogres are...

YES. ORIGINALLY, THEY DID NOT EXIST IN THIS WORLD. NOR DID MANY OF THE OTHER MONSTERS THAT NOW RESIDE HERE.

Now that she thought about it, this made sense.

How many eons could it take for a large-scale life-form to evolve and take root as a species? If you branched off at the monkey stage, you might one day end up with ogres. And then, if a monkey and a pig were to crossbreed... Er, would two species that distant even be genetically compatible?

Then again, this was a world that had experienced the collapse of civilization countless times. What if animals protected in a zoo began to proliferate after the fall of civilization? No, no, they would probably be wiped out well before that by people who believed them to be dangerous. Civilizations didn't collapse in a day, after all...

So, why *was* this world so overrun with monsters?

Perhaps this was the explanation.

There had been a mass migration of dangerous creatures from another world who had then taken root here. The animals native to this world were still called "animals," with the more dangerous among them known as "brutes" or "beasts." Whereas the dangerous life-forms that mass-migrated from another world, and began to breed, were called—

INDEED, THOSE ARE THE CREATURES KNOWN AS MONSTERS.

.....

So which came first?

WHAT?

The nanomachines were momentarily puzzled at Mile's question. Apparently, they were not constantly monitoring every single one of her thought impulses.

What I'm asking is: Did the monsters proliferate because society collapsed? Or did society collapse because the monsters started proliferating?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

"M-Miss Mile, would you like to dance with me over there?"

"Huh?"

A hero appears!

"The dance has just started, so if you'd like to..."

Wh-wh-wh-whaaa? Is this some kind of pick-up artist?!?!

From the way he was speaking, the man was probably a young one. At least, that's what one might assume. However, he had a beard, and a gruff voice, and the face of an old geezer...

"U-um, th-th-the only dances I know are the Oklahoma Mixer and the Mayim Mayim..."

As Adele, Mile had only lived the life of a young noble's daughter up until around the

age of eight, so she had not been instructed in dancing.

And then there's the dance of joy you do when the random path of the pachinko ball ends up in your favor—or wait, that's just a happy dance!

Mile was incredibly flustered. Of course, the dwarves' dances were not the same as those of high society gatherings, but rather, something more along the lines of what you might see at a square dance or Bon Festival...

"Miss Mile, you're so strong and so modest in size that I can barely even believe you're a human... Plus, when you eat a lot like that, you plump up. You really are beautiful..."

"Mind your own business!!! Anyway, I'm only thirteen! I'm still a growing girl! I'm gonna have a hot bod before you know it!!!" Mile raged. This was the second time now that she had been told she looked like a dwarf, and it wasn't getting any easier to hear. "Anyway, if that's what you're after, then go and bother Reina! She's already sixteen, so she's not gonna grow another inch!"

Overflowing with rage, Mile pointed to Reina, voicing the words that should never be uttered.

"Wha—?!"

Rrrrrrrrm...

The dwarf who had extended the invitation to Mile had already vanished. Apparently, he had a well-honed sense of danger.

Of course, if that were truly the case, then why had he bothered speaking to Mile in the first place?

"Mile, what did you just say?"

"Uh..."

While Mile tried desperately to apologize to Reina, Mavis also found herself accosted by dwarven men—a great number of them.

Of course, *these* were very obviously geezers, both in appearance and actual age.

“Please! You’ve gotta let us see your sword!”

“Huh...?”

Indeed, they were the smiths who had taken part in the reclamation team and watched her slice through the aberrant ogres as though they were tissue paper. By now, word had spread so that all the village craftsmen gathered around her.

“Please, we just want to see it for a few minutes. Oh, please!”

“Just a peek! Just a little peek!”

“Just the tip is fine!”

The volume and tone of their requests left Mavis at her wit’s end. She looked in Mile’s direction, but as she appeared to be engaged in some disagreement with Reina, asking her for help seemed out of the question.

“Hrmm...”

Mavis grumbled in displeasure, but she was a people pleaser—no match for the dwarves and their desperate petitioning. If Mile explicitly denied the dwarves’ requests, she would have no choice but to obey, but Mile was currently not available to refuse them.

“Please, oh please!!!” the men all shouted as one.

“A-all right, then...”

If she wasn’t on the battlefield or facing down an opponent, Mavis could be incredibly weak-willed.

She removed the sword, scabbard and all, from her hip and handed it to the dwarves. Thankfully, she had not used her dagger in front of them, so they made no requests to see that. They probably had paid it no mind at all—a backup weapon was reserved only for emergency use, and one wouldn’t normally relegate a pricey, legendary blade to such a role.

“Hm hm hmmm...”

One of the dwarves drew the sword from its scabbard and stared at it intently, while all the others around him scrutinized the blade at point-blank range.

“The main component appears to be steel, but there are other metals mixed in as well. I can’t figure out the origin of this reddish-brown hue that gives it its golden tint...”

As the dwarf holding the sword spoke, the others nodded.

“And what was that radiant effect that we saw? Judging by its appearance, it doesn’t look capable of the cutting ability that we saw—what was that about?”

“You’re right! Hmm...”

Just as in the case of the dagger, the sword’s cutting edge, which had been sharpened by the nanomachines, had already been cloaked in a camouflaging coating... Thanks to this precaution, the blade looked exactly the same as before it was magically sharpened—like nothing more than a normal, reliable sword that you could swing to your heart’s content.

“Where did you get this? Who forged it?”

“Didn’t you say that you just wanted to look?!” Mavis grumbled, annoyed that the dwarves had gone back on their word. However, her complaints were of no concern to the group of smiths.

“What is it made of? What’s the material ratio?”

“What temperature was it fired at?”

“It was definitely glowing that one time, wasn’t it? What *was* that?”

Mavis found herself surrounded, facing down a maelstrom of needling questions.

“Ah, uh...”

She would have kept her cool in the midst of a swarm of ogres, but dealing with a horde of greasy old dwarves was far outside of her comfort zone.

“I-I have no idea! I’m not the one who forged it!!!” she screamed desperately, and even the dwarves suddenly seemed a bit sorry, as though they knew that they might have

gone a hair too far.

“Th-then at least tell us where you purchased it from!”

Of course, being sorry and giving up the chase entirely were two separate matters, and these men would gladly sign away half their life spans for a chance to grasp a new, previously unseen technique that might bring their skills to grand new heights.

“Uhh...”

It was around then that Mile and Reina finally took notice of the commotion. Matters concerning Mile and Mavis’s abilities were matters that the Crimson Vow were sworn to conceal.

“That’s confidential information for hunters. Please don’t inquire any further,” said Reina to the dwarves surrounding Mavis, even as she ground her knuckles into Mile’s temples.

Hoping to further confuse the matter, Mile added, “That is a family secret, passed down through a noble line. If you keep pressing her to make her reveal her secrets, we may have to take appropriate measures.”

Hunters’ confidentiality.

A noble family’s secret.

And the “appropriate measures” to conceal that secret...

This could mean nothing but an immediate gag order. The dwarves may have been total fools for their love of smithing, but they were not so foolish as to fail to recognize that.

“.....”

They understood exactly what the girls were saying. After all, the existence of a sword such as this could overturn world order. If they knew of such a weapon, the army, nobles—even the Crown would stop at nothing to get their hands on it. The Crimson Vow would be dragged in and forced to reveal the sword’s secrets.

Of course, if they played their cards right, the power of the sword meant that the

Crimson Vow would never lack for employment and could maybe even earn titles. Therefore, the dwarves thought, there must be a reason why they contented themselves with being mere hunters. There was no telling whether it was by their own choice or as a result of some familial decree, but it was no surprise that it was taboo to speak of the sword's origin.

Nevertheless, there was no way that they could possibly forget the existence of this superior blade, now that they had come to know of it. The looks of distress upon their faces made this clear—as well as the fact that this was not a disappointment that would pass, allowing them to wake up the next day and give their all to their work in the smithy.

Guessing this, Mile reluctantly added, “I suppose we have no choice. It's clear that you won't be able to focus on your work unless I tell you a little bit about the blade... However, you are absolutely forbidden to speak a word of this to anyone else. If you let even one syllable slip, we'll have no choice but to silence everyone who has heard what I am about to say. If you can accept those terms, I will continue. Anyone who does not wish to hear should leave now—and keep your ears shut.”

“Really?!” the dwarves cried excitedly.

There was not a single dwarf who left Mile's side. On the contrary, all of the smiths in the village gathered around—along with the fighters whose jobs had nothing to do with smithing, the huntsmen, the woodcutters, the miners, the farmers, and everyone else. Only the mothers seemed to keep their distance, perhaps for fear of their young children accidentally letting something slip.

“First of all, the power you witnessed did not come from that sword,” said Mile.

“What?” After this collective exclamation, the square fell still. In the midst of the silence, Mile turned to one of the men who had been on the recovery team. “Would you lend me your sword?”

While he did not understand the reason for her request, the dwarf did as he was asked, unhooking the scabbard from his waist and handing it to Mile.

“What you saw was a type of magic. Like so.”

She hooked the scabbard onto her left hip and drew the sword smoothly with her right hand, gripping the blade near the guard between the thumb and pointer finger of her

left. Then, she slipped her fingers down the blade.

The sword began to glow with a golden light. Sure enough, it was the same gimmick as the “Light Beam Blade” technique she had used in the fight with Gren of the Roaring Mithrils. The body of the blade remained as it was, covered on the outside by a magical coating. The magical blade that formed over it was only a molecule’s width in thickness.

A clamor of shock rose from the dwarfs.

“Mavis, a stone, please! As big as you can lift with both hands!”

“On it!”

As directed, Mavis lifted a suitable rock nearby and threw it handily in a smooth parabola toward Mile.

“Secret Technique, Stone Splitting Blade! Hiyaah!!!”

Mile swung the sword as lightly as though she were cutting through cloth, and the rock fell to the ground, split cleanly in two.

“Th-the rock... A real, live rock. The sword cut right through it...”

“A clean cut, midair, with no support, without even fracturing... I-Impossible...”

“Th-th-th-th-that was one of our swords... A sword that I-I forged... Oh... oh my gods...”

“You can increase the cutting strength of any sword by putting a bit of magic on it. As I have just demonstrated, even the blades that you forge can withstand a move like that when strong magic is applied. They could even compete with Mavis’s sword.”

“Whooooooooaaaa!!!”

A cry of joy rang out, and all the dwarves began to chug their ale. The festival was becoming more and more disorderly... not that it wasn’t already an excuse to drink to begin with.

Meanwhile, the members of the Devils’ Paradise and the Fellowship of Flame only stared at Mile, not believing her explanation in the slightest.

Well, it's not a lie, thought Mile. It's all the nanos' doing, so it is basically a magical effect. The sharpness of the blade and everything are all thanks to magic! Yep! No doubt about that!

After the banquet, the representative of the merchants approached the guards to inform them that they would be prolonging their stay.

“We’ve made progress in our negotiations about purchasing the dwarven metalwork. We’ll still only be able to buy half as much as usual, but we should be able to get the pieces for their original prices. So we were hoping to extend our stay until the day after tomorrow...”

Staying on longer meant more pay, so the hunters gladly accepted.

The following day, while the merchants did their buying, the Crimson Vow did a bit of sightseeing around the village. Mile took a particular interest in inspecting the forges and distillery, as well as making inquiries of the girls of the village in the interest of gathering intel.

“Mile, what are you going around asking all the dwarven girls about?” asked Reina.

“That’s a secret!” Mile replied. Clearly, she was hiding something.

The truth was that Mile, who suspected that her own stature was at the median of humans, elves, and dwarves, had become curious about the growth rate of dwarven girls and busied herself gathering the pertinent information to calculate the average dwarven height.

Even though having this information would make no difference in the long run, it felt like something that she simply had to do... A maiden’s heart is a complicated thing.

“Let’s roll out!”

With a signal from the merchant leader, who served as the transport manager for the caravan, the group left the dwarven village of Glademarl behind.

If nothing unforeseen occurred, the route and campsite selection would be left up to the merchant leader's discretion. If they were attacked by monsters or bandits, their plans and movements would be determined by Wulf in his capacity as the guards' leader. From here out, every decision they made would require weighing pros and cons, and considering the safety of cargo, money, cart, horses, and even humans. In this last category, their own lives would be the chips with which they wagered.

Even we might one day be the leaders of a guard force. In fact, if it's a little caravan of just two or three wagons, we might even take it on solo, meaning that day could come as soon as tomorrow. Wulf is the veteran here. We need to watch him carefully and learn from what he does. Joint missions are always an opportunity for novices to learn, after all. As the leader of this optimistic bunch of rookies, I need to toughen up, and—

As Reina straightened up, deep in thought, Mavis called out, "Um, you do know that I'm still the party leader, right?"

"Oh. Did I say that out loud?"

"I could see it on your face!"

"Hold up!"

Sometime after noon on the first day of their journey, one of the merchants who was doubling as a driver shouted out to the rest. When everyone stopped their carts and gathered around, they found that one of his wheels had somehow gotten stuck in a ditch. Such occurrences were not at all rare on a sorry excuse for a road such as this, which saw very little traffic.

The cart might have been able to break out of the ditch, given enough *oomph*, but now that it was stopped in place, it was going to take an immense amount of force to free it. Though the cargo it carried was not especially voluminous, it was dense, and the cart was weighed down by its contents. Though the merchants had been able to obtain little in the way of metalwork, the dwarves were not going to pass up the chance to turn a profit, no matter how meager. As a result, they had decided to hawk every little thing that they could—from woodwork to surplus wheat and anything else they could find lying around. The merchants, in turn, bought it all up, feeling very much like charity workers.

Of course, even if it *felt* like charity work, they would still turn a profit. So, it wasn't *really* charity. Plus, it would do neither side any good to leave a bad taste in the other's mouth. It was all business, pure and simple. The merchants were simply sticking to their creed: "Even if all you have to carry is air, then carry it with favor and reputation."

Mind you, they intended to dump the excess goods at the first sign of danger... but that was none of the dwarves' concern.

"This is hopeless," said one of the veteran drivers. "Even if ya hitch up all of the other horses and get 'em to pull real hard, the wheel or the axle might just break off... We're gonna have to remove all the cargo to lighten the load."

The merchants appeared weary. Then, they looked to the hunters.

"All right then," Wulf sighed. "Handling your cargo ain't part of our contract, but neither is wasting our time. We'll do it for free... but half of us have to stand aside as lookouts. We'd be a laughingstock if we got wiped out because all the guards were busy unloading cargo when we were attacked. Real embarrassing for the wives and kids we left behind."

At Wulf's direction, half of the hunters went to help.

"All right, let's have the Crimson Vow, one of the Devils, and two of the Fellowship stay behind, while the rest of you—"

"Just a moment, please!" Mile shouted, interrupting. "Would you all mind leaving that to us?"

"Huh...?"

The four merchants raised their voices in surprise, but the other hunters were no longer in a position to be shocked.

"Go ahead. Let's see it."

"Thank you!"

Ignoring the perplexed merchants and drivers, Mile issued a command to Mavis.

"Mavis, use your body strengthening, True Godspeed Blade mode. Prioritize increasing

the strength of your muscles, tendons, and bones, and suppress your muscular output some. If you grab a weak part of the cart, it'll break, so be sure to find someplace that can withstand the cart's weight... Actually—you two, one of you stick with Mavis, please, and one with me. Give us some directions!"

Two of the drivers nodded, splitting up between the girls. A third stayed behind to inspect the condition of the wheel that had gotten stuck.

"All right, that's perfect! Now then..."

Mile began to silently incant a gravity spell as a precaution. This way, if they were to force the cart and snap the axle, it would only be a waste of time, not a crisis. However, no one outside of the Crimson Vow could ever know that.

Release eighty percent of the force pulling on the body of the cart!

"Okay, Mavis, please lift it, slowly and gently!"

"Got it!"

And then...

Shoop!

"Wh...?"

Thud!

"....."

"Both the wheel and the axle look okay!"

"....."

"So, should we get going?"

"....."

"Um..."

“.....”

“So, uh...”

“.....”

This is creepy!!!

A very strange atmosphere had permeated the caravan.

As the Crimson Vow busied themselves preparing dinner that evening, the atmosphere had more or less returned to normal.

“Seriously, though. You’re ridiculously strong.”

Wulf and the others had already given up on understanding Mile, but Mavis, who was a sword-wielder like they were—and who seemed to be a kindhearted woman with plenty of common sense—was different. Learning that she, too, was one of Mile’s ilk seemed to have left quite an impression. *They’re all monsters!*

Mavis guessed at their silent thoughts and ached to reply. *I’m not! Don’t look at me the way you look at Miiile!!!*

For her part, Mile was able to guess this from Mavis’s expression.

“Is that how you look at other people?!?!”

Silence fell again. The calm they had worked so hard to restore was beginning to sour again, ever so slightly.

“By the way, Mile...” started Mavis, a bit suspiciously.

“What’s up?”

“Why didn’t you just use earth magic to dig out a ramp for the cart wheel or to fill in the dip in the road? That seems like it would’ve been a lot safer and less risky...”

“Er...”

At Mavis's words, Mile froze, her face twitching.

"Moreover," Pauline added, jumping in ruthlessly, "I would have thought that you could have just put the cart away in storage temporarily and then taken it back out a little farther down the road."

"Gwah!"

At this, Mile crumbled. It made sense that the merchants, the Devils, and the Fellowship, who were not accustomed to Mile's magical abilities, would not have thought of this, but how in the world would it not have occurred to Mile herself?

The others looked on with pitying gazes, and the awkward atmosphere from before faded once again, for better or worse...

CHAPTER 70

THE REPORT

“We’re here to give our completion report,” Mavis announced at the Guild reception window. The other two party leaders, Wulf and Vegas, stood alongside her. Each party had accepted the job separately, so they each had their own contracts. Naturally, the clerk at the desk was Leutessy.

Perfect! These girls made it back safely once more! All thanks to me and my genius in sending the Devils’ Paradise and the Fellowship of Flame along with them! I am the Crimson Vow’s savior!

Leutessy was riding high, confident in the belief that her own quick judgment and decision-making was instrumental in keeping the Crimson Vow safe and helping them to grow... To be fair, if the Crimson Vow had been a normal rookie party, her pride in her judgment and actions would be justified. Her diligence—even going all the way to both parties’ homes after hours on her own time and asking them to protect a fledgling female party—was commendable.

It was only because the party in question just so happened to be the Crimson Vow that her efforts were all in vain.

“Brilliant work, everyone! And my deepest thanks to the Devils’ Paradise and the Fellowship of Flame for successfully carrying out your duties and continuing to guide and protect this fledgling party!”

The two parties in question went quiet at this praise, as the employees and other hunters inside the guildhall looked to them with admiration. The looks upon their faces were not unhappy ones, but certainly... complex.

And yet, once again, they could say nothing that would reveal the Crimson Vow’s abilities. Of course, that did not mean that they could keep *everything* a secret from the Guild’s upper management. They were compelled to report anything that might present an abnormal danger to other hunters or the general public, after all.

“Is the guild master in? We have something to report,” said Wulf, his expression

serious.

“Uh... yes. He’s in his office right now.” Leutessy replied, looking surprised.

“Could you let him know?” asked Wulf.

Leutessy stood from her seat at once and rushed up to the second floor.

“All right then. What did you come all the way up here to report?”

In a nearly unprecedented turn of events, the guild master himself was to receive a report from the parties who had accepted the escort job heading to Mafan. He wouldn’t normally interrupt his busy schedule for this, but these were two kindhearted and reliable veteran parties—a scarce resource in any guild—who had taken on this job in exchange for compensation that was not necessarily commensurate with the level of danger. He could at least spare them a minute or two of his time.

In truth, if these reliable veteran hunters felt they had something that needed to be reported to him directly, then he really had no choice but to listen.

“...Then, some new varieties of orcs and ogres. These were not a few rogue individuals—there was a whole settlement of them, with all of these specialized varieties. The orcs were like ogres, and the ogres were as strong as ogre kings. There weren’t just one or two of these advanced creatures—there wasn’t a single normal one in sight!”

“What?!”

At Wulf’s report, the guild master half-rose from his chair in shock. His reaction was understandable. If such creatures were to multiply, villages would be destroyed, towns swallowed up, and whole countries brought to their knees. And if there were enough of these creatures that they had already formed settlements?!

He never thought to question the truth of Wulf’s report, as much as he might have liked to. No hunter would be foolish enough to lie to the guild master over something like this, and the information came from two reliable veteran parties, as well as a promising party of young hunters traveling from abroad. None of them seemed the

type to spread malicious rumors.

“Where are they?! We’ll form a team to go and investigate this at once! You must guide us there! This is a compulsory direct request from the Guild. You can’t refuse!” No party would ever refuse such a charge, and the guild master knew this but was so distraught and worried that he inadvertently began to shout.

“Please calm down, sir!”

“How could I possibly be calm?! We must start for this town immediately!”

“No, I mean, we’ve already taken care of it! We wiped them all out!”

“What?!”

The guild master was dumbfounded. His formerly pale face now flushed with rage as he shouted at them.

“Wh-what are you...? There’s no way that you all could take on a horde of something like ogre kings with just three parties! Are you messing with me? Do you understand what this means?!”

“We aren’t that stupid! We know what would happen if we did that!!!”

“Tell me everything, from the beginning.”

Though this may have been only a provincial town, there were still some things that were always in the guild branch’s purview. Now that the guild master knew that there was no pressing danger, he collected himself and sunk back down into his chair.

“I’ll let these guys—er, the Crimson Vow give you the details.”

Wulf’s party, after all, were not the ones who had done the exterminating. It was the Crimson Vow who had the best grasp of the situation. Furthermore, any explanation would necessitate some reference to the Crimson Vow’s special skills and combat ability. Sworn as he was to both the Goddess and the Guild, there was an incredibly slim chance that the guild master would let their secret slip or attempt to use it for ill gain. Still, it would be a weight off Wulf’s mind to let the members of the Crimson Vow decide for themselves how much they wanted to share. And so, he tossed the ball into their court.

“I am Mile of the Crimson Vow, a C-rank hunting party registered to the capital branch of the Hunters’ Guild in the kingdom of Tils, currently on a journey of self-improvement...”

As Mile gave her spiel and the tale of the incident began.

“This is hard to swallow...”

The guild master appeared a bit skeptical, even though Mile had omitted any information about both her own abilities and the “hot” magic and watered down her descriptions of Mavis’s skills. Still, thought the guild master, these girls were not requesting any special payment, so they had nothing to gain from telling such a lie. On the contrary, they risked endangering their reputation within the Guild. It was not the sort of thing that any reputable hunter would do.

“Well, this isn’t really a matter of whether or not you believe us. I’m merely fulfilling my duties as a hunter by giving you the key details of the incident. In the event that something like this happens again, having previous examples to draw from will make a big difference in the initial response. Ideally, we would tell the whole Guild, but it might be laughed off as idle gossip, so we’ll leave that to your discretion. All we want to be able to say is that we told you everything we knew. Please put at least that much in the minutes.”

“Wh—?! That’s...”

The guild master twitched. Mile had as good as told him, “If you don’t tell the other branches and something happens and people get hurt, it’ll be all your fault.” A guild master, dressed down by this tiny girl...

He could not brave that danger.

That said, no one would believe him if he simply passed on the information via official post. His own credibility might be put in jeopardy. *The foolish master who swallowed the most ridiculous tall tale from a rank-and-file hunter...*

“Damn it!”

Sharing the story was a liability, but so was keeping it to himself. If he did share it, and

a similar incident happened to occur elsewhere, it would prove him correct. That said, he was not shameless enough to hope for such a thing to occur.

“Have you any proof?!” the guild master squeaked out, his face wrought in anguish.

Mile replied bluntly. “We do.”

“Huh?”

“First of all, the dwarves who fought alongside us will gladly testify on our behalf. They have already promised to do so. Second, we brought the corpses of some of the aberrant orcs and ogres back with us. I think examining them should offer more than enough proof.”

“Ah...? Oh, right! You were the party with the ridiculous amount of storage space... Fine. Let’s go to the processing room!”

The guild master led, and the whole group followed.

“Gollathen, come here a minute.”

As was the custom, a processing-slash-storage building stood beside the guildhall, part of which was used for deep-freeze preservation via magic. After leading the group to this building, the guild master called over an elderly man.

“I’ve got something I’d like you to appraise. Bring it out.”

The last few words were directed to Mile. As ordered, she produced the monsters and laid them out onto the floor. Back in the dwarves’ village, Mile, Mavis, and Reina had completely forgotten to mention them, and Pauline, knowing that the dwarves had little currency on hand, had purposefully neglected to bring the topic up. As a result, everything that they brought in on their journey had remained in Mile’s inventory. And now, it was all arrayed on the ground before them.

“*Wh-wh-wh-wh-what are these?!?!*” the guild master and the man named Gollathen shouted, as everyone had been in the midst of processing, and all the others in the warehouse began to gather around. All of their eyes fell to the masses of orcs and ogres piled up on the floor.

“These are...”

Gollathen was the only one in the crowd of workers to quickly regain his senses.

“Advanced types? No, this is ridiculous! There shouldn’t be so many of them... Plus, their body color and tusk growth patterns are completely normal. Still, you can tell by their size, musculature, and the thickness of their skin that they’d be pretty strong. They don’t have any fat on them. It’s all muscle!”

While the others were still stunned silent by Mile’s extraordinary amount of storage space, Gollathen was focused purely on evaluating their quarry. He didn’t possess anything so convenient as appraisal magic but relied on his own abilities and the knowledge and experience honed over years of working in the field.

“Where were these hunted?” asked Gollathen. When the guild master took a moment too long to reply, Gollathen shouted, *“I’m asking you where these were hunted!”*

Apparently, he could sense how dangerous the situation was just based on the number of rare creatures piled up in front of him. If anyone else had yelled at the guild master, there would have been consequences, but it was clear that their relationship went far back. In any event, the guild master appeared to take no offense.

“They’ve all been wiped out, it seems. Every male, female, and youth—every last one. And we don’t have any reports of other swarms appearing elsewhere.”

“I see.” At this, Gollathen seemed to calm down. “So, where did they come from? And is there a chance they’ll pop up again?”

“Currently, no. What was it that they said? That the ‘inner diamond shawl agate’ was gone or something...”

“An ‘inter-dimensional gate’?!”

“What? Y-you’ve heard of that, Gollathen?”

“Of course! Even I love me a bit of Miami Satodele!”

Gollathen had a habit of borrowing books from the clerks to read, but the guild master, who had no such habit, was unaware of this.

“Let’s put a few in cold storage. And we should get three or so on a special transport to the royal capital, with a couple of good mages to keep ’em cool. We can’t freeze ’em—their flesh and skin might degrade when they’re thawed out, and if it does, folks might not be able to tell just how special these guys are.”

“O-okay...”

The guild master, overpowered by Gollathen’s serious expression, could only nod.

“The chances of a reoccurrence anywhere near here are pretty low, but we can’t deny the possibility that sometime down the road—in a few years, or a few decades, maybe even in another land—this might happen again. We can’t waste this opportunity to gather information and spread the word to all of the other nations. It’s a godsend that we were able to get our hands on so many of the genuine articles as proof. No matter what happens, this information has gotta get out!”

“O-okay...”

It was becoming increasingly unclear which of them was actually the guild master.

“Oy! Somebody run over to the clerk and get all the hunters and Guild employees over here! We gotta use these bodies while they’re still fresh to give everyone a demonstration of how to deal with the creatures! Having that experience might make the difference in whether or not this town ends up on the brink of destruction someday. Get every last one o’ them over here! Oh, while you’re at it, go around to all the pubs, too!”

At Gollathen’s command, several of the younger employees went running.

“Um... I thought I was the guild master...”

Mavis looked at the despondent guild master with a sympathetic gaze.

“All right! That looks like most of ’em,” said Gollathen, scanning the room.

The guild master had shrunk back into a corner by now, utterly resigned to his new backseat role.

“These are some new types of orcs and ogres that we got in a little while ago. As you can see, they look pretty normal on the outside, but the orcs have bodies like ogres, and the ogres are built like ogre kings. According to the ones who fought ’em, it seems like that’s actually how they are, too. That’s right, they look normal at first, but they’re all like that!”

The chattering around him grew louder, and understandably so. Encountering such a beast could mean certain death for a hunter, and here there were dozens of them. There was no way that it wouldn’t cause a buzz.

“Calm down. You see how many bodies we’ve got here...”

Catching Gollathen’s meaning, the hunters finally calmed down.

“You understand me. There ain’t a single one left! It was the Devils’ Paradise, the Fellowship of Flame, and one more, um... that’s right, the Crimson Vow! Y’all have got them to thank!”

