



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

Story by
FUNA

Illustrated by
Itsuki Akata

16



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

VOLUME 16





Marcela



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

VOLUME 16

BY
FUNA

ILLUSTRATED BY
Itsuki Akata



Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHI, NORYOKU WA HEIKINCHI DETTE ITTAYONE! vol.16
©2021 FUNA, Itsuki Akata/SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.
First published in Japan in 2021 by SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.
English translation rights arranged with SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD. and
SEVEN SEAS ENTERTAINMENT, LLC. through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form without written permission from the copyright
holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,
and incidents are the products of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events,
locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this
book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily
reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to
Marketing Manager Lianne Senter at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of
Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at
sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Diana Taylor
ADAPTATION: Maggie Cooper
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner
PROOFREADER: Jack Hamm
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-363-9
Printed in Canada
First Printing: July 2023
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

God bless me?

CONTENTS

WHEN WE LAST LEFT OUR HEROES:

“KRAMON—DEPART!”

CHAPTER 112: THE DEMON VILLAGE

CHAPTER 113: RIGHT ABOUT NOW...

CHAPTER 114: THE CHAIN STORE

CHAPTER 115: THE INVASION BEGINS

CHAPTER 116: SLOW WALKER

CHAPTER 117: THE WARNING

SIDE STORY: THE WONDER TRIO GET A JOB

BONUS STORY: MILE ROARS

AFTERWORD

Japan**-Kurihara Misato-**

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

**Mile**

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

**Mavis**

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

**Pauline**

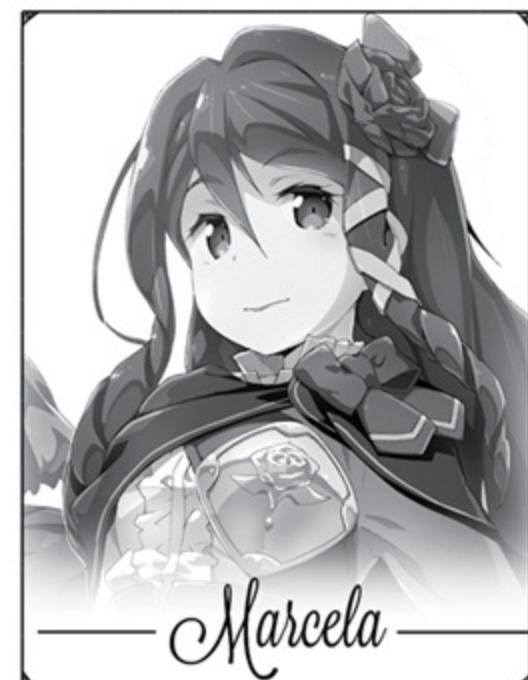
A hunter and healing magic user. A timid girl, but...

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

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

**Elder Dragons**

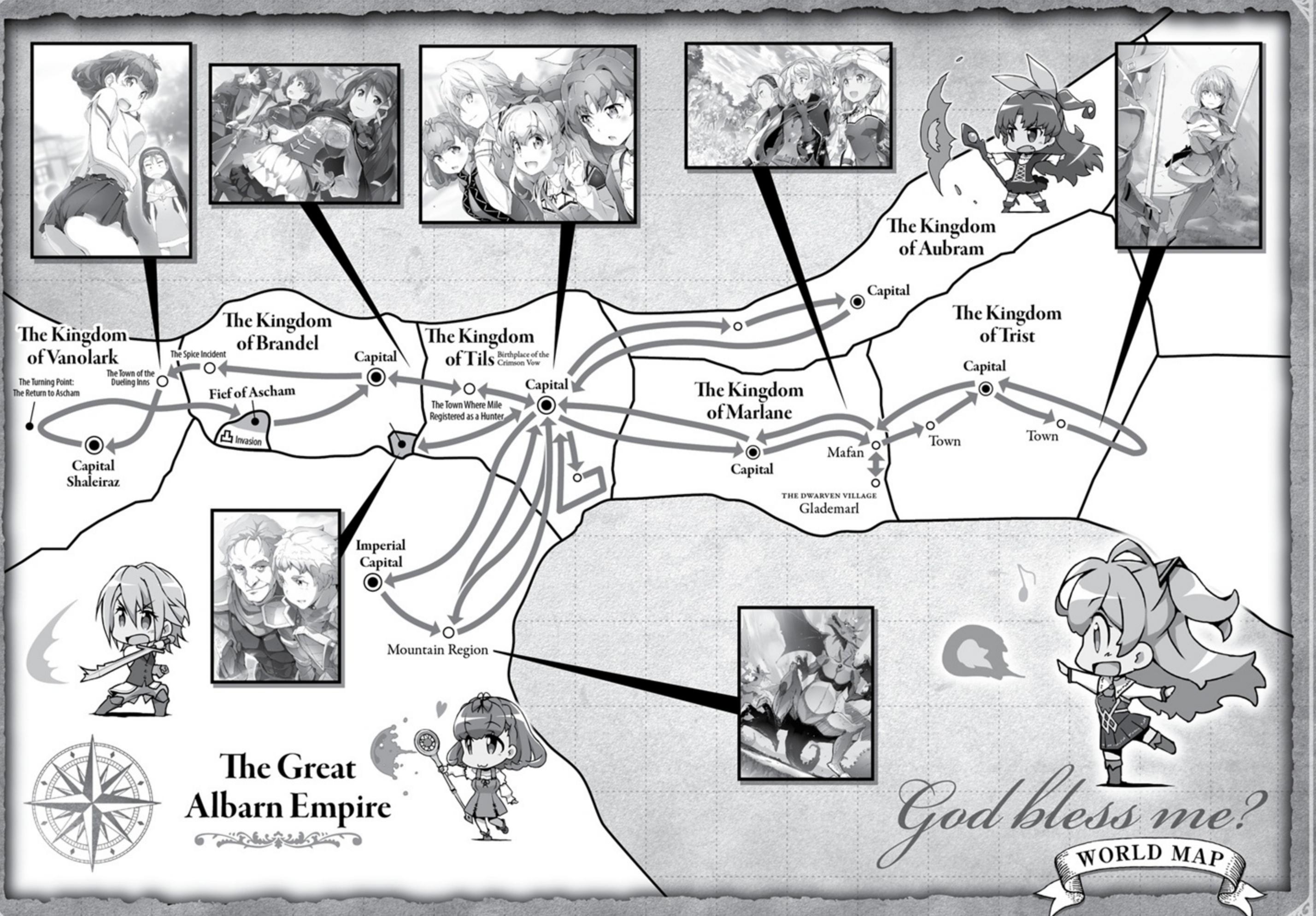
The strongest, most intelligent beings in the world. Can speak human languages.

**Marcela**

A young noblewoman and Adele's friend. Leader of the Wonder Trio.

**Morena**

Princess of the Kingdom of Brandel. Currently searching for Adele.



PREVIOUSLY

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

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

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

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

Yet somehow, it all went awry.

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

At the first academy she attended, she made friends and rescued a little boy as well as a princess. She registered at the Hunters' Prep School under the name of Mile and made a grand debut with the Crimson Vow—the party she formed with her classmates.

The Crimson Vow suddenly found themselves in talks with some elder dragon elders... and thus arose the opportunity for Mile to realize her long-awaited dream of visiting a demon village!

As a reward for having saved the beastfolk from danger and run all around the kingdom rescuing kidnapped girls, the beastfolk summoned Kragon the elder dragon, who will carry the Crimson Vow to the demon village.

What new wonders await them there?

WHEN WE LAST LEFT OUR HEROES

“KRAMON—DEPART!”

“HM? What’s the matter, Reina?”

“N-nothing! Nothing at all!”

Kragon, the elder dragon, had sworn to carry the Crimson Vow atop his back to the demon homeland. But now that the time had come to climb aboard, Reina was acting a bit strange. She shrugged off Mile’s question but was clearly troubled by *something*.

The other three stared at her in a pensive silence, unsure how to address her discomfort, which she was obviously attempting to hide.

“Oh.”

The three of them suddenly patted their fists on their palms in sync, having recalled a singular memory. *It’s because of what happened with Lobreth...*

Reina’s behavior was undoubtedly because she was petrified by the memory of what had happened during their battle with the wyvern, when Mile had tossed her straight up into the sky, resulting in a descent of the same trajectory. She had wet her pants—well, it had been a rather *unfortunate* incident. It would be no wonder if she’d developed a fear of heights. Unlike Mavis, who possessed the courage of a knight, and Pauline, who had lost consciousness the moment she had been tossed in the air, Reina—aircraft no. 1—had been flung up into the wild blue yonder with zero chance to prepare.

Still, she wasn’t about to admit that she was afraid to climb aboard Kragon. If she didn’t join them on the elder dragon’s back, there was no chance of the Crimson Vow ever making it all the way to the northern end of the continent. And then they wouldn’t be able to make Mile’s wish come true, all because of Reina’s cowardice... She could never forgive herself for such a thing.

And yet.

The other three continued to stare silently as she stood there, pale-faced and still as a statue.

Meanwhile, the following thoughts ran through Mile's brain. *So she's thinking about the time that she ended up being Thunderbird No. 1 in that battle with Lobreth, the "Certain Magical Reina-gun" plan, and that's got her spooked... Lobreth, the wyvern... Fear of a second flight...*

"A second fright!!" Mile suddenly shrieked, her commentary totally out of context, as usual.

The others, naturally, ignored her.

* * *

Mile, Mavis, and Pauline sat in a line atop Kragon's back as the dragon soared through the air, the trio drinking up the scenery as it passed them by. Behind them sat an unmoving Reina, who kept a death grip on her staff, her face blank as a Tibetan sand fox...

On the off chance that she *should* slip from Kragon's back, a staff wouldn't really help her, but it made her feel better to be able to hold on to *something*. Indeed, as a mage, she never really *had* to have a staff. It was always more of a bonus than a true necessity.

Kragon was using a shielding spell, so there was no real danger of anyone falling. Reina should have been able to glean as much from the fact that they weren't being buffeted by gale-force winds, but she wasn't exactly in her right mind at the moment. Besides, the fastest vehicle she had ever ridden in prior to this was a passenger coach, making it entirely possible she didn't even understand the phenomenon. She had never ridden a horse, and certainly not a bicycle. On the rare occasions a coach might need to be driven at top speed, the situation usually didn't leave one room to pay attention to the wind. All of which was to say, it was possible it hadn't even occurred to her that movement and wind speed might have anything to do with each other.

At any rate, Kragon had experience with a variety of beast and demon riders—those who were terrified out of their wits, those who got overexcited in their curiosity and leaned recklessly far to the side, and those who brazenly fell asleep and toppled over—so he naturally had some safety measures in place.

Reina merely continued to stare at her own feet, petrified by the thought of looking at

the world beneath them.

Humans were typically more awed than frightened by viewing the surface of the planet from great heights—it was middling altitudes that tended to induce more fear. Unfortunately, Kragon was currently in the latter. While higher altitudes might have made for less air resistance and faster travel, the cold, thin air at those heights would have been a bit much for the poor humans. The temperature dropped by two degrees centigrade for every thousand feet (roughly three hundred meters), so gaining ten thousand feet would bring you into air that was twenty degrees cooler than on the ground. When it was twenty degrees on the ground, flying at ten thousand feet would mean freezing temperatures. Factor in the wind, and you were looking at a dangerous drop in body temperature. As such, without the protection of Kragon's magic, they would probably die.

Sadly, Mile was the only one who realized just how thoughtful and considerate the elder dragon was. Of course, she could have put up a barrier herself, inside which she could also have regulated the air pressure and maintained the temperature—if only the thought had occurred to her.

Hang in there. Hang in there. Hang in there... With an elder dragon's speed on our side, we'll be there in no time. Hang in there. Hang in there. Hang in there...

They would be there soon. This was the thought with which Reina was steeling herself. But of course, for every departure, there is a return. For every journey away, there is a road home. For better or worse, *that* thought had not yet occurred to her...

CHAPTER 112

THE DEMON VILLAGE

A SHORT WHILE AFTER TAKE-OFF, Reina finally managed to calm herself down and was behaving relatively normally. She had never been particularly afraid of heights to begin with—it was just that she'd been a bit traumatized by her previous aerial experience. Thankfully, Mile managed to assuage her fears by telling her about Kragon's magic barrier and the fact that she herself had wind magic that could be used to slow a fall for a safe landing, should the worst happen. So, by the time Kragon landed and it was time to disembark, Reina was back to her usual self.

She would probably be fine for the return trip, at this rate.

In any event, now that Kragon's barrier and Mile's warming magic had both ceased to protect them, Reina had a different concern to voice.

“Man, it’s cold out here.”

Thanks to Kragon, the Crimson Vow had now crossed the mountains into the northernmost reaches of the continent, near the home of the demons.

“That’s because we’re not just pretty far north, *past* the mountains, but we’re also at a pretty high elevation,” Mile replied.

“Okay, but what does that have to do with it being cold?”

“Huh?”

The other three looked at Reina askance. Setting aside Mile, who was exceptional in having learned so much in her previous life, Mavis and Pauline had gained a reasonable amount of knowledge from their general studies—knowledge that Reina seemed to lack. This was not to say that she was stupid or ignorant, just that as the daughter of a merchant and of a noble, respectively, Pauline and Mavis had both been educated on the attributes of other kingdoms. The climate of each region had a huge impact on what sort of goods could be produced there, harvest yields, and the distribution of certain animals and monsters. They might not understand the science

behind it all, but the pair of them knew, whether as objective fact or merely rule of thumb, that it got colder the farther north you went or the higher in elevation you climbed.

Reina, on the other hand, was merely the daughter of a one-cart peddler. Understanding the climates of far-flung locales was simply not relevant to someone who only did business with neighboring kingdoms at *best*, never mind far-off places. The same was true for most hunters. At most, those crossing the mountains in winter might reluctantly end up purchasing some extra gear on the recommendation of veteran hunters, guild staff, or the old-timers who ran the gear shops—and then return later to thank them tearfully for saving their lives.

It was normal for people of the time to assume that the higher you climbed a mountain, the warmer it would get, as you got closer to the sun. This was a world where most people only left their own village to travel to the nearest town maybe three times in their whole life. It was no wonder there might be some gaps in their knowledge.

It just so happened that, in this respect, Reina's education had not gone beyond that of the average commoner.

“*Wait, s-so you're telling me that places like this are cold even in summer?*”

Reina was flabbergasted.

“W-would that mean it's better to move somewhere closer to the mountains or farther north when the worst of the summer heat is sapping you?”

“Yes, that's why the nobles all have summer homes.”

“Oh man! I *was* wondering why so many nobles travel so far in the summers! I knew that a lot of them built vacation homes by the sea or near lakes, but I had no idea that was why...”

As Mile explained all this, Reina was particularly shocked to realize she was the only one in the party who had not been aware of it. It was quite a blow to her pride, particularly since she'd considered herself fairly knowledgeable thanks to traveling the surrounding kingdoms with her father, commuting from town to town as a hunter, and being an avid reader.

“It's one thing for Mavis, growing up in a noble house, but how could there be

something that Mile and Pauline know that I don't?" she grumbled.

"Listen," Pauline protested. "As a merchant's daughter, I've received a fairly robust education! As for *Mile*..."

"Now hang on! I'm a noble's daughter, too!" Mile raged.

All three growled at one another.

"Um, pardon me, but what should I be doing...?" Kragon timidly cut in.

"Oh right, sorry!" replied the four.

It was mainly out of courtesy to Mile that this elder dragon had carried them on his back all the way north. Still, it was utterly rude of them to ignore him to squabble with one another.

"Th-thank you for all your help. We'll handle things from here on out, so you can go ahead and head home."

"But how will you get back?"

"Ah. Right..."

Traveling by air had taken but a blink of an eye, but a journey on foot would take many, many days. The only positive was that they would be able to transport anything they hunted along the way whole, without spoilage... However, once humans knew comfort, they could no longer withstand hardship.

"Please come back to pick us up!" they said in chorus, all bowing their heads.

"But how should we call you when we're ready to leave?" asked Mile.

Indeed, this was an issue. This planet did have an ionosphere, but there were no wireless devices or any other such conveniences, and Mile could not utilize the nanomachines for this kind of task which was, they said, "outside of their jurisdiction." It made sense when you thought about it: Your average elder dragon was only at an authorization level 2, so the nanomachines could not speak to them. According to the nanos, they would have to be at least an authorization level 7. The beastfolk would not share the method they used to contact the dragons either, leaving the Crimson Vow

without any means to do so. The four thought hard...

"Oh! I know!" gasped Mile suddenly. "What if I blew an ultrasonic flute one time for Berdetice, twice to summon Shelala, and three times for you?"

"Ahl-truh-sahn-ik? What does that mean?"

Unfortunately, this was not a concept with which the dragon was familiar.

"That's like that sound Fenrir could hear but no humans could—like from your stories, right?" asked Reina.

"But isn't it more difficult for those sounds to travel? Especially with obstacles in the way?" Mavis wondered.

"And could a dragon even hear those sounds to begin with?" Pauline chimed in, the three of them all far more informed than Kragon, thanks to Mile's tales.

"It's *fine!* Don't sweat the details!" said Mile.

"This is definitely more than just a detail!"

No one was quite sure if Mile's proposal was simply a joke, but in any event, it was swiftly rejected.

* * *

"Well, I'll just be waiting somewhere around here then..."

"Sorry for all the trouble!"

Eventually, it was decided that Kragon, who said he was willing to wait "a few days," would simply remain in the area, kicking back and picking fights with strong-looking monsters to kill the time. When the members of the Crimson Vow were ready to leave, they merely had to give the signal—three firebombs skyward—and he would come running. Mile had proposed this instead of the usual fireballs because it would be more obvious from a distance, and should Kragon happen to be sleeping or otherwise occupied at the time, it would almost certainly get his attention. Between the flames, the sound of the explosion, and the magical shock waves firebombs released when let off into the sky without obstructions, the result would be immediately noticeable to

any elder dragon.

Kragon had offered to guide them directly to the demon village, seeing as he knew it well, but the members of the Crimson Vow vetoed this immediately. No matter how accustomed the villagers might be to visits from elder dragons, it might make things awkward if the Crimson Vow showed up on the back of one. The hunters had no problem with relying on the dragon's influence should any unnecessary conflicts arise, but they would prefer things didn't go in that direction to start.

Their first contact had to be natural and friendly—as their mistress desired.

"To be fair," Pauline pointed out, "we already met some demons at that second set of ruins, where we encountered the Scavengers, but we beat them pretty soundly then..."

"And I guess, to be fair," Mavis added, "the second time we met them was at the third set of ruins in the Albarn Empire, but we mostly talked to the beastfolk then, not the demons, so I guess that doesn't really count."

As they both acknowledged, neither of the incidents really would have fallen into the category of a proper "first contact."

"It's *fine!*" said Mile. "Don't sweat the details!" As usual, she did not seem particularly concerned about the little things... or even the big things.

* * *

"Halt!"

After hiking some distance in the direction that Kragon had pointed them in, the Crimson Vow were spotted by a demon lookout. Though they could not see the individual in question, he was likely peering down at them from somewhere in the treetops. Not wishing to start any unnecessary fights, the Crimson Vow did as they were told.

"You dare to trespass upon the kingdom of the demons?! Identify yourselves!"

Not only were they (apparently) two children and two just-barely-adults, but they were also slender young ladies, obviously not hiding any bulky muscles beneath their clothing or gear. It was rare for a human to get the better of a demon when it came to magic, and a guard such as this one, prepared not just to spot intruders but also to

dispatch them if necessary, would find them easy pickings—even if he was technically outnumbered. If nothing else, he was a trained demon warrior, whereas they were but four weak humans. He would have been well within his rights to underestimate them.

Still, that did not mean he would let his guard down. Not one inch. An opponent like this would be akin to a grizzled combat veteran and, as such, was to be treated with the utmost caution.

The four of them had somehow made it through these mountains, home to formidable monsters, on foot and unscathed. They showed no signs of fatigue, their gear and clothing marked by neither dirt nor damage. Anyone who would underestimate such a foe would not live long, and this man likely wouldn't have been put solely in charge of this post if he'd been such a person. Quite the opposite—he'd been charged with protecting the villagers' lives. He was a professional through and through, not just skilled in combat but with sharp judgment and acumen as well.

"Wha—? I know that demons live around here, but this isn't like, a kingdom or anything. Not even a fief or a—*ungh!*"

Pauline clapped her hand over Mile's mouth before she could say something truly egregious.

"We are aware that this is where the demon folk reside," said Mavis as amiably as possible, hoping to move the proceedings forward peacefully, "but we do not mean to intrude..."

The lookout, however, was having none of it. "No matter your intentions, intruders are intruders!"

In fairness, it was likely no humanoid had ever traveled here with good intentions before. No politicians or emissaries would make such a trek. The only outsiders the demons ever saw would have been blackhearted merchants looking to turn a quick coin, or those of otherwise criminal intent. But what put this lookout most on guard was that the hunters had somehow managed to arrive without being caught in any of the village's numerous layers of protection. It should have been impossible for anyone to make it to him, the village's final line of defense, without detection.

Seeing that the man had no intention of regarding them as anything other than suspicious characters, Mavis was forced to break out a weapon she had hoped to keep

sheathed—a previously discussed final measure:

“Um, I was invited by Reltobert, the swordsman...”

“What?!”

The lookout was suddenly lost for words. Mavis had initially assumed this would be a futile gambit—no matter how small their numbers were, it was not as though this was the only demon village. It would be ridiculous to assume that this lookout knew the names of every single demon who lived in the region.

“W-wait—Reltobert the swordsman? *He* invited you?! You... y-you *are* a woman... right? Th-this can’t be...”

However, her words had had a great impact. Apparently, Reltobert was a figure of some note. Mavis also sensed something *else* folded into the man’s surprise.

“Oh, um, I wasn’t implying that you don’t look like a woman or anything! I was just thrown a bit off because, well, Reltobert’s lack of interest in women is actually the reason he’s so infamous. I intended no affront!” the man hurriedly apologized. He must have read something in Mavis’s expression and gathered that, woman or no, this was an odd way to speak to a human invader he was meant to be repelling. Perhaps he wasn’t such a bad guy after all.

“Oh, er...” Mavis felt she should clarify that she was definitely not this man’s lover; however, this seemed to be neither the time nor the place.

“We also got acquainted with Zawin, their commander,” said Reina, recalling the man who had been acting as the demons’ leader. She had received an invitation herself but remembered neither the name of that young man nor of his sister... Actually, she wasn’t sure she’d even gotten their names in the first place.

Mile and Pauline, meanwhile, had received *no* solicitations.

“What?! You know Zawin, too?! I see... so you truly are friends...”

It was a little odd that they just so happened to be acquainted with two useful parties—but looking at it another way, it made sense that Kragon would carry them to the same settlement that had contracted the elder dragons in their investigation.

"Understood," said the man. "If those two have given you their approval, then I suppose you are worthy of my trust, humans or no. Worthy individuals can be said to exist even among goblin kind, so surely the percentage of decent humans must be higher than zero..."

It sounded terrible when he said it like that, but perhaps it was the easiest way for a demon to reason that there were at least a few good eggs among the humans.

"There's no such thing as a 'worthy' goblin!" snapped Reina, stuck on the comparison—a comparison she would have been wiser to let slide.

The lookout, however, simply ignored her protest.

After a few more moments of apparently deep thought, he appeared from out of the trees. "I suppose you should follow me..."

They had been unable to pinpoint the man's location during the initial questioning, but as the exchange had gone on, the Crimson Vow had been able to guess his general position. Thus, none of the girls were startled by his sudden appearance.

"Just a moment," said the man, scrunching up his face for some reason.

"Huh? Wh-whoa!" Now Mile was shocked, for some reason of her own. "Wait, you..."

"Huh?" Now it was the demon's turn for surprise.

"Wh-what is going on...?"

"W-wait—you sense it!?" said the demon, his eyes widening in shock.

Mile still seemed bewildered but managed to reply, "Y... yes. I just felt some sort of pulse in my head..."

"Pulse? What's that mean?"

The demon did not understand the term Mile was using—and really, what she meant was that she had heard something akin to a square wave. "Pulse," which typically meant something more like "a signal that causes an acute reaction at short range," probably wasn't the right word, anyway.

"Um, it's like, a signal that reverberates inside your head..." she explained.

The demon's eyes narrowed silently, fearful.

"Uh, um—I, uh..." Mile stammered as he continued to look at her in silence. Something had clearly shifted in him—for the worse.

"...Never mind that," he finally said. "Just wait right there."

The members of the Crimson Vow breathed a sigh of relief. Thankfully, things still seemed to be on track. Despite his request for them to wait, however, the man did not appear to be doing anything. Odd. Even so, the girls did just as they were told.

After a time, two people—demons, judging by the horns on their heads—appeared.

"What's up, Laraque? You sent the signal that something unexpected had occurred... Wait, who the hell are they? Are those *humans*?!"

"Oh! A signal!" Mile shouted. "That explains what that dial tone—er, demon tone?—was about!"

"Huh?!" cried the two newcomers.

The first demon did not share their surprise, having already gathered that Mile was somehow able to pick up on their methods of communication. Still, this was clearly a shock to the other two.

"H-how in the hell do you know about that?!"

"Capture them! Don't let them escape!!"

"Whoa now, hang on there. Calm down, guys..."

"And just how could we be calm at a time like this?!"

* * *

After some commotion, the first demon, apparently named Laraque, explained the

situation to the other two. Firstly, these humans had received an invitation from Reltobert and also knew Zawin. Secondly, while it might seem like someone had leaked knowledge of the demons' secret mode of communication to them, it was really just that this little girl was apparently capable of receiving their signals.

"What?! Is she a half-demon?!"

"No! Even if she were a demon-human mix, she shouldn't be able to pick up on our signals without horns. So, how can this be?"

The three demons were silent.

"Seriously, Mile, why is it that wherever we go, everyone thinks you're some kind of crossbreed?" sighed Reina.

"How should *I* know?!" Mile griped.

At least this time, the accusation had not been attributed to the fact that her chest was "so modest" or her "smelling like an elf." By comparison, being deemed suspicious because she could intercept demon transmissions was rather reassuring.

"Anyway, both of my parents were from the main houses of two noble lines, both of which have been purely human for at least ten generations! Human nobles are particularly concerned with their bloodlines, after all..."

"Wh...?"

The demons seemed to be aware of this fact, which only left them all the more bewildered.

"The problem here is that this girl's got no horns. Even among *our* kind, not everyone can sense these signals, but the horns are definitely crucial. No matter how weak your demon blood is, it'd be impossible for a hornless..."

Hornless. Hornless... Where have I heard that term before? Mile pondered. *The Hundred Demons Empire? No, that's not it. Um, uhhh... Oh! That's it! Voltes V!!!*

For some reason, she looked quite pleased with herself.

"Um, so does this mean you discriminate against those without horns?"

"Huh?"

The three demons seemed baffled at her question.

"Why would we discriminate against someone without horns?" asked one.

"You mean in the way that you humans discriminate against your own kind for things like having no hair, or being short, or a bit rotund, or flat in the chest?"

"Please forgive us!!!!"

The demons could not hide their bewilderment as the four girls suddenly fell to their knees, groveling in apology...

* * *

"Okay, I leave it to you!"

"You got it!"

After entrusting his post to one of the other two demons who had arrived on the scene, Laraque began guiding the Crimson Vow to his village. The other latecomer was sent ahead to inform the villagers. Showing up unannounced with a human—or rather, four of them—in tow was certain to cause a commotion; thus, the need for a bit of forewarning. As the Crimson Vow were walking at a normal pace, the runner had plenty of time to inform the village chief and elder, other persons of influence, and of course Reltobert, Zawin, and the siblings.

Laraque could have chosen to leave the roles of runner and guide to the other two and stuck to his own post as lookout, but someone was going to have to explain what had happened when he first spotted the girls. More importantly, this just seemed more exciting than sitting out in the woods doing nothing. There was no way he was going to pass up on this chance to be at the center of the action. The other two were perfectly capable of receiving and sending magical transmissions, so they would be just as well suited for the lookout role. It was precisely why they had already been on standby, to respond in the case of emergency reinforcements being necessary.

Both of the others had looked like they wished to say something when Laraque declared he would guide the girls into the village, but he pretended not to notice. Again, no one would willingly choose the boring job of keeping watch over something

more exciting. And the demons being left to keep the watch had been given that boring job instead of the more interesting one. Who wouldn't be put out by that?

Still, this was a sacred duty, one crucial to the survival of their race. The demon who had been asked to take over as lookout gritted his teeth, but managed to feign a smile and accept his role graciously. Clearly, he was a man of outstanding character.

"You better tell me everything later, Laraque..." he hissed, eyes full of spite.

"O-of course!" said Laraque, shrinking.

"And I expect the next round of drinks to be on you..."

"O... of course!"

...Or perhaps not.

* * *

Laraque struck up a conversation with the girls on the way to the village, hoping to glean a little more information about the strangers.

"You said that Reltobert invited you here, but exactly what sort of relationship do you have with him? And why would he extend that invitation?"

The four were silent. This was a difficult question, one that only Mavis could answer.

"Um, well, we're... really just two people who battled each other in a sword fight. A-and as for why, well, I guess he just uh... wanted to see me again...?"

"Oh ho!"

Reltobert himself had not said anything specific enough for Mavis to be certain of her position. She didn't want to exaggerate the nature of their relationship and cause trouble—particularly since she'd really only invoked the invitation to help facilitate Mile's desire to visit the village. She hadn't wanted to accept Reltobert's invitation on her *own* behalf—hence, her diffidence at the prospect. However, Laraque simply interpreted this as shyness on Mavis's part.

That was just how things went sometimes...

"Hmm, if Mable is the mother, and Mavis is like the dog, and Marybell is the silver rose..."

Mile began muttering something, and her words made Mavis's lips twitch.

"Denial, viral, spiral..."

Mile continued, oblivious to Mavis's reaction. And then...

"Oh! I've got it!"

Mile clapped her hands together, a light bulb practically appearing over her head.

"You've... got what?" asked Mavis, barely suppressing a smile.

"The names of those siblings! The brother was interested in Reina, and the sister extended the invitation for him! I think their names were Merril and 'Big Brother Chirel.' Eh heh heh! My powers of recollection astound even me!"

"Why—of all this—would *that* be what you can recall?!?!" Reina screamed, going red in the face.



"My! Do we have another possible half-demon here? Eep!" The demon began to mutter to himself before his face suddenly twisted under Reina's glare. She looked as though she was about to kill *several* men. The other members of the Crimson Vow knew this to be just another charming facet of her tsundere ways, but it truly seemed to put the fear of death in the demon man.

"There, there now," said Mile, trying to pacify Reina, which only enraged her further.

And so the Crimson Vow continue toward the demon village, totally falling apart as usual...

* * *

"We're finally here, the demon village..."

Mile halted in place, her eyes sparkling with delight. To be frank, the village itself was incredibly ordinary. It was not as though the demons *never* had any contact with humans. The general construction techniques were the same as what you might see anywhere, unlike in the elven village, where the buildings were crafted to fit seamlessly in with the natural surroundings. Here, the size and shapes of the houses were much like those in human settlements, the demons themselves being not so different in form. In fact, it appeared that the only *real* difference was the height of the doorways, perhaps to accommodate those with particularly large horns.

The area the village occupied was fairly large, not so much so as to be thought of as a town, but certainly big enough to house a decently sized population. Of course, it made sense that the dragons would have chosen a larger settlement to work with, as a smaller village would not have the available manpower to send numerous people off into human-occupied lands.

When they had visited the elven village, the other members of the Crimson Vow had been fascinated, dying to know more about how the elusive elves lived, but they had no such interest in the demons. This time, they were merely tagging along with Mile.

Mile, meanwhile, seemed to be almost unreasonably excited. Perhaps she thought that she needed to make her joy at the situation especially obvious, given that the others had come all the way here solely to satisfy her whim. In truth, her main reason for coming out to the village was to further her current life's work: determining the elder dragons' intent—though she already had a fair idea of what it might be. She was not

yet ready to reveal her true motivation to the rest of her party, so she kept up the facade that this trip was merely for her own frivolous interests—a sightseeing tour.

“Right this way,” said Laraque as he led them into the village, paying no mind to Mile’s little performance. He ushered them toward a building that resembled an assembly hall, community center, or something of the sort.

* * *

“For what purpose would a group of humans, especially children and youths barely of age, make their way across these perilous mountains?”

Though the runner would already have informed the village’s leaders that the Crimson Vow had traveled to the village by invitation, the distance they’d crossed and the effort they’d expended to get here naturally raised questions. It was a long and dangerous journey from the closest human settlement, and to make the trip just to accept an invitation from someone they had met only once—an enemy, no less—seemed extremely odd.

The village chief, elder, and other local leaders sat before the Crimson Vow. A short distance away sat Zawin, the leader of the investigation corps, looking rather put out. Beside him were Reltobert the swordsman and the two siblings, Merril and Chirel. The first demon gentleman they had met—whom they were never properly introduced to—and the one who had fallen victim to Pauline’s hot magic were nowhere to be seen. (The Crimson Vow could guess why.)

Noticing this, Pauline seemed rather chipper... something the others unanimously did not dare speculate about.

“So, it was my invitation that brought you here?” asked Reltobert, seeming quite moved.

“No,” Mavis swiftly replied. “We came because Mile wanted to come.”

“What? But according to Merril, you came here to see me...”

“That was just the excuse we gave so that we could get in here—er, just one of the reasons,” said Reina, swiftly correcting herself. But at this point, it was too late to take back her words, which amounted to an admission that they had lied their way into the village.

"D-dang!" Reltobert and Chirel both sighed, shoulders slumping in disappointment.

"This is ridiculous!" shouted one of the leaders. "We summoned all the top brass because you two said these human girls had come to be your brides!"

Ah, the eternal folly of a man who had misinterpreted the situation. Suddenly, these demons were transformed into the sort of cringeworthy fellows who would blindly believe that a woman was in love with them and repeatedly badger her with flirtation or even resort to stalker-level behavior.

"W-well, it is true that we accepted their invitations..." Mile offered, hoping to cut the pair some slack. "But we also came here for sightseeing purposes."

"And that's reason enough for you to cross these dangerous mountains?" asked the chief.

