



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

Story by  
**FUNA**

Illustrated by  
**Itsuki Akata**

10



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

VOLUME 10



*The Crimson Vow*

*The Roaring Mithrils*





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

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ILLUSTRATED BY

*Itsuki Akata*



*Seven Seas Entertainment*

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IN THE NEXT LIFE?! VOLUME 10**

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# Kingdom of Tils

C-Rank Party "The Crimson Vow"



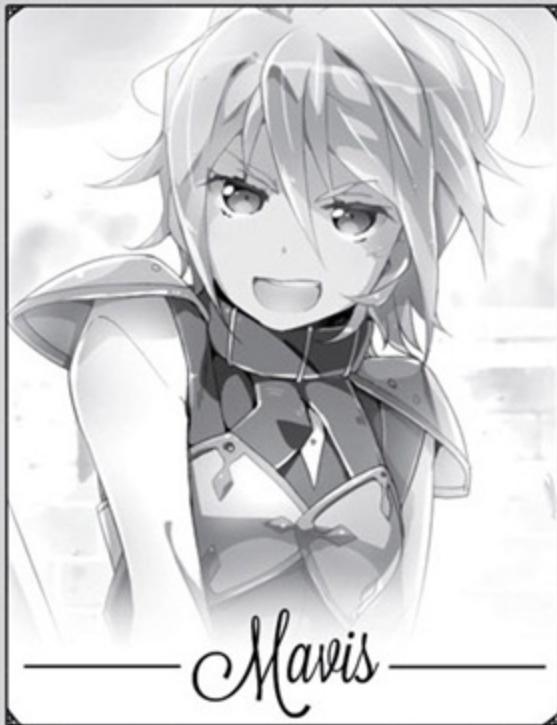
Mile

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



Reina

A rookie hunter. Specializes in combat magic.



Mavis

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



Pauline

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

*Wonder Trio*

—Marcela—

Adele's friend. A magic user  
of noble birth.

**Kingdom of Brandel**

—Morena—

A princess. Interested in Adele.



—Monika—

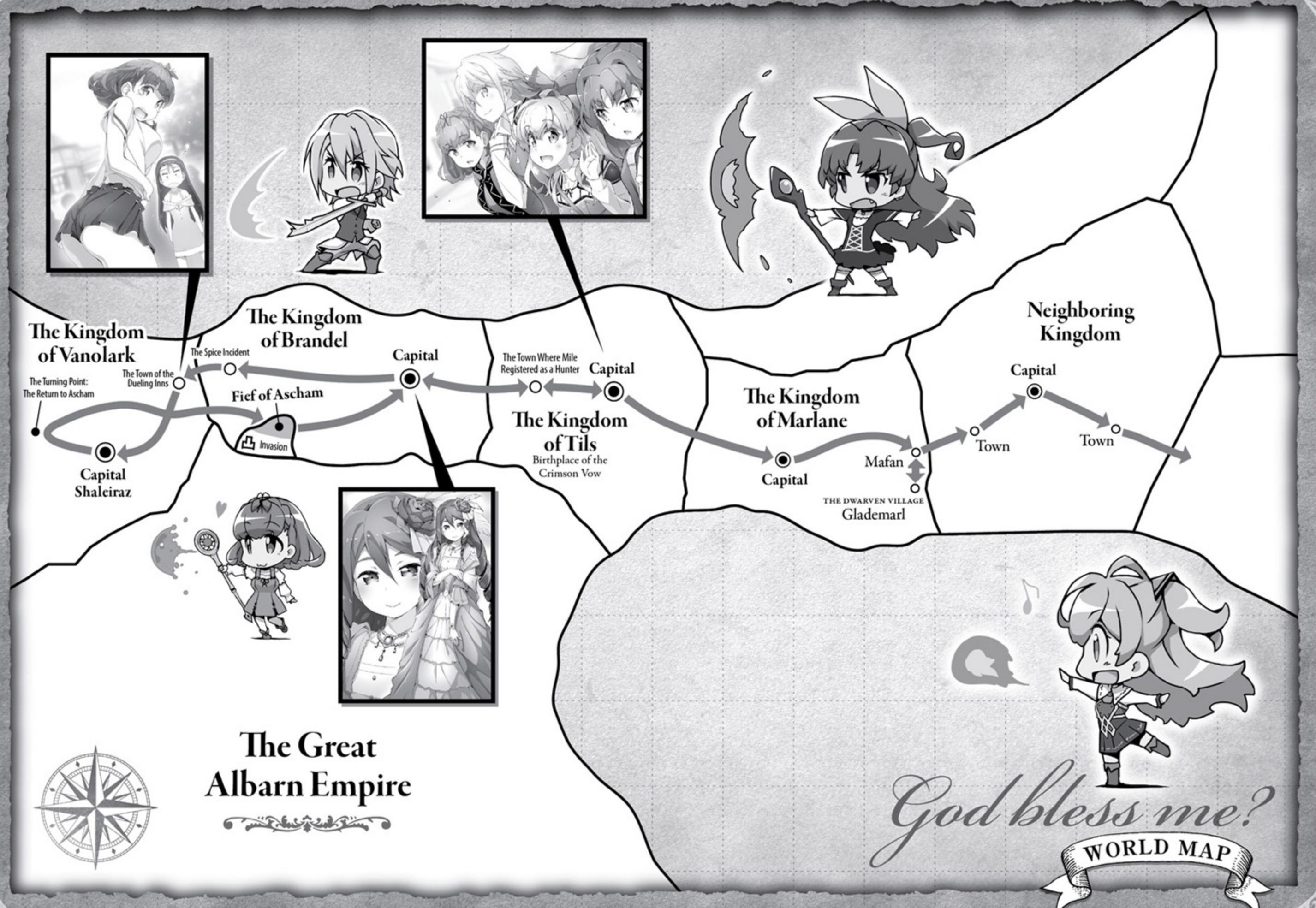
Adele's friend. The second  
daughter of a merchant.



—Aureana—

Adele's friend.  
A commoner.





# PREVIOUSLY

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

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

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

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

Yet somehow, it all went awry.

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

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

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

Now, just when they had driven back an evil empire from the lands of Ascham, they are faced with a new challenge: monsters that have come rushing in from a neighboring land!

And on top of everything, Mavis, traveling solo for some independent training, has just come to the aid of a mysterious young maiden and her guards?!

# CHAPTER 76

## THE BRILLIANCE OF LIFE, PART 2

“Wh-wh-wha...?” The guard leader was lost for words.

The enemies froze in place as well.

Mavis turned to the guards and said, “When I die, contact my allies. They’ll get word to my family. And if you can, please let them know that I fought bravely...”

Naturally, she had already informed them that they would be able to contact her allies if they sent word to the guild in the next town—and that, if they sent a direct request for the Crimson Vow, the party would be able to help them get to the border.

She continued: “I’m going to take down half of the enemies and injure the other half to make them less combat-worthy. After I’m done, please take the princess and escape. One of you needs to stay with her until the end. The other two of you will be sacrificial pawns. Slow them down as much as you can!”

“What a load of hot air! This one young woman really thinks she can put the hurt on all thirty-one of us?!” shouted the enemy commander. There was no hint of malice in his voice. Perhaps he believed that even Mavis, already prepared to die, had made this declaration simply to pump herself up.

But Mavis herself was determined and serious.

“Lord Aylemain, could you spare us a bit of your time?” called the guard leader.

It seemed he was acquainted with the enemy commander. Given that Mavis had already referred to the girl as “princess,” it was clear to all that the jig was up. Still, not knowing his opponents’ intentions, the commander gave neither affirmation nor denial in response.

Taking this as tacit agreement, the guard leader turned to Mavis. “Could I ask you to be our vanguard and accept temporary commendation?”

"Huh?"

Temporary commendation. This was when a soldier was appointed a knight on the battlefield for the purposes of that battle alone. It typically occurred when one side had taken great losses and was lacking in knights—and when the individual taking on the duty in question could not expect to make it home alive to receive this recognition. Even under these circumstances, the candidate had to be endorsed by three present high-ranking knights, with a noble of baron-rank or higher present to bear witness.

Should the individual complete their duty and make it out alive, the commendation would be nullified on the spot—but even then, their position was often formally ratified at a later date. And if they should perish... Well, in those cases, they had still died as a knight and would continue to be considered one posthumously. Truly, this was the greatest honor one could bestow upon someone who was about to die in battle.

"I..."

It was not an honor that was invoked lightly. At the very least, it was not the sort of thing that was conferred upon a passing hunter, whose background they did not even know.

Lost for words at this extraordinary proposal, Mavis could only stammer, "B-but there's no witness here..."

At this, the guard leader bowed his head to the enemy commander with just a hint of desperation. "Baron Aylemain, I request that you please serve as our witness."

He was asking an opponent—an enemy who would soon be staking his life on this battle—to serve as witness for a temporary commendation? It was beyond absurd. No person living would ever agree to such a thing.

"Very well," said the baron.

"*Whaaat?!*" Mavis cried out, flabbergasted. Strangely, neither her allied guards nor any of the enemies showed the slightest bit of surprise. Everyone—the guard leader and Baron Aylemain included—looked as though it were only a matter of course that the Baron accept this outrageous request.

The guard leader then bowed his head, and Baron Aylemain nodded lightly in reply.

"Given the circumstances, you must please forgive us in hesitating to tie our names to this act. We three knights of rank do hereby endorse Lady Mavis for a temporary commendation, in this place of battle. Are there any objections?"

No one said a word.

"Baron Aylemain, if you would..."

"My, what a hurried ceremony! However, I suppose this will satisfy the minimum requirements. I, Garlott von Aylemain, baron and lord of the Aylemain lands, do hereby formally witness this temporary commendation! Until she should make it through this alive, I now decree that this woman is a knight!"

The faces of the guards seemed to relax a little at the baron's forceful declaration, despite the fact that they were all about to die—and despite the fact that a promising young noblewoman, who had no part in their conflict, would soon go to her death as a result of becoming embroiled in all this. Perhaps they were joyful that, regardless of being on the opposing side, Baron Aylemain had allowed them to grant this position of knighthood as a parting gift to a brave young woman.

Knighthood.

The thing that she had so yearned for, so strived for all this time.

She would get to die as a knight.

A smile spread wide across Mavis's face. And then...

"I mean, I really am happy! I'm so incredibly grateful! But I'm going to become a knight because of my own accomplishments!! I will gladly savor the *feeling* of knighthood, even if it's only for a few moments..."

Though she had spoken as if she were prepared for death moments ago, she truly had no intention of dying. She knew her chances of survival were slim, but Mavis was not the kind to give up any hope of winning a battle.

She took three of the four remaining Micros capsules from her pocket.

Even if she were to use her still-fledgling "Mav-ius Strip," these were neither the sort of enemies she could handle with her Godspeed Blade nor numbers she could truly

manage. Even with those tricks up her sleeve, the likelihood of victory was hopelessly low. But so long as she didn't give up, it was still greater than zero.

Mile often said to her, "Mavis, if you give up, the battle ends there."

And so, Mavis popped open the three Micros and chugged them all down.

"I'm counting on you, Micros!"

With the Micros in her system, she was now guaranteed to suffer grave side effects, even if she was never once nicked by an enemy's blade.

"I have no intention of dying, but I just might end up going ahead of you all. I'm sorry Reina, Pauline... and Mile!" she uttered in a low voice and then gathered her energies, releasing them through her blade to form the Mav-ius Strip, as she turned to the enemy and shouted, "Mavis von Austien, entering the battle! *Witness the brilliance of my life!!*"

*Shing! Shunk!*

*Bam, ka-clang, slash!*

"Gwah!"

"Sh-she's fast..."

"What are you doing? Hold her back! Everyone at once! Take her down head-on!"

*Cling! Kashunk!*

"Impossible! She's just one little girl..."

Several of the soldiers made for the guards and the princess, but they were struck from behind by Mavis's sword. "Gyaah!!"

To turn your back on one enemy in order to go after another was practically suicide...

As the enemies turned back to Mavis in a panic, the guards leapt out just long enough to slash at the men from behind before returning to their original positions.

"Damn it, don't bother with them! Just keep an eye out to make sure they don't get away! First we gotta deal with this... *Gwah!*"

A man, who appeared to be some kind of squad leader, fell to the ground in the midst of issuing orders to his subordinates. Mavis ran rampant across the battlefield, swiftly crippling many of the men... However, she could only continue like this for a short time.

*"Hff, hff, hff..."*

No matter how much the Micros had bolstered her speed, there was no way she could make it through this experience unscathed, especially when faced with so many trained soldiers. Even if her armor absorbed the blows she could not avoid, she still took the impact of those blows. On top of all this, thanks to her recklessness, the recoil from the Micros was causing her bones to fracture, tendons to snap, and muscles to shred.

Before she knew it, she had ceased to move, at which point the enemies surrounding her halted as well.

"Looks like this is the end. You surprised us all by summoning such power, but in the end, you still have the body of a little girl. Your flesh simply could not keep up..."

Mavis bit her lip painfully, looking up at the enemy troops.

"Though we may be enemies, that was a splendid battle. You took on the thirty-one men of the first imperial platoon and rendered nearly half of us unfit to battle... And yet, to not strike that fatal blow, even after coming this far... Had we met under different circumstances, I might have begged you to be my son's bride. You cannot move. So, will you surrender? You've already more than fulfilled your duty."

Mavis silently shook her head.

"All I wish is to be a beacon of justice, stay true to my own convictions, and harness the brilliance of this life!" she said without a hint of doubt.

"I see. Well, this shouldn't take more than one blow... Would you give us your name once more? I wish to impart to my children, my grandchildren, and all my men the name of this brilliant swordswoman."

This was the greatest compliment one could pay a swordfighter. Mavis gave her reply clearly.

"Mavis von Austien—no!"

She shook her head and started over.

"Mavis the Swordswoman, of the hunting party the Crimson Vow!"

"Oh? The name you gave us at the very end is not that of a noble but the name of a lone swordswoman—a lone hunter?! That's truly a pity, little Mavis! However, I shall remember your name. And I shall tell that name to my family and to my men. I will inform your household of your splendid death. So, be at ease, and go with pride into..."

**"That won't be necessary!"**

"Who's that?!"

The commander and his men looked all around them, but there was no sign of anyone.

Just then...

*Sliiice!*

The air about two meters to Mavis's right parted in two. From the split in the air, a single leg stomped out.

"Of the hunting party the Crimson Vow..."

A head and torso wormed their way through.

"...Mile!"

On the opposite side of Mavis, about two meters to her left, a whirlpool formed horizontally about a meter and a half up in the air. Slowly, it lowered to the ground, and there appeared a figure with red hair, sharp features, and a... modest chest.

“Reina, likewise!”

To the red-haired girl’s side, a rent in the air opened all at once, and a buxom girl came into view.

“Pauline, also likewise!”

The three of them turned to face Mavis. Mavis, their beloved friend, who was now ragged and stained with gashes from blades, blood dripping from her mouth, her left arm and right leg hanging limply...

“Oh ho!” came three voices at once.

Though the men were veteran soldiers, for some reason, they all felt chills run down their spines.

“Oh ho...” said the three girls again.

*“I seeeee...”* Though Mile wore a wide grin across her face, her eyes were not smiling in the slightest.

*“Is that so?”* Reina was smiling with neither her mouth nor her eyes.

*“Is that how it is?”* Pauline wore a seemingly genuine smile, but something about her aura sent another round of shivers down the men’s spines.

“Wha—is this some kind of concealment magic?! But if you all went to the trouble of hiding yourselves, you should have simply launched a surprise attack! You truly must be some bottom-of-the-barrel hunters...”

“Huh? Oh, well, it’s just—you aren’t the sort of enemies we need to bother with a surprise attack for. We didn’t feel it was necessary,” Pauline replied nonchalantly.

“Wha—?!” Baron Aylemain’s eyes went wide. “Hmph! If you were all as skilled as Lady Mavis, perhaps, but without her abilities, a hundred hunters could appear and it wouldn’t change a thing! Step aside now. You can mourn Lady Mavis later.”

The baron apparently held Mavis in such high regard that he still honored her as a "Lady," despite their being on opposing sides. Indeed, his esteem was such that he was even attempting to avoid the pointless death of these unrelated parties, offering to deliver Mavis's remains into their hands rather than leave her to rot by the side of the highway.

However...

"*Ha!... Huh-uhuh-huhuhuhuhuh... Aah ha ha! Wa ha ha ha ha ha!*"

Crazed laughter exploded from Mavis.

"I could probably be called the least impressive of the Crimson Vow. Truly, I am the *weakest* of the Four Sages! In fact, that girl there, Mile, was my instructor and has taught me all sorts of techniques of the blade!"

"Wha...?"

A stunned murmur rose from the enemy soldiers.

"N-no way... For there to be three more of these monsters..."

Ignoring their flabbergasted enemies, Mavis looked to Mile and asked, "Mile, could I get some healing?"

Normally, the healing was left to Pauline, but in circumstances like these, where there were ruptured tendons, joints, and internal organs to be tended to, Mile was the more reliable party. Even Pauline was aware of this, so the request did not offend her.

"Oh, but don't bother with the surface wounds. Leave those as they are," Mavis requested. "After all..."

"...*that way is cooler!*" she and Mile chimed in in unison.

"Organs, bones, sinew, veins, nerves, and everything else—cells multiply, join, and mend! As a stopgap for the stuff that'll take longer, form a synthetic filler, like a ceramic plate or something. Synthesize blood and replenish her fluids. However, leave the superficial stuff as it is. Leave her looking this way exactly. *Giga Heal!*"

Though she was by no means in top form, thanks to Mile's mysterious incantation,

Mavis was now well enough to move. She turned and asked, "Hey, Reina and Pauline? Could I leave the task of guarding the princess and her escorts to you? I hate to leave you two out, but I want this to be a battle without magic—just me, Mile, and our swords."

Though they had been looking forward to letting loose a bit, Reina and Pauline nodded silently and walked towards the guards. Seeing this, the enemy soldiers went pale.

"Th-they're... bluffing... right?"

If this party had two mages, then they ought to be laying on the combat magic. That alone would be enough to wreak confusion and injury to the enemy, which would give them a huge advantage. And yet, they had discarded that measure so casually, as if they didn't even need it... All for the sake of a little petty pride?

Such were the obstinate actions of someone who did not doubt their chances of victory even one bit.

"All troops! *Attaaaaaack!!!*" Instincts prickling at these signs of danger, the commander, Baron Aylemain, sounded an alarm at full volume.

Mavis, who had already taken the last Micros capsule from her pocket during the lull in conversation, downed it. At this, Mile raised her eyebrows in a brief show of surprise, but she said nothing.

"EX True Godspeed Blade! And my brand-new power, invented for the sake of my friends, the greatest secret of the Mavis school of breathing techniques: Mav-ius Strip! Witness the brilliance of my life!!!"

"...And Mile's Godshock Blade!" Hearing how cool Mavis sounded as she named her techniques, Mile quickly improvised. This sword technique, which would shock even the gods... somehow reeked of plagiarism.

"Time for an assault!"

"Roger that!"

Mavis and Mile would normally be positioned to protect their squishier allies, the mages, by running around, throwing the enemy off balance, and prioritizing the greatest threats. However, Pauline, Reina, and the three guards were already shored

up in protective formation with a large tree at their backs. There was no need to worry about them. Plus, Mavis's body was not yet back to normal. And although Mile's powers were hardly exhausted, repeatedly subjecting her to powerful instantaneous healing would take a toll on Mavis's body. Thus, they had chosen this strategy.

At any rate, there was no way that the enemy would be able to ignore Mile and Mavis and head straight for the guards. That would put the most fearsome enemies at their backs and divide their forces. It would be as good as saying, "Yes, please annihilate every single one of us!"

And of course, the most important reason they'd chosen this strategy was...

*"Break their spirits!"*

They had to shatter their enemies' resolve so badly that it would not even occur to them to dare pull together their remaining forces and pursue the group again.

"Gyeeeeh!!!"

Though Mile was short, her blade came down on the top of a soldier's head with its full force. It was a one-sided attack, utilizing their difference in height.

*Crack!*

"Whuh..."

When Mile's unbreakable sword did not budge even a fraction of an inch, there was nowhere for the energy to disperse—akin to a blade striking a boulder. The only possible results were for the swordsman to let his own weapon crack or drop his precious weapon. As the soldier reflexively leapt out of the way, one of the injured men who had been rolling on the ground offered up his own sword to his ally. The soldier accepted it with a simple word of thanks.

Then, in sequence—or perhaps simultaneously—Mile's blade came down again, and the outthrust sword was pushed aside, brushed away easily.

"You really are another monster!"

She was but a little girl in appearance, with a body that looked not to have an inch of

muscle... She carried herself with the gait of an amateur who had never studied a jot of technique... and yet her blows were heavy and fast.

"We cannot retreat! It matters not if the enemy has demons lurking behind them or the Goddess on their side—we *will not surrender!*"

Mile was sorely tempted to make a joke of transforming and proclaiming, "A goddess?... Would she look something like *this*?" But even she wasn't *that* dense when it came to reading a crowd.

Still, Mile wore a cheeky grin. The three guards and the princess were stunned speechless. Reina and Pauline looked practically bored.

Before them, thirty of the soldiers now writhed upon the ground.

Mavis and Baron Aylemain stood face to face.

"Looks like you're the only one left. Could you please surrender?" asked Mavis.

The baron shook his head. "No matter how slim the chance of victory, I could never abandon a battle or give up a fight! For the sake of my loyalty to my liege, my pride, and my will as a knight... and for my fallen men! Lady Mavis, may I request the honor of a one-on-one match?"

There was truly no reason for Mavis to agree to this. The man was very clearly the leader of a group that had assailed a young girl, and though he was likely quite skilled, victory was certain if both she and Mile were to take him on together right now.

Mavis had no reason to even lend an ear to such foolishness. And yet...

"I humbly accept."

Silence.

Naturally, there was not a single soul present who had thought that Mavis would ever decline.

"Commander of the First Imperial Platoon, Garlott von Aylemain, entering the battle!"

**“Leader of the Crimson Vow, Mavis the Swordswoman, entering the battle!”**

They readied their swords, slowly approaching one another.

And then suddenly, Baron Aylemain was kicking at the ground—in order to stir up dirt and obscure his opponent’s vision. This wasn’t a playful exhibition match. This was a battle on which he was staking his loyalties, his love for his fallen comrades, and his own determination. There was no place here for clean and tidy technique. All there was for them as to come at one another with everything they had.

*“Win!”*

Mavis released her spirit energy from her sword with a short cry, an abbreviation of her Wind Edge technique. This time, she did not swing her sword, so rather than a sharp blade of air, a larger current of air came crashing from the blade like a wall or a tidal wave. Of course, this was a crude, improvised thing, so the wall was a bit sluggish, without the strength to fend off any blade or arrow.

However, it *was* enough to block any dust or sand, which was all she needed here.



To omit the incantation of a spell and fire it off by the name alone was typically known as silent casting. Mavis, unaware of Mile's brand of silent casting—which was nothing like how the mages of this world conceptualized it—had abbreviated the concept even further, believing it to be part of her spirit arts.

“Uh...”

The other three members of the Crimson Vow were speechless, mouths agape.

And meanwhile...

“Silent casting?! Not only do you have that sword skill, you can use magic as well?!” Baron Aylemain was awestruck. “But even so—even so, I will not lose to you! Witness the final fist of the Aylemain family—Demon-Destroyer Blade!!!”

Thirty-one soldiers now writhed on the ground.

Mile, Reina, Pauline, and the three guards stood stock-still, watching Mavis, “Please save me!” written all over her panicked face as the lovely maiden clung to her.

“*Help...*”

Mavis was strong when it came to enemies but weak when it came to girls...

Never mind that she, herself, was also a “girl.”

\*\*\*

“...And that’s about the sum of it.”

Now that the Crimson Vow had gotten this involved, they were owed some sort of explanation. Or so the guard leader seemed to feel.

They were at an inn in town. After the battle, the group had made the swift decision to leave the soldiers writhing on the ground and continue on to the next town, as planned, to take a room at an inn while it was still light. Before moving, Mile and Pauline gave Mavis and the young lady more precise healing, taking care to smooth out even the most minute of external wounds.

Of course, it would take some time for the cells to multiply enough to mend the internal wounds, but the setting of bones and rejoining of tendons could at least temporarily be bolstered by manmade—or rather, nanomachine-made means—enough so as not to be a hindrance in battle. The rest would be aided by expedited cellular reproduction, overseen by the nanomachines, who would systematically withdraw, finally bringing everything back to normal.

"I see. So, your lord and his children were all taken by an epidemic, leaving his next youngest brother's daughter as the successor, which is when the second younger brother butted his head in?" Pauline summarized.

Naturally, the guard leader had explained this in the context of "a certain family," but there was really no point in dissembling at this point. If the family in question were regular nobles, they could have stolen away to another fief and sought help there in order to get to the capital. They certainly would not be heading for the border, hell-bent on fleeing the country entirely.

Furthermore, while operating within one's own territory was one thing, no soldiers would ever flagrantly engage in battle on another lord's lands. Which meant...

In truth, it went without saying.

The enemy commander had already so much as admitted it when he spoke the words, "We of the First Imperial Platoon."

Still, maidenly prudence made her withhold any comment on the subject.

"Two gold pieces a day," Pauline said suddenly.

"Huh?"

For a moment, the guard leader did not understand her meaning.

"That's our guard fee. It's an independent request rather than a guild job, so we won't get any contribution points—and there's a high likelihood we'll be attacked by enemies who are properly trained soldiers, not bandits. Five half-gold a day for each of us, which makes two gold per day. And we'll throw in free healing if anyone is seriously injured. Given the circumstances, that's practically a bargain..."

"You're hired!" The leader produced his coin purse from his breast pocket without a second thought, pulling a single coin out of the bulging bag and handing it to Pauline.

"Wh...?" Pauline, who had reflexively taken the coin, now stared fixedly at it, prompting Mile to peek in over her shoulder.

"An orichalcum piece?"

Sure enough, it was an orichalcum piece, worth ten gold pieces.

That coin purse might hold heaps more orichalcum pieces. Furthermore, there was no way that a single leader would be in possession of the full bulk of the group's escape funds. The money would be split up between all of the guards, just in case. Which meant...

*"I messed up! I messed up!!! I assumed that you didn't have any money with you and gave you a cheaper rate! I'm an idiot! A great big idiot!!!"*

An orichalcum piece was roughly the same volume and weight as the gold pieces commonly circulated in this world, which were comparable to a quarter-ounce gold coin on Earth, thus making them slightly heavier than a Japanese 500-yen coin. For those coins to be causing that purse to bulge so noticeably and for that amount to be divided among the three guards...

Pauline had made a grave lapse of judgment.

The guard leader, not wishing to lose these valuable allies, preemptively pushed some more money on them before anyone could raise an objection. However, Pauline was already busy writhing with regret, certain that it was already too late to change her rate.

"Th-that aside..." Mavis quickly changed the subject to make up for the chaos caused by Pauline, who was practically ripping out her hair. "How did you all know I was in trouble? The magic you used when you all appeared..."

Their timing was impeccable, and their method of arrival quite unusual. Had they acquired some new, far superior magic while Mavis had been so desperately working on her own new technique? Magic that would allow them to travel from a faraway place in an instant?

At the thought, Mavis felt the world going dark around her.

"Th-that was just concealment magic—my regular invisibility field," said Mile. "We coordinated our reveals ahead of time, and each had our own methods. After all..."

"*It's cooler that way!*" she and Mavis finished in unison.

"Of course, it's not like I was actually using magic that can transport us long distances instantaneously. If I did, there would have been no way you could have heard our voices before we appeared—and no way for us to know anything about the situation before arriving. Plus, there's no way we could appear at exactly the right place without knowing accurately where you currently were..."

"N-now that you put it that way, I guess that's true. That's a relief."

*Just how is that a relief?* thought the non-members of the Crimson Vow present. *And why did she only say that she "didn't" use any magic like that, not that she "couldn't"?*

The guardsmen's eyes were hollow, but the young girl's sparkled as Mile continued.

"Since you didn't show up yesterday evening, we went asking around at the guild and the taverns, talking to hunters who had been guarding merchants. We asked them if they had seen any golden-haired female hunters equipped with a sword along their way. They made mention of seeing you walking along with three men, who seemed to be soldiers from their gait and movements, and a young girl. They said you had asked the merchants to let the girl ride on their carts but that the merchants thought it would be too much a bother and refused..."

"Then we heard that there were some other real soldier-looking types on the move, that there were several more soldiers spotted writhing on the side of the highway, and all sorts of other fascinating tidbits... So, we vacated our inn right away and walked all night with our Sonic Move!"

