

I SHALL SURVIVE USING POTIONS!



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7

I SHALL SURVIVE USING POTIONS

– Potion-danomi de Ikinobimasu –

- VOLUME 7 -

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[J-NOVEL CLUB]

**"So, what
do you
two want
to do?"**

**"Please let
me stay
here!"**
"Me too!"

Their answer
was immediate.
I figured Aral was
just following
Mine's decision
though.





CONTENTS

- | | | |
|-------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| Chapter 51 | * | Starting an Enterprise |
| Chapter 52 | * | The Targeted Orphanage |
| Chapter 53 | * | Reiko |
| Chapter 54 | * | Ambition |
| Chapter 55 | * | Mine |
| Chapter 56 | * | Dark Celes |
| Chapter 57 | * | Operation Headhunter |
| Chapter 58 | * | The First of Us |
| Chapter 59 | * | Third One |
| Chapter 60 | * | Enemy |
| Chapter 61 | * | Old Friend |

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"What...?"

I snapped my fingers, and Reiko, Mine, and Aral appeared. Each of them were wielding wooden swords that I had made...

Then we beat the crap out of the clerk guy and tied him up.

FSH...

SNAP!



CHAPTER 51

STARTING AN ENTERPRISE

The next morning, I left Reiko to take care of the kids while I went to visit the realtor. I couldn't bring the kids with me without first getting a handle on the situation, and I couldn't just leave them without supervision either. Reiko was better at handling them than I was, and I tended to scare them, so it was better to use my intimidation abilities on the realtor than the kids. We were each fit for our own roles, damn it!

And so, first thing in the morning, I stopped by to see the realtor who handled our property.

“Excuse me!”

Yeah, I wasn't going to pick a fight without confirming the details first. But if he had knowingly sold me a property with issues, I'd show him no mercy.

Now, let's see how this turns out...

“I see. So in other words, it would be pointless to meet with the previous owner now...”

“Yes, I'm afraid so...”

The person who had handled my property wasn't an employee, but the realtor himself. He must have figured that it would be dangerous to let one of his workers deal with a strange girl trying to buy a property in cash, especially one that he had been trying to get rid of.

When I asked the branch manager for details, he explained that the orphanage had been run by a deeply religious individual who had kept the building in good shape through renovation and repairs. With support from their liege lord and local donations, along with their simple chores and kitchen garden being handled by the orphans, they had been getting by without any major issues despite being far from wealthy.

When the owner retired due to old age, the man who took over ended up screwing up big time. Well, actually, it was more accurate to say he had volunteered to take over in order to get what he wanted: the meager monetary support from the lord and the donations, along with the orphans' labor. Together, they hardly amounted to what you would call a massive fortune.

So why had this scoundrel decided to get involved in running an orphanage? It was for the high-priced, easy-to-replace product that could be obtained there. That "product" was the children themselves.

Of course, the clients had taken them in as their foster children on paper. In truth, though, they were practically slaves and were forced to work without compensation. This would have caused issues if it had taken place within this domain, but things were kept quiet when dealing with merchants from foreign lands.

All of this aligned with what Minette, or Mine, had said last night. The dirty truth must have leaked out somehow, and the orphanage ended up being closed. They had been exposed without me having to bring the Goddess's justice down upon them, and the local lord had already punished the scoundrel.

However, the orphanage's budget had completely dried up, and its terrible reputation meant that no one wanted to associate with it. The local lord might have been a good person, but he couldn't provide endless monetary support, and hopes of keeping the orphanage running had looked dire...

Shocked and saddened by those events, the original owner had searched desperately for homes for the remaining orphans. Out of the last four orphans, the two oldest boys had been taken in by the local lord as soldiers-in-training, and the others had been sent to another local orphanage. Once that was done, this place had been closed down.

A portion of the sale's proceeds had gone to the owner's retirement fund, and the rest had been distributed between those individuals who ended up taking the orphans and the other local orphanage as a means of expressing gratitude.

Ah...

No one was at fault here other than the evil man who had taken over the orphanage. And it wasn't as if I could just dump those kids on the previous owner...

Besides, that Aral boy wasn't from here in the first place. He had just been purchased

somewhere by that merchant who had bought Mine.

"I apologize, but we do not have the heart to bring this issue to the previous owner in his retirement, so if you could kindly..."

I already know that, dammit!

"Very well. The previous owner of the orphanage had nothing to do with this, and your realty is not at fault either. I'll handle the rest, then."

"I'm terribly sorry... If possible, perhaps you could hire them as servants..."

You just assume we're swimming in money, huh...

We had pretended to spend our entire savings on the orphanage itself, but maybe it was obvious that we still had plenty of money... That said, I suppose people didn't usually spend everything they had to buy a house. Of course people would assume that we had some money left over for living expenses. Well, that much was indeed true, and this realtor was probably a good person, considering they had taken the risk of upsetting a customer by going out of their way to make such a suggestion.

Oh, fine!



"So, what do you two want to do?" I asked Mine and Aral after explaining the details of where their teacher and their friends from the orphanage had gone.

They were old enough to choose their own paths. At the very least, strangers like us, who they had just met last night, shouldn't decide for them. I flat-out refused to shoulder the burden of choosing someone else's fate.

Flat like my chest... *wait, shaddap!*

Then...

"Please, let me stay here!"

"Me too!"

Their answer came immediately, though I figured Aral had just followed Mine's example. That wasn't too surprising. The world wasn't so kind that a nine-year-old girl and six-year-old boy could just coast by on their own, living normal lives.



The lord of this city was a benevolent person as far as aristocrats went, and many of the residents here were relatively good people... Even so, this civilization was far less developed than Earth, and the weak were preyed upon by the strong. Of course, there were many kinds of "strong," like those who possessed strength, intelligence, wealth, military might, political power, or something else...

"Do you intend to turn this place into another orphanage or something?" Reiko asked, and I shook my head.

"No... I have no desire to run a business for taking care of orphans. But..."

"But?"

"I'm just going to hire some live-in orphans."

"That's pretty much the same thing," Reiko replied, but she was wrong. We wouldn't be taking care of orphans here; *they* would be taking care of *us*. Yes, just like how the Eyes of the Goddess had handled the cooking, laundry, and everything else around the house. I would leave all the bothersome work to the orphans and live in leisure.

I'd be providing their rent, food, and a salary on top, so they would be well taken care of. This would be a legitimate employer-employee relationship, after all. Plus, men would see me as a kindhearted woman who runs a business that helps orphans, which would help me in my search for a husband!

Ha ha.

Ha ha ha ha ha!

"Ah..." Reiko let out an exasperated sigh, as if she knew what I was thinking. Yes, she understood me too well. "I hate to say it, but I know exactly what you're plotting, Kaoru..."

Shaddap!

"And so, we will all be working to earn a living," I explained to the others.

Reiko and I didn't actually need to be taken care of and didn't intend to make a nine- and six-year-old do our laundry... yet, anyway. After all, I couldn't just let them handle laundry using my special liquid detergent (potion)...

I decided to teach them how to cook, then have them handle that afterward. I was just thinking of their futures, of course. This would all help them become independent, and not because... well, I did have ulterior motives, though I would actually be using their youthful labor in a different way.

Yes, it was time to begin working on starting a business that made it look like we were just barely getting by.

"First, we're bringing back a kitchen garden, like they had in the previous orphanage. Whatever is left over after we eat, we'll sell. Second, we're going to catch some fish. We'll sell whatever is left of those, too. And we won't sell them raw; rather, we'll process them to increase their value."

There was no way we could earn much from whatever meager amount of fish two kids could gather. With that in mind, we would make them more valuable by drying them, smoking them, simmering them, grilling them, and using various other preparation methods besides. Considering that our methods came from Japan, a country that was quite particular about food, we should be able to sell them for a good price at taverns and fancy inns. Eating roe and milt might be part of the culture here, but they weren't familiar with refined Japanese cooking methods.

Of course, Reiko had made sure to fill that brain of hers with all the necessary knowledge to prepare such dishes. She was so much more prepared than I was, having known that she would be reincarnated in another world with seventy years to get ready and all... *Damn it!*

Besides, given all the kindhearted people in this city, the sight of those kids working hard would tug at their heartstrings and loosen their wallets. Sob stories involving children and animals were guaranteed to sell, just like in those movies back on Earth... Plus, the products wouldn't go bad while stored in the Item Box, so there wouldn't be any losses from leftovers and discards. We could make huge batches all at once and store them in the Item Box for maximum efficiency.

Drying and smoking fish didn't need constant supervision, and I could let my workers keep an eye on the fire for the other methods. It looked like Reiko and I could earn a decent amount of money while investing little of our time. We owned the house and didn't have to pay for water. We would grow our own vegetables and catch our own fish.

Of course, we'd be applying some minor cheats here and there, like making the vegetables grow faster with potions and using replicas of Japan's finest fishing tools. That said, the fishing was intended in part to be a means of entertainment and relaxation for my workers, so I wasn't going to get too serious about it.

"We're also gonna make and sell something that's used a lot back where we're from, but that isn't really popular around here."

I was thinking of gradually manufacturing things that wouldn't be hindered by the difference in technological advancement, like flat marbles, round marbles, menko cards, stuffed dolls, bisque dolls, kendama, karuta cards, and yo-yos.

The ideas were obviously going to be stolen right away once they started to take off, but I could sell the items for as cheap as I wanted, and as long as I made it clear that we were the original creators, no one would try to interfere with the business of hard-working orphans—I mean, former orphans. I was expecting this city to be better than that. And, well, I could always move on to the next idea if that didn't work out.

"Little Silver is ready for business!"

"Yeaah!!!" Reiko, Mine, and Aral responded energetically.

Yes, the battle was about to begin. Business is war!

If you wanted to manufacture and sell something in this city, you had to go through their commerce and industry guild... Well, it was more like a local town committee, since it was so embarrassingly small, but you had to join and pay taxes through it to the lord of the territory. Well, that was to be expected. I would've been surprised if the lord *hadn't* collected taxes from craftsmen and merchants...

But! When this place was still an orphanage, it had been exempt from taxes on income that the orphans and teachers earned through their work because the staff were trying so hard to keep it running, and the income was to keep orphans from going hungry rather than for actually making a profit. Of course, it wasn't much money in the first place, and collecting taxes from an orphanage wasn't a very good look. In fact, tax money should have gone into supporting the orphanage, rather than being taken from them.

Anyway, on to my point...

I wanted to know if my business could be tax-exempt too. Fortunately... Well, maybe that wasn't the right way to put it, but we *were* taking care of two orphans already. Even if they had lost their parents, if they were employed and working at my business, they were a legitimate part of the workforce that had just so happened to lose their parents at an early age. And since I was their guardian and caretaker, they were no longer isolated and alone.

Whatever the technicalities might have been, and even though I had just claimed that these kids were no longer orphans yesterday, I had already changed my mind. My plan was to tell the local lord that I wanted to start a new enterprise to support orphans on their road to independence. I would use my linguistic abilities to the fullest, so whoever read my request would assume I was going to start an orphanage...

That wasn't fraud. Nothing I wrote would be a lie. And the liege lord seemed to be a good person—well, for an aristocrat, anyway—so I figured he would grant us tax-exempt status. I had specifically asked him to, after all, so I didn't have to worry about him forgetting to touch on that point.

I mean, that's how it had been before, so it wouldn't have been strange if he was to approve it because he (mistakenly) assumed that I was opening an orphanage here and paying for it out of my own pocket. It wasn't that I was greedy for money or anything... but paying taxes would mean I would have to deal with all that accounting and paperwork, the local lord's staff would get to see my entire cash flow, and I would be in a ton of trouble if I accidentally forgot to report something.

And if they found out I was making money without setting enough aside for taxes, they might demand a cut later down the line... Even if the local lord didn't care, his subordinates, the merchants connected to him, and any thugs that wanted some extra change could have tried to start something. There were some people out there who assumed that they could easily take money from an orphanage if they found out it was profitable, even though we weren't actually an orphanage.

Anyway, it was better to keep potential leaks and weak points to a minimum.

Little Silver was obviously the name of my organization. It wasn't the name of the shop, branch, company, or business operator. Publicly, it was a for-profit organization that hired orphans for live-in employment. Yes, a "for-profit" organization. It was by no means a charity or non-profit organization.

If anyone asked how I got the name, I would tell them this: All children are small silver nuggets. They might not be gold, but they are each valuable silver, and should never be treated poorly. They could become a silver ingot with big dreams, mature like oxidized silver, or discard their silver coating and reveal the gold bullion or precious metal hidden underneath. It was called “Little Silver” because we would protect and nurture those little pieces of precious metal.

That’s what I would tell people, but the real reason was that most of the products we would sell could be bought for a few hundred yen, or a few little silver coins. I wasn’t trying to make a fortune here. Well, I was eventually going to make the big bucks, but in private, so it wouldn’t draw much attention. The public would assume that it was an honest business that didn’t care much about profits. Meanwhile, the orphan-supporting Little Silver was just one of my organization’s soon-to-be-many faces.

I planned to have a development and manufacturing department for new products. Its purpose would be to invent and produce new products to see if there would be any issues if we made and sold them publicly. I wanted to avoid relying on potions for manufacturing. Not only would it be far too unfair, but it would also distort the legitimate flow of economic activity in this world. Of course, I also wanted the children to learn crafts by doing them manually.

Besides, I had no intention of making a boatload of misplaced industrial products. I wasn’t trying to make things difficult for archaeologists in the future. As such, I would only make small novelty items that could be made with the technology available in this world today. However, I made an exception for some stuff that was for personal use. I had no choice, really!

Then there would be the business division. This would be separate from the small sales the children handled, and would mainly be for developing trade routes for large-scale transactions. I wouldn’t do anything illegal. I would just be doing some wholesaling on top of the small-scale retail and consignment sales centered around the children. The lord of the territory might claim that this wouldn’t apply for tax exemption, but I would worry about that when it happened! They may also find it odd that such a young girl has so much purchasing power, but he would probably assume that I have some sort of outside backing. To be more specific, support from something like rich parents that let their daughter spend freely, or from someone so influential that they thought of this kind of money as chump change.

So, I could just tell him that I was running my business to repay the money I had

borrowed from my parents to buy this place. He would surely understand if I explained it that way, with the understanding that I was actually in debt. After all, that was the truth. Who could treat two little girls like the bad guys when they had bought an orphanage with their own money and started a business to help orphans? No one was dumb enough to do something like that if they were trying to make money through unscrupulous means anyway.

One might ask why I was risking so much exposure when I didn't need the money. Well, this was actually intended to be one of my safety nets. If the time came when I had to obtain something that was so expensive that it couldn't be purchased with our meager earnings... or when someone showed up trying to swindle us out of our little bit of cash, take our land and building away from us, or snatch up Mine and Aral as if they were products for sale... Anyway, I figured we would need some sort of support behind us, just in case.

If I made a few big trades, I'm sure those merchants would be willing to back me up. Once I start selling new products, people should realize I can make them money and lend us a hand. The smell of money can attract enemies, but it can attract allies too. As such, that side of things wouldn't be public, but more a behind-the-scenes type of deal.

In any case, my point is that a business run by (seemingly) underage kids without anyone to back them, no matter how small, could attract all sorts of scumbags. They could be your run-of-the-mill thug if it's a small amount of money, or gangs, crooked merchants, or crooked aristocrats when more money is involved.

An effective way to protect yourself from their kind is to secure connections with other organizations or merchants. That's why I wanted to align myself with someone who was relatively decent. I wanted them to assume I could make them a decent profit, but nothing too big. Plus, being involved with what looked like an orphanage could improve their image as an upstanding member of the community, so it would be beneficial for both sides.

"Kaoru, you mentioned Mine and Aral being targeted, but you could be seen as one yourself, you know? Not to mention, Hang and Scary are pretty valuable horses, aren't they? They could probably sell for even more money than us... And if people think we have rich parents, we could catch the attention of kidnappers and the like."

"Ah..."

And so, I decided to add some security measures. I needed to give Mine and Aral something to defend themselves with too. The best defense is a good offense, after all...

“So you want us to sell that thing here?”

“Yes. It was made by the children under our care. You can purchase it or stock it at your shop for a commission when it’s sold.”

“Hmm...”

I was out taking care of some business today. I had some handicraft goods that we had all worked on, including wooden carvings of a bear with a salmon in its mouth, lion dog statues for warding against evil, spinning tops, battledores, temari balls, and more... The spinning tops, battledores, and temari balls were not only for entertainment, but they served as pretty ornaments too.

Of course, Reiko was the one who drew the pictures on the tops and battledores. The kids and I didn’t have that sort of talent...

These sorts of items didn’t require advanced technology to manufacture. In fact, similar items had already been made hundreds of years ago. After all, people had been using balls stuffed with feathers or filled with air since ancient Rome. Humans have always been relentless in their pursuit of entertainment.

But it wasn’t as if all forms of entertainment were popular in all regions, and these items weren’t just for play, but were exotic products catering to those who were particular about their tools or cared about aesthetics.

I thought it *should* work... I would leave the kendama, flat marbles, beanbags, round marbles, menko cards, stuffed dolls, bisque dolls, karuta cards, yo-yos, and the rest for later. I mean, popular products would get ripped off right away, and I couldn’t manage that many of them at once anyway.

Besides, there were some items that would be difficult to make right away. Some things were hard to make without bamboo or wisteria, and things like flat and round marbles required a way to get glass for cheap. I needed paper for menko cards, though clay menko and lead menko were a different story... Stuffed dolls required high-quality

string and needles, and bisque dolls were too damn difficult to make! Sure, I could have just made them as potion containers, but these were for selling to strangers instead of for personal use, so I couldn't use them as our main items that would cover our living expenses.

"Hmm..."

The man running the fancy-goods store was still deep in consideration.

Then...

"Okay, why not. I'll do my small part to help out those orphans!"

"Thank you!"

All right, sales route secured! Heh heh heh, another step closer to fulfilling my ambition...

I would continue to develop outlets for sales like this, one by one. Of course, I wasn't just making playthings; I had begun dabbling in processed foods too. Catching our own fish would not only take time, but their number and species also wouldn't be consistent, so we were just buying them at the market for now.

I mean, we wouldn't be able to process much if we just caught five or six fish of completely different sizes and types. We couldn't prepare them all at the same time unless the species and sizes were consistent, because they all took a different amount of time to dry or smoke. Yeah, I hadn't thought this through enough...

Anyway, that was why we bought fish of similar sizes from the market to smoke or sun-dry, and then sold them at our shop. We weren't selling them to fish shops, though. I wouldn't have made much selling to a place like that anyway, even if they weren't going to drive a hard bargain. That was to be expected, since fish shops made their own dried goods anyway. That said, their quality wouldn't have been as good as ours.

And yet, it would have taken too much work and time to sell directly to individual households. Plus, our shop was a bit far from the city, so it would have been a pain for customers to make the trip, and I had no intention of setting up a store in the middle of the city. That's why I was gonna sell directly to taverns and eateries.

If I gained some traction, I could sell over ten fish to each store every day. It wouldn't be an issue if I sold it for a bit of a premium compared to what I'd charge the average

household, either. Besides, we couldn't make too many dried or smoked goods with our current roster in the first place. If I could secure a few shops as regulars, that would be enough for me.

And instead of making them when ordered, I would sell whatever I had made for that day. I didn't want to feel pressured to meet daily quotas, nor did I want the kids to live like a manga artist stressing out about deadlines. Living like that couldn't be healthy for the mind. Nope.

And so, I would just bring over whatever stock I made for that day and sell that. Obviously, such a dilettantish way of running a business would only work once my products became popular. There were all sorts of excuses I could use if I didn't have stock for the day, like bad weather, a lack of high-quality fish, or the orphans getting sick, so I doubted anyone would complain about it. But honestly, I could have just made a big batch when I had time and stored them in the Item Box.

Oh, and my plan to dry fish instantly with Reiko's magic ended up in failure. Apparently, there was something about the aging process or the chemical change that added to the umami, and just drying it wasn't enough to get a good result.

Yeah, I knew that. Grilled fish didn't work too well with magic either. The outside ended up burned while the inside was still raw.



Simmered fish was even worse. Continuously heating it with weak fire magic was just a huge pain in the butt. I didn't mind, but Reiko complained a lot. Yeah, I knew that too.

Besides, if we were gonna rely on magic to make our goods, the objective of teaching the children a craft went right out the window. Moreover, if drying the fish out in the sun or cooking them over burning firewood was easier and yielded tastier products, there was no point in using magic. The only thing it would be good for was conserving wood, or to serve as some sort of punishment for Reiko...

When it came to drying and smoking, magic was useful for one thing: making salt. There was an infinite amount of salt water right below the cliff. Clean seawater, still untainted by pollution. There were all sorts of ways we could extract salt, like using magic to separate and extract it, or boiling the water with fire. It was obviously easier to just use my ability, but sometimes it was better not to take the easiest way out. Besides, I needed to give Reiko *some* time to shine...

If it was just salt we were talking about, I could claim I was getting it at a low rate from a foreign country. That shouldn't draw suspicion, considering we were foreigners ourselves, and thought to be from a wealthy household besides. I could always secure a supply route by the time the orphans were eventually able to run the business by themselves. I could even teach them how to make salt on a small scale too.

The thing is, if you just bought salt at a store, it would cost a lot of money. Since salt was one thing that wouldn't draw a lot of scrutiny, and it could be purchased through normal means if we wanted (although it would be pricey), I decided to cheat on that end. This was all still within the range of what's acceptable. Yup.

And so, the processed seafood products were specifically for selling to taverns and eateries (I wasn't shameless enough to call these places restaurants). I wanted to get two or three more locations, but that would come after I confirmed how popular my items were at the places I had secured already. There was a limit to how much product we could produce at any given time, after all.

“This lifestyle isn’t as easy and elegant as I was picturing...”

“Of course it’s not! It would be suspicious if we were living the easy life when we’re not noble ladies or some rich merchant’s daughters,” I said in response to Reiko’s sudden complaint. Then...

"But people think we're two daughters of a rich family spending money for fun, right?"

Urg...

"W-Well, it may be convenient to have people assume that, but we don't actually have anyone backing us. Plus, I sealed away the fortune I saved up in the past, and we promised not to use it unless something drastic happened. We said that we would be normal civilians from now on, other than owning a house, and that we would start over without any money. Though, we could indulge in some of the humble luxuries of the commoners once we do save up some money. And while we're in our base, we can eat and use luxury items using my potion-making powers as much as we want..."

This was, in part, to help prepare for whatever may happen in the future, but I did plan on living a normal life outside of the base as a resident of this world. This went without saying now that Mine and Aral were here, but that had also been my intention from the beginning. Reiko and I had agreed on it beforehand. Otherwise, we wouldn't have decided to take the kids in so easily in the first place.

There was a big difference between living with just Reiko and with also living with Mine and Aral in terms of how careful I'd have to be, considering the kids were from this world and I couldn't tell them about my secret. Not to mention, our lifestyles were going to change drastically when moving between the two situations. It would pretty much mean cranking up the difficulty level way higher.

Though, that was fine too. Life in another world usually meant going to fight a demon lord or living the slow life. We obviously preferred the latter. But why not add a little spice to it? Yeah!

"...So, I brought Hang and Scary!"

"What do you mean, 'so'? That was pretty abrupt..." Mine and Aral said, looking rather bewildered as Hang and Scary stood before them.

There hadn't been any opportunities to ride them while they were being taken care of at the stables out in the suburbs. If I was just going somewhere local, it was far faster to just walk or take a cab rather than having Hang and Scary walk here or going to the stable myself. In other words, Hang and Scary had no chance to do anything unless we were going somewhere far away... and we had no plan to do that any time soon.

No wonder they were so sad...

That was why I figured they could live with us, considering they always did just as I asked and I didn't have to worry about them trying to run away. There were no other houses around here and there was grass growing everywhere up to the forest, so I could just let them loose. That way, they could also serve as lookouts.

Luckily, there was a storage shed that we could use as a stable. I would do my best to take care of them, of course, but I couldn't do as good of a job as a specialist could. Fortunately, Reiko and I had the ability to communicate with them, and I could give them potions for any injuries and illnesses they might get. I figured it wouldn't be a problem, but I wanted to consider what the horses wanted too.

And so, I asked them if they preferred living with us or the ranch, and they chose to live with us, as expected. Both of them, by their own decision. Mhm.

Then...

"And so, your internship comes to an end. I think you have a good idea of what kind of work we do and what we're aiming for. So, I'll ask again. Do you want to keep working here, or do you want to get paid for the work you've done so far and leave? If you choose to stay, you must agree to never speak of whatever abnormal things you might see or hear here. When you become independent someday and start your own business, you are free to use all the knowledge you've gained here. Give it some thought. I'll give you three days to..."

"I'll stay here and work!" the two orphans said in unison.

"That was fast!"

And so, Mine and Aral became official employees of our business.

So...

"This is the entrance for going underground. It's for getting supplies out of the stock room, storing products we made... and for hiding out until help arrives if we get attacked by thieves or bad guys who are after us. The entrance is difficult to find as long as it's closed, and it's very hard to open if we lock the deadbolt from the inside, since there's no way to get a good grip on it. The handle used for opening and closing it is designed to fall off if you try to pry it open while it's locked. Finally, once we go down the stairs, we'd undo the latch for the staircase, so anyone who tries to descend will fall onto a bed of poison-tipped bamboo. We'll use a separate entrance, so no need

to worry about that."

Mine stayed silent. Why was she looking at me with that strained expression...?

"Whaaa..." The six-year-old Aral stared, wide-eyed.

I would only let them on the first basement level for now. I had no plans on letting them into any of the lower levels.

Then, a few seconds later, Mine said, "Hiding and waiting is fine, but can we not strike back and kill the attackers?"

What are you, a soldier?!

"I will be your shield and protect you at all costs, Lady Kaoru. I will gladly sacrifice myself to take an enemy down with me. Please, take care of Aral once I die in the course of my duty..."

The image of two other orphans flashed in my mind. They were just as I remembered them so long ago...

"I don't want that!"

The two kids were frightened by my sudden outburst.

Wait, they're a little too scared... No, I know why! Damn it...

I let myself relax, then smiled with a gentle look in my eyes...

Why are they even more scared now?!

Anyway, I decided to say what I needed to say.

"We're capable of protecting ourselves, thank you very much! I don't need or want children to sacrifice themselves to save me! I'm an adult. You kids just do as the adults say and let us protect *you*. Don't get ahead of yourselves!"

Some may think I was being harsh, but if anything, I wasn't being harsh enough. This was something I had learned in the "first season" of living in this world. I didn't want any fanatics. Kids needed to grow up being kids.

“Huh...? Adult? Are there other people here besides us?”

...Shaddap!

“What? You’re both fifteen? Lady Reiko, maybe, but...”

I said, shut up! There’s hardly any difference between me and her! In terms of height, anyway! Damn it!!! Haah... Haah...

I glared at them.

“Y-Y-Yes, my lady! I-I understand! Fifteen! You’re fifteen!”

Damn right...

“Also, hold on to this,” I said, then handed them matching pendants. “Wear it around your neck or keep it in an inner pocket. Someone may think it could be sold and try to take it from you. This is for your protection, so there’s no need to show anyone.”

“Is it a good-luck charm?” Mine asked.

Well, it was natural that she’d assume that.

“No, this isn’t just to put your mind at ease. It’s for practical use. Watch closely, I’ll show you how to use it...”

With that, I pulled one out of my pocket that I had prepared for educational purposes. It looked exactly the same as theirs, but it was specifically for teaching them how to use it. And so...

“First, if you ever get attacked, point this part at your opponent and press this. Then...”

Fsh!

“As you can see, a small amount of mist sprays out. You only need to press it for a second. If there are many opponents, you can hold it down while spraying all around you. This one’s a sample, so it only sprays out water, but the ones I gave you two are filled with a poison mist that will inflict excruciating pain when it gets in the eyes, nose, or mouth, so make sure you only use it when you’re in actual danger. That said, it won’t cause any permanent damage, so don’t be afraid to use it if a bad guy does

show up!"

"R-Right..."

"And when you hold this part and pull..."

It started letting out a cute beeping noise.

"The real version will make a loud noise and a voice will scream, 'It's a kidnapper! Help!' so don't hesitate to use it if someone tries to swipe you or you need to call for help! Mine, be sure to go over this again with Aral in detail later."

"Y-Yes, my lady!"

Yes, that should do it.

If I gave them a projectile weapon that shot a lead bullet or something, it could end up hurting someone innocent by accident. That was why I armed them with tools that wouldn't inflict any permanent damage. Besides, I didn't want these kids to kill anyone, if at all possible. I understood how harsh this world could be, but I still wanted to put that off until they were a bit older and there was no other choice.

If these kids were to be targeted, it would be to get ransom money, so I doubted someone would try to take them out with a headshot or something. So as long as I could prevent them from getting kidnapped, it was enough. Reiko and I would handle wiping out the enemy scum. And so...

"Only use these tools when you truly feel like you're in danger. You will not use them just for fun or to play a prank. But do *not* hesitate if you do need to use them! Do you think a rich person who starves to death because they didn't want to waste any money is smart?"

They vigorously shook their heads. Yes, that was good, but it looked like their heads were about to fall off of their shoulders, so they should probably tone it down a bit.

Anyway, I think I got the point across. All we had to do now was get our brand-new business on track. Expanding our operations and starting other ventures would come after. First and foremost, I have to show everyone around that my business was profitable and wasn't going anywhere. Profitable businesses are trustworthy, and nothing is more important in business than trust.

CHAPTER 52

THE TARGETED ORPHANAGE

I had once said that this was a respectable city. This was indeed true. A respectable king, respectable lord, respectable guilds, and respectable residents. For the most part, that is.

Of course, there was no country that consisted only of good people. Even if there was, it would probably be devoured by some neighboring country. It goes without saying that there is no city that consists only of good people either. So, obviously, there are bad guys, idiots, and human pieces of garbage in this city too.

"Hey, I heard you orphans were making pretty good coin. Little kids like you gotta be careful. It's a dangerous world, ya know. Don't worry, we'll take care of you from now on. Just leave everything to us..."

Yup, here we go. I know their type well...

Today, I was delivering dried and smoked fish, along with seaweed products, to some taverns and eateries I had contracted with. I still hadn't started handling fermented food yet... but anyway, Mine and Aral were with me. They would be handling the deliveries on their own later on, so I brought them along to introduce them to the clients. Reiko was with us too.

Each individual delivery wasn't worth too much, so it was unlikely that someone would mess with us, and it wouldn't be a huge hit if we did get our products or money stolen. I would come back and punish them many times over later on anyway... Or so I thought.

And here we were... Not to mention, this was happening right in the middle of the city. They probably took us for easy prey, being kids and all. Mine and Aral obviously were, but I only looked to be around twelve years old, too, and considering I was apparently in charge here, they probably assumed Reiko was about the same age as me, albeit a bit more physically mature. In other words, we looked like a bunch of ignorant kids.

They must have figured we'd do as they said if they just threatened us a little. That

said, they probably weren't just interested in the products and funds we had on hand, but wanted to squeeze money out of us on a regular basis.

I had to make sure to teach them a lesson in a spectacular fashion, without exposing our unique abilities. After a few encounters like this, no one would even think of laying a hand on Mine and Aral, even if they were alone. Now I just needed to find out whether this trio of thugs was working on their own or if they were operating on the orders of someone else.

"No, thank you," I replied.

"We're not so pathetic that we'd need help from pieces of shit like you three," Reiko added. I tended to use relatively amiable phrasing when I talked to anyone, but Reiko was rather harsh when dealing with anyone she recognized as an enemy.



She really hadn't changed at all... Seeing this, I wondered how she was able to live her life without causing trouble in Japan... Of course, I doubted that there were many people in Japan that she would instantly consider an enemy, so maybe she seemed normal for the most part. Even if she did have enemies, she wasn't so aggressive with her wording as long as they didn't outwardly show hostility first. Even if she was inflicting horrible pain on them in her mind...

Anyway, there was one thing I could say for sure: Never make an enemy out of Reiko Kuon.

"Wh-What did you say, you fucking brat?! Keep talking and I'll beat the shit out of you and sell you off!" the thug yelled as he grabbed Reiko.

Gotcha!

"Help! It's a kidnapper! He just said he's going to assault and sell us and is taking us away by force! Call the guards, please!"

"What...?" The group of thugs looked flabbergasted in response to my scream for help.

Why were they surprised? They were threatening to attack, kidnap, and illegally sell us into slavery, so why wouldn't we seek help? Sure, we might have been ignored if we were just a bunch of orphans that didn't understand how things worked and if we didn't have anyone backing us. Most people wouldn't want to get involved when there was nothing to gain, especially if they could end up getting hurt themselves.

