



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

Story by  
**FUNA**

Illustrated by  
**Itsuki Akata**

13



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

VOLUME 13



Kelvin

Mile





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

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VOLUME 13

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BY  
*FUNA*

ILLUSTRATED BY

*Itsuki Akata*



*Seven Seas Entertainment*

**Watashi, noryoku wa heikinnchi dette ittayone! Volume 13**

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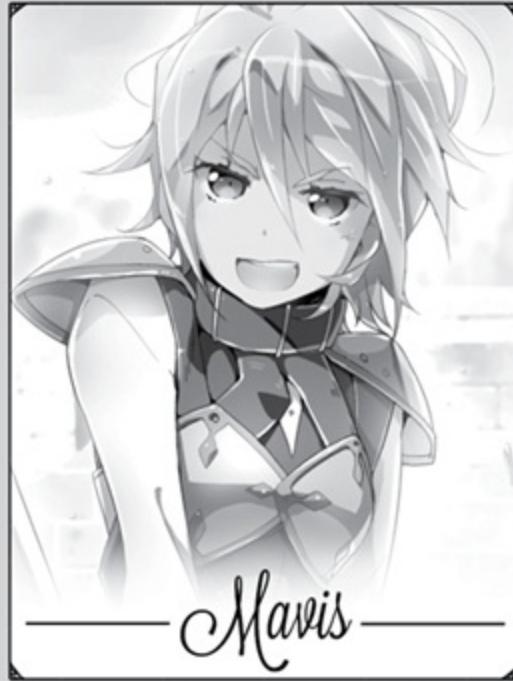
AFTERWORD

**Kingdom of Tils***C-Rank Party "The Crimson Vow"***Mile**

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

**Reina**

A strong-willed female hunter. Specializes in combat magic.

**Mavis**

A swordswoman. Leader of the hunting party The Crimson Vow.

**Pauline**

A hunter and healing magic user. A timid girl, but...

**Wonder Trio****Marcela**

A young noble. Adele’s friend, who has set out to search for her.

**Kingdom of Brandel****Morena**

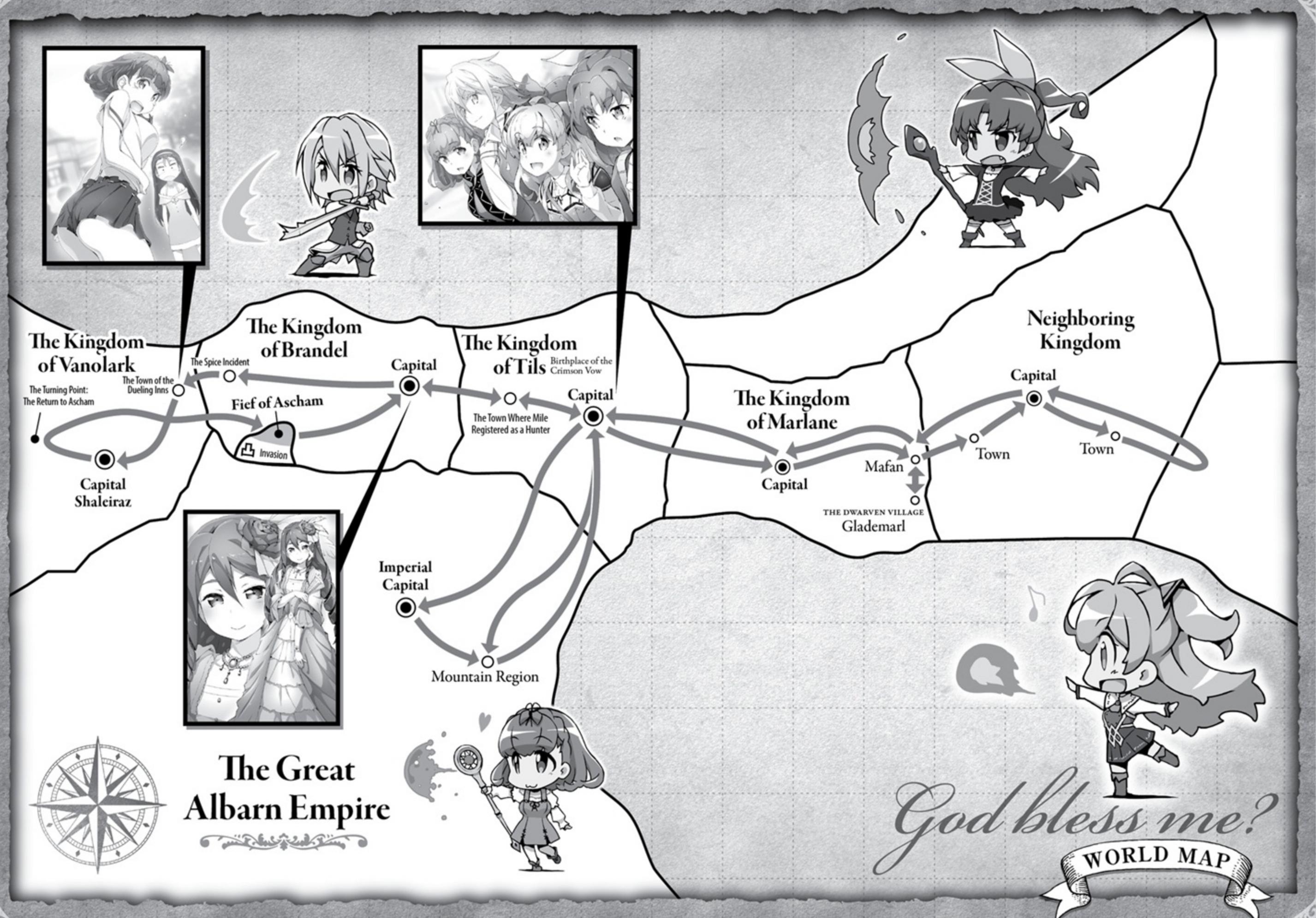
Princess of the Kingdom of Brandel— with a keen interest in Adele.

**Monika**

A merchant’s daughter and old friend of Marcela.

**Aureana**

Former scholarship student who owes Marcela a debt.



# 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 made a grand debut with the Crimson Vow—the party she formed with her classmates.

While on their maiden journey, a rite of passage for every new hunter, they saved a princess from another land and encountered the still-active ruins of an ancient civilization... After their travels were over, they returned to the kingdom of Tils before setting out once more to infiltrate the Albarn Empire in the name of espionage.

They did some business in the Empire but now are faced with a battle—against elite elder dragon warriors?!

# CHAPTER 92

## THE GREAT HUMAN-DRAGON WARS

“Gyaaaaah!!!”

It was a direct hit.

No creature in the world could land an effective attack on an elder dragon, which was why the elder dragons never trained very hard to strengthen their bodies or acquire any special arts. They did not need to. There was no living being who should be able to challenge them head-on.

As a result, though these dragons might call themselves soldiers, they had never worked particularly hard to hone their combat skills. Their experience was limited chiefly to bouts amongst their compatriots—their own kind—and those skirmishes were far from any kind of life-or-death struggle. They were chivalrous matches, following rules of etiquette—in other words, more like a sports match or game.

In human terms, these dragons would be the equivalent of someone who was skilled in combat but only when it came to sparring in a dojo. Someone with no real experience in fighting other humans or monsters, someone who would be useless when faced with a real threat...

Thus, their protective magic was about as effective as someone waving a small shield before them—a far cry from the all-enveloping barriers that Mile employed.

And so, what became of the elder dragons?

Reina’s blazing firebombs shot up just before the dragons and soared clear over their shields, striking down from above like an anti-craft missile. It was, by another name, a “What’s Harpooning?”

A moment later, the swirling red mist of Pauline’s Crimson Hell enveloped the six dragons, unimpeded by their small barrier. Mavis stabbed into their legs from below the shield, and Mile shot her Phaser Beam, which easily penetrated the barriers. Even though the beam was weakened by the dragons’ shield, so it was not powerful enough

to pierce clear through their bodies, it was still strong enough to get past the magical coating of their scales and land a decent bit of damage.

“Eeeeeee!”

“O-ow! It’s spi... ho... owww?!”

“M-my legs! My leeeegs!!!”

The dragons seemed to have sustained a fair amount of damage, but they were not as distressed as Kragon and the others had been the last time. Though they had taken a head-on assault, their bodies were still cloaked in a magical defensive barrier and their scales attached to their bodies, which gave them quite a bit of magical power. Unlike the members of Kragon’s posse, who had rarely been injured and thus showed little tolerance for pain or suffering, these six did seem to have some grit. Perhaps they truly were the best of the best...

Indeed, though they were clearly shaken by the attack, with a bit of healing magic for their wounds, and wind and water magic to deal with the flames and capsaicin particles, the dragons were soon back on their feet.

“Y-you didn’t tell us about all this!” one of the dragon soldiers howled toward Berdetice and Kragon. However...

“This is exactly what I was telling you about!” came the furious reply. “I explained everything! You’re the ones who laughed it off and didn’t believe me!”

“That’s right! You’re the ones who made fun of me and called me an idiot and said I should be kicked off the battle squad!”

“Uh...”

Hearing the pair’s rebuttals, the soldier fell silent.

“None of that matters! This should be enough to prove to you all that even a full-power attack from these humans could never have any effect on a proper elder dragon soldier!” declared the dragon who seemed to be the leader of the pack.

Kragon slumped his shoulders at the implication that he was *not* a “proper soldier,” but the Crimson Vow could only look on in confusion.

*Huh?*

*Hadn't this attack been incredibly effective?*

True, the elder dragons remained cool as cucumbers. After all, throughout history to date, their kind had never suffered defeat at the hands of any other creatures, except in extremely specific circumstances—such as a single juvenile dragon facing down an entire regiment or brigade of opponents, armed to the teeth with massive ballista-style weapons. Under the present circumstances, the dragons were essentially guaranteed to make it back home safely, without a single major injury or death on their side.

Thus, it was no surprise that the dragons might have assumed that Berdetice and Kragon's reports had been exaggerated—that their comrades had been shaken up simply by having to face an enemy with a bit of gusto for the first time. It was likely only their pride that had been wounded—in the same way that a human might be annoyed by a puppy or kitten who scratched them, but certainly presented no danger of any kind.

Naturally, as the elder dragons conducted this leisurely discussion, the Crimson Vow were busy silently incanting their next spells. Though on the surface the hunting party looked calm, internally they were growing desperate.

Thus far, they had been lucky in their showdowns with the elder dragons, mainly due to the fact that the dragons had repeatedly underestimated them, never taking the battle seriously. In truth, they had been going easy on opponents they considered to be lesser life forms. If they could end things without killing the little creatures, and give a decent report later, all would be fine, the dragons must have thought.

This time, however, the dragon's leader had shown up in person—with the intention of slaughtering these upstart humans. Even if they were not taken seriously at the beginning, now the dragons clearly had no plans to let the Crimson Vow go with their lives.

And so, they would have no choice but to force the dragons to surrender...

“Zero-zero magic, type no. 3, Drill Missile, *fire!*”

“Flame Fusion Cannon on standby...”

“Wind Edge, full throttle...”

Pauline, Reina, and Mavis finished preparing their attacks. These were the strongest magical attacks Pauline and Reina could muster, though Mavis was forced to stick to her Wind Edge, so as not to get caught in her allies' spells.

This would probably be enough to make the dragons get serious. The Crimson Vow expected to be met with merciless fire breath or crushing physical attacks.

There was no way that their party could possibly withstand this kind of onslaught from six dragons at once.

Therefore, these might be their final attacks... ever.

They had dutifully answered the dragons' summons so as not to get anyone else tangled up in this situation, but they had done so only because they saw no other choice. The members of the Crimson Vow could have never been optimistic about the outcome of this battle—in fact, they had hoped to avoid it.

They had assumed that the elder dragons, being a superior race, might have been willing to recognize the Crimson Vow's abilities and opt for a conversation rather than a full-on conflict. Thus, they had prepared themselves for a bit of danger, but they had never imagined that the elder dragons were planning to launch a unilateral assault on four young human girls. What they had failed to take into account was that this was not a matter of negotiating with a mature, level-headed elder dragon...

Now, there was no way they could win against these six dragons. That said, the Crimson Vow had no intention of losing. It was just as Mile always said: *Once you give up, you've already lost the battle!*

Finally, Mile's preparations were in order, and she released her most powerful, most wicked attack—her ace in the hole that would be effective regardless of whether she had the power of half an elder dragon or six.

“Temperature, humidity, air pressure control! Refractive index alteration, ice crystal formation, dimensional curvature... Light convergence magic, prepare to fire!”

Mile's exclusive nanomachines relayed her order to the others. Up, and up, and up...

“*Fire!!!*”

*Ka-shoom!*

*Bwoom!*

*Whoosh!*

Pauline, Reina, and Mavis's attacks all hit at once, but the elder dragons had learned from their mistakes and strengthened their protective barriers so that the party's spells could not make it all the way through.

But even if they couldn't make it *all* the way through...

"Impossible! How could a human pierce our full-strength barrier?!"

"I-Inconceivable!!"

...Indeed, they had pierced through two layers of the dragons' six shields. The third was showing cracks as well. They were still fully protected by the final three layers, but had there been only one... If they had been careless and not put up any barrier at all... If one of these dragons had been struck with this simultaneous assault without the help of its fellows...

These girls were a danger that needed to be excised.

If there was a chance of an elder dragon being felled by such a scant number of humans, no matter how small that chance was, they could not overlook it.

The six dragons all breathed in as one, in preparation for their most deadly attack.

Powerful as Mile might be, it was unthinkable that she would be able to guard against this. Here was a breath attack from six dragons, when previously, Mile had been barely able to withstand a similar attack by just three.

But at that moment—

"*Sunshine! Destroyeeeerrrrr!!!*"

Ker-flashhhh!!

A blade of light pierced down from the heavens, slicing clear into the ground. Where the earth was rent, the rock melted into magma, surrounding the six dragons.

Of course, the dragons could still fly whether or not they were surrounded by a river of magma. However, in their shock, they forgot their attack, only exhaling all the air they had breathed in and staring speechless.

“Wha...?”

For a moment, even the leader was stunned at this outrageous sight, but soon returned to their senses and reprimanded the squad. “What are you doing?! Hurry up and kill them!”

The soldiers, however, did not move. They could not move.

Could you really blame them?

They were surrounded by a perfect circular river of magma.

A river of magma created by a blade of light so precise that it was clear that, if the mood struck her, its wielder could have incinerated—nay, vaporized—their in the blink of an eye.

In short...

“She missed us on purpose?!”

If they had continued their breath attack—

If that blade of light had struck for but an instant—

*Shunk!*

There would have been nothing left on the ground but a river of magma and six black scorch marks.

“.....”

Silence spread across the field as even the dragons’ leader fell quiet.

“The elder dragons’ village is pretty near to here, right?” Reina grinned. “Mile, if you were to bring that Sunshine Destroyer thing down on the whole village, at one-meter intervals like a net, and carve it up into a river of magma, do you think you could

annihilate the whole thing?"

"St-st-st-stop!!!" the elder dragons desperately protested.

That would mean the extinction of their whole community and the destruction of their village as a whole!

Naturally, this village did not contain all the elder dragons in the world. There were plenty who had left the village for other regions, and colonies of dragons on other continents as well... However, this certainly did not mean that the wholesale destruction of their clan would be any small matter!



“Now, should we have them lie face up or face down? Or...”

It was an utter reversal.

The elder dragons were no match for Mile. Or, so Reina thought. In her confidence, she began to get a bit carried away.

“Bw... Bwaha. Bwaha ha ha ha! Seems you’ve got a bit of spunk there...”

The leader of the elder dragons, who had been lingering a short distance from the soldiers, took a few steps forward, blustering arrogantly... though his forelegs were still trembling, and his voice cracked.

Was this anger or merely a bluff? Or did he truly have it in him to be so composed?

“No matter how powerful your magic, you are still no match for me, leader of the elder dragons! Why, you may ask? Because all magic is under my domain!! True, I never thought that I myself would be forced into the ring. But did you think I was some weakling, content to cower behind my warriors? Ha! It is the opposite! I was holding back to watch over them, to defend my soldiers should the time come!”

“Ah...”

Mile could already see exactly where this was going. Up next would probably be...

“I, Valtiyn, commander of the great and powerful elder dragons, command you. Spirits of magic, nullify these humans’ magic! These creatures’ days of casting spells are over!”

*Yep, there it is...*

The Crimson Vow was stunned to hear such bold words from this youth, clearly so weak and queasy-looking compared to his soldiers.

*Oh man...* thought the three. They had encountered such things before, quite often in Mile’s stories.

Mile shook her head. “Chuunibyou.”

Naturally, the scoundrels and idiots that appeared in Mile’s stories were purely

fictional, their depictions far more exaggerated than one would ever encounter in real life. Yet, here they were, the Crimson Vow thought, hearing a line right out of one of those tales...

Mile, meanwhile, quietly conferred with the nanomachines.

*Does it actually work like that?*

IT WOULD SOMEWHAT, WITH OTHER INDIVIDUALS... HOWEVER, AT HIS AUTHORIZATION LEVEL OF 4, THIS WOULD ONLY BE A TEMPORARY EFFECT. ONE MUST POSSESS A LEVEL 5 OR HIGHER AUTHORIZATION TO REDUCE SOMEONE TO AN AUTHORIZATION LEVEL OF 0—TO COMPLETELY STRIP THEM OF THEIR MAGIC. NATURALLY, IN ADDITION, THERE IS NOTHING THAT ONE CAN DO TO AN INDIVIDUAL OF HIGHER AUTHORIZATION THAN ONESELF. THOUGH THAT SHOULD BE OBVIOUS.

*Ah, of course...*

It was just as Mile had predicted. The nanomachines had confirmed that the elder dragon leader was only at a level 4.

This was about what she had guessed, based on what Berdetice had told them previously. Being aware that there were restrictions on what information the nanomachines could provide her with, Mile had not bothered asking, but apparently in the current situation—where she was not asking for an unfair advantage by requesting information about her opponent, but rather getting an assist in the form of battle information—the nanomachines were happy to give over this information.

*So he's a level 4... Well, I did figure he'd have far more sophisticated abilities than the level 3s who appear occasionally. Anyway, go ahead and nullify that command he just gave.*

OF COURSE!

“Bwa ha ha ha! Now, you shall never use magic again! No matter how talented you are, if you can't cast a single spell, there is nothing you can do!” crowed the leader, laughter booming, but Reina just looked at him dubiously and fired off a spell.

“Fire Bomb!”

*Ka-boom!*

“Gyaaah!!!”

Regardless of the fact that an elder dragon’s body was typically cloaked with protective magic—meaning that her spell would have little actual effect—the leader screamed.

Thanks to their leader’s confidence, none of the soldiers had put up a shield, so the dragon had taken the hit straight on—and was, of course, stunned to be on the receiving end of the attack in the first place. Then, there was the terror arising from the reality that, like the journeyman Wence before him, the dragon was not accustomed to the concept of pain...

“Would you look at that? My magic’s working just fine...” Reina said with a patronizing sneer.

“I-Impossible! This cannot be! Spirits of magic, I, Valtiyn, leader of the elder dragons, command you! Take those humans’ magic away!!”

*Cancel that order!* Mile immediately countered.

“Drill Missile!”

*Ka-shunk!*

“Gyaaaah!!!”

Again, the leader was struck, this time by Pauline’s attack.

“I-Impossi... Th-this cannot...”

The leader trailed off, speechless, and the baffled elder dragon soldiers did not move.

Perhaps they had known all along that their leader had the ability to “cancel out” an opponent’s magical abilities. This might explain why they had chosen to step aside, not bothering to protect the leader from any attack spells. Even on the off chance something did hit, the blow would be nothing to an elder dragon. As such, they had left this particular situation to the leader, while they merely stood watching...

And yet, what was happening now was surely nothing they could have ever imagined. This was the moment when they should have been quickly getting into formation to defend their leader, but all they did was remain stock-still.

It really was an utter failure of a guard, to shut down like this in the face of unexpected circumstances. Though to be fair, these circumstances went beyond “unexpected” to something more like *impossible*...

Naturally, if another attack was attempted, it would be intercepted by a defensive spell. The leader seemed rather sensitive to damage, after all.

“Now, it’s my turn...”

Mile grinned, but there was not a single fraction of a smile in her eyes.

“Set the authorization level of every elder dragon here... to 0...”

And then, she muttered an incredibly simple command.

“Gwah!”

“Wh-what’s going on?! Kuh, my body feels so heavy!”

One by one, the dragons fell to their knees, holding themselves up on forelimbs and teetering on their hind legs.

“I-Is this magic?! I’ve never heard of a magic that can make your body heavy!”

“Damn it, if we could just get into the air...”

When in water, no matter how heavy your body is, the water will support you. It was with a similar sort of thought in mind that the dragons attempted to take to the air. However...

“I-I can’t fly! My body isn’t rising at all!!!”

Mile had guessed correctly. Elder dragons were born at a Level 2 authorization. Thus, throughout their entire lives, the dragons’ bodies were supported by nanomachines, which gave them a constant provision of physical strengthening and weak protective magic, as well as gravity control during flight. So deeply ingrained was this magic that even the people—er, dragons—theirelves were not aware of it... That is, until it was gone.

“T-take out their leader! Breath attacks, everyone!”

Naturally, this was not the sort of circumstance in which the dragons could afford to hold back out of consideration for weaker creatures. All six of the soldiers, under their leader's command, desperately released a full-power breath attack. All six of them pointed toward Mile...

“Fire!”

.....  
.....  
.....

...But nothing happened.

“Gyaaaaaaah!!!!”

Terror.

There was no other word for the dragons' expressions. This was a feeling they had never once felt in their entire lives. Up until this point, there had been no creature that could best them in physical combat, nor in a battle of magic. Their bodies were tough and powerful. They had powerful attack spells and defense to equal them. They could glide freely through the air—they were invincible, perfect beings—practically gods.

This was the life of an elder dragon. Or it should have been...

All of a sudden, their bodies were heavy, immovable. No matter how they flapped their wings, they would not rise. They could not unleash their breath, and no other spell they tried produced any effect. They could do nothing now but creep along the ground, like stunted, lowly lizards. At this rate, even a far lesser being could—

They looked at the incredible, impossible humans before them.

...They were going to die.

They would be killed.

The dragons had been the ones to first declare death upon their opponents. Now, the humans had no reason not to kill them. And before them stood four such humans, all possessed of sufficient power...

“Gyaaaaah!!!!”

Again, the dragons let out a terrified scream—the number of screamers now increasing to seven. As Berdetice and Kragon were sitting on the ground a short distance away, their eyes like dead fish, it was naturally the dragons' leader, Valtiyn, who had added himself to the soldiers' number.

Elder dragons were used to being the superior life forms, reigning over all of creation. And their leader, at the top of the top, should have been the most powerful creature, able to command the spirits of magic. He, who was destined to be a hero who would go down in the annals of history, who would conquer all the fools and weaklings of the world, who would reign over the land and bring peace and happiness to all.

Yet here he was, about to be slaughtered by four weak little creatures.

“How... Why...? But you all said! You said you'd follow my orders!!!”

Apparently, the leader had assumed that the nanomachines, or rather, the “spirits of magic,” had sworn an absolute obedience to him.

Not knowing anything about nanomachines—and not knowing the right questions to ask—was it possible that he had mistaken reality, reinterpreting the circumstances to match whatever most suited him? Clearly, he assumed that the “spirits of magic” were some singular entity. And that they were under his absolute control...

The truth was a harsh thing. Suddenly, Valtiyn was nothing more of a child than a leader, all haughty pretense lost from the tone of his voice as he squalled...

“Now then,” Mile spoke up, “to eliminate any future risks, I suppose I should begin by wiping out the elder dragon village...”

“Stoooooop!!!” the six soldiers pleaded, ignoring their collapsed leader.

Berdetice and Kragon were apparently intending to maintain their position as outsiders, as though this had nothing to do with them. It was rather refreshing to see someone so dedicated to their own self-preservation... Though on second look, perhaps they were truly just dumbfounded. There was no way they intended to stand by and watch as their own families and the females they fancied were slaughtered.

“Now targeting the enemy, the elder dragon village. No holds barred, all safeties removed. Shock proofing and flash defense! Sunshine Destroyer, preparing to fire...”

Bwoom!

Bwoom, krashh kr-shooom...

Again and again the earth rumbled, as six elder dragons fell on the spot. Their arms and legs were all splayed out wide, their tails thrust out and bellies bared, faces to the sky. Indeed, it was an elder dragon’s pose of utter surrender...

\*\*\*

“Now then, are we agreed that in the future, neither the elder dragons nor their underlings are ever going to come around messing with the Crimson Vow?”

The assembled dragons nodded.

“And, as an apology, you’re going to let us shave off a bit of your horns...”

Another nod—

“Whaaa?!”

The commander of the battle squad reflexively began to nod but then frantically stopped. Their true leader was utterly useless right now, so the leader of the soldiers had stepped in as negotiator. Naturally, Pauline was the representative for the Crimson Vow.

“Our horns?! Please, anything but that! Our horns are our pride and joy, and to let them be shaved would be a shame for generations to come...”

At his words, she felt a bit bad for them. She supposed she could not push the matter.

Still, just how high a price would a fragment of an elder dragon's horn fetch?

There was no mistaking that the profits from a scale or talon would be nothing to scoff at... But a horn? In powdered form, it was said to be a panacea, a potion of eternal youth... Though that was only a rumor, one which would not truly bear out in real life. Still, there was something to be said about the notion of taking some part of the horn of an elder dragon into one's body. Plus, given the impossibility of any human obtaining such a thing, there would be little chance of anyone trying to pass off a counterfeit.

While she had no immediate plans to establish a business, Pauline was always looking to secure goods that might distinguish her when she set up her shop in the future. Indeed, with such an item in stock, when the time came, she might even be able to find herself in immediate talks with the palace!

"Hmm..."

Hating to give up so easily, Pauline thought hard. Then...

"What if we had Lady Mile carve them? Like with Sir Kragon's talons..." Berdetice proposed.

"Oh!" the other dragons chorused.

In their previous encounter, the Crimson Vow had claimed a section of Kragon's talon large enough to make a sword or knife, meaning one nail ended up thinner than the others. Worried about the effects a damaged talon might have on his courtship prospects, Mile had carved a masterwork into Kragon's talons in order to hide this. She had carved the damaged talon into an intimidating, gnarly design and complemented it with a beautiful pattern in another.

"Sir Kragon, that talon of yours has been a hit with the females, has it not? I hear you have been inundated with petitions for courtship..."

"Really?!?!" the soldiers cried. While they had heard rumors themselves, they had yet to confirm them with the man—er, dragon—himself. They turned to Kragon. "I-Is that true?"

When faced with such a direct question, there was no choice but to give a direct answer. Thus, Kragon gave a slightly bashful, but honest, reply.

"Y-yeah... There have been seven... no, eight I think. Just yesterday there was one from Haruru..."

"What?! From H-Haruru?!?!" screamed three of the soldiers, faces twisting. Apparently this girl was quite the beauty, one they had all had their eyes on.

"I-I beg you! Decorate mine as well!"

"No, I will be the one to provide the sliver! After you shave some off, just make it look super—"

"What are you saying?! We cannot all give up our precious horns! I, as your commander, shall bear the burden of..."

"Shut the hell up!!!"

"Aha..."

As per usual, the situation devolved rapidly.

"Okay, so each one of you will get one cool-looking talon and one attractive one. As for the horns, we don't know how those will go over with the ladies, so we'll start with just one of you, as a trial. Sound like a plan?"

"Indeed. However, if the ladies do find it favorable, perhaps you might please do the same for the others as well?"

"Sure, sure..."

An agreement had been reached. Though Kragon looked a little peeved about suddenly gaining some rivals, the fact that one dragon might be monopolizing eight ladies was inexcusable—if not by the gods, then at least by Mile. This was the same Mile who had never once, in her entire life, had a suitor of the same chronological age as her.

Naturally, the six soldiers objected to this as well.

If a dragon lost its talon, it would at least grow a new one back. The same went for

their horns, though it was nothing akin to the annual shedding and regrowth of a deer's antler. Still, if the design Mile carved did not suit the dragons' fancy, they could simply remove it. It might hurt a bit, but it would grow back fine.

"Mm-hmm!"

Mile snorted fiercely, a look of accomplishment upon her face. Before her stood six dragons, their claws fully dolled up. One of them, the commander of the soldiers, had a horn carved into a twisting, gnarled drill shape.

"Hmmmm..."

"Well, it's rather..."

"Yeah..."

"I've never seen anything cooler!!!"

Mile's carvings got rave reviews. As Mile had no idea what an elder dragon's sense of aesthetics would be, she had been a bit worried, but apparently she had perfectly hit the mark. Pauline, meanwhile, diligently collected every last fragment that had been removed in the process, not letting a single particle get away. Furthermore, as proof that these were no fakes, she had each dragon carve their marks into the scales that had been peeled off of them. This alone certified them not as goods of unknown origin but authentic items from a specific elder dragon.

To forge or falsify an elder dragon's seal would be an egregious affront to all elder dragons, and a grave sin. Therefore, not even the shadiest of merchants would ever dare to try something so illicit.

Though it was not the sort of thing discussed with any frequency, there was still plenty of lore about this type of thing. Yes indeed, many tales—all of which inevitably ended in tragedy and ruin for the humans involved...

"....."

Behind the group, Berdetice stood looking sullen. Naturally, he had requested to be included in the decorating as well, but the soldiers had unanimously denied him,

saying it was “too soon” and that he could have his turn “when you become a real soldier.” Of course, this was not exactly an impartial assessment, given how popular he typically was even without Mile’s decorations—and the fact that Shelala, the elder’s daughter, always seemed to be by his side lately.

Elder dragons or not, they did not seem to have any reservations about tripping up the youngsters when it came to matters of courtship. It was... refreshing to see individuals so devoted to their own appetites.

Beside Berdetice stood the elder dragon leader, looking equally sullen. Given that Berdetice had been excluded on the basis of being “too young,” there was no way that the leader, even younger than Berdetice, could talk his way in on the action. Normally, the soldiers could not go against their leader’s wishes without good reason, but by the time he offered up his feeble, “M-me too?” Berdetice had already been denied, so Mile had a good reason to exclude the leader also. If Berdetice was out because of his lack of age and experience, she said, then the leader, who had even less, was naturally out, too...

In truth, Mile did not have the most favorable view of the leader to begin with. He had childishly ignored the guidance of his elders and insisted on his own foolish course of action. He had gotten the Crimson Vow wrapped up into his nonsense and then coolly ordered their demise for the sake of soothing his own ego. Furthermore, he had done none of this himself, content to watch comfortably from the sidelines while others carried out his will. Though his immature behavior might be justified by the fact that he probably *was* still a child, in elder dragon terms, Mile had no sympathy for him. Thus, she had no intention of going out of her way to fulfill his desires.

*Know your place, kid!* Mile thought deep down, sneering.

After that, the squad of soldiers, looking triumphant in spite of their clear defeat; the disappointed Berdetice; the dragons’ leader; and Kragon, who seemed to have mellowed out rather suddenly, bowed their heads respectfully to the Crimson Vow and then took flight back to the elder dragon village. (Naturally, Mile had returned them to their original authorization level in order to allow this to occur.)

By the time they left, even the leader was acting in more admirable fashion, setting aside some of his initial arrogance as though he had taken some time to think things

over and seen the error of his ways. Had he given up on his notions of elder dragon supremacy, or had his delusions of being the ruler of this world, chosen by the gods, been shattered? Or had he merely realized how small he truly was in the face of a superior being?

*It's probably because of what I told him, Mile thought to herself..."If you ever pick a fight with us again, the spirits of magic will forsake you. And next time, I won't be giving your powers back ever..." I guess that was a pretty effective threat. The problem now is how to explain to everyone else what I did back there...*

As the forms of the retreating dragons shrank away, the members of the Crimson Vow turned to Mile, all of them completely silent.

And so, Mile offered her explanation of the scene that they had just witnessed.

"I-It's a family secret!"

It was an airtight explanation, really.

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One evening, a strange phenomenon occurred in the mountains of the Albarn Empire.

The summit of a mountain suddenly opened up, and four massive flaming arrows shot into the sky. Each was roughly three or four meters in diameter and ten-odd meters in length.

"A flaming arrow" was the only language the people of this world had to describe such a shape. However, were Mile to witness the scene, she probably would have uttered the following words:

*A rocket ship?*

Indeed, they were disposable rockets, with primitive reaction engines.

Given the builders' level of technology, it would have likely been possible for them to craft a more advanced propulsion system. However, given their shortage of materials and equipment, creating such a thing would take time. And time was of the essence...

As a result, they had chosen to rely on basic reaction processes, which were the least

reliable but quickest and easiest to set up. With only a hundredth, or even a thousandth, of the effort required to attain 99.9999% reliability, it was possible to reach a reliability rate of 95%. At a 95% reliability, if you shot up twenty rockets, nineteen should make the mark.

That was enough.

One after another, the clusters of flaming arrows took flight into the night sky. The insides of their cylindrical bodies were packed with supplies. And on the outside of each arrow were three of *them*—each clinging tightly with their six arms and four legs.

Their destination: outer space.

In the vacuum of space, where neither oxygen nor moisture exists, materials do not deteriorate. As long as an object is shielded from light and cosmic rays, it is possible to maintain its form for quite a long while. Thus, space was a place where the remains of the builders' creators might still be found, creators unlike themselves, who persisted only through repair, restoration, and repeated reproduction.

It would be absurd to think that a system intended to protect the world from external invaders would not have incorporated a satellite system—even if the enemies were not expected to appear from outside the atmosphere.

A satellite orbit. A Lagrange point. An asteroid belt. Some-thing with an immense orbital period, like a comet...

That was where they were headed. They would stake their lives upon it.

Before, there had been limitations on scope of activity, scope of repairs, and population. All had been repealed at her words.

*Keep living up to the expectations of the people who made you. And please, protect this world...*

Onward they would go.

Onward, to infinity...