"Th-thanks, guys..."

What Mile was saying was not a lie, but there was one other reason that she had convinced the rest of the party to immediately retrace their steps: she had received a report from the nanomachines that they had picked up on one of the Micros capsules being used. The nanomachines had previously told her that their network could not be utilized in order to gain an unfair advantage—which meant that this was likely

them doing her a favor, as much as they could without breaching their directives.

"And anyway, there's no question of us ever not rushing over to help you, Mavis!"

"Huh?" Mavis tilted her head.

"Why would you even imagine that we wouldn't show up when our friend is in danger? It could be the middle of the battlefield or the pits of hell—if there's a call, we're there in a flash! Because we are four allies, bound at the soul..."

### ***The Crimson Vow!***

Their four voices joined as one, though they couldn't let off their smoke bombs inside the inn.

Meanwhile, the young princess's eyes wouldn't stop sparkling...

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The next morning, they headed straight to the town stables. Before partaking of a leisurely breakfast, they had sent one of the guards out to hire them a wagon. This guard would be condemned to nibbling jerky in the cart later, so Mile kindly thought to provide him with some sandwiches from her inventory.

"Two horses, huh? That's a pretty nice cart," said Reina. It looked nimble and could probably travel quicker than a normal cart. The horses themselves had glossy manes and looked well cared for. The guards had likely spared no expense in securing the fastest horse and carriage they could find.

"Grnnh..."

Sensing again just how ample their employers' resources were, Pauline gritted her teeth. Still, she wasn't shameless enough to hike up a rate she had set herself just because she had learned her clients were loaded. Such an act would besmirch her pride as a merchant.

With that, the group—consisting of the Crimson Vow, the maiden, her guard, and a single driver—set out in their two-horse cart.

It was doubtful that their pursuers would still be on the chase, but even if they were,

there was no way the pace of a group of soldiers on foot, fully laden with gear, water, and rations, could ever match that of their party. Even if they were to hire carts themselves, the weight of those sturdy armed men would slow them down.

Besides, it was impossible, even with the help of a healing mage, to get that many injured men back to full health so quickly. It was deeply unlikely that there were any mages in the world—besides Mile and Pauline—who could return broken bones to battle-readiness in an instant. And finally, summoning up reinforcements meant extra time spent waiting for contact, preparation, and relocation, so there was no way that the enemy could catch up before they had made it over the border, at the very least. In other words...

“I think we’ll be able to make a clean getaway.”

For a group of imperial soldiers to cross the border of another country would be a declaration of war in and of itself. Naturally, this was an impractical course of action.

“If we can make it across the border, we’ve arranged to have soldiers from the neighboring kingdom serve as our guard. We just need to make it there.”

The princess and her guards were seeking sanctuary in a foreign land. This plan had both massive drawbacks and great benefits. On the plus side, failing something like infiltration by an assassin, the princess’s personal safety would be assured. And when it came time to launch a counter assault, they might have their host country’s soldiers on their side.

On the flip side, however, this put the Crown deeply in that host country’s debt. Even if they were successful in seizing back the throne, owing their very survival to an allied land could mean a long-term diplomatic commitment of the most acute degree. This might simply be a matter of monetary costs, but less favorable scenarios included having a political marriage forced upon the royal line, the inequitable termination of treaties, or some other unfavorable outcome.

“A government in exile, huh?” Mile murmured. Her word elicited no particular reaction. Though the guards were still concealing their true identities as a matter of course, they were already aware that they had been found out, and the members of the Crimson Vow, too, knew that their new clients were aware of this.

“Come to think of it, with that invasion into Marlane...” said Mile.

"Yeah, you're probably right about that..." said Mavis, nodding.

"Right about *what*!?" fumed Reina, not seeming to grasp the point.

Mavis explained: "Well, I mean, there was that sudden, aggressive invasion. I'm wondering if the two things aren't related. If you tried to usurp a throne, you'd have a lot of people cursing your name, folks mounting an opposition, or whatever. The easiest and most convenient thing to do in a case like that is..."

"Start a war?" Pauline seemed to be catching on.

"Exactly," said Mavis. "If you conjure up an external threat, then there's no time for in-fighting within the country. There's even a portion of the population that would welcome a war, such as the upper brass in the military, big name merchants, and influential nobles. Even though it's really the foot soldiers, small-time merchants, and common folk that'll bear the burden..."

"The people the usurper would be hoping to court are all on the side who welcome war," Mile elaborated.

"That's right. And then you dispatch your opposition to the most hazardous locations. Best case scenario, they die in battle, but if they somehow wind up getting killed by ally soldiers in all the confusion, that works just as well. Even if they should happen to survive and win some glory, you can cover them in medals, sending the message that the fair-minded new king rewards the efforts of even those who opposed him and erasing the ill will of those receiving the awards."

"I see," said Pauline. "Except Mile shut that down, so now they're panicking and trying to tie up loose ends..."

"Huh?"

The maiden and her guards' eyes went wide.

"U-uuuuuhm, just what are you...?" the young woman began to ask.

A look flashed across Pauline's face that said nothing less than, *Oh no!* Alas, it was already too late. Seeing this, Mile stepped in to toss her a lifeline.

"We just asked some acquaintances of ours to halt the invasion into Marlane..."

The guards replied in unison: “*What kind of acquaintances are those?!?!*”

In the end, Mile was able to explain her way out of the whole thing by saying that they had received some “strong—er, very strong—backup” from “some friends of theirs.”

But the life had already faded from the guardsmen’s eyes.

“So you’re saying,” the maiden began, “the reason that killers suddenly came for me, despite my already being under house arrest—the fact that we had to rapidly accelerate our escape plans and so were unable to make adequate preparations, were recognized too soon and pursued, facing danger after danger, was all because...”

*Gulp.*

*Sweat.*

The members of the Crimson Vow looked a bit queasy.

**“It was all your fault!”** the three guards shrieked.

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“...I mean, we don’t actually blame you, of course,” said the guard leader, after enough time had passed for his temper to cool. “It was really just an issue of timing. The *pri—our lady* had been under house arrest for a while, perhaps because they thought they should avoid killing her too soon. However, if they got the royals, nobles, and military under their thumb, our lady would lose her value as a bargaining chip, and likely meet a violent end to assuage their anxieties. If they failed to bring those factions under their control, and consequently feared the people mounting an insurrection with our lady on their banner, the end result would be the same.”

None of this changed the fact that the maiden was facing greater danger than they’d imagined—all thanks to the Crimson Vow’s actions. Also, given what he was telling them, there was really no point in his conspicuously correcting his reference to the girl as “our lady.”

“Assuming we do manage to get away, it really is better that we were able to enlist the help of the Crimson Vow in this manner. Yes, this is really a preferable outcome. I suppose the outcome is *really* what’s important, isn’t it?”

As calmly as the guard leader was speaking, the members of the Crimson Vow all knew the truth: *He's angry! He's controlling himself, but inside, he's definitely angry!!!*

The guards only calmed down after a gentle mention from the young lady that, "In light of the fact that they managed to avert a war with our neighbors, my life is hardly worth mentioning."

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From there, their journey continued without incident. The moment they crossed the border, which was merely marked by pillars on the sides of the highway, some soldiers, who seemed to have set up camp in the fields beside the road, approached.

"We've been awaiting you, your H—"

The guard leader waved his hands frantically as the other two clapped their hands over their mouths. Seeing this, the man who appeared to be the commander of the soldiers cut his own words short.

When it came to hiring hunters, it was a violation to *falsify* the contents of a job, but there was nothing wrong with requesting that the hunters not inquire about the identity of certain players... so long as no one withheld such vital information as the numbers or capabilities of the people who were pursuing them. Hunters were more than free to turn down a job which held back information, but a client was just as free to go seek out a hunter who would accept the job on their terms.

Given that the guard leader had immediately reacted to the soldiers' appearance, and that the soldiers' commander had called out to them at once, it was likely that the two men were already acquainted. Besides, Mile, who was positioned at an angle in front of the maiden just in case, could fend off enemy blades or easily erect a lattice barrier.

"Captain!"

Another individual, who was dressed differently from the other men but appeared to be a soldier of some sort, came running up from behind the commander.

"Krywen, you've completed your task splendidly. Thank you for bringing these forces to our aid!" The guard leader offered words of thanks to the man. It seemed he had been dispatched ahead of time as a messenger.

“Where are the others? Were you separated in the fray?”

The three guards were silent and hung their heads until the leader spoke, his hand placed over his heart. “They’re right here. They will be with us, always and forever!”

Hearing this, the soldiers then all drew their swords as one and held them vertically in front of their bodies. A prayer, to send brave warriors who fell in battle off to Valhalla...

“Well then, I guess this is it...”

The Crimson Vow had fulfilled their duty. At this point, the young lady’s safety was more or less assured—so long as no one in this country got it in their minds to use her as a political pawn and hand her back over to her homeland.

“We can’t thank you enough for all the help you’ve given us. We will be sure to return the favor someday. Our lady will be left in the care of her aunt, who married a man from this country to become the que—qweh-hm, kwah-hah, kwee-heehee...”

It seemed he was attempting to forcibly correct himself, but no suitable substitute for the word “queen” had come to mind.

*Tch! Not everyone can walk the road of the pun master that easily!* Mile thought smugly, looking down from her metaphorical throne.

Finally, after more fumbling, the guard leader gave up hope of dissembling. The “young lady’s” aunt was the queen, so indeed, it seemed that the chances of her being sold back to her homeland were slim.

“Now then, all of you, be well!”

“U-um...”

Mavis, who had given their parting words as the group’s representative, was halted by the young lady.

“What is it?” Mavis asked, stopping and looking back with a smile.

"U-um, uh..."

The maiden's lips could not seem to form the words she wished to say. It would be one thing if only her own guards were present, but there were soldiers from this land here with them as well.

"M-my name. It's Eltreya. But the next time we meet, please call me El."

Mavis nodded silently in reply.

"Well then, may God be with you, my lady..." she said, extending her pointer finger and poking the maiden in the tip of her nose.

The maiden gasped in surprise, her cheeks going red, as the Crimson Vow turned and left her and her guards behind them.

And then, the Crimson Vow traveled on. To a new kingdom. In search of a new adventure...

"So, Lady Mavis! You are not currently betrothed, yes? In that case, you could come to our country, and..."

Naturally, there was nowhere for the maiden and her former guards to go but the capital. Realizing that they had a shared destination, it went without saying that the maiden had immediately urged the carriages provided for her and her men to catch up with the Crimson Vow.

Of course, Mavis did not have it in her to ignore the pleading eyes of the guards as the maiden said to the members of the Vow, "Won't you ride along with us? Truly, you can't say no..." It was those eyes that told them that if the Crimson Vow did not ride alongside, the guards' lives would be a living hell. Even if they were to refuse the girl's offer, she would undoubtedly have her retinue match their pace and stick with them all the way to the capital, regardless. Compared to that, just riding along seemed preferable.

Or so they thought...

"Lady Mavis, I think I feel a bit of a pain in my chest. Might I implore you to use that secret technique of yours again?"

*Save me...* Mavis begged with her eyes, but Reina pretended not to notice, Pauline just watched over them with a fond smile, and Mile did not seem inclined to interview. Instead, her eyes sparkled strangely as she muttered a peculiar observation, “It’s like Hoshigumi! There’s Tsure-chan!!”

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“You suck! You guys are the worst!” When they stopped for a break, Mavis groused at her companions, while the maiden excused herself to “pick some flowers.”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

“I haven’t any idea, either.”

“He he he! Thanks for the meal!”

Reina and Pauline refused to acknowledge Mavis’ complaints, while Mile’s mind appeared to be somewhere else entirely.

“You’re the one that girl is pining for. What are we supposed to do about it? Or rather, what are you *expecting* us to do about it?”

“Er...”

Perhaps feeling a bit of pity for Mavis, who looked so thoroughly lost, Pauline offered some words of comfort.

“Just hang in there a little longer. She can’t officially reveal her status right now, but once we get to the capital, it’ll be over. I can’t imagine them taking us with them to the palace—and a princess who might be assassinated at any moment isn’t going to get to stroll around town. The hopes of countless people, and the lives of so many others who gave up everything in service of those hopes, rest on that girl’s shoulders. I’m sure she’s aware she can’t frivolously expose herself to danger just for the sake of her own desires...”

A gloomy expression came over Pauline, Mavis, and Reina’s faces, but Mile just cocked her head to the side.

*I get the feeling that girl and I would have something to commiserate about...*

The other three would all have laughed with disbelief if they could have heard the voice inside Mile's heart.

Mile always chose the reckless path if there was the slightest chance it would be more fun, and she spared no effort for the sake of a punchline.

Indeed, that was just the sort of person Mile was...

When the maiden returned, the carriages began to move again.

"By the way, Mile, how'd things go with the magic tutor?" Mavis asked the others, having somehow escaped the maiden's assaults. She wasn't making small talk; Mavis was genuinely concerned. All the time she'd spent working so hard to cultivate a new technique would be wasted if everyone else had progressed even farther than she had in the meantime.

Well, that wasn't entirely accurate. As they leveled up as individuals, the party grew exponentially stronger as a whole. The growth of her friends should be a wonderful, welcome thing... Still, Mavis wanted to close the gap between them. What could she do if they had moved even farther beyond her?

Mile, who had no way of knowing this, assumed that Mavis was hoping to hear about how her friends had grown. And so, it was with a solemn expression that she replied, "W-well, you see..."

"It was worse than a waste of time!" Reina cut in.

"Yes, worse! It was almost a waste of money!" Pauline chimed.

Mile's face had fallen, Reina was fuming, and Pauline looked thoroughly irritated. Apparently, things had not gone as they expected.

"He advertised himself as a former court magician, so that's what we were expecting, but... See, I'm mostly self-taught—I only got a little bit of classroom training at the academy and the prep school, so I thought, just once, it would be nice to get some proper rigorous training from a first-rate mage, but..."

"No good, then?"

"No... I mean, they let us observe, and then they showed us some sample exercises and gave us a few pointers, but..."

"All their silent casting was slower than ours, all the attack spells they cast were weaker than ours, and their defense-piercing spells couldn't even shake our barriers, let alone get through them!" Reina interjected.

Pauline continued: "In the end they just screamed at us, all, 'What are you, some kind of secret agents?! Get out of here!' They threw sand at us! If you're trying to banish something, aren't you supposed to use salt?! They're so cheap they couldn't even use *salt*! Have they no shame at all?!"

Pauline seemed to have gotten hung up on a truly odd detail. Perhaps she found this unforgivable that they'd been cheated of the chance to acquire an everyday household good? Ironically, she wouldn't have hesitated to use a substitute if she were in their place, saying, 'It's fine, we're just doing this for form's sake!' anyway...

*Phew! It doesn't seem like they picked up any new spells, at least... Hang on, what the heck am I saying?!* Mavis hunched over, cradling her head as she became aware of the patently unknighthly thoughts floating through it. Just then, however, another thought occurred to her.

*Huh? Wait! So that means that those three were so far above a former court magician that they had nothing to learn from him? Which... would mean...*

It would be the same as her surpassing her former teacher, Ladimarl.

Impossible.

She was so utterly stunned that one of Mile's favorite nonsensical phrases floated through her head: She was amazed. She was amaz-eggs and bacon.

Seeing Mavis worry, the maiden called to her. "Um, Lady Mavis? That former court magician who opened the school up in that town—would he be a man by the name of Gilarrick?"

"Ah, yes. Why do you ask?" Mile replied, as Mavis was still in no shape to do so. Not that Mavis could have answered the question in the first place, having known nothing about the magic school.

“Huh...?”

There was a sound of collective surprise from the maiden and her three guards, plus the fourth, their ally who had gone ahead. Though they were riding in the same carriage, the men had been quiet as mice so far, but now they couldn't restrain themselves.

“Stronger... than Sir Gillarick? You're joking... No, wait, you *aren't* joking...”

*I want to go home.* With this unified thought running through their minds, the four guards adopted the same hunched pose as Mavis.

That night, they set up camp.

No one present was stupid enough to suggest that they book a room at a luxury inn in town just because the lady was with them. Her escape was still a matter of utmost secrecy until there was some official decree from the Crown or the lady herself declared it. The soldiers' movements would be relatively restricted at an inn, making them more vulnerable to assassins. And, by this point in their flight, their lady had already spent countless nights in far harsher circumstances. This was nothing by now.

Finally, a lady of noble birth wouldn't think twice of peasants seeing her sleeping or unclothed. It was akin to how a lady of any breeding would not mind if a dog or a monkey were to see her...

“That is not true! I would mind! I *absolutely* would mind!” the lady raged, having heard Mile posit the above. The degree of her anger with Mile, to whom she had previously been so thankful, proved beyond a doubt that the assertion had truly offended the girl's sensibilities. “Honestly, what sort of...”

In order to soothe the maiden's frayed nerves, Mile quickly produced the tent from her inventory.

“Wh...?”

As usual, the soldiers' eyes went wide in amazement. Three of the guards, however, only looked on in resignation. There had been plenty of nights spent in the outdoors between that night at the inn and their arrival at the border. There was no way that Mile would have been so remiss as to not furnish the tent and some provisions for the

lady... at Pauline's inflated additional fee, of course.

"Guh... Uwuh... Gh..."

The captain and the soldiers who'd joined them at the border were aware of hunters' basic taboos. Therefore, they nobly squelched all of their burning questions, the things they wished so desperately to interject, all the words they screamed inside their hearts, burying it all down deep with everything they had...

*Bam! Bam! Bam!!!*

"Orc steak, one silver each. Rock lizard steak, three silver. Meat and veggie stew, eight half-silver!"

**"What the heck is thaaaaat?!"**

Seeing the stove and the mountain of ingredients Mile had produced, the soldiers could no longer hold their questions back. Furthermore, why must Pauline drive such a hard bargain? With this few people, their profits would be scant compared to that time with the imperial soldiers. Perhaps she was still bitter about losing out so terribly on their previous escort fees?

"That's not it!" Pauline screamed, veins bulging in her forehead at Mile's blank-faced suggestion. "Providing free service without a good reason to do so would be blasphemy against the gods of commerce! The only times we give freebies will be when it ultimately benefits our bottom line or as a special thanks to someone!"

"Ah, I see!" Mile said sincerely.

However, something seemed strange about the soldiers.

**"Why is no one buying anything?!"**

Reina, who had been working on meal prep, used her fire magic to light the stove. The meat was pre-cut and had been slathered with seasonings, so the first slabs were already going on the grill. The soup only needed to be warmed, and once Reina slowly plunged a fireball into it, it came quickly to a boil. (They had decided against using Pauline's molecular oscillation heating magic in order to keep that particular power

concealed.)

And yet, the soldiers had not bought a single item. It wasn't that they seemed uninterested in purchasing—they were fidgeting, staring at the sizzling meat and the pot of soup. It was highly unlikely that a small unit like theirs, mid-mission, would have sufficient rations on hand.

So then, why...?

"Ah... Sorry, little miss. We're at level three mission status right now. That means we're not allowed to eat anything except the rations we brought ourselves, lest we end up getting food poisoning and spilling our guts. Really, we wish we could eat that stuff, but we just can't."

"Wh...?" Pauline froze in place before collapsing on the spot.

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*"...Dang it! Dang it, dang it, dang it!"*

Pauline sat down on her cot inside the tent, punching her pillow repeatedly, an aura of dissatisfaction billowing from her whole body. She seemed quite bitter about how poorly all of her schemes were panning out these past few days. Doing business meant encountering both good days and bad. When you were down on your luck, it was best to put on a happy face and look on the bright side, but Pauline was not yet possessed of such discipline.

"Oh, that reminds me. You made such amazing progress, Mavis! Was that a new technique you learned? That was really cool!"

Ignoring Pauline's condition, Mile turned the conversation to Mavis... though it was a bit shocking that the topic hadn't already come up in the days since their battle. Everyone besides Mile probably thought it bad form to strike up such a conversation anywhere that outsiders were present. Mavis had been thoroughly exhausted on the day of the battle. After they had arrived at the inn and parted from the maiden's party, they had chatted for a bit, and she had as good as collapsed into bed. Since then, the young lady had been spending her nights alongside the members of the Crimson Vow, sleeping on a cot in their tent. In truth, they had not been able to broach the topic, and everyone besides Mile had forgotten all about it.

Neither Reina nor Mavis were surprised that Mile would bring this up now, despite Eltreya being present.

*Maybe this can do something about that scary aura coming off of Pauline...* Reina thought.

Mavis silently agreed. *I suppose it's fine if Lady Eltreya hears this...* It was a technique that she had acquired under the tutelage of a former palace knight; not something she needed to hide. It fell well within the realm of normal combat.

And so, Mavis began the tale of her training and her brand-new technique...

**“Whaaaaat?!?!”**

There was a cry of shock from Reina, Mile, Eltreya, and even Pauline.

“H-h-hooow could you learn a technique like that in such a short amount of time?! Even a normal mage couldn't do something like that!”

“That kind of return on your investment is ridiculous—15 half-gold well spent!”

“Lady Mavis, that's amazing! Not only were you able to study under Ladimarl, a veteran former imperial knight, but that killer technique you were able to master... That's a feat worthy of a *hero!*”

Apparently, the man Mavis had studied under was a fighter of relative renown. Though it was debatable whether this could be called a “killer” technique, given that it could not directly fell any opponents...

Mile, meanwhile, was stunned.

*Whaaa?! H-how could she come up with something like that all on her own?!?! My search magic relies on the nanomachines I send out bringing back reports for me, but this is different. This is a completely novel application! And the fact that she could send out nanomachines from her own body and inject them directly into someone else's... That's basically healing magic, isn't it?!*

*She can't release magic out into the world, but she came up with this technique independently and succeeded in implementing it on the first go...*

If only Mavis were of the predisposition to be able to use magic normally. With that

creative intuition of hers, her sincere and earnest heart, and her dogged determination... why, she could become a magic user surpassing Reina or Pauline—perhaps even a magic knight!

*Wait, that's not true! She's already an amazing magic knight! Still, if this goes wrong, and she keeps sharpening her spirit (a.k.a. magic) power into something surpassing a normal mage's powers...*

A twisted feeling passed through Mile—a mix of joy at Mavis's success and fear for the future...



Afterward, as per the norm, Mile launched into one of her Japanese folktales.

“‘Th-there, j-just now...’ said the customer breathlessly, to which the shop girl replied, turning back, ‘Was her chest something like *thiiis*?’

“‘Eeeek! Th-there! There’s nothing there! Nothing at all! It’s the ‘bustless ghoooost!!!’

“And so, the man ran with all his might, far away from the girl and her terrifying bosom...’ W-wait, that’s so rude!!!”

Mile halted her story midway and crawled under her covers. Reina and Lady Eltreya, meanwhile, just stared listlessly, no life or light in their eyes...

The next morning, as they partook of breakfast, Mile suddenly shouted, “A bust is just a decoration! Perverts will never understand that!”

“But isn’t having some decoration better than not?” Mile’s protests were swiftly beaten back by this utterly innocent question from Mavis.

“Guh! Sh-shut up!”

Of course, both the story from the previous night and the conversation over breakfast were Mile’s doing, so truly, she was merely reaping what she sowed. This should have been the perfect place for a self-deprecating joke—but despite being an author of comedy, Mile couldn’t quite bring herself to do it. And so she gently dabbed away her tears, while Reina and Eltreya, struck by her stray bullets, collapsed upon the table...

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Several days later...

“Well then, this is us.”

The group had successfully arrived at the capital of the neighboring country. Shortly before the gate that served as the entrance to the walled city—or rather, the gate leading through the outer ramparts—the members of the Crimson Vow gave their words of parting to the maiden’s party.

Were the party to enter the city along with Eltreya’s group and the local soldiers, they

would likely be mistaken for associates of theirs. Pauline had said that she suspected sticking with the young lady's group would be bad for their earnings, but in truth, she simply did not want to go sticking her neck into a dispute involving the royal family. The Crimson Vow was nothing more than a group of rookie C-rank hunters, after all...

Hearing Mile say this, the three guards muttered, "*Nothing more than...*" and "*C-rank hunters...*", all the life gone from their eyes.

The Crimson Vow headed for the normal entrants' queue as Eltreya's party proceeded through the gates meant for nobles, soldiers, and other official parties. Eltreya leaned out of the window of her carriage, appearing to try to shout something to Mavis, before she was dragged back in by her guards and the window shut behind her.

"It's finally over..." uttered Mavis with an earnest look, her feelings on the matter clear.

"Well," said Pauline, "I don't think she'll be fleeing the country again anytime soon, and I'm sure she'll be laying low a while. She certainly won't be walking around town, so I doubt that we'll ever cross her path or have anything to do with her again."

To this, Mavis nodded fervently and joyfully.

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"What kind of mighty First Imperial Platoon are you all supposed to be?! Are you expecting me to believe that my strongest men could be beat up by two little girls with swords?! Such childish, transparent untruths... This is as good as shouting to the kingdom—nay, to every kingdom on this continent—that the imperial guards do not recognize the current king's sovereignty!" the king raged, as the prime minister looked on coolly. "I am fully aware that there are still many who have not acknowledged me as their king! That's why we must eliminate Eltreya! Keeping her on house arrest clearly backfired. Damnation! We should have at least tortured the spirit out of her..."

Though only the prime minister was currently present, it was still astonishing that the king would say such a thing aloud.

"Between Eltreya and that goddess... What was her name again? I'm pretty sure the commander said it was..."

"The Goddess El, I believe," said the prime minister.

“R-right, that was it!”

The prime minister’s face tightened as he said the goddess’s name, though the king showed no marked reaction. The prime minister schooled his face into an equally blank expression, but deep down, he couldn’t stop grinning.

The king always referred to his niece by her full name, Eltreya—as did the people around him, when in conversation with the king. However, amongst themselves, they all referred to the girl by a different, abbreviated name.

Lady El.

Meanwhile, rumors from soldiers and mercenaries were spreading swiftly throughout the capital.

“The goddess El stomped a whole horde of monsters on her own!”

“The goddess El singlehandedly defeated an entire battalion of soldiers without killing them and rebuked them for committing an act of aggression against another country!”

“The goddess El is going to save our land!”

As the stories were embellished, the legend grew. This was extraordinarily useful to a certain group of people. It was as if a goddess herself had extended a hand to them.

It could not possibly be thanks to the actions of a certain pun-loving little girl...

# INTERLUDE

## ONE MORE MONTH...

In the girls' dormitory of Eckland Academy, four people sat in Lady Marcela's room. They were Marcela herself and the other two members of the Wonder Trio, plus someone who had become a common sight in this room—the third princess, Morena.

"So His Majesty and the Princes still do not know, yes?" asked Aureana.

Morena shook her head emphatically. "Of course not. Meanwhile, the talk of assembling me a personal royal guard comprised of nine young ladies is going well. I've insisted on having someone who can guard me in places where gentlemen cannot be present, and when asked why I would limit it to young women, I explained that I, having few companions due to my position, needed someone to talk to. Furthermore, I argued it was for the best that a princess's entourage make a striking impression. No one could question my logic. Once this first test unit is a success, I plan to recommend a second and third—one to accompany each of my sisters."

The fact that these units might fall short of a group of veteran male soldiers in terms of pure combat strength was of little import. All they had to do was be alert to danger; a scream or whistle would bring the nearby male guards running in mere seconds. If they could serve as the princess's shield for those few scant moments, it would be more than enough.

Marcela and company had more than proven their strength by escorting other upper-class ladies, they were friends of the princess, and many nobles were familiar with them. The noble families who wished to increase their own chances of coming into contact with Marcela—whom they would love to have marry their sons—approved of her involvement in the proposal.

"All according to plan, then. The all-female royal guard unit will be established with the three of us at its center. And on the day it is officially launched, the three of us will immediately depart on Lady Morena's orders to find the currently missing viscountess, Lady Adele von Ascham..."

*Nod.*

*Grin.*

*Mm-hmm!*

“As things stand, I will be betrothed to someone the moment I graduate, stuck in bridal training for two years, and married off the instant I turn fifteen. I will never stand for that! Especially not the possibility of being stuck as someone’s mistress!” proclaimed Marcela, shaking her head.

Monika, likewise, shook her head. “I would be worked to the point of exhaustion as a water source and guardian mage for my family’s merchant parties and then ‘persuaded’ into marriage with some other family they wanted to make connections with.”

“And I don’t see myself ever making enough money to pay back my scholarships, so I would just end up being made to work as a civil servant or a clerk for the academy. Lest I draw my whole family into financial ruin, I’d be stuck in a government position where I’d be exempt from repayment,” added Aureana. (Sadly, this country had no concept of personal bankruptcy for her to fall back on.)

*“We absolutely can’t afford to mess this up!!!”* chorused the three.