Not to mention, orphans wouldn't try to ask random strangers for help in the first place. They didn't expect anything from anyone. Even in a city with a relatively high ratio of good people, most people would obviously prioritize their own safety over that of some orphan. It wasn't the same thing as donating money to charity. It was a shame, but that's how it was.

But we were just an ordinary, presentable-looking group, consisting of an entrepreneur and her employees. Three of the four of us were girls, and the last one was a young child. No one would ignore our pleas for help, and anyone could see that this was a group of three thugs trying to kidnap children from a proper household, so not only did someone run off to alert the guards, but some tough-looking men and frail-looking but chivalrous people immediately surrounded the group.

"Huh? Wh... Whaaat?"

The thugs looked rather panicked, but it was too late.

"Hey, is that you, Kaoru? From Little Silver? Are you in trouble?!"

"Oh, sir! These men suddenly showed up and demanded the rights to our business... They said they'd beat us up and sell us into slavery if we refused..."

The owner from one of the taverns I did business with had walked over, so I summarized the situation for him.

"What? The local lord has been looking out for you and gave your business special rights as a support project for orphans, right? Wouldn't they be in big trouble if they messed with you? And illegally selling children into slavery? That's a serious crime..."

Yup, thank you for that explanatory comment!

"Yes, I think so. I was going to find out whether they were acting individually or if they were under orders, then turn them in to the guards..."

"Whaaaaat?!"

The thugs were completely dumbfounded. Well, all that talk about beating us up and selling us off was probably just an empty threat, since it was pretty much the standard when dealing with kids. But if you said you'd punch or sell a full-grown woman into slavery, you'd be in some serious trouble.

"You must be the kidnappers!"

"What...? N-No, we were just..."

"That's them, sir!"

We were close to the center of the city, so the guard station was close by. Thanks to whoever ran off to get them, they had shown up in no time. Six guards in total...

A bit much, isn't it?

"If it isn't Kaoru! These bastards tried to lay a hand on Kaoru?! Hang them."

"Whaaaaat?!"

The commander, who had gone from zero to a hundred right away, was an acquaintance of mine. He probably wasn't going to actually hang anyone, but they were definitely gonna get the book thrown at them. After all, I was considered to be a young noblewoman who had put her own funds into buying an old orphanage in order to run a charitable business, even if it was actually for profit. Not to mention, the lord of the territory treated me favorably.

And, of course, I had spread gifts around the guard headquarters and guard station here, while asking them to help the kids if they were ever in trouble, and various other such requests. That was why several of the guards recognized me. I had also let them know that Reiko and I were fifteen, making us adults, even if we did look young.

That meant this was being interpreted as a case of some adult women who ran a charitable business being attacked by kidnappers. Yeah, that was a *huge* deal. The thugs figured they were just trying to bully some orphans out of their money, and assumed they would get scolded a bit and maybe spend a few nights in jail at worst, but this was far more serious.

“Please find out whether they’re acting on someone’s orders, whatever it takes.”

“Leave it to us!”

In this world, “whatever it takes” obviously referred to some pretty brutal methods of interrogation.

“Oh, and please let me know once you find out.”

“Of course. You’ll need to know who’s out to get you. Of course, there’s no need for you to deal with something like this. We’ll handle it for you.”

“Hehe, thank you.”

“No problem!”

And so, the three thugs were dragged away by the guards, and things got peaceful again. News of this incident would surely spread to all the thugs and criminals throughout the city. Criminals didn’t last long if they were slow to pick up on information, after all. Mine and Aral would be much safer after this.

One or two more run-ins with idiots like these and I probably wouldn’t have to worry

about simple, violent criminals like them, for the most part. But there were just so many bad guys out there...

“So you’re the orphans that have been living in the remains of the orphanage without permission! I’ll make arrangements so you can live there legally, as long as you do whatever I say!”

Aaand here we go!

A weirdo visited our residence a few days after those thugs messed with us. It wasn’t his appearance that was weird, though; he looked like a not-so-wealthy merchant. As far as I could tell, this didn’t seem like it was going to get violent or anything, but considering that had been the first thing he said to me when I went out to greet him, I had to think that “weirdo” was the only way to put it...

“Um... Who might you be...?”

“I am Darlish, a clerk of the Goneshell Trading Company.”

Ah... Must be some small-to-medium-sized trader...

“Is this a personal matter? Or are you working under the orders of your chairman?”

“The chairman wouldn’t involve himself in such petty matters as these. I’ll be the one taking care of you.”

Right...

It seemed that he wanted to make some side income, or maybe even report it to the company and get credit for it, at least once he made sure he could make some decent money off of us. Did his higher-ups know about us? Or maybe this guy was ignorant of our situation and acting on his own? Well, it didn’t really matter much either way.

“I refuse.”

“Hmph...” The clerk named Darlish didn’t react with surprise or anger, but just looked at me condescendingly. He’d have to be crazy if he thought I would obey him with that attitude. I figured he was just trying to act tough to gain control of the conversation. That, or he was *really* taking me lightly.

I figured this guy was one of several clerks, and a low-ranking one at that, so he probably didn't have much authority or information. Otherwise, he should have known that I had purchased this place through official channels, and that I had already talked everything through with the lord of the territory.

In other words... He wasn't even worth my time.

"Tell me how you make the dried and smoked food you sell. If you do, I'll let you work under me."

We're already making money on our own, so why would I want to give you a cut...?

This guy was probably treated like an intern, getting two meals a day without any actual salary. No, an intern would learn how to get work done and have aspirations to eventually become independent. Though, they'd still have a lot of hurdles and competition to get through...

Anyway, I had far more knowledge and ability when it came to business management, and I was already independent and making a profit, so why would I even consider working for some intern who would likely steal my manufacturing methods, then kick me out and threaten to report me to the guards if I copied "his" products?

That route would be going in the complete opposite direction of success. So...

"If you'd like me to tell you how to make my products, I'll be taking a down payment of 500 gold coins. I'll also take ten percent of your sales. Of course, that would be after you introduce me to the Commerce Guild as a guarantor and sign an official contract."

500 gold coins may have sounded like a lot, but it was only worth 50 million yen or so. Someone could take these techniques and start a business in the royal capital and the other major cities in each region, then expand to other countries, eventually establishing a major market share for dried and smoked goods. And if one of the products became famous, it would help massively in selling other products too. Considering all that, the price really wasn't that high.

After all, the fish, which was the main ingredient of the products, didn't cost all that much, and they could be bought from other harbor towns or small fishing villages for cheap instead of in just this city. You could even make processing facilities near those places where the fish would be bought. But this guy saw us as some random orphans, so he had no intention of paying that kind of money.

"Hah, what a joke. Do as I say, or I'll kick you out and sell you off to some slavers!"

...Yeah, I saw that coming.

"We have no intention of obeying such unreasonable demands. That means your statement is nothing more than a threat to sell us into slavery. As such, I will defend myself appropriately..."

I snapped my fingers, and Reiko, Mine, and Aral appeared. Each of them were wielding wooden swords that I had made...

"What...?"

Then we beat the crap out of the clerk guy and tied him up. I mean, some pot-bellied, middle-aged man didn't stand a chance against two girls who were physically fifteen years old and two kids who didn't know how to hold back. Plus, we were all wielding wooden swords. Reiko had handed me one too.

"Okay, Reiko, you stay on the lookout. Mine, Aral, go to the guard station and let them know a man came to us and threatened to sell us to slavers. Make sure you give them the name of our business and talk to an officer. I'm going to the Industry Guild to make the same report, then to the Goneshell Trading Company to see if this was done on their orders."

"Roger that!"

"Okay! We're off then!"

"What...? N-No! Stop! Don't go! Nooo!!!"

But Mine and Aral had already taken off.

"H-Hmph! No one will believe a bunch of orphans like you! All I need to do is say that I refused to obey your demands to pay you, then you made up a story to set me up. Then you'll be the ones who will get arrested, not me..."

Yup, it was that familiar pattern again. But...

"Well, we're not a bunch of orphans who are living here illegally as you claim. We paid big money to buy this place, and we've done the proper paperwork and got permission

from the lord of the territory to run this business. We've joined the Industry Guild too... Also, me and Reiko here are fifteen, making us adults," I replied, then continued before he could interject.

"In other words, you're a heinous criminal who barged in here and made unreasonable demands upon a legitimate business, got mad when we refused, then threatened to sell two adult women and two children into slavery. I'll be asking the guards to question you in detail to find out whether you were working under the orders of the Goneshell Trading Company and its chairman when you did all that."

"What...?"

Is that all this guy can say...?

"N-No, please! If you do that, the chairman will..."

Not my problem!

He was looking real pale, but this couldn't have been a complete surprise for him. This was just the result of his own actions, all of which he had undertaken of his own free will. He had no reason to be shaken or regretful.

If we really had just been a bunch of orphans, he probably would have taken advantage of us by force. He had taken a risk and now it had turned against him. What use was there in whining about it? His loss was due to his own lack of knowledge and ability. No one would take him seriously if he cried about the loss afterward.

Information spread slowly in this world, and it tended to change drastically in the process, so you had to be careful. This sort of thing is what happened when you didn't do your due diligence and instead decided to do stupid things based on your own misconceptions. It wasn't as if everyone needed to know everything. Even if one didn't have constant access to the latest news, they could make steady profits as long as they worked earnestly.

Put simply, if you were going to take a risk instead of putting in honest work, you needed information and analytical capabilities. This was the result of getting greedy without the skills to back it up.

"Okay, I'm going now!"

I left the screaming merchant behind and headed to the Industry Guild and then to the Goneshell Trading Company. At each place, I went to the counter and shouted at the top of my lungs:

“Excuse me! I’m from Little Silver! A clerk from the Goneshell Trading Company barged into our business, made unreasonable demands, then threatened to sell us to slavers! Is this standard practice for members of the Industry Guild? I sent a runner to the guards to report this, by the way!”

Yeah, that made pandemonium break out at both places. Then, since I didn’t want to get stopped and made to answer a bunch of annoying questions, I fled quickly afterward. I didn’t want to leave Reiko to deal with the guards all by herself, so I had to get back to her soon.

Afterward, we got visited by another merchant and a local thug, for a total of two more attempted shakedowns, but that was the end of it. The merchant must have heard about us through his network. Maybe the Industry Guild had made some sort of move. Although it was pretty much just a small-time merchant’s association in a rural town, they couldn’t just overlook something like that...

I was also impressed that the thugs had caught wind of the news. Though, even among thugs and criminals, there must have been some orphans or people who had been taken care of at the orphanage when it was still around. So, some of them had to be opposed to the idea of messing with a business that was actively helping orphans.

In any case... We, Little Silver, had succeeded in fortifying our social standing here among the other merchants, the general population, and even in the community of thugs. No one would try to mess with us now, unless they were exceptionally stupid or confident in their abilities... Not in an obvious way, anyway.

We weren’t valuable enough for anyone to take a risk coming after us quite yet.

No, not “yet.”

CHAPTER 53

REIKO

Kaoru hasn't changed one bit...

Well, it had been decades since I last saw her, but it only felt like five years or so to her. I had grown old and lived through an entire lifetime as a human being. Of course, my way of thinking and sensibilities had matured with age... then eroded, and wilted away.

But this was all due to the deterioration of my aging body, my social standing and treatment by others, and the inevitable erosion of my own mind and soul. Like a machine that had been damaged, degraded, rusted over, and slowed down, what remained was a malfunctioning, out-of-date mess. It was the natural progression of things and an unavoidable truth.

But what if a genius engineer (goddess) swapped my mind and soul (software) into a brand new chassis? And what if they replenished the energy in that worn, exhausted soul to, like, 120% capacity? A spiritual entity that had been supplied with a strong, youthful body and re-energized soul, that was me. Not to mention, the Goddess had given me the ability to recall everything from my student days to my early twenties as an extra perk. As a result...

“It feels like I’m back to the days when I was still with Kaoru...”

This meant that the memories that had naturally faded in the later parts of my life felt vague, while the present me felt as if I was back in those days of my youth. Maybe the Goddess had done this out of consideration for us, so I would be able to get along with Kaoru without issues. It could have been an adjustment she had made when revitalizing my discarnate entity. And she was even thorough enough to clarify my memories of my husband, who had been with me until the end, as well as my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren...

Quite considerate, really. It did make me slightly less angry at her for what she had gotten Kaoru into...

Still, it did pain me that Kyoko wasn’t with us. We weren’t KKR without all three of us

together. The balance was all off with one missing. Kyoko had been an ordinary, modern young girl who was always getting herself in trouble. However, the reason she got in trouble was, for the most part, because she was trying to help others.

When she saw a girl being abused, sexually harassed, and stalked in college, she got herself involved right away. And, of course, she immediately got into an argument with the perpetrator. It had turned into a whole ordeal.

Once Kyoko had garnered sympathy from onlookers as a poor, innocent girl who had gotten dragged into the drama against her will, Kaoru appeared. Her role was to put the opponent out of commission by verbally destroying him. If Kaoru had been the first one to approach, there was a chance that she'd be seen as the villain due to her eyes. That was why she had to be the person who came in later to help Kyoko.

Meanwhile, I used my three hidden micro-recorders and my ultra-compact camera to acquire the evidence. Afterward, I went to the lady at the student affairs office, the one I had become friends with. I explained the situation and told her, "I'm thinking of reporting this incident to the police. I was also thinking of discussing this with my cousin, who works for a magazine company..." and for some reason, it got resolved within a few days.

My cousin did indeed work at a magazine company. As the receptionist, that is. I hadn't actually lied. Not at all. I did "think about" discussing it with her. Not that it would have made any difference...

If it had just been someone like me, who mainly worked behind the scenes, or Kaoru, who was a good girl but was often misunderstood because of her eyes—well, she was pretty scary as an enemy, so maybe it wasn't so much that she was misunderstood... Anyway, the mood got way too dark when it was just the two of us.

But thanks to Kyoko, who was a cheerful, earnest person, she toned up our image so we didn't look like antiheroes... or rather, antiheroines. She was a loveable, wonderful mood-maker in class, got along with both girls and boys, and had a strong sense of justice... Or so she seemed.



She hung out with me and Kaoru... Of course she wasn't an ordinary girl. All I could say was this: "Don't piss off Kyoko Nishizono!" Well, I knew people said the same thing about me and Kaoru behind our backs. But this was different.

If you angered Kaoru or myself, you'd just end up getting badly injured at worst... Not that anyone would want to go through that. However, if you angered Kyoko, you wouldn't get off so lightly. It wasn't that she was malicious or anything... Probably. But... the world would end, though you would be fine as long as you didn't piss her off. Kind of like how they say, "It doesn't matter if you can't hit me."

In any case, there was a glaring issue when we didn't have Kyoko. We couldn't help but drift more and more toward the dark side when it was just me and Kaoru. That was why I hadn't given much of my input on whatever Kaoru was doing. There was a chance that things could get out of hand real quick if I did.

Also, I was still ignorant about many things in this world. I decided to focus on assisting Kaoru for now. Although I had to admit it would be nice if Kyoko would just join us already, I couldn't wish for such a thing. Because if she was to appear before us, it would mean she had died back on Earth.

Well, I was sure she had lived a full life and gotten her money's worth out of her time there. Unlike Kaoru, who had her overpowered ability to create things, I couldn't use my powers in front of others unless they were rendered unable to tell people about what they had seen. I could use water or fire magic to enhance my own lifestyle and make things in private, but still.

Anyway, my main focus was to put down my roots here with Kaoru and take care of the kids. It reminded me of back when I had taken care of my kids, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. I was used to it. Raising a few more didn't make any difference. Kaoru had experience taking care of orphans herself, so she had to be accustomed to it too. So, it should have been a piece of cake...

"...So why have you been such a slob?"

"Well, the kids took care of all the cooking, cleaning, and laundry before... And I want Mine and Aral to learn how to take care of themselves, so I thought..."

"Shut it!"

This is bad. I'm not taking care of two kids, but three...



"We've established our footing here for the most part, so I think the kids will be relatively safe even if they go out to town on their own. They're not just orphans anymore. They're workers who have been officially hired by our business. That puts them under the protection of the officials and guards, so anyone who tries to hurt or kidnap them will be punished heavily by the law," Kaoru said.

"Yeah, and they have those crime prevention tools you gave them..."

"Aha ha..."

Kaoru was right: Most people in this city already knew Mine and Aral weren't some lonely little orphans without anyone at their backs. And even if some ignorant person or newcomer from another land tried to mess with them, someone nearby would stop them.

Besides, they didn't even dress like orphans anymore. Anyone who saw them would assume they were kids from an ordinary household, or low-ranking servants working for a shop. They wouldn't be treated as if they had no human rights or get harassed by thugs without any consequences.

Now we could have them deliver products to the city or send them out for errands. In other words, Kaoru and I would have more time to do things alone.

"...Time to begin stage two?" I asked.

"Yup. It's time," Kaoru said, grinning as she replied to my question.

I decided to give her a piece of advice.

"Don't make that face in front of the kids. They'll cry for sure."

"Sh-Shaddap!!!"

Yeah, she always responded in the same way whenever I warned her like this. She hadn't changed one bit since those good old days...

CHAPTER 54

AMBITION

“Ambition, aspiration, happy weather forecast!”

“Are you supposed to be Wapiko or a motor company?!”

It sure is nice to have someone who understands my jokes...

“I was just thinking that we should start that private enterprise we’ve been talking about...” I said to Reiko, who was giving me an exasperated look.

Our public business was already reaching its natural ceiling. It wasn’t that we had run into a roadblock, but there was a physical limit to how much work that two fifteen-year-old girls, a nine-year-old girl, and a six-year-old boy could do.

Plus, it wasn’t as if we exploited our workers, nor did we have to endure grueling work to save up a little money. Sure, we had to earn a living, but we were already making enough to get by in our current situation. We didn’t have to pay rent, since we already owned a house, and being tax-exempt was pretty huge.

Sales for the processed fish and seaweed, along with the toys and folkcraft goods, were going well, and the farm should yield crops soon. It would be a bountiful harvest as long as I used my growth-acceleration potion.

I also carved out the back side of the cliff with my Item Box to make a staircase, then made a sort of indentation into the cliff at an appropriate height, forming a space of around four to five tatami mats, about the size of an average room. Yes, I had made a little fishing spot. It was carved into the cliff, so we could fish even when it was raining.

That said, I wasn’t sure if the rain would affect how much fish we’d catch. Fishing could be affected by all sorts of elements, like the water temperature and position of the tide. The concentration of salt on the surface would be lowered in the rain, and the ambient sound probably had an effect too...

In any case, we would be able to get a decent supply of fish instead of having to buy

everything at the market. I still had that bracelet I had made a while back, so I didn't need to worry about parasites or poison either.

Well, Mine and Aral could eat fish infested with parasites or poison without issues while they lived with us, but I would need to teach them not to eat like that anywhere else. It could cost them their lives otherwise, so I had to be careful. I definitely didn't want them eating fugu liver under normal circumstances...

"Kaoru, this is dangerous. Maybe we should teach them not to eat poisonous fish at all. Imagine what could happen if they slip up or something..."

"Hmm, you might be right..."

It was one thing for us to partake, but maybe it was too dangerous to get kids accustomed to eating food that tasted good in some parts but could kill you in others.

A shame, but I guess I should give up on my amateur all-you-can-eat fugu project...

"Let's just do it in our secret base with the two of us."

"Ah, thought so."

It seemed Reiko also wanted to eat some 100% safe fugu. Some said the slight tingling sensation you get from the poison was actually pretty thrilling, which was a bit too intense for me... wait, maybe we'd be fine with my potions and Reiko's healing magic? I glanced over at her and saw her grinning.

She's probably thinking the same thing...

Anyway, both sales and manufacturing of our products were going pretty well, but we didn't have enough manpower to make any more items to sell. My business wasn't sinister, unlike Reiko's appetite.

Little Silver is a company with morals!

And so, my public enterprise would maintain its current trajectory. If someone ended up copying our products and our sales took a hit, I would think about what to do then. I had plenty of ideas for new products, so it wouldn't be too big of a deal if one of them did get copied. Not that they could even compete with the quality, designs, or variations of my crafts anyway.

So, about my private business... It wasn't as if I was going to become an assassin or anything... though we probably could...

No, I wanted to move my products on a larger scale instead of just selling them to small retailers and wholesalers, but also avoid standing out too much. And by "larger scale," I didn't want to sell a massive number of things; I wanted to sell a decent number of items at a decent price.

I knew I would attract people who wanted my money or know-how if I drew too much attention. They hadn't shown up yet, but once they decided it would be worth taking a small risk to get what they wanted... We looked like minors, and we were all girls besides the youngest, making us easy targets...

And so, we started our plan in hiding. Well, the news would leak out eventually, but we just had to think of a countermeasure before that happened.

Some may wonder why we started doing this in the first place. After all, we had made enough profit already, I still had the gold coins I had earned a long time ago in my Item Box, and I could make even more using my potion containers. Besides, there was no way I would ever need a large sum of money because one of us had gotten sick or injured.

So why were we planning all this?

As they say..."Doth thou desire the power?"

If it had just been me, I could use my special move: "Run away if I get in an argument." But I couldn't do that with such a big household to take care of.

Well, I mean, it was *physically* possible. I could store all my important belongings in the Item Box, blow up the base to hide any evidence and keep it out of the bad guys' hands, and run away with everyone.

But I didn't want to discard everything I had built up so I could run away from bad guys. Not to mention, it would get real old real fast if that was my solution every time. Besides, I wouldn't ever be able to do anything out of fear of drawing attention from evil and influential people.

Celes had granted me potion-making powers and gave magic to Reiko, and we didn't intend on only using them to make our lives a bit more convenient without helping

the people of this world. It would've been a different story if Celes had been a true Goddess watching over the people of this world, and she didn't want us to spread our divine blessings to regular folks.

No, Celes was effectively a complete outsider with no real connection to humans. Her only task was to fix distortions in this world; not abstract things that could distort the progression of mankind, but literal "dimensional distortions."

Since we had received our powers for reasons unrelated to the people of this world, there was no issue with us using them however we pleased here. Celes probably didn't care one bit. In fact, as I recall, she had said so herself.

Yup. That was why I would become the god of this new world... or not. I wouldn't be able to live a proper life if I did, and I'd just end up attracting a bunch of hyenas and getting eaten alive in the end.

And so, what I wanted wasn't the ability to defend myself in a physical sense, but a degree of social standing that would keep me from getting taken advantage of by others. A place in the world that would put me out of reach; not of just thugs and small-time crooks, but also wealthy and influential people, government officials, and low-ranking aristocrats.

To be more specific, I suppose I would need to be an influential merchant.

Becoming an aristocrat wouldn't be easy, and I had no desire to put myself in the middle of factional struggles that involved political power and relationships. Besides, their hierarchical system meant that I would have to obey my superiors and otherwise be weighed down by unwanted obligations. It was out of the question.

Besides, Reiko and I didn't age, so people would notice something was up right away. The ability to stay young forever was the kind of thing the rich and powerful wanted above all else...

Maybe I could have passed as someone who "looked young" in my twenties for ten or twenty years, but I clearly looked like I was twelve or thirteen. It would only be a few years before someone started wondering, "How come those sisters haven't grown in all this time?"

It was no wonder vampires avoided recruiting children into their ranks. Children would draw suspicion, and they would need to move a lot more frequently.

And so, I couldn't deal with anything like an obligation to meet with the same people frequently or having my household strictly managed by someone else. I wanted to live in the outskirts somewhere, and only come into town for the occasional grocery run.

I could use clothing and makeup to make it less obvious, and I could have the kids go out to the city for me. And after a good number of years pass by, I could go to another country, then return as "Kaoru's little sister" or "her daughter"...Wait, there was no point in thinking so far into the future. For now, I would focus on building up my influence and making my debut one day as a powerful merchant.

I wanted to lay low at first because putting a lucrative business on display while we still didn't have any power would surely bring some unwanted attention onto us. And so...

We would work in the shadows, hide our abilities, and save up for now. We would keep to ourselves completely. The key point here was that I was aiming to become an influential merchant. Not a big-time merchant, but an influential one.

I had no interest in building a giant shop, equally huge storage, and then stocking a massive amount of products. No, I wanted to be a small-time merchant, but also one that couldn't be disrespected due to the importance of my wares.

I would be known among the big businesses and aristocrats, and be well-connected within them, meaning anyone who tried to mess with me would get burned for sure. That was the kind of position I wanted to be in. Once I was in such a position, I could do things that might be a bit strange or suspicious, and also help people out along the way, while still living a normal life.

"All right, let's prepare some products so we can get to know some mid-scale merchants first. After that, we'll move on to products that will give us an in with the big businesses and lower-class aristocrats. We'll start with the basic stuff at first, then gradually work our way up to the more unusual items you can't find around here..."

Then we both struck a strange pose and shouted.

"Gradually unusual items!"

Yeah, we're on a roll!

"Let's start things off with the go-to cheat items for life in other worlds: salt, sugar, and

spices! I'll make these using my powers. Things like flour and corn are pretty common but expensive here, so we'll be questioned about where we got them if I make them with my powers, but we could talk our way out of small, portable things."

"Maybe we should avoid sugar itself and go with processed sweets instead? People will want to know where we got sugar, and they'd probably be less likely to bother us about it if we offer snacks with a small amount of sugar in them instead of the actual thing. This way, our trade would be our baking rather than our supply," Reiko suggested.

"Good point..."

"Let's only use salt for cooking and processing goods. Using it for our processed food is one thing, but there will be some legal trouble to deal with if we started selling it outright. Plus, your ability to create something out of nothing with your potions goes against the laws of nature, so you shouldn't use it unless you need to. We can extract salt from the seawater."

"What? But if we evaporate a huge amount of seawater with your magic at once, it could leave behind magnesium chloride or cause a sudden change in the regional weather, what with all the warm air containing so much moisture moving upward..."

"We can extract the salt by storing the seawater in the Item Box."

"Good point..."

"As for spices, we should only handle the expensive ones, and just a small amount at a time. We'd be a magnet for criminals if we had too much of that stuff... Let's use it only as bait for merchants and aristocrats. If we're not careful, things could get out of hand once lords from other territories, nobles from the royal capital, and merchants from other countries start flocking to us."

"Good point..."

"If tasty food that you can't find around here with an unknown value and ingredients starts getting more popular, that would be good for us. What I'm saying is, how about soy sauce and miso? We could prepare them underground, it would be hard for others to imitate, and no one would try to take something that's so unusual..." Reiko trailed off, then continued.

"And I've already learned how to make them, of course. I'll need you to make the first

batch of koji mold, though. If your powers are backed by Lady Celes, she should be able to get us some from Earth."

"Good point..."

Oh no, I've only said "Good point" this whole time! You're too helpful, Reiko!

I had to provide an idea of my own too... Then, it hit me. The perfect cheat item to create in another world.

"Um, how about mayo..."

"No mayonnaise. Eggs are too risky. You shouldn't eat uncooked eggs unless they're the kind you'd find in modern Japan. There's a high chance that they'd be infected with salmonella otherwise. Being able to eat eggs raw like in Japan is the exception to the norm. And in a world without any methods of disinfection or refrigeration, they'll go bad right away," Reiko explained.

She continued, "Not to mention the other issues, like that the mayo could expire if you try to ration it out because it's so expensive, hygienic concerns, things like that... It could last a decent number of days if it was mixed well, but I'll bet that someone will make an inferior rip-off version that will end up giving people food poisoning. And what if people start blaming us then? That'd be kinda bad, right?"

Good poi— Wait, that wouldn't just be "kinda bad."

Damn, the trusty ol' mayonnaise had failed me...



“Japanese sake...”

“Do you realize how much effort, skill, and equipment we would need...? High-quality water, rice that’s suitable for brewing sake, polishing that rice, plus koji mold, yeast, temperature control... Even if we can get and do all that, we’d probably still fail by letting it go bad or something. Making a small batch with your power is one thing, but we won’t be able to brew our own. It’d be too heavy to smuggle in from somewhere else too. The containers in this world are too fragile.”

Damn.

Well, I could still make some for myself as a potion. It was fine. I was twenty-two in my previous life, and you would be considered an adult at fifteen in this world. I had reincarnated in this world in the body of a fifteen-year-old, and it had already been five... no, nearly eighty years since... No, no, no, no, no! In any case, I was a full-grown adult. Though, there was no age limit for drinking here in the first place.

I had to come up with a better idea...

“Plum liquor!”

“Making some with brandy might be a good idea.”

Ah, I finally got one!

“Anyway, let’s not make anything that people would make people go crazy and take it by force, or resort to murder to find out where we got it. Just something that’s good enough to catch the interest of some middle-class merchants. As for spices, let’s have a pretty good selection, but keep the stock low for each. And once we earn some trust and get introduced to the big business and aristocrats...”

“That’s when we bring out the big guns!” we yelled in unison.

Yes, we would bust out our most powerful product then.

“Okay, let’s go with that!”

Our plans were set.

"What? Oh, please wait a moment!"

Reiko and I were out for market cultivation today. Mine and Aral were at home taking care of the horses and doing farm work. Meanwhile, we were meeting with a new client for our private enterprise today; it was still too early for those two to be handling business like this.

We were at a mid-sized trading company with a sample of our product. Considering that the people of this continent thought we were only twelve or thirteen, we normally wouldn't have been taken seriously, but Little Silver was pretty well known for various reasons already... though, it was unclear whether it was for good reasons or bad.

In any case, the person dealing with us seemed to hesitate to make a judgment call to shoo us off. This was all thanks to that merchant who tried to mess with us before. The higher-up who had been called down must have feared for the worst, because he invited us into a meeting room in the back.

Special treatment, huh?

Not that this pleased me or anything.

"...So, you say you would like us to stock your wares? But we already do an extensive amount of purchasing already, so we're not exactly looking for a small quantity of vegetables... Perhaps it would be better to reach out to a smaller shop, such as a retail vegetable store, or otherwise sell them directly at the market..." the person, who seemed to be a shop assistant or sales clerk, suggested.

It didn't seem like he was just brushing us off to get rid of us. I had a feeling that he had assessed the situation, considered what was realistic, then gave us advice based on what he thought would be best for us.

Maybe he would have bought our products if it had just been this once, even if it was just a small amount. But if I was to do business long-term, it was better to secure a place that would be a good fit from the get-go. He must have considered this, and he gave me a recommendation based on what he thought was the most optimal option.

We wouldn't have been invited into the back room and received an appointment with someone higher up otherwise. But this was because he thought we were selling a small amount of vegetables, grown and harvested by orphans, and a few fish that we had caught on our own. And so...

"This is what we're looking to sell. We get them sent to us from our territory... I mean, home."

With that, I produced sample bottles from my bag and lined them up on the table. They were an array of rare spices contained in highly intricate glass bottles. Pepper, saffron, cinnamon, nutmeg, cardamom, cloves...

Starting with humans, the same creatures existed in this world as Earth, so it was logical to assume that the same plants existed here too. And of course, these were all extremely valuable.

"..."

The merchant's eyes were like saucers as they stared at the small bottles on the table. Of course, no merchant would miss the fact that I had let slip that these were from "our territory."

That statement should have immediately told him about our status and position, as well as the fact that we were the only ones who could stock these items. In other words, nobody could take our supply route even if they wanted to, and eliminating us meant they would lose access to our supply.

Besides, even if someone meant us harm, they would have to deal with our imaginary people back home, who clearly still supported us. Who knew what they would do if anyone harmed their adorable—yes, *adorable*—twelve- or thirteen-year-old daughters. Yeah, it was highly unlikely that he would try anything funny.

These had all been made at Celes's Factory (potion-making powers). We had no choice! There was no way we could obtain these otherwise without resorting to my powers. Even if we had found a supplier somehow, we would have had to pay as much as we were selling them for here, so it would have been pointless. The spices were just a means to get in with big merchants and aristocrats, and for teaching the kids a trade and how to earn money, so we decided it was fine.

So, how would the merchant react? We would just move on to a different shop if we didn't get the response we were looking for, though.

"...J-Just a moment, please!"

Hey, he ran off!

No, he must have gone to get his superior. Well, this was a decision that had to come from someone higher up than a shop assistant or young clerk, so that made sense. Maybe the chief clerk or the head of the trading company...

Oh, they're both here.

And so, we went through the standard exchanges, then moved on to talking about price. The shop would be able to buy as much as they wanted, up to a certain limit that we set. I guess that went without saying. Of course we would only sell what we could sell, and they would buy however much they wanted to buy.

They probably wanted to buy as much as they could, but we had other factors to consider. We had to manage the circulating supply, and it didn't make sense for us in terms of risk and efficiency to approach only this one shop when our goal was to make connections with influential people. No, we had to establish multiple routes at once.

The merchants also understood that we would be dealing with several business partners at once. That is, unless they thought we were idiots who would only deal with one client in a seller's market, throwing out any room for negotiation or risk diversification.