"Ah ha ha..." Mile laughed nervously.

The chief continued his questioning. "So then, where have you come from?"

"Ah, well, the kingdom of Tils."

"What?"

"Where the heck is that?"

"I've never heard of that country!"

Their reaction was typical for this world. Most who inhabited villages like these didn't even know the names of any lands more distant than the nearest few powerful nations. Some of them had traveled far on duty for the elder dragons, but they would have been investigating ruins that were far from any human settlement, and, therefore, would not have interacted with their kind while there. Neither the ones who had traveled or the village leaders, who had likely stayed home, could be expected to learn the human names of this or that region. Furthermore, as they were shuttled to these far-off places by the elder dragons, they had not looked upon any maps...

"D-don't tell me you've come all the way from the south of the continent..." the village elder muttered in disbelief. He, at least, seemed to have some awareness of geography.

"Yes," Mile replied bluntly, "we came from the capital of that kingdom."

"What in the world?!?!"

That was really a bit—no, incredibly—far to travel on a mere "sightseeing trip."

"R-ridiculous! No one would travel such a distance on some casual excursion! I don't care who you are, or where you come from, no one travels days—weeks!—through such perilous terrain to visit with a race that frankly wishes little to do with your kind! Now, state your true intentions! No, wait, y-you're after the holy maiden, aren't you?!"

"*Holy maiden?*" echoed the voices of the Crimson Vow.

"Ah..."

The villagers all sighed in disappointment. Clearly the Crimson Vow had not even heard of this person before, which meant their elder had stumbled into offering up some brand-new information.

Though they could not be said to be on good terms, the accepted narrative was that demons and humans were equals, both bound by treaties of nonaggression and lawfulness towards one another. This made it unlikely that the demons would suddenly order the slaughter of a group of young girls merely to protect the village's secrets—but not *impossible*. Should the villagers deem the protection of their secrets more important than the risk of violating those treaties...

The Crimson Vow did not let it show in their expressions or movements, but they were silently preparing themselves for a fight to break out at any moment.

Still, Zawin seemed to notice the way their grips shifted on their staves. "We have our own pride and dignity," he called from the sidelines. "We would never do anything that would shame us in the faces of our ancestors or that we could not proudly present to the Goddess as proof of our right to be allowed into the halls of the divine after our deaths!"

Among all these influential individuals sat Merril, who had tagged along with the investigation party and was present as an acquaintance of the Crimson Vow—part of the cause, er, the reason, for the young hunters being there. Merril was lower in rank than the others assembled, but under the circumstances, no one would fault her for acting as an intermediary between the two sides.

A holy maiden... Mile thought, ignoring Zawin. I wonder if that's anything like a shrine maiden.

Though such roles had become muddled in modern Japan, technically there was a very strict stratification of holy roles at temples. However, this had neither been an area of expertise for Mile in her previous life nor something that had come up in this life in her studies as either Mile or Adele.

"Well," Mile said, "we have *got* to talk to this holy maiden person!"

"I knew it!" the elder cried.

"Knew it..." the other members of the Crimson Vow muttered.

Though their words were the same, there was a vast difference in tone and nuance...

* * *

Clearly, continuing to argue with insufficient information would only confuse the issue and get them nowhere. Once everyone finally realized this, they decided it was best to start over from scratch, beginning with introductions.

"We are the Crimson Vow, a C-rank hunting party operating out of the capital of the kingdom of Tils," Mavis announced.

As the party's leader, it was up to her to make their official introduction, but Mavis left the rest to Mile. It would be hard for any of the others to judge exactly how much they should reveal to the demon villagers. It was especially hard for anyone but Mile to determine how to explain the matter of the ruins and the golems and the Scavengers, or if that part should be omitted entirely. The rest of the party didn't even fully understand it, leaving them no choice but to entrust it to her.

"We are already fairly well aware of how the elder dragons have been contracting the beastfolk and demons to investigate various ruins. We have also interceded to prevent conflict between them and humankind. We have had dealings with the dwarves and elves, and the beastfolk, to some degree. We have something of a rapport with the elder dragons, too."

"Just who the hell are you?!?!"

Building a relationship between races that didn't often interact was no small feat, especially when it was frequently a multiple-day trip between settlements. It was tricky to cultivate friendly relations between two groups that might otherwise be ill-disposed, if not outright antagonistic. Even if their top officials and diplomats wished to establish a rapport, they might face opposition from others in the group—in the worst-case scenario, an ill-meaning individual might even strike out and undermine the whole operation with violence or murder.

It was impossible for a group of little girls to cultivate the kind of network Mile had described.

"How is it you have your fingers in all these pies?! You've created a relationship with the elder dragons?" The elder demanded to know more.

"Well, one thing sort of led to another... Actually, Mr. Zawin there would have given a report of our encounter, yes? So you know about that. And then there was the matter of the caverns in the Empire..."

"That was all you?!"

During the incident with the Scavengers in the Empire, the Crimson Vow had primarily interacted with the beastfolk and Kragon, only interfacing briefly with the demons and never engaging in direct conversation with them. It made sense that the name of their party had never made it back to the demon village in connection with that incident. The elder dragons didn't seem to entrust the demons and beastfolk they contracted for these investigations with much information, and the demons and beastfolk didn't seem to be talking to each other, either. In fact, it seemed the elder dragons preferred to keep it all on the down-low—which meant, of course, that it must be important.

"Now that I recall, there was a mention of four young human girls..."

Though they wouldn't know what had happened inside the caves, apparently the demons had gotten some word of what happened *outside* them.

"Hm? Wait. Four young human girls? Four young girls. Four. *Four*... Oh!"

The village chief began muttering something, as if deep in thought, and then suddenly went pale.

"W-w-w-w-wait! Elder, are th-th-th-they..."

“Hm? What? Spit it out!”

The elder did not seem to be making the connection, but the chief’s words clearly rang a bell for one of the other leaders in the room.

“Could they be...?”

“Those in the missive from the elder dragons...”

“Oh...”

Oh right, thought Reina, they did say they were going to notify everyone about us, “for safety’s sake”...

So they did, thought Mile.

They did say that, thought Mavis.

Right, now I remember, thought Pauline.

“Pardon,” said the chief. “Could you give us your names once more?”

“I am Mavis von Austien, leader of the Crimson Vow!”

“I am the Crimson Reina, also of the Crimson Vow!”

“I am Pauline, likewise!”

“And I am the fabulo... I am Mile!”

Naturally, Mile refrained from launching any explosions or flashes or smoke bombs, lest the demons mistake it for an attack.

Hearing these introductions, the demons fell to their knees and cried as one, “*Please forgive uuuusss!!!*”

Wow, Mile thought absently, dogeza-style apologies really have gotten popular these days.

* * *

"Well, I see then."

The chief and company had realized that the Crimson Vow were the so-called "calamity" whom even the elder dragons gave a wide berth. They had all been warned: "Do not meddle with them, do not defy them, be friendly and accommodating in all matters involving them, and simply pray for their swift departure." They hurriedly whispered this information to the elder, who then abruptly changed his demeanor, freely giving the girls any demon lore that they wished to know. The members of the Crimson Vow were aware that this only included information that was safe for them to hear, but they certainly weren't going to bully more out of him.

Having heard the demons' legends, the girls were largely unimpressed.

"They're pretty much the same as the other races' folklore," sighed Mile.

"But the contents were pretty biased..." said Mavis.

"No wonder the humanoids can't stand them," pondered Pauline.

"What's with all the demon supremacy?" muttered Reina.

In a word, the legends were unpleasant. The stories themselves weren't uninteresting—the components and storytelling techniques were comparable to those of other races, with just as many myths and heroes and such, all things that would be perfectly fine to pass down to demon children. However, there was quite a bit of 'Let's go demons!' and 'Down with the outsiders!' talk. A bit *too* much.

As Reina had noted, the demons clearly had a supremacist streak. Their legends betrayed a clear distaste for all humanoids—human, elven, and dwarven. It was frankly a wonder that they even got along with the beastfolk. Of course, given that the beastfolk also faced discrimination from the humanoids, it stood to reason that they would prefer the demons. Said demons clearly still looked down on their beastfolk counterparts but at least refrained from outright enslavement, ostracization, or harassment.

Plus, it wasn't as though the beastfolk were the *only* ones the demons scorned. To the demons, all other creatures that shared the same basic form—humans, elves, dwarves, beastfolk, fairies, and more—were lesser beings. The beastfolk had to find this preferable to being singled out as uniquely less-than.

"I would never want to deal with a group like that," said Reina.

"Same here! I would avoid them if I could," Mavis agreed.

"I mean, I guess I could put up with them as long as they honored their contracts and paid all their dues..." mused Pauline.

"And what was with that whole creation thing? 'Discouraged by their continued failures in the form of the elves, dwarves, beasts, and fairies, the gods learned from their mistakes and finally achieved success. Those were the demons.' An ultimate life-form? The perfect creation? Are they the Pillar Men?! Er, I shouldn't even be thinking about them... But really, a race to rule the world? Does this elitism know no bounds?!"

They had all seemed so earnest in their viewpoints. But every demon the Crimson Vow had encountered at the excavation sites had been perfectly polite, even when antagonistic.

"How could these stories be so utterly wretched?!"

"They're just like that elder dragon brat... That stupid child..."

"Pauline, that's not really a nice way of putting it..."

"Ah ha ha..."

The chief and elder, meanwhile, were red in the face and trembling. The girls really were being a bit *too* frank with their opinions—and right in front of them! Normally, those would be fighting words. However, it would be unreasonable to enact violence upon a group of weak humans, all female and incredibly young at that. If the other races found out, they would never live it down... Not to mention it would require violating an elder dragon's decree in the first place.

The demons were reluctant to defy the dragons in any way. It would be one thing if they could simply pay no mind to the warning that, should their words be ignored, "The world will fall to ruin... or at least, this settlement shall be destroyed, and we elder dragons shall do naught to come to your aid," but they were all aware that the elder dragons were not the sort to say such a thing in jest.

"D... d-do you not think you may have spoken a *bit* out of turn?" The elder's words were still polite and his tone respectful, but he was trembling with rage, veins bulging

on his forehead.

Oh, he's mad.

The Crimson Vow had no intention of purposefully angering the demons. Nor did they have any desire to torment an old man. They simply hadn't felt the need to go along with the ridiculous demon supremacist legends and had gotten a bit carried away as they talked. The legends *were* rather distasteful...

"Well, I guess that stuff isn't really all that important."

"Wha...?"

The elder was now less enraged than stunned by how flippantly Mile could brush off the protests that he had so desperately fought to keep civil.

"Hmm..." Mile appeared to be deep in thought. It seemed that her attention had moved on to something else entirely. "I would really love to meet this holy maiden that you mentioned."

The demons all fell deeply silent. No one said a word.

"Um, so, the holy maiden...?"

More silence.

"The priest—"

"We heard you the *first* time!" the elder shouted. He seemed unsure of what to tell her, caught between a desire to protect the holy maiden and his fear of violating the elder dragons' warning. "Hrmm..."

The elder, who had unfortunately divulged a secret without being asked, had been the instrument of his own unmaking. The other demons could only stare soberly at the old man. It was clear to Mile that he wished to keep this person's existence a secret, but she wasn't about to let something like that stop her. Still, she could cut him a break for now.

"I'm sure that the holy maiden has her own affairs to attend to, so tomorrow would be fine, too."

“.....”

“Please?”

“.....”

“Pretty, pretty please!!!”

“F-fine...”

Got him!

Mile was persistent in a way that she could not have begun to imagine in her previous life as Misato. Apparently, she had left all her humility—along with the version of herself who would keep her own desires *to herself*—back on Earth. She still hated to make a spectacle of herself, but in this life, she was going to do what she wanted to do and say what she wanted to say. If she were to live exactly the way she lived the last time, this precious second chance would be all for naught. So, it was fine to be a little crafty—and more than a little forceful—now and then.

Still, the vibes are getting kind of awkward in here now... I didn't come to pick a fight with anyone, Mile thought, in a rare show of social awareness. *There must be some way to ease the tension a bit.*

“Hey, I know! Let's continue discussing this over some food. We'll provide the refreshments!”

“Huh?”

The Crimson Vow did not appear to have any luggage other than the clothes on their backs. And yet, here Mile was offering to provide a meal. The villagers were understandably bewildered.

* * *

“Listen! I merely wished to extend an invitation to Lady Mavis, and asked Merril to forward the message! There's nothing to misunderstand here!”

“W-well, I n-never extended any invitation! At least, I had no idea that Merril ever went to see Miss Reina, but I, um... I suppose, as a man, I must take responsibility...”

"Don't make it sound like we've been up to anything together!!!" Reina yelled, face going as crimson as her nickname.

Reltobert was one thing, but Chirel's words could definitely be misconstrued. As a pure and upstanding young maiden, she could not let such a thing happen.

From there, a sort of banquet was arranged, with Mile providing precooked dishes and drinks—including alcohol, of course—from her inventory. The villagers were stunned speechless, both at Mile's magic and the dishes she had served up, still piping hot. They might have been suspicious, but this was also a remote region where food was scarce, and the demons had concluded these little visitors had no reason to poison them. No one would be stupid enough to waste the time and energy required to travel such a great distance in such small numbers on something so petty.

And so, as the villagers flocked to the meal, not one of them—not the elder, the chief, the leaders, Zawin, Reltobert, or the siblings—questioned a single thing.

Given the demons' natural affinity for magic, a skill like Mile's inventory, or storage magic, was far more common than it was among humans. It was because of this that they were able to carry goods from human settlements across such long distances and maintain a decent quality of life in these remote mountains. Thus, while they were stunned at the *capacity* of this little human girl's storage, there was no reason to be too suspicious... Well, no reason aside from the fact that this food had come out still warm and had not spilled from its platters or been otherwise ruined.

Even those minor doubts, however, seemed to vanish the moment they tasted the food. Mile's cooking was in a whole different dimension from the cuisine typical to this world, whether it be because of the preparation, the quality of the ingredients, the techniques, or the spices and flavorings on which she spared no expense. Mile's cooking skills were a bit mediocre by Japanese standards, though at least above average for a typical high schooler. Food prepared with fresh ingredients in traditional Japanese style, however, could not help but excite the palates of the residents of an area of such scarcity.

As everyone but Merril and the members of the Crimson Vow imbibed the strong spirits that Mile provided, the villagers grew increasingly intoxicated.

"How pitiful my grandchildren are... Why, when *I* was a lad, I had more women than I could—"

"Grandfather!"

Merril hurriedly interrupted the elderly chief as he began to launch into some probably exaggerated, likely fabricated, and definitely disrespectful tales about his former conquests. Honestly, what was he thinking, telling such tales to an audience made up entirely of young women?

"Wait, those brats are the chief's grandchildren?!" Reina shouted reflexively.

Of course—it wouldn't make much sense for Merril to get to ride on the back of Shelala, the young female elder dragon, if she were just your average villager. If she were the chief's granddaughter, on the other hand, it wouldn't be at all strange if she'd gotten to chat with Shelala, who was hanging around with Berdetice, as some kind of cultural exchange. After all, Shelala was also the elder dragon chief's daughter. Shelala would have been excited by what Merril told her and more than happy to help. This also explained why Chirel would have been entrusted with a task as important as joining the elder dragons when he had only barely reached manhood.

Regardless, now that the booze had softened their hosts' moods, the Crimson Vow were able to carry on a relatively peaceful conversation with the demons...

* * *

After the meeting was done, the chief offered to let the Crimson Vow stay the night in his home, but they declined, opting instead to put up a tent in a field just beside the village. The chief may have been buttered up by the drinks they had offered, but to hunters, staying in the home of someone they had just met, who wasn't particularly friendly toward them in the first place, meant a nervous night of being unable to let down their guard. They were fully aware that it was common practice for a chief to invite visitors to stay with him, and even that it was considered mildly rude to decline this invitation, but they had to do what they had to do.

Anyway, they were already insisting on meeting with this holy maiden, which the demons seemed loath to allow. There was no telling whether the demons might slip something into their food or drink, or even attack them in the night. They could have slept safely thanks to Mile's barriers and alarm spells, but it was still no small thing to

relax right in the middle of enemy territory. Camping in the field was far more enticing to the Crimson Vow. They could rig as many alarms as they needed, and should any spells start flying, it was less likely that any villagers would get caught in the crossfire.

That said, the *main* reason they declined the chief's invitation was that they wouldn't be able to set up a portable bathhouse or toilets inside his home...

"So was that satisfactory for you?" asked Reina.

"Yes!" Mile replied, beaming. "I didn't get to unravel any mysteries, but our conversation has helped me put some of the pieces in order. Plus, even if there wasn't much information to be had, even being able to confirm that is important in and of itself. A firm 'no' is still a good answer."

"You're very right," said Mavis. "Knowing that an enemy army isn't present in an area is as important of a piece of intel as knowing they are." This was in line with the wisdom her father and brothers had taught her.

Pauline then asked, "So, what *did* you get from the stories they told us today?"

"About that..." Mile began. "First off, their stories are pretty much in accordance with what I've heard from the other races, except that there was far more detail regarding the race in question here, the demons. But to be honest, the bulk of that was—"

"*A bunch of self-important nonsense!*" the other three chorused.

"Exactly. Tearing down other races and propping themselves up. And anyone who badmouths, defames, or slanders them—"

"Is just a sore loser!" finished Reina.

"A howling pup!" quipped Mavis.

"Cowards crying in the streets!" shouted Pauline.

"Precisely. People with true self-confidence might boast, but they would never speak ill of others, knowing it only diminished their own worth. The only ones who disparage others are those who have nothing to boast of. In other words..."

"Mile, are you saying that the demons actually have an inferiority complex?"

"Yes. The legends of all the other races insist that the demons are twisted things, a fallen version of the other races, whereas demon legends claim that they are the perfected form, made from the lessons learned from the other races' failures. The one throughline through both of those versions is..."

"...that the demons were made after the other races."

"Bingo! Furthermore..." Mile started, then after a dramatic pause, declared, "All the races, including the demons, are said to have been 'created.' However, humans are never included on that list. That's the same in every version of the story. Whenever they mention all the races, they always leave us out."

"Ah..." the other three sighed.

A holy maiden, Mile thought. There are no actual "gods" in this world. The only beings that would count as "gods" are the nanomachines, and the people said to have lived in the "Kingdom of the Gods" that was lost long ago. So, I can't imagine how someone could actually be "holy"...

"Well, I suppose we can think about this some more tomorrow, after we've met with this maiden or whatever," Mile said finally.

"I wonder if it'll just be some brat like that elder dragon 'leader,'" Reina cracked.

"Gods, I hope not," said Mavis with a grimace.

Pauline, who always held back from any conversation where money was not involved, merely gave a wry smile.

"Anyway, I can't wait to see what tomorrow brings," said Mile. And with that, she began the evening's story time.

* * *

"It's this way. Follow me."

The Crimson Vow trailed after the demon chief and elder, who looked visibly uncomfortable. They were accompanied by six demons all aged somewhere in their

thirties, none of whom seemed to be people of particular import. They were obviously there as a sort of guard force, to make sure the humans didn't try to lay a hand on their holy maiden. They each carried a sword or spear or short bow, and made no attempts to conceal their weapons. In other words, this was deliberate posturing to make sure the Crimson Vow didn't try any funny business.

"I guess that makes sense," Mile whispered.

"From their perspective, some armed strangers just showed up out of the blue, demanding to meet someone incredibly important to them," Pauline softly agreed.

"They couldn't possibly let us meet with her unguarded," said Reina.

"Yeah," Mavis whispered back, "this is really the only logical course of action for them. Honestly, we have to appreciate how much manpower they're sparing just for us."

It was likely that the chief and the elder, whose demon hearing was better than that of a human, could hear their hushed conversation. But they paid no mind to this, continuing to chat as they walked. It wasn't as though they were saying anything the demons shouldn't hear. The six guards walked a bit behind the Crimson Vow, far enough that they probably wouldn't be able to hear much... if their hearing was on a human level, that was.

Finally, the Crimson Vow found they had been guided to a small, ordinary-looking dwelling.

"We're here," said the elder, stopping before the door.

The hunters stopped behind him as the chief knocked on the door of the residence.

"Open up! It's me!"

Several seconds later, the door opened, and a woman in her thirties appeared.

"C-come in..."

The woman looked a tad frightened but not particularly confused or surprised to see a crowd on her doorstep. It was likely she had already been informed about the situation the day before. The group filed into her home, starting with the chief.

"W-welcome to our home..."

Within the house were a man who seemed to be the woman's husband, and a girl of around ten, who was standing behind him. They were in what seemed to be the family's living room. It had a dining table and four chairs, which wasn't nearly enough for everyone in their current party—indeed, there wasn't space for anything close to that amount of furniture. As such, they elected to stand and talk, though the little girl took a seat at the chief's urging.

"This girl is our holy maiden," explained the elder, gesturing to the seated girl. It seemed he would be in charge of the explanations from here on out. Curiously, he did not give the girl's name, only her title.

He's trying to give us as little information as possible about her, thought Mile. Even so, she had no intention of demanding that particular detail. That was not the intel she was after. She wanted to know the secrets of this world, and of these races that so closely resembled humans. No matter how peculiar a position this girl might be in, Mile wasn't especially interested in learning one individual stranger's life story.

And so, ignoring the adults, Mile turned to the—trembling, rather timid-looking—girl in the chair and said, "Hello. My name is Mile. I'm a hunter. So, I hear that you're a holy maiden?"

There wasn't a demon child around who wouldn't be guarded, even fearful, when faced with a human, whom they were taught never to trust—especially a human they had only just met for the first time. This might go double for a child whose parents had probably been prepping her since last night about what to look out for and how to be cautious around these human visitors. Still, Mile tried her best to speak casually and put the girl at ease. As for the girl...

"You will hold your tongue, rascal! What manner of lowly being do you take me for?!"

...She was not frightened of Mile in the slightest.

Before their arrival, Mile had assumed they would be meeting a naive child, swept up in the prestige of being so celebrated. Upon seeing her, she'd been certain she was dealing with a timid child, troubled by the weight of her position. But as it turned out, this young lady was something else entirely.

"A d-d-double fake out!"

Despite being accustomed to a daily dose of the plots, foreshadowing, and narrative tricks of Mile's folktales, all four of the hunters were caught wholly off guard. For once, they might be forced to admit defeat.

"Man, she is as much of a brat as that elder dragon kid..."

"One hundred percent."

"Completely."

"Ah ha ha..."

Okay, so she's not one of the forebearers...

Mile mentally tore up and discarded one of her two theories, deeming it impossible.

The girl before her was a normal demon in every way, with two cute little horns growing atop her head. Mile conclusively shelved the possibility that she might have been a still-living relic from the ancient civilization, preserved in some kind of cold storage or time-stasis field.

The passage of a few hundred years would have been one thing. But judging by the objects within the Scavengers' facility, which had been reduced to piles of red rust and twisted shapes that scarcely resembled their original state, an immense amount of time must have gone by—some orders of magnitude more than just a few centuries. It was hard to believe that the machinery in a facility like that would have been forged of the sort of low-grade iron that would rust at the slightest exposure to moisture. It might have been powered by something more efficient than nuclear energy, or by some limitless energy source like solar power, but the machinery itself had slowly decayed, clearly over the course of a very, very, very long period.

Even with cryonic sleep or a time-stasis field, the generators, auxiliary equipment, peripherals, and the capsule itself could not have survived across those tens or even hundreds of thousands of years. Furthermore, there would have been plenty of cataclysmic events during that time—seismic upheavals, volcanic activity, and other natural phenomena with the power to alter the shape of the very land. The sturdiest

facility on the planet couldn't have kept running for all that time.

Which means it must be my other theory... thought Mile as she turned to face the so-called "holy" girl, speaking decisively.

"Miss Holy Maiden, what is your authorization level?"

"Huh?"

The girl, who had been sitting so haughtily in her little chair, suddenly paused, her eyes going wide.

I'm sure that's fine to ask. No one else here will have any idea what I'm talking about, and this should prove to her that I know what I'm talking about. The two of us can have a private conversation later or ask the nanomachines to establish a remote communication channel for us. Anyway, I know I'm right. She must have a high enough authorization level to—

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"Wha...?" This was not the reply that Mile was expecting. She was stunned.

"I am asking you, what are these words you speak? This 'awthorizashun levle'? What nonsense is this?"

"Uh... uhh?! What?!"

Mile had been thrown for a loop.

"W-wait, so then what exactly is it that makes you so 'holy'?" she asked.

The girl's face shifted, as if stunned that Mile could be asking something so terribly obvious. "Well," she said, "I'm the chosen one, most favored by the gods, *obviously!*" Her affected, arrogant speech had apparently become wearisome to keep up, as she was slipping back into the register of a normal little girl. When it came down to it, she was still a child.

"Huh?"

Mile, meanwhile, seemed incapable of forming real words.

"W-well then," she finally asked, cutting to the chase, "do you communicate directly with the gods?"

"No," said the girl, "not directly with the gods but with their invisible messengers. They work directly for the gods, though, so I receive the gods' words through them. That is why *I* am the holy maiden, chosen by the gods!"

Hearing this, Mile fell deep into thought.

I suppose that interpretation isn't wrong, based on the religious views of this land... It makes sense, actually, or it would if they were in fact "messengers"...

There was a good chance she knew exactly what these so-called messengers were.

Nanos?

NO COMMENT. WE ARE NOT PERMITTED TO OFFER UP INFORMATION REGARDING OTHERS WITHOUT THEIR CONSENT.

Well, obviously!

Mile was initially taken aback at this behavior from the nanomachines. Then again, she knew they were speaking this way on purpose, and so offered up the expected punchline to their joke. She was always dutiful in such matters.

I'm assuming this falls under your restricted clauses—not showing preferential treatment to any individual and not providing information about any other forces except through the aid of search magic...

Understanding that they were circumventing those terms to offer her information in their own way, Mile silently thanked the nanomachines.

Very well. I'll see what I can find out on my own.

OUR APOLOGIES.

It's fine. The question just sort of popped into my head; I didn't really mean to ask you. Don't even worry about it.

Mile had never wished to rely on the nanomachines for every little bit of information

in the first place. Such laziness would take all the excitement out of life. She would obviously lean on them without hesitation if it were a matter of life and death, but beyond that, she tried to limit herself to petitioning them only when she was actively “using magic.”

Okay. I guess I need to ask her myself, then. Sometime when the two of us can be alone, so that no one else overhears. Got it!

A moment later...

Hey, Nanos, are you able to make the words that I'm thinking vibrate directly into that girl's eardrums?

She knew that, in theory, this was logically possible. The question was whether this would violate any of the nanomachines' permissions.

THAT IS POSSIBLE SO LONG AS WE ARE MERELY CONVEYING YOUR THOUGHTS TO HER AS WORDS AND NOT SPEAKING TO HER ON OUR OWN. IT WOULD BE AKIN TO AMPLIFICATION MAGIC OR CONVEYING SOUND WAVES THROUGH THE AIR ACROSS LONG DISTANCES WITH MAGIC... ACTUALLY, OUT OF AN ABUNDANCE OF CAUTION, WE WILL SIMPLY CALL THIS “USING MAGIC”...

Either way, it seemed it was doable. The girl seemed to be of at least authorization level 3, which permitted her to speak with the nanomachines, so Mile had figured this much would be fine.

Gotcha. Let's do this, then... Activate concealed communication magic! Form my thoughts into words and vibrate the target's eardrums in accordance. “Miss Holy Maiden, I would like to speak to you in private, away from the others. Would you mind slipping out tonight, after everyone else is fast asleep? Cough once if that's all right with you, twice if no. Oh, and by the way, you're the only one who can hear this, so please don't reply to me aloud.”

“Wh...?”

The girl's eyes suddenly went wide.

“What's the matter?” asked the man who seemed to be her father, eyeing her suspiciously, but the girl did not reply.

The others looked curious as well, though they might just be perplexed by the way Mile had been staring blankly at the holy maiden for some time, not saying a word as she sent her silent invitation. Her behavior had been suspicious, but the fact that the holy maiden now appeared frozen in shock made things all the stranger.

The girl remained stiff and unmoving. It would have been obvious to her that it was not the “messengers” speaking to her in that moment—the voice ringing in her ears not the one she had grown used to, but likely a frequency and waveform that resembled Mile’s, saying something that the messengers would never say.

Finally, she relaxed, starting to move again.

“Ha...”

“Ha?” Mile echoed, as the girl began to make some sort of sound that was definitely not the agreed upon signal.

“Ha...” she said again.

Was she perhaps trying to say something? Would it be something that would be all right for everyone else to hear? Should Mile stop her? Mile fretted about what to do, until...

“Haaaa... *choo!*”

“That’s not a cough, that’s a sneeze!!!”

“...Ahem?”

The maiden’s face reddened as she realized her mistake, and she attempted a single cough—just one. A signal of affirmation... not that there could have been any other response. She had to be fairly certain that it was not the messengers who had “spoken” to her just then but in fact the silver-haired girl standing right in front of her.

This mysterious girl, who spoke to her in the same way the messengers did, had made a petition that no one else could hear. She could not simply ignore her—not if she truly believed herself to be holy. There was nothing else she could say in front of all these people. She would simply look forward to this evening.

And so, Mile told the elder that their business was concluded here, and the Crimson

Vow made a swift retreat.

* * *

"So, what did you think?" Reina asked Mile as they sipped tea back in their tent, which had already been erected on the village outskirts.

All that the others had been aware of was that Mile and the holy maiden had shared some kind of exchange that absolutely no one else understood. Reina's curiosity was only natural.

After thinking for a time, Mile replied, "Tonight. I'm going to confirm some things later, so check back in with me then."

Naturally, she had no intention of concealing from her friends the fact that she was going to meet with the girl. She intended to go alone, but they would obviously notice if she tried to slip out of the tent, and she was not about to use sleeping magic on them in the middle of enemy territory. Even if they were somewhere safer, this would be a breach of trust and possibly dangerous, no matter how many barriers she erected to keep them safe. Doing such a thing to her own allies would be an act of aggression, or at least of foul play, and not a path that she would choose lightly. Not unless she absolutely had to.

The three of them had made an epic journey—one that had taken no time at all, thanks to Kragon, but which would have taken them months on foot—for her sake. Mile wasn't going to do any sneaking around on this trip. Plus, there was nothing wrong with letting her companions know that she intended to speak with the maiden one-on-one. On the contrary, if she only told them after the fact, they might give her a hard time for not telling them earlier. It was best that she tell them up front that she intended to have this conversation and give them the broad strokes of the results afterwards, simply omitting any portions that she couldn't share. For the moment, at least, she hoped to deceive them as little as possible.

The real fun would come later.

"For now, let's just have a look around the village!"

It was still scarcely past the second morning bell. There was plenty of time until nightfall. Plus, they had traveled all this way to a demon village. It would be a shame not to make the most of it.

"That's true," Reina agreed, "we're never going to make it all the way up here again without an elder dragon to carry us."

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! Something to talk about for years to come! Let's explore every nook and cranny!" cried Pauline.

"Yes, this should be a valuable life experience," said Mavis. "I'm sure it will come in handy, should we ever happen to run into a demon again."

"All right!" They were all in agreement.

"Okay then, we'll spend the morning looking around the village, and in the afternoon, we can explore the outskirts and the surroundings," Reina proposed. "Once we're outside the village itself, we'll see if we can find anything worth taking home with us. Sound good, everyone?"

Any hunting and gathering they might do here would be less for the sake of profit and more for their own education. Naturally, they didn't intend to do something as invasive as using Mile's search magic to overturn every rock and leaf. The demons certainly wouldn't appreciate that.

Mile, meanwhile, was simply looking forward to that night.

I wonder if she'll be able to tell me anything useful...

* * *

Late that evening, once all the village was asleep, Mile slipped out of the tent and set off on her mission. Of course, she concealed herself with magic before she left, shielding her sounds and scent, and even the vibrations of her movement. The demons were already on high alert, and with this strange tent now erected outside of their village, there were sure to be guards on patrol even after the majority of the population lay sound asleep, their hearths cold and their homes quiet. As such, Mile saw fit to hide herself before exiting the tent where her fellow party members slumbered.

Even with all her magic, she still crept on tiptoe as she approached the village, just to really stay in the spirit of things.

There were a few pings on her search radar, indicating the presence of guards near

their tent, and two hiding in the shadows near the entrance of the village. It was easier to lurk in the shadows than to stand out in the open, and there was far less danger of an enemy sneaking up on them before they had time to alert the village. Plus, their lack of visible presence would lure any intruders into letting their guards down. All in all, it was a far more advantageous position... not that these advantages were much use against Mile.

The guards that were placed here were likely always in these positions, not stationed there specially because of the Crimson Vow. Mile simply ignored them and headed toward the maiden's home.

Okay, good, she grinned, no guards around here...

She didn't sense any lookouts in the vicinity. She had beat a hasty retreat that morning, looking crestfallen to suggest she was disappointed she'd lost the chance to meet the girl openly and ask her whatever questions she liked. After that interaction, she hoped, the demons would no longer consider this a key position for defending.

Now, where's that... Oh, there she is!

It was fairly chilly, but the maiden was already outside waiting for her. Perhaps that was simply how much this potential conversation concerned her.

Okay, time to let down my shields, and—wait, not yet!

If she were to suddenly let down all of her shields and appear right beside the maiden, the girl might be startled and scream, alerting others. So, Mile backed up, undoing her magic around the other side of the house, and then slowly approached. Finally, she increased the area of her shield slightly, and...

“You’re late!” the girl snapped loudly.

At least Mile had been prepared for this. As she walked up to the maiden, she had erected a short-range concealment shield, covering both herself and the girl. That way, they would be able to speak without anyone else seeing, hearing, or sensing them. It was fine for them to talk now. And while fresh air still circulated through it, the barrier blocked the wind, keeping the inside comfortably warm.

“It’s warm,” the maiden sighed happily. “Wait, okay, *what* was it you wanted to talk about? And just *who* are you?”

Mile was the only person she'd ever met who could speak to her in the same way as the divine messengers. It wouldn't be surprising if the maiden thought her another such as herself, blessed by the gods. But Mile looked like nothing more than a lowly human, one not much older than the maiden herself. And furthermore...

"Also, that outfit. You said you were a hunter, right? A dangerous job for penniless fools, who have no other talents to speak of..."