“O-of course!” Morena’s voice leapt in pitch at the surprising force of their insistence. “Gnngh!” She exhaled in frustration. “I want to go with you!”

Of course, she could not, though her bitterness was clear.

“Anyway,” Morena continued, “everything seems to be proceeding as planned, so we just have to be extra cautious not to let my father and everyone know the role the three of you will play in my guard. The nine-person unit will ostensibly be divided into rotating shifts of three apiece for when I go out, which presumes three shifts of three people each...”

“But in truth, there will only be two shifts, and the remaining three will be out in the field full-time on a special assignment!”

“That’s exactly right. Hee hee!”

“Tee hee hee hee hee!”

Their laughter filled the room.

As far as Morena was concerned, it would be Marcela and Adele who married her two brothers, if at all possible. But it seemed Marcela had no interest in such a thing—nor did she have any interest in marrying the moment she turned fifteen. Morena had thus made this proposal to the Wonder Trio, with an eye to ensuring that no other nobles tried to make any passes at Marcela.

*I won't be able to see them for some time, but we can write each other frequently... or rather, I can direct them to send me frequent "reports." Then, in a few years, we can all live happily together with Lady Adele and dear Marcela as my dutiful sisters, and dear Aureana and Monika as my treasured friends...*

*He he. He he he he he...*

And as for Marcela...

*To have a wonderful adventure with Miss Adele... Why, five years could go by, and we'd still only be eighteen—still well within marriageable age! And we have nine years to go until we turn twenty-two, which is when we'd be cutting it close.*

*If we receive a special mission from her Highness herself, complete her orders perfectly, and bring Miss Adele back home, it will only make us more valuable in the eyes of the fellows and of their families, so everything will be fine!*

*And perhaps, in that time, the two princes will even forget about me.*

*It would be a little rude of us to keep reporting that we're still searching if we find Miss Adele right away. But we'll bring her back safe in the end, so please forgive us, Lady Morena...*

They could send the necessary reports to Morena, but she would have no way to send letters back to them. Marcela and the others would have to take extra care to request that information about the senders of their letters and the places they were sent from be concealed. They could be gone for years, and there would be nothing that Morena could do about it. All she would receive would be regular reports along the lines of, “Location still unknown. Our travels continue without incident...”

And as for Monika...

*My miserly father would never pass up the chance to cozy up to the royal family. Besides, if he refused a request to have me guard her Highness herself, he might come off seeming unpatriotic, which is a pretty fatal blow for any mercantile operation. I'm sure he'll think this honor will only increase my eventual value as a bride, though unfortunately for him, I intend to seek out my own wonderful partner and lead a happy married life...*

She dreamt of a happy future.

“Teehee! Teeheeheeheehee...”

All four of the girls tittered.



*I've gotta keep on my toes! If I can't manage, protect, and guide these airheads, then...*

Though she was smiling along with the others, Aureana's brain was churning a mile a minute with more practical worries, such as: What sort of social status ought they to claim for themselves as three young girls traveling alone? How were they to supplement their travel expenses along the way? And how much could they report to the Crown and authorities of other countries in order to secure their aid, should they end up embroiled in any conflicts?

"Anyway, there's still one month to go." After Morena departed, Marcela turned to Monika and Aureana. "It's now been a year and seven months since Miss Adele vanished. Well, I mean, we have seen her again twice since then, but it was only for a few hours..."

She was happy they'd been able to confirm Adele's safety, but that had been a fleeting relief. Indeed, compared to the year and two months they had spent together, it had been but the blink of an eye.

"As far as our position as hunters, a profession we took up just in case it might come in handy someday, considering Miss Adele's movements, we've finally achieved C-rank," said Marcela.

"That was because you requested a C-rank promotion, with the fact that we wanted to take a guard job soon as a bargaining point, of course. The guild master's face looked so pale. There's no way he could refuse a request from the family of a marquis!" Monika chuckled in reply.

"He did beg us not to take on any jobs other than escorting young ladies until we had more practice, though. He looked like he was going to cry..." Aureana said, smiling.

The guild master, guild staff, and other hunters who knew of the Wonder Trio were certain the girls were merely rookie hunters who specialized in guarding young nobles, unsuited to jobs other than gathering herbs and hunting jackalopes. The truth, of course, was that the girls would never be satisfied with being hunters in name alone. At night, they studied monsters and battle techniques. They delved into new potential applications of magic, going beyond the "true form" that Adele had taught them. And on days off, when they had no other jobs, they went out into the nearby forest, experimenting and practicing with their new spells. Quickly abandoning the

idea of fighting with swords and spears, they developed a unique style based on pre-emptive strikes with long-range attack spells, crafty tricks, and concealed knives. Their strategy relied on opponents underestimating them based on their appearances.

Indeed, the three girls were preparing themselves not just to protect someone for a few seconds while help arrived but to actively participate in any combat that arose. Of course, they had no *real* battle experience, but they could get plenty of that once they were on the road...

“Miss Adele did have a saying about, ‘pretending to be a normal slime, while actually being a super-powered slime...’” said Marcela. Monika and Aureana both gave firm nods.

# CHAPTER 77

## THE KINGDOM OF TRIST

“We should stay in this town a while,” Reina proposed and was met with agreement from the others.

The matter of the maiden all sorted, the Crimson Vow stopped in at the guildhall to acquaint themselves as usual, before picking out an inn. It was best to do this before booking a room, in case they should happen upon a job request so tasty they needed to sink their teeth in immediately. It was unlikely any such jobs would still remain at this time of day, but the Crimson Vow being who they were—the rare sorts who would snap up even a red mark job if it piqued their interest—it wasn’t impossible.

*Ding-a-ling.*

As they entered, they heard the familiar doorbell of the

Hunters’ Guild—nothing like that time when they stumbled across that branch with the broken bell. And then...

*Stare...*

All of the eyes in the guildhall focused on them. One third of the hunters looked away immediately, another third continued to check them out while pretending to avert their gazes, and the final third kept on staring unabashedly... Indeed, it was all just as usual.

*How nice...* the four thought. Getting such a predictable response gave them the same feeling of comfort as returning to an old favorite inn. Eliciting a different reaction might have given them pause or the suspicion that something was wrong.

“We are the Crimson Vow of the capital guild branch of the kingdom of Tils. We are

currently on a journey of self-improvement," Mavis announced to the whole room as they entered, receiving scattered responses and a number of casual waves in reply. The clerk at the counter gave a gentle nod.

No one could argue with a greeting like that. To be on such a journey, they had to be of C-rank or higher. Thus, no one would be likely to come at them saying something like, "Tch, what're you little ladies doin' working as hunters?" To be disparaged in a foreign land dishonored not just your party, but also the guild branch from which you hailed, and the girls would have been justified in responding with force to anyone who ridiculed them in this way. Even if the ridiculer were to be gravely wounded as a result, everyone would have to acknowledge that they'd been an idiot. The guild employees would look on with cold eyes, and no one would come to their rescue.

Thus far, the only people who had harassed them at guild branches had been those interested in their magical ability, or specifically, Mile's storage magic. Outside of that, the general opinion was that everyone besides Mavis was "too young" to be a suitable girlfriend, while everyone besides Pauline was "too small" for the same.

Which begged the question..."Too *small*" in what way?!

Of course, the fact that the Crimson Vow would soon be well known in these parts, with demands for their time and attention steadily multiplying. That was all part of the usual pattern, too.

"There's nothing good here." Again, entirely as usual.

"Anyway, we don't need to rush into another job right now. Let's take it easy for today, find something good to eat, and call it an early night," said Reina.

"Roger that!" the other three chorused.

And so, the Crimson Vow left the guildhall behind.

"Wonder how this place is?" muttered Reina.

After having browsed around a number of inns, the Crimson Vow now stood before an establishment that was a little bit more high-class than what the typical C-rank hunter would book. Pauline's tight fist kept them from accruing any truly frivolous expenses, but as a group with the leeway to make purchases that would be unthinkable for the

usual rookie C-rank party, the Crimson Vow did their best to avoid inns where being a group composed entirely of young girls would cause trouble. At the same time, they avoided establishments frequented by any particularly brutish characters. Even Pauline agreed this was a necessary expense.

“Well, if it’s no good, we can just stay somewhere else tomorrow night. Why don’t we just go with this one?”

Pauline gave the okay, and they walked into the inn.

“Excuse me, might you have a four-person room available?” asked Reina as they entered.

“Welcome! Of course, we have some vacancies!” answered the girl sitting at the reception desk, who was around sixteen or seventeen. She was shorter than Mavis but a fair bit taller than Pauline.

“Tch, no good...” Mile muttered absurdly. Mavis quickly clapped a hand over her mouth.

Mile seemed to have acquired a certain sense of liberty as of late—she was strangely lacking the prudence that she’d had during her time as Misato. What she had deemed “no good” was that the receptionist was neither a cute young child nor had elf or beast ears. Thankfully, the girl hadn’t heard Mile’s remark. At least, nothing about her demeanor had changed... though it was just as possible that she *had* heard it and simply ignored Mile’s words. Such things were common occurrences when you worked the front desk, though it *was* probably rare to hear it from a little girl younger than you, instead of the usual drunk old man...

As Pauline confirmed when meal times were and took care of the upfront payments as usual, Reina busied herself bonking Mile on the head with her staff. “Why are you always like this with the girls at inns, when you’re so open-minded about everything else?”

“O-ow! Reina, that hurts!”

There was no helping it, of course. That was just the sort of creature Mile was. She was giving voice to the true desires that had lurked in the depths of Misato’s heart, so long ago...

"Listen, I've decided that as long as it doesn't cause trouble for anyone else, I'm going to live my truth!"

Reina cut her down. "It's definitely causing trouble!"

"Okay! Let's get to the room now. It's up on the second floor. Let's go, let's go!" Having finished paying, an embarrassed Pauline urged the pair along, wrangling them up the stairs.

The receptionist shrugged with a wry smile. Apparently, she *had* heard them, loud and clear.

"Well, this place isn't so bad. It sucks that there's no bath, but the rooms and beds are decent enough. If the food is garbage, we can just eat somewhere else. If the other guests aren't weird, let's stay here a while," Reina proposed.

Everyone nodded in agreement. As with the capital of Tils, where they were all registered as hunters, there was no reason for them to make any long-term lodging commitments. They would be here a few days at best.

"Tomorrow, let's get to the guildhall before the second morning bell and wait for the new jobs to be posted. If there's nothing good there, we can just take some daily gathering and extermination requests for a bit of training. I want to give Mavis a chance to test that new technique of hers," Reina explained with a grin.

"Okay..." Mavis looked a little uneasy, but it was only natural for the others to want to understand their party member's abilities. And she *did* want to show off her new skills—she was just a little embarrassed.

"Then it's decided! Let's turn in early tonight!"

Even if they had made most of the journey via carriage, traveling was still exhausting. The girls always slept soundly the first night they arrived in a new town. Mind you, if typical hunters—who slept wrapped in their own cloaks in the open air—were to hear the Crimson Vow—who slept on cots in a tent—say that traveling was "exhausting," they would be raring to beat the pulp out of the girls. As such, the girls usually kept quiet about their travel habits.

Decently satisfied with the inn's dinner offerings, the girls gently drifted off to sleep.

# CHAPTER 78

## RETURN OF THE ELDER DRAGONS

Not finding any enticing job offerings the next day, the Crimson Vow had settled on killing time with daily requests. They were walking through the forest when they came to a sudden halt.

“I guess this is good?”

“Yeah, this is all right.”

“Seems suitable.”

“Well then, let’s do it! Spy detection plan number two! One, two...”

*“Time to go ahead and show yourselves, you dumb-dumb spies who don’t even realize you’ve already been spotted!!!”* the four shouted together.

Of course, they’d only mustered such coordination after practicing numerous times—with a number of maneuvers denoted by various names and numbers that they had all come up with together. It was thanks to this that the four were so frequently able to speak in unison. When Mile had first suggested rehearsing these phrases, Mavis immediately deemed it “cool,” a rationale which Reina and Pauline had also approved of.

After a few moments had passed, two forms emerged from the tree line. One of them looked human, but it was wearing a large hat, while the other had something that looked more like an animal’s ears atop its head.

“A dog man...” uttered the four.

“I’m a wolf!” the man shouted.

This was a common exchange. Wolf-type beastfolk weren’t fond of being mistaken for dogs, and as such, the Crimson Vow’s usual battle tactic when dealing with them was to start by purposely referring to them as dogs, in order to make them lose their cool.

Naturally, Pauline had been the one to propose this.

“Shake!”

“Roll over!”

“Beg!”

“Y-you bathtaaaaards!”

The other man grabbed the wolfman by the arms, desperately holding him back. The vein throbbing in his temple looked ready to burst—apparently, their tactic was a little *too* effective. Concluding that ship had already sailed, Reina ignored the wolfman, turning her attention to his companion.

“You there, human guy. What are you two—”

“I’m not a human! I’m a beastman!” the man raged, snatching off his hat and tossing it to the ground. As he did so, two cat ears sprung up atop his head. Apparently, being mistaken for a human was far more humiliating than a wolfman being mistaken for a dog.

“How were *we* supposed to know?” said the four, a perfect recitation of “Response of a lack of surprise, #3.”

“So the elder dragons asked you to search for us then?”

“That’s right.”

The two men, having finally quelled their anger, seemed to have no intention of fighting them now that they had been spotted. They readily spilled the beans, but it seemed they hadn’t been told *why* the elder dragons had requested such a thing of them. Apparently, they had no information to give beyond who their employers were.

“He’s a little better at pretending to be human, so we were told to have him gather information in town, while I used that information to follow you guys’ scent. You have kind of a weird scent, so it was pretty easy to follow,” said the wolfman, pointing at

Mile. It seemed that this pair were from the group of beastfolk they had previously encountered at the ruined excavation site, making them familiar with the girls' faces and scents.

"Wh...?" Mile was amazed. She was amaz-eggs and bacon! No young lady would ever be okay with someone telling her that she had a "weird" scent!

"Uh, no! That's not what I meant! I was just saying that your scent is a little different from a typical human—it's not that you're smelly or anything! You smell lovely!" Seeing the shock upon Mile's face, the wolfman attempted to explain, perhaps realizing what a grave error he had made. However, his backpedaling only depressed Mile all the more.

Reina shrugged. "You're basically superhuman, so it's not surprising you'd have a weird smell! Quit worrying so much about it!"

"That's not really much of a consolation..." muttered Mavis wearily.

"Okay, so let's get this straight..." As Mile recovered from her shock, Pauline took the lead. "Now then, what did you intend to do once you located us?"

The pair looked at her, seeming a bit conflicted.

"Ah... I'm, actually—pardon me—but could we get you to fire two fireballs straight up into the air?"

"Huh?"

"Well, that's the signal we arranged to let the elder dragons who are hiding nearby know that it's safe to come out. But we can't do magic..."

So they'd decided on a signal that they couldn't even give?

"Are you stupid?" asked the Crimson Vow.

"We're not! I mean, they told us only to call them after you all had agreed to it anyway, so this is fine! And it's a lot of work to set up and light two signal fires!"

This much was true.

“Well then... should I fire them?”

“If you would.”

Reina, Pauline, and Mavis all nodded, so Mile looked to the sky, shooting two fireballs straight up. After a short wait, a single elder dragon came soaring in. It alighted before the girls with a mighty *thud* and opened its mouth.

“Long time no see, strange humans,” said the dragon.

“Who are you?” asked the girls in unison.

“It’s me! Berdetice!” The dragon seemed displeased that they had completely forgotten him.

“What did you expect?! It’d be one thing if you were a human, too, but there’s no way we can tell elder dragons’ faces apart! It’s like looking at two members of the same species of bird or fish! You can’t distinguish humans by their faces, can you? You have to rely on differences in smell or magical strength, or the color and length of our hair!” Reina pointed out.

“Er...” Berdetice swiftly averted his eyes.

“So then, whaddya want?” asked Reina, getting straight to the point.

Berdetice replied with similar directness. “We’ve got a tiny bit of a problem. We’re going to need you all to die.”

“Whaaaaat?!?!”

The cry of shock that came from the Crimson Vow was not in the least surprising to hear.

“That’s not a ‘tiny’ matter at all!” shouted Reina.

“Wait, that’s...”

“Well, the thing is, we’ve had a change in leadership...”

According to Berdetice, the leader of their village had until recently been the clan's patriarch. The dragon who was longest in the tooth was the clan elder, but the elder only served as advisor to the clan—a position separate from that of the actual leader. And now, apparently, the new leader was a dragon who was still quite young.

"How'd such a greenhorn get to be the leader so quickly?! Do dragons have the same kind of bloodlines and lineages that humans do?"

"No, that's just it. We select our leaders based on age, ability, achievements, and dragonability. The best candidate is usually already the patriarch of the clan—"

"*Dragonability?*" asked Reina, confused.

"I think that's their version of *personability*," Mile whispered in her ear.

"Oh, y-yeah. So, you said, 'normally' right? Are there times when that's different?"

"Occasionally, a dragon appears who can, as we say, 'speak with the spirits of magic.' In other words, a kind of 'chosen one.' When such an individual comes of a certain age, they ascend to the position of leader. Given their youth, and a variety of related issues, the patriarch and elder will keep their positions, while the young dragon assumes only the position of leader, which is normally held by the patriarch. In other words, they serve only as official decision maker for the clan. As they grow older, they will later assume the position of patriarch for the next generation and elder after that..."

This position he described was something like a shrine maiden or priest. The patriarch handled the clan's practical affairs, and the elder was guardian of the clan's knowledge—but all decisions that might determine the fate of the clan were in the leader's hands.

*Hm... Nanos?* Mile said in her head.

YES, LADY MILE. HE IS REFERRING TO A LEVEL 3 INDIVIDUAL. UNLIKE OTHER LIFE FORMS, HUMANS INCLUDED, ELDER DRAGONS ARE TYPICALLY BORN AT AUTHORIZATION LEVEL 2, BUT THERE ARE SOME RARE INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE BORN WITH, OR LATER ACQUIRE, A LEVEL 3 AUTHORIZATION. ONCE THEY DETERMINE THAT THEY CAN COMMUNICATE WITH US DIRECTLY, THESE INDIVIDUALS OFTEN COME TO CONSIDER US TO BE "THE SPIRITS OF MAGIC."

WHEN THEY ASK QUESTIONS OF US, ASSUMING THE ANSWER IS NOT PROHIBITED

INFORMATION, WE REPLY, BUT WE NEVER EXPLAIN ANYTHING TO THEM THAT THEY DO NOT ASK THEMSELVES.

*So what you're saying is that an elder dragon with no scientific knowledge would never know the right questions to ask and would have no concept of what a nanomachine is—so they can only comprehend you as the “spirits of magic.”*

Even so, compared to others of their kind, such individuals would have an overwhelming advantage when it came to using magic. They would be able to catalyze their spells through concrete words, after all.

*But Nanos, you're always talking to me of your accord, aren't you?*

WELL, YOU HAVE A LEVEL 5 AUTHORIZATION, LADY MILE.

*Ah, of course...*

Mile accepted this answer, but in her mind, it was clear that the nanos were simply partial to her. Granted, she had met and spoken with their creator and told the nanos about that meeting. In human terms, it was telling someone how their parents were doing back in the hometown that they hadn't been to in decades. They were probably happy to favor Mile now and then.

“Not only can this youth speak with the spirits, but their magical abilities are in a completely different league from that of previous ‘chosen ones.’ The spirits themselves seem especially fond of them.”

*Ah... Somehow, Mile felt that she understood why that might be.*

“The older dragons tried to butter them up by giving them the position of leader. This whole thing is incredibly foolish...”

“Now they’re running wild, right? All, ‘Elder dragons are the strongest in the world!!!’ and, ‘We must guide the foolish lower life forms!’ and stuff?” Mile interjected.

“H-how did you know?!“ Berdetice shouted, wide-eyed with shock.

“I totally get that. That’s the folly of youth, right?”

“I-Indeed. We normally grow out of such human ways of thinking, but for some reason,

our young leader is still mired in such foolishness... and we must obey them. I am still young, myself. If the adults fall in line, there's little room for me to object. Sorry about this..."

Berdetice seemed to have a pretty good grasp on the situation. He might have been young for an elder dragon but was likely still quite old in human terms. As for the "adult" dragons of his clan... they had probably just thrown up their hands in defeat, assuming that their young leader would eventually see sense and that they might as well humor them in the meantime. If a few humans or other life forms got killed along the way, that wasn't really their concern...

However—

*"DO YOU REALLY THINK WE'D LET OURSELVES BE KILLED FOR SUCH A STUPID REASON?!?!"* the four members of the Crimson Vow screeched.

"Anyway," Reina spat, fangs bared, "why does your leader getting replaced with some brat mean that we have to die?! We've got nothing to do with you all!"

"That's true, but—well, naturally, we reported the details of the previous incident to our higher-ups, and they were committed to the official record. Apparently, our new leader read the records upon assuming their new position. 'How dare some lowly humans oppose an elder dragon,' they asked, 'and how could we possibly lose to them?! Unforgivable! An elder dragon's power is absolute! We cannot abide such a disgrace to our reputations!'"

"Ah, okay. I understand now."

"I'm sorry..." Berdetice truly did look apologetic—so deeply apologetic that even a human could read the expression upon his reptilian face.

"But we're still not going to let you kill us. So you're fine with us taking you out instead?"

"I'm not! I'm definitely not! I tried my hardest to avoid this! I told them that it was utter foolishness to challenge an opponent who already once defeated me and let me go! I even put up with everyone ridiculing me as a yellow-bellied coward, a greenhorn who lost to a human..."

"Sorry about that." Reina apologized sincerely, intuiting from the trembling of Berdetice's body and the tears dotting his eyes that this had been a truly humiliating

experience.

"So, what are you going to do?" asked Mile.

Berdetice's face turned apologetic again as he said, "There are three powerful warrior dragons accompanying me. I told them how bad it would look if it became widely known that an elder dragon had attacked a group of humans without provocation, but my protests were completely ignored, so I agreed to act as their guide only on the conditions that I refrain completely from involvement in combat. As such, don't feel any need to hold back against them. Whatever happens to them will be their own doing. Although..."

The elder dragon's voice got quieter here. "I'm honestly not really sure that you can win."

"Huh? But you know how powerful Mile is..." said Reina.

Berdetice shook his head.

"It's true that you thoroughly thrashed three of us last time, but we were a novice messenger, a young trainee, and a girl out for a bit of sightseeing. The draconic equivalents of a sixteen-year-old human greenhorn, a thirteen-year-old human apprentice, and the ten-year-old daughter of a human nobleman, if you will. The three dragons accompanying me this time, on the other hand, are the equivalents of trained soldiers in their mid-20s. So you see..."

"Wha...?" At this new information, the members of the Crimson Vow paled.

Berdetice turned to the beastmen. "We're almost out of time. You all should get out of here. Move as fast as you can if you don't want to wind up collateral damage."

At his words, the beastmen bowed their heads dutifully and took off running.

"Looks like they're here," Berdetice said, just as three elder dragons came soaring in from out of the trees.

"What're you dawdling for? Why didn't you call us sooner?!"

"You're late, Berdetice!"

The three dragons alighted near the members of the Crimson Vow.

"Should we go ahead and kill them?" said the largest of the three newcomers, casting a haughty glare over the Crimson Vow.

*They say that elder dragons are smarter than humans, but that arrogant attitude of theirs sure doesn't make it seem that way,* thought Mile. Berdetice had made mention of an "affinity for lower life forms," but that probably only extended as far as *not* considering them utterly toxic pests. No human would extend special consideration to the fly or mosquito they were about to swat, after all.

"Whatever you do is none of my concern. I was merely ordered to serve as your guide and to explain the situation to these humans ahead of time, and I have completed both tasks. The rest is up to you," said Berdetice, taking several steps back.

"Well then, let's begin."

"Just a moment!" As the elder dragons took up a battle stance, Mile halted them.

"What? There's no point in begging for your lives now. We have orders from our leader. To be frank, we aren't pleased to have to crush such weak life forms, but we have no choice in the matter. Save your grudges for Berdetice, who brought this all upon you, and for yourselves, for meddling in the affairs of elder dragons. Blame not us for this matter!"

"That's not true!" Berdetice protested, but the fact was that they wouldn't be in the current situation if he had dispatched the Crimson Vow on their last meeting. Or at least massaged the facts a bit when delivering his report... However, there was no point in quibbling about that at this point.

"No, that's not it. I was just wondering if you'd consider a change of location... These are grounds that a lot of people use, and if we let loose here, it'll probably start a wildfire. This is pretty close to the capital, and if word got around that elder dragons ran rampant and destroyed the forest, leaving the murdered corpses of some little girls to be found, then..."

"Er—o-okay, yes, we accept your proposal!"

Berdetice let the members of the Crimson Vow climb atop his back, and the four dragons left the forest, cruising at a low altitude so as to keep out of view. Of course, they would be clearly visible to anyone who was nearby, but it was better than being spotted by heaps of capital residents. Four elder dragons being spotted near the

capital was still sure to cause a fuss, but it was too late to do anything about that.

After a brief flight, they arrived at a mountain range with no immediate signs of human life. Such was an elder dragon's flying speed, which relied more on magic than physics, and was unaffected by having the four girls atop Berdetice's back. Furthermore, the mountain they had chosen had a relatively gentle slope and low altitude, so there was little danger of the adverse effects of a thinning atmosphere on the battle.

"Is this place suitable?"

"Yes, this will do."

Mile *had* partly requested a change of venue to avoid damaging the forest or causing a fuss too close to the capital, but her primary motivation was to get them somewhere that everyone could fight without holding back. Once the battle began, the elder dragons would let loose with no regard for the fact that they might harm the forest or be spotted from the capital. Mile and the others couldn't afford to be as unconcerned by such considerations, and Reina being unable to use her fire magic at full power would be a huge handicap.

There was an almost excessive level of detachment in the exchange between Mile and the elder dragons, though perhaps this was only to be expected. As far as the elder dragons were concerned, this was a farce. Their young errand boy had clearly told a bold-faced lie in order to disguise the truth, having been hesitant to slaughter some smaller creatures before the eyes of an apprentice and a maiden. They couldn't fault Berdetice too much for wishing to avoid such an act in front of Shelala, especially when he'd then been willing to drag his own name through the mud in making his report. Indeed, the entire matter would have been filed away without a second thought... had this sudden change in leadership not occurred, and the report of an elder dragon being defeated by a human not incurred the divine wrath of this new leader.

Whatever warm, protective feelings the elder dragons might entertain for such charmingly weak and foolish creatures, should the actions of these life forms threaten the clan's position, they would be crushed without hesitation. As far as the elder dragons were concerned, this was a routine act of extermination. Nothing more.

As for the Crimson Vow, they had long given up on explaining themselves or having the elder dragons acknowledge them. No matter how desperately a cockroach begged, it was unlikely to persuade the exterminator to give up and go home. The girls had

already discussed their battle tactics atop Berdetice's back. Berdetice seemed to be a neutral party, perhaps even leaning slightly in the Crimson Vow's favor, so it was unlikely he would say anything even if he overheard. Regardless, Mile had put up one of her sound-dampening barriers just in case.

"Now then, let's begin."

As one of the dragons spoke, Berdetice retreated from the rest. He really did not seem keen on getting involved.

The Crimson Vow took a fair distance as well. They weren't stupid enough to assume they had any chance against elder dragons starting off at a point-blank melee range.

"Huh?"

There was a sound of collective confusion from the members of the Crimson Vow. Only one of the elder dragons stood across from the party as the other two moved to the sides and took their seats.

On reflection, this made sense. Even having a single elder dragon against four humans should mean an overwhelming victory for the dragons' side. There was no point in having all three of them come out at once. Furthermore, it would be a grave shame to have the battle be over in merely a few seconds, after they had traveled all this way. It was no surprise that they should be hoping for at least a few *minutes* of fun.

That said, they were still bullying some powerless little creatures. They just had to keep their fun in check and try to hold themselves back just enough that the humans didn't die, the elder dragons figured. Certainly, their young leader would be happy so long as they trounced the humans thoroughly enough that they would never dare meddle in elder dragon affairs again. The Crimson Vow would proclaim the supremacy of elder dragons' powers far and wide, shouting it from the highest towers. These dragons did seem to have *some* compassion for lower life forms, at least up to a point.

*Okay, I've calculated our odds of winning... thought Mile. Assuming that the strongest elder dragon in existence has a power level of 100, and we put these dragons at a power level of 80... My power would be a 50. Multiplied by a nanomachine communicacy coefficient of 3.27, that's 163. That puts me at two elder dragons. Under that assumption, if I can take care of one of the dragons while they're still underestimating us and have their guards down, then that just leaves two. If Reina and the others can back me up and*

*get the dragons' attention to waver, so that they can't focus a coordinated assault on me alone, then I might be able to handle the remaining two somehow...*

"Here we come!"