“All riiight!!!”

These three parties had fought valiantly, putting their lives on the line to eliminate a threat to the rest. Moreover, it was once again the Devils and the Fellowship, both trusted veteran parties. Not so long ago, they had protected a rookie party and driven back hordes of monsters, and just recently, they had volunteered to take on a dicey escort mission. The two parties, who did so much for this town and the hunters in it, were looked upon with only the deepest admiration.

Stop it! Please stop iiit!!!!

Deep down, the Devils’ Paradise and the Fellowship of Flame were suffering.

“Oy, you lot, try cutting into that ogre there,” said Gollathen.

“Uh...” The hunter he had addressed seemed puzzled.

“You might run into one of these someday. This is for the future!”

Hearing this, several of the hunters drew their swords. The people around them stepped back to allow them space.

“Hyah!”

The first man swung his sword down hard. The ogre might have been lying on the floor, but there was no hunter here green enough to strike the floor itself. As the sword struck the ogre’s flank, it barely sunk in before it stopped.

“Th-that’s tough!”

Because the target was laid out on the floor, the angle at which the hunter could swing the sword was awkward, and he was not able to put his usual power behind it. Even so, the hunter had not gotten the result he was expecting. He looked a bit pained, but he remained collected and stepped back to make way for the next person in line.

“Gwah!”

“Damn! Even that wasn’t enough?”

Having observed the first man’s folly, other hunters tried, swinging their swords with full power and gusto. More and more followed, and yet, again and again, the results were disappointing. A few lancers took some test jabs as well, but sure enough, their spears did not sink in nearly as far as they imagined, leaving them crying out in frustration.

“But these guys were all killed in a single blow, weren’t they? Look at this one—and that one—they were all cut right clean through from the sides. Yo, Wulf, is this your doing? Just how the hell did you cut these? You gotta come and show us!”

Everyone present had known each other for quite some time. Some of them had even worked alongside the Devils and the Fellowship and knew that, while they were extremely skilled swordsmen, they certainly did not possess magical skills.

But the men of the Devils and the Fellowship were at their wits’ end, too. There was no way that any of them could cut the monsters that way either.

Unable to ignore their distress, Mavis piped up from beside them, “I will demonstrate for you.”

This much, at least, was fine. What the Crimson Vow wished to avoid revealing were skills that defied everyday logic or magic that risked attracting the attention of any people in power, influential merchants, other hunters, or criminals with ill intent.

Letting the others see that a single swordswoman had the sword skill of a B or A-rank hunter was no big deal.

Besides, they had set out on this journey in order to better themselves. In addition to training, they had a secondary goal of furthering their own reputation. Thus, just as they had elected not to hide Mile's storage magic for the sake of convenience and earning potential (save for the ability-altering "Micros") there was no reason for Mavis to hide her sword skills.

Pauline's hot magic, on the other hand, was something that needed to be hidden at all costs.

As Mavis walked up beside one of the ogres, the other three stepped back, giving her enough space to swing her sword unhindered.

Come on, sword, don't fail me now... Mavis muttered, low enough that the spectators who stood at a distance would not hear.

Mavis was quick with a blade, but she was not especially strong. Despite all her training, she'd been raised as pampered nobility and had the build to show for it. Even using her True Godspeed Blade, she was only a little bit stronger than the average male C-rank hunter. Her speed and battle sense were exceptional, but neither of those applied to hacking into a corpse. Thus, she could only pray that her sword would be as sharp as it had been during the battle against the ogres.

With these thoughts in mind, she whispered to her blade, and...

YES! NOW'S OUR CHANCE!

The nanomachines attached to Mavis's sword congratulated themselves on what was turning out to be quite an interesting job after all. They were lucky to have been nearby when the initial call came—to have beaten the astronomical odds associated with being in the right place at the right time.

Reading the room, they omitted the special visual effects this time. They merely removed the coating that dulled the blade in such a way that none of the humans would notice. The blade appeared unchanged, but...

“True Godspeed Blade!”

Ka-shk!

With no other theatrics, Mavis made a brilliant vertical cut straight through the ogre’s body. Naturally, there was not a scratch upon the floor.

Though the ogre’s mass was still pressed to the floor, the body was cleanly bisected, without even a hairline nick upon the surface of the warehouse. This should have been impossible, no matter how skilled the sword fighter and how honed the blade.

Silence fell in the processing room.

Finally, everyone understood just how it was that these three parties had achieved their consecutive victories.

“Or, well, something like that...” Mavis demurred. She was beginning to turn, and then—“Eek!”—she found herself surrounded by the other hunters.

“Wh-what was that technique you just used?!”

“What’s a ‘Godspeed Blade’? Is it magic? Or is it a sword technique with some ridiculous special secret?”

“That sword is just a normal sword, isn’t it?”

She was surrounded, subject to the scrutiny of a horde of people who were not her enemies... This was not a circumstance that worked in Mavis’s favor. She was frozen, unable to speak.

“Ah, allow me to explain,” Mile volunteered and began to offer up the same explanation that she had given the dwarves...

Some minutes later, Mile finished. The other hunters seemed incredulous, and understandably so. Plus, if what Mile said was true, then this technique was something that they were desperate to get their hands on.

“So, wh-what is the incantation?”

“That is an old family secret,” Mile declared. Though Mavis was casting silently, she was still saying the incantation inside of her head. *“Mavis is a member of my party, so I made a special exception to share it with her. However, absolutely no one else must know.”*

When Mile put it that way, there was nothing that any hunter—who were all sworn to protect one another’s secrets—could say. Furthermore, having heard that it was a “family” secret, every single one of them no longer believed that Mile hailed from a common lineage.

“Give it up,” the guild master sighed. *“Do you really think anyone who’d jealously try to steal a rookie’s secrets could grow any stronger?! Of course, if you could copy her, then you probably would, but...”*

“Have you got a single persuasive bone in your body, you dolt?!” Gollathen said scathingly. *“Enough outta you already! Lookie here, anyone who wants to try, line up and take yer turn swingin’. You’re only allowed to cut these three, though—don’t touch the other ones!”*

As Gollathen took control of the room once more, Mile and the others followed the guild master, who was dragging his feet back to the main guildhall, leaving the processing warehouse behind.

The group returned to the guild master’s office.

“I’d like one of you three parties to accompany the transport wagon to the capital, both to guard it and to offer explanations. It’ll be a lot easier to tell the tale with someone present who was actually on the scene. I’ll be the one going to give the official report, so you’d be with me just in case they ask me something I can’t answer. You’d be signed on as guards, though naturally, we would bump the pay up a bit.”

All of the Devils’ and the Fellowship’s gazes fell immediately to the Crimson Vow. The Crimson Vow were the only ones who had truly fought against these aberrant monsters, and they included in their number one of the aforementioned mages, which made their party the obvious choice. Indeed, there was no one else anyone could think of who would fit the bill.

“Nope.”

“We shall decline.”

“No, thank you.”

“Hard pass!”

They refused.

“H-how...?” Wulf spoke unconsciously, stunned at the Crimson Vow’s refusal, which was delivered immediately, simultaneously, and without even a pause to discuss it.

“We just came from the capital. We’re in the middle of a training journey, so there’s no need for us to double back on a route we already traveled, is there? It’s a waste of time,” said Reina.

“We must always choose the path untraveled. That’s what a hunter’s training is all about, isn’t it?” added Mavis.

The leaders of both other parties had made such journeys when they were young hunters themselves and were in no position to contradict the rookies. The guild master, of course, had similar experiences of his own. Thus, no matter how suitable they thought the Crimson Vow would be for the role, they balked at trying to force them into it.

Truthfully, though the Crimson Vow did not wish to waste time traveling routes they had already taken, or to make a desperate petition to skeptical higher-ups, the real reason they turned the job down was something else.

Why would we ever go back to the origin of all those exaggerated stories from the graduation exam?!?!

The chances of the Crimson Vow ever accepting such a job were less than zero.

“Now then, if you’ll excuse us.”

In the end, the Crimson Vow refused the journey to the capital—as did the Devils’ Paradise and the Fellowship of Flame. The other two parties insisted truthfully that they had not participated in the battle against the monsters and were not familiar

enough with everything that had happened to explain it to someone else as though they had been there.

Plus, it wasn't an absolute necessity for the guild master to have someone accompany him on his mission. Mile and the others had already filled him in on all the necessary details, and he had the creatures' bodies to display. As it happens, the guild master had actually intended to have the Crimson Vow come along so that he could question them thoroughly along the road, and now that the girls had summarily refused him, he wasn't particularly put out when the other two parties declined as well.

The three parties returned to the first floor to receive payment for their guard duty. The reward for the orcs and ogres they handed over would be determined after a careful inspection, so they would be receiving that in the next day or so. The Crimson Vow requested that this payment be split into three equal parts.

Of course, the Devils and the Fellowship tried to refuse this egalitarian move, saying that they could not possibly accept such a sum, but the Crimson Vow—even Pauline—insisted on it, and so the other hunters eventually gave in. The monsters they had turned in included not only the aberrant specimens but the seven normal ogres they had hunted on the outward journey as well.

"I'm sorry. All we seem to do is steal the glory and the spoils from y'all," said Wulf, acting as representative of the two other parties. Yet the Crimson Vow gently waved their hands as if to say it was no big deal.

Then, just as everyone moved to disperse...

"Ah," said Mile.

"What's up?" asked Reina suspiciously.

Mile ignored her, then turned to Wulf and asked, "Umm, I hope you'll forgive me, but this has been bothering me for a while, so there's one thing that I have to ask, if you don't mind."

"Um? Sure, go ahead. Ask whatever ya like."

Mile posed her question: "So um, what exactly was the reason behind you guys naming your party the Devils' Paradise?"

Hearing this, the Fellowship looked exasperated, though the Devils did not appear to be bothered at all. In fact, it seemed they were almost amused by the question.

Wulf then explained the origin of their name.

“To tell you the truth, we’ve always thought that when we earned enough money as hunters, we wanted to use that as starting capital to open up an orphanage...”

“What?”

Wulf’s unexpected reply left the Crimson Vow frozen in shock—both because they never would have expected such a lofty goal and because they had no idea what this might have to do with the name “the Devils’ Paradise.”

“So anyway, when we were forming our party, the clerk who was processing our application asked us what the origin of the name ‘Goddess’s Paradise’ was. Of course, this wasn’t necessary for the application, she was just making small talk. And so we told her, honestly, ‘We’re gonna save up and start an orphanage. A Goddess’s Paradise, just like the name says...’”

The members of the Crimson Vow exchanged confused looks.

“And then, we explained the rest. ‘We’re only gonna gather female orphans. We especially want to get some elf and some beastgirl orphans, if we can.’ When we said that, the clerk’s smile twisted. And later, when we double-checked our registration, our party’s name had been recorded as ‘Devils’ Paradise’...”

Silence fell.

These scum...

All of that praise, wasted...

They’d be better off dead...

Officer, these are the men!

Wulf suddenly felt a bit uneasy as four cold gazes settled upon him. He called out to the leader of the Fellowship, moving to get out of there as quickly as possible. “Vegas, let’s go!”

T-Tech Setter!

As usual, the reference that crossed Mile's mind was one that absolutely no one else would understand.

CHAPTER 71

THE ELF ESCORT

After taking two days off, the Crimson Vow decided it was about time that they search for their next job.

“All these jobs look boring,” complained Reina, the tedium plain on her face, but her response by now was the norm. Tedious jobs were a hunter’s bread and butter. A profession where people who were otherwise halfwits could rise in the ranks was by nature not a glamorous one.

The four of them gazed at the job board, their brows knit.

“Oh, this one—”

Pauline’s eyes stopped on one posting, though it was not the contents of the job but the pay that interested her.

Accompaniment wanted for a woodland investigation. Duties include guarding two scholars, as well as transporting luggage and harvested materials.

It was a trip of three days, two nights, and the payment was an exorbitant eight half-gold each. This rivaled what you might expect to earn guarding a small-scale merchant caravan on a route that was teeming with bandits.

Reina took a long, hard look at the posting that Pauline had indicated.

C-rank or higher requested, eight to ten individuals in total. At least three among this number must be female.

“Does the fact that they’re requesting women mean that they’re planning something weird?” asked Mile.

“No, dummy, it’s the opposite!” Reina corrected. “They’re asking for a party with women so that nothing weird *does* happen. In other words, the clients are probably female.”

“Ah...”

“But there can’t be a lot of parties that fit the bill around here. Most parties with eight or more members are B or A-rank, aren’t they? They wouldn’t be out here in a middle of nowhere town like this.”

“Seriously, just how thick are you?! They wrote, ‘in total,’ didn’t they?! They intend for two parties to take this job together. There’s some leeway in the total number so the parties have more freedom in choosing who to team up with!”

“Ah...”

Mile was normally pretty swift on the uptake when it came to this sort of thing, but she was a bit off her game today.

“If we take this job, then it doesn’t really matter who the other party is. We’ve already got the female portion covered, and if we’re looking for four to six more people, that would include most parties around.”

Of course, Pauline was correct. Parties of three or more women were rare, so if the Crimson Vow did not take the job, the team would have to be composed of something like a party with two women in it, and another with one, which severely limited the pool of suitable candidates. If the first party to sign on had only one female member, then the second would be required to have at least two, and the chances of meeting the minimum requirements for the job were drastically lowered.

“Should we do it?”

“I guess so. There aren’t any other good jobs. I don’t really feel like taking on any more long-term guard duties while we’re here, but if this one wraps up in three days, and it’s not transport but investigation, which is in line with our objective to learn about each place we go to. It doesn’t seem too bad.”

Pauline and Reina both seemed to be on board, and of course, Mavis and Mile had no objections.

Just after the Crimson Vow had accepted the job and left the guildhall behind them...

“Got it!”

“Aah! Damn it, you guys! That was supposed to be us!”

“Early bird gets the worm!”

“No, hand it over! That one’s ours!”

There was a desperate scramble for the job posting, which was still being affixed to the board. It was a safe, easy, and well-paying job that parties of all men could now accept—and they got to spend three days with four beautiful and abundantly talented female hunters on top of that. Since all the hunters remembered only too well the good fortune of the Devils and the Fellowship, a squabble was the natural outcome of the circumstances at hand.

“We are your clients, Aetelou and Sharalir. We are researchers at the Academy. On this trip, we plan to explore a region that humans have barely penetrated. You are going to be our guards, and we request that you transport our food, equipment, and anything that we gather.”

Aetelou and Sharalir appeared to be in their early twenties. They had a prim and tidy appearance... and both women’s ears came to slight, tapered points.



“V-Vulcans!”

Reina smacked Mile across the back of the head. “They’re obviously elves! ‘Vulcans’ are those ‘logical people’ that pop up in your weird stories, aren’t they? Stop confusing fantasy with reality!!!”

“We would like for you to help us gather materials, as well. Anything that you find that is not of use to us, you are welcome to keep, if you think it may be of value. Think of this as an incentive to search to the best of your abilities.” Their employers were very frank, but open communication was always welcome. “That said, transporting our findings is part of your job, so we would like you to prioritize the items that we are after. Let’s say that our things should be about eighty percent of what you carry, and yours about twenty? The things you take home with you will probably need to be limited to lightweight, compact, and valuable items, such as rare medicinal herbs.

“Also, should you find anything else that proves valuable to our research, we would like you to hand it over to us—for additional pay, of course. The things that are valuable to us likely would not fetch a high price in town, so we can’t pay you a lot for them, but I believe what we can give you will still exceed the general going rate. Technically speaking, this isn’t something that we should have to pay you for, but, well, please think of it as a special reward.”

These were truly rather favorable conditions. Typically, on expeditions such as these, hired guards were required to hand over everything they collected. The two elves, who lived in the capital and had traveled out to this frontier region for their research, seemed fairly generous. Afterwards, the Crimson Vow and the other party introduced themselves. From the elves’ perspective, Mile and Reina appeared to be about forty or fifty years old, while Mavis and Pauline looked to be a few hundred at least, so the party’s youthful appearance did not worry them. They did appear to be amused at Mile’s self-designation as a “magic knight” but dismissed it as only an affectation.

The other party was a typical all-male team, with three swordsmen, one archer, and one mage. With them, the guard team came to nine in total.

Even though they were in another country, upon hearing of another group of elven researchers living in a human town, when so few elves lived amongst humans to begin with, the Crimson Vow immediately thought of a certain name.

“Elven researchers—just like Dr. Clairia?” Mavis muttered to herself.

“Clairia!!!”

Oh, so they're acquaintances, the Crimson Vow thought, until—

“Clairia! That filthy greenhorn heretic!!!”

The elves flew into a sudden rage.

Apparently, they did indeed know one another... and they were not on good terms.

After a short while, the pair finally calmed down and explained.

“That woman is a total amateur, but she flaunts her knowledge and uses it to obtain patronage. She lures nobles and merchants into the palm of her hand with information that literally anyone could pick up after a few decades of living in the forest. We work honestly and tirelessly at our research, aiming to be lecturers, or even associate professors, but that piece of trash just bypassed the whole process, using her adjunct researcher position to get anything she wants. She already has money and influence, but all she ever does in her ‘research’ is butter up the higher-ups with her infantile behavior!!!”

Since they were operating in an entirely different country, it was not as though Clairia had stolen their success out from under them, but her actions were apparently inexcusable all the same.

And then...

“She’s an adult, but she still clings to her father without an ounce of humility! We would love to be so close with our fathers, but we act our age and hold back from that kind of fawning!! Then there she is, acting like a spoiled little brat, and even getting other elves to permit—nay, *praise* this behavior, calling her a ‘good sweet girl, who always thinks of her father’! Seriously, what’s with that?! It’s absolutely absurd!!!”

Evidently, they had stepped on a land mine.

“We’re the Blue Meteors, C-rank. Nice to meet’cha.”

The other party who had accepted the job alongside them were a perfectly normal party of five men, all in their twenties. After they had finished meeting with their employers, the Blue Meteors invited the Crimson Vow to a meal in order to compare notes before the job. The Crimson Vow dutifully accepted. This was an important part of working alongside a party you were not familiar with, as it was hard to trust a partner whose strengths and skills you did not know.

Plus, the Meteors had said that they would treat them, which meant that the Crimson Vow really had not the slightest reason to refuse.

“Like I said before, we’ve got three swordsmen—including yours truly—as well as an archer and a mage, one each. I’m the leader—I use a greatsword, and I’m a vanguard-slash-tank fighter. Callack uses a rapier, and Rattle uses a shortsword.”

The sword that Graf, the party leader, wielded was a large one or two-handed blade, comparable to what Earthlings might refer to as a bastard sword or a claymore. Normally, it would be wielded two-handed, but certain opponents might warrant the use of a shield, in which case it could be used with one hand. Of course, such a thing required an uncommon amount of physical strength.

Then there was a rapier, which one could use to vex an enemy with quick jabs, and the shortsword, which was plain, but reliable and sturdy. The Meteors didn’t have anyone who wielded a spear, so they were strapped for melee weapons with reach, but presumably made do.

“Then we have Kesbard, the archer-slash-dagger-wielder, and Malawenn, our mage. Malawenn is mostly a combat type, but it seems like your Pauline is a support type, so I hope you’ll be able to back all of us up.”

Hearing this, Pauline nodded; she was indeed a support type. Her hot magic and boiling magic made it easy to forget that support and healing were *supposed* to be her specialty...

“On our end we have myself, Mavis, the leader. My strength and stamina still aren’t the best, but I’m confident in my speed and technique. Then we have Reina, whose specialty is combat and fire magic, as well as Pauline, who specializes in healing magic... Though those are their specialties, that doesn’t mean that either of them is unskilled in or incapable of other types of magic as well, so both of them should be able to help out in a pinch. Then, over here, we have... Mile. She calls herself a ‘magic

knight,' which means she uses both magic and swords, but, well, I would most simply classify her as... a Mile."

The heck does that mean? The faces of the Blue Meteors wore perplexed expressions, and Mile herself looked less than pleased.

Reina and Pauline, however, merely nodded.

They went on to have a more in-depth discussion, but as the meal progressed, the Meteors' smiles turned into grimaces as they saw the empty plates piling up. Reina and Mile would never pass up the opportunity to take advantage of a situation like this one. Unfortunately, the Meteors had taken them to a slightly more expensive place in order to show the girls a good time, so the damage to their purses was quite severe.

Each dish ranged from around one-and-a-half to two silver a plate, but their bill was already in the dozens *each* for Reina and for Mile. While Mavis was not as big an eater as either of her fellow party members, she was still tall for a woman, and very active, which made for a very healthy appetite. Meanwhile, Pauline, when faced with free food, was wont to stuff herself until she nearly puked—and had an unerring eye for the priciest items.

Their collective bill was already more than 80 silver—in other words, eight half-gold. That was the amount of one man's pay for their entire upcoming job.

One by one, the Meteors fell silent. The main reason they had taken this job, besides the fact that it paid well for the low level of danger, was that they would get to work alongside the Crimson Vow. In exchange for achieving that goal, eight half-gold was really a trifle.

So they tried to tell themselves.

And yet, they were shouting deep inside, *You all really eat too much!*

"Okay, let's head out!"

First thing in the morning two days later, the wagon began to roll at Aetelou's order.

The cart and its driver were both a rental, hired on to carry them the half-day's journey to the entrance of the forest and to return around noon two days later to meet them. On the ride, they talked of the investigation and the samples they would take until they arrived at the entrance of the forest around late morning.

"Okay. Carry the stuff," the Blue Meteors turned to Mile, demanding the moment they arrived. They clambered down from the wagon without even stopping to help unload the cart.

"Huh?"

"You've got storage magic, don't you? We'll leave the luggage and the samples to you. Hm? What's that face for? You're gonna carry everything that we hunt too, aren't you?"

At the prior group discussion, they had only introduced themselves and discussed combat strategies. Mile's storage magic had never been mentioned, but it wasn't as though she kept it a secret, either, and word got around quickly. There was neither a hunter nor a Guild employee in town who was not well aware of it. It wasn't strange that the Meteors knew about it despite not having been told directly.

The issue was *how* the Meteors had spoken. Their tone had been incredibly matter of fact, without a hint of gratitude or so much as a "please."

The reason so many guards had been requested was not only for the sake of protecting the researchers but also to aid in the gathering and transportation of their findings. This had been explained to them when they first met with the clients. And yet, the Meteors seemed to have decided that they were going to leave all of the transport work to Mile's storage, while they spent their time not on menial gathering but on hunting, the spoils of which they would have Mile carry, too.

"Excuse me? What are you all saying? Carrying *our* luggage is part of your job, but if you expect these young ladies to carry *your* luggage as well, then that's another thing entirely. What in the blazes are you thinking?!"

The two researchers, who had now disembarked from the wagon, fumed at the Meteors, while the Crimson Vow looked on dumbfounded.

"Huh? That girl's got a crazy amount of storage magic—it's fine to leave all the carrying to her," Graf said calmly, apparently utterly unaware of the real problem here.

This time, Aetelou was the one to appear shocked. “It doesn’t matter how much she can hold,” she said. “Whenever she puts something in, it takes that much more sustained magical and spiritual energy to maintain it! I might understand if we were in town, where it’s safe, but you want to impose that much of a pointless burden on someone out here in the middle of these dangerous woods?! Don’t tell me that you took this job with the intention of having a girl carry everything for you?! Not carrying your share of our luggage is a breach of your contract. If you’re going to violate the terms, we will void your employment at once.”

“Wh...?”

The two elves had heard nothing from the Crimson Vow at the initial meetup, so this was the first that they were hearing of Mile’s storage magic. Regardless, they were not about to let the Meteors, who appeared to have known about it already, take advantage of this. There were many elves who excelled at magic far beyond most human mages, so even this pair, who could not use storage magic, were aware of its difficulties and drawbacks... even if they were not aware that such things did not actually apply to Mile.

The Blue Meteors had seemed like honest men at their first meeting, but perhaps they were now showing their true colors, waiting until they had gotten all the way out to the job site to start making demands of the Crimson Vow. If the Crimson Vow were to quit now, it would be a breach of contract and a failed job, and they would have to pay a penalty, leaving them little choice but to put up with their fellow hunters.

Yet their employers were now declaring that it was the Meteors who would be in violation of contract and who would be treated as having failed the job!

“Grngh...” Graf grumbled, his carefully laid plans in tatters.

Apparently, the Meteors had not actually invited the Crimson Vow out for the sake of making a good impression, but simply so that they could take advantage of them later. It might have been different if this were the royal capital, but there was no chance of a young, talented party of rookies in the midst of a journey choosing to settle down in a remote border city like Mafan. As such, the Meteors probably thought that they could milk the Crimson Vow for all they were worth while they could, with no thought to consideration, politeness, or the general maintenance of good will.

The bulk of the Crimson Vow’s earnings and glory had been shared with the members

of the Devils and the Fellowship on their two previous jobs, and yet the girls still smiled kindly upon those parties. It was all too likely, thought the Meteors, that they were a group of softhearted fools who would do exactly as their seniors told them.

From the Blue Meteors' perspective, the Crimson Vow themselves had never actually refused to do as they said. Their employers had merely intervened before they could do anything.

That was what they believed.

Incidentally, there was a saying in certain circles:

"He who believes... will have the rug pulled out from under him."

They unloaded the wagon together, and the driver headed back into town. He would be back at the same spot to meet them two days later.

The group began making preparations to eat. It would be midday soon, and though it was a bit early, it was better to eat now rather than delve into the dangerous woods and then pause for a meal. Also, none of them were foolish enough to eat a big breakfast before a several-hour cart ride, which would leave their backsides sore and their guts jostled.

Riding along a road from a provincial town out into the forest, which was not maintained to the standards of a main thoroughfare, could be exhausting. Part of the purpose of their stopping to eat was to regain their stamina, and so there was no reason to rush. There was plenty of time to build a fire and make a proper meal rather than just nibbling on preserved rations.

Of course, "proper" had a fairly loose meaning when you were dining in the rough. For those accustomed to working in the wilds, even a simple meal of soup made from hot water, soup base, and dried vegetables, along with bread and meat warmed by flame, was fairly luxurious. Since a wagon would not be accompanying them throughout their travels, the hunters' employers did not have the ability to provide meals for their hired help. After all, it would be ridiculous to hire even more hunters just to carry food for them. As a result, there were many contracts for this sort of job that specified that hunters must provide for themselves in terms of food.

Thankfully, there were plenty of mages to go around, including their employers, so there was no worry about securing hot water. The two elves were able to provide soup for everyone. For the rest of their meal, the elves and each of the parties broke up into their own groups.

“Miss Aetelou, Miss Sharalir, would you care for another?”

Mile had produced a simple stove and frying pan from storage, along with pre-processed blocks of orc meat. When she offered the pair a plate of roast orc sandwiches garnished with pickles that she had whipped up, the two gladly accepted. Just like Dr. Clairia, the fact that they were elves did not automatically mean that they were vegetarian. Indeed, they were healthy, red-blooded carnivores.

“This is delicious!” exclaimed Aetelou.

“What is this spice you added?” asked Sharalir. “You managed to cut down the fat, so you can really taste the savory orc meat. And the bread, after it’s absorbed all the juices—it’s moist on the tongue and brushes gently against the gums...”

“Are you some kind of food writer?!” Mile exclaimed.

“Hey, gimme a big chunk o’ that meat,” said one of the Meteors.

“I’ll take two!” said another.

“Me too!”

“I’ll have three!”

“Just one’s good for me. But make it extra meaty!”

The Crimson Vow were lost for words.

“Huh?”

“Why are you putting away your stove and saucepan?”

“Huh? What?”

Pauline turned to the frantic Meteors and mercilessly declared, “I believe it was decided that each party would take care of their own meal prep, wasn’t it? We all heard that at the initial meeting.”

“Uh...”

The Meteors were stunned. Sure enough, that had indeed been part of the contract. And of course, the Meteors had brought their own food: hardtack, jerky, and dried fruit—the three basic food groups for hunters on the go. However, this was something they had packed away for a worst-case scenario. There was more than a zero percent chance that their storage-magic-user would be killed or carried off by monsters, after all.

And that storage girl should have had plenty of food on her for them to enjoy—and at worst, they could always hunt something along the way. Surely, she would be willing to share at a low cost, or perhaps even for free.

Of course, these assumptions were based on what they had heard from the local soldiers and merchants. The Crimson Vow did not go out of their way to hide Mile’s storage magic, and most folks, once sufficiently liquored up, deemed it appropriate to discuss at least that much. The Meteors, likewise, had assumed that since the Crimson Vow did not hide Mile’s skill, it was not a problem if the Meteors knew about it.

“How much?”