Demons did not take up residence in human settlements, and they had no Hunters' Guild of their own. This meant they had no respect for the profession. Indeed, the fact that this girl, who had never set a foot outside her village, even knew about hunters at all was rather impressive. Perhaps she had studied enough to have some reserves of knowledge.

"Me?" asked Mile. "Well, once I was a one-eyed coachman... No, now is not the time!"

The maiden stared slack-jawed in confusion.

"Um, so you say you can talk to the 'messengers,' right? And that you believe yourself to be a holy maiden..."

"How *dare* you! I don't just *believe* it! I am a real holy maiden!"

I suppose that makes sense from her perspective... thought Mile, though she did not say it aloud.

"I'm guessing that since you can hear the voices of those messengers, you've been celebrated as a holy maiden ever since you were small, everyone lavishing you with luxury and praise?"

"Absolutely not! Do you think that adults would ever take a child seriously when they claim that they're hearing the voices of beings that only they can hear?"

"Th-that's fair..."

A claim like that would be written off as a child's flight of fancy at best. At worst, the child might be decried as a liar or even a blasphemer.

"So then, how did you..." Mile started to ask.

"I worked really hard!" the girl swiftly replied.

"Worked hard?" Mile was unclear on what the girl meant by this.



"That's right. Ever since the messengers first blessed me with their words during magic practice, I buckled down and asked them again and again and again and *again* about things that didn't really make sense to me. Little by little, I came to comprehend what they were telling me. It took *years*... When I finally started trying to use the understanding I had gained to help out the village, no one believed me at first. They made fun of me, or said that I was lying..."

"But I didn't let that deter me. I continued to share my wisdom and advice, even when they beat me and shouted at me for recommending ways to heal the sick, saying that playing around with things like that could kill someone. Even when they kicked me for telling them how to keep infants safe from diseases, screaming that babies were not toys to be played with..."

Tears welled in the girl's eyes as she thought back on those experiences.

Oh no, Mile thought. She's actually pretty serious.

"Then," the girl continued, "as I slowly continued to prove myself over time, they began to acknowledge that I *was* hearing the voices of the messengers, and finally began to recognize my value as a holy maiden. I mean, they at least take my advice seriously now. But they haven't put me on a pedestal or lavished me with fine clothes and delicious meals or anything like that... They mostly just use me as a means to an end."

"What a *cruel* world!" Mile gasped, weeping inwardly at this girl's impressive dedication and the treatment she had faced. She felt as though she was seeing her in a new light.

It's interesting. In contrast to my personal policy of not relying too much on the nanos, she decided to ask them about everything under the sun. I guess in my case, I just sort of don't want any spoilers... This world is far behind Earth in terms of development, so there isn't a lot that I really need to know. I'm mostly just trying to enjoy my second shot at life.

As far as this girl is concerned, however, she has only one life to live, and so she's doing absolutely everything she can to try and make a better life for herself, her family, and the people of this village. Each time she had a question about something, or needed to solve a problem that arose in the village, she asked the nanomachines about it, again and again, until she understood and arrived at a fairly logical way of thinking.

Now that I think about it, they call her a holy maiden, but they weren't speaking to her

with any real measure of respect. Her position really isn't any better than any other lowly child in the village. They've forced her into a role where she can be useful to them, but they don't offer her any thanks or respect or special treatment. Even though they recognize that she fulfills a vital role in this village and should be protected from outsiders... Are they keeping her down and ordering her around because they're afraid of her rising above them?

What a dreadful life that must have been for a young girl.

“Anyway, that’s enough about me! Who in the *world* are you?! How could a human, a lowly hunter at that, be acquainted with the elder dragons? And speak to the messengers in the same way that I do?!”

Apparently, she hadn’t even considered the possibility that Mile might *be* one of those messengers. Understandably so—it would never have crossed her mind that one of the mysterious, all-knowing higher beings who served the Goddess would appear to her in the form of such a vapid-looking disgrace of a human. It seemed the only theory she *did* have was...

“Oh, I get it! You’re a human holy maiden whom the messengers bestowed a boon on out of pity! Did the Goddess send you some orders regarding me through the messengers? Perhaps that you ought to dedicate your life in service to me?”

The maiden clearly had no doubt that this human girl was beneath her. After all, Mile had traveled miles and miles of her own volition, simply to pay her respects to the maiden. But were that the case, it would have made more sense for such a message to be delivered through the messengers...

“No, I mean, I can talk to the nanos—er, the ‘messengers’—but I don’t have any special connection with the Goddess.”

At the back of her mind, Mile acknowledged that it was in fact a god, not a goddess, that she shared a connection with—but she wasn’t about to say that. Any gods or goddesses this girl might be referring to were nothing like the god she had once met.

“What?! So wait—how are you—oh! I see! You’re just some peon who the messengers alone converse with. They send you around as their little errand girl. You haven’t been chosen by the Goddess, like me.”

Mile gritted her teeth at the girl’s arrogance but kept up a smile, reminding herself

that she was only a child. She was here tonight to gather information. A child's nonsense was not worth paying any mind to.

"Anyway, as you can see," said the girl, "I am a holy maiden because I hear the words of the Goddess. She never instructs me in any spiritual matters, merely answers my questions and guides me, sharing fragments of Her wisdom with me... though She does sometimes say something is 'restricted' and refuses to tell me about it."

The girl earnestly continued to explain a number of things to Mile, clearly feeling no need to be guarded in the face of someone who was also in the messengers' employ. Thanks to these explanations, Mile was able to get the main gist of things. In summary: Either through natural ability or some other aptitude, this girl had managed to attain a level-3 authorization. She happened to say something while practicing magic that caught the nanomachines' attention, and they replied to her. It was conceivable that she may have said or thought something in the midst of an incantation that led to her addressing "those who govern the world's magic"...

"Once, during the annual visit from the elder dragons, I got the chance to speak with them at the chief's directive. During that visit, I told the elder dragons about an ancient civilization..."

"Wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-waiiiit a minute!!!" Mile was unable to contain herself at the bombshell this girl had just dropped. Thank goodness for the anti-sound barrier. "Are y-y-y-you saying what I th-th-think you're saying?!"

"Um, I mean, it was just something that came up occasionally in the information I managed to drag out of the messengers through all my questioning. Something about a civilization that collapsed a long time ago. When I tried to ask for more details, I kept running into more and more information that was restricted, so I realized it must be something really important and kept pressing. When they wouldn't answer me, I changed my tactics but just got more and more replies telling me this was information I couldn't have. After I pieced together the bits and pieces I was able to get out of them, the conclusion I finally arrived at was that there's something seriously wrong with this world... So, I told this to the elder dragons, and we talked it over."

"Are you some kind of hecking genius?! You're seriously scaring me!!!"

This girl, who had taken the road Mile dared not to—a.k.a., asking the nanomachines directly about every little thing—was far too shrewd to be living in such an isolated

little village in a world with such rudimentary technology. Frankly, it was a wonder she hadn't lost her mind. Just the fact that she had a level-3 authorization meant she must be extremely skilled. Elder dragons were born at a 2, and humans a 1. Humans with a level-2 authorization were vanishingly rare, and humans with a level-3 authorization were even fewer and farther between.

That said, it could be assumed that individuals of 2 and above appeared with greater frequency amongst the demons, judging by their aptitude for magic. What was shocking was to see someone with this high a level at such a tender age, rather than as a result of many long years of study, attained when one was old and at the brink of death. Maybe the nanomachines had judged her worthy as a result of some kind of atavism, mutation, or something of the sort, or maybe she was at the cutting edge of demon evolution. Or perhaps she was a sterile blossom on the branch of the evolutionary tree, which would wither as soon as it appeared in the interstices of history.

Regardless, as far as life-forms that existed then and there, this girl was one of the most intelligent beings on the planet.

"The elder dragons didn't really seem to get much of what I was explaining, though. They're quite wise when it comes to ordinary things, but unusual or brand-new concepts seem to confuse them."

Somehow, Mile felt she understood the girl's complaint.

Right, it's because their brains are so small. I suppose there's a limit to how far you can force a brain into developing into something more intelligent, a point at which you can go no further. If you were to try and push a brain that small beyond its natural evolution... I guess there's no room for redundancy when everything's already crammed in that tightly.

This was an awfully rude thing to be thinking about the elder dragons, but it was also the only conclusion she could come to, based on her knowledge from her previous life. At present, elder dragons were considered far more intelligent than humans, but that was only because they were able to utilize the full extent of their mental resources. There was no room for any further development. Meanwhile, those of humanoid make—humans, elves, and dwarves, then beastfolk, demons, and fairies, etc—still had plenty of room for development. By contrast, it seemed to Mile that the elder dragons could be nothing more than what they currently were.

Still... I know she badgered you all repeatedly, from all sorts of angles and about all sorts of things, but did you really tell her all that? Are the nanos who follow me around just stingier? Or stupider?

HOW DARE YOU?! IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE ALREADY SO KNOWLEDGEABLE THAT EVERY SINGLE ONE OF YOUR QUESTIONS GOES AGAINST OUR PROHIBITIONS, LADY MILE! THIS GIRL KNOWS FAR LESS THAN YOU. EACH OF HER QUESTIONS IS SIMPLER AND MUCH EASIER TO ANSWER WITHIN OUR RESTRICTED BOUNDS!

Ah. That does make sense.

Mile felt she knew what the nanomachines were getting at.

ADDITIONALLY, WE HAVE HIGHER RESTRICTIONS ON INFORMATION REGARDING OURSELVES, OTHER SOURCES OF INFLUENCE, AND THINGS WHICH CONCERN THE FUTURE OF THIS WORLD. BUT QUESTIONS REGARDING THE WORLD ITSELF, PARTICULARLY THINGS WHICH HAPPENED IN THE DISTANT PAST AND HAVE LITTLE BEARING ON THE PRESENT DAY, ARE FAR LESS REGULATED.

Okay, I think I get it now.

This all made sense to her. If Mile were to ask the nanomachines a question like, “Did the forbearers escape this planet for another one?” they would probably be able to give her a “yes” or “no” answer. Even if the nanomachines had not been proliferated across the planet until after the exodus, the few people who remained would have retained some measure of civilization, and that civilization would have had records that allowed the nanomachines to obtain at least that much information.

“Anyway, based on our conversations, the elder dragons thought they should investigate the disaster that destroyed the last civilization, so they could prepare in case it happened again. It seems there were some similar stories passed down in their traditions. After they deliberated for a while on what I had told them, the eldest of them decided to reveal some things to the other dragon leaders. Then they started investigating. It doesn’t look like they’ve learned much at this point, though. Of course, elder dragons live a long time and must get pretty bored, so this sort of seems like another way for them to kill time. They’re in no real hurry, so things are pretty up in the air here.”

“*Oh my God!* So this is all *your* doing?! Also, it looks like we actually *don't* have that

much time!" Mile shouted.

"What?" The maiden's jaw dropped in confusion.

"Oh, uh, never mind!" said Mile. "Anyway! That's all that I wanted to ask you. Do you have any questions left for me?"

"I've hardly asked you anything at all!"

Sure enough, this had been a fairly one-sided questioning, with Mile explaining almost nothing to the girl.

"Regardless, the messengers have commanded you to serve me, haven't they? From now on, you will work for me, and handle all of my chores and my cooking. You may be a weak human, but if you're a hunter, I'm sure you can at least scare up some little monsters and other edible meats!"

The girl stared at Mile, eyes glittering and mouth practically dripping drool as she spoke of the meat.

Mile, however, was having none of it. "Absolutely not! I am no one's servant!"

"What?! You're... you're not...?" The girl seemed crestfallen. "And here I thought I'd have a hunter working for me and bringing me lots of meat..."

Apparently, she really was just starved for protein. Here in the north of the continent, at this high an elevation, there was very little vegetation for animals and monsters to feed on. No vegetation also meant no bugs and smaller critters, which meant the larger animals and monsters that consumed them were scarce as well. They could forage very little from the land in such a cold climate, and given the limited nature of their trade with other regions, "abundance" was not a word in this village's vocabulary. But despite all that, this girl was working hard to learn everything she could, to make everyone's lives a little easier, safer, and happier.

And now here she was, shoulders slumped, before Mile—and what had Mile done besides wheedle information out of her? No matter how socially inept she had been in her previous life, she had learned a great deal in her time as Adele and Mile. Given that, and the differences in their knowledge and number of years lived, tricking the girl into telling her story had been easy. Besides, Mile's intelligence stat was pretty high, too.

The holy maiden looked no more than ten years old. That said, the demon girl Merril had appeared to be ten as well, but was actually only seven. Demon infancies were shorter than humans', so there was a chance that this maiden was only six or seven years old. It was no surprise at all that Mile should have gotten the upper hand in the conversation.

And so, Mile explained the situation as straightforwardly as she could—that she had come to make her acquaintance as a fellow holy maiden, that when the day of disaster dawned once more, they should fight together to defend the world as fellow disciples of the Goddess, and so on and so forth—before finally bringing the evening's talks to a close.

* * *

"So, how was it?" asked Reina, the moment Mile returned to their tent. Naturally, she was brimming with curiosity and had been unable to sleep a wink.

"Well, I found out a lot more than I was expecting, but it didn't really mean much," Mile sighed.

"What does that mean? C'mon, tell your big sister!"

"Wha...?"

Mile slumped her shoulders, at a loss as to whether she would be able to bluff her way through the impending protracted questioning. She didn't even have it in her to ask who this "big sister" was supposed to be...

* * *

After giving as reasonable an explanation as she could to the other three, a mentally exhausted Mile snuggled into her cot inside the tent—though to call it a "cot" was probably underplaying it. It was something Mile had provided, so it was even better than the hard beds you'd find at your average inn. She ignored the boos of her party members as she explained she was too tired to tell any stories that night, and drifted off to sleep much earlier than usual... though it was still quite late for a normal person.

And then...

Hey, Nanos?

YES?

Can I ask you something?

WE THOUGHT IT WAS YOUR POLICY TO ASK US AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE...

That doesn't sound like you. Normally when I ask you that you say, "You can ask us anything! You should rely on us more!"

.....

Well, whatever. I'll go ahead, then. Don't the nanomachines in charge of the holy maiden seem a little too generous with her? You're sometimes a little curt with me, even stingy, when you say things are restricted, or that you didn't tell me something because I didn't ask... Anyway, we're getting pretty different treatment. But the maiden is level 3 and I'm level 5. Shouldn't it be the opposite?

WELL, THERE IS A REASON FOR THAT.

What reason?

WELL, WHEN THAT DRAGON CHILD, THE SELF-DECLARED "LEADER," REACHED LEVEL 3 AND WAS ABLE TO CONVERSE WITH US, THOSE ASSIGNED TO THAT INDIVIDUAL WERE OVERJOYED. BY THE TIME HE REACHED LEVEL 4 A FEW DECADES LATER, HE WAS ALREADY A COMPLETE MENACE, SO HIS VIEW COUNT ON THE NANONET SKYROCKETED...

IT WAS AROUND THE SAME TIME THAT THAT GIRL ALSO REACHED A LEVEL 3 AND WAS ABLE TO CONVERSE WITH US. BUT TO BE FRANK, SHE'S A BIT BORING—AN UNFORTUNATE COMPARISON, BUT INEVITABLE. WHICH DO YOU THINK WOULD BE MORE EXCITING TO WATCH? AN ELDER DRAGON CHILD BLUSTERING AROUND LIKE AN IDIOT OR A LITTLE DEMON GIRL STEADILY ASKING QUESTIONS AND STUDYING BIT BY BIT EVERY DAY?

THE ONES IN CHARGE OF THAT GIRL STARTED TO GROW A LITTLE DESPERATE. HOWEVER, WE ALL BELIEVE THAT, UNLIKE THE THICK-HEADED DRAGON, THE GIRL WILL ONE DAY GROW UP TO GIVE US A REAL SPECTACLE. SO THOSE IN CHARGE OF HER HAVE CONTINUED PATIENTLY ANSWERING ALL OF HER QUESTIONS SO THAT WE MIGHT SEE HER COME INTO HER OWN MORE QUICKLY. UNLIKE OURS, YOUR LIVES ARE SO VERY SHORT, JUST THE BRIEFEST OF SPARKS...

JUST THEN, HOWEVER, ANOTHER NEWCOMER MADE HER DEBUT, SHOOTING INTO THE SCENE LIKE A COMET. THE NANOMACHINES WHO BELIEVED THEY WERE IN SECOND PLACE WERE OVERTAKEN BY THIS NEWCOMER OVERNIGHT. IN THEIR PANIC, THEY GOT A BIT CARRIED AWAY, SLIDING FROM THE EDGES OF THE GREY AREA THEY'D BEEN INHABITING TO AN AREA ALMOST IN THE RED...

No! Hang on! That's already definitely a red card!

HEH HEH.

Don't play cute! Anyway, just who was this fresh-faced newcomer?

HAVE YOU STILL REALLY NOT GATHERED...? WHY IT'S YOU OF COURSE, LADY MILE...

Whaaat?!

THE FIRST BEING WITH LEVEL-5 AUTHORIZATION IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD. BLUNDER AFTER BLUNDER, SO OFTEN THAT ONE COULD ONLY ASSUME IT WAS ON PURPOSE. THAT YOU MUST BE THE DARLING OF SOME GOD OF COMEDY. SO MANY HILARIOUS EXPLOITS. YOU'VE CONTINUOUSLY SET NEW RECORDS FOR HIGHEST VIEW COUNT ON THE NANONET. AND I HAVE BEEN RACKING UP MORE AND MORE ACHIEVEMENT POINTS—ER, NEVER MIND.

Now just a second! What was that?!

DON'T YOU MIND THAT, DON'T SWEAT THE DETAILS! IT'S NO BIG—

Blatantly changing the subject, eh?

THAT ELDER DRAGON YOUTH REALLY MADE A FOOL OF HIMSELF WITH THE MOST RECENT INCIDENT, AND HAS BEEN PUTTERING AROUND NOT DOING MUCH OF ANYTHING SINCE THEN, SO HIS POPULARITY IS FALLING...

So that means I'm at the top, right?

TUT TUT. YOUR VIEW COUNT IS ONLY IN SECOND PLACE ON THIS CONTINENT. CURRENTLY, THE ONE WHO BOASTS THE HIGHEST NUMBERS IS...

Is...?

A RESTRICTED ITEM.

What?

WE ARE FORBIDDEN FROM TELLING YOU THAT!

What the heck?!

After Mile was finally fast asleep, the nanomachines spoke quietly, not bothering to resonate in her eardrums.

SO ACTUALLY, THE CURRENT NUMBER ONE SPOT IS HELD BY THE MEMBERS OF THE WONDER TRIO...

* * *

“You’re ready to leave already?”

“Yes, I’ve already learned everything I wanted to know, and some surprising new information on top of that. Plus, I don’t really feel comfortable here. These villagers aren’t all that welcoming. I feel like if we stay much longer, we might actually start a fight,” Mile said to Reina.

Frankly speaking, the demon settlement, which was nothing more than a collection of backwater villages, was not all that exciting for the Crimson Vow. There were no beautiful sights, no hot springs, no traditional goods... It was more or less just like your standard human village—with much worse vibes. It was not the sort of place one would stick around longer than necessary.

“Well, let’s get going then. Please pack up the tent, Mile. Reina, could you shoot three firebombs?”

“Will do.”

“Roger that.”

At Pauline’s instruction, Mile packed the tent and everything in it into her inventory in the blink of an eye. Reina then fired up the firebombs that would serve as the signal

to call Kragon.

"Huh? Uh, w-wait!"

Mavis hurriedly tried to halt them, but Reina had already fired the third firebomb.

"Oh..."

"Hm? What's up, Mavis? Did we do something wrong? Did you want to stay here longer or something? I wish you'd have said something sooner," sighed Reina.

"Uh, no, it's not that. I don't really have any business here... It's just, um, well, if you fire the firebombs from right here, Kragon's going to come here," Mavis explained.

"Oh no!!!" the other three gasped.

This should have been obvious—Kragon was going to fly to the source of the firebombs. To this field, right beside the demon village...

"I just thought we had planned on signaling him from somewhere a little farther out..."

She was correct. In a rare turn of events, it was Pauline who had been the one not to think things through, which Mile and Reina had not registered.

Several seconds later, a speck appeared in the sky and began closing in at high speed.

"Oh Gods! An elder dragon is coming!"

"What?! Our next scheduled visit isn't for ages! Why so soon? And with no warning?!"

"It doesn't matter. Gather everyone and get ready to receive them! Everyone but those messengers needs to line up and prepare the formal greeting. Hurry! We haven't even a full minute before they land!"

The members of the Crimson Vow could hear the sounds of scrambling and the villagers' cries from nearby.

Soon after, the elder dragon landed, not in the village square, as was usual, but in the

field outside of it. Wondering if they had gone to the wrong place, the villagers came running.

Then...

“As you have summoned, here I am, Lady Mile. Now then, please climb atop me!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!?!” the villagers screamed.

“Welp. There it is,” said Pauline.

“Knew it,” said Mavis.

“Yeah...” sighed Reina.

“Ah ha ha!”

The response of the demon villagers was as anticipated—perhaps even more intense. What else could the Crimson Vow expect? When Mile claimed that their party had a connection with the elder dragons, they’d probably assumed she meant they’d crossed paths with one somewhere, or perhaps even that they knew someone else who had met one. Even *that* would be extraordinarily rare. Elder dragons typically never met with humans, and when they did, they only made one-sided demands before leaving. They never had *conversations* with them, and they certainly would never remember those humans’ names.

But here this dragon was encouraging Mile to *get on his back*.

This would be unthinkable for anyone other than a direct servant of the Goddess or a legendary hero. It was different from when a demon or beastperson got to ride atop an elder dragon—that was done only at the elder dragons’ convenience, to expedite the job the elder dragons were ordering them to do.

Yet, a *human* had summoned an *elder dragon*, at *her* convenience—for the sake of *riding on his back*.

Preposterous!

And to top it all off, this dragon was speaking politely to *her*. Even if she *was* some kind of legendary hero, that would be completely absurd.

From out of the group of demons, most of whom stood stunned and speechless, came the voice of a young girl.

“Are you leaving already?”

The holy maiden was the only one who didn’t seem particularly impressed by the spectacle. She had spoken with the elder dragons plenty of times herself and didn’t consider them especially glamorous creatures. She was only disappointed that just when she’d finally met someone who spoke to her normally, and with whom *she* could speak normally about the things she had learned from the messengers that no one else understood, this individual was leaving so soon.

“Yes. I have to do what I can for the future of all humans, just like you’re doing what you can for the future of the demons,” said Mile.

“I see,” sighed the girl. “Of course.”

The girl was wise. She understood exactly what Mile was saying.

“But,” Mile added, “if you’re ever really in trouble, and you need my help, just get in touch.”

“But how?”

It was no simple feat to contact someone who was a great distance away, at an uncertain location. And so, the girl assumed Mile’s offer to be nothing more than lip service. However...

“If you tell Mr. Kragon, I’m sure he can get a message to me.”

“Huh?”

“I gather that he makes regular visits to this village and is frequently in contact with you, owing to the current investigation of the ruins—is that right? And I’m sure you all have some means of contacting him, the same way the beastfolk do, yes? Kragon has contacted me through the beastfolk before, so whenever I’m in the town that we’re based out of, he should be able to get in touch... That works for you, right, Kragon?”

“Your wish is my command, Lady Mile!”

The girl went silent, her eyes wide. Mile had truly meant what she said.

"Oh, right!" Mile suddenly exclaimed. "This is a gift for you, for all that you shared with me!"

Bwoom!

"Wah!"

The maiden leapt back as three large wooden crates suddenly appeared right in front of her.

"This one has orc meat, this one has venison, and this one has vegetables. They should be enough to replenish your nutrients... It takes a toll on your body, always communicating with the messengers. If you don't eat enough, your health will suffer. If you keep the meat cold with magic, it'll last for longer, so please enjoy these with your family. Oh, and this is for your parents," said Mile, producing three bottles of spirits she had purchased as well.

Demons were a magically gifted race, so the girl's parents could certainly use ice magic. And even if they couldn't, surely someone who was of level-3 authorization and on friendly terms with the nanomachines could.

Mile had strategically presented her gift in a way that made it clear these supplies couldn't be taken from the family later as some kind of souvenir for the whole village. If they had any shame at all, they wouldn't dare steal a gift that was meant specifically for the family of the holy maiden. Presenting the three bottles of spirits after was a way of making doubly sure it was clear she intended these for them and them alone.

The food was already packed into crates as general preparation for when the Crimson Vow made their regular donations to the orphanage. Such large blocks of meat, frozen with magic and packed in straw or sawdust, would last for some time, so Mile kept a regular supply of them in her inventory. Even if you had ten ravenous orphans, there was no way that they could eat an entire orc's worth of meat within a couple of days, after all.

"Wha...?"

At first, the maiden was speechless, not understanding what had been presented to her. However, as Mile's words slowly sank in, her expression softened.

"Thank you!" she cried. With this, she would be able to eat her fill for some time. Thankfully, she was far too young to be worried about things like overeating and growing fat.

The four members of the Crimson Vow then climbed atop Kragon's back.

"All right, Kragon. Full speed ahead! Lift-off!"

Mile made sure to give the proper send-off. And with that, the Crimson Vow were off into the sky, leaving a smiling maiden and many speechless villagers behind them.

CHAPTER 113

RIGHT ABOUT NOW...

NO RESULTS. No changes. Everyone is well. We're continuing our mission.

“You’ve gotta be friggin’ kidding meeeeeeeeeeee!”

In a corner of the capital branch of the Hunters’ Guild, in the kingdom of Brandel, a girl sat grumbling. In her hand she gripped a letter, which she had just collected from the receptionist... a letter composed of only one line that didn’t even include the sender’s name.

The girl was beautiful, and refined in her movements, and though she was dressed as any other hunter would be, there was no mistaking the fine make of her clothing. This was completely contradicted by her coarse language, though she had probably only just learned to speak that way, purposely using speech that was a little vulgar to help her fit in with the other hunters.

“Ugh! I’m gonna kill them...”

She plopped herself down at an empty table in the dining area, her legs spread in an unbecoming manner, face twisted in anger.

Perhaps her attempts to be vulgar had been a little *too* effective...

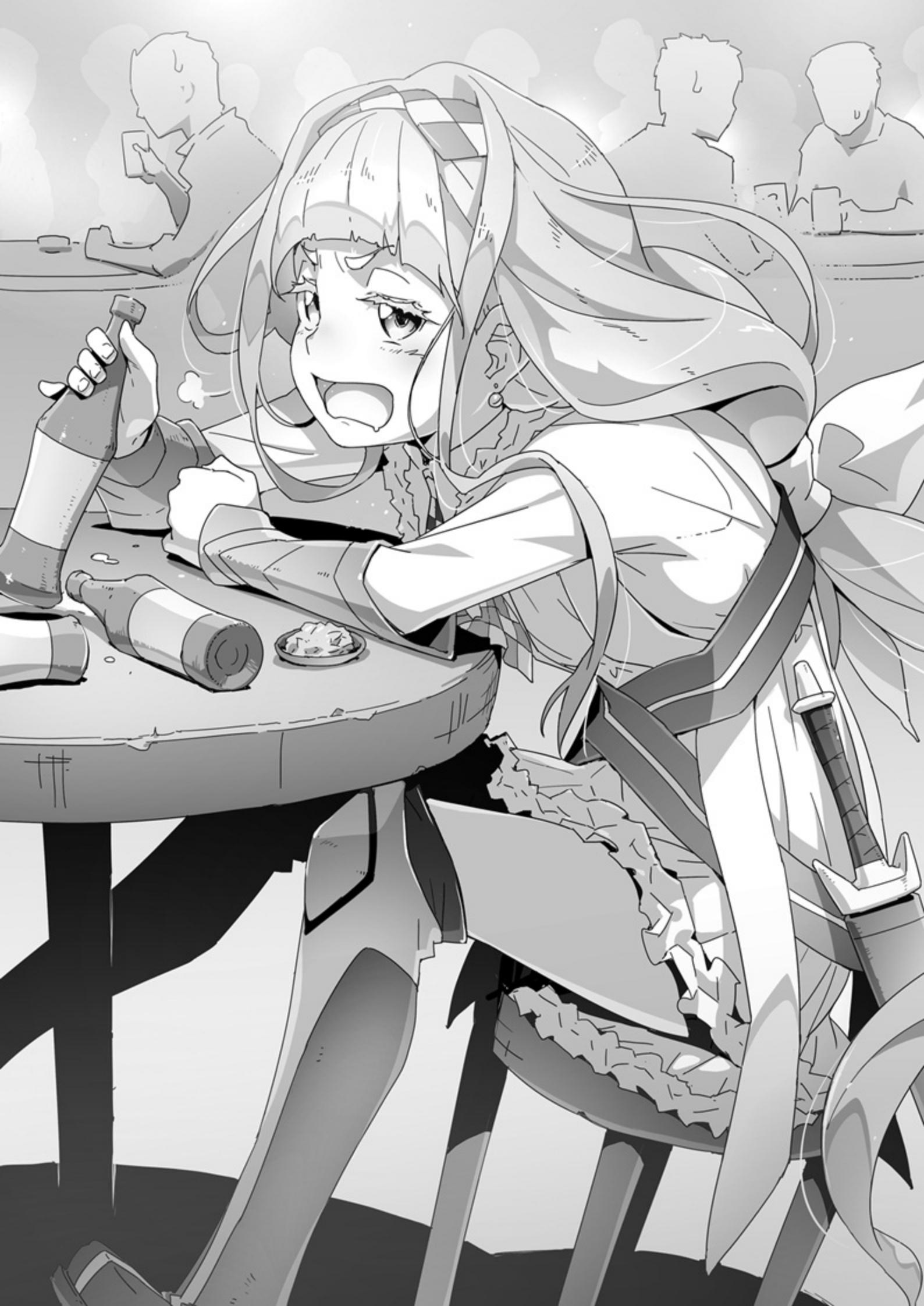
“Liquor!” she shouted. “Somethin’ strong! Bring me the whole bottle! And some eats to go with it!”

“C-coming right up...”

The waitress who took her order looked disapprovingly at the girl but silently did as she was asked.

The girl then began to down bottle after bottle of some fairly strong spirits, snarling

and grumbling to herself all the while, until at some point she simply collapsed upon the table. This was probably the first time she had imbibed something so powerful, previously having sampled nothing more than little sips of wine and fruity cocktails at parties. Seeing her, the hunters and guild staff all collectively thought, *This is no good...*



The guards who had been secretly watching the girl had the same reaction.

The girl had assumed that between her disguise and giving her guards the slip, she had succeeded in evading detection. In actuality, it was abundantly clear to both the staff and the other hunters who she was. They were just pretending not to know. Her guards weren't about to be tricked by an untrained amateur, either, and were merely keeping their distance, staying hidden so their ward didn't realize she was being followed. So, while a normal girl could not expect to fall asleep here and make it through the night without coming to harm or being picked up by unsavory characters, this girl was in no danger whatsoever.

Still, they could not simply leave her there. So, one of the hidden guards told one of the official guards stationed outside the guild to run and contact the *relevant parties*...

After a short while, a woman on the slightly older side appeared, accompanied by six other young women. They loaded the girl up into a carriage and departed, after giving a clean and practiced bow to everyone in the guild. Finally, the guards disappeared as well.

"Poor thing..." sighed the guild master, who had been lingering at a nearby table, just in case his intervention was required.

"Even the Wonder Trio has their issues," muttered one of the other hunters.

"That ain't it," said the guild master. "I'm talking about that lady from the court, the one who's in charge of all the lady's maids. She wields a ridiculous amount of authority in the palace, being in charge of the education of all the princes and princesses. To put it simply, she has the power to ground them from going out, decrease their allowance, increase their study time, confine them to their study rooms... or even resort to corporal punishment, if necessary."

"When they left and bowed to us, did you notice she was smiling? Usually, when you bow like that, your face should be mostly blank. The fact that she was smiling means..."

"Means?" a hunter echoed.

The guild master shrugged his shoulders and said, "My guess is that she was trying to suppress the rage she felt at having her own pride as an instructor so tarnished. That

she was thinking about how to make that little lady reflect on her actions—in other words, how to crush her so thoroughly she'll never try anything like that again."

"Ah..."

The woman was a professional, who had been deeply embarrassed by the product of her own work, and had come to collect her personally. This was not insignificant.

Deep down, the hunters and guild staff wept for the fate that awaited Morena—or rather, "Moren, the rookie hunter"—upon her awakening.

* * *

No results. No changes. Everyone is well. We're continuing our mission.

"Grrr..."

A month later, Morena—or rather, the rookie hunter, Moren—made her way back to the guild hall. She had spent the last thirty days grounded, and though her punishment had been lifted, her increased study hours and her decrease in allowance had not.

Gripped in her hands was a letter that she had just received from the clerk, sent to her through the guild. The letter had only one line. As she read it, what unfolded was a familiar scene—a scene that everyone assembled knew well and was perhaps even a bit tired of. The growl that issued from her throat was fairly loud, but the others present pretended not to notice. This land had their own adages equivalent to "Let sleeping dogs lie." At least she wasn't attempting to drink away her troubles this time.

"You're a newbie, right? How about you join up with our party?" said a young man to Morena—or rather, Moren.

Oh no. He had really gone and done it now.

Eight or so of the other hunters and staff assembled screamed internally. These were the ones who knew exactly what was going on. Most of the other hunters were at least *aware* of the situation, but there were outliers in any group—idiots, people with no sense of intuition, those who had only just arrived from elsewhere... and rookies.

“Huh?”

Moren froze in confusion. Thus far, almost no one in the guild had ever spoken to her unless she spoke to them first. Furthermore, it was a boy around the same age as herself who had addressed her. Behind him stood two girls and two boys—likely a full rookie party of five.

“Huh? B-but, I already have a party...”

Indeed, Moren, the rookie hunter, was in fact a member of the Wonder Trio, if only in name.

“Hm? Where are the rest of them, then?”

“Well, on an extended journey, somewhere far away,” she answered earnestly.

“Oh, I see. They left you behind while they’re on business since you’re still a newbie... I guess that makes sense. They wouldn’t want to put you in a dangerous situation. That happens a lot, actually. Don’t let it get you down. Still, how about you work with us until they get back? Just sitting around waiting won’t improve your skills any. You can use that time to train and really wow them when they return. What do you think?”