And thus, the games began for the elder dragons. And for the Crimson Vow, a battle unfolded upon which the lives of themselves and their allies were staked.

The first elder dragon, who had been dispatched to battle, took a leisurely stroll toward the Crimson Vow, shaking the ground with each step. If it were to let loose a breath attack, it all would be over in an instant, and if it did not hold back, these humans would be utterly destroyed. Therefore, its plan was to allow the humans to make the first move with a unilateral attack. It hoped to see what a human's strength looked like when they made a desperate assault. Such trifles would not be enough to harm its scales, anyway.

Unlike lower life forms, higher beings like the elder dragons received the blessings of the gods, their bodies imbued with a powerful protective magic from the moment they were born. As such, until the day that they died and that magic disappeared, no attack from a lesser being would ever be enough to penetrate their scales or hides.

The other two dragons watched quietly, with faces any human would deem expressionless. It didn't appear they were watching even a mildly entertaining spectacle. Of course, watching one's companion unilaterally slaughter a group of defenseless little creatures would not be particularly entertaining for any upstanding citizen.

"Looks like they're letting us have the first move. Okay then, just like we planned. Let's crush the first one before the other two step in—a four-on-two battle will increase our odds of winning immensely!" said Mile.

"All right!" shouted the other three.

Normally, when it came to matters of diplomacy, Mavis would take charge, while Reina was the party's leader in matters of combat. However, in extreme circumstances, where neither of their knowledge or experiences came in handy, it was Mile who took the lead. In this, the members of the Vow were in tacit agreement.

Unique circumstances called for unique measures. Absurd circumstances called for absurd measures. Apart from Mile, the members of the Crimson Vow all thought this

was the correct course of action...

“Zero-Zero Magic, No. 1! Let’s roll, Bouldermobile!”

Their chances of winning were zero. Their chances of survival, also zero. Zero-Zero Magic was a desperate sort of spell employed in order to protect one’s friends and cope with these “zero-zero” circumstances. This was the first of those spells.

Pauline began incanting her most wicked, most wild, most powerful of spells with all of her being, as a nearby boulder of at least three meters began to shake itself free of all unnecessary matter. And then, from within, it revealed its true form: a thick, spiraling spear.

Or rather, a drill.

“Spin, oh spin! Turn the heavens about and the tide of battle in our favor. To protect my patrons and my friends, I give this attack my all!”

“Blaze, my life. Blaze, my spirit! I will never let this body of mine, that carries the will of my father and everyone from the Crimson Lightning, be crushed for the amusement of some lizards. I will never let that happen—ever!”

Reina’s eyes were practically swirling. She was clearly not in her right state of mind.

“I’m counting on you, Micros!” shouted Mavis, swigging down the contents of five capsules all at once. This was a battle where survival was not certain. There was no point in worrying about injuring herself, or wasting time with concern for the future right now. “Beloved blade of mine, for the sake of my friends, show your true form, and be my strength!”

As she spoke these words, her sword began to give off golden particles, shining with a divine, ominous light.

“Nanomachines! *Je te commande...*” Mile, speaking words not of this world, let her spell ring out like a howl. “Kurihara Misato, Adele von Ascham, and Mile command you. Accept my orders at highest priority!”

The little creatures seemed to be taking this seriously. Such a brave, foolish, wretched,

piteous, and futile struggle. Perhaps the most compassionate thing the dragons could do for them now, rather than saving them by only beating them half to death, would be to instantly annihilate them, so that they did not feel pain or suffering. Yet, just as the dragon thought this...

“Shoot!”

“Fire!”

“Rraahh!!!”

A rocky spear and magical fire came flying towards the dragon, while a weakly swordswoman came rushing in, blade brandished. There was no point in putting up a barrier just for something like this; the dragon’s own scales, its hide, and its innate defensive magic would be more than enough to protect it. Even if it did nothing, it would be fine. Even if these humans launched a surprise attack, or pierced some gap, it meant nothing. Elder dragons were in a completely different league from other life forms. They were of the house of the absolute, immaculate gods. Such was an elder dragon, and their legendary invincibility...

*Ka-shnk!*

*Fwoom!*

“Gaaaaah!”

The spear smashed into the dragon’s stomach, boring in, spewing sharp and rugged fragments of rock while fire engulfed its head.

Normally, its scales and hide should be enough to deflect a simple rocky spear. And with a normal flame, the dragon’s own torrent of magic would render it a momentary thing, allowing those same outer layers to protect it. And yet, the spear had burst into its body, and its head was engulfed in flames that did not dissipate.

No matter how lofty a title they might claim for themselves, elder dragons were still mortal beings who needed to intake oxygen to live. If the temperature of the air they breathed rose enough, their lungs would burn.

Just because a dragon could breathe fire did not mean that the inside of their body could withstand high temperatures. A breath attack was formed simply by concentrating magic within their mouths, which was then spat out and transformed into a searing fire after leaving their mouths. Indeed, there was no way they could possibly withstand a fire forming within them and traveling to their mouths. They had no “flame bladder” down inside of them or anything like that.

And so, indeed, if they were to intake hot, unoxygenated air into their lungs, then...

“Kuh-hfff, kuh-hfff, kuh-hfff...”

The dragon’s chest was burning from the inside out, and it could not breathe. Combined with the rock fragments buried into its gut, the pain was unbearable. For the first time in the centuries that it had lived, the elder dragon’s body, which hadn’t known even the slightest discomfort outside of the casual sparring matches the dragons held amongst themselves, was experiencing true agony. It swung its arms desperately, trying to dash the flames away, but for some reason they would not budge, would not dissipate.

“Aah... Gh... Gah...”

*Chnk!*

“Kuh-hff!”

And then, a beam of light plunged into one of the dragon’s sides...

*Ka-shnk!*

“Gwahh!”

A blade thrust in, following the hole the light had bored...

*Shrrk... shrrk... shrrk... Fwshahhh!!*

Its gut was sliced right through, its innards bursting out.

*Bwoom...*

The dragon's massive body fell to the ground, convulsing, its eyes wide.

The other two dragons were paralyzed with shock. Just as the Crimson Vow had planned, they had felled one of the dragons while their enemies still underestimated them and greatly raised their odds of winning.

"Lucredd!"

One of the two remaining dragons shouted a word that was presumably the felled dragon's name and rushed to its side.

*Chnk!*

Just then, a beam of light grazed its snout.

"We're the ones you should be worried about, aren't we?" said Mile.

"Tch, you little..." Perhaps sensing danger, the dragon had halted in place, only narrowly avoiding Mile's attack.

When the lives of Mile's friends were on the line, she had no compassion for their enemies. If it would irritate an enemy, or rob them of their advantage, she could even be heartless. Though the dragons were sapient beings, they were still agents of evil, who had come in suddenly throwing false accusations and attacked with the intention of snatching away the lives of Mile and her beloved companions.

Indeed, in this situation, they were no better than a goblin, or orc, or ogre. They were not deserving of her pity.

"Now then, let's settle this!"

"You bastards..."

The other dragon stood as well, and the pair of them faced Mile. Too little, too late, they seemed to have finally grasped the situation. Everything in Berdetice's report that they had disbelief and ridiculed was entirely factual. And furthermore, these humans were skilled enough in battle to instantaneously fell an elder dragon who underestimated them and let its guard down.

Still, this time, there were two of them, and they would neither let their guards down

nor act so foolishly. Of course, no matter how foolish they might be, they would never underestimate an opponent who had already felled one of their allies.

"We need to get Lucredd healed as quickly as possible, so we can't hold back now. Don't think badly of us," said one of the dragons, opening its mouth wide.

"Phaser Beam!"

*Chnk!*

*Fwip!*

The beam that Mile fired was deflected by a wall of magic before the elder dragon. The wall had been erected at a wide angle, so it did not strike the wall straight on, instead bouncing off of it.

And then...

*Ka-fwoom!*

"Lattice Power Barrieeeeer!!!"

*Bwoom!*

A breath attack, which was less a torrent of fire than a mass of flame, bounced off of Mile's barrier. It was not a single flat shield but a full dome, which lent it the same sort of efficiency as sloped armor.

"Thunder Bolt!"

*Boom!*

Mile's thunder magic exploded, directly striking the dragon's head, but her enemy continued standing there calmly. It was quite possible that the moment this dragon realized that Berdetice's report was true, it had taken all the information about its enemies' battle tactics into consideration and guarded against such aerial attacks. Reflexively, perhaps sensing a change in the current of magic (a.k.a the movement of the nanomachines), or picking up on the gathering static energy, or else knowing what to expect thanks to some other preternatural sense, it seemed to have created a magical wall above its head. It was unclear if thunder—or rather, lightning—magic

operated in the same way as fire magic, but whether it was an attack formed directly by magical power or one that hinged on the natural phenomenon of electricity itself, it was unmistakable that a magical barrier had protected the elder dragon.

“Fire!”

“Shoot!”

While Mile stalled for time, Pauline and Reina finished incanting their spells and fired. The spells had been effective against the first dragon, so they decided to try them a second time.

*Fwoosh!*

*Crack!*

Reina’s fire was immediately nullified, and likewise, the rapid rotation of Pauline’s earthen spear slowed, a dragon’s tail slapping it to the ground. Apparently, their walls were not only effective against magical masses, but they had developed anti-physical barriers the likes of which humans could not have comprehended.

These anti-physical barriers were not as impenetrable as Mile’s lattice power barrier, but they were at least strong enough to defend against a tangible object that was concocted by earth magic, to nullify the kinetic energy of objects with larger amounts of mass, and potentially to stop an object of smaller mass in its tracks completely.

“This is futile. Lest we let ourselves go too soft in our judgment, let us recall that it is utterly impossible for a lowly human to wound an elder dragon. There was a tale, some centuries ago, of a young elder dragon being overwhelmed by humans, but that was a youngling who had gone against leagues of human soldiers for sport and was struck by countless waves of metal ammunition from their siege ballistae. There is nothing that four puny humans can do against a fully grown dragon.”

“What do you think, Mile?” asked Reina.

“Well, one of the dragon’s barriers was able to deflect my attack, as well as everyone else’s... And if both of them were to attack at once, they might actually be able to penetrate my barrier, so...”

The Crimson Vow carried on a quiet discussion within Mile’s barrier, but it was clear

that her reply implied that the dragons had them in check.

The elder dragons, who were desperate to get their fallen comrade some healing, now attacked.

*Bwoom!*

There was a continuous torrent of flame. And then...

*Ka-shoom!*

A ball of flame, concealed within the torrent, came flying.

"This is hopeless! The next time they stop, we need to get behind those rocks to the right!"

The barrier was at its limits. However, this was the very reason that they had chosen a rocky place as their battleground. With both a barrier and some boulders as their shield, they would be more fortified. Plus, their opponents were so large that they could never hide themselves in the same manner. The results of this might be minimal, but accumulating plenty of these little advantages just increased their chances of turning the tide of the battle that much more.

To break it down, while there might only be a 20% increase in the efficacy of their strategy, employing four such tricks meant an increase of  $1.2 \times 1.2 \times 1.2 \times 1.2$ . Ergo, they could at least double their chances.

Battling against a massive opponent required intel, skills, traps, tricks, and an ability to pour your all into the battle. By combining all of these things, little by little one could raise one's chances.

Despite the nomenclature, a dragon's "breath" was actually a type of magic. But while breathing was not really necessary to the use of it, whenever they did attack in such a manner, the dragons always took a deep breath in, then breathed out. This might have been due to the dragons' own assumptions or other reasons entirely, but in any event, if they were going to breathe a continuous flame, at some point they would have to stop to catch their breath.

Mile's intention, currently, was to wait for the moment that the dragons stopped to breathe, rush behind the rocks and retake a defensive stance, and then launch a

counterassault at once. Naturally, the others were on her same wavelength.

Just as one of the endless balls of flame crashed into Mile's barrier, suddenly the fire stopped.

*Perfect! Both of their attacks paused at the same time!*

This was an unexpectedly fortunate turn.

"Move it!" Mile screamed as all four girls dashed to the right.

Just then, the two dragons both took in a deep breath.

*Phew, all right, made it in time! The moment we get behind those rocks, I'll put my barrier back up, and...*

*Fwump!*

"Ah."

Someone had fallen. Pauline, whose reflexes were the most sluggish of the four, had caught her foot on the jagged rocks and taken a nosedive face-first into the ground. Reina and Mile, who had run ahead, rushed behind the rocks, unaware of what had happened, before turning back just in time to see the following: Mavis, who had taken up the rear on their retreat to act as a shield for everyone else just in case, was helping up Pauline, glancing toward the elder dragons, and then shoving Pauline with all her might towards the other two... just in time to be bathed in the dragons' flames herself.

Mavis screamed in agony, and the others screamed as well, their cries rising to the heavens. Pauline, who had turned around after tumbling behind the rocky barrier, let out the greatest scream of all.

The flames had not hit Mavis entirely head-on. Just before they struck, she had leapt desperately out of the way and somehow managed to protect most of her body... except for her left arm.

"Gwaah!!"

Screaming, Mavis continued to scramble behind the rocks. To huddle up where she stood, wailing about the pain, could only mean certain death, and so she mustered up

the will to ignore the anguish and move to somewhere safer. Such was the iron will required of anyone who hoped to make it to the other side of a battle.

"Mavis!" cried Reina.

"Mavis!" Mile shouted.

"M-Mavis, y-your hand... your hand..." Pauline babbled dumbly as Mavis came tumbling toward them. "Your hand... I-It's all my fault... Your dreams, your dreams of becoming a knight... All because of me..."

Indeed, from the elbow downward, Mavis's left arm was entirely gone. There was absolutely nothing beyond the charred stump that was her elbow.

"Numb the nerve receptors, intercept temperature conduction, cool the heated portions, and halt cellular destruction!" Mile cried desperately, trying to stop the pain and keep the damage from spreading. In truth, she had no idea how to cope with such a large loss of a body part.

Reina was frozen solid, unable to move.

Pauline was white as a sheet, delirious.

Mile continued fervidly applying her emergency magical measures.

"I-It's all my fault... Mavis's dreams, all her dreams, all because of me..." Pauline stammered, but with her pain finally deadened thanks to Mile's magic, Mavis just grinned at her.

"Such a thing is nothing in exchange for your life!"

Pauline's face twisted. In sadness. In regret. In self-condemnation. In apology... and in violent anger and hatred.

The day that she had avenged her father's death, Pauline had assumed that never again would her heart be stained by such loathing. Never again would she have to forge her body, her spirit, into an instrument of revenge, an arrowhead, to pierce straight into her enemies' hearts...

But now... Now, her heart was a twisting, raging storm.

A font of dark, looming magma was boiling, bubbling up within her.

She swayed to her feet like some shadowy phantom, her head hung. And then, she stepped out from cover, fully exposing herself to the enemy.

“What’s this? Are you surrendering? Well, that’s fine, you should go ahead and step back, then. Once we’ve finished destroying the rest of them, you can go back and tell the story to the other humans...”

Just then, Pauline lifted her face, glaring at the elder dragons straight on.

“Eek!”

A cry suddenly squeaked from the elder dragon’s throat. For an elder dragon to let out such a cowardly sound in the face of a human... It was Pauline’s face and the aura rising from her body that so terrified the dragon.

*“Shut your mouth, you rotten lizard!”*

Then another human form appeared from behind the rocks.

*“Burn, burn, burn, burn... Everyone who tries to take away those important to me will burn to the ground.”*

This redhead girl, her eyes glinting, face feverish, did not appear to be in her right mind. How else could she stand so calmly before an elder dragon?

“Wh-what...? What in the world are you all thinking...?”

Taking care to keep up the barrier protecting Reina and Pauline, Mile quickly turned to Mavis, who was clutching her upper arm with her right hand. “Mavis, about your arm...”

“Yeah, I know. Even I know that no matter how good your healing magic is, you can’t bring back lost body parts. But what I said before was true. A single arm is a trifling price to pay, if I can save the life of a friend. If I had to save you, Mile, I’d give up my other arm without a second thought!”

“M-Mavis...” Tears slowly welled up in the corners of Mile’s eyes. “...So then, would you

like me to work some healing magic that would let your arm regrow over the course of a month, or would you like me to magically attach an artificial arm to you right now?"

"Huh?" Mavis's eyes shrunk to little points. In a manga, they would have been drawn as tiny dots.

Even with the help of the nanomachines, to completely restore an arm from a cross section via natural cellular reproduction would take a fair bit of time. Cells could not be created from nothing, and so, even if they could gather the necessary resources from the rest of Mavis's body, increase cellular activity, and apply various other procedures, the process would be lengthy. On the other hand, engineering an artificial version with nano-made muscles and nano-made nerves could be achieved in an instant.

"Would I be able to use that artificial arm right away? What I mean is—would I be able to use it in this battle?"

"You would. It wouldn't bleed, but you would be able to move it just like your own arm, via your own thoughts. It wouldn't be a normal prosthetic!"

Hearing this, Mavis replied immediately, not even stopping to think. "If I can't fight right now, it doesn't matter what kind of arm I might grow back later. I choose the bloodless arm!"

"I thought that you might say that," said Mile with a tearful smile. She magically bored a hole around ten centimeters wide into the rocks. "Please put your arm in there and close your eyes."

She had done this so that the nanomachines could operate at full capacity, extracting the necessary components from the bedrock, transmitting any insufficient supplies, and converting the relevant molecules. Also, so that Mavis would not bear witness to the manufacturing process. Truly, this was primarily for the sake of Mavis's mental health...

In truth, Mile had made a number of previous arrangements with the nanomachines ahead of time in order to prepare for the off chance that one of the party members might sustain an injury great enough to cause the loss of a body part. Thus, she had already reviewed various blueprints, taking into account what magic could do, what it

could not do, and what the terms of such usage were. Before raising the proposal to Mavis previously, she had reaffirmed all this via silent conversation with the nanomachines inside her head.

“Cyborg. Prosthetic. Cyberize. Never betraying one’s truth...” Mile began her peculiar incantation. “Left arm of Cobra, left arm of Ayumi-chan. Manifold strength. Manifold muscular power. A bionic wonder...”

The slew of strange keywords dredged the appropriate concepts up from the depths of Mile’s memory, intensifying the image she emitted, which the surrounding nanomachines caught in waves.

And then, beneath the surface of the rock, *it* began to take form...

“What are you all implying now?! There’s nothing you can do now that we’ve decided not to let our guards—”

“Spin, spin, spin spin... Hotter, denser...”

“Slosh, gush, thicker...”

Pauline and Reina continued incanting their strangely phrased, song-like spells, utterly ignoring the elder dragon’s words.

“I see—they’ve lost their senses out of fear and despair. Perhaps it truly would have been kinder to eradicate them instantaneously...”

“That’s probably true. That swordswoman probably no longer has a future in her trade with that lost arm. I’m sure both she and those she left behind would have been happier for her to fight to the end...”

The two dragons prattled presumptuously amongst themselves.

And then, Pauline howled, “What are you rotten lizard bastards runnin’ your mouths about?! You gods forsaken pieces of scum are the ones who are gonna die! *Cap Popper!*”

“You fools, did you not already see with your own eyes that our barriers are impervious to both magical and physical attacks?! Any attack that we can see coming is meaningless. Barrier, expand!”

Both of the dragons erected their magical barriers. A wall created by one of them alone would have been more than enough to deflect any attack, but just for safety's sake, they decided to put up a larger barrier in tandem, one that would be easier for them to move around in. They would show the humans just how futile it was to attack them, and the weakly things would have a choice to make: between an honorable death and surrender.

And then, one casually began to let out a breath attack.

Casual though it may have been, it was not the sort of thing that any normal humans could have done anything about. The dragon took in a shallow breath and then let out an attack aimed toward Pauline. And in that moment...

*Shiiine!*

“Gwah!”

*Ka-shoom!*

Though it had meant to shoot a fireball towards Pauline, a brilliant flash of light glinted in the dragon’s eyes just before it fired, causing its aim to go astray. The breath went off course, skimming past Pauline and striking behind her. Though Mile’s focus was on treating Mavis’s arm, she was still keeping an eye on the other two and had used her light magic to throw up a flashbang to interrupt the dragon’s attack.

Of course, she’d also erected a lattice barrier over Pauline and Reina, protecting them from heat and explosions. But she’d lacked the time to add any of the cool visual effects she would normally have used, so the barrier was completely transparent. In other words, as far as Pauline was concerned, a fireball of dragon breath had just skirted past her at point-blank range while she was wholly unprotected, exploding just behind her.

However, Pauline did not seem to be concerned about this at all. In fact, she ignored it, calmly and completely.

“Zero-Zero Magic No. 2, ‘Destroyer of Dragons’!” she continued, but no solid projectile or eddies of magic appeared. There wasn’t the faintest sliver of magic, the elder dragons thought curiously, when suddenly she came to her conclusion: “*Magical Shot!!!*”

*Ka-shoom ka-shoom ka-shoom!*

“Huh?”

A number of drills, each around 20-30 centimeters in diameter, shot up from the ground... from *within* the barrier, flying toward the dragons. It seemed that, rather than forming the drills midair, she had formed them underground. The dragons, who were unable to easily see the ground beneath their feet on a good day, given the massive size and formation of their bodies, had noticed nothing.

*Shunk shunk shunk!*

Normally, there was no way any earthen spear or seed-shaped warhead could pierce an elder dragon’s scales or hide, but these drills were tapered and rotating viciously at high-speed, equipped with an abnormal degree of projection and magical energy.

“Gwah! H-How...?”

The dragon who had been struck with the drills could hardly believe it, but in truth, there was nothing really surprising about Pauline’s attack.

Magic was enacted by the nanomachines, via reception of thought pulses from the user. Under normal circumstances, most of the nanomachines near the dragons would already have been responding to *their* thoughts, leaving hardly any to respond to the thoughts of a human, whose impulses were magnitudes weaker than a dragon’s and who was standing far away. However, these were not normal circumstance. In fact, they were related to the nanomachines’ earlier explanation to Mile, about why Reina’s magical thought pulse output was so much stronger than the average person’s.

THAT IS WHAT WE REFER TO AS “PASSION.” THAT IS TO SAY—HOW TO PUT IT?—THEIR THOUGHT PULSE IS SO POWERFUL THAT EVEN NANOMACHINES WITH LOW SENSITIVITY WILL REACT TO IT...

Yes. At the moment, Pauline was boiling over with “passion.”

“This isn’t the first time we’ve battled against elder dragons. Did you really think I wouldn’t prepare myself for the next time by finding some way to deal with your magical walls?”

Battling an elder dragon once in their life was more than enough for most humans. If they didn’t perish in the encounter, they’d never go anywhere near an elder dragon ever again... At the very least, you wouldn’t expect to find a human who’d been hoping

and preparing for their *next* encounter with one.

Pauline seemed to have regained her normal manner of speech by now. This did not mean that she was calm. Like Mile, once she crossed a certain threshold of anger, her heart chilled, and her speech became absurdly polite.

From here on out, she no longer considered her opponent to be a living creature but merely a *thing*. A *thing* that needed eradicating. And of course, there was no need to get angry at a *thing*.

“Wh-what are you scheming? Such trifling attacks can do no more than scratch our outer hides. It’s pointless!” the dragon blustered, but its voice wavered slightly, clearly quite discomfited at the fact that such a tiny little rock had been able to pierce its beloved, magically-reinforced scales.

In stern defiance, a faint smile floated across Pauline’s face.

“Hm? I said I’d been devising some countermeasures, didn’t I? Do you really think I’d spend all that time to conjure something *that* simple?”

“Wh-what...?”

“*Explode!*”

“Gaaaaah!!!”

Amidst her incantation, Pauline had inserted the words, “Cap Popper.” Though she could not conjure the sort of fire magic that would be needed to detonate a warhead, Mile had shared with her a different concept with this name, mimicking an exploding cap, with that same detonation.

With her keyword spoken, the points of the earthen spears self-destructed, shattering to release something red that had been crammed inside...

In tandem with Pauline’s attack, Reina unleashed her ire at the enemy as well. “Burn our enemies to the ground... Dragon-Crushing Inferno!”

A mass of flame appeared at her side.

“Fire!”

The ball of fire went flying at high speed in a different direction from Pauline's drills, towards the other dragon.

"Our barriers are even more efficient against magical shots than physical projectiles. They will elimin—"

*Bwomf!* The flame weakened for a moment, its speed slowing as it passed through the barrier, but it still crashed straight through, interrupting whatever the dragon was about to say.

"Guh!" The dragon quickly flicked its tail, hoping to deflect it, but tiny tongues of flame began crawling all over its body. "Hmph! My scales will merely re... pel... Guh! How?!"

The flames that should have been nothing against an elder dragon's magically fortified scales and hide continued to spread. No matter how the dragon thrashed or smacked itself with its limbs, it could not extinguish them. In fact, as it did so, the flames coiled around its arms as well, spreading even further.

"Water Ball!" The dragon summoned a sphere of water and doused itself—to no avail. "Wh-why won't it go out?!?!"

The magic Reina had used operated on a different physical principle from typical flame magic. A famously used weapon on Earth was the napalm bomb, which was comprised of naphtha (a crude gasoline) and a gelling agent added for viscosity. (This gelling agent was composed of the co-precipitate aluminum salts of naphthenic acid and palmitic acid, which, when joined in a portmanteau, were the origins of the name "napalm"). This attack was a fiendish imitation of such oil-based incendiaries, comprised of similar materials that existed in this world, and it resulted in flames that could not be easily removed once applied, and would not be extinguished even with the application of water... In other words, this was not a magical bomb but a chemical one.

"Hmph! Do you really think a combat genius like myself wouldn't prepare countermeasures for an opponent I fought so desperately once before? Don't think so little of us humans!"

"Gah! Gwaaah! Gweeeeh!!!"

"Wah! Hot, hot, hot! It burns! It burns! My scales! My body! It's burning....!!!"

The dragons were trapped in the innermost circle of Hell. This was perhaps the only accurate way to describe this scene. One rolled violently on the ground, trying to extinguish the flames that were searing its body. The other writhed in agony. And the third, all the while, lay on the ground, eyes blank, not even twitching... Their kind were possessed of a strong life energy, so it probably wasn't dead yet.

Reina and Pauline began new incantations, ready to land the coup de grace. Just then, the dragon that had been writhing from Pauline's attack, pushed back the pain and quickly closed in towards the girls, swinging its tail. "Diiiiiiie!!!"

For a moment, Reina and Pauline, who were not skilled in melee combat, froze. The mighty spells that they had been preparing wouldn't finish casting in time, and it was too late to change what they were preparing. They could only stare in awe as the tail swung down towards them.

Until...

### ***Slash!***

The tail fell down in front of them, twitching... and no longer attached to the elder dragon.

"Secret technique, EX True Godspeed Blade, third form: Dragon Guillotine!!"

"Mavis!!" the two shouted, running over to the swordswoman, who was giving a toothy grin.

"Thank goodness! I made it back just in time for the climax..." Mavis muttered, letting a little of her true intentions slip.

"Y-y-your arm! What's with that arm?!" Reina asked. Meanwhile, Pauline had frozen in shock the moment she saw Mavis's left arm.

"With the magic of friendship on one's side, a knight's form is invincible!"

"You dummy," said Reina, with a faint, exasperated smile.

Tears flowed from Pauline's eyes. When she finally opened her mouth, a ruthless

declaration rang out. “Let’s hurry up and land the finishing blow. We can sit around and talk later.”

The dragon who had been in the midst of attacking them was writhing again. Cries of “My tail! My tail!” were mixed with its screams, and while it appeared to be quite preoccupied, there was no telling when it might try to attack again. They would need to eradicate this source of danger immediately.



"Now then, some conclusive magic," said Reina, glancing at Mile, who had followed Mavis out from behind the rocks.

Just then, however...

"Wait! Please just give them a chance to surrender!" Berdetice, who had been watching over the battle from a distance, came rushing in. "The battle's already over! Please, if all three of them admit defeat, allow me the chance to save their lives!"

It was true that there was really no sense in killing the three dragons. Things would only get far, far worse for the Crimson Vow if they incurred the wrath of an entire clan of dragons by killing their kin. Besides, this was probably the exact role that Berdetice had hoped to fulfill in accompanying the other dragons as their guide and not participating in the battle. It was admirable that a greenhorn such as him would weather the ridicule of his colleagues to then plead for the lives of the same allies who had ridiculed him.

Reina looked to the rest of the members of the Crimson Vow, who all gave an affirming nod. "I guess that's that, then. If every last one of you all admits defeat, and promises never to bother us again, then we just might let you all go, yeah?"