They probably would have tried to surround us by now, but they must have heard about what happened to that stupid clerk that had tried to mess with Little Silver, and they were well aware of the aristocratic comment I had made earlier. As such, they strongly requested that we provide them as much of our wares as possible, but that was common practice within the back-and-forth of negotiations. Merchants were pretty scary when they were desperate, though...

In any case, we went around visiting three other shops or so. It wasn't a good look to go around too many shops in the same city, and it was also too much work. Three shops should have been enough for them to keep each other in check from trying anything funny. Then...

"We could use a boat..." I muttered.

"Like, a luxury cruise ship? Or maybe a battleship, an aircraft carrier, or Atragon..."

"Where'd that come from?! No, a fishing boat!"

Yes, a fishing boat would yield far better results compared to fishing from land. The

points where you could fish from the shore were extremely limited and were highly dependent on the tide. But if we had a boat, we could even target the routes that migratory fish swam through...

And if we laid out some traps and some bait, we could quickly switch targets even if we didn't catch the fish we're going for. For example, if we anchored our boat somewhere and failed to catch horse mackerel, we could relocate near the sandy beach and let the boat drift around without lowering the anchor, using lugworms as bait to fish for whiting instead.

Depending on the season, we could even let the boat run and fish for hairtail. We could go trolling with the boat moving at low speeds, using reels and lures without fishing rods. Like those rubbery squid-looking things with hooks built into them.

It took far longer to remove the hooks and fix the tangled bait than the actual fishing, though! That said, sashimi tasted so good...

“Doth thou desire a boat...?”

That Reiko...

“Yeah, I've *been* saying I want a boat! And don't say it so ominously...”

Rowing a boat myself would be too much work, and that kind of boat would be too small anyway. Not to mention, we wouldn't be able to go trolling...

Still, using a powerboat would attract far too much attention. Not just from fishermen, but from merchants and influential people... and if anyone associated with the military saw me, it'd be game over. I had to avoid that at all costs. But if we were to go pretty far from the coast, I at least wanted a cabin to shelter us from any sudden rain. Oh, and a restroom. That meant it would have to be a cruiser or a mega yacht...

Who the hell is gonna drive something like that?! We're not even qualified to drive a small vessel...

I mean, it wasn't like we needed to get a license or anything, but we needed to know how to drive those things.

Damn...

"I have a vessel operator license. I'm also a certified weather forecaster and radio operator," Reiko said.

"What?!"

"I got them just in case. I did have over seventy years to prepare..."

"Urgh... But what use is a radio operator certification with no one to communicate with? Or a weather forecasting certification in a world with no weather charts?" I asked.

"Urrrgh..."

Yeah, take that!

Anyway, we probably didn't need a boat that big. A swan boat was probably enough if we were just going fishing nearby. The kind that was shaped like a swan and used pedals to move forward! Even if the military saw us in one of those, they wouldn't think of appropriating it or anything. The enemy army would probably fall over laughing if a fleet of those came advancing toward them.

But since those boats were so shallow and had such little propulsion power, they'd be in pretty big danger anywhere with a strong current or turbulence... Maybe they were exclusively for using in lakes and ponds... And as a girl, I had to have a restroom. I didn't want to be exposed, so naturally, a cabin would be a necessity.

"A fishing boat that won't draw unwanted attention, comes with a cabin and restroom, and is safe and stable... There's no way something so convenient is even a thing..." I said with disappointment, then Reiko immediately spoke up.

"It is."

"It is?!"

I didn't think such a thing existed...

"The part that shows above the surface will be just a small boat that's tall on the broadside. We can have a bigger, underwater part just below it."

"What is this, the Apollo Norm?!"

"You mean that thing that combined three giant carriers with six atomic submarines attached below them? No, this is more like the Submarine Fortress Saluud... We could even have a hatch below the ship so we could dive underwater when needed..."

"What are you even talking about?! And you only get the number-three Andromeda-class battleship when you look up Apollo Norm, unless you add Satoru Ozawa to the search."

"Such an old reference..."

"But you know it too, Reiko!"

What's with her...

"Well, I had over seventy years to look up all sorts of stuff..."

And so, we made a fishing vessel. Well, it was a potion container that looked like a fishing vessel, but yeah...

We had an emergency exit that was specifically for the ultra-compact submarine, and we also made a separate spot behind the rocks where we could embark. The L-shaped groove looked like a shallow indentation from the outside, but the end of the path turned to the right and into a waterway where the vessel was stored.

Not a lot of people would even look at the rock wall from the sea, and the groove wasn't visible from the top of the cliff. In order to get there from the land over the cliff, you would need to rope down from above or have some impressive rock climbing or bouldering skills. As for us, we just used the interior walkway.

When bringing Mine and Aral along, we would take them to a floating pier we had built at a rocky area some distance away—even though it was just three logs stuck together with a thick board on top—and have Reiko bring the vessel to that spot. Of course, I had carved out the seafloor with the Item Box to make sure the bottom part of the vessel wouldn't run aground.

That said, the water was clear enough to see a bit of the bottom part... but we didn't fret over the small details. I had told Mine and Aral not to mention anything about the vessel because it was a new model that was still under development, so I was fine on

that end. The kids had no reason to do anything that would compromise their place to stay.

We only used the vessel for fishing when all four of us went out for leisure. When we wanted to catch some fish for dinner, we just fished on land. I had dug stone steps into the cliff wall leading up to the groove that we used as a fishing spot, so it wasn't as if the children couldn't reach it by themselves, but I had forbidden them from doing so.

It was too dangerous for kids to go there alone. The stone steps were just there so people wouldn't realize that we actually used an underground pathway to get there. The kids would only fish there when Reiko or I were there.

That place was basically our rainy day fishing spot. Practically the whole area was suitable for fishing, so there was no reason to go out of our way to use such a small space when the sun was out.

And so, we could now farm, fish, and hunt in the forest, we owned horses, and we could build things and do construction in our DIY lifestyle. It was the slow life that tired old men in the big city dreamed of. It was just like Green Acres!

"I don't know about that..."

Shaddap!

"How are the plans for the spices going?" Reiko asked, sitting low in her gaming chair. She held a hot cocoa in her left hand and ice cream in her right, as if she was about to cast Antipode.

"Two-thirds of the total supply will be lower quality than what's in circulation around here, and a third will be a bit higher in quality. I'm planning on selling them all wholesale to three different shops, once a month, and the quantity will change each time to make it seem as if the supply is unstable. If we sold the same exact amount each time, they might demand a steady supply each month, or assume the minimum quantity should be a given and try to negotiate better terms using that as a baseline. I want us to have full control of the deal."

The reason we weren't increasing the quality right away was so we could hold on to the good stuff for later. We were planning on saving the high-quality goods for the local lord, for high-class aristocrats, and eventually even the royal palace, when we got there. We would only be hurting ourselves by putting our best products into circulation right

away. It would certainly attract some weirdos too. I mean, no super hero would use their special move or secret weapon right from the get-go.

Also, by putting the cheaper, lower-quality goods out there, they were likely to start being used by your average eateries and such. I didn't want the nobles and the wealthy to have all the good food for themselves; instead, I wanted to improve food quality for everyone. There wouldn't be any growth in food culture otherwise. It wasn't the rich and powerful who became cooks, after all. Good food had to be made and popularized by the common folk.

"Yeah, I think that's fine too. It's not some amazing product that you can't get anywhere else or something that's exclusively sold by a single trading company. Besides, even if someone wanted to take our supply route from us, it's supposed to be a product that's being sent to us from home, so it's not like they could get it sent to them in our stead."

In other words, it would be impossible for someone to take our supply route from us. The moment someone hurt us, all imports of our products would come to a halt, and they'd be held responsible. Plus, considering we look like young aristocrats, anyone who messed with us would be risking an international problem.

That should be very effective in stopping trouble before it happens. No low-ranking aristocrat, or even a local lord, would want to take on that much risk.

Perfect!

The rest of our items were things like dried and half-dried fish, and the higher-ups likely wouldn't be interested in that stuff, even though there were probably some aristocrats who liked them. Our products were really tasty, after all.

We intended to keep the fact that we sold spices and other luxury products to retailers, eateries, taverns, and other such common folk a secret. There was even a clause in our contract with the three trading companies we were dealing with detailing our need for anonymity.

Of course, we hadn't told Mine and Aral either. We intended to go on as peculiar kids who made a decent living doing business with commoners. People would know that we're surprisingly savvy and put-together, with powerful people at our backs, deterring others from messing with us.

Reiko was on the same page as me, so we decided to keep things as-is for now.

Then, after that...

"What do you wanna do about stage two?" I asked.

"Hmm... I guess we should just slowly climb our way up. It's not like we're running against the clock here..."

She had a point...

One possible issue was that someone might ask, "Hey, the sisters at that house don't look like they've aged at all, do they?" and think we're vampires. I mean, it wouldn't be quite so bad if they decided to drive the monsters away, but we couldn't have people going on a hunt in search of immortality. After all, it's not like we can create spawn or anything.

"I guess we'll have to compromise somewhere..."

"We could make a defense outpost in case things go south... One that comes with an escape route. It needs to be easy to keep hidden, difficult for powerful people to muscle their way in, inaccessible to assassins and spies, and highly defensible, which means..."

"An island..."

Yes, if we got our hands on a decently-sized island, we could defend it with ease. We wouldn't have to worry about intruders from the air or sea for quite some time, so we would just need to keep an eye out for ships, which were easy enough to find and sink.

The most important thing about living out in the middle of the ocean was securing a water source, but that shouldn't be a problem as long as the island itself was decently sized. If it came down to it, we had water magic, "water-like potions," seawater desalination devices, water filters, and other such potion containers to deal with that issue.

Then again, it wasn't as if we wanted to live on a deserted island hundreds of miles away from land. We could just make our base on some island that was less than an hour away from land via boat, then live on the mainland coast for the most part. Then we'd only need to flee to the island whenever things went south. We had no shortage of water, food, or medicine; we had access to all the seafood we wanted; and we could just sink any ship that came our way.

We could spend years... no, decades cooped up in there.

"Well, we could just move to some distant country instead of going through all that..."

"Yeah, that goes without saying..."

Yes, the world was a big place, and information had a tendency to spread slowly and without accuracy. That was even more the case when the source of that information was farther away. At least, that's how it was for this continent, but who knew if people even spoke the same language in other places. Not that language barriers were a problem for *us*, thanks to Celes.

"Well, that's that!"

"Yup!"

I didn't really know what that meant, but that was indeed that. We had implemented sturdy infrastructure for our intended lifestyle, which would keep others from suspecting us. Our relationship with the local lord was pretty good, and we were friends with the authorities too. That was partially because they worked under the local lord, but we had been delivering gifts to the guard posts, and they were aware that we were the ones making the dried goods that they had been snacking on at the taverns.

We also laid down a bunch of groundwork to get the local city folk on our side, which included the guards and the hunters. Many of them had wives and children, after all, and they would tell their husbands and fathers about rumors they had been hearing.

Yes, they would spread the word about the two girls who were seemingly of high status and had bought the former orphanage with their own money, working hard while taking care of children that had nowhere to go. It was no wonder that average citizens would want to rush over and help if we were getting harassed by some punks.

Yes, we're invincible! Mua ha ha ha...

"Then we'll keep things as-is for now and wait for Little Silver to get popular enough to reach the big businesses and aristocrats. Once we get their support, we can take it easy as a small-scale manufacturer and hope the royal capital doesn't catch wind of us."

"Yeah, agreed. I'd like to enjoy the slow life I've always dreamed of and take it easy for

a while too," Reiko agreed.

What, she lived to be over ninety and she had never taken it easy?! And come to think of it, between making all the dried and smoked goods, stocking fish, working the fields, and making craft products, we had been working pretty hard...

I mean, we were doing it old-school instead of using big agricultural machinery, but... Could this be considered the slow life too?

CHAPTER 55

MINE

"Now, do as you're told and work hard, okay? Hehehe. I'll leave them in your care, sir!"

With that, he pushed me toward the man in front of us. The man who had said he wanted to take me in as a foster child... There had been several other kids who had been picked up as foster children before me, but that had only happened once a year or so.

That was no surprise. Disease, accidents, war, robbers, etc... People died for many reasons, and there were more and more orphans each and every day. For every couple who wanted a child, they had a sibling, relative, or friend who had passed away, leaving behind their own orphans. There were also kids who had lost both parents, or who had one remaining parent who was in no state to take care of a child.

That was why it was standard practice for people to take in children from a family they knew, and taking in a complete stranger's child from an orphanage was quite rare. It made sense. You could spend many long years taking care of an orphan, only for someone claiming to be the child's parent, whether true or not, to barge in and claim they wanted their child back to have someone to take care of them after they retired. Then they could take them away by force or demand money.

But there were some people, albeit rare ones, who wanted to take in the orphans of strangers. In these cases, they were put through a background check, took in the child once they passed, and received occasional check-ins to make sure the child was doing fine.

That is, until about six months ago.

Half a year ago, "Daddy," who had invested his own money to build the orphanage and spent decades running it, had reluctantly retired, and things changed immediately once his successor had taken over. Orphans were taken away as foster children once every three to four months, and new kids came in right away as if to fill their spots.

For some reason, the kids were taken to other countries rather than staying locally.

Each country had their own orphanages, and there were plenty of children who couldn't even get into them. So why did these people go all the way to another country to foster these children?

This question was on everyone's mind, but it wasn't as if anything could be done about it. Even when we asked the adults, they just laughed and said, "You must be jealous of those kids who got adopted."

I was eight years old when my turn came, and I was taken in as a foster child by a mid-sized merchant house. Yes, I was supposed to be their foster child, but when I arrived at their shop, it wasn't life as a merchant's daughter that awaited me. I was forced to work from early morning to late at night for no pay as an employee... no, a slave.

This wasn't what I had signed up for. I was supposed to be welcomed as a daughter. I was told that the merchant had passed the evaluation conducted by the orphanage. But for some reason, the paperwork claimed I was a live-in servant who had been paid upfront for fifty years of work, making me effectively their slave. It must have been some kind of a trick.

Yes, I believed that "Uncle," the individual who had taken over after Daddy, wasn't used to running an orphanage, and he had been deceived by these people because of his lack of experience. There were far fewer orphans to keep track of when Daddy was running things, so the criteria for the evaluations must have gotten more lax.

That was why I had assessed my situation, gathered the necessary information I needed to get back to the orphanage, then spent nearly a year secretly saving up the necessary travel expenses. Since I wasn't getting paid, I had to save what few tips I got from customers and the coins I picked up off the streets. It was hard work saving up enough to buy even a few days worth of hard bread.

I would camp outside at night. I wouldn't need too much money as long as I ate the plants and nuts I found as I walked through the forest. And of course, I intended to sneak into the shop before I left so I could fill up my waterskin and take as much food and anything I could pawn off.

That's theft? No, it's actually really cheap if you consider it as wages for an entire year. Besides, I was escaping the home of a criminal who had lied to illegally buy me as a slave, so it was unlikely that anyone would try to put me on trial. It was no problem, really.

And so, by the time I had finished my preparations, I was already nine years old and starting to feel like I was in danger. Yes... in "that" sense. Around that time, a six-year-old boy was brought in from a different orphanage from the one I had come from. As a so-called foster child, that is.

Of course, he was forced to work like a slave without compensation, just like me. My "seniors," who had been purchased before me, just went through each day listlessly as if they had already given up. But this boy was so much like Jessie, a kid who had grown attached to me back at the orphanage, and I could see he hadn't been tainted with despair yet. Although he acted obedient to the master on the surface, he had also grown attached to me for some reason.

I decided to change my plans and bring him with me. My rate of travel would slow down a bit, and my food consumption would double, but it was no big deal.

So, I waited for that fateful day...

"Wake up, Aral..." I whispered to the young boy as he blinked his sleepy eyes.

"Nn..."

"I'm getting out of here... Wanna come with me?"

Aral was a clever kid. The drowsiness immediately vanished as his eyes widened, then he responded quietly but firmly, "Yeah! I'll go anywhere with you!"

"Good! All right, then let's get started."

I knew where the waterskins, non-perishable food, and petty cash were all kept. It wasn't as if I hadn't been paying any attention during the year I was working here.

I began stuffing whatever I could into my bag. I had already calculated how much I could carry on my own and decided on how much of each item I needed. After adding Aral's consumption into the equation, I quickly got to work.

As for money, silver and gold were all kept in the safe, but iron and copper coins were kept in the desk as petty cash, and that was only secured with a simple lock. They weren't worth much, after all. I could open it with ease if I wanted.

This wasn't "stealing." I was just taking a small portion of the wages I was owed from the year I had worked here. The rest of what I was owed would be paid out in another form...

Oh yes, he'll pay.

All the deeds for big, important transactions were kept in the safe, but the smaller transactions, day-to-day documents, and notes that weren't regarding financial transactions, like schedules for certain deals... those were all kept in the desk.

I shoved them all into my bag. I wasn't going to haul them around with me for the whole trip; actually, I planned on dumping them in the nearby river, so I just needed to carry them for a little bit. Yes, I needed to cause confusion and distract as many people as I could from coming after us.

Then...

I quietly undid the inside lock, went outside, and placed a piece of paper I had prepared beforehand onto the door. Daddy and my mommies had taught me how to read and write back at the orphanage.

With my awkward handwriting, I had poured my heart out and written about how we had been taken in as foster children but treated like slaves. I then detailed the shady business practices employed by this shop, how they avoided paying taxes, double-priced their goods, counterfeited and rewrote deeds, and more.

I had learned about commercial transactions, taxes, and accounting at the orphanage. Rather, I learned how to help Daddy when his eyes started going bad and he was having trouble managing his accounts. I was already handling the orphanage's books about a year before he had retired.

But here, I pretended not to know anything. The owner of the trading company and his clerks spoke openly about their illegal acts around me, assuming I didn't understand any of it.

"Listen up, Mine. Many people act as if they're more capable than they really are. When you do that, you'll only disappoint others when they find out the truth. But if no one expects anything of you, they'll be in for a pleasant surprise when they see you're actually skilled. And above all... when someone underestimates you and lets their guard down, it becomes easier for you to do what you need to do."

Daddy had taught me that. He also told me that if anyone tricked me or took something from me, I need to make them lose more than they had gained from doing so. Otherwise, they would just move on to another target.

That's why I had to make sure they didn't just fail to make a profit from messing with the orphans, but that they would suffer extreme losses. If I just took all this hardship without doing anything, it wouldn't just be a loss for myself, but for all the other people the bad guys would take advantage of after getting away with their crimes.

There were many other things that he had taught me.

"If it comes down to it, take your enemy down with you. That way, you can at least protect all the people who could have also become victims."

"Hurt the enemy as much as you can, so they have no room to mess with you."

"Use your anger to fuel your aggression! It will grant you unstoppable power..."

"One who has nothing to lose is invincible!"

What was Daddy doing before he started an orphanage, anyway...? And how did he get the funds to get it running?

Setting that aside, his way of thinking was probably correct. So I would do as he said.

"Okay, time to escape!"

I put up copies of my account on the door of the commerce and industry guild, the public information board at the plaza, and several other locations, then we fled the city. It wasn't as if this city was surrounded by walls or anything, so we were able to get out without any issues.

All I had to do now was head toward my old home, the orphanage, along with Aral. It was going to take days, or even weeks. We may be forced to drink mud water and eat plants along the way. But I was going home. No matter what.

I was going to go back to the orphanage where all my friends were...

So why was I getting stared down by a dagger-wielding lady with the eyes of a murderer who had killed dozens of people, and getting a weapon that was clearly more deadly

than a bow pointed at me...?

“Eek!!!” Aral and I leapt back instinctively and fell on our butts.

“D-Don’t kill us!”

At the time, we still had no idea that this would be the beginning of our glory days...

Ding, ding...

The bell at the hunter’s guild rang every time the door opened. The hunters and guild members all turned to me at once, but I walked right up to the reception desk, unfazed.

“...The mercenary guild is next door”

Shaddap! I’m not a serial killer, damn it!

“I’m not here to take on any orders! I have a request myself! And I’m not here to ask for anyone to get assassinated!”

“M-My apologies!”

How rude can you get?!

“This is my request.”

This wasn’t the first time I had made a request to the guild... but the last one had been over seventy years ago, in a foreign country. So, the method and standard rates for putting in such a request could be drastically different this time around.

“Yes, you seem to have all the necessities in order, and there are no regulatory violations. Your request can be processed. However, it seems the offered reward is left blank...”

Yes, I couldn’t just make up a number there.

“What would be the standard market price?” I asked.

I discussed it with the reception lady and decided on an adequate fee, after which my order was successfully posted. That mostly consisted of them just writing the details down in a notebook, then putting the form up on the board.

Yes, this too was a part of the process of integrating myself with the local community. Was the local lord's army the most powerful force in this city? Or maybe the guards? No. It was the hunter's guild.

There wasn't really a strict hierarchy, but the hunters did follow orders that came from the guild's higher-ups. As long as the orders didn't put their lives in danger or go against their interests, that is. If all of the guild members bared their teeth, their collective power surpassed even that of the local lord's army and the city guards.

Being a hunter was a common profession, so their numbers were massive if you included their lower-ranking members. On one hand, hunters went through actual combat and put their lives on the line against bandits and the like every day. On the other hand, the lord's soldiers and guards trained each day, but they had no experience killing anyone in this peaceful time without any wars.

If it came down to a pitched battle on flat, empty plains, the soldiers might be stronger. But who would win in an urban environment, where there were ambushes, sniping with bows and arrows, and terrorist and guerrilla tactics? Well, it wasn't as if I wanted to make the two forces fight each other. I simply wanted the hunter's guild on my side, just in case.

Consider a hypothetical conflict: On one hand, we were cute little girls who regularly brought in good work for the hunters. On the other hand, our opponents were some punks from who knows where. The average person might usually ignore a quarrel between random strangers on the streets, but would the hunters decide to step in on our behalf in that situation?

Yeah, I'm pretty sure they would!

I had already planned on putting in a request for the guild anyway, because I wanted to start stocking some meat. Not just for us to eat, but to make products out of it. Like jerky and smoked meat, for example...

Taverns and eateries would make their own simmered and grilled dishes, so it would have only made sense for us to go that route if we were going to sell those items at

food stalls or something. It was better for us to make products that took time and effort to make, lasted a while, and were portable.

If I had set Reiko loose in the mountains, she could probably hunt a bunch of stuff with her magic. But I had decided against that idea! No, instead I would kill two birds with one stone by asking the hunter's guild to bring us some beast meat.

The request was as follows:

Bring back some beast meat for consumption.

Targets: Horn rabbits, deer, boars, bears, orcs, etc. Turn in the carcasses intact without dressing them. However, you are to bleed the carcass before delivery.

Duration/Volume: Indefinite. However, the order quantity is to be adjusted at the reception desk.

Also, I would like to request lessons on skinning and dressing for a separate fee. The lessons would be only for the first few times for each type of prey.

The part about adjusting the quantity at the reception desk was to avoid getting too many of the same type of prey at once. I had already written out a list with the quantities and types of meat we were interested in buying for the receptionist.

I had also made arrangements so that when a hunter went to the reception desk to take on our request, the receptionist would give instructions based on the current order, and when the deliveries exceeded my preset order number, the request would be temporarily removed from the board. They would also need to check if I had already gone through the dressing lessons too.

Also, I had specified a window of time for when the prey would need to be delivered. I wouldn't be able to take the lessons on dressing carcasses if I was too busy at the time, after all and I didn't want them to deliver the carcasses when I wasn't home. It was a lot of extra work for the receptionist, so she ended up charging me extra.

Damn it!

I had set the reward a little higher than the market price. Most people should figure out that I was trying to teach the orphans how to dress animals based on the contents of the request. The perceptive ones should also be able to figure out that this meant

we were thinking of adding processed meat products to our lineup.

We would have just bought meat at a butcher if we were just planning on eating it ourselves. Guilds didn't do retail sales, after all. Not only were we buying the entire carcass, including the parts you'd normally throw away, we were going out of our way to learn how to dress them, so there was only one obvious answer.

I was relatively well-known around here, so hunters began gathering around the board and I quickly made myself scarce. There may have been immediate takers if I stuck around long enough, but I decided to leave for now. I didn't want to get in the way of the hunters discussing the job I had posted, and it would have been harder for them to talk to the receptionist if I was still around.

And so, I was outta there. It wasn't as if I was in a hurry anyway. Unlike a posting for a bodyguard, there was no need for the contractor to personally meet up with the client. Whether the contractor was up for the task was for the receptionist to decide, so I was just going to wait for the deliveries and the lessons I had asked for.

It was a bit of a pain not knowing when they would come, but there was no way around that. When would someone accept my request? When would the prey be hunted? When would the contractor decide to return from the hunt? Would they deliver immediately after coming back? Would they have a meal and drink first? Or would they come over the next morning?

There were far too many uncertainties, so it wasn't as if we could decide on the time of delivery beforehand. The only way for us to do it properly was to determine a delivery window and make sure everyone was home during that time. Fortunately, Reiko or I could handle the purchasing and preservation once we got through several dressing lessons, so we intended to change the delivery window once that had happened.

"Excuse me!"

Huh? Who's that at the door...?

I wondered why they hadn't used the door knocker instead of calling out. I figured it must be a hunter who had accepted my request.

“Coming!”

I rushed to the entrance, and a group of four people who seemed to be hunters was waiting there, as expected. They were all male, probably around twenty years old or so, maybe seventeen or eighteen on the low end. That was in accordance with this world’s standards, of course, and I would have assumed they were in their late twenties if this had been Japan. Locally, they were practically old men already.

“We’re here to deliver what you’ve requested. And to explain how to dress it...”

“Very well. Thank you for taking the order. And the prey...?”

I could see that they each had a bag slung over their shoulder. Which meant...

“We brought eight horn rabbits.”

I thought so... If they had caught a big one, they would be carrying the carcass differently. Considering they were each carrying a bag, it had to be several little ones. Finally, since I hadn’t ordered any birds this time around, that naturally meant they had to be horn rabbits.

The objective was to get meat, so goblins and kobolds weren’t an option. There were also deer, boars, bears, orcs, and ogres, but it was hard to find normal, non-monstrous deer or boars, and orcs, bears, and ogres were probably a bit much for four young hunters to handle.

I mean, they might have been able to pull it off, but if there was even a ten percent chance of someone getting hurt, one of them would probably have been seriously injured after taking on ten jobs. Not only would an injury reduce the team’s fighting abilities as a whole, but the injured individual would drag everyone else down... and it’d be game over.

So, naturally, they would only take on jobs that they could complete without serious risk of being hurt. For this party, that meant they wouldn’t be hunting any orcs, but goblins, kobolds, and horn rabbits instead.

Were they cowards? No, they would surely be skilled enough to hunt orcs in a few years, then bears and ogres after that. However, their colleagues of a similar age who were hunting orcs now would probably end up in that orc’s belly.

The world was a cruel place for fools, and fools would never even get a chance to learn and grow from their mistakes. That was just how the world worked...

"Please follow me, then... Get ready, everyone! We're dressing eight horn rabbits!"

"Okay!" Reiko and the others replied from the back.

They would likely make their way around from the inside, so I led the hunters around the exterior of the building. I wasn't about to let them walk through the house carrying those blood-soaked bags over their shoulders! We had a no-shoe policy in the traditional Japanese fashion, after all...

We went around the back to the area we had designated for the task, where I had also set up a water supply. Though, that said, all I had done was build a two-meter platform, place a giant barrel with water on it, then connect pipes leading here to the kitchen and the bathroom, and then attached some faucets at the ends.

The water supply? I had built a very delicate water wheel that spun around lightly in a nearby stream and added a drainpipe for the water to flow through. It didn't pump much water, but it was working constantly, so the small amount that it provided was enough. It was just the four of us using it, and the barrel serving as a reservoir was huge.

Of course, even that was just for looks. Any water that might overflow when the barrel got full would go down the drain, but the water wasn't actually going into the barrel to be used. The barrel had been built with a double-layered design. When the amount of water in the "actual" storage section fell below a certain level, a warning light in the house would turn on, and the "potion that's almost exactly the same as water" would be refilled by Reiko's water magic.

This should come as no surprise. Even though it had gone through a filtration system, I couldn't bring myself to drink wastewater or water that came from a stream that branched off from a river where animals bathed. Sure, I could use potions to heal us if we got sick, but still... If we had to leave the kids for an extended period, we could switch over to a mechanism that used a lever to refill the water in the barrel from the waterwheel.

Mine and Aral were already ready to go. They had already changed into their work clothes and laid out a set of knives in preparation. They were the only ones learning

how to cut the carcasses apart.

Reiko and I didn't need to learn... right? It wasn't like we were planning on making a living out of butchery, and we could always remove the skin, blood, and guts in a second using the Item Box. This was solely for training Mine and Aral in a new skill, and not for the sake of myself or Reiko.

"Okay, please begin."

"What...?" The hunters stared blankly for some reason.

"Oh, it's just... you want us to teach these little kids, and not you two?"

Well, come to think of it, that was a perfectly natural response...

"That's right. They're our employees, you see..."

"O-Oh..."

They didn't seem to realize that this wasn't an orphanage, Reiko and I weren't caretakers, and Mine and Aral weren't helpless children to be coddled. They were working and earning money for themselves already, and they would do the tasks that we assigned. They were getting this lesson for free, after all, as part of their development for the future. That was all.

"Okay, we'll show you how it's done, so watch close... wait, what's with your tools?! You have a whole array of sharp knives and tools I've never even seen before. And what's that thin tube with water coming out of it...?"

Yup, I had prepared some very high-quality tools.

"Let me see that. Whoa, that's sharp! You idiot, dull blades are dangerous because you have to put more strength into using them, but they're just as dangerous when they're too sharp! Besides, you'll cut right through the hide while skinning the carcass if it's this sharp! Haven't you heard of moderation?"

Huh, his tone was so polite earlier, but he had suddenly become so rude... Or, rather, it seemed he was scolding the kids for their own good.

"All right, I'll just let you borrow mine for today. Hey, you ladies go to a cutler, explain

what you need, and have them pick something out for you. Take these kids with you so they can check their size and grip strength, and the owner there should take care of the rest. Sheesh..."

Actually, I had made that knife. There was some potion inside the hilt and everything. Yup, I had made it with the same method I used when I created Exgram for Francette, though it obviously didn't sever things at the sub-atomic level or come with any supersonic vibration functions. I still made them extremely sharp, though, not realizing that it wasn't necessarily best to make them as sharp as possible.

"Here we go. Watch closely. First, we cut off the head. If you don't, the horn will get in the way for the rest of the rest of the process, and amateurs tend to stab themselves with it by accident. There are some idiots who get too focused on where they're cutting and stab their own stomach with the horn when they lean into the table."

That was a good point. It certainly made sense to cut the head off first when you put it that way. Plus, there were supposedly all sorts of uses for the horn itself. We probably couldn't make much money that way, so we'd leave that for other people and find our profits elsewhere.

"You place the blade here, then you put a little oomph into it all at once..."

The hunter deftly skinned the hide, removed the innards, and dressed the meat.

"We brought back the carcasses intact because that was one of the conditions this time, but we'd usually let out the blood, take out the guts, then chill the meat in a nearby pond or stream right after the kill. It would go bad quicker and taste worse if we didn't. Oh, but we still let out the blood on the spot. The meat would've degraded otherwise..."

"Ah, that's fine. If you could just simulate how the bloodletting is done..."

Just pointing at the carcass and explaining the method was good enough; moreover, I had written in the request form that I wanted them to let the blood out on the spot, so that was fine.

The hunter dressed another carcass and handed a knife to Mine.

"Here, now you try."

“What...?”

Mine froze in place for a moment, but her resolve quickly overcame her hesitation. She had decided to make it through life with her own abilities, and she would be the one who protected Aral. She grasped the knife, which was slightly too big for her hand, then faced the three horn rabbits on the table.

Mine’s concentration ran out after she finished dressing her fourth carcass, so I had the hunter handle the two remaining ones, and today’s training came to an end afterward. Aral ended up just watching as Mine practiced, but Mine could always teach him how to do it later.

And then...

“It was only the one person who gave the lesson, but I guess we have to pay all four of you, huh...”

The three who were “just standing around and doing nothing” looked rather alarmed by my comment. I was only kidding, of course. Mine’s head would have exploded if all four of them tried to teach her at once, and it was the party of four that had accepted the request. I doubted just one of them could have hunted eight horn rabbits, either.

“Kidding, kidding!” I assured them, and the hunters laughed awkwardly. I may look like just a little girl, but I did have some common sense.

I had to consider just how much this request was for the hunters. Horn rabbits could be sold at the guild for two silver coins each. Meanwhile, we were paying them three silver coins each. Plus, the guild got a commission from us for any completed requests, so they received achievement points for contributing to the guild in that way. It made sense that they would go through us rather than selling their spoils directly to the guild.