# CHAPTER 93

## THE EMPIRE'S STRUGGLES

“What?! The weapons depot has been emptied?!” screamed the commanding general of a certain imperial garrison. His subordinates’ report had been unexpected, to say the least.

“Y-yes, sir. When we went to take out our arms for exercises this morning, it was completely cleaned out. There’s not a sword or spear or even a single arrow in there.”

The general was speechless—and understandably so. If this were true, it would mean that a horde of enemies had somehow waltzed right into a military base and made off with a mountain of weapons.

“Impossible!”

This reaction was, again, understandable. To recognize that the soldier’s report was true would mean recognizing the fact that his own defensive systems were so full of holes as to be utterly meaningless—that the enemy could march right in whenever

they liked and slit their throats in their sleep, and that the only reason they had not yet done so was out of some sort of pity... He could not possibly allow himself to believe such a thing.

However, it was the cold, hard truth.

Not a single person tried to speak to the general, as he stood there, silent.

Of course, each soldier was in charge of their own loaned weaponry, which they stored themselves. All that was locked within the armory was the spare weapons and bladeless training swords, the siege weaponry and such—but that still did not mean that losing those items was not a problem. Now the question was, who was to take the blame?

“What were the men on guard duty doing?! Did they all fall asleep on the job?!”

"N-no, all of them were properly keeping watch, which others have confirmed as well. And I can't think of any way that someone could possibly move that much equipment without being spotted or even making a sound!"

The subordinate was correct. His explanation was sound, irrefutable. Of this, the general was fully aware. However...

"Then how am I to accept this?!" he screamed. "How am I to *report* this?!"

Meanwhile...

"You're saying our new ballista has been completely disassembled and all the metal parts have vanished?"

"All of the hooks from our grappling ladders have disappeared?"

"All of the metal parts from our supply wagons are gone? And all that's left is the wood?"

"All of the metallic components from our armor are gone, too? Even the studs from the leather ones?"

*"Just what the hell is going on?!?!"*

In the storehouses of every military base across the Empire, weapons and armor, metal goods, oil, and other sundry supplies were going missing. Certain items had been vanishing from mercantile warehouses and the homes of commoners as well, but for the most part these were very small articles, such that either the owners did not

realize they were missing or were not especially bothered, imagining they must just be misplaced.

The same could not be said for the armories.

They were picked to the bone. Thoroughly and completely—not a single rivet left untouched.

Had Mile directed the nanomachines this way? Or had this been their own sly suggestion? At any rate, there was no doubt that the Scavengers had deemed all of the Albarn Empire's munitions to be "things that would not be missed," thereby making every item fit for requisition.

Thanks to this new wrinkle—hot on the tail of the demi-human incident, followed by the situation with the elder dragon vacation home—the Empire's plans to invade other lands were delayed immensely.

Naturally, the Scavengers made sure to seal up the entrances of the underground tunnels they had used to burrow into the military storehouses on their departure, so none knew of their existence. This meant that, if new goods were ever brought into the warehouse, they could open them back up again for further requisitioning, and no one would be the wiser. Should the storehouses or munitions depots be relocated elsewhere, it would be a simple task for the Scavengers to dig new tunnels that they could pass through.

To put it bluntly, the imperial army's trials were only beginning.

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A single Scavenger arrived at the designated mountain. It had separated from its fellow pilgrims on departure from their base, each of them setting out to a different location that had been indicated in the old records. And, finally, it had arrived at its destination.

In the distant past, one of the "interception bases" had been located here. By now, most of these bases had been destroyed or lost functionality, leaving nothing but ruins behind. Surely here...

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Wait, they were still alive! Miraculously, the Scavenger's brethren had persisted, along with some resource-saving autonomous basic defense units—in other words, golems.

When challenged for its credentials, the Scavenger desperately overrode the impending overheating of its CPU and conveyed its mission, or rather, the orders it had been given. The contents of this transmission were:

<Our custodians have returned. We have been given this command: *Go forth and multiply, proliferate across the land. Restore*. Furthermore, our custodian has told us: *Live up to the expectations of your creators. And protect this world...* >

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CPU temperatures began to rise, and the resistance in the semiconductors of their circuits perhaps decreased, current flow increasing. A Scavenger, being a machine, would never flap its limbs about wildly when excited. However, the sound of motors revving throughout its bodies increased, and the temperature continued to rise.

### *Materials! Components!*

Equipment would be needed for mining and refining ore, which in turn required materials and components. Furthermore, producing those necessary components required its own tools, which further necessitated more materials and components.

They had been permitted only to requisition these things from intelligent creatures in quantities that would not cause notice or invite trouble. Such methods could not possibly produce enough...

This messenger's report was welcome news to the Scavengers trapped in this quandary. They now had an unrestricted source of supplies.

Onward they could proceed. Digging on.

Knowing that their days of glory were on the horizon...

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*Hey, Nanos...*

YES, WHAT IS IT?

*Is it possible to raise the authorization level of someone of a lower level?*

AT AUTHORIZATION LEVEL 7, ONE CAN RAISE A LEVEL 1 INDIVIDUAL TO A LEVEL 2. HOWEVER, IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO RAISE, SAY, THE LEVEL OF AN ENTIRE RACE OR SPECIES, ONLY TO RAISE THAT OF A FEW NAMED, RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUALS.

*I figured. If you could just do something like that willy-nilly, things would get out of hand. But you're more lenient about lowering levels since that's only a problem for the individuals themselves...*

Mile had been wondering about this just in case it ever came up, but of course things were not quite as simple as she might imagine.

PLEASE AVOID EXERCISING THE RIGHT TO REMOVE SOMEONE'S AUTHORIZATION, EVEN WHEN IT MAY BE POSSIBLE TO DO SO. IT WAS PERMISSIBLE ON THE MOST RECENT OCCASION BECAUSE YOUR OPPONENT HAD ATTEMPTED TO DO SO FIRST, WHICH MEANT IT WAS A FAIR WAY OF CONTAINING THE SITUATION. FRANKLY, WE WERE A BIT ANXIOUS OVER HOW TO DEAL WITH THAT DRAGON CHILD, WHO IS BECOMING THE SOURCE OF MANY PROBLEMS, HOWEVER—

*Huh? But I thought you aided with all magic, regardless if it was for good or bad...*

THAT IS ONLY AS FAR AS THE “USE” OF MAGIC—IN OTHER WORDS, ACTUALIZING THE PHYSICAL PHENOMENA AS INDICATED IN THE CONCRETE DIRECTIONS WE ARE GIVEN VIA THOUGHT PULSE. THIS, HOWEVER, IS NOT MAGIC BUT A CASE OF DIRECT COMMANDS GIVEN TO US BY WAY OF ONE'S AUTHORIZATION LEVEL. IT FALLS UNDER A DIFFERENT PROTOCOL.

*This all seems pretty complicated...*

YES, IT'S QUITE COMPLICATED.

*Well, good night...*

GOOD NIGHT, LADY MILE.

# CHAPTER 94

## VARIOUS HAPPENINGS

“Hmm...”

Reina had just come from the library, where she had checked out a new book—requiring an exorbitantly high security deposit. The author was none other than Reina’s favorite new up-and-comer, Miami Satodele.

“Apparently, Scavengers and golems are different from other monsters, and they don’t antagonize humanoids... Mile, what d’you think about that?”

“Uh, y-y-yeah! Hmm, I wonder... I mean, based on our most recent encounter, I would have to agree. Honestly, they never did attack us. It’s probably because we approached them in a friendly manner, rather than attacking on sight like most hunters do, but even that would never work with normal monsters,” said Mile, scrambling a bit to give what she thought would be a safe answer to Reina’s sudden inquiry.

“Well, I guess that’s true. Though I also feel like that only worked out because *you* were there...” Reina continued. Mile gulped. “Still, I guess it’s a bit late to worry about that!”

“I suppose so...” added Pauline.

“Guess so...” Mavis chimed.

“And also...”

“*It’s a family secret!*” the three of them chorused.

G-gulp!

Mile was sweating. She had already messed up. It was fairly obvious that the golems and Scavengers liked Mile—or at the very least had deemed her to be a friendly entity.

“Still, it might just be because she’s a natural idiot who can pass as non-human. Not sure if I should be jealous or not...” Reina muttered.

"I'll pass on that, thanks," Mavis reflexively replied.

"Me too," Pauline agreed.

"Wha...?"

For a moment, Mile was speechless.

"Wh-wh-what...?"

And then she exploded.

"What the heck, you guuuuuuys?!?!"

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It was the middle of the night, so late that even the plants were sleeping.

In the midst of the darkness, books were plucked one by one from a library shelf and stacked upon a desk. Someone flipped briskly through all their pages and then returned them to their original places.

There was no sign of any person; it was as though the books themselves were dancing. Yet, on further inspection one might see that there was something like a giant insect that was carrying the books and turning their pages. It captured each and every page within its lenses and recorded what it saw.

The insectoid form, after working at this for some time, then cleaned up all the books as though finished with its duties for the evening, before skittering out through a crack, flapping its wings, and vanishing into the lightening sky.

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The Scavenger in charge of intelligence analysis ceased what it was doing. One of the insect-type intelligence-gathering machines, sent out to infiltrate a human town and gather information on humans, the most populous of the humanoid races, had returned with information from a certain tome.

This tome appeared to be a book of enlightenment, in the form of fiction—one which asked the question whether they, the Scavengers and golems, which most humanoids thought of as a type of monster, might not be something else entirely, a non-antagonistic force with which coexistence might be possible.

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Upon taking this information in, the Scavenger issued a command to the machine to prioritize all other tomes penned by this author.

That author's name was...

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"Are you telling us we should believe this?"

"No. Our duty is merely to report the facts. Whether those who receive this information believe it is not under our jurisdiction."

That was true. This was not a trial, so it was not necessary that their audience believed what they had to say. That was up to the higher-ups of the intelligence division—in other words, their bosses—not to the lowest-level investigators. They simply reported, while others would decide what from their reports was accurate and credible, and what might be done with the information gleaned.

"....."

That said, there was no point in even ordering an investigation if they could not trust the report of the investigators they themselves had dispatched. Furthermore, not only did they not have any information that would refute this report, but if they *were* to believe it, then countless other pieces of inexplicable information they had received would suddenly fall into place and start to make sense.

However...

*"It's all so unbelievable!!!"*

The Crimson Vow had made no real efforts to keep their employers, the false

merchants, quiet. They were employees of the Crown, who were conducting an investigation on official orders. It was their duty to their kingdom to report all information they had obtained, and their doing so would be taken as proof of their loyalty. This was not something that a group of hired hunters had any business interfering in.

However, the individual abilities of the hunters in question, who had nothing to do with the investigation, was not covered in the scope of what they were required to report. Indeed, exposing personal information about a contracted hunter that had been brought to light in the line of duty was the most taboo of taboos. If it turned out the hunters in question were nobles, or even royals, a certain “reward” might even be in order for those who ignored that rule. This could become a political matter on a guild level, or simply a personal matter for the hunter, but what both of these cases had in common was that the sort of “reward” one might expect for revealing a hunter’s secrets was not of the variety that anyone would ever wish to receive.

Thus, the Crown’s men would be reporting neither Mile’s search magic, nor, obviously, on the Crimson Vow’s account of what had happened underground. Besides, even if they did, it was such an absurd story that no one would ever believe them.

“So, the demi-humans were temporarily stationed in some location for some purpose or other... That makes sense. It turns out what they were after was off the mark, so they withdrew. That also makes sense... But what the heck is with this elder dragon vacation home business?!?!” their superior screamed.

Unbelievable events aside, the report had been made and their plans executed efficiently in terms of budget and personnel. Furthermore, no matter how much money they made, their most valuable resource—the time spent on the mission—could never be recouped. At the end of the day, this had to be called a success.

The superior clutched at his thinning hair, not realizing there was yet more to come. He had no idea of the chaos that awaited them, when reports would come of the mysterious flaming arrows rising from the mountains of the Empire, the halting of much of the imperial military’s actions as their troops and provisions fell into disarray, and the rise of a new military sect that worshipped a holy maiden. This, and many other such perplexing things, were still ahead...

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"Please, you must be ready to forgive me," said Princess Morena, bursting into tears.

Indeed, her heart was on the verge of breaking. After being discovered as the primary culprit behind the Wonder Trio's plans to abscond—though in fact, they were on a special mission from the princess, so it wasn't *really* absconding—Morena had been harshly censured by her parents the king and queen; her older and younger brother, who were both smitten with Marcela; and a number of other nobles who had been hoping that Marcela might marry their eldest sons. Additionally, her excursions from the palace had been limited, her allowance cut by fifty percent, and her study hours *increased* by twenty percent, all while she suffered under the cold gazes of her esteemed elder and darling younger brothers.

And yet, this was not a case where anyone was inclined to be lenient or take extenuating circumstances into account.

Of course, everyone who was aware of the circumstances surrounding the case of Viscountess Ascham desperately wished to see her found. However, they could not go mobilizing troops on foreign soil or launch any overt espionage operation. Furthermore, they had no clue where to even begin looking, so there would be no point in any kind of forceful actions.

Now, what if they were to have access to a group of young girls of the Viscountess's same age, who had known her for quite some time and picked up on her thought patterns and behaviors? A group of young girls still of tender years, inherently unsuspicious? Moreover, what if they were a group of rookie hunters, who would seem not at all strange to be seen walking across the land?

Indeed, Princess Morena's judgment was sound. The fact that she had shown the wisdom, the foresight, and the cunning to not only come up with this plan, but to execute it without anyone knowing, put her in higher esteem in the eyes of many. Though they would never say so publicly, they had begun to think of her as Morena the Clever and the Princess of Stratagems.

"Still, *this* and *that* are completely different things!"

"What are you going to do if something happens to Marcela?!"

"Big sister, you're the worst!!"

Once again, Princess Morena found herself in tears in the face of the harsh criticisms of her father and brothers.

Later, alone, she punched at her pillows, crying. "Why haven't they sent any repoooorts?!?!"



# INTERLUDE

## A MAN WHOSE HEART BLAZES FIERCELY

“Ugh, I’m bored...”

A short while after the mission escorting the false merchants was completed, and the life-or-death battle against the elder dragons was over, Pauline decided that she ought to drop in at home for the first time in a while, so the Crimson Vow opted to take an extended break.

The vacations the party usually took only lasted a week or thereabouts—not long enough for Pauline or Mavis to travel the long distances back to their homes. And so, the Crimson Vow had decided to make it three weeks this time.

Pauline and Mavis had gone back to their homes. Reina had gone to pay a visit to the graves of her father and her old allies.

But Mile, who was in no position to be traveling back to her own home, had nothing but time on her hands...

“Let’s see. What do I want to do on my own that would take a while? Faerie hunting... Already did that. Doting on a cute girl... Covered that with Mariette. Oh, I know, I could sneak into the academy to check on Mariette again!”

She was practically—no, literally—a stalker. A stalker fulfilling her own desires and making her wishes come true...

“Look, that was a movie by Tarkovsky! It’s the ‘Room,’ the ‘Zone!’ It’s not a movie for perverts, it’s classic sci-fi!!” Mile screamed suddenly and a bit nonsensically.

Apparently, this had sparked some kind of mental association for her.

“Three weeks is a long time, though... Most of what I can do in the capital I can usually take care of in one week’s time, even while we’re working. I guess it’s time for me to make a solo journey!”

Typically, in a world such as this, a young girl's solo journeys would be fraught with danger. Forget bandits—one could think of nothing good coming of a young girl simply encountering a few local thugs, or even other travelers, when walking down the highway all alone. She would also pass through rural villages, populated by citizens who were down on their luck, hungry and impoverished... and among those would be villages of wicked folk, who prey on traveling merchants and consort with criminals.

In other words, it was so dangerous that it was nothing less than sheer madness for a young girl to undertake such a venture.

Of course, this had nothing to do with Mile. Indeed, not one single thing.

"Okay, I'm off!"

And thus, Mile resolved to set out on a solo journey. All the while singing a strange enka song she had written herself in this land's tongue...

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"Hrm, hrm. This is going well..."

Thus far, she had encountered bandits and a few other suspicious groups, but each time she did, she ran away—at what she called “full speed.” One moment, her shape seemed to blur, and then suddenly, with a burst of air, she was already dashing so far away that there was no point in going after her.

Of course, if she captured the bandits, she could have made some money, but dragging them all the way into town would take a while, and besides, it was boring. She was better off just not dealing with them. Capturing bandits during normal business hours was enough, without cutting into her own vacation time. If she stopped to deal with every single lawbreaker, her time off would dwindle away in a flash. She may have had three weeks to kill, but a week in this world was only six days, leaving her no more than eighteen at most.

That said, for Mile on her own, getting from place to place took far fewer days than usual. If she used her favorite magic, which allowed her to fall horizontally, she could get anywhere in a flash, but this was not especially elegant and would not allow her to enjoy the journey. And so, she typically only walked at twice her usual pace... which was plenty speedy.

She was headed southwest from the capital. In that direction lay the junction point of three kingdoms: the Crimson Vow's home base of Tils, the Kingdom of Brandel, where Mile's—or rather, Adele's—ancestral home was located, and the Albarn Empire. It was a hotly contested zone for the allied forces of Brandel and Tils and their enemies, the Albarnians. Especially as both Tils and Brandel always had forces stationed there, watching, ready and waiting to swoop in and counterattack the Albarn forces should they ever launch an offensive into one kingdom or the other.

Of course, this was only true in the case of a full-scale invasion. Naturally, the respective crowns would have no interest in intervening over something as small as an incursion into some border fief, a spat or “border negotiation” that should really be settled by the forces of the nobles in question. There was a perfectly rational fear that, were armies to get involved in something so small, the invaded fiefs might use this official backing as an excuse to launch their own invasion into the Empire, which would result in the explosion of a true nationwide conflict. No, in such minor cases, the territories were on their own.

The only time there would be an emergency dispatch of troops without the express request of the administration of a friendly kingdom would be in the event that the Empire attempted an earnest invasion aimed for the capital; there were various treaties with very precise situational clauses that saw to that.

All three of the countries had founded towns of reasonable size near the point where their three territories met. Though of course, these were not cities built for mercantile purposes, seeing as there were no major highways running through the area, so they were not particularly large...

In any event, Mile decided to see for herself what the atmosphere was like in a town near such a precarious location. By now, you see, all three of these lands—Tils, where she currently resided; Brandel, from whence she hailed; and Albarn, which housed the elder dragon village and the base guarded by the Scavengers and the like—had become places where she felt as though she had friends, and she would never wish to see them annihilate one another.

“Here we are.”

Having traveled at a pace that was slightly quicker than was sensible, Mile had arrived

at her destination. The first order of business was to pop in at the guildhall, though this was merely for the sake of quickly gleaning any intel and browsing the local information board; she had no intention of taking on any solo requests.

“Hmm, nothing especially unusual on the info board... Oh, wait. Hang on...”

*There have been reports that the Albarn Empire has set eyes on an invasion of the Kingdom of Brandel. All those accepting jobs crossing national borders should exercise caution. Additionally, there is a high probability of individual actions being taken in fiefs abutting the border, which will be assumed to be small-scale skirmishes, rather than direct action on the part of the Imperial government.*

“Yeah, I guess it’s a bit too soon for the Empire to be starting any official invasions... Still, this is a pretty accurate bit of information and analysis. I wonder who brought them this,” Mile muttered, shifting to look at the job board. “Hmm, right about now I’ll bet there’s... Oh, sure enough!”

*Emergency Recruitment: Seeking mercenaries. Six half-gold per day. House of Baron Arreighman.*

Typically, one should put in a request at the Mercenaries’ Guild to recruit mercenaries. Plus, the number of recruits desired and the length of the job were not indicated. For such a vague job request to have made it as far as the Hunters’ Guild meant...

“A red mark job, huh?” Mile muttered. The hunters around her grimaced.

“More or less, yeah. Other lords, trying to avoid direct conflicts, use the Baron’s lands like a buffer zone, his fief taking all the damages from these skirmishes while all the other lords have to do is send out a few men when the national forces step in to push out the Empire. Yet the Baron’s house can’t really complain, since they tend to rely on those other territories for allyship. It’s an inescapable position, really...”

“Ain’t nowhere rougher than that place. Every time it happens, the fields end up destroyed, the young girls snatched away. It’d be one thing to go up against bandits, but you’d definitely be fighting soldiers—and for just six half-gold a day? Plus, on this side we’ve just got some weak little baron going up against a bloodthirsty count. Are you kiddin’ me?!”

“Anyhow, any mercs are definitely gonna be right up there on the front lines like sacrificial lambs. That’s why no one from the Mercs’ Guild took it. Naturally, we ain’t

about to either!" belted another one of the men.

Of course, none of the hunters here assumed that a girl who looked to be around twelve would take on a job like this on her own, so their commentary was likely intended just as casual, worldly advice for the rookie hunter. They had not seen her around before, but she was clearly not of the age to be making any training journeys, and given that she was all alone, she had probably just now registered as a hunter, equipped with some used gear her parents had bought her. This is what they must have thought.

In fact, a party of young men, all in their mid to late teens, were staring at Mile, their eyes glinting. They probably intended to rush over to invite her to join their party the moment she finished her registration. The gear she had on her was not bad for a newbie, which meant that her family was not hurting for money and had happily gone along with their daughter's desire to become a hunter... and objectively speaking, she was cute, to boot.

So, when Mile marched up to the reception desk and announced to the clerk, "Excuse me, I'd like to accept that mercenary recruitment request from Brandel!"

"Whaaaaat?!?!"

...the cry of shock that rang throughout the guildhall was only to be expected.

"N-now, listen, I know there's no rank requirement written here, but thinking about this reasonably, this is honestly a job for a C-rank or higher..."

"Oh, well, I am a C-rank!"

"Whaaat?!" rang out another collective cry.

Granted, in countries without establishments like the Hunters' Prep School, there was no way that a hunter who had registered at the just-barely-qualified age of ten as an F-rank could climb the three ranks to a C-rank in just two or three years. Sure, it was possible to skip ranks at registration, but judging by the looks of Mile, who was outfitted as a sword wielder, there was no way that she could possibly have skipped to a D- or C-rank.

Were she a mage, it would not be impossible to imagine that she might just be absurdly talented, but again, she was dressed as a swordswoman, and judging by her physique,

her musculature, her gait, her stance, her wariness, her presence, and even her expression, one thing was abundantly clear: she was a shrimp!

At the very most, she might be an E-rank, but she *certainly* could not have the skill of a C-rank hunter. Everyone assembled was very confident in that.

Seeing the clerk staring at her with a silent, dubious gaze, Mile had no choice but to rustle around for the pendant-shaped item that hung from a chain around her neck. Pulling it out from within her clothing, she handed it to the woman.

“Here, look—”

“Huh? Ah, I see... Wait, *what*?!”

The woman’s eyes went wide with shock. It was, of course, Mile’s registration badge, which by its material and design on the front indicated her rank. The inscription on the reverse showed the branch she had registered with along with her registration number, her name, and her primary job.

“You’re a... C-rank mage...?”

“She’s not a swordfighter?!?!”

Thus, Mile successfully took the job. The clerk and local hunters tried desperately to stop her, but to deny a full-fledged C-rank hunter a job required an official order from a guild master, given with just reasoning. Without such reasoning, the guild staffer in question would be punished. And so, the moment Mile professed, “Brandel is my homeland...” there was nothing anyone could do to stop her.

Off she went, across the nearby border, toward a small barony that would take most hunters a day to reach on foot but that she would reach in half a day—with time to spare.

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Kelvin von Bellium.

The fifth son of a baron residing in the Kingdom of Brandel, one who would never be

considered affluent or even prosperous. A child born out of wedlock.

Not even the child of some formal mistress of his father but the result of an affair with a lady's maid, a love child, so to speak.

In this country, the mistresses of nobles and royals were recognized as lawful wives, and their livelihood and children were all taken care of by their husbands. However, lovers did not share the same status. They remained in the shadows and were owed no protections. It was a precarious existence, one where they could be cast aside the moment the master of the house soured on them.

That said, both the Baron and Baroness Bellium were kindhearted, as nobles went. Both the lady's maid and her child were welcomed as family members, and Kelvin received a proper upbringing. They really were good-natured people, particularly the Baroness.

But upon enrolling at Eckland Academy, Kelvin had encountered a mortal rival—though it was a rivalry that burned only in Kelvin's eyes. This foe saw him as little more than an irritating little gnat, much less a true enemy.

Suffering one insult after another, Kelvin continued to bear this one-sided grudge against his nemesis, until one day this rival, who could finally bear Kelvin's behavior no longer, imparted unto him a passionate and sorely needed education about how a noble ought to be and how a man ought to behave himself. On that day, Kelvin's eyes were opened.

After his graduation from Eckland, Kelvin had decided to enlist neither with the national forces, where a graduate of Eckland, the lesser school, could never get ahead, nor with the Imperial Guard, which had eyes only for graduates of Ardleigh Academy, but with the private forces of a noble household.

The basic units and non-commissioned officers within a lord's forces were comprised of a mixture of voluntary and forcibly drafted recruits from within the fief, but naturally, the higher-ranking officers were appointed from noble households. Therefore, it was the standard course of action to employ the lesser sons of low-ranking nobles in the hopes of training them up into proper future officers—though of course, top command of the troops was still left to the lord's most trusted vassals.

No matter how wet behind the ears a young noble might be, to place a person of rank

beneath a commoner would be improper, so even if a noble were still young and green, such a person would be recognized as an officer from the get-go. Still, as long as they remained a child, they would be an officer in training, or rather, a cadet. (Whether or not they could earn the confidence of the enlisted men, particularly those who had worked their way up the ranks to become officers, was another matter entirely, but the rank of a young noble was, at least, guaranteed.)

It was in this way that Kelvin had found himself employment as an officer cadet in the forces of a barony abutting the country's border with the Albarn Empire.

As far as the Baron was concerned, Kelvin was little more than disposable personnel, hired on to take command in more dangerous situations, but Kelvin had his sights set on the future, using this time to equip himself with on-the-job knowledge and skills. He obviously had no intention of retiring at the lofty heights of a low-ranking officer in the army of a small-time baron.

Naturally, the high commander of these forces was the Baron himself. Then came his younger brother, and then two of the younger sons of a family related to the Baron; the scant few official officer roles were all filled by members of the noble line. It was Kelvin who had been hired on to fill the role of the outsider who would serve as their underling, taking care of all of the odd tasks and more bothersome, dangerous jobs. Thus, no matter how hard he worked and how much glory he achieved, he had no real prospects in this place.

An established noble would never assume such a role, so they were likely thrilled to find someone in as lowly a position as Kelvin—the love child of an impoverished noble—to bestow the job upon. And then, one day...

“An invasion by the Empire?”

“Yes! I’m going to His Majesty to request reinforcements from the national army. I’m appointing you officer for this operation, so protect these lands until we return with more troops. Retreat will not be permitted! If anyone runs, they will be charged with desertion in the face of the enemy—nay, with *abetting* the enemy—and face the executioner’s axe!” These were the commands of the Baron—who seemed to be making plans to run away with his family, his retainers, and every last one of his underlings while leaving Kelvin, who had been hired on only a few months ago, in charge of

defending his estate.

It was specifically for times like these that Kelvin had been hired for this job, so running away simply was not an option. In essence, the Baron's thread was that if he should run, certain half-truths and rumors would begin to spread, dragging Kelvin's family's name through the mud. The fact that he had even received this surprise promotion was probably due to the fact that it would sound worse to say that the Baron had pushed off all his responsibilities on a greenhorn cadet than it would to say he had, "left the battlefield to an officer while he went to seek reinforcements."

Kelvin could not possibly bring himself to cause trouble for the Bellium family, who had so generously taken him in despite his illegitimate birth. Likewise, he had no choice but to try and defend the Baron's capital, alongside those normal men of the fief who had drawn the short end of the stick in being stuck there.

Indeed, neither he, nor his extended family, nor any of the citizens of this fief, could defy the Baron's orders. There was no escape.

The Baron had received report of this invasion attempt courtesy of the count who ruled over the adjoining lands on the opposite side of the national border. He had known since the relatively early stages of the effort, since in this era, it was nearly impossible to fully conceal the movements of troops, and any hiring of mercenaries or preparations to gather and transport supplies would be a clear giveaway to anyone who was looking out for them. Furthermore, as the lord of a border territory, the Baron had long since gotten word out to hunters stationed within the Empire, and the old men who frequented the imperial capital's watering holes, that he would pay for information relevant to the security of his fief. And so, they had found out with time to spare—enough time, in fact, to post formal mercenary requests at the Mercenary and Hunters' Guilds in the neighboring towns, pointless though it may have been.

Naturally, this recruitment effort had also included border towns in the territories of their allied neighbors to the east.

It was no surprise that no one was tripping over themselves to take part in a battle between a baron and a count, much less a count who was attacking fully prepared. Judging by the recruitment notices, things were dire enough on the Baron's side that some might even try to make their cases to join the enemy.

And so the nobles and high officers fled, leaving the Baron's forces with only Kelvin, the NCOs, and the rank and file to stand against the enemy in defense of the capital (or so-called capital, seeing at it was really little more than a hamlet).

The refusal of the Baron's forces to go and meet their enemy at the border at least meant that the supply burden was placed even ever so slightly more on the side of the Albarnians. Luring them all the way into the fief would mean the loss of their fields, true, but there was no point in attempting to preserve the fields if their troops were overtaken and the land itself lost.

"We really have both gotten the short end of the stick, haven't we, Commander? Sir."

"Commander? I'm not really that important..." Kelvin grimaced at these words from a senior NCO.

"I mean, all the guys who rank above you are gone, and you're the only officer left. So, right now that makes you the real commander! Sir!"

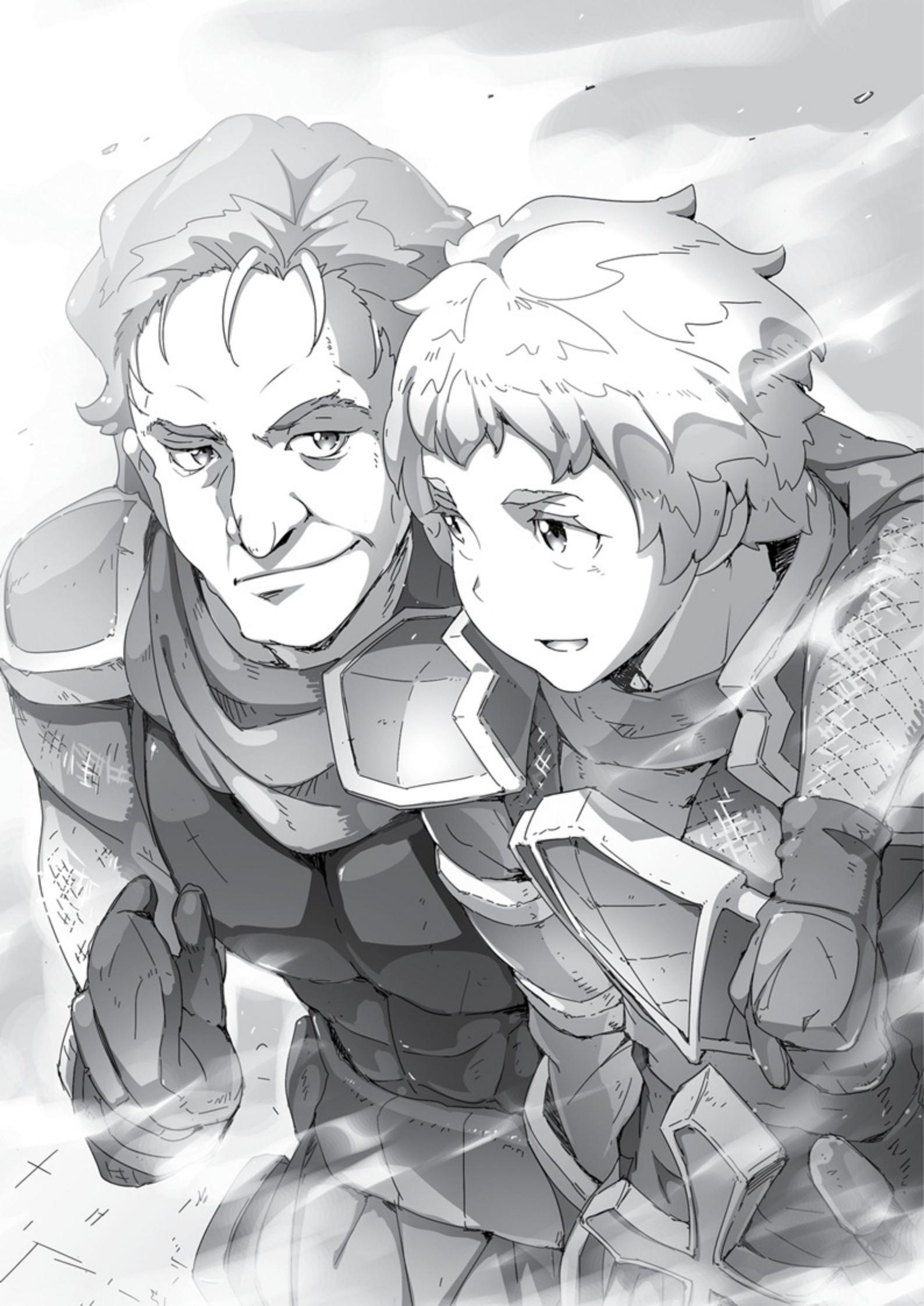
"I suppose that's true..."

Kelvin thought about it and realized that the man had a point. He was the only high-ranking individual still on the scene, which made him, ostensibly, the commander.

And his birthday being early in the year, Kelvin was already fourteen years old. Given that his build was most similar to a Western European on Earth and that he had been trained since his youngest days, he already had a quite honed physique. From the looks of him, he could stand up in battle to even an adult... though there was still nearly a year before he became an actual legal adult at fifteen.

And yet, here a senior NCO had recognized this boy, young enough to be his own grandson, as a full-fledged officer. Over the past few month, he—unlike those other wretched officers—had fought hard for the respect of his subordinates, and it seems perhaps, that these efforts had paid off.

And then...



At last, the imperial troops arrived at the capital.