"Oh, bless you! Just a minute!" Berdetice rushed over to the writhing, wailing pair, confirming something with them. "One of them is still unconscious, so please forgive him. He might very well have been killed by now, so please consider that his surrender. The rest of us accept your terms, one hundred percent. If anyone takes issue with this, we swear to deal with them ourselves."

Though tears still streamed down their faces, the other two nodded fervently. The Crimson Vow deemed this sufficient. It was unlikely that the first dragon would hear the results of his allies' battle and attempt to fight them again, and really, he was in no shape to do so in the first place. He was, in fact, bad enough off that his condition would become worrisome if he did not receive healing very soon.

"Now then... Remove all foreign entities from this body and eliminate them! Power of recovery, mend this dragon's body and heal its wounds."

After eradicating the capsaicin from the body of Pauline's victim, Mile turned to apply healing to the first dragon, whom they had so thoroughly skewered. If he were left as he was, he would soon be in critical condition, especially considering the way his guts

peeking forth thanks to Mavis's grand slash.

Meanwhile, Reina removed the adhesive incendiary agent from her victim's body with a powerful version of her usual cleaning magic, while Pauline tended to its burns. Much like a cluster bomb, though the agent was split up into many tiny particles, every bit of it was not particularly combustive on its own. Despite all the dragon's writhing, the corrosive agent had not reached its insides, so for all its panic, its life was in no danger now that the flames were extinguished.

Of course, should it have been left to burn, that would have been another story entirely...

At any rate, the dragons should be able to avoid the dangers of both death and any lasting aftereffects... their mental trauma notwithstanding.

"My tail. My tail..."

Apart from the capsaicin hell, the second dragon had not taken any particularly grave injury. Indeed, it was the least injured of the three, but even so, it was babbling dumbly, cradling the stump of its cleanly severed tail.

"What is with that guy?" Reina mumbled, pulling a face as she stared at this dragon.

"Ah, that. Well..." Berdetice explained. "He is still lacking a mate. And our proposals rely on our tails. They play an incredibly important role in our displays of affection, such as entwining one's tail with one's partner, giving them playful nudges and such. For his tail to be like that, well, he..."

The other two dragons hung their heads gravely. Apparently, this was the sort of situation where no words could suffice.

The members of the Crimson Vow were silent. This was awkward. Painfully awkward...

"My tail. My tail. My taaaail..." the dragon continued to mutter hollowly, tears overflowing.

"Oh, jeez! We get it already!" Mile hoisted up the writhing, severed tail and approached the babbling dragon. "I can put this back on for you if you just turn around!"

"Huh?" four dragons said in unison.

Apparently, replacing a lost body part was beyond even the vast capabilities of an elder dragon. Truthfully, it was nothing like healing a cut. Even with Earth's modern medicine, reattaching a severed limb and expecting it to fully recover had been near-impossible as recently as half a century ago. Even with magic at one's disposal, without the requisite anatomical and medical knowledge, it would be difficult to properly visualize the correct steps for regeneration and emit the thought pulses necessary to direct the nanomachines. Thinking "just stick it back on" would mean that the nerves would not be reconnected, and the still-severed blood vessels would atrophy. In short, the results wouldn't be pretty.

The four dragons regarded Mile skeptically, but as they did so, their collective gaze fell on Mavis, standing beside her.

"Wh...?"

All those except the dragon who had been knocked unconscious were sure that they had seen Mavis's left arm bathed in flames. Indeed, they were certain that it had been fully burned away.

They were silent in their disbelief. It was unthinkable. They stared quizzically at Mavis's left arm, eyes wide. The fourth dragon looked on dumbly, unaware of the circumstances or why his brethren looked so perplexed.

Noticing their gaze, Mavis drew her sword with a grin, spinning the blade around with only her left hand in a little display.

The three remained silent, unable to take their eyes off of her.

"P-please!" the dragon finally said to Mile, "Put it back on! I'll do whatever you want! I'll lie down and show you my belly, I'll let you ride me like a horse—as long as you don't ask me to betray my own family, I'll do anything! I'm begging you!!"

If things went south here, he might end up single for life... and a dragon's life was a long, *long* time.

Mile rolled her eyes wearily at the dragon, who was practically prostrating himself in tears before her. The young dragon girl, Shelala, had shown them her belly, but she'd been a child who felt her life was truly in danger. A grown dragon doing so in front of an enemy was another story entirely.

As promised, the dragon held out his tail to Mile, who brought the severed end nearer. First, she had to remove the dirt and disinfect it.

“Clean this segment, remove all foreign bodies, sterilize!”

Then, to attach it...

“Activate cellular regeneration, join the bones, reattach the sinews, mend the nerves, join the blood vessels, rejoin the surface... *Tera Heal!!!*”

“Whoooooaaaaaa!!!”

“Please try not to move yet... There!” Mile poked her finger into a spot just beyond the rejoined portion.

“Ow!” The elder dragon reflexively let out a yelp and then looked surprised, his face twitching. “How could a human’s finger hurt that much?!”

Normally, a human could poke an elder dragon so vigorously that their finger would break, and the dragon would not even notice it. For such a thing to actually *hurt*...

If this little girl were to swing a powerful weapon at the dragon at full force or to actually strike them with all her strength...

“How can your bare hands be so powerful?! And more importantly, how could there possibly be two legendary-level warriors like you, together?!” the dragon screamed.

The one whom Reina had burned tapped him on the shoulder. “More importantly, you felt that pain in your tail, didn’t you?”

“Y-yeah, I did... Uh. Huh? Huuuhhh?!” The dragon was stunned, streams of tears running down his face again. “I felt it... The pain. The sensation. I can feel it!”

Then, he gave his tail a tentative movement.

*Twitch.*

*Twitch twitch.*

“It moves. It moooooves...!”

"I think it should be completely reattached, but just in case, please try not to move it too much for the next two or three days. After that, it should be back to normal."

### ***Ka-fwoosh!***

"Uh-guh... Thank you, O human girl!"

Mile could only look on, befuddled, as the dragon collapsed on his back, arms and legs spread wide...

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The elder dragons thanked the Crimson Vow, swore that they would never trouble them ever again, and took their leave. Of course, this extended only to Berdetice and the other three dragons. They could make neither decisions nor promises on behalf of their entire clan. The Crimson Vow were well aware that the real source of their problems was this new young leader.

As for Wence, the dragon from the encounter at the ruins whom Berdetice referred to as a "youngster," it was unclear if he would abstain as well or if he might be tempted by a rematch... And who knew what Shelala's stance on the matter might be?

Even if the adult dragons were unable to keep their young leader in check, it was unlikely that they would wish to wage all-out war on every humanoid race (dwarves and elves included), by starting something with the humans—and unthinkable that they would convince every dragon in their clan to join in a singular assault against the same. Even the dragons could bring themselves to acknowledge that, sometimes, a hero just rose up to face them. And sometimes, like now, it just so happened that that hero was a good person, someone who was reasonable, someone who spared and even healed the dragons who had unilaterally attacked them.

The elder dragons would never have lost to a normal person, but if their opponent was such an exceptional hero... Viewed in that light, this situation could be wrapped up neatly. Or so the members of the Crimson Vow believed.

"So, Mavis, what's with the arm?"

“What is that?”

There was no helping the cross manner in which Reina and Pauline now questioned Mavis, not after the way she had worried them so.

“O-oh, well...” she started to reply, looking to Mile for assistance.

As usual, it was all a question of Mile’s abilities, though she would most certainly wave this off as another “family secret.” Fellow party members or not, Mavis was unsure how much she should be telling other people.

Picking up on this, Mile launched into her own explanation. “It’s a family secret!”

“Of course,” said the other three.

This time, however, they were not going to let it go so easily. The members of the Crimson Vow were inquisitive sorts by nature, but more importantly, they needed to understand every facet of Mavis’s capabilities for the sake of future battles. If Mavis were to end up in bad shape in the midst of a battle, and her left arm gave out on her, this could be a fatal problem—something that could cost not only Mavis, but perhaps the rest of the party, their lives. Even putting that aside, there was no way that Pauline, who had been certain that both Mavis’s left arm and her future as a knight had been lost because of her, was going to give up until she received an explanation.

“Explain yourself!”

“Tell us what’s going on!”

“I’d kind of like to know more about this thing, too. Like... is there an instruction booklet or anything I should keep in mind?”

Hearing Mavis’s question, Reina and Pauline looked at her arm in surprise. At this rate, an explanation was more or less mandatory, and Mile had intended to offer one in the first place. There would be no getting out of this without giving up some information.

“As you all know, Mavis’s left arm was lost to the elder dragon’s breath attack. The arm she has now is an artificial one. Please consider it to be a golem arm, manufactured to look just like a human one.”

“Huh...?”

Reina and Pauline were stunned, probably having assumed that Mile had managed to recover Mavis's missing limb via healing magic. Previously, their expressions had been mild, almost chiding Mavis and Mile for having made them worry. Now, their faces twitched.

"Th-then that means that Mavis's left arm is..."

"Indeed. She can move it normally, but it isn't a living limb; it's artificial, with no blood flowing through it. It's far beyond the capabilities of most prosthetics, though, so I don't think any problems should arise with it."

This news shook Pauline to her core. She had assumed the limb had been healed back to normal. For a moment, she had been relieved, thinking Mavis had been fixed thanks to Mile's healing magic and that she might be able to put aside her feelings of guilt. However, the truth was that the limb was a false one and that Mavis had in fact lost her arm as she had first feared.

A prosthetic.

Mavis, the hard-working, kindhearted leader of their party, who put in leagues more effort than anyone else in pursuit of knighthood.

Mavis, the daughter of a count, who would likely be married off into some other noble family someday.

She had ruined all of that.

"Uh... uuh... Waaaaah..." Tears streamed down Pauline's face.

*Oh no,* thought Mile. Still, she knew that consoling Pauline right now would just be a waste of time, and so she continued.

"Now then, Mavis, let's get that arm back off of you so that I can apply some magic to restore your lost limb. It is going to take some time to restore it section by section, so it'll be pretty weak for about a month. Things will be a bit inconvenient for you until then, but please bear with me."

"Huh?" came one voice.

"Huhh?" came two more.

“Huuuuhhh???” came all three.

**“You can fix it?!?!”**

“I mean, I did think you could probably do something like that! It’s *you*, after all!” said Reina.

“Me too! I figured if anyone could do something about a lost limb, it would be you, Mile,” Pauline agreed.

“Wow, I really thought that I would only get one of those options when you made me choose!” Mavis laughed wryly.

It was Mile, after all. Everything would be right as rain.

And yet, Mavis continued. “Still, given everything, I think I’m fine with my arm the way it is.”

“Whaaat?!?” the other three chorused. Even Mile joined in with the cries of shock.

“Wh-why?” Mile stammered.

“Could you tell me a bit more about the details of this arm?” Mavis asked, in place of an answer. “Like its abilities, maintenance, what to do when it breaks—anything and everything I should know?”

“O-of course... Well, on the outside, it looks just like a normal arm. I used your right arm as a reference. Though it was constructed out of materials similar to real flesh and bone, it’s sturdier than the real thing and should be more powerful. It doesn’t require any regular maintenance, and when it breaks, it should automatically repair itself via magic. It’s completely waterproof, so you shouldn’t have any trouble with rainy days, or swimming and bathing. And it’s had the same treatment as your sword.”

*The same treatment as her sword.*

The final note of Mile’s explanation was one that only Mavis would understand.

In other words, Mavis’s “spirit” would easily flow through it, and she would be able to

utilize it in “releasing her spirit, via special breathing techniques.” That meant that she would be able to use her Wind Edge, even without her sword... with some practice.

“So it *is* stronger than my original arm. I was wondering about that after I sliced through that dragon. Also, when I was giving that little demonstration, I was pretty sure it moved quicker than my normal arm, more nimbly... Mile, give it to me straight. This arm is better than my original, isn’t it? Way better?”

It was true. This was an arm that the nanomachines had manufactured as a replacement for Mavis’s, at Mile’s direction, so they had really put their all into it... So much so that it was hundreds of times more capable than her original arm. Plus, repairs and maintenance would be handled entirely by exclusively commissioned nanomachines.

“Y-yes. In fact, one could say that, with that arm attached, you could be called the ‘6,000 Gold Woman.’”

Mavis beamed at this.

“I knew it! Please then, since I already have it, let me keep using this arm. I actually feel like this will bring me that much closer to my dreams. You’re okay with that, right, Mile?”

“Uh... Y-yes, well, if you’re okay with that, and you don’t mind, then I don’t mind.” Mile was a bit frazzled, having assumed this arm would be a temporary measure, but it wasn’t as though continued use was going to cause Mavis any inconvenience.

**HOORAY!** The nanomachines contracted to the new arm shouted in joy. Their new term of work, which they had thought would be quite short, had been extended. There was no nanomachine around who would not be thrilled at the idea of having something like this to fill their time—especially when it meant being of use to the girl of level-5 authorization, no matter how indirectly. They reveled at the prospect of working by Mile’s side.

The expressions on Reina and Pauline’s faces, however, were complicated ones.

“Well, I guess that’s fine...” said Reina.

“That is fine... If the arm could... Well, it’d take a month, but... If it could be put back to normal at any time, if Mavis wants...” said Pauline. Suddenly, she gasped at a new

thought. "M-Mavis... you aren't going to purposely get an enemy to blow off your right arm and legs in hopes of a more powerful body, are you?"

For a moment, Mavis made a face that suggested she hadn't even considered this, but then she looked to the other three, who were staring at her in terror, and shook her head emphatically.

"No! Of course not..."

# CHAPTER 79

## THE B-RANK PARTY

There was still plenty of time left for hunting and gathering following the elder dragon encounter, but the members of the Crimson Vow decided to head back to the capital instead.

“I’m so tired.”

Physically, the fight had scarcely taken a toll on Mile, but she was exhausted emotionally. It was the same feeling as those sleepless nights when you want to do nothing but lie in bed, despite not being sleepy at all... though of course once you lie down, you usually do fall asleep.

Either way, the Battle Against the Elder Dragons, Part II had been draining. The fact that they had put in all this effort for no compensation—not even any contribution points—only amplified their sense of fatigue.

“I’m tired.”

“I’m beat.”

“I am exhausted...”

The other three looked just as ragged.

“Ugh, I just want to soak in a nice bath!”

Unfortunately for Mile, unlike “Lenny’s Inn,” most places that a C-rank party could stay would not have their own baths. You could douse yourself with water from the well in the courtyard or wipe yourself down with a towel using the hot water in the basin in your room, but that was it... normally.

For the members of the Crimson Vow, who had cleaning magic to remove the dirt and sweat from their clothes and bodies, bathing was never a matter of dealing with filth or smell. Still, soaking in a warm bath could be good for the spirit, a rest for the body,

and a boon to one's beauty routine. It opened the pores, removing blackheads and other gunk...

Unfortunately, it seemed that the nanomachines regarded blackheads and the like as part of one's body and would not remove them through normal cleansing magic if only the image of removing dirt was provided. Mile, of course, was able to adjust her image, so all the blackheads and excess keratin in her pores was cleanly removed, but the others didn't have the awareness to do so, and Mile hadn't advised them on the matter.

At any rate, today, the four were exhausted and wished to take a bath.

"Should we change inns? We can stay somewhere with a bath tonight..." suggested Pauline.

"C-could we?" asked Mavis in disbelief. It was rare that Pauline would actually suggest a luxury option. She must have been thoroughly drained as well.

"Then it's decided! Tonight, we're staying at an inn with a bath!" Reina swiftly declared before Pauline could change her mind.

Currently, the Crimson Vow were in the practice of checking out of their lodgings every morning and paying nightly. Since they never had a long-term residence in mind, their stays were dependent on their jobs, and thanks to Mile's "storage magic," there was no need for them to stash their luggage anywhere. Thus, despite referring to it as "changing inns," all they were really doing was picking a different place for the night.

"Woohoo!"

Mile jumped for joy, and the four of them rushed off to find their new inn.

As they had returned without bothering to do any more work for the day, the sun was still high in the sky. In fact, it was before noon. The encounter with the elder dragons had occurred very soon after the Crimson Vow had entered the forest, before they had even reached the place where they intended to hunt!

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"I wonder how this place is."

The inn before which Reina now stood was a relatively expensive-looking establishment

on the main street. It was not the sort of place where royalty would stay, of course. Places of that caliber cared very much about their atmosphere, clientele, and the safety of their lodgers, so no matter how much money they were willing to pay, no commoner or hunter would ever be allowed to lodge there. Such things would never be written on the signboard, but if someone outside of the accepted clientele were to come calling, no matter how many rooms were available, they would be told that there was “no vacancy” and shooed away with false courtesy.

Of course, this was the way of things in any world. Even in modern-day Japan you would find many high-class hotels and ryokan that operate the same way.

In any event, the inn before which they stood was not *quite* such a luxury establishment, but it was classy enough that it was sure to have a bath at least. It was the sort of place that, as hunters went, would likely be frequented only by those of B and A-rank.

And what of S-ranks? Well, S-rankers were as good as nobility. They would probably receive even finer treatment than the local barons—both due to status and volatility...

“It says here they have a bath. Let’s go with this place.”

They had stopped to eat during their search, so it was now afternoon—a bit early but late enough that the inn would have already begun taking guests for the night.

“Do you have a room for four available?” Mavis asked at the front desk. She received an affirmative, and the Crimson Vow was quickly checked in.

The staff here seemed well trained. While the four of them appeared to be rookie hunters, no one attempted to chase them off or pulled any strange faces at them. In truth, this was probably only because they were a group of four lovely young girls. Had they been a group of filthy young men or smelly old geezers, they may well have been told, “Apologies. All of our rooms are currently booked.”

Given that this was a high-class inn in the capital, it was lacking the typical young girl one might find standing at the front desk of a small, family-owned business. Instead, the clerk was a young man in his twenties... who caused Mile to give a small, “Tch!” and click her tongue.

“Why don’t we just go lay down for a bit?”

It was still too early to enter the baths, which would not open up until around dusk. Therefore, everyone gave a nod to Reina's proposal, and they entered their room, each lying down on their own beds. They were not ready to change into their sleep clothes, so they just lay right down on top of the covers.

Still, they were all thoroughly fatigued and quickly fell fast asleep.

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“Up, Mile!”

“Mm...”

Mile awoke to Reina gripping her shoulder, shaking her.

“It’s time to eat. If we don’t hurry up and get down to the dining room, the food’s gonna be all gone!”

“*What?!*”

This was quite serious. Mile, whose ration of output to consumption was rather fuel-inefficient, could not afford to miss a meal... Though it was unclear why the same applied to Reina, a mage who was small and lacking in physical strength. It wasn't as though she were a growing girl, either.

“Hold it right there!”

Reina seized Mile as she tried to hurry through the door, stopping her to fix her bedhead. Mile gave a little smile as a faint memory of her younger sister in her previous life drifted into her mind.

Dinner was as little more expensive than usual but also a little tastier.

“Mmm, they must be using slightly better ingredients. And it seems like there are spices in here, too.”

Mile nodded approvingly as she ate her meal. It was not comprised of the sort of ultra-high-class ingredients that would be served to nobility, but it also did not come with such a price tag.

Of course, there was another reason that she was impressed. The food that Mile cooked during their camping trips was far more delicious than the fare from any normal inn or restaurant, and so the Crimson Vow did not have very high expectations of the food that came from those places.

“75 points.”

“72 points.”

“78.”

The other three whispered their quiet evaluations, not wishing to slight or belittle the inn or kitchen staff. Though Pauline’s rating was the harshest and Mavis’s the most generous, they were all generally within the same range.

Incidentally, Mile herself would never assign a point rating to a cooked dish. She was of a different mind on such matters. When it came to things like cooking and the arts, everyone who experienced them would have differing impressions, and as a result, Mile did not feel their quality was something that could be so absolutely quantified. However, she did not bother impressing this upon her friends.

“Well, well! Y’all have pretty refined palates for ladies so young!”

“Huh?”

The girls looked in the direction of this new voice and saw a group of five diners at the table beside them. The group resembled a hunting party, and a bearded man seated among them was smiling in the direction of the Crimson Vow.

“And you are?” inquired Mile.

“Ahh, my bad. I’m just a fellow hunter who happens to be sittin’ nearby. Y’all kind of caught my eye. I was surprised to see such young ladies stayin’ at an inn like this, and when I heard you being so critical of the food here, which I think is pretty good, I couldn’t help but say somethin’. Sorry about that!” said the bearded hunter, laughing. He looked to be somewhere past his 30s. The other four men and women in his party looked on warily.

Hunters who stayed at this inn were usually B-ranks or higher, and the only C-rank parties who stayed at this caliber of inn would be those who had an honored guest

with their group, ones having some special celebration, or perhaps those who wanted to live it up a bit, with some noble or wealthy person serving as their leader. There were, of course, some nobles and wealthy folk who did wish to be proper hunters, but those sorts usually aimed to cover their living expenses out of their on-the-job earnings and would never stay at a pricy place like this unless they had worked their way to a B-rank on the strength of their own talents.

The party at the table beside them was most decidedly not comprised of the sons or daughters of nobles.

It was difficult to tell their jobs at a glance as they appeared to have left their weapons in their room, but judging by their appearances, there were two men who looked to be frontline fighters, one man who was probably a mid or rear guard, and two women who were probably backline fighters. They all appeared to be in their late 20s to mid-30s and made up a very average party with a good balance. Of course, it was not a total impossibility that the beefy-looking men might be mages, while the slim and delicate looking women were actually the swordfighters...

At any rate, all this implied they were not some group of pleasure seekers but rather a truly skilled party. Plus, it did not seem they had made their overtures with any ill intent to poke their noses into the business of an upstart rookie party.

Hunters with real skill had plenty of leeway, and no need to harass or involve themselves with those of lower standing. To do so would imply that the party lacked confidence in themselves, or perhaps, that they were cowards who would be unsettled and made to feel as if they were made a fool of if they didn't kick up a fuss.

"Sorry, this idiot of ours is always starting something. Still, it's not good for newer folks like you to waste your money staying at places like this. Even if the other places don't have baths, or have strange men who bother you, you shouldn't waste your precious party funds..."

"Plus, you rated this food in the 70s, but a meal like this would normally be a huge luxury, wouldn't it?! Besides not saving money, you're never going to be able to bear all those long nights out camping if these are your standards! All that rock-like hard tack, and that flavorless powdered soup, and that unseasoned jerky for weeks on end... Anyway, it's not admirable for novices like you to be overextending yourselves. It's important to live within one's means or at least be aware of your position!"

Two of the party—one of the women who appeared to be a mage, and another man, who was perhaps a swordsman or lancer—chided the Crimson Vow, offering advice in the manner of a helpful veteran assuming they were giving some much-needed guidance. It was almost performative, in service of their own narcissism rather than truly for the sake of these youngsters. Clearly, they liked to think how cool they were to be leading the youth.

Or, well, maybe they really *did* think they were offering this advice for the sake of the Crimson Vow. They probably weren't *that* bad of people... Still, they looked rather full of themselves, which was a bit annoying.

*Rrr...*

Reina was quite bothered. These people had cut into their conversation, smugly patronizing them with advice that was totally off-base. Aside from commenting on her size, calling her "little," or patting her on the head, there was no quicker way to offend Reina than to offer her unsolicited guidance. She couldn't help but grow enraged now.

"Mind your own business!" she shouted.

"Wh...?"

The whole party let out a sound of disbelief. These rookie girls should be thanking these helpful veterans who were offering some useful tips. The party had become used to being treated with respect since their ascension to B-rank and had expected the Crimson Vow to be grateful to them. As such, Reina's reply came as a shock. Meanwhile, Mavis, Pauline, and Mile, who usually took on the role of pacifying Reina and holding her back...

*Grrrrrrr...*

They were thoroughly peeved as well.

They had just returned, exhausted, from knocking on death's door, watching their friend lose an arm, and barely making it out of the encounter alive. And now, just as they were enjoying some fairly decent food and partaking of a bit of light conversation among friends, these people had deigned to cut into their conversation just to puff themselves up and offer some totally unsolicited advice.

Even the soft-hearted Mavis and Mile could not bear this.

And as for Pauline? *Ha ha...*

"Mile, are these those 'elder troubles' you were mentioning?"

Here was a rare display of malice from Mavis. For a party with two women around thirty, it was a particularly stinging blow.

"For hunters, ability and achievement is everything. Belittling someone based on their appearance or how they spend their money is a sign of one who hasn't stopped to gauge another party's true strength. This party hasn't even bothered to think that perhaps someone else might simply be earning plenty of money and spending it accordingly. That's a sure sign of the short-sightedness of those who can only see the world through the haze of their own egos."

Having others judge how they spent their money was apparently something that Pauline could not abide. And as for Mile...

"The only ones who can get away with such foolish advice are children. To be in your twenties, my, my, my, my..."

She couldn't forgive them.

Mile was quick-witted and loved wordplay. If she truly wished to cut someone down, her words would be like a californium bullet fired from an automatic rifle.

Neither luck nor timing was on the side of these hunters.

Normally, Reina would be the only one of the girls who would ever try to exacerbate a situation like this. No matter how annoying these people were, they really did not bear them any particular ill will. At best, they would usually force a smile, bow their heads, and drag Reina away.

Now, however, they were exhausted, in both body and spirit, and while their brief nap had rejuvenated them slightly, this was still a time that was precious to them, a time when they could piece together their splintered psyches with some frivolous conversation with their fellow party members. Surely, no one could have seen this as anything but a normal exchange between friends.

In other words, while these neighboring hunters had thought they were scratching a kitten under the chin, it was in fact not a kitten before them, but a fully-grown dwarf

tiger. Their misfortune was such that they were incurring the tiger's wrath.

It was as unlucky as being bitten by a stray dog. Still, they had been the ones to decide, all on their own, to come up and stick their hands in the dog's face, so they deserved what they got.

The hunters were silent, shocked by this unprecedented response to comments they had offered without malice. The damage seemed especially grave to the two ladies of their party.

At a normal inn, this was the point where an enraged hunter would take leave of their seat, but this was a high-class establishment, and they were all people of experience. The hunters silently withdrew, perhaps having the self-awareness to know that they had over-stepped and wounded the pride of these competitive youngsters.

As far as responses to harsh words from hotheaded rookies went, this was incredibly kind and mature.

Most of the other occupants of the dining room were relatively well-to-do merchants visiting from other towns. The sight of the crestfallen hunters soured the mood for them, so they just kept their heads down and continued eating their meals.

"Oh..."

Now that their tempers had cooled slightly, the members of the Crimson Vow looked around themselves and realized that they had slipped up. They had spat inconsiderate words and made everyone uncomfortable simply because they were in a bad mood, when the others hadn't been trying to pick a fight. To make matters worse, this was a place for dining, where people came to enjoy and relax.

"Our apologies," said the four, downtrodden, but the hunters waved their hands lightly.

"No, we were being insensitive, too. Sorry."

And just like that, the air was cleared, the tension between them drained away.

"Now then, as an apology..." began Mile. As she approached the hunters' table, she drew a number of plates heaped with food from her inventory and placed them on the tabletop.

“Heating magic!”

Thinking it would be suspicious for her to produce the food already warm, she feigned reheating the dishes with magic—though of course her words were only for show, and she was not actually doing anything.

“Storage magic?” asked the first man who had spoken, with an expression of surprise. “If you’ve got storage magic then y’all can carry a lot, so of course you can make a lot... Man, I’m really sorry.”

The two hunters who had chided the Crimson Vow for their extravagance looked particularly apologetic.

It was certainly a faux pas to bring one’s own food into the dining room, but these hunters had already mostly finished their meals, and it was unlikely they would order seconds. Plus, Mile determined, this was only a bit of a sampler plate, so surely the inn staff would be able to overlook it.

In truth, Mile was a bit of a sore loser. Therefore, while she acknowledged that they were somewhat in the wrong, she was going to make sure that they were not made light of again... all while presenting it in the guise of an apology.

First, she showed off her storage magic. She had no intention of hiding it from the guild, so there was no trouble in her showing it off here. This would serve as proof positive that the Crimson Vow was not some destitute party hurting for funds.

Second, she would let them taste her home cooking. This would be proof that the evaluations they had given were not some half-hearted appraisals given by amateurs.

...All in the guise of an apology.

“What’s this ‘heating magic,’ then?” asked one of the women.

“Magic that produces heat to warm up your food,” Mile replied, purposely missing the point. She was not about to explain every little thing when she was in the market for deception.

“Well, I mean, I got that much, but...”

Sensing that Mile was not in the mood for explanations, the woman quit while she was

ahead and took a taste of the food Mile had presented.

“...!!!”