It was a win for us too, since we received materials like animal skin and horns, and we could put in a little research to see if they had any other uses. The butcher in the city sold meat exclusively, but there were specific traders that purchased the other parts like horns and pelts.

One animal could be sold for about three silver coins, so eight of them came to a total of twenty-four silver coins. That was about 24,000 yen... It was a bit low for a day’s

work between four men... Of course, maybe they also made some extra income from hunting goblins, kobolds, and other targets that we hadn't specified in our request, or from gathering herbs and wild plants along the way.

And even though they had only hunted some small fry this time, they might make some better coin on average if they hunted a deer or boar once every few days. They'd save a good amount of money if they cooked their own food too. Vegetables and fish were pretty cheap here, after all.

Besides, they got paid for the dressing lesson today, so maybe they had taken down a decent wage after all.

"Say, what are you going to do with the entrails?"

"Huh?"

"I was just wondering if we could have them, if you're throwing them away. We're pretty poor, so a hot pot using those organs is kind of a treat for us. Most people throw them out, though..."

That made sense. But...

"Are you really going to call yourselves poor in front of kids who were orphans not too long ago...?"

"Ah..."

The hunters looked a bit embarrassed. It wasn't as if I was trying to be mean...

"I was thinking of teaching them how to cook the innards today. Hmm..."

I thought about it, then decided to give them a little treat, considering they were the first ones who had taken up our request.

"We'll cook them ourselves, but how would you all like to have dinner with us? We'll be making dishes using ingredients other than just the innards, of course."

"Really?!"

They were at the most difficult part of their career as hunters, considering they

weren't quite ready to hunt orcs yet. I figured they could probably use a little help.

"Here we are!"

A short time later, a variety of dishes had laid out on the table, all cooked by Reiko and myself, with Mine and Aral observing. I planned on having Mine cook something when it was just the four of us, but I didn't want to put any unnecessary pressure on her or delay the dinner. We had to be quick for our guests today, so it was just me and Reiko handling the cooking this time around.

We made some horn rabbit innards hot pot, fried rabbit, horn rabbit teriyaki, rabbit stew, roasted rabbit, and more. We had cooked up some vegetables and seafood dishes as well.

Some of the dishes were just things I had taken out of the Item Box. For instance, the stew was just some premade stuff that I added seared horn rabbit to, then let simmer. The stew was already warm out of the box, so it didn't take long for the meat to cook all the way through.

"You're done already?! That was fast! And so many dishes..." the hunter said in disbelief. It would have taken a lot longer if I hadn't had the Item Box, that's for sure.

"Eat as much as you'd like. I have plenty of meat to practice processing into non-perishable food, and I'm sure we'll get even more as more hunters make deliveries, so we don't mind finishing off a few horn rabbits!"

Some of the hunters seemed hesitant about eating some of the goods they had been paid for, especially considering the food had been cooked by their client, but they soon dug right into their meal. The food did smell great, after all.

I used plenty of spices for the dishes that incorporated innards, and most commoners around here would definitely not be accustomed to the taste. In fact, it was unusual to use expensive spices on cooked innards in the first place. It made far more sense to use them generously on higher-quality luxury meals rather than using a tiny bit on a variety of dishes. That was why cooked innards using spices weren't even a thing around here in the first place.

That was no surprise. Even on Earth, they used to say that pepper was worth its weight in gold in the old days. Of course, that was just a saying to show how valuable it was, not something meant to be taken literally. That was why spices had been exempt from

my decision to refrain from using my powers to create stuff.

As an aside, the pepper I had used in my previous life was 168 yen for twenty grams.

Wait, oh no! I need to eat before all the food is gone!

It seemed these people didn't know any restraint...

Wait, Mine and Aral! Don't copy them and stuff yourselves like starving animals!



How had all the food disappeared before I ate my fill when there were only eight of us?! And why did Mine, Aral and Reiko have such satisfied looks on their faces?!

Is it just me? Am I the only one who didn't get to eat a full meal? Damn it!!!

“Thank you!”

Shut it! I'll sign the form confirming the delivery was completed, so get the hell outta here!

And so, the same process was repeated with orcs, boars, deer, and other carcasses as they were delivered, and Mine's skill in dressing them gradually increased.

Word went around that anyone who fulfilled our deliveries got treated to delicious food, so the receptionist complained that she had been swamped with candidates. I had no choice but to give her three pieces of dried fish and an experimental jerky product intended for the tavern's owner to shut her up. I instructed her to spread the word if she thought it tasted good, so I considered it a marketing expense, investment for the business, a bribe, a social expense, or what-have-you.

...Damn it!

Oh, and whenever Mine couldn't learn how to dress something in one try, I requested additional lessons, and I kept up the purchases so I could use the deliveries for experimentation and making products. The receptionist (the one I had bribed with dried goods and jerky) made adjustments to make sure I didn't get too many deliveries at once, so I wasn't worried about that. Plus, I did have the Item Box.

Little Silver had formally succeeded in creating and starting up a meat-processing division. As such, we started getting meat dishes on the table in addition to fish and vegetables. Mhm. Well, that said, we had already made meat dishes with stuff we had bought from the butcher.

There were two growing kids in the household, so I had already thought that part through.

What's that? There are four kids, you say?

Reiko and I aren't gonna grow any more than this. In terms of height, and in terms of breast size...

Wait, shaddap!

One day, as our prospects of starting our lines of processed meat products were looking brighter... I heard someone knock on the door and answered it to find two dirty-looking boys who looked about ten years old standing there.

"We're hungry..."

Where'd these weirdos come from?!

"Orphans?" I heard from behind me. As I stood there blankly, Reiko, Mine, and Aral also walked up to us.

"Please let us stay here..."

"Leave!"

"Huh?"

The pleas of the children, who seemed to be orphans, were immediately shot down... by Mine.

"Whaaaaat?!" Reiko and I shouted in perfect sync.

I mean, it would have been one thing if it had come from me or Reiko. It was hard to believe Mine, a former orphan, said that to another orphan who had come seeking help at the former orphanage. And she had been in that same position not too long ago! It all seemed a bit harsh.

Aral stayed silent, perhaps because he didn't fully grasp the situation. Or so I thought...

"Hurry up and leave!"

"Whaaaaat?!"

It was Aral who spoke up this time, his words full of malice as he practically spit them out.

"Wh-Wh-Why...? You two never acted like this before..."

Indeed, Mine and Aral weren't the type to drive others away out of fear of having more rivals around, or getting a smaller share of food, or anything like that.

"A-Are they from a rival orphanage or something?" Reiko blurted out, obviously just as shaken as I was.

A rival orphanage? What?

There was clearly something wrong with Mine and Aral's attitude...

"You two are from wealthy families, aren't you?! You think you could fool us with those pathetic disguises? What, you think we were born yesterday? Stop taking this industry lightly!"

Wh-Whaaaaat?! I mean, they completely fooled me! And I didn't realize being an orphan was an "industry"...

"Wh-Wha... We really are... Why do you think we're in disguise...? D-Do you have proof, then?!" the child who seemed to be the older of the two shot back at Mine, but...

"Why would we want to point out the flaws in your disguise?! Go back to whoever hired you and tell them that your disguise and acting were so bad that you got caught, and that this method won't ever work again!"

"Urgh..."

The older child looked frustrated, while the younger looked somewhat scared. They were probably going to be punished when they reported back about their failure, verbally and physically... And judging by the older one's reaction, it was obvious that Mine and Aral were right. So...

"You have three options right now. First, you tell us who hired you and testify in front of the guards. That, or you run away crying and become our enemies. And your last option..." My mouth curled into a grin. "Is to die right here and now..."

"Gyaaaaaa!!!"

Oops, they ran off. Seems like a bit of an overreaction...

“That was a bit much, Lady Kaoru...”

“That face just isn’t fair...”

Shaddap!

Mine and Aral were just mouthing off freely... Reiko? She was already gone. She was using her magic to tail the two visitors. We had just learned that we had enemies, and they had attempted a preemptive strike. Of course we weren’t just going to ignore them. Search and destroy. We would take a page out of Admiral Halsey’s book.

“...So, what made you realize they were imposters?”

“It was obvious at first glance, my lady!”

Mine’s wording was a bit rough earlier, but she was back to her usual self.

Not bad, Mine...

It seemed she was far more wily and cunning than I thought. Well, if you weren’t hard, you wouldn’t be alive, I guess... And if you couldn’t ever be gentle, you wouldn’t deserve to be alive. Did we have the right to be alive...?

Well, the Goddess Celes had allowed us to, which meant we did have the right to live in this world by definition. We pretty much had an A-grade license to compete in the race. And so, we would use this license to live in this world full-throttle!... Anyway.

“First, the way their clothes were torn up was completely unnatural. Orphans cherish their clothes, so they would be worn down naturally instead of forcefully ripped and cut like theirs were. Secondly, their clothes should have had a sour smell from getting wet while sifting through garbage and spoil, but they had obviously rubbed dirt into theirs instead. Third, their hair was too neat, as if they hadn’t been scratching at it from all the lice. Not to mention, their skin...”

“Okay, that’s enough! I got it!”

Mine had been in an orphanage, so I didn’t think she’d had to live like a vagabond... What a fool I was. It wasn’t as if she had been born in the orphanage, so of course she had to live out there before that. It goes without saying that some kids went into orphanages immediately after losing their parents, but not all of them. I had forgotten

how Emile and the others from the Eyes of the Goddess were living before I met them. And Mine had likely gone through the same thing...

"You've done well in seeing through the enemy's attempt at infiltration. I commend you, Mine and Aral!"

"Thank you!"

The two seemed glad that they had been able to help me. Yes, I had to give credit where it was due. I decided to reward them later somehow. For one, I would make tonight's dinner instead of having Mine practice. I could even be extra nice and give them some fruit cake for dessert... All I had to do now was wait for Reiko to return...

"So, what's the report?"

"I found out who the enemy is. It's one of the mid-sized companies that we didn't choose to do business with. Those two kids were chosen by one of their apprentices, and I saw them getting hit by the owner when they told him about their failure."

She used invisibility magic (though I'm not sure if she used light distortion or made light pass through her) to trail the kids with ease and enter their shop. Maybe someone with honed senses could have sensed her presence and shouted "Intruder!!!" like a scene from a movie, but there was no such person there.

"Hmm, I see..."

This was all within expectations, of course.

"The question is..." I began to muse.

"How do we make them pay for this?!" we yelled in unison.

It would have been meaningless to go through their shop's vault, like some chivalrous robber. We had to make sure the world knew these were idiots who got their just deserts, or it wouldn't have much of an effect in terms of PR... I mean, prevention. And so...

"What? An employee from the Merdis Trading Company tried to run away to Little Silver?"

"I heard Little Silver treats their workers well, but the employees at Merdis must have it real bad if they ran away from their workplace to go to a former orphanage..."

"And I heard that Little Silver's owner caught on why Merdis Trading Company's employees ran away, made them go back, and asked the owner to stop abusing their workers. She even submitted a formal request to the commerce and industry guild to ban excessive violence, abusive outbursts, and exploitation."

"I heard they were making their workers pay lodging fees, food fees, bathroom fees, and other exploitative charges. They even took off some of their workers' salaries as unsecured loans and put them in their own account books... Pretty awful stuff..."

"Yeah. That's no way to treat an apprentice..."

"Word is spreading around the city. People have been asking us many questions, and we confirmed that it's all true."

"Well done!"

Mine and Aral reported back after making deliveries to shops around the city. I had told them to gather as much intel as they could, even if their deliveries were somewhat delayed. Yes, all the rumors were true... At least, that's what everyone thought.

After that whole incident, I had gone out in front of the shop in question and started loudly reading the notice. It would have been pointless to just hand it to someone in the shop, after all, since they'd just have thrown it out. That was why I had read it at the top of my lungs right in front of their place of business. Over and over again.

Someone rushed out of the shop red-faced right away, but I rejected his pleas by pointing out that I, the owner of the business they had caused trouble for, had come over in person, so it was only right for their owner to come out and apologize to me in person. The owner didn't appear, of course, but the ruckus drew a big audience, so I had fulfilled my objective.

I had submitted a memorandum to the commerce and industry guild afterward and

delivered a detailed report of the entire incident to prominent businesses in the region. Merdis Trading Company's public image had gone into the toilet. Many of the shop owners probably realized the truth already: "*Merdis must have dressed their apprentices up as orphans and sent them to Little Silver to find out how they make their dried goods...*"

Though, in truth, they probably had no interest in such small-scale profits and were aiming for my spices instead. They may have bribed an employee from one of the three companies I did business with, or else they got that info from some other method.

Shops that purchased from us would obviously need to resell our products elsewhere, so many people already knew that those three businesses were buying up a whole bunch of spices for cheap. That meant that, even if those shops we were dealing with kept the whole deal a secret, there was no way for me to prevent their business partners from spilling the beans.

In fact, my whole plan was for this info to reach the aristocrats, so this was all still considered within expectations. Unfortunately for them, these shops didn't have the whole picture. Maybe they figured they could take our importation route away from us or they wanted to be business partner number four...

Anyway, the fact that Merdis Trading Company was trying to infiltrate an orphanage by sending their disguised employees quickly spread between merchants, who were quick to pick up on news, and rumors about the company abusing their employees so badly that they fled to another business for help began to spread around.

Well, it was us who spread those very rumors, through various means. You can accomplish a lot with some money, connections, and hunters.

But Merdis Trading Company couldn't deny those rumors. It was a fact that two of their employees had come to us seeking help, and Reiko had discovered their names by making herself invisible with magic. Besides, there were several witnesses who had seen the kids dressed as orphans and leaving the city in our direction. It wasn't as if they had visited us in the middle of the night, so they couldn't have walked from the center of the city to our place without being spotted by anyone.

Now, no one else would want to send fake orphans to our place ever again. Besides, we weren't even running an orphanage. It was a commercial company, plain and simple. We had no obligation to take in any orphans who visited us.

The local lord made us tax-exempt because he thought we were a non-profit organization? Well, that was completely on him for having that misconception. I hadn't told a single lie, and I had done everything I explained back then. I took in some orphans and put them to work. I was paying them more than the market rate too. My business was supporting orphans, just as I had claimed.

But that didn't mean my business was an orphanage, and that was that. We hadn't taken Mine and Aral in as orphans; we had hired them. Of course, it wasn't as if I hadn't considered the fact that Mine had lived here before and desperately struggled to get here while helping Aral.

Whether I wanted to help someone who fought tooth and nail to survive or someone who asked for handouts because they were miserable was completely up to me. *I* would be the one who decided how to use my own money, and the one who determined how I wanted to live.

CHAPTER 56

DARK CELES

“...You’re Kaoru, aren’t you?”

“Hm? Um... Yes...”

Someone had talked to me out of nowhere while I was out shopping. She was a pretty young girl...

If I recall correctly, Aral is six years old, and Mine is nine, I think? This kid looked to be about the same age as Mine, but those two had spent time living on the streets and in an orphanage, so they were a bit smaller than the average child. This one had well-maintained hair and skin, and simple but expensive-looking clothes, as if she came from a wealthy family, so maybe she was a bit younger than Mine. I would have walked on without taking notice if it had been some guy trying to pick up girls, a shady-looking merchant, or a stuffy old man, but she seemed to have some urgent business with me...

“I’m Leia. You will take care of me!”

“You’re a bossy one, aren’t you?!”



“So, Leia...”

“Call me Mistress Leia. And stand at attention when you address me, and preface it with, ‘Your pardon.’”

“Just what empire do you rule over?!”

“Just a joke...”

Some time later, I reflected on how there was nothing funny about it when I considered what she had ended up telling me... Yes, she blurted out the horrible truth just moments ago. That being...

“Well, I’m here to find out whether that newbie Celestine has been running things properly around here.”

And there it was... It seemed this newcomer was Celes’s colleague, or even a superior, or some sort of inspector or official. Well, it was clear to see that the physical appearance of these folks had nothing to do with their actual age.

This was bad. Very bad. I couldn’t cause any trouble for Celes, and I couldn’t have her boss reacting like, “You gave these primitive creatures such overpowered abilities? What were you thinking?!” because she might end up taking away Reiko’s and my powers.

This was bad. Reeally baaad!!!

“...Oh, and this is a secret inspection, so don’t tell Celestine about me, no matter what. That is, unless you’re not afraid of the penalty that awaits you otherwise.”

I nodded. What else could I do?!

“Celestine will sense my presence if I use my powers here, so I have to refrain from using them. So if I’m ever in trouble, you take care of it for me!”

I nodded. I mean, that made sense to me.

“For now, I want a place to stay, good food, and some... ‘money?’ Give me lots of that. I’m very interested in this so-called food, so don’t let me down for my first experience!”

I nod—

“Wait, I can’t go along with that!!!”

She’s like a wicked version of Celes! Yes, you could even say she’s Dark Celes!

“So, you have no intention of living with me?” I asked.

“Of course not! If I did, I wouldn’t be able to do whatever... I mean, Celestine would find me whenever she checked in on you!”

What was with that Freudian slip?! That was definitely what she really meant!

“...So you paid ten days worth of lodging fees at the best inn in the city, up-front, gave her the food you had saved in the Item Box, and handed her 30 gold coins?”

“Yeah...”

After listening to my report, Reiko thought about it for some time. Then...

“She’s lying.”

“Thought so!”

Yup. Celes’s job, or rather, her duty, was to prevent the accidental fusion of dimensions. There was little room for consideration about whether the native creatures here lived or died. In fact, Celes had a pretty twitchy trigger finger when it came to dishing out divine punishments just because someone got in the way of her work. Not to mention, Celes was considered relatively mild-mannered and lacked malice for the most part, and she was the type to usually have her head in the clouds.

In other words, their kind hardly ever cared about the native lower beings of this world, barring some special cases. They probably cared about us less than a human would care about an ant. That is, unless we did something to help them or had something they wanted.

So, even if she was here for some sort of inspection, she should only be interested in how Celes has been keeping an eye out for distortions and handling them. At the very

least, there was no way she was here to interact with the native creatures here, eat good food, or ask for money. Which means...

"She's just here to secretly have fun behind Celes's back!" we exclaimed together.

Their kind was intellectually mature beyond human imagination, so the concept of malice or hatred hardly ever applied to them. There were times when such emotions occurred in their offspring, which had their intellect and abilities lowered to our level, but they were so faint that it was hardly worth noting. The reason Celes was so liberal with bringing down divine punishment wasn't because she was emotional in that sense. It was merely because she really didn't think anything of human life.

Similarly, humans killed insects not with malice, but simply because they felt mildly annoyed. From Celes's point of view, I was a pet that she liked to take care of, and the people around me were like local strays who her pet cat had brought in. That was likely the extent of her feelings for me...

So that girl... or, that offspring of a highly advanced life-form that looked like a little girl... likely didn't feel much malice for me either. She had only decided to come to this place on a whim...

"...That's probably what that lower life form is thinking," Leia thought as she elegantly sipped some tea. She sat in a room in the most luxurious inn in the city and took a bite from some snacks that she had wangled from Kaoru.

"It's true that our cores don't feel such emotions, but we offspring have had our abilities lowered to their level in order to communicate with these lower lifeforms. As such, we do have a mild form of those emotions, simply in order to understand how they think. So we understand things like intrigue, schemes, trickery, and the thoughts and emotions that come with them... In order to supervise the region that she's in charge of, my core created a lower form that's practically equal to Celestine in capabilities, and then that lower self branched off again to create me as part of this plot. As such, I'll see this scheme through to carry out the will of my originator!"

Leia grinned with her teacup in her left hand and half-eaten snack in the other.

"I will outdo Celestine by gathering more detailed information on that Kaoru girl and report to Earth's manager (hallowed be his name) to gain his favor! Then his affection

for me will be greater than for Celestine or for my progenitor!"

Not only do I intend to come out on top of Celestine, but I would defy even my own progenitor! Such a villain I am! Ah, such wickedness, such dastardly machinations! I am the very embodiment of evil! I terrify even myself!

"Ha. Aha ha. Aha ha ha....."



A spiritually mature, divine overlord... This was the ultimate evil that its extremely inferior version could manage.

“I have run out of ‘money.’ I want more!”

That was the first thing out of Leia’s mouth when she showed up at my door.

“YOU’VE GOTTA BE KIDDING ME!!!” I shouted at her at the top of my lungs.

Yeah, I was pissed! I had paid upfront for a ten-night stay at the most expensive inn in the city (with breakfast and dinner) and handed her thirty gold coins (equivalent to three million Japanese yen) just five days ago!

“How did you run out so fast?!”

“...Who knows? Because I used it?” Leia said nonchalantly.

“Let me go! Let me punch this little!!!”

Reiko ignored me and held me back in a full nelson.

Let me slug her, damn it! Haah... Haah...



"Listen, Leia. Money is something that's not easy to acquire. You can't just turn a faucet and get unlimited amounts of it, you know?"

It wasn't her fault she didn't understand. That was why I decided to put in the effort to educate her. Then...

"I know. So hurry up and get some!"

"Aaaaaargh!!!"

"Now, now..."

Reiko put me in a full nelson again as I erupted in a fit of rage. Reiko didn't understand how useless Celes could be. That was why she respected her as the goddess who had granted us our reincarnations and our cheat powers. This also explained why Reiko had respect for this one as a goddess. But they didn't deserve even a shred of respect from me!

"Let me gooo! I need to punch her in the face!"

Despite her youthful appearance, she was probably millions or hundreds of millions of years old. That meant it wouldn't be child abuse if I did punch her. I could hit her to my heart's content!

"Haah... Haah..."

I finally calmed down. She may not have much common sense, but she probably wasn't evil or anything... Probably. Surely that was true. At least, I hoped so...

"Can you come with me for a sec? Mine, you too."

"Hm?"

"Yes, my lady!"

Leia and Mine followed me, and of course, Reiko and Aral came along too. Our destination was...

“What is this place?”

“The room where we process our dried goods,” I said in response to Leia’s question, but I wasn’t sure if she even knew what dried fish was.

“Mine, dry this for me.”

“What? Oh, yes!”

I pulled a fish out of the Item Box while pretending to reach into a cabinet, but no one seemed to question me. I mean, Reiko and Leia were a different story, but Mine and Aral should have at least questioned it somewhat.

As I considered this thought, Mine was already getting to work opening the fish up. Leia probably couldn’t understand why I was having them do this while everyone watched, but since her kind perceived time completely different from us, she probably could have stared all day without thinking much of it.

Of course, Mine was already used to the process, so she wouldn’t take much time handling just one fish. But just as Mine finished most of the prep work...

“Leia. That work that Mine just did is part of the process for making the dried goods we sell. We also need to stock the fish at the market and wash it. And after this, we need to rub in salt, marinate it, then dry it in a cool, dark place or in the sun, and go out into the city... Of course, we’ll need to find a buyer and work out a deal beforehand too,” I explained.

“And once we complete a sale after all that work, we only make about two silver coins after you subtract the cost of the fish and salt, along with other expenses. That’s about one-fifteen-thousandth of those thirty gold coins you spent in these past five days, not even counting the lodging fees I paid for,” I said, completing my explanation.

“...Huh?” Leia stared blankly.

“If we made thirty of these dried fish a day, that’s five hundred days of work. That’s about two years, with two days off each week. Say the average age of humans in this world is about fifty years...”

I reached out with my right hand, then pointed right at Leia with my pointed finger.

"In other words, you wasted the money that this girl spent one-twenty-fifth of her life to make in just five days! We might just be insignificant lower beings to you, but you threw away one-twenty-fifth of a life that was born into this world, doing the best they could!"

"What...?" Leia looked dumbfounded.



Yes, I was fully aware that I was being unreasonable. My math was completely sloppy, and the coins I gave her were actually sourced from the money I had made selling potions a long time ago. But if this girl was an entity similar to Celes... and like Celes, if she was an extremely inferior version of her core... there was a good chance I could sway her with enough momentum. Just like I did to Celes that one time...

Even if we were just lower lifeforms to them, they probably had some level of compassion for us. It would have been one thing if she was a distant, isolated entity, but if she had been reduced down to the same level as Celes... Then maybe she would at least feel for us as much as we would for an ant trying desperately to live...

“One-twenty-fifth... One-twenty-fifth of her entire lifespan... I wasted that much of this fragile being’s life in just five days because I decided to eat, drink, play, and fool around...”

Huh, it’s working better than I thought?

I figured it wouldn’t have resonated with her kind if I just told her the number of years, so I put it in terms of how much of her total lifespan was used. Maybe the way I phrased it as “one-twenty-fifth of her life” had a big impact on her, or she had compared the two years of a mere fifty-year lifespan to hundreds of millions in her own life. In any case, she seemed to be taking it hard, so mission accomplished. I just had to press the attack!

“Do you see now? Money is important in this world. Some people can obtain it easily, but most people can’t. And it’s not like having money will let you do whatever you want or guarantee happiness. Money is an important tool for seizing happiness. It can’t buy all happiness, but it can buy most forms of it...”

“It can!?” Reiko whispered urgently behind me, but I ignored her.

Mine was nodding in agreement. Yes, Mine knew firsthand how scary money could be, as well as how helpful it could be.

“Sorry.”

Oh? She’s awfully meek all of a sudden...

This was unexpected. Maybe this was my chance to take the orthodox approach.

“Leia, you lied about being here to supervise Celes, didn’t you?”

“Urgh...”

I knew it.

“No, it’s fine. If you’re not going to be *too much* trouble for us, no one can blame you for taking a break from such important and taxing work. You’ve been watching out for distortions for the safety of all the creatures and dimensions in your jurisdiction, right? You have every right to take a breather every now and then. Don’t worry about it!”

“Huh...? Oh, um, right...”

Hm? That wasn’t much of a clear answer...

“Leia, is the region you’re in charge of okay? If a distortion appears there...” Reiko asked worriedly, then...

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about that.”

Why did she sound so unconcerned?

“The self that’s at an equivalent level to the Celestine here is managing the region I’m in charge of even now. I’m just a lower-level form created by that self...”

“You’re at an even lower level than that head-in-the-clouds Celes?!”

That meant her intelligence had decreased so far that, not only did she lack knowledge or divine powers, but her thinking abilities and intellect were below even that of a normal human’s! No wonder she was so easy to convince...

“Well, thank you.”

I had asked the person at the inn to take care of Leia. Leia and I had decided that her backstory would be that she was the daughter of a noble house and was visiting to supervise us. She was supposed to be a willful aristocrat from a household that had favorable relations with mine, and had convinced her family to let her come here, since

she was envious of the way we were living our lives freely and wanted to go on adventures herself.

We didn't think too deeply about why Leia would be supervising us when she didn't even look old enough to be ten years old, while Reiko and I looked about fourteen or fifteen, and twelve, respectively. The person at the inn probably just figured aristocrats did strange things and let it slide.

Well, kids from noble households were supposed to be educated from a young age. There were precocious kids, mature kids, genius kids, and surprisingly responsible kids among them, so it wasn't too unusual.

I decided to spread a rumor that she had bodyguards who were constantly watching her from the shadows and prepared to cut down anyone who laid hands on her. I mean, things could have gotten real ugly if I didn't. Not just to this city, but the entire country, or maybe even the continent...

Even though Leia was far more benevolent and kind to the lower lifeforms than Celes was, and it was highly unlikely that Leia would ever be in any actual danger, she wouldn't show any mercy to someone who attacked her with obvious malice. There was absolutely no reason for her to do so.

Humans, too, crushed mosquitoes without hesitation or guilt when they got stung. That applied even to people who were kind by nature, and it wouldn't have been strange if they were to spray their surroundings with bug spray afterward, even if the other mosquitoes hadn't done anything. Though she might just laugh off an attack, since it was likely to be as weak as being batted as a kitten, and thus let it slide...

Also, by declaring that she had bodyguards watching over her, people could assume one of them used a steel wire if an attacker's head suddenly got lopped off...

"No they wouldn't!"

And they wouldn't question it.

Yeah, I'm just gonna ignore Reiko's comment.

A cheap inn, or even a normal inn, was too dangerous to stay in alone for a girl who both looked wealthy and about eight years old like Leia did. That was why I had decided to have her stay at the inn she had gone to first, where the employees, service, safety—

and of course, price—were top-tier, but I lowered the quality of her room to make it a bit easier on my wallet.

I had explained Leia's made-up backstory to the workers at the inn, and told them she was a ditz who had used up the funds she brought from our home country in just a few days. I also explained that I would be paying for her room directly and would give her a small allowance once a week.

Normally, an employee at a high-class inn wouldn't ever discuss a guest's private matters, but since this pertained to Leia's safety, they agreed to make a public statement about it. They didn't seem to like it, though, probably because they didn't want others to think they had loose lips when it came to their customers' affairs. That said, I was the one who had practically forced them to.

But that's okay! The people who stayed at this inn were all competent, so when they heard the rumors about Leia, they would understand that the inn made themselves look bad for her safety, and it would be a net positive for their reputation! Probably.

And so, word spread around that robbing Leia wasn't worth it, and in combination with the rumors about her secret bodyguards, it was unlikely that anyone would find the idea too appealing in the future. Many people probably already knew about Leia's wild spending habits from the past five days, and she would now be living a meager (by aristocratic standards) lifestyle with the allowance I supplied her from now on, so the story checked out.

And since Leia knew Celes checked in with me every once in a while, she should focus on enjoying her vacation for the most part and stay away from me. I hoped that the entities like the higher-level Leias would enjoy seeing this, since they were too advanced to enjoy such behavior themselves, like older sisters fondly watching their little sister do dumb things for fun.

They were giving their best effort for the sake of all of space and time, so they at least deserved that much.

"...Is probably what that lower life form is thinking," Leia said to herself.

"Though, it's true that Celes would catch on if I spent too much time with that girl, and I only want to enjoy conversing with 'him' about her antics rather than how I can

manipulate her to my whim. He would probably scold me if I told him about that part..." Leia mused as she munched on some snacks in her room at the inn. Perhaps it was a characteristic of their kind, but she had a tendency to talk to herself a lot.

In any case, it seemed Kaoru and company would get away without taking too much damage from this whole incident.

"...But I think I should get a little more of an allowance. I can still eat much more with this body, and food and snacks are quite an interesting experience. And why is it that the better-tasting food is more expensive? Is this some sort of cruel joke?! I should bring this up the next time she gives me my allowance..."

She had mastered the language of this country, but for some reason, she still hadn't mastered what people would consider common sense in this world. Expenses related to Leia were separate from Little Silver's finances and came from Kaoru's old assets, so it didn't affect things too much in that sense... Yet.

And Kaoru had assumed Leia would go back home after enjoying her stay for a little while... Despite the fact that she of all people should have known that Celes and her kind perceived time completely different compared to humans. Then again, Kaoru had misinterpreted Leia's reason for her stay in the first place, so this additional misconception wasn't too big of a deal...

"All right, the case of the mysterious visitor is now closed! Let's return to our mission!"

This phrase, "return to our mission," was one I had used a lot in my previous life. It was something I had picked up from some war movie, if I remembered correctly. I had probably watched it with my older brother on TV, or otherwise it was some video we rented.

"Roger that!"

"R-Raw-ja that?"

"Raw-jar that!"



Of course, Reiko knew all of the phrases and terms I used from my previous life, and Mine and Aral mimicked her response in a fluster. *So adorable...*

Things had gotten a bit chaotic with Leia's arrival, but Little Silver had made a good running start on creating the processed meat division after its processed fish division, and the accessories division, which handled things like handicrafts, were also doing well.

The issue was that the demand outpaced our supply. After all, our production was mainly handled by Mine, who was a nine-year-old girl, and Aral, a six-year-old boy. There would obviously be limits to how much we could produce at a time.

I mean, Reiko and I were obviously working too, but our work mainly involved external parties, like pitching products and new business developments... and it wasn't like we wanted to do the production-side stuff every day.

I wanted to live in leisure and gain just enough money that no one would get suspicious about how I lived. It wasn't as if I wanted to spend a fortune on alcohol and gambling, and the food Reiko and I made was better than what your average lower-class aristocrats were eating. Not only did we know advanced cooking techniques from Earth, but we used seasonings that I produced with my potion powers.

That's cheating? Who cares!

Though maybe without those spices and seasonings I created with my potion-making ability, we wouldn't stand a chance against the top-of-the-line ingredients that they used in noble households... In any case, we left the physical labor to our workers while Reiko and I did the easy work.

But that's no reason for criticism! That's what it means to run a business, right?

Besides, we were doing a public service by giving Mine and Aral work and teaching them skills. There wasn't a single lie in that submission form and petition I had sent to the local lord. Nope. Of course, I had to admit that Mine and Aral had a disproportionate workload on their end. I really had to do something about that...

The obvious answer was to hire more employees. A skilled entrepreneur would build a work area next to the former orphanage in order to increase production. However, there was one problem with that: We had far too many secrets to keep, and we were sure to get weirdos if we started taking applicants.