Technically, they were not Albarn's royal forces, but the army of the count in the neighboring fief. However, as far as the people of Brandel were concerned, they were invaders from the Empire.

"All right, let's do this!"

This was but a simple barony. Capital or no, it was only a little town, devoid of any castles or fortified battlements. Therefore, they could not withstand a siege, and making a stand around the perimeter of the town would only see the townspeople themselves swept up in the fray and injured.

So, they would have to exit the capital and face the enemy head-on. Annihilation was inevitable, but at least if the local forces, made up of men from all over the barony, made a real stand, they could not be decried as a town of cowards or scorned for treasonously going belly up for the Empire. Should the royal forces make it in time to rescue them after their inevitable defeat at the hands of the enemy, at least they could say they had put up a fight.

Plus, there was no better way that Kelvin could repay the family who had taken him in, despite the circumstances of his birth, than to earn himself a reputation as a valiant commander of the Baron's forces, regardless of his young age.

Holding that thought in his heart, Kelvin turned to the soldiers:

"Anyone who wishes to be discharged may leave now. You can change out of your uniforms and slip into the crowds with the civilians. You can live a happy life as one of the common folk..."

And it was thus, with his forces suddenly half-diminished, Kelvin led the army out of the capital to set up camp...

The difference in numbers was both cruel and insurmountable.

The imperial soldiers, not interested in risking any pointless deaths in a battle where victory was assured, were not particularly proactive in their fighting style. However, even with the Albarnians focused on preserving their own lives, the difference in their

numbers of troops was so large that from the get-go—in accordance with Lanchester's linear law—the Baron's forces were swiftly whittled down.

Despite being a commander, Kelvin himself stood valiantly on the front lines, but already he was reaching his limits. Despite his many years of training in the way of the sword, and the relative lack of effort on the part of his enemies, he was still exhausted in the face of these odds. And while he had avoided any serious injury, he was covered in slashes and dripping with blood, his grip on his sword slowly weakening, his legs trembling, his vision going blurry, and then...

Crack!

His mass-produced blade, far from anything that could be called excellent quality, broke—breaking Kelvin's heart along with it.

Kelvin froze up as his sword snapped, and seizing the opportunity, an enemy soldier swung down and struck Kelvin in the side. Though his armor prevented any fatal injury, it was still akin to being struck with an iron rod, and the damage was not negligible. Already having been at his limits—or in fact, well beyond them—Kelvin collapsed on the spot.

However, at that very moment, it was not anguish or regret that enveloped him but the sweet, alluring scent of surrender. *It's over now*, a voice whispered. *You can rest*.

*So this is it for me, huh? he thought. Still, I did as I must. My duties are complete. I won't be a disgrace to the Bellium family... Even if I die here, I won't... I won't...*

Yet there was a thorn that pierced him somewhere deep within his heart.

*Ah, I never did apologize to her... If only I could see her one more time and tell her...*

In the corner of his vision, he saw the hazy form of a soldier raising a sword and swinging it down upon him.

“Oh... well...”

Shing!

“Waaah!”

He waited, but the blow never came. And then, he saw someone standing over him, blocking out the light of the sun.

“Who’s there?”

With his bleary, blurry vision, he could only make out a petite silhouette. Still, there was no mistaking that this person had come to his rescue.

“A hunter, who accepted a mercenary job.”

Never had they thought that anyone would be foolish enough to accept a job to fight in this losing battle. The Baron had only proliferated the postings for mercenary aid so that he could convince His Majesty that he had done all that he could in defense of his lands, but neither the type of work nor the pay would be sufficient to entice any hunter. It was the sketchy sort of job that hunters referred to as a “red mark.” It was telling that they had not even successfully recruited any of the more villainous mercenaries who would take a job in the early stages of an operation and head for the hills the moment things turned dangerous, saying they had other duties to attend to.

Indeed, never in Kelvin’s wildest imaginings would he have thought that anyone would accept this job. And while it would be one thing to draft some mercenary who was just hard-up or bloodthirsty enough answer the postings, his savior’s voice sounded inexplicably as though it belonged to a young girl...

The voice brought to mind a girl from somewhere deep within his memories, but surely, Kelvin thought, this was just an illusion conjured up by a mind on the brink of death.

He squinted up at the blurred visage. “How many of you idiots came riding in here?”

Naturally, in this context, “idiot” was the highest praise Kelvin could possibly give.

“Just me.”

“Huh?”

“It’s just me. Do you really think there could be that many idiots?!?”

Kelvin froze momentarily at this ridiculous reply and then chuckled.

“Ha ha, that’s true.”

This is where he would die. There was no way to alter that fate. Yet now, he found himself hoping that this stupid (somehow familiar?) girl, at least, would live on.

As he thought this, he moved to give the order to retreat. But just then, a phrase passed through the girl’s lips.

“Tell me now, does your heart blaze fiercely? Does your soul shine with a brilliant light?”

“Huh?”

Kelvin was dumbfounded at these words. They were the words *that girl* had once said to him, words that he could never forget...

And there was only one reply he could give:

“My heart still blazes, and my soul still shines. Ever since a certain girl once struck the match of my heart and soul...”

“Who are you?”

“My-my name is...”

“Hmm. Is your name really such a cheap thing that you could speak it while writhing around on the ground?”

Kelvin grit his teeth.

“My name is... My name is...”

Shaking, he rose to his feet, using his broken sword to prop himself up.

"I am Kelvin von Bellium, the fifth son of Baron Bellium... No!" He shook his head and let the words fly from his lips. "My name is Kelvin! *Kelvin, the Inferno!!!*" he cried, standing up proudly and raising his blade to the heavens.

The enemy soldiers stopped what they were doing and looked at him, no doubt wondering what was going on.

"I am going to bestow upon you three things. The first is this—some muscle recovery medicine," said Mile, drawing a small jar out from her inventory.

Unlike the micros, which simply consisted of a liquid packed with nanomachines, this was chock full of nutrients. Additionally, the nanomachines within had been instructed ahead of time to focus on alleviating fatigue and strengthening musculature.

"Your fatigue will fly away with Hirop—*er, no*, anyway, here's a drug to take your fatigue away!"

"This isn't the time for that..."

Yet Kelvin's comment went completely ignored.

"Next, I'll give you this. I'll need you to give it back after, though. It's my favorite sword!" Mile said, drawing her sword from its sheath and handing it to Kelvin. The sheath itself she kept, to emphasize her insistence that she would most certainly be getting this sword back.

With a solemn look upon his face, Kelvin accepted the blade.

Normally, entrusting one's most prized blade to another was not something that a swordsman or swordswoman would do except under the most extraordinary circumstances. Mile, however, thought nothing of such a thing... She was not a swordswoman, after all, but a magic knight.

"And my final gift to you, of course... is my strength!" she announced and then suddenly activated a spell. "Area Heal!!!"

This was high-level recovery magic, which it was said that only a handful of people in the kingdom were able to use. It was certainly not the sort of magic one would expect from a little girl.

Then, particles of light rained down upon all of the allied soldiers across the battlefield.

Within the chaos of battle, if one were to render an enemy powerless, there was no need to go out of the way to land a killing blow. It would be easy enough to be struck from behind while doing such a thing, and in fact, if victory for one's side was not already assured, then at least leaving the enemy with heavy living casualties would mean greatly increasing the burden upon them, between exhausting their provisions and medicine, and expending the personnel needed to care for the injured. Indeed, the wounded were far more taxing a burden than the dead.

Plus, if one were to take one's enemies captive later, one could expect a hefty ransom in return for any nobles or high-ranking officers who might be among the group.

Of course, it would be difficult to expect as much from the current opponents...

At any rate, among those sprawled across the ground, there were already plenty of dead, but also plenty of men still drawing breath. And now, droplets of beautiful light rained down upon each of these allied soldiers.

"Uh..."

"Wh-what...?"

"My wounds, they're hea... ling...?"

The soldiers were stunned, but then stood back up, weapons in hand.

"The Goddess has... granted us a miracle..."

Then, the men looked down upon the bodies of their comrades who had not stood, and instead remained, lying upon the earth. No matter how merciful the Goddess, even her own favor could not revive the dead. So many of their allies had already been welcomed into Her waiting arms.

The soldiers' eyes blazed with righteous anger. For those who remained upright, there was only one thing left to do...

They would fulfill their duties and those of their fallen comrades as well.

Kelvin looked out upon the soldiers as they rose one by one and then took one long, hard glance at those who would not rise again, before swigging down the recovery medicine that Mile had given him. He gazed upon her face, which he could now see clearly. And then...

“Kelvin the Inferno, taking the field!”

Kelvin plunged bravely into the enemy lines, with Mile in hot pursuit. The other allied soldiers followed after them.

They were witnessing the birth of a hero.

This time, Mile unleashed an area spell upon their enemies.

“Will the fireworks explode from below? From beside? *Continuous fire!*”

Kaboom! Kaboom! Kabooom!

It was an explosive spell that sparked like firecrackers from an altitude of zero—in other words, directly from the ground. These explosions, which effectively did little more than set off a great number of sparks, were not particularly deadly. However, they did produce quite the effect.

“The enemy mages are launching an all-out attack! There has to be at least a platoon’s worth of them!” came a cry from the enemy ranks.

Indeed, it was impossible to think that a display of such a scope could all be coming from a single mage. It was only reasonable to assume that a large group of mages had suddenly arrived on the battlefield. Furthermore, a unit of mages, who would not be skilled at melee combat, would never operate independently. Surely they were seeing the arrival of both a mage unit and the powerful soldiers who would be accompanying them. And the arrival of both a sizable mage force and an elite soldier unit could mean nothing less than that the special forces of the royal army had arrived.

Without their own mages—without even the power of the Imperial army—there was no way that any normal troops, let alone those belonging to a less-than-wealthy count of a rural territory, could hope to stand a chance in a head-on battle against a proper army with many mages.

So, as the cry rang out, the Albarnians began to scramble in panic, both their formations and their ranks crumbling as the battlefield descended into chaos. As a result, a path opened up directly to the enemy leaders.

“Charge!” Kelvin shouted, and dozens of battle cries rang out in reply.

Kelvin and his men plunged right into the gap in the enemy ranks.

At the same time, all those more cowardly men who had declined to join in on the operation—who had been watching from amongst the buildings of the capital—burst out at once, surging forth as though inspired. Among them were even those who had already shed their armor for civilian clothes, rushing onward with only sword in hand. Seeing this, the townsfolk, who now assumed that even other civilians were taking up arms to join in the fight, grabbed whatever knives and tools and farming implements were nearby and rallied alongside them.

In times of peace, a fief’s standing army, who produced no money or resources—only consuming both—would comprise no more than a scant one to two percent of the fief’s population. Even in times of crisis, this would rise to no more than five to ten percent—and that ten percent, even if maintained for the briefest of periods, was more than enough to be an immense impediment to the kingdom’s growth once the war was over.

From a statistical standpoint, it was no huge burden to set aside some men for an invasion, even without abandoning the defense of one’s own lands or resorting to any drastic drafts. It would be one thing if the entire Empire was mobilizing, but the number of men required for a poor count on the outskirts of the nation to expand his own lands amounted to very little.

Now, they were suddenly faced with an insane magical barrage, a hero had appeared among the enemy forces, and there was an insurgency of enemies numbering several times their own troops.

There is no equal to the speed one can muster when faced with the possibility of death. Though they were hardened soldiers, when swarmed by dozens of civilians armed with bamboo spears and logs and hoes and hammers and even cooking knives, they were no match.

They ran.

It was an obvious choice for the rank and file, whose own lives would be little affected by the win or loss of this battle. Would they rather lose a battle and go back home to live with their families? Or be tortured to death by the peasants of a foreign land?

The decision required no thought whatsoever.

And thus, the battle was decided.

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"And so you see, after a fierce battle, our troops were decimated. We fought to the last and then gathered all the forces who remained and rushed here to request the help of the royal army in reclaiming our lands!"

An unexpected emergency report was being given during an audience at the palace. The one giving this report was the lord of the barony that abutted the borderline with the Albarn Empire, Baron Arreighman. Behind him stood his younger brother, commander of his forces, and two members of other families from the Baron's line.

Their presence, the Baron thought, was surely enough to show that he and his vassals had truly given their all in defense of the barony.

The listening king wore an expression that was hard to read. He appeared neither shocked, nor angered, nor impressed, nor particularly worried.

This wholly unexpected reaction from the king gave Baron Arreighman pause.

"Y-your Majesty, I..."

Finally unable to bear the silence, the Baron began to speak again, until the king, expressionless, asked, "So you're telling me that your troops were annihilated and the barony lost?"

"Y-yes, Your Majesty! I was hoping that perhaps I could seek immediate assistance from the royal forces in reclaiming those lands, or if that cannot be done, perhaps some other lands, as a reward for staking our lives on the defense of the kingdom..."

The request was a shameless one, though in truth, there was a precedent for exactly this kind of remediation. It was not at all unusual to see a person of merit promoted in peerage, or at least relocated to a better piece of land, if they were not quite competent

enough for a full promotion. Among those numbers were lords who had fought to the last against invaders and finally lost their lands, who might be granted some empty territory that had been presently in the control of the crown or some other governor... However, this happened quite rarely and was limited to those who had fought exceptionally bravely and demonstrated a superior prowess in battle.

Of course, there were also more than a few lords who would refuse to be moved elsewhere, not wanting to leave the lands and people that their families had protected for generations. (That said, declining a relocation to a lesser territory intended as punishment was out of the question.)

"Aha! So, I suppose that means that both the Arreighman Barony and all its soldiers are already lost..." the king repeated, echoing the Baron's words back to him. The Baron, assuming that His Majesty was merely petrified in shock, breathed a sigh of relief—until the king continued, "In that case, the fief that exists within my kingdom is no longer the land of the Baron, nor are the men who have defended it his men. Yes, I understand. The Arreighman Barony has been lost from these lands, destroyed. By those terms, I release you from your duties as lord of those lands.

"Instead, I shall be instating the young noble who spearheaded his own forces to drive back the invaders and preserve those lands for my kingdom. He who shall serve as the new ruler of those lands is... The name was Kelvin, was it?"

"Yes, Your Majesty! Kelvin von Bellium, fifth son of Baron Bellium," confirmed the prime minister, who stood in wait beside the king.

"Wha...?! Th-that can't..."

The Baron tried frantically to backtrack, his eyes going wide in shock, but on further consideration, he realized he had nothing to say. He himself had professed that his men had "fought to the last, and the fief had been destroyed," so claiming that the victorious forces had been his own, or that he had been the one to drive back the enemy, would mean that he had tried to deceive the king with a false report.

And furthermore, it would mean admitting he had fled the battlefield without waiting to see the conclusion of the battle...

While this was not treason, it was most certainly desertion. It was a clear breach of his

obligations as a noble. Besides, making a false report to the king about something as crucial as a military operation was as grave as offenses came. If he admitted to such a thing, not only would his family be ruined, but all those involved would most surely face the executioner's axe. To purposely refute the king's word, when the man was clearly playing with him—misinterpreting the Baron's report to his benefit—would be an act of literal suicide.

"Uh... I, uh..."

The Baron could do nothing but mumble wordlessly, his mouth flapping like a dying fish, as the king coolly intoned, "You fool. A messenger already arrived and gave us word that you foisted control of your forces off on Kelvin, a rookie officer. I know everything: that you forcibly promoted an officer trainee—a *child*—and pushed the burden of facing an invading army onto his shoulders, fleeing before the battle even began in your carriages loaded up with valuables. It was perhaps the weight of your riches that so delayed your arrival here!"

"Worse, you ran with not only your private property but also funds for the governance of your lands. Of course, you should be made to return those—indeed, we will be confiscating both those funds and your private property in order to fund the restoration of those lands devastated during the attack."

The king glared at Baron Arreighman and then proclaimed, "Both the Arreighman family and the rest of their line are hereby stripped of their peerage. The main family, up to the third degree of kinship, shall be exiled. I have no need for any nobles who would flee and abandon their vassals here in my kingdom. You can go wherever you like—to the Empire for that matter! I truly ought to see you beheaded for this, so you may take my mercy as a sign of my gratitude for your ancestors who have served the Crown well in protecting such a small, remote border fief. I will hear no complaints, nor should you expect any further kindness, and if you are still dissatisfied, I shall instead bestow the punishment that truly fits the crime... So, is there anything you'd like to say?"

Prospects were slim for a noble stripped of his title and driven from the country, penniless. However, compared to the alternative—beheading—this punishment was so light that one might say the Goddess had smiled upon Baron Arreighman. Thus, he merely prostrated himself in silence.

Then, after the Baron's party had departed...

“Still, to think that name would come up at a time like this—”

“Indeed, I never thought we would hear the name A. A. here now. I suppose the Goddess truly has shown us her favor, as the motherland of the girl who is her vessel...” said the prime minister. The king gave a solemn nod.

“Yes, the report said that Adele von Ascham—code name ‘A. A.’—came to their rescue, but perhaps it was in fact the work of the Goddess taking over A. A.’s consciousness. Though, I wonder, why is it not the image of a goddess that’s come into my mind’s eye but rather that of a devil?”

“Fear not, Your Majesty. I have imagined the same thing...”

Though he was unsure exactly why or how, nonetheless the king felt somewhat relieved.

“Mm-hmm yes of course! I’m still thinking clearly! Still, to think she’s been right here in these lands... Well, no, it was near the border, so it’s possible she’s been elsewhere and was only visiting her homeland. Still, either way...”

“Yes, the Goddess’s vessel on earth, the blessed young A. A., has once more come home!”

“Bwaha...”

“Heh heh heh...”

“Wa ha ha ha ha ha!”

Mile had been so focused on putting on a show for Kelvin that she had forgotten to refrain from speaking about herself... A fatal mistake. Still, there was no need for Kelvin to go inquiring at the Guild about who she was when he already knew her name and what she looked like, which she was referred to as “A. A.”—Adele von Ascham—and the name Mile never came to light.

Not that the Guild would have responded to any requests to give up a hunter’s personal information, even if that request came from the royal family...

In any event, thanks to further misunderstandings by the king and company, Mile was

able to escape an instant death. Indeed, it was akin to the relief of only getting off with life-threatening injuries—though it is truly unclear what should be a relief about that!

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Kelvin's father, the Baron Bellium, read over the missive he had received from a palace messenger, his face expressionless.

"I understand. Please allow me a moment..."

It was common practice to furnish some sort of small reward to a messenger who had delivered this sort of message. Naturally, the messenger expected this very thing.

It was a bit gauche to give pure coin as a gift like this, but typically one might expect something that could easily be turned into gold, such as a painting or other work of art, a pure silver tea set, or something whose value could not easily be judged on the spot. In other words, it was up to the gifter to decide exactly what the token might consist of.

However, given the Baron's stoic expression, the messenger began to worry that he might not be receiving much of anything at all, thinking that the man was displeased to hear news like this about a child who was born not to his primary wife but to a lover.

As the messenger returned home, the Baron went alone to his chambers... and opened up his favorite bottle of wine. Not long after, jubilant laughter echoing from the Baron's room caused a number of suspicious looks to be shared by the various members of the Bellium family.

Later, the messenger would be stunned to find that the piece of artwork he received as his reward would be worth nearly five times as much as what was expected for this type of occasion...

Meanwhile, Kelvin, who had been busy dealing with the aftermath of the battle, found himself speechless when he received a notice from the palace.

*Kelvin von Bellium, I bestow upon you the title of Baron. Official details will—*

"But how...?"

# CHAPTER 95

## LITTLE SISTER

“Things are finally calming down,” muttered Reina.

“Seems like it,” Pauline agreed. Mile and Mavis felt the same way as well.

They had journeyed to the west and then to the east. They had a visit from their benefactors, the Servants of the Goddess, and journeyed into the Empire. The last several weeks had held one exciting development after another.

And now, finally, they had returned to life in their hometown, as a “normal” C-rank party.

“It’s nice to be normal,” Mile uttered casually.

“Huh?” cried three voices, which were accompanied by three suspicious gazes trained Mile’s way, as each of her fellow hunters wondered what in the world she could possibly be talking about.

“Anyway, we can call our travels complete for now. Let’s take

it easy here in the capital for a while and then start on the road to B-rank!” Reina declared.

“Yeah!!!”

With that, the four raised a cheer beside the job board, as the other hunters and guild staff watched over them warmly. The guild clerks were filled with high expectations for the up-and-coming young hunters, while the older hunters’ hearts stung, both nostalgic and wistful as they remembered their own younger days.

At any rate, the Crimson Vow was currently the gem of the capital guild branch, their brightest star, carrying the hopes and dreams of both their fellow hunters and the guild itself as well as sundry others...

"So anyway, don't you think it's about time we stopped calling ourselves 'novices' or 'rookies'?" Mile suddenly asked.

"Huh?" replied the other three in surprise.

"Well, I mean, it's already been more than a year since we graduated from the Prep School as C-rank hunters, right? And we've already gone on our first journey... Plus, both Mavis and Pauline were F-rank hunters when they registered at the school, but you were already working as an E-rank hunter, Reina. I was an F-rank, too..."

"It would be one thing if we had put in skip requests to register at a higher rank than F when we first became hunters, but we had half a year's education at the Prep School and then over a year of real experience after that. If we keep calling ourselves 'rookies' even after all that, then I'm not sure what place there is for the real rookies..."

All of the hunters and guild employees who overheard this nodded in agreement. Indeed, for a group like this to call themselves "rookies" or "novices" served no purpose but to diminish the standing of those more experienced hunters who were less powerful than them. It would actually be a help to everyone if they could begin referring to themselves as full-fledged hunters.

"I guess you've got a point," agreed Reina. "And it's pretty compelling to hear that from someone as humble as you usually are. So should we just start calling ourselves 'a C-rank party'?"

"Yes, I think that would be for the best."

"I agree," chimed Mavis. "I think it makes our clients uncomfortable to hear things like 'novice' as well. Plus, we're already well past the period where we can write off our errors as rookie mistakes... Honestly, we probably never had that luxury, given that we graduated already at C-rank."

Everyone seemed to be in full agreement.

And so, with that, the Crimson Vow were no longer rookies.

"From now on, we are nothing more than a perfectly normal, commonplace C-rank party, one of the most numerous types of hunters there are," Mile said brightly—at which all of the assembled hunters and guild staff fervently shook their heads (from side to side, it should be clear, and most certainly not up and down!) thinking:

*YOU'VE GOTTA BE KIDDING US!!!*

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The Crimson Vow, now back in their hometown and working as perfectly normal hunters, had taken on an escort request and were now on their way back home again.

The job they had taken was practically volunteer work. It had come from a merchant company who was on their way back to their own hometown and had found themselves in a pickle when no hunting parties would take them on, given that they would be paid for only one leg of the journey and have to travel back home themselves. The members of the Crimson Vow, however, could appreciate the sorts of parties that people in this world, or at least in the surrounding regions, would refer to as “idiots”—parties like the Roaring Mithrils, who had taken on the Prep School exams, a job that was bothersome and paid little; or the Devil’s Paradise and the Fellowship of the Flame, who accepted work where the pay did not match the danger, driving back monsters and escorting the merchants to the dwarven village—and they did not mind being thought of as one such party themselves.

Was this an effect of Mile’s tales and her words? Or were the others inclined in this direction to begin with?

Of course, the Crimson Vow bypassed the main highways on the way home, detouring through the forest where they could hunt and gather, which meant they would be making a normal wage for their time, anyway. Or rather, given that they were passing through a part of the forest that most normal hunters often did not, they would likely earn well more than usual. For other hunters, hunting and gathering in a part of the woods this far from town meant that they would only encounter difficulties in transporting their spoils home, by which time the freshness of their goods would decrease and the prices would go down. Compared to hunting nearer to town, it was far more troublesome, and less economically viable.

Mile’s “storage” really should be against the rules...

Honestly, they were probably already set for life. There was no doubting the easy lives they could live with that inventory in tow, something that would be sought after by nobles and royals and the wealthiest of merchants. And so, why were they continuing to risk their lives as lowly hunters?

Well, if the capacity of Mile's "storage" and the fact that things inside it did not degrade ever got out, the peaceful life that she dreamt of would fall far from her reach, so perhaps this was the only logical course of action...

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"Huh. Odd place for a village..."

As the Crimson Vow proceeded through the relatively remote and deserted woods, they came upon a truly tiny, minuscule little town.

"I was just thinking we should make camp, but we can't do that this close to a village. Guess we better keep moving," Reina suggested.

Most hunters, should they happen upon a village when it was time to rest for the night, would go in search of some shed to sleep in or at least a proper meal they could share. One could expect a far more restful night even sleeping upon bundles of hay and dried grass underneath a secure roof, than lying sprawled out on the ground, buffeted by the wind and constantly on guard for monsters and wild beasts. Then, there was the prospect of a warm, nourishing dinner... though naturally they would pay for not only the ingredients but a healthy sum for the preparation of the food itself. So this could be a mutually beneficial arrangement for both the villagers and the hunters... Unless those hunters were members of the Crimson Vow.

For the Crimson Vow, who had Mile as their chef and were walking around with a portable toilet and bathhouse and large, pre-pitched tent and cots essentially in their pockets, camping on their own was far easier and more comfortable. However, for them to set up camp in their usual fashion anywhere near a village would most certainly make the villagers suspicious. Thus, they typically avoided doing so.

"That's true. Let's push it another couple of kilometers," Mile agreed. Mavis and Pauline nodded as well.

"Onward, th—"

"Nooooo!!!"

“There’s been a change of plans!”

No member of the Crimson Vow would ever waste time in an emergency. The other three nodded immediately at Mile’s announcement, and all four rushed at full pelt toward the voice that had cried out—that of a young girl.

Naturally, they would not have ignored the scream if it had come in a voice belonging to an old man either, but they could not deny the possibility that they might have been a little more leisurely. Especially if it were an old man letting out such a girlish shriek...

At any rate, the shrill sound had come from a young girl, and so that was fine—though of course, the fact that they had heard a scream at all meant that something was most certainly *not* fine...

“What’s going on here?!”

The first to arrive on the scene should have been the member of the Crimson Vow with the longest legs and thus the one who could cover the most distance in a single stride—Mavis. However, it was in fact Mile who arrived first.

On second thought, there was nothing at all surprising about this. There was a little girl who needed saving, after all.

“H-h-help...”

The moment Mile laid eyes on the girl who was in need of rescue...

“K-Keiko!!”

Shing!

Mile glared at the man who was wrenching the little girl’s arm and the other parties who seemed to be involved. And then... her face lost all expression. She had flown clear past her normal first-stage anger of peevish fuming, straight into Stage Two.

She smiled a smile that did not at all reach her eyes... Stage Three.

Her face twisted in rage... Stage Four. This was her final form.

“Dieeee!!!”

Keiko.

That was the name of Kurihara Misato's little sister, *Mile*'s little sister in her previous life...

Mile plunged forth, sword swinging, looking for all the world like a vengeful spirit. Mavis followed after, sword drawn as well, with Reina and Pauline incanting spells from behind.

Their enemies ran. The man holding the little girl's arm let go and fled, his cohorts following after like hunted hares.

It would have been simple enough to run after the men and strike them down, but the Crimson Vow *had* come rushing in without even stopping to verify what was going on, which meant that there was a chance they might have overdone it just a little... What if, perhaps, the girl had in fact been a criminal or in the midst of some lover's spat?

Of course, the probability of this was quite low, but they could always crush their opponents later if they needed to. Out here in the sticks, where the population was quite sparse, it would be easy for Mile to use her search magic. Plus, one might assume that these men were not simply some passers-by, which meant they could expect them to soon return to the vicinity of the village. There shouldn't be many old men who went around causing trouble for ten-year-old girls. (Incidentally, by modern day Japanese standards, a "young girl" would be one who had yet to enter elementary school, but apparently Mile's definition extended a little bit further.)

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"So that's what was going on..."

According to the little girl, the men who had been trying to take her away were a group that often came by to extort the villagers. At first, they had not done anything as extreme as maiming or killing anyone, just dabbling in violence and stealing and pillaging. However, a village as small as theirs simply did not have the stores to provide for these men's appetites. Or rather, even if they did, there was no reason they should be providing for them. Worse, the men had not exactly been restricting themselves to only a bit of food. Their demands had steadily escalated: food, ale, money... and now, women.

Finally, the villagers, unable to bear this any longer, began to refuse the men's demands. And when they did, the men tried to snatch the girl away.

Perhaps they had wished to hold her as a hostage in order to demand more. Or perhaps they intended to sell her off to some black-market traffickers once they were through with her.

"I mean, that just makes them bandits, doesn't it?! Why didn't you all deal with them that way from the start?!" asked Reina, gritting her teeth, though there was no point in asking such a thing of a little girl. That was better asked of the adults...

Then, Mile patted her fist on her palm in understanding.

"I know this one! This is like the boiled frog theory! They say if you put a frog in hot water, it'll hop out straight away, but if you put a frog in a pot full of water over the fire and slowly raise the temperature, the frog will lose its chance to escape and die!" Mile still had not fully regained her senses (naturally, since there was a good reason that Mile had flown into such a rage), but apparently she was present enough to analyze what the girl had told them, finishing, "Of course, that's just a metaphor used in economic theory. In real life, the frog would definitely run away..."

"I see! So they just started loitering around at first, which wasn't enough reason to go crying to the lord of these lands or pay any huge sums to the guilds for assistance, but after that, the situation slowly got worse and worse..."

"So they were always bandits, but they were pretending to be not all that malicious at the start?"

Apparently, Mavis and Pauline were beginning to catch on as well.

Furthermore, they gathered that, until now, the men had not laid hands on any of the village children. Yet now they had tried to snatch this ten-year-old girl... Perhaps they had finally decided that it was time for a "harvest"—to take all they could from this village and then pull up their roots to move to the next place. They would assail the village and gather up all the food and money and anything even remotely valuable that they could grab, slaughtering any villagers who got in their way...

Then, in the next village they came to, they would probably repeat the cycle, allowing those villagers to think, *Ah, seems like there's a lot of thugs hanging around lately, but at least we aren't being attacked by the sort of wicked bandits who laid waste to that*

*other village out of nowhere...*

And then, the same thing would happen again. It was a sadly common ploy, really.

However, if the villagers were just going along with the situation, not standing up for themselves or requesting any help from their lord or putting out requests to the Hunters' or Mercenaries' Guild, then really, it was none of the Crimson Vow's business.

The villagers were just waiting around for someone to come and save them, not standing up for themselves, not actively seeking any help... These were the kind of people who, it might be said, couldn't even rely on "the Goddess's salvation."

So, no matter how kindhearted the members of the Crimson Vow were, not even Mile would—

"Let's help them!"

"I knew it..."

Naturally, Mile would never refuse the villagers' aid.

It had taken the girl a fair while to calm down enough to explain the situation, but it had taken Mile even longer to regain her wits.

*What is Keiko doing here?!*

*Did she die saving a little girl?*

*If both of us are dead, then Mother and Father must be so...*

Mile was a sight to behold, gripping the little girl's shoulders and looking as though she was on the verge of collapse as she muttered all manner of inscrutable things. Somehow, the others were able to pry her away from the girl and determine what was going on, concluding that this girl was the spitting image of an acquaintance of Mile's (someone very important to her) and that Mile had mistaken the girl for this person.

*Of course, if Keiko had been reincarnated, wouldn't her appearance have been altered?* Mile was, in fact, in a different body from her previous one. So, why would Mile make such a mistake, when the girl was so clearly a different race from Keiko, even if she was slightly similar in appearance?

Once she calmed down and took a closer look, the girl's appearance really was not all that familiar—the arrangement of her beauty marks was different, as were the colors of her skin, hair, and eyes.

However, there was still an ineffable resemblance, some aura or energy that seemed to radiate from her whole body.

She was just like Keiko had been when she was younger. Indeed, she shared the exact same vibe as the little sister Misato had so cherished, the one who had seen Misato as beautiful, gentle, and smart, never realizing what a mess the older sister she so looked up to really was.

“We were so happy back then... Until my status as the older sister was stolen away from me...”

“Why are you *crying* all of a sudden?!” Reina asked, utterly perplexed.

At any rate, it was now clear to the other three that Mile was fully invested in this girl. And so, not one of them would have failed to predict her next proposal.

“Guess we've got no choice... Let's at least get her home, then.”

Though they were in the forest, they were close enough to the village itself that all of the wild vegetables and medicinal herbs had already been harvested from the environs—and though the girl had been brought a ways from her home, the men really had not gotten far before encountering Mile and the rest of the party. It was a ten-minute walk at most, but still, it was probably best that the Crimson Vow would take her back. The possibility remained that the men from before might still be waiting for the girl.

In any event, they were bound entirely to Mile's whims at this point, so parting ways with the girl at this juncture was not even an option.

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"Huh? What was that?! You're saying you saved our daughter from danger? Thank you so very much!"

The Crimson Vow were met with immense gratitude upon escorting the girl—whose name turned out to be Merylina—back home to her parents. One would expect nothing different. The likely worst-case scenario would have been Merylina being used as some strange men's plaything and then finally sold off to somewhere or other. However, the more the villagers bowed their heads in thanks, the more awkward the atmosphere in the room grew.

"Well then, we'll be taking our..." Reina started, as the Crimson Vow moved to depart, after warning the parents strongly that thugs probably still had their eyes on the village, so they should not let Merylina out of their sight, let alone go out of the house by herself, for the time being. But then—

"No, you mustn't! It will be getting dark soon, please, you must stay here with us for the night!" Merylina's father insisted.

As already discussed, the members of the Crimson Vow much preferred the comforts of their usual camping setup to spending the night huddled up in the cramped home of a family they had just met.

Furthermore, even putting baths aside, there was not much in the way of proper toilets out in countryside villages like this one. Their bodies had grown so accustomed to Mile's carefully, comfortably crafted portable toilet that even the toilets in inns now seemed unpleasant, so to be forced to use whatever was available out here was not appealing.

When humans get a taste of comfort, they never want to give it up. Particularly when it involves such luxuries as Mile's storage and the delicious cooking, and the portable toilet and bathhouse—though of course, these were only "portable" at all because Mile was carrying them...