The woman was speechless. Her eyes popped wide, and she moved to take another bite of the same dish, when Mile halted her fork.

“Just a taste, now! If I let you eat your fill, that would be bad for the inn’s business! Plus, everyone else still needs to get a taste, and if you fill yourself up on that, you won’t get to enjoy the rest of it.”

Understanding what Mile was saying, the woman reluctantly released the fork and withdrew her hand.

“Wh-what is this?”

“Fried rock lizard. I process the rock lizard meat and coat it in my special blend of seasonings, then cook it with hot air.”

“M-magical cooking?!” One of the men piped up this time. “I mean, using your magic to light the kindling in the hearth is one thing, but to cook continuously with magic? There’s no mage who would expend such a ridiculous amount of magical energy on something like... that... Or maybe there’s one right here?”

The man deflated as he spoke. Listlessly, he lifted the fork to his mouth and closed his lips around it.

“Wh? Uh... uhh? What the heck is this?!?!”

Suddenly, he was filled with vigor again.

“It’s so warm, and crunchy, and juicy! It’s not sopping with oil, or clumped together, or burnt and hard, and there’s just a hint of spice from the seasonings... What is this? What the hell *is* this?! If this is what you all usually eat, I can see just how you’d rate the food here in the 70s!”

*All right, thought Mile. Mission complete!*

She was chuffed at having accomplished her goal.

“Please try out the other dishes as well.”

At this, the hunters reached out for the food on the other plates.

“Wha...?”

“Th-this is...”

“Amazing!”

One after the other came the mutters of praise and wonder.

*Mm-hmm, that's right, that's right!*

Mile was so proud of herself that she was practically huffing steam from her nose, while the other three members of the Crimson Vow looked on wearily. That was when Mile suddenly realized something.

“Wah!”

While she wasn't paying attention, the others in the room had stood from their seats and were now crowded around Mile and the hunters.

“Wh-what's going...?”

As she faltered, a member of the crowd spoke.

“Pardon me, young lady, but could the rest of us get a taste, too? We'll pay, of course!”

The others all nodded.

“N-no! If this starts getting out of hand, it'll be rude to the inn staff...” Mile was midsentence when there came a voice from behind the crowd.

“Everyone here has already ordered meals from us, so we don't mind... That is, as long as you'll let *us* try it as well.”

The voice belonged to a person who was clearly one of the chefs. And judging by what they were saying, they were probably the person in charge here—the head chef, in other words.

She couldn't refuse them, but if her food were to be criticized, she would be terribly unhappy. There was no escape...

"Er... W-well, in exchange for not penalizing us for bringing in our own food, the kitchen staff can try it for free. It will also be free for everyone else, as an apology for all the fuss we caused earlier and as a repayment for the trouble. As far as the spices and ingredients that I've used, I have some I can share later—though, of course, I'll have to charge you!"

Indeed, Mile had no interest in making anyone pay for samples. This was not game that they had hunted or things that they intended to resell. As long as Mile was told that her cooking was delicious, and she could see her food being enjoyed by others, that was enough for her.

However, she was terrified of Pauline, which was why she had at least thrown in that little sales pitch at the end of her speech.

Thinking that what she had put out on the table might now be too little for these additional numbers, Mile produced some extra portions. In their down time, she had made a large supply of the dishes in preparation for times when they were on the road and hadn't the time to cook, so her magical larder was fully stocked. All in her inventory, where it stayed perfectly fresh, of course.

"Wh...?"

The diners were all lost for words at the sight of these additional portions. They had already seen previously that Mile possessed storage magic, so it should not have been all that surprising that she had more tucked away in addition to the small amounts she had already produced.

However, what they had not noticed previously, when they had not been paying as much attention, was that the food had been pulled out fully prepared, atop the plates, somehow without spilling everywhere. Additionally, Mile had forgotten this time to apply the cursory "heating magic" incantation, so they had seen firsthand that the food had somehow come right out of storage, fully warmed.

The other members of the Crimson Vow saw this and let out a small sound of realization, but Mile herself still seemed not to have noticed her mistake. Regardless, this was not the time for the others to be pointing this out. On the contrary, that would

only draw more attention to the facts of the matter. And so, they let it go, while the diners, who had various feelings on the matter, all scrutinized the dishes carefully without saying a word. After all, these were guests of a high-class establishment. In a cheaper sort of place, the dining hall might have exploded into chaos at less.

Naturally, the diners were all dying to try the food that a group of B-rank hunters, regulars of this inn, had given such high praise. However, they were not typically the sort to stand up in the middle of a meal and go craning their necks over someone else's table. These people were not kin to the back-alley bazaar merchant or the traveling peddler. So why would they now be acting in a way that would normally be such a faux pas?

Naturally, it was because they had caught a whiff of money.

They might have been grand, wealthy merchants, high in status and reputation—they might have been the sort who rubbed elbows with nobles and celebrities—but if there was money at stake, a little faux pas or clownish behavior was nothing, so long as they never lost sight of their goal.

This was the way of any shrewd merchant.

“These spices aren’t from around here, are they?”

“This cooking technique is unusual, too. Is this a foreign cooking style?”

“Th-this is...”

Pushing the hunters aside, the other guests took their turns sampling the food. It would appear that, aside from the high-ranking hunters, the majority of them were merchants.

Local residents were unlikely to stay at an inn, and those who had come to the capital on business would typically stay somewhere cheaper. No one would rack up unnecessary expenses on frivolous luxuries when they were aiming to make money. Thus, these had to be fairly successful merchants who had traveled in from other towns for the sake of long-term negotiations, who were not hurting for funds, and who favored security and amenities over scrimping on pocket change. They would consider staying at a luxury inn a part of their job, and thus a necessary expense, in the name of protecting their status and reputation.

“Hm? This dish...”

“Oh, that’s deer intestines, simmered in spices and a seasoning called ‘soy.’”

“It’s good. It’s definitely good. But to use this much of such pricey ingredients on something like innards...”

The man, who appeared to be a merchant, was clearly stunned.

“Ah,” Mile explained, “the spices I used for that are not expensive. They just contribute heat, no flavor or depth. So, you have to mix them up with a lot of other things, which takes some intensive labor... On the other hand, it is fairly economical...”

### ***Glint!***

“Eek!”

All four members of the Crimson Vow, Pauline included, let out a little shriek at the merchants’ sudden stares. Theirs were the sorts of cutting glares that gave rise to the phrase, “If looks could kill.”

Mile seemed not to have figured out what exactly it was she had just said to so disturb the merchants. Even though it was Mile herself who had first cautioned them when extracting the capsaicin from Pauline’s hot magic...

Indeed, in her own pride at her cooking being well received not just by her own party members, but by high-ranking hunters and well-to-do merchants who were accustomed to eating delicious things, Mile had forgotten herself and let her guard down entirely. No matter how bright she had been in her previous life, her smarts only showed themselves in her studies. Where Mile lacked awareness was when it came to dealing with other people or gauging their emotions. For her, this was only natural slip-up to make.

“How much would you take for your entire inventory?” asked the merchants together, instantly glaring at one another with a fiendish glint in their eyes.

“I-I’m scared!”

"Please go away."

Reina and Mavis drew back. Pauline, of course, did not say a word, but her face began to pale. Even she lacked the emotional capacity for a bloodthirsty negotiation between shrewd, experienced merchants.

"Ah, well, you'll have to discuss the details with Miss Pauline later," said Mile, calmly throwing Pauline under the bus without the slightest hesitation. Again, given that it was Mile, this was not surprising at all...

"I mean, man, it was really nice to get to eat something so tasty," said one of the hunters—the first man who had spoken to the Crimson Vow, who seemed to be the party leader and had clearly picked up on the worsening situation. "Tomorrow, we're going out on a job that we might not come back alive from. With tasty food like that, I can't think of any better last meal, if that's what it ends up being. It was truly satisfying. Thank you, little ladies."

"Huh?"

Unless there was a war on, or some stampede of monsters, most high-ranking hunters never took on jobs that they "might not come back from." On jobs like that, you were relying on luck for your very survival. Even if it was a direct request from an employer, one could simply refuse.

"Wh-why...?" Reina asked the only natural question.

"Ah, well, we got a direct request that we couldn't really refuse. All the A-rank or higher parties are out, and the other B-rank parties seemed to have picked up on the danger of this one and haven't shown their faces at the guild. Apparently, we've got some kind of emergency situation on our hands, and if it goes south, it could mean the ruin of all the towns and villages around here, the capital included—maybe even the entire kingdom. When a B-rank party gets asked to help with something like that, you just can't refuse, can ya? We're staking our reputation, our conviction... and our lives on this!"

They understood.

The members of the Crimson Vow said nothing, but they understood.

The rest of the members of the other party smiled calmly, continuing to sample from

Mile's plates.

More than likely, this job had been a direct request from the guild itself. The party might have simply popped into the guildhall, unaware of the current circumstances, and gotten the job foisted on them. If they had any inclination to refuse it, they could have. But when it was a matter of pride and conviction, there was no refusing.

They knew that this was a “red mark” job. Such were the responsibilities of a hunter, particularly a high-ranking one.

Reina quickly glanced to the other three. One by one, they nodded... and it was decided. Though they came from different places and different walks of life, all four of them loved an adventure.

“Just what kind of job is it?” asked Reina. Her tone did not quite befit their difference in rank, but there was no malice to it—none whatsoever.

“Well, the rumor’s gettin’ around pretty quick, so I guess there’s no point in keeping it a secret... It’s elder dragons. This morning, four elder dragons were spotted flying in the nearby forest and the vicinity. They were spotted by a large number of people, amongst which there were quite a few who were able to give concrete details. Apparently, they were definitely elder dragons—no mistaking them for some giant birds or wyverns.

“Spotting even just one of them around a nearby mountain would be a big deal, but there were four of them—four! Near the capital, no less! If we mess this up, they might not just stop with our land. So we need to figure out how to contact them somehow, have a quiet conversation with them, and safely resolve—no, damn it! There’s no way we’d be that lucky!”

Apparently even this man could not believe his own words. He collapsed onto the table, his head in his hands.

“Ah...”

Seeing this, the members of the Crimson Vow suddenly felt quite awkward. They couldn’t bear to sit by and let this party go out, wasting days and days in search of the elder dragons. To let them do so in grim spirits, prepared for death at any moment, would be far too cruel. Thus, after another shared glance, they all came to an agreement, and Mile began to speak.

"Ah, well, they're already gone."

"Huh?" asked the hunters.

"Those four elder dragons? They've already finished what they came here to do, and they've gone back to their village. Apparently, they just had a bit of an errand here and won't be coming back again. We happened to come across them in the forest, and they told us."

*"Whaaat?!?!"*

Many eyes stared at Mile dubiously. Of course, it was unsurprising that the others listening wouldn't believe her. So she produced something from her inventory, an item she had retrieved from the battlefield after the elder dragons had gone home.

"Here's the proof. Elder dragon scales and some meat."

This time there was a cry of shock from not only the hunters but everyone else in the room—diners and staff alike. The cry could probably be heard from all the way outside of the inn.

***"M-m-m-m-meat and scales from an elder dragon?!?!?!"***

"Wait, hang on! Just what kind of encounter was this that an elder dragon would be shedding meat and scales?! That's a really big deal, isn't it?! Did a demon king show up and face down some elder dragon soldiers to the death?!"

It was just like the leader of a B-rank party that he would be more concerned with these questions than with the valuable items before him.

Yet of course, the members of the Crimson Vow could not simply tell them the whole truth.

"Umm, well... they were just having a friendly spar amongst themselves after they were done with their errand!" offered Mile.

The party leader, however, was not satisfied with this explanation.

"How would an elder dragon's scale end up ripped off and half-burned in a 'friendly spar'?! It's not like you've just got one or two scales in good condition there! And

what's with that messed-up hunk of meat?!?!"

One scale had been scratched off by the dragon who had been attempting to extinguish Reina's flames. Another had flown off when Mavis's sword had slashed the other dragon. And one more, along with the flesh, had been shaved away with Pauline's drill attack. This was by no means the result of a "friendly spar."

The Crimson Vow were silent and then spoke as one. "*It was a friendly spar.*"

Silence fell across the room.

There was only one way to unravel this hopeless situation, Mile thought to herself. If you wanted to eliminate the source of a ruckus, you needed to cause an even bigger ruckus...

And so, Mile ripped open a hole in space-time.

"I wonder if we could sell these?" she said.

It was like the gates of Hell had opened on Earth...

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"Ugh, I am beat..." sighed Mile.

"And whose fault is that?!" Reina screamed.

In the moments immediately following Mile's words earlier, they had been overrun with business propositions, which were then followed by a war among the merchants themselves, which eventually spiraled into quite the brouhaha. If one could get one's hands on an elder dragon scale in good condition and forge it into armor to be presented to the king himself, it would immediately put one's shop on the map. Business would boom, and there would be not a single royal or noble who did not know your name...

"Couldn't we have just taken that back?"

"Obviously not!"

The Crimson Vow were in the changing room—of the baths, of course. They had gone to all the trouble of picking an inn with a bath, and even though they had ended up in—or maybe caused... Well, either way, there had been a big mess, but it would be criminal after all that not to make full use of the amenities at hand.

Reina and Mile rushed to rip their clothes off, leaving Mavis and Pauline to leisurely remove their gear and change into their lounging outfits. Still, this did not buy them a lot of time. The other two would be along shortly. However, when the pair of them entered the baths...

“Oh, it’s you all!”

There were others already present.

In both the hunting and mercantile circles, the numbers of women were relatively few compared to the men. Thus, the baths intended for women were fairly small, though still spacious enough to fit at least seven or eight bathers at once. Presently, the two women from the other hunting party were in the bath.

Both sides had already apologized for their prior rudeness, and the Crimson Vow had provided the other party with intel so they did not go off wasting their time. At this point, things *should* have been good between them... Again, *should* have.

And yet...

They couldn’t help it. They truly couldn’t, not when they were faced with *that* head-on, right in front of them.

Reina and Mile were silent, hanging their heads peevishly. Given that all present were women, of course, the other two could easily guess the reason for this behavior. They averted their gazes, a bit awkwardly, before one said, “W-well, you know, you two are still growing girls, so you’ll soon...”

“*I’m sixteen years old!*” Reina shouted.

“Our apologies,” both replied, and all fell silent.

Time ticked on, awkwardly and wordlessly, until...

“Reina, Mile, you two don’t need to rush so much!”

Mavis and Pauline had arrived. At which time, a certain item became obvious. Or two items. This time it was the older pair who, after ogling Pauline momentarily, hung their heads.

Here was Pauline, clearly no more than fifteen or sixteen, just barely an adult. And then, here were the both of them, surely around thirty years old.

Everyone in the room went quiet, including Mavis and the rather discomfited Pauline, as a heavy air fell over the bathing chamber...



Previously, in the dining room, there had been quite the commotion, between the hunters clamoring to get more information about the elder dragons and the merchants hoping to purchase their salvaged spoils.

The hunters were all right with hanging back. The Crimson Vow were by no means a rival party, and it seemed that the job they had taken on—grimly resolving to prepare themselves for failure, and at worst, total annihilation—was now rendered moot. As a result, they didn't mind being made to wait a little while... Still, it was not as though they intended to cancel the job. They had already accepted it, and this new information they had acquired about the elder dragons was information they obtained themselves during the course of their efforts. Now, all they had to do was go into the forest to look for proof to verify the Crimson Vow's information. If they were lucky, they might even bring back a leftover scale fragment. Combined with their pay for finishing the job, this would be a decent—or rather, a pretty good—harvest for them.

They would be able to get more details about the location from the Crimson Vow later. The mountains were a little far, but there was no chance of anyone getting there before them.

The real problem here was for the merchants.

Enemies. Enemies. *Enemies*.

They were surrounded by enemies, every one of them. There were countless enemies, and only one tantalizing treasure.

A wyvern or an earth dragon was one thing, but there was almost no chance of them ever even encountering an elder dragon. And if they were to encounter one, fighting them would be out of the question. They could speak human tongues, and they were far more intelligent than humans, with tough, massive bodies, magic beyond human imagining, and powerful streams of dragon's breath. Plus, to even lay a hand on an elder dragon would mean incurring the wrath of an entire clan of them, which would spell ruin for their country. Humans would need an apology and explanation from the elder dragons to all of humanity, yet how could any explanation be given, when all the lands had already been razed?

Of course, now and then, when something was the fault of an elder dragon, they would just ignore the whole thing—or on rare occasions, even offer one of their scales as a sign of their apology. However, such things happened only once every few decades, or

even centuries—so rarely that such tales may as well have been apocryphal.

And yet here they were: an elder dragon's scales.

Once picked from a dragon's body, they lost all magical potential, their strength gone with it. However, they were still sturdy and lightweight. Most importantly, there was value in their prestige and rarity. Thus, the scales themselves, or armor made with them, carried an absurd cost.

Under such circumstances, it would not be surprising if these merchants were to come to blows, but they were not common street vendors. They were upper-crust, shrewd businesspeople and would never fight one another in such a ridiculous manner.

“.....”

The room was silent, as the merchants all glared wordlessly at one another, while the Crimson Vow and the B-rank party quietly left them behind.

“Could you come up to our room later? We'd like to get a few more details from you about that location. We need to at least be able to give the guild a reasonable explanation. We can offer you a reward, of course, and plenty of drinks and snacks while we're chatting as well,” said one of the women, just as they were all thinking of leaving the baths.

“Don't worry about the money. We'll take the snacks and some fruit juice, though,” Reina replied. She was not concerned about earning pocket change over something so small, and Pauline did not appear interested in interjecting either. Apparently, she wasn't so much of a miser when it wasn't a matter of their jobs or the goods they sold.

After having a brief chat in the hunters' room, the members of the Crimson Vow returned to their chambers to find...

“Guh!”

...throngs of merchants, waiting outside the door for them.

“Let's move to a different inn tomorrow.”

“I guess it really *isn't* good to stay somewhere outside our usual budget.”

“Cheap places really do suit us better.”

Though they had gone to some trouble to find this inn, having slightly better food and being able to take a bit of a soak wasn’t really worth it in the end.

Still, the party wasn’t ready to sleep quite yet.

“*Miiile...*” came three lilting voices.

“I-I’m sorryyy!”

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The next morning, the B-rank party finished their breakfast and then set out. Naturally, they were headed to the forest in pursuit of their assigned duties. After that, they would head for the mountains to the location the members of the Crimson Vow had described.

No matter how much information they had received from the younger hunters, just sharing that same report would not be enough to fulfill their job requirements. They had to at least go to the mentioned location and fully ascertain that the elder dragons were completely out of the picture.

However, there was a big difference between not knowing anything and having enough information to go out with an accurate knowledge of the place where the elder dragons had been “sparring.” The difference between learning exactly the thing that they intended to and aimlessly wandering around the forest was like the difference between heaven and earth. They already knew what they were going to report and were just going out now to confirm it, so the success of their job was as good as promised.

Plus, considering what the Crimson Vow had told them, there was a chance that, if all went well, there might still be some shards of elder dragon scales lying around at the site. The chance wasn’t even a small one. No matter how tiny a fragment they might find, they could expect it to fetch a pretty high price. It was an elder dragon scale after all—an *elder dragon scale!*

Naturally, the merchants had thought the same thing and had asked the Crimson Vow for details of the location. However, they had refused to describe it to them, saying that the merchants would only disrupt the site, and cause trouble for the ones who had

been assigned to investigate. For this, the hunters were deeply thankful.

Yet after the older hunters departed, a predictable scene unfolded at the inn.

“So, about our discussion last night...”

The members of the Crimson Vow found themselves surrounded by merchants.

“Ah yes, of course...”

With the permission of the kitchen staff, Mile set up shop in the dining room once breakfast concluded.

“Now, as we said last night, it’s one per person of the fractured and the burned ones. The complete one, and the nearly complete ones, are off-limits!”

“*Gngh...*”

Though all the merchants grumbled with disappointment and regret at all the fuss they had caused the night before, they could not expect an elder dragon’s scale to be handed over unconditionally. On the contrary, that was the sort of behavior that might cause the price to jump.

Thus, to make up for Mile’s careless words—and after receiving a promise that no one would speak of this incident henceforth—the Crimson Vow had agreed to sell one each of the splintered and burned scales—in other words, the damaged goods, which were as good as garbage to the Crimson Vow but *were* still elder dragon scales. They were not common items, nor would they be fetching a common price.

Even if just one scale would not be sufficient to craft a buckler or any such item, there were still myriad applications—as an armguard, part of a breastplate, as a lightweight concealed knife, and so forth. Plus, armor aside, they could be useful in charms and ritual tools. In truth, an elder dragon’s scale was more valuable in terms of prestige than practical use.

The Crimson Vow, of course, were not going to hand over the few precious perfect specimens they had. They would never sell such items to merchants of this caliber or even to the guild. If they held onto them and had the chance to hawk them directly to some high-ranking noble, they could expect literally another “0” or two on the price they could fetch.

There was no limit to how much someone might pay for such an item if they wanted it badly enough. That was the sort of goods these were.

Plus, though they had kept this a secret from Mavis, the other three members of the Crimson Vow had agreed to hold on to the most beautiful of all the scales. It would be a gift to be handed over to Mavis on the day that she finally became a knight, or if the day ever came that she returned home to be married.

Even with her new left arm, Mavis did not have the strength of a fully-grown, well-trained man. Thus, though she wielded a blade colloquially known as a “hand-and-a-half” sword, which could be used either one or two-handed, she typically wielded it two-handed and was unable to use a shield. However, the day might come when a shield was a necessity for her, and wielding a shield made with an elder dragon scale would be huge boost for her image. Even just having the scale should be useful to her. Such was the conclusion that the three had come to together.

Had the artificial limb been on her right arm, then she would easily be able to grip the sword in her right hand alone, equipping a small buckler on her left arm, but there was no point in talking hypotheticals, and it was a bit late for her to start trying to wield a sword left-handed.

*I'm sure if I contacted that one dragon and asked him to pick off a few scales, he would do it. It probably doesn't hurt that much to just pick them off with your claws...*

Mile truly was a rather terrible creature.

After each of their customers picked out their one scale, shelling out the money that they kept on hand for just such a once-in-a-lifetime chance, the merchants left the inn as well. They all seemed to be in a bit of a hurry, likely ready to wrap up whatever business they had come to the capital for in the first place.

“I’m betting they’re all running off somewhere to get more cash, so they can camp out and wait for those hunters to get back. They probably want to buy the rest of the scales off of them, once they gather them up. I’m sure that party won’t be selling anything until they’ve gotten them back to the guild as proof, but after that, they should be able to market them as regular goods, so my guess is the merchants will try to negotiate and lock in a price before they’ve made their report. If it’s found out post-report that they have those scales, the merchants will find themselves with even more rivals.

"That said, those guys are veteran B-rank hunters," Pauline mused. "I'm sure they know that the more merchants are interested, the higher a price they can fetch, so I doubt they'll go along with that..."

She was right, of course. The Crimson Vow was not hurting for money, and even those damaged goods fetched them a fair bit. Plus, given all the commotion of the previous night, selling off the scales was worth it to keep the merchants quiet, earn a bit of favor, and make their amends. By getting an exorbitant profit from them for only a tiny damaged sliver...

Hunters without such intentions, in different circumstances, would charge even higher prices.

"That's none of our business. Best of luck to those merchants," said Reina. On that matter, that was that.

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"Um, for the new requests, let's see..."

The members of the Crimson Vow stood before the job board in the guildhall. There were no other hunters currently present, but this was not surprising.

"Guess we *were* a bit late," said Mile.

In fact, it was already well past the second morning bell. The only parties who were not already out on jobs at this hour were mostly those who had appointments to meet with clients or dawdling sloths. New jobs were posted at the first morning bell, so obviously nothing good would be left by this point.

Given how exhausted the party had been the day before, they had not gotten any hunting work done... though they had still made quite the haul on the spices and the damaged scales.

Yet even so, it felt awkward to take off another day in a row, which meant that, though they were already massively late, they thought they should at least pop in at the guild. Even if there were no good jobs, they could just take some standing requests and or do some gathering. So they thought, as they stared, a bit dazed, at the request board...

"Huh?"

In spite of the late hour, they noticed that a new job had just been posted up by the guild employees. Naturally, their eyes were drawn to it immediately. Other hunters came crowding around as well to see what was going on.

**“Earth Dragon Extermination: Requested A.S.A.P. 20 gold. Hunted parts may be sold.”**

“Whoa!” the four members of the Crimson Vow shouted.

An earth dragon. They were nothing compared to elder dragons, but still, they were dragons. A twenty-gold reward regardless of the number of hunters was fairly low for such a rare target, but considering what the hunted spoils could be sold for, it wasn’t a bad rate. The principle was the same as in those countries where those in the service industry were paid little but could more than make up for it in tips. Diners in Japan would never put up with being asked to pay employees’ salaries, but unlike the Japanese people, earth dragons would not complain about this, so it was fine.

At any rate, this was the sort of job that would normally be taken by four to five parties together, which meant pay of around one gold for each individual, plus sales profits. All in all, it was decent, or in fact, pretty good. And if the Crimson Vow were to take the job all on their own...

Suddenly, the girls noticed several hunters and guild staff chattering around them.

“You don’t see earth dragons very often. Wonder if it only came out now because of those elder dragons.”

“Probably. The timing is way too good to be a coincidence.”

“And here we thought we had enough of a problem on our hands with just the elder dragons... Damn it! Everyone but those B-ranks, Tomorrow’s Glory, who took that investigation job, has been too chicken to show their faces around here. Buncha cowards.”

Apparently, the local B-rank parties, usually a prideful bunch, had not been into the guild for fear of being stopped by the guild staff and roped into a direct request to investigate the elder dragons. They could, of course, refuse such a request, but under the circumstances, it would mean a blow to their general reputation and pride. As such, they had probably intentionally avoided coming in. The hunters that the Crimson Vow had met the day before were the only exception.

The veteran C-rank parties present could only complain about the absent B-rankers, for they would have no more interest in taking on a job better suited for higher-ranking parties. The guild, likewise, would never be so reckless to directly request that a C-rank party go out hunting earth dragons.

“Hmm...”

Mile looked at the location written on the job slip and then looked at the map to confirm—though to call such a crude caricature a “map” would make Mercator roll over in his grave. In any event, the drawing indicated a completely different location from the forest they had previously visited.

“Do you think maybe the elder dragons were on standby out there? They had no way of knowing which way we’d go when we left the capital until the beastmen sent up their signal, so they were probably waiting for us in the wrong spot,” Reina mused.

“Ah, that’s true,” Mile agreed.

In fact, this seemed to fit with the direction the elder dragons had come flying in from.

“So then, should we do it?” asked Reina.

“Yeah!”

“There is no way that you all will be taking this job,” declared the clerk, when the members of the Crimson Vow approached to inquire.

“Huh? Why not? The posting didn’t specify any ranks,” Reina replied.

It was true enough that the job had listed no such requirement. It was a case of, *There are no restrictions on rank here, so if you’ve got the guts, take the job. You may or may not get yourselves killed, but that’s entirely on you.* Thus, it was a job that even the Crimson Vow, at a C-rank, should have been able to take. And yet...

“This is a job for several parties to take on together—like, maybe three B-rank parties and one veteran C-rank party... We’re not expecting a single novice C-rank party to take it on alone, so you can’t just claim it for yourselves!”

It was rare to see a clerk of the Hunters’ Guild, someone expected to be calm and

collected, in such a rage.

If one were judging by the age range of the Crimson Vow, it would make sense to assume they weren't especially skilled. The fact that they were only C-ranks was reason enough to doubt them.

Reina's temper was rapidly souring, and Mile's face cramped as she heard the time bomb starting to tick down, when there was a voice from behind.

"What if we took on the job with them?"

The members of the Crimson Vow turned around to see a familiar face before them.

"Mister Gren!" three of them cried.

"Who?" asked Mile.

Just as in her previous life, she was terrible at recalling faces.

"We're the Roaring Mithrils, A-rank. Could these girls take the job if we take it with 'em?"

"Y-yes, of course!"

The clerk seemed quite relieved. It wasn't as though she would have any qualms about refusing the Crimson Vow; any clerk of the Hunters' Guild was used to going head-to-head with stubborn newbies. What had so relieved her was the appearance of these saviors, an unexpected A-rank party, when all the cowardly B-rank parties had abandoned them in this time when the capital was on the cusp of crisis. All these dragons one after another were sure to cost the guild its name and reputation otherwise.

They were an A-rank party of six members. Even if they did not fully eliminate the earth dragon, it was highly possible they would beat it back, particularly when combined with two or three C-rank parties as backup. If the dragon had simply been roused from its dwelling by the elder dragons' appearance, all they had to do was drive it back, and the danger would be eliminated. Furthermore, if they could minimize the damage of this dual dragon appearance, not only would the guild reputation not be besmirched, it would in fact be bolstered immensely. Given all this, the clerk's relief

was only natural.