If all they wanted was a few half-silver, the Meteors would pay it. So thought Graf. However...

“No, well, I mean—our trip has just started, so we need to economize and make sure that we don’t run out of ingredients for ourselves... Please go ahead and eat the food that you brought for yourselves. You shouldn’t be thinking about stealing other parties’ provisions,” said Mile, her refusal swift and direct.

“Honestly, just how much were you hoping to rely on those girls?” asked Aetelou, looking at the Blue Meteors with contempt.

“What unbelievable creatures you are!” added Sharalir.

The two elves were not aware of the true capacity of Mile’s storage and thought the Meteors were trying to steal away the finite amount of food that the girls had prepared

for themselves—an unforgivable sin. As for themselves, Aetelou and Sharalir had had only one serving each and assumed that the girls had merely happened to cook a bit too much and were sharing their leftovers, which meant that their partaking was not a problem. If it should happen that the girls ran low on their stores because of their generosity, the elves were more than willing to share their own supplies. Even if food became a concern, they could still go a few days on water alone without much discomfort. Elves had slower metabolisms than humans, and since this pair was no exception to the general rule of elven magical proficiency, water was not a worry. Even if they lost all of their food supplies, they could survive for a week without trouble.

“Seriously? Wait, do you all just hate us?” asked Graf.

The Crimson Vow and the elves were silent.

The Meteors appeared to be truly stunned. Reina, equally surprised, asked, “Do you all really not understand why someone might hate you, when you talk to people like this?! It would be way weirder for someone *not* to hate you with the way you’ve been acting!”

The other five women nodded emphatically.

“B-but we treated you! You all stuffed your faces on our dime, didn’t you?!”

Mavis quickly brushed Graf’s gripe aside. “Weren’t you the ones who extended the invitation to take us out?”

“But given how much you ate at that dinner, you should at least share a little of your food now! In exchange, we’ll even give you some of the rations that we brought!”

“The exchange rates for food in the forest aren’t the same as they are in town. Out here, we’re using the outdoor rate, which is essentially 100-to-1,” said Mile, summarily dismissing Callack’s offer.

“Of course, we are all allies here,” said Pauline with a grin, “So we’ll provide you with as much water as you need. So, Mr. Malawenn, you can reserve your magic for battle. That’s a special service, just for you all.”

“Though you did underestimate and belittle us, I suppose it’s not like you’re traitors or criminals. You just tried to take us for fools because we’re a group of newbies. So, we’ll still uphold our duties as a joint force. We’ll support you in battle, provide healing, and complete all of the functions of our job diligently... But don’t expect us to

do anything out of the kindness of our hearts!” said Reina, landing the finishing blow.

“What?! C’mon! What we’ve done isn’t any different from how the Devils’ Paradise and the Fellowship of Flame treated you guys. You let them take your glory, your spoils, and your pay—and you let *them* eat your food, didn’t you? That’s what the soldiers and the merchants said.”

“That’s right. But those men treated us as equals! They would have used their own bodies to shield us if they had to. Plus, they took that very first job of chasing back the monsters just out of concern for our safety, even when it wasn’t worth the pay. Do you really think that the five of you, who came gunning right for Mile’s storage and tried to catch a free ride on our coattails, deserve the same treatment as those other men? Ha!”

It was a full-frontal verbal attack. The men collapsed in despair.

“Of course,” Pauline continued, “It seems there are some loose-lipped soldiers and merchants back in Mafan. When we get back into town, hm... Say, Graf, won’t you tell me the names of those men who decided to go blabbing to you?”

She was terrifying. The eerie smile upon her face sent a shudder down their spines.

However, even they still had their pride as hunters.

“Sorry, can’t reveal our sources!”

“Ohoho...”

“Ohoho...”

“Ohoho...”

“Ohohoho! Ohohohohohoho!”

“You’re creepy! And what the hell was with that last laugh?!”

The two elves and nine hunters proceeded into the forest.

“We are now reaching the boundaries of the area where humans typically tread,” Aetelou explained.

The guards nodded silently. The fact that this land was “untrodden” did not mean that it was uncharted territory or that it was home to dangerous monsters. It merely meant that no one came here because it was not worthwhile for anyone to do so. That was all.

Coming all the way out into the remote depths of a forest did not guarantee finding valuable prey or rare herbs—not any more so than the edges of the forest might provide, anyway. Plus, lugging your spoils back out took an exceptional amount of time and effort. Hunting on the outskirts was simply much more efficient.

The elves’ aim on this venture was to study plants that were of “scholarly value,” research mineral distribution, and track local monster breeding rates. While the items they valued might be very important to the scholars, nothing they collected would be particularly profitable in terms of market value. This being the case, the Blue Meteors tried to leave all of the gathering work to the Crimson Vow, while they busied themselves with hunting beasts that would provide meat, horns, tusks, claws, and hides that would fetch a good price... all while ensuring their clients’ safety, of course. They weren’t *that* rotten, after all.

Even so, their initial hope of getting to use Mile’s storage as much as they liked was now nothing more than a pipe dream.

“Now then, we would like to begin our investigation,” said Aetelou.

The two lines of guards halted their steady procession and spread out beside her, walking more slowly now as they examined the plants on the ground. All of them stood up straight, not bending at the waist. If they spent the entire investigation hunched over, their bodies would not thank them.

They had already been shown sketches of the plants the elves were after, along with an explanation of what they were for. As for monsters and animals, all they needed to do was record that they had encountered them. Until a little while ago, the Blue Meteors had naturally taken the lead, but now they were spread out, so everyone had to concentrate on pushing away the tall grasses and tree branches that were right in front of them. Combining that with keeping one’s eyes to the ground was quite difficult, so their speed took a nosedive.

That said, there were no roads in a remote place like this, and their aim was investigation, not getting somewhere by a certain time. It was fine to proceed as slowly and carefully as necessary to make sure they did not miss a thing.

“Reina, two meters ahead at one o’ clock!”

“Oh, there it is! Miss Aetelou, over here!”

They couldn’t just pluck up anything that they found willy-nilly. Their gathering was pointless if the scholars could not record where the plants were growing, the amount of sun they were getting, what other plants grew beside them, and every other little detail. Even deciding whether to pick them at all or simply to leave them be was its own judgment call—one that, naturally, had to be left up to their employers.

“Pauline, 1.5 meters ahead at 1:30!”

“I see them. Miss Sharalir, they’re here!”

“Mavis, 2.3 meters ahead at twelve o’ clock!”

“Objective number three spotted!”

One after another the Crimson Vow uncovered the target plants, Mile giving coordinate directions based on the clockface directional method that they had established.

“This is amazing. Normally, we would probably have missed more than half of these, but at this rate we might find all of them,” said Aetelou. “We’ll have to readjust our margins for compensation here.”

Sharalir nodded in agreement.

At Aetelou’s words, Graf of the Blue Meteors exploded. “Are you serious?! This is weird, isn’t it?! If they were all off looking separately, I’d get it, like, okay, they have good eyes, or like, they’re just really good at searching. But how can Mile stand all off by herself and find all of the plants and direct them to them?! Sure, yeah, maybe she has great eyesight, but she can’t see through grass or trees!”

The two elves completely ignored him—as did the Crimson Vow.

“Say something already!” Graf shouted at the members of the Crimson Vow. He was already fed up with watching them find things one after another while the Meteors found nothing. However, before the Crimson Vow could react, Aetelou replied, “I thought the rule was that hunters were not supposed to make inquiries into others’ skills and abilities?”

“Er...”

There was no written record anywhere of such a rule, but most every hunter around had a tacit understanding of it. Breaking this rule was as good as declaring, “I’m gonna take advantage of you to line my pockets,” under which circumstances, the offender should not be surprised to have a sword drawn on them. Having had this pointed out to them, the Blue Meteors could not say another word.

Overhearing the whole exchange, the Crimson Vow could merely shrug.

Hm...

After a short while, Mile realized something.

“Umm, Miss Aetelou. I’ve just realized something about our number two objective, the Lieelen grasses.”

Naturally, Mile was searching for the target plants using her surveillance magic, a skill that had become more and more advanced since the first time she had used it. The very first version had been a voice guidance system that made Mile feel like she was talking to a car GPS. A scant few seconds later, she had upgraded to the second generation, the PPI (Plan Position Indicator) scope system. In this system, she utilized a 360-degree revolving grid radar screen, the likes of which you often see in war movies or anime.

What Mile was now using was her third-generation surveillance magic, which oscillated in all directions from the center of the screen in order to detect its targets—rather like an active sonar system. It would analyze the targets and mark them with an arrow, circle, or triangle. These statistics were integrated with her normal vision, projected directly onto her retinas.

Of course, this system had been further customized for the current job. All their objectives were highlighted with a red blinking light. Plants, animals, and minerals...

“Oh? What is it?”

Lieelen grass, which was used in specialized magic potions, did not grow properly under human cultivation. It wilted and died, and even if it survived, turned out scant in medicinal properties. It was an herb that drove many a researcher to tears—as a specialized ingredient, it was never required in large quantities, so not much research had been conducted on it. However, when the occasion was called for, it was usually impossible to get a hold of or terribly expensive. Thanks to Mile’s help, they had so far found five whole stalks, which Aetelou and Sharalir collected with gusto.

That said, it was an herb that many researchers had *tried* to grow. It was unthinkable that this little girl, who was a complete layperson in terms of medicinal sciences, could have uncovered new information about the plant simply by finding a few specimens. Even so, it would be kind of any employer to listen to what she had to say without belittling her, particularly when it was a young female hunter who was taking this kind of initiative in aiding them. It was good for motivation, if nothing else, Aetelou believed.

“There’s always a tafina tree nearby wherever the lieelen grass is growing,” said Mile.

While this was true, it was also something the elves already knew. However, it showed promise for Mile that she could hit upon that pattern in such a short amount of time, thought the researchers, smiles spreading across their faces.

“There’s four-eye grass growing nearby and copper in the soil, right?”

“Wh...?”

The pair was speechless.

Many methods for cultivating lieelen grass had been attempted up until now—planting it near tafina trees, testing various soils and fertilizers, even applying a variety of medicinal and growth-enhancing magics. But had anyone tried the combination of growing it alongside other plants and placing ores with specific metallic components nearby?

No. Neither of the pair had even heard of such a thing. Someone might have tried

growing it with other plants or in dirt fortified with crushed minerals, but they had never tried that specific combination—or at least, the elves had not heard of anyone doing so to any particular effect.

“Wh-what makes you think that?” Aetelou asked, trembling slightly.

It was easy to see the tafina trees and the four-eye grass, but if there was copper ore around, it would be hidden by dirt, or moss, or grass. And even if there was some visible ore in Mile’s line of sight, it was unlikely that any amateur would be able to tell that there was copper in it just by looking. Indeed, the most common copper ores around were only around 0.5% copper in composition.

And yet, Mile matter-of-factly replied, “Huh? Well, that’s what my search magic indicates.”

“*What?!*” the pair shouted.

They, along with the five Blue Meteors, who had already been approaching to see why everyone had stopped, were stunned into silence. The kind of search magic they were aware of was nowhere near this precise. No one outside of the Crimson Vow had ever heard of such a thing.

“B-by ‘search magic,’ you mean...”

“She means search magic.”

“Please don’t inquire into a hunter’s skills and abilities.”

There was no telling what Mile might say if the explanation was left up to her, and so Reina and Pauline stepped in to take the lead. There was nothing else that Aetelou and Sharalir could say. They would never divulge the results of their research if someone who they had just met demanded it. There was no reason for a hunter to go blabbing about their abilities, which were their livelihood and their lifeline, to anyone who passed by.

There was a brief silence, and then—

“Um, so the way that I use this search magic is...”

Squeeze!

“What are you running your mouth off about?! Did you listen to a word that Pauline and I said?!” asked Reina, pinching both of Mile’s cheeks.



As far as Mile was concerned, this matter of the search magic was neither her livelihood nor her lifeline. It was not a combat skill, and it was useful for everyone, so it wasn't something worth hiding. Or so Mile thought. To everyone else, it was obvious that it would be a very big deal if such a thing ever became public knowledge. Both for Mile and for the world at large...

"Mile, try having some common sense now and then!"

"Mile, don't you think it'll be bad for other hunters if rumors start getting around that hunters are so dumb that they'll give away all their secret techniques and knowledge if you just ask?"

"Ah..."

Apparently, Pauline's more concrete explanation made a stronger impression on Mile than Mavis's abstract one.

The two elves, having missed their chance to hear the secret of Mile's search magic, continued to stare at her with determined eyes...

"There's some lieelen grass!"

After harvesting a number of other varieties of plants, Mile once again came upon some lieelen grass. As Aetelou and Sharalir investigated the area, sure enough they found there was a large tafina tree growing nearby and four-eye grass alongside.

"And copper ore?" asked Aetelou.

"Right there," said Mile, pointing to a nearby rock.

The elves were silent. They might have been researchers, but their area of expertise was botany, not mineral science. It was impossible for them to judge at a glance whether or not what Mile said was true.

"Would you like to take it with you?" asked Mile.

"Y-yes! If you would..."

Having received the affirmative, Mile tucked it away into her inventory... the rock, that is.

“Huh?” the pair asked.

“Huh?” Mile replied.

“Huhh?” the elves echoed.

“Huhhhh?”

Aetelou had thought Mile was asking if they ought to harvest the grass. Mile, however, had been asking whether they wished to take the rock home to confirm if it had copper in it. The part of the rock that had been protruding from the ground was about two or three cubic meters, but when Mile stored it away, it left a huge hole in the soil. Apparently, the bulk of the rock had been buried beneath the ground.

Both the elves and the Blue Meteors were stunned in silence.

The other three members of the Vow could only look on, resigned.

If what she says is true, and proximity to tafina trees, four-eye grass, and copper ore is really the key to cultivating lieelen grass... the research and experiments, the trials to verify results, and the presentations and paper-writing could take years, but if it is true and we can succeed in coming up with a formula for cultivation... we might be promoted to the rank of lecturers or associate professors—or even full professors! What a splendid chance! What good fortune! thought one of the researchers.

But... The other elf was focused on something else entirely.

Compared to the secret of Mile’s search magic and her absurd amount of storage space, I just can’t care about lieelen grass at all!!!

As it turned out, the two elves were not so different from Dr. Clairia.

“Would you mind if I do some hunting for a bit?” asked Mile.

“Hm? W-well, I suppose it’s been long enough that we might take a break,” said Aetelou.

“I don’t need a break. You all can keep on with your investigation.”

With that, Mile disappeared in the direction of ten o’clock. Not a few minutes had passed before she returned. She was empty-handed, but no one around thought this peculiar. Nor were they shocked at the speed with which she had returned.

Storage magic, huh? And that search magic...

Already, they had become accustomed to the creature known as Mile.

That was all there was to it.

“Miss Aetelou, Miss Sharalir, feel free to join us!”

Later, when they made camp, the two elves joined the Crimson Vow alongside the simple stove they had set up at Mile’s invitation.

“I caught this while we were working, so the two of you have a right to this meal!”

The pair accepted Mile’s explanation and gladly partook. Mavis roughly chopped up the deer meat that Mile took out from storage, while Pauline grilled the pieces one after another.

“This is delicious!” the pair cried.

For many Americans, venison is considered more of a luxury than beef. It was the same in this world, where the only ones who could afford to eat deer, boar, and beef on a regular basis were the very wealthy. The only thing that the common folk got to eat on a daily basis was cheap monster meat. Other meats, particularly venison, were something they might enjoy only on very special occasions.

The fact that the Crimson Vow were so accustomed to eating venison was only because of Mile. If they had been normal hunters, even if they were able to hunt deer, they would have had to sell anything they caught, unable to sample anything aside from the parts that couldn’t be transported and the internal organs, which were normally consumed on site.

Meanwhile, five pairs of eyes looked on jealously.

“Those poor lads seem rather strapped for food. Perhaps you might give them a little bit of this as well?” asked Aetelou, unable to bear the hungry stares from the Blue Meteors.

“This is meat that we hunted while on contract with you, so we will do whatever our employers wish. You can call it a special favor from yourselves to your employees, so that should be fine,” said Mile.

“Oh, thank God!”

“Th-thank you...”

Apparently, the Meteors had come to at least understand where they stood in the pecking order.

“Alakazam!”

Fwump!

At the behest of Mile’s peculiar spell, a large tent appeared, and silence fell around the camp.

Yep. That seemed about right. The two elves and five members of the Meteors looked on with utterly weary expressions.

“Um. The two of you are welcome to share our tent as well.”

For their own security, the elves had specified that three or more women be amongst the guards. If the Crimson Vow took the tent and made their two female employers sleep outside with five men, who did not seem particularly trustworthy in the first place, they could not say that they were fulfilling their expected duty.

The elves pulled up the entry flap and looked inside.

“Beds...” started one.

“A trunk...” the other trailed.

“And a table and chairs!” they said together.

They didn’t want to think about it anymore.

Breakfast was a simple affair of hardtack and dried meat, though the soup they had alongside it was not made of foul-tasting “soup base,” but a proper broth, with vegetables and scraps of meat. This alone made it luxurious as far as a hunter’s breakfast went. Mornings were normally hectic with everyone preparing to move out, and there was no time to sit around waiting for water to boil. Thankfully, the Crimson Vow had three mages who could use utility magic, allowing them this luxury.

Afterwards, they quickly cleaned up their sleeping area and resumed the investigation. Like the day before, their employers took copious notes, investigated the target specimens that they found, took some specimens with them, and left some as they were. Just as midday was rolling around...

“Stop! Everyone please get over here quickly!” Mile called out in a low but harried voice.

The other three members of the Crimson Vow were already nearby, but at her words, the researchers and the Blue Meteors rushed to Mile’s side. Taking her lead, they tried to make as little noise as possible.

“There are seventeen orcs approaching at high speed! They already know that we’re here. I’m sorry I didn’t notice them sooner. I had my search magic tuned to gathering, so my enemy detection range was shortened!”

Despite Mile’s desperate apology, just having enough advance warning to guard themselves against this surprise attack was an immense help... or so most people with common sense would realize.

“This is bad,” said Graf, “There’s too many of them! If we can’t get the drop on them, then we can only take on about four or five at once. We’d have no problem taking them down if they came at us one at a time, but since they’re in a group, we won’t be able to provide cover for you all while also guarding our clients! Reina and Pauline, you hold down the fort with our clients, and you two front liners, protect the clients and the mages! Focus on using your magic to break the enemies up into groups and try and make it so that we only have to face five or less at once! Try to keep ’em distracted, and

don't try to hit 'em too hard! If you've got some leeway, weaken them with area attacks. If you've any more, pick 'em off with simple spells!"

It was a sound strategy to make the safety of their clients the top priority, and the safety of the mages their second. Besides, it would be easier to protect both groups if they were all in the same place. Though there were hunters who would prioritize their own safety in a situation like this one, Graf was at least honest enough to put the job and their clients first. As leader of the C-ranked Blue Meteors, he was the obvious choice for their collective commander both in terms of overall experience and party numbers. The Crimson Vow had already accepted this without protest, judging by their manner during prior discussions, but now, seeing Graf actually take the initiative, the Crimson Vow's eyes grew wide.

"Defensive maneuvers..."

Mile, in her own world as usual, seemed to be deeply moved by something or other.

"Well, orcs are really no big deal," Reina said casually. "We can rush in there and take 'em out, just like—"

"No," Mavis interrupted. "We have to follow the directions of our commander. We took this job together, as two parties, and Graf is our leader. Unlike his previous behavior, these directions are actually quite sound. Inviting chaos by acting of our own accord is of no benefit to us. We all learned that you should always move as you are directed, did we not?"

"Er..."

She was right. Reina, as the member of the Crimson Vow with the most experience as a hunter, was in no position to deny this.

Of course, neither Reina nor Mavis intended to follow Graf's commands as far as never leaving their position even if the Blue Meteors were in danger. Neither did Mile nor Pauline. They would utilize everyone's strengths to the best of their abilities under Graf's direction, but if their employers or their fellow guards were in danger, they would switch into autonomous mode.

"They're here!"

Just as Mile shouted this warning, a horde of orcs began to appear from between the

trees. Perhaps because they weren't particularly smart, or perhaps because they did not think that any special measures were required against a group of humans, over half of whom were weak and skinny "females," they were all traveling at slightly different speeds and emerged in a staggered fashion, rather than en masse. This gave the Blue Meteors an advantage.

"Earth Needle!"

"Ice Needle!"

Both Reina and Pauline launched needle-type attacks, the incantations already completed within their heads. The names of the two attacks were similar, but the first was made of hardened earth, and the second of ice—magic from two completely different sources. The two area attacks arced over the orcs at the head of the group and fell upon the ones behind them.

Needle attacks were never powerful spells of the one-hit-kill variety, but as the orcs tried to shield their faces from the magic raining down upon them, they stopped in their tracks, opening up more of a gap between themselves and the vanguard—just as the Blue Meteors had requested.

"Earth Nail!"

Malawenn, the Meteors' mage, fired an earth spell at the head group.

Attacks like these fell behind needle attacks in terms of number of shots and area of effect but won out in terms of damage. That said, this spell was, likewise, not enough to fell an arc in a single blow. Still, further disrupting the monsters' advance was a great help to the frontline fighters.

After Kesbard fired off his bow on the midline, he drew his dagger and joined in with the front line. Unlike the archer of the Servants of the Goddess, he did not toss his bow away but slung it onto his back. (It was possible that he felt that there was far too high a likelihood of the weapon getting trampled in these conditions.)

The Blue Meteors' front line was able to safely engage the three orcs of the first wave, who had been injured before even entering the battle. However, the second wave arrived before they had finished dealing with the first. Just when it seemed that they might actually be in danger...

“Earth Javelin!”

“Icicle Lance!”

Two attack spells pierced two of the orcs right through.

Given both the distance of the mages, and the proximity of the Blue Meteors to the orcs, using area spells was probably out of the question for fear of friendly fire. However, Reina and Pauline were not the ones who’d fired these concentrated attacks.

After all, there were far more accomplished mages among elves than humans, so there was no reason that their employers should not take part in combat.

“Mile, can I leave this to you?” Mavis asked, turning to Mile.

Mavis knew it was safe to leave the defense of Reina, Pauline, and the two magic-wielding elves in the capable hands of Mile, who could use both a sword, wield magic, and erect a sturdy barrier. She thought it would be best for her to go help the Blue Meteors. If there was a chance of her wrapping up a fight by rushing in a blaze of glory, Mavis wasn’t about to hold back. Plus, while the Meteors were by no means weak, there were so many orcs that providing magical support from a distance would be more difficult as the battle grew more hectic.

“Of course! I’ll put up a barrier if anything happens, so no worries!”

Mile had not put up a barrier so far, to allow the others to keep firing attack spells, but she could call up protective spells in an instant if necessary. She could see that the Meteors needed backup and waved Mavis on without a second thought.

“I’m here to help!”

“Ah, thanks!”

Mavis joining the Meteors’ fight was in violation of the positions that Graf had assigned, but battle was a fluid thing, and the mages still had plenty of defenders. Judging by the demonstration she had put on at the Guild warehouse, the Blue Meteors assumed that she had enough battle skill to tip the scales back in their favor.

Mavis was not one to defy such an expectation.

“True Godspeed Blade!”

Her blade slashed through one orc after the next.

Sh-she’s strong! The five Meteors looked at each other in shock.

The attack spells and the efforts of the Meteors had already thinned out their foes. After all, the creatures were not ogres, but orcs, which were vastly inferior. Not so long ago, Mavis had faced down ogres—or, in truth, a swarm of something like hyper ogres—and finished without a scratch. She could take on twenty, even thirty orcs without breaking a sweat.

A few of the orcs broke off and headed toward the mages and their clients, but with Mile there, there was no reason to worry. Reina was sure to be in a sour mood if she didn’t get at least one moment in the spotlight, so she might even ward them off with a magical attack herself, denying Mile a chance to shine.

There was no need for Mavis to use her Micros against so few enemies. Her True Godspeed Blade, which focused her spiritual energy, was more than enough. It had been a while since she’d really gotten to flex her muscles, and as she waded into the fray, she got caught up in the moment. Mile and the others were confident that Mavis could never be overtaken by some regular old orcs, and so, they focused their attention on the few monsters who were headed their way.

But then...

“Gwah!”

Mavis took a blow from an orc that halted her in her tracks.

Perhaps she had gotten careless, or perhaps she had been struck from a blind spot, but the attack that connected with her right flank was certain to have broken ribs. It was impossible to tell whether or not the broken ribs had punctured her internal organs, but regardless, Mavis had stopped moving, and in a free-for-all melee, standing still on the battlefield meant certain death.

You always strike the weakest link first. This was the cardinal rule of battle, which even a creature as unintelligent as an orc knew. Before Mile and the others even realized that anything unusual had happened, several orcs swung around and focused their attacks right on Mavis.

I'm gonna die!



Mavis reflexively used her “spiritual” power to strengthen her body, but it was not enough. Images of all that she had achieved in life began to flash before her eyes at blinding speed.

There were conversations with her parents. Times that she imitated her three older brothers as they practiced with their swords. The day that she watched her brother’s promotion ceremony, the day that he became a knight and she swore that one day she would follow in his footsteps.

And then, there were her three companions, who she met at the Hunters’ Prep School.

To think that she was going to be killed by the likes of orcs here, her life drawing to a close with her dreams unfulfilled, her debts to her parents unpaid, her allies abandoned. All because she had underestimated her enemies. Because she had grown overconfident in her own power, even though it was only thanks to the Micros and her special swords that she had been able to become as strong as she was.

Father, Mother, Brothers, and everyone else... I’m sorry.

Ka-shnk!

Bang! Ka-thmp! Crack! Shunk!

The terrible sounds of crushed meat, broken bones, and the tearing of flesh surrounded Mavis.

“Huh?”

Mavis was dumbfounded as she saw a figure appear between herself and the orcs. It was Rattle, the swordsman, his shortsword plunged into the gut of one orc even as he took an attack from another. Then, she saw Graf, facing an orc head-on, swinging his greatsword at full power. There was Callack, his rapier piercing the base of another orc’s skull. There was Kesbard, swinging his dagger with gusto and slashing through an orc’s windpipe. And finally, there was Malawenn, just finishing up a spell and letting an attack fly.

Everyone had turned on the orcs that were bearing down on Mavis, opening themselves up to attack from the previous opponents on whom they had turned their backs. Pain was nothing more than an indicator from the body that something was wrong. Combatants in the heat of battle had no need for such notifications, which did

nothing more than slow them down.

“Graaaaaaah!”

“Don’t mess with us!”

“You pieces of crap!!!”

Rattle’s posture was awkward as he tried to position himself between the orcs and Mavis. He was far too close to the orcs, leaving him unable to swing his sword. So, after drawing the blade out of the orc’s body, he instead bludgeoned its eye with the hilt and then forced the blade across its neck. It might have been a sword made for crushing and chopping, lacking the keen edge of a Japanese-type katana, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t slice an orc’s throat.

The others swung their swords in turn, and the orcs surrounding Mavis fell or were pushed back.

“Mile!”

“On it!”

Mile rushed to Mavis’s side at top speed.

“Earth Javelin!”

“Ice Spear!”

Reina and Pauline released the spells they had been holding, eliminating the orcs in front of Mile. The monsters would be of little impediment to her, but it was best to avoid any obstacles when she had a sword that needed swinging—no matter how minor those obstacles might be.

“Ice Needle!”

“Ice Arrow!”

Aetelou and Sharalir let two more attacks fly.

Certain that the orcs ahead were out of the way, Pauline followed Mile. With Mile already on the way, what they needed was not Reina with her attack magic skill, but Pauline, with her healing. Reina, with her immense attack power, stayed behind to defend their clients. There probably wouldn't be any orcs left to come running the elves' way, but they had to be prepared. Their clients' lives depended on it.

"Damn it! This is disgraceful. No, stop—that doesn't matter! If anything were to happen to the Blue Meteors for my sake..."

For now, a gap had opened up between Mavis and the orcs. Not letting this chance slip through her fingers, Mavis drew three capsules from her pocket and flipped open the lids, downing them all in one gulp.

"Please, just let me not feel pain! I can get healed afterward. *I'm begging you, Micros!!!*"

Now back on her feet, Mavis thrust herself between the Blue Meteors, who were desperately beating back the orcs, and swung her blade with a mighty effort.

"EX True Godspeed Blade!"

Slash!

Shunk!

Bwoosh!

"Huh? You can move?"

"You aren't hurt?"

Wshh!

Bash!

Thunk!

"*Sh-she's really strong...*" the men muttered, shaken to see Mavis's ultimate technique at such close range. Shaken or no, the members of the Blue Meteors never stopped moving. They weren't amateurs, after all.