I mean, this was a business that a couple of wealthy aristocratic girls were running for fun. It just reeked of money. Not to mention, we had special connections for obtaining those spices. Every merchant and scoundrel who caught wind of it would be foaming at the mouth for an opportunity to get in on this. There would definitely be some unscrupulous people, or those applying on their boss's order, in the applicants we got.

Besides, it would defeat the whole purpose of this operation if we hired a bunch of people, then had to take on more work to pay for their salaries. We only worked so everyone could live happy lives and didn't want to take on risk or do anything we didn't want to. We'd make the big bucks with the other, private business, so no thanks.

I still had my old savings to pay for Leia's living expenses too. Though, it wasn't as if that was unlimited, so my emergency funds would only dwindle over time if this kept up. After all, I had only converted a portion of my fortune, because putting too much money into circulation at once would bring us some unwanted attention. Most of it was still in the old gold coins that were no longer being used.

I had to think of something...

CHAPTER 57

OPERATION HEADHUNTER

“...You wish to increase production?”

I had brought up the idea after our post-meal tea time. Mine thought about it for a while, then gave me her opinion.

“To be honest, it won’t be easy to increase production with how things are currently. We may be able to squeeze out an extra twenty percent or so if we really tried, but that would be pushing it...”

With that, Mine glanced over at Aral. She probably would have replied that she could do an extra twenty percent if it was just her, but she was concerned about putting that extra strain on the six-year-old Aral.

Knowing Mine, she probably felt ashamed about answering the way she did. She wasn’t supportive of increasing production because she cared about Aral, but I could tell she would have pushed herself for our sake out of a sense of obligation. But that was okay. It was completely fine.

“I know you two have been doing your best to maximize output during work hours, so I’m fully aware that you won’t be able to massively increase production as things are now. If you could, that would mean you haven’t been giving it your all until now. Of course I know that’s not the case. I’m not a fool, you know,” I said, and I could see Mine’s eyes watering up.

I didn’t want her to look at me with a fanatical look like the kids from The Eyes of the Goddess did. Even if we were like family, the only sort of hierarchical relationship between us would be one of employer and employee. There was no need for worship or rabid devotion. So...

“I’ve been thinking of hiring more employees, but I know we would get weirdos if I started taking applicants, so I’m thinking of picking people we want to hire and making them an offer. But it’s not like we have friends in this city, and we don’t know who to trust or who’s in whose pockets. So, question time: Who do you think we

should try to hire?"

Mine responded to my question right away. "Orphans!!!"

"Correct!"

Indeed, orphans wouldn't be connected with any wealthy or influential people, and all they wished for was a full stomach, a warm place to sleep... and to survive. That was all. But if I could provide those three things... I doubted any of them would ever betray me. Just like those kids in the Eyes of the Goddess...

"But this is what's left of the orphanage that got shut down, and the local lord made sure the orphans from back then went to proper homes, so I doubt he would just leave the kids that couldn't find homes out to dry, right?"

Reiko was right; this city was unusually supportive of orphans. Everyone was kind to Mine and Aral, too, and according to Mine, people had treated her relatively well even when she was an orphan...

That was why there hadn't been any homeless kids living by the riverbed or vagrant kids without any place to sleep in this city for a long time. Between the orphanage that used to be here, workplaces that offered live-in jobs for kids who were of age, and the occasional couple that wanted to foster a young child due to losing their own or because they had trouble birthing one, there was a good balance of supply and demand, for lack of a better phrase.

But obviously, things didn't go so smoothly in every city. Usually, most workplaces were already full of people who had connections there, and orphans were hardly ever offered jobs due to lack of trust. After all, they didn't have parents or siblings who could pay compensation for damages if something happened. They were probably afraid orphans would steal their money and run off.

In truth, it was far less likely for kids from orphanages to commit crimes compared to the average person. I mean, why would they throw it all away after finally putting themselves in a situation where they could work to eat their fill and sleep in a warm bed each night? Not to mention, they could laugh off hardships that most people would give up on and say, "This is heaven compared to my old life"...

And of course, there was one main reason they worked so hard: If they did anything that would make others lose trust in them, their orphanage would also get a bad

reputation, making it harder for the other kids to find jobs. They would disappoint all the people at the orphanage who had taken care of them and all the younger kids who had looked up to them.

Nothing was scarier from the perspective of a former orphan. That was why they were actually rather trustworthy. Unless you betrayed them first, that is.

“Are you going to go looking for orphanages in other cities then?”

“No, I can’t just bring kids over from other territories. They’re still part of that population, even if they’re orphans. They become a part of the workforce once they get to a certain age, and they’d be an important asset if some sort of crisis happened...”

I couldn’t agree with Reiko’s idea. Bringing people from other regions was asking for trouble already, but I didn’t have that much reach in the first place. I might have helped people that I happened to meet along the way or acted like a pseudo-goddess by sharing happiness with others, but I wouldn’t go out of my way to some distant land to help a bunch of kids I didn’t know.

There was no way I could help every orphan in this country, or every country in this world. It was better to just not attempt to do the impossible or to do things halfway.

“What are you going to do then? The kids who were here when this place was still an orphanage found places to be and are living normal lives, right? We can’t just bring them back here. That much is obvious. Doing such a thing would cause trouble for the homes that took those kids in, and it would be a slight to the local lord and everyone who had put effort into getting those orphans into homes. Not to mention, it would hurt Little Silver’s reputation as well.”

“That’s why we’re bringing them back, starting with the kids we *can* bring back, from places where we can remove them from without issues.”

“Ah...”

That was enough of a hint for Reiko to figure it out. We would “bring them back.” That meant they used to live here once. I was talking about the cases where there wouldn’t be any problem for the kids themselves or the people at their workplace, or cases where it didn’t matter if we caused trouble for them. In other words...

“Mine, you said the person running the orphanage changed about six months before

you were sold, right? You escaped about a year after you were sold, then it took some time for you to get here... And it was about half a year ago that the bad guy who took over this place was caught. In other words, there was about a year or so during which the other kids who were sold off went through the same things you did."

"What...?"

Mine's reaction wasn't exactly out of surprise, nor did she fail to realize what I had just pointed out. She was asking if those kids could truly be saved; it was a voice of disbelief, but she wanted to trust in that faint light of hope I had just offered.

She had to know. She knew, but there was nothing she could do about it, and it would have only weighed on our hearts if she had mentioned it to us. That was why she had kept silent. In truth, she wanted to shout from the bottom of her heart: "Please save my friends; they went through the same pain as me!"

All right.

They'd be employees who we could bring here without causing any issues. The only ones who would have an issue with it were bad guys, and they deserved whatever consequence came to them. There was no need to concern myself about that. The local lord would likely take my side, too, and the kids that I saved would likely work as hard as they could and never even think to betray me.

I could save children and take down a bunch of scumbags. Maybe being a "goddess" or "angel" once in a while wouldn't be so bad... At least, under a pseudonym, and only part-time. Being a full-time, official goddess or angel was a bit too much. I didn't mind doing it in my free time, though.

A long time ago, I had made a decision when I met everyone from the Eyes of the Goddess. I would live free. I would live in the way *I* wished. And I would use my potion powers to bless the people, just a little bit. Excluding the bad guys, of course.

It wasn't that I was doing this for Mine. It was simply that Mine, the other kids, and my objectives all lined up. That was all. I had told the local lord that Little Silver is an organization that provides support for orphans so they can gain independence. I had said so right on the petition to apply for tax-exempt status. Everyone would thus behold as we did that very thing.

"All right! Little Silver, begin Operation Headhunter!"

"So, you were sold in the country northwest across the sea from here, right? We'll probably have to travel by land, then..." I muttered to myself, then Reiko said from beside me...

"The recommended route is to go by land. You might even call it the rec-route for recruits."

Shaddap!

In any case, I asked Mine about the details of when she had been sold off and how her life had been since. Of course, she didn't know she had been sold at the time; she thought she was being accepted into a rich household as a foster child. Even when she had realized just what her situation was, she still assumed that the new director of the orphanage had been tricked and didn't know what was going on, right up until I told her everything...

"Wha—?! So he... that bastard is the root of all this! He'll pay for this..."

"He was already caught and sentenced a long time ago!"

In any case, I finished questioning Mine without any issues. Though, that went without saying, since she was being completely cooperative.

And so, I was off to my next stop to gather information. Yes, the local lord's place. I needed him to show me the records from when they investigated the new owner, and I had to make sure we were on the same page.

The local lord had caught and punished the owner of the orphanage, but that was all he was able to do. I couldn't blame him, though. It wasn't as if he had failed to do his work or accepted a bribe. The local lord couldn't dispatch an official to another country to conduct an investigation or detain and question foreign merchants. And of course, he couldn't seize those kids after they had been legally adopted and were living in another country.

After all, an orphanage from his own country had received payment and had done the paperwork for the foster children, and the documents had been signed by his own subordinate. If he had tried making a move on someone from another country, they could have marched right over the royal palace and registered a complaint, putting his position as a lord in risk. There was nothing he could have done.

Yet... We weren't originally from his territory, or even this country. If there was any trouble, he could just claim we were foreign strangers.

Since the lord assumed we had a powerful noble house at our backs, he probably thought we had bodyguards and chaperones watching over us all the time. And not a fake guard like Leia's, but someone actually keeping an eye on things.

If we did something crazy and no one stopped us, that would implicitly mean that our watchers were fine with what we'd done, which would also hold true for our household. Since the local lord was a good person "for an aristocrat" and was considerate toward orphans, he would surely be willing to take this chance. It was a gamble, but one where he would be putting nothing at risk.

In any case, it was time for me to submit my petition.

I got approval for a meeting right away. When I had submitted the request for tax-exempt status, all I had to do was turn in a written petition; afterward, an emissary delivered me a letter containing the local lord's reply, and I never actually met him in person.

This time, though, the emissary had handed me an invitation rather than a letter. Yes, an "invitation," not a summons. That wasn't surprising, since he thought I was a noble girl from another country, so he was probably playing it safe. This wasn't something he could easily approve just from reading my plea, after all, so I had expected that he would want to meet in person.

So, I went to the local lord's manor at the specified time. Along with Reiko, that is. I could have just gone to talk to him alone, but I felt safer with Reiko at my back in case something went down. Compared to my potion powers, her unlimited magic was far more suited to situations where we were surrounded by enemies.

If we ended up in a scuffle with the local lord, it went without saying that we wouldn't be able to stay here. If that happened, we would have to take Mine and Aral and hightail it out of here. So, it was possible that we would need to make use of some magic. I had been made painfully aware of my potion power's limitations during that incident back then.

I had told Mine and Aral to hide in the underground room just in case. There was a

bathroom in there too, so no worries there. I had also instructed Mine to teach Aral all sorts of things, like how to read and write.

And so, a servant showed us inside. We greeted the local lord, then came the first words out of his mouth...

"I heard you've been selling exceptionally delicious dried seafood and jerky products. I'd like them delivered here too!"

Whaaaaat?!

...I mean, they *are* good. They were marinated in my potion sauce, then made with Reiko's processing methods. Then, the chemical reactions and dehydration condensed the umami, resulting in that indescribably tasty flavor. You can't get that kind of flavor from some fish or meat shop owner who doesn't know what they're doing!

Wait, that's not what I'm here to talk about!

"I-I see... It's an honor, my lord..." I replied without much enthusiasm.

"Ah, never mind the formalities! I don't have time for all that. Please, be at ease."

It seemed he wasn't the type who got hung up on social hierarchies and propriety. I used to talk to royals as equals, so if he insisted...

Poke, poke!

Yes, you don't have to poke me! I know not to be rude!

Sheesh, did Reiko think I was that stupid? Anyway...

"I will have some sent to you later, as you wish. If it suits your palate, we would be delighted to have you order them from the next batch on... However, we will be traveling for some time, so the next delivery will need to be after we return..."

"Oh? A trip, you say? Are you perhaps going home? How long will you be gone?"

It was the perfect segue. I had used relatively soft wording in the petition, and claimed that I would be checking up on the current status of the children who had been fostered from the orphanage a year before it shut down. As such, the lord probably

assumed we were going to hire someone to investigate on our behalf.

At the very least, he never would have guessed a couple of “proper ladies” like us would put ourselves in danger for some orphans by going out on a journey ourselves, so I couldn’t blame him for not making the connection even after my comment.

“Oh, it’s just that we were thinking of going to bring back some children who had been kidnapped through falsified documents...”

“Wh-What?!” the local lord stammered, standing up from his seat in surprise.

Well, I couldn’t blame him. It *had* to be pretty surprising, coming from two little girls like us. He stayed silent, but I could tell there were all sorts of thoughts spinning in his head. I hoped it would lead to the conclusion I had hoped for...

“Tell me more.”

Bingo!

“...And so, we would like to get access to the records from the investigation, particularly information on the people who took the children in. That, and your agreement to stay quiet about this.”

It was time to see how the lord would react. Things seemed to be going well so far...

“...You may look into the records. However, I can’t agree to stay silent!”

Huh? Damn, I should have done this in secret without involving the local lord!

Though, he would have noticed and inquired right away if the orphans who had been sold off started returning... Things were looking pretty bad...

“How could I possibly stay silent about this? I give you my full, official approval on this! I can’t give you specific orders due to my position, but I hereby declare that this region will give its full support in Little Silver’s endeavor to rescue those poor orphans!”

...Huh? I thought he was a good person “for an aristocrat,” but it looked like he was just a good person, period!

“I see...”

Reiko and I were in the local lord’s store of documents and looking into the records of that case. Of course, the person managing this place came with us to help out. We would have no idea where anything was if it was just us two! On top of that...

“I think we got most of the info we’re looking for...”

For some reason, the local lord was also here with us after shouting, “How could I not get involved in something so exciting?!”

“...So, what will you do now?” he asked.

“...”

“Tell me, just a bit.”

Don’t say that like “just the tip”...



“...”

“Come on, just tell me a tiny bit of your plans...”

How annoying.

Though, being a local lord was probably just a bunch of responsibilities and boring routine work, so he didn't have much time for recreation or going out to do what he wanted. None of his subordinates would push back against his orders or admonish him, and his servants just didn't want any trouble. A pretty boring life, if you ask me.

Honestly, a third son who lived with the family would probably have much more freedom to go out and enjoy life. You really only need so much authority and status. Too much of either, and they'll suck all the joy out of your life.

That was part of the reason I disliked standing out too much. There was nothing fun about being hailed as a deity, constantly being watched by the public eye, with no freedom at all. The only thing you couldn't have too much of was money!

But even though I felt a bit bad about his lack of anything fun to do, I couldn't help being annoyed. I decided to make up some plausible excuse and have him leave us alone.

“You're annoying, so please just go back to your work!”

Translation: We wouldn't want to trouble you, so please leave the work to us, my lord!

“What...?”

His face froze.

What just happened?

“...Kaoru, I think you accidentally switched your inner thoughts and what you *wanted* to say,” Reiko noted.

“Ah...”

Judging by the look of utter shock on the local lord's face, it was probably exactly as Reiko had said...

I blew it!!!



“Kaoruuu!”

“I said I’m sorry...”

Yup, we were lucky we didn’t end up getting tried for lèse-majesté. The lord had just laughed dryly and returned to his room, reinforcing my impression of him as a good person.

His subordinates, who had also laughed awkwardly, helped us search through the records from six months ago, and we were able to find out where the three orphans other than Mine had been taken to, along with the identity of the middleman. We had written all that info down, of course.

The local lord had been mortified when the incident had taken place on his own territory, but all he could do at the time was punish the second owner of the orphanage. Of course, he had reported the events to the royal palace, lords of other territories, and other orphanages, so they could never commit such atrocities again. At least, not in the same country.

He couldn’t do anything about those who had been transported to another country, but it is what it is. It’s already commendable that he had gone out of his way to warn the other lords.

Of course, they had just dismissed him, stating that it was better to get rid of orphans, especially for a small sum of money, since they were just a useless waste of resources otherwise. Unfortunately, he couldn’t do much about that either. Everyone had different ways of thinking, and there were some really dumb people out there.

I thought that they should have just scouted homeless kids instead of going through an orphanage, but kids in orphanages were taught how to read, write, and do some simple math from a young age, along with things like common sense and manners. They were also kept healthy, so... that was probably why.

This may not be the right way to put it, but it was the same as how people thought it’s better to get a dog from a pet shop, breeder, or caretaker rather than picking up a stray, since they tend to be trained and done with their shots already.

There may be more upfront expenses, but it would end up costing less in the end... I didn’t want to compare humans to dogs or cats, but since these people actually used children as slaves...

In any case, our investigation was complete! We just had to stop by the local lord's place, apologize for the earlier incident, and get outta here.

I should treat him a bit with tomorrow's dried fish and jerky order... Maybe I'll add some free candy and tell him it's a gift from back home.

I decided to send something to the guys who helped us check through the records too. They would probably enjoy some alcohol, like the kind from Earth that I made with my powers for me and Reiko. They could always sell it if they didn't drink. That'd probably be worth a pretty good amount.

Three days later... All of our preparations had been completed.

Gathering intel, check!

Delivering orders and letting customers know we'll be out on a restocking trip, so we'll be closed for a while, check! They weren't too happy about it, but there was nothing we could do about that. I figured they understood this and were just complaining for the sake of it.

Home security, check! I had blocked off the staircase leading down from the first floor basement with a boulder from my Item Box. There was no way some thief would be able to do something about a boulder, especially one that fit perfectly in there. I had also put the fishing boat back into my Item Box.

I had left some furniture and worthless stuff from the orphanage days strewn around the first floor basement and put all the valuables into the box. I didn't want to incentivize any thieving, after all. It would have been a bad precedent if someone made a killing breaking into and stealing stuff from Little Silver.

And of course, I set up some traps. The idea of finding out how to make our tasty and profitable dried fish and jerky products or swiping some gold or jewelry from some rich girls had to be appealing.

To be fair, I also put up notes and signs that warned of deadly security devices. They clearly stated that the traps were coated with poison, and that any intruders would risk their own lives by breaking in.

Despite that, I decided to make sure the traps wouldn't be quite enough to kill people. The potion I had coated the spikes in would cause extreme pain and fever, and the wound would swell up and change into a putrid color. I also put up a note that read, "Antidotes available. 10 gold coins each."

They'd probably go crazy wondering when we'd get back, whether they'd live or die, and when their limbs would rot and fall off. Mua ha ha ha!

"Are you a demon or something?!" Reiko interjected.

"You do that kind of stuff all the time, Reiko. Like that time with that guy who was stalking Kyo..."

"Don't bring that up, damn it!"

Yeah, no one liked to admit to the blunders of their youth.

Mine and Aral's preparations... check! Though, they didn't really have any belongings, so they didn't have anything to prepare. Besides, we don't really have to pack for trips or pick what to bring in the first place. All we have to do is dump everything into the Item Box.

"Okay!"

"You're just gonna ignore me?!"

Reiko was screeching about something, but we were good to go! Aral looked oblivious, but Mine understood that we were putting ourselves in danger (lol) for the sake of her old friends. There was guilt, discomfort, and worry in her eyes. After all, she thought Reiko and I were just a couple of "normal" rich kids. But...

"Kaoru, are you going to tell them?"

"Huh? Tell them what?"

It was Reiko again.

"I mean, they'll find out about the Item Box eventually, and that you can talk to horses, as long as they stick around long enough. It's not like you can avoid using the Item Box or talking to the horses during our whole trip. That'd be way too inconvenient..."

Ah. Ahh... Ahhhhhhhh!

It hadn't even crossed my mind...

"If we don't tell them, we'll have to figure out what to do about beds, water, food, and clothes..."

"Yeah, we'd only be able to use the stuff we loaded onto the carriage in the beginning. We obviously wouldn't be able to use our beds, and we'd need to put up a tent every time we stopped for the night. And whenever we stayed at an inn, we'd have to worry about thieves, crooked stable keepers, and other employees there taking our stuff... And of course, we wouldn't be able to bring out fresh food or water at night, or use any magic to wash ourselves off or clean our clothes."

"I'd die!"

In the beginning, when I still wasn't properly prepared for life in this world, I was able to get by easily thanks to the Item Box and my potion powers. I haven't been able to imagine life without them since, and have constantly benefited from their boons. If I was to suddenly stop using them...

"I'd die!!!"

I had to say it twice, because it was that important. Though, that was normal for the average traveler. Oh, I mean, traveling in that state, not the dying part.

"I didn't expect to run into a pitfall like this..."

I discussed it with Reiko, and we reluctantly decided to reveal some of the details to Mine and Aral. But just how much should we tell them? And we still had to figure out how to phrase things so they would understand.

"We have no choice but to tell them about the Item Box, huh..."

"Yeah. And about that... Should we just tell them that's your ability? Or should we say you're using some special item, like a mysterious bag with infinite storage capabilities, or a ring that can store stuff in it?"

That was a tough one... I didn't want any more fanatics or undying devotion... Everyone from The Eyes of the Goddess were fanatical believers in me as a goddess,

but had treated the usual me, or “Kaoru the housemate” as a normal person. But that was just because they were with the other orphans and everyone had agreed to do so, knowing that was what I wanted.

But Aral was still young. That was why Mine took everything including Aral’s burdens upon her shoulders, decided things for herself, and tried to accept all responsibility. I couldn’t put any unnecessary pressure on her or put her in a situation where she would be forced to make a tough decision. I had to explain simply so that she wouldn’t have to agonize or think too hard.

So I had to...

...

...

Oh no, I can't think of anything!

My thoughts just went in circles, and time passed without progress...

“I have a good idea.”

“Really?!”

Thank goodness for Reiko and the wisdom of age!

“So, what’s your idea?”

I stared at Reiko in anticipation...

“We can tell her we’re angels of the Goddess. That way, they won’t be surprised or suspicious about any miracles or supernatural phenomena, and they’ll take our word as absolute, meaning they wouldn’t ever have to think or worry about anything. Perfect, isn’t it?”

“Did you even *try* to think?! Two fanatics, coming right up! That’s exactly what I wanna avoid!!!”

“Ah, thought so...”

You little...

She did that on purpose. She does this kind of thing all the time! Not that she was actually trying to annoy me. Whenever we hit a roadblock like this, she threw out ideas that obviously wouldn't work just to reset my thoughts. It allowed me to start fresh again, exploring routes other than the ones where I couldn't make any progress. Reiko really is reliable.

And so, I decided to start over...

"We'll need to tell them we can both use the Item Box, or things could get complicated later on. We should also tell them about my potions... healing potions in particular. Otherwise, we'll run into issues if either of them get hurt or sick. Though, I could make a potion that makes their appearance and symptoms look like they're recovering slowly but actually heals them all at once, then tell them it's normal medicine that just works really well... Let's just say it's some secret medicine passed down through our family."

That was pretty much the only way we could go about it.

"Hang and Scary are divine beings descended from the Goddess's horse, and they have the ability to understand their owner's words. The explosive potions I use when we're attacked by bandits and bad guys are a secret family recipe, and your magic is divine power granted to you by the Goddess. The best way to convince the kids of this setting is..."

"To tell them we're goddesses, or angels of the Goddess!" we said in unison, then stared at each other.

"Thought so!"

"Whaaaaat!!!"

After we had given our explanation, Mine pressed her lightly balled-up fists to her mouth, eyes wide with shock, and Aral stood frozen at a loss for words.

"L-L-Lady Kaoru and Lady Reiko... are mages?!"

Yup, that was what we settled on. No, don't call us magical girls! I had to be careful not to be too Mami-like...

Practical magic didn't exist in this world, other than the kind used by some monsters, like dragons. But there were such actual examples of magic already, and I had heard that there were some wealthy researchers who had dedicated their lives to the study of magic. Supposedly, they could even use fire magic to produce a candle flame, and water magic to produce a steady drip of liquid.

They say that a demonstration was once held in some country for the royal family, and it was already common knowledge among the people there that humans could use magic. Though, the extent of their prowess was as I just explained.

And so, people didn't really doubt the existence of magic. Or maybe it was more accurate to say they knew of its existence. But it really didn't make sense to deny that magic existed when everyone knew that the Goddess was undeniably real and they had witnessed the power of her miracles...

And of course, magic users who could accomplish superhuman feats were featured often in many forms of entertainment, like in plays, epics, and bards' tales. There were countless stories like those even back on Earth, where magic didn't exist at all. It went without saying that they would be quite popular in a world where magic was real.

And normal people who didn't have many ways to get proper information or accurate knowledge believed in the magic that they heard about in stories, and the reason they hadn't seen a mage in real life was because they were hiding their powers to live normal lives. Or maybe they were believed to live in secret research rooms in a royal palace, or in some high tower on the frontier somewhere...

Just like in the stories...

In any case, mages and witches in this world were like superheroes and superheroines: to be admired, and without a negative public image. Moreover, they were in a separate category from the Goddess, angels, religions, miracles, and the like. Magic was strictly a power that humans could achieve through hard work and talent, like royal guardsmen or wealthy entrepreneurs.

In other words, their accomplishments might be out of reach for the average person, but they were still simply considered really incredible people, and without much

mysticism to them. Of course, those powers also weren't something a girl around who was around fifteen years old could ever achieve... But who cares about the details?!

"All set!"

We had already finished contacting our clients, making deliveries, stashing valuables in the Item Box, setting up our security systems, reaching out to the local lord, and explaining things to Mine, Aral, Hang, and Scary. After that, we had gone to sleep early last night, so we were full of energy the next morning. After having a meal from the Item Box that was already fully cooked...

"Okay, let's go!"

"Yeaah!"

We were bringing Mine and Aral with us, of course. We couldn't just leave them here alone, and Mine knew the other three kids who we were going to go help. That meant we needed Mine with us in order to gain their trust.

No one was dumb enough to follow some strange, seemingly-underage kid that appeared out of nowhere and said, "I'll take care of you, so give up your current life and follow me." This was especially true for these kids, who had crawled through the lowest parts of society and gone through such horrible betrayal already. As such, it was best to just have Mine explain everything to them for us.

Their adopter... though, they never actually completed the official adoption process, and instead had just paid a few decades worth of salary upfront, and probably had some apprenticeship contract... Anyway, those folks were definitely going to oppose us, so we needed the kids to trust and cooperate with us completely. Well, even if we didn't need Mine and Aral's help, leaving them behind wasn't an option. Of course it wasn't.

We had already delivered the dried fish and jerky we had promised to the local lord. Well, we went in through the back door and handed the goods over to one of his servants. No business would call upon the local lord directly just to deliver something like this, and no servant would even allow such a thing. I had included some pickled yellow radish, turnips, and cucumbers, some candy, and a few bottles of brandy for free. The pickled goods were homemade, but we had cheated to get the candy and

alcohol.

Oh, and I had also prepared something for the people who had helped us with our research. It's important to express gratitude for these sorts of things, since that kind of consideration always comes back to you in the end.

Besides those things, we had brought a small bottle of soy sauce for the dried goods, along with a note that detailed how to use it. I even included tips for broiling the dried goods. The chefs here probably already knew all this, but I didn't want them overcooking the food just because they couldn't trust things that had been brought in by some kid amateurs.

That was why I made sure to include a sealed letter addressed to the local lord detailing all of this. I didn't want my food to be ruined by being handled improperly. He probably didn't have a lot of things to look forward to, after all.

Honestly, I had never expected to get this involved with the local lord himself, even after thinking up all sorts of plans to make connections with nobles and wealthy merchants... Oh well. Things didn't always go according to plan in life. You could run into unexpected accidents or a stroke of good or bad luck. This could probably be considered one of those strokes of good luck.

After we finished locking up, Reiko, Mine, Aral, Hang, Scary, and I stood in front of the house. It was time to go!

"Come out, magic carriage!"

Poof!

"Whoaaaaaa!"

Panzer had suddenly appeared right in front of us. Yes, I had given this one the most intimidating appearance out of my three carriages to discourage weirdos from messing with us on the street. It was the one with the dummy (Oscar) in the coach box.

Back on Earth, everyone knew that a pumpkin could turn into a carriage with magic. In this world, everyone knew that carriages could appear out of thin air... probably. Mine and Aral's exclamation wasn't a scream of fear, but a cheer of excitement. It was the first time they had witnessed magic firsthand. It was no surprise that they raised their voices.

“Brehehe, breehehee! (Hang, Scary, I’m counting on you two!)” I said in the language of horses.

“Brehehehe! (Leave it to us!)” they replied.

Mine and Aral stood frozen as they watched Hang and Scary move into position to get their harnesses put on. They were actually more surprised than when they saw the carriage appear. I couldn’t figure out why...

“Why are you two so surprised? Didn’t I explain that they’re descendants of the divine horse, the one that served someone who was known as a goddess and an angel? That’s why they can understand most of what their master says...”

Aral still didn’t seem convinced. Then, Mine stared into my eyes and said...

“B-But... it wasn’t that the horses understood their master’s words... You just spoke horse language, Lady Kaoru...”

“Huh?”



What? Huh? Whaaaaat?

I looked over at Reiko and saw her staring blankly, mouth agape.

“I blew iiiiiit!”

According to what I had told them, we should have been speaking human language, and the horses should have understood it. If I spoke the language of horses, any horse should have been able to understand me. Neither Reiko nor I realized this fact. It was a huge plot hole in our explanation...

“D-Don’t tell me...”

“Lady Kaoru is...”

Oh no! They’re gonna find out the truth!

Just how sharp were these kids?!

“Lady Kaoru is a descendant of the divine horse!”

“How’d you come to that conclusion?!”

“Who are you calling a descendant of a horse?!”

“W-We’re sorry...”

I mean, it didn’t bother me...

We had already finished putting harnesses on Hang and Scary and started moving along. We would put Oscar the dummy in the coach box after we got some distance between us and the city. Otherwise, someone from the city might see us and wonder who was sitting there. Our faces were pretty well known around here, after all.

Reiko was the one sitting in the coach box for now. Meanwhile, I was explaining things to Mine and Aral in the cabin.

“I was only making noises and pretending to speak the language of horses because

people would think there was something wrong with me if they saw me talking to horses in our language, and there might be some bad guys out there who would get funny ideas if they found out Hang and Scary could understand us. It's not that descendants of the divine horse can understand their master because they understand our language. They have the power to understand me no matter what, so the words I say to them don't actually matter."

"I see..."

Easy!

"Now, I'm going back to the coach box, so you two get some rest. But no sleeping allowed! You won't be able to sleep at night if you do."

"Yes, my lady!"

Crisis averted. Reiko would get upset if I left her in the coach box alone for too long, so I had to keep her company. After we got far enough from the city, we could put Oscar up there and we could all hang out in the cabin together. There was some distance between us and the kids as employer and employee at Little Silver, but we could probably speak more candidly sitting and talking in the small carriage together.

Mine and Aral were a bit too stiff. I mean, it was normal for them considering their positions, but Mine was far too rigid when dealing with us, and Aral obviously followed her example. I wanted them to just be themselves.

Yes, like everyone from the Eyes of the Goddess...

"...You heard Lady Kaoru, but what are you gonna do, Mine?"

"Just as Lady Kaoru and Lady Reiko say, of course. I don't understand why they're telling us this, but if that's what they wish for us to believe, we have no choice but to act as if we believe it. So we will say they are mages, not angels!"

"Okay!" Aral replied.

Mine cocked her head in confusion, despite her instruction to Aral.

The Goddess's wisdom. Benevolence toward orphans. Her countless miracles. The Goddess's carriage, drawn by divine horses. The ability to speak with animals. These stories were all featured in the chapter known as "The Goddess's Benevolence" in all versions of the scripture, for both children and adults.

In every country, kids had the scripture read to them in orphanages, and children in general households were repeatedly drilled in its teachings at the Temple of the Goddess or at home by their parents. In other words, everything Mine had seen and heard, and the earlier explanation, were pretty much equivalent to Kaoru declaring, "We are angels." There was no way a smart child like Mine wouldn't understand this, and Kaoru and Reiko should have realized that.

So why did they say deceptive things despite already telling us the truth...? Maybe they have some deep thoughts that we can't understand...

Mine was too sharp for her own good... and she was also overthinking things. No one could blame her, of course. They couldn't have known that the Angels were dumber—rather, they couldn't have known that they would make such a careless mistake...

CHAPTER 58

THE FIRST OF US

We put two dummies in the coach box after getting some good distance between us and the city. Then, the four of us had a pleasant chat inside the cabin. Although Mine and Aral were formal and stiff in the beginning, the snacks and juice helped them loosen up over time.

We were making steady progress in our travels, and we crossed the border into the neighboring country without any weird run-ins. Instead of using the empty lots on the side of the road to take breaks or to camp out at night, we took the carriage off-road completely and went into areas that couldn't be seen from the road at all.