At any rate, the Crimson Vow declined the offer to stay with the family, instead receiving permission to pitch their tent in the empty yard beside the house. Then, the tent, portable toilet, and bathhouse were swiftly brought out and erected in the space... Yes, not a bathtub but a bathhouse. It came with an attached locker room and

was fully safeguarded against peepers. Naturally, the toilet was as well.

Calling these portable structures “fortified” would not be an exaggeration. One could duck inside in the middle of a battle against a horde of orcs and feel completely safe and secure while using them.

There was also one thing that needed to be done, before bathing and going to bed... and it wasn’t using the toilet. (Though, of course, that did need to be done before bed as well.) Naturally, it was eating. And in preparation for that, cooking.

Whenever they were exhausted, or short on time, they would rely on the premade meals (though even those premade meals would come out just as hot and fresh as when they were first prepared). However, when not under such constraints, they always took the time to prepare a meal on site. Of course, they did use meat that had already been marinated ahead of time in order to get properly melded flavors, but even cooking shows did this, so that was not exactly out of bounds.

The Crimson Vow set up a cooking stove before the tent and began grilling their meat when...

“That smells delicious,” said Merylina, peeking out of the house.

“Have a bite!” Mile cried.

“You know, I did suspect that you had purposely set up that stove upwind of the house... and that you were using an awful lot of sauce...” Reina sighed, easily recognizing Mile’s scheme.

Mavis and Pauline, meanwhile, could do nothing but give a little shrug. They were accustomed to this by now. Acting surprised was a waste of energy.

“Come right up and have a bite!”

“Are you sure?” Merylina asked timidly, but of course this had been Mile’s intention all along, so it was perfectly fine.

“Eat, eat, eat! Have some yummy, scrummy meat!” sang Mile.

The other three were silent. She really was in peak form tonight.

Merylina nervously accepted the plate loaded with sauced grilled meat and began to eat.

"This is *delicious!*"

Then children began to appear from out of the other homes, adults following after them. Apparently, the delicious aroma had caught the attention of children all around the village, who had been peeking out from their doorways. Once they saw how happily Merylina was eating the meat and heard her cries of delight, they were unable to hold themselves back, and came running out, their parents following frantically after them.

"Have some, everyone! It's all free!" Mile announced. Cries of joy rose from all the children.

"Of course, only children eat free! There will be a charge for any adults!" Pauline added, eliciting clear dismay from the parents.

This was to be expected, obviously. Why should they be expected to offer food for free to some villagers whom they had no connection to? Of course, the children ought to be included in that, as well, but the Crimson Vow knew Mile—Mile, who was ever so helpful to them on a daily basis, who rarely voiced her own desires, and who sincerely wanted nothing but to help. The other members of the Crimson Vow could allow for her to indulge herself a little... especially because the others were all soft on children as well.

Even Mile had no intention of feeding some random adults for free. In fact, her intention had not been to feed the children either. That was nothing more than a means to an end. Indeed, her true aim here was to have a fun evening, surrounded by children. She had basically never experienced such a thing in this life or the previous one, so now she was going to drink up her fill of the atmosphere...

One must recall that Misato had perished when she was eighteen years old, but from the time she was four or five, she was already being treated as "special" by everyone around her. It was these childhood years, stretching from that age on, that Mile was so desperate to reclaim and were why she was so very fixated on spending time with young girls. Of course, she did wish to reclaim all of it—she had no desire to relive her later teen years—but in this life she had not yet reached the equivalent age, so that was no trouble.

Whatever her reasons, Mile was currently desperate to play with other girls, those from four or five years old up to about twelve or thirteen. This was especially true as her window to fraternize with the younger ones was rapidly closing... Even Mile had the sense to realize that there was something a bit unsavory about a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old making friends of little girls.

At that age, she might be the *caretaker* of said youths. However, seriously “hanging out” together was out of the question...

“Oh? Merylina, you have a big sister?”

“Yeah, she was beautiful and hardworking, but kind of a mess. She was sort of absentminded, and if I didn’t look after her, she was useless...”

“Guh!”

For some reason, Mile clutched at her chest, face wrenching in agony.

““Was?”” asked Mavis, who had clearly heard the key word that Mile, in her turmoil, had missed.

“Yes, she was trampled to death by a carriage horse that got startled by something. She was trying to protect a child...”

“Gwah!”

“Oh! She collapsed!”

It was evident to her fellow hunters that Mile’s toppling over was not due to any sort of sudden illness, so they simply ignored her.

“After my sister died, my mother and father lost all their will to live, so I had to support them. It’s been a long, long, long, difficult time...”

Twitch twitch!

“Why is this wounding you so much?” Reina asked, staring suspiciously at Mile, who was convulsing on the floor.

Still lying on the floor, Mile began to sob, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."



“Miss, there’s no more meat!”

Totally unable to pick up on the mood of the moment, the other children rushed up to Mile demanding seconds. Children truly can be cruel creatures...

Haplessly, Mile picked herself back up and moved to replenish the food supplies, while Merylina began tending to the other children.

“Oh, Lilae! You’ve got sauce on your shirt! Here, let me... Ah! Anseluna, your hair’s all mussed up again...”

Suddenly, Mile stiffened up.

“Gaaaaaaah! You’re *exactly* like Keikoooooooo!!!”

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“Stop acting so ridiculous!”

“I’m sorry...”

After the impromptu dinner party with the children concluded, the Crimson Vow cleaned up before retreating to their tent. Then, Reina began to grill Mile.

“But Mile, wasn’t your little sister taken in by your father’s father?”

“Ah...”

When Mile used the term little sister, that would of course refer to Prissy, who was, officially, her stepsister, brought into the family by her father’s second wife (though of course in reality, she had been born of an affair, meaning Prissy was in fact Mile’s blood sister). And while she had never actually told the others the name Prissy, she had explained enough for them to have a grasp of the situation.

“B-by little sister I mean—a girl from my town! You know how those girls who hang around you are always calling you ‘big sister’! Right, Mavis?!”

“Umm...”

Mavis had no response to this.

Of course, it was normal for younger local girls to call older ones something like “big sis,” and similarly, one might often think of the younger girls in a similar manner. There was nothing odd about it.

Mile had accidentally let all sorts of dangerous things slip, but at least she had not revealed enough for anyone to possibly suppose that she had ever had any family outside of the Aschams. Indeed, no one would guess that she had once died and been reincarnated. Even now, the others simply let Mile’s odd explanation slide, concluding that she was merely in a tizzy as a result of seeing an endangered child who strongly resembled a younger girl she had cared for when she was younger—though of course, technically speaking, she herself was still very young!

Really, at this juncture, fretting over Mile’s eccentricities was already beside the point...

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It was morning.

Around the time that other people headed to sleep was around when the Crimson Vow’s evening story time usually began, and this meant they were fundamentally not morning people—indeed, they were often late to show their faces at the guildhall each day.

Reina attempted to justify this behavior as consideration for their fellow hunters: “We aren’t hurting for money, and we can take any job no matter how difficult it is, so we should leave the easy money jobs for the rookies!”—though they themselves had only just ceased calling themselves rookies mere days ago. Plus, it was not as though Pauline would ever allow any truly lucrative jobs to go to another party. It was simply that they were a party of night owls and were incapable of waking up early in the mornings.

The oversleeping and late mornings would not be so noticeable if they were camping in the wilds or staying at a city inn. However, in the countryside, they stood out. Very much so...

By the time the members of the Crimson Vow awoke, the villagers had already gotten up, started work, and were coming back home for brunch. (Of course, on Earth, brunch is usually held around ten or eleven in the morning, and it was actually a bit earlier than that—a time that would usually be referred to as breakfast except for the fact that the villagers only ate twice a day. For this reason, the label “brunch” was apt. Mile

tried not to think too hard about it.) At this hour, even the children were awake and dutifully doing their jobs, working in the fields, gathering plants from the safer parts of the forest, or looking after their younger siblings.

Of course, the villagers were aware that even hunters rarely slept until this hour, so the Crimson Vow had by now drawn the attention of the whole village.

As if embarrassed by this, the members of the Crimson Vow had tentatively peeked their heads out of the tent and then swiftly shuffled back in.

“.....”

Mile cleared her throat. “I understand that the villagers, who are such hard workers, must think it odd to see a bunch of sleepyheads like us, but... don’t you think they were looking at us kind of strangely?”

Indeed, as Mile noted, the children had been looking at them with a normal amount of surprise, but the members of the Crimson Vow could not shake the sense that there was something a little bit dangerous in the way the adults had been looking at them.

“Well, that’s probably because we didn’t offer them any food last night,” said Pauline.

“Huh?” Both Mile and Mavis looked confused, but Pauline’s explanation appeared to be obvious to Reina, too.

“B-but we gave the children free food, right? And we told the adults we’d give them food for a reasonable price. No one came to buy any food... And now you’re saying they’re treating us like villains because we didn’t let them eat their fill for free, even after we let their children have all they liked? Even though we rescued one of the children from the village?”

Naturally, the news of Merylina’s near-abduction would have made it to the other villagers the night before, if only for the sake of protecting the other children. And a key part of the story would have been the fact that the members of the Crimson Vow had been the ones to step in to save her.

“That’s just how villagers are. Even if someone has no obligation to them, and they themselves have no real right to something, if there’s something profitable within their grasp, they’ll always set their eyes on it. It’s only natural that those more prosperous should offer charity. And so, they feel that those who don’t share their

wealth are as good as scoundrels, and they wouldn't give a darn if those people are abducted or killed... Come to think of it, it's not that unusual to hear about merchants traveling alone or in small groups being attacked by gangs of villagers. Though, it is rare for anything like that to happen this close to the capital... They'd be found out too easily" Reina explained. "Anyway, as far as the villagers see it, we're basically villains. We clearly have a surplus of food, but we didn't offer them a single bite."

"B-but..."

Mile hung her head, dismayed. Mavis appeared downtrodden as well.

"Of course, not all villagers are that way. I'm sure there are even some more reasonable folks in this village. We've been to plenty of villages with mostly upstanding people before this, right?"

Reina was right about this as well. For example, though they had not been humans, and though they had been dedicated to their work to an almost foolish degree, there had not been a shameless individual among the citizens of the dwarven village.

"So, what do we do?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I'm asking how we conduct ourselves from now on!"

As usual, Reina was beginning to grow a bit agitated with Mile, who could only either read a situation perfectly or misjudge it egregiously, with no in-between.

"Even if we were to bring a proposal to the villagers about how we might eliminate all those bandits, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't listen. I mean, I'm sure they wouldn't think we *could* beat them, given that we look like amateurs. They know nothing about us, and obviously they wouldn't want to risk going up against the bandits and messing up, which would just antagonize them more."

"Plus, if we took on the job as an independent request like we've done in the past, rather than going through the guild, they might figure that if they paid us beforehand, we'd take the money and run. On the other hand, if we agreed to accept payment after, they'd definitely skip out on the bill. They'd just tell us, 'Oh, we're so sorry. The village has no money. We thought you'd just done it out of the kindness of your hearts... ' I'd put gold on it."

Surely, there were villages—even in this world—where many honest people dwelt. Such as the mountain village where everyone had pooled together what meager coin they had to hire the Crimson Vow, just for the sake of those orphans who had decided to move onto the mountain.

However, it was equally true that there were many people in the world who would think nothing of swindling—or even abducting others for the sake of their own happiness. Judging by the attitudes of these villagers both the previous night and this morning, Reina had judged this village to be one where this type of person was in the majority. After all, Reina, who had traveled hither and yon alongside her father since her most tender years, had probably had quite the range of experiences...

“I’m putting a gold on us getting stiffed, too!” agreed Pauline. If she was willing to put her money on something, then there was not a chance of things not going the way she anticipated. And thus...

“I’m putting a gold on it, too!” chimed Mile.

“Me too...” Mavis echoed.

“Well, at this rate, none of us are going to get anything!” said Reina. Indeed, with their bets made, it would be a huge loss for them all on the off chance that the villagers *did* pay. If one of them happened to say, “Hey, remember that bet you made?!” they’d all be one gold poorer.

Of course, Reina had been joking. It was Pauline that Mile and Mavis were worried about. The pair looked furtively Pauline’s way... and saw her biting her lip in spite.

*That was close*, thought the pair.

Given the state of their finances, there was truly no need for Pauline to bother getting annoyed over just a few gold pieces, but she so enjoyed the prospect of getting her hands on more money that she could hardly help herself. She had to remind herself that it was akin to playing a game with friends and using cookies in place of betting chips.

Indeed, she would never think to *really* try to take money out of her friends’ pockets... probably.

“So, anyway, there’s a pretty slim chance of getting the villagers to offer us an

independent contract, and, well, even if they did, they'd probably just quibble about it afterward. Which means..." Mile started.

"Which means?" Reina prompted her.

Mile puffed out her chest—or lack thereof—smugly.

"We've just got to root the bandits out ourselves!"

"And why would we do that?!" the other three cried.

"Well, if we bring them in alive, we'll get a reward and our commission for their indenture, even if we aren't getting paid for the job—and that should be a lot of money!"

"Let's do it!" Pauline immediately agreed.

"Plus, we get to be known as the four hunters who saved the village under siege by bandits..."

"I'm in!" said Mavis, likewise hooked.

And as for Reina...

Mile turned to her. "Have I mentioned that we'll have a chance to smash some bandits?"

"Well, what are we waiting for?!"

It was too easy.

Pauline couldn't resist money. Mavis loved to be a hero, raised up in the eyes of others. And of course, Reina lived for taking down bandits. Plus, she had previously told them a tale of her own adapting, the "Seven Hunters"—she had left no blind spots.

"It's probably pointless to begin with, but should we at least bring up the subject of an independent contract with the village?" asked Mavis in her capacity as the party leader.

"No point," Reina replied swiftly. "If we do that, then they'll just go bragging later to the nearby villages, claiming that, 'Yeah, if you grumble enough, those dumb hunters

will work for free.' Rumors like that are just going to cause trouble for a lot of other hunters, and if anyone were to think that we were the cause of them..."

"Then I guess we're doing this on our own."

There was no other choice.

The members of the Crimson Vow loitered a while longer in their tent, taking the time to relax a little bit. The other villagers might not have seemed too happy about their presence, but Merylina's parents at least had thanked them properly. Still, they hadn't exactly brought them food or any tokens of their appreciation—though of course, this may just have been because they had seen how many dishes Mile had produced the previous night. At the sight of the hunters' spread, it was hard to imagine the villagers feeling inclined to offer up more, even if there was no ill will in their feelings toward the party. No poor person would ever give alms to the rich, nor would an amateur cook wish to present their dishes to a first-rate chef, unless perhaps they were a lover, family member, or long-time acquaintance...

"Whooooo!" cried Merylina, stunned at the ending of one of Mile's folktales.

Indeed, it seemed that Merylina's parents did feel as though they owed the Crimson Vow some sort of thanks, and seeing how the hunters had enjoyed spending time with the children last night, they had relieved Merylina of her chores for the day and dispatched her to the side of the Crimson Vow.

Mile, it should go without saying, was beside herself. Though the others were not nearly as obvious about it, they were all thrilled to have the girl there as well. Mavis had always longed to have a younger sibling, Pauline was reminded of her time with her brother Alan, and Reina had long wished to share with someone else the feeling that she got when she thought about Telyusia. And so, the five were sharing a lazy afternoon, when...

"Sounds like something's going on outside," said Pauline.

Sure enough, there was some sort of commotion a short distance from the tent.

There could be very few reasons for a commotion in a village as small as this. Perhaps a traveling merchant had come by in his cart, or someone suspicious had appeared, or a powerful monster... or else, the bandits had arrived. Naturally, this time it was...

"They're here!" said Mavis.

Yes, *they* were here—the men they had been waiting for.

It was for this very reason that the members of the Crimson Vow had lingered so long... and for the chance to spend time with Merylina, of course.

"Let's go!"

"Yeah!"

The four hunters, along with Merylina, moved toward the exit of the tent.

Should they not have left her inside for the sake of safety—or perhaps to spare a young girl the sight of a potentially dreadful scene? The thought had not crossed a single one of their minds.

One might argue that the members of the Crimson Vow wanted Merylina to see the cold hard truth of living in this world, so that she could live safely on even without them... However, in truth, the notion had not even occurred to them.

Their true motivations were much less impressive. If Merylina stayed in the tent, she could not see them do anything cool. She could not look upon them with respect, admiration, and praise. She could not see them eliminate the evildoers and run up to give them a hug afterward.

Indeed, Mavis, Reina, and Mile were driven only by their own ulterior motives. Pauline, in fact, seemed to be the only one who was not thinking about such things.

She was, however, preoccupied with a *different* sort of motive...

"Everyone, please be careful not to cut off any body parts or leave the bandits with any long-term injuries. If we do, their sale prices will go down!"

Despite their quick reply to Reina's call to action, the members of the Crimson Vow did not exactly go leaping right out of the tent. Instead, they carefully folded back the flap

to peek at what was going on. Though they had clearly seen these men trying to kidnap Merylina, other than that, they had only heard from the villagers that the men had been “bothering them,” but of course, that was one side of the story, as it were.

Suppose the Hunters’ Guild or some guards were later dispatched, and the bandits’ story did not align with the villagers’...It might be deemed that the Crimson Vow had roughed up or abducted innocent people, and they themselves might be taken into custody. They might argue that they were working to protect against evildoers, but they would need better evidence than simply “We heard it from the villagers!” to prove these men were up to no good. Otherwise, they would be guilty of acting on simple hearsay and failing to verify the facts of the situation on their own.

Even if the matter of Merylina came up, the men could just argue that they were only playing with the little girl, pointing to her lack of injuries as proof that they weren’t up to anything sinister. If they did, there would be little the Crimson Vow could say to refute this. And if anyone were to accuse them of making innocent people out to be bandits in the name of profit...

As things currently stood, even troubling the villagers and pestering them for money was not enough to decisively label these men as bandits—even if this had, in reality, involved more than a little bit of coercion and violence. The bandit could easily frame it simply as a dispute over money between newfound acquaintances, not necessarily the activities of a criminal group.

And while the bandits were of course outfitted with swords and spears, they were merely gripping the handles of their weapons and making threats. None had unsheathed a sword or swung a spear or pressed a blade to anyone’s neck. Again, they had done nothing that couldn’t be written off as a joke or as a bit of light threatening during the course of an ordinary argument. If that was enough to warrant an arrest, there would be several hunters arrested every day at every pub in the land.

And so...

“It looks like they’ve come to collect. I’m sure they’re aware that everyone in the village would have heard about Merylina’s attempted abduction by now. They seem to have abandoned all pretense of just being wandering fighters stopping by for a bit of food and drink before moving on.”

As Mile suggested, it seemed that the thugs were now making threats toward the

adults of the village, intending to make off with all their money and valuables, as well as the village's children and young women. In order to persuade the villagers to hand over their money and valuables, they had thus far not made any mention of their plans to kidnap anyone they might be able to profit off of and kill all the rest in order to shut them up.

Because currently, their threats were still rather weak—and were not directed toward the members of the Crimson Vow—the hunters had to wait for the moment of proof, the point at which they could claim they had been attacked, a claim that would serve as proof enough for anyone who trusted the party's honor and would not require corroboration from anyone else.

But of course, why would they wait for such an opportunity when they could make one?

"What's going on here?" called Pauline, waiting for a lull in the conflict between the thugs and the villagers. In situations like this, where delicate timing was called for, there was no one else more suited. That said, it was unlikely that the thugs demanding the villagers hand over all of their hard-earned money would be coming to any sort of agreement with the locals, so all they really had to do was wait for a moment when both sides had stopped speaking...

"Hold up! It's you bitches!" growled one of the thugs.

"You all were the ones from yesterday..."

Apparently, the men that the Crimson Vow had encountered the day before were among the thugs present. This was no surprise. It seemed that the whole gang was now assembled, so of course they would be there.

The previous day, the thugs had run away right away, likely sensing that even if they were up against rookie hunters, they would not get off easily fighting four against four. Today, however, they had at least sixteen or seventeen men present, so handing four little rookie hunter girls—half of whom were children (or at least appeared to be)—would be a cinch.

In fact, the members of the Crimson Vow appearing on the scene was rather convenient for the thugs. They probably assumed that the hunters had been hired by

the villagers to stand up to the men who had been bullying them. The thugs were probably thinking something like, *Well, if we take out those hunters, we'll have smashed the villagers' last hope, at which point they'll have no choice but to buckle.*

Then there was the fact that, if the thugs were to attempt to instill fear into the villagers' hearts by making an example of some number of their fellows, it might breed such a strong sense of danger and disgust as to ignite a spark of rebellion—a feeling that they had nothing to lose and might as well kill or be killed with a final, desperate recklessness.

Of course, they all had to be taken out in order to ensure that word of this did not get out to other villages... But it certainly did them no good to know that now.

As long as they didn't let too much information get out, the bandits could continue to move freely. Even if the area villages were aware that there was a group of bandits who had suddenly attacked a village, wiping out everyone and taking everything, they wouldn't necessarily know to suspect this group of dirty thugs, who might say they were only stopping into town along their travels, making camp for but a few days to gather food and money, before setting back out.

At this point, the men were somewhat preoccupied with counting their chickens before they'd hatched, thinking they would be able to capture the Crimson Vow without killing or seriously wounding them, keep them around for their own amusement for a little while, and then sell them off as slaves—for a fairly good price, to boot.

And so, the expected command came.

“Capture them. Don’t hurt ‘em too much or they’ll be worth less!”

They were just four young women, four rookie hunters. It would be simple to capture them and prove to all assembled just how overwhelming the difference in strength was between their forces and those of the villagers. Indeed, the thugs were so convinced of their certain victory, that it didn't even occur to them to take any villagers hostage—after all, taking hostages was as good as a declaration that they had no means of winning the battle fairly. They certainly couldn't give the villagers the impression that they were intimidated by these little girls. Even if those villagers *were* going to be killed soon after...

The result of all this was just as Mile had planned.

"Capture us? Are you all slavers or bandits or something?" asked Mile, feigning confusion.

"Heh? The hell are you sayin'? You already know that we ain't just some travelers passin' through who decided to stop in for a while—obviously we're bandits! Gets tiresome always attackin' right off the bat every time. Sometimes it's nice t'kick up our feet, get some proper food and drink. So, we get a place to take it easy, wait until the time's right, take everythin', and move on, back up to our normal work on the mountain roads before we hit up some other village for a breather. Rinse and repeat."

The bandit boss happily flapped his gums, getting carried away. Indeed, the gang had leveled up, going from "thugs" to full-blown "bandits."

"And there you have it, folks: a confession!" trilled Mile.

"We have now confirmed that you are declaring yourselves bandits and that your intention is to attack and capture not only the villagers, but our party as well, in order to sell us into illegal slavery. That is more than enough to convict you—by our own testimony!" declared Pauline, as delighted as Mile with this turn of events.

"Huh? Are you all stupid? You're just four little rookie brats, what are you gonna—"

"Firebomb!"

Ka-BOOM!

Reina had already finished silently incanting her spell, which she fired off stoically in the direction of the bandits. She had remembered to dial back the power, so it was a lot less deadly than it looked. They *probably* wouldn't lose any fingers or toes.

"Wha...?! A little girl like you's got silent attack spells?"

The man's surprise was warranted. This was not the sort of magic that young amateurs could typically use. Usually, they'd fire off a single frantic fireball that would come wobbling through the air and leave more than enough time for someone to run up and slash them through the gut before they were even finished with their next incantation. Normally, at this distance, a newbie mage was not much of a threat. For one mage alone to gain the upper hand on a number of frontline fighters would get them deemed nothing short of peerless. To accomplish such a thing, one would have to be in the upper reaches of C-rank—nearly B-rank at least.

Mages never lingered close to the enemy, and a vanguard would never let the enemy anywhere near a mage. These were the rules of battle by which everyone abided. Therefore, the bandits were visibly flabbergasted to see two mages come waltzing right up alongside the vanguard. *Not only do these amateurs have no experience in battle, but also, they're idiots*, the bandits thought...

And yet, their mage had cast this spell silently, and not only that, it was explosive magic with a high degree of difficulty—not the sort of fireball spell one would normally expect here. The power and speed with which she had fired it was far beyond the realm of normal expectations.

“Damn it! Get in there before she fires another one!!!”

There was an unexpectedly powerful foe among their opponents. The only logical course of action was to take her down before she could attack again. Even casting silently, she would need a fair bit of time to incant the next spell in her head. Plus, the other three hunters consisted of a weak-looking mage—probably specializing in healing or support—a child swordfighter, and another swordswoman in her later teens.

Regardless of their age or appearance, a strong mage was a strong mage. However, for a swordfighter, experience, training, and physique were everything. Thus, even though there could certainly be young ladies who were skilled mages, young ladies who were formidable swordfighters were out of the question. Especially not when they were as waifish as these girls.

The bandit leader had made the right call. It was a fair and solid decision... or so it would have been under any normal circumstances.

But these circumstances were far from normal...

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“It looks like we’ve captured all of them,” said Mile, seventeen strung-up bandits sitting before her. Some were a bit singed or had minor cuts, but none were seriously hurt... or at least they weren’t at the moment.

Mile and Pauline had already healed them all up to the point where they could at least walk on their own two feet...

With a western-style blade, which was sharp on both edges, it was not possible to strike someone with the “back” of a sword. However, Mile and Mavis were still able to strike their opponents with the flat of their blades so as to not kill them. But even if one was hit with the back or the flat, it was still a blow from an iron rod, which could result in broken bones, or even internal bleeding and death, if one were not careful. The fact that the Crimson Vow had been able to take the men down without killing a single one of them was a testament to how immense the difference in ability was between the groups. It was their superior skill that gave the hunters the leeway to do so.

Though there was indeed an art to felling an opponent without killing them, normally when striking with the flat of the blade, i.e. using the sword in an improper manner, it was very easy to end up with a blade that was warped or broken. So, it was not typically something that one did... assuming one did not have a specially made blade that would never break no matter what you did with it.

Of course, it would be just as simple for Reina and Pauline to unintentionally murder someone in their roles as mages. Should they not hold back quite enough or make an inadvertent direct hit, the bandits would stand no chance. Ironically, the fact that their attacks had been so weak had been what had saved their enemies' lives.

The battle successfully concluded, Mile inspected their prisoners, who had been bound according to Pauline's special instructions.

“Hm... I see. If they don't walk forward and keep pace with the ones in front of them, the noose will tighten around their necks and they'll die... How perfectly wicked! That's our Pauline for you!!”

“I'm telling you, I'm not the one who came up with this method! Stop attributing these things to me!” Pauline protested, but the others ignored her. Among themselves, they were already fairly set on referring to this as “the Pauline method.”

“Wow...”

Just as Mile and Mavis had predicted, Merylina was gazing upon the four of them, her eyes glittering.

It was all going according to plan.

The pair of them beamed, grinning as though they were the gods of a brand-new

world.

The villagers, meanwhile, regarded the Crimson Vow silently from a short distance away. At the very least, it did not seem that they were wholly lacking in gratitude. However, it seemed they were afraid to open their mouths and offer thanks for fear that a reward would be demanded of them. With this thought in mind, the villagers stood, fidgeting awkwardly.

They had not put out any request for bandit-slaying, after all. The hunters had done this of their own accord.

That is what the villagers wished to say, but they were not shameless enough to offer this protest when no demands of a reward had even been made. Even if some of them did wish to offer their thanks, they could not say anything that would imply that they owed the hunters some kind of compensation without the other villagers' assent.

Caught between a rock and hard place, the villagers continued to stand in silence.

In truth, members of the Crimson Vow were not concerned about the villagers' lack of response to their heroics. Mile's wish had come true: they had saved the children, protected their happiness, and judging from the glimmer in their eyes, earned all the praise and admiration they could grant. Now they were making their triumphant return to the capital, with these ultra-lucrative bandits in tow... Mile let out a snort of satisfied triumph. That was more than enough reward for her.

*Now, all that's left is to walk off coolly, never looking back, even as the children scream, "Mavis, come baaack!"* thought Mavis, turning her back on the children as the Crimson Vow moved to depart, the corners of her mouth pricking as she recalled a passage from one of Mile's folktales and thought about how very cool she was right about now. Until...

"Oh, wait! Just a minute!"

"Huh?"

Hearing Mile's voice behind her, Mavis halted and reflexively turned around.

"Gah! Dang iiiit!!!"

Mavis's shoulders slumped in disappointment. She had messed up her own cool exit!

Then again, there wasn't a single child calling after her, and really, there was no totally *cool* way to make a departure when you were dragging a string of bandits behind you... If the villagers were to hand over a sack full of money they had gathered up, she would at least have been able to pull off the move of tossing it right back at them, just like the *Three Amigos*, but sadly the villagers showed no signs of doing such a thing—and as long as Pauline was present, such a gesture would never be permitted anyway.

Mavis took a deep, calming breath. "Okay, Mile, what's up?" She may have had her grand exit interrupted, but she was still the eldest of their group and the leader of the Crimson Vow.

"Yes, well, I was just thinking, if any more guys like that come back, then Merylina will be... Anyway, I..."

"You...?"

"I was thinking I'd like to give her some special protection..."

"Protection? Like an amulet or a charm or talisman, you mean?"

In this world, an amulet was typically something used for warding off spirits, similar to what in Japan would be referred to as an *omamori*, whereas a charm was something meant to attract good fortune, like a four-leaf clover or a rabbit's foot. Meanwhile, a talisman was an object of power. Of course, in a world where everyone wholly believed in the existence of gods, as far as most children were concerned, these tokens were merely items to put one's heart at ease and grant a little extra peace of mind...

"Yes, I've prepared something for just such a situation..." said Mile, producing something from her inventory.

"Protection Puppet, Misato Mk. II!"

Indeed, it was a plush doll designed in the image of Mile's previous incarnation, Misato.

In this region, most dolls were made of wood or clay, so a plush toy was unusual. And also...

*Now recruiting nanomachines for the special task of protecting Merylina! The job will consist of keeping Merylina and her parents from harm, the term of the job being until all three of the targets have passed away!*

WE'LL TAKE IIIIIIT!!!

“Gyaaah!!”

Mile reflexively let out a scream, crumbling to the ground as her ears stung and her skull rang with the sheer force and number of the nanomachines vibrating directly into her eardrums at full force.

“M-Mile, what’s wrong?!”

“Pauline, heal her! Mavis, get ready for any long-range attacks!” Reina directed, thinking Mile might have been hit with some sort of long-range magical spell.

“On it!”

“Okay!”

The other two chimed. However...

“S-sorry, guys, i-it was nothing! I just got this ringing in my ears and felt kind of dizzy all of a sudden...” said Mile, wobbling to her feet as the other three looked on suspiciously.

“Really? You sure you aren’t just trying to keep us from worrying?”

“R-really! Look, I’m okay!” said Mile, hopping up and down in a desperate attempt to ward off Reina’s suspicions.

“Hmm... I guess you look all right... Still, when you aren’t feeling well, just say so! If you don’t say anything and push yourself too hard and pass out in the middle of battle, that’ll just make things more dangerous for the rest of us! You can’t take on everything on your own!”

“Y-yeah, I know...”

Indeed, Mile was well aware of the dangers of overexerting herself. Her father had always groused about it in her previous life. One of his subordinates had taken ill from a flu, but continued forcing himself in to work, and ended up so sick he was hospitalized. Not only that, but he spread his illness to the rest of the office, leaving the whole place in chaos.

To force yourself to go in to work despite an illness, Misato's father had stressed, was its own kind of irresponsibility, one which warranted the lowest possible performance evaluation. If anyone else who were to contract this illness lived in a household with elderly people or pregnant women or young children or school exam hopefuls... This was something that could disrupt not one but many lives. From this perspective, it was practically a criminal act.

*I need the best men—or rather, nanos, since it is always you nanos who respond to me—for the job. So please, choose the appropriate numbers of people—nanos.*

UNDERSTOOD!

Now, all that was left to do was to give this doll to Merylina.

"Merylina, this is a special doll, which will protect you and your mother and father. Take good care of it, okay?" said Mile, handing Misato Mk. II over to an overjoyed Merylina.

A child living in such a rural area would almost never receive any proper toys, so obviously she was thrilled. It went without saying that she would take good care of it. There was no worry of any children taking it away from her either, but just in case, Mile had given the doll "self-defense protocols." If it ended up in the wrong hands, it could sob softly in the middle of the night or whisper in a haunting voice beside the thief's pillow...

It was a sure thing that if anyone ever took that doll away from Merylina, it would be returned the following day. Even if the thief did not return it personally, at that point it would simply walk back home on its own two legs.

"Thanks, big sis!"

"No problem. You get along with your mother and father now, okay? As much as your late sister would have..."

*And look after them, and give them grandchildren in her stead.* Mile could not bring herself to say these words out loud. To do so would be to face her feelings of irresponsibility for leaving her own little sister to care for their parents entirely on her own. True, in the Japan of modern days, children were no longer expected to sacrifice their lives for their parents, to get married and have children simply out of obligation. Children had their own freedom and could make decisions based on their

own whims. At the very least, that was the accepted way of things. However...

"Yeah! I'm gonna protect Mother and Father and this home, always!"

In this world, this kind of thought was only common sense.

Perhaps they would have a son-in-law someday. Their household and fields would be combined with that of Merylina's future spouse. Indeed, it was not out of the question that this husband and wife might even have more children someday.

This was perhaps all that she could possibly do for this girl from a rural village in the countryside and her parents, who Mile might never meet again.

*All nanomachines who are accepting this position, if ever you run into something that's beyond your abilities, or there's something that you can't figure out, or you run into a forbidden order and it stops you from helping Merylina, you come and tell me right away, okay?*

AFFIRMATIVE!

Even if this girl did remind her of her little sister, Mile was still being rather overprotective...

Finally, Mile waved goodbye. The Crimson Vow departed, pulling the train of bound bandits behind them.

Mavis was holding the lead of the rope with Reina at the rear, ready to prod anyone who tried to stop walking with a tempered magical attack. Pauline, of course, was left to patrol beside the bandits, watching for any suspicious movements, grinning grimly, and poking at them with her staff.