The orcs had already been cut down greatly in number, and now thanks to Mavis's onslaught, only a few remained, all of which had already taken a fair amount of damage. The Blue Meteors took the opportunity to attack.

"Mavis, I'm here to help! Er..."

By the time Mile plunged in, her sword swinging, not a single orc remained standing.

"Guh..."

Suddenly, one of the Blue Meteors collapsed to the ground.

It was Rattle, who had taken several blows from the orcs when he wedged himself in front of Mavis to shield her. Hyped up on adrenaline or something of that nature, he had been able to continue fighting, but no matter how good his armor, taking several hits from an orc was quite different from being struck by a human. Now that the battle was over and he sensed that the danger was through, his body relaxed, and a wave of pain overwhelmed him.

"Oy, Rattle! You okay?! Man, Mavis! You were acting like you were seriously hurt, but apparently you still had it in you to be jumping around like that? It's because of you that Rattle—"

As Graf, who was slightly injured himself, expressed his displeasure, Mavis hung her head in shame. Until...

"Uh-hurf! Gu-huh!"

She began violently vomiting blood and collapsed.

"What?!"

"Mavis!"

Mile rushed to Mavis's side and began waving her right hand over Mavis's body—scanning Mavis's condition with the help of the nanomachines, holding in her mind the image of some kind of medical tricorder.

"You've got three splintered ribs, and your broken ribs are piercing your lungs. Your

right arm is broken, the ligaments are torn, you've snapped your Achilles tendon, and you have numerous other fractures... *How many did you drink?!*" Mile screamed.

"Guhf... Th-three..."

For the moment, Mile pushed her rage aside. She could deal with that later.

Pauline had now caught up, and Reina, certain that all of the orcs were dealt with, followed with their clients in tow.

"Pauline, get Rattle! He looks like he's really hurt—it's not just broken bones. Look out for internal injuries and intracranial bleeding. Reina, Miss Aetelou, Miss Sharalir, please do what you can to heal the others!"

"R-right away!"

"On it!"

Mile would deal with Mavis, who was most gravely injured. Pauline would take care of Rattle, the next-worst injured. The others had only taken scrapes and body blows, so they probably only had a fracture or two at worst, which meant that normal healing magic would be more than enough to aid them. Mile and Pauline could double-check all the patients afterwards, just in case. It was normal for elves to have some facility with healing magic, so whoever got stuck with Reina was probably the least fortunate... though even she was a more skilled healer than the average person.

"I-I'm sorry. I was really rude. Please ignore me," said Graf, his face flushing as he thought of the horrible things he had just said to Mavis, who had pushed herself in battle to the point of serious injury. What he did not know was that the bulk of her injuries were actually not from the orc attack but an aftereffect of imbibing so many Micros.

"Set the bones back in their original places, rejoin the fragments, mend the tendons, repair the nerves and blood vessels, restore the muscle, augment self-recovery strength, eliminate chances of infection..."

Behind Mile, who was incanting her spell, Pauline recited a similar spell over Rattle.

Meanwhile, Reina, Aetelou, and Sharalir were performing the normal incantations of the healing magic in this world.

“No way!”

“How did you mend them so quickly and so cleanly?”

Aetelou and Sharalir were stunned to see Mile and Pauline’s healing abilities.

“Please stop looking around! Focus on the healing you’re doing!” Graf and Callack wept, prompting Aetelou and Sharalir to quickly return to their patients.

“What in the world were you thinking?!”

Mavis knelt on the ground as Mile grilled her.

“I-I’m sorry. I underestimated the orcs and let my guard down...”

“That’s not what I’m talking about! Why did you drink *three*?! I told you that you should only take one, maybe two if you absolutely had to, and then to be extra careful... Did you completely forget all of my warnings?!”

There was no way that Mavis could have forgotten. Not after the hours of lecturing she had gone through after the battle with the elder dragons...

“B-but, if anything had happened to the Meteors because of me—”

Mavis had no idea that Mile’s healing powers went as far as regenerating missing limbs. Faced with the possibility of the Blue Meteors not just dying but taking career-ending injuries because of her, she’d had to do everything she could to end the battle. Despite knowing how good at healing Mile and Pauline were, she didn’t want to leave anything to chance.

Mile knew what it was like to be overly empathetic. She was the type of person who would rather lose 1,000 yen herself than make someone else lose 100 yen because of her—the type who would get to a meeting place an hour ahead of time rather than make someone else wait even a few minutes for her arrival.

And yet—

“B-but I told you no more than two! With three, your nervous system might break down from the shock, and there’s a chance that you could really die! Not a small chance, either!”

Mavis had already heard this speech the first time that Mile gave her the Micros. She had heard it again and again—she had heard it so often that it made her sick, in fact.

The Blue Meteors’ lives were irreplaceable. Though she apologized desperately to Mile, there was not an iota of fear, distress, or regret upon Mavis’s face. If this ever happened again, she would do the exact same thing she’d done today.

Such was the way of a knight, and particularly of the young knight hopeful by the name of Mavis von Austien.

Understanding this, Mile could only shrug. All told, if she’d been in Mavis’s place, she would have made the same call. Once she came to that realization, there was nothing left for her to say.

But the fact remained that a medicine she had concocted might have been responsible for the death of a friend. *Maybe I was wrong...*

She was beginning to regret ever giving Mavis the Micros, but she could not take them back now. Mavis had been troubled by the difference in power between herself and Reina and Pauline. She’d felt inferior to them because of the leaps and bounds they had made as mages due to the cheat code that was Mile’s power leveling. For Mile to take the Micros away from her now, after it had meant so much to her...

Plus, it was true that without those Micros, one of the Blue Meteors might have died. Mavis had used the item that was provided to her in case of an emergency, in an emergency situation. Could Mile really criticize her for that?

So this really is all my fault...

Overhearing the exchange between the two girls, the Blue Meteors looked uneasy. They had never considered that Mavis would be so desperate to try and save them that she would use a magical medicine that endangered her own life. Furthermore,

they could scarcely begin to fathom what the cost of such a magical medicine might be.

If Mavis had not rushed back in to help them when she had, they might have died or taken serious injury. On top of coming to their aid, she had taken that precious, dangerous medicine, pushing her body to the limits while risking injuries that would normally leave her paralyzed—all to save their lives.

And after all she had done for them, they had lobbed ungrateful, scathing words at her...

The five Meteors clutched their skulls, moaning in self-hatred, shame, and guilt.

The two elves, meanwhile, stood frozen stiff. First that bizarre search magic, then that absurd storage magic capacity, and now a magical medicine that could strengthen the body?

Reina and Pauline, meanwhile, sat leisurely upon a rock and waited for everyone else to calm down.

“I’m sorry! I’m really, really sorry!”

The Blue Meteors, starting with Graf, all bowed their heads in gratitude to Mavis.

Mavis, likewise, was bowing her own head, her face full of gratitude and shame.

As far as Mavis was concerned, the Blue Meteors were her saviors. They had gotten hurt because they had prioritized saving her over their own safety after she jumped so recklessly into the fray. She had gotten cocky and let her guard down, and they had saved her—especially Rattle, who had shielded her with his own body.

Both sides felt utterly indebted to each other, and the exchange of gratitude dragged on.

“Give it a rest already!” Reina cried. “We took this job together, so we’re all allies here—obviously we would all try to help each other out!”

Finally, the two groups settled down.

“Mile, please put those orcs in storage. There won’t be any extermination reward for hunting them all the way out here, but we should be able to get a good price for their meat and other materials, which will make for a decent haul. Oh, and put the Meteors’ in there with them.”

“Okay!”

At Reina’s direction, Mile lugged the orc corpses into storage (or rather, her inventory), one after the other.

“Huh? A-are you sure?” asked Graf, surprised.

“We fought together to protect our employers, and you shielded Mavis with your own bodies, didn’t you? I’m not some spoiled baby who’s going to keep being cranky after you showed us some sincerity!” Reina harrumphed, but it was obvious she was trying to hide her embarrassment. Apparently, she had been quite moved by the way the Meteors had protected Mavis but couldn’t form the words to properly express this.

“Haha, well, thanks. It’s a big help,” said Graf with a wry smile, seeming to sense her awkwardness.

If they care that much and are brave enough to risk their own lives to protect another party, then why were they so rude when we started out? They aren’t bad people, and they aren’t unskilled, so you’d think that they would be able to behave themselves better. They probably aren’t too popular with the ladies, Pauline, Mavis, and Mile thought to themselves.

There were many useless and stupid men in this world. Plenty of people had attractive exteriors but were rotten on the inside—and the Blue Meteors seemed to be the exact opposite. They would just have to wait until a girl who saw past their abrasive exteriors and recognized how good they were came along...

With this thought, Pauline, Mavis, and Mile all realized something.

We just assumed that they’re all single, but for all we know, some of them might have girlfriends or even be married men. But if we ask them about it, they might think that we’re interested, and that would be annoying... Ugh, we need to know, but we can’t ask them!

As the three languished in their curiosity, Reina looked on, puzzled.

“S-say, Mile?”

“Yes?” Mile replied, cocking her head at the sudden question from Aetelou.

“When this job is over, would you consider working for us full-time? Ah, I mean, along with your three companions, of course. You could help us in our research or come along on our investigations...”

When Mile took a closer look, she noticed a peculiar gleam in Aetelou’s eyes. As she hesitated a moment at the unexpected question, Pauline cut in from beside her. “Does that mean you want Mile to help you with your research? Or that you want to research *her*?”

“Er...”

The two elves were lost for words.

“I knew it!” said Pauline, pressing on. “I’m sure you have high hopes of using her for her ridiculous storage magic or want to try to make her spill the secrets of her other skills, but she’s had more than her fill of that already. If she wanted money or fame, Mile could have both—and yet here she is, working as a hunter. Please consider that. Besides, do you really think that you two are the first to make her such an offer?”

“Er...” they both stammered.

And yet, just as Pauline thought they were starting to get it...

“B-but, you’re all acquaintances of Clairia’s, aren’t you?! There’s no way she would ever let such a juicy research subject slip out from under her nose! I’m sure that she tried to sink her teeth into you! And I’m certain that we could get much better research results than that little—”

“That’s right! Rather than frittering her time away like that little fiend who only pretends to be a serious scholar, it would be much better if Mile were in our hands!”

“Hey now, hey now, hey now!!!”

Not only the Crimson Vow, but the Blue Meteors, leapt in to object to this dangerous

turn of phrase.

“I-I mean, in our hands purely for research purposes, of course,” the elf explained.

There was only silence in reply.

“Mile has no interest in any such thing!” Pauline denied them once more, but the pair were not ready to back down.

“We weren’t asking you—we were asking Mile! Mile, come and live with us! We could even teach you a bit of elven magic! Special, secret elven magic that no human knows. If you would teach us some things, then I’m sure the elders would permit us to share at least a little. We might even be able to invite you back to our elven village as a privileged friend!”

“Nn...”

For Mile, this was quite the tantalizing offer. Elven magic was one thing, but a special invitation to an elven village?

“Nn. Nnh. Nnnnnnhhh...”

Got her! the elves thought, grinning triumphantly, but then Mile finally managed to wring out her reply.

“...Y-you’ll have to go through my manager!”

“Manager???”

The entire group was dumbfounded by this unfamiliar term.

“Wouldn’t it be better to discuss this over dinner?” asked Graf. “Let’s stay focused on our investigation while it’s still light out. That battle with the orcs ate up a lot of our time.”

“Ah...”

The Crimson Vow and the elves could not help but agree.

“Graf, you’d be much more popular with the girls if you always acted like this,” Mile said without thinking.

“Shut up! That’s none of your concern!” raged Graf.

Judging by his response, there was no way that he wasn’t single.

“This is good!”

Mile let herself get a bit carried away preparing the last dinner they would share during the course of this expedition. Breakfast the following day was sure to be another simple affair, as would lunch, which they would eat while waiting for the wagon to arrive at the outskirts of the forest. She also wanted to thank the Blue Meteors for protecting Mavis the way they had. Granted, as long as no one actually died, Mile’s magic could probably have healed even the gravest of injuries. But the trauma of being that badly pummeled by several orcs might have affected Mavis’s ability to continue on as a hunter.

Frankly speaking, no matter how strong Mavis was, she was still a slender girl with a noblewoman’s pampered upbringing. Her armor was simple leather, the type that favored movement over protection, with only partial coverage of the most vital areas; her skull was completely exposed. In short, the Blue Meteors had literally saved Mavis’s life. By extension, they were the saviors of all the Crimson Vow. As such—and partially in apology for treating them so cruelly on the first day of their journey—Mile put her all into treating them to a lavish feast.

“What is this?! It’s so tender and toothsome, and this flavor...”

“It’s rock lizard fried in hot vegetable oil.”

“This stew has such a sharp flavor...”

“Eheheh, I used slightly more expensive seasonings than you’d find in most restaurants. I don’t use these very often. Pauline complains.”

“I’ve never seen a dish like this...”

“It’s tomato chicken rice, wrapped in an omelet. It’s a specialty of my hometown, my *pièce de résistance*!”

“This soup is so good...”

“That’s just a normal, hearty minestrone.”

The two elves sat by, silently eating their meals as the Meteors lavished Mile with compliment after compliment. But then...

“Mile, are you sure you wouldn’t like to come and work as our housekeeper?”

“Who the heck would want to do that?!?”

“But seriously, are you saying that we could’ve eaten like this yesterday, too? We really messed up!” said Rattle.

“No, this is a special occasion—it’s so I could give my thanks to you all! Normally, we might just have orc steak and vegetable soup, or boar meat with ginger and wild mushroom soup, or something like that. And then maybe one vegetable side... We only make this many dishes when we’re celebrating or when I’m trying out new recipes,” Mile replied.

“Ah, that reminds me—” she added, suddenly recalling something. “Please don’t ask any questions about the medicine that Mavis used. I’ve been worried that you might, so...”

At her words, the Blue Meteors smiled wryly.

“Everyone knows it’s taboo to ask about a hunter’s skills or abilities,” replied Callack, the rapier-wielder. “I’m sure you’ve kept that medicine concealed precisely so it doesn’t get out into the world. Besides, there’s no way you can use something like that without having a dedicated healer around, right? Judging by the condition Mavis was in after using it, and the godly healing skills you and Pauline have, it’s clearly not something a normal hunter could ever handle. If any of us tried it, we’d probably self-destruct on the first go, wouldn’t we? We’re not stupid enough to try to get our hands on that.”

“Well, that’s a veteran hunter for you.” Mile nodded approvingly. “Seems like you understand perfectly.” She’d been worried that the Blue Meteors might be overly interested in the Micros and had been coming up with explanations to put them off, but blessedly, one of them had beaten her to the punch.

Honestly, they’re a lot more reasonable than I thought they were. So why did they say such unfortunate things before? It’s such a waste. They’re perfectly fine fellows, but they’ll never catch a girl’s eye if they keep acting that way.

That one point still had Mile well and truly frustrated.

“So Mile—about signing on with us...”

“Will you forget about it already?!”

Even Mile had begun to reach her limits in the face of the elves’ persistence.

Breakfast was a quick meal of reheated leftover soup from the previous night, along with hardtack and fruit. Of course, even the addition of the hot soup and fresh fruit added an element of luxury. Malawenn, the one mage among the Blue Meteors, didn’t have all that much magical power and couldn’t afford to waste any on prepping hot beverages before they’d even set out. The Crimson Vow, with three mages overflowing with magic, was an abnormality. That was all there was to say.

“All right! It’s time to head back. When we get to the rendezvous point, we can have a quick lunch while we wait for the wagon. We’ll be traveling a bit off the main path, so please don’t forget to keep gathering and investigating your surroundings along the way. Let’s go!”

Following Aetelou’s directions, the group proceeded.

About one hour had elapsed since they set out when Mile announced what seemed like her umpteenth discovery.

“Oh, Miss Sharalir! Special A-rank targets—a whole patch of them!”

“What?!”

Both Sharalir and Aetelou shouted in surprise.

Special A-rank targets. These were the research items that the elves had indicated as ones that should be reported with utmost priority if discovered and absolutely should not be touched. In other words, they were extraordinarily rare.

“I-It’s true... Phipholcia plants, a wh-whole field of them...”

“No way!”

These plants were nothing like Mile had ever seen before. Perhaps because they had just happened to stumble upon them when they were in bloom, they were covered in beautiful pale pink flowers. However, their true value lay in their medicinal qualities.

“I-I-If we harvest all of these and bring them back with us, we could make so much money...”

“What are you saying, you idiot?! Sure, we could earn a few bucks—or we could have the Academy come out, stake a claim on this place, and cultivate phipholcia plants here. If we play our cards right, we might even get to be in charge of the cultivation! Combine that with our success in discovering this location, and we could both become associate professors, at the very least! If we report our findings here, the Academy can take control of the area at once and establish a road from the edge of the forest to this spot. We could establish a residential facility for cultivators and their guards, and start developing this place...”

Both of the elves suddenly fell silent.

“These aren’t candidates for gathering. Let’s keep moving.”

Sharalir and Aetelou began walking, suddenly very serious.

“What?!”

The whole group, save for the two elves, raised their voices in shock. What happened to the fervent interest of just moments ago?

“Didn’t you hear me? If we report this place, they’ll lay a road through here and erect a bunch of buildings,” said Sharalir.

“In other words, they’ll cut down the trees and trample the plants. And these beautiful, wild phipholcia flowers will become just another specimen in their garden plots.”

There was a collective sigh of acknowledgement.

“As part of the terms of this job, I am swearing all of you to secrecy. You are not to breathe a word of the location of these phipholcia flowers. If any of you break this vow, you will be reported to the Guild post-haste.”

All of the hunters nodded emphatically. If their clients were willing to throw away a chance at their coveted professorships for the sake of protecting these wildflowers and their habitat, then they had no choice but to obey. Even humans would be saddened to see this lush field spoiled. It wasn’t a stretch of the imagination to think that the elves might be feeling the same way.

Plus, the day that the Guild found out they had broken a vow of secrecy, it would be all over for them.

Nothing had happened. No one had discovered anything.

There was nothing to report.

“You’re all idiots,” Pauline muttered venomously under her breath, but her expression was not truly an unhappy one.

“Kesbard, five meters ahead at 1:30! Callack, seven meters ahead at eleven o’ clock!”

“This is rather convenient.”

“Mile are you sure you don’t want a short-term contract with us?”

This time, Mile issued her directions to the Blue Meteors as well. Though they did not wish to spoil the environment by ripping up every single thing they came across, their clients began indulging themselves a bit now that they were aware of Mile’s storage capacity, ordering the harvest of anything and everything it was safe to take. They might claim that their primary goals were knowledge and academic renown, but they couldn’t quite ignore money that was lying right on the ground before them. Nor could they give up so easily on the gem that was Mile...

“Honestly, though, are your expeditions always this dangerous?” Mile asked suddenly, finally voicing the question that had been on her mind. Even accompanied by hired guards, they were still young... for elves, anyway. If these two women kept traveling to such dangerous places, they would probably die sooner rather than later, long life spans or not.

“Mm, well, we usually go to places where our races—elves, humans, and dwarves, that is—rarely tread, so we have no way of knowing the area, or accurately judging the degree of danger,” Aetelou explained. “We don’t normally encounter more than ten or so goblins or orcs at once, so if we hire about ten guards, it’s not all that dangerous. We can use attack and support magic ourselves, after all. I suppose if the monsters send out a hunting party of ten, and they all get wiped out, they might think to send a greater number the next time... Hm, that is a bit troubling. I guess we’ll have to hire even more guards next time.”

“I see,” Mile said.

Then Graf spoke. “That was my fault.”

“What?” the two elves asked.

“I made a miscalculation in my commands. With the forces we had, we should have been able to handle even that many orcs without serious injury. My first mistake was putting only my party on the front lines and relegating the Crimson Vow to staying behind to protect our clients. Because of that, our frontline forces were insufficient, and once we entered the melee, we lost any hope of magical support. Honestly speaking, and given that our clients could use attack magic, I should have appointed only Pauline, who excels at both healing and support, and Mile, who can use a sword and cover close-range defense, to guard our clients while Mavis and Reina joined up on the front lines. Reina could fire off precision shots while Malawenn devoted himself to support.”

Graf had clearly thought this through at length, as he continued, “I didn’t account for our clients in combat because I regarded them merely as individuals to be protected. I slipped up again with Mavis. Even though I saw her skills for myself back at the Guild, I thought that they were merely a bit of showmanship from a young maiden, and that a real battle would be too dangerous for her, so I hesitated to have her come up front. I’m sorry.”

“What?!”

The members of the Crimson Vow let out a cry of shock.

“Wh-wh-whaaat happened to you?! Did you eat something weird?” cried Reina rudely.

“The only thing I’ve eaten since last night is the food you gave me!” Graf retorted. But really, one could not blame Reina for her surprise. After how he’d behaved on the first day, she could have never imagined such self-awareness from him.

Come to think of it, she thought, the old guy back at the game exchange counter at our home branch called it. He used to say that even though male hunters often look down on women, or try to push odd jobs off on them, that’s just their immature way of flirting. When it really comes down to it, they’ll put their lives on the line to protect those same ladies...

Graf said it was a lapse in judgment. He’s probably the sort who believes you invite ruin if you put female soldiers on the front lines, because the male soldiers will act recklessly to protect them. In our battle against the orcs, he tried to make his own team take on too much, prioritizing our safety above theirs, which left the Meteors with too many orcs to take on...

On their last two missions, the Devils’ Paradise and the Fellowship of Flame had both been pressured to accompany them by the receptionist, which probably also meant that they were the best parties in town for the job—judging not only by their skills, but by their manners and conviction. (At least, if you put aside the Devils’ motivations and preferences.) The Blue Meteors, meanwhile, were a garden-variety example of a C-rank party from a provincial town. They were skilled, driven, and a little bit crafty.

The Crimson Vow had been mostly paired with especially skilled parties in the past. There was a lot for them to learn from working with completely average hunters. They realized now that, no matter how weak your opponents, there were numerous variables that could change the tides of combat. And they realized how difficult it was to give commands to another party whose abilities you did not know.

We’ve got a long way to go, thought Pauline, Mile, and Mavis, their hearts filled with humility.

Deep down, even Mavis had truly believed that that the Crimson Vow was already as strong as a B-rank party. All they had to do was to finish out the requisite amount of

time as C-ranks and fulfill their other requirements, and they would be promoted, easy-peasy. However, even if they could surpass B-rank in momentary bursts of offensive ability, they were still far from being B-rank hunters in terms of experience and ability to strategize.

Considering this, even Reina fell deep into serious thought.

“We offer you our deepest gratitude for all that you did for us. Without the selfless actions of Sir Rattle in particular, I may not have made it home alive. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Unlike Reina, who was too shy to properly give her thanks, Mavis, an aspiring knight, could offer honest words of praise and gratitude to another without any affectation. Mile was equally sincere, while Pauline could utter honeyed words without batting an eye, her philosophy being “Flattery doesn’t cost a thing.”

Once they arrived at the rendezvous point for the wagon, the group dug into a simple lunch of sandwiches that Mile had taken from her storage, accompanied by fruit and soup that had been prepared with a tiny fireball. Incidentally, Aetelou and Sharalir, having seen that it was Reina and not Mile who had produced the fireball, could only look on with blank faces, a kind of hollow laughter bubbling up from deep in their chests.

After the meal, Mavis once again expressed her sincere thanks to the Blue Meteors.

“No, really—you saved us from a bad situation, too. Our own poor judgment put us in danger. The crisis that arose as a result is our fault, and it’s only natural that we should protect you girls,” said Graf humbly.

“If word got out that we let the girls who were traveling with us get hurt, it would cause us major problems down the road,” added Rattle.

Hearing this put the Crimson Vow in good spirits, and Mile and Pauline chimed in with compliments of their own.

“No, seriously, you were amazing! Most men would never be able to throw themselves in front of an orc’s blade to protect a lady!”

“It’s enough to make a girl fall in love at first sight!”

“Mile! Pauline! Hold it!”

They had overdone it. Or rather, they were having a bit of fun at Mavis’s expense. Perhaps encouraged by their words, the Meteors shared a collective wink.

Then, as leader and representative of the party, Graf launched into a short speech. “We know that the Crimson Vow is currently in the midst of a journey and that eventually you’ll be returning to your home country. So how about this: why don’t we, the Blue Meteors, travel along with you for the rest of your trip? We’re all completely free, with no offspring at home or parents to look after, so we could settle down in your home country when all is said and done.”

“After all, you really don’t have enough frontline power. With us along, your balance would be better, and the party would be more secure.”

“That’s a great idea!” Rattle and Kesbard immediately offered their fervent support for Graf’s proposal.

And then came the obvious, immediate reply:

“No, thank you!”

“B-but why? You all were just showering us with praise. What went wrong?!”

A triumphant look spread across Mile’s face as she offered up a famous turn of phrase: “In the end, you were all just shooting stars. No matter how brightly you shone, you were destined to fall...”

“What the heck are you saying?!?!” the Blue Meteors shouted and then hung their heads, heartbroken.

CHAPTER 72

TRAVELING

“All right, please bring them out.”

“Understood!”

At Aetelou’s direction, Mile extracted their harvest from her inventory and deposited it in the corner of the storeroom of what seemed to be a research lab.

“Wh-what the heck is all that?!” Several of the assembled elders cried out in shock at the amount the group had gathered. Of course, it was unclear if what they were shocked at was the number of things they had gathered or the absurd capacity of Mile’s storage magic.

“Lady Aetelou, Lady Sharalir, h-how in the world did you...?”

“I’ll explain more at the debriefing,” said Aetelou, waving them off, though other than the fact that one of the hunters they’d hired possessed immense storage magic, there was little she could really explain.

Hm? Mile whispered under her breath. *Miss Aetelou and Miss Sharalir made it sound like they were underlings, but they seem to be treated pretty respectfully here.*

In an equally quiet voice, Mavis explained. *Well, they obviously get special treatment. They’re a pair of elves who came all the way out of the forest to collaborate with human researchers. The elders can’t treat them the same way that they would a young human researcher. In truth, those two are probably even older than these old-timers.*

Ah, said Mile. *I see...*

“Oh! Would you like me to take out the copper ore as well?” she asked.

“W-wait!” said Aetelou, quickly stopping her. “Please wait to take that out until we get over to the smithy.”

“Huh? But didn’t you want everything we gathered to be put right here?”

“The floor won’t be able to take it! Plus, if you brought that thing out indoors, we’d never be able to move it again!”

The elders’ eyes darted wildly back and forth as the elves paled. They probably had no choice but to foist it off on the blacksmith for refinement. They would be able to earn a bit of money that way, too. And so, Mile placed the ore outside where Aetelou directed. With that, her job was complete.

“Thank you for all your hard work. Now, the job completion form, yes? Here is the one for the Crimson Vow, and here is the Blue Meteors’. You both did wonderfully out there. Thanks to you, we were able to gather specimens that would normally take us several trips to accumulate, as well as some other valuable materials that we can use to bolster our research funds. You have our gratitude.”

When the parties looked over their stamped and complete forms, they found they both had been assigned A-grades. The grade might be a C, or a B if they were lucky, so this was a blessed day... for the Meteors. This was normal for the Crimson Vow.

“Thank you very much!” all the hunters said in unison.

The members of the Crimson Vow turned on their heels to head straight back to the guildhall, but a voice called out to them from behind.

“Wait! Mile! Are you absolutely *sure* that you have no interest in quitting your job and staying with us? You can even keep your registration as a hunter if you really want to...”

The elves hadn’t given up on trying to recruit Mile. Pauline, who could stand it no longer, answered with words as potent as a powerful attack spell.

“I guess you really are exactly the same breed as Dr. Clairia!”

“Th-the same breed...? The same... as Clairia...”

Shaken to their cores, the pair shouted in rage, *“Don’t lump us in with her!!!”*

As their former employers stood frozen in shock, the Crimson Vow took the opportunity to leave.

“Lady Aetelou and Lady Sharalir really do hate Dr. Clairia, don’t they?” muttered one of the Academy department heads, looking upon the two associate researchers who had been paralyzed at the thought of being likened to an associate professor from a neighboring country.

“Yes, indeed,” another replied.

“We invited them here as associate researchers, thinking they might consider it an honor to be ranked more highly than Dr. Clairia. But this seems to have merely strengthened their competitiveness.”

“Elves seem to be rather prickly when it comes to their own kind. I don’t think there’s anything we humans can do about that.”