If other travelers stopped at the same place as us, they would realize our group consisted only of kids. It was obvious what would happen if people found out there were only children in this rugged, military-looking carriage with our two high-quality horses. Even a relatively moral person could be tempted if a forgotten wallet was laid out in front of them. A criminal could be made out of someone who had no intention of committing a crime by laying out enticing bait.

I wanted to avoid anything like those malicious entrapment cases. That was why I couldn't let anyone know about us outside of the members riding in our carriage. Whenever we entered a city, I put the carriage away and put saddles on Hang and Scary to ride in normally. Two expensive-looking horses and four kids were already enticing enough as-is, but we didn't have to worry much as long as we headed straight for the local luxury inn and stayed there.

We just had to go somewhere secluded as soon as we left the city the next day and switch over to Panzer again. That way, anyone following us would walk right by without noticing us. We had used this method many times on our way here from the Kingdom of Balmore.

Then...

“This is the city where the first of us was sold.”

Yes, this was the place.

"The local lord wrote us a document that verifies our social standing, but that will be our last resort. Kinda like how they say, 'A gun's a last resort!'"

"How do you know such an old quote?!" Reiko asked, even though she clearly got the reference too!

"...Well, anyway, since we're not from here, our local lord's documents won't necessarily have any effect. It's just a piece of paper showing that a foreign aristocrat vouches for us. It's not enough to absolve us if we're ever suspected of being criminals, and it would just bring heat down on him if we used it as an attempt to get us out of trouble. A noble never wants to be in a position where another noble has some dirt on them. I don't even know why he wrote it for us... This sort of document would only be effective within his own territory," I said.

Reiko looked exasperated in response to my comment.

"He probably thought that a foreign aristocrat would try to use us as a tool for negotiations rather than killing us outright if we used this document in a pinch, without considering that he'd be put at a disadvantage. As an aristocrat and a lord, he's a little..."

"Too naive!"

He must have prioritized our lives even with all that considered... It was foolish, but we didn't dislike fools like him. So we didn't want him to regret his choice, and we would never betray his trust.

"We'll go with Plan A-3. If anything irregular happens, we'll move on to the backup plan right away. If the backup plan can't cover it, we'll shift our main strategy. Worst-case scenario, we'll blow everything up, rescue the targets, and flee in the opposite direction from where we came from to throw off anyone on our trail. Got it?"

"Roger that!"

"R-Raw-ja that!"

"Raw-jar..."

It would have been pointless to go in through the front and try to talk or negotiate our way out of this. Their paperwork claimed that the orphans were live-in apprentices with a few decades worth of salary paid upfront, and they were actual official documents. The manager of the orphanage and the local lord's signatures were on it, so there was no way around that.

Since they already had the paperwork, I couldn't imagine we'd convince them to just hand the kids over through negotiation. Maybe they would if we offered enough money, but these were evil merchants we were dealing with, and we looked like a group of kids. As soon as they found out we had money, they'd do their best to take it from us, or worse. Yeah... they could try to take advantage of us in all sorts of ways.

And even if this could all be resolved with money, I didn't want to take that route. The price written on the paperwork was just for show, and it was probably much higher than the actual sum that the second owner of the orphanage had received. If they thought they could get money out of us, they would surely try to add all sorts of unreasonable fees.

If we agreed to that, they would just take that money and buy two or three more orphans somewhere else. So, we decided to learn from the past in order to prevent that. Yes, we would make full use of the same method Mine had used.

"Ellie..."

"Huh?" The ten-year-old girl who was stocking the storeroom thought she had heard someone calling her name, then shook her head.

"I thought I heard Mine calling for me... guess not. I got tricked into coming here, but I hope she's doing well at the orphanage. I thought I could finally live a normal life after getting fostered, but I got caught up in this fraud that slipped through the screening. I can't catch a break... I was hoping to spend the rest of my life repaying my new parents..." Ellie mused to herself.

"But I'm sure Uncle (the new director) won't get tricked so often, so the other kids are probably living happily in their new homes. I'm gonna escape and go back to the orphanage as soon as I'm ready. I have to warn Uncle about the fraud right away... I can't have them taking us lightly when we were trained and taught by Daddy."

There was no one else in the storeroom, so she could talk to herself out loud without

issues. It was only natural that she talked to herself often after working alone for so long. Of course, she made sure to keep her mouth shut whenever she heard the door open or saw light coming in.

“Well, I’ll have to lay low for a while. I’ll prepare carefully, then head to the orphanage. Then I’ll be together with everyone again...”

“Too bad, the orphanage is no more...”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”



Ellie immediately leapt backwards. There shouldn't have been anywhere else around. She hadn't heard the door open and there was no change in the light in the storeroom, so there was no way anyone had entered, either. And yet, those words had been whispered into her ear in the darkness. Ellie's mind was filled not with fear, but with a sense of danger instead.

They heard me!!!

Ellie was already ten years old. She was certainly already aware of what could happen if a man snuck into this storeroom with no one else around. But right now, the fact that someone had heard her mumblings was a far bigger concern.

She narrowed her eyes in the dim storeroom, a wooden skewer that she had kept just in case she was attacked gripped tightly in her hands. Her stance was low, ready to pounce on any threat. There was no point in speaking now. It was either kill or be killed...

"Wait! Wait just a minute! It's me, Ellie! Mine!"

"Mi... ne...?"

But even when she heard that panicked voice, Ellie didn't relax from her fighting stance. Only an amateur would trust someone's words without confirming their legitimacy. The original director of the orphanage had taught her that.

"Oh, for goodness sake... Lady Reiko, please dispel the magic!"

"There!"

Poof!

Three silhouettes appeared right beside Ellie.

"Mine!" Ellie exclaimed in a hushed tone, then jumped toward Mine in an embrace.

"Gyaaa!" Mine let out a rather unladylike scream and scrambled away. She couldn't help it. Ellie still had the skewer gripped tightly in her hand, and it would have dug right into her if they went in for a hug...

“So, you were watching me all day yesterday and picked the best place to make contact with me?”

“Yeah. Thanks to Lady Kaoru and Lady Reiko’s invisibility magic, we were able to watch you right out in the open.”

The reason we hadn’t shown ourselves immediately after confirming Ellie was alone in the storeroom was because we weren’t sure if she would instinctively attack any intruder nearby. Mine had repeatedly warned us that Ellie would definitely attack.

“Hmm... A mage, huh...”

Ellie was ten years old, making her a year older than Mine. Maybe it was because she had more common sense due to being older, or because she hadn’t seen magic other than the spell that made us invisible, or because she hadn’t sworn her loyalty to us for saving her like in Mine’s case, but she didn’t seem to fully trust what Mine was telling her.

“So, these two mages want to invite you to join us...”

“I don’t know...”

It seemed we couldn’t quite gain her trust... I figured she wouldn’t listen to us, but I thought Mine could convince her... It was too bad. If she wanted to stay where she was, it wasn’t as if we could force her out. Unfortunate, but we had no choice but to move on.

“Then...”

It looked like Mine hadn’t given up convincing her yet. I mean, Mine clearly wanted to help her friends, so it was no surprise that she wanted to persuade Ellie to join us. However, Reiko and I had no intention of forcing our salvation on those who didn’t want it. We would only extend our hand to those who sought help and took a step forward of their own volition.

Mine continued with her pitch.

“These two took us in in the middle of the night when we arrived looking like tattered pieces of garbage, gave us food, a bath, and a comfy bed to sleep in, then gave us jobs. They want you to come with us, but...”

“Of course I’d be happy to!”

What?!

She had hesitated because we had been presented as suspicious “mages,” but maybe she thought we were worth trusting as soon as she found out we extended a helping hand to orphans. Though, the fact that Mine vouched for us was also probably a big part of it...

“Then let’s run away together. You’ve been legally hired according to the paperwork, with your salary paid up front. Since it’s an official document, there’s no point trying to contest it head-on. But that only applies within this country,” Mine explained.

She continued, “Come back to our country, where those documents were already proven to have been forged by a criminal who abused his position; that culprit has already been punished. If anyone tries following you to get you back, we’ll arrest them as a part of a human trafficking organization on the spot. That means we win as soon as we make it home.”

“Ohh! But wait... Who’s this criminal you’re talking about?”

Mine looked rather grim as she responded to Ellie, who thought the culprit was just tricked by the owner of the company.

“It’s ‘Uncle’...The whole reason he wanted to take over the orphanage was so he could run his little scheme.”

“Wha...”



Ellie looked flabbergasted for a moment, then her expression filled with rage. Well, I certainly couldn't blame her. According to Mine, the quality of life, starting with the food, had dropped drastically when the management changed, and the orphans had their work hours increased. Everyone assumed the orphanage was struggling and put in extra effort as a show of appreciation for Uncle. But now that Ellie knew the truth, no one could blame her for the anger that boiled up inside her as she realized it was all a scheme to embezzle money.

"Well, setting that aside for now..."

"We'll be fine as long as we escape back to the former orphanage!"

Mine was right. As I had explained earlier, we had no reason to worry as long as we could flee without getting caught in this jurisdiction. After all, the documents from the trading company had stated that the arrangement was an apprenticeship contract with up-front payment, but on the orphanage side—that is, the documents that the local lord had—claimed they were foster kids.

If an official objection was raised against a lord of a different territory, the truth of the matters would obviously be investigated officially. That meant that the lord of this territory would look into the trading company's affairs, and it would quickly become evident whether a child had been taken in as a foster daughter or apprentice.

After all, employees, vendors going in and out, guests, and many others had surely seen them already. Even if they tried to silence all of the witnesses, someone would eventually spill the beans, whether it be because they couldn't handle the guilt, couldn't stand up to intense interrogation, or because a rival business owner made an offer for them to testify in exchange for a new job.

The reason our local lord couldn't do anything about the situation was because he couldn't investigate a company based in another country. It would have caused a huge problem if he had made a complaint to another lord without any hard evidence. Of course, it would be a different story if the other lord made the first move. Our lord could then demand that proof be provided and force the other lord to conduct a thorough investigation into the trading company.

Rather, even before registering a complaint, the lord here would definitely look into whether the company owner's claims were true or not. You couldn't just make complaints about an aristocrat from another country and then admit that you were

wrong afterward. Not only would your reputation be completely ruined, but it would be big enough of a blunder that you might end up being summoned to the royal palace.

And even if the company owner was in the right, he might ignore the issue just to avoid dealing with it. That was why it was highly unlikely that the company owner would register a formal complaint through the local lord here. But what if one of his goons appeared at Little Silver to demand we hand over their escaped foster daughter, you ask? That won't happen. It wouldn't be strange for some of their employees to come for her if she had been an apprentice who ran away.

But it wouldn't make sense for employees to come get the owner's "foster daughter" rather than the owner himself or his wife. And regardless of whether it was an employee or the owner himself, they would be detained as soon as they stepped foot in our territory to make any such demands.

The second orphanage director had already been exposed and punished for his crimes in our territory. If his accomplices came strolling up to us, they'd be arrested immediately. Although it would be difficult for us to march into another country to make those accusations against them, the local lord could use his authority to punish a criminal who was captured within his own domain. It didn't matter where that culprit came from originally. That was why he absolutely wasn't going to show up. That is, unless he was extremely stupid.

"We'll come back for you tonight."

"Huh?"

Why did she look so surprised? Maybe she assumed we were going to take her away right now...?

"If we took you now, they'd notice you were missing right away. Don't you think we could buy more time if you slipped out in the middle of the night?"

"T-True..."

Maybe Ellie was just inherently clever, or otherwise the original director had trained her well, because she nodded her understanding right away.

"Okay then, keep working as if nothing happened. We'll come back once everyone's sound asleep, so gather up your stuff and get ready. Oh, and don't worry if you have a

lot of stuff. You can bring everything with you, no problem.”

No matter how much stuff she had, we could jam it all into the Item Box without issue.

“All I have is some change of clothes. I could hold it all in one hand.”

That was no surprise. It wasn’t as if she would have souvenirs from a school trip, ornaments, or wooden carvings of bears lying around... She obviously wouldn’t have things like photo albums full of pictures with her family, either...

“So, where should I wait for you?”

We couldn’t have her wandering around at night with all her stuff and risk her getting spotted by the guards or the employees.

“You can stay in your room.”

“What...? But I live in a six-person room. The others...”

“Don’t worry! Remember what Reiko and I are?”

“Mages...”

“That’s right. So, we’ll see you later!”

I signaled Reiko, who was standing around looking bored with nothing to do, and she activated her invisibility magic. We then took Mine gently by the hand and made our way out of the storeroom. We had slipped in beside Ellie when we entered, but we let ourselves out through the door on the way out, so she saw it open and close even though she couldn’t see us.

“Sorry for the wait!”

Ellie started as Reiko suddenly appeared out of nowhere. The young girl was sitting wide-awake in the dark even after the tallow candle had gone out and the other five girls in her room had fallen asleep. The thought of what was about to happen had obliterated all traces of sleepiness from her mind, and she didn’t want to wake up the others by getting up from a sleeping position. Not to mention, she couldn’t change into

her sleepwear, and lying down in her work clothes would have looked rather suspicious, so she didn't have any other choice.

Ellie wasn't suspicious that it was just Reiko who had appeared, even though she had stayed in the back without saying much during their encounter in the storeroom earlier in the day. The reason was quite obvious. It would have been completely foolish for a big group of kids to show up when they were planning to sneak out in the middle of the night. Ellie was also bright enough to figure that the other "mage" who had done a lot of explaining earlier was staying back to keep the other two kids safe.

"Okay, let's..."

Reiko began talking at her usual volume, then Ellie covered her mouth with both hands in a panic and gestured for her to stay quiet.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm using magic to muffle sounds, so they won't be able to hear our voices or any noise we make."

"Ah!"

What an incredible mage!

Ellie wanted to shout it out, but she had gone through too much already to take Reiko's word for it and raise her voice just because she had been told that the others couldn't hear her.

"Let's go!"

"Good work!" I said, nodding.

Reiko returned with Ellie to the empty lot where I was waiting with Mine, Aral, Hang, and Scary. It seemed they hadn't run into any issues, judging by the thumbs up she flashed me. This wasn't a bustling street in a big city back on Earth, so there was no one around this late at night.

I still looked around to make sure there was no one there, just in case. Seeing that there wasn't, I decided to give Ellie a little show to play up my role as a mage.

“I summon the Goddess’s carriage!”

Poof!

“Wooow!!!”

Good, they look surprised...

Invisibility magic didn’t quite look impressive enough to wow anyone, so I thought it would be better to give them a little show of magical prowess here. I didn’t want them freezing up in shock when it counted later on.

“Okay, all aboard, everyone!”



“...She just called it the Goddess’s carriage.”

“Yeah, she did...”

“Hm? Did you say something, Aral, Mine?”

“No, nothing!” they replied in unison.

“Oh? Then hurry up and hop on!”

“Got it!”

We decided not to expose the crimes of the company owner in this city, per Ellie’s request. There were many normal employees working at the trading company, and she didn’t want their lives to be ruined by taking action against the business. Although some of them had treated her harshly, she cared more about those who had shown her kindness. They thought Ellie had been sold off by her parents, and supposedly, it was rather common for children in such a position to face some bullying. As such, she didn’t want to cause any trouble for the others.

So foolish...

Of course, Reiko and I didn’t dislike fools like her. Still, the company owner might have sent a search team to bring Ellie back if we fled without doing *anything*. That was why we left a letter behind.

It listed out the details of their illegal trafficking operation, the one disguised as adopting orphan children, as well as the fact that the former director of the orphanage had been captured and punished. It also included a warning that anyone involved in this ordeal would be arrested and punished as soon as they stepped foot into a neighboring country, and that the documents they had given the orphanage side were already in the hands of our local lord. The letter was secured to the owner’s work desk with the blade of a knife so it wouldn’t get blown away by the wind...

Then, we were off to the next town to see the second child.

Off we go!

And so, we arrived at the city where the third child was. Yes, the “third” one. We had already rescued the second child, Fria. It pretty much went the same as when we picked up Ellie, so we can skip over that part.

Here in this city, we were planning on rescuing the last child, a seven-year-old girl named Lucy. We intended to get a room at an inn first, then visit the trading company that took her in to do some scouting from the outside first. Or so I thought...

What... is this?

I had left the kids with Reiko at the inn so I could take a look at the company in question. They still should have been open at this hour, and it wasn't a holiday, but their shop was closed. Someone had written all over the doors and walls, with signs of trash having been thrown at them...

“Oh, that place has been closed for the last two days.”

“Huh?”

Some middle-aged man that happened to be walking by stopped to explain when he saw me standing there blankly.

“I heard they took in an orphan as a foster child, but they actually paid the orphanage several decades worth of salary upfront to make her work as an apprentice without compensating her. That girl put fliers up all over the city exposing the whole thing, and she even took a bunch of contracts and memorandums from their safe and destroyed them all.” the middle-aged man said.

He continued, with a certain degree of relish, “It was pure chaos. The rumors spread like wildfire because of those fliers, and the local lord had no choice but to take action. Once things were set in motion, they couldn't stop it even by bribing the lower-level city officials. I'll bet the bigwigs had no choice but to do something about it.”

The local lord had to save face, and he couldn't afford to let word of this incident reach His Majesty the King's ears. If it's true that these folks used trickery to get some kids from another country, this could end up being an international conflict. The owner of the company and his head clerks didn't get taken away by the guards, but they were dragged straight to the local lord's manor, so those guys are probably done for...” he finally concluded.

“Whaaaaat?!”

I was at a complete loss for words.

That mad lass...

She had used the same exact method as Mine. The teachings of the original owner of the orphanage had been passed down far too powerfully.

...Just who the heck was that guy?! No, that's not what's important right now!

“U-Um, where is that child now...?” I asked.

“I heard she’s gone missing. But the thing is...”

“Yes?”

“I heard that the owner of the business asked a gang to capture the girl before he got dragged away. During his questioning, he admitted that he said to find her ‘dead or alive’...”

“Whaaat?! Wait, why do you know so much, old man...?” I asked.

“O-Old man?”

The man’s shoulders drooped at my slip of the tongue. But now wasn’t the time to worry about that!

“How reliable is that information?!”

That was the most important part.

“Why are you so worked up about it...?”

He looked exasperated as he asked, but ended up explaining anyway.

“...I’m off today, but I’m on her side...”

So he was an officer, or working for the local lord! That meant his information was almost completely reliable. I did wonder about confidentiality, but this was probably

all public already, or otherwise within the confines of what he was allowed to tell me. He didn't seem like the type to blab out secrets like an idiot, so he must have talked to me out of kindness after seeing me stare at the shop. He must have figured that anyone from the city would have already known the details, and I was standing frozen at the state of the shop after coming here from another city...

Well, that was exactly what happened. But there was no time to waste! I stuck my hand into my bag, and...

Potion with the same flavor, fragrance, and alcohol content as expensive brandy, except it's good for you and comes out in a fancy-looking bottle!

"Thanks for telling me so much, mister! This is for you! It's luxury alcohol made in my city. Hope you enjoy it. See ya!"

I pushed the bottle into his arms, acting a bit more excited than usual, then got out of there. I heard him saying that he couldn't accept it from behind me, but I ignored him. There was no time to deal with that right now.

CHAPTER 59

THIRD ONE

I rushed into the inn and barged into the room we had rented.

“Emergency deployment! We need to check out and leave right now, so get dressed! I’ll explain in the carriage. Hurry!”

I urged the others to get a move on as they looked at me with puzzled expressions, then let the receptionist know that we were leaving. She offered to refund a portion of what we paid for our stay, but I told her to use it as a tip for the stable keeper and get the horses ready right away, and she ran off as fast as she could. Heading toward the stables, I think...

The others had changed from their relaxed clothes to their traveling outfits and approached me after some time, so we headed toward the stables together. Hang and Scary were ready to go already, so we hopped on, then the stable keeper and receptionist sent us off with deep bows. Mine, Aral, and I rode on Hang, while Reiko, Ellie, and Fria rode on Scary. Three riders for each horse. We were over capacity.

“Sorry...”

“What are you apologizin’ for? We military horses run around with grown men fully equipped with weapons and armor on our backs. Three unarmed kids are pretty much the same as nothing at all. Who do you think we are?” Scary replied.

“There you go being rude again... But Scary is right. Please understand there’s nothing to worry about... Besides, we will be using the carriage once we leave the city, will we not?” Hang said.

Although their demeanors were completely different, they both had good hearts. They were definitely descendants of Ed, that’s for sure. And just as they said, I would pull the carriage out as soon as we left the city. The carriages I had stored in the Item Box stood out far too much to ride with just us kids; we’d just be asking for criminals to mess with us. That was why we always put them back in the Item Box before reaching a city, then switched to riding horseback.

Though, even that looked unnatural now that we had so many people in our group. If we kept this up, soon we'd have four riders for each horse. That was a bit much... Maybe we could have the kids ride horseback while Reiko and I held the reins...

Wait, I don't have time to be thinking about this right now!

We quickly pressed forward, then stopped at the first empty clearing away from the city. After making sure no one was around...

"Merkava, come out!"

Bam!

I summoned Merkava.

I decided to avoid the heavy-duty Panzer because we were in such a hurry. The Penelope was rather delicate, and it would be a bit difficult to fit six passengers in a carriage designed for two, even if they were all kids. Maybe that would work for quick trips but definitely not for longer ones. That was why I went with the Merkava.

I actually wanted to get the carriage running right away and explain everything inside, but I couldn't do that. This was because we had to discuss where we were heading to first. Since we were heading in the opposite direction, we would end up losing some time. And so, I had to get everyone on board and explain myself.

"So, that's why we need to find Lucy quickly and make sure she's safe before those hired thugs get to her."

The carriage fell silent after I finished my explanation. However, there was no time to waste. I produced a single map from the Item Box. It was one of those maps that only showed mountains, rivers, forests, the sea, and villages, with no regard for scale, like the kind you might find as a bonus item in a Japanese fantasy game. Accurate maps were probably considered military secrets in this world, so I had to work with what I had. Still, it was better than having nothing at all, which was why I had bought it in the first place.

I spread the map out onto a table.

"There are three routes away from here. One leads to the royal capital, one leads to the country to the west, and one goes back to our home country, the one with the former orphanage that's currently known as Little Silver. The road going back goes all the way around the first and passes between the forest and some rocky mountains. Which direction do you think we should be heading?"

Reiko and I had no basis to determine which route Lucy would have picked. If we were trying to figure out what I would have done, I would try to come to a logical conclusion after putting thought into it. However, I had no idea what a seven-year-old orphan who had lost everything would do in this world. The only people who might have an idea were...

"Here! Lucy would go this way!"

"Yeah. This is definitely the path that Lucy would take!"

"There's no way she'd take any other route..."

The three girls who knew her best all pointed at the same road. It was the path leading back to the former orphanage where they had once lived together. Their fingers traced not the path that went all the way around the woods, but directly through the deep, dangerous forest full of wild beasts and monsters...

"Wh-Why...?"

I mean, I had suspected that it would be the route leading back to the orphanage. If she was clever and decisive like Mine, she probably would have looked into the surrounding geography and figured out the way back to her former home in secret. I had brought this up to discuss it with the others only as a precaution. It was still possible that Lucy was a pessimist who would assume the orphanage had sold her and thus head to another country, or maybe she was a reckless child who would seek a new, unexplored world...

Going back to the country that she came from was the most obvious choice, so that wasn't a surprise in itself. But why would a seven-year-old girl choose to walk right through the perilous forest?! It didn't even have a proper road going through it!

"She would try to go back to the orphanage for sure."

"Horses and carriages would catch up to her in no time if we followed the road, and

she'd be easily spotted."

"So, it would be better to go somewhere dangerous with low visibility without a road for carriages or horses to ride through. That would decrease her chances of getting caught. And..."

"She just has to make the loss that's risked by going after her outweigh the benefit of capturing her. That would make her pursuers give up."

Reiko stared at them with a stupid-looking expression on her face, her mouth wide open. I probably had the same expression on my own face. A few seconds later, we raised our voices in sync.

"You kids are scary!!!"

A few minutes later, Merkava began moving to the east with abnormal haste. Although it wasn't as swift as the Penelope, Merkava had been made with titanium, duralumin, FRP, and carbon nanotubes, making it extremely light and resilient despite its seemingly normal appearance. With the two top-class horses of the Silver breed juiced up on my special potions, we were absolutely flying. Wild beasts, monsters, and bandits were of little concern to us. We were too fast to catch, and even if they blocked our path, we could blow them to smithereens in an instant with magic or my nitroglycerin-like potions.

The power of KKR was unstoppable when it came to saving cute little girls! This was true even back on Earth, when we didn't have any cheat powers. Not even the gods could stop us in this state. What if that girl wasn't cute, you ask?

Little girls who aren't cute don't exist in any universe! Little girls are cute just by being little girls! It has nothing to do with appearance!

Just like how kittens and little birds are cute, all girls are adorable. End of discussion!

"So, this is the border of the forest..."

"From here, we take the long way around the forest to the left side. That is, if we're

riding down the road..."

"Yeah. If we're riding down the road..."

Everyone got out of the carriage and took a look around. The forest was directly in front of us, but the road veered off to the left as if to avoid it. We were about to go directly through this forest.

"Let's move into the forest a bit and park the carriage at a spot where it can't be seen from the road. Reiko, Mine, and I will form a search party. Sorry, Mine, but we need you to explain things to Lucy, so you're coming with us. The others will wait at the carriage. I'll surround the carriage with a barrier with a ten-meter radius, but it shouldn't interfere with your grazing. Hang, Scary, watch over the kids for us. Make sure they don't leave the barrier, no matter what! It will keep enemies out, but I'll make it so you can leave it from the inside, just in case."

I repeated the same message in human and horse language, then...

"Huh? The hell are you talking about?"

"I'm afraid I cannot obey that order."

Hang and Scary denied me.

"We are the Goddess's horses. There is no way we could let our master roam around while we stay somewhere safe and await your return!"

It wasn't as if we had much of a choice...

"But horses can't walk through such a dense forest, especially since it hasn't been maintained. There's uneven footing, mud, grass, vines, fallen trees, and other obstacles along the way. You could easily get your foot caught and break a bone..."

"And?"

"Huh...?" Hang asked as if he didn't understand what I was saying. His expression? Well, I didn't know how to read the look on a horse's face...

Then, Scary spoke up. "Don't you get it, Missy? That's not nearly big enough of an issue to get in between you and us. Many of us Silver horses have dreamed of fulfilling our

duty to serve you, and we've been waiting over seventy years for the opportunity. A few broken legs or a broken neck aren't gonna stop us."

"The moment we fall, another Silver horse will rush to replace us. When they fall, another will rise to the occasion. It will go on until the very last of the Silver breed has fallen."

"That's the wish of our great ancestor, Ed!"

How foolish. Ed was a fool, and so were these two for trying to carry out his wish. I mean, I could heal them with my potions if they got injured, though they would still experience the pain that comes with the injury. And if I left them behind, there was no telling what they would do. Actually, that's not true; they would definitely leave the barrier and try to follow me. They'd leave the carriage with Aral, Ellie, and Fria behind too... If I sealed them inside, they'd probably go wild and try to break out.

I couldn't leave such young kids alone by themselves, even if there was a barrier covering them. After Hang and Scary left the barrier, I could make it so it also prevented anyone inside from leaving it, in addition to keeping others from entering, but I wasn't sure if three kids who weren't even ten years old could endure waiting for us to come back when they wouldn't even know if or when we'd return.

The impending darkness of night... Distant, eerie howls of monsters... We're nowhere in sight, even after a day or two have passed... And the sight of fervent beasts and monsters surrounding the barrier... Yeah, that would be terrifying.

I thought it would still have been fine if Hang and Scary were around. Those two were pretty responsible for their age, and having big horses nearby to protect them would probably give the kids a great sense of safety. Plus, there was no way we'd just go somewhere else without coming back for Hang and Scary, so the kids would be reassured that we weren't going to abandon them.

They may not think it strange for someone to abandon some orphans, but they definitely wouldn't think anyone would leave two fine horses and a carriage behind. Though, the whole reason we were here was to find and help orphan kids, so that wouldn't really make sense... But I couldn't blame them if they felt that way, considering they'd been betrayed by adults so many times at such a young age...

All right!

"Change of plans! We're putting Merkava away, and we're all gonna go look for Lucy on Hang and Scary! *Hang, Scary, can you guys each carry three of us and walk through the forest?*"

The last part was directed at Hang and Scary in the language of horses.

"Not a problem! Compared to carrying soldiers with full armor and weapons, three kids will be like nothing at all!"

"Exactly! We shall run through the roadless forest as if it were an empty field of grass!"

"Ah... No running, please..."

Hang and Scary had replied with great confidence, but running in the forest would have been a bad idea. But hadn't Scary said something like that earlier...? Maybe it was his catchphrase or something. Anyway...

"All right, then; everyone off of the carriage. Just carry your canteen with you, okay?"

I didn't want to use my ability every time someone became thirsty, and my potion creation power was supposed to be a secret.

And so, I put Merkava away, put the kids on Hang and Scary's backs, then Reiko and I each hopped on...

Off we go!

Hang said he'd run as if we were on an empty field of grass, but we just kind of... clopped along at a much slower pace than usual. If we rushed through a place like this, we'd fall over after just a few steps and break a bunch of bones for sure.

Lucy had gone ahead of us, but she was only seven, so we should be able to catch up before she got through the forest. Yes, I know we could have followed the road, looped around to the other side of the forest, and waited for her to come out. It would have been many times faster for a carriage to run down a road compared to a seven-year-old making her way through a forest.

But that method only would have worked if Lucy was capable of overcoming monsters,

beasts, injuries, hunger, thirst, fear, her pursuers, and everything else in her path to get through the forest safely. It was highly unlikely that the thugs following her would enter the forest, but the chance of that happening wasn't zero.

And even if we were sure Lucy was going to be safe, we still would have chosen this route. Whether she could get through the forest or not, I wasn't gonna let a little girl spend the night in a forest trembling in fear without doing anything about it! And, of course, there was no guarantee that Lucy would be able to make her way out of the forest unharmed.

In fact, it was far more likely that she wouldn't. This wasn't Japan. Monsters and wild beasts lurked within forests in this world. Not to mention, I had no idea how well-equipped Lucy was. She'd need water, food, camping gear, medicine, and more... I had to get to her as fast as possible. In short, we had no choice but to choose this route. So choose this route we did!

“Lady Kaoru, we should proceed a bit more to the left!”

“Huh? But this route leads straight through the forest from one side of the road to the other. Lucy must have spent a long time researching her escape route, so I'm sure she would go this way...” I said in response to Mine's suggestion, then...

“Yes, but if there are any pursuers, they would think the exact same thing, so Lucy would change course. The question is whether she would go right or left. The right side leads back to the road at a point that's a bit farther compared to going in a straight line, which is the quickest way through. The left side would take us to a point that's a bit closer...”

“Then wouldn't she go to the right so she wouldn't lose any distance?”

“Yes, but the pursuers would think the same thing, and I don't think Lucy ever intended on getting through the forest using the quickest route. If she had, she could have ended up getting caught the moment she got back on the main road. I suspect she will hide in the forest for a few days until her pursuers give up...”

“The hell?! Are you kids in the special forces or something?!”

Seriously, what's up with them... They're scaring me here!

But considering they had received the same education and lived together for many

years, her way of thinking would be much closer to Lucy's than whatever we could come up with. Regardless of whether it was logically sound or not, it was the most likely option that Lucy might take.

“...Okay. Let’s go a bit more to the left.”

I gave the instruction to Hang and Scary to change course a bit, using a compass to make sure we didn’t lose our sense of direction in the forest. Of course, there was a potion inside it. I asked Mine how Lucy would keep track of her direction, and she said there were several methods, like using the sun, stars, tree stumps, and more...

According to her, counting the rings of a tree wasn’t a very accurate method because it varied depending on the topography and environment, but using it as a point of reference was better than nothing. Supposedly, she learned all this from the original director of the orphanage... Seriously, who the hell was he?!

“Stop!”

Ellie, who had been staring straight ahead from Scary’s back this whole time, suddenly shouted for us to stop. Hang and Scary couldn’t understand our language, but they were intelligent enough to make decisions based on the situation, so they stopped in place without me needing to translate the order.

“That broken tree branch is unnatural. It’s too high up for a small animal to break. And if it was a large animal that broke it, there should be more obvious traces. That means it’s highly likely that within the past few days, a tall animal—perhaps a bipedal one, like a human child—could have passed through...”

“You too?!”

I guess they were all birds of a feather...

Scary, who was carrying Ellie on his back, led the way to follow the traces left on the branches and grass. Then...

“Oh, it leads this way...”

Even I could tell there were traces of something having passed through the vegetation. Just as I said it out loud...

“Those were purposely left there as misdirection. It’s too obvious. The real path is this way. There are faint traces of someone having covered up their passing.”

“Gimme a break...”

Fine, you kids handle it! I'll just shut up and follow, okay?!