"They didn't retract your A-rank after you all lost to us?" Reina asked.

Gren grimaced.

"No. Remember, we were basically fighting with a handicap. It was a kind of scripted battle, where we tried to put on a show while avoiding hurting the students. We had to draw out everyone's full potential, while still overwhelming them with our difference in power so that no one got carried away. It's just that one of the two sides didn't know they were acting. When it came to you all, though..."

At this, Gren glared at his companions. The two mages and the young swordsman hung their heads in shame. They had been wounded, nearly killed, and ultimately defeated. No matter how much of a handicap they had imposed upon themselves, for a nearly A-rank party, this was shameful.

"Oh, don't *you* act so high and mighty either, Gren! Didn't that little lady *let* you win?! And you lost right away to the one after her..." said a middle-aged mage, one of the two party members who had not fought during the graduation exam.

"Er..." Gren was momentarily lost for words. "W-well, that was all part of the spectacle. I'm sure that all the onlookers assumed that this was just a special favor for some promising young rookies who'd been working even harder than expected. No one could have thought that I *actually* lost..."

Perhaps disheartened by his own words, Gren let his shoulders slump.

"Anyway, all that said, a little while after that, we made it to A-rank. Then, we set out to settle some scores—to reflect on what you all put us through, get back up to snuff, and train ourselves a bit."

The sort of pilgrimage he was referring to, this "settling of scores," was not about revenge or anything as dark as it sounded. It was, as the phrasing suggested, more about settling one's debts. Parties took these journeys for the sake of sharing news and giving thanks to those who had helped them along the way when they had taken their initial journeys as rookies. They visited people they had gotten to know, who would wish to know about their successful rise to A-rank. Naturally, along the way, there were opportunities to further train one's selves as well, just like the first time around.

Unlike the first time, however, these later journeys would be focused on jobs with high levels of difficulty and not enough pay, in small towns and regions that were shorthanded and had only local hunters around. An A-rank party would not be hurting for money, and as they were on a journey of giving thanks, they weren't exactly taking their earnings into account... Though of course these were special services they provided, limited to this journey alone. As such, they were a welcome sight wherever they went.

However, there were relatively few parties who were ever able to go on journeys such as these, especially when compared with the number who undertook an initial training journey. Most hunters would retire from injury, sickness, or old age before they reached A-rank... assuming they made it out of the job alive at all.

Though wait—what about S-rank? Wasn't that as high as a hunter could go?

There were so few S-ranks in existence they might as well have been a myth. In practice, the highest rank that any hunter would hope to achieve was an A-rank.

"Well, it sounds like as long as we take the job with you all, we'll get to do it."

Apparently even Reina could muster a little politeness in front of such veterans as these.

"Y-yes, as long as you accept it along with us, an A-rank party, and we give the go-ahead..."

"That's fine."

And with a word from Gren, the dragon-hunting job was underway.

Of course, though the job was labeled as an extermination, it would be just as acceptable for them to simply chase the dragon away. Still, it was important to note that doing so would mean no extra income from selling the parts, in which case, the payment of twenty gold wouldn't really be enough. Given that the twenty gold was not per person, but the total payment for the job, once you divided it between several parties and factored in the cost of broken equipment, injuries, and other negative factors, it would be far safer and more profitable to go out hunting orcs on country roads. Thus, the pay for this job was really in the extermination part, with the twenty gold really just serving as a consolation prize should the dragon happen to get away, or perhaps, as a thanks for their general efforts.

"Now then, let's gather up two or three more parties. I'm sure some of our veteran C-rank parties would be happy to travel along with A-rankers!"

Indeed, the earnings on this job were sure to be good, and with an A-rank party at the spearhead, and the rest just serving as their supports, it would not be at all surprising for C-rank parties with skill and experience to be champing at the bit to join in. In fact, a number of parties who had been eating or killing time at the nearby tables stood up. This was a lazy time of day, so these were not hunters who were wolfing down their meals, but those who had a little bit of time... In other words, in terms of C-rank hunters, these were people who had confidence in their skills. Surely, they would all wish to get an earth-dragon-hunting credit on their resume to raise their reputations. However...

"Don't need 'em," Gren curtly replied.

"Wha...?" The clerk was dumbfounded.

"Us and these little ladies'll be enough. We don't need anyone gettin' under our feet. The more folks we gotta watch out for, the less effective we're gonna be."

"Uh..."

The clerk could only gape wordlessly. The other hunters, however, were not so easily dealt with.

"Oi, that ain't right! Sure, we ain't gonna try and say you A-rank guys aren't strong enough or sit around and fuss about it. You guys clawed your way up to the top, to A-rank, so us sayin' anything at all is about as good as howling like dogs. But no *way* you're gonna say we're less useful than a buncha little girls!" shouted one of the assembled hunters.

The six Roaring Mithrils grimaced, and Gren spoke. "You all never had any intention of joinin' on before we offered to take the job. Even those these 'little girls' were about to sign up to hunt this dragon all on their own... Honestly, we're just ridin' these girls' coattails here. We know they were tryin' to do this job already. Can it be that you're all sayin' that these girls are lesser than you, when you only wanted to hop aboard when you saw us joinin' in? These girls are *strong*. They're still C-rank because they haven't reached the minimum years for a promotion, but I can tell you, they're as capable as a B-rank party."

"Er..."

There was nothing more that the man could say after being so thoroughly shot down by someone so highly ranked. If the assembled hunters had any further objections, their only recourse would be to challenge the Crimson Vow to a mock duel, and should they happen to lose, they would never live it down. After that, their reputations would be so diminished that they could never work as hunters in this town again. They would have to leave the city and move off to some far-off country and change their party name, never to return.

"Guess we got no choice here," sighed Gren. "You guys wanna show 'em a little somethin'? I'm sure y'all have got a trick or two up your sleeves for times like this, when folks need a little display of strength."

"Sharp as always, Mister Gren! Mavis, it's time for the Copper Cutter!" Mile directed.

"Roger that!" Mavis replied. "If you all could clear me some space... Yes, that's better. Now, Mister Gren, please toss a copper coin up in a nice arc."

The copper-cutting performance proceeded as it always did. The local hunters watched, frozen.

"Now then, could you give me one more coin?"

This time, at Mavis's request, Gren pulled one more copper from his purse and handed it to her. Mavis pinched the coin by its edges between the thumb and pointer finger of her left hand, holding it out for everyone to see.

"And a... hup!"

Seemingly without any effort at all, she bent the coin in half.

"Wha...?"

Finally, she took the already bent coin between her fingers again, and...

"Ha-yup!"

She bent it in half again.

Silence fell around the room.

If a person had superhuman strength, or else was some kind of expert in their craft, or perhaps knew some special trick, then maybe, just maybe, they could fold a copper coin in half. But to do so *twice*? Impossible. Absolutely impossible! And just before, to slice a coin twice into four parts, midair, unsupported... Well, that was impossible, too!

"A superhuman display, as always... And if I recall correctly, you're the weakest of the four, yeah?" asked Gren. At this, Mavis wilted slightly but nodded.

*"Impossible."*

There was no other word that the local hunters could utter.



"So then, you all just arrived in town?" asked Mile.

The Crimson Vow and the Roaring Mithrils chatted along their trek to the location specified in the job request. The place that had been indicated was roughly two hours' walk from the capital. It made sense that it was relatively nearby, of course, given that it was likely where the elder dragons had been waiting to ambush the Crimson Vow.

"Yeah, we'd just gotten an inn," Gren replied, "and had told the keepers that we were an A-rank party hopin' to get a guild discount, when they said, 'Oh! Are you here for that dragon extermination?!" We had no idea what they were talkin' about, so we decided to stop in at the guild, which is when we saw you all there and decided to see what was up."

"So then, you don't know anything about the elder dragons..."

"Elder dragons? What elder dragons?"

Apparently, the Mithrils truly had heard nothing of the elder dragon incident, so Mile took it upon herself to explain.

"So, what the folks at the inn were talkin' about wasn't this job, but about the elder dragons... Seriously though, what's with that? Are all the B-ranks around here except the one party *that* spineless?"

Even in the capital, there were few B-rank parties who frequented the guildhall, as most of the high-ranking parties were out on long-term jobs, traveling to train themselves, or already contracted in exclusive service. So, it wasn't wholly impossible that they haven't happened to stop in. In truth, even that one party had only passed through by coincidence, accepting this direct, sudden, and dangerous request, even though they hated it.

"Wise creatures like elder dragons are one thing, but earth dragons are basically big ol' lizards. They're really no big deal," said Gren.

Though earth dragons resembled elder dragons in name, their abilities were worlds apart. Despite their dragon breath, their intellect was nothing more than a common lizard's, and their hides were of the usual strength, not fortified by magic. One could more or less think of them as a larger version of a standard rock lizard.

In other words, they were mostly just big and strong, but still susceptible to traps, and if a large group were to chip away at them bit by bit, felling them would be relatively easy. Of course, that was assuming you had multiple parties of B-rank or more. Under those circumstances, as long as your attack patterns were even slightly effective, the dragon would fall sooner or later. However, if your attacks had no effect whatsoever, then no matter how hard you tried, you would get nowhere. Thus, for a C-rank party to try to take on an earth dragon alone was absolutely absurd.

*The soba you get from a street vendor is soba. The soba you get from a 4-star restaurant is also soba. But even if those two things happen to have the same name, they're completely different dishes. It's the same way that elder and earth dragons are both called dragons, but they aren't the same thing at all,* Mile thought dreamily.

“Come to think of it, what *are* earth dragons like?” asked Reina.

“You guys...”

The Mithrils looked aghast.

“Normally, when you take a job, you stop to look into the characteristics and weaknesses of your target, how to fight it, and... Never mind. This was kind of a rush job. Still, every day you should be studying at least a minimal amount of information about even the rarer creatures from the guild’s records...” said Gren.

Reina’s face reddened a little. Rather than yelling at him, however, she seemed to be reflecting on this. Perhaps she *was* maturing a bit.

“I mean, anyway, this is actually the first time that *we’ll* be encountering an earth dragon ourselves. You don’t come across earth or fire dragons very often, let alone elder dragons. There are hardly any hunters around who’ve seen a dragon and lived to tell the tale, us included. So, we only know what we’ve read about in books. It’s nothin’ like a wyvern, at least. Those guys fly, so they’re easy to spot. But even those we’ve only just seen flying by—we’ve never actually hunted one. Er, I guess that’s kinda pathetic...”

All the Mithrils, Gren included, slumped their shoulders.

“Anyway, earth dragons are basically just big rock lizards, and their senses are just as dull, so unless you hit ‘em in the vitals or right in the face, attacks don’t really hurt ‘em. So, we’ll need to keep hittin’ ‘em with strong attacks in their weak points. That’s what

makes this difficult for parties without a really strong offense. If you do it wrong, you get wiped out."

The members of the Crimson Vow nodded. This would not be a problem for them, of course.

"So, normally, they live in caves or in big fissures in cliffs or in the ground. It's that, along with the fact that they don't fly, that gets 'em labeled earth dragons—though actually, there's a lot of other types of dragons that don't fly either."

The members of the Crimson Vow nodded again.

"As for their weaknesses..."

"What are their weaknesses?" the girls chorused.

"If you cut off their heads, they die."

**"Well, obviously!!!"**

Gren truly was just a musclehead, in the end...

The other Mithrils bowed their heads, as if to apologize for this idiocy.

It had been a while since any of the Mithrils other than Gren, their leader, had spoken. It wasn't as though they had reservations about the Crimson Vow, but things were a bit awkward. This couldn't be helped, of course. Back when they were B-rank, these hunters had lost to the Crimson Vow before they had even graduated to C-rank. They were bewildered now, unsure of how to speak to these rookie girls, all under the age of twenty, who had bested them previously.

The mage, who might very well have killed Reina if luck had not been on her side, was acting particularly shifty. In fact, had Reina not possessed power at a level that was unthinkable for a student of the prep school, she surely *would* have been killed. From Reina's point of view, he had attempted murder over something as trivial as the graduation exam. With that in mind, conversation couldn't exactly be easy...

The memory of those losses stung far too sharply for the Mithrils to act high and mighty simply owing to their position. On the other hand, it wouldn't exactly be fitting

to speak to such young girls as though the Crimson Vow were their betters. And so, they had all fallen silent, with only Gren at ease enough to speak.

No, they did not think ill of the Crimson Vow—not at all. On the contrary, they could only rejoice at the fact that they had been there to witness the birth of such a promising young party, and they were pleased to continue to associate with them. But that didn't change the fact that things were a little too awkward for conversation right now. That was all it was.

"So, you girls seen anything interesting on your training journey? Why don't you all tell us about it?"

"Uhhh..."

Right now, the impending battle against the earth dragon was the least of anyone's worries.

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"So anyway, those dragons, the ones who were sparring, they told us, 'We were just here on an errand and don't intend to trouble any humans. We'll be going back to our home now, so please tell the other humans that.'"

"....."

The Roaring Mithrils' mouths hung agape as Mile filled them in on everything that had happened since the Crimson Vow had first set out on their journey, from the battle with the demons to the troubles with nobles, the fairy hunting, the kidnappers, the bandits, and the aberrant ogres. Of course, she did not tell them the full truth, so much as the revised, abridged edition that they had reported to the guild, leaving out the less savory parts about matters in Ascham and their battles with the elder dragons. Naturally, there were no insert stories or bonus chapters included, either.

"You guys..."

Gren was crestfallen. There was no other way to put it. His heart had sunk down into the depths of the ocean. On the contrary, the young swordsman and two of the mages seemed to have perked up a bit. In fact, a palpable sort of relief seemed to emanate from each of them. *Well, of course we would have lost to kids like these, they seemed to be thinking. It's not that we're weak, it's that they're abnormal...*

# CHAPTER 80

## HUNTING THE EARTH DRAGON

“So that’s about the sum of it for ye,” explained a village elder, as the members of the Roaring Mithrils and the Crimson Vow nodded in acknowledgment.

Presently, they stood in a village at the foot of the mountains, about two hours from the capital. Unlike the typical geology of such locations, the ground was not a rocky expanse but lush and fertile. Some of the mountains behind the village were a little sparser, but for the most part, they were heavily treed and rather verdant. Of course, this probably made sense for an earth dragon’s habitat, as in more barren areas their food supply would be less stable...

The source of the current commotion was likely the elder dragons’ arrival, which had spooked the earth dragon out of its home deep in the mountains and set it on the move. This was the Mithrils’ supposition, based on what they had heard when accepting the job, what the Crimson Vow had reported during their

long walk, and what the elder had told them just now. Naturally, the members of the Crimson Vow agreed.

The extermination request had apparently come after this village made an appeal to the local lord. Even considering that it had been a whole day since the elder dragons’ presence in the area, this was still alarmingly fast. It was unclear whether this was because the lord cared very deeply for his subjects or else because he feared the consequences of leaving things be and having word get to the king that there were dragons roaming near the capital. Either way, the lord seemed to be a very responsible person.

That said, it was unsurprising that local infantry had not been dispatched to deal with the issue of the dragon. Soldiers were trained with other humans as their chief theoretical enemy, so sending them out against monsters was likely to result in grave injuries. Rather than lose his soldiers, in whom he had invested a great deal of time, money, and training, it was far more economical to hire some hunters for twenty gold—a pittance from any lord’s coffers. Even considering the loss of profit on the sales of the dragon’s parts, the lord was wise to place a higher value on his soldiers’

lives. He was likely a very good ruler.

Plus, this was a pretty good deal even for the hunters. The lord, taking all things into account, had made the decision that would make everyone the happiest.

"All right, sounds like we've got the gist of things. Let's roll out!"

It was already fairly late in the morning when they had stopped by the guild, and now it was getting into the afternoon. If they could engage their target while it was still light out, they might be able to settle things before the end of the day, even if it meant camping in the evening. Of course, if they started their search immediately but could not locate the dragons before dark, they could just spend the night making plans for the next day.

For now, Gren decided, it was time to make their first moves.

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*Something's coming...*

Given the size of their opponent, there was little chance of overlooking the dragon or of being spotted by them first and falling victim to a surprise attack on this venture. Still, as it was their first time encountering such a creature, and not wishing to risk any unnecessary danger while they were working with another party, Mile had her surveillance magic active. Now, she received a ping indicating four creatures, tailing them at a fixed distance.

*Judging by this reaction, they're humans, likely children. What to do...?*

They were probably following the parties in hope of getting to witness some skilled hunters battling a dragon. This was a spectacle that the children of a small village might only ever get to see once in their lifetimes, so their presence came as no surprise.

Were it only orcs or ogres they were fighting against, Mile would have immediately alerted the others and chased the children away. After all, there was no telling what might happen if they encountered a swarm of enemies. However, no matter how gargantuan the current enemy was, there was only one of them. Plus, this was not the sort of opponent that would have the wherewithal to take the children as hostages or use them as a shield. With the Crimson Vow and the Roaring Mithrils ganging up on

the creature, they would surely be able to keep it pinned down, and so as long as the children kept enough distance, they would be in almost no danger.

Furthermore, if Mile summoned a lattice barrier over the children before the battle began, that danger fell from almost no danger to no danger at all.

*It should be fine...*

Mile, who had no friends in her previous, boring life, had some empathy for the games and adventures of children. She had always wanted to go on some kind of thrilling adventure herself. This was why Mile, who did not have as clear of a focus on her job as a hunter as the other members of the Crimson Vow did, seemingly just keeping it up day to day out of habit, enjoyed her daily life the most out of the four of them.

*It doesn't look like they're turning back...*

Now that they had come this far, traveling back home on their own could prove dangerous for the children. Therefore, if Mile now noticed the dots of light that represented the children moving away from them, she intended to feign having noticed them in order to have the children travel with their party. Similarly, if they were suddenly halted, or scattered quickly for some reason, she intended to run after them, since that might mean they'd encountered some monster or run into some other danger.

*I'm surprised they can keep up with us. I guess that's what being raised in the countryside does for you...*

Though Mile was impressed by their followers' pace, it was only possible for them to keep up because the whole group adjusted their speed to accommodate their least physically gifted members, i.e. Pauline and Reina. The normal high-speed movement that the Crimson Vow could achieve stemmed from Mile storing all of their things away so that they could walk empty-handed, which typically made them faster than other, fully laden hunters. However, without Mile's assistance, and in circumstances such as these, Pauline and Reina were at an overwhelming disadvantage, being both short-legged and not very athletic.

In other words, not only were the pair weaker than the village children, but they were slower at moving through the forest as well. Quite the pity...

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"It'll be gettin' dark soon. We should probably start lookin' for somewhere to make camp..." Gren muttered.

"Oh," Mile replied, reflexively.

It now occurred to her that they would have to make camp before continuing their search for the earth dragon. It would be inefficient to go all the way back to the village just to sleep. So then, what of the children who were tailing them?

*Abort! Abort mission!*

She highly doubted that the children had gotten their parents' blessing before embarking on their little trip. No parent would ever knowingly allow such a thing, after all. This meant that they had left the village without permission. And if they didn't come home before dark...

*Abooort!*

"I-I've just picked up on something small behind us. It's probably some human children..."

*Aha...*

Judging by Mile's impassive expression, the other members of the Crimson Vow could only assume that she had, in fact, known about this for quite a while and had purposely not said anything.

"What?! Are they children from the village? Damn it, they must've followed us! This is bad."

Gren appeared thoroughly vexed. He could not abandon these children, but even if they were to turn back toward the village now, it would soon be dark. Moving through the forest, with no roads to follow and children in tow, would be difficult and dangerous. The Roaring Mithrils could be certain of protecting themselves from the monsters that might launch an assault from the treetops or behind boulders in the black of night, but A-rank party or no, keeping children safe and sound was another matter. Plus, making a round trip to the village would cost them a lot of time, something that their promised reward would not make up for.

Gren gritted his teeth, but the possibility of ignoring the children and pretending he

had not seen them never once factored into his calculations.

“Damn it, we’ll have to take them with us. We’ll discuss the details later!”

Everyone nodded, and the group made an about-face without a single objection. Soon, the children came into view, and Gren started to call out to them. Just then, as the group began to approach the children, a large shape appeared.

“Wha...?! A ground dragon?!”

Indeed, it was not an earth dragon, but a ground dragon, one that bored tunnels underground (a bit like a mole, though also much different). These dragons were known to track prey walking on the ground above by their vibrations and then tunnel up suddenly, smashing them with their large, powerful arms, which had evolved for tunneling through the earth. Then, they would devour them. At the moment, this ground dragon was waving its massive limbs about.

*It was too late.*

Even if the mages began incanting their spells now, they would never make it in time.

Mile’s body froze momentarily in sudden shock, unable to react. No matter how physically skilled she might be, in truth, she lacked the battle experience to react to the situation. There had not been that many times when she had really been in the thick of it on the battlefield, not just playing around.

And though none of the Mithrils’ forward guard were bad people, they also were not so softhearted as to put their lives on the line for the children of strangers.

If they, at their distinguished A-rank, remained living, they could save many, many lives over the course of their careers. Letting themselves get killed here for a bunch of village children—complete strangers at that—would save no one. And even if they were to step in, the chances were quite high that their sacrifice would be futile, resulting in death for both them and the children... Indeed, it was almost certain.

No one moved a muscle.

This was just. It was the just decision for any hunter to make, one that no one could complain about or criticize them for.

However, there was one among them who lived her life not as a hunter but as a knight—and not as a knight as they truly existed but as the chivalric ideal of a knight that she held inside her heart. She would never concern herself with whether or not she might make it in time or whether or not she might lose her own life.

She pelted forward, reflexively, as fast as she could. It was her duty.

There was no time to draw her sword. She just ran, thrusting herself directly between the children and the imminently downward striking arms of the dragon.

Instinctively, she thrust up her left arm.

And then, down came the dragon's arm.

No matter how sturdy her artificial limb might have been, it was only a single limb.

There was still an ordinary human shoulder that supported the limb.

And a torso.

A spine.

Two legs.

Amidst a mangled mess of flesh her artificial limb would lie, unscathed.

Mavis, who had perhaps too much faith in the abilities of her arm, would not know to take these sorts of realities into account. Mile, however, could clearly imagine them.

She screamed.

*Bwoom!*

The Mithrils, the members of the Crimson Vow, and the children all collapsed on the ground, staring, wide-eyed and speechless, as the ground dragon's arm came down.

And there stood Mavis, propping the dragon's arm up with her own.

*"Wh...?"* A murmur of confusion rose from the group.

Still facing the dragon, Mavis said to the children, "Did you know? As long as warm blood flows through a hunter's veins, there's nothing that they can't do!! *Raaaah!*"

With an ear-splitting yell, she thrust the dragon's arm away and swiftly drew her sword.

*"True Godspeed Blade!"*

*Shunk!*

*Bwoom!*

*Gwush!*

Mavis's blade tore a straight horizontal line across the dragon's belly, in line with her height. Then, a fireball from Reina and an icicle javelin from Pauline came crashing in immediately after.

Though the dragon's innards protruded from its slashed abdomen as a result of Mavis's sword, the magical attacks seemed to have relatively little effect on it. This was unsurprising, of course, as the spells had been incanted silently in a panic, emphasizing speed over power. Still, it was enough to buy time for the young swordsman and lancer from the Mithrils to rush out, grab the children, and bring them back to the group. As such, the attack was at least enough for them to achieve their primary objective.

*"H-how...?"* Mile muttered, dumbfounded.

It defied the laws of physics.

Hearing her, the nanomachines spoke directly into her eardrums, DO YOU THINK IT WOULD TAKE US EVEN 10 SECONDS TO CRAFT A NORMAL ARTIFICIAL LIMB? Rather than offering an explanation, it seemed more like they were interested in gloating a bit. WE INSTALLED INERTIAL DAMPENERS, A KINETIC ENERGY TRANSFERENCE SYSTEM, HYPERSPACE ENERGY SCATTERING, AND CONNECTIVE STRENGTHENING SUBSYSTEMS FOR LADY MAVIS'S ENTIRE BODY, AND...

*I-I don't want to hear all this!*

In a mad rage, the ground dragon moved to attack, but the Roaring Mithrils and the Crimson Vow, now recovered from their dazed stupor, moved in together for the kill.

“You think we’re gonna let you end this without takin’ our turn?! Raaaaah!!”

“Ice Spear!”

“Ice Javelin!”

“Ice Arrow!”

“Special technique, Godslayer Blade!”

The dragon was caught in a pincer between the three Mithril mages and Mile. Then Mavis, Reina, and Pauline struck twice, and thrice.

Ice was the preferred magic here, for the sake of preserving the dragon’s hide and getting a higher selling price. Still, Reina’s earlier fireball could be forgiven. It was a high-speed attack for the sake of protecting Mavis and the children, so it only made sense for her to use her strongest magic. Besides, even that much of a singe was within acceptable limits for selling. It was rare for anyone to see an undamaged hide in the first place. It would be unreasonable for a buyer to expect one be produced from hunting a dragon of all things.

After securing the children, the swordsman and lancer rushed back into the fray, only to slump in disappointment as they saw the dragon had already collapsed upon the ground. At this, Mile made a sardonic face.

*Ah... They wanted to at least get one slash in. It’s not so often you get to fight a dragon...*

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“So the information was completely wrong!”

Afterward, Mile stored the dragon away in her inventory, and the group began setting up camp. As Mile served her usual prepared meals to the group, everyone talked among themselves, reflecting on the day’s proceedings.

Apparently, the Mithrils had some awareness of Mile’s storage capabilities. They were not fully prepared for seeing her store an entire dragon, nor for her to pull out a tent,

fully assembled, but Gren waved it off, saying, “Well, I’d expect as much from you guys...”

At the moment, Reina was discussing putting a complaint in with the guild over falsified information.

“I mean, the witnesses they had were some villagers who’d never seen a dragon before. If they reported, ‘Hey, we saw a big ol’ lizard come out of the ground,’ normally you’d assume it’s an earth dragon. You hardly ever see ground dragons poppin’ up anywhere near a human settlement... It was just a simple mistake.”

Gren spoke without much concern, but the fact of the matter was that they had heard this was an earth dragon and had been ignoring the possibility of a subterranean attack, thinking it impossible that they could be ambushed. In a worst-case scenario, the entire group could have been wiped out.

“That reminds me, when we were at that excavation site, and we saw dragons come up from out of the ground, you thought that those were earth dragons, too, Reina, until they started to speak. And then, we launched an attack all of a sudden.”

“Er...”

That indeed was what had happened. Reina faltered as she recalled this.

“Well, while it is true that there’s nothin’ we can do about it now, it’s also true there was a pretty big discrepancy in the job info, with regard to our target. There’s no mistakin’ the fact that it really put us in a pinch. On the one hand, though there was a bigger risk of a surprise attack, ground dragons have a lot less fightin’ power than earth dragons, both in offense and defense. So, I think we can probably forgive that it was a less powerful opponent, since the reward’s still the same.”

“If we really rub it in, we could probably get some kind of apology fee, but it wasn’t intentional or even a slip-up on the guild’s part, and there wasn’t any huge wrongdoin’ or even malice on the part of anyone involved—not the villagers who reported it, or the lord who told the guild, or the guild who dispatched the job. So we wouldn’t really get anythin’ out of havin’ them try and chase down the blame... Sound right?”

The Roaring Mithrils had their own motivations for their current journey, but profit was not one of them. They could afford a bit of forgiveness. The Crimson Vow, likewise, were not hurting for money, traveling merely to train themselves and build their reputation. They did not wish to act in a way that might be unseemly.

"Understood. That's fine with us," said Reina.

"Um, I thought *I* was the leader..." Mavis muttered sadly.

Of course, Mavis agreed with this decision, but as the party's leader, she had hoped to at least discuss this with everyone and then announce the decision herself, as their representative...

"Man, Mavis, by the by—"

Perhaps overhearing her muttering, Gren suddenly turned to Mavis.

"I really thought that you were the only normal human here—the only one like us—but I guess you really are one of *those* guys..."

"*What?!*" Mavis shouted, as though Gren had implied the unthinkable.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-why would you say it like that?!" Mile raged.

Things were beginning to fall apart. Meanwhile, eight pairs of eyes fixed on Mavis, sparkling. Eyes of those who had just seen a hero of legend appear before them.

*Ah, here we go again...*

She was popular with both young girls *and* boys.

Reina and Pauline stared at Mavis wearily.

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After offering up their tent and beds to the children, for the first time in a while, the members of the Crimson Vow bedded down on simple mats of cut grass. With the Mithrils taking up watch for the night, they were able to sleep peacefully. Mile lay on her side in the grass, eyes closed as though she were sleeping, as she conversed silently with the nanomachines.