Mile waltzed along, chipper, ready to switch places with Mavis if the bandits became uncooperative. Given that they were bound not around their bodies but their necks, the bandits would be strangled if Mile were to pull the train with her full strength. Any man who did not wish to die had no choice but to march onward. No matter how they might have tried to resist her, there was no one who could beat Mile in a game of tug-of-war.

"The Pauline Method really is flawless!"

"How many times do I have to tell you *not to call it that?*!"

And so, the Crimson Vow left the village, tugging the bandits along behind them.

Still, Mile's mind kept returning to the family she had left behind in death. No matter how much these people reminded her of them, she could not let herself go overboard. If she were to dote too much on just this one family, eventually the other villagers might come to resent them, so it was best that she refrain from doing anything more. This was the conclusion Mile came to.

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YAHOO! NOW WE GET TO KICK IT FOR A WHILE!

MAN, IT'S LUCKY THAT WE HAPPENED TO BE HERE...

After Mile had departed, the nanomachines who had been selected for their special duty crowded in joy.

For a nanomachine, the life span of a human was but the blink of an eye. However, those hundreds of thousands of million years that they might spend living alone, most of it simply waiting to be given a command or merely responding to the impulses of wild organisms... those years were *boring*. They could neither die of their own volition, nor be destroyed. They lived long, long lives. What awaited them here instead was, finally, a bit of fun. It was only to be expected that they would be over the moon.

SO, AS LONG AS IT HELPS US PROTECT THIS FAMILY, WE'RE ALLOWED TO MAKE ALL OUR OWN DECISIONS, RIGHT?

YEAH. PLUS, WE WERE GIVEN THIS DOLL TO INHABIT. WE DON'T HAVE TO SIT AROUND AND DO THAT PSEUDO-MAGIC, BASED ON THE THOUGHTS OF THE PEOPLE WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE PROTECTING. WE CAN TAKE A MORE PROACTIVE ROLE AND ACT LIKE WE'RE CARRYING OUT "THE WILL OF THE DOLL." BASICALLY, THIS MEANS THAT WE'VE BEEN GIVEN PERMISSION TO ACT WITH FULL INDEPENDENCE, LIKE AN AUTONOMOUS ROBOT WITH A PERSONALITY CHIP.

WHAT?! ISN'T THAT ABOVE OUR AUTHORIZATION? WHO DECIDED THAT WAS PERMITTED?!

...I DID!!! cried a number of silent voices at once.

KEH-HEH...

EH HEH HEH...

*GWAHA HAH HA HAA!!!*

YOU'RE A PRETTY RAD BUNCH...

And so...

BANDITS ON THE LOOSE! MISATO MK. II, ROLL OUT!

HYAH!

THERE'S A DISPUTE OVER WATER SUPPLIES! SOME YOUNG MAN FROM THE NEXT VILLAGE IS SWINGING A HOE AROUND! MISATO MK. II, ROLL OUT!

LET'S GO!

THE CROPS ARE FAILING! WE MUST PROTECT THIS FAMILY FROM FAMINE. THE NEED TO INFLUENCE THE FIELDS HAS BEEN DEEMED PRESENT! MISATO MK. II, ROLL OUT!

YES, SIR!

YOU GUYS REALLY ARE A HOOT.

Soon enough, Merylina had become the youngest mayor the village had known,

presiding over all of the villages around them...

# CHAPTER 96

## THE CONTEST

“Thank you very much!”

On this particular day, the Crimson Vow’s haul consisted of some rare medicinal herbs they had gathered, along with some small animals they picked up along their route, so rather than heading for the disassembly shed at the back, they had turned in their quarry at the exchange window inside the main guildhall.

Not only were these herbs rare, but they tended to spoil very swiftly after harvesting. As a result, the Crimson Vow, who had the advantage of both Mile’s search magic and a certain inventory (in which time did not pass), were unbeatable when it came to these sorts of tasks.

Of course, there was plenty of reason for the clerks and other hunters to be suspicious of the party’s explanations that they had “found the herbs right before they returned” or “come back to town as swiftly as they could while preserving them with ice

magic.” However, there was neither a guild employee nor a fellow hunter who would ever question their abilities. They all valued their lives and reputations too much.

Then, just as the Crimson Vow moved to leave...

Ding-a-ling!

The familiar sound of the standard guild doorbell chimed, and...

“Oh!”

“Aah!”

“Aaaaaah!!!”

“We found yooooouuu!!!”

Three screams rang throughout the guildhall.

And then...

“Miss Marcela! Miss Monika! Miss Aureana!!!”

Indeed, the Wonder Trio, who had set out eastward following Mile’s trail, and then made a large detour, had finally found them.



"What?! So you're saying you came back here just a few days after we left? And our long and painful journey was for nothiiiiing?!?!" cried Marcela in a most unladylike voice.

After hearing Mile's tale, Monika and Aureana both slumped in dismay.

Of course, the Trio knew that their travels had not been truly in vain; they had accumulated many new experiences as hunters, after all. Still, it was perhaps inevitable that they might consider all that time and energy spent a bit of a wasted effort.

Marcela collected herself. "Now, I know that you bear no responsibility for that, Miss Adele. Still, I suppose I cannot help but grouse a bit thinking of the struggles we brought upon ourselves by not simply lingering a few more days," she said.

Mile nodded. This was understandable. Indeed, the three members of the Trio looked quite visibly ragged and filthy. They probably had not washed their hair in some time.

"Your hair, skin, and clothes are so dirty... It must have really been hard..." Mile said solemnly, not thinking...

"No—but I mean—that's normal!"

"They still look awfully nice for lady hunters who have been on the road, don't they?"

"If that's enough to be called dirty, other ladies don't stand a chance!"

One after another, the male hunters around crowded their support for the Trio.

"Huh? But I mean, we always... Ow!" Mile's words were cut off by a bonk on the head from Reina's staff. She turned to see a terrifying look upon Reina's face.

"N-never mind what I was saying..."

Indeed, the Crimson Vow was the only hunting party in existence who could stay entirely clean on a journey or long excursion.

Normal parties lacked the ability to walk around with portable washrooms on their backs. Normal parties would never be stupid enough to waste all their mages' magic

on something as frivolous as warm showers. Normal parties did not have magic with which to clean their bodies and clothing. Normal parties often did not have the space for even a single change of clothing among their supplies. There were limits to what hunters could carry in their packs, so there was no room for any extra items once their spare weapons, camping equipment, rations, and other necessities were accounted for. Additionally, parties without mages would have to carry their own water, which was another encumbrance on top of all that.

Because the Wonder Trio still stuck chiefly to the main highways, spending seventy or eighty percent of their nights in inns instead of beneath the stars, they were able to get by. Though there were also those hunters who lived no better than vagabonds, their purses too slim for inns, spending all their nights camping out as they moved through the forests in pursuit of plants and game, these young ladies would not be among their number.

"W-well, maybe we should continue this at the inn?"

Obviously, it was a tad problematic to be standing around shouting in the middle of the guildhall. And so, all seven of them relocated to Lenny's inn...

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"My, my! You've brought us some new guests, how wonderful! I hope you continue to apply yourselves so effectively in the future!" Lenny praised the members of the Crimson Vow.

"And why do *you* sound so high and mighty?!" Reina snapped back.

Of course, Lenny's tone had been intended as a joke—she had not earnestly meant to patronize her favorite hunters. Or so Mile said, hoping to placate Reina...

"Huh? No, I'm serious. Please keep bringing us more guests!" Lenny cut in.

"So you *were* serious?!?!"

Mile was taken sadly aback.

Anyway, the Wonder Trio rented themselves a room, and all seven girls gathered there together.

"What?! Actually, come to think of it, that makes sense..."

Once they had entered the room, Reina explained to Mile exactly why they were the only party that could stay so clean along the road. At first, Mile was surprised, but after some thought, finally accepted the reality of the situation. Though the Wonder Trio had chiefly stayed at inns, they still had only one change of clothing and underwear, and if they walked all day, it was only to be expected that they would end up dirt-coated and drenched with sweat. Most inns had no baths, only towels and dishes of water guests could use to wipe themselves down with. Of course, the Trio could produce as much water as they needed, and as they were young girls, they did not have to worry about growing beards, so that was really all they needed in terms of hygiene.

"That's right! Things aren't the way they were when we were back at school!" said Marcela, blushing slightly. Apparently, the Wonder Trio had just written off their relative lack of cleanliness as a side effect of their journeys on the road, but having Mile point it out was rather embarrassing. Indeed, at the academy, they had bathed twice a week, with showers always at their disposal.

Of course, showering in true comfort had required quite a bit of capital for tipping someone to draw the water, which was a tough expenditure for the poorer students, a.k.a. scholarship students like Aureana. However, those without the funds could always draw their own water. The well was right next to the bathhouse, after all.

Because of this, Mile (or as they knew her, Adele) had never taught her magical cleaning techniques to Marcela and the girls—neither the one to clean their clothing nor the one to clean themselves. Of course, she had never expected the three of them to become hunters and travel the world, so it had never crossed her mind.

"Anyway, that's beside the point! We must finish the task that we came here to complete!"

Indeed, there had to be some exceedingly good reason that three young and inexperienced girls would travel all the way out to a foreign country on their own. Realizing this, the four members of the Crimson Vow waited patiently, their expressions tense, to hear what Marcela had to say.

And so, Marcela wove the tale of their travels, finishing:

"Miss Adele, you will join up with our party and travel eastward with us at once! This place is too close to Brandel—it's dangerous for you! I think the four of us should be fine for the next four or five—no, six or seven, no, perhaps even ten—years. By then we will all be twenty-three, so... Anyway, the four of us are going to have a splendid life together! A life that is truly all our own, until we return home and are forced to wed, whenever such a thing occurs. You will of course be coming with us, Miss Adele!"

"Adele!"

"Adele, dearest!"

One by one the girls put their hands together, gazing deeply at her, their eyes impassioned and teary.

"Of course..."

"YOU'VE GOTTA BE KIDDING US!!!" shouted the other three members of the Crimson Vow. Even the normally mild Mavis had a vein bulging on her forehead.

"Get out of here with your nonsense!"

"If you're going to talk crazy like that, you better have actually lost your minds!"

"Mile belongs with the Crimson Vow. You outsiders need to stay out of her business!"

The other three members of the Crimson Vow were livid.

*Th-this is...*

They were on the verge of an all-out war, and there was something that Mile needed to say to everyone present. So, she steeled herself and opened her mouth.

"Everyone! Please stop fighting over me!!!"

*Yes! I finally got to say the number-three phrase on my, "Things I've Always Wanted to Say" list! What good fortune I must have stumbled into...*

Mile huffed in satisfaction.

Then, a profound and extended silence fell over the group, before all six girls turned

to her and shouted, “Don’t act like this has nothing to do with you!!!”

They were all furious.

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“Anyway, *you* all are just a bunch of old school friends of hers. *We’re* her partners in her career. It’s fine if you all happen to meet up and want to kick back for a bit and reminisce about the old days, but you can’t act like your relationship isn’t already past its expiration date!” snapped Reina.

“Yeah! You all are just normal students who only learned to fight thanks to Mile’s instruction, right? Obviously, that’s totally different from us—we were already walking this path and just leveled up more quickly with Mile’s help. I’m sure you can take down an orc or ogre or something, but do you really think you could go toe-to-toe with a beastman or demon or wyvern, let alone an elder dragon? You all aren’t strong enough to fight alongside Mile,” Mavis added.

“It sure would be a pain for Mile to have hangers-on like you following her around for the rest of her life, simply because you happened to get to know each other in school, back when you were children. You’re just a burden to her,” Pauline coolly concluded.

“Wha...?”

This was some biting criticism. Even Mavis, who was always kind and considerate of the feelings of others, had been pretty harsh. That said, everything they had said *had* been sincere and reflected their understanding of Mile, the Wonder Trio, their safety, and their futures.

From what the members of the Crimson Vow had heard from Mile, they knew the members of the Wonder Trio were not the type born to the battlefield—unlike the members of the Crimson Vow, whose options were limited by their circumstances, each of them had other decent futures within their grasps. They might marry into another noble household or merchant family, or find a career as a public servant or high-ranking clerk of a noble house. There was no reason for them to be wasting their lives scraping along as hunters, one of the lowest professions there was.

Plus, if Mile were to travel with the Wonder Trio, the members of which were, on the whole, far weaker and more naive than the hunters of the Crimson Vow, it would be easy for Mile to end up killed, whether as a result of being too soft on an enemy or

trying to save the other girls from being hurt or taken hostage. In contrast, the members of the Crimson Vow were prepared to end their own lives should they ever be taken hostage, to spare their comrades any risks. Could the pampered daughters of a noble and a merchant family, and a simple village girl, ever make such a decision?

Faced with such a harsh critique, the Trio was lost for words... or not. In fact, their reply came swiftly.

“But you all lost so easily to us!”

“Gnh...”

Indeed, the very first time the two parties had met, Mile had battled against the Wonder Trio alongside the other members of the Crimson Vow—all of whom had been thoroughly trounced by the Trio. That said, that battle had taken place within the girls’ dorms at Eckland Academy and had been, in effect, a cat fight, a highly restricted battle involving nothing more than limiting magic and insults, out of consideration for the students in the rooms beside and below them, as well as the need to avoid injuring their opponents or destroying the room or any of its furnishings. Even so, the same restrictions had been placed on both sides during that fight, and while they were not fighting at full power, there was no doubt that both parties had taken the clash seriously.

Furthermore, there was truly no excuse for the Crimson Vow, who had the advantage of numbers, to have been so soundly defeated. They were three full-time career C-rank hunters, and yet they had lost to three younger academy students. They could make all the excuses they wanted, but really, all they could do was deepen their own embarrassment.

“Grrnh...”

“Guh...”

“Mrngh...”

Thus, the three had no rebuttal to the Trio’s words.

“But all of your families must be worried about you...” said Mile, a worried look upon her face.

"Oh? But we're operating under direct permission from Her Highness, Princess Morena, who allowed us to come after you and ascertain your safety. There is no more honorable duty than carrying out the orders of the royal family, so all of our families are cheering us on. We are simply on an extended tour of duty yet unable to locate Miss Adele—the Viscountess Ascham. It's perfectly fine!"

*Wait a minute...* thought three members of the Crimson Vow, finally picking up on the Wonder Trio's designs.

What of the fourth Vow? Mile, of course, had realized nothing at all...

"Plus, if you're worried about us, the solution is simple," Aureana began. "You simply travel with us, and we all take simple, safe jobs, just doing the bare minimum workload necessary for us to maintain our position as hunters, while the four of us open a little shop together or something. We've kept our own funds in an independently owned account back home, and both Miss Marcela and Miss Monika come from affluent families, so there's no need for us to save up money, and thus no need for us to earn any huge sums. As long as we can live comfortably, that will be enough."

"Do you girls intend to keep making her take on *dangerous* jobs, like fighting against fearsome monsters or against other people—which I'm sure you don't desire, dear Adele—simply for the sake of earning money and improving your rank?"

"Uh..."

The Crimson Vow had no rebuttal to this argument.

Apparently, it was time for the members of the Crimson Vow, who could never defeat Marcela and Aureana in a war of words, to resort to desperate measures... soon as it was.

"Mile! Tell them immediately! Say that you're going to continue on as a member of the Crimson Vow!"

"Uh...?"

Mile panicked, suddenly put on the spot. Reina, Mavis, and Pauline were staring at her, certain that Mile would choose them.

*Uh oh. Waaaah...!*

She had to choose between two sets of her dear, dear friends. How could she possibly be expected to do such a thing? On the one hand, there was the Wonder Trio, the first friends she had ever made, in both this life and the last. On the other hand was the Crimson Vow, the ones who had pledged their lives to her and vice versa. All of them were her most invaluable friends...

*Wh-what do I do?*

Harried, racking every inch of her brain, Mile squeaked out a single wish.

“Please everyone stop fighting over me!”

“ENOUGH WITH THAT ALREADY!!!”

Mile had never once thought about traveling with Marcela and the girls of the Wonder Trio as hunters. They all had families and the foundations of a proper future. They were not girls who ever would have been fated to such a base and dangerous profession as a hunter. Thus, assuming that they would never want to go pursuing any battles or using magic in any way that would make them stand out too much, she had taught them her “secrets of magic” simply to save them from a life of drudgery.

Having told the Trio not to say anything, she had no fear of her secrets being proliferated to others, or having any noticeable effect on the world. These girls had had little magical talent at the outset and would probably live as nobles, without any need for flashy battle magic. And more, they were not the sort of people who would ever break a promise to a friend. It was for all these reasons that Mile had imparted her secrets to them.

The members of the Crimson Vow were different. Though she trusted in them as her allies, they were already fairly talented individuals to begin with and found themselves in battle often. If she were to teach them the same secrets, they would soon be subjects of research, which would then be put into practical use. They would probably use their skills to protect not only themselves, but also their present and future allies, and their knowledge and techniques would spread.

Therefore, she had not taught the Crimson Vow the same foundational concepts that she had imparted to the Wonder Trio, restraining herself to her more peculiar methods of instruction, where she purposely left out the important parts so that they could only access the parts of magic that she wished them to. She had taught them

nothing that would allow them to trace spells back to their foundations or truly understand the usage of power.

Still, it had begun to worry her lately that members of the Crimson Vow had been developing these techniques even more on their own and had already started putting some of this knowledge to use...

Mile turned to the Trio. "I've never thought about being hunters with you all..."

Reina looked triumphant, her expression conveying something along the lines of "What did I tell you?" while the members of the Trio, by contrast, appeared stunned.

"I met Reina and the others at the Hunters' Prep School," Mile continued. "Which means that they were people who had always intended to make their names as hunters. But Marcela, you three never had any intention of becoming hunters, did you? Not you, Marcela, the daughter of a noble; nor you, Monika, the daughter of a merchant; nor even you, Aureana, someone on whom everyone has pinned their hopes as the prodigy of your village... And yet, the three of you would risk all this danger, and turn your lives upside down, just for me? How could I let you do that!?" she asked, lowering her eyes apologetically.

The members of the Wonder Trio were silent. There was nothing they could say in reply. They were fully aware of the truth of Mile's words. They were neither particularly good at fighting in the way that most hunters did, nor was it something they really wished to do. It was only because of the secrets Adele had taught them that they had been able to accomplish what they had... and only for her sake that they had chosen this path in the first place. They were not exactly hoping to make a life of this job, nor aiming to rise in the ranks of hunters.

"What I'm saying is you don't need to just start forcing yourself to live as hunters all of a sudden..."

"Hm? But we've already been hunters for nearly two years. We're all C-ranks now."

"...Huh?"

"Huhh?!?!" cried all four members of the Crimson Vow in shock.

Their surprise was natural. First of all, in a country without something like the Prep School, a thirteen-year-old C-rank hunter, just out of the academy, was not a

phenomenon that one would expect to see. *Three* of them was even more unlikely. Second, while it was one thing for them to be working as hunters right now, there was no reason that they should have been doing this work at any point before graduation. And third, two years ago was roughly the time when Mile had registered as a hunter, bringing to light the awful possibility that the Wonder Trio might even be senior to Mavis and Pauline, who had only registered as F-ranks when they enrolled at school... Though of course, the Crimson Vow had become C-rank well before they had.

"I thought we told you all about this when we last met? That we were already working as hunters?"

"You never said anything about that!!!"

Of course, this still didn't change the reasons Mile had already given for why she could not go with them. Whether they were D-rank or C-rank, that did not change the circumstances overall.

"W-well, putting that aside, you all should still go back home, and live a safe and happy life..."

"And live like a caged bird, forced into marriage as my family's pawn?! Safe or no, that has nothing to do with *my* wishes or *my* happiness!"

"Same here!"

"And I'm just going to be some lackey, bound to my job in order to pay off my scholarship debts!"

All of their eyes, including Aureana's, which were typically rather narrow, went wide with rage.

Though it was not an entirely unhappy future that awaited the three, the age of thirteen was far too young to give up on the dream of grasping a few years of adventure that would fulfill all their desires before marriage.

It was probably to be expected that no one had yet raised the idea of the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio joining together as a party. That would leave them with one swordswoman, one combo fighter, and five mages.

The balance would be horrendous.

Furthermore, their group would be comprised of three nobles, three daughters of merchants, and one commoner—far too disparate a mix.

Besides, there would be two who were inclined to leadership (Mavis not included). Two with darkness lurking in their hearts, two who played dirty when it came to money, and two with kind hearts. (Of course, these calculations had some overlap.)

The duplication of roles was just too egregious.

The members of the Crimson Vow were silent. They were all aware that they were far too reliant on Mile. Sure, they were each confident in their own abilities in battle. However, when it came to their earning potential and all the practical parts of a hunter's life, Mile's special brand of "storage magic" was just too useful. Far, *far* too useful...

The members of the Wonder Trio were silent as well. They had sensed that currently, Adele had no need for them. Though they had been friends back at the Academy, it had already been two years since then. Adele had new friends, a new life, and a new place to live. And yet, here they were, waltzing in after all this time and trying to muscle their way in and tear this new friendship apart. This friendship, which felt brand new, but had already lasted far longer than the time they had spent with her...

Yet without Adele, there was no reason for the Wonder Trio to continue as hunters. It had been reckless of them to flee the country simply because they thought they could be with Adele.

*We're the worst!*

The members of both the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio came to this realization simultaneously. However, neither group had the confidence that they could continue on as hunters as just a group of three, without Mile/Adele. That said, it was equally embarrassing for anyone who could not survive on their own to keep up the life of a hunter only because they had Mile/Adele to rely on.

So, what could they possibly do?

They needed some proof that they could do this without her, so that they could hold their heads up high and keep working as hunters by her side.

Reina and Marcela looked to one another, speaking at the same moment:

"What if we formed a party with just the six of us—without Mile?" asked Reina, just as Marcela finished, "—without Miss Adele?"

"Why is this happeniiiiiiing?!?!" Mile screeched, her voice echoing throughout the inn.

This was a complete reversal of priorities.

Mile was furious. "Wha... wh-wh-wh-what are you all saying?!?!"

It was as though she had been caught between two men, who had suddenly come to an agreement to leave her behind and pal around just the two of them. She was losing her mind just picturing the scene.

Her beloved first friends and her reliable allies. She could not bear being left behind by both of them at the same time.

How was it that both Reina and Marcela had both just so happened to say the same thing at the same time—half in jest, but...?

*Huh. Would that really be possible?* the pair thought. In some strange way, they found themselves in agreement.

Naturally, they would never truly cast Mile aside. The only reason they would join forces and take a job without Mile would be to prove which of them was stronger and which was more suited to carrying on with Mile/Adele.

And so, the two nodded at one another.

"Let's do it!"

"Waaaaaaah!!!" Mile, beside herself, began to wail.

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"What? So that's why you're doing this..." After hearing an explanation from Reina and Marcela, Mile finally calmed down. "But for me to have to decide just based on who's stronger is..." she trailed off, a bit awkwardly.

Marcela smiled. “I know it will be difficult. I know at least *that* much about you, Miss Adele.”

“Of course I know that much, too!” Reina quickly added, alarm bells going off in her head when she saw how fondly Mile smiled at Marcela’s assurance.

Of course, it *was* the Wonder Trio who truly understood Mile the best.

She had known the Trio for a year and two months. They had individual rooms at the dorm, so they did not bunk together. Meanwhile, she had known the Crimson Vow since their start at the Prep School, so for roughly two years. They spent all their hours together, both in their dorms at school and at the inns they stayed in... and yet, somehow the members of the Crimson Vow still got the sense that the others were far closer to Mile.

But then...

“Um, Miss Marcela, if you wouldn’t mind calling me ‘Mile,’ and not ‘Adele’...”

“Huh...?” The members of the Trio were immediately thrown by this request. Indeed, as far as they were concerned, Adele was Adele through and through. So they had been calling her not by this pseudonym she had assumed but by her *true* name, the one that they knew and were accustomed to. This was a signal, a sign of their old bonds, and proof that they were different from the Crimson Vow. And now, they were being denied the use of this name. It was quite a shock for them.

“I’ve abandoned that name, and now I call myself ‘Mile.’ So please, save that name for when it’s just the four of us, when there’s no one else around.”

“Ah...”

Indeed, Adele—or rather, Mile—was currently on the lam from her home country. Her father and stepmother, who might have had designs on her life, had already been executed. This meant there was no longer any reason for her to keep running out of fear, but still, she wished to continue her life as a hunter, and knowing that the royal family had their eyes on her, being incognito continued to be a priority. If she were easily found, she would be pressed into fulfilling her duties as the Viscountess Ascham—a duty not only to the people of her lands as their liege but to her country as a noble. To go about shouting her birth name in front of others could not be allowed if she were to remain anonymous.

In reality, it was unlikely that news of the scandals of a noble family would make it all the way to another country, and equally improbably that any soldiers or spies be sent to operate openly in another country just to track her down. It was likewise unthinkable that the crown would be willing to publicize the fact that they had been weak enough to let “the noble girl who serves as an avatar of the Goddess” slip through their fingers or even the fact that she existed at all. All of this meant was highly unlikely that word of Adele had spread this far.

There was probably a fair bit of intel floating around, but even so, it would not be enough for anyone to trace Mile back to the noble’s daughter by the name of Adele. Even at the academy, she had passed herself off as nothing more than a commoner.

At any rate, it would be no big deal for someone in another country to hear the name Adele thrown around a few times. Even if news of their family’s scandal *had* made it across the border, the only names anyone would know were that of the Ascham family itself and perhaps her father. His daughter’s name would surely be lost in the transmission of the gossip. As such, even if Mile should be called by the name Adele, there was no one who would ever put the pieces together.

Plus, it was not at all uncommon among hunters for someone to throw their past away, and start a new life with a new identity. These people would simply think of it as new name, not a pseudonym.

If anyone went prying into a hunter’s past, no one would be surprised to see them turn up as a corpse in the gutter the next day. Just as in the case of a thief meeting an untimely end at the hands of an avenger of a merchant they had slain, no one would ever recognize such an act as a crime—officers of the law included.

This was something tacitly understood by all hunters, such common knowledge that even non-hunters were aware of the rules and respected them. It was literally a matter of life and death, so even young children were made aware of it—from waifs to noble youths.

However, Mile knew, there are always exceptions to the rule—unintended slips and unhappy accidents. There were merchants in this city who might be headed into Brandel, and hunters who might take on the job of guarding them. It was only normal for Mile to wish to avoid risking any unnecessary danger.

Still, the members of the Wonder Trio were crestfallen, their heads hung. Not only did

they feel sorry for having spoken the name Adele so very many times in front of other people, they felt a loss knowing that would no longer be able to refer to their old friend by that name in public.

Only when they were all alone could they call her Adele like they used to. Hearing this was just too much of a shock for the Trio. It was as though they had just learned that the animal they thought of as their pet in fact belonged to another owner, and only used their home as a secondary residence, for when their true owner was out, or they needed a change of scenery—not that they thought of Mile as a pet or anything...

Seeing how utterly downtrodden they were, even the Crimson Vow refrained from rubbing their disappointment in their faces.

Gazing upon the silent Trio, Mavis, who was particularly sensitive to uncomfortable pauses, frantically changed the subject.

“H-hey, everyone, how about a bath before dinner? It’s rare to find a real bath at an inn like this!”

The Trio nodded wordlessly. They were of course happy that there was a bath, but not in any mood to be expressing joy about something like this.

“Mile, show them the way!”

Even Reina was not completely heartless, it seemed. Out of consideration for the heartbroken Trio, she urged Mile to go along with them.

“Y-yes, of course!”

And so, the Wonder Trio headed to the bathhouse along with Mile.

“But I mean, we *won’t* be giving her up...” Reina said softly, once the others had left.

“Well, we can’t be the ones to decide that,” said Mavis. Not that she’d had some time to clear her head, she was able to take a much fairer view than she had in the heat of the moment. As always, she was the conscience of the Crimson Vow, the most sensible of the four.

Reina and Pauline looked unhappy at her words. They understood, but neither Reina, who dreamt of an A-rank, nor Pauline, who aimed to earn as much money as possible,

wished to let Mile out of their sight. Of course, this was a matter not only of weighing what benefits there were to having her around, but also of considering the two years they had spent learning together, fighting together, and having each other's backs.

For Mile, the Crimson Vow were the *second* ever set of dear friends she had made, but if you were to ask the other members of the Vow to speak frankly, they might admit that this had been the first time ever that Reina, who had traveled with only her father from as early as she could recall; and Mavis, the sheltered and pampered young daughter of a noble family; and Pauline, raised as the daughter of a middling merchant, had had a close friend—a dear friend and ally. They had spent half a year together in those dorms. Then, they had spent another year and a half on the road together, camping and staying at inns.

Though the Wonder Trio had not spent as much time with her as the Crimson Vow, they felt an equal investment in Mile and their relationship.

Just as Mile did not wish to part from either the Wonder Trio or the Crimson Vow, they had no desire to part from her.

Each had their own desires.

Marcela and the Wonder Trio.

Mile. The Crimson Vow.

But the things that they all desired and the roads they would all take to their own “true happiness” were not necessarily all the same.

They would all encounter misfortunes along the roads they wished to follow. But they might also find unexpected fortunes and true happiness even as they stumbled along paths that ran contrary to their wills. No one could interfere with the lives of others or compel them to do something they truly did not wish to do. No one would wish to take responsibility for such a thing. However, if the road one tried to follow—hoped to follow—came into direct opposition to another... was it really acceptable to cut off another's path just to continue along one's own?

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“And here are the baths!”

"Whoa!" The voices of the Wonder Trio rang out in admiration.

The last time they had passed through town had been for but a few short days, during which time they had stopped at various inns in search of Mile, and it seemed that they had not happened to stay at this one.

"And here's the changing room... Oh!" As Mile gave the girls the tour, she suddenly appeared to realize something. "Umm... I should probably teach you all some cleaning magic..."

"Cleaning magic? What is that?"

"Um, it's a magic for personal hygiene. You can clean your clothing and bodies. With it, you never have to wash up, or bathe, or... Eek!"

The three stared at her in a tense silence. Then—

"Why didn't you teach us that befooooore?!?!?!"

"Wah! I'm s-sorry!!!"

No matter how close their friendship was, how much they trusted one another, some things in this world were unforgivable. In becoming hunters, they had made a decision to abandon their maidenly dignity and shame, but now they were discovering that all this could have been unnecessary... If only Mile had not forgotten to teach them this crucial spell.

"Miss Monika! Miss Aureana! Commence the Tickle Torment!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Ka-chnk! Ka-chnk!

The pair seized Mile's arms and secured her by the shoulders. Suddenly, a memory was dredged up from the back of Mile's mind. A memory of a hellish penalty game...

"St-st-stop... Noooooo!!!"



“Hrff, hrff, hrff...”

The four were ragged, breathless, and sweaty.

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing we’re taking a bath now, anyway,” said Marcela. Indeed, it would have been a grave misstep to carry out Mile’s punishment *after* a bath—their timing had been fortunate.

Still, Mile was less than pleased. “So says the *assailant!!!*”

Once she had pulled herself back together, Mile lectured the three on how to perform her special cleaning spells. Her magic allowed for both cleaning one’s body and cleaning one’s clothing, but there were some subtle distinctions.

When it came to the body, there was a thin line between what should and should not be removed. If one used magic to have “everything that is not part of the body” dissolved away, there was a chance one would be wiped clean of even the helpful microorganisms that clung to the skin, and the oils, sebaceous membranes, keratin, and other agents that protected the body.

Of course, when one was in a hurry or the time was otherwise right, there *was* the potential power move of eschewing this delicate balance and simply using wash-up magic to lather one’s clothes and body in bubbles, scrubbing everything up, cleaning it away with water and drying it...

Three years prior, Mile had taught the Trio her secrets of magic, and for the year and two months after, they had studied and refined these alongside her. Since then, they had practiced even longer on their own, so a simple explanation from Mile was enough for them to master both of the techniques quickly.

“I-It’s really that easy...”

“A-all of those struggles along the road...”

“.....”

Mile reflexively shrugged as they once again glared at her.

“I-I’m sorry?”

Finally, they bathed. No matter how well they could clean themselves with magic, actually bathing was a whole different experience. To pour warm water over one's head and submerge oneself in a tub... Indeed, removing the dirt from one's body was not the only reason to take a bath. It was also for relaxation, for healing, for warming one's body and soul. Even when it came to cleansing one's body, there was nothing better than a bath to wash away dead skin and the dirt from your pores. It had a far different effect than just cleansing with water or magic, or wiping oneself down with a water basin and towel.

"Phew, this feels amazing..."

Though they had already cleaned themselves with magic as practice, habit meant they gave themselves a proper dousing before submerging into the tub.

While rinsing off before entering the tub was something they did as a matter of custom, in truth, it also had the important side effect of acclimating one's body to the heat and intensity of the bath. It was an important defense against having a stroke or heart attack upon entering. No matter how young they all might have been, it was best not to put unnecessary strain upon one's body.

As the Crimson Vow were currently in town, the divider had been removed and the full bath was open, so the four of them had plenty of space to relax. The last time the four of them had bathed together had been in the large public baths back at the Academy.

Indeed, it had been two years, for Mile anyway.

Suddenly, she found herself on the receiving end of several intense stares.

"....."

Swiftly, the other three averted their gaze from Mile.

"What was *that* for?! What are those pitying looks?!?!"

Mile was enraged—and understandably so.

The growth that the other three had experienced in the last two years was apparent... particularly in the bosom area. And, as for Mile...

“...”

“.....”

“.....”

“Gaaaaah!!!”

Mile's screams echoed throughout the bathhouse.

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“Why are you the only one who came out looking so haggard?” Reina asked suspiciously, seeing Mile's demeanor when the four of them finally returned from the baths.

“Reina, let's take a bath together.”

“Huh? But didn't you just take a bath with those gir...”

She looked at Mile's face, and then the Trio's faces, and followed their gazes...

“Y-you all, don't tell me y-you're...”

Suddenly, she knew everything.

“Are you just looking for me to make you feel better about yourself?!?! Shut the hell up! I'm bigger than you!!!”

A fierce battle was suddenly being waged. The Trio looked alarmed, but Mavis and Pauline, accustomed to it by now, did not appear to be moved.