“The traces end here. She may have moved between branch to branch, or made makeshift stilts with wood and vines to get across...”

Yeah, yeah...

I had already gotten used to it.

“Kaoru, were the Eyes of the Goddess like this too?” Reiko asked.

“Like hell they were!” I immediately snapped back.



"She said 'the Eyes of the Goddess'..."

"She sure did..."

"Hm? Did you say something, Aral, Mine?"

"No, nothing!" they replied in unison.

The kids were whispering among themselves, but there was nothing wrong with that. It was natural for employees to complain or talk crap about their employer, and it was even healthy to do so from time to time. I hoped they weren't saying anything *too* bad about me...

"Ellie, do you see any traces of someone going after Lucy?"

Monsters and beasts were dangerous, but the biggest threat to Lucy was human pursuers. With monsters and beasts, there weren't really issues as long as they didn't lock on to you as prey. But with human pursuers, she would be their target from the get-go, and they would persistently hound her and attack.

"I don't see anything so far. If several adults had rushed through a forest without regard for leaving traces behind, there would be some obvious marks. However, this only means that we haven't found any signs of anyone having pursued Lucy yet. That doesn't necessarily mean they haven't run into her via a different course, or that we haven't simply missed any evidence that they left behind..."

Is this girl really ten years old?! Anyway, we need to catch up to her, quick...

"Having said that, she's probably fine," she added.

"Huh?"

"A normal thug wouldn't go into a forest to go after a seven-year-old girl. Considering the order was to find her dead or alive, I doubt her pursuers are licensed hunters. A guard wouldn't accept a job like this either. That means they have to be goons who didn't measure up as soldiers or guards. Someone like that couldn't last several days in a forest, conducting a search without the proper know-how or equipment. No, they would just stick to the main road for their search. And even if they did enter the forest, Lucy would notice their talking and noises before they saw her. It won't be easy to find a seven-year-old hiding in the bushes or behind a tree."

Mine and Fria nodded along to Ellie's explanation.

"..."

Reiko and I found ourselves at a loss for words. The blank look on Aral's face was actually comforting to see. Come to think of it, he wasn't from that mysterious orphanage. He was one of us! Good, good...

I patted Aral on the head, and he smiled happily.

Well, aren't you adorable...

Mine, Aral, and I were seated on Hang in that order, so I could pat him as much as I wanted. Though, Mine was looking back at us and staring intensely at Aral and me for some reason... She's gonna hurt her neck and back positioned like that... Maybe she was worried I had taken the "big sister" role from her?

More importantly, we had to keep moving forward...

We moved to a spot where the trees were more sparse, and I pulled the carriage and tent out from the Item Box to prepare for camping. We could recline the seats back to turn them into a comfortable bed, but there wasn't enough room for six kids with just the Merkava alone, so I brought out Panzer too. I also brought out the big tent to use as a spot to eat and hang out after dinner.

It was already pre-built, of course, so all I had to do was pull it out. I would put it back away when we went to sleep, so we didn't dig a drainage ditch or secure it to the ground with pegs. It was strictly just for eating and chatting.

I then gave Hang and Scary some fodder. It was a mixture of oats, soy, pulses, and hay, with some healing potion sprinkled on top. For dessert, they had all the apples, corn, carrots, and sugar cubes they wanted. I heard horses could get diabetes if they were fed too much sugar, but they wouldn't have to worry about disease as long as they were with me.

I then brought out a cooking table, tools, water tank, and ingredients, and started the prep work. Since we were in a forest, I avoided using fire to prevent starting a forest fire, attracting monsters, or alerting any possible pursuers, so it would be a simple meal without any grilling or simmering. We had already camped several times since picking up Ellie and Fria, so they were used to it by now. Just like with Mine and Aral,

we already told them Reiko and I were mages, so there were no problems on that end.

We had already made good time getting from the city to the forest on the main road, so we should have made quicker progress than Lucy even after we entered the forest. If we kept this up, we might even catch up to her tomorrow. I wanted to make sure this would be the last time a little girl like her spent the night all alone in a place like this. That was my hope and my duty.

As per the request by the orphanage trio, Mine, Ellie, and Fria slept in Merkava together. That left Reiko, Aral, and I in Panzer. It seemed kind of imbalanced, but they probably wanted to have a chat with just the girls from the orphanage. It might have made me sad if it was split between the four kids in one group and Reiko and I in the other, but we had no complaints since Aral was with us. And so, I decided to tell some Japanese nursery tales arranged for this world's setting to Aral, who usually spent his time stuck to Mine.

"...So, I know it sounds questionable, but we're going to act as if Lady Kaoru and Lady Reiko are mages. Whatever you do, don't call them goddesses or angels!"

Ellie and Fria nodded in response to Mine inside Merkava.

"Also, this 'mage' story is only for us Little Silver employees. To others, they're supposed to be charitable rich aristocrats who bought out an old orphanage and just hired orphans for fun."

They nodded again.

"So, once we get Lucy, we'll all swear loyalty to them, then we'll teach everything we taught from Daddy to Aral, and we'll all seize a happy life together!"

"Yeaah!" the girls cried out together.



YEEEEEEEEEAAH!



Meanwhile, Aral was laughing happily as Kaoru and Reiko played with him, completely oblivious to what awaited him...

The next day, we had a quick breakfast with some precooked food from the Item Box, then put the two carriages away and got moving. We wouldn't be able to make any progress once the sun set, so we needed to find Lucy as soon as possible after it got bright. I didn't want to end up saying, "If only we left ten minutes earlier..." or "If only we left right away instead of drinking tea..." and dealing with regret.

And so, we continued on with our search and pursuit, taking breaks and meals in between, and once the sun started getting ready to set...

"I'll try calling for Lucy."

"Huh?"

Ellie had suddenly spoken up, seeming to suspect that we were getting closer. It didn't seem like any thugs were actually coming after her, and it wouldn't be too big of a deal if there were. The most important thing right now was to find Lucy as soon as possible and make sure she was safe. She wouldn't be able to hear us from far away even if we called her name in this forest, but we should be able to spot a child from a closer range than our voices would carry. We could always quench ourselves with potions if our throats went dry, so we figured it was better to try it out.

"Oh, okay, then. Go for it!"

Kids' voices have a higher frequency than adults', so... wait, everyone in this group was probably about the same in that sense.

Piiiiiiiiii!

She whistled with her fingers?!

She wouldn't end up killing her throat this way, and the sound carried much farther than her voice could. But even if Lucy did hear it, she would need to recognize that it was a signal from her allies.

"I whistle at a specific tempo, so she'll know that we're friends," Mine whispered next

to my ear as if she understood what I was thinking.

“Oh... Right...”

...Seriously, what's with you kids?!



Ellie and Mine occasionally sounded their finger whistles as we advanced forward. Although Fria could do it too, she wasn't as good as the other two, so she let them handle it. Considering Lucy's life was in danger, it made sense to let the ones most suited to the task take care of it.

Many Japanese people could whistle with their lips, but not many of them could whistle with their fingers. Most people could in places like America, though... Maybe it was because America was a big place, so they needed to use it as a way to signal others when they got lost or something? They should make finger whistling a thing in Japan, in case people get attacked at night or lost while climbing or camping...

And after the finger whistles were sounded several times...

Piiiiiiii!

I thought I heard a similar, faint whistling noise from somewhere else.

"It's Lucy. That signal means 'Healthy, no problems.' It came from that way. Let us hurry!"

"Oh... Right..."

Seriously!!!

Hoot! Hoot, hoot!

As we moved toward the whistling noise that had responded to us, we started hearing some sort of nocturnal bird, like an owl.

"She's close."

Reiko and I shared a silent glance.

They even had signals for that...? Though, it was true that enemies would be less likely to catch on if you signaled with bird noises. Maybe they learned it in the girl scouts or something?

By the way, I wonder if "girl scout" came from scouting girls with significant talent, or because girls were trained to become scouts? They're probably both wrong...

They continued to signal and adjusted our trajectory accordingly, then...

“I’m in here!”

I heard a young girl’s voice from a nearby bush.

“Lucy!”

“Ellie?”

“Mine and Fria are here too!”

“Thank goodness...”

Lucy must have known that a friend, maybe someone from the orphanage, was trying to communicate with her, but she seemed relieved from the bottom of her heart to finally confirm it. She may have been brave, but it had to have been terribly lonely for a seven-year-old girl to spend the night in a dangerous forest by herself.

Then, I heard the bushes rustle...

“Ellie, Mine, Fria!”

The silhouette that jumped out of the bushes leapt into Ellie’s arms.

“Sorry for the wait!”

“You’re here! You’re here! Ah... Waaahhhh!”

Lucy finally seemed to let herself relax, and her emotions came pouring out as she cried. I couldn’t blame her. She must have been fighting so desperately with her mind on high alert the whole time...

Ellie and Mine were crying too. It had to be tough for them too, since they had been sold off...

“So, who’s coming to rescue us?” Lucy asked once she calmed down.

“Huh?”

Ellie looked at her with a confused stare.

"Oh, I mean, where are the adults? You guys are here to guide the party, right? Aren't there adults to protect us against monsters and wild beasts?"

Ah...

That was a logical assumption.

"There aren't any. It's just us," Mine interjected.

"Huh? What? Whaaaaaat?"

Lucy's mouth hung open in disbelief.

"Then if it came to a fight with monsters, beasts, or my pursuers, we aren't much better off than when I was alone! They'd just be happy that there's extra prey for them!"

Yes, I understand, Lucy... Wait, what's that?

"Lucy, your foot..."

"Oh, I sprained it... I must have been dragging it since, then cut it open on a sharp rock or something..."

There were vines wrapped all around Lucy's left ankle to keep it immobilized, but I could see they were stained with blood.

"Didn't you signal that you were healthy and there weren't any issues?" I asked, and Lucy made a suspicious face.

"...Ellie? Who's this kid?"

Oof!

A seven-year-old called me a "kid"...

"They are Lady Kaoru and Lady Reiko, the people who saved us. They're business owners, and they hired us to work at their office, Little Silver. Oh, and this is Aral, a boy I brought with me during my escape. He's from a different orphanage than us, but

he has a similar background," Mine said, jumping in to concisely introduce everyone new to Lucy.

Then...

"...Business owners?"

Yeah, it made sense that that part would raise an eyebrow, considering we looked like we were twelve...

"Whaaaaat?! You own a business at your age?! And you got our old orphanage in a hostile takeover?"

"Like hell I did! I paid good money for that place!"

We had moved a small distance away into a little space between some trees to sit down and explain the situation to Lucy. She had had that sudden outburst while we were explaining how we had met Mine.

"I-I'm sorry, she can be a bit hasty at times... Lucy, you need to let others finish talking before you go off like that! You'll bring all kinds of monsters if you raise your voice in the forest at night like that!"

"Eep!"

Lucy made a startled noise and quieted down, not because of the part about the monsters, but because she saw the look on Ellie and Mine's faces. Yeah, their expressions were scary, all right.

What? My face looks scarier? Shaddap!

It was remarkable how Mine and Ellie seemed deeply grateful to Reiko and I for saving them, though. Moreover, they knew that the futures of all five orphans, including Mine, Aral, and Lucy, rested on our shoulders, so they couldn't stand idly by as Lucy made comments that could upset us. Of course, Reiko and I weren't bothered in the least by a child's careless remarks.

"But just look at her, this lady has the face of an evil villain..."

Everyone suddenly went quiet.

“Why won’t anyone deny that?!”



Lucy finally seemed to understand once we finished explaining.

"I look forward to having a wonderful relationship with you," she said.

What, are we getting married or something?!

I mean, I hadn't even agreed to hire her yet... She was probably saying that to speak it into existence before I said otherwise. She knew what she was doing. Of course, I was already planning on hiring her from the get-go.

...Wait! What am I, stupid?!

I hadn't done anything about Lucy's foot! She acted as if it didn't bother her, so I ended up getting too busy talking and forgot all about it. There was no way she wasn't in pain. In fact, it had to hurt really bad. So much so that she couldn't walk without wrapping ivy tightly around it and dragging her foot. She had even cut it open on a rock. It was painful just looking at the purplish, blackish, swollen mess.

"Show me your foot!"

"What...?"

"Just do it! Let me see your left foot!"

Lucy seemed hesitant as I demanded to see her foot. Maybe she was afraid of what I would do, or she was just being modest. Mine gave her an encouraging look, and she gingerly extended her injured foot toward me. I was careful not to touch her damaged ankle and supported her calf from below as I assessed the injury.

"Didn't you signal that you didn't have any problems?"

"I mean, this isn't anything I can't handle. It's not a deadly injury, and it wasn't as if I was immobilized, even if it did slow me down a bit."

Was she stupid or something? It would only get worse if she ignored it and could cause permanent damage. Bacteria could get in the wound, making it fester or giving her tetanus. So... I quickly reached into my bag.

Healing potion, come out!

I then took hold of a potion bottle inside the bag.

"Here, pour this on it!"

With that, I pulled the potion out to hand her. Two bottles, just in case. One was for pouring onto her wound, and one was for her to drink, just in case bacteria had gotten in her body already. Just drinking it would have sufficed, but it would have been suspicious if her wound healed up just from taking oral medicine.

However, Lucy didn't accept the bottle I offered. Maybe she didn't want to use the medicine when she had no idea what it was, or maybe she was afraid I would force her to work without pay for years in order to make up a heavy price. I couldn't blame her. These kids had gone through far too much to easily trust a stranger they had just met.

So, I had no choice. I decided to do it myself. I opened the potion bottle, then gently poured the contents over Lucy's left foot. First, I went over the gash she had cut on a rock. Then, onto her swollen sprain... Finally, I gave her the other bottle to drink. I practically had to force it down her throat.

"What...?"

She stared blankly.

"Ah..."

Shock overcame Lucy's face as her wounds healed before her eyes, while Mine and Aral looked unsurprised, Ellie and Fria stared wide-eyed, and Reiko looked exasperated.

"Ang—Urp!"

"Go—Erg!"

Mine covered Ellie's mouth as she was about to say something, and Aral followed suit by covering up Fria's mouth. Ang? Go? What were they about to say? And why had Mine and Aral covered their mouths in such a fluster? Meanwhile, Lucy still hadn't moved an inch...



GOD-

DESS

“We’ll be camping here tonight.”

Everyone nodded. With their agreement, we settled on this place for our camping spot. It was near the place we had found Lucy, where the trees were spaced out somewhat sparsely.

I brought the carriage out as usual, followed by the pre-built tent, cooking table, water tank, food ingredients, chairs and tables, and more... We decided to have the kids sleep in the two carriages while Reiko and I slept in the tent. I could already tell we wouldn’t be able to sleep with the kids getting excited and catching up on what they’d been up to.

Anyway, I could worry about that later. First, it was time for dinner!

...Are they really trying to keep it a secret?

Hmm... Well, whatever the case, I think we should still pretend not to notice for a while... Isn’t that how it is in the stories? The characters take a long time to catch on, even if the secret is glaringly obvious.

Ah, guess so...

“Aral, Mine, did you say something?”

“No, nothing!” they replied in unison.

“Oh? Then let’s get started on dinner. You kids help too, okay?”

For some reason, the three newcomers looked frantic as they nodded.

The next morning, we had a quick breakfast with some ready-to-eat stuff from the Item Box and departed right away. Lucy’s safety was guaranteed now that we had grouped up with her, but we couldn’t let such young children spend too many nights camping in the forest.

As such, our plan was to go straight out the other side of the forest and onto the main road, then head directly to Little Silver. Of course, we would have to camp out on the side of the road, stop at an inn in town, and check on the trading company where Mine

used to work, so it wasn't really a direct route...

Either way, Little Silver only handled dried and smoked food along with nonessential grocery items, so taking a week or two off wouldn't cause any trouble for anyone. We even had official support from the local lord, so we could stay out even longer if we wanted. Besides, it was completely normal to take a few days or even a few weeks off to stock up on goods in this world. Of course, that didn't really apply to Little Silver, considering we could restock locally without issues. Anyway...

"Stop!"

Whoa!

Hang and Scary came to an abrupt halt in response to Reiko's order in their language. We had been going at a pretty easy pace, so the stop wasn't too jarring for the riders. Mine, Aral, and Fria were riding on Hang, while Ellie and Lucy were riding on Scary. Four riders was a bit too much, so Reiko and I were walking. Boohoo...

Mine insisted on walking so Reiko and I could ride horseback, but I ordered her as her employer to get her butt on Hang's back. Sure, it was a bit strange for them to be on horseback while their bosses walked on foot, but maybe she was more worried that we were too frail to be walking through the forest. She probably thought she could handle it, having been through hardships as an orphan...

That might be true under normal circumstances, but we had potions for recovering from fatigue, so it wasn't an issue. We might cut ourselves on plants and small trees, but my potions would make quick work of those wounds too.

All hail potions!

"Four medium-sized monsters approaching quickly! They're heading right for us! Group up, everyone!"

Reiko gave the order after detecting monsters with her magic, and I brought Hang and Scary closer with the kids still on their backs. With this done, Reiko cast her spell.

"Barrier!"

There was really no need to call out her spells like that, but we decided it would be better to name them out loud whenever possible to give the kids a sense of safety and

to emphasize what kind of magic they were being protected by at the time. Honestly, though, the real reason was because it sounded cooler that way.

Of course, if we were dealing with humans and we didn't want them to know what we were up to, she would have opted to stay silent. My potions weren't all that useful at times like these... It wasn't that they were useless, though! I could patch us up right away, so we could shrug off any injury as long as we didn't die outright, which was incredibly reassuring to know.

But when it came to enemy ambushes or self-defense, my potions weren't always the best option. If a monster jumped at us from behind a tree at breakneck speeds, I couldn't just create a nitroglycerin-like potion and catch it in a well-placed explosion. The monster-warding medicine was useful for sprinkling around the camp at night, but it wasn't all that helpful while in motion, and although its smell triggered a sense of aversion, monsters would attack us anyway if they saw some soft, easy-looking prey. Like they were now.

Firearm-type potion containers? No way! I'd probably end up shooting my own allies in the back or blowing up my own finger. Besides, I wasn't some sharpshooter capable of instantaneously landing a shot on a monster or beast that leapt at me from behind a tree at close range.

Not to mention, I didn't like the idea of using a gun in my daily life. I was fine with getting a little wild with the Goddess's miracles or bringing down the Angel's wrath. Such powers were completely and utterly out of reach for mere humans. But what if someone saw me using a gun? They would think, "I could be just as powerful if I have that thing." I couldn't have that.

Still, I knew I couldn't be picky like that when it came down to it. In the meantime, I have Reiko. So there. The right person for the right job. We would each do what we were good at to cover each other's weaker points. That was enough for now.

"Ray Gun!"

Pew, pew, pew, pew!

As soon as the opponents came into view, Reiko formed the shape of a gun with her index finger outstretched and thumb up, then shot a beam from her pointing finger. I wasn't sure if it was supposed to be a laser or maser, but ray guns, heat guns, and

blasters were pretty common in science fiction novels. The military was even working on using them as practical weapons... Though, maybe the technology had already been in common use by civilians by the time Reiko had died. I decided to ask her about it later...

But come to think of it, I wouldn't really call that magic... Though, they do say that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. It probably had nothing to do with the Reiko Hadoken. Probably.

"Wow!"

"She took down a forest wolf in an instant..."

"Amazing, Lady Ang... I mean, Lady Mage!"

"A-mage-ing!"

The heck is that...?



And so, we went back to moving forward. Maybe it was because we were moving loudly and in a big group, but we ran into some more monsters and beasts, even though Lucy had been able to evade them by moving quietly by herself. Anyway, Reiko made quick work of them without issues. Such convenience! Every household should have its very own Reiko.

Now that Lucy had joined us, there was no need for her to kill time in the forest to avoid anyone who might be going after her. As such, we had changed course a bit to the right to save some time, then moved out of the forest and back onto the main road.

Since the sun was already starting to set, we had decided to camp by the side of the road and get back on the carriage tomorrow. We had settled on a spot that was some way into the forest and out of sight of the road, rather than using the empty lot that was intended for travelers to camp overnight.

I brought out both Merkava and Panzer for the kids to use instead of tents. Reiko and I were just going to use the tent again, but we could deal with it later. It wasn't as if it needed any set-up, so we could just bring it out right before it was time to sleep. I decided to spray some repellent for monsters, beasts, and bugs around the campsite, then got ready for dinner.

I didn't want to use fire much in the forest, and since it could also attract unwanted guests, I began pulling out some raw vegetables and fruits from storage. This was the first time I'd be making Lucy a proper meal.

All right, let's do this!

I brought out a simple furnace, a cooking table, a grill, and other items, then got to work cutting and grilling a bunch of meat and vegetables. The kids were giddy with excitement. This was probably the first time they had experienced something like this. Not just the food quality, but this sort of event.

After some time, a delicious scent filled the air...

Hm?

I thought I felt someone staring at us from the other side of the kids...

“Whoa!”

There she is.



There was a long, silent pause.

"Leia..."

Yes, it was Celes's cousin... though, she was even more useless than our airheaded Celes due to her being a low-level, inferior offspring. This problem... child, was staring directly at me... no, at the barbecue table.

Ah...

"Fine, fine, you can join us for dinner. So? Why are you here?"

I mean, I did have a hunch...

"Really? Yay! Well, I was watching you so I could gather more intel, but the food looked so good..."

Leia's initial, child-like reply seemed like her honest reaction, but she immediately assumed her arrogant demeanor afterward. That said, she did seem to be much less of a pain compared to when I had first met her.

She was probably incredibly old, just like Celes, but that only really applied to her core and her higher-grade offspring. Even if she had vast memories and incredible powers, it was just recently that this offspring with human-level intelligence came to be. This one's body was probably far superior to ours, but it wasn't as if she was as tough as steel or anything...

Plus, she didn't want to use her mysterious powers out of fear of being found by Celes. That was why she had bugged me for money despite having the ability to do anything she wanted. She ended up costing me a lot! Hmph! So, it was probably better to just treat her normally without overthinking it.

Celes seemed to be happy about that sort of treatment too. I figured that, unlike our overlords, an entity like the Celes and Leia we knew had lowered their intelligence and mental processing speed to enable themselves to communicate with creatures of the world, and thus possessed emotions that their cores had already lost a long time ago.

That was why Celes had a personal interest in me and even had some feelings for that special someone. These emotions may have been granted to them for the sole purpose

of giving them the ability to communicate with the native creatures of this world, but these emotions were also a part of Celes and Leia, so I didn't think too deeply about it.

Anyway, I introduced Leia to everyone. Of course, I only revealed info about her public persona. The story was that she was supposed to have been sent as our supervisor, but she was also a free-spirited noble girl who wanted to have some fun away from her parents.

"Is she an angel too?"

"Who knows... She may just be a relative of Lady Kaoru or Lady Reiko. I doubt the Goddess would turn just anyone into an angel..."

"I see..."

"What was that?"

"Nothing!" they replied in unison.

Maybe it was just my imagination...

Anyway, it would be a good experience for Leia to spend some time with other kids who appeared to be around her age. It would be great if she could develop some love for us so-called lower beings, even if it was something akin to the love one might have for their pet.

I got back to cooking to get everyone excited again, but then...

"Hey now, that's some tasty-lookin' food you're eating here..."

What now?!

Actually, I had just started grilling, and we hadn't started eating yet. Not that it mattered.

In any case, some suspicious-looking men appeared before us. There were four of them, each looking like a stereotypical thug you'd see in stories. Maybe these were the guys looking for Lucy?



CHAPTER 60

ENEMY

"A bunch of kids and two expensive-looking horses? Where are the parents? Come on now, this is way too careless..."

"There are so many kids here, they can't have anything to do with that brat we're looking for, right?"

"Damn, guess not..."

"I totally thought it'd be the brat we were told to find when I saw the fire between the trees some ways off from the camping lot..."

Ah... So they saw my cooking fire...

I had positioned the furnace with the direction of the wind in mind, which ended up making the fire easily visible from the road. I messed up... I had even read that one ninja manga that says, "Positioning yourself downwind was your blunder!" so many times...

Damn it!

And it seemed that these guys were the ones after Lucy after all. But since they didn't have a photo or drawing to reference, they had probably only been told about her hair color and were looking for a ragged-looking seven-year-old walking along the road by herself. I mean, it was highly unlikely that they'd find anyone like that other than Lucy.

In any case, even though one of the eight kids on the ground happened to have the same hair color as Lucy, they wouldn't think it's actually her. Six of the eight were between the ages of six and ten, after all... Of course, they probably figured me and Reiko were about twelve or thirteen too. It made no sense for a bunch of children like us to be traveling by ourselves, so they would naturally assume we were only temporarily separated from the adults.

"What the... the hell is up with you lot..."

That sounded awfully close to what I had said several times in the past few days. I wondered why the words came out of the thug's mouth.

"A bunch of strange men approach you at night, and you all look completely unfazed! Shouldn't you be more scared or cautious?! And you! Why are you still grilling meat and vegetables as if nothing's happening?!"

Oh, me? I mean, a hooligan or four don't actually pose any threat...

We had Reiko's barrier and offensive magic, my nitroglycerin-like material, the ability to create poison in their bodies, and more. I didn't fare well against enemies who could swiftly ambush me, but I could easily handle humans who weren't moving around. That said, they hadn't attacked us yet, so I wasn't going to do anything yet either.

As for Lucy, these guys only accepted the job and intended to carry it out, but that didn't necessarily mean we had to strike first, even if they had accepted a job from outside official guild channels.

If these guys only intended to capture Lucy and hand her over to their client, it would mean they had just accepted a request to capture a servant who had run away before paying off her dues, and accepting that job wasn't illegal in itself. The only illicit activity here was the fake request that had been submitted by the merchant.

Even though the conditions stated to bring her back dead or alive, they probably wouldn't go out of their way to kill a girl they had captured alive, and it was unlikely that they would need to kill her out of necessity upon catching her. The conditions of the job could simply be interpreted as, "You'll get paid even if you find her corpse," so that part wasn't all too strange.

Anyway, did that guy call himself and his group "a bunch of strange men"? I guess he is self-aware...

"...Hey, give us that food."

What? Give you the food? Like all of it? Are you stupid?

"No, thanks!"

"Get lost."

“Inferior creatures...”

Me, Reiko, and Leia delivered a triple combo Jet Stream Attack.

“What!”

“Fuckin’ brats!”

“You think this is a joke?”

The only joke here is you clowns...

“Hey, how about we forget about the request and take them instead? Eight brats and two fine horses. They’ll fetch a good price. Much better than the one kid we were asked to find,” the fourth man said, as if he had just come up with a great idea.

“Hey, that’s a great idea!” his fellow thugs replied at once.

Oh boy...

I had given them the benefit of the doubt and interpreted their actions as being from ordinary people who just happened to accept a request to find a servant who ran away, but they had just leveled up to being obvious criminals guilty of serious crimes like human trafficking and child kidnapping.

Or maybe it should be considered “leveled down” instead of “leveled up.”

“Then let’s get this over with before their parents get back. Not that it’ll matter as long as we take them hostage. They only have themselves to blame for leaving kids all by themselves. Ha ha, this is gonna get us a much bigger payday compared to catching just one kid! That brat must have gone into the forest, seeing as she wasn’t on the road, but there’s no way she’d survive a few days in there alone. Probably ended up getting eaten by monsters already. Let’s forget about that runt and make a killing with this haul! These two horses and the rest will give us enough money to live like kings for a while!”

“Sounds good to me! Ha ha ha!”

Although he said they could take us hostage if the adults arrived, he would prefer not to deal with that at all. No parent would just watch and do nothing as their children

were being taken away. They might resist on the spot, follow the kidnappers in secret, report the incident to some nearby guards, or any number of other things. It was highly likely that they would try to get this over with quickly.

These men were clearly enemies. The moment they tried to lay hands on us, they would be condemned as guilty. Reiko was already lecturing the kids on safety measures, so they wouldn't be in any danger. I watched to see what our opponents would do...

"How about we tie them up, eat the cooked meat real quick, and get on outta here?"

"Let's go with that!"

They should prioritize leaving this place as soon as possible, but they wanted to eat first? Were they that hungry? Oh, but if they had been searching for Lucy over several days, they must have only had portable rations to eat. They could refill their water at a nearby stream or spring, but...

"All right, you all better stay quiet and... Ow!"

The man who seemed to be the leader among the four approached us with his right hand outstretched, then slammed his finger painfully into an invisible force.

"Wh-What? What did I just run into? Huh? Th-There's something here?"

Yes, he had just run into the invisible barrier, courtesy of Reiko.

"What's happened?"

"Stop fucking around!"

The others moved in closer, then...

"Ow!"

"Agh!"

"Th-The hell?!"

As expected, the same thing happened again.

"Confirmed: The declaration of an intent to commit a crime and an attempt to put it into action," Reiko stated in a flat, emotionless tone.

"The prerequisites for the rules of engagement have been cleared. Attack at will," I followed in a similarly flat tone of voice.

Yup, they had stepped over the line first. We had no reason to hold back now. I mean, it wasn't like we were going to kill them or anything, but...

"I can kill 'em on my own!"

Wait, shaddap!

"What is this thing?!"

"It's some... invisible... wall..."

The four rowdy men suddenly quieted down at once. Then...

"...I-It wasn't me. I don't have anything to do with this."

"Me neither. I was just looking for a lost kid because Eilas asked me to help. That's all I know! Really!"

"M-Me too! I was just helping because Eilas asked me! I don't know anything!"

"Y-You bastards..."

The man who had first approached us was apparently called Eilas, and he went pale with fear at the sudden betrayal, then red with anger. I mean, they had just run into some kids who were protected by an invisible wall. That could only mean they were purehearted children under the protection of the Goddess, like in the fairy tales, or it was the work of some mage.

And if a mage was responsible... There were mages who stood for justice and mages who did evil in the world. According to common knowledge among the general population, that is. But it didn't really matter which one it was, since you'd be in trouble either way if a mage became your enemy. The only thing that awaited a mage's enemy was death and destruction. According to common knowledge among the general population, that is.

And if the invisible force was a blessing from the Goddess... The Goddess here was *the Celes*. Everyone knew that if you got on her bad side, you should abandon all hope. It was no wonder the thugs immediately tried to blame someone else and retreat...

“Damn it! No wonder the kids were left alone here with magic like this... Hey, I know, we’ll be fine as long as we get outta here before the parents get back! It’s not like these brats have any power, and we can grab them as soon as they step out from behind the wall. That means they can’t come after us to go get their parents. I mean, there’s a chance we could just pretend to run away and wait to ambush them as soon as they move away from the wall...”

Ah, so they’re taking the psychological approach. Nice try. But too bad!

“Minor Lightning Strike!”

Zap!

The leader-looking man, Eilas, went stiff as a board as he was struck by Reiko’s lightning magic, then fell to the ground. There was dirt and grass here, so he wouldn’t get hurt too badly by the impact.

“What?! It’s not just the parents that are mages, but the kids too...?”

“No, if their parents are mages, of course they’d teach their kids magic. Nothing weird about that!”

“Good! We’re lucky this has nothing to do with the Goddess!”

Ah, that last guy did kind of have a point...

Reiko’s magic was very convenient for times like these. In my case, it was hard for me to hold back my powers. The nitroglycerin-like material was a bit extreme, and it was hard to use it to pacify people without blowing up their heads...

And I was hesitant to use anesthetics unless it was against bandits or people who no one would miss if they died, since I may end up accidentally stopping their hearts or their breathing. These guys may be thugs and criminals, but I wasn’t sure if they had gone as far as murdering people before.

Anyway...

“Minor Lightning Strike!”

“Gyaaaaaa!”

We decided to capture them.

“Barrier off!”

Having defeated all the thugs, Reiko dispelled her barrier. Now we just had to tie them up... but would they be cooperative and walk to the city with us?

I want to hand them over to the guards after crossing the border, but even the closest city is... wait, duh! If we use two carriage... wait, we only have two horses, and all the carriages need two horses to draw them! Damn...

Reiko took the ropes that had been removed from the Item Box, and the kids approached the downed thugs. It seemed Leia wanted to watch, since she also walked closer to them. Neither Reiko nor I had the skill to tie up grown men in such a way that they couldn't undo the rope.

But these kids... Ha ha ha... Just what did the original director want these kids to be?

“Ah!”

Huh?

I had let the rope-tying professionals (the kids) do their work and began preparing the barbecue, while Reiko checked inside the Item Box for some dessert.

And when I turned around to the sound of the kids screaming... I saw the leader of the group, Eilas, charging directly toward Leia with a dagger in hand.

Reiko had cast Minor Lightning Strike on him before, but it seemed she had held back too much to avoid killing him, he had some resistance to electricity, or he had just endured it through sheer willpower. I glanced at Reiko, but her reaction was delayed due to being preoccupied with the Item Box before she noticed him. My potions couldn't do anything in time, and I wouldn't be able to accurately spawn them on a quickly moving target.