The position of associate researcher was a specialized position—the same as associate professor, but with the luxury of focusing only on research, without any obligations to the students. What the human researchers didn’t know was that *Aetelou and Sharalir* weren’t aware of this. The elves were under the mistaken impression that they were being treated as assistants or post-docs, lowlier than a mid-rank professor, lecturer, or general associate faculty.

Aetelou and Sharalir’s hunger to make their grand debuts would continue for some time yet...

“Thank you for everything!”

“And thank you for everything!”

The Crimson Vow turned in their verified completion form at the Guild and received their pay, and then headed to the exchange counter to sell the orc carcasses. Their profits were to be shared equally with the Blue Meteors.

The Blue Meteors had hoped to invite them out to dinner, but the members of the Crimson Vow had refused, saying there was no reason for them to continue eating together after the job was finished. After all, they had already spent three days sharing meals. The Meteors slumped in disappointment, while the other hunters consoled

them with pitying smiles.

“An omen to the east!”

“I still have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Weren’t you telling us about that ‘To-ho Pro-jekt’ or something the other day?”

Now accustomed to Mile’s peculiarities, Reina and Mavis casually ignored her. Pauline, however, was different.

“Heading eastward is a good omen, isn’t it? You want to go ahead and start heading to the next town, right Mile?”

That was Pauline for you. Only she could decipher Mile’s strange turns of phrase. Of course, even she had her limits—there was no way she could be aware of the play on words Mile was trying to make.

“Well, we already decided that this last job was going to be our final task in this town. We’ll continue on as planned. I think we’ve all learned more than enough from this place,” said Reina, glancing furtively at Mavis.

“Well then, let’s get going!” said Pauline.

The other three raised a cheer, and they were off.

“So, why are we taking this route?” Reina grumbled.

“I already explained this over and over—didn’t I?!” cried Mile. “I want to take this route to the next country because it interests me. And you agreed to it, too!”

“Well, I mean, that’s true... but this is a lot more inconvenient than taking the main road!” said Reina, continuing her grumbling.

The Crimson Vow were currently proceeding through the middle of the forest—rather than down the main road, where they could stroll at leisure. Of course, this time was

not the first that they had walked these woods. When they first came to Mafan, they had taken on a job to drive back monsters in this very area where they now found themselves.

“Reina, don’t just keep complaining! Focus on finding things to gather! There are herbs around here that sell for a pretty good price and all sorts of high-priced culinary ingredients! Look! That mushroom right there! You can make three half-silver off that, easy!”

Mile was not using her search magic so that they could all get some practice at spotting valuable plants. Pauline had a few complaints about this, but both Reina and Mavis, who well understood the danger of overreliance on Mile’s abilities, had backed her up. Frankly, Pauline knew they were right, but she was consumed with the desire to snatch up every valuable material they could. It wasn’t as though they spent every day out in the woods where such things were plentiful.

Harvesting every single plant and animal of value in an area was generally frowned upon. That didn’t stop many people, but even so, when Pauline’s scheme was rejected—with the other three telling her that she should just gather whatever she wanted to gather herself—she gave them a verbal lashing.

“We came all the way out here into the middle of the forest! We should be gathering anything that we can—at least enough to earn our food and lodging!”

“Okay, okay,” the other three sighed.

Indeed, this was Pauline’s firm condition to accepting Mile’s plan to travel through the woods. *“I’ll approve this route only if we try earning some money along the way,”* she’d insisted.

“Mile, if any orcs show up, we can’t run from them! Mavis, you cut them down cleanly! Don’t let the digestive tract leak into the body, and don’t rupture the liver!”

“Okay, okay,” said the two.

“One ‘okay’ is enough!”

“Okay, okay...”

This is such a bother!!!

“We’ll be crossing the border soon,” said Mile.

The other three nodded silently in reply. Unless they had taken on a job that put them in opposition to another country, hunters generally had no problem crossing national borders in the middle of the forest or the mountains instead of via the highway. Except in special cases, they were under no obligation to pay taxes to any particular nation, after all. On the other hand, were any merchant to attempt such a thing, they would be charged as smugglers.

“Let’s keep going for now and wait to make camp until tonight. We should be able to make it to the edge of the forest before night tomorrow,” said Mile.

She had seen the scope of the forest from the air, so she had a good idea of how long it might take them to get across. Assuming that she was not accounting only for her own individual, unrestricted speed of movement...

The evening of the next day, just as Mile had predicted, the Crimson Vow arrived at the edge of the forest. They had caught several orcs along the way, and as a result, Pauline appeared to be in better spirits.

The party decided to make camp for the final time just inside the outskirts of the woods. If they were to make camp outside the forest, they might be seen by the nearby villagers. Their cooking fire would be easily spotted from a distance, after all. In a world where monster and brigand attacks were an everyday occurrence, few went out of the way to reveal their presence—and those who regularly did such a thing didn’t live long.

In short, it was survival of the fittest.

Mile took her tent out of her inventory as she always did, followed by a stove, table, and chairs, along with cooking implements and ingredients. Pauline began chopping up the ingredients to make soup.

“Droplets dance, spin, and boil! Hrah! Hwahhwahhraaah!!!”

She had placed the ingredients and water straight into the dishes and heated them

there, so there was no need to ladle out the soup or wash any pots. Seeing this, Reina sighed. "This really is more convenient. I know we have to pass ourselves off as a normal C-rank party when we're on guard duty, but I hate all the extra work we have to do..."

It was true. While they were on their last job, they had used Reina's fireball as their teakettle instead of Pauline's special molecular oscillation magic, thinking that it would invite too much interest to let the elves see such a maneuver.

At any rate, now that they were alone, they could use their magic freely.

"Wind Edge!"

Behind them, Mavis was using her Wind Edge to chop up some boar legs that Mile had taken from her inventory. As in Pauline and Reina's case, she had hesitated to use this skill in front of the elves, who were very familiar with magic, given that she believed she was using a special, secret technique of harnessing spiritual power. Wind Edge was still too crude to use to cut into the belly without slicing through viscera, so she used a kitchen knife for more precise cuts. Likewise, she used a skinning knife to carefully remove the pelts, which could be sold.

Any time she got it in her mind to use her dagger for cooking or skinning, she could swear she heard a faint crying from somewhere, so she refrained.

"It's so much easier and more relaxing when no one else is around," the four sighed, thinking how much more constricted they felt on days when they had to worry about who might be watching.

"Mavis, we can give you a good cleaning and a hot shower later, so don't even worry about getting dirty!" added Reina.

"Oh, thanks! I was just gonna prep enough for tonight, but I'll go ahead and cut up the whole thing!"

Naturally, Mile had taught both Reina and Pauline to create warm showers with magic, so there was no need for Mavis to balk at the thought of getting sweaty or ending up covered in beast blood. This was a blessing she gladly accepted... as long as there were no other hunters or clients around.

“Let’s go.”

The next morning, after finishing a simple breakfast and completing the instantaneous work of packing up their tent, the Crimson Vow exited the forest and continued straight on. After proceeding for a short while, they came upon a path. It was probably one along which people traveled when they wished to reap the blessings of the forest, gathering wild vegetables and fruits, collecting herbs and kindling, and hunting beasts and monsters—which meant that following it should lead them to the nearest village.

The girls, of course, had no business in any village and didn’t intend to even stick around for tea. They merely wished to drop in and see what damage had been done.

The Crimson Vow had been able to obtain certain information from the guildhall at the last town where they had stayed. Apparently, while no one in the neighboring country had died during the prior monster-suppression incident, the royal army had taken a fair number of casualties, several hunters had been mildly injured, and some of the fields of the local villages damaged.

The soldiers had undoubtedly taken so many injuries because they gave their all to the battle at hand, unlike hunters, who would save their own hides and let the monsters go if things got dangerous for them. On this front, there was a clear difference between soldiers and the free agents known as hunters.

As far as the Crimson Vow were concerned, their job was done; this affair no longer had anything to do with them. The fact that they were curious about what had happened as a result of a job that they had already completed, and hoped to see it for themselves, was proof of a softheartedness that was not often praised by those in their profession.

It was something that, in the future, would do them more harm than good.

“.....”

They had not yet seen anything resembling a village, but the fields were now coming into view—as well as what probably used to be more fields.

This was likely the aftermath of where the monsters had run amok. There were signs of repairs happening here and there, but it would take quite some time before the

crushed, trampled fields could be restored to their former glory. As the party continued on, observing the fields out of the corners of their eyes, they noticed a group of children ahead of them.

“Are they coming back from gathering in the forest?” Mile asked curiously. “Seems a bit early for that...”

Pauline looked to her and said, puzzled, “Mile, you—or really, all of us, are not exactly morning people. We usually wake up late. Farmers all wake up at the crack of dawn and start work first thing. They go back home to eat between the second morning bell and the first midday bell, and then after their meal break they go back out and work the evening through until dark. It’s not at all odd to see them heading back home right about now.”

“Oh, so they only eat twice a day, then? Brunch and dinner?” asked Mile.

“*Brunch?*” asked the other three.

“It’s a meal that combines breakfast and lunch!”

“Isn’t that just first lunch? They call it that in your country too, don’t they?”

“Ah, yeah... Ahaha.”

Most modern townspeople in this world ate three times a day, as did nobles and academy students. Even hunters were not usually foolish enough to put their bodies in danger of overexertion by working on an empty stomach until midday or to stuff themselves with first lunch, which would restrict their movement and could lead to fatal injury—especially if they took injuries to the abdomen during their afternoon endeavors. Therefore, all four members of the Crimson Vow had led a three-meal life until that point... except for the scant few times when they had been temporarily restricted by being on the move as part of a job with other people.

When they were all alone, preparing a simple meal took no time at all. They just dined on boxed lunches or sandwiches from Mile’s storage. The party was already aware of the secret of Mile’s time-static storage magic (read: inventory), so she was free to use it without restriction.

“Well, why don’t we try talking to those kids?”

They had no intention of actually going into the village, but it should be fine for them to at least talk to some of the villagers. Mile ran up to the children, calling out to them. The children, however, froze—the older boys forming a barrier for the girls and the younger children to hide behind them. They were on high alert.

“Wh...?”

Mile was taken aback. Ever since she was reincarnated and regained her memories, and then enrolled at Eckland Academy, she had always been fairly good with children.

“Aha... Mile, could you take out two or three orcs for a minute?”

“Huh? O-okay...”

While she did not understand the reasoning behind Pauline’s request, Mile did as she was told and took three orcs out of storage. Pauline then turned to the children, whose eyes were wide with shock, and explained, “You see? Despite how we look, we’re all super-strong hunters. We’re not empty-handed because we’re here to poach your prey or steal from the village; we just happen to have a storage magic user on hand. We have plenty of other game and spoils in here too, so we don’t need to take any of the herbs and vegetables you all have gathered.”

“Ah...” said the other three.

A party of four girls who all appeared to be novice hunters, half of them underage (or so it would seem) had just emerged from the forest empty-handed and approached a group of children with foraged goods in hand. And then there was the fact that they were armed with weapons...

“Yeah, I guess that would make anyone nervous...”

“I see. So everyone in the village was safe, but some of the hunters and soldiers were hurt, and part of the fields were damaged?”

“Mm-hm... We reckoned we had to try and earn a little bit if we could, so we’ve been goin’ out into the woods to pick anything that we can eat or sell.” Thanks to Pauline’s careful explanation, the children had calmed down and told the Crimson Vow a number of things about the village.

“B-but that’s so dangerous!” cried Mile, her face paling. “Even if it’s just the outskirts, the forest is still the forest! There are monsters in there! With just a group of children, even a goblin or just a few kobolds could mean the end of you!”

The children looked at her coolly.

“Yeah, but there aren’t any monsters in the outskirts anymore. Normally, we’d never be allowed to go into the woods all by ourselves, but until the old hunters tell us that the monsters have come back, we’ve got special permission.”

“Hm...?”

Apparently, thanks to the stampede that Mile had caused, the battle to drive the monsters back had grown so fierce that the monsters had been pushed back *too* far into the forest. Goblins, ogres, and other dangerous monsters were one thing, but the counter-offensive had driven away even jackalopes, orcs, and normal prey like deer and boar, which were sources of meat, hides, horns, and tusks. Thus, the hunters had no choice but to delve deeper into the forest, and until the monsters returned to the area, even children were permitted to go foraging on its outskirts.

There was silence from three of the members of the Crimson Vow.

“Wh-what are you all staring at me for?!” Mile groused as their gazes triangulated on her. Of course, she had put the stampede plan into motion after discussing it with them, so they were really in no position to criticize her. However...

“Mile! Limits!”

“Common sense!”

“Discretion!”

“Nnnn...”

After handing the children a share of their spoils, which they would be able to sell for a few silver pieces, the Crimson Vow followed the joyfully gamboling bunch into town. They had no use for this village, but they did plan on staying a few nights in the next proper town they came to. It was not a bad idea to get a more regional perspective of

the country before heading into its capital.

Cling-a-ling.

“Huh?”

The moment that the Crimson Vow entered the new guildhall, they froze in shock.

“What was that sound?”

Guild doorbells normally made a deep, resonant sound—not the dainty noise they had just heard. Seeing the four standing stock-still, the other hunters and guild staff grimaced. Apparently, every new hunter to show up at the branch had the same reaction.

“There was a fight a little while ago, and the Guild standard bell got caught in the crossfire. It broke. We’ve got a new one on order,” said a middle-aged hunter standing nearby.

“Th-thank you very much,” Mavis replied.

I knew it, Mile thought to herself. They’re all the same standardized bell! I did think that it sounded the same everywhere we went...

The other three all nodded approvingly, as though they had been thinking something along those same lines.

Starting over, Mavis, the party leader, turned to the room and gave a formal greeting.

“We are the C-rank party, the Crimson Vow, registered to the capital guild branch in the kingdom of Tils! We are currently on a training journey. It’s a pleasure to make everyone’s acquaintance!”

“Pleased to meet you!” said the other three in turn.

From around the room came a number of brief replies, some *ohs*, and a few words of praise. These hunters seemed to be a friendly bunch, which put the members of the Crimson Vow at ease.

Next, the girls went to check in with their old friends, the information board and the job board.

“Monsters have disappeared from the outskirts of the forest near the border, so fulfilling hunting requests will require traveling farther than usual into the forest. Beginners should exercise caution, it says.”

As Mavis read the information off of the board, the faces of the three members of the Crimson Vow twisted. Apparently, they had made things a bit difficult for the local novice hunters—and for the villagers and soldiers, but they weren’t overly concerned about that part of the equation. This country was the one that had started the cycle of harassment to begin with, so they were in no position to complain. They’d been the one to cause trouble for the people of Marlane, the kingdom they had last resided in, and there had been injuries and even deaths amongst the local soldiers and hunters near the border. Worse still, it had all been done intentionally, with malice aforethought.

Indeed, this kingdom should feel grateful that they had the consideration to make sure that none of the soldiers here had ended up dead. If anything, the farmers of this kingdom should be holding their own government responsible... not that any of them were actually in a position to do so, of course.

It was just, well, the forest was probably an important source of earnings for the fledgling hunters who had yet to make C-rank. And so, the way the Crimson Vow had done it was a little—maybe just a tiny bit unkind—particularly when the four of them thought back to their very first paying jobs during their time at the Hunters’ Prep School.

As for the hunters who had been hired by the royal army to help drive back the monsters overflowing from the forest and had gotten hurt... Well, they had made an independent assessment of their own abilities and taken the job for pay. Some amongst them had probably even helped driven back monsters in the forest before. Hired mercenaries could not complain about being killed by enemy mercenaries—it was as good as in their job description.

There were no other items of consequence posted on the information board. They moved to check the job board, but there were no interesting or unusual jobs there, either. Even if there had been some, they had probably already been snapped up by local hunters.

“There’s nothing good here,” said Reina.

“None of these pay well,” griped Pauline.

“I don’t think any of these would be good training or experience,” muttered Mavis.

As always, the trio’s complaints were rather presumptuous, but they were young people on a journey of learning, on the hunt for experiences that would facilitate their growth. Knowing this, the more senior hunters, who remembered such a time in their own youth, could only look on with a wry smile.

Hm?

Suddenly, Mile noticed one of the hunters, who was eating over in the dining corner, staring at her.

I wonder what that’s about...

Not once did the thought occur to Mile that someone might just think that she was cute—even though that was probably all it was.

*Could there actually be someone who I’ve met before in a town that I’ve never been to?
O-oh no!*

Much as it seemed inconceivable to Mile, who was bad with faces, there were people in the world who had access to a ridiculous cheat code that allowed them to remember anyone they’d met even once. Mile could not even begin to fathom such an ability. For her part, she had trouble remembering faces even after having met someone a number of times. She was convinced that it was the same for most other people—that they, too, had to distinguish people by their clothes or what they talked about, rather than their appearances.

D-d-d-d-don’t tell me—did they see me in my Goddess Phenomenon form? Could there be someone who was a hired hunter in the monster-driving force... who also possesses the legendary cheat code to remember the face of someone they’ve only met once?

Sweat began to drip down Mile’s temples.

Meanwhile, the man, a hunter in his late twenties, realized that Mile had noticed his gaze and was staring back at him. Seeing that she appeared to be terribly shaken, he

became even more frantic himself.

The two continued to stare at each other in frozen silence.

“What are you staring at that man for?!” shouted Reina.

“Uh, no, I was just...” Mile panicked.

The man appeared to be suffering similar taunts from the hunters near him.

The other three members of the Crimson Vow cast Mile dubious looks.

Gaaaaaaaaah!!!

In this moment, the hearts of Mile and this unknown man were entirely in sync... though neither of them realized it.

“It should be somewhere around here...” Mile muttered to herself, standing outdoors in the dead of night.

“Sorry to keep you!”

“Eek!” She reflexively let out a tiny shriek at the sudden voice from behind her.

“Ah—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.” It was the man with whom Mile had locked eyes that afternoon, emerging from the shadow of the trees.

After that initial moment at the Guild, he had approached Mile on the pretext of flirting, stealthily handing Mile a slip of paper upon which was written a place and a time. Mile, thinking that this was a conversation she needed to have, slipped out of the inn after the others fell asleep, using her well-practiced sound and movement barriers.

She had to silence him. (Well, that was dangerous phrasing, but she had to keep him from talking, anyway!)

“I am Lycus, a C-rank hunter. Thou seemst to be quite radiant today, my lady Goddess.”

“Noooo! P-please, stop doing that!”

Mile had feigned godhood numerous times in the past, but to actually be spoken to that way face-to-face sent a shiver down her spine, or gave her goosebumps, or... something like that. At any rate, she could not bear to be addressed in such a manner.

“Please, call me ‘El.’ Of course, I normally go by a false name, so take care not to call me that in front of others. Furthermore, please don’t use my false name in conjunction with talk of my true nature!”

“Of course, Lady Visibiel.”

After some back and forth, she finally got him to agree to addressing her as “Miss El.” That was apparently as far as she would be able to push it.

“Well then, your... er... Lady... *Miss El*, I am honored that thou wouldst share thy presence with—”

“Gaaah! Please don’t go out of your way to speak so formally! Just be straightforward about it!”

“Oh, are you sure? I’ll talk normally then, thanks.” Even Lycus seemed to realize that his mode of address was a bit excessive.

“Now then, why is it that you called me out here?”

At Mile’s prompting, he elaborated. Initially, according to him, the military had hired hunters from this town to participate in the monster suppression. However, they had been hired on directly by the army instead of through the Guild, which meant that the pay was not as good, they earned no contribution points, and even if they were injured or killed, they would receive no support from the guild branch. Thus, as the problems with the monsters continued, the number of local hunters who were willing to sign up decreased. Currently, their only recruits were gold diggers, unsavory characters, and thugs who weren’t even hunters. There was no telling what might happen if such a motley crew were sent off into the forest without a single local to guide them, and so, Lycus had been recruited to participate at the guild master’s behest.

Naturally, this had come with a bonus fee from the Guild on top of what the army was paying.

“Honestly, when those swarms of monsters came stampeding toward us, I’d as good as given up. I thought it was all over for us. But then you came in at the last moment

and rescued us! I don't know how I can repay you! I'll do anything! Uh, well, I mean, I still would do whatever your Greatness said, even if you hadn't given us your favor, naturally!" he quickly added. He really was a bit too casual about addressing a goddess...

Grateful for his offer nonetheless, Mile hit the man with a barrage of questions.

"So not a single one of the hunters in this town is participating in the monster chase anymore? Ah, I guess rumors would have started flying after you made your official report to the Guild... Or, er, not rumors, but, given that the commander ordered the Guild that they absolutely must not continue driving the monsters into the neighboring land again, no matter what—and the fact that the two platoons left in the forest outskirts were in shambles, and the two who went into the forest were mostly unharmed, and the suspicious behavior of the unharmed soldiers... Well, actually, I mean, he didn't order it so much as demand it—he doesn't have that kind of authority—but it really was as good as a command, or rather an entreaty, which was relayed to the Capital immediately. All that gave your report some credibility? Mmm, I see..."

Given how frantic the soldiers must have been, even the Guild could not write the commander's instructions off with a complaint that they were overstepping their bounds. The Guild didn't take orders from the military, but here, it was simpler just to agree.

"So, is that the reason that you concealed yourself when you came to this town?" asked Lycus, his expression dark.

Mile cocked her head, unsure what Lycus was asking.

"I'm begging you! There are at least fifty people in this town who are good of heart! To destroy them all would be..."

"Is this Sodom and Gomorrah?!"

After some explanation, Mile was able to clear up the misunderstanding.

"Not even my companions are aware of this side of me, so please don't say anything about it to them!"

“V-very well, understood! By the way, the reason that I called you all the way out here is that there is something that I absolutely must tell you at once.”

“Then next time please lead with that!” Mile stormed, unhappy with the man’s sense of timing. She had put up a sound dampening barrier from the get-go, so there was no worry of anyone coming around if she stirred up a bit of a fuss.

“To tell you the truth, I heard some people will be coming from the capital to investigate this incident.”

“Huh? But, there’s nothing to investigate, is there?”

At best, they could confirm what damages had been done to the farmers and their land. It was unlikely that testimony from hunters hired on in an emergency capacity would contain anything more informative than, “We fought to stop the monsters that came out of the forest.” That was all they had been hired to do. Other than Lycus, everyone who had been in the forest at the time had come from the capital.

“I agree, but I guess without seeing it for themselves—with just the word of the people on the scene—they can’t call off everything that they’ve been doing. It’d be bad for their honor, or pride, or something.”

At Lycus’s explanation, Mile began to understand the gist of things.

If they do investigate and decide there’s evidence to back up the soldiers’ testimony, then they might resume driving monsters into Marlane. If a higher-up gives the order, then it will be pointless for the commander who was present at the time to try and oppose it. Plus, if another unit gets put on the next mission, then those people probably won’t care either way...

Ugh, this is bad! Especially since I ran my mouth and promised the commander and the people from the Guild that there would not be a next time. What do I do?

Of course, Reina and the others shared the blame in this case. They had all agreed upon this plan ahead of time, and so it was all of them who had made that boast.

Okay, thought Mile, I’ll discuss it with the others!

Then, she returned her attention to Lycus. “I see. Thank you for informing me. Let us end things here for tonight. I sincerely hope that you will not forget that in my normal

form, I am nothing more than a novice hunter.”

“Of course! I will never forget how you saved us!”

Truthfully speaking, the fact that they had even been endangered in the first place was also Mile’s fault, but Lycus did not know this. As far as he was concerned, Mile—or rather, “the Goddess, Visibiel”—had saved his life. Even putting the whole “savior” business aside, no one in their right mind would pick a fight with a goddess. At least, not in this world.

Knowing this, Mile was not particularly concerned about Lycus. She had been worried when she received the message calling her out, but the fact that she had been contacted for benevolent reasons put her a bit more at ease...

Still, I do need to do something about this.

With that thought, Mile fell into a gloom.

“Are you *serious*?!” Reina raged upon hearing Mile’s tale the following morning. “First of all, Mile, *why* did you go out without telling us?! Just how many times have you done this now?!”

“Ah, well, I told him that I’d kept the fact that I was a goddess secret from my friends, so...”

“Yeah, but that’s only something you need to tell *him*! That’s no reason not to tell *us* that you’re going to meet with him! Who knows what could’ve happened to you—meeting up with a man all alone in the middle of the night!”

“My guess would be... nothing.” said Mavis.

“Nothing at all.” Pauline agreed.

“I don’t think there’s any man in this world who could overcome Mile by force.”

“It would be impossible.”

“Now that you put it that way...”

At the pair's assertions, Reina finally came back to her senses. "But if Mile wanted to overcome *him*..." she muttered.

"Yeah," agreed Mavis and Pauline thoughtfully, as though wondering if such a thing had happened before.

"*I wouldn't!*" Mile screamed. "A-anyway, at this rate, the investigation is going to turn up no evidence, and the government here might start up their harassment of Marlane again."

Hearing the apprehension in Mile's voice, Pauline cut in. "Would they really do something like that after you warned them so vehemently?"

Mavis, meanwhile, was of the same mind as Mile. "The people who have been ordering this harassment are honor-bound, stubborn people, and it's not like Mile actually incited a natural disaster or anything like that. If all they have is a vague threat from a little girl dressed up like a goddess, they might just decide that the monsters' advance missed the soldiers by chance and call it a day."

"I-I suppose you're right..." replied Pauline.

"Huh?" asked Reina, "But didn't she put on some kind of spectacle?"

"Healing magic. Bending swords. Poking holes in armor. Striking through a rock with an attack spell. It probably had a huge impact on the men who were actually there, but their superior officer might not believe soldiers who came running home with their tails between their legs, crying, 'Our enemy was just way too strong!' And even if they believed that a good portion of the soldiers' testimony was true—each of those individual feats are something that a particularly powerful mage could've done, aren't they?"

"W-well, I suppose an A-rank mage might be able to do something like what Mile did, if you turned it down to about twenty or thirty percent of the same power... So, if they thought that the testimony had been blown out of proportion somehow, I suppose they might conclude there was a possibility of the goddess being a sham..."

Reina was a mage, and so she understood exactly how absurdly strong Mile's magic was. Mavis, who could not use magic (or so she thought), and was used to seeing Reina and Pauline's fairly strong powers as well, lacked that same intuition. She didn't quite grasp the insurmountable wall between Mile's magic and the magic that Pauline and

Reina could produce when they got serious. This made Reina realize that people who were not mages might see things the same way as Mavis.

“That would be bad...”

“This is bad...”

“This can’t be good.”

“This is really bad!”

“So you’re Lycus or whatever, is that right? The one who was working as the guide?”

The man who had come from the capital was a clerk with an arrogant attitude. Naturally, he was of peasant stock. No noble would ever stoop to such a job... assuming there was not some added benefit to make it worth it.

“I am.”

Lycus gave nothing more than the minimally required reply. He had neither the slightest bit of respect nor consideration for anyone who had been party to the capital’s foisting off its burdens onto the fief in which he lived. He was even less amused by a common man who conducted himself as though he were a noble.

On top of which, this man was also “an enemy of the Goddess.”

This man hadn’t the authority to coerce him—he was nothing more than a lowly messenger, after all. Lycus was not only a citizen of a different fief, but a key witness to the incident *and* the only local who had cooperated with the military. He had no reason to conduct himself humbly.

Of course, the clerk was only doing his job, so if he’d behaved himself properly, Lycus would have responded in turn. However, if he was going to speak to him that way, clearly belittling Lycus with his arrogance... that was a different story.

“So then, what are these little girls about?”

Sure enough, there in the conference room of the guildhall, were Lycus, the clerk from

the capital, the guild master, the submaster, and the four members of the Crimson Vow.

The Crimson Vow had killed time in the days until the messenger's arrival bolstering their resumes with short day jobs, in the name of training. In reality, they were worried that this inquiry might conclude without them, so they were trying their best to be in town whenever Lycus was to confirm his story.

"They're hunters who were working on the other side of the border during the monster suppression."

"What?! Then that makes them our enemies!!!" the clerk growled.

Exasperated, Lycus explained, "Hunters traveling away from their home base have no allegiance or loyalties to any one country. You could say that whoever pays them is their ally. They would be our allies if we hired them."

"Hmph! So you're saying they're a bunch of good-for-nothings with no patriotism and no loyalty who would trade their lives and their morals for a bit of money? That's as good as selling their bodies for coin!"

As the Crimson Vow overheard this, the veins in their foreheads began to twitch, but the clerk did not appear to take notice. If he *did* notice, then he did not particularly care.

For the most part, Lycus answered the clerk's questions, and the Crimson Vow provided only simple follow-up replies. There was nothing for them to talk about beyond, "We battled against the monsters who were coming toward us, killed some of them, and drove most of them away."

Having acquitted his duty to the most minimal degree possible, the clerk packed up and left, posthaste. He showed no sign of wishing to go into the forest himself to investigate.