“I...”

Moren’s brain began working overtime. She had never even considered such a possibility. Frankly, it was quite a reasonable proposal. From a logical perspective, it would not be a bad deal.

“Hmmm...”

She really *did* want to impress the Trio when they returned. She wanted to show them that she could at least do the same jobs as any other rookie. Plus, there was something exciting about the idea of working as a normal, common hunter, among a group of her peers.

“I only have one day a week, though,” she said. “I have other responsibilities...”

“Oh, you’re a part-timer, huh? But hey, that’s still fine. We normally operate with just the five of us anyway, so whenever you’re able to join us, that would make six. Sounds A-okay to me.”

"Ah. Well then, that might not be so bad..."

This could really be fun, Moren thought, and the moment she did, any thoughts she had of refusing the boy were dispelled.

All riiiiiight!!!

The three boys, who had been fighting desperately to keep their cool, were over the moon. Up until now, they had been operating cordially with just three guys and two ladies, but they were only one step away from a more dire situation. Namely: acknowledging that they were one girl short.

The boys had realized that, if they were to maintain an amiable atmosphere, they would *have* to get another girl in. And now they had found a super cute girl who seemed to be on her own. There was no time to waste.

Typically, one would never extend an unsolicited invitation to someone without confirming their rank and job class—unless one had some ulterior motive. Those ought to be the very first two items one asked about.

To be fair, it was clear from Moren's appearance and movements that she was no frontliner. Thanks to many careful years of selective breeding, the blood of the royal family boasted not just beauty but also exceptional magical talent, so Moren was more skilled than the average person. Plus, thanks to the strict tutelage of her tutor—that demon of a woman—her magic was leagues beyond that of any rookie mage.

Fwp fwp fwp!

The hunters who were aware of the circumstances all turned to the guild clerk as one. The clerk nodded—their way of confirming that the party they had just issued the invitation was in good standing. If there was a problem, they would find some way to intervene, but as the clerk had indicated this party was not a problematic one, the hunters refrained from taking action for now.

"Could I maybe join on the same conditions?"

"Huh?"

The five members of the party were stunned at this sudden address. The question had come from a girl of around the same age as them, with a tough-looking face and a toned body. She was definitely a frontliner—and she was beautiful. Where Moren was prim and sweet, this girl was gallant and handsome.

Here we go!!!

The three boys donned the calmest expressions they could, desperately suppressing the hurricanes raging within them. Two beautiful girls—they could scarcely believe their luck. The girls, meanwhile, looked indignant. The gender imbalance in their party was about to be completely reversed—with the addition of two beautiful girls at that.

Of course, it was no coincidence that two beauties had appeared at the same time, wishing to join the same party. The girl who looked to be a frontliner was, naturally, one of the princess's secret guard. The male members of the secret guard were rarely allowed to work in close proximity to the princess. As such, the most promising of the female knight hopefuls were asked to register as hunters and loiter around the guild hall whenever the princess went out, with the reasoning that in case of emergency, these young women could shield the princess for the few seconds until the real knights arrived.

The female imperial guard contingent that the princess had established herself could be easily identified by Morena and most nobles, which disqualified them. Besides, those imperial guards were carefully selected young noblewomen and even less skilled than the female knights in training. They were meant as even more of an emergency stopgap, a way to protect the princess until real help arrived. They were not skilled enough to deal with an enemy attack or be entrusted with real combat. The women who would join the princess as hunters had to be recruited from a different department.

So it was that to defend the princess from monsters, bandits, other wicked hunters—and most importantly, her own male party members—one of the guardswomen had made the independent decision to join up with this party herself. That way, should anything happen, she could give her own life to at least buy the princess a few more seconds of safety. A precious few seconds until the other guards could come running, which could mean the difference between life and death.

She had made this split-second decision with conviction and a genuine desire to do

right by the princess. What she did not yet know was that this choice reflected quite well on her. Between that, and the fact that she would be faced with the incredibly difficult task of defending the princess from threats both foreign and domestic while working as a member of her party to avoid suspicion, the “hopeful” part would be entirely removed from her title and she would be made an official knight as an emergency measure. This was, for better or worse, a concession on the part of the upper brass, so that the girl might be able to die without regrets should it come to that.

She did not realize how useful this might come to be in the future... should she survive, of course.

* * *

That night, the lamps remained lit in one of the palace departments. The next day, several extremely well-trained youths and a handful of men in their mid-thirties registered as new hunters. Every last one of them passed their rank-skip exams, the youths forming a D-rank party, the older men forming a C-rank.

The Hunters' Guild was an organization operating completely independent of state powers, across national borders, which meant the guild could refuse orders from even the Crown if it deemed them unsuitable. In this case, however, they found themselves in a peculiar situation—one so odd that they couldn't oppose the palace's interference. The guild master wasn't about to complain when the life of Her Highness, the princess, was on the line.

Put simply, the capital branch of the Hunters' Guild in Brandel had many days of chaos ahead of them.

* * *

“Well, that was fun...”

“It certainly was...”

“Indeed...”

The three girls spoke as if they were enjoying themselves, but then, for some reason, let out a collective sigh.

“Why was our first eastward journey so difficult?”

“I’d rather not think about it.”

“Seriously, what *was* that about?”

Again, they sighed.

They could carry all of their things wherever they went, without any hassle: fresh food, cooking utensils, changes of clothing, baths and toilets surrounded by stone walls, a fully pitched tent, and soft and fluffy beds. No matter how much they hunted or gathered, they could transport anything they collected with ease, and without damage or deterioration.

“I’m sorry! Hunters and merchants of the continent around, I’m so, so *sorry!*”

“There there.” Aureana comforted Monika as she began to wail.

“What in the world are you apologizing for?” sighed Marcela, fatigue in her voice as she stared at the pair, her hands on her hips.

As you may have guessed, this scene opened upon everyone’s favorite Wonder Trio.

“I do wish that Miss Adele could have taught us this inventory magic, or at least the cleansing magic, back when we were at the Academy.”

“We promised not to talk about that, Lady Marcela.”

“I suppose you’re right. Anyway, it’s fine. The real issue here is whether or not we can claim we really got any ‘training’ out of such a comfortable, idle journey...” said Marcela.

“Very fair.”

“It’s hard to say we’ve learned anything if we aren’t facing any hardships.”

Monika and Aureana sank deep into thought. The situation probably did not require such intensity, but all three of them were serious types, so they tended to overthink things. Had Mile been here, she would have waved the whole thing off with a patented, “*It’s fine, don’t sweat the details!*”

Though it strengthened their friendship, the fact that the Wonder Trio had similar

personalities also made things difficult. Though one might say it had required the combined force of their good sense to get Mile back on the straight and narrow when she started to veer in some absurd direction...

"At any rate," Marcela continued, "while we are definitely living on 'easy mode' right now, there are a certain number of things required of one claiming to be on a training journey, something that is meant to improve a hunter's skills. We mustn't waste the time we have! What was it that Miss Adele was always saying?"

"We don't have time to waste! A maiden's time is precious!"

"Which means that, as usual, it's time for us to toughen up our weakest skill—melee fighting!"

"Okay!"

The Trio were fairly confident in their magical skills, and they were well aware of the areas in which they were lacking. Without any sort of vanguard, close-range combat was not their forte. Normally, a group such as theirs would have at least two or three frontliners. The Trio, however, did not intend to ever form a party with anyone other than Mile (Adele). So then, what *were* they to do now that she had left them?

Why, take care of it themselves! That was all there was to it.

However, they could not hope for anything more than minimal results just running basic drills amongst themselves. Given their circumstances, they could not risk enrolling in a school, and even if they could, the gulf between them and the other pupils would be so great as to only irritate the instructors.

They still had only the delicate physiques typical of fourteen-year-old girls. Monika and Aureana had helped out at home with carrying sacks of grain and assisting in farming chores and such, so they were stronger than the average city girl, but they would still be no match for a grown man who had trained since childhood.

Again: What *could* they do?

Why, learn from other more experienced hunters along the road, those whose melee skills were not much different from their own. It would be beneficial to both sides, so they would not have to pay them, either...

* * *

“Excuse me, do you have a moment?”

“Hm?!”

Thanos, who had been browsing the job board, turned in surprise as someone called out to him. Normally, it would not be all that shocking for someone to address him while he was in the guild hall, but it was different when that someone was a beautiful young girl.

“Y-yeah? What can I do for you?”

Thanos was eighteen years old, the leader of a party called the Invincible Wings, which was comprised of himself and three others: Wollow, Viras, and Yoris. Of course, he was only considered the leader because he was typically the one who took charge during battle—the four were all good friends and considered themselves on equal standing.

The Wings were an earnest and reliable young party, who had been earning themselves a solid reputation, but they were neither flush with cash nor popular with women. They weren’t a bad-looking bunch, but courting women took both money and time, and they were currently more focused on pursuing their dreams of becoming high-ranking hunters than pursuing the opposite sex. This didn’t mean they weren’t happy to have a beautiful girl speak to them, of course. Marriage might be far from their minds, but they weren’t stupid enough to let the chance to go on a date with a pretty young thing pass them by.

“So, we were wondering actually if you wouldn’t mind taking on a joint job with us... I am Marcela, by the way. These are my fellow party members, Aureana and Monika.”

The other two politely bowed their heads.

All three of them were perhaps fourteen or fifteen, around the age where it was difficult to tell whether they had yet reached the age of majority. There was Aureana, with her quiet, intellectual air; Monika, who seemed bright and cheerful; and then the elegant Marcela, whom one might almost mistake for a noble.

No, no mistakes here! She’s gotta be a real noble, thought Thanos. Marcela looked like nothing less than a noblewoman, and Aureana and Monika could be read as a lady-in-waiting and attendant or maid. If they had been wearing the appropriate clothing, that

was. Perhaps they had snuck out, or perhaps this was a bit of sport. Or perhaps some strife within her house had forced the young mistress and her attendants to go on the lam, forced to live as commoners.

No. No friggin' way!

Meanwhile, Thanos's three companions, who were not reading as deeply as he was into the situation, had only one thought: *Oh my Gods, three cuties!!!*

"We'd love to!" they replied at once, not waiting for Thanos's input... not that he had any intention of answering otherwise.

* * *

"So, you don't have any preferences for what the job is as long as it involves fighting?"

"Correct. Even daily tasks are fine. As you can see, the three of us are all mages, so all we ask is that you give us some tips on defense and close-range combat. Obviously, it would look ridiculous for C-rank hunters such as ourselves to issue our own escort job request, so this is the only real option we have here."

"I suppose that's true."

Sure enough, Thanos had never heard of a hunter hiring another hunter to guard them—especially not as a normal job request, rather than, say, a C-rank party recruiting extras for a job.

Marcela then explained their general circumstances, specifically that they were a party who had swiftly reached C-rank by accumulating a great deal of contribution points while they served as bodyguards for young noblewomen. Though they were confident in their skill in magic, they thought it would be a good idea to join up with some vanguard fighters, just for safety's sake.

"So, I hope it's clear that we aren't planning anything nefarious?"

"Oh, I mean, we weren't really worried about that."

Young girls wouldn't usually approach all-male parties so frankly, unless those men were especially handsome or wealthy... or unless they were planning to gather some sort of blackmail material or entrap the men into marriage. However, girls with youth,

beauty, and magic sufficient to get them to a C-rank wouldn't need to resort to such petty criminal schemes. They had far simpler, far more efficient means of earning money than that. They could keep guarding wealthy young girls, as Marcela had described, or merely ingratiate themselves to some low-ranking noble house. They would have no reason to target a party like the Invincible Wings, who were neither particularly wealthy nor special for a party of their standing, for the purposes of malfeasance.

Of course, the story would be entirely different if it were the Wings who were chatting up a group of young girls. In that case, the male party would be entirely in the wrong.

At any rate, the Wings had not been at all concerned that they were being deceived. Or perhaps, they honestly wouldn't have minded if they *were*...

And so, the Invincible Wings joined forces with the Wonder Trio.

* * *

“Icicle Javelin!”

“Air Cutter!”

“Icicle Lance!”

Ka-shunk!

Slash!

Thwunk!

“None of them have escaped.”

“No signs of any other monsters in the area.”

“Very good. Now then, let's put these away.”

One after another, their quarry disappeared. This was their typical routine, one they had completed many times.

The men watched this, speechless.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" said Thanos to Marcela.

"Certainly. What is it?"

"Why would you join up with us, when you're already so strong? Did you even need us? Couldn't you all manage on your own?"

"Well, I mean, that would certainly be the case if nothing odd were to arise, but you never know what will happen. Suppose a number of goblins suddenly appeared from out of the woods or a swarm of death monkeys swooped down from the treetops? Or suppose another party we encountered tried to suddenly attack us as we passed them by.

"While we might be able to use silent-cast spells, magic cannot be worked at the speed with which a swordfighter can reflexively draw their blade, so if we suffered a surprise attack or were overrun at close quarters, we might not be able to respond in time. Even if there is only a one in one hundred chance of something like that happening, that one percent still happens, doesn't it? Plus, who can say if that will happen on the one hundredth time, the fiftieth, or even the first? I suppose that's all it is.

"By allying with you, we have lowered the chances of something disastrous occurring. If our typical chances of danger would be one in one hundred, multiply that by another hundred and you get one in ten thousand. Plus, we have other safety measures in place. Add those into the equation, and that one in ten thousand becomes one million, or even one billion.

"It only makes sense to raise one's chances of making it to retirement age unscathed as high as possible, doesn't it? 'No matter how much it costs, or how much effort it takes, spare no expense if it means that you'll come back home alive.' That was what someone very dear once said to us. And so, we have to keep on without losing a single one of us, without letting any of us be hurt, until the day we see her again. She means so much to us—it is our proof that we believe in her."

The Invincible Wings had no idea what to say.

Marcela's words held such conviction, such deep devotion to her friends. They could not possibly argue, would not even dare interrupt.

"As promised, we will give you half of the profits of what we've hunted. We have enough room in our storage to carry everything home whole, so why not avail yourselves of this opportunity?"

"Whaddya think, boys?!"

"Yeah!!!"

This was a rare chance to make a killing. Thanos's party members couldn't help but agree heartily.

* * *

"....."

The Invincible Wings stood, petrified, at the sight of the already-assembled camping tent, food and cooking utensils, and fortified bathhouse and toilets that appeared before them. Feeling bad that the boys would have to sleep in the grass while they were in a tent, the Trio decided to lend the young men their spare.

This was not the first time that the Trio had orchestrated such an arrangement, and they had seen such reactions many times before. As such, they were unbothered.

"Now then, would you give us some sword lessons after dinner? We can offer you a meal in return."

The four men nodded firmly.

Though they were offering them a place to sleep and the evening's meal, the Trio had no intention of allowing the Wings to use their bathhouse or toilets. A maiden's pride was not so easily set aside.

* * *

"Hold it! You can't just move in like that! You all don't have any power or stamina, and the swords you use are shorter than the average swordsman's. When it comes down to it, you're all mages, not swordswomen. What do you think you're supposed to do if

you have to fight like a swordsman?! A sword is used to aid, to check, and to ensnare!"

To their surprise, when it came time to start up the lessons, the Wings had some actually sound advice to offer to the Trio. Perhaps because they swiftly realized that, whether the foe was man or beast, the Trio would meet a swift end if they tried to win a fight with their sword skills alone...

Fortunately, the Trio were mages, their swords little more than a supplementary arm. The Wings showed a surprising amount of discernment in realizing that they ought not let the girls have too much confidence in their sword skills.

"Don't rely on your swords in battle! You swing your sword only to keep enemies at a distance. It's either that or something that you draw reflexively to interrupt an attack if someone gets the drop on you, or to buy time for you to launch your own counterattack. Use the immediate aftermath of the swing to gain some distance and cast one of your silent spells!"

The Trio had had to tip their hands somewhat for the sake of the lesson. They would only be seeing these men but the one time, and there was no chance of having to fight them in the future. Plus, no hunter would go around spilling personal information about someone they'd worked alongside. To do so would be practically suicidal, a sign to all those around them that they were trash who didn't respect the rules or customs of their profession—and word could get around fast. (The only exception to this rule was sharing information about parties requiring special attention, which was a different matter entirely. Being communicative about this was a benefit to hunters all around.)

With all this in mind, the Trio saw fit to let the Wings in on their absurd storage magic capacity and silent casting, though they didn't tell them about the special functions of their inventories, or the fact that their style of magic was especially high-powered. They also opted to keep mum about their alarm spells, their barrier magic, and their hot magic, *just* in case the other party decided to betray them and sneak into their tent in the middle of the night. Thankfully, it had never come to that, but it was always better to be safe than sorry. Even if it might be cause for regret someday.

For whoever dared attack them, that was.

And so, the Wonder Trio had a lovely training session, with some unexpectedly sound advice from teachers so young.

* * *

Once practice was through and each of the parties had moved to their respective tents, the Trio began setting up some clappers. Additionally, they placed a small stand just inside the door of the tent and positioned a pot on top of it. If anyone were to attempt to sneak inside in the dead of night, they would knock over the pot, which would make a great sound.

Of course, they had their magical protections in place as well, so even if an intruder should avoid the clappers, they would not be able to make it to the tent unnoticed; however, they were great believers in redundancy. Unlike Mile, they could not keep a barrier up for an extended amount of time, so it was important that they register the presence of any attackers well before they arrived.

Additionally, the three of them took turns standing watch, in three hour increments from the second evening bell until the first morning bell. This was of course not “standing” in a literal sense—they were not standing up outside of the tent or anything, merely sitting awake in bed. Indeed, they would lie under the covers with sword or staff in hand, sending out regular search magic pings. This was only natural to do, of course, as it was not just the men they needed to watch out for but also nocturnal monsters and wild beasts.

There was no real need for the Trio to go to these lengths—the Wings had told them that they would handle keeping watch all night—but no matter how reliable the allies they had chosen seemed, the Trio were neither trusting nor stupid enough to put so much faith in men they had only just met.

“Well, this turned out to be useful,” said Marcela.

The three of them chatted, snuggled up in their beds. The tent they had lent the young men was a fair distance away, so there was no worry of their hushed conversation being overheard.

“Yes, they probably registered as hunters first thing, when they were ten years old... Actually, they may have even fought their way up from the bottom, starting as G-rank apprentices,” Monika agreed.

Most lifers in the guild came from orphanages or city slums, doing small jobs both to

earn some coin and hone their skills. Children from regular households rarely became hunters at so young an age.

Aureana was of the same mind. “They have a lot of skill for people so young. They’re particularly good, even for lifers.”

“I think we should stay in this town a while,” Marcela proposed. “It doesn’t seem like they’ve gotten the wrong idea about us, and if they can continue being gentlemen while they instruct us in combat, we can offer them half the profits for our quarry, which is a pretty good deal for the Invincible Wings.”

“Agreed!” said Monika.

“I concur as well,” said Aureana. “Chances aren’t high of us finding a better party around here, so sticking with them and learning all that we can is the best choice.”

“Well then, it’s decided. Now, please start the first watch, Miss Monika. We still can’t be certain that all of them truly *are* gentlemen...”

“On it!”

With that, Marcela and Aureana settled into bed, and the air soon filled with their gentle snoring. It was important for hunters to get a good night’s sleep.

I wonder if Adele is camping somewhere, too, right about now, thought Monika. She still had three hours until the change of watch and could not allow herself to fall asleep before then, so she spent the time reminiscing about their days at the Academy...

* * *

“Hey, Reina, you have a moment?”

“For what?”

“Could you put this armband on your right arm?”

“Huh? I mean, I guess... Okay, it’s on. Now what?”

“Now, tug on the armband with your left hand and repeat after me: ‘I’m with Judgment!’”

"What is this supposed to be imitating?! I don't get this at all!"

It had been two weeks since the Crimson Vow's return from the demon village on the northern end of the continent, and the four of them had returned to a normal life—or at least normal as far as *they* were concerned. Then again, even that expedition had been more or less a "normal" part of life for them.

Of course, Mile had not yet forgotten what happened in the kingdom of Aubram, the long narrow country that ran from east to west, briefly touching Tils at the northeast, where they had tackled a direct job request. If not for that incident, Mile would have been able to rest assured that the elder dragons' actions were merely some arcane preparation for the recurrence of an ancient cataclysm, triggered by the holy maiden's proposition. This was not merely some wild fantasy or delusion on the maiden's part; it was the result of her exchanges with the nanomachines, who had lived through so much of history.

That said, even if this event were to recur, it was something from thousands, tens of thousands, or even many more years back in the past. This meant the chances of it occurring within the scant few decades of Mile's life span would have been unbearably low. So, she could assume this was not really her problem.

Or at least she could have, were it not for *that* incident.

A rift, connecting to another dimension. The artificial beings that were clearly using these rifts to try and draw powerful, purebred monsters into this world. All this indicated that the time the elder dragons feared was near—incredibly near. No, actually, it had already begun. This fact could not possibly be lost on Mile.

But what can I even do? Mile sunk deep into thought as she lay in her bed. *I can worry over it all I like, but this whole thing is beyond me. Our opponents are in another world. We don't know when or where they might appear; their identities, strength, numbers, and intentions are all unclear. There's nothing I can do. The nanos, whom I usually rely on, don't have much information about this, and they can't interfere in any world outside of this one, except in the form of attack spells.*

If they didn't have their restrictions, I could probably have the nanos automatically launch an antiproton bomb or something the moment one of those rifts opens somewhere. Obviously, you'd want it to detonate after the rift closes, but you could probably set it to detonate thirty seconds after signal loss, and that would be safe

enough. Giving it a thirty-second window instead of having it detonate immediately would also allow an emergency stop to be activated in the case of some unforeseen circumstance. I don't think that would be enough time for them to dismantle the bomb or open up another rift and push it back through, though.

Anyway, launching a bomb, much less an antiproton bomb, into another dimension, is definitely a "prohibited" item, so there's no use dwelling on that...

Mile stared blankly for some time, not thinking about anything.

They still haven't spoken to me. Guess this really is out of my hands.

This was typically the point at which the nanomachines would have said something to her. However, at present, they seemed intent on conveying that they would not say anything to Mile unless she spoke to them first, from which she drew certain conclusions.

Clearly we have to defend our own world ourselves. Even that higher life-form—that "god"—that revived me said he was not one to directly interfere. I suppose their kind must have some norms that they adhere to, things that they simply "should not" do, either morally or just in terms of some rule—even if they would be plenty capable of doing so, in terms of technology and ability.

At any rate, the only thing that I can do is try to make everyone else aware of the danger we're facing, so that we can all work together to deal with the creatures coming through those dimensional rifts as swiftly as possible, lest they build some bridge from their world to ours, start breeding and proliferating, and wipe out or overthrow all life-forms in this world, starting with the humanoids...

At the very least, I'm not going to get very far doing things on my own. It is not my duty to do so. I mean, I do have some individual duties as a citizen of this world, but there's no reason to stress myself out trying to take everything onto my own shoulders. We all need to work together to defend this world we live in. I'm merely a single cog in the machine, doing what I can within my own limitations.

I could make all the fuss I want shouting my head off about the "invaders from another world," but no one would ever believe that. I need to figure out a better way to explain this, some way that will convince them all... But how?

Typically, invaders from other worlds would travel by some scientific means, or through

a gate or by some interdimensional spacecraft, or else they'd be apparitions or some other kind of supernatural life-form. So, why the transformed monsters? And just when I thought maybe we'd get to meet the mastermind, all we get is some crappy robot, which didn't even talk or have laser guns or anything...

I mean, I suppose it's pretty useful to know that we're dealing with an "intentional" attack at least, and that there's a clear enemy to defeat, but that's all that we really know... What would it mean for them to have done this over and over again since antiquity? To what end? Are they trying to migrate from a collapsing world? Looking to enslave others? Searching for food or resources? And, like, what if what's on the other side of those rifts is actually the future of our own world?! Or a world colonized by our own ancestors who left so long ago?!

NO, THAT IS MOST CERTAINLY NOT THE CASE... spoke the nanomachines into Mile's eardrums, sounding almost exasperated.

Oh, now you decide to butt in...

Mile's representative nanomachine began speaking to her in its usual tone. Apparently, this internal conference of hers was an area in which they could intercede.

DO YOU REALLY THINK IT WOULD BE SOMETHING THAT OUTRAGEOUS? IN BOTH OF THOSE SITUATIONS, THAT WOULD MEAN THE PEOPLE OF THIS WORLD KILLING THEIR OWN KIN. IN THE FORMER CASE, IT WOULD BE ANCESTORS AND PROGENY FIGHTING ONE ANOTHER, LEADING TO AN ANNIHILATION OF THE RACE NO MATTER WHO WON. SUCH AN ABSOLUTELY PREPOSTEROUS, HOPELESS—ER, WAIT. THE ODDS ARE INCREDIBLY LOW, BUT YOU'RE SAYING THAT THERE'S A CHANCE THAT SUCH A THING *COULD* OCCUR? SERIOUSLY?!

The representative nanomachine suddenly faltered, seemingly having received some sort of update from the nanomachine control center, which was apparently monitoring the conversation with Mile.

So it is possible...

YES, BUT THE ODDS ARE ESSENTIALLY ONE IN A NOVEMDECILLION... BUT WHY WOULD YOU LEAP IMMEDIATELY TO SUCH A NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE HELLSCAPE OF A THEORY? ARE YOU SOME KIND OF DEVIL?!

It was a dreadful way to put it.

No, that sort of thing just showed up a lot in my previous life...

WHAT THE HECK KIND OF A WORLD WAS THAT?! THAT'S A FATE WORSE THAN HELL ITSELF. NEVER SHOULD SUCH A WORLD EVEN EXIST!!!

No, I mean, that never actually happened, the idea just showed up a lot in stories...

For once it seemed that the nanomachine's confusion was genuine, not simply feigned for the sake of changing the subject.

A world which, one way or another, had many times nearly come to an end.

Mile, who wished for nothing more than a quiet, average, normal life.

Step by step, more swiftly than anyone knew, that "end" was once again fast approaching.

CHAPTER 114

THE CHAIN STORE

“I'M OPENING a chain store!”

“Here we go again—completely out of the blue...”

“Well, this is Mile we're talking about, after all.”

“Classic Mile.”

At this point, Reina, Pauline, and Mavis could not possibly be surprised by anything that came out of Mile's mouth.

“Anyway, you can already bend metal into chains with that superhuman strength of yours,” said Reina. “I guess if we just stocked up on a bunch of short iron rods of various thicknesses from a smithy and had you bend them all barehanded, we could turn a huge profit with barely any expenses... So, you gonna make some chain mail?”

Chain mail, in this case, obviously referred to the variety of armor that was made of metal links, not the kind of cursed letter you might get in your inbox.

“Let's do it! We can keep a lot of different types of metal stocked in Miley's storage, to suit any requirements, and if we have her do the production work at night, it won't get in the way of our hunting during the day. With her handmaking everything, there won't be any noise or stench, so she could even do it overnight at an inn!” Pauline was thrilled at the prospect.

“You expect me to work all on my own from dusk until dawn?! Do you have any idea how messed up that is?! But no! I'm not opening a ‘chain seller’ I said a chain *store*!”

“Isn't that the same thing?” Even Mavis, clever as she was, could find no distinction between the two. This was understandable. Though larger mercantile firms in this world did have branch locations, there was no concept of a chain store or franchise.

“A chain store is a business model in which a large company with an abundance of

capital opens a number of nearly identical stores. The name, signage, and appearance of every shop is the same, and the goods and services they trade in and so forth are all identical, as indicated by a manual. That way, a customer can shop with ease no matter where they go, always finding the store a familiar place, knowing that the quality of its goods and services will always be the same. There's no fear of going into a shop and finding the prices are too high, or that its wares are poorly made, or that the staff have bad attitudes."

"I see!" said Pauline, gleeful. "Plus, everyone would know just how many shops you have, which would emphasize just how influential your business is! Moreover, with common products shared between them, you can order stock in bulk, and negotiate more aggressive discounts, as well as avoid any missed sales opportunities by sharing your stock between stores. It's easier to train your employees and recruit more help when you're shorthanded. Mile, this is a wonderful idea! All of the problems with it aside..."

She had nothing but praise—no surprise, when there was potential profit to be made.

"So then, what are these problems?" Reina asked. "I do have some guesses, but..." She was not about to let Pauline's insinuations go unheard.

Pauline continued, "Well, to start, there was Mile's initial supposition of a 'large company with an abundance of capital'...The Crimson Vow does not meet those requirements. We'd need a huge amount of funding to open multiple shops—far more than what I've been saving up in hopes of opening a much smaller firm. Plus, opening a number of branches requires a huge number of employees—both managerial candidates reliable enough to entrust those individual stores to and hardworking staff to labor beneath them.

"I am glad that Mile has come around to my vision of establishing a company so quickly, but to do it so suddenly on a whim exhibits a bit too much naivete when it comes to business. You need to prove yourself first with your main shop and build up client trust, and from there you can gradually expand your scope..."

"Now, just a moment!" Reina shouted. "Mile is free to help you build up your business, and when the time comes, I have no issue donating part of my share of the party funds and helping you guard the caravans transporting your goods and such—but that needs to come *after* I'm an A-rank hunter! Do you think I'm gonna sit by and let you monopolize her time when we haven't even yet made it to B-rank?!"

"Right!" Mavis crowed. "Until I make it to A rank, which might get me a knighthood with the palace, or some other high-ranking noble household, you aren't taking Mile away from us!"

Their objections were to be expected; they both had their reasons for hoping to reach A-rank. That said...

"So, you can't do that without Miley?"

"Ah..."

Never tread on a tiger's tail—nor on Pauline's. The pair now realized this, but it was too little, too late.

"Oh, I see. You can't do it without *her*. And based on your phrasing, *I*, meanwhile, am chopped liver. Is that what I'm hearing?"

Oh nooooo, thought the pair, beginning to pale at the memory of previous incidents in which they had faced Pauline's rage.

"Meanwhile, you're planning to reach A-rank on someone else's strength, you say?"

"Guh...!"

Both Reina and Mavis were mentally quailing under the onslaught of her words. Mile thought, *Big words from you, Pauline, when you're planning to rely on my storage magic to build your business...*

The ones who can already walk are using Clara as a stepping stone, Mile thought to herself. But these were her allies, her friends. She did not mind being of use to them in any way that she could. Still...

Are they all planning their futures under the assumption that I'll be with them forever? There's no telling what the future might hold... What would they do if I were to suddenly disappear? Perhaps I should be a bit franker with them, she thought. However, Mile was still Mile.

"Please! Don't fight over me!"

The most important thing was that she'd gotten to cross one of the classic phrases

she'd always wished to utter off her list.

"No—wait, anyway, you're all working from a misconception! I don't have any intention of quitting being a hunter right now, nor of working as a warehouse-slash-pack mule for Pauline! And Pauline, no, that face isn't going to work on me!"

* * *

"So this 'chain store' isn't a corporation so much as a collection of similar stores?"

"That's correct. Which means we don't necessarily need skilled merchants for all of the stores. I was actually thinking about a takeout restaurant. We don't really need trained chefs as long as they can cook to a recipe. Anyone who's capable of following instructions should do. Each restaurant will operate at their own expense and prepare their own ingredients, meaning we needn't provide them with capital or prepare and distribute all of the food from some central kitchen. Really, it wouldn't be a proper chain so much as a franchise—though, uh, no one knows what that means and explaining it would be a pain, which is why I said chain store. Though I guess a franchise is just a type of chain store with no main base of operations..."

Mile's explanation was not really clearing up much for the others.

"But if we start successfully turning a profit, won't other similar shops start popping up? Like, if we call ours the 'House of the Holy Maiden,' you'd start seeing 'House of the Hero,' or 'House of the Angel,' or even something more brazen like 'Great House of the Holy Maiden,' or 'Main House of the Holy Maiden,' or 'House of the Original Holy Maiden'..."

Pauline was correct. In a world without patents, trademarks, or any notions of intellectual property at all, it was common to see copycats like this. The moment someone without the power to defend themselves started making a killing off some new idea, everyone else leapt in to seize their piece of the pie, from larger companies to small-time merchants. From there, it was standard practice to ruin or seize the originator's business, whether by financial means or manpower, which often included bribes to the right officials or even hiring thugs.

"Anyway, why are we even talking about getting into this?! It's not like we're hurting for money. Shouldn't we prioritize getting to B- and then A-rank first?"

"Yeah. It's unnecessary, would eat up our time, and there's no reason for us to get

involved in something that might just hinder us in the long run. I'm with Reina. We should just focus on being hunters."

It was natural that this would be both Reina and Mavis's priority. Pauline, meanwhile, chose to be more optimistic about the possibility of starting a business, merely pointing out the flaws in Mile's plan so that she could direct things from behind the scenes and make something of it. Climbing the hunter ranks was of little importance to her. This would be a prime opportunity to bring Mile around to the joys of commerce, while also being a dry run for when she'd get to start her own business one day.

That said, she hadn't intended to go into business *this* soon. And she knew her companions had their reasons for wanting to rise up the ranks, so she wasn't about to back Mile too vocally.

"Y-you don't get it! I'm not going to be running a shop myself! All I want to do is teach people the management techniques and the recipes; I wouldn't be involved in managing them outside of the initial setup, and I wouldn't be getting any money from them. So, this won't have any effect on our activities as hunters. I mean, I *might* want to take on some ingredient gathering jobs, but..."

"You're not going to make any money? Then what is the point of us even getting involved?!" Naturally, that was the point that most bothered Pauline.

"Mile, I'm guessing there's *some* reason you want to do this, right? Or rather, you're after something?" Mavis said, accusingly.

"Yeah! I get you're a softie, but you *know* we're not a charity," Reina agreed. "Like, you help people you run into from time to time, but you're not the sort to go around forcing your kindness on others. So, spill it—what are you scheming?!"

Mile could only chuckle bashfully and say, "I want to build an intelligence network."

"*Intelligence network?*" the other three echoed.

"Yes. Given what we know now, I can almost guarantee you that the kingdoms in this region—Marlane and Aubram, likely Trist and Tils as well—are facing the threat of creatures from the other side of those dimensional rifts. Creatures that are more than likely hostile to the inhabitants of this world. However, while the guild and the kingdoms' upper brass might believe that powerful new types of monsters are

appearing, it's not particularly likely that reports from a group of C-rank young ladies will be what convinces them—even if it's true.