But there was no need to panic. He must have seen that Leia was exceptionally pretty

among the group, the only one dressed like a noble girl, with beautiful, long hair that reached her waist, which was impossible for poor children to maintain due to money and time constraints. Considering this, he must have assumed she was clearly the child of the mage and the one who cast the attack magic from earlier. Reiko had vocalized the spell name, but she said it quietly, so they may not have heard her from that far away.

So he must have thought that by getting Leia under control, he would not only render the rest of the kids powerless, but he could use her as a hostage against her magic-casting parents, and even sell her off if he successfully kidnapped her.

But that girl is... you know, the same type as Celes.

She probably wouldn't use her powers, so as to not be found by Celes, but even if her body wasn't made of steel or anything, her dynamic visual acuity, physical speed, strength, and other aspects should be far beyond those of a human.

There was nothing to worry about. Leia herself was standing there looking unconcerned. She would probably catch the blade between two fingers with ease, or take him down in one hit...

“Move!”

Fsh!

“What...?” For a moment, I had no idea what had happened.

The thug Eilas had leapt out with a dagger in hand, and Mine stood in his path. Eilas slashed her with his weapon to get rid of the obstacle in his way. The thought that he had to stop and kick Mine's body away to remove the weapon if he had stabbed her, so the sideways swipe was the correct choice, instantly crossed my mind, though it was completely pointless.

My mind must have refocused itself on something trivial, not able to comprehend the reality of the situation. It had all happened in an instant.

“Mine!”

By the time I came to and shouted her name, Eilas was already rolling on the ground, having been rocked by Leia's punch.

“Why...?”

Leia stood there after punching Eilas, staring with wide-eyed disbelief. This shouldn't have affected her at all. She had simply swatted an insect away, and a lower being she had just met got injured. There was no way she would be concerned. Or so I thought...

“Why...?” Leia repeated the same question again.

“Ah!”

Leia finally seemed to snap out of it and ran toward the fallen Mine. She crouched down to place her hand on Mine, but I ran up and grabbed her by the hand to stop her.

“What are you doing?! I need to heal her...”

I was happy to hear that coming from Leia, but I couldn't let her do that.

“That's my job as her employer and the one who planned out this quest. And you don't want to be found by Celes, do you?”

“I don't care about that!!!”

Leia had lost her composure for some reason, but I already had a potion I had created on the sprint here in my left hand. It was faster to make a new one rather than getting one out of the Item Box, and it could be used right away because I created it without a lid in the first place.

So I ignored Leia and poured the contents of the bottle onto Mine's wound, put the empty bottle into the Item Box, then cradled Mine's head as I made her drink the potion I had created in my right hand. I had to relieve Mine of her pain as soon as possible.

“Why did you do something so stupid?!” I shouted, and Mine struggled to keep her eyes open as she replied weakly.

“I-If I let a friend of yours get injured in our presence, I wouldn't be able to face the other orphans... We are counting on you to help many more orphans moving forward... L-Lady Kaoru... Lady Reiko... P-Please... take care of Aral... and the other orphans... Ah... I don't feel any pain anymore... It has been a short while, but our time together was like a lovely dream. Thank you... Now... I'll see you again by the Goddess's

side..."

Smack!

"Ouch!" Mine yelped in pain as I let go of her head, dropping it onto the ground.

"Remember what my occupation is. Of course a mage can cast healing magic!"

"What...?"

Yeah, let's just keep it at that. I mean, she already saw me heal Lucy's foot injury...

"Whaaaaat?!"

Mine felt around her body, shocked that her blade wound had disappeared. Then...

"Ahhhhh! M-My clothes! My precious clothes that Lady Kaoru bought me!!!"

Ah, I couldn't fix that with my potion. I didn't realize she cared so much about the clothes I bought her...

"Why...?"

Oh... Leia was still asking that question.

"Why did you do that?! I wasn't in any danger! You die after just a few decades, and you're still a juvenile that has barely had a chance to live! So why...?"

She seemed really shaken by all this. What was going on...? I figured we were like fleas to her, so whether one of us lived or died shouldn't have concerned her at all...

"What's wrong, Leia? You need to calm down!"

"I had a thought," she said after a brief pause.

Huh?

"I thought, 'I don't want to disappear'..."

"I mean, I don't think anyone does. That's completely normal."

Maybe not for someone like Leia, though.

"No, it's not... Maybe for lower beings, but we never have thoughts like that... I wouldn't disappear just due to a physical phenomenon like earlier, but if I did for whatever reason, I'm just an offspring that branched off far down the line from my core, so it wouldn't affect my main body. And since my memories and experiences will be retrieved at the closest divergence and become a part of the network, my existence won't go to waste. So if I do disappear, it's not a problem."

Leia continued speaking, almost to herself.

"But... when that man came charging at me... Even though I knew that piece of metal wasn't going to do anything... And even though I knew it would be fine if this body was damaged or if I vanished from existence... For a moment... just a moment, I thought... I didn't want to disappear. I've experienced so many things for the first time... Eating, drinking, playing... And those pointless conversations with the lower beings, like the employees at the inn and the other guests... They were... They were..."

Ah... so she had fun.



WAAAAAAAH!



"So why...? You only live for such a short amount of time. You can die so easily. And unlike us, all of your information disappears with you. Everything you learn, the fact that you existed at all, and the meaning behind it, they all vanish from this world. You risked it all just for me, someone you only met a few times and who has nothing to do with you..."

Leia was way too shaken by this. It wasn't like her. More importantly, she was giving out way too much info! Sure, the kids probably couldn't understand any of it... But I couldn't let my guard down, not with those kids...

While we were talking about all this, the children had tied up the thug... no, he had attempted to murder someone, so he was officially a dangerous criminal. I still had to figure out what to do with these guys...

Even Hang and Scary couldn't pull Merkava and Panzer on their own, and even though Penelope seemed light enough for one of them, it only accommodated two riders, so that wouldn't work either. Besides, that would leave no usable carriage for the remaining horse.

Honestly, I didn't feel like making a twelve-person carriage just for this occasion... Even though eight of the twelve were small, light children... including us... it would still be rough with such a height difference and a bumpy road ahead, even if I made the carriage extra light.

"Reiko, what should we... wait, what the hell is that?!"

"What... is that...?"

Reiko didn't seem to know either. A mysterious object floated in the sky.

Yup... that's a UFO.

How could I be so sure? I mean, a UFO is just an unidentified flying object, so that's literally what it was. It wasn't like an alien had to be driving the thing for it to qualify as a UFO.

"So what do you think it is...?"

The metallic-looking orb floated dozens of meters in the air. Actually, maybe it was more like several hundred meters. It was hard to determine its height in the night sky

with no frame of reference, but it seemed to be decently big. Maybe a few dozen meters in diameter? It was clearly out of place in civilization, given its level of development. That's why I had decided to ask for Reiko's opinion, as the one who had the most life experience.

"It could possibly be from another planet, underground, beneath the ocean, the Mu empire, or another dimension entirely. Or maybe it's an AI, a vehicle of the Goddess, or someone who didn't hold back at all when requesting cheat powers," Reiko replied rather sincerely to the question I had asked in my dazed state.

...Wait, but that last one is you.

Celes's duty was to prevent the destruction of the dimensional fabric, so everything else was probably just her killing time. That included the times she warned humans about great disasters or messed with us on a whim. As such, she probably wouldn't be too bothered if aliens or a subterranean species made an appearance. If it was unrelated to her mission, it didn't matter. Celes would never descend in a vehicle like that.

Yeah, it seemed this didn't have anything to do with her. Even so, that thing's appearance here and now couldn't just be a coincidence. Maybe it had detected some energy, wave, or a tremor in time and space that had been emitted by Reiko's earlier electric magic. It was better to prepare for the worst-case scenario.

And so, I decided that it was possible that that thing meant us harm and acted accordingly. Even so, I wanted to avoid misreading the situation and I definitely didn't want to attack first when it wasn't even hostile to us, so I gave an order to protect us from sudden attacks without triggering a response...

"Reiko, I need you to put up a barrier at max power. Have some magic beams and blasts ready to go. Can you reflect enemy attacks back at them? Like in Operation Rearview Mirror, where they bounced Calamity and Rainbow Death Ray with a giant reflective device..."

"What are we dealing with here, Barugon?! And no, I can't!"

"Roger that. Then I guess I'll dump a potion that melts anything and everything on it..."

"Wouldn't that melt through to the other side of the planet when it hits the ground...?" Reiko said, pointing out a trope that was common for this sort of thing.

I gave her the expected response.

“Of course not!”

“I figured...”

“It would only melt through to the *center* of this planet!”

“Then it’ll slowly melt through the planet from the inside...”

“Ah ha ha ha!” we laughed together.

We were being our familiar selves again. Our banter had a tendency to get worse as a situation grew more dire. In other words, our caution and nerves were at their peak.

We did have Leia as our ace in the hole. But unlike Celes, Leia had to reason to help us. It was entirely possible that she would just stare at us emotionlessly as we died... But no, we still had value to her as a source of money! That said, I didn’t know whether Leia had any intention of getting directly involved with us like that, and she was acting a bit strange right now.

All right, if you want it, bring it! We’re ready to take down that UFO!

CHAPTER 61

OLD FRIEND

“...It’s moving!”

Several protrusions appeared out of the bottom of the spherical UFO. What if it was Indra’s Arrow or something? Maybe someone’s in there shouting, “Energy charged 120%!” or “Anti-shock, anti-flare defenses!” Or maybe it’ll be a Specium Ray right off the bat?!

“Reiko, stack as many barriers as you can! Radium and ultra-gold wall-shaped potion containers, come out!”

...

...

...

“Long time no see!”

A voice rang out from what seemed to be a loudspeaker on the UFO.

Oof.

It was the last one! It was the very last one of the possible scenarios Reiko had predicted! It was someone who hadn’t held back at all when requesting cheat powers!

“You’re late, Kyoko!” Reiko said, sounding completely unconcerned...

Wait, this is bad! The kids are watching!

“Reiko, speak Japanese when you’re talking to Kyoko!”

I decided to make up an excuse for the kids later.

The round, gravity-defying thing descended slowly in front of us. The things that appeared under the object weren't weapons, but landing gear. Though, they probably weren't designed to support its entire weight, and I suspected there was some anti-gravity device to negate most of its mass. Otherwise, the ground here wouldn't be able to support that thing at all. The landing gear would have gotten stuck in the ground, causing the rest of the vehicle to tilt to one side or even fall over.

...Spheres definitely weren't designed for landing.

The thing was about ten meters in diameter. Back on Earth, there were 300-meter luxury cruisers, 400-meter container ships and tankers, and even bigger ships, but a sphere with a 10-meter diameter still wasn't small by any means. This was particularly true when you considered that it wasn't a ship that carried cargo or passengers, but only whatever features it had. Besides, spheres contained much more volume compared to a ship with an orthodox design.

...Anyway, none of this was all that important. Not compared to the person that just came riding in that thing...

That voice and intonation from earlier was definitely Kyoko Nishizono of our group, KKR. Kyoko was the ordinary person among us... Or so she claimed, but that only meant she was relatively normal compared to the two of us.

The reason Reiko and I were often forced to take action was usually because Kyoko brought trouble with her. There was nothing really ordinary about her. Kyoko was someone who belonged with us as our friend after all.

Before I knew it, the round thing had stopped descending. There was no space for it to land around here. I wasn't able to tell when it was flying overhead, but looking at it up close, that thing was huge. It was more like 60 meters in diameter.

Why was she riding in something so big? Didn't she have a smaller option? More importantly, what was this thing in the first place?

The sphere froze in the air about ten meters above the ground, then something other than the landing gear came stretching out from under it. Maybe it was a tube for getting on and off the vehicle? It extended all the way to the ground, then the front slid open.

"Kaoru! Reiko! In middle school form?! But I guess I am too!"

“Kyoko!”

“Kyoko...”

Kyoko gave me and Reiko a squeeze, and we returned the embrace. From Kyoko's perspective, she was seeing one of her best friends, one who she hadn't seen in decades... though it had only been about five years for me.

We would finally be able to unleash KKR's full power. The trio had finally been reunited!



A goddess...

She came descending on a star... They have no intention of hiding it anymore, do they?

Are we still supposed to pretend they're mages?

Hmm...

“What? Did you say something?”

“No, nothing!” the kids replied in unison.

Maybe it was just my imagination... Anyway, it was time to celebrate our reunion with Kyoko.

“Kyoko, would you mind taking us and these attempted murderers to the city?”

“You should make use of whoever is standing in a pinch, even Clara.” That’s a famous quote from a world-renowned film.

There’s another famous quote that goes, “If you’re going to die, take the dog with you!” It’s quite educational...

“There’s nothing educational about that!” Reiko had interjected.

Oops, I must have said it out loud...

In any case, we may have been speaking in Japanese, but this wasn’t a good time for catching up with the kids watching and listening.

“I’m sure the guards and local lords are all sleeping by now, so I wouldn’t want to force whoever’s on night watch duty to wake up the person in charge... All right, let’s camp out for tonight and make our move first thing in the morning. We should do it before the sun rises, while it’s still dark. We wanna avoid getting spotted by travelers or descending near the city while it’s bright out, right?” I suggested while pointing at the thing floating in the sky, and Kyoko and Reiko simply nodded.

I mean, what else could we do? The attempted murderer had been tied up, but I gave him a potion that would keep him asleep until we decided to wake him, just to be careful. He was probably going to wake up with sores all over his body from sleeping

directly on the ground in an unnatural position, but it was far better than dying.

We then resumed our barbecue and started eating together.

Afterward, we had the kids split up to sleep in Merkava and Panzer... though, they were probably going to gather up in one of the carriages to catch up and talk for a while. Meanwhile, we were going to chat together in the tent.

Kyoko pointed at her ship and told us that it was comfortable in her dinghy, but I didn't want to get separated from the kids in case something happened to them. It was much more reassuring to be in the tent next to the carriages.

And that thing is supposed to be a dinghy?! When it's that big...?

"So, what is that thing?" Reiko asked, pointing overhead. Her finger indicated the top of the tent, but she obviously wasn't talking about that.

"My dinghy?" Kyoko asked.

"If it's a dinghy, that means it has a mothership, right?"

"Of course!!!"

After a brief pause, Reiko and I spoke up at the same time.

"Just what kind of cheat power did you get?!"

Kyoko explained that, just like Reiko, she still retained her memories and experience from when she had gotten older, but it felt like she had witnessed them through an impartial, birds-eye-view lens. Her current state was due to God strengthening her memories from when she was twenty-two. Therefore, she didn't feel like she was living a continuation of her life as a senior, but it was more like her new life had diverged from when she was twenty-two.

Were her two lives really going to converge after seventy years? Maybe it was because of her new body, but she was pretty much back to her old self. I mean, even with all

the knowledge and experience in the world, there wasn't much you could do if your body and mind started breaking down.

So now, with her newly refreshed spirit and discarnate entity from when she was younger...

"I'll live in this new world with this new life!"

"You too?!"

Yeah, we read the same kinds of books and watched the same kinds of anime...

"By the way, are you two traveling all around this continent right now?" Kyoko asked out of the blue.

"Hm? Well, we were preparing to stay in one place for a while... Well, we just went on a trip across the continent, and we're on the way back from a neighboring country, so I guess you could put it that way in a broad sense. Why do you ask?" I asked in turn.

"Well, because God told me you were on a trip around the continent with your friends..."

"Ah..."

Their kind sensed time in a completely different way than us. So from a god's point of view, it probably seemed like we went on a trip immediately after we had crossed the continent. Actually, maybe the god of Earth knew a good deal about human sensibilities. I suspected he had heard about it from Celes many times. Celes's information was unreliable, so I couldn't blame Earth's god if he got the wrong idea.

Yeah, it was all Celes's fault. Made sense to me.

"So, what kind of ability did you get, Kyoko?"

Our conversation wasn't really moving forward, so Reiko finally went ahead and asked the question. Yes, that was the main issue here. That was definitely the reason for that thing floating above us.

Then, Kyoko replied...

"Oh, I got the power to create any ship that I know. They're designed to the specifications written in the ship's documents, and I automatically gain the knowledge of how to use them."

We both remained silent, deep in thought.

It made sense. Celes must have thought she went a bit too far with Reiko's and my powers, but figured this wouldn't be too bad... And we have that floating thing as a result.

"Fictional ships count too?!"

I couldn't help but shout my reaction, and Kyoko grinned as she replied.

"Well, from a species that's so advanced you can't tell them apart from gods, a sailboat, a luxury cruise ship, and an alien spaceship from a science-fiction novel all look the same. It's like how we see the difference between a dugout canoe and a raft, so don't even worry about it!"

Ah... Now I remember. This is how Kyoko is...

"This is insane..." Reiko said while gazing up at the sky, then Kyoko made a troubled face.

"But there's one problem with this ability..."

"You mean like there are limits to what kind of ships you can make?"

"You get some sort of penalty if you overdo it or something?"

Reiko and I asked our questions consecutively, then Kyoko replied with a regretful expression.

"I can summon the ships fully equipped, but... I don't have any crew..."

"Huh?!" Reiko and I couldn't help but raise our voices.

"What I mean is, I can summon ships and understand how to use them, but there aren't any crew members to man them. That means I can only use ships that can be piloted by one person. Plus, I obviously can't create any humans or any other creatures, but

androids with human-like intellect and computers are also a no-go.”

Kyoko sighed, then continued.

“The Goddess said that deities consider such advanced AI to be at the same level as living organisms, so I’m not allowed to mess with them. Well, she doesn’t actually care about that, but supposedly there are morality issues if a goddess creates another race for us to use as slaves... Kind of weird considering they have no qualms about mass-murdering native creatures...”

I covered Kyoko’s mouth in a fluster. Celes likes to check in on me every once in a while...

“Anyway, there’s a computer with its own personality onboard, but all it does is follow orders and can’t think for itself or give advice. It’s not like I can talk to it like a friend. It can handle things like autopilot, but still...”

So a robot ship was fine, but things like Chaika, Paolon, Swordbreaker, or the Riprimu were off limits. For some reason, most spaceships that appeared in science fiction novels required a big crew, no matter how far science had advanced.

You’d think they would figure out a way to automate things like the navigation and weapon management systems so that one person could pilot the ship from the bridge... When attacking enemies in combat, you should be able to give general orders to an AI. There shouldn’t be any need to manually control target reticles to fire all the cannons... Maybe it was to prevent the machines from rebelling.

Anyway, there wasn’t much she could do with a sailing ship or a steam engine without a crew. How did she end up with such an inconvenient ability? I did have a hunch...

“Celes...”

That was it. I knew she hadn’t intentionally tried to twist Kyoko’s words to mess with her. Celes wasn’t like that. She simply didn’t notice or consider these details, and instead granted the ability exactly as it was described.

My guess was, Kyoko hadn’t gained god-like creative powers, but there was something that detected, crafted, and sent over a ship whenever she wanted to summon one. How exactly it was able to make an entire ship in an instant, I don’t know... Maybe they were made in some other world where time passed several million times faster than Earth

or in this world, then delivered here once complete.

Anyway...

"It's hard to tell whether your ability is useful or not..." Reiko pointed out, and all Kyoko and I could do was hang our heads.

We talked until late into the night, then I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes in the morning, prepared breakfast, and woke the kids up. It was still dark with plenty of time until sunrise, so I figured we would get to our destination in no time with Kyoko's ship. As such, we'd arrive at Little Silver before it became bright out, as long as we ate quickly and left immediately after.

Once we arrived, we would hand the attempted murderers over to the local lord. We would phrase the accounting of events in such a way that put us in a good light too. We had apprehended them in another country, but the victims were citizens from his territory, so no one would question where the criminals had been captured.

Whoever their lord was, it was highly unlikely that he would start beef with a lord from another country for the sake of some criminals. He would understand that if things escalated to the royal palace of each respective country, and the fact that a merchant from their own territory had committed such heinous crimes and placed a hit on the underage victims came to light, things would end up very badly for him.

Yeah, we were gonna be fine.

Leia had disappeared sometime last night. She probably figured breakfast would be nothing to write home about and went back to her usual routine of occasionally observing us from a distance. Maybe she hadn't actually appeared last night for the food, but she was drawn to everyone having a nice, lively meal together.

And so, we had breakfast and put everything away. All I had to do was put everything in the Item Box, so it only took a second. I would wash the dishes later. I took the kids, who were showing an array of reactions from wide-eyed wonder to jumping at shadows, and the attempted murderers, who were absolutely terrified that the Goddess was about to take them straight to Hell, and pushed them all onto the boarding tube.

I put the carriage and tent in the Item Box, but I had Hang and Scary board normally.

Hey, I didn't realize that the tube could change size... Well, I guess that should be easy. After all, this was probably Star Empire technology that we were dealing with...

"Okay, time to blast off!"

"Hey! That's my line!" Kyoko pouted.

Come on, let me have my fun!



BONUS STORY

THE KIDS

“Yaaa!”

Whack!

“Ow!”

A woman who seemed to be around twenty or so struck a young girl around twelve or thirteen with a wooden sword, driving her to her knees. The girl looked frustrated, but had no choice but to accept the results, considering the vast difference in their skill levels.

“You are not ready. I can’t accept your request at this time. You must improve your skills.”

“Yes...”

The girl’s shoulders drooped, then she moved to the corner of the training area, making space for the others.

“Next!”

“Yes!”

A boy who seemed to be about fourteen or fifteen stepped up to the center with a wooden sword in hand.

“You requested a higher allowance, yes? Then I will face you wielding the wooden sword with only my left hand, and with my pinky finger raised, without moving a single step. If you can touch me with your wooden sword just once or force me to take a step, I will consider it your victory. Do you accept?”

“Yeah!”

Then, their fierce duel began. No matter how skilled the woman was, she couldn't get a good grip on her weapon with only her left hand and her pinky raised, and her restriction of being unable to move meant she was wide open to attacks from behind... Or so it seemed.

Whack!

"Your allowance will remain as-is! Next!"

The boy was sent flying back several meters with a powerful blow to his abdomen, then rolled to a stop at the corner of the training area. The woman's attendants worried about her inflicting injuries when they no longer had any more of the Goddess's potions left, but she shot back that anyone who couldn't handle it was useless to her and continued her training.

That meathead... the attendants spat internally with a bitter expression.

It wasn't as if there was some unbridgeable gulf between the woman and her attendants. In fact, they revered her from the bottom of their hearts, and would sacrifice themselves without hesitation to protect her. But for some reason, the woman had a tendency to communicate with her physical body rather than through the language of this country.

It wasn't as if she said nonsensical or stupid things. She was always fair, considerate of the people rather than desiring her own gain, and was a respectable knight, aristocrat, and member of the royal family. If only she didn't have muscles for brains...

To be clear, she wasn't stupid. She had as much wisdom and knowledge as anyone else. However...

She possessed such extraordinary strength that it outweighed all of her other features. It was that simple. Her attendants couldn't help but try to give her candid advice or internally voice their complaints.

The children she was training so aggressively that they risked serious injury weren't soldiers or knights in training, but the master's children. Moreover, they were also the son and daughter of the very woman who was dishing out such unreasonably harsh training. The woman known as Fearsome Fran, the great hero and guardian of the kingdom.

"Fran, the attendants have been complaining about you. They think you need to be more considerate of the children's safety..."

"What nonsense is this?! Then who, exactly, do you suggest should protect Lady Kaoru when she next graces us with her presence?!" Francette raised her voice in response to Roland's words.



Francette was relatively mild-mannered and obedient out of consideration for Roland most of the time, but she refused to yield an inch when it came to certain topics. Especially when it involved Kaoru or the children's upbringing.

"But our children are strong enough already. Even our youngest, Lilith, defeated the guard captain during their training drills last time. He ended up getting depressed and tried to resign..."

Lilith was still an eleven-year-old girl.

It seemed that Francette, who had received one of Kaoru's overpowered potions before she had learned self-restraint, had gained the blessing of youth and a powerful body that changed her at the genetic level. Although it was only a fractional change, those powers had been passed down to her children as well.

No, it could be that they were normal kids, but they ended up like this because Fran made them go through unreasonable training since they had learned how to crawl... I'm sorry! I'm sorry, kids! Especially my daughters!

Roland had tried to stop her, but it was no use.

"I will teach the children everything I know, and that's final!"

"What? Including how you stop enemy blades between your fingers or destroy ballistae and catapults by throwing a big rock at them?"

"Yes, and?"

Roland could only remain silent by way of reply. Fran was the only human that could do that... but he didn't dare say it out loud. After all, how to raise the children and how to serve Lady Kaoru were the two things that Francette would never back down on. If he talked back to her on those topics, he would get a lecture that lasted until morning and silent treatment for an entire week. Roland wanted to avoid that at all costs.

I'm sorry, kids... I'm so, so sorry!

"So, can your son defeat my daughters in a mock battle?"

“That’s impossible! Please! There’s no way!”

Roland’s younger brother, King Serge, shook his head violently at Roland’s ridiculous request.

“Then can you beat Francette?”

“Urgh...”

Luckily, Francette already had feelings of respect and adoration for Roland when they had first met. Moreover, since she was just a humble knight and he was the king’s brother at the time, he was like a mixture of an idol and the imperial family in modern Japanese terms. There was no way they wouldn’t end up together once they had fallen for each other.

Serge’s son and Roland’s daughter were the crown prince and a young lady of a ducal household, respectively, so they were similar in terms of status. However, that also meant that Roland’s daughter was in the upper echelon of society, and so she didn’t have a blind sense of admiration for the crown prince.

A crown princess would need to deal with stifling restrictions and a great number of duties, and it wasn’t uncommon for young noble ladies to be averse to the idea of committing themselves to such selfless devotion. This was a form of self-actualization that had suddenly become widespread for some reason about twenty-five years ago.

When it came to a noble or royal family member’s marriage, their parents simply needed to order it, and that was that. But considering Roland and Serge had each chosen to marry the woman they loved, they couldn’t bring themselves to force their will on their children when it came to choosing a marriage partner. That was why they had been providing places where they could meet others, in hopes that they would fall in love naturally. However...

“I have no interest in any man who is more foolish or weaker than myself.”

It was completely normal for a woman to have certain standards for their potential marriage partners, and there should have been plenty of men who could meet those standards. That is, unless it regarded Francette’s daughter...

“Then what am I gonna do?! ”

“Don’t ask me!”

Serge didn’t have the answers, but it was he who wanted his eldest son and Roland’s daughter to marry more than anyone else. That meant Serge should be the one who had to find the solution, but...

“Your daughters will never get married at this rate. Are you okay with that?” Serge asked.

“Urgh!”

It pained Roland to hear it, but it was true; there were very few men out there who could meet the prerequisites for his daughters. There might be expert swordsmen out there, but they tended to be middle-aged or older, and likely with a family already.

“This is bad...”

“It sure is...”

“What do we do...?”

“Say, kids. Don’t you think that marrying a man who’s weaker than you and protecting him would be an interesting way to live?” Roland asked his daughters one day.

“Not in the slightest.”

“Do you mean you and Mother, Father?”

“Sh-Shaddap!”

“Say, kids. Don’t you agree that a man’s worth isn’t necessarily in his strength, intelligence, or administrative abilities?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Are you making excuses for yourself, Father?”

“Sh-Shaddap!”

“Say, kids. Don’t you think the crown prince is quite a respectable young man?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“He is weaker than us women, and a wimp. Oh, are you trying to set up a political marriage, Father? Even though you fell in love with a common female knight, then granted her noble titles so you could marry her...? Or could it be that you intend to make more friends who can’t stand up to Mother so you have someone to complain to...?”

“Sh-Shaddap!!!”

It seemed it would be a long time before Roland’s... or more accurately, Serge’s... wish would come true...

“Fran sure doesn’t age...” Roland uttered quietly to himself in his room.

Francette had reverted to the body of a sixteen-year-old when she drank that potion at twenty-seven. She was now a fifty-two-year-old with the body of a forty-one-year-old. However, she didn’t look a day past her early twenties. It wasn’t that she hadn’t grown or gotten older, but she was clearly more youthful than anyone else. Her skin was positively radiant too...

Roland was now in his fifties, and couldn’t help but smile at the sight of his wife’s youthful appearance. He couldn’t deny that he wished he had his own youth again, but that was his greed talking. As long as he had his eternally young, strong, and beautiful wife, and his adorable children, he couldn’t ask for anything more.

His kids were all small for their age, and he had worried that they weren’t growing fast enough at first, but he was no longer concerned. He had eventually realized that it wasn’t that they were growing slowly, but that they were getting older at a slower pace.

The kids were a product of Francette, who had superior physical abilities, and Roland, who was a member of the royal family. There were plenty of people who wanted a part

of that bloodline in their own families. Not just locally, but from those outside of their country as well.

To those people, most of their bloodline's value came not from Roland, but Francette. After all, she was the great hero who had saved not only her own country, but every living being in the entire continent.

She had managed to convince Celestine to heed her words, a feat that would have been impossible for any silver-tongued swindler or bard. She was pretty much a living god and had carved her place into history as one of the greatest people to ever live. She was the trump card of all of humanity, and could stand against Celestine herself.

Forget being "blessed by the Goddess." She had become a goddess herself. A beacon of hope that protected humanity from Celestine's evil will. Such was the strange situation Francette found herself in.

In any case, it was pointless to think about just how many people sought after her genes. Only Serge wished for his and his brother's children to marry for Roland's bloodline rather than Francette's. It was his fault that Roland had lost his path to the throne, and his older brother had conceded the crown to him despite being wiser and much more suited to be king. He wanted his brother's genes to be in the royal family's legitimate line. It was Serge's one and only wish.

Roland understood this, which was why he chose not to oppose the idea. However, he wouldn't allow anyone to force his daughters to do anything against them or make their lives miserable. Never.

But Roland also understood there was no need to worry about such things. After all, Fran was their mother.

"Fearsome Fran."

Make her angry... and the world would burn. No hero would dare do such a thing. Even a demon lord plotting world domination would run away barefoot before Fearsome Fran.

"Well, I'm sure things will find a way to work themselves out... I'll just be careful not to oppose Fran..."

Fortunately, Francette wasn't against the idea of her daughter and the crown prince

getting married. It was unclear whether her stance was out of a desire for her daughters to be happy, or because having her daughter in the center of the royal family would give her an “in” to mobilize the country if Kaoru ever showed up again. It would be completely unnecessary if so, considering she already had greater influence than any king...

But, thinking ahead to after her eventual death, it might be a good idea to train someone from the religion that the orphans had started, the Order of the Goddess Kaoru, so she could send them into the royal family as the queen dowager and pass down her teachings across generations.

Francette wasn’t one for scheming, but she had no qualms against conspiring when it came to matters regarding Kaoru. She was the type who thought that any evil deed was acceptable as long as it was in the name of justice.

It was a country where the kindhearted king ruled, the wise older brother supported him, and the fearsome one had authority over all. The country where Saint Kaoru had once lived, and the Eyes of the Goddess, a small-scale business of national importance run by the blessed children of Nagase, were located.

It seemed this country would be prosperous for a long, long time.

AFTERWORD

Hello again, this is FUNA.

Potions volume 7 is finally out! With Mine and Aral having joined the team, Little Silver is fully in business! Sure, there were some problematic customers, but no big deal! They swatted away the buzzing bugs, then were off to retrieve some orphans as part of their recruiting operation.

Then..."it" appeared. Who knows what trouble the trio will get into in volume 8 now that they've been reunited...?

I wasn't one to go out much in the first place, so I wasn't affected too much by the coronavirus, but I used to go out to eat about once a month. I rarely ever go out now, and cook at home or buy premade dishes at the supermarket.

Not going out and being unable to go out seem similar, yet they're so different... I would like to regain the option to not go out by choice again soon. All I have now is the freedom to do laundry whenever I want...

On December 9th of last year, volume 7 for Potions and 80k Gold were released. Please take a look along with the light novels.

To my editor, the illustrator Sukima, the binding designer, the proofreading supervisor, the publisher, distributor, bookstore workers, managers of the light novel publishing website, Shōsetsuka ni Narou, everyone who pointed out typos and gave advice and ideas in the comment section, and everyone who picked this book up, I am grateful from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you! I hope to see you again in the next volume...

FUNA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Cover

Chapter 51: Starting an Enterprise

Chapter 52: The Targeted Orphanage

Chapter 53: Reiko

Chapter 54: Ambition

Chapter 55: Mine

Chapter 56: Dark Celes

Chapter 57: Operation Headhunter

Chapter 58: The First of Us

Chapter 59: Third One

Chapter 60: Enemy

Chapter 61: Old Friend

Bonus Story: The Kids

Afterword

Color Illustrations

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I Shall Survive Using Potions! Volume 7
by FUNA

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