"He doesn't believe us, huh?"

"He didn't believe us, did he?"

"I don't think he believed us..."

"He who believes... will have the rug pulled out from under him."

And so, the next day the Crimson Vow set out for the country's royal capital.

They were not in the best of moods.

Indeed, the clerk's insulting words seemed to have left them deeply wounded... or rather, angry. Livid, in fact.

Those insensitive words had done his own country a grave disservice, but neither he, nor his superiors, would ever know it.

CHAPTER 73

A WARNING

“I see. So that’s how it is...”

Back at the palace, the clerk gave the king his report.

It was not often that someone of such low station got to report to the king directly, so the clerk, a commoner, spoke at length about things that would win him the king’s favor—things that had nothing to do with Lycus’s report. In an authoritative tone, he spoke on all manner of things that he had not confirmed for himself, things that he only guessed at, or even altered entirely to suit the King’s fancy.

There had been no so-called goddess, he claimed. Instead, the whole episode was a farce, fabricated by the unit’s commander to shift the blame for all the damages his unit had taken.

When the clerk’s report concluded, the King spoke. “No matter how diligently we drive the monsters from our borders, the damage done to our neighbors has not increased. On the contrary, our side took quite a blow. And our soldiers are fabricating lies in order to shirk their responsibilities? Unacceptable. We have no choice but to resume the invasion plan at once. We will take our forces to the outskirts of the forest on Marlane’s side of the border and drive those monsters all the way out!”

“What?”

There was an outcry of surprise, not only from the clerk, but from the nobles and military personnel in attendance.

“B-but, Your Majesty! Taking our forces across the border will be seen as an act of aggression! Our informal treaty, worked out in mutual, tacit agreement—” began an upper-ranking officer, who looked a bit frantic.

The king, however, appeared unconcerned. “What of it?”

“Huh?”

“We will expand our kingdom’s territory. We will seize control of that forest and the lands just beyond it. Make preparations at once!”

“Y... yes, sir!”

It was a declaration of war.

They would expand the dominion of their motherland, seizing the wealth and forces of their neighbors for themselves. The invasion would bring them plunder and new land—gifts that could then be bestowed upon those who did great deeds in service of their country. Nobles could have their existing lands supplemented, and non-nobles might be granted peerage...

Though the nobles were shocked by the abruptness of the king’s announcement, this really wasn’t bad news for them at all. The ones likely to die in battle were common foot soldiers and conscripted peasants. The noble officers who commanded them from afar rarely fell on the battlefield, and even if they should find themselves in danger, they could merely surrender to save their own hides. After that, all they had to do was pay a ransom and they would be returned home safely. Even while they were held captive, as nobles, they would be treated with courtesy. Their relations with Marlane were not especially good but not so dire that Marlane would be expecting a sudden invasion, either. This was good news too, for it meant they would have the element of surprise.

“That forest has served as a natural barrier, protecting us from border conflicts for many years. That ends today. When we conquer the entirety of the forest, we’ll push on forward and cut Marlane off from the woods and all of their bounty, the minerals in the mountains, and all that lies around the town of Mafan!”

A hearty cry rang through the room.

“...or at least, that’s what I imagine is happening,” finished Pauline, a look of exasperation on her face as she pored over a mercenary recruitment flier that had been posted at the guildhall.

Knowing that there would not be any new movement until the clerk made his report, the Crimson Vow had advanced at a leisurely pace toward the capital, taking more gathering and harvesting type jobs along the way. When they finally arrived and

headed to the guild branch to check the job and information boards, they found the following announcement affixed beside it:

Recruiting mercenaries. Provisions included, compensation provided for combat, bonus for special achievements. Details available at the Royal Army outpost.

Of course, there was nothing in the notice that implied soldiers would be crossing the national border. Everyone—including the Crown and the military—knew that any information posted here would be leaked back to Marlane, after all. Based on this announcement, most would simply assume that, as usual, the military was recruiting fighters to drive the monsters back to the border and correct the unintentional side effects of their previous drives.

The hunters and mercenaries would probably be given a certain degree of explanation—or at least a hint of what was to come—when they chose to enlist. Something like, “There is a possibility that battles against other humans may occur...” If the new hires didn’t pick up on this, and were ordered to do things that tested the boundaries of their contracts, well, that was their own fault.

“Posting a recruitment flier for a non-Guild job, right beside the Guild job board, is kind of...”

Mavis was a bit stunned, but the fact remained that if you hoped to hire hunters as mercenaries, placing your advert here *would* be the most effective. Furthermore, if the Crown was the one in charge of the posting, the hunters were in no position to refuse. The Guild itself was not involved in formulating the mercenary contracts, so this did not violate the basic tenet that the Guild would not involve itself in waging war.

Of course, anyone who was a mercenary by trade could officially take on the job through the Mercenaries’ Guild. Until now, the military had not been operating under the expectation of actual combat, so they had not contacted the Mercenaries’ Guild. But this time was different. In addition to reaching out to hunters and mercenaries, recruiters would probably be putting word out to all the thugs and vagabonds in town, considering them disposable fodder to be sent out ahead of the career fighters and conscripted peasant soldiers.

“No! Leave that one alone!”

“They’ll chew you up and spit you out before you even get paid!”

“Folks like you’ll get knocked out before the battle even starts! You’re on a journey, right? Just keep on moving to the next country!”

All of the hunters currently present shouted words of warning at the Crimson Vow when they saw them looking over the recruitment flier.

“And anyway,” one hunter called out to them, “this one’s definitely a red mark. Apparently, there’s some things that came up during those previous pushbacks—some things that no one should be gettin’ themselves mixed up in. Talk is that there’s opposition to it within the military, and it seems like the soldiers get punished if they so much as talk about it, but we aren’t bound to that sort of thing. Here and there you hear from the hunters who participated last time, and the various thugs around town, and it doesn’t seem like any upstanding guys are gonna be going in on this one. The only ones takin’ this job are folks with no instinct for danger, guys who are broke and don’t have much other choice, and idiots. This means there ain’t a lot of folks gonna be on this mission aside from the usual soldiers and farmer recruits, which means that you’d definitely be put on the front lines to protect ‘em... Anyway, there’s a pretty good chance that ladies like you would be assigned *other* duties... You aren’t planning on taking the job, are you?”

“We aren’t!” Reina emphatically denied.

“That’s good. I guess it doesn’t matter since you aren’t, but soldiers who are willing to go out on the front lines where they’re likely to die are hotheaded folks, and there’s a lot of desperate fellows out there. It’s best you don’t go treading carelessly around folks like that. My recommendation is you get back on the road and leave this country. Or, you take it easy and start headin’ back on home.”

“Is it really all right that we didn’t take that job?” asked Pauline, master of cunning, as they left the Guild behind and began searching for an inn. “We could have gotten information a lot more easily from within enemy ranks, and it would be an opportunity to stir up some trouble, too...”

“We can’t,” replied Reina. “If we were hired on a proper contract, we wouldn’t be able to betray our employers. It’s not illegal to hire mercenaries for waging war, but making a formal declaration of war is a political decision that has nothing to do with hired

soldiers. If you're bound by a formal contract, as long as the upper brass doesn't use their position or status to try and coerce their hires into an illegal act or breach of contract, you can't betray the ones who hired you on. It sucks, doesn't it?"

"Nn..."

Pauline was not the type to balk at backstabbing or lying if it was for the sake of the greater good, but Reina was inclined to uphold the principles of hunters through and through. It went without saying that Mavis, the aspiring knight, would never approve of any speech or conduct that might prove shameful to her position.

As for Mile...

"But Reina, this a case of 'then is then, and now is now!'"

"You shut up!"

At any rate, the possibility of joining up with the enemy forces was rejected.

"Well, I guess I couldn't forgive myself if anyone got hurt or killed because of us," said Mile, while the other three looked back at her, the expression on their faces as good as saying, "That's exactly what we thought!"

"All right, I'm heading out!"

"Please be careful!"

"Carelessness is one's greatest enemy, Mile!"

"If you find anything valuable, bring it back with you!"

Nodding at everyone's words of warning—and one comment with a slightly different intent—Mile set off into the night.

Despite their good intentions, the fact was that the Crimson Vow had caused a conflict that should have been a few months away to happen almost immediately. Their actions, which had not been ordered by their employers, had led directly to the monster-driving counterassault. The soldiers of this country weren't necessarily bad

people, they were just doing as their superiors ordered. Should the Crimson Vow cross paths with them as enemies, there was no reason to cause them pointless death or injury.

With all this in mind, the Crimson Vow had decided to try and stop the next monster drive before it even began—in such a way that the outcome would persist even beyond the current venture.

The fact that the current campaign was not a simple monster-repelling drive like before, but a legitimate military operation that concerned the national border, had yet to be made public. Thus, the Crimson Vow still believed that it was nothing more than another expedition of the first type. They all knew that military operations took time, both in preparation and actual execution. If the Crown was recruiting hunters and mercenaries, then it would probably be a little while before they began trying to enact any plan. Assuming this, the girls saw no real reason to hurry, other than getting something bothersome out of the way as quickly as possible—and saving the farmers from getting conscripted for no real purpose.

“All right. This looks like the palace.”

One could make a pretty good guess at where a royal palace was located, based solely on where the most important people seemed to be and the general architecture of the buildings. Plus, one might fairly assume that the palace was usually the building that was the most heavily guarded.

In other words...

“Good evening!”

“Wh-who are you?! Guards! What are you louts doing?!”

Surprisingly, the king was still awake, poring over some sort of documents by lamplight while the rest of the palace—save for the guards on night-shift—slept. The king called out for assistance, but Mile had already activated a sound and motion barrier, which meant that his voice did not reach the guards standing just outside the room.

“Uh... Huh...?”

So as not to frighten him too much, Mile dropped her optical camouflage. Looking upon her, the king was lost for words.

One couldn't blame him, really. Not when Mile looked the way that she did at the moment...

She was dressed all in white, in an elegant garment that resembled an Ionic chiton, the likes of which might be worn by a Greek goddess. At first glance, it appeared to be a complex outfit, but in truth, it was the typical garb of an ancient Grecian, a leisurely garment of simple make, constructed from only one rectangular piece of cloth, not cut or stitched anywhere. Of course, that meant it was incredibly easy to make.

When worn by married women, the garment came down to the ankles, with shorter hems being customary for men, children, and soldiers. In order to make it easy for her to move, Mile's was incredibly short, which made her look more like a child than a married woman.

The familiar ice crystal wings sprouted from her back, and above her head floated a ring of ice. She had no idea if all gods and angels in this world sported halos but was personally firm in her belief that a deity simply *must* have one. Combined with a magical (read: nanomachine-enacted) sparkling light effect and dancing ice crystals, her "Visibiel-Mk. II" disguise was complete.

She had decided to forego wearing any weird masks on this occasion. It would be unnatural for a goddess to be wearing such a thing. Speaking of unnatural things, there was one part of her outfit that was slightly more unnatural than any mask...

Namely, her chest.

As it happened, Visibiel-Mk. II sported an unnaturally prominent bust, giving her an hourglass figure... or at least an obviously faked one.

The enhancement was clearly artificial and in strange imbalance with her short stature, so the fact that she was wearing such a flimsy garment, which left nothing to the imagination, gave her an even more surreal vibe.

But Mile was happy with it—which was all that really mattered, wasn't it?



Even without a mask, she had at least disguised herself a little by changing her hair and eye color to a golden hue, to ward against trouble in case they should meet again or she should be sought after. Since photography had not been invented, it was unthinkable that the king would be able to reproduce her exact likeness. As long as she changed her hair and eye color, which would be the foundational traits of any search, she should be fine. This was the conclusion reached by Mile's little ashen cells.

(Incidentally, I've heard that "little ashen cells," as it's phrased in Japanese, might be something of a mistranslation.

As I recall it, the original English phrase was "little grey cells," with the "grey cells" referring to brain cells, or the grey matter that makes up one's brain, the implied meaning that the individual in question was unusually intelligent. The diminutive involved in referring to one's incredibly sharp mind as "little" denotes modesty—so to append "ashen" doubles down on that meaning... Then again, it's possible that they changed it on purpose, as a literary expression, fully aware of the implication. It sounds prettier that way in Japanese and actually pretty cool! Translators sure are formidable!!!)

As always, Mile's "little ashen cells" were occupied with something entirely unrelated to the task at hand.

"D-don't tell me... Impossible! You're that sham?! You can't fool me!" the king shouted desperately.

The "sham," however, grinned and replied, "Hm? Sham or no, I've not said a word or even introduced myself, have I? So what right do you have to make such accusations? I am nothing more than what you see before you right now. Just someone who was able to slip into the innermost sanctum of the palace without any of your guards noticing, who snuck up behind you without your knowing of my presence until I raised my voice, and who can slip away again with no one the wiser..."

The king began to look queasy. The only possible conclusion one could draw from her words was that she could assassinate him whenever she pleased. Slowly, he slipped his right hand beneath his desk to the knife holder affixed there in case of an emergency...

Ka-shnk!

Without hesitation, the king flung two throwing knives in quick succession. He had prepared and practiced for just such an occasion. He had many enemies, after all, and his life depended on this maneuver. The two knives struck their target perfectly, lodging right in the suspicious creature's chest.

"Gotcha! Hahaha—you fool! Did you think that a king would have no taste for the art of combat? That I wouldn't be prepared for this sort of attack, for an assassination—"

Halfway through the king's haughty proclamation, he froze, a look of disbelief spreading across his face.

"I am nothing more than a beautiful girl... er, what?"

It was rather awkward for Mile to refer to herself as "beautiful," but then, there were many who proclaimed the same of themselves back in Japan. Soldiers in sailor suits, masked girls, and the like...

Regardless, as Mile lowered her gaze, she saw the two knives protruding... from her own chest.

"Gahh! You put holes in the outfit Pauline made just for me! Now you've done it! *You've really done iiiiiit!!!* This might've been handmade, but cloth doesn't come free! Why would you do this to meeee?!?!"

Of course, delivering this speech was entirely out of keeping with her goddess charade, but in her rage, she forgot her pretense. Luckily, the king was already shaken enough to completely ignore her strange wording. You see, the knives had only pierced her thick paddi—er, *clothing*. Indeed, even without the paddi—er, thick backing of her clothing—it was unlikely that a knife thrown by a normal person could have pierced Mile's body.

As compensation for her damaged clothes—and because his knives appeared relatively valuable—Mile stored them away magically, without even moving her hands.

"Wh...?"

It was about now that the king finally recognized the reality of the situation: the creature that stood before him was definitely not any normal little girl.

“Be warned—actually, as it happens, I already warned you! What became of the commander to whom I entrusted my message?”

“Uh... Well, he was stripped of his command and jailed for shirking responsibility, making reckless remarks without proof, and lowering the morale of the troops.”

For some reason, the king seemed compelled to answer her with perfect honesty. This was, of course, more or less the outcome that Pauline and Mavis had imagined. Things seemed to have become rather unpleasant for the commander, so Mile felt obligated to help out a bit.

“You will release him from prison. If you require proof of my powers, I shall provide you with it now. Shall I blow this entire palace down? Or would you like me to reduce this country to a smoldering ruin?”

Naturally, this was only a bluff, but the king went white as a sheet, shivering. The fact that his teeth were not chattering was the last mark of his pride.

Mile’s work was already done. There was no need to give him the full warning all over again. The commander would be released first thing in the morning, at which point, he could deliver the message himself. The king might be wondering just who Mile was, but that did not matter. As long as she was someone who might snuff his life out at any time, at the slightest offense or irritation, that would be sufficient.

“Now then, I shall be taking my leave for tonight. Ah—but I will be making a slight detour. Let’s make it so that I don’t have to come back here again. At the very least, there absolutely will not be a *third* time.”

Hearing this, the king was unable to form words.

There absolutely would not be a third time. There was no other way to interpret this except that any second time would mean the end of his life.

“Good night...”

“Huh?”

With that simple utterance, the king lost consciousness where he sat.

Mile had intended to use sleep magic, but she had no idea what method the nanomachines employed. Perhaps they had generated some kind of sleeping gas, or done something to his nervous system, or affected his brain directly... Mile never worried over the little details like that.

She had put him to sleep so that there was no danger of him kicking up a fuss the moment she vanished from sight. Even if she was invisible, too much hubbub would make her retreat much harder, and Mile still had a few things to take care of before she left.

“But wait! At this rate, there’s a chance he might think that it was all just a dream... Umm, what should I do?”

After thinking for a moment or two, Mile carried the king to his bed. Then, she withdrew from her inventory a cheap sword that she had previously taken from a bandit.

Ka-shnk!

She plunged the blade into the pillow, right beside his face.

“This should keep him from thinking it was just a dream! Now then, I’ll just put up my optical camouflage, and...”

For the next few minutes, Mile went around plunging swords into the pillows of every royal and high-ranking noble who lived within the palace. She realized it would be a waste to do this with swords that she could use herself in the future, so for everyone who was not the king, she used the nobles’ own swords, which she found within their chambers.

Then, after making her rounds in the palace, she traveled to the residences of all the upper-ranking nobles—most of whom were employed as cabinet ministers or military officials—which stood around the palace. Mile was nothing if not thorough.

“Hm?”

In the bedroom of one noble's home, Mile found a certain book placed atop the bedside table.

"This is one of mine! I have readers even here? What a blessing! I should probably move it away from where I put the sword in... Wait, huh?"

There was something a bit off about this book. Mile picked it up and took a closer look, to see...

"From Orface Publishing, a book by Niyama Sattodel? *This is a bootleg!!!*"

What good fortune that she had cloaked herself not only in an optic but also in a sound barrier...

Mile opened up the cover and read a little bit.

"The main character's social rank, age, family structure, circumstances, the academy setting, and their part-time job are all exactly the same! They left the story pretty much exactly as it was—and they forced in a bunch of dirty jokes. The extra insert illustrations are all super pervy! *And this version seems to be selling?!*"

When Mile left that room behind, she left behind twelve swords stabbed into the bed, and something that might once have been a book torn to shreds on the floor.

It seemed that she had taken offense.

"I'm back! Er, huh?"

When Mile returned to the room, everyone was already fast asleep.

"Didn't you say that it would be shameful if you all were asleep when I got back? *What's going on here?!?! I was so moved that you were going to wait up for me!!!*"

"*Mile, be quiet!*" three voices shouted.

"Grrrgh..."

The last time she had gone out, she'd returned just a little bit after the second evening bell (about 9 PM), but this time it was midnight. The others could not help having fallen asleep. But even realizing this, Mile could not accept it...

"Gyaaaaaaaaah!!!"

The next morning, screams rang throughout the bedrooms of the palace, and in the homes of the nobles all around.

"Previously, I indicated that we would be invading the kingdom of Marlane by crossing the border at the forest. However, I have decided to put that plan on hold. I have judged that our land is not yet sufficiently prepared to enact such a plan."

The king seemed somehow disturbed as he gave his statement, and the ambiguous expression upon his face suggested there was something he could not say. But for some reason, all of the ministers and upper-ranking officers in the conference room seemed to have no reaction to this, only nodding silently. Though there were a few who had initially dissented against the king's sudden declaration of war against their neighbors, most of them stood to gain from it. So why did none of them object to this equally sudden change of plans?

A portion of those in attendance found the king's change of heart peculiar. But, they thought, if the bulk of the most powerful higher-ups and the king himself were in agreement, then any objections they might have were meaningless. If they spoke up, they'd just get labeled as an opponent of these important people.

Thus, the plan for the forest invasion was scrapped, and the conscription of peasants, along with the recruitment of mercenaries, hunters, and thugs was halted. Naturally, the peasants were overjoyed. The mercenaries, having accepted contracts through their guild, were entitled to penalty pay for breach of contract, but the hunters and the local thugs, who had taken their jobs on independently, had their contracts unilaterally abolished without a single copper in compensation... On top of which they became the laughingstock of their colleagues, who had told them not to bother with such jobs in the first place.

And so, the upper brass of the kingdom lost all interest in invading the kingdom of

Marlane through this route... for the time being, at least.

Mile's speech to the commander had specifically concerned the destruction of the forest. Ostensibly, what had angered "Visibiel" was that the forest was being destroyed—not the possibility of one country invading another, or other such conflicts between men. All the Crimson Vow cared about was not causing trouble for the people of Mafan. They owed no loyalty to Marlane as a whole, and sweeping demands such as, "You may never invade any other countries ever," was sure to see the terms of their agreement broken—sooner rather than later. By setting a smaller goal of the forest not being interfered with, they improved the chances that their terms might be upheld indefinitely. There were plenty of other routes for soldiers to take across the border, after all.

In the morning, after hearing all about Mile's covert operation (from a slightly peevish Mile), the members of the Crimson Vow decided to pack up, leave the inn, and move on to another town at once. While all their loose ends had been tied up for now, the royals and nobles were still in a tizzy about a number of things, and the atmosphere of the capital itself was not ideal. The prominent merchants who'd lost money from the proceedings, the more middling merchants who had hoped to benefit from the leftovers, and the mercenary bands and thugs were becoming brazen in their lobbying of the officials, with those in weaker bargaining positions resorting to more outrageous acts to voice their discontent.

Most importantly, however, the Crimson Vow worried about what might happen if Mile were to be active in the capital. No matter how drastically she had changed the color of her hair and eyes, she had still shown her face plainly to the king. The chances of an average C-rank hunter getting to meet a king were almost zilch, but one never knew what might happen. The king might decide to leave the palace and happen to spy her from the window of his carriage or something. The other hunters had urged them to move on from the get-go, so there was nothing wrong with leaving before taking on any proper jobs.

And so, the Crimson Vow left their inn fairly late. After a slightly early lunch, they stopped by the guild branch to find that the recruitment notice from the palace had been torn down and replaced with a notice that recruitment was being halted. They heard from a well-informed hunter that the conscription notices sent out to the peasants had been rescinded—and with that, the Crimson Vow said their goodbyes to the Guild staff and the assembled hunters, safely leaving the capital behind.

CHAPTER 74

GETTING STRONGER

“What? You say the neighboring country has stopped their operation?”

Rumors had been flying at both the military barracks and the Hunters’ Guild in the town of Mafan. They had been hard at work, bribing the Hunters’ and Mercenaries’ Guilds of not only the towns closest to the border, but even the country’s capital, along with some ordinary citizens—all for the sake of gathering information. Of course, there was no way that they could obtain a complete report on anything bigger than a mid-sized operation, but any reports at all were a boon.

Low-ranking soldiers, villagers, and thugs—the types who did not recognize the importance of information—were liable to talk their heads off. The transport of supplies and mobilization of troops was easily spotted, and the solitary messengers that carried messages over long distances traveled much quicker than

any troops, making it easy to eavesdrop on relevant information with so many such individuals in your pay. Their enemies might have maintained the element of surprise if they could pretend they were gearing up for a normal “monster drive,” but judging by the scale of the military mobilization, and the number of peasants who were being conscripted, the people of Mafan could tell that they intended more than just simple harassment this time.

“I was worried whether we’d be able to hold out until the reinforcements got here, but... Well, if that’s true, we gotta get out a messenger right away! We were wrong to call for mobilizing that many troops—we have to call it off right now! If we have to pay expenses, rewards, and apology gifts to each of the lords’ militaries, we’ll all go bankrupt! Hurry up! Get all the information you can!”

Compared to what would happen if a true war were to break out, this was a relief. The best outcome here would be to end this safely and without wasting money.

So thought the lord of these lands, dispatching messengers to gather information as quickly as possible.

“We’re pretty far from the capital now. I think we should probably be all right,” Reina muttered.

“Yes,” Pauline agreed. “I think we’re far enough to be safe. I’m pretty sure that word of what Mile did probably won’t get around much, either...”

For the past few days, the Crimson Vow had marched on, sleeping in the open to prioritize getting as far as possible as quickly as possible. As a result, though they had yet to make it over the border, they were already a great distance from the capital. They decided it was time to stop in at the next town and see what intel they could gather at the local guildhall.

“There’s nothing!”

There were no interesting jobs, no lucrative jobs, and no jobs that would provide them with good experience. This was, of course, normal. If any jobs like that cropped up in a little town like this, they would be snatched up by the local parties.

“I guess we’ll just stay here tonight and then head on to the next town.”

If they were going to kick up their feet for a while, it would be better to do it in a bigger town. The other three nodded in agreement with Mavis’s suggestion.

“...Huh?”

As they left the guildhall and walked down the main road in search of an inn, a particular signboard caught Mavis’s eye:

Sword lessons. Observers welcome. Short-term drill sessions also available. Former knight of the Imperial Guard, Ladimar!

“ ... ”

“.....”

“.....”

“Okay, okay! You wanna go, so let’s go!” Reina sighed in resignation, seeing how Mavis stared at the sign, not moving a muscle.

“Mrnn...”

The four members of the Crimson Vow sat in the corner of a training hall, observing the sword instructor’s lessons. Every now and then, Mavis grunted.

“All right! What is it?” asked Reina.

Clearly deeply moved, Mavis replied, “He is certainly someone worthy of his former title. His skill and his methods of instruction are exceptional. My father and older brothers are very skilled, but they’d prioritized the pursuit of their own goals, so none of them were very good at teaching. Plus, I was just a little girl back then. Now that I think about it, they probably treated sparring with a child as a game. I can’t really say that I ‘learned the art of the sword’ from them.”

Mile and the others would never think such a thing, but as Mavis observed the swordsmanship and teaching acumen of this former knight of the Imperial Guard, she suddenly felt that her own skill with a sword was little better than that of an amateur.

She gazed fixedly upon the former knight’s demonstrations, her eyes alight.

Ah, she’s hooked! thought the other three.

Anyone with sufficient drive and the slightest bit of discernment would want to learn from this man. It was probably his confidence in this fact that had lead him to allow observers into his classes. And it was for the sake of those who were unable to study under him for long periods that he offered “short term focus sessions.”

“The fee’s gonna be super expensive!!!” Pauline grouched, but even she knew that Mavis improving her skills would be beneficial for the whole party. “Fine! We’ll pay the fee out of the party bank!!!”

Hearing this, the receptionist, a refined older woman, gave a satisfied smile. More than

likely, she was the instructor's wife.

"That will be three half-gold a day for each of the two swordfighters."

"Whoa! That's expensive!!!" all four hunters reflexively replied. The woman only smiled and asked, "Do you realize the value of being able to say that you've received instruction from a former knight of the Imperial Guard—without being a formal pupil? Are you aware of the kind of money and connections normally involved in obtaining the tutelage of such a person?" Even Pauline was wondering if this might actually be a bargain. The instructor had to be a good-natured man. He could have easily found employment as the teacher for the children of any noble, and yet here he was, teaching commoners in a place like this for just three half-gold...

"But he teaches more than ten people at once! And he has the pupils spar against each other while he just sits back to watch! These lessons are only two, three hours tops, so if he runs two groups of students a day, that's over sixty half-gold!!!"

As Mile did the math, the woman averted her gaze.

"He's making a killing!!!" shouted the other three, and throughout the hall, the students engaged in their sparring bouts all suddenly froze.

"Is that so...?"

After the incident in the hall, the woman explained to the Crimson Vow that there were various tiers of training fees, and there was a big difference between the tuition for beginners and most experienced folks. For penniless commoners, orphans, and the like, they charged only a nominal fee—and after the lessons were through, they even provided them with meals. If they did not collect the bulk of their fees from those who could afford to pay them, they would not be able to continue serving the poorer ones as well. Satisfied with this explanation, the members of the Crimson Vow had no choice but to accept.

The woman, who had initially thought that both Mavis and Mile would be taking lessons, was a bit disappointed to learn that her expected revenue would be halved. She strongly urged Mile to take lessons as well, but Mile told her that despite her gear, she was primarily a mage. Moreover, Mile claimed, despite studying the sword for over a year and a half at the academy, she still had yet to grasp even the basics, so studying

for just a few days now would do her no good. Although the woman looked regretful, she seemed to give up.

“Well, I guess while Mavis is taking lessons for the next few days, the rest of us can go do a few jobs or just kick back for a bit...” said Reina.

The receptionist interrupted her train of thought: “I should let you know that in a town two days’ walk from here, there’s a place where you can receive magical instruction from a former court mage. What do you three think of training over there? He allows observation and offers short-term focus sessions as well.”

“Huh?” asked the three in perfect unison. As fellow party members, they had a way of reacting in sync.

“Are they some kind of affiliate?” asked Mile.

The woman answered without a hint of hesitation. “We have no direct affiliation, though the master there was a friend of our master here back during his years of service at the palace. Plus, any student who carries a letter of referral from us receives a five percent discount on their tuition. And we receive fifteen percent of their tuition fee.”