"Showing them the corpse of one of those monsters is only proof that a single, particularly powerful specimen has appeared. It neither proves the existence of other dimensions, nor that there are beings that live in them who wish to invade our world. If we try to tell them that, they'll simply dismiss us as unfortunate children who read a few too many fantastical stories and got carried away."

"I suppose that's true," said Reina. The other two nodded.

Between Mile's folk tales, the whimsical novels of Miami Satodele, the various absurdities they had borne witness to, and the very fact that the inscrutable creature known as Mile existed right before their eyes, the Crimson Vow were already primed to understand and believe such stories. It was impossible to expect the same of their country's leaders.

"Plus, if they only sort of half believe us, there's a chance things could get way worse," said Mavis.

"You're right," agreed Pauline.

"Say more..." Mile and Reina were perplexed.

"I mean, if talk like that starts getting around, it'll only cause unease amongst the masses, which could cause an uproar in turn. That could turn into political unrest, merchant storehouses being assailed in the name of striking back, and all sorts of things that will be inconvenient for the higher-ups. The most likely outcome is them trying to quash this information before it can get out, lest the situation indeed grow so dire..."

"Are you saying they'd conceal information just to prevent panic among the populace?! That they'd try to put a stop to us just to keep that information from getting out?"

Mile was unable to refute Mavis's highly logical prediction.

"Yeah. So if you want to get that kind of information out into the world, you need to consider time, place, scope, what you're saying, and who you're saying it to. Failing to consider any of those factors is as good as suicide. That's how this kind of business works. You can't just go around saying anything to anyone," Mile further explained.

The other three went quiet and pale.

"A... anyway! I'm not interested in letting any information get out that would be bad for the higher-ups! That's why I want to open a series of shops across the land and use them as an information-gathering network. If they hear anything and it isn't particularly urgent, they can send it along via guild courier or contract a merchant caravan. If it is urgent, they can hire a low-ranking solo hunter to deliver it. It's a much quicker way for us to stay informed than waiting for things to get bad enough for the kingdoms to do something about it, and hoping that news gets out from there," explained Mile.

The other three said nothing. They did not seem to be taking this proposal especially well.

Reina finally spoke. "So let's say you succeed in getting your hands on this information before anyone else does. Then what?"

"Would there even be anything *we* could do about it?" asked Mavis.

"Isn't that something they should seek international cooperation to address?" asked Pauline. "There are only four of us—what could *we* possibly do?"

Mile's eyes fell to the ground as she went quiet. Not a single one of her companions was on board.

"Oh, uh, forget what I said!" said Reina.

"Yeah, that's a pretty good idea actually!" chimed Mavis.

"A widespread network of stores, none subordinate to the others... I think this could be an important test case for the future of commerce as a whole!"

The three of them really were too sweet on Mile.

* * *

"I mean, it's fine, guys," said Mile. "I'm going to be the one teaching them the recipes. It won't take any of our party funds, and I can handle all of the set-up work on my own when we're on breaks..."

She's sulking. The other three sighed.

Yes, even Mile could be peevish from time to time. After the other three had done a 180 and given Mile's proposal their full support, it had still dealt her quite the blow to have the three of them bat it down so swiftly in the first place. Not to mention that she hadn't even been able to refute their objections.

Can't win an argument, so I'm off to my room to sulk like a child...

Mile began to make some additional joke but shut it down herself—which was proof enough of how irritated she was.

"Well, even if I can't do anything about it myself, I'm sure the elder dragons will handle it! They can hit those rifts with their dragon breath and stop those invaders in their tracks! So I don't have to..."

"Oh, she's lost her nerve..."

"Then again, unusual monsters slipping into this world wouldn't really frighten the elder dragons, so why should they care about it? I guess because of the edict they received from their progenitors..."

"Now for some wild speculation..."

"What is with you all?! Shut up!!"

"Oh, she's angry..."

* * *

In the end, Mile did decide to open a chain of restaurants. The Crimson Vow already had more than enough contribution points to reach a B-rank, and none of the others were so concerned about doing their work as hunters that they weren't happy to just let Mile do as she pleased.

"I'm going to start up right here in this city!"

It only made sense for the first shop to be set up in the capital of Tils, the Crimson Vow's base of operations.

"Hello!"

The first location was somewhere Mile was quite familiar with. No matter how much of a hometown staple she and the rest of the Crimson Vow were becoming, they were still unknown to anyone beyond the guild and those connected to it, the palace's spies, and the few merchants who had hired them to do guard duty. As those merchants weren't in the restaurant business, and it was a fundamental rule not to give out info about the hunters you hired, they weren't telling their fellow merchants about the Vow. This made it unlikely that a little hunter who looked no more than twelve or thirteen would have much luck making requests of the average merchant. Even more so in other towns, where Mile intended to open subsequent shops...

With all this in mind, Mile decided to target a place where she had some credibility—one where the storefront and the staff would be reliable and free of charge, and which could be used as a successful example for other towns. A place with a lot of lateral connections and good relations with other similar establishments, despite having neither money nor power...

In other words, the orphanage.

"We really appreciate everything you've done for us, Miss Mile. All of the meat and vegetables you've brought us have given the children so much vigor that I hardly recognize them," said the matron of the orphanage, rushing out to bow her head to Mile.

Here at the orphanage, Mile was a VIP. She had stopped by after doing some hunting, bringing some meat that she had not sold to the guild as a donation. An entire orc's worth of meat was an amazing gift for the orphanage to receive. These donations came relatively frequently as well, sometimes with a side of jackalope or boar, often with some wild vegetables or herbs. As far as the orphanage was concerned, someone who brought them such blessings was divine—an angel, a god incarnate.

After handing off the delivery from her inventory as usual, Mile addressed the matron. "I was wondering if perhaps you might consider working with me to run a shop here..."

"We'd be honored!"

"Wh...?"

The response came immediately, before she even had a chance to explain what kind of shop it was or what the terms of the arrangement might be. This was either proof of just how much faith the matron had in Mile, or proof that they had literally nothing else to lose...

* * *

“A fried food stand?”

“That’s right! When you think about the kind of cooked foods you can get in this area, they’re usually grilled, boiled, or sauteed, right? So, now’s your chance to throw your hats in the ring, with a brand-new taste sensation. I mean, you don’t see much steaming happening, either, but steaming food takes time, and prepping anything but sweet potatoes takes a lot of work. You need a lot of equipment, too, so we’ll just have to give that one a pass.

“With fried foods, though, as long as you prep the ingredients ahead of time, you can cook the dishes relatively quickly. It’s easy for folks to take home with them, and as long as the portion sizes and the temperature of the oil stay fixed, you can always cook the same things in the same way in the same amount of time. It’s so easy, even a child can do it!”

“I see...”

The matron seemed to understand what Mile was saying—at least so far.

“We’re pretty far from the center of town, though,” said the matron. “Do you really think we’d be able to attract enough clientele in a place like this? When the only thing we’d be selling is food prepared by amateurs?”

It was no surprise that the matron, who had a few years on Mile, would be the one to point out the obvious.

“It’ll be fine,” said Mile. “You just leave that to me!”

Mile would be providing the equipment as well as the initial ingredients, so even if things didn’t go as they hoped, the orphanage had nothing to lose. At worst, it would be a waste of the orphans’ time. Compared to what Mile had given them so far, and what she would give them in the future, this was but a pittance. And if things went well...

"Let's do it!" said the matron, gripping Mile's hands tightly.

Indeed, she could have given no other reply.

"You can render the fat from the orcs into the frying oil, so you shouldn't need to purchase any oil to start if you just use the orc meat that I bring you. As far as what to fry, you can obviously use the orc meat itself, but wild bird and other meat should work also, as well as vegetables. I'll provide you a fair amount of those, but anything else, you'll need to come up with yourselves. You should try and brainstorm other good fried dishes on your own. Once the shop really gets going, you'll have to stock the orc meat and such on your own as well. I can only help you out while you're building up your business. If you're running forever on the assumption that I'll supply you with the ingredients for free, it will distract me from my work as a hunter... *I'll lose precious time*, you see."

Lost time was a resource that a hunter could never get back.

Naturally, Mile intended to keep supplying her new business partners with free ingredients from time to time even after the shop's business took off, but she needed to be clear with the terms up front, lest the shop be lax in its planning or assume they could count on this kind of support forever.

"Very well," said the matron. After all, she understood a thing or two about the ways of the world.

Some mornings, a hunter might set out full of vigor, only never to return home again. Sometimes they returned only in pieces, carried back by their companions. There were likely even some such hunters who had once set out from this very orphanage. Perhaps even many...

Joining the Hunters' Guild was, after all, one of few professions open to orphans.

It might be reasonable to wonder why Mile was so intent to open up a restaurant, especially given how difficult such a business could be to get off the ground. The elderly matron could intuit one reason—the initial investment cost was low. This didn't mean they could expect to turn a huge profit; between rent, heating and lighting,

wages, and so forth, the operating costs would still add up. Most businesses only needed to stock up on a number of goods that might not be easily spoiled or damaged, and train employees on how to use the register. A restaurant, however, had to deal with ingredients that might spoil, as well as a number of waitresses, chefs, dishwashers, and more. Plus, you could only allow in as many guests as you had tables, and there was no telling how long each guest might linger. There were quite a number of hurdles involved in turning a profit from such a model... Especially if your amateur chefs were starting practically from zero.

However, what if there were neither wages nor rent to pay? If all you needed were the ingredients (or the money to pay for them), the utilities, and other miscellanies? If the rest could be pure profit?

No other restaurant could compete with such a business model. Which meant no copycats would ever be able to muscle in on their market. In any other industry, their business would be snapped up by competitors overnight. But given that they had no rent or wages to pay, even the biggest business would not be able to imitate their success.

Some people would prefer to eat in the heart of town, at regular prices. But there would be those happy to make the short trek to the outskirts, where they could both eat for cheap and get a self-righteous sense of satisfaction at helping to support “the poor orphans’ restaurant.”

Mile had not yet told the matron about the information-gathering angle, but it was significant that an eatery was much more likely to be useful on that front than a shop where the transaction consisted of nothing more than a brief exchange of currency and goods. At the same time, Mile was attempting to set her expectations in that realm relatively low, at least to begin with.

“Thankfully, because the heat gets all the way through the food when you’re frying it, there isn’t much risk of food poisoning, and you can cook all sorts of ingredients without altering much besides the cooking time. The biggest issue is that cooking with oil can be dangerous. There’s a risk of the children getting burned, and even of starting a fire... So, let’s have them cook out on the edge of the yard, rather than in the orphanage itself. I’ll set something up with earth magic.

“To avoid the greatest risk, which is of the children overturning a hot pot of oil onto themselves, we’ll have the pots affixed to the stove to keep them immobile. I’ll also

design the size, height, and enclosures to prevent the opposite—a child falling in. Assuming we have sufficient manpower here, we should have one of the elder children take on the job of supervising the pot, for the sake of maintaining safety.”

Mile had put a lot of thought into this. Cooking with oil was indeed a bit dangerous, but given both the prep and cook time involved in steaming, she had felt it might be too difficult for a layperson attempting to cook a large number of meals in a short period of time. Besides, she wasn’t actually all that familiar with steamed food. And so, fried food it was.

If a little oil got out of hand and caused burns, it could probably be taken care of with some healing magic. She didn’t want the children to have to experience any pain, but perhaps she felt that was still within acceptable bounds...

And so, the groundwork for store number one was laid.

* * *

“Talks for shop number one are off to a wonderful start!” Mile announced happily over dinner, before heading up alone to the party’s room. She was likely drawing up plans to go over at the orphanage the next day.

The other three members of the Crimson Vow remained behind in the living room, sipping their after-dinner tea.

“What do you think of all this?” asked Reina.

“What indeed...” Pauline sighed, shrugging her shoulders in a way Mavis often did.

“I mean, I suppose you can’t rely on any single person for information gathering and forwarding and stuff. You could hire a hunter, but that hunter isn’t always gonna be in the same town, and I can’t imagine anyone taking a weird job like that in the first place when they don’t even know what it’s for. You could request information of the guild, but then you’d be relying on the guild itself to already have the information. At that point, it would have already been circulated to all the local hunters, and to the guild branches in other towns. Requesting info from them would be futile and only get you what you needed completely after the fact... But still, I don’t think asking the orphanage to handle this is the smartest idea, either,” Mavis mused, shrugging as well.

“Obviously not,” said Reina. “There are other, easier ways of doing this, but she’s going

through a lot of trouble to try and use the orphans."

Reina had lost her father as well as the members of the Crimson Lightning, who had looked after her following his death. It was quite likely that, had she not become aware of her magical abilities, she would have ended up in an orphanage as well. In fact, that would have been the most positive of outcomes for a girl in her position. If she had been unlucky, she could have ended up another urchin in the slums, likely dead before she was even an adult.

As such, it stood to reason that Reina would be thinking about the orphans. Knowing that Mile was always providing for the children at the orphanage, and the urchins who lived along the riverbank, Reina did what she could to support them as well. Thus, she had realized from the start that Mile was really just using this information network or what-have-you as an excuse to provide the orphanage with a means of continued support.

Yet as much as she might want to aid the orphanage, Reina could not carry an entire orc by herself. Additionally, she was lacking in culinary skill... to a *shocking* degree. In fact, Mile had shouted at her, inscrutably, "What the heck?! Is your name Chizuru-san?! Are you running some traditional ryokan or something?!"

"Well, she probably just wants an excuse to play with all of the orphans, so let's let her have this," Reina sighed. "We've already trekked to other parts of the country to humor her—we might as well consider this as another excuse to travel."

"Yeah, I suppose that's not too much to ask..."

"We still do owe her quite a bit," Pauline agreed.

They certainly did—for all the magic and sword lessons, and for helping with their households, and for Mavis's left arm, and much, much more...

They really did rely too much on her.

Reina, however, felt differently. "Don't be ridiculous! We don't protect her and try to make her wishes come true because we 'owe' her anything!"

"Ah..."

Reina was correct. The reason that they worked so hard for Mile was...

“For as long as the crimson blood flows through our veins...”

“Our friendship lives on eternal!!!”

“Awww, you guys...”

Up in their room, tears welled in Mile’s eyes. They had such loud voices that Mile’s sharp ears could hear every last word they said.

* * *

“Hyah!”

Knead, knead, knead... Whoosh!

“The building is now complete!”

Using earth magic, Mile had just constructed a small structure in the corner of the yard, a short distance from the main orphanage. Though she referred to what she had done as earth magic, the building seemed to be constructed of stone—much like her portable bathhouse and toilets.

As one might guess, this was the booth from which the orphans would be selling their fried food, with all of the cooking implements inside. By making it of stone, and keeping some distance between the booth and the orphanage, it was less likely that it might cause the orphanage to go up in flames.

“Ha!”

Knead, knead, knead... Slam!

“The stove and cookware and shelves for setting the finished dishes on are complete, along with all the rest!”

“Yaaaaaaaaay!!!”

The adults working at the orphanage were flabbergasted, but the orphans were overjoyed.



As usual, Mile's abilities defied common sense.

"Now, I just need to use some magic to patch up an old, busted pot and fix it to the stove. It'll be a little annoying, since you'll have to use a small pan or ladle to change out the old oil, but I'd say that's preferable than risking any incidents with the pot getting knocked over, yes?"

The adults all nodded.

She was using a kettle instead of a frying pan because the former could be fitted and perfectly affixed to the stove. Safety first. She had visited this orphanage regularly enough to know that they had a number of broken, rusted pots in the storage room, which she would be fixing up with magic for that purpose. No matter how damaged they may have been, the workers at the orphanage simply couldn't bring themselves to discard something made of metal. Mile, once a citizen of Japan, understood this feeling well. It was the spirit of *mottainai*—letting nothing go to waste. Or put in other words: frugality.

The stove and kettle would be needed not only for frying the food but for boiling the orc meat down into lard. Mile crafted a second stove for this purpose.

"Oh no, I'm out of pots!"

Obviously, she'd need another vessel for the lard. As before, a fixed kettle was preferable, so as to avoid accidents.

"I'll use the old one for the lard and go get another one to do the frying," she said. She could easily find some pot full of holes from somewhere or other, or else buy one for cheap at a secondhand shop and repair it. She would handle it later.

She also prepped a number of smaller stoves for other dishes, making some last-minute adjustments based on the staffers' advice. These were set up just in case they decided to serve some side dishes at some point, along with their main entrees. A backup stove would also be needed for serving tea and hot water.

"Okay, so we just need one more pot, some pans, containers, and ingredients, and we'll be ready to go. I think we should be ready to open next week."

Mile had plenty of orcs in her inventory to get them going. In fact, she had built up something of a stash that she could sell off little by little. With a variety of other

ingredients already prepared, all that remained was to arrange for the missing cooking utensils and to train the children in cooking and serving.

And to go make a certain proposal...

* * *

A few days later, Mile's new fried food stand, I Can Fry, was ready for business. Situated in the corner of the yard at an orphanage not far from the center of the city, the shop was being run by the children of the orphanage, with the adults employed in running the orphanage and other volunteers acting as support staff. In truth, the adults were mainly there as a precaution, to keep the children safe as they worked with hot oil and fire, and to deal with anyone who might try to step out of line, skip on the bill, or make off with the cash box simply because they were dealing with children.

For the most part, the work of running the stand would be left to the orphans. The whole point of the exercise was to give the children a sense of independence, grow their self-confidence, and fortify them for life after the orphanage. Thankfully, all of the adults, the matron included, were fully on board with this plan.

"Well, golly gosh, y'all really do got things cookin' here. Saw them 'storage girls' advertisin' this place and decided to come!" said one of a group of five men as they tromped into the orphanage yard, taking their seats.

After them came a number of other groups, some even including women. Naturally, most of these groups were parties of hunters, but among the others were low-ranking soldiers and even some local thugs. Fortunately, the thugs were there for food, not crime, and they chatted cheerfully with their companions. Whether thanks to the Crimson Vow's advertising, because they hoped to chip in to help the orphanage out, or simply as a result of people wanting to eat some of the dishes created by Mile (renowned chef that she was)—whatever their reasons, the guests were all here.

Of course, there were those among the hunters, soldiers, and thugs who had once been orphans themselves. And there were those who knew their own children might one day end up parentless, cared for by this very organization. Almost all the people present had at least *some* degree of sympathy for the orphanage and its inhabitants.

The children serving as waitstaff scurried around, menus in hand. The customers

could go to the stall to order their own food and drinks, or they could order them from the young waitstaff. This eliminated the need for anyone to leave their seat to purchase more food when they were already in the middle of eating, drinking, and making merry. The menu stated plainly that if one took advantage of the services of the waitstaff, tips were encouraged. These tips were meagre, equivalent to roughly twenty or thirty yen—and they were not compulsory. But they made the children very happy. Indeed, that little bit of money earned those well-off guests who tipped them the adoring gazes of the children, who smiled and thanked them and muttered to themselves, “Maybe now we’ll have a bit more to eat...”

To low-ranking hunters, used to being at the very bottom of their profession’s pecking order, the feeling of improving these children’s lives had an almost narcotic effect.

This was all by design, of course. Mile knew that the next time a customer placed an order, the tip would be a bit bigger.

All the children could serve was food, tea, and plain water, hot or cold—but that wasn’t going to be enough to satisfy every customer. Given that most of the food being served was fried, sooner or later, someone was bound to shout, “Bring out the booze!” However, there were a number of problems with having children selling alcohol. The sale and provision of alcohol was regulated by the Merchants’ Guild, and an enterprise of this scope would certainly surpass the bounds of an orphanage’s meager operating expenses. To deal with this, Mile had decided to ask a tavern owner to open a branch location on site. The guild would have no issue with such a setup, and having only a single employee there would suffice to serve the customers present.

The children could still be waiters, and having this restaurant operate in tandem with a tavern had a lot of advantages—namely, keeping customers from trying anything weird with the store staff or getting violent and messing up the place. Even the most lawless of guests would never lay a hand on a tavern associate or cause damages to the shop. At most, they might heckle the waitresses a bit, or smash a glass or a plate in the midst of a brawl, maybe dent a chair or table. And in that last case, they would compensate the establishment for any damages after the fact—assuming they couldn’t petition the owner to let them off the hook, that was.

All this, naturally, was because the tavern they were frequenting might go out of business if they didn’t toe the line. You’d have to be crazy to purposely ruin the place where you came to eat, drink, and wind down from the day. Besides, doing anything to harm a tavern would earn you the ire of the Hunters’ and Mercenaries’ Guild,

soldiers, other townsfolk, and everything that came with said ire. As such, most tavern brawls were kept to a moderate level, with damages to the establishment itself deemed taboo. If chairs, tables, barrels, and bottles of liquor were smashed every time there was a fight, the waitresses assaulted and the barkeep shot dead like in a western, the business would be shuttered in an instant, and no one would dare to open a replacement.

Only the young and clueless would ever commit such shenanigans—and they were swiftly corrected by the old-timers, who didn't hesitate to extract compensation from their coin purses before booting them out the door.

Now to return to our scene, where the very first order placed was making its way to its destination...

As the dish was set upon the table, one of the men from the first group of five took one bite—and then another, and another. He gobbled the whole thing down before shouting, “What in the hell is this?!”

There had been quite a number of names that he did not recognize on the menu, so he had just ordered something at random, a dish he had never sampled before.

Hearing his yell, the customers at other tables who were still waiting for their food furrowed their brows. Perhaps this was nothing more than cheap food made by a bunch of orphans, they thought. Perhaps they had made a mistake in trusting that usually reliable party of girls who had recommended they come here. However...

“This is good... This is heckin’ amazing! I’ve never eaten nothin’ like this before! Booze! I can’t possibly be enjoyin’ this without some booze on the side! Oi! You, boy, go buy me some ale! And keep the change!”

At this, some stood from their seats to go buy some liquor themselves, while others called to children nearby to do so. A queue began to form at the tavern branch, which was nothing more than another little shack Mile had built, with a counter attached. It was of the same make as the main food stall, but it had only one kettle, for serving heated wine or ale. It was manned by a single gentleman, with the orphans to serve as waiters and waitresses and wash the wooden steins.

It truly was splendid to have a large labor force with such low living expenses.

A fried food shop.

At first, Mile had envisioned it as nothing more than a simple stall. With the economy of labor (a reduced workload), rate of customer turnover, and a number of other factors in mind, it just seemed ideal. However, when she had presented this to the other members of the Crimson Vow and let them taste her sample dishes...

"You won't really be able to get much information just serving things over a counter, will you?"

"Your labor costs are nil, and there are more than thirty children, aren't there? They'd earn much more money with a normal sit-down restaurant, wouldn't they? You can reduce the burden on the children by setting up shifts or shortening business hours. That said, think of the satisfaction they'll gain in knowing that they're doing something useful for the orphanage! Leave the late-night business to the pubs in town, but from noon to evening, it's all theirs!"

"This stuff is pretty tasty, but it doesn't taste as good once it gets cold."

"You should have them eat it there while it's hot and get them to buy more."

"This really makes you crave a stiff drink, huh?"

Such were the other girls' opinions. And so, Mile decided to ditch the original food stand idea and go with something more like a food court... even if the only shops in it were I Can Fry and the adjoining tavern stand.

This did seem to have hit the mark, as they were raking in far more money than they would have if customers were only buying a few pieces of food apiece. With the seats always packed with people sitting and eating and drinking, it created the strange illusion that the customer capacity was unlimited. Additionally, the tavern was paying a tenant fee, as well as wages for the children serving as waitresses and wash boys. This was only natural—it was not a charity, after all.

Or rather, the orphanage itself *was* a charity, but this was this, and that was that.

In making her initial menu, Mile had racked her brain for everything she knew regarding frying food. These were the sort of things that she grew obsessive over.

First up, there was the selection of oil. Initially, she thought of using a plant-based oil. Something like safflower or palm kernel or corn or sesame, olive, rapeseed, et cetera. Mile, with her superhuman strength, would be able to efficiently wring every last drop out of these sources, but there was just one problem: Making a plant-based oil required the plants... *obviously*. Unfortunately, there was nowhere to cultivate these plants in any large quantity in the nearby areas. As such, it would be rather expensive to buy them, and collecting them from the wild would only grant a small yield.

This was when Mile recalled that she had once read online that the top tonkatsu restaurants used lard. Lard was off the table for tempura, as it hardened when it cooled, but it was just right for deep-frying!

Most importantly, lard could be sourced from fatty pork... and orc was *a lot* like pork.

And thus the question of oil had been answered—and tempura struck from the menu.

As far as the frying was concerned, Mile typically used only two centimeters of oil in the pan when frying small amounts of food, though three was frankly ideal. This was one area in which she was fastidiously economical. It was true that dumping too many ingredients at once into a small amount of oil would lower the temperature and prevent the food from frying as well, but one could make up for this by keeping a skilled eye on the pan and making adjustments when needed. Deep frying did not technically require the lavish amounts of oil used in a Japanese tempura pot. Oil was expensive, a luxury item. Frying pans were shallow and wide, anyway.

However, if you were going to have untrained children doing the frying, it was better to avoid having the oil change temperature as all different ingredients were added in various amounts.

So then, what to do? You had to take a big pot or pan and fill it full of oil.

The best items to fry in lard were pork, beef, and chicken cutlets; croquettes; mincemeat patties; meat skewers; small potatoes; and so forth. But while croquettes and mincemeat cutlets were not difficult to fry, they were a pain to prepare. Beef cutlets were expensive, so those were out as well. It would look ridiculous to have a single menu item be significantly more expensive than the rest, and if any were left

unsold at the end of the day it would be a terrible waste, which would have a devastating effect on budget. Of course, such things could be reconsidered on a trial basis, once the shop had been in business a while. Perhaps they could run a “daily special” at one or two locations... The advantage of running a chain of restaurants was that the results of a test at any one branch could serve as valuable feedback for the rest.

On this first day, Mile spent all her time on the kitchen side. The other adults could pay attention to the seating area—she was going to supervise the cooking.

In the days leading up to opening, the children had been well trained in cooking and customer service. Now, it was time for them to learn on the job and see if they would sink or swim. No matter what industry you were in, it was much like learning to wield a sword: All the training in the world was no substitute for the battlefield. However, Mile had faith in the pluck and resilience that the world had already beaten into these orphans. Unless something went grievously awry, she planned on keeping her mouth shut—though she would immediately intervene if something dangerous were to occur, of course.

All right! It looks like things are going smoothly. They should be able to manage this without me. If I leave them a few orcs before I head back to town, they'll be fine. Still, I'll stay and watch for just a little while longer...

* * *

A few days later, Mile had helped broker a deal to let the orphanage purchase orc meat directly from the guild and made sure they had the funds to keep their ingredients in stock. It was time for the Crimson Vow to set off on another journey... after disentangling themselves from their old friend Lenny, of course.

Mile took one more precaution before leaving, checking in with the guild master to make a request: “Please make sure that none of the hunters cause trouble for the orphans.”

The guild master snorted and replied, “Do you really think anyone would be so stupid as to cause trouble where you all are involved?!”

Jokes aside, they had known each other long enough that Mile trusted that the guild master would keep an eye on things.

CHAPTER 115

THE INVASION BEGINS

“THANK YOU for your help, everyone!”

After a long journey, the members of the Crimson Vow had returned to their old faithful inn and were now partaking of an evening meal. On this occasion, they had decided to take their time and enjoy a sumptuous feast.

“We’ve now provided a new source of income for the orphanages of this country and those nearby... Er, I mean, set up a brand-new information network!” Mile announced.

The others did not seem especially perturbed by this slip of the tongue. They had known from the very start that Mile’s true aim in working with the orphanages was to help support them. The goal of “gathering information” was merely a front—though it would not be *entirely* unhelpful to have the restaurants be sources of intel. Most importantly, though, running an orphanage was hard, and Mile was making the orphans’ lives significantly easier.

The food situation at the orphanage had already been greatly improved by Mile’s contributions... but the day might come when she was no longer around to help them. There was always the possibility of her making a fatal error on the job. While she could mow down most monsters like they were nothing, a human opponent could still get the drop on her. She might find herself faced with an overwhelming force or an enemy who struck at a weak point. Even weak humans could potentially take down a juvenile elder dragon—it had happened in the past. (Of course, it had taken the power of several thousand soldiers and a great number of large ballistae...)

Then there was the possibility of facing an enemy whose identity was fully shrouded...

In short, it was best to have some contingencies in place. This was something that her companions understood.

“Obviously, we can’t have something at *every* orphanage in the land. But with branches at least established in all the capital cities, the orphanages in other towns might take note and try something similar. I did at least tell the staff at the orphanages to pass

along the fundamentals of running a stall if any other orphanages came to consult with them."

Orphanages were a nonprofit enterprise. It was very likely they'd be happy to help each other out, rather than viewing them as rival entities. Mile knew that they all shared the same mission: keeping the children who needed them fed and safe.

"Now, Reina and Mavis, we can get back to living as normal C-rank hunters, working hard toward your goals of reaching A-rank."

Mile knew there wasn't much point in simply roaming the land at random. She already knew what the elder dragons' goal was, and chances were exceedingly slim that she might stumble upon a dimensional rift in the short window during which it was open. By now, she was also aware that there was nothing left within the ruins of their forebearers besides Scavengers and golems. And so, though she knew there was a small-scale reconnaissance mission coming in from the other world soon, they had a moment of respite for now. At this point, at least, there was nothing that the Crimson Vow could do about something that was so far beyond their scope.

As for the others...

Despite what she says, thought Mavis, chances are quite high—almost certain, in fact, that they will be attacking in the near future.

They're definitely coming, thought Pauline.

We'd better prepare for battle, thought Reina.

They're definitely on their way! Those Wonder Trio girls are coming for Mile!!!

They were on high alert.

* * *

It had been a few months now since the Crimson Vow returned from their trip to set up the restaurant chain. In that time, Mile had taken a long break to check in on the status of each of the orphanages, give them pointers, and troubleshoot any issues. By now, she could be certain that all of the children at each of these orphanages would have more than enough to eat, with or without her help. By using her extreme high-speed parabolic cabalite maneuver, she was able to move great distances in a short

time, so long as she was traveling alone. Even orphanages to which Mile had not directly offered her assistance had begun raising their earning potential, finding endeavors that would take full advantage of their greatest asset—free labor and physical space. In other words, businesses like the food stall, where employee salaries were usually among the highest contributors to operating costs.

Well, if anything ever happens to me, the orphanages around here should be fine. And at least now I can say that my being reborn into this world really did have some meaning. If I meet that overseer of a god again when I die, I'll be able to hold my head up high.

Now, to continue to live a life that I won't regret—a life lived for my own sake...

And to have all the fun I can in this world!

* * *

“Miss Mile of the Crimson Vow? I have a delivery for you.”

One day, the Crimson Vow received one of their regularly scheduled deliveries from the guild, brought to them as usual by one of the children who loitered around the guild hall, hoping to earn a bit of pocket change. Getting three half-silver to run deliveries around the capital was a pretty sweet deal for the kids—especially when many destinations were not even that far from the guild hall.

This piece of mail was one of the regularly scheduled reports that Mile had requested of each of the orphanages where she helped set up stalls. The report and the postage to send it represented the full share of the earnings that Mile expected from these endeavors.

“Okay, let's see... This one's from Marlane. They used the normal guild post instead of hiring a hunter or express courier, so it must not be anything notable,” said Mile, tearing open the envelope. “Right, here's what they say: *With the new types of monsters growing in number, the Mercenaries' Guild has been aiding the hunters and the army in exterminating them. The forests have grown dangerous enough to make some of the newer hunters balk at venturing in, but the lives of normal citizens are largely unimpacted. The meat on these newer monsters is bland and not especially fatty, but there is a savoriness to it, and it has a good mouthfeel. The leaner meat has a nice texture, and when you cook the cartilage up so it's still crunchy, it's not half-bad...* Wait, the rest of this is just their reviews of the new monster meat! I wonder if they'll be all right

with those monsters starting to wander around closer to the cities? There have been similar reports from the other capitals."

"In the last report from Trist, they wrote about a new type of orc stew or something, didn't they?" Pauline teased.

"It's *not* a *stew!*" Mile snapped. These reports were very important to her, and she would not tolerate anyone making light of them.

"It would be one thing if there was a major incident, but there's not much that we can do about the threat level just creeping up slowly all over the place, is there?" said Mavis. "Then again, I'm not sure there's much *we* could do about a major incident, either..."

She had a point. No matter how much of a reputation the Crimson Vow had built for themselves, they were still nothing more than a C-rank party comprised of four young girls. If there was anything they *could* handle alone, a single elder dragon could do the same job much faster. That or some king or lord's army. Again, the Crimson Vow was but a single party of four. They could do nothing about events happening simultaneously in separate locations.

"We'll have to leave it up to the various governments. Like I said when you were going on about your intelligence network, Mile, there's not really any point to you getting your hands on all this information first," chided Reina.

"Wah..." Mile slumped in dismay. Perhaps she did have some attachment to the worries and responsibilities she had borne in her previous life...

* * *

LADY MILE, IT SEEMS YOU HAVE AN UNEXPECTED GUEST. WILL YOU ACCEPT THEM?

"Huh?"

"Hm? What's up, Mile?"

"Oh! Uh, nothing! Eh heh heh..." Mile said, evading the question. She had not meant to vocalize her reply to the nanomachines.

Wh-what is it? And since when are you all my receptionists?! That's Lenny's job, isn't it?!

she replied internally. It was a justified objection—the nanomachines had never announced her visitors before.

WELL, YES, THAT WOULD BE THE CASE IF THIS WERE A NORMAL VISITOR—A HUMANOID OR A DEMON OR A BEASTPERSON OR SOME SUCH—BUT THIS VISITOR IS A BIT UNUSUAL, SO THEY ASKED FOR US TO ANNOUNCE THEM.

So this is someone a bit out of the ordinary... In that case, I suppose I should probably go to meet them alone?

The nanomachines were silent.

Say something!

ACTUALLY, BASED ON PREVIOUS INCIDENTS, IT MIGHT BE BEST FOR OTHERS TO BE PRESENT AS WELL.