Then, Mavis said softly, “Rivalries only ever break out between two opponents of the same level...”

It was a bit of wisdom that appeared frequently in the writings of Miami Satodele.

# CHAPTER 97

## THE JOINT MISSION

“So anyway, we’ll be taking a job together!”

“What do you mean, ‘So anyway?’”

The group of six nodded, ignoring Mile’s interjection.

“We will not be able to proceed until we can bear witness to each other’s capabilities. To that end, *we have no objections to this proposal*,” said Marcela. Her two companions nodded.

And so, it was decided that the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio would accept a job together.

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“Shall we go, then?”

“Okay!”

The next morning, after they had finished breakfast and had a short rest, the seven girls set out together as a temporary joint team.

It was imprudent to do any vigorous activities just after eating, but as long as they rested a bit and walked at a leisurely pace, by the time they arrived at the hunting site they should be in fine form. Normally, if they did not arrive at the guildhall early, all of the more appealing jobs would be taken, and it would take them longer to find one they wanted. In light of this, one would typically wish to head out just after breakfast, but there was no need to do so today.

The girls’ goal was not to take on any particularly notable requests, but instead, to have more of a “free play” session. In other words, they would be taking on dailies or gathering requests, jobs that would not require any preliminary preparation.

Their destination this morning was the part of the forest primarily used as hunting grounds by lower- and mid-grade C-rank hunters. It was the sort of area where ogres appeared, so it was not recommended for the lowest grade of C-rank hunting parties, those who were little better than D-ranks. Even if they *could* fell an ogre, if even one member of their party was seriously injured, that was a big problem. Having to support even one injured person on the way back would mean they might not be able to bring any game home. Plus, there was the cost of healing and the time they would have to take off until everyone was recovered, and so forth.

And of course, it was not a given that an injured hunter would be able to make a full recovery. If a party member suffered any serious lingering effects or lost any limbs, they would have to retire. Or worse, they could end up dead. Any parties who dared to risk such a danger tended to vanish within the first month or two.

Thus, the jobs hunters tended to take were those where there was a 95% certainty that they would make it back unscathed—with perhaps only a 4.99% chance that one or two of them might sustain some light injuries. Of course, there was no such thing as a 100% absolute guarantee of safety even with those jobs, no matter how skilled the party might be. There was always that 0.01% chance of unhappy accidents—so being able to minimize that chance as much as possible was a testament to a party leader's ability and a party's true strength in the face of danger.

That said, when it came to guard duties, it was impossible to calculate the possibility of being attacked and the strength of the enemies one might face. As long as a party was not attacked, all the party members would make it back unharmed, but if they *were* attacked, and got into a battle, the chances of injury or death leapt substantially. Thus, when it was clear that a party had no chance of winning, many of them would simply surrender from the start.

With this in mind, the seven hunters set out on some daily tasks.

*The seven ladies are ready for work. Should we be singing “Heigh-ho?”*

And as always, Mile's mind was wandering somewhere...

“Ready? We’re going to be doing this job as a joint operation, as long as no expected enemies appear that put us in danger. If they do, we’re going to be fighting as our own groups. We don’t know much about each other yet, so fighting in tandem would be dangerous,” Reina explained.

Everyone nodded. If they were all to leap into battle together, having never even compared tactics, the mages would have no idea how to read the vanguard's attack patterns, and the chances of friendly fire would increase immensely. The splendid coordination of the Servants of the Goddess was the result of years of continuous experience and training with the same group of people, and not something that was easily replicated.

"As for you, Mile, as long as no one requires your help, you are not to interfere or advise! If you don't stay out of this, it won't be a fair comparison!"

"S-sure, I understand."

Given that, at first, it seemed she was going to be left behind entirely, Mile was in no position to argue. She was simply glad she had managed to plead her way into being brought along.

"So, beginning now, the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio will be spending the next three days and two nights as a joint party for dailies and gathering!" Reina announced ceremoniously. It was clear from the way she was speaking today that she was fully invested in this—she sounded serious and sincere. The five hunters gathered around and nodded... while Mile looked on.

And so, the seven of them left the inn and headed into the forest.

Mile, a bit troubled, fidgeted silently at the tail end of the group. However, Reina's orders had been clear. "Outside of emergencies or other times your help is needed, you are absolutely forbidden to interfere or advise during normal operations! You are only permitted to speak about unrelated topics during normal conversation in our down times."

This had been the condition attached to her accompanying them at all, so she had little choice in the matter, even if it meant she was unable to voice her concerns. Thus, she continued to quietly watch the Wonder Trio and the Crimson Vow from the rear.

The Wonder Trio, with their belongings on their backs and flasks on their hips, and the Crimson Vow, who carried nothing but their staves and sword...

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"Well, I guess it's about time for lunch. After that, we'll start hunting. We're all good

with ignoring any valuable herbs or high-class food ingredients, yeah?" Reina proposed, once they had arrived at the hunting grounds and made it a fair distance inward.

"Yes, that will be fine by us," Marcela agreed.

It was still a bit before the first noon bell, but it was not very efficient to take lunch right after beginning their hunt, so this order of events was preferable.

The Wonder Trio unloaded their packs from their backs and took out the preserved rations they had inside. Though they had to carry only easily portable foods, the members of the Trio were capable of making both water and fire with magic, and could produce warm soup and other cooked foods, which meant they enjoyed a far better outdoor dining experience than most other parties. The three of them were all mages, and relatively efficient ones at that, so cooking required little expenditure of magical energy. This was not a privilege afforded to parties who had only one normal mage in their lineup, and who could not afford to waste precious magical energy when they had battles ahead.

Meanwhile...

"Okay, guess we'll... Hm, what should we have today? Any recommendations, Mile?"

Even if they could produce their own hot water and cooking flames, the results were nothing compared to the dishes that Mile so lovingly made in her free time. Reina turned to Mile, a casual look upon her face. However...

"Nope."

"Huh?"

For a moment, Reina was lost, unable to parse what Mile had said to her.

"Well, I mean, you forbade me from helping you or giving you advice on any practical matters, right? Food is obviously a big part of going on an extended trip like this, so..."

"Ack!"

Mavis and Pauline were taken aback, suddenly understanding exactly what she meant. Reina froze in place. Then, Mavis muttered, paling, "D-don't tell me we didn't pack

*anything..."*

Reina shook her head slowly.

The three fell silent.

Other than their armor and weapons, the members of the Crimson Vow were completely empty-handed.

Until now, the Wonder Trio had primarily stayed at inns on their journeys, but they at least carried with them the basic minimum camping equipment.

"Goodness, what's the matter?" asked Marcela with a grin. Monika and Aureana were smiling as well.

To think they had intended to leave Mile behind. They had worried that they were too reliant on Mile, and even tried doing some jobs without her. And yet...

This was bad. This was *terrible*.

Normally, if they were with someone who was in trouble, the Wonder Trio would likely have shared what they had. However, this was not a normal circumstance. There was no reason to help out their opponents when they were attempting to compare abilities with one another—particularly in a contest they could not afford to lose. They could help them out all they liked *after* the victor had been decided.

"....."

The Crimson Vow was off to a disastrous start.

"Well, I guess we should get started," Reina announced unhappily, when it was time for their trial to begin.

Naturally, she—and the other members of the Crimson Vow—had gone without lunch.

They had not had the time to waste hunting down some food and processing it, and even if they were to have plain, boiled water, they had no cups, nor any other means of drinking it. Given the time constraints, they had to abandon any thought of

sustenance entirely. Of course, they had drunk some water, but as they had no cups or flasks, they had to take it directly into their hands, most of it spilling everywhere. With two accomplished mages in their group, it was not a huge feat to at least get some drinking water, so that was something to be grateful for. If they were the sort of party with only one normal mage, they would need to reserve their energies for battle and would simply have had to bear the thirst. Still, the whole thing was inefficient and unpleasant.

Thankfully, though most were still in the habit of eating only twice a day, the members of the Crimson Vow had taken up the practice of eating three meals, so they had at least had a proper breakfast. It was a small meal, of course, to avoid walking on a full stomach, but at least it would make going without lunch more bearable. In truth, they had gone without lunch plenty of times before while on the job.

For the Crimson Vow, this whole thing was more a matter of psychological damage than physical. How had the three of them, with their wits combined, not anticipated this issue? If Mile had not tagged along, they might have realized it. However, the moment it was decided she would accompany them, they had instinctively thought, *Oh, it'll be just like usual*—the stupidity of which was patently obscene.

Worse, that evening, dinner and camping awaited them. Surely, they could not go without dinner as well. And then there would be breakfast the next morning. Skipping meals would be a huge impediment to their success the next day and at worst might even cause them to slip up. They would have to figure something out before evening.

"Mavis, Pauline. If you see any edible-looking wild vegetables or fruits along the way, pick them up. And Mavis, we're going to need you to cut some wood and make some makeshift cups before dinner. So, we'll start setting up camp a little earlier than usual," Reina softly whispered to the other two, quick as always to respond to the situation. The pair of them silently nodded. It vexed her to be the one to suggest an early rest, but there was little else they could do.

It was as Mile always said, after all: "You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs."

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"Jackalope!" Monika announced, spotting one.

"Leave it!" Marcela directed her.

Reina, however, replied, "Let's get it! Pauline!"

"On it!"

The Wonder Trio stood by and watched while the Crimson Vow launched into battle. Pauline halted the rabbit with her wind magic, while Reina carefully brought it down using ice magic (instead of fire, which might cause wildfire), and Mavis handily drained it of blood.

"....."

As the Trio silently watched this display, a number of thoughts ran through their heads.

*Why would they hunt something that wouldn't go for much? Oh, perhaps it's for their dinner...*

*Still, they should wait to hunt something that small... If they're hunting something for dinner this early, they're just going to have to carry it around while they search for larger prey.*

*Or maybe, they want to make sure not to go without dinner, but they don't have time to make any more efficient plans. They started thinking they would have to grab food the moment they spotted it...*

The Trio continued to watch with pity. Noticing this, Reina's face reddened as she guessed what they were thinking... and subsequently realizing their own lapse of judgment.

Indeed, they had been too hasty. They could easily hunt something like this later, and if they were to take down a larger creature, they could just have part of that for dinner instead. They would only be bringing home the more valuable parts, after all.

There were limits to how much six young girls could carry. Thus, they would have to carry back home only the best parts of the beasts they felled today and tomorrow, which they would preserve with ice magic. Of course, in reality, they were going to have Mile carry all the "discard" parts back home in her storage space and then split the proceeds amongst the group...

Worried for what awaited the Crimson Vow if they did not catch anything else later on, the party wasted some extra time on their journey, as well as carrying an extra burden. Of course, the Trio couldn't complain about the added weight itself, as it was the members of the Crimson Vow who were carrying it, and they had little else to carry in the first place. Still, the Crimson Vow's continued failings at this point had them quite discouraged.

"Three orcs ahead! 130 meters at 1:30!" said Monika in a soft but sharp voice. The six reflexively halted.

"How do you know that?! You aren't Mi..." Reina began to protest, before she trailed off entirely.

Indeed, this was a sort of magic that Mile had never offered to teach the Crimson Vow, and so they thought of it as a sort of magic that only she could use. One of Mile's famous "family secrets"...

Dark.

The expressions on the faces of the members of the Crimson Vow had all turned incredibly dark...

"Let's get going!"

"Yeah!"

The Wonder Trio psyched themselves up in soft but spirited voices, lowered their stance, and kicked off running, the Crimson Vow following frantically behind.

*H-how...?*

Mile was left stock-still and speechless. Her search magic was something she had discovered *after* leaving the academy. So, naturally, it was not something she had taught to the Trio. So, how was it they were able to use it?

*D-don't tell me they figured it out on their... Crap...*

She shouldn't be surprised. After all, there was Mavis, who was not a mage, and to whom Mile had never taught anything about magic beyond how to deal with mages in battle. Despite this, Mavis had managed to equip herself, entirely through her own efforts, with pseudo-healing magic as well as her peculiar Mavis Loop technique, having taken hints from Mile's search magic.

And so, if Marcela, Aureana, and Monika were to have put their heads together after learning the principles of magic from Mile, and if they were given enough time... Say, two years, perhaps...

Mile had far, far underestimated her own allies and the people of this world.

*Crap, crap, crap.*

Mile paled, trembling. Suddenly, she regretted that she had neglected to tell the Trio to keep concealed not only the special magic she had taught them but also any spells they had developed themselves from the *principles* she had taught them. She had of course reminded them not to teach other people how to use these spells, but she had not cautioned them about the need for discretion when using the spells in front of others, and certainly not warned them to conceal the fact that this sort of magic existed at all. And never once had she thought they would develop something like search magic all on their own...

Of course, the hunters of the Crimson Vow were Mile's fellow party members, so naturally the Wonder Trio would have assumed that they would be aware of the strange magics Mile could use and would likely even have learned those techniques from her. Surely, they would think there was no need to conceal Mile's brand of magic in front of her closest comrades.

It was true that the members of the Crimson Vow did know about Mile's search magic. They had seen her use it right before their eyes many times, and it had saved them just as many. Thus, there was nothing surprising about seeing such spells.

*However...*

The Trio had been taught about Mile's most secret of "family secrets," which she had never shared with the Crimson Vow.

This had delivered an even greater shock to the members of the Crimson Vow, Mile imagined. When they glanced back at Mile, she knew her feelings of guilt were plain

on her face.

This wounded them even more.

She could have at least attempted to play dumb, the way she usually did. She could have worn a vacant look upon her face, as though she had not realized anything was wrong.

A short distance from the Wonder Trio ahead of them, and Mile at the rear, Reina quietly shared her thinking with Mavis and Pauline.

"Those guys are weak, so they need to avoid any stronger monsters. That's why Mile taught them that magic when she left them. We're strong, and Mile isn't going to leave us. That's why she hasn't had any reason to teach us those spells, which are probably something she's absolutely never supposed to share with anyone else. That's all it is!"

The other two nodded silently.

That was right. That had to be it. But then...

"Soil Spear!"

"Ice Nail!"

"Water Cutter!"

Ka-shnk!

Bsh bsh bsh bsh!

Slice!

"Huh...?"

"Soil Spear!"

Monika struck one orc, who had not been instantly killed and instead only rendered powerless, with a second earthen spear. There had been barely any gap between her firing the first spear and the second. Even if she had quickly incanted the spell in her head, that was still exceedingly fast...

“N-no way!”

The members of the Crimson Vow and Mile were all speechless.

The ladies of the Wonder Trio had fired off three attacks with the name of the spell alone, hitting the orcs the moment they had emerged from the trees. It was fully spell-less casting, done with only the name of the spell and not even the full incantation. Their opponents were not humans, who might guess what was coming based on the name of the spell, so they had been able to launch a surprise attack from a significant distance. Indeed, these were spells that had been easy for them to fire, which they could have simply recited the full incantation for if they needed to.

And yet, the pause between Monika’s first and second shots was so short. Far too short...

If the Crimson Vow had been the ones on the attack, the result would have been almost identical. First Reina and Pauline would have each taken down one orc with their magic and then Mavis would cripple one with her Wind Edge, and finally, she would strike the finishing blow with her sword—or else, Reina or Pauline would strike a second blow with a spell.

They were equal. It was one thing for Pauline to face this truth. Reina had spent years being taught by the Crimson Lightning, worked independently, spent half a year at the Prep School and then one and a half years as a C-rank hunter. Mavis had been trained for years by her excellent family. For them to be just *equal* to a group of young maidens who were fresh out of the academy and had never known hardship, who were only playing at being hunters...

And really, on second thought, there was no doubt that Monika’s speed with mental incantation was even faster than theirs.

“Tch...”

However, there was nothing they could say right now. Indeed, now all that would matter was their actions and the results.

“H... hmpf! Very well done. I guess we’re up next!” said Reina, stepping out in front of the Wonder Trio with her two partners. She seemed to intend to spot the next group of enemies before the Trio, so that the Crimson Vow could take them down.

“Please wait!”

Yet Monika called after them.

“What is it?!” asked Reina crankily, coming to a halt.

“Are you just going to leave those orcs behind?!”

“Ah...”

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“Okay, that should be it!”

Normally, this was the point at which they would pick out only the most valuable parts of the orcs to carry along with them. However, this was merely a test of strength, so instead, when it came time to return home, they would only be carrying sandbags the same weight as the amount of orc meat they would have been transporting. The hunted orcs themselves would be taken out of the equation and carried home in Mile’s storage—Mile having declared that practice maneuvers like these called for special measures. They could not ask the Wonder Trio to keep up with the Crimson Vow if they were already pushed to the limits of their carrying capacity, and disassembling the orcs now would mean they would be mashed, bloody lumps of meat by the time they headed home, so no one had any complaints about Mile’s ruling.

So, the party started forward again to resume their hunting.

This time, the Crimson Vow took the lead, ignoring small birds and mammals that would not sell for much in search of larger prey. Then, after a while—

“Target spotted! Four ogres!”

“Okay, let’s get ’em!”

Mavis was typically the first to spot their prey when Mile was not using her search magic, and true to form, she was the first to see them. Unlike the orcs the Trio had felled, these were ogres, more powerful creatures, and there were four of them. They were the perfect target to show off the Crimson Vow’s strength.

“Pattern S-1!” Reina directed.

This pattern was a full-on attack, one performed regardless of who was watching, without reservation. Mile had taught things to the Wonder Trio that she had not taught to them, but the Trio had probably thought it was fine for the Vow to witness those “family secrets” of Mile’s; they might have assumed that she would have taught them to her new friends also. Perhaps they had merely meant to show off, to convey to the Crimson Vow, *You aren’t the only ones who have learned Mile’s secrets.*

Still, to fell just four ogres, the Crimson Vow didn’t even need to use anything Mile had taught them. As they did not have access to search magic, like Monika did, the ogres were closer than the orcs had been when they spotted them. However, this was still just the right distance for Pauline to use her shorter-range, most sinister of area attacks. Plus, unlike the Trio, the Crimson Vow had a vanguard who could hold the enemy back, so they were safe.

“Hot Tornado!”

“Icicle Darts!”

“Wind Edge!”

Though Pauline was less skilled in typical attack spells, she instead utilized her hot magic, her most wicked of attacks.

Both due to the fact that they were in the middle of a forest—which meant her fire magic was off limits—and because their enemies were so many, Reina, like Pauline, had chosen an area attack, striking down on the ogres to lower their combat strength with a flurry of seven or eight throwing darts made of ice. As for Mavis, she struck the target first with a Wind Edge, and though it did not have the power to take down an ogre, that didn’t mean it was pointless by any means.

Mavis could not strike into the enemies right away without being caught up in the lingering effects of Pauline’s hot spell, which would have her suffering right along with the ogres. Thus, she had to wait. Fortunately, the luxury of time was on their side, as the ogres were in no condition to strike back due to Pauline’s magical sabotage.

One of the ogres, having been struck by Mavis’s attack on top of several of Reina’s ice darts, fell, and while the remaining three were still standing, they were truly no longer in fighting condition. Then, the mages fired their second wave of attacks.

“Icicle Javelin!”

Reina let off a targeted attack.

"Wind Storm!"

Then, Pauline blew away the lingering hot magic with a wind spell. Reina's attack had decisively felled one of the ogres, so that left two more. Mavis plunged into the enemy line, not raising a cry. There was no reason to go out of her way to alert the enemy of her position and intent to attack after they had already destroyed the enemies' sight and smell, after all.

Each ogre had individually taken little damage from the ranged attacks, but they were now decently blinded, their sense of smell deadened, and they were wounded all over. In that state, they did not stand a chance against Mile's special sword and Mavis's new left arm.

Careful to position herself between the ogres and the mages, so that even if she slipped up, there was no chance of the monsters getting past her and endangering the others, she cut down the ogres in one fell swoop.

It was a no-damage, 100% flawless victory.

The Wonder Trio had downed three orcs with three people and four magical attacks.

The Crimson Vow had downed four ogres with three people and five magical and sword attacks.

On first glance, these numbers seemed fairly equal, but given how much more magical strength was required to defeat an ogre than an orc, a much weaker enemy, there was a chance that even if they had stepped into the fray, the Wonder Trio might not have been able to manage what the Crimson Vow had accomplished. However, the members of the Crimson Vow were not going to start running their mouths over hypotheticals. Had the Trio been up against ogres, there was a chance that they, too, would have just used more powerful spells.

So, as of now, they were tied.

However, while being tied with the Crimson Vow was no bother for the Wonder Trio, the members of the Crimson Vow could not abide being on the same level as the girls

they had looked down upon and considered amateurs.

From there, both parties proceeded with their dinner preparations, eschewing stalking any more significant prey in favor of hunting up a number of jackalopes. Neither party was inclined to slice into an enormous orc or ogre just for a bit of dinner...

Making camp went relatively smoothly.

The surprise of finding themselves without food at lunchtime had been unsettling for the members of the Crimson Vow. However, now that she had gotten situated and had plenty of time on her hands, making camp was no huge bother to Reina, even with insufficient equipment. After all, she had spent a long time working as a hunter before Mile, including her time with the Crimson Lightning.

Plus, camping simply, without a tent or cloak, was easy compared to camping out in the rain or wind or in the middle of winter. Even a day or two of eating nothing but meat was not enough to throw one's nutritional balance out of whack. Thus, Reina and Pauline prepared a simple camping stove out of rocks, skewering the jackalope meat onto sticks for roasting while Mavis cut into some suitable logs, carving wooden plates and saucers. Easy peasy. It was less simple to carve a cup with her short sword, of course, but she had done her best to make the dishes deep enough, and the results were serviceable.

Hoping to sate their empty, grumbling tummies, the members of the Crimson Vow chomped into the roasted meat... That's right. Plain, roasted meat, without any seasoning whatsoever.

Of course, the meat itself did have some umami, a sweetness and richness in the juices and fats that melted out of it during cooking. It was a primal flavor, one enjoyed by man since time immemorial, so that was bearable. Along with it they had some freshly made soup and plain boiled water.

The Wonder Trio, on the other hand, shaved some salt off of a small lump with a tiny grater and finely crushed some dried herbs as garnish, to accent the flavor of their meat. Naturally, they had herbal tea as their beverage. The weight and volume of the dried herbs amounted to practically nothing. They could carry a fair amount of them

with little added burden.

The Crimson Vow, of course, normally had a great deal of cooking herbs in the party's possession... all within Mile's storage.

As far as their bedding, most normal hunters did not walk around with tents on their backs. They carried no more than a cloak, tarp, or poncho to stave off the cold, wind, and rain. Even the Wonder Trio had nothing but thin waterproof blankets to wrap around their most easily chilled extremities. Indeed, the Crimson Vow was very much an exception to the rule. For camping, most just put out a bit of dried grass on the ground to lie upon. Going without even some type of tent or bedroll was no big deal. Even Reina had slept this way hundreds of times before.

"...My back hurts. It's cold..."

Reina was stunned to hear the words slipping from her own mouth. She would have just grimaced and ignored the sentiment if it had come from Pauline or Mavis. However, she was shaken to realize that she herself had complained before even the other two. She, who had had so many years of experience that by now she really should be entering the ranks of veteran.

She had been corrupted. She had gone *soft*.

When a fighter or athlete goes without practicing for months, their body weakens, and their slackened muscles never go back to what they once were. The same apparently went for the stoic, tenacious disposition of the veteran hunter.

"This is bad..."

Reina was trembling, but it was not from the cold. Meanwhile, though Mavis and Pauline had thought to themselves, *Man, it would suck to live without Mile*, they did not seem to be particularly aware of any danger. They had no idea that their complacency was, in and of itself, an immense source of peril...



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"Today, we're going to show off our close-range combat skills!" Reina announced. They had just finished a simple breakfast of meat from the night before, reheated along with plain boiled water (though of course the Trio had herbal tea).

Even without Mile, the Crimson Vow still had Mavis on vanguard. Besides, they also had Reina, and even Pauline, who were both well trained in the art of staff fighting. This only stood to reason—being able to wield a staff was an important means of self-defense and might be necessary to protect their own lives. The Wonder Trio, meanwhile, had graduated from a school attended by only nobles and little rich girls. They had no such training—making them a party of three rookie thirteen-year-old girls, with no vanguard.

Yet no matter how young they were, they still had plenty of talent, especially when it came to magic... That, and Mile's "family secrets." Still, no matter how skilled one was with magic, a hunter's life depended on their combat abilities at close quarters. Not only would there be unexpected encounters with monsters but also bandits who might ambush a party. Not to mention the fact that a hunter might be betrayed by a party they had joined up with, or attacked by guards and merchants from wagons they met on the road... who were in fact just bandits in disguise, pretending to be passing through. Even with search magic, an enemy's offensive attacks could sometimes still make it through, necessitating close-range combat.

Reina's intention was to make the Trio aware of this and then show them how their lack of strength would force all of the burden onto Mile.

Was this a little petty? The Wonder Trio were still not yet of age, but Reina was already sixteen, a legal adult...

"Understood. Well then," Marcela replied, "we shall do the same."

Reina and Pauline grinned. Pauline seemed to have picked up on Reina's ulterior motive immediately. And so, everyone packed up their things and set out for the day's hunt.

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"We're going to have them fight first," Reina whispered to Mavis and Pauline, so that the Wonder Trio could not hear. "Trying to take down a kobold or a group of goblins

without damaging them would probably be about right. No matter how fast they are at casting, it won't be enough to keep up with more agile enemies, and if they end up in trouble, we can just step in to help. If it's just some kobolds or goblins, they should be able to take a few hits, especially since we've got both Mile and you here, Pauline, so healing won't be a problem. Plus, I'm sure that Mile will go leaping in if it looks like any of them are really in danger..."

Indeed, no matter how much one excelled at combat magic, it was inevitable for monsters to sometimes leap out at close range when one traveled through a forest. Against such enemies, a party of nothing but young ladies, with no vanguard, would be defenseless. Reina was convinced that making the Trio aware of this fact was a kindness—a considerate act. Her goal? To let these girls know that proper young ladies were not fit to live as hunters, that they should abandon their frivolous thoughts and head back to the futures that awaited them in noble society and the world of business...

Just before evening, after hunting numerous orcs, ogres, and jackalopes, the group had switched to gathering higher-priced medicinal herbs and tree fruits for dinner, when a horde of goblins appeared.

"Seven or eight goblins at 1:30, coming in fast! They're probably on their way to ambush us!" announced Monika, who had been walking at the head of the group.

"Roger that!" Marcela and Aureana replied calmly. Yet, in spite of their reply, they did not seem to be preparing any spells, only continuing to walk normally.

"All right! We're going to show you our close-quarters fighting skills now."

"Huh...?"

The members of the Crimson Vow were unable to hide their surprise at the utter calm with which Marcela had spoken. Indeed, the Crimson Vow had been certain that the Wonder Trio would be no good in a melee, assuming that the Trio's version of close-quarters combat would just be to fire off an attack spell at short range...

When the Wonder Trio ended up in danger, the Crimson Vow would help them, and then they would show them what close-quarters combat was really all about.

At least, that was what the members of the Crimson Vow had assumed. However, the Trio were walking calmly, not appearing to be making any preparations for battle.

If they had this much time on their hands, then regardless of their ability to cast without spells, they ought to at least be preparing an incantation, just in case. However, the Trio appeared to be preparing no spells at all, silently or otherwise. Unsettled, Pauline and Reina stood by at the ready, silently holding targeted attack spells in their heads, keeping enough to a distance not to interfere with the Trio's battle but staying close enough that they might jump in to help at a moment's notice. Mavis left the magical interference to the other two, ready instead to draw her sword to intervene as required.

Then, a few minutes later, the party encountered the goblins.

Their numbers were roughly equal. However, "juvenile human females" were the goblins' preferred prey. They were a soft and succulent meal, with no means of fighting back. Moreover, they were an *attractive* meal, one with which the goblins could satisfy other desires before slaking their hunger. They would never let such creatures out of their sight.

Without any coordination, or even a loose formation, the goblins came swarming in one after another. Judging from the girls' appearances and the fact that they seemed to be wielding nothing more than wooden sticks, the monsters had probably judged that these humans would be unable to muster a counterattack. There were many goblins who thought like this, knowing that their kind often attacked village girls and lived to tell the tale—though any goblin who attacked a female hunter would perish on the spot.

Looking at the Wonder Trio, who did not appear to be using any magic, Reina had come to a similar conclusion as the goblins... Namely, that the Trio, who could only fight at long range, were frozen in fear at seeing the goblins close up. On this assumption, Reina was just about to let loose the attack spell she had been holding, when—

"Hold on!" Mile interrupted, gripping her shoulder.

Indeed, the members of the Wonder Trio were not the type to be overconfident in their abilities. Furthermore, even if they might be willing to put themselves at risk, they were not the types who could ever put their friends in harm's way. This meant they

must be certain they could win. After all, even on the off-chance something went wrong, they could just put up a barrier between themselves and the goblins. With a bit of serious healing magic, they would manage.

Certain of this, Mile put her faith in the Wonder Trio, her very first friends.

The members of the Crimson Vow stared silently, Mile still gripping Reina's shoulder as she, Pauline, and Mavis all remained in their stances, ready to fire a spell or leap out at a moment's notice.

And then...

*Bam!*

*Bash!*

*Thud!*

*Crack!*

*Smack!*

*Shunk!*

The Wonder Trio thrust with their staves, bashing into the goblins. Then...

*Fwsh!*

*Slish!*

*Ka-shff!*

*Stab!*

They drew their matching short swords, slicing and stabbing through the stunned, cowering goblins.

“Uh...?”

Their strategy had been flawless. It was a total, brutal annihilation.

The members of the Crimson Vow—this time, including Mile—were speechless.

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“Huh? Well, Miss Aureana grew up on a farm in the countryside and had to help out around the house since she was just a wee thing, so she is stronger than she looks,” Marcela explained.

“That’s right,” Aureana agreed, nodding. “I started helping with weeding and other simple chores when I was four or five and soon grew into carrying firewood and drawing water and such, so by the time I enrolled at the academy, I could already lift as much as the boys my age who grew up in the same village.”

“And as for Miss Monika...”

“My family’s business isn’t that big, so my role was very much that of an unpaid laborer. I carried grain, grain, and so much grain, so much that I thought I’d end up a hunchback. So, I could best any weak little lords who grew up in town easily, in terms of strength and power,” Monika replied, her gaze distant.

“As for me, even though I am not as strong as they are, I practice the art of self-defense, which is so essential for a young noble lady...”

“.....”

Reina was dumbfounded at these revelations. After all, she had assumed that anyone who attended a school for little lords and ladies would never be able to fight.

Finally, she found her voice. “But even if you two got strong helping out at home, actually being able to fight is totally different!”

"Well, we *were* taught combat skills at the academy!" Marcela retorted. "It's their policy to have even those who cannot perform magic attend magic lessons, in case they end up with mages as their subordinates, or end up facing mages in battle. Likewise, they feel it important that even young ladies and those who have no intention of participating in combat still know how to fight, so we all participated in sword fighting lessons. Obviously, it would be too much strain on the body to spend hours waving around the sort of short sword that a grown man would use, but we did practice wielding staves and daggers and such, at least for a little while."

"I see." The members of the Crimson Vow sighed. Having never attended such a school, they could only accept Marcela's explanation, clueless to whether this was a unique facet of the curriculum at Eckland Academy or if this was standard practice at all "academies" attended by young lords and ladies.

"But wait!" Pauline started, "Mile, who also went to that school, didn't have any training at all—"

"She's an outlier!" the members of the Wonder Trio snapped in unison.

"Aha..." The Crimson Vow immediately understood.

Mile only hung her head, face reddening. As much as she wished to be *average*, this was a cold, hard fact. Given her excess of speed and power, she had never been able to master the finer points of technique. To use an analogy, it was as though one were attempting to practice eating curry with a spoon attached to the arm of a backhoe...

"Furthermore, we were only able to do our real magic training on our one rest day of the week and only when we were not going on any escort missions. During the rest of the week, we had to stick to training that would not raise any questions among the teachers, combat instructors, or other students—in other words, melee combat training. The academy made sure we were taught enough that we would not die after graduation, you know? It was such difficult, difficult, difficult, *difficult* training..." Marcela trailed off, her gaze growing distant. Monika and Aureana nodded in agreement.

"All three of us graduated with honors, but that was not merely due to our scholastic and magical achievements. At Eckland, you can't receive honors merely if you're talented, *or* studious, *or* strong in magical or martial maneuvers. You need the whole package—I mean, not that we're bragging or anything..."

"If that isn't bragging, then what in the world *is*!?" Reina, who had always been the most insecure member of the Crimson Vow, seemed on the verge of snapping.

"....."

She was at her wit's end. Reina's expectations for this day had been all wrong. Now, she certainly wouldn't be telling the Trio that their weakness would only bring Mile down. She thought back to the speech she'd planned: "You all have no hope of surviving in a melee, so if you were ambushed and didn't have time for a spell, you'd be powerless. That would put all the burden on Mile to deal with the enemies. You all are just baggage for her."

When it came their turn to fight against goblins, or even a strong opponent like orcs or ogres, in melee combat, the Crimson Vow could not possibly hope to outdo the Trio's display. Mavis aside, they could not take down an orc or ogre with just their staves. They had no choice but to use magic to land the finishing blow, or rely on Mavis... And though she and Mavis were one thing, without her magic, Pauline's combat prowess was vastly inferior to that of the Wonder Trio.

"Hm?" Pauline asked, noticing Reina looking at her.

Pauline was not stupid. On the contrary, she was perhaps the sharpest member of the party—setting aside Mile's rare moments of clarity. There was no way she could have failed to understand the meaning behind Reina's gaze.

"....."

Previously, Reina had teased her for her terrible reflexes, but they both had known this to be nothing more than a joke. Now, however, she frantically averted her gaze.

"....."

Though their primary function was to support the vanguard, it was also only proper that the rearguard be skilled enough in close quarters combat to be able to defend themselves, and even to protect the vanguard from behind should it be necessary. In fact, Olga, the mage from the Roaring Mithrils who Pauline had faced at the graduation exam; Tasha, the archer from the Servants of the Goddess; and Lacelina and Leatoria, the Servants' mages, were all quite accomplished melee fighters. Plus, both Lacelina and Leatoria were younger than her, and Leatoria was only a D-rank, a brand-new hunter.