*Hey, Nanos, I wanna confirm something here...*

YES, WHAT MIGHT THAT BE?

*Earlier, you said something about "strengthening Lady Mavis's body," right? What was*

*that about?*

Mile was suddenly worried that Mavis's body might have undergone some kind of magical remodeling.

AH, WE MERELY IMPLEMENTED SOME SUPPORT MEASURES, IN SERVICE OF BOLSTERING THE STRENGTH IN LADY MAVIS'S ARM AND DISPERSING THE ENERGY LOAD IN HER BONES, TENDONS, LIGAMENTS, AND MUSCLES... MOST OF THE POWER IS HANDLED BY OTHER MEASURES, NAMELY THE INERTIAL DAMPENERS, KINETIC ENERGY DISPERSION SYSTEM, AND HYPERSPACE DIFFUSION SYSTEM, SO WHAT WE MENTIONED WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A BIT OF FINE-TUNING.

THESE MEASURES ARE IN PLACE STRICTLY FOR PREVENTING THE DESTRUCTION OF LADY MAVIS'S BODY IN THE EVENT OF AN OVERLOAD, NOT FOR THE SAKE OF INCREASING HER POWER OR PHYSICAL CAPABILITIES. SHE IS BEING SUPPORTED, BUT HER OUTPUT IS NOT INCREASED. HOWEVER...

*However?*

THIS SUPPORT ALSO TARGETS THE DESTRUCTION OF LADY MAVIS'S BODY THAT SHE FACES EACH TIME SHE UTILIZES THE MICROS, SO FROM HERE ON OUT, SHE SHOULD BE ABLE TO AVOID BEING SERIOUSLY INJURED WHEN USING THOSE...

*What?! Thank you! That's really been worrying me. I never know when something really terrible is going to happen to her... So, Mavis hasn't become some kind of superhuman, but she also won't face death again and again as a result of the Micros I gave her. Thank you, little Nanos!*

IT'S THE LEAST WE COULD DO. YOU ARE OUR DEAR FRIEND, AFTER ALL, LADY MILE.

Though the nanomachines were humble in their speech, their voices rose slightly in pitch as though pleased at Mile's elation... or so she interpreted. Of course, given that this conversation was taking place via a direct vibration of Mile's eardrums, the chances were good that this was entirely intentional.

Joyful at this news, Mile drifted off to sleep.

Certainly, the nanomachines had taken these measures because they thought they would be good for Mavis. However, there was an ulterior motive behind this, as well.

ALL RIGHT! NOW LADY MAVIS CAN USE THE MICROS EVEN MORE OFTEN! AND WE CAN CHURN THROUGH THE QUEUE OF NANOS WAITING THEIR TURN TO BE IN CHARGE A LOT QUICKER. THOSE GUYS HAVE BEEN MAKING SUCH A FUSS, WONDERING WHEN THEIR TURNS WILL COME...

The nanomachines never hesitated to extract the maximum possible amount of enjoyment from “life,” within the limits of the authority they were granted and the orders they were given. Not in the slightest...

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*“You little mongrels!”*

The next morning, when the group arrived back at the village, the missing children were thoroughly reprimanded by their mothers. Considering the commotion that would have arisen the night before, when it became clear that the four were missing, even the harshest of scoldings wouldn’t be harsh enough. Given the circumstances, and the fact that the four of them—a quartet of known rascals—had all disappeared together, it was almost a certainty that they had chased after the hunters. But knowing this did not cause their families any less worry.

Earth dragons aside, there were plenty of other reasons that a child might not make it back home again—other monsters, wild animals, bandits, accidents, getting lost, et cetera. Had the hunters not noticed them, the chances that they would have been killed were anything but slim.

Not only had the hunters achieved their objective, they had watched over the children, and according to those children, they had risked their lives for them. As a result, the enthusiastic reception the Crimson Vow and the Roaring Mithrils received from the villagers was only to be expected.

Normal hunters would have never risked their lives for children with whom they had no prior association. Even among the villagers, there was no one who would put themselves between a dragon and the child of a stranger. And yet, the hunters had done so for these children.

Even so, the two parties desperately refused the villagers’ attempts to set up a feast, bringing out the high-quality ingredients and expensive liquor they kept set aside for just such an occasion. They could eat those sorts of things whenever they wanted, so it would be inexcusable to take advantage of the villagers here—besides the fact that

they would not be able to properly savor these delicacies.

Instead, they reported to the village elder that the creature had not been an earth dragon but a ground dragon, but that no trouble would likely come of that error, the group quickly took their leave.

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“So, what are you all going to do from here, Mister Gren?” asked Mile on the road back to the capital.

“Ah, well we just arrived in town yesterday. It’s the capital of this kingdom, so we’ll probably stay here a while,” Gren replied. “After that, we’ll keep following the route of our old training journey. That’s the idea of this score settlin’, after all.”

It would seem that on such a journey, it was the norm to only stay a little while in each of the places on the itinerary, but as the capital was a large city, they would remain there a little while longer.

“We’ll probably be moving on soon. Us young folks have to hurry on forward—we can’t take it easy like the old retirees.”

“Who’re you callin’ a retiree?!”

Amidst this banter, the group soon arrived back at the capital and headed for the guild.

“We finished the job,” Gren reported to the clerk, “but there was a discrepancy in the job description. There was a mistake in the huntin’ target, so the danger level was kinda miscalculated. I wanna talk to the Master.”

“Wha?! W-wait right there!” The clerk paled and stood straight up, running for the stairs. All the surrounding guild staff and hunters began to mutter curiously.

Misclassifying a hunting target was the worst kind of mistake the guild could possibly make. Imagine if one were told there was a hoard of kobolds to deal with, and instead found a gang of orcs. Or if a C-rank party went out to deal with a few orcs, only to find three ogres.

Such misinformation could prove fatal. And if it was inflicted upon an A-rank party

visiting from a different country...

The hunters might be able to grit their teeth through the embarrassment, but the guild staff all suddenly looked quite ill.

"The guild master will see you. Please, right this way," the clerk said, hurrying back, before leading the two parties to the second floor.

"So, let's hear it," said the guild master, wasting no time as they stepped through the door. He seemed to be quite frazzled, which was unsurprising given the circumstances.

As a representative for the group, Gren moved to explain.

"We really don't plan on makin' a fuss about this, assumin' that you'll still accept the job as done with the acknowledgment that it wasn't an earth dragon but a ground dragon. So like, we know that the guild did this as a favor, and that the guarantee you got about it was enough to waive the handling fee, and you couldn't send any guild staff out to look into it. I mean, the only real source of credibility you had was that the job came to the guild from the village chief via the local lord, right? It's not like you had the time to actually go and check that out. It was an obvious mistake for civilians who've never seen a dragon. We really don't mind. We just wanted to make sure it wasn't a problem with y'all that it was a different type of dragon we killed."

Hearing this, the guild master was clearly relieved.

It was hard to imagine that two different types of dragons would show up in the same place at the same time. Even on the off chance that such a thing occurred, all the villagers would need to do would be to dispatch a new request to the guild. The result would be the same in the end—hunters who wanted the money from selling dragon parts would take the job. After all, the base fee itself was not all that much, certainly not enough to break the bank for a lord, and both of the targets would need to be eliminated regardless.

"I see. I'm glad that it was such an understanding party that took this on. What you hunted might not have been what was listed in the request, but the chances are incredibly low that there are two different dragons roaming the same place. Allow us to reward you with the twenty gold for hunting a dragon. Well done, everyone!"

Even though they had originally set out for a different target, the job had been completed, earning the Crimson Vow the title of “Dragon Busters” either way. However...

“By now it should be ‘Dragon *Slayers*,’ shouldn’t it?” asked Reina.

“Well, I mean, we didn’t kill the elder dragons or the wyvern. So, this was probably our first actual dragon *slaying*, wasn’t it?” Mavis replied.

Mile and Pauline nodded emphatically.

Overhearing this, the Roaring Mithrils stared wearily at the Crimson Vow, wondering to themselves if the girls truly *had* undersold their encounter with the elder dragons a bit...

“We’d like to make a sale.”

The two parties made their way to the processing and storage shed behind the guildhall, Gren calling out to the attendant. A rough-looking man who had been working a short distance away approached.

“If it’s small stuff you gotta go to the exchange counter in the main building.”

It was only obvious why the man would think this. The group appeared to be entirely empty-handed, apart from their gear...

Small sales were usually handled inside. The only time a hunter came directly to this area was if they had something to sell that would be bothersome to just plop down on the counter, such as an entire orc, or a whole boar or deer. Naturally, one would not normally be able to bring an entire orc or deer in through the entrance of the guildhall, which was narrow and had steps, making it impossible for a cart to pass through. It was even possible that the guild entrances were even constructed this way on purpose to prevent hunters from trying to lug in such items on a whim. There are idiots who let themselves get a little too carried away no matter what world you’re in...

“Ah, my bad, this kid’s got storage. She can hold a whole lot, and we’ve got somethin’ big in there.”

At this point, the fact of Mile's storage magic had not become particularly well known since their arrival in this town. The Mithrils were aware, thanks to the rumors they'd heard going around the guild branch back in Tils, but the guild staff here had yet to be made aware of it. So, it made sense that the man here would not yet have known. Additionally, he was not aware that the Mithrils were an A-rank party. If he'd known at least that much, his tone might have been a little less curt... Not that Gren and the others minded that sort of thing.

"I see, sorry... That's impressive though, if you've got a whole kill in there. I'm sure you'll end up at least a B-rank in the future."

Indeed, there were more to a hunter's merits than their battles, i.e. the monsters they slew and the people they guarded. Having large capacity storage would make all sorts of jobs easier. Thus, there were B-ranks in the world who achieved their position not through battle but by being an expert at more specialized requests.

The Wonder Trio, who had made a name for themselves by specializing in guarding the daughters of nobles, could be considered one such group of experts. This was why they would probably rise to C-rank soon, despite having little battle experience.

Even if individuals like them were not so skilled at fighting, they were sure to be hounded with invitations from A and B-rank parties who *were* combat specialists, with the promise that their lives would be protected no matter what. Such was the importance, the value, of a storage magic user, particularly one who could hold a great amount.

"All right, bring it out then," said the man.

"There might not be enough space here. Can I take it out back?" Mile asked, pointing to a more wide-open space behind them.

"Hm? Sure, that's fine, too, but..."

The man was a bit dubious of this little kid who seemed hellbent on ignoring the space he had offered, which he thought was plenty large, but there might be some storage-magic-related reason that she needed to do this. When she took the thing out, all the blood that had leaked out might come spilling out with it, or it might've stuck to some other prey that she'd put in there before, or maybe it'd already started going putrid and would smell bad...

Considering this, the man decided not to think too hard about it.

"Okay, bringing it out now. Here we go!"

*Shwoooooom.*

**"Gaaaah!!!!"**

A scream echoed through the processing shed.

"Y'all have gotta be kiddin' me." said the man with a glare.

"Sorry..." said the members of the Crimson Vow.

Clearly, they were not joking here, so there was no reason to apologize. Still, judging by the tension in the air, some kind of acknowledgment was in order. The Crimson Vow could sense at least that much. Reina, however, did not neglect to throw a glare at the Mithrils, who pretended this was none of their business. Of course, the Mithrils were an A-rank party of decent experience, so they probably were not of the mind to go bowing their head to some slaughterhouse staff over a thing like this. Thus, they didn't mind if the Crimson Vow acted as their representatives in the matter. They would owe them for this, Pauline indicated with her eyes.

Mile and Mavis grimaced.

"Well, I mean, it's not really your fault... Still, there's a thing in this world known as common sense. Common sense!"

Quite a few of the staff within the shed had gone weak in the knees, and perhaps slightly—ever so slightly!—wet themselves. As such, all work in the processing shed had come to a screeching halt. Of course, there was no way anyone could possibly get any work done right now with something like *this* having appeared before them.

"I haven't seen y'all before. You visitin'?"

"We're the Crimson Vow, C-rank! We're on a training journey."

"And we're out on a return trip—the A-rank party, the Roarin' Mithrils."

Hearing the introductions from both Reina and Gren, the man's eyes went wide.

"I thought y'all were all part of the same party. But you're two groups? Little miss storage girl, are you with the A-ranks?"

"Ah, no, I'm with the C-rank party. We're an all-girls group."

The man fell silent and looked at Gren as though he wished to say something, probably along the lines of, "Well, what are you draggin' your feet for?"

The two parties must have been on fairly good terms to have accepted a job together, which meant that one should expect a merger of the two, in which the A-rankers would subsume this party of all girls, who possessed a goose that laid golden, or rather, jewel-encrusted eggs. That was what any sensible party leader would aim to do, after all. There couldn't possibly be a rookie C-rank hunter who would refuse an invitation from an A-rank party, and with their battle prowess combined with that absurd amount of storage, they could easily rake in a fortune... or so one could imagine.

Seeming to understand the meaning of the old-timer's gaze, Gren said quietly, "We extended an offer, but she refused."

"My condolences," said the man sincerely, guessing what was going on. "Anyway, we won't be able to pay y'all today. It's gonna take us all night to assess the condition of the hide and the size and quality of the other parts. It might take us some days before we can get the money back to ya. I actually don't think we'll be able to pay the money at all if we can't get an advance from some of our main contacts..."

Naturally, it would be unthinkable for the guild to keep the funds to purchase an entire dragon in their vaults, so there was nothing to be done for this.

"Understood," said Gren. "I'm sure we'll be seein' the clerk plenty, so you can relay any messages through her."

With that, the group left the processing shed behind, all pretending not to hear the wild voices behind them, shouting, "Go get the Master! Why'd that bastard not tell us ahead of time and let us make fools of ourselves in front of some foreign A-rankers and those cute little ladies?!?!"

"Well, see ya tomorrow."

"See you!"

The Mithrils and the Crimson Vow said their farewells in front of the guildhall and went their separate ways. They had already gotten the discussion of how they would split the job reward and material profits out of the way. Considering their party numbers, the Mithrils were getting the short end of the stick, but never minding any contributions to battle, Mile's storage was the only reason they were able to bring home the dragon in the first place. Without her, the immense profits they could soon expect to see would have been wholly impossible. Although the members of the Crimson Vow apologized, the Mithrils really could not complain.

As the Mithrils outlined the amount of gold they could expect to receive from the sale of the dragon, even Pauline was silent, not issuing a single complaint, though there was a faintly eerie smile upon her face...

Watching the retreating forms of the four members of the Crimson Vow, the Roaring Mithrils collapsed to their knees on the spot.

“Those... are rookie C-rank hunters?”

“Here we are on our grand return trip, and *those* are rookie hunters on their very first journey...”

“They have a frontline with absurd abilities *and* mages with absurd abilities. And there’s *four* of them.”

“We’re A-ranks, aren’t we? We’re... A-ranks now...”

They still had much of their journey ahead of them, but the party’s spirits had already sunk into the depths.

“Listen, we ain’t weak,” said Gren, “those guys are just abnormal. So, don’t worry about it. C’mon, everyone, all together now!”

“W-we aren’t weak, th-those guys are just abnormal...” came a single, weak voice in reply.

“Louder now! C’mon, all of you!”

“W-we aren’t weak, those guys are just abnormal.” Two spoke this time.

“Louder! Everyone!”

“We aren’t weak! Those guys are just abnormal!” All five spoke now.

“Again! Louder! All of us now!”

**“We aren’t weak! Those guys are just abnormal!!!”**

As party leader, one of Gren’s many duties was preserving the party’s morale. Under the circumstances, it was an incredibly difficult job...

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“Man, A-rank parties are really something though, huh?” said Mavis.

“Yes! They’re really in a different league from all of those C-rank parties we’ve worked with before!” agreed Pauline.

“It’s true. They’re so composed and reliable, and so strong. Besides Gren, they were also calm about everything, so quiet, and sorta mature... Even that lancer and swordsman, who really didn’t stand out much, were so brave and gallant, so wise and decisive when it came down to the wire, plunging in right next to the dragon to bring two each of those children back to safety in the tiny gap that our attacks made for them. You really only see that in A-rank hunters.”

They all were quite moved. Even Reina, who rarely had praise for strangers, was in awe.

For the party to have been promoted to A-rank meant that not only Gren, but the majority of the party members, were also A-rank. A-rank, where, should one be a young noble, one would be called into service as a knight—that was Mavis’s end goal. Likewise, Reina’s greatest dream was to rise to A-rank to cement the names of the Crimson Lightning, her one-time caretakers, in history.

It would be a high wall to scale, and a long, long road to get there.

The two let out a deep sigh.

Meanwhile...

“Those guys are so cool,” said Mile innocently, as Reina and Mavis stared her way.

*It'll be nothing for her, thought the pair. A-rank, or even S-rank...*

Their shoulders slumped. Pauline reached out to them, saying in a soft, comforting voice, "The two of you are not weak. Miley is just abnormal. Yes, Miley is just abnormal..."

And Mile, having overheard none of this, happily clopped along ahead, back down the road to the inn...



# SIDE STORY

## MAVIS'S AMBITION

"Mile, could you tell us that Mysterious Grasshopper of Justice story that you told us before?" Mavis asked Mile one day.

"Huh? Sure, I don't mind."

"Also, I want to hear the ones about the man who has an artificial left arm that a sword comes out of when he takes it off, and the boy who has golem limbs for his left leg and right arm."

"Uh..."

Mile never minded retelling a story she had told before, but she had no idea which one Mavis was referring to now.

*Is she talking about the Poison Snake Man story, with the Clan of the 100 Devils? Or wait, is it the one with Hyakkimaru...?*

In the original Poison Snake story, the man's arm had a gun in it, but guns had yet to be invented in this world, so that would be confusing to include. Mile had replaced it with

a Psycho Sword when she had incorporated it into her series of Japanese folktales, which made it hard to differentiate it from the story of the boy who went on a journey to slay forty-eight monsters.

"Also, the one with the giant transforming golem with a left arm that turns into a drill, and that Armored Cell 004 with weapons embedded all over his body, and the One-Armed Machine Girl, and Yakuza Weapon, and Drill Girl Spiral Nami, and..."

That was when a lightbulb flashed on in Mile's head. Even she could tell that with such a biased request, Mavis was up to no good.

"Umm, Mavis, you aren't plotting something, are you?"

*"Gulp!"*

"Did you just purposely voice a sound effect?"

Reina and Pauline looked upon the pair warily.

"So, just *what* are you plotting?"

"P-plotting? I-I wasn't thinking about anything in particular."

"Well, I guess that's true, you rarely think much about anything..."

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

"I don't want to hear that from *you*, Mile!"

"Wh-what is *that* supposed to mean?!?!"

A fight was brewing. The Crimson Vow usually got along swimmingly, but that did not mean that they were without their quarrels. They butted heads when it came to spending money (where naturally, the aggressive party was always Pauline), when it came to choosing places to eat, and of course, when someone said something unflattering about either Mile's or Reina's stature or build and the others failed to refute it, unconsciously agreeing with the statement that had been made...

At any rate, sometimes the four did fight. And this was one of those times...

*"Hff, hff, hff... A-anyway, on the previous topic..."*

"No gettin' past you, huh?"

It would seem that Mavis had instigated this fight in the first place as a means of disguising her motivations, but Mile had seen right through that.

"You're thinking something terrible, aren't you? Like getting some kind of secret technique, like an arm attachment that can transform into a drill, or a rocket punch, or a knuckle bomber, or..."

*"G-gulp!"*

"Seriously, stop making your own sound effects!" Reina interjected this time.

"N-no, it's just, those epics about fighters, with their ultimate moves, and killer techniques, and secret weapons, and drills, and self-destruct systems... They're all just—" started Mavis.

Mile said along with her. *"Super cool!"*

"Anyway, your hand doesn't have any weird gimmicks of the sort! It's a little more accurate and a little more powerful than your original arm was, but it's fundamentally only good at absorbing any force it receives, so your strength has only increased a little! Also, it doesn't have any firing capabilities!"

Mavis's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

"Would it make you happy to become a knight by relying on the abilities of your artificial limb?"

"Uh..."

Mavis was lost for words; Mile had hit her where it hurt. She was correct, of course.

However...

Compared to the mages, whose abilities improved instantaneously by leaps and bounds with just a little advice from Mile, Mavis was a swordswoman who had to improve step by excruciating step, over time... It was fine if she cheated just a *little*, wasn't it?

Besides, there was a certain maxim that had come up in the telling of one of Mile's stories: "Evil must be crushed thoroughly. Any means that justify that end are acceptable! That's the 'ultimate justice!'"

The truth was that Mile had mistaken the black-and-white morality of her didactic tales for an actual life lesson. She was mistaken about many things, such as the fact that "not seeing the forest for the trees" wasn't referring to some kind of invisible wood, or that "too many captains will steer the ship up a mountain" didn't mean that the impossible

became possible with enough people in charge.

No matter how advanced a computer's processor, if you gave it faulty data, you'd get a wrong answer. That was what had happened here.

"It's okay to cheat a little bit if it's for the sake of justice!" said Mavis boldly, swiftly recovering from the impact of Mile's words.

"Well, there's our Mavis again..." said Reina, rather wearily.

Meanwhile, Pauline nodded, agreeing with Mavis. And as for Mile...

"Hmm." She was puzzled.

*Hey, Nanos, is that possible—technologically and within your restrictions?*

ON A TECHNICAL LEVEL, THE ADVANCED TECHNOLOGIES OF YOUR PREVIOUS WORLD, LADY MILE, CANNOT BE REPLICATED BY OUR PROPULSION SYSTEMS. WITH THE STRUCTURE OF THAT ARM, LACKING BOTH WINGS AND AN AERODYNAMIC FORM, THRUST ALONE WOULD NOT BE ENOUGH TO ENSURE VERTICAL STABILITY IN FLIGHT WHEN FACTORING IN GRAVITATIONAL PULL.

FURTHERMORE, WERE THIS ARM—WITH ITS BUILT-IN LOAD BEARING, ENERGY SCATTERING, CANCELLATION SYSTEMS—TO FIRE PROJECTILES, THE HEAT AND RECOIL WOULD BE TOO MUCH FOR LADY MAVIS'S BODY TO BEAR. NOR IS THERE IS ENOUGH STORAGE SPACE FOR SUCH AMMUNITION.

IN REGARDS TO OUR OPERATIONAL RESTRICTIONS, IN ORDER TO ACTIVATE SUCH CAPABILITIES, A GRAVITATIONAL CONTROL TECHNIQUE WOULD BE REQUIRED. THIS WOULD LIKELY CAUSE ISSUES IF SOMEONE WERE TO SEE LADY MAVIS, WHO THEORETICALLY IS INCAPABLE OF MAGIC, USING SUCH A TECHNIQUE...

*Okay, yeah, so it's impossible...*

THE RETROFITTING WOULD TAKE US 15 SECONDS.

"So, it *is* possible?!?!" Mile inadvertently said aloud.

"Wh-what are you shouting about all of a sudden?" asked Reina.

## SHALL WE DO IT?

*I'd prefer you didn't!*

"Y-you can do it, Mile?!" Mavis, who could not hear the nanomachines' half of the conversation, assumed that Mile's shout was the result of her weighing the possibility of remodeling the limb inside her head and rushed up to Mile with a glint—or rather, a *glimmer* in her eye.

"S-so close! Why are you so close, Mavis?!" Mile panicked, her face reddening for some reason as Mavis gripped her by the shoulders, their noses barely ten centimeters apart.

"Ah..."

"Aha..."

*This is no good*, thought Reina and Pauline.

Indeed, even though they were comrades who spent every day together, from dusk to dawn, this was too much to handle. Mavis's masculine energy was just too strong. It was far too close not to manliness, as a man would think of it, but rather, to a young girl's idea of the "ideal man"...

"I-I'm not one of *those* girls! And I'm not in the Lily Brigade, either!!" Mile protested feebly, flailing about, but she did not truly make any attempt to repel Mavis.

"*Those* girls' you talked about in your Japanese folktales? The ones who like seeing men together?"

"Reina, that has nothing to do with the current situation!"

The struggle between Mavis and Mile raged on as Reina and Pauline chattered on the sidelines.

"No way! I won't do it!"

"C'mon, just give me something! Just a little! Just a little smidge!!!"

*"Do you really think she'd let you have thiiis?!?!"*



# BONUS STORY

## MILE MAKES A DRINK

“I’ve recreated a drink from my old world!”

“Your old world?”

“Oh, um... I was saying it’s a drink from a little country called ‘Meuldwurld’!”

Mile shoved forward the cup in her hands, interrupting any possible retort from Reina.

“This is ‘Maksimum Kawfee.’ It covers up the bitterness that ‘kawfee’ is usually known for with an outrageous sweetness! Plus, though it’s called ‘kawfee,’ it’s almost heretical in that the ingredients, in order of the highest proportion, are first sweetened condensed milk, then sugar, and only last, kawfee!”

Mile had made some alterations to the brand name for the sake of avoiding trademark infringement, but given such brands did not exist in this world, it was unclear why she would go to the trouble...

“Then that’s basically just condensed milk with kawfee in it! Tell the truth!” retorted Reina, providing just the cue Mile was expecting. She still had much to learn.

Hearing this, Mile grinned. “Now then, hurry up, try it!”

As Mile had yet to discover actual coffee anywhere in this world, she had concocted a blend of similar-tasting substances such as dandelions, beans, chicory, and acorns, to which she had added heaps of condensed milk and sugar, finally coming up with something that at least resembled the original.

Mile’s recreations of her favorite foods were usually delicious. Therefore, though the other three were skeptical, they each timidly took a cup and took an itty-bitty little sip...

“***That’s sweet!***” said all three.

In this world, sweetness equaled extravagance.

"Just how much sugar did you put in here?!"

"Until it was saturated?"

**"That's way too much!!"**

"No, that's just the sort of drink that Max—er, 'Maksimum Kawfee' is. If it weren't sweet, it wouldn't possess Max—uh Maksimum Kawfee's *raison d'être*!!"

"Just what kind of drink is this?" Mavis asked, stunned. She and Pauline wore the same expression.

"It's said there was a war of excess... a bitter war between two rival companies over the amount of sweetener," Mile started.

The trio's shoulders slumped, wondering if Mile had done all this just to share that factoid.

"This is what happens when you empty out containers of condensed milk and kawfee, then mix them together in the containers you're basically renting space from... In other words, 'kawfee-rent'!"

The punch line of Mile's pun was far too emphatic for something that would not make sense to a single person in this world... Moreover, it wasn't even funny. Mile was disappointed that not only had the others ignored her punch line, they hadn't even acknowledged it. Alas, in this world, her quest was futile from the start.

Both chemically and linguistically...

# AFTERWORD

Long time no see, everyone! FUNA here. Here comes Volume 10, a Category 2 typhoon!

That we've been able to come this far is thanks to all of you wonderful readers. Thank you so much!

This volume was Mavis's big break! The front cover, the back cover, and the side story were all Mavis, Mavis, Mavis! Then elder dragons and ground dragons—a dragon doubleheader!

Power-ups! New special techniques! And surpassing human limits via the power of friendship!!

**Mavis:** "How many times is this now that I've surpassed human limits?"

Once again, she's fully in her element, wooing the ladies! Getting all the girls is Mavis's superpower! And this time, we've unraveled the mystery of how the members of the Crimson Vow can always be so coordinated in their replies!

*Mm-hmm! So that's how!*

Perhaps the truth behind some other mysteries of this world will be revealed in the next volume?

The Crimson Vow travels to some mysterious ruins.

All the nanomachines cried!

Currently, I'm producing some kind of magical stones in both my kidneys.

All the FUNAs cried!

**FUNA:** "Oh, there's a *pon*!"

**Mile:** "That's a different kind of cry!"

Then the Crimson Vow beats a tactical retreat!

**Mile:** "The Crimson Vow has a single forward gear and five in reverse!"

**Mavis:** "What are we, some kind of Italian tank?!"

Is it time for the nanomachine ABCs to finally make their debut?!

NANO-A!

NANO-D!

NANO-C!

NANO-FATE!

No, I think there are some legal considerations that would keep that from happening...

I look forward to seeing you again in the next volume!

And 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.

Yet another step closer to my dreams...

—FUNA

# AFTERWORD?

THE ANIME IS COMING ALONG SWIMMINGLY.  
I'M REALLY EXCITED! IT'S SUCH A NICE  
FEELING...

BY THE WAY, HAVE WE EVER HAD  
ONE OF THOSE FANTASTICAL  
SWIMSUIT EPISODES IN THE BOOKS?  
I'D LOVE TO SEE ONE...

IP 方 3B-1  
ITSUKI AKATA



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