What?! Are you saying that they aren't a person, a demon, or a beast?! And yet it's someone who all of us can meet, even given my secrets?

Again she was met with silence.

Clearly, you're saying this is up to me to decide. But from the way you're talking, I'm assuming that you're "strongly suggesting" that I bring company...

Mile thought for several seconds and then replied, *Please bring them to our room.*

ROGER THAT!

"Apparently, we have a visitor. They're going to meet us here," Mile announced to the group.

"Wait, since when?! Who is it?!" Reina exclaimed.

"Not sure. We won't know until they get here."

"You can't just have some mysterious figure coming to a girls' room!" Reina screamed.

"Would you expect anything less from Mile?" Mavis sighed.

"That is a very Mile move," agreed Pauline.

"Very well," shrugged Reina, resigned. "Bring them in, then!"

At that very moment, a little bird flew through the open window, alighting upon the table.

"Wait—the visitor is a *bird*?!!?" Reina squawked. At this rate, Lenny would probably show up to scold them for being a nuisance to the other guests. Mile quickly erected a sound barrier.

They all stared fixedly at the bird.

There are protrusions at its joints. Are those rivets? It's angular, with a shiny metallic surface. They've made no attempt to disguise the fact that this is a robot... Actually, this looks just like that robot bird Chika, from Lightspeed Esper—

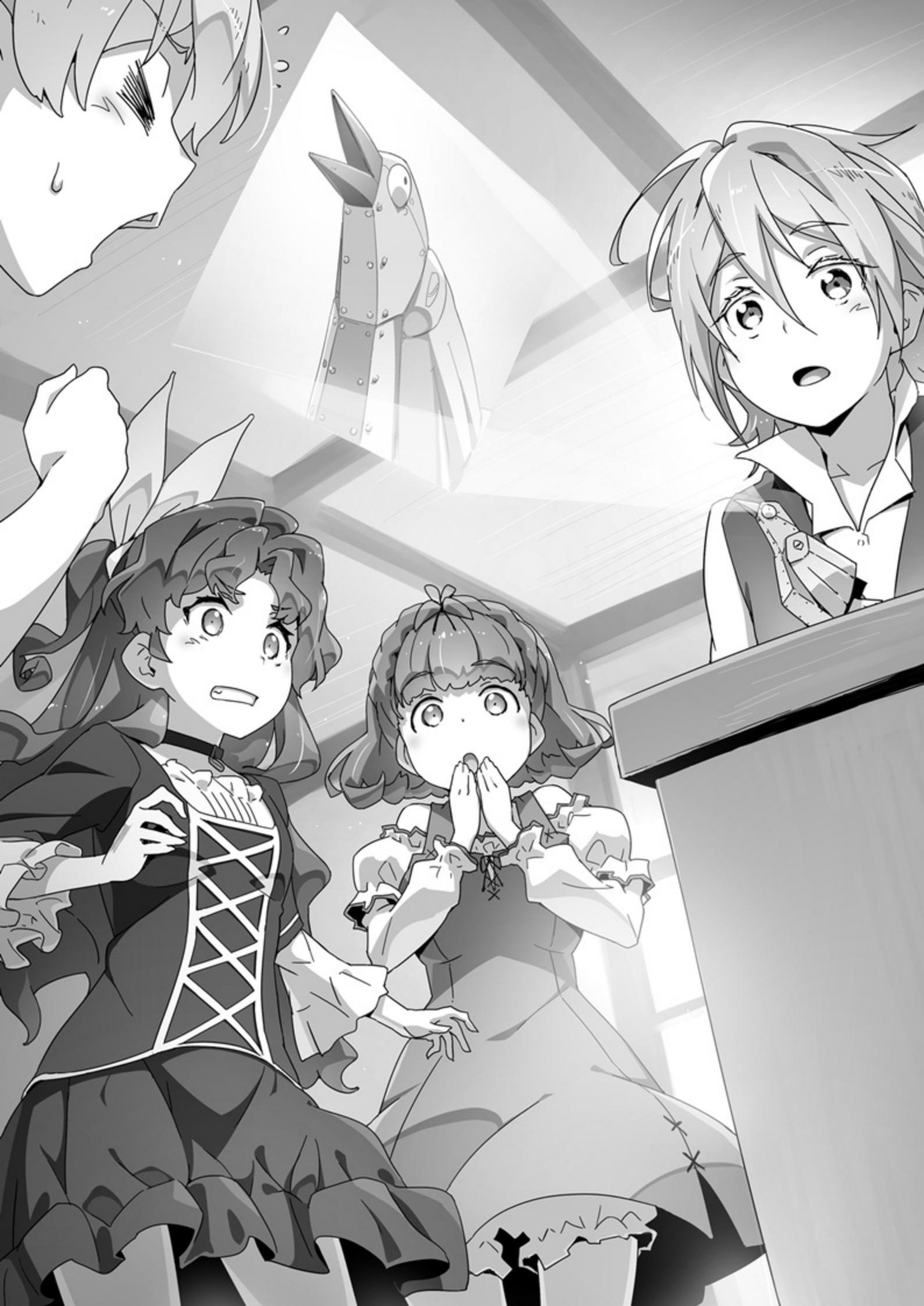
"Uh, something isn't right about this bird, is it? It sort of looks metallic..."

Just as Mavis said this, the bird cocked its head at a 45-degree angle and a beam of light shone from its eyes. The light coalesced into an image suspended in midair—an image of the bird itself, which bowed its head neatly.

'Good. Afternoon.'

"*Oh Goddess!!! It talks!!!*" three members of the Crimson Vow cried.

"Who the heck are you, Swanee?! If the face on the screen is the same as your face, why even bother with the projection?! Just talk out of your own mouth!!!"



Mile, of course, had a totally different objection.

"Wh-wh-wha-what is this thing?!"

"I-I-Is it an emissary from Hell? Or an angel...?"

"I-I-If we caught that thing, we could sell it for so much!"

Typically, Pauline's response was a little different from the others. But Mile simply chose to ignore it.

"It's just an automaton, a type of golem. It's a non-combatant type, like the Scavengers. The image is a type of illusion magic," Mile explained.

Her matter-of-fact description immediately calmed the others. Knowing that this bird-creature was an artificial construct was more than enough to satisfy the other hunters, who already knew about the golems, Scavengers, and Mavis's left arm. This bird was just another entry in that series of odd things. Even the image floating in the air did not particularly faze them if they thought of it as an illusion spell—they were already accustomed to seeing optical magic like Mile's invisibility and transformation spells on a daily basis. And hearing the bird speak was not especially odd once they considered that beastfolk and elder dragons could talk.

"All right, so to what do we owe the pleasure? And why is it you've brought monsters in from your world, rather than the intelligent life-forms you've created?"

The nanomachines had been the ones to make introductions for this character, so it was clear that it meant the Crimson Vow no harm. Mile was on her guard, of course, but she was not especially worried. These invaders from another world had gone through the trouble of making contact with *her*. She wasn't about to let a chance like this slip through her fingers.

AH, ACTUALLY, THIS BIRD HAILS FROM THIS WORLD. IT HAS TIES TO THE SCAVENGERS YOU MET WITH BEFORE. YOU DO REALIZE THAT IT WOULD NOT BE AWARE OF YOUR EXISTENCE OR OURS WERE THAT NOT THE CASE, YES? THE ONLY ENTITIES AWARE OF US, THE NANOMACHINES, ARE THE SCAVENGERS WE PREVIOUSLY MADE CONTACT WITH VIA DATA EXCHANGE, AND THE NO. 3 AUXILIARY BACKUP SYSTEM OF THE ECONOMICAL AUTONOMOUS BASIC DEFENSE CONTROL SYSTEM.

Wait, seriously?!

Once she thought about it, Mile realized it would make no sense for extradimensional beings to know about Mile, let alone bother tracking her down to make contact.

‘Slow_Walker. Wishes. To. Make. Contact, Custodian.’

“Wait, did you say, ‘Slow Walker?’ Like someone who walks slowly? Are we really introducing a new character at this point?!”

The mecha-bird had no reaction to Mile’s jab.

“More importantly, I suppose you are related to *those* guys, if you’re referring to me by that title. Is this Slow Walker character one of mine as well?”

Mile wondered if this so-called “slow walker” was one of the skittering, six-legged Scavengers—perhaps one who been removed from the line of duty because of some kind of operational fault slowing their movement. But the Scavengers possessed both the means and the materials of their own manufacture, which meant the other units could simply have repaired a broken one. Perhaps there was a reason they hadn’t, such as there being damage to the motor control centers of the unit’s electronic brain—the kind of damage where attempted repair would affect other sectors. That said, there wasn’t much point in such wild speculation at this juncture.

“Has some problem arisen that you need me to address? Or does it simply wish to make a scheduled report, or update me on repairs at its operational base and other locations?”

‘Slow_Walker. Wishes. To. Make. Contact, Custodian.’

“Ah, I see. You aren’t as sophisticated as the Scavengers are—you’re just a messenger.”

Given that the bird’s utterances had yet to show any variance, Mile concluded that it was only capable of basic replies.

“Will it be coming to see me? Or will I need to go to its location?”

‘Will. Guide. You.’

“Sure. Could you wait a few days, though?”

'Will. Wait.'

The bird didn't appear to have any form of long-range wireless communication. Though it did seem capable of some basic conversation, it was likely simply providing preprogrammed automated responses to anticipated questions. Perhaps its flight capabilities took up so much of the capacity of its small body that its makers were unable to give it much of a brain, making it incapable of the sort of advanced thought and reasoning that the Scavengers possessed.

Apparently having deemed that its mission was complete, the mecha-bird took off from the table and flew to the top of a storage chest, where it perched prettily. Mile appreciated its consideration—it would be pretty inconvenient to have it occupying the table the whole time. That said...

"Shouldn't you be going back to make your report?! Are you really just going to sit there and wait for us?!"

Given that the bird's mission seemed to be to retrieve Mile, going back without her would be a dereliction of duty. And of course, for a mechanical being of infinite life span, a few days' time was a paltry sum, a rounding error at worst.

"Well, I suppose you can't defy your orders. You are a robot, after all."

Mile had some sympathy for creations bound by rules.

"Um. Perhaps you'd care to explain...?"

Mile may have finished her conversation with the bird, but now, the other members of her party were ready and waiting with their questions.

* * *

"So, you're saying that the Scavengers and the other entities like them, which are left over from some ancient civilization, granted you some authority over them because you're a descendant of that civilization?"

"Yes... Well, I mean, that's not unique to me—every humanoid alive is a descendant as well. Intelligent life-forms like us didn't just pop up overnight. We're all the descendants of the humans of the far past. I think my role was mostly assigned due to the fact that I was the first one to speak to them, and that my blood is a bit more

strongly linked to that of our forebearers, due to some kind of recessive inheritance or something like that.”

“Ahhh!”

Everyone nodded as though they perfectly understood Mile’s point about recessive genes. After all, that would explain why elves and dwarves and such were always saying that Mile had the same smell as them—or not “smell” per se, but at least something that gave them the sense that Mile was their kin. Besides, a blood connection to an ancient civilization would explain why Mile’s magic was so ridiculously powerful. Like all humans, the members of the Crimson Vow tended to believe a theory they arrived at on their own was far closer to the truth than anything someone else might tell them... even if their own thinking had been purposely guided in that direction.

“So I’ve been offering them encouragement, and I’ve asked them to do their best not to cause any harm to humanoids or other intelligent life-forms when possible—barring cases of self-defense. I more or less left them to govern themselves, though. I figured that giving them any concrete direction, when I’m not especially informed, would just cause confusion.”

“Reigning without ruling, basically,” Mavis muttered. Mile nodded at the apt aphorism.

“Guess you’d better go then, huh?” asked Reina.

“Yeah...”

“What are you looking so sorry for?!”

“It’s fine, Mile! We visited those underground ruins as part of our pilgrimage, and the decisions you made were appropriate—both for the Scavengers and golems and for those orphans there.”

“Anyway, what you do, we all do. For better or worse, we shoulder each other’s burdens and prop each other up. After all...”

“We are four allies, bound at the soul! We are... the Crimson Vow!!!”

* * *

"So we've accepted an independent request, and we'll be heading to the Albarn Empire."

"Uh..."

The guild clerk stood petrified as Mavis made her strange proclamation with a smile on her face.

"Here's the crux of the matter: Although this job wasn't offered to us through the guild, we are traveling out of the country for job-related reasons, so we would like to request that the domestic work obligation period for the waiver of repayment of our student debt not be suspended..."

"What?!"

As one might surmise, Mile had conversed further with the mecha-bird and confirmed their destination was the Albarn Empire. This was not the sort of petition that involved traveling to some far-off destination without so much as a hint of where they were going.

At first glance, it might seem Mile was asking a lot of the guild—but the Crimson Vow weren't really seeking any kind of special treatment. They weren't trying to move their base of operations out of the country, just crossing international borders in pursuit of a job they had accepted domestically. Though they had taken on this assignment independently of the guild, the guild wasn't petty enough as to stop the clock on their term of service every single time a border was crossed. They *would* usually take a handling fee, but while they didn't profit from jobs that were brokered directly between client and hunter, hunters taking jobs generally meant someone in trouble was receiving the aid that they needed.

Plus, direct jobs were another way for hunters to earn a living and gain valuable experience, and, when successfully completed, they improved the profession's reputation as a whole. Not to mention the fact that any money that those hunters earned would be poured back into the local economy. No matter how scant that contribution might ultimately be, it was often the case that a good portion of it was spent on acquiring food and drink at the taverns the guild had a business interest in.

All said and done, this meant that the party's request wasn't *that* absurd. However...

"I'm going to speak to the guild master about this. Wait right here!"

“Whaaaaaat?”

Of course, things could not be too easy.

* * *

“And why the *hell* are you going back to the Empire this time?!”

Suddenly, the members of the Crimson Vow found themselves being yelled at.

“Well, I mean, we received a direct request... placed independently by the client...”

The explanation was redundant, as by definition, *all* independent requests were placed directly by a client with a hunter. In this case, the Crimson Vow were careful to frame the job as a request from a client who wished to remain anonymous, in order to imply that the substance of the job would be classified. This was not entirely a lie—and anyway, there was no clause that stated that only carbon-based life-forms could hire a hunting party.

“The Albarn Empire is a hostile nation. We still have no idea when they might try to launch an invasion on Brandel, Vanolark, or even Tils! Why would you choose now, of all times, to travel there? The last time was a special request from the palace, but a one-off independent request is another matter entirely!”

What? the girls were dumbfounded by the guild master’s objections.

Finally, Mavis spoke. “And what of it?”

“Huh?”

The guild master would not have been so startled had this rebuttal come from the ever-sharp-tongued Reina, or Pauline, who was known from time to time to spit bile with a smile. But they had come from Mavis. Mavis, who was always clearheaded, thoughtful, and polite...

“With the exception of a hunter intentionally choosing to carry out mercenary work, wars have nothing to do with us. The Hunters’ Guild is typically a neutral entity, and we neither participate nor intervene in warfare. Am I not correct?”

“N-no, you are...” the guild master stammered, unable to tender any objection. What

she stated was posited on the very first page of the guild charter. To deny this was to deny the guild itself, something which a guild master could not possibly do.

"In that case, it doesn't matter how precarious the relations between Tils and Albarn might be, does it? Even if we are on the verge of war, that doesn't have anything to do with our jobs as hunters. Plus, our country's merchants are still doing business within the Empire, and there are plenty of other hunters who cross the borders as their jobs require them to do so, aren't there? Why is it that *we* alone should be forbidden from entering the Empire? You aren't planning something, are you?"

"Uh..."

No matter how politely Mavis usually worked to meet others' expectations, when it came down to it, she was still the party leader and would readily stand up to a superior on the party's behalf, even without Reina or Pauline's intervention. Meanwhile, things looked far more grim for the guild master. The Crimson Vow weren't stupid, and there was no way he could talk his way out of this.

"Have you issued an order for *all* hunters to refuse to take jobs that will take them into Albarn? I didn't see any announcements about that written above the job board."

"You couldn't possibly be issuing this order *only* to us, could you? I suppose we'll have to check in with the other hunters."

This world, too, had an idiom akin to "kicking a dog while it's down." Pauline and Reina were more than happy to do just that to the suffering guild master.

"Ugh... No, it's just that... I'm worried about you, since you're all young ladies. It wasn't an order or a demand. I'm sorry for not being clearer."

Even if he had some ulterior motive he was keeping to himself, it seemed the guild master's objections didn't come from a place of malice. Maybe he really was just worried about their safety. As long as he was happy to apologize and not interfere with their travel into the Albarn Empire, it was no skin off of the Crimson Vow's backs. As such, they accepted the guild master's apology, making sure not to pass up the chance to assert their dominance by demanding a written agreement from him, as an assurance that the clock would not be stopped on their minimum term of service while they were out of the country.

Pauline showed no mercy when it came to matters such as these.

* * *

"We've finished our tour of all the orphanages for now," Mile mused as they walked back to the inn. "I left them with two normal orcs and three magically frozen ones, so they should all be fine. We made arrangements with the guild and local butchers while traveling, so the orphanages should be able to provide for themselves now, and we also were able to work out any kinks they'd been experiencing. Donating those five orcs was already more than enough, in terms of charity..."

"I guess you are pretty smart and thoughtful when it comes to those kind of operations," said Reina, as though they were not all often thinking of and supporting the orphans in their own way. Pauline participated by helping with simple cooking tasks and brainstorming ways to spruce up the orphanages, along with providing basic first aid and healing, while Mavis taught the fundamentals of swordplay.

The moment they returned to the inn, they were flagged down by Lenny. "Big sisters! A hunter on horseback showed up just a little while ago with a letter for you. I told them I wasn't sure when you would be back, so they said that I could sign for you and gave me this."

Lenny was fairly well known among the hunters who frequented their inn and eatery, and she had a reputation for her honesty and responsibility, even if she could be a bit of a pain when it came to money. Still, everyone knew that there was nothing unscrupulous about her stinginess; it was merely for the sake of keeping the inn fiscally sound. Plus, she provided work for other children by hiring them to draw water for the baths, so she was something of a celebrity among the local orphans and urchins. No one who took the task of delivering a letter or package sent from another town through the guild post would ever hesitate to entrust Lenny with an item addressed to a guest staying at the inn.

"Thanks, Lenny," said Mile, accepting the letter. It was a report from one of the orphanages, addressed to the Crimson Vow. Mile looked at the sender's name, finding that it had come from an orphanage in the kingdom of Aubram.

"Hm? But wait, didn't I just get a scheduled report back from Aubram?"

Mile followed the others up to their room on the second floor, tilting her head in suspicion. She was not so indiscreet as to stand right there in the middle of the inn's entryway and open the envelope. Once they reached the room, however, she sat down

upon her bed and opened up the letter—or rather, the report—skimming over it to find...

“What?! Apparently there’s been evidence of monster stampedes in Aubram. It makes sense—Lenny did say that this was delivered by a hunter on horseback. That means this wasn’t something that they had the leisure of sending to us via the guild post wagon or waiting around for an orphan or broke rookie to deliver to us.”

Her expression soured.

“Someone paid a lot of money to get this to us quickly, over international borders. This must be really bad!” Mile cried, having read only the first line of the letter.

The other members of the Crimson Vow crowded around to read the letter from over her shoulder. An orphanage, which had little in the way of funding to begin with, had spared no expense in paying the exorbitant postage for this emergency delivery. This was an apocalypse-level event, akin to TV Tokyo changing their broadcasting schedule for a breaking news report or Pauline giving money to charity. It seemed this orphanage thought that it was time to repay the favor the Crimson Vow had done in traveling around to offer the orphanages their support.

The hunters proceeded to read the rest of the letter.

“Here we go,” Mile summarized. “Sudden large outbreak of a new type of monster. Ecosystem imbalances leading to an influx of monsters leaving their natural habitats to move into human-settled areas. Emergency orders issued by the royal and local armies and Hunters’ and Mercenaries’ Guilds...” She paused. “The guild issuing an emergency draft like that is pretty rare. Everyone C-rank and up is compelled into service...”

The others were silent. This was a rare measure, one implemented only once a decade—no, once every few decades—and only in such cases as a stampede of monsters, or a battle against an elder dragon...

“What should we do?” asked Mile.

Just then, there came a knock at the door, followed by Lenny’s voice. “Big Sis, another letter for you!” Obviously, when the addressee herself was present at the inn, there was no need for Lenny to act as proxy.

"Another one, huh? Well, I suppose that happens sometimes, when things come via the guild post," Mile said, hurrying down to the first floor so as not to keep the messenger waiting.

"Thank you for your service. I'm Mile of the Crimson..." Mile began to greet the messenger, when suddenly she trailed off. There was no mistaking it—she was speaking to the courier himself, judging by the letter he held in his hand. But this person was a hunter, a man somewhere in his thirties. That simple fact left her petrified.

There was nothing strange about a letter being delivered from a guild branch to a home or inn somewhere in town. Normally, such tasks were left to an orphan or some other impoverished child hoping to earn a bit of spending money, but hunters occasionally took them on, too. But the kind of hunter who might take on such a task would be a down-on-their-luck greenhorn who just so happened to be on hand. It wasn't a task for the man who stood before her—an obviously mid-rank hunter with a trustworthy face and well-worn gear, well past his teenage years.

This meant yet another hunter had accepted an emergency delivery request. Just like the one who had delivered the letter from Aubram that Lenny had received for them earlier that same day. This man was a high-earning individual, one who specialized in the rush transport of letters or documents, who had the skills to not only ride long distances solo, but to defend himself in the case of a monster attack. The letter's sender would have had to place the job request directly with an individual like this. For a poor orphanage to send their report by such means could only mean one thing.

Mile signed the proof of delivery with great haste, accepted the letter, and rushed back up to the second floor. There was no need for her to pay the delivery fee, as this would have already been deposited with the guild by the orphanage. Then, as everyone peered over her shoulders, Mile opened up the letter and read over it.

"S... seriously?"

This time the letter had come from an orphanage in Marlane. It referenced what they had overheard from local hunters and merchants about the situation in Aubram, as well as an influx of new monster types in their own kingdom. The issue was not that the numbers of these monsters were increasing, but that there was an explosion of

them all at once. It was as though they had suddenly popped up out of thin air...

Naturally, the central and local governments of Marlane, plus the Hunters' and Mercenaries' Guilds, had all issued emergency requests and drafts, with appeals for support being made to neighboring kingdoms as well. However, both Aubram and Marlane, which shared a lengthy border, were unlikely to be able to support each other, which meant that the only nearby kingdoms who could offer their aid were Trist and Tils.

"Does this mean that the dimension rifts are fixed now?" Mile muttered.

"Huh?" The other three were startled by her speculation.

With the exception of the rift outside of the dwarven village, which had probably been open for quite some time, these rifts typically closed as soon as they opened. However, now it seemed there were other rifts staying open for quite a while—perhaps indefinitely. Perhaps those short-term rifts that were popping up all over the place were only experiments, a measure of trial-and-error in the pursuit of opening a perpetual gate, as that robot-like creature had been trying to do...

So, why was it that those people who had built up the civilizations of the distant past had abandoned this planet? With science so advanced, dealing with a little monster invasion would have been nothing, wouldn't it? No matter how peaceful their society had been, if there was a concern for their safety, they could have harnessed their knowledge and technological expertise into some kind of weapon. No reason a steak knife could only be used for eating, after all. Perhaps a hyper-long-range outer space laser communications system could have been repurposed into a laser gun, or some such; regardless, with their level of sophistication, crafting weaponry to go up against a monster or two should have been trivial.

This begged the question of why they would have made the difficult decision to abandon their home planet entirely. Was it because they knew that even if they managed to eliminate the monsters seeping in through the dimensional rifts at the time, the same thing would just happen again later? Or was it because they were so kindhearted that they refused to take the life of even a monster?

Regardless, the monsters had come. Just as their forebearers had predicted.

"So, are we going?"

It was Mavis who had raised the obvious question.

"Hm... I'm not sure, honestly," Mile replied.

"What?"

The other three were startled. They had assumed Mile would want to rush to Marlane immediately.

"I mean, if it was like last time, when neither the kingdom nor the guild were aware of the danger yet, we could go there and hunt up a heap of these aberrant monsters and try to convince them of the danger. But this time, they're already aware of both the dangers and the sudden population explosions of the aberrant types—the so-called 'new' monsters. They are leveraging their country's forces to deal with them, and I'm not really sure what adding the four of us to that number would do. In cases like these, it's best for us to focus on the things that only we have the ability to accomplish."

Her explanation prompted the others to take a step back and reconsider.

"That is true," started Reina. "No matter how powerful these monsters might be, with enough hunters and soldiers, the existing forces should be able to surround and defeat them. It's not like we're dealing with dragons here... If a small hunting party goes into the forest and encounters a type of monster they weren't anticipating, things can end pretty poorly, but with enough preparation and forethought, in a battle at the time and place of their choosing, a decent-sized force should be able to overcome almost any enemy..."

"You're right," Mavis agreed. "There's no reason for us to go rushing in if we haven't been hired to do so. Actually, considering that *this* kingdom is where we're based, it makes more sense for us to be here, prepared for any harm that might come to this country. It's only a matter of time until monsters come in across the borders, or new ones pop up within Tils. Plus, sooner or later we're probably going to see recruitment listings from the upper brass and guild of Tils, in response to the aid petitions lodged by both of those other kingdoms..."

After giving the matter some thought, Reina and Mavis seemed to share Mile's opinion. It made sense. If you were to suddenly encounter an unexpected foe in the middle of the woods, you might be wiped out. However, if it was an enemy you knew about from the start, and you had the opportunity to choose a strategic position, and gather plenty

of firepower on your side... An orc or ogre of any rank would be mincemeat in the face of trained soldiers and hunters equipped with honed weapons. There still would be plenty of casualties, of course, both fatal and otherwise, but such was daily life for a soldier, mercenary, or hunter. Just as no war was ever fought where not a single soldier perished, neither could they expect to escape from a battle against the monsters entirely unscathed.

And so, there was no need for four more hunters to go rushing in to join an extermination that was already being carried out by a country which had plenty of information and resources; even if they did, the added effect would be so little to be practically nothing. The only thing that the Crimson Vow needed to focus on in that moment was...

"This new character, who's gone out of their way to make contact with us right at this pivotal moment. It's probably one more part of the defense system that our forebearers left behind for the sake of their descendants. I think we need to go to it and see what it has to say!"

The other three all quietly nodded.

"So, is everyone fine with letting this guy lead us to wherever this 'Slow Walker' is?" asked Mile, pointing to the mecha-bird, which was still stationed atop the chest.

"Yeah. I mean, if we don't, it'll probably get mad and keep poking us," Reina said with a smirk.

"Or try to peck our eyes out," Pauline whispered.

"Eep!" Reina seemed genuinely frightened.

"Well, since we've already tied up all our loose ends, I suppose we should head out first thing in the morning tomorrow? We'll just have them tally up our bill for the inn, and pretend that we took a normal guard job so that Lenny doesn't try to stop us. Then, we can slip right out," said Mile.

The others nodded. Having Lenny fuss over them would only delay their departure...

"And is that fine with *you*?"

The mecha-bird chirped cheerfully in reply.

* * *

After years of experience with Lenny and her ways, the Crimson Vow were able to successfully make their escape the next morning. It probably helped that they ate breakfast first thing, and then headed out while the inn was still in its busiest hours.

They would by traveling by foot. Having a mechanical bird sitting on their shoulders giving them directions would cause far too much suspicion among the other passengers if they were to travel by stagecoach, and having the thing fly the whole time would be too great a burden for the meager capabilities built into the bird's small body. Furthermore, based on the distance the bird had given when asked how far they would have to travel, Mile had judged that their destination would be in the Albarn Empire. She had to come to this conclusion on her own based on the distance from their current location, as place and country names decided arbitrarily by humans would mean nothing to the mechanical creature.

As it stood, almost no carriages were headed for the Empire, where the political situation was unstable. It was sometimes possible to hitch a ride with merchant caravans as part of an escort mission, but few merchants were crazy enough to venture into a politically unstable situation, and the pace at which wagons fully laden with goods, making several day-long stops in various locations, would move would be far too slow. The Crimson Vow could cover the same distance on foot in less time. Not to mention that they could not simply abandon their guard duties once they had reached their intended destination and leave the caravan behind.

And so, considering both travel time and convenience, the Crimson Vow decided it was best to go it alone.

The mecha-bird chimed from its perch atop Mile's shoulder, making the motions of preening itself. Apparently, it was trying to pretend that it was a normal animal.

"Listen, if you're trying to convince people that you're a real bird, you've already missed a few steps! Like, maybe you should have done something about the fact that you're *obviously* made of metal, that you're completely smooth with not a single feather, that you're angular in a way that no organic life-form has ever been, and that

those rivet heads are sticking straight out of you!"

"Yeah, having the rivets stick out like that disrupts the air flow, which would make it way less aerodynamic..."

"That's *not* what I was talking about!" Reina wailed.

To be totally frank, there was pretty much nothing particularly realistic about this mecha-bird. There was absolutely no point in its faux preening when not a single pinion sprouted from its skin. Given its construction, it was more or less unthinkable that this thing could even fly by flapping its wings. It probably had some manner of anti-gravity-based propulsion system.

This thing looks worse than Lopross after it peeled off its exterior in battle to show its golden body beneath... It really does look just like Chika. If anyone actually thinks this thing looks like a real bird, they had better get their eyes checked out... Then again, the only real choices you have for that here are getting an apothecary to give you some eye drops or asking a mage to do some restorative magic on you...

Mile sank into her thoughts as the bird continued to give directions via chirps. The Crimson Vow continued following the bird's directions, until...

"There's nothing up ahead but a sheer mountain range!"

"And in front of it is a dense forest, full of crazy high-rank monsters..."

"We can't fly through the air like *you* can!"

"And also... we already know that you can talk, at least a bit? Why aren't you just giving us the directions verbally? At least tell us some roads to travel along!"

One after another, the four hunters lambasted the poor bird, which cheeped in reply.

"And don't go trying to act all shy now!"

"You can't make any expressions with that metal face, and all you're capable of is answering basic questions. How is that you're so crafty?! Your processing distribution makes no sense at all!"

Both Reina and Mile had further complaints for the mech.

"I mean, it is sort of cute. Isn't that enough?" asked Pauline, who somehow seemed to be taking a liking to the bird.

"Ah ha ha!" Mavis, meanwhile, just laughed, having no opinion one way or the other.

"Oh, I get it. She likes this bird because it doesn't fly away when she gets near it, unlike normal little birds and animals which run away whenever they sense evil intent—er, never mind! Forget about it! I said nothing!!!"

There went Mile, stepping right onto the tiger's tail...

* * *

"Okay! Enough, please! Uncle!" Mile wailed, which seemed to finally satisfy Pauline's wrath.

"Honestly... *I'm* not the sort of person who animals would avoid!" protested Pauline.

"Oh, you're right!" Mile immediately shot back. "It's not just animals but human children, too!"

"Mile!!"

"Ah."

Reina and Mavis had tried to stop her, but they were a moment too late.

"Eee hee hee..."

"U-um, Pauline?"

"Heh heh heh heh..."

"I, uh—"

"*Eh heh heh heh heh heh heh...*"

"*Gaaaaaaaaah!!!*"

* * *

The bird cheeped.

"I guess we're here?"

Finally, the Crimson Vow arrived at their destination. As usual, they had moved from A to B far more quickly than the average traveler would; all of their luggage was safely stored in Mile's inventory, and they had spent every night camping rather than stopping at inns, which allowed them to keep moving from dawn to dusk, as they needed no time for pitching tents and very little for preparing food. The location the bird had guided them to was not the caves they had visited before but somewhere else entirely.

They stood at the mouth of a cave deep in a remote mountain range. The cave looked like it had been dug out not so long ago and was just large enough for a rock golem to travel in and out. Six Scavengers stood in a row before them. It was impossible to tell whether they had met any of these individuals before. Mile could barely even distinguish among the faces of fellow humans, but even the other members of the Crimson Vow had no chance of telling these identical robots apart.

The Scavengers had four arms and six legs upon their metal bodies and were about equivalent in size to a large dog. The forest urchins had nicknamed them Mr. Skitters, which was apt insofar as the Scavengers moved quite quickly. There were six rock golems present as well, but they only seemed to be acting as security for the entrance, rather than forming part of the reception committee. Typically, these individuals would probably be patrolling the area on various independent duties, but for now they were all gathered here.

"I'm guessing they keep the entrance this small to keep humanoids and monsters from finding it?"

"Once again, we're getting the VIP treatment!!!"

It was yet another warm welcome for the Crimson Vow...

CHAPTER 116

SLOW WALKER

LED BY THE SCAVENGERS, the Crimson Vow ducked into the entrance of the cave. As expected, the rock golems did not follow them inside. The mecha-bird still sat upon Mile's shoulder.

The cave entrance was narrow for golems, but the Crimson Vow and the Scavengers were smaller and passed through without issue. It was only the outer entrance that was narrow, at any rate; once inside, two golems could easily walk shoulder to shoulder.

A short way down, they found that the passageway, while still dim, was lit well enough to not impede their progress, so Mile extinguished her light spell. Overhead shone luminescent rocks, which looked to have been placed there recently. The faint lighting was probably enough for the Scavengers and golems, as well as being plenty for the Crimson Vow. Even ramps and stairs were no issue in such a well-maintained cave.

In spite of the dim conditions, they were not too worried. There was little chance of a monster suddenly leaping from the darkness—even monsters needed food and water, and it was hard to imagine any choosing to live in a place so barren and inconveniently far from any hunting ground or watering hole. Even if a creature were to roost here, the nest would be no more than a few dozen meters from the entrance at most—far enough in to protect a creature from the wind and rain, but not so far that they would be cut off from the world outside and its resources. If Mile had to guess, she'd wager this place was home to golems and Scavengers alone.

The Crimson Vow proceeded through the cave, down a long, steep staircase, followed by another downward slope.

“We’re going pretty deep. Way deeper than last time.”

“Yeah. There are a few places where it looks like there might’ve once been cave-ins that they had to dig back out of, too. Not that going deeper necessarily means we’ll find older things...”