“We figured it would be something like that!!!”

In the end, the three other members of the Crimson Vow headed out of town, leaving Mavis. Much as they might gripe, they were all curious to see what kind of power and teaching style this former court magician possessed.

Before they departed, Mile had insisted to Mavis again and again, “If anything happens, please call us right away!” That being said, the town seemed relatively orderly, and it was hard to imagine that anyone would bother Mavis, a hunter armed with a sword. The town that the trio was traveling to was only two days away, and there had not been talk of any bandits appearing in the area for several years at least. Perhaps, they theorized, the towns were a little too close to each other to provide adequately lucrative hunting grounds for brigands. An extermination force would be quick to appear from either side.

Mavis’s short-term lessons were to run for the next five days, though she could extend

her stay as much as she wanted. The idea was that this period would be long enough for her to be made aware of her own power and her own current shortcomings. Afterwards, she could take her time training in the particular areas where she stood to grow the most—under Mile’s capable supervision.

For his part, the sword master was thrilled. Not only was he happy to find a customer with a bit of money, but it had been ages since he had had a pupil of such promise, one who showed potential even after a short trial. His short-term students were usually self-taught, with absolutely vulgar technique.

Plus, she was a young beauty, with a prim and tidy appearance—in terms of attracting other customers, her presence was priceless. And then there was the fact that, if the three other girls went to the mage’s place, the swordsman would get a cut of the three half-gold tuition for three people over several days. If things went well, they might get six or seven, even ten or more half-gold.

The looks of satisfaction upon the faces of the master and his wife were only inevitable.

“Godspeed Blade!”

Smack!

“Gah!”

“That’s enough!”

Mavis stepped down as her sparring bout with one of the senior disciples came to a close.

Here in the training hall, there was a clear distinction between true disciples, and the short-term customers, the latter being referred to only as “students.” The students would leave once they were through and have nothing to do with the school again. As such, they were not deserving of the name of “disciple.” Similarly, the disciples referred to their primary instructor as “Master” rather than as “Teacher” as a way of separating themselves from their fellow students. Certainly, the short-term students would never refer to the disciples as their fellows.

However, for some reason, Mavis was being treated as a disciple by the end of the first

day's training and so was permitted to refer to the other disciples as her seniors. None of the disciples seemed unhappy about this and in fact doted on Mavis, their little junior.

Mavis, entering into this world for the first time in her life, was overjoyed.

My seniors! Brethren, walking the path of the sword together!!!

Meanwhile...

A young, beautiful lady! She's elegant, and judging by the worldly topics and martial matters she speaks about, she's clearly from a well-off noble family. She's honest and good-natured. This is a gold digger's paradise!!! So thought the disciples.

She's getting the disciples fired up, and more short-term hopefuls are going to come flocking in! thought the master. *Plus, she's a hard worker and good tempered. And though she can only maintain her concentration for a short while, she has that tremendous "Godspeed Blade" technique, which allows her to make rapid, continued strikes. It's a shame that she's only enrolled short-term! She is in the middle of a journey with her allies, though, so I suppose there's nothing to be done for it.*

She is chivalrous, the sort of person who would never sully her hands with foul deeds. I'm certain that one day she will grow into someone truly splendid and find herself wedded to a person of great status. If I can advertise the fact that she was my disciple, when that happens...

Everyone had their own way of looking at the situation, but as long as none of them were in direct conflict, everyone was happy, and that was fine.

"Master, roughly how strong do you think I am compared to other hunters?" asked Mavis after their lessons.

Master Ladimarl, the instructor, stroked his beard, mulling over the very straightforward question before finally issuing his reply. "Hmm... In standard terms, I would say you're in about the top twenty percent of C-rank hunters. You told me that you learned from your father and older brothers, but you're also earnest and disciplined. You haven't any bad habits. Most hunters are self-taught, with a wasteful, vulgar technique. Compared to them, you're doing quite well. Also, your blade is incredibly fast.

“However, though your strength and endurance is impressive for a lady, you still have a woman’s slight frame, without the sort of musculature that female rogues carry. Considering those setbacks, you’re not quite at B-rank, though your speed is good... That said, when you use that ‘Godspeed Blade’ of yours, I think you could rival any B-ranker. If you were to rattle them enough, or strike them while they were down, you might even have a chance against a lower A-rank hunter. It pains me that you cannot stay on for very long, but I will say that I rarely get to spar one-on-one with a student for such an impressive length of time.”

Thus far, Mavis had presented only her basic Godspeed Blade here. If combined with the *True* Godspeed Blade, which used her “spiritual power,” she believed she could generate an impressive display of strength... Naturally, the use of her *EX* True Godspeed Blade was limited to actual battles, when it was a matter of life and death. Anyway, she could not reasonably call that a use of her *own* power.

“I see...”

Reina and Pauline’s magic was probably on the level of A-rankers. Mile was... well beyond that. Compared to them, she could only just measure up to the level of A-rank via her trick of drinking Micros. She could just barely match them by relying on a medicine that someone else had provided her, and which only worked for a short amount of time, ruining her body in the process.

Her heart plummeted at the realization of her own worthlessness.

Besides, the mages could take on scores of opponents at once, while she could only fell the enemies who stood right before her, one at a time. Of course, she did realize that this was a swordsman’s role by nature, and their functions would never be the same. Still, Mavis could not help but be overtaken with a sense of powerlessness.

“Master, could I ask you to let me train in an all-against-one?”

“What?”

By “all-against-one,” Mavis meant that she wished to practice facing down an army’s full forces all at once. In other words, she wished to have all the disciples serve as her opponents, fight them all at the same time. By this time, the short-term students from the afternoon period had already gone home, with Mavis remaining behind by special permission to train alongside the regular pupils. Therefore, only twelve now

remained—all of them fairly skilled senior disciples. They were the sort of swordsmen against whom even B-rank hunters could not hope to win.

There was a possibility that she could win in a short bout if she imbibed some Micros, but of course, that would mean nothing in terms of training.

“You do understand what it is you’re asking, yes?”

“I do.”

“Are you fine with being removed if this is received as an insult to your seniors?”

“I would never insult them!”

“Do you believe that you can win?”

“No... but I hope to practice so that I might be able to someday win. And so that I can catch up with my friends, just a little bit.”

Ladimarl, fell silent and then asked, “Are they really that strong?”

“Yes. Even our healer, who has the weakest attack magic among the three, could probably snuff out several A-rank swordsmen in the blink of an eye.”

“What?!”

At this, the disciples behind her froze.

“Please! I don’t want to drag them down—I don’t want to be dead weight! I have to make it over this hurdle! I must surmount this wall!!!”

A single tear dripped down Mavis’s cheek.



Everyone present was a martial man.

They knew the days of writhing in anguish as a result of hitting a wall in terms of their strength. The days of wanting to die from the weight of self-loathing, being stained with bitterness and envy at how far they had fallen behind their friends. The days when they futilely banged their heads against that wall, saddled with the regret of not protecting someone that they failed to save due to their own inadequacy.

There was not a single person among them who'd never experienced such things.

"I will not allow a disciple of the Ladimarl School of the Sword—nay, any swordfighter—to be made to look a fool beside three mages. I will train you as you like. You will learn well for your three half-gold a day!"

"Yes, sir!"

"You will all assist me in this, for the sake of your dear junior, for the honor of your school, and for the pride of followers of the sword the world over. You will not hold back. To do so would be an insult and a betrayal of your fellow student!"

"Yes, sir!!!" the others chorused.

And so, Mavis's special training began.

It was hell. But her dreams were coming true, and by that measure, it was also paradise.

"Thank you very much!" cried Mavis, all in tatters.

Once again, after all the other short-term students had gone home, she'd remained to train with the full disciples. They had just finished an all-against-one bout—all-against-Mavis. Now, the disciples would clean and tidy the training hall, head into the backyard to wash up with water from the well, and then change their clothes.

Though she was being treated as a disciple, there was no way that Mavis, who was paying quite a bit of money, would be asked to clean the hall along with them. Mavis offered to help anyway, but the master shooed her away. Furthermore, no matter how egalitarian their shared training might be in regards to gender, the idea of Mavis

washing up half-nude and changing her clothes alongside her seniors gave everyone pause. Instead, she would do her washing and changing after returning to her inn. As a result, Mavis left the hall a bit sooner than the rest.

As she headed toward the inn, Mavis thought to herself, *I didn't really make very much progress today, either. By our initial planning, I have two days of training left. Could I stay a bit longer? No, that would just cause trouble for the others.*

So, what if I ended it here now? When I think about it, I've already learned quite a bit. The excellent sword technique that my seniors taught me and also the tactics, practical skills, and repertoire of dirty tricks—my ability to battle against other hunters, brigands, soldiers, and the like has been elevated by miles.

I've received so many valuable gifts from the master and the other disciples in exchange for the money I paid. No, it's even more than that...

Mavis had half-resigned herself when something that Mile had once said floated through the back of her mind.

"Mavis, if you give up, then the battle is already lost!"

What in the world am I thinking?! How could I give up and waste these few precious days that my friends have allowed me, at the expense not only of our party's funds but also of their time?! A maiden's most precious resource—something that we can never get back!

It's not that I have only two days left, it's that I still have two days! I'm sure that Mile would think that way!

Think, Mavis! I must think of some way to get stronger in just these two days! It's not often that you get the chance to gain experience in battles of one versus many. You must not waste this opportunity!

Think! You must think of something, Mavis von Austien!

A number of thoughts then ran through Mavis's mind.

"Um, well, actually, there is a way that you could probably win..."

Mile's words from the day of the fight against her older brother suddenly came to the forefront of her memory.

“You just need to get used to my speed... Strengthen your muscles with the power of your mind...

“Pain is nothing more than a warning signal. So all you have to do is tell yourself, ‘All right, all right, I get it already!’ and keep on pushing...

“You have to harden your heart!...”

“Use your speed to raise your power...”

“It’s centrifugal force or something like that...”

“Cats are so adorable...”

The smattering of phrases crossing her mind gave her an odd sense of déjà vu. And then...

“That’s it!”

With that cry, Mavis rushed back to the inn, quickly cleaned herself and changed her clothing, and hurriedly ate her fill of dinner. No proper knight would ever neglect food and hygiene, no matter how much of a hurry they were in. A knight’s body was their greatest weapon. Being in robust health was necessary to do their masters proud.

With all of her preparations complete, Mavis slipped into bed with her beloved sword, clutching the scabbard tightly, and began to channel all of her spiritual energy and powers of imagination.

When she had expended all of her spiritual energy, she promptly fell into a coma-like sleep.

“Please, allow me to use this one today.”

As the standard training drew to a close and it was time for Mavis’s final all-against-one training battle, she produced something from her pack.

“This is...”

“Yes, my own sword—in other words, a real sword, wrapped in cloth.”

After giving her a good, hard look, Ladimarl said to her, “Very well. With the blade so carefully wrapped, it is unlikely to cause injury. It might be harder to swing than a wooden sword, though, and less convenient. If you’re fine with that, then you are welcome to use it.”

“Thank you very much!”

The senior disciples appeared to accept this too, and they all silently nodded.

“All right, everyone, please prepare your hearts... Mavis von Austien is now entering the ring!”

“Splendid!” Ladimarl cried, leaping to his feet as Mavis thanked her seniors, her twelve seniors, who had all been knocked out of the ring, no longer able to fight...

No matter how many hits Mavis took, she persevered. The rules of the battle were that, if any of the other disciples took a hit that would have rendered them unable to fight on a real battlefield, they were to step out of the ring. All of the battles so far had been run under the same conditions, but previously, Mavis had succumbed to damage and fatigue before she could wipe out all of her opponents.

This time, while she had taken a number of hits in the opening moments, she had managed to dodge the rest of the blows after that, going on to fell all twelve of her opponents.

“Did something happen to you since yesterday?” the master asked.

Mavis, beaming, replied, “I found new strength in the words of my friends!”

“I see... You have yourself some wonderful friends.”

Then came the final day of Mavis’s training. Having managed to avoid any wounds that would be deemed fatal in her final battles against the disciples, Mavis received Master Ladimarl’s final decree.

“Our school has no proof of enrollment, nor certificate of mastery. We have no need for such things. Our skill is our testimony. While there are those who can study the art of the sword for ten years with no results, there are also those who can make leaps and bounds in just three days. Whether one can truly grow in such a short amount of time... well, that isn’t a question you need anyone else to answer, now is it?”

Mavis shook her head.

“You came here as a customer, just a short-term student, but I don’t believe anyone here now thinks of you as merely that. You are a disciple of the Ladimarl school, and fellow to all who study here. From now on, I permit you to bear that title. Never forget, there will be many who are your seniors, and from now on, many more who are your juniors. Whenever you are in trouble, rely on those allies. And now, you must go to the friends who await you!”

“Yes, sir! Everyone, thank you for everything. I will never, ever forget your kindness. Now then, I will say farewell!”

Bowing her head deeply, Mavis left the hall behind. Tonight, she would rest again at the inn, and tomorrow morning, she would set out to the next town to meet up with the others.

“Gone, is she? Haven’t had that much fun in quite a while! All right, all of you, clean up, get changed! Let’s all go out for a drink, my treat! I’m feeling good today! Can’t pass up a chance to celebrate, can I?!”

The disciples let out a cheer, while the master’s wife, who was tighter with her purse, forced a smile—which was to say, she gave the master’s announcement her approval. The disciples cleaned the hall with great vigor.

“Later on, find out for me what country the noble house of Austien hails from, would you? If she gets famous, it’ll be great publicity for us. And if she’s ever in trouble, let’s give her a teeny bit of help. And when she gets married... perhaps we’ll send her a gift.”

“Yes, dear.”

Ladimarl’s wife, of course, understood. When her husband said, “a teeny bit of help,” he meant that he would be willing to devote the rest of his “teeny bit” of remaining life

to aiding Mavis.

“Say, if our daughter were still alive... No, never mind.”

“Yes, dear.”

Mavis von Austien slept, her beloved sword in her arms. She knew not the trials that lay on the horizon, but whatever dreams she dreamt, the look upon her sleeping face was a happy one.

“Hehehe! They’re gonna be so surprised. Now, I wonder when would be the coolest time to make my big entrance...”

Mavis strolled down the road with a slightly crooked grin upon her face.

Without Mile around, she had neither tent nor bed nor blanket, though of course, most normal travelers did not carry those sorts of things. As long as you had a cloak, there was no need for such conveniences. She was traveling for two days, one night at most. As for food and water, she had what she needed inside the pack slung over her shoulder. There would be places to draw water along the way as well.

Incidentally, she did not use the type of bag that you carry on your back—in the event of a surprise attack, she would be unable to drop it quickly enough, and it would get in the way of her ability to fight. This would not be a huge issue if she were a mage, but such things had a fairly drastic effect on swordsmen.

Mavis walked along, making all sorts of exciting plans in her head, when suddenly she heard a harried, desperate voice.

“Please, hold on! If a wagon passes by, we’ll ask them to let us ride with them! Then, we’ll be able to make it to the next town... If we get to town, we can get you to a healing mage or doctor, so please, endure just a little while longer!”

There was no one else along the highway. Mavis turned to follow the sound of the voice, only to see—a girl, fifteen or sixteen years of age, sitting in the grass along the side of the road, leaning against a tree. Three men stood around her, all appearing to

be in their mid-30s, and armed with swords. They were probably her bodyguards. They did not appear to be hunters, so they were likely the hired entourage of a wealthy young noble or something of the sort.

At first, Mavis thought that the girl might have taken ill—in which case there was nothing that Mavis could do for her. Even if the other members of the Crimson Vow had been here, she would have had to take a back seat. Resigned to this fact, she started to simply pass them by... when suddenly, the smell of blood wafted into her nostrils.

Reflexively, she directed her power into her eyes, and the nanomachines inside her body sharpened her vision. It was the same kind of unconscious body strengthening she employed in her True Godspeed Blade. What she saw with her now-strengthened eyesight was...

Blood?

Sure enough, there was dark red staining the girl's clothing.

"What happened to her?"

As Mavis stopped and called out to the four beside the road, the men reflexively put their hands to their blades and took a protective stance.

Ah, I messed up! Though she carried a sword herself, she was just a young woman, all alone, strolling casually down the road. She was neither a particularly strange nor threatening sight... or so she'd thought.

The fact that they were so terribly on guard had to mean one of two things: either the men themselves had a guilty conscience or they had recently come under attack.

It was probably the latter.

Perhaps realizing that Mavis was clearly not the enemy they had imagined, the tension between the men seemed to lessen, and their hands moved away from their hilts. Of course, they did not really let down their guard, remaining poised to draw their swords at any moment.

"Forgive us, but would you happen to have anything on you that can stop pain or bleeding—or do something about this wound? If you do, we desperately beseech you

to help us. Naturally, you will be appropriately rewarded!" pleaded the man who appeared to be the leader of the trio.

Unfortunately, Mavis was not carrying any kind of medical supplies. The Crimson Vow, who had two supremely skilled healing mages, had no need for expensive medicines, and of course, Pauline would never permit such an excess expenditure.

"My deepest apologies. I haven't any... Oh!"

Mavis looked surprised at herself, as though she had suddenly realized something.

"Would you allow me to take a look at the wound?"

A young woman's bare body. If she were a man, she would never be granted permission, but Mavis was a woman, and moreover, she appeared to have some sort of plan. Hoping against hope, the leader nodded.

Mavis approached and gently pulled back the girl's clothing.

"Nn..."

Earlier, one of the guards had mentioned holding out until they could reach a town by wagon, but the odds of such a thing didn't look particularly likely. Such was the severity of this wound.

"A stab wound, inflicted by a dagger. She was able to avoid a fatal wound by dodging at the last minute—or because someone intervened?"

She exchanged a look with the guards, but they appeared to be at a loss, standing by helpless. Mavis decided to put into motion the plan that had occurred to her. She was not the type to stand by and watch a girl die, after all.

"I am going to attempt to treat this girl. This technique is a family secret of mine."

"Oh my!"

The guards' voices were filled with admiration and hope.

"Oh, oh blessed day! We will most certainly repay..."

Mavis waved her right hand to interrupt the guard.

“However, there are some conditions.”

Did she intend to take advantage of their situation and demand a ridiculous sum in return for her assistance? The guards looked a bit grim, but Mavis paid them no mind.

“Three conditions, to be precise. First, you must trust in me, and you must not interrupt me partway. Second, you must not ask me anything in regard to this secret technique. Third, you must not speak of this to anyone... Can I ask you to abide by these rules?”

The guards nodded fervently. Such terms were only to be expected if one hoped for someone to use their family secrets in service of another. Of course, one could not possibly betray someone who would rescue the daughter of an influential household.

“We swear it before the gods, on our honor!”

Hearing this pledge, Mavis gave an emphatic nod.

“Now then, I shall begin.”

Mavis gripped the hilt of her sword with her right hand and exposed about ten centimeters of the blade. She gently pressed her left arm to the exposed blade, and moved it very slightly. Though it is said that Western-style swords are unable to cut, that is primarily true of longswords of the type wielded by knights on horseback, which are used chiefly against fully armored enemies. Moreover, it is not so much that such weapons *cannot* cut, but rather that they are not designed with such features in mind, having no need for a cutting edge. In any event, a normal sword like Mavis’s could still cut fairly well.

And so, the blood ran down Mavis’s arm, moistening her palm (she had not cut her fingers or palm because of the effect it might have on her sword grip).

Next, she took a single tiny metal capsule from her pocket—her old friends, the Micros. Of course, the Micros were nothing more than a liquid suspension dense with nanomachines, meaning that they had no effect on their own. They were not a potion. Just trying to have the girl drink them would not have any effect on her wound.

Instead, Mavis took the liquid into her own mouth. Then, she wrinkled her brow and

thought for a little while, before suddenly embracing the girl.

“Wh...?”

The three men were dumbfounded. Instinctively, one of them moved to separate the two young women, but the leader gripped his shoulders and stopped him.

“We swore that we would believe this woman and leave it to her. Do not interfere!”

Mavis pressed her blood-soaked left hand gently to the wound on the girl’s side, slowly brought her face closer to the girl’s... and gently kissed her.

“*Whaaaaaaat?!*” the three guards shouted.

“W-wait! Wait just a minute!!!”

This time it was the man from before who pressed the leader back, as he moved to grip Mavis’s shoulders and pull her away.

“Didn’t you say we’re supposed to believe in her?!”

“N-no, but, I mean... But seriously!!!”

At first, the girl opened her eyes wide in shock, but then her cheeks went a deep red, and slowly, she closed her eyes again.

“Aaah! Gaaaaaaah!!!”

The guard leader’s shrieks resounded across the area until...

“Pfah!”

After ten-odd seconds, which felt like an eternity to the guards, Mavis finally pulled away from the girl’s face.

The girl sat with her eyes closed and her cheeks aglow.

The guards wore obscure expressions, their faces marked by strange feelings that they could not place.

In the midst of this tense atmosphere, Mavis, her hand still pressed to the girl's wound, shouted in almost an explanatory tone, "By the secret medicine imbued with my spirit flowing into her mouth, and by the power of the spirit carried in my blood now flowing into her wound, let the damage be healed!"

Naturally, there was no real need for such an incantation. The so-called spiritual power required for the healing had already been expended. The incantation was frankly nothing more than an explanation for the benefit of the others present, a way of dispelling the tension that Mavis sensed in the air.

The guards immediately began to assail her with questions. Having predicted this, Mavis prepared herself to explain.

"I, I-I-I, I see...?"

"I, I-I-I, I see, hm..."

"I, I-I-I, I see..."

The three finally seemed to accept Mavis's explanation, which she had now delivered twice in its entirety. As she explained it, she had planned to use the power of her "spirit" to strengthen the girl's body and aid in her physical recovery, sending that spiritual power into her via the "secret medicine" and her blood... or so she imagined.

In reality, Mavis had used honest-to-goodness healing magic. Having no idea of this, she believed that she was using not magic but a new art, which she had come up with all on her own, inspired by Mile's old family secret of "spiritual power." In fact, she was rather pleased with herself.

I've surpassed the limits of Mile's secret art. I wonder if I ought to call this something new, like, The Mavis-Style Art of Spiritual Cultivation...

She was starting to let herself get a little bit carried away...

"A-anyway, we are in your debt! When we first saw you, we believed you to be only a swordfighter. But to think you would also be skilled in healing magic... I suppose you did say that you carried no medicine. You have no need for such things in the first place, do you?"

There was nothing to be done about the blood that the girl had lost, which meant that she still wasn't in full health. However, she had begun to recover and could even move now under her own strength—albeit slowly. For this, the guard leader thanked Mavis graciously, the other two bowing their heads as they followed suit.

“Please, don't mention it. It's only natural that someone aspiring to be a knight would stop to help a person in need. It is truly my honor to have been at your service. Now then...”

As Mavis spoke her words of parting and began to take her leave, the guard leader shared a quick, meaningful look with the other three. They all shared a nod of agreement, and the leader called out to halt her.

“Please wait! It appears you are heading in the same direction as we are. Could we possibly implore you to accompany us until we cross the border?”

Such a request was only natural. With Mavis traveling at their side, they could rest assured that someone would be there to handle things if what they believed to be the “healing magic” was somehow incomplete, and the girl's condition once again worsened.

Mavis considered their request. She still had four more capsules of Micros, and it was true that they were traveling in the same direction. At worst, she might arrive in town a day later than planned, and that much should not worry her companions terribly.

With that in mind, Mavis gave her assent—but really, there was no other choice she could have made. After all, she was Mavis von Austien, proud noble daughter and knight hopeful.

“Oh, bless you! We must repay you!”

The guard leader bowed his head again and again in excessive gratitude. Suddenly thinking of something, Mavis cut in. “In that case, so that we can all proceed without worry, could we frame this as a formal job request? An official escort until we reach the next town? As for payment, how does one half-gold sound to you?”

A price that low was as good as free. For even a normal escort request, one might expect to pay upwards of two gold a day at typical market price, and these were clearly special circumstances. They had been attacked once and seemed to think it might happen again, which meant that chances were high they were probably being tailed

by someone competent, rather than some simple bandits. Furthermore, the guards were hoping that Mavis would provide additional healing using her special medicine, should the need arise. And it would be difficult to make it to town by the next day with an injured girl in tow.

Mavis should have been requesting at least one full gold. If Pauline were present, that would probably be inflated to three gold. If such a request were to be posted at a Hunters' Guild branch, it would, without a doubt, be considered a "red mark" job. It might not even be posted through the Hunters' Guild but the Mercenaries' Guild... or perhaps the local or national military.

"We really can't thank you enough! I must apologize for asking so much. Thank you for accepting our request."

The guards could tell that Mavis had taken their circumstances into consideration and was offering her services at less than the going rate. They could offer her more money, but to speak of numbers and compensation now, knowing that Mavis had accepted their request regardless of compensation, would be an affront to this young knight hopeful. They could simply give her a generous bonus, when all was said and done.

For now, bowing their heads and thanking her for her kindness was plenty.

The party progressed at a leisurely speed to match the girl's pace. Numerous carts and carriages traveling in the same direction passed them by, but they were refused rides from all of them. Even when they asked if the girl alone might ride, the drivers were loath to drop their speed to match pace with those on foot. People seemed to suspect that they might be bandits in disguise, waiting for a chance to attack. It was unnatural to see a sickly girl of apparently high status walking on foot, and no merchant wished to get caught up in any kind of funny business. They all had their own lives, along with the livelihoods of their families and employees, to take into account.

If Mavis, the guards, and the girl were to proceed along the highway at their current rate, anyone pursuing them would soon overtake the small group. Despite this, they could hardly travel by forest or field, or through the mountains. The girl's pace was severely limited, so though most of them would have been fine on rougher terrain, she was in danger of slipping and spraining her ankle, which would slow their progress even more. Plus, no matter how much cover the forest might provide, the trade-off would be a slower pace, which might allow the main corps of their pursuers to easily

circumvent them. The result would be a scenario in which they could be surrounded by enemies approaching from both the back and the front.

As they proceeded, the guards provided Mavis with a minimum of necessary information, rightly assuming that it would be unreasonable to get someone involved in a fight without letting them in on its origins. Plus, they likely wished to assure Mavis that they were in the right.

“I see. So, if the young mistress, first in line for the inheritance, perishes, then the second child becomes the heir. Well, such stories are not uncommon ones these days, though they are of course a great nuisance for the parties involved.”

Mavis meant the group no malice, but those were her truthful thoughts on the matter. The guards looked a bit dispirited, but the girl could only offer a bitter smile. She had probably thought the same thing herself.

However, that was all the explanation that Mavis received. She was not told the name of their household nor that of the one who was second in line for the inheritance. Such information was not necessary for her to protect them, and it was easy to tell by Mavis’s speech and manner, along with the fact that she had mentioned a family secret, that she was no commoner. They may have asked her aid, but there was no value in sharing too much with a noble from another country, especially at a time like this.

Still, Mavis was no idiot, and she *was* the daughter of a noble family. She could guess a fair bit from their conversations, though the young lady and her guards had probably not realized this...

It was still light out when the group was overtaken by their pursuers. They seemed to have surrounded them by hiding behind the large trees growing along the road.

“Six of them, huh? An advance search party. If we run, they’ll go and tell the rest of our current position and condition. But if we wipe out every single one of them... Well, I don’t think they have any intention of letting us run, anyway.”

Just as the leader insinuated, the true priority of this group would not be taking back information, but rather capturing, or perhaps even killing them all. It would be one thing if they were up against bandits, but Mavis got the impression that they were facing knights or skilled soldiers who would never pass up the chance to show off their

skill. The travelers' one extra member was a rookie female hunter, so as far as the enemy was concerned, she did not factor into the number at all—the fight was as good as two-against-one.

“Lady Mavis, please keep a tree at your back and defend our lady,” said the leader.

This request was probably to prioritize the safety of the girl they needed to protect. And to keep Mavis, who was merely a hired helper, out of harm's way, where she could just surrender if the other three were wiped out.

However, the job that Mavis had accepted was to escort and protect them.

“I understand. And I do believe that is the appropriate call,” Mavis replied, seeming to be on the verge of agreement. “However, I must refuse.”

“Huh?”

The other four were perplexed.

“I may have been hired by you, but it is within every hunter's right to refuse or offer alternative suggestions in response to any direction or order that they find clearly erroneous. Furthermore, I believe you all have wrongly assessed my abilities, and thus made a lapse in judgment. You three are the ones who should stand by the tree and defend the young maiden. As for me...”

Mavis drew her blade swiftly.

“I am going to annihilate the enemy!”

CHAPTER 75

THE BRILLIANCE OF LIFE

“Wh-what?!”