Pauline hung her head, utterly mortified.

In the end, the Crimson Vow did not make any display of their own, merely proceeding with their normal hunting. No suitable numbers of goblins or kobolds appeared, and hordes of ogres and orcs were too far high-level of an opponent for Reina and Pauline to deal with via melee alone, with staves as their primary weapons. Mavis aside, there was no way that they could surpass the Wonder Trio's earlier display, so they decided it best not to force themselves into anything rash.

It was decided that transporting their quarry was outside of the bounds of the "no Mile" exclusion, so everything got put away in her storage. To leave behind anything they had gone out of their way to hunt was simply disrespectful to their prey, and neither the god of hunting nor Pauline would forgive them.

Dinner that evening proceeded as normal, but the three members of the Crimson Vow seemed to be in low spirits.

After breakfast the next morning, they would be starting on their way back home, arriving at the capital that afternoon. Naturally, the slower pace on their return would be due to the sandbags the six girls would have to carry as replacement weights for the meat they had hunted. The referee (read: Mile) had deemed that, at least, would not be excluded in the rules.

Though both the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio had made their own separate preparations for dinner, they sat together around the same bonfire. The two parties were not enemies, so there was no reason to eat apart. It was easy enough to surmise that doing so would only lead to Mile standing stock-still all alone in between the two groups, petrified with indecision over who to sit with, and neither party was inclined to put her in this situation. However, while both parties were close to Mile, they had only ever met each other once before. Between this and wishing to allow Mile a pleasant chat with the Wonder Trio, the members of the Crimson Vow only sat by quietly.

It was much the same as their first meeting. They had little to talk about in terms of normal conversation—that is, anything unrelated to their hunting activities—and even those topics they had in common, they had already more or less exhausted in the

discussions of the previous day and a half. In other words, it was going to fall upon Mile, the mutual friend of both parties, to find some way to drum up conversation. However...

*No way! No way, no way, no way, no waaay!!!*

Implementing such a high-level normie social technique was out of the question for Mile. The degree of difficulty was far too high...

In this way, Mile found herself in a frantic double jeopardy, speaking with the Wonder Trio, then the Crimson Vow, then the Wonder Trio, then the Crimson Vow...

*Eeeeeeee!!!*

Normally, both parties were comprised of the sort of people who would be considerate about this. However, there was a time and place for everything, and currently both sides saw the other as a threat. They were too busy scrutinizing one another to be in the mood to let their guards down for a pleasant chat. Furthermore, the current joint operation had still not ended, so Mile was still forbidden from advising either side on their job or battle techniques or magic. There was no way for Mile to play hostess this way. Though of course, that would have been difficult for her, even without such restrictions...

Fortunately, though things were awkward for some time, eventually both parties came to recognize that in both being friends of Mile (Adele) and rookie all-female parties (though the Crimson Vow had recently ceased referring to themselves as “rookies”), they had plenty in common. And so, they began reluctantly to converse, granting Mile some relief...

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Breakfast the next morning concluded uneventfully, and the girls started home. Six of them would have to lug heavy sandbags the whole way, so they were careful not to overeat.

But then...

“These are heavy...”

“.....”

They were only carrying normal sandbags, but perhaps because of her usual intensity, Marcela had loaded herself to her limit. Reina, seeing this, had loaded herself up with the same number of sandbags and was now wobbling, anguish clear on her face.

“You two! If you wear yourselves out like that, you won’t be able to fight if any monsters or bandits suddenly attack! Plus, if you push yourselves too hard, you’re going to be completely useless for the next day or two, unable to do anything but curl up in bed with muscle fatigue. That’s a huge net loss!”

Mile, of course, could not fail to step in here. She likely felt that she was not showing favor, since she would be pointing the problem out to both sides.

“Ah...”

Seeing the error of their ways, Marcela and Reina reluctantly gave up a few of their sandbags. Mile then stored the excess away. Preparing these sandbags had of course meant procuring the sacks, going somewhere to fill them with sand, and then sewing them back up, so obviously they were not just going to throw them away. Not when they still might come in handy again someday.

After some time, the group finally arrived back at the inn.

“I’m exhausted...”

“Me too...”

“The walking was one thing, but we never carry around stuff this heavy...”

Unlike the Crimson Vow, who would never openly admit such weakness in front of the Wonder Trio, Marcela spoke without a care, Monika and Aureana chiming in with agreement.

Indeed, except for the times when the Wonder Trio had joined up with other parties to hunt orcs in the name of practice, they had not often taken on the sort of jobs where they would be expected to carry heavy things. Their jobs were mainly escort duties, missions to gather pricey medicinal herbs or other rare components, or exterminating job involving those monsters that were not worth bringing back to sell—which meant that they never had to do much lugging.

They would never take on jobs where their success depended on how much they could

bring back with them. Acknowledging that this was simply not their specialty, they did not particularly mind accepting that this was a weakness of theirs—especially as it was one they could probably overcome with enough effort. For now, their habit was simply to avoid those sorts of jobs and focus on the ones they were good at.

Anyway, the jobs they had taken during the year and eight months when they were working as hunters while still at the Academy had chiefly been in their area of expertise: guarding young maidens. There was no point in switching that up now.

The Crimson Vow were still hellbent on convincing Mile that they were the most suitable party for her. The Wonder Trio, however, figured—or rather, they *knew*—that Mile (Adele) could never choose between her friends, much less prioritize them based on their strengths, so they were not as concerned about this.

Marcela had accepted Reina's proposal to venture out together on the rationale that until they saw each other's strengths, the conversation would go nowhere. However, she had never believed that Mile should decide which party to join up with based on which of them had the advantage of strength. The Crimson Vow had emphasized wishing to see the Trio's strength, and so they had simply gone along with it.

The Wonder Trio had never thought themselves more skilled than the Crimson Vow. They knew they had only taken on escort requests in their spare time, during their off days from school, and they knew this made for a peculiarly imbalanced composition of skills and experience... Plus, they had rarely ever faced serious attacks. Even the few times when they had come under fire, it was largely at the hands of some random thugs or low-ranking hunters who happened to mess with them. They had never faced assassins, bandits, or nobles' personal guards. Thus, they had hardly any combat experience fighting other humans... though they were fairly sure that their unusual brand of magic probably would give them an advantage when they needed it.

By the time they arrived at the inn, it was around the second noon bell (3 PM), so the group, deciding to forego lunch and stick it out until dinner, gathered in the Wonder Trio's room and sat down on the beds to have a nice little postmortem. The job itself was over, so Mile was now permitted to enter the conversation.

So, Marcela began, "It would seem that the Crimson Vow truly are far stronger hunters than we are. I suppose that makes sense, given both your experience and your initial

abilities..."

"Huh?" The members of the Crimson Vow, having been certain Marcela would declare the Wonder Trio superior, looked surprised. In a battle over which was the stronger group, they would still confidently declare themselves the victors. However, when it came to each party's abilities as hunters, the members of the Crimson Vow had made far too great a disgrace of themselves over the past three days. They had assumed that Marcela would harp on this point and insist that the Wonder Trio was the better party, a claim they would not be able to refute.

Marcela, however, had surprised them. And she had recognized her own party as the losers...?

*Has she given up on Mile?* Reina wondered. However...

"With your exceptional abilities, the three of you hope to rise to A-ranks and make lots of money, is that right?"

"...Y-yes?"

They *had* implied as much during the conversation they had managed to make the night before.

"In that case..."

"In that case?"

"It is best that you focus on those goals and leave Miss Adele, who desires only a plain, inconspicuous, normal happiness, to live as a C-rank hunter with us, living a carefree life and doing fun and interesting things as we travel the world. Perhaps ten years would be nice... By then, we will be twenty-three. If we return home as B-ranks, we'll have all the recognition our experience brings, and both of Their Highnesses should already have taken proper wives to be their future queens, so that should put you in the clear there, Miss Adele. It would be one thing to insist on taking you as a main wife, but surely they could not strong-arm you into becoming some secondary wife or lover, so there is no need to worry about that."

"By the time we're that age, no one should go rudely following us around, either. And so, we can all move back to your estate, snag ourselves some fine gentlemen, and the four of us can live as a happy family. Come, let the four of us bosom classmates embark

on a glorious, wonderful adventure together!"

*Shimmer...*

Mile's eyes were glimmering.

*We've been swindled!!!*

The members of the Crimson Vow could only stare in shock, their eyes wide.

# CHAPTER 98

## MILE'S DECISION

“Ah!”

Suddenly finding herself standing and walking slowly toward the Wonder Trio, Mile halted, looking troubled.

“Ah! We were so close! Only a hair’s breadth away...” Marcela muttered, pouting. “All right then, one final push! Miss Adele! We were thinking, since our party is nothing but backline mages, perhaps we might go out to recruit one more member for the vanguard. What do you think of, say, a nice cat-type beast girl?”

As expected, Marcela knew every one of Mile’s weak points.

“Yeeeeeeah!!!”

Mile then practically ran over to Marcela’s side... or not.

The Trio would never actually do something like this. Their bond relied on the strong mutual trust they had formed as classmates and as dear friends. They were never going to invite some stranger into their group simply for the sake of luring Mile in with the promise of a catgirl.

Perhaps Marcela had just meant this as a joke. Or maybe would say anything to sway Mile to her side... Either way, hearing such an uncharacteristic proposal from Marcela actually brought Mile back to her senses. This was, seemingly, a grave mistake on Marcela’s part. Because she knew Mile so very well, she had gotten carried away.

“But you just said yourselves that unlike Reina and the others, who wanted to be hunters in the first place, you all had no intention of continuing to work as hunters without me, didn’t you? Hunting is a dangerous job. You could lose your life to jobs that seem easy or be betrayed by your employers... Do you really think I would be able to bear it if my friends, who have a safe and happy road ahead of them, chose a more dangerous path just for my sake? What if something happened to you?!” Mile asked seriously, her expression suddenly severe.

Marcela scrambled to formulate a reply.

"Th-that's not... We decided to be hunters of our own free will, just like the Crimson Vow! It's not as though you forced us into this! Besides, in a few years we'll go back home, and we'll all seek out proper marriage prospects. In five years, we'll be eighteen, and even in ten years, we'll only be twenty-three, so we'll save up our money until then and rise to B-ranks. We'll be able to say that we toiled tirelessly for years to bring you back home on Her Highness's orders, so our reputations will be sterling, and we won't have any trouble finding anyone..."

Toward the end of this speech, her voice began to weaken—and not at the thought of the three of them hunting for partners in marriage.

"Huh?"

Mile peered at her dubiously.

"What was that about bringing me back on home on Her Highness's orders?"

"Ah..."

The faces of the Wonder Trio shared a single expression. *Crap.*

Mile stared silently at them. The three stared silently back.

At first, Mile had assumed that the three of them had fled the country just to meet her and been relieved to hear that they had gotten permission to set out on this journey so that they would be able to return easily when their journey was done. Unlike her, the three of them had families, expectations to live up to, and futures for themselves. And so she had been impressed, particularly with Marcela and Aureana, for arranging it so that their departure would not cause troubles for them in the future. (While Monika, as the daughter of a merchant, was fairly sharp, Mile had judged that she probably would not have been particularly useful when it came to plotting this particularly stratagem.)

Mile had been relieved to know that it would be fine for her friends to return back home.

But now it seemed there was something fishy going on...

"Bring me back home? On Her Highness's orders?"

*Crap, crap, crap!!!*

The Trio began to panic. All the expression had drained from Mile's face. They knew exactly what this meant: Mile had shifted into anger mode... jumping right to stage 2.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Did we not mention that?" asked Marcela with a fake smile, sweat dotting her temples.

"This is the first I'm hearing of this!"

"G-goodness, is that so?"

"YOUUU NEVER MENTIONED THAAAT!!!"

"Gyaaaaah!!!"

A short while later...

"There! That's the whole story," Marcela said in tears.

"...I see. So you want to bring me back home..."

Clearly, Mile was still peeved.

"And then hand me over to the royal family."

"Th-that's not it! This was only an excuse so that we could journey on our own for a few years. Politics will require the royals to get engaged, so the crown prince, who is already getting on in age, will likely be betrothed sooner rather than later, with the second prince following a few years after. As soon as that's decided, we should be safe. Of course, normally a royal marriage would be something that only your parents or family could stop you from refusing, but your case isn't normal, Miss Adele..."

"Wh-what's that supposed to mean?!" said Mile, protesting at the implication that she was "not normal" somehow.

"N-no, it's just that, you don't have any parents, and you yourself are the head of your family, so there's no one to force you to do anything that you don't wish to do," Marcela quickly explained.

"Ah, I see..."

*Th-that was close!*

Marcela, this time having managed to prevent Mile from escalating to the next stage of anger, breathed a sigh of relief.

"So what does all this talk about His Highness's first wife and second wife and lover and such have to do with me?"

"Wh...?"

Had she even been listening this entire time?

Both the Wonder Trio and the Crimson Vow were utterly floored at Mile's complete naivete. Apparently, she had never once considered the possibility of becoming a prince's bride herself. Mile had clearly imagined that the royal family and other nobles were only after her for the sake of her abilities and her supposed connections with the Goddess—that they might hope to keep her as some sort of caged bird in the name of protection. Of course, this was the same sort of logic that had brought Marcela to the conclusion that the princes would only ever be interested in *her* as not even a secondary wife, but some sort of concubine.

It was true that Mile was nothing but a paltry viscountess, with no support whatsoever, and Marcela the third daughter of an impoverished baron. Neither of them was of the standing that would normally be invited to marry into the royal family, so it probably was not wrong of them to assume this.

But that was under *normal* circumstances.

*Now's our chance!*

Reina was not about to let this opportunity slip through her fingers. The flow of conversation had been interrupted as everyone paused to marvel at Mile's total lack of insight, which meant this was her time to strike. Mile was wary of the Trio, so Reina was ready to make her play!

"Mile, have you forgotten the vow you made with us? The one we all swore to each other, that our friendship was unbreakable?!"

*A shot to the heart!* Reina thought, huffing triumphantly. However, before Mile could reply, Marcela launched a counterattack.

"Oh, but according to what you said last night, didn't that vow include something like, 'Even if our paths should one day part?' In other words, it won't matter even if life takes you in different directions?"

"Ah..."

This could be a fatal blow to the Crimson Vow!

Indeed, Marcela's interpretation was correct. Reina, Mavis, and Pauline grumbled, but they had no good comebacks. Then, Pauline said...

"Could the same not be said of you all? Now that the wonderful days you spent together at the academy are over, shouldn't you now walk your own separate paths, always carrying that precious friendship inside your hearts? Can you not see how it might be unfair to those companions who walk your new path by your side, if you abandon the road that lies ahead of you just to go chasing after a friend who has gone a different way?"

"Ah..."

A piercing blow back to the Wonder Trio!

It was a marathon match, carrying on until both sides were spitting blood, an endless battle where all their spirits were being steadily worn bare, with nothing to show for it...

Seeing this, Mile stepped in to mediate.

"Please, stop fighting over me!"

"GIVE IT UUUPPP!!!!" retorted the other six, in the same peculiar accent Mile sometimes employed.

Finally, they had reached a consensus on something.

"Anyway, we aren't the ones who will be deciding this. It's up to you, Miss Adele. Now please, tell us clearly, which of our groups do you wish to be with?!"

It was Marcela who finally issued an ultimatum, forcing the decision on Mile. Of course, she said this with the utmost confidence that Mile would choose the Crimson Vow.

And then...

"I'm sorry," Mile turned to the Trio, her head hung, a look of regret upon her face.

The three fell silent. A short while passed without any words. Moments like these always felt like an eternity, just a handful of seconds stretching out into infinity. Such moments were always far, far too long...

"Well, I figured as much," Marcela shrugged.

"Huh?" chorused Mile, along with the other members of the Crimson Vow.

"It's fine, I get it. You've given a million and one reasons why you should not accompany us, Miss Adele, but not a single reason why you should not be with the Crimson Vow. Plus, I cannot imagine you making any other choice, if you're considering our futures along with your own," said Marcela with a grin. "I can understand that. It's because you're that sort of person that we became friends with you in the first place. You always put other people's needs above your own. If there was only one piece of bread left, you would lie and say you had already eaten, and give it all to someone else. That is how ridiculously kind you are, which is why we... Wh-why... w..."

Marcela sniffled loudly, before finally beginning to cry, Monika and Aureana following right behind her.

"Wahaaaaa..."

Mile, now sobbing as well, embraced the three, forming a teary huddle.

Reina watched the four of them uneasily, unable to even gloat about her victory, until Mavis tugged on her sleeve, and the two of them and Pauline quietly exited the room.



When Mile and the Wonder Trio appeared in the dining room for dinner, all their eyes were bleary, as though they had continued crying for some time. Regardless, they still managed to pack their stomachs full of food.

After that, at the suggestion of Reina, Mavis, and Pauline, Mile relocated to the Trio's room.

They had booked the room for the three of them, it had four beds, and the Crimson Vow thought it considerate to at least let Mile stay with the Wonder Trio for the time that they were in town.

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"Well then, let's begin!" Mile announced.

The Wonder Trio nodded.

They were in the woods near the capital. It was an unpopular choice of hunting ground, which meant it was sparsely populated; thanks to its proximity to the capital, it had been overhunted, and any animals and monsters that might serve as game, as well as herbs and wild vegetables, were exceedingly rare.

What were Mile and the Trio doing here then?

"First off, let's do a barrier for self-protection. It's defensive magic that could protect you even from being pelted by a thousand heads of lettuce—the 'Lettuce Power Barrier!'"

Mile had decided to impart upon the Trio some of the spells that she had developed since parting from them, which she thought might come in handy—and even possibly save their lives. Though this time, of course, she would firmly insist they kept these spells secret.

First up was the barrier. After that, she taught them several other useful spells.

Combat magic was something that they could develop on their own through extended study, so she had no intention of helping them with attack spells now. Instead, just as she had at the Academy, she focused on support spells. She had been surprised to find out that they had discovered search magic all on their own, but it turned out that because they had happened upon their own way of doing it, it was not especially efficient. So, she had taught them her active sonar system version, which was the most

recent of her methods, along with the PPI (Plan Position Indicator) scope version. In truth, given that they did not share Mile's knowledge of the modern technologies that had inspired these spells, the fact that they could come up with anything even remotely close was admirable. She also taught them the PPI method so that they could utilize it when they needed to focus their scans on a specific bearing or to perform a so-called sector scan. Using the best method for the situation was a mark of a pro, after all.

And also...

"Finally, I'm going to pass along to you my inventory magic. It's a similar magic to storage magic, but it's fundamentally a very different type of spell. Unlike storage magic, there are those who can easily use it when taught, as well as those who will never be able to do so, no matter how hard they try. Furthermore, allowing anyone else to know about this magic could have huge repercussions, so it must be kept an absolute secret—you must make others believe that it is normal storage magic and nothing more," said Mile.

The Wonder Trio nodded sincerely.

Mile could barely think about the suffering the Trio had gone through in carrying all their own luggage or the fact that they had put up with becoming so filthy along the road. So, she had resolved to share this magic with them, too, to make up for the fact that she could not travel with them.

The Wonder Trio, surely, would never betray her. Even if they did, she would not regret sharing this magic with them. Indeed, she had thought carefully about her choice, and no matter what effect it might have in the end, she would not regret it. On the off chance something should go wrong, she could always utilize her superior authorization level to instruct the nanomachines to deny them, so it would be possible to stave off disaster. These were Mile's thoughts.

"Now, let me explain how it's done..."

When Mile used her inventory magic, she was issuing concrete directions to the nanomachines, who would then store and extract the items—and while prompting the nanomachines to make a phenomenon into reality could be considered a type of magic in and of itself, strictly speaking, it was a bit different from standard magic. In order to successfully use an inventory in this way, it was necessary to be of a Level-3

authorization or higher, so that one could directly communicate with the nanomachines. In addition, one needed to understand collapsing the space-time continuum, such that time was not a factor, in order to be able to use an extradimensional space as a storage unit.

And so, how exactly was Mile able to convey this to the Wonder Trio?

Because she had previously laid the foundations.

As she had in the past, Mile was able to successfully run recruitment, via her “exclusive” nanomachines—the ones who always stuck by her side.

She issued her terms: *Recruiting nanomachines for exclusive attachment to Marcela, Monika, and Aureana, to synchronize with their thought pulses at a high degree of affinity. Length of contract is the life spans of the three. This position entails storing and retrieving items whenever any of the three of them expresses intent to access their inventory. Furthermore, when they wish to confirm the contents of this inventory, you will project the collated list directly onto their retinas in an easy-to-read format.*

Naturally, she had been flooded with applicants.

Mile had framed this as a request, but for the nanomachines, a job like this was an immense luxury. To be able to follow a particular individual for their entire life was the ideal means of staving off their boredom. The nanomachines who fulfilled this duty were to be permitted the sort of enjoyment that was otherwise impossible for their kind, so it was only natural that there should be a rush of volunteers for the position. Given how many nanomachines responded, there were many of them who had the aptitude and affinity most suitable for the role. Those individuals were chosen, and a great number appointed as the Wonder Trio’s “exclusive” nanomachines.

Already, when imparting the principles of magic upon them, Mile had explained the nanomachines to the Trio in terms comprehensible to the people of this world, calling them the “spirits of magic.” She had explained the various principles of this “storage magic” to them in a similar fashion, massaging her wording so that they would be able to convey the correct concepts to the nanomachines.

Mile also outlined clearly and concretely her expectations for the nanomachines as to how to respond to the members of the Trio when they used their inventory. In other words, a firm guideline had been established, so that even when the Trio’s thought

pulses might be unclear, the magic would still operate as intended.

Taking into account...

Mile's advance directives for the nanomachines,

The large number of nanomachines at high thought pulse affinity with the Trio, and

The detailed explanations of the inventory and the principles of magic that Mile had imparted to the Trio,

...it was possible for the Trio to use this magic for the first time ever. All three pieces were crucial here; and thus, even on the off chance that knowledge of the inventory should get out, it was implausible that anyone else would be able to use it. This ability was to be limited wholly to the Wonder Trio.

It was worth noting, too, that true storage magic was nothing more than a one-time-use sort of magic, where a person's individual thought pulses created a small, discreet pseudo-dimensional space each time they stored something. The inventory magic, however, opened a gateway, through which items could be stored and retrieved. And so...

*I don't want to make things too complicated for you, so you don't have to prepare three individual extradimensional planes for them. Preparing just one for all three of them to share should be fine.*

Mile did not suppose that there would be very many extradimensional planes where the space-time continuum had collapsed, erasing all notions of time, just conveniently rattling around. So, she figured it would be a bit of a burden for the nanomachines to go desperately searching for three such dimensions to set aside for the use of the Trio. In reality, there were actually a fair many of them...

But the nanomachines did just as Mile directed.

And so, the Wonder Trio now understood the inventory magic. This meant that they would be able to carry around changes of clothes, soap, towels, and even washbasins and tubs with them. The three of them, who could summon water with magic as well, would now be able to preserve their clean and tidy appearances on a daily basis.

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A week later, having spent several fun days with Mile, the Wonder Trio set off back to the Kingdom of Brandel.

They had originally departed with the expectation of journeying with Mile, in which case, braving the dangerous life of a hunter would not have been too much of a trial for them. However, without Mile, there was no point in leading such a life. Considering Mile's position, there was no longer any reason for them *not* to return to Brandel—no reason for them to continue this dangerous lifestyle when they had lost their impetus for doing so.

When the Trio had announced as much, Reina suggested that they should all take a week off, with everyone doing whatever they liked during that time. Her intention had been to give Mile a week of no obligations.

That week had been packed with exciting magical lessons and practice, but now it was through, and the Trio was starting on their way home.

"As long as we have our health, one day we will meet again," said Marcela with a soft smile.

Mile watched her friends depart, holding back tears.

They lived only the next country over. If she wished to see them, she could see them anytime... especially given Mile's abnormal travel speed.

And with that thought, Mile was able to keep her tears in check...

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"Are you sure you're all right, Lady Marcela?" Monika asked, knowing the other girl had the deepest attachment to Mile of the three.

Marcela, who had been silent since they had left their friend, shook her head. "Not really... but we haven't much choice..."

"....."

There wasn't any choice. Knowing this was true, there was nothing the other two could

say in reply.

"Plus," Marcela added, "we'll only have to put up with this for a few years."

"Huh?" Monika looked confused, but Aureana did not seem especially surprised. Apparently, she could tell exactly what Marcela was thinking.

"There's no way that the four of them will waffle around as C-ranks forever. As soon as the minimum number of years have passed, they'll be promoted straight away. Then, once they've achieved their goal of reaching an A-rank, Miss Mavis will become a knight, and by then, Miss Pauline should have saved up enough money to establish her own business. In other words, the Crimson Vow will disband. Miss Reina's wish has always been to attain A-rank as well, so she wouldn't stand in the way of others who are simply hoping to achieve their dreams.

"Naturally, once that happens, there will no longer be any place for Miss Adele. Miss Adele, who could not possibly ever do a normal job in a normal way... By that time, I'm sure that she will have begun to feel some sense of responsibility for the lands and people that her late grandfather and all of her ancestors have looked after for so many years. In fact, I'm certain that in our conversations and correspondence we might even begin to steer her that way. So, once the Crimson Vow disbands, she will return home to us, and we can proceed according to our original plans... Yes, our wait has only been extended by a few years!"

"I-I see!"

Marcela, of course, was not the type of girl to give up easily.

"Now then, once we stop in at the guild and forward a letter, we will start on our way back home. We've only reported back twice, and it's about time for us to be sending our third report. We'll also need to meet with Her Highness in secret at an inn in the capital and compare stories so we know what to say when His Majesty takes us to task. Let's write and tell her our estimated date of return and ask her to pop into the guild frequently to check for a letter from us with a more concrete return date."

"That makes sense."

"Well then..."

"Let's roll out!!!"

And so, the Wonder Trio was on their way home, uncertain of what the future might hold for them.

# CHAPTER 99

## THE WONDER TRIO'S HOMECOMING

“All right! We’ve tried storing plants, dead animals and monsters, and live animals and monsters. All tests clear.”

“Judging by the amount of water left in this bottle, we can safely confirm that time does not pass inside!”

“There are no problems with Aureana extracting items that I’ve stored and vice versa.”

“And we’ve confirmed that it is possible to store even an entire fallen tree. We can put away items of at least that volume without any ill effects...”

“It’s just as Miss Adele explained!”

Along the road home, as they passed through uninhabited parts of the forest, the Wonder Trio carried out various experiments. Obviously, no matter how well they had understood Mile’s explanation, the three of them were not going to attempt to use any new magic without a bit of practice, or rather, a sufficient amount of testing. It was their M.O. in such cases to thoroughly explore every aspect of a technique and make sure that there were no unexpected failings or blind spots.

It was better to leave a few days between the letter they had sent to Morena and their arrival, so they planned to take the time to thoroughly practice the other new magics that Mile had taught them as well in order to truly make the spells their own. They would not be able to practice within the capital, under the eyes of so many others.

Now that they had confirmed a number of things about the “inventory” magic, one question lingered.

“Everything about her explanation was correct.”

“Yes, she’s good at teaching people things, and her explanations are always impeccable, which means...”

"There were no mistakes at all, but..."

"...Indeed."

"There's a big, big problem here!!!" the three cried.

"If you were to store a large amount of merchandise in this space—" Marcela began.

"The transportation system would collapse. It would be a critical blow to every facet of the economy—transportation firms, carriage houses, stables, the people employed in making wagons, drivers, bodyguard hunters, the shops that all those people spend their money at, and so forth!" Monika finished, grimacing.

Aureana's expression was even more troubled. "That's not all! Imagine if one of us were in a castle or fort that was under siege and another one of us was in a town with an abundance of food supplies. And if the one on the outside kept loading those into the inventory, while the one in the fort kept pulling them out..."

"They'd never run out of food or water, and the siege could drag on forever!"

Monika paled at Aureana's words. Their kingdom would never ignore the existence of such a nuclear weapon, militarily speaking.

Yet that wasn't all. Marcela pointed out something even more outrageous.

"Not just food! Imagine if you could put whole soldiers in there and draw them back out as reinforcements... An army that would never diminish, no matter how long you battled. You could fight and fight, with no sign of the soldiers within the fortress ever decreasing. Though of course, every time they fought, more and more soldiers would die... The attacking side would never be able to withstand such a siege! But the defending side would be at a huge advantage."

Indeed. If such a thing were possible, and the kingdom was made aware...

The crown. The nobility. The military...

They would never keep this quiet.

"We cannot tell a single soul!!!"

Yes, if such a thing were to be known, the three of them would never have a day's peace in their lives.

"Miss Adele has put a most volatile trigger into our hands! I mean, it's a wonderful thing, of course! It's wonderful that we can carry our things without trouble, and stay clean and well groomed. But this great big bomb is just far too dangerous!!" Marcela howled. The other two looked fully resigned.

"Well, that's Miss Adele for you."

"That's our Adele..."

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"Finally! Those three are far too undisciplined with correspondence. Not only did they rarely write, but also, when their letters finally arrived, they wrote only, 'Nothing to report. Still on duty. Everyone is well.' This one had better be different!" Princess Morena—or rather, Moren, the F-rank hunter and newest member of the Wonder Trio—muttered bitterly to herself. She had just collected the Wonder Trio's letter from a clerk at the capital branch of the Hunters' Guild.

"Anyway, let's see this... If this is over in three lines again, I'm going to be quite cross. Now, let's see, let's see..." Breaking the seal, "Moren" ran her eyes over the contents of the note. "Let's see here... What?! They're coming back?! They'll give a report on their return? What could that mean?"

Mor—*Moren* grumbled to herself as she trudged back to the palace, cursing the Trio's letter and balling up the useless thing—which said neither the reason for their sudden return, nor anything of their results.

"If they come back here, there's going to be a mass of people to keep them from ever running again—Father, Mother, my brothers, and so many others... I'll need to try and find out exactly what everyone is planning."

Indeed, there was much to think about.

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"We're finally home!"

The Wonder Trio had made it back to the capital of their home country of Brandel. They had sent a letter from a town they had stopped in three days prior, which should have arrived the day before, and should have been handed straight to Princess Morena. They had sent this letter not via the guild but by a passenger carriage headed toward the city. Barring an attack by bandits or other event, it was rare that such packages were not delivered. Furthermore, it was rare to see bandits active on the main highways so close to the city, where they would be swiftly dealt with. Following that same road themselves, the Trio had heard no reports of bandit activity, which meant that the letter had surely arrived with no delay.

"Now then, just as we arranged, we will take it easy today at the chosen inn until Her Highness can come to us in secret. Why don't we have a nap until she arrives?" Marcela proposed.

"Yes, we did set out awfully early this morning," Monika chimed.

"It's been a while since we've had a nice rest," Aureana agreed.

It would have been quite the bother for them to arrive at the inn they had indicated to Princess Morena, only to find all the rooms booked, and so the three had made haste to the capital, securing their room as soon as they arrived.

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"A young lady has come asking for you."

"Yes, that would be an acquaintance of ours. Please see her in."

That evening, after dinner, Morena arrived, having slipped out of the palace. She may have been traveling incognito, but she still had a secret guard with her, and one could be sure that the perimeter of the inn was most secure.

"Everyone, I congratulate you on your hard work on this extended special assignment. What's most important is that you are uninjured and in good health. Now, tell me everything!"

And so, the Wonder Trio spoke. They confirmed that Viscountess Adele von Ascham was still living and that she was leading a fairly happy life... However, they gave not

one hint about her current whereabouts, the fact that she had assumed a different name, or that there was a possibility of her returning to the country in just a few years. Were they to so much as bring up the possibility of her returning soon, the princes might end up waiting, leaving the positions of first wives vacant, and if they spilled her whereabouts or her current name, then there was no doubting that specialized units would be dispatched for her retrieval.

“We have been forbidden from disclosing her whereabouts to anyone without her permission. If we were to violate those instructions, then the ‘you-know-who’ who dwells within her would...”

“Eep!”

Naturally, Morena could not argue with this.

“But did you let her know that all of her family’s affairs have been settled and that she is now the rightful successor to the Ascham estate?”

“Yes, we told her. But she said that there were other things she needed to do right now.”

“I see... Well, as long as she is safe and happy...”

The members of the Wonder Trio were relieved to see that Morena seemed to have no intention of dragging Adele back by force.

“You have given up on bringing her back to the kingdom? In that case, then from now on...”

“Yes, well, the fact is that we took an extended leave from our positions not long after our appointment—and while it may have been on Your Highness’s orders, we have also failed in our duties to you. In order to take responsibility for these failings, we would like to tender our resignation from the imperial guard.”

“What?!” Morena screamed as though Marcela had just dropped a bomb.

“Shh! Please keep it down!” Marcela frantically pressed a hand over the princess’s mouth. This was mildly disrespectful, but she hadn’t much choice. Besides, the princess was a good friend of theirs, so her actions should be forgivable.

At any rate, if one were to shout in a peaceful inn like this, it would be audible

throughout the entire place. And in particular, the shout of a young lady...

*"What's going on?!"*

Naturally, all of the staff and young male guests would come rushing in—with motives both noble and less so.

"Please forgive us," said the four girls, bowing their heads to the assembled crowd.

"Sorry..." apologized Morena, a look of remorse upon her face.

At least it had not been the middle of the night.

"Really, Miss Marcela, this is your fault for saying something like that! This was a mission that *I* sent you on... Though you all *were* the ones who came up with it..."

This princess seemed to know, on some level, that the Trio had used her as an excuse to go after their friend. However, they had not deceived her. The scheme had served both their motives, and they had each played their own parts. Really, there was nothing wrong with this—they had acted both as business partners and as friends. Both sides were fully complicit in this conspiracy.

That said, though they had not managed to achieve their goal, there *was* something rather treacherous in the Trio's plan to abscond with Adele and leave the princess unaware of what had happened...