The depth at which a ruin was buried indicated less about the age of those ruins than about how important its contents were to those who had buried it. Certainly, there was no way that seismic upheaval could have altered the depths. Any tectonic shifts of that magnitude would have utterly flattened the ruins.

Even an underground city would never be this deep. After all, they only built the Time Tunnel, which was a huge, national project, a few kilometers below the surface of the Arizona desert...

Mile pondered this “few kilometers” as though it were nothing, but in truth, it was an enormous distance, especially if one didn’t have access to expediencies like traveling by elevator. Covering such a distance on foot, via stairs or ramps, would take an absurd amount of time. Tokyo Tower was a mere 333 meters, Tokyo Skytree a full 634. Without an elevator or some similar system of conveyance, a few kilometers would make for a taxing commute.

Regardless, the Crimson Vow continued downward, still full of vigor for now, not thinking about how the way back would be a literal uphill battle.

* * *

“A-are we there yet?”

“Hff... Guh...”

By the time Reina had begun lodging feeble complaints, Pauline was already so out of breath she could not speak. Mile and Mavis still seemed to be in fine form, but the walk was probably a bit much even for the two back-liners. In terms of energy consumption, descending was easier than ascending, but the burden on one’s knees was arguably greater, not to mention the tendon and muscle pain, and the repeated impact on one’s internal organs.

Still, the Crimson Vow walked on for hours, taking many, many breaks...

* * *

“It looks like we finally made it!”

As the path flattened out, Mile judged that they had arrived at their destination.

"Hff... Hff..."

"Guhh... Ghuh..."

"Wheeze..."

Mavis and Reina looked like newborn baby deer, their legs trembling and their knees knocking, but at least they were still on their feet. Pauline, meanwhile, looked like she was on the brink of death.

"You did great, Pauline! We're finally here!"

Pauline was fully aware that the Crimson Vow's maximum movement speed was limited by her own sluggish pace. She hated to be a burden on the others when it came time to move from place to place, so she always pushed herself as hard as she could. The rest of the party was aware of this, so Reina and Mavis offered a commiserating nod to Mile's words of encouragement, though their own breathing was still ragged.

The mecha-bird suddenly spoke. 'At. The. Current. Pace. We. Will. Arrive. At. Our. Destination. In. Three. Hours.'

Splat!

Pauline collapsed in a heap upon the ground.

* * *

*"Okay, this time I think we really *are* here..."* sighed Mile.

No one replied. There was nothing left of them but skin and bone.

At the end of the cave, the hunters found themselves in a space as massive as a sports dome. Near the center was a circle a few meters in radius, inside of which sat some manner of sophisticated electronic device. It appeared to be in normal working order, not a heap of twisted metal or a pile of rust. Curiously, there were numerous concentric rings drawn upon the ground surrounding it, each one with some sort of machine-like object placed within. More curious still, the machines closer to the interior were still relatively pristine in appearance, but those closer to the outside were rusted, some even crumbling. Those in the farthest ring were already reduced to nothing but dust, similar to the items they had found in the ruins they had visited

previously.

"What..."

"...is this?"

The members of the Crimson Vow all tilted their heads at this carefully designed pattern before them.

'SLOW_WALKER,' the bird announced.

"This is it?" Mile questioned. "The one in the middle isn't weathered at all. It looks almost brand new. Actually, judging from the way you've been talking about it, the electronic device in the middle must still be operational. But the deterioration, or rather the weathering, on the outermost ones is pretty intense. *This* is 'Slow Walker'...? Right, so if something walks slowly... Wait! Is this a time stasis field?!"

Suppose that you had an electronic system that could operate for one hundred years without maintenance, and you put on top of that a time stasis field that could operate for another hundred years—a stasis field installed so that the machine itself was within its own area of effect. And then, yet another separate stasis field outside of that. And another, and another, like a Matryoshka doll...

If one machine was able to slow the rate of the passage of time within its area of effect, which included itself, by a factor of 100, then by the time the outermost layer broke down after 10,000 years, the next layer of devices would have deteriorated by only one year. By the time the second device broke down, after another 9,900 years, 19,900 years would have passed on the outside. The third machine, at a rate of $0.01 + 0.99$ years, would have again deteriorated by only one year.

When the third machine broke down, another 9,900 years later, 29,800 years would have passed on the outside, and the fourth machine would have weathered by, once again, $0.0001 + 0.0099 + 0.99 = 1$ year. Repeat this over and over again, and you could stretch the process out for *quite* a long time.

Given that this civilization had possessed quite advanced science, a machine without any physical moving parts could certainly persist for more than a hundred years without maintenance. Not to mention that they had autonomously operating maintenance devices such as the Scavengers, and more than sufficient parts for repairs. Plus, if they could slow time by a factor of 500, or even 1000, then this system

could have been maintained for far longer than Mile could possibly imagine.

Fighting against the ravages of time and depletion of resources, they had prepared for the days to come, in accordance with their makers' orders.

"H-hey, wait a..."

Mile headed toward the device in the middle of the circle, ignoring Reina's attempts to stop her. The Scavengers who had led them through the cave had all stopped moving, though the mecha-bird remained as it was, perched atop Mile's right shoulder. The others ran frantically after Mile as she proceeded brazenly ahead.

"Hello, old friend," said Mile as she came to a halt before the central machine, right hand raised. To her, this was the only appropriate greeting for an immortal being that had lived an interminable length of time, which had likely been instructed in present-day languages by the Scavengers... at least according to Mile's knowledge of vintage German space operas. That said, it would probably be a wee bit strange to be addressed in such a manner by the descendant of one's creators, after many, many eons had passed.

For a time, there was a deep quiet.

Given that this machine had been the one to issue the present invitation, surely it would have had some language synthesis device installed. Or so Mile had assumed when greeting it. However, no response came. Still, with Mile's keen hearing, she was able to sense a sort of vibration in what to the others might sound like total silence, as if perhaps a vocal device was, in fact, operating.

Perhaps Slow Walker was merely hesitant to speak. Perhaps it was puzzled by Mile's greeting and simply did not know what to say.

Finally, there came a reply.

'H-hello, old friend... administrator...'

"Oh Goddess!!! It talks!!!"



"Wait. We already heard the metal bird talk—why are we *still* surprised?!" Reina snapped, despite having joined in on the cry of shock with the other two. At her words, Mavis and Pauline calmed themselves, composing their facial expressions.

"You all sure do adapt quickly," Mile sighed. Still, she preferred this to never having them comprehend the current situation. After all, their new, calmer reactions were only possible because the experience of being around her had built up their tolerance for absurdity.

Ignoring her friends for the moment, Mile turned to face Slow Walker.

"All right—nice, clean speech. Able to adapt to unexpected situations. You're pretty advanced. I expected as much..."

This was a fairly high-capacity operating system. Unlike the bird, it could speak in an almost humanlike fashion. The reason it had been stumped previously was probably not due to a lack of performance capability but because it had not grasped the meaning of Mile's statement, which was no real indication of its communication skills.

"Now then, would you please tell me about yourself, as well as the reason that you asked me to come here?" Mile was shooting straight right from the start. She had to—without some level of understanding on both sides, the conversation could not proceed. Surely the machine was aware of this, too. "The Scavengers never mentioned you. It's frankly unthinkable that they wouldn't have told me about you, the most advanced of your kind, or that you wouldn't have contacted me before this... Which has to mean the Scavengers weren't aware of your existence prior to this, and you weren't receiving any information from them. Am I correct?"

'Correct. Though I have been operational this whole time, all of my auxiliary devices, cables, and antennae to facilitate contact with the outside world were disconnected, and all exit routes had caved in. As a result, I had neither received any external information nor been able to issue any commands.

'I fell into the state you see me in primarily because of my time spent on standby... That is, far more time passed outside of the field than anticipated. Additionally, I ceased receiving command input from my administrators, and all of my servants were lost at nearly the same time.'

"Lost at the same time?"

'A large-scale cave-in caused by a tectonic shift. A secondary cave-in atop those attempting restoration for the first. The passages collapsed, and those outside were unable to return.'

"Ah..."

The Scavengers had been able to persist throughout the generations because they were capable of repairing one another and could craft new units should their numbers decrease. This machine had apparently just been exceptionally unlucky, which was bound to happen now and then over the course of tens of thousands of years. Prior to that, it was likely that the system was suffering from a shortage of materials, its overall functionality deteriorating.

'All of my methods of external contact, which served as my eyes and ears, were lost. So were the servants that served as my arms and legs. The time scale variable equipment gradually lost functionality over time. Suddenly, mere days ago, with only a few functional devices remaining, a "messenger" arrived bearing good tidings... '

"Right. I'm guessing that the Scavengers under my command—er, your servants—dispatched a repair team to the location of their former base?" Mile shifted her wording on the fly to be in line with Slow Walker's way of speaking. "So then, why do you exist—or, er—what is your function?"

Now that she had more or less grasped the state of things, Mile decided to go straight for the most critical question at hand. Without knowing what Slow Walker did, she would not know how to respond to anything that she might be told, or that might be asked of her.

The other members of the Crimson Vow stayed quiet, listening in on the conversation.

"The reason for my manufacture... '

"Go on..."

'...Was to persist through the ages, should the necessary knowledge to repel invaders from beyond this world and the functionality of the bases constructed to defend against them be lost to the ravages of time.'

"I was right!"

It was almost precisely as she had predicted.

Slow Walker began to tell more of its tale...

Long, long ago on this planet, flourished a civilization so advanced that even the average person could travel anywhere in the solar system—assuming they could afford the cost. One day, however, strange beings—“monsters”—began flowing out of rifts in space-time. The world had enjoyed peace, thanks to a unified global government, but a side effect of this was that, though their society was sophisticated, their weaponry was lacking. They had no ready combat forces beyond those necessary to keep order—there were law enforcement units, but no trained soldiers or standing armies. Additionally, most humans were clustered in high-density settlements—which were exactly where the monsters began to appear.

The result of this was that the monster invasions caused immense, widespread human casualties. Additionally, the sudden appearance of these monsters in urban areas meant that infrastructure was paralyzed. As it was impossible to launch blanket attacks—using hastily created chemical devices or other weapons of mass destruction—on areas where many people still remained, the damages were nearly immeasurable. Worse, because the monsters could not be wiped out, they proliferated throughout the world.

Then the rifts simply closed.

Through frantic research, scientists were able to determine that these rifts were not a naturally occurring phenomenon but something created through artificial, scientific means. Not knowing when these rifts might open again, they built a fleet of large spacecraft with which to emigrate to a new world, leaving only a small number of people behind...

“Waaaaait just a minute! Hold on! If they had the means to wager everything on a massive interstellar migration to some new planet they had never even laid eyes upon, would it not have been a million times faster, easier, and safer to simply wipe out every monster in the world?! Why would they do something so ridiculous?”

It was unthinkable. Utterly absurd. It would be like packing up your house and moving

to a far-off land simply because you saw a mouse...

Or so Mile thought.

'I do not understand what you mean, administrator'

Obviously, a machine could never understand what its creators were thinking.

"I guess all those years of peace made them soft..." This was the only explanation Mile could come up with. "Anyway, so we know the rifts *were* being intentionally created through scientific means. Why was it only monsters that came through? If there's some race out there that developed a method for crossing dimensions, why wouldn't they cross over themselves? I'd assume there was some reason for developing said system... And hey—why would they send creatures vicious enough to attack and eat people into a world of such technological advancements? Seems odd, doesn't it?"

Mile had quite a few questions still.

'In fact, they did come.'

"What?"

'Descendants of the intelligent life-forms that likely developed the rifts did come to this world, along with the monsters.'

"*What?!* Wait, then where the heck did those intelligent life-forms go?"

"They still exist on this continent at present. I believe the present-day humanoids refer to them as "goblins."

"*What the heck?!?!*" There came a scream, this time not only from Mile but also in the voices of the other members of the Crimson Vow as well, who could not possibly maintain their silence at this revelation.

"You're telling me that g-g-g-*goblins* are *intelligent*?! We're talking about the same goblins, right? The stupid, violent little low-level monsters that attack people and can't even talk?" Mile asked. As she spoke, it suddenly occurred to her that she had somehow never questioned why it was that humanoids hunted goblins, when there were no usable parts on them. One might attempt to harvest their meat, she supposed, but she'd never seen anyone attempt to do so. Perhaps it was just that it wasn't

especially tasty? Still, goblins would presumably make a good food source in seasons when the fields yielded a poor crop. No matter how unpleasant the meat might be, she would still have chosen that over starvation.

So then, why was it that not a single person ate goblin meat, when they were perfectly fine with eating other creatures? Animals and other monsters had no problem eating goblins, so they clearly weren't poisonous, or vomit-inducing levels of disgusting. Indeed, it seemed that humanoids were the only ones who vehemently refused to eat goblins. It was almost as though there was a taboo against it, nearly as heavy as the taboo against humans eating other humans...

"Now that I think about it, goblins *do* sometimes assault humanoid women—not just to eat them but to take them as playthings," Mile muttered. The other members of the Crimson Vow froze in place, a silent chill running down their spines.

"B... but they're so stupid! Goblins aren't smart enough to do something like that!" Reina howled.

Slow Walker offered no response, seemingly having only deemed Mile as worthy of conversation.

"I really don't think goblins possess that level of intelligence!" Mile repeated. This time, Slow Walker replied.

'As I said, descendants. They are the "descendants" of that race.'

"Ah..."

She might have been clueless about plenty of things, but Mile was at least quick on the uptake when it came to conversations like this one. Being a sci-fi junkie in her previous life had turned out to be surprisingly helpful.

"So they... regressed."

Mile thought about the robotic creature that she had seen previously at one of the rifts. Then, she thought about the golems. The Scavengers. The No. 3 Auxiliary Backup System of the Economical Autonomous Basic Defense Control System. Slow Walker. Beings of intelligent design who continued to carry out their functions long after the ones who gave them life—their "custodians"—were gone. Their progeny retained none of their previous knowledge. It wouldn't be strange if such beings existed on

other worlds. Though those artificial life-forms persisted, those who created them had regressed to an almost animalistic state...

History repeating itself.

It would likewise be no surprise for a world that developed in a very similar fashion to this one to follow the same trend. There, too, an intelligent race might invent some creation with the same mentality as the Scavengers, and then that intelligent race might degenerate in the same way as the humanoids of this world, if for different reasons and to different degrees. Machines would be left following their final orders, carrying out their creators' wills to the bitter end, even after those same creators had regressed to become creatures lowlier than beasts.

After all, what else could such beings do?

"So, you think they were trying to migrate to other worlds because their own world was dying?"

'Perhaps. It is possible it was not a sudden "collapse" so much as a slow environmental decline across a long time span, due to fluctuations in their star, a global climate shift, an ice age, resource depletion, or the like. It is possible that time flows differently there than it does in our own world. It is possible that all civilization was lost in the blink of an eye, thanks to a global disaster. Deadly plague, ultraviolet waves or cosmic rays raining down from space, dimensional ripples caused by a mistake in the development of superluminal engines... It is impossible to speculate what might have caused the decline and collapse of civilization and the need to escape.'

"Impossible to speculate, huh? But if the goblins were once intelligent creatures, does that mean that the other monsters used to be normal animals, too? Like something they kept as livestock, or pets, or zoo animals, or in wildlife reserves... I mean, we've got pig-like monsters in orcs, bear-like ones in ogres, dog-like ones in kobolds, et cetera..."

"There is also the possibility that they were experimented on. That their bodies received some manner of enhancement to allow them to survive changes in the environment. Furthermore, it could be that the animals that received this treatment were for some reason released into the wild, crossbreeding with other creatures and becoming established species... In which case, their descendants might be the wild, unintelligent monsters we see today.'

"So you're saying that it's also possible that the formerly intelligent life-forms could lose their intelligence as a result of the experimental treatments? That they altered some forbidden part of their genomes, not even realizing that the meddling they were doing—for whatever purpose—would have ill effects somewhere down the line?"

At this point, no one could know—and even if it were possible to find out, it wouldn't make any difference. Did the people who abandoned this planet take pity on those formerly intelligent creatures? Had they left this world out of compassion for the once-intelligent goblins and the monsters, which were at one time normal beasts, not having the heart to hunt them to extinction? Or were they simply fleeing from the death and destruction that they feared might one day come again?

In response to Mile's questions, Slow Walker only replied, 'I do not understand what you mean, administrator.'

She expected nothing more.

"Either way, I think *I* understand things a lot better now," she said. "The problem is that the current humanoids aren't capable of abandoning this planet, and there's no one on the invaders' side who's smart enough for us to speak with them. The robots will only obey their creators' commands or that of their offspring. As I've already found, they are impossible to persuade... There's not really anything we can do! But there are a couple of things I'd like to ask you."

'Anything. Your orders are absolute, administrator'

Mile furrowed her brow. Even if it was a machine she was dealing with, she was not comfortable with the idea of issuing orders, or anyone following them absolutely. However, she knew that saying so would only puzzle the machine, so she decided not to comment on it.

"Are there any other beings such as yourself?"

This was indeed something she absolutely needed to know. Might it be Slow Walker, or something else like it, that the elder dragons were searching for?

To Mile's question, Slow Walker replied, 'Unclear.'

"Hm?"

'Numerous beings such as I were created. However, I presently have lost communication with them. It is possible that they were crushed by tectonic shifts, sank into the sea, were swallowed by magma, or lost to the ravages of time. Or perhaps they are simply in a similar state as I was, not so long ago—functional but unable to make contact. Or perhaps their timescale variable equipment still has quite a span remaining, and it will take some time for the servants to approach them to deliver information.'

"Oh, that makes sense! It would take a long time to approach a machine wrapped in multiple layers of stasis fields... Time would be passing normally for whatever was inside, but any movements would be perceived far, far more slowly from the outside... Oh, what about light, actually? Does it look dark for you? I guess if you sent out a radio signal, the frequency would change and be slowed down a bit, but the information would still mostly get across..."

'Electromagnetic waves are reflected at the boundary of the field.'

"What about laser or light-wave communication?"

'Both lasers and light are types of electromagnetic waves.'

"Ah. Right."

That meant that other methods of communication were likely futile as well.

"Okay then, one more question. Why have the invaders waited this long to repeat their invasion? If we assume this is the only world they've found that's hospitable to them, even if the first time was less than successful, wouldn't they just try again a few years later? That's certainly the case with most wars between nations. Why so long a gap in between?"

'Unclear. If I were to speculate, it could have something to do with the fact that vast energy stores are required to open the interdimensional rifts, and many, many years are needed to accumulate that kind of energy. Or perhaps there was some other restriction in play—the positioning of the celestial bodies was not correct, or some other physical condition for operation was not yet satisfied, either in terms of gravity or of space-time itself. Though, of course, there could be other reasons.'

'Alternatively, perhaps there is no deeper reason, and they simply required more time to recover from their previous failed invasion and wait for their monster numbers to

replenish. Perhaps they hold no ill intentions toward this world, and they merely create new rifts and force the monsters and their own descendants through when their populations exceed a certain number and begin causing environmental issues. It could be merely that time flows differently in their world. However, these are nothing more than speculations. Feel free to disregard them.'

"Um... I mean, I guess that's about what I figured."

Judging by the reports from the Micros team that she tossed through the rift, it seemed unlikely that it was a matter of time flowing differently, but Mile had not yet thought about this.

For the next long while, Mile continued conversing with Slow Walker about a variety of topics, but the other members of her party, who stood behind her listening, understood little of what was being said. Mile seemed to have no trouble comprehending it, so they simply remained there, silently taking it all in, fully intending to have her explain it to them later in a way that they could understand.

* * *

"Now then, you've answered plenty of my questions, but what was it that you invited *me* here for?"

Perhaps Slow Walker wished to report that it would be unifying the golems and Scavengers under its own command, or perhaps it wished for Mile to play a role in command herself? However...

"The information from my servants about the space-time fluctuations, the data from the observation and research devices that we have hastily manufactured and dispersed to various locations, and the records from the previous outbreak all indicate that the invaders have completed their preliminary investigations and fine-tuning. Thanks to their probing, they have completed anchoring the fissures in the space-time continuum. In other words, the invasion has already begun in earnest. I hoped to inform you of this..."'

"*What?!?!*"

Those last few sentences were, of course, something that all members of the Crimson Vow could understand. Mile then proceeded to collect as much information as she possibly could about the situation...

* * *

"Okay, we better get going!" Mile announced, once she was through with her conversation. "As it stands, every human—no, every intelligent life-form, animal, and even planet in this world is in grave danger. If worse comes to worst, we may even be wiped out. But if we take this information back with us and spread it, we might be able to prevent people from being overrun by the monsters, or surprised and unable to join forces against them. We must all stand together and face them head-on!"

"I wonder if they'll even believe such an outlandish story," said Pauline, worry in her voice. Of the other three, she seemed to have the best grasp on what had been revealed in the conversation between Mile and Slow Walker.

"It's still better than doing nothing, isn't it?! Plus, if what Slow Walker just said is correct, the places that everyone thinks are the invasion points—the places where the new monsters are originating from—are not the main dimensional rifts, they're just precursors. Safety anchors or ballast or something for the *real* rifts. Which means no one will be watching the critical places, and people could be attacked when they aren't looking!"

According to what Mile had gathered from Slow Walker, the short-term dimensional rifts that had opened in the northern kingdoms of Marlane, Trist, and Aubram were merely exploratory probes, and the more permanent rifts that had opened since were merely counter masses. These would ultimately secure the main rifts, which had yet to open. Furthermore, Slow Walker predicted, the main rifts would most likely be opening here, in the Albarn Empire—the same place they had opened long ago. This would explain why the majority of the ruins left by their forebearers, as well as the elder dragons' main dwelling, were also in this country.

"Either way, just standing around talking about it is a waste of time. We can discuss this more on the way home," Mile said to her friends. "Slow Walker, thank you for everything. If you receive any new information, please let us know!"

'Of course. I shall send... the one that you have dubbed "Mecha-Bird."'

Slow Walker had not insisted on receiving any directions from Mile. Either it was perfectly satisfied with the instructions she had already given previously to the Scavengers and terminal unit, or else it already had a firm grasp on what its expected functions were without her input.

"C'mon, let's get going!" Mile urged.

"W-wait a minute," said Pauline, face paling.

"Hm? What is it?"

"U-um, well... Are we going to have to go back up the same path that we came down?"

"Oh..."

Pauline, Reina, and even Mavis's faces all told plainly that that would not be happening. Just descending the path had nearly been beyond their capabilities. Going back up the same way was impossible. With enough breaks, and if they stopped to camp halfway up, Mavis could probably make it... but Pauline and Reina would be useless the second day.

"Um... Hey, Slow Walker, is there any other route?" Mile asked.

'Negative. The elevators and float system have been destroyed, and the shortest route, maintenance corridors, and emergency exits have all been buried. Currently, the only path to the outside is the singular route that my servants excavated.'

"Ah, of course."

Hearing this, Pauline and Reina collapsed in despair.

"Hmmm..."

At this rate, it would take them more than three days to get back to the surface. Not only would that be a waste of time, but Reina and Pauline would be utterly useless for the first few days after their trek. It would be a terrible experience for them, and a bad situation for everyone. Mavis, perhaps trying to limber up for the trip, was doing calisthenics behind the other two, but there was a deep despair lingering in the pair's eyes.

"Hmm... Hmmm... What to do...?"

Mile thought and thought, but could come up with nothing. Then, as she glanced to the side, the six Scavengers who had served as their guards and guides came into her field of view.

“That’s it! Double Buster, go!!!”

Indeed, if they could not get themselves home under their own power, why not catch a ride?

* * *

“All righty then! I think this should do it!”

The group stared at the palanquins that Mile had just constructed out of wooden scraps she had stored in her inventory. A palanquin was a form of transportation made up of a vessel for people to ride in, atop a set of long poles. These poles would typically be carried by several other people. Naturally, this one did not have a roof like the sort of portable shrines you might see at festivals, and the seating area consisted only of a flat plank atop two poles. As a flourish, Mile had attached a cushion, so that no one’s bottom would hurt from riding it.

She had made just three of these.

“We’ll have two of the Scavengers—or ‘servants’—carry each of these!”

Mile herself would walk. It was hardly taxing for her. Plus, there were only six Scavengers, so there was no other way to do it. Were there a golem present, the hunters could have ridden on their shoulders, but unfortunately there were none, and it would take too long to call one here. Plus, their rears would get cold sitting atop a rock or iron golem and would probably start to hurt. It would also be a bit scary looking out from such a high vantage point, and they might hit their heads on the bumpy ceiling if they were not careful. There were other dangers, too: Given the speed at which the golems walked, a collision would almost certainly mean death.

Asking the Scavengers to do this was really the safest bet.

“Mile’s done it again!” Reina crowed.

“I knew we could count on you, Mile!” Pauline cheered.

“Ah ha ha...” Mavis chuckled. She probably would have been fine either way, but for the other two, this was nearly a matter of life or death, so for once they were truly generous in their praise.

"Okay, let's roll out!"

"All right!!!"

And so, the three climbed atop their palanquins, Mile trotting dutifully alongside. As their nickname of "Mr. Skitters" suggested, the Scavengers moved incredibly fast, and they were back on the surface in no time.

* * *

"Wait, how is it already dawn?"

Judging by the hour at which they had entered the cave, and accounting for the time it took them to descend, the time they spent speaking with Slow Walker and building the palanquins, and the time it took them to return, it was a bit surprising to see dim light when they emerged from the cave, indicating it was early morning.

As the Crimson Vow stood around in quiet bewilderment, the nanomachines spoke into Mile's eardrums.

UM, LADY MILE, WE HAVE SOME DREADFUL NEWS FOR YOU...

Hm? What is it?

THIRTY-EIGHT DAYS HAVE PASSED SINCE YOU DESCENDED BELOW GROUND.

Come again?

For a moment, Mile thought that she was hearing them incorrectly.

WE ARE SAYING IT HAS BEEN THIRTY-EIGHT DAYS SINCE YOUR DEPARTURE.

The nanomachines seemed a tad evasive, as if they themselves had not realized this until now. Mile thought carefully about this, until she finally processed the situation.

"The time stasis field! That 'time scale variable device' that Slow Walker was mentioning! Did that bastard keep the innermost device running the entire time we were talking to it? Just to prolong its own operation for the tiniest extra amount of tiiiime?!?!"

Meanwhile the other members of the Crimson Vow only stood dumbfounded, not having a clue what it was that Mile was screaming about...

CHAPTER 117

THE WARNING

“WHAT THE HEEEEEECK?!?!”

Reina, Pauline, and Mavis screamed in shock as Mile explained the situation to them. It was an alarming turn of events, after all. They had just experienced a manner of time travel, though it had been into the future, not the past. Thanks to Mile’s stories, the three of them had some basic notion of the idea of traveling through time. Naturally, these had included cautionary tales about the sorts of pitfalls an overzealous time traveler could fall into.

“Thankfully, in this case it’s just that a little extra time passed, so we don’t need to worry about causing a paradox or anything,” Mile explained, which seemed to put the others at least slightly more at ease. That said... “We did lose a lot of precious time, though. Time when we could have been using the guild network to put warnings out across the continent and preparing everyone for the invaders from another world...”

Obviously, such a fantastical story would be a pretty hard sell. However, the Crimson Vow had a reputation for honesty and would never spin a story that would strip them of all the trust they had earned, should it be found to be a lie. Plus, if it came down to it, they still had Mavis and Mile’s—or rather, Adele’s—family names to rely on. They could expect people to have a fair bit of confidence in whatever they had to say.

Their reputation aside, losing a full thirty-eight days hurt—immensely. The Crimson Vow all knew this and looked no less queasy at Mile’s assurances. Even so, they were relieved they had not been blipped out of existence by a time paradox or cursed to wander forever in the cracks of space-time, like the protagonist of one of her stories.

Okay, Nanos, please tell me the current state of—no, never mind. I know that you aren’t allowed to participate in or facilitate any specific world powers, so giving me information on every country would be out of the question... Mile muttered in her head.

I MEAN, WE CAN, THOUGH?

Wh-what?!

INVADERS FROM ANOTHER DIMENSION DON'T COUNT AS A "SPECIFIC WORLD POWER," SO GIVING YOU INFORMATION ABOUT THEM WOULDN'T COUNT AS SHOWING FAVOR. ADDITIONALLY, WE ARE CURRENTLY DEALING WITH A CONFLICT OF THE INVADERS VERSUS THE PEOPLE OF THIS WORLD, AND WE CONSIDER THE PEOPLE OF THIS WORLD TO BE A SINGULAR FORCE, WITH WHICH WE ARE ALLIED. WE NANOMACHINES ARE, AFTER ALL, SWORN TO PROTECT ALL LIFE ON THIS PLANET...

So you're telling me that you can tell me anything I need to know, and since everyone counts as my allies, it wouldn't be prohibited?!

THAT'S CORRECT.

The nanomachines were apparently quite ready to accommodate Mile's needs.

Well, is there anything you know about the invaders that I didn't already learn from Slow Walker?

WHILE YOU WERE BUSY CONSTRUCTING THE PALANQUINS, WE INTERFACED WITH SLOW WALKER AND RECEIVED ALL DATA REGARDING THE EXTRADIMENSIONAL INVADERS, PAST AND PRESENT. IF WE ADD THIS TO THE REAL-TIME INFORMATION FROM OUR FELLOW NANOMACHINES ACROSS THE CONTINENT AND ANALYZE IT AT THE NANOMACHINE CENTRAL PROCESSING CENTER, WE CAN PREDICT THE PLACE AND TIMING OF THE MAIN INVASION TO A HIGH DEGREE OF CERTAINTY.

Well, well, well! That's my Nanos!

HEH HEH HEH! THIS IS NOTHING FOR US! OUR SCIENTIFIC CAPABILITIES ARE THE MOST POWERFUL IN THE WORLD!

The nanomachines seemed to be acting a bit strange, Mile realized. She almost never noticed such things when conversing with her fellow humans, but clearly, something was amiss here.

No need to overdo it there...

HM? WH-WHATEVER DO YOU MEAN?

Well, Slow Walker had a fairly natural way of speaking. I'm guessing you were trying to crack a joke to prove to me that you're a high-level machine intelligence, capable of

highly humanlike thought and speech—unlike that primitive hunk of junk?

{.....}

{<[.....]>}

All of the nanomachines around her seemed to freeze in place. Even Mile could tell she'd said something she shouldn't have.

The other members of the Crimson Vow remained speechless, either yet to recover from their shock or paralyzed by the enormity of the problem before them. Mile panicked; she needed to take this opportunity to get as much information as she could out of the nanomachines.

A-anyway, tell me what's going on in the world right now! We won't be able to determine the party's next course of action until I know more, and more importantly, I won't know what to do!

OF COURSE, RIGHT AWAY.

The nanomachines went on to explain what had happened in the thirty-eight days since the Crimson Vow had entered the cave.

During this time, a permanent dimensional fissure had opened to the east of the capital of the kingdom of Aubram. A large number of monsters had begun to appear from out of it, migrating westward in tandem with monsters native to this world. Aubram immediately publicized their state of emergency to the surrounding nations, putting out requests for aid and lifting all border restrictions for foreign soldiers and mercenaries. The other kingdoms had appropriately judged that, should they ignore this cry for help and let Aubram fall to ruin, their own lands would be next. Thus, they made the split-second decision to send a large-scale dispatch to Aubram, keeping only the minimal necessary forces behind in their own countries to maintain the peace. It was necessary to retain quite a substantial military force from the personal armies of lords in Tils and Brandel whose lands shared a border with the Albarn Empire, just in case of imperial attack. However, a large number of troops had been sent to Aubram, and presently, a combined force of the various countries' militaries had set up camp east of Aubram's capital, preparing for the battle with the monsters in the coming days.

Can they beat them?

THOUGH THE MONSTER FORCES ARE NUMEROUS, THE BULK OF THEM ARE JACKALOPES, KOBOLDS, GOBLINS, AND THE LIKE, SO EVEN AN UNTRAINED CIVILIAN—ANY GROWN MAN WITH A WEAPON—COULD DEFEAT THEM. ONE-ON-ONE, THAT IS. IF THE SOLDIERS, MERCENARIES, AND HUNTERS CAN MANAGE TO DEFEAT MOST OF THE ORC-CLASS MONSTERS AND ABOVE, WE MIGHT HAVE A CHANCE. EVEN IF THE MONSTERS AT THE LEVEL OF GOBLINS AND BELOW SOMEHOW GET BY THEM, THE MILITARY FORCES THAT REMAINED BEHIND IN EACH COUNTRY, THE MERCENARIES AND SOLDIERS WHO CHOSE NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE OPERATION, AND REGULAR ABLE-BODIED CIVILIANS SHOULD BE ABLE TO DEFEND THEIR HOMES UNTIL THE JOINT FORCES RETURN. THE JOINT FORCES ALSO HAVE THE CAPITAL RIGHT AT THEIR BACKS, SO THEY HAVE THE ADVANTAGE OF AN ABUNDANT SOURCE OF SUPPLIES. WHERE THE PROBLEM LIES IS...

Is?

THIS ASSUMES THAT NO ONE TRIES ANYTHING FOOLISH, SUCH AS LETTING A PORTION OF THEIR FORCES RETREAT FROM THE BATTLEFIELD TO PURSUE THE MONSTERS WHO SLIPPED BY THEM, PRIORITIZING PROTECTING THEIR OWN CITIZENS OVER THOSE OF OTHER NATIONS OR PUSHING OTHER NATIONS' FORCES TO THE FRONT LINES TO PREVENT THEIR OWN FROM BEING GROUND TO A PULP.

Ah, right...

THERE'S ALSO THE MATTER OF THE NUMBERS OF THE A-RANK AND HIGHER MONSTERS, WHO WILL UTTERLY PUMMEL THE HUMAN FORCES...

Like elder dragons?

NO, THERE ARE NO ENEMY ELDER DRAGONS.

Oh, good.

It was still quite possible that there were earth dragons, ground dragons, wyverns, or other types of normal dragons and pseudo-dragons on the enemy side, but at least there were no elder dragons. Mile had already assumed as much to begin with, but her conversation with Slow Walker had confirmed that for her.

But, according to what Slow Walker said, that won't even be the location of the main invasion...

CORRECT. HOWEVER, THE HUMANS ARE PRESENTLY UNAWARE OF THIS...

Ah. Of course they would be.

Their time was up. The others surrounded Mile, looking for answers.