Before the guard leader could stop her, Mavis took a few steps forward. She brandished her sword, concentrating her spirit as the guards looked on. Thus far, Mavis’s behavior was not strange. It was perfectly normal for a swordfighter to use all of her mental focus in battle.

Well, it *would* have been perfectly normal if she did not also appear to be muttering something to herself...

“Swirl, o spirit of mine. Go beyond my body, beyond my limits! Swirl around me and relay all movements to me!”

And then, she slowly closed her eyes.

To close her eyes in the company of numerous enemies, she must have been absolutely out of her mind.

“Are you *crazy*?” screamed one of the enemies. They suddenly stopped, freezing in their formation and looking utterly spooked by Mavis’s strange confidence.

The day that Mavis had found herself at a stalemate in her matches with the other disciples, she had recalled all of the things that Mile had ever said to her, mulled them over, and thought her hardest to see whether she could devise a solution. The result of all this thinking was a revival of Mile’s “art of the power of spirit.”

One could not achieve drastic advances in sword speed or power overnight. It took hard work day in and day out, diligent study and concentrated effort over many years. Mavis’s Godspeed Blade, for example... if anyone could catch up to that overnight, she would probably want to die.

So then, how could one achieve victory in a battle against numerous first-rate swordsmen?

How could one possibly win—or at least, not lose?

How could one avoid losing?

It was best not to take hits from the enemies' blades, right?

So then, how could you make it so that you avoided all of the enemy's attacks, while making sure that all of yours landed—without a sudden, marked increase in speed and power?

What she finally hit upon was Mile's so-called search magic. A shortcut, or trick, which allowed one to discover the position and condition of enemies from a distance. With magic like that, surprise attacks were nothing to fear.

What if she were to emulate such a thing at point-blank range? If she could attain information about anything and everything around her—the status of enemies, hidden foes, and the location of her allies...

Mile had said it herself.

"In my country, we have a concept of something called 'boundaries.' There are two kinds. The first is a defensive boundary that repels all enemies and enemy attacks. That's the kind of barrier I taught Reina to erect.

"The other kind is a more *conceptual* boundary, where the enemy's attacks become transparent. It's a perfect comprehension of one's own space, in which one perfectly grasps all the enemies' movements. This is called having 'mastery of the air.'"

If she were to cultivate Mile's search magic at high density and close range... But how could Mavis, who could not use magic, use a skill like that?

If Mile could release a wave of magic and pick up the rebound... well then, Mavis, without any magic, could just use her "spirit" power!

Mavis then began a process of trial and error.

She transformed her own intention into spiritual energy, channeled it into her sword, and using her sword, she released that power into the environment.

However, just releasing her power did not give her a sense of anything. So what if she

let it spin around her? Like drawing a circle?

Or—what if, instead, she were to create a band? What if she were to scan her environs over and over again with something shaped like a belt—something that rotated and flew about her, collecting information about everything within that range and returning it to her in a wave? Then, she could reconstruct a model of her surroundings inside her head, in all directions, spanning 360 degrees...

Simply having the band spin in a circle would be ineffective. She needed a more complex motion. However, it would take all of her powers of concentration to control a motion like that, which would require taking her focus away from her sword. Somehow, she had to cultivate some kind of unconscious control...

“If you take a long and thin strip of paper like this, and rotate it a half-turn, then fix both ends together—you see? The front and back are connected. It creates a mysterious ring with no inside or out. As for the name of this ring—”

Once again, Mile’s words floated through her head.

What a useful person Mile was...

This technique had been perfected thanks to her time with the master swordsman and senior pupils, and now it could make its grand debut. Mavis closed her eyes, and the movements of both friend and foe within the several-meter radius of her concentration appeared like silhouettes in the back of her mind.

There was no way that Mavis, who had a flair for the dramatic, could resist showing off a bit. In this way, Mile’s influence on the other three members of the Crimson Vow—and particularly Mavis and Reina—was striking. However, borrowing the phrase of a famous blind swordsman from one of Mile’s tales felt out of place, so she gave her own twist to the quote.

“Just what might you all be? Do you come with the intent to slay me? I would urge you to consider a change of plans.”

Mavis was a little disappointed to realize it did not sound quite as cool as the original.

“Tch! This uppity little wench... Oy, let’s go! Don’t hurt the girl, but you can kill the rest

of them.”

Naturally, “the girl” referred not to Mavis, but to the young miss who had been injured. They had previously given her a near fatal wound, but there appeared to have been a change of plans. Of course, even if they were not interested in killing her now, that did not mean that they did not intend to do so in the future. They might kill her after their employer had confirmed that she was the genuine article, or they might slaughter her after having their way with her, subjecting her to all other kinds of unspeakable indignities. The terrifying possibilities were endless. It was enough to make a girl think that she might be better off being killed on the spot. As a result, the words “Don’t hurt her,” did not offer anyone very much solace.

Three of the attackers turned toward the guards and the girl by the trees, while the other three turned toward Mavis.

If all six of the attackers turned their attention to the three tightly huddled guards, they would have ended up in too-close quarters, unable to swing their swords. Plus, doing so would leave them open to an attack from Mavis at their rear. As things stood, half their group simply had to keep the guards restrained, while the other three wiped Mavis out. After that, all six of them could cut the guards down at their leisure. This method was the safest, and the most certain—a fairly solid call to make.

Just then, as the enemy commander moved to give the order to attack, Mavis uttered her stock phrase.

“I advise you to cease your foolish plans. If you die here, your deeds will never come to full bloom.”

As it turned out, she could not create an appropriately intimidating atmosphere without the right turn of phrase. Unfortunately, coming from someone as young as herself, the words only sounded comical. Poor Mavis was unable to bear the shame...

“Shut up! *Get her!*”

At the commander’s order, Mavis’s eyes burst open. Naturally, she had no intention of fighting with her eyes closed.

It was clear to the men that this girl was only a D or C-rank rookie hunter. Even fighting one-on-one would be out of the question, yet here she was, hoping to take on three of them. The most she would be able to manage was a bandit or two.

And yet, just as they were thinking these thoughts, Mavis was picturing a thin strip of paper...

“Mav-ius Strip!”

Ka-shnk, smack, thwump!

“True Godspeed Blade!”

There was a gasp of surprise from everyone present.

Even with her True Godspeed Blade, Mavis could not be entirely without fear in the face of a skilled, well-trained soldier... and yet, she had defeated all three of her attackers without pause.

Whoosh!

She slashed from behind at one of the men approaching the guards.

It's important to clarify that this was by no means cowardly. Striking whenever an opponent leaves an opening is normal in an open combat. It wasn't a game or a mock duel, after all. When one's life, earnings, status, or future were on the line, there was no time for hesitation. And so...

Crack, thwump!

“It's hopeless. I have no blind spots!”

The attackers crumbled beneath Mavis's onslaught.

“Impossible! *This is impossible!!!*” one of the remaining men screamed, but already four of them, including their commander, had been felled, and now the battle was two against four, with the attackers at a disadvantage. Furthermore, one of the four was a monster who had massacred four of their companions in an instant! There was no way they could win.

Now that their enemies had been reduced to just two, there was no need for the guards to focus their energy on protecting their charge. The pair of remaining attackers were focused wholly on Mavis, so they were stunned as the three guards leapt forward, unceremoniously bringing the battle to a close.

When it was over, three fearful faces turned to Mavis, while a fourth, shimmering gaze came her way, sparkles practically hanging in the air between them...

The five proceeded once more down the highway.

Three were silent, while one was quite garrulous, and the last appeared rather uncomfortable.

“Lady Mavis, just what kind of technique was that?”

“Lady Mavis, you have older brothers in your family who can assume inheritance, don’t you? So then, are you free to do whatever you please?”

“Lady Mavis, if you’re still a knight hopeful, that means you aren’t yet in official service anywhere, right? In that case—”

Save me...

Mavis tried to send a plea to the guards using only her eyes. However...

We’re so sorry...

They quickly averted their gazes.



After the battle, they had done their six fallen enemies the favor of applying first aid to staunch their bleeding, bandaging them up just enough so that they would not die, binding them, and rolling them out onto the side of the road. The ones who had not been as gravely injured had their arms and legs broken in order to ensure they stayed out of commission for a good long time. This would tax the enemy's forces even more than killing the men, as they would have to spare a few extra sets of hands to carry their injured comrades into town. Indeed, leaving an enemy injured but alive was nearly always a greater burden on one's opponents.

Furthermore, these men had only been following their master's orders, which did not necessarily mean that they were heinous criminals themselves. They wouldn't hesitate to fell them in order to protect themselves, but now that the battle was over, there was no reason to needlessly snuff out the men's lives in spite. As Mavis, the girl, and the guards agreed on this course of action, the bound men appeared to be impressed, silently hanging their heads in shame. Perhaps now they realized that the duty they had been asked to fulfill was not a commendable one.

Of course, those same enemies were then rather taken aback at Mavis's further insistence that they break the limbs of those who had only been mildly injured, but even this could be considered a kindness to show to someone who had tried to kill them. The men tearfully accepted their fate—or rather, they protested violently, but were assaulted nonetheless. Their bones were broken in a series of quick snaps.

Thankfully, the three guards had been the ones to do the bone breaking. While it had been Mavis's idea, she hesitated to perform the act herself. She was not yet ready to shed all of her softness. At any rate, if they made it back to town and paid a hefty sum to a skilled healing mage, their attackers would be right as rain, since the guards had been so kind as to break the bones cleanly.

"Even bandits are unlikely to needlessly abandon their allies. If they're honorable soldiers, they won't leave their injured companions behind, and that will reduce the enemy number by a few more."

With these words, Mavis unhooked her canteen, leaving her own water behind for their enemies. Observing this, the young girl's eyes began to glimmer, and the guards, who knew the girl's general disposition, began to feel a bit uneasy...

Yep. Here we go, thought one.

Ah, so it's come to this, thought another.

Mm, yep, I figured... thought the third.

They had anticipated just such an outcome. Apparently, this sort of thing had happened before.

“Y-you’ve got the wrong idea! I’m just attracted to brave heroes and knights on white horses! But I’m not into girls or anything!!!” the young maiden protested, red in the face. She had thought it peculiar that Mavis was so clearly avoiding her, and when she questioned her about it, she found that Mavis had made a bit of a mistake. “It’s just that the brave hero who saved my life, whom I’ve fallen in love with, happens to be a woman!”

“That does not put me at ease one bit!!!”

Mavis’s cries rang out in vain.

Later, when the conversation returned to talk of swordsmanship between Mavis and the guards, the girl thrust herself into the exchange, kicking up a fuss and obstinately insisting that if Mavis was aiming to be a knight, she should come and be employed in the service of their household—a notion that only troubled Mavis further. However, seeing her remain stoic, the guards could only shrug their shoulders in resignation.

Two days later, they had made camp twice by now, proceeding toward town largely without incident.

“Our apologies, Lady Mavis. Originally, you would have arrived in town well before yesterday evening and have already met up with your friends.”

Even though Mavis’s healing measures had more or less sealed the girl’s wound, she had lost a fair bit of blood and still suffered the side effects of her internal injuries. While it would have been possible for one of the guards to carry the girl, it would not have had much impact on their pace, and more importantly, it might have exacerbated the girl’s injuries. If luck was not on their side, the gash itself might even reopen, and she could bleed out, so they had no choice but to have her walk on her own two feet,

no matter how slowly.

There was no point in bearing a grudge against the merchants who would not let them ride upon their wagons. They would just have to hold out for another half day. If they proceeded at the same rate, they should be able to arrive before nightfall.

Should I have tried to send a note to Mile on one of the wagons passing by? I'm sure they would have taken it if I told them that I would pay them five silver and that the recipient would pay them another five.

No. This is a job that I accepted of my own volition, regardless of the profit in it. I can't get the others involved in this—and make them retrace their steps, no less.

It would be possible to accept a new request to escort them beyond the border as the Crimson Vow, though, once we arrive in town. A proper, direct request through the Guild, priced at market value...

It was just as Mavis was thinking this over that *they* arrived.

Their enemies had likely been waiting in the position they felt was most suitable for their attack, awaiting the return of the search parties they had sent out in both directions.

There were roughly thirty of them.

Just like the last time, when they confirmed that there were enemies up ahead, Mavis's group moved into a defensive formation with a large tree at their backs. As predicted, their attackers appeared from behind them and from the grass on both sides of the road, moving into encircling formation. Looking them over, Mavis calmly assessed their numbers.

"Hmm, I suppose that would be a platoon of forty, minus six, and two more to escort the injured, with another one sent into town to hire a carriage, which leaves thirty-one—is that right?"

"Are you the swordswoman who defeated the six men of our reconnaissance party? You are young but incredibly skilled. Despite all of our expectations, you let my subordinates go, sparing them their lives. For that, I must thank you," began an elderly soldier, bowing his head. He was likely the platoon's commander. "However, then is then, and now is now. My apologies, but we must execute our duty. I hope you can

accept that.”

Mavis silently nodded. Then a voice came from behind.

“Hunter—er, Lady Mavis. We met by chance, and we hired you on as our lady’s healer, but your duty ends here. I formally declare this the end of your contract. Leave here now, and continue your journey.”

No matter how skilled an individual might be, there was no hope of winning against such enormous numbers. A coordinated team of five soldiers, fighting in tandem, were not the same as one soldier of five times their skill, but perhaps a soldier of ten, or even twenty times their abilities. And if there were thirty such people...

The guard leader’s words indicated that he had determined that this was the place that they were fated to die. By insinuating that Mavis was nothing more than a hired hunter, he hoped to persuade her to run away without getting involved.

The enemy commander, meanwhile, awaited Mavis’s reply. He thought, perhaps, that there was no way he could possibly sentence a promising young swordswoman, who originally had nothing to do with the situation at hand, to certain death.

“Very well. My contract as your escort ends here.”

“Thank you for everything. Now, may you go in good health—”

Cutting off the guard leader’s words, Mavis continued, “And now, I, Mavis von Austien, having come across a young girl in peril of being assailed by enemies, shall come to her aid in accordance with my code of honor!”

“Wh-what the hell are you saying?!?”

The enemies’ voices joined as one.

“Wh-why...?” the guard leader asked in a trembling voice.

Mavis replied calmly. “The answer is simple. I am Mavis von Austien, a lady who aims to be a knight, as well as a member of the hunting party known as the Crimson Vow. It is the duty of a hero to rescue a princess, is it not? And furthermore...”

“Furthermore?” asked the leader.

Mavis puffed out her chest and replied:

“It’s super cool!!!”

SIDE STORY

THE MELANCHOLY OF MAVIS

I am Mavis von Austien.

My birthday passed quite a while ago, and I am now eighteen years of age.

It has been more than a year since I last left my family home.

Eighteen...

The more precocious daughters of nobles are married at fifteen, as soon as they become adults. This often happens because their betrothed has been decided since they were very young. In most other cases, we noble daughters are married between the ages of sixteen and twenty, whether through some connection of our parents, or because we catch the eye of someone at a party, or perhaps by some other means. By twenty-one, things start to go downhill. By twenty-three, it's too late. By twenty-four, we've already stepped halfway over the precipice, and by twenty-five, we fall into despair. By twenty-six, our eyes go hollow, and at twenty-seven, we attain enlightenment.

For me to have made it all the way to eighteen without so much as a single candidate for marriage puts me well behind the curve... In other words, I'm something of a menace.

For better or for worse, neither my father nor my older brothers are interested in seeing me married—or rather, the aftereffects of my plans to obstruct such a thing have taken care of the issue. At present, it does not appear that I will be forced into a meaningless marriage. In truth, since I pushed through all of their objections and ran away in order to become a knight, it's unlikely any proposals will be made.

Still, I know they won't want me to end up an old spinster, never married at all. Sooner or later, my father is going to start presenting me with more proposals. I know he would never force me into a horribly lopsided political marriage, where I would be miserable—at least, I'd like to hope not. Proposals from some ancient widower of a marquis's line, or from some rich idiot son with a dreadful personality...

Anyway, I've gotta become a knight!

And then, I'll achieve glory saving the kingdom alongside my fellow knights, have a grand romance, and be wed to one of them!

And if it should turn out that my lover is actually a prince in disguise, then all the better!!!

Eheh.

Heheheheheh...

In order to make that happen, I have to hurry up with the knight part! At as young an age as possible!

And for that, I have to hurry up and become an A-rank hunter and get all the other necessary prerequisites in order to be appointed to my desired rank!

Drat it! If my family hadn't objected, I could have gotten a recommendation from the head of the Austien household, and then my brothers, who are all knights already, could have pulled some strings. Then I would probably even have been allowed to enroll in the knight training school...

It's pointless to even think about that now. I'm going to become a knight on the strength of my own achievements alone, and show all of them!

And then, I'll find a splendid master...

Eheh.

Heheheheheh...

I'm learning that the road to that very first step, becoming an A-rank hunter, which just *might* give me a leg up in becoming a knight, is not an easy one. This makes sense, of course. If it were that easy, every noble daughter not in line for an inheritance would probably aspire to be an A-rank hunter. Most hunters never make it past C-rank,

whether because they retire or because they die. Only a handful of skilled and lucky hunters ever reach B-rank. Attaining A-rank is something reserved for those upon whom the Goddess smiles.

As for S-rank?

It's about as likely as a poor country girl one day receiving a visit from a knight on a noble steed, who tells her, "In truth, you are the daughter of his Majesty, the King, and thereby your true identity is the princess of our land." Even in Mile's fairy tales, it's the kind of scenario that would be ridiculed as "stuff and nonsense, pure poppycock!"

In other words, well, it's the sort of thing that no reasonable person would ever think possible. Thus, I am aiming for A-rank.

Even that has people asking me, "Are you serious?" However, my odds are definitely greater than zero. And compared to the chances of becoming an S-rank hunter or a knight on a gallant steed coming for me...

Though I'm probably not someone "upon whom the Goddess smiles," if a smile from a weird little girl who sometimes pretends to be a goddess counts, then I do get one of those every now and then. Maybe that will work?

In order to be promoted as a hunter, you need contribution points, a minimum amount of time spent at your current rank, and a judgment from the Guild that you have "sufficient ability, reliability, and personal characteristics" for the next rank. The greatest barrier among those, for most hunters, is contribution points and ability.

Jobs that will give you a large number of points don't come around often, and even if you're lucky enough to be able to accept one, you might not make it back alive... It's the jobs that are dangerous and difficult that give the most points, so that's to be expected. Hunters who try to get all their points at once by way of some huge achievement—instead of trudging along the slower, less risky route—often die early deaths.

Skilled hunters die quick deaths, and hunters without skill live a life of drudgery, which means that they live longer but achieve very little... Such is the way of the world.

For someone like me, who aspires to rank up as soon as possible, the chances of dying

before my dreams come true are pretty high. I am all too aware of this fact. But what good is living, if not for the sake of your dreams?!

In order to make C-rank as quickly as possible, I took the entrance exam for the Hunters' Prep School and passed with flying colors! And then I met my companions, whom I roomed with in the dorms, and we formed a party...

What the hell is with these guys?!

Are hunters really this strong?! Are mages?!

Is that really the ability of a rookie C-rank hunter?!

This is hopeless! There's no way I can make it to A-rank at this rate!

Aah! Aaaah! Gaaaaaaaah!!!

So I thought when I first got to know my fellow party members. Realizing that their abilities were—how shall I put this?—abnormally excellent, and *not* standard for normal rookie C-rank hunters, brought me some relief. The three of them were people who could easily climb to A-rank. That was all. Mm-hm, mm-hm...

With them at my side, I began to feel that I, too, could climb in rank as a hunter.

"Burn them to the bone!"

"Ultra Hot!"

"Lattice Power, Barrier!!!"

These guys will let me tag along until we reach A-rank, right?

They won't leave me alone on the side of the road somewhere, right?

Right? *Right?* Right...?

I don't want to be left alone. I don't want to cause trouble for the others. I don't want to fall behind.

It was with those thoughts in mind that I asked Mile to be my sparring partner and strove to better myself. Selfishly, unreasonably, I petitioned Mile to tell me her family secret and endeavored to attain her arts for myself... I'm sorry, Mile!

After I labored for weeks—after a long, long, long, long, long, long, long, *long* period of training—I trembled with joy at having finally mastered this skill, only to see Reina and Pauline mastering new magics like they were nothing, with only a bit of simple direction from Mile.

What the hell is thaaaaaaaat?!

Drat it! Draaaaaaaaat it!!!

But, well, I mean, swordfighters and mages are different.

I can't do anything about the fact that we have different jobs. It's just one of those things.

I know that. But, *but*...

No, that's not iiiiiiit!!!

Hff hff hff hff...

If I could beat those mages at something—anything at all!—it would be a consolation.

If there were some skill I could contribute as member of this party—as the party leader—without being a burden upon the others! Some kind of useful ability?

Goddess, please, give me strength!

And, if you could, make me popular with gentlemen instead of ladies!

Oh, Goddess, pleeeeeeeeeeease!!!

I am Mavis von Austien.

A woeful maiden who has amazing... perhaps slightly *too* amazing friends.

BONUS STORY

A REVERSE REINCARNATION

“Who the heck are you?!”

“Huh?”

Having just woken up, Mile was somewhat dumbfounded by Reina’s questioning.

“Where is Mile?”

“You’re quite skilled to have slipped into our midst without us knowing...”

Pauline and Mavis stood blocking the door and window, intent on keeping the mysterious intruder from escaping. They were all still in their pajamas, but Mavis was gripping her sword, and Reina and Pauline stood with their staves in hand.

“C’mon, you guys, what are you saying? Er—uh, what?”

It was then that Mile finally realized her vantage point was higher than normal. When she looked at her own hands, she saw that they were long and slender, and the hair that hung over her face was a glossy, jet-black...

“Huh? *Huuuuuhh?!?!?*”

“So you’re still insisting that you’re Mile?”

“But I *am* Mile...”

“There’s no way Mile could be that tall!”

“There’s no way that Mile’s boobs could be that big!”

“There’s no way that Mile’s face could appear so wise! What did you do with the real Mile?!”

“Wh-wha...? Sh-shut up, all of you!!!”

“Ah,” said the three, “so she *is* Mile!”

“...I guess it’s true.”

After telling them a brand new Japanese fairy tale, divulging secrets that no one outside of the Crimson Vow could know, and confirming their pre-established signs and signals, Reina and the others finally came to believe her.

“But Mile, how is it you look like that all of a sudden? You don’t have any idea?”

“Nope, not really.”

Confirming her change in appearance in the mirror, Mile learned that she currently resembled the Misato of her past life, but she truly had no idea why. No matter how much she had opened up her heart to her fellow party members, she couldn’t tell them about her otherworldly reincarnation, or her encounter with God. Not knowing what to do, Mile was at her wit’s end.

“Well, it’s not really that big of a deal. It’s fine.”

“I agree.”

“*Huh?*”

Mile and Reina were rendered speechless at Mavis and Pauline’s nonchalant remarks.

“Well, I mean,” said Mavis, “If I got really hurt and ended up disfigured or something, or Pauline got really sick and her chest got smaller, would that make me or Pauline a different person? It would be different if who we were *inside* changed, but just because someone’s appearance has changed, does that mean we’ve lost our friend?”

Mile shook her head wildly.

“Then, it’s just fine, isn’t it?”

Mile nodded silently.

“No,” Reina, who had been silent until this point, suddenly roared. “There’s a big problem here! I don’t care about your face, but tell me how you got taller and made your b-b-b-b-boobs bigger! *Spit it out!!!*”

“So that’s it...” said the other three.

Nanos?

YES?

Do you know the cause of this?

YES. WE BELIEVE THAT THIS MAY BE THE EFFECT OF SOME MISCHIEF ON THE PART OF THE LADY MILE, OR LADY MISATO, OF A PARALLEL DIMENSION. BECAUSE HER DIMENSION IS IN SYNC WITH THIS ONE, HER ACTIONS HAVE HAD A RIPPLE EFFECT ON YOU. BECAUSE OF THIS, ONLY LADY MILE, AS THE SOURCE OF THE RIPPLE, WAS DIRECTLY AFFECTED, WITH A POSSIBILITY THAT THE CHAIN REACTION ALSO SPREAD INTO OTHER ADJACENT DIMENSIONS...

What?! So then, are you saying I’ll stay this way?

NO. YOU WILL LIKELY RETURN TO NORMAL ALONG WITH THE AFTERSHOCK OR REBOUND WAVE. AND IF YOUR APPEARANCE DOES NOT RETURN TO NORMAL ON ITS OWN, ONE OF OUR CREATOR’S RACE WILL LIKELY CORRECT IT MANUALLY, SO THE EFFECTS WILL LIKELY PERSIST ONLY FOR THE DURATION OF TODAY.

All right! So I get to tease Reina for the rest of the day!

PROCEED AT YOUR OWN RISK...

And so, Mile used Misato’s height and proportions to ridicule Reina for the remainder of the day. But the next morning, when Reina saw that Mile had returned to normal, she returned the teasing tenfold.

AFTERWORD

Long time no see, everyone. FUNA here.

I now possess magical stones in both of my kidneys, so my quest to store up magical energy is progressing well. It does seem to hurt a little bit, but I'm sure that's just my imagination. I've been getting occult blood reactions for a while, but I'm sure that's just my imagination, too...

Quercus salicina supplements, I choose you!

Anyway, Volume 9 is finally, finally here! That second digit is almost in my grasp! I've already as good as won!

Development on the anime is also progressing smoothly. I haven't had any updates in a bit, but Rome wasn't built in a day! Secret developments that no one must know of are happening below the surface...

Will I get to know more about what's going on by the time Volume 10 gets here? Or do I have to wait a while?

This time we've got dwarves, elves, a mysterious young maiden, and Mavis showing her stuff! We find out just a little more about this world's mysteries. Mavis devises a brand-new, made-up Mavis-style "spiritual" technique. Facing off against a hopeless number of enemies, she lets out a battle cry!!!

And just when things are getting good, we have a "To be continued..."

Mile: "Why would you cut it off there?!"

Mavis: "Because it's cooler that way!"

Next time, we see Mavis's battle and the elder dragon onslaught...

Mile: "*O-kami-saaaaan*, the next volume is here!!!"

Mavis: "What the heck is that?!?!"

Reina: "These references are so old, none of the readers are gonna get them!"

Mile: "I mean, I'm sure that about eighty percent of the *Let's Be Novelists* enthusiasts will get them!"

Pauline: "You can't assume that those guys represent the average reader! That's the same as using Mile as the standard for humanity as a whole!"

Mile: "Wh—?! And just what is that supposed to mean?!?!"

Also, somehow or the other, Volumes 1 through 4 of *Average* have earned the honor of holding spots #1, #2, #4, and #5 in the rankings of Amazon USA's light novel category (as of the August 2018 charts). Half a year has passed since the first volume initially went on sale, and Volume 4 is still only available on pre-order.

Incidentally, during that period, it was *One Piece* that took third place...

Speaking of which, I'm surprised English-speaking readers are enjoying all the puns and obscure anime references!

Mysteries abound!!!

Anyway, I'll do my darnedest to keep up this energy until the anime is televised!

Now that all three of my Flat-chested Girls series have crossed over into publishing, please look forward to both the novels and manga!

Finally, to the chief editor; to Itsuki Akata, the illustrator; to Yoichi Yamakami, the cover designer; to everyone involved in the proofreading, editing, printing, binding,

distribution, and selling of this book; to all the reviewers on *Let's Be Novelists* who gave me their impressions, guidance, suggestions, and advice; and most of all, to everyone who's taken these stories into their homes, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Next time, I'll be back with Volume 10 of *Average*.

Well, no—before that, there'll be Volume 4 of both *I Shall Survive Using Potions!* and *Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for my Retirement*, both of which are scheduled to come out at the end of the year from Kodansha's K Ranobe Books, and Volume 3 of the manga for both series, scheduled to come out early next year and make their way into your hearts!!!

Just one step closer to my hopes and dreams...

—FUNA

AFTERWORD?

WHAT THE HECK, VOLUME 9'S HERE ALREADY?!

SEEMS LIKE THAT CAME PRETTY FAST, BUT I
GUESS IT WASN'T...

ANYWAY, HERE'S PAULINE, WHO DIDN'T GET A
CHANCE TO SHOW UP MUCH IN THE ART THIS
TIME...

**STRONGEST GIRL IN
THE UNDERWORLD, MIKIO!**

THE ADVENT OF PAULINE!!!

OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT...

I MEAN... ACTUALLY IT WAS AROUND HALLOWEEN
WHEN I WAS DRAWING THIS... SO I SORT OF JUST...

東方逆封

ITSUKI
AKATA





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