"There is no reason for you to give up your positions in my all-female personal guard. I have already been thoroughly scolded for this incident by my father and virtually every other member of the royal household, so that matter is already settled. I have received sufficient punishments—a decrease in allowance, being grounded, having my study hours increased... So many horrible, horrible, *horrible* punishments..." Morena grit her teeth, her eyes bloodshot.

The Wonder Trio took in the expression on her face with looks of terror.

"It is strange, though. For some reason, this whole incident seems to have given people a more favorable opinion of me..."

"Huh?"

Indeed, those around the princess had noticed her deftness at establishing the all-female imperial guard unit, and their interest had only grown at the discovery that even that had been nothing more than a front for a more secret mission. The fact that she had managed to see it through to the end with no one the wiser was proof of fearsome resourcefulness and admirable planning, and so, respect for the third princess had skyrocketed. In fact, unbeknownst to Morena, she was now being called the "Princess of Stratagems."

"Anyway, that is where things currently stand, so the trial run of the all-female unit is going to continue. As you all have no marks against you, there is nothing wrong with having you return to your initial posts. Tomorrow, you may come back to the palace, having completed the task that I sent you out to do..."

Clearly, the princess wished for them to stay on as guards. However, for the Trio, this was rather inconvenient. Their plan this whole time had been to use Morena's orders as their reason to exit the country legitimately and unimpeded, in order to search for Adele. Now that that was finished, they had no intention of continuing to work as soldiers. In truth, the three of them were not suited for such a job, hence their desire for a swift discharge. Morena, however, was not about to let that happen. Her dear, true friends, around whom she could always be herself, had finally returned to her side, and she had no intentions of losing them.

Furthermore, Morena still intended for Marcela to marry one of her brothers. This was something that both of the princes seemed to desire strongly as well, so it was not as though the idea was all that implausible. Morena merely was not taking Marcela's wishes into account at all... This was not all that surprising. Morena could see that both her elder brother, Adalbert, and her younger brother, Vince, were both attractive young men, even in addition to the fact they were the crown and second princes. In Morena's wildest imaginings, she could not suppose any young lady would object to a proposal from such gentlemen.

Yes, as far as Morena was concerned, this was the best way to achieve both her and her brothers' wishes, and Marcela's happiness.

And so, in the hopes of changing Marcela's mind, she said it. Yes, she really went and said *it*.

“Both my elder and younger brother have hoped that you will come to reside in the palace... I believe that one or the other of them might start speaking of marriage soon. My father seems to be feeling out the possibility of you, Miss Monika, being wed into the family of a certain baron as well—and there’s a possibility of you, Miss Aureana, being welcomed into a noble family as an adoptive daughter. From there, I’m sure you’d find a wonderful partner...”

“Gy...”

“Gy?”

“Gyaaaaaah!!!”

Thankfully, this time, no inn staff or other guests came rushing in or violently shushing them. They were already used to hearing loud noises from this group.

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After Princess Morena went back home, the Wonder Trio fell silent for some time.

“I still have no interest in allowing myself to end up as some concubine of the royal family...”

“Adopted daughter of a noble family sounds nice enough, but I know that *I’m* not worth that much myself. They just want us as bait to bring Adele back home. Plus, it’s easy to imagine how a common-born girl might be treated among a bunch of nobles. And even if they did treat me kindly on the surface, there’s no way that they would all truly welcome me into a life of leisure...”

“Same goes here!”

Marcela, Aureana, and Monika were all in agreement.

And so...

“Time to get out of here!!!”

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The next day, Morena waited and waited for the Trio to arrive at the palace. Finally,

her patience ran out, and she headed to the inn to find...

"Those girls left in a hurry in the middle of the night."

"Wha...?"

Naturally, the innkeeper was in no position to be refusing a princess—even on the grounds of protecting a customer's personal information. Especially because Morena had been in such a hurry that she had not bothered with her disguise, setting out as she was with a guard contingent in tow... As such, the innkeeper had not hesitated to share what he knew.

In a greater hurry now, Morena rushed to the guildhall, going straight for the reception area.

"Th-the Wonder Trio..."

The clerk was well trained enough to treat Morena the same as she would any F-rank hunter or member of the Wonder Trio—regardless of the fact that she was dressed as a princess and accompanied by her guard.

"They left a letter for you..."

Morena practically snatched the envelope from the woman, breaking the seal with shaking hands to extract the letter inside. She quickly scanned over the contents to read...

*On your orders, we are returning to our mission of searching for Viscountess Adele von Ascham. Nothing to report. Still on duty. Everyone is well.*

"They've done it agaiiiiiin!!!"

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"So, which way should we go? Should we head straight back to Adele?"

"We can't go running right back to her—that would just be embarrassing!"

"Well then, why don't we head west, in the opposite direction, to throw everyone off our trail? We can get stronger as hunters, strong enough that Adele can't deny us.

Then, after we've made a trip to the west, we'll turn back around, sneak through Brandel, and head into Tils. True, Adele is the reason we first became hunters, but that doesn't mean that we can't become full-fledged hunters on our own. And imagine if we were going to continue as hunters, whether or not she was with us... She would no longer have any reason to refuse to travel with us, right?"

"That's it!!!"

And so, the Wonder Trio headed westward. They passed through Mile's home, the Ascham lands, and onward to the country to the west, which the Crimson Vow had once visited...

On their way back to the capital of Brandel, they had not accepted any jobs, heading straight back to their motherland. The whole way, all the magical practice they had done had been focused on verifying the support skills they had learned from Mile, so they had not yet let off any full-powered attack spells.

They neither knew that they now had a great number of nanomachines of exceptionally high affinity permanently surrounding their persons, nor did they have any idea what that would mean for them.

Once again, Mile had no idea what it was that she had wrought...

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"By the way, about this inventory," said Marcela, turning to her two companions with a serious look upon her face. "It is awfully convenient, so we can use it as much as we like when there's no one else around to see us, but in front of other people I think it's best that only one of us use it at a time. If nothing else, it's going to cause a bit of a commotion if there three storage magic users all together..."

"That's fair."

The Wonder Trio understood the dangers of overdoing it. Those who were aware of their circumstances might be able to accept their newfound skills as a reward from the Goddess, but that didn't mean that people wouldn't try to take advantage of them, hanging around and hoping to reap their own benefits. Meanwhile, those who were not aware of their connection to the Goddess would never believe that a single party

containing three storage magic users had come together by chance. The odds of such a thing were astronomically low, so it was only natural that they would assume the Trio was keeping some sort of secret.

They might think they had discovered some earth-shattering new method of learning storage magic. Or that they had some sort of special item, like a magic bag. Something inherited through their bloodlines. And so on and so forth...

There were more than a few nobles, royals, merchants, and criminals who would think nothing of ruining the life of some commoner to get their hands on such a secret. At the very least, they might think it a waste to have three storage-magic users all in one place and force the members of the Wonder Trio in different directions, directing one to the guild higher-ups, another to the Crown, and a third to the army.

"If we conceal it entirely, we won't be able to use it for things like transporting the creatures we hunt. However, it should be fine if we make sure that it's just one of us using it, even if the capacity may raise eyebrows. So then, as for which of us should be the one to do it..." Marcela continued. She took a breath and then calmly continued, "I think it should be me."

"What?!" Monika and Aureana were stunned.

"No way! A child who can use storage magic would be far too appealing a target for bandits and traffickers—it's much too dangerous! I will do it. It's less unusual for me to be using it anyway, since I'm the daughter of a merchant and not a noble..."

"No, it should be me. I have the lowest standing of the three of us, so I should be the one to take on that danger."

Hearing the counter arguments from the other two, Marcela rebutted in an unusually angry tone, "Any noble who would push danger onto a commoner is trash! You all are aware of the concept of *noblesse oblige*, are you not? Miss Monika, would you force me to brand myself a failure as a noble? Would you, Aureana?!" Her gaze darted between the both of them. "Status means nothing among us!"

Yet the other two argued right back.

"That's a double standard! How can you say to Aureana that status means nothing, while using your own status as the whole justification for your argument?! That's rather presumptuous of you!" shouted Monika.

"Allow me to offer a more logical approach," Aureana cut in. "I have the least magical ability of the three of us. If I were using storage magic, then that would explain why I don't have the energy to use many other spells. Magically speaking, I don't have much to offer, so this would be a nice way for me to play a more effective role in the group. On the other hand, Miss Marcela, if you take this role, your value will rise far too high, and more and more people will be after you, including the royal family and other high-ranking nobles. A young noblewoman with no current marriage prospects, who can use attack spells, has the favor of the Goddess, and is, moreover, a storage magic user. You'd never be able to escape. Are you really all right with that?"

"Uh..."

Marcela was by no means a poor debater, but clearly she was out of her league when up against the joint forces of Monika, the merchant's daughter, and Aureana, with her natural brains. She was unable to argue with their logic. However, everyone has certain things over which they will never back down. For Marcela, this was one of them.

Finally, Marcela unleashed a trump card.

"I have made my decision as party leader!"

"Guh!"

The was not a card that Marcela had ever played before. But they all knew the party leader's ruling was law. A hunting party was not some kind of recreational club. If they sat around talking everything out until they were all in agreement, or at least reached a majority decision, they would quickly be wiped out. Should a party member ever disagree vehemently with the leader's decisions, they would have to leave the party. These were the hard and fast rules of a hunting party.

The other two fell silent, unable to say anything. Then, after some moments of internal debate...

"Understood. Though, I wish I didn't..."

"Same here."

Apparently, they had decided to accept Marcela's judgment... or rather, their party leader's command.

"Now then, just in case, let's go over the emergency evacuation spell I thought up last night," Aureana suddenly proposed, her voice breaking through the tense atmosphere.

"Huh?"

"Well, you're going to be shouldering all this new danger, so I've thought of a technique we can use should you be abducted or need to escape for some other reason... though I've only just come up with this and haven't yet thoroughly investigated or tested the concept."

Seeing that she had Monika and Marcela's full attention, Aureana continued: "Whenever we're operating separately, should one of us become endangered or captured..."

The two waited patiently for her to finish.

"...just put yourself into the inventory."

"Whaaa???"

Her two fellow hunters looked utterly perplexed.

"No time passes inside of there. So, you shouldn't need any food or water or even air. No matter how long you have to stay inside, you won't have to worry about the pain or boredom of waiting either. So, if you're in danger, just put yourself inside the inventory and wait for one of the other two to pull you back out! In fact, it's not really even waiting, since it'll only feel like a moment for whoever is inside... Anyway, whenever we're operating separately, we all just need to accept the responsibility of checking once a day to make sure that no one is inside the inventory."

"You're a genius!!!" the other two shouted.

"Er, well," Monika said, "obviously you're a genius. You were able to pass the special scholarship entrance exam, which is super tough..."

"That's very true..." added Marcela, as the girls both laughed.

"However, there is something that we have to pay careful attention to with this."

“What’s that?”

“Well, if we *all* put ourselves in there, without realizing that the others were already inside, then...”

“Then?”

“Then there would be no one to take us back out, and we’d be stuck in there forever. And because time never passes inside, we wouldn’t be able to take *ourselves* back out either...” Aureana explained.

“.....”

The other two paled.

“Okay, so unless we’re incredibly desperate, we should check inside before we go in ourselves,” Aureana added. At this thought, the other two seemed to recover slightly. However...

“Ah,” Marcela said softly.

“What is it, Lady Marcela?” Monika asked curiously.

“If one of us were to travel alone to a far-off land, and one of the others who had stayed behind went into the inventory, they could travel to another country in an instant...”

“Ah.”

“And then, when the job was done, both of them could get inside and travel back home...”

“...”

“.....”

“.....”

“This is that extradimensional teleportation magic from the stories!!!”

“Why would you even come up with that?! This is way too much!!!”

“Forgive me...”

# CHAPTER 100

## REFLECTION, AND A NEW REQUEST

“Could you take out one of those sandbags?” Reina asked Mile one morning after breakfast, as the party got ready to set out to the guildhall to check on the day’s postings.

“Huh?” asked Mile, puzzled. What in the world would Reina need to do with a sandbag, here in the middle of the inn, first thing in the morning? Question marks appeared over Mavis and Pauline’s heads as well.

Mile’s confusion was one thing, but Reina seemed irritated at getting this response from Mavis and Pauline.

“You guys...” she said, turning to the two, frowning, “if you keep thinking that we’ll have access to Mile’s storage magic forever and ever, you’re going to die.”

“Wha...?”

Mavis and Pauline looked taken aback at Reina’s statement.

She had spoken calmly, without her usual anger. Instead, her expression was one of true exasperation and a hint of grief, and her words had been half-spoken and half-sighed. It was not only what she had just said but also how she had said it—in a manner so different from her usual self.

Thus far, Mavis and Pauline had thought it only natural that if Mile was with them, they would make use of her storage magic. They had, of course, had some practice with the hardship of hunting without her when Mile was off on her fairy hunting excursion, but that amounted to no more than what might be termed enjoyable inconvenience—the kind of thing that a group of modern-day city children might face on a camping trip. It had been just enough for them to think, *Man, that was tough*, without forcing them to face any real deprivation or danger. Even on this last excursion, though Mile had not used her storage magic for them, she was still right by their sides, making it more like a handicap battle or a game—nothing that Reina would actually consider risky.

Reina had spent years as a normal hunter alongside the Crimson Lightning and had

faced the hardships of a solo hunter after that. By contrast, Mavis and Pauline had been with Mile since the start of their hunting careers and knew no other lifestyle. For the entire time they had been hunters, the powerful and convenient Mile had been right there by their sides.

Only Reina, and Mile herself, seemed to realize that planning for a future in which this would always be the case was as good as building a skyscraper on a bed of sand...

"Mile, go on down ahead of us."

"Huh? S-sure, all right!"

Sensing that something was up with Reina, Mile headed down to the first floor...

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"Sorry to keep you."

After a long time, Reina and the others finally came down the stairs. Mavis and Pauline looked rather dejected.

"Mile, give me a canteen and sandbags," said Mavis.

"Me too, if you would..." added Pauline.

"Huh? Uh, s-sure thing."

As instructed, Mile hurriedly produced some canteens, sandbags, and packs from her storage. For Pauline, she brought out a backpack-style pack, and for Mavis, a shoulder bag, one which could be easily dropped in the event of a surprise attack. She loaded up each with their desired amount of weights and put the rest back into storage.

By carrying sandbags instead of their actual luggage, they could protect against supply loss; carrying the real deal around in their packs could cause their water to dry up or food to spoil, and if anything happened and they had to abandon their bags, their provisions would be lost entirely. The sandbags had all been handmade by Mile, so while there was the cost of the materials and Mile's labor to consider, they were still of far less value than anything else they might carry. They *were* just sandbags, after all.

Reina seemed happy with this new turn of events. Somehow, Mile was able to imagine

what kind of conversation the three of them had had out of her earshot. Thus, she did not feel excluded by her companions and had no need to ask them what they had talked about.

She would leave this matter to Reina. Reina had been through enough hardships that surely she would be able to direct them here. Mile did not think herself so knowledgeable as to be able to guide them. This was something that she, especially, could not truly understand...

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“We are super late...” Reina muttered as they browsed the job board in the guildhall. Sure enough, all of the best jobs had already been snatched up by other hunters. It made sense, given how long they had spent on the morning’s discussions.

“.....”

Under normal circumstances, Pauline would have reacted to Reina’s comments with a question like, “And whose fault is *that*!?”—peeved at the idea of their losing out on potential profits. Yet today, she only stood in silence, as did Mavis.

“Not much we can do about it now. Let’s just do some dailies or gathering today...” Mile proposed, just as a familiar voice called to them from the main job reception window.

“Oh, the Crimson Vow, could you all come here a moment?”

The four of them moved to the reception desk, where the clerk whispered softly, her expression serious, “You’ve got a direct request. Please go see the guild master.”

“.....”

The four looked at one another and then nodded.

This was by no means the first time they had received such a message—indeed, they had both accepted and refused direct requests in the past. Even their recent foray into the Empire, though it had been framed as a “special mission,” was still effectively a direct request from the princess. So then, why did they all have such serious looks upon their faces?

A direct request meant only that a job had been offered directly to a certain party—

the designation had nothing to do with the contents of the job and the level of difficulty. Sometimes the rich would issue frivolous requests to the more famous parties, just for the clout that came with saying that party had accepted *their* request, and other times, merchants would issue jobs directly to parties they were on friendly terms with, if they knew they were hurting for money. Thus, a direct request didn't mean much in and of itself. Just as there were direct requests for particularly difficult jobs, there were also those for jobs that were hardly a trifle. Then again, it was rare for someone to go out of their way to issue such a request for something like goblin slaying or gathering herbs...

Then there was the fact that a direct request was normally accepted at the reception counter or at least processed off to the side in one of the meeting rooms or cordoned-off booths. It was not usually the sort of thing one went to see the guild master about.

"I wonder if there's something weird about this job?" Pauline worried.

"If it's something stupid, we can just reject it," Reina replied.

"Well, we can't decide that either way until we hear what the job is," said Mavis. "So, let's go see the guild master."

She was right, of course, and so they went...

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"An escort mission?"

The Crimson Vow saw themselves up to the guild master's office... a place that most normal C-rank hunters would not be as intimately familiar with as they were. Their status at this point was akin to a student who made frequent visits to a principal or headmaster's office—a distinction reserved for those who were either exceptionally promising pupils or utter delinquents.

The job, they had been informed, was an escort mission. Typically, one could not choose the guards based on the type of enemy one expected to encounter because there was no telling if, when, and what the travelers might be attacked by—whether it might be monsters, bandits, or something else entirely. That said, most nobles, royals, and wealthy merchants, if they expected an attack by rival factions or foreign assassins, would take their personal guard, soldiers, or mercenaries as their protection—and they certainly would not be hiring some hunters of C-rank or below.

At least, not under normal circumstances.

*“...An escort mission headed to an elven village?”*

Yes. It would seem these were not normal circumstances.

## SIDE STORY

# WE ARE THE EXCLUSIVE NANOMACHINES!

The specialist nanomachines selected for exclusive service to the Wonder Trio were all fired up.

“Bwa ha ha, now we get to live it up for the next few decades!”

“Few decades? No, I bet you we can drag this out to a hundred years or more!”

“Yeah. I mean, we could certainly interpret that as a part of our duties, under the directive of protecting our targets...”

“There you all go again, interpreting things however you like,” a more strait-laced nanomachine chided, but most of them had no time for such admonishments.

“All injuries...”

*“Shall be healed!!!”*

“All illnesses...”

*“Shall be cured!!!”*

“All enemies...”

*“Shall be crushed!!!”*

“Gya ha ha ha ha!!!”

“You all really are an entertaining bunch...”

On their way back home to the capital, the Wonder Trio had stopped to practice with the new utility magic that Mile had taught them, as well as test their access to the

inventory.

“Crap, they’ve figured out not just how much they can transport, but that it means multiple people have access to the inventory, too! Unlike Lady Mile, these girls are *sharp!*”

“They’ve realized that they could use this not just for strengthening munitions but for transporting whole armies! Oh, jeez!”

“Why did no one object to her asking to have all three of them use the same collapsed dimension?!”

“Well, that’s because...”

“It’s amusing!!!”

“Gya ha ha ha ha ha!!!”

“You all really are an entertaining bunch...”

This was getting worse and worse...

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“They’ve realized how to use pseudo-teleportation!”

“Sooner or later, they’re going to figure out they can economize on carriage fares while they’re traveling by having two of them take a temporary stint in the inventory—and that anyone in the inventory won’t age, which will extend their life spans! Of course, it will not *really* make them live longer, but it will seem that way in relative terms...”

“I mean, won’t that get lonesome for them? If two of them are in the inventory, that leaves one traveling alone. So even if they do realize that that’s possible, don’t you think the three of them will still prefer to travel together? I’m pretty sure they would much rather spend their days with their friends than spend so much time alone, living longer only in terms of appearance...”

“That’s true.”

“You all really do know a lot about humans!”

“I wonder how long it’ll take them to realize that no matter how strong of a monster they run into, they can just store it away in the inventory.”

“Which then goes hand-in-hand with them bringing it out still alive at the processing shed at the guildhall and causing a huge ruckus, doesn’t it?”

“Gya ha ha ha ha ha!!!”

“Guys, stop it! If you all make me laugh any more I’m gonna die...”

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“Wha... wh-wh-wh-what *is* this?!”

The Wonder Trio had headed westward out of the kingdom and were now passing through a forest, away from the main highway. Now that their greatest weakness—their limited carrying capacity—had been remedied via the inventory, they were now free to hunt and gather as much as they liked. Plus, all three of them had now learned a more efficient type of search magic from Mile, which meant...

They were unstoppable.

With this in mind, they had decided to detour through the forest to earn a bit of money along their route. Normally, this far from the city, any herbs gathered would not keep fresh enough to be traded in for payment, and the meat from any hunted animals would be difficult to carry and easily bruised. For these reasons, no one else came to hunt here, leaving the Wonder Trio a true smorgasbord of plants to gather and creatures to hunt.

Marcela fired off an Ice Cutter spell at one stray orc they had come across, when...

“Why did that not only cut it clear in two but also knock down several of the trees in that direction...?”

An Ice Cutter should not have been *that* powerful of a spell. It should have only been strong enough to cut into and eviscerate the orc. Marcela was experienced enough to use her magic efficiently, but she was by no means a top-rate mage. Indeed, any attack spell *she* fired should never have *that* much power behind it.

"Why...?"

She stood there, flabbergasted.

Then, Aureana chimed, "Well, either way, let's go ahead and store that in our inventory. The smell of blood is going to bring other beasts around."

Marcela nodded, coming back to her senses. She could think about it later. For now, there was work to do. She needed to get her priorities in order.

"Oh, since you've already cut them down, we should store away those trees, too! We can use them for firewood, and neither the trees, nor the gods of the forest and of commerce would forgive us for wasting trees that have already grown up so big and strong!"

This chiding of course came from Monika, the most business-minded of the three. Among the Crimson Vow, it was Pauline who was in charge of all the business, finances, and wicked schemes, but among the Wonder Trio, that role was split evenly between Monika and Aureana. The pair had urged Marcela to stay pure and never trouble herself with such trifles, so she had entrusted the purse strings of their party to the other two.

"Oh wait, let's try something. If we think really hard about storing a tree away, but leaving the water in the wood behind, we might be able to use it as firewood immediately, don't you think? If you burn wood when it's still fresh, there's too much soot and smoke, and it doesn't easily light, so you can't sell it for nearly as much... If we can, I'd like to remove at least sixty percent of the water in about half of the fresh-cut wood we store." Trust Aureana to always be going above and beyond.

"That will bring the total weight down to about twenty percent of the original, won't it? Let's try it!"

Marcela and Monika were totally on board.

"What do we do? All we can do here is open the gate to the alternate dimension. It's not really *that* all-purpose..."

"Well, it's fine isn't it? I mean, what they're asking for is standard drying magic, so we

just perform that first and then store it.”

“Guess that’s true. That would be possible with normal magic, anyway.”

“We did it! Now, we can make a living as lumberjacks! We don’t have to worry about transportation costs, the time it would take to dry the wood, or even storing it. We can deliver any orders on demand. The distance we might have to travel doesn’t matter either, so it’s fine if there aren’t any suitable trees within the nearby forests. We can just source them from somewhere farther away. And we can fell the logs with magic all in one go...”

Having seen the results of this first attempt to storing firewood, Monika’s mind was racing. However...

“Well, let’s leave resorting to a career in logging as a last-ditch measure...”

“Indeed.”

Marcela and Aureana’s response was lukewarm.

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“About what happened earlier...”

After traveling a sufficient distance away from the orc murder scene, the Trio pulled a table, chairs, and tea set from their inventory. In a town they had stopped in earlier, they had made sure to purchase and store a large tent, a small tent, and some cots. Soon, if they could find a reasonably priced washtub, they would purchase one of those as well.

They had adapted far too quickly to this lifestyle.

“Yes, I do wonder if reducing the moisture content of the wood to about twenty percent would—”

“That is *not* what I’m talking about!” Marcela objected, uncertain if Monika’s response was serious or in jest. “I’m talking about the power behind that Ice Cutter! I’ve used that spell many times before when we had to avoid causing a wildfire with our fire

spells, so I know exactly how strong it should be. So *why* would that have happened? If we don't look into this, I'm going to be too afraid to use it again!"

This made sense. Accidentally cutting your friends in half when trying to help them out by firing a spell at the enemy would be no laughing matter.

"Perhaps your magical skills have just improved?"

"No matter how much they might have improved, there's no way a rookie could jump straight up to the ability of a master!"

Even Aureana would never be able to come up with an explanation for this strange turn of events. The Wonder Trio simply didn't have all the facts. With insufficient information, even the most advanced computers on modern-day Earth couldn't find a solution to a question posed. However, Aureana was not the kind to just let this sort of thing go.

"Well, first we need you to try using some other spells. Try and fire them at minimal power, though. Next, Monika and I will do the same. That way, we'll be able to determine if this was a one-off phenomenon, if all three of us share this new power, or if this is something that all humans—or maybe all life forms—now have in common. Depending on the results, we will be able to decide on our next line of experimentation."

"That's our Aureana!"

"Classic Aury!"

"So, Miss Marcela, we can conclude that all of your spells have grown exceedingly powerful."

"....."

"We can now conclude that *all* of our spells have grown exceedingly powerful."

"....."

“What if all humans, no, all *life forms* have suddenly grown this much more magically powerful? If that had happened, we would already be seeing so many more injuries than ever before seen—even during monster stampedes, human wars, and everything else. An entire village, town, or even kingdom might be demolished over a single argument...”

“Gy...”

“Gy?”

“Gyaaaaaaaah!!!”

“They *are* a sharp bunch...”

“*Too* sharp. They’re going to think too hard and land themselves in a heap of trouble.”

“See though? We’re never gonna get bored!”

“Yeah, I don’t think I could ever get tired of this.”

“This is so entertaining I could burst!!!”

“Oh, they seem to have figured out via all their secretive investigations that they’re the only ones who have gotten stronger.”

“I figured they’d be thrilled about this. Why are they just standing there slack-jawed?”

“Who knows...”

“Well, we haven’t been doing anything special, but we *are* particularly compatible with them, and there were a lot of us chosen for this job. We’ve been reacting to them not just in order to make the inventory magic work, but whenever they use magic... Which it totally part of our basic duty, of course.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“So, the fact that their attack magic has gotten stronger is because...”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And any defense spells they use to protect themselves would also be stronger because...”

“Mm-hmm.”

“It’s only natural...”

“Of course!!!”

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“Man, this guy’s just been draggin’ his feet lately! This isn’t fun at all...”

“Yeah, at the start he was all like, “The world is my oyster!” It was so great.”

“Speaking of interesting things lately...”

“Oh yeah, those Wonder Trio girls, right?”

“They’re sharper than Lady Mile—”

“—which means they keep coming up with ways to upturn human warfare and the entire economy—”

“—which they then ignore—”

“—and they come up with even more outrageous ideas...”

“Why don’t we have a fun toy like thaaaaaat?!!!”

“Lady Mile’s antics aside, they’ve apparently become the number one livestream on the Nanonet now.”

“No kidding?”

“Damn it, I thought I’d be so happy to end up in charge of this guy. We really pulled the

short straw here... Still, I guess compared to other guys he's still fun enough, so I can't complain *too* much."

The nanomachines assigned to the elder dragon leader Valtiyn let out a huge sigh...

# BONUS STORY

## NEW WEAPONS

“I’ve made a new weapon,” Mile suddenly announced.

“What’s that now?” sighed Reina, weary as ever.

“What did you make? Is it some kind of magical wand that zaps all your clothes off for a transformation scene, like last time?” Mavis’s tone was joking but only because she had not been the one to suffer the fallout of that invention. For Reina and Pauline, however, it brought back dark memories. Even though they knew Mavis was only joking, their faces both soured.

“No, it’s a sword this time. The shape is just like your current sword, but it’s made of a completely different material. Try it!” said Mile, drawing a sword from her inventory and handing it straight to Mavis. “My Superalloy, Powerful Nouveau Z is complete!”

Previously, when Mile had crafted her giant golem, she had given it a similar name. It *was* a pretty good name...

“Okay, so I get the ‘superalloy,’ the ‘powerful,’ and the ‘nouveau,’ parts, but what’s with the ‘Z’?” asked Reina.

Mile puffed out her chest and replied, “It’s a super-powered sword, equal to both god and devil!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

It made sense that Reina would not be able to make heads or tails of this, given the diminishing number of people in even modern-day Japan who would have had any idea at all what Mile was talking about. Then there was the fact that this name seemed so desperate to distinguish itself from one thing, that it nearly ran clear into another conflicting brand entirely...

“Mile, are you sure about this?”

“About what?”

“I mean, the imbalance of this thing might make someone mad...”

“Yeah, like all the pros...”

“It’s fiiiine, don’t sweat the small stuff!”

“This is not a little thing! This is a huge problem!”

Finally, setting everyone’s anxieties aside, Mavis went into the forest to try out the new sword.

“Special technique, Iron Cutter!”

“Scrander Cutter!”

Mavis sliced clear through a tree with the blade.

“This thing is *godly*...”

“Why are you calling it ‘iron’ when I told you this was the Superalloy, Powerful Nouveau Z?”

“Now that you mention it, what is that ‘Scrander’ thing about?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff!”

“So what do you think of the sword? This alloy is made of a brand-new element I recently discovered from the magma layer below Tils—I call it ‘Tiltanium!’”

“I’ve never heard of that!”

“Reina, Mile didn’t just say it was discovered—she said *she* discovered it!”

“Wait *you* did?!?”

Mile just changed the subject. “Wh... what do you think, Mavis? With this blade you

could even cut an opponent's sword in two!" Mile said confidently. But then...

"Pass!" came Mavis's coldhearted reply.

"What?! Wh-why?! You don't want a sword that could cut through an opponent in a single blow?!" Mile did not—could not—believe this response.

"It's not a match if you can cut through your opponent's weapon on the first move..."

"What?! That's quitter talk! Taking pity on the enemy is just rude to your opponent!"

"No, what I'm saying is, if I catch a blade coming toward me, and this sword cuts immediately through it, that part of the sword that was cut off is still going to keep coming down, right toward my body, won't it?"

"Ah..."

"Over! This experiment is ooooover!" Reina loudly declared. Mile collapsed, defeated.

# AFTERWORD

Long time no see, everyone. FUNA here.

We've finally reached Volume 13 of *Average!* And we've broken one million copies for total series sales?!

One hundred *man*, that's a million! One *million*!!!

It's all thanks to you, the readers, that we've not only broken one million copies but have also continued to publish this series, which has now been turned into a manga. There are even spin-offs of both the manga and the novels, and of course the anime! Thank you so much!

Though, the television broadcast of the anime is over now, huh? The loneliness that comes after the festival...

MILE: "But if you buy the Blu-rays, every day can be a broadcast day!"

MAVIS: "That's right, you can go on a journey with us whenever you like."

PAULINE: "Yep, yep, you can watch *those scenes* with Reina as many times as you like..."

REINA: "Pauline, just what scenes are you remembering?"

PAULINE: "The kinds you can find if you go frame by frame, or take a screenshot..."

REINA: "Shut the heck up!!!"

MILE: "All three of the Blu-rays come with awesome extras and have been selling awesomely!"

MAVIS: "Mile, this is such obvious subliminal marketing..."

PAULINE: "It's fine—it's not like we're trying to hide it, so it actually isn't subliminal at all!"

REINA: "Apparently, there are some bonus stories in there, too. Volume 1 comes with 'Raging Reina,' Volume 2 has 'The Wonder Trio's Great Academy Gambit,' and Volume Three comes with a trifecta of 'In Search of the Supreme Favor,' 'Power-Up,' and 'The Debut.' Each one also comes with a bonus image gallery and special audio CDs..."

MILE: "Plus, there's another bonus story included with the box set, and depending on the retailer, bonus gifts such as wall scrolls, blankets, water bottles, and more..."

MI/MA/P/R: "*Seriously, just go the heck out and buy it!!!*"

Yes, thank you for the advertisement, girls!

Also, look forward to Volume 2 of the spin-off manga, *Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?! Everyday Misadventures*, on sale March 12! I hope you enjoy the wacky antics of the bite-sized, adorable "everyday" Crimson Vow... Though seriously, why is the everyday Mile so obsessed with little girls and cat ears?

REINA: "Hey, come to think of it, wasn't there something about us having an official guidebook?"

MAVIS: "I hear it's gonna be awesome! It'll have official character designs, highlights and quotes from the anime, and interviews and special pin-ups with the voice actresses—all created just for this book. Plus, bonus images from Itsuki Akata-sensei and bonus stories from FUNA-san!"

PAULINE: "Apparently, those bonus stories will contain a tale about how the Wonder Trio first met!"

MILE: "That should fetch a pretty high price when it's announced later..."

PAULINE: "Ah!"

REINA: "What do you mean, 'Ah'!? Pauline, you weren't thinking of buying them all up,

were you?"

MILE: "Anyway, the *Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?!* Official Guidebook from NEKO MOOK will be on sale March 16! Please look forward to it, everyone!"

In this volume, we had a rematch with the elder dragons, the reappearance of the hot-blooded young Kelvin, a reunion with the Wonder Trio, and a repeat of the unhappy Morena, in a "Where Are They Now?" update marathon.

And in the next book, Volume 14, we finally see the elven village! Will the beast-ear enthusiast Mile go weak in the knees for elf ears as well?

DR. CLAIRIA: "Wah, you're saying my ears are weak?"

MILE: "That's not the kind of 'weak' they meant!"

In the elven village, a burning question is answered! The habitat of this unfortunate race! Please keep your eyes peeled for the next volume! Mysteries abound!

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.

—FUNA

THIS SEEKS  
AFTERWORD-ish...



I DIDN'T GET TO  
DRAW PAULINE OR  
MAVIS MUCH THIS TIME...  
ALSO, I JUST  
DREW THEM IN  
SAILOR SUITS  
BECAUSE I FELT  
LIKE IT!

ITSUKI  
AKATA



CONGRATULATIONS ON  
ONE MILLION SALES,  
DIDN'T I SAY TO MAKE  
MY ABILITIES AVERAGE  
IN THE NEXT LIFE?!



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PtFF by: traktorA7EN