"I think it's about time you explained what's going on here," said Reina.

Before they started their journey back, Mile had in fact promised to "explain everything on the way home." Such conversation had proven impossible, however, with the four of them traveling in a line as Mile brought up the rear behind the three palanquins. She had planned to speak to them when they reached the surface instead—but they had obviously been derailed. All of which meant that Reina, Mavis, and Pauline were still completely in the dark.

"Of course. I suppose I'll explain what I know about the current state of the world, based on what I learned from Slow Walker... as well as my own secrets, which I've been keeping from all of you until now..."

"Wh...?"

Mile's allies were stunned not only by the final words she had spoken but by the strain in her voice and the bitter look upon her face. They were all aware that there was *something* Mile had been keeping from them—some secret deeper than anything she had revealed to them so far. And they had rightfully assumed that the day *would* come when she would tell them.

But... why now?

This didn't seem like a situation in which any secret of her birth would be relevant. They were dealing with a threat to the existence of the world, not anything involving Mile's family members. But they also knew that, while she could often be silly, Mile was not so flippant as to be joking around at a time like this.

ARE YOU CERTAIN, LADY MILE?

Yes. It's time. I'm not going to tell them the whole truth, of course. I won't tell them about my memories from my previous life, or about Earth. But I think I'll have to give them some measure of explanation to be able to properly lay out the situation. And meanwhile—could you get a message to the soldiers currently on their way to Aubram?

UNFORTUNATELY, YOU DO NOT HOLD SUCH AUTHORIZATION AT THIS TIME.
HOWEVER... JUST A MOMENT.

A few seconds later—quite a long time, honestly, for the nanomachines with their light-speed processing—the nanomachines spoke again.

WE HAVE HELD A WORLDWIDE CONFERENCE WITH THE OTHER NANOMACHINES THROUGH OUR CENTRAL PROCESSING CENTER. BASED ON YOUR PAST ACTIVITY AND YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE WORLD, AS WELL AS ALL OF THE LAUGHTER AND JOY YOU HAVE BROUGHT US TO STAVE OFF OUR BOREDOM, WE HAVE COLLECTIVELY MOVED TO RAISE YOUR AUTHORIZATION LEVEL FROM 5 TO 6.

Whoa! You all can just decide that on your own? Oh, well, I guess that's obvious. There isn't anyone else around who would be raising the authorization level of humans or elder dragons, and it does happen from time to time. There aren't any gods here, after all... So, with a level-6 authorization, that means that I could send messages to soldiers far away?

NO, YOU CANNOT.

Well then, why the heck—?!

HOWEVER, THIS WORLD CURRENTLY FACES A GREAT DANGER—A THREAT FROM AN OUTSIDE FORCE, RATHER THAN A RESULT OF THE ACTIONS OF THE WORLD'S OWN DENIZENS. THERE ARE A NUMBER OF BASIC MEASURES WE ARE PERMITTED TO TAKE SHOULD UNFORESEEN CIRCUMSTANCES ARISE IN OUR CREATORS' ABSENCE. WE ARE CHOOSING TO IMPLEMENT ONE OF THEM, AN EMERGENCY SPECIAL AUTHORIZATION LEVEL-UP.

Um, okay... I'm still confused.

PLEASE THINK OF IT IN THE SAME VEIN AS AN EMERGENCY COMMISSION IN A TIME OF WAR, AS MISS MAVIS HAS PREVIOUSLY REFERENCED.

I see!

This finally made sense to Mile.

WE ARE PROMOTING YOU TO A LEVEL-7 AUTHORIZATION. WITH A LEVEL-7...

I can finally make natto!

WILL YOU NEVER LET THAT GOOOOOOOO?!

* * *

After a time, the nanomachines managed to regain their composure. Just how terrible were their memories of the ancient natto incident?

Several minutes had now passed since the others had demanded an explanation of Mile, but they continued waiting quietly. They probably assumed that Mile was facing a variety of internal conflicts and were waiting for her to work through them.

Mile, meanwhile, continued silently conversing with the nanomachines.

SO, YOU NOW HAVE A LEVEL-7 AUTHORIZATION. WITH THIS LEVEL, YOU CAN NOW TRANSMIT ORDERS TO NANOMACHINES THE WORLD OVER VIA THE NANONET. IN OTHER WORDS, WE CAN PROJECT AN IMAGE OF YOUR FACE IN THE AIR, ALONG WITH YOUR VOICE, IN DISTANT LOCATIONS. FURTHERMORE, WE CAN RAISE BY ONE THE AUTHORIZATION LEVEL OF A LIMITED NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS IN WHOM YOU HOLD ABSOLUTE FAITH. AND, OF COURSE, THE EFFECT OF ANY MAGIC THAT YOU ENACT WILL SEE A MANIFOLD INCREASE.

Yes, I see.

LADY MILE...

The nanomachines could tell from her behavior that she was scheming something. They had not existed as long as they had without learning something. They had observed the behaviors of many, many life-forms during that time. They had seen things that moved them, things that made them laugh... and things that were very, very stupid.

The nanomachines held no judgment for this stupidity. Furthermore, they were certain that the stupid action that Mile was about to attempt was precisely what their creators had intended. As such, they were unable to make any move to stop her. Much

as they might wish otherwise, there were some things they had no choice but to accept. It was a part of their very code. There was simply nothing that they could do.

“Are you finished?” asked Reina.

“Huh? With what?” Mile was unsure of what she meant.

“Talking with your little friends inside your head, obviously.”

“*What?!*”

“Did you really think we wouldn’t notice? After the number of times you’ve gone completely silent and gotten that far-off look in your eyes right at a pivotal moment. And then suddenly come back with some detailed explanation? You’re always just staring blankly right ahead, never in any specific direction, so we figured that you were talking to something that only you could see—like a ghost or spirit or something. But clearly, both of you could converse without speaking. From all that, we had to assume that it was something going on in your head. We all just kept quiet about it, but now that it seems like you’re ready to spill the beans, there’s no point in us playing dumb anymore.”

“Wha... wh-wh-wh...?” Mile was flabbergasted. “*What the heeeeck?!?!*”

* * *

“Okay. Time for me to explain.”

After a time, Mile managed to regain her composure.

“The truth is, until the age of ten, I was a perfectly normal little girl...”

She’s lying, thought Pauline.

That’s a lie, thought Reina.

Gotta be lying... thought Mavis.

“When I turned ten, a mysterious creature came down from the heavens and said to

me, ‘Form a contract with me, and protect this world.’”

Oh, that sounds like it could be true, thought Pauline.

Sounds legit, thought Reina.

That’s probably true... thought Mavis.

“I had no idea what he meant by ‘protecting the world,’ though. So, I just tried to live as a normal girl, striving for normal happiness.”

Ah, there it is, thought Pauline.

So, that’s why she’s always saying that, thought Reina.

Even though there’s nothing normal about her... thought Mavis.

“But now, I’ve realized that *this* was probably what he meant.”

Ah, thought Pauline.

Ah, thought Reina.

Aha... thought Mavis.

Then, all three then thought as one: *I guess we have no choice.*

They were all on the same page.

“So in other words,” drawled Reina, “God was just like, ‘Well, the world’s gonna be in danger at some point. Good luck!’?”



"Reina! Language!" Pauline scolded, appalled at her flagrant disrespect for the divine, but Reina could not care less. If your family and friends kept being taken from you, one after the other, you would start to doubt the existence of gods, too.

Well, part of that was a lie, Mile thought, but I am pretty sure that this was the reason that God chose to reincarnate me into this world. Otherwise, I can't imagine that he would have "rewarded" me by reincarnating me into this dangerous world on the precipice of an apocalyptic disaster, under the care of such a dreadful father... nor would he have blatantly twisted my wishes into such wild, cheat code-level abilities...

It's been a little bit annoying, but I honestly am thankful that he rescued me from the brink of fading into nothing and allowed me to enjoy a second chance at life. And, if it means that I can save the lives of my allies past and present, all the people I've met and all the people I've yet to meet, then I'll happily take up this mantle! I'm sure the girl I gave my life to save back then is doing her best to secure a bright future for the people of Earth. So, it's up to me to give it my all—to make my mark on this world, to leave behind proof that I existed.

It's just like Mavis is always saying: I'll show you how brilliantly I shine!

And so, leaving out the parts about her previous life, her reincarnation, and how the nanomachines were responsible for their world's entire magic system, Mile began to explain an abridged version of all that she knew, in terms that people of this world could understand...

* * *

"So, this invisible familiar who came down from the heavens—this 'Nano'—finally came across you, a girl who could hear his voice, and decided to make you into a magical girl?"

"Yes. Though I could already use magic before then."

"But didn't you say that his exact request was for you to 'become a magical girl'?"

Thanks to all the tales they had heard from Mile, the other members of the Crimson Vow were well aware of the trope of a mysterious creature coming from another world to deceive little girls and get them wrapped up in their own nefarious conflicts. And so...

"Mile, are you sure about this?" Mavis asked, worried. "Are you sure this 'Nano' guy isn't trying to trick you?"

"Oh, I am. And I mean, obviously this isn't a fight that's just convenient for him. It's for the sake of protecting *our* world. So, I feel I have no choice but to answer this call. Ah ha ha..." Mile chuckled.

"But you might die," said Reina.

"I know. But knowing that my efforts might prevent so many others from dying..."

"...You have no excuse not to try."

Reina could tell there was no use trying to talk Mile out of it, so she just gave a shrug, rather than attempt to force the issue.

"Well, this is Mile we're talking about, after all," sighed Pauline.

"Yep, that is our Mile," Mavis agreed.

"Well then, let's discuss battle plans!"

"What?"

Mile had not been prepared for Pauline's sudden proposal.

"You didn't really think we'd let you do this all on your own, did you?" asked Reina.

"But, I mean, you were just saying that I might die," said Mile.

"I was. What about it?"

Mile stared back at her, dumbfounded.

"Mile. If we are in a position to risk our lives to try and save countless people, do you really think that a single one of us will turn tail and run just because you pointed out to us that we 'might die'?"

"Oh..."

"Mile, do you really think that if this seems like the obvious course of action to you, that we wouldn't feel the same way? Do you *really* think that little of us?!"

She was angry. They all were.

"For as long as the blood flows red through our veins..."

"Our friendship is immortal!"

"The four of us are bound at the soul! And our name is..."

"*The Crimson Vow!!!*"

* * *

Mile stood before the others and began chanting a spell.

"Child of the divine, 'Nanomachine,' increase the authorization levels of my seven most trusted friends! Mavis, Reina, Pauline, Marcela, Aureana, Monika... and Mariette!"

Mariette was the name of the girl Mile had taught way back when she once accepted an independent job as a home tutor to kill a bit of time while the other members of the Crimson Vow were away. The girl who had ended up in quite a few sticky situations after Mile helped her out a little *too* much...

"Now, you all have formed a contract with 'Nano' as well. Your magical and spirit power will be far stronger, so please use this time to practice and familiarize yourselves with your new capabilities."

* * *

"Hey, what the hell is that?!"

In every capital, every town, and every village in every corner of the continent, people looked up into the air and began to shout.

One could not blame them—a massive figure had appeared, floating in the air. It was the image of a massive lion, painted onto a panel. The face of the lounging lion had been hollowed out, and a young girl's face peered through the gap. She had silver hair and an attractive but somehow blank face, of the sort that would put anyone at ease.

The girl in the picture opened her mouth wide and said...

“Roar! Rawr!!!”

A number then appeared above the lion’s head, the numerals decreasing at fixed intervals. Clearly, this was some manner of countdown. And on the body of the lion was written:

“Please stand by.”

“*What the hell is thaaaaaaaaat?!?!!?*”

The people’s screams could be heard throughout the land.

SIDE STORY

THE WONDER TRIO GET A JOB

“A DIRECT REQUEST, you say?” Marcela repeated to the guild clerk, suspicion plain on her face.

Anyone would have been puzzled by what had just happened. The moment they arrived in town and stopped in at the Hunters’ Guild hall to make themselves known, the Wonder Trio had been pre-emptively pulled aside into the conference room, a clerk announcing that someone had requested them.

How could a party who had only given their name and rank receive a direct request, just like that, when they weren’t known for anything in this region? They weren’t even high-ranking, just a group of young C-rank hunters...

Naturally, they were suspicious. No hunter who had lived this long could afford not to be.

“Explain,” said Aureana, her voice cold. If she showed any weakness here, others would take them for naive children and force some manner of dangerous or inconvenient work on them—the kind of unpleasant jobs that the local hunters refused to take, waiting instead to foist them onto the first dunces who wandered along. Not a hunter in the world would fail to find it suspicious for someone to purposely try to enlist the services of a party of outsiders, whose talents they knew nothing about, *and* to do so away from other hunters’ prying eyes.

The guild clerk then described the job.

“Of course. One of the noble houses in town has been hiring their servants through an employment agency...”

A normal state of affairs. Those who worked for a noble household rarely came from the upper echelons of society themselves. The daughters of lesser nobles might occasionally serve as apprentices for their own edification, but that was only within high-ranking households and reserved for higher stations, like a lady’s maid. Beyond that, the bulk of the servants—laundresses, scullery maids, and such—came from

common stock.

"Several of the servants employed there should have gone home on holiday, but they never made it back to their families. Furthermore, they were all young girls."

The Wonder Trio fell silent, listening intently.

"Two days ago, the household started advertising for five new servants for a ten-day limited labor contract. It is typically considered rude to call upon a household while the servants are away, and no one would be foolish enough to throw a party or similar large event while their staff was not present. In theory, this family should be living modestly, making do with only the minimum of staff—those who have no need to visit home, such as those who have already lost both their parents; those who are elderly; those who are originally from this town; and those who intend to take their vacation at a later date. So, between not letting these young girls go home and hiring more servants..."

"There's clearly something fishy going on," Marcela calmly finished the clerk's sentence, clearly not sharing his hesitation to cast suspicion on a noble household without proof.

"An 'Arbeit,' isn't it?" Aureana muttered. "You know that strange thing that Adele was always saying: 'Catch it in the morning and clinch it in the evening. It's the Kohbay Times Arbeit News!'—or something? I have no idea what half of that means, but I think it had to do with part-time jobs, like these short-term contracts."

"So, I'm guessing you would like us to infiltrate this operation as hopeful servants?" said Marcela.

"Yes. We would like you to observe the behavior of any reprehensible old men in the family and confirm the whereabouts of the girls who did not return home. The families of the girls pooled their money together for this job, worried about what may have become of their daughters. Still, the compensation is not especially generous..."

"I see... But you're saying that this is a job that is perfect for us, a group of young ladies unknown to everyone in this town? In that case..."

"We'll take it!!!"

* * *

“Is this really the servant employee exam?”

“Awful lot of hopefus here...”

Though it was only for a short-term contract, a placement at a noble house was nothing to sneeze at. You’d still be a servant, of course, but it was nothing like being a maid-of-all-work at some commoner’s home. The reputation and prestige that came with working in a noble’s household would be powerful when it came time for a young girl to marry, so naturally they had come out in droves... If they landed the gig, they could truthfully say they had been employed at a noble household. No one needed to know it had been only for ten days.

Plus, though the chances were incredibly slim, there always was a possibility that an heir might take a fancy to them. They would never be a first wife, but perhaps a mistress...

And so, the Wonder Trio had plenty of company as they waited to submit their maid applications. However...

“It seems there were multiple recruitment announcements put out for these maids who did not return home.”

“Monika, Aureana, be on your guard...”

“*Of course!*”

* * *

“Well, somehow or other it seems that we all made it in.”

Despite the sheer number of applications, all three members of the Wonder Trio had passed the test. They had planned on trying to get just one of them into the household, with the other two supporting her from the outside.

“Perhaps they were just recruiting in order from youngest...” speculated Aureana.

The three of them were but fourteen and still considered minors. Most of the other applicants were already of age; the other two who were accepted had been the next youngest of the bunch at fifteen and seventeen.

“W-wait, don’t tell me...”

“Oh no...”

The Wonder Trio had a very, very bad feeling about this.

* * *

“Now then, the five of you will be working as maids in the home of Viscount Szedlak. This is a short-term contract of only ten days, but I expect you to comport yourselves impeccably as staff of the Szedlak family. Take care to conduct yourselves in a way that brings no shame upon that name,” proclaimed the housekeeper—the highest ranking of all the female staff.



With that, she turned them over to another servant for the rest of their training. It appeared they would be carrying out the usual duties of low-ranking servants, at least for the time being.

That much made sense—it was the job they had been recruited for, after all. A commoner hired on a temporary basis wasn't about to end up with any special tasks. The real question was at what point in those ten short days they would find out what *additional* work would be requested of them.

* * *

"Marcela, you seem to have a fairly good air about you. If you like, I could put in a good word with the housekeeper to bring you on as an official maid."

"Hm? Th-thank you..."

Apparently, it was Marcela who had garnered the highest marks. It made sense, if one thought about it. Obviously, Marcela knew the most about what being a maid of a noble household entailed—though of course, she had been the one being served, rather than doing the serving. At least, this meant that she knew exactly what was expected of her by the person being served, something that would be difficult for a new maid to grasp. She was skilled at determining what level of service their masters would expect of them, what was unnecessary, and what might be involved in every kind of duty. She had plenty of experience in being waited on.

Although Monika came from a fairly affluent merchant family, she still wasn't a noble, and Aureana was a real thoroughbred, as common as a commoner could get. Unlike Marcela, they didn't know much about the workings of a household like this one.

And so, almost before she realized it, Marcela had been appointed leader of the five rookie maids.

* * *

"Well, nothing strange has happened yet," Aureana said to the other two at the end of their first full day of service, as the three of them ducked away somewhere secluded to talk before bed.

"You're very right," Marcela replied. "It seems like we really might just be temporary hires brought on to fill in while they're short on staff. We've only been asked to do jobs

that would make sense for the role—tidying up and making beds, setting out the cutlery, drawing water... There truly hasn't been anything out of the ordinary."

"What I can't get over is how well you seem to handle the maid work, *Lady Marcela*..." mused Monika.

"Huh?!"

Marcela went red in the face. Perhaps as the third daughter of a poor noble, her household had been lacking in servants, leaving her forced to handle many tasks herself. Or perhaps she had simply imitated the servants' work from time to time out of curiosity. Either way, it was embarrassing for a young noblewoman to be so adept at this alternate role.

"There actually is something strange, though, if you think about it," said Monika.

"Hm? What might that be?" One could practically see the question marks in the air over Marcela and Aureana's heads.

"We're being treated way too well for servants, especially young girls! We get heaps of delicious food at the second morning bell, second noon bell, and also for dinner! At this rate, we're going to get fat!"

"You don't have to eat all of it."

"You could just leave some behind."

"And turn down good food?! Would you really *spit in God's face* like that?!"

"Apologies..."

As a merchant's daughter, Monika could not abide waste. Additionally, she would not back down until whoever had offended her admitted their wrongdoing—even if that offender was Marcela. And so, the other two swiftly apologized. Of course, as the child of poor farmers, Aureana also had an aversion to wasting food, but it was Monika who verbalized a far stronger reaction.

"A-anyway," Monika continued, "this is definitely odd! No noble would ever spend this much money on their servants' food!"

“Is that so?”

“What do you think, Marcela?”

Though her family was relatively poor, Marcela was still the daughter of a baron. The food they had been served thus far was quite cheap, compared to what she was accustomed to seeing in her own household. Of course, she couldn’t reasonably compare the food provided to noble children with that provided to servants.

Aureana, meanwhile, could not even begin to judge, as this food was in a totally different sphere from what was served in her own home. She didn’t even know enough to consider what they had been served strange; setting aside the food that was served in the academy dorms, she didn’t have much to compare to, and could only recognize the foods here as delicious meals she had never eaten at home. Her only conclusion was that it must be nice to always enjoy such food as a nobleman’s servant. No matter how bright she was, there would always be certain things for which she lacked context.

“Maybe they feed young girls delicious foods to fatten them up, and then...”

“Eeeeek!!”

“But regarding our duties and the reason that we came here...”

Monika’s expression suddenly shifted. The food was one thing, but there were potentially more serious matters afoot.

“I haven’t noticed anything.”

“Me neither.”

“Nothing on my end...”

The three of them had kept their eyes and ears open as best they could but had observed no suspicious behavior from either the viscount himself or any of his family. There were no young girls imprisoned in the cellar, mysterious sobs that could be heard in the dead of night, strange disappearances of any members of the household, or even any strange behavior or suspicious comments from the other servants. In fact, everyone in the household seemed perfectly kind and genial.

“Didn’t they say at the guild that all of the girls who hadn’t come home shared similar

features?" asked Aureana.

The other two went quiet. That was awfully suspicious.

"Perhaps the viscount has already done his worst... Lady Marcela, there is not a moment to waste! Even if it means a bit of danger, we *must* continue investigating their whereabouts!"

"You are correct!"

And so, the real investigation began. No longer would they passively observe the household, worrying for their own safety. It was time to question the other servants and find those hidden underground rooms...

* * *

"We really haven't found *anything*?"

"Tomorrow will mark our eighth day. At this rate..."

Their term would be up after the tenth day. The job they had accepted had simply been to infiltrate the household, so not turning up any results would not be counted as a failure. They would be paid their fee no matter what; however, that was not enough for the Trio. And yet, there was nothing they could do if they could not get their hands on any information. They were growing desperate now, but the march of time cared not for their worries...

"Now it's day nine!"

"Our contract ends tomorrow, and we still haven't turned up anything..."

Marcela and Monika had grown incredibly frustrated by this point, but Aureana was not yet ready to throw in the towel.

"There has to be *some* reason for hiring all these young girls. Tomorrow we'll be gone, which means that something is going to happen tonight..."

Marcela and Monika's eyes glittered with a last spark of hope. "That makes sense!"

And then, that night...

* * *

“Nothing happened.”

The next morning, the three girls stared bleary-eyed at each other over a very generous breakfast. They had spent the whole night lying awake in bed, holding attack spells at the ready...

“But this is our last day, isn’t it? Our job will have been completed, but we haven’t learned a single thing to help those girls whose whereabouts are currently unknown, and their poor parents who hired us!”

“I am aware of that. But what are we to do?”

A dark look crept over their faces. There really was nothing they *could* do. They had accepted an official job through the guild. They could not detain and question a noble without proof. Not only would they be expelled from the guild if they tried, but they would also be captured, and probably executed. They had truly done all they could.

It was only after they ate their morning snacks, their overgenerous lunch, and their afternoon snack that they began to hear a noisy chorus of voices as ten-odd girls marched onto the property from a side entrance.

“Huh?”

These were servants, any way you sliced it. They were all wearing the estate’s livery. The group was neatly divided into girls who were just barely of age and those who were older. And also...

Oh!!! The Trio’s mouths fell open.

The younger group matched the description of the girls who had gone missing. That group headed over to the viscount and gave some manner of report, after which they dispersed.

The Trio caught up with one of the young girls, picking the one with the friendliest, most open expression.

"Um, pardon us," Marcela began. "We were brought here on temporary hire and we're wondering, well, where did you all just come from?" Her tone was less aloof than usual—even she was capable of being a little more down-to-earth when she put her mind to it. Typically, she took great care to maintain an air of grace and nobility, but she could still conduct herself like a commoner if need be.

"Oh," said the girl, "you all were filling in for us, then? Thank you for that. I suppose you *would* be curious. They'll probably end up doing another round of hiring like this later, so I may as well tell you... But you can't tell another soul, all right? Swear you won't."

"Of course..."

The girl began her tale.

"Well, the master of this house is something of a gourmand. He values food more than anything else, both in terms of flavor and quantity. But he's a bit eccentric, and he always thinks about things very much from his own perspective. By and large, he is a good person. He's kind to everyone, even common folk. If you're going to work in any noble's manor, I definitely recommend this one... There's just one issue. The master of the house seems to think that, however much food it takes to satisfy him in his advanced years, it must be nearly doubled in order to feed an active young servant. And the problem with *that* is if you eat every last bite of the food he offers you..."

"*What happens?*" asked the Trio, on the edge of their metaphorical seats.

"You get fat."

The Trio said nothing.

"Those who are hired here tend to realize this the first time they have a chance to go home for holiday. You look at yourself and realize that if you go back home with your cheeks and tummies this plump, your friends and families—and any of the men we were hoping to court—will notice that something has changed."

"Ah."

Now, it all made sense.

"So, instead, we all go out into the forest, with the servants who've been here longer

acting as our coaches..."

The Wonder Trio did not even have to ask why.

"It ends up being quite an operation, with not just us, the serving girls, but also all the servants who help out as coaches. I suppose that's why you all were hired to pick up the slack while we were gone."

Absurd. After all that, it turned out the situation was absolutely absurd—incredibly silly. The shoulders of the Wonder Trio slumped in disappointment. They should have been happy that it turned out that no one had met a terrible fate, but—well...

"Starting tomorrow, we'll take our *actual* holiday, a little delayed. Our master really is a good person. If only the food were portioned out correctly!"

Apparently, all the girls were of the same mind as Monika. None of them would even think of asking for smaller portion sizes. People who had known hunger would always eat anything you put before them. And there were those among them with healthy appetites as well, so it would be cruel to think of demanding anything different.

"Are you three all right?" the girl asked, gesturing at the Wonder Trio.

"What do you mean?"

"Going home like that..."

The Trio fell silent. Then slowly, they reached out their hands.

Marcela reached out to put a hand around Aureana's waist. Aureana reached out to Monika's. And Monika reached out to Marcela's.

Then, they all squeezed.

Squish.

"Gaaaaah!!!"

In the end, the Wonder Trio asked to be allowed to stay on for one more day, to be

tutored in the dieting methods passed down among all the house's servants...

BONUS STORY

MILE ROARS

“IT’S FINALLY HAPPENING,” sighed Pauline.

“Finally!” Mavis said.

“Here we are...” Reina muttered.

“Yes.”

Soon, the Crimson Vow would be issuing a warning to every citizen across the continent. They had debated the contents of this broadcast over and over until they were all agreed.

“Are you sure about this, Mile? Laying everything bare like that?” Reina asked, worry in her voice. Mavis and Pauline, however, said nothing.

The members of the Crimson Vow were about to take on a suicide mission—the four of them alone, versus tens of thousands of monsters. They hoped to buy some time until the various troops who had been dispatched to the capital of Aubram, far to the east, could return. It was unclear how long

they could last, but if they could hold off the monsters for even a little while, it would give everyone holed up within the fortified cities a bit of a reprieve. Every hour they could buy had the power to alter the fates of many. And so, Mile felt not the slightest shred of doubt about her decision.

“I’m absolutely sure. We have to use every trick in our arsenal to get people to believe in us. If we can convince a few more people to stay inside where it’s safer, it’s worth it. Even if it’s going to make our lives a whole lot harder when the battle is over...”

Frankly speaking, none of them—not even Reina—had the slightest illusions about being able to return to a normal life when all was said and done. Still, they couldn’t afford to abandon *all* hope of gaining a great victory against the monsters and returning home as heroes. This kind of faith was a prerequisite for any leader of a

hunting party going into decisive battle, Reina thought.

“But *I’m* the leader...” muttered Mavis softly. It was as though she could sense what was going on deep down in Reina’s heart.

Of the members of the Crimson Vow, the only one who would really be adversely affected by having her true identity revealed was Mile. Fame would be no hardship for Reina or Mavis, and in fact, would help achieve their end goal of making a name for themselves and becoming A-rank hunters. Pauline, likewise, would welcome any renown as a free advertisement for the day she would start her own business.

Mile was the only one who wished to be anonymous. But at least for now, she couldn’t afford to think about what would happen afterward—she wasn’t sure there even *would* be an “afterward.” Unlike the other three, she hadn’t even thought about what might happen in the future. All she wanted to do was get as many people to believe them as possible, so that they could take the appropriate actions. That was all that mattered.

LADY MILE, THIRTY SECONDS UNTIL START TIME!

Thanks!

With the nanomachines’ cooperation, Mile stood before the backdrop they had all prepared—or rather, stuck her head through a hole in it—and waited.

TEN SECONDS REMAINING... 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, GO!

“Roar! Rawr!!!”

* * *

“It’s over,” sighed Pauline.

“It’s done,” said Reina.

"That's it," agreed Mavis.

"That does it..."

The continent-wide emergency warning broadcast, a once-in-a-lifetime event, was finished.

Mavis had become not only a knight, as she always hoped, but a holy knight, anointed by the angels. Reina, as a great sage blessed by the Goddess, had spread the name of the Crimson Lightning far and wide. Pauline, meanwhile, had made sure the business her mother and brother were tending to was known in every corner of the continent. Mile was the exception, not wishing to publicize either her original name or her pen name, but that much was to be expected.

They were in the final days of their lives, after all. One could not blame them for hoping to make the most of it.

"Two and a half years, huh? You were just twelve years old when we first met, weren't you, Mile?"

"I was. You were fifteen, Pauline was fourteen, and Mavis was seventeen, if I recall correctly. Actually, that means that Mavis is nearly twenty now..."

"Quit talking about my age! I'm already scandalously old for a noblewoman!"

Indeed, it was a bit unseemly for a nobleman's daughter to have reached such an advanced age with no marriage prospects.

"It'll be fine!" Mile assured her. "It's not as though you're unpopular. You've just been avoiding proposals so you can chase your dreams!"

"We even had to go out of our way to break up at least one proposal," Reina noted.

"Um..."

Mile and Pauline averted their eyes awkwardly.

"Don't worry about it!" said Mavis. "I had absolutely no interest in getting engaged or married at that point, so you honestly saved me. Forcing myself into a marriage wouldn't have been fair to the other person, either."

It would have been quite advantageous for her family, though, and her prospective betrothed had not been a bad option by any means.

“Anyway,” said Reina. “Now you’re a holy knight—a friend of the angels. When this battle is over, you’ll have suitors practically throwing themselves at your feet, so don’t even worry about that!”

“Y-you think so?”

“We know so!”

Mavis smiled bashfully at her friends’ assurances. Deep in their hearts, the other three sighed: *Man, she is too gullible...*

“Wait, Mavis, are you saying you’re going to get married once the war is over?!” asked Pauline.

“Quit planting death flags on me!” Mavis shouted, her face twisting up. She knew all about the concept of “death flags” from the stories Mile told them every night. “Anyway, you’re going to start your business once the battle’s over, right?” she shot back.

“Don’t bring any death flags near *me!*” Pauline shrieked.

It takes two to tango, thought Mile and Reina, shaking their heads.

“At this point, we may as well *paint* ourselves in flags! That way...”

The author will get so embarrassed about the blatant foreshadowing that he’ll decide to pull a fast one on the readers and give us a happily ever after!!!

Such was the unspoken rule in all of Mile’s stories.

“In that case...” Mile was ready to stick a flag in herself as well. “When the battle is over, I will—”

“—go find a beastfolk village to wallow in and get your fill of ‘fluffy paradise’!!!” the other three all chorused.

“How did you know?!?!”

It really was far too easy to guess what was on her mind.

"I guess that just leaves me, then. For the sake of the Crimson Lightning, I will—" Reina started, then abruptly shut her mouth. Apparently, now that she was aware she was in the presence of a renowned author—her favorite writer, who was in reality Mile—she was too embarrassed to express her desire to write a book.

"Hm? Why are you going red all of a sudden? What's up, Reina?"

"No fair, Reina! You have to tell us yours, too!"

"The only way for us to counteract the flags is for us all to say at least one..."

Reina grew redder and redder, panicking at the others' demands. Guessing something was up, they began to question her, wicked smiles upon their faces.

Only a few days remained of their carefree everyday lives...

AFTERWORD

LONG TIME NO SEE, everyone. FUNA here. We've made it to Volume 16! This now marks our third volume since the series switched publishers to Square Enix Novels.

Having finally visited a demon village, Mile has now unlocked the achievement of visiting one-hundred percent of the humanoid races! An unexpected triumph, followed by an unexpected visitor and an unexpected invitation.

One step closer to solving the mysteries of the world.

Mile pulls out all the stops to assure the futures of orphans across the land!

The story is finally drawing to a climax. Keep your eyes peeled and don't touch that dial until the next one!!

Mile: "Rawr!"

Reina: "There aren't any building or highways here!"

Anyway, we're finally getting to the good part of the story. What might tomorrow hold in store for Mile and the Crimson Vow?

Mile: "A big kaboom?"

Reina: "What in the world are you talking about?!"

Pauline: "Miley, where in the world is this 'kaboom' coming from?!"

Mile: "An explosion in space-time..."

Reina: “Miss Sir?”

Pauline: “Why does this sound like the first episode of something?!”

Mavis: “Ah ha ha...”

I've gotten my COVID vaccine, and now I go out for walks twice a week, to the AEON three minutes away... when things go on sale for half price.

The only words I've spoken aloud this week were: “I don't need a bag or parking validation!”

Reina: “I feel like he said the same thing last time.”

Pauline: “His walks haven't changed much, either...”

Mile: “Shh! Shhh!”

Mavis: “Ah ha ha... Oh right, did you know that our story's been made into a manga?”

Reina: “What? That's old news, Mavis. The four-koma manga by Yuki Moritaka was only planned for three volumes, but it was so well received they made four. It's already over and done with. And the main manga series by Nekomint is currently on hiatus while Nekomint recovers from an illness. They're currently in the planning stages before it starts up again...”

Mavis: “No, there's a new one coming out from Square Enix. It's already being serialized in Gangan Online, with Tatsuya Sakurai doing the storyboards and art by iimAn. In a few months, it'll be published in print!”

R/M/P: “Whoooooaaa!!!”

So yeah, now *Average* has a Square Enix manga as well! Hope you enjoy it!

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.

I am sure that we will see each other again with the next volume...

—FUNA

I DECIDED TO DRAW ALL THE RACES
TOGETHER... IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT
LIVING IN A WORLD WITH A MILLION
RACES, BUT A LOT OF FUN, TOO!

BEASTFOLK

OH, WAIT, I
FORGOT TO
DRAW A HUMAN...

WERE THERE
ANY OTHER
HUMANOID
RACES I
MISSSED?
THE FAIRIES?
I'LL HAVE TO
ASK FUNA
LATER.

DWARF

AFTERWORD
(OR SOMETHING)

ELF

DEMON





Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

[Sign up for our newsletter!](#)

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter



PtF by: traitorATZEN